

The Crossing

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The charge was faltering. There were simply too many of them. He had no fear of death, that had passed when he had lost the only people he had truly loved, his wife and daughter, but failure, the thought struck him like a blow to the face. Suddenly he saw something, someone ahead and to the right that was not like the others. A man, not a beast trying to claw him from the saddle but a man in dark robes. The man was chanting. He set his spurs to the flanks of his horse and the animal reared and lashed out with its hooves smashing two of his attackers to gory pulp, while he swung his great sword in an arcing figure eight clearing more of the creatures from either side. For an instant there was a gap in front of him. He spurred his horse again and suddenly he was through. The robed man never stopped chanting as the blade struck him in the shoulder and continued through to the opposite hip. With a look of amazement on its face the body fell to the ground and separated. Seconds later the creatures too collapsed where they stood. It was over.

He

He sat his horse for what seemed an eternity, a sound like the last resonance of a bell filling his head, his mind unable or unwilling to acknowledge any other sound. With a supreme effort of will he raised his head and opened his eyes. The scene before him was just a blur, with undefinable streaks of grey, blue, green and a dark glossy red. He shut his eyes again tightly as if the image they had seen had somehow burned them. Finally his mind began to register other sounds. His breathing was coming in short rapid gulps. His heart pounded in his chest as if trying to force its way from the confines of his ribcage. With still more effort he tried to raise himself in his saddle and lift his head but the effort required was too much. He wanted to just lean against the high back of his saddle and let darkness overtake him but it would not, not completely. It was always like this.

He

In time his senses began to clear. He raised his head once more and opened his eyes. The scene before him took shape this time. For a moment he wished it hadn't. Before him was a bridge of stone, wide enough for four horses abreast, littered with the debris of the dying and the dead. Horses, men, and sick parodies of men and women that may once have been living but were now bloated bags of rotten flesh. His other senses were also returning. The smell, a mixture of offal pit and slaughterhouse was overwhelming. The water on either side of the bridge ran a foamy pink and bodies choked the central archway below. He turned his head and retched.

He

He was approached by a young man that he had met only that morning. The young knight was barely out of his teens but he bore the full heraldry of his house, a sign of these desperate times. It was then that he turned in the saddle and looked to either side and behind him. What he saw made him both proud and dismayed in equal measure. He had left for this bridge with a dozen knights and their men at arms and archers. Added to that were perhaps twenty young knights only recently having earned their spurs and hoping to make a name for themselves. Little more than half of that company still lived, and of those several more would not see the next days sunrise, but they had taken the crossing. The newcomer reined his horse next to his and said nothing for a long moment. He was relieved because it gave him time to remember the man's name before he finally spoke. "Are you alright?" he said. The youngster hesitated for a moment before answering. In a soft voice that betrayed his youth the young knight answered "I am unhurt, and yourself?" He took a moment to check before answering. His armor was stained but he could find no wounds or feel any pain other than the burning of his muscles. "I am not as young as I once was but I am whole."

He

Without further words he turned his horse and rode to the riverbank where even now the wounded were being gathered and the dead were being counted and sorted for burial. He turned to the young knight and asked if he would

gather the remaining knights on a hill that he pointed to a short way off with a large oak at its crest. Gather them there and I shall join you shortly. The youngster nodded and rode off to find the other knights. He brought his horse to a stop near a group of wounded and dismounted. At first his legs refused to hold him upright so he was forced to steady himself by holding onto his horse's bridle. As soon as his legs would hold him he walked to each man, praising them for their part in the fight and encouraging them. Over each of the dying he spoke a prayer to the Lady for the ease of their suffering and recognition of their bravery, noble or peasant it made no difference.

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^ ^ ^ When he was done he made his way to the hill where the knights had been gathered, first greeting each one and acknowledging their part in the battle. They were all so young. The oldest was perhaps twenty five, and the youngest no more than seventeen. He spoke of the care for the wounded, the disposition of the dead and the gathering of the enemy corpses to be burned. There was some protest at this but he explained that should more of those creatures arrive or Lady forbid, another necromancer, there should be nothing left of use to them. He then laid out a plan of defense for the bridge and the surrounding area. The hill on which they stood would become their strong point with stakes and earthworks around the base and a lookout placed in the tree. There would be regular patrols and lookouts placed at either end of the bridge.

^ ^ ^ He had laid out his plan and given his orders. He wanted nothing but the chance to rest but that would have to wait. There was much to do before nightfall. They had taken the crossing. Now Lady willing, they would hold it. ^ ^ ^ ^