

Chapter 916 Berserker

Meriette watched the healers retreat towards the stone walls of their training hall. His eyes were focused on the mountain of a man before him. If it truly was a man. All he could see were the brown, near red eyes, not near as vibrant as his own.

[Berserker – lvl 368]

A respectable level for a human, he admitted. Inconsequential to his own at four hundred and thirty. He had faced higher level monsters than even he was, and yet he chose to take this fight extra seriously. Meriette never disrespected an opponent, such would be uncivilized. He still adjusted his fighting style to allow them at least some presentation of their magics and powers.

Eighty levels, and he still lost. He didn't look at the Sentinel who had fought before, the healer somehow overpowering Ernath.

Perhaps he will learn not to underestimate his opponents.

He looked at the pacing Berserker, taller than even he, broader than two men. There was no fear in his eyes, no apprehension. As if a beast ready to pounce. His armor was made of ash, thick and jagged, like black rock, reflecting the cool light from above in a dark sheen. His weapon was dented, a two handed maul made of steel, held in one hand. Neither enchanted nor worth a mention. A way to intimidate others?

The hall had quieted, none of the healers so much as whispering.

They were ready to fight, and he realized his opponent was waiting for him.

“Meriette Vallen, Court of Flow,” he spoke and bowed to show respect to a warrior.

His opponent did not respond, nor did he bow.

Meriette's eye twitched slightly. He reminded himself that the people of the East did not know of their customs and rules.

“Begin,” the voice of the machine resounded, at least the green eyed being knew what his gesture had meant.

Blood magic surged through him as he grinned and crouched slightly, waiting for the Berserker to rush forward. He waited. The Berserker continued his pacing for a few more steps, then stopped.

He stood and looked at Meriette.

Very well. My courtesy only goes so far, he thought and summoned one of his heavy revolvers into his right hand. Blood magic surged into the enchanted gun as he aimed at the man's right shoulder before he pulled the trigger.

A boom echoed through the hall, an impact following a split second later, chunks of ash and flesh ripped away from the Sentinel's shoulder, splattering to the ground a few meters back.

Meriette watched as blood seeped down and over the sleek armor of the Berserker's arm, the hall quiet yet again.

The man made no noise, his eyes still just watching.

Meriette smiled. *A challenge then.*

He moved his revolver down and shot again, the boom echoing through the hall as his hand remained perfectly steady, the recoil stopped against his strength. He saw the dent in the man's stomach, the large pellet having dug deep. And still, the man stood, unmoving, watching.

Meriette heard a few whispers now. He ground his teeth before he summoned a second revolver into his other hand. He aimed at the man's chest and fired. Six times with his left and four more times with his right, the shots so fast, the noise nearly flowing into one continuous sound.

Bits of ash, flesh, and muscle fell from the Berserker's chest, deep dents and bleeding holes visible where each enchanted sphere had punched through his armor.

The Sentinel growled, eyes narrowing slightly before he took a step forward.

He's not healing, Meriette thought as he watched the Berserker take another step. *Does he plan to get killed?*

Perhaps a century past, he would've been intimidated, would've been confused as to what the warrior tried to do. But he had faced plenty of Vampires in his time. His revolvers were empty. So he replaced them with two full ones. This time he aimed for the knees, the guns running empty in the time he blinked his eyes. Chunks of flesh and bone were stripped away with each impact, the combined force of six metal spheres infused with explosive blood magic raked through the berserker's legs.

Much of them were gone.

And still, he stood.

Meriette narrowed his eyes and summoned yet another revolver. He hesitated, seeing the blood leaking out of a dozen wounds, rolling down the black armor and onto the stone floor. Bits and pieces of ash littered the ground, flesh and bone mixing with the destroyed armor. He raised his revolver and aimed for the head.

He glanced at the onlookers.

Nobody intervened.

He stared at the green eyes of the machine and gulped, looking back at the insane human, his steps slowed now that his knees were near entirely broken. And still, he moved. Still advanced. His glare more intense than before.

Meriette aimed for the head. He pulled the trigger.

His revolver rocked in his hand, the echoing blast resounding through the silent hall as the Berserker's head snapped back, the enchanted sphere tearing out a chunk of ash and bone that splattered onto the stone floor beyond. Flesh lay exposed, a furrow visible as blood leaked out from the human's head.

Meriette noticed himself taking a reflexive step back.

The brown, near red eyes still watched, and the head moved forward yet again.

Meriette's eyes widened as he aimed his gun and pulled the trigger, the remaining five bullets ripping into the Berserker's head, his armor tore off, his face gone with the next two wet impacts, bone and flesh shattered.

Only one of his eyes remained, blood leaking down from the exposed socket. His lower jaw was hanging down, mere bits of muscle holding on to it.

Meriette could feel his own pulse, echoing in his ears.

