

"Are we expecting a major attack tomorrow?" the lieutenant asked me. His voice was a little nervous. First battle, I was guessing. I'd heard it before. It's funny, how some things never change. Young money looking their first engagement in the teeth is one of them.

"Ours not to reason why," I said, eyeing him coldly. "Ours but to do and die. Follow your orders, officer, and let your Queen do the thinking."

He flushed, saluted, and waved me through the gates. I kept walking, unconcerned. He hated me now. That was good. Hate might keep him fighting when he would rather turn away.

Hate's a powerful thing. It can keep a man going for a long, long time.

The soldiers in the camp paused as I walked through, turning to watch me. Some of them bowed to me, or saluted. Most just turned back to their work, dismissing me. The fae are good at that. They can sneer at you with their guts on the ground, and die satisfied.

I made my way to the command tent, a palatial thing of silk and velvet that could have housed a battalion. That's the nature of things in a Sidhe army. Even in the middle of the war they find a way to set themselves above the rest, looking down on the world from a thousand feet high.

The squire watching the door tried to stop me from entering, but the sergeant with her held her back. He nodded to me, respectfully, and I nodded back. I didn't know his name, but I remembered his competence. The sergeants have always been the last refuge of competence in an army, since before there were sergeants. Some things don't change.

Stepping inside, I brushed through the crowd of officers, adjuncts, and sycophants. They stepped away, getting out of my way without ever quite acknowledging my presence. Almost two thousand years I'd served the Queen, and still I was an outsider, an observer. Not a one of the fae respected me. Oh, they respected my *office*, the authority I'd been given, and certainly they respected my power, but not me. The lowliest goblin in that camp would still look on me with a sort of condescending pity.

"General," I said, stepping up beside the leader of the Midnight forces in the area. An ancient Sidhe, old when I had been young, she had an arrogance to her that the others in that tent could only dream of. They were playing at being soldiers, but she was the real thing.

"Sir Carraig," she said, nodding to me. Still no respect, but there was at least a touch of fear there. She had seen me work before, she knew something of what I was capable of. Unlike the others here, she knew that I walked through a camp of the darkest nightmares the faerie realms had to offer, and I was the most terrifying predator there.

"I will be participating tomorrow," I said. "On the eastern flank."

She nodded. "Are we anticipating a heavy enemy deployment?"

"I expect another Champion of the Courts to be present," I said, smiling. "I advise you not to deploy any other forces in the area. It would be an unfortunate waste of resources."

She nodded again, tightly. She hated me as well. Old wounds, inflicted in my youth, that never healed and never will. But she wouldn't, couldn't, act against me. Not so long as Scáthach holds me as her Champion, and after so long neither of us believed that I would be cast out of that position. The only way I will be leaving my office is feet-first inside of a box. Not that there's likely to be enough to bury. Or that anyone will bother.

"Until the morning, then," I said, still smiling. Then I left, pushing through the crowd.

A brusque entrance, and an even more abrupt exit. It was rough, rude, offensive; the Sidhe there would gladly have killed me for such an offense. But I was not concerned. It was my job to be offensive, a reminder of what my Queen could do if she had the mind. It is the nature of the Midnight Court to present an iron fist beneath a velvet glove.

I have never been a man of velvet.

I retired for the night in the small tent that was reserved for me. In any camp, any fortress, any place that the Midnight Court went, there was a place set aside for me. It would not do for Scáthach's Champion to arrive and accommodations not be ready, after all.

I could have had much grander lodgings, if I wanted. I could have a dwelling to dwarf the command tent. But even after almost two millennia, I am not so comfortable with luxury. I don't care for servants, or extravagance. Give me a place to sleep and something to keep the rain off, that's all I need.

I had nightmares. Dreams of fire, blood, ravens gathering above. A raven perching on a corpse before me, looking at me with intelligent eyes. An offer. A very, very foolish man accepting that offer.

It was easy to think that had been a stupid choice, and from an objective view it was, but at the time it had made sense. I'd been a scared, angry young man, barely more than a boy, and my king had betrayed his kingship. All the battles I'd fought, dreaming of uniting the land under the rule of a king more god than man, had been for nothing. I'd wanted nothing more than to die, and one of my gods had given me the chance to die a hero, and have my name remembered 'til the stars burned out. Not such a bad deal, from that perspective.

