

The Second Tale of Sir Simon, Knight of The Quest: Blood On The Sands

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THE SECOND TALE OF SIR SIMON DU MONTFORTE, KNIGHT OF THE QUEST:

BLOOD ON THE SANDS

In which a new friend is discovered, an ancient evil is awoken, and a vile secret is revealed

Listen

then ye ladies and gentlesirs, as I tell thee the second tale of Sir Simon, a most noble knight of the Quest. It is a story of desperate battles under the unforgiving moons, of blood on the desert sands, and most of all, the courage of a true Bretonnian. So hearken then, and let us begin our next journey...

The hot sun

beat down upon the column as its inched slowly, like a train of determined ants, across the mighty sand dunes of the desert. Trudging wearily along, the men of the column looked ragged and downtrodden. For weeks, they had marched into the desert, only to now walk out once again without the great wealth and loot they were promised. Some struggled along using their weapons as crutches and others helped push a set of rickety wagon, laden with provisions and barrels, across each steep dune. This far out in the desert there was no path, nor was there any water. Men licked their cracked lips and wiped sandy sweat off of their brows. The sun, like the desert, was completely unforgiving. In the last two days alone, four men had succumbed to heatstroke, dropping out of the march to lie amongst the sands until some carrion birds came to pick their bones clean.

Those birds circled the column now, casting huge shadows as they lazed across the blazing midday sun. The sole non-human of the group, a sturdy looking dwarf with a bushy black beard and fierce grey eyes, scowled up at the cawing birds and spat onto the sand. The moisture from his spit sizzled on the ground and the dwarf grunted. Of all the members of this column, Brynn Borgnisson looked among the best at the moment. Indeed, he was from the Elder Races and he didn't really need as much water as the men who trudged slowly alongside him. Even his heavy breastplate armor seemed to discomfit him little, despite the cooking heat that would've dropped most men.

“Damn

buzzards,” he said to no one in particular, “they’re driving me bloody mad with that damn cawing. What I wouldn’t give for a fine crossbow at the moment… or a pint of ale… yes… a lovely pint right now would be wonderful…” The human warriors marching next to the dwarf rolled their eyes as their stout ally let his sentence descend into mumblings about Bugman’s brew and some bar called the Ten-Tailed Cat. They had heard the same thing a dozen times before on the march and would doubtless hear it again, assuming they lasted that much longer. Despite his grumbling, the dwarf truly was one of the few individuals in the column who didn’t seem to feel the heat. Another rode towards the front of the group and unlike the dwarf, did not grumble, much less make a sound. Had his un-helmeted head not occasionally turned to take in the surrounding landscape, the other men of the column might have mistaken him for a corpse on a horse.

Attired in a worn suit of plate

armor, the knight rode tall in the saddle despite the oppressive desert environment. A mighty two-handed blade, the trademark weapon of a Bretonnian knight of the Quest, sat across the back of his well-built frame in an old leather scabbard, ready to be drawn at a moment’s notice. A faded and torn black jupon, emblazoned with the heraldry of silver stag’s head, covered his steel breastplate, yet it only added to the man’s rough look. His face, just showing the first stubble of growing beard, was stern and square-jawed. Across his neck was a shallow scar, the sign of some near mortal wound from a battle long past. However, it was his piercing green eyes that stood out the most, sweeping back and forth across the land around the caravan, constantly looking for some sign of danger. Where other men in the column had grown too weary to even raise their heads, the questing knight remained ever vigilant of some as of yet unseen threat. With a quick nudge of his heels, he urged his warhorse, a large rowan beast as ragged looking as its master, forward a little farther ahead of the column. Truth be told, Sir Simon Du Montforte, knight of the Quest, dispossessed lord of the Montforte family lands, did not much like his travelling companions. It was only by the grace of the Lady herself and her guiding visions that he had fallen in with this group of mercenaries and their rather eccentric leader. A loud curse from the rear of the column identified the location of that leader, riding atop a cart upon which was lashed a gold box, decorating with intricate carvings, about six feet long and four feet tall. It was the only item that the caravan had taken from its destination before turning back for the coast of Araby.

The column’s leader and financier,

a well-bred Tilean, was struggling to urge the horses drawing the cart over the latest dune and was cursing as some of his mercenaries tried to help shift the wagon’s weight from the sand it was stuck in. Francesco Ferdonio cut a striking figure, despite the deprivations and hardship of his journey through the desert. Clad in a billowing green silk shirt and gold-trimmed red pantaloons, garments that would not have been out of place at the court in Couronne, the mercenary captain looked every inch the dashing rogue. A bronze breastplate, engraved with the twin symbol of the Tilean city of Luccini, covered the showy green shirt and protected his chest. A brace of pistols hung from a broad leather belt that ran around the Tilean’s waist under his breastplate, accompanying a fine steel rapier, its thin blade decorated with slightly glowing runes. The weapons left little doubt as to the man’s trade. His face was dominated by a mustache, which Ferdonio had a nasty habit of twirling the ends of when

annoyed, and a finely manicured goatee. Quick brown eyes looked out over a bulbous nose and a ruddy face that was framed by curly black hair, as was common amongst many Tilean men. To top off the man's garish ensemble, he wore a cap with a large eagle feather at a jaunty angle on his head. Truly, Ferdonio was every inch the classic Tilean mercenary captain.

However, at the moment Ferdonio was every inch the aggravated wagon-master, hollering orders at the men who were pushing the cart. Finally, Brynn the dwarf stepped up and shouldered some of the cart's weight, pushing it over the sand dune and sending it rolling on its way once again. Ferdonio sighed with relief and sank back down onto the seat of the wagon, tutting the horses forward once more. This entire expedition had been funded at great personal expense so that he could acquire the treasure that now sat in the back of this cart. Undoubtedly, it would make him a very rich man, yet the men he had brought with him had been promised loot and had received none, so every delay in the journey back to Araby made Ferdonio sweat from more than just the heat.

The Tilean was not a stupid man by any means and he knew full well to be wary of a group of disgruntled, hot, and hungry mercenaries. Indeed, he had been on the instigating side of enough mutinies to know the danger that all captains faced, especially when promises of wealth were not kept. It was surprising that he had managed to keep the men going this long. The promises of great treasure stored within the golden chest, a chest he told the men could only be opened by Arabyan sorcerers, had so far been enough to keep his mercenaries marching. That was a lie of course. Ferdonio could open the chest at any time and had indeed done so to check its contents when he had first discovered it lying deep underground in the musty tomb of some long-dead king. It was worth double its weight in gold, yet the collector who wished to acquire what it contained had given very specific instructions about the state in which the box was to be returned. If the men were to take it or open it, they could very well jeopardize the whole deal that Ferdonio had worked so hard to construct, and that was just not a risk he wanted to take. The only other man in the column who knew the contents of the box sat next to him, a thin, skeletal figure with narrowed, squinting eyes dressed in dirty brown robes.

