



JOHN GWYNNE

Yellow

*Book Two of
The Faithful and the Fallen*

TOR



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Cast of Characters

ARDAN

- Anwarth – warrior of Dun Carreg, father of Farrell. Escaped with Edana from the sack of Dun Carreg.
- Brenin – murdered King of Ardan.
- Brina – healer of Dun Carreg, owner of a cantankerous crow, Craf.
Escaped with Edana from the sack of Dun Carreg.
- Corban – warrior of Dun Carreg, son of Thannon and Gwenith, brother of Cywen. Escaped with Edana from the sack of Dun Carreg.
- Cywen – from Dun Carreg, daughter of Thannon and Gwenith, sister of Corban. Presumed dead in the sack of Dun Carreg.
- Dath – fisherman of Dun Carreg, son of Mordwyr and friend of Corban.
Escaped with Edana from the sack of Dun Carreg.
- Edana – Princess of Ardan, daughter of Brenin. Presumably Queen of Ardan since the death of Brenin, but now a fugitive.
- Evnis – counsellor and murderer of King Brenin and father of Vonn. In league with Queen Rhin of Cambren.
- Farrell – warrior, son of Anwarth and friend of Corban. Escaped with Edana from the sack of Dun Carreg
- Gar – stablemaster. Escaped with Edana from the sack of Dun Carreg
- Gwenith – wife of Thannon, mother of Corban and Cywen. Escaped with Edana from the sack of Dun Carreg.
- Heb – loremaster of Dun Carreg. Escaped with Edana from the sack of Dun Carreg
- Marrock – warrior and huntsman, cousin of Edana. Escaped with Edana from the sack of Dun Carreg.
- Mordwyr – fisherman of Dun Carreg, father of Dath and Bethan.
Escaped with Edana from the sack of Dun Carreg.

Cast of Characters

Pendathran – battlechief of King Brenin. Held prisoner by Evnis in Dun Carreg.

Rafe – young warrior belonging to Evnis’ hold. Childhood rival of Corban.

Thannon – husband of Gwenith, father of Corban and Cywen. Slain by King Nathair of Tenebral in the sack of Dun Carreg.

Vonn – warrior, son of Evnis. Escaped with Edana from the sack of Dun Carreg.

BENOTH

Aric – Benothi giant, companion of Uthas.

Balur One-Eye – Benothi giant.

Eisa – Benothi giantess, companion of Uthas.

Ethlinn – Benothi giantess, daughter of Balur One-Eye, also called the Dreamer.

Fray – Benothi giant, companion of Uthas.

Kai – Benothi giant, companion of Uthas.

Morc – Benothi giant, keeper of the wyrms.

Nemain – Queen of the Benothi giants.

Salach – Benothi giant, shieldman of Uthas.

Sreng – Benothi giantess, shield-maiden of Nemain.

Struan – Benothi giant, companion of Uthas.

Uthas – giant of the Benothi clan, secret ally and conspirator with Queen Rhin of Cambren.

CAMBREN

Braith – warrior. One-time leader of the Darkwood outlaws, now huntsman of Queen Rhin.

Geraint – warrior, battlechief of Queen Rhin.

Morcant – warrior, first-sword of Queen Rhin.

Rhin – Queen of Cambren.

CARNUTAN

Mandros – King of Carnutan, slain by Veradis in the belief that Mandros murdered King Aquilus of Tenebral.

Cast of Characters

DOMHAIN

Baird – warrior, one of the Degad, Rath’s giant-killers.

Conall – warrior, bastard son of King Eremon. Brother of Halion and half-brother of Coralen. Sided with Evnis in the sack of Dun Carreg.

Coralen – warrior, companion of Rath. Bastard daughter of King Eremon, half-sister of Halion and Conall.

Eremon – King of Domhain.

Halion – warrior, first-sword of Edana of Ardan. Bastard son of King Eremon, brother of Conall and half-brother of Coralen.

Lorcan – young Prince of Domhain, son of Eremon and Roisin.

Maeve – bastard daughter of King Eremon, half-sister to Coralen, Halion and Conall.

Nara – mother of Coralen.

Quinn – First-sword of King Eremon.

Rath – Battlechief of Domhain, giant-hunter.

Roisin – Queen of Domhain, wife of Eremon, mother of Lorcan.

HELVETH

Braster – King of Helveth, wounded in the battle against the Hunen at Haldis.

Lothar – battlechief of Helveth.

Ventos – a travelling merchant-trader.

ISILTIR

Eboric – warrior, Gerda’s huntsman.

Gerda – estranged wife of King Romar, lady of Dun Kellen, mother of Haelan.

Gramm – horse-trader and timber merchant, lord of a hold in the north of Isiltir. Father of Orgull and Wulf.

Jael – warrior of Isiltir, nephew of King Romar and cousin of Kastell. Allied to Nathair of Tenebral.

Kastell – warrior of Isiltir and the elite Gadrai. Nephew of King Romar and cousin of Jael.

Cast of Characters

Maquin – warrior of Isiltir and the elite Gadrai, shieldman of Kastell.
Orgull – warrior of Isiltir, captain of the elite Gadrai. Son of Gramm.
Romar – King of Isiltir, slain in the battle against the Hunen at Haldis.
Tahir – warrior of Isiltir and the elite Gadrai.
Thoris – warrior, battlechief of Gerda at Dun Kellen.
Ulfilas – warrior, shieldman of Jael.
Varick – Lord of Dun Kellen, brother of Gerda and uncle of Haelan.
Wulf – warrior, son of Gramm and brother of Orgull.

NARVON

Camlin – outlaw of the Darkwood. Recently allied to King Brenin and Edana of Ardan.
Drust – warrior, shieldman of Owain.
Owain – King of Narvon. Conqueror of Ardan with the aid of Nathair, King of Tenebral.
Uthan – Prince of Narvon, Owain's son. Murdered by Evnis on Rhin's orders.

TARBESH

Akar – captain of the Jehar holy warrior order travelling with Veradis.
Enkara – warrior of the Jehar holy order. One of the Hundred travelling with Tukul.
Javed – slave and pit-fighter of the Vin Thalun.
Sumur – lord of the Jehar holy warrior order.
Tukul – warrior of the Jehar holy order, leader of the Hundred.

TENEBRAL

Aquilus - murdered King of Tenebral.
Armatus – warrior, former first-sword of King Aquilus.
Bos – warrior of the eagle-guard and expert in the shield wall, friend of Veradis.
Ektor – son of Lamar of Ripa and brother of Krelis and Veradis.
Fidele – widow of Aquilus, now Queen Regent of Tenebral, mother of Nathair.
Krelis – warrior, son of Lamar of Ripa and brother of Ektor and Veradis.

Cast of Characters

Lamar – Baron of Ripa, father of Krelis, Ektor and Veradis.

Marcellin – Baron of Ultas.

Meical – counsellor to Aquilus, King of Tenebral.

Nathair – King of Tenebral, son of Aquilus and Fidele. In league with Queen Rhin of Cambren.

Orcus – warrior of the eagle-guard, shieldman of Fidele.

Peritus – battlechief of Tenebral.

Rauca – warrior, a captain of the eagle-guard and friend of Veradis. Slain by Gar in the sack of Dun Carreg.

Veradis – first-sword and friend to King Nathair. Son of Lamar of Ripa and brother of Ektor and Krelis.

THE THREE ISLANDS

Alazon – shipwright.

Calidus – spymaster of Lykos, Lord of the Vin Thalun, and later counsellor to Nathair, King of Tenebral.

Deinon – warrior, shieldman of Lykos and brother of Thaan.

Emad – shieldman of Herak. Guard and trainer of pit-fighters.

Herak – pit-trainer.

Jace – member of Lykos' ship's crew.

Lykos – Lord of the Vin Thalun, the pirate nation that inhabits the Three Islands of Panos, Pelset and Nerin.

Thaan – warrior, shieldman of Lykos and brother of Deinon.



**THE
BANISHED
LANDS**



War eternal between the Faithful and the Fallen,
infinite wrath come to the world of men.
Lightbearer seeking flesh from the cauldron,
to break his chains and wage the war again.
Two born of blood, dust and ashes shall champion
the Choices,
the Darkness and Light.

Black Sun will drown the earth in bloodshed,
Bright Star with the Treasures must unite.
By their names you shall know them –
Kin-Slayer, Kin-Avenger, Giant-Friend, Draig-Rider,
Dark Power 'gainst Lightbringer.
One shall be the Tide, one the Rock in the swirling sea.

Before one, storm and shield shall stand,
before the other, True-Heart and Black-Heart.
Beside one rides the Beloved, beside the other, the
Avenging Hand.
Behind one, the Sons of the Mighty, the fair Ben-Elim,
gathered 'neath the Great Tree.
Behind the other, the Unholy, dread Kadoshim who
seek to cross the bridge,
force the world to bended knee.

Look for them when the high king calls, when the
shadow warriors ride forth,
when white-walled Telassar is emptied, when the book
is found in the north.
When the white wyrms spread from their nest,
when the Firstborn take back what was lost, and the
Treasures stir from their rest.
Both earth and sky shall cry warning, shall herald this
War of Sorrows.
Tears of blood spilt from the earth's bones, and at
Midwinter's height,
bright day shall become full night.

