

The Duel

Part 1

It was a busy morning for Gareth; he had a private duel with one of the other members of the fighter's guild today. He had already sharpened his sword, and inspected his armor for any damage that might be taken advantage of. All he had left to do was make the potion that would ensure his victory.

Sandra, the fighter he would soon be dueling, had grated on his nerves nearly since they had first met. She was a fighter in name only, as far as he was concerned. While the guild had agreed that any physical combat ultimately counted as fighting, she was far more interested in practicing her arts as a thief than as an honorable fighter.

She had a slender build, and used her agility to win fights by being more mobile than the other members of the guild. She did not even wear real armor into combat. She had the barest covering of thin metal plates hanging over leather pads on her vitals, while the majority of her body was covered by casual wear. It was no secret that a thieves' agility would outperform a typical fighter in one on one combat, but that was because they had different roles.

Gareth looked down at the crude pot over the fire pit. The dull green liquid was beginning to boil, which meant that the recipe was just about complete. He opened the drawer next to him and pulled from it a bottle made from stained glass. He dipped a ladle into the pot, and carefully poured the potion into the bottle. The potion's green hue blended visually with the stained glass to give the illusion of a vibrant red color.

He placed a stopper on the potion bottle, and slid it into the first slot on his armor's potion belt. He repeated the process again until all four slots had been filled. The guild encouraged members to take up hobbies, and Gareth turned out to have some talent as an apothecary.

Potions were in constant demand in the guild. The role of a fighter is to take to the front lines and ultimately bear the brunt of the damage on behalf of his team, so that the others could do what needed to be done. This was why he did not see Sandra as a real fighter. She was more the type to leap out of harm's way, leaving the rest of the party exposed to danger.

Gareth put on his armor, and made sure the potions were lined up properly. He put them on the side, behind him just enough to be out of his way, while still conceivably reachable. Fully equipped now, he seemed almost two sizes larger than he normally was. The plates on his shoulders exaggerated his width, while giving his arms room to move with limited resistance.

His short brown hair was hidden completely under his helmet. The face of the helmet wrapped tightly around his eyes, covering as much surface as possible without obscuring his vision. His piercing green eyes appeared to shine through the shadow of his helmet, giving him an ominous look that he often used to intimidate lesser foes into surrender.

Not that an easy surrender was on the table today. If she lost, she had agreed to leave the guild. With those stakes, he was confident they would actually finish their fight for once. She had a nasty habit of surrendering in practice matches with him the very moment he seemed to be close to landing a blow.

He had been lost in thought for some time, walking on auto-pilot through the forest. His ponderings were only broken by the light of the clearing, with Sandra standing on the opposite side. She had her long, fiery hair down today. Normally she had it tied in a bun to minimize the chance of it getting caught or grabbed during a match. She also was not wearing her makeshift plate mail today either. Instead, she was wearing a full set of leather armor, dyed with patches of green and brown.

Most likely, he figured she was trying to blend in with the forest, in the hopes that he would have a harder time tracking her movement. Regardless of her colors though, he could tell what was close and what was not. He had only to move closer to the center of the clearing and her camouflage would be useless.

He continued to walk into the clearing before calling out to her. "Are you ready, or do you need time to fix your hair?" He only half cared how his question may have sounded; he wanted to be sure though that she could not blame her loss on her hair getting caught in a joint in his armor.

She gave a wicked grin as she called back "I'm fine exactly as I am" before drawing a dagger from the scabbard at her side, and dashing towards him at an angle. She moved quickly, as her flowing red hair trailed behind her, making it simultaneously easier to see her general location, while making it harder to focus entirely on her body.

As she darted near him, he dove to avoid her first. His armor may have been heavy, but he had trained long enough to stay somewhat mobile inside of it. He glanced around to spot her as he stood again, and made sure to face her. That was her plan for this match then, he thought. Her hair in this clearing was so bright and vivid, it was almost instinctual to focus on it rather than where her blade arm was.

That singular trick, however, would not be enough to win her this duel. Once you know an illusion; especially a non-magical one, it takes only a little focus to see through. She began to run towards him again, maintaining her angle to maximize the visibility of the trail behind her. He watched her feet instead, keeping an eye on her distance from him, and recognizing that she would pass him far too widely to actually make an attack.

She must have been hoping he would dive again, and was giving herself room to change direction and hit him from behind. If that was her plan, he could play along. With a heavy thrust, he leapt forward, imitating his previous dive, except that this time he stuck his right leg out at the high point of it. As his foot touched the ground, his boot dug into the ground, rapidly halting his momentum as he let his other leg swing around, forcing him to turn around.

With a fluid motion, he drew his sword into a swing, in time to meet Sandra's attack halfway. Unfortunately for her, a dagger does not have the same kind of reach that a sword does, and as he deflected her dagger's blow, the tip of his sword cut cleanly across her, slicing through the shoulder straps on her armor, and causing the leather pads on her upper body to fall down around her waist.

Her shirt had also been cut, and hung open now, though her sleeves ensured that it would not fall with her armor. Through the opening in the cloth, he could see the red line just above her chest where his sword had made contact glowing for a moment, before she covered it with an arm and darted past him.

Sandra willed the wound closed, feeling her vitality draining away from her as she did so. Most fighters had enough vitality to will away dozens of wounds in a single battle. She on the other hand could barely handle one or two minor injuries before she became exhausted. She kept this fact largely a secret from the rest of the guild by avoiding hits entirely, and surrendering as soon as she knew she couldn't dodge a blow.