Paulus was one of the many hedge wizards that could be found roaming the Tilean countryside, but he was doubtless one of the most accomplished amongst those who had never set foot inside the Imperial Colleges of Magic. More importantly, he was completely and utterly loyal to Ferdonio, a trait the mercenary captain admired above all others. It was Paulus who had enabled him to bypass the wards of the tomb and had guaranteed that the column would so far be free of any sort of retribution, though Ferdonio doubted that the nonsense of curses his natives guides had babbled at him as they led the way to the tomb was anything more than superstitious prattle.

That being said, it was better to be safe than sorry. He made sure Paulus worked many spells to mask the raiders'

presence as they had snuck in and out of the tomb. Only the damnable dwarf and that aloof Bretonnian knight had refused to enter, something about the sanctity of the dead and whatnot. While Ferdonio was happy to have their added experience and blades, he didn't not particularly like either the dwarf or the Bretonnian, who always seemed to look at him as if he were some sort of rodent rather than one of the most prestigious mercenary captains in the glorious city of Luccini. Such was the way with Bretonnians, Ferdonio thought, always so damn aloof until they needed you, then it was all smiles and oaths of honor and whatnot. Regardless, he was keeping a special eye on the two warriors, especially the Bretonnian, who had shown up so mysteriously out of nowhere right before the expedition's start. No one, not even some supposed questing knight, was going to upset his chance at a fortune. As he leaned over to whisper something to his sorcerous compatriot, he kept one eye fixed on the dwarf and the Bretonnian, who appeared to be talking together at the head of the column.

"Ya know that's some fine Dwarven steel ya got there on yer back laddie," said Brynn, looking up at the strange Bretonnian knight leading the front of the caravan. The man appeared to not have registered the comment, so the dwarf spoke a little louder this time. "I said, that's some fine Dwarven steel ya got there on yer back laddie!"

With a sigh, the knight snapped his head around to the dwarf, his voice stern and deep. "Please be quiet, lest you startle Marcelles," the knight patted his warhorse on the neck as it snorted, "and I heard you the first time." The dwarf eyed the horse warily, knowing there was no love lost between his kind and such mounts.

"Tis a great big beastie if you asked me. It will take more than me chatting with ya to startle such a large creature. I reckon a whole tavern full of drunken dwarves would ne'er scare that monster." The dwarf smiled up at the knight, yet kept a wary eye on the horse nonetheless. Marcelles snorted again, as if sensing the dwarf's discomfort, and Brynn licked his lips nervously. If the knight noticed the dwarf's edginess, he said nothing. Instead, he returned to the subject of the sword.

"You speak true master dwarf, the sword is the work of your kind, at least the blade. The hilt and pommel..."

The dwarf cut the knight off, "Are bloody elven work if I'm not mistaking, and I never am. And my name is Brynn Borgnisson. Calling me master dwarf makes me sound like a bloody craftsman, which I ain't particularly. Now tell me, how does a Bretonnian knight, especially one wearing such banged up armor, no offense..."

“None taken,” the knight replied softly.

“Come across something as beautiful as a blade crafted by both the Elder Races?”

Sir Simon nodded, knowing the dwarf’s question was a valid one. Though he did not like conversing much with the other members of the caravan, the ride had been long and there seemed to be no immediate danger. Sir Simon figured he would suffer the distraction. Indeed, it had been some time since he had spoken to a member of the Elder Races.

“It belonged to my father, Lord Raymond du Montforte and his father and his father before that. It has been in my family for generations and sadly I do not know exactly how it came into our possession. The blade is a credit to your people master Brynn, for it has served me well the many years I have travelled the questing road.”

“Oh aye laddie,” the dwarf nodded sagely, seeming ignore the use of master before his name, “I have nary seen such a nice blade in many a year. I’m proud to know that one of my people has greatly aided ya through his fine smithing. Doubtless more than that elf rock on the pommel there.”

Sir Simon chuckled, “Oh, it has helped me through a few scrapes as well, though it is most likely nothing without the blade itself. Now it is my turn to ask a question of you, master Brynn. How does a son of the mountains come to wander the deserts of Araby with a caravan of mercenaries? It is far from your people’s mighty holds.”

“Oh aye,” the dwarf said, his voice sounding a little distant as he reminisced, “tis far and not the farthest I have travelled, let me tell ya laddie. I couldnae give ya the whole story now I’m afraid, for it is long in the telling. The short of it is, my family’s lands were laid to waste by foul greenskins while I was off campaigning. I was all that twas left of the clan, and with nothing to tie me down, I began wandering, looking for some way to make enough money to raise me own force and go after the monsters that slaughtered me kin. It has been many years since, yet I still dinnae have the resources I need, so I ended up following that damned fool Ferdonio out it to this accursed

desert, hunting for his bloody treasure. Which never materialized, I might add.” The dwarf spat into the dirt and the knight smiled slightly. “That’s the long and short of it laddie. And you? How does one of you mighty knights end up riding through an endless desert with a crew of ruffians led by a half-mad Tilean? Doesnae seem the place for one such as yerself.”

Sir Simon chuckled again. He was enjoying this conversation more than he had thought. He liked this rough dwarf and his straightforward manner, despite his seeming desire to spit upon most everything in sight. Certainly, it was a change from the rest of the shifty members of the caravan guard.

“Our stories are slightly similar, at least in the fact that they are long in the telling, to use your words. My father was slain by a foul creature of the night, my family’s lands left in its grasp. A young man, grievously wounded I staggered away, searching for the Grail of my Lady so that I may gain the strength and wisdom to one day return and claim what is rightfully mine.”

“Revenge. Tis a fair motivation laddie, and one this particular dwarf can well understand.” The dwarf grunted his approval and motioned for the knight to continue.

“As for my presence on this caravan, a vision led me here. My Lady appeared in a dream as I slept under the stars and whispered softly the words Ferdonio and Luccini into my ear. I rode with all haste to the city, found the man, and agreed to join his expedition, though to what end I know not.”

The dwarf looked at the knight skeptically, “A lot of faith to be putting in your Lady, is it not knight?”

Sir Simon shook his head dismissively, “She is my guide and my shield, and she has served me as faithfully as I have served her. I would follow her will to the ends of the world and beyond. And my name, master Brynn, is Sir Simon du Montforte. You may call me Simon. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, son of the mountains.”

