

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Sword in the Storm

David A. Gemmell

## About the Book

Deep in the green mountain lands of the Rigante lies the settlement of Three Streams, whose people worship the gods of Air and Water, and the spirits of the Earth. Among them lives a boy whose destiny is written in the starlight. He is Connavar, the Demonblade, born in a storm that doomed his father.

A man with the makings of greatness will always have enemies and from the start of this epic chronicle it is prophesied that the Armies of Stone will one day cross the water . . . and that their coming will be like an avalanche. Here the strangest forces, wise and evil, play their allotted part – from the Ghost General and the malignant Morrigu to the Woods whose magic harks back to a world before the coming of Man.

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Also by David A. Gemmell

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# Sword in the Storm

David A. Gemmell

*Sword in the Storm* is dedicated with love to Stella Graham,  
with heartfelt thanks for eighteen years of great and abiding  
friendship.

## *Acknowledgements*

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## Prologue

I WAS A child when I saw him last, a scrawny straw-haired boy, living in the highlands. It was the afternoon of my eleventh birthday. My sister had died in childbirth the day before, the babe with her. My widowed father was inconsolable, and I left the farm early, leaving him with his grief. I was sad too, but as with most children, my sorrow was also tinged with self-pity. Ara had died and spoiled my birthday. I shiver with shame at the memory even now.

I wandered through the high woods for most of the morning, playing games. Warrior games. I was a hero, hunting for enemies. I was the deadliest swordsman of them all. I was Demonblade the King.

I had seen him once before when he, and several of his companions, had ridden to our lonely farm. They were merely passing through and my father gave them water and a little bread. The king had dismounted and thanked Father, and they stood talking about the dry summer and the problems it caused. I was around five I think, and all I remember was his size, and the fact that his eyes were strange. One was a tawny brown, the other green, like a jewel. My father told him how our one bull had died, struck by lightning. Three days later a rider came by leading a fine, big-horned bull, which he gave to us. My father was a king's man after that.

I was just eleven when I saw him again. Tired of playing alone I went to my cousin's house in the Rift Valley, some three miles from home. He gave me food, and let me help while he chopped wood. I would roll the rounds to where he stood, and place them on the low stump. He would swing his

axe and split them. After he had finished chopping we carried the wood to the log pile and stacked the split chunks against the north wall of the house.

I was tired and would have spent the night, save that I knew Father would be worried, so an hour before dusk I headed for home, climbing the Balg Hills and making for the high woods. My journey took me close to the old Stone Circle. Father told me giants crafted it in a bygone age, but my aunt said that the stones themselves were once giants, cursed by Taranis. I don't know which story is true, but the Circle is a splendid place. Eighteen huge stones there are, each over twenty feet high. Hard, golden stone, totally unlike the grey granite of the Druagh mountains.

I had no intention of going to the Circle, for it was more than a little out of my way. But as I was making my way through the trees I saw a pack of wolves. I stopped and picked up a stone. Wolves will rarely attack a man. They steer clear of us. I don't blame them. We hunt and kill them whenever we can. The leader of the pack stood very still, his golden eyes staring at me. I felt a chill, and knew with great certainty that this wolf was unafraid.

For a moment I stood my ground. He darted forward. Dropping the stone I turned and ran. I knew they were loping after me and I sprinted hard, leaping fallen trees and scrambling through the bracken. I was in panic and fled without thinking. Then I reached the tree line no more than a few yards from the Stone Circle. To run further would be to die. This realization allowed me to overcome my fear and my mind began to clear.

There was a low branch just ahead. I leapt and swung myself up to it. The lead wolf was just behind me. He leapt too, his teeth closing on my shoe, tearing it from my foot. I climbed a little higher, and the wolves gathered silently below the tree.

Safe now I became angry, both at myself and at the wolves. Breaking off a dry branch I hurled it down onto the

pack. They leapt aside, and began to prowl around the tree.

It was then that I heard riders. The wolves scattered and loped back into the woods. I was about to call out to the newcomers, but something stopped me. I cannot say what it was. I don't think I was afraid, but perhaps I sensed some danger. Anyway, I crouched down on the thick branch and watched them ride into the Stone Circle. There were nine of them. All wore swords and daggers. Their clothes were very fine, their horses tall, like those ridden by the king's Iron Wolves. As they dismounted they led their horses out of the circle, tethering them close by.

'You think he'll come?' asked one of the men. I can still see him now, tall and broad shouldered, his yellow hair braided under a helm of burnished iron.

