

FIRST DAY

a short story by

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I paused with the others, panting hard from recent exertion; our breath forming white clouds in the chill air. Snowflakes fell from the lead-grey skies as we stood there in a winter landscape; a thick blanket of snow draped over a silent forest.

I was the last man in a line of eight, so I took the opportunity to look back down the trail, at the twin channels engraved by our skis. The fresh tracks of startled animals also clear in the deepening snow. All was calm, peaceful, quiet, and almost surreal. It was a strange place for me to be; there was an underlying feeling of...something not quite right. I tried to remember.

I knew a few things about this, my first day with the new unit; I knew my name, Magnus; I knew I had been involved in desperate hand-to-hand fighting in a far-away, war-torn city the day before. But I didn't know the guys in this unit, nor the nature of our current mission. So, like them, I followed the Sergeant's lead. All would become clear - given time. That was something else I kind of knew.

It must have been snowing out here for most of the day, judging by the depth of the fresh snow around us, but we had stuck to the more sheltered trails where our skis could glide more easily.

Returning my gaze forwards, I studied the men. We all wore arctic camouflage kit and shouldered standard issue back-packs. The similarity ended there. Our weaponry was quite varied, but that was to be expected from a mercenary unit such as ours. Men like these had their favoured, trusted companions, kept them clean, oiled - and loved - for their lives depended on them.

There was a hand signal and we were off again, over the top of the rise, and soon gliding down towards the valley floor far below in the snow-obscured distance.

I continued my observations as we descended.

The Sergeant led the way, crouched low on swishing skis. Clipped to tightly buckled straps that crossed his body, was a pair of chrome-plated Uzi's. I could also see the an automatic pistol secured in a leather holster at his right hip. A few strands of blonde hair that were not contained by his helmet fluttered about his broad shoulders.

Next in line was the one called Bear. A huge man – hence his call-sign – who carried a massive multi-barreled machinegun slung across his back. So broad was his back, that I only caught glimpses of the Sergeant when the trail took a turn.

The rest of us were all pretty much armed with rifles, sub-machineguns and the odd pistol. But the

guy directly in front of me was Erik, the sniper, and he had a covered scope fixed to his rifle.

After an hour of gradual descent, the trees began to thin out, and we halted again.

The Sergeant and Bear went forwards a little way. The Sergeant raised his binoculars to study the ground ahead. They were in deep discussion.

I tapped Erik on the shoulder. He turned. A tight smile crept over his thin lips, but his grey eyes were cold – killer cold.

“Where we headed - exactly?” I asked, calmly.

“The Sarge knows, so that’s all I need to know.” he shrugged.

“Aren’t you even slightly curious?” I didn’t hide my frustration. “In my old unit we would--”

“Curiosity killed the cat, Private.” Bear’s gruff voice cut in.

He towered over us. I smiled a weak apology. He grinned back.

“If you want to survive your first day with us son, keep your voice down and your eyes peeled. Now get ready; we may be heading into a little trouble.” He nodded in the direction of our progress.

Erik and I looked ahead. The Sergeant had resumed his place at the head of the group, an Uzi now in one hand. He waited for Bear’s signal.

Bear obliged and we set off again. I swung my assault rifle around across by chest, barrel angled down. My pulse quickened. This was more like it.

We broke from the tree-line in two interweaving extended columns, and raced across an area of snow-covered pasture. We headed towards an old wooden bridge which spanned a narrow frozen river.

The Sergeant had just reached bridge when the enemy sprang their ambush.

Men rose from the snow, shrugging off white tarpaulin sheets that had concealed them, and opened fire with automatic weaponry.

“Ambush!” yelled Bear, a little too late.

Their opening salvo took down a couple of our guys near the front, but it soon became obvious that they were too trigger-happy to worry us once we retaliated.

The unit was in its element. The men moved... aimed... fired, choosing their targets as the ambushers blazed away indiscriminately. Men fell.

