

Chapter One: Two Types of Dead

(Hand-drawn image of a dead man leaned against a tree in a snow-covered forest)

Khella tensed in her saddle as she saw the frozen corpse ahead. He sat, back against a birch tree, facing her and the other riders in the unit. His jaw was slacked open and his wide, ice-stilled eyes seemed to refuse that their master was dead. The corpse was Serran, but even from fifty paces Khella could tell he was well past the age of twenty.

Which meant it wasn't her son.

Khella let out a long, quiet exhale. Their unit had been sent to track a band of Yazerack spotted within Serran borders, but she'd joined to look for her boy. This lone corpse in the middle of the forest brought that search to a halt, but perhaps it could offer a hint of what's nearby.

The sound of Geran clicking the inside of his cheek struck the air and his horse stepped beside Khella's. He sat straight in the saddle, torso as large as his horse's, and pointed down at the snow-covered path that carved the forest. Turning to Argwei, their commander, he spoke in a low, rumbling voice, "Send the faerma."

A faerma was a horse no longer able to foal and ever since Khella'd convinced their tribe that she'd left her own foaling years, it'd become Geran's favorite insult. But she was unphased. As tribes dwindled, courtesy became extravagance and decency became as useful as a three-legged stallion.

Khella looked at Agwei, who sat on a white gelding a full hand taller than any of the other horses. His twin braids hung in front of his shoulders, stopping just above his chest. Khella put a hand on her hip and nodded toward Geran. “Why don’t we send the oaf? If he falls, at least our food supplies will last twice as long.”

Several of the other twelve riders laughed.

Geran scowled at Khella. The green and white trees and the snow-covered hill behind him emphasized his thick, black hair and beard. He spoke, louder this time, “You’re going to regret those words.” He swept a finger at the rest of their unit. “Just as those who laugh will regret their laughter. When we find the Yazerack, trust me, there’s not a man here that’d rather have *her* beside him instead of me.”

Geran was right, Khella knew it. When fighting their undead enemy, Geran was always a greater asset. He was a greater asset than nearly any other Serran. But if she let his insult stand, the others would all lose respect for her. “Between your bellowing when you’re awake and your snoring like a mammoth in heat when you sleep, I’m sure they’ll be the ones to find *us*.”

“Enough,” Argwei said. His stoicism only broke when he was annoyed. He pointed to the hill on their right. White-tipped pine trees spiked from it like hair on a startled cat, and twigs had been broken from their branches. Since the Yazerack showed up, these signs of travel were found in every forest. Argwei spoke again. “Bornigui, Cangir, climb that hill and tell me what you see.” He nodded toward the corpse. “Khella, scout the body.”

Geran leaned from his saddle and kept his eyes locked on Khella's. The pungent remain of alcohol wafted into her nostrils. Arkha was strong but Geran had emptied half a skin of it last night.

Khella dismounted, unstrapped her bow, and walked along the still-melting snow. Argwei then said, "Geran, you go with her."

Geran muttered under his breath but swung from his saddle. The leather plates of his armor rubbed against each other in a series of rhythmic squeaks as he slogged forward. Snow crunched under his boot and Khella wondered if he was physically able to walk any louder.

The patches of soil that freckled the snow were damp and clung to Khella's boots. The still air of the forest broke as her white gelding snorted again. She glanced back. His hoof drove into the earth and his head bobbed up and down.

"Are you waiting for *more* of your hair to turn white?" Geran asked.

"Something's spooked my horse," Khella said. She tracked Bornigui and Cangir, who were about a quarter of the way up the hill.

Geran ran a hand through his unkempt hair as he looked at the horses. "Your gelding hasn't been this far from our clan in some time. Probably caught a whiff of the Yazerack's rot. The other horses are used to it; they won't react until the scent is stronger."

Khella wasn't convinced. She looked at the other mounts, searching for signs of unease. Aside from some tails whipping, which could have been from any number of reasons, most were calm.

Geran snickered. “Khella, we’ve a simple task. Let’s just get it over with.”

Khella flashed him an annoyed look. She raised a finger to her mouth and stared into his eyes, dark eyes that were more perceptive than he let on. Garen may be irritable as a donkey, but there was a cleverness to him that was disarming—when he wasn’t drunk, anyway. She searched the trees and focused on the sounds of the forest, but there was nothing. Not even the flapping of birds fleeing as they approached.

“Why are there no birds?” One of the sounds every Serran grew accustomed to was the fleeing of birds as they rode through the forest.

