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BRAENDUIR CHRONICLES

Book Two

SLAVE MARKED

By
JP ASPENN

A teaser of the upcoming book

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The second book of the epic fantasy series Braenduir Chronicles by Julia P
Aspenn

A teaser of the upcoming book

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“Ja näistä Aamutähti yksin tahtoi vapauden
Paikan jossa sanoa voi ”ehkä tahdo en”
Planeetan ja piirin maisen jossa kaikki koetellaan
Mittansa mukaan”

CMX, Alkuteos, Elementa, 2018

A teaser of the upcoming book



“Find the nightingale.”

Beware of the Golden Adder; the ancient augur had breathed to Arron in the dream. Too bad, she had been belated with her warning this time. The adder had stricken before Arron had encountered her in the Kingdom of Dreams. He peered at his surroundings through cracked eyelids, his head foggy and throbbing, and heart as numb as it had been ever since Grimwryth had pulled him out of the sea and belted him for trying to throw away the life Jan had given up for him.

He was in a cell. He strained his memory to determine whether he had done something to deserve to get thrown into such but couldn't recall any deed related to a crime. He had signed the Contract, agreed to a lifelong service onboard the Bitch, and come to Aelathduir... *When exactly?* He had no idea of how long he had been imprisoned.

Katrina had taken him to the Council, the six noblemen and women in silver robes that ruled the lands beyond the Gorge, saying it was routine. Every new member of the crew must be presented to the Silvers. Had Arron said something to offend them? No. For all he could remember, he had said barely anything. Katrina had done most of the talking. Besides, the Silvers had seemed pleased to see him. He had been offered a drink, even...

That was the last thing he remembered, holding a wooden cup with a silver embossment of some weird, six-headed monster on its side. He didn't remember drinking from the cup, but he must have done, and the drink must have been spiked, as he had no inkling of what had happened after he had toasted with the smiling counselors and the captain whose smile had been forced and gaze aimed somewhere past his shoulder.

She had known what was to come. She had known, he'd be captured. A white-hot blade of anger shredded the dun veil of numbness that entwined Arron's core. Had she known all along, already when she insisted on him sign the Contract? Why would she bring someone through a Portal just to be locked up in the dungeon? Was it because of Jan and what they had been to one another?

He cracked his lids a sliver more and looked around. There was nothing much to see. The cell was small, just wide enough for Arron to lie straight on the thin pallet, windowless but not dark or covered in muck and slime. There was a lidded bucket in one corner, and a torch burning outside the door of wrought iron bars as thick as his wrist.

He pushed up to lean on his elbow despite the nausea that rolled over him. The world vaulted. He pinched his eyes shut and eased himself back down on the pallet, rolled onto his back, and willed the acrid bile back down to his stomach. Whatever they had given him had been strong stuff, scarlet cap maybe, or marrow root.

He reached for the anger that had flared within him only a few moments ago but found nothing but numbness inside him again. He thought about Katrina, whom he had taken for a friend, and tried to make himself hate her for handing him over to the unknown enemies for a reason he could only guess, but the damp blanket of grey dullness soon smothered the spark of wrath. He gave up trying to feel anything, linked his arms under his head, and allowed himself to drift back to sleep.

Find the nightingale. The ancient augur's wheezy voice still echoed in Arron's ears as he woke up with a start to someone poking him into the side with an ironclad tip of their boot. He blinked his eyes open and caught a flash of bright aquamarine. Instinctively, he crouched his abs, expecting a kick, but the person looming over him, his face shadowed by the torchlight glowing behind him, wasn't here to rough him up. Instead, he asked, in Westang, to Arron's further surprise: "How's the head?"

His accent was thick, but he articulated the words with care. Arron answered him with a question of his own: "What law did I break?"

"I asked you a question," said the man, his tone placid, almost kind.

"Mine is quite a bit more relevant, though," Arron pointed out, knowing that he was asking for a kick in the liver.

"You are hardly in a position to ask any questions, relevant or not," said the man still in that same, amicable manner. "You'd do wisely to answer mine, however. *How's the head?*"

"Aching," Arron replied, the anger splitting the numbness like a lightning bolt splits a mass of slate-grey storm clouds. "I don't suppose you brought me anything for it?"

"I'd also advise you not to get cheeky with me," warned the man. "I could make your head hurt twice as much very easily."

"I was wondering when the beatings begin."

