



AGE OF FANTASY

THE PROMISE OF ETERNITY



SHORT STORY

She stood poised and defiant, looking through the large stained-glass window of the castle's throne room.

However, Yeleva didn't focus on its beauty. Yeleva looked on at the Orc camps just beyond the walls. The Orcish artillery struck hard against the gate, launching bolt after bolt to blast open their gate after the Skeleton Watch had driven back their Giant Boars with crossbow volleys.

She clenched her fists hard in anticipation, drawing blood that dripped onto the cold floor. She didn't need it. She could always get more later.

With her focus on the battle ahead, she almost didn't hear the hurried footsteps behind her.

"The Orcs, my lady. Am I too late?" Yeleva heard a familiar voice behind her.

She spun toward a Drained servant. He stood ready, dressed for battle, but breathing hard.

He was a handsome man: tall, dark-haired, with a well-defined chin. Yeleva's eyes danced over his neck, driven with an iron tap, which allowed her to feed upon his blood at her leisure.

Her tongue stroked the back of her sharp vampiric teeth for a moment before her attention fell to the round object he held, gripped underneath a tarnished cloth. There was a look of pride behind his concern.

He always had too much confidence for a Drained.

"Raznir, you found it?" Yeleva asked, taken aback.

"Hidden in a secret catacomb behind the prison cells, my lady," Raznir said, pulling off the cloth. "Just as we deciphered with the old scrolls."

Underneath the cloth was a smoky glass orb, a bit larger than a human head. Within, inky vapours swirled as if possessed of their own will.

"I can't believe it has been here all this time," she said.

"Is this artefact why the Orcs came?" Raznir replied.

"I cannot say. They have shown little interest in negotiation," Yeleva said, glancing again out the stained glass window.

Yeleva ran over to the table in the corner of the room, still covered in a pile of old parchment and scrolls. The battering against the front gates still rang in her ears.

Yeleva skimmed over the rambling poems of the half-maddened Necromancer who created the Necrorb until she found the relevant passage.

*The Necrorb hides a blighting mist,
held by glass in its bearer's fist.*

*Take heed when the dark orb is thrown
of deathly crack and wailing moan.*

*From shattered sphere, the shadows rise,
leaving black blood and empty eyes.*

*No spell can spare those doomed to die;
only silence where the living lie.*

Yeleva looked up at Raznir. "We will go forward with the plan then. We must get the Necrorb to the centre of the Orc army."

Yeleva held out her hand for Raznir to hand the orb over, but he hesitated. "Allow me to do it, my lady. Let me prove myself."

"That is not an option. Though you are Drained, your lungs still draw breath. We have many other undead in our ranks that should remain unaffected." She replied, gesturing hurriedly with her arm.

"Perhaps I would have the strength to resist its power... if you were to bestow the gift of vampirism upon me. Have I not proven my worth to you? I beg you, turn me so that I might stand by your side eternally!"

Yeleva would have blushed if her heart still pumped living blood to her cheeks.

Raznir continued. "I am here today because you saw potential in a lowly peasant, beyond being a mere bag of blood. I have stood with you for decades as I watched you rule with strength and sincerity. I want to serve you in a greater capacity. I want more...for us."

"This is hardly the time, servant," she said, emphasising his title. Her eyes darted to the door for anyone who might be listening in.

"Please, call me by my name. If the orb fails, then this may be our only final meeting. Give me a chance to finish this task; make me a Vampire, and I will have the power to serve you as you deserve."

Yeleva paused. If they lost, it would be. Yet, she knew the consuming thirst of her curse; she had spent years learning to contain herself, to direct it, but she never truly had control. It always lay just beneath the surface. She had seen others who had been broken by the curse, especially during the turning itself, losing not only their minds but their very forms as they took on the shape of maddened beasts.

Vampirism was not the blessing that the living of the Marches believed it to be. Though she loathed to admit it, even to herself, she was fond of Raznir; he was more than a servant and deserved better than the fate he now begged for.