The fire-fight was over in seconds. Two of our men and maybe ten or twelve enemy lay in the blood-spattered snow. The contrast of colour was momentarily stark.

“Bear, Magnus; check them.” the Sergeant shouted from the bridge. “Erik; with me. Martens,

Brand; defensive positions by the bridge. Full alert – there may be more”.

We moved to comply with the orders.

Erik joined the Sergeant and they ski'd over the rickety bridge. Bear walked past me, touching my arm as he did.

“Check those guys over there first.”

He indicated a few soldiers lying together in a crumpled heap. I nodded and walked over to them, trusting that Martens and Brand were covering us.

There were three men, all about my age. They lay there – dead – in a tangle of arms, legs and guns. A crimson halo expanded from the shattered skull of one soldier. I was fairly sure I'd tagged him myself. A head shot - quite difficult under the circumstances. I took a deep breath and released it in a long, slow sigh, then bent to my task.

I checked all the bodies down one side of the field. There were no survivors. They had all been men of Nordic heritage by the look of them; elongated faces, pale skin, light eyes and hair. At least that was in keeping with our surroundings.

But I was still a little concerned over how we had not spotted them initially. I determined to raise the issue with Bear again.

I turned - and had to act fast to catch the rucksack that hit me square in the chest!

“Uh?” I grunted, “what—”

“Good catch, kid,” Bear grinned again. “Nine-

pouch C4 satchel charge with chemical fuses. It's yours now."

I looked at the satchel with undisguised trepidation, placing it gingerly onto the snow at my feet.

"Can you handle this as well?" asked Bead, throwing another package at me.

I caught this one by the canvas strap, and looked at the stencilling down the side of the green plastic box.

"Jesus Christ, a man-portable missile launcher!" I scowled at Bear. "What kind of mission is this?"

"Search... and destroy." he replied, and a low laugh rumbled in his throat as I stared at the case.

I sensed a different vibration, quickly looked around the field and held my hand up to halt Bear's laughter. He stopped, tilted his head to one side. Now we all heard it.

A low, thrumming noise with an accompanying high-pitched whine which could mean only one thing...

"Chopper!" yelled Martens from the bridge and pointed up the stream to where it disappeared into the forest.

Dipping down over the treetops flew an attack helicopter, twin machineguns blazing away. Two trails of bullets tore into snow, earth, the wooden

bridge and the flesh of the two men nearby.

“Bastard!” roared Bear, swinging his own multi-barrelled weapon around and squeezing the trigger.

Nothing happened.

“Damn!” he cursed, trying again with the same result. He stared ahead; a look of futility and rage twisting his features into an ugly mess.

I fumbled with the missile case, flipping catches, grabbing at the tubular content, letting the case fall away, priming and aiming at the chopper as it prepared for another attack.

I could hear Bear yelling wordlessly, blazing away with a submachine gun. I could hear the sharp crack of a rifle and small-arms fire from somewhere – probably Erik and the Sergeant – but all their bullets pinged off the chopper. Blocking this from my mind, I concentrated on aiming the missile. I fired.

I missed!

The pilot was good – very good. The missile left a trail of white vapour as it whipped past the cockpit.

“Damn!” shouted Bear again, “we’ve had it now.”

“No,” I tapped a label on the case, “it’s a *heat-seeker!*”

We looked up as the chopper bore down on us, opening fire once more. Behind it, the missile

scribed a sharp arc in the air and jetted for the helicopter's engine exhaust tubes.

“Get down!” I cried, and we dove into the snow a split-second before the deafening roar of destruction shook snow from the branches of trees within a hundred metre radius.

Debris fell to earth all around us, and I looked up to see the burning wreckage of the chopper no more than ten metres from where Bear and I lay in the already melting snow.

Bear was quickly on his feet, offering me a huge paw of a hand. I took hold and he hauled me up. He looked at me with open admiration. I bent my head to hide a smile and patted away snow from my trousers.

