

BLOOD OVER BRIGHT HAVEN

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*Author of
The
Sword of
Kaigen*



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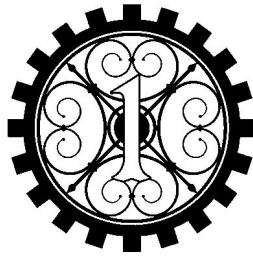
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*To the DNF Crew
for helping me through the Deep Night.*



A FIELD OF FLOWERS

THOMIL HAD TAKEN the long way back from scouting. Against his better judgment, he let his wolfskin hood down and welcomed the wind's needles as he pressed through the howling dark. Thomil's gods were in this cold, as they were in the snow and the crocus stem promise of color fast asleep beneath the freeze. If this was the last time they ever wrapped their arms around him, he wanted to feel it.

What was left of Thomil's tribe waited for him in a huddle at the edge of Lake Tiran. Massed in the dark, the Caldonnae were alarmingly small against the expanse of ice before them. Of the several scouts who had peeled from the group to look out for direwolves, snow lions, and rival tribes, Thomil was the last to rejoin the clan, his return bringing their number to forty—forty people left of a nation that had once numbered in the tens of thousands.

"No pursuers," Beyern said as Thomil passed him. It wasn't a question. The lead hunter inferred everything he needed from Thomil's body language.

"None, Uncle."

With life ever dwindling across the Kwen, scouting for danger had come to seem more like a formality than a necessary precaution. It had been six months since the Caldonnae had encountered another clan and years since Thomil had seen a direwolf. The most prolific killer on these plains didn't stalk on earthly feet, and the best scout in the Kwen could never sense it coming.

“Join your family.” Beyern nodded to where Maeva and Arras leaned into each other in the dark. “And put your hood up, fool.”

“Yes, Uncle.” Thomil smiled and drew his hood over his numb ears, trying not to think that this might be the last time Beyern ever snapped at him.

Maeva was quiet as Thomil slipped into a crouch at her side. Thomil had been taller than his older sister for half a decade now, but to him, she would always be a shelter, a hearth light when all other love had gone from the world. She met his eyes, then turned meaningfully to the glow beyond the lake, inviting him to follow her gaze and share her hope.

Everything about the city on the far shore was alien—the buildings taller than any tree, the spires piercing the sky like teeth, the boom and whir of machinery. It would never be home, but it was a chance at survival. Magical shielding glittered around the city of Tiran, forming a dome that stretched from the sun-eating mountain range in the west to the lower barrows in the east. That bright work of sorcery protected those inside from Blight, winter, and everything that had driven the Caldonnae to the brink of extinction.

“Are you ready?” Arras asked because that was the kind of inane question he liked to ask.

“No.” Thomil tried not to sound exasperated with his sister’s husband, but really, how ready could a person ever be for near-certain death? And if not death, then the enormity of the unknown. The plains of the Kwen were the only mother Thomil had ever known—brutal but comprehensible if one had the stillness to listen and learn her mysteries. Even as he beheld the city across the lake, his mind couldn’t reconcile the idea that safety lay in the incomprehensible sorcery on the other side of that barrier.

Maeva reached over and squeezed Thomil’s hand, her grip as reassuring as it had been when they were children and he came crying to her with nightmares of wolves with many mouths. Thomil wanted to slip his deerskin mitten off and grasp her hand in earnest, in case this was the last time. But there was a silent agreement among the Caldonnae not to say goodbye. They had to keep believing, however unlikely it was, that they would all live to see the sunrise.

“Thomil,” Maeva said with the soft confidence that told him she could see straight to the doubt seething beneath his composure. “The worthwhile run is never the short one.” Old hunter’s wisdom, based on the day it could take to track and hunt the largest prey—followed by the kind of abstract

wisdom only an older sister like Maeva could give: “You know we’re not running from oblivion, Thomil. We’re running toward hope.”

Maeva and Arras’s daughter mumbled sleepily on her father’s shoulder, and Maeva betrayed her own anxiety by clutching Thomil’s hand a little tighter.

