

Bastard

t'Sade

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It was the type of summer morning in Creation where the gods blew their noses on the clouds and then vented their frustrations of their last drunken party by peeing off the edges and splattering the ground below in piss-warm rain. Impromptu rivers sloshed through the mire of the battles of yesterday, pooling around the corpses of brave mortal men and woman who died in service of the Terrestrial Exalted. What little blood remained had long since washed away in the treacherous puddles and around scattered swords other mute testimonies to the brutality of war.

Tiolis stamped on his feet, trying to knock it back away as he contemplated the battleground before him. Two ranks of warriors danced on their own boots, shifting their weapons from hand to hand as they juggled with cumbersome shields and heavy armor. It was only their second day and he thankfully missed the first onslaught against the Raimé Barony, a small no-name homestead that had aspirations to glory. Like anyone could get that living less than a week from the Wyld. He groaned, then silenced as the mercenary next to him glared. He let his eyes scan over his own men, or what would become his own men if he actually survived his first battle. He still feel the burning lines of the Training Master from only a week ago, where he got stabbed with a short wooden sword enough times to crack his ribs.

A ripple of noise caught his attention and he focused on the commander of his dragon. It was some white-haired Earth Dragon-Blooded and he wouldn't let anyone forget it. Tiolis only saw him once before, when the perpetually pissed off Lord of Earth decided to gather more troops, by stripping the mercenary training camp a

full month before they were ready to go. The long march to this fight did nothing to help the mercenary's mood, but seeing the pristine horse prancing through the mud and the glorious, but upright, posture of his commander gave him second thoughts about the battle ahead. A small part of him was amazed that the horse could even carry him wearing his jade armor, but somehow the horse gave the impression of being above the mud and the mercenaries arrayed before it.

Tiolis shook his head and closed his eyes to blind himself from the greasy sky above. A trickle of warm rain dripped along his armor, splashing down his back into places he couldn't reach even if he wanted to. He considered asking the mercenary behind him to shift his helmet when a warning cry from his scale leader brought his attention to bear.

“Three Spurs Scale! Ready!”

Around him, the other scales were crying out to their men, preparing them. For the third time that day, he wondered if they were actually just making sure no one fell asleep since the last rally. He hefted his sword, almost dropped it, then hefted it again. Slimy water dripped off the blade, oozing around the few patches of rust along the handle that he still managed not to burnish out. A cry rose up in the front and he watched as the commander turned his horse and began to march out into the battlefield. Across the field, through the thin mist of some god's sneeze, he could see shifting movement of the Raime Barony moving forward.

For brief moment, he wondered if there was someone on the other side, looking at him and wondering why either of them were caught in the ass-end of some god's nightmare, but then he needed his attention to remain upright through the churned mud he stomped through.

It took an easy five minutes of marching forward until he saw their opponents. Dressed in a maroon color that looked a lot like menstrual blood after a bender, they were just as miserable as he was in his green... no “teal” uniform. He hated teal, it looked like someone threw up after drinking too much moonshine. His attention running away, he grabbed it and shoved it back into his skull as the men in front of him began to trot. He groaned inwardly and followed, struggling not to slip through as they passed bodies

and weapons. To his right, someone fell down and ruined the formation for the next ten people behind them. He saw the banks of his opponents and worried they were set for a charge, but then he realized they were also trotting toward them.

The battle cries rose up into the sky, amusing the bleary-eyed gods while they had another beer. His trot turned into a charge and he ran forward, ready to avoid cutting the man in front of him and slaying anyone who managed to slip past the first three ranks.

The two units crashed into each other, punching through each other's ranks. One moment, he was staring at a sea of dark blood, then second they were past him and he was trying to desperately block against the fourth ranks of the baron's men. Something tugged violently at his shield and it slipped from his hand, leaving his side unprotected. His heart and lungs froze as he slashed and parried, feeling a few narrow cuts. The impact of the two armies crashing into each other left him deafened to anything but the red in front of him. He slashed out as hard and fast as he could, narrowly avoiding a blade aimed at separating his head from his toes. With a desperate jab, he managed to twist the point of his blade into the chest of the baron's man and punch it between his ribs. Something slammed into him from behind and he tripped over the corpse he just made, flipping over and landing hard on the ground. His sword remained in the corpse, wrenching his wrist as he barely managed to keep holding it.

