

The inside of King Bran's command tent smelled worse than a pig-farmer's socks. A noxious mixture of bad breath, body odour, stale air and damp hide permeated the air. It was stifling, and almost too much for a man of Alwysyll's delicate disposition to take. If the king did not make his appearance soon, there would be one chieftain less in the gathering, as he felt sure he was being slowly poisoned to death.

On glancing around the gloomy interior, he was disappointed to note that none of the other nine chieftains showed any sign of discomfort. Not that he could see them too clearly, the dull, orange glow from the central fire did little in the way of illumination, its flickering flames merely serving to make his companions appear more grotesque, if that were possible.

A cold shiver ran through his body. Sitting in a mangy old tent in the middle of the Quintock hills with this sorry lot did not come high on his list of places to be. He could think of at least a dozen things he would sooner be doing. Lying safe and warm in bed back at his hut, for one. Even though the roof leaked, the windows rattled and the door was tied in place by strips of leather, it was home.

In an effort to ease the constriction around his throat and drag some air into his lungs, he tugged at the collar of his tunic. Immediately, a heady mix wafted up his nose to make a beeline for his windpipe. He gagged. Beads of sweat sprang to life all over his body, and his tunic clamped to his scrawny torso like a love-struck leech. He knew that if he didn't get some fresh air soon he would throw-up, and that would be all he needed. As one of King Bran's trusted chieftains, it would not do for him to show weakness in front of his peers.

“What’s the matter with you?” a voice growled from beside him.

Alwysyll suppressed his feeling of nausea and glanced to where Forbai squatted, a huge bear of a man with more hair on his face than his head. The dancing flames from the fire gave his marred features a demonic mien, the red scar across his milky right eye burning crimson in the glow.

“Nothing. Nothing at all. Just feeling a little queasy.” Alwysyll fiddled with the collar of his tunic, careful not to pull it too far from his throat. “Hot in here, isn’t it?”

Forbai grunted, his beard twitching in amusement. “Not runnin’ scared, are yer? About tomorrow’s fight, an’ all?” His one good eye stared at Alwysyll.

Alwysyll looked away, hoping that Forbai hadn’t noticed the nervous tick that always seemed to afflict him when battles were mentioned. By the gods, his stomach felt ropy. Ropier still since Forbai’s comment about a fight. Deep inside, he hoped that Forbai was wrong and that there was another explanation for the gathering. One with less bloody consequences. Somehow, he doubted it. Why else would the King want all the warriors of Connact in one place unless he had a battle planned?

A welcome blast of fresh air swept through the tent as the hide covering the entrance was thrust aside. There, his huge frame thrown into silhouette by the light of the half-moon, stood King Bran. He paused on the threshold for a moment before striding in to stand across from where Alwysyll sat. A mere few yards and the fire separated them.

“Chieftains!”

Alwysyll felt his face drain of colour. The power in the King’s deep voice was frightening, as was the probable reason for the gathering of the tribes. Any moment now the reason for the meeting would be out and he wasn’t looking forward to hearing it. Not that he

was a coward, far from it. He could name-call and throw sticks as good as the next man. But to actually fight? That was different. That was for sword-wielding thugs. Men like Forbai who had more muscle than brain. Not for more cerebral types like him.

King Bran's forked beard bristled, his dark, deep-set eyes sweeping over the men arrayed before him. His long ginger hair, braided at each temple and tied off with hemp, appeared redder under the fire's glow. Certain he had the men's attention, he folded his arms across his broad chest and stood tall.

"I have dire news, my chieftains. News that affects us all." He paused to let his words sink in. "One dark and stormy night last sevenday, the royal Seer, Cynyercumin, had a vision. A vision of such clarity that it needed no runes to be cast to determine its meaning." His eyes swept the chieftains again. "We are to be invaded by Leeks!"

The resultant clamour was deafening, with more than a couple of the chieftains jumping to their feet to punch the air with clenched fists as they gave vent to their fury.

King Bran raised his arms for calm. "The time has come for the people of Connect to join forces and repel these invaders from distant lands. Your Queen, Maebie the First, has commanded that I, her beloved consort, gather the tribes to quash the barbarians and drive them back to their godforsaken lands. We are here, my friends, to smash them once and for all!" For emphasis, he hammered a meaty fist into the palm of a hand.

The chieftains roared their approval and punched the air in salute. All bar one.

Alwysyll was rooted to the spot. All his fears had been realised and any form of frantic body movement would result in a rather embarrassing incident. One which would be difficult to keep hidden from his comrades, despite the stench within the tent.

After a brief pause for order to reassert itself, King Bran continued. “Cynyercumin’s vision was most specific. Tomorrow, the third morn following the second sevenday after the night of the festival of Beltaine, invaders will broach our shores not a half day’s ride from where we now stand.”

“Surely that should be sit, Sire,” a voice corrected.

By the high, whining, nasal tones, Alwysyll could tell that it belonged to Nemed the Pedantic, one of the more quarrelsome of the chieftains. His was a voice that could make the deaf cringe.