“And you know Carra’s going to be alright,” Thomil said, wanting to return his sister’s reassurances. “If nothing else, Arras can run.”

“Was that a veiled dig at my intelligence?” Arras raised a bushy red eyebrow at Thomil.

“Was it veiled?”

“I swear, little brother, if my girl wasn’t sleeping, I’d deck you so hard.”

“I know.” Thomil grinned at his broad slab of a brother-in-law. “Why do you think I waited until she was asleep?”

It was a stupid exchange, but it got Maeva to laugh. And that was all that mattered: that their last moments as a family here on this shoreline be warm ones.

The tribe strung out into a single line where the rocks met the ice. It would be a miracle if half the Caldonnae reached the opposite shore. But only death waited in the Kwen behind them. Blight had taken too many of the animals they hunted and the summer crops they would have stored to hold them through the Deep Night.

“It’s nearly time,” Elder Sertha’s voice creaked like an oak above the murmurs between family members. “Get the blood moving in your legs.”

“Leave your tools and weapons,” Beyern added. “They’re just weight.”

As instructed, Thomil unslung his bow and quiver and set them in the snow. Taking his hands off the weapons was harder than he had expected. For a thousand years, the Caldonnae had defined themselves by their hunting prowess. Leaving their bows and spears here on the shoreline felt like a final concession that they were no longer the apex predators their ancestors had been.

“Up.” Beyern walked along the shoreline, pulling the sickly and sleepy to their feet. “It’s not getting any colder tonight. If the ice at the warm end is ever going to hold, it’ll be now.”

Already, the sliver of returning sunlight had conspired with the warmth from the magical barrier to weaken the ice between the plains and the city of Tiran. The full warmth of summer would melt the impassable snow drifts at the feet of the mountains, opening marginally safer land avenues into

Tiran, but even the most optimistic among the Caldonnae knew the tribe wouldn't last until then. The lake was their only chance.

Four-year-old Carra woke as Arras adjusted her weight in his arms.

"Papa," she said sleepily, "is Uncle Thomil back?"

"Yes, sweetling. He's right here," Arras said, and when Carra still looked worried, he put his nose into her mess of auburn hair to whisper something that made her giggle. "Now, hush, my heart. Everything will be alright."

The children Carra's age and younger couldn't run through the shin-deep snow and would have to be carried. Thankfully, Arras had retained his massive strength and stamina through the lean months of the Deep Night. He could make the two-mile run under the extra weight if fate allowed it. But that, too, was a slim hope. The greatest danger out on that lake would not be cold, exhaustion, or thin ice. It would be Blight, magnified tenfold.

"While you can still breathe, keep moving," Beyern said. "Stop for nothing. Turn back for no one. Not even your own blood." The words turned white before him and hung there like a mourning shroud. "We are one blood now, one name, with one purpose: *cross*."

"Everyone, ready," Elder Sertha said as the last of the Caldonnae took up position along the rocks.

Numbers were supposed to help. No solitary runner ever made this crossing in one piece, but in big groups, sometimes, there was a chance. Prey mentality.

"*Move!*"

As one, the Caldonnae surged onto the lake.

Thomil felt the difference the moment his boots hit the ice. Normally, Blight did not announce its arrival to the senses, but here, there was a slight change in pressure, a promise of evil in the air.

White ignited the dark ahead of Thomil, catching one of the teenage hunters who had struck out ahead of the rest of the group. As the light hit the boy's sleeve, he jerked to a stop, and when it flared to illuminate his face, Thomil recognized the Blight's first victim: Drevan, an orphan of the last winter, a gifted small game trapper, a quiet boy... He was not quiet now. No one was when Blight pierced their flesh.

Magnified by the uncaring expanse and sharpened by the cold, Drevan's shriek was the sound of nightmares. Skin unraveled from flesh and flesh from bone like unspooling thread. A few of the adolescent runners nearest

Drevan stumbled to a halt in horror, even as the elders at their backs cried, “Keep running! He’s lost! Keep running!”

