



AGE OF **FANTASY**

**READY TO
FIGHT**

READY TO FIGHT BY BROOKE STEMME

Lanterns sway placidly from wooden rafters over a much more rambunctious sight below. New and old Ratmen recruits of all stations crowd around tables full of food and drink. Laughter and conversation echo off the walls.

Their weapons may be stashed in cubbies near the front door, according to the honour system, but that doesn't stop Abgrit from stirring up a challenge.

"Arm wrestling!" the young Ratman calls out. "Who will step up to oppose me?"

His confidence outweighs his stature by a slim margin, but he doesn't back down.

An older Ratman, with a cracked front tooth and a scar across the back of his hand, puts his elbow on the table. "I'll try."

Abgrit sits down eagerly, matching the other Ratman's posture and taking his hand. The chants of others crowded around, counting them down.

"Three! Two! One! Go!"

Abgrit can't wipe the grin off his face. He matches the strength of his opponent, trying to see exactly how much force is required to keep their fists level between them. It's a practice in precise strength, though the deep frown on the other Ratman's face is reminiscent of frustration and exerted effort, not the curious testing of one's own strength.

As soon as Abgrit feels his opponent's strength waver, he puts everything he has into slamming their hands to the side, his own facing up.

The room erupts in cheers, fists pumped in the air, save for the loser of the game.

Abgrit's opponent shakes his head. "I used to beat you before you took those potions. Still, you've earned your victory this time, but I'll know better next time."

Though there's no malice in the other Ratman's words, they bring Abgrit down a notch from his satisfaction in his victory. He understands the disappointment of leaving a challenge where the odds were never in his favour in the first place.

He never intended to be the source of that disappointment for anyone else. What he meant to be a celebration of his newfound abilities has left a sour taste in his mouth. The cheering and shouts around him suddenly seem too loud.

Excusing himself, Abgrit slips out of the crowd with well-placed smiles and laughter into the quieter evening street.

Outside, a small square serves as a walkway to the other establishments in the immediate vicinity. A fountain sits in the middle of the square with a stone statue standing inside it, a rat woman pouring a jug. Water tumbles out of the jug, pooling in the basin below. The sound echoes off cobblestones, finding even more open doors filled with music, light, and laughter.

Abgrit peers over the edge of the fountain into the water. His only distinct feature he can make out is his light brown fur. The ripples distort his reflection too fast for him to see himself. He frowns, as if squinting his eyes more might make his reflection clearer.

Abgrit has changed. He's now taller than both his brothers now, despite being the youngest. The muscles are broader, his paws leave a big footprints behind and the entire city seems smaller than it once did.

So far, the only downside is that the alchemical potions still cause his food to taste a bit more sour than before.

A paw claps him on the back, the force just restrained enough to keep him from tumbling into the fountain. Abgrit turns to find Jipthip looking down on him with a toothy grin and amber eyes. His sheer size would be more intimidating if he didn't have a perpetual lazy smile and slight swagger to his walk.

"What are you doing out here?" Jipthip says. "Forgot what you looked like?"

Abgrit flexes, then lifts his heavy mace, feeling its weight in his hands. It's comforting knowing a potential enemy would find more trouble than an arrow in the dark. Then again, he's never had the opportunity to test out the mace yet on anything more than a hay-filled sack.

"I'm making sure I know my strength," Abgrit says. "I've done more practice this evening than you've done in a week."

Jipthip laughs. "I've practiced enough for a lifetime. As long as I'm alive, that's proof enough I know how to fight."

Neither of them notices Kedcrei approach until she's standing at Jipthip's side, only a few inches shorter. Her fur is darker and thinner in some places. The tips are beginning to turn white, especially around her nose.

"Do you remember what you were like, Jipthip, that first week after you finished your treatment?" Kedcrei says. "If I recall, you punched so much stonework around the city you're still paying back debts. At least Abgrit is less destructive in his exploration of strength."

Jipthip opens his mouth, then shuts it.

