

Informally dressed in his tunic and breeches, a young soldier sat upon a three-legged stool, slowly and carefully sharpening his sword with a whet stone. The long, well trained and practiced strokes against the blade's edge gently rang in a regular, percussive rhythm through the canvas space. Seated near a brazier to keep himself warm, he seemed content with his surroundings, despite the unusual circumstance surrounding how and what brought him to this location. Stopping occasionally, he raised the weapon to his face long enough to check the beveled edge. Had he cared to gaze at this reflection in the mirror-like blade, he would have seen the young, strong, and handsome chiseled features indicative of a lad his age and vocation. Wiping the weapon with a soft, wet cloth, he dropped the tip to the ground and continued to work the cutting edge.

A short distance from the temporary lodgings, two other warriors exchanged pleasantries.

"Here for your relief," the soldier grunted, apathetically.

"It's about time! Where have you been, Rhun? I'm tired and ready to sleep."

Unconcerned with his counterpart's gruffness, Rhun ignored the abrasive remark. "Anything to report?" He asked continuing the relief ritual.

"Nope...everything's quiet...except for that howlin'. You guys ever figure out what that's all about?"

"Frankly, I'm really not that concerned, 'specially after our little chat. It shook me up at first, but you were right about a logical explanation. Besides, I haven't heard nothing since before my sleep cycle, so there's probably nothing to it!"

"Guess you're right. I was a little spooked at first, but I haven't heard it for a while myself."

"You...spooked? Then what was all that stuff..."

"*The kid!*" No reason for him to get all spun up about nothin'."

"Hmpf...always *the kid!* He's gotta grow up sooner or later!" Rhun spat on the ground in disgust. "Any more ruckus from behind the wall?"

"Naw, I expect they're all dead by now. It's been days!"

"Right then, consider yourself relieved."

The older soldier shook his head and walked away from the post as his replacement began the next watch. Not yet used to the change in temperature, the relief guard, shivered from the cold.

"Hey, Blooch..." he yelled at his confederate, "tell Dyfed to bring me something hot to drink, would ya...it's cold out here!"

"Yeah...right," he muttered without turning, raising a hand in acknowledgement. "I'll make sure he's as punctual with yer drink as *you* were in yer relief!"

Blooch's replacement took his place in front of the barricaded wynde, satisfied that Nemed and the prisoners on the other side would remain quiet from this night on. Turning the corner, Blooch walked along the street toward the canvas barracks. He hummed to himself in a vain attempt to ignore the feeling of disquiet the ancient city gave him. Pieces of buildings broken from their foundations and fallen to the ground lay haphazardly strewn about the old

partially cobbled street, each wrapped in heavy blankets of white-pearled ice. In truth, few of the cobbles remained in place, some jutting up out of the ground while others were simply missing altogether. Occasionally, Blooch looked up into the broken and dilapidated windows of the ruined buildings and saw images that his fatigued brain interpreted as ghostly faces; faces of those long departed. He immediately cast his eyes back to the ground, promising himself not to repeat the action. But inevitably, he felt himself drawn back by the specters that inhabited the dilapidated shambles. He did not know which disturbed him more, the frozen and half-demolished buildings, the thousands of Camorrans buried in these wyndes over the generations, or the pleas for help that wafted through the barrier from Nemed and those that had recently been condemned to die with him. Nearing retirement, he believed himself condemned as well, assigned to this remote outpost after nearly a lifetime of military service; guarding a wynde that housed a leader he, like so many of his fellows, had come to admire. Not the way he expected his career to end. But such was the military life. All too often during his long career, he had been called upon for many such unpleasant duties. Nearing the comfort of the lighted bivouac, Blooch sighed in relief.

*Another shift closer,* he thought to himself. *I guess it ain't that bad a place to end up. There's a lot worse.*

Throwing the tent flap back, he entered the room, Dyfed still sat on the stool putting the finishing touches on the end of his blade. The warm room, floored with thick matting and heavy cloth, contained one cot and two stools, and various other essential paraphernalia necessary to sustain their meager existence in the ancient city. Several braziers placed strategically around the tent burned low but steady. A small opening at the top of the tent allowed ample ventilation. Stark but adequate, the old soldier considered himself satisfied with a relatively comfortable place to rest.

