

Mercy

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The flood of motionless bodies stained the snow deep red; discarded weapons and pieces of armour along with dead horses littered the icy valley. The howling wind crept between old stumps tearing the remains of clothing off the corpses as strangled cries echoed across the battlefield carried away by the surges of freezing air.

Henryk buried his face deeper into the scarf around his neck, eyes scanning the area. A shiver ran up his spine at the sight.

Time after time a lonely man would appear among the fallen - bent over, mumbling incomprehensible words in a low voice to each and every soldier. His ragged coat was flapping in the wind, scaring away the ever-present crows which were already flocking, ready to feast on the corpses.

After the sunset, darkness took over the land and he lit up a lantern, small rusty thing with dirty glass that cast shadows on his face as he worked.

As cold started seeping through Henryk's clothes he got up from his watch on the cliff overlooking the battlefield to start a small fire. His hands had gone numb long time ago and all the firewood was wet from snow. He spent what felt like hours setting up the campfire, occasionally checking on the stranger.

When the first small flames finally shot up from the pile of wood, the valley was already pitch black; only the faint light of the man's lantern flickered many feet under Henryk's campsite. Grabbing a thick woollen blanket from his backpack, Henryk bundled up and sat down by the fire with a clear view of the scenery below. Nothing but the outline of the surrounding mountain range was visible, not even the nearest town of Kokaw with its glimmering streets.

There was a rustle in the bushes to Henryk's left. He stiffened at the sound. Maybe making a campfire was a bad idea after all. Gods know who was wandering the forests near a freshly abandoned battlefield, a band of scavengers at best, bandits if it came to the worst.

However, before Henryk's thoughts could take the darkest turn, a man emerged from the bushes. The familiar lantern was dangling from one end of a stick perched on his left shoulder and a dark cape was hiding the upper half of his face. Henryk recognized him nonetheless.

"May I join you, my young friend?" The stranger's voice was barely a whisper, like autumn breeze playing with colourful leaves.

Henryk cleared his throat, one hand tightening the grip on the blanket which was still around his shoulders, while the other searched for the hilt of his dagger.

"Of course, sir," he replied, "please, sit and warm up by the fire."

The stranger bowed his head ever so lightly. He lowered the stick with the lantern to the ground and sat down on the small rock by the fire, opposite Henryk.

It was then that he noticed the man's face. Pale in the light of the fire as it may have been, his skin seemed almost ashen, worn out by both years and the wind that never let out in this valley. A small crinkle formed in the right corner of his mouth.

"What is it that made you smile, healer?" Henryk asked.

The smirk on the stranger's face grew even wider, yet the rest of his face was still hidden under the shade of the cape.

"What makes you think I am a healer, young man?"

Henryk only then realized his little slip-up. If he were to answer the question, he would have to admit he was watching the man. He opted for wit instead.

"What makes you think I am young?"

A loud rumbling laugh echoed from the other side of the campfire. It was so unlike the voice in which the stranger spoke that it made poor Henryk almost fall to the ground. The healer threw back his head in another cackle, the cape slipping down to his shoulders, and what started as a few amused exclamations slowly turned into a laughing fit.

It made Henryk wonder who this strange man was that he could laugh after seeing so much death during the day. He had never met such a healer.

"It appears I have missed the joke," mumbled Henryk under his breath.

The man stopped his howling noises and turned back to Henryk.

"You have not, dear friend," he said, a small smile dancing over his features, "you simply presented wit and backbone. Rare traits these days if you ask me."

"It is," the healer continued after a short pause, "refreshing, to say the least."

Henryk smirked as well and bowed his head in a thank you.

"Glad to be of service, then."

The corners of the man's mouth stayed upturned even hours later as he watched the crackling flames. His light coat was left open, revealing a linen tunic underneath, yet he did not shiver in the freezing night air.

Strange, Henryk thought, very strange, indeed.

"Sir, if I may," Henryk started.

The stranger nodded, his eyes trained on the campfire were void of emotion.

"Why were you tending to the soldiers?"

A heavy sigh left the healer's lips. He looked up, suddenly staring straight at Henryk with a striking urgency.

"You should smile more, Henryk," said the stranger in a low voice as if thinking about the whole situation was the most painful experience of his whole life. A shadow from the fire crossed the healer's face, making it look like a mask of sorts.

"Excuse me?"

The relentless look in the stranger's eyes ceased for a bit, only to be replaced by a much stronger conviction. "Lady Morana has mercy on those who smile in both life and death."

"That is not the answer to my question."

And the smile was back, more crooked this time, almost devilish.

"Oh, but it is," the man said. "If you know of Morana, if you believe in the goddess of winter and death."

The revelation dawned on Henryk with such a devastating force that he let go of the blanket over his shoulders. Of course, he had heard stories of Morana, or Marzanna, as his grandmother used to call her. When he was a child, the whole village would make a doll with such a name and burn it in celebration of the end of the winter and to honour those who never got to experience the upcoming spring. He also heard of many murders committed in the name of the goddess - terrible, bloody killings done by insane cultists.

The sound of a war horn cut through the night air. The stranger shot up from his seat by the fire and made a quick work of propping the stick with a lantern on his shoulder.

"I am terribly sorry, my friend," he said in a haste. "Duty calls."

Leaving a dumbfounded Henryk to sit on his own, the man headed for the bushes he remerged from only hours before.

"You cannot go!"

The healer turned on his heel; he fixed Henryk with a questioning glare.

“They will all die,” Henryk whispered, his voice breaking at the final word.

“They are already dead, Henryk,” said the stranger as lowly as when they first met.

“I can only help them plead for Morana’s mercy.”