

Prologue

Smoke drifted hazily off the hamlets, villages and shepherd settlements. scattered across the valleys and hillsides in the morning frost that touched the dew and lightly coated the tree tops. Despite the still morning air the smoke rising up from the settlements in the distance meant the Albions army had begun their invasion and brought with them death and rape and the bloodlust of crazed men. Any fool alive knew the Albion's would scorch the earth behind them – a trail of burned fields and rotting crops. The smell of rotten corpses strewn in the open. The screams of women echoing off the hills to nearby villages. A promise of what was to come.

If we live through this war we'll likely starve next winter, Derfen thought angrily. The women and boys would be raped and enslaved, sold like cattle at various ports in Kingdoms that hadn't outlawed slavery like the Kingdom of Annwyl had. It was a point of pride that Annwyl had outlawed slavery some years ago. Derfen watched another cloud of smoke, miniscule in the distance, start to rise and despite the distance he had a hunch it was one of the neighbouring villages he grew up in. He looked over the parapet of Dinas castle and in the distance barely within line of sight, like a plague of locusts the Albion army hovered.

Derfen spat off the edge of the parapet, shifting his feet ever so slightly and readjusting his belt and scabbard. He paced the parapet again. Dinas city which lay behind the castle was in a valley of high risen mountains. The valley grew smaller and smaller until you marched on the castle. Being a foot soldier and approaching the castle, noting the high rise mountain ledges perfect for small bands of archers to harass the incoming army and the fact the Valley would narrow the army as it approached, must've sent shudders through the attacking soldiers spines.

“Look at these fucking cunts,” Derfen growled in thick Annwyl. The language relied a lot on tonal useage so normally it held a lilt and playful tone to it – almost as if in song.

However coming from the man that stood atop the parapet snarling at the horizon the words came out like splintered chunks of wood, grinding and snapping into each other.

“Oh aye, by the time these bastards have marched through our hills they'll be so knackered they'll fall onto our spears!” His friend Rhydwyn replied with an accent just as thick and a tone just as angry.

The both of them jeered a few guttural grunts as they slapped each others backs promising the enemy that waited on the horizon quick deaths.

They cheered again when a paige boy came by them with two wooden mugs of a

thick brown ale to which they lifted their pints of beer and clashed them together and took a full swallow. Derfen let out a gasp of appreciation for the smell of ale that filled his nostrils wiping beads of ale from his full beard with the backs of his hand.

He reached into his pocket and produced a dented coin flipping it in the direction of the paige who watched it tumble amongst the stone floor nonplussed.

The paige looked at the coin in disbelief for a full 3 seconds before Derfen motioned for the boy to pick it up.

“Well take it and piss off you daft bastard.”

“Cheers,” the boy said before rushing off back to the cook house to replenish the other soldiers that stoop atop the parapets.

“That was near a weeks pay man. Have you lost your mind?” Petyr said, stunned with his friends generosity.

Derfen grunted, “I’m feeling generous,” and took another full swallow of ale, his eyes pulled back to the horizon where smoke rose into the sky and men died.

Ladders were all over the castle and when Derfen swung around with his mug of ale still attached to his lips he watched women and children carrying water, ale and food to the men waiting atop the castle battlements. Smaller children were scurrying up the ladders with a practiced skill, carrying smaller rocks. These would be used to hurl at the enemy when the heavier rocks had run out. The ladders created a network around the court yard and 2nd, 3rd and 4th tiers of the castle. The wind was colder up on top though and Derfen found himself restless for the war to start. An adrenaline already starting to surge through him.

Beside him Petyr took another full mouthful of ale. Wiping his mouth with the back of a dirty, callused hand.

“Fucking cocksuckers,” His friend snarled into the distance. Derfen shifted again, grunting an agreement, sharing the rage like a well worn cloak.

The King of Annwyl stepped into the courtyard of the castle. He wore a beautiful green cloak atop his full armour and his sworn men that followed him were adorned in blue cloaks. The commander looked around and gestured at Petyr and Derfen to which the pair clamboured off the top of the parapet and quickly paced down the ladders which were propped and fastened around the castle allowing easy access to resupply men, ammo and weapons.

