

'Aye, I've never known it as bad as this. Not by a long way.' Mugger belched, red cheeks and nose flushing even brighter pink. His breath reeked of sour wine, the liquid in his wineskin more akin to vinegar than anything else.

Theron couldn't help snorting. The drunk soldier's words were laughable. None of them had ever known anything other than wartime until now, born during the conflict and signed up as boys. He doubted even the oldest man or woman in the world could remember a pre-war age.

There were seven of them in total, all huddled over around the fire. Each had wrapped themselves in whatever blankets they possessed to their name, trying to keep the cold at bay. Most were old army issue or hand-me-downs, rough sackcloth stained dark brown with the grime and dirt of a hundred campaigns.

Mugger's had been dyed purple at some point, the colour now fading and worn bare in patches. It marked him as Valentian as much as his accent did. Once upon a time, the Kingdom of Valentia had boasted one of the proudest military traditions of all, even insisting on trivial details such as colouring their troops kit with state colours. They had been alone in such as pointless gesture, soon running out of coin to pay for such extravagances as the war dragged on.

In Theron's experience, it was a display designed to hide the simple fact that their armies were untrained boys and girls, scared and homesick. It was little wonder their country had been decimated by the conflict. The valiant knights were long gone from that land, in their place a cold and miserable peasantry ill prepared for fighting.

Mugger alone seemed talkative amongst the figures surrounding the campfire, his drunken voice drawling on regardless of whether anyone showed sign of listening. His words echoed through the silent forest, accompanied only by the crackling of the fire, and the occasional sound of an animal moving through the undergrowth. The rest of the sorry bunch were content to simply warm themselves at the fire, hoping to resist the harsh winter weather for a little bit longer.

Theron knew one of them, the young lad sitting apart from the rest, wouldn't survive the night. He was a scrawny wretch, no meat on his bones, skeletal frame visible where his ill-fitting clothes were a size too small. Unlike the rest, he had no blanket or shawl to cover himself, and lay on the frozen ground in the foetal position, passed out. The stench of death was thick about him, the sour milk smell of rot mixed in with the scent of dried sweat and grime they all wore.

Theron didn't even know the lad's name. Mugger had called the boy Blondie, on account of his straw-coloured hair, and it suited well enough. None of the others, Theron included, would have given the boy bedding or clothes of their own, even if they weren't already wearing every layer they owned just to keep the bitter cold at bay. It was survival of the fittest, each looking out only for themselves even amongst friends - and none of the men and women here now shared that camaraderie besides.

Leftovers from their regiments, deserters, or criminals, each had their own story as to how they got to be sheltering in the woods. They had banded together this evening for survival only, a group of them more easily able to gather wood for the fire, and to fight off bandits or predators overnight. Come

morning, they would most likely part ways again. They were not alone. Scores of soldiers existed this way, severed from the world by the Century Wars, and wandering aimlessly. Theron knew from experience that after the evening was over he would be unlikely to see any of the faces currently around the fire again. There were just too many people out there, and too many campfires.

Not to mention the hazards which claimed their lives in between.

He had lost count of the number of frozen corpses he'd passed on the road, starving stragglers who had no choice but to try and bed down and wait for morning in the darkness, alone. Such desperation was tantamount to suicide.

'It was the fault of the bloody Castellyians, this war. You know that? Its why things have gone to shit now.' The outburst drew Theron's attention back to the group, waking him up from his quiet musing.

'Them and their bloody pride. They've always been trying to take that which doesn't belong to them. The whole country, stinking thieves, rapists and murderers. For years, they've wanted nothing but to ruin the rest of us.' The sharp voice belonged to Ferro, a small Figeon man with fierce eyes, sitting to Mugger's right.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Nationalism like this was rife in the fledgling Empire of the Free Cities, especially amongst the old soldiery. A life spent fighting enemies from other states couldn't so easily be put behind a man. All sorts of vile slurs, accusations and warnings had been scrawled over walls throughout every Sovereign State, etched in chalk or daubed in paint.

Once, Theron would have admitted that he held some sympathy for the viewpoint. Like many, he had struggled during the war with not demonising the enemy, and remembering that they were just men, flesh and blood as he was.

In the times after the war, when he had met those same men and women, and seen how closely they resembled the people he'd served with, Theron had begun to put any such thoughts behind him.

It hadn't been overnight though.

To his shame, Theron had his fair share of stories of violent brawls in and outside of taverns, beating men bloody just for the sake of a flag that no longer meant anything. The first days after the armistice had been dark ones he'd rather forget, and one of the reasons why Theron preferred to walk the long road alone, forgoing companionship. Leave that bond for those that deserved it, and not a man such as Theron had once been, or Ferro still was.

He kept quiet, the reaction of a coward, a snake that didn't want to draw attention to itself.

'Easy there, Ferro. No need for that kind of talk.' Mugger tried to salvage the moment, the heavysset Valentian's tone uneasy despite his friendly words. He smiled under the bristles of his moustache. 'We're all friends here.'

'Friends? Since when have I ever wanted anything to do with Valentian scum like you?' Ferro spat his retort at the larger man, eyes blazing with a fiery intensity that belied the frosty temperature around him.

'You didn't seem to mind sharing his stew earlier, Ferro.' Another voice, this time belonging to a hulking Skaldic cavalryman still wearing his crested doublet, proud eagles emblazoned over his chest. The rest of them laughed in response to the words.