“Birds?” Geran asked. “You stupid gant. We’re tracking Yazerack, if there were birds they’d have flown at the sound of stumbling steps.”

Geran was right. If the Yazerack had come through, they’d have scared off any animals. But there was still a problem. “If the Yazerack came through, Geran, then why didn’t they stop to eat the corpse?”

“The day I understand how a Yazerack mind works is the day I hope someone puts an end to me.” He took another step toward the corpse, but there was something off about this situation. Khella grabbed his arm and told him to wait.

Garen spun, eyes flashing to the other riders. They were all watching. Geran snatched her hand from his arm. “You want me to make your left eye match your right?”

The whole tribe knew how Khella had gotten the scar that ran from just under her right eye and down her cheek and no one had ever referenced it. Khella stood her ground, looking up

at Geran and said, “Threaten me again and I’ll make sure the next time you go to sleep you never wake up. Morikhan knows how much arkha you had last night. Everyone’ll assume you finally had a drink too many.”

Geran’s eyes blazed with fury, but he didn’t speak.

Khella continued down the path, whatever was wrong about this situation, she’d have to figure out later. She knelt, her body squared to the corpse so that he was now looking to her right at the approaching Geran. His cheeks had wind-torn blisters that reminded her of a Yazerack, but his teeth were picked clean whereas the undead’s always had chunks of flesh lodged between them. Khella peeled the corpse’s hand from his stomach and the frozen blood made a long cracking sound.

He wore a blue deel—a long robe that most Serrans wore, regardless of which tribe. It was thick and warm, perfect for the harsh winters across the steppes of Serranol. When last she’d fought the Yazerack, more were clad in deels than in years past.

“How’d he die?” Geran asked.

Khella looked at the red stains around the man’s stomach. She lifted his arm higher and then opened the tear in his deel so Geran could see. “Stab wound to the stomach.”

Geran approached, slower than normal as he examined the corpse. He shook his head. “No, he didn’t.”

Khella jeered and pointed at the bloody wound. “He’s been stabbed in the stomach, Geran.”

“Yes.”

“And stabs to the stomach tend to kill people, right?”

“Right.”

“So this man died from a stab wound.”

“No.”

Khella sneered. “You are too stupid for that big head of yours.”

Geran grunted as he knelt down. He pointed to the throat. It was purple and red. “He was strangled.”

“Okay, so one man restrains him while another stabs him.”

“No, Khella, there’s not enough blood on his deel. His heart had long stopped beating by the time he’d been stabbed.” There was no insult in his voice as he said her name. It’d been so long since he’d not spoken derisively to her that it took her off guard. He then rose, eyes scanning the forest around them, stopping on the hill to their side. Khella looked as well but only saw Bornigui and Cangir nearing the top, bows in hand and sabers strapped to their waists.

“What?” Khella asked. “*Now* you’re careful?” He didn’t reply, so she rose, too and stood next to him. Something in his focus on the hill made Khella as nervous as if her gelding had snorted a hundred more times.

“This man wasn’t stabbed to death,” Geran said. “He was strangled—and he was strangled willingly.” There was only one reason for that. Serrans believed in two styles of

execution: blooded and unblooded. Unblooded was a sign of respect for the one being executed.

“When that man died,” Geran continued, pointing to the corpse but keeping his eyes forward, “he died without a scratch.”

This confirmed it *wasn't* Yazerack that killed him, but people. People he trusted. This was a trap, and it'd been set by the living.

“Argwei!” Geran called out, but before he could continue, the trap sprang. Men in deals of blue, red, and brown crested the hill. They carried clubs or wood-tipped spears that had clearly been made in a rush. Several had iron weapons, a few wore armor.

“Dismount!” Argwei yelled. The forest was no place for their mounted tactics. “Bornigui, Cangir, fall back!”

Khella lifted her bow and reached for the quiver strapped to her waist. The charging Serrans screamed battle cries and curses as they charged down the hill. A *thwimp* sounded and her arrow flew toward a Serran with a long, black braid. The loose skin of his face fell from his high cheekbones. She'd aimed center torso but it struck the target in the left shoulder. The momentum sent him off balance and he fell, driving the arrow deeper into his flesh and out his back. He let out a crazed yell and returned upright. He was already at the base of the hill when Khella fired again. This one hit him dead center in the chest. He fell, grunting as he tried to rise, but couldn't stay upright. He leaned back against the hill and coughed, splashing the underside of his nose with red. More Serrans came down the hill, but Khella nocked her third arrow and loosed it into the man, hastening his passage to death.