Valour



CHAPTER ONE

UTHAS

The Year 1142 of the Age of Exiles, Birth Moon

The cauldron was a hulking mass of black iron, tall and wide, squatting upon a dais in the centre of a cavernous room. Torches of blue flame hung on the walls of the chamber, pockets of light punctuating the darkness. In the shadows, circling its edges, long and sinuous shapes moved.

Uthas of the Benothi giants strode towards the cauldron, his shadow flickering on the walls. He climbed the steps and stopped before it. It was utterly black, appearing to suck the torchlight into it, consuming it, reflecting nothing back. Just for a moment it seemed to shudder, a gentle throb, like a diseased heart.

A muffled request from the chamber's entrance reached him but he did not move, just continued to stare.

'What?' he said eventually.

'Nemain sends for you, Uthas. She says the Dreamer is waking.'

The giant sighed and turned to leave the chamber. He brushed his fingertips against the cauldron's cold belly and froze.

'What is it?' his shieldman Salach called from the chamber's doorway.

Uthas cocked his head to one side, closing his eyes. *Voices, calling to me.* 'Nothing,' he murmured, unsure whether he heard or felt the whisperings from within the cauldron. 'Soon,' he breathed as he pulled his fingers from the cold iron.

A shape slithered from the shadows as he walked towards the exit. It blocked his way, gliding about him. A wyrm, white scales glistening as it raised its flat head and regarded him with cold, soulless eyes. He stood there, still and silent, let it taste his scent, felt an instant of unease as he waited, then the snake slithered away, its huge coils

bunching and expanding, back to the shadows to rejoin its brood. He let out a breath.

‘Come, then,’ he said as he strode past Salach. ‘Best not keep Nemain waiting.’

He glanced at the chamber’s dour-faced guards, all wrapped in fur and iron, as he marched past them. Salach’s footfalls followed him. In silence they passed through the bowels of Murias, the last stronghold of the Benothi. It was nestled deep in the highlands of Benoth, carved into and beneath the grey, mist-shrouded land.

In time they reached a wide staircase that spiralled up into darkness and soon Uthas was muttering under his breath, the old pain in his knee gnawing at him as he climbed higher and higher.

‘*Bitseach*,’ he swore, thinking of Nemain waiting for him at the top of this high tower. Salach chuckled behind him.

Eventually they were at a doorway. Salach nodded to the warrior standing there, Sreng, Nemain’s shield-maiden. She opened the door for them.

The room was sparsely decorated, with little furniture apart from a large, fur-draped bed at its centre. A woman lay upon it, slender, sweat-soaked, her limbs jerking and twitching. A white-haired man sat beside her, his huge bulk crammed into a chair, holding her hand. He looked over as Uthas and Salach entered the room and stared at them, a ruined, scar-latticed hole where one of his eyes should have been.

‘One-Eye.’ Uthas nodded. ‘How is she?’

Balur One-Eye shrugged.

‘Where is Nemain?’

‘I am here,’ a voice said, drawing Uthas’ gaze to the far end of the room. A figure stood in an arched doorway, framed by the pale day beyond.

Nemain, Queen of the Benothi. Ravens gathered on the balcony beyond her. One fluttered onto her shoulder.

‘My Queen,’ Uthas said, dipping his head.

‘Welcome back,’ she replied, hair the colour of midnight framing her milky, angular face. ‘What news?’

‘Events are stirring in the south,’ Uthas said. ‘Narvon wars with Ardan, and the warriors of Cambren are marching east.’ He paused, breathing deep, his next words frozen on his lips. He feared the

answer he expected. ‘Our enemies war amongst themselves. It would be a good time to strike and reclaim what was ours.’ *Please, Nemain, give the order. Save me from what I must do if you refuse.*

Nemain smiled, though there was little humour in it. ‘Strike south? We are a broken people, Uthas – you know this. Too few to fill this fortress, let alone the south that once was ours. Besides, we are set a different task, now.’ She walked out onto the balcony.

He sighed and followed her onto the balcony’s edge, where cold air stung his skin. A cliff face sloped steeply down, wreathed far below in mist, a sea of dark granite and snow and wiry heather rolling into the distance. Ravens swirled about the balcony, riding the updraught. One cawed and veered to land besides Nemain. Idly she reached out and scratched its head. It clacked its beak.

‘What of the west?’ she said. ‘What of Domhain?’

Uthas shrugged. ‘There we know little. I suspect that Eremon grows older, content to do nothing in his dotage. That *bandraoi* Rath keeps us out,’ he spat. ‘He does not rest. He hunts our scouts, raids our land, him and his giant-hunters. There have been some casualties.’

‘Ach,’ Nemain hissed, eyes flashing red. ‘I would like nothing more than to march out and take back what we have lost, remind Rath why he hates us.’

‘Then let us do it,’ Uthas urged, feeling his blood surge, hope flaring.

‘We cannot,’ Nemain said. ‘The cauldron must be guarded. Never again can it be used. It must not fall into the wrong hands.’

Uthas felt the words like a hammer blow, her words sealing his future.

‘But we must know of what is happening beyond our borders. Domhain cannot remain closed to us. You will lead a company south, learn what you can of Eremon’s plans.’

‘As you command, my Queen,’ Uthas said.

‘Choose who you will, but not too many. Speed will serve you better than strength in numbers. And avoid Rath’s notice.’

‘I will do as you say.’

A sharp cry rang out from the chamber behind them. The woman on the bed was sitting upright, sweat-darkened hair clinging to her

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face, eyes wild and bulging. Balur gripped her hand, murmuring to her.

‘Ethlinn, what have you seen?’ Nemain asked.

The pale-faced woman took a shuddering breath. ‘They are coming,’ she whispered. ‘The Kadoshim draw ever closer. They *feel* the cauldron. The Black Sun, he is coming to make them flesh. He is coming for the cauldron.’



CHAPTER TWO

CYWEN

Cywen woke slowly, like the tide creeping in.

First she felt. A dull throbbing in her head, her shoulder, her hip. She ached everywhere, she realized, but worse in those places. Then she heard. Groaning, low voices, the thud of footfalls, a dragging, scraping sound, and behind it the cry of gulls and the distant murmur of the sea. She tried to open her eyes; one was crusted shut. Daylight felt like a knife jabbing into her head. *Where am I?* She looked about and saw warriors in red cloaks dragging bodies across the stone-paved courtyard, leaving blood-smeared trails across the cobbles, piling them onto a heaped mound of corpses.

Suddenly it all came flooding back, memory upon memory tumbling together: talking on the wall with Marrock, Evis in the courtyard, the black-clothed warriors within the walls, the gates opening, *Conall* . . .

There was something soft beneath her. She was sprawled upon a body, a female, staring at her with lifeless eyes. Staggering she climbed upright, the world spinning briefly before it settled.

Stonegate was wide open, a trickle of people passing in and out of the fortress, most in the red cloaks of Narvon. Columns of black smoke marked the pale sky, a soft breeze from the sea tugging at them, blurring where smoke ended and sky began.

The battle is lost, then. Dun Carreg is fallen.

Then another thought cut through the fog filling her mind. *My family.*

She looked at the bodies strewn about her, remembered falling with Conall but could not see him amongst the dead. Her mam and

da's faces flashed through her mind, Corban, then Gar's. Where was everyone?

She left the courtyard unchallenged and drifted slowly through the streets, following the trail of the dead. They were littered everywhere, sometimes in mounds where the fighting had raged fiercer, some still locked together in a macabre embrace. The smell of smoke and fire grew thicker the deeper she walked into the fortress. Her feet took her to the stables. There were more warriors here, red-cloaked men tending wild-eyed horses. She glimpsed Corban's stallion Shield in the paddock, then he was gone, lost amongst the herd gathered there.

Where is Gar?

As if in a dream she walked on, peering at the faces of the dead, searching for her family, relieved every time a lifeless face was not one of them. Her search continued, becoming more frantic until she found herself in the courtyard before the feast-hall.

Another pile of the dead was heaped here, greater even than the one before Stonegate. Warriors were everywhere, wounded, covered in ash and blood. In one corner Cywen saw the grey-cloaks of Ardan, the defeated warriors gathered together, many injured. They were guarded by a cohort of Owain's men.

A great ululation came from the feast-hall. Something – a board, a tabletop – was being carried from the entranceway. As Cywen watched, it was hoisted upright and leaned with a thud against one of the columns that supported the entrance. A body was fixed to the board, covered in blood but still recognizable. Cywen's stomach lurched.

Brenin. His head was lolling, arms twisted, wrists and ankles nailed to the tabletop. A great bloom of blood surrounding the wound in his chest. Cywen spat bile onto the stained cobblestones, motes of ash falling softly about her like black snow.

She wiped her mouth and stumbled towards the hall's doors, eyes fixed on Brenin's corpse.

'Please, Elyon, All-Father,' she prayed, 'let my kin still live.' She stopped before Brenin, stood staring up at him until a warrior bumped into her and told her to get out of the way. She glared at him.

