

Addictus

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Sunrise. It was often a symbol of hope, a reward for making it through the dark of the night to see another day. As the rays of the morning sun splintered through the barren branches it only served to illuminate the countless corpses lying in the snow, turning the white powder crimson beneath them.

“RETREAT!”

The Knights of Ashfeld attempted to escape the Vikings’ ferocity, yet several more men and women were cut down by the axes of their foes, leaving them to join their brethren among the dead below. Cries of pain and anger pierced the dawn sky, the clashing of steel heard as the defenders made a full retreat.

“Archers! Release!” The shouted order came from the same individual as before, the heavily plated Warden desperately attempting to keep her soldiers alive as more and more failed to escape the clutches of the raiders. Upon the command a rushing noise like wind blew over the battlefield and a swathe of arrows streamed over the heads of the Knights, piercing the Viking lines with deadly force.

“Commander!” Rattling chains and plated armor accompanied the yell; the Warden’s second, Roderic, had caught up with her amidst the retreat. “Regal hasn’t come, we’re on our own out here.”

Was it worth it?

“Regardless of their aid we regroup at the Underlands,” she ordered in return, glancing behind them as they ran. Fortunately the volley had done its job, creating a gap between the two opposing forces and granting the Knights the breathing room they needed to fully make their escape. As the sun fully crested the horizon the Vikings roared their victory, watching the steel clad cowards flee into the forest.

If you keep going like this there’s no going back.

They continued to retreat, slowed by their wounded that left blood among the brush and roots, thorns snagging on tabards as if to pull them back to the fight. Still they pushed on, finally making it to the sanctuary of the fortress. In the wake of the demoralizing loss, the tall, stone walls of Riversun Fortress were hope for some, though it would soon become a tomb for others as the medics desperately tried in vain to save their comrades.

Can you even hear me?

The Warden's eyes flickered up to meet Roderic's perplexed gaze, clearly waiting for an answer from her.

"What was that?" She asked wearily, the Conqueror's amusement melting into concern.

"I said patrols have been sent, the Vikings haven't the gall to follow us this far." He paused, narrowing his eyes at the crimson upon her armor. "Are you sure all that is only theirs?"

"I'm fine," she retorted tartly. "Keep patrols on rotation, we all need rest."

"Bit hypocritical," Roderic pointed out, reaching up to remove his bucket helmet to reveal his closely shaved head and thick beard. With only the Commander and her second in the room, the atmosphere shifted to a more casual setting. "I can tell when something's on your mind, Bennet. What is it?"

Please just come home... we miss you.

Bennet pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to will away the piercing thoughts that kept occupying her mind.

"Up until now we were unstoppable," the Commander began. "Battle after battle we won, nobody could defeat us, but it seems that the past few days have changed everything. It's all been steadily going downhill until we suffered today's losses." She paused, bowing her head a moment. "Two hundred, Roderic. That's nearly a third of our people."

"It happens, Bennet," Roderic replied. "You can't control whether our reinforcements arrive or not. Regal didn't show, they might not have even received our message." The Warden shook her head, standing up straight from the table and turning away from him, staring hard at the far wall without truly seeing it.

As Commander she should have foreseen these things. She should have called the retreat sooner, should have ensured their allies would be at their side, should have not left their flank so open to attack...

You're running out of time, it's now or never.

"Stop!" Bennet suddenly snapped, spinning around to glare at her second, but Roderic looked at her entirely in bewilderment.

"...Stop what?"

We're not leaving you.

“Roderic... I need time to clear my head.” The Conqueror blinked in shock at the abrupt dismissal.

“Bennet...”

If she doesn't disconnect soon it's over.

“Leave.” Even Roderic would not disobey such a direct order. Giving a small nod he turned to exit the Commander's quarters, leaving the Warden alone with her increasingly disturbing thoughts.

Why can't you just shut it down?!

Bennet ripped off her helmet and threw it to the side, the clatter echoing around the stone walls as she clung to her head. Where were these voices coming from? Did this loss cause her to go insane? Feeling a tug she looked up towards the ceiling, vertigo clutching her as it appeared to be opening up, a flickering of bright, white lines appearing around her. Was she dying?

JESSIE!

No! In the legion's darkest moment her men needed her, needed a Commander that could bring them through all of this. Two hundred lives had stood fast in the face of death, for them she refused to let this end.

She's not leaving... I'm so sorry.

Nearly as soon as it had started the light disappeared, leaving Bennet to the dark of her command room once more. Wildly looking around she waited for the voices to return but finally all was silent, only her own private thoughts of fright and bewilderment filling her head. Letting out a long sigh of relief the Warden tried to calm herself, knowing the last thing her soldiers needed was to see her scared of what was to come. Bracing herself to meet face to face with the wounded she retrieved her discarded helmet and left her room, intent on finding Roderic first to ease the concerns of her second.