

The Crossing

By Nikos Gaitanopoulos

A great reward was said to await anyone who conquered the Fields of Ash and, although the concept “field” might seem quite chaotic, to cross them there was only one way; Through. Simple as a concept that may sound yet hundreds of thousands had lost their souls on the crossing. The Champion stood at the edge of the Fields now and was pondering on what reward might have drawn so many to lose themselves in such a dreadful place.

Tall, gaunt and battle-worn he was and as his gaze drifted upon the grey wastes with the occasional wandering ember vanishing to nothingness on the rogue gusts of wind he could not help but feel the rising weariness and fear tighten their grip on his heart. Please no more, he thought. No more fighting, no more conquering, just let this end. Yet a challenge was waiting before him, the only thing that he ever had trouble resisting, for it tasted sweeter than love and its lure was stronger than hate. The wraith like trees, twisted and charred, beckoned him to come under their ragged shadows and the plains with the wandering wraiths begged him to dive in the unconquerable reaches. No one had managed to cross the Fields of Ash yet, the Champion mused, it might as well be me. Or it may even be a fitting ending, a darker voice said from within, not loudly enough to even be considered a breath. His grip tightened on his ever-trusty sword and he marched forth.

The air smelled of flames long faded and every step upon the scorched memories of grass raised countless specks of ash and dying cinders around his feet that made the Champion look like he was floating on a slow, determined wind that swept the Fields of Ash in purposeful opposition to the drifting nature of everything else. Shades would wander around the edge of his vision, trying to claim his attention, but thicker than the ash the Champion’s thoughts were and few things could claim him from them. Each step felt harder than the last yet the Champion could not help but wonder if that was all there was to the Fields of Ash. Where was the unconquerable beast that would bar his path, where was Death and his scythe that would slice his life’s thread and end it all? Where was the fight he had come for? Only defeated souls seemed to float to and fro purposeless and defeated, but no sign of the their vanquisher was to be found. Where was the fight he longed for? The fight that might claim him at last, the voice whispered.

“Ho, stranger!”

The hooded figure that had materialised out of the rugged remains of the fallen raised a saluting hand towards him and the Champion mimicked the gesture in return with his free hand. Under his visor a frown creased his face. Would death approach with kind words? Certainly, it wasn’t the first time he had faced an opponent like that. Yet the hooded man, at least that was what his voice made him to be, did not seem menacing. On the contrary he walked casually to the Champion’s side in the friendliest of ways and pointed to the never ending ashen plains around them with a wide gesture.

“Through might be the only way, but you don’t have to cross alone, Champion. Two can always make the passage swifter. You know what I am talking about. So, what say you?”

The Champion shuddered at the thought. He didn’t care that the hooded man knew of him or his pain. It was the thought of the pain itself that had made him stop. Companions, friends, his love... they had to be left behind so that he could be who he was. His path was one of loneliness and so it should remain. He was always alone and that was a fact undisputed. They had tried to come close, yet they never seemed to touch his soul and then they had to be forced away. It was demanded of him to be alone and the Champion never shied from his duty. Yet the hooded man did not seem to be bothered by his dark bearing and the Champion motioned him to lead the way. After all the hooded man seemed familiar with the Fields of Ash and the Champion did not want to wander forever. There were battles to be fought. There might be release on the path. There might be death, the voice whispered.

“I guess you seek the beast that has claimed all this men, is that correct?”, the hooded man asked with his dry voice.

The Champion only nodded, earning a low chuckle from his companion.

“But of course, you do. That’s why you are here after all. All of them came here for the same reason after all and the Champion could be no exception. Fear not, for the Beast is near.”

This time the Champion did not have time to respond for he heard the Beast approaching. Just not a dragon, he thought. Anything but a dragon. The last one had almost claimed his life. Let it be a dragon then, the voice trailed as an afterthought. The largest and most ferocious one to ever throw its shadow on the world. Let it come and I will face it, the Champion thought. And maybe die at last. No. I will not die. I shall conquer. Or maybe find peace. How would you define peace then? The voice asked. In victory. In death. Both the Champion’s hands were already gripping on his sword hilt before the Beast appeared in the horizon.