"Hello, boy," he greeted in a fatherly manner, removing his heavy cloak and placing it on a peg that projected from one of the large central tent poles.

Dyfed smiled. "Hey Blooch!" The young warrior greeted cheerfully. "I guess Rhun finally showed up! You must be ready for a little rest, huh?"

"Yeah..." he grunted. "Why was he late *this* time? What's been goin' on in here?"

"Rhun's been complaining again. I had a tough time getting him to wake up. He just wanted to have a lie in."

"So that's why he was so late with the relief! What's he complainin' about now?"

"He just keeps on about us being here...says it's pointless, guarding a dead man out in the middle of nowhere; that there's no point in us pulling these shifts. He thinks it's good enough for us to stay here in the tent; that we're just as much a deterrent inside as standing guard in front of an ice wall."

"Hmpf," Blooch grumped, as he removed his sword and helmet. "Rhun don't know when to keep his big fat mouth shut...but truth be told...I can't say I disagree completely. I doubt that anyone would venture out here now."

Dyfed seemed confused by the older man's confession. As a fresh recruit, he had been paired with Blooch to learn the ropes, and had come to greatly respect Blooch's opinion. Until this moment, Blooch always took the soldier's line, never questioning the leadership, and it sounded odd to hear him agree with his hotheaded, argumentative, and quick-tempered counterpart. Normally, the two comrades ended up at loggerheads with one another. As the

old soldier scratched his head and rubbed his hair where his helmet had matted his brown curly mop, he noticed the disbelief on his young charge's face. Blooch smiled understandingly.

"There *are* reasons for us to do this...aren't there?"

"Course there are, kid..." Blooch grunted, "...there's *always* reasons. It's just that...well...sometimes, they don't tell us them reasons, so it makes it difficult to accept the orders!" Dyfed shook his head. Clearly, he did not have the experience to discern the subtle difference. "Look, kid, it's okay to complain so long as you do what you're told!"

Dyfed smiled uncomfortably, still unsure where his mentor stood on all this. Blooch rubbed a frustrated hand over his heavily wrinkled forehead and down over his slightly unshaven face. He unbuckled his breastplate and set it on a pillow by his cot.

"Yeah...so..." he started, stumbling over himself trying to manufacture some plausible explanation for the novice, "we're here because...uh...we're here in case somebody comes out here to try and free Nemed, *right?*"

"But who would come all the way out here, to free someone condemned by the state...especially someone with the plague?"

Blooch sighed. *This kid is so green.* "I dunno, kid...like I said, probably nobody. But we're here just in case...y'know? Nemed was a pretty powerful man, and there might be some folks out there that think they could benefit from getting' him outta there and settin' him up on the throne again. A powerful man like that could repay favors a thousand times over, and each time in a big way!"

Dyfed smiled and slowly nodded his head. The relatively weak argument seemed to satisfy the young man's need for a justification. "So how long do you think we're going to be out here?"

"Till they call us back...not a day sooner; not a day later!" Blooch replied sarcastically. "What duties you got left?" he asked, trying to change the subject to something a little less politically charged.

"Well, I have to feed the horse and check the supplies. But I..." Dyfed's voice trailed off.

"What is it, kid?"

The young soldier looked away, embarrassed by the words that stuck in this throat.

"Kid...?"

"Have...have you heard any more of that howling?"

"No...not for a while anyway. Why? You're not *worried* about it, *are* you?"

"It's just that..."

"Yeah..."

"It's just a little...unsettling. I know what you said about that racket, but this is my first rotation checking on the horse since it all started. It wouldn't be so bad if the pen was closer to the tent."

Blooch chuckled. "Yeah, but then we'd have *another* kind of problem. You're *scared*, eh?"

"No..." Dyfed snapped.

"Yeah...didn't think so. Tell you what...Rhun wants somethin' hot to drink. You put the pot on and I'll check on the animal."

"*Absolutely not!* This is *my* responsibility. Besides, it's your rest period. You need to get some sleep."

"You sure?"

“Absolutely!” Dyfed moved to put a pot on the boil.

Blooch sat on the edge of his cot and cleared his throat. Dyfed’s quick and slightly indignant response made him proud of the young man.

*He’ll make a fine soldier*, he thought satisfied with his protégé. A raw recruit himself many years ago, Blooch understood that the hardest lesson a soldier had to learn was mastery over his own fear. “I’m going to take a minute to unwind before I settle down...maybe have a cup myself, so you go ahead and feed the horse. I’ll be here when you get back.”