“The pleasure is mine, laddie.” The dwarf ignored the knight’s name and reached up a hand. The knight leaned down and shook it. “Now laddie… Simon..sorry… tis a long walk and it’s been a while since I’ve had a passable conversation with one of the people of this here expedition. Tell me about how you came across that great bloody scratch in yer armor there and I’ll tell you all about the bastard troll that gave me this here wee nick in me axe.”

The knight trotted along and the dwarf strode by his side, chatting pleasantly in the pressing heat of the desert sun as the column struggled along behind them across the dunes.

He awoke with a start. It was gone. He could feel it. Had he slept so long and so deeply that he had not known? He had not arisen to defend it and now it was gone. And with it, her. He rose from his funeral bed with an angry roar. Bones creaked and a nimbus of energy played around the walls of his burial chamber. There would be a reckoning. There would be vengeance. There would be blood on the sands and death in the air. He would retrieve it and with it her, or he would die a thousand times trying. Another roar, in the ancient tongue of Nehekrara, summoned the Hierophant Priest that was bound to his tomb. The crinkly old creature, more corpse than man after centuries of silence in the tomb had taken their toll, appeared at once at his master’s side. Climbing out of his coffin for the first time in over a thousand years, the Tomb King Anharasphut gave his orders.

“Summon what force you can Hierophant and awake my Ushabti,” the Tomb King’s voice was a chilling and deep, “Fetch me my khopesh and my armor. It is gone, and with it her, and I must retrieve it.” The Hierophant, a glimmer of power already forming in his eyes, bowed before the might of his arisen King and hissed his affirmation. The army of Anharasphut marched to war once again and doubtless there would be much blood on the sands when those who had transgressed against such a majestic Lord were found. Woe betide them, thought the Hierophant as he let the ancient magic of the desert flow through him. Woe betide those who would trespass on this land.

Paulus the hedge wizard had been nodding off in the seat next to Ferdonio when he suddenly sat up, startling the mercenary captain, who had also been drowsing in the setting sun of the evening. The blessed cool of night was a well-needed relief to the heat of the day and briefly, he had wondered if he should consider ordering the caravan to move on through the night. Whatever thoughts he had been having of such a plan were shattered when Paulus spoke, his nasally voice filled with dread.

"They have awoken Francesco. The wards are gone and Shallya help us they have awoken! They will be coming for it! What do we do?"

Ferdonio gripped the hedge wizard by the collar of his ragged robes and drew his face in close. The Tilean's voice was melodic and light, yet carried an underlying threat that was not hard to discern.

"First, we will keep the noise down huh? Do you want them all to know what we are doing? What we have done?" The hedge wizard, startled by his ally's harsh tone, shook his head dumbly. The mercenary captain continued, "For now, we do nothing right? We wait and we watch and we continue marching. It would take them days to reach us no? Plenty of time to reach Araby and then safety. Keep your magicks up to detect pursuit, and we will double the guard, say we fear bandits or something. Even if they do catch us, we can see these dead things off."

Paulus nodded, wishing he had the same confidence as his long-time partner. "Most importantly," the mercenary hissed in Paulus's ear, "we tell no one. We want no rebellion, no mutiny. It has never happened to Francesco Ferdonio and it never will. Are we clear?" Again Paulus nodded.

"As you wish, Francesco. I will keep my wards up and ready, and hopefully we will know before they come."

Ferdonio smiled and twirled his mustache with his finger. He reached back and lovingly stroked the gold chest, feeling its warmth beneath his gloved hand.

"Excellent friend Paulus. We shall not fear the dead. Somebody already put them in the ground once yes? How hard could it be to do so again? They will never take our prize from us, or my name is not Francesco Ferdonio."

The caravan made camp for the night atop a large dune. They circled the wagons, putting the cart carrying the golden chest in the center. Ferdonio slept atop the wagon, next to the golden chest, cradling a primed pistol in his hands. The rest of the men slept next to their mounts or underneath the wagons. Sir Simons settled down with Marcelles next to a supply wagon, where Brynn sat nestled up against a wheel, smoking a pipe. Ferdonio had warned the mercenaries about the potential for bandits, so as an added precaution they had taken some of the barrels down off the carts to form barricades between the wagons.

Extra sentries were also posted to ward off any bandits, though few men actually expected an attack to come in the night. It was some shock then, when, as the brilliant moons of Morrslieb and Mannslieb were at their zenith, the bulky Rieklander Gerhard, wanted for the strangling murders of six children in Estalia, suddenly screamed out as two arrows appeared to sprout from his chest. Jean Luc, a former Bretonnian yeoman working for Ferdonio, echoed the cry and collapsed atop the wagon where he had been standing sentry, a black arrow piercing his skull. Suddenly, the air was alive with the hissing of black-shafted arrows, which hummed through the mercenary encampment, cracking into wood and thumping into bodies.

Panic gripped the mercenaries as men groggily arose to defend themselves. The flickering lights of the nearly dead cooking fires illuminated the chaos as men tried to find cover from the merciless rain of arrows. After a long day of weary marching, it was the last thing anyone expected. A sudden, surprise attack by an unseen enemy who could shoot accurately despite the darkness was the most horrific thing that could have happened. As if to prove the point, another man let out a gurgling cry as an arrow pierced his throat, pitching him back onto the wheels of the central cart. Francesco Ferdonio stood atop the treasure wagon, bellowing orders while calmly avoiding the arrows himself. Not all the mercenaries were panicking.

Oster, a grizzled, lanky Hochlander, hefted a strangely built long rifle, which he had stolen from an engineer he had killed in a robbery many years ago. The Hochlander slammed up against the wood of the wagon next to Sir Simon and Brynn, looking through the telescopic device upon the top of the rifle for a target in the darkness. Sir Simon, who seemed entirely unfazed by the arrows flickering around him, looked at the rifle with disdain and hefted his shield, checking to make sure the Montforte family blade was strapped securely upon his back. Brynn groaned and hefted his own round wooden targe, catching an arrow on it and snapping it off with the haft of his axe.

“Aren’t ya gonna join in the shootin’?”
The dwarf grinned at Sir Simon as Oster’s rifle cracked and flashed brilliantly in the night. The knight grimaced.

"It is beneath a Bretonnian knight
to use bows or... these things called firearms... to attack his foes. We prefer to
clash with true steel."

The dwarf, ducking another arrow
that came skipping over the lip of the wagon, laughed aloud.

"Seems a wee bit of a silly thing
donta think? Especially considering the current circumstances. I wish I had a
nice wee crossbow right about now."

"Regardless master Brynn," Sir
Simon said, grunting as he caught an arrow that seemed to change path in
midair, heading unerringly for Oster, on his shield, "you know full well that
this barrage is only meant to keep our heads down long enough for whoever is
out there to move up and finish us off up close. Then you and I shall come into
our full."

