

The sun was high and bright. There was nothing obscuring the violence in the shallow valley below. Sandre watched in somber silence as the Rhadir carried out another of their raids with brutal efficiency. He had seen enough of them that now that they no longer shocked him. The knot in his stomach that formed when the screams reached him reminded him he still had his soul, at least.

Amid the din he heard a horn blare. It rang out into the hills with a desperate sound a few times, then stopped as the raiders descended upon it. Things quieted down throughout the village shortly after. The Rhadir had finished in record time.

Sandre looked down the shallow embankment to see Romag, the Rhadir's leader, motioning for him to join him. Sandre nudged his horse with his heels and made his way down. It was time to get to work.

The village was remarkably intact. There were no fallen weapons; just some shattered farming implements. As he rode between the huts, Sandre saw just as many men taken prisoner as the women. There were no warriors here, no sentries, just farmers. The conquest had been mercifully swift, he thought.

Romag's men dragged a young man forward and threw him to the ground before them. They had bound his hands and beat him cruelly, but he was alive. Romag steered his horse alongside Sandre and raised his chin to the bound man.

"He sounded a horn during the raid," he said.

"I heard," Sandre answered.

"Ask him who he called out to."

When Sandre was growing up in Laligald, he had spent most of his days in the academy. He had excelled in language studies, and the Master of Books had delighted in challenging him. Sandre had dreams of traveling to all the lands he'd read about and testing his linguistic mettle against the locals. Instead, Romag and sacked the city and took him as his prize. Now Sandre used his talents to mitigate disasters.

Sandre cleared his throat and straightened in his saddle. "Do you speak Rhadiro?"

The bound man struggled for breath, pained, and glared in response.

"Do you speak Planan?" Sandre asked in that tongue, but still no answer. He repeated the question in a litany of languages until he saw a spark of recognition in the bound man's eyes.

"Please talk to me," Sandre said in the foreign tongue. He raised his hands as best he could, showing he was tied to the pommel of his saddle. "These are not my people. I want to spare yours from the worst."

The bound man clenched his jaw and deliberated.

"Get on with it," Romag sighed.

"He's not inclined to help," Sandre said, then bitterly added, "For what should be obvious reasons."

"Careful," Romag said in a warning tone.

Sandre's smart mouth had been stupid in the past, and he wasn't convinced his ribs had healed properly. He checked his temper and looked back at the bound man.

"Please. Help me help you as best I can," he begged in the foreign tongue.

"What do they want?" the man asked.

The dialect was distinct, but the vocabulary was familiar enough. Sandre ached to sit down with this man and talk long into the night, learning every nuance of their language.

"You blew on a horn," Sandre said. "Who did you summon?"

The bound man was caught somewhere between disbelief and insult.

"You do not know?" His gaze darted between Romag, his men, and back to Sandre. "You come to our homes, you do this to us, and you do not even know where you are?"

"They don't care," Sandre explained. "They go where they want and take what they want."

The bound man panted out laughter. It rose into a mad, barking cackle as he fought to breathe. He was in pain, but he was driven by unbridled, malicious glee.

"We are protected by Regent!" he screamed. "These are Regent's land! We are Regent's people! He was called, he will come, and you will all pay for your evil!"

"What is he howling about?" Romag demanded.

"I'm working on it," Sandre said, then in the local's tongue: "Who is Regent?"

"The god of the land!" the man cackled. "The Mountain-Shaper! The Plains-Strider! He parts the clouds of the storm! He drives the evil gods away! You are *nothing* before him! Blessed is Regent! Regent is our Gods!"

Sandre looked to his captor. "He says Regent is their patron god."

"Like a spirit?"

"The implication seems to be one of the real gods."

Romag scoffed. "The gods don't answer to people. At best they step on you, at worst they eat you. They're roving beasts."

"I know. Still, he seems to think the horn will summon one to protect them."

