

Blessed Sir Sly

Wednesday, 29 October 2008

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As the mist coiled quietly through the morning air and the sun rose slowly behind the horizon, a figure appeared silently in the fog. Deroche recognised her immediatly. He had been looking out for her ever since he had embarked on his quest. Now he was here, in front of her. He found himself in a small boat, silently gliding through the cold waters. The woman, whom he knew was none other than the blessed Lady herself, stood bare-footed on the grass. Enchanted by her beauty, he could not move. The boat hit the lakeside, so quiet and peaceful it was hardly noticable. Deroche stepped out of the boat as if guided by an invisible hand, irresistable.

She turned around, walking away, and he had to follow her. Through the grass and fog they walked. All other features of the landscape were hidden in the white morning mist. Deroche forced himself to look around, look up, but there was no sky, there was no horizon, everything, everything around him, was white, save for the Lady in front of him and the ground on which they walked. They came to a cavern, it felt like a looming gate, a gigantic maw. It frightened him, but the Lady beckoned him onwards, and he could do nothing but to follow her. Through the jaw of the great beast they went, the Lady in pure white robes, guiding the way, Deroche in dirty and battle-worn armour, following her. They came to some sort of chamber, the stomach of the beast, inlaid with gold. At last she stopped at some sort of doorway and she turned around to look at him. Deroche knew that he would never forget the look in her eyes, it was as if she knew everything, every thought, every desire. Her blue eyes pierced him, and they were not only beautiful, but also ice-cold. He went through the doorway into a very small room, hewn out of the solid rock, but Deroche payed little attention to the room itself. On the altar in the middle of the chamber, he saw the object he desired most of all, the Grail, the holy Grail. He wanted to stretch his arm and touch it, he longed for it, he had prayed for it \hat{A} in his secret dreams, but he couldn't move, and slowly, almost painfully, the vision faded, the white mists became darker and more vague, until all was darkness.

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Deroche opened his eyes. He blinked twice and looked at the ceiling of his room, the wood had rotted on a few place and the shack didn't look at all too stable, but he had other things on his mind. His quest was complete, and yet, it didn't seem as if he had completed it at all. A new quest had just started, a new quest for the grail. He remembered her eyes, cold, blue eyes. Deroche almost chuckled, the Lady of the Lake, protector of the whole of Bretonnia, omniscient deity of purity, had been tricked. It would be the downfall of Bretonnia, the start of a new era, an era in which he would be the omnipotent ruler. She had given him the key to domination, the key to immortality. He would do what no other knight, no other man, had ever done, he would take the grail from its cavern and use it. Use the power that is stored within, to overthrow the reign of Louen Leoncoeur and take the crown of Bretonnia for himself. He would be a just monarch, strong and just. He would lead the knights of Bretonnia to battle against the Empire, Estelia, and kingdoms beyond, and with the Grail in his power, he would be victorious in all campaigns. The people of Bretonnia and beyond would honour him, he would be the greatest king since the birth of men. He would be god. Now that he knew where it was located, there was nothing to stop him. True, the island on which the cave lies was supposed to be inaccessible, guarded by the undead, Deroche had heard the tales, nobody had ever reached the cavern alive, but indeed few had attempted. He had considered this, and he had found a way past the undead.

Slowly, Deroche lifted himself from the bed and stood up. He had plenty of time, there would be no one to stop him. He would leave his armour here, it would only hinder him on his way. He would only take his sword and enough food for a few days. But although there was more than enough time, Deroche couldn't help feeling rushed. Infinite power was within his grasp, it was there for the taking. all he had to do was reach out, and take it.

After paying the innkeeper, Deroche mounted his horse and rode to the west. Instinctively, he knew where the Grail was to be found. The lake, the isle, it had seemed so familiar. He knew where it was, and he would go there, but he had to visit another place first. A place more sinister, a place that bore the blessing of the Lady in name, but had long since fallen from grace.