The man kicked Arron in the ribs. Not so hard as to break bones but fierce enough to make him gasp despite himself. His voice rang steel as he said: “I warned you not to run your mouth to me. I take no pleasure in violence, but I won’t listen to any backtalk. I can make your life here either miserable or something comparable to comfortable. Which way the scales will tip is all up to you. Now, would you like a cup of water?”

Arron would’ve given his left thumb for even a mouthful, but the man had stirred his anger for real, and instead of simply saying yes, he spat out: “I’d rather drink my piss than anything coming from your hand.”

“Why, you may well end up doing so if that’s the attitude you keep showing me.” The man backed up toward the door, casting a long, pitch-black shadow upon Arron. “Be that as it may, I happen to be in a good mood, so I reckon your head still being a little clouded is the only reason for your insolence. As I check on you in the morning, you’ll remember your manners. Good night to you.”

He spun on his heels and stepped out of the cell closing the door behind him with a soft clank. The key rattled in the lock, and the torch flickered as he strode away along the narrow corridor. The echoes of his footsteps bounced from the rough granite walls, another door thudded, and he was gone.

The silence hummed in Arron’s ears. He sat up, expecting to feel sick again, but the dizziness was gone. Only a faint pounding in his temples reminded him of the drug.

Now that the headache and nausea had relented, he noticed the pain in his palms. A burning throb so intense that it was a minor miracle he hadn’t paid any attention to it earlier. He lifted his hands in front of himself and turned them palms up. He could but stare into the raw, glistening sears the shape of a ship’s wheel. The shape of Katrina’s silver pendant that Jan had used to summon the Breeze Bitch to the Plains of Midathrir. Arron squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again to make sure he didn’t imagine the brands as if the pain spiking through his arms wasn’t proof enough.

Why would they brand him with the captain’s Wheel? Why would they brand him with anything? Was it to make sure he’d be recognized as a fugitive if he managed to escape from the dungeon? If so, why brand the palms instead of the face where the mark would’ve been much harder to conceal?



“The birds have nested.”

A boy in a dull brown, darned knit cap rode a dung cart toward the city gates. He whistled a simple tune steering his span along the cobbled street at an unhurried pace. The horses were hefty, dark bay draughts long-maned and with tall, white socks on each leg. Had the guards standing by the open gate bothered a second glance at them, they would’ve noticed that another of the draughts was a sliver too lean and fine to be a cart-horse, but they were too busy in urging the boy to hurry out with his reeking load and turning their heads away in disgust as the cart rolled through the gates to pay any attention to such details.

The boy flashed an apologetic grin in their direction and smacked his lips to the horses to make them increase their pace. The draughts moved into a slow trot and the driver let them run a few hundred paces to sparsely blooming meadows outside the city. The spring was belated, but some flowers had already unwhirled their petals to lure the few bees and butterflies buzzing and wafting above the fields. A skylark warbled in the bright zenith, and the boy tried aping its song for a moment. He gave up soon enough, though, chuckling to his feeble imitation and returned to his whistling.

He was a child still, twelve or so, and smallish for his age, a skinny wisp of a boy huddled inside an oversized sweater of undyed wool, but his hands holding the reins were deft, and the skin of his palms was tough as old leather. He didn’t seem to mind the heavy, pungent smell of mitten waste clouding him the slightest. As he got bored with the song he had been whistling since setting out, he changed into another, a merry theme that bounced up and down, up, and down, like a vivid stream between the stones. Had he been a singer, he could’ve sung, but his voice made even the crows puff up their breast, thinking that even their defamed croaking sounded better than the dung boy’s offkey quaking.

As the horses and skylarks were his only audience, the boy could very well have sung nonetheless, but he preferred whistling. By the time he reached the

edge of the young, luminous forest, he had moved into a third song and taken off his cap for, despite the chilly wind, the sun felt warmer than yet once this spring.

The trees were veiled in light, vivid green, an exact match to the boy's impossibly green eyes, and the forest floor were pregnant with fragile liverleaf flowers. The boy let the reins loose as soon as the cart was fully covered in the hazy, bluish shade of the trees, and the horses slowed their gate into a lazy walk.

A couple of hundred yards in the woods, someone blocked his way. A boy a few years older than him stepped from behind the tree trunks holding the reins of a chestnut workhorse. The dung boy stopped his span and declared in conversational tones: "The birds have nested."

"Soon the wolves will come seeking them," said the older boy as casually, wrapped the reins of his horse around a slender oak sprig, and started to take off the saddle.