'He'll come,' said a second man. 'He wants peace.'

They rejoined their comrades, who were sitting in a circle within the Circle. Having decided not to show myself, I lay there quietly. They were talking in low voices and I could hear only a few words clearly.

The sun was going down and I decided to risk the wolves and make my way home. That is when I saw the rider on the white stallion. I knew him instantly.

It was Demonblade the King.

I cannot tell you how excited I was. The man was close to myth even then. His beard was red gold in the dying sunlight. He was wearing a winged helm of bright silver, a breastplate embossed with the Fawn in Brambles crest of his House, and the famous patchwork cloak. At his side was the legendary Seidh sword, with its hilt of gold. He rode into the Circle and sat his stallion staring at the men. They seemed to me to be tense, almost frightened by his presence. They rose as he dismounted.

I would have gone down then, just to be close to the legend. But he drew his sword and plunged it into the earth before him. The man with the braided yellow hair was the first to speak.

‘Come and join us, Connavar. Let us talk of a new peace.’

Demonblade stood silently for a moment, his strong hands resting on the pommel of his sword, his patchwork cloak billowing in the breeze. ‘You have not asked me here to talk,’ he said, his voice deep and powerful. ‘You have asked me here to die. Come then, traitors. I am here. And I am alone.’

Slowly they drew their swords. I could feel their fear.

Then, as the sun fell in crimson fire, they attacked.

# Chapter One

ON THE NIGHT of the great man's birth a fierce storm was moving in from the far north, but as yet the louring black clouds were hidden behind the craggy, snow-capped peaks of the Druagh mountains. The night air outside the birthing hut was calm and still and heavy. The bright stars of Caer Gwydion glittered in the sky, and the full moon was shining like a lantern over the tribal lands of the Rigante.

All was quiet now inside the lamplit hut as Varaconn, the soft-eyed horse hunter, knelt at his wife's side, holding her hand. Meria, the pain subsiding for a moment, smiled up at him. 'You must not worry,' she whispered. 'Vorna says the boy will be strong.'

The blond-haired young man cast his gaze across the small, round hut, to where the witch woman was crouched by an iron brazier. She was breaking the seals on three clay pots, and measuring out amounts of dark powder. Varaconn shivered.

'It is time for his soul-name,' said Vorna, without turning from her task.

Varaconn reluctantly released his wife's hand. He did not like the stick-thin witch, but then no-one did. It was difficult to like that which you feared, and black-haired Vorna was a fey creature, with bright blue button eyes that never seemed to blink. How was it, Varaconn wondered, that an ageing spinster, with no personal knowledge of sex or childbirth, could be so adept at midwifery?

Vorna rose and turned, fixing him with a baleful glare. 'This is not the time to consider questions born of stupidity,'

she said. Varaconn jerked. Had he asked the question aloud? Surely not.

‘The soul-name,’ said Vorna. ‘Go now.’

Taking his wife’s hand once more, he raised it to his lips. Meria smiled, then a fresh spasm of pain crossed her face. Varaconn backed away to the door.

‘All will be well,’ Vorna told him.

Varaconn swirled his blue and green chequered cloak around his slender shoulders and stepped out into the night.

It was warm, the air cloying, and yet, for a moment at least, it was cooler than the hut and he filled his lungs with fresh air. The smell of mountain grass and pine was strong here, away from the settlement, and mixed with it he could detect the subtle scent of honeysuckle. As he grew accustomed to the warmth of this summer night he removed his cloak and laid it over the bench seat set around the trunk of the old willow.

Time for the soul-name, Vorna had said.

In that moment, alone under the stars, Varaconn felt like an adult for the first time in his nineteen years. He was about to find the soul-name for his son.

His son!

Varaconn’s heart swelled with the thought.

Following the old goat trail he stepped out onto the green flanks of Caer Druagh, the Elder Mountain, and began to climb. As he journeyed high above the valley his thoughts were many. He recalled his own father, and wondered what he had been thinking as he climbed this slope nineteen years before. What dreams had he nurtured for the infant about to be born? He had died from wounds taken in a fight with the Pannones when Varaconn was six. His mother had passed over the Dark Water a year later. Varaconn’s last memories of her were of a skeletal woman, hollow eyed, coughing up blood and phlegm.

The orphan Varaconn had been raised by an irascible uncle, who had never married, and loathed the company of

people. A kind old man, he had tried hard to be a good father to the boy, but had managed – among many good lessons – to pass on to his ward his own wariness of fellowship. As a result Varaconn never courted popularity, and found intimacy difficult. Neither popular nor unpopular with the other young men of the Rigante his life had been largely undistinguished, save for two things: his friendship with Ruathain the First Warrior, and his marriage to the beautiful Meria.

