

A HOPELESS

SITUATION

THE SNOW WHIPPED THROUGH THE air like a frosty white blanket, chilling everything that it came into contact with. Winter had fallen across much of the kingdom, and with it, much of the hopes of the land. As the temperature continued to plummet, a land known as the Andazi Wilderness became covered with the crisp, white snow as well. It was an isolated, desolate area of Purthia that had quickly become smothered with the wretched winter weather, making it all the more miserable. Yet for as bleak as the land seemed, it wasn't without habitation.

Nestled deep within a grove of snow covered pine trees was a tiny flicker of orange light that appeared as though any minute it would be swallowed completely by the white maelstrom. But as hard as the wind blew, brushing sheets of snow lay across the land, and the small fire fought back defiantly, struggling with all of its might just to stay alive. And through its resilience, there was indeed proof of life. The fire itself fought not just to protect its own life, but for the lives of the three warriors that sat close beside, huddled tightly together, grasping any shred of warmth that they could hold on to.

The warriors had barely escaped with their lives from the king's castle when Felton took over, fleeing as far away as their legs would take them. But safety was fleeting as well; for the entire land had seemed to turn against them, even though they had spent the vast majority of their lives defending it. It was unfair, but that was the situation that had suddenly laid hold of Purthia. Everyone and everything appeared to be completely and utterly mad, with the insanity only deepening with the start of each new day.

Struggling with the preposterous situation as they fled to safety, the warriors finally ended up directly in the middle of nowhere—the Andazi Wilderness, a place where nobody would dream of finding them. And when they arrived, they couldn't blame any would-be pursuer for not setting one

foot in the land, for it was indeed that desolate. In every direction there was nothing but dead land for as far as the eyes could see, save for the tiny patches of pine trees scattered here and there. Other than that, there was nothing but rotten wood, rocks, some of them the size of a house, and scrub brush. It was the perfect hiding place, but it was almost too perfect, for as soon as the harsh winter set in days after their arrival, the warriors began to realize the grave mistake they had made. The heaping amounts of snow made the land almost impassable and as they hunkered down around their fire, they quickly began to realize that survival was every bit as fleeting as the safety they had desperately sought only days before. And to make things worse, the mood of the warriors only deepened with the accumulation of snow around them.

Peaking through his snow-covered, cloth parka, which was drawn almost completely around his head, one of the warriors, Alexander Stone, finally broke the monotonous crackling of the fire and howl of the snow-driven wind as he ominously muttered, "Our days are numbered if we stay here much longer."

Another warrior, Davin Pellier, shifted beside Stone and abruptly replied, "I love your knack for the obvious, Stone. Is there no end to your wit?"

Stone glared at his comrade and said, "I don't see you doing anything to better our situation."

Pellier turned away from Stone and stared back into the fire. "It's just as much as you are doing. You are just as resigned to your fate as the rest of us."

Stone, drawing great insult from Pellier's gloomy statement, quickly stood to his feet, despite his frozen limbs and answered, "Speak for yourself, but as for me, I am not going to die here. I'm getting out of this place."

Pellier turned from the fire again and stared at his brazenly overconfident comrade. "Hmph. Tell us then, Stone, how are you going to do that?"

"I'm going to head north. We're bound to run into somebody friendly sooner or later," replied Stone as he stared off into the dark horizon.

Pellier shook his head. "You're crazy! Our situation has made you talk nonsense. There's no way you will make that kind of journey."

Stone, his face twisting from Pellier's annoying comments, stared down at the warrior and said, "What would you do then? Lie here and die? Give Felton the pleasure of cowering away in obscurity?"

"Enough of this!" yelled Yahg Madi, the third warrior of the group who had been sitting in his own snow drift near the tiny fire as he listened to his friends squabble. "If we keep arguing like this, we are certain to accomplish one thing and one thing only and that is ensuring that we will all die."