A gurgle came from the man. He reached up with his free hand and pushed up his jaw, a tongue regenerating as bits and pieces of his face knit themselves back together. The healing stopped a mere moment later, his left eye still gone.

“More.” The single word was barely recognizable.

“This is insane,” Meriette spoke and glanced at the onlookers. “I will not kill this man.”

A gurgling chuckle brought him back to his opponent.

“Kill? No, Vampire,” he spoke as mana exploded from him, his wounds healing rapidly as a mist of ash came to life, his armor reforming as metal spheres were pushed out of the holes, falling down and into the puddles of blood. He opened and closed his mouth, adjusting his jaw just when his left eye reformed and focused back on Meriette. “Let me show you, what it means to fight.”

Meriette watched as the man charged. His eyes went wide, a loaded Henry 27 appearing in his hands, the six barrels firing their blood enhanced and explosive payload straight into the center of mass of his opponent. A weapon that would stop mid level three mark creatures in their track.

He barely managed to teleport when the Berserker nearly barreled into him.

Instead of slowing, the human increased his speed, running now with resounding steps as he kept his eyes firmly planted on his opponent. His chest showed chunks of ash missing, spheres deep within, blood leaking out with wounds closing yet again.

The injuries didn't matter.

The pain didn't matter.

He was not facing a human, a fighter, nor even a beast that felt and feared. This was a monster.

He calmed his breathing, aimed, and fired. A dozen impacts. He reloaded and fired again. This time, the Berserker vanished. So he did too, not checking around himself as he chose a random location and appeared. He turned and fired again, seeing a shield of ash take most of the impact. He could see the holes in the man's chest closed already, the armor reforming.

Two teleports later, he found himself next to the Berserker. He dodged back but was struck by a wild horizontal swing of the unenchanted maul. The heavy force rocked through him, disorienting him for a split second when he felt something grip his arm. He focused and felt the crushing strength of the man holding onto his arm, pulling him closer as he raised his other arm, the maul falling to the ground in that moment.

Meriette summoned another revolver, shooting at the man's head from near point blank range, his hand raised to block the bullets. Ash and fingers splattered away, leaving a bleeding stump with one metal sphere ripping away a chunk of the man's skull. He stored his empty revolver when he saw the stump come for his face. The hit made his vision blur for a moment. He raised his arm but found it pulled aside. His own strength surged to fight back but he was met with a massive ash armored skull slamming into his face.

He tasted blood in his mouth. Another strike followed. His teeth cracked. His nose broke. Another made his vision darken. His arm was pulled aside. He felt the crack, the pain dulled and still he

moaned. Another punch sent him down to the floor. A kick sent him rolling over the ground before he raised himself up on his arms, one of them bent outwards. Meriette spat blood. His own blood. A few teeth were mixed in, his vision clearing slightly. Something pulled up his hair, and brought his head down into the ground.

Stone cracked as darkness enveloped him.

A sharp breath. Pain. Healing. He shot up and found the monster crouching next to him, brown, near red eyes staring at him.

He seemed. Disappointed. And he held a vial in his hand. A vial of blood.

“Drink. And fight,” the Berserker spoke, casually throwing the vial towards Meriette.

He caught it and looked around. The others were still watching, murmurs resounding now.

“The ingestion of dragonblood has not been suitably tested,” the voice of the machine came from somewhere to his left.

He brought me down.

Humiliated me.

Meriette grinned. *You want to fight.* He flicked open the vial, feeling the potent blood through the enchanted glass container. *You will get your fight.*

He downed it all, his throat burning as the blood seeped into his muscles. He screamed, the pain searing red, and hot. His eyes focused on the monster before him. His claws were blood incarnate. He could feel his every muscle tense. Never had he felt so powerful. He breathed out, and slammed into the monster of a man.

Aki watched with a mental sigh as the Vampire downed the dragonblood and sprang up, a loud crash resounding when Gael was lifted up and slammed down into the ground, stone and ash spreading out, the Sentinel’s roar resounding in turn as the onlookers cheered and howled.

It was their choice to come here and join in, he reminded himself, glancing over at the watching vampires. *Discussing with interest. They almost look envious.*

Chunks of flesh were stripped away, ash and bone broken as he watched the start of a rivalry between the battle healers of the Medic Sentinels, and the Vampires of the Court of Flow.

“Keep an eye on their vitals,” he reminded the healers nearby.

“All covered, boss,” Chana said with a joyous voice.

Aki kept a part of his attention here, but at this point he felt these warriors were more experienced in this downright ritual than he could even perceive. At least with this Centurion model.

Sparring for hundreds of hours. More injuries in a week than most adventurers face in a lifetime. And it looks like the Vampires are not so different.

He had a feeling they would return soon, their projectiles enchanted with anti healing curses and effects meant to linger and weaken instead of eliciting instant and heavy damage.

