



The Hawk Eternal (The Hawk Queen)

By David Gemmell

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Only Caswallon—loner, warrior, and thief—realizes the true extent of the danger and the mayhem that his people will come to face. As Taliesen tries to discover Sigarni's purpose, Caswallon must attempt to unite the clans to overcome their greatest peril.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Gemmell’s great reading—the action never lets up. He’s several rungs above the good—right into the fabulous!”

—Anne McCaffrey

“For anyone who appreciates superior heroic fantasy, David Gemmell’s offerings are mandatory.”

—Time Out London

“[Gemmell] does high adventure as it ought to be done.”

—Greg Keyes, author of *The Charnel Prince*

About the Author

David Gemmell was born in London, England, in the summer of 1948. Expelled from school at sixteen, he became a bouncer, working nightclubs in Soho. Born with a silver tongue, Gemmell rarely needed to bounce customers, relying instead on his gift of gab to talk his way out of trouble. This talent eventually led him to jobs as a freelancer for the London Daily Mail, the Daily Mirror, and the Daily Express. His first novel, *Legend*, was published in 1984 and has remained in print ever since. He became a full-time writer in 1986. His books consistently top the London Times bestseller list.

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Chapter One

Caswallon watched the murderous assault on Ateris, a strange sense of unreality gripping him. The clansman sat down on a boulder and gazed from the mountainside at the gleaming city below, white and glorious, like a child’s castle set on a carpet of green.

The enemy had surprised the city dwellers some three hours before, and black smoke billowed now from the turrets and homes. The distant sound of screaming floated to his ears, disembodied, like the echo of a nightmare upon awakening.

The clansman’s sea-green eyes narrowed as he watched the enemy hacking and slaying. He shook his head, sadness and anger competing within him. He had no love for these doomed Lowlanders and their duplicitous ways. But, equally, this wanton slaughter filled him with sorrow.

The enemy warriors were new to Caswallon. Never had he seen the horned helmets of the Aenir, the double-headed axes, nor the oval shields painted with hideous faces of crimson and black. He had heard of them, of course, butchering and killing far to the south, but of their war against the Lowlanders he knew little until now.

But then, why should he? He was a clansman of the Farlain, and they had little time for Lowland politics. His was a mountain race, tough and hardy and more than solitary. The mountains were forbidden ground for any Lowlander and the clans mixed not at all with other races.

Save for trade. Clan beef and woven cloth for Lowland sugar, fruits, and iron.

In the distance Caswallon saw a young girl speared and lifted into the air, thrashing and screaming. This is war no longer, he thought, this is merely blood sport.

Tearing his gaze from the murderous scene he glanced back at the mountains rearing like spear points toward the sky, snowcapped and proud, jagged and powerful. At their center the cloud-wreathed magnificence of High Druin towered above the land. Caswallon shivered, drawing his brown leather cloak about his shoulders. It was said that the clans were vicious and hostile to outsiders, and so they were. Any Lowlander found hunting clan lands was sent home minus the fingers of his right hand. But such punishments were intended to deter poachers. The scenes of carnage on the plain below had nothing to do with such practices; this was lust of the most vile kind.

The clansman looked back at the city. Old men in white robes were being nailed to the black gates. Even at this distance Caswallon recognized Bacheron, the chief elder, a man of little honesty. Even so, he did not deserve such a death.

By all the Gods, no one deserved such a death!

On the plain three horsemen rode into sight, the leader pulling a young boy who was tied to a rope behind his mount. Caswallon recognized the boy as Gaelen, a thief and an orphan who lived on scraps and stolen fruit. The clansman's fingers curled around the hilt of his hunting dagger as he watched the boy straining at the rope.

The lead rider, a man in shining breastplate and raven-winged helm, cut the rope and the boy began to run toward the mountains. The riders set off after him, lances leveled.

Caswallon took a deep breath, releasing it slowly. The flame-haired boy ducked and weaved, stopping to pick up a stone and hurl it at the nearest horse. The beast shied, pitching its rider.

"Good for you, Gaelen," whispered Caswallon.

A rider in a white cloak wheeled his mount, cutting across the boy's path. The youngster turned to sprint away and the lance took him deep in the back, lifting him from his feet and hurling him to the ground. He struggled to rise and a second rider ended his torment, slashing a sword blade to his face. The riders cantered back to the city.