The dragon the Champion had slain seemed tiny in front of the Beast. His adversary had wings, horns, talons and spikes and the Champion felt like trying to stare down a mountain just by seeking its eyes. The ground shook at its wake and the wind came and went with its breath, tainted with fire and sulphur. The horizon seemed to vanish under its shadow and even light itself tried to steer clear of it. The souls of the fallen had dispersed at the mere sound of it and even the hooded man had somehow leapt on a tall stone spire to watch the confrontation from a distance. The Beast was doom incarnate and the Champion felt fear’s clutches at the heart of his reason. He could never even hope to stand against the thing. And yet he raised his sword. Death at last, the voice rejoiced, peace.

Amidst dying embers and roused cinders the Champion and the Beast fought. The Fields of Ash shook, heaved and seethed and the winds that blew around them ripped the dying trees from their roots and tossed them around as if they were but mere twigs. In the heart of the battle the stern man found his terrifying completeness again, the sense that he belonged there more than anywhere else and whatever gentleness might have one day bloomed in his heart was scorched in the flame of his lust for fighting. His sword broke and his armour was torn to shreds yet on he fought with bare hands and clenched teeth. Each wound inflicted was pleasure, each taken a testament of life in an otherwise empty chest. The Beast roared and fought but for all its might it could not stand against the sense of belonging that the Champion felt in battle and soon fell dead at the man's feet. The howling wind was all that remained after the Beast's death and soon even its corpse was reduced to dancing ashes. The Champion rose, now in rags, and instead of sword his hands held a chain of ashes.

"A mighty feat, indeed", the hooded man exclaimed and clapped loudly seeing the Champion emerge victorious, "Never before have I seen a man fight like you."

Somehow he had reappeared on the Champion's side. Of the Beast there was no sign. Yet now the lost souls, aimlessly drifting up to this point, had started turning their gaze towards the Champion attentively. They were not following but they saw that a worthy man was walking the fields. The Champion merely shrugged, as if the compliment never reached him. There was still a long way to go.

"Of course, you are not the first to slay the Beast", the hooded man went on, " But for some reason it always come back. You, however, may have scared it for good. What a fight... For a moment I thought there was no Beast at all, when I saw you swinging down there..."

The hooded man kept rambling on and the Champion paid less and less attention to his words. What did that wretch want from him? If a Beast was slain before, why did he even spent his time flattering him. Words such as these rarely reached the Champion's heart and he would gladly have it so, in order to keep himself away from arrogance. Maybe the hooded man used kind words to have him lower his guard. How had he found him after all? It could be that he was the real challenge, the one testing men with the Beast to find those worthy of testing him. The Champion had seen his like before but dreaded to face him again. Tall and black clad with scythe in hand he and Death had exchanged blows for many a year. It could be the real challenger that had sowed so many souls in the Fields of Ash. He is the one that brought you here, the voice reminded him, and the one that will soon or later claim you.

The Champion's inner dialogue was abruptly interrupted as he noticed something out of place at the edge of his vision. There was light being reflected on steel. Stealthily he risked a look at his guide and felt almost satisfaction at seeing the scythe in his hands. How had he failed to notice? Of course it was Death guiding him to his tasks. A heavy sigh escaped

his mouth. It was just another fight and yet he could feel his limbs shaking. He had fought for so long, that he had forgotten how it was not to fight. It was a sweet wine, an addiction that he threw himself in again and again for the sheer pleasure it offered, the sense of being alive, and yet he dreaded it more and more every time. Death would be a fitting last opponent, the voice suggested. The Champion lowered his gaze at the only reassurance he had left, only to be reminded that the sword that he had come so much to rely on was replaced by the ashen chain. The sense of loss felt like something sitting heavy in his stomach but his pose revealed nothing of his pain. He turned at his companion but found him at his side no more.

“Let’s see whether the Champion is as great as the world claims”, Death said without emotion. He was wearing a cloak of ash, as if the Fields embraced him as one of their own, as if they were him and he was them. He held no scythe but a twisted black crook that looked like the trees that littered the Fields, but it seemed no less deadly than the scythe the Champion had imagined in Death’s hands.