Noise from the feast-hall leaked out into the courtyard, some kind of commotion – men shouting, a deep growling. *Storm?*

Then she was dashing through the open doors, blinking as her eyes adjusted to the gloom. Everything was chaos in here, tables and chairs overturned, timbers blackened and charred with fire, clouds of smoke still clinging to the rafters where the flames had only recently been doused. There were many people gathered in here. She saw Owain talking with Nathair, a cluster of the black-clothed warriors that had stormed the gates gathered about him. Evnis was amongst them, and Conall. Anger flashed in her gut and her hand instinctively reached for her knife-belt. She scowled as she remembered she'd used all the blades last night on the wall.

Then her eyes were drawn back to the commotion that had first caught her attention. A group of warriors were circling something, a snapping, snarling something.

'Just kill it,' she heard one of the warriors say and saw a flash of sharp white teeth, a flat muzzle, brindle fur.

'Buddai,' she whispered and ran forwards, elbowing through the line of warriors.

They were grouped in a half-circle about Buddai, the great hound standing with his head lowered, teeth bared.

Cywen stumbled to a halt and Buddai's big head swung round to face her, teeth snapping. Then, suddenly, he knew her. He whined, his tail wagging hesitantly at seeing someone familiar in this place of death, someone that was *pack*. She threw herself upon him, arms wrapped about his neck, and buried her face in his fur. She stayed like that long moments, tears spilling into Buddai's fur. In time she leaned back, got a lick on the face and looked down.

'That's why you're here,' she mumbled. Her da lay sprawled on the ground, eyes glassy, flat, wounds all over his body, blood crusting black. With a deep sob she knelt beside Thannon's corpse and gently brushed her fingertips across his cheek. *Are they all slain, then?* She laid her head upon Thannon's chest. Buddai snuggled in close to her and nudged Thannon's hand with his muzzle. It flopped on the ground.

'Girl,' a voice said and a spear butt dug into her back.

'What?'

'You need to move,' the man said, an older warrior, silver streaks in his red beard.

'No,' she said, squeezing her da tighter.

‘We have to clear the hall, lass, an’ that hound won’t let us near him.’ He prodded Thannon’s boot with his spear butt. Buddai growled. ‘If you can get that hound to go with you all the better, otherwise we’ve no choice but t’kill it.’

Kill Buddai. No more death.

‘I . . . yes,’ Cywen said, wiping her eyes and nose. She knelt before Buddai, running her hands over him. Blood crusted the fur on his front shoulder and he whined when she probed the wound. ‘Come with me, Buds,’ she whispered, ‘else they’ll kill you too.’ He just cocked his head and stared at her with uncomprehending eyes.

Cywen stood, took a few steps away from the hound and called him. He took a hesitant step towards her, then looked back at his fallen master and whined pitifully.

‘Come on, Buds. Come.’ Cywen slapped her hand against her leg, and this time he came to her. The red-bearded warrior nodded and continued with his work.

No one was taking any notice of Cywen; she was just another blood-stained survivor of the night’s dark work. All of the warriors in the room seemed to be busy clearing the floors, tending to wounded comrades. Owain and Nathair were still deep in conversation, though Cywen saw that the King of Tenebral’s shieldman – the black-clad warrior called Sumur – was staring back at her.

‘Come on, Buddai,’ Cywen said. ‘Best be getting out of here.’ She turned towards the feast-hall doors and with a thud crashed into someone.

‘*Oof,*’ the man grunted. ‘Watch where you’re— *You.*’

Cywen stood frozen, staring at the person she had collided with. It was Rafe.

The huntsman’s son glared at her. Buddai growled and Rafe took a step backwards.

His fair hair was dank, ash stained, his eyes red veined with dark hollow rings. He had been crying. There was a gash in one leg of his breeches, just above the knee, and drying blood soaked down to his boots. A ragged bandage was tied tight above the wound.

‘Your brother did that to me,’ he said, following her gaze to his wounded leg. ‘One more thing I owe him for.’

‘Ban,’ Cywen gasped, her heart twisting at the mention of her

brother. 'He lives, then?' She was almost too scared to speak the thought out loud.

'Maybe, but not for long. We'll catch him, catch all of them.'

'All of them? Who else? My mam, Gar?'

Rafe just looked at her, then smiled slowly. 'All on your own, little girl? Best be getting used to that.'

She felt a swell of rage, hated Rafe at that moment as much as she'd hated anyone. She reached for her knives again, cursed silently when she remembered they were all gone. 'Traitor,' she hissed at him.

'Depends where you're looking from,' Rafe said, but frowned nevertheless. 'Way I see it, Evnis is my lord. I do as I'm bid. And it seems to me he's on the winning side, at least.'

'For now,' Cywen muttered.

'Things have changed around here.' Rafe wagged a finger at her. 'And if you don't realize that quick, you'll end up sorry. You'd best be minding your manners from now on. All your protectors have left you. Not so special are you, eh? Why'd they leave you?' He grinned. 'Think about that.'

Cywen wanted to hit him. His words were sharp, cutting deep like one of her knives. She clenched her fists, knowing attacking anyone right now was not a good idea.

Rafe looked over her shoulder and she followed his gaze. Evnis was beckoning to the huntsman's son, Conall still beside him. 'I'll be seeing you,' Rafe said. 'And don't worry, we'll find your kin for you.' He grinned, an unpleasant twist of his mouth, and drew a finger slowly across his throat, from ear to ear. Before she knew it, Cywen was stepping forwards, ramming her knee into Rafe's groin.

He crumpled forwards, folding in upon himself and curled up into a ball on the ground, whimpering.

'Best you keep away from me and my kin,' she snarled at him, then heard a chuckling behind her. The red-bearded warrior was watching her, along with a handful of others.

'You'n that hound, you're a good match,' the warrior said. He grinned and she flushed red, biting back angry words, thought she'd best be making herself scarce. Lowering her gaze, she headed for the feast-hall's open doors, Buddai following. She glanced back as she

stepped out into the daylight to see Rafe pushing himself up from the ground. Sumur was still staring at her.

Consumed with an urge to go home, she ran through the streets, Buddai limping along beside her.

When she opened the door and stepped into the kitchen she almost expected to see her mam standing there, bustling about by the ovens, her da sitting at the table, eating something. She even called out, hoping to hear someone. She searched every room until she found herself back in the kitchen. Her home was empty, as cold and lifeless as her da's gaze.

Where are they?

'Gone,' she whispered. A sob bubbled out of her and she swayed, steadying herself against the kitchen table.

All gone. And they've left me behind. Rafe's words rang loud in her memory. *How could they just leave me?* She looked at Buddai and the hound stared trustingly back at her. An image of her da flooded her mind, crusted blood all over him, those terrible, empty eyes. She wished her mam was there to hold her, comfort her. And Ban, her brother, her best friend. Why had he abandoned her? Another sob burst out of her and she sank to the floor, wrapped her arms about Buddai and began to cry in great, racking waves. The brindle hound licked Cywen's tear-stained cheek and curled himself protectively about her.



CHAPTER THREE

VERADIS

Veradis drank from a water skin, pouring some over his head and neck. He and his men were spread in a half-circle before the great gates of Haldis, last bastion of the Hunen giants. Only a short while ago Calidus and Alcyon had disappeared inside, with over two hundred warriors at their back.

Survivors of the clash against the giants were trickling into the clearing and Veradis sent half a dozen scouts out to help guide the stragglers in.

‘It’s thirsty work, eh?’ Bos, his comrade-in-arms said, grinning. ‘This giant-killing.’

The big warrior was bleeding from a cut to his ear, blood matting his hair. As Veradis stared he realized it was more than a cut; a large chunk of his friend’s ear missing.

‘Where’s your helmet?’ he asked.

‘Lost it.’ Bos shrugged. He touched his ear and looked at his bloodied fingertips. ‘Better’n losing my head.’

‘That’s debatable,’ Veradis said as he passed his friend the water skin.

Bos drank deep. ‘We have a fine tale to tell Rauca, eh?’

‘For sure,’ Veradis said. ‘If we make it out of here.’ He gazed at the surrounding cairns, each one at least twice as tall as a man and grave to a giant. The sounds of battle still drifted on a cold wind, faint and echoing. Beyond the cairns the trees of Forn Forest rose all about. At Veradis’ back a sheer cliff face reared, covered in huge carvings; an open gateway at its foot led into darkness.

The blood-rush of battle was slowly fading, replaced now by aching muscles, tiredness and a throbbing in Veradis’ face. He

reached up and pulled a splinter from his cheek, from where a giant's axe had carved into his shield, chopped through its iron rim and spat splinters of wood into his face.

Many of his five hundred had fallen in the battle amongst the cairns, but those left stood proudly. They knew they had turned this battle, somehow pulled victory from defeat with their shield wall.

Braster and Romar's warbands had been decimated, laid low by giants' magic and giants' iron. Braster himself had fallen amongst the cairns, carried wounded and unconscious from the field. Romar, King of Isiltir, had led a force in chase of the routed Hunen through the black gates. Despite Calidus seeing him as a thorn in their flesh, opposing Nathair and his servants at almost every turn, Veradis didn't envy Romar the close-quarters battle he would encounter in the dark tunnels.

Especially as Calidus had hinted that it was time to take drastic measures against the recalcitrant King. That was Calidus' business. Nathair had made it clear to Veradis that he had no authority over Calidus, that the man could do as he wished. And Calidus had the Jehar to enforce those wishes.

