

The Survival of Civilization

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Winner of the 11th Anniversary Literature Competition

The long lavender grass was blowing in the wind. Two of the three suns were shining. The animal inhabitants of the tree-like tower were playing with each other with abandon. Bastian Justlance, Fifth Commander of Steelfist, was cursing violently.

"We did not escape being crushed by gargantuan claws simply so you could strangle us with perfumed silk!" he objected with vehemence. "Us fifty are all that's left of the proud citadel of Steelfist, and I refuse to let you turn warriors into debauchers!" Bastian had to double check, but to his dismay his count was right. Only fifty shivering refugees remained, where once thousands marched to a triumphant drumbeat. The only recourse left for the survivors of Steelfist was Lady Radiva, the Enchantress of the Emerald Pinnacle.

The provenance of Lady Radiva was a mystery to all. There were plenty of tavern tales and marching songs about her, but they contained little truth and much innuendo. What was certain was that the longhaired lady held sway over the Emerald Pinnacle, a tower of great beauty but questionable defense. Many call her a sorceress, although she prefers the term "enchantress". Which is simply another way of saying "decadent harridan".

"One can still be a righteous warrior while being civilized, Sir Bastian," said Radiva, unperturbed by his rage. "Courtesy does not preclude courage. To forgive your opponents does not mean you are afraid to face them. It is in fact far braver to forgive than to condemn, for it takes much time and effort to reform an enemy. It takes only a moment to execute one."

Bastian barely held back a sigh of frustration. Radiva had vainly tried many times to court the commanders of Steelfist, her only accomplishment being to amuse them with her efforts. A wanton jezebel with braids of hair of every colour, she labours under the impression that there is something beyond warfare. That there is another way in this time of endless strife, of overcoming foes like the Green Tide, the Flesh-Eater Courts or the Ruinous Powers. She bandies around words like mercy, honour and chivalry. The mere thought nearly made Bastian puke. It was beyond him how a sorceress of such power could be so willfully blind.

But he had to try. If he didn't convince her to use her magic for offensive ends, they would all perish. "There are those enemies who do not want to be forgiven, Lady Radiva," he reasoned. "There are forces of primordial chaos who cannot be forgiven, for they do not understand the concept of peaceful coexistence, of creation instead of destruction."

"All the more reason for us to hold those values dear," riposted the dumb dilettante. "The fact that the enemies of civilization stand against rhyme and reason, does not mean we should abandon them. It is what sets us apart from them, makes us nobler than them."

“Nobility will do us nothing if we’re dead”, Bastian raged. “If you do not kill the thing that is pursuing us, it will mean the end for us and you! It will rip and tear that oh-so-precious dress of yours, crush that absurd girdle with his iron claws and fasten your crippled remnants to his belt with that ridiculous hair!”

His body shook not only with rage, but with genuine fear. Every inhabitant of Steelfist was taught how to wield a spear and sword when they reached double digits. Their skill at arms was beyond compare, their military demand in such demand that messengers had happily traversed continents for the smallest suggestion. Yet a single brute, whose muscles and mutations threatened to rip its already tattered armour, had succeeded where entire armies had failed.

Bastian tried to compose himself, but it was not to be. As if his ghastly memories had called it forth, the nameless scourge of Steelfist had appeared. It opened its grotesque mouth in a skyward scream as it charged toward them.

As soldiers of Steelfist, it was their duty to know no fear. But Bastian and his people were afraid, and Lady Radiva took advantage of that to walk through their wavering ranks to confront the monster alone. She half-connsoled, half-sung soothing words of sympathy and solace. It roared in return, splattering her face with spit and making her braids tremble like a kite caught in a fierce wind. The possessed brute raised its claw in the sky. Her braids also reached into the sky, but this time of their own accord. The long locks of hair became even longer, reaching and touching the monster on the head and heart with a musical ping and a strange aura. It halted its charge, looking at everyone and everything as if it was seeing them for the first time. Then it roared again, but now with sadness. Before Bastian could understand what had transpired, the doom of Steelfist fled from them, weeping like a newborn child.

“What was that?”, Bastian finally managed to say.

“That used to be a man”, the enchantress told them, delicately cleaning her face with a handkerchief. “A warrior of great skill, much like you. But in the end he let warfare consume him, until it was the only thing that he could think of. No days of rest, no consideration for diplomacy, no room for differing opinions. Also much like you. I made him remember what he had lost, what he had destroyed. I hoped that he would stay and be healed, but perhaps he will return. This is why I preached the ways of chivalry and honour to you. Because I know that an unbalanced mind is easy prey for the Ruinous Powers.”

The heart and mind of Bastian warred with each other. The mind won. “You turned him from his monstrous ways with a mere touch of your magical locks. Yet you claimed it takes time and effort for redemption to take hold.”

“Oh, it does. It has certainly taken a long time for you to see the light.”

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