

Gareth I

The Bandits came slinking from the shrubs aside the trail like wraiths in the damp morning gloom.

Sir Gareth counted four, all raw-boned men garbed in muddied rags, rusted farm tools clutched in white-knuckled fingers, eyes bright in dirty faces. The big ugly one in front wielded a hatchet, its head crusted with black blood. A faint rustle from above revealed a fifth hiding up in the shadows of the old oak that leaned over the trail, the thin outline of a shortbow just visible through the branches. Somewhere in the canopy, a sparrow trilled in alarm, and the young Knight Errant sighed. *Your warning comes too late, bird. Always, I am beset by violence. Why does fate frown on me so? Am I not humble? Do I not pray enough, not give enough alms?*

Sir Gareth glanced aside at Willam. The Veteran Soldier gestured subtly to the tree, then to the reaching weeds and shrubs behind them. *Well of course there's more.* Sir Gareth had seen many such men down in Mercantia, in the bloody wake of the last round of Trade Wars. Men shat on by fate, with nothing to lose and less to live for, merely existing from moment to moment. *I know your struggle. I feel your pain. I too, am fate's well-used privy.* A handsome privy, it had to be said, but shit was still shit, no matter how pretty the hole it fell into.

Strider gnashed his teeth and lowered his massive head as if preparing to charge, as ornery a warhorse as there ever was. *Mind still down south too, eh? Reliving our glorious charge to skewer Bloodmane, I bet. Fate did not frown on me that day, oh no.* The muddy track, humped with thick roots and scattered with twigs, was just wide enough to accommodate two horses abreast. For a skilled enough horse and rider, a charge wasn't out of the question. Sir Gareth slouched low in the saddle and stroked Strider's thick neck. *Not just yet, boy. We'll give them a chance to live, same as they've given us. The alms of a warrior. We all deserve that much, even the lowest of vermin.*

Willam leaned over his horse and spat, then scratched the bristly black hairs that dusted his lantern jaw. The lines of his face deepened as he scowled down at Cristan, who was leading the pack mules. "Some Scout you are, boy. Didn't notice this bunch of bad apples?"

Here they go again. Sir Gareth made a wing over his heart, four fingers straight, thumb tucked tight to his palm. *Dragons, preserve me.*

“Well I didn’t come this way, did I?” Cristan fired back. He had always been a big lad, but he’d had a growth spurt recently and was almost as tall as Willam, who was not a small man by any means. “The good sir bid me to scout the road, not this godsforsaken goat trail, so scout the road I did! We only came this way on account of all the Caravaneers clogging the stones. I done my duty!”

“To the letter,” said Sir Gareth, swatting at a mosquito buzzing in his ear.

Willam ignored him. “He probably thought you’d have the good sense to sniff around a bit. I could smell this lot from leagues away. Thought we were about to be ambushed by a passel of bloodthirsty pigs.”

One of the Bandits grunted, perhaps offended by the comparison. He was similarly ignored. *Do not fret. You will have our undivided attention soon enough.*

“Oh shove off, you miserly old drunk!” said Cristan. “I found them berries, didn’t I? Didn’t hear any complaints when you were stuffing your face!”

Willam cracked a smile. “Didn’t hear any complaints when I was stuffing your mother, either. A shame she didn’t teach you to respect your elders.”

“Fraid not.” Cristan sniffed. “She only mentioned respecting my betters, and you ain’t one of ‘em.”

“Bettors, eh? I certainly would’ve been better off if I’d kept my coin in its purse, I’ll tell you that. But your mother was a fine lass, finest lass I’d ever seen. Too fine for the likes of a killer like me, Asherah bless her soul. But one less cheeky bastard following me around would’ve saved me a world of grief, I swear. No offense, Gareth.”

“None taken, old man.” He *was* a bastard, after all. The most royal bastard to have ever lived. No man living or dead could contest his pedigree, not with a King for a father and a Queen for

mother, but many men contested his inheritance. There were armies full of them. *Fate gave my enemies thousands of swords, and me only the one.*

“Never have sons,” Willam told the Bandits. “They are pains in the arse.”

“I am sure my father would have agreed,” said Sir Gareth. *Would he still be King of Vallon, if he hadn't welped me on my mother? Would he still yet live?*

“Nah, not your father.” Willam shook his head. “He loved you as much as a man can love his son.”

“He certainly had a strange way of showing it.” The old scar on his chest gave a phantom twinge. “Suppose he was just troubled, then?”

“Well of course he was! Betrayed by his own brother, driven from his own lands, the love of his life wedded to another man. Any man would be troubled after so many losses, so many defeats. Is it any wonder he lost his way? And to think-”

“Oi!” shouted the axeman. “Wha-What the fuck is this? We didn't come by for a chat!” He looked absolutely flummoxed, as if he had been struck soundly across the head with a heavy cudgel. He glanced among his fellows, each of them stricken with stupefied silence.

