White Winter Hymnal

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White Winter Hymnal

by <u>feralphoenix</u>

Summary
It was a long and dark November.
Notes
(I wished for eyes that could see into a man's heart. – I took my love down to Violet Hill)

She could see her breath, great clouds of silver in the air, at least before it was torn apart by fat lazy half-frozen droplets of rain. Her hair would probably freeze into its braids, and she wouldn't be able to get the waves out of it for weeks.

But there wasn't really time to worry that in the middle of their aspiring revolution.

Valery turned her head to glance at Ragnus beside her. She had fallen into step with him as they crossed the camp, and he hadn't spoken to her, just given her a questioning look. His stride was wide, and he walked with his hands in his pockets, staring straight ahead as they made the rounds.

He was a quiet man, their leader. She had a funny feeling that it was the still-waters-run-deep kind of quiet, not shyness; calling out orders in meetings seemed to rest on his shoulders as naturally as that kind of thing could.

She also wondered a little if he was cold—his head was half-bowed so that his nose and mouth fell under his muffler—and if she ought to offer her spare set of gloves. It was unusually cold for Nizver, and this sleety rain felt more like something that would hit them in mid-to-late Jotun, around the new year.

Then she noticed that the men were talking.

"—that Daltania bastard, our leader?"

There was the sound of spittle hitting the hard earth—a sound different enough from the sleet that it made her hackles raise.

"Like fucking hell. Our job's not over until *all* those sons of bitches taking our freedom away are dead. Everyone with Daltania blood needs to suffer like we suffered. Twice as bad as we suffered!"

"—we're not gonna listen to him no more. We have a *real* hero now, a *real* leader. We have Julio, the *true* son of the hero Ricard. We don't need to listen to anybody's orders but his."

Her frustration burned against the cold; bitter thoughts against the soldiers' callous slurs demanded voice. These men had been hurt, surely; they had a lot of anger to vent against their oppressors. But Ragnus had led them for long years, or so she'd been told. He counted himself as one of them, she'd been told. And she'd *seen* him bleed for them. Surely they ought to know by now who their allies were, regardless of blood.

But beside her, Ragnus said nothing. His pace did not change, nor did his expression.

She wondered about it, tuning the soldiers out in favor of watching him instead.

The only sign that he might have heard at all was a little crease between his eyebrows, a slight narrowing of his eyes. He simply continued walking, hands tucked out of sight, ice beading on the fabric of his shirt, in his hair, on his face.

For a moment, Valery had the strangest desire to reach out and cover his ears with her hands —cover them against the wind and the cold and those ugly words until her fingers froze into his hair—to protect him from everything harsh, whether Ragnus actually cared about those things or not.

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