Derfen watched the King disappear out of sight into one of the nearby barns with his main bannerman. Derfen had never been good with flags, the Kings bannerman but

his instincts told him a good portion of the Kings army was nowhere to be seen. Had a sworn bannerman refused the Kings orders? If they had then well, when King Glendower prevailed and won what was shaping up to be Annwyls most important battle then they'd be hung for traitors after months in the dungeons. Rhydwyn shuddered at the thought - having spent time in a dungeon as a boy for petty theft the memories of men moaning in pain and hunger in the pitch black would forever be with him.

"We need two men on the doors for the Kings meeting," the commander said matter of factly. He was a stern man who had no time for drink or whoring yet he was respected and feared by his men.

"Aye sir."

The commander brought the two men into the barn that had been reshaped into a military command base. On the table was a beautifully hand drawn map which included the Castle of Dinas and the surrounding valleys and hills. Annwyl was known for it's incredibly hilly terrain.

Derfen stiffened into position beside the door beaming with pride at being offered a position guarding the King. The King stood proud with his back straight and flowing hair. He moved effortlessly.

"Order," the commander banged his horn of wine loudly onto the table stifling the chatter that had started amongst the other old battle hardened warriors who were engaged in disputes on strategies.

King Glendower gave a quick curt nod of thanks to the Commander who remained expressionless and attentive to the task at hand. The King looked down at his sworn bannermen and smiled.

"I've heard the lot of you muttering about the absence of Lord Fen Wy Crasser," the King said in a loud and young voice.

"Pissing coward.." someone at the table said through gritted teeth and banged his fist onto the table.

"Quiet," The young King said before the table could get riled up again, "He stayed in his holdings as per my orders."

There was a brief pause before one of the generals pointed at the spot on the map where the Albion army marched toward them and said with stifled anger.

"And why would my King leave Lord Fen Wy in his holdings when he commands one of the largest battalions in Annwyl?" Murmurings at the table began to get louder. Derfen tried to remain disconnected and resilient however he found himself being drawn into the fraught conversation.

The King held up one hand and waited for a quiet.

“Lord Fen Wy is meeting them out in the field my good sirs.”

The King waited a moment for that realisation to sink in then smiled.

“When the Albion army arrives at our gates Lord Fen Wy, will attack them from the rear and crush them against our walls,” The king walked his fingers over the map to the front of the castle. It occurred to Derfen now why him and the rest of them had been out digging pot holes with stakes buried a foot deep for the past few days. Why the moat had been drained in the last few weeks whilst labourers and workers embedded sharpened wooden stakes into the floor.

It's going to be like a damn meat grinder, Derfen thought, the news uplifting his spirits. The Lords at the table looked at the map then up to the Kings grin.

“Right after we ram our swords up those Albions arses we'll spit roast the cunts on the marshes,” one of the Lords exclaimed grinning widely, spittle flying from his mouth and beating his chest plate with a mailed fist to drive the point home.

King Glendower nodded, his young genial smile now wide and open.

“Anyway, our scouts estimate they're going to make it at our gates in a day and a half's time. I want as many men as we can spare digging holes in the mean time.”

With a renewed vigour the Lords, Commander and King packed up and left the barn as quickly as they had entered it. After being dismissed by the commander Rhydwyn and Derfen returned to their posts atop the parapets swilling beer and laughing about the coming war.

By the time the castles horns sounded signalling the beginning of battle every man atop the parapets looked down at the field the bastards would have to cross before arriving at the castle gates. With a knowing smile they looked to where they themselves had dug potholes which would snap a galloping horses leg, at the moss covered ditches where upturned wooden stakes would drive through bone and flesh and to the overarching cliffs where archers could patiently fire at will.

“All you bastards are gonna fall right in there,” Rhydwyn screamed to the oncoming army and pointing at the moat littered with sharp wooden stakes, grinning at the prospect.

