

The Harvest Wars



CRUSADE

MARCO BAIER

RUIIN

An apt name for a world
that has lived long past its prime.

Ruuin has seen the rise and fall of many peoples,
many life forms, many wonders and horrors—some of
which have defied the gnawing teeth of time, lying
dormant in the shadows below the tormented earth.

It is a world pockmarked by the past, with remnants of
mighty civilizations standing long after their creators have
perished, or lost to memory, deep underground
in caves the size of cities.

It is a world of discord, where the rise of the dead is
considered just another catastrophe, and where ancient
magic and technology, too powerful and alien to
be comprehended, lie waiting for those foolish
(or unlucky) enough to stumble upon them.

It is a world too stupid to quit
and too stubborn to die.

These are its tales.



Marco Baier

Prologue

“At first, none of us thought of it as a plague. Murder, fighting and riots were common enough in the poorer quarters of Covenport, but when the chaos spread to Golden Holt, we realized this was not merely misery boiling over, but something far worse. Two days later, the Blood Plague was everywhere, filling the eyes and minds of its victims with crimson, driving men, women and children into fits of murderous rage. Still we thought we could contain it, save the city, be victorious—then the dead began to rise, adding their force to that of the infected.”

- *Sergeant Meinhart Kain, Survivor of the Blood Plague*

Summer, Year 1888

Covenport burned.

Flames and madness devoured the great and ancient metropolis. Thousands were dead, and packs of infected roamed the streets like rabid dogs, their blood-filled eyes searching for victims.

And, of course, there were the walking dead.

In the manner of a tidal wave following an earthquake, the Rising had shattered what little hope had remained to

deal with the Blood Plague. For days now, everyone that died within the city came back to a mockery of life, killing and devouring those still uninfected. It was as if the gods themselves had decided to wipe the decadent city from the face of Ruin, destroying everything and everyone not strong enough to endure the cleansing flames.

Megan had endured, but she was exhausted, as was her stallion Sirius.

“I tell you, old friend,” Megan said, leaning forward in her saddle to speak directly into Sirius' twitching ear while making sure his blindfold sat tight. “If... When we make it past the gates and into safety, there will be no more adventuring for the both of us. I'll take that position as a court mage old Bannister offered me two years ago. It will be boring, but there will be no burning cities, no undead or infected—only dull nobles, too much food and lots of mares for you to entertain.”

The animal seemed to understand the last remark, whinnying approvingly. A wry smile cracked Megan's stern expression, making the grey-green eyes below the mane of dark hair twinkle mischievously. Old Sirius, such a hound for a horse...

If he only knew how bad their situation was.

Her pretty face turned blank as she looked around. She had a hard time recognizing the Merchant Quarter.

The market stalls lay broken about, their contents scattered over the streets between human and animal bodies too mangled to rise from the dead. Black acrid smoke belched forth from burning buildings, birthing ash that fell like tainted snow, covering everything in a thin blanket. Also, still audible above the roaring of the fires, were the sound of distant fighting and the ever-present wails of the dead and dying.

The noise made them both nervous and, leaning back in her saddle, she urged Sirius on, saying “Come you rascal. We better get a move on if you want to hump—”

A violent moan cut off her next words and Megan’s slender body tensed as she reached for her bow, realizing a moment later that arrows would do no good here. The roof of a tall building to her right was collapsing, the weakened timbers causing the moan.

“Damnation!” Megan cursed, then shouted, “Move!” while digging her heels into Sirius sides. The blindfolded animal only hesitated for a split second then surged forward, powerful muscles straining under his brown hide.

They had covered only a few yards when a loud crack rolled over them like cannon fire. The building began to collapse on itself, sending forth a torrent of smoke and hot air that rolled over them. However, neither Megan nor

Sirius felt the bite of the heat.

Instead, a numbing cold spread throughout the mage, and she felt her life force draining away as the spell protecting them absorbed and dissipated the lethal combination of superheated air and smoke. Thankfully, the drain lessened substantially as they cleared the torrent of heat moments later. Shivering, Megan tugged on the reins. They came to a halt in the middle of the street.

“That was... unpleasant,” Megan groaned through clenched teeth, slumping in the saddle. “I swear, someday the drain will kill me.”

Sirius replied with a whinny that sounded concerned. Megan smiled as he turned his head towards her, trying to see if she was ok.

“Oh, no worry, I am fine and have plenty of reserves left,” she lied, leaning forward to pat Sirius on the neck while catching her breath.