“Hey guys,” called Erik from the other side of the downed chopper, “the pilot's alive; bailed out just in time.”

I shouldered the pack of C4, and followed Bear as he ran over to where Erik stood over the prone body of the pilot.

Erik rolled the pilot over with his boot. The pilot's dark-visored helmet fell away to reveal a pain-wracked, but beautiful, face – a woman!

The three of us stood there, transfixed by her glamour. I seemed unable to act – uncaring even – as the gorgeous creature before me drew a revolver with one delicately manicured hand while all the time engaging us with those deep blue eyes.

She brought the gun up level with Erik's head.

A red hole appeared in her own temple before she could shoot and she fell to the ground like a felled sow. Her spell was broken; it must have been a spell.

We turned to see the Sergeant holster his gun.

“Be more careful.” was all he said.

“Yes Sarge.” I replied.

He stared at me, and I returned his gaze. I saw him as if for the first time. His helmet had been discarded at some point and his shoulder-length blonde hair framed a clean-shaven face that seemed hewn from granite. This man’s visage and whole demeanour was of supreme confidence, like he was born to lead, fight and kill men. He’d make a good Viking, I mused.

Yet there was a twinkle of humanity in those ice-blue eyes. As if to prove it, he smiled at me; a perfect white-toothed, genuine smile.

“Nice work soldier.”

“Thanks Sarge.”

Bear slapped me on the shoulder and grinned his enormous grin.

The Sergeant’s face hardened again; back to business. “Move out. Leave your skis; they’re no use from here on. And pick up the pace, we’re running out of time.”

He walked away towards the bridge.

Erik still stared down at the dead pilot. Bear placed an arm over Erik’s shoulders.

“Come on Erik, leave her be.”

“She was a real Valkyrie, Bear, a *real* one.” Erik muttered as Bear gently led him away.

“You’ll find your own one day, Erik.” Bear soothed.

I readjusted the C4 satchel and my weapons, took one last look at the carnage around me, and followed on after the others.

The four of us lay on a ridge, overlooking the valley floor. The Sergeant had his binoculars out again. He passed them along the line so we could all see the mission objective. I was the last to see it.

Nestled in the valley, perhaps four kilometres away was a large – a very large – wooden building. Mostly in shade by now as the sun lingered over the ridge opposite us, the hall was very reminiscent of a Viking hall, with a few modern adornments such as floodlights, various outbuildings and a garage.

A number of armed men in black fatigues patrolled the perimeter. Horses and snowmobiles were corralled and parked to the rear.

“It’s huge.” I admitted, impressed. “Very traditional; any Viking lord would have been proud of that place.”

“Mm,” agreed the Sergeant, “the owner is big on tradition - one of the last and greatest.”

“Looks like his bodyguards are with him.” added Bear.

“Won’t they have heard our gunfire and explosions?” I wondered. “Surely they’ll be on full alert by now.”

“I doubt it. The main battle rages on the far side of the valley, closer than we are.”

We listened and soon I could hear it; far off, unmistakable sounds of battle.

“But they *will* hear it when we –you – blow up the Hall.” continued the Sergeant.

I was slightly surprised; I thought I was just the transport for the satchel. He made it clear I was more than that.

“When we get down there, set charges at the base of the major structural timbers. No-one gets out in one piece - alive or otherwise.”

I nodded, and decided to press for a few more answers.

“So who exactly is our target, Sarge?”

“A very dangerous old man.”

“He has many names and many warriors.” Bear added.

“And he’s a master of disguise too.” said Erik.

“But you need not worry - we’re here to blow up every occupant of the building – the explosion does not have to be selective.” the Sergeant concluded, retrieving his binoculars. “Come on.”

We crawled back, away from the cliff edge.

We made the final descent to the Hall without incident; indeed, Bear reckoned the fight on the other side of the valley had drawn away most of the warriors from our side.