King Bran peered down at the stick-like figure of Nemed with disdain. “What?”

Nemed ran a grubby hand through his greased-back hair before answering. “My pardon for interrupting, Sire. But ‘sit’ would be more technically correct.”

“What?”

Nemed drew himself taller and spread his arms to indicate the seated chieftains. “As you can see, Sire. We are all sitting, therefore to say that the invaders are going to land not half a day’s ride from where we now stand is not exactly right, is it? I mean, there are eleven of us here, of which ten are seated. If we divide the number of -”

“*SILENCE!*”

Nemed snapped to a halt mid-sentence.

“I don’t give a sheep’s fart whether there are more of us sitting than standing, if I want to say ‘from where we stand’, I will!” The King’s voice turned low and menacing as he leaned toward Nemed, his hand moving to the hilt of the whopping great sword strapped to his side. “Or do you want to argue the point further?”

Nemed gave a sickly grin and shook his head.

“Good!” Bran drew himself straight. “Now where was I?”

Forbai waved a hand in the air, his one good eye alight with excitement.

The King dipped his head in the giant’s direction.

“Invaders, Sire. Tomorrow, the third day after the seven secondary... The second day after the seven-day sec...” Forbai’s face screwed up in concentration.

“Thank you, Forbai.”

Forbai grinned.

“As I was saying. Tomorrow, we are to be invaded. After the cock crows thrice, but before the gong sounds Matins, the Leeks will arrive in the Bay of Plenty, there to sack the Sacred Convent of Noemenear.”

Low growls of outrage rolled around the command tent as Alwysyll struggled to recall why he knew of the Sacred Convent. He smiled. The Queen’s sister, Leda. That was it! She had been banished there by Queen Maebie after she’d been caught taking liberties with castle staff. Boy, she was a feisty wench, and a stunner, too. The waving of an arm in the air distracted Alwysyll from further ruminations on the matter.

“What now?” snapped the King, glaring at Forbai.

“After the cock crows thrice but before the gong sounds Matins, Sire?”

“Ten of the candle, man. Don’t you know your markings?”

Forbai looked to the ground, his face reddening.

Alwysyll struggled to keep from sniggering as the King continued.

“It is time for us to stop these diabolical incursions by Leeks.”

The low grumble of ‘Aye’ greeted the statement.

King Bran stared down, his eyes dark and hooded, a hand resting on the pommel of his sword as he let his gaze rest briefly on each man sat before him. “For too long they have raided our lands.”

The ‘Ayes’ were louder this time.

His voice increased in power. “For too long we have allowed them the freedom to do what they like.”

The ‘Ayes’ were almost a roar.

King Bran warmed to the acclaim. His voice fair bellowed as he strove to be heard. “And now the time has come when we turn them from our shores, sending them packing with their tails between their legs!”

The resultant clamour was deafening, resulting in a number of the chieftains jumping to their feet to cavort on the spot. To Alwysyll, they looked like chickens stamping for grubs.

King Bran raised his arms, the men who had jumped to their feet sitting down at the sign.

“With your help, my brave men, we will pay them back for the crops they stole, the women they burned and the horses they raped!”

This time the ‘Ayes’ were muted, coming out as a confused murmur as the chieftains cast each other puzzled looks.

Forbai raised a hand. “Sire!” he yelled. “Permission to speak!”

King Bran straightened to peer across the fire, his long hair braids dangling perilously close to the flames as he leaned forward. “Oh, it’s you again. For one moment I thought it was that fool, Alwaysill; the fever-cursed idiot.”

Forbai sniggered and nodded to where Alwysyll was sitting.

King Bran's bushy eyebrows rose in surprise. "Oh, so you're here, then? I didn't see you hiding in the gloom."

Alwysyll felt his face grow red as the other chieftains looked his way, the expressions on their faces ranging from open amusement to outright hilarity. He drew himself taller and returned his King's gaze. "When my King calls, I follow," he said, commanding all the composure he could muster.

The King grunted an acknowledgement and switched his gaze back to Forbai. "Well, what do you want this time?"

Forbai frowned, his forehead creasing as he tried to remember what it was he was going to ask. Suddenly, his bushy beard split into a grin. "Rape the horses, Sire!"

"What?"

"Yer said, 'They steals our crops, burns our women and rapes our horses'."

"No I didn't," the King retorted, eyes narrowed.

"You did, Sire," agreed Nemed. "Didn't he lads?"

Alwysyll heard a couple of the others grunt in agreement.

"*NO I DIDN'T!*" King Bran thundered. "You must have misheard me."

"You definitely said 'Rape the horses', Sire," Nemed persisted.

The King's face reddened. "Do you dare question me, again?"

"You did, Sire," agreed Forbai, nodding.

King Bran snapped his attention to Forbai, his eyes seeming to flash sparks in the gloom. "Are you trying to say I don't know what I'm talking about?"

The silence within the tent was deafening as time stood still, had a break, went for a cup of coffee and a biscuit while waiting for Forbai to answer. Even the fire ceased to crackle and pop.

