

Baronne was unceremoniously thrust out through the steel door into the cold, crisp air and he stumbled, tumbling down the rocky slope until he finally came to rest, his shoulder smashing painfully into a large and unfortunately angular boulder. He pulled his aching body away from the boulder and used his legs to push against it to give himself some space. Resting his head back against the rough ground, he looked up at the sky of his new land. It was a clear, moonlit night; the moon was large and full and away from its looming presence he could make out dozens of stars, perhaps hundreds, some moving, most still. He had never seen such a beautiful night sky. In his homeland the ever-present neon would have overwhelmed those stars and the tall buildings would have restricted the panorama. It was the same moon he had seen throughout his life, the same sky but it was unnervingly different and despite its evident beauty it was a frightening reminder that he was now far from Lakeura. He felt thoroughly dejected and miserable. He was far from his friends and family, far from familiarity and comfort. He sat upright and satisfied himself that he had received no serious injuries, checking his tender shoulder, then running his hands up and down his sore and aching legs. He pushed himself up slowly from the ground, grimacing at his stiff muscles and knees and looked around. His immediate surroundings seemed totally black, despite the moonlight, and he could make out no discernible pathway to follow. He looked back up the slope. The now closed doorway was built into the base of a high, steep cliff face and was mostly hidden from view by thick undergrowth. He tried to note the exact location, to instil any visible landmarks into his memory. Any ideas he may have had about ever returning through that door were foolish but that thought, that hope, was all he had left. His eyes slowly began to adjust to the darkness. Above him and far over to his right was an enormous concrete structure embedded in the steep hillside; some kind of dam. He had an irrational desire to stay closer to the south. Closer to Lakeura. But that would mean scaling the high cliffs and scree-laden slopes which were surrounding him on three sides. His way back towards home was closed off to him physically as well as politically. His only option was to walk in the other direction, down the hill to the north east. He tried to convince

himself that it made no difference. Staying a few miles closer to his homeland was futile. It was simply a meaningless psychological comfort. He would never be able to return.

In the distance below, he could make out the faint, ember glows of a city. It was no doubt Skandia City, his new home. Nizza would have stood out in stark contrast to the surrounding countryside. Its lights would have been ablaze, warm and bright even from this distance. Skandia was barely visible. The pitifully dull lighting was a grim foresight of his future life. It was cold here, bitterly cold in the dark and the clothes he was wearing were more suited to the warmer climes of his former homeland. He shivered, braced himself and began to move warily downwards in the direction of those unappealing lights, hoping the ground ahead of him was clear. It was too cold to wait for better light. He needed to move, to keep warm but also to have something to occupy his thoughts other than his banishment and his misery.

He walked for what must have been three or four hours, picking his way carefully down through the darkness, his way ahead slowly easing as dawn approached. He desperately hoped that the days would prove to be far warmer than the nights in this unfamiliar region. He was not used to hardship or physical discomfort. He was already beginning to have doubts about his ability to survive here in this unwelcoming climate. Those dim lights of the city were closer now, perhaps only a further two or three hours away. He kept moving forwards, still choosing his way carefully over the rough terrain and finally came to a road. It was hardly a road by Lakeuran standards but it at least afforded him some relatively hard and smooth ground and he was able to pick up his pace a little, confident that he would not fall and injure himself further. Off the road to the right and a few hundred meters in front of him in a copse, a small, flickering light came into view. As he approached closer he could make out a small fire and could hear several muffled voices. He started to feel anxious. He wondered if he should leave the road and return to the rougher terrain to the left, bypassing any possible danger of an encounter with strangers. He would need work, so he would have to approach people eventually but he had heard worrying tales about his new region, especially about how unwelcoming to new arrivals they could be. The people here were poor and work was

notoriously hard to find. He was a banishee, and wore the red stripe of the banishee along his forehead just above the eye line. He imagined there would be a particular loathing for his kind. A contempt for someone who had not made the most of being born in an easier land, for someone who was perhaps even a criminal. He hesitated, unsure of what to do. Maybe on his first night here he was better off giving these people a wide berth and continuing into the city where the light and witnesses would deter any potential aggression. He should be very careful, remain safe until he knew and understood the people of Skandia a little more. But then again these might be precisely the sort of people who could help him find work and might be less worried about his dubious and shameful provenance. After all, why were they here, outside the city, gathered around a small fire in the night? Perhaps they were like him, outcasts with whom he might find some form of kinship. He gathered his courage and walked slowly and warily towards those low, whispered voices. He thought it best to announce his presence well in advance rather than surprising them close up, so he called out from some distance.

‘Hello? Is there anyone there?’ There was no reply, but encouragingly there were no startled movements either and no sign of any physical threat. ‘Hello? Is it okay for me to approach?’

He continued to ease his way through the trees and slowly entered the small clearing where a group of half a dozen men were sitting on the ground around the fire. An old, beaten and blackened metal pan was hung over the flames boiling water and each one of them held a steaming and equally beaten tin mug in both hands to warm them. They wore nothing more than rags but in abundant layers with every inch of skin well covered except their fingertips and faces. None of them moved, those facing away from him made no effort to turn to see who was entering their small camp.

‘Would it be alright if I warmed myself up a little by your fire? I have been walking all night, and as you can probably see I am not really prepared and dressed for the cold of your region.’

One of the group looked up at the young man who had approached them and Baronne saw the immediate flicker of distaste in his eyes as he noticed the red mark indicating his new lowly

status. Is this how it would be everywhere here? How would he ever be accepted as an equal in his new home? The man staring at him looked old, certainly much older than the others in the group. Saying nothing, he finally motioned to the ground next to him.

