

# The Quest for Dawnbringer

## Prologue – The Battle of Draigdall

*A Century Ago*

The thunderous echo of the Nord's war horn bellowed across the ocean of flashing steel, breaking bones and fallen soldiers all under the banners of Aurelion the Rebel Lord and Hjaal Oath-Slayer. The Battle King of Haugrdalr. The banners were illuminated under the light of the moon that projected the heraldry of each side onto the ground. At the sound of the horn, the hulking warriors threw up their shield wall to allow the shock raiders to get in position as the rebel natives charged at the wall, in attempts to shatter the formation with a move that was a pure gamble on Aurelion's behalf. Men bashed at the shields with their own whilst thrusting forth with any weapon they had on their person at this point.

At the second bellow of Jarl Yorgrim's horn, the Haugr shield wall burst open and the raiders charged the rebels with a deep, mighty roar. The axes were raised to hook and drag down the Celtic shields throwing the rebel forces off guard with such risky assault. Yet it seemed to have paid off. The rebels' formation scattered and the raiders threw down their axes across the warriors before dragging them towards the shield wall that had been thrown up once more to defend. The discordant sound of shattering and slashing rang throughout the field along with the strangled cries of the native men.

At the heralding of cries, the surviving rebels rushed out of the murderous paths the raiders were taking. One man had run almost fifty yards to sound off a roar of his own.

"SAETHWYR!" He bellowed to a unit hidden from the all-seeing eye of Hjaal's men. Within minutes above the hill, the hidden revealed themselves and drew back their bows, aiming down at the carnage the Norse were leaving in their wake. Multiple breaths were taken before a second cry erupted "RYDDHAU" And then the arrows were loosed.

A shadow blocked out the moon as the Norse continued on their work only to have a cry of warning reach them all but too late. A thousand arrows rained down upon them as furiously as the rain from a storm. There was no discrimination as to who was impaled upon the blood-drenched soil marred by those who had fallen. A painting of depravity was canvased as the flash storm subsided.

A valourous cheer was let up at the impalement of the Nordic enemy. The fatigued rebels rushed back to end the suffering of the impaled before the Norse turned and retreated only a short distance to stratagise with their leader, one raider in particular sprinted against the

fatigue towards his king's camp where the King, Hjaal Oath-Slayer stood looking over a map of the kingdom of Morweness. A calloused hand stroked the untamed locks of his fiery beard, his brows knit together in deep concentration. He gestured to various areas surrounding the battlefield and then turned, his figure towering over his generals.

Taking a deep breath, the deep baritone of the king's voice rang out. "How far are the natives?"

"They have broken the defence!" Jarl Yorgrim stressed as another Jarl implored: "What shall we do?" A heavy brow raised as Hjaal merely turned himself towards an oak chest, opening the lid to reveal a speckle stained broad axe. Reaching in, his hands wrapped around the wooden handle as he raised the blade up. "We walk the battlefield with the men. Boost the morale." He nodded as he turned towards the countless men currently engaged in a skirmish with the native defenders.

"Warriors! Today we are fighting for our home! For the crown! For all of us! Search deep within those hearts of yours, stronger than the armour of our cowardly enemy, and find your courage. Today we take back our rightfully earned land." His shoulders straightened as he turned to his generals with a proud smile. "Ready the raiders, we will turn the tide of battle. I can feel it." His fist clenched firmly around the broad axe and his eyes shot towards the rebel encampment.

On the other side of the field, a stout man with light hair, dipped his quill into the inkwell provided for him. Aurelion proceeded to mark off the enemy positions on his map. "It looks as if we are in a perfect position to demand the right of single combat." The Celtic generals looked to one another, then back towards the Nordic camp, where the Norse King was currently rallying his men to the chorus of the cheers and rowdy roars of his men. "Lord Aurelion, you cannot invoke that right!", "You will be slaughtered on the spot!", "You wouldn't make it past the battlefield!" A hand was raised towards the dissent. "Look at me and know this: Lord Hjaal is a man who cannot refuse a challenge that directly threatens his precious honour. He will listen." He turned from his generals and towards the battlefield a grin upon his face. "Wish me luck."

Aurelion took a hold of one of the spears and took up his oval shield, shaded a dull crimson from years of use, speckled with a vibrant red. The Celt proceeded to trek towards the contested land with an air of caution due to the small skirmishes littered around the field. Footman and raiders were locked deep in an ever-changing conflict. Shields were raised as hatchets hacked at the wood, whilst steel clashed in a most unsavoury manner, screaming as they connected. There was a sickening crack of one rebel's bones that followed a heavy blow to his gut from a maul, however the raider with the maul met the end of a longsword, run through his tunic, his leather jerkin and through his chain mail to puncture his liver.

Aurelion continued to walk past the scenes of depravity, his back straight as he strode across the field drenched in the blood, bone and gristle of the fallen men. It seemed as if the warriors on both sides didn't notice the Celtic leader as he strode towards the bottom of Hjaal's hill encampment. He took a deep breath in through his nose and exhaled through his mouth.

"HJAAL." He began tapping his spear against the shield of a fallen rebel, creating a metallic twang that rang out through everything along the battlefield. Some contingents of soldiers ceased their battles to turn their attention towards the man who appeared to have a personal death wish. The leader from Haugrdalr perked up at the sound of his name being called, he turned towards the rebel king and narrowed his eyes at him. "You." As Hjaal stared at the fair haired rebel whilst the jarls stood behind him clutching at their weapons in anticipation for what their king was to order. "Is this a surrender Llewellyn? Will you finally admit that this insurrection was all for nought?" He asked pointing his broad axe at the spear wielding warrior. "Actually I had hoped you would indulge me in the right of single combat?" The field fell silent at the request.

The jarls rushed to commune with Hjaal. "These Single Combat rules mean we will not be able to help you." Jarl Lalia "My King, this can easily be a trick."

"Surely you would find more joy and more pleasure in ending this rebellion on your lonesome. Imagine the glory you will bring your god." Aurelion offered as he stood his ground. The Haugr King stood deep in thought before he proclaimed:

"I accept your challenge Aurelion." A grin formed on the Celt's face as he raised his shield as well as his spear. Hjaal took his broad axe and lifted his shield up as the contingents of men ceased the fighting. Some turned towards the two leaders in anticipation others looked at their own generals or their jarls. Whispers drifted along the battlefield as the two sized each other up.

"Looks like we have an audience Oath Slayer, shall we give them a show."

"Your bravado sickens me rebel, thankfully I will end that soon."

"Fighting words! I do enjoy a rapport with my foes, makes for such ballad worthy battles." The rebel king offered a smirk as he twirled his spear around nonchalantly.

"Enough." Growled the Haugr king as he rushed the rebel leader. Blue eyes widened and he adjusted his posture to prevent the hulking Nord from taking him off balance. His spear arm was tucked against his body as the oval shield was raised in anticipation. Shields collided and Aurelion strained to keep Hjaal dead locked as he manoeuvred his hand to thrust his spear forward, grazing the other king across the bicep. He pulled his spear back and pushed his shield back against the broad axe currently attempting to carve into the wood, attempting to create an opening for any possible strike. Hjaal simply kept his own shield up to cover his chest as the rebel continued to jab at him with the spear, which the Haugr either repelled with his axe or took a graze or puncture. The warrior snarled to himself as he managed to predict a jab from Aurelion and took his axe and threw his entire weight against the blow to deflect. When the spear was thrust elsewhere, Hjaal raised his blade and bashed the pommel of it into the rebel's jaw that led to a sickening crack.

Aurelion turned, spitting blood through his laboured breaths as he raised his shield against the warrior's assault before the strikes would become too great for him to bear. He watched as the red head raised his hatchet for what seemed like the millionth time and brought it down onto the shield once more. This time however, the rebel's eyes widened in anticipation and he twisted his shield to catch the hatchet on the longest side of the wood before he jerked his hand away from him and brought his fist into the eye of the other. Hjaal hissed in pain and held his eye as he reached for his war horn. The rebel noticed this move, rushed to pull his dagger from his belt and slashed into the king's face, opening a wound that spanned from his jaw to the beginning of his bushy eyebrow.

Letting out his second hiss of pain, the Haugr snarled and wrenched his hatchet from the wood of Aurelion's shield and smacked the dagger from the rebel's hands with a swipe from his axe. He smirked and proceeded to slam the hilt of the hatchet against his head. The rebel fell to his knees at such an impact before the war horn was raised again. Hjaal took a deep breath; the hulking King blew into the horn to alert his men to continue fighting the rebel insurgency. The hoard did so with little hesitation as the king moved to run back to his encampment and rally his men.

