

The Lady's Will

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Winner of the Bronze for the 2010 Anniversary Literature Competition

Fellow Bretonnians,

Herein lies my entry for the 2010 Anniversary Literature Competition. It is my first work of writing submitted for any competition. The story consists of exactly 2976 words. Spelling and grammar are American English. Please enjoy!

~Gastion le vaillant

The village of Gunard was a wall-less shanty town of sodden streets and pockmarked peasants, boasting a single inn and little else. Its chapel was a small stone building with rotting pews and few patrons. Still, it was home to Sir Logrean, Knight of the Grail and living legend, rumored to have saved the king's life long ago. 'Twas to see this great man that Gastion de Bravour knelt amongst the chapel's congregation, chancing a glance at Logrean's peppered beard and chiseled face.

The doors of the chapel flew open with a chill gust of wind. Gastion's light brown eyes darted to the silhouette collapsing in the sunlight. Gasping for air with wet, bile-filled breaths, a deeply wounded troubadour fell upon the hard stone floor. Blood flowed freely from the severed stub of his right forearm, and his leggings were soiled with the uric stench of terror.

'Gone. They're all gone,' he croaked through rotten teeth. 'Lady preserve us all!'

Sir Logrean moved to the wounded fool, falling to one knee beside him. 'Who?' he whispered, 'Who is gone?'

'Everyone!' the troubadour gulped. 'At dusk men came like shadows with the wind, clad all in black!'

'Did they display any heraldry?'

The troubadour grimaced. "None! but their faces were hidden with grinning golden masks."

Logrean touched the bleeding stump of the troubadour's right arm. "Where are you coming from?"

"Frespard, Milord. Not twenty miles to the south of here. I fled with two others!" the troubadour spat a wad of blood, "I fled on stolen horses as the masked men burned everything. My companions! they did not live..."

"Craven fool!" Gastion de Bravour uttered.

"Survivor," Logrean corrected. "One who escaped from an attack intended to leave none alive." He turned back to the troubadour. "You are safe here. I am Sir Logrean of the Grail, defender of the Chapel of Gunard. I do not take the Lady's enemies lightly."

The troubadour's eyes widened. "Thank you!" he whispered. "I am Flambuxteaux. The Fool."

Sir Logrean addressed the congregation. "Those of you unable to bear arms, stay within the chapel. Men, muster the militia. Damsel Elise, tend to this man." He waited a moment as the chapel filled with movement. "You, Sir Knight," he called to Gastion, "You must come with me."

The young knight nodded. "As you wish Milord." He followed Sir Logrean through a large oak door behind the altar, emerging into a small antechamber. It smelled of incense, and the walls were lined with blessed scrolls. A suit of gilded armor gleamed brightly on a stand. Resting on its greaves was an equally magnificent sword, its jewel-encrusted cross-guard a golden fleur-de-lys.

"You are Lord Josquin's eldest are you not?" Sir Logrean inquired, fastening the blade's sheath to the belt around his waste. He gestured to the shining silver griffon embroidered upon the errant's blue surcoat. "I know your father's coat of arms well, Gastion. Many years ago, I served with the Silver Griffon to drive back the northern barbarians. You are far from home."

"On my errantry, Milord."

â€œI surmised as much. What is your task?â€•

â€œMy sister Estelle instructed me to perform five deeds of valor. Thus far, Iâ€™ve had little luck.â€•

â€œA difficult task. Knights rarely travel here unless for questing or errantry. Gunard is too remote, and too near Mousillon. You are the first noble to stop here in over six months.â€•

â€œâ€™Tis not so bad,â€• Gastion offered, â€œThe inn is warm and comfortable. Though I miss the down mattresses and feather pillows of home, the straw cots are soft and the wine is sweet and plentiful.â€•

â€œFew see this town in such a light.â€• The grail knight smiled faintly. â€œI did not when I first arrived, but I follow the Will of the Lady. â€™Tis a life that suits me. Now, come.â€• He swept from the antechamber through the heavy doors of the chapel, Gastion hot on his heels.

