

Resurrection

A paupers graveyard lay silent beneath growing black storm clouds. Derelict as it was, overwrought with weeds and rats, left to itself and the bodies it held, it was peaceful. Even as a horrible cry rose up on the wind, screams lost amidst the sudden cracking of lightning, the graves were silent, packed with dirt and secure. All but one, which laid open to the sky, open enough to hear the voice which whistled past.

"YOU ARE THE FIRST;" it said, heated and heavy, **"BLESSED ARE YOU AMONGST THE DEAD."**

Breath filled lifeless lungs as thunder shook the sky and bones which once were stiff, aged, and decrepit now bent and creaked under new weight. Within a dusty cage of rip and spine, an old heart trembled minutely before releasing a horrible, heavy beat, one which felt more akin to a kick in the chest and which shook a pained wheeze from a scorched throat as blood began to run freely through once dormant veins.

"I SEE YOU. ARISE AND WREAK MY VENGEANCE."

It was agonizing, opening eyes which had not a moment before been empty sockets in a skull. But they blinked open all the same and when they did, the entirety of the clear night sky, in all its starlit splendor, was blinding.

Fingers twitched to life, cracking with each curl of bone and with each shaking, rasping breath, the world seemed to press in, the sound of the voice, steady and deep and laced with a frenetic mania, the smell of smoke on the

wind, the feeling of wood against its back. Slowly, the sky dimmed and in the eyes of a corpse, the world began to take shape.

The sky was framed by the hard edges of a newly dug grave. The corpse's breath was laboured, its lungs only just remembering to expand and contract in time for the air to make it in and out. Its fingers quivered and its arms barely had strength enough to push itself up. But there was something on the wind calling out to it, a voice just at the back of its mind.

"COME OUT OF YOUR TOMB, FROM THE PIT THEY DUG FOR YOU TO KEEP YOU FROM ME. COME."

Slowly, each movement sending a thrill of agony through fresh nerves, the corpse pushed itself up to its knees within its broken coffin and moved toward the edge of its grave. It steadied its hands, pushing them into the wall of dirt and mud. With the makeshift support, it pulled itself up, breathless, its lungs on fire, and leaned against the wall to breathe ragged breaths, inhaling dirt into already destroyed lungs.

Rain fell about the graveyard, first in droplets and then in sheets, clotting the dirt into mud which slipped through the frigid fingers of the corpse. But its hands stayed firm and as it pressed a bare foot into the mud, it struggled to pull itself up, wet hands slipping and catching on roots and patches of grass above the carved hole.

Finally, with breaths now turned to haggard panting, the corpse dug its nails into the earth and pulled, its feet scrambling for purchase in the mud below. Its muscles screamed as it hauled itself up and up and up until its feet finally met

the edge of the grave and it was able to throw itself forward onto the ground.

It lay on the damp earth for a moment on its hands and knees, back arched and breath coming in short, ragged bursts. The rain had long since plastered what was left of its hair to its face and its filthy, torn clothes to its skin, but it couldn't feel the cold. There was already a chill in its bones and in its blood, but not from the rain or the howling wind.

The wind whipped past its face, almost a caress and, with one final breath, it followed the touch. Its heart raced and it listened once more for the voice that had awoken it. When the air stayed silent, the corpse pushed itself up onto shaking legs and took its first shambling step forward.

Its god was calling it, cashing in a debt long-owed.

A horrid, haggard laugh escaped its lips, rising through a dried and cracked throat and lifting out into the wind. It smelled the smoke on the wind and as the world came into focus around it, it saw a red glow on the horizon. It knew how this went; it had done it many times before in life.

Its cold, dead hands would no doubt feel the warmth of blood before the night was over, of that it had little doubt.

With each step, it became more surefooted, its steps heavy and purposeful as it followed the stench of violence. A fleeting thought slipped through its mind though, the lightness of its hip and the empty hand. It remembered the cold and jagged steel of a blade and sharp bolts set into a cruel bow and screaming. It remembered screaming.

Its eyes were locked on the familiar red on the horizon, its senses lost to the faint taste of ash on the wind. It didn't

notice then when its feet no longer sank into thick mud but stepped atop firm ground amidst soft grass. Long stemmed flowers rose up to meet its empty hands, drifting over cold skin, the touch soft and barely perceptible.

Only it gave the corpse pause and, blinking its eyes, it saw that it had found itself in a large field of flowers.

It spread on and on ahead, what seemed like acres of thick grass and full blooms, paintbrush petals and drooping bluebells. The corpse suspected that the field lost some of its splendour in the cold, pale light of the full moon, its colour and brilliance. Here, each flower looked like a ghost of itself, yellows and purples waning and pallid. That didn't stop it, though, from bending down and letting its hand hover over the petals of a short pink bloom. It was quiet here, the distant sound of screaming lost now on the wind which rustled through the grass and the heady scent of the flowers overcame the smell of ash and smoke which had worked its way through its nose onto its tongue. The corpse couldn't help but breathe it in deeply, its mind fogging over with the aroma.