The dwarf grinned madly and ran a
thumb down the edge of his axe, drawing a little dribble of blood. "Oh aye
laddie, dontcha worry about that."

Ferdonio's shouting had largely
brought the mercenaries into cover and order. Despite his best efforts, the
volleys of arrows had been devastating, leaving ten men either dying or wounded
around the campsite. That left only about thirty men to repel whatever was
slowly approaching in the darkness. Those men who possessed crossbows or
firearms began trying to fire back at their mysterious attackers, but it was
hard for them to pick targets despite the moon's glow. Even Ferdonio let off a
shot with one of his pistols, as the wizard Paulus stood below him chanting and
waving his hands in the air, desperately trying to conjure up some sort of
spell to aid the mercenaries against the sudden assault.

"Sigmar's blood and ghost!" Shouted
Oster, dropping down behind the cover of the wagon. "Sigmar's bloody blood and
bloody ghost!" The man looked pale and suddenly frightened and he clutched his
rifle to his chest. Both Sir Simon and
Brynn looked at the man quizzically as he swore again.

"What is it man?" Snapped Sir Simon, his tone contemptuous.

"They're dead you bloody Bretonnian fop! Sigmar damn them they're dead and skeletons and they're moving. They're moving and shooting!"

Given the stress of the situation, Sir Simon chose to overlook Oster's insult, at least for the time being, and continued his questioning.

"What do you mean they're dead?" He queried, though he asked the question more to try and assuage his own fears more than anything else. He had warned Ferdonio. He had refused to enter the tomb along with the others because deep down inside, he had sensed that this might happen. They had not listened, and now he knew what they faced without Oster even having to tell him.

"They're skeletons and they're moving! I saw them through the scope of old Helga here. She don't lie, no she don't. There's Sigmar-damned skeletons out there and there's dozens of the things and they're coming to kill us and we're all going to DIE!" There was a loud smack as Brynn Burgnisson slapped the man across the face. Oster looked shocked.

"Pull yerself together manling! Skeletons break apart just as well as any other damn thing in this bloody world. Now use that peashooter ye got there and bust some skulls, ya hear me manling? Either that, or I shove it so far up your backside that you'll be the bloody rifle I'll be firing!" The dwarf's tone was firm and commanding, and there was a threatening gleam in his eye. Oster nodded weakly and propped himself up against the wagon and sighted a new target out in the night. Sir Simon looked at Brynn slightly askance.

"Perhaps not the most honorable way to handle such a situation master Brynn," Sir Simon said mildly.

Brynn grinned again, "Well laddie, some things ya pick up in a dwarf regiment and those habits never leave ya."

Sir Simon shook his head slightly, "I hope that you remembered the habits that made you a warrior then dwarf, for I fear we'll have need of them momentarily." He swung up onto the back of Marcelles as the arrows seemed to slow down. "It seems that our undead foes seek to test our steel at a personal distance. The Lady protect you Brynn Burgnisson," the questing knight said as he lowered the visor of his helmet.

"Ah think she's gonna have her hands full protecting you laddie but I'll thank ya regardless." The dwarf hefted his axe. "Time to crack some skulls."

"Indeed," said Sir Simon disdainfully as he hefted the gleaming Montforte family blade, "indeed."

The skeletal ranks of King Anharasphut advanced slowly towards the small circle of wagons, their bleached bones creaking in the cold desert night. Sir Simon's breath caught in his throat. He was not a man unaccustomed to horrors, yet even he gave pause as he watched the march of the ranks of the undead. In all his years as a questing knight, he had never faced such a concentration of the living dead, the ancient bogeymen of Bretonnian nightmares. Their glowing eye sockets and creaking bones were enough to send even the hardest men running for cover, and the silence, that was the most unnerving thing of all. The ranks of the dead marched quietly, without horns or drums, the only noise was the crackling of ancient bones and the occasional hiss of an arrow. For a second, Sir Simon felt terror welling up inside his breast, but then the pommel stone of his sword glowed brightly with its soft golden light and he felt the fear seeping from him, replaced with a cold determination to fight in the Lady's name. These were the vile foes of the Bretonnian people and he would banish them as he had banished so many other foul monstrosities in his quest for the Grail.

Marcelles reared as the first of the skeletal ranks slammed into the barrel barricade, knocking through the wooden wall with a mighty crash. Shouting an oath to the Lady herself, Sir Simon charged, smashing into the first rank of skeletons and cleaving down into a skull with the blade of the Montfortes. His charge hit the advancing skeletons like a thunderbolt. Bones snapped and skulls went flying as the Bretonnian knight and his mighty steed drove forward into the packed mass of

skeletal soldiers. Sir Simon's blade was a whirlwind of endless motion. A quick strike shattered the spinal column of a skeleton that lunged at Marcelles' flank with a spear. His next blow chopped through a bronze sword and shattered the ribcage of a clawing foe, sending a pile of bones collapsing to the ground. With a touch of Sir Simon's heels, Marcelles changed direction, swinging his hefty flank into the next rank of skeletons, sending them tumbling backwards with a clatter of bones. The knight followed up with a series of rapid strokes, each one smashing or beheading a skeleton before the undead warriors could even react.

Using the gap the knight had made with his charge, Brynn rushed forward, swinging his axe to crush a reeling skeleton's knee and then handily decapitating it with a backstroke. He barreled his stocky form into the next enemy, its pelvis disintegrating when met with the solid force of dwarven muscle. Swinging his axe and shouting war cries, the dwarf cleared his own space next to the stamping Marcelles, giving the other mercenaries more room to counter-charge.

Inspired by the knight and the dwarf, the other mercenaries leapt to attack the skeletons. The hedge wizard Paulus sent dizzying rays of light blasting into skeletons ranks, disintegrating those enemies they touched. Even Ferdonio laid into the enemies, abandoning his chest to push in amongst his foes, swinging his rapier with quick, mechanical strokes. The runes on the blade flashed and each time it stung a foe, the skeleton seemed to shatter into dust as if they had been struck by a mighty warhammer. The Hochlander Oster shattered the skull of the skeletal regiment's standard-bearer with a well-placed shot and the bronze banner pole fell to the ground.

The fight was brutal but brief. Attacking with an unexpected ferocity, the mercenary band crush the skeletal regiment, leaving their enemies as crumbled dust in the desert sand. The warriors, Sir Simon included, roared in triumph as Brynn shattered the skull of the last skeleton with a mighty downward stroke of his axe. Then, almost instantly, the desert grew quiet. Following the fury of the skirmish, the silence seemed unfamiliar, and was broken only by the heavy breathing of the men, a groan from a wounded Reiklander laying up against one of the wagons, and the whinnying of Marcelles. Sir Simon looked down at Brynn, who was covered in bone dust, sand, and small scratches. The dwarf was grinning maniacally.

