

# THE QUARRY

**Ben Lawrence**

**Misguided**

The fire crackled, green logs spitting sap into the small inferno. A man and a woman huddled close to the fire. Their silhouettes danced around them. They sat on the cracked flagstones of a ruined tower. The rest was tumbled out around the hillock, long overgrown with moss and lichen.

The woman wore a circlet of gold on her greying hair. Her face was dominated by a hawk-like nose that kept watch over lips set in a sharp line. She wore studded leather pants, with thick riding boots and a coat of plates that had once been fine, but was now scarred and dull. On her shoulders she wore ornate pauldrons set in the likeness of a lion's head, the eyes set with precious gemstones.

A snore came from the prone figure on the other side of the fire. She looked at the pile of blankets and creased her brow in a frown.

‘Bard’

‘...’

‘Bard!’

The man jolted awake at the Queen’s bark, grumbling under his breath. He was dressed in a much simpler fashion. Woollen pants, supple hunting boots, a dirty linen shirt and a simple leather vest. His blonde curls sat in a tousled heap on his head, giving him a youthful appearance.

The Queen’s frown deepened,

‘You are addressing Queen Ysabel of White Shore.’

‘Raise the dead with that shoutin,’ you will.’

She bristled at his lack of respect.

‘You would do well never to speak to me like that again.’

‘Aye, and you might do just as well to keep ye voice down... *M’lady*. No tellin’ who or what lurks in these parts at night.’

He could feel her baleful gaze drilling into him from across the fire, but she didn’t deign to retort. Probably never been told to shut her trap, he thought.

Instead, she rummaged in her pack and drew out a whetstone. Her sword lay next to her on the flagstones and now she inspected it. With a sniff of annoyance she set the stone to the blade and began honing its edge with long, purposeful strokes. The Bard watched from across the fire, the flames highlighting her movements. They were graceful, exact, and deadly, just as they had been in the battle against the Griffon that day. She did not wear the armour or sword simply for show it seemed.

He inspected his own sword. It was a utilitarian tool, solid iron with a wooden handle and a bronze cross piece. There were several nicks along its edge and some rust spots at the base of the blade. He shrugged and placed the weapon on top of his pack alongside his harp. He didn’t feel like sharpening it just now.

The night was deathly silent. No owls hooted, no critters scurried along secret paths, and the rasping sound of stone on steel set his neck and arm hairs standing on end.

‘Why sharpen it?’

‘Because it needs doing,’ she said in between strokes.

He pushed the sound to the back of his mind.

‘Why? The Griffon’s dead, the battle fought and won.’

‘This battle,’ she said, looking up at him. ‘And who are you to question the Queen of White Shore? You were hired to write a song about my victory over the Griffon. Nothing else, understand?’

He was not surprised by the shortness of her reply. He was used to being looked down on by those of higher station. Yes, they would pay him handsomely enough for a song of their brave deeds, but at any mention of a truth that was not their own, he would be discarded. Just another peasant who didn't know how to respect his betters. What truly shocked him was her coldness.

‘That beast slaughtered a hundred of ye knights today. Their blood is nawt cold and here ye are preparing for the next battle? Why so cold, mistress?’

‘Are all Bards fools? Or just you? I would think that singing songs of great heroes all day would teach you a thing or two. There is always another battle, another war. To not recognise this is to die a fool.’

He shook his head in disbelief, his mind recalling the images of the battle against the Griffon. He saw again how the Queen had ordered her knights to charge the beast, and how the knights were cut down by the Griffon's fowl claws. All the while, she watched, searching for an opening. He saw how she had urged the last of her knights forward to their death, and how she had charged behind them, trampling those who were wounded in order to strike the killing blow.

‘Aye, I sing songs of heroes, mistress. But none so cold as you.’

She regarded him with narrowed eyes and a furrowed brow, and if she hadn't been raised a Queen, she might have chewed her lip.

‘You truly are a fool. All heroes are heartless at some point. That is the part the tales leave out.’ She reached inside her pack and withdrew the trophy she had taken from the Griffons' corpse. It looked like a feather, but it was about half a metre long and rich gold in colour. The fibres were malleable, but he had witnessed swords shatter against them. As his eyes ran along its sleek surface, he noticed how the colours changed, from gold to bronze to brass, and at the very tip, bright silver.