Six days had passed since the dream. Now, he was ready to face the undead, ready to gamble his life for ultimate power. He approached the lake. It was exactly as in his dream, the slowly coiling mists, the endlessness of the surrounding moors, the peace that seemed to hang thickly in the air. It was hard to believe that the cursed undead roamed here and harder still that within the calmth of this space, unequalled power was given shape, waiting to be taken. Deroche halted, he could sense the undead around him. They sensed him too, he was sure of it, it was time for the ritual. Deroche took a small pouche from his belt and opened it. Many times the undead had been fended off with holy water and blades of blessed steel, they kept the undead at bay, but they would never ultimately stop them. The numbers of undead guarding the grail were unending, they could not be slain. One could not reach the Grail by force, it required cunning. Deroche grinned, showing a single golden tooth in a rotten jaw. He had found the way, the way that would bring him to the grail. One could not fight the undead, one had to become the undead. But the dead could not enter the cavern, many Vampires, seeking the unlimited power, had tried, but the purity of the grail warded them off. One had to be both

living and dead to reach the grail, and in a way, Deroche was.

The pouch contained the key, for it contained the grounded bones of a long dead soldier of Mousillion, slain in betrayal. In one movement, he scattered the powder all over him. The air around him turned heavy with the stench of the dead, he had become invisible to the senses of the undead. With no intelligent force to guide them, the undead would let him go past, not aware of the life still contained in him. There was no flaw in his plan and there would be no flaw in his plan. Almost arrogantly, he walked towards the boat. At once he noticed there were no oars, he wondered if they had intentionally been taken away, making the crossing impossible, but as he stepped into the boat, he knew that that was not so. Slowly, the boat carried him across the lake, gently rippling the untouched waters, moved by an invisible force. Deroche looked forward, at where he expected to see the lady, the island. It seemed to him that the lake was hidden in an endless, clean fog. Trees and bushes became faint silhouettes behind him as he was taken to the open waters, yet still the world was motionless, save for the small boat gliding silently through the water.

After what seemed like an eternity, a darker shade appeared in the endless white mist. Deroche's heart leapt up as he saw it. It was exactly as in the vision. As soon as the boat hit the shore, Deroche stepped out, he could not restrain himself. He was here, he had passed the undead unseen. This isle was too holy for the dead, he was safe here. He ran towards the cave, it was not far. Endless power, endless glory, within his grasp. He could not stay calm, not now. This was it, he had done what no other being, mortal or immortal, living or dead, had ever done. He had reached the grail, he was about to enter the holiest of shrines in Bretonnia. The cavern maw, it was exactly as he remembered, exactly as he had envisioned it. The room, the golden decorations, the primitive glory, and the altar. He remembered it, he was at the exact same place, yet now he could stretch out his arm, touch immortality.

"You've have come far, Deroche."

Deroche turned around in shock. Before him was the unmistakable, the immortal, the Lady of the Lake.

"You fear me, Deroche?" She spoke calmly, her bright blue eyes fixated on Deroche. Not the beautiful eyes of a fair maiden, but the ice-cold eyes of an immortal goddess.

"I expected your coming," she continued, "I knew what you were up to, Deroche, never consider yourself above me, never expect yourself to defeat me. I can not be defeated, I can not be cheated."

"The Grail is mine. You can not stop me." Deroche hissed, he had come too far, he would not be stopped, not even by Her. He tried to grab his sword, but he could not move.

"It is yours, I can not stop you, but I know you will do no harm." She said softly. All the while, she did not move, save the movement of her lips as she spoke the words. Deroche could not even be sure he was not talking to a vision, but he did not dare to touch her.

"I will be king, King of Bretonnia!" Deroche said hoarsely. A sudden fear had come over him, this was not part of the plan, he had to take the Grail and get out.

"Calm down, Deroche, calm down. I will not harm you, I can not harm you." She said, still not moving, but in a mystical way transfixing Deroche. "I have seen your traitorous heart, but I have also seen your bravery, your cunning, your ambition. You will be the greatest among Grail Knights. The common people will worship you. The nobles, Dukes and even the king shall honour you."

"Deroche, kneel before me." She whispered as she took something from her robe. Impossibly hidden, she produced a sword from underneath her gown. Deroche could do nothing but obey her and knelt. In one slow gesture, she raised the sword and let it fall silently on Deroche's shoulder.

"Stand up, Sir Deroche, first knight in the order of the Lake," she waited, "stand up, my son, son of the lake."

An unspeakable bliss overwhelmed Deroche. The Grail, the object of desire, the giver of power, it had seemed so important. There were other things, still more important, still greater. Silently, he accepted the sword and then there was just air. The Lady had disappeared, the object of all courtly love. The Grail was still behind him, untouched, but he did not look at it. As he walked out of the cave, into the mists, he realised that it was neither undead, nor cold water, nor seal of purity that protected the Grail, it was the honour of Bretonnia, the honour of her knights, the honour of her Lady.

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