The guards posed no problem to Erik. He picked them off from range with his silenced rifle as the rest of us approached stealthily.

Once at the rear of the hall, I began readying a series of charges while Bear and the Sergeant took positions on opposite corners of the building.

From the periphery of my vision I saw a lone black horse moving slowly away from its fellows. But I paid it no heed, my task at hand requiring all my attention.

As I was placing the first charge near to a partially shuttered window, a commotion from within came to my ears. There were two distinct voices, one obviously the leader, the other an employee or servant perhaps.

“If that is so, then where is he?” demanded the leader.

“In the thick of the fighting, sire.” The servant sounded rather worried.

“Damn him to the depths of hell! And where is that other fool I have the misfortune to call son?”

“I know not, my lord.”

There was a sound of a fist striking timber and I felt the hall shake from the blow.

“Damn him too!” bellowed the leader.

I heard a gasp from my left and turned to see see Berar looking towards me. No, he was looking past me, towards...

“Thor! Watch out!” Bear shouted, as he broke into a lumbering run.

I swivelled to look at the other corner of the building, and I gasped in shock and horror.

Where the black horse had been grazing moments earlier now stood a tall, thin man, close to and behind the Sergeant – whose name was Thor I had just discovered. This newcomer had black hair scraped back into a pony tail, and wore a black leather coat with silver adornments. The horse had worn a silver decorated saddle and bridle I recalled. But it could not be!

He raised an ornate, wide-headed warhammer over his head in one hand. In his other he grasped the hilt of a vicious dagger – the two-foot blade gleamed in what little light remained of the day.

“Looking for something, brother?” he sneered, threatening to bring the hammer down upon Thor’s head.

Thor spun around with superhuman speed and in one swift movement he had the man’s wrist caught in a strong and painful grip. The hammer fell backwards and thudded into the ground. Thor’s left hand closed about the other’s throat.

“Hah!” Thor was triumphant. It was short-lived.

A few inches of the long knife suddenly projected from Thor’s back as his attacker plunged it to the hilt into his chest. Thor toppled backwards, dead before he hit the ground.

“Hah! to you,” choked the killer gleefully. “You lose this time, Thor.”

“Loki, you murdering, transmuting swine!” growled a barely recognizable voice as a large brown bear brushed past me and barrelled towards the dark-haired man.

Loki turned to face the bear, an automatic pistol now in his left hand.

“So says you, Ursus-kin!” Loki laughed. “But these rune-etched bullets will soon sort that out.”

Loki extends his arm and squeezes the trigger tightly. The fourteen-round clip emptied into Bear’s charging body in seconds, sealing his fate.

But the huge lycanthrope had enough strength for one final supreme effort. He leaps into the air and crashed down upon his killer. Loki’s cry abruptly ended in a sickening squelch and crunch of splintering bones. Bear lies dead. One of Loki’s legs twitches, then he too lay still.

I crouched there in total, utter shock. What in hell had I just witnessed? Animals transforming into men. Men transforming into animals? Was I insane? I thought I must be – or worse.

But the fight was not over.

Erik yelled my name and looked up to see him skidding down a slope towards the hall. He gestured to the open window.

“Blow up the hall! Throw the satchel through the window—“

His instructions were cut off as a number of arrows struck him about the body. He managed a few stumbling steps then he fell to the ground, his beloved rifle falling from lifeless fingers.

Warriors poured around both sides of the building. Most wore long chain hauberks and helms of a time long ago, gripping swords and spears. Others wore the black fatigues we encountered earlier. They were all moving towards me, and moving fast.

The next few moments seemed to proceed in slow motion.

I looked towards the open window – fully opened by the man now silhouetted by the lights from within. I caught a fleeting impression of him; an old man, white haired, an expression of rage upon his face, his one eye sparkled with venom – the other nothing but a deep dark pit of evil blackness.

With a speed born of desperation, I set a charge and hurled the satchel into the building. The old man flailed at the bag as it flew past him.