"A fair fight that huh laddie? You and yer wee beastie there did a fair amount o' damage I have to say. Ya know how to use that blade, that's for sure."

"My thanks master Brynn. I would

venture to say that your axemanship was not too poor either. I have to say though," Sir Simon lifted his visors, revealing sweat-streaked face, "I do not think that our ordeal is over. There was no leader amongst these undead, no champion animating their corpses. I feel we have not seen the last of these foes." As if on cue, the hissing of arrows broke the night's silence, and an Estalian screamed as an arrow took him in the eye socket. The mercenaries scrambled back to the cover of their wagons, their sudden victory turning into an inglorious panic under the barrages of the unerringly accurate black-shafted arrows. Sir Simon nodded at Brynn over the chaos.

"As I said master Brynn, this is far from done," he said, as an arrow nicked Marcelles ear, "and I believe I might know why." He gestured his head towards the cart with the golden chest, where Ferdonio stood twirling his mustache and stroking the box.

"Aye laddie. I follow yer thinkin' on that," whispered the dwarf, "Let us see what becomes of this then shall we? Fer now, I feel we should be steelin' ourselves for the next attack." Sir Simon nodded and checked the edge of his blade, casually ignoring the arrows flickering around him. He needed to remain calm, despite the dangers of skewering death from the skies, or he would not make it through what promised to be a long, harrowing night.

Dawn broke, and with it came the oppressive desert heat. Yet for the men of the column, the sun's harsh rays were a welcome relief from the terrors of the previous night. Though another group of skeletons had not assaulted the caravan's wagons directly, the rain of arrows had been relentless. The sides of the carts were covered in arrows and more than a few mercenaries lay in the open, spiked like hedgehogs thanks to the infallible accuracy of their undead foes. Yet, the skeletal archers had faded with the dawn, taking their arrows with them, and the caravan quickly worked to get moving once more. Not knowing the speed at which their enemies could march, Ferdonio had ordered that the caravan rolled as quickly as possible. The dead were left where they lay, though not before a few of the more scruple less members of the group rifled through their pockets for valuables. Sir Simon watched the scene in disgust as Brynn sat beside him on the sand, chewing on a piece of leathery jerky that he had somehow scrounged from one of his belt pouches.

"Disgusting wretches," said Sir Simon, making no effort to hide the disdain in his voice, "this blatant thievery is the very reason we are stuck as we are." Brynn nodded, as his mouth was too occupied with the tough old jerky to reply. "And I tell you, friend Brynn," Sir Simon continued, rubbing his forehead wearily, "it's whatever is in that damn box that is causing those foul undead to attack. They may be mindless but the foul intelligence that animates them is certainly not." Brynn finally

swallowed his jerky with a forced gulp.

"This damn stuff, nearly as deadly as the bloody skeletons. But ya are right laddie, Ferdonio's got something in that there box and it's put us all in it up to our bloody necks so it has. I'd sorely like to know what I'm sticking me neck out for, if ya know what I meanin'; Simon." The knight nodded his agreement.

"Then we shall find out, master Brynn," said the knight firmly, as he rose from the ground and gripped the hilt of his blade, "then we shall find out right now." Brynn let out a sigh and stood up to follow the knight as he strode down the hill towards Francesco Ferdonio.

Ferdonio stood atop the chest wagon, shouting orders at the men around him as the mercenaries packed up their remaining gear. Paulus tugged at his pantaloons, causing him to turn and match the gaze of the glaring Bretonnian knight, who advanced towards him with anger in his eyes.

"The chest mercenary," said Sir Simon, his voice menacing, as if he was keeping his anger barely contained, "what is in that accursed chest?"

Ferdonio grimaced at the knight's tone. Again with the damned mercenary too. He had a name, a well-earned, well-reputed name. Impudent Bretonnian fop. "Tis treasure, Sir Simon, as I tolda you at the tomb. I cannot open it, not at least until we reacha some sorcerers in Araby." The mercenary smiled widely, his tone almost jovial, and raised his hands disarmingly. "What has gotta you so worked up that you need to knowa now huh?"

Sir Simon's voice was like cold steel, "I do not believe you mercenary." Ferdonio's smile fell away, his face turning into a sneering mask.

"What did you say knight?"

"I told you mercenary, I do not believe you. Those undead would not attack with such numbers and determination merely for the sake of a box full of trinkets. You are hiding what you know."

"You do not trust a Francesco Ferdonio knight?" The mercenary captain hissed, "Am I not up to your sacred standard of honor huh? Me, a ragged mercenary, I cannot understand your highbrow ethics huh? Why should you not trust me and my word? I am one of the greatest captains in all of Luccini and you dare to question my honor? I will not have such a treachery amongst my men!" Ferdonio's hand drifted towards one of his many pistols.

Sir Simon's hand strayed towards the hilt of his sword, "I am not your man, Ferdonio. I am here because my lady told me to be here, and I distrust you because I feel she would tell me you are lying. I will not ask again? What is in that chest?"

Ferdonio spat upon the ground, "I will not tell you, nor will I tolerate this!" As his hand reached openly for his pistol, a sharp dwarven shout broke the air.

"Enough manlings! Enough." Brynn hefted his axe onto his shoulder. "In truth it doesn't matter what's in the damn box! If those skeletons come back and we're fightin' amongst ourselves, they'll slaughter us like little elf-babes! Put yer damn gun away Ferdonio, you'd lose the bloody hand before you could draw it. Ye saw the laddie here last night dinnae ye? And Simon, put the damn sword down laddie. If ya kill Ferdonio here, we'll be up to our bloody necks in shite and none of us'll be gettin' paid. An' not gettin' paid is ne'er gonna make us any friends amongst this crew, as Ferdonio there well knows." Sir Simon nodded, sliding his hand away from the grip of his sword. Ferdonio spat on the ground in front of the wagon and took his gloved hand away from the pistol grip.

"The dwarf is right knight. I needa you and you needa me. But you challenge me about the box again, and I will have Paulus here turna you into a toad, you hear me?" The hedge wizard's eyes flashed with a magical gleam, as if to enforce his point. Sir Simon narrowed his eyes in return.

“I will trust master Brynn this time, but know Ferdonio, you will have to answer for the deaths that this secrecy causes. There will be a reckoning.”

He turned his back on the mercenary and hedge wizard and walked back to Marcelles. Brynn grunted and turned to follow.

