

At Any Cost

By JonaWolf

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Kayman's feet left the hard surface of the road and found their way into the long grasses that grew so thick in the ditches. He wasn't familiar with this area but he felt the need to escape for awhile, to have nothing but the sounds of nature fill his head after so many long hours of marching on a hot and dusty road. The roar and clatter of passing vehicles and machinery still rang loud in his head as he walked slowly through the grass. His feet found a narrow game trail and they followed it as it wound through the grass and through a low hedge of bushes. The soft ground under his boots was a glorious sensation after hours of marching on a hard packed road.

He paused for a moment on the other side of the hedge and stood quietly for a moment, panting slightly and his ears twitching this way and that as insects buzzed and hidden birds chirped cheerfully in the early evening light. Suddenly the birds grew quiet and the roar of an engine grew loud behind him. Kayman flattened his ears as the clank of tracks and pulleys rang loud before slowly fading away. A pall of dust rose over the hedge and a few faint shouts arose as some of his comrades hurled insults after the driver of the vehicle. A grimace crossed Kayman's muzzle and he started walking again. He had to get farther away from that damned road if he wanted any peace. Those poor bastards would be setting up camp now, panting up a storm in the sun while they struggled with heavy equipment and supplies. He was glad he wasn't there with them even though his conscience nagged at him for not helping them out. Fortunately the privileges of rank allowed him the freedom to escape such menial tasks if the need arose. The grunts under his command likely wouldn't be happy to know what he was doing instead of helping them set up camp but that was their problem, not his. Still, Kayman felt slightly guilty about taking the easy way out. His sense of duty had always been strong. He picked up his pace and headed through the grass, shifting his slung rifle to his other shoulder as he walked.

It was a nice and warm late summer day, too warm for marching and once he was out of earshot of the road he slowed again, letting his body cool down slowly. Soon he had stopped panting and was breathing easier as he walked easily through rolling hills and scattered hardwood trees. Sunlight sparkled through leafy branches caressed by a gentle wind and a smile appeared on Kayman's muzzle for the first time in what felt like days.

The trees thinned out ahead of him and soon Kayman found himself standing at the edge of a farmer's field. The view from this point was spectacular. He had lucked out and found his way to the crest of a hill. The land below stretched out in a mosaic of fields and scattered groups of trees along a winding blue river. Here and there an old farmhouse could be seen in the distance, nestled among fields that varied from green and yellow all

the way to harvest ready autumn gold. Kayman sat down at the edge of the field at the crest of the hill, eased off his pack and rifle from his weary shoulders and let the memories take him away as the long grasses gently waved around him.

He remembered days like this when he was a pup. His parents owned a small farm and on those rare occasions when free time could be found between chores, he and his brother would go exploring the fields and forests. Happy memories of chasing each other through the grass, swimming in the creek and hunting rabbits flowed back to him as he leaned back in the sweet smelling grass and enjoyed the scenery. Sometimes the two of them were late getting back home and their father would give them heck for being out playing instead of doing their chores. He was always gentle about it though and you could see it in his eyes, ears and tail that he wasn't really mad at them. He understood that there had to be time to play among all of the work. Mother would always laugh at their silly games and give them something good to eat and drink before shooing them out of the house and back into the fields. Life was so much simpler back then. Not easier by any means but that life had a sort of idealistic simplicity that made it easier to remember fondly when far away and in different times. With the arrival of the Invaders, everything had changed and that life had been shattered into a million pieces.

Kayman thought back to his brother and his mood abruptly sobered. The two of them had always been very close. Ronin was the elder by three seasons and Kayman had always looked up to him. His older brother had always been a great companion and a valuable source of information about everything from the best ways to hunt deer to growing crops, even to the secrets of the females. Kayman's world had been turned upside down the day that two of the local militia had shown up and taken him away with them. There had been news of Invaders from the east but he had not paid much attention to the stories until the soldiers showed up at the door one early winter afternoon. He remembered his mother crying hysterically when they took Ronin away. His father had held her tightly, a knowing look in his eyes as they took his eldest son off to war. Ronin had looked on in confusion as his brother walked away, flanked by the two soldiers. He didn't understand exactly what was going on and thought that his brother would return in a few months. He hadn't realized that it was the last time he would ever see him.