"He's lying," Romag sighed. "It's a bold bluff, I'll credit him with that much, but that's not who he signaled."

"Regent will come for you," the bound man sneered. "He will grind your bones into the soil, and we will burn the harvest we grow from it!"

Romag drew his sword and drove it through the man's eye, twisted sharply, then shook the corpse off the blade.

"Disrespect is a universal language," he muttered.

He wiped his blade clean and gave orders to the men assembled. The raiders were to round up the villagers, separate them into groups and to stockpile supplies. Sandre was to question them for information on valuables, neighboring tribes and other useful facts. Sandre had long since learned to use such opportunities to quell dissent, promote calm, and instill hope.

The latter wasn't always a lie. Sometimes the Rhadir only needed light provisions, and so would leave their victims relatively intact if they didn't resist. Once a boy, no more than eight, had declared he would hunt down Romag and get his revenge. Romag was so tickled he left one of the village militia behind with a sword to train the boy specifically so he could cut him down in battle one day.

On the other hand, the same scenario had begun in another village, only Romag was in a foul mood. He put every child to the sword, castrated every man, and took every woman to be used by the raiders or sold to slavers. He left the elderly to mourn and watch their village die with their generation.

Sandre was allowed off his horse, but his hands were bound to one ankle by a length of rope. He was given an escort to protect him from attack, and he was certain to ensure he didn't try to escape.

As he spoke to the frightened villagers he tried to adapt to their manner of speaking. Some seem comforted in hearing him use their own words. Others looked insulted, as if he was stealing their language along with their goods. He didn't blame them.

"Where do you store your food?" he asked an elder.

"If I tell you, you'll leave us to starve," she said.

"Yes, but you will live to harvest again. Please don't make them take your lives as well."

She mulled over this, then told him how they kept some stores fresh underground.

Sandre heard the bound man's prayer over and over as he went from group to group. "Blessed is Regent. Regent is our God." It was whispered, muttered, sung and shouted. He began to use it as a greeting as he approached the captives.

"You think he will spare you because you use our words?" a woman snarled.

"No. I hope he will reunite me with my family when he comes," Sandre answered. "The Rhadir took them from me many years ago. I miss them very much."

He did not see forgiveness in her eyes, but he did see understanding. It was enough.

Night came upon the village. The Rhadir were grumbling. Normally they would be reveling in the spoils of their conquest, but Romag had them sober and on watch. Guards were posted at the huts containing the men, women, children and elderly. A hearty meal was had by all, but most of the food was inventoried, stored and put under guard.

Sandre bowed as he entered the hut Romag had claimed for himself. He sat sharpening his sword with a stone by firelight.

"Well?" he prompted.

"They are farmers, all of them. None of them know how to even work a bow or a snare," Sandre said. He had to make them seem as harmless and worthless as possible. "The elders lament at how sickly and weak they get each generation. The women die in childbirth, and the men collapse when traveling to trade with other tribes."

Romag shot him a look that told him he wasn't buying it.

"And what about Regent?"

"He is their god," Sandre said with a shrug. "Of that I am certain. They're convinced divine retribution is on its way."

Romag nodded in agreement. "I've heard the prayers. I don't know what the words mean, but the intent is clear."

"I'm surprised you haven't tried to stop them," Sandre said. He winced, unable to catch his words in time. Why even suggest such cruelty?

Romag chuckled. "No point to it. They'd just whisper it rather than chant it, and my men would be wasting energy." He inspected his sword. "I don't know if "Regent" is a warlord, or some charlatan magi. But it's clear they've left an impression on these people. I won't gamble on it being nothing.

"Let them pray. Let them stare at their precious horn. When no help arrives, the truth will come to them. That will break their spirits more than any beating we could give them."

Sandre was struck once again that Romag wasn't a stupid man, just cruel. A stupid man, a brute, could've been coerced into doing something reckless. He could be lulled into a false

sense of security with flattery, or made paranoid of his more cunning comrades. Sandre had gone to sleep fantasizing about tearing down the Rhadir from within bit by bit.

