

The sound of clanging metal echoed throughout the dungeon like the sound of death strolling through a battlefield. Two massive soldiers in old plate armour walked slowly down the dank, damp, and cold corridor, dragging a man whose face had been disfigured by the torture he had endured. His hands and feet were numb from the restraints that had kept him prisoner for hours, unable to move. They had not been able to make him betray his own, not even by cutting off a couple of fingers from his left hand. The disfigured man would sooner swallow his own tongue than say anything to those bastards, but his pride and loyalty had come at a high cost, leaving him on the brink of death.

A burning sensation gnawed at his chest from within, rising up his throat to his mouth, causing him to spit it out to avoid choking and relieve the pain. Black blood, like tar, dripped from the corner of his mouth. The soldier on the left delivered a kick to his mid-back that would have made anyone scream in despair, but the disfigured man had no strength left to scream. He was so dazed that he could not even recognize where they were taking him until an elf shouted his name.

"Medes! Don't be a fool! Tell them what they want to know, and they won't kill you."

"Mayr?" Medes managed to say before receiving a powerful punch to the temple and falling unconscious to the ground.

The rest of the prisoners, upon hearing the name of the dying man, awoke in a furious uproar, barking like hunting dogs after their prey. In the total darkness, Medes could hear them screaming, insulting, and blaspheming. Some even dared to spit at him through the rusty cell bars. An old man reached his hand through the rusted metal bars in an attempt to grab Medes.

"He's the son of a bitch who murdered our king! Elf-fornicator! Rot in hell with your magical monsters."

This time, it was the one-eyed soldier on the right who acted, grabbing the axe he carried and, in one swift motion, cut off the old man's arm. The dying old man's screams mingled with those of the other prisoners who continued to growl. The soldiers left the old man in that agonizing state, lying on the floor of his tiny cell, clutching what remained of his mutilated arm. They picked up Medes and took him to a small metal door. The one-eyed soldier kicked it open and, together, they shoved Medes inside the cell, closing the door behind them with a spine-chilling creak.

In the dim light, Medes crawled as best as he could to the wall and leaned his back against it. He was exhausted, nervous. His laboured breathing, due to the pain, did little to help calm him. A sharp pain shot through the middle of his chest when he tried to breathe slowly. He was broken, with torn clothes, bruises and swelling, cuts, and blood splattered on his body and clothes. Amidst the pain and fatigue, he noticed a beam of light hitting his feet. In a failed attempt to get up and see through the small window, his legs gave way, and he fell flat on his face. He cursed in every language he knew, which were not few. Sobbing in the dim and cold, he fell asleep.

Startled, he woke up when he heard the metal door opening. With bleary eyes, he could not make out who was entering. As the footsteps drew closer, a guard with a simple helmet that covered half of his face came into view. He whispered something to Medes, but he was still too groggy and disoriented to understand. The guard's hand reached out to him, holding a plate filled with a foul-smelling mush, while he continued to murmur something. Medes stared at the plate. He was not going to eat that.

"Kill me now because I won't accept a crime I didn't commit. And take away that garbage. Give it to the pigs because that's dung."

The guard brought the plate closer, shaking it before placing it next to him, and then he left the way he came. Medes was utterly confused. He waited for the door to close before searching through the pile of mush. Inside, he found a stiletto. It all became clear to him. Medes approached the small door, still lying on the ground and propped against the wall, and began to strike the rusted metal of the door with the plate while hurling insults at the guards and soldiers who might be nearby. It did not take long for him to hear fast and firm footsteps approaching. It sounded like two men, likely the soldiers who had brought him. From the ground, Medes got ready. The door opened, allowing the first soldier to enter, and he stumbled as the plate struck his face. Without hesitation, Medes grabbed the soldier's ankle and pulled him to the ground. The guard's head struck the floor with force, causing his iron helmet to embed into his skull. As he struggled to get up, the one-eyed soldier entered. Thanks to his eye injury, he did not see Medes swiftly plunge the stiletto into his neck with a flick of the wrist. The soldier fell to the ground, bleeding profusely, attempting to call for help but only producing incoherent grunts. Medes thought the danger had passed, and calmness descended. Suddenly, the guard with the half-face helmet reappeared. Medes prepared to repeat the same action, but the guard agilely dodged the stiletto.