Caswallon found his hands shaking uncontrollably, and his heart pounded, reflecting his anger and shame.

How could men do such a thing to a youth?

Caswallon recalled his last visit to Ateris three weeks before, when he had driven in twenty long-horned Highland cattle to the market stalls in the west of the city. He had stolen the beasts from the pastures of the Pallides two days before. At the market he had seen a crowd chasing the red-haired youngster as he sprinted through the streets, his skinny legs pounding the marble walkway, his arms pumping furiously.

Gaelen had shinned up a trellis by the side of the inn and leaped across the rooftops, stopping only to make an obscene gesture to his pursuers. Spotting Caswallon watching, he drew back his shoulders and swaggered across the rooftops. Caswallon had grinned then. He liked the boy; he had style.

The fat butcher Leon had chuckled beside him. "He's a character, is Gaelen. Every city needs one."

“Parents?” asked Caswallon.

“Dead. He’s been alone five years—since he was nine or ten.”

“How does he survive?”

“He steals. I let him get away with a chicken now and then. He sneaks up on me and I chase him for a while, shouting curses.”

“You like him, Leon?”

“Yes. As I like you, Caswallon, you rascal. But then he reminds me of you. You are both thieves and you are both good at what you do—and there is no evil in either of you.”

“Nice of you to say so,” said Caswallon, grinning. “Now, how much for the Pallides cattle?”

“Why do you do it?”

“What?” asked Caswallon innocently.

“Steal cattle. By all accounts you are one of the richest clansmen in the Farlain. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Tradition,” answered Caswallon. “I’m a great believer in it.”

Leon shook his head. “One of these days you’ll be caught and hanged—or worse, knowing the Pallides. You baffle me.”

“No, I don’t. I make you rich. Yours is the cheapest beef in Ateris.”

“True. How is the lovely Maeg?”

“She’s well.”

“And Donal?”

“Lungs like bellows.”

“Keeping you awake at nights, is he?”

“When I’m not out hunting,” said Caswallon with a wink.

Leon chuckled. “I’m going to be sorry when they catch you, clansman. Truly.”

For an hour they haggled over the prices until Leon parted with a small pouch of gold, which Caswallon handed to his man Arcis, a taciturn clan crofter who accompanied him on his raids.

Now Caswallon stood on the mountainside soaking in the horror of Aenir warfare. Arcis moved alongside him. Both men had heard tales of war in the south and the awful atrocities committed by the Aenir. Foremost among these was the blood-eagle: Aenir victims were nailed to trees, their ribs splayed like tiny wings, their

innards held in place with wooden strips.

Caswallon had only half believed these tales. Now the evidence hung on the blood-drenched gates of Ateris.

“Go back to the valley, my friend,” Caswallon told Arcis.

“What about the cattle?”

“Drive them back into the mountains. There are no buyers today.”

“Gods, Caswallon! Why do they go on killing? There’s no one fighting them.”

“I don’t know. Tell Cambil what we have seen today.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll stay for a while.”

Arcis nodded and set off across the slopes, running smoothly.

After a while the Aenir warriors drifted into the city. The plain before the gates was littered with corpses. Caswallon moved closer, stopping when he neared the tree line. Now he could see the full scale of the horror and his anger settled, cold and malignant. The cattle dealer, Leon, lay in a pool of blood, his throat torn open. Near him was the boy thief Gaelen.

Caswallon swung away and moved back toward the trees.

I am dying. There was no doubt in Gaelen’s mind. The pain from his lower back was close to unbearable, his head ached, the blood was seeping from his left eye. For a long while he lay still, not knowing if the enemy was close by; whether indeed an Aenir warrior was at this moment poised above him with a spear or a sharp-edged sword.

Fear cut through his pain but he quelled it savagely. He could feel the soft, dusty clay against his face and smell the smoke from the burning city. He tried to open his eyes, but blood had congealed on the lashes. I have been unconscious for some time, he thought.

An hour? Less? Carefully, he moved his right arm, bringing his hand to his face, rubbing his right eye with his knuckle to free the lashes. The pain from his left eye intensified and he left it alone, sealed shut. He was facing the shuttered gates and the ghastly ornaments they now carried. Around him the crows were already settling, their sharp beaks ripping at moist flesh. Two of them had landed on the chest of Leon. Gaelen looked away. There were no Aenir in sight. Gingerly he probed the wound above his left hip, remembering the lance that had cut through him as he ran. The wound still bled on both sides, and the flesh was angry and raw to the touch.

