

The Mission



By
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Year 449 of the fourth age in the land of Isharune:

The airship Trident glided through the air, slowly descending to its destination, the Dead Marshes. It was an area spanning several miles around the south and southeast sections of the Dark Iron Mountains.

Victor and Almira Prescott stood on the outer deck of the airship watching the foggy landscape pass by below. The Trident was an open deck airship meaning the gondola hung below the balloon tank by a series of cables. The gondola itself resembled a seafaring ship, even including a figurehead of a merman holding a trident. Inside the balloon tank itself were eight separate balloons housed in a single metal casing. The side of the balloon tank displayed the symbol of the Kalez, a gear with metal wings coming out of each side.

They stood on the outer deck trying to stay calm, to say they were excited would have been an understatement. Victor and Almira Prescott both stood just over five feet tall with blond hair and blue eyes. They were twins, brother and sister that trained and joined the Augurium at the same time. They held the rank of initiate and were on their final mission before becoming knights.

“This is it, Ali!” Victor said with a wide grin on his face. “After this last mission, we will finally be knights of the Augurium!”

“I know Vic, I can hardly believe it,” Almira said, squeezing her brother’s hand tighter. “What do you think this last mission will be? I have never been to the Dead Marshes.”

Victor shrugged. “Who knows. The place is filled with old ruins, orcs, trolls and all kinds of other beasts. Hopefully it will be something exciting!”

The Augurium were both the shield and sword of the Kalez. They were an elite military group that trained for years in combat, tactics, diplomacy and most importantly magic. As a people, the Kalez couldn’t use magic naturally, they relied on Aion, a blue glowing liquid that allowed them to use elemental magic. The only known source of this Aion was called the Source Well located in the capital city of Tor-Valon.

Footfalls drew the twin’s attention. Standing behind them was Lexi Belmont, knight of the Augurium and their mentor for this mission. She stood almost six feet tall with long red hair that draped halfway down her back tied into a tight braid.

“Ma’am!” the twins said in unison saluting by bringing their right arm horizontally across their chests, their hand in a fist.

“At ease,” Lexi said with a smile. “Are you two ready? We leave within the hour.”

“Yes ma’am,” they said in unison.

“Good. Gear up and be on the bridge in fifteen minutes for your briefing,” Lexi said with a salute.

“Yes ma’am,” the twins said.

The twins went to their cabin retrieving their pistols and blades for the mission. Victor had a long sword strapped to his hip, opposite his pistol. Almira had twin daggers along with her pistol.

Almira wrapped Victor in a quick hug before pulling his tailcoat straight. “I love you Vic.”

A look of concern crossed Victor’s face. “Are you ok Ali? Did you have a vision or hear the voice again?”

Almira was one of the Blessed, people that had dreams of other lives and sometimes heard voices of the dead in their head, or so the rumors said. Victor didn’t really understand it, but he knew sometimes the dreams and voices were not so nice causing her to wake up screaming in terror during the night.

Ali smiled while shaking her head. “No, I am just so happy.”

Ali wrapped him in another hug.

“I love you too sis, but we have to complete this mission before we are eligible to be knights,” Victor said with a smirk.

“I know,” Ali said straightening his tailcoat and peak cap. “I just know I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“You know that isn’t true,” Victor said patting Almira on the head. “Besides what are older brothers for.”

“You’re only two minutes thirty seconds older than me,” Almira said putting her hands on her hips which caused Victor to laugh.

“It’s not my fault you showed up late,” Victor said. “And speaking of late, we better get going before you make us late again.”

“We will be moving out in a small group. Our destination is here, not far in the Dead Marshes from our landing point. The orcs and other creatures that live there have been pushing their way north out of the swamp closer to the city of Harmon,” Lexi said. “The city’s defenses have had no problem pushing them back but is concerning as to why the creatures have been leaving the safety of their marshes. Our mission it to find out why.”

Victor raised an eyebrow. “Ma’am. With all due respect, how are we supposed to do that? The Dead Marshes span for miles, it would take us months to investigate them, let alone the time to determine the cause of the movement.”

