

## Inciteful Rebirth

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Â Winner of the 2nd place in the 2014 Literature Competition

Harken ye all and list' now to me,

As I spin ye a tale of great mystery.Â

From a shadowy defile upon a moss wrapped hillock, an ancient horn sounds a mournful clarion call across the forgotten earth below. The haunting tone echoes down into the mist filled vale, reverbrating throughout the blackened, twisted trees and the lichen strewn fen at it's foundation. Until finally, the note fades into the chilling wind that scours this unforgiving landscape. And for the longest of times, there is naught but silence.Â

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Without warning, a broken shaft of forked lightning descends from the murky clouds above, obscuring the sickly green face of Morrslieb as the bolt rushes to impact upon the boggy ground. The thundercrack that follows is instantaneaous. It's mighty sounding is beyond belief. And the jolting detonation that is unleashed, transcends into an unimaginable roar that at once shakes the bones of the earth and the very pillars of the heavens above.

Seconds stretch into minutes as the unrelenting peal continues, before the consequences of the strike begin to coalesce. Everything and all suddenly stops dead. The silence returns. Vacuum-like in it's totality. And for the merest of moments, it almost seems like the entirety of the world is desperately holding its breath. Fighting, straining, railing, at the inevitable. Until at last, it can do so no longer and the full force of the event is surrendered in a deafening cry.

From the centre of the scorched earth where the bolt touched down, a depression begins to form. The whisper of chilling wind that had stirred the limp rushes of the fen earlier, swiftly transforms into a punishing, swirling gale. It's fury unleashed, it tears at the ground still further. Vegetation is rent, mangled and destroyed as it's strength and vigour increases. Each violent gust soon begins to uproot and break the twisted trees and bushes that dotted the vale but moments before.

Scree, gravel and stones are scoured from the wet, fetid soil. Until rocks and boulders of great size are caught in it's ruthless grasp to be cast far across the terrain as the howling dervish continues it's onslaught. Deeper and deeper the swirling, biting, storm delves into the earth. The crater grows vast and wide. And soon all there is and was is consumed by the ravenous maelstrom. When abruptly, the seemingly impossible occurs. Out, across and over this chaotic cataclysm of howling gales, an ancient horn sounds a mournful clarion call across the decimated earth below.

As hurriedly as the storm had been birthed, it quickly begins to lose it's momentum and purpose. First the largest rubble falls. And then smaller pieces of dirt, dust and debris returns to the churned earth in an intermittent rumble of dull, sodden impacts. Whilst the torn flora and broken greenery are scattered haphazardly to the furthest reaches of the dissipating tempest. The howling, roaring wind quiets to a whispering whistle. And with agonising slowness, the oily bog-water begins to seep to the surface of the mire once more.

For a time, it appears that whatever phenomenon had occurred in this devastated vale has passed. Leaving the land reeling in shock and broken by turmoil. With the unseen agents of the catastrophe, whether natural or diabolic, seemingly having worked their will. Abandoning this unremembered field in Moussilon in the waning of the storm. It's ancient history and secret to remain lost to the mists of time. To lie abandoned, buried and ever unknown to all. All that is, but one. The ancient horn whose mournful clarion had been cast twice before this night, now calls thrice.

From the shadowy defile upon that moss wrapped hillock, witchlight suddenly blossoms and flares. It's ethereal fire, casting light throughout the obliterated vale. Illuminating all before it in a green, phosphorescent glow. The world stands in eerie relief, a scene from a grown man's nightmare. A vision made ever more horrific, by the scraping sound that now begins to be heard from beneath the water-filled crater. An incessant noise that grows in volume and voracity until a mailed gauntlet suddenly punches up through the boggy ground, with a rush of gurgling water.

In a series of stiff, jerking movements, the gauntleted hand claws and digs frantically at the cloying mud that envelops it. Scraping and tearing at the sodden turf till a buried root arrests the pulling motions. The searching hand hurriedly becomes a clenched fist and with supernatural strength begins to heave. Slowly, the pressure of the trapping mud is exhausted and inch by relentless inch, the helmed and armoured form of the fallen knight is revealed.

