

The Bird Empire

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Graveyard of Dignity

A certain deep desire had always incensed Edvard's heart with the wish to visit his city's Grenadier's Barrack and admire its luster architecture whose halls bear tall, imposing walls of green stone displaying different paintings artistically emphasizing upon the elements of masculinity, honour, and discipline the Grenadier regiments were renowned for.

Little did he know that his wish would come true under such unexpected circumstances, as he is walked amidst this building's entrails by a contingent of guards, holding him, and the surviving dissident incapacitated.

Despite the grueling stress of his current circumstances, Edvard did not fail to witness a withered and lifeless courtyard there where he expected his kingdom's finest to be training. Even the walls turned lackluster as the beautiful paintings that adorned them were removed, carefully stockpiled in various banks or the Royal Palace in order to elude them from the scars of war. It quickly became clear to him, judging from various Imperial legionaries and Praetorians sitting motionlessly like malign statues in sepulchral scenery while the cabins were filled with forsaken souls like birds trapped in their owners' cages as either dissidents or criminals filled the confines that once warmed the cold, dreary nights of those who now fatten the earth, only to be remembered by those whom they died for.

Like the scent of burning wings from an angelic creature, desolation plagued the black-feathered Vagelauchen as the thought of him ending here grieved him utterly. His acumen failed to imagine what sort of unfathomable manners of interrogation or merciless forms of torture he will be subjected to and he most certainly was not curious to find out. Unfortunately, he knew very well that sooner or later the mystery will be unraveled here, in this very place he craved to visit until a few months ago when everything changed.

He glanced back only to notice the expression of a female Vagelauchen marked by pain as heavy breathing and occasional moans accompanied her sauntering steps. Edvard was surprised to know that a madam took up arms, an activity reserved exclusively for the males of his civilization. His inquisitive curiosity made him ponder what sort of ideals these rebels promise, seeing that women flock into their ranks just as men, however, such thoughts were quickly laid aside once his eyes intersected with a certain odious sight:

Something was abnormal at this yellow-feathered Vagelauchen madam, with tiny, puncturing teeth piercing out of the edges of her beak, and exhausted black eyes, and no one, no matter his perception, could not have discovered why: Her right hand was missing, while her entire

right arm appeared lacerated, turned into a bowel-turning mass of molten flesh and seared bone. It would appear that during the firefight, the Praetorians that entered his house shot her arm, marking her with an everlasting memory of her deed, one that would make her question her actions twice from now on, undoubtedly.

Edvard spent days in one of this improvised prison's cells, fearing his sanity rotting away, slowly devoured by the claustrophobic confines of the green, cold walls projecting the incongruous appearance of moss and rot. Never in his life did he think he could be subjected to a routine as horrendous as this as he would find himself dragged into a solitary room at a daily basis, placed in front of a blinding light while the rest of the room writhed with an overgrown darkness that projected sickening silhouettes and flying skulls, as if poltergeists possessed the armours of the Praetorian guards standing by his interrogation sessions.

The first sessions proceeded uncannily, with promises of freedom, money and other benevolent services in exchange of information regarding the dissident cell he works for. However, after Edvard failed to form any satisfying replies, stating that he does not know anything, the deceitful kindness transformed into threats and sly persuasions, a ravaging verbosity with an almost theatrical manifest that proved effective in mutilating both the victim's stamina, and his mind.

For several nights did he return to his cell, terrified and broken, only to notice that the invaders did little effort in actually transforming the cabins into prison cells, seeing how they retained the amenities a Grenadier would have had: A bed bunk, a modest array of brown, metallic, furniture, and a functional bathroom, all in an acceptable condition. Edvard was unsure whether this was because his guards had some mercy in them or it is just because these invaders prize hygiene so much that they cannot afford to clean after their prisoners. Regardless, whenever he would return to his cell, he would do little more than letting his decrepit body crash onto his bed, as everything that had a connection with his past life slowly faded away in the face of this agony. Soon, he would even forget why he came here in the first place, as the willpower it took him to hold his sanity from one day to another proved too strenuous to allow for such luxuries.

During the following weeks, Edvard managed to acquaint himself with his neighboring prisoners, as his cell found himself right between two cells occupied by two intriguing personages. On to the right of his cell stood, most surprisingly, the female dissident that was brought to him, which he came to know as Indra, and in the cell left to his, stood Ernar Blufthust, whose appearance he never came to see, but judging by his voice that resonated throughout the thin walls, Edvard could have assumed him to be a staunch and hardened individual.