“We have a lead Initiate Prescott,” Lexi said. “The oracles have told us where to look but couldn’t determine exactly what to look for.”

The Oracles were a mysterious group possessing strange powers, which was known to drive some of them mad. Some of the Oracles could speak directly to your mind miles away, others could hear your thoughts while others could look into your dreams as you slept. They were advisors to the council that led the Kalez and to the Augurium.

Lexi pointed down at the map on the table. “We will be landing here, on the southern edge of the Dead Marshes. Our destination is about three hours walk north of there. Our group will consist of myself, knights Jennie Hendron and Rufus Caidon along with initiates Victor and Almira Prescott. We have twenty militirum soldiers and Knight Alexander Black that will guard the airship while we are gone. If we don’t return in two days, the Trident is ordered to return to Tor-Valon and report our mission a failure.”

“Aye ma’am,” Captain Lucian Beckham, the captain of the Trident, said nodding.

“Keep the militirum vigilant Knight Black, this is a dangerous area we will be landing at.” Lexi said.

“Yes ma’am,” Black said.

“The environment within the swamp is dangerous, not to mention the aggressive locals. Leave your peak caps on the ship, you will be taking your helmets and masks for this mission.” Lexi said. “Questions?”

“No ma’am,” everyone said in unison.

Lexi smiled. “Then let’s get moving. Time until we land captain?”

Lucian examined one of the nearby bridge consoles. “About ten minutes ma’am.”

Even with their masks on, the sulfurous smell of the swamp greeted them, reminding Victor of rotten eggs. Their metal domed helmets covered from their foreheads to the back of the head; the mask covered their faces completely. Wide goggles in the masks gave them a good view while the filter tubes near their mouths cleaned the air they breathed.

“Alright, we have a bit of a walk ahead of us. The fog isn’t too thick today, but the terrain will still be treacherous. Watch your footing and above all, keep your eyes and ears open,” Lexi said glancing at the rising sun.

“Yes ma’am,” the four Augurium said saluting.

Lexi nodded. "Knights Hendron and Caidon will be on point, I will be watching our rear."

In less than an hour they came across their first group of orcs, unexpectedly finding them all dead. They entered the small village not far from the edge of the marsh, the overpowering smell of death all around them.

"How many do you have?" Lexi asked.

"Around twenty over here ma'am," Hendron said.

"It looks like they killed each other," Almira said looking over a group of the dead orcs.

"Here too," Victor said inspecting the wounds of another group. "Many of these orcs have extensive burns ma'am. Can orc use magic?"

"Not as far as I know," Hendron said.

"Ma'am, I found a trail heading to the north filled with orc tracks," Caidon said.

"Well done. Gather up, we are moving out. We have a mission to complete," Lexi said. "Remember to stay on the trails, you will get stuck in the muddy swamp if you wander off the path."

The group continued deeper into the swamp following the trail. Along the way they found the occasional orc body but little else. After another two hours of travel, the sounds ahead told them they were getting close to something. The fog grew thicker as they

followed the sounds to the edge of the tree line. Moving from tree to tree, they kept close enough to see each other through the fog while trying to stay hidden in the foliage from anyone in the village.

“Another village,” Lexi whispered. “But this one is still occupied.”

Victors nodded. “Yeah, but not all of them are alive, you can see the dark shapes in the fog.”

The orcs stood in a group cheering another orc that stood upon a large rock. The orc was the largest Lexi had ever seen, standing one and a half times the size of a normal seven-foot orc. Its skin was more ashen instead of the typical green orcs had, and its ears were elongated enough to look like horns coming out of its bald head. Glowing orangish-red eyes darted back and forth watching the gathered orcs. An aura of dark smoke surrounded the behemoth, swaying gently in a breeze that wasn't there.

The large orc raised its fists high which drove the others to cheer even louder. The large orc made guttural sounds and noises while waving its arms around, the rest of the orcs went quiet, listening intently to the orcish words as their apparent leader spoke. After a couple of minutes, most of the orcs began cheering again as they sprinted off to the north, bloodlust in their dark eyes. Six orcs stayed behind with

their leader. The large orc watched the others go before turning in their direction.

