

The Damsel's Tale: Chapter 3

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The third chapter of The Damsel's Tale, a collaborative writing endeavour between Sir Guy des Bontemps and Damsel Elise.

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Chapter Three

A little over three weeks had passed since Elise's departure from Donjon sur Petite Brienne before the first dreadful rumour reached the north-west edge of Sir Guy's estate. One of the villeins had brought back an unconfirmed story he had heard from a Brienne river-man: the port city of Brionne, a thirty-day hard ride westward, had been invaded by a sea-borne force of undead corsairs that had sailed into the estuary of the Brienne. Those citizens of Brionne who weren't still fighting for their lives had already begun to form a column of refugees that was making its way east to escape the horrific onslaught. The rumour had returned to the castle with one of the patrols, and as soon as the garrison's captain was informed, he headed for the great hall, where he knew he would find his master.

Hearing the captain's approach as he entered from the far end of the hall, Sir Guy looked up from the manuscript he was studying only to meet Ansroi's grim expression.

"My lord, I bring disturbing news," said the captain, and proceeded to recount the tale to the Suzerain, whose gaze grew gradually bleaker as the story wore on.

"The villein heard this from a passing river-man going up-river, but was unable to provide any further proof of the story. The river-man told the villein that refugees are already headed in this direction," Ansroi said, concluding his report. ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^

"This is not only disturbing news, Ansroi, grave tidings indeed, if they are to be believed," the old knight responded slowly. "However, it is as I feared. The campaign to Araby has left Bretonnia's borders undefended, and the dark dominions are ever-vigilant for an opportunity to strike against our fair land. With so much movement to prepare for the crusades, on the roads and from the ports, it would be only a blind and deaf creature who could not know what it all suggested. Alas, now all Bretonnia is ripe for their fell intentions," he finished with a heavy sigh.

"Aye, my lord, it does not bode at all well," Ansroi agreed. "What would you have me do first, my

lord? Increase the patrols, or prepare the estate for a possible attack?â€•

The Suzerain pondered

Ansroiâ€™s request for direction for a few minutes while staring blankly at one of the wall hangings that depicted a battle scene, as though it was providing him with inspiration for the best plan of action to take.

After what seemed an age

to the captain, Sir Guy finally rose silently from his chair and went to an ornately carved wooden chest that lay almost hidden in a shadowed corner of the hall. Unlocking the chest, he removed a large rolled parchment, which he took to a nearby trestle table while summoning two attendant pages to bring some additional light for him.

â€œAnsroi, come over here

and help me with this,â€• Sir Guy instructed as he unfastened the cords securing the parchment, beginning to unroll it across the table.

The captain approached

as the pages brought lighted candles on tall iron stands to the table, and with the additional light casting its glow across the parchmentâ€™s surface, Ansroi could see it was a large map of Sir Guyâ€™s estate and the surrounding area, as far as the Brienne river and its tributary, the Petite Brienne. With the help of Ansroi and the two pages, Sir Guy weighted down the corners of the map before sending for a jug of mead, drinking bowls and a trencher of sweetmeats.

Once the pages had left, the knight began to reveal his plan to Ansroi.Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â

â€œI want you to pay close

heed to what I now say;Â there will be

much to carry out in the time we have left to us should the rumoured incursion prove to be true,â€• Sir Guy began. â€œAs I reckon it, if Brionne falls to the undead, they will be able to sail up-river and be at the confluence with the Petite Brienne, here,â€• Sir Guy indicated on the map. â€œWithin thirty five to forty days, should they remain unhindered by the elements or opposition by any of the garrisons scattered between ourselves and Brionne.â€• He broke off as the pages arrived with the sweetmeats and mead, and waited until they had finished serving first him and then Ansroi with a bowl each of the fiery liquid, before continuing to instruct his attentive captain.

â€œThose forty days are

vital to the success of our preparations for holding them off until some additional friendly forces can be mustered from Quenelles,â€• he continued.

â€œThat, or until Eliseâ€™s mission is completeâ€• he mused aloud.

At this last utterance,

Ansroi looked questioningly at Sir Guy â€œMy lord? Begging your pardon for my asking, but does the Damselâ€™s recent visit play a part in our defence?â€•

â€œAye, and hopefully for

the rest of Bretonnia besides, if the Lady wills it so,â€• came the reply, before he added: â€œI pray that it is so.â€•

He paused to gather his

thoughts while he sampled some of the sweetmeats, washing them down with a deep draught of the mead. Then, at length, he spoke again.

