

A Winter's Tale

Friday, 30 October 2015

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"For
whatsoever from one place doth fall,

Is
with the tide unto an other brought:

For
there is nothing lost, that may be found, if sought."

Edmund
Spenser, The Faerie Queene

It
was winter in Broceliande, the worst of seasons, when the freezing snow wraps itself across the cold hard ground like a shroud over a corpse. Families huddle inside around small fires for warmth and gabble desperate prayers to the Maiden that they have stockpiled enough supplies to last them until the spring's thawing. The sacred pond freezes over and the temple closes its doors for the long rest, ready to reopen them as soon as the ice cracks and the still waters are once more revealed to the faithful. It is known that rifts are more common in the winter. There has never been a Graal who has not despised the winter months, for oncoming ice always heralds the arrival of more foul intruders from beyond our simple valley. I hate the winters.

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It
was winter in Broceliande, and Madame Lacroix's youngest child, Thierry, was missing. He was not the first to disappear that season. The Deschamps' son, Henri, had headed off to bring some food to the ailing Poniard family at his mother's behest and simply never arrived. Then there was the Flamberts' boy, Auguste, who slipped out of his house in the night to look for his dog. The dog came back, hale and hearty. Auguste did not.

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It was winter in Broceliande, and I,
Theirulf Le Hir, the Graal of Broceliande, was determined to prevent the loss of another child. We of the Graal Order have protected this valley and the township in the name of the Water Maiden since time immemorial. We are warriors, sworn to our goddess, defenders of the townsfolk who cannot defend themselves from the rift horrors. That winter, I was failing in my duty.

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I knew the disappearances were related to the rifts. That much was obvious given the time of year, but I had not found the tracks of some horrible beast or seen any other evidence of such foulness wandering our lands. Looking back on it now, I was a fool to think outwards, never inwards, but at that time I do not believe I had ever truly accounted for the potential of evil influence to seep, drop by drop, upon the hearts of those I protected.

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I was tall and strong then, with, so I have been told, hard features set around sharp green eyes. What a figure I must cut, heading out into the chill light of the setting sun, wearing the green-tinged armor of the Graals with my cloak thrown back to reveal the Order's sword, Durendal, and a simple hunting dagger strapped to my waist.

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Durendal is, without any doubt, the oldest object in Broceliande. It is certainly older than the Graals and most likely came from Bretongyr, the lost paradise lands of legend. Gwydion, the town's aged wizard, is unable to decipher the magic that went into its making, though I feel he knows more than he lets on. I have, on occasion, found him in the chapterhouse of the Order, simply touching the weapon and weeping for what we of Broceliande have lost. He shrugs these moments off as "magically induced fluctuations of spirit" but I know there is more to it than that. The sword is magical, unerringly sharp with an aura of succor and strength about it. To the more attuned, it undoubtedly bears memories of its makers. Of lost Bretongyr.

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We Graals only carry Durendal now. I know our order once used the lance in battle as well. Yet, the lance, just like horse-mounted combat, has faded from our training. My master Angevin always assumed that it was the thick woodlands of Broceliande that made charging on horseback with a lance redundant, if not foolish. In reflection, I may agree with him, though it is also possible that those who knew the art of the lance and horse simply died without passing it on to their successors. One more piece of knowledge taken to the graves of Broceliande. One more piece of Bretongyr that we will never recover. I apologize, for I have wandered into melancholy. Back to the winter. Back to my prey.

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I set out that evening to find Jacques Curier, the town's baker. He'd fallen ill not long after the seasons changed. According to our wise woman Jeanette, it was an illness like that of the Poinards, yet far more terrible in its nature. Curier had been living, bed-ridden, in his house for most of the winter. Naturally, that should have removed him from my suspicions, but something was not right. One man claimed he'd seen Curier, shuffling around the house and talking animatedly with cloaked figures in the night. A huntsman shared a similar story. Spurious rumors or evil behavior? I was not sure.

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Then I had found the charm. It was a simple thing, three circles of moldering wheat, bound together and left to rot at the edge of the woods. The edge of the woods very near the Curier house. It was an evil icon, the foul totem of a dark god. I had originally seen it in the library of the Graals, in a book that is better left closed whenever possible, and Gwydion had confirmed my assumption before burning the thing. It was the symbol of Nurgleth, the foul master of rot, of despair, of illness. The coincidence was too much to stomach. I did not want to believe that one of Broceliande's townsfolk had fallen prey to such entities, but I was still pragmatic. If Jacques were guilty, I would end his evil, resident of Broceliande or no. The position of Graal required no less. But first, I had to find him.

