

The Darkest Road: Book Three of the Fionavar Tapestry

By Guy Gavriel Kay

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In the conclusion of Guy Gavriel Kay's critically acclaimed fantasy trilogy, **The Fionavar Tapestry**, five university students from our world prepare to sacrifice themselves—as they enter into final battle against a power of unimaginable proportions…

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The Darkest Road: Book Three of the Fionavar Tapestry By Guy Gavriel Kay Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review
Praise for The Fionovar Tapestry trilogy

"Kay's bestselling - and stunning - fantasy trilogy finds its power not in its feats of imagination or world-building (though there are dazzling heapings of both) but from its rootedness in the reality of human emotions and relationships." --*The Globe and Mail*

“Immense scale, literary richness and dazzling heroes.”--*Toronto Star*

“A remarkable achievement . . . the essence of high fantasy.”—*Locus*

“A grand galloping narrative . . . reverberates with centuries of mythic and incantory implications—with a little Prince Hal and Falstaff on the side.”—*Christian Science Monitor*

"The Fionavar Tapestry, when all is said and done, is one of the most beautifully written and moving fantasy trilogies ever written. Those are very large words, but I truly believe this book is large enough to fit into such a reputation."--Green Man Review

Praise for the novels of Guy Gavriel Kay

“[Read] anything by Guy Gavriel Kay... His strengths are strong characters and fantastic set pieces.”--*The New Yorker*

“History and fantasy rarely come together as gracefully or readably as they do in the novels of Guy Gavriel Kay.”--*The Washington Post Book World*

“Kay is a genius. I've read him all my life and am always inspired by his work.”--#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Brandon Sanderson

"A storyteller on the grandest scale."--*Time Magazine*, Canada

About the Author
Guy Gavriel Kay is the internationally bestselling author of more than a dozen novels. His work has been translated into over 30 languages. At the outset of his career Kay assisted in the editorial construction of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion.* He has also written for the Washington Post, the Globe and Mail, The National Post, and The Guardian, among others, and has spoken at literary events around the world. He was won numerous literary awards, and is the recipient of the International Goliardos Prize for his contributions to the literature of the fantastic. In 2014 he was named to the Order of Canada, the country's highest civilian honour.

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And so the time of prophecy has come at last, the final days for those who dwell in Fionavar, the first of all worlds. Even as the Unraveller’s armies march to battle, the warriors of Light are calling upon the most

ancient of powers to aid in their struggle.

But despite all that can be done by mage lore and earth magic, and the sacrifices made by those brought from our own world, all may come to naught because of one child's choice. For he was born of Darkness and Light, and as the fate of all the worlds hangs in the balance, he alone must walk *The Darkest Road*. . . .

"A remarkable achievement . . . the essence of high fantasy."

—*Locus*

"This is the only fantasy work I know which does not suffer by comparison to *The Lord of the Rings.*"

—*Interzone*

"A grand galloping narrative . . . reverberates with centuries of mythic and incantory implications—with a little Prince Hal and Falstaff on the side."

—*Christian Science Monitor*

"As fine a piece of fantasy as has been published for some time."

—*Winnipeg Free Press*

"Kay has an acrobatic imagination . . . one ingenious plot after another . . . well-staged and presented."

—*Montreal Gazette*

"Excellent fantasy reading . . . *The Fionavar Tapestry* will deserve a place among the best of fantasy."

—*Regina Leader Post*

Look for the other volumes of *The Fionavar Tapestry:*
The Summer Tree* and *The Wandering Fire

At the end of this road as at the beginning of all roads
are my parents, Sybil and Sam Kay. This tapestry is theirs.

The
Darkest
Road

The Fionavar Tapestry:
Book Three

Guy Gavriel Kay

In *The Summer Tree* it was told how Loren Silvercloak and Matt Sören, a mage and his magical source from

the High Kingdom of Brennin in the world of Fionavar, induced five people from our own world to “cross” with them to Fionavar. Their ostensible purpose was to have the five participate in the festivities attendant on the celebration of the fiftieth year of the reign of Ailell, the High King. In fact, there were darker premonitions underlying the mage’s actions.

In Brennin, a brutal drought was afflicting the kingdom. Ailell’s older son, Aileron, had already been exiled for cursing his father’s refusal to allow him to sacrifice himself on the Summer Tree in an effort to end the drought.

In Fionavar, the five strangers quickly found themselves drawn into the complex tapestry of events. Kim Ford was recognized by the aged Seer, Ysanne, as the successor she had prophetically dreamt. Kim was initiated into the knowledge of the Seers by the water spirit, Eilathen, and presented with the Baelrath, the “Warstone” that Ysanne had been guarding. Kim was also shown the Circlet of Lisen, a gem that shone with its own light. The beautiful Lisen, a power of Pendaran Wood, had been the magical source and the beloved companion of Amairgen Whitebranch, the first of the mages. She had killed herself, leaping into the sea from her Tower, upon learning that Amairgen had died. Ysanne told Kim the prophecy that accompanied the Circlet: “Who shall wear this next, after Lisen, shall have the darkest road to walk of any child of earth or stars.” Later, as a last gesture of ultimate sacrifice on the eve of war, Ysanne, knowing Kim would have need of the old Seer’s power in the days to come, used Lökdal, the magic dagger of the Dwarves, to kill herself—but not before tracing a symbol on the brow of the sleeping Kim, which action enabled her to make of her own soul a gift for Kimberly.

Meanwhile, Paul Schafer and Kevin Laine were initiated in quite a different way. Paul played—and lost—a night game of chess with the High King in the palace of Paras Derval, during which an unexpected bond of sympathy was forged between the two. The next morning he and Kevin joined the band of the reckless Prince Diarmuid, Ailell’s younger son, in a raid across the River Saeren to Cathal, the Garden Country. There, Diarmuid achieved his intended seduction of Sharra, the Princess of Cathal. After the company’s return to Brennin, they passed a wild night in the Black Boar tavern. Late at night a song Kevin sang reminded Paul too acutely of the death in a car accident of Rachel Kincaid, the woman he had loved. Paul, blaming himself for the accident, which had occurred moments after Rachel had announced she was going to wed someone else, took a drastic step: he approached the High King and received Ailell’s sanction to sacrifice himself in the King’s stead on the Summer Tree.

The next night, the glade of the Summer Tree in the Godwood saw an epic battle. As Paul, bound on the Tree, watched helplessly, Galadan the Wolflord, who had come to claim Paul’s life, was opposed and driven back by a mysterious grey dog. The following night—Paul’s third on the Tree—a red full moon shone in the sky on a new moon night, as Dana, the Mother Goddess, granted Paul release from his guilt, by showing that he had not, in fact, subconsciously willed the accident that had killed Rachel. As Paul wept, rain finally fell over Brennin. Paul, though, did not die. He was taken down from the Tree alive by Jaelle, the High Priestess of Dana. Henceforth Paul would carry another name: Pwyll Twiceborn, Lord of the Summer Tree.

By now it was clear that an epochal confrontation was at hand: Rakoth Maugrim, the Unraveller, defeated a thousand years before and bound under the great mountain, Rangat, had freed himself and had caused the mountain to explode with a hand of fire to proclaim that fact.

His freedom was to have immediate consequences for Jennifer Lowell, the fourth of the strangers. In Paras Derval she had witnessed an unsettling incident during a children’s counting game. A young girl, Leila, had “called” a boy named Finn to “take the Longest Road” for the third time that summer. No one, not even Jaelle, who had also been watching, knew exactly what that meant, though Jaelle was quick to enlist Leila as an acolyte in the Temple. The next day, riding outside the town walls, Jennifer met Brendel of the lios

alfar—the Children of Light—and a party of his people. She spent the night in the woods with them, and in the darkness they were attacked. Concerned about the arrival of the five strangers, Rakoth Maugrim had Galadan and Metran—the traitorous First Mage of Brennin—abduct Jennifer. She was bound to the back of the black swan, Avaia, and borne north to Rakoth's fortress of Starkadh.

Meanwhile, the terrifying explosion of the mountain had caused the death of the aged High King. This led to a tense confrontation between Diarmuid and his brother, Aileron—who had been disguised as Ysanne's servant since his exile. The potentially violent situation was ended by Diarmuid's voluntarily relinquishing his claim to the throne, but not before he'd received a knife in the shoulder, courtesy of Sharra of Cathal, who had come to Brennin to seek vengeance on him for the deception that had led to her seduction.

In the meantime, Dave Martyniuk, the last of the five strangers, had been separated from the others in the crossing to Fionavar. He ended up far to the north among the Dalrei, the "Riders," on the Plain, and found himself drawn into the life of the third tribe, led by Ivor, their Chieftain.

Ivor's young son, Tabor, fasting in the forest for a vision of his totem animal, dreamt a seemingly impossible creature: a winged, chestnut unicorn. Three nights later, at the edge of the Great Wood, Pendaran, he met and flew upon this creature of his fast, Imraith-Nimphais—a double-edged gift of the Goddess, born of the red full moon.

