

The Darkness Before Dawn

Sunday, 02 July 2006

Last Updated Friday, 16 March 2007

Being a report of Sir Alain de Montgallions first engagement in the Twilight War.

Sir Alain de Montgallion watched the shambling monstrosities of the undead advancing towards his position. Sir Arthur Ferranâ€™s scouts had been accurate in their reports on the location of the Necromancers army. It was not yet dawn, but the inky blackness of the night was receding. In the east the darkness was fading, the blue tint to the sky a herald to the approach of daybreak. But the approach of daybreak did not fill Sir Alain with new hope. The news from Littleton was bleak. Even now it was being overrun by waves of Beastmen, Ogres and Chaos filth. A scout from Sir Arthur had only just left after delivering the tragic news of the death of Sir Guibert, Sir Arthurâ€™s brother and a noble heart. He had fallen to the Black Knight. Blood Dragon Vampires were on the loose. He surveyed the advancing foe before him again, these were not Blood Dragons, so the advancing Black Knights he saw approaching the bridge over the stream were not the ones who slew Sir Guibert. No matter, he would exact his revenge upon them anyway. They would be one less threat to the poor folk of Littleton so sorely pressed but a few miles south.

Â

Sperran, his loyal steed snorted and pawed the ground restlessly, he did not like the aura of fear which emanated from the abominations on the far side of the river. Sir Alain stroked his neck gently to calm him. He was outnumbered he knew, but Bretonnian courage and honour would more than make up for their lack of numbers.

Â

The Black Knights were 14 strong and were definitely the main threat. They would be the target for himself and his 7 other Grail Knights. The Standard Bearer carried the Banner of the Lady, and Sir Alain smiled grimly. Together they numbered 9 against the 14 Wights. With the Lady with them he was confident he would vanquish these monsters. Behind the Black Knights staggered heavily armed and armoured skeletons, and just behind them was the foul Necromancer himself, Velanâ€™Krom. Sir Alain narrowed his eyes. Something was strange about that vile mage. It seemed as if Sir Alain could see right through him. Ah, the coward was using a cloak of mist and shadows to try to save his cowardly hide. Let him try to protect his worthless carcass. His cloak would avail him not if he and his Knights could close with him.

Â

A huge force of shambling zombies was already crossing the ford in the river upstream of the bridge on his left flank. They were at least 40 strong. His 44 Men at Arms would have to contain them with the support of 30 skirmishing archers he had deployed on the small hill to his right. Of more immediate concern were the 4 fell bats which had already reached the far bank of the river and were even now within striking range of his archers and his small unit of Knights of the Realm. On their own the 6 Knights could handle them, but wafting over the grass behind them was something straight from a nightmare, a host of vaporous intangible ghosts, driven forward by a hideous vile creature as ugly as sin itself, transparent, its straggly hair flowing about its wrinkled, desiccated face. Its eyes, hollow orbs of evil, a Banshee! This was a dangerous creature. Fear flowed from the Spirit Host and the Banshee causing horses to rear and men to waver. â€œStand fast!â€• bellowed Sir Alain, you are Bretonnian! Now let us show these horrors what it means to be Bretonnian!

Â

The Necromancer was chanting, his foul spell urging the Black Knights forward with unnatural energy onto the bridge. Miranda, the Damsel raised her hand to dispel the foul energies but Sir Alain grasped her wrist, firmly but gently. â€œNay maiden, stay your counter spellâ€•, he whispered, â€œlet them comeâ€•. With a slightly puzzled look she lowered her hands and the undead knights gallop onward. Sir Alain sighed. She was so young, too young, to be exposed to the horrors of this campaign, and to the horrors before them. That was why he had placed her in the midst of his Grail Knights. There was no safer place to be than amongst these living saints. â€œStay your hand Miranda, I have a surprise in store for these accursed Wights.

Â

And now the time to strike had arrived. The evil spell of the Necromancer had allowed the Black Knights to advance rapidly and far, too far. With a roar Sir Alain spurred Sperran forward and charged the Wight cavalry. The fear emanating from them meant nothing to Sir Alain and his companions. He did not fear them, he did not hate them. No, he pitied them and all these wretched undead creatures. They had been men once and knights. They had been forced into this horrid condition and denied their rightful sleep of death. He would lay them back to rest, and the vile Necromancer who had denied them their rest would pay in full!

Â

The Grail companions surged towards the distant Wight Cavalry. The Hell Knight commander watched them as they thundered towards the bridge, his eyes, burning coals of hatred flashed, the Grail Knights had made a terrible mistake. They were too far removed, their charge must fail and then they would know pain, they would know death, and they would know unlife! His smugness was replaced by anger as he realised that the Grail Knights were not stopping, urged on by the Battle Standard Bearers exaltations and his blessed virtue of impetuosity the Grail Knights slammed into the Black Knights. With a crash of metal on metal, splintering lances, flailing hooves and hacking swords, the Grail companions slashed, hacked and barged their way deep into the enemy ranks. Their assault was so furious and irresistible that the foul magicks binding the Wights to their unlife shuddered, and then broke apart. The last remaining Wights lost their grip on existence as their bodies dissolved into a dissipating black mist which was swept away on the breeze, their now empty suits of armour collapsing and scattering on the bridge.

Â

As the Grail Knights had made their glorious charge, the Knights of the Realm had advanced to place themselves between the vulnerable archers on the hill and the advancing Fell bats, and those fearsome ethereal creatures behind them. As they took up position the archers let loose a volley of arrows. The rain of deadly bodkins showered the bats, cutting them to ribbons leaving their foul bodies twitching and dying by the riverbank.

Â

Miranda invoked the power of the Lady to summon a Thorn Father to envelop the vile Necromancer but the force of the Necromancers counter spell almost unhorsed her. Curse that evil mage.