The next years passed quietly and an undercurrent of sadness became his family's constant companion. Mother seemed to have lost part of herself when Ronin had been taken away. The news from the east kept coming in and most of the time it wasn't good. The invaders kept coming in huge numbers. Whole towns were wiped off of the map and the land churned up as great battles were fought. Soldiers and civilians alike weren't safe from the weapons of the invaders. So many had died and the numbers kept climbing. The invaders seemed bent on wiping them out completely.

Sporadic letters made their way back home from Ronin, often months apart. The ones received while he was training were his usual happy and joking self. As the months passed, his mood changed and the letters seemed to have been written by someone else. They were darker, sombre, even hopeless. It seemed that Ronin was growing weary of

the hard life he found himself living. It was almost like he had to force himself to write. He gave little news of the war other than saying that the fighting was fierce.

That winter had passed slowly. Kayman felt lost without his older brother to keep him company. His mother stared out the window over the snowy landscape for long periods; her laughter seemed to have dried up and blown away with in the winter winds. His father worked quietly, his usual talkative manner silenced by worry.

There was one bright spot that winter. Kayman met a young female from a neighbouring town and began courting her. Her name was Charen and she was everything he'd ever dreamed of in a female. Kind and compassionate, yet possessed of a sense of humour that never failed to keep him entertained, she had silkiest pelt of midnight black he'd ever seen and beautiful, tall ears. Her eyes were a deep ice blue and she was always quick to smile and laugh and wag that long, beautiful tail of hers. He'd known from the moment that he first laid eyes on her that she was the one he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. She was shy at first but soon responded to his attentions. They were mated in the spring in a big celebration and some happiness finally returned to what was left of his family.

His mate's parents had given the young couple a small piece of land and everybody pitched in to help them build a house. Kayman began to farm this small piece of land with some help from his father. That first year was a hard one. The farming wasn't good that summer. The crops failed in a drought and even Charen's huge vegetable garden suffered under the burning sun. Autumn closed in and the snows came late to the frozen earth. Kayman hunted hard and often in the face of a hungry winter to come. He and Charen got by, barely. Kayman had been lucky enough to bring home a few deer to ease the hungry months. Spring came late the next year and news from Ronin had all but dried up. One day late in that spring, an official military letter had arrived at his parent's place, delivered by a stone faced Captain in full dress uniform. In terse military script, the letter stated that Ronin was missing in action and presumed dead. The news had nearly shattered his family. Mother had taken it especially hard but father seemed to have already resigned himself to the fact that he would never see his eldest son again. Kayman remembered feeling numb at the news. It had taken him days to fully understand that his brother was now lost to him. When the realization finally burst upon him, the tears just didn't want to stop. Charen stayed with him those days, strong in her devotion to her mate. It was her empathy that had allowed him to put the pain behind him and celebrate the life his older brother had led.

As the weeks passed, the bad news kept coming in from the east as the Invaders crawled closer. Several friends that Kayman had known over the years fought and died in great battles that seemed worlds away from the quiet farm that he shared with his mate. Kayman ploughed his land and planted his seeds, all the while wondering what the world was coming to when unknown outsiders seemed bent on the destruction of his entire species.

Another summer slowly grew over the land, a better summer this time. The crops grew and flourished under warm sunshine and plentiful rains. The harvest was bountiful and there was more than enough food in the stores to last over the winter as summer faded away. Kayman hunted again as autumn set in and managed to add some meat to their stores of vegetables and grains. As winter took the land in a snowy grip, Charen surprised him with the news that she was pregnant. It was one of the happiest, yet scariest moments of Kayman's life. He hugged his mate long and hard when she gave him the news and he felt tears of happiness well up in his eyes. Everything was going so well and he and his mate enjoyed happy times between them. Unfortunately it that happiness was not to last the winter.

It was exactly two years to the day that Ronin had been taken that the soldiers showed up at his door, this time for him. He had just turned nineteen years old and it was a day that he would never forget.

