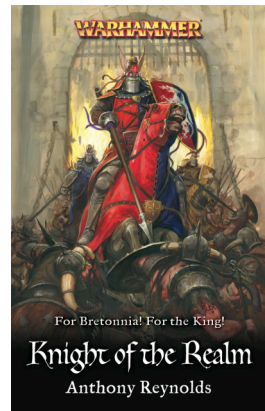


KNIGHT OF THE REALM

A Knights of Bretonnia novel

By Anthony Reynolds

Bretonnia is a land shrouded in myth and legend. Protected by the its gallant knights, this magical land is ever under threat from the forces of darkness... In the aftermath of the beastmen invasion of Bordeleaux and the death of his father, Calard must face up to his responsibilities as a knight of the realm. But there is little time for respite as a new terror comes to plague the land of Bretonnia...



About the Author

Anthony Reynolds worked in Games Workshop's Design Studio in the UK for over five years. He is currently living in Australia, where he works as a freelance writer.

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The following is an excerpt from *Knight of the Realm* by Anthony Reynolds.

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Bertelis's arms felt like leaden weights and his breath was coming in short, sharp gasps, but he pushed through his exhaustion and launched another attack.

Feinting with a strike to the head, he rolled his wrist and whipped his sword around in a low, disembowelling slash. His opponent took the attack on his shield and launched a strike of his own, his blade hissing through the air. Bertelis deflected the blade, letting it glance off his black and red shield, throwing the other knight slightly off balance. Not giving the man a chance to recover, Bertelis launched into a series of swift attacks, his blade cutting left and right, forcing his opponent backwards, defending frantically.

Stepping in close, Bertelis slammed his shield into his opponent. The knight grimaced and staggered back. His rear foot, supporting the majority of his weight, slipped in mud, and he dropped to one knee. In an instant, Bertelis's sword tip was at his throat.

'I concede,' said the defeated knight, Huebald, blinking rain out of his eyes.

None of the cousins felt any shame at being bested by their younger kinsman. Bertelis had always been talented with the blade but had never been one to dedicate

himself to training. That had all changed since the death of Gunthar.

Gunthar, the old weapon master of Garamont, had taught both Bertelis and Calard in the arts of swordplay and the joust since the day they could walk. He had been one of the finest swordsmen in all of Bastonne in his day, and he had been wounded in a duel six months earlier, a duel that he had fought in lieu of Calard. Though he had defeated his opponent, Gunthar had in turn been badly injured. His wound had festered, and the only chance would have been to have his leg amputated, though even then his chance of surviving was slim. Refusing to suffer such an ignominious fate – for what good was a knight that could not even sit in the saddle? – Gunthar had given his life defending Bertelis, standing over him and protecting him while he was incapacitated. He had taken a dozen or more enemies with him before he finally fell, a hero, pierced by a score of blades.

The old weapon master had given his life that Bertelis might live, and that was something that the younger Garamont brother had found hard to accept. In the months since, he had dedicated himself to his training to an almost obsessive extent.

Bertelis removed his blade from his cousin's throat, his chest heaving with exertion. Still he allowed himself no rest, and turned to face his other two cousins.

'Come,' he said, nodding to Tassilo. Slender and quick, the youngest of his cousins was a skilful swordsman and Bertelis enjoyed sparring with him.

'Enough, brother,' said a voice.

Bertelis turned to regard Calard, who was emerging, dishevelled, from his red and blue tent. His face was heavy with stubble, and his dark hair was unruly, hanging around his shoulders. He was dressed in the same clothes he had been wearing the night before, and even from here, Bertelis could smell the reek of alcohol on him.

‘Decided to grace us with your presence?’ said Bertelis, sheathing his sword.

‘Couldn’t really sleep with the racket you lot were making, could I?’ replied Calard.

‘It’s almost midday, brother,’ said Bertelis. ‘We were meant to strike the camp at dawn.’

‘Water,’ ordered Calard, sending servants scurrying. He was handed a goblet of water, and drank deeply.

