



THE MINER'S GUILD



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REVOLUTION

The Behemoth didn't start on the first try, the heavy machinery misfiring with an angry whirring of gears, black smoke bursting from the exhaust to wreath the mighty engine. For the briefest moment, Ballista quite forgot himself and felt doubt settle upon his mind. The creation hadn't seen anywhere near the extensive level of testing he'd once have insisted upon, when furnished by a large purse and the luxury of time. Instead, he'd brought it down here into the mines relatively unproven, consoling himself there would be no better trial than surviving hard graft amongst this industrious folk.

Ballista could hear that the choke was pulled all the way out when the driver tried to fire the engine again, the sound of the ignition a throaty rasp. His earlier fears abated as a low whirring sound took root inside the engine block. It slowly gained tempo and volume until the entire chassis bobbed up and down, the movement reverberating through the ground to where the Lord Artificer stood with Shaft, the Miner's Foreman.

Fissure's expression remained set in concentration, eyes narrowed as she carefully balanced the fuel mixture and coaxed the Behemoth into firing on all cylinders. By the time the foul tar smoke had been completely banished by paler grey, Ballista was delighted to hear the machine ticking over at perfect

pitch. Not for the first time, he smiled at how quickly the young Numasai had learned her new trade, mastering the drivers' seat in mere weeks.

Fissure offered the rest of the crew a thumbs up, pulling a heavy set of goggles over her eyes before turning her attention to the sheer rock wall ahead. With a sudden shudder the entire engine began to lurch forward on its tracks into the gloom.

Never one to wear an easy smile, Shaft's mouth resisted the grin Ballista thought he saw creeping at the edges of his lips. Bright streaks betrayed the shorter man's satisfaction all the same, fleshy lines cracking through the grime covering his face. The Miner might have been a dour, dry-humoured soul, but the Lord Artificer knew there was plenty here for the average man to respect. The people of the Miner's Guild were fair and honest, even if they did hold their cards close to their chest among outsiders.

The pair looked on as the immense machine loudly trundled forward, barely meeting resistance as the drill struck the opposite wall and quickly shattered the stone into a shower of chalky dust. In moments the Behemoth was surrounded by broken lumps of rock and soil as it forged ahead. Spade led the other members of the crew in its wake, pitching the debris into a huge hopper lashed to Mule's long arms.

Shaft clapped Ballista's back in a comradely gesture, his smile threatening to break free at last. 'Not often you'll hear me say something like this, Engineer,

but—’ He was interrupted as the whole world began to shake violently, continuing for several seconds as a vicious aftershock thundered its way through the cavernous tunnel. A cacophonous rumble soon followed, emerging loudly from somewhere in the depths despite untold tonnes of rock.

Ballista took cover by instinct, no stranger to explosive munitions.

Only as the shuddering subsided did he feel confident enough to gingerly rise to his feet and dust himself down, a wary eye appraising the walls and ceiling for any trace of falling stone. He wasn’t surprised to see Shaft and the other Miners had kept their feet. Despite a shorter stature from so many years under the ground, they were a hardy breed, long familiar with the danger that came as part of their surroundings.

The Foreman was bellowing at his crew over the noise of the Behemoth, good spirits replaced by an irritated scowl. ‘Spade, get your arse down into five and find out what that damned fool thinks he’s doing! I hope for his sake that blast has taken his head clean off this time, or I’ll beat it bloody myself!’

The Lord Artificer didn’t doubt Shaft would be as good as his word. In the short time he’d known the man, Ballista had quickly become accustomed to the fierce loyalty the Foreman held towards his own. There wasn’t room in this mine for a maverick who endangered the others.

The Miners formed close knit communities. They

all worked together, drank together, and shared each other's burdens should they arise—and arise they often did, given the extreme working conditions. One look at their weary and lean cast, along with the variety of disfigurements they'd suffered was enough to convince Ballista of that.

It was another world compared to the ingrained isolation and competitiveness of the Engineer's Guild, where individual artisans jealously guarded their secrets with threats and hard words. Everyone was equal down here. If their labour bore fruit, everyone profited, not just those who were already wealthy. Ballista found the idea strangely appealing, and quite unlike anything he'd encountered before.

'Sorry about that.' Shaft shrugged his shoulders apologetically.

Ballista chose not to voice his own thoughts on the matter and opted for politeness. 'Not at all. Always one, eh?'

'Huh, not on my watch there won't be. Fuse was—is a good lad, but I don't trust or like recklessness.' The Miner paused, a sad look taking hold of his eyes. When he spoke again, he lowered his voice and sorrow snuck in. 'I need to find him a way out of here which saves the lad face, I think. Man and boy I've known him, and he's not getting any better.'

Ballista nodded, stroking his chin. 'War's like that. For some, the scars lie under the skin, and don't ever seem to properly heal.' They both knew the words to

be a considerable understatement. The first moment he'd laid eyes on Fuse, the Lord Artificer had seen the unhinged tint in the Sapper's eyes, and the devilry curling his lip.

