

The entire tribe turned out to watch Cinon's testing. His family – mother, four brothers and two sisters – were given a place of honor with the Chieftainess' party, along with the seasoned warriors who would decide his fate. With them stood Calliac, the only non-soldier allowed to pass judgement. Clothed in gray, her long silver hair streaming in waves down her back, she looked appeared to glow next to the dirty, leather-clad men of arms.

The Harvest Moon would be full tonight, but at the moment the sun dominated the cloudless sky, casting long shadows across the wide valley, where tall grasses waved in the cool air, darkened by patches of shadow cast by the surrounding foliage. These attracted friends, neighbors, supporters and even a few foes to stand in their midst, waiting to cheer on Cinon's victory, or revel in his defeat.

My eye was drawn to Sorcha's party, surely just as she wanted to be, but rather than resting on her, I fixated on a stately woman of middle years in a red tunic. Her dark hair was braided and piled on her head like a crown, small balls of gold glinting in the depressions between strands and hanging from her ears. On her right upper arm was a thick band of bronze and at her feet lie a long spear and a leather-covered shield.

Kiara followed my gaze. "She is Dolina, Cinon's mother. If he passes his tests, she will arm him, welcoming him into the tribe as an adult and he will take his place as a warrior in Sorcha's army."

"And if he does not?"

Kiara shook her head. "Let us hope it does not come to that."

Sensing that was a subject best left unbroached, I turned my attention to Sorcha as we took our places, forming a crescent around Dolina. Sorcha took in the proceedings from a tree stump one of her attendants had carried for this purpose. She cocked her head like a tiny bird to

concentrate on something Calliac was saying, and a breeze lifted her hair, flapping three feathers secured to her head by a leather thong. From this distance, I couldn't identify them for certain, but their size and coloring indicated some type of eagle. Fascinated, I looked around the assembly, seeing now striped and spotted owl feathers, the inky black of ravens, and even a few pure white swan feathers.

I turned to Maracil, who was sitting next to me, watching the crowd and smiling to self, intent on asking her about the feathers, but her amusement stopped me. "What brings you such cheer?" I asked instead.

Maracil giggled. "I know the secrets about so many of these women and men I could bring down the whole tribe, if I chose. It's sad, really."

"Why did they all confide in you?"

"Who says they did?" She countered. "I have ways of finding things out. How else do you think I married into this tribe? It certainly wasn't for love, and while I am nobility," – she gestured to the crossed owl feathers stuck into the knot of her hair – "I am no chieftainness. In my station, information is more valuable than gold. But I suppose you know that. Sometimes I forget I am speaking to a former queen."

"It is good to be reminded," I assured her, silently marveling at how alike she and Sobian were. They would either get along like sisters, or despise one another. "You mentioned your rank. Is that what the feathers mean?"

"Yes. Only the chief or chieftainness wears three. Those black ones," – she pointed to the judges conferring with Sorcha – "are given to all Votadini warriors who pass their testing, provided they have noble blood. Other tribes use different feathers, which is why you see much variance here. Some of our men earned their honors among the X, Y, Z tribes." She scanned the

crowd, looking for another example and pointed to the blonde priestess who attended Calliac.

“The priests and priestesses among us wear white feathers.”

“And you, what do your two feathers mean?”

She touched them softly. “Together, they tell everyone that I am of a very high rank. But separately, they speak of my accomplishments.” She brushed her fingertips over the thin tail feather of a pheasant. “This one was my warrior’s honor. But this one,” she indicated “was awarded me when I ZYX.”

“As a foreigner with Votadini blood, am I allowed to test for my honor?”

Maracil’s eyes widened as though she could not believe what I had just asked. “Of course, but you may wish to see the testing first. As you have said, you are not as young as you once were.”

I playfully hit her on the arm and she rubbed the spot in mock pain in response.

A high wine from a thin, curving horn, drew all attention to the chieftainess and her party. After surveying the crowd to be sure everyone was paying her their due, Sorcha raised her hands like a goddess calling down benediction on her followers. “Let he who will be tested come forth.” Her voice rang throughout the clearing.

Cinon emerged from the shadows, clad only in a pair of short breeches that allowed maximum freedom of movement and gave a clear view of the chiseled muscles in his calves. As I watched him bounce in place on bare feet and wave his arms to warm up the muscles, I found myself wishing I had a daughter, for he was the kind of skilled, handsome man I would wish her marry. When he was ready, he stood in front of Sorcha and Dolina, positioning his body so that he was equidistant from both, but within arm’s reach of three short swords protruding from the earth. He bowed slightly.

Dolina inclined her head in response and lifted up her arm, palm to the sky. It was time for the testing to commence.