“You’ll see a knight!” Shouted Ferdonio after him, “you’ll see the treasures huh! You’ll all see the treasures men! Now get this cart moving!” The mercenaries, who had paused to watch the tense situation unfold before them, snapped back to work, ignoring the furious glances of their captain as they set about preparing to march.

“You’re lucky he didn’t bloody shoot you laddie,” scolded Brynn, “He woulda put that damn bullet right through yer skull.”

“I would’ve killed him friend Brynn, you know as much.”

“Oh aye laddie, I dinnae doubt yer speed, but what about all the others then? The wizard? The men of the crew who are still loyal to Ferdonio? Wouldya kill them all as well?”

The knight grimaced, “If I had to yes.”

Brynn snorted derisively, “Well then laddie, we’d be standing by ourselves in front of all them skeletons and we’d only be one box richer. Let’s wait shall we? I feel we’ll be findin’ the contents of that box soon enough, I swear upon me father’s beard.”

King Anharasphut watched the column
through the magic of his Hierophant. "They are not slowing hierophant?"

The wizened old man answered, "I
know my lord, but they move slow as it is. They will not make safety for days."
The Tomb King hissed.

"They are not slow enough,
hierophant. We must stop them and get it back, and with it her. The living need
water do they not? Tonight, you will release Ahknetan, my guardian, and you
will destroy their supplies. Then, with their spirit broken, I shall lead my
Ushabti and Tomb Guards to finish them, and retrieve it."

The Hierophant bowed, "Yes my lord.
I shall do as you wish and we will see the death of these interlopers."

King Anharasphut gestured to the
Hierophant and turned his back to the priest, heading to join his Ushabti that
stood waiting behind the dune.

"Blood on the sand and death in the
air!" He shouted, raising his mighty khopesh above his head. The Ushabti roared
their unearthly approval, and in a swirl of sand, the undead disappeared into
the desert.

As night fell, the column had not
marched far enough. Safety was nowhere close and the mercenaries were on edge
as they circled their wagons for another night. They all expected another
attack and they were not to be disappointed. As soon as the sun fell and the
moons rose into the sky, the attacks began again, much the same as the last
night. A rain of arrows flitted into the campsite and at least one of the

twenty remaining mercenaries cried out in pain as three arrows pierced his back and pitched him into the fire. He screamed as the flames lapped around his body, and continuing shrieking until Ferdonio fired a bullet through his skull.

“You will holda my proud men! You will holda or we willa die!” The Tilean mercenary captain was every bit the dashing leader, leaping amongst his remaining men as the arrows fell, shouting words of encouragement or sharing a joke in between volleys. He stayed far from Sir Simon and Brynn, who hunkered down behind a wagon on the far side of the campsite drinking water, next to the rifleman Oster. The Hochlander seemed much steadier than he had been the previous night. A belch in between shots revealed that he was also considerably drunker. Sir Simon growled in disgust and Brynn spat.

“Bastard’s been holding out on me,” he complained to Sir Simon, who rolled his eyes at the dwarf’s discontent.

The arrow storm stopped slowly and Sir Simon mounted Marcelles again. The skeletons would not be far behind he knew. Indeed, a man on the opposite side of the camp shouted in alarm as a group of skeletons began advancing in imposing ranks once more, driving forward with the creak of bone much as they had done the night before. Sir Simon tried to ride Marcelles to the other side of the encampment but he struggled to navigate the treacherous ground throughout the corpses and detritus of the camp. This time however, it was the hedge wizard Paulus who broke the skeletal regiment’s momentum. Standing tall atop the water supply cart, his robes flickering about him like a nest of snakes, the wizard a massive bolt of seething multi-colored energy from his outstretched hand, blasting a massive hole in the ranks of the undead. He followed up with a second blast that annihilated yet another column of skeletal soldiers.

“Colleges of Magic be damned!” The sorcerer roared in a voice that was not quite his own and the remaining mercenaries cheered as he blasted more skeletons to dust under the baleful light of the twin moons. Their cheering was cut short however, when the ground beneath Paulus shuddered and cracked, pitching the grinning wizard onto the ground with an undignified cry. A massive form, made of wood, bone, stone, and bronze crashed up from the ground beneath the water cart, shattering the wagon and the barrels of precious liquid. The monster resembled one of the many scorpions that plagued the desert, but it was a hundred times larger and bulkier. Its bronze claws cracked the barrels and its tail whipped out to crush a keg of water into the sand. A dessicated corpse, dressed in fine silks and wearing a golden headdress, lay in repose at the center of the monster’s writhing chitinous body.

The mercenaries, including Ferdonio, stood stunned at the horrendous creature that had emerged in the middle of their camp. It was Paullus, the closest man to the scorpion, who reacted first. He raised his hands and began to utter another spell. He was not fast enough. The creature lashed out, gripping the screaming hedge wizard in its claws, lifting him up into the air, and ripping him apart in a welter of gore. Blood sprayed the mercenaries and men cried out in terror, backing away as the scorpion hurled the chunks of the sorcerer's body at them. It was Brynn who turned the tide. The dwarf roared a war cry and hurled a throwing axe at the monstrosity, embedding it in the side of the monster, before charging forward to engage the beast.

"The water you fools," Ferdonio shouted, the spell of the creature's hideous appearance broken by the courageous dwarf, "protecta the damned water!" The Tilean fired a pair of pistols into the thrashing scorpion as the rest of the mercenary band hurled themselves forward with their weapons raised. Brynn ducked the creature's piercing sting and chopped down on a joint near its claw. He avoided its next stab by rolling to the right, but the Empire man behind him was not so lucky. The scorpion's bronze-tipped sting ripped the Stirlander in half before he could even scream. A claw lashed out and tore the head off an Estalian spearman with a sickening squelch. The other claw stabbed at the dwarf, who once more rolled aside and slashed at the creature with his axe. There was a crack as Oster the Hochlander blew out the one of the creature's bejeweled eyes with a keen shot from his rifle. Thrashing, the scorpion responded by driving its sting through the chest of an Arabyan mercenary in an explosion of blood.

Laughing madly, Ferdonio emptied another pair of pistols into the front of the creature, but he did not leave his perch atop the chest wagon. With another crack of its tail, the creature disemboweled two mercenaries with one stroke, dropping both to the ground. Suddenly, the charging form of Marcelles slammed into the side of the scorpion. With dexterity that seemed surprising for a man in a suit of plate armor, Sir Simon leapt from the back of his steed to balance precariously atop the thrashing scorpion construct. He grunted as he caught the creature's striking sting on the Montforte family blade, the tip of the bronze spike barely piercing his side. With a cry, he pushed the stinger away and swung his blade in a mighty arc, severing the creature's tale. Deftly, he spun the sword around and, gripping it firmly with both hands, drove it straight down into the corpse at the center of its thorax. There was a welter of sickly-smelling black blood and a burst of magical energy. Sir Simon was thrown clear, though his sword remained pierced into the body of the monster, as it thrashed about before crashing into the chest wagon, sending Ferdonio and his beloved box hurtling onto the desert sands. With a final shudder, the scorpion collapsed to the ground in a cloud of sand.

