

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Ravenheart: A Novel of the Rigante

David A. Gemmell

About the Book

It is eight hundred years since the legendary King Connavar defeated the army of Stone. The Rigante are now a conquered people, living under the iron rule of the Varlish, their customs despised, their culture all but destroyed. One woman remains who follows the ancient paths once trod by the Rigante. She is the Wyrđ of Wishing Tree Wood, and she alone knows the nature of the evil soon to be unleashed on a doomed world.

In a perilous land, her hopes are pinned on two men: Jaim Grymauch, the giant Rigante fighter, a man haunted by his failure to save the friend he loved from betrayal, and Kaelin Ring, a youth whose deadly talents will earn him the enmity of all Varlish. One will become the Ravenheart, an outlaw leader whose daring exploits will inspire the Rigante. The other will forge a legend and light the fires of rebellion.

The third in the compelling Rigante series, *Ravenheart* has everything fans of heroic fantasy can wish for – and then some.

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About the Author

Also By David A. Gemmell
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Ravenheart



David A. Gemmell

Ravenheart is dedicated with love to the memory of Bill Woodford, a big, flawed, tough and kindly man. During the Second World War he fought with distinction at El Alamein, Anzio, Salerno and Monte Cassino, and was mentioned in despatches twice for gallant conduct. In 1954 he married a woman he adored, and raised her son as his own. As I said in the dedication to *Legend*, back in 1984, without him Druss the Legend would never have walked the walls of Dros Delnoch. He was at the heart of many of the heroes I have created over the years - none more so than Jaim Grymauch, whose story is told within these pages.

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Prologue

THE SUN WAS setting and Lanovar sat slumped against the stone, the last of the sunlight bathing him in gold. There was a little heat in this dying winter sun, and the brightness felt good against his closed lids. Lanovar sighed and opened his eyes. The huge figure of Jaim Grymauch stood close by, gazing down at him.

‘Let me carry you to the Wyrd, Lan,’ he said. ‘She’ll cast some ancient spell and heal you.’

‘In a while, my friend. I’ll just rest here and gather my strength.’

Grymauch swore and turned away. Loosening the strap at his shoulder he swung the massive broadsword clear of his back. The black hilt was almost a foot long, crowned with an iron globe pommel. The curved quillons were beautifully crafted to represent the flared wings of a hunting falcon. Drawing the fifty-two-inch blade from the scabbard, Grymauch examined the sword in the fading light. There were still bloodstains upon the blade and he wiped them away with the hem of his black cloak. Beside him Lanovar lifted clear the wedge of blood-soaked cloth he had been holding to the wound in his side. The bleeding had slowed, and the pain was almost gone. He glanced up at Grymauch.

‘That monstrosity should be in the Druagh museum,’ he said. ‘It’s an anachronism.’

‘I don’t know what that means,’ muttered Grymauch.

‘It means out of its time, my friend. That blade was created to rip through plate armour. No-one wears plate any more.’

Grymauch sighed. Returning the blade to its scabbard, he sat down beside his friend. 'Out of its time, eh?' he said. 'It's like us then, Lan. We should have been born in the days of the *real* highland kings.'

Blood was leaking slowly from the cloth plugging the exit wound in Lanovar's lower back, a dark stain spreading across the outlawed blue and green cloak of the Rigante. 'I need to plug that wound again,' said Grymauch.

Lanovar made no complaint as the clansman pulled him forward and he felt nothing as Grymauch pressed a fresh wad of cloth into the wound. His mind wandered briefly, and he saw again the Standing Stone and the tall, black-clad man waiting there. Regrets were pointless now, but he should have trusted his instincts. He had known deep in his heart that the Moidart could not be trusted. As their gaze met he had seen the hatred in the man's dark eyes. But the prize had been too great, and Lanovar had allowed the dazzle of its promise to blind him to the truth.

The Moidart had promised that the Turbulent Years would end. No more pointless bloodshed, no more senseless feuds, no more murdered soldiers and clansmen. This night, at the ancient stone, he and the Moidart would clasp hands and put an end to the savagery. For his part the Moidart had also agreed to petition the king to have Clan Rigante reinstated to the Roll of Honour.

Lanovar's black warhound, Raven, had growled deeply as they walked into the clearing. 'Be silent, boy,' whispered Lanovar. 'This is an end to battle - not the beginning of it.' He approached the Moidart, extending his hand. 'It is good that we can meet in this way,' he said. 'This feud has bled the highlands for too long.'

'Aye, it ends tonight,' agreed the Moidart, stepping back into the shadow of the stone.

For a fraction of a heartbeat Lanovar stood still, his hand still extended. Then he heard movement from the undergrowth to left and right and saw armed men rise up

from hiding. Six soldiers carrying muskets emerged and surrounded the Rigante leader. Several others moved into sight, sabres in their hands. Raven bunched his muscles to charge, but Lanovar stopped him with a word of command. The Rigante leader stood very still. As agreed, he had brought no weapon to the meeting.

