

'The Watcher'
by Cian O'Farrell

They had marched for fourteen hours that day. The sun had been high in the sky and had cast a hellish heat down upon the marching soldiers. They had all marched in unison; same step, same dull green uniforms, same chest plates, same tin helmets and same dirty boots, all stepping in perfect unison. They had the same rifles in the crux of their arms and the same knives at their sides. As they made camp, an uneasy tension could be felt everywhere. People talked in hushed tones as they pitched tents or sat around fires. They all knew that their enemy could be waiting for them around any damn corner.

As they marched, they had passed by many ruins of the old world, many bombed out and abandoned buildings along the pothole-filled and ash-covered tarmac. The Battalion marching had been an unnatural break in the usual calm of the wasteland. They were miles from home now. Many thought to themselves that they would never again hear their loved ones, that they may never hear the quiet calm of their small settlements or the bustle of the fledgling cities of the republic. It didn't much matter to Aradesh. He had been selected for that night's rear guard and that was all that he could think about.

The job would probably be boring as it usually was, they were miles from Eclipan territory in northern California. And besides, not even their ruthless tribal enemies would dare attack a whole gods-damned Battalion. So as the sun set, Aradesh settled in for a peaceful night's watch. The first hours passed quietly as Aradesh talked with his fellow watchman, a private by the name of Joe. *"I need a piss, I'll be back in a minute Joey."* Aradesh walked off into the nearby ruin, not waiting for a reply. He placed his rifle on a half-broken desk as he went about his business. Soon he was finished but, as he picked up his rifle, he heard a sickening sound like metal cutting a wet fruit. Aradesh peered around a collapsed section of wall and as he did he felt his face drain of colour and his hands grip his rifle hard. Before Aradesh was a trio of Eclipan scouts who quickly whistled low and loud as others rushed to join them, slipping into the now undefended camp.

Aradesh crouched behind the ruined wall, his hands shaking, his knuckles white as he gripped his rifle. He could only watch, frozen in fear as the battle began. The Eclipans set fire to tents and fell upon the unprepared men and women of third battalion, their blades deadly in the close-quarter surprise conflict. The screams of men and women could be heard as the brutal hammer of the Eclipan raiding party smashed into the shaken battalion. And all Aradesh could do was sit and watch as his brothers and sisters in arms were butchered. The Eclipans were methodical and ruthless slashing throats and stomach as though they were Death himself swinging his scythe. Aradesh wanted to fight, no he wanted to run; but all he could do was watch as many of his comrades were slaughtered or rendered unconscious, while others burned or worse. He saw another group enter the camp dressed similarly to the Eclipan raiders but slightly different. These men began to drag the unconscious from camp, binding the arms and legs of their captured prizes together.

Suddenly, gunfire and more shouting and screaming erupted from within camp. It would seem that the men and women of third battalion had finally gotten their act together and had begun to fight back. However, with more Eclipan raiders streaming into the camp, Aradesh knew that their struggle was in vain. Even with their superior weapons, they could only hold off the inevitable death or defeat for so long. Aradesh continued to watch, for it was all he could do; he was but one man against, by his count, at least two hundred raiders. Soon, the fires of the camp roared and the raiders began to trickle out, dragging unconscious bodies with them. The Eclipans began to unbind those whose legs they had bound, clearly not expecting this many captives. They bound arms and forcefully woke the defeated from their cold slumber, forcing them to stand on their shaky legs and begin marching north. The crack of a whip could be heard as the Eclipans marched or, in some of the odd cases, carried their prizes back towards their territory through the burning cinders of the camp.

With the last of the raiders gone, Aradesh collapsed on the ground and began to cry. Why had he just watched as his comrades and friends had been slaughtered or worse? Why hadn't he done something? He could have charged them, or shot at them, or alerted the camp. But no; he had crouched there and watched, frozen in the actions like a deer in torchlight. He cried slumped against the wall, his rifle still in his hands loaded and ready, but at that moment, utterly useless. Aradesh slept like that slumped against the wall and as he came to the next day he got up and strode towards the camp, harder and stronger than when he had left. Aradesh had steeled himself and looked through the camp. Grabbing the green cape of a commander, he wrapped it around his face obscuring the bottom half; the top already hard to see thanks to his helmet.

Aradesh walked to the quarter-masters' area, though it was mostly cinders and remains he found the black polish he was looking for. He coated his armour and the symbols of the Republic he had once fought for in this dark polish which was reserved for officers' boots. Getting up, the once soldier of the republic checked his rifle, which he also gave a coating of black polish. He picked through the remains of the camp, grabbing clips of ammo and a second belt which he slung across his torso to carry more clips. Within minutes the heavily armed warrior strode out of camp. Aradesh swore that while he would never again serve the republic that had brought this baseless conflict upon him, he would avenge those friends he had lost, and he would save those he could. And so, as he walked, Private Aradesh was left behind in the embers of the third battalion and, in his place, rose someone new, someone driven, who wouldn't freeze at danger, but someone who would watch, wait and then strike.