

Same Ending

Kaius walked proudly over to the open keep. It was the place where the Skirmishers met and ate each night. This group of warriors was different than the normal army. They were soldiers, sure, but more unconventional. They did not train in marching and group tactics. They did not salute and call each other by ranks. They fought against creatures with multiple tentacles, green and black skin, breath that could melt armor, and that fought with fangs and talons. They defended people like him from natural and supernatural threats, while the army carried out the king's will. Since his parents and sister were killed by a rogue werewolf who was hunted and killed by their warriors, a Skirmisher was all Kai had ever wanted to be.

The keep was large and almost devoid of civilians. Only those that kept the pigs roasting over the dozen fires and that kept the barrels of wine fresh were allowed. Fights often broke out over debts, slights, and portions, so the fewer townspeople involved, the better the relationship between them and their sometimes unwilling protectors. Their numbers were always constant because the pay was good and they didn't have to follow the traditional military code of conduct. And, if there was a particularly fatal threat, the army would allocate conscripted forces to fill in for the dead until new recruits could be added. Kai was signing up in the morning, and couldn't wait to meet his fellow men at arms. He stayed in one of the guard towers after the drawbridge was closed, and then came down and joined in the revelry.

"So, what's your story?" the fresh faced youngster asked the nearest barrel-chested warrior. "How did you get to Halle?"

He was a kid, not more than fourteen or fifteen years old, and too small to make anything of himself on the battlefield. He had a sword in an ill-fitting sheath on his belt that weighed down his pants so much he had to keep a hand on them at all times to keep them up. He had hopeful brown eyes, bright red hair, and freckles. Freckles for Tempus' Sake!

"I got here, on a horse, boy," the battle scared older man scowled, "Now mind your business." He placed a rough hand on Kai's chest and pushed him away.

He wouldn't be swayed to stop though. The boy drifted from clique to clique, trying to make his way into a conversation or listen in on a battle story. He had none of his own, but was eager to begin his legacy. Orphaned, as were so many of the young men who lived in North Cairfawn due to the longstanding Civil War, he had finally gotten to the age where the priests would let him leave the orphanage's fields and fight. They didn't accept all volunteers, but Kai had known several older boys that had joined their number, and knew they would give him a good word to the captain.

He nosed his way into an odd grouping, a woman of otherworldly white eyes speaking with a horned man who had light red skin and blonde, human warrior. He'd seen the blonde man before around town, and had even gotten a few odd pieces of copper from him when he was hungry. This gave Kai enough courage to worm his way into the group and listen. His presence was noticed immediately, and the conversation stopped. He just smiled politely at everyone, nodded, and repeated his question.

“So, how did you come to join the Skirmishers?”

He looked inquisitively to the horned man first. Kai knew he was a tiefling; as tall as the warrior, but not as broad through the chest. Tieflings were something of a legend, hunted to near extinction, but starting to return to civilized society. This one was impeccably dressed in leather and shining buckles, but he also had a wicked looking sickle on his belt, and the rod he carried gave him away as a mage. Kai waited patiently. The man laughed.

“You dare address a demon seed of the underworld! I am a tiefling, wretched creature! Aren't you afraid I'm going to eat your family, boy?” he growled, showing off some wickedly sharp teeth.

“I know what you are and I've heard stories of your powers,” he replied reverently. “Still, since you were here in Halle and talking to these folks, I thought you were an alright sort. I haven't got a family, my lord, but if you are hungry I could fetch you some lamb from the campfires. Not sure it tastes like man-flesh, but you could give it a try.”

This got a hearty laugh from the other two warriors and the tiefling as well. He put a few hearty pats on the boy's back, knocking the wind from him slightly.

“Good boy!” he shouted, “don't be afraid of anything or anyone! I'm not hungry at the moment, but I will let you know when I am.” He turned to his companions, signaling to Kaius that he should leave, but he didn't take the hint. He stood just behind the mage and waited for his answer.

“I think your charge is still waiting for your response, Pesmerga,” said the warrior with a strangely familiar accent. It was a common dialect, but almost like he was impersonating someone; like he was impersonating royalty. Pesmerga let out an exasperated sigh.

“Fine,” he said and turned. “I got here because I signed up to be here. I am a warlock and there's not much to a warlock who has never faced war. I made my way here from someplace else, and when I have made my mark on this battlefield, I will leave to find another. Does that answer satisfy you, boy?”

