



JOHN GWYNNE

Willow

*Book Two of
The Faithful and the Fallen*

TOR



THE
BANISHED
LANDS





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

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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

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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-smearred 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, Evnis 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

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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?*

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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, brindled 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.

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'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

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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

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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

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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.

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‘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

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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.

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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.

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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.'

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‘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

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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.