The break turned out to be lifesaving as a shop selling alchemical ingredients further down the street went up in an explosion that bathed the road ahead in green-blue flames.

Startled, Sirius started neighing, rearing up on his hind legs and almost throwing her off. Her strong limbs tightened around his back, the hands on his neck taking hold of his thick mane to prevent her from falling off.

“Ho, easy,” she shouted over the explosions, eventually managing to calm him down only to find herself being subjected to a stream of huffing and bickering from the animal.

“Hey, it’s not my fault that it is taking longer than expected!” Megan defended her decision to brave the burning city district. “At least we are avoiding the infected and undead this way... Or would you rather like to try your luck with the other survivors?”

The bickering reply coming from the animal gave her a piece of his mind.

“Oh shut up!” Megan said, turning aside, earning silence from her companion.

Satisfied to have won the argument – for now – she allowed herself a superior smile. The victory all the sweeter since Sirius seemed to be right.

At first, it had looked like a good idea to use her magic to traverse the burning Merchant Quarter. However, the way had turned out longer than expected, slower, and infinitely harder. She could hardly blame Sirius for being unhappy. If at all, the situation was harder on him than on her. After all, she had had to blindfold him so that the flames would not spook him.

Yet her protection spell did little to filter out the

aroma of smoke and burning flesh, nor did it muffle the cacophony of screams the wind carried through the alleys. It was a sign of the animal's complete trust in her that it had not thrown her off hours ago and made off without her, and Megan would not be found wanting in regards to that trust...

"Come on, Sirius, time to g..." she trailed off and her eyes widened as several undead stumble from the smoke ahead of them.

Megan counted a total of ten, two of them children of six or seven years. Half their number was little more than skeletons with patches of charred flesh over scorched bones. These were the easy ones to look at, for with their skull-faces, they seemed more monster than human. The others, however, although horribly mutilated, retained much of their former appearance; their slack jaws and staggering gait making them look more like shocked victims rather than the monstrosities they had become. Their eyes, or rather the lack of them, was a dead giveaway, though. The heat had ruptured them, leaving raw sockets bleeding a white liquid that flowed over their faces like molten wax. Nevertheless, they staggered towards Megan and Sirius as if they could see them, their arms outstretched, fingers clawing.

"This is going to be interesting," Megan whispered,

the tension in her voice making Sirius scrape the street with his hooves.

There was no way to get past them, not with Sirius blindfolded as he was. Nor could she risk casting another spell to dispose of them. They would have to be taken care of in a more conventional manner.

“Easy, old friend,” Megan said to Sirius, taking her bow from her saddleback. Though very few people would have recognized the mechanical contraption as such.

Fashioned from metal and strange materials lighter than wood, but harder than steel, the weapon was made up from interlocking sections, cables, pulleys, gears and cogs. Creating a leveraging system that made the weapon more powerful, accurate, easier to use—and overall more deadly than any non-magical weapon she had ever come across. An artifact from the Forgotten Ages, the Clockwork Bow was a priceless wonder, its workings and the technology that created it long since forgotten.

“It’s gonna be a tight call,” the young mage whispered. Reaching for the quiver at her back, she drew one of the arrows, being painfully aware that but a dozen remained. “You better make them count...”

Ignoring the slight tremble of her hands, she notched the arrow, pulling it back until the goose feathers of the

shaft tickled her cheek.

A thin beam of red light, only visible due to the smoke in the air, blinked into existence. Originating from a small, glass-eyed cylindrical contraption above the bow's grip, it drew a red dot onto the naked chest of the undead closest to her. A tall, but spindly thin man, whose left arm was burned down to the bone.

Guiding the red dot up, moving over the line of his exposed sternum, until it settled between the raw eye sockets, Megan exhaled and let loose.

The arrow hissed through the air with the velocity of a fired pistol-shot, piercing the skull at exactly the point where the red dot rested, rocking the head back with enough force to make its spine snap.

Before the twitching body hit the ground, she pulled and fired again, the missile hissing through the air to bury itself into the right eye-socket of a powerfully built zombie, sending him spinning to the ground.

Again and again she fired, remaining as calm and composed as if she was merely shooting at target dummies. Uncaring of their losses, the zombies staggered ever closer. Twice the arrows went right through bone and brain matter, exploding from skulls in a shower of red and gray to ricochet from the cobblestones. Only once her arrow missed his mark, yet she never flinched, never hesitated—

not until only one more creature was still standing.

