

The Forgotten Hero

“Gods almighty!”

The words were scarce whispers past the chapped lips of the soldier who stood frozen, his somber eyes gazing beyond the steppes of the mountain range to the valley beyond. Standing atop one of the several watchtowers located at various intervals within the mountain city of Arrow’s Peak, the watchman had a clear view of the unwelcome sight ahead. His pale, muscular arms flexed as they rested on the parapet, his breath hanging about his face in white mist during the crux of the winter season. Cheeks numb, every one of his limbs ached from the cold, yet he cared little, for the only matter of importance was the enormous army that advanced in the valley below, toward the city.

Truly, it was a dreadful sight. At least thirty-thousand troops marched, blood-red banners waving amidst the winter chill like a grim precursor of impending doom. Footmen, trudging along in crimson tabards, their pikes pointed to the sky, and cavalry as well, intermingling with the horde. No doubt those cursed wizards were among them, clad in their outlandish cloaks and skull masks. Lastly, Wyverns added to the overwhelming sight, those nasty winged beasts of dragon kin, swirling above with enormous bat-like wings, forging a dark blotch in the failing light of the setting sun.

Randas watched the procession from his perch on the watchtower, his face emotionless though his insides churned in a mixture of fear and anger. There was no sense to it, no reason behind the upcoming slaughter. True, the great northern hordes had an everlasting dislike of Arrow’s Peak, mostly for the simple fact that Arrow’s Peak was a strong, self-reliant civilization located in the center of a harsh, tribal territory. It didn’t matter that Arrow’s Peak had done nothing to provoke an assault, nor did it matter that they’d always kept to themselves, caring little of events that took place beyond its sturdy walls, save perhaps protecting the trade routes that carried south to the Kingdom of Hafnarfjor. The hordes, united together by some unknown warlord, strode upon them anyway, and what vile cruelty they ushered, Randas could only imagine.

“They will reach us by nightfall.”

Randas hadn't heard the other soldier approach until he had reached his side and spoken. He glanced briefly at the newcomer – a young soldier whose face he recognized, but whose name he didn't know – before returning his attentions to the spectacle in the distance. He didn't reply, and for several seconds, both men simply watched the sea of red as it gradually inched closer with every agonizing moment.

Finally, the young man spoke again. “You know, the city council has discouraged the citizens from fleeing. I have a wife and son, and all they can do is linger in this walled prison until death reaches them.” The sentry shook his head glumly. The sharp air had turned his youthful face red and watered his eyes. “The council believes that those devils will show mercy if we remain in the city and surrender. Fools.”

“Where would we run?” Randas' words weren't really a question. “All routes are blocked. There's nowhere to escape in these mountains. Surrendor or no, they'll kill every last one of us.” Randas spat. He left no room for debate in the statement. “The men at least. The women will have it worse. May the gods pity them.” For the first time in his life, Randas was thankful he hadn't a female companion to worry for. Not one that remained in Arrow's Peak, anyway.

“Have we no hope, then?” the young man asked, a scant flicker of optimism in his tone.

Randas grimaced even more than usual. “Nay. We will hold for some time, no doubt, for we are hardened and stubborn as hell. But, look at those sheer numbers. We cannot hold back an army like that.” He tilted his head, as if mentally pointing to the valley. Then, in a surprising move, he waved his clenched fist in the air. “But, by the gods, I won't die easy. The blood of that damned red army will drown my sword.”

“I am not so ready to die,” the younger soldier simply stated.

Randas glumly nodded. “Let such fear drive you to become something greater in your last moments.”

The man said nothing in response, and Randas couldn't blame him. In truth, his words felt hollow and meaningless even to himself. He merely said them to encourage a frightened man. There was no making sense of this madness, or the deaths that would follow.

Forcing his eyes away from the scene, Randas gave the other man an encouraging slap on the shoulder before starting down the tower. He clenched his teeth angrily and pain welled in his stomach; the anxiety of anticipation, or perhaps sheer helplessness. Was this really the end? Would he die to a flood of sadistic warriors as they poured into the city like a mob of starving cockroaches? Gods, the thought made his sick.

Randas reached the landing and entered the main street of Arrow's Peak, called Westward Way. The city was little more than one ten-mile long road with a few avenues that wound like snakes into the mountain crags.

The normal scents of the city were absent; spilled wine, cooking spices, perfumes of the women. As he sauntered along, Randas felt the deathly calm about him. The streets shown empty save for the occasional guard or mercenary preparing for the onslaught. Most sane folk had locked themselves away in their dwellings, probably in vain effort to disregard the horror that was shortly to come upon them. It wouldn't last, for when the siege began, the terrified populace would flood Westward Way in a torrent of panic and madness, like cattle running to the slaughter. He could almost hear their screams; smell the buildings that would be put to the torch, their luminescence bright against the stark black sky. It would be utter chaos, and he'd be right in the middle.

