

## The Tale of Sir James

Sir James Reed waited quietly, tankard in hand, at a small table in the corner of the tavern. The young bartender had got his order wrong, but he preferred to sit there and take little sips of watery ale, than walk up to the counter and make a fuss.

The room was heaving with people. Most were knights who had finished their quests for the day and convened at the “Hungry Giant Inn” to drink together over stories and stew. A hoard of them surrounded the bar, spilling over the counter as they fought for the next order. The tavern keeper slid mugs over to their grabbing hands: a hearty middle-aged woman with a laugh like a ringing bell. When she smiled, her whole face creased and wrinkled, joy etched into the fabric of her body. Sir James was debating whether she really found their slurred jokes funny, or was just being polite, when the tavern erupted into noise. Sir Gale Humfridus had arrived, bursting through heavy doors that swung backwards into the face of his squire. He joined onto the end of another group’s table, forcing each person to shuffle over to make room, then ordered the squire to fetch him some wine.

While Sir Gale commandeered their discussion, his squire braved the bar’s growing mob, swallowing up half the room. A head taller than the other men, he waded through closely packed bodies, stretching his gangly limbs to the front. Moments later, Sir James watched incredulously as he attempted to balance, against his chest, two drinks and a large plate of chicken legs. When they met each other’s eyes, he smiled in return, closed-mouthed but warm. Sir James thought about offering to help, but by then the squire had already turned away, slowly moving to rejoin Sir Gale and the small crowd that had since gathered around him. Their conversation filled the room. Sir Gale stretched his voice to each corner, rolling it out like dough.

“I wiped the floor with that beast, I’m telling you. Even the King said it was best slaying of a dragon he’d ever seen, didn’t he, Corwin?”

“Yes, Sire.”

“I was launching arrow after arrow into her flesh, lodging them in between her scales. I thought there was no way she was surviving all that, what about you, Corwin?”

“No, Sire. I didn’t.”

“But then she started flying towards me, with those massive wings,” he took a mouthful of chicken leg, spraying pieces into onlookers’ faces as he continued, “So I took out my sword, and I swear to you she started to back away in fear, right before I cut her down. Isn’t that right, Corwin?”

“Yes, Sire. Something along those lines.”

“That’s how it happened. You can ask the King.”

“I bet that’s not the first time a woman has been scared off by your sword,” Sir James said, but no one heard him over the rumble of the crowd. “I bet that’s not the first time a woman has been scared off by your sword,” he tried again, but the conversation had already moved on. He swigged his tepid liquid and stared at the table.

A few days later, Sir James found himself sat at the same bar, ordering the same ale. He had convinced himself it would be more enjoyable than the last time. At least it was a shelter from the cold. “The usual, love?” The tavern keeper asked, feeling along the shelves for a tankard. Sir James thought about saying no. He could ask for something exciting, like Pixie Tears or Goblin Sweat, and her head would turn to him in surprise. They might make some jokes, actually good ones, and she would send him off with his exotic drink and a renewed sense of respect. Even milk would at least be something different.

“Yes please,” he replied instead, and then waited in silence as she filled up his cup.

At that moment, Sir Gale burst inside, storming towards the bar. He shouldered a few men out of the way and kicked a stool closer to sit on. Sir James pretended to read the labels on the display bottles.

“He took Corwin.”

Sir Gale drummed his fingers along the counter, his arm tensed. It took Sir James a few moments to realise he was talking to him.

“What?”

“He took my bloody squire!”

“Who did?”

“The Chosen One!”

The Chosen One hadn’t actually been chosen by anyone, as far as Sir James was aware. His real name was “Gregory,” and he had appointed himself the title to seem important. The Chosen One was destined to unite the humans and monsters of the kingdom, but until he saw it in writing on a prophetic scroll, Sir James wasn’t believing that either.

“Ah. Yeah, he’s a pain, isn’t he.”