There was a lot of intense verbal intercourse between these two almost opposing characters, while the black-feathered Vagelauchen embraced the silence of contemplative solitude. It quickly became obvious that Ernar was clung to monarchist ideals, much like Edvard, while Indra remained true to her rebellious conceptions even behind the bars. Zealotry empowered both sides' words, and as such, the resulting conversations were explosive, to say the least.

“Have hope! Soon the freedom fighters will come and save us! And then you will all be able to join us in our fight against the Empire and the crown.” Indra shouted one night, after Edvard confessed his sorrows to Earnar, and the worry that he may never be able to see the light of day.

“What makes you think anyone wants to join your band of fools?” Earnar replied.

“Excuse me?!” Indra’s voice lashed. Surprisingly, the guards had no reaction to the prisoners conversing even as ostentatiously as this. One may think that the hollers of a depraved soul’s lamentations or delusions would entertain their boring duties.

“Nobody here wants to join you rebels and your delusions.” Earnar continued.

“Don’t tell me you still believe in that excuse of a king who sold everything we had away! How can you let these barbarians take everything from us, just like he did?” Indra shouted.

“If I remember right, your bunch cried on his lap just like the rest of us all when the war was on, isn’t that rat? Your group is nothing but carrion!”

“You insolent monarchist scum!” Indra exploded. “We fight for the freedom and equality of our people and you do nothing but swallow those lies? I bet you would rather rot in here than actually do something.”

“Do something? Do something? I was actually on the front when all this started! In the 61st Grenadier Regiment who was stationed in this very barracks! And you dare say that I had done nothing?”

“And... And how did you end up here, if I may?” Edvard intervened suddenly.

A long sigh was heard from Earnar’s room. “I was caught stealing from forum. After peace was signed, my regiment, and most of the army, was disbanded, and well, life wasn’t going pretty well, for anyone, as I am sure you know. Suffice to say, I was jobless, and I had to tend to a wife and five starving children. I was desperate, you see, so I took up to stealing food and supplies. It did not go well, unfortunately.”

“And why did you not continue fighting them with us?” Indra asked, with a tone slightly struck by compassion.

“This is starting to irritate me...” Earnar muttered. “There are two things that we are thought as soldiers: To serve the king, and to protect our people.” He said. “No self-respectful soldier would go against a peace signed by the king himself, furthermore, dissent only harms the very people we sworn to protect. Yes! You do shoot at some of the legionaries once or twice, but who do you think they will point their guns at when you lack the spine to answer for your acts? Civilians!”

“And how was it like... fighting against them?” Edvard asked.

“Heh! Unlike anything you would imagine. I remember when we were first carried with the bulk of our army to one of our colony planets: Deresden. It was a planet much like ours, with

big mountains, and forests. Anyway, we had to protect our settlement there, against their attack, so we dug in, built trenches, positioned our artillery, mobile units and tanks in the flanks, sharpshooters guerilla units hidden in the mountains to halt their advance and cripple their logistics, and so on.” Ernar said. “When the battle came, it was... horrifying. I have seen one of my life-long friend’s head melt like butter put in a microwave only to explode as this ball of green light passed through it, filling me with whatever juice remained of his molten brain – I even have a few scars left on my face thanks to that – it was... it was... gruesome. But we? We used bullets, high caliber bullets, yes, and machine guns that could pierce holes through a wall but it did not compare to that...”

“And what happened?” Edvard inquired.

“We lost! Obviously! And we lost every single battle until we reached our homeworld!” Ernar shouted. “In fact, the only battle I think we won, besides a few irrelevant skirmishes, was this battle somewhere on our second colony, the one where it’s always winter, you know? Anyway, there was this winter storm, which jammed all frequencies, making their communications and scanners completely useless! We, though, we knew that planet like our own feathers – command liked to send us to train in that place to “harden” ourselves. Who knew it would have ever paid off? – So... we took the initiative, and under the cover of that storm, we swarmed their positions, and we won! But the joy did not last long, because then they chose to just bombard the crap out of that planet from outer space, and as there was nothing but snow, we had nowhere to hide so we fled to our homeworld while whatever remained of our fleet tried to secure us our retreat. Then... well, you know the rest of the story.”

A few more exchanges of trivialities were seen between the three, only so that they would eventually confound themselves into the perpetual silence of the night, as the mind seeks transient bliss in the realm of dreams, entirely oblivious to the things that the next day prepares.