Meanwhile, Dave was escorted toward Brennin by a party of Dalrei led by Ivor's older son, Levon. The company was ambushed by a great number of the evil svart alfar, and only Dave, Levon, and a third Dalrei, Torc, survived by riding into the darkness of Pendaran Wood. The trees and spirits of Pendaran, hating all men since the loss of the beautiful Lisen of the Wood a thousand years before, plotted the death of the three men, but they were saved by the intervention of Flidais, a diminutive forest power, who claimed, among other things, to know the answers to all the riddles in all the worlds, save one: the name by which the "Warrior" could be summoned. As it happened, the search for this name was one of the tasks Ysanne had left with Kimberly.

Flidais sent word to Ceinwen, the capricious, green-clad goddess of the Hunt, who had taken a special liking to Dave. The goddess arranged for the three friends to awaken safely on the southern edge of the Great Wood in the morning.

She did more. She also caused Dave to find a long-lost object of power: Owein's Horn. Levon, who had been taught by wise old Gereint, the blind shaman of his tribe, then found the Cave of the Sleepers nearby—a cave wherein Owein and the kings of the Wild Hunt lay asleep.

The three friends rode south with this knowledge to Paras Derval, in time to arrive for the first council of Aileron's reign. The council was interrupted twice. The first time, by the arrival of Brock, a Dwarf from Banir Tal who knelt before Matt Sören—once King of the Dwarves—and proffered the terrible tidings that the Dwarves, under the leadership of two brothers, Kaen and Blöd, had helped the Unraveller to free himself by treacherously breaking the wardstone of Eridu, thus preventing any warning of Rakoth's stirring under the mountain. They had also found and delivered to Rakoth the Cauldron of Khath Meigol, which had the power to raise the newly dead.

In the midst of this terrifying recitation, Kimberly suddenly saw—in a vision shaped by the Baelrath—Jennifer being raped and tortured by Rakoth in his fortress of Starkadh. She gathered Dave, Paul, and Kevin around her, reached out for Jennifer with the wild power of her ring, and drew the five of them out of Fionavar back to their own world.

And so ended *The Summer Tree.*

The Wandering Fire picked up the story some six months later, in November and back in Toronto, with Kimberly waiting for the dream that would give her the Warrior's summoning name. Jennifer, badly scarred in her soul and carrying the child of Rakoth Maugrim—having vowed to give birth to that child as her answer to the Dark—was brought early to her time by a sudden crossing back to Fionavar. The crossing was achieved by Paul when the two of them were threatened by Galadan, who had crossed to their world in pursuit of Paul.

In Fionavar, Jennifer's child, Darien, was left to be secretly fostered in the house of Vae and Shahar, the parents of Finn—the boy called by the children's counting game to "take the Longest Road." The only persons informed of the secret were the priestesses of Dana, because Paul and Jennifer needed Jaelle's magic to send them home.

The following spring Kim finally had the dream for which she had been waiting. As a result, the five traveled to Stonehenge where Kim raised the spirit of Uther Pendragon by the power of the Baelrath and compelled him to name his son's resting place. Kim then went alone, by the magic she carried, to Glastonbury Tor and there—having first sent the others ahead to Fionavar—she drew the Warrior, Arthur, from his rest by the summoning name: Childslayer. The name was an echo of the sin Arthur had committed in his youth after discovering his inadvertent incest with his sister. Kim and the Warrior followed the others to Paras Derval.

An icy winter gripped Fionavar, even as midsummer approached—a winter so terrible that Fordaetha, the Ice Queen of Rük, was able to come as far south as Paras Derval. She almost killed Paul in the Black Boar tavern before he succeeded in driving her back north. It was decided in council that Jaelle and the mages and Kimberly would join with Gereint, the old shaman, in an attempt to magically probe the source of the killing winter—a necessary prelude to trying to end it.

In the meantime the dimensions of Arthur Pendragon's tragedy were beginning to take shape as it became clear (to Brendel of the lios alfar, first of everyone) who Jennifer Lowell really was: Guinevere, beloved of Arthur and of Lancelot. Marred by her suffering in Starkadh, Jennifer withdrew to the sanctuary of Dana with Jaelle. It was Jaelle who explained that Vae and Finn had taken Darien (who was growing with the unnatural rapidity of all the andain—children of mortals and gods) to Ysanne's cottage by the lake. There, Darien, seeming now to be a child of five years old, was growing up in the loving care of his foster mother and brother, who were troubled by two things: a power which caused his blue eyes to flash red, and an awareness that the child was drawn by voices in the storms of winter.

On the Plain the Dalrei were hard-pressed. The winter had rendered the graceful eltor—the creatures the Dalrei hunted and depended upon—awkward and ungainly in the snow, which made them easy prey for Galadan's wolves. Ivor—now Aven, or "Father" of all the Dalrei—had herded the eltor down to the southeastern corner of the vast Plain, and there the gathered tribes guarded them as best they could. Until one attack included great numbers of the hideous urgach mounted upon six-legged monsters called slaug. Only the intervention of Diarmuid of Brennin, with Dave and Kevin in his company, saved the Dalrei from the first wave of the mounted urgach. And only the appearance of Ivor's son Tabor, riding Imraith-Nimphais, his deadly, winged mount with the shining horn, saved them from the second, larger wave. Ivor was painfully aware of the effect such flight had on Tabor, drawing him ever farther from the world of men.

Shortly after, back in Brennin, another new strand entered the Tapestry. At the urging of Levon, Ivor's older son—and having the reluctant agreement of Loren—Kim and Dave, the bearers of what Levon thought to be the elements of an ancient verse that spoke of the waking of the Wild Hunt, went with a number of companions to the place at the edge of Pendaran Wood where the Cave of the Sleepers lay. The Baelrath shattered the stone at the cave mouth and then Dave's horn summoned forth Owein and the seven kings of the Hunt. With the shadowy sky kings wailing "Where is the child?" a child did, indeed, step forth to become

one of the Wild Hunt: it was Finn, and this was the Longest Road to which he had been called.

Most of the company, including Shalhassan the Supreme Lord of Cathal, and Sharra, his daughter, who had arrived from the south with reinforcements, made their way the next morning to Gwen Ystrat, the province of the Goddess; partly to meet Gereint, the shaman, there, partly in response to a report from Audiart, Jaelle's second in command, that the province was being beset by wolves. The company was led by the grey dog that had saved Paul on the Summer Tree, and who turned out to be Cavall, Arthur's hunting dog. They passed into the province of the Mother amid ice and snow on the day before Maidaladan—Midsummer's Eve—with all the ancient, erotic, blood magic such a night implied. That evening, with the aid of the other magic wielders, Kim descended into the designs of Maugrim and found a clue that enabled Loren to deduce that the winter was being shaped by Metran, the treacherous mage, using the Cauldron of Khath Meigol, and basing himself on the unholy island of Cader Sedat. Kim herself would have died in her quest, had she not been saved by an unexpected source: Ruana of the Paraiko, one of the Giants, the people who had shaped the Cauldron in the first place. They were a race long thought to be dead and haunting the mountain passes with their "blood curse." Ruana reached Kim telepathically and told her that his people were alive but were slowly being put to death—bloodlessly—by the urgach and svart alfar.

The next day, during the wolf hunt, Kevin—who had been feeling useless through all the combats—had nearly fatal injury added to insult when he was gored by a white boar. He was saved by the healing magic of the mages, but this last symbolic portent finally brought home to him what his own fate and task were to be. Amid the unbridled eroticism of Midsummer's Eve in Gwen Ystrat (on a night when Prince Diarmuid told Sharra of Cathal that he loved her), Kevin slipped away alone to the east and, guided by Cavall in the snow, came to the cave of Dun Maura where he sacrificed his life to the Goddess, that she might intercede and break the winter—thus enabling the others to sail to Cader Sedat and battle with Metran.

In the meantime, Paul had remained behind with Vae and Darien. Earlier that same day he had taken Darien to the Summer Tree. His plan was to summon Cernan, the stag-horned god of the forests (and Galadan's father) to help accelerate Darien's progression to his maturity—a maturity desperately needed, for the ambivalent child was growing steadily in power. As it happened, Darien needed no such aid in an oak grove on Midsummer's Eve. He propelled himself forward in years to much the same age as his brother Finn had been before he left. Having overheard Cernan ask Paul why the child had even been allowed to live, Darien departed, vowing to seek out his father, Rakoth Maugrim.

Not long after, it was decided that Diarmuid's men, with Loren and Arthur and Paul, would sail for Cader Sedat. Kimberly had remained in the east, with only Brock the Dwarf as her companion on a journey to the mountain pass where the Paraiko were being slain. The two of them had scarcely entered the mountains, however, when they were attacked and captured by a band of brigands.