Whatever happens, happens, he thought. Romar meant little to him, but Veradis did have friends in there, inside those tunnels. Kastell and Maquin. They were part of the Gadrai, Romar's elite warriors. He would not like to see them come to harm. But he had warned them, or tried to. What else could he have done?

Even as Veradis looked into the tunnels, noise filtered out of the darkness – the clash of iron, faint screams.

Bos tapped him and nodded towards the mounds. One of the scouts had returned.

'I've found something,' the scout breathed, chest heaving.

'What?'

'A doorway, hidden. I heard voices, and something else. It was strange.'

Veradis gathered a dozen men, left Bos in charge of the rest, then marched after the scout. He led them on a path through the cairns. All was eerily silent.

The barrows ended, replaced by clustered stone buildings, empty and shadow filled. Their progress slowed as Veradis and his men checked there were no giants lurking in the darkness.

‘There,’ the scout said, pointing at the cliff face.

Vine grew thick across the rock. Veradis stared but could see nothing out of place.

‘No, there,’ the scout urged, walking forwards. He stopped before the escarpment and scraped the soil at his feet with a boot, revealing a handle. It was attached to a trapdoor.

Veradis knelt, putting his ear to the ground. At first he heard nothing, but then, distinctly, he heard a muffled cry, like a child.

He pointed to the handle, whispered orders until two warriors were gripping it, the rest gathered about the trapdoor, weapons drawn.

‘Now,’ Veradis ordered, and the door was heaved open.

Wide stone steps led down, sunlight shafting into the hole, revealing faces staring back up at them. Many faces. Giant faces, though something immediately struck Veradis as strange. Different.

Before he had a chance to do anything, there was a roar and a figure hurtled up the steps, swinging a war-hammer. Voices cried out from behind the giant. Veradis leaped to the side, the hammer missing him, smashing into another warrior. Bones crunched, the man crumpled, the giant surging onwards, sending other men flying.

Veradis and his men circled their foe, who snarled curses at them, turning defiantly. Veradis darted forwards, stabbed, retreated. The giant roared and spun around, only for Veradis’ warriors to move in, all stabbing. The giant bellowed his rage, charged the circle, smashed one warrior to the ground. Swords slashed. The giant stumbled on a few steps, collapsed, blood staining the grass.

Veradis stood still a moment, breathing hard, then strode forward and nudged the fallen body with his boot. He would not be getting back up.

‘Come out,’ Veradis spoke into the trapdoor. The only answer was silence. He peered in, saw shadowed figures beyond the sun’s reach. ‘I’m not fool enough to come down there. If you stay, you will all burn,’ he said, louder. Still no answer. He shrugged and turned away.

‘They are only bairns,’ a voice grated from the darkness. ‘We will come up. Please, do not kill them.’

Giant bairns. What a day this is. ‘Come up. If it is as you say we

will not shed the first blood.' Veradis stepped back, holding a warning hand up to his men.

A figure emerged from the hole in the ground, a giant, tall and broad. A female, no drooping moustache, though she was as muscled as any male. Black strips of leather crisscrossed her breasts and she held a war-hammer loosely in her hands. Her dark eyes darted from Veradis to the giant lying face down on the grass. Grief swept her face.

Veradis ushered her forwards. She took hesitant steps, said something unintelligible and others appeared behind her.

Veradis blinked. There were between twenty and thirty of them. They were a mixture of heights, ranging from shorter than him to taller, and many in between. They were muscled, though leaner than full-grown giants, their limbs longer, almost gangly, like newborn colts. Tufts of hair grew on some faces, though most were hairless, appearing softer, somehow, lacking the stark angles of the adult giants that Veradis had seen. Some held weapons, daggers as long as a sword to Veradis, one or two – the larger ones – hefting hammers or axes. All looked terrified, on the edge of fight or flight. Veradis felt the tension, knew this could turn into a bloodbath at the slightest misstep. Their guardian said something; the ones with hammer and axe lowered their weapons slightly.

She feels it too.

'They are only bairns,' the giant repeated, pride and pleading mingling in her voice.

Children. 'Most of them are bigger than me,' Veradis snorted. He ran a hand through his hair. 'I shall not harm them, or you. As long as you show no aggression.'

The giant's eyes darted between him and his men. 'The battle is lost, then,' she said. It was not a question.

'Aye. You will need to lay your weapons down. All of them.' *And then I can figure out what I am going to do with you all.* Veradis glanced at the small host gathered at her back, uncomfortably aware that they outnumbered him and his men.

She snapped something over her shoulder and iron clattered to the ground. A few hesitated and she spoke more loudly at them, at the same time dropping her own hammer. As she did so, something behind Veradis caught her attention, a frown creasing her thick brows.

Alcyon was striding towards them, Calidus and the Jehar behind him, spread like a dark cloak.

‘What have we here?’ Calidus said.

‘They were hiding,’ Veradis said. ‘And they have surrendered.’ He did not like the hard look in Calidus’ eyes, the way the man’s hand was resting on his sword hilt.

‘*Dia duit,*’ Alcyon said, stepping forwards. He touched a hand to his forehead.

The giantess eyed him suspiciously, but returned the gesture. She lifted her head, sniffing the air like a hound catching a scent. Her eyes narrowed, focusing on Calidus. ‘*Cen fath coisir tu racan ar dubb aingeal.*’

Alcyon shrugged. ‘I have made my choice,’ he rumbled, some emotion sweeping his face.

Is that shame? Veradis thought.

‘They cannot live,’ Calidus said behind Alcyon.

The giant raised a hand, scowling. ‘They are only bairns.’

‘They will not be bairns forever. They will seek revenge for their kin. And for what you have taken.’

‘Taken what?’ the giantess demanded, pronouncing the words slowly, grimacing as if they left a bad taste in her mouth.

‘The starstone axe,’ Calidus said.

The giantess’ eyes whipped to Alcyon, and Veradis saw the axe slung across his back. It was a dull black from blade to hilt. As Veradis stared at it, a sound fluttered in his mind – a faint wind, the whisper of voices – just for a heartbeat, then it was gone. He blinked.

The giantess snarled something, snatched her hammer up and flung herself at Alcyon. He reeled backwards, shrugging the axe into his hands and blocking a strike that would have taken his head from his shoulders.

Behind her a handful of the giant bairns grabbed their discarded weapons and followed their guardian. With a sound like a wave breaking, the Jehar drew their swords.

Veradis stumbled back, sword and shield ready, but something held him from entering the battle. He did not want to shed the blood of these giants. They were only children. *They are your enemy,* a voice said in his head.

And what of mercy, even to an enemy? he thought.

Alcyon was blocking the female giant's attack, using his new axe like a staff. There was a flurry of blows, Alcyon retreating before the onslaught. He too seemed reluctant to draw blood. About him the Jehar fought with the adolescents, who threw themselves at the black-clad warriors with more passion than skill. Many were dead already.

Alcyon cracked the butt of his axe into the giantess' head. She reeled back, sank to one knee. About her the battle lulled, the young giants staring.

'Drop your weapon,' Alcyon grated.

Calidus appeared between them. Alcyon yelled at the silver-haired man, but Calidus ignored him. He swept his sword in a looping blow, chopping the giantess' head from her shoulders.

Her charges screamed in grief-stricken rage, some renewing their attack, others breaking away, running amongst the cairns.

Alcyon bowed his head.

The Jehar made short work of the remaining giants, and in moments the conflict was over.

'Well met, Veradis,' Calidus called out, grinning as he strode over. With his cloak he cleaned the blood from his sword. Akar, the dour-faced leader of the Jehar, walked behind him.

Veradis nodded a greeting, his eyes drawn to the giantess' head, the bodies of children strewn about her. 'Did things go well? In the tunnels?' he asked, trying to look away from the faces of the dead.

'Well enough. The Hunen are broken, now. And we found a great prize for Nathair.'

'Prize? What?'

'This.' Alcyon lifted the axe. 'One of the Seven Treasures.' He was still scowling.

Now that he was closer, Veradis saw that the axe haft was dark-veined wood, smooth and shiny from age and use, bound with iron rings all along its length. The double blade was a dull matt black, seeming to suck light into it, casting none back.

He glanced beyond them, saw the Jehar and a handful of other warriors. He recognized Jael amongst them.

'Where is everyone else?' A sick feeling grew in the pit of his gut, his thoughts turning to Kastell and Maquin.

'There were casualties,' Calidus said with a shrug. 'This is a battlefield, Veradis. Men die.'

‘Men. What men?’

‘Many,’ snapped Calidus. ‘Romar fell, along with some of his men.’

‘All,’ Alcyon corrected.

‘All,’ Calidus repeated coldly. ‘A tragedy, but, such is the way of these things.’

Veradis stared at him, Kastell and Maquin’s faces hovering in his mind’s eye. *I tried to warn them.*

‘Come, Alcyon,’ Calidus said, turning away. ‘Clean up here, Veradis. We will meet later, talk of what happens next.’

Alcyon strode after Calidus, balancing the black axe over his shoulder. Akar remained with Veradis, frowning. He looked as if he was going to say something, wanted to say something, then he turned away and marched after Calidus, his black-clad warriors falling in behind him.

Veradis watched the light and shadow of the crackling fire flicker across Calidus’ face as he sat opposite him, deep in conversation with Lothar, battlechief to King Braster of Helveth.