And so they fought. If the fight with the Beast was the sea in a storm, then the confrontation with Death was but a spot of water in the storm’s eye. The fallen souls all along the plains rushed to the point where the two figures stood only like moths to a flame, only to find them exchanging occasional blows, lazy almost as if the fight between them did scarcely matter. Yet to the keen eye it was clear that the opponents just measured each other’s strengths and it was thoughts and notions that they tossed frantically against one another, ideas that would bend ordinary men to their knees and kept the souls at bay lest they were reminded again of their own demise. Their eyes were locked on the combatants as if they thirsted for the spectacle yet they dared not approach in fear of being caught in their exchange. And right they were for suddenly with a heart wrenching scream the Champion leaped at Death and started whipping him mercilessly with his chain. In an instant it was over and only an old cloak remained of the hooded man. The Champion picked up and donned it on his shoulders before continuing on his way. And from a distance the souls followed.

The Champion was almost broken. Blood was pouring forth from his wounds mixing with the ashes in his feet. He had never feared death and that had almost proven to be his downfall. He had dived into the Pit of Death once a long time ago and he had come back yet never had the probability of death been more real to him than at this last fight. At the mere thought of it he shuddered. You have defeated Death, said the voice gleefully, what mightier weapon than you exists in the world?

“NO! I AM NOT A WEAPON!”, The Champion screamed in wrath to no one in particular and the souls indeed did not seem to care as they flowed around him.

Oh, but you are, the voice went on with terrifying certainty. You cut down earth’s beasts and the legions of darkness. Every challenge that came your way you faced with a sharp blade and a sure hand. The Fields of Ash have almost knelt to you. One more fight and this shall be done, as well. You are the Champion because you are the world’s weapon and a perfect one at that.

“Get out of my head...”, the Champion whispered in a menacing tone, “Do not distort things to serve your own purposes. You know nothing of me...”

Don't I? The voice insisted. I am you. Who else would speak in your head? Unless of course you are going to mad, in which case you'd better accept me fast for we are spending eternity together. How else did I know of the number of challenges? How else did I tell you how to win every fight?

“I won the fights on my own, not because of you”, the Champion grunted through gritting teeth, “Do not try to claim my fights from me”

Of course I would not dare do such a thing, the voice said apologetically and the Champion thought that he could almost contain it. But on it went and every word was a blade in his heart. Who would dare claim victories away from the weapon that earned them. You are human no more. You rejoice only in combat. Even love you cast away for fighting. If that is not the definition of a weapon, I do not know what else can be. It's alright to be a weapon, after all. You are not the first but at least here you can excel, you who failed to be anything else, and be the deadliest.

“I did not send her away for my love of fighting...”, the Champion said almost in tears, “I could not have her witness my death.”

At the mere thought of his love, her visage and voice appeared in his mind and then all of the people who had either demanded things of him or accompanied him on his path.

"I won't allow you to forge him into a weapon, she had demanded, he is a man, not a sword."

“He is what the world needs him to be” , one of them had replied sternly, “and if the world needs a weapon I won't prevent the only willing man from becoming one.”

“Do not do this!”, she had pleaded with tears in her eyes, “You are forging a broken sword!”

“It's you that is breaking the sword”, the reply had come, “It's you that is destroying our only chance for survival. He himself chose to be a weapon, before choosing you or me or anything else. Are you going to deprive him of his choice? Are you going to deprive the world of his weapon?”

She knew nothing of you, the voice reassured the Champion, nothing of the real you. Nothing of the strength that you have and how you are meant to use it. She was loving but

ignorant, unlike you who have seen the truth. You are becoming what you were always meant to be and that's alright.

The Champion took another unsure step and then collapsed to his knees and wept. The souls gathered around him in bewilderment yet did not dare to come close. Sobs shook his whole body and his back bent for the first time since he had set foot in the Fields of Ash as his knees starting giving way beneath him.

"I am not a weapon...", he whimpered, " I am just a man and nothing else... I am not a weapon... Or maybe I am... I don't know... Let me be just a man please... Don't force me into being a weapon"

The Champion waited for the voice's reply sure of the condemnation it would hold for him and yet nothing came from within. He almost dared hope that it was over. And then the tide of souls around him parted and a tall man on a huge, black destrier rode forth. His armour was free of dent and his sword shone with a light so pure in these sunless lands that almost caused a new wave of tears to engulf the Champion. The knight in from of him was perfect in every sense, a Weapon that would never see defeat, but tear through every challenge as if it were water. And sure enough, when the knight lifted his visor, the Champion found himself staring a face that was the same as his, yet different for no smiles had graced it and endless frowns weighed its brow down.