Aurelion stirred from his hazy state and watched as his rival run away. His eyes widened before he scrambled to retrieve his spear from across the way. His hands raked through the dirt of the battlefield as he took the shaft of the spear into his calloused hands. Whipping his head back around, he searched for the Nord King in the crowd of clanging steel and cries of pain. He rushed to his feet holding onto the spear in his hands before he drew back the blessed weapon and launched it across the battlefield towards the Nordic king.

As the spear shot through the sky, missing skirmishes by mere inches the sun began to rise as the light gleamed off of the tip of the silver spear catching the attention of Hjaal. As the King turned towards the light the spear ripped through his armour and then tore through his skin, piercing his entire body; the spearhead embedded itself into the ground as the Nord

king's life began to ebb away. There was no time to scream; the warrior coughed up blood and spat it as he tried to speak. At this sight Jarl Yorgrim bellowed, "Fall back! The king has been struck!" The skirmishes seemed to halt as the Haugr soldiers rushed or limped back to their encampment with a few rebels chasing after them cheering at the supposed death of King Hjaal.

Aurelion paused. Did that really just happen? The cheers from his men and the silence from the Haugrs made the supposed death of the king seem more real. He turned towards the contingents of men who were in the process of cheering his name as loud as their voices would allow, yet to the rebel all he saw was a wordless sea of men screaming as time seemed to slow. One of his generals limped across the battlefield to him and gave a smile as well as a firm pat on his shoulder. "Aurelion, it appears the mighty Dawnbringer has slain the tyrant king."

"Dawnbringer?"

"Your spear sir. The men have named it as such for the way it glimmered across the battlefield."

Aurelion paused and raised an eyebrow.

"I see then." He muttered in a deflated tone. "Where is Dawnbringer now?"

"Still impaled in the heart of our most hated enemy."

With that Aurelion pushed past the crowd of admiration, weaving through cheering men and women as if he were a fox, dodging his hunters' arrows and hounds. His boots crunched against the course dirt of the battlefield and snapped loose arrows beneath him as he walked towards the Haugr camp. Dry blood and bile stained the leather as he trudged across bodies and loose pieces of armour until he reached the bottom of the hill. He exhaled a deep breath and shook his head as he climbed the hill to meet the sight of the dying Hjaal. The king turned his woeful gaze unto the rebel leader.

"So" He began "This is how my story ends, at the end of an arrogant barbarian's spear. Struck down in a manner akin to that of a dog."

Aurelion couldn't help but feel a chill run down his spin as he puffed his chest up and strode over. "This is just how it ends in war. You just happened to be on the losing side of it."

“Do not talk down to me.” The Warrior snapped. “Just know this that bravado you carry about will weigh upon you one day.” He paused to cough violently, spitting blood.

At this sight, the rebel leader’s face fell into a frown filled with concern. The Haugr king took a deep breath and smirked.

“I see now. That bravado of yours is just a cloak isn’t it Aurelion?”

“I am just showing some respect to a man who is dying” He hissed before he wiped his face.

“Best take your blade now. You wouldn’t want to keep your public waiting.”

The rebel bowed his head as he muttered “I’m sorry it had to end this way.” He wrapped a hand around the shaft of his spear and closed his eyes as he withdrew the weapon from the king with a sickening squelching sound. Hjaal’s face screwed up in discomfort at the feeling a moment before he fell onto the battlefield, gasping for air. “No Aurelion. You’re not sorry, you always wanted it to end this way, you told me yourself, this was my chance to end this war and I have done as such. So accept my humblest congratulations King Aurelion.” With those words spoken, Hjaal’s eyes glazed over as his chest stopped rising.

The rebel turned his face from the fresh corpse and turned down onto the sea of warriors looking up at him awaiting his words. His eyes shot towards his spear as he wiped the blood from the silver head. He raised the weapon above his head as the men let out a rambunctious cheer.

“Long live King Aurelion, liberator of Draigdall.”

## Chapter 1: The Council of Six

*A Century Later, in Clan Dualtire*

The moulded, oak doors to the keep swung open. With the opening of the doors, the clamouring sound of the lord of Morweness rang around the hall where a circular table sat seven chairs, two of them empty until the leader of Clan Drekarè ran into the room and took her seat. She brushed her red hair back before setting her stave down.

Before the elder woman could get a word into the discordant conversation, a pale, calloused hand was raised towards the red-haired woman.

The hand belonged to a woman aged around her mid – twenties with dark hair and deep amber eyes. Her face was littered with scars and at her hip was a worn longsword sheathed in a leather sheath. On her back was a kite shield with her heraldry that depicted an eagle eating a snake.

“Seer Ilianata, you are late.” Came her stern tone.

“I apologise Lord Kyria, but I have to ensure that Drekarè has the wards setup every time I leave the hold to ensure my hold is safe from any attack. I humbly apologise for my tardiness.” Sarcasm peppered the redhead’s words.

“Watch your tongue witch!” Spat Kyria “Issues regarding the King must be dealt with swiftly, if not for his work Drekarè wouldn’t exist at all.” Ilianata’s eyes widened before she scowled muttering lowly to herself.

“Enough of that! We must discuss the matter at hand now. There can be no leeway for the lords who are late.” Cried a stout man with a bushy blonde beard who slapped his fist against the table. The stout man wore fur lined iron gauntlets with a bear pelt as his cloak. His weapon was placed on the table, a small hatchet engraved with druidic blessings.

“Lord Varun be quiet and let those from Clan Uisge arrive before we discuss a matter as serious as King Aurelion’s heir.” Snapped the elderly man from Daltire, Lord Albion as he narrowed his eyes towards Lord Varun. The elder was white haired with a circlet upon his head, his eyes were an icy blue and his greyed beard was braided. Across his chest was a worn leather satchel. He reached in and pulled out a leather-bound journal stuffed with loose pages and torn notes from years past, he set his journal upon the table with a short bronze dagger. The leader of Mèirlach bowed his head and sat back down before the doors opened to the final lord.

“Should I have left you to argue some more or shall we begin this meeting?” Came the voice of a man who couldn’t look a day over twenty, with dark chestnut hair and pale grey eyes, he wore the garb of a merchant with a kilt containing gold, navy blue and slivers of white: his clan colours.

Lord Kyria exhaled deeply. “Lord Gaheris, what took you so long? All other clan leaders were informed of the severity of this meeting.”

“Would it surprise you General, that I was in the process of getting off of my horse when all of a sudden I was drawn aside by the utter squalor in the Hold of Iolaire.” Gaheris stated as he kicked his feet up onto the table. Kyria’s eyes widened at his words and she reached for her longsword before another redhead halted her advance with her arm.

“Bold words for a man who sold himself out to The Invictus Empire.”

The Lord of Uisge pulled his feet off the table as he leaned across, staring into the Lord of Raelhart’s eyes: “Watch your tongue Ruairi, lest I remind you who saved your clan from the brink of starvation two winters ago?”

“Don’t you go bringing up old wounds Gaheris. You know as well as I that Mèirlach has gifted you many boons that your nation brandishes to the Empire as if they are your own.” Varun scoffed as he crossed his arms across his chest.

“Hypocritical words Varun,” Ilianata began as she chuckled. “You all have benefitted from my clan’s wares and potions and Mèirlach benefits from the trade with Hammasran.”

“The Sultan’s business with my clan is none of your concern, witch.” The blonde snapped.

The bickering was ceased when Lord Albion slammed his fist down onto the table. “Enough of this! As I told Lord Varun before, we are here to discuss the issue regarding King Aurelion’s throne not to bicker like siblings over who has benefitted from what, now all of you take your seats.” He asked sternly.

The Lords looked at one another and sat down slowly as the Lord of Dualtire opened his journal. “I hope you realised the situation we have been left with since Aurelion’s disappearance. Without a king, we as a nation are dying. Our culture is fleeting and the respect from our neighbouring nations has all but dissolved.”

“How did you guess Albion?” Gaheris asked coyly. “Was it the broken trade deal with Hammasran? Or was it the fact our opinion on matters is all for naught?”

“Do not kid yourself Lord Gaheris, the respect the other nations have for us was diminishing the moment Aurelion went missing almost half a century ago.” The younger redhead stated as she massaged her temples.

The room further erupted into a myriad of arguments and underhanded insults, to the point the chairs scraped against the stone floor as Lord Kyria and Lord Gaheris marched over to the other with weapons in hand, whilst Lord Varun swiped his hand across the table in a swift motion, causing the stray maps and papers to fall to the floor. “If this is how the clans will conduct themselves, then why are we talking when a duel can just as easily solve this?” Ilianata huffed as she reached for her stave.