He glanced back at the Moidart. The nobleman was smiling now, though no humour showed in his dark, hooded eyes. Instead there was hatred, deep and all-consuming.

‘So, your word counts for nothing,’ said Lanovar softly. ‘Safe conduct, you said.’

‘It will be safe conduct, you Rigante scum,’ said the Moidart. ‘Safe conduct to my castle. Safe conduct to the deepest dungeon within it. Then safe conduct up every step of the gallows.’

At that moment a bellowing war cry pierced the air. A massive figure rushed into sight, a huge broadsword raised high. His lower face was masked by a black scarf, and his dark clothes bore no clan markings. Lanovar’s spirits soared.

It was Grymauch!

The surprised soldiers swung towards the charging warrior. Several shots were fired, but not one ball struck him. The massive broadsword clove down, slicing a soldier from shoulder to belly before exiting in a bloody spray. In the panic that followed the clansman’s charge Lanovar leapt to his left, grabbed a musket by the barrel and dragged it from the hands of a startled soldier. As the man rushed in to retrieve the weapon Lanovar crashed the butt into his face, knocking him from his feet. A second musketeer ran in. The warhound Raven gave a savage growl then leapt, his great jaws closing on the man’s throat. Lanovar raised the musket to his shoulder and sought out the Moidart. The nobleman had ducked back into the undergrowth. More shots rang out. Smoke from the guns drifted like mist in the clearing, and the air stank of sulphur. Grymauch, slashing the great blade left and right, hurled himself at the musketeers. A

swordsman ran in behind him. Raising the captured musket again Lanovar fired quickly. The shot struck the hilt of the swordsman's upraised weapon and ricocheted back through the hapless man's right eye. Across the clearing three more musketeers came into view. Raven, his jaws drenched with blood, tore into them. One went down screaming. The others shot into the snarling hound. Raven slumped to the ground.

Lanovar threw aside the musket and ran towards Grymauch. The musketeers, their weapons empty, were backing away from the ferocious clansman. The swordsmen were either dead or fled into the woods. Lanovar moved alongside the blood-spattered warrior.

'We leave! Now!' he shouted.

As they swung away the Moidart stepped from behind a tree. Grymauch saw him - and the long-barrelled pistol in his hand. Vainly he tried to move across Lanovar, shielding him. But the shot tore through Grymauch's black cloak, ripping into the outlaw leader's side and out through his back. 'That is for Rayena!' shouted the Moidart.

Lanovar's legs had given way instantly. Grymauch reached down, hauled him upright, and draped the paralysed man across his shoulder. Then he had run into the thickets beyond the trail. At first the pain had been incredible, but then Lanovar had passed out. When he awoke he was here on the mountainside, and the pain was all but gone.

'How are you feeling?' asked Grymauch.

'Not so braw,' admitted Lanovar. Grymauch had plugged the wound again and had settled him back against a rock face. Lanovar began to slide sideways. He tried to move his right arm to stop himself. The limb twitched, but did not respond. Grymauch caught him and held him close for a moment. 'Just wedge me against the rock,' whispered Lanovar. Grymauch did as he was bid.

'Are you warm enough? You look cold, Lan. I'll light a fire.'

‘And bring them down upon us? I think not.’ Reaching down, he pressed his left hand against the flesh of his left thigh. ‘I cannot feel my leg.’

‘I told you, man. Did I not tell you?’ stormed Grymauch. ‘The man is a serpent. There is no honour in him.’

‘Aye, you told me.’ Lanovar began to tremble. Grymauch moved in close, pulling off his own black cloak and wrapping it around the shoulders of his friend. He looked into Lanovar’s curiously coloured eyes, one green, one gold.

‘We’ll rest a little,’ said Grymauch. ‘Then I’ll find the Wyrð.’

Jaim Grymauch moved out along the ledge and stared down over the mountainside. There was no sign of pursuit now. But there would be. He glanced back at his wounded friend. Again and again he replayed the scene in his mind. He should have been there sooner. Instead, to avoid being seen by Lanovar, he had cut across the high trail, adding long minutes to the journey. As he crested the rise he had seen the soldiers crouched in hiding, and watched as his greatest friend walked into the ambush. Masking his face with his scarf Jaim had drawn his sword and rushed down to hurl himself at the enemy. He would willingly have sacrificed his own life to save Lanovar from harm.

The sun was setting, the temperature dropping fast. Jaim shivered. There was precious little fuel to be found this high. Trees did not grow here. He moved back alongside Lanovar. The Rigante leader’s face looked ghostly pale, his eyes and cheeks sunken. Jaim’s black cloak sat upon the man’s shoulders like a dark shroud. Jaim stroked Lanovar’s brow. The wounded man opened his eyes.

Jaim saw that he was watching the sky turn crimson as the sun set. It was a beautiful sunset and Lanovar smiled.