Neither of us could really be blamed that it hadn't worked out that way. Death is often a fickle lover, embracing those who flee her and spurning those that seek her. It was hardly my fault that I'd lived long enough to see how foolish that boy's ambitions had been.

Still, I was almost glad for the reminder. It had been almost twenty years since I had that dream, maybe ten since I thought of that day at all.

It's important to remember where you come from. That's what set me aside from them, even after so long in their company. The Sidhe are immortal, ancient beyond words, but at the same time almost childlike in their outlook. I wonder sometimes whether they remember the past at all, or they're so busy drowning it in the present that they don't think of it at all.

I walk through the camp, enjoying the silence. There's no stillness quite like the stillness of a camp just before the battle starts. It helps that they know exactly when the battle *will* start. I'd tried to argue against that, early on, but it was no use. That was how the Sidhe were. They fought, yes, but it was a *civilized* war. The battles had to be open, honest, so that there would be room for deceptions and games and bargains behind the curtain.

As I was gathering the things I would need, a half-breed ran into me; he wasn't looking where he was going, too focused on delivering his messages to where they were bound, and I was lost in thought. I barely stumbled, but he hit the ground, and as he scrambled to his feet he got a look at what I was doing.

"What do you need so much food for?" he blurted, thoughtless.

I looked at him and put one hand to my sword. A silent threat, but not at all difficult to hear. He knew that I could cut him down in the middle of the camp, in front of a hundred witnesses, and not one would bat an eye. I'd done it before.

He flushed and kept moving, at a dead sprint. He did glance back once, clearly expecting me to have a weapon drawn. I just smiled at him and put the loaf of bread into my bag. The baker was already awake, as might be expected, but she knew better than to question me.

It wasn't a problem. But it *was* concerning, that I hadn't seen him coming. That was careless, and I wouldn't live long if I were careless. It had been too long since I had a chance to relax. I'd hoped to take a holiday, take a few years to myself. Catch up on my reading, do some hunting in the high places. But Scáthach wanted to press the advantage after reclaiming her spear, and when she wanted to do battle with the Daylight Court, she sent me.

Ah, well. That was the way of things. Perhaps next year, or the year after that.

On the way out of the camp, I passed the deserters, crucified in neat rows at the edge of the encampment. For all its reputation among humans, crucifixion isn't such a terrible thing. The fae could do worse things to a person.

The fae *had* done worse things to these people. The whole point, after all, was that the punishment for desertion was worse than death in battle. The foot soldiers dying in the front lines had to be more afraid of their own commanders than they were of the enemy.

The crucifixion was my touch. I started doing it to mock the Romans, and then, just a few years after the Romans died, the Christians came to the isles.

Of the two, I think I hate the Christians more. The Romans slaughtered us in droves, but at least they never claimed it was for our own good.

And besides, there were no Romans anymore. There was no point in hating a people that had been dead and gone for five hundred years. There's no passion in hate for something dead.

Out in the wooded hills overlooking the field of battle, there was a clearing. In that clearing, there was a broad stone outcropping that had a good view of the field, but couldn't easily be seen from it. On that stone, a heavy wool blanket had been laid out. One side of the blanket was in open sun, while the other half was in the shade cast by a small grove of oaks. Sitting on the sunny side was a scruffy, ugly man wearing mail and carrying an axe.

"You're late," he said as I walked into the clearing. He spoke the old language, the language I'd spoken as a child. There couldn't be more than a few dozen people left who knew it. His dialect was even older than mine; he was my elder by a few hundred years.

That had seemed so important, once. Much as it had seemed important to fight the enemy. It took a few hundred years to realize that I had more in common with my immediate opposite than either of us had with our allies.

I shrugged. "I was delayed." I sat across the blanket from him, in the shade.

He nodded. "It happens," he said, reaching into the pack sitting by his side. He pulled out a bottle and a pair of ancient clay cups. Those cups were a hundred years old, and looked it.

I pulled out a loaf of bread and a haunch of mutton, and set them on the blanket, so that they crossed the boundary between light and shadow. Half on each side, much the same as the cups he poured.

Cups poured out of the same bottle, and he made no move to choose one, leaving it up to me. A small courtesy, a measure of safety.

Not that it mattered. One day, there would be poison in the wine, or razor blades in the bread, or any of a thousand other tricks that we were capable of. One day. We both knew it. It was the way of things.

"This isn't a fae vintage," I commented, picking up one of the cups.

"No," he agreed. "Human. A Burgundy, from about ten years ago."