"Medes! Stop, damn it," shouted the guard.

Medes, who was about to strike again, stopped. It was Algaba, his lieutenant. Algaba gestured for him to be silent, handed him a seax, and the two of them slipped away. Algaba's plan did not anticipate that three more guards would come after the commotion. They could pose a problem, even though they were less armed than the soldiers were. Suddenly, Medes laughed. Algaba was astonished. After everything that had happened, he still had the strength to laugh in the face of a fight. In unison, they howled, undermining what little morale the guards had left. It was so effective that one of them fled, leaving his comrades to charge headlong into their doom.

Algaba was the first to engage. The guard miscalculated, missed his strike, allowing Algaba to easily dodge with a feint and then smash the guard's head against the stonewall. Algaba finished the job by impaling his brain. The second guard, overconfident, thrust at Medes, and he could not avoid it, being wounded in the shoulder. The guard quickly repositioned for another thrust, but Medes was ready. He anticipated the attack, deflected it with the seax, and proceeded to stab the guard's stomach repeatedly with the stiletto. Medes appeared exhausted and slumped to the ground. Algaba helped him up, and they made their escape.

As they got closer to the exit, the noise of clashing metal and the shouts of soldiers grew louder. It was Medes' troops engaged in a battle in the prison's courtyard against the garrison.

Medes and Algaba made their way through the prison's courtyard, trying to avoid the bodies of the fallen soldiers as they approached their troops. His soldiers welcomed him with cheers, and from their midst emerged Golubeva, his wife, with their two children. Her eyes filled with tears of joy, and she broke into loud sobs, letting herself fall to the ground. The three of them ran to greet Medes, embracing him as if it were their last moment.

"I thought the Dictator would have captured or worse..." Medes said.

"Algaba saved us. As soon as we heard of your arrest, he mobilized the entire legion to get us out of the city. We barely made it," Golubeva replied.

Medes looked at Algaba with a smile and gave him a nod of approval. Algaba placed one of his hands on Medes' shoulder. With Algaba and Tolbi's assistance, they lifted him from the ground.

"Sir, everything is ready for you to leave," Tolbi said. "I will take you with me to the Northern Lands, with my family. They won't dare to search for you there."

"And the Dictator?" Medes inquired.

"He's prepared a great massacre of non-humans, and he's cornered most of them in the Efsún Forest. The people are with him. That bastard... He's calling it the last hunt," Tolbi replied.

"In that case, I'm not leaving. Golubeva, you know I have to stay. I must prevent him from destroying them. Tolbi, take them and keep them safe. When all of this is over, I promise I'll come find you," Medes declared.

Golubeva knew it was impossible to change his mind. He was a stubborn and headstrong man, as well as intelligent and loyal. Nevertheless, that did not stop her from fearing for her husband's life.

"Algaba! Get the troops ready. We're going to Efsún," he commanded.

The forest seemed calm. The grayish winter sky hinted at an approaching storm and amidst the characteristic scent the forest released just before the rain, there was another nauseating stench that Efsún had not recognized in centuries. The reek of death. A whirlwind of noises and crashes, accompanied by thunder and the onset of raindrops, shattered the eerie silence that pervaded the place.

The Dictator's scouts, known as the Hounds for their attire made of the heads and pelts of mangy dogs, had discovered the hideout of the non-humans inside the Efsún Reserve at the mouth of the Yermes and Siatur rivers, a place where no human had dared to venture since the last wars. One of them took a horn and sounded it with a chilling, echoing blast that alerted the non-humans to their arrival. The Hounds began to pursue them with rabid ferocity and a thirst for blood that blinded them. They were not interested in hunting them one by one; they wanted to corner them and lead them to the Dictator. It was an ambush.

Among the non-humans, the dryads and the elves were the most skilled in combat. They protected those who, like satyrs, sylphs, or nymphs, fled in terror with tears in their eyes. The humans were taking away their homes and lives without any regard simply because they were different from them. The dryads, from the heights provided by the trees, and the elves from the shadows on the ground, slowed down the advance of the Hounds, but it was futile. They were like a fly fighting against a giant toad.