‘Midday?’ said Calard, squinting up at the overcast sky.

‘That’s right,’ said Bertelis.

Calard’s bleary gaze wandered around the clearing.

‘Training again?’ he said.

‘No, I’ve been milking cattle,’ snapped Bertelis. ‘Yes, I’ve been training, for all the good that it will do. At this rate we are not going to arrive at the tournament in time to take part anyway.’

‘The tournament’s what, a week away? That’s plenty of time.’

‘It is two days away, brother,’ said Bertelis. He turned away, muttering under his breath, a look of disgust on his face.

Calard’s expression darkened.

‘Don’t turn you back on me, brother,’ he snarled.

Bertelis turned back towards him.

‘How can I serve you, my lord Garamont?’ he said, giving a mocking bow.

Feeling the eyes and ears of his knights and peasants all around, Calard bit back his angry retort. He fixed his younger half-brother with an angry stare.

‘Come here,’ he said through gritted teeth, lifting the tent flap and gesturing inside. ‘I would speak with you alone.’

Seeing the shared glances between his knights, Calard felt his rage build.

‘Strike the camp,’ he ordered. ‘We leave within the hour.’

Calard poured a goblet of wine and offered it to his brother. Bertelis refused, as he knew he would. The wine was worth a small fortune, being one of Bordeleaux’s finer exports, and rather than have it go to waste, he drained the goblet. As an afterthought, he poured himself a second.

‘Don’t ever talk to me like that again in front of our cousins,’ said Calard. ‘Our father would never have stood for such disrespect. He’d have had you flogged for such insolence.’

‘Our father is dead,’ said Bertelis. ‘You didn’t save him, remember?’

The colour drained from Calard’s face.

It had been less than six months since the death of Lord Lutheure, killed by a hateful creature of Chaos. Castle Garamont had been overrun and Calard, accompanied by the revered Grail Knight Reolus and a lance of loyal knights, had raced to save it from destruction. Even

travelling the fey paths of the Lady of the Lake, led upon those mystical secret ways by his sister, the Damsel Anara, and travelling many hundreds of miles in the blink of an eye, he had been unable to save his father. The true horror of the event had been two-fold. One, that Lutheure was already dying, his body withered and wracked by poison delivered by Calard's beloved, the Lady Elisabet of Marlemont. And two, that Lutheure's killer, a horrifying creature that was truly neither man nor beast, was none other than the castellan's own mutated son, driven and obsessed to slay its own father. The same blood that flowed in its veins flowed through Calard's, and the horror and disgust of that knowledge haunted his dreams.

Tainted blood.

That was what Calard knew his knights whispered behind his back, and yet he did not silence them. Indeed, he feared it was the truth.

'You think he would have lived had you been there?' said Calard, his eyes haunted.

'We'll never know,' said Bertelis.

'Maybe you could have saved him,' admitted Calard.

'But you were not there; your injuries are only now fully healed.'

'As I said, we'll never know.'

Calard stared into his brother's accusing eyes, seeing the anger simmering there, and he sighed. Taking his goblet of wine, he sank onto a divan, his shoulders slumped.

'What is wrong with you these days?' he said, not looking at Bertelis. 'Where is all this anger coming

from? Is it because of father's death? Is it because of me?'

Bertelis's hands were clenched into fists.

'What's wrong with me? Take a look at yourself. You've been drunk for months, neglecting your responsibilities... you don't even know what day it is.'

'I didn't ask for our father to die.' snapped Calard. 'I didn't ask to become the lord of Garamont.'

He looked up at his brother.

'Is that what this is about? You want to be the lord of Garamont, Bertelis? I'll abdicate. I don't want these responsibilities. You can have them.'

'That is not what I want and you know it,' said Bertelis.

'I'm sure your mother would be most displeased to hear you say that,' said Calard.

'Leave her out this,' growled Bertelis.

'I thought you'd be the last person to lecture me,' said Calard, taking another swig of his wine. 'You used to be different. All you do is train these days. You never used to be so... obsessed.'

