Cut down, and then focus on Azel/Ursar issue

Lieutenant Takken stood a dozen paces from his soldiers and, to any of his sullenly watching command, was attempting to slowly and steadily work his head free from its mooring. First, he would swivel his neck to peer expectantly at the western skyline, fiddling apprehensively with his brightly shined, lieutenant’s bars. Then, as if the moldering hovel was some enormous predator, sagging roof and twisted chimney creeping closer whenever he turned his back he would whip around, pinning it to the earth with his gaze. If anything, the ground was creeping up, over the building slowly but surely turning the one room hut into basement real-estate. Corporal Anya, whose spittle laced instructions were to shoot anyone “Or anything. Even if they- it looks human. They were given clear orders. Just following protocol,” watched her commander’s head make another violent arc. She, very carefully and very deliberately, didn’t look to the pile of helmets, rifles and jackets that lay like the epidermal peel of an animal that had just been skinned. Nor did she look to south, where what everything that had been Lower Ravnasill lay. None of the twenty-four less three company clustered at the base of the predawn hill did. At least up here with the Lt., she couldn’t smell the pyre. With her stomach roiling as it was, she didn’t think she’d be able to eat pork ever again.

A sudden squawk, like a chicken giving itself a concussion, drew her attention away from the smell that still burned in her nostrils long after the fires had banked. Lieutenant. Takken’s vigil was at an end. Several of the soldiers on the trail to Ravnasill noticed as well. A light had appeared in the western sky, like an echo of the sunset. As the light grew in intensity and size, wings of ghostly fire, flickering from rosy purple to blue, appeared. It was mesmerizing, beautiful; if she hadn’t seen it once before, she might have thought Orturiel himself was descending. The TRU (Tactical Response Unit) hit Prime half a kilometer up. Seven seconds after, the sound wave hit like thunderclap making the tops of trees dance. It wasn’t long after the Templars arrived.

In theory, that should have siphoned the tension of the hillside away. When the Templars came, it wasn’t your responsibility anymore. Not your operation, not your command, not your fault. Except it still was. Anya smelled what a day ago she might have mistook for burning pork and tried not to cringe as the Templar commander crested the hill and strode toward them in silver and gold like the judgment she was.

“Lieutenant,” she said. It was a hard voice, and sharp, like a flint broken of any smooth edges.

Lieutenant Takken saluted smartly. He seemed to have gotten ahold of himself, finally, and addressed the Templar. “Lieutenant Takken, Pacification division three.”

“You were the one to report possible buried Ursar in the Ravnasill environs.”

“Not just possible. We found them, two sir, maybe more. My soldier had established an entry point on the southern and eastern-”

“Where is Lower Ravnasill?” The Templar said flatly, cutting through the Lieutenant’s stream of consciousness like a shark.

“Just there, sir,” the Lieutenant said, pointing nervously south, a grin playing about the corners of his mouth like a child gamboling about quarry’s precipice.

“No. Ravnasill is a crossroads town. It has an inn, The Quill and Arms. It has fifty-three people, half farmers and half servicing travelers and it has a memorial to the six sons and daughters who came home in pieces. That,” she pointed south, “is a pile of charcoal, a funeral pyre, and a desecrated stone,” her voice remained level, and steady, but Anya shuddered still.

Takken, on the other hand, was still bent on spilling his tale for the world. “Yes, we got them! Sir, it was an amazing battle. We had established entry points to the south and east when I sent for the Templars. But they must have gotten wind of us, the Ursars, I mean, because not half an hour after I sent for you-”

A villager, in his mid-forties missing his two front teeth and with all the luck of a lightning rod in a storm had stumbled into their position. But Anya did not say any of this. If she opened her mouth, something a bit more might escape.

“A man working for the Ursars attacked out southern foothold,” finished the Lieutenant almost breathlessly. “My soldiers took him down but he’d served his purpose, he’d alerted the Ursars to our presence. We had to spring into action to save the moment.”

He’d practically tripped over Jarred and Jarred hadn’t thought. Then everything in that moment that could go wrong, did go wrong. After, much after, Anya had found Jared, pale as willow bark and shaking. She didn’t know if it was because of shooting that fool man or what had happened after.

“My troops had the village surrounded and I gave the order to advance.”

The second Jarred’s shots rang out, the nervous, trigger ready platoon panicked.

“We had to follow protocol. If a pacification platoon or company encounters Ursar or indications of Ursar within a civilian population-”