“You might as well come out little humans, your stink is undeniable,” the large orc said, his glowing eyes flashing brighter for a moment.

The others looked at Lexi. The knight opened her hand, palm down pushing closer to the ground indicating to hold position. She walked out from behind her tree, her weapons still holstered. The smaller orcs growled, gripping their weapons tighter but the large orc held up his hand quieting the others down.

“And what brings you to my swamp little human? Come to take what isn’t yours like all your kind?” the orc asked.

“My name is Lexi Belmont, I have come to find out why your... people have been moving north out of your swamp toward my people.” Lexi said.

“Because I the mighty Skorgul wishes it little Lexi Belmont,” Skorgul said, the dark aura around him growing thicker. “I want better food, better land and better opponents to fight. We will push north killing all in our path while filling out bellies with the meat of our enemies.”

“I see.” Lexi said taking a step back pulling the vial of Aion from her belt pouch. *I’ve never heard of an orc that could speak Huhn, nor one that had glowing eyes. The most*

concerning part is the dark aura surrounding it, she thought. I need to get back and report this. “Well mighty Skorgul, now that I have my answer, I think will be on my way then. Good luck with your conquest.”

“The voices are right,” Skorgul said grabbing the axes strapped to his back. “You want to steal my kills, take them for your own. Then steal my food and my soldiers. I will kill you first, make a good meal out of you.”

Damnit, doing this the hard way, she thought pouring the Aion into a drinking port.

Skorgul charged in at amazing speed, leaping high into the air, his axes held overhead. The orc brought both axes down as he landed, slicing right through the spot Lexi had been a heartbeat before, the Augurium knight jumping to the right at the last moment. Streams of fire shot out from the other Augurium hiding in the nearby brush striking Skorgul in the chest, but if the orc felt it, he didn't show it. He swung his left axe horizontally to his left, Lexi drawing her sword just in time to block the strike, but the force of the impact sent her falling back, her sword flying from her grasp. The rest of the Augurium sprinted from their hiding spots, charging at the mighty orc.

“Ah, more little playthings. More opponents to kill. More food to eat,” Skorgul said with a wicked grin.

“Take out the other orcs initiates!” Lexi said retrieving her sword. “We’ll handle Skorgul.”

“Ma’am,” the twins said heading towards the other six orcs.

Hendron fired both her pistols over and over at the orc, but Skorgul ignored it as he sprinted at them. The orc brought both axes down from overhead, Hendron dodging to the left, firing her pistols, Caidon parrying the axe while stepping to the right. Caidon stepped in slashing his sword across the orc’s abdomen, drawing a thin line of blood. He stepped back ducking under the first swing only to get a knee to his face breaking his mask along with his nose. Skorgul stepped in punching Caidon on the side of the head, knocking his helmet and mask off. The knight dropped to the soggy ground unconscious, his body just a dark shape beneath the thick fog.

Arcs of lightning drove Skorgul back a couple of steps as Lexi charged in, moving the lightning from her hand to her sword. Swinging her sword from left-right-left she drove Skorgul back. The thick, dark smokey wisps gathered around the orc’s back forming large bat-like wings. He brought the wings forward sending a gust of wind that threw Lexi and the unconscious Caidon flying back.

“I’ll scatter.” Victor said sprinting towards the group of orcs. He drew in the magic, forming into a wind at his back then under him as he leapt up into the air. He gathered the magic into the palm of his hand, forming a tight ball of air, compressing it more and more with every passing heartbeat.

Victor twisted his body in the air, avoiding two of the orcs axes as he landed, his one palm touching the ground first. An explosive blast of air shot out in all directions throwing the orcs into the air then landing hard on the wet ground. Almira dashed towards the nearest orc driving both daggers into its throat. She called the wind to push her towards the next orc in line, slashing its throat open before it knew what hit it.

