

The Tale of Sir Robert, chapter iv. In the Heart of Altdorf

Contributed by Robert Minchin
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After their battle with the Orcs on the borders of the Empire, The Bretonnian force under Sir Orin Neville-Smythe escorted the surviving monks from La Maisontaal to Nuln without further adventure. The Taalian abbey of Nuln was not in the city, but a short journey outside, surrounded by thick woodland. The local abbot was very grateful to suddenly have many more mouths to feed, but saw his duty to take them in charge until he could arrange for them to travel back to Talabheim. The Bretonnians did not stay long there before pressing on towards Altdorf, for the place had the air of the strange Imperial God which felt unwholesome and bestial beside the purity of the Lady of the Lake.

As they drew closer to Altdorf, Sir Orin recognised the tall towers of the Colleges of Magic. They towered above the grey haze that hung over the city, fed by the workshops and fires of the metropolis. His companions had never seen a city so large, one expressed the opinion that he hadn't thought it possible so many could live in a single place without fighting. "It isn't." Sir Orin replied, with a grin. This city had been his home for five years, it was where he had changed from a boy to a man. It held terrors for him, but unlike the terrors that some of the others were facing he knew what his terrors were, he could even put names to some of them.

They grew closer now, smaller towers could be made out through the haze, and the masts of ships in the docks could be seen. He wondered if the monks they had escorted were now in one of those ships they could see, tossed about on the waters of the Reik and crammed below deck like animals. He was glad they had ridden. He pointed out the Palace of the Prince of Altdorf to Sir Robert. "It doesn't look very big," the young man said, but Sir Orin corrected him, pointing out that they were still a long way off. It was big, it was just that Altdorf was much bigger. He told him that the Prince of Altdorf was the Emperor, but because the Emperor was chosen from one of the Elector Counts every time the old one died, the title could change lines. This meant that there was no Imperial Palace as such, although people sometimes referred to the Prince of Altdorf's palace by that name as the Princes had been the Emperors for over a hundred years now.

The Bretonnians reached the city gates around nightfall and made camp for the night, as the gates were now shut and it was unlikely they would be opened for foreigners. The next morning they were approached by a formation of Reikguards, sent out to see if they were friend or foe - mad as it would have been to attack Altdorf with such a small force, the Bretonnians had a not undeserved reputation for such madness when it came to overestimating their chances in battle. Their captain issued a challenge in broken Bretonnian, to which Sir Orin replied in fluent Reikspiel. He conversed with the Imperial soldier for a while, before telling the Bretonnians that they would camp outside the city for a few days to replenish their stocks and then proceed towards Axe-Bite pass, and home.

He was silent for a few moments, then he announced that from the time they left the city the company would be lead by Sir Leodegrance, as he would be remaining in Altdorf in order to act as Duke Tancred's ambassador to the Imperial court. With him were to stay two Knights of the Realm, Sir Mauville and Sir Terrance, and a young Knight Errant, Sir Robert de Giselles.

The week the company spent encamped outside Altdorf seemed to take an age to pass for Sir Robert. He was itching to enter the city, but while they remained members of a foreign force they could not pass the gates. They must wait and let traders come out and charge them hugely inflated prices, which Sir Orin rarely let them get away with, all the while watching for those who would sneak into the camp and 'liberate' their belongings. Eventually the week was done and as the Bretonnian company packed up to travel home, the four knights and their attendants prepared for their much shorter journey. Sir Orin saluted Sir Leodegrance as he led the Bretonnians away down the western road, then they turned and rode through the gates to enter Altdorf at last.

The streets of Altdorf were crowded like nothing Sir Robert had ever seen before. Everywhere there were people selling things, buying things, or just moving things around. Children ran between their horses and dodged under and around wagons, while street traders hawked their wares from road-side stalls. All around was noise and bustle, far from the quiet of his home at Ælfinfort, or even the Ducal city of Quenelles. He had not entered Nuln, and Bretonnia's largest city, Bordeleaux, he had seen but not truly experienced as he had visited only the Ducal castle and the noble areas of the city, not venturing into the busy port itself. As it was, this was his first experience of a truly large city, and he was impressed to the point of fearfulness.