'Would that I had paid more attention to Gunthar,' said Bertelis.

For a moment, there was silence.

'You've changed, brother,' said Calard, at last.

'Yes, I have,' said Bertelis. 'Maybe it is about time that you did, too.'

Calard placed his goblet on a side table and hung his head in his hands. His half-brother and he had always been the closest of friends. He had believed that he would always be able to rely on Bertelis, no matter what. How had things gone so wrong?

Everything had changed with the death of their father. Calard's whole world had been shattered. He was blood-brother to a mutant monstrosity. His beloved had been exposed as a would-be murderer. Attempts had been made on his life, and he had accused – falsely, it seemed – his step-mother, the Lady Calisse, Bertelis's mother. And he had been thrust into a position of great authority and responsibility that he was nowhere near ready for. Coming back to the present, his head still in his hands, Calard sighed.

'There is truth in your words, brother,' he said. 'And I am sorry for mentioning the Lady Calisse.'

In a way, Calard felt sorry for his brother, for he knew that the Lady Calisse spouted her poison in his ear at every occasion.

Bertelis folded his arms and shifted his feet.

'You are under a lot of pressure,' he said. 'I do not envy you.'

Calard smiled, though his eyes were hollow and empty.

'Is it really two days until the tournament?'

'It is,' said Bertelis.

Calard swore.

'Two weeks we've been away from Garamont then,' he said, shaking his head. 'Folcard is going to kill me.'

Though well into her middling years, Bertelis's mother, the haughty and proud Lady Calisse, was a strikingly handsome woman still, and as she laughed, the years dropped away from her.

In her prime, Calisse had been a renowned beauty, and before she had wed Lutheure of Garamont, a score of

knights from all over Bretonnia had paid her suit, competing for her hand. Elegant and imperious, she was reclining on a velvet chaise longue within castle Garamont, her diaphanous silk dress flowing around her. 'It was you who tried to have him killed,' she said in a soft voice, her eyes gleaming with deadly amusement. 'I knew it!'

The chamberlain of Garamont, Folcard, stood in the doorway, tall and gaunt, like a looming vulture waiting for its prey to die. His face was long and severe, and his nose was hooked. He had the look of one who had been sucking on lemons, and deep frown lines were permanently etched on his face.

'Keep your voice down,' Folcard said.

'Oh, calm yourself,' said Calisse with a dismissive wave of a hand heavy with rings. 'I sent all the servants away that we might speak freely.'

For more than six decades Folcard had served the Garamont line, overseeing the day to day running of the castle and its estate with a rod of iron. He was the terror of the servants, an exacting and harsh master, but he was nevertheless widely respected for he was himself no slouch, even at his age, and put in more work than any of those who served under him.

Castle Garamont and its line was Folcard's life, utterly and completely, and his devotion could not be questioned. Which was why Calisse was so amused to have finally worked out that it was he who had tried to have Calard murdered while engaged in Bordeleaux the previous autumn.

Folcard glared at her, making no attempt to hide his disdain for her, though she was long past caring what the old chamberlain thought of her.

‘It was Tanebourc, wasn’t it?’ said Calisse. ‘He was the one that you coerced into doing your dirty work?’

‘Your lover?’ snapped Folcard. Calisse stared at him blankly.

‘Yes, I knew that you were being unfaithful,’ said Folcard. ‘Your adulteries started soon after Bertelis was born, if I am not mistaken?’

‘Was that how you got to him? You blackmailed him into doing what you wanted, threatening to tell Lutheure that he was bedding me if he didn’t do as you wished?’

‘Something like that,’ said Folcard.

‘If you knew of my... infidelity these last twenty years, why did you never speak of them to my husband?’

‘I am a loyal servant of Garamont,’ said Folcard coldly.

‘I would never have done anything to bring dishonour upon my lord.’

Calisse laughed, the sound cold and unfriendly, but filled with genuine humour.

‘But you would happily have your lord’s son murdered?’ she said. ‘It is a curious sort of honour you follow, my dear chamberlain.’