Varaconn paused in his climb and stared down at Three Streams settlement far below. Most of the houses were dark, for it was almost midnight and the Rigante were a farming community, whose people rose before the dawn. But lamplight was flickering in some of the windows. Banouin the Foreigner would be checking his tallies, and preparing his next journey to the sea, and Cassia Earth-maiden would be entertaining a guest, initiating some young blood in the night-blessed joys of union.

Varaconn walked on.

His marriage to Meria had surprised many, for her father had entertained a score of young men seeking her hand. Even Ruathain. Meria had rejected them all. Varaconn had not been one of the suitors. A modest man, he considered her far above him in every way.

Then one day, as he was gentling a mare in the high meadow paddock, she had come to see him. That day was bathed in glory in the hall of his fondest memories. Meria had leaned on the fence rail as Varaconn moved around the paddock. At first he had not known she was there, so intent was he on the bond with the mare. He loved horses, and spent much of his early life observing them. He had noticed that herd leaders were always female, and that they disciplined errant colts by driving them away from the safety of the herd. Alone the colt would become fearful, for predators would soon descend on a single pony. After a while the mare would allow the recalcitrant beast back into

the fold. Thus chastened it would then remain obedient. Varaconn used a similar technique in training ponies. He would isolate a wild horse in his circular paddock, then, with a snap of his rope, set it running around the inner perimeter of the fence. The instinct of a horse was always to run from danger, and only when safe would it look back to see what had caused its fear. Varaconn kept the pony running for a while, then, not knowing Meria was watching him, he dipped his shoulder and turned away from the mare. The pony dropped her head and moved in close to him. Varaconn continued to walk, slowly changing direction. The mare followed his every move. As he moved he spoke to the mare in a soft voice and finally turned to face her, rubbing her brow and stroking her sleek neck.

‘You talk to horses more easily than you talk to women,’ said Meria. Varaconn had blushed deep red.

‘I’m . . . not a talker,’ he said. Trying to ignore her he continued to work with the pony, and within an hour was riding it slowly around the paddock. Occasionally he would glance towards Meria. She had not moved. Finally he dismounted, took a deep breath, and walked to where she waited. Shy and insular, he did not look into her eyes. Even so he saw enough to fill his heart with longing. She was wearing a long green dress, and a wide belt, edged with gold thread. Her long dark hair, save for a top braid, was hanging loose to her shoulders, and her feet were bare.

‘You want to buy a pony?’ he asked.

‘Perhaps. Why did the mare suddenly start to obey you?’ she asked.

‘She was frightened. I made her run, but she didn’t know what the danger was. Did you see her snapping her mouth as she ran?’

‘Yes, she looked very angry.’

‘That was not anger. Foals do that. She was reverting to infant behaviour. She was saying to me, “I need help. Please

be my leader.” So I dropped my shoulder and gently turned away. Then she came to me and joined my herd.’

‘So you are her stallion now?’

‘In truth that would make me the lead mare. Stallions do the fighting, but a mare will command the herd.’

‘Ruathain says you are a great fighter and a good man.’ This surprised him and he glanced briefly at her face to see if she was mocking him. Her eyes were green. Large eyes. So beautiful. Not the green of grass or summer leaves, but the bright, eternal green of precious stones. Yet they were not cold . . .

‘Now you are staring at me,’ she chided.

Varaconn blinked and looked away guiltily. She spoke again. ‘Ruathain said you stood beside him against the Pannones, and broke their charge.’

‘He is too kind. He knows I was too frightened to run,’ he admitted. ‘Ruathain was like a rock – the only safe place in a stormy sea. I’ve never known anyone quite like him. The battle was chaotic – screaming men, clashing swords. It was all so fast and furious. But Ruathain was calm. He was like a god. You could not imagine him being hurt.’

She seemed annoyed, though he did not know why. ‘Yes, yes, yes,’ she said. ‘Everyone knows Ruathain is a hero. He wanted to marry me. I said no.’

‘Why would you say no? He is a wonderful man.’

‘Can you really be so foolish, Varaconn?’ she said, then turned and strode away.

Totally confused he had carried the problem to Ruathain. The powerful, blond-haired young warrior had been out with three of his herdsman, building a rock wall across the mouth of a gully in the high north valley. ‘Every damn winter,’ said Ruathain, heaving a large slab into place, ‘some of my cattle get trapped here. Not any more.’ Varaconn dismounted and helped the men for several hours. Then, during a rest break, Ruathain took him by the arm and led him to a nearby stream.

