

THE HOLLOW THRONE

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THE
HOLLOW
THRONE

TIM LEACH



An Aries Book

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For Emma, Sarah, and Kathy

AD 180

Antonine Wall (disused)

Island of Spears

D A M N O N I I

R. Clyde

Souther

D A M N O N I I

Up

R. Nith

NOVANTAE

SELGOV

Solway Firth
Bibra

Alauna

Magis

Gabrosentum

Legend

□ Roman forts

25 miles

50 km





NORTH SEA

Firth of Forth



THE MAIMED KING

AD 175

1

Across the hills and through the heather, a broken people wandered to the north.

Many thousands they were, grey-faced with exhaustion, their skin daubed with blood and earth, stumbling and dragging their feet as they walked. They resembled an army of the dead more than the living, as though some ancient barrow had broken open and the corpses had come crawling out in their thousands. Etched upon their shields and upon their skin could be seen the markings of many different tribes – the Damnonii, the Venicones, the Taexali, and many more. Half a dozen tribes of the northlands, who had put aside the ancient wounds of their feuds beneath a single banner and called themselves the Painted People.

No army pursued them, no living enemy could be seen. Only, towering in the distance to the south, the great Wall of stone that marked the edge of an Empire. The Painted People fled from that Wall, and it was as though that army of the dead had fought a monster of stone, and had lost.

But no monster had defeated them, nor had it been the Legions of Rome – that at least would have been a familiar

humiliation. This had been a new enemy, a new shame for them to bear. A people from a distant land bound in service to the Empire: warriors who wore dragonlike scales upon their skin, carried great lances in their hands that seemed made to murder giants, rode monstrous horses that fought and killed alongside the men.

What could one do against such warriors, who seemed to have ridden out of a myth? And though the Painted People barely had the strength to walk or even to stand, even so they recited a name, spoken over and over again, like a curse or a prayer: *Sarmatians, Sarmatians*. The name of those who had defeated them. The name they would have to learn to hate.

The Painted People moved like a wounded beast, staggering and bleeding their way across the heather and the hills, a spoor of corpses left behind them as bloodied men stumbled and fell and lay down to die. They fled to a deep forest within a valley of the northlands, one of the places where the secret acts, sacred and forbidden, were done amongst their people. There at last, shielded by the trees from the eyes of men and gods alike, they collapsed to the ground.

No more words, at first. Save for that repeated naming of their enemy, their shame and exhaustion had taken them to a place beyond language, back to the old ways of the heart and the mind, when their ancestors had loved and fought and hated without speech. Gradually, piece by piece, the art of words came back to them. But they needed only one. They spoke nothing but a single name, over and over again.

'Corvus, Corvus, Corvus.'

The name of their war chief, the high king of the Painted People. The man who had led them to their defeat.

One day before, they had chanted that name as a rallying

cry upon the battlefield. For he had brought them great fortune in war, taught them well how to hate and destroy their enemy. Now they spoke his name like a curse and a command, demanding that he come and face their judgement.

Summoned by the word, the way that fey creatures are bound to answer the sounding of their true name, a figure stepped into the clearing, the moonlight shining upon his corpse-white skin.

He was tall, taller than any other man there – a fair-haired warrior from half the world away, from the forests beyond the Rhenu at another edge of the Empire. His blue eyes were as still and empty as the waters of the northern seas, his pale skin marked with the signs of the Legion he had deserted long before. He stood before them then, unbowed and seemingly unafraid. He waited to see what those broken people would do to him.

The Painted People gathered about him, murder slowly building in their hearts. The vengeful anger of defeated men, and more than that too – for all the dead that they had left behind in the shadow of the Wall, they knew that a sacrifice was still needed. A curse of the gods must be upon them, to suffer such a defeat. Only the blood of a king would end that curse, and he had been a king to them all.

Corvus knew all this, it seemed. But he did not beg, or curse, or take up a weapon to defend himself. He merely unclasped his cloak and cast it to the earth, pulled away the armour of leather and cloth, unwound the wrappings of his boots. He moved with slow, careless gestures as he cast away his clothes – he might have been a traveller come home after a long journey to warm himself by the fire, or a man going to bed with his lover.

At last he stood there naked, an offering of flesh.