For a terrifying moment, he was staring up at the greasy sky, piss splashing on him, then he scrambled to his feet. He clutched on the sagging corpse to pull himself up, then yanked his hand back as a sword came down in an overhead smash to cut clear to the bone of the corpse he no longer touched. With a grunt, his attacker yanked it clear and prepared to cleave him in half again.

To his surprise, it was a woman. It wasn't that there weren't any female mercenaries or fighters, but it was the bright blond hair that peeked out from the dented helmet and the shockingly bright blue eyes that shot icy daggers into his very soul. Her sword dripped with fresh crimson blood, no doubt another of his own companions. She spun around, slashing the sword in a low blow designed to remove him from his knees.

Desperately, he levered his sword through the soft squishy innards of the corpse and brought the hilt of his sword down in front of her attack. He snatched his hands away from the blade as the sharp metal cut into the leather hilt, ringing out loudly even over the din of screaming and fighting.

As the vibrations of her blow rang through the meaty shield, he reared back and punched her with his left fist. It was a weak, pathetic blow, but it staggered her back enough for him to plant his foot into the dead body, grab his sword with both hands, and yank it free. Her bright eyes burned with anger as she launched herself at him, sword flashing in the oily light. This time, he was ready and threw up his arm, parrying the sword. Twisting hard, he aimed a slash at her briefly unprotected stomach. Instead of spilling out her organs, his foot slipped on the mud and he dropped to his knee. His fatal blow barely missed her foot and he swore in his native tongue, Forest-tongue. It was his turn to scramble back and jump to his feet as she attacked. He parried her twice, then launched a blistering attack that she wove and dodged away from.

There was a brief pause as they stepped back, setting the grips of their weapons. Tiolis' sword felt heavy in his hand as he imagined how he would attack, spinning there and slamming his sword into her stomach. A grim smile stretched across his face. Across from him, she crouched down herself, her own shield-less hand hovering in air as those burning blue eyes bore directly into him.

At some unheard signal, they both attacked. He jumped slightly in his attack, stumbling forward, but somehow managed to direct the point of his sword in the spot he aimed for, right below her rib cage. With startling clarity, he watched as it punched through her leather armor, the shimmering blade disappearing into her body with only the barest hints of resistance. He slammed to a halt, his eyes locked on his sword. Shaking slightly, he rose his head to look up at the eyes that now fogged over with pain. He jerked forward, trying to lever the point up into her lung and kill her, but his body refused to move. He frowned as he felt a tightness in his left shoulder. Moving shakily, his head swiveled around to see that her own point impaled him. On the other side of his shoulder, at least a foot of her blade dripped with crimson.

He swore again, turning back to her. A faint grin crossed her suddenly blood-flecked lips and she looked down. He followed her gaze to her dagger, buried in his stomach. On cue, he felt a burning sensation spreading through his gut as he realized that with a flick of her wrist, he would be the one disemboweled.

His lips worked silently as he swore. Her eyes didn't even flicker in understanding, but he saw her own lips working. It was Riverspeak, a language he had no understanding of, but somehow he thought he understood the gist if not the meaning. He arched his eyes in ironic justice and prepared to kill her just as she killed him.

Their impromptu stand-off was resolved when someone slammed into their sides, throwing them to the ground. His hand slipped off his hilt and he begged silently to survive, but soon he was struggling with thick, greasy mud that suffocated him. As darkness came, he felt his life's fluid pouring out of his shoulder and gut.

—

“Where is Tiolis?”

Remthus, Tiolis' older brother, refused to let go of the slightly overweight man who acted as Tiolis' fang leader. His eyes scanned around him, at the hastily assembled camp. It was just coming on midday, after an hour of fighting and more hours of retreating and pulling back until the arrows no longer reached the retreating warriors. The morning mist had faded, but now the constant rain had turned the battlefield into a sea of mud and blood. Out in the No Man's Land, he could see people from both sides struggling for movement or just shifting down in the last threads of their mortal life.

“By the gods, where is my brother!?”

The man wiped the back of his hand against the sweat that dripped off it and pointed with a shaking hand into the sea of destruction they just left. Remthus swore loudly and threw him away, storming away as he fought the sudden surge of tears that burned his eyes.

