

Obzen

Rob, a boy who wanted nothing more than to be a stalwart knight was born to a lowly recognized family. He was not deprived in any means as he was given an education, clothing, and was taught how to protect himself if the need arose. Near him lived the beautiful, adventurous daughter of a middle-class home who he would eventually fall for. One evening in the markets of the city, the young woman would find herself browsing the stalls and tossing spare coin to the occasional beggar. It would be here that these two would have their first encounter.

The markets were a busy place. The streets were crowded and noisy during the day. Mixed aromas from the nearby blacksmiths, taverns, and bakeries flooded the streets to create an almost nauseating perfume of what could only be described as sweet bile. The young girl found herself in an alleyway just outside the entrance of a blacksmith's shop, admiring the metalwork. She is about to walk into the doorway when a drunken off-duty guard stumbles into her and claims that he could use a bit of "relief" and knows of just the lost lamb to help him.

Inside the shop, Rob is finishing up his business of having his family crest restored. He leaves the shop and starts to walk home when he hears the cries for help from a usually un-trafficked alleyway nearby. He runs toward the cries and finds a woman with now ripped clothing being grabbed aggressively. Spotting the guard's discarded belt, Rob swiftly picks up the belt and begins to strangle the guard from behind. During the struggle a dagger falls from the inner-pockets of the guard and falls toward the girl. The guard, now sobering, head-butts Rob with the back of his head and knocks Rob to the ground in a daze. As Rob begins to recover from the blow he looks up to see the guard now standing over him. In that second there's a flash of red as the girl stabs the dagger through the neck of the guard, showering blood onto Rob's face and clothing.

The moment calmed, the two look closer to see that the guard was of high-birth and his missing would surely be noticed. Knowing that soon they would be the targets of the entire watch, they decided that it would be best if they left the city and did not look back. Quickly, they left via an exit by the meat vendors so the blood on their clothes would arise less suspicion. Once a couple miles from the city-entrance they decide to rest for the night, listening as bells signaled a city now on alert.

A week has passed since the murder and they are more acquainted with each other. Rob has confessed his affections for the girl and claimed that after the ordeal, he will be her protector. The girl chuckles and lets him play the knight that he's always wanted to be. As they are on the road they come to a tavern and decide to have an actual meal and a bed as opposed to foraged food and lying on the ground. When Rob goes to use the last of his coin to pay for the food and bedding for the night, the tavern keep lets them know that they are able to sleep and eat for free. Confused but tired enough to not care, the two adjourn to their room and have the first peaceful night of sleep they've had since the incident. When they wake they are immediately aware that there is little commotion for a tavern on the main road. They exit the building and are immediately greeted by a squadron of guards who were called the night prior by the tavern keeper who recognized the family crest. As it would turn out, Rob and his friend were prime suspects in the murder of the guard. His business with the blacksmith put him within

spitting distance of the crime, flakes of the restored crest were found at the scene and both families had reported both of them missing the very night of the murder.

Rob knew that there was no winning a fight against a squadron of armored guards with a dagger and plain clothes. Hoping to possibly come out ahead in a trial, Rob confesses to the murder; claiming that he killed the guard in defense of his compatriot. They arrest both of their suspects and begin back to the capitol. They stop at a military encampment for the night and chain the two to a metal pole in the center of camp.

The following morning Rob awakens to the sound of chains being removed from the pole followed by "no, just the girl." He sees his friend led to a nearby table. In the morning light, he also sees the same family crest of the murdered high-born guard on the nearby flags and tents. Mentally putting the pieces together, Rob realizes that it wasn't an arrest that the family was seeking, it was a bounty and they were not to be taken alive. He looks back to the table to see his failure. He is forced to watch as his friend is defiled and eventually killed. A guard who had participated in the debauchery comes over to a defeated Rob and flicks the blood of his friend into his face. This act breaks Rob and the blood rolls from his head into his eyes and he sees nothing but red.

It's now midday; there is a circle of ashes where the encampment tents and flags once stood. The ground is now a red mud littered with viscera and dented steel. In the center of it all is a broken and blood-stained Rob punching what remains of the last guard's skull. Bone from the shattered skull now lodged in his knuckles. The repeated *squelch* upon landing blows mixes with the chime of what little chains still remain attached to create a perverse chorus. This continues for another 6 hours until Rob sees two shadows cross his plain of vision. As the sun starts to set, he sees two silhouettes on a hill. One is a man holding a spear and the other is more feminine in nature. Still seeing red, Rob charges them. The larger silhouette readies his spear and trips the rushing Rob then impales him to the ground through his chest. The red disappears from Rob's eyes and he holds a hand out to the two silhouettes before passing out.

Rob's vision is black but he hears a faint voice "...I will not let you fall this day, To steel or Iron or Lead..." the voice fades. "Now rise again brave warrior! Cut down who dare oppose, And heed those very souls who seek our secret to expose." Rob opens his eyes and gasps for air; he is restrained by leather straps and notices he is in a tent. To Rob's right is a pale man holding a large spear and to his left, a woman whose hand is placed on his chest where the spear impaled him. The pale man readies his spear again to end Rob's life again should he make the wrong move. "Lead, stand down!" The woman then asks "who are you?" Rob thinks in silence, recalling everything that happened up until he was impaled. Looking to Lead, "whoever I was, you killed him." Lead smirks at this. The woman says her name is Malina or "Mali" for short and that she and Lead saw the body of the woman and how she was the only one intact at the site. "You cared for her?" asks Mali. Rob replies in a mix of anger and pain "I did, and I failed her." Mali and Lead realize that Rob is not the same person he was when he charged them and unlatch his bindings. Rob mutters, "Obzen." Mali and Lead share a glance of confusion. "My name is Obzen. My old life is over. The only thing I know is that I did obscene things and was perfectly content to do them."

Mali leads Obzen out of the tent followed by Lead who is still very much on guard with this new fellow. They lead Obzen through a camp filled with numerous other people. He notices

that they are all enjoying each other's company. They lead Obzen to a short, bearded man. Mali speaks, "Dracon, this is Obzen." The bearded man gives Obzen a look and then produces two decks of cards. "Your state of mind worries me, play this game of wits and then we'll see what to do from there." The game goes on for a while before Dracon eventually beats Obzen. Dracon then chuckles and calls for a drink. Confused, Obzen speaks "I lost, shouldn't I be killed again or something?" The short man laughs harder as he gets his drink handed to him. "Honestly, I just wanted to play a game of cards, your actions since you've arrived have given me no reason to mistrust you." Dracon stands, "Berserkers, we have a new member!" There is a bevy of cheers.

"State your name."

"Obzen!"