“Touch the wood and I will not hesitate to cut you down witch.” Snapped Kyria as she pointed her blade towards the druid, who began to mutter to herself. “Anuinif Hdagob.” Her hands emanated a faint glow as the loose ivy vines began to twitch and slither from their original place. The vines twisted as they made their way towards Kyria’s boots before the vines could ensnare the leather, Albion slammed his dagger into the table “HTOAG!” From his words a powerful gust of wind blew into the other five lords, disrupting Ilianata’s spell. All eyes fell upon the elder.

“We have certainly come a long way.” Lord Albion sighed as he wiped his forehead and took a deep breath. He slumped in his chair looking up at the quintet with sorrowful eyes. “Lord Aurelion would weep at our conduct if he so much as glanced at us.” He shook his head. “The Clans of Morweness used to be a beacon of freedom personified, a coalition of merchants, warriors and druids from all creeds, yet now we are dwindled to a group of lords who squabble like children. We have come a long way.” He paused and took his journal into his hands. “I remember a time, long ago where our clans stood in unity long ago.”



At the elder's sorrow, the Lords of Iolaire and Drekarè looked at one another and lowered their heads in shame. Lord Ruairi sighed and turned to the elder. "Lord Albion, why don't you teach us about the history of our clans and their unity?" She gestured to his journal as the elder gave a breathless chuckle. "I can do something much more meaningful." His bony hands reached into his satchel and gripped onto a long fibrous purple plant, he pulled his hand out of his satchel and held his fist before whispering, "náhturs."

Within moments his fist erupted into flames, smoke emanating from him as the plant burned before he opened his hand and blew the ashes onto the table. As the ashes settled upon the table, Lord Albion then waved his hand: "hcaéf na ma áta etiac." The ashes began to glow before rays of light shot up and painted a map of Morweness upon the table. The map showed the western mountainous ranges of the holds of Dualtire and Iolaire. To the South West of Iolaire stood the mighty Rhaelness Forest containing clan Rhaelhart, to the east of Iolaire there stood the fortified walls of Mèirlach surrounded by a river on the coast mirrored by the hold of Uisge surrounded by its bountiful mines and craggy landscape. To the North stood the marsh and the forest containing the elusive druids of Clan Drekarè.

The lords peered over in awe of the lights, Gaheris reached out to touch these lights only for Ruairi to slap his hand away. Lord Albion then gestured towards the map where flickers of movement appeared in one clearing. "Many decades ago, our clans were once the staunchest of allies. There was nothing we couldn't accomplish together and under Aurelion's reign, our people flourished. We were respected and renowned for our fierce loyalty and our spiritual ties to our homeland. "As he spoke the flickers of movement upon the map, mirrored his words to the lord's intrigue.

"We even managed to win three wars against the armies of the Invictus Empire and Haugrdalr, from those battles we began an alliance with the Solaris Sultanate." He continued before his eyes fell to his journal.

"However, that was when we were still led by Aurelion. Wasn't it?" Kyria pointed out.

"Aurelion and his relics." Ilianata added.

Albion paused, yet let out a breath he had subconsciously held. "Yes, that was during his reign." He idly stroked his beard "When Aurelion vanished, our clans searched for months for any sign of him or his relics. However, our efforts to locate him were in vain. Our predecessors did not know what to tell the sovereigns of the other nations, or how to tell them. When we eventually informed them of the disappearance we were ridiculed. How could you lose a king? Then the ridicule turned to rage, accusations of assassination and threats of war."

"How did we respond to this?" Kyria asked.

"Well, our clans did what we knew best. We stood together despite all the vitriol; we even fought a war together until Uisge sent a missive to council one day." The Lord of Dualtire flicked through the pages of his journal until he came across a crumpled and partially burnt letter, with the broken wax seal of Uisge. He lifted the parchment. "Lord Agravaire of Uisge,

the father of your father Gaheris, told us that unity was no longer profitable and so they left us to fend for ourselves.”

Gaheris’ eyes widened at the sight of his clan seal and his jaw clenched. His arms crossed across his chest as his eyes darted from the sight of Albion. “My grandfather had his reasons.” He muttered bitterly.

Varun scoffed and raised his hand to which the young lord flinched. “Show respect! Albion is trying to educate us on the failings of our past, your past in particular.” He drew back his hand. “To think your clan chose fortune over fraternity.”

“Bold words Lord Varun, however, your predecessors are not entirely innocent. Lord Elinore of Mèirlach sent a missive two winters after Lord Agravaine abandoned us. She told us that unity was no longer the honourable choice for her.” At the revelation, Varun turned his gaze towards the floor. Silence fell upon the room.

“What of the other clans?” Ruairi asked.

“A small dispute was sparked over a murder in the hold of Iolaire which Lord Aodh blamed the druids of Drekarè for. The druids of course blamed the warriors in turn for the rising number of bandit raids on their hold. Clan Rhaelhart isolated themselves for half a century and to my sorrow, my countrymen lost hope and followed suit.”

The Lord of Dualtìre flicked through the pages of his journal to reveal a worn, hand drawn map of Alterim. “Recently however, a scouting party from Clan Rhaelhart found this map on the banks of the Afon Gwiddyon, look at the seal on the compass.” The lords peered at the map curiously. The seal was blood red with Celtic knot in the shape of a shield and contained a spear in the centre.

“Is that?” Came the wide eyed Ilianata

“Aurelion’s seal.” Whispered Lord Varun.

“I have reason to believe that our Lord Aurelion has hidden his relics across the continent for some unknown reason, and with this map I believe we could find his relics and possibly find someone among us worthy to take up the mantle of Aurelion’s successor. The clans could unite once more and offer a champion to quest for the relics.”

“Yes, and then they can test their mettle in battle to see who will rule.” Kyria suggested with a grin. Ruairi nodded in agreement, uncrossing her arms. “Perhaps make the test a battle where they have to wield his relics as their weapon.”

“Or possibly they can test their mettle in the arcane manner.” The redheaded elder added.

Albion conjured a smile at the enthusiasm of the lords and his eyes softened at the sight, it had been many years since he witnessed the clans joined together. Even longer since he had seen them cooperate. To see at least three of his fellow lords agree on a matter warmed his old heart.

“As exciting and as hopeful as these revelations sound, I cannot offer one of my own to chase down a rumour.” Varun stated “Even if this proves fruitful, I cannot afford to lose a man if the Empire chooses to attack.”

Gaheris scoffed “You speak falsely Albion, these fairy tales you speak of will be the downfall of our clans, I won’t send any of my men out to die on some fool’s errand.” He stood, picking his crossbow up before sheathing it. He swiftly turned on his heel and left the hall. Following him was Lord Varun who picked his hatchet up on his way out, as he left the hall, he turned to push the doors shut, his gaze falling upon the four left inside, his eyebrows curved upwards as his eyes appeared to be empty. He turned his face away as the doors shut leaving only an echo.

Lord Ruairi watched the two leave with a look of disdain before she turned to Albion. She stood to attention, her feet together and her chest puffed out slightly as she brought her fist to her chest. “You can count on Clan Rhaelhart to provide you a champion with a strong heart and a pure soul.” Lord Kyria copied the huntress’ actions and bowed her head. “You can rely on Iolaire to provide a suitable champion, worthy enough to find these relics” Lord Ilianata tapped her stave against the ground and bowed her head. “Drekarè will also offer one of our own to quest for the relics.”

The grey-haired man nodded. “And so, it is decided. There shall be three champions sent across the land of Alterim to search and retrieve Aurelion’s relics.” The younger redhead perked up. “For the sake of our land I pray to the gods these three make themselves known to us soon.” Kyria nodded her head swiftly. “I fear for what will happen if we delay a quest of this calibre, especially with two clans openly against the idea.” She gestured towards the door.

Albion nodded. “We have waited half a century for our king, and we cannot afford any more time, I would suggest that the champions must be selected by the coming of the new moon.” Ilianata nodded “One week will be plenty of time.” The Lord of Dualtire nodded. “If that is all we have to discuss than I call this meeting of the Council of Six, to a close.” With his words, the three lords left the keep, to journey back to their homelands leaving the greying man alone with only his thoughts as company.

Albion pressed his face into the palm of his hand. "Gods let this work." He muttered.

## Chapter 2 - The Hunter's Way

*In the Rhaelness Forest, 2 days since The Council of Six.*

Deep within the luscious undergrowth, all that was heard was the distant howling of the wind and light patter of rain. The rain made for a perfect cover. The ambiance of the forest was broken as an archer inhaled deeply, nocking an arrow, drawing the bowstring back towards their cheek. They held that breath as all sound was drowned out by the beating of their own heart. Just ahead of the archer's position, a doe wandered into their line of sight, tail flicked from side to side. 'No distractions' the archer noted mentally.