Despair gripping at his heart, he walked back to his own camp, where his fang had already set up their tents and were tending to their wounds. One of the camp medics, a man who barely knew the end of the needle to use, hovered over one of them, making vague threats of infection and diseases, but Remthus shoved him away,

grabbed the bottle of alcohol the warrior had in his mouth, and poured it across the wound. At the yelp, he handed him a bandage.

“Just wrap it, he’s just going to make you even worse.”

The field medic glared in mute outrage for a moment, then stormed off. The mercenary blotted up the last of his drink as his shield-mate wrapped the bandage tightly around his arm. Remthus shrugged and his two men nodded in agreement, the doctors on this campaign had already lost more warriors to infection than in any other campaign he suffered through in three years.

The mercenary wrapping the bandage looked up curiously and said, “Your brother?”

Remthus’ silence answer told his men everything they needed to know. One of his other warriors sighed.

“I’m sorry, for what it is worth.”

Remthus sighed, “Thanks, it was too soon-”

His words caught in his throat as he heard a roar rising up. His eyes automatically flashed to the battlefield, but everyone else stood up and stared at the other direction.

“Stay here.”

He grunted and quickly forced his way through the growing crowds toward the commotion. Near the edge, he slowed down as he saw three scouts talking frantically to their lord, Magnificent Shadows of the Sun on Jade Mountain, or Jade Mountain. Outside of his armor, the Terrestrial would look like any other man in his mid-thirties, but in the white jade breastplate and matching daiklave, he had an aura of presence that declared him far more powerful than any mortal in the field. Remthus sighed and sidled closer to listen.

“A wing, my lord.”

“A wing? Who’s men, is it one of ours?”

“No, my lord.”

“With the baron?” The Dragon-Blooded’s face furrowed in a scowl.

The mortal scout blanched, “I-I don’t think so.”

“And why is that?”

The lord started to pull out his massive jade sword, crouching down in the beginnings of a killing attack.

“I-I-I just assumed, m-my lord, they were not prepared for battle,” the scout faltered, holding up his hands in surrender.

The lord's attack stopped as the sound of wagons coming up to the edge of the camp cut through the din and chatter. As one, the remains of the dragon-sized army looked across a short field where five wagons pulled along a road. At the first sight, Remthus saw that they were all painted the same, white and red with a strange symbol of what looked like a dire lance on the side. There were fifty-odd men flanking the wagons, with weapons and armor, but the swords were not drawn and they had a casual grace to their movements.

Something stood up in the front and he focused on it, freezing as he saw the red and white plates forming a solid suit of armor. It covered the man from head to toe. The jade plates had mystical symbols covering every square inch, but there was no question that the leader of the strange wing was a Dragon-Blooded himself, no one else would wear one of the fabled Dragon Armors out in plain day. Despite never seeing one in person, Remthus remembered the histories of the awesome combat weaponry, but this armor looked like nothing he had imagined. A bright white fin that jutted from the back looked different, more bestial than the old monk described. It looked... evil.

The armor hummed as the leader stepped forward, marching toward the ranks. He had a black jade sword at his side, but made no motion to draw it, even with at least fifty mercenaries in front of him. Remthus kept his hand hovering over his hilt as he watched the leader stop in front, then make a gesture with his hand. The helmet peeled back, folding into some hidden compartment and exposing the face of a man who had to be in his eighties. Heavily wrinkled, the old man had flame red hair and pale skin. His eyes were bloodshot, which made the terrible glare he laid across the army send a shiver to Remthus' bones.

“What, in the name of the burning pissar that is the fire dragon, are you doing on my field!?”

His voice had all the qualities of ten men cutting through wood using nothing but shards of glass and the tears of a thousand virgins. It dripped with such sardonic poison that Remthus thought the ground would immediately wither away. Instead, he just repeated himself, his voice reverberating over the stunned silence that followed.

Jade Mountain sputtered as he shoved himself forward, his shining white armor sparkling in the few motes of greasy light oozing out through the rain. He drew himself up into his imposing stature.

“I am Magnificent Shadows of the Sun on Jade Mountain!”

The old man barely gave Jade Mountain a glance.

“So, where the hell is your leader?”

Jade Mountain growled, “I am.”

The bloodshot eyes focused on him. A smirk crossed the old man’s face.

“No, really, who is in charge?”

Jade Mountain’s face turned a mottled red.

