

To Be A Warrior

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Winner of the 2nd place in the 2012 Literature Competition

The crackling of the small fire seemed to echo throughout the still clearing as the dancing flames drew Matthew's gaze. He was struck by the irony of this little light, burning utterly oblivious of its situation. If only he too could maintain such blissful spirits in the face of the darkness that surrounded him.

It was not just the campfire that appeared to defy all contemplation of their hopelessness, but also his numerous comrades who at that very moment lay peacefully slumbering on the ground about him. How was it that none of them could have the same unease and dread with which Matthew now found himself filled?

Each of these men had received the highest martial training available in the Old World, honing their skills through years of practice and dedication to the point that they were poised as perfectly crafted instruments of war to do their lords' bidding. There was a certain assurance that should arise from this training, and to some extent he felt confident that when the time came he would ably play his role.

Yet despite all this knowledge there existed within him a doubt, gnawing at him as a wolf would a bone, leaving him feeling naked and powerless. Somewhere nearby, he knew, sat an army not of dummy's or sparring partners but of fearsome men who knew only the language of war and whose speech was the spilling of blood. They existed to butcher and cared not what became of them, because their efforts would be reward at their death.

Nor were these foes that they now faced a simple warband come to attack the knights upon their own soil, where they could rely upon the levies and safety of their keeps. No, this was quite the opposite. They, seeking glory and honor, had been possessed with the audacity to march into the jagged and hungry maw of the dread chaos menace. When they fought, it would be on the enemy's terms, and now it seemed that the hour of this trial had nearly arrived.

At the outset of this expedition, the young knights had been promised lands, titles, and the wealth that accompanied these privileges. No longer would they face the prospects of starvation or the humiliating disdain of their peers. Through their efforts, they would prove their right to be called nobles of Bretonnia. The scheme had worked, and young knights in the hundreds had flocked to the banner of this holy crusade to purge the world of vile chaos.

Inspired

by the rousing rhetoric, he had been assured of the Lady's support for their cause and convinced of victory in her name.

In the darkness, though, surrounded by those who would seek his life and possessing nothing but the uncertainty of the future, doubt began to creep into his mind. Those men that he would soon face believed with equal fervor that it was the will of their gods that Matthew and his companions be slaughtered. How, then, would the victory be determined—as a grand struggle between mighty gods with mere men as their lowly and insignificant pawns? He shuddered at the thought, for even if the Lady were to emerge triumphant, there was no guarantee that he would survive the coming battle where he might be cast aside as a craftsman would discard a broken tool.

The

sound of the earl's trumpet shocked him from his thoughts as the harsh tone signaled the order to prepare for battle.

He watched as the world around him gradually came to life with men awakening, rising, and beginning to move throughout the camp. Each sought his belongings, where the majority of his armor was stored. By order of the earl, no man had removed either his mail or cuirass since crossing the border of Bretonnia several days prior for fear of being caught by surprise and unready for battle. With the knowledge that battle was drawing near, the men now began to don various other pieces of armor. Some among them had fine sets of plate crafted by dwarven smiths in the affluent coastal cities, but for many even a complete suit had been too costly for their families.

Casting

about for his baggage, he grabbed it and set off in search of his brother. When he finally found Michael near the wagons, his older brother was struggling in vain to lace the bracer hanging loosely from his left forearm. Catching sight of Matthew, he smiled and the two greeted one another. For the next hour, they consumed themselves with ensuring that their armor was properly secured, helping where needed for lack of a page or squire. An anxious silence fell between them broken only by the occasional nervous observation or attempt at a joke. If even Michael was frightened, were they in even more danger than he had thought?

Not

wishing to become idle once they had finished arming themselves, the two brothers moved to where their horses were tethered to a nearby tree. The steeds pawed at the ground and tossed their heads, expressing their general displeasure. As an added precaution, the saddles and barding had been left on the horses during the few hours following their march. Perhaps it was merely this departure from the normal routine that was the cause, but Matthew could not help but notice a hesitation in the horses as they led them toward the tree line where the troops were assembling.

