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MICHAEL MOORCOCK



THE OAK
AND THE RAM

CORUM BOOK 5

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THE OAK AND THE RAM

CORUM BOOK 5

TITAN BOOKS

The Oak and the Ram
Print edition ISBN: 9781783291731
E-book edition ISBN: 9781783291724

Published by Titan Books
A division of Titan Publishing Group Ltd
144 Southwark Street, London SE1 0UP

First Titan edition: September 2015
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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Edited by John Davey

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This book is for Jarmila



PROLOGUE



IN THOSE DAYS there were oceans of light and cities in the skies and wild flying beasts of bronze. There were herds of crimson cattle that roared and were taller than castles. There were shrieking viridian things that haunted bleak rivers. It was a time of gods, manifesting themselves upon our world in all her aspects; a time of giants who walked on water; of mindless sprites and misshapen creatures who could be summoned by an ill-considered thought but driven away only on pain of some fearful sacrifice; of magics, phantasms, unstable nature, impossible events, insane paradoxes, dreams that come true, dreams gone awry; of nightmares assuming reality.

It was a rich time and a dark time. The time of the Sword Rulers. The time when the Vadhagh and the Nhadragh, age-old enemies, were dying. The time when Man, the slave of fear, was emerging unaware that much of the terror he experienced was the result of nothing else but the fact that he himself, had come into existence. It was one of many ironies connected with Man (who, in those days, called his race "Mabden").

The Mabden lived brief lives and bred prodigiously. Within a few centuries they rose to dominate the westerly continent on which they had evolved. Superstition stopped them from sending many of their ships towards Vadhagh and Nhadragh lands for another century or two, but gradually they gained courage when no resistance was offered. They began to feel jealous of the older races; they began to feel malicious.

The Vadhagh and the Nhadragh were not aware of this. They had dwelt a million or more years upon the planet which now, at last, seemed at rest. They knew of the Mabden, but considered them not greatly different from other beasts. Though continuing to indulge their traditional hatreds of one another, the Vadhagh and the Nhadragh spent their long hours in considering abstractions, in the creation of works of art and the like. Rational, sophisticated, at one with themselves, these older races were unable to believe in the changes that had come. Thus, as it almost always is, they ignored the signs.

There was no exchange of knowledge between the two ancient enemies, even though they had fought their last battle many centuries before.

The Vadhagh lived in family groups occupying isolated castles scattered across a continent called by them Bro-an-Vadhagh. There was scarcely any communication between these families, for the Vadhagh had long since lost the impulse to travel. The Nhadragh lived in their cities built on the islands in the seas to the north-west of Bro-an-Vadhagh. They, also, had little contact, even with the closest kin. Both races reckoned themselves invulnerable. Both were wrong.

Upstart Man was beginning to breed and spread like a pestilence across the world. This pestilence struck down the Old Races wherever it touched them. And it was not only death that Man brought, but terror, too. Willfully, he made of the older world nothing but ruins and bones. Unwittingly, he brought a psychic and supernatural disruption of a magnitude which even the Great Old Gods failed to comprehend.

And the Great Old Gods began to know fear.

And Man, slave of fear, arrogant in his ignorance, continued his stumbling progress. He was blind to the huge disruptions aroused by his apparently petty ambitions. As well, Man was deficient in sensitivity, had no awareness of the multitude of dimensions that filled the universe, each plane

intersecting with several others. Not so the Vadhagh or the Nhadragh, who had known what it was to move at will between the dimensions they termed the Five Planes. They had glimpsed and understood the nature of many planes, other than the Five, through which the Earth moved.

Therefore it seemed a dreadful injustice that these wise races should perish at the hands of creatures who were still little more than animals. It was as if vultures feasted on and squabbled over the paralyzed body of the youthful poet who could only stare at them with puzzled eyes as they slowly robbed him of an exquisite existence they would never appreciate, never know they were taking.

“If they valued what they stole, if they knew what they were destroying,” says the old Vadhagh in the story, *Now The Clouds Have Meaning*, “then I would be consoled.”

It was unjust.

By creating Man, the universe had betrayed the Old Races.

But it was a perpetual and familiar injustice. The sentient may perceive and love the universe, but the universe cannot perceive and love the sentient. The universe sees no distinction between the multitude of creatures and elements which comprise it. All are equal. None is favoured. The universe, equipped with nothing but the materials and the power of creation, continues to create: something like this, something of that. It cannot control what it creates and it cannot, it seems, be controlled by its creations (though a few might deceive themselves otherwise). Those who curse the workings of the universe curse that which is deaf. Those who strike out at those workings fight that which is inviolate. Those who shake their fists, shake their fists at blind stars.

But this does not mean that there are not some who will try to do battle with and destroy the invulnerable.

There will always be such beings, sometimes beings of great wisdom, who cannot bear to believe in an insouciant universe.