Not going quite how you had imagined, is it? Sir Gareth supposed they thought themselves frightening, and perhaps they were, to whatever poor Merchants or Shepherds that normally came this way. Willam was more talker than fighter these days, and Cristan was still half-a-boy, but they had faced far worse things than a few half-starved Bandits in tattered tunics. Half-starved Soldiers for one, which weren't much different now that he thought about it. At the lower levels, at least. Better armor and better weapons, but no better sense. If this lot had any they would have stayed hidden and waited for easier prey to wander by. *But I cannot fault them for their ignorance. They don't know who we are, or what we've faced. Bloodmane and his wives would've made a quick meal of this lot. Quite literally, if the stories were true.*

The axeman's eyes slid across Sir Gareth's face to the long white hilt that leered over his mailed shoulder. *Admiring the golden pommel? Wondering how much it might be worth? More than your life, for*

a certainty. Perhaps even more than mine. It would have been prudent to keep it wrapped and hidden, but Sir Gareth couldn't resist wearing it, and it very much wanted to be worn.

"Forgive my friends," Sir Gareth said, smiling pleasantly as if the Bandits were fellow Knights of honor and not the low creatures they were. *Uncle Art always said it cost nothing to be courteous.* "We have been long on the road, and they have forgotten their manners on the way. Not that there was ever much to forget." He laughed, but no one joined him. "Pray forgive me for my reticence, as well. I am Sir Gareth of Ruatha." Strangely, that seemed to make them angry, much to his puzzlement. "These are my squires Willam of Strathford and Cristan of Brenton. Loyal and good men both, if a touch unrefined and prone to verbosity. Nothing like you fine gentlemen, I am sure, but manners are often a casualty of war. Tell me, who leads among you? Step forward, please. You have nothing to fear from me. We are all civilized men, are we not?"

Another glance among them. And then, "Well met, Sir Gareth...of *Ruatha.*" The voice came from behind, old and gruff, with an edge menace. *Now the jaws of the rusty trap close shut.* "What a fine bunch of lads you are. My name is 'give us your horses and we'll let you live'. Weapons and armor too, if you please. Do as we say, and this ends with you lot still breathing. Fight us, and we'll kill you and take our due from your corpses. I got a archer up in that tree—"

Swift as a wind sprite, Willam put a blowgun to his lips and blew, hard and quick, like the marshmen down in Gressil had shown him. A moment later, the archer tumbled from the tree and thumped the ground with a squelching thud. No one moved for a long moment. No one spoke. Strider stomped the mud, grunted. The mules nickered. *And now here we are. The sweet pause just before the shout of release.* Somewhere in the brush, a toad croaked.

There was motion, sound, the steel whisper of blades drawn, the clatter of hoof and boot, the clinking of mail and the creaking of leather. Sir Gareth wheeled Strider about to face the speaker, Willam laughing behind him, Cristan flinging insults like rocks from a sling. Somehow Caliburn was already in his hand, the bright metal glinting in the scattered sunlight, its presence a sharp touch in the back of his mind. He could not hear its voice yet, but one day it would speak to him.

The Knight Errant dug his heels into Strider's flanks, leveled the blade like a lance, caught a glimpse of wide eyes and a wild beard as the speaker threw himself into the shrubs.

His fellow wasn't as quick on his feet. The bandit barely had time to scream before Gareth crunched him across the face with the flat of his blade. The man crumpled, blood gushing from his broken nose.

Willam was still laughing behind him, a deep belly laugh that echoed through the boughs, and his mirth was infectious.

The third bandit had gathered himself, and jabbed at Gareth with his sharpened stick. Smiling, the Knight Errant twisted in his saddle, swung his sword, and chopped the spear in half.

He felt powerful in that moment, brimming with might, like he always did when the fight was on and his blood was up. But the moment could not last. He had seen powerful men, and he was a long way from those lofty heights. A truly powerful man wouldn't have drawn his blade at all.

"Surrender now, and I will spare you," Sir Gareth said. "But if you attack me, I will leave your corpse for the worms."

The man threw down his half-spear and raised his hands, palms out. "Don't kill me, sir! I surrender!" He fell to his knees. "By the gods, I surrender. Great Mother bless you, Sir Knight—"

"Spare me your groveling, if you please. It is unbecoming, even of a cretin like you. Keeping your word will be enough, I think." Sir Gareth glanced over his shoulder. Willam had put one man in the dirt, disarmed another, and was pummeling a third with his bare fists while Cristan stood by with his sling in his hand, jeering and insulting them both. The big axeman was slumped at the young Scout's feet, wincing as he pressed his hand to head, blood dripping down his face.

