

SOLACE

BY

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my mother and father for giving me the love and support that fostered my imagination. For my brothers who brought the magic of movies, books and video games into my life that molded my fantasies. For my teachers that developed my love for learning and writing. Finally, for my friends that left an everlasting mark on my life. Each of you all are inspirations, thank you.

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CHAPTER 1

FALL

The air snapped and trembled through the sea of gray clouds above. Alexander pierced through the layers and a lone ray of sunlight shone through where he passed before the cloud cover closed in on itself. His speed kept increasing as he fell, the rushing air muffling his cries of terror. With immense force, he crashed through the forest canopy and slammed into the hard ground, sending dust into the air at impact just as thunder ripped through the air and shook the trees around him.

As the last rumble of thunder rolled into the distance and the man still hadn't moved, the fog displaced by his fall settled back down, covering Alexander. Face down on the ground, the golden glow of a protection spell withered away immediately after impact.

Alexander's skin crawled as the chilly fog rolled over him. The sounds of this place pierced his ears. He gasped and clenched a fistful of dirt before struggling to his feet. A bit unsteady on his feet, he scanned the surroundings and examined his own person for injuries then, in a panic, looked frantically around for his compass. He left the area to expand his search and tripped over an object sticking out of the ground. Upon closer examination, he realized it was a handle. He looked at the handle, up to the sky, and then back to the handle.

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Well, could have saved me a lot of trouble if it just hit me.

He grasped the handle and pulled a long blade adorned with ancient markings out of the soil. His search continued until he saw his shield jammed deep into the trunk of a turned-over tree. He wiped the dirt off and looked at the depiction of an eagle with blue and yellow coloring. He secured it, along with the sword, to his person. The search was not over for him, as he continued to wander throughout the area. A sense of urgency rose, and his searching became more and more frantic.

He froze as he spotted a young boy, no older than a toddler, in the shadows of the towering trees outside the impact zone. Dressed in layers of worn, colorless rags, the boy held Alexander's pristine gold compass, which was untouched by the world around him.

Alexander slowly raised a hand to the boy, to gesture that he would not hurt him. But before he could speak a word, the boy turned and ran away into the forest.

"No, wait!" Alexander yelled before giving chase.

As he plowed through the brush, the boy slipped farther into the wilderness. Every time he felt he had closed the gap between them, the boy slipped out of sight. Then Alexander would hear the sound of breaking sticks and he would head in that direction. Eventually he lost sight of the boy going down a hill.

He tripped over a branch and tumbled down, slamming into the base of a tree. Dazed, he looked up to see the boy standing motionless in the middle of a road. Seeing an opportunity, Alexander raced to the boy. He quickly grabbed the compass and was about to scold him for stealing, but was stopped by the sound of grinding metal.

A large metal machine moved toward them. A group of five soldiers, dressed in ragged uniforms, surrounded the vehicle. A lone

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individual turned around and raised his fist while yelling something to the vehicle over its roar. Black smoke puffed out the back of the machine as it stopped. One of the men approached, while the others raised their weapons at the man and boy.

“You there!” the leading soldier yelled.

Alexander struggled to find the right response to the man’s common language. He was finally able to utter a simplistic answer, “Yes?”

“What’s your business here? Acropolian? Oren?”

“W-what does that even mean?” Alexander asked, puzzled. He looked at the boy for any insight.

The boy silently returned his gaze.

“It’s a simple question, son!” the leader pushed.

“Looks like one of those raiders reported over the radio, sir,” one of the other soldiers reported. “Raided those convoys over the last few weeks.”

“Probably a scout. Take him out, and the kid!” the leader shouted.

The men aimed their rifles and shot a barrage of bullets. Instinctively, Alexander whipped around his shield to protect the boy and himself. The shield rattled as the bullets hit, while dirt popped around them from the missed shots. Alexander was shocked by the presence of these strange weapons.

Arrows without a bow? Arrows without a stem...at these speeds?

He grabbed the boy and ran to a nearby tree for cover. The soldiers shouted orders as one of them banged on the body of the vehicle. The machine roared to life and a turret appeared from the top to take aim. Alexander glanced around, looking for an escape, but there was none. He sighed, looked at the boy, and held him tight.

