

The Breach: Welcome to the Breach

Gregor stood behind his desk, looking out over his fortress, the Breach. His post sat atop one of the few buildings able to break the seemingly omnipresent fog here in the Maw's valley. The dusky sky caused an echo of his face to stare back, a crisscross of burns, scars, and too many nights spent on ramparts instead of a bed. His dark brown leather armor offered only the barest hints of a reflection. Instead, the longsword hilt, iron hook, steel boots and gloves caught the glow from the flickering lanterns.

Suddenly, a loud shriek journeyed the forty feet up the Watchtower. It ignored the stone, wood, and glass to drill straight into Gregor's ears. The unholy combination of a baby's wail and a panther's cry forced him away from the window. Glancing up, he saw the source - a winged creature ascending from the smog below. It didn't so much have a color as it lacked one - an absence moving through the evening sky. Within seconds, the sound came again, tenfold, heralding a dozen more of the monsters to follow their leader above the ramparts.

Within the space of the next breath, the guardians of the Breach responded to the invasion. The signal bells echoed twice to signal flyers, and the pitch funneled along the walls erupted into fire. The distinctive twang of bows joined the clamoring of guards and equipment as arrows starting chasing the darting targets.

Gregor stared down into the erupting chaos, running through orders, right hand instinctively resting on his sword's hilt. The soldier's preparations had been twenty-seven seconds slower than average. Gregor moved through the circular command center, managing the spider web of signal wires to send orders through the Breach. The rope in his right hand would light the signal lanterns to tell the families to take cover. A half step to the side and a lunge with his left arm reached a lever which called the runners to deliver barbed arrows to the ramparts. Gregor's movements were exact, practiced over his three years as commander in this hellscape.

But something kept nagging in the back of his mind. Flyers hadn't attacked alone in two years. Recently, the bastards brought some other damned creatures to accompany them. The third wall claimed the forest sat silent, and the fighting had already been contained to the second ring due to quick movements by the bowmen. Gregor jumped from his thoughts with a start when a thud echoed from the stairwell. A hissing followed, and then another slam, getting closer. The creator of the noise had to weigh at least as much as two men. Gregor drew his bastard sword, backing away from the only entrance - a trapdoor now ten feet from him. He tossed aside a chair for twenty more inches, but the desk proved too unwieldy. If he was lucky, a shambler would take twenty seconds to close the distance. One of the leaping creatures would have him pinned in a moment. A heavy thud shook the latch. Another came two seconds after. One, two -

And another knock came at the door, taking Gregor out of his memory. He blinked, before turning from the glass back to his desk, ducking under one of the signal wires. The echoes of a commotion crept in through the cracks of the wood.

"I am a member of the royal court! I can go where I damn well please!" a nasally voice complained.

"The commander ain't ready, you can go down to the feast in the first wing with the new arrivals," Eibert, Gregor's occasional guard answered gruffly.

"I am no criminal or pilgrim sent here to wait. / will see him when I desire!" the shrill voice almost seemed more painful than the cries in the daydream.

"ENOUGH!" Gregor boomed out. "Eibert, let him in."

A brief rattling of keys and locks lead to the loud creak of sedentary wood forced into motion. The alleged royalty stumbled onto the threshold. The man's long, bright blue robes were expertly maintained - not a crease or stain in sight. Bracelets of various metals that couldn't be used in weaponsmithing jangled on his thin wrists. His eyes darted around like lost fish. The man's scrunched nose seemed afraid to leave the safety of his face.

In the room of furs, leathers, trophies, blades, guts, orders, weapon plans, unit profiles, and the dense network of signaling devices, the advisor looked positively alien. He hunched under the cables, crossing the ten feet with stutter-steps to avoid touching anything, before sliding into the seat opposite Gregor. A moment of silence passed. The man's gaze attempted to latch onto something, but couldn't rest on either the grotesque decorations or Gregor's face.

"Well?" asked the so called men, only to be answered with a glance. "Aren't you going to offer the king's advisor something to drink?"

Gregor let out a sigh - he hated dealing with suppliers like this. "Not unless you brought something with the reinforcements. I doubt the local mushroom brew fits courtly tastes, mister..." Gregor trailed off, gesturing towards his guest with a gauntleted hand.

The man recoiled in shock. "Did you not hear of the appointments? I, Erwin Stauffer, am right hand to the new lord, Bernard Nemetz. I see to all-

Gregor interrupted with a raise of his hand. "We only get news with reinforcements. The Breach is more concerned with fighting the demons at our door than who sends us the men." The commander hoped that would end the conversation.

"W-well, you'd best start refocusing," Erwin stuttered out. "I'm not here just for resources, but an inspection. His highness wants to know what we've been spending so many resources on maintaining. After all, Einvorn has no enemies in the forest."

"WHAT?" Gregor yelled, slamming his desk with his hand. Erwin tried to shrink away, but had run out of space in the small chair. The commander rose to his full height, looking like a giant compared to the cowering politician. "The Breach has held the line against creatures you can't

imagine for that last four centuries. That forest is full of terrors, and if the Breach were to fall, they would roll from the Maw like locusts upon ripe wheat!" Gregor's punctuated his sentence with slamming his index finger on the map in front of him, his words still echoing in the chamber.