“And then good ole Lord Fen Wy, is gonna push and hack you fuckers as you try to escape!” Derfen slurred and they cackled together. The ale the page boys supplied them with was keeping them happy. Derfen reflected, briefly, on whether or not it was a good idea on drinking 6 pints of ale before what could likely stretch into a seven day siege. But then again Derfen, nor Rhydwyn, were the types to plan for the future.

And besides, this wasn't Derfens first battle. Wasn't even his first war. He had the missing teeth and entrenched scars across his arms and chest to prove it and Derfen would tell you ten times out of ten that fighting a battle sober was a cunt of a milk sops idea. All the great warriors might tell you drink slows you down but what they don't tell you about sobriety is that you have to face 5 men for everyone one of yours - all angry as piss and vinegar poured over a bulls face and then you had to watch men you grew up with, men you trusted - being chopped up and hacked to bits. Their heads mounted on spikes and their bodies defiled by the enemy. For those slightly more delirious during the bloodletting it wasn't uncommon to see a man running at you with blood smeared around his mouth and face, frenzied by hate.

No, Derfen thought to himself, *I'd rather be pissed up and numbed than ready to face that sober again.*

The horns went up again as the drawbridge closed shut and the process of damming up the side entrances to the castle with stone began. Derfen leaned over the parapet again, the wind rustling the hairs flowing out of his helm and the gnarly wooden spikes below waited. The army on the horizon rolled ever forward like a miasma and before long they filled the horizon. Their details becoming more keen and distinct as time passed. Flags eventually became decipherable and unmistakable of house Erthwell began to become clear – a sword shoved through the throat of a lion. The tiny patter of their war drums starting to be heard in the distance.

The sounds of their drums would be bloody thunderous by the time they stood in front of the castle. Derfen nodded to Rhydwyn who passed him a fresh horn of ale. The Albion's stopped short of arrow range distance. The drums now beating in unison to one steady beat which pulsed through the castle. And then they stopped.

“Go fuck yourselves with a cows hoof you stupid bastards!” Rhydwyn screamed off the top of the parapet. There was no knowing anyone had heard him until an arrow slumped in the grass. Well short castle of the castle and Derfen grinned at the wasted arrow.

Derfen climbed on top of the parapet, Rhydwyn gripping onto the underside of his jerkin to prevent him going over the other side of the parapet as Derfen pulled his trousers down and screamed at the Albions

“Get this down your throat you cock sucking Albions!”

There was a cheer up from the castle as they laughed at Derfen, taunting the oncoming army.

“Christ Derfen, when was the last time you gave your arsehole a wash?” Rhydwyn said disgusted as Derfen swayed dangerously over the parapet in an effort to show them as clearly as possible the cock he was holding, grunting as Rhydwyn pulled him back over the parapet. A tiny moment passed where Rhydwyn was fearful of his grip on Derfen's jerkin. The moment passed though with a sense of relief passing through Petyr. Nothing would spur the invading army on like a soldier falling from the parapet with his trousers around his ankles. He wasn't a big believer in signs but that'd be no way to start a war. Rhydwyn noted that more arrows slumped where the previous one had and Rhydwyn hoped the arrows they wasted now would benefit them later in the battle. It was the small things that won battles, afterall.

There was a shout from the Albions that could only just be made out.

“Did he say he was gonna “beat our farts?” Rhydwyn asked Derfen as Derfen stepped off the parapet then hoisted his trousers back up.

Derfen shrugged, “Sounded like eat your hearts.“ He pointed at Rhydwyn, “and it was May festival I had a bath you cunt.”

Another cry from the Albions – something about being sheep fuckers. As more men along the parapet tried to goad archers into wasting their ammunition.

“Look how far these bastards have got to march,” Rhydwyn laughed and then a cheer erupted through the castle as another soldier was hanging over the edge of the parapet, with his arsehole directed at the incoming army.

This continued for the better part of 2 hours and the enemy archers became more conservative with their arrow shots until no arrow was being fired and the men on the parapet knew the game was up. One man from the parapet had been foolish enough to return fire.