Sweet merciful gods, he thought. What hell will come upon us?

Randas had taken his position near the center of the city when the first wave of wyvern's began to swoop in low, their riders tossing javelins down upon the populace. The tips of the descending projectiles exploded as they made contact below. The result was nothing short of misery itself. People scampered aimlessly about the streets, crying out of fear, or injury, or worse. The explosions manifested from small stone spheres filled with oil and a small

elixir of fire, which were then placed on the ends of the javelins. The resulting bursts were modest, but at large quantity, they were brutally effective at causing damage and creating chaos beyond the protection of the city walls. The spheres would smash upon impact, throwing flaming oil in all directions, lighting up the nighttime world and setting anything flammable afire. Curtains of flame shifted in the darkened night, and a wave of smoke stung Randas's lungs and eyes. Battling blurred vision, he gazed upward.

Only vaguely, the soldier could see the Arrow's Peak Sky Riders soaring upward to meet the enemy wyverns in the sky. These Sky Riders, soldiers mounted on dragons, were vastly outnumbered, but they were a dogged bunch and extremely skilled. Randas guessed they'd all die, but not before many a wyvern and its mount had been slain by the deadly lance of Arrow's Peak's most pretesgious, and feared, division of the city guard.

The solider pushed his way through the growing mob of terrified citizens. Scattered amid them was children, the lucky ones merely frightened beyond reason, the unlucky having already lost their parents within the press of bodies. The madness before the butchery, he mused grimly.

As Randas moved past one building wholly aflame, he heard a scream from within. Something inside him, some unintentional code of honor, caused his momentum to slow until he ultimately stopped.

Someone cried out from inside that inferno, and though he had no desire to act upon it, Randas understood he could not simply walk away. Accelerating to full speed, he burst through the open front doors and immediately realized that the structure was a tavern. A lone figure crawled on the ground near the back wall. Randas waded further inside, nearly closing his eyes amidst the swell of black vapor and searing heat. He reached the figure and pulled the body to its feet.

An old man, delirium draping his panicked face.

"Help," the fellow croaked before coughing roughly, directly into Randas' face.

Without thinking, the soldier bent low and scooped the man over his shoulder. By now, smoke and flame had obscured his vision beyond

usefulness. Randas could only guess where the door was located. With heat so intense, it felt as if his skin were about to melt from his bones. He pushed forward, and to his pleasure and relief, carried the old man directly through the doorway and out into the lunacy of Arrow's Peak.

The cold air felt like heaven to Randas following the intense inferno of the tavern. He towed the old man sufficiently far enough away from the burning building, dumping him into a snow bank.

The elderly fellow was hacking uncontrollably, but somehow managed to thank the guardsman between convulsions.

Randas frowned. "Not sure you're better off, friend, unless you'd rather die by a spear thrust." The soldier didn't wait to hear the old man's answer, for he left him there and hustled away.

At this point, the streets had taken a different tone. People still lingered about in terror-stricken indecision, but there were fewer, for many had scuttled further east in a desperate attempt to flee the oncoming tide of spearmen who had broken into the city.

Randas could see the devils now, plowing their way through the western gate, killing all who stood in their way, be it soldier or commoner. Clearly, they had already torn through the Arrow's Peak western contingent of defenders, and now, inside the gates, it was only a matter of time.

For another moment, Randas calmly watched the deluge of death. What a surreal vision it was! Similar to having a front row seat to the apocalypse, he thought. Chaos everywhere, sound and sight. Nothing redeemable remained, no lasting memory to hold dear before his end. His people, his friends, dying to their own screams by the hands of invaders whose merciless bloodlust drove them on. Gods, what a horrible end!

"Come, soldier. We need every sword for our defense."

Jerked from his stupor, Randas turned to see another soldier, an officer, regarding him. The man was older, but certainly still able. His hair shown fully gray, as did the stubble on his chin, and the freezing weather caused every wrinkle on his face to show more prominently.

“Captain Jenk,” Randas acknowledged his superior.

The captain pointed to a group of other soldiers who busied themselves setting up a blockade in the middle of Westward Way. Some of them came from the city’s rear-guard, aiding their brethren, preparing for a mid-city stand. Anything that took up space; wagons, barrels, and the like, was dragged and heaped together, drawing a line across Westward Way. Looking back at the captain, Randas nodded and withdrew his sword from its scabbard. That seemed to satisfy the officer, for he moved away, barking commands at others.

