

PROLOGUE: Sentries

Thirty years before Walter's Banquet:

Six warriors stood over a desert dune fixing their gaze towards the east. Their silhouettes were like statues under the moonlit sky, with their weapons planted over the sand in front of them.

One of them moved more than the others. "This is taking forever!" Victor Vernon complained as his awkward, acorn shaped head shifted left and right at his companions. "How much more are we supposed to wait?"

"About fifteen minutes, give or take. He'll be here before the sun comes up." Another replied as his left eye glimmered, hinting at his Prowess of foresight.

"Patience, Victor," said their commander, who towered above them all.

"Yeah, kid, settle down. Try to enjoy the quiet of the desert wind," said another as the red of his waving cape revealed itself under rays of starlight.

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Victor scoffed, “I know you’re a hotshot, pal. But don’t call me kid...”

“Shhh silence,” ordered their commander, “Don’t waste your thoughts on petty arguing. Take this time to temper your minds. The darkness looms and we’re here to put it down,” he turned his glance toward Victor. “Duty. Focus on duty. Focus on your brothers and your strength and blades.”

Victor nodded quietly as the man in the red cape leaned in and shot a glance at him. “Sorry *light bearer*.”

“Light bearer...” Victor grinned, “that’s more like it.”

Fifteen minutes passed and a figure approached in the distance: a cloud of sand dragging chained prisoners toward their direction.

“Something’s pulling them from under the sand.” Victor noticed. The others stood quiet as a subtle smirk played in Trasque’s lips.

The dust cloud halted near the dune, the prisoners fell on their knees, crying and gasping for air and a dark voice emerged from beneath the ground.

“You are in my way, creatures of dust.”

“In your way?” asked the man in the red cape, “No, no, no we are your way’s end!”

“Oh?” The voice replied. “Daring little things seek to die in shame?” It said, as a thundering laugh followed, shaking the ground beneath the crying prisoners. “Very well then. Feed The Salasil’s hunger.”

A great arm emerged from the ground, followed by another, and then the face of an eyeless, mouthless giant emerged. Then his body emerged, with red lidless eyes over its chest, and a dreadful, fanged mouth opening up within its stomach. Its breath was the smell of sulfur. The creature was massive, towering over the dune. This was their target, the Salasil.

Victor flinched, but his companions did not waver.

“It is time for our blades to fulfill their promise...” Trasque spoke. His skin began to fume as vapor shot out of his nostrils with each breath he let out. This was his Prowess, the Blood Rage. He then lifted his mighty sword from the ground and pointed it to the Salasil. “The promise of your death.”

The creature’s laughter drew silent at Trasque’s words. “You dare to address the Elden Beings in such a way?” It spoke, its eyes growing a red, furious glow. “You shall not speak another word, creatures of the dust!”

Trasque turned his gaze to Victor and gave him a pointed nod. “Show him your Prowess, light bearer,” he commanded.

Victor nodded. The Salasil charged towards the dune. Victor raised his palms and whispered, “shine” as a blinding light emerged from his being, all in the direction of the creature.

The Salasil cried and its jagged hands covered its eyes as another force toppled it to the ground.

The Sentries charged in a daring attack. The light subsided, and the Salasil was pinned down and defeated. The man in the red cape drew near the beast’s throat. “I told you. This is the end of the road,” he said to it, before swinging down his blade upon it.

The Salasil turned to dust, the prisoners were freed, and the man in the red cape looked back at Victor with a nod. Then they turned to the East to spot the first light of dawn.

ACT I: NOBLES

In the Western World, were the four nations of Anthem, Corvoro, Bragslav, and Lereux.

Here, the Sentries dwelled as watchmen against the beings of the dark.

Faithful to the people and loyal to the crown, these great warriors of unequaled skill gave their lives against foes that few believed in.

But the world lost sight of their sacrifice, and the four nations abolished the sentries by mandate.

Now, the nations keep their peace, and the darkness begins to loom...

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The doom of war was long at rest, but the light of peacetime cast a long shadow behind its onlookers. It stalked them, as something else took root in their souls. Twenty years of silence in the West blinded the children of peace from the presence of darkness, and with the passing of time, it emerged.

King Walter Howsard had seen both war and peace. He understood, more than most, what twisted the wills of people. He scheduled a banquet on the night of his 70th birthday. On that afternoon, while the servants prepared the great hall for this joyous occasion, the wine maid had her back against the cellar wall.

