

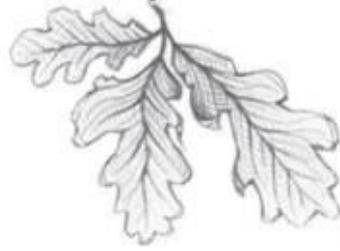
"*Fire Bringer* does for deer what *Watership Down* did for rabbits." —*Locus*

Fire BRINGER



DAVID CLEMENT-DAVIES

FIRE BRINGER



David Clement-Davies

‘One of the best anthropomorphic fantasies known to me...’ Richard Adams, author of *Watership Down*.

Phoenix Ark Press

Part One -

1 Birth and Prophecy

'When the Lore is bruised and broken, Shattered like a blasted tree, Then shall Herne be justly woken, Born to set the Herla free.' Herla Prophecy

A lone red deer was grazing across the glen swaying through the deep tangle of heather which covered the hillside. The stag's coat glinted russet and gold in the dying sunlight slanting down the valley and on its head a pair of ragged antlers reared into the sky, like coral or the branches of a winter oak.

The stag was a royal with twelve spikes, or tines, on its proud head and its antlers marked it out instantly as an animal of power and distinction. The antlers' beams were covered in summer velvet, the downy grey coating that lines new antlers as they grow. From their base, the two sharp brow tines flayed out like curved daggers. Above them the bez tines were slightly smaller and, further up the beams, the trez tines rose larger again, before the antlers flowered into their high cups.

The stag's fur was already thick but this could not hide a series of cuts and wounds on its sides and haunches, the marks of innumerable battles, and a livid scar that ran from the bottom of its neck clear to the base of its spine. The deer was not an unusual sight in the glen, for although this was long ago, in the days when the Great Land was still known to many men as Scotia, red deer were as plentiful then as they are in our own time. But it was unusual to see such a magnificent animal and such a splendid head of antlers.

Suddenly the stag flinched and swung its head towards the beech wood on the edge of the western slope. Its ears pressed forward, its muscles tensed and its nostrils began to flare, sending out wreaths of vapour that hung in the air. The stag's huge eyes pierced the thickening twilight, casting restlessly along the shadow of the trees. But the scent it had caught on the breeze was lost and the deer's head returned to its mossy pasture, nosing through the undergrowth, rooting out the juiciest of the summer stems.

As it went the deer's legs carried it gently back and forth like rushes on a pond. Now and then its hoofs would slip into a crevice, hidden below the deepening covering of vegetation, but the stag never once lost its footing. Its great body would compensate instinctively, like some huge yet graceful cat, so that it seemed almost to be a part of the landscape around it, inseparable from the contours which made up its home.

All around the silence was deepening with the evening. The stillness was broken only by the distant cry of a goshawk glorying in the hunt, the lonely hallooing of a night owl or the cracking flurry of a pheasant as it broke cover and exploded into the gloom. But everyday sounds like these did not frighten such an experienced animal. The stag's body might brace to deflect the sudden violence of the noise, but it went on feeding. A hind or a young buck might have been unnerved by these sounds. But not a beast that had spent so many years in the Corps. Not the veteran of countless battles. Not a deer whose sight, smell and sense had taken him so quickly up the ranks of the herd. Not Brechin, Captain of the Outriders.

Brechin had reached a rocky hillock, purple with vegetation, and he was just settling in to enjoy a thick sprig of gorse when he suddenly threw up his head again. Now his eyes shone with recognition of the scent he had just caught again. But this time Brechin snorted and stamped the ground angrily. He dropped his antlers, then, aiming his head towards the north-west corner of the wood, he raced off along the edge of the valley, tossing his head as he ran. As he neared the wood he began to swing his antlers right and left in a great arc and then, abruptly, no more than three branches' length from the trees, he crashed to a halt and stamped the earth.

‘So,’ he shouted furiously. ‘Now Herla spy on Herla?’ Brechin had used the deer’s name for their own kind, but it brought no response. From far away the cry of an eagle haunted the breeze but nothing stirred in the wood.

‘Come, I’m no green hind to be stalked like a rabbit,’ continued Brechin. Show yourself. I nosed you on the other side of the valley.’

At this the trees started to rustle and the antlers and head of a young stag pushed through the leaves. A red deer stepped into the open. There was a splash of black on its muzzle and its antlers were in their fourth growth, with eight spikes, two tines at the top of each beam and its bez and brow tines below. It was also in thick velvet. Brechin’s eyes softened a little as he recognized a youngster from the Corps.

‘Well, Bandach,’ said the captain coldly, ‘I never thought I’d find you creeping about the wood like a lost brailah.’ The young deer’s antlers lifted immediately. For a deer to be called a brailah, or hedgehog, is a great insult and there was a challenge in his reply.

‘I’m no brailah, Captain Brechin,’ answered the newcomer slowly, ‘and I’ll fight any deer that says so.’

‘Bravely spoken, Bandach.’ Brechin smiled. ‘Then perhaps you’ll tell me why you’ve been watching me since I topped the hill.’

Bandach’s eyes flickered but still he held the captain’s gaze.

‘I bring a message from Drail.’ Brechin nodded calmly.

‘So, now even you spy for Drail,’ he said sadly. Drail and Sgorr had spies everywhere nowadays.

‘I was watching you, Captain Brechin. But not spying. Bandach spies for nobody. Not even the Lord of Herds.’

‘The Lord of Herds,’ snorted Brechin contemptuously. ‘I’d never have used such a title when I was your age. Isn’t “Lord of the Herd” enough without Drail wanting to rule throughout the Low Lands?’

Bandach didn’t answer.

‘Very well, then,’ said Brechin, pretending to graze but listening closely, ‘deliver your message.’

‘Drail has summoned the council,’ said Bandach. ‘At Larn.’

‘Summons, meetings. Can that soft-foot think of nothing else? Well then, tell Drail I’m busy.’

‘But, Captain Brechin—’

‘Enough. Drail knows that one of my does is near her time. I must see to her.’

Bandach stirred back and forth nervously. Brechin was famous for his shows of disrespect towards Drail and admired by many for it, including Bandach himself, but such open disregard for his orders could mean serious trouble. Drail would not flinch at punishing the messenger for the message.

‘Captain Brechin,’ he continued more courteously, ‘when may I say you will come?’

Brechin looked out across the valley. The light was fading quickly now and in the creeping haze clouds of gadflies were billowing into the air. A deep stillness was settling in over the glen and as the deer looked up he saw the evening star specking through the darkening blue. Larn, the time when the great star brings together the Herla to ruminant and discuss the day, was close at hand.

‘When I can, Bandach,’ Brechin snorted and with a toss of his head the captain turned and ran along the edge of the wood. But before he had reached the end of the trees the deer stopped and looked back.

‘And Bandach,’ he called, his strong voice echoing across the valley, ‘if you must, you can give Drail my apologies. Herne be with you.’

With that Brechin was gone.

The young deer stood motionless. He was shaking but he was deeply relieved that Brechin had tempered his reply to Drail. Drail had grown increasingly unpredictable. As the sun finally vanished beyond the horizon Bandach nodded his head with a new resolution.

‘And Herne be with you too,’ he whispered, and disappeared into the trees.

The evening star was already bright by the time Brechin reached the home valley. He paused on the brow of the hill and looked down at the herd grazing across the grass below. In front of him there must have been two hundred red deer, feeding quietly in the twilight. Some were sitting down to ruminate, bringing back into their mouths the grass, bark and berries they had collected during the day and stored in their bellies; chewing steadily on the rich pellets to release the nourishing juices.

In the meadow that opened out at the bottom of the valley the deer were made up mostly of hinds, the females, with their young fawns suckling greedily or nestling under their legs. Much further up the valley the stags were set well apart in stag parties or grazing alone in the glen, the older stags higher up the hill. Except at the time of the rut, when the stags fight to establish their harems and wrestle for control of a group of hinds, males and females in a wild red deer herd live apart, often at some distance. It was unusual for them to be so close now, for it was July and nearly all the hinds had calved weeks ago. The youngsters were already venturing out to make friends or testing the strength of their young legs.

As Brechin watched he spotted a hind who had been in his harem two seasons before and a yearling grazing nearby. Brechin's bloodline ran strong in the herd and he recognized one of his own calves. Its first head of antlers was coming, but Brechin smiled as he realized that he didn't even know the youngster's name. No matter, he thought to himself. It was only right for them to be distant while the calf was still with the hind. When he carried his second or third head Brechin would get to know him properly and start to teach him the ways of the Outrider.

As Brechin looked on he felt the powerful protective instinct that is the bloodright of the Outrider rise in his belly and was relieved to see the silhouettes of his fellow Outriders crowning the neighbouring hills. Their antlers rose and fell as they fed and watched in the calm evening. He could make out the thick, shaggy form of Greyneck, the quick, youthful movements of Tarn, and the single ragged antler of Crinnan.

Brechin walked on slowly until a snort came from his left. Two stags were racing across the ground to meet him.

'Who goes? Hernling or Lera?' one of them called.