Drevan had left the shoreline at a sprint, meaning the whole tribe was behind him. They all saw him disintegrate, screaming, until the ribbons of light peeled the lips from his teeth, the skin from his ribs, and at last unmade his lungs. In seconds, the little trapper had crumpled to a pile of cloth, hair, and stripped bones. The blood that had spun from his body made the impression of a flower on the snow, mocking life.

“Forward, sons!” Beyern grabbed two of the young men who had stopped and hauled them back into motion. “Look back for no one!”

The next to die was Elra, an eight-year-old boy struggling through the snow near the back of the group. A woman—in his periphery, Thomil couldn’t see if it was Elra’s mother or one of his doting older sisters—wouldn’t let go of his hand, and the Blight took her too. Not sated with the body of a malnourished boy, the light spun straight to its next meal the same way it jumped from one wheat stalk to the next when wind brushed them together. Boy and woman unraveled one after the other, overlapping flowers on the lake’s surface.

Terror was thick in the air now. Thomil couldn’t blame the younger Caldonnae who retched and wept at the sight of their fellows in ribbons, but at twenty, he had lost enough loved ones to Blight that he was hardened to it. He forged ahead alongside his sister and her husband, pacing himself carefully, no matter what he heard, no matter whose screams pulled at his heart.

He tried not to recognize one scream as belonging to Landir, his last surviving friend from childhood and the last practitioner of their tribe’s traditional woodwork. He tried not to see the light claim Rhiga, who had breastfed him in his mother’s absence; Traehem, whose impeccable memory kept the tribe’s oldest songs alive; Mirach, who was the last descendant of the founding Caldonn line.

Mercifully, as the screams multiplied, they merged into one rending, all-encompassing howl in which the keenest ear could never discern an individual voice. Instead of letting himself wonder how many Caldonnae were still left running, Thomil focused on Arras several paces ahead of him and Maeva at his side. As long as they were with him, he could keep going. And if, at some point, they weren’t... well, Thomil had tried to steel himself for that too.

As they neared the middle of the lake, the remaining youths who had sprinted ahead were flagging. It was the seasoned adult runners like Thomil, Maeva, and Arras who pulled ahead now. Arras led their cluster, leading everyone, even with little Carra in his arms. All Caldonnae were winter runners, but even the best-conditioned lungs could only draw in so much air at these low temperatures before the cold overcame the runner. Thomil was starting to feel the freeze dangerously deep in his chest. He had just fallen a few paces behind Maeva in the hopes of slowing his breathing and easing the damage when, ahead of them, the white struck again.

Right between Arras's shoulder blades.

Maeva's "*No!*"—more plea than denial—couldn't stop the inevitable. Arras turned back to his wife, and Thomil had never seen such mortal terror in those steel eyes. The hunter's roar was just recognizable as words. "*Take Carra!*"

Driven by primal maternal desperation, Maeva managed an impossible acceleration over the last few feet of snow to her husband. She snatched Carra from Arras's great arms just as he came apart in a spiral of light, blood, and unfurling muscle.

Little Carra shrieked as a stray loop of the light clipped her face, then she went abruptly quiet, unconscious—Thomil prayed to the gods, *please, just unconscious*. The light had only grazed her face; it hadn't successfully jumped from Arras's body to hers.

"Arras!" Maeva wailed as her husband fell to the snow in a red flower indistinguishable from any other. "My Arras..."

But the only thing she could do for him was keep running. Clutching a limp Carra to her breast, she staggered forward through her sobs.

"I'll take her!" Thomil called over the screams, recognizing that his stricken sister wouldn't make it under the dead weight. "Maeva, I've got her!" He fell into step with Maeva and pulled Carra into his arms without breaking stride. "Just focus on running."

The frozen air had turned from a burn to a stab in Thomil's lungs, but it no longer mattered what damage he sustained. Not now that he was responsible for getting Carra to safety.

The remaining runners were at least three-quarters of the way across the lake now. Almost there, and there were still some of them left. Thomil didn't look, but he could hear their boots crunching snow whenever there

was a break in the screaming. That snow thinned with their progress, growing wetter as the glow of Tiran's barrier loomed closer.