Behind the counsellor, hidden in shadow, was the bulk of Alcyon. A dark mood had been upon him since the killing of the giant children. The black axe lay across his lap. In his hand was a long thin needle, black ink dripping from its tip. Veradis watched with fascination as Alcyon rhythmically stabbed at his forearm, adding more thorns to the swirling vine tattoo that marked the lives the giant had taken in battle. Veradis scowled. *Are Kastell and Maquin marked by one of those thorns?*

Akar sat at the fire with another of the Jehar, a dark-haired, sharp-featured woman. She looked young, as far as Veradis could tell, not much different in age from him. He frowned, still not comfortable with the thought of female warriors, and especially not ones as skilled as the Jehar.

Lothar made his farewells and strode off into the darkness. No one had wanted to camp amongst the silent graves of Haldis, so they had settled on the sloping approach to the burial grounds, not far from where Veradis had viewed the battle that morning. It seemed a long time ago.

Campfires flickered all along the ridge, warming the survivors of

the battle. Around four thousand warriors had marched into Haldis. Fewer than a thousand had survived, and half of that number belonged to Veradis' warband and the Jehar. Romar's warband had been almost entirely destroyed, only Jael and a few score others surviving. Braster's warband had fared little better, only the few hundred that had carried his wounded body from the field remained.

'Well?' Veradis said across the flames. 'How is King Braster?'

'His wound was not fatal,' Calidus replied. 'A hammer blow crushed his shoulder. Lothar said their healers are happy with the setting of his bones, so . . .' He shrugged. 'He may not swing a sword again, but he'll live.'

'Good,' Veradis said. He liked Braster. There was a gruff, blunt honesty about Helveth's king. 'So, what is our plan, now?'

'Now it is time to find Nathair. We have been apart from him long enough.'

'Excellent.' Veradis had felt a fierce pride at being given command over this campaign, more so now for bringing his warband successfully through the conflict, even though he knew that Calidus and Alcyon had played a large part in that, counteracting the magic of the Hunen's elementals. Throughout the whole campaign, though, he had felt a nagging worry about Nathair, knowing that his king, his friend, was sailing into the unknown in his search of the cauldron. He was Nathair's first-sword; he should be at his side.

'How will we find him?' he asked. 'He was about to sail for Ardan when we parted, but who knows where he is now?'

'I have received word,' Calidus said, tapping his head. 'Remember, I was spymaster to the Vin Thalun for many years. Nathair is at Dun Carreg in Ardan. We will head there. Nathair needs us, needs his advisers about him. I will make sure that Lykos meets us there.'

'Huh,' Veradis muttered, not sure if he wanted to know how Calidus would manage that. He liked the thought of leaving this forest behind, but part of him still prickled with suspicion at the mention of the Vin Thalun. Some distrust burrowed deep.

'So we leave on the morrow?' Veradis asked.

'At first light. We will travel east with Jael to Isiltir, then carry on to Ardan.'

'Jael?' Veradis said. He had disliked Kastell's cousin the first moment he set eyes on him. He was a very different man from Kastell

or Maquin, both of whom Veradis had considered friends and who now lay dead in the tunnels beneath Haldis. By whose hand Veradis did not know, and some part of him did not want to. Another part of him could think of nothing else. *Let it go*, a voice whispered in his head.

‘Yes. Jael,’ Calidus said. ‘Is there any problem with that?’

‘No,’ said Veradis. He thought of saying more but held his tongue.

‘Good. Jael has a strong claim to the throne of Isiltir, now that Romar is gone. And Nathair will support him in that claim.’

‘It is strange,’ Veradis said, the words spilling out, ‘how Romar and all his shieldmen died in the tunnels. Yet Jael survived.’ He raised his head and stared hard at Calidus.

The counsellor gave a thin-lipped smile. ‘It is war. These things happen.’

Calidus was right, men did fall in battle. Veradis had lost more shield-brothers than he cared to think about in battle, many of them friends, and he knew that in life things were not always clear cut. But this? What had happened in the tunnels felt like *betrayal*. ‘Did you see Romar die?’ Veradis pressed. ‘And the one that slew him?’

‘Oh yes,’ Calidus said, his face as expressionless as stone. ‘A giant slew Romar. Think more on the living than the dead, Veradis. We are all serving Nathair here. What we do is for the greater good, for Nathair’s good.’ His eyes narrowed. ‘I hope that you have the conviction to serve your king fully.’

‘Of course I do,’ Veradis said. ‘Never doubt my loyalty to Nathair.’

‘Good.’ Calidus gave a faint smile. ‘Well, I am for my rest. We have an early start and a long journey ahead of us.’

Alcyon rose and followed Calidus into the darkness, Akar making to do the same.

‘Akar. Did you see Romar fall?’

‘Aye.’

‘And . . .’

‘Calidus spoke true,’ Akar said. ‘A giant did slay Romar.’

‘Oh,’ said Veradis, both surprised and relieved. He had been so certain that Calidus had been involved.

‘A giant wielding a black-bladed battle-axe,’ Akar said, then turned and strode into the darkness.



CHAPTER FOUR

MAQUIN

‘I’m going to let you go, now. Don’t do anything stupid.’

The words filtered into Maquin’s mind as if from a great distance.

Where am I?

He opened his eyes, though at first it seemed to make little difference. It was pitch dark, his face was pressed hard against cold stone and a pain bloomed in his shoulder.

‘Careful. They’ve been gone a while, but sound carries in these tunnels,’ the same voice said.

Tunnels? Then it came back, an avalanche of memory. *Haldis, the battle in the tunnels, Romar arguing with Calidus over that axe. Betrayal. Death. Kastell . . .*

‘Kas . . .’ he breathed.

There was a long silence, then. ‘He’s dead. They’re all dead.’

Kastell.

He had seen Jael stab him, knew instantly that it was a killing blow. He had tried to get to him, but Orgull, captain of the Gadrai, had grabbed him, dragged him into the darkness while battle still raged nearby, though the end had been in no doubt. Romar, King of Isiltir, had been betrayed by Calidus of Tenebral. And by Jael.

And Kastell had been slain.

At first Maquin had fought, trying to break Orgull’s grip on him, but the man’s strength was immense, and then . . . nothing.

‘I can’t remember it all. What happened?’ he croaked.

‘You were fighting like a draig to run off and get yourself killed. Had to crack you one on the head.’ Orgull’s voice drifted down to him. He felt the big man shrug, a ripple of pain through his back. ‘Sorry.’

He became aware of a pressure on him, a great weight pressing down. ‘Are you sitting on me?’

‘Had to be sure you wouldn’t jump up and run off the moment you woke up.’

‘No chance of that,’ Maquin grunted. ‘Get off.’

He felt Orgull’s weight shift from his back. Maquin rolled onto one knee, groaning as he stood, a hand reaching instinctively for his sword.

Orgull frowned. ‘You thinking straight?’

‘Aye.’ Maquin scowled. He rolled his shoulders, cramped muscles stretching. And there was a greater pain shouting for his attention. He remembered catching the wrong end of a giant’s war-hammer. Waves of pain pulsed from his shoulder. He gritted his teeth and looked about the chamber.

Torches still burned, blue light flickering from some kind of oil held high in iron bowls that marked an aisle to the dead giant-king, his cadaver still sitting in its stone chair upon its dais. Bodies lay strewn before it.

Maquin and Orgull shared a look, without a word walked back to the battle scene, treading carefully amongst the dead.

We’re all that’s left of the Gadrai, a voice whispered inside his head. *The rest are gone. All dead.* He closed his eyes, saw again Jael’s sword punch into Kastell’s belly.

Orgull knelt beside Vandil and closed the eyes of their leader’s corpse. There was a gaping wound in his chest where the giant Alcyon had struck him with that black axe.

Maquin strode to where he had seen Kastell fall.

He lay face down, a black pool of blood spread about his waist. Maquin knelt and rolled him over, cradling him in his arms.

‘Oh, Kas,’ he whispered, tears rising up and choking the rest. *So many memories.* He remembered the day Kastell had been born, when he had been a warrior in the hold of Kastell’s da, remembered his pride when he had been chosen as Kastell’s shieldman, remembered carrying the boy from the flames and wreckage of a Hunen attack, remembered his oath, solemn words to protect unto death.

Tears dripped off his nose, smudging pale tracks in the grime on Kastell’s face.

I have failed you. He had loved Kastell as the son that he had never

had, and he had let him die by Jael's hand. A cold rage ignited in his belly.

Tenderly, Maquin brushed dirt from Kastell's face, then laid him back down. He found Kastell's sword and placed it on his body, folding stiffening fingers about its hilt. Then he knelt, whispered a prayer, asked for forgiveness and swore a new oath. *And this one I shall not fail, except by death's intervention. Jael shall die by my hand.* He drew a dagger from his belt and cut a red line across his palm, let his blood drip onto Kastell.

Orgull came and stood beside him, head bowed.

'Jael killed him,' Maquin mumbled.

Orgull nodded, torchlight gleaming blue in his eyes. 'Jael seemed overly close to that Calidus. I should have seen it. They have much to answer for.' He tugged thoughtfully at the warrior braid bound in his blond beard. 'This ran deeper than some blood-feud between uncle and nephew. I am thinking that Jael has designs on the throne of Isiltir.'

'The throne?' said Maquin.

