

The Damsel's Tale: Chapter 1

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The following comprises the first chapter of a collaborative writing experiment between Sir Guy des Bontemps (aka Geoff Buss) and Damsel Elise (aka Kit Buss), a writing partnership between father and daughter, both in true life and as alter egos on this website.

The intention of this collaboration is two-fold: firstly, for the two of us to write alternate chapters of the story, thereby working partially independent of each other; and secondly, but more importantly, to grow the story along roughly similar lines to those used in RPGs.

Perhaps the main differences between RPG and this endeavour are that we have a basic plot with an end objective and we have set ourselves some limitations; namely, we plan to conclude the story satisfactorily by the end of Chapter 10, and each chapter is limited to between approximately 2,500 and 3,000 words.

Finally, we both freely admit that we are practising completely free literary licence, enabling us to develop our own story with little regard to strict adherence or observance of any traditional or given histories or characters already written about in official or fan-based Bretonnian literature. We do this purely to avoid any restrictions to our creative writing. Nevertheless, we both hope that you - the reader - enjoy the story as it unfolds.

Sir Guy des Bontemps (June 2008)

Chapter One

Sir Guy des Bontemps embraced his only daughter Elise, the Damsel of Brionne, in a bear-like hug.

"I urge you, daughter, to return to the safety of these walls as speedily as you can," he said hoarsely, trying his best to hide his emotions from her. He knew that her mission was vital to the safekeeping of the southern region of Bretonnia while many of its knights and their retinues were away on crusade in the Southlands and Araby. This did not change the fact, however, that he would much rather it did not fall to her, as a Damsel of the Lady, to embark on this dangerous task.

"You will be protected by the Queen's champion, the Knight of the Perilous Lance, and by Jasperre Le Beau. I have also provided you with a small contingent from my garrison to escort you. I'm afraid they're all I can afford to spare in these perilous times, Elise. So, mind now that you don't stray from the main highways. And defer to Jasperre's advice when needs must, my dear. I fear for your safety and would accompany you myself if circumstances did not dictate my need to remain here in Donjon sur Petite Brienne. However, I-"

"Yes, father, I know," Elise cut in. "You've already explained your reasons to me quite clearly, and I understand. I honestly do, father. Now, no more fuss about my safety. And no more instructions, please- I shall be adequately protected by Jasperre and Perilous, and by your men-at-arms and bowmen. Good Lady bless me, father! Any more protection than I already have and I might as well make a public proclamation of my purpose!" She drew in a breath and let it slowly back out again. "Now: let me be on my way. No more ifs or buts. I love you, Papa." The Damsel embraced him momentarily, and then turned to

stride purposefully to where her horse was held ready for her by a young page.

Jasperre, already mounted on his magnificent white pegasus, Cirrus, waited patiently at a distance before the modest castle's barbican as Sir Guy bade Elise yet again good speed and safe return. Jasperre glanced briefly at Perilous and then at the two dozen men-at-arms and bowmen, to reassure himself that everyone was ready to leave before he spurred Cirrus into flight.

Perilous returned Jasperre's glance with a nod of his helmeted head, and Elise, now mounted on her horse, took the reins from the page and gently urged the mount into a walk. She turned briefly to raise her hand in a gesture of farewell to her father, before nudging her horse into a trot and moving up alongside the barded grey of Perilous. The small company of men fell into step behind Elise and Perilous, as Jasperre circled Cirrus up and around until he could face Sir Guy below him and dip his lance in salute to the old knight of the realm.

Sir Guy acknowledged Jasperre's mark of respect to him with a brief wave of his hand while he watched his beloved daughter ride away with only two brave knights and a handful of men for protection.

"Lady watch over her for me and keep her from harm, I pray thee" he said quietly as he knuckled a tear from his brimming eyes.

Then, regaining his composure and drawing himself up, he turned on his heel and strode back through the barbican towards the courtyard within, calling for his garrison's captain, Ansfoi.

"My Lord" Ansfoi acknowledged, falling in beside Sir Guy. The captain was a lean but strongly-built man of middling age, and knew from the many years of service to his lord to keep his silence until invited by him to speak his thoughts.

