

## The Fall of Keln

Sunday, 07 November 2010

Last Updated Thursday, 16 December 2010

The dimly lit room shook slightly as the mercenaries battered the citadel's door once again. Dust fell from the stone ceiling, coating everything below in a fine powder. Sir Rivence leaned forward on his stool to gently brush the specks from Simone's face. As he sat back, he gazed in anguish at his beautiful wife turned cold and lifeless on their bed. By now, the red blankets covering all but her head had been turned white with the falling dust. He repeated the process as powerful hit sent another shower from the ceiling. They had been married for five wonderful years before she died, and they had been considered Keln's finest rulers in years. The townsfolk had been content, and he had brought a previously unheard of level of prosperity to their town. Those had been the best years of Rivence's life, when he had been surrounded by adoring subjects and had the woman he loved beside him. Only in hindsight did he see that their blessing had become a curse. The unprecedented wealth that Keln had amassed had also attracted unprecedented attention for the town, and it soon found itself under attack by those wishing to pillage their wealth. He still could not believe how quickly the mercenaries had encircled the town, trapping those inside. Had he but listened to Simone's advice, they could be safely away by now, smuggled out by swift horses as the enemy approached. He had refused to flee. His honor would not allow it, but now she lay dead. In his heart, he knew that the town would have held had the mortal disease not reared its ugly head. The first cases had been reported two weeks after the siege began, and everything had been done to stop its spread. The bodies had been burned and citizens had been quarantined, yet the disease had spread throughout the town like wildfire. Even now he had no idea how Simone had become infected. He had ordered her to remain their chambers, and only he had been allowed to enter. He had brought her meals, and the plan had worked for a time. Somewhere something had gone wrong and she too had grown ill. When he had found out, he had been desperate to find a cure. He had searched the entire town, but nobody could help him, so he had been forced to sit helplessly by his wife's side as she had faded away. When her last breath had finally left her body, Rivence had grown uncontrollably distraught. He had refused to leave her bedside, and had continued to gaze at what had once been his loving wife. At first, his men had tried to come to him for guidance in the town's defense, but he had refused to talk with them. He felt a twinge of guilt as he thought back on how he had abandoned his people in their time of need, but that was over now. And soon, very soon, it would all be over. He took a moment to glance out of the window. Everywhere there were flames and smoke. The town in which he had spent his entire life was quickly being reduced to nothing. He could not bring himself to dwell on the fate his beloved people would be subjected to after this battle was over. A mighty crash shook the keep more violently than any before. From the cries below, Rivence could tell that the battering ram had broken through the oak doors and the mercenaries were now streaming into the great hall. Soon the loud clangs of metal greeted his ears, and with them came a new sound: the shrieks of the wounded as they were struck down. Rivence could only shudder as he thought of his poor townspeople fighting against all odds to save those who were huddled behind them. Those men-at-arms who had been so proud on the training field were now discovering how inadequate their preparations had really been. They had never been intended to hold their own, but to simply support the knights as they rode to battle. The problem was that the few knights who had been in the town when it was besieged were all long-dead. They had been heroes, true legends of Bretonnia. Some died as the walls were overwhelmed, but most had been cut down as they tried to delay the surging masses of attackers. They had stood bravely in the streets to give the civilians a chance to flee from their homes, and they were killed where they were. They were not knights of Keln, but they had given their lives to protect its people... given their lives while Keln's lord sat in a tower. They had never questioned him, never muttered against his inaction. They were all too noble to dishonor a man mourning his wife's death. Yet now all of those fine defenders lay dead, and there was nobody to stop the mercenaries from butchering Rivence's soldiers. As he sat listening, the screams of dying men were replaced by those of terrified women and children being herded off toward an unspeakable future. Their shrieks pierced his ears, and he began silently to weep. How had he stood by and allowed his town to be destroyed? How had he been such a coward? Swallowing, he stood for the first time in days. His hands trembled as he moved to the wall where his mail, shield, and sword hung unused. With the speed of one practiced in war, he donned his armor and shield. Finally he turned to the sword, which he held in his hands for a long moment, allowing himself to feel its weight. At last he buckled on the scabbard and faced the room. Tears were now streaming down his face as he made his way toward the lamp sitting by Simone's bed. It had been a small source of comfort for him in times past, but it would now be the cause of indescribable pain. Lifting it, he gazed once more at his beloved wife and whispered, "My dear, I pray that we will meet again. But until then, I will not let them take you." With that, he threw the lamp onto the bed, which burst into flames. He stood silently for a few moments, watching the fire consume his wife, the one person he had loved beyond measure. When he could no longer see her face, he turned and walked toward the great hall. The corridor ended far too quickly, and he was now forced to see the full extent of the massacre. Everywhere blood stained the stones, and bodies lay limp upon the floor. The few women and children who had escaped to the keep were being lined up by the doors. Some pled for mercy, but most simply looked defeatedly at their feet. They had accepted their fate, and they were broken. Sir Rivence strode quietly into the room, ashamed at having allowed this to befall his people. It was a small boy that saw him first, shouting out excitedly and pointing to him. The mercenaries whirled around to face him, their faces shocked. They had not thought there were any defenders remaining in the keep. Now face with the town's lord, they were unsure of what to do. Raising his voice, Sir Rivence addressed the hall, "My people, I cannot express my pain at seeing you in this state. I knew in my heart that I am responsible for this, and I do not ask your forgiveness. It is far too much to ask of you, who have suffered from my selfishness. I ask only that you remember your defenders fondly, for they fought valiantly to secure your freedom. It is me that you should blame. As for our enemies, who among you dares to fight me? Is there a champion among you that wishes to test his skills? Surely one of you desires to hang my bloodied shield

from your tent this night and proclaim to all the world that "It was I who did kill Sir Rivence, Lord of Keln!" Stepping forward, one of the mercenary captains answered, "You are a very strange man, Sir Rivence. You stood by and did nothing as your people were slaughtered and captured, yet now that the battle is all but over, you seek a challenger. Hmm, very odd indeed. Yes, I shall take your challenge, and I shall have whatever small honor can be gained from slaying you." The man drew his blade and advanced on Sir Rivence, grinning. Once they were within a few feet, he lunged, forcing the knight off balance. As his opponent chuckled, Rivence regained his footing and attacked. Forward and forward he pushed, the mercenary captain giving ground as he parried Sir Rivence's fearsome blows. Then the man ducked and slashed backwards quickly with his sword, driving it into the knight's leg. With an agonized gasp, Rivence sank to his knees, pain overwhelming his will to fight. "No, I must continue," he thought. Leaning heavily on his sword, he began to stand. A loud click drew his attention upward. The captain stood above him, a pistol pointed at Sir Rivence's head. The knight sighed. "I am coming, my love."