Maracil leaned toward me, her full lips nearly grazing my ear as she spoke. “The first test is dexterity with a blade. Every warrior displays his skills differently. Cinon is clever, so I am curious to see what he has chosen to perform.”

Cinon began by picking up three apples from the ground and juggling them like a performer at a fair. Higher and higher, they spun until all three were airborne at once. In a fluid gesture, he unsheathed his sword, holding its blade to the sky as he watched the apples fall toward earth. One by one, they came to rest impaled on his blade.

He bowed, flinging the fruit to Sorcha, Maracil and his mother, who each caught their piece impassively, unmoved by his attempts at humor and charm.

After wiping his sword blade on the grass, Cinon took up another blade and began twirling it with dexterous turns of his wrist that made it look like the weapon was everywhere around him at once. Taking a deep breath, he launched one blade into the air, then the other, twisting and turning, angling his wrists at impossible angles to catch the swords by their pommels. While both were airborne, he pulled a third from the ground and flipped it, so the spinning blade caught the light. After keeping them in motion for a few breathless moments, he caught them by the handles and bowed.

The assembly stomped the ground to show their approval.

Cinon moved on to a tall stack of wood higher than his head. Rocking back and forth on his heels, he flung his arms above his head and leapt straight up to the top. Jumping down again, he headed for a thick tree trunk that was at least twice his height. Bending down, he hugged it near the base before lifting it nearly onto his shoulder. Muscles straining, he took a few uneven

steps before letting it fly. The log landed several feet in front of him, startling a flock of gray, stripped cuckoos who took flight in noisy protest.

Something about this sequence of events was familiar. Maracil and I looked at one another and in unison let out a devastating war cry in support of his success, and he shrieked in response.

Maracil laughed as I covered my ears. “Well, that certainly qualifies as passing the voice test.”

Now, two of the men from the audience led a small, stocky pony into the center of the clearing. Cinon took up a shorter spear and stood facing the pony as though he was staring down the enemy. I recognized that look from my years with Lancelot. He was concentrating. Then without warning, he took off at a sprint, racing toward the animal, spear held high. For a moment, I feared he would impale the beast, but at the last second, he rammed the spear into the ground and leapt up like a salmon, using the handle to vault himself onto the horse’s back.

So that was the famous spear vault. I had heard of it in tales of old, but had not ever witnessed it, not even from my mother. It was the most common way for warriors to mount a horse before the coming of the Romans, but was rarely used anymore. Those who knew it, kept its secret, as it was advantageous in quickly evading the enemy in times of war.

As if taking a cue from my thoughts, a band of a dozen so warriors burst out of the trees behind Cinon, whooping and yelling war cries even more devastating than Cinon’s had been. This must not have been part of the test Cinon was expecting, because of a brief time he struggled to maintain control of his horse, which reared as the others approached. But then he pulled himself together, digging his boot into the horse’s side and the two galloped off toward the woods.

“Cinon must now show not only his skill at evasion, but also at stealth, for being a warrior is not only about how you handle a blade,” Maracil explained. “There are judges hidden throughout the wood who will note his progress and attempt to confuse and distract him. Then once he has returned here, they will check to see how many branches are broken and what kind of trail he has left behind. The goal is to leave as little evidence of his passage as possible.”

I shook my head. “You are harder on your warriors than any people I have ever heard tell of. There is no way I could pass these tests now. I may not have even done so in my youth.”

“Caught was we are, as we have been for centuries between two competing peoples who each want our land, our strength as warriors is our primary asset against our foes. The ancient tribes trained this way to ensure their land would not be taken by one another. We do so in order that it not be stolen from without.”

As I thought about the fanatic young man galloping through the woods, seeking escape, but trying not to leave any signs of his progress, a thought came to me. “What happens if he falls or is caught?”

“He is automatically disqualified.”

“How long does this part of the competition take? Is this is the final test?”

Maracil shrugged. “It takes as long as it takes. Sometimes it is short, other times many hours. We will wait here until then.” She glanced over my shoulder. “Or not, one of Sorcha’s men is headed this way.”

I turned, just as the man reached us. “Our chieftainess wishes to speak with you,” He held a hand out to help me to my feet. “But not to you,” he added to Maracil.

She rolled her eyes. “What a surprise.”

When we reached Sorcha’s party, she motioned for me to sit at her feet.

I took umbrage at the subservient position, but knew better than to argue with a woman of her power, so I obeyed.

She looked down her pretty, thin nose at me. “This testing has put me in a mind to hear stories of battles long past. Though I am certain these men would have plenty to entertain me,” she paused, gesturing to the group around her who grinned like fools. “I wish to hear about the ones you have seen for yourself. Tell me of the victories of the great King Arthur.”

“My Lady, I am sure news of them reached you even here. How can I do them justice?”