Hesitantly, a hand reached out, fingers delicately skimming over the stem before pulling at it gently. The corpse stood, bringing the flower along with it, the scent drifting faintly to its nose. Slipping it through a hole in its chain armour, it pressed the flower gently to its chest and began once again to walk through the field, its hands at its sides, drifting almost without thought over the petals, its eyes once again on the fiery horizon ahead.

It had a debt to fulfill.

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The red haze on the horizon was that of a city ablaze, low rooves long aflame and many already in cinders, ashes swirling like snow in the air. A body lay across the ground by the gates, twisted and mangled, a long blade stuck in its chest. The work had already begun.

The corpse paused, reaching down, and letting its fingers curl around the hilt of the sword. The cold metal shocked through it, and it barely held back a small gasp as its fingers tightened, almost desperately around the sword. With a quick tug, the sword was pulled from the body, blood spraying the ground and still dripping from the blade.

It let the tip of the sword drag in the dirt, adding its own horrid, scraping shriek to the general pandemonium around it.

The city was in chaos, women and children running, screaming, wailing over bodies long since limp and lifeless before they too were cut down. There was shouting from further down the blood-soaked street, in between sounds of clashing metal. Shoulders that had been hunched and rigid slowly lowered and its spine straightened as the corpse followed the sound of the slaughter.

"Captain!"

Through the haze and smoke, the corpse found itself staring into wide, terrified eyes, a long sword pointed at its chest. The hands which held it trembled terribly and as its eyes trailed up back to the face, it caught sight of the armour and crest.

Palace guards then. Untrained, unprepared if the fear in their eyes was anything to go by.

"Captain," the guard shouted again, their eyes snapping between the corpse and the fighting figures behind them, "Captain, there's another one! Another undead! Where do they keep coming fro--"

It didn't let them finish. Perhaps, once upon a time, the thought of honour or mercy might have passed through its mind, the terror in their face giving them pause, but not now. Now, it was filled with purpose, it had been given orders. It couldn't veer from this path even if it had wanted to. Someone else had its leash.

So, its sword flew through the knights armour like butter, barely making a sound as it sliced through steel and flesh. A horrible gurgling gasp was all that followed, save for the thump of the knight's knees against the dirt as they fell.

"Sara!"

The scream that tore through the air did nothing to slow the pace of the corpse as it stepped over the now lifeless body. The slice of a sword through its chest, however, did.

"Bastard!"

The blade stuck out from its chest, already stained with dark blood. The corpse could feel the slight tremor in the sword from the hand that held it. It hadn't noticed the figure come up behind it, but that didn't matter. There was no pain, only a tightness where the sword had pierced its skin. Without warning, the blade was ripped back out and the corpse let out a wet gasp, hunching over slightly before whirling around, swinging its own blade wildly.

Its eyes landed on a figuring, armour shimmering wet in the rain, helmet long discarded, her face pale and tearstained. Her

hands grasped her sword tightly, so much so that her gauntlets practically clattered with the force of it. Her breathing was hard, horrible, and there was the barest hint of a sob barely held back. The corpse curled its fingers around the hilt of its sword and twisted its foot in the dirt, taking stance.

For a moment, the world was quiet, the two staring at one another, rage and a wretched sorrow written into every line of the guards face, and from the corpse, nothing more than a blank stare.

Then a shout and a flash of movement had the corpse on the defensive, barely enough time to bring its sword up as the metal crashed down against it.

"Vile spawn!" she snarled through clenched teeth, "Go back to the hell you were dragged out of!"

From this close, the corpse could see the tear stains which cut a path through the dirt on her face. Her face was sickly and it thought for a moment that she must have already been wounded. The strength of her attack did nothing to suggest it though, each lurch and crash of the sword shoving the corpse back a step. It would have been admirable, impressive even, had there been any hope for her in the first place. But as it was, in a moment of pause as the nameless guard hunched her shoulders and breathed, the corpse took a steady step forward and kicked out, its foot slamming against her chest, sending her flying back into the dirt.

There was no pause, not a moment taken to triumph over a downed opponent. The corpse merely stepped forward and placed its sword against her throat, watching as she went still, her laboured breaths settling and her body tensing against the press of metal. They watched each other, her eyes searching, perhaps

hoping to find something like humanity within its own but there would be nothing to find. Finally, it reared back, its blade arcing up and coming swiftly back down, ready to run through her before she suddenly lashed out, her own sword still held tightly in her fist, slicing wildly through the air, forcing the corpse to jump back to avoid the blow.

She was up in a moment, knees struggling under her and still swinging wildly but her movements were messy, uncoordinated, and left her open. She staggered, flying forward with a yell, throwing herself and her sword towards the corpse in a desperate attempt to catch at them with the blade but the corpse slipped out from under their aim. She stumbled, crumbling to the ground, a wild, strangled scream tearing through her throat. Frustrated, enraged, and miserable.

The corpse took its time, letting the tip of its blade once again drag in the dirt behind it. Its steps were purposeful and direct and when it finally stopped at the head of the nameless guard, it crouched, head tilted, looking into her eyes which now spilled over with tears.