“Oh yes sir!” he responded, delighted he finally got his first answer. It only took one brush off before he'd made his first friend. This was much better results than he'd hoped for when he was hiding all afternoon. Pesmerga turned on him again, but Kai worked his way into the circle and addressed the woman. “And you, miss? Are you a warlock too?”

The blonde man and the white-eyed woman laughed again. There was no getting back to the subject which they had been discussing, even if any of them could remember what it was. She absentmindedly pricked her fingers against her crystalline hair and responded.

“I am a genasi. Do you know what that is?” she asked. Her voice was soothing, but also made him feel like he should know what a genasi was when he didn’t. He shook his head.

“Well, when you find out, you can address me again,” she told him. Pesmerga and the warrior shook their heads.

“That’s not proper, Zindel,” the man replied, not in a rebuke, but just a friendly reminder.

“Stuff proper, you shouldn’t coddle the ignorant,” she said to him and then turned to face Kai, “or they will never learn.”

“I’m Heath, my young friend,” the warrior said, ignoring the woman’s advice. “I’m a fighter. Is that what you want to be?” he asked, nodding toward the boy’s sword.

“Oh yes sir,” he said quickly, letting the red leave his cheeks from the embarrassment of not impressing the genasi. “I want to fight in the caves against trolls and goblins.”

“No, boy, I don’t just fight. I am a Fighter,” he corrected. “A trained warrior. My role is to defend people like Pesmerga and Zindel on the battlefield, to take hits from monsters so foul their breath would burn your eyebrows. That way the mages can use their knowledge to destroy the creatures. Do you understand?”

It felt nice to be talked to like a person, like the priests with him did at the orphanage. “Yes, sir, I understand.”

“You can call me Heath.”

“Yes, Sir Heath,” he responded dutifully.

“Just Heath, boy,” he corrected again with a laugh.

“Thank you, Heath. I’m Kaius the Great,” he said proudly, giving them the moniker that he and his friends had decided on when he left to join the Skirmishers. They didn’t laugh nearly as hard as this new group of people did. He was a little disappointed to learn at that moment that tieflings could cry from laughter just like a normal man.

“You better wait until someone names you ‘Great’ before you use it in introductions, boy,” said the haughty genasi, “and not your mum or sis.”

“Do you have a sword or axe Heath?” he asked, trying to get past the whole Kaius the Great mistake. “I have a sword I got from one of the retired soldiers.” He unsheathed it to show a nicked iron blade of a sword that might have seen its glory days against the ash undead.

“Mine’s a bit bigger,” Heath replied, as he reached down and brought up a greatsword that was the size of the boy from head to toe. It had a non-descript wrap around the handle, but the metal of the hilt seem to be infused with some kind of sparkling metal, shinier than steel. The size of a true warrior’s weapon made Kai feel very unsure of his decision to join the Skirmishers. He was one of the bigger boys at the orphanage, but against a true man he was starting to doubt if he would even survive one parry.

As he faded off in thought, the three started talking amongst themselves, and the boy finally took the hint. He walked away and in hearing the musical laughter from the genasi, he knew they were talking about him. He kicked up dust as he walked through the camp, looking around for a friendly face or another lonely soul. He was too busy looking at the shadows the fires were throwing around the ground to notice he was walking in another man’s path. The other man didn’t notice because he was trying to remove his armor. They came together with a crash, but only Kai ended up on the ground. The man was sturdy.

“Watch where you are going, boy,” he said calmly, knowing that there was more harm done on the kid than on him.

Kai was about to say something then he was grabbed by his collar and lifted off his feet. In fact, the man he bumped into was now eye to eye with him. But, it wasn’t he who had picked him up, it was something else.

“Apologize, wretch,” came a voice. He couldn’t describe it. It came from far back in a deep throat. It sounded forced, like the words were hard to form. The words lacked clarity, like there was something wrong with the man’s mouth. He tried to turn and face the person holding him, but he could only assume because of the ease in which he rose through the air and the height he now dangled from that the man was huge.

“Apologize!” the voice demanded, shaking him slightly closer to the other warrior’s face.

“I’m sorry!” he said in a yell, not because he was angry, but because he was frightened. He dropped suddenly, and the height was enough to send a dull blast of pain through his shins as he landed. He dropped his head back to look up at his assailant. He had to look way up. The man, correction: creature, stood more than seven feet above him, a full head and a half over the other man. It had the head of a bull. His horns were long and curved, and thick enough to skewer a pig on each one. His eyes were pure black in the darkness, and the brass ring through his nose was stained with blood. His hands were that of a man, albeit a large and horrible one. The one that had a hold of the boy now rested on the hilt of a battle axe hanging from a hook on his belt, and the other was invisible behind the largest shield Kai had ever laid eyes on. He couldn’t discern many other details because

the rest of his body was covered in thick plates of golden armor. Kai felt a whimper escape.