She glanced down into her shirt, making sure the wound was gone before turning back towards Gareth. He was good at making potions to restore one's vitality, but while he often made potions for other members of the guild, he always refused to make any for her. That was why they were dueling now. If she won, he would have to make her potions any time she needed them. He made the demand however, that if she lost, she would leave the guild.

She kept her distance from him as she lifted her armor pads over her head and tossed them onto the ground. They were worse than useless in the state they were in. Likely to get tangled on something, or slide further down and trip her up. She had her eye close on him to make sure he didn't charge her while she was distracted, when she noticed his potion holster peeking out from his left side.

Of course he had potions on him. He made potions as a hobby; he could afford to waste a few potions on a duel like this. If she had access to some potions, she would have brought some as well. Then again, with her agility, she could probably get access to his potions easily enough. He had them almost behind him, probably hoping to hide them from her.

She began to run towards him again, coming in close this time. Tossing her dagger to her left hand, she made a wide, obvious swing at his chest, and as he deflected it, she rotated around behind him, carefully sliding the last potion on the belt from its slot.

She looked down at the red bottle for a moment before she put the stopper in her mouth, and pulled it out with her teeth. She braced herself, and then poured the bitter tasting liquid into her mouth. She almost gagged on the powerful taste, but managed to swallow it down. She'd heard his potions were not the tastiest from the other guild members, but she was not quite expecting that.

She wiped her lips and as she looked at her hand, she noticed a green residue was left on it. She stared at it for a moment, and then looked back at the bottle. She could now see the bottle was not made from clear glass like most potion bottles were.

She turned around and looked at Gareth in surprise, not sure what to say. She could feel her legs growing weak; though she had no idea if that was an effect of the potion or her own reaction to having consumed a foul, mystery liquid. As he sheathed his sword, she could feel a pit falling in her gut. He knew she would steal that potion.

As he stepped closer to her, she could feel his eyes cutting deep into her soul. She knew that wasn't normal... that the potion had to be doing this to her. She could hear the sound of her own dagger striking the ground moments before she felt her legs grew too weak to hold her. She fell down onto her knees, kneeling and looking up at the powerful warrior above her.

Sandra could feel her pulse rushing as he looked down at her. She was unarmed and unarmored now, and felt completely exposed. She nervously tugged at her shirt collar, feeling increasingly timid in his presence.

Gareth looked down at her. He'd never seen her like this before; normally her body was covered by her shoddy scrap armor, and her hair was always kept in an unflattering bun. Now, he could see a generous amount of cleavage through her torn shirt, and her hair was free and gently swaying in the wind as she looked wide-eyed and timidly up at him.

He had never really considered her for her attractiveness before. He had originally intended to humiliate her somehow, to teach her a lesson about stealing from others, and make her leave the guild so she wouldn't endanger any adventuring parties with her inability to take a real hit.

He couldn't help but think of other possibilities now though. Her eyes were gradually losing their sparkle as the potion's effect ate away at her will, and he knew with a single command she would soon do whatever he desired.

"Are you aware of what is happening to you?" he asked her, testing to see how responsive she was now.

"I... I think so..." she replied weakly, as she continued to look up at him. She could feel the potion's effect spreading through her easily now. There was no doubt her weakness was caused by it, but more than that, it felt like his very presence was dominating her very essence.

“You should know better than to steal potions from another warrior.” Gareth said firmly to her
“You never know what kind of effects they might have.”

She nodded meekly, as she actually began to feel guilty about stealing the potion. She could hardly believe what she was feeling. She knew it was the potion making her feel this way, but on the other hand, it still felt exactly as real as any other guilt she had experienced before. She looked down in shame, noticing for the first time that her nervous tugging had pulled her shirt open, exposing a wide view of her cleavage.

She blushed as she covered her chest with her arms and looked back up at Gareth, nervous about what he might be thinking. She felt oddly lucid with that sudden realization, though she wasn't sure exactly how long it would last.

Gareth watched her reaction calmly, and when she looked up at him, he could see her eyes had almost cleared up completely before beginning to slowly fog over again. “What are you doing, covering yourself now?” he asked her.

Sandra had to ponder the answer a moment. She wanted to agree that it was strange to cover her chest; but she also knew that potion was messing with her head still. “You can't... look there...” she said, between slow breaths, struggling to draw out her thoughts.

“You were not covering up before” he replied, and she really could not argue against that; she could remember only just now covering herself up. Covering herself so suddenly was kind of strange in that context. Her arms felt weak anyways, so she let them fall limply back to her sides.

While it was clear the potion was working on her, it had a much weaker impact on her will than Gareth had expected it to. She must have had an exceptional amount of willpower for a thief, perhaps even enough to have qualified her as a magic wielder. Why she insisted on trying to be a front lines fighter was beyond him.

He would have to take it slowly though, and the middle of the forest was hardly a place to linger for too long. He reached down and picked up her dagger, which caused Sandra to weakly grab for it as he pulled it out of her reach. She looked up at him pleadingly, like a child who just had their favorite toy taken away from her.

“Follow me to my house, and you can have it back” Gareth said to her firmly.

Sandra continued to look up at him for a few moments. If she was pondering his command, or simply thinking too slowly to respond promptly he could not tell. Finally she gave a slow nod, and lifted herself awkwardly back to her feet. Gareth turned around, and began to walk back towards his house, with Sandra close behind, stumbling along almost drunkenly due to the weakness effect the potion included.

Once they reached his house, he opened the door to allow her inside first before following her inside and closing the door behind him. There would only be a few hours before the potion's effects would wear off, but he was sure he had plenty of time to teach her everything he needed by then.