

*The road is hard. Our steps are weary. A point where one path threw all the cards out of balance. The Empire had fallen, and its downfall brought our misery. The rich hurt; the poor suffered. Many of the Empire's elite horsemen were left without a country, and often times without a family. Most were left wandering the outer lands; cold, hungry, and homeless.*

The water lapped at the small ferry, the ferry master pulling a long rope that disappeared into the night's foggy darkness.

"You, one of those soldiers?" His only customer looked up from his lap, startled by the sudden conversation. His horse that stood beside him nickered softly at its owner.

"Yes." His reply was hesitant, and barely heard. The young soldier sighed in relief as the shore of the mainland came into view, the ferry master stopping short. It had now become custom, since not everyone who rode could pay. "How much?"

"One copper flake. A bargain if you'd like to know." He nodded at the ferry master, and fished out his small drawstring purse. The jingle it had made earlier in the year was absent, his hand coming out of the fabric with just one coin; his last copper flake. A small pang tore at his heart, his fingers rubbing against its cool surface. It took more will power than he liked to hand over the tiny coin, which the ferry master grabbed at hungrily.

"Is there any work over here?" The master studied him, and frowned, the young soldier already guessing at his prospects.

"Always depends on who's looking. Soldiers don't have good reputations in these parts. Why exactly did you come here?" He took to his pulling of the rope, a dock slowly appearing before them.

"It was nothing." The master raised an eyebrow, but kept quiet. Once they were at the docks, the soldier led his horse off the ferry, the animal following silently. Fishing and shipping vessels lined each side of the docks, men staring at him with dislike and scrutiny. It was all he could do to pull his last cloak around his torso, masking his face. The battle tack on his horse shook with every movement it made, drawing more attention to them.

The village that laid just over the hill from the docks did little to ease his spirits. Ramshackle huts hugged the outskirts, a few farmhands watching him from the muddy fields and pastures. The road he walked on was a plain dirt one, riddled with holes and standing water. His horse was covered up to its flanks with mud, dirt clinging to its coarse hairs. When he made it into the village there was almost no one to greet him, the street giving a sense of abandonment. The Inn came up on his right, the Inn keeper eyeing the soldier with a deep rooted mistrust.

"No money. No admittance." The soldier's empty purse remained under his cloak, his fingers tightening on the reins of his horse.

"I can work for any accommodations."

"I don't need your help. You'd be better off selling that horse of yours."

"No. I wouldn't. Is there any other place that would take me?" His voice went deeper, trying to mask his anger.

“Not in this town.” The Inn keeper ignored the soldier’s turn in mood, giving him a cold look.

“We followed orders too.” He turned his horse, and was about to walk away until the man stopped him.

“Is that what you call the slaughter of our people? What is your name, soldier?”

“Attalus Maruthus.” The other man just shook his head, and turned back inside, closing the door behind him. Attalus felt his horse’s head bump into his side, a request for food. He turned and led the horse down the road, watching the villagers absentmindedly. Some stared back, but most kept to themselves, muttering about sickening soldiers. Another bump into his side, and he stopped, rubbing a hand down his horse’s forehead.

“Easy, Soren.” The horse tossed its head, paying no heed to his words. “I don’t have any food.” Soren stared him down, but stopped after a moment, his ears twitching to another direction. Attalus turned, finding a woman standing behind himself.

“I apologize.” She bowed her head, her eyes watching the villagers in a hawk like fashion. “I did not mean to frighten you.” Attalus raised an eyebrow, his hand finding the hilt of his sword with a guarded ease.

“If you had scared me, you would be dead.” She looked at him in scrutiny, and let out a small laugh.

“I suppose that would be true.” His hand moved to rest on the top of the hilt. “I overheard you were searching for somewhere to stay.” She pulled out a purse from her cloak, and drew it open, a handful of coins shining in the dull light. “If you were still looking, I could be of some assistance.” A smile broke onto her face, and Attalus froze, knowing all too well how these affairs worked.

“And what makes you think I should trust you?” The question didn’t catch her off guard, her eyes fully meeting his in a battle of will and wit.

“There are others like you.” She slid the purse back into the confines of her cloak and shrugged. “They joined with little hesitation.”

“You seem to think you are in control of this situation.”

“But I am, Sir Maruthus.” She reached back into her cloak, and held out a knife. The way her hand grasped the handle told him she was not a novice in wielding it. “My lady is recruiting at the moment.” The knife was hidden out of sight again, giving off an unassuming vibe from her. “You can come if you wish.” She turned to leave, but stopped, looking back at him shortly. “But this is a onetime deal.” She stepped closer to him, looking up the bridge of her nose at him. “And there is no going back on your decision either way.”

Attalus sighed, and pulled his hand away from his sword. “I’ll do it.”

“And what if this was all a trap?”

“Then it’s a trap.” She gave him an amused look, and pulled her cloak tighter around herself.

“For a soldier, you aren’t too focused on security.” There was a laugh, but her joking stopped as she motioned for him to follow her to where a coach sat waiting. “Follow us, and my lady will explain when we arrive.”

“And the identity of your mistress?”

“I’m afraid I can’t reveal that.” A doorman walked around the carriage and helped her in, never glancing at Attalus’s soaked form. Attalus quietly pulled himself into Soren’s saddle, matching the pace of the dark carriage. They were heading out of the village, and into the woods, the trees blocking out any light the moon would have cast on the shallow trail. Soren was the only one who was undisturbed by the turn of events, his canter as brisk as it had been when they were still a part of the army. Now, though, they were all alone, and in a foreign land with no real supplies of their own to survive off of. Hardened soldier meant nothing in light of all the fear that had welled itself inside of him, stealing away the resolve that had earned him Soren in the first place.

Mud flew up from the road, splattering onto his hand, which had been resting against his leg. He cursed at himself, wiping the mud onto his cloak, and putting his hand on his hilt. This wasn’t the time to be mixed up in his thoughts. A horseman must be alert at all times. He repeated the mantra over and over, drilling it back into his brain. His captain would have mocked him for this absurdity.