Randas took his position at the barricade, which spanned the entire width of the street. Beside him were a good number of other soldiers, standing firm and holding on to any remnants of hope they could muster. Seeing the willful determination in his comrades, Randas almost allowed himself a trace of confidence until he witnessed the sea of red coming toward them from the west. It seemed endless; wave after wave of berserkers with murder in their eyes. The sound of their rushing feet upon the cobble and their shouts of war turned his stomach in a knot.

“Arrows! Fire at will!” Captain Jenk’s voice carried loud and clear.

The twang of bowstrings resonated as archers from the rear guard began firing over the barricade. The front line of attackers crashed and rolled along the ground, arms flailing, as those behind struggled to trample over top of them, many tripping within the bedlam. A single wizard, part of Arrow’s Peak defense, threw a fireball that exploded amid the mass of berserkers. The unfortunate souls caught in the blast were flung in several directions, their furs and leather armor torched and set aflame, their skin burning horrifically. After two more rounds of arrows and spells, the enemy footmen closed the gap.

“Arms!” the commander shouted above the fray. “Hold your pos—” Either he had been struck down, or his voice had simply been drowned out by the clamor.

Randas ducked beneath the spear-head of a soldier whose progress had been halted by a barrel full of water at the blockade. Leaning forward, Randas

thrust his sword, catching the man pure in the face. He heard a muffled scream as the enemy soldier reeled backward, but another foe had already taken his place, and Randas engaged him. In every aspect, it looked as if the barricade would be overrun within seconds by the seemingly endless horde.

From the sky, a wyvern spiraled downward, its body bloodied with fatal wounds, and crashed on the opposite side of the barricade, in the midst of the oncoming mass. Several men were instantly crushed. One enemy footman, desperate to escape plummeting monster, leapt recklessly over the barrier. Randas missed him with his sword, but was able to secure the attacker by pinning his arms to the ground. He looked in other man's eyes and saw a fellow who was probably in his mid-twenties.

Randas hesitated only long enough to blink, then cut his throat and spun back to his feet to prepare for the next enemy. The dead wyvern had given the defenders a few moments respite, but soon the attackers worked their way around the huge lifeless beast and continued their advance.

No more thoughts crossed Randas' mind. He simply fought; fought like a madman who had sacrificed all else and no longer had purpose to live. His sword was red from hilt to point, his arms tired, but he carried on. Those fighting at his side fell one-by-one around him, and soon the enemy footmen were pouring over the barricade.

Randas stepped back to catch his breath and give himself room to move. The dead bodies strewn at his feet hindered him and he needed space. A foe came rushing from his side, and Randas dropped to a knee and swung low, severing the man's legs just above the knees. When he rose, he squared his body to face his next opponent.

The newest berserker did not rush him heedlessly as the others had, but instead approached with caution. He was dressed in furs and finery that most certainly marked him as more than just the common barbarian, and he carried a fine sword rather than a pole-arm. Randas bordered on exhaustion, but he gathered resolve and prepared himself for the next challenge.

Blades flashed, and the two duelists locked each other in combat. No one else interfered, but several of the enemy spearmen halted to watch their

superior finish off one of the last of the city's protectors stationed at the barricade.

It became apparent that his newest opponent was skilled with a sword, and Randas, battling his own fatigue, fell heavily on the defensive. With his last bits of strength, he parried the enemy's assaults, but couldn't manage to mount an offensive of his own. Catcalls from the onlookers rose in volume, anticipating the concluding fatal blow.

In an effort to change the tide of the duel, Randas made a clumsy thrust aimed for his adversary's neck. The enemy swordsman deflected the strike, and in an impressive maneuver, encircled Randas' weapon with his own and knocked it free, disarming the exhausted Arrow's Peak watchman.

There was a cheer from the audience, and the victor grinned slightly before rearing back his arm, poised for a death blow. At the last possible instant, Randas ducked the sweeping attack, his opponent's blade missing the top of his head by less than an inch. He then hurled his body directly into the chest of his opponent, and both toppled gracelessly to the ground. Randas threw a fist into the nose of his adversary and heard it shatter. As the man cursed in pain, blood gushing from his face, Randas took advantage of the moment to wrest the sword from the others' grip, placing the tip against his throat.

Completely out of breath, Randas pressed his face close and muttered, "For Arrow's Peak..." The foe vaguely struggled as Randas drove the blade home, killing the man with his own sword. It was his final triumph.

He never felt the other spearmen fall on him, their thrusts puncturing his body. For him, the bell had already tolled. He could die knowing he'd sacrificed everything for the people of Arrow's Peak. He wouldn't know what fate awaited those on the eastern end of the city, but it was no longer his concern.

As life drifted from his body, he gazed to the sky one last time, ready to embrace those that welcomed all the forgotten heroes of war.