But Romag was dangerously savvy. He kept his men in control at all times and never counted one among them as his friends. The Rhadir were in fearful awe of him. He treated them fairly and showed them no abuse. But when they stepped out of line he was vicious and decisive. With all that in mind, Sandre considered that perhaps Regent could be a man after all if he were anything like Romag.

They both looked up as they heard a brief, distant boom of thunder.

"You'll be sleeping outside tonight," Romag said, "For that nonsense about them being weak and worthless."

Sandre clenched his teeth and nodded solemnly. He had suffered worse punishments.

"Anything else you haven't told me?" Romag prompted.

"They have been very compliant, and that's the truth."

Another brief boom of thunder.

"The next tribe is a two day ride north-west..."

Another boom. Louder.

"...where things are much the same. They apparently grow a grain that..."

Another boom, this time shaking the ground.

"...that they brew into a strong ale," Sandre finished with a stammer.

Romag barked a laugh. "Sleep sitting up. You'll drown otherwise."

Sandre grimaced. The sky had been clear when he entered the hut. The coming storm sounded relentless.

Another boom, and this time Sandre stumbled as the earth shook.

"That wasn't thunder," Romag said, jumping to his feet.

A cry went up from the Rhadir watch. Romag hurried out with Sandre following. On the horizon he could see the distant hills in a sharp silhouette against the wash of stars. Rising from it looked like the head and shoulders of a man. The ground shook rhythmically now as it approached. The form kept growing, blotting out more and more of the sky. Soon its head eclipsed the moon, and the torches sputtered as they felt its breath fall upon them.

"Blessed is Regent! Regent is our God!"

The chorus steadily rose from within the huts. Romag shouted commands to assemble the Rhadir. The chanting of the villagers rose, as if the walls refused to hold in their voices. Raiders screamed directions and encouragement to each other. Amid the mounting chaos, Sandre stood in awe of the towering shadow blotting out the night sky.

The smell was astounding. It reminded him of fresh tilled earth after a heavy rain. A sweet, pungent scent of grass, rot and earth. Another breath hit him like a gust of wind, nearly knocking him off his feet. He strained to look into the shadow to catch some detail in the faint firelight.

He could make out acres of dense fur rolling over the hills and valleys of an arm, muscular and toned. An impossibly large hand settled gently between the huts nearby. Even resting on the knuckles, the finger's segment was taller than he was.

A group of Rhadir charged in with swords and spears. The hand casually rolled to scoop them up. There was a brief chorus of screams, a gut-rendering squelch, and a fine rain of visera fell to the ground.

“Blessed is Regent! Regent is our God!”

The chanting was thunderous. They were stomping inside their prisons, shrill cries rising up to punctuate the beat.

Romag was screaming commands as Rhadir fled into the night. Some flaming arrows were loosed, and Sadre watched as they illuminated muscles with the texture of weathered stone. They bounced off the titan’s hide and fell pitifully to earth. It then reached out and patiently pressed each archer into the ground, crushing them like ants.

Sandre realized he was holding his breath and broke out into hysterical laughter. He had dreamed of poison, subterfuge and daggers in the night. He had prayed for rival raiders, or plague, or wild animals. Nothing seemed to stop his captors. And now, materializing from the night, was an unstoppable and merciless force.

Years of beatings for speaking out of turn cut his laughter short. Sandre flinched, expecting a sharp blow from Romag. But it did not come. Sandre searched amid the low light and panicked scrambling. Romag wasn’t shouting orders anymore. The Rhadir were imploding without his guidance. Then, just at the edge of the village, he caught sight of someone on horseback.

Sandre limped his way to the horn. While he’d held no hope for Regent to arrive - and what a fool he felt like now for that - he had felt drawn to the horn itself. It had been so finely crafted compared to everything else, so meticulously constructed, that it felt like it held some kind of power.