‘I love this land,’ he said, his voice stronger. ‘I love it with all my heart, Jaim. This is a land of heroes. Did you know the great Connavar was born not two miles from here? And the

Battle King, Bane. There used to be a settlement by the three streams.'

Jaim shrugged. 'All I know about Connavar is that he was nine feet tall and had a magic sword, crafted from lightning. Could have done with that sword two hours ago. I'd have left none of the bastards alive.'

They lapsed into silence. Jaim felt a growing sense of disorientation. It was as if he was dreaming. Time had no meaning, and even the breeze had faded away. The new night was still and infinitely peaceful.

Lanovar is dying.

The thought came unbidden and anger raged through him. 'Rubbish!' he said aloud. 'He is young and strong. He has always been strong. I'll get him to the Wyrd. By heaven I will!'

Jaim rolled to his knees and, lifting Lanovar into his arms, pushed himself to his feet. Lanovar's head was resting on Jaim's shoulder. Moonlight bathed them both. 'We're going now, Lan.'

Lanovar groaned, his face contorting with pain. 'Put . . . me . . . down.'

'We must find the Wyrd. She'll have magic. The Wishing Tree woods have magic.' In his mind he saw the woods, picturing the path he must take. At least four miles from here, part of it across open ground. Two hours of hard toil.

Two hours.

Jaim could feel Lanovar's lifeblood running over his hands. In that moment Jaim knew they didn't have two hours. He sank to his knees and placed his friend on the ground. Tears misted his eyes. His great body began to shake. He fought to control his grief, but it crashed through his defences. Throughout his twenty years of life there had been one constant: the knowledge of Lanovar's friendship, and, with it, the belief that they would change the world.

'Look after Gian and the babe,' whispered Lanovar.

Jaim took a deep breath. He wiped away his tears. 'I'll do my best,' he said, his voice breaking. His mind, reeling from the horror of the present, floated back to the past: days of childhood and adolescence, pranks and adventures. Lanovar had always been reckless, and yet canny. He had a nose for trouble, and the wit to escape the consequences.

Not this time, thought Grymauch. He felt the tears beginning again, but this time shed them in silence. Then he saw Gian's face in his mind. Sweet heaven, how would he tell her?

She was heavily pregnant, the babe due in a few days. It was the thought of the child to be that had led Lanovar to trust the Moidart. He had told Jaim only the night before that he didn't want the child growing up in the world of violence he had known. As they sat at supper in Lanovar's small, sod-roofed hut, the Rigante leader had spoken with passion about the prospect of peace. 'I want my son to be able to wear the Rigante colours with pride, not be hunted down as an outlaw. Not too much to ask, is it?'

Gian said nothing, but Lanovar's younger sister, the red-haired Maev, had spoken up. 'You can ask what you like,' she said. 'But the Moidart cannot be trusted. I know this in my soul!'

'You should listen to Maev,' urged the raven-haired Gian, moving into the main room and easing herself down into an old armchair. One of the armrests was missing, and some horsehair was protruding from a split in the leather. 'The Moidart hates you,' she said. 'He has sworn a blood oath to have your head stuck upon a spike.'

'Tis all politics, woman. Peace with the highland Rigante will mean more tax income for the Moidart and the king. It will mean more merchants able to bring their convoys through the mountain passes, and that will bring down the prices. Gold is what the king cares about. Not heads upon spikes. And, as one of his barons, the Moidart will have to do what is good for the king.'

‘You’ll take Grymauch with you,’ insisted Gian.

‘I will not. We are to meet alone, with no weapons. I’ll take Raven.’

Later Maev had come to the hulking fighter as he sat in the doorway of his own hut.

Normally his heart would beat faster as she approached him, his breath catch in his throat. Maev was the most beautiful woman Grymauch had ever seen. He had hoped to find the courage to tell her so, but instead had stood by as she and the handsome young warrior, Calofair, had begun their courtship. Calofair was now in the north, trading with the Black Rigante. When he came back he and Maev would Walk the Tree.

Jaim glanced up as Maev approached. ‘You’ll go anyway,’ she said.

‘Aye, of course I will.’

‘You’ll not let him see you.’

Jaim had laughed. ‘He’s a bonny swordsman and a fine fighter, but he’s a hopeless woodsman. He’ll not see me, Maev.’

Gian came walking across to them. Maev put her arms around the pregnant woman, and kissed her cheek. Jaim Grymauch wondered briefly how it would feel if Maev did the same to him. He reddened at the thought. Gian stretched and pressed her palms into the small of her back. This movement caused her pregnant belly to look enormous. Jaim laughed. ‘Pregnancy suits some women,’ he said. ‘Their skin glows, their hair shines. They make a man think of the wonders of nature. Not you, though.’

