

THE LAST NECROMANCER

by

A.R.R. Ash

*A*t top his mount, Knight Commander Ashtar ascended the slope to the crest of the escarpment. Alighting, he removed his falcon-shaped helm, its burnished steel coated in thick black gore, and tucked it beneath his mailed arm. The chain coif underneath had already begun to cool against his nape. Despite the chill, sweat beaded upon his forehead beneath the heavy helm, and he felt the biting winter air against his copper-complexioned brow. Without the helm, the bracing air filled his lungs, invigorating him. He fancied that his escaping breath resembled some of the ethereal abominations they'd battled.

Ashtar surveyed the vista before him. At the start of the day, the canyon floor had been blinding in the reflected light of Glorious Ra from a pristine carpet of unbroken snow. Now, in the failing light, the ground of the canyon was churned brown, red, and white and dotted with the bodies of mounts, his brother knights, and the remains of the twice dead. The bronze-armored forms of lesser-ranked knights flitted among the corpses of fallen paladins and bestowed benisons that would prevent the deceased from rising from their deserved rest and raising arms against their erstwhile brothers of Ra. At the northeastern end of the canyon stood a massive, stepped tower, like a circular ziggurat, that was the last refuge of the Necrolatrists, that Ra-

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damned group of Black Necromancers. Beyond that, beginning just before the mouth of the canyon, was a pine forest blanketed in white.

“Commander!”

At the stentorian call, like rumbling thunder through a still night, Ashtar turned to face the approaching form and stood at attention. With eyes toward but not focused upon the imposing paladin, he said, “Lord High Commander.”

“Well fought, Commander.” Hakor stood straight and tall, his full plate of golden ceremonial armor exchanged for one of blue steel, his peregrine helm held in the same manner as Ashtar’s own. “Report.”

“The abominations were destroyed, and the tower is besieged. Tomorrow, Ra’s light will see the tower fall.” Ashtar clenched his jaw and ground his teeth at the insidious pride that found outlet in his voice. A knight of Ra should not cling to pride. His actions were irrelevant. All happened by Ra’s will alone.

“Well done, Commander. Ensure final preparations are made. I will lead the assault on the tower myself.”

Beneath his gore-splattered plate, Ashtar felt a moment’s pang in his chest. Again, he chided himself for his pride and vanity. Such reactions were beneath the dignity of a paladin of Ra. As Lord High Commander, it was Hakor’s prerogative—indeed, it was only fitting—that he lead the Knights to victory. “It will be done, Lord High Commander!”

“May Ra’s light shine upon you, Commander.” With that, Hakor turned and strode away, the sun setting behind him and the clank of azure armor fading as he went.

The remainder of Ashtar’s night was spent in a frenzy of inspections, strategy meetings, and tactical planning, reviewing troop placements and company assignments. Nevertheless,

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before Ra's light crested the escarpment above the canyon the following morning, Knight Commander Ashtar sat upon his destrier at the fore of the amassed force of plated knights and barded mounts. Before him was Lord High Commander Hakor, gauntleted hand raised in a fist.

The bodies of the fallen knights had been gathered and would be set upon carts once victory was attained. The bodies of the twice dead fed a great fire that still blazed, sending ash falling like black snow.

Ashtar held his helm in hand to feel the dual sensations of Ra's light and the stinging breeze upon his face. The breaths of hundreds of knights wafted and dissipated in the current. Between excitement and final planning, he hadn't slept, yet he felt no fatigue, as if Ra's light infused him and gave him strength.

In the momentary lull before the start of battle, Ashtar's mind strayed to recent, fond memories . . .