The dung boy hopped down from the bench and untacked the draught that was slightly too fine to be a carhorse, took the saddle from his elder, and flung it on the horse's back with a soft grunt. The older boy shook his head a little and pointed out: "I could've done that."

"I know," said the dung boy, holding out his hand for the bridle.

It took them less than a quarter of an hour to change the horses and groom the bay gelding's legs. His tall, white socks had begun to flake off long before the cart had gotten out of the city, but that, too, had gone unnoted of the guardsmen.

The older boy mounted clumsily, his gawkiness making the other frown: "You can handle him, can't you?"

"Of course, I can!" the other snapped. "It's just been a while since I've last been in the saddle."

"Just asking." The dung boy shrugged, retreated, and climbed back on the cart. "Have a safe ride then."

"You too. May the Fortunes be with you."

They reached to each other for a brief shake of hands before the older spurred his bay back toward the city, and the other shook the reins to wake up his drowsing span.

The afternoon drifted by without anyone interrupting the dung driver. The few travelers on the road hurried their gate when he approached with his load that reeked more by the sunny hour, and even as a couple of city guardsmen cantered past in quite a haste, they gave him naught but an irritated sidelong

look. They had no reason to stop him, of course. He was but a pheasant boy driving a load of mitten waste from the city to the fields.

As the afternoon eased into a cool, windless evening, he started to scan the surroundings for a place to shelter himself for the night. He wouldn't have minded riding through the night, but the horses needed their rest. And the road was rutty, besides. It would be foolish to risk a broken leg by pressing on in the dark. As soon as the forest morphed into fields again, he spotted an old barn standing lopsided not so far from the road, but far enough not to tempt those in a greater hurry.

He turned the span to a cart rut that led through the freshly plowed field to the barn, parked the cart to its side, and freed the draughts from the harness. He walked them into the barn that had two large doorways on the opposite walls and a roof drooping as low as a back of an ancient pack mule, but there was some last summer's hay still left in one corner, and the roof seemed not to have too many holes.

The boy hobbled the draughts, fetched two small sacks of oats from the cart, and tied them under their jaws. The horses sank their muzzles into the sacks and started munching away their dinner as he dug out some food for himself from a patched backpack he had pulled out from under the driver's bench. His stomach was rumbling loudly as he sat cross-legged in the haystack to indulge himself with cold porkpies, a handful of prunes, and a small flask of watered red wine.

Once finished with his late dinner, he stretched down in the hay, linked his arms under his head, and crossed his ankles squirming sideways for a while to dig himself a snug nest to sleep in. The hay was a little damp and moldy, the dust puffing from it made him sneeze a couple of times, but it made soft and warm enough a bed so, he decided to ignore such slight inconveniences. The steady crunching of the eating horses soon made him drowsy and before he knew it, he had fallen asleep only to startle awake in what at first seemed to him utter blackness but after a few blinking of eyes turned out to be stained with reddish torchlight.



“Go.”

The clatter of hooves had scarcely died away as the knight clasped Irana’s wrist and twisted until she gasped and dropped the dagger, she had been holding on his throat to prevent him from doing anything foolhardy. Sir Righar wriggled from his side to his back in the narrow space they shared under the cart’s false bottom and used his legs to force open the hatch still covered with a pile of wet mitten waste. He slammed the lid open with all his might and was up and out of the hole before Irana could utter a word of objection. He didn’t linger to help her up but leaped down the cart and dove under it, pulling out the bloody corpse of his squire.

Irana climbed out of the hideout feeling surreal. Though she knew full well that all three of their friends were dead, she half expected Livvy to hurry to her and start fussing about her, mourn her soiled, stinking clothes and hair, usher her toward the cabin to bathe and change into a clean garb.

She jumped down from the cart and started at a reluctant pace toward the two bodies sprawled in the yard. Lacran was closer, lying face down on the hard-stamped ground in a vast stain of blood that had already absorbed into the dirt. His throat had been cut to the spine. Irana circled him and pressed on to Livvy, who had fallen onto her side, curled up like a mauled kitten, loose strands of straw-colored hair streaking her destroyed face.

Slow as a sleepwalker, Irana dropped onto her knees beside her former maid and reached a hand to brush the blood-soaked locks off her cheek. She was as hollow as an empty cask. Try as she might, she couldn’t squeeze one teardrop for the friends who had just died for her. She pushed back up to her feet and spun around to see where the knight had gone.

Sir Righar had hurled Stevan’s body over his shoulder, found a shovel somewhere, and was halfway toward the woods already. Irana stopped him short: “What do you think you’re doing?”