"Rise, Champion!", the Weapon commanded him with an all too familiar voice, "Rise and let these lost souls see who is the real Weapon and the one worthy of conquering the Fields of Ash."

But the fight had been driven down from the Champion. Even if he wore Death's cloak and wielded the Beast's chain, his limbs were heavy as lead and not even once did he manage to come through the Weapon's defences. It was his own self at the peak of his skill and power that he was fighting and the Champion, now weak, weary and broken, had no hope of defeating him. His adversary soon started laughing at his weak attempts and came back with attacks of his own that the Champion could no longer help but take. Rivers of blood flowed down his body and soaked the ashes around him but the Champion did not feel the pain at all. He only rose and fell again. Planted his feet on the mud only to find them giving in under him time and time again. Raised his weapon only to see it deflected yet he persevered. He was a Weapon his whole life and by accepting it he could die at last in peace. The shining sword pierced him countless times and soon the Field of Ash disappeared in a mist of blood, light and dancing embers.

"Even in death I shall believe in you", her voice echoed there at the brink of oblivion and sweet release, "For I see no hero in you, or champion, or weapon or the object of the cosmic desire. I see only on you and I love this one more than the world loves or needs any of the others."

The last memory was of his love whispering his name and how he had rejoiced at loving her no matter how fleeting the feeling was. The sword of light came down upon the Champion and he could see clearly its arc coming down on him but felt no fear. No pride in taking his final hit straight up his feet. No desire to be hit to be reminded that he was alive. Only peace.

The Champion rose on his feet and looked straight at the triumphant Weapon's face.

"It's alright", he said calmly, "I put you in there and I will get you out."

"You know nothing, Champion!", the Weapon bellowed, "You have failed at last."

"I wanted to...", the Champion replied calmly as he observed the shining blade shatter on him in a thousand shards that dispersed amongst the ashes in the wind, "But no more!"

"In these Fields of Ash one by one I conjured my fears.", The Champion went on with a certainty that came from within and made his ragged form seem prouder than that of the Weapon "I fought them again and again and whipped myself with my own fears so that I could be defeated and stop going, for I was tired of holding my sword and desired peace. Yet, now I know that all of this is because of me and all these men around me have fallen because of themselves. I see you Weapon for what you are and I am coming to get you. For I put you in there and it is me that shall redeem you."

The Fields of Ash seemed to hold their breath as the Champion moved towards the screaming Weapon, who was frantically trying to stab him with his broken sword only to fail, every time more miserably than the previous one. The Champion reached out and although the Weapon stood on the destrier's back he grabbed his face from under the visor and ripped it out of the shining armour.

"It's enough. You can rest...", the Champion told him as he wore the stern face over his own and then smiled brightly. No one could have known that he was actually a young man. The Weapon's form dispersed as every other before him and calm at last the Champion climbed on the destrier's back. He was about to gallop away when he saw that the souls of the fallen had gathered around him from every direction. Calmly he looked at them and for once did not think fighting as his only option. Instead he watched and waited.

It happened slowly and serenely as the breath of infant. In each tattered form of floating ash an ember blossomed, much like a firefly, no stronger yet no less lively. In the bewildered stares pride and knowing dawned and soon the Champion found himself surrounded by millions of little lights that shone with purpose and glee for having found release at last. They drifted in spirals and then fell in line behind him slaves no more to the dead wind's whims. The Champion nodded and with the cloak and chain in hand, for now he wore his fears as weapons and close reminders, and rode the shadow steed to the end

of his path. The land tilted upwards and the Fields of Ash followed him in silent procession. Soon the Champion stood on a clouded mountain top. He was alone with the souls of the fallen waiting just a few steps below. There was white snow on the ground and a lone sunray pierced the clouds like a lance to shine on the spot. Nothing else was there. No treasure, or weapon or anything of worth. And then the clouds parted and the young man, Champion no more, yet champion of the Fields of Ash, saw the world spreading beneath his feet. His gaze took everything in; the world and the souls behind him in waiting and he knew. And leapt.