‘The Lady Yvette of Bordeleaux was tainted,’ spat Folcard. ‘Touched in the head. Corrupted. She ensorcelled Lutheure, ensnaring him and clouding his judgement.’

Lady Calisse’s expression hardened. Always she had felt as though she were in the shadow of her husband’s first wife. Always it felt to her as if her husband had judged

her, weighing her against his first partner. He would never allow so much as a bad word spoken of her in his presence, and Calisse had been forced to endure having a painting of the woman stare at her across the great hall for her entire marriage.

‘She frequently suffered fits,’ continued Folcard. ‘She would fall to the ground, her limbs shaking and foam frothing from her mouth. It was clear to everyone but Lutheure that she was... unclean. When she gave birth to Calard, everything seemed to be in order. There was no obvious corruption in him, and I prayed to the Lady that his blood was pure. All seemed well, and indeed even Yvette’s fits became infrequent. When she became pregnant again, Lutheure was ecstatic. She gave birth to a daughter; Anara. Truly, in all the days that were to come later, I never saw him happier than at that moment.’

Calisse bristled, but Folcard continued on, lost in the past.

‘But it did not last long. The midwives refused to hold the baby girl. She was no more than weeks old, but they said that they could hear the babe’s voice in their minds. There was something terribly wrong with Anara, and in the years that followed, it became clear that she shared her mother’s curse. She was of the fey; touched in the head, abnormal. She would hug a kitten to her chest, and cry out in horror as its heart stopped beating. She would stroke one of Lutheure’s hounds, only for its eyes to start bleeding; as much as she cried, it would be dead within the day. She would see things that had not yet come to pass. She could hear people’s thoughts. Everyone hated

her, and worse, she could read the hatred in their hearts. There was much relief in the court when the Enchantress took her away.'

Lady Calisse shifted uncomfortably. Though Anara was now a young woman, a holy damsel of the Lady no less, their brief meeting had left Calisse terrified.

'But still worse was to come, and it was this that proved Yvette's blood was truly cursed. Once again, she was heavy with child, though this time the pregnancy was difficult. She travelled to Bordeleaux, to be near her mother for the birth, which was long and bloody. She birthed an abomination. I will not dwell on it, for you saw the foul creature with your own eyes. I curse the day that it was allowed to live. Yvette hurled herself to her death in horror and shame.'

'Would that she had courage to have done so a decade earlier,' said Calisse. 'She might have spared all of us the horror of her foul get. But what relevance does this lesson in the sordid Garamont family history have?'

'Calard might appear wholesome and untainted, but the same blood that runs in the veins of his freak sister, the same foetid blood that ran through the veins of the abomination, runs in his own. By his bloodline, that of cursed Yvette, he is tainted. I love Garamont more than life itself, and I will not stand by and see its line devolve. Who is to say that were Calard to sire an heir, that son would not be a debased bestial fiend? No, I cannot allow such a chance. Thus, for the good of the line of Garamont, Calard must die.'

Calisse wore a look of repugnance on her face. She could not fault Folcard's logic, nor even his twisted loyalty.

Her own desires were far more straightforward; she merely wanted to see her own son succeed her husband, not her stepson.

‘It would seem that we are in accord,’ said Calisse. ‘We both want to see Bertelis become castellan.’

‘That would seem to be the case,’ said Folcard, somewhat reluctantly.

‘Then, what do you propose we do about it?’

‘Things are already in hand, Lady Calisse,’ said Folcard.

‘Ah,’ said Calisse. ‘I should have expected as much. You are so very efficient, aren’t you, Folcard?’

‘I do my best, lady,’ his hawk-like eyes glinting. ‘Now if that is all, I will return to my duties.’

‘Fine,’ said Calisse, dismissing him with a languid gesture.

With barely a sound, the stick-thin chamberlain backed off into the darkness and was gone.

She plucked herself a heavy, blood-red grape from the bowl at her side, and popped it into her mouth.

‘Very fine indeed,’ said Calisse to herself.

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