



And now the tale that has to be told as she would want it told...

The sun was low in the sky and mist was rising again afore they stopped to rest. They built a pitifully small fire, roasted rodents for supper and sat around looking miserable.

‘It’s a damnable shame is what it is,’ said Thistlehead with a small hiss. None of them wanted to speak loud, for they were afraid as never before.

‘Never should have took the bitch,’ said Gorsegruncher. ‘I told him, I did. She’s a looker and they gives you trouble I says.’

‘Never did once, fibber!’ said Lurchless, raising his voicing a squeak.

They looked at each other and shuddered.

‘Sorry,’ whispered Lurchless.

They were the only three left and they did not know whether it was more accident than will of the Gods, because after getting out from that disastrous sandstorm they’d taken a wrong turning and got lost in the fog that laid low in them dirty old woods - if it was a fog, which they now doubted. They were covered in mud and dead leaves and looked like they’d been torn out of some pauper’s grave. Maybe they were alive for a reason and they knew it. Maybe they had to tell the tale. Unbiased, forthright, without embellishment. A bloody tale of retribution and of foul deeds gone awry.

After a while Lurchless asked, ‘Are we to say it all then?’

‘Aye, the full sorry tale,’ said Gorsegruncher.

‘Unexpurgated is how it should be,’ said Thistlehead. ‘That’s what she’ll be wanting, that’s what I be thinking.’ He did not think very often. Like his former boss, he favoured action.

‘Nothing less, nothing more,’ said Gorsegruncher.

They sucked on the burnt tails of the rodents thoughtfully.

‘I’ll begin then, shall I?’ said Lurchless. His face was still caked in blood that was not his.

‘Go on then,’ said Gorsegruncher. ‘Be brave for a change.’

‘And stick to the facts,’ said Thistlehead. ‘No frills. Leave off the poetry, you’re a warrior and no bard.’

‘Tell it as she would want it told,’ said Gorsegruncher.

‘Where shall I begin?’ asked Lurchless. His blistered hands twitched nervously.

‘Over the hills and far away is as good a start as any in this cursed place,’ spat Gorsegruncher. This had really been the worse day in his short brutal life.

‘Alright then,’ said Lurchless. He took the last swig of mead from his flask and began. ‘Over the hills and far away,’ he said, ‘in the West, in the realm of the Celts, there once lived a kind and gentle King whose lands stretched far and wide. Full of lush farmsteads and well watered market gardens, lots of apple and pear trees. The people were happy and prospered...’

‘Get to the rape and pillage,’ said Gorsegruncher impatiently.

‘Give me a chance, I’m just getting going,’ said Lurchless. ‘Every story needs a bit of context. Now, let’s say that this Kingdom had known peace for many years until the great Invasion from the North began. Wild bands of warriors, not unlike ourselves, whose own lands had grown barren and overused, strayed across the seven borders of the kingdom, doing a lot of *pillaging* and leaving nothing but an ashy trail of destruction.’

‘That’s better,’ said Gorsegruncher, rubbing his hands together. He was not warm even though the inside of his throat felt scorched raw.

‘The King had no army as such, least not what we’d call an army,’ continued Lurchless. ‘There had been no need for so long - people come to trade fine gemstones and silks and enjoy a bit of peace and quiet, not to destroy...’

‘As was our partiality,’ said Gorsegruncher, viciously poking a stick in the remains of the fire.

Lurchless pursed his scarred lips, rubbed his face irritably and continued. ‘At first, the King’s advisors called this incursion of Pictish Northerners a vile aberration. They said it would pass with the Summer and it was true that the raiders retreated back across the mountain passes from whence they came. But the following Spring, they were back, in greater numbers, striking farther into the Kingdom, and by the mid-point of the year, refugees were encamped on the King’s own doorstep, and there were reports from the Eastern provinces of an invasion by sea.’

‘Oooh, scary stuff,’ said Gorsegruncher.

‘Be serious,’ said Thistlehead. He was still shaking in his ruined boots and he didn’t know any time before when that had been the case. His sword was shattered and his brother Thistleface crushed flat as a Persian flatbread. ‘Go on,’ he said, ‘Tell the story, all of it.’