“We shouldn’t be doing this, Roth,” she breathed soft words into the ear of her beloved. The doors were shut, and the cellar was a good place to hide.

Roth of the Paladins, the King’s sworn guard, held her in a tender embrace. He bore the golden spangled armor caped in sapphire that was his uniform. He wore all but his helmet, one of gold with carved stars and sapphire plumes which covered everything but the eyes of its wearer. The

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helm stood over a wine barrel, before the cellar's darkening corridors. Roth allowed himself a moment, from his post, to embrace the woman he loved.

He then loosened his embrace, the weight of duty pressing over him. "You're right," he said to the girl. "I must resume my post."

The girl smiled at him, caressing his cheek and examining his long red hair. "We can continue this after the ceremony," she said, as a loud cry called for her from the banquet hall above, startling them both. "I'm coming!" she yelled back, before looking back at Roth. "I must take these flagons. You wait here. It would not look good for the two of us to arrive together. It might raise an eyebrow or two," she winked.

Roth stood in place as the girl ran out with her flagons of wine, leaving him in the dim shadows of oak, redwood, and yew containers. He picked up his helm and examined it, as its olive-leaf eyes examined him back, calling him to his duty. He then placed the helmet over his head and made his way towards the door before a crack in the floorboards caught his attention. He turned towards the back of the room and examined the darkness of the cellar's corridors as an acrid tang began to fill the air, sharp and invasive, clawing its way past the blended scent of wine and wood into the breath of the Sentry.

A trembling fear crept into his heart, one unfamiliar to him, begging him to pull his sword from its sheath. There was a presence before him, one cloaked in shadow, and as it rose from the blackness of the room, a smile formed over its face, and the fear in Roth grew. He was one trained for battle, who had faced countless foes of sword and spear, and proved to be superior. But this presence was not inferior, and it was not a mere foe of sword or spear.

"You are trespassing." Roth's voice shook as he held his massive blade forward toward the presence. "You will stand down and receive judgment, or you will die now." His hesitant words carried the weight of the Paladins. Few matched their authority.

But the words were mere words, and his authority was but over the peoples of the Empire, and any other peoples who inhabited its domain.

But this presence recognized no such domain, and no such authority. It stepped forward with quiet wickedness, revealing the shape of a man unarmored and shorter than Roth.

Roth leaned into a battle stance, his stature over the intruder reassuring his voice. “It seems you’re lost,” he suggested, without lowering his sword. The figure walked towards Roth, who ordered it to “Stay back!” But it did not stay back. “I’m warning you.” But it didn’t heed his warning. “In the name of the King.” But the presence did not recognize that call. As it approached, Roth raised his sword. With the precision of grand mastery, he lunged forward with a powerful slash.

But the slash did not hit, and with his last breath of life, Roth realized he had been cut. The helmet toppled to the ground, and from it sprang a puddle of blood, and the Paladin’s body followed. His assassin, the presence then cloaked in shadows, now walked out of the cellar wearing his regal Paladin armor.

At the Banquet Hall, a great table for three stood on a platform above the guests, who awaited the King’s welcome. These guests included the Pope, the King’s extended family, and members of the Pan United League, which included the Keeper of Knowledge of Anthem, high nobles of Corvoro, and the bankers of Lereux. Also in attendance was one former Sentry.

All stood at the entrance of the King, as he arrived with his wife and remaining son, and sat upon his throne before the table of three, with the queen to his left and his son to his right. The twelve Paladin knights marched behind them, planting themselves like sentinels in their duty, unaware that one among them was a deceiver.

The wine maid poured the King his goblet, and he gestured for his guests to sit before his opening words:

“I must begin by thanking you for showing up. I’m an old king with slow words, but perhaps, before we start drinking, I can make good use of those words. I’ve been dreaming of the past, you see. Faded dreams, like ash. But they remind me of the lessons I have learned. Lessons from my younger years at war, and those of the long present of peacetime.

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However terrible war was, it kept us united, and the enemy was clear to us. Now we're just stumbling in peacetime not knowing who we're fighting. And swinging at each other blindly. We're not united anymore. Not as we used to be. Not as brothers and sisters. But I suppose it is the price to pay for peace.

