



THERON ORIGINS



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THE OLD RAEDLANDER

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 way 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.

REVEILLE

'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 Pigeon 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.

ATHENA

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.

UNDER THE LIGHT OF THE MOON

Theron's eyes opened slowly, his first thoughts docile, and his breathing and pulse relaxed. It was a welcome respite not to be shaken back to consciousness by his nightmare for once. Light flooded all around him to cast a golden veil over the world, and for a moment he simply lay where he was, trying to savour the moment.

It was no use. Serenity had escaped him long since, left behind in times past, before he had been forced to grow harder and forget such contentment existed.

He rose onto one elbow, taking in his surroundings. The fire from the previous night had burned out completely, leaving only charred remains of the wood he'd thrown into the brazier, stained sooty black. The remnants lent a soft and strangely homely scent of charcoal to the room, permeating even through the damp mould and his own sorry stench. He was alone, the only sign of Athena the broken dust over the floor where she had bedded down next to him, her blankets now absent.

Theron rolled over, and pushed himself up to his knees. Where the pair had hung their clothes to dry last night he could see only his own coat and threadbare trousers. Rubbing the mist from his eyes with one hand, the other pulling his hair into a ponytail and away from his face, he shook off the last vestiges of slumber before rising to his feet to go in search of his companion.

It was quiet outside, the only sound the faint rustling of the nearby trees as an early springtime wind tickled their leaves. The sun was even brighter, richly bathing the scene and warm on his skin. During the bleak times of the Century Wars he might have considered this peace a paradise, as far from the misery and bloodshed as could be.

Athena was still nowhere to be seen, her absence unusual and disconcerting. Throughout their time together on the roads, Theron had rarely awoken after her, his nightmares tearing him from a tormented slumber most nights. In his experience, she had never gone to forage or scout the land in the early morning.

Walking around the perimeter of the dilapidated building, eyes scanning the horizon in all directions, Theron could feel his heart sinking. Placing his hands around his mouth like a funnel, he tilted his head back and called her name, turning to face a different direction each time he repeated it. The name was elongated by his elevated voice, turning the final syllable into a drawn-out note which cut through the silence.

His only answer was from a falcon far overhead, which offered him a piercing shriek before banking to fly swiftly southwards.

Theron continued his path, still shouting. By the time he had made his way back to the door, it was the voice of a man keening for a loved one, body wracked with grief.

Just as he had been betrayed before, so he had been again.

His first reaction was to give in to anger, seizing a rusty axe he saw half buried in the dirt, and taking it to a nearby tree. He fiercely hammered the iron blade over and over into the bark until his arms ached and sweat drenched his clothes, the aged tool's blunt edge denting and splintering the wood instead of cutting cleanly.

Eventually, even the mighty oak could sustain his assault no longer, and it mercifully toppled away from him, not crushing the shack by luck more than any judgement. As he stood next to the stump, breath ragged from screaming and exertion both, and his ears ringing from the sound of the dull metal cutting into the tree, Theron felt hopelessly impotent. He had run out of the yard, and attacked the tree like a child venting its anger for a broken toy, not a grown man.

The realisation stole his fury and reduced him to his knees, crying at the unjustness of the world and what might have been.

In days that followed, Theron worked through his sorrow in isolation, choosing to remain at the shack rather than returning to the road. Initially, he was content to lie to himself and ignore the dread feeling in his gut, hoping against all odds Athena would return and by staying he was simply waiting for her. Yet, as time wore on, even that voice was silenced by cold, hard, reality.

Athena was gone, and with her the final chance for some kind of acceptance in the new world.

She had been the only other soul he had encountered who had experienced the horrors of the wars, and had somehow avoided being turned into a heartless monster, the same as all of the others. The men and women in his regiment, the Skaldic cavalryman, a score of other faces he had seen on the roads, even Mugger. All of them had been changed by the wars, made harder, and dispassionate. Some even worse, turned hateful and callous, like Ferro.

Each of them had left Theron cold. He wasn't like them, his humanity drained to the point of being lost altogether. He couldn't be. It was all keeping him going, and meeting Athena had given him hope he had at last found a kindred spirit.

Yet, he realised Athena's revelation of her past had broken her. Some trauma a person buried so deep as never to be seen, because even speaking of it was gouging a bloody hole in the world, reopening an old wound which should be left well alone.

That had been why she left.