It was... had been a young girl, wisps of curly blonde hair hanging over her face, putting it in shadows. She wore a dirty nightgown, holding the smoldering remains of a headless teddy bear in her puffy arms.

Megan cringed as she heard her sobbing. If not for her badly burned legs, she would have looked alive. Just a child. Swallowing hard, Megan drew a bead on her, bringing the red dot to settle on the girl's forehead. The child-thing froze as if knowing it was about to die, and then lifted the stuffed animal, embracing it as if searching comfort.

“Damn...” Megan cursed, and against her better judgment, she lowered her bow. In response, the girl smiled, then snarled, revealing rows of broken, bloody teeth.

She dropped the teddy bear and lurched forward, a high-pitched cry that held all the hunger of the world escaping her throat.

Hating herself for it, Megan aimed and released. It was a good shot. Hit by the arrow, the girl's head snapped back as if violently kicked, her little body somersaulting backward from the force of the impact to come down with a sickening crunch.

Ashamed, Megan averted her eyes from the twitching carcass. The sight was almost too much for her and combined with the drain, she wanted to do nothing more than lay down and die. As so often before, Sirius wrested her from her shock, craning his neck until he could nudge her leg.

“It’s ok,” she said patting his head and gently running her fingers over the white diamond-shaped spot on his forehead. “All is... all is well...”

Cold and shivering, even in the baking heat, she regarded her handiwork.

The score of undead lay at their feet, truly dead this time. She briefly considered retaking her arrows, knowing she had only one left. She dismissed the idea, knowing she could not protect Sirius from the heat should she dismount.

Urging her mount on, she slumped over his broad shoulders from exhaustion. They moved on, navigating between the undead she had laid to a final rest.

A tear rolled down her cheek as she looked at the little girl for one last time.

She blamed her crying on the smoke.

She had to.



Only shortly afterwards, the walls of smoke masking their way parted, torn by a breeze sweeping through the streets and revealing the towering ramparts of Covenport looming up merely a few hundred yards away from them.

“See, Sirius,” she whispered, exhausted by the constant drain of her magic spell. “Told you we would make it!” The animal whinnied, nudging her to take off his blindfold.

“Yeah, yeah...” she said weakly, pulling the rag of his brown eyes and together they looked up at the enormous ramparts towering over the city.

In all of Ruuin, few fortifications were as impressive as the walls of Covenport. Impregnable, dark and pitted by the eons, they fully encircled the city and merged with the steep cliffs in the north and west to build one of the most formidable barriers the world had ever seen. Nothing had ever managed to breach these walls; walls that reached up two hundred feet and that were more than fifty feet across at their base. Legend has it that Covenport had been carved from a mountain, something Megan had not believed until she saw the ramparts with her own eyes. Stout towers crowned the wall in regular intervals, standing like grim guardians, each bristling with enormous siege weapons that could hail death and destruction for miles in

any direction, be it land or sea. Yet as powerful as these weapons were, they had proven useless against an enemy such as the one they were facing now.

“Alright, looks like it’s just down the hill from here on out,” Megan said, rubbing Sirius' neck. “The street should lead to the gates and from there it’s just out and away.”

The large animal huffed, nodding his huge head.

“Come on, let’s get out of here... and pray to your horse gods that somebody lifted the city gates by now. Damn quarantine having done more damage than good anyway.”

As it turned out, the gods were listening, but in their infinite cruelty chose to twist her wish.

“No...” Megan whispered, her eyes widening in nameless terror as they turned the corner and the Gate Marketplace down the hill became visible. From her elevated point, she saw it choked with hundreds, maybe thousands of refugees, more arriving by the minute, scores of infected and undead on their heels. Barricades sealed off most junctions and were the site of desperate battles, the upturned wagons and market stalls a feeble protection against the growing tide of fiends.

The buzzing sounds of combat and screams filled the air and made the very ground vibrate. She swallowed hard. Never had she seen so many people in one spot. Her eyes

wandered over the sea of bodies, following the direction of their flow until they settled on the entry to the Gate Tunnel. The massive iron grate that had sealed the enormous tunnel reaching through the ramparts was open, but escape seemed impossible.

A mountain of corpses blocked the over twenty feet high and thirty feet wide half circle of the tunnel, creating a truly gruesome bottleneck. A wave of nausea and claustrophobia overcame Megan as she stared at the rows of bodies that lay stacked upon one another like so many sacks of grain, some still twitching and squirming, trying to free themselves. She did not know if these poor souls were alive or the resurrected dead, nor did she want to. The sight alone violated her mind and Megan felt herself one step closer towards the abyss that was utter insanity.