On the other hand, it gives me joy to see unity between the countries of the Western World, Lereux, Corvoro, Bragslav, and my Antheman Empire. Thank you for being here, representatives. I suppose I have to thank the Pan United League for that. And I am glad to be by my family's side. Audrey, my Queen, your love is like wonder. You are too good for me. And Mangrove, my young one, you'll make a great king one day. I miss your brother, Siegfried. I grieve his absence.

It seems that the tides have brought in a symbol of hope – a survivor from the expedition - and so I will cling to hope for my eldest son's return.

I raise my glass to Siegfried, who is lost, and to my family, which remains, and I ask those of you, my guests, to drink in honor of them and my legacy."

And the king and the guests drank.

On the western end of the hall, sitting against the wall by a table for two, was Gaius Emile Trasque. "Wise words as ever from the King." His voice was low, fixed only on the person he was addressing. "Didn't mention you though. Disappointed?"

Trasque was a beast of a man towering over the room at an imposing 7 feet and 10 inches tall. His sheer size made him an undeniable focal point. His dark, ebony skin clashed with his snow-white hair, intensifying his striking presence. His massive physique, sculpted through years of relentless training and battle, was a testament to his enduring strength. Despite his advanced age of sixty, Trasque was in better shape than anyone else present, even outshining the armor-clad Paladins. His presence alone was enough to instill awe and respect in those around him, marking him as one of unparalleled might. The man he was speaking to was Fallon Howsard, the king's younger brother; a man in his fifties and in shape fit for a seasoned warrior. He had a full head of short, gray hair,

a trim beard pointing from his chin, and he shared the honey-colored eyes of all members of the Howsard family.

Fallon gave Trasque a challenging smile. “No, I was never expecting a mention,” he said. “The King doesn’t have time to think about the man truly running his empire; not when he’s in the company of the former High Master of the Sentries. How could I ever compete with you in his eyes?”

“I don’t think you can,” Trasque admitted. “But don’t dwell on it. The King roots his admiration in romanticized accounts of the Sentry Order,” he paused to take a sip of his drink. “Although the Order is dissolved and its members scattered, perhaps I am the sole reminder of a time he misses.”

“Ah yes, the time of perpetual war,” said Fallon. “We in the King’s army focused on conquest and expansion, while you and the *seventeenth order* of The Sentries were dealing with great beasts, witchcraft, and unknown evils. It’s easy to romanticize that era.”

“Unless you were there,” said Trasque.

Fallon nodded. “Fair point. The further you are from terror, the more you crave the opportunity to face it – naïve - but there are no horrors today like there were back then, no men as evil, and no beasts as dark.”

“The worst of all men died well after the war,” said Trasque. “The Warlock, who turned light into darkness... But I know what you mean. It seems like things changed after his death. Now those powers hide. You will not find a creature like the Salasil roaming about the lands of men. No. Now they lurk beneath the shadows.” Trasque flinched for an instant, as if something had taken ahold of him, but it was quick, and he smiled after it passed.

Fallon raised his brow. “Perhaps,” he spoke. “In any case, the days of battle for the greater good are gone. Now, it’s all *politics*. Everyone wants power and they sink to the deepest lows to get it. It is as my brother said. Peacetime is a shame. People have nothing to fight for.

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So, they fight each other for pride and vanity. Nobody cares about honor anymore, nor duty, nor purpose."

Trasque chuckled, "People are far too self-involved for all that," he said. His eyes wandered across the hall, examining the whispering of guests and how their eyes leered with thirst for gossip, some looking back at him. "It's what compels the few who do care about such virtues to *escape*."

Fallon drank. "That's what Prince Siegfried did," he spoke. "He set sail to the south because he felt his purpose fading. He left his father a sad king, and his inheritance adjudicated to his brother."

"Yes. And he took five hundred ships with him," said Trasque. "Only madness could compel one to venture on such a hopeless journey. Perhaps peacetime was too much for him to handle."

Fallon turned, following Trasque's gaze, and he saw what *he* saw. "Perhaps it was," said Fallon, turning back. "But I choose to cling to whatever hope is left. Fortunate news has emerged. Bastius Bloome washed up on shore. He was part of that expedition, a *captain* no less. My brother hopes that his return is a sign of good tidings."

Trasque's gaze drifted back to his friend. He brushed his hand against his collar. "The return of Bastius is fortunate; he is a good lad, but I wouldn't get my hopes up for news of any other survivors. Hadia is an evil land. A voyage of five hundred ships left one survivor, a *former Sentry* no less." Trasque then took a longer gulp of his ale before continuing. "Has the king shown any interest in questioning the lad?"

