

Should I Falter

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Well met, fellow Table members! Herein lies my 2013 Anniversary Competition entry. It somehow managed to be exactly 3,000 words. Hope you all enjoy!

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^ Winner of the 3rd place in the 2013 Literature Competition ^

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^ Should I Falter ^

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Devastation spread throughout the former village, the charcoal ruins of its hovels groaning weakly in the howling chill of late autumn wind. An early snow frosted the wilted grass and earthen streets, dappled with iced blood and the dismembered limbs of those who fought to save their homes. The lord and his family were tied to a post in the village square, stripped, naked, their flesh carved with profane symbols from an unholy ritual. The hoofed prints of beastmen ran rampant on the ground.

Jean had heard the woodland folk of Arden faced dangers unknown to those outside the forest, but he had not expected such ruin. The cursed creatures spared no mercy. Wizened crones and suckling infants lay hacked upon the ground. Had he been one day earlier, he may have helped rally the village. Perhaps he would have saved those lying at his feet.

After being certain no survivors hid in places unforeseen, Jean mounted Skywind, his palomino courser, and set off once more into Arden's depths. He had not bathed or shaven for far too long, his straggly hair and matted beard dark with dirt and filth. While his mind held guilt and doubt after beholding the tragedy of the forsaken village, his body was weary, spent, starving. His bones ached; the quest took its toll. When nightfall came, he tethered Skywind to a tree and lay beneath its boughs. Sleep came easily.

It was past the witching hour when he heard screams and shouts, rousing him from slumber. Crying horses and the thunder of hooves brought him to his feet, his body reinvigorated with the din of the distressed. Swiftly, he mounted Skywind and drew the bastard sword that lay within his sheath. Stars glimmered distant light in the clear sky as he

galloped toward the cacophony of battle.

Within moments, he arrived at the bank of a slowly freezing stream. Two knights splashed through cold water, assaulted by a dozen frenzied peasants armed with farm tools and torches. The knights' ebon destriers frothed sprays of misty breath into the night. Their shields bore a black bear on golden yellow, and their swords were castle-forged steel. Jean spurred Skywind forth, raising his bastard sword to strike the rabble that dared attack their lieges.

The song of Jean's blade joined the symphony of battle, its edge sinking into the nearest peasant. Caught by surprise, the lowborn fell face-first into the icy stream, his spine split in twain. Two other peasants turned in shock to see their comrade's death, and moved to attack Jean. Skywind was ready, rearing, stomping hooves-first crush the nearest to his death. The other gaped at the questing knight, dropped his two-pronged pitchfork, and fled into the forest.

Not wasting time, Jean rode toward the rest of the skirmish. One of the knights was being pulled from his horse and beaten with hoes and rakes. His sword was on the ground, the peasants wrenching forth the helmet from his head.

Unhand him! Jean bellowed, his tenor cutting the air as Skywind leapt over the stream. The peasants paused, giving the falling knight a moment to recover. With a gauntleted hand, he smashed the jaw of one of his assailants, sprinkling the ground with teeth and scarlet spit. Jean arrived to cleave the prongs from a rake and the head of a hoe, wood splintering and stabbing itself into unarmored flesh. Two more peasants fled, and Jean reached down to take the fallen knight's hand.

I thank thee, the beaten knight said, not ungratefully.

The other sliced a peasant's throat, blood painting the ground with crimson strokes. Thy timing could not have been better, Sir! he called to Jean, flinging gore from the edge of his longsword. The three knights regrouped, brandishing their blades. Their fierce purebred horses stomped the cold earth. The remaining lowborn fled, and the gold-clad knights charged forward to cut them down like dogs.

“Must we pursue them?” Jean bellowed, wiping his blade clean with a cloth from his saddlebag, stopping the knights in their tracks. “There is little honor in slaying those who no longer pose a threat.”

“Are you simple? Would you have them roam free to poach and thief upon the helpless?”