Sir Simon staggered to his feet, feeling fell poison coursing through his veins from where the monster's stinger had clipped him. He stumbled forward until he gripped his sword, pulling it from the corpse of the scorpion construct before stumbling slightly. He put his weight on the blade and felt the warmth of the pommel stone as it glowed with soft golden light once more. Though the poison was still in his body, Sir Simon felt less of its effect, as warmth crept from the blade down his arm. The

knight hacked up some black bile and pushed himself to his feet. He would not die here, the Lady would not allow it. With a grunt, he shook his head to clear the haze that had fallen over his eyes. Distantly, he heard Brynn calling his name.

Gripping his wounded side, the knight half walked, half stumbled over to the dwarf, who stood next to the box and Ferdonio. The mercenary captain steadied himself against the side of the fallen chest, the finely carved lid of which had slid into the desert sand. There was no treasure inside. Instead, there was the mummified corpse of woman, dressed in the finest of regal robes and jewelry, wearing an elaborate golden funerary mask. The mercenaries gathered around, the anger in their muttering clear. It was Oster's gravelly voice that cut the air.

"What the hell is that Ferdonio? That's not bloody treasure you lying Tilean bastard." The Hochlander's rage was echoed by the rumbling growls of assent from the mercenaries around him. "Where's the damn treasure you promised us? Where's our bloody money? What the hell is that?"

Ferdonio just laughed maniacally, the fires of madness gleaming in his eyes. He raised a pistol and fired, throwing the Hochlander's body back into the remaining mercenaries. No one moved as he whipped out his next pistol.

"No mutiny you bastards!" The Tilean exclaimed, drawing his magical blade in his other hand, "And for those of you who are wondering, that is the body of Queen Sekmat, the wife of the King Anharasphut. There's a collector who wants this and is willing to pay a damn good money. Money to be shared!"

Brynn growled, "You stole the corpse of this king's wife? Dinnae you think maybe he wants her back? Dinnae you think you called these damn skeletons down upon us? You bastard!" Ferdonio snarled and swung his pistol to point at the dwarf.

"Do you think the great Francesco Ferdonio was a fool? Do you not think I'd know that this would happen? Paulus and I planned for this. We must simply keepa fighting, their magic will fade soon!"

It was Sir Simon's turn to snarl,
"Keep fighting mercenary? Look around you! There are nine of us left and you just killed our marksman dead. We could not overcome the limitless hordes of the undead!"

"SILENCE!" shouted Ferdonio, swinging his pistol to face the questing knight, "I said no mutiny damn it or I swear I will..."

A staggering roar, a scream, and a squelch cut off Ferdonio's threat. The mercenaries turned as one to see a massive skeleton, twice the height of a man, with the skull of a jackal perched atop its armored shoulders, swing a massive blade through an Estalian crossbowman standing near the back of the group. Another mercenary already lay in two neatly severed pieces at the monster's skeletal feet. Five more of the creatures emerged from the haze of the desert, but despite their terrifying presence, it was the figure they formed around that made the breath catch in Sir Simon's parched throat.

Even in the moonlight, the Tomb King cut a striking figure. His mummified face was filled with contempt and his glowing eyes seemed to pierce the knight to his very soul. Intricate and perfectly crafted bronze armor covered his tall, thin figure, giving it an extra bulk. Upon his brow sat a jewel-encrusted crown, as if anyone could have mistaken the creature for the horrendously majestic lord it was. Sir Simon had met few men who exuded such an aura of power. The King hefted a mighty curved sword, the khopesh of the desert people, above his head and roared, signaling the monsters around him to attack. They charged forward and the panicked mercenaries met them with the desperation of men who knew their lives were at a close.

Madness gripped Ferdonio as he jumped to defend the chest and its contents from a bull-headed monster as it barreled forward. He fired his second-to-last pistol straight into its face and slashing at it with his rapier. Three quick strikes to the creature shattered its knee, its elbow, and finally, its broken skull, the potent magic of his rapier smashing the bones with deadly energy. Paulus was dead! The chest was opened! The dead, the dead he had so scoffed at, were upon him! The damn mercenaries were rebelling! He was assailed on all sides! He would not be defeated, not by the dead, not by the men he had commanded! The Tilean whirled his blade around, slashing into the back of an Estalian, blowing the man's ribcage out the front of his chest.

“Monsters! Mutineers! You shall not have it! It is mine and mine alone!” He raged at the men and the creatures assaulting them. His rapier flashed around him as he stepped forward to bring his blade down on the back of the unwary Brynn. A voice, as cold and as firm as sharp steel, stopped him dead in his tracks.

“Mercenary!” The mercenary captain was quick and he span around, drawing his last pistol almost faster than the eye could follow. It was not fast enough. Sir Simon, weakened by poison and the battle against the tomb scorpion, still whipped his glittering blade around, ripping the pistol out Ferdonio’s hand before he could fire. Ferdonio grimaced and hefted his deadly rapier, the runes on the thin blade glowing with power. Sir Simon lunged forward, hammering his giant blade in to try and overwhelm the mercenary’s guard. With a rapid flick of his rapier, Ferdonio turned the mighty blade aside and lunged to attack, striking like a viper at the knight’s already wounded side.

It was all Sir Simon could do to bring the edge of his blade around and block the blow before another rapid strike of the rapier slammed into his shoulder plate. The pommel stone of Sir Simon’s sword flash a brilliant gold as it absorbed much of the magical energy of the blow, yet he still stumbled backwards. It felt like an ogre’s fist had slammed down into his shoulder. Ferdonio leapt forward, the thin blade snaking out towards another vital area of the reeling knight. Sir Simon caught the rapier on his guard and launched his own quick counter-attack, jabbing the tip of his long blade forward towards the Tilean’s exposed throat. Again, Ferdonio cracked the blade with his rapier and drove it back despite its size. He lunged again, slashing into Sir Simon’s other shoulder. Once more, the questing knight staggered under the magical energy of the strike.