Her voice was the north wind, clear and cool and persistent. Righar turned to face her, his movements clumsy for the heavy burden: “I will bury my squire.”

“We’ve got no time for such,” Irana snapped. “We must go now before the Emeralds return or someone...”

“Go,” he cut her off, his eyes the puddles of frozen jade. “Do go. I would like nothing better.”



“Draw your sword and be the first to die.”

The dawn had just broken, and the budding forest tinged with birdsong. Thodir checked his destrier into a slow walk to spare his strengths for the long journey ahead and was just about to ask if his companion was alright in his hideout as the thunder of galloping hooves caught his ear. He crouched his shoulders and yanked the hood lower over his face but also pulled a heavy bundle of leather out from under the bench with his foot and reached down to fold it open, making sure his hand would find a weapon in a heartbeat should such need occur.

“Dan?” he grunted in a low voice. “Are you awake?”

“Yes,” the mage’s muffled voice answered. “And I hear the horses, too.”

“Can you push the lid open yourself if need be?”

“Easily.”

“Good.”

Thodir kept the reins loose, and his head bowed as dozen men at arms in emerald cloaks surrounded the cart. The Robes had learned from their mistake and sent guards instead of knights. The men besieged the cart, forcing Thodir to stop. He held onto the reins and waited to be spoken to as any common coachman would’ve done.

“Pull off your hood, smith,” ordered the Emerald in command. “Your little dressing game is over. Now, where is she? Did you stuff her into a barrel?”

“I was given the freedom to go,” Thodir pointed out, straightening his back. “And I certainly don’t have a habit of mistaking women as dried bream.”

“You may have been given leave to go, smith, but the princess was not!” the commander snapped. “And I have no time for your gimpy jests, so for the last time, where is she?”

“Wherever the swallows go.” Thodir shrugged.

The man’s broad face reddened in anger. His hand found the hilt of his sword, and Thodir readied himself to snatch his hammer the heartbeat the guards would bare their steel. From the corner of his eye, he saw the midnight blue and lavender glow in the cart brightening and knew that the mage was ready, too. His blazing aura, as well as Thodir’s faint onyx-black one, was invisible to the guards’ eyes. Only those with the gift of channeling the vigor could see a mage’s aura, and among the Westerners, such a gift was rare enough to be called nonexistent.

The commander twined his fingers about the gilded hilt of his longsword but let it nest in the scabbard still. *He’s wary*, Thodir realized. *But is it because of me, or do they know Adan is with me?*

“Lady Irana!” The commander raised his voice. “I give you this one chance to come out and yield! If you won’t, we start poking the casks, and the smith, with our blades until we find you!”

Go ahead, Thodir urged in his head. *The barrels won’t mind the slightest, but the heartbeat the first man draws his sword, you begin to die. Like flies, just like the knights in the Council Chamber.*

“Lady Irana?” the commander called again, a sliver of insecurity lacing his voice.

Thodir stole a glance at the other guards. The fools had no weapons but swords. No bows, not even spears. The Robes had sent them to be slaughtered, and by the way, the commander was lingering with his orders, Thodir judged that the man was well aware of it.

“The king regent might not be overly pleased with you should you pierce the princess’ heart with a sword,” Thodir pointed out conversationally.

“We act on his grace’s orders!” the commander snapped but still didn’t bare his blade. “Lady Irana! We do not wish to harm you nor the smith, but we have an order to do whatever it takes to find you and bring you home!”

“Pray, tell me, while we wait for the lady to chew over your words, how did you come to know that I’m a smith?” Thodir inquired, taking care to keep his tone light and casual.

“Why, *Duirn Fridassen*, isn’t that obvious?” the commander snorted. “Your occupation is written into your frame plainly enough.”

True enough. Yet, I told my mother’s name to no one in the castle, not even the princess or Sir Righar. So, you’ve either dug the information out of my apprentice, or the White Lady put snoops on our heels as we left the castle. For the sake of yourself and your men, we shall hope it was the latter.

“I do not know of whom you’re talking about, though you’re right in one thing; I am indeed a smith.”

“And a fool,” the commander declared. “You seemed to have quite a successful business in the Drummer’s Street. Why give it up for a woman who’s got naught to give to you?”

The former, then. A pity. I would’ve preferred avoiding the bloodshed.

“Commander?” one of the guards interrupted. “Shall we check the cart?”