Jean shrugged. “I seek the Grail and nothing more. My business is elsewhere in the forest depths, following what scant visions the Lady has seen fit to grant me.”

The lead knight rode beside Jean, lifting his visor to reveal eyes of forest green and thick black brows. “A Questing Knight.” He exhaled, watching his breath mist in the frozen air. “I retract my words, good Sir, and beg forgiveness for them.” Jean nodded as the knight continued. “Please, take shelter with us. Our home is less than a league hence.”

The questing knight’s heart relaxed a moment, picturing a warm hearth and a well-cooked meal. He could almost feel the fire’s heat, taste roasted game and fresh-baked bread. “One night of rest is all I need, and I thank you for the invitation. Tell me, where is your home?”

“Chateau de Cornes. My father, Baron Melwin Deagon, is lord of the castle and the surrounding village of Furrure.” The lead knight smiled. “I am Geraut, and this is my younger brother Xandre.”

“Well met. You may call me Jean.”

“I am humbled.” Sir Geraut shook his hand. “Shall we thither?”

“Aye,” Jean said, “Though I must inform you that I rode upon a village this past morning, sacked entirely by Beastmen encountered no survivors.”

Geraut looked to his brother. “We shall tell our father of it when we return home.”

“I thank you.”

They set forth. Dense forest gave way to elm glades, and glades turned to thinning tracts of fir and oak. The ground grew hilly, until they saw, in the distance, a high stone castle surrounded by a great palisade-walled village. The gates opened as the watchmen recognized their baron’s sons, and squires were roused to take their horses to the stables. Jean gave Skywind an affectionate pat before following his hosts through heavy oaken doors into the Great Hall of the keep.

Geraut escorted Jean to a guest room, then retired with his brother to their chambers. The room was small but cozy, with a down bed, wool blankets, a storage chest, and a basin filled with cool, soothing water. Jean scrubbed his face and hair before stripping from his armor, then fell quietly upon the mattress into a dreamless sleep.

He was roused the next morning by a loud knock.

“Enter,” he called, pulling the blankets over his naked body.

A young woman emerged, tan-skinned and raven-haired, with lips bright as berries. “Her green eyes were mild and curious as she placed a cup of water on the floor beside his bed. “My father invites you to break your fast with him. My brothers sit at table as well.”

Jean smiled softly. “I will gladly attend them.” He sat up, keeping the blanket over his chest. “You must be another Deagon. Tell me lass, what shall I call thee?”

“Isette,” she said softly. “Her voice was slightly raspy, but high-pitched and pleasant. She bowed.

“I am glad to know you, Isette. Now, if you would be kind enough to excuse me a moment.” He looked to his armor.

Isette’s cheeks grew rosy for a moment, understanding. She moved quickly to the hall, shutting the door. Jean tossed the blankets from his body, put on his stinking layers of armor, and strapped his bastard sword to the sheath upon his back. Turning to the basin of water, he splashed and scrubbed his beard once more, attempting to tidy his appearance.

When he arrived downstairs, the Great Hall was bright with candlelight. Lord Deagon sat at the head of a long table, his sons to his right, his daughter to his left. There was no sign of a wife. The table itself was laden with an array of autumn berries and late harvest grapes, heaped atop trenchers of sweet brown bread. Smoked fish and hot cream completed the display, accompanied by a wheel of golden cheese and combs of honey.

“Sir Jean!” Geraut called, excitedly. “He gestured for the questing knight to sit beside his sister.

“Good morning Sirs,” Jean said, grinning. “He bowed to Baron Deagon, a tall man of twilit middle age, with thinning black hair cropped close to his head. The green eyes of his family twinkled brightly in deep-set shadows.

“I am told I owe you the lives of my sons,” the baron spoke, leaning forward. “His voice was deep and soft, soothing, yet edged with authority.”

“They would likely have prevailed themselves,” Jean answered, “They were assailed by starved farmers and old men.

