

The nightmare woke Theron as it always did, the sudden sense of terror no less potent than the memory of cold steel piercing his skin. The dream was as vivid as life, a huge brute from the Skaldic Imperial Guard holding Theron down, another approaching with his blade drawn and a haunting look in his eyes. It ended that way every time, leaving the infantryman startled awake and gasping for air, heart hammering in his chest.

As the fog and sense of desperate urgency began to fade, Theron took in his unfamiliar surroundings. Although his head couldn't have been down for long, after so many days on the roads all places had begun to blur into one, often leaving him disorientated when he first awoke.

This time Theron saw that he was holed up in an old barracks, sprawled out on a dirty cot. It was a clear night for once, autumnal clouds and storms absent, moonlight shining through the windows to bathe every surface with its ghostly hue.

He didn't need to look at himself to see that he was soaked through with sweat in spite of the chill in the air, thin tunic plastered to his skin. He shuddered involuntarily. The horrific memory haunting his dreams was as vivid as ever, forcing him to relive the trauma of the moment in every exacting detail.

At least he hadn't soiled himself this time.

There were two other men in the abandoned barracks with him, both snoring. Theron didn't know their names, nor would he have cared to ask even if they had been awake. The men hadn't been here when he had laid his head down, and he was only thankful that neither appeared to have stolen anything from the meagre supplies in his pockets. They were just soldiers like he was, happy to have a roof over their heads whilst they slept.

Theron wondered if they ever dreamt as he did. The Century Wars had left him scarred, a mind filled with horrific sounds, the likes of which man should never know but could never forget. The clash of metal, the roar of cannon, the screams of the dying; all of these and more rose to the surface whenever the world grew quiet, grim reminders of the grisly battles he had endured. Every time the infantryman closed his eyes he would see a different face, pleading with him. Friend or foe, it was always the same, a lost soul begging for the pain to end.

Theron rolled off of the cot as quietly as he could, and started pulling his boots on. He knew from past experience he wouldn't manage any more sleep this eve.

When he looked up, he saw a reflection of himself staring back from the window glass. Even as a distorted image, a crack running over the surface and through his hairline, his face looked gaunt and tired. All of the miserable soldiers that shared his fate looked the same. Abandoned stragglers, survivors of decimated regiments, or simply lost and far from home; they belonged to a forgotten generation of men and women without a place to return to in the aftermath of the wars. He was just another of their brotherhood, one more infantryman with no purpose in a time without conflict.

Infantryman. Even the name was a joke. It was an identity from a past life, meant to be over now. That's what the people safely ensconced in their cities and towns said, after all. The Century Wars had ended, so everyone could go home and live better, more comfortable lives.

Theron ran one hand through his hair, knotted and matted together after long days without being washed, the same dirty brown as his scraggly and unkempt beard. Once upon a time when he had belonged to the world, he had preferred to remain clean shaven. Days long passed.

He stared around at the barracks' state of disrepair. Cracks ran across the plaster of the walls and the roof had fallen in over one corner, the debris dusty and old. Green vines snaked through broken tiles underfoot, every surface discoloured by grime or dirt. Children had thrown stones through most of the windowpanes, and splinters of glass lay on the ground, covered in misty smudges. The unwashed stench of Theron and the other two men was masked by the thick odour of piss, and damp rot.

This was the real end to the wars, as experienced by the soldiers that fought in it, not the peasants that rejoiced in the streets, nor the nobles celebrating the accolades of peace.

It disgusted Theron, almost as much as it left him feeling betrayed.

'Smash it! Smash it down!' A gang of youths surrounded the large statue, several of them swinging long sledgehammers into the grey stone, their peers cheering every impact. Theron was too far away to see the likeness of the figure, but it looked like a memorial to one war hero or another, a vague shape of a man holding a long spear.

The adolescent group were akin to a pack of jackals surrounding their prey, cackling idiotically. Even at distance he could see a thin coat of white dust coating most of them. Their scrawny arms had so far been unable to strike with enough force to do anything but chip the surface of the statue, their efforts slowly eroding away the features and little else.

Theron rolled his eyes as he watched, wondering where the spiteful children had stolen the tools from. The heads of the mallets were dark iron, spotted with rust so bright it was still visible under the coat of detritus.

If they'd taken them from a Mason's Guild yard, the children would more than likely be strung up by the afternoon. The Guilds did not permit such infractions, even from the young, and the state had no power to challenge the mighty mercantile institutions now they had ended the Century Wars.

'Show them what we think of their precious general!' Another dull impact, followed by the rattle of stone hitting the ground.

At last the tide had turned, and the relentless assault had begun to fracture the statue, the mighty figure unable to continue weathering the storm of blows. Theron could see deep cracks had begun to snake across the figure, and as he watched, the group's efforts were finally rewarded, the fist holding the spear haft shattering from the main body.

It was an ignoble end for the unknown hero, and what they had stood for.