Lera is the deer's word for all animals, except of course man, but the deer see themselves as different; they are Hernling, creatures that enjoy the special protection of the forest god Herne.

'Hernling,' replied Brechin. 'Friend of the forest.'

'Come then and tread lightly,' came the formal greeting and two deer were at Brechin's side. It was Spey and Captain Straloch. Both were royals, with twelve tines fanning above their brows.

'Brechin,' said Straloch breathlessly, 'we hardly heard you.'

'No, Straloch,' replied Brechin with a smile. 'How is the herd?'

'The evening goes well. Tarn nosed fox beyond the stream just before Larn, but the scent has gone. We have warned the hinds to be careful.'

'Good.' Brechin nodded. 'But see they keep a keen eye.' A deer herd is at its most vulnerable just after fawning.

The herd lives in constant threat of attack and a fox is fully capable of taking a young fawn. But with their new-born calves the female deer are easily frightened and, as much as the loss of a young fawn, the Outriders now feared a stampede. Deer are flight animals but when the herd is with very young calves their habits change dramatically. Flight can be disastrous for the fawns and so the herd tend to bunker down, usually in a shaded valley like this one, and rely on the Outriders to scare off predators and fight if necessary.

'What news of the council meeting?' asked Brechin.

'Council meeting?' said Spey with surprise. 'We've heard nothing of a council meeting.'

'I thought not.' Brechin nodded gravely.

'Is anything wrong, Captain?' asked Straloch.

'Perhaps. Drail sent a message that he has summoned the council. But all the Outriders are here. He knows that the council cannot meet without the captains of the Outriders present.'

'Shall I call them?'

'No, Spey. Stay here and keep watch. The fawns are more important.'

With that Brechin ran on down the hill. As he dipped into the meadow he saw a group of Corps members trotting up the opposite hill towards the Home Oak. So a meeting was to take place. A full moon was climbing the sky now and in its strong, blue light Brechin made out Drail's massive form moving slowly up and down the lines of assembling stags. He snorted in disgust as he spotted an antlerless deer behind him. It was Sgorr, Drail's second in command.

'Hatred and fear,' said Brechin sadly to himself, 'that's all they are breeding in the herd. And cruelty.'

Brechin turned west towards the little stream that bubbled along the meadow at the bottom of the valley. Nearby, in the sludgy ground by the water, a hind had made a wallow and was rolling around in the delicious, cooling mud. Brechin plashed over onto a strip of green that edged the trees, where six or seven hinds were feeding, chewing steadily on the cud, and raced forward as he caught sight of the single rowan tree.

Beneath it Eloin, the hind Brechin had mentioned earlier, was lying on her side in the long grass. Her belly was swollen and as she slept her flanks rose and fell noiselessly and every now and then her smooth body twitched with pain. Hinds can mate as early as two, especially woodland deer which tend to mature quicker than deer that live in the open, but there is some variety in their breeding habits. Eloin was a five-year-old now and had mated with Brechin late the previous winter. At four she was not exactly old to mate for the first time, but some in the herd whispered that the beautiful hind had been holding herself back. The pregnancy had been an unusually long one too and Eloin was one of the last to drop her fawn. Brechin knew that it meant danger for both calf and hind.

He padded up to her side and as he looked down his eyes grew dark with worry and love. The thought of losing Eloin filled him with an aching confusion.

When red deer have mated they separate and do not show much concern for one another, especially during calving. But although Brechin's strength and prowess had won him seven hinds the previous autumn, he was unusually fond of Eloin. Knowing that she was having difficulties calving, he had spent the last eight suns checking up on her.

The most unusual part of their coupling, though, was that last season Brechin had not even had to win Eloin in the rut. When the stags fight for their hinds the home valleys echo with the clatter and scrape of clashing antlers. After the victorious deer have chosen their mates one or two of the younger deer may step in to claim the remaining hinds. But very occasionally a brave hind will come forward and attempt to choose a mate for herself. She risks being gored in the process but when Eloin had padded up to Brechin and, without even lowering her head as was expected of her, had touched the base of both his antlers with her muzzle, Brechin had simply muzzled her in return and together they had walked away. All agreed that their mating was made by Herne.

All but Drail. He had wanted Eloin for himself and when she had stood with a captain of the Outriders he had been consumed with jealousy. Perhaps that was part of the reason for the change in him, thought Brechin now, as he looked down at his beautiful hind. He lowered his head and licked Eloin's face.

'Eloin,' he whispered softly. 'Eloin. Wake up.'

The hind opened her eyes and tried to lift her head.

'Brechin. I was sleeping.'

'Lie still, Eloin. You must rest and be strong.'

‘Forgive me,’ said the hind, sinking back into the grass. ‘I’m too weak.’

‘When is your time, Eloin?’

‘Soon. Very soon now. He kicks like Herne.’

‘Will you be the last?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Bracken dropped her fawn this morning.’ Brechin knew the name. Bracken was a doe who had stood with one of Brechin’s Outriders last autumn, an ageing stag of about ten years named Salen. She was a slow hind and rather timid but was still quite a catch for Salen. He had had a bad fall the previous summer and this would be his last season as an Outrider. He had been lucky to have any hinds at all, let alone a new-born calf.

‘Salen will be very proud,’ said Brechin delightedly. ‘Is it a buck or a doe?’

Eloin looked back sadly at her mate.

‘Neither, Brechin,’ she said. ‘The calf was stillborn.’

Eloin looked towards the trees and in the shadow of an oak Brechin saw Bracken. She was standing quite still in the grass. Her head was tilted slightly to one side. Every now and then her haunches would flinch and her muzzle drop to nudge the little body lying motionless at her feet. It was a dead calf.

Eloin laid her head on the earth again. One of the most painful sights in the forest is a mother deer and her dead fawn. The hinds will stay by their fawns for days, waiting for them to move or nuzzling them to feed, until at last, filled with endless confusion, they simply walk away.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Eloin, sensing Brechin’s concern.

‘Bracken was weak but I’ll bear you a fine little Outrider.’

‘Eloin,’ Brechin whispered, ‘I must leave you for a while. Drail has summoned the council to the Home Oak.’

‘And the Outriders?’

‘Bandach says we are called but when I got back to the home valley none of them knew anything about it.’

Eloin stirred and tried to raise her head again. A deer’s instinct for danger is its chief weapon in the world.

‘Be careful, Brechin,’ she said. ‘You know how jealous

Drail is.’

Brechin snorted.

‘If Drail wants you he must fight for you at Anlach,’ he said. ‘That is the law. And if he fights I could take the old soft-foot with one antler. And a broken one at that.’

‘Yes. But there’s Sgorr and the younger stags. They have no duty to sprig nor thorn. Be careful, that’s all.’

‘I’ll be careful and when I return I won’t leave you till you have calved.’

Brechin pressed his muzzle gently between Eloin’s ears and turned away. Across the stream he spotted an old hind named Bhreac grazing on the bank and he ran straight up to her.

‘Bhreac,’ he said, ‘Eloin is near her time and I’m worried. Will you watch her for me?’

Bhreac looked irritably at Brechin for with the years she had come to be no lover of stags, even an Outrider captain like Brechin. But nonetheless she lowered her head deferentially. Reassured a little, Brechin cantered off towards the meeting place. The moon was midway up the sky now and in the distance the Home Oak was surrounded with stags. As Brechin rose up the hill Eloin stirred restlessly by the rowan tree. Her eyes were beginning to mist over with pain and with great difficulty the hind got to her feet. Eloin’s time had come.

What Brechin had said about being able to take Drail with one antler was true. Drail was old – nearly

eleven – and virtually lame now, and although he could still hold his own against many a young stag he was no match for Brechin, the greatest fighter in the herd. Indeed Brechin could have beaten Drail even in his prime, though it would have been a bloody business. Brechin had never had any ambitions towards the lordship of the herd but recently he had been pushed further and further towards challenging Drail's authority.

The organization of a deer herd is not especially complex. There may be up to two or three hundred deer in a large herd like this one, grouped together in loose associations through family ties and friendships. The binding principle among the stags is the Corps, which every male deer must enter, paying allegiance to the Lord of the Herd. Alongside the Corps come the Outriders, elite stags chosen for their strength and courage and usually natural loners. The Outriders are scouts and fighters, who look for new pastures and patrol for predators. The most important of the Outriders are styled Captains like Brechin.

These simple structures give the herd a strong unity, except in late spring when the deer's antlers fall and the herd's hierarchy is disrupted, and at Anlach, at the beginning of autumn, when the deer rut. The rut is the most important event in the deer's year, when the males fight for mates and settle scores. It is at this time and this time only that a stag may challenge for lordship, which normally happens once every four or five years. But Drail's lordship had not been challenged for over six years now.

This was not because there was no stag strong enough to defeat him but because a new system had been introduced into the herd. Through a network of invented titles and privileges Drail had gathered together a close and loyal group of males from within the ranks of the Corps. It acted both as bodyguard to Drail and as a kind of secret police, spying on the Corps and the hinds and reporting any signs of discontent. It had been called the Draila and was both resented and feared. But the most feared of all was its leader Sgorr, the hornless deer, or hummel as they are also called, who Brechin had spied with Drail earlier.