Abgrit weighs his options, then decides to push his luck. "What was it like for you, Kedcrei? After you took the potions."

Kedcrei shakes her head, her sigh emphasising the concentration of grey fur at her temples and cheeks. "It's less a question of what was it like adjusting to your new form, and more your reasons for volunteering."

Jipthip interjects. "To be a head taller than everyone else playing cards!"

Kedcrei glares at him.

"There are mediocre reasons," she says, continuing. "Of need, and there are those relatively noble. It doesn't really matter what your reason was, as long as you can stand behind it."

Abgrit nods slowly.

"How do you know?" he says. "If your reason was a good one."

Jipthip shrugs. "Can't undo what's been done. Just gotta keep on living with it."

Jipthip's advice falls flat in the face of what Abgrit hopes to hear. Kedcrei, whether she knows that or not, elbows Jipthip with a sharp point of her armour and looks Abgrit in the eyes.

"You'll test your strength soon," Kedcrei says. "That's the only way you know what you're made of. We've built ourselves something worth protecting. Of course, anything worth protecting is also worth taking; it's only a matter of time before some trouble comes to our doorstep."

READY TO FIGHT BY BROOKE STEMME

Abgrit tries to suppress a shudder. Despite his alchemically enhanced size and strength, there's still worry in the back of his mind. He believed his enhancements would dispel his fear, give him confidence alongside the physical effects. Perhaps, he considered, most who underwent the treatment were just braver than he was.

His eyes dart to a scar along Kedcrei's shoulder, disappearing beneath her armour. Age has faded it from an angry, red wound to a thin grey line. He's heard more than a dozen stories of battles fought, won, and lost, but scars are personal. That's what waits for him in battle, if he survives it.

"I'll be ready," Abgrit says.

Jipthip laughs, his smile returned. "You better be. Trouble waits for none."

"I will be," Abgrit says, as if by saying it again he might convince himself it's true. "If you don't believe me..."

The ringing of bells drowns out Abgrit's words.

The entire city seems to hold its breath, waiting to see if it's a false alarm or if it's really real. Drills have been run before. This close to the borders of the Human Empire, there's always diplomatic tension, but Abgrit had never actually heard the alarm before.

Not until today.

The bells continue to ring. Jipthip's humour dies in his eyes. "Stay close and follow me. We need to figure out what's going on here."

The sudden shift in the atmosphere means Abgrit isn't thinking when his body starts moving. Years of training have drilled that into him. Follow the command first, think second.

That's what he's always been told. This is the first time it's not a drill. Jipthip takes them down streets meant to direct them just north of the city's heart. That's where they'll receive their orders. Abgrit has walked this way many times before, but as he follows Jipthip, the streets seem to be unfamiliar in the late afternoon light.

As Ratmen flood the street around him, he wishes the thinking part might wait a little longer to kick in. He can't be worried if he's not thinking, but he can't hold off that worry for long.

The bells mean danger. Not a warning or a scout, but that danger has met them at their city gates. It's the desperate need to not lose sight of Jipthip and Kedcrei in the crowd that propels him forward.

What's waiting for them out there? He can imagine a hundred different possibilities. Until he knows which one is real, they each create a rising anxiety in him that threatens to stop him in his tracks and turn him the other way. That's where the civilians are going; toward escape.

Abgrit is running into the midst of the storm.

In his mind, he knows what he's been trained for. He volunteered to take the alchemical potions to make him stronger. He's never shied away from any challenge before. And yet, this challenge? It's just a test of strength or a game of wits; it's life or death.

What is waiting for him out there?

It's his nose that gives him the first clue. An acrid scent causes his nose to wrinkle, blinking a few times as if it might clear out the smell.

Smoke.

His blood runs cold. He looks up, as if his eyes might prove his other senses wrong, but above wooden roofs toward the edge of the city are the first tendrils of smoke and sparks across the angry orange of the setting sun.

"Fire." Abgrit only dares to whisper the word.