Confident in his ability to discharge this duty but contented that he would not be left completely on his own Dyfed donned his heavy cloak and left the warmth and safety of the tent. Making his way to the rear of the bivouac, Dyfed grabbed a bag of feed and slung it over his shoulder. He grunted under the strain, and spent a moment balancing the load. Once comfortable that he could shift the waxy flaxen bag without dropping it, Dyfed trod off down the frozen avenue, taking care to avoid the broken and missing cobbles and fallen debris. The fog made visibility, even around his feet, difficult, and he had learned from previous trips to the pen that exaggerated high steps were about the only way to keep from tripping. Deadly quiet, the street between the wyndes may have seemed eerie to his mates, for him it meant a certain amount of safety and security.

For days now, an evil howl hung in the chill air. Loud and low, the noise sounded unlike anything the three soldiers had ever heard before. Even Blooch, with his many years of service and experience said that he did not recognize the clatter. Initially concerned that it came from some kind of animal, the howling had generated a lot of discussion between the three men about just what animal could make such a noise, as well as spirited arguments about this posting in general. Rhun felt sure that the howl did not come from an animal but emanated from the otherworldly spirits of those long dead Camorrans unfortunate enough to be buried alive in these wyndes. Rhun’s comments evoked a strong reaction from the others, but sensing the concern in his young charge, Blooch called his contemporary a superstitious grandmother, diffusing the potential powder keg. Dyfed had no idea what to think. His compatriots, both military lifers, had more experience about everything than he. Despite his own personal fears, he sided with his mentor Blooch, who offered numerous logical explanations for the noise; from wind through the streets to the settling of the ruins. Dyfed used those explanations to maintain his decorum under the present circumstance.

A large wooden wagon guarded the entrance of a shallow wynde that the guard had set up as a makeshift stable for the solitary horse.

“Dinner time,” Dyfed called out in advance of his arrival attempting to calm the animal as he turned the corner. Entering the stable, the animal neighed softly and shifted in response to the friendly voice. The young soldier dropped the bag next to a small feed bin in front of the horse. Patting the animal gently, he spoke to it.

“How you doin’ girl?” The beast pushed its nose playfully into the young man’s hand. “Hungry, huh? Well, you’ll have to wait a minute. First things first,” he continued.

Dyfed grabbed a pitchfork that leaned against the side of the feed bin and began mucking out the small area. Once finished, he returned to the feedbag, slit its top, and dumped the contents into the bin. The horse stepped forward and began to feed.

“There you go girl,” he commented, patting the animal’s side. Grabbing a hand brush from the wall, he lifted the cloak around the animal and gently began to rub the horse’s side. “That’s a good girl,” he said softly, as the horse sidled closer to him.

Suddenly, the howling began again; this time it sounded softer and more measured than before. Something about its intensity made both the animal and boy sense it closer by. The horse bucked nervously at the unearthly sound. Dyfed stiffened at the sound, gulping in the frigid air. Putting himself between the grain bin and the animal, he closed his eyes.

“Easy girl...” he said hollowly, trying to comfort himself, “it’s okay...probably just the wind.”

On the street side of the wagon, two blood-red tips silently cut the fog; two steel blue eyes peered through the spokes in the wagon wheel. Dyfed had no idea of what transpired behind him, but the horse did. Sensing the danger, it backed from the feed bin toward the wagon and bucked strongly, pulling the young soldier to the ground.

“Hey...settle down, girl. What’s the matter?”

Dyfed rose to his feet and peered back toward the wagon. He saw nothing there. Brushing himself off, the soldier patted the animal once more and quickly left the pen. Walked back to the tent, he opened the flap and entered, slightly breathless and disheveled from the experience. On his feet, Blooch had just donned his heavy cloak.

“You okay, boy?” he asked, surprised to see his young charge.

“Sure...” Dyfed asked “...why?”

“I heard that howlin’ again. I was just comin’ to check on ya.”

“I just figured it was the wind...like you said!”

“Probably so.” Blooch moved to the tent flap.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothin’...Think I’ll check on Rhun though. You know how easy he’s spooked!”

Dyfed smiled. “I can do it,” he replied, “I have to steep his drink first, but I’ll go.”

