

WITH A BROKEN SWORD

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For Melissa, as always.

*I'd like to thank the readers of my newsletter,
who stuck with Ser Colin through thick and
thin.*

Chapter One

THE MORNING SUN had the temerity to shine down bright and warm from the clear blue sky above. Good spring weather. The rains were days behind them, but their scent still teased in a breeze which was just cool enough to mitigate the heat of armor.

Perfect weather for a just war against Berledth's tyrant king.

Perfect weather going to waste for Ser Colin, who rode with Ser Darren's company of six knights through the rolling fields just east of the mighty river Odeda's snake curves. Miles south of the Berledth front.

Secret missions. Knights riding without their squires and banners. Enough to make Ser Colin spit. Or it would have been, were he not astride his roan steed and clad in his helm and his rings of steel. Spitting was for clearing the mouth of blood or mud in a battle, or of nerves and morning eggs before the battle began. Spitting was for taverns and firesides, not for an armored knight riding in the service of his king, Boris III of Kholast.

Even if that mission were of questionable honor at best. Follow the Odeda up through the forest Taern to where the Berledth pickets were weakest. Slip through enemy lines and hit three key points in their supply

chain, far enough behind the front to be unprotected.

Work for assassins, not knights.

Ser Colin spat anyway. If he was to be given work beneath his station, he might as well act the part.

The sound did not escape the catlike ears of Ser Jane, who dropped out of line to ride beside him and quirk that half-smile of hers. Ser Jane stood a half-head shorter than Ser Colin, but no enemy still lived who ever faced her glaive. Whether twirling its six-foot handle to strike with the butt end, or slashing and stabbing with the single-edged blade at its tip, Ser Jane was equally deadly against both footman and horseman alike.

“Brothers and sisters,” she called aloud, her voice full of humor. “I do believe the youngest member of our company has spat.”

A chuckle rolled through the knights. Even one of the horses nickered as though on cue, and Ser Colin’s ears burned with embarrassment.

“Could it be,” continued Ser Jane, “that the newest member of the Knights of the Morning has another task in mind for his mighty sword? I wonder what he would rather be doing...” She made a show of consideration, tapping the point of her jaw. “Leading the vanguard, perhaps? Or charging in to support the infantry?”

“Are you going to tell me you’re happy about our mission?” The words came out louder than Ser Colin intended, ringing in the morning air. Sparrows took flight from a copse of elm trees atop a nearby rise, as though in protest at his disturbance.

Before Ser Jane could answer, the quiet rasp of Ser Darren took charge, much as the craggy knight himself had done for longer than Ser Colin been alive. “What are the words of our order?”

Trick question. Ser Colin might only have received

his arms and standing two seasons ago, but he had worked hard to truly understand the distinction of that question's answer.

"The words on our banners are 'king and country.' But the words we swear to are country and king."

"And the difference?" said Ser Jane.

"Everyone believes we swear to serve the king, but in truth we serve the people." Ser Colin cocked his head. "Like the two Berledth dukes who are aiding us against their own king."

"Those dukes might be aiding themselves," said Ser Darren. "But rather than fighting at your precious front and covering ourselves with glory like the other orders, I volunteered us for this mission."

Ser Darren and Ser Jane both smiled at the shock on Ser Colin's face.

"That's right," said Ser Darren. "Now why did I do it?"

Ser Colin gritted his teeth in frustration that the answer did not leap to his lips.

Sers Roderick, Tabitha and Gerald shook their heads, but Ser Darren kept a steady eye on Ser Colin, waiting, and Ser Jane nodded encouragement, as though she too felt he should see the answer.

But just then they heard the rising two-tone blast of a ram's horn. A Berledth attack signal.

Arrows volleyed down around them from the right. One caught Ser Roderick in the throat. The veteran gurgled and fell from his horse.

From the rise and the copse of elms came thundering Berledth warriors. Dozens of them, armored, and wielding lances, swords and maces.

Another volley of arrows crested the sky...

Chapter Two

THE NEXT THING Ser Colin knew, a crow's sharp beak pecked away at his forehead, trying to dig for his eyes.