Yet, it was not the time for such sentiments, if there was ever a right time to indulge them.

"You speak out of turn. Do not do so again," Yeleva said harshly, "You know nothing of what you ask; the process can take up to a year. It is not a matter to discuss when there are Orcs just outside the gate."

"Won't a start be enough?" Raznir spoke, stepping toward her.

She took a step back, holding up her hand. "Don't be naïve."

Raznir paused for a moment, considering his options.

"What if I don't deliver the Necrorb? I can break it right now," Raznir said. "All I ask is the promise of eternity with you after the battle is won. Give me that, and I will lead the charge."

Yeleva looked at him, stony-eyed at the defiance. Seeing his Lady unmoved, Raznir relented.

He held out his hand, relinquishing the orb and its cloth cover. Yeleva hesitated, then took it, lingering as her hands brushed against his.

She shook her head and steeled herself. Her mind had drifted from the sounds of battle for a moment, but she realised the pounding at the gates had stopped altogether.

"You will not be fighting; you will be charged with protecting the Drained here. The Necrorb's mists are deadly to any whose blood still flows."

"My Lady—" Raznir tried to object.

"That is an order, servant." She commanded and turned away before she saw the disappointment in his eyes.

She ran down the castle stairs into the pale courtyard. It was nearly dusk, the skies darkening quickly from its orange and purple hues. Her eyes scanned her waiting army and fell on a Drained Archer against the south wall.

She called to him. "Things have been silent."

"It seems the Orcs have retired back to their camp for now," the Archer answered. "They will surely return in the morning; they know full well that the night is our ally."

"Tonight will be no different."

"My Lady?"

"We cannot hope to match the Orcs in number, but my castle holds many secrets. You are to spread this message along the wall; the Drained are to stay within the inner walls of the castles. Meanwhile, every Skeleton that can still move is to report to me."

The soldier looked surprised but nodded and turned to carry out her order.

Yeleva turned up the southern stairwell and onto the parapets. She oversaw the rotation of the Skeleton Watch while she waited as the skies slowly started to match the colour of the dark castle behind her.

In the distance, small fires marked the Orc camp, creating a small constellation that betrayed their location.

Here atop the walls there were no lights or fires. The moon behind the clouds was enough light for her garrison.

The size of the Orc army was daunting. Normally, there would be no way to defeat them outside of the castle walls.

Normally.

Soon, the Skeletons arrived. Silently, they arranged themselves into formation. Yeleva inspected them closely, choosing who she would task with this mission.

She needed only a handful; the rest would be needed if they failed, to hold the walls for as long as possible.

Drawing her chosen retinue forward, she gave them their command. "Tonight we kill every Orc that lies in that camp."

A nervous clatter sounded as one of the Skeleton picked up his jaw from the floor.

"But this is not an assault," she continued. "Your objective is to deliver this."

She held out the Necrorb and pulled off its cloth. Its smoky centre swirling in anticipation.

"Once you arrive at the centre of their camp, you are to smash this orb on the ground. The power this orb contains will be more than enough to destroy them for good. And lucky for us, it only affects those who still draw breath."

Yeleva inspected the skeletons one last time before indicating one, "You; step forward. You will be the first to carry the orb."

The skeleton held out his hand, accepting the Necrorb.

"This must be delivered to the camp. If the carrier falls, then another must retrieve it," Yeleva said simply. "Now, we shall depart when the night is darkest. Until then, stand ready."

The soldiers responded by bowing their skulls low. Then, they stood with uncanny stillness, waiting for her order to depart. Yeleva turned back towards the scattered Orc campfires dotting the landscape around their castle. The largest concentration was not far from the main gate, but getting there undetected would prove a challenge.

As she surveyed the field, Yeleva noticed movement below her and looked down. It was there she saw a tall shadow, moving quickly, but stealthily, away from the castle walls.

