

Sunlight filtered through the branches, painting the forest floor dappled brown and yellow. Theron strolled over the bed of rich, earthy soil and grass, carefully avoiding snagging his boots where roots had grown out from the ground. The great forest was filled with sounds besides his steps; birdsong, water gurgling from somewhere ahead, and a gentle wind sweeping between the trees. None of them seemed out of place or uninviting, only strangely calming to his ragged senses.

It was a haven as far away from the violence and torment of his past as could be. No matter the machinations of man, this place had stood for time immemorial, a bastion where the universe defied the destructive touch of humanity and its petty rivalries. Theron wasn't sure if he had escaped civilisation and found this hallowed ground by his own accord, or had been drawn here somehow by a strange and otherworldly design.

He didn't care.

At last, he was blissfully alone. Here he would suffer no condemnation, and no prejudice. This world simply offered acceptance. Even the nightmares had stopped since he had entered the great forest, this primordial world releasing him from their torment at last.

Theron journeyed ever deeper into the depths, embracing them and leaving the roads and their struggles far behind.

As Theron grew closer, he saw that the break in the trees ahead was actually the edge of a cliff face, the ground dropping away to reveal a grand horizon of treetops. At the far side from where he stood, a fast-flowing stream ran over the edge, a beautiful waterfall cascading over the rocks as a fine mist.

A man waited for him in the clearing, watching Theron through eyes shrouded under a hood of leather and furs. As he approached, Theron was careful to present himself to this sentinel as unthreateningly as possible. The last thing he wanted was to make himself unwelcome in this sanctuary.

He was surprised to see a holster containing an iron at the stranger's belt. The weapons were a rare and dangerous creation from the tail-end of the Century Wars, employed only by gunners from specialist regiments. Theron had only encountered them once before, when the trenches at Flount had been overrun. They were deadly in such close confines, their buckshot capable of peppering multiple targets at once, or simply reducing a man to messy pulp at extreme proximity.

How one had managed to find its way into this sacred place could remain a mystery. Like most soldiers that had witnessed their deadly potency, Theron wanted nothing to do with such firearms. Its presence here was an unwelcome reminder of a dark barbarity better forgotten.

The stranger considered him for a moment longer before speaking. 'I know your kind. Desperate men with bloody pasts. Thieves, poachers, and vagrants.' He frowned. 'Why are you here, soldier?'

Theron shrugged. 'I have to be somewhere.'

The stranger's frown deepened in the following silence, and Theron felt displeasure emanating from the eyes beneath the hood.

'Try again.'

Theron sighed at his own folly. There were no secrets here, their place in the world behind him.

'I am running, fleeing my past.'

'Good. Your second answer is better. Don't repeat the mistake and try to hide the truth, especially from the Scion.' The hint of a Mald accent lent a hard edge to the stranger's warning.

'The Scion? Is that your name?'

The man's lips curled upwards at the edges, his smile visible even underneath his bristles. 'No lad, I'm not the Scion, far from it.' He walked towards the edge of the cliff, beckoning Theron to follow. 'The Scion is the warden for all you see before you, from the trees and the mountains, to the creatures that live betwixt. He is the voice of the Father, and first among his people.'

'Is the Scion why I am here?' Theron raised his voice, competing with the sound of water crashing noisily onto the rocks below.

He thought he saw a break in the stranger's hostility for a moment, a softening to his smile.

'I see why Hearne wanted me to meet you, Theron. Perhaps there may be something to you after all.'

The man turned his back, and began walking towards the forest, their conversation run its course. Theron watched him go. Just as he had not questioned how stranger knew his name, he also understood that the time of their meeting was past.

Before he reached the treeline, the man stopped and gave him one last look. 'The Scion will come to you this eve, in the hours after the Father has fallen from the skies. Make a hearthfire to honour both him, and the dead which you mourn.'

He stepped forward and disappeared between the trees, their foliage enveloping him until he was completely concealed from sight.

--

Theron stared into the flames, watching them dance. How many times had he done this? Sat at the fire, and been lost amongst memories of the dead? Far too many, he decided. There were always faces and names pulling at him, trying to grasp his attention. More lost souls than any one man deserved to remember or to countenance, even to his own conscience.

Theron hadn't lust after the war, nor had he wanted to fight and spill blood. He had been full of pomp and patriotism; filled with an unshakable pride in his homeland, standing ready to protect her borders, but he had never once had he wanted to kill enemy soldiers. Stealing territory and subjugating the populace was the province of the enemy, not the noble Raed.

He remembered all too clearly the first time he had taken a life. His victim had only been a young lad, fresh faced and barely able to fill out his armour, not many moons older than Theron himself. He had watched his target for only a moment before smoothly drawing his bow and staring down the

sight. The shot had been instinctual and automatic, a snapshot honed by months of work in the training yards.