The city of eternal spring radiated warmth into the surrounding air, which would have been a welcome reprieve if Thomil had not already burned his lungs raw. The echoing twang beneath his boots—falling too heavily now that Carra was in his arms—was meaningless to him until it grew louder, and someone far behind cried, “The ice! It's giving!”

Thomil looked back just as the first person went through the lake's surface. It was Beyern, the hunter—turned prey in the jaws of the lake. Jagged ice gnashed closed on him like teeth, and as the cracks shot outward from his position, the men and women behind Thomil stumbled—all six of them.

Gods, were there only six left?

No. That couldn't be right... But the snow behind the breaking ice spelled the truth in a meadow of red flowers. More than thirty Caldonnae had been reduced to blood on the ice, leaving only six—and the ice beneath their feet was breaking. It happened in terrible succession, like the Blight jumping from one living thing to the next. The ice split along many seams, pitching the remaining Caldonnae into the water.

“No!” Thomil gasped as the indifferent lake swallowed his sister whole.

After Thomil's mother had died giving birth to him, Maeva had been there to hold her new brother without selfishness or blame; her face was his earliest memory. When Blight had taken their father from the fire beside them, Maeva had scrubbed the blood and tears from Thomil's face. After all their aunts and siblings were gone, Maeva had been there. The single constant.

Thomil's world broke with the ice. His legs gave under him. Dark and cold closed around him, even though the ice beneath his knees had yet to split. He drowned with his family.

A “*NO!*” like a spear pierced the smothering dark.

Maeva was submerged except for her head, the chill of death already clinging to her lips, fiery hair frosted to her cheeks. She had clawed her way up a tilting pane of ice—not to live but to scream, “*Thomil! RUN!*”

And a truth snapped painfully into place in Thomil's heart: Maeva had carried Thomil all this way for this moment. So that, at this last stretch, Thomil could carry her daughter. This was a reason to live greater than all his grief and fear.

The water lit up bright white in three—four, five, six—places that quickly turned a churning red as Blight claimed the drowning victims, and so went the last of the Caldonnae.

But not quite. Thomil clutched his niece close, and the feel of her head on his chest drove him to his feet. *Not quite the last.*

We are one blood, Beyern's voice resonated even as the hunter and Maeva and all the rest slipped into the blazing jaws of death. *One blood, one name, one purpose...*

Empty of all things but that purpose, Thomil turned and *sprinted* for the city. No longer caring if he destroyed his body, he ran as no human had ever run before. Carra's weight, which should have slowed him down, pulled him forward as though all the fickle gods of the Kwen had thrown their strength into this last sprint for the shoreline. Siernaya of the Hearth made strength from the burning in Thomil's lungs, Mearras of the Hunt lent him stamina beyond his physical form, Nenn of Waters held the ice firm, even as cracks bit at Thomil's heels. The rocks along the edge of the lake glowed gold with the magic of Tiran. Salvation. And Death Herself seemed to let Thomil slip by.

His boots went through the ice at the last few paces, where the warmth of the barrier had reduced it to a thin sheet. It didn't matter. The water here only reached his shins, and he crashed forward, cutting his legs on the breaking ice but unable to feel the damage through the cold. He reached the rocks a madman and scrambled up them into the golden glow of safety.

The barrier didn't resist Thomil's entry—just washed him in light that prickled painfully on his chilled skin, then turned to pure spring as he broke through the other side.

They had made it.

Thomil fell to his knees on the flattest ground he had ever seen. Not ground, he realized. The stuff beneath his knees was a Tiranish invention. *Pavement.*

He set Carra down as gently as he could on the unnatural flatness. Her little face was pale with cold and oozing blood where Blight had burned a crescent across her left eye. With his hands shaking beyond his control, Thomil fumbled to yank his mitten off and pressed two fingers to the side of her neck.

"Please..." he murmured, "please, please..." and even here, where none of his gods could reach, they granted this one mercy. A heartbeat answered.

Carra was going to live. With that understanding, the animal strength went out of Thomil, and he collapsed beside his niece. Blight had gone from the air, but so had any whisper of Thomil's gods, leaving behind only the terrible absence all around.