Her face clouded with annoyance. “You forget your place by questioning me. But you also forget I am young. I do not remember any of the stories from when they happened. Start with the famous skirmish at Mount Badon.” This time her tone made it clear she would not tolerate further evasion on my part.

I took a deep breath and began relaying the tale to her, beginning with Mayda’s fortuitous warning, leaving out nothing. If this child-queen, who I doubted had ever been on a battlefield herself, wished to know what pitched battle was like, she would know every gruesome details. Perhaps then she would have greater respect for those more seasoned than herself.

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It was nearing dusk when the first shouts reached us from the woods.

Maracil grabbed my shoulder. “Cinon is coming.”

I looked up from the joint of meat I was eating before the cook fire, wishing more to stay and finish my meal than to watch for the warrior to emerge from the green. But Maracil insistently tugged at my arm, nearly lifting me off the ground in her excitement. Her face was glowing, as though it was her own son who was near to completing his tests.

We joined the gathering crowd of spectators near the forest's edge, where it gave way to the clearing. Someone had built a large bonfire of thick vertical branches whose tips touched, surrounded by a circle of rocks. Its bright orange flames happily consumed the wood, fanned by an occasional breeze. I was grateful for the warmth, for the night was quickly growing chill with the dying of the light.

The shouts grew closer, and Cinon burst forth from the trees, pony and rider both lathered with sweat and mud from their ordeal. He did not stop at the fire as I expected, but continued into the shadows beyond.

Soon I knew why. He was not alone. He was being pursued by a large warrior on horseback. He was fearsome to behold, armored with a large round shield and with a strange headdress that covered his face, leaving room only for sight holes and a place to draw breath. His left hand held the reigns, and his right was raised, a large double-headed axe in his hands. He chased down Cinon, drawing him back into the reach of the firelight. He swiped at Cinon with his axe, causing the boy to lean sideways to avoid the blow, and also knocking him off his horse at the same time.

When Cinon fell, I wondered if this was the end, as Maracil's words seemed to indicate. But the warrior dismounted as well, approaching Cinon with measured steps. His caution was well-founded, for as he neared, Cinon, who had appeared injured in his fall, rolled over and sprang to his feet, wielding his sword before the masked warrior had much chance to react. Cinon pressed his advantage, driving his opponent backwards, seeking to disarm him.

But it wasn't long before the masked warrior rallied, coming at Cinon with all his strength. As he has not been through the ordeal in the forest, it hardly seemed a fair match, but I

reminded myself that I had faced opponents far stronger than myself and triumphed. The boy could, too.

They crossed swords with a deafening crunch, each holding their own. Cinon performed a complex maneuver that rid his opponent of his shield, but he was no match for the bigger man's skill with the blade. The masked warrior made quick work of dispatching Cinon's weapon, but even then Cinon would not back down. He did his best to evade his opponent, landing a few kicks before he was wrestled to the ground.

For a moment, I could not speak, my disappointment was so great. I lowered my eyes, not wishing to see the rest. "He failed," was all I managed to squeak out.

Maracil shook her head. "Perhaps not. Look. They still have to evaluate his whole performance."

When I looked again, the warrior had lifted Cinon to his feet and was holding him in a headlock before the panel of judges, about whom I had completely forgotten.

Dolina bowed before the others, submitting to their will.

The four soldiers were the first to cast their vote, two standing, their swords unsheathed and raised high, while the others remained seated. A tie vote. Calliac stood as well.

As one, every pair of eyes turned to Sorcha. "As head of the army, she has the right to veto the panel's decision if she disagrees."

Sorcha did not move for some time, her eyes far off, as though she was reliving Cinon's entire testing in her mind. But then she rose.

A deafening clamor followed, as the masked warrior let Cinon go and he stumbled forward to fall at his mother's feet. She was crying, but still managed to make her proclamation loud and clear for the whole gathering to hear. "Cinon of the Votadini, today you are called a

man of our tribe. Receive your weapons and use them well to defend your land, your chieftainess and those who rely on your protection.” She bestowed the shield and spear upon him, kissing him on the cheek.

Sorcha came forth, a black feather in her hands. “I acknowledge you as one of my guard. Do you swear your loyalty to me from this day forth?”

Cinon kneeled. “I do so swear.” He bowed his head and she secured the feather in his hair.

Standing once again, Cinon was swarmed by family, friends and fellow warriors. But that was not what I was watching. Sorcha was talking with the masked warrior, whose face was still hidden. Slowly, she reached up and removed his mask.

I was struck dumb by what I saw. It was Lancelot.

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“Lancelot!” The cry came from my own throat, but it barely registered as my own. I was so convinced, had believed for so long that he had died in the battle of Camlann, that I could scarcely believe my eyes.