There had been a knock on the door one snowy afternoon and Charen had paused in her cooking to answer it. Kayman had been working away in the neighbouring room, building a crib for the pup that was to arrive in the spring. He'd not thought much of the knocking since visitors to their small home weren't that uncommon. At first he'd thought it was another birthday well wisher and he stopped his work and headed to join his mate at the door to greet the visitors. At Charen's soft cry his stomach had lurched and he stopped cold when he entered the room. A cold draft swirled in through the open doorway, crawling along the floor and pushing the heat from the stove back into the corners. It was snowing gently outside, a beautiful, pristine snowfall of large fluffy flakes that seemed to take forever to reach the ground. Two figures stood outside, the heavy snowflakes gathering on their shoulders and melting slowly into their forest green uniforms. Twin pairs of yellow eyes and perked ears regarded him coolly and Kayman knew his time had come. The faces of the soldiers remained expressionless as they asked him for his identification. Kayman couldn't keep his paws from shaking when he produced his official government ID card. It was plucked from his numb fingers, examined with military precision and handed back to him. He was informed that under the authority of the Conscription Act he was to be taken into military custody and sent to a local camp to begin his training for the war against the Invaders. The look of helpless despair that took over Charen's beautiful face as the soldiers droned on would remain burned into his mind until the end of his days.

Kayman had long known that these soldiers would one day come for him as they had for his elder brother. He'd tried not to think about it as the months passed but the increasingly bad news out of the east did nothing to ease his worries. He'd hoped that being mated and having a pup due in the spring would put him off the conscription list but he knew deep down that they would still come. The invaders fought their way closer with each passing day and every available male was being called into active duty in an effort to defend their territory.

The soldiers didn't give him much time to get his affairs in order before he left. They gave him two hours and then stepped outside into the snow to stand guard and leave the stunned couple in peace.

Those two hours had passed far too quickly. They were last two hours, it turned out, of a life he had lived and enjoyed for nineteen years.

As Kayman bid a heart wrenching, tearful goodbye to an almost hysterical Charen, he recalled that cold day two years ago when the soldiers had escorted his brother away from their home and off to a war from which he would never return. Was his fate to be the same as his brother's? He remembered being so numb as he watched the clock tick away the last few minutes of his freedom. There were so many things that he just didn't have the time to do. He'd never even had the time to say goodbye to his mother and father. He'd left a hastily scribbled note for them that Charen would deliver into their paws as soon as she was able. He wondered if his mother would survive the news of her only remaining son going off to a war that had already claimed her eldest child.

As the soldiers led him away from his home and mate, the sounds of Charen's sobbing behind him tore at his heart. He wanted nothing more than to turn back and run to her, taking her in his arms and wiping her tears away. He wanted to be there when their pup was born and he wanted to hold the newborn in his arms and revel in the miracle of life. Most of all he wanted to be there with Charen at his side, watching and helping as the pup grew and matured. Such things drew farther and farther from his reach with every step he'd taken away from home. Just before he rounded a corner and went out of sight, an anguished howl reached his ears from far behind him. It was Charen, singing a song of mourning for him and for their shattered hopes and dreams. Kayman stopped and his shoulders sagged. He choked back a sob and wrestled with the impulse to run back to his mate. Even the soldiers' stony composure broke down briefly. He saw their ears flick back and a brief expression of sadness crossed the face of the soldier on his right. The soldiers hadn't been entirely heartless. They'd allowed him a quiet moment to collect his feelings before gently prodding him to get him moving again. The trio moved along slowly and as they rounded the bend and drew out of sight of Kayman's home, he'd walked away from his old life and into a tunnel that had deepened and darkened as the months passed.

Kayman sighed, pulling his knees up to his chest and hugged them tightly. The sun was warm against his pelt and he closed his eyes for a moment, breathing deeply of the fresh country air. He terribly missed that old life of his. He missed that simple existence of farming and hunting and most of all he missed his mate and the pup he'd yet to hold in his arms. Intense sadness suddenly took a hold of him and his entire body sagged like a deflated balloon. Would Charen even want him back? He shook his head slowly from side to side. He was not the same person he once was. Nearly three years of war had seen

to that. He felt he really didn't know that old life anymore and the people that lived in it. Sometimes he even found it hard to believe that he had been part of it. He understood now his brother's weary and depressing letters and why they had slowly dried up to a trickle before ceasing altogether. He too had been finding it more and more difficult to write to his loved ones waiting for him back home. There was a gulf between them now that words could no longer bridge. He read their letters and knew how much they cared for him but they seemed so far away from him now, and that distance grew with each passing day. It was not something he liked to think about. He'd learned that the constant fighting and death changed a person in ways that weren't easy to understand. One can only see so many friends die in horrible ways before something inside of them dies as well. Kayman felt the emptiness that lay in his soul and had a moment of transparent fear at what he had become. With trembling paws he pulled a small photo from his breast pocket. He carried it there wherever he went as a reminder of why he fought the Invaders that forced their way inexorably into their lands. The photo was tattered and ragged around the edges despite the loving care with which he handled it. A soft smile appeared on his muzzle as he gazed at it and for a moment he brightened up. Charen must have spent quite a pretty penny on that photograph. It had been taken with one of the first runs of true colour film and every time he looked at it he imagined the she was real enough for him to touch. If he concentrated hard enough, he could even recall her sweet scent and hear her beautiful voice calling his name.