Soil, slime and ichor fall away from the knight's frame as it struggles out of its watery grave. The rusting, pitted metal of its once fine plate mail grates and clangs hollowly as the dead man stretches to his full, towering height. Awkwardly, the bucket-helmed, face of the undead paladin turns to face the source of the witchlight. Cocking its head in an odd fashion, he listens to some silent command. When, without warning, the helmeted head snaps up and a spark is ignited within. The light seethes and flashes bright, before dying to a smouldering, glowing red. Until at last, the empty orbits of the skull are filled with the unnatural glow of balefire.

The creature swiftly appears more animated as some dark power further suffuses it. Hastily it drops down to a squeaking crouch, scrabbling through the grave earth that had so recently been its tomb. Finally the gauntleted hand grasps what it seeks and brings forth a corroded warhammer in fountaining a spray of wetness. All around the knight, other similarly armoured forms begin to break through the water-logged surface of the crater. Inexorably rising from graves they had lain within, slumbering for countless centuries.

One by one, the same balefire blossoms where once their eyes had been. And one by one they heed the unheard command that still sings out from the ancient horn. Raising the warhammer to the night, the undead paladin hisses his silent challenge to the skies and shambles towards the nearest of the risen knights. His fellow fallen, similarly acknowledge the unspoken order and seek out an adversary of their own, and within seconds battle is enjoined.

Threescore risen knights, their movements marionette-like, strike at each other with unnatural force. Grime encrusted weapons fall and rise again with brutal efficiency as armour is riven, bones are broken and skulls are smashed. With numbers ever dwindling, some spark of memory emanates from within some of them and soon small groups start to band together. Some distant, ingrained memory instinctively separating the two forces that had fought and died on this water meadow so many generations before. Yet there is a third force that soon makes itself known. And he recognises no former friend from former foe.

The warhammer wielding paladin, the first to rise, is indiscriminate in his assault. Caring only for the closest enemy he sees. He carves a path through the ever diminishing horde, his momentum though great, is hurriedly stalls. Twoscore have fallen this night so far and only the strongest yet remain. Seemingly able to recognise the threat the towering paladin to be, the others close in upon him as one. Rusted swords, maces and even skeletal fists rain down from all sides. Dull, hollow sounding strikes, leaving deep dents and jagged rents in his pitted plate. Punishing blows that eventually drive him to his knees.

From the scrum of undead before him, a knight in dark armour forces his way forwards. It's red eyes afire and blistering the enameled face of his basket helm. It raises it's cankered mace high, appears to pause maliciously for the barest heartbeat before it brings the weapon down savagely. The blow impacts brutally upon the bucket helm of the paladin. His head snaps backwards, the force of the blow lifts him from his knees and he lands deeply in the sucking mire of the crater. The attack is not over however, and soon the pummeling resumes. Prone and broken the paladin can only ward a few of the hits that fall before he is disarmed and an unseen weapon clangs hard upon his chest and the balefire in his eyes dims. Then dies.

The clash of arms continues in a frenzy for long minutes before they begin to ebb. The time between strikes ever lessening. Until at last, there is nothing more to be heard but that thin whispering wind. The cankerous knight in dark armour stands victorious. He faces towards the hillock where the witchlight still burns and raises his mace in exultance. The dark champion cocks it's head in an odd fashion, as though listening to some silent command. Seconds pass before the knight seems to comprehend and begins to claw his way out of the crater. The vigorous animation gone, it walks mechanically and shambolically towards the source of the witchlight. Where the last dying notes of the ancient horn still resound.

The witchlight recedes from the vale, concentrating upon the moss covered hillock. Until only the barest glimmer can be discerned from the shallow defile upon the hillside. Inside the abandoned crater, the mangled forms of the fallen knights lie fractured and shattered. Like discarded dolls in some wicked puppet masters theatre. All is darkness here. All is empty, devoid and forsaken. Yet a presence remains. A glint in the void-like blackness. A spark that somehow becomes a shimmer. A glimmer that burst into wildfire. And suddenly the fallen paladin rises once more.

As the dark champion arrives at the defile, an iron brazier of brimstone burns starkly within, casting flickering witchlight throughout the shallow hillside cleft. A figure appears from the shadows. Midnight robes hide his form, yet he is no less sinister for it. The hairless skull-like face of the individual holds no trace of humanity or sanity any more. If it ever did. It is a visage made horrific by madness and obsession. He bears a yellowed tome within his feverish hands. The knuckles white in his demented grasp. He peers out into the night through gummed, rhuemy eyes before his sight alights upon his dark champion. His face breaks into a slavering, toothless grin and he begins to scuttle towards his new minion when he suddenly stops. His mad gaze stares intensely beyond into the darkness where another figure has impossibly appeared.