Â

The Necromancer had suffered a fearful blow with the loss of his cavalry and his dreaded bats, but he knew if he could get his Skeletons into combat and charge the Grail companions, he could still snatch victory, and then those hated and haughty Bretonnians would become a new army of Wight cavalry for him. He urged his skeletons forward with a gleam in his eye. Yes he thought, yes! Now with the invocation of Vanhelâ€™s Danse Macabre they would have those knights. He started to chant, calling on the dark powers when Miranda raised herself high in her saddle and raised her right hand. In it she clutched a small gleaming silver mirror. As the Necromancer chanted, the swirling mist of power he had conjured was suddenly sucked into the surface of the mirror, which burst into radiant light. The light flashed in a searingly bright beam straight at the stunned Necromancer blasting him from his feet. He staggered upright, shaken, his robes smouldering, the skin of his face burned and peeling.

Â

With the failure of his spell the skeleton warriors found themselves open and exposed. Sir Alain knew what must be done. Lowering their lances the Grail Knights surged forwards, barrelling into the skeletons with the force of a battering ram. The skeletons could not resist such irresistible force and they simply disintegrated in a shower of shattering bones and dismembered limbs. The warhorses hooves crunching through the smashed bones like treading on eggshells.

Â

On the left flank the advancing Spirit host were almost upon the wavering archers. The six Knights of the Realm lowered their lances and charged. It was a valiant but suicidal assault as they knew full well that their weapons would be ineffective against such dread beasts. However, overcoming their fear, they charged. To save the helpless peasants on the hill they charged. For glory and honour, for Guibert and for the Lady, they charged!

Â

They collided with the ghostly forms, their lances passing harmlessly through the non-corporeal bodies of their foes. Silently the spirits clawed back at them, razor sharp talons scraping against the tough armour of the knights and the barding of their mounts.

Â

On the left flank the shambling advance of the zombies had brought them within arrow range of the archers. Another hail of bodkins rained down upon the stumbling forms cutting down a couple. It would not be enough. The Men at Arms, looking uncertainly from side to side, held their ground awaiting their remorseless march.

Â

Miranda, flushed with the success of her dispel, sat up in the saddle again and began chanting. The Necromancer feeling the gathering power of the winds of magic, started to mumble his counter spell, but still weakened and in pain from his burns, he could not gather the strength for the counter spell he so desperately needed. As Miranda uttered the last words of her Thorn Father Spell twisting writhing tendrils of thorns broke through the ground around the Necromancers feet, wrapping around his legs and dragging him to the ground. As he screamed in agony, the tendrils wrapped around his arms, his body and his neck, lacerating and slashing as they bit deeper and deeper. As he screamed, the writhing tendrils tore his squirming body apart.

Â

With the death of the necromancer, the magical cords binding the undead host to this universe began to disintegrate. Spirits began to dissolve into nothingness as zombies started to collapse as they shuffled forward. But still they came, and the dreaded Banshee was rapidly approaching the Knights of the Realm as they fought for their lives.

Â

Sir Alain brought his Grail Knights about and galloped back across the bridge. He had to get to the beleaguered knights before it was too late. Before that dreadful Banshee could begin her murderous cry. But he was so far away, so far. He would never reach them in time. As he galloped to their aid he looked over his right shoulder towards the Men at Arms. He wished he could help them against the foul zombies who were still moving towards them remorselessly. But his Knights needed him.

As the Zombies finally charged the quailing Men at Arms, their hearts almost failed them. The rotting, stinking walking horrors almost overwhelmed them with fear and revulsion. But the banner of the Lady was before them. They would not flee while the lady was with them. They would stay and they would fight!

Â

As the clumsy shambling monsters finally rushed to the attack, the peasant soldiers stood their ground, their spears stabbing, cutting down the undead creatures where they stood.

Â

At that moment an unearthly screeching howl erupted by the riverbank. Horses reared, throwing riders into the water as the deathly wail swamped the Knights of the Realm. Horses and men collapsed and died, their hearts literally stopped with fear and horror. All but one perished. He reeled with shock, stunned by the wailing cry and by what had befallen his friends and comrades. Summoning his courage he stood fast, slashing hopelessly with his sword.

Â

Sir Alain spurred Sperran on, faster, he needed to get there faster! The Banshee was advancing on the archers now. He knew the archers would be doomed if that thing from hell was not dealt with. Then he watched in amazement as the archers cast aside their bows, and in wild desperation charged the Banshee! Their desperation giving them the courage they needed to charge!

Â

Sir Alain and his companions finally slammed into the remaining apparitions of the Spirit host, their ghostly forms shimmering, dissolving into wisps of mist that drifted away on the breeze.

Â

As the archers surrounded the Banshee on all sides, hacking in vain with their daggers, she gave her piercing wailing cry again. Two peasants fell screaming in horror, but for the Banshee it was too little too late. The press of humanity finally breaking asunder the magical bonds holding the creature to existence.

Â

For the Zombies too it was over, as the few remaining were cut down or simply collapsed as the final bonds of magic snapped and gave way.

Â

Sir Alain lifted his helm and sucked in a deep gulp of air. The sun was finally creeping over the distant horizon setting the

sky ablaze with glorious orange and red hues. It was a new day he thought, but the glorious red dawn he was witnessing was the red of blood. This battle was over but the war was only beginning.

Â

Grimly he replaced his helm and turned his mount about. He would tend to his fallen comrades and then, on to Littleton. He spared a single glance towards the dismembered remains of the Necromancer, Velanâ€™™Krom. â€™œGuibertâ€™•, he thought himself, â€™œthis one was for youâ€™•.

Â