

Three Resurrections and the Warm, Embracing Earth

By Brent Baldwin

The first time Chiesa was resurrected, memory drifted from her as formless as the smoke blanketing the battlefield. Arrows cut ribbons through the sky to clatter against iron, wood, flesh, bone. She stood mutely as they landed like hail.

The soldier to her right wore mail over his shoulders and chest, but it hung ragged where his left arm ended at the elbow. An arrow took him in the eye. He didn't flinch. The soldier to her left wore boiled leather as shredded as if it had been gnawed by a pack of wolves. The arrows passed around him, though another wound would have been hardly noticeable.

They both weathered the storm with mindless determination.

One of the volley's final arrows pierced Chiesa's thigh. She jerked, expecting pain, finding none.

A compulsion gripped her, forcing her into motion. The arrow ground against her femur, but it was a mosquito's bite and worthy of even less attention. A distant part of her wanted to pluck it free. An even further distant part worried about the damage done. The compulsion to march forced her forward.

The ground thundered as the enemy charged. Men in leather and iron armor, screaming battle cries as they raced toward Chiesa and her fellow soldiers.

The first wave reached the front rank. Metal crashed on metal. Screams echoed across the line. Plenty of Chiesa's fellow soldiers fell, but they fell in silence, returned to the mud from which they had risen.

Chiesa and the survivors smashed through the enemy soldiers and marched onward, as inexorable as a spring flood. A few of the enemy broke ranks, and the rest quickly followed.

The compulsion guiding Chiesa twisted, and her legs seized up, holding her in place, waiting.

She reversed her spear and set the butt into the mud. Its shaft was broken halfway along its length, splinters protruding where a spearhead should have been. She couldn't remember whether it had started the battle intact or broken. She couldn't remember the battle's start. A thought floated: *something isn't right*. When she tried to put form to the "something," it slipped away.

The army lurched into motion again, Chiesa with it.

Lightning split the sky. Thunder rolled over the army. Smoke rose in columns, painted with the crimson and azure of sorcery.

The sense of wrongness increased.

The next attack came from the right flank; from mounted knights, not simple foot soldiers. The knights crunched into the resurrected soldiers fifty paces away. Chiesa pivoted, set her spear. A knight charged toward her, armor shining silver and gold. Chiesa raised her shield, the broken wood providing little protection as the knight swung their mace.

The last thing she saw was the mace's glimmering silver spikes.

The second time Chiesa was resurrected, memory clung to her like stink on a corpse. She gathered her broken shield and shattered spear. The flesh of her left arm sagged, revealing bone beneath decaying muscle. She should be dead. She *wanted* to be dead. And yet... Glimpses of charcoal and byzantium tendrils flickered at the edge of her vision.

She remembered the knight. She remembered the crows that came after, that plucked at her flesh and gnawed at her bones.

A compulsion engulfed her, forcing her to stand, to march, to form into a row with the other newly resurrected. They stared ahead, their eyes – the ones that still had eyes – blank.

A voice filled her head, though the only noise on the battlefield was the clank of armor. “Heroes, I must call upon you once again to defend these lands. Peril encroaches upon your husbands, your wives, your children, your grandchildren. You are all that stands between them and destruction. Fight for them once again, that they may live.”

Husband. The word rang within her like a struck bell. Snippets of memory cascaded. A hearty laugh. The angle of cheekbones. The scratch of a moustache upon her neck. A promise she had made, but not kept.

Longing warred against the compulsion guiding her steps.

A name tickled the tip of her tongue, but she couldn’t put sound or shape to the memories.

After this is over, she thought. I will find him.

Chiesa came back to the present, to the clamor of approaching battle. The enemy approached, shouting their battlecries. They were men and women with dirty faces, wearing dented and scuffed armor. A memory flickered; of being conscripted and serving in a group much like the one that approached.

Once, perhaps, she had felt pity. Her arms and legs moved mechanically, stabbing, tripping, cutting a path through the living flesh that dared approach her.

Her weapons splintered and shattered. She found new weapons. Shield and spear, bludgeon and blade. She worked her way across the battlefield, relentless and bloody-minded.

The rumble of hooves echoed in the distance. The voice in her head gave orders, and the resurrected soldiers leaped to obey. Chiesa leapt with them, hunting for a pike or a spear, something long and sturdy and sharp.

When the line of knights attacked, Chiesa and the soldiers around her were ready. Spears and pikes rose, as thick as pine needles. The knights clattered into them, pushing through the line of spears, but men and horses fell. The resurrected struck with blades and clubs, ensuring none that fell would rise again until called upon by their master.

The surviving knights wheeled away, counting their losses.