"What are you waiting for? Loose your arrow." Hissed another as she placed a hand on the archer's cloaked shoulder. Sound flooded back to the archer. So much for no distractions...

Their arms relaxed, setting the bowstring back to its original position. Their blue eyes narrowed as whipped their head around revealing a youthful feminine face, framed by locks of curled red hair, under the cloak.

She opened her mouth to speak. *Snap.* The redhead closed her mouth and ducked into the foliage, gesturing swiftly for the others to do so. She raised a finger to her lips before turning back towards their target. The doe was alert stomping it's hoof. Elironwy watched the doe intently and kept her movements still before she heard the nocking of an arrow and the eventual loosing of it. Her eyes widened, before she could utter the word 'wait' the arrow had already landed a few feet in front of the doe's hooves. The doe looked up in alarm before flagging its tail and bolting off into the forest.

A fair-haired girl stood up, bow in hand. "What are we waiting for? Let's chase it down." She inched forward to leave their position before an arm shot out in front of her, cutting off her path forward. The girl gestured sharply to the direction the deer went. Her gesture however received only a scowl as the owner of the arm stepped back, her jaw clenched.

She inhaled deeply through her nose before she spoke "Who loosed that arrow? Ninian?"

At the sound of his name, the brunette hunter raised his eyebrows as he held his hands up. "Elironwy, it wasn't me I swear!" He gestured to the bow sat by his boots. Satisfied with his

answer, the redhead turned towards the other huntress, her voice dripping with venom. "Aithne?"

At the tone, the girl slowly set her bow back down by her feet, and lowered herself to her knees. "Maybe I got a little carried away." She muttered, looking away.

"You're telling me." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Hunting takes patience, a skill that you clearly lack." She gestured to her. "The next time we get an opportunity to take the prey down, you leave the shot to me."

"Well, you weren't going to take that shot any time soon." She crossed her arms over her chest before Elironwy leaned down to force eye contact with her.

"*You* distracted me from taking the shot because *you* were impatient." Aithne frowned as the huntress continued to speak calmly, yet harshly. "If you had kept quiet, we would have had something to return to the clan already. Now I advise that you keep your mouth shut and your bow on your back."

She turned around and wiped her face. "I suppose we will just have to track it again." She muttered to herself, huffing as she pushed the foliage from the undergrowth aside walking towards the trail left by their nimble prey.

She knelt down to inspect the tracks the deer left; her calloused hands felt the dirt dredged up from the tracks. The soil felt fresh and soft to the touch. She smiled for once. They had fresh hoof marks. "Follow me."

The redhead gestured for the others to follow her as she followed the tracks left by the doe for twenty feet at least. The others collected their longbows and picked up the leather knapsack of essentials before turning around to follow their unspoken leader. They trudged through the forest before they came across a winding fork in the road. The path on the left was weathered and well-travelled, the path on the right was undisturbed save for a few broken branches.

Blue eyes darted between the paths as her mind swiftly processed her options. "We go left." Elironwy decided, gesturing for the others to follow her. Aithne paused before patting Ninian on the chest lightly gesturing towards the redhead. "How in the name of the void does she manage so do that?" She whispered. Ninian just shrugged and carried on. That was one question he was not ready to know the answer for.

The tracks ended as the hunting party came across an old ruin. Curiosity spread amongst the hunters who stopped for a moment to inspect the crumbling stone archway. As Aithne passed through the archway and looked up in awe, Ninian spoke. "Where do you suppose the archways came from?"

"Who knows? Maybe elves put them here?" The blonde grinned.

"Aithne, you know that elves aren't real. These archways have to be from the time of Draigdall." He scoffed.

"Aurelion's time? I suppose the stonework matches." She shrugged at the suggestion as her hands traced the stone. The sections of stone that weren't covered in moss or dirt portrayed strange scenes carved into the stone.

"Suppose the stonework matches? It's an *exact* match." The brunette stressed gesturing to the archways.

"We can't all be stone experts Ninian, anyway it's just a crumbling ruin, nothing more than a future landmark. "You can't even make out the carvings." She scoffed.

"Carvings in archways are usually a bad sign, be glad you can't make them out." He huffed before turning back to the task at hand.

"Whatever you stay Ninian." Aithne turned. "So, what's the situation with the deer tracks Eli?"

As the hunters spoke, the redhead furrowed her brows as she passed by the archway entirely. She crouched down and pressed her hands against the ground to feel for loose dirt only finding that the ground was coarse. "The tracks stop here." Elironwy lifted her head up to inspect her surroundings for any sign of disruption. To her dismay she found nothing. She stood up and knit her eyebrows together.

"Are you both going to stand around gawking at stone or will you be helping me track this deer?"

“Well, you seem to be doing things just fine on your own.”

“Aithne, do you want to eat tonight?” Calloused fingers pressed against the bridge of her nose.

“Yes?” Hesitation littered her voice before Elironwy responded to her

“Then work on tracking the deer.”

Unable to argue with her commanding tone, Aithne and Ninian split up and inspected the area, looking for any sign of their target. The brunette brushed his hands against the bushes to feel for any freshly snapped branches before the soft, melodic voice of Aithne rang out. “I have something here.”

‘Finally,’ Elironwy thought, as she turned away from the ground and made her way over to the huntress. As she crouched down, she peered at a fallen tree, covered in moss with a patch down the middle missing. She smiled to herself. “We go west, I doubt the prey passed the Afon Gwiddyon, we can finish it off there. Let’s move.” Elironwy vaulted over with ease before waiting for her companions. The other hunters nodded and began to follow the redhead out of the ruins. Each taking a little time to climb over the felled tree. Ninian looked back briefly to glance at the ruins curiously before a shiver ran down his spine. He turned away and continued following the huntresses.

“So Elironwy, if I may?” Began the brunette who received a brief and swift nod. “How far are we going to chase the prey?”

“We’ll chase the deer until sunrise, if luck permits, we’ll be able to end the prey before sunrise. We’re making good time.” She assured, keeping her eyes to the path, scanning for any more signs of disturbance.

The hunting party continued to trudge through the Rhaelness forest, avoiding the broken branches on the weathered paths instead opting to travel on the grass covered ground. It would be a perfect way to mask their approach and muffle the sounds of their boots. Aithne looked around the forest curiously before clasping her hands behind her back.

“It’s far too quiet, Eli since this is only our second hunt together, do you mind if I ask a few questions?” She grinned as she peered at the stoic huntress. A ginger brow was raised. “I don’t recall saying that you could call me Eli.” She began with a small playful smile, to which the huntress’ eyes widened. “Are you actually smiling?” Her question gained a slight shake of the Elironwy’s head.

“I do not mind you asking questions.” She continued as Aithne beamed and opened her mouth before the redhead held a calloused hand up. “But it depends on what you plan to ask me.”

The blonde tapped her chin, deep in thought before tilting her head to the side. “How did you meet Anwen?” At the mention of the fishermen, the redhead stopped in her tracks. Aithne bit her lower lip, shooting a look to the ground as she attempted to steel herself in anticipation of her reaction.

Out of all the questions the blonde could ask, she asked about her love. Elironwy, however, didn’t protest, instead her shoulders relaxed, and her lips curled upwards into a small, tender yet noticeable smile. Aithne flinched when Elironwy turned around, awaiting her venomous words, yet calmed down when she heard her sigh. “I suppose talking about her would not hurt.” To say the fair-haired huntress was surprised would have been an understatement. Even Ninian looked shocked at the sight. In all the time the pair had known the huntress she had never seen her smile so softly.

“I met Anwen on the banks of the Afon Gwiddyon one day in winter, on a hunt of course, I was tracking a boar for two days at that point and at this point it had stopped to take a drink.” Elironwy continued to follow the tracks, walking briskly compared to half an hour prior.

“I lined my shot up with its throat, my bow drawn back to my cheek for a split second, until I saw a maiden wander into range. She spooked the boar as she carried a basket on her back. At first I was livid.” She rolled her eyes and chuckled at the memory. It seemed silly when the present was taken into account.

“However, when I took a proper look at her, I lowered my bow, stricken with awe by her beauty. Chestnut hair, soft emerald eyes and a smile that could brighten even the darkest of days. As much as I hated to admit it, it was love at first sight.” Her hand hovered over her heart briefly as her eyes softened.



“That doesn’t explain *how* you met her,” Aithne stated in a playful tone as she inspected her nails.

