

### **Embrace the Gloom**

Time had not been kind to Farhaven. Traffic on the Golon Road had long ago waned over the course of multiple centuries; after the Torreruna marble quarries had played out, and the Saryonne mines dried up, the surrounding towns had dwindled in size, a slow decay that resulted in the caravans becoming fewer and farther between. The wealth that had once been the hallmark of Farhaven had slowly faded over the long years, until it had become little more than a vestige of a memory, a long-forgotten footnote in the town's history.

By the time the Vreech attacked the Protectorate, Farhaven was a dust-covered relic, a skeleton of a town long since dead, little more than a collection of farms eking out an existence with an inherited name and a lost remnant of heritage. The tiny size of the town, and the utter poverty, had made the transition easy for them. When news came of the Vreech invasion, there was some concern, but with it came a simple, practical realization - Farhaven was far too remote, far too unimportant, to draw the attention of something as world-shattering as the Vreech. With a collective shrug towards a world far larger than their day-to-day life, the residents of Farhaven simply... chose not to participate. The crystalline repeater that had brought their periodic news update - and had warned them, eventually, that the Vreech devoured magic - was the first sacrifice to be made, and it was barely felt. It sailed downriver on a small raft purpose-built to cleanse the town of anything magical. An ancient axe, long-since gone mundane, joined the crystal, along with a few potions that the town's midwife had kept for the direst of emergencies.

None of these losses were truly felt by the town - in mere weeks, those items were simply forgotten, unused detritus that had finally been purged, and good riddance to them. Magic was the purview of rich folk, and there were none of them living in, or anywhere near, Farhaven's borders. Life continued as it had before, without even a nod towards the world outside. Farhaven would continue, as it always had, clinging to life out of sheer stubbornness, silently agreeing to forget the Protectorate that had long since forgotten them.

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Commander Issarel hated the Repudiator towns, with a passion. At first glance, they seemed little different from any of the other minor towns that had survived the Fall; fortified as best they could, rabidly suspicious of outsiders...hard people living hard lives. That Issarel couldn't blame them for - those were simply good survival skills. Any of the Hidden States would do the same, after all. His Argent Shield symbol was enough to allow him to approach the gates without being shot; some good manners and an offer of useful skills had actually yielded something approaching civility. The jobs in these sorts of places were generally the same: disrupt raiders, dispatch some monster... the usual. With Lieutenant Lathai at his side, they'd been able to handle more than he could alone, and they'd actually built a reputation that extended above and beyond that of the Order. That had helped with the negotiation, as it usually did.

It was the aftermath that always bothered him. Lathai knew enough to be on her guard inside the town more than when they were hunting. Strength of arms only. Speed, stealth, tactics, training...those were all okay. Even alchemy, though that was tough to access without a proper laboratory. But never, ever, a hint of anything that could even be interpreted as magic.

He'd heard the stories, how quickly places like this Farhaven would turn on you. One moment, you're eating the food they'd prepared as a reward, regaling them with a tale of the beast that you'd fought - a beast that they'd begged you to fight, to save them from - and the next, they were picking up your drugged body, ready to hang you for the crime of suspected magic use. Even membership in the Order of the Argent Shield wasn't enough to spare someone of suspicions. If anything, it seemed to make them more suspicious. They were a superstitious, nearly xenophobic bunch, to be avoided if possible. Still...they had a job to do.

They needed supplies, and food, and Farhaven was doing well enough to be able to provide them with what they needed. The Fall had been kind to Farhaven: far enough from any ley-lines, Vreech had never attacked here, and its isolated location and fortified walls had dissuaded raiding bands. Their local militia was even talented enough to be able to handle minor issues like kobolds or goblins or the occasional random bandits, which meant that the only things to draw the Order to these lands were serious threats. In this particular case, a howlbear. When the Corteggio caravan passed along word of a howlbear in the woods near Farhaven, Issarel had groaned. It was exactly the sort of issue that the Order existed to take care of...but it was also exactly the sort of issue that would cause trouble. Too strong and dangerous to allow to roam wild; too strong and dangerous for the militia to be able to deal with. Penetrating its thick hide took strong, precise blows, and teamwork that spoke of training at a level rarely seen in simple militias... or powerful magic. And since the militia was unlikely to admit that the Order fielded better, stronger warriors, they would simply assume magic. As the Repudiators always did. Arguing with them would be as pointless as debating with the town's palisade.

He'd been able to negotiate a relatively fair trade with them - mostly trade goods, as he didn't trust the food they'd offer, though a "pick your own" approach on some of the outer farms afterwards would supplement what they'd been able to hunt. It was more of a formality than anything; they would have hunted the howlbear anyway, but getting something out of it other than a thrashing was a definite perk. Which is how they were out here now, following the game trails, looking for a creature that almost certainly massed more than Issarel and Lathai both. It was days like this that made him wish that the Order hadn't had to leave the Tower all those many years ago. It would have made this whole event so much easier....

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In the end, it had taken two days of hunting to find the howlbear's trail, and an additional day to track it back to its lair. The attack had gone better than he'd hoped, only resulting in a broken crossbow, a vambrace that desperately needed replacement, and a few cracked ribs on his part. Resting for a day gave them plenty of time to smoke the howlbear meat, enough that they'd be

able to eat the greasy stuff until they got sick of it. Which, as Lathai pointed out, would come long before they actually ran out of it. The laugh she earned for that made him ache.

Lugging the beast's head back to Farhaven was unpleasant - the day was hot enough that it stank, even with some crushed mint smeared across their upper lips - but it earned them some begrudging respect from the militia. It made the second round of negotiations a little easier, substituting a vambrace and a crossbow for a bolt of wool - easy enough that Issarel started getting a bit suspicious.

He gave a signal to Lathai, and she started scanning the area. A moment later, she drew an arrow and nocked it in one smooth motion, bringing the point to bear on one of the rooftops near the wall. "Have your sniper stand down!" she snarled at the militia captain, looking down the arrow at the crossbow-wielding man half-obscured by a chimney. "I'm a good enough shot to have taken down a howlbear, I'm certain that I won't have any problems skewering him."

After a tense moment while nobody moved, Issarel looked around non-plussed. "Well?" he prompted the militia, who begrudgingly made a motion. A moment later, the archer put down the crossbow and moved out of sight. Issarel beamed at them, a wide, friendly smile that got nowhere near his eyes. "See? We'll just take our payment and head out now, if you don't mind." He dropped his hand to his sword hilt. The militia captain glowered at him, but gave a quick order, and in a few minutes, Issarel and Lathai were safely out of arrow range. "Not bad for a few days' work, Commander," she said to him, giving him a lopsided grin. He snorted, trying not to laugh, feeling his ribs ache again.