Turning his head toward the mountains, and the tall pine trees on the nearest slope, he tried to estimate the time it would take him to reach the safety of the woods. He made an effort to stand, but a roaring began in his ears, like an angry sea. Dizziness swamped him and he lost consciousness.

When he awoke it was close to dusk. His side was still bleeding, though it had slowed to a trickle, and once again he had to clear his eye of blood. When he had done so he saw that he had crawled twenty paces. He couldn't remember doing it, but the trail of blood and scored dust could not lie.

Behind him the city burned. It would not be long before the Aenir returned to the plain. If he was found he would be hauled back and blood-eagled like the elders.

The boy began to crawl, not daring to look up lest the distance demoralize him, forcing him to give in.

Twice he passed out for short periods. After the last he cursed himself for a fool and rolled to his back, ripping two strips of cloth from his ragged tunic. These he pressed into the wounds on his hip, grunting as the pain tore into him. They should slow the bleeding, he thought. He crawled on. The journey, begun in pain and weakness, became a torment. Delirious, Gaelen lived again the horror of the attack. He had stolen a chicken from Leon and was racing through the market when the sound of screaming women and pounding hooves made him forget the burly butcher. Hundreds of horsemen came in sight, slashing at the crowd with long swords and plunging lances.

All was chaos and the boy had been petrified. He had hidden in a barn for several hours, but then had been discovered by three Aenir soldiers. Gaelen had run through the alleys, outpacing them, but had emerged into the city square where a rider looped a rope over his shoulders, dragging him out through the broken gates. All around him were fierce-eyed warriors with horned helmets, screaming and chanting, their faces bestial.

The rider with the rope hailed two others at the city gates.

"Sport, Father!" yelled the man, his voice muffled by his helm.

"From that wretch?" answered the other contemptuously, leaning across the neck of his horse. The helm he wore carried curved horns, and a face mask in bronze fashioned into a leering demon. Through the upper slits Gaelen could see a glint of ice-blue eyes, and fear turned to terror within him.

The rider who had roped Gaelen laughed. "I saw this boy on my last scouting visit. He was running from a crowd. He's fast. I'll wager I land him before you."

"You couldn't land a fish from a bowl," said the third rider, a tall wide-shouldered warrior with an open helm. His face was broad and flat, the eyes small and glittering like blue beads. His beard was yellow and grimy, his teeth crooked and broken. "But I'll get him, by Vatan!"

"Always the first to boast and the last to do, Tostig," sneered the first rider.

"Be silent, Ongist," ordered the older man in the horned helm. "All right, I'll wager ten gold pieces I gut him."

"Done!" The rider leaned over toward the boy, slicing the dagger through the rope. "Go on, boy, run."

Gaelen heard the horse start after him, and throwing himself to the ground, he grabbed a rock and hurled it. The yellow-bearded warrior—Tostig?—pitched from his rearing mount.

Then the lance struck him. He tried to rise, only to see a sword blade flash down.

“Well ridden, Father!” were the last words he heard before the darkness engulfed him.

Now as he crawled all sense of time and place deserted him. He was a turtle on a beach of hot coals, slowly burning; a spider within an enamel bowl of pain, circling; a lobster within a pan as the heat rose.

But still he crawled.

Behind him walked the yellow-bearded warrior he had pitched to the ground. In his hand was a sword and upon his lips a smile.

Tostig was growing bored now. At first he had been intrigued by the wounded boy, wondering how far he could crawl, and imagining the horror and despair when he discovered the effort was for nothing. But now the boy was obviously delirious, and there was little point in wasting time. He raised the sword, pointing downward above the boy’s back.

“Kill him, my bonny, and you will follow him.”

Tostig leaped back a pace, his sword flashing up to point toward the shadow-haunted trees as a figure stepped out into the fading light. He was tall, wearing a leather cloak and carrying an iron-tipped quarterstaff. Two daggers hung from a black leather baldrick across his chest, and a long hunting knife dangled by his hip. He was green-eyed, and a dark trident beard gave him a sardonic appearance.

Tostig looked beyond the man, straining to pierce the gathering darkness of the undergrowth. The warrior seemed to be alone.

