

Retribution

Friday, 05 November 2010

Last Updated Saturday, 11 December 2010

Winner of the Gold for the 2010 Anniversary Literature Competition

Retribution

~ snap ~

A tiny orb of light poked through the dark ooze of evening. It made him nervous – very nervous.

“Maggot-breath!” he hissed, “Your carelessness will see both our heads skewered by Bretonni lances before we’ve begun!” Another snap of fingers and the light was extinguished.

The brief glow had illuminated the head of his smaller companion, its grotesque face a near equal to its fetid stink. Again, as it had so many times before, the real risk of betrayal loomed heavy in his thoughts.

“The light is for your eyes, Maass-ter. Is it not?” the creature nearly spat the human words at the warlock.

The papers strewn across the stone slab were barely visible through the dim haze of the midnight mist but they were not there for him. He had studied the maps for years. In fact, he had surveyed the lands himself. The parchments had been drafted by his own hand. The details of these maps were permanently branded in his memory. The maps, here amongst the stone idols, were for his confederates, not for him.

“Twenty-three years, Quilkwit! Twenty-three years I’ve been tracing every root of every tree. I don’t need these maps! They’re for you and for the others!” The veins in the warlock’s neck were nearly bursting as he rebuked the Skaven general, his teeth clenched shut.

What a grim group he had assembled.

Grey Seer Quilkwit had known the longest. He had been captured by the Skaven brood some fifteen years prior. The spells he’d used in his defense did not stop the capture but they did keep him alive. Quilkwit gleaned the small amount of Shadow magic that the warlock knew. Gleaned it like a ravenous dog. The Grey Seer wasn’t here for any other reason than greed. The Skaven were here for the plunder.

Maldrake, the Druchii Dreadlord, was here for the living. The slaver was notorious for the deals he made with humankind. Many a lesser noble had bargained with the Sea Lord to overthrow a rival, inspections of battles revealing Dark Elf weaponry, armour and other traces of Druchii guilt. Slaves were hauled away while corrupt nobles increased acreage and power accordingly.

The marauder Helgin Gor had been the trickiest one to convince. It was Gor that would be the lure of the trap. The warlock had to promise the chaos lord that all of the glory would be his and that the other factions were only here to ensure that the Bretonnian army would not escape his crushing blow. Helgin Gor was here for the glory – for the glory and for the killing.

The vampire, Lars van Reuben, was here for the dead. This had not been a particularly difficult negotiation although finding the bloodsucker had been a feat in its own right. It took many offerings of unwitting, young wholesome wenches to uncover the fiend. In the end, the promise of an army of Bretonnian knights lying dead on a field of battle, just waiting to be re-animated, was simply too much for the Lord of the Night to resist. This had been the warlock’s final recruit and he

needed him most for Van Reuben had another task as well - one that he had accepted most voraciously.

Twenty-three years. Twenty-three years he surveyed the land. Twenty-three years he spent securing his allies. Twenty-three years he sacrificed to have his revenge on her - just her. All of this "just for her."

^

^

Helgin Gor was the bait. His horde of blood-crazed savages had razed Quenelles. Great care had been taken to ensure the Loren was not touched. Help from the Asrai would not bode well. The chaos army had holed up within the walls of the deserted city Brandeleine. It was here that the trap would be sprung.

The crescent shaped line of hills and trees to the east was perfect for an assaulting army. A siege would not be required as the walls of Brandeleine were in severe disrepair. This copse of woods, directly opposite Brandeleine from the crescent hills, provided an excellent vantage point for the two sorcerers. It was an ideal place to watch the efforts of twenty-three years of planning and fifteen years of youthful pain unfold. It was just the right place to witness the execution of his nemesis.

Scouts had been reporting for days that the Bretonnians were gathering on the far side of the crescent hills. Tens of hundreds of tents stood. Easily a thousand knights and five times that of cursed peasantry amassed just beyond the trees. It would be a slaughter. It would be a slaughter just close enough to the Loren that she would have to come to help them. She would come "and she would die."

He remembered the day as if only yesterday. She came for them in the morning. She knew where they were hiding. They had been careless. They had been seen. It's one thing to juggle balls without hands for your brothers but it's quite another to flip a girlfriend's suitor upside down and toss him in a river in a fit of jealous rage. She came for them. She took them and he never saw them again. Murdered - just like the others.

He was five years old when she took them. He couldn't do the tricks yet, but later, when the taint came, he realized what the smell had been. He learned how to recognize a damsel. Each had her own scent when she cast spells, a mix of brimstone and a sweet odour like perfume. He remembered the smells of his brothers when they had been doing illusions for him. How he longed for that again. For fifteen years he kept the taint a secret. He kept his secret well but then left the hamlet at twenty years of age. He left to enact his revenge.

The sound of drums awoke him from his trance.

"It begins," he murmured.

^

^

The sun had not yet crept over the hills to the east when the Bretonnians broke the dawn's grim silence. Peering across the walls of the city, the warlock could just make out the shapes of infantry marching amongst the dim light of torches. They lined the hillside from north to south. Behind the soldiers, the knights of Bretonnia crested the hilltop "resplendent in their perfection" the torchlight dancing across the shining armour. The great noblemen of Bretonnia had come to cleanse Quenelles of the chaos scourge. What a surprise awaited them. Looking down, the warlock watched the Grey Seer rub his palms in greedy anticipation.

The army of Bretonnia began its march down to Brandeleine.

By the foreign sound of a gothic horn, Helgin Gor emerged through the broken gates and the Bretonnians ground to a silent halt. Sitting upon his blood-soaked stallion, Gor seemed prepared to assault the entire army on his own. Slowly the marauder's forces joined him. Nearly two thousand horsemen, savage and knight, joined the chaos lord before the gates of Brandeleine. The two armies stood as still and quiet as stone – snorting horses steaming the cold air of morning.