“Now. Heed me carefully, Ansfroi, for this is what we must do,” he said. “Firstly, we must establish the truth of the rumours. We’ll deploy scouting parties along the banks of the Brienne. Pick twelve good horsemen, split them into three parties and instruct them to ride no longer than five days of hard riding westward towards Brionne.”

He paused to take another drink from his bowl, then went on.

“They are to gain as much information as possible, but only that which can be corroborated by more than one source. It is essential that they gauge the size of the undead force and number of sailing vessels, as well as their current progress and location. The scouts are all to return here without delay after the five days are exhausted; sooner if the rumours are proved true before their allotted time is used. Is that clear, Ansfroi?” he asked, looking intently at his trusted captain.

“It is, my lord,” replied Ansfroi.

“Good! Ah! Yes! And something else, Ansfroi: have the scouting parties report back on the refugees and their movements.”

The captain gave a nod in acknowledgement of this afterthought.

“Next,” Sir Guy ploughed on. “While the scouts are abroad, continue to dispatch patrols of the estate boundary; but be sure to double their numbers. As one patrol returns, dispatch the next one immediately, but maintain their alternating routes. When a patrol encounters a villein’s holding, half of the patrol is to continue on its route, while the remaining half is to escort the villein, his family and any livestock he holds back to the castle,” Sir Guy paused for thought and a mouthful of sweetmeats. “Instruct the escort to ensure that the villein also brings with him any produce or materials that are immediately usable or stored for winter use. If there is an ass, donkey, horse or cart that can be used for work or transporting burdens, these are also to be brought, along with any wood or furniture that can be employed for cooking fuel. The folk can bring spare clothing and their bedding, but no other belongings save for any small, personal items of worth. Everything else is to be left behind. Is that clear?” he concluded with a far sterner tone to his question.

Again, the captain nodded. “It is, my lord,” he added, making known his understanding of the implied warning from his master.

Sir Guy grunted his approval to Ansfroi’s response while he studied the map, and held his wooden bowl out towards one of the pages to indicate he was to refill it with mead. While this was going on, Ansfroi took the opportunity to take a good long drink from his own bowl, savouring the sweet, burning liquid as it coursed down his throat.

Looking up from the map

to ensure that he still had his captain's attention, Sir Guy then continued to explain his plan and Ansfroi's responsibilities for making sure it went as intended.

"Once we have started to

gather in all the villeins and their folk and livestock, we must then prepare some forward defences that are guaranteed to hinder the fleet's advancement as much as we are able. You are to take a detachment of men from the garrison, together with those serfs who have the skills to help build a number of war machines in as short a span of time as possible. Assemble a trebuchet, mangonel and two ballistas on opposite banks of the Brienne below its confluence with the Petite Brienne, here and here," Sir Guy indicated on the map and continued "I want to be able to sink any corsair vessel that approaches up-stream."

"Set the war-machines

well back from the banks of the river, but still able to cover the width of the river for at least one and one half thousand paces down-river of the machines' positions. Have the mangonels capable of casting burning pitch and naphtha at the corsairs. I want to burn them and their foul ships in the very fires of hell, where they belong," he said thumping the table so that the pages jumped with surprise.

"The trebuchets are to

cast rocks into the hulls of their galleys and vessels, so they are utterly destroyed and taken down to the bed of the river," Sir Guy continued passionately, his eyes starting to gleam. "What we are unable to burn, we can drown! And at the same time we can blockade the river with the shattered hulls of their damnable ships!"

"And the ballistas, my

lord? Of what would you have them capable?" Ansfroi queried.

"They are to be capable

of carrying both fire and destruction to the undead and their minions. I want them to be skewered and roasted like their unspeakable kind MUST BE!," Sir Guy almost roared, being so consumed by fury by this point. Catching himself, the knight took a long deep breath both to calm and allow himself to drink from his bowl without choking. However, at the sudden outburst, several servants with apprehensive expressions had appeared at the doorways into the great hall, but mostly from the adjoining kitchen. As Sir Guy regained his composure, the servants melted back into the rooms from whence they had come.

The knight had good

reason to feel such passionate hatred for the undead, for it was they who had slaughtered his parents and siblings when he was a young squire. At the time of this dreadful tragedy, he had been in the service of the Duc de Parravon and therefore far from his family's estates back in Brionne. As such, present circumstances offered the perfect opportunity to wreak the revenge he wanted on their kind.

"Aye, my lord, I shall

see that all is as you have instructed," Ansfroi acknowledged. "Will there be any other actions you wish me to see are taken in preparation for our defence?"

