

The two men walked slowly through the blackened ruins, their footsteps breaking through the silence as they crushed extinguished embers underfoot. Once this had been Union land, a place none beyond that treacherous brotherhood would have dared to tread. Through fear of bloody reprisal, the outlaws had held this place for as long as either man could remember, the word of tyrants become the law in this dank and shadowy corner of the world.

That myth had been proved false overnight. The Union had never wielded true power, only the semblance of it. When the eye of the Solthecian order fell upon them at last and the Inquisitors came, torches in hand, flames revealed the promise of retribution against trespassers for the lie it always had been.

For the first time in their lives, Avarisse and Greede shared a moment of uncharacteristic reverence as they stood side by side and surveyed the destruction. Not a trace of life remained throughout, every surface and piece of furniture hopelessly charred. The structure little more than a skeletal frame, the hideout had become a morbid monument to the ruination of the Union.

‘Just us left then, from the old firm.’ Avarisse was the first to speak.

‘It would appear so, Mssr Avarisse. Your insights remain as sharp as your wit, and dashing smile.’ Greede flashed his colleague a dark humoured grin of his own before continuing. ‘I suppose the question now should be whether we are to claim punitive vengeance on behalf of our fallen brothers and sisters, or to forgo that particular sentiment entirely.’

Avarisse kicked a chair lying on the ground beside him, barely more than a burnt silhouette, watching as it exploded into charcoal. The lumps of cinder and dust were unrecognisable from what they had once been, with no hope of ever returning to their previous state.

‘Don’t much feel like it. Never liked most of ‘em anyways.’ He snorted. ‘Besides, there’s enough scratch in my pockets for me not to care, even if it were my old dam that burnt to death in this shithole.’ He patted his coat, feeling the satisfying bulge of gold coins.

Greede raised an eyebrow. ‘I was unaware we had made such a lucrative arrangement with any of our principles in recent times, Mssr Avarisse. Do be so good as to share the wealth, as the common man in the street might say.’

‘You didn’t make any arrangement, little man. I did, for myself. The penny finally dropped, and the bag of gold in my pocket tells me where I’m headed. Don’t know about you.’

‘A lone enterprise? Are you suggesting... we go it alone?’ A quaver in Greede’s voice betrayed uncharacteristic nervousness. ‘I am hesitant to entertain the thought of parting ways. After all, old soldiers must stand shoulder to shoulder until the end, comrades forevermore, if you care to remember the creed of the old Raedlanders.’

‘We were never them, though.’ Avarisse wasn’t nearly so naïve to believe the manipulative dwarf’s plea. Everything Greede said was carefully calculated, spoken only in order to further his own agenda.

Greede sighed by way of reply, sullenly staring at the setting sun through a gap in a broken-down wall, the burnt wood lit bronze by the light.

A strange sense of vulnerability settled over the scene, as each man contemplated their future. Neither had ever tried to make their way in the world without the other, the dissolution of their partnership offering something completely unknown.

'Enough of this bull.' Avarisse was fast growing tired of waiting. 'I probably owe you enough to dice for it at least. Didn't you have a set somewhere?'

'Alas, I fear my favoured possessions resided in the corner yonder, more is the pity.' The smaller man pointed to a bare stretch of blackened stone, bitter winter wind having swept away any ashes remaining from his lost effects.

'Hmm. Shame. Good dice they were, engraved ivory.' Avarisse caught himself smiling wistfully. 'Didn't you steal them from the old friar on Thrift Street? I remember you pocketing them whilst I dug the hole to throw the silly bastard in.'

'Mssr Avarisse, you do have such a worrisomely eidetic memory.' Greede grinned. 'So, that leaves us stone, parchment, knives then?'

Avarisse sniffed. 'Haven't played that since I was a lad.'

'How fortuitous a statement!' Greede was playing a pantomime for his own benefit. 'I even believe such a game was how we first decided to begin our joint venture. Now I think of it, it occurs to be even more appropriate than I first thought!'

'Whatever. I'm tired of this already. Just get on with it.'

Greede's smile turned bittersweet, his expression softening. 'Why, Mssr Avarisse, I would have expected at least a hint of theatrical flourish from you. We stand now at the precipice, and speak of a momentous unbinding of fates!'

Avarisse didn't rise to the bait.

The smaller man took the hint and hurried on. 'Very well, then. Let us proceed. If you win, we shall go our separate ways.'

His words were bold, but Avarisse had to force himself to stifle a dry chuckle. Neither man was under any illusion Greede would likely survive on his own, so varied and far ranging were the enemies he'd made over the years. The dissolution of their partnership was a death sentence.

Greede continued, unabashed. 'But if I win, then our partnership is unbroken.' At this, his gaze strayed greedily towards the outline of Avarisse's coat pocket, and the promise contained therein.

Avarisse eyed his colleague warily. It was well known that Greede cheated at all games. Already the grin plastered over the dwarf's face had begun to slip away, replaced by a sneer to match the vicious and manipulative thoughts no doubt coursing through his mind.

He gave up worrying about it and shrugged. 'On three, then.' In the worst instance, he'd have to murder his old friend and leave the body somewhere.

That was fine. No one would miss the little bastard.

With purposeful threat, he held out a fist, his huge mitt dwarfing Greede's tiny hand. Greede at least had the decency to look suddenly nervous. Avarisse offered a threatening smile of his own in reply. Through the hole in the wall the sun dipped behind the horizon, heralding the end of a long day at last.

'One, two... three!'