"An Orc?" She called out to the Skeleton Watch, still at their post. "Do not allow our foe to escape."

The skeletons quickly drew their arrows and fired towards where Yeleva was pointing. The figure jumped out of the way as the arrows thumped into the ground. The figure rolled into a sprint.

"Get that intruder!" Yeleva called out again.

The Orc had likely overheard their conversation and now intended to return back to camp to report on their attack. If this scout was successful, then there was no chance of them reaching the enemy camp.

More arrows missed their mark and buried themselves in the ground. Yeleva was panicked, necrotic energy pulsing at her fingertips as she started casting a spell. But she realised the figure was now too far away.

There was now only one thing they could do.

She turned and called toward the soldiers who had descended the stairs. Luckily, they had stopped at the sounds of Yeleva's screams and firing weapons. "Change of plans! It is possible that our plan has been discovered. We depart at once!"

The soldiers hurried towards the gates, eager to carry out her orders. The sound of shifting wood and grating metal sounded as the gate slowly lifted from the ground.

The Skeleton Knight noticed Yeleva following in stride. The Skeleton extended an arm, as if to stop her; some protective instinct woven into the spell or in the spirit of the old warrior who animated the bones.

She searched her memory for a moment, trying to bring to mind the face of the warrior that the bones belonged to, but it had been far too many years.

"I shall follow," Yeleva said at last, "This is a matter that I must attend to myself. It is far better to fail in the effort than to spend my final days knowing that my last hope has come and gone."

The Skeleton Knight bowed his head and lowered his arm, allowing the Lady to pass.

Yeleva and her entourage needed to reach the camp before the Orcs had a chance to prepare, but she couldn't help but stop for a moment at the gate and look back towards the castle.

Raznir was safe inside. She hoped that, if they survived, he might forgive her.

She ran into the darkness, looking for the figure among the shadows. Could he have made it there already?

She and her soldiers moved quickly but silently in formation, with Yeleva at the back. The night was cold, with a light breeze, but the undead could not feel it on their own skin.

The lights ahead grew larger and larger as they drew near. She started to make out the tents and wooden structures. Most Orcs appeared to be dining or sleeping, still unaware of the coming attack. Perhaps the Scout had not heard them after all?

She felt relief was over her as she moved through the dim twilight, approaching the light of the Orcish tents carefully.

Then, she heard a shout from the tents ahead that echoed into the night; they had been spotted.

The Orcs emerged from their tents slowly, hesitant to leave behind their meals.

Fortunately, Yeleva did not have far to go; she looked towards the Skeleton Knight.

"Forward", Yeleva gave the command, "Deliver the Orb."

With that, the Skeleton Guards swept forward, revealing their position to the scattered Orcs still moving into position. The Skeletons at the front swept into the assembling Orcs, trying to open a pathway.

Amid the chaos, a Giant Boar burst forth from its pen and started to rampage. Its massive swinging tusks tossed aside both skeletons and careless Orcs.

Yeleva charged into the fray. An Orc tried to bring her down with a spear blow, but Yeleva ducked. Before her foe was able to react, she had already slashed her sword across his belly.

With the Giant Boar still raging, she began muttering another spell, casting a Deathly Gaze on the beast.

Reacting, the animal reared its head with a surprised roar. A Skeleton Guard took the opportunity to run beneath it and drive his spear into its unprotected neck.

She searched the fighting crowd for the Skeleton Knight, locating him in combat with an Orc Boss. The enemy's heavy halberd swung threateningly close to the Knight's face.

Yeleva took a breath, but she knew that she did not have the time for another incantation; instead, she pushed through the crowd, rushing to the Knight's aid.

She wasn't fast enough.

The Orc spun and knocked the Knight's head clean off. Yeleva watched both his skull and the Necrorb roll across the ground.