‘Aye, she’s ugly now right enough,’ said Maev. ‘But when she’s birthed the rascal she’ll become slim and beautiful again. Whereas you, you great lump, will always be ugly.’ Maev’s smile faded. ‘Why does the Moidart hate Lanovar so?’

Jaim shrugged. The truth clung to him, burning in his heart, but he could not voice it. Lanovar was a fine man,

braw and brave. He had many virtues and few vices. Sadly, one of his vices was that he found women irresistible. Before wedding Gian the previous spring Lanovar had been seen several times in Eldacre town. Few knew the woman he had met there, but Jaim Grymauch was one of them. He suspected that the Moidart was another. Rayena Tremain was beautiful. No doubt of it. She was tall and slender, and she moved with an animal grace that set men's hearts beating wildly. The first affair with Lanovar had been brief, the parting apparently acrimonious.

Rayena had – four months later – wed the Moidart, in a great ceremony in Eldacre Cathedral. Within the year there were rumours that the marriage was foundering.

Lanovar began acting strangely, disappearing for days at a time. Jaim, concerned for his leader and his friend, had secretly followed him one morning. Lanovar travelled to the high hills, to a small, abandoned hunting lodge. After an hour a lone horsewoman rode up. Jaim was astonished to see it was Rayena.

Beside him now Lanovar groaned, the sound jerking Jaim back to the painful present. Lanovar's face was bathed in sweat, and his breathing was shallow and laboured. 'I was never . . . frightened . . . of dying, Grymauch,' he said.

'I know that.'

'I am now. My son is about to be . . . born and I've . . . given him no soul-name.'

In the distance a wolf howled.

Chapter One

THE THIN CANE slashed through the air. The fourteen-year-old youth winced, but uttered no cry. Blood seeped from a split in the skin of his right palm. The tall, bony schoolmaster loomed over the black-haired boy. He was about to speak, but saw the blood on the tip of his bamboo cane. Alterith Shaddler gazed on it with distaste, then laid the bamboo on the shoulder of the lad's grey shirt. Drawing the cane back and forth he cleaned it, leaving thin crimson streaks on the threadbare garment. 'There are those,' said Alterith Shaddler, his voice as cold as the air in the stone schoolroom, 'who doubt the wisdom of trying to teach the rudiments of civilized behaviour to highland brats. Since knowing you, boy, I am more inclined to count myself among their number.'

Alterith placed the cane upon the desktop, straightened his threadbare white horsehair wig, and clasped his hands behind his back. The youth remained where he was, his hands now at his sides. It was a shame that he'd been forced to draw blood, but these clan youngsters were not like Varlish boys. They were savages who did not feel pain in the same way. Not once did any of them make a sound while being thrashed. Alterith was of the opinion that the ability to feel pain was linked to intelligence - 'No sense no feeling', as his old tutor, Mr Brandryth, was apt to say regarding clan folk.

The schoolmaster looked into the youth's dark eyes. 'You understand why I punished you?'

'No, I do not.'

Alterith's hand lashed out, slapping the boy hard upon the cheek. The sound hung in the air. 'You will call me sir when you respond to me. Do you understand *that*?'

'I do . . . sir,' answered the youth, his voice steady, but his eyes blazing with anger.

Alterith was tempted to slap him again for the look alone – and would have, had the distant ringing of Dusk Bell not sounded from the St Persis Albitane School. Alterith glanced to his right, gazing through the open window and across the old parade square to the main school building. Already Varlish youngsters were emerging from the great doors, carrying their books. One of the masters came in sight, his midnight blue academic cape shimmering in the afternoon sunshine. Alterith looked with longing at the old building. Within it were libraries, filled with historical tomes, fine works of philosophy, diaries of famous Varlish soldiers and statesmen. There were three halls, and even a small theatre set aside for great plays. The teacher sighed, and returned his gaze to the cold stone walls of his own classroom. It was a former stable, the stalls ripped out and replaced with twenty ancient desks and chairs. Twenty chairs and fifty students, the unlucky ones sitting on the floor in ranks around the walls. There were no books here, the children using slate boards and chalk for their work. The walls were bare but for a single map of the Moidart's domain, and beside it the daily prayer for the Moidart's continued health.

What a waste of my talents, he thought.

'We will recite the prayer,' he said, offering the customary short bow. The fifty pupils in the class rose, and – as they had been taught – returned the bow. Then the chant began.

'May the Source bless the Moidart, and keep him in good health. May his lands be fertile, his people fed, his honour magnified, his laws be known, his word be obeyed, for the good of the faithful.'

'Good day to you all,' said Alterith.

'Good day, sir,' they chanted.

Alterith looked down into the eyes of the black-haired youth. 'Begone, Master Ring. And bring a better attitude with you tomorrow.'

The lad said nothing. He took one backward step then spun on his heel and walked away.

One day, thought Alterith Shaddler, Kaelin Ring will hang. He has no respect for his betters.