'Aye. Romar's boy is, what, ten summers?' Orgull said. 'And Jael is blood-kin to Romar, though distant. He would have a claim, if those closer were removed.'

'Such as Romar,' Maquin said.

'And him,' Orgull added, looking pointedly at Kastell.

Maquin ground his palms into his eyes. 'Jael will pay for this.'

Orgull gave him an appraising look. 'If I am right, the best revenge is to deny Jael the throne of Isiltir.'

'A sword in his heart will do that,' Maquin said.

'And if you fail? We do not know how things lie up there, but likely he has shieldmen about him, and Calidus, along with his giant and the Jehar. Chances are you won't get close to him. Then Jael still gets the throne. Don't call that much of a revenge.'

Maquin glared at Orgull, part of him recognizing the truth of his words, but the greater part of him not caring.

'Word must get back to Isiltir of this – of Jael's treachery. I'll not see all our sword-brothers dead for nothing.'

Orgull bent besides Romar, recovered the dead king's sword and wrapped it in a cloak. 'I did not save you to see you throw your life away the instant we set foot above ground.'

'My life is not yours to decide,' Maquin said. 'I am going to kill Jael.'

Orgull stooped to look Maquin in the eye. 'I need your help. There is more at stake here than one man's vengeance. Please, help me to get word back to Isiltir of this slaughter.' He paused, eyes locked with Maquin, then shook his head. 'I will make a pact with you. Help me to do this, and then I shall help you. We shall bring about Jael's death together, or die trying. I swear it on our fallen brothers.'

Maquin sucked in a deep breath, chewing over Orgull's words. There was sense in them: if he went charging after Jael now he was most likely rushing to a death that accomplished nothing. 'All right,' he whispered, glancing at Kastell's corpse.

They gripped forearms.

'Course, we've got to get out of here first,' Maquin said.

'True. Are you injured?'

'I've been better.' His left arm hung limp at his side, his face was pale, slick with sweat. 'I blocked a hammer blow with my shoulder.'

Orgull stood behind Maquin, his fingers probing the warrior's shoulder and arm. 'Dislocated, not broken. Here, bite on this.' He gave Maquin a strip of leather, then gripped the warrior's shoulder in one large fist, placing his other hand between shoulder blade and spine. Then he pushed, hard.

There was a loud crack, Maquin hissed and slumped.

'Next time, use a shield, not your shoulder,' Orgull said.

'I'll try and remember,' Maquin mumbled, spitting the leather from his mouth. He sank to one knee.

'Take what you need,' Orgull said, reaching down to grab a shield from a fallen warrior. 'We need to find a way out of here.'

With an effort, Maquin walked away from Kastell's body and began searching the ground. First he looked to his water skin, drinking deep, then refilled it from others about him. In short time he found a plain wooden shield, iron-rimmed and bossed. Its face showed signs of the battle, but only shallow scratches. He hefted it, checked its straps, then slung it across his back. He also found a broad-bladed spear. Orgull was holding an axe that had belonged to one of the long-dead giant warriors left guarding their king. As Maquin stared at him, Orgull swung the axe at the stone floor, sparks

flying as it chipped a chunk out of the rock. Rust fell from the blade. Orgull ran his thumb along its edge and nodded approvingly.

‘You thinking to chop your way out of here?’ Maquin asked.

‘If I have to. It’s still sharp enough.’ Orgull smiled humourlessly. ‘I’m not taken with the idea of using their front door, though. Can’t see that Calidus leaving it open, or unguarded. And if I start chopping at it I’ll wake all between here and the forest.’

‘Agreed,’ Maquin said.

‘See those flames?’

Maquin looked up at the blue flames. Some flickered and crackled, touched by a breeze.

‘Let’s find where that air is coming from and hope it’s more than a crack in the ground.’

There was a sudden muffled groan from amongst the bodies around them. Maquin pulled at the corpse of a Jehar warrior, revealing twitching fingers, a moving arm.

It was Tahir, one of their Gadrai sword-brothers. He was a young man, not much older than Kastell. *They had been friends.*

They uncovered him and checked him for wounds but could only find a large, egg-shaped lump on his temple. The stocky, long-armed warrior touched it and winced.

‘What happened?’ he muttered, his eyes unfocused.

Orgull recounted Jael’s treachery.

‘Vandil?’ Tahir asked, rising unsteadily to his feet, gazing at the dead strewn about him.

‘Dead. Slain by Calidus’ pet giant,’ Orgull said.

Tahir whistled, shook his head and instantly looked as if he regretted doing it. ‘What now, then?’

‘Find a way out of this hole. One thing at a time.’

Maquin fashioned torches out of axe and spear shafts, wrapping them in strips of cloth torn from tattered cloaks, and dipped them in the oil-filled bowls that lined the walkway. They flickered with the same blue light.

Together they marched to the edge of the chamber and began tracing its edge, searching for a doorway. It was not long before they found an archway draped with thick cobwebs, a slight breeze stirring it. Maquin touched his torch to the web and blue sparks crackled out in a widening circle, consuming the web right back to the stone.

Orgull looked at them both, then strode into the darkness. Tahir followed.

Maquin paused, looking back into the chamber. ‘Farewell, Kastell,’ he said, and after a few long moments he gritted his teeth and stepped into the tunnel.

The three of them trudged in silence, blue-tinged torchlight flickering on the tunnel’s high roof and walls. Other corridors branched off, Maquin eyeing the dense shadows suspiciously. This place was in Forn Forest, after all, or beneath it, and Forn was the dark savage heart of the Banished Lands. Its inhabitants were by and large unpleasant. And predatory.

His thoughts drifted back to those left behind, to Vandil, to his Gadrai sword-brothers, to Romar and most of all to Kastell. Yet again he saw Jael stepping in front of Kastell, stabbing him. He should have stayed closer. His vision blurred with tears and he swiped at his eyes, fist clenching.

A sound drew his attention: a scraping, submerged in the deep shadows of a side tunnel. He stared into the darkness, thought he saw the hint of movement just beyond the torchlight’s reach. Something big. There was a faint reflection. He hissed a warning and drew his sword.

‘What’s wrong?’ Tahir said, as Orgull joined them.

‘Something’s down there,’ Maquin muttered.

‘What?’

‘I don’t know. *Something.*’

Maquin walked into the side tunnel, his torch held high. Darkness retreated before the light, revealing nothing but empty space.

‘Nothing there now,’ Tahir pointed out.

‘Come on,’ Orgull said. ‘Tahir, guard our backs.’

‘Aye, chief.’

They walked on, their pace quicker, now, the tunnel rising steeply. *A good sign*, thought Maquin, sweat trickling down his back. *Up is far better than down.* The tunnel was also getting narrower, the roof lower. *Not such a good sign. Will it just end? What then?* Soon after, Orgull called a halt. He raised a hand to the tunnel’s roof, fingers tracing a tree root poking through the stone, twisted and knotted.

‘Must be near the surface,’ Maquin said.

‘We must have walked more than a league by now,’ Tahir commented.

‘Aye. We’re out past Haldis, I’d guess, but not much further,’ Maquin said.

‘Is all well back there, Tahir?’ asked Orgull.

‘Nothing to see,’ the warrior replied.

‘Good. Onwards,’ their leader said and set off.

It was not long before Orgull stopped again. The tunnel came to an abrupt end, a dozen wide steps leading sharply up to the roof, where it met a round, flat-bottomed stone. Orgull climbed the steps and tapped the stone with his axe. He climbed higher, braced his shoulder against the stone and heaved. With a grating sound the stone shifted, minutely, earth falling from about its rim.

‘Help,’ grunted Orgull.

The steps were wide enough for two abreast so Maquin climbed up beside Orgull, adding his weight and strength. Together they strained and Maquin felt the stone shift, dirt falling into his face, then there was a wash of fresh air, a glimpse of moonlight.

‘Keep pushing,’ Orgull muttered. ‘Nearly there.’

Then Tahir screamed. Maquin and Orgull dropped the stone back in place and turned.

Something had hold of Tahir: a many-legged, chitinous creature, all bristle, eyes and fangs, as wide as an adult boar, but far longer, its segmented body swallowed by shadow. Tahir was screaming as he hammered futilely at the creature with his spear.

Maquin darted forwards, jabbing his own weapon. It slid off a hard, shiny carapace. He thrust his torch at the beast, but a sharp-spined leg smashed it out of his hand, the blue light sputtering out. He launched forwards with his spear again; the blade scraped along the creature’s hard shell, then sank into a gap between segments. It let out a high-pitched squeal, dropped Tahir and reared up, fangs and forelegs waving, almost filling the tunnel. Maquin grabbed Tahir’s wrist and dragged him back. The creature scuttled after them, a green, jelly-like substance oozing from the wound in its side. It sank a fang into Tahir’s leg, just below the knee. Tahir screamed and thrashed.

Then Orgull was there, bellowing for Maquin to get back, for Tahir to stay down. He swung his new war-axe, smashed it with all

of his prodigious strength into the creature's head. There was a sickening crack. The thing's legs jerked, twitching furiously, its mandibles clacking. With a sigh it sank to the floor, spasmed once more and then was still.

'Get it off me,' Tahir hissed, a fang still buried in his leg. Maquin heaved and wrenched the fang out. Tahir gasped with pain, blood running down his leg.