The autumn air chilled them as their footfalls echoed on the cobblestones, and both men were glad of the welcoming glow of fire as they entered the great hall. A warm golden light spilled from the large hearth, illuminating the rich tapestries on the walls, and where its light did not reach in the recesses of the expansive room, the shadows were banished by tallow candles flickering in their brackets. The hall was silent apart from the crackling of burning logs and the distant voice of Sir Guy's head cook berating one of her kitchen servants.

Sir Guy sat himself in his usual high-backed chair at the side of the fire, his hand nudged a few moments later by the nose of his faithful dog, Belle, who joined him as he gazed into the flames, lost in thought. Ansfoi stood quietly to one side of Sir Guy's chair, respecting his lord's need for silence while the old knight mulled over his thoughts before speaking.

Sir Guy broke off his trance-like gaze into the leaping flames and aware of Ansfoi's presence over his right shoulder, ordered a page standing in the shadows of the side aisle to fetch a jug of mead and two drinking bowls from the kitchen. He then invited his garrison captain to report the status of his remaining garrison strength and its readiness. Sir Guy asked more from a need to keep his thoughts from wandering back to his concerns about his daughter's safety and the vital success of her mission. As Ansfoi began to give his account of his company's status, the page poured the mead into the wooden

bowls, giving one to Sir Guy with an accompanying bow of respect and then the other bowl to Ansfroi with a nod of deference.

“... and finally, bushels of barbed and broadhead arrows, we have nine score and ten, my lord,” Ansfroi concluded.

“Hmmm... Not as good as I would have wished it, but better than I had hoped,” Sir Guy replied as he savoured his drink. A good brew, he mused to himself as he took another sip from his bowl. “Ansfroi, I want you to set up a regular patrol of the estate boundary. Assign a dozen mounted men – at least half of them bowmen - to circle the estate at semi-regular intervals, so that their frequency cannot be easily discerned by anyone spying on us. Each time a patrol returns to the castle, have the sergeant report to you, even if it is to say that there was nothing unusual to remark upon. However, if something is observed by a patrol, I want you to report it to me immediately you are notified yourself.” He paused to think for a moment. “Also, each patrol should be comprised of fresh men; make sure that they ride out in a direction that does not repeat the route of the previous patrol. Do I make my purpose clear?” he concluded.

“Indeed, my lord,” Ansfroi nodded. “I shall see to it immediately and report back to you as soon as the first patrol sallies out. I’ll ensure also that the men from a returning patrol are stood down for six hours, so that they may rest and take some victuals and refreshment, if that pleases my lord.”

“It does, Ansfroi...thank you - on your way now.”

As the captain made to take his leave, Sir Guy called after him.

“And one final thing, Ansfroi: instruct the patrols that they are only to defend and not engage. Not unless absolutely necessary. Is that clear? I need to conserve every able-bodied man and the weaponry that I have remaining to me. If a patrol is attacked, they are to return to the safety of the castle as quickly as possible.”

“And if they come upon others under attack, my lord? Villeins, for example...” Ansfroi enquired.

Sir Guy exhaled heavily down his nose, thinking. “Then they should engage only to secure the safety of those involved. If the foe is too numerous to deal with, they should either send a rider back for additional help or make good their escape with as many of the folk as they can save. Have I your complete understanding of the situation, Ansfroi? If so, then make haste.”

“You do, my lord. It will be as you command,” the captain confirmed. “I take my leave, then.”

He bowed and then turned to stride quickly away to see that his lord’s instructions were carried out to the letter.

As Ansfroi left the hall, he heard Sir Guy call for his reeve to give an account of the castle’s provisioning, and what additional victuals and materials could be brought in from the estate at short notice.

After satisfying himself that, in general, his good management of his fiefdom and encouragement of its occupants had yielded the results he sought and required, Sir Guy was able to relax a little while he consumed more of the fiery mead. As he fell into a mesmeric gaze watching the dancing flames, Sir Guy let his mind wander to reflect on the many aspects of Bretonnia that had unfolded over recent years. One in particular sorely troubled him. Many of the knights had taken up a new fashion that, to Sir Guy, was so distasteful he had publicly denounced it, incurring the displeasure of some of his closer allies, as a consequence. But how, in the Blessed Lady's name, could the young knights - and even some of the older ones, shame on them - sink to such levels of excess? Of affectation? Taken to adorning their warhorses and even themselves in many cases, with escutcheons; oaths; medallions; ribands; and other such fripperies... They looked more like a horde of foppish Empire dandies than Bretonnians. It demeaned everything that a Bretonnian knight embodied! Oh, how he mourned the old days and customs of Bretonnian knighthood; the chivalry, the false modesty, the chasteness and the purposefulness of it all. Now, the new generation of knights seemed generally to be so much more arrogant: so self-possessed and full of braggardliness, all-in-all totally abhorrent to the old knight's sensibilities. Perhaps he was just getting old and too set in his ways, he thought.