The master sighed again, then moved swiftly across the room, lifting his greatcoat from its hook on the wall and swinging it across his thin shoulders. Despite the promise of spring the highland air was still icy cold. Wrapping a long woollen scarf around his neck Alterith left the old stable and walked across the parade ground into the school proper, striding down the now silent corridor leading to the outer grounds. Several of the other teachers were sitting in the Academic Chamber as he passed. A fire was blazing in the hearth and Alterith could smell the spices used in the mulled wine. It would have been pleasant to sit in one of those deep armchairs, his feet extended towards the fire. But then, unlike the other members of staff at Persis Albitane, teaching was Alterith's only source of income, and he could not afford the Chamber membership fee. Pushing thoughts of mulled wine and warm fires from his mind he strode out into the cold air. The sun was shining in a clear, bright sky. Immediately his eyes began to water. Alterith squinted towards the road and the lake beyond.

He could see the pony and open carriage already making their way slowly along the water's edge. Alterith's heart sank at the prospect of the four-mile journey to the Moidart's estate. He would be frozen and blue by the time they arrived, his teeth chattering, his mind unable to function properly. Alterith hoped the Moidart himself would not be present to witness his arrival. The last time they had met, Alterith, limbs trembling with the cold, had tried to bow – only to see his horsehair wig slide off and land on the

marbled floor at the Moidart's feet. Alterith blushed at the memory.

The sound of the pony's hooves could be heard now and Alterith walked down to meet the carriage, anxious for the journey to begin as soon as possible. The driver nodded to him but said nothing. He was, as usual, wearing a thick overcoat and had a plaid blanket wrapped around his shoulders. Alterith climbed into the open-topped carriage and settled back, pushing his bony hands into the sleeves of his greatcoat and trying not to think about the cold.

Kaelin Ring had no coat. He had loaned it to his sick friend, Banny, though at this moment was regretting the kindness. Banny had not come to school today, which meant the coat was hanging on a hook in his hut, and not keeping the wind's icy fingers from tugging at Kaelin's thin shirt.

Kaelin ran from the school yard and out onto the cattle trail leading up into the hills. At least the cold made the pain in his hands less worrisome, he thought. Anger touched him then, warming him as he ran. He pictured old White-Wig, tall and skinny, his narrow lips constantly twisted in a contemptuous smirk, his pale eyes seeping tears whenever sunlight shone upon them. His clothes smelled of mothballs. The bony Varlish bastard will pay for every stroke he has ever laid upon me, decided Kaelin as he ran. He tried to think of punishments befitting such an ogre. When I am a man next year I'll nail him by his hands to the schoolhouse gates, then I'll take a whip to his hide. Five strokes for every one he's laid upon me.

Suddenly Kaelin's good humour came flooding back. He would need to be a great deal better at his arithmetic to tally such a sum. What a pity it was not thought worthwhile to teach the clan children mathematics. Perhaps he should ask old White-Wig for private lessons. The thought was so ridiculous that Kaelin slowed to a stop and burst out laughing. How would the conversation go? 'I'm planning my

vengeance on you. So would you kindly explain the multiplication so that I may lash your back to the exact number required?’

His laughter pealed out once more, then faded as he heard hoofbeats. Moving to the side of the trail he waited. Five riders emerged from the trees. All of them were soldiers of the Moidart – beetlebacks, as the highlanders called them, referring to the black breastplates of baked leather they wore. The lead rider was a portly officer named Gallriott. He was known widely as Gallriott the Borderer, since his main role was to track and capture criminals and outlaws before they could cross the borders that marked the limit of the Moidart’s jurisdiction. Just behind him was the sallow-faced Sergeant Bindoe and three other soldiers Kaelin did not know.

Gallriott drew rein and smiled at Kaelin: ‘Cold to be going without a coat, Master Ring.’ His voice, as ever, was friendly and warm, and Kaelin found it difficult to hold a dislike for the man. But not impossible if he worked at it.

‘Aye, it is, sir.’

‘Perhaps your uncle Jaim will buy you one.’

‘I’ll ask him next time he visits, sir.’

‘You’ve not seen him then?’

‘Has he broken the law, Mr Gallriott?’

The officer chuckled. ‘Always, boy. He was born to break the law. Two nights ago he was in a fight at the Cock Crow tavern. Broke a man’s arm and stabbed another in the face. Fellow was lucky not to lose an eye. If you see your uncle tell him the owner of the tavern applied to the magistrate for damages to three tables, several chairs and a window frame. Costs have been set at one chailling and nine daens – plus a two chailling and six daens fine. If it is paid by the end of the month there will be no charges against Jaim. If not, I am to arrest him and take him to the Assizes for judgement by the Moidart.’

‘If I see him I’ll tell him, Mr Gallriott.’ Kaelin shivered.