As they emerged, the eighty or so men who dwelled within the village stood before them. Most were lowborn farmers armed with rusted tools. About twenty wore the uniforms of the dukedom of Lyonesse; these were the veterans. Only three were landed yeomen, garbed in studded leather coats and armed with mighty Bretonnian longbows. All looked in awe as the Grail Knight moved to speak.

â€œThe village of Frespard was burned to the ground last night. None survived.â€• Logrean let the words sink in. â€œWhoever committed this act may be heading our way. We must labor hard to fortify the village. Yeomen, scout our borders and farmland. Men-at-arms, take five teams of men. Dig entrenchments at all major access points to the village. Line the trenches with sharpened wooden stakes. The rest of you, ensure your weapons are in working order.â€• He turned to Gastion., â€œYou will assist me with planning the defense.â€•

Gastion nodded, and the militia followed suit. Throughout the day the peasants carried out their orders, taking what remaining time they had to train. When they had finalized their strategies in early evening, Gastion and Logrean went to retrieve their horses.

The stables were rank as Gastion went to his destrier and gently stroked his mane. Servants had clothed the massive chestnut in blue and silver barding. Aptly named Tempest, the horse was tall, furious, and smelled of earth and musk. When Gastion raised himself into the saddle, Tempest stomped his feet with impatience. â€œCalm yourself, old friend. Weâ€™ll see action yet.â€•

â€œYou look much like your father,â€• Logrean commented, riding a grey courser to meet the young knight. He wore his gilded armor now, and a surcoat of black and silver. When the two knights rode to the center of town together, with armor glistening in the fading sunlight, the lowborn bowed in awe at their splendor.

“Milord!” A clear call rang across the town square. Yeoman Xavier rode swiftly through the street. As he neared, Gastion beheld the shaft of a crossbow quarrel digging deeply in his side. “Milord, they are nearly here—they’ll arrive by sunset.”

“Where are your companions?” The yeoman shook his head, then fell from his saddle to collapse on the ground. Elise flocked to him, ordering two women to take him to the chapel. Logrean reared his horse back, his voice echoing to the heavens. “Women and children, to the chapel. Men, to your positions! Elise, remain in the chapel. If your spells are needed, come to our aid.” He clapped Gastion on the shoulder. “You and I part ways here. Take the eastward defense. I ride south.”

Gastion nodded. “The Lady’s Blessing upon you Milord.”

“And on you, young griffon.” Sir Logrean turned his horse, then cantered down the filthy southward road. Gastion moved east.

The Men-At-Arms saluted as he arrived. Flambuxteaux the Fool stood amongst their ranks, healed by Damsel Elise. Where his hand once was, a heavy iron mace was grafted to his flesh with thread and flame.

A low horn blared far in the distance. The sound of hooves beating virgin ground grew to a deafening roar. “Hold, men,” Gastion called calmly. The shadowed silhouettes of riders danced through the mist astride ebon horses, wearing armor to match. Hoods shrouded their heads, but the glint of golden masks shined through. They were armed with handheld crossbows, which they cocked and fired. The barrage of quarrels fell upon the Bretonnian ranks before they could react.

“Shields!” Gastion yelled as men fell around him. The remaining Men-At-Arms grounded their tower shields in the mud as archers crouched behind for shelter. “Knock! Draw!” He drew his sword, its blade catching the light of the braziers. “Fight!” the dark riders reloaded, the archers stepped forth and released into the night. Five enemy horsemen crumpled to the ground. A cheer rang through the Bretonnian ranks and the dark riders turned to disappear into the mist. It cannot be that easy, Gastion thought to himself.

Moments later, a massive knight clad in black-enameled full-plate led the hooded riders, charging forth. As the crossbowmen continued to fire their missiles into the Bretonnians, the black knight smashed through their lines. Without stopping, he moved at full gallop past Gastion as a fierce wind whipped the hood from his head, unveiling a grinning mask of gold.

“Hold the line men!” Gastion yelled, turning Tempest to follow the knight. As he arrived at the steps of the chapel, the masked figure dismounted, unsheathing his blade.

“Hold!” Gastion called, mustering all his impetuous courage. “Move no further!”

