

Eternity Never Ends

The air in the summoning chamber reeked with fumes and power. Ancient eyes narrowed in concentration, unperturbed by the cries of the tiny humans in the nearby brazier.

"All is ready, M 'Lord". The General didn't bother to acknowledge the fawning sycophant's announcement. Lord Belzecue's honour had been insulted. Lord Belzecue demanded satisfaction. At once. The Hollows of Noctume would be the battle ground. Not the general's first choice of terrain, but under the Council's rules the challenged chose the place and the Queen had picked ground her troops knew well. His own forces were a steady bunch, but still, Nocturne could distract even the most steadfast. Special care would be needed in the choice of Archfiends to supplement his forces. Lord Belzecue was not patient or particularly forgiving. The choice must be made.

Howls of ultimate agony arose from the souls trapped in the brazier. A glowing red mist leaked from them, leaving only writhing maggots behind. The mist swirled, coalesced and with a vast thunderclap vanished. Into the ensuing silence the general intoned, "hear me, hungry Bolagg, hear me and heed my summons and do my will. There are enemies to smite and your hunger must be fed..."

The Hordes stood in ranks. Roseate light gleamed off armour, weapons, and feverish upturned faces. The ground mist was beginning to lift, its soothing vapours already but a memory to the aroused and growling mobs.

Shauniel settled her wings more comfortably as she completed her scan of the broken terrain comprising this section of the Hollows. Lava pools and tar pits seethed in the low-lying areas, burping clouds of noxious fumes to mix with the mists. The ground was easily defensible; arrogant Lord Belzecue's forces would again pay the butcher's bill for their Lord's fragile ego.

That suited Shauniel just fine. With a toss of her long blonde locks the Laacia made her way towards the command group at the top of the ridge. A few wayward souls scrambled to avoid the thirty-foot-tall Lieutenant's bootsteps. None were crushed, this time. The glances they gave her as she passed were equal parts gratitude, fear, and admiration. By any Earthly standard all the Laaciae were beautiful, by contrast with the infernal environment, they were devastating.

"No sign of them yet, Lord Nisroc", she announced as she approached the hilltop.

The creature she addressed nodded his great rain-horned head. Both hands were in motion; the naked swords he held sang softly as they flickered about. From a mouth filled to overflowing with dagger teeth Nisroc hissed, "Not yet, but soon", enunciating very clearly, Shauniel thought, for one with such dentation.

"Soon, soon," echoed a cold quiet voice from one of Nisroc's greaves, "Doom, doom," echoed another, nearly identical one.

The Archfiend ignored these voices, as did the Pluton Hussar next to him. Taller than the Laaciae, this Lieutenant, a token of the alliance between the Queen and the arms merchant Lord Hades, was still only slightly more than chest high on the Archfiend Nisroc. The Hussar's ability to teleport gave her as much mobility as Shauniel's wings, though not with the same style.

"Now, I think. Movement at 1000 meters, NNE my position. Air and ground units." The Pluton Hussar delivered her report in a calm, detached manner, but Shauniel thought she could detect the battle lust underneath, and Shauniel was damned good at sensing lust.

The rest of the report was lost in a yowling screech from their right flank. The Archfiend Araquel launched herself skyward, plainly disregarding her General's order to let the enemy come to them. In the fiend's wake Laacia Serenity, looking none too serene now and the Pluton Hussar Siren did their best to hold the Hordes in place, even as Shauniel and Cote III did the same.

"Wait for it" shouted/moaned Shauniel, trembling with eagerness.

The Sergeants added their voices to the mix.

Lightning flared, followed by a tremendous detonation and a thunderous roar. Gurzon, for certain. This could be a bad one. Araquel screamed again, and then there was only time to concentrate on the area immediately in front of her. Large shapes moved across the valley floor, picking their way over solid ground. Her Hordes, from their covered positions, began to rain arrows and javelins and upon the enemy's Hordes. Shauniel could also make out a Nuckelavee, steadily forging its way through the lines, ignoring the hail of fire, laying about with its cursed halberd, leaving a spray of dismembered body parts in its wake.