The photo had been taken in late spring. There were green grasses and a few flowers to be seen in the background. The trees were out in full leaf and the sky was a perfect, clear blue. Charen was down by the lake, sitting on the sun warmed grass. She looked happy; her blue eyes were smiling and her muzzle was parted in a happy grin. Her black fur had a healthy sheen under the spring sunlight. Kayman's eyes clouded as he became lost in thought and memory. Cradled in his mate's lap was the pup he had fathered but had yet to meet. The little one was reaching playful paws up to her mother's muzzle, a happy smile on her little face. She had her mother's eyes but her father's grey and black markings. Kayman gently stroked a finger over the photo. He loved those two more than anything in the world. The little one Charen had named Kirlyn after her sister that had died when she was just a pup. Kayman smiled. It was a fitting name for such a beautiful little female. He hoped one day he would be reunited with his mate and get to know the little one he had left behind.

A frown came to Kayman's muzzle as the familiar empty sadness returned. The male that Charen had mated was not the same one that sat morosely here in the grass. The years of fighting had not been kind to him. Shrapnel had sheared off the top of his right ear at the halfway mark and the last six inches of his tail had been a casualty of the same grenade blast. A long scar ran along the side of his muzzle, courtesy of another piece of shrapnel in another battle. The little fur that had regrown over that scar had come back in pure white but there was a bald patch behind his nose where the fur would never grow again. The middle finger on his right hand was a ruined stump. It had been knocked off at the first knuckle in a burst of machine gun fire that had killed or seriously injured several of those in his rifle company as they ran for cover during an ambush. It was a wonder to him then that he hadn't been hit again. No longer was he the young and handsome male he

had once been and he wondered how Charen would react to his appearance. Would she accept who he had become or would he see a look of shock and disgust on her beautiful face?

Kayman sat motionless for a long moment, the precious photo cradled gently in his fingers. Deep down he knew he would probably never see his mate again, that he would never know his child. The war was not going well and the casualties kept growing as the Invaders pushed them back. Kayman knew that he was on borrowed time and that he was lucky to still be counted among the living. The Invaders were just too many, and their weapons too devastating. Almost every battle fought was won by that hated enemy and Kayman wondered how much more his soldiers could take. Supplies of food and water were sporadic at best. Munitions weren't much better, on several occasions they had literally been reduced to counting every single shot. Almost all of their equipment and weapons were wearing out or being destroyed faster than they could be replaced. The supply of replacement soldiers was drying up as well. New recruits were usually on either the young or old ends of the spectrum of conscription. Kayman found it especially hard to watch the young males barely into adulthood die horribly on the fields of battle. Far too many lives were being cut short just as they were getting started.

With a resigned sigh, Kayman tucked his precious photo reverently back into the breast pocket of his uniform. He pushed himself to his feet, shouldered his rifle and his pack and took one last look at the quiet, untouched countryside that lay below him. It took supreme effort for him to turn around and head back into the emptiness that had become his life.

Halfway back to camp he ran into a young lance-corporal that had been sent out to look for him. The youngster looked scared stiff at meeting him. The poor soldier's eyes were wide, his ears back and his tail knocking about around his knees. Kayman guessed he couldn't have been much older than sixteen seasons. Far too young to be dragged from home and into a war that would likely end his young life. After a few false starts at addressing him, the corporal informed him that he was wanted at headquarters. Apparently there was another battle brewing as the Invaders drew close to a nearby town. Kayman thanked the corporal for the news and left him standing uncertainly in the trees, his mouth half open as his superior walked quickly away. Kayman felt a bit bad for the youngster but he needed to be alone for a bit longer. If another big battle was in the works, that young male was almost as good as dead. Kayman would rather he remain nameless to him. Seeing horribly mangled bodies was less painful when they weren't people you knew. The last three years had taught him that hard lesson, and it hadn't been an easy one. Far too many friends and comrades had gone back to their homes and loved ones in a box. He was one of only a few left in the brigade that had been in the field for nearly three years. The rest had been killed or wounded and it came as a surprise to Kayman that he could hardly remember their faces anymore. They were like ghosts to him now, the memories of them fading away like the morning mist under the warmth of the sun. Some days he questioned whether they had even existed at all.