‘You didn’t come all the way up here to build a wall. What is on your mind, my friend?’ Without waiting for an answer he stripped off his shirt, leggings and boots and clambered out into the middle of the stream. ‘By Taranis, it is cold,’ he said. The water was no more than a few inches deep, flowing over white, rounded pebbles. Ruathain lay down, allowing the water to rush over his body. ‘Man, this is refreshing,’ he shouted, rolling onto his belly. Varaconn sat by the stream and watched his friend. Despite the awesome power of the man, his broad, flat face and his drooping blond moustache, there was something wonderfully childlike about Ruathain; a seemingly infinite capacity to draw the maximum joy from any activity. The warrior splashed water on his face, ran his wet fingers through his hair, then rose and strode to the water’s edge. He grinned at Varaconn. ‘You should have joined me.’

‘I need your advice, Ru.’

‘Are you in trouble?’

‘I do not believe so. I am merely confused.’ He told him about Meria’s visit. As he spoke he saw the young warrior’s expression harden, only to be replaced by a look of sadness. Varaconn cursed himself for a fool. Ruathain had asked Meria to marry him. He obviously loved her too! ‘I am sorry, Ru. I am an idiot,’ he said. ‘Forgive me for troubling you.’ Ruathain forced a smile.

‘Yes, you are an idiot. But you are also my friend. She obviously doesn’t want me, but I think she is in love with you. Go see her father.’

‘How could she love me?’

‘Damned if I know,’ said Ruathain, sadly. ‘Women are a mystery to me. When we were all children she always used to follow us around. You remember? We used to throw sticks at her, and shout for her to go away.’

‘I never threw sticks,’ said Varaconn.

‘Then maybe that’s why she loves you. Now go and make yourself look handsome. Cefir will not tolerate a shabby

suitor. Best cloak and leggings.'

'I couldn't do that,' said Varaconn.

But he had done it. The marriage took place three weeks later on the first day of summer, at the Feast of Beltine.

And so had followed the finest year of his life. Meria was a constant joy and Varaconn could scarce believe his good fortune. During the spring and following summer Varaconn caught and gentled sixty-two ponies. Sixteen of them had been of high quality, and most of these had been sold as cavalry mounts to the nobles who followed the Long Laird. The profit had been high, and Varaconn was determined to buy an iron sword, like the borrowed blade he now wore.

He patted the hilt, drawing strength from it. Even so, a touch of fear returned.

Tomorrow the Rigantes were to march in battle against the Sea Raiders, camped beyond the Seidh river. Varaconn hated violence, and was not skilled with sword or lance. What he had told Meria was true. When the Pannones charged he had stood frozen beside the powerful Ruathain. Yes, he had fought, swinging his bronze blade with the fury of terror, and the Pannones had fled. Ruathain had wounded three and killed one.

Varaconn had prayed never again to be drawn into a battle. That fear had turned to terror five days ago, when he had killed the raven. He was riding a wild pony, galloping it over the hills. As he topped a rise the raven had flown up from the long grass. Startled, the pony reared, lashing out with its hooves. The raven fell dead to the ground. Varaconn had been horrified. His birth *geasa* had prophesied he would die within a week of killing such a bird.

He had confided these fears to Ruathain. 'The horse killed it,' said Ruathain. 'You have not broken your *geasa*. Do not concern yourself. Stay close by me, cousin, and you will live through the battle.' But Varaconn was not comforted.

'I was riding the pony. It was in my control.'

So great was Varaconn's panic that, in the end, Ruathain drew his sword, which was of iron, and cunningly crafted. 'Take this,' he said. 'It is blessed with four great Druid spells. No-one carrying it in battle will suffer death.'

Varaconn knew he should have refused at once. The blade was priceless. Most warriors had bronze weapons, but Ruathain had journeyed to the coast with his cattle and had returned to the Rigantes with this sword two years ago. The young men of the tribe would gather round him at the Feast of Samian and beg him to let them touch the grey blade. Varaconn felt the onset of shame, for he reached out and took the blade, perhaps condemning Ruathain to death in his place. He could not look his friend in the eye.

'Vorna says your child will be a son,' said Ruathain.

'Aye, a son,' agreed Varaconn, glad of the change of subject.

They sat in silence for a while, and the shame grew. Finally Varaconn hefted the sword, and offered it back to the warrior. 'I cannot take it,' he said.