Orgull ripped Tahir's breeches up to the knee, poured water over the wound and tied a strip of the torn breeches above it.

'How is it?' Tahir asked, a touch of panic in his voice.

'As good as it can be down here,' Orgull muttered, 'though I'd like something stronger than water to flush it with. Can you stand?'

'I'll stand to walk out of this place,' Tahir breathed, steadying himself with his spear.

Orgull gripped his axe haft and with a wrench pulled the blade free of the creature. He threw one of their torches back down the tunnel, where it wavered but stayed alight. 'Maquin, best get that stone shifted. Who knows what else we're sharing these tunnels with.'

Maquin ran up the steps and put his shoulder to the stone. Nothing happened. He tried again, grunting and straining.

'What's keeping you?' Orgull called.

'It's heavy,' Maquin muttered. 'Could do with you here, chief.'

'Can't be in two places at once,' Orgull said. 'And you'd best get a move on. Light's fading.'

Even as he spoke, the torch he had thrown back down the tunnel guttered and then winked out. The darkness surged forwards, held in check by Tahir tightly clutching the last torch.

Maquin renewed his efforts, fear of being trapped in the dark giving him an extra strength; the stone shifted, grinding against rock and earth. Maquin dug his spear butt into the gap, levered and shoved as he strained, veins bulging with the effort, and finally the stone lifted clear. Pale moonlight greeted him.

He reached up through the hole, savouring the sensation of air on his face and grass under his fingertips; he grabbed a tree root and pulled himself up. He could hear the sighing of a breeze amongst branches, the distant murmur of voices, faint song, could see the pin-pricks of many campfires.

Back in Forn, then. Must be the survivors of the battle. For a moment the thought of Jael filled his mind, sitting beside a campfire, eating, drinking, celebrating. Without realizing, he stood and took a step forwards, hand reaching for his sword hilt.

‘Could do with some help down here,’ a voice whispered to him. He froze, remembering Orgull’s words to him, their pact in the burial chamber. *Soon, Jael.*

The moon slipped behind ragged clouds and all was in darkness.

Maquin set to pulling the others out of the tunnel and, as quietly as hunting wolves, the three warriors slipped into the forest, the last surviving remnant of the Gadrai. Maquin looked back once and then followed his sword-brothers into the trees.



CHAPTER FIVE

CORBAN

Corban gripped the boat's rail as he stared back into the distance. Dun Carreg had long since disappeared and in all directions a grey, foam-flecked sea stretched as far as he could see.

It was late in the day now, well past highsun, and Corban's stomach was rumbling. He had not eaten since the evening before – nor had anyone else on this boat. No one had given food much thought in their desperate bid to escape.

Dun Carreg, he thought, wishing that he could still see the fortress, still see Ardan, still see his home. *Home no more*. Everything had changed so quickly. And Thannon and Cywen were both still in Dun Carreg. His da and sister, both dead, both needing a cairn to be raised over them. It wasn't right. Tears filled his eyes.

His mam lay sleeping upon a heaped pile of nets. She looked older, the lines in her face deeper, dark hollows about her eyes. Gar sat beside her, chin resting on his chest, sleeping too. Most of this band of runaways were in the same state. It had been a long, hard night, in more ways than one.

Footsteps drew Corban's eyes up to Halion, his weapons-master from the Rowan Field, making his way along the fisher-boat towards him. The warrior nodded grimly as he walked to where Mordwyr, Dath's da, stood guiding the boat's steering oar.

'We need to find land. Somewhere to get food and water.'

'Uh,' Mordwyr acknowledged. His eyes were red rimmed, his face lined with grief. He had left Bethan, his daughter, amongst the dead in Dun Carreg.

I was not the only one that lost kin last night, Corban thought.

Mordwyr pointed into the distance, northwards, and Corban saw a dark line on the horizon. Land.

‘We’ll have to risk it,’ Halion said. He patted Mordwyr’s shoulder and made his way back along the boat, to where Edana sat with her head bowed.

The Princess of Ardan, now heir to its throne, had said nothing since they had climbed aboard the fisher-boat. The last sound Corban had heard from her was screaming as she witnessed the death of her father.

She’s lost both her mam and da, now. At least I still have my mam, someone to share my grief with.

Storm’s muzzle touched his hand. Corban tugged on one of her ears, grimacing as the movement sent a ripple of pain through his shoulder. Brina had tended the wound where he had been stabbed during the battle in the feast-hall. Helfach had done it. The man’s life-blood still stained the fur around the wolver’s protruding canines. Brina had assured him the wound was not deep and was clean, but it still hurt.

He looked for the healer and she caught his eye, beckoning him over. Craf, the healer’s unkempt crow, clung to the boat’s rail above Brina’s head.

‘*Cor-ban,*’ it squawked as he squatted down before Brina.

‘What was that about?’ she asked. ‘Between Halion and Mordwyr?’

‘Time to find some land. For food and water.’

‘Ah. Out of the cook-pot and into the flames,’ Brina muttered.

‘What do you mean?’

She looked over the boat’s side at the growing line of land. ‘That’s not Ardan. Not that Ardan’s the safest place to be right now. Still, that’s Cambren. Rhin rules there.’

‘Oh.’ Corban frowned, remembering the kidnapping of Edana’s mother, Queen Alona, back in the Darkwood, where Alona and so many others had died. All because of Rhin. ‘But what choice do we have?’

‘None, I suppose.’ Brina sighed, wiping rain from the tip of her pointed nose.

‘*Wet,*’ muttered Craf.

‘Why should you care?’ Brina snapped at the bedraggled bird. ‘You’re a crow.’

‘Cold,’ it grumbled. ‘Fire.’

‘I’ve spoilt you,’ Brina said.

The rain was falling heavier now, a cold wind throwing it stinging into Corban’s face. In the distance the black smudge of land had grown closer, blurred by rain. The sea was an impenetrable iron grey, the waves about the boat higher, white-flecked with foam, whipped by the wind. Corban grabbed the rail and steadied himself as the fisher-boat rode a huge swell then sped down the other side. The boat’s only sail was straining, thick ropes creaking. Corban felt a flutter of panic in his gut, then he saw Dath climbing amidst the ropes and sailcloth. His friend flashed him a weak smile.

He doesn’t look so worried, thought Corban.

The sun was sinking, only a diffuse glow behind thick cloud, when they reached the coastline. Mordwyr steered the small skiff into a narrow steep-cliffed cove sheltering a strip of empty beach. Craff exploded into the air with a noisy squawk. Everyone disembarked – Storm needing a little encouragement from Corban – and the skiff was beached safely.

Marrock, Camlin and Dath set off to scout the area and to try and hunt something to eat.

Brina and Heb, King Brenin’s old loremaster, led Edana off the narrow beach and settled her in a sheltered dell under a dense stand of rowan and yew, an icy stream bubbling through its middle.

Storm lapped at the stream, then padded off into the deepening gloom.

Halion set two men on watch. The rest of the small band set to chopping wood, clearing space for sleeping, digging out a small pit for a fire. Soon flames were crackling greedily in the dell and the rain-soaked band crowded round for some heat, even the crow.

It was dark when Marrock and the others returned, Dath carrying two hares over his shoulder. In short time the animals were skinned, gutted and boned, chopped into little pieces and dropped into a pot of boiling water.

Craff made disgusting noises as he helped himself to the hare’s entrails.

That bird makes me feel sick.

It didn't stop Corban eating, though. The stew tasted like the finest meal to him, even as his mind told him it was watery, the meat stringy.

Two men were sent to relieve those on watch, Vonn being one of them. Dath glowered at his back as Vonn trudged into the gloom.

'His da betrayed us all. Can he be trusted to guard us?' he muttered to Corban.

'None of that,' Halion said, overhearing. 'He's suffered, lost people, same as the rest of us.'

'She was *my* sister,' Dath grumbled.

'And *my* daughter,' Mordwyr said. 'He loved her. Leave him be.'

Dath's mouth became a hard line but he said nothing more.

The small group sat around the fire, full dark settling about them, the trees sheltering them from the worst of the rain. Grief hovered amongst them like a heavy mist. Corban sat in silence, just listening, feeling exhausted, numb. His da and sister's faces danced in his memory every time he closed his eyes.

'So, Halion. Tell us of this plan to take Edana to Domhain.' It was Marrock who spoke. All other conversation stopped as everyone waited Halion's answer. 'Domhain is a long, dangerous journey,' Marrock continued. 'We could still sail from here to Dun Crin and the marshlands in the south of Ardan.'

'We could,' Halion said, glancing at Edana. She sat staring at the fire, giving no sign of interest in the conversation.

Edana should be leading us, but she can't. Marrock is her kin, so has the right, but Halion is her guardian, was given the task to protect her with Brenin's dying words, as most of us here heard.

'Eremon rules in Domhain, and he is distant kin to Edana. I know him, and he will not turn her away, or betray her.'

'He turned you away,' Marrock said.

Halion stared at Marrock a long, silent moment.

Heb spoke up now. 'Tell us of your father. Will he give aid against Owain?'

Halion grimaced. 'My father is old, beyond his seventieth year now. When I last saw him he was still sharp of mind. I am his bastard son, you understand, not his heir, but he always treated me well enough.'

‘Then why did you leave Domhain?’ Marrock asked.