Conscious again. Blue sky above. Hot, midday sunlight on his face. Heavy weights pressed him into ground made muddy with blood. Blinking against the brightness, Ser Colin saw that his legs, his hips were pinned in place by the still-armored bodies of his fallen companions.

His ribs were squeezed too tight for even a deep breath, but with the stench of death and offal in his nose and their taste on his tongue that might have been a blessing.

He could at least wave away the crow, and two or three of its brethren from the murder that pecked away at the remains of Ser Colin's brothers and sisters in arms. A half-dozen knights and horses. Slaughtered.

Some wonder then that Ser Colin, the least of his company, had survived. But the lingering pain in his forehead was dull, and deep, and obviously not all from the crow's beak. His probing fingers told him of a cut near his right temple that had bled itself out. It stung, hot to his touch.

A flash of memory. A diamond-shaped mace head passing his guard, coming at his face. The grin of the horseman at the other end of that long handle. The tearing and jerking as Ser Colin's helmet crumpled and flew free. Ser Colin falling from the back of his roan. Then nothing.

His company had been ambushed well behind the battle lines by a force from Berledth. The memory was hazy, but he could remember the blasts on the ram's horn. The falling arrows, one tearing through Ser Roderick's throat. The charge...

Fast, shallow breaths began to spin the sun high above Ser Colin, edged darkness at the periphery of his vision. He forced his hands to squeeze closed then open wide. Made each breath follow the movement of his hands, even if he could not fill his lungs.

Once. Twice. Thrice. Calm.

Ser Colin could hear nothing but the feasting of crows and their cries to companions.

No. He could hear past that. A breeze, not strong. And yes, there, in the background, the rushing waters of the great river Odeda.

But no nickering horses. No shouted orders or feasting victors. No sounds of life, not human ... nor the others that Berledth's foul king was said to have at his command.

Ser Colin took a risk, though he needed three efforts to manage even a rasp that made him think of Ser Darren. "Any others still alive?"

No answer came, beyond the mocking of crows.

He was alone then, and the victors had moved on.

Slowly, one sworn brother or sister at a time, Ser Colin dug himself free from the bottom of the pile. His every muscle screamed protests at being asked to move,

but he stood at last.

Any hopes he clung to about running down a lost horse collapsed as he counted all six dead steeds around him. Not piled like the knights, but left where they were brought down by arrows and spears.

No dead Berledthi. Either they had taken their dead with them, or their victory was complete.

Ser Colin looked back at his fallen companions. Their gory tableau burned itself into his memory, knights he had fought beside and looked up to, now a mess of slashed and stabbed and crushed corpses, each with at least two arrow wounds as well.

He could not spare time to bury them, much less recover their armor for their families. But this much he could do.

He dragged their bodies, in pieces when necessary, to the copse of elms atop a nearby rise. The closest thing to a cairn he could arrange for them. There he arranged their bodies in order of rank.

Ser Colin sketched the eight lines of their order's star in the air as he said the words for fallen brothers and sisters.

"Your lives spent in service. Your blood spilled for others. I who have survived you, will remember. I who have survived you, will tell of your deeds."

Ser Colin bent his knee before them. "I shall carry your names with my own. Ser Darren. Ser Jane. Ser Roderick. Ser Tabitha. Ser Gerald. Go now to the next battlefield, where those who have gone before await you. And may you yet know rest and peace."

The last lines should have been spoken with Ser Colin's sword offered as though swearing fealty. But his father's blade was missing from its scabbard. The ritual complete, he returned to the bloody mud and searched

for his weapon.

He found it. In two halves.

In fact, all the swords they carried had been broken. The maces as well. All Ser Colin could scrounge from the remains were his bow and arrows — still packed with the saddle of his dead roan — and Ser Jane's glaive.

Ser Colin replaced the pieces of his father's sword in its scabbard, then wrapped the scabbard in a horse blanket and tucked it into a saddlebag alongside his share of the ... food.

A quick search of the other saddlebags confirmed his fears. No food had been taken. No weapons. Not even such few coins as they carried onto the battlefield.