A baby. Chiesa remembered a baby with sandy hair and blue eyes. Her baby.

The memory was interrupted by the crack of a thunderbolt twenty paces away. Mud and armor rained upon her.

The skies turned dark and swirled with flame. Lightning flashed and struck. The colors of the rainbow painted the underside of the clouds. A vortex formed and swept across the risen army, whipping weapons and armor and flesh into the heavens.

Chiesa staggered forward to a fallen knight and plucked a silver dagger from its side. Overhead, a great, red bird formed amongst the twisting winds. Flames burst forth, washing over her, searing flesh from bone.

She fell, undone.

The final time Chiesa was resurrected, memory weighed upon her like a yoke upon an ox. Her husband. Her son. Beyond the rivers and across the hills, they awaited a wife and mother, conscripted and dragged to a distant war.

Scraps of charred flesh clung to her bones. Clumps of hair hung from her scalp. Dark bands of obsidian and violet bound her limbs with false muscle and gave her strength she had never possessed in life.

Chiesa gripped a sword in one hand and a silver dagger in the other. She heard the call of battle, the summon to war, the command to obey. She heard them and she fed them to hungry memories. She heard them and quelled them, forcing her own will through her bones.

Memories took firmer shape. The smell of freshly baked bread. The promise she had made to Charles.

Charles.

Charles needed her. Her family needed her.

Somewhere near the battle's rear, a sorcerer fought against her, but his will could not control the thousands of soldiers around her while battling a being determined to break free.

The power of her unkept promise pulled at her, stronger than a sorcerer's will. She harnessed her need, turned it against the bonds that kept her on the battlefield. The compulsion buckled.

Chiesa slipped through the fighting until she reached battlefield's edge and waited there among the corpses and the crows, until night fell. Once safely in darkness's embrace, she left, guided by the stars and memories as clear as winter midnight. Through rivers, over hills, across valleys.

Anything living that caught sight of her fled in terror. Anything dead recognized her and stayed clear. She weakened by the day, but she found the strength to put one foot in front of the other, time and again. All else paled before her need.

Days slipped into weeks before she reached her destination, midway up the slope of a mountain on the edge of two kingdoms.

An apple tree stood upon an outcrop, and Chiesa crouched in its shadow. A gravestone nestled among its roots, covered in lichen. In the valley below, smoke rose from the chimney of the simple cottage that had once been her home. Sheep grazed in the meadow around it. A cow lowed from behind a barn.

She knew this place, yes. She had been called to it like a piece of iron to a lodestone. Here was where the sorcerer's soldiers had come recruiting. One to fight, one to stay with the farm, they said. Charles was the obvious choice to fight, but she had volunteered. If he stayed, the farm would survive. If she stayed, she and the baby would be homeless by the end of the first harvest season.

So she had gone. And fought. And died.

The sun rose, bathing the cottage in the golden light of morning. Chiesa crept down from the hill. Her bones ached with each step. The bindings that held her body together weakened in the sunlight, and she knew she didn't have much time left. Still, she approached the door. She kept her promises.

The window over the kitchen sink offered her a view inside. A bearded man worked at the table, peeling vegetables. He flicked a peel at the toddler sitting across from him. Chiesa couldn't hear the man's laughter, but she could see his delight when the toddler threw the peel back at him. For an instant, he was her Charles. His laugh, his cheekbones, the curl of his mustache. Then his head turned, shattering the illusion.

He had Charles's cheekbones and moustache, but he also had her nose and her mouth. For an instant, she saw even her father in the shape of his jaw.

The toddler glimpsed her through the window. Its eyes went wide, and it screamed. Not-Charles rushed to it, soothing and carrying it away.

The weight of weeks and months and years settled upon her bones as heavily as any coat of armor. Time meant so little in her state, and she had no idea how much had passed since she had left home. He was her son, perhaps. Or even her grandson. Who could say, without asking, and who could ask, given what they would find if she knocked upon their door.

Instead, she lay her silver dagger upon the cottage's front step. A small reward for the loss of a mother and grandmother, but something, perhaps, to ease the coming years.

She climbed back to the hilltop, to the apple tree, to the lichen-covered gravestone. She brushed the stone clear.

Two names were engraved upon it.

Charles | Chiesa

Dear Father | Dear Mother

Dead of a broken heart | Lost in a foreign war

Chiesa unbuckled her sword and dug among the roots. She shifted soil and stone until she could settle into the hollow with her sword at her side.

“I told you I’d come home, Charlie, to tell you I love you one more time. Well, I do.”

Her hands shook as she worked, but they had strength enough to pull the soil back over herself. She lay still at Charles's side, and at long last, she rested.

THE END