Undaunted by the monument of flesh, desperate men and woman were fighting to leave the city by the scores. Climbing the mountain like ants to reach the gap at the top, pushing and shoving to get ahead of their fellow men only to meet their end by what awaited them there.

“Dear gods,” Megan whispered. “Who are they?”

Using what little magic Megan had left, she cast a simple spell and the world seemed to jump forward, magnifying the top of the corpse mountain.

Three warriors stood there, preventing waves of citizens from leaving this nightmare by slaughtering any who dared oppose them. They were a terrifying group, led by a true giant of a warrior. Standing close to eight feet and powerfully built, he wore a heavy suit of gore-dulled silver gleaming plate armor. His enemies he cleft apart with a Flamberge that was as tall and looked as heavy as the man himself. The weapon too shone brightly silver, hissing through the air like lightning and each swing of the waved slab of steel sent bodies flying down the hill, showering blood and guts over the following escapees.

Flanking the hulking brute, two nimble warriors in sets of matching chainmail armor fought at the giant's side, ornate battle masks covering their faces. They were both tall but looked like children compared to the enormous slayer in silver. Their armor too had a unique coloring. One set of chainmail gleamed like slime-covered gold; the other appeared scorched and blackened as if having suffered the bite of a roaring fire for too long. Each dual-wielded a set of different weapons: the golden warrior favored a pair of ornate cleavers—using them with gruesome efficiency and sending body parts flying with each mechanical stroke. His twin made use of a set of short swords that gleamed and sizzled like molten metal, cutting, cauterizing and setting clothes and flesh aflame

with hissing strikes.

“A meat grinder,” Megan uttered, ignoring the nervous prancing of Sirius. She saw another one.

Behind the three butchers stood a slender woman dressed in a white hooded cloak and matching garments: knee-high boots and a scandalous tunic that revealed more skin than it did hide. She was very pale, so much so that her skin seemed almost blue in color. A long scar ran the length of her body, down her crown, between her eyes, her breasts, and even deeper. Even marred as she was, she looked terribly beautiful, but how anybody could have survived such a wound was beyond Megan.

Having no part in the slaughter, the pale woman's arms remained crossed in front of her ample bosom as she watched the melee impassively from under her hood. Megan could feel the power radiating from her. She was a mage, a truly powerful one.

Her task in the battle became clear as a volley of arrows was launched at the butchers during a brief break in the melee. Before they even came within ten feet of the three warriors, they burned to ash in a flash of white light, leaving nothing behind but ash.

Megan was still trying to make sense of why these formidable warriors—seemingly neither undead nor

infected—were battling their fellow men when a long knife suddenly buried itself into the side of Sirius' neck.

Her companion reared up on his hind legs, whinnying in pain and surprise, throwing her off. She landed hard on the cobblestones of the street, the fall knocking the wind out of her and shrouding the world in black.

“No...” she whispered, fighting to remain conscious. “Not like this...”

Slowly, her vision returned to reveal one of the infected in mortal combat with Sirius. The attacker was a fat giant of a man, naked apart from gore-stained breeches, and surprisingly nimble for his size and girth. He sliced the air in front of him with a large cleaver, avoiding Sirius's flailing hooves, while trying to deliver a fatal blow. Unwilling to leave his master to her fate, the stallion danced back and forth, occasionally rearing up on his hind legs, using his hooves like a brawler, trying to cave in the man's head. Yet for all his ferocity, the large animal was barely keeping the infected at bay. Judging by the sheer amount of blood pumping from his grisly neck-wound, Megan knew he would not be able to keep this up for long.

She knew she had to do something. Fast!

Having exhausted her magical energies, only her clockwork bow seemed fit for the task. It was gone.

“No-no-no-no!” Megan moaned, searching for the

ancient weapon. “Where is it?”

A wave of nausea overcame her as she turned her head too fast, but she caught a glimpse of the weapon lying amidst the broken remains of an overturned market stall that had been selling fruits and vegetables. A mere ten feet away, she rolled over and began crawling towards it. Yet her fall and the magical drain had taken a higher toll on her than she had thought.