The Orc smirked as he leaned down to pick the orb up and investigate it. Though not before Yeleva arrived and drove her knee into the head of the stooped Orc.

He cried out and turned to face her, letting the Necrorb fall.

"That is not yours." She said, raising her sword.

"It will be." The Orc replied, his lip curled in a gritted smile.

The Orc lunged at her with his halberd, Yeleva barely dodging. She wasn't able to recover before he swung again, driving his halberd into her sword arm.

Yeleva snarled in pain and made a grab for the sword as it spun out of her hand. Instead, a massive hand grabbed her by the throat and lifted her.

As the Orc lifted her up, she realised the grip was strong enough to break her neck. And his grip was getting tighter.

She desperately tried to knock his arm from her neck, her dislocated wrist flailing helplessly. She raised her other arm and began to chant.

The Orc dropped his l from his other hand and used it to grab and smother the spell.

"Like I said. It will be." The Orc said, smiling again.

Yeleva couldn't respond. She could feel his fingers digging into her spine, and her vision went dark.

Then the grip loosened, and she fell to the ground.

Choking on her collapsed trachea, her vision came back to see a sword sticking through the Orc's chest. The Orc collapsed, revealing Raznir behind him.

He had the Necrorb under his arm and had draped himself with the boar skin drying among their tents.

"Raznir? What are you doing out here?" Yeleva coughed out.

"My dear Lady," Raznir said, "I've come here to earn my place by your side."

And he was gone, ducking back into the battle. From a distance, he might be mistaken for a small boar.

Then she realised who the figure from earlier had been; not an Orc, but a foolhardy servant too eager to serve.

"No, Raznir!" She called out in a rasp, stumbling forward.

He was trying to prove himself and force her hand. She knew he had never been satisfied as a mere mortal servant.

Perhaps, if she had accepted him, this might have been avoided. Now, however, it was too late.

She staggered towards the camp, but before she could reach him, a vaporous cloud began to spread out from the camp.

Yeleva stepped back; the Necrorb's effects were powerful enough to even give her pause.

The Orcs looked on in confusion, but Yeleva began to run. Moments later, the cloud exploded out.

A wave of inky smoke tore through bodies like a shadow, creating moans of anguish in its wake as the Orcs' veins blacked and their bodies rotted in an instant; only the Skeletons seemed completely immune.

Yeleva only barely paused to look back as the cloud followed her outwards. Eventually, the smoke dissipated out to her. She felt an immense and chilling cold rip through her dead heart.

Yeleva kept running as it washed over her, her army, and across the grassland toward the castle wall. There, it stopped abruptly, reaching its limit of influence.

The sounds of pain continued around her like a chorus of death.

As the cloud began to clear, Yeleva saw the desolation before her. Giant Boars and Orc bodies littered the ground. They were blackened and wrinkled, their now ashen skin flaking off in the breeze. Even the surrounding grass was black and dry.

A few Orcs still stood, stumbling over themselves as they gasped for breath. Eventually, each one fell to the ground, crawling slowly, but desperately, until their body gave out.

Yeleva had never seen devastation like this. Her army stood still over the field. The chilling air penetrated even their undead bones.

Yeleva stepped towards the gate. Her distance and undeath had protected her from the worst of the curse's effects, but its poison still touched her heart with a blackness that threatened to swallow her whole.

Not mortal could survive that; not even the mightiest Orc. Nor could Raznir.

She wouldn't go looking for his body; she did not want to see him like this.

"It is over, but the magic still lingers," the Vampiric Lady called out to her Guards, "Return to the walls. The Orcs shall not linger here long, and those that do shall regret it."

Her retinue turned and slowly walked back towards the castle. They emerged from the smoke as they approached the gate.

Yeleva again walked in the rear; the empty feeling the Necrorb caused was magnifying the loss she felt. It took all she had to not stumble and let the shadows take her too. She reminded herself she still had her people inside, waiting for and depending on her.