The clansman stepped forward and stopped just out of reach of the Aenir’s sword. Then he leaned on his staff and smiled. “You’re on Farlain land,” he said.

“The Aenir walk where they will,” Tostig replied.

“Not here, my bonny. Not ever. Now, what’s it to be? Do you leave or die?”

Tostig pondered a moment. His father, Asbidag, had warned the army not to alienate the clans. Not yet. One mouthful at a time, that was Asbidag’s way.

And yet this clansman had robbed Tostig of his prey.

“Who are you?” Tostig countered.

“Your heart has about five beats of life left in it, barbarian,” said Caswallon.

Tostig stared deeply into the sea-green eyes. Had he been sure the man was alone, he would have risked battle. But he was not sure. The man was too confident, too relaxed. No clansman alive would face an armed Aenir in such a way. Unless he had an edge. Tostig glanced once more at the trees. Archers no doubt had him in range at this moment.

“We will meet again,” he said, backing away down the slope.

Caswallon ignored him, and knelt by the bleeding youngster.

Gently he turned him to his back, checking his wounds. Satisfied they were plugged, he lifted the boy to his shoulder, gathered up his staff, entered the shadows, and was gone from the sight of the Aenir.

Gaelen turned in his bed and groaned as the stitches front and back pulled at tender, bruised flesh. He opened his eyes and found himself staring at a grey cave wall. The smell of burning beechwood was in his nostrils. Carefully he moved onto his good side. He was lying on a broad bed, crafted from pine and expertly joined; over his body were two woolen blankets and a bearskin cloak. The cave was large, maybe twenty paces wide and thirty deep, and at the far end it curved into a corridor. Looking back, the boy saw that the entrance was covered with a hide curtain. Gingerly he sat up. Somebody had bandaged his side and his injured eye. Gently he probed both areas. The pain was still there, but more of a throbbing reminder of the acute agony he remembered from his long crawl.

Across from the bed, beyond a table and some chairs rough-cut from logs, was a man-made hearth skillfully chipped away at the base of a natural chimney in the cave wall. A fire was burning brightly. Beside it were chunks of beechwood, a long iron rod, and a copper shovel.

Bright sunlight shafted past the edges of the curtain and the boy's gaze was drawn to the cave entrance. Groaning as he rose, he limped across the cave, lifting the flap and looking out over the mountains beyond. He found himself gazing down into a green and gold valley dotted with stone buildings and wooden barns, sectioned fields and ribbon streams. Away to his left was a herd of shaggy long-horned cattle, and elsewhere he could see sheep and goats, and even a few horses in a paddock by a small wood. His legs began to tremble and he dropped the curtain.

Slowly he made his way to the table and sat down. Upon it was an oatmeal loaf and a jug of spring water. His stomach tightened, hunger surging within him as he tore a chunk from the loaf and poured a little water into a clay goblet.

Gaelen was confused. He had never been this far into the Highlands. No Lowlander had. This was forbidden territory. The clansmen were not a friendly people, and though they occasionally came into Ateris to trade, it was well known to be folly for any city-dweller to attempt a return visit.

He tried to remember how he had come here. He seemed to recall voices as he struggled to reach the trees, but the memory was elusive and there had been so many dreams.

At the back of the cave the man called Oracle watched the boy eating and smiled. The lad was strong and wolf-tough. For the five days he had been here he had battled grimly against his wounds, never crying—even when, in his delirium, he had relived fear-filled moments of his young life. He had regained consciousness only twice in that time, accepting silently the warm broth that Oracle held to his lips.

“I see you are feeling better,” said the old man, stepping from the shadows.

The boy jumped and winced as the stitches pulled. Looking around, he saw a tall, frail, white-bearded man dressed in grey robes, belted at the waist with a goat-hair rope.

“Yes. Thank you.”

“What is your name?”

“Gaelen. And you?”

“I no longer use my name, but it pleases the Farlain to call me Oracle. If you are hungry I shall warm some broth; it is made from the liver of pigs and will give you strength.”

Oracle moved to the fire, stooping to lift a covered pot to the flames. “It will be ready soon. How are your wounds?”

“Better.”

The old man nodded. “The eye caused me the most trouble. But I think it will serve you. You will not be blind, I think. The wound in your side is not serious, the lance piercing just above the flesh of the hip. No vital organ was cut.”