Whoever's waiting for them is trying to burn them out.

The dread in Abgrit's stomach is a full-force will of its own. Civilians flee all around them. Jipthip carves a path down the major city streets, still opposite the flow of the crowd, headed toward their designated posts.

The closer they get to the fray; the more frenzied cries rise around them. Shouts of Human Infantrymen and Fanatics carry on the wind along with the smoke.

His training has taken him this far, but a traitorous thought starts to eat away at him.

Would anyone even notice if he ran too?

Without warning, Jipthip slams to a halt in front of him. Abgrit tries and fails to avoid running into him.

Wincing, he pulls himself back to meet Jipthip's gaze. There's no humour, no silly quip ready. He's serious. Abgrit has never seen him like this before.

"We're here," Jipthip says, through gritted teeth. "Whatever comes next, we face it together. Everyone else is relying on us to hold these lines and keep them safe."

"What if I'm not ready?" Abgrit blurts the words before he can think better of it.

"You just told me you were," Jipthip says. "Are you saying now that I can't trust you?"

Kedcrei ignores Jipthip's question and puts both her hands on Abgrit's shoulders. Abgrit's attention is fully on her, a tension in his chest straining as he waits for what she'll say.

"This is your first fight," Kedcrei says, her voice gentle yet firm, as if a battle wasn't about to start raging around them. "If you weren't afraid at all, you'd be a fool. But this is when you decide if this is going to be your first fight or your last. You have to choose courage; otherwise, fear will choose for you. Do you understand?"

Abgrit swallows hard, then nods. "I understand."

The older Ratman studies him for a long moment, before letting him go.

"He's ready," Kedcrei says to Jipthip.

Then, to Abgrit, "Trust us; we'll do everything we can to make sure you make it out of this. We just need to trust that you're ready to do the same for us; we're counting on you."

There's no accusation in her voice. Her words aren't meant to cut, but Abgrit is acutely aware they've reached the point where there are no more second chances. Everything he does from this point on matters more than anything he's ever done before. His life, Jipthip and Kedcrei's, and everyone else's hangs in the balance of what happens today.

"Together, then," Jipthip says. There's a sort of resignation in his voice that Abgrit has a sudden desire to prove wrong.

If he wasn't ready before, he has to be now. There's no more practice, no more drills. He can't let them down.

READY TO FIGHT BY BROOKE STEMME

Orders are shouted ahead of them and passed down the ranks, from the centre outward. Each unit splits from the gathering to their appointed positions. Abgrit, despite his resolve to choose courage, still holds his breath until their command comes.

"Protect the main tunnel!" a voice calls. "Help the civilians escape and don't let the humans follow!"

It's straightforward enough. Just a few blocks south of them is the main tunnel entrance. They passed by it on their way here. A drill would include setting up a perimeter, a series of tests in repelling enemy advances from different angles, then a hearty meal and a good sleep.

None of those drills or instructions accounted for the temperature of the rising flames closing in on their position as well as the Human army.

Abgrit shudders as they step forward towards the perimeter.

"We can do it, together." He says it once out loud, then repeats it in his head enough times he hopes the mantra is embedded in his bones.

Four paths lead to the main square. This one, the clearest path to the city gates, is the most heavily guarded. The three of them take up positions along the street aimed toward the gates. They stay close together, watching Ratmen flood by and waiting for the Human ranks to close.

Across the square behind them is the main entrance to the tunnels. This is the one meant for mass evacuation, but it was also built in the early days of settlement. All other access points to the tunnels are well hidden.

Even if they weren't, in the debris of a fire they should be that much more impossible to find. Still, the mouth of this tunnel is only wide enough for two or three Ratmen pressed shoulder to shoulder to enter at a time.

Those trying to evacuate are piled up at its entrance, pressing forward with all their strength to force their way inside.

They need to buy more time. If the civilians are going to get out, it's up to them to keep the Humans from breaking through their ranks. Assuming, of course, the fire gives them enough time. It's closing in around them from all directions, sending waves of heat across them. Sweat drips down Abgrit's back, matting his fur.

