

## Chapter 5

Darkness still dominated the sky although only the brightest of the stars were still visible like the fading looks of a once beautiful woman. Aro, Volorious, Tarragonus, Hadrus, and three other men from the Wolves had moved to the base of the wall without being noticed thanks to covering magic from the mages of the armies of Jojus the Black.

Volorious took a step away from the base of the wall and slipped off his hip the long length of rope to which a grappling hook was attached. He looked up to the top of the wall and began twirling the hook around in his hand.

“Keep still,” Aro whispered in a sharp but quiet voice when he saw the movement from Volorious.

Volorious immediately stopped, bit his lip, and nodded his head.

“Don’t throw it until I give the order,” said Aro with a grin and a wink that may or may not have been noticed in the dim light. “You’ll be fine. Don’t worry.”

Volorious nodded his head and smiled at Aro, “Thank you, captain,” he said.

Horns suddenly sounded from the distance as if to call forth the dawn. Just then the first rays of light appeared on the horizon.

“Steady,” said Aro quietly and watching the men carefully “Not until I give the order.”

The horns redoubled and the coming light revealed the armies of the Black lined up in formation. Behind them stood a large battering ram and other siege engines. The horns sounded again and the first stones from the catapults launched into the sky although in the dim light their path was impossible to follow.

Rocks bounced against the front walls doing no apparent damage and the massed men began to move slowly forward to the beat of drums and the sound of horns.

The armies of the White responded quickly and horns from within the palisades countered those from without creating a terrible cacophony of noise like a murder of crows joined by a flock of gulls. At the base of the wall the contingent of Wolves remained silent and unmoving. Aro said nothing.

The sounds of drums and horns was soon replaced the noise of arrows in flight followed by the screams of the wounded.

“Now,” said Aro quietly with a nod to Volorious.

The former farmhand stepped out and away from the wall a few feet, held the length of rope in his left hand, twirled the grappling hook around and around, and looked up to the top of the wall. He paused for a few moments and all the sounds of war seemed to fade into nothingness.

Then the grappling hook flew through the air, the rope trailing as it uncoiled behind. The hook hung poised in the sky for a moment before clearing the top of the wall by only a few inches. It landed with only a small clink that was drowned out by the sounds of battle all around.

Even as Volorious pulled on the rope with first a gentle tug to catch the hook and then a more vigorous yank to set it, Aro leapt onto the giant's shoulders and took the trailing rope into his hand. Volorious pulled down hard to ensure it was set and Aro began climbing rapidly, hand over hand, not bothering to use his legs or feet at all. He seemed to fly up the rope and was up and over the top seemingly instantly.

No one needed to give orders as to who was supposed to ascend next as they well knew the sequence given by Aro earlier. Volorious climbed much more slowly but his arms bulged with power as he went up. He braced his feet against the wall and hand-over-hand ascended. Another man began climbing right behind him.

As Volorious cleared the top he had just enough time to see Aro disappear down the stairs just to his right where the excellent memory of the captain had predicted they would be. Volorious stepped into a puddle and only then noted the dead man leaning against the wall blood still flowing freely from a long slash across his neck. The big soldier paused long enough to ensure the grappling hook was securely placed and then chased after Aro and down the stairs. There were no other guards to be seen on this section of the wall. He arrived at the base of the steps and turned to his right toward the little guardhouse that contained the winch that opened the door to the sally port.

Aro was already there pulling at the handle but their luck ran out here, for whomever was inside followed proper procedures and locked it despite there being no immediate threat.

"Out of the way," shouted Volorious, perhaps too loudly, charging forward and toward the door without hesitation.

Aro had just enough time to leap to the side before the giant of a man smashed into the heavy door shoulder first. The door gave off a splintering crash but remained closed for the moment. Volorious staggered back from the blow, squared his shoulders, and lashed forward with a massive boot. This time the door flew open and into a soldier wearing a white tabard emblazoned with the symbol of Thrimbar upon it.

The man crumpled the floor blood streaming from his nose and Aro dashed in even before he hit the ground. Aro kicked away the stop that prevented the winch from being turned and immediately began to crank. Volorious leapt in next to him and looked over his shoulder to where Hadrus stood with his sword drawn.

"It'll be done in a second, signal your friends!"

Hadrus nodded his head and dashed back toward the stairs that led up the wall.

"Stay here," commanded Aro as they finished turning the crank. "Don't let anyone turn that thing."