They wound their way through the streets, passing the entrances of large houses where armed retainers stood on guard and the great gates of the University of Altdorf, home of the Colleges of Magic. Eventually they entered a wide plaza that was kept free of street-hawkers, although it was still thronged with people, and saw the Prince's Palace stretched along the far side of the square. Close up it seemed truly huge, and the artistic workmanship and large windows that covered its face were in sharp contrast to the solid stone walls that fronted most Bretonnian castles.

The palace was separated from the plaza by a highly decorated ironwork fence which stood about four times a mans height, atop a low wall about ten yards in front of the palace. It was to a gate at the centre of this fence that they now rode, where a guard resplendant in the colours of Altdorf, challenged them. Sir Orin handed him a scroll, sealed with the Great Seal of Quenelles, and the guard went to fetch his captain. The captain broke the seal and read the contents, then saluted and beckoned the Bretonnians into the palace. They passed through an arch into a courtyard, where there horses were given up for stabling, then they were lead to the audience chamber of the Emperor.

While waiting to be presented, Sir Orin studied the others in the audience chamber. Many of the courtiers he did not know, but a few he recognised from the years he had spent in Altdorf before. Among the latter was the Margrave von Strehlheim, whose pale face and cruel eyes flicked over the Bretonnians, not recognising in their leader the boy who had escaped him many years before. As the Margrave turned to his companion, Sir Orin was shocked to realise that he knew him too, if only by repute and description. The old man stood by von Strehlheim could be none other than Sir Marc de Swandle, father in law of Sir François and grandfather of Sir Robert, who had fled Bretonnia in disgrace rather than face Sir François in single combat.

At last their turn came to be presented. The other three knights followed Sir Orin as he made his way to the foot of the throne. Sir Orin ceremonially presented the Emperor with the scroll from Duc Tancred bearing his credentials and then, when the Emperor extended his hand, knelt to kiss his ring in the proper manner. The other three knelt behind him and then rose as Sir Orin presented them to the Prince of Altdorf.

The formalities over, the Bretonnians were taken to their quarters, a large house a short distance away which fronted onto a road leading into the Palace Plaza. The house was somewhat like a castle in its design, in that there were but narrow window onto the street and the inside was accessed through a large gated arch, which lead to a courtyard containing stabling for the horses. Yet there the comparison ended. The walls were thin (by Bretonnian standards) and the windows onto the courtyard were large. The gate, while strong, would not hold against a determined attack, and there were only a few inches between the walls of thir house and the next. Still, it was stronger in appearance than most houses they had seen in the city, and they were glad of it.

Inside, they discussed their presentation. Sir Orin talked of his enemy whom he had seen at the Audience, "The Margrave von Strehlheim, who was present at the Audience, was the killer of my adopted father. He is not a servant of the Empire, as he appears, but of the Chaos gods, and I have sworn to be revenged upon his body when the time is right for my father's death. My name, I doubt he ever knew, nor that I escaped to Bretonnia. He will not have recognised me, but the name of Sir Robert will have caused consternation ton another at the court"

"Why so?" asked Sir Robert, "I've never been here before, and I did not recognise any of them as visitors to Ælfinfort, certainly not ones that would have cause for consternation on a second meeting."

"Yet it is true." replied Sir Orin, "For among those present was one who had hoped never to hear the name de Giselles again. I talk of the Margrave's companion, Sir Marc de Swandle, your mother's father, whose name you must know and whose doom you are to be."

There was silence following these revelations. Sir Robert knew well the story of Sir Marc and his father but he had not known Sir Marc to be still alive, despite the prophecy that he would die by the hand of his daughter's son, and he had certainly not expected to meet him in the court of the Emperor.

"What are we to do?" he asked eventually.

"Do? Nothing beyond the ordinary. Fate will take its good time, and there is further preparation to be made before his comes upon him. In the meantime we must be vigilant, for he may try to upset or delay fate with a stroke at you - and we are all in danger while we stay in this foreign city where many have little cause to love righteousness and more still have little liking for Bretonnia.

"I have made an arrangement for you, Sir Robert. You are to train with the cadets of the Knights of the Blazing Sun, an order dedicated to goddess Myrmidia and close to the Lady of the Lake - for they were founded in battle alongside Bretonnian knights in Estalia. There you will have the chance to improve your skills in combat and in tactics, while also improving your Reikspiel. You will also be as safe within the barracks of the order as is possible in this city, at least from external attack.

