

The Knight of Dreams

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The castle walls glisten with spear tips and polished helms, all ready for battle. The soldiers stand tall, knowing that Sir Thegan, a great knight, is leading them. Not a week ago had he arrived, and the captain requested his assistance in the coming fight.

But Thegan is not among them, and the eagerness of the soldiers wanes. The great knight from far away broods below in the barracks, hunched over his late breakfast while the captain, dressed for battle in his shining armor and crisp tabard, is doing everything he can to convince Thegan to take to the walls as was previously agreed.

“This will be a savage skirmish, and every surviving man will be hailed as a hero. How could you refuse?”

The knight tears at a biscuit. “If it's so glorious, you lead them. I never agreed to lead the men; you devised that on your own.”

“What good is a knight that will not draw his sword?”

“I am done drawing my sword!” Thegan takes a gulp of sweet milk.

The captain stares at him, mouth agape.

“Think of the men who will die if you don't join us.”

“They are soldiers. They should always be ready to die in battle.”

“That doesn't mean they *must* die.”

A horn sounds on the wall. The enemy is here.

The captain hesitates, gawking at this sad knight before him, but he pulls himself away and rushes to see for himself what comes on the horizon. He tops the walls and looks out over the fields.

Below in the barracks, Thegan listens with sharp ears. Booming footsteps fill the dreadful silence and tension of the castle and walls.

The captain fails to muster words for a speech and stares blankly at the giant knight cresting the hill. The clear blue sky is disturbed by the abrupt peak of black metal, a forty-foot-tall knight carrying a blade even longer than himself.

Thegan returns to his ship. He has seen enough battles to know what happens next. The giant will mount the walls and hack away at the men

stationing it. The captain will fall. But someone will climb the giant and hack at its weakest point and save the day. A hero, as the captain himself said. It's all happened before, and Thegan is not needed. There are no battlefields that need him. And he no longer needs battle.

Thegan departs on his lonely sloop.

The pacifist knight has beached on a quiet island of green in the roiling seas. Atop the gentle hill sits a crumbled old home, once an estate of wealth and history, with spiraling stairs, long halls, painted windows, delicate candles glowing on chandeliers, and filled with the laughter of those who lived there. The walls now hunch and stoop over the fallen ceilings and roofs, and green vines wrap the ruins and invade the halls, rooms, and lofts. It is the vine-leaves that laugh in the wind.

Thegan stands at the front double-doors, one of which lies in the entrance like a fallen soldier. The knight enters, taking once familiar steps through the threshold and into the entryway where the scent of vanilla once greeted him. Dust swirling at his feet now greets him.

“Might it not have fallen had I not left? I promised only to leave until the battle was over, but the battles never end. A knight is never without wars to fight and crusades to host.”

Thegan shambles down the hall and returns his sword to the wall-rack where he'd first taken it from years ago. The scabbard rests with a dull thud. Now just a man, Thegan inhales deeply and strides through the halls of the ruin.

His old room greets him; everything where he had left it. The east window where the morning sun always wakes him is dim in the evening light. It grows dark as night arrives. Thegan moves through the room and tours his old things; his first suit of armor, crafted for a small boy that hangs on an armor stand in the corner; a long tapestry that tells of Dame Ingela, a knight of great beauty that Thegan had fallen in love with as a young man full of dreams; a bookcase filled with dusty tomes half-read and half-remembered.

Dawn peers in through the window, but Thegan still sleeps.

He continues down the hall and into the parlor, where the sun paints across the two half-walls still standing. A laugh chimes like silver. Thegan looks around but sees nothing and no one.

“We missed you,” says a voice.

From nowhere apparates a pale phantom. Long hair drifts as if carried by an unseen current.

“Mother?” Thegan whispers.

“We've waited a long time, Father and I.”

Next to her, an old man appears, bone-thin and glassy. As night settles in, the pair glow softly white.

“Did you win the war?” the old man rasps.

“The war never ceases. There are always battles.”

“Hmph. So you thought you'd take a vacation?”

“Hush, deer,” Mother says. “He can stay home as long as he needs.” Their voices ripple like water against a far-away shore; two worlds briefly colliding before the tide leaves again.

“I grow tired of fighting. There's no sense to it.”

Father stomps a ghostly foot through the floor. “Bah! Do you think it was merely fighting that made Dame Ingela a great knight? A legend? She saved lives and protected the weak. Don't tell me you've been fighting for the sake of fighting all along?”

Thegan had no reply.

“Should I make dinner?” Mother asks. “Oh, I suppose breakfast,” she says, surveying the brightening sky.

“I am not hungry.”

Father frowns at his boy. “Are you sure? You seem awfully hungry for a cause, a reason to fight. You had one when you left, what'd you do with it?”

“I hadn't yet seen the bloody faces and weeping survivors.”

“And when the bloody faces were buried and the survivors stopped weeping, what was it like?”

“It was,” Thegan thinks back to the towns,

villages, cities, and castles he had defended. “Relief. Eagerness. Hope.”

“You can't have night without day.” Evening sets in. Night consumes them. “And there's always a dawn.”

The sun blossoms over the seas and settles into place.

“You'd best get going. There are people waiting to be saved.”

“Don't be away so long next time,” Mother says.

The knight answers, “I promise to return again someday.”

Thegan returns to the hall and retrieves his sword from the rack, then sets sail in his stoic sloop and braves the thrashing seas.