“Yeah...well...that’s fine. You steep the drink, and I’ll meet you there.”

“Okay...I guess...you sure there’s *nothing* wrong?”

“Absolutely! You take care of the drink. I’ll see you at post.”

Blooch, walked quickly down the street. Impressed that another presence flowed him, he shuddered and tried to shake it off. Attempting to fight the urge, Blooch made an effort not to look up into the windows, but the temptation proved overwhelming. He looked up momentarily. As he did, a flash of matted-white fur blurred past him. Closing in on the wynde, Blooch could not believe what he saw.

“Rhun...Rhun? Where are you?” He shouted trying to locate the missing soldier. *He’s probably sitting down in some quiet corner, sleeping...lazy jerk!* Rhun... answer me!” Storming off down the street, the senior warrior fumed over what he expected he would discover. *When I find you...* he started. But as he began to curse the missing soldier, Blooch’s foot caught something metal, the item noisily rolled for a moment and stopped. It rocked back and forth before finally coming to rest. Blooch reached down into the fog and retrieved the item. His heavy eyes widened in startled horror.

*This is...a...helmet...Rhun’s helmet! What’s going on here?*

Rhun...Rhun!” Blooch shouted in a panic. Silence. Pulling his hand away from

the head-guard, the soldier felt something cold and wet against his fingers. *What's this?* Turning his hand over, he drew it close to his face. *Blood! Oh my g...*

“Dyfed!” The old soldier turned and ran back toward the canvassed bivouac. “Dyfed,” he shouted in a panic, “Dyfed stay in the tent! Dyfed...do you hear me? DYFED!”

As Blooch passed the wynde where Nemed lay entombed in the ice, two steely blue eyes pierced the fog, stopping him dead in his tracks. He could just make out the matted-white, sweaty fur of the animal before him. “So...*it is* you! I thought I recognized that howl, but never thought you'd actually come into this city. You've taken a big chance, and this time you tangled with the wrong man!” Instinctively, the soldier reached for his short sword, but could not find it. In his haste to check on Rhun, he had left the weapon on top of his breastplate back at the tent. Blooch swallowed hard. He knew what would happen next. The beast growled. “Come on...” he braced. “I'm not afraid of you...Cwn Aarawn!”

Steeling himself for hand-to-hand combat, he started to yell his young charge's name one last time. Before he could utter the words, the animal struck, its wide, gaping jaws crushing the soldier skull.

Dyfed opened the tent flap carrying three of the hot drinks. *We can all have a quick one*, he thought as he moved toward the wynde. “Blooch...did I hear you yelling for me? I coming.” No answer. “Blooch,” Dyfed yelled. “Blooch...Rhun...come on you guys...answer me. Where are you?”

As Dyfed stepped nearer the wynde, the drink sloshed over the side of the tankard burning his fingers.

“Ouch,” he complained looking down at his red, wet digit, “that's *hot!*” Craning his neck, he tried to find his comrades but found nothing apart from the frozen wynde entrance. Dyfed took in a lung full of air and prepared to shout one last time. Before he could expel his breath, the young soldier sensed a presence behind him. “About time,” he began, spinning himself around, ready to surprise his friends with a hot libation. “Where have you...”

Dyfed stood motionless, petrified by the sight that stood menacingly before him. Half animal, half specter, this phantom merged, perfectly camouflaged with the blue and white fog on the ground. Its ghostly head bent low to the ground; cold blue eyes narrowed, focusing on its next victim. Only the tips of its ears cut the mist. The apparition's huge chest and gaping jaws looked unlike anything he had ever seen. For a moment, the inexperienced warrior thought he saw it smile.

“H--he---hello?” Dyfed called nervously, hoping for a friendly reply.

But the phantom remained silent. Dyfed realized that he stood completely unarmed and totally at the mercy of the creature. Fearful that the beast might attack him suddenly, Dyfed looked frantically for something with which to fight. Suddenly, his eyes fell on the steaming liquid in the tankards which he carried. Without warning, he threw the scalding hot drinks into the animal's face. It cried a horrific sound, momentarily stunned. The noise and the adrenaline vaulted the young man back toward the safety of the tent, the recovering white monster in hot pursuit. Diving through the flap, Dyfed grabbed the sword he had just sharpened, took a position behind one of the braziers, and steeled himself for what surely followed.