They had never met, but aside from thinking him big-headed, Sir James didn’t really dislike the guy. In fact, he quite agreed with his politics. But this was not the time to mention that.

“He’s shit! A knight’s job is to slay monsters, not sit and have a beer with them! That’s just stupid. And if there are no more monsters to slay, then what? And now he’s taken my squire too?”

No monsters, no squire? I've had it up to here with this guy!" Gale slammed his fist against the table, the glasses rattled nervously.

"No, I get that. I get that."

Sir Gale grasped his arm, Sir James almost jumped.

"You've got to help me get him back."

"Sorry?"

"Well, I don't have a squire now, so you'll have to do."

Sir James tried to subtly wiggle his arm away, but Sir Gale just held him tighter.

"Look, I agree, we should look for Corwin, but –"

"Great." Sir Gale said. He started fishing around the floor for his helmet, "We can ride in tomorrow, bring your biggest weapon." He snorted. "I'll meet you in there; you distract the monsters, I'll hack their heads off, then we find Corwin."

Sir James thought that was a terrible idea.

"I like that idea," he said, "But I think we might need to plan out the specifics before, you know, jumping straight into it."

Frowning, Sir Gale dumped his helmet on the table and looked up.

"Specifics? What do you mean specifics?"

"Well, I don't know, have you checked how many guards there are? Or how I go about distracting them all?"

"It doesn't matter how you do it, just do it!"

"Okay, but –"

"Meet in the forest tomorrow morning," Sir Gale stood up, his stool screeching along the floorboards, "We ride at midday."

He left the tavern, the crowd parting as he marched through. Sir James ordered another ale, hoping it wouldn't be his last.

It was sunrise when Sir James journeyed to the forest. He flew through across the plains on his trusty steed, a chestnut-coloured stallion called 'Buck'. Riding was one of the things Sir James loved most about being a knight: the feeling of closeness to his horse, the rest of the world a blur, a faded backdrop. He breathed in the crisp morning air, relishing the cold lashes of wind against his skin. His armour clattered to the horse's rhythm, boots hitting against the stirrups with metallic clinks. Above them, amber seeped into blue, streaking Buck's mane with sunlight as it billowed out against the restless breeze. Sir James gripped the reins tighter as flat grass turned to mud and dust. They dipped between trees and into the forest, leaping over roots that twisted into the undergrowth. As Sir James travelled deeper, the glow of the sun dimmed, disappearing behind a mass of leaves and branches. They rustled at his arrival, disquieted, sharing low murmurs of disapproval. Knights, once revered defenders of the land, were no

longer welcome in pockets like this; the trees knew their code of honour had been worn with time. When he glimpsed the castle beyond the wood, he slowed Buck to a trot, guiding him towards a small clearing with a better view. It was a daunting structure, fortified by thick walls and towers that stretched to the sky. Each brick was worn, scarred from countless sieges and battles. Dismounting, Sir James snuck closer to analyse the defences. The battlements were lined with grey creatures, ogres, most of them baring crossbows. Their faces were disfigured, with features of different sizes but always large noses and wide mouths. While ugly, their bodies rippled with muscle, and Sir James shuddered at the thought of facing so many of them at once. He knew that he must be delicate in his approach.

“Hello.” He called to them, edging out of the forest and towards the castle.

“Who goes there?” The biggest ogre answered gruffly. Sir James paused.

“My name is, um, James. I’m a political ambassador here on behalf of the King. I just wanted to see if we could, possibly, strike up a deal in terms of human and monster relations.”

The ogres in the battlements talked among themselves, eyeing Sir James suspiciously. Eventually the biggest one replied, “Well, ‘Um James,’ we weren’t expecting any visitors today, especially not a delegate from the King.”

“Oh, that’s strange, because I definitely exchanged, uh, fairy-mail with one of your guys.”

“What was his name?”

Sir James swallowed.

“Steve?”

The ogres retreated again for a hushed conversation, then reappeared over the parapets.