Ser Colin knew his duty. He had to head for the Odeda and continue the mission. Breaking the supply chain on his own would prove difficult, but that was the task Ser Darren had agreed to, and with the death of the others only Ser Colin remained to complete it.

However, Ser Colin saw a problem. That the Berledthi claimed no spoils might have been difficult to interpret. But that they abandoned perfectly good food while in the field meant they expected a ready supply, and soon.

In searching for weapons, he had seen many hoof prints on the ground, signs of the passing of the Berledth force. Ser Colin had assumed they had come down through the forest Taern to either harry Kholast's supply lines or trap part of the army in a pincer move.

But if that were their goal, they should have been riding east.

And they were riding south. Where they expected to find food.

Ser Colin had a task before him, and honor required him to complete it or die trying.

But if he did, he would be leaving an unchecked Berledthi force behind him. And riding south would take them to...

Three Bidges. The town built where the Odeda split three ways. If Berledth took and held Three Bridges, they would control river access to most of Kholast. The battle might be miles north, but the war, the country could be lost.

And the people of Three Bridges. They would be caught completely unprepared.

Ser Colin had orders from his king. But his country needed him.

Ser Colin started south at a ground eating trot.



Chapter Three

THE SUN HAD begun to set by the time filthy, bloody Ser Colin arrived on foot across the massive Odeda river from Three Bridges. The pain from his head wound had settled to a dull ache, but weariness pulled at his limbs and made his rings of armor seem to have been forged from lead, rather than steel.

He collapsed atop a small rise among a few scrub bushes, to the irritation of a flick of hares. For a long moment he scrambled for his bow, but quickly abandoned that hope. By the time he could have strung it and nocked an arrow, the slowest of the flick would have been long gone.

He gave himself a few minutes to rest under the slowly darkening sky, his breaths panting and sweat dripping down from his matted black hair to create runnels in the mud and blood on his face. But the cool breeze felt almost sweet after the afternoon heat, and his stomach rumbled at the smell of baking bread from across the river to the west.

Across the river, and across the nearest of the three bridges. This one a high arch of stone. Wide enough for three carts to ride abreast and tall enough to admit a small sloop passage beneath.

And the Odeda was deep enough for such a ship, some four or five fathoms according to rumor, and a full sixty feet across.

And the river ran fast. Far too deep and wide and fast for Ser Colin to swim it, not even fresh from a night's sleep.

The tracks of the Berledthi horses had followed the river straight to the bridge, and Ser Colin had caught no glimpse of the attackers themselves during his long afternoon run. That meant that they had to have crossed the bridge by now. And that he could not hear any sounds of fighting told him that Three Bridges had already fallen.

Of course they had. Farmers and merchants and dockworkers against blooded troops? If they were smart, they surrendered without a fight to spare their own people needless death. The invaders would probably keep them alive and more or less intact so long as they housed and fed the troops without incident.

Did that mean that no one had carried the news? Fled seeking help?

No way to know yet. Ser Colin had to cross that bridge. Speak with the locals. Hope they wouldn't turn him in as a troublemaker.

No. With a knight to lead them, some would fight. No one would choose to be ruled by that foul Berledthi king. Capitulating to save lives was not the same as surrendering body and soul.

But first, that bridge.

The Berledthi were certain to have guards high atop it, where they could spy an attacking force coming for some distance.

Would they have noticed a single runner? Ser Colin had to hope they did not.

He contemplated possible approaches while his

teeth gnawed on dried meat and fruits from his pack. It might be that, with a night's sleep to refresh him, he could scale the side of the bridge and cross. A single slip would mean death, but even a meager guard force positioned on the main bridge into town would have him more than outnumbered anyway.

Where were the other two bridges? Ser Colin could not see them in the fading light, but he knew from memory that they spanned the other two branches of the Odeda, south of the town proper, one on the east side and one on the west.

Crossing the east bridge would not help him. The Odeda would not narrow enough to ford for several leagues from here, if at all.

No, the climb would be his best bet. And the sooner he slept, the stronger he'd be.

Ser Colin's eyes were barely closed when he heard low, deep barking.

Dogs. On this side of the bridge.

The invaders had spotted him.