-they are to quarantine the area and summon Templars. No living thing is to be allowed to leave the cordon. All potentially exposed soldiers are to be confined until proven clean. Lieutenant Takken had made sure they were clean. Corporal Anya stood guard before the last standing house of Lower Ravnasill and listened to the story unfold all wrong. Whatever skill Takken lacked for command, he made up for with the ability to tell extravagant, exquisitely crafted lies. Perhaps he even believed them himself, who knew? Anya listened with disgust the story of a bumbling pacification platoon that had never before seen combat pulled together by a heroic lieutenant. There was the tragic and regrettable but entirely necessary pacification of Lower Ravnasill. Pacification, not slaughter, no, never slaughter. Then there were the Ursar. If Takken was to be believed, half of Ravnasill were buried Ursar. If she hadn’t been at the little farmhouse a hundred paces from the crossroads, she would have thought every word was horse shit. But she had, and she’d seen what the Ursar had made out of itself, and what it had done to Sanders, Vivi, Half boots and KT. Then the Lieutenant, reaching the climax of his story, looked the Templar in the face and told her that he had killed the Ursar himself, “run it through with this very bayonet, I did. Vivian had thrown herself in front of me, shielding me from the burns. She sacrificed herself, she did.” Anya had to respect the slight tremor, the careful setting of his jaw as he told the lie. She’d often wondered how Takken had made Lieutenant at twenty two, and now she didn’t have to. Anyone who could go from cowering behind a field stone wall, shrieking orders to anyone who would listen as his sergeant was burned from the inside out to telling a Templar he was a war hero had a certain kind of guts. She supposed she ought to hate him for it, but all she felt were cold, slimy slithers of guilt that came from her part in the story, her silence, what she and all of them had done. “I felt the thing die on my steel. Let me tell you, it’s not something I’ll soon forget. I only wish I had killed it sooner. My soldiers had already been exposed.”

The Templar looked at him impassively. She had listened to every word the man had spoken without comment, her silvered visor betraying nothing of the face within. The Lieutenant could not see her gaze rake his ashy, grimy but definitively not bloody hands as he drew the scene of his triumph in the air, nor could he see the burning anger that reflected the still smoldering cinders of The Quill and Arms.

“I see,” she said with brittle calm. This quieted the Lieutenant, though did not shake his certainty in the story he had woven so expertly.

“I wish to see the exposed troops, to verify their sanctity,” whether by chance or by divine providence, the wind died and her gun metal voice was heard across the hillside by every soldier lost in the pitfalls dug by their own minds. No one said anything for a second, and then the Lieutenant cleared his voice.

“Right this way, though I’d be careful if I were you. I did everything I could think of to pacify them, but Ursar are tricky. We’ve kept them under close guard.”

“Thank you for your warning, Lieutenant. I’ll try to keep it in mind.”

Anya’s eyes strayed to the blade at the woman’s hip. It was short, thick and did not sway with the intermittent wind. Angel steel, she guessed, and shivered. She’d heard stories of Templars wielding those, and the rifle slung across her back looked capable of turning a horse into pink spray. The woman was just as good an actor as Takken, if she could say accept his patronizing caution with a level voice.

With a horror, dulled by the numb blanket of sickness that had fallen over seemingly every member of the platoon except one, Corporal Anya realized the monster killer was approaching her. She straightened into a salute which was met with a nod. A mailed hand landed on her shoulder, as lightly as a ten-ton butterfly graciously choosing not to crush her.

“It will all be over soon, like none of this ever happened,” whispered the Templar. It was only after she had swept past, through the slanted door that Anya realized there had been a note of kindness threaded through the harsh voice. Anya wished the woman would find something else beneath the earth. The hilltop held its breath as the Templar found what lay interred within the cold earth and held it, and held it. A prickle of predawn light was spreading its fingers of light across the east when she reemerged. She was helmetless, and Anya was startled to see that her tightly curling black hair was cropped short. For some reason, she’d imagined her as having long, flowing locks like some knight ridden out of the old tales.

She walked straight up to the Lieutenant, face as cold and unmoving as the helmet had been. “Lieutenant Takken, it occurs to me that you may benefit from a reassignment. Someplace closer to home I think.”

“Sir? Is there something wrong?”

“I was under the impression that you had quarantined three soldiers who had been exposed, is that correct?”

“Yes, sir,” the Lieutenant snapped off another salute, “Any human exposed to Ursar must be immediately neutralized and placed into quarantine, as per protocol sir!”

“Neutralized,” echoed the Templar.

“Drastic situations call for drastic actions. Anything could have been incubating inside them.”

“So, you emptied a magazine into their skulls?” The way she had said it triggered some, deeply buried and suppressed instinct for self preservation, but the Lieutenant was too deep in his story.

“Protocol is quite clear there. The Ursar might have planted anything inside them before I killed it.”

“It might have.”

“Sir, I would like to request the medal of bravery.”

The Templar raised an eyebrow. “Really for whom?”

“For my late sergeant, dying the line of duty. His actions were heroic and deserving of honors,”

“And I suppose you would request the same for yourself?”

“If you think I merit it,” he said, generously.

The Templar regarded the Lieutenant like a something she’d found adhering to the sole of her boot. “I think, that you should take my offer of reassignment. I think you should be transferred straight away.”

The Lieutenant blanched. “But sir, the award ceremony. I can’t leave my command without seeing them properly honored.”

“It might be dangerous to stay in your current position. Your soldiers may have a different view of last night’s events.”

Takken’s head whipped around, as though now it was his own company creeping up on him. Then he faced the Templar. “There were Ursar everywhere. I’m afraid one or any of them might have been exposed.”

“And all exposed soldiers are to be confined until proven clean,” the Templar said with finality.