Further down the tunnel the Behemoth at last resumed its passage, emitting a sharp metallic grinding sound as it struck a harder vein of rock amongst the soil. Ballista nodded appreciatively as he heard an undeterred Fissure change gears and the drill switch up to a higher torque.

Shaft saw his opportunity to change subject to something more comfortable, jabbing a thumb backwards towards the machine. 'That's one bastard monster you've made there. Never thought I'd see the like. Does the work of ten men, and doesn't even hurt the back of the driver neither.' He chuckled mirthlessly and patted the surface of his prosthetic arm. 'If we'd had one of them back in my younger days, I might not have the ol' jawbreaker here.'

'Jawbreaker?' Ballista raised an eyebrow at the unusual name.

'Aye, that's the name the lads gave this thing after I laid out one of those bastards from the Thatcher's Guild. You'd have laughed to see it. I know I do, remembering his feet leaving the ground and him coming back down on his arse. Deserved it though. No Thatcher will ever be welcome in a mine while I draw breath, Engineer, I'll tell you that.' As if to underscore the point, he spat a bitter mouthful of phlegm onto the tunnel floor.

The Lord Artificer decided not to question the man further. Inter-guild rivalries were nobodies' business but those involved.

'So, how comes you decided to come down to see us again today? Here to make sure we haven't broken her already?' Shaft raised an eyebrow good naturedly, and Ballista found himself returning the gesture with a smile. These were earnest people. It was difficult not to like them.

'I doubt you could. Five sheets of armour plating cover the Behemoth. Even a rockslide or cave in shouldn't much bother it. No, I came here with an entirely different proposal for you—and maybe one that'll solve your problems with explosives too.'

'I'm listening.'

Ballista chose his next words carefully. He knew that times were hard for these people. As the Empire of the Free Cities rapidly expanded during a new era of peace, the Miner's Guild bore the brunt of increased demand for raw materials more than most—yet their administrative class of magisters and chamberlains seemed entirely content to pocket the increased revenue without improving the lot of their workers.

Over a quiet drink in the mess hall, Shaft had privately confided of shortages in food, supplies, and new bodies to replace those who were forced into early retirement by injury. Appalled, Ballista had done his best to supply prosthetic replacements for missing limbs, and bent his continued mechanica research into

providing new equipment like the Mule and Behemoth. But for all this bold group embraced him with a heart-warming familiarity, his actions still fell shy of making the difference he'd hoped. The agonising hard labour continued, for longer hours, and with less people.

He'd not been surprised to discover protests were a common occurrence in the mines. The men and women that laboured in these terrible conditions were disgruntled and underappreciated. There had even been strikes, where crews threw down their tools until some reparation was made. In the aftermath of such events an uneasy stalemate had come into existence between the councils formed by the workers and the elites above. Even a typically reserved and taciturn figure such as Shaft was put on edge by the volatile situation. The Miners were ready for a call to arms.

It was precisely this sentiment Ballista planned to appeal to.

'In the cities, far from the isolated wilderness of the mines, the world continues without the slightest hint of your plight. From the lowest man in the gutter to the crown princes and monarchs, nothing is being done to either address or increase awareness of your struggle.' He waited for the foreman to nod before continuing.

'You and I both know that to be a travesty. I've never known conditions like this outside of the horrors I witnessed in trench warfare. We both know the situation cannot continue.'

‘But what do you suggest, Engineer? Our tools are blunted. The councils argue and bicker amongst themselves on the way forward, and short of a violent uprising, I cannot see a way forward. Even then, our numbers are so few that if we took to the streets, we’d quickly be lost amongst the throngs of people. You spoke yourself of our anonymity.’ The frustrated words were clearly hard for Shaft, his expression resigned.

‘I agree. But we can change that. It feels obvious to me your plight can reach a greater number of ears should you be given the opportunity—and after much consideration, I have decided exactly the platform to achieve this, and the body of people who shall take up your protest.’

Shaft wasn’t slow on the uptake. ‘Guild Ball? But what can we hope to achieve among the paltry audiences of the lower divisions?’ He snorted. ‘I have no confidence in the bastard elites parting with their gold in any case. We could never fund a team, despite the wealth they make off our broken backs.’

‘And that’s precisely why we’ll ignore them. I will fund you. And, my influence will assure you of a place in the Big Leagues, alongside the Engineer’s Guild. There, you shall find the voices you need and boots to march for your cause, united behind you. The revolution is coming. And this will be a new beginning for both of us.’

Shaft scratched his chin thoughtfully, gruff nature warring with optimistic excitement. In the silence

Ballista heard singing, echoing down the tunnel from where the crew still worked to dig out the debris.

The sound was inspiring and powerful. The sound of a bold future, that would reach across the simple boundaries of nations and sovereignty to unite the population behind a flag of equality.

On instinct and without hesitation, he thrust his hand boldly forward.

The foreman gave up the uneven struggle, and let a broad smile take hold at last. ‘We stand with you, Engineer—as your comrades.’