‘How much do you think this is worth, Bard?’

He thought for a moment, but couldn't think of a number high enough.

‘I don't know, mistress.’

‘Exactly,’ she said as she twirled it in her hands, the firelight making it look like liquid gold. ‘It is priceless. It is power, and glory, and riches. And this is just one. When I harvest the rest from the Griffon's corpse tomorrow, I will become more powerful than all the Kings on this continent. And I will start an Empire the likes of which the world has never seen. Yes, my knights died. But they died an honourable death serving their Queen.’ She said

this all without taking her eyes off the feather. She seemed to be somewhere else, as if in a daydream.

The Bard didn't understand.

'An honourable dead man is still a dead man, mistress. And you're already a Queen. You've a whole kingdom, hundreds of kilometres of land and wealth. Why be an Emperor?'

She tore her gaze away from the feather, although it seemed to pain her to do so.

'And? Hundreds will become thousands, tens of thousands. I will have it all. And no man will ever dare to question my rule again.'

He was lost for words. Granted he had always wanted a bit more. A few more coins to jingle in his pocket would have been nice. A new harp would be good if he could afford it, and he did want to settle down someday with a plump wife that would give him many sons. But she was a Queen. The idea that she could possibly want for more just did not make any sense to the Bard.

An idea struck him.

'Do you know the history of this tower?'

'Of course I do!' she snapped. 'It is the seat of the Old Empire.'

'Right you are, mistress. But do ye know how it came to be nawt but a ruin?'

Her eyes narrowed and she shook her head. A grin split his face, revealing crooked teeth.

'Worry not, mistress, let me tell ye the tale of the great Empire of Abernia, which stretched all the lands to the north and most to the south, all of it ruled from right here in this very castle.'

'Get on with it, Bard, I assume this tale has a point?'

'Aye, it does. Now, the Empire was at peace, had been for years. But the King was a vain man. He loved nothing more than to sit on his throne and count his coins. Then, one day, during a feast he held as celebration for the conquest of another nation, a real threat came to his kingdom. Or at least, the news of one. A farmer crashed through the door to the great hall, weak and weary from travel. "Dragon! Great, terrible, fire breathing dragon! A vile creature, evil to the core! Please O' wise and noble King, send your knights to slay this beast and deliver us from fear," said he. Naturally, everyone at the feast was shocked by such news, but they were even more shocked by the King's reaction. "Good man! Thank you for bringing word of this threat to our safety. Sit! Feast! On the morrow, I will lead my knights and slay the creature."

“O’ Wise King, O’ brave King! God's praise you! The creature is truly evil. It killed ten farmers with one fell sweep of its claws, and then set the buildings alight with its wicked breath.”

“Fear not, brave fellow, my knights and I will slay the beast, of that you can be assured!”

‘So, that settled, they feasted into the night and when morning came, the King and his knights and the farmer set out to find the dragon.

‘They travelled far to the south where the King’s grip on the land was not as tight. The farms he passed were far dirtier, and far poorer than the pretty ploughed fields outside his castle. “Look at what this beast has done! My poor subjects suffer greatly at the hands of its evil.” His knights agreed, but the farmer was confused. The creature had only attacked his village. These farms had not been affected and to him looked as they always had. But he didn’t say so, far be it for him to question his King.’

‘If only all men were as noble and loyal as this farmer’ remarked the Queen, voice thick with derision.

‘Aye, mistress, if only,’ the Bard replied, knowing full well the comment was aimed at him, and recalling that the Queen’s sword was now very sharp. But he continued anyway, hoping his tale would reach her. ‘When the King and his knights came upon the man’s village, ravaged and savaged as it was, they found the dragon sleeping on a pile of bones. The King ordered the charge and the battle was on. For a day and a night it raged, but finally, the beast was slain. Many brave men died in the battle, including the poor farmer.