Facing Theron after he had learned her past would have been too hard, knowing he would look at her with sympathy, or even worse, pity. Pity at what she had experienced and understanding, when in reality, Athena likely bore the burden of survivor's guilt and a destructive self-loathing born from it. Why had she survived, when so many of her comrades had succumbed to the Rat Catcher's vile gasses? Had she fled from the walls and left them behind too soon, or just been lucky

enough to trap enough clean air in her bolt hole, whilst the others choked on poisonous fumes?

Having someone look at you kindly was an insult to the memory of the dead, and hopelessly infuriating both. Athena left because she didn't want to lash out at Theron, and come to despise him for trying to reach her, nor have to try and articulate her frustration or grief.

As much as her leaving had broken his heart, Theron found that he could respect that. He had his own memories, his own horrors to contend with.

It was always easier to run than it was face them.

A sudden noise outside woke Theron up, dragging him back to alertness. He sprang to his feet, already reaching for his belt where it lay on the floor next to his trousers. He had a moment in the near darkness to find his bearings, before the wood around the latch on the aged front door splintered as it was kicked in. A tall man burst through, followed by a bulkier figure, their faces difficult to make out now the fire had burnt close to embers. Behind them, Theron could see there was at least one more bandit, waiting.

'Well, what do we have here then, eh? An old soldier?' The taller man spoke, his reedy voice spiteful and mocking.

There was a sharp metallic slither as Theron drew his blade from its sheath, a long knife with a serrated edge on one side. Its size was masked by the gloom, giving

him at least one advantage against three assailants. He could see that both of the men inside the shack were armed, their shadows unable to hide the silhouette of their weapons, the third man still a mystery. Theron stepped a pace backwards as the first man advanced, increasing the distance to the figures blocking the light from the doorway.

Suddenly the tall man shrieked a battle cry and launched himself at Theron, both hands holding the hilt of his sword over his head. His raised blade caught the moonlight as he passed a window, reflecting the light and showing its surface to be lousy with spots of rust. Knowing that he couldn't possibly parry the weapon with his own, Theron reacted quickly and threw his body forward, underneath the bandits raised arms so that he was too close to be hit.

He collided with his attacker, the point of his knife easily piercing the man's woollen shirt, and into the flesh beneath. Unlike his opponent, Theron had been diligent in the upkeep of his weapon, keeping it clean and well oiled, and the blade sharp and deadly. As it punctured the skin, warm blood began to flood out over Theron's hand and the floor, the veteran snarling as he twisted the knife and wrenched upwards, cutting an even larger wound. The tall man let loose a bloodcurdling scream, and his sword clattered to the ground. Attack forgotten, he dropped to his knees as Theron tore the knife from his body, hands clasped together over his belly but unable to stop blood welling

up between them all the same.

With their accomplice sprawled out on the ground and whimpering pathetically, the other two men eyed Theron cautiously.

‘Poor old Patches. Never liked him much anyways. About time we had to stop sharing loot with the bastard.’ The sturdy man spoke in crude Valentian, his cruel tone matching his words and the long dagger in his hand. ‘You might have saved me a job, soldier.’

Now the final man had stepped into the shack, the moonlight from the doorway lit the scene slightly brighter, revealing him at last. Slight of stature, his face was covered in a wrap which obscured his jawline and hair and lent him a similar appearance to a Sult bandit. He held a short hatchet in his right hand, and stood with a lazy arrogance which betrayed a lack of fighting experience.

Theron knew he might need to exploit that inexperience if he were to survive the night. A tool more suited to cutting wood than fighting could still be deadly, even in the hands of fool.

Slowly the pair advanced on him, their steps moving them as far apart as the small space would allow until they flanked Theron either side, and he couldn’t keep his eye on both.

He didn’t wait for them to press their advantage, pouncing towards the shorter brigand. His boot went low, aiming a savage kick to the groin which took the inexperienced man by surprise and dropped him on

contact, before Theron whirled turned to face his other assailant. His attention returned just in time, the larger man's blade slashing sideways towards Theron. Diving away and in the same direction as the attack, Theron crashed in a heap as he tripped over his first opponent, the man now still and unmoving on the floor.

He made his feet back in time to see the large man stepping over his ally, lips locked into a spiteful grin and eyes full of malice. The bandit kicked at a shape by his foot, and Theron realised he had dropped his knife when he tripped, the weapon now scattering across the floor and into a wall.

Theron could sense the tide turning against him, and changed tact. 'Why are you doing this? I don't have anything for you to steal, look around you!'

