

Sir Relain's Quest

Saturday, 29 November 2008

Last Updated Monday, 01 December 2008

“Bring us honor and pride.”

The words reverberated within Sir Relain's head as he rode away from his home. Of all the words his parents could have chosen, it had to be those. Quietly, he reflected on his misfortune.

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Ever since he had been little, his parents had repeated a variation on that same, cursed phrase. He knew that they meant well, but at times it was more than he could bear. In his heart however, Relain understood the importance of those words. It was up to him to bring honor back to his house after his father's infamous defeat at the hands of a peasant uprising. Only with the help of his liege had his father been able to stop the revolt. By that time however, his reputation was irreparably tarnished.

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Presently, Relain came upon a bridge passing over a small brook. This bridge held great significance, for it marked the end of his family's territory. Steeling his heart and mind, Relain urged on his steed. The solemnity of the moment washed over him as he left the land that had been his home for so many years. With a sigh, Relain took one last look at his beloved home before spurring his horse onward to Telnir Keep.

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It was nigh past three when Relain finally reached Telnir Keep. Though only a few miles from his home, it felt as if he was separated from it by no less than half the world. He swung himself down from his horse, handing the reins to a stable boy who ran out to greet him. Relain then proceeded to walk up to a guard, standing at the entrance to the inner hall.

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“Greetings good sir. How might I help thee?” the guard greeted him.

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“I am Relain, an Errant Knight. I have come at my father's request to swear allegiance to our good Lord, and to seeketh from him a quest, that I might prove mine worth.”

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“I shall go and tell my Lord of thine arrival. Remain here until I return.”

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“As you say good sir.”

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The guard vanished into a doorway.Â Relain stood, observing the keep.Â It was not small, yet it was clearly meant as little more than a bastion in times of distress.Â Its stone walls rose barely twenty feet into the air, with a single tower at each corner. Â

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â€œThis is what our home should look like,â€• thought Relain.Â â€œPerhaps, if I can accomplish his tasks...â€•

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At that moment, the guard returned. Â

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â€œLord Mecharns will see you now.â€• Â

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He motioned for Relain to follow him before turning and going once more through the doorway.Â They strode through a dank, poorly lit hallway before they came to a set of double doors.Â The guard stopped.

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â€œJust through here sir, and may the Lady be with you.â€•

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â€œAnd also with you, good sir.â€•

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Relain opened a door and went inside of a magnificent room.Â Beautiful tapestries covered each of the walls, which were also lined with tables and seats.Â The seats appeared to be occupied by various vassals of Mecharns.Â At the far end of the room sat Mecharns himself.Â Relain approached, noticing the aged look of the wise leader. Â

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â€œHail, Lord Mecharns!â€•

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â€œAh, Sir Relain, how splendid of thee to join us.Â Come now, and tell us the reason for thine visit.â€•

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“My Lord, my mission has two parts. Firstly, I would ask that you accept my humble offer of allegiance, to serve you as a vassal. Second, I beseech you to give me a task, that I might prove mine worth.”

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Mecharns nodded and said, “To the first, your offer do I now accept. As to thine second request, I am most glad that you have asked this of me. In the woods to the Northeast of here, there is a small hamlet. In it resides a band of brigands, the leader of whom has declared himself a knight. You of all people must realize the gravity of this claim. So now do I give you this task, bring me the head of that cursed man! In return for your service I offer you land, serfs, crowns, and my daughter’s hand in marriage.”

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Relain was stunned. After a number of seconds, he managed the stammering reply, “My Lord Mecharns, most graciously do I thank you. I could think of no better reward for serving you. Be assured that I will make haste to bring about this blasphemer’s demise!”

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“Go now, brave knight. You need but ask my servants for any items you are in need of and they are yours.”

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With a bow, Relain turned and left the room. Going to the stables, he readied his steed. After receiving food and drink for his journey, he mounted his horse and left to begin his quest. Â

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As he moved further away from the keep, his thoughts began to wander, and his horse slowed to a walk. He thought back to the promise that Lord Mecharns had given him. It was everything a young knight could ask for. This reward would more than fulfill his parent’s phrase, “Bring us honor and pride.” However, there was a reason which blocked path to all of this. Ambrei, a young woman from the peasant village outside his family’s home was awaiting his homecoming as the date upon which they would announce their desire to be married. True, this marriage would bring nothing, perhaps even dishonor, to his family. However, he could not ignore the fact that his heart belonged only to her. How could he simply abandon the one he loved in order to achieve glory? He pondered this as the day slowly faded into night. Â

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It was late, but Relain still pressed onward, urging his steed to continue, though he could not see his hand in front of his face. Relain’s head bobbed rhythmically as he struggled to remain awake. Finally, he could bare it no longer. He dismounted and, leading his horse towards a small brook nearby, he fell into a deep sleep. Â