“I’m getting to that, be patient.” She chuckled briefly as the hand the blonde inspected was placed upon her hip. “I can’t help wanting to know about the lass who warmed your icy heart.”

Blue eyes narrowed. “May I continue answering your question or are you going to commentate on every word I say?” She shook her head and the tale continued:

“I struck up a conversation with her, offered to carry the basket for her, stumbled over my words when I attempted to flirt with her. The standard things you do when you fall in love. Surprisingly enough, Anwen found me endearing and we began to meet with each other whenever we could and after countless meetings, we became lovers.” Elironwy turned around with a cocked brow. “Does that satiate your curiosity?”

“Entirely.”

After a moment of silence between the trio

“Excuse me?” Began the male.

“What is it Ninian?” The redhead asked calmly.

“I think I see more tracks ahead of us.” He gestured to the ground, to which both huntresses paused to look at the ground, sure enough the fresh-faced hunter was right. Tracks were littered across the ground yet lead further west. Without another word the party moved onwards. As they proceeded, Ninian looked down at the stone debris that littered the grass and dirt. His eyes squinted as he attempted to inspect the stonework. He reached a hand out to trace the jagged stone peering at over inch of it.

“Ninian? Are you coming?” Called Aithne. He pocketed the stone and shook his head, he began to jog after the huntresses, who at this point had travelled a significant distance.

He eventually caught up to the pair, stopping only to catch his breath, leaning over, hands placed on his knees. "You took your time catching up." The blonde chuckled whilst the brunette just shook his head. "Sorry for my tardiness."

The moment he looked up he was met with the sight of a towering, yet crumbling stone castle, overtaken by the foliage of the forest and masked only by the numerous alder trees surrounding the ruins. The brunette pulled the stone out from his pouch, holding it up against the ruin before his eyes went wide. "It's a match." The only difference between the stone and the ruins was the fact the carvings on the ruin were still intact.

"I can't believe it, there's a preserved ruin from the time of Draigdall." He muttered before Elironwy nodded. "Do you think that tower is stable enough to set up a position?"

"It's probably stable enough for two people," Aithne guessed with a shrug of her shoulders, turned to Ninian for a sign of agreement. He was silent, still entranced by the ruins laid out before him. "Ninian?" He shook his head, turning back towards the huntresses briefly. "I apologise, what were you talking about?"

Aithne sighed, gesturing towards the tower. "Is it stable?"

"Possibly," His eyes remained glued to the ruins as his hands ran across the stone carvings. His brows furrowed inquisitively his lip mouthed unspoken questions.

Ignoring the brunette currently deep in thought, Elironwy nodded at the previous statement he made before she walked towards the tower. 'Possibly' would be enough. She reached up to grip onto the stone before pulling herself up the tower, Aithne following her up. Sweat rolled down her forehead as she continued to ascend the walls, the sound around her drowned out as she focused on reaching her vantage point.

"Could you hurry it up Eli? My arms are aching down here." Whined the blonde.

"Hush." She hissed, groaning as she pulled herself up onto the stone platform hiking her legs up to ensure she was stable.

“There,” Sighed Elironwy. “Now you can climb up yourself with no issues at all.” The blonde chose to ignore the sarcasm peppered in her voice as she too hoisted herself up onto the platform. “Now watch me closely as I await my target.” She nocked an arrow and crouched down against the exposed stonework of the tower’s turret; her knees pressed against a moulded wooden hatch.

Aithne gestured towards the hatch. “Are you joking? Could we have gone up the stairs instead of climbing like a bloody weasel?”

“The stairs are probably ruined just like everything else here, now please shut it and nock your arrow.”

On the ground, Ninian continued to inspect the carvings, his eyes wide as he gazed upon the stone. The carvings were separated into four segments. The first contained the image of the ruins that they were currently in, the second segment showed a great pitch black hound, with eyes that appeared to glow without the aid of any gems or paints. The third, depicted the hound chasing a group of humans. The final piece showed the various bones and corpses of the humans alongside the howling hound. Along the bottom of the carvings, a dirt encrusted message was scratched hastily into the stone. He squinted as he brushed the soil away, tracing each word with his finger.

*‘ Gwyliwch rhag y rhai sy'n dod ar draws yr adfeilion hyn’*

*‘Byddwch yn wylidwrus o gi uffern’*

His eyes grew ever wider as he muttered. “Beware of those who come across these ruins.” His hands dropped to his side, his bottom lip quivering as he swallowed harshly. “Be wary of the hell dog.” He muttered before his eyes darted around frantically. Up towards the tower. Down towards the bushes. At best he would see a fox, at worst he would meet the ‘hell dog’ “Gods let this be a myth.” He whispered as the leaves began to rustle violently. He withdrew his longbow swiftly, nocking an arrow and drawing back towards his cheek. His arm shook with fear as the rustling became more intense as well as violent. His breathing grew sporadic, eyes shifting back up towards the tower.

Up in the tower, Elironwy and Aithne scanned the area for any sign of their elusive target, the redhead looking to the east, the blonde to the west. After what felt like a lifetime of waiting, the doe trotted out of the forest and into the clearing, sniffing the ground as it began to graze calmly. With a smile upon her face, Elironwy drew her bow, nocking her first

arrow back towards her cheek, the world around her drowning out as all she heard was the beating of her heart.

Ninian's heart on the other hand, was pounding against his chest. There had never been a time in his life where the thought of an animal shook him to his very core. He was a hunter after all, however that fact brought him no comfort. His palms felt sweaty against the leather grip of his bow. The string dug into his fingers causing him to wince slightly, however that would be the least of his troubles at the moment. Sweat rolled down the back of his neck as his breathing grew more erratic. Each minor sound Ninian heard, caused his eyes to dart towards the source, then back towards the rustling bushes. This time the bushes had another sound layered on top of the rustling. A low, rolling snarl. Ninian's widened eyes darted up towards the tower, wordlessly screaming for help.

Above, Elironwy noticed the deer perk its ears up in a similar fashion as it did almost a couple of hours ago. She spat a curse through grit teeth as the deer scrambled away from the clearing. Bucking its legs as it sprinted off into the forest. Blue eyes narrowed at the sight whilst Aithne threw her arms up and scoffed. She tossed her bow down in frustration. "Now can we chase it down?" "No," A hand was raised to silence her. "For a deer to run away like that something must be wrong."

From the bushes, erupted the apparition of a large black hound that gave off the appearance of a shadow. Its eyes appeared to be two balls of fire; its paws encrusted with dried blood. The beast whipped its head around darting icy glares all around the ruins until it focused upon Ninian, paralysed with fear. There was nothing he could say or do to move even an inch. His body wouldn't allow it. When the hound charged forth, leaping with jaws agape, it was only then that Ninian screamed.

Elironwy's eyes widened at the scream, she turned away from the forest line and peered out of the ruined turret. As she looked down towards the ruined keep, she spotted Ninian on his back, bow knocked from his hands and the hound's jaws latched onto his collarbone. A sickening crack was heard as the collarbone snapped. Aithne rushed to see what the screaming was about before her eyes widened in shock at the sight before her. The hound had begun tearing into Ninian's collarbone area, blood gushing from the fresh wound, its paws already drenched in the archer's blood. The hunter continued screaming for his life as his hands scrambled in attempts to force the beast off of him as it continued to mangle his torso, digging its paws into his chest.

“NINIAN!” She turned towards the dilapidated hatch. The redhead took a hold of the blonde’s shoulder, looking at her intensely. “Go down there and distract that... thing, I’ll stay up here and take the shot.”

“Eli, how do you know if we can kill that beast?”

“I don’t.”

Aithne nodded and pulled the moulded hatch back, grimacing at the creaking sound before hopping down the hatch, leaping from one flight of stairs to the next. The screams of her friend pushing her to speed her efforts up. She reached the moulded door towards the tower and rammed her body into the wood once. No movement. A second time. The wood creaked and splintered. Sweat rolled down her forehead before she took a few steps back. She rushed at the door once more, forcing the wood open. She darted her gaze around the ruin before spotting the shadow hound. She withdrew a knife from her belt and charged.

The blonde drove the knife into the back of the beast, wrapping her arm around the throat of the hound in attempts to pry the beast off of the brunette. The beast howled out in pain, finally releasing the mangled hunter beneath it. The beast’s eyes flashed a dark red as a throaty snarl was let out, the beast then melted into the ground, causing the huntress to fall onto the ground with an audible thud, knife in hand.

Aithne looked around, ‘Did that thing just disappear?’ She held her blade close before turning around in hopes to spot the hellhound. Her body tensed as she heard a low growl behind her. She turned, watching as the beast charged at her, jaws snapping as an eerie bark rang around the ruins. She held her arms over her face as the beast slammed into her body, knocking her against a stone wall. She hissed at the impact against her back, dropping to her knees as the hound advanced upon her, bearing blood-soaked teeth.