The buzz of anticipation holds them all captive. The last of the stragglers run past, smoke rolling in behind them as buildings are set ablaze further up the street. Jipthip stands in the centre of the street, Abgrit and Kedcrei at his sides. The rest of the remaining units file in around them, creating a barrier of rats preventing easy access into the city square.

If they're going down, they're going down fighting.

Abgrit stares into the smoke, waiting for human shapes to appear. He taps his mace against the cobblestone, the sound echoing as others around him do the same. Though there's a fear deep in his bones and his hands shake, he's not going anywhere.

As the first shadowy shapes begin to claw their way out of the smoke, Jipthip lets out a shout. Abgrit's voice rises with those behind him. The humans shout too, their weapons drawn to meet them. Both sides charge, meeting in the middle with a loud clang of metal on metal.

Abgrit finds each moment seems to fracture into a series of movements, actions, and reactions.

Abgrit's mace clangs against the steel of a Human Infantryman. The man reels back, another one filling his place. Abgrit swings again, and this time his mace dents deep into his foe's armour.

The man doesn't back down but swings his sword. If it finds a mark, Abgrit doesn't notice the pain.

Jipthip bears his teeth with a shout Abgrit can't hear over the ringing in his ears. He swings his weapon, meeting an infantryman's blade.

To his left, Kedcrei is hand-to-hand with a Human Fanatic, both bearing more scars than Abgrit could count, even if he had the time.

The sight of them encourages his spirit. He bares his teeth, facing the battle ahead of him with all the energy he has.

He's still standing, and yet still more shapes seem to come out of the smoke closing in on them.

Bodies push against his back. The sheer number of Ratmen behind him helps to keep him standing, but he still slips back a few feet on the cobblestone.

Abgrit heaves ragged breaths, a bitter taste on his tongue. The fire is closing in, and step by step, they're losing ground.

The sound of a horn cuts through the fray. The high pitch causes Abgrit and others to wince, his eardrum throbbing. His brain doesn't catch up to the meaning until the Ratmen behind him take up the cry.

"Retreat! All units retreat!"

They're falling back to the tunnels. They've held on as long as they can, and now it's time to run.

A cry of anguish snaps Abgrit's thoughts from retreating back to the battle around him. It's not his own pain, though. Abgrit turns to see Kedcrei stumble back a few steps. She presses one hand to her abdomen, the other held outstretched weakly as if to defend against another attack. She wavers unsteadily for a few moments, then falls to her knees.

"Cover me!" Abgrit shouts, hoping Jipthip is still close enough to hear him, but that's not what's on his mind as he kneels next to Kedcrei.

"Please," Abgrit whispers. The force of his hope is almost too much to carry. "Are you okay? You have to be okay."

It was one thing to imagine running. It's another to see someone he cares about wounded on the front lines. There's no time for this, but Abgrit won't leave her behind, not if he doesn't have to.

"They got me," Kedcrei says. She speaks through gritted teeth. "They were just... too fast."

Abgrit assesses the wound she's holding, looking for any other visible blood that might be hers. He doesn't find any other grave wounds, but that doesn't mean this one isn't fatal. Still, he pushes that thought from his mind.

"So you are getting old?" Abgrit says.

Kedcrei laughs. "Get up and fight, boy. At least if I die here, it's in battle, knowing the two of you got away."

Abgrit extends his hand. "I'm not going anywhere. And you're not dying today. This is the only chance we get. Get up and fight with me."

READY TO FIGHT BY BROOKE STEMME

Kedcrei snarls at his outstretched hand, more from pain than dissatisfaction with Abgrit's comment. "They've called for retreat," she says. "So retreat."

"I..."

Jipthip hauls Abgrit to his feet. A moment later he's dragging Kedcrei up too, though with more protesting.

