



Mick walked with a palm on his sword's hilt, which hung sheathed at his side. He didn't place his hand there on purpose. It was just something he'd grown accustomed to doing after a lifetime of being ambushed.

The hillside was steep and he looked back to savor the view of the castle. It looked magnificent from this distance. Serene and artistic. Far from the political viciousness that thrived within its walls.

Out here was where Mick thrived. Hunting in the wilderness for a beast to slay or a monster to kill. It was how he made his living and grew his reputation. But he usually worked alone. He wasn't used to traveling with a partner, much less three of them. He would have to, though. Something made especially difficult when one of them insisted on stopping every thirty minutes.

A lancer named Luis, who consistently brought up the rear, sighed and leaned against a tree. "Hold up. Ale break."

Sam, which Mick thought was an odd name for a woman, turned around and snapped. "Are you kidding me?"

"This is the fifth time we've had to stop so you can drink," the archer named Gwen added.

"What can I say?" Luis replied, grabbing the canteen dangling from his belt. "Walking sobers me up."

The women huffed as Luis took a swig.

"These delays aren't doing us any favors," Mick reasoned, "and I'd like to reach our destination before dusk."

"Me too," Luis said with a sly grin. "Hard enough to see during the night without being drunk on top of it."

"Why don't we just leave him?" Gwen mused while gripping the bow around her shoulder.

"I have a better idea." Sam removed one of the many daggers strapped to her abdomen and casually waved it in Luis's direction. "What's stopping me from killing him right now? Increase the bounty's payout for the rest of us."

After finishing another big swig from his canteen, Luis sloppily wiped the golden liquid dripping from his chin. "The king's not an idiot. He wouldn't have called in four mercenaries unless he needed our combined might to slay the dragon. Probably best if we arrived at its nest at full strength."

Sam flung the dagger with a flick of her wrist, impaling the tree beside Luis's head. He didn't flinch.

"Okay," she chirped. "I'll just kill you after we kill it."

"Then who will you celebrate with?" Luis teased, ignoring the dagger still next to his face.

"Not you," Sam chuckled, amused by the prospect. "Not any of you. We're not friends. We're not partners. We're nothing. Just four warriors thrown together by chance without even being bound together by contract."

"What about honor?" Mick asked.

Luis grunted a noise that resembled half a laugh. "Can't remember the last time I paid a woman off in that."

"So should we go our separate ways?" Gwen mused. "Is that what we're discussing? Every merc for herself?"

It was clear to Mick that this group needed some sort of guidance. Not a leader, per se. They would be too stubborn for that. Just someone who could instill logic into their egos.

"Luis was right," Mick stated, still clutching his sword's handle. "The king hired four of us because it'll take four of us to complete this job, and there's no guarantee he'll pay the full bounty if one of us doesn't make it back."

A tense silence fell over the group as they mulled Mick's point.

"Fine," Sam finally exclaimed as she stormed over to Luis's tree. "Just stay out of my way."

She yanked the dagger free and began waving it wildly as she went on. "That goes for all of you. I don't need amateurs cramping up my—"

"Be still," Mick cut her off, raising his hand.

"Seriously?" she said, appalled by the interruption. "If you want to silence me you're going to have to rip out my—"

"Stop talking!" Mick whispered as loud as he dared. He scanned the brush all around them. "We're being watched."

The other three warriors readied their weapons, joining Mick in surveying their surroundings. Gwen nocked an arrow while Sam drew a second dagger. Luis dropped the canteen, exchanging it for his lance. Mick was the last to draw his sword, and just as he did an army of savage creatures with green skin and crooked teeth stormed their position.

"Orcs!" Mick yelled.

The brutes were covered in mangled armor and wielded an assortment of weapons from maces and clubs to axes and flails. They snarled an inhuman battle cry while charging and made an alien screech upon death. Mick and Luis circled one another, relentlessly slicing any fiend within reach.

Sam danced through the crowd with lightning-speed. Her daggers made quick stabs that showered the battle with dark red streaks. Mick only caught glimpses of the femme fatale as she moved yet found an odd familiarity to the way she held the blades as extensions of her body.

Walking backwards into the center of the fight, Gwen scaled up a rock while launching arrow after arrow at orcs in the distance. From her elevated position, Gwen's firing arm stayed in motion. She pulled back the string of her bow and released just to swipe another arrow from her quiver and do it again.

It wasn't long before the hillside was littered with green bodies, but the orcs never stopped. If anything their numbers only increased, forcing the humans to fight harder and faster just to keep up.

As fatigue set in, a sudden gust of wind bombarded the battle. The unnatural gale swirled into a mini cyclone, causing the combatants, human and orc alike, to lift off the ground. Tumbling bodies collided in the chaotic twister. Then, when the swirling air abruptly dissipated, everyone dropped back down to the field with a thud.

Several orcs were dead. Many were only injured. But they were all ignored as another wave of their brethren moved in to take the humans prisoner.