As a young knight, he had ridden out on quest and fought in the east mostly against the greenskins, as well as a combined horde of beastmen and Norse savages, giving good account of himself in his deeds and actions on the battlefield; all in the name of the Lady and in service to Bretonnia.

His knightly reputation secured, he then proceeded to make a name for himself as a man of both good humour and good nature. Sir Guy expected and deserved the respect of his position as the lord of Donjon sur Petite Brienne. The old knight treated his retinue and retainers well and led by example rather than by fear or intimidation; those he held in reserve only for his foes, the fell creatures of the northern wastes and other loathsome dark places bordering Bretonnia's realm. Although he was from an older, more established lineage dating from Bretonnia's more noble days of yore, he was well regarded by most, if not all, his fighting men and his servants alike. Guy de Bussi, Suzerain des Provinces Sousbrienne-Lorental, was not also named Sir Guy 'des Bontemps' for naught. He held banquets and celebrated even the smallest successes with festivities, to which all dwelling within his estates were invited. Although these festive occasions were not lavish by any stretch of the imagination by general Bretonnian standards, everyone who attended enjoyed them and appreciated his generosity, nevertheless. In return, he expected and obtained a good day's work from all those who maintained his estates, and loyal service and dependability from his fighting men. In this state of mutual appreciation, Sir Guy's fiefdom generally remained a happy and contented one. Of course, there were always the odd disputes between his villeins and among his garrison; the usual petty disputes over property or holdings, or fisticuffs resulting from over-indulgence or gaming in the local brew-house. But whatever their nature, these upsets were nothing that could not be settled by Sir Guy with a few stern but just words for the wrong-doer and some sympathetic but wise words for the injured party.

In his later years, he had focussed his efforts on encouraging and developing a trusting relationship with the elven folk who lived in the south-western fringes of the great Loren Forest. He had accomplished this first by leaving tributes and small tokens of friendship in the glades at the edge of the Forest that bordered upon the eastern side of his estate. It was through this perseverance he had won the elven folk's trust, and thus had encouraged further contact with them; leaving in place of tokens invitations to participate in archery tournaments. This was not merely born of naïve goodwill: the Elves' skill with bow and arrow was well-renowned, and the knight deliberately staged these contests to attract

them. And after nearly a score of years, his persistence finally came to fruition when a group of the Loren folk took up the invitation and sent a group of ten of their kind to out-shoot, not only every Bretonnian archer who was audacious enough to compete against them, but the very best (including Sir Guy, himself a champion archer) that Bretonnia could offer. Since that time, he had hosted members of the elven folk at some of his grander banquets, and could count several of their kin as friends, at least as far as the relationship between folks of two very different kinds of people and cultures would allow.

To his great satisfaction, Sir Guy had recently managed to secure an accord with his elven friend, Gryndelhûr, to provide mutual support and protection of the area surrounding Donjon sur Petite Brienne and bordering on Loren Forest. He could not very well be called 'manipulative' for his efforts; merely resourceful. Now he could at least feel reasonably certain of his ability to defend the countryside between the citadel of Quenelles and the northern edge of the Vaults.

He smiled to himself as he downed the last of his mead. Yes, he felt reasonably secure for the time being. But as he asked the page to refill his drinking bowl with more mead, Sir Guy returned his thoughts to the safety and security of his beautiful daughter, Elise. As he did so, the smile faded slowly from his lined face.

"How will she fare?" he mused aloud, so that the page attending him blinked.

"My Lord?"

"Hmm?" The old knight stirred at the question. "What? Ah-… yes. No matter, lad. Go to your bed, it is nearing the witching hour."

He dismissed the page with a wave of his hand and then returned his gaze to the glowing embers of the dying fire. Slowly his head drooped forward as the warmth of the fire and effects of the mead took him into sleep.

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