Kayman walked the rest of the way back to camp with the outside world held at bay by the emptiness within him. He didn't even feel his feet hitting the ground nor did he hear

the vehicles that roared past him once he reached the road. He gravitated to the tent containing HQ and barely acknowledged the sentry standing guard at the door.

The briefing dragged on almost forever. Kayman only half listened to the battle plans, his experienced mind picking up on only the important pieces of what the aged general was droning on interminably about. He didn't much like what he was hearing.

The Invaders had broken through a defensive line a few kilometres ahead and the surviving troops had been hastily pulled back to a safer location. Another defensive line was hurriedly being formed through the nearby town and all available personnel and equipment were to be thrown into battle against the Invaders in an effort to buy some time so reinforcements could arrive. Another battlegroup was two days travel away and with the help of those troops there was a small chance that they could hold their ground though the cost in bodies and equipment would likely be steep. Kayman could smell the uncertainty in the room. No one had any false hopes of victory. This was a last ditch effort, a plan to stall the Invaders long enough so more civilians could be evacuated and sent out of the reach of the war. Something had to be done, they all knew it. The Invaders did not leave any survivors nor did they take any prisoners. Recent intelligence had made light of the fact that the enemy believed that Kayman's kind were abominations, horrible creatures that must be destroyed and the land cleansed of their defiling presence. They were fanatical in their beliefs that only their kind had the right to exist. They fought like demons and never surrendered, often taking their own lives when capture became imminent. Kayman thought back to his mate and his pup waiting patiently for him on their small farm. The invaders were closer than ever to that sanctuary and he knew that they too would fall to the Invaders if the tide against them could not be stopped soon. His heart lurched at the thought of what those horrible creatures would do to those he loved more than anything else. He'd seen enough bodies horribly mangled and mutilated at the paws of the enemy.

Orders were given out to the individual commanders and Kayman listened with a sinking heart to the battle plan. His company was ordered to take up defensive positions near the center of the town, using the old stone buildings to their advantage in any way possible. They were to be right on the front lines, the very first line of defence against the Invaders as they advanced upon the city and they were to hold their ground at all costs. Kayman felt hollow, like an empty husk ready to blow away in the wind as the General droned on. He knew that his experience would prove invaluable on the frontlines and that was precisely the reason why his company had been chosen to be the anvil upon which the hammer of the enemy would first strike. Kayman's ears sagged and he stared down at his feet for a moment. His soldiers would pay a heavy price in blood in this battle but they had little choice in the matter. The enemy had to be stopped, and at any cost.

The briefing broke up with a salute and a prayer for victory to whatever Gods might still be listening. Kayman felt a deep fear within his soul as he left HQ and rejoined his rifle company. The battle that loomed in the near future hung over him like a dark cloud. He knew it was a nearly hopeless effort but he also knew that there was no choice but to fight. To give up would be to accept the extinction of their entire species and Kayman knew

that both he and his soldiers would not give up the fight while there was still breath left in their bodies.

He called his company to attention before him and did a quick inspection. There were a few new faces among the twenty that looked up to him as Captain. He paused in front of the new recruits. So young, barely more than pups. He could see the fear in their eyes and saw how a couple of them could barely keep their ears still as they stood at attention in their clean new uniforms. The pungent scent of fear drifted through the company and Kayman tried hard not to let the despair that brewed up within him show on his face. He knew that many of those that stood before him would not live through the impending battle. He sighed and forced that thought away. The troops needed confidence and seeing the hopelessness that had gripped their commander would destroy what little morale they had left. Kayman composed himself and stalked up and down the line once more. The more experienced of his remaining soldiers had a haunted look in their eyes. They knew as well as their Captain did that the battle that loomed on the horizon would see the ends of many of them.