“How dare you run into a priest? Do you not know a man of faith when you see one?” the bull admonished, not even stooping to make eye contact, but satisfied to terrify him from far above. “Be aware of your surroundings or you will be appropriately punished for your ignorance!”

“Easy Gnesh,” the other man said, putting a calming hand on the monster’s thick, armored forearm. He was trying to keep the bull from unsheathing his weapon. “I am alright and he is sufficiently educated. I think we can leave him to reflect.”

“I am sorry for your inconvenience, Master Pell,” the bull said, lowering his gaze to not make eye contact with the cleric. “I will see to it that the lower classes learn more respect.”

“It is not your role, Gnesh, to watch over me or treat me as royalty,” he reminded. “Things are different here than in the labyrinth. I do not seek to be treated differently, but instead enjoy being among the men and women that fight beside us. We are comrades in arms, not masters and servants. Does this make sense to you?”

“It is not my way, but I can see it is true, Master Pell,” he admitted. He knelt down to the boy, still frightened by what he saw in the creature. There was an undeniable ferocity to his appearance and just underneath his demeanor, but he also had a different presence. “Be more careful, human child. This is no place for you.”

“I,” Kai stammered, “I am a warrior.”

“It is safer for you at the orphanage, boy,” said the priest, finally unstrapping the last buckle and freeing himself from the scale armor he wore with a satisfied sigh. “You are not big enough for battle yet.”

“But I am,” he replied, relieved to not have to look the bull monster in the face anymore. “The priests said I was. I am the biggest boy at the orphanage.”

“That is because all the bigger boys have left to go to battle, my son,” the priest replied, crouching down to Kai’s level, still prone from being dropped by the Minotaur. “And all those boys are dead.”

“How do you know?” Kai asked, unsure if he could trust this adult or if it was another that wanted to hold him back.

“Because their blood is on my hands,” he replied, showing the boy the palm of his hand, covered in old, brown blood. “I serve on the battlefield to keep soldiers alive, to help them honor Kord. But, my having to concentrate on the helpless does not honor my god, and does not turn the tide of battle. I should be there to help warriors like Gnesh recover

his wind or strike a blow with my own mace, and to do that I must choose to leave you and other orphans like you to die when you are wounded. Do you understand?"

"I..." it was difficult to accept, but easy to understand. If there was a warrior like Gnesh to defend the fortress and he was in need, why would a priest stop to heal Kai's wounds? The priest put a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"One day, you may be ready to meet destiny with a sword in your hand, but do not be in a hurry. Fate favors the prepared. You don't want to meet the same ending." The priest gave his shoulder a squeeze and rose to leave.

"Your name, sir?" Kai asked after him.

"I am Kalador," he said without turning around. "And this is Gneshat." It didn't take them long to disappear in the mass of soldiers and shadows.

Kai picked himself up and dusted off. His shins and ankles still hurt him from the sudden drop. He started to consider the cleric's words. And if there were beasts on the other side as large or as fearsome as Gnesh, then what chance would he have? He started off toward the outskirts of camp, towards the smaller exits on the side of the keep, when he saw a fire separate from the rest. It was still surrounded by soldiers, but at least twenty or thirty yards from the main camp site in the center of the fortress. Curious, he started towards it, thinking it may be the younger fighters or some people more like Heath.

He arrived at the fireside and saw that these people were not like the rest. Some of them bore manacles and chains, though the links were not attached to anything. Others wore armor bearing the crests of other lands, and still others no armor at all, but trappings of hide and leather covering vital organs. They were armed, so he had to assume they were Skirmishers as well. He approached a man and woman sitting side by side on a log. This time, he thought to listen before opening his mouth.

"How can you fight so hard for a side you don't believe in?" the woman asked with a quiet passion.

"I had a home too, you know," he said back, seeming to ignore the question. She noticed.

"You are changing the subject, Dag," she said. She didn't seem to mind, but she didn't like being ignored either.