With Kevin's sacrifice ending the winter, war became a reality. From the borders of Daniloth, the Shadowland, where dwelt the lios alfar, an army of the Dark was seen sweeping south toward the Plain. Ra-Tenniel, Lord of the lios alfar, sent warning to the Dalrei. In response, Ivor led his whole army—save for Tabor, left behind to guard the camp—in a wild, full-tilt ride across half the length of the Plain to meet the enemy by the banks of the Adein River. The battle that followed was on the verge of being lost—despite the appearance of Ra-Tenniel and the lios alfar—when Dave Martyniuk sounded Owein's Horn to summon the Wild Hunt. The kings of the Hunt, led by the child who had once been Finn, began slaughtering the forces of the Dark—and then, without discrimination, those of the Light as well. They were only diverted from their kill by the intercession of the goddess Ceinwen. Much later, Dave awoke in the darkness on the mount beneath which Ceinwen had gathered the dead, and she made love with him on the grass that night.

Back in Brennin, on the morning before the voyage to Cader Sedat, Jennifer emerged from the Temple at the

urging of Matt Sören. For the space of a single day she was reunited with Arthur. Then, after the ship sailed she set out in turn, with only Brendel of the lios alfar to accompany her, to watch for its return from the Anor Lisen: the Tower at the westernmost edge of Pendaran Wood where Lisen, a thousand years ago, had waited for Amairgen.

At sea, the ship *Prydwen* was attacked by a monstrous creature, the Soulmonger of Maugrim. Amid the sound of unearthly music, Loren and Matt defended the ship while Paul desperately sought the power to summon Liranan, the god of the sea, to battle the monster. At the last instant he was reached by Gereint the shaman, who had sent his soul traveling out to sea in search of Paul to give him the aid that would make the summoning possible. Thus compelled, the sea god came and drove the monster into the deeps, killing it—but not before Diarmuid had leaped to the Soulmonger's enormous head and plucked the white staff of Amairgen Whitebranch from where it was embedded between its eyes.

And so two tragic mysteries were made clear. Amairgen, who had disappeared after sailing for Cader Sedat a thousand years ago, had evidently been slain by this creature. Even worse, the music they had heard was the glorious singing of all the lios alfar who had set sail west toward the hidden island the Weaver had shaped for them alone. Not one of them had reached it in a thousand years; all had been slain in this place.

With Arthur's guidance and Loren's power the ship came to Cader Sedat. There they discovered that Metran had been using his mage's power, augmented by the Cauldron, to shape a death rain over the eastern land of Eridu and was preparing to bring the rain westward over the mountains. On that island a titanic mages' battle was fought by Loren and Matt against Metran, who was sourced in the power of a myriad of svart alfar who—drained to death by the power he sucked from them—were being revived by the Cauldron of Khath Meigol. In the end Loren prevailed, killing Metran and shattering the Cauldron, but only by drawing upon a depth of power that also killed his source, Matt Sören.

In the aftermath of that duel, Paul and Diarmuid followed Arthur into the Chamber of the Dead beneath Cader Sedat. There they watched the Warrior wake Lancelot du Lac from his bed of stone to join in the war against the Dark. And so all three members of that triangle were now in Fionavar. Back in the shattered Hall of Cader Sedat, Lancelot's first action was to use his own particular gifts (exercised once before, in Camelot) to bring Matt Sören back to life. Unfortunately, during the brief time that Matt had lain lifeless, the bond of mage and source had been irrevocably broken, and Loren Silvercloak had lost his magical powers. *The Wandering Fire* ended as the company prepared to leave the island and sail back to war.

The Five:

KIMBERLY FORD, Seer of Brennin

JENNIFER LOWELL, who is also GUINEVERE

DAVE MARTYNIUK ("Davor")

PAUL SCHAFER, Lord of the Summer Tree ("Pwyll Twiceborn")

KEVIN LAINE ("Liadon"), the sacrifice come freely on Midsummer's Eve

From Brennin:

AILERON, High King of Brennin

DIARMUID, his brother

LOREN SILVERCLOAK, once First Mage of Brennin

MATT SÖREN, once his source: King of the Dwarves

TEYRNON, a mage

BARAK, his source

JAELLE, High Priestess of the Goddess

AUDIART, her second in command, in the province of Gwen Ystrat

LEILA, a young priestess, mind-linked to Finn dan Shahar

SHIEL, a priestess in Paras Derval

COLL of Taerlindel, lieutenant to Diarmuid, captain of the ship PRYDWEN

GORLAES, Chancellor of Brennin

MABON, Duke of Rhoden

NIAVIN, Duke of Seresh

VAE, a craftswoman in Paras Derval

SHAHAR, her husband

FINN, their son, now riding with the Wild Hunt upon ISELEN

DARIEN, their foster child, son of Jennifer Lowell and Rakoth Maugrim

BRENDEL, a lord of the lios alfar, from Daniloth

BROCK, a Dwarf, from Banir Tal

From Cathal:

SHALHASSAN, Supreme Lord of Cathal

SHARRA, his daughter and heir (“the Dark Rose”); betrothed to Diarmuid

From the Plain:

IVOR, Aven of the Plain, Chieftain of the third tribe of the Dalrei

LEITH, his wife

LEVON, his older son

CORDELIANE (“LIANE”), his daughter

TABOR, his younger son, rider of IMRAITHNIMPHAIS

TORC, a Rider of the third tribe

GEREINT, shaman of the third tribe

From Daniloth:

RA-TENNIEL, Lord of the lios alfar

LEYSE of the Swan Mark

In the Mountains:

DALREIDAN, an exile from the Plain

FAEBUR of Larak, exiled from Eridu

CERIOG, leader of the mountain outlaws

RUANA of the Paraiko, in the caves of Khath Meigol

MIACH, First of the Dwarfmoot, in Banir Lök

The Dark:

RAKOTH MAUGRIM the UNRAVELLER

GALADAN, Wolflord of the andain, his lieutenant

UATHACH, the urgach in white, commander of the army of Maugrim

FORDAETHA OF RÜK, Ice Queen of the Barrens

AVAIA, the Black Swan

BLÖD, a Dwarf, servant to Rakoth

KAEN, brother to Blöd, ruling the Dwarves in Banir Lök

The Powers:

THE WEAVER at the Loom

MÖRNIR of the Thunder

DANA, the Mother

CERNAN of the Beasts

CEINWEN of the Bow, the HUNTRESS

LIRANAN, god of the sea

OWEIN, Lord of the Wild Hunt, rider of CARGAIL

FLIDAIS (“Taliesin”) of the andain, a power of Pendaran Wood

CURDARDH, The Oldest One, guardian of Pendaran’s sacred grove

From the Past:

ARTHUR PENDRAGON, the Warrior, with CAVALL, his dog

LANCELOT du LAC, from the Chamber of the Dead in Cader Sedat

IORWETH FOUNDER, first High King of Brennin

CONARY, High King during the Bael Rangat

COLAN, his son, High King after him (“the Beloved”)

AMAIRGEN WHITEBRANCH, first of the mages; slain by the Soulmonger

LISEN of the Wood, a deiena, source and wife to Amairgen

RA-TERMAINE, greatest of the Lords of the lios alfar; slain by Galadan in the Bael Rangat

RA-LATHEN (“Lathen Mistweaver”), his successor, who shaped the mists that made Daniloth into the Shadowland

LAURIEL, the White Swan, slain by Avaia in the Bael Rangat

REVOR, ancestral hero of the Dalrei; first Aven of the Plain

SEITHR, King of the Dwarves during the Bael Rangat

CONNLA, mightiest of the Paraiko, who bound the Wild Hunt and forged the Cauldron of Khath Meigol

PART I

The Last Kanior

Chapter 1

“Do you know the wish of your heart?”

Once, when Kim Ford was an undergraduate, young for university and young for her age, someone had asked her that question over cappuccino on a first date. She’d been very impressed. Later, rather less young, she’d often smiled at the memory of how close he’d come to getting her into bed on the strength of a good line and a way with waiters in a chic restaurant. The question, though, had stayed with her.

And now, not so much older but white-haired nonetheless, and as far away from home as she could imagine being, Kim had an answer to that question.

The wish of her heart was that the bearded man standing over her, with the green tattoos on his forehead and cheeks, should die an immediate and painful death.

Her side ached where he had kicked her, and every shallow breath was a lancing pain. Crumpled beside her,

blood seeping from the side of his head, lay Brock of Banir Tal. From where Kim lay she couldn't tell if the Dwarf was alive or not, and if she could have killed in that moment, the tattooed man would be dead. Through a haze of pain she looked around. There were about fifty men surrounding them on the high plateau, and most of them bore the green tattoos of Eridu. Glancing down at her own hand she saw that the Baelrath lay quiescent, no more than a red stone set in a ring. No power for her to draw upon, no access to her desire.

It didn't really surprise her. The Warstone had never, from the first, brought anything but pain with its power, and how could it have been otherwise?

"Do you know," the bearded Eridun above her said, with harsh mockery, "what the Dalrei have done down below?"

"What? What have they done, Ceriog?" another man asked, moving forward a little from the circle of men. He was older than most of them, Kim saw. There was grey in his dark hair, and he bore no sign of the green tattoo markings.

"I *thought* you might be interested," the one named Ceriog said, and laughed. There was something wild in the sound, very near to pain. Kim tried not to hear it, but she was a Seer more than she was anything else, and a premonition came to her with that laughter. She looked at Brock again. He had not moved. Blood was still welling slowly from the wound at the side of his head.