Victor was back on his feet, his sword cleaving the head of the nearest orc as it tried to rise. He turned to his left parrying the club of another orc, pushing it slightly to the left. He reversed direction then stabbed straight out into the stomach of his opponent. He shifted his weight, pulling his sword horizontally through the orc gutting the creature. Shots rang out as Almira downed another with her pistol leaving only one orc left. The creature looked from one twin to the other before turning tail, fleeing the battle.

Small balls of fire shot out from Hendron’s hands striking the orc in the back. Skorgul ignored the fire as

he turned towards her, his right axe slicing through the Augurium knight, cutting her in two before he turned towards Victor.

“I think you’re right, that one is a worthy opponent,” Skorgul said with a wicked grin.

The orc leapt into the air, his shadowy wings pulling him higher into the sky. He dove down towards Victor, his axes leading the way.

“Victor!” Almira cried out, her hands extended towards her brother. A sudden gust of wind pushed Victor out of the path of Skorgul’s axes.

Victor rolled with the momentum coming back onto his feet as Skorgul approached. The young initiate called the magic to him again letting it build. He shifted the ground creating a hole under Skorgul’s foot tripping the large orc as he charged. Victor stepped to his left out of the orcs path as he reversed the grip on his sword and drew his pistol. He shifted back to the right driving his sword into Skorgul’s right wrist, the blade going completely through and out the other side. He shaped the built-up magic along the blade as ice, letting it build until he couldn’t hold it any longer.

Skorgul cried out as his wrist exploded as shards of ice shot out taking the hand with it. The orc staggered a step back, blood pouring out of the bloody stump. Victor fired his pistol, but the orc ignored the

bullets as he pumped his wings forward summoning a gust of wind that sent Victor and his weapons in different directions. Almira sprinted toward the orc, approaching from behind. At the last second the orc spun to the right, his wing catching her, sweeping her to the side then face down in the swamp.

Lexi leapt between the two, the wind at her back carrying her with incredible speed. She drove her sword into the chest of the orc driving him back a step as he dropped his axe. Lighting erupted out of the blade causing the orc to twitch uncontrollably.

Victor's soggy footfalls gave him away as he sprinted towards the back of the orc, determined to end the creature. Skorgul spun to the right, throwing Lexi as she lost her grip on the blade. Victor ducked under the shadowy wing only to get grabbed by the orc. The creature tossed Victor like a child's toy at Lexi, both going down in a tangle.

Skorgul slowly approached the three Augurium, his chest and mouth starting to glow a flickering orange color. "Now you die little worms."

Victor called on the magic he had left, drawing water from the swamp around him, forming it into a wall of water between them as a stream of fire shot out of Skorgul's mouth burning everything between him and the water. On her feet again Almira rushed

forward, the wind at her back. She ran through the wall of water as the fire started to dissipate. She leapt up, the wind pushing her up over the orc's reaching arm. The initiate stabbed both daggers down to the hilt into the arm just above the wrist.

Skorgul screamed as he threw his arm out wide flinging the young woman to the side. Lightning arced out from Lexi's outstretched hand striking the sword still in the orc's chest.

"No!" Skorgul screamed as the shadowy aura around the orc formed a giant hand in front of his chest. The hand shot out reaching for the Augurium knight.

Victor jumped between the combatants, pushing Lexi to the side. The shadowy hand enveloped Victor as it slammed the young initiate into a building not far away.

Lexi grabbed Victor's sword from the ground as she sprinted to the orc, driving it into the creature's chest. Skorgul eyes opened wide in surprise as he staggered back a step, then another before falling over dead. The orc's flesh turned black as it drew tight to its bones, its eyes and tongue dissolving.

Lexi took a step back horrified. "By the gods!"

"Victor!" Almira called out running toward the hole in the wall Victor had made when he crashed through the building.

Victor slowly pulled himself up on the ruined wall, scratches and tears covering his tattered uniform, mask and helmet.

"I'm ok," Victor said standing on unsteady feet before falling to his knees. For a moment everything felt like it was spinning and his head began to ache.

They helped Victor out of the ruined building, Almira giving him a hug. "Victor I was so worried."