'Whisht, man, of course you can. I'll not die tomorrow. I have not broken my *geasa*. Hold the sword, and return it to me after the battle.'

'It is a great comfort to me,' admitted Varaconn. They sat in silence for a moment, then the frightened young man spoke again. 'I know you love Meria,' he said, not looking at his friend. 'I see it every time you look at her. And I have never known why she chose me over you. It makes no sense even now. But I ask you - as my dearest friend - to be a strength to her if I do . . . die.'

Ruathain gripped Varaconn's shoulder. 'Now you listen to me. Let the words burn themselves into your soul. I will not let you die. Stay close to me, cousin. I will guard your back when the battle begins. That is all you have to do. Stay close to me.'

Alone on the mountainside, Varaconn curled his hand around the hilt of Ruathain's iron sword. The touch of the

leather binding, the firmness of the grip, eased his fears once more, and he sat upon a boulder and prayed for an omen so that he could give his son a good soul-name. The boy's Rigante name would be Connavar, Conn son of Var.

This would be the name to earn honour among his people. But the soul-name would bond him to the land, and carry with it the magic of the night.

Varaconn prayed to see an eagle. Eagle in the Moonlight would be a good soul-name, he thought. He glanced at the sky, but there was no eagle. He prayed again. A distant rumble of thunder sounded from the north, and he saw the advancing clouds snuffing out the stars. Lightning flashed almost overhead, lighting up the mountain. A fierce wind blew up. Varaconn rose from the boulder, ready to seek shelter. The sword brushed against his leg.

The iron sword!

Fearful that the lightning would strike him Varaconn drew the blade and hurled it from him. The three-foot sword spun in the air then lanced into the earth where it stood quivering.

At that moment the lightning flashed again, striking the sword and shattering it.

Then the rain fell.

Varaconn sat slumped by the boulder staring at the broken shards of blackened iron. Then he rose and began the long walk back to the birthing hut.

As he came closer he heard the thin, piping cries of his newborn son echoing above the storm winds.

The door of the hut opened and Vorna, witch and midwife, stepped out to greet him.

'You have the name,' she said. It was not a question. He nodded dumbly. 'Speak it aloud,' she ordered him.

'He will be Connavar, *the Sword in the Storm.*'

## Chapter Two

RUATHAIN WAS RIDING back from the lands of the southern Rigante when he saw the boys playing on the hilltop above the smithy. He reined in the chestnut pony and dismounted, watching the youngsters from the edge of the trees. They were chasing each other and he could hear the sounds of their laughter, their joy. Ruathain smiled. It was a good sound. He was especially glad that the ten-year-old Connavar was among them. At least it meant he was not getting into trouble – which was sadly the boy's greatest talent.

Ruathain was anxious to be home, for it had been a long ride from the southern cattle market, with the last ten miles steadily uphill. His pony was tired and breathing hard. He patted its muzzle. 'Take a breather, boy. When we get back I'll see you fed the finest grain.'

From here, far below where the boys were playing, he could see his house, built at the junction of the three streams after which the settlement had been named. It was a good house, well constructed of seasoned timber, and heavily thatched with straw. Cool in summer, with the wide windows open to the breeze, and warm in winter, with the shutters drawn and the central fire lit. Tiny figures were moving in the paddock behind the house. Ruathain smiled. Meria had saddled the dwarf pony and was leading him around the paddock, while their youngest son clung to the saddle. Bendegit Bran was only three, but already he was fearless, and a great source of pride to the swordsman. Beside him his own pony snickered, pushing its head against his chest.

‘All right, boy. We’re going,’ said Ruathain. He was about to mount when he heard the start of a heated exchange among the boys on the hilltop below.

By the time Ruathain ran in among the boys the fight had become brutal. Govannan had blood streaming from his nose. Ruathain’s nine-year-old son, Braefar, was lying on the grass, half stunned, and his adopted son, Connavar, was laying into the other three boys like a whirlwind, fists swinging, head butting, feet lashing out in kicks. Another boy went down, having taken a terrible blow to the right ear. Connavar leapt upon him, slamming his fist into the boy’s nose.

Ruathain ran up behind him, grabbing Connavar by the collar of his green tunic and lifting him clear. The ten-year-old swung in his grip, his small fist cannoning into Ruathain’s face. Ruathain dropped the boy, and cuffed him hard, sending him spinning from his feet.

‘That is quite enough!’ he bellowed. Silence descended on the hilltop. ‘What in the name of Taranis is going on here?’ None of the boys spoke, and none would look him in the eye.