An arrow's fletching cut the air and Khella ducked in response. She swept the forest looking for its source, landing on three bowmen. Argwei spotted them as well and called their location. Half a dozen arrows streaked up the hill. Two were struck but one hid behind a tree. The others of Khella's unit switched targets, but she nocked an arrow and counted to three. She drew the string and loosed the arrow. It arrived just as the archer peeked from cover. His bow was already drawn but as Khella's arrow split his throat, he fell to the ground several feet in front of him.

Bornigui and Cangir raced to the bottom of the hill as the other ten continued shooting into the charging attackers. Only Geran ran toward the hill, iron mace held high and roaring like a maniac as he interrupted Khella's line of sight with her target. The arrow had already slipped from her thumb ring and the string was in motion. She jerked her left hand high, sending the loosed arrow far off target.

"Geran you oaf!" Khella yelled. But he either didn't hear her or didn't care. The Serran unlucky enough to have been selected by Geran wore lamellar armor, the series of iron scales that ran up and down it shook and it was clear the armor hadn't been made for the wearer. The Serran raised his saber and Geran seized the opportunity. He reached out his left hand, grabbed the attacking Serran's right wrist, and stopped the saber strike.

The forest became a series of battlecries as more enemies topped the hill. The bows of the other ten Serrans sang arhythmic *thwimps*, casting arrows into the clunky, disorganized attackers.

Khella selected another target, loosing an arrow. Geran let out a deep "*Hrrrrr!*", grunting as he brought his mace down hard on his assailant. He connected at the collarbone and even from

as far away as she was, the crunching of bone was clear. The man collapsed and screamed in pain but Geran continued up the hill. Khella swore. The collapsed man was writhing on the ground. She nocked an arrow, and loosed it into his throat.

Geran raced up, quicker than a man his size should've been able. He approached one of the remaining attackers, a man with a bald head and thick eyebrows. The attacker thrust his spear, but Geran grabbed the wood and brought his mace down on the man's hand. He yelled in pain and dropped the weapon and Geran swung a second time. The bald man raised his other hand, a weak attempt to block the strike, but the mace swung through. Khella cringed as it passed through the bald man's hand and found a skull behind it. The dull sound of a gourd cracking open hit the air and the bald man fell.

A high-pitched yell caught Khella's attention. One of the attacking Serrans, five paces away, sprinted toward her. His eyes were wide, crazed as only one who's seen horrors of the Yazerack could be. His loose, unbraided hair flew wildly behind him and his rusted ax bounced up and down with the steps of his sprint.

Khella dropped her bow but threw the arrow in her hand at the charging Serran. He hesitated at it, slowing just slightly, and that was his downfall. Khella drew her saber and the Serran gripped the ax with both hands. He grunted as he readied a swing with far, far too much intensity to be effective. Khella stepped back and the air *swished* between them. His momentum carried him off balance and she lunged forward, raising the saber and bringing the hilt down on the back of the man's head. He let out an *oof* but remained upright. His right hand released the ax, balled into a fist, and swung wide. It connected against her lamellar and she barely felt it. She

grabbed the back of his head and brought her knee up to his face. Blood spewed from his mouth as he toppled backward.

“Drop the ax,” she said. The attacker regained his balance and swung again, a desperation in his exhausted grunt. The ax missed, but he moved quicker than Khella anticipated and swung the butt of the ax at Khella’s face. She ducked but the wood still grazed the top of her head. A light thud bounced between her ears. He was no trained soldier, and that made him more unpredictable.

Khella connected dropped her saber and lunged forward, erasing the space he’d need to use the ax effectively. She hugged her left arm over his shoulder and drew her knife with her right. She plunged it into his ribs and he let out a high-pitched squeal. She retrieved the knife as he stumbled back and leaped forward. The two fell to the ground and Khella stabbed his under his left armpit. He was dead before Khella could rise.

The base of the hill was littered with corpses—not a single one was of their unit. The last of the attackers stood opposite Geran. He was nearly as tall, but barely a third the weight, his torn, brown deel hung from his body. Geran roared, arms wide open and inviting an attack and the other Serran dropped his club.

Geran shoved his mace back into the belt of his deel and faced their unit. “Argwei!” he yelled, “as I was about to say, we’d best be on our guard. I think we’re about to be attacked.”