Sgorr was not a birth-member of the herd but had appeared just three summers before from over the northern hills. When he arrived, asking for pasture, the young stag had been wounded in one eye and had claimed to have lost touch with his home herd after an attack by a wolf. But many dark rumours had already grown up around him. Some said he had a terrible secret. Others that he had made a pact with the forest god and had been driven out of his own herd for treachery. Some even said that he had broken the oldest law of all and had spent time in the company of men.

Whatever the truth, Sgorr had rapidly won Drail's confidence and had now been promoted far beyond his seven years. Drail was ageing fast and as he became more and more lame Sgorr played on his fears of being ousted. It was Sgorr who had come up with the notion of the Draila two seasons before and he had personally masterminded its creation, choosing and grooming young stags himself cleverly spying out the most discontented members of the Corps and promoting them rapidly.

Brechin had mistrusted Sgorr from the outset, though he could see the young stag was very clever, and he had immediately opposed Sgorr's entry into the herd.

Subsequently he had watched Sgorr's activities with quiet disgust. But if Brechin had a weakness it was that he was a soldier and Outrider first and preferred not to get involved in the politics of the home herd.

It was not until Sgorr had sought control of the Outriders too that Brechin had shown open opposition. With the other captains he had fought hoof and antler to stop Drail forcing members of the Draila on the Outriders. Drail had responded by sending the Outriders to roam further and further afield, on increasingly dangerous and unnecessary scouting expeditions. The Outriders had lost six members since the spring. One had been taken by wolves. Three killed by men. Two had vanished without trace, including Brechin's own brother, Whitefoot.

Meanwhile Drail's ambitions had grown with his power. His power base now stretched far beyond the herd itself; hence the newly invented title, 'Lord of Herds', which Brechin had so scoffed at in the glen. But the title represented far more than a name, or the simple reflection of Drail's vanity, for many of the red deer across the Low Lands now recognized his authority and, before Anlach, would come to pay him homage. The home herd was the largest red deer herd in the Great Land, and the Draila had won support from other lords by offering help against their own enemies. Drail's methods had begun to spread like a virus and his writ now ran as far north as the Great Mountain and even to the edges of the High Land.

Yet to Brechin the greatest threat posed by the Draila was within the herd itself, for the Draila stags were becoming increasingly aggressive. Apart from predators, starvation and disease the main causes of harm to a deer herd are wounds inflicted during the rut. But although stags will fight often, especially during the rut, their battles are mostly for show and their encounters rarely result in any serious damage. A directly fatal injury is virtually unheard of. But that was beginning to change. The encounters were proving more and more ferocious and Sgorr had even begun to train the young stags to use their antlers in an entirely new way; to sharpen them on rocks and stones and cut and jab with the points and to aim for vulnerable parts of the body. It meant that last autumn there had been far more injuries than normal and one stag, who had been caught in a fight over a hind with two Draila, had even been killed.

The habits of the hinds had also changed under Drail's lordship. His consuming desire for control had meant that the Draila had forced the females to live much closer to the stags. The herd had become much less mobile and for three seasons now they had used the same Home Oak. Brechin did not approve of this, though he was strangely glad to be so close to Eloin.

As Brechin climbed the hill he heard a familiar voice in the darkness. It distracted him from his dark thoughts. Ahead of him a group of yearlings were sitting in a circle in the grass, their spindly legs folded under them, and listening, wide-eyed, to the old deer addressing them. Most of them were around nine months old and had stopped suckling. But they were not too old to listen to a good story.

'And so, when the forest was young,' the old stag was saying, 'Starbuck stole the magic antlers from Herne and won a promise that for evermore the deer would roam as free as the wind.'

It was Blindweed, the storyteller.

'Spinning more of those old tales,' Brechin chuckled to himself. He remembered many cold winter nights sitting at old Blindweed's feet lapping up the stories of magic antlers, enchanted forests and of Herne himself. The ancient stag seemed to have been no younger then.

No one in the herd knew how old Blindweed really was. Some said he was fifteen, others even older. Eight is a good age for a red deer and thirteen about their natural span, but in exceptional circumstances they can live to as old as twenty and even older. You cannot, except in young deer, tell the precise age of a stag from his antlers, though the number of tines and their size is a good indication, for you find few royals below the age of five or six. Blindweed had a fine head, with nobbly, pearled antlers that rose to fourteen points on his brow. But it was clear that they had gone back, as it is called when they weaken, and would never be as strong as they had been in his prime.

'Well, that's quite enough for one moon,' said Blindweed suddenly. 'Your mothers will be scolding me with the morning.'

'But what happened to Starbuck?' shouted an eager voice from the back.

The fawns took up the cry.

'Yes, yes, how did he steal the antlers? Come on, Blindweed. Tell us.'

The old deer chuckled to himself.

'Very well, but then to your mothers. Promise, now.'

'We promise,' came the cry, except from the young fawn who had shouted out first.

Blindweed gathered himself and began, as Brechin padded up behind them.

~~‘Well then, let me see. Yes. For days and days Starbuck travelled through the forests, driven by wind and snow, hunted by fox and wolf, but he was always too quick for them. Then, at last, he passed through the Great Glen and entered Herne’s Wood. He travelled on until he reached the clearing and saw Herne himself lying by a brier, fast asleep. Above, hanging from the bow of an oak, were Herne’s antlers, which he always takes off when he rests.’~~

The young deer shuffled excitedly in the grass.

‘Well, as you know, only Starbuck could tread lightly enough in the wood not to wake Herne and so very slowly, he crept past the sleeping deer god, stood on the tips of his hoofs and, with his muzzle, plucked the antlers from the tree and put them on his own head.’

Blindweed paused portentously.

‘Yes, yes, and what happened then?’ shouted an eager fawn from the front.

‘Then there was a sudden thunderclap that shook the roots of the forest and Herne awoke.’

The fawn nuzzled closer to the others.

‘When Herne saw that his antlers were gone he sprang to his feet and stamped his hoofs and snorted, and his red eyes flamed and he cried out in a great booming voice that made the branches shake. ‘Who wakes the spirit of the forest? Who dares to steal Herne’s antlers?’ As you can imagine even Starbuck was frightened by Herne’s anger, but he held his courage and answered coolly:

‘“It is I, Starbuck the deer. I wear the antlers.”’

‘“Give them back,”’ cried Herne furiously, and with that he leapt on Starbuck. But Starbuck was wearing the magic antlers and so, with a single spring, he jumped high over Herne’s head and landed far off at the edge of the clearing. Herne turned but he knew that as long as Starbuck had the antlers he could never catch him. Then Herne realized he was beaten.

‘“What is it you seek?”’ said Herne in a gentler voice.

‘“No more than you,”’ answered brave Starbuck. ‘I seek antlers for the deer, to protect them from Lera. It is not much to ask, Lord Herne, for we are Hernling yet we wander in the world with nothing to protect us but our senses and our speed.’

‘Well, Herne thought for a time and then he answered,

‘“Very well, Starbuck, if you are sure that is what you want.”’

‘“I am sure,”’ said Starbuck, and with that he took the antlers off and gave them back to the god.

‘When Herne had his horns back he seemed terrible indeed and he looked at Starbuck closely and said in a strange voice,

‘“Starbuck, you are a brave and bold Hernling, so I will grant your wish though I could drive you from here like an autumn leaf tossed by the wind. But what you seek I will give only to such as you, foolish young stags who wish to fight. The hinds shall not be touched. Also, because you stole this prize from me, you shall have antlers with every season only and each year they shall fall from your heads when the spring rains shower the earth and leave you bald and naked, to be laughed at by every Lera. Until, when the spring flowers have blossomed and summer is beginning to ripen, they will grow again like the branches on the trees. And I will tell you this: what you seek is full of danger, so be certain.”’

‘Starbuck was so flushed with his victory that he hardly heard Herne’s warning and assured the god that he was indeed certain.

‘“Very well then, Starbuck,”’ said Herne. ‘Go over to that oak. At its bottom, though the oak is barren with winter, you will see a single leaf. It grows all year round, for it is filled with Herne’s spirit. Eat it, Starbuck, and your wish shall be granted.’ So Starbuck approached the oak and there he saw a single withered leaf which looked dried and dead, though it was still on its stem. Gingerly, he pulled at it and it came away and he stood there in Herne’s Wood munching on the stem. It tasted

bitter and earthy, like peat moss and burnt bracken, and when Starbuck had finished he stood around blinking and waiting for something to happen. As he did so he realized that Herne had vanished.

“Tricked,” said Starbuck angrily, for nothing was happening. But suddenly, like the sound when the earth shakes, Herne was speaking again and his voice was all around.

“Starbuck,” he was saying, “your wish is granted. But because you stole this gift, the things you seek shall be both blessing and curse to Herla. So tremble, Starbuck, and run.” Starbuck felt a terrible pain in his head and saw a blinding light and he turned and bolted in terror. He hurtled back through the wood, the branches of the trees tearing at his sides and haunches, his face scratched and bruised, and all along he was driven by the agonizing pain, as though his head would burst open.