“Did you bring me here?”

“No.” Using the iron rod, Oracle lifted the lid from the pot. Taking a long-handled wooden spoon from a shelf, he stirred the contents. Gaelen watched him in silence. In his youth he must have been a mighty man, thought the boy. Oracle’s arms were bony now, but the wrists were thick and his frame broad. The old man’s eyes were light blue under thick brows, and they glittered like water on ice. Seeing the boy staring at him, he chuckled. “I was the Farlain Hunt Lord,” he said, grinning. “And I was strong. I carried the Whorl boulder for forty-two paces. No man has bettered that in thirty years.”

“Were my thoughts so obvious?” Gaelen asked.

“Yes,” answered Oracle. “The broth is ready.”

They ate in silence, spooning the thick soup from wooden bowls and dipping chunks of oatmeal loaf into the steaming liquid.

Gaelen could not finish the broth. He apologized, but the old man shrugged.

“You’ve hardly eaten at all in five days, and though you are ravenous your stomach has shrunk. Give it a few moments, then try a little more.”

“Thank you.”

“You ask few questions, young Gaelen. Is it that you lack curiosity?”

The boy smiled for the first time. “No, I just don’t want any answers yet.”

Oracle nodded. “You are safe here. No one will send you back to the Aenir. You are welcome, free to do as you wish. You are not a prisoner. Now, do you have any questions?”

“How did I get here?”

“Caswallon brought you. He is a clansman, a Hunt Master.”

“Why did he save me?”

“Why does Caswallon do the things he does? I don’t know. Caswallon doesn’t know. He is a man of impulse. A good friend, a terrible enemy, and a fine clansman—but still a man of impulse. When he was a youth he went tracking deer. He was following a doe when he came upon it caught in a Pallides snare. Now, the Farlain have no love for the Pallides, so Caswallon cut the deer loose—only to find it had an injured leg. He brought the little beast home upon his back and nursed it to health; then he released it. There’s no accounting for Caswallon. Had the beast been fit he would have slain it for meat and hide.”

“And I am like that injured doe,” said Gaelen. “Had I run into the trees unharmed, Caswallon might have killed me.”

“Yes, you are sharp, Gaelen. I like quick wits in a boy. How old are you?”

The boy shrugged. “I don’t know. Fourteen, fifteen . . .”

“I’d say nearer fourteen, but it doesn’t matter. A man is judged here by how he lives and not by the weight of his years.”

“Will I be allowed to stay, then? I thought only clansmen could live in the Druin mountains?”

“Indeed you can, for indeed you are,” said Oracle.

“I don’t understand.”

“You are a clansman, Gaelen. Of the Farlain. You see, Caswallon invoked the Cormaach. He has made you his son.”

“Why?”

“Because he had no choice. As you said yourself, only a clansman can live here and Caswallon—like all other clansmen—cannot bring strangers into the Farlain. Therefore in the very act of rescuing you he became your guardian, responsible in law for everything you do.”

“I don’t want a father,” said Gaelen. “I get by on my own.”

“Then you will leave,” agreed Oracle, amiably. “And Caswallon will give you a cloak, a dagger, and two gold coins for the road.”

“And if I stay?”

“Then you will move into Caswallon’s house.”

Needing time to think, Gaelen broke off a piece of bread and dipped it into the now lukewarm broth.

Become a clansman? A wild warrior of the mountains? And what would it be like to have a father? Caswallon, whoever he was, wouldn’t care for him. Why should he? He was just a wounded doe brought home on a whim. “When must I decide?”

“When your wounds are fully healed.”

“How long will that be?”

“When you say they are,” said the old man.

“I don’t know if I want to be a clansman.”

“Reserve your judgment, Gaelen, until you know what it entails.”

That night Gaelen awoke in a cold sweat, screaming.

The old man ran from the back of the cave, where he slept on a narrow pallet bed, and sat down beside the boy. “What is it?” he asked, stroking Gaelen’s brow, pushing back the sweat-drenched hair from the boy’s eyes.

“The Aenir! I dreamed they had come for me and I couldn’t get away.”

“Do not fear, Gaelen. They have conquered the Lowlands, but they will not come here. Not yet. Believe me. You are safe.”

“They took the city,” said Gaelen, “and the militia were overrun. They didn’t even hold for a day.”