The Bretonnian general raised an arm and the drums started anew. Archers raised their bows, arrows nocked. With the drop of his arm the drums stopped and a thousand arrows flew at the chaos horsemen. Most of the brightly feathered arrows fell short of their prey but some hit home. Horse and rider fell as the Bretonnians took first blood. Helgin Gor glanced down at his fallen men, spat, drove spurs into his horse and charged headlong towards the peasants. A tide of warriors swarmed behind him like a wave tracing the shore of a dry beach.

Just as the archers were readying their second volley, Druchii and Skaven assassins burst from the trees. Unit commanders fell to poisoned knives even as the assailants themselves were felled. Disorder ensued.

A sinister grin crossed the face of the warlock.

Heedless of the lowborn rabble scrambling amongst them, the knights of Bretonnia lowered their lances and resumed their march down the hill. A line of death was forming that would surely break the enemy asunder. The march became a charge, as the Bretonnian general gave the command, and half way down the hill the charge became chaos as an army of the dead erupted out of the ground.

Helgin Gor veered his charge to flank the Bretonnians from the south. At this, the Druchii force emerged from the trees to the north of the city. At a run they would round the rear of the humans and block their escape. Skaven crewmen pulled away camouflage and began firing arcane war machines into the whirling melee on the slopes, caring not of the undead casualties incurred.

It would be a massacre. The warlock could scarcely contain his mirth, and then out of the woods she came: Child Stealer - Destroyer of Families - Torturer of Brothers. The Fay Enchantress emerged from the woods surrounded by her faithful Grail Guardians. –Your Knights will be of little help, Asrai demon, the warlock gloated.

The vampire, Lars van Reuben, leapt high into the air from the battlements of the city. His prey had finally arrived.

Even from this far away, the warlock could detect the sweet scent of magic emanating from the Enchantress. Fallen knights were resurrected. Simple peasantry deflected blows that should have crushed them. She was a whirl of sorcery but something was strange. There was – something in the air – something in the scent of her magic.

The Bretonnians formed a great circle surrounding their religious leader. The Druchii had hit them on the north and blocked their escape to the east, the marauders were on the south and the vampire's dead legions tore at them from the west. All the while, Skaven warp cannons and other strange weaponry continued to penetrate their ranks from the walls of Brandeleine.

–What is that smell? he asked himself again. –I know it. It's not her. What is it?

The vampire was trudging through the Bretonnians. He tore everything that came across his path to shreds. His eyes focused on his prey. The lure of ancient elf blood had his attention fixed on the Enchantress.

Her power should have been subsiding by now but she was still just as potent as ever, perhaps even more so than she had been when she began. Her smell was infused with something else. Someone else was aiding her. She was wielding her own power but it was enhanced by another's. In fact, it was enhanced by many others.

“ He noticed that the Enchantress’s guardians were not fighting.

“ Quilkwit he demanded. “The Enchantress’s companions. What do you see?”

“ Droning and muttering, the Grey Seer replied, “They are chanting. They do not fight. They are “ channeling the Winds

“ Men, magic, scent, men, magic, brothers, disappearances, guardians, magic, men, scent, brothers!

“ He knew what the scent was. His brothers lived “ and he was about to kill them.

“ He looked down at the Skaven wizard, desperation in his eyes. As calmly as he could muster, he opened his soul to the Winds of Magic. Aided by the warpstone in his fist, he opened a hole directly beneath the feet of the Grey Seer. The Skaven’s bodyguards fell to their death but the ratman himself hung suspended in the air. Quilkwit snarled. Raising his arms, he too inhaled the magic breath of the Winds but, before he could finish, the recoil from the spell just cast imploded the air around them.

“ All went black.

“

“

“ When the warlock awoke, nothing was left of the Grey Seer. Dead or fled, the ratman was gone yet he was still alive. He struggled to his feet, dread in his heart as he peered out towards the battle. What a tragic mistake he had made.

“ The trace of a smile crept across the warlock’s face.

“ To the north, the Druchii were engulfed by an Asrai host. Dryads, treekin, treemen and woodland elves granted swift and savage death to the infidel Druchii. The corrupt nobles of Bretonnia would need to find a new patsy for their manipulations.

“ At the city, the Skaven had abandoned their war machines. Taking what plunder they could, they fled the battle after the fall of the Grey Seer.

“ The vampire had been killed by the Guardians of the Fay Enchantress and his army was in its final death throws “ crumbling back into the earth from whence they had come.

“ To the south, the chaos horde was falling from glory as the entire force of Bretonnia focused on them alone. The Bretonnian general was locked in mortal combat with Helgin Gor, the former gaining the upper hand with each stroke of his sword.

“ The battle was all but won. The warlock had failed. He uttered an unfamiliar prayer to the Lady. It had been thirty-eight years since he had prayed to the Lady of the Lake. He hoped that she could hear him now. He couldn’t believe his incredible good fortune. What a day this had been. He had felt the joy of revenge, the horror of a terrible mistake and the relief of that undoing. His life had changed. Would he ever be forgiven?

^ ^ Stumbling backwards, he found himself sitting on the stone slab. Looking down he noticed a strange glow on the parchments he was sitting on ^ a strange green glow. He looked at his hands and saw that they too were aglow in green. The air chilled and there was breath at his neck.

^ ^ Turning slowly, the warlock looked directly into the eyes of the Shadow Steed. Upon its back, the Green Knight drew forth the Dolorous Blade.

~

{mos_fb_discuss:22}^