The dark figure turned in silence, his mask grinning. Gastion spurred Tempest forth. As he came within striking distance, the masked knight swept his sword with uncanny speed and force. His blow shattered Gastion’s blade, knocking him from his horse. Ears ringing, Gastion pulled himself to his feet and drew his dagger as the knight advanced.

“I demand to know the name of my foe!” he yelled in earnest. “As a knight you are honor-bound to tell me.”

The golden mask laughed with amusement. “I am honor-bound to tell you nothing.” His voice was deep, smooth, a rumbling basso. He lunged with the pommel of his blade before Gastion could raise his shield, crushing the errant’s jaw. Again he struck without warning, knocking Gastion to the ground. “This is where your honor falls,” he said coolly, placing an armored foot upon the errant’s neck. Slowly, he began to increase the pressure.

From far away a pure, crystalline voice soared to the sky, its melody flowing like healing waters. Tendrils of bracken erupted from the earth, curling themselves around the masked knight’s foot. Several more curled together to form a protective shell around Gastion. Silhouetted in golden light, Damsel Elise stepped from the chapel with arms outstretched, her grey eyes aflame with eldritch power. “You shall go no further,” she fumed, waving her hands to send forth spires of thorn and vine in the direction of the great masked knight.

With shield raised, the knight moved forward. Each step took him closer to the damsel, his armor merely denting from the barrage that assaulted him. “Your Lady is failing you, Damsel. Her light is dim.” With a dark steeled hand, he reached out and grabbed the damsel’s face, digging his sharp armor into her flesh. Blood trickled down her temples as she screamed.

“No!” Gastion cried, squirming to wrench himself from his protective prison. Helplessly, he watched the masked knight Elise and smash her head into the chapel doors. Braced shut, they held firmly against the battering as her body fell limply to the ground. The masked knight turned back to the doorway and kicked. Bloodied oak and metal splintered from the impact, and the dark figure strode purposefully into the chapel’s sanctuary. With blade raised, he began to slaughter the peasants within the chapel, crimson spurts raining upon the floor as the powerless sated the bloodlust of the mighty.

With the thunder of hooves a silver figure pierced the darkness. Sir Logrean leapt from his horse with the grace of a hart, eyes blazing. In his hand gleamed his sword, its blade a thousand colors fighting back the night. “The riders to the south are slain or in retreat. I’ve sent several men to the eastward road to bolster its defense.” He sliced through the bracken that trapped Gastion, freeing him from his prison. “Stay with Elise. I shall deal with the monster in the chapel.”

“But Milord! Damsel Elise! I believe she is slain.”

“Is your faith so shaken, young knight?” Logrean inquired, touching Gastion’s shoulder. Warmth spread throughout the

errantâ€™s body and he felt light and healthy. â€œThe Lady shall provide for those who follow her Will.â€•

Gastion bolted up the muddy street to where Elise lay. Her eyes were shut, and her face was gashed where the masked knight had gripped her. Still, her chest rose and fell with life. Gastion took her hand in his, watching Logrean ascend the chapel steps.

Within the chapel, the helpless lay slain in scarlet pools. The giant knight held a girl by the throat upon the altarâ€™s cold surface, his armor slicing her skin. She was pure, innocent, supple with the blessings of youth. He moved a spiked hand down the clinging cream of her dress, drawing a line of blood upon her milky flesh, savoring the moments before he desecrated her as he had desecrated the chapel.

Without a word, without a warning, a glowing blade smashed itself upon the masked manâ€™s armor, the sound reverberating to the rafters of the chapel. Turning, the giant knight caught the blazing gaze of Sir Logrean and bowed with mocking courtesy. Silently, he drew his ebon sword from its sheath and met the living saint in combat.

Sparks of heat erupted as blade clashed against blade. With inhuman speed, the two knights fought, a whirlwind of light and darkness. As Logreanâ€™s blade glowed a rainbow of color, the masked knightâ€™s sword drained light where it was swung. Candles were extinguished with the sheer wind created from their speed; stained glass windows shattered with the force of each blow. For what seemed an eternity, the pair fought their duel. Finally, when both were winded from combat, Sir Logrean buried his blade within the armpit of the masked knight. As his foe collapsed to the chapel floor, Logrean kicked the mask from the figureâ€™s face and stood back in disgust.