Up in the turret of the tower, Elironwy had her bow focused on the depraved scene and the moment Aithne was thrown against the wall, she loosed her arrow. The arrow shot into the beast’s hide, causing the flaming red eyes to shoot towards the redhead. The eyes narrowed as Elironwy calmly nocked another arrow, ignoring the sweat that amassed on her hands. She drew back the bowstring, taking a deep breath before loosing her arrow once more, successfully hitting the beast in the shoulder. The hellhound yelped in pain before walking away from the blonde, its focus entirely on the elevated archer, who just stared back at the beast. The hellhound glared at the archer in the tower, eyes flashing again before melting back into the ground, stalking the shadows before reappearing inside the turret much to

Elironwy's surprise. The red headed archer drew an arrow from her quiver, drawing the bow back as quickly as her body allowed, loosing her arrow as the beast charged her. The arrow embedded itself into the hound's eye, causing it to halt in its tracks and howl in pain. Its eyes flickered yet the beast remained in the tower.

Elironwy picked her bow up, turning towards the beast, watching as it stumbled around the dilapidated turret, searching for the archer. She looked at her bow then back up towards the hellhound, a smirk crossed her face before she leaped onto the beast's hide pressing her bow against its throat. The hound howled in pain as it scrambled to free itself from the constricting hold. The redhead pulled on each limb of the bow to tighten the grip it had on the beast's throat drowning out the howling as the bowstring began to dig into its neck.

As Elironwy continued to strangle the beast, Aithne rushed to the brunette's side, gently pulling him into her arms. His body was cold to the touch "Ninian, focus on me now." She cupped his cheek and slowly turned his head to look at her. Ninian winced as she turned his head before he held onto her shoulder with a pale hand. He took laboured breaths. "Aithne?" He asked softly, his eyelids opening and closing slowly as his body slouched against the huntress. "Yes, I'm right here Ninian, Elironwy is going to get us out of this, you're going to be okay." She assured as her hands trembled; her eyes wide with fear as she attempted to stop Ninian's bleeding. Blood oozed onto her hands as she felt his pulse slow beneath her fingers. He looked up at the blonde, his breathing slowing down as his eyelids continued to flutter open and shut. His pulse continued to slow beneath her hands. Then it stopped.

The blonde hunter's eyes widened as panic washed over her body. "Ninian?" She uttered softly. No reply. "Ninian?" Her voice was firmer than before. Still no answer. Her body grew cold as her eyes widened at the realisation. "Ninian please," Her voice grew shaky before tears began to fall down her face. "Gods no." She pulled the brunette close and cried into his shoulder. All that she could do now was hope and pray that Elironwy would make it out of the tower alive.

In the tower the beast screeched and yelped at the feeling of the bow being pressed against its airway, as well as the bowstring cutting into its flesh. It struggled and thrashed against the huntress as she moved her hand up towards the bow grip pressing it into the beast further, whilst her newly freed hand reached for the dagger attached to her belt. The beast snarled and reared up onto its hind legs, turning sharply in attempts to throw Elironwy off of its back. She snarled as the pressure upon the beast's throat heightened.

She gripped the leather of her dagger's hilt, unsheathing the blade as deftly as her fingers would allow before jerking the blade into the chest of the hellhound eliciting a bloodcurdling howl of pain. She pulled the blade out and stabbed the beast repetitively, losing count of the amount of times she had stabbed the beast.

Eventually the hound contorted its body enough to loosen the grip Elironwy had on on her bow before throwing her from the tower, and towards a broken, overgrown stable. She turned before landing abruptly upon the hay, hissing in pain letting crying out a curse. Shock ran through her back as all the air stored in her body was expelled. She screwed her eyes shut before looking up towards the tower, to see the hellhound snarling and inching closer towards the edge. Her eyes darted around her before they landed upon Ninian's bow. She reached for the grip, hissing and snarling in pain as she did so. After a while of pushing through the pain she took a hold of the leather grip.

She searched for her arrows, attempting to ignore the shooting pain in her side, only to find the arrows were snapped. She turned her head sharply towards the huntress, currently crying as she cradled the body of their companion. Their lifeless companion. Sorrow washed over her; her tensed shoulders slumped at the sight. "Aithne, pass me an arrow." She commanded to which the blonde wordlessly obeyed, her quiver was unbuckled and tossed towards the redhead, who pulled out an arrow. She grit her teeth as she nocked the arrow, twisting her body only to cry in pain once more. Her breathing became laboured as she drew the bow back towards her cheek. She exhaled as best she could before aiming at the beast. "For Ninian." As she spoke, she unleashed her arrow. The beast howled in pain as the arrow pierced its skull, the body of the hound fell limp, tumbling from the tower, landing onto the ground with a thud.

Elironwy fell back against the hay, exhaling deeply before checking her injuries. Broken ribs were a definite, and she felt a section of her side and hissed in pain. Something was definitely wrong with her stomach, however that pain would have to wait. She turned towards Aithne, breathing heavily. "Are you alright?" She asked slowly before the blonde turned towards her. Her eyes appeared red from the crying. Her shaking hands were covered in blood.

Aithne nodded "I'm fine Elironwy, what about you?"

"I think I cracked some ribs, and my leg feels very strange."

"Don't move then, you'll probably bugger it up more."

“How considerate of you.” She chuckled breathlessly before hissing in pain.

The two looked over to Ninian, their faces contorted into looks of sorrow before they bowed their heads. Eventually Aithne lifted her sullen head, wiping her eyes.

“You know, Ninian was always an interesting man, he was always inquisitive when it came to our shared history, a-and he always told the most wonderful stories about where our clan originated. Now he’s gone.” She paused and cradled her head, Gods, what a mess.

“How are we going to get Ninian back home?” Aithne asked.

“We’ll carry him back even if it kills me.” The redhead stated.

“Eli, it’s best if you don’t die.” She joked weakly.

The duo wouldn’t have to wait too long due to the thunderous sound of hooves against the ground as well as the sound of multiple voices. Soon enough a scouting party rode through the forest, a group of two men and five women all of which were dressed in their clan colours. Aithne perked up at this revelation, standing and waving. “Hey! Over here!”

The scouting leader turned around, his eyes widening. “Aithne? Elironwy?” He trotted over towards the duo, dismounting before he frowned. “Is that?” He paused as his eyes fell upon Ninian. A hand went to his mouth as his eyes fell away from the body, towards the ground. The huntresses nodded, confirming the lead scout’s suspicions.

“What manner of monster did that to him?”

“Something you shouldn’t be worried with anymore.” Elironwy noted as she attempted to lift her body up from the hay, only to cough clutching at her sides, this was unlike any injury she had received before. The scouting leader’s eyes widened before turning to one of the other men as well as one of the women.

“Drustan, Aderyn go check on Elironwy.” At his tone, two of the scouts dismounted.



Elironwy rolled her eyes. "That won't be necessary."

"If you can walk then be my guest, if not you will be examined and if needed carried back to the city." It was hard to argue with the scout leader as he turned his head back towards the blonde huntress. Even harder to argue with the two medics that were currently inspecting her, conversing amongst each other, noting down her injuries intently before opting to lift the redhead up and carry her towards the awaiting horses and get her mounted.

Aithne watched this briefly before she shakily stood up. "Will Ninian be coming with us?" Her eyes fixated on the floor. "Of course, he will be, we can plan the burial after we get you both recovered fully." The scouting leader nodded solemnly. "We best get going then, Bran, Carys bring back our fallen brother, and take him to his family." The two nodded and dismounted to lift the hunter's body up and secure him to a horse.

As Aithne was lead towards a horse, the scouting party mounted their steeds and lead the huntresses back towards their homelands. Elironwy held onto Ninian's bow, her fingers softly tracing the carvings upon the limbs of the bow, she cradled the bow in her arms as if it were a child. "I'm going to honour you Ninian, I promise."

The journey back to Rhaelhart was longer than the previous journeys that the huntresses had taken, the silence was deafening even when the sounds of their homeland came into earshot, murmuring from the inhabitants rang out the moment the scouts reached the gates.

"Declare yourself!" Called a gatekeeper.

