

# Among The Fallen

by,

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Genre:

Medieval Literature

Before my eyes ever opened, I felt as if a great weight was slowly suffocating me. Though I could not tolerate the sensation, my body did not respond to my commands, as if my limbs had been carved from wood. I wanted to scream, but as I opened my mouth nothing came out but a gasp, and then the weight rolled off of me. It was then my vision returned. The weight that had been smothering me was the corpse of my commander.

I lay on my stomach, embedded into the wet earth, and I could not see beyond the barrier of bodies and fallen horses that surrounded me. I struggled to recall what had happened, but it seemed that memory would be the last thing to return to me. My commander had apparently taken a savage blow to the head; a vast pool of blood had formed around his sundered helmet. My own injuries I could not catalogue, though I knew they must be severe to have put me in this state.

I could hear the survivors, though I could not tell whether they were friend or foe. If it were the latter, it would not be long before one of them would discover me and finish me off. They would not bother to ransom me, for I owned little of value beyond my horses and arms, and it was common practice to prowl the battlefield after victory to exterminate the wounded. I myself had done this, and though there is no honor in murdering the defenseless, it is better to die than to waste away on the battlefield.

Having found myself in that very position, I did not want death. The voices grew closer, and involuntarily, my muscles grew tense. Sensation had returned to me, though with it came a nauseating pain, radiating from my torso to every extremity. I rolled onto

my back, which brought some relief, but the urge to cry out was almost too much to bear. I tried to breathe, but with each breath the agony grew.

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I could see myself now, plummeting down the hill on horseback, at the front of the line. I could hear the great clash as my lance wrought its terror upon my opponents, shattering them before me. I reached for my ax, and then the cacophony of battle ceased, and I was no longer flying through the enemy horde. I thought of taking a brief respite, just for a moment, and as those above me trampled upon my back and forced me deeper into the muck, I slept peacefully.

Though the thought of moving again made me wish for a slit throat, I knew I had to find a weapon. If the men who approached intended to send me to God, I would not go without a struggle. As I writhed in the muck and blindly grasped around for anything that could stab or crush, I found the ax that had distracted me before. Now it was a godsend, for it was a versatile weapon, perfect for someone as desperate as I. With great effort, I managed to sit up, resting upon the fallen, to face my executioners.

The battlefield was strewn end to end with the dead and dying, never before had I seen such carnage, even in the corridors of Jerusalem. The battle must have gone on for hours after I lost consciousness, and with a pain greater than any wound could summon, I saw all of my brethren broken and twisted on the field. Our banners lay soiled in pools of blood; our great steeds met their ends in this cold, miserable place. Our entire nation, it seemed, had perished while I slept.

That I still drew breath was the greatest tragedy of all, as I would have traded places with any of the dead, for all were better men than I. I knew now that no matter what fate awaited me, I could never again gaze upon my homeland, as the only survivor

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of this cruel defeat. I would rather be drawn and quartered than face the multitude of mourners this battle has created.

The voices from before now resumed their conversation, and judging from their stares, I was the subject. They advanced – three of them – and I could see from their armor that they were not of noble origin. These men were here to rob the dead, to deprive the fallen of their only possessions. Their hauberks were covered in filth and rust, it was a wonder that they were allowed to enter battle in such a shameful condition. To be struck down by these primitive thieves was an insult to everything I stood for. Grins spread across their faces, eager as they were to prey upon a live victim, for men of this stature find great pleasure in fortifying their arrogance by exploiting the weak.

Though I was not free of sin myself, and doubtful that I deserved to stand before a god of justice, I could not allow myself to meet death at the hands of these dogs. Somewhere deep within me, from a well unknown to me until this day, arose a hatred that consumed all suffering and fear. I stood on uncertain legs, and as the men stumbled over the dead to reach me, they laughed at my defiance. As they closed in, I knew that it would be a miracle if I managed to wound just one of them before I was cut down. I made the sign of the cross, and raised my ax, nearly collapsing from the wave of pain that followed.

This misery, however, was soon overshadowed. There was a faint whistling, for only the briefest of moments, that I did not notice until after the fact. It was the sound of a crossbow bolt, issued from an unknown source, colliding with one of my enemies' skulls. As he fell straight onto his contorted face, I could see the tail end of the bolt

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protruding from the base of his neck. The other two turned, only to face an entire volley of bolts, and as I observed their futile efforts to evade the missiles, the pain of my broken form subsided.

It was then, in my private jubilation, that I noticed that I too had failed to avoid the bolts that had only just spared my life. Fresh blood welled from new wounds, and though I'd inexplicably survived all the perils before this, death had finally found its mark. Without feeling or the powers of observation, I found myself again embedded into the wet earth, knowing that this would be my grave. With numb hands I desperately tried to impede the flow of blood, not because of delusions that this might save my life, but because I could feel the warmth draining from my body. I did not think to say a final prayer, or to utter last words of any significance; I wanted only to bask in the heat of the sun and sleep gently in the embrace of its radiance.

In this pit of crimson, I was the last to fall among those who would never rise again. Though my saviors brought with them my condemnation, I felt no rage or spite in my last moments, for I had already left the field, riding amongst my brothers once more.

