

Unremembered Loss

For all the news and information from the world of Rathrae, and for the story Unremembered Loss

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Here is a different kind of story, that I wrote a while ago. I decided to dust it off and finish it for this month's newsletter. It is a story that celebrates what I think makes a good leader. As I watched the news and witnessed how terrible we can be to each other, it made me question the use of violence in some of my stories. But, when I look back at my body of work, I see that the violence in my stories is always the example of what we shouldn't do and is used to contrast the mercy and love that should be our response. May peace and love find you in this holiday season and be your response to the trials you face.

Douglas G. Clarke

Once a Prince

Prince Harlow walked down the dirt road, dust floating around him. He had never walked this road before. On mount or in a coach - yes, but on foot, the thought to do so had never crossed his mind. As he walked, he realized that many things had never crossed his mind - like the reason he was walking. His cousin had taken the throne, which was his right, but his first act as king was to take Harlow's family lands and title and give them to another.

No longer a duke, or even a sir, Harlow's thoughts were mostly on dinner and where he was going to spend the night. He patted the pouch on his side and heard the reassuring tinkling of the gems within. A glance up showed the sun halfway to the horizon - four hours 'till evening. A noise caught his attention. In one motion, he turned and drew his sword. The road twisted back into the distance between the trees and bushes, but in the shadows he saw a squirrel running his way.

Harlow stepped to the side of the road and waited.

The squirrel ran past him, sending a spray of rocks up into the air. Harlow turned his back and shielded himself with his cloak. The squirrel skidded to a stop, turned, and returned to where Harlow stood.

The squirrel bowed. "Pardon me sir. I thought you a commoner. Can you ever forgive an addle minded squirrel?"

"How were you to know? It's not as if I have my squires with me. I take it you have not heard the news then?"

"News? News, I love news. What news do you have?"

"My cousin Frederick is King and I am no longer a duke. So please stop bowing, before you get me into trouble."

"It is a shame and an injustice. Your uncle, the King, God rest his soul, must be ..."

"Hush, Chestnut, you must not speak ill of the King. It is not proper, nor healthy."

"Where are you headed?"

"Down this road to find an inn for the night."

"Let me take you then."

"You are no longer my subject. I shall walk like a commoner."

"You may not be the Duke in title, but your subjects still love you. I will always do whatever I can to honor you."

Chestnut bowed again and waited. When Harlow just stood there Chestnut added, "Please don't make me look like the fool."

Harlow climbed onto Chestnut's back and could feel the pride in the way Chestnut rose and ran, keeping his back level and the ride smooth as his feet flew across the ground. They covered in fifteen minutes what it would have taken Harlow the rest of the day to cover. Chestnut stopped in front of a large maple tree. In the trunk of the tree was a door and above the door a sign that read, "Drunken Grasshopper," in big green letters.

"Best inn in these parts. I hope that my lord will not find the accommodations too uncomfortable."

"I'm sure they'll be fine and please don't call me lord."

"As you wish, my lord." Then Chestnut started to laugh in that chirpy way squirrels do.

Harlow slid off of Chestnut's back and watched as Chestnut scampered off into the woods. He took a deep breath and shook the dust from his cloak. When he opened the door he expected to see a dark and dreary hole, but his spirits were lifted by the bright light and the sounds of music and laughter.

A young girl skipped up to him and curtsied. "Welcome to the Drunken Grasshopper. Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"Would you like to remain alone or would you like to join the common table?"

Harlow paused for a moment considering another choice he had never contemplated before. "The common table sounds wonderful."

"Can I bring you something to drink? The food is already on the table."

"Some rum if you have it."

The girl smiled and ran off. Harlow picked a chair between a rather large man who spilled over the edges of his chair and a very small man who stood upon his. The table held every kind of vegetable, both cooked and raw.

Harlow filled his plate with fried mushroom steaks, cooked squash, a salad of leaves and flower pedals, and carrot sticks.

The evening went quickly. He had another two rums as he listened to the men around the table talking about their crops and their homes and their love interests. Before he knew it, the last two men at the common table said their farewells and disappeared into the night.