Scared as they were, Kayman was proud of his soldiers. They had fought fiercely in the face of hopeless odds. They bled and died on the fields of battle without complaint for every single one of them understood what was at stake. They all knew that the fight was all that that they had left. The fate of their entire species would be decided on the battlefield and that gave them the desperate tenacity they needed to keep fighting in the face of insurmountable odds. These males, young or old, inexperienced or veteran, they were brave beyond their understanding and unabashedly selfless on the fields of battle. They gave their lives without hesitation for each other, for their families and for the land on which they had grown and lived. Kayman nodded and concluded his inspection. He stepped back from his soldiers and gave the command for them to stand at ease. His yellow eyes slowly roved over the group, searching every face. These soldiers had earned his respect, and he theirs. Kayman saluted them earnestly and began his short speech.

The speech was a pre battle ritual that Kayman had started on the eve of his first battle in command of a rifle company. It had seemed like so long ago he had been given that command, but in reality it had been barely two seasons. How things had changed since then. No longer was he the uncertain, inexperienced youngster he had once been.

Kayman's speech began with him telling his soldiers that he was proud of them and the strength they had showed in the face of such adversity. He went on to tell them that their friends and families back home were proud of them and that while the hopes for survival of an entire species rested squarely on their shoulders he told them to try not to let such weighty problems get to them. There was little they could do about it. Their only hope was to fight, to push back the Invaders. Only then would their families be free from harm and their species be safe from extermination. Here he paused for a moment and paced back and forth before his soldiers. He went on to warn them that the fight that awaited them was no easy task. A defensive line was being formed and it had to be held at all costs lest the invaders break into the heartland of their country and attack defenceless civilian populations.

At this point in the speech, Kayman paused to let the reality of that statement sink in. He could see the realization enter their eyes in short order. They were thinking about the families and friends back that they had left behind them. Kayman clenched his teeth as sadness brewed up within him. The same thoughts were never very far from his mind. Taking a deep breath, Kayman continued his speech. He told his soldiers that the Invaders were smart, their weapons and equipment far better than their own and their battle plans crafty. Even so, they could be defeated, this hated enemy, though it was a difficult and costly task. He had smelled their fear and seen them run from the fields of battle with his own eyes. He had counted the smashed and broken corpses they had left behind and let loose a howl of victory as they were routed. Strong this enemy was, but they were not invincible. Fight well he told them, and die well, he added. He would see all of them again in the halls of their ancestors, and every single one of them was worthy of the places that waited for them there. Stay strong, he told them and make the Invaders rue the day they had landed on their shorelines.

Kayman finished his speech with a phrase so ancient that its origins were lost in the sands of time. Eat, drink, and be merry, he told them, for tomorrow we die. With a salute he then turned his soldiers loose for a bit of much needed revelry. They would be sober by the time battle called, well most of them would be anyways. Those who weren't, well, they would have to fight not only the Invaders, but their hangovers as well. Kayman wouldn't hold it against them. He knew well what war and fear did to a person.

While his soldiers partied and enjoyed themselves as best as they could considering their circumstances, Kayman wandered slowly through their midst. He had a drink or two and talked with a few that he had fought with before. The rest he simply watched, fighting away the sadness as he did so. In two days many of these soldiers would be either dead or wounded. It was a horrible thing to think about, how young life could so quickly and easily become gruesome death. Barely holding his despair at bay, Kayman walked unsteadily away from the party and found his tent.

Sleep did not come easily to him that night. It rarely did before a big battle. It was one of the things he'd learned to live with over the last three years. The party continued on through most of the night without him and Kayman couldn't stop think about the family he'd left behind. He spent more than a couple hours that night staring at that precious photograph of his mate and daughter, dreaming about what might have been. He had a bad feeling about the battle that loomed on the horizon and he couldn't help but wonder if his time had come. When he started thinking about it, he knew should have been dead a long time ago. A healthy dose of luck and a bit of skill had kept him otherwise but he understood that it was only a matter of time before his luck ran out and an enemy bullet or shell found his mark. Kayman sighed and felt most of the life go right out of him. He knew that he would probably never see his mate and child again, not in this lifetime anyway. That thought caused him great pain and he felt the tears grow in his eyes. He clutched the photo to his chest and the tears began to flow freely. He fought for them, he bled and suffered so that they would not know fear or pain at the paws of the enemy. If he could spare them that, all of the last three years of fear and despair would be worth it. He

would give up his life in an instant to keep them safe, even if it meant that he would go to his ancestors without seeing his mate again or watching his beautiful daughter grow up.