‘Well, the King was feeling helpless so he decided to look for help, didn’t he? He sent out a message far and wide, beyond the borders of his kingdoms to other lands. The message was simple. *Warriors Required Immediately to Repulse the Northern Invader. In return for nearly half the riches of my Kingdom. Signed, Good King Theosophus.*’

‘Was that his name then?’ said Gorsegruncher. ‘Never realised that. Bit poncy.’

‘There’s only three things you ever paid attention to,’ said Thistlehead. ‘A sharp blade, a keg of beer, and a woman’s arse, in that order.’

‘Tis the truth,’ said Gorsegruncher in a rare moment of self-reflection. He moved closer to the pathetic fire, grubbing out some chestnuts with his stick.

Lurchless continued. He knew what was left of his life might depend on it. He cleared his thoughts and said, ‘King Theosophus believed it better to give away half of

his riches than lose all of them by having the lifeblood of his dominions slowly drain and so it was the opinion of his advisors...'

'The ones we joyously slaughtered,' interjected Gorsegruncher.

'His *former* advisors,' said Lurchless, 'when they was still in a state of living, noted that no-one really knew how many riches he had accrued, and therefore it was unlikely that any forthcoming candidates for the job would be able to calculate what exactly they would be owed and so there might be some clever financial trickery involved in any deal.'

'Which we soon got the wise eye to,' said Thistlehead. 'Not as stupid as we look.'

Lurchless was getting used to the interruptions. He carried on enthusiastically, reasoning that a finely embroidered tale would lengthen his lifespan considerably. 'To the far south of the Kingdom,' he said, 'over a harsh mountain plateau, past many lakes and rivers and ravines, there lived a warlord, Vortwulf, of wicked and gruesome reputation, said to be descended from Vortigern himself. Vortwulf loved depraved conduct and merciless fighting so much he called his fortress Blood Castle. He garnished each tower with his battle standard, a red dragon on a purple background.'

'Home sweet home,' said Gorsegruncher.

'Blood Castle, also named because when we beheaded men and animals in their multitudes on the battlements, the blood spurted onto the grass below, running down to the river, desanguinated bodies left to hang there in iron cages as a grisly warning to others. Oh, it was an infamous castle. It stood proud on a headland looking out to sea, above the wide river draining out into the bay. The red rays of the setting sun glistened on the water below and reflections played on the ugly walls of the castle in a suitably bloodcurdling fashion.'

'Lovely description,' said Gorsegruncher. 'He's doing alright, isn't he?'

'We'll see,' said Thistlehead.

'And so Vortwulf, freshly washed for a change and resplendent in his silver armour so as to make a good impression, with his band of rapacious and oh-so-hungry-to-kill warriors, came to solicit an audience with this Good King, the ever-so-slightly-thick Theosophus. And how kindly were they received with the greatest of feasts laid out before them and there was much merriment and banter. But as usual there was some dirty dealing afoot with the King's cunning-but-see-through advisors. They, in their previous conniving, having enjoined Beatrice – she being the beautiful daughter of the monarch, his beloved only child - to serve Vortwulf and his lieutenants with many fine wines and ale, so that he might soon become so intoxicated he would sign a contract that was distinctly one-sided in favour of the King and not entirely to the benefit of us mercenary hordes.'

'But we don't do contracts, do we?' said Gorsegruncher, 'Seeing as we can't read and write.'

'The thing is, they was thinking their plan was succeeding cos Vortwulf marked his cross on the parchment and even raised a toast to the King and made like he was ignorant of what he was signing and he promised faithfully to rid the Kingdom of the plunderers and despoilers forthwith. But we knew Vortwulf always took what he wanted and liked a fight and would put a cross on your forehead with a pig skewer if

you but asked. We knew their plan was going to go awry. We could tell Vortwulf was all stoked up with this duplicity and enamoured with the gorgeousness of the damsel.'

'So off we went,' said Gorsegruncher, 'and dealt with the Pictish hordes.'