"For the rest of us, we must trust our own vigilance. Although I am currently unknown, I fear it may not be long before my enemies discover my history, for Sir Marc is among them and so their attention will be drawn to us. This war must be fought in secret, however, and I must plan out moves carefully if we are not to be defeated.

"I have already said that the Margrave is a disciple of Chaos, I fear Sir Marc may have travelled down the same road after his disgrace. We cannot act, however, until we have proof positive that we can bring before the Emperor, to do

otherwise would serve nought but to have us removed from the city, at best.

"But let us not despair! We are knights of Bretonnia and we are not in entirely unfriendly country. The Lady is with us, and we shall be victorious."

After a few days to settle in, Sir Robert made his first visit to the chapter house of the Order of the Blazing Son in the company of Sir Orin. The Master of Cadets had served under Sir Orin's true father before he had joined the order, and was willing to help Sir Orin's protege once he had sufficient proofs that Sir Orin was indeed the son of the late Baron von Neuville. Sir Robert's Reikspiel was improving, but was not yet at such a standard that he could keep up with the comments that passed among the cadets when he took his place among them. No language was necessary, however, to understand the gist of what was said, and it was not complimentary.

After a week or two with the cadets, this feeling boiled over into outright conflict. Sir Robert was practising his sword-work, sparring with another cadet, when a third approached him from behind and siezed him aroud the neck. While he struggled to get free, his sparring partner punched him hard in the stomach, winding him. Others joined in, and Sir Robert went down under a rain of blows. Eventually a cry went up that the master was returning, and the other boys quickly scattered, leaving Sir Robert to pick himself up. The master looked at Sir Robert and asked what had happened. "I relaxed for a moment," he replied, "and my defence was beaten." The master looked long and hard at him, but Sir Robert returned his stare, daring him to disagree.

"Be more careful next time then." was all the master said before he turned again and left. Sir Robert looked around at the other cadets, smirking at the side of the practice hall.

"Is that the Imperial idea of honour?" he asked. "Is that what Myrmidia desires of you? That you should attack from behind and in overwhelming force? That you should fight like Orcs or Skaven? Are there any of you out there who are man enough to meet me in single combat, or are you all the craven disgraces to your Order that you appear? Who here thinks they could best a Knight of Bretonnia honourably?"

There was silence for a long moment, as the embarrassing truth came home to the young Imperials. Then one approached, saying "I will take up your challenge, Bretonnian. Let us fetch our swords and meet in the meadow by the back gate when the knights go for their noon repast."

And so the duel was set. As the weak noonday Sun of Altdorf struggled to burn through the clouds, Sir Robert met with the Imperial Cadet, who went by the name of Johannes Kirchwald. Sir Robert was the smaller by a good six inches, yet he looked confident as he stood in his polished armour, his sword bare in his hand and his shield on his arm. His head was exposed, as is the custom for Knights Errant, so he could look straight into his opponent's eyes. "Nervous" he thought, and Johannes looked it. He was quite obviously ill at ease as he looked upon the Bretonnian, who made up for his lack of stature with his battle experience.

"Begin" said Sir Robert, and stepped forward. Johannes' size and nervous demeanour belied his skill, however, as he attacked fluently, forcing Sir Robert to defend himself with his shield. Yet defend himself Sir Robert did, then riposted with blows aimed at his opponent's body. These Johannes blocked or parried, then the two stepped apart again. Sir Robert looked directly into Johannes' face and smiled, meeting his eyes and holding them before launching a furious assault that pierced the young cadet's defence and wounded his left shoulder.

Again they stepped apart. It was firt blood to Sir Robert, but the fight was barely started. Over the next few minutes many blows were traded, some falling on shields, some parried by swords, and some breaking through to their armoured bodies until both were bleeding from a dozen wounds. Yet none of these were debillitating, neither could land the decisive blow that would finish the conflict.

Johannes had strengthened, his initial nervousness overcome now he could see they were fairly evenly matched. Sir Robert saw this too, yet he had been duelling since he could stand and lift a wooden sword, and waited for overconfidence to take the place of nervousness.