There was still no sign of a second Archfiend, though. Nisroc suddenly leapt forward, obviously intending to engage Belzecue's Lieutenant. He stopped just short of the centaur's reach and screamed in its face. It screamed too, as flesh melted from its face and vainly upraised arms. Somehow the maimed creature found the strength to surge forward, driving its Chargebreaker polearm into Nisroc's chest. Simultaneously, the earth behind the Archfiend crumbled and a Budela dragged its noxious carcass from the hole, its' filth encrusted Morningstar swinging in a long, low, lethal arc that struck the side of Nisroc's knee. The joint, armour notwithstanding, exploded.

Cote III was already moving down the hill, pumping pistol rounds in to the stricken Nuckelavee. A platoon of low-slung, steel-plated war machines added their cannon fire. Twenty frothing

barbarians, clad only in the elaborate tattoos they'd had before they died, leapt forward as the centaur collapsed, completing the disemboweling begun by the shot. With experience borne of millennia of incessant war, they began to move clear as the body began to crackle and smoke. One group strayed too close to stricken Nisroc. Their death screams as he consumed them were lost in the tumultuous crash of the battlefield.

Things were not going too badly, Shauniel thought, both flanks holding although Serenity had gone off to help Araquel against mighty Gurzon. Time for her to get into the action. She spread her wings and was immediately nailed by a spike of purest pain/pleasure. Caught by surprise, the Laacia staggered helplessly, transfixed by waves of passion. "Hold the hate," she thought, "Hold the hate and follow it up." As her senses cleared she spotted a familiar winged form hovering nearby "Traitor", Shauniel hissed, "Whore of Belzecue. You, Gianna, are a



stain upon the honour of the Laaciae, one that I ...hunh". The rock-hard ash of the hillside suddenly went liquid beneath Shauniel's heel. Wings furiously pumping, she struggled to lift off.

The rogue, Laacia Gianna chose that moment to strike. Shauniel partially deflected the sword blow, suffering a minor wound. More significantly, chains erupted from the still subsiding ground, called into existence by the eldritch power of Gianna's Sword of Imprisonment, twin to the blade that Shauniel carried. The shackles wrapped themselves firmly around Shauniel's long legs, anchoring her hopelessly to the ground. From beneath, sixty feet and seventy tons of four-armed doom pulled itself from the tunnel it had made. Bolagg. Bolagg the Mad, Bolagg the Destroyer.

"Now, finish her, finish that yappy bitch", directed Gianna from above. Bolagg shifted his massive, tusked head, four small eyes gleaming hungrily as he lumbered towards Shauniel, skull mace raised.

It could not end like this; millennia of service about to be undone by this moronic juggernaut and traitor Gianna. "Not me, you idiot," she snapped, with all the scorn and contempt her voice and cold blue eyes could muster. In the Name of Lord Belzecue, it's her that you want." Shauniel had the cold comfort of seeing Bolagg's expression shift to puzzlement, though not enough to change the trajectory of his mace as it smashed into her ribs.

The Hollows were, if not exactly silent, then more quiet than usual. A few Hordlings still moaned and cried from where they lay shattered on the ground. None had the energy left to scream. They would either heal enough to make it back to camp or be consumed by the denizens of this region when they came out scavenging.

The two Generals regarded each other calmly. The surviving Archfiends had returned from whence they came. The Lieutenants and Hordes had withdrawn to their respective sides.

"Well fought. I believe my Lord Belzecue's honour is satisfied", said the dark, scarred one, with a twisted smile.

"Aye. A good contest, right to the end," replied the other, full lips and dark, dark eyes smiling. "Keep winning battles like this and your Lord will get nervous and have you purged, my friend." Standing hip-shot, with back straight for full effect, she added, "My Queen's always looking for a few good men".

A rumbling grunt that almost passed for laughter. Almost. "My honour is my loyalty, and no Second Fall monkey lover's going to lead us back to heaven. We must be strong and united. My Lord will do that, despite the Council dictates." A taloned hand unconsciously caressed knobbed keloid. He continued. "A good battle indeed. I'm sure we will cross swords again. And, I think, we missed one. Clean her up and tell her to be more careful next time." He pointed, turned, and left.

"Hmmm." The Queen's General turned, following the indicated direction to a tar pool. "Shauniel. Good. We've put too much work into you to lose you now. Don't worry, child, you'll be ready for battle in no time. We have eternity."

Story by Tom Frank