He gripped the mouthpiece and breathed into it. A weak, sputtering honk barely squeaked out.

Sandre fought to calm himself and catch his breath. That monster was fleeing into the night.

“Blessed is Regent! Regent is our God!”

Their words sent a thrill through his body. He needed to put their prayer into that horn.

Sandre blew again, and the sound rang out clear and true.

He felt Regent’s attention before he even looked up. He looked straight up into a pair of golden moons, blazing with their own light. There was an awareness there, a will, and Sandre felt himself shriveling in its presence.

“He’s getting away,” he murmured.

“Blessed is Regent! Regent is our God!”

He fought back the sensation of drowning in the god’s gaze.

“He’s getting away!” he shouted, then pointed with his bound hands to the horizons. “He led them here! He did all this! He has to pay! Please!”

For a moment Sandre feared he didn’t get the point across. What was the whine of a gnat to the ears of a god? But then Regent straightened and looked out into the fields. It then lurched with terrifying speed, its form blotting out the scenery as it passed.

Romag had enjoyed at least a ten minute head start, maybe more. His personal horse was famed for its speed and sure-footedness. Regent was upon them in an instant. Sandre heard the horse shriek as it was scooped into the sky.

The moon framed the god’s face in a perfect profile. Its pursed, ape-like snout pulled back to reveal a serrated beak. A grand crest rose up on its head. Romag’s cry of defiance was faint but distinct. Then the monster and his flailing, kicking mount were consumed.

Sandre dropped to his knees and wept. His wrists were burning; severely chafed by the ropes as he'd hurried to sound the horn. It didn't matter. The man who had destroyed his life and paraded him through years of horror had met an end that defied imagination. He was free. It was over. It was done.

He was then aware the chanting had stopped, and that the villagers had surrounded him. That was fine. He was ready to pay for his cowardice and complicity. The ground shook as the living shadow came to loom over him. He craned his neck up to look into the golden eyes of the god. Sandre smiled and raised his bound hands to it.

"Blessed is Regent," he said in reverence. "Regent is our God."

A single finger descended toward him. It was as if a tree were gliding down to meet him with the grace of a butterfly. A ragged fingernail as wide as his head caught the edges of the ropes binding his wrists and plucked them apart.

The villagers slipped to their knees as one and began to sing. It was a gentle hymn; quiet and respectful. Sandre tried to follow along, but he was choking on his tears. He bowed his head to the ground and sobbed.

Regent turned and went back towards the hills. The ground shook less and less, the sound diminishing to distant thunder. Soon its form couldn't be distinguished from the mountains' silhouette.

Sandre woke with the sunrise. He'd been left on the ground beneath the horn. His eyes were caked in dried tears and his throat was raw. His wrists were stiff, aching and black where the ropes had scarred them. He struggled to sit up and look at where Regent had come from. All he could see were the faint, hazy mountains.

He made his way through the village like a ghost. Most of the locals didn't acknowledge his presence. Those that did either gave him a curt greeting or a wide berth. One of the elders offered him some breakfast, which he accepted with a deep bow. She gave him a befuddled look, then shooed him away.

Once he had eaten he continued his rounds. When he found them repairing their homes, tending to their wounded or burying their dead he would approach them with his head bowed.

"May I help?" he'd ask.

Some were kinder in their rebuking than others. Finally, one man pointed to the ground soaked in Rhadir remains.

"Move that soil to that field over there," he said. "We will harvest their souls and burn them. They will die a second time."

Sandre did as he was asked, one handful at a time. Eventually a young woman brought him a spade and bowl to help with his work. Every so often a crowd would gather to watch him working, muttering to each other. That was fine. He was certain their tolerance came exclusively from Regent sparing him and setting him free.

The day wore on and a small boy brought him lunch. As Sandre took the bowl the boy grabbed his hands and inspected his wrists. Sandre patiently let him look, then watched as he ran off to gossip to the other children.