I dove for what meagre protection the earth could offer as fiery death and destruction washed

over me. My ears rang and sang in symphony with the explosion that shook the hall – and the men within and without – to thousands of shattered pieces.

I rolled over onto my back, to extinguish the flames and view the aftermath of my efforts.

And the sun set over the hills, and darkness descended upon a scene to rival hell itself.

I laughed – a grim sound that startled me. I laughed again. The relief was almost too much. A tear formed... and was forgotten as I heard a new sound.

A horn – from afar. Then another, and yet another. Still more sounded, until the whole valley resounded to their ominous call. Then abruptly they ceased.

I saw torches, lanterns, and heard – through near-ruptured ears - the voices of the men who carried them. They were many, clad in various fashions of soldiers from many periods of human conflict.

With an effort, I gained my feet, stooped and hoisted the nearest weapon I could reach – an AK-47 assault rifle. I was prepared to die fighting; I worked the slide and took up a firing stance.

They saw me. They stopped. And... they cheered! They all cheered – for me! Like I was the hero; I had won this day - for them!

And then, I took an involuntary step backwards as more supernatural strangeness sought to drown my floundering sanity.

The old man pushed himself free of the debris! He was unharmed, his clothes pristine. It was impossible; he should be a charred husk at best! But there he stood before me. And now he walked towards me through the ruins of his once magnificent home.

But as he strode, there was more madness. For, piece by shattered piece, the demolished Hall was put back together. Shards of all sizes flew from their resting places to reform. Slowly, the building took its original shape. Until, as the old man halted but three paces from where I stood, the Hall was rebuilt exactly as it had been.

No, not exactly; there was a huge oak door behind him now.

He looked me up and down. The rifle hanging forgotten in my loose grip, I stared back at him – in awe. He must be a god!

He laughed at me. No derision, but more akin to grudging approval. And as he spoke, I realised he was the leader I had overheard earlier.

“Congratulations, warrior,” he said in his gruff tones. “I see you are one of the new generation; those who prefer modern firearms to the traditional sword and spear.”

“Who... who are you?” I managed with a dry throat. “What is this place?” Somehow, I think I

knew the answers to both questions.

“Who... am...I?” The old man glared at me as if I was a fool, then his expression slowly softened – a little.

“Ah, I see! Even more remarkable, your success! I, my young warrior, am Odin, the All-father... You are in Valhalla... and this is my Great Feasting Hall.”

The huge door swung open at his gesture and I stared dumfounded and open-mouthed at the scene revealed to me.

Vikings - yes Vikings - ate and drank within the revitalized hall. A great banquet was laid out upon planks rested atop sturdy trestles. Men laughed and sang in great booming voices, among the trilling of buxom serving wenches.

“Val- Valhalla...” I stammered.

I saw Thor and Loki sharing a drink and a joke. I saw Bear ripping off great chunks of meat from a huge leg of pork, his teeth sharp and pointed. And I saw Erik, nestled between two near-naked women who wore winged helms and took turns to feed him sugared fruits.

The significance slowly dawned upon me; the memories of my recent life – and death – returned to my mind as treacle into a bowl. The fight in the city streets, the rocket attack, the blinding light, and then the cold snow.

Thor appeared at my side, took the rifle from my hand and replaced it with a tankard. He

clanked his own against mine and drank deeply. I followed suit, still a little bemused, but recovering fast. Thor grinned at me. I grinned back.

Odin laughed, clapped us both on the shoulder and wandered away into the hall.

“Ale! Fetch me ale!” he bellowed.

I watched him go and shook the last of the uncertainty from my head.

“Battles all day, feasting and wenching all night... “ I took another mouthful of ale. “I think I might get to like it here.”

“Of course you will,” Thor agreed, “You didn’t do too badly for your first day, lad - to say you’re dead!”

And we laughed as we walked into the Great Hall. The huge door closed gently behind us.

THE END