

An eagle's winter

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A bretonnian Lord leads an army to the shores of Naggaroth to rescue his enslaved battle standard bearer and reclaim his banner.

“We live our life through vows, eventually broken by death; at one inevitable point or the other. So much honor, hovering over lonely graveyards.”

Sir Peter Grliah, Paragon of The Recadent Host

His charger broke into a gallop. The ice glazed, lower branches of surrounding trees, hitting his armor, bore witness to the speed of the pursuit. The treacherous woodland already claimed a life of a knight on account of his reckless velocity. It was highly doubtful the prize was worth the sacrifice; the prize being the last surviving Har Ganeth executioner from the regiment they broke in combat earlier, at the foothills of the nearby hill. Only two bretonnian knights remained after that onslaught; both of them grail knights. The first, Lamorak, was now dead. The other, the Lord; still in pursuit of the fleeing draitchmaster.

Hearing Lamorak's warhorse stumble, a small hope ignited in the soul of the dark elf. The remaining knight, the Lord, noticed elf's run patterns changing, luring him into boggy ground, heavy undergrowth and deep snow. The druchii deemed, he had a chance to survive this ordeal. The knight, known as Knight Mallis, took the bait, having faith in the Lady of the Lake, that his own charger, Gringalet will be able to elude this dangerous terrain.

Any ambition, which through the cruelty of situation, gets melded with despair and hope at the same time, ultimately ends in disappointment. Overplaying his position, the executioner ran into a formidable puddle of cold water and mud.

Knight Mallis caught up with the druchii and beheaded him. It seemed right to end him in the same manner he lived. Mallis dismounted, taking a moment to watch the lifeless body drown in the grey pool. He kneeled, realizing this place to be the furthest from Bretonnia he ever took a kneel to pray to Her. The Lady: the emerald deity of morning mists and calm waters. The spirit of the Land – a magical weave that binds crops to soil, trees to forests and courage to men. Does she hear him this far off? Does her being reach beyond its domain? As far as this place: The Watchtowers of Naggaroth.

The unmistakable redolence of the Sea of Chill filled his nostrils, overwhelming his soul with the burden of doubt. Doubt and memories. They mustered at his command, in early spring, at the plains of Crac D’Aigle, Eagles Fort in the Bretonnian Hinterland, north of Gisoreux. All of them, rallying to the same banner. His own vassals: the knights of Coteau Derriere, joined by a brotherhood of errant knights, always eager to gain full knighthood through feat of arms; along with a few hermit questing knights banded into impromptu regiments... At their head rode all of the Hinterland’s Grail Knights. All of them. None would refuse their brother in this: his hour of need.

That spring was long past, its scents and sounds, crushed by the loud waves of The Great Ocean. Its benevolent nature ripped from recollection by the marauding winds of the Land of Chill...

His goal was so near... So near, that after months of planning and sailing, he could finally justify to himself bringing a whole army to the shores of Naggaroth. The excitement seemed palpable. Or was it something else he felt?

He swung around his axis, raising his sword, and there, amidst the trees stood a woman. She was young, slender and black haired. That black hair was the color of the night’s sky in summer, falling in riotous torrents from her scalp. Her face was a vision of beauty but somehow defiled by a malicious grin. A grin, that like an ominous lighthouse, warned of perils beneath that alluring facade. She was a druchii, and judging by her clothing, ornaments and equipment; a sorceress. In her hand, she held a black staff, adorned with a bleached skull at its top. A golden crown broke out of her lush hair, resting just above the forehead. She was poorly dressed for this weather, but didn’t seem to mind. Mallis fixed his eyes on her face, focusing on her smile again. Beneath all that malice was something else... That unmistakable satisfaction of one’s plans coming together. That, worried him the most.

“You have something of mine, Sorceress, and I came for it”, said Mallis.

The Dark elf smiled, the innocence of that smile, devoured by evil intent beneath it:

“You are in no position to demand, human. Well, perhaps make last wishes, but...”

“Silence Sorceress. I have not travelled half across the world to indulge in your grandiloquence. Your raiding party is dead, and your ships are being claimed by my men. I have come for my Battle Standard. The banner, you took from a lone knight, riding towards Marienburg, late this winter. I want them both: the flag, and its carrier.”