When the boy had fallen, clutching desperately at his neck in a futile attempt to save himself, the realisation of what he had done had hit Theron hard. No matter how the others from his unit had patted his back and offered him words such as honour and valour, the deed had been murder.

In times to come, Theron found himself wishing that he had at least hesitated in the slightest before he cast his innocence aside, never to return. But once the door had opened, it was too late.

That day he became not only a soldier proper, but a murderer, and a monster.

Ever since, each life had felt the same, adding yet more weight to his shoulders. It didn't end with the enemy; somehow even the death of his friends increased his burden, the same as if he had taken their lives with his own hands. By then end of the fighting, the sheer pressure of the death toll had been defeating, dragging him down into the depths of despair.

When the armistice had been announced, Theron had thought he would at last find respite. He had been hopelessly wrong. Death waited still in the aftermath, on bleak and desolate roads where outlaws and murderers roamed unpunished.

And so, the war continued.

Theron could never surrender, never give in to defeat. Cowardice wasn't part of the creed of the Royal Raedlanders. If he relented, it would be an insult to the good men and women that had given their lives for the regiment, and what their code had stood for.

Theron looked at the brocade sash tied to his belt, the firelight revealing the places where it had torn and been splattered with mud. As far as he knew, it was the last remaining piece of his proud regimental standard. He'd come across it as he was forced to retreat from the field, his unit devastated by casualties as they tried to hold ground around Fiscerano.

Russet had been the regiments standard bearer, an old veteran from countless engagements, worldly-wise and always possessed of a kindly smile for the men and women sharing his fellowship. He had been dead when Theron accidentally stumbled into the ditch, the venerable soldier apparently cut down during a cavalry charge, the gaping wound in his chest obviously from a sabre. Theron saw Russet's last breath had escaped in bloody bubbles only, thin trails of pink spit staining his tunic, an ignoble end for the haughty officer.

The only thing left had been to salvage as much of the ruined standard as Theron could, to take with him. Frantically he had cut a section away, the cleanest part he could find not lost to arcs of crimson or dirty brown mud, and tied it to his belt before resuming his withdrawal. It was the only way to keep proud Russet's spirit alive, and that of the Royal Raedlanders.

Theron had never untied the standard since. The other survivors of that bloody day hadn't chosen to make comment, most too jaded to care, only a handful even recognising it. But Theron remembered. He alone respected what it stood for, and why it had been too important to leave on that forsaken patch of ground.

It was his identity now, all that was left of him, and why he always sat vigil for the dead.

Hearne simply appeared out of the gloom, standing across from Theron as he sat at the fire, lost to his thoughts. He towered over Theron, his shoulders broad and stature powerful, radiating vitality into the world around him. Even the flames seemed to react to his presence, bending closer to the priest, bright hues illuminating him as though he stood in the sun.

'I am Hearne, Scion of the Father.' His voice matched his appearance, deep and momentous enough to move mountains.

Theron nodded, blinking away his reverie to stare at the Hearne. Somehow, a sense of inevitability pervaded through him, that he had reached the end of a journey.

'Why have you come to the great forests, Theron?'

Theron recalled the stranger's advice. 'I am escaping from the world, and leaving a bloody life behind me.'

The Scion regarded him. 'I do not think that true. You lie to yourself; no matter where you run, your burden yet remains, your memories bound so tight around your throat as to strangle you. They are truly what you must be freed of.'

'If I abandon them then I am a coward, no better than those who threw down their weapons on the field, or the betrayers that fled back across the seas to Raedland. I cannot condemn the memories of the fallen so.' Theron returned his eyes to the fire, and the comfort of the flames.

'Did you ever consider that by refusing to confront their deaths, you are even more craven still? Why do you honour those who passed on by lamenting them alone? Where are the words of their glory, of their noble sacrifice?'

'There was no noble sacrifice. No glory, and no heroic deed.' Theron shook his head sadly. 'Only death. Death, and rotting misery, our endless march towards our demise. I watched the best of us fall alongside the worst, and all of those in-between. There was no ceremony for any of them, even the heroes, just shallow and unmarked graves. They are only commemorated by their memories. I cannot deny them that.'

'And what of your enemies? Do you salute their souls with your nightmares?'

Theron could feel Hearne's intense stare boring into his soul, the hairs on his arms standing.

'The guardsman? Aye. That was the worst of me, in the worst of times.'

Hearne nodded, waiting patiently.

'You're here to judge me, I suppose? That's fair. His death has haunted me for months, ever since the truce.' Theron's head dropped, weariness creeping into his voice. 'In my dreams, I am the victim. But that's not true. That day, I held the rapier, and ran him through.'

Theron could still remember how the weapon had felt in his hand, the unusual design alien to the swords he was used to, made for piercing rather than slashing. He had found it on the ground after

losing his own sword in the heat of battle, wicked steel glinting in the sunlight despite the blood staining its edge.