For a long while Kayman lay still and quiet, fighting back the emotions that brewed up within him. The sounds of revelry still continued outside and he wondered what thoughts would roll through the minds of his soldiers when the fun ended and the silence closed in. Did they fear the future as much as he did? Did they understand that their young lives might end horribly in barely a day's time? Most of all he wondered if they would be ready to fight tooth and claw against the Invaders, knowing that defeat was almost inevitable. He rolled over on to his side and stared emptily at the wall of his tent. Sleep finally took him and the photo tumbled from his limp fingers. Instead of darkness and despair, Kayman dreamed happy dreams that night. Dreams of a beautiful spring day down by the lake with his mate and pup played through his mind. Happy cries and Charen's laughter rang through the air as he played with Kirlyn on the shores, chasing butterflies through the grass, and a smile grew on Kayman's muzzle as he slept. For the first time in a long, long time, he remembered what it was like to be happy.

The battle had gone better than expected and silence had returned to smother the town. The Invaders had been repelled and the sounds of battle had faded into the east as they pulled back to regroup their survivors. The sun was out and a gentle breeze stirred the air, but the town below had not survived the battle. Rubble was strewn everywhere and in places it was hard to tell where the streets had been. Burnt out vehicles still smoldered in the afternoon sun, sending black pillars of smoke spiraling up into the blue sky. Here and there were scattered the casualties of battle, green and grey clad forms lying deathly still amid the rubble of smashed buildings. Grey stone glistened red in the sun, stained by the blood of those who had paid the ultimate price. The occasional cry of a wounded soldier could be heard among the broken buildings and soon the first sign of life appeared in the shattered town. Two green clad figures with pointed ears and long furry tails worked their way through slowly the rubble. White armbands identified them as medics. They carried a stretcher between them and here and there they paused near still figures to check for signs of life. When they came to the center of the town they paused once more. Behind a pockmarked remnant of a wall lay two motionless green clad figures. A destroyed Invader tank still smoldered a short distance away. Several of the enemy lay dead near the inert hulk, their grey uniforms charred black by the heat from the explosion and fire. Several other enemy corpses lay near at paw and the two green clad soldiers were nearly buried under a mountain of empty brass shell casings. A damaged machine gun lay beside them, still pointing at the burnt out Invader tank and the dead enemies beyond. Of the two friendly soldiers, one was young, no more than sixteen seasons. One of the medics checked the young one's neck for a pulse and shook his head sadly when he found none. The other medic's ears and tail sagged at the news and he moved to check out the other soldier. That one had fallen face down over the youngster's legs. It looked almost as if he had put himself in front of the young soldier in an effort to protect him. He

had absorbed several bullets before his end had come. His pistol was still clenched in one paw and judging by the glittering shell casings and empty magazines at his side, he had fought until his very last bullet. When the medics rolled the other soldier onto his back, they saw that the youngster had a crude tourniquet above a nasty wound on one leg. The medics looked at each other, a knowing look in their eyes. The other soldier had tried to save the youngster, protecting him with his body from enemy fire until he met his end. This other soldier was older, a Captain, a commander of a rifle platoon. His name was printed in blocky letters on the left breast of his uniform and it was easily read as he lay on his back and stared up at the sky with half-lidded eyes. It read: CAPT. KAYMAN MILLER. The medics nodded sadly to each other. There was nothing they could do here. They left the corpses behind them and went in search of survivors.

Silence settled over the town once again after the medics departed and Kayman's dead eyes stared emptily into the blue sky above. A butterfly fluttered down out of the blue and settled on the remnants of the stone wall by his head. It sat there for a moment, wings flapping lazily before it fluttered over the wall and disappeared amongst the ruins. A shaft of sunlight managed to crawl over the wall and lit up Kayman's dead face as he stared unseeing up at the sky. There was a half smile on his muzzle and he looked peaceful, almost happy that the end had come and his battles were finally over. A small, bloodstained photo lay beside him on the rough stone among scattered shell casings that glittered brightly in the sunlight. The photo fluttered momentarily in the wind, suddenly taking flight and swirling around to land on the dead soldier's chest for a moment before the wind picked it up once more and carried it over the wall and out of sight.

End.