The rain intensified, pounding forcefully against the soldiers' armour as they moved heavily through the lush vegetation surrounding Efsún. Medes, leading the Ursus Legion, approached the forest's edge. No one was certain of what would happen. Hearts trembled with fear. Everyone knew the tales of Efsún, and they were far from favourable. The oldest legends shrouded this forest in an aura of mystery, beauty, and terror. It was both heaven and hell, where the most beautiful creatures in the world could snatch your soul in a matter of seconds.

Medes ordered them to advance. They would keep going straight until they discovered where the Dictator's troops were holding their position. The deeper they went the clearer the cries of desperation became, rising above the rain and thunder that could not mask them. Algaba scrutinized every tree, every crevice in the expansive green world where they found themselves.

He did not want to be caught off guard. In one of those fleeting glances, Algaba spotted a Hound tied by the feet to a tree. Medes and he approached. The Hound was still alive, though he tried to play dead. His breathing gave him away. He was nothing more than a teenager. Beneath him lay a knife on the ground. Without hesitation, Medes picked up the weapon, and he was about to thrust it into the Hound's chest when the teenager began to scream and beg for mercy.

"Are they in the rivers?" Medes asked, bringing his face within an inch of the Hound's and pressing the knife against his throat.

"Yes! They're right at the mouth of the Yermes. Please, don't kill me," the boy burst into pitiful tears.

He separated slowly, raised the knife, and cut the rope. The Hound fell face-first to the ground, wincing in pain. At no point did he notice Algaba picking up his war hammer, a splendid weapon for combat. Richly adorned with gold inlays on the handle and the head. Most people would have it on display in their homes, but Algaba was not like most. Suddenly, the hammer crashed into the teenager's chest, shattering all his ribs and organs. His life was extinguished instantly. He did not even realize what had happened. There was no need for a second blow, but Algaba's rage consumed him, and he pounded the lifeless body of the teenager with the hammer over and over again. Medes gestured with his left hand, signaling that this macabre spectacle had gone on long enough.

"Ursus!" Medes addressed his soldiers. "Do you hear those screams? They're giving their victims the same treatment we just gave to this dog. They can't wait to do the same to all of us and our companions from Efsún. Have no mercy because they won't! Understood?"

The entire legion howled and cheered their general's words. They had a bit more confidence now. They quickened their pace under the command of their leaders. There was no time to lose. Everyone knew what was at stake in that forest. It was not just their lives, the lives of the non-humans, or even the politics of the nation. The balance of the world was at stake.

They made their way through the vegetation and trees of Efsún. In some ways, it was easier than they had thought. They were following the path the Hounds had made. As they approached the confluence of the Yermes and Siatur rivers, a strange odor wafted among the troops. They never imagined that in a place like this, they could smell something so vile, foreshadowing what they were about to encounter. They continued on, fearful of what might lie ahead. It was strange, but there was more and more light in a forest where the tree canopy barely let the sun's rays through. About a hundred paces ahead of the legion, hell unfolded. Medes could not believe what he was seeing. A large clearing lay before them, consumed by the flames of a devastating fire like Efsún had never known. A fine layer of ash covered the ground like a carpet, and on top of it lay the charred corpses of those who had confronted the Dictator. The trees were falling victim to the flames.

There was absolutely no one left alive in that graveyard, and that troubled Medes greatly. There were no signs of the Dictator's army, or where they might have gone. Worry consumed him. He was thinking about how to handle the situation. It had been a severe blow to the morale of his soldiers. However, he could not just leave. He sent a small scouting party to explore the surroundings, while he and Algaba would come up with a plan completely in the dark. The scouting party did not take more than a breath to return from the other side of the clearing, but something was amiss. Only one of the five they had sent came back.

"General! The Dictator..." Before he could say anything else, an arrow pierced the middle of his back, and he fell dead onto the ashen ground.