Alwysyll had recognised the beginnings of a deadly rage developing even before the King had turned his attention to Forbai. With any luck Forbai hadn't, and would end up on the receiving end of Bran's lethal style of retribution.

A log in the fire exploded to shatter the silence and time returned, suitably replete.

"No, Sire," mumbled Forbai, much to Alwysyll's disappointment.

The King folded his arms across his barrel-chest and glared around the seated chieftains. "Does anyone dare question me?"

A swift chorus of 'No, Sire's' swept the tent.

Sparks flew into the air as the fire continued to erupt, lending support to the King's anger. The seated chieftains gave each other nervous glances at the obvious portent. Too often they had seen the end result of one of Bran's rages, and it wasn't pretty. Unless you were a vulture, that is. Then, the aftermath was pretty scrummy.

"Right then," growled the King. "As I was saying, before I was interrupted" - he glared at Forbai - "it is time for us to put a stop to these incursions. Tomorrow, at first light, we will prepare for battle. In force, we will sweep down from the hills through the Valley of Fing and smash the Leeks as soon as they step foot on our shores, turning the sea red with their loathsome blood." He straightened and folded his arms across his chest, all evidence of his previous anger vanquished. "Right! Any questions?"

"Is that it?" ventured Nemed.

King Bran turned a puzzled gaze on him. "Is that what?"

Nemed flushed crimson. “Er, the plan. We wait for them to land, then ride down and kill them?”

The King nodded.

Nemed frowned. “But what -”

Bran’s hand strayed to his sword, and Nemed stuttered to a halt.

“Any more questions?” The King demanded, eyes locked on Nemed’s.

Silence.

Satisfied with the response, King Bran hooked his thumbs in his belt, and in a powerful voice, said, “Tomorrow, my friends, will go down in the annals of history as the day of a mighty victory for the flower of Connact.” With a sudden lunge, his right hand whipped to his sword and snatched it out of its scabbard. Thrusting the weapon high into the air, inadvertently stabbing the hide in the process to create a much-needed vent, he shouted, “Together, we will expunge the name of Leek from history!”

The chieftains rose to their feet, thumping their chests and rattling their swords as they voiced their support. King Bran basked in the adulation, arms thrown wide, a huge smile splitting his beard.

Not wanting to appear rude, Alwysyll also rose, fighting to keep control of his iffy stomach. Unfortunately, as soon as he was on his feet, his well-being took a definite turn for the worse. The explosion of movement within the tent sent the previously quiescent fumes flying around, resulting in volumes of putrid air penetrating his lungs. His gorge rose, and he panicked. With speed born from necessity, he turned and fled, unnoticed by all except Forbai, whose eyes glittered with unconcealed contempt as he scampered away.

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Weak, watery sunlight bathed the Plain of Firg, casting a muted radiance over the bedlam that was Camp Connect. Within the camp, all was madness. Ground-hugging mist swirled and eddied in a light breeze as the heaving mob of unkempt humanity yelled and jostled in its haste to smother fires, dismantle tents, gather arms and retrieve missing horses. Everywhere one looked there was movement and feverish activity. Everywhere except for one small oasis of calm, that is.

Deep within the milling throng there was an area remarkably still and tranquil. An area that wasn't touched by the madness of it all. An area that couldn't give a sheep's fart whether there was a battle or not. An area with one battered tent near its centre and twenty-two comatose humps scattered around the remains of a central fire. Completely oblivious of the call to arms, the warriors of Tribe Wewonowt slept on.

Within the much-patched tent, Alwysyll stirred as the racket from outside infiltrated his sleep, which rather annoyed him as he had been having the most wonderful dream and had just arrived at the most interesting part. Groaning, he tossed aside his sleeping furs and levered himself to his feet to ease the kinks in his back from sleeping on the rough ground. He cursed as he stretched. In his dream, he had been just about to enter Drumalla, the Hall of Plenty, where all your wishes could be realised, when some inconsiderate sod had woken him. However, now that he was fully awake, he realised the ruckus outside was loud and frantic, and changed his opinion to inconsiderate sods. He was rubbing at his eyes when understanding of what it was hit home. The King's forces were preparing for battle! His

ailment returned with a vengeance, his stomach kicking into spasm mode. Not wanting to throw-up in his tent, he staggered to the hide flap and thrust it aside, then doubled over.

“You all right, Chief?” a voice called out.

Alwysyll peered across the trampled ground to where his warriors were scattered around the dully-glowing embers of the previous night’s fire, still wrapped in their sleeping furs and sound asleep. Around them, the combined army of the King’s tribes prepared for the coming day’s battle. Tents had been struck, fires extinguished and the short, shaggy hill ponies saddled and made ready. Men milled around, gathering weapons and helms as they shoved and shunted in their haste.

Alwysyll gave a wry grin. With any luck, the fight would be fought and won before he and his men arrived on the scene. His stomach calmed at the thought.