“Yes, captain,” said Volorious and pulled his thick sword from its scabbard, took his immense shield into his hand, and stood in front of the door, his massive frame blocking the entire entrance. The other members of the Wolves, having arrived in the interlude, took up position just beside him. Meanwhile, Tarragonus slid between Volorious and the door and positioned himself behind Volorious at the ready to cast spells in support of the mercenaries.

They didn’t have long to wait as an alert captain of the White somewhere along the wall noted the intrusion and organized a counterattack. Not a minute passed before a half-dozen men appeared from around a corner and charged the Wolves in a ragged line. The first man veered away from Volorious at the center of the line and directly into the blade of another soldier and two more men went down quickly before the remainder backed away and waited for reinforcements or at least someone with missile weapons.

A commander of some rank was the next to arrive and spotted the remaining soldiers hanging back, “Charge them now, we’ve got to close the sally port!”

At that moment an arrow pierced his neck and he went down in a shower of blood as first one, then three, then dozens of black clad warriors charged through the gate. The remaining soldiers in white turned around and ran as fast as their legs could carry them.

The warriors of Jojus the Black poured into the gap and a tall man with a gaudy uniform came to relieve Aro and the other Wolves at the gatehouse.

“Well done,” he said with a nod of his head. “We’ll take matters from here. You can do as you please. The city will be ours in a matter of hours.”

Tarragonus looked at Aro and nodded his head, “What now, captain?”

Aro smiled, “It’s my opinion that, have taken enormous risks to ensure the success of this delicate operation, we deserve a little time away from the fighting to relax.” He looked around. “As I recall there was an officer’s only tavern down that street at which we mercenaries were not welcome. I’m thinking that the rules in regards to where we can and cannot go might be relaxed at this time of crisis.”

The few remaining men all grinned at one another although Hadrus said nothing.

Aro looked at the soldier in black and pursed his lips, “Hadrus!” he commanded.

“Yes?” said the former prisoner.

“You can run along and join your comrades in conquest if you desire. The battle is won but there are plenty of skirmishes to be had in the city and spoils as well. I wouldn’t want to deprive you of any fun you might have in mind.”

Hadrus nodded his head and put his sword into the scabbard on his belt, “Thank you, Captain Aro.” With that he trotted off down the street to join his unit as they captured the city.

“To that tavern?” asked Tarragonus with a grin while watching Hadrus leave. “I have no desire to risk my skin any more today.”

“Perhaps we should wait for the rest of our command,” said Volorious looking at the sally port where soldiers in black continued to pour through. “They should be along soon enough.”

“You know the tavern of which I speak?” asked Aro a twinkle in his eye.

Volorious nodded.

“Well then, you wait here for our comrades and guide them to the tavern when they arrive. That way the rest of us can start drinking and begin arrangements for entertainment before the others arrive.”

“Yes, captain,” said Volorious nodding his head and smiling.

“Come along, men,” said Aro the wide grin never leaving his face. “We’ll find that tavern and, if I’m not mistaken, there was a house of ill repute next door. The girls will need protectors now that a new authority has come to town. I suspect the commander of the Black will not object to us saving a few attractive women in payment for our services. Perhaps we might arrange a loan of them to soothe our needs for a few weeks as a bonus!”

The three other Wolves cheered and even Tarragonus smiled.

“And we’ll want to find where they disposed of Captain Aurelius as well,” said Aro his mood darkening and the smile departing. “We can only hope the body is intact so that we can give him the burial he deserves.”

This proclamation sobered the men somewhat.

Meanwhile Volorious walked the few yards over to the sally port and watched as more reinforcements from the demonic army poured through. It wasn’t until half an hour or more passed and the sky was bright that the remaining members of the Wolves came upon him.

“Aro and the men are up ahead at a tavern around that corner,” said Volorious to them they entered the gate with their swords drawn at the ready. “We are not doing any more fighting today. Aro has ordered you to join up with him at the tavern and await commands.”

“What about you, Volorious,” said one of the gruff mercenaries eyeing him narrowly. “You will not join us?”

Volorious shook his head, “I find myself wanting to learn how an army of demon worshippers treat a city recently sacked. Do you remember how the priests of Thrimbar treated the people in that town we helped take a few months back? It was not a pretty site; I wonder if the forces of darkness will be more merciful or less.”

The mercenary nodded his head, “You’re a thinker, Volorious. That you are. Those things are beyond my understanding. I’ll save you a bottle of wine and perhaps a girl as well.”

Volorious nodded his head and smiled at the thought. The life of a soldier lacked many things and drink and women were often among them.