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However, exhausted as he was, his dreams offered no respite. They were a twisting, chaotic mass of competing people, here his parents, and now Lord Mecharns. Throughout the dream, he caught glimpses of Ambrei, but as soon as he turned to speak to her, she vanished. After hours of such agony, he finally had peace. Â

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When he awoke the following morning, the dawn was still fresh.Â Birds sang quietly as the world stirred.Â Looking about himself, Relain noticed that he had passed the night in a beautiful hollow.Â It was surrounded on all sides by pines, and a blanket of needles gently covered the ground. Â

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It was over these very needles that a figure moved silently towards Relain.Â It was nearly twenty feet from where he lay by the time he noticed it.Â Startled, Relain looked up to see a beautiful woman.Â She wore a silvery gown, and her features seemed light as air.Â Her body seemed to emit a soft glow, nothing to be frightened of, but enough to give her an otherworldly appearance.Â When she spoke, her voice was like the whispering of the trees.

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â€œGreetings Relain.Â I am Eleansia, daughter of the forest.Â Your moods have brought much distress to our fair wood.Â Even as we speak, unnerved animals rouse their young, ready to leave if it appears more hostile actions will follow.Â Kind knight, I pray thee, tell me what troubles you.â€•

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Cautiously, Relain began to speak, â€œI know not how you knoweth my name, nor how you sense my distress.Â However, you appear to mean no harm. I will tell you my sorry tale.Â Perhaps thou will find me a means by which my conflict might be resolved. Â

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My family lives in yonder province, a sad, dishonored lot.Â How we have payed for mine fatherâ€™s failures!Â When I came of age, they were delighted that I would now be able to restore honor to our home.Â I traveled to Lord Mecharns, whom did give me a most wonderful offer.Â In return for the head of the brigand peasant, he offers a fief, serfs, crowns, and his daughterâ€™s hand.Â This is all my family dreamed of and more.Â But I...â€•

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â€œYou wish for something different.Â Someone perhaps?â€•

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â€œYes, wise lady, you are correct.Â My heart belongs to one, Ambrei, of my fatherâ€™s village.Â She is the most beautiful women I have ever met!Â Her flowing brown hair, her gorgeous smile, her fair skin, and her twinkling brown eyes all combine into the most marvelous sight imaginable.Â Not only that, but her compassion surpasses that of any woman I know, and she is more knowledgeable than most men in the village!Â How often we have discussed matters no other peasant could begin to comprehend.Â Ah! Even now as I converse with you, I am reminded of how deeply I feel for her.Â But alas, she is but a peasant.Â Such a marriage would bring dishonor, as well as ill-will from Lord Mecharns.Â Do you now see mine difficulty?Â I would honor my family and my lord, yet deny my love.Â Likewise, to choose my love would bring dishonor and scorn upon my house.â€•

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“Indeed, this is a most unfortunate situation, but you must not despair. If I were asked the question, “Which is more dishonorable, to fail to keep a promise to a loved one or to insult a lord,” I would answer the former. My ways are not those of mortals though, and you must make this choice for yourself. No doubt, this decision will be difficult. However, while you are in our wood, you will be blessed with a clear mind, that you may make this decision to the best of your abilities, fair knight. May the Lady guide you and keep you on the path of truth.”

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“I thank thee for thine aid, fair lady. If ever I have the power, I will return to this very place and build a monument, a testament to all the goodness of this forest. Now, I must continue on my way, and ponder more this dread question.”

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With a nod, the woman turned and walked away, vanishing behind a pair of trees. Rousing himself, Relain gathered his belongings, and, with new courage, mounted his steed. Returning to the path, he continued the short distance left in his journey. ^ ^

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It was nearly noon when he reached the small path. Barely detectable, it was the product of numerous feet, all walking in a single line. Foliage had been broken off at regular intervals and placed over the tracks in a piece-meal fashion. Luckily, the peasants were incompetent enough to leave a decent trail. Relain dismounted, and drew his sword. As quietly as he could, he began to creep along the path.

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He walked silently for nearly half an hour, wary of an ambush. Once, a branch snapped off of the trail to his right. He quickly dove off the trail and waited. It was several minutes before he decided it was safe to continue. As he continued forward, he gradually became aware of smoke drifting above the trees. Soon, he could hear the rough voices of peasants and smell cooking food as its scent wafted through the trees. ^

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He withdrew a number of paces from the path and crept along towards the rebel camp. At last, he saw a pair of guards stationed on the trail, paying little attention to their surroundings and arguing spiritedly about some subject Relain could not quite make out. Slowly, he inched his way forward, careful not to make any noise. Within seconds, he came to the edge of the trees, and, crouching, looked out upon the camp. ^

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It consisted of seven tents, arranged in a circle around a central fire. Men, women, and children all moved throughout the clearing, engaging in their various chores. Above the fire, a fat boar was roasting, no doubt poached from some knight’s land. Quickly, Relain tried to count the number of people moving throughout the camp. Though he could not be sure, he guessed it to be nearly 30 rebels. Relain shuddered, thinking of how best to obtain the leader’s head. When he had an idea, he moved silently back into the forest.