The

two brothers parted with words of blessing, each to find his formation and wait there for further orders. Heraldry and the panoply of banners were nothing new, but the tumultuous confusion that they found as men dashed to and fro making final preparations left Matthew feeling overwhelmed so that it took him several minutes to locate the members of his lance.

His

face flushed somewhat as he realized that the other dozen men had already arrived, and he attempted to take his place among them unnoticed. Moving closer to the group, he realized that

his late arrival would hardly be noticed, as the men were taking turns boasting of the virtuous deeds that they would soon accomplish on the field of battle.

He stood and listened silently as the men continued their pompous declarations, each trying to outdo the other in words as a prelude to their contest in arms. Presently a hush fell over the army as a damsel of the Lady rode gracefully along the lines, haughtily surveying the troops. Apparently satisfied, she reigned in her steed and turned to face them, frozen in anticipation. As if on cue, the entire host dropped to their knees and bowed their heads.

“Oh gracious Lady, who protecteth our fair land and emboldens thy people to greatness, watch over thy servants in thy benevolence as we march to battle. Guide the lances of thy courageous knights that they may find their mark and thou may be glorified through our victory this day. And if we should fall, usher us quickly into thy most sublime kingdom, where we may dwell with thee in peace until the end of days.”

Frowning, Matthew looked around at his fellow knights to gauge their reactions. He was not sure what he had thought the prayer would be like, but this hardly seemed to express a reassuring sentiment. Judging by their faces, others seemed to share his misgivings, but there was no time to dwell upon them for at that moment the trumpet sounded a second time, signaling the order to mount.

Settling into the saddle, Matthew gazed across the field, straining to see the enemy undoubtedly forming along the opposite tree line. Perhaps they would cross the field only to find that the chaos horde had withdrawn, but no, he could sense that that would not be the case.

A third and final blast of the trumpet signaled the order to advance, and with great trepidation, he spurred his mount onward. Slowly, the vast army began to move forward as one body. He had a distinctly physical sensation of being completely surrounded by a multitude united in their aim to break the enemy line. All fear vanished from his mind as he allowed himself to be caught up in the exhilarating surge of cavalry.

As they gradually approached the enemy army, the horses began to gain speed until they had reached a thundering gallop. Lesser horses would have cowered at the prospect of dashing headlong into a forest, yet the warhorses of Bretonnia were bred to feel no fear and they did not shy from the impending danger. A wave seemed to pass through the ranks as the knights began to lower their lances.

The last moments before their charge slammed into the enemy’s line seemed to slow. The steady inhale and exhale of his breathing, the rise and fall of the horse’s body, the weight of his shield as he adjusted it all began to magnify in importance until it seemed there

existed nothing else in all the world.

A
terrible cacophony of shrieks, lances slicing through human flesh, and the shattering of wood and bone filled the air as the knights crashed into the enemy and the first ranks of infantry simply melted into the obscurity of carnage.

Matthew
twisted in agony as an enemy spear found its way between his armor, driven deep by his own momentum until he was thrown from his horse. Shock consumed him as he struggled to stand- struggled to comprehend what had happened. He stumbled to his feet and rushed after his companions, but was stopped in his tracks by an axe hurled from somewhere ahead at the Bretonnian onslaught.
He sagged to his knees, using his sword to support himself. Try as he might, he could not move his legs. The world began to blur and he blinked, trying to clear his eyes. He looked down, and saw the ground strewn with the dying and the dead.

Unable
remain upright any longer, he allowed the welcoming ground to greet his hollowing body and closed his eyes. He was going to die. There was nothing that he could do about it. There was no reason to be afraid, because whatever happened would happen. Lying at peace on the forest floor amid the bodies and the blood, he felt as his life slowly ebbed away.