“You have much to learn, boy. About war. About warriors. Aye, the city fell, and before it other cities. But we don’t have cities here, and we need no walls. The mountains are like a fortress, with walls that pierce the clouds. And the clansmen don’t wear bright breastplates and parade at festivals, they don’t march in unison. Stand a clansman against a Lowlander and you will see two men, but you will not be seeing clearly. The one is like a dog, well trained and well fed. It looks good and it barks loud. The other is like a wolf, lean and deadly. It barks not at all. It kills. The Aenir will not come here yet. Trust me.”

* * *

When he woke Gaelen found a fresh-baked honey malt loaf, a jug of goat’s milk, and a bowl containing oats, dried apple, and ground hazelnuts awaiting him at the table. There was no sign of Oracle.

Gaelen’s side was sore and fresh blood had seeped through the linen bandages around his waist, but he pushed the pain from his mind and ate. The oats were bland and unappealing, but he found that if he crushed the honey cake and sprinkled it over the mixture the effect was more appetizing.

His stomach full, he made his way outside the cave and knelt by a slender stream that trickled over white rocks on its journey to the valley below. Scooping water to his face, he washed, careful to avoid dampening the bandage over his injured eye. He had thought to take a short walk, but even the stroll to the stream had tired him and he sat back against a smooth rock and gazed down into the valley.

It was so calm here. Set against the tranquillity of these mountain valleys the events at Ateris seemed even more horrifying. Gaelen saw again the crows settling on fat Leon, squabbling and fighting over a strip of red flesh.

The boy was not surprised by the Aenir savagery. It seemed a culmination of all that life had taught him about people. In the main, they were cruel, callous, and uncaring, filled with greed and petty malice. The boy knew all about suffering. It was life. It was being frozen in winter, parched in summer, cold-soaked and trembling when it rained. It was being thrashed for the sin of hunger, abused for the curse of loneliness, tormented for being a bastard, and despised for being an orphan.

Life was not a gift to be enjoyed, it was an enemy to be battled, grimly, unremittingly.

The old man had been kind to him, but he has his reasons, thought Gaelen sourly. This Caswallon is probably paying him for his time.

Gaelen sighed. When he was strong enough he would run away to the north and find a city the Aenir had not sacked, and he would pick up his life again—stealing food and scraping a living until he was big enough, or strong enough, to take life by the throat and force it to do his bidding.

Still dreaming of the future, he fell asleep in the sunshine. Oracle found him there at noon and gently carried him inside, laying him upon the broad bed and covering him with the bearskin cloak. The fur was still thick and luxuriant, yet it was thirty years since Oracle had killed the bear. An epic battle fought on a spring day such as this . . . The old man chuckled at the memory. In those days he had been Caracis, Hunt Lord of the Farlain, and a force to be considered. He had killed the bear with a short sword and dagger, suffering terrible wounds from the beast's claws. He never knew why it had attacked him; the large bears of the mountains usually avoided man, but perhaps he had strayed too close to its den, or maybe it was sick and hurting.

Whatever the cause it had reared up from the bushes, towering above him. In one flowing motion he had hurled his hunting knife into its breast, drawn sword and dagger, and leaped forward, plunging both blades through the matted fur and into the flesh beyond. The battle had been brief and bloody. The beast's great arms encircled him, its claws ripping into his back. He had released the sword and twisted at the dagger with both hands, seeking the mighty heart within the rib cage.

And he had found it.

Now the bear, the lord of the high lonely forest, was a child's blanket, and the greatest of the Farlain warriors was a dry-boned ancient, known only as Oracle.

"Time makes fools of us all," he whispered.

He looked down at the boy's face. He was a handsome lad, with good bones and a strong chin, and his flame-red hair contained a glint of gold, matching the tawny flecks in his dark eyes.

"You will break hearts in years to come, Gaelen, my lad."

"Hearts . . . ?" said Gaelen, yawning and sitting up. "I'm sorry. Were you talking to me?"

"No. Old men talk to themselves. How are you feeling?"

"Good."

"Sleep is the remedy for many of life's ills. Especially loss of blood."

"It's peaceful here," said Gaelen. "I don't normally sleep so much, even when I've been hurt. Is there anything I can do to help you? I don't want to be a burden."

"Young man, you are not a burden. You are a guest. Do you know what that means?"

"No."