"Scouting leader Einion, with the hunting party from the Rhaelness. We have an injury and a fatality." He proclaimed before the stone gates opened up to reveal the clan's city. As the gates opened up and the light poured in, Elironwy gazed upon her bustling clan marketplace where the noise of the city flooded into her ears and drowned any other thoughts that lingered in her mind, but only for a split second. To her left she spotted the woodsmen returning from the western entrance, hauling the freshly chopped lumber inside. To her right was the aforementioned marketplace where she focused on the numerous stalls shielded by a wooden canopy as merchants peddled goods ranging from bows and blades to children's toys and books. Spotted around the marketplace were the homes of all who lived in Rhaelhart, log cabins and small cottages. To the south, few homes were settled on the

banks of the Llyn Relion. In the distance there stood the Keep, a large stone fort that housed Lord Ruairi and her personal squadron of guards, the Garaint Order.

Outside one of those homes, by the lake stood a brunette girl, with soft green eyes focused intensely on pulling the nets in from the lake and setting the catches of the day aside in a basket, Elironwy's cheeks flushed at the sight of Anwen and kept her gaze fixated on her for a moment longer.

Anwen looked up from her work and smiled warmly. She waved at the huntress before a look of concern fell across her face. Elironwy waved back before giving her a look that wordlessly told her that she would be alright. Elironwy's shoulders relaxed at the sight of home, the sight of her clansmen going about their daily lives caused her to crack the smallest of smile and brought her some comfort. Aithne, who was walking beside the horses shook her head and looked to Ninian's body.

"Before anything we should tell his family." She noted, breaking her silence.

"With respect Aithne, you and Elironwy need to be checked over for anymore injuries and you need to speak with Lord Ruairi." Einion protested. "No." The redhead muttered to the surprise of the scouting leader who merely shook his head. "At least accept someone to help you stand Elironwy, I do not like the look of that leg and regarding Lord Ruairi Einion, you can brief her and then come back for Elironwy." Aderyn gestured towards her leg and furrowed her brows in concern. The huntress nodded as she hooked Ninian's bow onto her back before being helped dismount. Aithne walked towards the horse brandishing Ninian. She looked upon him before tenderly snaking her arms around his torso and legs, lifting him into her arms before carrying him towards a small cottage.

Elironwy was helped by Aderyn towards the cottage, a few seconds behind the blonde. Countless thoughts ran throughout her mind, could she have saved him? Should it have been her in his stead? Could this have been avoided? Her thoughts silenced when the cottage door opened to reveal an elderly man. At first he looked at the two girls fondly, opening his mouth to speak before he focused on Aithne's tearful face. His face warped into a look of confusion before his gaze fell to the boy in her arms. He made a choked sound before his knees gave out. "My boy." He sobbed, pulling him from Aithne's arms, cradling him as he ran his hands through his hair. "What manner of beast did this to my boy?"

The huntress knelt beside him and placed a hand on his back, rubbing soothing circles as she began to speak. "A hellhound ser, we didn't notice it at first and when we did it was too late,

I'm sorry we didn't get to him sooner." She muttered as the elder sniffled. "And what of the beast?"

Aithne turned to Elironwy before biting her lip and looking at the ground. The redhead sighed and placed a hand on his shoulder. "The beast was killed, with your son's bow, ser. My greatest regret is that I didn't slay it sooner, maybe if I was faster Ninian would have survived. I'm so sorry." Her voice cracked as she spoke, taking the bow from her back she offered it towards the man.

His eyes fell upon the recurve bow before he shook his head and pushed her hand towards her. "I have no use for this bow and if what you say is true, then as the slayer of that beast, you should wield my son's bow into battle. Honour him Elironwy." He commanded as he looked down onto Ninian and then towards Aithne, sighing deeply. "I will need to prepare his burial rites. As much as the sight of my son's body breaks my heart, at least you brought his body home and I thank the both of you for that."

Elironwy sighed as she watched the huntress comfort the elder, however as Aderyn helped her turn around only to see Einion marching up towards the redhead, a look of confusion upon his face. "It appears, Lord Ruairi wishes to speak with you." He muttered after a while. The look on her face mirrored his before she spoke: "We best not keep her waiting then." She noted as she was aided towards the keep.

The keep was the only building other than the blacksmiths made entirely of stone and was notorious for being difficult to navigate, without a guide that was. Elironwy would not have to worry about getting lost however due to the escort from Einion. The scouting leader kept his eyes forward, remaining silent. The redhead brushed a strand of her hair back before looking around her. She noticed that the halls were lined with the various pelts of the native beasts of the Rhaelness as well as various weapons from ages past. As she examined the pelts, she thought back to the hellhound. *'If only I brought that pelt back.'* She thought before Einion lead them towards a large wooden door. He pounded his fist on the door, eliciting a thunderous echo.

"Enter." Came a stern voice.

The doors creaked open to reveal a redheaded woman, with tanned skin, sat on the opposite side of an extensive table, her boots propped up on the table as her arms rested behind her head. Also resting on the table was a pair of curved daggers, a hunting knife sat beside a recurve bow. A quiver sat filled with what looked to be forty broadhead arrows,

and ten separate arrows with dripping in an unknown substance. In the centre of the table was a knapsack as well as what appeared to be a folded pile of clothing as well as a leather arm guard. The redhead wondered what this equipment would be used for, however her thoughts were disrupted at the sound of Einion's voice: "I have brought the huntress Elironwy, the one who lead the expedition today, my Lord." Proclaimed the scout, stood at full attention.

A redbrow was raised. "I can see that scout, now be on your way this business pertains to myself and Elironwy here."

Aderyn looked between her commander and her clan leader in confusion at what she was to do.

"Since you are actively helping her walk, Aderyn you can stay." Ruairi assured gesturing to the duo to take a seat. The tanned medic pulled out a chair and settled Elironwy down as gently as she possibly could before standing to attention beside the chair. The huntress hissed in slight pain.

"I have heard about what happened today in the Rhaelness forest, I would have hoped to hear it directly from you Elirownwy but that was not a luxury I was afforded today. However, if you are comfortable in telling me, what happened today?" She asked.

The huntress shifted in her seat before turning away from her clan leader. "After tracking our prey we came across these ruins in the Rhaelness, N-" She paused, swallowing hard. "Ninian told us about the origins and we carried on, but when we reached an old storehouse, this beast attacked, it looked like a mix between a shadow and a wolf, its eyes were red. After the battle myself and Aithne delivered Ninian back to his family."

As Elironwy spoke, Ruairi's eyes focused on one specific sentence and widened at the realisation; she pulled her feet off of the table to stand. "The creature that you faced was a gwyllgi. You faced a gwyllgi and you're alive?" She furrowed her brows in confusion before she pressed her hand against her forehead. "If this is true then our clan owes you a great debt, a beast like that could cause countless deaths." She muttered in shock.

"In fact." She continued "If you were the one who slew a beast of that calibre, then you are just the person I need."

Elironwy's eyebrows furrowed in confusion as well as annoyance, "I'm sorry what?"

"The lord of Dualtire has asked that the clans present a champion to search for King Aurelion's relics in hopes to solve the lack of a monarch. I believe that you are perfect for the task, judging from what I have heard of you as well as the fact you slew a gwyllgi. Will you take up the mantle as the Champion of Rhaelhart?"

"Respectfully, my lord, I will not be going on any quest. I have just lost my hunting partner and I have ruined my body in the process, to the point I need aid in merely standing." Her eyes darkened with rage. "For you to hear how I have just delivered my friend's corpse to his father after we faced a beast that you yourself, said 'could cause countless deaths.' And still have the audacity to throw a foolish quest my way, truly shows how warped your priorities are." She snapped.

The outburst took the lord by surprise, "You do realise what you are denying? Your clanmates would jump at being our champion, imagine the glory, the wealth you would be granted if you embarked on this quest, you could be High Queen of all Morweness."

"What is the point of that if I have so much more to lose? I have a life here my Lord and I won't go galivanting off on some quest just for you to gloat to the other clans. I will stay here with Aithne with Anwen and with my family." Elironwy hissed.

"What if I reward you for going on this quest Elironwy? How does exemption from the army, the Garaint Order as well as raising you and your love to the title of Lady? You will be given a secluded home, wealth and privacy." Ruairi swore. "All you have to do is go on this quest represent Rhaelhart and return to us."

Elironwy paused, her mind processing what had just been said to her. On one hand she had just lost a dear hunting partner, to one of the worst deaths that she could image; on the other hand, she was being offered a life of solitude with the woman she loved, paid for by her Lord; She would be forever known as the champion of Rhaelhart. The thoughts collided against each other, if she took this quest, she would be taken away from her homelands, from Anwen and Aithne. To take this quest after her injuries would be suicide, however her mind flashed back to what Ninian's father had said: *'Honour him Elironwy.'*

She blinked away tears before looking up to her leader. "My Lord, I will reconsider. I would honoured to take up that mantle... no matter the burdens it will entail, there is just one problem however."