A rustle in the shrubs. Labored breathing, a quiet curse. Sir Gareth listened for a moment, head tilted, then quickly jabbed the wild growth with his sword. A shout burst up from the shrubs, and more curses. The speaker stumbled out onto the trail, one hand up in surrender, the other holding his bleeding shoulder.

Sir Gareth gave him a sharp smile. "Had enough?"

“More than enough,” the man grunted, sweat beading his brow. He didn’t seem to be stuck too deep, but pain was pain. “This was a fool idea.” He let out a heavy sigh, then winced. “If only I’d had the stones to cross the mountains.”

You would die, crossing the mountains. “Banditry is no less illegal outside of Rhys. The only difference is how they kill you, when they catch you. Which mountains were you crossing? The Bannerlords of Albion have a taste for beheadings, the Ruathans will have you drawn and quartered, and in Vallon they’ll give you to the flames. Now sit.” When Sir Gareth turned back again, the third man was slumped on his rump and Willam was wiping his hands clean on his jerkin. He hadn’t even broken a sweat, nor taken a bruise. Cristan stood over the downed man, vigorously slapping him awake.

“Why dismount?” Sir Gareth asked.

“The little shit dared me. He forgets that I’m a 6th level *Veteran* Soldier. Had to remind him of who his father was, save me the trouble of beating him for his insolence.”

Cristan stepped away as the man moaned awake. “Good show, thrashing a handful of lowly Bandits. Bet this lot aren’t even past their first level.”

Willam scoffed. “*You* aren’t hardly past *your* first level.”

I should’ve never asked. As the two started bickering anew, Sir Gareth made the Bandits line up one by one in the muck, and those that couldn’t move themselves he had moved by their fellows. A few scuffs and bruises and suddenly they were like whipped dogs, scrambling to obey his orders with that pitiful sort of expression that beaten dogs get sometimes. He made them sit on their hands before he addressed them, just in case one of them felt brave. He could’ve just killed them, and probably should’ve, but he was curious. It was clear they were new to banditry, so why? What had driven them so low?

“Now where were we? Ah yes, your names.” Sir Gareth walked Strider down the line to loom over the speaker. Willam was closer now, watching the Bandits with a steely gaze, while Cristan tended

the mules and his father's horse. Deep in the brush, the toad was still croaking. "If I recall correctly, your name is 'give us your horses and we'll let you live', correct?"

The man winced. "That was ill done," he wheezed. "My name is Tomas. Of Greenoak."

"A pleasure, Tomas of Greenoak. Judging by you and your fellows' truly innovative raiment and weapons, I imagine you all were Farmers before you fell to banditry?"

"Some of us is Farmers, it's true. Bly here was a Carpenter." Tomas nodded his head towards the ugly one, thin trails of blood drying on his face. "Nearing my third level as a Farmer, before Raiders come and burned our fields and stole our livestock."

Three levels as a Farmer was nothing to laugh at, thought Sir Gareth, when Common classes could only Rise to the fifth.

"Took some of our wives too," said Bly. "And my daughter, Willow." His lip began to tremble, eyes growing wet with unshed tears. "She weren't no woman. Just a girl, a sweet girl. Good with bees, she was. Was gonna apprentice her to the Beekeeper. Why take her?"

"Raiders? In Rhys?" Willam sounded skeptical. "Brave Raiders, to challenge the Church of Adonai so brazenly. I can't think of anyone stupid enough to try. Hylians maybe? Might find a few this far south, and if anyone is stupid enough, it's those mountain worshipping heathens." He spat into the mud.

"We reckon they came down from Ruatha," said Tomas. Everyone looked to Sir Gareth at that, even Willam. "They had the look of Ruathans, with them round banded shields and throwing spears. There's been battles, I've heard, and refugees coming over the mountains by the score."

Battles? Sir Gareth had a half-sister up in Ruatha. He remembered a laughing girl, gangly and fierce, with a head of thick red hair, just like his. Couldn't hardly recall her face, but he remembered her name. Beowyn the Bold, and it had been him that first added the 'bold'. "Battles against who?" Willam had yet to look away, and it was starting to make Sir Gareth uncomfortable. "The Hylians?"

Tomas shrugged, then winced from the pain in his shoulder. “Could be, but folks is saying it’s the old King Consort. Lord Grindal something-or-other. Say he stole the throne from the young Queen after the old Queen died. Exiled her from court and put a bounty on her head.”