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My thoughts swirled darkly as I approached the Curier house, a brooding, squat affair that sat on the edge of Broceliande, almost inside the thick woods surrounding the town. There was a single horse tied to its front, a thin grey mare belonging to Ganelon, one of Broceliande's aldermen. The man could not be seen, though I half expected him to come oozing out of the shadowed doorway at any second, dressed in his usual gold-trimmed black hunting leathers. I did not like Ganelon. He was slick as lamp oil and had a heart that was just as black. The presence of his horse was incriminating, but it did not seal his death warrant. After all, he was also a judge and militia captain. I thought he might well have been pursuing his own discreet inquiries in the night.

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I could tell right away that the house was deserted, so I slipped around the back to see if I could find anything that would lead me to my mark. I spotted the trail of foulness almost immediately. Something had dripped on the snow, staining it black and rotting the grass underneath. Something vile. Something diseased. The trail of rot led from the house's cellar door into the woods. Alongside it in the snow was a track where something, perhaps the size of a young pig, had been dragged along. I had my quarry.

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In the borders of the forest, where the dark trees were more spread out, the track was not difficult to follow. Yet if I worried that, if it continued too far, I would reach the barrier, the point at which the trees grew together so thick a man could not squeeze between them. I did not imagine that Curier was capable of going beyond that strange, natural border, for I think only Gwydion could have done (and perhaps did) such a thing, but where foul gods are concerned, nothing can really be too impossible.

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The trail led me to the edge of a rare clearing in the woods illuminated by torches set at equal intervals around a squat, flat stone. Behind the altar-like rock there was a rift, a sickly purple-green tear in reality that seemed to pulsate with anticipation. Two cloaked figures with their backs to me were chanting slowly. On the stone was the bound, squirming form of Thierry Lacroix. I watched as one of the cloaked figures drew a long,

slender-bladed sword from underneath its dark robes and approached Thierry. My rage built as the child screamed pitifully. I remember my righteous anger that Curier and his accomplice would betray Broceliande and the Maiden so. The cultist's sword rose for what could only be a killing blow. I did not hesitate.

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Roaring with wrath, I stormed out of the woods. The two figures whirled at my cry and were revealed in to me. The first was not surprising. Jacques Curier's robe slipped as he turned, showing his naked flesh. Small red sores covered every inch of him, from his forehead to his feet. He lifted the slimy human skull he held in his hands and continued chanting as the other figure stepped forward confidently.

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Its hood slid back to reveal the cruel smile of Alderman Ganelon. It was he who held the sword, a blackened rapier that seemed to weep rust. He said nothing as he charged me, merely smiled, full of confidence thanks to his cursed weapon.

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I will admit that I was actually surprised that Ganelon was there. I had never thought him capable of just petty injustices, not such great evil. I know now that the alderman was the master of the pair. He had turned Jacques to Nurgleth, perhaps even brought about the poor baker's illness, in order to start a ritual that would give his dark master a foothold in our valley. I never found Auguste or Henri Deschamps. I can only assume they were sacrificed as part of the build up the summoning that I was interrupting. At the time, I knew none of this, Ganelon was nothing but my foe, a competent, if not deadly, swordsman trained by some of the most talented militia members. He did not stand a chance.

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Graals are educated in an ancient style that is a sacred secret of our order, a piece of living history from Bretongyr. Le Art de L'coullant Espee, the art of the flowing blade, is both beautiful and deadly in its execution. I used it clinically in my fury.

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My first blow, a broulliard confus, flicked aside Ganelon's opening thrust and snapped his vile blade at the hilt. I slid alongside him and whirled Durendal into a brume sang. It is a light, precise blow that barely kisses the side of a man's throat, just enough to sever the blood channel there. Looking stunned, Ganelon fell to his knees, gurgling and desperately clutching at the blood spurting out of the slit in his neck. I think he had expected a better fight, perhaps even victory, but he was not a true warrior, not a trained Graal. He was outclassed from the moment I was taken into the Order.Â

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I spun away from the mewling alderman and advanced on Jacques. The baker had slipped round behind me, perhaps trying to escape, which forced me to turn my back on the rift to confront him.

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Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "It is over, Curier," I said firmly, "release that foul icon and submit yourself to my justice. I will end your suffering."

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Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "By the Maiden, Curier, release the icon!" I yelled. I could feel something terrible building in the air, like lightning in a storm. Shaking in a horrible manner, Curier began to scream and collapsed to the ground. I have seen many foul sights during my time as a Graal, but that moment will always remain with me. The small sores that covered Curier's body began grow rapidly in size until horrible weeping wounds occupied every inch of his skin. He was gagging and spitting pus across the ground and foulness oozed from his body in waves. Curier's screaming continued unabated throughout. I almost retched at the sight. But then the screaming stopped. And the chuckling started.