“I’m grateful that you understand,” the Lieutenant said.

“I do understand.” A touch of sorrow had entered the Templars words. Anya felt as though the woman had just cut her throat. Speech, air, breathe they were all suddenly impossible. In numb betrayal, she watched the Templar rest a friendly hand on the Lieutenant’s shoulder. He staggered from the weight.

“You’re a graduate from Arenholm Academy, aren’t you?” Her tone was suddenly friendly, cheerful, almost as if she were greeting an old friend.

“Graduated just a year ago, top five percent of my class and captain of the orator’s team as well.”

“Really? That’s very impressive. I never went to Academy.”

“Oh, you’ve done fine for yourself,” Lieutenant Takken said graciously.

“Nothing like you. You graduated top five percent-”

“Four percent, not that it matters,”

“Oh, silly me. Four percent. You must know an awful lot about fighting then, and tactics,” her voice had taken on a vapid tone, seemingly shedding years off her weathered basalt face.

“I specialized in logistics. In my final quarter I-”

But he never finished his sentence. The hand that had rested in such a friendly manner on his shoulder had clamped around his throat. To her horror, Anya witnessed her commanding officer lifted off his feet by his through, his hands scrabbling uselessly against the Templar’s plate. “I was in the vanguard on Kulrathen. I broke the siege of Ruhiem. I’ve torn Ursar to pieces with my bare hands, stupid child,” she threw him then, like a rag doll. Every eye was on him as he rolled to a bleeding, quivering heap. The Templar descended on him like the wrath of God. “And even blind and broken I could still see that carrying your wounded and dying out of the hell of lead and steel was the right thing to do, no matter the cost.”

On the ground, the Lieutenant choked for air. Above him the Templar drew her angel steel blade. It was matte grey, and ugly. Nothing like the shining weapon of Angels Anya had expected and it was echoed by a cavalcade steel being slid home. Appearing like specters from the brush, fully armored Templar rose, rifles locked and shouldered. Any thoughts of coming to their commander’s aid died. These were Templars. You can’t fight Templars.

She spoke in a ringing, voice, the soldiers who had once been Takken’s hearing with dead ears and seeing with cold eyes. “If a pacification platoon or company encounters Ursar or indications of Ursar within a civilian population they are to quarantine the area and summon Templars. No living thing is to be allowed to leave the cordon. Lieutenant Takken. My Templars have found forty-six bodies in the village. That leaves seven your inescapable cordon let slip through, including the two buried Ursars.”

“Impossible, they’re dead!” Takken managed, his voice going from rasp to panic.

“All potentially exposed soldiers are to be confined until proven clean,”

“I was only following protocol. I had to!” screamed the Lieutenant as he was lifted up again by the jacket.

“You were exposed, Lieutenant, when you ran it through with your bayonet.”

“I didn’t! I wasn’t! I didn’t run it through, per say, I shot it, from a long way away. I wasn’t exposed, I swear.”

“Corporal,” the Templar’s hazel eyes touched Anya’s and the world waited. She saw the tears running down Takken’s face, the spreading wetness of his pants and almost told the truth. Then, she saw Vivi’s bubbled corpse hurled by what the Ursar had made from three men, and set her back.

“He was exposed,” she said, and was pleased that her voice did not waver.

“Just following protocol,” the Templar said baring predatory teeth, all white enamel and pink gums as though they were display pieces that had never encountered the taint of food. The angel steel went through him like hot metal through snow. She dropped him, gasping and clutching at the blood that welled from the wound as though somehow he could stop the red tide.

“When is an Ursar most dangerous?” The blood stained woman bellowed.

“When it has nothing left to lose!” chorused her Templars.

“What are we?”

“The monsters that kill monsters!”

“They have six hours head start and we have seven trails to follow. Move out.”

Sorena will have three sections.

Part I.

Introducing her as the counter to Hoar’s Azil aren’t monsters. She must be powerful, but not 100% evil. Air dropped in to oversee the cleanup. Meets with young, idiot who made it necessary to massacre an entire village. Complete bungle. The target got away. Tries to save him, and his men but he doesn’t listen or keeps on digging the hole deeper. She has to kill him, for securities sake. Gains to pleasure in it. Grieves for him.

Comes on hard and sharp. Goes friendly, as a last kindness.

Part II

Much neater situation, but still bloody. Shows how deadly some of Ruhiel’s creations were, this was a monster seed which suddenly burst cover. Sorena contained it, this time. She had to kill a small group of travelers to do so at a check point. It had become a full fledged monster by then. It nearly killed her, vowed Ruhiel will rise again. Reports of strange happenings in the Golemel. Follow up?

Comes on hard and sharp. Goes friendly, as a last kindness. Kills a partial monster asking “Mother? Mother?”

Part III

Goes and has a chat with the Trader. Gets all the information he knows. Very friendly, had a “friend” from up there once.

Part IV

Attack on the village. Kills Azil on sight. Meets with Parseek, talks it over with him as her soldiers surround the village. Hoar marches into the middle of this to talk with the people.

Sorena Introduction Part I

Identify with Sorena, make her a good vs. good kind of villain.