

Alesira Stormwind jolted awake as a tankard slammed onto the tabletop.

A gray-haired man held the tankard, taking the seat across the table from her, “Sleeping on the job, Red?”

Groggily, Alesira grinned at him, “Deacon. Brought me another drink?”

“You wish, Stormwind,” Deacon laughs.

A bump from Alesira’s left called her back to her surroundings, sitting at a long tavern table with comrades from her company. She’d been taking jobs with the Black Dawn for almost three years now, serving as a specialist in magical arcana and crossbow combat. Pulling herself from her reverie, she looked up and down the table at the soldiers she was close to calling family.

To her right sat the Black Dawn’s resident shield-bearers, Malcolm Proudfoot and Lysandros Daubney. Both of them were proud veterans, and had saved Alesira’s skin on a number of occasions. On her left, Amalia Kirchner, a cleric of Othkkarho, the God of Balance and Order: she served as the Black Dawn’s battle priest and healer. Beyond her, Cyril Causey, a swordsman under the tutelage of Deacon Levitt, the man sitting across from Alesira. Far up the table, the Black Dawn’s elvish archer Victory sat deathly silent. In all of her three years of working with the Black Dawn, Alesira had never heard Victory speak, except to ask for food or water. Alesira smiled softly as she turned back towards Deacon, who was already laughing with the others about a joke at Cyril’s expense. The lieutenant of the Black Dawn joined the group, sitting across from Victory with a similar aura of dread. Alesira frowned at this: Liesel Papke was usually gallant and noble, but today solemn and quiet. Janik Friesinger, the company’s commander, towered over Deacon with his helmet under his arm.

“Prepare your gear, men, there’s work to be done. We set out tomorrow,” Janik grumbled.

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### *Three Days Later*

Alesira’s head was throbbing, her ears ringing. She tried to take a breath, but choked and spluttered on a thick mixture of blood and mud. Mustering what strength she could, Alesira sat up, pushing the bodies of fallen soldiers off her as she clawed at the clasps of her helmet. She let it fall to her knees, retching until she could breathe. She wiped blood and mud from her face with her glove, and ran the other hand through her hair, which was knotted with more mud. A firm hand slammed her shoulder, and Alesira turned to see Janik, his face hidden by his helmet.

“Come on Red, up! We’re rallying for the next push! Get your helmet on!” Janik yelled.

Alesira began to notice the roar of the flames around her, the pile of bodies she had dug herself up from, and the crumbling castle a few hundred yards ahead of her. She groaned, taking a few deep breaths before she pulled her helmet on. She fished her rapier sidearm out of the mud, wiping it off on her leg before sliding it in its scabbard. She picked a crossbow up off a nearby corpse, testing the string with her finger before sliding a bolt down the groove. Janik hefted his greatsword, shifting its weight to rest across his shoulders as he began trudging up the hill ahead of her. A groan sounded to her left; Deacon was leaning on his sword, barely able to stand. Alesira reached out to help him.

“No, no... I’m all right, Red, really. Go on, I’ll catch up,” Deacon said, pushing her hand away. Alesira could only nod, before trudging up after their commander.

Janik was pressed against the castle wall, some of the other soldiers gathered behind him. Alesira recognized some of them: Lysandros, Cyril, Malcolm. She leaned up against the stone wall behind Cyril, and noticed Victory climbing up the hill, her helmet missing and drawing an arrow from her quiver.

“Everyone ready?” Janik says, shifting his greatsword off his shoulder, “Let’s move!”

Janik rushed forward, the shield-bearers behind him, then Alesira followed by Victory. They rounded the corner, just in time to see Janik plant his blade in a poor foot soldier’s shoulder. Liesel was there as well, holding the line by herself, light radiating from the holy symbol about her neck. Cyril pushed another foot soldier down, screaming as he stomped on the man’s head. An arrow soared past Alesira’s ear, reminding her of the weight in her hand; she took a shot, the bolt of her crossbow burying itself in the lung of one of the men attacking the Black Dawn’s second-in-command.

“Janik, the courtyard is clear,” Liesel said, “But I think the enemy is rallying beyond the inner wall.”

“Then we’ll just have to be extra careful, right, lieutenant?” Janik replied.

“Has anyone seen Amalia?” Malcolm asked, “Lysandros and I have taken a beating.”

“Alesira, Victory, go find Amalia. We’ll regroup at the inner wall,” Janik ordered.

The women nodded to each other, as Alesira loaded another bolt.

Trudging through rubble, the pair followed the sound of metal banging and yelling, finding Amalia straddling one of the castle’s defenders and bludgeoning his head in with her iron club. Alesira dropped her crossbow, running to the cleric’s side and pulling her off him.

“That’s enough! He’s dead, that’s enough, Amalia!” Alesira yelled, the sound of her own shouting echoing in her ears as Amalia dropped her club and took a few deep breaths.

“I’m okay, I’m okay...” Amalia said, propping herself up against a crumbled wall.

“Janik is leading another charge. They need us, we can’t stay here,” Alesira said, resting her hand on Amalia’s shoulder.

“Just give me a moment to rest...” Amalia says, gently shutting her eyes.

“If you give out here, you will not wake up, Amalhild. Get up,” Alesira ordered. Amalia sighed, pulling herself to her feet and dragging her club to her side. “Victory, lead on.”

And Victory led, as Alesira propped Amalia up against her, helping her hobble back towards Janik. Victory moved quickly, darting well ahead of them in the castle ruins. They found the rest of their company in a clearing, just inside the inner wall. Stacked in a pile, Cyril and Lysandros’ corpses were dripping with blood, armor torn open. Amalia ripped herself away from Alesira as she staggered to Malcolm’s side, saying prayers aloud to Othkkartha, begging for his mercy. Liesel was lying flat on her back, her hair sprawled out with her helmet at her side. She drew long, ragged breaths, her holy symbol glowing softly.

Janik sat a mound of rock, no longer worthy of being called a castle wall, his greatsword leaning against him. His helmet hid his eyes as he looked up at Alesira. She pulled her helmet off and let it clatter to the ground.

“No more,” Alesira said, “I can’t do this anymore.”