“Stop wasting arrows you feckless cunt!” a gruff voice thundered at the man who was barely a boy. Sheepishly he sheathed his second arrow and kept them sheathed.

Stillness filled the air for a time and then the drums kicked back in and every man on

the castle knew death would visit this place today by the thousands. The Commander within the castle then motioned for the castle drummers to start up their beat and there was no ignoring thuds as the castle acted as an echo chamber.

Derfen looked over to Rhydwyn and thought for the briefest moments of asking Rhydwyn to ensure his wife and child were well taken care of should he die but Derfen dismissed the idea as quickly as it came into his head – considering it coward and milk sops talk. He knew he never had to say that to Rhydwyn. It was an unspoken promise.

The invaders drums kicked the pace up a notch and the army broke into a run. In the entire eyeline from high up on the castle he saw Albion men run at the castle screaming and shrieking. Faces contorted in a hate so absolute only murder they seemed inhuman. Derfen laughed heartily as he picked his bow up from and began notching an arrow. He watched as men sprinted through the marsh, snapping legs in the pot holes that had been dug in heavy armour as they did, squealing like stuck pigs.

Yet they still filled his vision.

The occasional misplaced foot striking a soldiers head who'd fallen taking their life before they could ever harass the men in the castle. As they came into bow and arrow range Derfen began loosing his arrows in a frenzy. He barely watched his arrows land and hit their targets. Yet Rhydwyn congratulated him each time they did which was oft enough. As the Albion army stumbled closer to the castle their losses became insurmountable. Where minutes before the grass had been a lush green blood began to seep and pool everywhere..

“I don't even think we're gonna need Lord Fen Wy to show up. These filthy bastards are doing the work for us.”

The sentence was lost on Derfen though. Too busy notching arrows and blocking out the pain the repetition was causing in his fingers, arms and upper chest. And at that moment a horse let out a shriek and thrashed around below. It's leg must've caught in one of the pot holes and that's when the King of Annwyls banners came into the distance and every man on the parapet laughed at the coming slaughter. Gripping their bows and slingshots with renewed fervour. The fools were marching the wrong way. Their own drummers disorientating the sounds of their army as they lost beat, King and Lord Fen Wyls ten thousand troops came into full view.

“Look at those glorious bastards,” Rhydwyn said in pure awe at his King and his men.

“We'll piss on their corpses after the battle in the mean time give me some more arrows you empty headed sod,” Derfen grunted and Rhydwyn refilled his sheath. The enemy were trying to lower a ladder down into the pit and one man managed to set it right before taking an arrow in the leg and falling onto the spiked and gnarly sharpened sticks below. Derfen kept the arrows coming thick and fast and so did every archer atop the wall. Boys hurling slingshots of sharp and heavy rocks flew randomly into the Albion crowds. The oncoming Albion army had to descend the steep side of the moat, then up the steep side again to plant a ladder to get up to the castle. All whilst being fired upon by rocks and arrow fire.

Derfen ducked briefly as their archers got into range on the far side of the moat. They were quick to fire but the panic down below meant they were firing frantically which made them sloppy. The page now running to and from different archers and supplying them with arrows as he did. Rhydwyn stood beside him laughing as the men tried to lower ladders down into the pits. They did eventually just by sheer numbers and began scrabbling down to the pits in what now could be considered

only foolish desperation. Their numbers meant you couldn't hit everyone – but that still didn't stop the archers on top from trying. The moat which was normally filled with water at this time of year was now an abattoir of butchered men and men stepping gingerly to try and haul ladders to the other side of the moat. But yet they came. By sheer volume of men they advanced on the castle and clambered ladders. The King had known a full fortnight in advance of the Albion invasion and the King had had men digging day and night to entrench that moat even deeper. They'd be lucky to get to ground level before taking a rock through the face or an arrow let alone reach tops of the castle walls. As the first Albion man began ascending a ladder he had just propped against the inside of the moat a boy no older than ten grinned as he hefted a block of granite the size of a mans head over the side of the wall. It drove through the mans face leaving a smattering of blood across the man behind him. His dead, limp body falling off the ladder like a ragdoll. The boy whooped with joy but it was short lived as an arrow thudded into his skull, buried so deep the shaft was down to the fletching's. The boy toppled backwards into the moat in silence, more debris to fall onto the oncoming army. A sea of dead bodies filled the moat with smell of searing flesh in the air. Rhydwyn filled Derfens pouch as Derfen continued firing now gasping in pain as each arrow was let loose – his fingers bloody through the repetition of notching. And that's when Derfen saw the banner of the King raised proudly from the backs of the Albion army and three horns went up sending confusion and disarray through the Albion army.