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“Well, I guess this is one way,” he muttered to himself.

An explosion shook the ground and made the boy and Alexander flinch. However, they were unharmed. Instead, the cries and shouts from the soldiers echoed through the air along with the smell of burning metal and flesh.

“Contact left!” one soldier shouted “Right!”

“Where’s it coming from?” another soldier frantically yelled.

Alexander looked from behind his cover to see the metal machine engulfed in flames. Two of the soldiers were on the ground motionless, and those who remained looking wildly in all directions. Two snaps rang out, and two more of the soldiers dropped. After the rest of his comrades fell, the last soldier fired in all directions. Alexander noticed that behind the soldier, a shadowy figure dropped from the trees quietly and proceeded toward the unsuspecting soldier. The soldier turned around to see the figure, but was unable to react as it swiped its arm at him. He fell to the ground with his throat slashed, gargling in his own blood until he lay motionless. The shadow revealed itself as a hooded man whose shroud covered his features.

Alexander stood up from behind the tree with his weapons and shield wielded.

“What kind of idiot are you? Put those toys away! Trying to get the kid killed?” The hooded man cursed as he stomped toward the two. Under the hood, the man’s face was covered by an armored mask, showing only his mouth and green eyes. The armor was styled to imitate a predatory animal of some kind. His torso was covered in an olive green metallic armor that was worn by dirt, scars, and scuffs.

“I’m not trying to kill anyone; they just attacked us!” Alexander explained to their mysterious savior.

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“Don’t take me for a fool, guy! I don’t care how righteous your cause is; you’re not recruiting a child to bring back your lost kingdom!”

“Lost Kingdom? I don’t know what you’re talking about. The boy just took something of mine and I wanted it back.”

Before the hooded man could respond, they were interrupted by the muffled voice from a strange piece of gear off one of the soldiers. It repeated itself over and over, followed by static. The hooded man walked toward the bodies to hear better, then snapped around.

“We have to move, now!” The hooded man urgently directed them down the road in the opposite direction.

“What’s going on, what was that?”

“Radio check, every unit is checked by their command regularly. If they don’t respond ...”

“What happens?”

“They drop artillery until the area is glass.”

“This place is nothing like they said it would be ...”

“Keep your voice down, kid, and move!” the hooded man ordered as the group went off the road into the wilderness.

CHAPTER 2

AMONG SHADOWS

Alexander and his two companions moved throughout the forest for what felt like hours. The absence of sunlight made it almost impossible to tell the time of day. They proceeded with caution with regular stops to check for anything that might be lurking. Finally, they reached a village in a clearing. Huts made from broken stones and rotted wood huddled tightly together.

As they approached the outskirts of the village, the hooded man turned to the boy. “This is yours, yes?”

The boy nodded in agreement.

“Show us your home.”

The boy took the lead and guided the two through the village to a small house where a woman was busy repairing the fence. Upon seeing the boy, she dropped her tools and rushed over in excitement.

“Fifle!” She embraced him tightly. “Good to see you’ve returned. Who are these gentlemen?”

“Dresden, ma’am,” the hooded man introduced himself. “This man here is—”

“Alexander,” he interrupted quickly.

“Alexander? Such a strange name for this area,” the woman observed.

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“Yes, it is, isn’t it?” Dresden mused.

“Where are you from, sir?” she asked Alexander.

“Well, uhm, ma’am. One could say that I’m not from around here,” Alexander replied.

“Yes, I can tell. Your name, dress, and equipment are very odd,” the woman replied skeptically.

Alexander scratched the back of his head and struggled to find the right words.

“He came from the sky, Mommy,” Fifle piped up suddenly, causing everyone to look at Alexander strangely.

“Well... he’s not wrong,” he admitted.

The woman’s face wrinkled with confusion at the admission and began to guide her son into the house. “We should be getting back inside, looks like it could rain. You gentlemen have a good day.”

Dresden gave a salutation to the woman before she closed the door and then turned his focus on Alexander.

“Sky, ay? We should probably get a drink, son,” Dresden suggested.