"In my home, I was a leader, a captain of the guard," he went on. His voice was smooth and steady, like summer wind coming in off the ocean. The story he was telling was captivating the boy eavesdropping behind them. "In spite of my title and privilege, I was immature. Irresponsible. I concerned myself with seducing ladies-in-waiting and scheming for political power rather than my duties. It was one such tryst which ended that frivolity and got me sent with our garrison of troops to the frontline in South Carifawn."

Realizing that he was not changing the subject, she let him continue.

“I thought I could dive into battle with the recklessness I had always followed in my life, believing myself too lucky to die,” he said, almost chuckling at the preposterous thought. “I thought myself immortal. The joke was that I was right! I am too lucky to die, but I’m not too lucky not to lose. My recklessness betrayed those that I was supposed to protect.”

Kai edged closer to the log, trying not to make a sound or else he’d be discovered and not know the end to this tale.

“That battle, it was my first, and I lost nearly my entire squad of troops to the North army. We fought a pitched battle over a field of already harvested crops in the dead of winter. I know how wars are fought. We were fighting for nothing more than the right to kill each other. All the blood dyed the snow red. Men whose wounds were mortal lived preserved in the cold long enough to realize they could not be saved and regret their every decision in their lives. So I lived, but buried a dozen men’s sons in the earth that day.”

He gazed into the firelight, seeing all of the faces of the dead. She shut her eyes tightly, trying to forget those same faces. A thought struck him, and he laughed.

“Did you know I am a father?” he said. “I have no wife, but maybe a half dozen children. Maybe more! I don’t know any of them. None could be older than a toddler, but one day they will be caught in such a conflict. It’s all this land has ever known. If I would want that commander to be responsible for my sons and daughters, then how can I not be?”

“We were cut off, Quinn,” she said. “By the time the retreat sounded, there was nowhere to cut and run. If anything, it was my fault for not keeping a clear escape.”

“You can’t take this from me, Ranger,” he replied. “This is not your yoke. No, I must take responsibility.” Then he looked at her, seeing all the faces of his dead charges in hers. “And I have.”

“You ask me why I can fight for them, conscripted like a common slave? Look around you.” He put a hand on her shoulder as she took in the scene. They were surrounded by other conscripts, warriors who had survived on the battlefield only to be put in the service of their enemy. Men and women happy to be alive, but still shamed and far from the homes they knew and loved. “They are my charges now, and so are the ones that choose to be here. On the battlefield, survival matters, not the politics. I will be loyal to those that depend on me to keep them alive, and one day, maybe, I’ll again get to fight for a cause or a king I can believe in. Until then, I will fight for them, and for you, and for the memory of our men. And I will get you home.”

She smiled, understanding a little more of the man she’d met and served under just a short while before their defeat and capture at the hands of the North. Their fighting skills

undeniable, they had been given a choice. Either fight with the Skirmishers or languish in a cell as a prisoner of war. They would not be asked to fight against their countrymen, but against the infernal monsters that threaten every civilized outpost in every land. They would defend innocents, although innocents under another flag. She had chosen this route because it seemed more like freedom, but he had chosen this as a more appropriate punishment, and chance for redemption.

“I can take care of myself, milord,” she said. “You just worry about those other folk. I’ll watch your back.”

“Still, even with our renewed resolve, we are likely to meet the same ending,” he told her.

“I know,” she replied, getting up to fetch more wine.

Kai struggled to his feet; his arms were numb from resting on them. He admired the pure honesty of the man and the depth with which he connected to his troops. He also admired the stoic nature of the woman and her fierce confidence. He walked away from the fire a bit and reached for his sword. With a commander like that, perhaps he could be a soldier. When he felt for the hilt, it was gone.

“I’ve been robbed,” he thought. “I need a sentry!” His gaze darted around to see if he could spot the culprit. Men and women everywhere sported swords, axes, bows, and more exotic weapons. It would be impossible for him to prove, even if he could find his sword among them. He felt around his scabbard again, and found a small scroll of parchment shoved into the hole. He wedged his finger in and pulled out the paper. He moved to the closest fire and unrolled it.

You shouldn’t eavesdrop on people. Consider this your penalty.

Kai looked up again for a glimpse of the thief and decided he must be a ghost. Between the tiefling, the bull, the genasi, and the ghost, there was no place for a boy with an empty scabbard and an unearned moniker. No, he would give up this dream for now. Maybe with another year or two he would be more prepared than the boys who bled out in the priest’s hands. Maybe he would be better prepared to survive and not haunt his warlord’s thoughts after his death. Maybe he would be able to avoid the same ending the warlord spoke of. If anything, it would give him time to earn enough for a new sword.