Perhaps when he had taken over as the Guardian of Iz, he may have been worried. But by now he knew that competition would lead to innovation and growth. He had seen it time and time again. Both sides would benefit, as long as nobody died. And it turned out that both Sentinels and Vampires were famed for their durability.

He did pity the new members tasked with cleaning duties, but then he supposed for them, this was just another week.

A part of his attention shifted. To Riverwatch, and the grounded city beyond. Relations between the remaining elves of the Sky domain and the people of Riverwatch would likely remain tense for as long as the city remained visible. Too many had died in the attack. Both sides felt this way, though some blamed the elves, others the Monarch, some even the Accords, for not intervening fast enough. He knew there would've been tens of thousands dead without them, hundreds, if not thousands without the help of Ilea herself, but then their existence and history had allowed the Cerithil Hunters to push into the Navali forest, and they had removed the Taleen threat and constant pressure, changing the internal situation of the Elven Domains.

Blame would be placed on many, and perhaps some of it was fair, though he would not concern himself with the past, other than learning to improve what he could change in the present. He felt for those who had lost loved ones, friends, family, and still, a cold part of his knew that the conflict had cost far fewer lives than it would have.

His perception was far greater while connected to the Pursuer model he had chosen to keep in Riverwatch. The choice of not sending any Taleen machines into Verleyyna itself had been logical. While most Elves did not go so far as to betray the Oracles and Monarchs to join the Cerithil Hunters in the fight against the machines, most had fought them for decades of their long lives, had lost brothers, had seen young fighters die against the endless hordes.

Today was different.

He had joined Isalthar at the base of the grounded city, now scanning and documenting everything he could as they made their way through the structure. Few other representatives of the Accords had joined for this opportunity. Even Ilea had initially refused, letting him know that she may get *a little pissy* if she met the Oracle who let all of this happen, including the death of Heranuur.

Aki felt it was wise for her to stay away too, but Isalthar had let them known that the Oracles refused to talk without the new Monarch present. Whilst what he had learned about the Elves and their culture suggested she would be treated with utmost respect, fact remained that she had burned down and grounded the Sky Domain, and she had killed their previous Monarch, and hundreds of their fighters.

Myr Iva of the Mava had chosen to join, as had Niivalyr of the Hunters, and Eregar, the five of them reaching the highest level of the once flying city.

Isalthar led them past the many run down palaces and mansions, even the enchanted floor showing wear from millennia of exposure. Aki had expected one of the larger structures to house the Oracle or Oracles, but the Hunter stopped when they reached an overgrown plaza. It seemed nondescript, even from the views of the distant Watchers. There were worn down stone statues, cracks and scratches. Many were missing entirely, only the sockets remaining. The broader placement of where Aki thought their shoes would've been suggested they had once depicted beings not of Elven kind. Dwarves perhaps, if Isalthar's theory on the history of Verleyyna were the truth.

Aki knew it had not been the Taleen to build the city, nor likely Paarah. The Kingdom of Parior nor the dwarves from the Mines of Groll were likely involved either. Perhaps those from the Halls of Herom had been responsible or knew more, but even the Foundation and Io knew little of the secretive and ancient dwarves, hiding behind their impenetrable walls, deep below the range of Naraza.

Creators hidden away or lost to history. Perhaps one day, their secrets too, will be unearthed. He thought of all the adventurers moving out into the world, trained, equipped, and using the gates to travel distances thought impossible to traverse before.

Isalthar glanced at them, then turned towards the statues. He spoke in Elvish. A greeting to the Oracles, spoken as an outsider. As a guest. Rare in itself, as far as Aki understood. Even more so, knowing that the elf himself was considered cursed by most of his brethren.

A wave of mana extended from the center of the worn white stone plaza. Light came to life. A mere mote floating in the air. It gathered more and more mana as seconds passed, growing in size. Slowly, the mote extended. Blurred arms and legs, two wings of light. A humanoid form, two long ears. It floated, then opened its two eyes of pure light.

A subdued presence, and still, Aki could feel the purity of mana more than anything, and he knew that this creature was not merely residing in this city. It was part of it.

He collected every shred of data that he could, the concept fascinating, especially with what he knew of the One without Form. Had the Taleen been inspired by whoever had created Verleyyna? Had this Oracle found a way to merge with this city? Had some ancient being merged this creature with stone? Or had Verleyyna itself been built around the Oracle, and her true form?

“Monarch.” A whisper. Spoken through wind and air, as if ripples flowing through reality. *“Bearer of the Primordial Flame. We greet thee, and welcome thine presence.”*

Aki watched and documented as Ilea looked at the Oracle. She had to reschedule a date with Felicia to join, though he supposed the Imperial Major would understand, given the gravity of the situation.