“More arrows,” Derfen screamed, his voice almost at breaking point, he turned frustrated and spotted one of the boys running across the yard, “you boy. More arrows now!” he screamed.

The boy responded with a look of fear so deep ingrained on his face, “we're out of arrows, I'm bringing up rocks now.”

Derfen shrugged and turned to Rhydwyn, “Here that, no more arrows. Let's join the shield wall,” and he said this with a grin as he began clambouring down from the parapet.

As they both made their way through the castle they did so in utter chaos. Orders were barked at boys and girls alike to take boiling water or oil up the ladders and give them to those on the parapets. By the time Derfen and Rhydwyn made it round the back of the castle and that back around he could see that tight formations of shield walls formed. They ran to join the end of the shield wall. Shields had run out as well so they would have to take one of the dead that dropped it. Each man clutching the shield and long knife used for close quarter combat and the Albions advanced in both directions. The shield formation was made up of one man kneeling, one stood above the kneeling man and a line of men ready to take their place should any fall. They edged slowly and toward the Albion army who were trying to form a shield wall whilst also attempting to scurry up the side of the moat to plant ladders. Time seemed to dilute and flux as the shield wall shifted closer and closer.

Their discipline had thrown the King off and despite gaining a brief advantage as time pressed on the shield walls clashed together – each man desperate to keep the weight of his shield high enough to protect himself and the men beside him. Blades sliding under the shields trying to nick and cut at feet. Derfen stamped on one of the blades and briefly exposed himself by reaching over the shield wall and shoving his long knife through the face of his opponent. Derfen did it in one fluid movement and was back behind his own wall before the enemy had realised.

“That's a lovely shield there pet,” Derfen said in broken Albion to a man who spat at

him through broken teeth.

“Where’s your God now,” Derfen grinned and rammed his sword into the mans face, sending him to the netherworld. Pulling it out just as quick.

His grin turned sour as he looked toward the distance and saw it full of Albion men. He recognised some of the flags as they advanced.

“Got the fucker,” Derfen screamed gleefully but any hope of breaching that the wall in the moment was dashed when another Albion quickly took his place. The dead body being pulled out of the way behind him. Sweat glistened off Derfens brow his arm almost numb from holding the thick wooden shield up that now was nicked and hammered and splintered. His bulging forearms beginning to feel the weight of the shield. In the recess of Derfens mind he wondered with a strange detachment what would happen when the shield disintegrated from the weight of the enemy. Deftly deflecting a blade that attempted to broach the wall, seeing through the helmet slit of the man that now faced him. His eyes blazing with defiance sought to reinvigour Derfen who was struggling to keep the shield high. Distantly Derfen noticed how far the sky had moved in the sky but was snapped back to reality when a particularly hard crush came from the Albions. Holding fast Derfen saw Petyrs shield drop and in the blink of an eye a long knife reached through and stabbed Petyr viciously in the face.

Another man tried to fill Petyr’s spot, the crush pressing on Derfens already worn muscles.

The line must hold, his brain screamed with an urgency that fuelled his push into the shield wall. Derfen knew it was too late as the wall collapsed inward and the Albion’s poured through the crack, hacking and slashing where they could and Derfen wondered if this was the day he’d dine with the Gods.

