

Rake’s Drift

Prologue

Rake gazed down the valley, his eye line picked out peaks at random. So many unclimbed, at least by humans; but why would the others want to, he wondered. Clouds scudded across the sky, and with the temperature falling he began the slow descent back to camp. Still no further ahead, yet no sign of the Teneroi; Elaina had been true to her word.

He was still way above the tree line, careful steps taken to pick his way through the scree field, Rake scanned the makeshift fortification. Defensively set, it looked all too easy to take apart from his vantage point. Exhausted soldiers at watch, fighting fatigue; he shook his head and fixed the smile to his face with encouraging words shared with those he passed.

Tobin made his way across to him, gnawing on a piece of meat.

‘When do we leave? The people are as rested as can be, yet restless, we must keep moving.’

The King was barely recognizable from the proud, arrogant lad who had inherited his duty just over six months ago. The easiest job in the kingdom people had joked, a silver spoon and a lifetime of excess were guaranteed. The Teneroi had seen to change that and brought out the man – impetuous yet a leader.

Yes, he agreed with Tobin’s words, we must move on, but to where? Water was a three hour round trip to the west, and firewood and prey two hours to the east. Prey, was that what the Teneroi saw them as?

He shook his head, greasy curls flicked across his eyes, Rake studied his King.

Who was the leader here? Tobin had become increasingly reliant on Rake’s judgment, a fact that both men hated.

How many groups of men, women and children were left he wondered. They were learning too late how to oppose those who killed from afar. What had Arafan, Tobin’s father, discussed with the Teneroi when they first arrived?

A headless corpse held little answers.

Rake looked past Tobin to the children, ragged and dusty, little bodies still yet to echo their parents’ worn faces, there had to be a way.

‘Tomorrow we move.’ Rake addressed his King. ‘Folklore holds of a vast interconnected cave system in the next mountain range. There the children will be safe.’ He hoped his words carried sincerity; to him it was just prolonging the inevitable.

Tobin set his jaw and seemed to look through Rake, was this what he imagined his kingdom would become? A peaceful people with profitable trading links through their merchant partners, borders respected by all parties. A year of extermination had put ten years onto Tobin. How had it come to this? Tobin saw the young materialistic flutes man before him once again.

Sarafar counselled him to trust Rake, with his kingdom’s brigades gone and villages razed only the life in the children’s eyes lifted him, they would not face the Teneroi yet.

Again he asked himself the question, what did the Teneroi want? They had the land; they had effortlessly brushed aside the best the Pantogan had to offer.

Why this, why crush his people into the dirt? Was he to finish his reign in a cave? A tiny voice welcomed and warmed to the only logical conclusion, the promise of rest and a final end to this charade – he hated himself for it. He pinched nails into his palm, bringing clarity, drawing blood – no.

Rake relaxed as he sensed a familiar realization in Tobin, what to do when there are no choices, no options.

Tobin placed a hand on Rake’s shoulder.

‘Tomorrow we make our last stand in the cave system, we will buy our children a little time yet.’

The King looked out at his remaining people, the Queen’s Elite, shed of plate armour yet still carrying arrows and swords. The women restrung bows, sharpening arrows, talking of range and rate of fire. The men with the traditional long sword, skills acquired over generations yet until recently not tested in any meaningful combat for the last fifty years. Peace had not softened them yet how do you hit an

enemy seemingly always out of reach, who transformed the very terrain you fought upon?

Rake stretched out on mossy covered rock, his feet aching, and took a piece of offered meat.

‘We move?’ Tenkini asked. Rake could still see the elegant courtesan behind the warrior that stood proudly before him. A bow across her shoulders and a pod of arrows strapped to each leg. The shapely figure replaced by one toned and scarred through constant battle and flight.

Rake simply nodded and reached down to release his flute, the simple notes passed around the camp. People paused in their activity to smile, frowns momentarily smoothed away; the children danced over, swirling and laughing, eyes alight pierced though dirty faces they pulled the adults around Rake.

Tension evaporated from across the camp, radiating into the surrounding ranges, the scudding clouds taken with them to leave behind a slowly setting sun pouring fire onto the mountainous backdrop.

As Rake played he looked to the skies, the gnawing realization dawned that he had done what he could, bringing a little escapism from this drawn out extermination. One of the girls had broken away from the children and was stood tip to toe with Garvin, Tobin’s mindguard. The sight of the hulk that was Garvin visibly shrinking from this youngling a third of his size took more and more attention.

‘The necklace is mine.’ The girl demanded in a child’s singsong voice, pointing at Tobin. Garvin looked sideways towards Tobin with a grave scowl, he would not meet the girl’s stare.

‘Garvin?’ Tobin exclaimed, never having seen his protector act in this way.

The aged mindguard looked from the King to the young girl. ‘I do not know how, but she knows.’

All remnants of thoughts of the Teneroi vanished as the Pantogan began to drift around their King. The girl slowly turned to face Rake.

‘Grandson of Tawgan Drift.’ She smiled. ‘I see the essence of the flute has passed down to you, this one will not allow itself to be smashed, it is good to see that it has weathered well.’

Rake felt a bolt of lightning race down his back, how did this girl know his grandfather who had taught him how to channel his flute? How could this be? The girl pushed past Garvin without a word and stood toe to toe with Tobin, her hand outstretched.

‘My necklace.’ She calmly demanded.

Tobin looked at Garvin. ‘And you allow this?’ He murmured, looking into the girl’s eyes. ‘To whom am I talking?’ Tobin exclaimed, his voice getting louder with each syllable offered. The words echoed off the natural amphitheatre the camp sat in. A scarlet red touched the top of the surrounding mountains, the last light of the day.

‘I am Anya, daughter of Terrin, and that necklace belongs to me.’ The words spoken with the calm assurance of one who knows that they will not be turned away. ‘Before me it belonged to the Elders, I was the first Pantogan to receive it.’ The girl shifted from foot to foot. ‘King Tobin, do not deny my claim.’

Tobin turned to Rake who was sat dumbfounded staring at the girl. He looked sideways to a small tent open on one side; the structure of cloth and interwoven bamboo frame was one of the few patterned in bright colours. The old woman in it simply smiled her assent.

A glance taken to the remnants of his people, Tobin slowly unwrapped the bracelet from his wrist and handed it to the girl Anya. As the bracelet touched the girl’s hand it sagged, stretched through time, to slowly droop and melt, twisting from one side to another as though a skinned snake would placed in salt. A look of confusion ran across her face, childhood dissipated, to be replaced with a resolute grimace.

Unsettled murmurs began amongst the crowd, one of the women racing back from guard duty pushed her way through the mass of people.

‘Anya, what are you doing?’ The mother stepped backwards, gasping. ‘Your eyes? Who has done this? Who? Why?’

Anya looked straight at her mother with little recognition, eyes of a matte black offered a perfunctory scan of her mother’s face, and then past her to the old woman sprinkling drops of water into a mixture of dust and pebbles outside the patterned tent, a glare set to linger taken into the flickering flames pulsing along a length of oak fragmented within the camp fire. ‘Sarafar, the time for the artefacts has returned.’ The old woman sat a little straighter and simply nodded.

Rake could feel a vibration by his leg, subtle changes of pitch resonated with his flesh and bone. Reaching down he took his flute out of the leather pouch and worn velvet bag; a frown creased his features, feeling a musical energy emanating from the wooden musical instrument.

The girl turned to face him, four single words offered in seeming isolation. ‘Now do you understand?’

Knowing not why Rake had the most alien of feelings, one that he had not experienced in the last year. He felt himself beginning to hope.