‘We were just playing,’ said Govannan, at last, blood dripping to his tunic. ‘I’m going home now.’ The youngster and his four bruised friends trooped off down the hill. Connavar was sitting on the grass, rubbing his head. Braefar tried to stand, but fell down again. His father moved to him and knelt on the grass.

‘Where are you hurt?’ he asked the slender boy. Braefar forced a smile, but his face was grey.

‘I’m not hurt, Father. Just dizzy. I fell just as Govannan’s knee was coming up. Now I can see stars in the daytime.’

‘An interesting way of putting it,’ observed Ruathain, ruffling the boy’s blond hair. ‘Lie there for a moment until the world stops spinning.’ Rising he walked to where Connavar was sitting. ‘That was a good punch,’ he said, rubbing his jaw. ‘I can still feel it.’

Making a joke of a problem usually worked with Conn. His anger was always short lived. At the jest he would relax, an impish grin spreading across his features. Then the situation – whatever it was – could be resolved. But this time the boy did not smile. He looked up into Ruathain's face, and, for the first time the powerful swordsman found himself disconcerted by the look in Conn's strange eyes. One was green, the other a tawny brown that turned to gold in the sunshine.

Ruathain knew something momentous had occurred. He sat down and looked at the boy's strong, flat features. A bruise was beginning on his right cheek, and his lower lip was cut. 'What was the fight about?' he asked.

Connavar was silent for a moment, then he pushed his hand through his red-gold hair. 'He said my father was a coward. That he ran away.' The strange eyes searched Ruathain's face, watching his expression intently.

Ruathain had lived with this fear for many years, and now that it was upon him he felt a sinking of the heart. 'Your father was my friend, Conn. He stood beside me in two battles. I was proud to have him for a friend. You understand that? I would not befriend a coward.'

'Then he didn't run away?' The green-gold gaze locked to Ruathain's eyes.

Ruathain sighed. 'He broke his *geasa*. He killed a raven. You had just been born. The night before the battle. Varaconn was desperate to see you grow, to be there to guide you. The thought of death weighed him down. It sat upon his shoulders like a mountain.' He fell silent, his thoughts drifting back to that dreadful day ten years before, when the tribes had banded together to fight the raiders from the sea. Twelve thousand fierce-eyed reivers, faced by eight thousand determined tribesmen. It was a day of blood and bravery, with neither side giving a yard of ground. At the height of the battle a terrible storm broke overhead,

lightning flashing down, hurling fighting men into the air, their flesh blackened.

Ruathain took a deep breath. 'Listen to me, Conn, Varaconn was my sword brother. He stood beside me all that day, protecting my back as I defended his. That is what counts.'

'Did he run?' asked the boy. Everything in the child's face begged for the great, comforting lie.

And Ruathain could not give him that gift. Honour was everything to him. Yet he knew the young viewed the world with all the certainty born of inexperience. A man was either a hero or a coward. There were no shades of grey. He made one last attempt to still Connavar's concerns. 'Listen to me, the raiders were beaten – but they launched a last charge. It was almost dusk. We had won. But they almost broke through. Five of them rushed at your father and me. He was killed there. Let that be an end to it. I lost a friend. You lost a father.'

But Conn would not be shaken. 'Where was his wound?' he asked.

'You are concentrating on the wrong things, Conn. He was a fine, brave and noble man. For one moment only he . . . knew panic. Do not judge him harshly for that. When the battle was over I sat with him. His last words were of you and your mother. He wanted so much to see you grow. And he would have been proud, for you are a strong boy.'

'No enemy will ever see my back,' said Connavar. 'I will not run.'

'Do not be stupid,' snapped Ruathain. 'I have run. A good warrior knows when to stand and fight, and when to withdraw to fight another day. There is no shame in it.'

'No shame,' repeated Connavar. 'Who was guarding *your* back when my father ran?'

Ruathain said nothing. Connavar pushed himself to his feet. 'Where are you going?' asked the swordsman.

'To find Govannan. I must apologize to him.'

‘You have nothing to apologize for.’

Connavar shook his head. ‘He was right. My father was a coward.’

The boy stalked away. Ruathain swore softly. Braefar came over to him. ‘Is he still angry?’ he asked.

‘Angry and hurt,’ agreed Ruathain.

‘I think he might have beaten them all. He didn’t need me at all.’

‘Aye, he’s strong,’ said his father. ‘How are you feeling, Wing?’ he continued, using the abbreviation of Braefar’s soul-name, Wing over Water.