"It means you are a friend who has come to stay for a while," the old man told him, laying his hand on the boy's arm. "It means you owe me nothing."

"Caswallon pays you to look after me," said Gaelen, pulling his arm away from Oracle's touch.

"No, he does not. Nor will he. Though he may bring a joint of venison, or a sack of vegetables the next time he comes." Oracle left the bedside to add several chunks of wood to the fire. "It's so wasteful," he called back, "keeping a fire here in spring. But the cave gets cold and my blood is running thin."

"It's nice," said Gaelen. "I like to see a fire burning."

"Chopping wood keeps my body from seizing up," said the old man, returning to the bedside. "Now, what would you like to know?"

Gaelen shrugged. "About what?"

"About anything."

"You could tell me about the clans. Where did they come from?"

"A wise choice," said Oracle, sitting at the bedside. "There are more than thirty clans, but originally there was one: the Farlain. Under their leader, Farla the First, they journeyed to Druin more than six hundred years ago, escaping some war in their homeland. The Farlain settled in the valley below here, and two neighboring valleys to the east. They prospered and multiplied. But, as the years passed, there was discord and several families broke from the clan. There was a little trouble and some fighting, but the new clan formed their own settlements and began calling themselves Pallides, which in the old tongue meant Seekers of New Trails. In the decades that followed other splits developed, giving birth to the Haesten, the Loda, the Dunilds, and many more. There have been several wars between the clans. In the last, more than one hundred years ago, six thousand men lost their lives. Then the mighty king Ironhand put an end to it. He gave us wisdom—and the Games."

"What are the Games?" asked Gaelen.

"Tests of skill in a score of disciplines. Archery, swordsmanship, racing, jumping, wrestling . . . many, many events. All the clans take part. It lasts two weeks from Midsummer's Night, and concludes with the Whorl Feast. You will see it this year—and you will never forget it."

"What are the prizes?"

"Pride is the prize—and always has been." The old man's blue eyes twinkled. "Well, pride and a small sack of gold. Caswallon took gold in the archery last year. A better bowman has never been seen in these mountains."

“Tell me of him.”

The old man chuckled and shook his head. “Caswallon. Always the children seek stories of Caswallon. If Caswallon were a swallow he would stay north for the winter, just to see how cold it gets. What can any man tell you of Caswallon?”

“Is he a warrior?”

“He is certainly that, but then most clansmen are. He is good with sword and knife, though others are better. He is an expert hunter and a good provider.”

“You like him?” asked Gaelen.

“Like him? He infuriates me. But I love him. I don’t know how his wife puts up with him. But then Maeg’s a spirited lass.” Oracle rose from the bedside and moved to the table, filling two clay goblets with water. Passing one to Gaelen, he sat down once more. “Aye, that’s the story to give you a taste of young Caswallon.

“Three years ago at the Games, he saw and fell in love with a maid of the Pallides, the daughter of their Hunt Lord Maggrig. Now, Maggrig is a formidable warrior and a man of hasty and uncertain temper. Above all things on this earth he hates and despises the Farlain. Mention the clan name and his blood boils and his face darkens.

“So imagine his fury when Caswallon approaches him and asks for his daughter’s hand. Men close by swore his veins almost burst at the temples. And Maeg herself took one look at him and dismissed him for an arrogant fool. Caswallon took the insults they heaped on him, bowed, and departed to the archery tourney, which he won an hour later. Most of us thought that would be the last of the affair.” Oracle rose and stretched his back, then moved to the fire and added two thick logs. He sighed and refilled his goblet.

“Well, what happened?” urged Gaelen.

“Happened? Oh, yes. I’m sorry, my boy, but the mind wanders sometimes. Where was I? Caswallon’s courting of Maeg.” Returning to the bedside, he sat down again. “Many of the Farlain enjoyed the jest for such it had to be. Maeg was almost twenty and unmarried and it was considered she was a frosty maiden with little interest in men.

“Two months later, in dead of night, Caswallon slipped into the Pallides lands, past their scouts and into the heart of Maggrig’s own village. He scaled the stone wall of the old man’s house and entered Maeg’s room unseen. Just before dawn he awoke Maeg, stifled her scream with a kiss, climbed from the window, and was gone into the timberline. Oh, they chased him all right. Fifty of the fleetest Pallides runners, but Caswallon was the racer to beat them all, and he made it home without a scratch.

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