He thought he must run on for ever as the trees lashed passed him. But at last the pain began to subside and Starbuck broke clear of Herne’s Wood and came to a stop in the sunlight by a clear pool. There the exhausted Starbuck reached down to drink and as he did so he saw his reflection in the water. His face was scratched and bruised by his flight, his clear eyes blinking in the day, and on his head were a pair of mighty antlers, vaster than any deer has known. And that is how the brave Starbuck won horns for the Herla.’

The assembled fawns were silent, their young mouths hanging open with amazement.

‘So,’ said Blindweed in a cheerful voice that broke the spell, ‘which young fawn can tell why Herne’s gift was both blessing and curse?’

The young deer looked back and forth to each other wonderingly.

‘Come now, there must be one of you. What ever do they teach you nowadays?’

Suddenly the calves turned their heads, startled by a voice that sang out from the back.

‘The antlers of Hernling are blessing and curse, For they mean we must fight for the chance to be first. Though they help us protect both the herd and each other, At the time of Anlach, we must fight one another.’

‘Captain Brechin,’ said the startled storyteller. ‘I didn’t see you there’.

‘Forgive me, Blindweed,’ replied Brechin as he entered the circle, ‘but I couldn’t help listening. You still tell a fine tale.’

Blindweed was delighted.

‘Fawns,’ said the old deer, remembering himself, ‘have you forgotten your manners? Welcome Captain Brechin, the bravest of the Outriders.’

Most of the fawns were too overawed to do anything at all.

‘Sit still, little ones. And don’t let me disturb you further, Blindweed,’ said Brechin. I have stayed too long already. Continue your story.’

‘No, Captain,’ replied Blindweed with a mixture of embarrassment and pride. ‘It’s very late and if we sit here talking how will they ever grow up to be brave Outriders? Come now, be off with you.’

At this, some of the calves began to grumble and the young fawn at the back shouted out, ‘Tell us another story, Blindweed. Tell us about the First Stone.’

‘Yes,’ said another.

‘Now, now. I’ll tell you tomorrow. I promise.’

‘Tell us about Willow, the Mother of Hinds.’

‘Tell us the Prophecy, Blindweed,’ said the fawn that had spoken first. His name was Lychen. The fawns took up his cry.

‘Yes, the Prophecy. Tell us the Prophecy.’

‘Silence,’ snapped Blindweed angrily. ‘The Prophecy is no mere fable to be fed to young fawns. It is part of the Lore. Now stop being foolish.’

‘I bet Captain Brechin wants to hear it,’ said Lychen boldly. ‘Go on, Blindweed.’

‘I’ll muzzle you if you don’t be quiet,’ said Blindweed furiously.’ Captain Brechin has much more

important things to do than listen to a lot of little soft-foots and an old storyteller.’
But the calves weren’t listening to Blindweed. They were looking up at Brechin.
‘Please, Captain Brechin, sir,’ said Lychen in a bold voice, ‘you want to hear it, don’t you?’
Brechin looked down at the calf and his heart was suddenly pierced with worry for Eloin. But he smiled.
‘If Blindweed will tell it,’ he said, ‘I would be honoured.’
‘Hooray,’ shouted the fawns delightedly. ‘Go on, Blindweed, tell it. The Prophecy. The Prophecy.’
‘Very well,’ said Blindweed irritably. ‘If the captain insists. But silence, all of you. This is not for fooling.’
The fawns had already fallen silent as Blindweed readied himself. Even Brechin felt a thrill as the ancient stag swayed his gnarled antlers back and forth, closed his eyes, and as though talking to the moon, began to recite:

*‘When the Lore is bruised and broken,
Shattered like a blasted tree,
Then shall Herne be justly woken,
Born to set the Herla free.
On his brow a leaf of oaken,
Changeling child shall be his fate.
Understanding words strange spoken,
Chased by anger, fear and hate.
He shall flee o’er hill and heather,
And shall go where no deer can,
Knowing secrets dark to Lera,
Till his need shall summon man.
Air and water, earth and fire,
All shall ease his bitter pain,
Till the elements conspire
To restore the Island Chain.
First the High Land grass shall flower,
As he quests through wind and snow,
Then he breaks an ancient power,
And returns to face his woe.
When the lord of lies upbraids him,
Then his wrath shall cloak the sun,
And the Herla’s foe shall aid him
To confront the evil one.
Sacrifice shall be his meaning,
He the darkest secret learn,
Truths of beast and man revealing,
Touching on the heart of Herne.
Fawn of moonlight ever after,
So shall all the Herla sing.
For his days shall herald laughter,
Born a healer and a king.’*

Blindweed finished and opened his eyes. A slight breeze had come up as if from nowhere, rustling the grass. Brechin shivered. His old scar suddenly pained him. The deer looked at each other in silence and Blindweed shook his tired head.

‘Right,’ he said at last. ‘It’s time.’

Without any further protest the young fawns got to their feet. They thanked Blindweed as they went and began to run down the hill together, back to the safety of their mothers. Soon only one was left by Blindweed’s side. It was Lychen.

‘What does it mean?’ asked Lychen in a little voice. ‘The Prophecy. Is it true?’

‘What does it mean?’ said Blindweed. ‘Well, Lychen, why don’t we ask Captain Brechin?’

Brechin was standing, gazing back towards the Home Oak.

‘Excuse me, sir,’ said Lychen nervously, ‘but do you know what the Prophecy means? Is it true?’

‘No, little one,’ said Brechin, looking down, ‘I don’t. But as for it being true I will say only this. There is more truth in Blindweed’s stories, though they are only stories, than there is in the heart of many a stag. So listen to them well. Now off with you, I have business to attend to.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ said Lychen and, caught between fear and pride, with a skip the fawn turned and shot off down the hill. When he had gone Blindweed walked slowly up to the captain. He had heard something serious in Brechin’s tone and he sensed something was wrong.

‘Captain Brechin,’ he said gravely, ‘it is very good to see you again and to know that at least some of the Hernling remember the old tales. Nowadays everything has changed. No one listens any more. And what with Sgorr and the Draila, they would drive away the spirit of Herne.’

‘Yes, Blindweed, there is much trouble in the Low Lands. But if I remember the old tales it is because you taught us them so well. You taught us that in those tales lies the secret of the Lore.’

‘Ah, yes,’ said Blindweed, shaking his antlers. ‘The Lore. It is too much abused.’

‘Well, Blindweed,’ said Brechin, suddenly flexing his haunches and snorting, ‘I’m glad I’ve seen you, for tonight it is the Lore that I shall need.’

With that the captain raced away, up the steep gully towards the Home Oak. The full moon hung in the sky, bathing the valley in a luminous, eerie light as Brechin approached the meeting place. The wind had strengthened, sending great shoals of cloud scurrying across its haunted face. On the exposed plateau, that is such a common feature of the southern glens, twenty Corps members were assembled and around them stood the closed ranks of another fifteen Draila. As Brechin crested the plateau four of these stags broke away and ran up to meet him. They were lead by Narl, a young buck who only the spring Brechin had nearly come to blows with when he blocked his admission to the Outriders.

‘Herne be with you,’ called Brechin loudly and with little warmth.

‘Brechin, you’re late,’ said Narl, ignoring the traditional greeting. ‘Drail is growing impatient—’

‘Captain Brechin to you,’ Brechin bellowed. He had halted and already his front haunches were set forward. The three other stags stopped behind Narl and as Brechin pointed his brow tines and stamped they edged in behind their leader.

‘Forgive me, Captain Brechin,’ said Narl sarcastically, but clearly intimidated by the huge antlers, ‘I forgot how keen the Outriders are on their titles. But if you’d be so good as to join us, Lord Drail has something to tell you.’

Under any other circumstance Brechin would have charged Narl. But now he was keen to know what was happening at the meeting place. He had delayed too long.

‘Surely you mean Lord Sgorr?’ said Brechin contemptuously, and he pushed straight through the four deer. ‘Well then, what are you waiting for?’

Brechin surged on across the heather as the four Draila brought up the rear.

Blindweed was deeply troubled when Brechin left him to go to the meeting place. For two seasons now he had watched the plots of the Draila with mounting disgust. He hated what Sgorr was doing to the herd and though he understood little of politics, he knew that it would bring nothing but harm. Sgorr had even tried to ban the old stories, though too many Corps members had opposed it. But tonight there was something else. He couldn’t quite scent it out but Blindweed had spent too long immersed in the legends of the Herla not to carry something of their magic and not to trust his instincts. Tonight his scars ached and the pain in his left foot had returned. He knew in his bones that something was happening.

He was pondering these things as he walked slowly towards the bottom of the home valley when suddenly he saw a group of thirty Draila moving rapidly up to the meeting place. They were packed tightly and running along a slight gully, out of moonlight, as though trying to avoid being seen. He stopped dead in his tracks but as soon as he did so he realized he was upwind of them. Two Draila nosed him immediately, broke from the group and raced towards him.