The dark champion turns to face the towering paladin who has followed in his wake and now stands waiting. Hissing a silent roar of anger at this intrusion, the cankerous knight raises its pocked-marked mace in warning. Whilst the paladin's own silent reply is a simple pointing gesture with his hammer and a beckoning of his foe with the free hand. Malevolence burns through the dark champion as he drunkenly charges the paladin. His whole undead frame infused with murderous intent. The paladin braces for the impact and once more battle ensues.

Blocking the mace, the paladin swiftly counters with a stabbing motion that arrests the cankerous champion's advance, forcing it back a single step. Pressing the advantage, the paladin lands a ringing blow upon the knight's abdomen, opening a rent in the blackened armour. Enraged, the dark champion swings its mace straight up in a savage arc that catches the underside of the paladin's helm, ripping it free and sending it out into the darkness. Exposed, the few remaining wisps of white hair that cling to the scalp and chin of the paladin's fiery-eyed skull dance lazily in the wind, before being whipped forcefully back by the paladin's next attack.

The blow goes wide. The momentum carries the paladin too far forward and the dark champion smites him with a ghastly blow to the left knee. Collapsing, the paladin strives to stand once more, but a second blow to his back forces him to his knees to receive that same blow that had felled him before. Throwing an armored fist out to stop his fall, the paladin uses the movement to spin his kneeling frame around in a tight circle, placing all the might he possesses into a sweeping blow that smashes against his opponent's right calf. The dark champion's greave plate crumples, the leg shatters and he falls awkwardly onto his back. Seizing his chance, the still kneeling paladin raises and crashes the head of the warhammer deep into his opponent's helm and does so again and again.

The paladin suddenly halts its next strike, as the helmet of his opponent collapses upon itself and the head within erupts in a flare of balefire that swiftly darkens. The ember that animated the dark knight, soon dies out completely. The true

champion stands now, and makes his limping way towards the iron brazier that still burns within the defile. Seeking out the ancient horn, whose note still sounded so irresistably in his head. The black-clad necromancer had fled when he had arrived to challenge the other. Yet it was clear that he had only retreated within the hillside cleft. For as the paladin approached the brazier, the figure quickly began to cackle with glee.

The paladin stops dead as the laughing summoner hurries forward, the yellowed book still clutched desperately to his chest. Howling maniacally, the robed figure begins to dance an odd little jig, before walking around the motionless paladin. Taking a moment to gather the few faculties he still possesses, the warlock stands before his new champion and begins to frenziedly leaf through his diabolic tome. Finally finding the spell he was looking for. The old man holds forth his clawed right hand and starts to chant in a wheezing voice. Running through the litany, the small figure literally screams the last word of power and stands expectantly. He does not have to wait long.

With unearthly strength the paladin swings his rusted warhammer sideways, smashing the crazed smiling head of the necromancer from his emaciated shoulders. The head bounces erratically down the moss covered hillock, echoing dully as it does so and is soon lost to the night. The headless body however, still stands upright for several seconds before falling limply to the ground. As dispassionately as only the dead can be, the paladin tears the robes from the fallen body and finally grasps the ancient horn that only now had fallen silent. As the paladin rises, he also retrieves the necromancers foul tome, before making his way to the brimstone brazier.

Staring deep into the flames with his own burning orbs, the paladin places the grimoire carefully upon the glowing coals. He ignores the grasping flames as they lick up and over his armour. Feelings and sensations being lost now utterly to him. Now he waits, till the evil book has been fully consumed. Poking at the ashes with his own hand until he is truly satisfied. Stepping back, the Paladin casually kicks over the brazier, spilling the fell coals in a tumbling trail down across the hillside. Finally, with the ancient horn held firmly in his left fist and pressed tightly to his chest, the undead knight retrieves his antiquated weapon and heads off far and away from this acursed place. He will keep the ancient horn safe against all who may come after. A guardian to keep the evil thing out of the hands of the wicked. For after all, one who was a paladin in life, is surely still a paladin in death.

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Thanks for reading.