'Who said I was a thief, come to steal your precious coppers, soldier? Maybe I just don't like your type. I don't care for heroes.'

'I'm no hero. All I want is to be left alone.'

'Too bad for you then. No state funeral.'

'You want me to leave? So you can have this place for yourself? Is that all scum like you want?' Theron could hear the groaning sounds of the shorter man from behind his assailant. If the brigand intended to attack again, Theron knew he had to goad him into it now, before it became two against one again.

The man laughed. 'All I want is to gut you, soldier.'

He lunged forward, the dagger's point glinting pale

silver. Theron stepped out of its path and to the left, fingers on his right hand grasping the man's wrist and twisting violently, whilst his free hand struck upwards with as much force as he could manage. As his open palm hit the larger man's extended elbow, there was a loud snapping sound and the thug yelped, his voice surprisingly high pitched.

Staggering away from Theron on uncertain feet, all resistance fled the bandit, his face pale as he clutched his ruined limb. 'You broke my arm, you bastard!'

His answer was a boot to the chest, driving him backwards into a corner and over the open stairwell leading to the cellar. Arms flailing, the thug overbalanced and disappeared from view, his descent accompanied by splintering sounds as he broke through the steps, and then a sickening and final thud.

Theron barely turned to face the shorter man before the flat head of the hatchet struck him across the jaw, and knocked him sprawling. Face numb, Theron didn't have time to be thankful his opponent had missed with the sharp edge, before he was kicked in the ribs with enough force to be driven backwards across the floor.

Theron rolled with the momentum, avoiding a second kick which sailed through empty air, and allowing him to grab his attacker's leg and drag him to the ground. Before his opponent could retaliate, Theron raised a fist into the air and brought it down into the man's concealed face, striking him across the nose. He was rewarded by seeing his opponent

momentarily dazed, and Theron risked scrambling away, reaching for his knife. He didn't know where the hatchet had gone in the darkness, and the close proximity made it poorly suited for the fight regardless.

As his fingers tightened around the soft leather grip, he felt the air driven from his lungs as the man crashed into him with a roar, sending them both down onto the dusty floor once more.

Dirty fingers with broken nails pushed painfully into Theron's swollen jaw, whilst the other hand pinned down his knife hand. Looking up, he saw the lower half of the wrap around his assailant's head had fallen away, revealing his face. A light stubble did little to hide an animalistic sneer stretched over pale skin, eyes glaring balefully from sunken sockets. As Theron stared, the man lunged forward, teeth snapping at him and trying to bite his exposed skin, spittle showering over his neck.

Horror and outrage lent Theron strength, and he tore his knife hand free from the savage's grip, driving the blade into the side of the man's torso in the same movement. As his adversary howled like a dog, Theron stabled again and again, brutally cutting into the meat, and feeling his body warm from the blood gushing over him.

Finally, the man stopped struggling and was still. His fate joined that of the tall bandit, life fled from both bodies in a wet stain on the floor.

Coughing up spit and gasping for air, a breathless

Theron struggled to rise to his feet. Slowly he staggered to the stairwell, leaning over to look at the second thug. Past broken wooden slats he lay at the bottom, body twisted at an unnatural angle. His broken neck looked strange and inhuman in the light, a strange expression forever etched over his features.

Theron grimaced, staring around him.

The world he had fought so hard to surround himself with, one without the violence and carnage of the wars had been destroyed. This bloody encounter had reminded him once more of what he had been, and still was, as much as he tried to hide it. Fighting the bandits had been practiced and automatic, too easy to have truly been born of desperate survival. Theron knew better than to lie to himself.

He looked at the last man, the ghoulish figure who had tried to sink his teeth into Theron, one flank now reduced to a bloody pulp. Theron felt as much a monster as his assailant. In the end, he was just the same as all of the others on the roads, those figures he so despised, and denied fraternity with.

It was for the best that Athena had left. He couldn't have stood her seeing him this way.

His breathing now calm, Theron walked to the doorway. Outside, the night was quiet and still, the ascendant moon bathing the land in a ghostly hue. Perhaps out somewhere beyond the fringes of man was the peace which he had lost in this place.

That would be the next path he walked.

Before he left the bloody scene behind him, Theron looked back at the corpses. They had been cowards, unfit to prey upon the strong, and no brothers to him. He found he couldn't help offering them a feral grin as he crossed the threshold, and stepped into the wilderness once more.

— THE LAST POST —

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 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.