Theron had seen enough, and continued walking. Scenes like this were not unusual in his travels. The aftermath of the wars had brought anarchy in some of the cities and towns, and Valficio was no

different. All the way on the road from Gacildra in the far south, there had been signs of the disaffected populace at best, outbreaks of violence at worst.

Vagrant soldiers represented the face of suffering that no one wanted to see; the murderers that had stolen their loved ones, the pathetic remnants of their national pride, and a harrowing reminder of the poverty and homelessness which plagued most of the Sovereign States. If they looked hard enough, a person could find whatever scapegoat they wanted in the men and women left walking the roads in the aftermath of the Century Wars.

There were plenty of stories of soldiers being attacked by packs of thugs and adolescents, unable to fight off their assailants in their weakened condition. Theron had no desire to become one of those unfortunates, his final breath spent bloody as he died in an alley somewhere.

In years to come, if history remembered the end of the Century Wars as peaceful then it would be a monumental heap of bullshit. These were dangerous times.

'Hey, you! You're a soldier!' Theron didn't bother look in the direction of the elderly voice. 'Hey! Look at me! You *are* a soldier, right?' This time, the words were accompanied by an urgent tug of his sleeve. He wheeled around, one hand raised to cuff away the fingers grasping him, the blow paused in mid-air when he saw they belonged to a decrepit old crone.

'That's right, belt an old woman like me in the jaw, won't you?' The hag spat the words at him, enmity clear in her eyes. 'You thugs are all the same. Show some respect for the uniform you wear, and stop those damned brats from breaking up the monument over there!'

Theron offered her a despairing look as he swatted away her fingers from his coat. 'Do you even know what uniform this is, you old hag?' He pointed at the shield on his coat. 'I'm a Raedlander, not some Figeon footslogger from your piss poor armies. Your precious statue means little to me, even less than those in my homeland do, just a lump of stone covered in bird shit.'

'What difference does that make? We're all on the same side now, didn't you hear?' Her eyes were fierce. 'My Maurice would have stopped them, Solthecius watch his soul. But I suppose you wouldn't understand that, would you? Just another craven coward, shaming his uniform like all the others.'

Theron knew that once he would have reacted to such an accusation. Similar insults had never failed to send fire shooting through his veins, and gotten him into vicious fights which only finished in blood. By now though, even that rage had been exhausted. Creating yet more misery for the world was no answer, only an endless circle threatening to drag him under once more, and return him to an existence he had vowed to break from.

Besides, he didn't even know whether he deserved to be called a soldier anymore, just as the name infantryman felt hollow. What was the worth of a man from a nation betrayed by rebellion? Not much, as far as Theron could tell.

His regiment had been one of the few Royal Raedlander divisions posted overseas with the rank and file infantry, the pinnacle of elite soldiery amongst their countrymen. The proud griffin rampant

on their standard flew a head higher than any other supporter as the Raed armies marched across the land, and they shared the greatest camaraderie of any unit.

Yet with the advent of the military coup at home, the Royal Raedlanders had been abandoned by their commanders just the same as the other regiments, left to fight their way home with no support or supplies.

No matter their superior training and equipment, it hadn't taken long before their number had been decimated. Casualties, disease, and even desertion, each took their bloody toll. Theron had been one of the fortunate few, the ever-diminishing handful of men and women that survived each engagement and simply tried to keep going, right up until the end of the war.

The conditions they had endured by the announcement of the armistice had been so brutal and bleak as to leave a taste in the mouth that would never be gone. Surrender was scant reward for their sacrifices, even less than betrayal had been.

Once infatuated by the prestige of being a Royal Raedlander, Theron didn't even know whether he wanted to be a soldier by the end. His sense of patriotism and valour were both dead in a ditch somewhere, along with most of his friends. All that had been left of his regiment was a bunch of hard-nosed bastards, tough as nails and desperate to survive at all costs, a far cry from the noble ideal they had previously represented.

Like the rest of them, as much as he might have started a proud soldier, in those dark days, Theron had been simply reduced to a man, trying to survive. It had been a bitter thing to admit, that all of his aspirations had turned to ashes.

He brushed away such thoughts. Looking back only led to nightmares, and he was haunted by those enough when he slept.

Theron shouldered his kit bag and pushed his way past the old woman. It was time to leave Valficio behind, just as he had done so with all of the other cities. There would be no refuge for him here, any more than he had previously found in any other settlement throughout the rest of Figo. Behind him the crone's complaints turned into jeers, her voice slowly dying out as he kept walking, until eventually he ceased to be able to hear her at all.

It didn't matter that he knew ignoring the old woman and avoiding drawing attention to himself had been the best course of action. He still could recall the venom in her voice, and the spiteful words.

*Just another craven coward, shaming his uniform like all the others.*

He kept his head down as he walked his lonely path away from civilization once more. On the horizon, a dark line of trees and the distant peaks of mountains beckoned, the sun slowly rising above them.