Mick and those fighting alongside him had lost their weapons in the scuffle, and he was just too weak to resist his captors. He looked up and saw an orc approaching them that was different than the rest. The creature was taller, skinnier, and wore a robe unlike the traditional orc battle armor. This strange orc held a staff made of twisted, dead wood, and Mick quickly realized he wasn't just the orc in charge. He was also a mage.

Pointing his crooked staff, the orc mage grunted a ghoulish language at his minions, ordering them to bring Gwen forward while others cleared the hillside of their fallen comrades.

Mick wondered what the orcs were doing there. This wasn't a small raiding party wandering the countryside. The four of them had stumbled upon an army preparing for an invasion.

They dropped Gwen to her knees in front of the mage who turned to the others, snarling and spitting in his guttural language.

"We can't understand you," Mick pleaded with him.

"And I don't think he can understand us," Luis snickered.

The mage continued to bark at them, but Mick didn't need to decipher his howls to know what he wanted. The orcs planned on storming the castle and were looking for a

way inside. They weren't going to get it, though. Despite their differences, Mick trusted the others not to turn on their own kind. Even in the face of death.

When it became clear the mage wasn't getting an answer, he called over a rather large, thuggish orc that dragged an unwieldy axe behind him.

"I—I can't watch this," Sam said, averting her eyes.

The orc executioner took up position beside Gwen and raised the axe high.

"Just don't forget about me, will you?" she lamented as tears swelled in her eyes. "Make sure the king knows I died in his service. Make sure the people sing songs about—"

The axe came down hard, severing Gwen's head from her body in one swift slice. It rolled down the hillside, tumbling over rocks and brush before vanishing out of sight.

As a pair of orcs took the archer's headless body away, Mick felt an odd sense of grief. Gwen was practically a stranger to him, yet his heart swelled as if he'd lost much more than a temporary companion. A knife of anguish stabbed him in the chest like he'd just lost a friend, a relative, maybe even a lover.

Mick wanted to search his heartache for an explanation, an answer to why he experienced such sorrow over the death of someone he barely knew. He didn't get the chance, though. The mage ordered him brought forward and placed on his knees to become the orc executioner's second victim.

Again, the mage gurgled his demands, and again he was met with silence. The executioner lifted his axe and Mick closed his eyes, preparing for that sharp trip to oblivion.

He heard a subtle growl instead.

The orcs had made an assortment of strange noises since they first unleashed their attack, none of which resembled anything remotely human. This sound was different. It wasn't crudely primitive but animalistic. Raw and visceral. Like a predator on the hunt.

Mick opened his eyes and saw everyone around him, human and orc, staring up the hillside. He did the same and discovered a silver dragon peering over top of them. The creature's sharp lizard-like eyes focused on the puny figures before it, sizing them up as potential meals. It reared back on its hind legs, stretching its wings and towering nearly fifty stories tall. The dragon roared into the sky before unleashing a breath of fire that scorched a dozen orcs into nothing more than charred husks.

Chaos erupted across the hillside. Half the orc forces fled for their lives while the other half scrambled to attack the beast. With the executioner no longer at his side, Mick stood and caught a sword being tossed at him. Once it was in his hand, Mick realized the sword was his and he saw Luis had thrown it.

"You still up for killing that thing?" the lancer asked.

Sam stood beside him, both of them with weapons in hand.

Mick nodded and took a fighting stance as well. "It was the only thing I had planned for today."

The three humans charged ahead, ignoring the orcs futilely throwing rocks at the dragon's head. The beast opened his mouth and let loose another stream of fire. Mick lowered his shoulder, preparing to be consumed by the inferno, but the flames abruptly stopped as if hitting an invisible wall. It was the orc mage, wielding his staff, who halted the fire breath from engulfing them.

Mick was grateful for the save and used the opening to launch himself at the dragon's leg. With Sam and Luis following, the three warriors climbed the dragon's scales to its back, stabbing and piercing as they moved. The dragon roared in pain while swiping at the tiny ants that infested its body.

Mick held on as tight as he could while also driving his sword with enough force to pierce the creature's thick skin, but his grip weakened by the second. The dragon flapped its wings hard enough to fling the unwanted intruders from its back. After soaring wildly through the air, the humans crashed hard into the orcs attacking from the ground.

The dragon retracted its head to build up for another wave of fire when the orc mage stepped forward, raising his staff to the sky. A loud crack boomed from the heavens, and a shower of lightning rained upon the battlefield.

The bolts were random and merciless, jolting every living thing within the mage's reach. The dragon took the worst of it, crying out in pain so loud that it rivaled the thunder echoing all around them. The orcs howled and shrieked as well, and Mick didn't blame them for it. The pain was excruciating.

Mick tried his best not to scream. He didn't want to give the orc mage the satisfaction, even though he knew the spellcaster was suffering too. Instead, Mick bit his lip and fought through the agony, all the way up to the point that darkness filled his eyes and his mind went blank.