

A Roar of Smoke



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Wynter stood in the main thoroughfare of the camp and listened to the silence. The road was a humpbacked ribbon of moonlight stretching away to the deserted barricades. Behind her, Alberon's tent slept beneath the wide-eyed moon.

Why was it so quiet? Where were all the subtle noises of a night-time camp? Wynter listened in vain for the discreet tramp and murmur of the sentries, the snores, the sighs, the coughs of sleeping men. There was none of that – just a low creaking, like a heavy sack swinging idly from a pulley rope. She looked up and down the road, but could find no source for the sound.

Alberon's voice drifted from the tent above, his words clear, though softly spoken.

'You are on my side, brother?'

Wynter turned and looked up the hill, waiting for Razi's reply. None came. She knew Razi was standing up there, gazing at Alberon, his face as unreadable as a starless sky. She took a step forward, her intention to climb the hill, but that creaking noise distracted her again, and she glanced back over her shoulder.

For the first time she noticed the scaffolds that had been erected all through the camp. There were at least two for every tent, their criss-crossed timbers stark against the moonwashed brilliance of the sky.

Men hung from them in sets of five, their lifeless bodies swaying in the gentle breeze. There were so many of them. How could they have escaped her attention before now? The thick ropes from which the men were suspended groaned against the wood of the scaffold bars, the source of that heavy creaking sound. Wynter blessed the shadows that hid the details; she had never been able to stomach the bloated spectacle of a hanged man's face.

So this is why the camp is so quiet, she thought. I had best deliver this news to Alberon. I'm sure he'll want to know that his men are dead.

A chill wind blew from nowhere, casting grit and dust into Wynter's face. She flung up her hands to save her eyes, gagging on the stench of gunpowder and rot. The ground vibrated beneath her feet, the familiar warning rhythm of an approaching horse, and a ghost rider broke from the dark of the trees. As he shot through the barricades and up the road towards her, Wynter recognised him as the soldier from the ford, the man that Razi could not save. He was barely clinging to his saddle, his transparent face creased with agony. He was shouting, his mouth opening and closing in silent desperation as he galloped through the camp.

He advanced at tremendous speed. Wynter had barely time to stagger back and he was upon her: horse and rider passing through her in a blast of icy cold. The gale from their passage howled within her, screaming in her ears, snatching the hair back from her forehead and temples, stealing the breath from her lungs. Her eyes were blinded with swirling milky light. The soldier's voice roared in her mind, *He will betray you! He will betray you! My Prince! It is a trap!*

Then he was gone, and Wynter fell to her knees in the dust, her hands clawed, her eyes staring, her heart clogged in her throat.

Razi bellowed NO, and Wynter turned just in time to see him fling himself between Alberon and the horse. Razi threw up his arms, turned

his face away, and the messenger hit him full force.

Rider and horse exploded into cloud and dust, scattering the air with particles of light. Razi was flung into his brother's arms, his coat and his hair beaded in phosphorescence. As Alberon staggered under his brother's weight, Wynter saw his eyes lift to the barricades. His face fell, and Wynter spun once more to face the trees, seeking to find the source of his despair.

More riders were galloping from the forest. Their faces set, their crossbows drawn, they passed through the thick walls of the barricades, their eyes fixed on the Rebel Prince. Wynter recognised the two in front, knew them by the Merron arrows that still pierced their bodies and their blood-blackened horses. They led a charge of glowing nebulous men – victims of God knew what distant battle – all intently following the two ahead.

Wynter ran towards them, screaming NO! NO! They advanced, unheeding, on a hurricane of dust and cold. As one, they raised their crossbows and fired. Instead of the *thwack* of arrows there came a belch of smoke from each bow, a roar as from a series of cannons. Trails of smoke shot outwards, passing over Wynter's head, ruffling her hair. She spun, following the smoke as it arced its deadly trail to the hill above her.

Alberon looked up, his face illuminated by the advancing light. Razi frowned and turned, too late to see. The missiles hit and the brothers were consumed in fire.



A warhound growled in the gloom, and Wynter snapped awake, listening. The dog growled softly again, but there was no urgency to it and no other noise except for the gentle breathing of the tent's sleeping occupants.