

The screams of the dying surrounded him. Agonised wailing, voices drawn into incoherent screams from the pain, unintelligible and raw. Skewered on the spear of an enemy, or belly slit open by the swipe of a sword, no man or woman died quietly. Not even the poor souls hit by cannon fire were safe, their bodies carved into pieces by the chain shot but their mouths streaming gibberish as their minds tried to process such massive trauma.

Worse still were those who managed words, their final messages somehow all the more haunting. In voices trembling from fear or pain, they begged for the forgiveness of loved ones or offered prayers to whichever deity they recognised, their passion and heartbreak plain to hear. Both outnumbered those that cursed the world and their enemies. When death cast a shadow over the battlefield, those that felt its touch seldom had the strength to waste on hatred, only regrets.

Theron was yet far from surrendering to death's embrace and knew only anger, bellowing at the uncaring gods in their darkened skies as the carnage enveloped him. No creature worth devotion would allow such bloodshed to be visited upon their faithful flock.

The man holding him down by the shoulders belted him across the face, dazing Theron, and silencing him for a moment. Theron tasted blood in his mouth, sharp and coppery, warmer than any broth he had eaten in months. Through blurry eyes Theron watched another soldier approach, his heavy green jacket like a deathly shroud. Something metallic shone in his hand, sharp and terrifying, for all that Theron couldn't make it out clearly.

Closer, and Theron could see the blade at last, a long rapier. Its sharp edge matched the cruel smile of the infantryman holding it, a cold line bereft of any warmth. Theron's anguish was abruptly replaced by fear and he began pleading, struggling harder against his unseen captor, bucking against their grip. Still the smiling face came closer, only inches from Theron's own, the breath sweet on his skin, gentle and soft-

Theron lurched forward, waking suddenly to see Athena smiling at him. One hand was on his shoulder, where she had been gently shaking him.

'Same dream?'

Theron nodded dumbly, a coarse hand brushing scraggly locks away from his eyes. He was panting heavily, and his forehead was clammy to the touch, a thin layer of sweat across the flesh.

'You were talking again. Something about the Greens. I didn't know that Raedland had much cause to fight the Old Skaldic Empire during the wars. I thought that your lads were all stationed in Valentia and Figo.'

The softness in her voice was soothing, helping to calm his racing pulse and relax his breathing.

'We were in the end, those of us that were left. But at the start, we were all over. Raedland used to have colonies in just about every corner of the world. When the civil war happened at home most of us were cut off, and had to try and make it on our own.' He paused, remembering the sorry remnants of his regiment by the time they'd reached Valentia. They had been unrecognisable from the men and women they once had been.

'The garrisons in Figo and Valentia were made up of stragglers that made it back. When we got there, we discovered most of the rest had already fled from the mainland. By then, most of us had spent so long trying to get to safety, the final betrayal was just too much. We simply gave up on seeing Raedland again, and reinforced the few men left behind.'

'Why not just surrender? Live out your lives in the safety of a prison cell somewhere, instead of fighting?' Athena looked into the distance. 'The fighting was hell. Too many good men and women lost, for no good reason that I could tell you.'

'Because we don't do that.' The answer was automatic, said without thinking. Theron wondered how long the sentiment would remain, when so much of the rest of his identity as a soldier had already slipped away behind him. The sudden thought tugged at his mind until he pushed it away again.

Athena was frowning, and he smiled sadly. 'We didn't do that, I mean. Not the Royal Raedlander regiments. Our creed was built on pride, on courage in the face of overwhelming odds.' The words sounded hollow even as he said them, false and from another time when they hadn't truly been tested under fire.

'Didn't do you any favours, I see. You were left to die in your trenches and on the field by the men and women commanding you, and bull like that kept you there.' Athena got up, and dusted herself down. 'Come on, time to get moving, Raedlander.'