Halion looked about them all, then took a deep breath. ‘Conall, my brother, he has, *bad* . . .’ He paused a moment. ‘He had a temper, and a lot of pride. It got him into trouble more than once. Growing up, we were fine; my mam was looked after by my da – she was his mistress, one of many. But in his old age he took a wife because he had no heir. Roisin. She was young, beautiful, and she treated us and my mam well enough, when we saw her, which was rare. Then she fell with child, birthed a boy – Lorcan. Things changed then. She became jealous, fearful that Conall and I had eyes for the throne of Domhain. And not just us – we were not Eremon’s only bastards. Accidents began to happen; people died. My mam was one.’ He threw a twig on the fire. ‘Of course, Conall didn’t take that well: he thought that our mam had been murdered. He confronted Roisin, said things he shouldn’t have. Soon after that my da came to see us, told us he would arrange sanctuary with King Brenin of Ardan.’ He shrugged. ‘We left.’

‘So how can you take us there, when your own life is at risk? Surely your enemies will become Edana’s enemies,’ Marrock said.

‘There is no safe place, now,’ Halion said. ‘But my father will give Edana sanctuary, of that I am certain. He thought well of Brenin. Maybe he will give other aid. I cannot promise men, but at least it will be a safer place than most, and far from Owain’s reach.’

Marrock frowned, thinking over Halion’s words. ‘I see the sense of it. But I’d rather be doing something, fighting rather than running away. And I know we’ve all lost people, but there are still others that we’ve left behind in Dun Carreg, others that still live. More warriors to join our cause, and others. Defenceless others, like my Fion . . .’

He dropped his gaze, staring into the fire.

Fion, his wife, Corban thought. *That must be hard on him.*

‘My troubles are my own,’ Marrock said, lifting his head, ‘and my duty is to protect Edana, but still, running away, allowing Owain to just hunt down and kill any that would stand against him in Edana’s name; it does not sit well with me. And the thought of Owain sitting in Brenin’s feast-hall . . .’ His lip curled in a snarl and others around the fire muttered their agreement.

Corban looked between Halion and Marrock, could see the sense in both arguments. He leaned towards Halion; he knew from hard

lessons in the Rowan Field that Halion had a strategic mind, and patience. *He believes there is more chance of success if we retreat now, plan to fight another day.* Marrock's argument stirred his passion, though. Part of him did not want to run.

'It angers me too,' another voice said, Edana's finally. She was still staring at the flames. There were scars on her cheeks where she had clawed them in her grief at Alona's death. They gave her a feral, inhuman quality. 'And I will take it back from him. But for now Halion's plan is a good one. I need time.' She looked at Halion and nodded curtly to him. Slowly a silence draped itself over them all.

Twigs snapped and there was a scuffling sound in the darkness beyond the firelight's reach, a hulking figure taking shape out of the shadows. It was Storm, the carcass of a deer hanging from her jaws.

She padded through the group and dropped the deer at Corban's feet, nudged it towards him and waited.

'Seems you're pack leader,' Halion said.

'She thinks so.' Corban placed a hand on the deer, accepting Storm's gift. He drew his knife and began to skin the carcass.

Not long after, Corban was licking hot fat off his fingers and wiping it from his chin. Storm was curled at his feet, cracking one of the leg bones between her teeth, gnawing at the marrow.

Gwenith leaned over and squeezed Corban's hand. 'It is time to talk,' she said quietly. Without looking at him, she stood and walked away, to the edge of the firelight. Gar rose with Corban and followed.

When he reached her, Gwenith took Corban's hand and led him beyond the firelight. She sat down beside a smooth-barked rowan, patting the grass in front of her.

Hesitantly he sat, feeling anxious. It was not as dark here as it appeared from beside the fire. Moonlight silvered his mam's hair and played on her face. Much was still in shadow, but he could see enough to know that she was troubled. She chewed her bottom lip. Gar sat next to her, watching Corban with an intensity that was unsettling.

'There is much to tell you, Ban,' his mam said, a tremor in her voice. 'Almost too much. Now that we are here, I hardly know where to start . . .' she trailed off.

'Whatever it is, can't it wait?' Corban said. 'We are all half-blind with grief and exhaustion?'

'I know,' his mam said, 'but—'

‘It cannot wait,’ Gar interrupted. ‘With each day we are travelling further from our true destination.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘First,’ his mam said fiercely, ‘remember this. I love you. We love you. And know that whatever we have done, and will do, it has come from trying to do right. To protect you, and to serve Elyon.’

‘Elyon?’ said Corban.

His mam nodded.

Elyon, the All-Father, had always seemed just a distant name to Corban, someone or something that he knew about but that never directly affected him. He remembered Brina telling him about the All-Father, how he had given authority to mankind over all creation, and that after the War of Treasures and the Scourging Elyon had turned from mankind, forsaken all he had made. He remembered too what she had said about Asroth, dark angel of the Otherworld: how he yearned to become flesh so as to destroy all Elyon had created.

He shivered. ‘But Elyon has abandoned us. Why serve him?’

‘Why?’ Gar blinked, looking shocked at the question. ‘Because he is our creator. Because he will return. Because it is *right*.’

Corban shrugged. ‘Why are we sitting in the dark talking about this now? What’s all this got to do with me?’

His mam took a deep breath. ‘You know that things are happening. Strange things – day turned to night on Midwinter, white wyrms roaming the dark places.’

‘I know that,’ Corban said, remembering the wyrm that had attacked them in the tunnels beneath Dun Carreg.

‘They are signs that something is coming. The God-War.’

Corban’s skin prickled, the hairs on his arms standing up. *The God-War*. He had heard rumours, talk, mostly from Edana, spying on King Brenin after his return from the council in Tenebral. It had made him feel strange, even then, but now, in the dark, leagues from home . . .

‘You are a special child, Corban,’ his mam continued. ‘And I do not mean that in the way that all mothers think of their children. You are different. Chosen.’

She paused, looking deep into his face, searching for something. He just felt confused.

‘Chosen? Mam, what’s this all about? By who? For what?’

‘By Elyon. You have a part to play in the God-War. Because of this you have also been hunted, since the day you were born.’

‘Hunted? Who by?’

Gwenith looked about, as if to check that no one was creeping up on them. ‘Asroth,’ she whispered.

‘Chosen, hunted?’ A smile died on Corban’s lips as he saw her expression. *She really believes this. Grief and exhaustion have confused her*, he thought.

His mam shook her head. ‘It should be Thannon doing the telling. I do not know how to say this,’ she muttered, eyes flickering to Gar. A tear rolled down her cheek.

The warrior frowned, eyebrows bunching. ‘Your mother speaks the truth. The important thing for you to know, Ban, is that you are part of this. Part of the God-War. What happened at Dun Carreg is only the beginning. The Banished Lands are falling into chaos.’

Questions were erupting in Corban’s mind, one after another. One fought clear of the rest. ‘How do you know this?’

Gar waved a hand. ‘There is a lot to tell you, too much for now, for here. But I will answer all your questions during our journey, if I can.’

‘Journey? You mean to Domhain?’

‘No, Ban. We must go to Drassil.’

‘What? Drassil?’ *The fabled city in the heart of Forn Forest?* Corban shook his head. None of this was making sense. He remembered overhearing his mam and Gar talking, back in Dun Carreg. About the arrival of Nathair and his guard, Sumur. They had mentioned leaving then, spoken of Drassil. But it had felt different. Everything had felt different. Cywen and his da had been alive, then.

‘Yes, the giant stronghold. It is vital that you – we – go to Drassil.’ Something flashed across Gar’s face. *Longing?* ‘You will be safe there.’

‘But . . . what about the others?’ He looked over his shoulder, saw the flicker of their campfire, dark figures around it.

‘We must leave them.’

Corban rocked back, recoiling as if slapped. *Leave them.* The thought seemed ridiculous to him, unimaginable. This group was all that was left of Dun Carreg, all that was left of *home*. And his mam and Gar were asking him just to walk away from them. Abandon

them, abandon Edana. Suddenly he could see the Rowan Field, smell the sea air. A crowd was gathered about him as he took his warrior trials. He glanced at the palm of his hand, the scar where he had sworn his blood-oath in the Field a silver line. He had pledged his life to king and kin. His king was dead, but Edana was Brenin's heir. Walking away would make him an oathbreaker.

'No,' he heard himself say.

'Ban,' his mam said.

'We must,' Gar said.

'No. Everything, *everyone* has been broken, killed, destroyed.' He kneaded his temples. 'Da, Cywen . . .' He looked up and locked eyes with his mam. Tears streaked her cheeks. 'They are all that's left of home,' he said, waving his arm towards the campfire. 'They are our family now.'

'Ban, this is beyond all kin, beyond all friendship,' Gar said, an inflection in his voice hinting at some hidden emotion, a lake of it, buried deep beneath the surface. 'This is about doing what is right, doing what must be done, despite the cost. Please, trust us. We must leave.'

'I have sworn an oath to Edana. I'll not become an oathbreaker.' He stood, feeling dizzy, not wanting to hear any more, not another word; not this madness about Elyon and Asroth, not about Forn, and Drassil, and not about *leaving*. He felt as if he was a dam full to bursting. His mam reached for his hand, but he snatched it away and stumbled into the darkness.