After a moment spent studying the bedlam, Alwysyll straightened and looked around to see who had called him, and spotted the emaciated figure of Laeg. The old man was stooped beside the remains of their fire, his sleeping fur wrapped around his bony shoulders as he attempted to resurrect it. To give him credit, at least he was trying, even though Alwysyll doubted he would have much success feeding it stones. “Try some wood,” he shouted. “It burns better.”

Laeg looked at the grey lump in his hand, brow furrowed in puzzlement. After a brief moment he smiled and tossed the rock over his shoulder, ignoring the grunt of pain from the man it landed on. “Good idea, Chief.” A wide smile split his gaunt features, revealing the total lack of teeth in his mouth. “No wonder you’s the chief, hey?” He cackled as he rose to his feet, then groaned when his knee cracked at the movement. “Darn arthritis,” he moaned. “Always plays up this time a year. It’s the damp, yer know. Now, when I were younger-”

“Yes, yes, yes,” said Alwysyll, stepping toward the dying fire, rubbing his hands to ward off the chill. “Now go and see if you can scavenge some wood so we can get this thing burning. A nice, hot tisane will do me the world of good.” He glanced around the hive of activity surrounding their campsite, and grimaced. “Then wake the men, before the King does it for us.”

Laeg blanched, and turned to disappear into the masses. He halted as he came face to face with Forbai, which is perhaps the wrong expression as Laeg was only short and Forbai huge. In actual fact, he came face to stomach with Forbai, then face to ground as the chieftain smashed him out of the way with a backhanded cuff.

With his huge body encased in a black animal skin and his bushy beard poking out the side of his leather helm, Forbai looked like a rogue bear striding through the camp. Alwysyll cringed as he approached, his stomach tying itself into knots. It had completed the sheep’ shank and was busy tying the slip-girdle double-ended barrel knot by the time Forbai halted some two paces away.

“Why aren’t yer ready?” Forbai demanded, jabbing a grubby forefinger into Alwysyll’s scrawny chest. “King Bran wants your miserable lot in the vanguard.” A wicked smile slit his beard. “So yer’d best get yerselves prepared. And smartish!”

“Vanguard?” The word came out as a whisper. “Surely there must be some mistake. The King would never send his best men in first.”

Forbai’s beard parted and harsh, guttural guffaws issued from the maw. Tears formed in the big man’s eyes. “Best men? You lot?” Laughter continued to emerge from the hairy orifice as Forbai struggled to contain his mirth. Eventually, the grunts subsided and Forbai

stepped closer to Alwysyll to fix him with a hard stare. “Yous the expendables.” Each word was punctuated by a hard jab in Alwysyll’s chest by a massive digit.

Forbai’s pug-ugly visage lowered until it was a mere finger’s breadth from Alwysyll’s. “Yous is the ones least likely to live.” An evil grin formed on his face as he shoved Alwysyll to the damp ground. “Got it? Yer got until I gets back to be ready, or else!”

With a final sneer, Forbai turned and strode from the camp, kicking out at one of the sleeping warriors in passing. He laughed as the man cried out in pain. For good measure, he kicked three more awake before swivelling to glare back at Alwysyll. “Until I gets back, or...” He drew his fingers across his throat. “Understand?”

Unfortunately, Alwysyll did. He sighed and flopped back onto the ground.

From somewhere nearby, a cockerel crowed. To Alwysyll it sounded like a death-knell, and he peered around, half-hoping to spot the bird so he could strangle the little clucker before it could utter the next crow. Not spotting anything resembling a feathered harbinger of death, he quickly rose to his feet. If he were about to die, he would sooner do it with his loyal and steadfast tribe around him. Following Forbai’s example, he walked around the camp, kicking his men awake.

By the time Forbai returned, leading his mount, Alwysyll was sitting astride his pot-bellied bay pony at the head of his men, a short throwing spear grasped in one hand while his other held the reins. Behind him, the might of tribe Wewonowt was arrayed, men who were primed, ready for action, at the peak of their power. Well, in Alwysyll’s mind they were. To the casual observer, however, they looked like a gaggle of village idiots on a day trip. All that was needed were some minders with lead ropes and the picture would be complete.

Forbai's one good eye widened as he spotted the tribe, and he halted his march to study them. After a moment, he shook his head. "Glad to see yer joined us."

All around them, the army of the King waited for the vanguard to move out. Horses whickered and stamped impatiently while men spoke in muted whispers. Alwysyll heard it all through heightened senses. It felt like everyone was staring at him and his men, which, to a certain extent, they were. Drawing himself straighter in the saddle, he urged his pony forward, ignoring the condescending smirks from the surrounding warriors. Behind him, his small group of men followed. On reaching Forbai, Alwysyll pulled his pony to a halt.

Forbai looked him in the eye and grinned, then stepped out of the way to give a mocking bow. "After you, my Lord. Yer battle awaits."