A rustle of now-dead grass sounded behind her. She turned and gripped her sword.

Then she saw him. A silhouette emerged as the air continued to clear. He was slowly approaching, dragging his feet and swaying from side to side.

"Raznir?" She said, stepping toward the figure.

As with all her Drained, she had fed him occasional drops of her immortal blood to prolong his mortal life as he served her; perhaps this was what had first whetted his appetite for immortality as a vampire. Perhaps that is what gave him the strength to last longer now.

"My...Lady..." Raznir said as he stumbled forward.

His skin was expectedly black and chalky. His lips were chapped, and his eyes were sunken and dry.

To say she was looking at the man she loved would be untrue, as she had not allowed herself to love him. But even then, in this moment, she felt as if she did. And for that, she was angry.

"Raznir, you fool," She said, tears forming in her eyes again.

"I am ready, Yeleva. I am ready to stand by you for eternity." He said in a dry whisper.

"Why didn't you listen?" she said.

"Please, Yeleva, there isn't much time." Raznir pleaded.

"There is no time! Don't you see?" She said, distraught, "No ritual can reverse this! You have no more blood to spill."

"You don't know that; you can't—" He started to plead.

Yeleva cut him off, "Even my powers have their limits; you have just been blinded by love!"

"And you have always been blind to it... I have given my life freely," Raznir said with a deep sadness, "If you wish to preserve me, then I shall serve you always."

She paused, sobbing. She knew all too well the agony which the ritual caused. Many died in the process; others lost themselves entirely, living on as a maddened beast broken in mind and body.

When she had turned into a Vampire, she had almost lost herself to madness. She refused to risk that with Raznir.

She wanted to protect him. She could not bear the pain of losing him...of seeing him lose himself. She had loved him.

"I wish you to remain by my side." She said in answer to him. Her voice was firm and commanding as ever, but tears coursed down her cheeks.

"We may still be able to do this. We won't know unless we try."

The air continued to clear, the shadows sinking into the earth. It seemed as they faded, so did Raznir.

She knew it wouldn't work. Yet if she could not convince him to share their last goodbyes, she would at least grant his dying wish as best she could.

"Kneel, Raznir," she said, wiping the tears away.

With life still draining from his eyes, he was too weak to move completely on his own.

Yeleva helped him to his knees, steadying him with her hand under his chin. As the shadows dispersed completely, the moon emerged from the clouds, casting rays of light.

"To join with me in eternity, you must cede your mortal essence. Relinquish your blood and accept my own." She began to recite, "Shall you embrace this curse as your own?"

"Yes...My...Lady." Raznir said, barely able to breathe. He was using all the strength he had to stay on his knees.

Yeleva looked at his face, trying to picture his confident smile again through the blight.

"I am sorry I did not love you as you deserved," she said. Then she sliced her sword across Raznir's wrist.

It was unorthodox, but it would have to do.

Blood did not spill, but a black ichor slowly oozed from the wound and flowed to his fingers.

Then she took the blade across her own wrist, pouring as much blood as she could into his mouth.

She thought she saw his lip curl into a smile before his eyes dimmed to a dark grey. He tipped slowly to the side and collapsed to the ground.

Then there was silence. Not a moan or cry left to hear.

She thought back to the last few sentences of the Necrorb poem. The one that gave the instructions to use the relic.

"From shattered sphere, the shadows rise,

Leaving black blood and empty eyes.

No spell can spare those doomed to die,

Only silence where the living lie."

She would live on knowing things might have been different. She would take everything back now for a second chance. If only she had turned him earlier. There might have been a way for them to live on. Eternity is a long time to have regrets.

He was gone, so there was nothing left to cry over.

Perhaps, all along, she was the *living lie*.

"Goodbye, Raznir," Yeleva said.

She turned and walked back through the gate. Her gate had held. Her castle was protected. Her Drained subjects remained safe inside of its walled.

All but one.