Chalk-white skin stretched itself gauntly across angular bones. Glossed red eyes stared at the face of the Grail Knight, and strands of ebon hair dangled limply to his neck. Past thin purple lips protruded long, sharp canine teeth, and tendrils of black slime webbed themselves across colorless cheeks.

â€œWho are you?â€• Logrean demanded. â€œYou are both mutant and vampireâ€•! How?â€•

The creature grinned. â€œI am but one of many seeking vengeance. We were wronged, you see. Wronged by your kings. Wronged by your people.â€•

â€œThe king does not negotiate with your kind.â€•

The creature laughed. â€œWe were wronged long before this.â€• He grimaced as he gestured to his body. â€œThis is merely a means to an end, Grail Knight.â€• The sound of hoof beats grew near. â€œWe wish to reclaim that which was once ours. Nothing more. Nothing less.â€•

“Milord!” yelled Gastion in a panic. He sounded pained.

“I ask you once again,” Logrean bellowed, “Who are you?”

“Do you not know?” the creature mocked. He stood, wrenching Logrean’s blade from his armpit and throwing it to the ground. In an instant, the Grail Knight saw it - a talisman that dangled from the creature’s neck. “It was a small shield with an ebon fleur-de-lys upon a golden field. His eyes grew wide. “Ah, now you understand.”

“Mousillon!”

“Such a clever knight.” The creature bowed with a flourish. “I am Arnaud d’Arcaunis, and I must be going now.” toward the doorway to the chapel, knocking oil lamps upon the floor, setting flame to the holy sanctuary. Two mounted crossbowmen stood with lit torches at the entrance, and Arnaud leapt behind one of the riders. “Kill him,” he said. Two crossbow bolts found the Grail Knight directly in the heart. “And burn this town to the ground.” As they left, each rider moved his torch upon the roofs of the hovels, setting them ablaze.

Gastion watched with rage and horror, helplessly held to the ground by a crossbow bolt that punctured his left hand. Elise had not yet stirred, and it took all his strength to yank the bolt from his palm. Limping, he ran up the stairs of the chapel to get Sir Logrean before the building fell.

“I told you to guard Elise,” Logrean managed, coughing blood.

“The riders have gone. We must get out before the town burns down.”

“I cannot go anywhere. I have done the Lady’s Will. There is no task left for me save one.” He pulled Gas
“They were from Mousillon, young knight. You must! you must go to the king. Go to the dukes. Tell all who can hear that they move against us.” He took a breath. “His name was Arnaud d’Arcaunis. Remember that name.” Gastion nodded. “I call her Daylight! keep her close.”

“!” Gastion was at a loss for words.

“There’s no time. Go now! Leave me within the chapel I’ve guarded.” Logrean held forth the hilt of his sword.

Respectfully, Gastion grasped the blade. "You shall not be forgotten." He ran from the chapel, barely escaping before the roof collapsed. As he arrived at the bottom of the stairs, Elise was awake. "Can you stand?" he asked. She nodded. Taking her hand, Gastion whistled for Tempest, who came running for his master. As the two of them prepared to mount the horse, the few remaining villagers ran to them, Flambuxteaux in the lead.

"Gastion," Elise said, placing her soft hand on his shoulder. "We cannot leave these people. We must at least take them with us."

"Aye," Gastion conceded. He stood tall, realizing that they would all be looking to him for leadership. "We stay here for now. I doubt our attackers will return."

"What of Sir Logrean?" "That was Flambuxteaux."

Gastion turned to the chapel. "He is with the Lady." He looked to the ground. "Let us rest now. We've lost much, but we have much to do on the morrow." The survivors nodded in agreement and set up camp as their homes burned around them.

By morning, the flames had died. Flambuxteaux led several peasants to recover the body of Sir Logrean and erect a reliaque dedicated to his remains. Elise did what she could for her wounds, but she would have five scars upon her face forevermore. Gastion, mounted on a tired Tempest, was focused only on his quest. He would sound the alarm. He would go to King Louen. His errantry no longer mattered.

Only this singular task remained, and he would see it through.

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