Surprisingly, Alwysyll's ailment never made an appearance at the mention of battle. His stomach felt fine. In fact, he was remarkably calm about the whole thing. Probably because he knew that if the battle didn't kill him, Forbai probably would. Either way, he was doomed. With a dark cloud of destiny hovering over his head, he nudged his horse in the ribs, sending it forward into the masses, who moved their mounts aside to form a clear avenue for Alwysyll and his men.

Somewhat reluctantly, tribe Wewonowt rode through rank upon rank of mounted warrior. With their spears thrust vertical, their backs held straight, and their buttocks clenched firmly together, which is not an easy feat to achieve when straddling a pony, they followed their leader.

With every step forward, Alwysyll's pride in his tribe grew. All eyes were turned to them. For once they were important, the centre of attention, the King's finest! Or so it felt. Had he been studying the watching faces more closely he would have noted the looks of

amusement, or, more alarmingly, the tight-lipped sorrow of men watching comrades about to be sent to the slaughter.

At the end of the avenue, sitting astride a pure white stallion of at least seventeen hands, waited the King. Even if Alwysyll didn't know it was he, he would be able to tell it was the King due to the fact he wasn't riding a bow-legged, pot-bellied excuse for a mount like the rest of them.

Alwysyll's breath caught in his throat as he gazed on King Bran's resplendent figure. His trident beard had been combed and tasselled and his wild, red hair freshly braided. A crimson cloak, fastened with a gold broach, hung around his broad shoulders, flowing back over the horse's flanks in a puddle. He wore tunic and trows of Connact tartan, a deep blue background with dark green cross-hatching, and his burnished helm shone.

As Alwysyll approached, the King smiled and raised his spear in salute. "Well met, my brave men," he bellowed.

Brave men? Alwysyll had never heard that said about his tribe before. His face broke into a grin as he halted his pony. "Your majesty," he said, "Tribe Wewonowt are ready to bring glory to your name."

A puzzled frown crossed the King's face, which quickly dissipated. "Aherm, yes." He paused for a moment, then said, "Well, let's hope you do, hey?" He gave a half smile, then raised his voice so that those behind Alwysyll could hear. "Anyway, I am sure you will do your best. Won't you lads?"

Behind Alwysyll, the tribe gave nervous smiles but said nothing.

The King turned his attention back to Alwysyll. "I must say, I was rather surprised to hear you had a plan. And a damned fine one at that, I hasten to add. I always took you for...

well, a bit of a cowardly idiot, really.” He shook his head and pursed his lips. “But to lead it yourself? That takes courage, man. Rare courage. It would seem I was wrong about you.”

With each word the king spoke, Alwysyll’s jaw dropped lower, until he felt sure it would hit the ground. Lead the attack? Rare courage? Wrong about him? Plan? What plan? The only plan he had ever come up with was for a new sun lounge at the back of his hut, and that was a disaster. It looked fine in charcoal, but in the cold light of day? A sun lounge facing the back of a cliff-face could hardly be described as a great success, especially with a dirty great overhang blocking out the sun.

“What plan would that be, Sire?” he heard himself ask in hushed tones. Behind him, he could hear his tribe mumbling, and could imagine what they were saying. He knew they didn’t follow him for his great bravery or battle skills, they followed him because he was never anywhere near where the fighting was, thus ensuring they could live to a ripe old age.

The King frowned. “The one where -”

“Perhaps I should explain, Sire.”

Alwysyll looked to his right, to where Forbai had pulled alongside him, his huge black horse dwarfing Alwysyll’s small pony, and the reason for his tribe’s predicament became clear.

Forbai turned to peer down, a malicious grin evident through his wild beard. “Yer plan, as I seem to recall, was to send your small force hammering into the invaders. Then, when their attention is all on you, we come riding over the hill to smash them to pieces.”

“It was?”

Forbai nodded.

“And a damned fine plan it is, too,” said the King. “I wonder why I never thought of it?”

“I wonder,” muttered Alwysyll, casting Forbai a dark look.

From beneath King Bran’s horse, a small brown shape appeared. It looked at Alwysyll once, blinked its beady black eyes, hopped onto a nearby rock, then stretched its neck, fluttered its wings and went cock-a-doodle-do for the second time that morning.

“Best be on our way, then,” said the King, not appearing to have seen the cockerel.

With King Bran leading the way, the army of Connact rode for the Valley of Firg. High above, carrion crows gathered in their hundreds, sensing dinner would soon be served. In a heaving, fluid black mass, they screeched and cawed to each other as they followed the horde.

The land gradually inclined and the Hills of Firg began to close in on the riders, funnelling them toward a narrow opening. Through the opening, clear blue skies could be seen and the nearer they got to it, the faster Alwysyll’s heart beat and the drier his mouth became. He’d never felt so nervous. Amazingly, his ailment remained absent, which was just as well. With nine hundred warriors behind him as witnesses, he would never live it down if he puked now.

“Nearly there,” Forbai grunted, as if reading Alwysyll’s thoughts. He turned in his saddle to sneer down.

Alwysyll ignored him, his eyes fixed on the gull that was gliding on the thermals beyond the hills. Such freedom. At that moment, he would give everything for the freedom of that gull.