As they passed through the village, Alexander took notice of the conditions. The uneven and unfinished cobblestone streets were filled with mud, littered with scraps and possessed a rotten smell. The people looked destitute as they hobbled along aimlessly to their destinations. Market stands were noticeably empty of the commodities they advertised.

An old woman sitting on the curb stared at Alexander as he walked by. He noticed her emerald-colored eyes, how tired they were against the backdrop of a face wrinkled by the expressions of sadness and hardship she must have endured. He shook his head, feeling a hint of guilt for looking at the destitute condition of these people. It

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did not help that Alexander stood out among the crowd due to his clothes, which were certainly not clean, but they were more complete than anyone else's. His thick black hair was free of gray. A young, unwrinkled, albeit dirty face with piercing blue eyes was a stark departure from the features of these people. His presence was like a lone candle in a sea of darkness.

A bell tower stood prominently at the town square that had a remarkable scale and artistic style that caught Alexander's eye. He marveled at how the colors that decorated the smooth stone, though faded, made the building shine with prominence. It was almost majestic, and such a stark contrast to the decrepit and depressive state of the rest of the settlement.

Crowds of people gathered around an individual who spoke loudly and boisterously from a cart that elevated him above the crowd. "To what end will these sides go to in order to claim what they call victory in this duel of fates?" the man asked the growing crowd. "Ten years, ten long years since the Long Night descended upon us. In this everlasting night we learned the ultimate truth of where true darkness lies, in the hearts of men. And eight years! Eight years since those accursed farmers discovered those dreadful stones beneath our soil. The miracle of these stones to give us food from the ground...such promise. What was meant to be the foundation of our salvation turned this land into a hellish landscape of blood and ash. As Acropoli and Oren slaughter each other here and tear us apart to save themselves, we must find another place to find our solace."

"Here we go," Dresden muttered.

"As the Goddesses have left us, it is time to look to our past and place our faith in the divine builders, those who transcended reality to

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become Gods themselves. We at the Harvest Dawn offer you a place to live, safety for your families, food for your stomachs.”

Dresden pulled Alexander along. “Come on. I can only listen to so much of this.”

“What did he mean by miracle rocks? Oren? Acropoli?”

“I’ll explain later.”

Dresden gently pushed away a convert who approached, wanting to spread their beliefs, and gestured for Alexander not to lag behind. In the center of the square stood a blue banner that bore an image of a marble column, devoid of any other symbols or text. It was the cleanest object in the entire settlement.

The two arrived at a local tavern called The Armory. The building itself was the remaining piece of a larger structure, modified into a building all its own. Remains of what it used to be a part of were still visible, but were reduced to the foundations that now served as the home for simple tents that housed families of all different sizes. Men and women stumbled out of the tavern in a drunken stupor, the stench of alcohol overwhelming the foul odor that was causing Alexander to gag. In these inebriated villagers, Alexander finally saw a smile.

They entered the tavern and proceeded down a staircase to the lower level which housed a bar. A few patrons sat silently with their drinks. The area was lit by damaged chandeliers, with many of the candles burnt out or missing. They took a seat at the bar; Dresden made a sign for two to the bartender.

“Such a strange name to call a tavern, the Armory, why you think they call it that?” Alexander asked as they received their drinks.

“Because it used to be one. Part of the Maw,” Dresden said.

“The Maw Palace? This is the palace of the Kingdom of Termina?”

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Dresden took a drink. “It’s what’s left of the palace... That was destroyed years ago, same with the kingdom.”

“Unbelievable,” Alexander gasped.

The Kingdom of Termina had a history that many considered legendary due to its resilience. It was commonly known that no matter what disaster ravaged the world, Termina would always survive or, sometimes even come out stronger. Its destruction was a revelation that deeply unsettled Alexander; this was the first place he recognized in a world that caused him such confusion. The fact that this place was now gone only further unnerved the confidence he had of his personal knowledge. In Alexander’s mind, there were still a number of different kingdoms peppering the landscape, Termina being one of the more prominent ones. One of the more striking surprises was the presence of such strange weapons that were a horrifying and confusing shock. Although blessed with a number of runes and natural mystical power, he felt his weapons were beyond inadequate for this strange new world.