‘And get yourself a coat,’ said the officer. Heeling his mount, he rode away. Kaelin watched as the riders cantered towards the town. Sergeant Bindoe glanced back, and Kaelin could feel the malice in the man. Beetlebacks were hated and feared in the highlands. Most – though not all – were Varlish, and over the years had been responsible for many outrages. Only a month previously a woman living in an isolated cabin had walked into town and reported to the magistrate that she had been raped by three beetlebacks, one of whom was Bindoe. Her story had not been believed and she had been birched and jailed for two weeks for fabrication under oath. After all, it was said, what self-respecting Varlish soldier would touch a lice-infested highland slut?

Kaelin waited until the beetlebacks were out of sight then ran on. The wind was less fierce within the woods and he was soon sweating as he ran. The trail wound up, ever higher. He stopped at a break in the trees and gazed down over the hills below. Hundreds of small dwellings dotted the countryside, and many more, he knew, were hidden from his gaze, their sod roofs blending into the landscape. Cattle and sheep and goats were grazing on the new spring grass, and, some way to the west, Kaelin saw more beetlebacks riding the Eldacre Road where it met the shores of the lake.

Cutting away from the main trail he darted up a side slope, hurdling a fallen tree, and sprinted along the final stretch to the crack in the cliff face. It had rained in the night and, glancing down, Kaelin saw that he was leaving footprints in the earth. He continued to run along the line of the cliffs until he reached higher ground, then climbed to the vertical rock. The face was sheer for some fifty feet, but Jaim Grymauch had taught him to overcome his fear of heights, and to glory in the joys of the climb. Wedge holds, hand hams, pressure holds, all were second nature to Kaelin Ring now and he smoothly ascended the wall of rock, traversing back until he was once more alongside the crack

in the face. Swinging himself inside he edged along the narrow gap then climbed again, emerging into a deep cave. A fire was burning in a rough-made hearth and a man was sitting beside it, gently burnishing the blade of an enormous broadsword. Kaelin leapt to the floor of the cave and ran to the fire. The man glanced up. He had but one eye, the other covered by a strip of black cloth wound around his bald head, and his face was scarred and pitted. There was a large, purple bruise upon his cheek and a cut to his lip was almost healed. Splashes of dried blood had stained the black cloak and kilt he wore.

‘I hope you learned a goodly amount today,’ said Jaim Grymauch.

Kaelin settled down opposite the big man. ‘I learned that Connavar was a Varlish prince and not a clansman at all,’ he said.

‘Aye, I’ve heard that. Did they also tell you that he shat pearls and pissed fine wine?’ Putting aside the broadsword Jaim reached out and took Kaelin’s hand, turning the palm towards the firelight. ‘I see that you’ve been insolent again. What was it this time?’

‘I told old White-Wig that Connavar was Rigante and that the man who wrote about him being Varlish was a stinking liar.’

‘I’m a great believer in diplomacy, Kaelin, and it pleases me to see you mastering it at such a tender age.’

‘Oh, and I saw Mr Galliot. He says you’ve to pay one chailling and nine daens for damages and you’ve been fined another two chaillings and six daens. He says it must be paid by the end of the month or you’ll be taken before the Moidart.’

‘So how much do I owe in all?’

‘A lot,’ answered Kaelin.

‘I’m not good with numbers, boy. Calculate it for me.’

Kaelin closed his eyes. Best to calculate the daens first, he thought. Nine plus six made . . . he counted it on his fingers.

Fifteen. Suddenly he thought of Banny again, wondering if his cough had improved. Jerking himself back to the problem he calculated that fifteen daens made one chailling and three daens. To which he had to add the fine – two chaillings. Making three chaillings and three daens. He told Jaim the figure.

‘You’ve lost a chailling,’ said Jaim.

‘I have not!’

‘Forget the daens for a moment. How many chaillings was the fine?’

‘Two.’

‘And how many for the damages?’

‘One.’

‘Well that makes three already. Now you have fifteen daens. That makes one chailling and three daens. So, I owe them four chaillings and three daens.’

Kaelin scowled. ‘You told me you were bad at figures.’

‘I *am* bad at figures. I’m just not as bad as you.’ The warrior sighed. ‘I’m getting old, Kaelin. Was a time when the damages and fine always came to more than five chaillings. But now I’m weary before I’ve bent the second chair over some poor fool’s head.’

‘You’re not old,’ said Kaelin, moving to sit beside the grizzled warrior and enjoying the warmth of the fire. ‘You’ll never be old.’

‘That’s probably true.’ He glanced at Kaelin. ‘You staying long, boy?’

‘Only an hour or so. Aunt Maev has chores for me. Why don’t you come back and have supper with us?’

Jaim shook his head. ‘I’m feeling solitary.’

‘You want me to go?’

Jaim grinned, then winced as the scab on his lip parted. He dabbed at it with a finger. ‘No, I don’t want you to go. Sitting like this reminds me of times I sat with your father. You look just like him, save for the eyes. His were strange,

one green, one gold. You have your mother's eyes. She was a good woman, Gian. Deserved better.'

