

Rudolpho and Gilga

The company tied their mounts in a small copse of dead-looking trees not far from the camp. Rudolpho watched as his horse grazed on clumps of soggy, disheveled grass, then looked upward. The clouds had finally parted, revealing thousands of stars glimmering in the jet-black sky. The night air smelled fresh and crisp, as if the storm had cleared away some previously-unnoticed taint.

Gilga Pelch's voice came from behind him. "A warm breeze feels good after all that rain, doesn't it, soldier?"

"Yes," Rudolpho agreed. He stretched, then turned to face her in the gloom. "But I'm no soldier. Not anymore."

The thaumatician stepped forward, holding a small glass ball. She whispered and the bauble began to glow, emitting a sterile white radiance that lit their immediate surroundings.

"You mistake me," she said. "I meant a soldier of Brogan's Blades, not the Arisid army."

Rudo glanced at the rest of the mercenary company, struggling to set up their tents in the mud. "My membership is temporary."

She waved a hand, as if this fact lacked significance. Rudolpho took a moment to study her: an attractive woman, full-figured and only a few years his senior. Silver clasps braided her brown hair, below which blue eyes flashed. She wore leather boots that matched the belt drawn around her midsection, and a long dagger hung in a sheath below it.

"Come with me, Rudolpho, if you have the inclination. I would talk."

Rudolpho considered her offer. *My watch is later in the night, and I don't really feel like sleeping.* He nodded and followed the thaumatician back to her fire.

"I don't know much about you," Gilga told him. "But I'd guess you're of noble blood."

Rudolpho sighed. "I am. But please, thaumat Pelch, do not ask about the glories of House Tammareus. I tired of my heritage long ago."

"Call me Gilga." She seated herself on a rough wooden plank laid near the fire. He sat across from her and the flames danced between them, flickering and crackling.

"Fair enough—and I am Rudo to you."

Gilga extinguished the glowing orb with a whispered word, then placed it inside a small leather pouch. That done, she lifted the lid of the iron pot sitting on the fire-grate, and gently stirred its contents with a wooden spoon.

Rudolpho's mouth watered at the scent. *Whatever's in there, it smells wonderful.*

"The stew is just about done," Gilga told him. She replaced the lid and began rummaging through a large rucksack. "While we eat, I'd like you to tell me why you're here instead of taking orders from General Xeimos."

"I left the army last year. I grew tired of pointless bloodshed." An image came to his mind, unbidden: an enemy soldier, mortally wounded, begging Rudolpho to spare his wife and children. Rudolpho had made haste to kill the dying man before he learned his family had already been put to the sword.

Gilga produced two rough wooden bowls from the sack and began ladling steaming food into them. "What I really want to know is why you joined in the first place. What drives an Arisid noble to forsake his privileged birth and risk his life in a time of war? Why not stay at home, in the undoubtedly luxurious confines of your family's estate?"

Rudolpho stared intently into the fire for a few moments. *My family's estate is luxurious, all right—that's part of the problem.* He grabbed a spoon and scooped up a large helping of Gilga's stew. He blew on it, then shoveled it into his mouth. It tasted even better than it smelled.

"Rabbit," he said, licking his lips. He gave Gilga a quizzical look. "How do you keep the meat fresh while on a long march? It doesn't taste salted."

The thaumatician laughed. "My culinary secrets shall remain mysteries to you, Rudo of Aris." Her expression turned serious. "It's good, no?"

"Delicious," Rudolpho agreed. He ate another spoonful, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. A moment later he sighed and words poured from him.

"When I was a boy, no more than twelve, my father had a servant named Jorry. His tasks included looking after the grounds, caring for the dogs, and sometimes watching my brother and myself when we were at play." Jorry had been over fifty years old, a broken-down warrior and a drunkard. "One day, a few coins went missing from one of my mother's purses, and suspicion fell on Jorry. Despite his protestations of innocence, my father had him horse-whipped on the lawn, in front of the other servants. After the lashing he was sent to the stables at the far end of the property. Some days later, the missing money turned up. It had been somehow misplaced. Still, Jorry did not reappear at the house. He stayed at the stables, cleaning the stalls, and on the few occasions we approached him to play, he shied away."

Rudolpho paused his tale, staring into Gilga's eyes, which were bright with attention. "From that moment, I wanted to leave Aris. When I came of age, I enlisted and did so." Poor Jorry had died by then, and was given a perfunctory burial in a pauper's grave at the edge of the estate. The cruelty of the world knew no end.

"Do you understand, Gilga?"

Somewhere, a wolf howled in the night. Gilga took a mouthful of stew and chewed with a thoughtful air. She swallowed before replying with a question of her own. "Did you know I was born in Lorea?"

"No."

"Within a few weeks, my city will be under siege by your nation. The emperor's phalanxes will batter down the gates. They will throw rocks and flaming pitch over the walls, they will storm the battlements with sword and arrow. Destruction will rain from the heavens. Thousands of my fellow citizens will be slain by the armies of Aris, perhaps even members of my own family. And yet here I sit, across from an Arisid noble, sharing with him my food and fire." She chuckled low in her throat. "Do you know how I feel about all of this?"

Rudolpho finished the last of the tasty rabbit stew. "No."

"I feel nothing. Nothing at all." Her eyes met his. "There's something wrong with me, Rudo. A piece is missing from my soul. I find it difficult to care about anything or anyone. That's why I left Lorea, to make my way in the world alone. Do you understand?"

Rudolpho nodded. *I think I might. There's something wrong with me, too.*

He carefully placed the wooden bowl and spoon in the grass, wet his handkerchief from a nearby waterskin and cleaned his hands and face, then stood and stared at the starry sky.

Gilga joined him, and for a while neither spoke. Finally she stepped closer, pressing the curve of her hip and breast against his side.

"You're on watch with Harlan Quab, are you not?"

"Yes, at one hour past midnight."

The thaumatician loosened her robe. "Come here, then. I know a way for us to pass the time."

Rudolpho took her hand, and she pulled him under the tent-flap and into her bedroll without another word.