“I am, if you as so much insult me one more time-”

He never finished his sentence because the old man suddenly glowed with shimmers of heat and somehow covered the distance between him and Jade Mountain in a blink of the eye. Red-tinted afterimages followed him, but Remthus managed to follow it in time to see the old man punch his lord and master in the stomach, folding him in half like a used condom. The Earth Dragon-Blooded groaned loudly and collapsed to the ground, clutching his belly. His sword, which he was drawing, splashed in the mud, sinking out of sight in the few more seconds of silence as the mercenaries stared in stunned amazement.

The old man gave them another withering glare.

“Now, who the hell is in charge and what the hell are you doing on my field!?”

When no one answered after a few seconds, Remthus pushed his way through the crowds. He kept his hand hovering over his hilt, but he stepped in front of the old man.

“I’ll do.”

The blood-red eyes focused on him, then down at his weapon and back up. Remthus felt like he was being appraised and barely registered above “minimally capable.” The old man grunted.

“You’ll do.”

Up close, Remthus saw that there were no mystical symbols engraved on the armor. Instead, it was painted on and it just said “Touch and Die” written in every language of Creation that he

knew, and a few others that he could only suspect said the same thing. He fought a tiny quirk of his lip.

“I’ll do for what?”

The old man pointed toward the battlefield. His armored hand hovered over Remthus’ shoulder and he felt heat radiating off the mystical armor.

“I’m going that way. Get off my field and get out of my way.”

“Are you with the Baron?”

“Baron!? Who in the Yozi’s butt is the Baron?”

Remthus sighed, “Our opponent, on the other side.”

Another scoff, “Like I care about your pathetic little battle. I have a job to do and,” he made a point of looking around then down at the Dragon-Blooded mewing in the mud, “there really is nothing that you can do to stop me.”

Remthus took a long breath, calming himself, “I won’t, as long as you neither try to harm us or join our enemies.”

The old man grunted once, then stepped around him. Without giving a single command, he speared forward, the ranks of the mercenaries peeling back and giving him a corridor to walk along. Less than a minute later, the path was cleared to the No Man’s Land. Remthus made no effort to move. Instead, he watched the five wagons and over two hundred men file their way. Near the back, about two dozen of the new wing of warriors suddenly split apart, disappearing into the ranks of the mercenaries with just a whisper of movement. The warriors were not paying attention, somehow focused on the loud and obnoxious Terrestrial in the front.

“Hey!”

Remthus held his sword and dove after them, shoving his way through the stunned crowds and leading toward the first of the men. He found them between two tents, kneeling down and unrolling something in front of heavily injured mercenary. He spoke with a smile, not seeing Remthus.

“Hello, I’m one of the Bastards. If you don’t mind, I’d like to see that injury.”

Almost gracefully, the strange man had unrolled a field surgery kit, had a hastily donned bandage on and was already looking at it.

“Oh... if you don’t mind?”

It was polite but sudden. The mercenary nodded and the doctor pulled out a thread and needle. Threading it with one hand, he started to stitch the nasty wound together. To Remthus' surprise, he didn't even see a ghost of pain on the mercenary's face. Frowning, he slipped away toward the next one. This medic was treating another injury, removing an arrow buried in a man's stomach. Moving faster than he thought possible, the man had staunched the blood and treated it, setting the arrow aside as he moved with supernatural speed. He drew closer as the mercenary's companion watched with his own hand hovering over the blade.

"Who are you?"

The medic looked up, "Bastards, actually. A small wing of combat medics graced by our nearly-impossible-to-stand leader, the Ancient Healing Bastard."

"A-Are you Blooded?"

A smile, "No, a mere mortal like yourself."

"But," the mercenary looked down where the medic had already sewn up the wound, doing hours worth of work in mere minutes, "how can you work...?"

"What, this? By the grace of Bastard, he grants us speed and skill where we only have a small measure."

Remthus cleared his throat, "What?"

The medic glanced over at him, then shifted slightly to work on the next mercenary, this one had a bloody bandage over his head.

"Your leader, the white guy Bastard knocked out. Doesn't he use the grace of the dragons to enhance your combat abilities?"

Remthus shook his head slowly, "No..."

"Well, the Bastard doesn't hold back for us. We have his abilities when it comes to being a combat medic, when he remembers. We'll be in and out of her in a few hours, if no one bothers us."