He cocked his head to the side, listened for the sound of fighting, and was able to hear some horns in the distance; although the winding streets of the city and high walls around it made it all but impossible to tell from what direction came the sound. Trusting to luck he sheathed his sword, put his shield on his back, and began to wander the city in the opposite direction as had gone his companions.

There were sporadic signs of battle about the city and occasionally small bunches of corpses, or those not quite yet dead, lay in heaps where they had been haphazardly dumped. Volorious walked past them with barely a glance and continued to wander the streets as the sun rose slowly in the sky. It was turning out to be a lovely day with only a slight breeze and nary a cloud in sight. What few civilians he saw rushed quickly to their house and peered at him from windows.

As the day went on and Volorious continued his meandering throughout the conquered city he began to more frequently run into soldiers from the victorious army as they celebrated their conquest. Many of them were already inebriated although officers seemed to largely have them under control. A quick look over the tops of nearby buildings gave no indication of fires spreading out of control through the city.

On occasion he passed houses with their doors kicked in but there did not seem to be anything other than sporadic looting. Children did not lay dead in the doorways and the screaming of women did not emanate from the residences.

By midday there seemed to be no more fighting and Volorious found himself heading back to the region where the Wolves were presumably still drinking the day away. He eventually found the tavern Aro mentioned and saw two of his comrades standing guard at the door.

“Hail, Volorious,” shouted one of them with a grin on his face. “Aro insisted upon saving a bottle of the finest wine for you and a woman as well. Go in, make merry. For tomorrow we have no commission.”

“There will always be wars,” said Volorious quietly as he passed through the door and into the building. The place seemed to be largely intact having been kept from deprivation during the siege by the officers who patronized it and having now fallen to the tender care of the Wolves.

“Volorious,” said Tarragonus from a corner of the room as he saw his friend. He was stripped down to just a tunic and leather pants and his bare feet sat in a tub of water. “We’ve been worried about you.”

Volorious looked for any sign of Aro but if he was around there was no evidence of him. “Where’s Aro?”

“With a couple of the girls from next door,” said Tarragonus with a grin jerking his thumb to point to a set of stairs that led up. “I could use something of the same myself but I will restrain my urges until I return home to my wife.”

“Greta is a good woman,” said Volorious with a smile remembering the short time they stayed in Tarragonus’s home village and he met the woman. “You are fortunate to have such as her and she is as well to have you.”

“Hardly,” said the druid with a smile as he looked at the wooden floorboards of the inn. “Well, I’m lucky to have her, but I could be a better husband in many ways. But enough of me,” he continued on looking back up to Volorious. “You are a young man, full of vigor, not yet married or betrothed to any girl. Aro made sure to keep one of the whores away from the other men so she’d be fresh for you.”

“And a bottle of wine as well?” said Volorious with a smile. His mood was pleasant because of the good order of the forces of Jojus the Black. He was glad not to have witnessed some of the more gruesome acts that come with any conquest, deeds done in the high spirits of victory, things which he had seen before.

“And a bottle of wine as well,” said Tarragonus with a grin and nodded with his head to a man who stood at the bar. “Now we’ll have that bottle which you boasted about to our commander earlier.”

The barkeep knelt down behind the heavy oak wood bar and emerged a moment later with a grin that displayed at least half-a-dozen yellow and crooked teeth. “You’re the fellow then,” he cackled. “Remember our good graces when the Black Demons come here. Remember we were your friends. No poison drinks and good girls without dirks hidden under their skirts.”

“We’ll remember,” said Tarragonus his mood suddenly turning somber as he appraised Volorious with keen eyes. “What did you see out there, Volorious? Things to make a good man weep and horrors that brought joy to those with evil their hearts? Are demon worshippers kinder or viler to their conquered foes than other men?”

“No worse, that’s sure,” said Volorious with a smile as he looked at the bottle of wine the man held. “Not that I saw at least. The officers keep the men in line so far. Tonight will tell the tale though.”

“Indeed,” said Tarragonus with a look to the door where two of the Wolves still stood guard. “There’s nothing to be done about it until the morrow in any case. Best enjoy yourself while you can. The girl awaits upstairs; what room was it?” he asked of the bartender.

“Third door on the left from the top of the stairs,” said the man setting down the bottle of wine with a thump.

“Open it and I’ll have two glasses,” said Volorious with a smile. “Share the spoils, I say.”

The bartender quickly obliged and Volorious took the bottle and both glasses in one massive paw and headed up the stairs.

“Happy venture,” said Tarragonus with a grin and went back to his own drink.

Volorious nodded at his friend and then turned to the barkeep. “Does she have a name?”

“Does it matter?” replied the man.

Volorious shook his head, frowned, and headed up.