"D-d-don't insult my intelligence," Erwin finally stammered, sitting up in his own chair. "I don't know what it's in that grog you drink to convince you otherwise, but I've also read the tales of the Breach's founding. Those creatures never existed. The garish heads on your wall can come from anything. And if some echo of mythology runs in those forests, any man can kill a beast. We don't build fortresses to stop bear attacks," he spat out, mustering as much of a snarl as he could.

Gregor planted both his hands on his desk, and leaned in towards Erwin. To the worm's credit, he didn't recoil - it'd only taken five minute to learn not to show weakness in this room. "Look at my face. Eleven years ago today, another slime came rolling over my threshold. When I struck it, it absorbed the blade. When it grabbed my leg, I felt my leathers dissolving in moments. The only way I lived was smashing a lantern into my shoulder, pouring flames over the pair of us." Gregor leaned back. "Its head's over there, third from the left," he said, gesturing to a mass of toothy mouths and eye stalks, wilted like dying plants. "No *bear* could have killed the six guards of the Watchtower in moments," the last words dripping with venom. "Every true Breachman has spent their lives preventing Einvorn's nightmares from returning. Can the unprotected farmers half a day's ride out say the same?"

"Yes, I'm sure the celebration and feast below are excellent training exercises," Erwin responded with a sneer.

"They're honoring the arrivals. In three days, the new soldiers will be sent into the forest at dawn. Whoever comes back upon the next, and is still human, will be made a Breachman."

The politician took his turn to stand in outrage. "Wait! I bring you some of the best soldiers of the royal army, and you plan on...sacrificing them? Wasting the one hundred volunteers on some ritual?" Erwin snapped, his face turning three shades of red.

"First, you sent more than usual, so some will get removed to keep supplies balanced," Gregor ignored Erwin's jaw dropping. "Second, I thought you didn't believe in the creatures of the forest. And more importantly, it's not a waste. Each time we've sent the recruits out, the Breach has avoided attacks for the following two months. I'd much prefer losing untrained men in bulk than five each day that took sixteen years to grow."

The room grew silent. Gregor counted the seconds for Erwin to stop stumbling over his own tongue and find his thoughts.

Forty-one.

"I'm leaving with the volunteers. We will return with the King's own forces, and you will surrender this post," Erwin said, as a matter of fact. "The crown cannot let a madman who throws away citizen lives on a whim to command anything." The weasel stood up. Gregor waited the two heartbeats for the advisor to reach the trapdoor.

"I can't allow that," Gregor said. Erwin froze, but didn't turn. "The nature of the Breach's foes caused worry. Some can manage to look just like you or me, and sneak past any guard post. That's why there are the Sentries - surely you remember those two towers, a thousand yards out from the rear gate?" Erwin turned around to face the commander. "They kill anyone who leaves the Breach if they don't see a particular signal. This lever right here, actually," Gregor gestured to the controls on his right "lights a lantern that means someone has been cleared to pass. Without it, you die the moment you leave that gate."

Gregor stepped around his desk, and approached the beat-red Erwin. The worm, who'd been so calm at the entrance, radiated anger. Gregor put an arm around the politician, and started pushing him towards the exit. "So let's join the celebrations and worry about the rest later."

"By the five, we'd we have to get guard shift on Reinforcement Day?" Leon complained to his partner, Finn. "Second time in a row - I'd say we're cursed." The echoes of the festivities in the center might have only been whispers on the third wall, but it served as a depressing reminder.

Finn lowered his spyglass to reply. "Nothing ever happens during feasts, anyhow. The drums and fire scares the beasties away. Besides, not like we have to remember their names. And at least we ain't on the wall," he finished, before returning to peer out the window. It was an undeniable upside - the watch house had a table, stools, and a fire. More importantly, Finn had managed to grab a skin of mushroom ale. Tasted like the shit it grew from, but Leon couldn't complain about the kick. The drink, combined with the walls of the hut, had managed to keep the cool winds from bothering them. Neither commented about the shift from blistering heat to cutting ice - after being raised in the Breach, they knew better than to complain about weather - it would often change by the hour.

Leon was set to continue complaining, but before he could open his mouth, Finn interrupted with a wave. "Does that look right to you?" he asked, passing the spyglass to his brother, as he pointed to a set of trees maybe five hundred yards out.

Glancing down the tube, Leon saw the set of trees swaying violently, as if sitting atop a wave. That wave was getting closer, and faster. Leon froze for a moment before reflex kicked in. "Finn, flash the lantern four times! BURROWERS" he yelled, leaning out the window as Finn stumbled over to the signal light. Grabbing his knife, Leon cut loose the bundle of logs and rocks hanging outside. The booming noise of the mass hitting the ground at the wall's base, fourteen feet below, should pull the creature closer towards the Breach. Then the only problem was how to kill it.