Kaelin looked away and added some sticks to the fire. His mother had been killed two nights after he was born. Beetlebacks had raided the settlement. Few had escaped. Aunt Maev had been one of them, carrying the infant Kaelin in her arms. He changed the subject.

'What was the fight in the tavern about?'

'I don't remember.'

'You stabbed a man in the face, Grymauch. You ought to remember.'

'Aye, that's true, I guess.' The big man stretched himself out beside the fire. 'It was probably over a woman. Most fights are.'

'Have you ever lost a fight?'

Jaim was silent for a moment. 'I think that - in a way - I have lost every fight I've ever had.' He sat up. 'I'm like the Rigante, Kaelin. I have fought men in the highlands, in the south, and across the great ocean. No man has ever bested me in battle, and yet I sit in a hidden cave nursing my bruises. I own no cattle. I have no land.'

'You should wed Aunt Maev.'

Jaim's laughter pealed out. 'She's too good a woman for the likes of me, lad. As she'd tell you herself.'

'You like her, though?'

'Of course I like her. She's a woman to walk the mountains with.'

'She's mean with her money, though,' said Kaelin.

'Aye, she's careful. She needs to be. The Varlish don't like to see any highlander gathering wealth. It makes them uncomfortable.'

'Why? She pays her tax to the Moidart and the king.'

'They mock us and tell us we are stupid, but secretly they fear us, Kaelin. Wealth is power. The Varlish have no desire to see powerful highlanders. Now, enough talk. You tell

Maev I'll be needing you at the week's end. The pass is open and I've a hankering to see the ocean.'

Kaelin laughed. 'Will it just be the two of us?'

'Of course. Together we're an army, boy.'

'And whose cattle will it be? Old Kocha?'

'I've not made up my mind. I like to spread my favours.'

Jaim chuckled. 'They say the Moidart has brought in a new bull from the Isles. Ten pounds he paid for it.'

'How much is that in chaillings?' asked Kaelin.

'Two hundred.'

'For a bull?' Kaelin was amazed that such a sum could have been paid. 'Are you joking with me, Grymauch?'

'I never joke about the price of cattle. I'm wondering how much the Pinance would pay for it.'

'How much do you think?' asked Kaelin.

'At least enough for my fine,' answered Jaim Grymauch, with a wide grin.

The ride had not proved quite as uncomfortable as Alterith Shaddler had feared. The wind had died down, the temperature hovering a few degrees above freezing. There was still snow on the high ground, and the wheels of the carriage crunched over icy puddles, but Alterith believed he could finally feel spring in the air.

The carriage slowed as it neared the top of a rise. The driver cracked his whip above the pony's ears. The little beast lunged forward. Alterith felt a moment of motion sickness and took a deep breath. Then the carriage topped the rise, and the schoolteacher found himself gazing down over the magnificence of the Eldacre valley. The first sight to catch the eye was the mighty castle, rearing like a giant tombstone on a hill above the town.

The ancestral home of the Moidart, Eldacre Castle was a monument to the power and ingenuity of the Varlish race. Alterith's heart swelled each time he saw it. Walls forty feet high, boasting twenty jutting turrets and four massive gates

of seasoned oak, reinforced with iron. Fifteen thousand workers had laboured for seven years to build it. The finest stonemasons and carpenters had been brought in from the south at vast expense. Many of them had stayed on in the valley after the castle was built, including Alterith's own ancestors, one of whom had been responsible for fashioning the curved rafters of the chapel within the Great Keep.

For three hundred years Eldacre Castle had been an impregnable fortress in times of war, and a mighty symbol of Varlish superiority in times of peace. Just the sight of her massive walls and turrets, fashioned with murder holes and oil vents, was enough to quell any thoughts of rebellion within renegade highland hearts.

The carriage picked up speed as it moved down the hill. Alterith's motion sickness returned. 'Slow down, for pity's sake!' he yelled.

'Mustn't be late, sir,' answered the driver.

Alterith sat miserably, praying that he would not be sick. Bad enough that his wig had fallen off at the Moidart's feet. The prospect of arriving before the Moidart in a vomit-stained coat was more than he could bear. The Moidart would, in all probability, dismiss him, and Alterith could ill afford to lose the extra two chaillings a month. Steeling himself, he clung on to the strap on the inside of the carriage door and tried to focus his mind on something other than his heaving stomach. He chose history.

Eldacre. Originally Old Oaks, the centre of government in the ancient kingdom of the Rigante, once ruled by Connavar, Bane, Laguish, Borander and Sepdannet the Leaper. Now a town of some twenty-five thousand souls, with three mines, two of coal, one of gold, five blast furnaces feeding a thriving industry making muskets for the king's armies, iron rims for wagon wheels, ornate buckles and accoutrements for officers and gentlemen, and swords for the military and for export. It was a prosperous community, a healthy mix of industrial and agricultural, with

seventeen churches, a massive cathedral, and an Academy for the Instruction of the Righteous. Alterith himself was a graduate of the academy, having majored in the Terms of the Sacrifice, and the evangelical journeys of St Persis Albitane.