Remthus relaxed slightly, "And that's all you are doing? Healing?"

The medic nodded, already done with the second man.

"Feel free to escort me and the others. Get us to those who need saving and we'll make sure no one dies without us doing our best."

Remthus flicked a hand to the three remaining members of the fang. They stood up, belted on their weapons, and followed the medic. Remthus found another two.

“You, find the others and make sure they are watched. If they are just healing, don’t bother them, but if they attack, make sure you kill them before they hurt us.”

“Sir!”

Remthus spread the word as he made his way to the front ranks. Half the army stared out into the No Man’s Land as the five wagons spread out across the field. White uniformed medics stretched out and started to comb the bodies. He watched as two of them knelt by a hand reaching up and started to pull out their surgery kits.

“I’ll be damned.”

—

Tiolis woke up as his entire body caught on fire. Someone knelt on his chest, holding him down painfully as he stirred something burning in his stomach. The smell of searing flesh flooded his senses.

“You bastard!”

A gruff voice answered him, “Yes?”

He froze, feeling his body shaking violent as he looked down at his side. The speaker had two fingers shoved up into his belly, twisting painfully around as green flames flickered around his hand. The heavy jade armor almost crushed him down and he could see it had writing all over it. He only could read some of them, “Touch and Die,” but the fear of being pinned by someone in Dragon-Armor frightened him. Only his healer’s head was uncovered, an ancient man who looked like he only smiled when there was an eclipse.

He yelled out as he felt his inner organs twisting in burning pain. Bastard yanked his fingers out of Tiolis’ gut wound and shook off the smoking blood.

“That should hold, but in the future, I recommend you don’t impale yourself on swords.”

“What? I didn’t-”

Bastard snapped at him, “You did too. I just pulled that thing out of your shoulder and a knife out of your gut. If that isn’t impaling yourself, you need to seriously see some help before your next battle.”

Then, the old reached down, grabbed a small money pouch from Tiolis side and yanked it off.

“Wait! That’s mine!”

He pocketed it and stood up, releasing the pressure from Tiolis' chest. He gasped in breath, pain flooding through him from floodgates just opened. He tried to stand up, but his body collapsed and he slumped back into the mud. Sweat pouring on his forehead, he looked up to see the armored man stepped in a short circle. His hair brushed up against a white shimmering dome that covered them, cutting through the mud.

“W-What is this?”

“A shield, but I thought even an idiot like you would have realized that.”

As if to answer him, a clattering of arrows slammed into the shield. The dome flashed in response and he saw tiny cracks forming in the raw essence.

“What?”

The old man glared at him, “You ask a lot of questions for someone about to visit the Underworld.”

Then, he knelt down on the ground and dug his hands into the mud. Tiolis watched in fascination as he drew out a face, then a body from the mud. Only blood-flecked lips were visible in the oily mud. It was the woman who attacked him. Crimson stained the mud over her chest, but the old man didn't seem to notice. Instead, he set her down on a drier spot under the dome and began to poke and prod her. When she cough, he grunted.

“Looks like this one was also clinging.”

He started to reach for her, green fire bursting from his hands. Tiolis sat up, holding out his hand.

“Wait!”

Bastard paused, looking at him with a deep glare.

“Why?”

“She's the enemy!”

“She's dying.”

“But-”

The ancient healer grunted, “Look, if you let her die, I'm going to walk over there and crack your rib cage and pull out your beating heart to try saving her. So, either you can shut up or I can drown you in your own vomit.”

The force of his words was stunning and Tiolis clamped his jaw shut. Bastard felt around her armor, then grabbed it around the

collar and tore the leather in half. Tiolis gasped from the immense strength as the boiled leather tore like paper, along with the shirt underneath. With most of her body covered in blood, her suddenly bare breasts were painfully bright against the dark stains and a grievous wound inflicted by his sword.

Bastard hummed, "Collapsed the one lung."

He clapped his hand together as the white fin on the back of his armor began to shimmer with heat. The shimmering ignited into white flames as his hands burned with a flame of green and yellow. Tiolis could only watch as he took his two fingers and jammed them into the terrible wound. He watched as her back arched in pain, a gurgling noise escaping her lips as the smell of burning flesh and agony filled the tiny space of the dome.