As they had passed along the roads heading northwards, the scenery had changed as dramatically as the weather. At last the blasted winter had begun to thaw and reveal green grass beneath the frost, and the sun rose earlier, spending more time overhead, warming their tired bodies for longer. It was a blessed respite. The road was no place to be during the winter, the pair having spent long nights frozen through, huddled together for any warmth they could take.

Athena had fast become as close a friend as Theron ever had known. Her quick wit and sharp tongue often kept his mood at bay when faced with adversity, or led him to laughter in easier times. She was easygoing and kind, yet assertive and dependable. Having a conversational partner had reminded Theron of the camaraderie shared by his brothers and sisters, the other men and women stationed with him during his time as an infantryman. In both instances, the adversity of circumstance had bred a strong and unbreakable bond.

Having someone dependable to stand watch whilst sleeping was enough of a boon on its own, affording peace of mind from bandits, or worse. When his turn came, Theron would steal glances at Athena as she slept, and wonder at her past. She remained a mystery he could not fathom, regardless of what she had told him. An officer in the Figeon state militia, only mobilised in the final months of the Century Wars, she still seemed to have plenty of stories from much earlier in the conflict, of battlefields and sieges which a simple auxiliary militia had likely never seen.

Pretty in her own unconventional way, her features were unblemished by scars or the nervous twitch some soldiers failed to shake after seeing friends taken in the most horrific circumstance. Theron

couldn't imagine she had known the war which she spoke of, but the details were rich enough he didn't doubt her word.

Theron had no idea why such a woman would choose the life of a vagabond. She was no lost soul like he was, or any of the other unfortunates consigned to a life walking the roads for that matter.

They had been walking for most of the morning, the sun almost at its zenith before Athena's eye picked out a silhouette on the horizon. She pointed off away from them in the direction they were headed, her features lit up with excitement. 'Hey! That place up ahead could be perfect to rest for a couple of days, Raedlander.'

She seemed to have a better eye than he did, and it took several minutes before it came into his own sight, a dark square against a backdrop of trees, partially hidden from sight.

Although their days had become easier, it was obvious to both of them that they remained exhausted. They had survived the winter, but barely, clothes loose on their bodies from lack of sustenance. Hunting and foraging for food in the unforgiving cold had been difficult, forcing them to survive on the paltry scraps Theron had saved from the summer beforehand.

A day or two of rest under a closed roof, and with a little luck, a warm meal, would go a long way to restoring both of them. He didn't need to ask Athena to know that she would agree with him. Both had familiarity enough of their hard life for it to be obvious.

As they grew closer, Theron saw that the building was a rough stone shack, with a dark thatched roof still drying out after being soaked through by snow. Fortunately, it looked abandoned. No smoke issued forth from the chimney, and weeds had grown around the walls, white mounds still piled up against them as the remnants of the snow melted.

It promised infinitely better rest than the cold ground.

Inside was unfurnished, but for a fireplace covered in dusty soot, and a broken wooden cupboard in one corner, bare of contents. Opposite was a set of rickety wooden steps, leading downwards into a cellar of sorts, a tiny space that reeked of mould and spoiled meat. Whomever had made their home here had long since departed, taking all of their possessions with them.

It would do marvellously.

The flames ravenously devoured the logs which Theron had thrown on the fire, as though it too was famished from starvation. As he watched the bark blackened and peeled back, flames licking at the surface, the ends smouldering embers. Underneath, the softer wood darkened, more resistant, but already its surface catching.

He had stared at a similar sight every time they had made campfire over the long weeks, hypnotised by the way the orange light moved. This was the first he had been afforded the luxury of doing so without the biting wind whipping at him, or twisting the flames unnaturally at its whim. The fire almost seemed relaxed, a calm, soothed beast left to slumber contently.

Next to him Athena stirred, stretching her legs and arms, and moaning slightly. Theron smiled at her. The half-light complimented her features well, a strong jaw softened by the shadows, skin glowing with an umber tan to mask the pale freckles he knew.