“Was it Steve R? Did he have big ears and a nose ring?”

“Yes, yes. It was him!”

“Liar! Steve R is on paternity leave!”

At that, the ogres broke into a frenzy of outraged cries and grunts. They drew their crossbows and pointed them each squarely at Sir James. He debated making a run for the woods, but knew he couldn’t evade every shot.

Before they could fire, there came a sharp yelp and one of the ogres disappeared from view. Another soon followed, and more after him, leaving the remaining ogres looking about their line in confusion. Sir James seized the opportunity to duck back behind a tree, just as Sir Gale yelled from beyond the walls. A song of violence followed: the valiant clash of weapons as metal met metal. Blades sank into flesh with the agonised groans of those who had fallen. A chorus of battle cries turned to panic, and the ogres fled. Sir James returned to the open to see bigger

ogres ferrying smaller ones through to the towers. Some attempted to carry their injured to safety. Sir Gale stood proudly in the centre.

“Those guys were terrible fighters, just awful.” He shouted.

“Really? I couldn’t tell from their cries of pain and terror.”

“Yeah, it was unbelievable. I tried to let all the little ones go, what kind of idiot puts kids on the front line?”

Sir James’ voice softened with concern, “There were kids?”

“Yeah! How cruel is that?”

Sir Gale tossed over a scaling ladder and Sir James climbed up to join him. Despite splatters of green blood and the odd dismembered limb, he observed that what Sir Gale had said was true: there were very few actual casualties, none of which were children. Still, he responded, “If we see the ogres again, let’s leave them be.”

“Sure, alright.”

With their presence known, the knights resolved to move quickly, crossing the battlements and into the keep. James led the way, recognising a servants’ tunnel that would conceal them. Sir Gale grabbed a torch from the wall and followed him down. It was a tight, winding staircase, bare but for the occasional arrow slit or door to the main halls. The steps were uneven, jutting out like crooked teeth, and difficult to balance on with the bulk of their armour. When the slits disappeared, they knew they were underground, swallowed into the castle’s depths.

At the bottom of the staircase, they exited into a cavity, a hole lying deep in the body of the castle. It was hot and wet, like an infected wound. The sides were lined with jagged rock, marked with large dents, rough under Sir James’ palm as he felt his way forward. He heard noises from the darkness. They echoed through the passageway, shifting and warping. Something sounded like a moan: long and low and almost human. The knights kept going. Sir Gale held his torch in front of them, casting shadows that writhed up the walls, damp stone slabs glistening below. The further they crept, the thicker the stench of blood in the air, and Sir James prayed that whatever lay beyond them was feeling merciful.

From the light of their torch, the creature emerged. It was tall, at least eight feet, with leathery green skin hanging in folds, parcelling mounds of fat and muscle. Yellow-brown tusks protruded from its mouth, with matching rows of canines that shone with saliva. It plodded towards them, raising its weapon: a large metal mace stained red. With each of its steps, the ground rumbled. Releasing a throaty growl, it began to speak.

“If you wish to pass, you must answer my riddle correctly. Answer wrong and you shall face my wrath.”

Sir James stuck his hand up.

“Yes?...”

“I just want to clarify,” He lifted up the flap in his helmet, “What exactly does that mean? Death? Is that what the stakes are here? Because-”

The creature swung its mace and struck the ground. It split under the force.

“Silly question. Sorry. Ignore me.”

It shambled closer and delivered its riddle:

“What has legs, but cannot walk, arms that cannot hold... “

“I think it’s a chair.” Sir James whispered.

“Hands that cannot feel, a mouth but cannot speak...”

“Nevermind, he’s lost me.”

“Eyes but cannot see and knees that cannot... knobble.”

The knights exchanged glances.

“Okay, um, could we maybe hear the whole thing again?”

The creature cleared its throat and recited from the start:

“What has legs, but cannot walk, arms that cannot-“

Sir Gale stopped him.

“Okay I’ve had enough of this.”

