

Death and Life

Pow! The gunshot sounded from across the trench. Thud! Instantly my right side erupted in burning pain. I slumped down against the side of the trench, holding the now bleeding wound, just below and to the left of my right shoulder. I removed the hand to loosen my GI belt to use it as a tourniquet. *\$@#! *That hurts!*

A loud snorting reached my ears. *A horse? They've not been used in battle for ages!* As I looked up it seemed that what was left of my strength drained away. Just above me stood a black horse, eyes glowing red. I pushed myself against the trench wall, wishing it would swallow me up. The horse pawed the ground and whinnied wildly. It turned slightly, allowing me to see the rider. If the horse had scared me then the rider terrified me to no end. He sat tall and straight, totally covered in black chain mail. His helmet was also black and looked like one of those ancient Greek ones, with metal plates coming around to protect the cheeks and the mouth, and so obscuring the wearer's face. Two burning coals shown out of the oval eyeholes, piercing me like a needle cloth. A black cape fell from his shoulders and seemed to become one with the black stallion's back. In his right hand he held a long javelin with a razor-sharp tip. He spoke, his voice rumbled like thunder and creaked like unoiled hinges. I suddenly realized who stood before me: Death himself. He did not look like my grandfather had described him. To Grandpa he had been peaceful, yet to me he was terrifying.

Death roared again, and moved his steed forward. My mouth was filled with dry ashes and my stomach heaved as the reek of sweaty horse and sweaty man mingled with the smell of blood. I shivered and tried to speak, but all that came out was a hoarse croak. The morbid horseman raised his spear, tip pointing towards me. The horse leaped forward as Death thundered again and drove the sharp weapon towards my heart as the waves of darkness crashed over my head.

The black waves parted as I shot up from the bottom of the abyss. I opened my eyes and immediately squeezed them shut again. The light was simply too bright. I cautiously opened one eye and looked around a brightly lit room. Colorful curtains had been pulled back to let the morning sunlight in. The large windows had been opened to let in the spring air. The dull throb of my wound seemed almost relaxing. Slowly the sense of feeling slipped through my numb body. A gentle hand was holding my left wrist. I turned my head slowly and saw a young woman sitting beside my bed, looking steadily at her wristwatch. She was dressed in white hospital uniform. Her hair was brown and pulled back in a ponytail. Her face glowed with life, standing out from the sterile white of her clothing, and she seemed almost to be trying to infuse me with life as she took my pulse. She dropped my arm gently, nodded to herself, and marked something on her chart. She took a quick, almost worried look at me. Her face brightened into a beautiful smile as she noticed I had come to.

"Welcome back to the living, Corporal," she said, handing me a glass of water. I sipped it slowly and swirled it around in my mouth. No water had ever tasted so good. It washed the burnt ashes from my mouth, giving it a clean taste. The nurse still stood beside the bed, an expectant look on her face. From it, I suddenly wondered: had I been dead, or almost dead? The memory of the encounter with the black horseman made me shiver. Almost subconsciously I felt my chest. There was no wound there, only the clean hospital garment covering my body. I breathed an almost audible sigh of relief.

"Death be not proud!" I whispered. I had been given a second crack at life and I hoped that this one would be far, far from any and every battlefield. Yet, what about the black horseman, Death? Will he still be as harsh as on the battlefield, or maybe gentle like with Grandpa? This I will learn when the time comes. But fear him will I always.

Copyright © 1993, 2002 by Josh Malcolm. All Rights Reserved.

This is a free distribution made available through Wolfhawke.com <http://www.wolfhawke.com/>

This version is for the personal use of the person who has downloaded it. That person has the right to print one (1) hard copy at a time, provided the story is printed in its entirety, cited correctly, and not given to resale. It is not to be redistributed in any way shape or form, whether in print, or as electronic media without written permission from the author. Any editing or alteration of the story are direct infringements of copyright. For more information write to writings@wolfhawke.com.

Internet: <http://www.wolfhawke.com/stories/dnl.php>

PDF: <http://www.wolfhawke.com/pdf/dnl.pdf>