I shrugged and downed it. I've never been a connoisseur of wine.

"How do you expect the battle to go today?" he asked, tearing off some bread and meat.

"You'll gain a few yards here, we'll gain a few yards there. A couple hundred soldiers will die, and at the end of the day nothing much will have changed."

"You always say that."

I grinned. "I'm always right. It's how it is."

"True enough," he sighed. "Although our side brought more people today than usual. Ogres, dryads, a handful of sylphs."

"So did ours," I said, shrugging. "Trolls, mostly." That was how it usually went. Both Courts trying to dupe the other, but they were so much in lockstep that they ended up doing the same things.

I ate some mutton and watched as Midnight troops began pouring out of the camp, rushing across the field at the Daylight defenses. I couldn't hear them from this distance, but I heard the battle cry all the same, the wild, bloodthirsty howling of the masses. Behind that blood-maddened rabble came the real soldiers, tight, disciplined units.

Daylight fighters came rushing out to meet them, crashing together on the open field. The leading fronts of both sides began to fall, mingling until it was hard to say where one army ended and the other began.

I wondered if there was a difference between the two sides, anymore. I thought there was one, once. I remember there being more of one. But maybe I'd just gotten cynical. I remember thinking it was about right and wrong, once, but now it was just about us and them. That was all any war was about, really. Politics, religion, land, those are just pretty words to put on top. The real reason you go to war is that they hate you and you can't stand them, and *why shouldn't* you all slaughter each other?

"Looks like your guys are trying a flanking maneuver," he commented, pointing at a small group of Midnight soldiers creeping through the grass. From our elevated position they were easy to see, but from the field they would be hidden fairly well.

"And your people will send out their cavalry on the other side," I agreed. "Lure them in, draw back so that they have to overextend. Then send aerial forces to surround the flanking force, reverse the retreat and catch them in a pincer." I sighed. "I swear I've seen this battle before."

"That's how the fae work," he said. "Nothing really changes. It doesn't matter who's fighting, the fight's the same."

It was as good a summary as any. The Court as a huge churning mass, people dying and being replaced almost before they were dead, the office far more important than the officeholder, while Scáthach stood above it as constant and remote as the North Star.

Or did she? Had my Queen, my goddess, been replaced as often as everyone else? Would I even have *known* if she had? Queen was a role the same as any other, after all. It was a disturbing thought.

He didn't have it quite right, though. "That isn't just the Courts," I said. "Humans are no better. Did you pay attention to that mess in Russia in the last century?"

"Not really," he admitted. "I remember hearing something about it, but I haven't been on earth much lately."

"A bunch of workers decided that they were cold and hungry, and they'd be better off overthrowing the tsar. Put in a communist government. Then, just a few decades later, they realized that they were still cold and hungry, and overthrew that regime. Tried a democracy for a while. Now they're thinking about changing it up again." I shrugged. "They haven't figured out yet that factory workers in Moscow are always going to be cold and hungry. Doesn't matter who's in charge of things."

"True enough," he sighed. "But that's enough talk about such grim things. Are you up for a game?" he asked, pulling a chess set out of his pack.

"Depends. You got another bottle in there?"

He did, and for a few hours, the Courts were forgotten.

He won the first game, I took the second, and the third and fourth were stalemates. Neither of us was willing to quit on that note, so we kept playing until I finally dragged out a victory in the fifth game.

"Damn," he said, draining another cup. We'd finished off the second bottle of wine and moved onto the whiskey I'd brought by that point. "Time for one more?"

I looked out at the battle. At some point it had passed the climax, and both sides were now fighting for a draw. "Better not," I said reluctantly. "They'll be expecting me back at camp soon."

He nodded and started packing up the pieces. "I can't be here tomorrow," he said. "Titania wants me in Alfheim. Something about a show of support during a trade meeting."

"I understand," I said. "Maybe next year."

"Maybe," he said, extending his hand again. "Good to see you again, Carraig."

"Likewise," I said, shaking it. "Look after yourself out there, Aodh. I'd hate to miss the chance to kill you."

He laughed and walked off into the sunshine. I watched him go for a moment, considering the possibility of putting a knife in his back.

Then I turned and walked into the darkness. One day, I'd kill him. One day. It was inevitable; how Carraig and Aodh felt about it was irrelevant. I served Scáthach, who'd once been called Nemain, and he served Titania, who was once Brigid. One day there would be no more ignoring that.

One day. But not today.