

After the din and clamor of the village welcome, the hum of the forest felt like a nest of velvet around his head. They rode in silence for a time, horses carefully picking along the narrow path. Easy to lose one's way if one was not careful, for the grass was long in spots and the only way to tell if a path was there was by the bend in the grasses, left by the passing of animals. The golden stalks of melick wood turned brown where they pressed up from the ground, and he checked for the dull gleam of chain or jaw that might reveal the presence of a trap. Easy for an animal to get snared here, and, if the trapper was not careful, quickly forgotten to die on its own.

Up ahead, Mitrofan tilted his head and squinted at the map the Juuvasvita chief had drawn for them, his face twisted in a revealing scowl.

"Are we lost?" Gogu rolled his shoulders beneath the weight of his spear, eyeing him with some suspicion.

The scowl deepened, the map turned to catch a shaft of sun, "No it's... I don't know what the hell that is."

"Give it to me. Let me see it." Gogu reached towards the map. His hand a collection of calloused joints and sinew.

Mitrofan yanked the map away, "Get out of here."

The other soldier flapped his free hand, "You couldn't find your own ass with two hands and a mirror."

Mitrofan edged further ahead, out of the radius of Gogu's arcing reach, "You get lost one time. *One time* and they never forget." He grumbled.

Adamas, seated atop the black mare, regarded the soldiers from beneath hooded lids and kept his peace. He could tell them exactly where they were in relation to the Fomore Keep. The soil of Ythrael had drunk enough of the Crown Prince's blood that it had practically become a part of him. Lodestone Ythrael. He turned to look at Silandras, breathing slowly, with the measured patience of a father allowing his sons to struggle through a puzzle he himself had already solved. But he looked faded. The reins were loose in his hands. The ghost of a frown played in the corners of his mouth. The journey was taking its toll upon the Prince.

Dandelion flowers dazzled like candles as the sun limned their candescent yellow crowns and seed pods silently exploded against the ankles of the horses. Without a word, Adamas stilled his horse. The gold rings and chains that laced his ears glinted against the iridescent black hair. His horse flicked an ear and blew air from her velvety nostrils. Silandras halted Temperance with a gentle tug on the reins.

A break in the path wended to the left. Granite stones pushed up through the sea of

grass, sharing the peace with crooked birch trees. A large stone hill, crowned with a thick layer of moss, rose up like a pair of grey shoulders.

Continuing to banter, the two soldiers pushed their way through the knee high grass for a few more paces until the sense of distance between them caused them to stop and look back. Mitrofan, slack jawed and red faced, turned on his heels and pushed his way back. Gogu was not far behind.

"Lord." Gogu bowed.

Slanting shadows spelled out the runes of evening on the grassy floor.

"We camp here." Adamas said. Quiet.

They had built a fire in a quickly assembled circle of stones, picked from the granites amid the birches. After having a meal of gifted fruit and dried meat, they played at dice. Adamas had retired, most likely reading in the dark closeness of the tent. At night, the men were careful to wait until the prince had gone to take out their dice. Though the measure of a commander was usually made by his ability to play dice or cards with his men, they regarded Adamas with suspicion. Any win or loss was cast into doubt if a shadow passed over the dice. That superstition extended to Silandras as well, for each time he tossed the wooden knuckles, the men would cast a glance behind him, ensuring that Adamas had not emerged from the tent. He cast a glance over his shoulder as well, which always brought a chuckle from the men he played with.

"Aye." Mitrofan chuckled down at the product of Silandras's latest toss, "Looks like you could use your Lord's eye tonight, Silky."

He shrugged and pushed the silver he owed towards the growing pile of coins that glittered in the firelight, "If it wasn't for poor luck, Fan, I wouldn't have any at all."

The dice clattered noisily in the wooden bowl, bouncing off the sides.

Gogu spat and swore.

The birch trees could be made out just beyond the warmth of the firelight, their pale forms lurid and graceful as dancers.

That night, after his breathing had become a rhythmic susurrant, Silandras rose from Adamas and slipped outside. The embers of the fire pulsed red and black in the slow exhaustion of their dying. Gogu on fourth watch eyed him silently, leaning against a tree just beyond the horses, twisting the thread of a necklace he wore around his fingers, rolling the single glass bead between pointer and thumb, breathing on it. Cold and curled, the birches absorbed the light of

the moon, beckoning. Beyond the hulk of the great stone hill, the stars were a distant spray of crushed white glass.

The crickets and frogs, in their silvery urgency, joined with the cool air to enclose him in silence. He felt the power of his Dwell move beneath his skin, rolling in pleasure along the sinew of his spine. This ritual was an important one for him. A nightly walk in solitude, seeking only to ground his spirit in the protean essence of the sleeping forest. The ancestors felt close in a place like this. Beyond the granite knuckles and procession of birches, he paused in a clearing. A dull gleam of something caught his eye. The sheenless solidity of old metal drew him closer, urged him into the copse of pines.

There, among the lazy curl of ferns and half consumed by generations of shed needles, a breastplate lay, vacant as a ship wreck. An empty helmet, so crusted with mud and moss that it could have been a stone. A gauntlet almost completely consumed by time and like an empty muscle shell, cast aside. Silandras stepped closer. A heaviness, like a thing always carried and often forgotten, shifted inside. The forest felt silent. A torn length of rotted cloth inside the breastplate, caked with dust and the slow accretion of the seasons revealed itself to his eye. The skeleton displayed like the mountain range of a child's model continent, gripping the shaft of a shattered spear. Silandras knelt and reached for the bones.

How long? How long had this soldier been here? Nameless and unmourned. His only burrow the drowsy downward pull of the pine branches soaked by rain, or burdened by ice and snow. Was there any part of the land that was not touched by blood? A part that as yet had not served as firmament for the tragic dance of constant war? And who had this soldier left behind? What face, so longed for, had been wetted in tears, or smeared in ash?

The bones beneath the fabric felt light as feathers.

Joining with the sound of the night around him, Silandras added his own voice.

He prayed for the soldier who had fallen, either from a wound now melted into the moss, or because the pull of the earth had become too heavy a burden to carry.

He prayed in a language no human could hear and understand. The language of the Fomore. As old as the stars.

Night returned the prayer in the soft, urgent moan of an owl.

In the morning, they broke camp and set off on the road. Silandras slouched in his saddle, exhausted from the work of the night. As they rode, he could feel Adamas studying him. When curious, the full weight of his attention felt solid as a hand. Silandras felt his amber eyes the same way he felt the morning breeze across his brow. Claspings the reins, the dirt beneath his

fingernails looked like black moons.

"You've been digging." Adamas observed, patient.

Silandras cast a look to the side, the need to sleep and the need to mourn a heavy muzz around his head.

"He waited long enough."