Already wounded, the Bretonnian was struggling to handle this opponent. Ferdonio’s speed made him deadly, and when combined with the magical blade that increased its hitting power, he was a formidable foe in any conditions. Desperate, the knight tried to think of a way to overcome his enemy as he desperately parried yet another rapid series of sweeping strokes. The foppish mercenary’s blade struck just as the knight’s moment of realization did, crashing into Sir Simon’s unwounded side. The armor crumpled, and again it felt as if an ogre had punched him in the kidney, yet this time Sir Simon did not reel. Instead, he clamped his armored arm to his side, catching the rapier firmly in the elbow joint of his armor. His arm extended, Ferdonio tugged at the blade trying to free it, a look of panic in his maddened eyes. With a mighty cry, Sir Simon swung the Montforte blade downwards with his free hand, severing Ferdonio’s sword-arm at the elbow.

Francesco Ferdonio stared at the stump of where his forearm had once been, a look of shock emblazoned upon his ruddy face. The look remained on his face as his head went spinning across the

battlefield, knocked clear across the campsite by Sir Simon's powerful upwards reverse stroke. The questing knight staggered to his knees as the effort of the fight and the wounds that the Tilean had dealt him crashed down upon him. Doubtless, his struggle with the mercenary had started the fell poison from the scorpion thing pumping through his veins again as well. He stumbled up to face a roaring monstrosity with the head of a lion, painfully raising his sword to the guard position and whispering his last prayer to the Lady.

With a cry, Brynn Borgnisson slammed into the side of the construct with a mighty leap, slamming his axed down again and again into the thing's skull. Sir Simon powered forward with the last of his strength, swinging his blade up and around, smashing through the constructs spine and collapsing it to the ground. He breathed a sigh of relief.

"I owe you my life, Brynn Borgnisson," the knight said, hefting his blade again.

"Tis nothin' laddie. T'was quite a nice move ye pulled on that fool of a Tilean there. The least I could do was make sure ye didn't get chopped down right away, though I really only delayed the inevitable I think." The dwarf and the knight turned two face the remaining three constructs, just in time to see an alligator-headed warrior cleave the last mercenary, a duelist named Paolo, in twain, even as he tried to flutter his cloak in front of the thing's face. Brynn and Sir Simon stood alone, facing the three monsters. The creak and tramp of old bones revealed another regiment of skeletons approaching behind the creatures. Unlike the previous skeletal warriors the column had faced, these were dressed in impressive armor and carried fine weapons and shields. They stopped suddenly just behind the constructs and the Tomb King emerged from the group, strolling past his bodyguards to stand before the knight and dwarf.

"I hope your Lady appreciates a fine death laddie," said the dwarf as he hefted his axe, "for I dinnae see any other way out of this." Sir Simon hefted the sword of the Montforte family.

"The Lady is always watching, master Brynn. I am glad to have fought by your side."

"And I you laddie."

Sir Simon stepped forward to challenge the approaching Tomb King and the creature stopped, its piercing eyes locking on those of the questing knight. It spoke, but its voice seemed to echo in his head, instead of coming from the creature's mouth. The voice was cold and hard, and dripped with malice.

"You need not die here mortal knight," the voice echoed through Sir Simon's head, "I only want she who is mine and mine alone. She did not deserve this. My hierophant tells me you did not enter the tomb." Sir Simon looked at the dwarf next him, and could tell he was hearing the same words.

"You are clearly brave warriors and I would lose much for your deaths, but the results would be the same regardless. I the great King Anharasphut, give you my word that if you allow me to take my Queen back to our eternal rest, I will allow you to live." Sir Simon kept his sword up and considered the undead lord's words.

"How can I trust you, undead creature? What word is that of the dead?" Sir Simon's voice was strong and firm, despite the fearful enemies arrayed before him.

"I was once a great King mortal! I knew of honor and nobility long before your ancestors even wore furs! You have my word that you can walk free. You also have my word that you will die if you stand against me."

"I do not fear death Tomb King," Sir Simon remained with his sword raised.

"Neither do I mortal knight," the Tomb King smiled a lipless smile, a disconcerting sight, "I assure you it was quite conquerable, at least for me. Now I offer one last time, return my Queen to me, or die."

Sir Simon looked at the dwarf next to him. Brynn's eyes flickered between the skeletons and the knight. The dwarf nodded slowly. Sir Simon breathed deeply and turned to face the Tomb King. In the back of his mind, he felt the lightest touch, the softest words, and he knew what he must do.

The questing knight lowered his blade. "You may have your Queen back, Tomb King, and I will hold you to your word."

He stepped aside, though his gut churned with consternation. The dwarf nodded to him again and stepped aside as well, lowering his axe. A hunched figure, who appeared to be a living, wizened old man, shuffled forward past the King, pausing only to whisper something to his lord. He then approached the casket and began muttering words as the knight and dwarf watched him intently. King Anharasphut turned back to Sir Simon.

"My hierophant tells me you protected my Queen in battle mortal knight. The mortal that led you would have done nothing but harm to her. For that I thank you. Take this." sand blew away in front of Sir Simon, revealing a necklace hidden in the ground. "It belonged to one of your kind who passed this way long ago," the King's hollow voice continued to echo in Sir Simon's head, "and I give it to you, with your life, as a reward for your protection. Pass through this land again though and your blood will decorate the sand." The King turned as a great sandy wind blew up, obscuring everything in front of Sir Simon and Brynn. In seconds, the sands disappeared, and with them, the undead King and his warriors. The two were left standing in the silent ruins of their campsite.

Marcelles, somehow still alive after the battle, whinnied on the far side of the camp and trotted towards Sir Simon. The questing knight knelt down and picked up the necklace, decorated with a simple silver fleur de lys, the sign of the Lady. He could feel the magical power emulating from the icon, and noticed that a small questing knight was engraved upon its pristine surface. The poison in his blood suddenly seemed to fade, and with great reverence he slipped it on around his neck, and the warmth spread to his chest.

Brynn whistled. "Well laddie, that was the closest wee scrape I've ever been in and that's the truth. I thought our bloody boots were cooked, so I did. I dunno what to make of all this, I tell ya."

Sir Simon smiled wanly, "I do not know either. The Lady, I felt her right before I talked to that monstrous King. I knew I was doing the right thing, for she would not lead me astray."

"Better you than me laddie," the dwarf snorted, "I thought he was going to bloody well skin us after ye lowered ya blade."

"Clearly he did not, master Brynn. Now, we have some riding to do, so I suggest we gather up what water we can, as well as Ferdonio's map, and get moving. We don't want that undead King to change his mind." The magic of the amulet made him feel stronger already, and he swung himself up into the saddle on the back of Marcelles.

"Bloody water," the dwarf grumbled at his side, "I'm damn near sick of bloody water. I need a drink. Some nice ale would do. Yes, I nice ale... Did I ever tell ya about this place called the Ten-Tailed Cat, twas this tavern in..."

Sir Simon chuckled, hefted his blade into his scabbard, and began trotting off towards the sinking moons, the dwarf following along behind, chattering all the while.

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