

POPPIES

by ellerean

Haar didn't often think of the view. The mountainous landscape had become common, just another route via air, his wyvern knowing the drop-off spots better than he did. So it was seldom that he took the chance to look at it. It *was* a nice view, he had to admit, the highest mountains permanently capped with snow. The scattered clouds were starting to part, offering a glimpse of blue sky beyond. He sighed, and steered the wyvern south. He had to pay attention today; the old beast didn't know *this* destination as well as the rest.

The axe was heavier than he was used to, but its heft felt natural in his hands. The other recruits had retired for the evening, doing whatever young men do after the evening meal, so the training grounds were blissfully empty. It offered more than enough space to get a real feel of the axe, seeing how high he could lift it over his head, gauging how quickly and heavily it could fall.

"Easy, solider."

Perhaps, he wasn't as alone as he originally believed.

Captain Shiharam was just visible in the growing dark, slowly approaching as Haar lowered the weapon. He, too, still wore his armor, though Haar couldn't remember seeing him in anything else. Haar straightened his shoulders. "Captain."

"At ease." Captain Shiharam studied the weapon, one that Haar could see now was beyond his skill level—the gleaming silver blade, the handle he pretended didn't slip in uncalled hands. "You

appear to be eager,” the captain said. “You’re the only one who trains at this hour. Why are you never punctual for morning drills?”

Haar swallowed. “I— I have trouble waking up, sir.”

He thought Shibaram smiled. “An honest answer.” The captain lifted the axe with ease, a mere toy in his hands. “That should be our first training, should it not?”

The wyvern didn’t want to land. Haar gently pulled the reins, but they circled the mountain instead. Whether it didn’t recognize the area or didn’t want to go, Haar wasn’t sure. “Stubborn beast,” he muttered, stroking its neck, a feeble attempt to soothe its anxiety.

When they finally settled down, and Haar dismounted, he felt what the wyvern had felt—he didn’t like the air here; it had a faint metallic tinge, the memory of old battle. There was no reason why the scent of blood would linger after all this time. It taunted him, like the land didn’t like him, either. “The feeling is mutual,” he said to no one, and the wyvern snorted in response.

“Don’t move.”

He hadn’t tried, and it didn’t feel like he could. Haar felt exceptionally sluggish, heavy with a sleep he couldn’t remember. He definitely didn’t remember lying on a bed, nor did he comprehend the intense pressure behind his eyes.

He gathered his surroundings on sound and smell alone—bootsteps on packed earth, a hint of peppermint, and then a hand crowning his skull. Based on the voice, he knew it belonged to Shiharam.

“Where am I?” His throat was sand, the words dry.

“My quarters. You’ve sustained extensive injuries.”

“Injuries?” Haar tried to sit up, but the hand on his head pushed him back down. “I don’t remem—”

The javelin soaring across the sky, too fast to dodge, reins wound around his wrist to prevent tumbling off.

“It seems you do.” Shiharam’s voice was gentle, and he didn’t like it.

The peppermint grew stronger, its scent stinging his eyes. Per command, he didn’t move, but made an effort to finally open his eyes.

Eye—his vision was partially blocked, only the left side making logical sense. Shiharam sat at the bedside, his daughter turned away at a small table, presumably doing something with the increasingly potent peppermint. Her red ponytail bobbed as she worked, the subject of her concentration hidden from his view.

When he attempted to move again, Shiharam didn’t scold him. Haar’s fingertips fluttered across his forehead, tracing the line of bandages down the side of his face. He tried to blink, but the bandages were wound so tight he couldn’t move the right side of his face.

He closed his good eye. He didn’t want to consider anything. He just wanted to rest.

The grave hadn't been maintained. Haar knelt on the hard ground, pulling weeds with unnecessary force. Though they'd grown unruly around the small marker, the weeds had since died as well, the roots easily sliding out from the packed earth.

They hadn't had time for a real gravestone. The company worked with what they had, a spare piece of scrap metal, large enough to find later and maybe replace with something nicer. He tossed handfuls of weeds as far as he could, dry roots scattering dust in their wake. He wiped the marker with the side of his hand, as if there was anything etched on its surface to see. He sat back, hands on his knees, suddenly embarrassed by the sorry excuse for a memorial.

"You probably think it's stupid I'm here, anyway," Haar said. "But I had to."

"You're fully aware of what this means?"

Commander Shiharam had been pacing for so long, a path was worn in the middle of the tent. Haar alternated between watching and closing his eye; if the commander noticed his occasional catnaps, he didn't comment.

"It means we'd be deserters," Haar replied. "But I don't care if we never see Begnion or the Senate again."

Shiharam stopped so suddenly, it made Haar sit up at attention. "Do not say that so loud," he hissed. "We are still on Begnion soil, and there are many here who would turn us in as traitors."

"We're already traitors." Haar settled back into his chair, but did lower his voice when he spoke again. "I'm not loyal to Begnion. I never cared a whit for the Senate." He paused, waiting for the reprimand, but none came. "I'm loyal to you, Commander."

Shiharam ran a hand through his thinning hair; Haar hadn't noticed before how quickly he'd aged. He was relieved when Shiharam finally stopped pacing, the air and dust of the tent suddenly still as the commander sat beside him.

"As independent agents," he said, "things will be different. I would like you as my Second-in-Command."

Haar's eyebrows raised. "Me? Why?"

"When we start to move, some may still be loyal to the Senate. I need someone by my side I can trust." Shiharam paused. He didn't look at Haar directly, staring instead over his shoulder. He folded his hands together, but Haar could see the slight nervous wringing when he continued. "And if anything happens to me, then Jill—"

"Consider it done."

People still lived in Talrega. Perhaps they didn't make it up here on the mountainside, or superstition told them not to trek over old battlegrounds. It meant Shiharam slept here alone, but maybe he wouldn't mind.

"I thought I'd find you here."

Haar turned, though he knew the voice as well as his old commander's. Jill knelt beside him, holding a bundle of poppies in both hands. Haar had been so focused on the weeds that he hadn't thought to replace them with something else, something *alive*. He watched Jill lean forward, delicately arranging them on the marker so their red faces turned toward the sky. She was pretty good at those things, he thought. He didn't know how often she visited, or if she had at all, but the poppies were a nice touch. She sat back, dusting unseen dirt off her hands.

“Five years,” Haar said. “It doesn’t feel like that long.”

Jill didn’t reply, but he knew she was thinking. The way she lowered her eyes; the way she twisted her hands together, the same way her father had, the same callouses in the same spots on her palms. When she untwined them to place a hand over his, he didn’t refuse.

The poppies looked nice, the red a stark contrast against the metal marker. Haar thought maybe this would be the year to get him a proper gravestone. When he turned to Jill, his thoughts were interrupted by the shining tears on her cheeks. He froze. He hadn’t known her to be a quiet crier, though war forced many changes on them all. She blinked slowly, staring straight ahead, the steady stream of tears the only evidence she felt anything at all. Haar sighed, slid his hand out from beneath hers, and wrapped an arm around her shoulders.