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Some fifteen paces back from the edge of the clearing, Relain set to work. He made a small pile of broken branches, and covered it with leaves. Soon he had a small fire, with seven branches sticking out. Grabbing the burning branches,

Relain hurriedly ran to the edge of the woods. He stopped and took a deep breath before hurling the branches, one onto each tent.

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Within the camp, a cry went up, and soon the brigands were all running for their lives. Relain drew his sword as all seven of the tents were engulfed in flames. With that, he let loose a mighty roar which echoed through the trees. Sounding like a small army, Relain charged into the clearing at the terrified peasants.

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Thinking that they were surrounded, most of the peasants tried to run into the trees on the opposite side of the camp. However, one of them was attempting to organize a defense. He carried a shield which bore a crude attempt at heraldry. It had two red swords crossing diagonally. Instantly, Relain knew that this was the leader, and he ran to finish him before the peasants realized that he was the sole attacker.

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Seeing him charging, the few men the brigand leader had managed to rally fled into the trees. Cursing, the man turned to meet Relain. He brought his shield into a defensive position, and held his sword close to his body with his other hand. Relain raised his own sword high above his head, and using both hands, split the man's shield in two. The ferocity of the attack surprised even Relain who had never thought himself capable of such strength.

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As his opponent stumbled backwards, Relain pressed his advantage. Again and again he struck, first from the left, then from the right. With each blow the man's reactions were just a little slower, his resolve a little bit weaker. Finally, Relain's sword tore into the man's arm, severing his tendons and rupturing an artery. Dark, crimson blood shot from the man's arm as his sword fell to the ground.

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The man uttered a cry of agony, and dropped to his knees, quietly begging for mercy. With one decisive stroke, Relain swung his sword down and cut the man's head cleanly off of his mangled body. Relain retrieved the head and began to walk back to his horse. Seeing their leader fall, the few remaining rebels dispersed, running for shelter in the woods.

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It was late in the day when Relain arrived back on the road. He found his horse resting on some grass. He retrieved his bags and began rummaging. With a grunt, he brought forth a rough sack into which he placed his grizzly prize. Next, he began to clean his sword with a rag. One of his first lessons in dealing with weapons was how to properly care for and maintain his sword. When the blood was wiped away, he returned the magnificent blade to its scabbard and mounted his horse. The day was old, but he still felt no weariness. With a flick of the reins, Relain began his victorious journey home.

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The moon had already begun its decent by the time Relain brought his steed to a halt. It had been almost a day since he had slept last, and exhaustion had finally overtaken him. Finding a nice clearing, Relain dismounted and lay down to sleep. He drifted into that blissful realm entirely undisturbed by phantoms or thought.

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When Relain awoke, the sun was only just beginning its steady ascent.Â Mist still covered the ground where he lay, and an eerie quiet lay upon the woods.Â No creatures stirred, save Relain.Â Despondent, he remembered the decision he would have to make that very day: Whether to accept Lord Mecharnsâ€™s generous offer, or to follow his heart. Â

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With a sigh, Relain once again weighed his options.Â If he married Ambrei, his familyâ€™s honor would be ruined.Â However, he would be happy, and could spend the rest of his life in the company of his beloved.Â On the other hand, he could accept Lord Mecharnsâ€™s generous offer and marry his daughter.Â This would bring his family honor, and he would receive a fief that would bring him wealth for the rest of his life.Â HeÂ groaned as the gravity of the situation overwhelmed him. Â

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Then, he thought of how he would feel if he were to choose each option.Â Not immediately, but several years in the future.Â If he chose Ambrei, his life could easily be hell.Â He would likely be disowned, and possibly even lose his knighthood.Â However, he and Ambrei would be together, and that would bring them both everything they ever really wanted.Â If he chose Mecharnsâ€™s daughter, life would be perfect.Â He would have everything he wanted, but he could never be truly happy.Â However, his family would have their honor restored, along with land and money.Â This would make his family happier than they had ever been.Â After so long deciding, Relain finally made up his mind.Â Standing, Relain woke his horse and, with a newfound resolve, began his journey. Â

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The sun was already low in the sky when he finally arrived at Telnir keep.Â He was greeted with cheers as people flocked around him.Â He dismounted, and a guard led him triumphantly into Lord Mecharnsâ€™s hall.Â The king was at dinner, but he put down his food as soon as he saw Relain.

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â€œBless the Lady! You have returned Sir Relain.Â Tell me, did thou succeed in thine quest?â€•

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â€œYes my liege,â€• Relain said.Â At the same time, he withdrew his bloody trophy from its sack.

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â€œExcellent my boy, thou shalt indeed go far in this world.Â You have defeated a vile enemy of ours, helping to keep our lands safe and prosperous.Â Such work will not unnoticed.Â But you must be wondering about the reward I promised you.Â No worry, it shall be granted in full.â€•

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Slowly, and painfully, Relain began his reply...