The commander bit his lip, still reluctant to give the order, his fingers stroking the hilt of his sword. Thodir remained motionless and expressionless though the curtains of blood-red fury flagged and flared and roared within him. *I should’ve taken the boy with me, after all, he thought, hating himself. I should’ve taken him to Aenerhjelm and kept him as an apprentice for a few years still. He had yet much to learn. And even more to see and experience. He was only a boy, just five and ten, and utterly blameless... I should never have entangled him into this shit. My fault, all my fault. Again.*

“Start poking the barrels!” the commander ordered. “But not too deep. We don’t want to kill her, just tickle her out of her hideout.”

Go on, draw your sword and be the first to die.



“She did what?!”

The last candidate of the day was a small, sly-looking man with thin, black whiskers curled into swirls with wax and beady rat’s eyes, but Toren learned soon enough that one should never presume anything by the opponent’s appearance. The man was a magician with a sword, swift and unpredictable in his moves. Had his blade had sharp edges, he would’ve wounded Toren severely more than once during the duel and had managed to give him a few rather nasty bruises even with the blunted one. Toren was forced to admit that the man might have won the fight had there not been an interruption in the form of Sage Otmar’s steward, the plain man whom Awra had said to be something quite else than his humble appearance let to assume.

As Cysbar sidled under the canopy pitched to shade the king and his chosen courtiers from the blazing sun, Waldhark roared a halt to the combat. Toren

waited until his opponent had lowered his sword before letting the point of his blade clink against the cobblestones. The small man grinned: “Weary, are you?”

“I’ve fought seven men already today,” Toren replied, keeping an eye on the king whose face was growing darker by the word Cysbar whispered into his ear. “So, yes, I am getting a bit tired.”

“She did what?!” the king roared loud enough to startle both a flock of jackdaws from their perch on the roof of the guards’ common hall and Tim from his on the stone fence.

He landed on his feet, graceful as a feline, and heard Cysbar shushing the king, his hushed words ringing clear in the utter silence that Waldhark’s outburst had caused: “Please, Your Grace, we do not want the whole court to know. Besides, the information needs to be confirmed before we can...”

“Confirmed?!” bellowed the king almost as loud as before. “Didn’t you just say the letter was signed by Prince Helbar himself?!”

“Yes, Your Grace, but...”

“Then what is there to confirm?! Surely, you’re not assuming that my son-in-law would send such a message as a prank?”

“No, of course, he wouldn’t, but the letter might be from someone else. From King Daeryik’s supporters who wish to...”

“Was it sealed with Hamar’s stamp?”

“It was, Your Grace, but...”

“Then there’s no question of whether it’s genuine or not! Even a lackwit as yourself should understand as much! Tell me again with whom she ran away?”

“A knight of her Chamber Guard and...” The sage’s steward darted a glance at Toren. “Two Hjelman sellswords, Your Grace.”

In the silence following his words, Tim could hear the humming of the blood in his veins. No one even breathed during the eternity that lasted no longer than two or three heartbeats before all hell broke loose. The king shot up from his seat and rammed out of the canopy, scarlet splotches blooming on his doughy face, white as the curdled milk. The courtiers seated on the lower benches dove out of the way as he avalanched down toward the yard roaring at the top of his lungs: “Eddesen!!!”



“The chaos knows no master.”

The tall, carved doors of the great hall flung wide open with a bang that cut off the hum of speech in a fracture of a heartbeat. Cavwn took an instinctive step closer to the cwba, and another, as his eyes fell upon the slender figure that flew through the doorway like a gust of dark wind. Cwba Gwdaen craned his neck to better see the comer and scoffed after a beat, in astonishment: “That’s Cwdi Kwneya!”

Every pair of pale-blue eyes were glued to the woman as she stormed along the aisle her black, salt-spattered cloak billowing behind her. A gloomy cwr hurried on her heels, his expression a mixture of shame and aggravation. They were brutalizing the code and he knew it.

Cwdi Kwneya Tynflannen strolled up the dais and threw herself on her knees at the feet of her brother who had risen from his seat his face pale with anger and concern. Cwbae Kwnfhyr bent down and pulled her up by the arms, demanding: “Kwneya! What in the world do you mean ramming in my hall like you had all the daemons of abyss snapping on your heels?”

“Forgive me, thwlo,” she pleaded. “I had to come, to warn you.”

“You could’ve sent a word that you’re arriving. I would’ve arranged a convoy for you,” the cwbae scolded. “Surely, no warning requires such haste and disregard of manners!”