"That being?"

"I cannot put pressure on my left leg, my hip and my side has been in pain ever since I have returned. I will not be able to travel."

Ruairi shook her head. "I can make arrangements for horse travel, as well as a specialised saddle to rest your leg, however you are not to be presented until next week, you will have time to recover." To hear Ruairi assure her of recovery brought comfort to her. With her conscious clear Elironwy knew what she would respond with: "In that case my Lord, I shall accept."

The elder's eyes widened as a smile formed upon her face. "Wonderful to hear; now the equipment laid out on this table, as you have seen, is for you. This quest will not be easy, so accept these little gifts from your homeland." She gestured towards the table before she raised a brow. "However, I feel as if you do not need a new bow." She gestured to the recurve upon her back.

At the mention of a new bow, Elironwy held onto Ninian's recurve, instinctively moving her body away from her. Ruairi's eyes widened at the motion, yet she said nothing and just awaited Elironwy's response: "Respectfully, I will decline the bow, I swore an oath to carry this one into battle with me but I will humbly accept the other gifts." Ruairi nodded at the response, walking over to take a hold of Elironwy's arm grasping it before nodding to her. The huntress gripped the elder's forearm in response nodding back before she let go.

"Then it is settled, you Elironwy will be named Champion of Rhaelhart. We'll be leaving for Dualtire in five days, rest up as much as you can, you are dismissed."

Elironwy looked at the equipment, sheathing her new daggers as she stuffed the hunting knife and clothing into the knapsack. She placed the bag on her back as she took the quiver of arrows, leaving only the longbow on the table. She was helped from her seat by Aderyn and walked back towards the city. One thought, however dominated her mind.

*'For Ninian'*

### **Chapter 3 - The Ebony Warrior**

*In Clan Iolaire, 4 days since The Council of Six*

It was raining in the hold of Iolaire as it did almost every week. The rain however would not be a deterrent for anyone who lived inside the walls of the city. In fact, training was enhanced when it rained, and none knew this better than Dunwall Duanna and his daughter.

The pair were stood outside their home with their weapons and equipment in hand.

"Today I will teach you a move to disarm your opponent in a single advance. The trick is to outsmart your opponent and disarm in a swift motion." Dunwall gestured to a spot a distance away from him, to which his daughter, a dark-haired woman, in her early twenties walked towards without a word.

"Raise your shield and make an effort to block me." He raised his shield, slowly walking towards the girl. She threw her shield up raised her bearded axe up analysing the movements made by her father. He stepped left then right; she furrowed her brows before swinging her axe. He thrust his sword forth, catching the head of his daughter's axe and

pulled away sharply, to his daughter's surprise. The axe was pulled out of her hand and dropped onto the ground in one swift motion.

The girl took a sharp breath, her eyes wide. Her father leaned down to pick her axe up walking towards her, handing the haft to her. "Now I'll run you through each motion then we will attempt a mock fight."

The daughter took her axe back from the elder before taking a few paces back, raising her shield as her father mirrored her actions. She rushed him, raising her axe to which her father deflected the blow and disarmed her in a swift motion, yet again. He swept her feet out from underneath her, causing her to fall into the mud. Her jaw clenched as her hands balled up, her brows knit together.

"Again." His tone was hard to argue with and so she stood up and adjusted her grip on the haft of her axe. She walked towards her father once more, taking deep breaths as she feigned right, slashing with her axe. The elder brought his blade to meet her axe.

"Again Morwen, you almost have it." His sword clashed against her axe.

Morwen grunted at the feel of the force, her muscles straining as she pushed back against his steel sword. Sweat and rain rolled down her pale face before the owner of the sword wiped strands of his hair away from his face before running a hand through his beard, wringing the water from it.

"Now Morwen, your advance is too predictable, you need to slow down, keep your shield raised." He advised, adding: "You also need to adjust your stance, loosen up trust in your movements."

She nodded at the advice, taking a deep breath. She raised her shield; adjusting her grip on the axe before advancing towards her father once more. Morwen bounced on the balls of her feet, her eyes darted around before she feigned a right. Her father swung his sword in anticipation. This time however, the girl's axe turned to catch the hand of her sparring partner twisting it before bringing her shield down onto his bicep, causing him to drop his sword.

"Was *that* what you were trying to teach me father?" She teased, to which the elder chuckled, idly rubbing the spot that had been hit by the shield. A twinge of guilt flooded over the her at this sight, yet it swiftly ebbed away when her father smiled.

"It was certainly close, but if you are to join the Dead Legion my girl, you will need to loosen up your stance further." Morwen nodded as her father sheathed his blade, clapping his hand onto her shoulder. "Regardless I believe that was enough training for today."

“Are you sure? We could refine my stamina or even my blocking skills?” She asked before she was stopped.

“Morwen.” He began slowly. “Your drive to learn, and constantly improve is admirable, however you need to learn that issues you will face in the Dead Legion are not issues you can solve with a heavy hand.”

“What else is there to the Dead Legion then father? You are the great Dunwall Duanna! A captain in the Legion! Surely you would understand that I need to be fully trained.” She stressed balling her fists up.

He turned around sharply. “I *was* a captain, so you should be heeding my words.” He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose as he placed a hand tenderly on her shoulder. “There is more to the Dead Legion than simply battle and glory, you have a duty to the people of Morweness, a duty to serve them. If I do not dissuade you then ask our people of the tale of General Balchder. Perhaps in his failings you will learn.”

Silence fell across the two for a moment whilst Morwen shot her gaze towards the floor, her shoulders slumped before she finally looked up towards the greying warrior. “I do this because I care about you girl.”

She turned towards the village. “You are right, I need to be a servant of the people, but how can I do that?”

“Walk the village and ask if people need help, then work honestly for them.”

“You can start by serving me and my family Ebony, we all know a lass like you can’t make it into the Legion.” Came a voice. She turned around, away from her father to begrudgingly look at the source of the voice. The voice belonged to a man who leaned against the Duanna’s stable, he stood tall, with dark brown hair and icy blue eyes. He stood up straight, walking briskly over towards the raven-haired warrior.

“Besides they would never allow someone as impulsive as you into an order that prestigious, veteran father or no. Perhaps you should leave the Legion to me, I can bring our future family all the glory you would ever desire since your old man won’t be around to see it though.”

Morwen snarled as she marched over towards the man only for her father to grip her shoulders and shoot her a look. ‘Be smart’. She nodded and took a deep breath before glaring at the man before her. “Ever the charmer aren’t you Llewncroc?” Her voice dripped with sarcasm.

“Only for you dear Ebony, but the offer still stands for you.” He walked towards the girl, hands behind his back whilst Dunwall stepped away from his daughter allowing the brunette to come closer. “You will always have the chance to make the right decision.”



“Well I have already made the right decision several times.” Her words were disregarded as Llewroc continued to speak. “Become a member of my family, you know it is destiny for you to be mine.”

He reached out to cup her cheek. “Besides your greatest use will be birthing my children, you don’t want to end up like your mother now do you?” Morwen threw caution to the wind and caught the man’s wrist with her axe, twisting his arm around violently to which he gasped, reaching for his shoulder to alleviate the pain.

“Touch me and you’ll lose that hand Llewroc, you know my answer.” She hissed leaning in close. “If you need it in writing, I can give it to you, if you want it screamed from the top of mountains in Drekare, I will scream it but know this: I would sooner bend my knee to the Invictus Empire than marry a pig like you.” She unhooked her axe from his wrist, before nicking the skin across his forearm, eliciting a cry of pain. “Now get out.” The man scrambled off, gripping his open wound as he shot an icy glare at the two

“I swear that pig is here every week asking the same thing over and over again. I don’t think he has a brain.” Morwen ranted before taking a seat on the steps leading into her home.

Dunwall laughed briefly. “I doubt that he doesn’t, the boy may be horrid but he’s quick as a whip. His mother proves that.” He noted taking a seat besides his daughter.

“Are you going to be cryptic or will you be telling me why his mother proves that?”

He sighed. “Why would I mention it if I did not plan on telling you Morwen?” He cracked a small smile. “That boy’s mother was a member of the Legion, a special sector that planned all of the tactics and battle strategy. She was one of the less experienced strategists, however she was still as smart as she was cunning.” He warned, “Without a doubt, she has taught her son to be just like her. Be careful with him Morwen.”

Morwen nodded firmly due to the fact that his eyes did not match his jovial tone, a clear sign that she needed to be mindful of what Llewroc was capable of. A shiver crept up her spine that she shook off the second she noticed it. He was just another man that she could certainly handle.