At least Petyr will be there to dine with me, he thought angrily as the chaos of limbs and weapons flurried around him. A meer miracle he was still alive as he parried a stab from an Albion and grunting with all his effort turning to punch the man with the edge of his shield, disfiguring and near killing him in one blow. It was only a brief moment Derfen got to enjoy that satisfaction before he was deflecting another mans blade. The blow echoing up his numbed arm and yet Derfen raised it again and again. They were done. He knew that as another sword rang loudly off his own. They had broken the wall and as a result had lost the war. With them now scattered and fighting in the open they would be taken out by the enemy archers at their leisure. A man appeared in front of Derfen, his face taut from screaming and Derfen only pulled his short blade up in time for it to clang against the enemies. Pushing forward Derfen shouldered into him ensuring he couldn’t regroup for another blow and dropping his short sword deftly pulled the knife out his belt and plunged it into his stomach and dragged the knife across the front of his belly, guts spilling out over Derfens hand and the handle of his blade. Keeping a firm grip on the handle even as blood and intestines spilled over his hands Derfen wrenched it free.

He pulled his knife from the dying man, sheathed it and took the sword from his lax hand and turned away from him and wherever he looked there seemed to be men in Albion dress. In three strides he covered a great distance then punched an Albion man in the back of the neck that had his sword half way through one his countrymen.

Without missing a beat he stepped again to bring his swort sword in an arc onto an Albion. His shield appeared in time and a small chunk of wood spattered into the air and he edged forward closer and Derfen was aware with a shield and long sword he

had the advantage in the open. He saw the man in Albion colours behind the shield. He was afraid but he was battle hardened so would not be prone to mistakes. He moved forward patiently and Derfen realised with his two blades that things would get very grim very quickly if another Albion came to his aid. He looked around quickly to find any man in Annwyl colours was dead or dying. The Albion stepped forward quickly, dropping his shield to thrust his sword through Derfen and Derfen twisted awkwardly only just able to parry the blow.

All is lost, Derfen thought as the albion thrust his sword out again. It would only be a matter of time before he was overrun. The Albion thrust forward again in a flurry of attack. Derfen moved his shield to catch the first, deflected the 2nd aimed for his face only just in time and as he moved to slice down the side of his ribs he slipped in the soup of mud and blood the field had become.

Derfen cackled into his face as he ran the sword through the back of his neck.

There was no Albion near him but Derfen had no clue as to what stage the battle was in. half the men on the field were so heavily coated in blood and mud it was impossible to see what team they fought for. As a man staggered toward Derfen with a sword sticking in his belly, Derfen thought he had an Albion look about him and plunged his sword through his neck. He could've just as easily been a countrymen though. The daft bastards were still trying to scramble up the steep sides of the now muddy and bloody moat banks as the King of Annwyl tore an arsehole like a yawning bison through the backs of the Albion Army. The crush of Lord Fen Wys forces against the backs of the Albion army pushed men into the moat into a crush. Derfen tried not to think too keenly on the unfortunate arrows shots the men around him took. Or the ones that glanced off the stone walls with loud *chinks*.

Everything seemed to focus and time seemed eternal as Derfen moved deftly from one kill to the next. The edge of thought remained blurred and distant as if his body moved and twirled away from sword edges and thrusts in a dance, his boots struggling to find purchase on the ravaged mud the battlefield had become. This battle trance lasted a long time. By the time he came to, through exhaustion and weariness he realised the sun had shifted across the sky and though Lord Fen Wyns forces that skewered from the back, there seemed to be an endless supply of forces of Albion men. Each heft of his sword through the skull of an Albion brought another 7 on the horizon. Their forces were dwindling and he realised with a horror that the Annwyls were now being pushed back through the fields of mud and blood. They were losing. He looked across to Rhydwyn who had suffered a terrible blow to his left arm which hung uselessly to his side yet his right hand held his sword with a grip as tight as ever. Locking eyes they returned to the fight with a renewed vigour.

Still, Albion men stepped forward.

It's done, Derfen thought to himself as he stepped to face his newest opponent. His body numb from the abuse and he was frankly shocked he was still able to hold his sword.