‘It was during the last days of the war, when the Skald mounted their last attacks on us. Only a handful of us left by then, the rest we’d been forced to leave behind, to rot in ditches. We were cold, hungry, and damned miserable. For weeks, we’d been dug in around this shitty little town I don’t even remember the name of.’

‘It all felt so futile. Ever since we’d discovered the bastard politicians had abandoned us, everything had. Yet still we fought on through that hell. It was all we had, the only thing keeping us going.’

Theron stopped and threw another stick on the fire. When he spoke again, his voice had shrunk to barely more than a whisper.

‘It was dirty work, that day. The Greens looked been pretty beaten themselves, probably fresh from a scrap somewhere. By then, skirmishes were everywhere, and no real battle lines were left. You’d be fighting in a tiny pocket, the whole world reduced to a tiny patch of mud.’

‘Old Jackdaw held the big bastard down, but gods he was strong as an ox, with plenty of fight left in him. I had to gut him fast. As the blade slid between his ribs, he swore at us in all languages, died looking right at me, lips cursing the whole time. Not at Jack holding him down – at me, the monster that murdered him.’

Theron realised that his eyes were watery, and wiped them on his sleeve. The next words emerged in a stark and moribund tone, the final piece of the admission. ‘I lost my will to fight after that. It was just one death too many, one blasted man too much for me. The next morning, before the rest woke, I stole as many rations as I could, and fled. Left the cutthroat survivors and their tarnished honour behind me, and headed south.’

‘I had to get away. Had to prove to myself that I was no monster like they had become, that humanity remained somewhere within me. It seemed the only answer. Those men and women, they weren’t Royal Raedlanders anymore. It was a disgrace to the memory, to the standard at my belt.’

His eyes met Hearne’s. The priest didn’t seem moved at how red Theron’s eyes had grown, or his story.

‘It doesn’t change that I deserted that day. I was a coward with no stones left in me, and fled like some mangy mutt with my tail between my legs. All I am now is an empty shell, the man inside hiding behind a pretence of keeping a memory alive.’

The confession was a sob, Theron’s eyes running freely now that the dam had burst. He slumped forward, still recalling the moment which had finally broken him and forced him to where he was now, alone and ashamed.

Hearne had held his silence throughout, listening. Gently, he pressed a large hand onto Theron’s shoulder. It was reassuringly warm, unnatural power resonating through his flesh.

‘I don’t truly offer judgement, Theron. The only one who you must answer to is yourself; and you alone must live with this pain.’ Hearne smiled, his next words softer, and oddly paternal. ‘But know

that you have been chosen for a purpose. Here in the great forests, you might be resurrected again, rise as the avatar of the Father does each day.'

Theron looked up, a question at his lips that Hearne quickly waved down.

'I know that you opened fresh wounds when you killed those men that attacked you. Yet I have watched you for a long time, and I do not think that you will disappoint me. That eve, you felt the touch of the Goddess upon you, for all that you did not recognise it.'

Hearne frowned and stared off into the distance, some unknown omen suddenly made clear to him by his next words.

'All of us are close to both the Sun and the Moon, and her temptation is ever strong. But I have faith that the man still within you is stronger than the devil she would drag from his broken shell. That is not something I could say for many.'

His smile returned. 'If you choose to serve, and refuse the calling of the Moon, then I will teach you, and give you reason to be proud once more. I will help you leave the existence of shame and pity from your past.'

The words were soothing, promising salvation.

Theron thought back to the horrors of the Century Wars, and then the cold months on the road, forgotten, ashamed, living without purpose or honour. He remembered the countless faces, the men and women that had been taken too soon. He thought of the roads and the fate of the cavalryman, cut open for the sin of trying to make peace; of Athena, out there somewhere, alone again with only her trauma as company.

All of them had deserved better.

Yet, it would never come to them. They had been taken in such horrific events they had become vengeful spirits that chased his every action, poisonous and crippling unless he finally made peace. And now Theron alone, the man that broke and least worthy of all, had a chance to be reborn again, to become a soul guided by a higher purpose.

He didn't deserve this boon. But in spite of that, he owed it to all of the others to accept this resurrection, and finally lay their memories to rest.

Theron wiped the remnants of the tears from his eyes. Carefully, he untied the standard from his belt, folding it as neatly he could. The thick weave carried the weight of lost generations, the broken virtue of a betrayed nation, and the failure of the old world.

Theron held it in his hands, just feeling the burden it carried through the cloth, and mentally saluting the fallen. Not just the Royal Raedlanders, but those men and women of all nations, who had their given their lives in such futility.

'Let go. It is for the best.' Hearne's voice was kind, and grandfatherly. He patted Theron's shoulder.

Theron paused for one last moment, lip trembling, before he reverently sacrificed the last emblem of the Royal Raedlanders to the flames, and watched the past burn away forever.