Bile rose to her mouth in sour waves, a sheen of perspiration appearing on her exposed skin as she willed herself forward. Every fiber of her being hurt and already the darkness of unconsciousness was creeping up on her from the edges of her vision, shrinking the world, little by little.

“Come on you bitch,” Megan growled. “Just a few more feet...”

She had almost reached her bow as a pain-laced whinny erupted from behind.

Sirius.

Icy fear gripped her heart and her head snapped around just in time to see her companion coming down onto his front legs, entrails spilling from a large gash alongside his abdomen. Her eyes widened in terror as the innards hit the cobblestones with a wet thud and unfurled

like a nest of glistening snakes. The deadly wounded stallion shuddered, and then faltered as his legs gave way under him. As if in slow motion, he toppled to the side, coming down hard and with a finality that stunned Megan to the core.

The butcher, having ducked out of the way after delivering his fatal blow, was upon Sirius in a heartbeat, hacking and slicing with reckless abandon. Every blow of the large meat cleaver caused misty explosions of red, drops of blood trailing behind the broad blade like the tail of a comet. Megan flinched with each wet thud-thud of the weapon, frozen by the sight of such mindless horror and cruelty.

“Forgive me, Sirius,” she whispered, fresh tears streaming down her face. Knowing that her companion was as good as dead, there was but one thing she could do: end his suffering... and avenge him.

Still too far away from her bow, and doubting that she would be able to bring it to good use before the butcher turned his attention to her, left her but one way. A means she swore never to use. Ever...

Megan’s perception shifted into the spectrum of sight that only those with the gift of magic were able to perceive. The Sight revealed the very essence of all life forms, for life was in itself the truest expression of magic,

showing itself in a multitude of colors, reflecting both one's nature and emotions.

Holding no spark of life, the stones of streets and buildings faded to a dull gray, providing a stark contrast to the living ivy growing over the building across the street. The plant began to glow in a vibrant green, as did—although to a much lesser extent—the vegetables and fruits that lay scattered about on the street. Spots of different colors revealed the tiny lives of animals and insects hidden in the foliage and amongst the rotting fruits. Flowing from all, and by extent connected with everything, were thin filaments of energy that danced like strands of spider silk in the ethereal winds, forming the Everweb.

This magical net connecting all things living was in turmoil, strands of angry red stretching through the air like swollen blood veins. It was a manifestation of the suffering and death that plagued the ancient port city. The strongest aura in view was that of the infected: an angry crimson that shone with an unnatural intensity. No thought of self-preservation, or indeed any other feeling, clouded his mind. There was only the urge to kill.

Siriu's aura, on the other hand, was a melting pot of emotions: fear and pain being the most dominant. It broke her heart to see her friend suffer like this, the sight

strengthening her resolve.

It had to be done...

She gave in to that most ancient taboo and began taking that which was not hers. The spell came terribly easy to her... To Megan's sight, darkness spread from her like a sickness. The fruits lying closest began to fester and rot, the insects that had been feasting on them scuttling away in nameless terror before what little life they had was wrested from them... Like a vortex, Megan devoured their essence, all essence, draining the world of color, of life.

A rush of purest euphoria engulfed her as her magical reserves were replenished, pain and exhaustion fading away.

A moment later, the effects reached Sirius and the infected—they both shuddered in revulsion at the magical rape, the act freezing them. The butcher was too strong to die by the assault, inborn defense mechanisms protecting him from a deadly shock to his nervous system, yet his blood-filled eyes locked onto her with murderous intent.

Sirius, already dying, was too weak to defend himself and Megan wrested his life from him with a yelp of shame and ecstasy. She could feel his conflicting emotions as if they were her own: love, fear, pain, hatred, and a gut-wrenching feeling of betrayal.

Then, nothing...

Sirius was dead and Megan was renewed.

Her magic lifted her on her feet, black hair billowing around her in invisible waves of energy radiating from her. She had never felt that powerful before... It was almost overwhelming, the feeling of guilt for killing her friend, the only thing anchoring her in the here and now. She focused on the infected.

“Time to die,” she hissed through gritted teeth.

Taking a heavy step forward, the infected lifted his cleaver for a throw. Instantly, her magic reached out and she envisioned twisting his arm. In response, reality bent to her will, and she saw the limb corkscrew, bones snapping and breaking with revolting cracks. Falling from nerveless fingers, the cleaver clattered to the ground, yet to Megan’s dismay, no sound of pain or surprise arose from the diseased. The man did not even flinch as he looked at the mangled limb dangling from his shoulder. He merely took another step towards her, the intent to murder a seething promise in his eyes.