The staff erupted in dark energy and it was soon enveloped by black translucent fog, swirling towards the bretonnian Lord. Surrounded by the unnatural miasma, the knight lost his sense of direction. He could not discern how close he was to the cold pond, unsure of his footing. He was unable to move with any degree certainty. Thus, he stood in place. The sorceress was pleased.

“I see you made time for me. Tell me more of these men of yours. Were they all wearing blue tunics and riding loud horses?”, asked the Dark elf. The knight hesitated. He replied:

“Yes...”

“All of them carrying large cumbersome swords?”, continued the sorceress.

Mallis was silent.

“They were naive just as they were slow. Most of them met their end at the tip of the bolt. My Shades had no mercy for these old men. The regiment was routed with only one grey bearded human alive, fleeing towards the sea...”

The knight suddenly raised his head. His metal helmet showed no emotion, but his voice behaved otherwise.

“There were two.”, replied the knight, just slightly louder than a whisper.

“Foolish human! There was only one. I saw him with my own eyes.”

“No, Sorceress. There were two regiments... Two regiments of questing knights, have I sent towards the shore.”

The Dark elf paused. She became nervous, calculating whether this could be true. The Bretonnian capitalized on this, and continued, partly reassuring himself:

“Two questing knight regiments were sent towards the ships. I went up the middle along with my grail knights and all of the errant knights. The errants were broken by the...”

“Black guard...”, interrupted the druchii, with a poorly hidden concern in her voice.

“Yes.”, confirmed Mallis, slowing the pace of his speech. “The errants were routed, but we slaughtered the Black guard, overrunning into the Executioners, whose Draitchmaster lies at the bottom of this puddle. With the ships taken, the centre lost, the only question remaining is that of the outcome on the left flank.”

They were looking at each other as the miasma started to disperse, both of them, obviously trying to determine the odds on that left flank. The knight took the initiative and ended the pause:

“Two units of heavy cavalry, my own vassals... There is no way they could have lost the flank.”

“If they did, the humans guarding the ships would have an exposed rear...”, she retorted.

“There is nothing in your army that can withstand the charge of my cavalry.”

“Oh yes there is, haughty human...” murmured the sorceress; more to herself than to her adversary.
“My witch elves... They wouldn’t dare break. They know I bear the crown... The golden crown on my head, given to me by Morathi herself. They would not dare betray me...”

Both of them turned their heads towards the hill, hearing noise and commotion at its top.

“We will soon get our answer Sorceress. The answer will present itself on that slope yonder. ”

A moment of silence passed between them. Both of them sharpened their vision, focusing solely on the hilltop, bathed in an orange hue from the impending sunset. And then, a figure appeared at the hill's summit. First it seemed only a shadow, devoid of feature: but soon the dark outline became a rider - its appearance clear. There, on a rampant black horse with flamboyant dark mane, clad in bloodied armor and bearing the black and gold livery of his domain, stood Sir Leon the Paranoid, a knight of the realm. He brandished a mace over his head, and behind him, emerged whole regiments of bretonnian knights, piercing the horizon with lances held high. The Recadent Host of the Hinterlands, galloped down the slope to the sound of trumpets.

The Sorceress turned to face Knight Mallis. Her eyes were pools of anger. Her full lips unable to verbalize the rage she felt. She was not outsmarted by this armor-wearing pig farmer. Her demise was of her own doing. She should have scouted the enemy forces better... Perhaps called for aid. But greed got the better of her. A bretonnian army, shipwrecked on the shores of The Land of Chill was to delectable a prey to turn down. But now she realized one implausible fact: they were here on purpose. The emotionless visor of the knight's great helm was fixed on her. Mallis broke the silence:

“Return my Banner to me. Hand over its carrier, and you will live.”

“You invade Naggaroth for a piece of worthless cloth!? What possible justification could you have for such an act?!”, she asked in shock.

The knight lowered his gaze slightly, and without looking at the Druchii, replied silently but with utter confidence in his words:

“Honor is all. Chivalry is all.”