I threw my arms around him, intent on never letting him leave my side again. “You are alive.”

He returned my embrace as though he could draw warmth from me. “As are you.”

“Angus,” Sorcha butted in, “how do you know this woman?”

“She is my love. I was her champion when she was queen and so I remain until my dying day.”

I looked up at him. “Why does she call you Angus?”

Lancelot beamed. "It is a long story and the three of us have much to discuss."

Sorcha signaled to her entourage, who began the long, slow trial back to the castle. She signaled us to join her. "Come, you will sit by my side this night and I will hear everything."

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Inside Din Edin's massive great hall, the festival was in full swing. Joints of meat were passed on wooden platters, each guest taking their share, while mugs were filled and plates cleared by a small army of servants.

Unlike at Camelot, here they feasted on furs strewn across the floor, reclining or sitting as each person saw fit. Sorcha, as was her due, sat in the lone chair, a wooden backless that was little more than a glorified seat, but she seemed quite comfortable, able to look out over the heads of her fellow courtiers. Lancelot and I sat at her feet, along with her champion, husband and Maracil. Galen was not far away, enjoying the company of Sorcha's attendants. From the look of things, he was regaling them with a tale of some hilarity.

Cinon sat in a place of honor near the hearth fire, surrounded by his friends and fellow guards, who were loudly recounting the events of the evening over sloshing cups of dark, bitter ale, increasing Cinon's accomplishments with each pass of the telling. A bevy of women, one or more of which would likely warm Cinon's bed this night, hung around them in a circle, making eyes at the men and laughing flirtatiously at their every word.

In between were groups of warriors and nobility growing more and more boastful as the night wore on. In between conversation with Lancelot and Sorcha, I heard snippets of tales from

many of the Votadini's past battles told with deep, dramatic intonations. Some of these men, and a few of the women, could give our bards competition for their storytelling abilities.

Dolina rose from out of the crowd like a specter, dressed now in robes of white. She rapped a long wooden staff carved into the head of a horse at the top on the ground. Heads turned, and then quieted as she repeated the gesture twice more.

“Cinon, son my heart, child of my thighs, come forth.”

Her son extricated himself from a knot of men and women and kneeled before his mother.

She speared a piece of tender meat with a dagger. “Just you received your first food from my hand, receive now your first meat as a man from my own weapon.” She held it out to him, feeding him like a child.

One of the women rose from the throng, earning for her efforts daggers from her companions. She presented him with her own cup. Lowering her eyes to the floor, she said, “May I be the first to slake your thirst, my lord.”

A wave of guffaws rippled through the crowd, confirming my suspicion that she was not just offering him liquid refreshment.

Cinon watched her appraisingly, bidding her to raise her eyes. For a long moment, neither moved, but then a grin lit up his face and he reached for the cup, but instead of taking it from her, he placed his hands over his, guiding the cup to his lips. His gaze never left hers as he drank. It was a startlingly intimate gesture. When he had supped his fill, he gently released her hands, keeping his fingertips on her lightly on her wrists. “Thank you, kind lass. May I know your name?”

“I am Erina.”

“Join me, won’t you, Erina?”

An audible groan went up from the other women. Cinon had made his choice.

I turned back to the others, who had evidently tired of this teenage show of attraction. Sorcha looked bored, and Lancelot was intent on his meal. Only Maracil appeared to show my interest in the two would-be lovers.

“So, Angus,” Sorcha’s husband, Dand said as he chewed, “when did you return to us? I do not recalling seeing your face at our last gathering.”

“It has not been long,” Lancelot said. “I came north looking for this lovely lass.” He squeezed my shoulders. “I knew she had Votadini blood so this seemed the most logical place to begin.”

Sorcha perked up. “He came around asking for her. That’s when I intercepted our handsome warrior for a special assignment.”

“One I was pleased to accept.”

She cocked her head at Lancelot. “No one has ever bested you, have they?”

Lancelot thought for a moment. Only one, Liam of X. Sadly, he died in a raid a few years ago. Great man.”

“How long have you been doing this?” I asked, confused. Lancelot had been with me for many years at Arthur’s court, so I was having trouble seeing when he could have had time to assist the cheiftainess.

“On and off for more than a decade. This was the first time in many years, though. My work at Camelot kept me plenty busy.”

“I’ll bet she kept you busy,” Maracil chimed in, elbowing me in the ribs.

My face suddenly felt like I was standing next to the fire. I opened my mouth to reply, still unsure what I was going to say, when Lancelot saved me.

“That she did.” He kissed me on top of the head. “But I returned whenever I could. I have always considered this area another home.”

“As well you should. Not many warriors receive an honorific like yours,” Dand noted.

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