“This one does,” Cwdi Kwneya claimed. “I must speak to you in private. Please.”

“As you will,” the cwbae subsided, turning to Gwdaen. “Son, the hall is yours.”

“I think the cwba should also hear this,” said Cwdi Kwneya.

“Very well... Gwdaen, would you come with us? Twran Dryfean, be kind and hold the court for me.”

The twran in question inclined his head and the cwbae took his sister by the elbow, walking her down the dais and through the dead silent hall at a swift pace. Cwba Gwdaen followed them slower though Cavwn could tell, he was seething with curiosity. So was everyone else in the hall. Cavwn knew that the

speculation would start the moment the doors clanked shut behind them. Did the cwdi realize what a whirlwind in a wineglass she had stirred with her sudden intrusion? Of course, she did, and as she had stormed in regardless, her business must be most severe.

Cavwn stopped as the cwba pushed open the door to his sire's luminous study, but Cwbae Kwnfhyr beckoned for him to enter as well. He did, surprised and somewhat disquieted by the invitation. The cwdi's message must be graver than he had imagined as the cwbae regarded that even Cavwn should hear it firsthand.

Cwdi Kwneya strolled back and forth on the polished stone mosaic floor, twitching her hands in front of herself, restless as a lioness in a cage. Crimson splotches bloomed on her bony cheeks, and her eyes had a feverish gleam in them. The cwba frowned, ever so slightly, and stepped to her, clasping her hands: "I'd say it's good to see you, aunt, but your anxiety concerns me. Please, take a seat and tell us, what's amiss?"

"Nephew," the cwdi's wandering eyes focused on his face and she seemed to calm down a sliver. "I am happy to see you, too. You've fared well, I hope?"

"I have. You, however... Forgive me my bluntness but you look rather strained."

"My condition is the least of our worries," declared the cwdi. "Brother, nephew..."

She fell silent as her gaze caught Cwnriath over the cwba's shoulder. Her brow wrinkled and she glanced at the cwbae, demanding in almost angry tones: "Pray, why did you summon a cwr? Surely, you don't expect me to commit an assassination of my own kin!"

"Cwr Rhianvrannen is the heir to Lwbh Laichran and almost like a second son to me," the cwbae explained. "If anything threatens Flwthean, his house is our strongest ally."

"Ah... My apologies, cwr, I didn't recognize you. I thought the colors of House Rhianvrannen are emerald and gold?" the cwdi eyed Cavwn up and down, confused.

"They are but Cwbae Kwnfhyr has kindly allowed me to bear the colors of his house, instead."

"Hm..." Cwdi Kwneya cast yet another appraising look at him before spinning back to her brother and spilling the news. "My husband is hatching a war."

If the cwbae was surprised or shocked, he hid the feelings magnificently. His face and voice gave out no emotions whatsoever as he inquired: "Against whom? Not Flwthean, certainly, as we're brothers through marriage."

“Against everyone,” said the cwdi, somber as a late autumn day. “He’s leagued together with a couple of inland counts and the people beyond the Gorge...”

“Excuse me?” Cwbae Kwnfhyr cut her off, his mask of serenity cracking. “Have you come mad, thwli? There are no people beyond the Gorge! Only deserted mountains.”

“That’s what I thought yet a couple of moons’ turns ago,” the cwdi allowed. “However, it has turned out, we’ve been wrong all along. There are people and they’re waging war. Together with your fellow cwbaei, they’re planning to take back our ancestral lands from the Westerners and Islanders.”

“So, it is true then,” mused Cwba Gwdaen, speaking mostly to himself, sounding more excited than worried. “The legend about the elven seer who led a group of people of all four native races to the eastern side of the Gorge just before the Era of Conquests due to a premonition in which he had seen that, otherwise, they’d all be swept off the face of the Torn Continent.”

“There’s such a legend?” the cwbae looked baffled.

“Yes.” His son’s eyes welled with genuine bewilderment. “Everyone knows it. Don’t they?”

“I didn’t,” Cwbae Kwnfhyr confessed. “Have you heard about it, thwli? Or you, Cwr Rhianvrannen?”

“Did you truly sleep through all your lessons with the scribes?” The cwdi sounded exasperated. “Yes, thwlo, everyone is familiar with the particular legend. Except you, apparently.”