A gust of wind whistled past them carrying the sound of hooves from the incoming knights. It ruffled her black straight hair. She looked at the knight and addressed him. At first her words were mere whispers, but they became louder by every passing moment, morphing into loud threats like a wrathful crescendo:

“Your standard bearer was on another ship... A ship that has long since docked in the cold harbor of Karond Kar. If he has survived malnourishment, disease and torture, he is now a slave. He is rotting in a cold cell, the likes of which your men will experience as well. He is beaten, tortured and humiliated. And there is no escape. He will die there. As will your insolent knights. You, you will not see the dark walls of Karond Kar, nor its sorrowful streets. You will die here. You, knight, have spent all this time planning and plotting how to save your battle standard bearer. Have you stopped to consider, mine...”

A halberd hit Mallis from the back. He was flatfooted and stunned. Another blow hit the torso, shaking his ribcage. Neither blow pierced his armor. He started to turn but stumbled and fell into the snow. The Sorceress was laughing.

“He is my servant and my lover. He will sacrifice his life to take yours. Even in victory, you are beaten. Finish him, Liokor.”

The masterful elf warrior swung the weapon to deliver the killing strike, only to find that the ground was covered by low thick mist. The polearm hit the ground, missing Mallis completely. The strange mist vanished, leaving the dark elf master befuddled. There was no confusion in the mind of the Bretonnian knight. The answer he sought earlier came now. The Lady was with him.

This gave Mallis enough momentum to stand up. But as soon as he took up a battle stance, the same miasma surrounded him as before, hindering his battle prowess significantly. The Sorceress did everything to help her lackey. She was successful. Mallis could not keep up with the swift movements of the elf, and was getting tired quickly. His knights would not reach the site of the duel in time, and she knew that. She was waiting for him to die before taking her leave.

Amidst all the fighting, Mallis noticed something falling out of his sleeve. It was a tress of golden hair. A tress given to him by his beloved, a symbol of courtly love and a charm. But it was more than that. It was a reminder of all the bonds that linked him to this world. In one moment of prescience, the knight shifted his grip on the sword, holding it like a stabbing dagger, and brutally pierced his opponent through the heart. The elf fell to the ground dead, with the blade still in his corpse. Taking no pause Mallis advanced towards the wizard. She pulled something from her pouch and threw it in the pond. It was a dirty, torn rag. But on its surface, the Lord noticed a golden fleur de lys. It was his battle standard. Mallis rushed towards the puddle and fell to his knees, trying to prevent the flag from drowning. By the time he managed to pull it out, the Sorceress had already cast another spell. She was gone, flying on the back of an insubstantial coal-black drake.

He collected his sword from the serf's dead body and it was not long until his army reached him. He gave the banner to Sir Cawdor the Wanderer, who was the interim battle standard bearer.

"Fly the standard as it is. We will mend it and wash it once we rescue him..." Mallis instructed.

A grey bearded knight in blue garments rode towards his lord. It was Sir Smolian, the afore mentioned last surviving questing knight.

"There were no prisoners in the ships, my lord" . His voice was elderly and relaxed.

"He is in Karond Kar." replied the Lord, raising his visor, displaying an exhausted face.

"We have frail chances of reaching him there" another voice joined the conversation, as two Gallants approached, one of them Sir Leon, and the other - the knight who spoke, Sir Lucas.

“Frail? I would say none.”, interrupted a questing knight paragon, who was just joining them, Sir Peter Grliah.

The Lord was listening but he turned his gaze towards the south, staring across the wild Sea of Chill. Somewhere on that perilous horizon was the dark elf city and harbor of Karond Kar, and in it: one of their own.

“We sail for Karond Kar. There is no other way.” spoke Mallis.

His vassals looked at each other. Grliah replied:

“It is a valorous effort my lad... my lord. But we cannot hope to infiltrate such a fortress.”

Mallis bore a solemn expression, knowing full well the magnitude of his next words:

“I do not plan to infiltrate it. I plan to tear down its gates, storm the streets and kill every slave trader I find inside its walls.”

Sir Smolian stepped into the conversation:

“No one enjoys a glorious charge like me, my lord, but I am afraid that steel and ardor won’t get us into Karond Kar. Stealth and cunning might.”

Despite knowing that his paragon was right, Sir Mallis concluded:

“Unfortunately, my friend, steel and ardor is all we have. Prepare the ships! ”