‘Hey, you!’ shouted one as they neared the storyteller. ‘What are you doing lurking so close to the Home Oak?’

‘Nothing, Captain,’ said Blindweed. ‘I was just telling some stories to the fawns. They like to sit on the hillside.’

‘Why, it’s only old Blindweed,’ said one of the others. ‘We don’t have to worry about him.’

‘Worry about me?’ said Blindweed. ‘Why, Captain, is there trouble in the herd?’

‘Never you mind,’ said the captain. He looked a little guiltily at his companion and then added in a softer voice, ‘The Outriders have nosed fox. You’d better get back to the home valley.’

‘Certainly, Captain. Thank you for your concern.’

The stags raced off again and Blindweed continued on his way, a good deal more troubled than before. In the meadow at the bottom of the valley the herd seemed quiet enough, though Blindweed noticed other Draila moving about amongst the hinds. Every now and then they would stop to talk to them and seemed to be trying to reassure them. Then they would move off to their captains and report. There was much nodding of antlers. Blindweed pretended to graze and as he did so he swayed closer and closer to three stags who were standing by a small thicket. He managed to edge to the far side of the thicket, just out of sight but near enough to overhear their conversation.

‘When is it to be?’ one was saying in a voice that shook with emotion.

‘Soon, Brach, very soon,’ whispered another. ‘You must be patient. Everything is set.’

‘It’s this damned waiting I can’t stand,’ said the first.

‘Silence,’ said a third voice, older than the other two. ‘We need you to be calm when it comes. It’s your job to reassure the hinds.’

‘Yes,’ agreed the first, ‘and it won’t be easy. What if they bolt?’

‘They won’t leave the fawns,’ said the older voice calmly.

‘And if they try, there are enough Draila to hold them. But we must be certain of the lead hind, Fourleaf. Now, I’ve got to get going. I have the Outriders to attend to.’

The stag who had just been speaking turned on his haunches and set off into the darkness. Blindweed was dumbstruck. Very softly the old deer backed away from the thicket and padded back towards the stream. He stopped to drink, his old, calloused lips sucking at the cool water. Then he set off along the bank again, his head buzzing with the talk of plots. At last he reached a clear stretch of open ground and he froze as he heard a snort of pain. It was a hind straining with her unborn calf.

‘Stand off there, in the name of Herne,’ cried an angry voice from the darkness. It was Bhreac, the old doe that Brechin had asked to watch over Eloin. She had nosed Blindweed coming down the stream and now her instincts were roused.

‘I mean no harm, old one,’ said Blindweed softly, realizing what was happening. ‘Who is it that’s calving?’

‘Blindweed, it’s you,’ said Bhreac less harshly, ‘I didn’t realize. It’s Eloin. One of Captain Brechin’s hinds. He asked me to watch her.’

‘I just saw the captain on the hill,’ said Blindweed. ‘He was going towards the Home Oak. Bhreac, there is trouble in the herd tonight. The Draila are out.’

‘Stags,’ snorted Bhreac in disgust. ‘They always mean trouble. But we hinds have more serious things to think of. Blindweed, I fear this will be a hard one. I have never known a hind to be so late.’

The old deer nodded gravely.

‘Don’t fret,’ he said. ‘Eloin is strong and the calf of

Captain Brechin has a better chance than most.’

‘Still,’ said Bhreac, ‘I wish there were something we could do.’

But the two old deer were silent now. They were listening to Eloin’s breathing. It was shallow and painful. They wanted to help her but they knew she had to do this alone.

When Brechin arrived at the meeting place the Lord of the Herd was addressing the stags from under

the spreading branches of the Home Oak. Drail had twelve points to his antlers but from their size and thickness it was clear that they had already gone back.

His voice was fighting the wind as his great, shaggy form limped back and forth. The ranks of Draila around him were nodding enthusiastically. Brechin smiled as he recognized some of Drail's own sons among his bodyguard. It was typical of Drail to grant special privileges to his own.

Drail was not an unattractive deer but his eyes had a wary, cruel look. To the left of Drail Brechin caught the glint of Sgorr's single eye in the moonlight and the flash of his long front teeth. A deer with no antlers can sometimes grow fierce teeth which, when used skilfully, can prove nearly as dangerous. On Sgorr's head were the stumps of bone where the antlers had failed yet again. His left eye, now just an empty socket, was closed up by a deep scar that ran straight across his left scent gland.

'And these rumours and lies must cease,' Drail was saying.

'If any deer has a genuine complaint he can bring it to me or to Sgorr. The Draila will be happy to investigate...'

As Brechin drew nearer and trotted up the line towards the tree, some of the Corps members stamped appreciatively. Drail broke off at once to address the captain.

'Brechin. So good of you to join us,' he said sarcastic-ally. 'We thought you had got lost. Bandach gave me your heartfelt apologies but still, perhaps you can tell the young Corps members why a captain of the Outriders chooses to come so late to a meeting of the council?'

'Lord Drail,' replied Brechin coolly, 'perhaps you are mistaken. The Herla may only stand in council when all the captains of the Outriders are present. I see here only young bucks. But no captains. Where are Straloch and the others?' At this one or two of the members of the Corps nodded their antlers in agreement, but others of the Draila stamped and moved forward.

'But you are present, Captain Brechin,' said a thin, hard voice. It was Sgorr. 'Don't the Outriders see you as their lord? You can represent them.'

'Sgorr. You know full well that the captains of the Outriders meet as equals. Equally they must be present if the council is to be called.'

'That may be,' said Sgorr, smiling, 'but isn't it strange that such a respected Outrider cannot come when the Lord of Herds asks? Is nothing sacred any more?'

Sgorr's tone was sly and sneering.

'Lord Drail,' said Brechin. 'All the herd knows that one of my hinds, Eloin, is very close to her time. The pregnancy is proving difficult and I had to attend to her first. Perhaps even the captain of the Draila can understand that?'

'I only understand,' said Sgorr coldly, 'that Captain Brechin shows little respect. Perhaps he forgets that the council comes before any other matter in the herd. Besides, isn't it strange that he spends so much time with a hind?'

As though on cue the Draila nodded and snorted.

'As I've said,' continued Brechin calmly, 'this is no council, so I cannot see—'

'Silence, Brechin,' cried Drail suddenly. 'You forget yourself. Now I have something to say to you all of you. Captain Brechin, you are an example of just how little respect is shown in the herd. It is time that stopped, time some changes were made. First and most importantly Anlach will be with us soon enough, so the members of the Corps should know that I, in consultation with Sgorr and the Draila, believe that it is dangerous and wasteful to the strength of the herd that there should be such regular challenges for the lordship. And as for the choosing of hinds. . .'

The wind had dropped now and Drail's voice sang in the moonlight. If the members of the Corps had not been rooted to the spot by the sheer enormity of what they were hearing they might have noticed a group of thirty or so Draila moving silently through the heather behind them.

‘Therefore,’ bellowed Drail, ‘the members of the Draila have voted that I should continue to guide you for three more summers at least.’

Drail paused to listen for the effect of his words as the Draila began to close in around him. They had already heard the news. Brechin stood quite motionless. He didn’t know whether to laugh or shout. Indeed he could hardly understand what Drail was saying. Not even he had suspected that Drail would try this. To hold himself in place without even a challenge! It was unthinkable. It meant – Brechin tried to weigh up the idea – it meant abolishing Anlach. It was like abolishing the forest itself.

Across the home valley a hind, heavy with her fawn, winced in pain. Nearby an old doe came forward but Eloin stamped and told her to stand off. Eloin lifted her head and sucked at the air. Her muscles tightened and she started to shake. Around her the forest and the stars and the great moon began to swim before her eyes.

‘No. It is unthinkable. You cannot. It is against all the laws of Herne.’

Brechin was speaking now, in a clear, strong voice. The thunder of his words made even the assembled Draila stir uneasily.

‘It is already done, Brechin,’ said Sgorr, stepping forward and baring his teeth, ‘and many of the herds in the Low Lands have accepted Drail’s command.’

‘You’re a fool, Sgorr,’ shouted Brechin. ‘The Corps will never allow it. And you,’ he continued, turning suddenly to address the younger stags, ‘listen to me. Drail has gone mad.’ But as he said it Brechin started. From the darkness antlers were emerging on all sides. Lines of Draila were flanking them everywhere. Their heads were lowered and their antlers prone. The trap had been sprung; they were completely surrounded. For a moment irresolution wavered up and down the Corps.

‘You were saying, Captain Brechin?’ sneered Sgorr.

‘No,’ shouted Brechin. ‘If the Corps accepts this, the Outriders never will.’

‘Ah, yes,’ said Sgorr coolly, and as he did so five Draila stepped towards Brechin. ‘The Outriders believe Lord Drail was coming on to that.’

Suddenly the assembled stags were transfixed by a great, bellowing bark that shook the air from across the valley and, as they looked on, they saw the silhouette of a deer on the far hillside. He was surrounded by four stags and their antlers were burying themselves deep into the deer’s sides, slashing and goring at his flanks. It was Captain Straloch. The cry was taken up from another hilltop and then another, until it seemed that the whole glen echoed with the cries of pain.