If not for Cwba Gwdaen’s relentlessness in lecturing him about the myths and history, Cavwn would’ve been as ignorant about the matter of the ancient immigrants and much else, but he kept his mouth shut and face straight, trying his hardest to melt into the tapestry behind him. He didn’t belong here. To a war council, maybe, but not in the private counsel with the three members of the ruling house. Regardless of the cwbae’s lavish statement of him being like a son, Cavwn knew better than to take his words seriously. He was but a cwr, albeit a son to one of the cwbae’s most powerful liege lords, and should’ve been standing in the corridor with Cwdi Kwneya’s cwr.

“When you say hatching a war, what do you mean in practice?” Cwbae Kwnfhyr’s composed voice drew his attention back to the conversation he shouldn’t have been hearing. “Are they still in the stage of toying with the possibility of attacking us or already mustering troops? What’s the number of men joining Cwbae Hrwnnon and the others from the east? Do they have a fleet and of how many ships?”

“I don’t know about the numbers, but I dare say that they don’t even matter,” said the cwdi, glancing between him and Cwba Gwdaen her eyes brimming with dread. “They’ve found a way to summon Maedeth-cu from whichever pit of the abyss it dwells.”

For a heartbeat, the cwbae looked like she had slapped him across the face. Then, he burst into a laughter that was anything but genuine. He shook his head, belittling her announcement: “My dear sister, you know as well as I do that such thing as daemons exist only in the tales of barmy, old crones! If my fellow cwbaei truly intend to take the world over with an army of fairy tale creatures, I’d best start to prepare Gwdaen for ruling not just Flwthean but half of the Counties one day. They’re delusional and you’ve disgraced yourself for naught.”

“I knew you wouldn’t heed me.” The cwdi folded her arms in front of her chest. “But you should, thwlo. You really should. They’ve discovered some ancient magic with which a spirit of a divine creature can be summoned to our world and bound to a mortal. And what’s worse, they’ve found a suitable vessel for that spirit and sanctified him. All they need anymore is some token.”

“Eudder’s Coin?” the cwba cut in.

Cwdi Kwneya spread her arms, regretting: “I’m afraid I don’t know much more about the piece. They’ve been talking about a token and a counterpart. Some northern gods have been mentioned... Sadth...”

“Scathidor?” the cwba helped.

“Yes! Thank you. I knew you should be present when I talk about this.”

“Didn’t you say just a moment ago that they’re planning to revive Maedeth-cu?” Cwbae Kwnfhyr interrupted. “Yet now you’re talking about some gods even the name of which you can’t pronounce.”

“Scathidor, another of the twin gods of battle in the jotuni mythology, is much the same thing as our Maedeth-cu,” explained the cwba, sounding like he was lecturing a slow-witted child. “Our mythology knows only one god of war, Twrnryth, but just as Stryader and Scathidor, or Eudder and Eulner, as they’re called in the breunniri mythology, are two sides of the same coin, he’s a counterforce as much as a twin to Maedeth-cu. Twrnryth represents the order, discipline, and honor of war, whereas Maedeth-cu is the incarnation of chaos, panic, and brutality. To make a battle, both are needed. If we rule out Maedeth-cu, we won’t have a war but friendly combat, and if Twrnryth isn’t present, the battle becomes a carnage. What’s more, there’s no power to keep the madness from spreading outside the battlefield. If the chaos is let loose, without the order to keep it checked, it’ll devour the whole world, those who released it as

well as the peoples they meant it to destroy. The chaos bows no master. Like wildfire, it consumes all on its way.”

The cwbae crossed his arms in front of himself, scowling at his son. Gwdaen met his gaze evenly. Cwbae Kwnfhyr grunted a wordless sound of reproach and pointed out: “Be that as it may, we’re still talking about mere myths. Even if some madmen have carved runes into the flesh of some unfortunate bastard, or whatever is needed to sanctify a vessel for a god, he’s still just a man with ugly symbols in his skin and will ever remain only that. There is no such thing as gods and daemons. You as a literate man should know as much, son.”

“All I know, as a literate man, is that in Aenerhjelm, the cult of the Antlered One is alive still today,” countered the cwba. “I have also heard from reliable sources that the creature that dwells in the Green Halls is not just a man in a mask but something far more sinister. The priestesses of Uanneach still possess the knowledge and magic to bind a divine spirit into a mortal.”

“And I possess the skill to tame a dragon but it’s of no use as the dragons don’t exist,” snapped Cwbae Kwnfhyr.

“My husband and his allies seem to believe that they do,” his sister cut in, drawing up to her full height.