The baron’s lips tightened. “We have a saying in Artois: a starving wolf is far more lethal than a wolf who just has fed.” He took a grape and held it between a thumb and forefinger. “Winter came early this year, our harvest was meager, and our livestock are unfit for slaughtering. The desperate will crawl from their hovels and strike their betters, and it can only get worse.” He tossed the grape in his mouth with a casual flick of his wrist. “I must protect those within my barony, and I am disappointed that you chose mercy. Said vagrants should have been cut down like the maggots they are.”

Jean moved to speak in disagreement, but chose not to. “It was wrong to insult a lord in his own hall, even one of lower rank. “I appreciate your candor,” he said, “No offense was intended.” He took a slice of fish and slathered it with

“I am not offended, though trouble will no doubt spring from your deed.” The baron sighed. “My sons also tell me of a village sacked by beastmen?”

“Aye, some leagues southward. The lord and his family were defiled as part of some dark ritual.”

Baron Deagon placed his hands together. "There are several villages south of here. Did you see the colors of their livery?"

"No." Jean shook his head. "Most fabric was burned or red with blood, and no banners flew upon the towers of the

"I'll send riders to ascertain what transpired." The baron looked to his children, then to Jean. "My hunger is satisfied now, but do not let my absence spoil your appetites." He stood and left the hall with a sweep of his black cloak.

They finished their meal in silence, wordless and solemn. After his hunger was slaked, Jean took his belongings, thanked his hosts, and retrieved Skywind from the stables, setting off once more on his quest. The sun was halfway to its full height, muted beams of light filtering through the bare branches of the forest. Curiosity got the better of him, and Jean turned southwards down the beaten path. He headed toward the stream where he had found the Deagons.

The questing knight shivered. The air grew ever colder with the passing of time, and he buried his chin and nose into the thick fur lining of the heavy cloak wrapped around his armor. Though well-rested and rejuvenated, he could not fend a sense of trepidation. Something was amiss. He knew not what.

At noon, he neared the stream, frost misting from its surface. Through the thinning forest canopy, he noticed a cloud of black smoke churning through the sky above. His stomach turned with unease; the smoke was fresh, fed, lasting in the frozen air. Skywind snorted. The water was frozen over with a thin layer of ice, and the horse's tongue stuck briefly to the surface. Jean dismounted, affectionately stroked the courser's mane, and drew his sword to crack a hole in the ice. Skywind gave him a nuzzle before drinking greedily, and Jean ate a slice of salted beef from his saddlebag. Then, Skywind's ears perked up.

An arrow flew past Jean and thudded into a nearby tree, barely missing his head. "Skywind's tail whipped with agitation. "Steady, my friend," Jean managed, as another missile flew past, inches from his left arm. He looked across the river toward the arrow's source, and saw dark figures running toward him through the mist. He swiftly mounted Skywind, brandishing his blade. "I seek not to fight you, but shall not turn from bloodshed. Ask if you truly wish to fight a Questing Knight of Bretonnia!"

In seconds, two-score peasants crossed the river. They were clad in filth-stained rags; many had toes and fingers black with frostbite. All were bone-thin, emaciated, armed with branches and broken tools. Many were toothless, spotted, suffering from scurvy. Others leaked green snot from scabby noses. These were disorganized, desperate men, not the highwaymen Lord Deagon feared. The leader of the peasants, a tall yeoman with a gaping hole for a right eye, held out his hand and stopped the rabble.

"I've seen you," he said to Jean. His voice was wet with phlegm, and he spat a thick wad of golden mucus to the ground. "You were in our village yesterday, riding northwards into Deagon land."

Jean was taken aback. "I rode through a ruin, not a village. There were none who survived." He lowered his blade, gauging whether these peasants would do the same. They followed suit.

The archer frowned with sadness. "Nay, my lord. A few survived. Far too few."

"What happened?" Jean inquired. "The tracks of beastmen were everywhere."