“So,” Dresden started. “You’re no rebel. I don’t take you for a merchant. Exotic armor, gear that can stop bullets without leaving a scratch. A child’s mind is a very imaginative one, but I feel oddly confident in suggesting that you’re a Warden.”

“The one thing I never thought over before I came down here was how I was going to introduce myself. Didn’t really have much time before the jump.”

“So, you are claiming to be a Warden, the protectors of old, and all the rest of that mythical stuff?”

“Don’t believe me?”

“Does it really matter if you are? From what I know of the old myths, the Wardens left for some reason. Forced us to build new, more

deadly weapons to defend ourselves against the monsters and other races that the Wardens used to protect us from,” Dresden said.

“Seems like one of those metal chariots could take on a few orcs without much trouble,” Alexander suggested.

Dresden smirked a little, “More than just a few. The whole damn race was wiped out by them, among many others. Thanks to our illustrious leaders and their Doctrine of Destiny. Cheers.” Dresden sarcastically raised his glass to honor the Doctrine’s authors.

“Sounds like some kind of war declaration,” Alexander said, frowning into his drink. He ran an index finger around the rim of the glass as if subconsciously looking for something.

“You’re on the right path there. It was more like an extermination order. But it brought all the kingdoms together for one of the first times ever. They banded together to make the world safe for humans once and for all. This Doctrine had societies welcome the skill of dwarves, the science of mages, and the intelligence of elves to build new types of weapons and...well a whole new way of life honestly. Guilds were replaced with factories that produced things on a scale never before seen, weapons, metal, bombs, motors, gears, you name it!” Dresden shook his head as he glanced at Alexander. “But I’m sure half the words I just said aren’t anything that you would recognize or understand. Of course, I’m guessing this, because you appear as though you don’t know shit about this place.”

“There are a few gaps in my knowledge, that is accurate,” Alexander admitted. “I take it that the Doctrine went well?”

“Oh yeah, real well, that’s for sure. Took a few years, but the world was made safe for humans. But, you know what the funny thing is? It turns out that the biggest threat to humans was...well our fellow

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humans. Not long after we won, everyone just started fighting each other after the sky went dark and folks started losing their minds. Going back to before I went on a rant, what about this jump you mentioned?”

“Well,” Alexander started, “It’ll sound a little strange, but, the only way to get down here from Skyhold is to be protected by the Goddess’ Veil, I guess it would be a spell to you, and then just fall here and hope that the spell doesn’t wear off before you hit the ground.”

“Huh,” Dresden shrugged. “An amusing tale. Friendly advice, though keep that stuff about spells and magic to yourself.”

“Why’s that?”

“Just trust me,” Dresden answered. “After the sky darkened, folks weren’t particularly friendly to magic.”

“I’ve answered a few of your questions, how about answering a few of mine?” Dresden nodded and took a few swallows of his drink. “Acropoli and that other one...what was it?”

“Oren.”

“That one. Of all the histories I read before coming here, I don’t recall those two places being mentioned. And they’re warring with each other over what I can assume to be those rocks?”

“Yeah that’s about it. Acropoli and Oren are considered the two big players on this part of the continent. Both of ‘em grew rich in their own ways. Oren through trade, Acropoli through industry. When, what the prophets call, the Long Night arrived, obviously famine started to become an issue. But, my guess is you wanna know about the rocks. A bunch of farmers here in Termina and the surrounding municipalities somehow were still able to grow their crops with only water and seeds. Folks finally found that a bunch of rocks under the soil that look like marble were the cause.”

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“Life giving rocks,” Alexander commented.

“You know of these?”

“No, haven’t ever come across anything like that in my studies. Although geology wasn’t a subject I went into in any depth. History is more my interest,” Alexander explained, “Still though, a rock that has that kind of power, must be of almost pure essence. Rather remarkable.”

“Remarkable is one way to put it,” Dresden said, “but deadly is more accurate term. Rocks of Death is a better name for them, but they’re officially known as Gaea Stones. Other places like Oren and Acropoli were able to find their own sources, but they had more mouths to feed, and the stones are rather rare. Places caught in the middle of their frantic search became warzones like ole Termina, poor bastards were torn to shreds. Whole cities were even destroyed by the slightest rumor that they had deposits of Gaea under them.”