'With the might of his warriors, with killing swords and fire, Vortwulf duly laid waste to the invaders of the kingdom,' said Lurchless in his loudest and most sombre voice, in case anyone else out there in the forest was listening. 'Sprinkling their blood on the ground of eight battlefields from sea to sea, Vortwulf even pursued them to their deepest confines, ruining their houses and their young.'

'There was no rest by day or night,' said Gorsegruncher.

'He always was thorough, you could say that of him,' said Thistlehead.

'Everywhere we went, carnage,' continued Lurchless. 'Villages deserted, hearth fires were doused, wells polluted, dogs scurrying away with their heads hung low. No suck of acorn, nor berry to tongue crush, no ale to dribble. Vortwulf showed 'em what was what he did.'

'He did,' said Gorsegruncher. 'It was a very satisfactory business.'

'Up to that point,' muttered Thistlehead.

Lurchless nodded, as if in a daze. 'After several months of that sort of thing,' he said, 'we returned to the King victorious and met with a rapturous welcome, of sorts. Theosophus and his advisors were in a bit of a bother, no doubt thinking of the old adage about the frying pan and the fire. Still, there was yet another grand feast to be enjoyed. Vortwulf was decked out in his silver armour again, all polished up nicely. Half way through the wild boar stew, he got up and hotly demanded the daughter of the King. He said, "I will take half your riches, whatever they may be, and I will also take your daughter Beatrice as the prize, for she is fair and comely and will make good breeding stock for my empty house." There was a lot of cheering from our side but Theosophus didn't look too keen on this arrangement and his advisors were all gathered about with peace on their tongues and treachery in their hearts. But Vortwulf knew how to play this game and was used to following up a threat with a decisive deed or two.'

'He didn't make any threats as I do recall,' said Gorsegruncher. 'He should have threatened to rip out the King's windpipe with his teeth, something like that.'

'Vortwulf couldn't be bothered with making threats,' said Thistlehead. 'He just thought it one moment and the next moment he did it, no messing about, no strategems or cat and mouse play for him.'

'So, we did set about the King's retinue and killed 'em,' said Gorsegruncher. 'Up close with whatever was to hand. A nice little carving knife I had. Bit messy but it did the job.'

'We set about them like wolves in a sheep pen,' said Lurchless. His throat was excessively sore from the sand but he struggled on. 'And so the incautious sovereign was required to cede both his sovereigns and baubles along with his one and only offspring. But there was twist in the tale and it was this; the daughter of the King, this Beatrice...'

'Spiteful bitch,' said Gorsegruncher.

'Shut it,' said Thistlehead.

'Well, Beatrice had taken quite a fancy to Vortwulf. She dreamt about him coming back to take her away from her spoiled, well regulated and somewhat boring

life. She dreamt of what adventures she might have with this brave and daring warrior and of his fine castle, as fine as his shiny suit of silver armour.'

'Bit of a romantic, if you ask me,' said Gorsegruncher. 'It was the only thing that he bothered to keep clean and he never took it into battle. She hadn't a bloody clue, had she?'

'Aye, and we did in the end, did we?' asked Thistlehead bitterly.

'She thought he would be as faithful as he was strong,' said Lurchless, 'She built him up into something he wasn't. She was wanting a real man, without knowing what a real man can be. She'd only seen him that one time before, and by firelight in the hall when he was full of feisty good humour and had a good scrub for the first time in an aeon.'

'Softens the features, don't it?' said Gorsegruncher. 'The firelight, not the scrubbing up, cos dirt hides a man's scars, don't it?'

Lurchless nodded. 'Indeed,' he said. 'And this second time she saw him in the flesh, though he looked a little worse for wear, the dazzle of his silver armour hid a multitude of sins. So she was more than willing to journey back with us, despite the promise of it being a slow and tortuous journey with all those wagons laden down with the booty of the Kingdom. "I'll be back in one year for the next instalment," Vortwulf told the King. The King was crestfallen, he was, not at all Kingly. We travelled back to Blood Castle, over mountains and precipices, past rivers discoloured from source to mouth, through swampy land and measly towns we'd already ransacked, through hundred league on league of creaky hollow woods, but Vortwulf couldn't wait could he? Social etiquette was not his strong point.'