‘Better. Govannan has hard knees.’ Braefar grinned. ‘It was worth the blow to see Conn knock him down. He is not afraid of anything – or anyone.’

Yes he is, thought Ruathain, sadly. He’s afraid of being like his father.

He gazed up at the blue sky. ‘I told you to stay close to me,’ he said, sadly.

‘What did you say, Father?’ asked the bemused Braefar.

‘I was talking to an old friend. Come, let’s go home.’

Lifting Braefar he settled him on the pony then led the beast down the hillside. I could have lied to him, he thought, told him his father had not run. But more than twenty of the Three Streams men had seen it. At some time the story was bound to have surfaced. Meria would be furious, of course. She was fiercely protective of Conn, and loved him more than either of her sons by Ruathain.

And certainly more than she loves me!

The thought had leapt unbidden to his mind, like a poisoned arrow shot from ambush.

They had wed a mere four months after the battle. Not for love. He had known that. But because she believed that Connavar would need a strong father to teach him the skills of the Rigante. Ruathain had been certain that she would come to love him, if he treated her with kindness and compassion. At times he even thought that he could detect

in her a genuine affection for him. The truth, however, was that no matter how hard he tried, there always remained a distance between them that he could not cross.

One night, at the Feast of Samain, when Conn was a year old, Ruathain had spoken to his mother, Pallae, about the problem. His father had been dead for two years, and Ruathain was sitting beneath the vast branches of Eldest Tree, Pallae beside him. All around them the people of the settlement were drinking, feasting and dancing. Ruathain himself was a little drunk. He would not have raised the subject had he been sober. His mother, a tall and dignified woman, who, despite her iron-grey hair, retained an almost ethereal beauty, listened in silence. 'Have you ever done anything to offend her?' Pallae asked him.

'Never!'

'Are you certain, Ru? You are a lusty man like your father. Have you sown your seeds in any other field but your own?'

'No. I promise you. I have been faithful always.'

'Have you ever struck her?'

'No, nor even raised my voice.'

'Then I cannot help you, my son. Except to say that she holds some grievance against you. You must hope that her anger fades. I expect that it will when she has borne your son.'

'And if it does not?'

'Does she respect you?'

'Of course. She knows - everyone knows - I would do nothing base.'

'And you love her?'

'More than I can say.'

'Then build on that respect, Ru. It is all you can do.'

They did not speak of it again until six years later, as Pallae lay on her deathbed. Sitting quietly beside her, holding her hand, Ruathain had hoped she would slip away quietly in her sleep. The cancer had stripped away her flesh, the pain of it causing her to writhe and cry out. Vorna's

herbs had, at first, dulled the agony, but lately even the strongest of these had little effect. Despite the pain, and her increasing frailty, Pallae clung to life. Often delirious in the last days she would sometimes fail to recognize Ruathain, speaking to him as if he were his father. But on the night of her death she opened her eyes and gave him a wan smile.

‘The pain has gone,’ she whispered. ‘It is a blessed relief.’ He patted her hand. ‘You look tired, my son,’ she said. ‘You should go home and rest.’

‘I will. Soon.’

‘How goes it with you and Meria?’

‘The same. It is enough that I love her.’

‘That is never enough, Ru,’ she told him, her voice edged with sadness. ‘I wanted more for you than that.’ She lay silently for a moment, her breathing harsh. Then she smiled. ‘Is Connavar behaving himself?’

He shook his head. ‘The boy was born to mischief.’

‘He is only seven, Ru. And he has a good heart. Do not be too hard on him.’

He chuckled. ‘Too hard? I have tried talking to him. He sits and listens, then rushes off and gets into trouble again. I tried beating him with my belt, but that had no effect. He took his punishment without complaint, and a day or so later stole a cake from the baker in the morning, and left a live frog under my bed covers in the evening.’ He laughed suddenly. ‘Meria got into bed first. I swear she rose up towards the ceiling like a startled swan.’

‘You love him, though?’

‘Aye, I do. Last week, when I was telling Meria about a lone wolf in the high woods, Conn was listening. He stole my best knife and went missing. Seven years old and I eventually found him crouching in the woods, a tin pot on his head for a helm, waiting for the wolf. He has spirit. And when he grins you could forgive him anything.’

The lamp by the bedside guttered and the bedroom fell into darkness. Ruathain cursed and walked back into the

main living area, lifting a lantern from the far wall. He returned to her at once, but as the light fell upon her face he saw that she had gone.