"I am interested," the other man said mildly.

Ceriog's laughter ended. "They rode north last night," he said, "every man among them, except the blind ones. They have left the women and children undefended in the camp east of the Latham, just below us."

There was a murmur among the listening men. Kim closed her eyes. *What had happened?* What could have driven Ivor to do such a thing?

"What," the older man asked, still quietly, "does any of that have to do with us?"

Ceriog moved a step toward him. "You," he said, contemptuously, "are more than a fool. You are an outlaw even among outlaws. Why should any of us answer questions of yours when you won't even give us your name?"

The other man raised his voice very slightly. On the windless plateau it carried. "I have been in the foothills and the mountains," he said, "for more years than I care to remember. For all of those years, Dalreidan is what I have offered as my name. Rider's Son is what I choose to call myself, and until this day no man has seen fit to question it. Why should it matter to you, Ceriog, if I choose not to shame my father's grave by keeping his name as part of my own?"

Ceriog snorted derisively. "There is no one here who has not committed a crime, old man. Why should you be different?"

"Because," said Dalreidan, "I killed a mother and child."

Opening her eyes, Kim looked at him in the afternoon sunlight. There was a stillness on the plateau—broken by Ceriog's laughter. Again Kim heard the twisting note in it, halfway between madness and grief.

"Surely," Ceriog mocked, "that should have given you a taste for more!" He flung his arms wide. "Surely we should all have a taste for death by now! I had come back to tell you of women and boys for sport down below. I had not thought to see a Dwarf delivered into my hands so soon."

He did not laugh again. Instead, he turned to look down on the figure of Brock, sprawled unconscious on the sun-baked stone of the plateau.

A sick foreboding swept over Kimberly. A recollection, though not her own; Ysanne's, whose soul was a part of her now. A memory of a legend, a nightmare tale from childhood, of very great evil done, very long ago.

"What happened?" she cried, wincing with pain, desperate to know. "What did they do?"

Ceriog looked at her. They all did. For the first time she met his eyes and flinched away from the raw grief she read in them. His head jerked up and down convulsively. "Faebur!" he cried suddenly. A younger light-bearded Eridun stepped forward. "Play messenger again, Faebur. Tell the story one more time. See if it improves with age. She wants to know what the Dwarves have done. *Tell her!*"

She was a Seer. The threads of the Timeloom shuttled for her. Even as Faebur began his flat-voiced recitation, Kim cut straight past his words to the images behind them and found horror.

The background of the tale was known to her, though not less bitter for that: the story of Kaen and Blöd, the brothers who had led the Dwarves in search, forty years ago, of the lost Cauldron of Khath Meigol. When the Dwarfmoot had voted to aid them, Matt Sören, the young King, had thrown down his scepter and removed the Diamond Crown and left the twin mountains to find another fate entirely, as source to Loren Silvercloak.

Then, a year ago, the Dwarf now lying beside her, had come to Paras Derval with tidings of great evil done: Kaen and Blöd, unable to find the Cauldron on their own and driven near to madness by forty years of failure, had entered into an unholy alliance. With the aid of Metran, the treacherous mage, they had finally unearthed the Cauldron of the Giants—and had paid the price. It had been twofold: the Dwarves had broken the wardstone of Eridu, thus severing the warning link of the five stones, and then they had delivered the Cauldron itself into the hands of their new master, the one whose binding under Rangat was to have been ensured by the linked wardstones—Rakoth Maugrim, the Unraveller.

All this she had known. Had known, too, that Metran had used the Cauldron to lock in the killing winter that had ended five mornings ago, after the night Kevin Laine had sacrificed himself to bring it to a close. What she hadn't known was what had happened since. What she now read in Faebur's face and heard him tell, feeling the images like lashes in her soul.

The death rain of Eridu.

"When the snow began to melt," Faebur was saying, "we rejoiced. I heard the bells ring in walled Larak, though I could not return there. Exiled in the hills by my father, I too gave thanks for the end of the killing cold." So had she, Kim remembered. She had given thanks even as she mourned, hearing the wailing of the priestesses at dawn outside the dark cave of Dun Maura. *Oh, my darling man.*

"For three days," Faebur went on, in the same detached, numb tones, "the sun shone. The grass returned overnight, and the flowers. When the rain came, on the fourth day, that too seemed natural, and cause for joy.

"Until, looking down from the high hills west of Larak, I heard the screaming begin. The rain did not reach the hills, but I could see herdsmen not far away on the slopes below, with their goats and kere, and I heard them scream when the rain fell, and I saw huge black blisters form and break on animals and men as they died."

Seers could go—were forced by their gift to go—behind the words to the images suspended in the coils of

time. Try as she might, Kim's second, inner sight would not let her look away from the vision caught in Faebur's words. And being what she was, twinned soul with two sets of memories, she knew more, even, than Faebur knew. For Ysanne's childhood memories were hers, and clearer now, and she knew the rain had been shaped once before in a distant time of dark, and that the dead were deadly to those who touched them, and so could not be buried.

Which meant plague. Even after the rain stopped.

"How long did it last?" she asked suddenly.

Ceriog's harsh laughter told her her mistake and opened a new, deeper vein of terror, even before he spoke. "How long?" he snapped, his voice swirling erratically. "White hair should bring more wisdom. Look east, foolish woman, up the valley of the Kharn. Look past Khath Meigol and tell me how long it lasted!"

She looked. The mountain air was thin and clear, the summer sun bright overhead. She could see a long way from that high plateau, almost to Eridu itself.

She could see the rain clouds piled high east of the mountains.

The rain hadn't ended. And she knew, as surely as she knew anything at all, that, if unchecked, it would be coming their way; Over the Carnevon Range and the Skeledarak, to Brennin, Cathal, the wide Plain of the Dalrei, and then, of course, to the place where undying Rakoth's most undying hatred lay—to Daniloth, where dwelt the lios alfar.

Her thoughts, shrouded in dread, winged away west, far past the end of land, out over the sea, where a ship was sailing to a place of death. It was named *Prydwen*, she knew. She knew the names of many things, but not all knowledge was power. Not in the face of what was falling from that dark sky east of them.

Feeling helpless and afraid, Kim turned back to Ceriog. As she did, she saw that the Baelrath was flickering on her hand. That, too, she understood: the rain she had just been shown was an act of war, and the Warstone was responding. Unobtrusively she turned the ring inward and closed her palm so it would not be seen.

"You wanted to know what the Dwarves had done, and now you know," Ceriog said, his voice low and menacing.

"Not all the Dwarves!" she said, struggling to a sitting position, gasping with the pain that caused. "Listen to me! I know more of this than you. I—"

"Doubtless, you know more, traveling with one of them. And you shall tell me, before we are done with you. But the Dwarf is first. I am very pleased," said Ceriog, "to see he is not dead."

Kim whipped her head around. A cry escaped her. Brock moaned, his hands moved slightly. Heedless of risk, she crawled over to help him. "I need clean cloths and hot water!" she shouted. "Quickly!"

No one moved. Ceriog laughed. "It seems," he said, "that you haven't understood me. I am pleased to see him alive, because I intend to kill him with great care."

She did understand and, understanding, could no longer hate—it seemed that clear, uncomplicated wishes of the heart were not allowed for her. Which wasn't all that surprising, given who she was and what she carried.

She could no longer hate, nor could she hold back her pity for one whose people were being so completely destroyed. But neither could she allow him to proceed. He had come nearer, had drawn a blade. She heard a

soft, almost delicate rustle of anticipation among the watching outlaws, most of whom were from Eridu. No mercy to be expected there.

She twisted the ring back outward on her finger and thrust her hand high in the air.

“Harm him not!” she cried, as sternly as she could. “I am the Seer of Brennin. I carry the Baelrath on my hand and a magegift vellin stone about my wrist!”

She was also hellishly weak, with a brutal pain in her side, and no idea whatsoever of how she could hold them off.

Ceriog seemed to have an intuition about that, or else was so goaded by the presence of the Dwarf that he was beyond deterrence. He smiled thinly, through his tattoos and his dark beard.

“I like that,” he said, gazing at the Baelrath. “It will be a pretty toy to carry for the hours we have left before the rains come west and we all turn black and die. First, though,” he murmured, “I am going to kill the Dwarf very slowly, while you watch.”

She wasn’t going to be able to stop him. She was a Seer, a summoner. A storm crow on the winds of war. She could wake power, and gather it, and sometimes to do so she could flame red and fly between places, between worlds. She had two souls within her, and she carried the burden of the Baelrath on her finger and in her heart. But she could not stop a man with a blade, let alone fifty of them, driven mad by grief and fury and awareness of coming death.

Brock moaned. Kim felt his life’s blood soaking through her clothing as she held his head in her lap. She glared up at Ceriog. Tried one last time.

“Listen to me—” she began.

“While you watch,” he repeated, ignoring her.

“I think not,” said Dalreidan. “Leave them alone, Ceriog.”