She was almost to an inch as tall as the cwbae, slender as a willow switch, and brimmed with determination. Cwbae Kwnfhyr huffed an exasperated sigh and tried to reason with her: “Kwneya, I understand that you’ve sacrificed a lot by coming here behind Cwbae Hrwannon’s back but...”

“Everything,” she cut him off, her voice spiked with agony. “I’ve sacrificed everything, thwlo. My children...”

Her throat caught and she turned away from them, her shoulders trembling in violent, restrained sobs.

“Your husband won’t harm them,” the cwbae comforted her. “They’re also his children and none of us can afford to lose a single child of our blood.”

“If he remarries...”

“He can’t do so for as long as you live. He can’t divorce you without my consent.”

“Gwreth is frail,” the cwdi sobbed. “And Rhwnna is a girl. She at least is disposable.”

“Anything but if her brother is sickly,” the cwbae objected. “Rest assured, thwli, that not even Hrwannon is as heedless as to slay someone who might be his only hope to get an heir if his son should perish. The only one you should be worried about is yourself. He won’t let you live after this.”

“I know.” The cwdi dried her face into a sleeve of her black dress and turned to face them again. “Which is why I can never return to Hwryen. I’ll never see my children again. Do you think I would’ve left them behind for good for mere assumptions and delusions? It is true, Kwnfhyr. The myths, legends, all of it. It’s true, and we may be the only ones who can stop the world from getting devoured by the shadows.”



“Don’t waste your tears on me.”

The merciless sun blazed in the zenith. The day was calm, and the heat so overwhelming that the stands were half empty. In truth, they had been that after Arron had lost his third duel. The people weren’t quite as interested in watching a chicken getting beaten as the Silvers imagined.

Today it would’ve been worth it for anyone to defy the swelter, however. Today, the pansy wouldn’t get beaten, Arron realized as his gaze fell upon the opponent dragged into the arena in a cage by half a dozen burly turnkeys. He’d be eaten.

Beside him, the warden turned pale as a snowbell. His aquamarine eyes fixed on the beast, and his mouth formed what could’ve been a litany of curses as well as prayers. Arron was numb. It was his usual state of mind nowadays, and not even facing a monster from the nightmares of a dreamer with the most vivid and perverse imagination could rattle him. He was too tired to be afraid, too exhausted to be even amazed.

He had learned on the Bitch that the creatures that in Braenduir were considered long extinct or mythical, to begin with, were very much alive and real in Aelathduir. They had swarmed the lands at the eastern side of the Gorge since the immemorable times, and it had been the squatters from the west who had been forced to adapt to their presence, not the other way around as it often was when men invaded new territories.

“They’ve taken leave of their fucking senses!” the warden ground out, swearing for the first time ever in Arron’s presence. “A fucking khlyon! I thought they wanted you to stay alive...”

Arron said nothing. He was still refraining from speaking to anyone save for Aedel and being forced to fight a mythical monster was no reason to break his silence.

He studied the creature with nothing if not mild curiosity. The gods must've been in their cups in earnest when designing it. It was half something comparable to a woman, though its features were rough and twisted like those of a clay model molded by a haphazard sculptor's apprentice, half an octopus that's tentacles ended in snake's heads. There were eight of them, slithering and hissing and trying to reach the guards from between the bars of the iron cage. The woman's head was grimacing, displaying rows of pointy teeth dripping with saliva.

The warden touched Arron's hand, ever so lightly, brushing his knuckles with his thumb. Arron turned his attention away from the monster and met his eyes. The aquamarines were blazing so bright that looking in them all but blinded Arron. *Furious*. Trenghaol concealed his feelings remarkably, but Arron could tell that he was burning with pure rage.

"Fuckers!" he growled, barely moving his lips. "May the Mother smite them down."

He nailed his eyes into Arron's and went on in only a sliver less wrathful a voice: "Today, you can't refrain from striking the opponent. She doesn't look fast, but she is. She's ferocious and fearless, too, and her teeth are poisonous. Every head is a lethal weapon. If she bites you, you're dead. Do you understand? The venom... What now?"



This was a teaser of the upcoming book, *Slavemarked*, the second book in the series of *Braenduir Chronicles*. The eBook will be published on 2/3/2023 on various platforms.

If you'd like to receive **an early reviewer copy** of *Slavemarked* a couple of months before the release date, contact me via email at jpaspenn@gmail.com. If you have a book blog, bookish Instagram account, etc., and willingness to review the book there, I am happy to provide you with a free EPUB/PDF file.

I hope you enjoyed this sample and thank you for your interest in my work.

With love,

Julia