'Being buggered on the back of a rough-maned horse wasn't what she was expecting, was it?' said Thistlehead. 'No flowers, chocolates or dinner beforehand.'

'And he wouldn't shut up about his exploits would he? How he murdered his Uncle to become chieftain, shagged his Uncle's first wife, then put her to the sword and then his nephew. Killing missionaries or saints, who can tell which was which, destroying churches and crops. He went on and on. In grisly detail.'

'All of us did,' said Thistlehead, 'like dogs to vomit.'

'Aye, young Spiteful liked to tell her how with his great axe he cut and hacked and chopped every living thing in his way,' said Lurchless. 'What mighty might, what bloodythirsty deeds! Let's face it, our lieutenants were not the greatest of conversationalists. One track minds. Murder, blood, slaughter, when's dinner? That's all Fartwind could manage by way of pleasantries. Clank of metal, grind of teeth, grunt upon grunt, hour upon hour of cheerful reminiscences of how spines were severed or eyeballs gouged out by Grumblespike. I don't think dainty Princesses are fond of that sort of thing. She quickly came to despise Vortwulf and all his cronies with their leathery faces, flayed by wind and rain and sea salt, and their unceasing talk of butchering.'

'Myself, I liked them stories,' said Gorsegruncher.

'Not the way to treat the ladies,' said Thistlehead. 'Trust me, I've had experience.'

They looked at him in surprise. 'Always thought you had different inclinations,' said Gorsegruncher.

Thistlehead cracked a thin smile. 'All's fair in love and war, eh?'

‘Anyways,’ said Lurchless. ‘Finally we all got back to Blood Castle, which I do have to admit looked a bit ramshackle at the best of times. No one would come near the place with its fearsome reputation, so it never needed much upkeep. The worse it looked the better really. But the look on her face when she saw it, it would turn milk sour. Nevertheless, the wedding feast was planned and this was to be on the Midsummer solstice, the day of her 18th birthday. And so the charade continued, both a celebration and a damnation.’

‘She said we had horrible table manners,’ said Gorsegruncher.

‘That’s right enough,’ said Thistlehead. ‘She wasn’t impressed by all the gnashing and slurps and salivations of the feast.’

‘She was a picky one. Good proteins and carbohydrates went to waste on her plate, if you asked me,’ said Gorsegruncher. ‘Why complain when there’s plenty of black pudding to consume and fat to guzzle?’

‘As dusk fell on the night of her wedding, our new princess and bride went up to the jagged battlements and wept out loud in her utter unhappiness and wanted to cease the noise of living. Her cries were swept up into the wind that blew over the bay and her tears caught up in the gathering rainclouds, for it was an abominable night.’

‘Or was to be, afore too long,’ said Thistlehead.

‘Now comes the second twist of the knife,’ said Lurchless. ‘What we was not told but we knows now to our eternal detriment was another promise made long ago, by her father to the Queen of Faerie.’

‘Let’s face it, none of us believed in Faeries,’ said Gorsegruncher. ‘That way madness lies.’

‘Aye it does,’ said Thistleface. The fire was nearly out. He poked the embers with the jagged shard of his broken sword. He looked over his shoulder at the dark forest. ‘Still, we should’ve read the small print,’ he said.

‘Very funny,’ said Gorsegruncher.

‘Aye, regardless of the particular promise made to Faerie,’ said Lurchless, ‘we should have remembered that a Celtic woman can be elected chief, lead her clan into battle, remain mistress of all she surveys and all she brings into the marital bed.’

‘What marital bed would that be?’ said Gorsegruncher. ‘Vortwulf slept on straw like the rest of us.’

‘She had rights, is all I’m saying. Ancient ones,’ said Lurchless. ‘We know Vortwulf couldn’t give a toss about these things, and he didn’t know about the promise either. He didn’t know that this very night, Queen Mab would cross over into this world and come bringing greetings and gifts to the wedding feast. He didn’t know that this was a day of precious import to Faerie and what the soothsayers said about the auspices or how the events of this day and any child born on this day was bound over to them.’

The words came quickly and easily, like poison mixed with honey from a golden goblet. The story had to be told, he knew. He could see it clearly, all of it, Though it was not possible for him to have seen all of it, he could no longer tell what was his and what was from someone else.