“More right than you know my astute traveler,” a man commented as he sat down next to Alexander. “I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation about current events.”

“Awfully rude to be eavesdropping,” Dresden growled, “but I also don’t recall inviting you to sit down.” Dresden glowered at the man as he made himself comfortable. The man looked like he belonged in academia. Although he was still dirty from his travels, his clothes were much finer than any of the other patrons in the tavern. He removed his feathered cap, combed his fingers through his short black hair, and adjusted his glasses up from the end of his nose. Alexander took particular note of those glasses since he had never seen such things before, only read that some humans needed them to help with imperfect vision.

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“It’s alright,” Alexander turned to the man. “You a merchant of some kind?”

“Heavens no,” the man laughed, “but not for my parent’s lack of trying. No, no, Doctor Melvin Dixon, adjunct professor of political science at the esteemed University of Soma of the Serene Republic of Oren. At your service, gentlemen.”

“Rather impressive line of work, academics is always held in high esteem where I come from.”

“And where, my friend, are you from?” Dixon asked with genuine curiosity. Alexander hesitated, so Dresden responded, “From the East, Amber States”

“Ah, the Amber States. Haven’t heard much from over there lately. Well, other than rumors, is it true that-”

“We’d rather not talk about it,” Dresden interrupted.

“Ah, yes, well, I see, fair enough then.”

“Awful dangerous for an academic to be wandering around a warzone. It’s common knowledge that this area is pretty fucking bad,” Dresden commented.

“Yeah, and I thought I seemed out of place,” Alexander added. “What brings you here?”

“Ah, for knowledge of course. This war is perhaps one of the most important debates raging in our government now. Alas, other than the war reports from the military and refugees, there really isn’t any actual news coming from here. I aim to change that with some firsthand accounts. I also want to test some of my theories on intrastate conflict on why states fight.”

“I think there’s a pretty self-explanatory reason for it, friend,” Dresden chided.

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“Yes, yes, the Gaea Rocks and famine. But it’s been eight years and we have, or at least Oren has, enough to feed a great majority of our people. So why does it all continue? That’s what I want to answer,” Dixon explained to Dresden who only shook his head at the notion.

“So, in your travels, what can you say about the state of this war? I’m not fully familiar with it or the area in general,” Alexander inquired.

“Always a pleasure to teach to a person seeking knowledge.” Dixon pulled out a small piece of paper and a pen and began to draw a crude map. “This is Varia, of sorts, to the East past the Vola River is, you know, the Amber States and the Twilight Ocean to the West and South. Furthest to the South, on the coast, is Acropoli and their client states. North, past the Nuvian Isthmus is where you’ll find Oren and her allies nestled in their own little world of hegemony. We are here, in the middle where Termina is, or was. East of Termina near the Vola is where most of the major fighting is located, but it has died down in recent months. However, the void of government has only proliferated rebel groups, outlaws, armed cults.” Dixon glanced at his pocket watch and nodded. “It’s about time that I take my leave.”

“Late for something?” Dresden asked, suspiciously.

“No not really.” Dixon remarked, “I just have a specific amount of time that I like to spend in one place. Not very long, usually, one way to stay a step ahead of the chaos.” He gave a small salute before he exited the tavern as quickly as he appeared.

While Dresden consumed his drink as if it were water, Alexander struggled with his as it had a sour smell and an aftertaste that burned all the way down. There was a distinct taste of mushrooms, a food he noticed was a common sight on almost every plate in the tavern.

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Dresden could tell by the look on Alexander's face and the way he leaned forward a bit that he wanted to ask a question.

"Go ahead, ask," Dresden sighed.

"The mask, you ever take it off? I see that it's armored so it looks like its protecting you, but it's just so odd," Alexander burst out.

"It's more for protection, I had some injuries a while back that needed some added cover."

"What kind of job would cause such injuries?" Dresden stared silently at his drink for a moment before responding, "Security."

The other patrons of the establishment sat in their own corner, content with their drinks and their portions of mushrooms that they protected from anyone who passed by. Nefarious-looking individuals patrolled about in a search of those who were willing to offer access to extra food, water, or any type of supplies in exchange for various, but broadly defined, work.