"None." Fallon spoke, turning his eyes towards his brother, King Walter, who entertained and drank with guests. He could sense the sorrow behind his eyes. "I suspect he fears what he might find in doing so. Mine might be the only semblance of real hope he has."

Trasque nodded. "He has to choose between hope and mourning," he spoke. "But the King's decision is for the best. Let the son of the great Merchant, Balthazar Bloome, live his days in peace. He has a second chance at life. Let him forget whatever happened thence and try to reclaim what he had left behind."

Fallon nodded. "I think we have exhausted ourselves from somber talk," he spoke. "Let us drink to what we have. To King Walter Howsard, long may he reign!"

"Long may he reign!" said Trasque.

Some guests stared at Trasque, murmuring about his reputation as "The Berserker of Bloody Abbey." Some whispered terrifying tales of Trasque's violent past. They included the Camden Abbey Massacre and a recent incident with a *witchman* at Trasque's doorstep. Some scoffed at him, few respected him, and none crossed him.

Closer to the King, the wine maid poured glasses. She glanced at the Paladins, expecting Roth to glance back, but he never did.

Then the King called her, and she poured, and he drank and let his sorrows fade behind the numbing pleasure of the drink. He drank more and more until his memory of his eldest son blurred behind his drunkenness. His wife, the Queen, suggested he had enough. "I'm sorry." The King grumbled, perhaps for more than simply that, and excused himself to use the privy. "Come with me, Roth. I need help to stand up," he said. The man in Paladin armor nodded, helping the King from his throne and carrying him toward the eastern wing, away from the watchful eyes of all of the guests.

"Here to the right," King Walter said in his drunken state, asking his Paladin to go with him through a narrow corridor with a terrace overlooking the city of Illium. He spoke in dragging honesty pausing to observe the sunset and the crowds below. "Roth, you are my youngest Paladin. Although you never experienced the most brutal years of my reign, you've proven to be a man of... Valor." Walter offered him a reward, knowing of his relationship with the wine maid, and proposed giving them a proper home to start a family. He said this, unaware that Roth's lifeless body lay on the cellar floor.

Yet, as King Walter turned to look at the Paladin, he noticed his apathy toward what he had to say. "Are you listening to me boy?" he asked, peeking through the shadows of the helmet into its wearer's eyes. But there was no answer...

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It took a moment for the King to realize his doom. The murderer removed his helmet and tossed it aside. The King gasped. He tried to push himself away, but the killer pulled him from his royal mantle. Their eyes met for one long, final second before a blade pierced the heart of the King and his assassin smiled beneath the darkness of his nature.

As the dark man removed his armor, the pungency of sulfur emerged once more, and it overcame the smell of blood. The foul stench crept toward the Banquet Hall. It cut through the scent of wine as it was being poured, swirled, and tasted and the guests noticed and complained.

“What’s that smell?” Fallon asked as the odor punctured Trasque’s nostrils.

Trasque’s eyes grew wide, as if a shadow had pulled him back into the past. He stood in a hurry, making noise as the bench beneath him cracked against the floorboards. The people turned to stare at his worried gaze.

“Are you alright?” Fallon asked, but Trasque didn’t answer. Instead, he followed the smell through the exit of the Banquet Hall and into the eastern wing. Fallon followed behind Trasque, the mystery of his concern blending with the putrid pungency to cause a twisted feeling in his gut. Something was wrong.

Tomthunder, the Captain of the Paladins, saw this. He followed the pair out of the Banquet Hall, with two other Paladins behind him. Fallon neared Trasque before the corner that led into the narrow corridor. Trasque, upon turning to the corridor, made an abrupt stop and let out a long, sighing “no...”

“What’s wrong?” asked Fallon. His mind raced in worry about what his heart already suspected. Fallon covered his nose with his arm to mask the smell of somber news. Tomthunder and the Paladins hurried past him, turning on the corner of the corridor letting out cries that were muffled behind Fallon’s worries.

Fallon finally approached Trasque and pushed him to the side. He feared what he would see, and his fears proved true. The armor of one of the Paladins had been tossed to the side. But beyond it, under the light of the

silver moon which peered through the balcony, was the still body of his brother, Walter. With petrified eyes, he rested in a puddle of his own blood and Fallon wept.

The King was dead.