The Eridun wheeled. A twisted light of pleasure shone in his dark face. “You will stop me, old man?”

“I shouldn’t have to,” Dalreidan said calmly. “You are no fool. You heard what she said: the Seer of Brennin. With whom else and how else will we stop what is coming?”

The other man seemed scarcely to have heard. “For a Dwarf?” he snarled. “You would intercede, now, for a Dwarf?” His voice skirled upward with growing incredulity. “Dalreidan, this has been coming between us for a long time.”

“It need not come. Only hear reason. I seek no leadership, Ceriog. Only to—”

“Only to tell the leader what he may or may not do!” said Ceriog viciously. There was a frozen half second of stillness, then Ceriog’s arm whipped forward and his dagger flew—

—over the shoulder of Dalreidan, who had dived and rolled and was up again in a move the Plain had seen rehearsed from horseback for past a thousand years. No one had seen his own blade drawn, nor had they seen it thrown.

They did see it, all of them, buried in Ceriog’s heart. And an instant later, after the shock had passed, they

saw also that the dead Eridun was smiling as might one who has found release from overmastering pain.

Kim was suddenly aware of the silence. Of the sun overhead, the finger of the breeze, the weight of Brock's head in her lap—details of time and place made unnaturally vivid by the explosion of violence.

Which had come and was gone, leaving this stillness of fifty people in a high place. Dalreidan walked over to retrieve his blade. His steps were loud on the rocks. No one spoke. Dalreidan knelt and, pulling the dagger free, cleaned it of blood on the dead man's sleeve. Slowly he rose again and looked around the ring of faces.

"First blade was his," he said.

There was a stir, a loosening of strain, as if every man there had been holding his breath.

"It was," said an Eridun quietly, a man older even than Dalreidan himself, with his green tattoos sunken deep in the wrinkles of his face. "Revenge lies not in such a cause, neither by the laws of the Lion nor the code of the mountains."

Slowly, Dalreidan nodded his head. "I know nothing of the former and too much of the latter," he said, "but I think you will know that I had no desire for Ceriog's death, and none at all to take his place. I will be gone from this place. I will be gone from this place within the hour."

There was another stir at that. "Does it matter?" young Faebur asked. "You need not go, not with the rain coming so soon."

And that, Kim realized, brought things back round to her. She had recovered from the shock—Ceriog's was not the first violent death she'd seen in Fionavar—and she was ready when all their eyes swung to where she sat.

"It may not come," she said, looking at Faebur. The Baelrath was still alive, flickering, but not intensely so.

"You are truly the Seer of Brennin?" he asked.

She nodded. "On a journey for the High King with this Dwarf, Brock of Banir Tal. Who fled the twin mountains to bring us tidings of the treachery of others."

"A Dwarf in the service of Ailell?" Dalreidan asked.

She shook her head. "Of his son. Ailell died more than a year ago, the day the Mountain flamed. Aileron rules in Paras Derval."

Dalreidan's mouth crooked wryly. "News," he said, "is woven slowly in the mountains."

"Aileron?" Faebur interjected. "We heard a tale of him in Larak. He was an exile, wasn't he?"

Kim heard the hope in his voice, the unspoken thought. He was very young; the beard concealed it only partially. "He was," she said gently. "Sometimes they go back home."

"If," the older Eridun interposed, "there is a home to go back to. Seer, can you stop the rain?"

She hesitated, looking beyond him, east to where the clouds were piled high. She said, "I cannot, not directly. But the High King has others in his service, and by the Sight I have I know that some of them are sailing even now to the place where the death rain is being shaped, just as the winter was. And if we stopped

the winter, then—”

“—then we can end the rain!” a deep voice rumbled, low and fierce. She looked down. His eyes were open.

“Oh, Brock!” she cried.

“Aboard that ship,” the Dwarf went on, speaking slowly but with clarity, “will be Loren Silvercloak and my lord, Matt Sören, true King of the Dwarves. If any people alive can save us, it is the two of them.” He stopped, breathing heavily.

Kim held him close, overwhelmed for an instant with relief. “Careful,” she said. “Try not to talk.”

He looked up at her. “Don’t worry so much,” he said. “Your forehead will set in a crease.” She gave a little gasp of laughter. “It takes a great deal,” he went on, “to kill a Dwarf. I need a bandage to keep the blood out of my eyes, and a good deal of water to drink. Then, if I can have an hour’s rest in the shade, we can go on.”

He was still bleeding. Kim found that she was crying and clutching his burly chest far too hard. She loosened her grip and opened her mouth to say the obvious thing.

“Where? Go where?” It was Faebur. “What journey takes you into the Carnevon Range, Seer of Brennin?” He was trying to sound stern, but the effect was otherwise.

She looked at him a long moment, then, buying time, asked, “Faebur, why are *you* here; why are you exiled?”

He flushed but, after a pause, answered, in a low voice. “My father unhoused me, as all fathers in Eridu have the right to do.”

“Why?” she asked. “Why did he do that?”

“Seer—” Dalreidan began.

“No,” said Faebur, gesturing at him. “You told us your reason a moment ago, Dalreidan. It hardly matters anymore. I will answer the question. There is no blood on the Loomweft with my name, only a betrayal of my city, which in Eridu is said to be red on the Loom, and so the same as blood. It is simply told. Competing at the Ta’Sirona, the Summer Games, at Teg Veirene a year ago, I saw and loved a girl from high-walled Akkaïze, in the north, and she . . . saw and loved me, as well. In Larak again, in the fall of the year, my father named to me his choice for my wife, and I . . . refused him and told him why.”

Kim heard sympathetic sounds from the other Eriduns and realized they hadn’t known why Faebur was in the mountains; nor Dalreidan either, for that matter, until, just now, he’d told of his murders. The code of the mountains, she guessed: you didn’t ask.

But she had, and Faebur was answering. “When I did that, my father put on his white robe and went into the Lion’s Square of Larak, and he called the four heralds to witness and cursed me west to Carnevon and Skeledarak, unhoused from Eridu. Which means”—and there was bitterness now—“that my father saved my life. That is, if your mage and Dwarf King can stop Rakoth’s rain. You cannot, Seer, you have told us so. Let me ask you again, where are you going in the mountains?”

He had answered her, and with his heart’s truth. There were reasons not to reply, but none seemed compelling, where they were, with the knowledge of that rain falling east of them.

“To Khath Meigol,” she said, and watched the mountain outlaws freeze into silence. Many of them made reflexive signs against evil.

Even Dalreidan seemed shaken. She could see that he had paled. He crouched down on his haunches in front of her and spent a moment gathering and dispersing pebbles on the rocks. At length, he said, “You will not be a fool, to be what you are, so I will say none of what first comes to me to say, but I do have a question.”

He waited for her to nod permission, then went on.

“How are you to be of service in this war, to your High King or anyone else, if you are bloodcursed by the spirits of the Paraiko?”

Again, Kim saw them making the sign against evil all around her. Even Brock had to suppress a gesture. She shook her head. “It is a fair question—” she began.

“Hear me,” Dalreidan interrupted, unable to wait for her answer. “The bloodcurse is no idle tale, I know it is not. Once, years ago, I was hunting a wild kere, east and north of here, and so intent on my quarry that I lost track of how far I had gone. Then the twilight came, and I realized I was on the borders of Khath Meigol. Seer of Brennin, I am no longer young, nor am I a tale-spinning elder by a winter fire stretching truth like bad wool: I was there, and so I can tell you, there *is* a curse on all who go into that place, of ill fortune and death and souls lost to time. It is true, Seer, it is not a tale. I felt it myself, on the borders of Khath Meigol.”

She closed her eyes.

Save us, she heard. Ruana. She opened her eyes and said, “I know it is not a tale. There is a curse. I do not think it is what it is believed to be.”

“You do not think. Seer, do you know?”

Did she know? The truth was, she didn’t. The Giants went back beyond Ysanne’s learning or Loren’s or that of the Priestesses of Dana. Beyond, even, the lore of the Dwarves, or the lios alfar. All she had was her own knowledge: from the time in Gwen Ystrat when she’d made that terrible voyage into the designs of the Unraveller, shielded by the powers of her friends.

And then the shields had fallen, she had gone too far, has lost them and was lost, burning, until another one had come, far down in the Dark, and had sheltered her. The other mind had named himself as Ruana of the Paraiko, in Khath Meigol, and had begged for aid. They were alive, not ghosts, not dead yet. And this was what she knew, and all she knew.

On the plateau she shook her head, meeting the troubled gaze of the man who called himself Dalreidan. “No,” she said. “I know nothing with certainty, save one thing I may not tell you, and one thing I may.”

He waited. She said, “I have a debt to pay.”

“In Khath Meigol?” There was a real anguish in his voice. She nodded. “A personal debt?” he asked, straining to deal with this.

She thought about that: about the image of the Cauldron she had found with Ruana’s aid, the image that had told Loren where the winter was coming from. And now the death rain.

“Not just me,” she said.