"I'm fine." Victor said looking at the orc. "What happened to it."

"I... don't know," Lexi said shaking her head.

Groans from Caidon drew their attention.

"Come on, we need to leave before more show up," Lexi said heading towards Caidon.

Victor stood staring at the fallen orc. *He thought you were weak, and now he's dead. You will show them what true strength is, show them you are not weak,* a voice in Victor's head said.

The initiate looked around but didn't see where the voice was coming from. He shook his head dismissing it as his imagination.

"Ugh. What happened?" Caidon said sitting up. "My head is killing me."

"Get up knight, we have to go," Lexi said helping him to stand.

“Wait, where’s...” Caidon asked looking around.
“Jennie!”

“She’s gone!” Lexi said holding the knight back.
“We can’t stay; more will be coming!”

“But we can’t leave her!” Caidon pleaded. “We
have to bring her with us!”

Lexi sighed. “Two minutes and we leave.”

They gathered some skins and wooden poles to
make a stretcher. They strapped Hendron’s remains to
it before heading back into the swamp.

“That is our mission report Ordermaster
Beckworth,” Lexi said standing next to Caidon, Victor
and Almira. They were back in Tor-Valon, the capital
city, in the ordermaster’s office.

“I see.” Arturos said scratching the beard on his
chin. He was the ordermaster of the Augurium, the
highest rank of their order. “The loss of Knight Hedron
is terrible, but she died fighting for what she believed
in, never forget that. We will bury her in the morning
with honors. That being said, I must say that your
performance on this mission exceeded my expectations.
I never expected such a foe waiting for you in the

swamp. I am very proud of each and every one of you, especially initiates Victor and Almira Prescott."

"Thank you, sir," all four said in unison.

"Is there anything else to report?" Arturos asked.

"Sir. I would like to speak privately." Lexi said to the surprise of the others.

"Very well," Arturos said. "Everyone else is dismissed."

Once the two were alone Arturos smiled, sitting back in his chair. "Speak freely Knight Belmont."

"Sir, that orc..." Lexi said trying to find the words. "There was something... unnatural about it, besides the fact it was able to use magic."

"What do you suggest?" Arturos asked.

"We keep a close eye on the marsh sir," Lexi said, her body stiff. "Whatever that was... I don't believe it is finished with us and if the orcs have a source of magic..."

"Sound advice," Arturos said. "I will speak with the oracles about this. I will also assign regular patrols along the border to watch for anything suspicious."

"I would like to be part of that sir," Lexi said.

"And why is that?" Arturos asked.

"It was my fault she died sir," Lexi said, her eyes rimmed with tears. "I was in charge; she was my

responsibility. I want to make sure this doesn't happen again."

The ordermaster sighed. "When you are in command of a mission, people may die. It is part of the job we do Knight Belmont. A long time ago I lost my best friend on a mission, but I pushed on doing what my duty requires me to. It isn't easy, and I think of him often, but I don't let the past chain me in the present. You must learn to do this."

Lexi looked at the floor. "Does it get easier sir?"

"Yes," Arturos said. "But the pain will never disappear entirely."

"I understand sir," Lexi said, her eye resolute.

Arturos smiled. "Very well Knight Belmont, I will make the necessary requests. But a word of warning. Keep my words close. Don't let Knight Hedron's death consume you. There will be days when it feels like your guilt will swallow you whole, but it won't. Let it instead remind of why you fight and keep you vigilant in your missions going forward."

Lexi saluted. "Thank you, sir. I will."

“You are hereby granted the rank of Augurium Knight Victor Prescott, congratulations.” Arturos said shaking Victor’s hand.

Cheers erupted in the crowd as the five initiates granted knighthood bowed to the gathered crowd.

Look at them, they cheer but not for you. They don't think you are special like the others here, they think you will never be, the voice inside Victor's head said. They believe you to be common, weak. But we will change that. We will show them how special you truly are.

“I’ll show them. I’ll show all of them what I can do,” Victor whispered to himself with a smile. “Then... then they will see I am someone.”