

— THE TALE OF MALDRED —

PART THE FIRST: LANDUIN THE FAIR

Listen, ye traveller, to the tale of the Curse, and the land and people on whom it fell, for the sins of but a few. For though the Knight will deny it and the Grail Damsel would curse the tongue that speaks it, it was the flower of Bretonnia fair that cursed the Lost Duchy of Mousillon, the noble souls to whom the land was entrusted and who betrayed it. And yet there is more to my tale than the treachery of Maldred or the evil of Merovech, and woe to you who hears the truth in my words.

Once upon a time there were Fay upon these lands, and their works still stand, a testament to their wizardly ways. But the Fay retreated from our lands, and they became the lands of men, besieged and fearful as the Greenskin and the Goblin did multiply and do much evil. But there was one man to whom the land was a prize worth fighting for! Many are the tales told of Gilles Le Breton, many are the chansons singing of his battles against the Green of Skin that won the lands of Bretonnia for brave and noble men. Many also are those that raise voices in praise of Gilles' companions, the most virtuous men of the land excepting Gilles himself, each as noble in demeanour as he was fierce in battle, as brave as the blade and wise as the dawn. And yet our tale speaks of these but one, Landuin by name, the fairest man, they say, that ever graced Bretonnia.

Was there ever a man so enamoured of peace, and yet who embraced war with such devotion? Did ever a Knight despair so of bloodshed, and yet bring the lance and the sword to his enemies with such great wrath? Such was Landuin of Mousillon, the finest knight of the land, who rode forth from the valley of the river Grismerie to give his life alongside Gilles in battle. Tall and fair, quiet of word yet decisive of deed, as swift as the coming of night, level-headed and of gentle demeanour, they declare that Landuin was the most perfect knight in all the days of Bretonnia, and who am I to say it was not so?

The Chanson of Gilles, that ancient and most lengthy verse, tells of the vision that spake unto Gilles as he travelled through the Forest of Chalons. Landuin was beside him as they beheld the Lady, hallowed be her countenance, rising from the hidden lake to grant unto them the power to rid the land of its enemies. The Lady knew well of Landuin's fairness of mind and body, and she blessed him with such grace that no blade could find its mark upon him, nor could the ill-minded find fault with which to curse him.

So were the Grail Knights set upon their task. Twelve were the mighty battles fought, and twelve were the victories that the knights won for fair Bretonnia. And yet among these there is one that our tale dwells upon, for it brought great woe to peerless Landuin. Landuin had ridden forth from Mousillon, which stood upon the river Grismerie in a green and snail-rich valley where evil had never set a foot. And yet when Gilles and his Companions rode unto Mousillon, a great woe fell upon Landuin's heart. For here had evil un-life found its purchase!

A mighty host of the malodorous dead did march upon the soil of Mousillon, choking the fouled Grismerie with their presence. The land was grey and dying, its people broken and fearful. And to none was the sight more dreadful than Landuin, whose heart could hear such sorrow. His own blood lay among the dead, his own lands made dark and foul.

Was any man so fierce in battle as Landuin that day? Some say even Balduin of Brionne was never so determined to bring the blade to his enemies. For a day Landuin was lost among the host, which pressed all around him with their slimy bodies like a sea. Gilles and the Companions lost sight of Landuin and much feared him dead. Yet when the day came to its end Landuin did return, much fouled with gore and bearing the head of the vile wizard who had commanded the host. Grim and without word was Landuin for many days to follow as the walking dead were driven into the sea and Mousillon was won back by its noblest of sons.

Some say Landuin was never filled with joy again after seeing Mousillon so tormented. Even when Bretonnia was made whole and the Lady bade Gilles take up its crown, Landuin could not feel triumph in his heart as did the other Companions. He rode back to Mousillon and rebuilt his home, but the duchy was forever touched by his sorrow. Thierulf, Companion of Gilles and friend of Landuin, sought to ease Landuin's grief, but his cause was hopeless. None can say what hurt was done to Landuin's pride but he did fight Thierulf in a duel most sharp and wounded Thierulf about the face. From the courts of the Companions did Landuin withdraw after this. Much later, mystery was joined with woe when Landuin, an old man, was found dead in his bed, for so few had shared his life those past years and none knew what thoughts held court in his heart. It was said he died of a broken heart, weeping for his dead kin and the sickness upon the land of his birth.

What Duke of Mousillon since has not fought against the grief of the land that seeks to drain the heart from its people? And what Duke has succeeded? For every noble knight who has made the valley of the Grismerie verdant and fair, there is another who has shared Landuin's sorrow and left it sodden and grey. Think not that a rebel's tongue speaks in this head! This bard seeks not to denounce the nobles of Bretonnia, heirs as they are to Gilles and his Companions. But every tale agrees that men like Merovech the Butcher thrive in that benighted land of Mousillon, of noble birth though they be. Yes, Merovech cursed be his name, who in the dark days of the Red Pox seemed a saviour of Bretonnia from the vermin that did infest it, and yet who was struck mad in battle and was called out by the King for the depths of his bloodlust. Merovech, who slew the King in a

duel like an animal, who died without honour, his name a blight on Mousillon. And yet he, as you know well, traveller, is not the foulest man to have taken a seat in the Ducal Palace of Mousillon.