Jillian, as Harlow had found the young girl was named, skipped up and sat down in a chair across from him, showing way too much energy for someone who had been working all night.

“Will you be spending the night with us?”

“Yes, I will.”

“Would you like a room by yourself or would you like to stay in the common room?”

Harlow didn't think long on that question, “Alone, I believe.”

“You will be following me then, please.” Jillian leaped to her feet and headed towards a stairway that was carved into the curved interior of the tree. Harlow followed as they climbed up and up. They passed through the common room, where several men were already sleeping - their snoring made Harlow smile at the good choice he had made.

Two more flights up and they came to a floor that had a hallway with two doors. Jillian opened the door to the left and lit the lantern by the door of the small room. “It's not much, but the bed is down and there is a window if it gets stuffy. She stood to the side and let Harlow enter. Another curtsy, then she closed the door and Harlow was alone.

The bed was soft, as soft as his own had been. The window looked out over a lake, which showed a reflection of the quarter moon. The rasping of grasshoppers and the chirping of crickets echoed through the trees. The cool night air felt refreshing on his face. Harlow stood there, just being, for an hour before sleepiness overtook him. He lay in the bed, the thick blankets warming his body, and dreamed of nights just like the one he had just had.

Morning came in the familiar way - sun shone through the tiny window, bird songs filled the air, and the aromas of breakfast drifted up from below. Harlow found his way down stairs and enjoyed the pancakes with maple syrup and a fresh blueberry. He was sitting by himself, there was no one at the common table, when a man ran through the door.

“War,” he yelled. Every head turned to face him. “The King has declared war on the Shire. He rides with his knights this very morning.”

As quickly as he had come, the man was gone, leaving the inn in turmoil as a dozen conversations started at once. Harlow just sat there, mouth open.

Harlow gathered his things and paid his bill. He opened the door and froze. Two dozen knights were riding past the Inn. High upon their squirrels - swords at their hips, their bodies covered in leather armor that matched the armor on their squirrels, helmets resting on their heads - they looked so impressive.

He looked for his cousin, he had to talk some sense into him. He stepped outside and saw the King riding at the front of the procession. He started to run beside the row of knights. Suddenly one of the squirrels turned and cut him off, the knight holding his sword at the ready. Harlow skidded to a stop.

The knight looked at him. He saw sadness in his eyes. “Please return to your home. I don't want to have to hurt you.”

Harlow recognized the voice of Sir Kevin. His heart sank.

“Please my lord, this is not your fight. Please give me your sword.”

Harlow bowed to Sir Kevin, handed over his sword, and returned to the inn as the knights circled the lake on their way to the Shire.

“Harlow. Are you in there?”

The high pitched voice came through the inn's door and shook Harlow. He set his glass of rum down.

“Be still, I say. Why would you be bothering me?”

“Your subjects need you.”

Harlow picked up his glass and took a sip. “I have no subjects. Go find the King.”

“Soon we will have no king. Unless you come we may all bow to the Shire by night fall.”

He put down his unfinished glass and tried to stand. He made it to his feet, but was soon falling. Jillian was suddenly there holding him up. She helped him stagger to the door, where he held himself up on the door-frame.

“What good can I do? I can't stop the King.”

“I'm not sure what you can do, but I know you can do something and I'm going to help you do it.”

In Harlow's current mental state he couldn't argue with Chestnut's enthusiasm, so he climbed onto his back. Chestnut started running after the knights.

“What can I do? I don't even have a sword.”

Chestnut stopped for a moment, then turned and ran off into the woods. The next time he stopped, they were by a huge cactus.

“One of these spines will be your weapon.”

Harlow slipped from Chestnut's back and nearly fell over. He spent several minutes picking up and trying various spines that lay on the ground. He found a fresh one and practiced fencing with the cactus. Satisfied he climbed back on Chestnut.

“You have found me a fine weapon, but I have no armor - I'll end up looking like this cactus.”

Chestnut started running again, this time leaving the forest and running up onto the rocky side of the mountain. He stopped by a huge snake skin, nearly five feet in length.

“And what do you want me to do with that?”

“We will make you some armor.”

“Snake skin is tough, but I don't think it will stand up to a sword's blow.”

