

SUNDERED

preludes

“Traits”

by Raphael Tehan

special
sneak
preview

I HATE LISS. On the surface it's nothing worse and nothing any different than any of the other couple of dozen settlements clinging like fleas to the back of the wastes. I mean, let's be honest; all the towns around here are open festering sores of humanity, dirty, reeking, and nasty, just like the people living inside them. And the only reason we all cower within these settlements is because, for all their problems, they're a whole hell of a lot better than being stuck out in the wastes. Whatever great wrong our ancestors committed all those centuries ago that cracked our world wide open, we're sure still serving our penance for it. But there's something especially bad with Liss, some extra layer of despair lurking beneath its surface. I see it in the eyes of its inhabitants, as they crouch at the base of their rotting buildings, I see it in the nasty things they do to one another, in the shadows, when no-one's looking.

Still, it's better than wandering the hills, lost and alone, dying of hunger and thirst. In fact, when that's your situation in life, even Liss looks pretty inviting. Put one way, I owe Liss my life, which sort of makes me hate it all the more.

I had been a part of a group of caravansera, one of a number of traders who trundle—at great risk—from settlement to settlement trading food and cookware and clothing and other necessities of life. Along with a dozen or so others, I was a member of the private army of our caravan, our duty it was to watch the hills with hawk-like eyes, waiting for the inevitable attack from bandits, or worse yet, the sub-humans. Then, fates willing, beating them back.

A bandit raid the day before had left us undermanned, and when at dusk the screeches came—those unnerving screeches that you can never erase from your memory, no matter how hard you try—and the sub-humans washed over us like a great tidal wave, I knew we were lost. I would have done anything for a gun. The last one I had seen had been the prized possession of a friend of mine, a thick, short little piece of business that I had watched blow the head clean off a man. Someone smashed the back of my friend's skull in to gain possession of that gun, and I can see why. The art of their manufacture died out with our ancestors, and the scarce few that survive are zealously cherished, and effectively priceless.

Instead I held in one hand an old chain, weighted at one end with a sharp, misshapen chunk of stained concrete, and in the other a long metal pipe with one end split and bent back on itself, which I used as a kind of cudgel. Like everything in our lives, we made do with what the ruins of our lost ancestors provided us, and it wasn't much. Still, I had killed a fair number of enemies with my weapons, and I crushed in the brains of a good few of the sub-humans now as they lurched at me in the dusk light, but I was only delaying the inevitable. Already they had overturned one of our wagons, a rusted old metal hulk whose original wheels had been replaced with a makeshift set cobbled together from rubbish that had never quite performed adequately. It still had bits of the engine and drive mechanism which had once, ages ago, propelled it. Once, when there were still fuels to be had. Now the rusted remains of its engine was only so much more weight that our pullers had to handle with their ropes. As the engine and the wheels and everything else vanished in a smoke-dirtied plume of flame, a cheer went up from the sub-humans.

I looked at those eyes flickering madly in the light of the flames as the wretches danced around the burning wagon, and realized then that it wasn't hunger which had driven them to attack. It was vengeance. Vengeance and rage. They hated us, and they meant to express that hate the best way they knew how, by tearing us apart.

The force of my own assailants' assault had driven me a couple of dozen paces away from the wagons before I was aware of it, and as I smashed my cudgel down into the skull of my last immediate attacker, I turned to sprint back to join my allies, do what I could.

I had taken no more than a step when something hard and damned painful smote me across the back of the head. I toppled and fell, and everything went dark.



I don't know how long I was out, but it can't have been more than about fifteen minutes or so. Whatever it was, it was long enough. Fighting against the pain pounding at the back of my skull, I raised my head from the uneven weed-choked ground and surveyed the remains of the battle that, plainly, had resolved without me.

Two of the vehicles were on fire. Most of the others had been ransacked and torn apart, their contents strewn pell-mell across the track. I figured the sub-humans had "won", the survivors clearing out as soon as there was nothing left to kill or mangle. If any of my compatriots had survived the attack, they'd fled for the hills long ago. As I dragged myself to my feet, it was pretty obvious I was the only one in the area that was standing.

Bodies were everywhere, both the wretches' and my friends'. One of the latter had fallen just a handful of paces from me, a young woman named Meg that had always been pretty nice to look at during our long trips. Now, not so much. I felt a pretty nasty stab of despondency as I averted my gaze; I would have liked to have tidied her up a little, but I didn't know what I could do, so I left her. She had a sling still gripped in one hand, and my eyes suddenly alighted on a little rock near where I had fallen, my blood still drying on it. How ironic, that one of my own had felled me. Equally ironic that her misfire had probably saved my life. I guess that I had looked like just another corpse to the sub-humans, so they'd let me be. Fortunate, perhaps, that these weren't the flesh-devouring variety; or maybe they were, and they'd gotten their fill on some of the others. Either way, falling face-down onto the dirt had saved my life.

Near Meg's body lay a funny-looking little black contraption that I remembered her always clutching possessively, only parted from her at last when the battle had turned sour. I stooped and picked it up, shaking the dirt from it. She had called it her bolt thrower, and that's about what it was. It looked something like a misshapen tube, small enough to hold in one hand. There was a lever that drew back, and a trigger that, when pressed, would fire a little bolt. I'd seen Meg kill someone at thirty paces with a well-aimed shot, and I'd always envied her the thing. Now that she was dead, I didn't think she'd mind me taking it. I hoped not.

Ignoring the gasp from my abashed conscience, I raided her body for the collection of the thin little metal tubes that had served as bolts. She only had a couple of dozen of the things left, housed in a little makeshift quiver on her hip. Once they were gone, I doubted

I'd be able to find any more, but I took them anyway, grabbed what little bit of food the sub-humans hadn't taken, and then got the hell out of there.



Water was my biggest concern. The wretches, unsurprisingly, had taken all of it from the caravan, and in these worthless, unwelcoming wastes it was about as precious a resource as something could be. Wars had been fought over water here, and a day and a half from the massacre I was feeling about like I might be willing to kill for a drop of it myself.

I had decided to work my way back up the track down which we'd come, return to the town which had been our last stop. Since we'd just come from there, I had a reasonable idea of the distance I needed to cover to get back. I figured that, if I didn't meet with any further unpleasantness along the way, I'd get there just before my tongue swelled in my mouth and I choked to death.

Unfortunately, I did meet with more unpleasantness. A motley little band of half-starved bandits tried to kill me, and I was forced to flee in to the hills to elude them. By the time I was sure I'd shaken them, I was also sure that I was hopelessly lost.

Finding yourself in the hills surrounding the wastes is bad enough; finding yourself lost in those hills is downright disheartening....

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