Sir Guy considered his words. "Hmm. Yes! Perhaps one or two more for now, Ansfroi. If any refugees should approach the estates for succour, you are to instruct the patrols to encourage them to continue their search in the direction of Quenelles. It cannot be helped: we will have enough trouble providing for our own estate folk within the protection of this holding, without the added burden of sheltering refugees. Hard as it may be on them, the truth of it is that they may provide a welcome diversion for any undead who are able to pursue them and thus win us some additional time until another garrison is able to come to our aid."

The knight paused for a moment before continuing: "Which brings me to the last part of my plan for the moment. Dispatch eight men on swift horses: two men each to ride to Quenelles, Chateau Mont Gris, Palais de Chevalier Carcassonne and Donjon Bricbec to request aid. I will prepare a letter bearing my seal, which each of the messengers is to carry to the commanders of these garrisons. I know that each of their liege lords is away on crusade and so I will be able to use my own position to call upon their fighting men to lend assistance. The "favour" will have to be repaid by me either in coin or in kind to each of the lords upon their safe return from Araby. Whenever that may come to pass," Sir Guy added.

He finished his mead and dismissed Ansfroi, saying "Away now and see to my instructions without delay. Our very lives depend on their success. I will prepare the letters to be carried by the messengers, so have them assemble here by dusk."

The garrison captain acknowledged this last instruction from his lord, and then bowing with a final "My lord", he quickly strode from the hall to set about overseeing the tasks to be carried out.

Sir Guy studied the map a little longer before finally re-rolling it and then fastening it closed with its cords. He replaced the rolled map back in its wooden storage chest and then locked the lid shut. Returning to the trestle table, he took a sheaf of parchment sheets and proceeded to draft the letters for the messengers, sealing each letter with a few drops of melted wax into which he pressed a large signet ring bearing his crest.

He summoned the two pages that attended him and said "Guillaume, instruct my reeve to attend me here at once. Renouf, you are to prepare my light armour, and instruct the kitchen to prepare food and refreshment for two travellers who are about to embark on a five-day journey. Tomorrow, you and I will ride to meet with Gryndelher in his arboreal lair. Off you both go now, and no dallying with the young wenches, you wretched rascallions. Haha!" he guffawed, partly from the mead taking its effect, partly from a sense of relief at having set his plan into motion, but for most part at the looks of delight and embarrassment on the faces of the two young lads.

The knight was now aware of his reeve's presence and asked him to attend closely, while he explained the chain of events he had set in motion. He finished his instructions to his reeve with:

"! and once the villeins are settled inside the quarters you have assigned them, I want you to put them to work helping with the preparations of the castle to withstand a possible

siege. No man, woman or child is to be left idle while they are under my protection within these walls. They all work and help wherever they are best suited. Is that understood, Hevre? If so, be off about your work now,â€• dismissing the man with a flicking gesture of his fingers. The reeve bowed low and took his leave.Â Â Â Â Â

As the late autumn light outside the great hall began to fade, Ansfroi entered the hall, followed by eight of Sir Guyâ€™s men-at-arms. The men lined themselves in front of the table at which their lord sat while he looked each one slowly over, as if appraising the captainâ€™s choice of men for the task at hand.

â€œIt appears you have made a good choice by the look of these men, captain,â€• Sir Guy decided finally. â€œDo you all understand what you have to do and that it is vital you succeed in your task?â€• he asked then, addressing the men directly. â€œIâ€™m sending two of you to each of your destinations to ensure that at least one, but hopefully both, delivers his message to the garrison commander and thereby accomplishes what is asked of you. Here are the sealed letters you are to deliver. Come forth and collect them now, and may the Lady protect you and lend speed to your horses.â€•

Looking to Ansfroi, Sir Guy gave him a nod to indicate his instructions had finished, after which each man strode forward in his turn to first salute smartly to Sir Guy, collect the letter from the table and then to step back into his place in the line. Once all the letters had been distributed, Ansfroi faced the men and issued the command: â€œTake to your mounts!â€• at which all eight men saluted smartly to Sir Guy, turned towards the door and marched as one out of the hall, followed at the rear by their captain.Â Â Â Â Â

After a short while, Sir Guy heard Ansfroi call for the gates to be opened, followed by the clatter of horsesâ€™ hooves on the cobbled surface of the courtyard as the messengers rode out into the cover of night to deliver Sir Guyâ€™s summons for help from the neighbouring garrisons.Â Â

Sir Guy began to mull over the tactics he had described earlier to his captain for defending the river, just to reassure himself that they were sound. He nodded to himself with satisfaction, and then rose slowly from his place at the big oak table and wearily made his way to his bed chamber; for tomorrow, he would need to rise early and put the next part of his plan into action.