Beads of sweat began glistening on Megan’s forehead, her face flushing in fear and fury.

“Scream, you bastard!” she shouted, reaching out with her hand as if to grab him, focusing on his skull.

The murderer froze, then stumbled, lifting a hand to

his head as blood began to shoot from his nose, ears, and eyes... Gurgling, he fell on his knees, coughing out a mouthful of blood as the pressure inside his cranium became even stronger. Eventually, the pain overcame the rage brought on by the Blood Plague...

His screams were like music to Megan's ears. They had lasted a very long time before she closed her fist shut.

With this, the head of the infected exploded, blood and brain matter shooting from eyes, mouth and ears, the man's neck bulging and swelling terribly under the sudden rise of pressure. He stood still for a second, twitching feebly, and then Megan let go of him. He collapsed with a meaty thud.

"May the Void claim your soul," she whispered spitefully. Then her eyes fell on the motionless form of Sirius, and all her hatred washed away. She walked over to him, falling on her knees, reaching out, but too afraid to touch him. Instead, she clutched her hands between her knees, weeping silently.



Megan had no idea how long she had been mourning beside her dead companion as a tremendous explosion shook the ground.

She looked up to see a fiery cloud roar up into the sky

from the center of the market. Bodies and body parts flew in every direction, along with bits and pieces of burning wreckage. She could taste the magic in the air, knowing instantly that this had been no ordinary blast, that this was the doing of the sorcerer atop the corpse mountain.

The sudden devastation had created a circular kill zone smack in the middle of the marketplace, sending almost everybody in close vicinity to the floor, setting man and buildings afire. Yet the exodus continued almost uninterrupted, the survivors even more desperate to get away. To her amazement, the butchers atop the hill had stopped their bloody handiwork as if appraising the destruction the sorcerer had wrought. It was then that Megan decided she would chance her luck and climb that mountain.

There was nowhere else to go anyway.

Sobbing, she wiped away her tears, leaning forward to place a kiss on her companion's forehead.

“Goodbye, old friend,” she whispered.

She had a feeling they would be together soon enough.



Megan arrived at the marketplace just as the stunned survivors of the explosion realized that those killed by

shrapnel and falling debris were already rising from death. Initially, fighting had been limited to the streets leading to and from the market, making it a relatively safe base-camp to stage escape attempts.

The attack of the sorcerer had changed this.

The undead looked not much different from the wounded - bloody, blackened and stumbling as they were. Only when they began turning on their former fellow men, tearing into them to rip out entrails and steaming gobbets of flesh, the danger of their situation sank in. With the enemy in their midst, it was but a matter of time until this last post was overrun.

Megan did not hesitate, slipping directly into the masses and heading for the corpse mountain, dodging past groups of men and monsters locked in mortal combat. Tugging away her bow—useless in such confined spaces—she readied her magic and pulled forth a pair of twin daggers from hidden sheaths inside her boots, dealing with every opposition swiftly and efficiently. Repeatedly she felt blows absorbed by the magical field that surrounded and protected her, the two blades in her hands darting forth like striking snakes time and time again.

Yet whenever she could, she avoided combat altogether, dodging under attacks or simply taking a route that kept other survivors between herself and an enemy. A

tactic that became harder the closer she got to the corpse mountain.

Time stretched to an endless array of terrified faces, eyes filled with crimson and gore-stained maws. She pushed the horror of it all aside, steadily working towards her destination, little more than an automaton. A detached part of her mind wondered how she actually managed to remain sane admits all this—then another part, dark and sarcastic, asked if she was sure she still was.

The thought faded as she found her way blocked by the broad back of a man in front of her. She was about to shoulder past him, as his head was soundly split by an axe that ate its way down to his collarbone.

Blood splashed on Megan's face, temporarily blinding her. She wiped the sticky liquid from her eyes just in time to see a huge warrior in dented plate armor rip his axe free in a spray of blood, his victim crumbling to the ground. Eyes shielded by a faceless full helmet that covered his skull down to his neck, the warrior focused on her and the bloody weapon began rising again, this time to cleave Megan down to her core.

“No!” she screamed, mostly to buy her some time while simultaneously strengthening her magical armor and preparing to strike at the warriors only visible weakness—

the slits of his helmet.

To her surprise, the warrior halted, then shouted, “Move!” while stepping aside. Only then did Megan realize that the fighter and several others at his side merely held back the undead and infected. Behind him loomed the beginning of the corpse mountain, groups of refugees gathering at its base.