She caught his eyes, and chuckled. 'Draw a picture. It will last for longer, Raedlander.'

Theron quickly turned his body away. Both of them had taken the opportunity to strip off their soaked and stained outer clothes to hang by the fireplace, and now lay on their bedding wearing only breeches and light tunic. Seeing more of Athena's flesh and feminine curves than he was used to had caused a stirring sensation Theron had thought forgotten long since.

She laughed even more heartily at his reaction, the tone good natured and friendly. 'Gods, Theron, I'm hardly a maid. You look as hungry as a wolf!'

Theron shook his head, shaggy hair moving from side to side. 'Sorry.'

'Don't be. Precious little else to stare at in here, I'm not so proud as to ignore the compliment.' She shot him a deliberately lecherous look of her own. 'Besides, you're not half bad to look at either.'

Theron offered her a lopsided smile as she shuffled over onto her belly and looked him up and down, eyes glittering in the light. She was beautiful, the bleak surroundings fading away.

'Where did you come from, Athena?'

She grinned. 'That's an odd question to ask a lass at a moment like this. I think the time for clever lines to bait your lure has passed.'

'Just... just, I thought to ask is all. I know nothing of you, really.' Theron thought he detected a hint of annoyance cross her eyes for a moment, before it passed.

'That's because there isn't much to know.' She shook her head. 'I grew up in a little village near Talfallore, which was annexed by Castellya not long after my first bleeding. We fled to the city with the rest of the people dispossessed by the invading armies. All along the way, I listened to the stories the soldiers escorting us would tell of the wars, enough to know that it wasn't going well. As soon as we reached the city, I signed up for the militia.'

Athena broke for a moment, her features hardening. 'It took the Castellyians over a year to commit to a siege, but when the war finally came to our gates again, I fought as hard as any. We couldn't defend our poor little village, not even with walls around it. But there was no way that I was going to stand by and let the bastards into Talfallore.' She closed her eyes, clearly remembering different, and harder times. 'I saw enough horrors standing on those walls to last me a lifetime.'

Theron found her hand, warm to the touch, and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

'Worst were the great war engines.' When Talfallore fell, it was one of those fucking machines that did it.' Athena shot Theron a dark look. 'Don't ever let some pompous cretin tell you otherwise. Bravery was always on the defender's side, with us, no matter how many fell from the cannon fire or gave their lives repelling the siege towers from the walls.'

'But we couldn't stop the Rat Catcher, and his gasses. You ever see those poison clouds, Raedlander?'

Theron shook his head.

'Be glad that you haven't. The gas was thick, mustard yellow, hanging in the air like mist in the early morning. It stank of garlic, and that was usually the only warning you had before it was on you. Then you just had to abandon your position and run.' Tears shone in Athena's eyes. 'That's how they took the city. Poisoned themselves doing it, just as much as they did us. When we were marched out of our homes, I saw as many Castellyian corpses all bloated and covered in sores from the gas as I did our own, their final moments spent in just as much agony.'

'What does it say for man, when he's prepared to unleash hell like that on his own kin? Even the most bloodthirsty animals wouldn't go that far. Part of me died in the final day, never to return.'

She shook quietly, her piece finally said, a terrible secret no longer now it had been let loose into the world.

Theron leant forward, free hand reaching towards her. Athena flinched away at first, eyes wary of him like cattle watching an approaching predator, before she gave in and let him pull her close. For a moment, it crossed Theron's mind her nervousness might be from fear of rejection now she had shared her dark memories, as though he would suddenly be repelled by her, or push her away.

He could understand that. No one had survived the Century Wars intact, each of them harbouring a host of irrational doubts and fears not present before. He kissed her forehead, rough fingers brushing away an errant strand of hair away from her cheek, coloured copper in the light.

He intended to prove he would not abandon her, and that her fears would not be realised.

They spent the rest of the evening without speaking again, Athena trembling in his arms as she remembered the horrors which she had survived, and the faces of those fallen in such bleak times.