Ferro shot the cavalryman a filthy look. For a moment, it looked like he would open his mouth and reply, before he clearly thought better of it. With easily a foot over the Ferro, the cavalryman was a brute, and his present smile looked like it could very well turn down at the edges in an instant.

The tips of his ears turned beetroot red, Ferro swore under his breath and leapt to his feet, leaving the group for the darkness. Theron watched him go. Vile little men like Ferro didn't deserve to share the fire with the rest. More than anything, the men and women here were all united by their shared experiences. It didn't matter who they had once fought for.

A hard life on the roads, and wandering through the country with plenty of time to think had soon taught Theron who was to blame for the war, and its atrocities. He would never forgive the nobles for their hubris in starting the conflict, blithely sending hundreds of thousands to their deaths, nor the generals for betraying their men and standing mutely by. The soldiers were only victims following orders, that was all. The only difference across all of the Sovereign States was their accent.

It was difficult for a man of any intelligence to hate a reflection of himself.

Dawn came, the sun melting the snow on the branches of the trees as it crested the horizon. Theron had sheltered under such a tree for the night, icy water now dripping over his blanket and the exposed skin of his face, waking him with a start. Cursing, he sat up and blinked away the residue that covered his eyes, trying to shield them with his hand as they adjusted to the light.

Morning had arrived, and with it the aftermath of last night's events was laid bare. Where Blondie had laid was only a messy vermilion stain discolouring the pristine white snow, brighter red trails leading away in all directions. It looked as though the predators of the forest had taken their fill last night, the boy reduced to meat for their ravenous appetites.

Theron wondered if the boy had woken at all since he stumbled over to the group, and collapsed like a marionette with its strings cut. There had been little ceremony to his ungainly fall, but those might have been more humane final moments than waking to find that he was under attack by wolves.

The others were still asleep, but for the cavalryman. Eyes glazed over and staring directly forwards, the Skaldic man's skin was pale from the cold, his lips blue. His throat had been slit during the night, the wound a thin red line painted over icy skin, blood staining his tunic crimson. It had been half torn, half cut open in a struggle, right through the heraldic eagle stitched into it. From where Theron sat across the smouldering fire, it looked like the bird itself had been killed, along with the man.

If the animals hadn't taken him, it couldn't have been long before dawn that the murder had taken place.

Theron wasn't surprised to see that Ferro was gone, along with his bedding. There was little doubt he had had committed the crime in an act of spiteful vengeance. The roads knew no justice and the

murder would go unpunished now Ferro had fled, as long as he was careful enough to not cross these paths again.

It was time for Theron to move on as well. The words of last night had reminded him of his own shame, and that he didn't feel either welcome or a sense of camaraderie here either.

Before he left, Theron was careful to gently close the cavalryman's eyes, fingertips brushing over cold skin. It looked like Ferro had already looted through the man's possessions, leaving nothing of worth behind, not that Theron would have taken anything if it had been here.

He had that pride left to him, at least.

Theron stood, and resumed his path northwards, one frozen foot after another through the snow. He got about twenty paces away from the rough camp, the faint smell of the embers lost behind him, before a voice hailed him.

'Hey! Hey there! You, Raedlander!' Theron stopped in his tracks. The voice belonged to one of the women, the pitch higher than a man's tone, although no less powerful.

He turned to face the woman as she caught up with him, breath streaming out from her mouth and into the frosty air as small clouds. She wore the uniform of a Figeon officer, tan leather brigandine still dark, leggings replaced with rough wool trousers. Her tawny hair was tied up in a messy knot, an errant bang having escaped to fall across her forehead.

She smiled at him, the gesture oddly gentle for the harsh world which they lived in. She was pretty in an understated way, a mischievous glint to her eyes that reached her lips, now Theron had seen it.

'I saw what you did back there, for poor Günther.'

Theron nodded. The act didn't need words put to it. He had just paid an honest decency in the face of yet another injustice on the roads, to go with a hundred more.

'You always walk alone, right? You're one of those types? A lone wolf?' She stared into his eyes, her own coloured soft hazel, and welcoming.

'I am. Don't much care for company.'

'Me either. So, that suits us both fine. Where are you headed?' She cocked an eyebrow, inquisitively.

'North, up past Rue Aliano, along the old pilgrim path.' Theron jerked a thumb behind him, in the direction of his travels.

'Getting towards Erskirad? What's up in that blasted wasteland? Even colder up there than it is here, all the year around.'

Theron shrugged. 'Never been up that way before, that's all. If it doesn't fit, I'll catch a boat to Eisnor, or back to Raedland, maybe.' In truth, the last thing on his mind was returning home, but the woman didn't have to know that.

'Sounds as good a place as any to me. Let's get going.' The woman walked past him, the hypnotic sway of her hips visible, even under her thick winter clothing. Theron watched for a moment, until she turned around to look at him.

'Aren't you coming then?' Theron hesitated. It had been a long time since he had known company. Yet, there was something disarming about this woman, a kindness that he had hoped remained in the world, even in his darkest hours. Forcing himself to smile back, he nodded to her and started forward.

'Name's Athena, by the way.'

'Theron.' He wondered if the woman truly was an officer, or had merely looted the uniform from some unfortunate. She had an easy-going air to her that didn't match it very well.

'Well met, Theron.' Athena smiled at him again. 'So, tell me a story about how you got here...'

Side by side they walked over the snow, as a light breeze brought a fresh shower of the thin white dust, quickly concealing their footprints behind them.