‘Oh, Herne. What is happening?’ shouted Eloin as she stood shaking by the rowan tree. ‘The pain. It’s terrible.’

The two old deer standing nearby were motionless but their bodies too were trembling. Yet their worry was no longer for Eloin and her calf. They had heard the cries of the Outriders on the hills and fear was moving through the herd like a wind.

‘Who fights with me?’ cried Brechin. ‘Who fights for the Outriders?’

Brechin lowered his head and charged straight at Sgorr and the Home Oak. But his way was suddenly blocked by a forest of bone as a line of Draila lowered their antlers and closed ranks to block the path to the Lord of the Herd. He pulled up on his haunches and pawed the earth violently.

He had to think quickly. All around him stags were locking antlers. Brechin swung round as a young Corps member cried in pain. A Draila had charged him and gored him in the side with his brow tines. Other members of the Corps were standing down, intimidated by the surrounding stags. But a few were fighting, bucking with their antlers or rising up on their hind legs to box in the manner of hinds and of stags in velvet.

Suddenly Brechin noticed that to his right the way was momentarily open, leading up to a patch of higher ground. Brechin dashed for the opening, bucking and tossing as he ran. In an instant he was

clear, rising up above the melee. He felt the wind on his face and his head began to clear. But, as he stopped on the hillock and wheeled round to survey the scene, he saw another stag racing towards him. Brechin dug in his hoofs and prepared to fight. The stag came nearer and nearer and suddenly Brechin heard a familiar voice. It was Bandach, the young stag who had brought him Drail's message earlier in the day.

'Bandach,' cried Brechin delightedly. 'At least some stags have sense and courage.'

He had noticed that Bandach's face was torn open at the cheek.

'But I doubt the others will fight,' panted Bandach. 'There are too many of them and we're still in velvet. Have you noticed? The stags whose antlers came out of velvet first are leading the attack. Sgorr must have picked them out specially. But many of the Corps members' antlers are still too soft to be much use. We never even nosed them creeping up on us.'

'Brave Bandach,' said Brechin. 'You'll make a fine Outrider.'

As he said it Brechin and Bandach looked at each other and there was the full horror of recognition in their eyes. But they did not have long to share it for in that instant they heard a bellow from below. A Draila had spied them on the hill and now ten or twelve stags were racing towards them.

'Well, Captain. Do you think me a spy now?' said Bandach, his eyes gleaming with pride. 'Come then, let me show a captain of the Outriders how a young stag can fight, for they mean to kill you, Brechin.'

'No, Bandach,' said Brechin quietly. 'Eloin. You must warn Eloin. Sgorr hates me and I fear what he will do to my calf if anything happens to me. And Eloin – when I am gone Drail will try to take her. You must save them, Bandach.'

'But Captain—'

'Please, Bandach, do as I ask. Quickly.'

The young stag stared into the captain's eyes. At last he nodded.

'Herne be with you always, Captain Brechin,' he said as he turned.

'And with you too, Bandach. Run freely.'

As the Draila reached the bottom of the hillock Bandach slipped back down the side of the hill and made for the rowan tree by the stream. But at the bottom of the slope he turned to watch the ghostly scene above him. On the hill Brechin was encircled by eleven stags. They came slowly, warily, with one stag slightly to the front. It was Narl. Brechin lowered his antlers and readied himself. Below, most of the fighting had died down and the red deer looked up. Even Drail shuddered at that unnatural sight. On a hillock above the Home Oak, silhouetted by the full moon, Brechin, Captain of the Outriders, was fighting for his life.

He swayed right and left like a dancing Lera, filled with the spirit of Herne. Five times the circle closed in on the deer. And five times he emerged again, bucking his great antlered head. But on the sixth charge a Draila caught Brechin in the haunches and another straight in the flanks. Brechin lifted his head and let out a cry that rent the sky. The deer's front legs buckled before him and he crashed to the ground. Even the Draila paused as the captain tried to stagger to his feet again, his bloodied mouth crying out and scything back and forth. But at last Brechin's head dropped and the stags moved in. There was one last bellow of pain that seemed to tear open the heart of the world and then a terrible silence descended on the glen. It was finished.

At the bottom of the valley, by the rowan tree near the stream, a hind was lying motionless, her long neck limp in the grass. Eloin's eyes were closed but her sides rose steadily up and down as she panted with exhaustion. At her side something was stirring in the wet grass; a new-born fawn that had nearly cost Eloin her life. The little creature's thick, woolly coat was wet and sticky and it was kicking its legs and blinking as it tried to stand up, its sleek little ears twitching helplessly in the darkness.

2 Changeling

'O soul, be chang'd into little water drops And fall into the ocean, ne'er be found.' Christopher Marlowe, *'Doctor Faustus'*

'No, you old fool, stay here. What could you do to help at your age?'

'I can still fight, can't I?' mumbled Blindweed. 'My antlers may have gone back but they can still strike a blow or two.'

'You couldn't take a fawn, Blindweed,' snorted Bhreac irritably. 'Be sensible. If they are fighting the herd, so be it. Let the old look to the young.'

As Bhreac spoke Eloin lifted her head and strained her neck back over her shoulder to lick her little fawn's muzzle. She sank back again, exhausted by even this tiny effort.

'Come on, Blindweed,' said Bhreac. 'Let's see if we can do anything for Eloin.'

Blindweed nodded resignedly as Bhreac wandered over to the hind.

'Well, my dear, that was a close thing,' said the old hind kindly. 'But my it was worth it. He's a fine one. I've never seen such bold eyes and so many freckles on a back. They're like snow leaves dropped from the clouds.'

Eloin opened her eyes and smiled faintly.

'Yes,' she said. 'It was worth it.'

But then Eloin's eyes clouded again.

'But it was terrible too. I thought the whole herd was crying out.'

Bhreac and Blindweed looked at each other gravely as the little fawn nuzzled closer to its mother's side.

'What will you name him, my dear?'

Eloin looked back at her fawn. His tail was flicking back and forth as he tried to get to her milk.

'If it had been a doe I would certainly have called her Bhreac,' said Eloin. 'But as it is, why not Rannoch?'

The name was well known to the Herla for Rannoch had been one of Starbuck's calves.

'Rannoch. It's a good name,' said Blindweed in the background, nodding his old antlers approvingly. 'Herne himself would be pleased.'

'Thank you, Blindweed. What do you think of it, my little Rannoch?'

Rannoch wagged his tail furiously but his evident pleasure was from the milk that he was suckling at his mother's side, not because he understood a word of what the grown-ups were saying.

'Ouch. Don't bite so hard. You've plenty of time to grow up like Brechin.'

Bhreac cast Blindweed an urgent look but the old deer shook his head.

'Eloin, may I see your little one?' he asked, stepping forward.

'Certainly, Blindweed. May the teller of tales be the first stag to welcome him to the herd.'

'Come then, Rannoch,' said Blindweed softly, nudging the young fawn with his muzzle.

Blindweed's gentle buffet swung the calf round and he stood there blinking up at the old storyteller, his front feet splayed slightly out in front of him and his tail twitching furiously. Blindweed stretched forward to give him a lick on his nose but as he did so he suddenly stopped and pulled back.

'In the name of Herne,' he gasped, drawing in his breath sharply.

'What is it?' said Bhreac.

Blindweed was muttering something under his breath.

'On his brow a leaf of oaken,' he mumbled.

'Blindweed, what on earth's the matter?'

'Look,' replied Blindweed as he gazed at the patch of white fur in the centre of Rannoch's forehead.

'Why, it's only a fawn mark,' said Bhreac. 'I thought something was wrong'

‘Yes, but look at the shape,’ Blindweed whispered.

In the centre of Rannoch’s forehead, formed by a slightly raised tuft of white fur like a plash of snow, the little stag’s fawn mark was in the shape of a perfect oak leaf.

At the Home Oak Drail was counting the cost of the night’s work while the Draila moved about the meeting place making sure of the Corps members.

‘Well, Sgorr,’ said Drail as the captain of the Draila marched up to him, ‘what’s the count?’

‘One of the Corps killed and several injured, Lord Drail,’ answered Sgorr. ‘The rest have come over.’ Drail nodded contentedly.

‘Bandach escaped,’ added Sgorr a little nervously. ‘But we’ll catch him before the sun’s up.’

‘Do so. And the Outriders?’

‘Two evaded us. Salen, though he was badly wounded, and Captain Spey. But otherwise it is done. They are dead.’ The two were silent for a moment. Even they felt the enormity of what they had done.

‘It’s bad that Spey got away,’ said Drail. ‘He’s a fast one. Still, what of the Draila?’

‘A few have damaged their antlers for they are still softer than I would have liked.’

But Sgorr bared his teeth; it was the only way he knew how to smile. He was pleased that his trap had gone so smoothly and though Brechin’s stand had been impressive, there was at least a compensation. He could see that Drail was deeply displeased that Brechin had fought so bravely and always gratified Sgorr when Drail was displeased. It made him all the more malleable.