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I turned slowly to face the rift. The creature that emerged from it was a tall, sickly green-skinned horror from nightmares. I knew its kind. A plaguebearer, a harbinger of Nurgleth. Â Intestine and bone seemed to sprout from its bulbous, rotting torso and its pus-colored, pupilless eye stared at me from under a curved, yellowing horn. Upon recollection, I think it stood at least a head taller than I, broader and undoubtedly stronger. Yet at the time, I only focused on the thick, rusted falchion it held in its hands. Burbling with laughter, as if finding amusement in my presence, the beast casually paced towards me.

I charged to meet it. I am a Graal. I fear no riftspawn. I met the downward stroke of its horrible weapon with a broyage rapide. The blow hit with the force of a sledgehammer and I felt something pop in my left knee as I absorbed the shock of the strike. Yet, I maintained my footing and whirled to the side, catching another crushing swing in a strained, formless parry. I knew I had to end the fight quickly. Even with the strength of Durendal's magic, it was obvious I could not endure a drawn-out contest with this beast. I angled my sword on the next strike, a changer le cours, deflected the plaguebearer's sword, and lunged in under its guard. Grunting with effort, I delivered the floraison couer, an accurate thrust that drives into the enemy's chest and bursts his heart. A swift, sure death stroke that immediately ends a duel.

I sunk Durendal to the hilt before I realized my terrible error. The creature looked down at the magical blade buried in its body and bellowed with laughter. It had no heart. I had miscalculated. I knew I would die for it. Thierry would die for it. Broceliande would die for it. The plaguebearer delivered a sharp, vicious blow to my chest that cracked my armor open and sent me flying back across the clearing to the edge of the torchlight. I slammed into a thick tree trunk and slid to the ground in a wounded heap.

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The plaguebearer stood before the altar, my sword buried in its body, chuckling to itself in a sick, wheezing manner as it slowly advanced on me. I dragged myself upright and at least one broken rib scrape together. The pain nearly dropped me back to the ground again. Battered and bruised, my armor shattered, I gritted my teeth and gazed upon my doom.

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Most men would have broken and run then. I am not most men. I am a Graal. I stood firm. It is what we are sworn to do. I ignored the screaming pain in my body, drew my hunting dagger, and charged the rift horror again.

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There was a certain madness to it. Angevin would have called me a fool. But he would have also been proud. One Graal, charging against the darkness with nothing but his spirit and courage, defying evil to the end. Such is the heroism our order is made for. The monster let me come on, chortling all the while. I think it was amused. It thought me easy prey now. It thought wrong.

I leapt forward as I neared it and drove the dagger downwards with double-handed grip. Surprised, the beast tried to swat me away but I had been too quick and it too lackadaisical. My small blade pierced its bulbous eye, popping it like a rancid boil, and my armored weight slammed fully into the creature as its chuckling turned into pained bellowing. As it stumbled backwards, I gripped onto my sword and pulled. With a howl of effort, I drew Durendal from the squelching grip of sickly flesh and whirled it around in a mighty swing. It was la riviere separant, the beheading stroke. The rift monster's head went sailing away across the clearing, my now-rusting dagger still embedded in its destroyed eye. Its body staggered for a second before collapsing and immediately began dissolving into a pile of filth, maggots, and worms. I spat on it as I turned on the portal once more and hobbled back towards the prone form of Jacques Curier.

The hideous, twisted baker had still not released the skull. I doubt he could have, even if he had wanted too. He stared up at me, his eyes wide with madness and fear. I wonder to this day if he knew what had been done to him. That he had been made a conduit for a dark god, his flesh and spirit, and the flesh and spirit of his young victims, traded to open a portal large enough for just one of Nurgleth's servants to come through. A quick thrust downwards with Durendal ended his miserable existence. I took no pleasure in the act. Upon his death, the

skull dissolved into grime, and the portal began to slowly ebb and fade.

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I painfully made my way to young Thierry, still tied up on the altar stone. He was unconscious as I went to lift him, but small, three pustule groupings rapidly forming on the side of his neck stopped me short.

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I think I cried out then. The exposure to the plaguebearer had been too much for him. He lacked the protection of damnation or the blessing of the Maiden. For the second time that night, Durendal drove downwards in the mercy stroke. I, Thierulf Le Hir, had failed to save another child. I had failed in my duty. To this day, I pray that the Maiden forgive me for that.

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Sorrowful, I carefully wrapped my heavy burden in my discarded cloak and set off towards Brocelainde. I would send for Gwydion and the militia to help me purge the clearing when I got back, but first, I would burn the body of young Thierry. The Curier house would be his funeral pyre.

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It was winter in Broceliande and I wept as I limped through the uncaring woods and falling snow with a dead child in my arms. I hate the winters.