Wherefore did this curse come to Bretonnia? Surely not from the soul of Landuin, whose heart was as strong and pious as any who ever lived. Some villain, then, who did evil away from the sight of men? Some taint from before the time of the Elves? A work of the Greenskin beasts or the wizard of the walking dead whom Landuin slew? None know, not I, not you, not the sage and the lord, and yet all know that the curse waxes deadly still. For witness the tale of Maldred, and know you grief that the curse can so twist the noblest soul, and that such treachery can come of it.

PART THE SECOND: MALDRED THE FOUL

Maldred, the Last Duke of Mousillon, lorded over the most lavish court in Bretonnia from the Ducal Palace. At his side his lady, the ravishing Malfleur, pale of skin and sharp of word, was famed for her comeliness throughout the land and, said many, had the ear of her Duke more than was meant for a lady. Maldred built marble where there had been hovels, and gilded the chapels to the Lady, and spake of the honour he had restored to Mousillon. Malfleur gathered ladies-in-waiting of matchless beauty to grace the court. Happy was the Knight who was called to the court, for none offered a greater feast or nobler chanson to a guest than Maldred of Mousillon.

Came the day the Fay Enchantress herself was asked by Maldred to do the honour of attending his court. The Fay deigned to accept for Maldred had built many monuments to the Lady. Many were the ignoble tongues that wondered aloud, "will Lady Malfleur or the Fay surpass the other in beauty?"

But alas! Alack! There was no beauty at that ill-starred feast. For the feast was poisoned and put the Fay Enchantress into a deathly slumber, there to be imprisoned by the fell magics of Malfleur—for the Dark Lady of Mousillon was a sorceress most impious. And so Maldred's plan came to light. He desired the throne of Bretonnia and claimed far and wide that the Enchantress had deserted the rightful King. Then, when the most stout-hearted Knights were doubting that the blessing of the Lady still lay upon the crown, Maldred made the foulest claim than hath besmirched the tongue of any Knight before or since. He claimed to have the Grail, given to him by the Lady, and demanded the crown be his!

Maldred's lie was so brazen that not a true-hearted Knight in the land believed it to be the truth. Maldred the Mad, he was named—Maldred the Foul, the Betrayer of the Grail. The bauble he claimed was merely a trinket enchanted by Malfleur, and even as he brandished it from his battlements the army of the rightful King marched into Mousillon. Maldred, however, had the support of many nobles of Mousillon, having tricked some and corrupted others, along with many Knights whose hearts had become dark and whose lust for power and wealth outweighed their devotion to their Code. There the City of Mousillon was besieged, and a most terrible siege it was. The Knights and men-at-arms of the King were valiant in their attack, but the walls of the City were stout. Then, o woe of woes, the Red Pox was rampant among friend and foe. The dead filled the streets of the City, and lay in heaps among the siege works. Great was the death, and so foul the stench that some say all the waters of the Grismerie have never yet washed it away.

Maldred and Malfleur, alike in their wickedness and madness, shut themselves in the Ducal Palace and feasted with gluttony unbecoming Knight or lady. Day and night they feasted, and danced, and heard the songs of gutter-tongued bawds, even while death danced its merry dance in the streets outside. The Red Pox, cruellest of maladies, slew every man, woman, child, dog and crawling thing in the City, and thereafter it was remembered as the City of the Damned. When the plague-weary forces of the King finally opened the gates, they found nought but a town of corpses. And in the Ducal Palace, still attired in finery, were the corpses of Maldred, Malfleur and all the courtiers, dead where they had fallen in the midst of their dance. It is said by some that the marks of the Red Pox were not on them, but that the poison that slew them was the pure venom of treachery, striking dead their very souls.

So passed Maldred the Betrayer and Malfleur the Dark Lady of Mousillon. The King was much sorrowed to see the verdant valley and fair glades of Landuin's home brought so low, and he spat upon the ground and declared the Lady's light shone no more upon Mousillon. The Fay Enchantress, rescued from imprisonment by a valiant young Knight, lent her voice to his declaration—that Mousillon will have no Duke, and that all the duchies of Bretonnia shall no longer embrace that land as brother. For so long Mousillon had sunk into disgrace and wretchedness, and now the duchy was truly lost, its arms stricken from the banners of the land.

But the curse—ah, the curse outlives all, traveller. And I fear it will outlive you and I, for there is a taint on this land and the Grismerie is turned too sluggish and sick to wash it away. Plague stalks this land as surely as do the bandits and walking-dead, and madness, too. No, the woes of Mousillon are not yet done, and there are those who say that they are only just beginning anew. Witness the armour of black, the unraised visor, the iron-clad fist that rules from the shadows! Yes, darkness is abroad, from the City of the Damned to the hovels of the wretched. Mousillon is lost indeed, and if you seek to find it, traveller, you will find only death.