By sundown he had amassed a sizable pile of earth and human ruin. He had thought of piling the weapons for his hosts, but immediately received wary looks, so he left them where they lay. The repetitive work was good. His mind was buzzing from all that had happened the night before. It still didn't feel entirely real.

Night came and the villagers settled around a communal fire. A soft, mournful song arose among them; beautiful and haunting. Sandre settled on the ground next to the horn. He doubted he was welcome among them. But once the song had finished, the boy from earlier came and led him over.

He sat among them, and an old woman washed the blood and dirt from his hands. He was offered a meal, which he accepted with another bow of his head. A few bites in and he realized all eyes were on him. In the flickering of the firelight, he couldn't tell if they were looks of pity or scorn.

"Thank you," he said in the language they understood. After an awkward silence, he added: "Blessed is Regent. Regent is our God."

That seemed to appease most of them, but one old man huffed.

"He is our god," he said. "Not yours."

Sandre nodded solemnly. "Yes. But he set me free. He avenged my people." He tried to say more, but he choked on renewed tears. It took him several minutes to calm down, after which he croaked: "Blessed is Regent."

The crowd echoed him in agreement, and the night went on solemnly. He was later led to a hut to bed down among some of the elders. He thanked them and immediately fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

When he woke up the next day, the sun was already well into the sky. A lone elder sat across from him, nursing a pipe. Sandre struggled to sit upright. His body ached, and he felt nervous. There was no one to demand him to rise. No one to threaten him. As awful as his time was as Romag's assistant, it had still given him purpose. That was lost to him now.

"You cannot stay here," the old man said.

Sandre latched onto his words. It was a direction, at least.

"I understand," he replied. "You all have been very kind to me."

"Your home. It is gone?"

"Yes. The raiders burned it to the ground years ago."

The old man took a long drag on his pipe and released a long, thoughtful plume of smoke.

"Regent freed you. What will you do in return?"

"Whatever he wants," Sandre said. "I just...don't understand. I have seen other gods in my travels. If they paid any attention to humans, it was to eat or terrorize them."

"Blessed is Regent," said the old man. "Regent is our God."

Sandre nodded. It was both an unsatisfactory answer and yet the obvious one at the same time.

"We will send thanks to him where he rests," the old man said. "It will take four days to reach him."

"May I go with you?"

"No. It is our offering, and you are not one of us." The old man puffed his pipe. "If you were to walk in the same direction to make your own offering, we would not stop you."

Sandre smiled. "I will try to stay out of your way then."

"They will leave tomorrow," the old man continued. "I cannot see well. I often overlook things in here."

"I hope nothing troubles you in the night, because I won't be here."

The old man nodded, understanding, and tapped out his pipe before leaving the hut.

Sandre spent the day rifling through the Rhadir remains. The villagers had left most of their provisions alone. Perhaps they felt they were tainted. The horses had been left to wander free, but some lingered. By the end of the day, Sandre had amassed enough goods for the journey and a horse to ride. He had wanted to get an idea of what the locals were preparing for Regent, but they made it abundantly clear he wasn't welcome in the preparations.

He spent the night among the stunningly near-sighted elders, then rose with the sun to prepare to follow the pilgrims. There was some discussion among them as they realized what he was doing, but some assurance from the pipe-smoking elder seemed to calm them down. They set off on foot, and Sandre nudged his horse to follow at a respectful distance.

He looked to the horizon and wondered where they were going. What kind of land hosted a god that cared for humanity? What kind of people flourished under such divine protection? Once he reached Regent's resting place, what would he do? Now that his life was his own again, what would he make of it?

Sandre took a steadying breath and focused on the hazy mountains on the horizon. The answers would come with time. He had no control over when, but a little over how, and that would suffice. The memory of the eyes and the weight of its presence sent a thrill through him.

"Blessed is Regent," he concluded. "Regent is my god."