“Not speaking, huh?” Forbai laughed. “Can’t say as I blame yer. Must be takin’ all yer concentration just to stay in the saddle.” After giving another harsh laugh, he barrelled his horse forward to join the King.

The land rose sharply as they entered the valley proper. Rolling grassland gave way to gorse and bracken and the muffled thump of hooves on soft ground echoed eerily around them. Horses snorted and equipment rattled, but no one spoke. Even the following crows ceased their squawking and settled for hovering above the army. Death was in the air, and they knew it.

Soon after entering the valley, King Bran called a halt and waved Alwysyll forward to join him and Forbai. Together, they rode the short distance to the crest of the trail, then stopped to follow it down through the hills with their eyes.

Far below them stood the Sacred Convent of Noemenear. Nestled on a promontory that extended into the Bay of Plenty, it looked like a fairie castle in the early morning sun. Built of sandstone, the convent’s walls seemed to glisten with an inner fire, a sharp contrast to the dullness of the slate roof. Two rounded turrets at the forward entrance rose majestically into the sky and, as a bejewelled backdrop, sunlight sparkled off gently swelling waves. Neatly tended fields and gardens spread out from the convent in a patchwork quilt of greens and golds. Livestock was evident in a number of enclosed paddocks and already some of the women were about, working the land.

Alwysyll’s breath was taken away by the splendour of it all. It was hard to imagine a more peaceful scene. Surely the Royal Seer must be wrong. Nothing as brutal as war could ever happen in a place of such outstanding beauty. Battles only took place in dull, dreary fields filled with churning mud and slurry, didn’t they?

On the far distant horizon, looming ever closer, he spotted the reason the might of Connact had gathered at this particular spot. The image of flawlessness was forever spoiled, the numerous white sails appearing as a boil on the bum of perfection.

From out of a bush to the left jumped a small brown shape. Unseen and unheard by any but Alwysyll, it gave voice to the third crow of the morning.

“How many are there?” Alwysyll asked, one eye staring fearfully at the distant white specks while the other searched for the cockerel, which seemed to have vanished into thin air.

The King shielded his eyes with a hand and peered into the distance. “One, two, three, four... er, six... um, nine... Oh, er, about teneen of them.” He turned to Alwysyll. “Each carrying at least thirty men, that makes...”

“Lots,” said Alwysyll, morosely, having given up on trying to track down the bird.

“Look on the bright side,” said Forbai, grinning. “At least there will be some left for us to mop up after you finish annoying them.”

For some reason, that statement failed to lift Alwysyll’s spirits. How could his small force hope to make a difference against so many? Which, of course, was Forbai’s plan all along. With his lands being next to his own, it did not take the biggest genius in Connact to work out who would benefit should Alwysyll and his men fail to live through the battle.

The sails were closer now, heading unerringly for the shingle beach some two thousand paces to the right of the promontory, the only area within the bay and immediate coastline where boats could safely make land.

The King wheeled his horse around. “Best get ready,” he said, locking eyes with Alwysyll. “And may the gods be with you.”

Stuff the gods, thought Alwysyll. He would sooner have the rest of the army with him. But thanks to Forbai, that was not about to happen. He could see the figures of men on the boats now, their shields fastened to the outside of the hulls. With the warriors on board holding their spears upright, the boats looked like an armada of floating hedgehogs. Feral ones, at that.

“Break a leg,” sneered Forbai, wheeling his mount to follow the King.

Alwysyll ignored him, his gaze transfixed by the doom bobbing on the waves.

The sound of a bell, repeatedly struck in rapid succession, shattered the quietness of the morning, sending gulls wheeling in the air to shriek their anger at the clamour. The women in the fields looked up in alarm, then began to run back to the Convent, their skirts hitched up to prevent them from becoming entangled in their legs.

It would appear that the King’s forces were not the only ones to have spotted the invaders.

Turning in his saddle, Alwysyll looked to his men and waved them forward. Tears of pride pricked his eyes as they eased their mounts toward him. His were not fighting men, but farmers, weavers and crofters, but each of them looked like true warriors this day. If you discounted the fact that their ponies were a few years shy of the glue pit, their spears short lengths of sapling with knives strapped on, their helms old cooking pots tied on with hemp and their swords scavenged from the scrap heap, they could easily pass for veteran fighters.

At that moment, Alwysyll was the proudest man alive. He may not live to see another sunrise, but at least he’d had his day. Never again would he be known as Alwaysill At-The-Edge-Of-Battle. Never again would the likes of Forbai be able to mock him. Never

again would the tribe be called Wewonowt. From this day on they would be known as tribe Wewon!

His face set, Alwysyll turned to face the enemy. The first of the boats had now reached the shallows and men were in the water, pulling the hide-covered coracles onto the beach. It was time for the attack.

Raising his spear, Alwysyll dug his heels into the pony's ribs and cannoned it down the trail, shouting his newly devised war cry at the top of his voice.

