

DRY BONES

Korine Martinez, A story written in
honor of the city of Santa Fe, TX

Aksana sat on the edge of the outcropping and cried. She was alone. The great commander, the leader of her people, was wholly alone as the indifferent sun drifted up over the edge of the hills in the distance. The sun's rays slowly illuminated the field before her, revealing centuries worth of devastation and hatred. She had sat on this rock every morning for as long as she could remember. First, as a young girl while her father prepared the troops for the day, then as a soldier herself, and finally as commander. Normally in these moments, as the rays of the rising sun created brilliant reflections off ancient shield and sword, she was inspired. Her heart would fill with a sense of purpose, a desire to serve her people honorably and to deliver them at last from the enemy never stopped his onslaught. She would honor the fallen. She would save the living. But this morning was

different. This morning she saw only a field of lifeless bone.

Yesterday there had been no battle, and the soldiers had enjoyed a day to rest. Just because a war has continued for centuries, does not mean every day is a skirmish. As night came, singing could be heard around the campfires. Aksana had wandered from fire to fire enjoying the stories and songs of each company. While visiting the handful of refugee families who resided on the outskirts of the camp, she felt a tug on her tunic and looked down into a small grubby face. Lilliana.

“And what are you doing up and running around so late, little soldier?” Aksana asked, as she placed a calloused hand on the young girl’s hair.

“Oh Commander, I was planning a battle for tomorrow! See, I drew you the plans.” Lilliana proudly held out a crumpled sheet of paper.

Aksana scanned the charcoal X’s and arrows scrawled across the page. She knelt beside the girl and gave a firm nod. “Excellent work, soldier. Now to bed with you. A battle cannot be fought on no sleep.” The girl gave a quick salute and was off. Aksana carefully folded the paper and placed it in her pack. A rare smile teased the corners of her mouth as she finally headed towards her own tent. She relished the idea of a few hours of peaceful

sleep. It had been a good day. Perhaps tomorrow she would send out scouts to see where the enemy was hiding, but for tonight they were safe, and she could rest.

But Aksana never made it to her tent. Instead, she heard a scream ring out not far from where she was. Aksana stopped and listened intently. Another scream followed, the scream of a child. She turned on her heels and began to run. The continuing screams pushed her forward. Had a fire broken out among the families? Another scream and then she heard the deep, strangled curses of the enemy. Her legs moved faster, and she drew her sword.

Dry bones. That is all she saw as she regarded the old battlefield. Tear after tear traced the contours of her face as the images from the night before flashed through her mind. A child running past her, arm stained crimson. A soldier hurrying trembling teenagers away. That same soldier falling as a dark arrow struck him from behind, his charges scattered in the tumult. Though she had no memory of doing so, she was certain she had taken out at least one of the creatures because there was blood running down her sword well before she reached him.

Him. In the center of the refugee encampment stood a dark figure, taller than any soldier she had

at her command. In his clawed hand he held what seemed to be a mere rag doll, small and frail. He grinned at the carnage around him, and then his black eyes connected with hers. “Aksana, great commander of my enemy, it is a pleasure to finally meet you. I have tired of our skirmishes and decided that tonight we would have a bit of fun. I hope you don’t mind.” Then with a flick of his wrist, he tossed the ragdoll at her feet. Lilliana’s lifeless eyes stared up into Aksana’s.

Now, sitting on the rocks, she tried to remember what she had done next. Had she done all she could? She recalled the creature had not stayed long after his taunt. Bending down to whisper something in the ear of his chief lieutenant, he had then casually turned and walked away, vanishing into the shelter of the trees. She had been paralyzed looking into the young girl’s eyes, but that had lasted only a moment. Her soldiers arrived in force, and most of the enemy had been scattered. One had been captured. But what did it matter? Too many had been lost, too many innocents. How could they ever move on from such a loss?

Footsteps sounded behind her. Startled, she turned with her hand on her sword, but it was only a man approaching her haven. He approached her

with a smile and gestured to the rock beside her. She nodded, giving him permission to sit. To not be alone would be nice. For a moment, they simply sat in silence.

He broke the silence first, “How many did you lose in the battle?”

“It was no battle; it was a massacre. Battles are honorable. Soldiers die in battles, not children. We lost eight children and two caretakers. Children and caretakers who were slaughtered, without cause, and with no way to defend themselves. Do not call this a battle!” Her tears flowed freely, and her face turned towards the man in a twisted rage.

Placing a hand calmly on her shoulder, he nodded quietly, and then asked, “And how do your people fare, your soldiers? Will they fight again today?”

“They are broken. I am broken. I will not lead them in to yet another battle with this enemy. He is stronger than we are because he is crueler. He will go to lengths we will not go. We cannot win, so why should we fight? You ask how my people are? Look out at that field. My people are no better off than those dry bones.”

Sadness filled his eyes at her vehemence, “Dear one, you are right. They are no better off than those who fill the field before you.”

With a look of surprise, she stared at him. He smiled at her shock and turned her head back towards the field. “Look again, sister.”

For a moment the field looked the same, then “there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. Tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them but there was no breath in them.”¹ Aksana looked out over the lifeless army, and with anxious eyes turned to the man, “What use is this vision? Does it matter that the bones have sinew and flesh, if still they have no life in them? Are you merely a servant of our enemy come to torture me with cruel visions?”

“No little soldier, keep looking. I bring visions of life, not death.” Again, he turned her head back towards the field. She felt a quiet wind blow past her. She saw the signs of similar winds move through the trees to her north, east, and west. The wind was silent, but it came from everywhere, and then it filled the lifeless army before her. Eyes opened. Muscles flexed. And the army began to pick up their weapons which had been long ago lost on the field. They stood together as one vast army ready to fight again.

¹ Ezekiel 37:7-8

“Is this real? Can this happen?” Aksana asked , and she turned pleading eyes to the young man.

“Of course it can happen. I would not show it to you if it could not.”

“Then come with me now, raise our lost children. Raise Lilliana.”

This time he turned her back towards the camp. “Dear child, this vision is not for those you have lost who have found their peace already. It is for you, for the living.” As Aksana stood, she felt the wind move past her once again, this time moving towards the people she loved and protected.

Santa Fe Strong