On his back, Thomil opened his mouth to sob, but he was too weak to do more than wheeze. Tears trickled from the corners of his eyes into the hair at his temples, melting the crystals where sweat had frozen on his skin, and he hated himself for not being able to scream. The Caldonnae were gone, along with all their skills, and songs, and love for each other. The Earth should be shaking. The sky should open up and wail for their loss. And here Thomil lay, gulping like a beached fish, unable to muster a sound.

He didn't know how long he had been lying there when a boot heel dug into his shoulder.

"Hey!" a voice said with the impatience of someone who had repeated himself several times. "*You awake, Blighter?*"

Thomil barely understood the words. They were off—nearly Caldonnish but not, nearly Endrastae but not. A foreign face swam into focus above Thomil, green-eyed and snub-nosed under a thatch of short brown hair. Tiranish.

"Hey, Benny!" The barrier guard turned and called over his shoulder. "*We got a Kwen over here!*"

The sun was peeking over the eastern hills, but it was not the sun Thomil knew. The barrier had altered its color, and straight buildings broke its light into stark alien rectangles. Even the air was wrong now that Thomil's lungs had stopped burning enough for him to taste each breath—smoky. But unlike a campfire or prairie burn, this smoke carried a tang of acid like the taste after vomit.

"*Just one this time?*" said a second voice.

"*Well, two, counting the little one, but I think it might be dead.*"

No! Thomil tried to say, but all that came out was a burning gurgle.

A second figure appeared above him, distinguishable from the first only by the smattering of freckles across his nose; Elder Sertha had warned that Tiranish could be difficult to tell apart. These two were dressed identically in stiff brass-buttoned uniforms. Both of them had strange weapons on their backs, longer than clubs, shorter than spears, and gleaming metal. Guns.

"*If they're too weak to work, we don't have space for them,*" the freckled guard said coolly.

Did that mean...?

"Want me to throw them back out?"

"No!" Thomil finally managed and grasped the first guard's boot. He might not be able to speak above a grating rasp or even stand, but his grip was powerful from years of stitching leather and stringing bows. It should speak for itself. *"I can work."*

They were among the few Tiranish words Thomil had learned before the crossing. Elder Sertha had said that anyone who made it to this side of the barrier would need them to stay alive.

"I can work!"

"Yeah?" the freckled Tiranishman looked unconvinced. *"You don't look it."*

"He's got quite the grip, though." The first guard grimaced down at the hand on his boot. *"Can't hurt to take him to the camp and see if he recovers."*

"Fine," the freckled guard said impatiently. *"I'll get rid of the girl."* He reached down for Carra.

"NO!" Desperation reanimated Thomil's body, pitching him forward over little Carra.

"Oh, for Feryn's sake!" The first guard placed a boot against Thomil's shoulder to shove him aside.

But there was one last thing Elder Sertha had said about the Tiranish: they couldn't knowingly separate parents from children. Their religious laws forbid it. So, braced over Carra, Thomil rasped a Tiranish word the Caldonnae had little use for:

"Mine... My daughter."

It felt viscerally wrong to deny Maeva and Arras's existence when their blood was still fresh on the ice. But the Tiranish gave strange power to words and claims of ownership.

The boot lifted from Thomil's shoulder.

"Your daughter, huh?" The freckled man said. And apparently, the Tiranish had the same trouble with Kwen faces as Thomil had with theirs; neither guard questioned why Thomil shared precious few features with his niece. The gray eyes were enough for them.

"Fine, then, you can go to the camp together. See how you like it."

Thomil looked at the freckled guard in confusion.

The man clarified with spite, *“Good luck feeding the little rat. It’ll be your funeral.”*

If the words were meant to intimidate Thomil, they were a poor attempt. Did this man not understand? Thomil was already dead. Everything that had made him who he was lay on the other side of the barrier in bloody shreds that would vanish with the next snowfall. But Carra was alive. And while Thomil’s husk drew breath, by all his silent gods, she was going to stay that way.

He doubted in his heart that it was possible to raise a Caldonn child in this city of metal and gears, but he would be betraying all his ancestors if he didn’t try. As long as the two of them stayed together, he could tell himself that the carnage of the crossing hadn’t been for nothing.

The Caldonnae still lived.