Erwin sat beside Gregor in a seat of honor, but refused to look even near the commander. He pushed the potatoes and pork on his plate, while the rest of the feasters dug in with ferocity. Dented drums and poorly tuned lutes were played in the way only drunken soldiers can manage, a cacophony of noise that almost had a beat. Some people gathered around the central bonfire, miraculously finding a way to dance to the sounds.

But a flash of light drew even the drunkest Breachmen's attention towards the forest gate. The recruits took a moment to recognize the sudden silence, and looked confused. Gregor counted three more flashes.

"Burrowers!" He yelled, his booming voice carrying over the remnants of conversation. "Stations! NOW!" he emphasized. If the creature came through the fortress, the soldiers had maybe two minutes to pull the beasts to the surface.

The Breachmen went to grab weapons and torches from the armory. Archers climbed atop the first wall, looking for the telltale rippling of burrowers. At the second and third wall, Gregor knew similar preparations were happening. He cursed himself for leaving the tower - its view would have the creatures intercepted in a moment.

Within forty-five seconds, four of the runners had grabbed a thumper and wheeled it into the courtyard. An additional twenty, and it was set up, drumming against the ground with a pounding piston. In the distance he heard a rumbling, growing louder. Instinctively, Gregor stepped back and drew his sword, filling a hole in the circle of Breachman around the thumper. He had lost Erwin somewhere in the commotion.

Ten more seconds. A new signal showed that only one beast seemed to be coming. Another showed that they had changed its path towards the thumper. The device could no longer be heard over the roar of stone and earth being moved.

Then the thumper exploded in a cloud of dirt and rock. Gregor lunged forward to prevent being crushed by a small boulder, and looked up to see the creature, now thirty feet away. It seemed like a giant snail - reaching up to five feet at the height of its shell, and six feet long. But then Gregor noticed the limbs. Two arms came out from the center, each at least four feet long, with massive clawed hands, currently flailing for any purchase on the ground. The legs weren't much better - equally spindly, but moving with unnatural, jerking motions, like a dying insect's last kicks. The snail-beast's arms found the ground, and it slowly turned towards the bonfire at Gregor's back. Its face looked like a man's, but melted and stretched to twice the length. Sunken eyes shook in the overgrown sockets, and the jaw hung open in a constant grimace. A low moan, which shook Gregor's bones, came from the creature.

Then it stood.

The moan turned into an indescribable howl of pain as the arms lifted up the creature to stand on its rear legs. Its underbelly rippled like a deer caught in a tar pit. The head rolled on the hanging neck, flopping with a squelch as the monster moved. And with another cry, its stomach erupted.

Gregor fell to the ground, as a massive tendril whipped from the monster, snagging a soldier and tossing him into ten others. Dozens followed, grasping for any man as the creature continued groaning. Gregor grasped out for his sword in the mud before standing with a swing. He sliced a tendril off, causing the beast to howl as thick ichor sprayed from the stump. Archers fired flaming arrows at the creature, but it seemed to shrug off the pain. No other soldier could get to Gregor to help - the whipping tentacles forcing them back. But their commander had been lucky, the beast couldn't confront the singular threat inside its defense. Gregor continued to hack off the grasping black coils, advancing towards the creature's body.

But the beast wouldn't give up. When Gregor kept approaching, the monster threw down its arm to squash him. He rolled out of the way, but the flailing limbs proved just as impossible a barrier as the tendrils for the others. It took all his focus to stay on his feet, much less attack.

Then, Gregor heard a yell. Glancing over, he saw their savior - a group of runners mounting one of the thumpers onto a cart. With luck, it could get past the arms to drive into the monster. The other Breachmen quickly saw the contraption, and began trying to force an opening. Stepping into his swing, Gregor managed to take out three more tendrils, but another knocked away his blade. The beast turned to him and shrieked, turning away just enough to expose its side. The runners charged ahead, slamming the pistoning weight into the gap between shell and flesh. Gregor swore he saw surprise on the melted face before it let out a stomach flipping scream. It started writhing in pain, and a limb threw one of the runners against a wall, but the device wouldn't release. As its side tore asunder, the creature fell into a pile of leaking fluids, and collapsed, lifeless. The remaining tentacles followed twelve seconds later.

Immediately, the Breachmen began gathering the wounded and the supplies. As the battlefield cleared, Gregor looked for any sign of Erwin. Not finding him, the commander headed to the hero of the day, the runner who'd been tossed aside at the last moment. The lad, not a day older than fourteen, lay broken and lifeless. Gregor heard someone trudging up behind, a familiar stutter-step. Turning, he saw Erwin, now caked in mud and sweat approaching the body.

"Well," Gregor said. "Here's your hero. And there," he gestured to the snail-man "is your great beast. Still think the forest legends are false?" he continued. Erwin stood quiet.

"His name was Kurt Dorn," Gregor added, gesturing to the body. "If he hadn't charged in, we'd all be like that." Gregor turned away, and then looked over his shoulder. "Oh, and I never did say it formally - welcome to the Breach," he finished bitterly, walking to help the repairs.