He drew a breath. A tension seemed to ease from within him. “Very well,” he said. “You speak as do the shamans on the Plain. I believe you are what you tell me you are. If we are to die in a few days or hours, I would rather do so in the service of Light than otherwise. I know you have a guide, but I have been in the mountains for ten years now and have stood on the borders of the place you seek. Will you accept an outlaw as companion for this last stage of your journey?”

It was the diffidence that moved her, as much as anything else. He had just saved their lives, at risk of his own.

“Do you know what you are getting into? Do you—” She stopped, aware of the irony. None of them knew what they were getting into, but his offer was freely made, and handsome. For once she had not summoned nor was she compelled by the power she bore. She blinked back tears.

“I would be honored,” she said. “We both would.” She heard Brock murmur his agreement.

A shadow fell on the stone in front of her. The three of them looked up.

Faebur was there, his face white. But his voice was manfully controlled. “In the Ta’Sirona, the Games at Teg Veirene, before my father exiled me, I came . . . I placed third of everyone in the archery. Could you, would you allow—” He stopped. The knuckles of the hand holding his bow were as white as his face.

There was a lump in her throat and she could not speak. She let Brock answer this time.

“Yes,” said the Dwarf gently. “If you want to come we will be grateful for it. A bowman is never a wasted thread.”

And so, in the end, there were four of them.

Later that day, a long way west, Jennifer Lowell, who was Guinevere, came to the Anor Lisen as twilight fell.

With Brendel of the lios alfar as her only companion, she had sailed from Taerlindel the morning before in a small boat, not long after *Prydwen* herself had dipped out of sight in the wide, curving sea.

She had bidden farewell to Aileron the High King, to Sharra of Cathal, and Jaelle, the Priestess. She had set out with the lios alfar that she might come to the Tower built so long ago for Lisen. And so that, coming there, she might climb the spiraling stone stairs to the one high room with its broad seaward balcony and, as Lisen had done, walk upon that balcony, gazing out to sea, waiting for her heart to come home.

Handling the boat easily in the mild seas of that first afternoon, sailing past Aeven Island where the eagles were, Brendel marveled and sorrowed, both, at the expressionless beauty of his companion’s face. She was as fair as were the lios, with fingers as long and slender, and her awakened memories, he knew, went back almost as far. Were she not so tall, her eyes not held to green, she might have been one of his people.

Which led him to a strange reflection, out among the slap of waves and the billow of the single sail. He had not made or found this boat, which would ultimately be required when his time came, but it was a trim craft made with pride, and not unlike what he would have wanted. And so it was easy to imagine that they had just departed, not from Taerlindel but from Daniloth itself. To be sailing west and beyond west, toward that place made by the Weaver for the Children of Light alone.

Strange thoughts, he knew, born of sun and sea. He was not ready for that final journey. He had sworn an oath of vengeance that bound him to this woman in the boat, and to Fionavar and the war against Maugrim.

He had not heard his song.

He did not know—no one did—the bitter truth. *Prydwen* had just set sail. She was two nights and a dawn yet from the sound of singing in the sea, from the place where the sea stars of Liranan did not shine and had not shone since the Bael Rangat.

From the Soulmonger.

As darkness came on that first night, Brendel guided their small craft toward the sandy shore west of Aeven and the Llychlyn Marshes and beached it in the gentle evening as the first stars appeared. With the provisions the High King had given them, they made camp and took an evening meal. Later, he laid out a sleeping roll for each of them, and they lay down close to each other between the water and the woods.

He did not make a fire, being too wise to burn even fallen driftwood from Pendaran. They didn't need one, in any case. It was a beautiful night in the summer shaped by Kevin Laine. They spoke of him for a time as the night deepened and the stars grew more bright. They spoke, softly, of the morning's departures, and where the next evening would see them land. Looking at the night sky, glorying in it, he spoke to her of the beauty and the peace of Daniloth, and lamented that the dazzle of the stars was so muted there since Lathen Mistweaver, in defense of his people, had made their home into the Shadowland.

After that they fell silent. As the moon rose, a shared memory came to both of them of the last time they had lain beside each other under the sky.

Are you immortal? she had asked, before drifting to sleep.

No, Lady, he had answered. And had watched her for a time before falling asleep himself, beside his brothers and sisters. To wake amid wolves, and svart alfar, and red mortality in the presence of Galadan, Wolflord of the andain.

Dark thoughts, and too heavy a silence for the quicksilver leader of the Kestrel Mark. He lifted his voice again, to sing her to sleep as one might a cherished child. Of seafaring he sang, a very old song, then one of his own, about aum trees in leaf and sylvain flowering in spring. And then, as her breathing began to slow, his voice rode her to rest with the words of what was always the last song of a night: Ra-Termaine's Lament, for all those who had been lost.

When he finished, she was asleep. He remained awake, though, listening to the tide going out. Never again would he fall asleep while she was in his care, not ever again. He sat up all night watching, watching over her.

Others watched as well, from the dark edgings of Pendaran: eyes not welcoming, but not yet malevolent, for the two on the sands had not entered the forest nor burned wood of the Wood. They were very near, though, and so were closely observed, for Pendaran guarded itself and nurtured its long hate.

They were overheard as well, however low their voices, for the listening ears were not human and could discern speech at the very edge of unspoken thought. So their names became known. And then a drumming sound ran through that part of the Wood, for the two of them had named their destination, and that place had been built for the one who had been most loved and then most bitterly lost: Lisen, who would never have died had she not loved a mortal and been drawn into war outside the shelter of the Wood.

An urgent message went forth in the wordless rustle of leaves, the shadowed flicker of forms half seen, in a vibration, quick as a running pulse, of the forest floor.

And the message came, in very little time as such things are measured, to the ears of the only one of all the ancient powers of the Wood who wholly grasped what was at work, for he had moved through many of the Weaver's worlds and had played a part in this story when it first was spun.

He took thought, deliberate and unhurried—though there was a surge in his blood at the tidings, and a waking of old desire—and sent word back through the forest, by leaf and quick brown messenger and by the pulse that threaded through the roots of the trees.

Be easy, he sent, calming the agitation of the Wood. *Lisen herself would have made this one welcome in the Tower, though with sorrow. She has earned her place by the parapet. The other is of the lios alfar and they built the Anor, forget it not.*

We forget nothing.

Nothing, rustled the leaves coldly.

Nothing, throbbed the ancient roots, twisted by long hate. *She is dead. She need never have died.*

In the end, though, he put his will upon them. He had not the power to compel them all, but he could persuade, sometimes, and this night, and for this one, he did.

Then he went out from the doors of his house and he traveled at speed by ways he knew and so came to the Anor just as the moon rose. And he set about making ready a place that had stood empty for all the years since Lisen had seen a ghost ship passing and had leaped from her high balcony into the darkness of the sea.

There was less to be done than might have been supposed, for that Tower had been raised with love and very great art, and magic had been bound into its stones that they should not fall.

He had never been there before; it was a place too sharp with pain. He hesitated on the threshold for a moment, remembering many things. Then the door swung open to his touch. By moonlight he looked at the rooms on the lower level, made for those who had stood guard. He left them as they were and passed upward.

With the sound of the sea always in his ears, he climbed the unworn stone stairs, following their spiral up the single turret of the Tower, and so he came to the room that had been Lisen's. The furnishings were sparse but exquisite and strange, crafted in Daniloth. The room was wide and bright, for along the western curve of it there was no wall; instead, made with the artifice of Ginserat of Brennin, a window of glass stretched from floor to ceiling, showing the moonlit sea.

There was salt staining the outside of the glass. He walked forward and slid the window open. The two halves rolled easily apart along their tracks into recesses hidden in the curving wall. He stepped out on the balcony. The sea sound was loud; waves crashed at the foot of the Tower.

He remained there a long time, claimed by griefs too numerous to be isolated or addressed. He looked to his left and saw the river. It had run red past the Anor for a year from the day she had died, and it did so yet, every year, when the day came around again. It had had a name once, that river. Not any more.

He shook his head and began to busy himself. He pulled the windows closed and, having more than power enough to deal with this, made them clean again. He slid them open a second time and left them so, that the night air might come into a room that had been closed a thousand years. He found candles in a drawer and then torches at the bottom of the stairs—wood of the Wood vouchsafed for burning in this place. He lit the

torches in the brackets set into the wall along the stairwell, and then placed the candles about the one high room, and lit them all.

By their light he saw that there was a layer of dust on the floor, though not, curiously, on the bed. And then he saw something else. Something that chilled even his wise, knowing blood.

There were footsteps in the dust, not his own, and they led over to that bed. And on the coverlet—woven, he knew, by masters of the art in Seresh—lay a mass of flowers; roses, sylvain, corandiel. But it was not the flowers that held his gaze.

The candles flickered in the salt breeze off the sea, but they were steady enough for him to clearly see his own small footprints in the dust and, beside them, those of the man who had walked into the room to lay those flowers on the coverlet.

And those of the giant wolf that had walked away.

His heart beating rapidly, fear shadowed by pity within him, he walked over to that bright profusion of flowers. There was no scent, he realized. He reached out a hand. As soon as he touched them they crumbled to dust on the coverlet. Very gently, he brushed the dust away.