At last the carriage began to slow, cutting away from the main highway and onto a narrow stone road leading between a line of fir trees. Leaning to his left and looking past the hunched figure of the driver, Alterith could see the wrought iron gates that barred the way to the Moidart's huge country manor. It was here that the Lord of the Highlands spent the winter. Two musketeers stood sentry, the sunlight gleaming on the gold braid and bright brass buttons of their yellow jerkins. The first of them called out for the carriage to stop, and, laying aside his long-barrelled musket, stepped forward to inspect the vehicle. He looked closely at Alterith.

'Are you carrying any weapons, sir?' he asked.

'I am not.'

'Be so kind as to step down.'

Alterith pushed open the small door and climbed from the carriage. His black greatcoat was tight fitting, but, he supposed, it could still have hidden a small knife. The soldier expertly ran his hands over Alterith's garments.

'My apologies to you, sir, for the impertinence,' said the sentry.

Alterith resumed his seat and the second sentry opened the gates.

The sound of blades clashing was music to the ears of Mulgrave. Such was the skill of the fencing master that he did not even have to see a duel to judge the skill of the fighters. He had but to hear the sweet sword song of kissing steel. Mulgrave loved to fence, and could have made his fortune as a duellist in any one of fifty major cities across the empire. The problem – though Mulgrave did not see it as

such – was that he did not like to kill. There were those who thought him squeamish, and others who whispered that the swordsman was a coward. None, however, was sure enough of either view to dare to speak them to his face.

Mulgrave was not only a master swordsman – he *looked* like a master swordsman, tall, lean, and with reflexes that could make a man believe in magic. His eyes were a pale, metallic blue, deep set and piercing, his features sharp, his mouth unsmiling. His hair, close cropped to his skull, was the silver of polished iron, despite the fact that he was not yet thirty years of age.

Selecting a slender rapier, the point capped by a small wooden ball, he bowed to the golden-haired young noble standing before him. His opponent pulled his face mask into place and took up his position.

‘Are you ready?’ asked the fifteen-year-old Gaise Macon.

‘Always,’ answered Mulgrave, donning his own mask of fine mesh.

The young man darted forward, his rapier lancing towards the chest guard of the older man. Mulgrave side-stepped, avoiding the thrust. Gaise stumbled. Mulgrave’s rapier struck the young man’s leg a stinging blow. ‘A nice idea, but poorly executed, my lord,’ said Mulgrave. Gaise did not reply. Nor did he react to the blow, save to assume once more the fighting stance. This pleased the master. Their blades touched, slid away, and the practice continued. The lad had fine balance and great speed of hand. Already he was more than a match for most men, with rapier or épée. His sabre work was not of a great standard, but then he was of slight build. Maturity would add muscle to his frame and strength to his arm, Mulgrave knew.

Towards the end of the session Mulgrave allowed the young noble to score a partial hit. He did not want the lad to become discouraged.

‘Enough!’ he said, offering a bow to his opponent. Gaise returned it, then swept the mask from his face, tossing it to

the grass. His golden hair was sweat-streaked, his face red from his exertions – save for the star-shaped scar upon his cheekbone, which remained bone white. Mulgrave removed his face guard and placed it on the ground.

‘By the Sacrifice, you are not even warm, sir,’ said Gaise, with a sudden smile.

Mulgrave gave the young noble a warning look and the smile faded. Gaise unbuckled his quilted chest guard and glanced up at the house. A silver-haired figure, dressed all in black, was standing at the balcony rail looking down on them. Then he was gone.

The fencing master saw the look of sadness that came to the young man’s face. There was nothing Mulgrave could say or do. ‘You are moving well, my lord,’ he told the young man. ‘You almost had me in trouble twice.’

‘I think that he hates me,’ said Gaise.

Mulgrave took a deep, slow breath. ‘Your history teacher is due soon, sir. You should get out of those clothes and towel yourself down. This is the weather for chills to take hold.’

‘Aye, ’tis a chilly house,’ said Gaise Macon, sadly. Mulgrave wanted to throw his arm around the young man’s shoulder and say something to cheer him, but he guessed that the Moidart would be watching them from behind a curtain at one of the upper windows. It saddened Mulgrave to think that Gaise had every reason to believe his father disliked him. They rarely spoke, unless it was for the Moidart to criticize some aspect of the youth’s behaviour, and often Gaise carried bruises to his face or arms that Mulgrave guessed came from beatings suffered. The fencing master had been bodyguard to the Moidart as well as martial instructor to Gaise Macon for three years now, and in that time had seen much of the Moidart’s cruelty.

‘This afternoon we will try out the new pistols,’ he said. ‘They are beautifully balanced.’

‘I will look forward to it,’ answered Gaise.