"Monster," she spat, her eyes twitching as she tried to focus on its face, "Have you nothing inside of you? It is a craven master that uses dead men like puppets."

Its fingers twitched on the hilt of its sword, something curling in its chest, tight and indignant. It was about to open its mouth, to snarl or bite out something resembling words, when it jerked, a voice breathing through its mind, a whistle on the wind.

Bringing it to heel.

Slowly, the corpse looked up, letting its eyes wander in the direction of the wind, through the dark streets and beyond. It could feel the eyes of the guard still on it but now, in that moment, it was secondary. It stood, abruptly, and without warning or thought, it thrust its blade down through their back and chest until it pierced through the dirt below.

A gasp: choked and surprised, one or two deep, terrible breaths, and then silence. It pulled its sword free of the body, not bothering to wipe it clean, and continued, dust whipping behind it and blade dragging in the dirt.

The city was wrapped in a panic, the screams of the dying filled the air, high and piercing and seemingly never ending. Bodies flew past it, and each time the corpse would lift its sword, bringing it down in a terrible destructive sweep. It slashed through armoured leathers, through chainmail, through flesh, tearing a path through the streets, its mind humming with the call of the voice in its head.

The heat from the flames licked up its side as it went and it felt its skin bubble and burn under the blaze. It knew that it was not the only one called to this place, there were others here like it, killing, burning, and it wondered if they too were guided by the voice.

It continued through the carnage, walking along cobbled streets, the light from the lamps still casting warm beams to combat the blue of the moon. It stepped through blood and gore, following the wind up through the town, past the hanging bodies of lords, past heroes-to-be fighting for their lives, and through the gates of the great palace. Its spires rose up to block out the sky, white and gleaming in the night. The

courtyard was empty save for the crumpled, discarded bodies that lay strewn throughout, but the corpse took no notice.

The great doors were already open, studded with arrows and axes, parts broken, the wood cracked and creaking, coming off its hinges. It stepped from the ashen, scorched courtyard into the dim foyer and felt something in its chest come undone. The entryway was illuminated by the low, warm glow of lamps and the great, thick walls muffled the sound of the battle outside. The corpse continued forward, another set of doors greeting it, partway open already.

It pushed through them and blinked, letting its eyes adjust to the sudden warm glow which permeated the throne room.

"I'm pleased to see you," a voice echoed from inside and the corpse felt something in its chest tighten again at the sound.

It allowed its eyes to look up from where they had been locked on the floor, and at what it saw, it released a breath.

It stepped further into the hall, leaving bloody footprints on the marble floor as it began to walk. It took in the overturned tables, the shattered chandelier which had been cut from the ceiling, the bodies that littered the floor, crumpled and broken, before letting itself settle on the silhouette waiting amidst it all.

At the corpse's attention, the figure turned to look at it with one of its many faces, one which was mostly teeth and stretched out a long hairy arm, beckoning it forward. The corpse went but did not take the outstretched hand which was offered to it. The figure grinned, sending wrinkles across the rest of its skin.

"I am glad you were not waylaid by the mess outside. Though I can see even you did not come out unscathed."

The figure reached out another hand, one of bone with gilded knuckles and jeweled fingertips. It ran a hand over the wound the corpse had received from the guard, a long and ragged tear through its skin and chainmail. The hand stilled for a moment, then moved up just slightly to the small flower which still sat within a hole in the chainmail. The edges of its petals were slightly withered but it had lost none of its vibrancy and against the dark, blood-soaked armour it shone like a beacon.

"How charming."

The figure turned then, the face on the back of its head opening its eyes to address the corpse as it moved. The corpse, for its part, followed behind it towards the throne at the end of the hall which was not empty. There was a body on the throne, its eyes wide and mouth open in an expression of terror but it remained unmoving. Perhaps, the corpse mused, due to the spear sticking out of its chest.

As though it were nothing, the creature grabbed the body and pulled it off the throne. It went with a clatter, the crown which had been upon its head falling and rolling to their feet. Reaching down with its skeletal hand, the creature picked it up and set it snugly on their own head before sitting themselves heavily on the throne. They paid little mind to the blood which had soaked through the wood of the chair or how it still dripped with it. Their eyes, instead, were fixed on the doorway at the end of the long hall.

"It is almost done, do you hear?"

The corpse listened and indeed the sound of marching could be heard amidst the screams outside. Something was coming. The corpse turned to the creature who only let its teeth smile back.

"You have a debt to settle, and I have need of a general."

The tightness in the corpse's chest wound around and around its heart until it could hardly breath. It felt as though it was suffocating and wished, desperately, that it had remained dead.

"Your army waits just outside, dead and festering and awaiting your orders," the crowned thing said, leaning forward on its throne, eagerly watching, **"And you will lead them into battle..."**

They stood.

"...after battle..."

They reached out...

"...after battle..."

...and plucked the flower from its armour.

"Until I am sated."

They let the flower fall from their fingers, before stepping forward, crushing it beneath their boot.

"And my appetite is endless."