He could have made the floor shine with a trace assertion of his power. He did not; he never did in his own rooms under the forest floor. Going down the stairs one more time, he found a sturdy broom in one of the lower chambers and then, with strong domestic motions, proof of long habit, Flidais swept out Lisen's chamber by candlelight and moonlight, to make it ready for Guinevere.

In time, for his was a spirit of play and laughter even in darkest times, he began to sing. It was a song of his own weaving, shaped of ancient riddles and the answers he had learned for them.

And he sang because he was filled with hope that night—hope of the one who was coming, that she might have the answer to his heart's desire.

He was a strong presence and a bright one, and there were torches and candles burning all through the Anor. The spirit of Gereint could not fail to sense him, singing, sweeping the dust with wide motions of the broom, as the shaman's soul went past overhead, leaving the known truths of the land to go spinning and tumbling out over the never-seen sea, in search of a single ship among all the waves.

As the sun went down on their left the following evening, Brendel guided the boat across the bay and past the river mouth toward the small dock at the foot of the Tower.

They had seen the upper lights come on as they swung into the bay. Now, drawing near, the lios alfar saw a portly, white-bearded, balding figure, smaller even than a Dwarf, waiting on the dock for them, and being of the lios alfar and more than six hundred years old himself, he had an idea who this might be.

Gentling the small craft up to the dock, he threw a rope as they approached. The small figure caught it neatly and tied the end to a peg set in the stone dock. They rested there in silence a moment, bobbing with the waves. Jennifer, Brendel saw, was looking up at the Tower. Following her gaze, he saw the reflection of the sunset sparkle off the curved glass beyond the parapet.

"Be welcome," said the figure on the dock in a voice unexpectedly deep. "Bright be the thread of your days."

"And of yours, forest one," said the lios alfar. "I am Brendel of the Kestrel Mark. The woman with me—"

“I know who she is,” the other said. And bowed very low.

“By what name shall we call you?” Brendel asked.

The other straightened. “I am pied for protection, dappled for deception,” he said reflexively. Then, “Flidais will do. It has, for this long while.”

Jennifer turned at that and fixed him with a curious scrutiny. “You’re the one Dave met in the woods,” she said.

He nodded. “The tall one, with the axe? Yes, I did meet him. Green Ceinwen gave him a horn, after.”

“I know,” she said. “Owein’s Horn.”

To the east just then, under a darkening sky, a battle was raging along the bloodied banks of the Adein, a battle that would end with the blowing of that horn.

On the dock, Flidais looked up at the tall woman with the green eyes that he alone in Fionavar had cause to remember from long ago. “Is that the only knowledge you have of me?” he asked softly. “As having saved your friend?”

In the boat Brendel kept silent. He watched the woman reach for a memory. She shook her head. “Should I know you?” she asked.

Flidais smiled. “Perhaps not in this form.” His voice went even deeper, and suddenly he chanted, “I have been in many shapes. I have been the blade of a sword, a star, a lantern light, a harp and a harper, both.” He paused, saw something spark in her eyes, ended diffidently, “I have fought, though small, in battle before the Ruler of Britain.”

“I remember!” she said, laughing now. “Wise child, spoiled child. You liked riddles, didn’t you? I remember you, Taliesin.” She stood up, Brendel leaped to the dock and helped her alight.

“I have been in many shapes,” Flidais said again, “but I was his harper once.”

She nodded, very tall on the stone dock, looking down at him, memory playing in her eyes and about her mouth. Then there came a change. Both men saw it and were suddenly still.

“You sailed with him, didn’t you?” said Guinevere. “You sailed in the first *Prydwen.*”

Flidais’ smile faded. “I did, Lady,” he said. “I went with the Warrior to Caer Sidi, which is Cader Sedat here. I wrote of it, of that voyage. You will remember.” He drew breath and recited:

“Thrice the fullness of Prydwen *we went with Arthur, Except seven, none returned from—”*

He stopped abruptly, at her gesture. They stood so a moment. The sun sank into the sea. With the dark, a finger of wind arose. Brendel, watching, only half understanding, felt a nameless sorrow come over him as the light faded.

In the shadows, Jennifer’s face seemed to grow colder, more austere. She said, “You were there. So you knew the way. Did you sail with Amairgen?”

Flidais flinched, as from an actual blow. He drew a shaken breath, and he, who was half a god and could induce the powers of Pendaran to accede to his will, said in a voice of humble supplication, “I have never been a coward, Lady, in any guise. I sailed to that accursed place once, in another form. But this is my truest shape, and this Wood my true home in this first world of all. How should a forest warden go to sea, Lady? What good would I have done? I told him, I told Amairgen what I knew—that he would have to sail north into a north wind—and he said he would know where to do so, and when. I did that, Lady, and the Weaver knows that the andain seldom do so much for men.”

He fell silent. Her regard was unresponsive, remote. The suddenly she said:

“I will not allow praise to the men with trailing shields,
They know not on what day the chief arose,
When we went with Arthur of mournful memory—”

“I wrote that!” Flidais protested. “My lady Guinevere, I wrote that.”

It was quite dark now on the path, but with the keen sight of the lios alfar Brendel saw the coldness leave her face. Voice gentle now, she said, “I know, Taliesin. Flidais. I know you did, and I know you were there with him. Forgive me. None of this makes for easy memory.”

On the words she brushed past both of them and went up the pathway toward the Tower. Over the darkened sea the evening star now shone, the one named for Lauriel the White.

He had done it completely wrong, Flidais realized, watching her walk away. He had meant to turn the conversation to the name, the summoning name of the Warrior, the one riddle left in all the worlds for which he had no answer. He was clever enough, and to spare, to have led the talk anywhere he wanted, and the Weaver knew how deep his desire for that answer was.

The thing he had forgotten, though, was what happened in the presence of Guinevere. Even though the andain cared little for the troubles of mortal men, how could one be sly in the face of so ancient a sorrow?

The lios alfar and the andain, each with his own thoughts, gathered the gear from the boat and followed her into the Anor and up the winding stair.

It was strange, thought Jaelle, to feel so uneasy in the place of her own power.

She was in her rooms in the Temple in Paras Derval, surrounded by the priestesses of the sanctuary and by the brown-robed acolytes. She could mind-link at a moment’s need or desire with the Mormae in Gwen Ystrat. She even had a guest-friend in the Temple: Sharra of Cathal, escorted to the doors, but not beyond, by the amusing Tegid of Rhoden—who, it seemed, was taking his duties as Intercedent for Diarmuid with unwonted seriousness.

It was a time for seriousness, though, and for disquiet. None of the familiar things, not even the bells ringing to summon the grey ones to sunset invocation, were enough to ease the thoughts of the High Priestess.

Nothing was as clear as it once had been. She was here and she belonged here, would probably have scorned any request, let alone command, to be anywhere else. Hers was the duty and the power, both, to shape the spun webs of Dana’s will, and to do so in this place.

Even so, nothing felt the same.

For one thing, hers also, as of yesterday, was half the governing of Brennin, since the High King had gone north.

The summonglass of Daniloth had blazed yestereve—two nights ago, in truth, but they had only learned of it on their return from Taerlindel. She had seen, with Aileron, the imperative coiling of light in the scepter the lios alfar had given to Ailell.

The King had paused only long enough to snatch a meal as he gave terse commands. In the garrisons, the captains of the guard were mobilizing every man. It took very little time; Aileron had been preparing for this moment since the day she had crowned him.

He had done everything properly. Had appointed her with Gorlaes the Chancellor to govern the realm while he was away at war. He had even paused beside her in front of the palace gates and quickly, but not without dignity, besought her to guard their people as best her powers allowed.

Then he had been up on his black charger and galloping away with an army, first to North Keep to collect the garrison there, and then north, at night, over the Plain toward Daniloth and Dana alone knew what.

Leaving her in this most familiar of places, where nothing seemed familiar at all.

She had hated him once, she remembered. Hated them all: Aileron, and his father, and Diarmuid, his brother, the one she called the “princeling” in response to his mocking, corrosive tongue.

Faintly to her ears came the chanting from the domed chamber. It was not the usual twilight invocation. For eight more nights, until Midsummer’s moon was gone, the evening chants would begin and end with the lament for Liadon.

And so much power lay in this, so magnificent a triumph for the Goddess, and thereby for herself, as first High Priestess in uncounted, unknowable years to have heard the voice from Dun Maura cry out on Maidaladan, in mourning for the sacrifice come freely.

And with that, her thoughts circled back to the one who had become Liadon: Kevin Laine, brought from another world by Silvercloak to a destiny both dark and dazzlingly bright, one that not even the Seer could have foreknown.

For all Jaelle’s knowledge, all her immersion in the nature of the Goddess, Kevin’s had been an act so overwhelming, so consummately gallant, it had irrevocably blurred the clarity with which once she’d viewed the world. He was a man, and yet he had done this thing. It was, since Maidaladan, so much harder to summon the old anger and bitterness, the hate. Or, more truly, so much harder to summon them for anything and anyone but Rakoth.