"Aye. They fell on us at mid-day some weeks past. Baron Selwin and his sons sallied forth unto their deaths, and then we broke and burned. Those that survived found others, from other villages and towns who met the same fate. And now the herd is back, burning its way northwards, trampling all that stand in their way."

Jean looked up. "That smoke."

"It's from them. They found our scouting camp, butchered all save one." He looked to those he led. "We are between two evils."

"What do you mean?"

"The Deacons, Milord. We sought protection from the Baron but were forced back. He claimed they could not feed more mouths, then sent his knights to chase us from his land. Some have accidentally set foot within his territory, and when they do, they are cut down like cattle when spotted by his scouts. His two sons are the worst, reveling in the slaughter of the lowborn."

Jean's heart skipped a beat, enraged. "I found Deagon's sons beset by peasants like yourselves last night. I thought they were assaulted by unworthy adversaries and aided in their defense. Might I assume that, instead, they shed first blood?"

The yeoman nodded. "Aye. They did."

"By the Lady," Jean said, eyes narrowing, "I'll have words for the baron and his sons when next we meet."

“It would do little good, methinks,” the yeoman said, “The Baron is cold, with a heart of stone. There’s naught if Iâ€”

He was interrupted. The thunder of horses echoed from the north. Nine knights, bearing the Deagon coat-of-arms, emerged from dark trees. Their helmets were shut, their lances lowered, and they charged straight at the two-score peasants.

“Halt! Hold!” Jean screamed, turning to protect the helpless lowborn. The final words of the questing vow sounded in his mind, his lips praying their lingering cadence. “This is my questing vow, and I swear before you, mistress of mercy, and beg that you shall strike me down should I falter.” He gripped the hilt of his bastard sword in his right hand, his bright eyes narrow. The knights did not slow, and continued forward in their charge. He turned to the peasants. “Hold your line, ’tis better to die with a lance in your heart than with a sword in your back!” He faced the oncoming Deagons, spurring Skywind forth, targeting the nearest knight and shifting to avoid the lance that barely missed his breast. He swung his weapon, its blade smashing against chain and half-plate, knocking the rider from his horse. The other knights passed him.

With a sickening crunch of bone, five lances impaled five peasants. The knights drew their swords after their charge. Jean saw little hope, and instead focused on the fallen Deagon knight upon the ground. As he stirred, he lifted the visor of his helm. It was Baron Deagon. Jean moved Skywind to place a hoof upon the fallen lord’s chest.

“Call them off.”

The baron clenched his teeth, green eyes icy. He shook his head as his knights began to hack the peasants like butchers. Jean dismounted quickly, pressed the tip of his sword upon the baron’s forehead.

“Call them off.”

“No. My sons shall live and you shall perish in these woods. Your quest is at an end, for once my sons have ridden down the peasant filth, you shall be skewered like a boar.”

More peasants fell, crimson spilling on the frozen stream, steaming into the mist. Jean looked to the sky. The smoke was thicker, darker. Drums sounded, horns blared. Hope faded from the baron’s face. The knights were nearly finished with their slaughter, and the beasts of Chaos had arrived.

Jean withdrew his blade. “Do you see that smoke? Hear the sounds of war? A Beastman horde approaches, moving northwards like a flood of fire.” He mounted Skywind. “You have left your own domain without its knights, abandoned those who swore to protect the lowborn who serve them. You deserve your fate. The Lady is forsaken here.”

“Should you flee, I name you coward, questing knight!”

“I do not flee. No vow of mine binds me to your defense. Nay, my quest shall take me elsewhere in this forest.”

“Where shall you go?”

Jean glared with judgment. “You have kin and subjects that you abandoned. I shall do as you cannot.” He turned Skywind to gallop from the stream, moving northwards at full speed.

The noontime sun grew dark, eclipsed by smoke, as Jean left a tyrant coward and his henchmen to die.