“I’ve made it,” Megan muttered surprised. She stumbled past him.

The sudden absence of fighting around her was strangely confusing and she struggled to get her bearings. Looking around, she saw she was now protected by a half-circle of guards, warriors, or simple men and women that had taken up arms. At least a hundred survivors stood huddled closely together, preparing to ascend the mountain. More refugees were arriving by the second, ushered through like Megan.

Feeling a wave of exhaustion wash over her and realizing it was the drain of her spell, she let go of it. She regretted it instantly, the stench of death saturating the air hitting her like a hammer. Retching, she went down on all fours, bile rising to her mouth as she realized the cobblestones were slick with blood and corpse juices seeping from the countless bodies that made up the mountain. She quickly cast her protection spell once more,

the vile stench fading almost instantly. Others did not have that luxury and were either vomiting or trying to fend off the worst of the smell by tying strips of cloth around their faces.

Forcing herself to calm down, her gaze wandered around, yet her blood froze as she saw the battlefield behind her.

“Dear gods!”

The barricades blocking off streets leading to the marketplace had been overrun, hordes of infected and undead streaming onto the marketplace to join the melee. Megan was no soldier, but even she could see that the battle was as good as lost, would be over within the hour, maybe sooner.

She knew she had to get out. Now.

Turning from the combat, her gaze wandered up the mountain and to the unrelenting carnage on its top. Her knees trembled at the thought of what awaited her there, but she did not come this far to give in to her fear now.

“I shall not die here...,” she told herself, her mind already coming up with a plan that might increase her chances of survival.

Not far away, a dozen warriors were preparing another charge up the mountain; women and children huddled

together behind them so they could follow in their wake. None of the warriors looked like they had any hope of actually killing the butchers. The resignation in their faces, and the love with which they regarded some child or woman, telling Megan that the best they hoped for was to throw themselves on the weapons of their enemy. So that their kin might survive. Heroes in the making...

Groups like these were constantly climbing the mountain, clashing against the butchers like the tide against a cliff, their blood wafting back down the mountain as a fine mist. Fighting these monsters was madness and Megan had no inclination to become just another dead hero, her wish to survive being stronger than her pride.

She took the clockwork bow from her back and pressed a button on it. Gears began spinning and the weapon folded onto itself until it was no bigger than a brick. Tugging it away into the safety of her satchel, she then sheathed her two daggers. Unarmed now, she joined a group of women and children accompanied by a group of formidable-looking warriors, just one more survivor that could not fend for herself.

Less than a minute later, a towering knight in bloodstained armor stepped forward, lifting a spear over his head, shouting words of encouragement.

Megan did not even listen, her eyes mapping out the

best route up the hill.

“Onwards, to freedom,” the knight yelled eventually, pointing his spear towards the top of the mountain.

And just like that, they were on their way.



For every step Megan took, she felt her sanity slip away.

The corpse mountain shifted and heaved like the body of an amorphous creature, indicating that a fair amount of the corpses it contained had turned undead and were trying to wriggle free. Thankfully, however, none of the trapped zombies was able to pose a threat. The climbers that had come before had made sure of that by bashing in every skull they could see or chop off any wriggling, searching hand from the undead inside.

Twitching stumps, resembling giant worms trying to bury their way into freedom seemed everywhere... It was an appalling sight. Arms, legs, and the occasional chest gave way beneath Megan, making her fall forward into blood-slick bodies and broken faces on several occasions. Each time she struggled back on her feet in a frenzy. Disgust and the knowledge that the tide of refugees in her wake would just roll over her, stomping her into the rotting flesh until she was but a part of it, jarring her up.

Sticky sweat poured down her face, her exertion made worse by the moist heat emanating from the rotting corpses. She got sick twice as clouds of gas exploded in foul puffs from the bodies, not even her spell able to protect her entirely.

Then the torso of the knight who had been leading the charge up the mountain flew past her. Severed by the midriff, his guts trailing behind him.

She realized she would reach the top in a few moments.

Fear froze her. Megan slowed her ascent, letting several refugees crawl past. They all died within moments, cleft to pieces by the monster in silver armor and the two demons at his side. Up close, the giant warrior looked even more terrifying, as big and imposing as the ramparts themselves, the silver Flamberge in his hands seemingly too big and heavy for a mortal to wield. Yet he swung the weapon effortlessly and without pause, slicing through refugees as if he was but cutting wheat, severing legs, arms, and heads, splitting whole bodies down the middle. The two warriors at his side were equally efficient in their killing, although their work was one of precision rather than the mass destruction their leader wrought.