‘As proof of his victory, the King brought back a large scale from the beast’s breast, crimson and gold in colour. Now, as I said, he was a vain man and wanted to assert his wealth and power even though he was an Emperor. He flaunted his prize and gloated with glee... And was promptly assassinated by jealous rivals.

‘Without a King, the Empire crumbled, and all because the man who had it all, wanted more.’

‘A fine tale, Bard, you obviously have some skill,’ the Queen said begrudgingly. ‘But it is a tale, nothing more than myth and legend based on an old fool.’

As he had been talking, a red sun had begun to rise. It was still an hour or so until dawn, but the first tendrils of crimson light were filtering in from the east, creeping over their camp.

The Bard's shoulders sagged. He had failed to have an effect on the Queen. She remained stoically silent as she watched the world awaken to the new day.

Eventually, she spoke.

'Tell me, Bard, what song have you written of me? How shall my victory over the Griffon be remembered?'

'I haven't written anything yet, mistress' he lied.

'I have seen you practice at night as we travelled from White Shore, and you have just proved you have some skill in the art. Come, sing it to me. Now.'

With a sigh he relented. He picked up his harp, plucked a few strings and adjusted them. Then, satisfied, he began to play a slow melody.

*'There once was a Queen, greedy and bold,  
She went chasing legends of old.*

*For o'er yonder hill from White Shore,  
There was a creature who she was sure  
If not slain, would be her shame,  
So she set out, to gain her fame.*

*Over high mountain and deep river,  
She voyaged with barely a shiver.*

*She took a hundred knights to meet their maker,  
All in the hopes that she could be greater...'*

'Enough!' she screamed. 'Your arrogance knows no bounds. You have insulted me beyond forgiveness this night. As Queen of White Shore, I sentence you to death.' She rose from her sitting position, sword in hand and advanced. 'The Lords of White Shore have always been their own headsman. Bow your head so that I may make it a clean death, though you don't deserve one.'

The Bard scrambled for his blade, regretting his laziness earlier in the night. She was old but experienced, and he lacked training but was young and fit. He took the guard position he had been taught as a child, feet braced apart, sword raised in front. She swung her sword in lazy arcs as she advanced, the blade whistling as it cut the air.

She feigned left then lashed out with a right-hand cut. He blocked to his left then slashed wildly, forcing her to jump backwards. She immediately stepped forward again, bringing her blade down in a swift overhead motion. He barely managed to get his blade up in time, and the force of the blow made his hand go numb. She was much stronger than he had anticipated.

He lunged forward, but his blade was easily swept aside. Overbalanced, he had no choice but to continue the motion. He knew he couldn't bring his sword around in time, but neither could she, so he threw his fist into her chin as he careened forward.

She fell hard but instinct saved her. As soon as she hit the ground she was rolling, and his sword struck the stones where moments before her head had been. He advanced on her again and she lashed out with her heavy boots, catching him on the knee. He howled in pain and was forced to move back, giving her enough time to regain her feet.

They had the measure of each other now and the duel settled into a steady rhythm, the clash and clang of their sword's echoing through the pre-dawn light, giving a grim feel to the red light of morning.

Her sword sliced into the Bard's arm, her superior skill giving her the upper hand. He grunted in pain and frustration, blood flowing freely down his arm. She advanced again and he backed away, unable to keep his sword raised. He tripped on the fire as he retreated and the Queen's boot caught him in the chest as he struggled to maintain his balance. He sailed backwards over the fire, losing his sword as he fell, severely winded. Fighting for breath and in immense pain, he dragged himself across the ground toward the Queen's pack. She advanced, ready to drive her sword into his exposed back.

He reached the pack and frantically rummaged. The Queen brought her sword down just as he rolled, so instead of skewering him, her sword only cut him superficially, grating as it glanced off his ribs. But he had what he had been searching for in her pack, and he drove the feather into The Queen's neck. Blood erupted from the fatal wound and poured down the feather onto the Bard's hand.

Her eyes widened in shock as she fell to the ground, coughing and spluttering. A pool of blood quickly formed as she clawed at her ruined neck, fighting for a breath that would not come.

The Queen of White Shore died with the Griffon's feather still protruding from her neck, shining crimson and gold in the light of dawn.