"They're going to surround us if we don't get moving," Jipthip says, ignoring Kedcrei's discomfort. "Assuming the fire is going to continue graciously letting us live." He swings his weapon at a fanatic that gets too close.

"So," Jipthip says. "Are we retreating now?"

"Run."

"No."

Kedcrei and Abgrit lock eyes, each of their statements overlapping.

"If we're not running, what are we doing?" Jipthip says.

"You told me I was trusting you both with my life," Abgrit says, still looking at Kedcrei. "Did you mean it when you said you trust me?"

The older rat hisses as she removes one hand from her wound, curling it into a fist.

"I meant it."

"Then go to the tunnel," Abgrit says. "On my signal, seal it. Then we'll regroup and draw their focus away."

"Ready to run, now ready to fight," Kedcrei says. "Boys grow up fast when they have to. Just tell me when."

Abgrit turns his full attention to the Human Infantrymen closing in around them. Jipthip lashes out, sharp and close motions. It only serves to glance sword tips away for a moment before they're trained on the Ratmen again.

"Can you get to the fountain?" Abgrit says, stepping up beside Jipthip. "If we make it through this, we'll need to make it through the fire next."

The Ratman glances over his shoulder, then back to Abgrit, grinning. "You got it. Take this."

Jipthip hands over his weapon, then takes off running.

Abgrit makes his own concession of ground, running just far enough to scramble up onto a low stone wall marking a soon-to-be burnt garden. He flexes his tail, the metal ball on its end finally more than an inconvenience walking through town.

A mad smile grows across Abgrit's face, locking eyes with each Human Infantryman in front of him, each sword hoping to find its mark in his flesh.

"You want to burn this city down?" Abgrit says. His throat burns from the smoke, but it doesn't stop him from shouting with all his strength. "You'll have to go through me first! Now!"

Abgrit leaps from the low wall, swinging his weapon, the sound of a small concussion behind him at the tunnel entrance. His tail makes contact with another, forcing him to stay on his toes to maintain balance.

From the side, and fully drenched in water, Jipthip makes his reappearance to attack the Infantrymen with Abgrit. He has a strip of equally drenched pieces of fabric between his teeth and more in his claws.

Abgrit, finding a brief reprieve in the infantry attacks, takes the other two strips of fabric, one for himself and one for Kedcrei, as he falls back to seek her out in the settling dust.

"Here." Abgrit thrusts the cloth into her hand, his words spoken through his own cloth.

"When I said your strength would be tested," Kedcrei says. "I didn't think it would truly be a trial by fire."

The cloth in Abgrid's mouth muffles his reply, but he's proud of it nonetheless. "Well, I suppose that we know what I'm made of now."

Abgrit signals for Kedcrei to stay close to him, trying to ignore the hand still pressed to her wound. The two of them charge back into the force opposing Jipthip.

The charge knocks the infantrymen back far enough that there's a brief break in the conflict.

Abgrit pulls Jipthip back from advancing, pointing deeper into the city. Without another word, the three of them retreat. Kedcrei leaves a trail of blood behind her that's impossible to track among the falling ash.

To draw off the human forces from the others' escape, they'll have to make their own way out. That means heading deeper into the heart of the fire before reaching the edge of their city.

Shouts rise up behind them. Footsteps are drowned out by the crackling blaze of the fire.

Abgrit's eyes prick with tears, each breath a struggle even with the wet cloth in his mouth. As the adrenaline begins to fade, he can feel his own wounds that mark the beginnings of scars. Sword blades along his forearms, a well-placed flail mark drawn across his back. The pain calls into question the decisions he's made this far, but there's nowhere else to go but onwards. Fear will not win. If fear wins, that means he stops. If they stop, they die.

Each fountain they pass by, though each serene figure promises peace, has stony eyes that can't see the fire around them and the army behind them. Still, as the fire roars above and beside them, they do not give up.

For as long as the three of them are drawing breath, Abgrit has no doubt that they will continue on together.

If they make it out alive... When they make it out alive, his scars will forever tell the story of his first of many fights.