Dresden wasted no time in turning one away. A visible blade with a serious look was enough to scare anyone away.

"Now," Dresden looked at Alexander, "the boy said you fell from the sky, and there was an unusually large explosion before you appeared. For all I know, you could have fallen from the sky and are a Warden, or you crawled out from under a rock... It doesn't matter. It's clear that you know nothing about this world."

"My expectations for this world were... different. Last I read, you were all still throwing around swords, spears, catapults and other weaponry. I'm not sure what those soldiers were using or whatever that heinous metal chariot was."

"Soldiers were carrying guns, rifles to be more exact, that can deal a good amount of damage from a safe distance. And that chariot was a

tank, meant to launch a bomb at an enemy from a little further away... and run over people.” Dresden’s explanation was cold, as if he saw the question as elementary. “Of course, swords and other older weapons still have a use. Outside the army, it’s hard to find a rifle...legitimately. So, there are a number of folks using the stuff that you’d be used to I suppose.”

“Skyhold has nothing close to these kinds of things. Guess our information about this place is quite out of date.”

“Just a little,” Dresden grimaced. “Just a little. You’re one lost and uninformed newcomer to these parts. Which begs the ultimate question,” Dresden replied. “Why have you come down from on high?”

“I come... I came to look for someone.”

“Someone? A fellow God?”

“We’re not Gods... far from it. But, yes, a person I know.”

“Well, riddle me this, son. How do you plan to find this missing friend of yours?”

“With this.” Alexander pulled out his compass.

“I’ve seen compasses before; they usually need a map. Well, unless of course you come from a magic land where maps might not be necessary?” Dresden commented.

“Not this one. It’s special.”

“Of course it is,” Dresden quipped.

“It has the ability to point whoever holds it in the direction of their destiny,” Alexander explained.

Alexander handed the compass to Dresden for examination. The compass went wild in all directions initially before it pointed at Alexander. Dresden moved his arm around, finding to his bewilderment that the compass corrected itself to always point at Alexander. His

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mind tried to analyze how a compass would focus on a person, it may be a busted compass held by a madman, or maybe Alexander's armor was made of a metal that attracted the needle, or maybe it was magic and his destiny lay with this strange person he just met.

"Where does it tell you to go? If it's showing multiple paths, it means your mind is clouded. Let your mind relax and exhale, that should fix it. Or at least that's what I was told," Alexander said, trying to glance at the compass.

"Nowhere in particular," Dresden said as he gave back the compass. "Guess my destiny is something even the Gods don't know."

"Well, in any case, this compass will get me to the destination. But it doesn't mean it will guarantee success, by any means."

"Well, it sounds like an interesting problem. I also have a developing problem," Dresden admitted. "You."

"Me? What did I—"

"The sound of you *landing* here was louder than anything I ever heard. Probably what triggered that patrol to roam around where they found you, and now they are dead. Luckily, I still had some armor piercer bombs left for that tank. But, it's not hard to believe that more soldiers are going to be searching for their killer, also didn't help that I decided to blow up the damn tank. Then again, they were asking for it for having an exposed fuel tank on the side. Worse, the kingdom is in the middle of full-blown civil war."

"Why is that worse?"

"Everyone is considered suspicious."

"Wh—" They were interrupted by the sound of yelling outside.

CHAPTER 3

WATCH THE FIRE BURN

Terror struck the people as they rushed through the streets in a hapless craze. Dresden and Alexander hurried out of the bar to the sound of screams and the grinding of metal in the distance. The bell tower rang at a furious pace, signaling a warning. The grinding grew louder and louder, overtaking the screams of the terrified masses. Alexander drew his sword and shield while Dresden crouched to the ground to observe the pebbles that shook with the ever-growing noise. Then, the noise stopped. The people stopped. The pebbles stopped. Dresden stood back up.

“What’s happening?” Alexander asked.

“Run, as fast as you can,” Dresden whispered. “Go!”

A whistle pierced the silence, and then an artillery round struck a nearby building. The two men sprinted down the street as the people ran around in a panic. Explosions struck the area in successive order. As they rounded a corner, an explosion blew out a wall and knocked Alexander to the ground. His shield deflected the larger debris, but the shock deafened him.