And then, almost as if in response a light that blinded everyone flashed through as far as the eyes could see. Such a piercing white light that everyone stopped the fighting they were doing. And as vision returned to Derfen in hazy black and white silhouettes he followed the trace of the source of the light that was now pulsating into the distance like a ripple on a lake. It was the figure of a robed man holding a staff that glowed with a light that seemed to shine like the torches of the Afterlife.

In the distance he saw this figure who slammed his staff toward the earth again and

light returned. Blinding them all.

Ezazel, Derfen thought to himself even as he struggled to see through the piercing brightness which enshrouded his vision, *but Ezazel is a myth?*

He thought this to himself and the light returned, again. Everything silhouetted against a backdrop of pure white. As if they walked the surface of the sun.

Derfen felt the pulse this time in it's physical form that rocked the ground beneath them. Falling to the ground as another ripple of pure white light scorched the earth and then to that backdrop of ground shaking blinding light Derfen noticed a dead man with an axe through his face begin to shake as if possessed. His arms moved at first in jittery unsure movements then regained composure and became fluid. The light appearing not to bother him as he wrenched the axe out of his skull and pushed himself to a standing position. Hefting the axe he threw it in a deft motion, the axe going through the chest of an Albion. Derfen tried to survey the battlefield but the pure light that streamed from the curious man atop the hillside blocked most of everything out. He could only see the silhouettes of dead men rising. Gathering their swords and advancing toward the albion men. Ignoring the sword thrusts that went clean through their chests and bringing their weapons down on the Albions. Panicked the Albion men hacked at the dead men, but removing limbs or decapitations did nothing. Hysterical screaming amongst the Albions began as the Annwyl men looked in disbelief as the dead pulled themselves from the ground.

Derfen began to hear chants of the Albion men. Almost in unison. It was a Christian prayer of theirs called *Mercy for Gods men*. Derfen watched in horror as what was a battle became a slaughter. Then Derfen did something he never imagined he would he ever do. He dropped his swords and began to run from the battlefield. Away from the light on the hillstop from the mage Ezazel. He ran as fast as he could. A feeling of uncleanness and filth clung to his skin. Shivers of evil erupted through Derfens body. He was not a coward. He was not afraid of death or dying. By the Gods, he often imagined he would die with a blade run through him or an arrow through the chest.

He ran because he sensed pure evil. As if the God of the Underworld was stood atop that hill emitting light.

Hours passed as Derfen was still running. His chest heaving with spattered breath. He rested at a tree for a moment, *Not far enough*, he thought to himself and took off again.

"Enough," King Glendower roared through the noise and the light pulsing from the distant figure on the hillside died out. The only men alive were the Prince of Albion and his remaining guard of around a hundred soldiers. They stood their ground with their weapons raised knowing death awaited them. A defiance in the face of death which was admirable.

"Do you surrender?" The King offered the Prince who held his sword in stark defiance. Moments passed and the Annwyl men grew twitchy surrounding them.

"Lay down your arms and you'll go unharmed," The King offered.

An eternity passed as he contemplated and the King knew he had already accepted his fate at the end of a sword. This second chance at life now offered he seemed unsure.

The Prince nodded in resignation and with a breath the fight went out of him.

"I surrender," he said loudly, and tossed his elegant sword to the ground.

The men surrounding the Prince of Albion laid down their arms.

“Pick 9 men to take home with you,” The King yelled, “the rest won’t be so lucky”. The Prince meekly accepted and took 9 men from the cowering group that was left. At realising the remaining men scurried to pick their weapons up. But the butchers stepped in before they had much of a chance. The prince watched with a bitterness as his remaining men were slaughtered.

The King shook his head at the final act of slaughter wondering how the Gods would judge him. Wondering if today’s act would sit right with them. And yet no matter how he played out today in his head he knew *they wouldn’t have won were it not for Ezazel*. The King thought too, to the villages and towns that had been razed to the ground on the Princes march up here. If he had shown weakness to his bannerman and people they may not turn up the next time he raised a call to arms. Divided – the small and mountainous country that was Annwyl would be carved up. Every man and woman a slave, the royal family murdered and the country reduced to what? Another slave trading post for the Albions as they exported the riches of Annwyl out of the country, like they did to so many other kingdoms.