No fire had been struck, for none of them had the strength or the will to build one. But the moon was half full, and the near-ceaseless clouds had cleared for once. The wind lay still; the clearing in the forest was open to the sky. And so the Painted People saw Corvus clearly, just as they saw the knife in his hand.

It would have been the work of a moment, to swarm upon Corvus and cut him to pieces. Yet they held still. Not from fear of what his knife might do to them, for they were too weary to feel any fear of death. Somehow, in that moment, they found themselves afraid of what Corvus meant to do to himself.

The knife rose high, as he offered the blade to the goddess of the moon. Corvus laid the edge of the weapon to his forehead, perhaps seeking some comfort in the touch of the iron, dry and cold, against war-fevered skin. The tip of the knife went to his chest, as though he intended to give himself a quick death, then to the belly, the place of the slow death. The knife drifted down, beneath his manhood, and the Painted People knew then what he intended.

They were crying out then, calling for him not to do it. For all that they had been willing to kill him a moment before, they feared for him now. They felt his pain as their own. He was their brother, and they loved him.

But it was too late. He had already begun to cut.

A ragged screaming broke the silence of the forest – Corvus had borne many wounds on the battlefield, but this was a pain unknowable. His teeth bared, bone white under the light of the moon, the cords of his neck dancing and writhing, his agonised face turned towards the sky.

Then it was done, with a flowing of blood and seed upon the earth. And Corvus was kneeling, red hands cupping and holding himself, as though he feared to let what he had cut away touch the earth. Silence from those around him, who knew that they were witnessing something terrible and holy.

Corvus was speaking then – he gave no prayer to a god to undo what had been done, nor sound out a curse upon his enemies. He simply said: ‘Bring it to me.’

For the Painted People, there was no doubting what he meant. There was only one treasure of theirs that he could mean.

It was secret and forbidden, known only to the tribes of the northlands. They had carried it with them on their journey, but had not dared to use it even when they knew they were defeated. Better to die, it had seemed to them before, than to unleash that evil upon the world. But now the word went out, and from the heart of the woods, passed hand over hand with great tenderness, they brought their terrible treasure forward into the clearing.

At first it seemed that they carried a piece of the night itself – a sphere of utter blackness, swallowing the moonlight that fell upon it. But those closer to it could see the old hammer marks on metal that had been beaten to smoothness more than a century before. Those who held it felt the patterned shapes beneath their fingers. The etchings of trees, elm and oak and ash. The faces of men, smiling and laughing and screaming.

It was an old cauldron, forged of black iron. Such a simple, humble thing, the kind that might hang above a cookfire all through those lands north of the Wall. But there were many sacred cauldrons in the tales of their people. The Cauldron

of Ceridwen that brewed wisdom as if it were soup. The Cauldron of the Dagda that would never run empty. And this one – the Burning Cauldron, the tomb of long-dead gods.

Each man who held it did so only for a moment, stumbling to pass it on as quickly as he could. Afterwards, all of them would swear that though the cauldron had not felt fire for a hundred years, even so it almost burned their fingers, still hot to the touch.

And so it travelled hand over hand, until it came at last to rest before Corvus. Before the man they would come to call the Maimed King, who reached into it with a trembling, bloody hand.

Within it lay no treasure of gold and silver, no crown of kings or wizard's wand. There was nothing within but ash and soot. And into the Burning Cauldron, Corvus cast that ruined piece of himself. Then he bowed over to the ground and lay weeping upon the earth, all his strength and courage spent.

All at once, the Painted People gathered to their king. One laid a cloak across Corvus to cover his nakedness, and another lay beside him in a close embrace, a brother's embrace. All was forgiven then, for they knew the blood sacrifice he had made. The great offering to the old dead gods – a forbidden, powerful magic that might let them rise again.

The killing spirit had left them now. There was only a kinship of suffering, a quiet grief that bound them together. For there would be no peace, not after such an offering. No retreat to the valleys and the rivers, no peaceful life spent tending herd and field. They were given over to one purpose only – revenge against the Romans and the Sarmatians,

those who had wronged them. Revenge for their Maimed King, who had sacrificed so much for them.

It would be a patient revenge, a thing of many years. For now, they were content to disappear into the forest and heather. To tend their wounds, gather their strength, and let the evil in that cauldron grow strong, ready for the time that it would be unleashed upon the world.

All that grows and thrives must first come from the earth – this the Painted People knew. And so, beneath the light of the moon and stained with the blood of their king, they began to dig.