‘Where is he?’ asked Drail.

‘Brechin? Still on the hillock, Lord.’

‘Well then, let us pay our respects.’

The two stags ran up to the hillock but before they passed beyond the Home Oak Sgorr stopped and muttered something to a stag. He nodded and set off back down the hill towards the bottom of the valley. Then Sgorr continued on his way, careful to keep slightly behind Drail’s limping gait. As they went, the lines of Draila dipped their antlers. Brechin was lying in the centre of the hillock. His great body was badly broken and his tongue lolled from his mouth. His eyes were closed and his sides and haunches were still bleeding. Sgorr hung back as Drail circled the corpse.

At last the Lord of the Herd stopped and bowed his antlers. He hooked them into Brechin’s and with a great effort lifted the bloodied head from the ground. Then he bucked the skull up and down twice, before letting it drop limply to the earth. Drail was about to walk back to Sgorr when he suddenly stopped and turned round again. He walked back to the body and then did something that even the assembled Draila winced to see. He swung round, pawed the earth with his hind hoofs and kicked out at Brechin’s head. The blow caught Brechin full on the right antler and with a great crack snapped the horn clean in two. Gratified, Drail walked back to Sgorr’s side.

‘A fine blow, my lord,’ said Sgorr fawningly. ‘That one would please many a young hind.’

‘Herne’s teeth!’ said Drail. ‘Eloin. I had quite forgotten. Go, Sgorr.’

‘And if the calf has come?’

‘By Herne,’ snorted Drail, rounding on Sgorr. ‘Must I tell you everything? You haven’t done so much fighting this night that those teeth can’t deal with a new-born fawn.’

Sgorr bowed his head and backed away. Turning on his haunches he called four Draila to his side and led them away down the hill.

When Bandach saw Brechin fall on the hillock he made straight for where the hinds were gathered by the stream, running as fast as his legs could carry him. But as he neared the meadow he saw that the whole place was swarming with Draila. He smelt the fear on the air as the hinds blinked and looked about them nervously. A stampede had indeed only just been avoided when the cry had gone up from the Outriders and now the Draila were moving among them, trying to calm them. The lying words of

the Draila had begun to reassure the hinds, for they wanted to believe what the Draila were telling them about a minor rebellion in the herd that had soon been put down.

Those hinds who asked difficult questions were being separated from the rest. Bandach could see twenty hinds being rounded up quietly and led away to the Home Oak with their fawns in tow. Every now and then a hind, followed closely by her calf, would try and break from the group but the Draila would pounce on them and herd them back, not flinching to use their antlers to do it.

As Bandach watched the group passing now, from the safety of a yew tree, he saw a hind slip away and make towards him. Bandach recognized Fourleaf, the lead hind. He backed away slightly and tried to press into the trees behind him but as he did so he stepped on some dry wood and the snap alerted her to his presence. Fourleaf stopped in her tracks, her senses on full alert, her eyes blinking nervously and her sleek muzzle sniffing the air.

‘Who’s there?’ she called under his breath.

‘Fourleaf. It’s me. Bandach. In here, quickly.’

The doe pushed forward into the trees and for a moment stood there shaking as she looked into Bandach’s eyes.

‘Bandach, did you hear it? The terrible noise. And now the Draila—’

‘I know,’ said Bandach. ‘They’ve taken the herd.’

‘It can’t be true, Bandach. Have they killed the Outriders?’ Bandach looked back at her. His eyes told the full horror of what had happened.

‘Fourleaf, we can’t stay here, it isn’t safe. Besides, I have a duty to perform. Brechin asked me to warn Eloin. You know she is near her time. It was his last wish.’

Fourleaf had hardly been listening but this news brought her back to her senses.

‘Brechin is dead?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then we must hurry, Bandach. There’s no time to lose.’ But with that the two deer heard a noise along the edge of the wood. The Draila guarding the hinds had noticed that Fourleaf was missing and now five of them were coming back to find her. They had already nosed her on the breeze and were moving quickly along the thicket.

‘What are we to do?’ said Fourleaf desperately. ‘I’ve led them to you.’

Bandach stamped back and forth in the leaves as he tried to think.

‘There is no way back through the thicket,’ he said. ‘We must try our luck in the open. If we run hard enough we can make the far trees and the slope. There’s a trail there I know well. It leads back through the glen to the stream.’

Bandach knew it was desperate: there are few hinds that can outpace a stag. But it was their only chance. Then, suddenly, Fourleaf did something extraordinary. She stepped backwards out of the thicket into full view.

‘Goodbye, Bandach,’ she called softly. ‘Herne be with you.’

Before Bandach even realized what was happening the Draila had surrounded the hind and were escorting her back to the group.

When they had gone he slipped out of cover and ran across the valley. The path through the wood that Bandach had talked of was a long way round to the stream and Bandach knew instinctively that he hadn’t much time. He ran desperately, hurtling through branch and thorn.

Every now and then the trees below him would thin out and he could see the Draila and at one point the wood opened completely and Bandach caught a view clean across the glen towards the Home Oak. He fancied he saw Drail and Sgorr on the hillock where Brechin had died, but on he ran, not daring to stop or look back.

The path began to drop again and Bandach followed it down. He was rounding a bend where the

track swung sharply south when he suddenly lurched off the path to avoid two Draila who were blocking the way ahead. Bandach nearly tumbled down the hill, but he held his balance. The Draila heard him though and in an instant were on him. His attempt to avoid them had been a mistake, for now they had the advantage of height.

‘Bandach, we had heard you’d escaped,’ cried one Draila, as both deer lowered their antlers and advanced slowly towards him. ‘But where are you going now? Perhaps to warn Eloin that Sgorr wants Brechin’s fawn?’

Bandach backed away but his haunches were against a tree now. He dug in and prepared for the charge. The first deer threw himself forwards and Bandach rose to meet him. They collided heavily and their antlers knocked together with a loud crack, tearing some of the velvet from the Draila’s horns. The Draila had had the momentum of the slope and Bandach was dazed. But the Draila was winded too. He recovered himself and charged again as Bandach rose to the attack.

A thundering crack split the air as the deer’s heads collided. Bandach was holding his ground but on the next charge the second Draila came in too and, as he locked with Bandach, the first Draila dropped his head and aimed his brow tines straight at Bandach’s throat. Luckily, he slipped on the verge and his antler caught Bandach’s side instead, tearing through the fur to leave a deep gash. The two Draila regained their footing as Bandach looked down at the open wound. He was bleeding badly. The slope had given the Draila an impossible advantage. Bandach braced for the next charge.

Suddenly there was the sound of splintering branches and churning leaves. From above a shape was hurtling towards them. There was no time to get out of the way as the charging stag reached them. His trez tines caught the Draila who had wounded Bandach, full in his side. The startled animal bellowed in terror and tried to swing right with his antlers but the impact of the blow knocked him clean off his feet and threw him sideways. The charging deer crashed on top of him, lost its balance and together they tumbled down the slope.

Bandach didn’t waste a moment. Almost as soon as the unknown deer collided with the first Draila Bandach dipped his head, turned it slightly to one side and lunged. The prone brow tine was aimed straight at the second Draila’s chest, at the soft flesh where the haunches meet, and Bandach’s aim was true. Being below the attacking deer now gave Bandach the advantage, for the tine passed in and up. The deer bucked free and, bleeding badly, he turned and fled. Bandach shook himself and looked round.

Below he could see that the other Draila had got up and was also running. Nearby, the unknown stag was pulling himself to his feet. His right antler had snapped in two and part of it was hanging off the beam, covered in blood and torn velvet. Then Bandach blinked in recognition. It was Salen whose hind, Bracken, had given birth to the stillborn calf. The old stag came towards him up the slope. But when he walked his front legs suddenly gave way and he stumbled. It was only then that Bandach noticed the deep gash on his flank.

‘Salen, Salen! You’re wounded,’ cried Bandach as he rushed forward.

‘Yes,’ panted Salen desperately. ‘They came on us downwind. We thought they were Outriders at first and by the time I realized what was happening it was too late. The cowards attacked us in groups. There were too many of them, Bandach, too many’.

‘Hush, Salen,’ said Bandach. ‘Don’t speak.’

‘I saw you from above the path,’ Salen went on, struggling with his breath. ‘I was resting up there on the bracken. When I saw you pinned against that tree I realized you hadn’t a hope. I knew with this wound there was little chance of helping you on flat ground, but with that slope there was a slim one.’

‘You saved my life, Salen.’

‘At least I did some good then.’ Salen nodded, his breathing shallow now and his eyes glassy. ‘Those damned Draila. They’ve taken Tarn, Straloch and Crinnan. I passed their bodies by the old

cairn. I saw them catch Spey on the east hill. We've all gone, Bandach, all of us. The Outriders have been destroyed.'

'Hush, Salen. Try not to move.'

Salen's head was swaying back and forward now. But suddenly his dazed eyes seemed to clear.

