

The Broken Realm

Homecoming

Dawn was still an hour away as the *Sprite* turned to starboard and entered the mouth of the River Dee. It was the eve of Christ's Mass and a cold fog hung just above the water. Barren mud flats could be seen closer to shore, and Boda was quietly calling the depths back to Master Sparks at the helm. True to his word, the master of the good ship *Sprite* had brought Roland Inness and Declan O'Duinne safe home.

"The channel looks clear for a ways, lads, but ye'll need to take the skiff 'fore long."

"Aye, Master Sparks," Roland called back. "Let's not ground the *Sprite* at the end of such a grand voyage. I think we are close enough now."

"Drop anchor, Mr. Boda!" Sparks commanded.

Boda tossed the anchor over the side and made sure the ship was fast, then joined Master Sparks and the two young knights at the stern. One of the crew had pulled the tow line in and the skiff bobbed in the current just below.

Sparks clasped the hand of each of his passengers in turn and spoke with his usual bluff good humor.

"Home in time for Christ's Mass! Ye lads have been too long gone from yer own hearths. When next ye need passage on a good ship, ye may find us at the port of Southampton. We'll be refittin' the *Sprite* there over the winter."

Roland looked at the two men who had shared so many dangers and hardships with them on the journey to the Holy Land and back.

"Master Sparks, no matter what feats of seamanship others may boast of in my presence, I will silence them with an account of my days on the *Sprite*."

Declan reached out and offered his hand to the first mate.

"Master Boda...I thought ye an evil looking man on first meeting, and I'll confess ye look no less evil upon repeat viewing, but I count ye as a true friend and a brave one. I hope that our paths may cross again." In the dim light it was hard to tell, but Roland was sure both men's eyes had gone misty.

It was time to go.

The two young knights tossed their kit into the skiff. Roland had on his mail and a sword strapped to his belt. Over his shoulder was the longbow given him by Sir Robin of Loxley. Declan wore a sleeveless mail coat and had the vestiges of the Shipbrook tunic with rampant stag hanging from his shoulders. The garment had faded from black to brown and the stag was a dingy gray, but at least it had survived. Roland's tunic had been chewed by rats in the Crusader camp until it had to be discarded. At his waist, the Irish knight carried a long broadsword.

Roland grabbed the tow rope and walked backwards down the stern of the *Sprite* until he alighted in the smaller boat. Declan followed a moment later. A crewman already sat at the oars waiting to ferry them to shore.

The Broken Realm

“Godspeed!” a hushed voice called from above.

“Fair sailing to all aboard the *Sprite*,” Roland called back and cast off the line. The man at the oars gave a strong pull and with just a few strokes they passed alongside the little cog and headed upstream. From his seat in the stern, Roland twisted around to watch the ship that had been his home for so many months slowly vanish into the mists.

He turned forward and could clearly see the dark outline of Declan sitting in the bow, though his friend’s face was in shadow. The Irishman watched the channel ahead, taking care to keep them in the main course of the Dee. If they wandered off into one of the smaller tributaries that emptied into the estuary, it could take hours to find their way back out. For a long time they saw nothing but wide mudflats on either side, but then, through the mist, thick reed beds began to appear. The sky was growing lighter ahead of them. They rowed toward the dawn.

An hour of hard pulling against the current brought them to a ford where an ancient trail crossed the Dee from England into Wales. Roland had the oarsman drive the bow of the skiff hard in among the reeds on the northern bank. They hopped out onto the marshy path and their few possessions were quickly passed forward. Their kit secured, they shoved the little boat back into the current. The man from the *Sprite* expertly turned the bow downstream and disappeared into the mists.

Roland looked around him. This ford was where he had once killed a Welsh raider hidden in the reeds on the far bank. Could it have been over two years since he trailed Millie into Wales? He shook his head. By his best count, he’d be seventeen in the spring. He felt much older than that. After the awful chaos and death of the Crusades, it would be easy to forget that this borderland was still a dangerous place. Looking across the water at the opposite bank, he stopped to string his bow. Declan gave him a curious look, but his hand fell absently to the hilt of his broadsword.

The two gathered their kit and headed up the track that led to higher ground and to Shipbrook. Roland slung the longbow over one shoulder and over the other he carried his bedroll and a sack with the rest of his belongings. As they trudged along in the spreading glow of the sunrise, he looked about him.

The path up from the ford was pocked with small puddles covered in a thin coating of ice. The trees were bare and the fields were brown, but even in winter he could sense the lushness of the place. It caused a lump in his throat after his years in the barren and unforgiving hills of Palestine. He had been raised in the peaks of Derbyshire, but the marshlands and low rolling countryside of Cheshire felt like home to him now. He quickened his pace.

Looking down he saw scattered hoof prints in the spongy ground. Few riders had used the ford in recent days it seemed.

“I wonder if Sir Alwyn is still dispatching patrols twice a day to keep watch,” Roland said as they hurried along.

“We’ll know soon enough,” Declan replied. “I wonder what the Master of the Sword will think when he finds we are knights!”

Roland laughed.

“He’ll probably put us directly on patrol duty so that we don’t forget our place!”

It was full daylight when they crested a rise and saw Shipbrook before them.

Everything about the scene was wrong.

The Broken Realm

The open fields that surrounded the place showed no signs they had been tended. Nothing moved on the walls of the little fortress and the gate hung half open at an odd angle. A small wisp of smoke rose from somewhere inside.

Fear twisted his gut and he heard Declan whisper a quiet oath beside him. Two years of bitter war had taught them the look of trouble. It also taught them to be cautious. Roland knew they should not rush in, should scout the place first, should have a plan.

A plan be damned.

He dropped his kit and started forward at a run. Declan did the same. Twenty yards from the gate they slowed. Declan drew his sword and Roland slipped an arrow from his quiver. The gate was smashed, but still hung drunkenly from its top hinge. They eased through it.

Inside, the roof of the great house was gone, burned along with all of the wooden structures within the walls. The livestock were gone, but five horses were in the pen next to the west wall. One man, dressed in mail, was just mounting one of the horses and four others were gathered around a cook pot near the well at the center of the cobbled courtyard. The mounted man noticed them first.

“You there! Stop where ye are!” the man spurred his horse out of the pen and toward them. His fellows scrambled to grab helmets and swords. The rider reined in just short of running them down and lowered a lance until it pointed at Declan’s chest.

“Drop yer weapons and state yer business here!” the man ordered.