From between the trees emerged the Dictator's Armored Soldiers, the kingdom's best-trained elite troops. The Dictator stood on the back of a majestic horse, wielding the sword he had stolen from Medes years ago above his head.

"Sir, there's the Dictator. What are your orders?"

"Defensive formation and shield wall. Rows of four. Be cautious of the charge."

Medes was nervous. He had never faced the Dictator in real battle before. Their encounters had always been one-on-one duels where his skill gave him an advantage. In contrast, the Dictator was very brutal, had immense strength, but was also very unintelligent. He hoped that his opponent's lack of intelligence would work in his favour this time, as it had in many previous encounters.

"Brother! I didn't expect to see you here," the Dictator sneered as he approached on his horse with his personal guard.

"Cut the nonsense, Meneo. You're a disgrace to the family. You've committed an atrocity here today. You deserve nothing but death, brother. Our parents would be ashamed of you."

"But they're dead. Because of the monsters that lie here. Did you forget that?"

"Never. That's why I fought in the Senate to live in peace with them, without more unnecessary bloodshed. Today will be the last time this happens."

"Indeed. Today, you'll die, little brother," Meneo said, moving away with his guards and disappearing behind his troops.

Medes turned around and addressed his troops, rallying them for the upcoming battle:

"Brothers! Today, we're here for one reason only. Those scoundrels in my brother's service want to bend the world to greed and destruction. They've forgotten our gods, our traditions, and our values. They want to exterminate our non-human brothers! We can't allow that. What makes them different from us, except for their appearance or skin? We are the same, we are brothers! They love, fear, and suffer just like us... Soldiers! I dare say they are better than us. They take care of each other and don't kill their own kind. They worship Mother Earth, protect her, and hold her in reverence. And we are killing her! We have much to learn from our brothers, and they from us. Together, we are stronger!"

The Ursus Legion was ready for battle. They clashed their axes and swords against the huge shields they carried. They howled in unison like bears roaring at the poacher who wants their hide. No one at all expected what was about to happen, least of all Medes. With all their attention focused on Meneo's Armored Soldiers, who were standing just a few steps behind the Yermes River, Medes' soldiers did not realize that a rain of fiery arrows flew from the trees to their flanks. Half of the Legion succumbed to the arrows, and the other half was engulfed in an almost instantaneous fire. Some of the Armored Soldiers arrived amid the confusion, led by Meneo. The clash was merciless. Chaos overtook the Ursus. Medes tried to regroup the troops. There was no salvation, but he would not give up. He would fight to the end. In the chaos of the battle, arms grabbed him from behind, preventing him from moving. Meneo appeared like a ghost in front of him. Without a word, Meneo, while looking into his brother's eyes, took the

sword that once belonged to their father and thrust it into Medes' chest, leaving him lying there. Meneo looked at his brother one last time and left. Algaba rushed to help him while his troops faced the Dictator's charge.

"Algaba... Retreat with the troops, save them. Please. This is already lost."

"Medes, by the gods, hold on. We'll get you out of here."

"It's an order, Algaba! Listen to me for once in your life, you wretch." A faint smile appears on the dying general's face. "And take care of my children."

"Is that another order?"

"No, my friend. It's the last favor a dying man asks of you."

Medes slowly closed his eyes. His breathing became weaker and more erratic. Algaba held him in his arms while a battle raged around them in the midst of the inferno. The flames consumed the trees and rapidly approached those, feeding on the corpses scattered on the ground. Algaba laid him down and, with a trembling voice, gave the order for the few remaining soldiers to retreat. Many of the Ursus Legion had already fallen, and their souls were now joining that of their general. Those who were left discarded their armour and followed Algaba, who led them out of that green hell.

Many years of fighting for a better world were fading into nothingness, into a dark and unknown future. Medes, the man who had led the Ursus Legion with courage and cunning, with humility and empathy, the man who had challenged the corrupt senate and earned the position of the king's chancellor, would die at the hands of his brother and the greed of men. Finally, Medes ceased to breathe, and his eyes closed. Algaba could not hold back his tears as he ran through the trees of Efsún, fleeing from the Dictator's troops that still pursued them. His friend, his mentor, his general had died, and the world was lost.