*“WHO’S GONNA GET YER? WEWON, WEWON! WHO’S GONNA KILL YER? WEWON, WEWON!”*

After a few stanzas, his men caught the drift and joined in. Their mantra bounced around the hills as they thundered down the trail, the echoes making it sound as though a hundred rode to the attack.

The warriors in the water and on the boats looked up at the roar. Initial fear turned to amusement as they spotted the twenty-four ill-armed horsemen riding toward them. In no time at all, over three hundred warriors lined the beach, a bristling mass of badness, awaiting the futile attack by a disorganised rabble.

On the mountain trail above, King Bran and Forbai watched the charge. King Bran with pride, Forbai in grim satisfaction. Soon, Connact would be free of the blight on its warriors. Connact men were fighters, not wimps. The end of Alwysyll and his ragtag band of idiots would be most welcome, as would the annexing of Alwysyll's lands to his own.

“Do you think we should help them?” asked the King. “There seems to be an awful lot of Leeks for Alwysyll to battle.”

Forbai shook his head. “Remember the plan, Sire. It was Alwysyll’s express wish that he and his tribe prove their worth by taking on the enemy first.”

“Hmmm! I’m not sure he expected there would be quite so many to face. Do you?”

Before Forbai could answer, a small brown shape darted out from beside the trail and ran under the King’s horse. Once there, it spread its wings, thrust out its neck and cock-a-doodle-dodded at the top of its voice, unheard by any but the stallion.

Panic-stricken, the animal reared to paw at the air, eyes wide and nostrils flared. Before Bran had chance to bring his mount under control, it shot down the trail with him hanging on for grim death.

On seeing their King charge forward, the combined might of Connact followed. Soon, nine hundred shrieking men hurtled down the trail toward the invaders, the King at their head.

Forbai cursed his ill-fortune and heeled his mount into the mob. It would not do for him to be seen lagging behind while others battled.

By the time the King made his appearance on the trail above, Alwysyll and his tribe had reached the base of the hills. His battle-lust was up and every nerve was tuned to charging the enemy, to rid Connact of the loathsome presence. He’d never felt like this before, but he enjoyed the feeling. He felt truly alive. Thoughts of death had been vanquished. Now, he longed to do battle, to rid Connact of the enemy. He wanted to kick some ass!

As he powered closer, he saw panic affect the front ranks of Leeks. Spears were lowered and men started to turn for the boats. A grim smile formed on his face. They were actually scared of tribe Wewon. The enemy was panicking! They were turning tail and running! “*WEWON, WEWON!*” he yelled, and thundered his pony across the ground.

Long before he reached them, the Leeks had scrambled back onto their boats and were propelling them out to sea as fast as they could. Spears, thrown away in haste, lay on the shingle, mute testament to their hasty departure.

Alwysyll hauled his pony to a halt in a spray of small stone and jumped from its back. He grabbed one of the spears from the ground and waved it at the retreating foe. Then, he turned to his men and shouted, “*WHO’S GONNA GET YER?*”

“*WEWON, WEWON!*” came the rejoinder from twenty-three voices raised in triumph.

“*WHO’S GONNA KILL YER?*”

“*WEWON, WEWON!*”

The realisation of what they had achieved flowed through Alwysyll’s veins. He felt light-headed and tingly, and sank to the ground in stunned disbelief. They had seen off hundreds of Leeks, all by themselves. They had done it. He looked up as the thunder of hooves reached his ears, and saw the King’s forces riding toward them, King Bran at their head.

Without waiting for his horse to stop, the King vaulted from the saddle and strode over to hoist Alwysyll to his feet. He gripped him by the shoulders, then crushed him to his chest. Just as quickly, King Bran thrust him away. “I have never witnessed such a brave act,” he said, fumbling with the gold broach that pinned his cloak at the neck. Having wrestled it free, he removed the cloak and handed it to Alwysyll. “Your King would like you to accept this gift as a token of thanks for the bravery of Tribe Wewonowt.”

“Wewon,” Alwysyll corrected, drawing himself taller. He accepted the gift from the King then turned to the watching men, holding the cloak high for all to see. “From this day forward, we shall be known as tribe Wewon!”

Nine hundred and twenty three voices repeated the refrain, over and over again, until the very hills rang with the cry.

*“WEWON, WEWON, WEWON!”*

Seriously miffed at having lost out on lunch, the hovering mass of crows flew off, cawing their disgust as they went. It would be worms again for dinner.

Far out to sea, one coracle lagged behind the rest. Uphat Leekeater stood at the rear and glared back at the army gathered on the shore, swearing revenge for the day’s debacle. His eyes fixed on the skinny runt with the red cloak and he vowed not to return home to the Isle of Leek until he had killed the upstart, whoever he was.