‘The rain was falling and pitting the sand of the bay, and a strange haze was forming in between the headlands on either side of the river, cloud and mist coming over the peninsula, tendrils creeping to the foot of the battlements. At the twilight

hour, they came out of the mist and the rain like a great army and the only guard on duty, who was as drunk as he could be, was shook awake by a cold draft or a pigeon shitting on his head more like and he looked down in terror at the mysterious host. She was black as a royal raven and bejewelled and a thousand lights glittered in her wake. The guard, damn him, called out the alarm, fumbled at his bow and cast a quiver of arrows out into the darkness below.'

'I'd have done the same,' said Gorsegruncher. 'It's a natural reaction.'

'Well, it's not the way to welcome a delegation of Faerie, is the point I want to emphasise to anyone who might be interested,' said Lurchless. 'There, in the great hall, Vortwulf and his warriors, us dullards and buffoons, stirred amidst our orgy of eating and drinking and debauchery, how we grabbed at our weapons and ran out into the night air, swearing horrible oaths, mounting the horses, tightening harnesses and we tumbled out of the castle to confront the enemy and smite them down in our anger. But there was to be no smiting this night. We floundered about in the mists, which changed shape before our befuddled eyes. "What devilry is this!" cried out Vortwulf, slashing on all sides as the faerie figures faded to nothingness.'

'Speak for yourself,' said Gorsegruncher. 'I'd gone out the back gate by mistake in all the hurry. Couldn't see a bloody thing. Never heard nor saw Vortwulf again.'

'This was no way to greet Queen Mab and her mighty procession, who came bearing gifts not threats. But once spurned they called up powers beyond imagining and cast them down upon these savage warriors. When the sea was out you could ride a horse 20 leagues around the bay and now all these sands lifted up and swirled all about and fell upon Vortwulf and his unfortunate band with a terrible vengefulness.'

They all began to speak at once.

'Candles and roasting fires flickered out....'

'With clog of throat...'

'With whirr of sand...'

'With grit in eye..'

'With slit of paunch...'

'With spill of blood...'

'Oh, such stinging pain...'

'Oh, mouth and nose filling....'

'Lungs filling...'

'Filling with briny grains...'

'Last spurts of breath...'

'Extinguished forevermore...'

'Faerie know how...'

'Deep secret power...'

'Blades cast down...'

'Horses ground into the ground...'

'Flesh flayed...'

'Screams, so many screams,' gasped Lurchless, his chest aching horribly. 'For even the strongest of them, trapped and slowly drowning in coils of sand, it seemed the very stones of the castle were torn asunder and tumbled down amongst them, in a final unforgiving suffocating embrace.'

‘Twas a petrifying curse! When I heard it called out, rumbling like thunder, I shat myself,’ said Gorsegruncher. ‘As did others, even Groanman and Grumblespike. Before their skulls was crushed between fists of sand.’

‘They say no man hears a Faerie curse and lives,’ said Lurchless. ‘But here we are, still breathing air as far I can tell.’

‘It was an awful choking in that storm of sand,’ said Thistlehead. ‘Still don’t know how I came to be here. In the midst of a blasted whirlwind one second, then horseless and running into the forest the next, coughing and spluttering. And I layed down and thought that was to be my last moments.’ His chest still felt bad, like he’d swallowed splinters of glass.

‘But they never come for us did they?’ said Gorsegruncher. ‘Didn’t finish us off. I don’t fathom it.’

‘Didn’t need to,’ said Lurchless. ‘Someone got to be left to tell the tale.’

‘But they left her, didn’t they?’ said Gorsegruncher. ‘When day dawned, I saw her from afar standing amidst the ruins, still in her wedding gown, not a mark on her. I swear that unforgiving bitch had a big grin on her face.’

‘Hush,’ said Thistlehead.

They looked around with a shiver. The storm clouds were blowing over, revealing the first tenuous stars of the night. The dark of the forest was less dark, but not much. They shook the last grains of sand from their shredded clothes and hoped the tale was told as she would want it told, that their debt was paid and that they might yet see the next morning light to tell the tale again.