The gurgling rose, then the wind came back into her chest as she drank in a deep breath and coughed violently. Bastard kept his hand inside her, her body glowing from the inside. It looks like her breasts were burning bright, with two dark points of her nipples. Tiolis blushed suddenly and looked away as she let out a scream of pain. It was in Riverspeak, be it sounds like "Fuck!" just the same.

He started to grin, saw that it was still his enemy and looked away again. Bastard flicked his fingers.

"You'll live."

Another round of arrows slammed into the shield and it finally cracked. Piss-warm rain splattered down on him. While unconscious, it had turned from the type of greasy day to the type of wet, disgusting night that felt more like the intestines of a rotting yeddim than a proper night. He choked at the terrible smell that assaulted him.

Bastard stood up, the helmet of his Dragon Armor folding back into place and sealing away his face. His voice was mechanical when he spoke, brimming with the raw power of Essence. A few more arrows appeared from the darkness, hitting the ground with wet slops and splashes.

"W-What? Why are they firing at us?"

"I suspect the Shadows of a Stick up his Jade Ass is pissed off because I punched him out. From the other side, the Baron took it personally that I seem to keep helping Jade Ass' men and robbing the corpses."

The woman spoke, her Riverspeak accent sweet against his ear as she asked something. Bastard took it in stride as his own, switching to a nearly perfect version of Riverspeak. His words, on the other hand, managed to have the same curt, impatient tone that he answered Tiolis with. He cleared his throat.

“W-What did she ask?”

He grunted, “What I was telling you. Now, if you just-”

Someone screamed out in the darkness. Bastard’s head shot up, staring out into the darkness. The visor of his armor glowed white for a moment, flashing in the dark light of the suffocating night. In the distance, between two torches, Tiolis saw someone wearing the maroon uniform of the Baron standing up, brandishing a sword. He squinted to get a better view and saw that there was a medic kneeling, protecting the body of someone else wearing his “teal” colored uniform.

A deep growl vibrated from the armor.

“Excuse me.”

Then the sword came down, cutting into the medic with a spray of blood that splattered the torches. Bastard’s voice dropped deeper as he growled again. This time, his armor began to shimmer with light and heat as the fin died down and a brilliant aura of fire burst around him. Four jets of red jet began to glow.

Tiolis realized, with a heart-wrench shock, that he was sitting right behind those jets as waves of heat slammed into it. He scrambled to his feet, then saw the woman trying to do the same, but unable to. Without thinking, he flung himself over her as the jets ignited. With a scream of air being torn, the Dragon-Armor blurred as it launched itself forward, sending up a shower of mud and water as it covered the hundred meters distance in a matter of seconds. Heat and fire seared his back as he yelled out. It left his armor smoking, but it was over almost instantly. He knelt up enough to see the Dragon-Armor slam into the man, throwing him straight up into the air. Red after-images of Dragon-Armor faded as sheets of mud rained down, but Bastard wasn’t done. His armor launched straight up, the blade blade somehow leaving a streak of burning embers as it cleaved the man in half. In a stunned silence where even the gods paused, Tiolis watched as the armor hovered in

air for just a moment, slashed again to form a black cross and cutting the man in half again.

The armor landed lightly on the ground with green flames around the armor's fists as he started to heal his medic. The fin ignited back into life as the anima banner faded away. A jet of pure flame rose out of his back as Bastard quickly worked to save the life of his own medic.

Tiolis gasped and turned back to the woman he just saved. He looked down to see that his hands were pressed up against her breasts, using them to lever himself up to look. Snatching them back as if they were burning, he lost his balance and sat back heavily in the wet, warm mud.

"I-I'm sorry!"

She said nothing but she slowly crossed her arms over her breasts, glaring at him with her burning blue eyes. He blushed and looked away, chuckling uncomfortably. He spotted one of the medics coming toward him and watched in silence as they drew closer. This one was a woman, hard-faced but with a reluctant smile.

"I thought I saw him here, is Bastard done with you?"

"I... I don't know."

"Well, you are speaking, so I'm going to assume he did."

She crouched down between the both of them and Tiolis had to force himself not to look at the glaring enemy.

"Which sides are you with?"

She had to repeat the question before he answered.

"Jade Mountain."

She looked at the tattered remains of the woman's uniform.

"Damn."

"What?"

"Give me a second, another medic should be coming back soon."

"Why?"

"We can't leave you alone in the field. I need to send you back to your places."