Dresden rushed over, pulled Alexander up, and yelled directions in his ringing ears. As Dresden dragged him along, he saw fires, falling debris, and people tripping over the dead who littered the ground.

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Another shockwave knocked them down. Alexander turned over and found himself staring into the lifeless eyes of the old woman he saw earlier. In that instant, his hearing returned and all the horrors of what he saw around him were now audible.

Dresden pulled him up again and rushed him forward through town. They ran to the town square where people scattered in a frenzy. Explosions continued to harass the surrounding area as each detonation pushed and funneled the crowds to different paths of escape. An incoming artillery round struck the center of the bell tower, severed the structure, and sent the tower crashing down. The collapse kicked up a cloud of dust that made it impossible to see.

In the chaos, Alexander found himself alone with the sounds of war and cries all around. Once pristine and clean, he was now caked in the dust that lingered in the air. He ran around calling out, trying to find Dresden, but no matter how loud he yelled, his calls disappeared into the debris-filled air. To his shock, Alexander collided with Fifle. Before he could say anything, Fifle ran off and disappeared in the dense cloud. Shadows of people passed by like ghosts, which further disoriented Alexander. Out of the shroud of the debris, Dresden appeared and grabbed Alexander.

“Come on!” he shouted. “Move!”

“To where?”

“Anywhere but here!” Dresden yelled as he quickly scanned the area, “We’ve got to get out of town.”

The two rushed out of the village using their speed rather than sticking to cover, a strategy that doomed many of the inhabitants during the bombardment. As they were about to enter the forest on the outskirts of town, Alexander stopped when the explosions ceased. Dresden ran back to where he was standing.

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“What are you doing? Come on!”

“But, the attack stopped.” Alexander pointed to the village.

“You haven’t seen anything yet, now come on!” Dresden yelled, running into the forest.

When they reached the ridge, Dresden and Alexander had a bird’s eye view of the village. Both stayed low to avoid silhouetting themselves. Dresden pulled out a rifle scope to see more clearly. He watched for a few minutes before putting down the scope.

“What’s happening down there?” Alexander questioned.

“Well, the soldiers have entered the town and it’s... routine,” Dresden concluded.

“Routine? What is that supposed to mean?”

Dresden handed the scope to Alexander to have a look for himself. Armed men moved throughout the streets. They guided people to the center of the village, where there were more soldiers and more of those armored machines. Alexander noticed a leader among the soldiers who appeared to berate the people as they flowed in. The man was tall, bald, with a white beard. A scar sliced across his left cheek. Surrounded by a team of soldiers, the leader examined the crowd of people and read out a proclamation from a document he pulled out. The distance made his voice hard to hear, but some of the chilling words carried to Alexander.

“Murder of Acropoli soldiers... capital offense... punishable by death,” the leader announced to the crowd.

Alexander realized the gravity of the situation and turned to Dresden. “We have to do something!”

“There’s nothing we can do.”

“You killed those men.”

Kevin Tomaszewski

“Yeah, that was a couple of distracted soldiers,” Dresden reminded. “There’s practically a company down there.”

“There has to be something.”

“You can’t put out every fire, kid. Every now and then all you can do is watch the fire burn.”

Frustrated, Alexander continued to watch the scene that unfolded back in town. The leader had finished his speech and stood for a moment as if to look for anyone who would admit to his or her crimes. He glanced at his watch for a few seconds and then instructed the soldiers to pull five people from the crowd, line them up, and force them to their knees.

“What in the world?” Alexander muttered as he noticed a familiar face among the chosen. The boy. Tears rolled down the boy’s face as he looked around aimlessly. He appeared to look right at Alexander through the scope as a metal weapon was placed behind his head. In the blink of an eye, his face exploded as the sound of a crack cut through the air.

Alexander jumped, “No!” he yelled.

Dresden threw him to the ground. “Quiet yourself!”

Alexander tried to collect himself as the cracks continued in successive order to five.

“Why are they doing this?” Alexander frantically questioned, his voice cracking in shock.

Six.

“Who does this?” He pleaded for answers.

Seven ...