Meria lifted Bran from the dwarf pony and hugged him close. 'Did you like that, my pet?' she asked him.

'More, Mama,' he said, reaching out towards the little grey horse.

'Later,' she promised. 'Look, there is Caval,' she said, pointing to the black war hound lying in the shade. Distracted, Bran struggled to be free. Meria lowered him to the ground and the boy ran across to the hound. Bran threw his small arms around her neck and snuggled down alongside her. The hound licked his face. Bran giggled. A black shape glided across the sky and a huge crow landed awkwardly on the thatched roof. The bird tilted its head, its eye of glittering jet staring down at the tall, slim, green-clad young woman below.

Another woman stepped from the house. 'Your husband is home,' said Meria's cousin, Pelain. Meria glanced up towards the hills and saw the tall figure of Ruathain leading his pony down the slope. Young Braefar was sitting in the saddle. For some reason that she could never later recall, Meria found herself growing angry.

'Aye, he's home,' said Meria, softly. Pelain gave her a sharp look.

'You do not know how lucky you are,' she said. 'He loves you.'

Meria tried to ignore her, but it was difficult. Once Pelain got her teeth into a subject she was harder to shake than a mastiff. 'You'd know what I mean if you were married to Borga,' continued Pelain, with a wry smile. 'He gets into bed from the left, rolls across me to the right. And somewhere between he grunts and asks, "Was it also a wonder for you?" Happily he's usually asleep before I answer.'

Meria grinned. 'You shouldn't talk that way. Borga is a fine man.'

'If he made his bread with the speed he makes love we could feed the tribes all the way to the sea,' said Pelain. She transferred her gaze to the walking warrior. 'I'd wager my dowry that he doesn't brush across you like a summer breeze.'

Meria reddened. 'No, he doesn't,' she admitted, immediately regretting the comment.

'Then you should value him more,' observed Pelain. 'I know I would.'

The anger flared again. 'Then you should have married him,' snapped Meria.

'I would have - had he asked me,' answered Pelain, no hint of offence in her voice. 'Two strong sons, and no dead babies. Strong seed in that one.'

Pelain had lost four children in the last five years. Not one had survived beyond five days. For a moment Meria's anger subsided, replaced by affection and sympathy. 'You are still young,' she told her cousin. 'There is time.'

Pelain shook her head. 'Vorna says there will be no more.'

Ruathain opened the paddock gate, leading his pony inside and lifting his son to the ground. Braefar took the reins and led the pony away. The warrior kissed Meria's cheek, then swung round to Pelain. 'If you are here making mischief for me,' he said, with a smile, 'I shall throw you over my shoulder and carry you back to your husband's house.'

'Please do so,' she replied, 'since he's not there and I have a wide bed just waiting to be filled by a real man.' For a moment Ruathain stood shocked. Then he laughed aloud.

'By Heavens you have become a wicked woman,' he told her.

Even the normally outspoken Pelain seemed surprised by her own comment. 'Wicked or not, I know when I am not

needed,' she replied lamely, before heading back into the house.

Ruathain took his wife's hand and kissed it. Above him the crow suddenly cawed and danced along the rooftop. Ruathain glanced up. He had no love of carrion birds, but he knew they served a purpose and was normally content to leave them be. But this one caused the hackles to rise on his neck.

'Did you get a good price at market?' asked Meria.

'Fair. No more than that. The Norvii also brought their cattle. I was lucky to sell on the first day. By the third the price dropped considerably. Have the boys been well behaved?' The question caused her anger to rise again. Why should his absence bring a change in their behaviour? Did he think her some weak-minded wench who could not control unruly children?

Ignoring the question she told him: 'There is a hot pie just baked. You must be hungry.'

'Hungry for sight of you and the boys,' he said. She gave a wan smile and moved away towards the doorway. He was about to follow when Connavar appeared from the far side of the house. Meria gave a broad smile, her mood lifting momentarily, like the sun breaking through clouds.

'Where have you been, my bonny lad?' she asked him.

'Is the pie ready, Mam?' he countered.

She stepped in close, peering at the bruise on his cheek and the cut lip. 'Why what have you been doing? Not fighting again, Conn?'

'Just playing, Mam,' he told her, squirming from her embrace. 'Anyway I've already told the Big Man all about it.' He darted into the house. Meria swung on Ruathain.

'What did he mean? What has he told you?'

'He got into a fight with Govannan and some of the other boys. It is over now. It matters not.'

'It matters to me, husband. Why were they fighting?'