It was as if the world had stopped. Surely he had heard wrong. This was a joke, an illusion, a false trick of magic. Any second now some mangy hedge-wizard was going to come cackling out the brush, laughing about how he had fooled them all. But the moment never came, and the silence lingered until Sir Gareth managed to speak. “The old Queen...*died*. How? Was it the King Consort as well?”

Tomas shrugged again, then winced again. “Weren’t a man that done her in, but some manner of monstrosity. I’ve heard some say it was the Fomori, but others is claiming it was Driders.”

Dead. My mother is dead. Sir Gareth had more questions, but he found he could not speak, his teeth pressed too tight for even the slightest sound to worm through. His eyes were burning. *Dead. My mother is dead.* She had been the first to put a sword in his hand. Led his pony herself, for his first ride. He had longed to see her, after Arturan passed and he was freed from his oaths, but he had told himself that it wasn’t the right time, that his presence would cause undue strife with her Barons, and had gone south instead to fight in some meaningless war for coin and glory. And to Rise, always to Rise, as if gaining levels was the most noble ideal a man could aspire to. And what did he have to show for his troubles? Three levels as a full Knight and a dead mother. *Dead. My mother is dead.* He felt like the shittiest privy in all the kingdoms. But what could he have done? Whatever could kill the Highlander Queen of Ruatha would make quick work of him.

Caliburn thrummed in his mind at the thought, like a cat purring in pleasure. Somehow, it brought clarity, cut right through the fog of self pity. There was nothing he could have done. Not for his mother. He simply wasn’t strong enough, not even with the sword. But he would be. He made the wing over his heart. *By the Dragons, I so swear, that vengeance and justice shall be mine.* There was no response from the Dragons. He hadn’t yet Risen far enough to reach their notice.

“So let me get this straight,” Willam was saying. “Just so we’re clear. Ruathan Raiders burned your farms and took your women, so you lot trudged on over to Rionne to what, rob Merchants and the

like just a few miles outside the city? Don't seem very smart to me. Why not take your pitchforks and rakes and go after the Raiders yourselves?"

Tomas spat. "We came to beg the Count for justice. Group of us tried tracking the bastards, but it didn't end well."

"What of your Village Head?" Willam said. "They killed him as well?"

"Cut him open like a pig and left him laid out on the village green," said Tomas. "We pay our taxes to Master Mortimer, the spineless shit. I told him myself of what happened, and he threw me out in my arse. Didn't even look at me. Just waved his hand, and out the Cavaliers took me. Wouldn't let me back in the city after that. Sent another in my stead, and haven't seen him sense. Reckon he's dead, most likely."

Sir Gareth finally found his voice, and when he spoke it was sharp and deep, like a knife through the gut. "I will speak to Master Mortimer in your stead. And, once my business in Rionne is finished, I will hunt down these Raiders and bring them to justice."

"You will?" said Tomas, hope making his voice faint.

"You *will*?" said Willam, disbelief making his voice rough.

"I will. And I will pen a letter of introduction for the Knight of Arturan's Rest. He would have you, at my word."

"And King Mordan would have their heads, if he finds out you sent them," Cristan muttered from over by the mules. "Should've just given him the bloody sword." But nobody seemed to hear him, except for Sir Gareth, who paid him no mind.

"Never heard of no Arturan's Rest," said Bly.

"It used to be called Camlann, before King Arturan was buried there," said Sir Gareth. *First my father. Then Uncle Art. And now my mother. My mother is dead.*

“Huh,” grunted Tomas. “Arturan’s Rest, eh? You’re a good man, Sir Gareth.”

“I try to be, when fate allows. Perhaps one day I shall succeed.”

Tomas looked thoughtful now. “Never been to Albion. Never been far from Greenoak, really. How far is this Arturan’s Rest?”

Sir Gareth thought for a moment. The mountain roads were not for the faint of heart. “About a month of travel, perhaps, if you stick to the road.”

“A month?!” crowed one of the Bandits.

“You’ll want to stay on the road in the wild places,” said Willam. “Up in the Weepers, but especially in the forest. Trust me. There’s dark things in the Stonewood. Old things.”

“They’re called trees,” said Cristan.

“Shut your gob, boy. The creatures of the wood aren’t idiots. They can tell a hard meal from an easy one. No offense boys, but you lot are easy eating.” He looked them each in the eye, suddenly deathly serious. “Stay on the road, you hear? And if you hear something crying, ignore it. Got enough dead men on my conscience without adding you eight idiots.”

It was then that the archer groaned awake, snapping up suddenly, a little dart dangling from his neck. “Did we get them?”

“No,” said Tomas, face pensive. “But we got something. You’re a rare sort of Knight, Sir Gareth of Ruatha. A rare sort.”

“The rarest.” Sir Gareth somehow found it in himself to grin. What were a few more turds for fate’s favorite privy? Just shit as usual.