“What?”

He brandished his sword, “You trolls always think-“

“I’m not a troll. I’m just a big goblin.”

“Okay? You goblins then as well, you always act like you’re so smart. Well, we’ll see who’s smarter when I slice your bloody head off with my-“

“Whoa.” Sir James guided his sword down by its point, “Calm down, Sir Gale.”

“He’s acting like we’re stupid!”

“I know, but he’s just doing his job.”

Sir James took a tentative step closer to the goblin.

“Look, I know how these things are. You’re in the middle of a shift, right? You’ve probably been here for hours.”

The goblin lowered his mace and answered slowly.

“Yeah, I started at sunrise, and I only got a fifteen-minute break for lunch.”

The two knights looked at each other and shook their heads.

“Now, that’s awful.”

“That’s not right.”

“That has to be a violation of goblin workers’ rights, they’re taking advantage.”

“Yeah, they’re taking the piss.”

The goblin looked around and leaned in. “To be honest with you, I have felt mistreated. It’s not easy doing this job all day, I have to keep coming up with new riddles.” He sighed, hitting his mace against his thigh, “And with the long hours I hardly see my wife and son, he’s already in bed by the time I get in.”

Sir James leaned in to meet him. “Have you ever thought about unionising?”

The goblin thought about it.

“There are others like me, you know, just as angry with it all.”

Sir James patted him genially on the shoulder.

“I tell you what, what was your name again, sorry?”

“Grunk.”

“I tell you what, Grunk, if you let us through that door, I promise I will personally help you found a ‘Goblins’ Guild’.”

Grunk’s expression softened. “Do you mean that?” He asked.

“Of course.”

Satisfied, Grunk lumbered aside, “Your friend is where the cells are, down the hallway. Keep going and it’s on your left.”

He motioned for Sir James and Sir Gale to enter the doorway behind him. They thanked him and walked through, following his directions down a narrow corridor.

Sir Gale straightened out his chainmail, “Honestly, I had no idea guards like him were treated so badly.”

“I know,” said Sir James, “Poor bloke.”

Rats scurried past their boots. Sir James saw one gnawing at something red and mushy on the ground. He didn’t look any closer.

“I’m quite glad I didn’t kill him now.”

Sir James turned to Sir Gale. He couldn’t make out his face, but his tone belied remorse. Normally, he’d be charging forward, reckless, eager for the next fight. Now, he was quiet, almost passive.

“Yeah, me too.” Sir James said, “He was nice.”

“You’re good at talking, you know.”

“Ha, no. Well, thank you. But really, I just don’t like fighting people who don’t deserve it. We’re all just trying to get by.”

Sir Gale hummed in affirmation.

“I get that.”

There was a pause. But Sir James could sense that Sir Gale wasn’t finished.

“Are you actually going to make a union for that guy?”

Sir James nudged a skull out of his path with his foot.

“I’m going to try, at least. I’ll see if I can get a message to the King; I’m a man of my word.”

They heard a faint murmur ahead: a pitchy voice, slightly whiny. “That’s Corwin!” Sir Gale cried and bolted ahead. Sir James ran after him, weapons readied. His mind sifted through ideas of what other monsters could await them; you couldn’t fit a dragon in there, but a giant? A cyclops maybe? He squeezed the hilt of his sword, palms sweaty beneath his gauntlets. His pulse throbbed in his ears. They stole a quick glance inside each cell they passed, but there were no signs of life; only the limp chains and cuffs that dangled from the walls.

Then they saw him. Corwin sat in a chair at a small wooden desk, twirling a large set of keys around his fingers. Upon seeing the knights, the keys flew onto the floor, and Corwin had to bend over and scramble to pick them up again.

“What are you guys doing here?”

“We’re here to rescue you!” Sir Gale announced.

“Oh, for crying out loud, Sire! I don’t need rescuing. Go home.”

“What? I thought you were kidnapped?”