He felt a cold shiver down his spine.

"Which side?"

"Well," she shook her head as if she answered the question a hundred times before, "Jade Mountain for you and the Baron for her. Why would I give you to your enemy?"

"I... um... I don't know."

She chuckled and looked over at her, "Questions?"

The female warrior said nothing, then said something in Riverspeak. The medic frowned for a moment, then falteringly began to speak in Riverspeak. The female warrior seemed to relax slightly, then gestured down toward her breasts. She glared up at Tiolis who looked away again. A response in Riverspeak, obviously a negative, then a sigh.

He started to stand up, but a firm hand pushed him down.

"Patience, with everyone shooting arrows, you are likely to get hurt. And that would mean my ass out here."

He wanted to resist, but the hand held him down. Finally, he sank back into the muck and sighed explosively. His eyes drifted back to his enemy and found her glaring at him, her blue eyes almost burning in the darkness.

Time stretched out and his level of discomfort grew. In the distance, the torches were extinguished and the battlefield grew dark and silent. Moments later, the hum of Essence-driven muscles came out of the shadows and Bastard stepped into the tiny range of his vision.

"Gedoria, I think we are done."

The medic stood up, "Are you sure?"

"There are no more living people here. And if there is a piece of jade on the ground for three hundred yards, I'll be impressed."

She looked around, "I guess you are right, time to leave. Which one, boy or girl?"

Tiolis watched as Bastard look him over and then the girl. He prayed that he could go with Gedoria but the armored gauntlet pointed to him.

"I'll take him. Meet me where we agreed."

She nodded and helped the other warrior up to her feet. The tattered remains of her uniform clung to her hips and Tiolis looked away again. Bastard remained silent so he just stood up and remained still. Then, he heard splashing. But, then a warm hand pressed against him. He turned in shock as his enemy, the woman who tried to kill him, kissed him fiercely. Stunned, he held out his hands in the air as she pressed against him tightly. When the kiss

broke, she whispered something in Riverspeak and turned away. His jaw low, he just watched as she disappeared into the darkness.

Stirring himself, he looked up at the armored old man.

“What did she say?”

He grunted, “You don’t know Riverspeak?”

Almost pleading, Tiolis said, “Please tell me.”

“No.”

Then he walked in the opposite direction. Tiolis looked back into the darkness, then followed Bastard.

—

“As soon as you see him, I want you to kill the Bastard!”

Jade Mountain screamed at Remthus after an hour-long dressing down for taking over and not killing him in the first place. Remthus endured the berating just as he silently prayed that Bastard, whoever he is, would find his brother. The two dozen medics in the camp had disappeared even with their escorts after they finished healing and patching up almost every single injured person. They managed to offend the incompetent camp surgeons, but there was no question that they were fast, personable, and talented. He suspected that they were let go after they saved so many.

“Dismissed!”

Jade Mountain remained on his couch, still clutching his belly where a massive bruise was forming. Remthus bowed as appropriate and fled the tent. Outside, he didn’t extend the orders. Instead, he stormed out back toward the No Man’s Land. He found his fang watching.

“Anything?”

“Sorry, the last torch went out about ten minutes ago, then nothing. We haven’t anyone being dragged back for about an hour.”

“And the medics?”

“Gone.”

Remthus sighed unhappily.

“I hoped.”

A pat on his back, “Sorry... wait!”

Remthus looked up to see the heavy, faintly glowing Dragon Armor coming back. Next to him, a familiar sight.

“Tiolis!”

Ignoring the dangers, Remthus rushed forward. Tiolis ran to him and give him a tight hug. Remthus pushed him back briefly to look at the wounds in his gut and shoulder. Without saying anything through the tears choked him, he hugged his younger brother tightly.

“I thought I lost you.”

Tiolis mumbled into his chest, “Me too.”

Somehow, Bastard slipped back through the ranks and disappeared without anyone stopping him. Remthus didn't care, so happy to have his brother back in his arms.

About the Author

t'Sade has been happily using third-person singular since the late eighties. Besides that strange quirk, they enjoy writing a brutal combination of sex and violence for decades. Most of their stories explore the fringe edges of sexuality in the epic quest of trying to write a story for every fetish and turn-on known to the human libido.

It's going to take a long time.

Their writing can be found on their website, tsade.com. Most of it is free to read and enjoy.

t'Sade

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