The winter was over. The summonglass had blazed. There was war, somewhere north, in the dark.

And there was a ship sailing west.

That thought carried her back to a strand of beach north of Taerlindel, where she had watched the other stranger, Pwyll, summon and speak to the sea god by the water’s edge in an inhuman light. Nothing was easy for any of them, Dana and the Weaver knew, but Pwyll’s seemed such a harsh, demanding power, taking so much out of him and not giving, so far as she could see, a great deal back.

Him too she remembered hating, with a cold, unforgiving fury, when she had taken him from the Summer Tree to this very room, this bed, knowing that the Goddess had spoken to him, not knowing what she had

said. She had struck him, she remembered, drawing the blood all men should give, but hardly in the manner prescribed.

"Rahod hedai Liadon," the priestesses sang under the dome, ending the lament on the last long, keening note. And after a moment she heard Shiel's clear voice begin the antiphonal verses of the evening invocation. There was some peace there, Jaelle thought, some comfort to be found in the rituals, even now, even in time of darkness.

Her chamber door burst open. Leila stood in the doorway.

"What are you doing?" Jaelle exclaimed. "Leila, you should be in the dome with—"

She stopped. The girl's eyes were wide, staring, focused on nothingness. Leila spoke, in a voice tranced and uninflected. "They have blown the horn," she said. "In the battle. He is in the sky now, above the river. Finn. And the kings. I see Owein in the sky. He is drawing a sword. Finn is drawing a sword. They are—they are—" Her face was chalk white, her fingers splayed at her sides. She made a thin sound.

"They are killing," she said. "They are killing the svarts and the urgach. Finn is covered in blood. So much blood. And now Owein is—he is—"

Jaelle saw the girl's eyes flare even wider then, and go wild with terror, and her heart lurched.

Leila screamed. *"Finn, no! Stop him! They are killing us!"*

She screamed again, wordlessly, and stumbling forward, falling, buried her head in Jaelle's lap, her arms clutching the Priestess, her body racked convulsively.

The chanting stopped under the dome. There were footsteps running along the corridors. Jaelle held the girl as tightly as she could; Leila was thrashing so hard, the High Priestess was genuinely afraid she would hurt herself.

"What is it? What has happened?"

She looked up and saw Sharra of Cathal in the doorway.

"The battle," she gasped, fighting to hold Leila, her own body rocking with the force of the girl's weeping. "The Hunt. Owein. She is tuned to—"

And then they heard the voice.

"Sky King, sheath your sword! I put my will upon you!"

It seemed to come from nowhere and from everywhere in the room, clear, cold, utterly imperative.

Leila's violent movements stopped. She lay still in Jaelle's arms. They were all still: the three in the room and those gathered in the corridor. They waited. Jaelle found it difficult to breathe. Her hands were blindly, reflexively stroking Leila's hair. The girl's robe was soaked through with perspiration.

"What is it?" whispered Sharra of Cathal. It sounded loud in the silence. "Who said that?"

Jaelle felt Leila draw a shuddering breath. The girl—fifteen, Jaelle thought, only that—lifted her head again. Her face was splotchy, her hair tangled hopelessly. She said, "It was Ceinwen. It was Ceinwen, High

Priestess.” There was wonder in her voice. A child’s wonder.

“Herself? Directly?” Sharra again. Jaelle looked at the Princess, who despite her own youth had been trained in power and so evidently knew the constraints laid by the Weaver on the gods.

Leila turned to Sharra. Her eyes were normal again, and very young. She nodded. “It was her own voice.”

Jaelle shook her head. There would be a price demanded for that, she knew, among the jealous pantheon of goddesses and gods. That, of course, was far beyond her. Something else, though, was not.

She said, “Leila, you are in danger from this. The Hunt is too wild, it is the wildest power of all. You must try to break this link with Finn, child. There is death in it.”

She had powers of her own, knew when her voice was more than merely hers. She was High Priestess and in the Temple of Dana.

Leila looked up at her, kneeling still on the floor. Automatically, Jaelle reached out to push a snarl of hair back from the girl’s white face.

“I can’t,” Leila said quietly. Only Sharra, nearest to them, heard. “I can’t break it. But it doesn’t matter anymore. They will never call them again, they dare not—there will be no way to bind them if they do. Ceinwen will not intercede twice. He is gone, High Priestess, out among the stars, on the Longest Road.”

Jaelle looked at her for a long time. Sharra came up and laid a hand on Leila’s shoulder. The tangle of hair fell down again, and once more the Priestess pushed it back.

Someone had returned to the dome. The bells were ringing.

Jaelle stood up. “Let us go,” she said. “The invocations are not finished. We will all do them. Come.”

She led them along the curving corridors to the place of the axe. All through the evening chants, though, she was hearing a different voice in her mind.

“There is death in it.” It was her own voice, and more than her own. Hers and the Goddess’s.

Which meant, always, that what she said was true.

Chapter 2

The next morning at the greyest hour, just before dawn, *Prydwen* met the Soulmonger far out at sea. At the same time, on the Plain, Dave Martyniuk woke alone on the mound of the dead near Celidon.

He was not, never had been, a subtle man, but one did not need deep reserves of subtlety to apprehend the significance of Ceinwen’s presence beneath him and above him on the green grass tinted silver in the night just past. There had been awe at first, and a stunned humility, but only at first, and not for very long. In the blind, instinctive assertion of his own lovemaking Dave had sought and found an affirmation of life, of the living, after the terrible carnage by the river.

He remembered, vividly, a moonlit pool in Faelinn Grove a year ago. How the stag slain by Green Ceinwen’s arrow had split itself in two, and had risen, and bowed its head to the Huntress, and walked away from its own death.

Now he had another memory. He sensed that the goddess had shared—had engendered, even—his own compelling desire last night to reaffirm the absolute presence of the living in a world so beleaguered by the Dark. And this, he suspected, was the reason for the gift she had given him. The third gift, in fact: his life, in Faelinn that first time, then Owein's Horn, and now this offering of herself to take away the pain.

He was not wrong in any of this, but there was a great deal more to what Ceinwen had done, though not even the most subtle of mortal minds could have apprehended it. Which was as it should be, as, indeed, it had always been. Macha knew, however, and Red Nemain, and Dana, the Mother, most surely of all. The gods might guess, and some of the andain, but the goddesses would know.

The sun rose. Dave stood up and looked around him under a brightening sky. No clouds. It was a beautiful morning. About a mile north of him the Adein sparkled, and there were men and horses stirring along its bank. East, somewhat farther off, he could make out the standing stones that surrounded and defined Celidon, the mid-Plain, home of the first tribe of the Dalrei and gathering place of all the tribes. There were signs of motion, of life, there as well.

Who, though, and how many?

Not all need die, Ceinwen had said to him a year ago, and again last night. Not all, perhaps, but the battle had been brutal, and very bad, and a great many *had* died.

He had been changed by the events of the evening and night before, but in most ways Dave was exactly what he had always been, and so there was a sick knot of fear in his stomach as he strode off the mound and began walking swiftly toward the activity by the riverbank.

Who? And how many? There had been such chaos, such muddy, blood-bespattered confusion: the wolves, the lios arriving, Avaia's brood in the darkening sky, and then, after he'd blown the horn, something else in the sky, something wild. Owein and the kings. And the child. Carrying death, manifesting it. He quickened his pace almost to a run. *Who?*

Then he had part of an answer, and he stopped abruptly, a little weak with relief. From the cluster of men by the Adein two horses, one dark grey, the other brown, almost golden, had suddenly wheeled free, racing toward him, and he recognized them both.

Their riders, too. The horses thundered up to him, the two riders leaping off, almost before stopping, with the unconscious, inbred ease of the Dalrei. And Dave stood facing the men who'd become his brothers on a night in Pendaran Wood.

There was joy, and relief, and all three showed it in their own ways, but they did not embrace.

"Ivor?" Dave asked. Only the name.

"He is all right," Levon said quietly. "Some wounds, none serious." Levon himself, Dave saw, had a short deep scar on his temple, running up into the line of his yellow hair.

"We found your axe," Levon explained. "By the riverbank. But no one had seen you after . . . after you blew the horn, Davor."

"And this morning," Torc continued, "all the dead were gone, and we could not find you. . . ." He left the thought unfinished.

Dave drew a breath and let it out slowly. "Ceinwen?" he said. "Did you hear her voice?"

The two Dalrei nodded, without speaking.

“She stopped the Hunt,” Dave said, “and then she . . . took me away. When I awoke she was with me, and she said that she had . . . gathered the dead.” He said nothing more. The rest was his own, not for the telling.

He saw Levon, quick as ever, glance past him at the mound, and then Torc did the same. There was a long silence. Dave could feel the freshness of the morning breeze, could see it moving the tall grass of the Plain. Then, with a twist of his heart he saw that Torc, always so self-contained, was weeping soundlessly as he gazed at the mound of the dead.

“So many,” Torc murmured. “They killed so many of us, of the lios. . . .”

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