“No, not a single layer, but what about twenty?”

Harlow cut the snake skin into three-inch lengths with a knife. Then he cut arm holes and a pair of slits one inch up front and back of each piece. Chestnut helped slide one over another. Because the snake got bigger in the middle, each piece was just big enough to slide over the previous ones. Soon they had the whole skin compressed into one three inch long piece.

He squeezed into the tube and stuck his arms out the holes. He was surprised at how well it would protect his body, even his legs, but it did nothing for his arms. He would have to watch them.

“How about my head?”

“I know just the thing.”

They ran down the rocky hillside and back into the forest. Chestnut ran to his favorite oak tree. “I’m sure one of these will fit.” Harlow looked around, trying on a dozen or more acorn caps until he found one that fit. He kept looking.

“Come on, you found one that fits.”

“Yes, but...” Harlow reached down and found a flatter cap. He flipped it over and carved a hole near the stem. Smiling, he put away his knife and held the acorn cap in his hand. “I need a shield.”

They stopped by the swamp and Harlow wiped streaks of mud across his face and his armor, then, much to Chestnut’s consternation, he smeared large stripes across his fur to match his own stripes.

Chestnut and Harlow raced down the road towards the Shire. Harlow’s head was clearing, time and adrenaline doing their work, but no plan was coming to mind.

It was mid-afternoon when they topped the last hill before the Shire. In the valley below they could see the two forces.

The King held the high ground with his two dozen men atop squirrels. The Shire had three dozen men, but they rode lowly chipmunks. As Harlow watched helplessly from the hill top, the two forces charged at each other. He kicked Chestnut into a run as he screamed for them to stop.

No one on the battlefield heard Harlow. None saw him charging. Their eyes were filled with red and their ears the pounding of their own hearts. Chestnut ran as fast as he could, but the distance was against him. Still a long way off, the first knights met. The ring of steel hitting steel rang through the valley. The screams of attack and the screams of death joined in.

The initial collision ended, ten knights lay on the ground. The rest circled in the dance of war, each trying to stay out of harm’s way while trying to harm. Harlow watched the chaos in horror, wishing he could freeze time like water freezes into ice - to somehow stop this madness.

Harlow didn’t slow down. He didn’t stop yelling. He drove Chestnut right into the middle of the mass of knights. He smashed between the pairs of fighting knights, taking blows to his shield when he could, parrying others with his spine, and letting the rest strike his armor. He didn’t slow down, he didn’t pull away, until he had driven all the way through the two forces.

In his wake, he left confusion, the dancers having lost their places. He spun Chestnut around and screamed again, “Stop.”

For a moment they stopped.

The forces began to move towards each other again, then Sir Kevin’s voice rang out.

“The King is dead, long live the King.”

Everyone paused for a second, and in that second Harlow yelled out again.

“My cousin was wrong. We do not want war.”

Everyone looked to Harlow. Sir Kevin backed his squirrel up. Then a second and a third knight backed up. Soon the forces were a foot apart.

“We sue for peace,” Harlow yelled.

The leader of the Shire maneuvered between his men and stopped a few inches from Harlow.

“Your cousin has harmed us. Shall we not have our revenge?”

“My cousin is dead, what more could you want? But I give you all he left me.” Harlow unfastened the pouch from his belt and tossed it to the Shire-man. “I know it is but a token, but until I become king, it is all I have, except for my honor and the loyalty of my subjects.”

The Shire-man thought for a moment, then said, “Let us bury our dead and forget this day ever was.” With that, he tossed the pouch back to Harlow and dismounted to hold the head of one of the fallen.

The afternoon was sullen, seven men were buried in the green grass of that valley and five others had to be carried away. When Harlow led his men back home, he was heralded as a hero; not because of the mighty battle he had won, or the number of men he had killed, but for the peace he had restored to the kingdom.

Progress

Another month – I’m not doing very well at getting my additional stories written. I have two of the six half-written as of the 18th. I will have a little time over the Thanksgiving weekend so I’m still hoping on getting three done by the end of the month, leaving me three for December – plus any of the very short ones I want to pick up (4 to 7). All-in-all I’m thinking I’ll make my end of the year goal.

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