“Well, you thought wrong,” Corwin got up from his chair and went to unlock one of the cells, “The Chosen One didn’t kidnap me, I decided to join him. And now I’m on prison duty.”

“Prison duty? There aren’t even any prisoners in here!”

“Yes, it’s a very relaxing workplace.”

Corwin performed a quick examination of the room, scanning the walls and floor for holes. He started yanking at its chains as he continued, “Recently... I don’t know, I’ve felt a bit disillusioned with how knights round here go about ‘saving the kingdom.’ What about the monsters you kill who have life goals and dreams? Families who will miss them when they’re gone? That’s why I like The Chosen One, you know, he’s all about treating different species equally.”

Sir Gale threw his sword and shield to the ground, clattering loudly.

“You think that guy’s so great? Let me tell you, Corwin, he’s a real piece of work. We’ve been searching through this creepy old castle for ages, but you know what the worst part of it has been? Seeing the state of all the poor monsters following him! He treats them as badly as any knight does, Corwin, believe you and me. You know that goblin guarding the way to you? He told us he barely gets to see his wife and son. The ogres defending the castle? Fresh-faced idiots set up to die first, and some of them were kids! ‘The Chosen One’ my arse! He just likes to -”

Sir Gale was interrupted by echoing footsteps. They glimpsed a figure approaching them, rushing through the passageway, a long, ragged cloak flowing behind him. As he came closer, Sir James could see that his face was aged, his features sinking into a heavy frown. Over his wiry hair sat a make-shift crown, formed of several golden chains and gems strung together.

“You! You two are the ones who broke into my castle, viciously slaughtering my henchmen, how dare you?”

Sir James stared at him, “Henchmen? I thought all humans and monsters here were equal?”

The Chosen One froze, “I didn’t say henchmen.”

“Yes, you did.”

“No. Well, even if I did, that’s not what I meant.”

“It sounded like you meant it to me. And you know what, that adds up, because these creatures are being treated horribly. Have you seen how bad their working conditions are?”

“Yeah!” Shouted Sir Gale, “We’re gonna make a union!”

The Chosen One clutched at his head, readjusting his 'crown.' "No!" He screeched, "You can't do that! It will upset the order! These monsters need me, you see, I'm their leader! Without me, they'd be mindless, aggressive... I'm their saviour!"

"You're not their saviour, you're just a mean old man called Gregory!" said Sir Gale, and The Chosen One pounced on him. Howling, he started scratching at Sir Gale's helmet, long, dirty fingernails clawing for his eyes through its slit. Sir Gale started screaming, flailing around on the floor like a dying insect. "Get it off me, get it off me!" he wailed as Sir James tried to drag The Chosen One away by his cape. Grasping at clumps of fabric and hair, Sir James resorted to pulling away the crown from its web of tangled gold and grey. The Chosen One turned and hissed at him, lunging to take it back. As Sir James fended him off, Sir Gale found room to reach for his sword. Then, in one swift motion, he lopped off The Chosen One's head. It fell to the floor with a wet thud.

"Thanks for that, mate." Sir Gale exhaled, shoving off The Chosen One's lifeless body.

"That's alright, he was a nasty piece of work, as it turns out," Sir James said.

Sir Gale stood up and wiped some blood off his chainmail, "Right, well, I don't know about you two, but I fancy a drink after all that."

That night, Sir James Reed waited quietly, tankard in hand, at a small table in the corner of the tavern. Beside him sat Corwin, nodding and making notes, as he outlined the structure of the new Goblins' Guild. Across from them, Sir Gale hauled over a chair, waving around a large bottle of wine. They cheered as he poured them each a drink and raised his cup for a toast. "Good riddance to The Chosen One," he said, and waves of red sloshed onto the table. The men drank and joked and laughed, and the fireplace roared with them, its embers drifting into the air, swaying to the music of drunken joy. Sir James smiled and refilled his tankard, hoping he wouldn't fall off his horse on the journey home.