Unable to move, the blood and body parts rained down on her. It was then that Megan realized she would

die here. Not even her magic would be able to protect her from creatures like this. She would have to retreat, find another way...

It never came to that. The ascending refugees behind her pushed her forward, using her like a shield, just as she had used the others before her.

She fought back, and then a fleeting thought of hope occurred. If she could just cross the distance faster than the ones in her wake, she might make it.

Hoping that the monster would not waste a strike on just one unarmed woman, she stormed forward, her eyes fixed on the head of the giant. His face and eyes concealed behind the helmet, she could not tell of his intent as he raised his sword to his side, ready for the next cleaving strike. Would it tear her apart or the ones in her wake? The tension was unbearable, her heart pounding so loud it drowned out every other noise.

She stepped into the radius of the Flamberge.

Then she was past him.

A wild grin stretched over her terrified features, her eyes looking past the seemingly disinterested mage of the butchers, and fixing on the shadowy forms of other escapees storming through the tunnel.

“I made it,” she yelled in disbelief.

Then, a giant hand grabbed hold of her tunic.



With a suddenness and violence that made her bite through the tip of her tongue, the hulking warrior jerked Megan off her feet, holding her by her tunic as if she weighed no more than a puppy.

“No, I made it! I made it!” she screamed over and over again, a sense of terrible betrayal forcing the words out.

Keening, she struggled to get free, summoning forth what little magic remained to aid her, yet all efforts ceased as she found herself held up before the helmeted face of the titanic warrior. Green fires burned from within the slits of his ornate helmet, burning into her very soul. Rumbling laughter rose from deep within the chest of her tormentor.

“No, you have not,” the juggernaut said, letting scores of refugees sweep past him unscathed. “They have...” Seeing how they got what had been denied her was too much. Tears began streaming down her face.

“Better luck next time ... Back to the pond with you!” the titan roared and with that sent her flying.

Megan screamed, the world becoming a kaleidoscope of colors and movement. Spinning through the air, the wind tugging on her clothes, she tried to concentrate, to

summon her magic once more to protect her from the impact.

She could not focus.

It was just too much...

When she came down on the unyielding cobblestones of the street, she felt a sharp pain in her back, then absolutely nothing. She bounced off the cobblestones a few times, before finally coming to rest against the wall of a building. There she lay, silent and still. A discarded rag doll, arms, legs, and even the lower part of her body twisted at odd angles.

Unable to move or close her eyes, her mind foggy from shock, she saw that the silver butcher had hurled her to the side of the corpse mountain. She had come to rest in a nook of the street, where the first buildings merged with the city wall, out of immediate danger of the battle fought at the base of the corpse-hill.

Her mind slowly righted itself, the realization that the fall must have snapped her spine, leaving her paralyzed slowly dawning on her. The horror was too much to bear. She passed out.

As she woke, the battle was still raging. Terrified of what may become of her, she prayed for a quick death.

Yet the reaper was too busy this day...

As time went on, she began screaming inside her head, tears streaming down her bloody face. Her mind conjured up one horror after another. The most terrifying realization was that, should the corpse mountain grow even more in size, she would soon be part of it, buried alive with the dead and undead...

It was this thought that finally drove her mad.

She had to be mad, because stepping into her line of view, whinnying and clubbing the bodies of the men in front of him with hooves and shouldering them aside, was Sirius.

He looked just like she remembered him from better days, her growing madness blocking out the many grisly wounds marring his hide and his empty belly with the torn entrails hanging from it. It was Sirius, her old companion trotting towards her, not some abomination drenched in blood and with milky white eyes.

Just like she remembered him...

Tears of joy streaming down her motionless face, he came to a halt in front of her broken form, softly nudging her, a gentle kiss to start another wonderful day...

She was so happy she could cry...

She did.

As Sirius opened his mouth, he revealed jagged broken teeth streaked with crimson. He must have been eating

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raspberries again... probably pilfered from a merchant stall. Oh, Sirius, she thought... You are such a hound for a horse.

It was her last thought, for a moment later; the jagged teeth clasp around her throat and with a sharp snap, the world was drenched in darkness and sweet oblivion.

Sirius, such a hound for a horse...

To be continued...