

The Flying Man Trapped in the Mobile Siege Tower

by John Riley

The Flying Man lives in a wooden cage built on top of a mobile siege tower, and is rolled from battle to battle. His job is to watch the suffering inside the walls of surrounded villages and report on the misery's progress to the king's men that gather each night around the siege tower's staked wheels. The king thinks the trapped Flying Man brings his army good fortune and seldom does a day go by that he does not stop his horse to offer the Flying Man his best wishes.

In the midst of a siege, when attacks are mounted during the day, the Flying Man lies coiled inches above the cage floor. At night, he listens to the men around the campfires sing songs of home, lonely songs that make the Flying Man happy he has his own place.

When the burning arrows that sing overhead bury themselves in the cage walls he quenches the flames with buckets of water lifted with strong ropes through a small hole in the cage floor. At night he eats freshly killed meat scorched over camp fires. The soldier who fills his supper basket, a boy too young to shave, includes a slice of hard bread with his meal and sometimes a skein of sharp wine.

The end of a siege is always the same. The villagers behind the surrounded walls begin to keen and to sob and a few days later he hears the gravediggers' shovels scrape earth and rock hour after hour. After the sieged walls come down, or the village's gates are forced open, and the massacre has ended, the army and the siege tower move on. The Flying Man loves these days of travel, when he can squint between the cage walls and watch swallows and crows and sometimes an eagle float and dip over the treetops while the men and horses steady the tower as it rolls along the dusty roads.

There is always a new battle waiting and new innocents to die but the Flying Man's heart is never divided. Once he flew wherever he wanted but now the Flying Man knows freedom is living in his cage atop the mobile siege tower. He loves his captors, the king and his soldiers that make sure he is fed and offer him gratitude for the good luck he brings. The Flying Man has long forgotten the days he lived outside his cage. Today he lives only for the sweet smell of burning flesh, the exquisite snick of a slicing blade, the taste of boiling siege oil that clings to his tongue.