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It was way past the witching hour when Alwysyll left the party at the King’s camp and staggered toward his battered tent, an empty tankard clutched in a hand. He’d drunk and ate too much and was feeling decidedly wobbly. The ladies of the convent had surpassed themselves at the joy of being saved from certain torture and provided meats and pastries the likes of which Alwysyll had never before tasted, plus copious amounts of ale to wash it down with. Much to his disappointment, the ladies had left as soon as the food had been served and retreated to the convent. He sighed. No matter, he was more than pleased with the day’s outcome. Especially as he had been made the King’s Shieldman and his tribe elevated to

Kingsmen, much to Forbai's disgust, judging by the barely concealed malice on the big man's face when the King announced it.

Alwysyll pulled the red cloak tighter around his lean frame as a cold shiver went through him. The cloak had remained fastened around his neck by the gold broach ever since King Bran had given it to him, and he'd noticed Forbai's covetous gaze a number of times throughout the night.

The moon appeared from behind its curtain of clouds, casting a silvery light on the encampment. Alwysyll halted for a moment to stare back at the convent, its otherworldly majesty heightened by the moon's silver radiance. If he stared hard enough, he could imagine creatures of myth and legend dancing around the twin turrets or cavorting on its roof. He giggled. This was one night he'd never expected to see and he was enjoying every minute of it. He breathed deeply of the night air, inhaling the scent of roast suckling pig and the smell of spices. He could still hear ribald shouts and laughter coming from the King's camp and for a moment considered going back to rejoin his men. Forbai's malicious gaze came to the fore and Alwysyll decided against it. It would be best if he avoided him for a day or two.

Singing the tribe's anthem softly to himself, he turned and tottered toward his camp, carefully negotiating the haphazard clutter of tents and ponies as he went.

"Who's gonna get yer? Wewon, Wewon! Who's gonna kill yer? Wewon, Wewon!"

Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw a dark shadow flit to his left. He halted, swaying on the spot as he tried to focus his eyes. But all was quiet and the night remained still. Raising the empty tankard, he threw it into the gloom, waiting for it to clatter to the ground before continuing on his way. It must be the tiredness, he surmised. Either that or he was more inebriated than he thought.

It took an age for him to find his tent. They all looked the same in the dark and he tried three or four before eventually climbing into his own. He could tell it was his by the smell. Unlike the others, his was made of goatskin, the tribe being too poor to waste precious cow hide on a tent. No matter, that would all change now they were Kingsmen.

With a sigh of relief he flopped to the ground and heaved off his boots. After tossing them across the tent he crawled to his sleeping fur and climbed in.

It squealed.

Alwysyll screamed.

The sleeping fur said, “Shhhhh!”

Alwysyll screamed again.

The sleeping fur shot out a hand to wrap across his mouth. A rather slim and delicate hand. One without calluses.

Although tempted to bite it, Alwysyll refrained. There was something about the hand that begged further investigation.

The hand was soon joined by another, which tugged at the broach holding the cloak in place.

“I don’t think we will be needing this,” said a soft, husky voice.

“Leda?”

Although he had only met her the once, when the Queen’s party had passed through their village on the way to taking Leda to the convent, Alwysyll would recognise her voice anywhere.

A soft, feminine giggle sounded. “I see you remember me, then?”

Remember her? How could he ever forget her? He'd had sweet dreams about the Lady Leda for months after she had left, and she'd only spent two markings of the candle in their small village. He turned and slowly melted into her embrace, not thinking to question why she was in his tent.

A short time later, Alwysyll was alone. Much to his disappointment, Leda had stolen into the night, saying she had to get back lest she be discovered missing and given extra chores as punishment for late night excursions.

For the first time in his life, Alwysyll was content. He'd fought for his king, been made a King's Champion, his tribe had been elevated and he'd...

A light breeze caressed his face as the hide flap of the tent was pulled aside. Alwysyll smiled. She'd come back.

His nose twitched as a familiar scent struck his nostrils but try as he might he couldn't recognise it. Deciding to leave asking Leda about her new perfume till later, he levered himself to his elbows to await her arrival.

He didn't have long to wait. Within moments, something long, slim and cool entered his sleeping fur, then his side, then out through the sleeping fur again.

"Onions!" he heard himself mumble through blood-flecked lips, finally recognising the smell.

"Leeks, yer heathen scum," came the bitter rejoinder.

Slowly and painfully, the long, pointy thing withdrew. Without its support, Alwysyll sagged back onto the ground. The breeze caressed his face one last time as the hide flap was thrust aside to allow his killer out, then all became cold. Very cold. The heat from his body was fast evaporating, his breaths becoming shallow and ragged.

As life left him, a bright light appeared in his mind's eye, which gradually faded to reveal the recognisable shape of a doorway. Alwysyll gasped in amazement. It had to be the entrance to Drumalla; the Hall of the Gods. At the realisation, he felt a force tug at his being; drawing it upward. It *was* the doorway to Drumalla., and he was about to join the heroes of his peoples' past, enjoy riches he'd never had in life. A smile formed on his face as he let go of his earthly form. For once in his life he had done something right, and was being richly rewarded for his endeavours.

The smile was still on his face when old Laeg discovered his cold body the following morning. Although, of the red cloak and gold broach there was no sign.

ENDS