The fight continued, and Johannes seemed to gain an advantage. Sir Orin was limping on his right leg and letting his shield arm droop. Johannes saw this and stepped in to attack Sir Robert's left side, where he was exposed behind the low shield. Too late he realised his mistake, as Sir Robert's shield came up and he pushed off his supposedly bad right leg to swing strongly at him. Johannes raised his shield, but this time his body was not the target. His sword caught on Sir Robert's shield, Johannes could do little as Sir Robert's sword slammed into his extended arm. He felt his fingers go numb as the bones in his forearm gave, and his sword fell to the ground. Sir Robert turned back quickly and his reverse stroke took Johannes in the ribs on his now unprotected right side. The Imperial fell to the ground, and yielded as Sir Robert stood over him, sword to his throat.

From that day onward, Sir Robert was treated with a new respect by the cadets. After the duel he had helped Johannes get his injuries treated and had made a firm friend of his opponent and they were inseparable over the next year.

Sir Orin had not been idle over the year either. He had made many representations to the Emperor over the threat the Undead of the Grey Mountains posed to both nations and the need for concerted actions. He had met with little success in this, but he had been more fortunate in his dealings with the Emperor's son, Karl-Franz, who already often led the armies of the Empire as his father lieutenant and who appreciated more readily the dangers posed by Kemmler and others such as the Blood Dragons who hid in the heights of the mountains, within sight of Altdorf itself.

Yet he had not neglected in his other campaign at this time. He had contacted those within the Witchfinders who he knew to be trustworthy and had revealed himself to them as a former cadet of their ranks. With these he had shared his knowledge of von Strehlheim and the fate of his step-father, himself a witchfinder. Evidence was being gathered and a covert watch placed on both von Strelheim and Sir Marc de Swandle, and others who were suspected of involvement with the conspiracy.

At last, in the spring of 2493, by which time they had been in Altdorf around 18 months, Sir Orin deemed the case to be complete. The Emperor would now be made aware of the treachery of one of his trusted courtiers. Thus Sir Orin went to the palace with his companions from Bretonnia and with the Witchfinder Christoph Weissmann and others of that order. They were quickly able gain a private audience with the Emperor, for they came near the time when the court broke for the noon repast and even here the witchfinders were feared and respected. Having heard their evidence, the Emperor decided to summon Sir Marc and von Strehlheim to his private audience chamber under a pretext, then sieze them while Weissmann's men rounded up those outside the palace.

The two conspirators entered unsuspectingly, and the Emperor addressed them. He first let them know that he had fears for his safety, that there might be a plot against him inspired by witches an other evil-doers, before revealing that he believed them to be the ringleaders, as he ordered his guards to sieze them.

"It's a dirty Bretonnian lie!" von Strehlheim exclaimed, seeing the others in the chamber for the first time as they emerged from the shadows near the edge of the room. He drew his sword and slew two guards and then, finding his way to the door blocked by witchfinders and other guards, strode towards the throne, screaming "You will die for this! The false Emperor shall die and his minions too! The time of Chaos is come! The end times are upon you!" Sir Orin drew his sword and awaited him.

"I do not fear you, von Strehlheim." Sir Orin replied, "I have waited long for this day. You slew my father when he discovered your dark secret fifteen years ago. This time, you shall not walk away."

And so battle was joined on the very steps of the Emperor's throne. throne, as Weissmann escorted his lord to safety. They fought long and hard, for both were excellent swordsmen, and the floor of the chamber ran red with their mingled blood. Yet Sir Orin had the mastery, for he was younger and fitter than his opponent, and he had righteousness on his side. There von Strehlheim was despatched to meet the dark Gods he had worshipped for so long, and the floor of the Emperor's chamber was stained with his dark blood

Sir Orin slumped exhausted on the steps of the throne, then looked around the room. "Where is Sir Marc?" he called to Weissmann, for he could not see the traitorous knight.

"He has escaped." Weissman replied, "He must have had a bound spell of teleportation or some other magic - he seemed to vanish into thin air just as he was seized."

"Well then, come forward Sir Robert." Sir Orin called, "Here is a quest of knighthood for you, if there ever was one. You shall track and find Sir Marc and fulfil that which has been prophesied. You shall bring back his broken sword as proof of your victory and his disgrace. Do not fear, doom and the Lady are with you, and it is said rightly that a knight who dishonours his sword will have it break in his hour of need. Go now, before the trail is cold. I believe he will head north."