‘Thank you, sir. My name is Baronne. I am new to Skandia.’ There was still no response from anyone, other than a barely perceptible nod of acknowledgement from the same old man. In the light of the fire Baronne became even more aware of the stark, red mark across his face. He was feeling embarrassed and ashamed but he knew this was something he would have to get used to. He would need to accept his status quickly and overcome any feelings of shame and humiliation. He was now very conscious not only of his red line but also his accent. The people here spoke the same language as he did but the accent was very different. He had met people from Skandia before, in his homeland of Lakeura. He had even come across several relocs – fortunate people who had been chosen for relocation from a lower land. They spoke in an odd, slow manner which people in Lakeura would often mock. He tried speaking with them again. ‘I’m looking for work. Would any of you gentlemen know of anything? I’m a hard worker and a quick learner.’

The old man took a sip of his hot drink and sniffed, rubbing the sleeve of his worn, brown overcoat across his nose. He coughed and spat something from his mouth. ‘Everyone in this place is a hard worker. Everyone here has to be a fast learner.’ That strange, slow Skandia drawl. It was more extreme coming from this old man’s mouth than he had heard before from his limited encounters with those young relocs. The accent was even more pronounced than he had feared. He would be even more different here than he had feared.

‘Do you know of anything at all, sir? May I ask your name?’

‘There is nothing for you here. Go to the city. People like you would not be interested in anything we have here. Not at the beginning anyway.’ For the first time this elicited a response from the others as he heard several amused grunts from around the camp fire.

Baronne felt disappointed but relieved at the same time. Disappointed that his initial bravery had brought no rewards but relieved that at least he had not been attacked. He pondered what the

old man had insinuated. He was not ready for anything illegal yet, if that was indeed what he meant. He could not risk any further banishment. He had known of Skandia before being sent here. He knew that it was a harsh place, a poor place. Nobody knew for certain of any land lower. If there were a lower region, then nobody had ever returned from it to tell the tale. There were myths and legends, horror stories and children's tales but nobody knew for certain. Whatever these people camped here outside the city did to earn a living he did not want anything to do with it. Or as the old man had said: at least not yet. He stayed for a further few minutes in silence, as long as he could before it became too awkward, then thanked them and stood up to continue his journey into the city of Skandia.

It was much lighter now and as he got closer to the city the road became smoother and wider. The rough, rocky terrain at the beginning of his walk had now given way to lush, rolling, green farmland and he could already see men and women working in the fields. Skandia was an agricultural land. Its produce was sent to many other surrounding regions and life here was notoriously hard and physically demanding for its inhabitants. Any work would be punishing on his body. There would be little demand for his skill set. Luckily he was young, strong and fit. He would surely soon become accustomed to the harsh physicality of any work. He could see an impressively wide river in the distance, running parallel with him, no doubt flowing from the mountains and the dam behind him and irrigating the fields now surrounding him. The river was so wide that he could barely make out its opposite bank. He was hungry but exhaustion was now beginning to overwhelm even his hunger. He desperately needed some sleep. Just a few hours would do before he entered the city itself. He turned off the road along a narrow track, searching for somewhere quiet and sheltered. When he found a suitable spot, on the edge of what appeared to be an orchard, he collapsed onto the soft, long grass and fell asleep within minutes.

When he woke, the sun was much higher and he could feel its warm, welcoming glow on his face. A small stream was running just below the stretch of long grass which had formed his bed and he scrambled down to it and drank a few handfuls of water, splashing some over his face and neck.

The orchard on the other side of the stream was filled with apple trees and he looked around, listening for any signs of a worker or passer by who might be watching. He was frightened but he was starving, so he quickly ran to grab a couple of apples and returned to hide in the long grass. He greedily and furtively devoured the two still sour apples before walking back towards the road and turning left to continue his long and lonely march into the city.

The fields were now filled with busy workers, hunched over silently, picking produce. What it might be, Baronne had no idea. His ignorance worried him. How would he find work ahead of any local who would know far more than he did about farming? Occasional wagons passed by on the road, drawn by emaciated, miserable looking horses, the drivers offering no acknowledgement of his presence whatsoever. As he entered the outskirts of Skandia, he was shocked to see the dusty, potholed streets and the flimsy, wooden buildings. No mechanical transport was visible, there was none of the bright, neon lighting he was used to back in his home city. There was no noise, no music, none of the all pervasive ads which used to annoy him so. He would give anything right now to be pestered by one of those gaudy advertisers pushing some kind of superficial nonsense. It was as if he had travelled back in time hundreds of years. The workers were dressed in rags no better than those worn by the group of men he had seen overnight by the camp fire. Nobody smiled, nobody laughed. They seemed to go about their day as if in a daze, with enough energy to complete their work but little else.

He walked on. The houses seemed to become a little more substantial, some even brick built. He noticed a glass-fronted building, all of three stories high with an elaborate, decorative balcony surrounding the top floor. Written above the entrance door was "Overseer". Several wagons were parked outside it, the horses taking the welcome opportunity to take a drink from a trough. People were entering and leaving, so Baronne approached the building and walked hesitantly inside, hoping that this might be a good place to begin his day's search for work. A small queue of men and women were ahead of him. The women were dressed in exactly the same manner as the men, rags of mostly brown and grey cloth. They were queuing at a counter which was manned by a male,

probably in his thirties, who looked very different from those he had seen thus far. This man looked healthy, with a lean, wiry and fairly muscular build. He was dressed in a bright, electric-blue jacket with an immaculately white shirt underneath. His trousers and expensive looking shoes were as pure a white as the shirt. He was smiling and passing coin cards back to those in the queue, who took their payments with sad, exaggerated sighs before turning to leave the room, muttering quietly to themselves. When the man in the blue jacket had paid the last of them he turned his attention to Baronne and the bright, white smile immediately dissipated as he took in the new arrival's face and the thick red line across his forehead...