'Bandach, tell me. What of Captain Brechin?'

Bandach hesitated. 'Salen, you're wrong,' he said suddenly. 'You're not the last of the Outriders. I saw Captain Brechin escape over the western hills.'

'I knew it,' sighed Salen. 'They'd never take Brechin. Then at least there is some hope.'

Salen's body began to shudder violently. His legs shook and with a great sigh he laid his head on the forest floor. In the valley bottom the Draila had finally settled the hinds and the nervous mothers were beginning to graze again.

But suddenly, as though of one body, the hinds and their fawns flinched and pricked up their ears to listen. From the hillside they heard, for the last time on that terrible day, one more bellow of pain. It was Bandach, mourning for Salen.

'Enough of your silly stories, Blindweed,' snorted Bhreac by the rowan tree. 'Can't you see you're frightening Eloin?'

Eloin's little calf had started to feed again.

'They're more than just stories,' grumbled Blindweed.

'Nonsense. Besides we've more important things to worry about than a fawn mark.'

Eloin, who had been deep in thought, pricked up her ears.

'What do you mean, Bhreac?' she said. 'What's wrong?' Bhreac was silent. She looked nervously at Blindweed.

'What's happened?' said Eloin, struggling to get up.

'My dear,' answered Blindweed quietly, 'there has been fighting in the herd. The Draila are up to something.'

'Brechin?' cried Eloin. She was up now and pawing the ground as Rannoch tried to nudge between her legs.

'I don't know. I last saw him going to the meeting place.'

'Then I didn't dream it. The cries from the hillside?'

'No, you didn't dream it,' said Blindweed. 'The Outriders have been attacked.'

Rannoch seemed to sense his mother's fear for he nestled in beside her, looking up nervously at the two old deer.

'I must try to find Brechin,' said Eloin, glancing about her desperately. Nearby she saw Bracken, her dead new-born fawn lying motionless at her feet, as she grazed listlessly by the trees.

'No, my dear, it is better that you stay here with the little one,' said Bhreac. 'Blindweed says the herd is swarming with Draila. Blindweed? What are you doing now, you old fool?'

The storyteller had wandered off to the edge of the stream and was pushing his muzzle into the side of the bank, as though trying to pick up a scent.

'This is no time to graze Blindweed,' snapped Bhreac.

'Have you gone mad?'

But when Blindweed lifted his head it was stained with mud from the wet ground. He trotted back towards them.

'Blindweed. Stop fooling,' said Bhreac.

'Silence, hind,' snapped Blindweed suddenly. 'Eloin, I am old and have strange ways and there is much trouble in the herd. I do not understand politics. But I know this: that fawn mark of little Rannoch's will bring him nothing but trouble. Will you trust me, Eloin?'

Eloin didn't understand but as she gazed back into the old storyteller's grave eyes she realized he was ~~deadly serious~~. She nodded.

'Come here, Rannoch,' said Blindweed. He nudged the fawn and Rannoch swung round, startled. The old deer reached down and, with one swing, rubbed his nose across the little fawn's forehead. The smear of mud stained Rannoch's fur, almost completely masking the white leaf.

'That's better,' said Blindweed. 'We can't have you wandering around with a fawn mark like that and making the other deer jealous, can we now?'

Rannoch blinked up at Blindweed, then, suddenly frightened of the huge mouth and great tongue, he turned back to his mother. Eloin let him come and stood gazing out across the home valley. She hardly knew why, but she felt better for what Blindweed had done.

'Oh, Brechin,' she whispered. 'I wish you would hurry'.

As Sgorr ran, his Draila behind him, he let the wind score his face and his lungs swelled with pleasure. The night's success had surpassed even his wildest expectations. The Outriders, who he had tried to outmanoeuvre for so long, were crushed. Brechin was dead and now a new time was beginning in the Low Lands. Drail would not be challenged for three summers at least and thus Sgorr's own position was secure.

Drail. He's an old fool, thought Sgorr to himself. But he won't last. He's lame and tired. But I must bide my time. Then they'll see. Then let them talk, when a hornless stag is the Lord of Herds.

Bitterness welled up in Sgorr's stomach. He remembered the days of terrible humiliation when his antlers had first failed. Then the contempt with which he had been treated by stags so much stupider than himself. That was before he had been driven out and forced to wander the forests alone. Ah, but that had been fate that he had stumbled on this bunch of brailah. If it hadn't been for the gullible, lame Drail, Sgorr thought, where would he be now?

His thoughts turned to Brechin and he bared his teeth with satisfaction. Brechin had fought hardest to prevent him entering the herd; now Brechin was dead and he was on his way to fetch Eloin. The beautiful Eloin. Drail would have her. For now at least.

As Sgorr pictured Eloin he felt a strange confusion enter him. It was the closest he had ever come to loving anything in his life. He thought of her sleek fur and her proud muzzle. Of her huge eyes and her bold temper. But as he thought and he tried to picture the two of them together, the vision failed. 'How could she ever want to stand with me?' he said to himself bitterly. With one eye. With no brave antler to fight his place. But he must have her somehow. Then he hit on it. Eloin's calf. Soon, Eloin, soon. Then he would have revenge for his own ugliness.

Sgorr was shaken from his thoughts by a stag running towards them from across the valley. It was the Draila that Sgorr had sent off from the meeting place.

'Well?' he said as the stag came up to him and bowed.

'Have you found her?'

'No, Captain Sgorr. But a hind over there says she thinks she's beyond the stream.'

'Good. Then let us see.'

Sgorr wheeled round and ran straight for the pasture towards Eloin and Rannoch.

Blindweed was moving restlessly up and down the edge of the stream, trying to scan the valley for signs of movement or for any approaching Draila as Bhreac tried to reassure Eloin.

'Brechin will be all right, my dear,' the kindly old doe was saying, 'you'll see. He hasn't ever been beaten.'

'No,' agreed Eloin nervously. 'I'm sure you're right.' From the corner of her eye Eloin saw Bracke flinch and the two deer heard the trees on the mountainside rustle.

'A stag,' whispered Eloin. 'Coming down the hill.' Blindweed had heard it too and was with them again.

'Brechin?' said Bhreac.

The branches parted and, as the deer emerged, Eloin shook her head.

'No,' she sighed sadly as she spied Bandach running towards her. He raced straight over to the group. He was panting heavily and drenched in blood and sweat.

'Forgive me stealing up on you,' said the young stag as he reached them.' Captain Brechin sent me

'Brechin? He's all right?' Bandach lowered his head.

'No, Eloin, I'm sorry,' he answered. 'The Outriders are gone.'

Eloin began to shake. Her haunches flinched and she walked backwards as Rannoch tried to stay under her soft belly.

'What have they done?' cried Blindweed. 'Stags do not kill each other.'

'Drail has gone mad,' said Bandach. 'He has forbidden Anlach.'

'But he can't.'

'The Draila are everywhere. And Eloin, I have come to warn you. They are coming to take you to Drail.'

'Drail?' cried Eloin. 'Never.'

'It is worse than that,' whispered Bandach, looking down at Rannoch. 'Sgorr. He is coming to kill your calf. I must get you all away.'

Suddenly the terrible sadness that was filling Eloin's heart was swept away. Now all she could think of was saving her fawn. She would gladly die if she had to, but she must protect her little one.

'We will go west over the valley to the next glen,' said Bandach. 'From there into the high mountains. Perhaps even into the High Land itself.'

Bhreac looked fearfully at the hind. To the Low Land deer the High Land was a distant, sinister place, surrounded by legend and fable and cloaked in mystery.

'But the little one,' said Bhreac, 'he'll never survive the journey.'

'We must try. It's his only hope.'

'Yes,' agreed Eloin, 'we must try.'

'It's too late,' cried Blindweed.

Blindweed was looking across the stream. In the distance, no more than thirty trees away, Sgorr and five Draila were hurrying towards them.

'We're lost,' said Bhreac.

'Hush,' snapped Blindweed. 'I've an idea. If only we had more time.'

'If time is all you need,' cried Bandach, 'you shall have it. But hurry with your plan, for Herne's sake.'

Bandach leapt forward on his front haunches and, tossing back his antlers, he splashed through the stream. Up the facing bank he ran and then, bucking and kicking, he shot forward diagonally across Sgorr's path. He was out in the middle of the valley when the Draila spied him and, as he had gambled, the whole group swung away to follow him. Bandach had guessed that Sgorr would not risk depleting his own bodyguard, nor deprive himself of such a prize.

On Bandach sped, with the wind in his ears and anger pumping his heart. He was fast and young and for a while he held them off. But at last the day's terrible exertions and the fight on the hillside began to catch up with him. He slowed and the Draila drew nearer. Then they caught him. He kicked out behind him but an antler caught him in the leg and he tripped. Bandach would never get up again.

Sgorr led the Draila slowly back across the stream. He wanted to savour this moment. As they reached the far verge, he saw Eloin ahead of him, along with the fool of a storyteller Blindweed and an old doe he didn't recognize. From Eloin's shape he knew instantly that she had already calved.

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