No. Without Ezazels dark magics raising the dead back to life Annwyl would have suffered a worse fate. Without it the capital would lie in ruins. Another puppet state for the Albion Empire. Slavery returned to the kingdom without slaves.

The King thought to himself and one by one he wrestled with his doubts and fears and brought them to heel but the uncleanness clung to him like skunk spray and weighed his spirit down.

He did what he had to do for the good of his people.

History would know that.

After the battle soldiers stalked through the mud and dirt and silenced those screaming in pain from mortal wounds. Albion men were killed quickly and swiftly, their corpses pissed on but for the Annwyl men an effort was made to find their swords and place them in their hands before sending them to the afterlife.

“Feast well now brother,” was said to them before the point of the sword found their hearts. The men happily robbed the dead as they stalked through the corpses and mud. With blood running this high there would be many a rape tonight.

The Kings feet had taken him to a small cottage on the hillside with a view of the capital. He looked over his shoulder and in the peaceful early morning the King could see the destruction and mess the battle had left across the capital, the singing of birds seemed surreal. A peaceful place gazing down on the chaos and death below.

He rapped his knuckles on the wooden frame of the door and waited. He got no answer. He rapped again – louder. But still no one came. Somewhere a dog barked. He wandered around the small cottage and saw her.

She wore a simple linen dress which had been worn to a fade and had patches of cloth sewn back into it from wear and tear. The occasional patch here and there. She had beautiful auburn hair which was tussled from a days work on the farm.

Too young, the king thought to himself with a bittersweetness, *She's much too young*.

“My lady,” the King said and stepped forward to kiss her mouth.

“My King,” she replied in a sultry way, which pleased the King, “you know I am no lady,” she said this last with a wistful longing, “but I love you all the same.”

After the kiss he pulled her face gently back to look upon it. He stroked the face and the line of freckles which covered her face and upper arms. Brushing a slither of red hair behind her ear.

“It is good to see you.”

There was a moment of pause.

“Is the war over?” She asked gingerly, hopefully and the King thought how harrowing it must be. To watch from the hilltops a battle rage below you on the capital city. He knew well, too, how quickly and accepted these things become normalised. A backdrop to life.

“It is good to see you alive,” she said again and the King smiled.

“The war is over. There will be no further invasions from Albion,” he spared her the image of deadmen rising at Ezazel's bidding and at that she hugged him, beaming brightly.

“But Ceinwyn, that means I must return home. Home to my wife. And there is more,” the King said gravely. His brow knitted together in pain.

“Your brother, Rhydwin, did not survive. He died bravely..”

The King trailed off. Ceinwyn's face furrowed in disbelief then contorted into pain and as the King held her as grief took her, her body wracking in sobs beyond her control. Again the King questioned his honour in his actions. Here was a woman he loved that he knew he could never marry, for, he already had a wife. She would never be anything more than a concubine. Mulling over this realisation saddened his heart for the thousandth time.

He brought dishonour to his wife, to Ceinwyn, himself and his House just by being with her.

He knew this couldn't last but Ceinwyn held him tighter and wept for a time into the nook of his arm in her grief and for a time the King stroked her red hair, loving the woman and hating himself.

So much blood had been spilled today. More than the King ever wanted to see in a lifetime. King Glendower was dwelling on the days events when finally Ceinwyn broke the silence. When she finished weeping and her sobs had died to a slow breathing rhythm she whispered.

“I've not had my moons blood for 3 full moons. Yesterday I felt him beat inside me,” Ceinwyn finally said, her voice barely above a whisper and she placed the Kings hand on her belly and with a growing trepidation inside the King he imagined what would become of the life inside her.

“I'll call him Rhydwin, after my brother.”

The kings hand rested pensively on the young womans belly whilst worry wracked his mind a tear pricked his eye and not for the first time today he thought, *the Gods will absolve me.*