Prince Corum Jhaelen Irsei was one of these. Perhaps the last of the Vadhagh race, he was sometimes known as the Prince in the Scarlet Robe.

This is the second chronicle, concerning his adventures. The first chronicle, known as ‘The Book of Corum’, told how the Mabden followers of Earl Glandyth-a-Krae killed Prince Corum’s relatives and his nearest kin and thus taught the Prince in the Scarlet Robe how to hate, how to kill and how to desire vengeance. We have heard how Earl Glandyth tortured Prince Corum and took away a hand and an eye and how Corum was rescued by the Giant of Laahr and taken to the castle of the Margravine Rhalina—a castle set upon a mount surrounded by the sea. Though Rhalina was a Mabden woman (of the gentler folk of Lywm-an-Esh), Corum and she fell in love. When Glandyth roused the Pony Tribe and the forest barbarians, to attack the Margravine’s castle, she and Corum sought supernatural aid and thus fell into the hands of the sorcerer Shool, whose domain was the island called Svi-an-Fanla-Bro—Home of the Gorged God. And now Corum had direct experience of the morbid, unfamiliar powers at work in the world. Shool spoke of dreams and realities. (“I see you are beginning to argue in Mabden terms,” he told Corum. “It is just as well for you, if you wish to survive in this Mabden dream.” – “It is a dream...?” said Corum. – “Of sorts. Real enough. It is what you might call the dream of a god. There again you might say that it is a dream that a god has allowed to become reality. I refer of course to the Knight of the Swords who rules the Five Planes.”)

With Rhalina his prisoner Shool could make a bargain with Corum. He gave him two gifts—the Hand of Kwll and the Eye of Rhynn—to replace his own missing organs. These jeweled and alien things were once the property of two brother gods known as the Lost Gods since they mysteriously vanished.

Armed with these Corum began his great quest, which was to take him against all three Sworn

Rulers—the Knight, the Queen and the King of the Swords—the mighty Lords of Chaos. And Corum discovered much concerning these gods, the nature of reality and the nature of his own identity. He learned that he was the Champion Eternal, that, in a thousand other guises, in a thousand other ages, was his lot to struggle against those forces which attacked reason, logic and justice, no matter what form they took. And, at long last, he was able to overwhelm (with the help of a mysterious ally) those forces and banish gods from his world.

Peace came to Bro-an-Vadhagh and Corum took his mortal bride to his ancient castle which stood on a cliff overlooking a bay. And meanwhile the few surviving Vadhagh and Nhadragh turned again to their own devices, and the golden land of Lywm-an-Esh flourished and became the centre of the Mabden world—famous for its scholars, its bards, its artists, its builders and its warriors. A great age dawned for the Mabden folk; they flourished. And Corum was pleased that his wife's folk flourished. On the few occasions when Mabden travelers passed near Castle Erorn he would feast them well and be filled with gladness when he heard of the beauties of Halwyg-nan-Vake, capital city of Lywm-an-Esh, whose walls bloomed with flowers all year round. And the travelers would tell Corum and Rhalina of the new ships which brought great prosperity to the land, so that none in Lywm-an-Esh knew hunger. They would tell of the new laws which gave all a voice in the affairs of that country. And Corum listened and was proud of Rhalina's race.

To one such traveler he offered an opinion: "When the last of the Vadhagh and the Nhadragh have disappeared from this world," he said, "the Mabden will emerge as a greater race than ever were we."

"But we shall never have your powers of sorcery," answered the traveler, and he caused Corum to laugh heartily.

"We had no sorcery at all! We had no conception of it. Our 'sorcery' was merely our observation and manipulation of certain natural laws, as well as our perception of other planes of the multiverses which we have now all but lost. It is the Mabden who imagine such things as sorcery—who would always rather invent the miraculous than investigate the ordinary (and find the miraculous therein). Such imaginations will make your race the most exceptional this Earth has yet known, but those imaginations could also destroy you!"

"Did we invent the Sword Rulers whom you so heroically fought?"

"Aye," answered Corum, "I suspect that you did! And I suspect that you might invent others again."

"Invent phantoms? Fabulous beasts? Powerful gods? Whole cosmologies?" queried the astonished traveler. "Are all these things, then, unreal?"

"They're real enough," Corum replied. "Reality, after all, is the easiest thing in the world to create. It is partly a question of need, partly a question of time, partly a question of circumstance..."

Corum had felt sorry for confounding his guest and he laughed again and passed on to other topics.

And so the years went by and Rhalina began to show signs of age while Corum, near-immortal, showed none. Yet still they loved each other—perhaps with greater intensity as they realized that the day drew near when death would part her from him.

Their life was sweet; their love was strong. They needed little but each other's company.

And then she died.

And Corum mourned for her. He mourned without the sadness which mortals have (which is, in part, sadness for themselves and fear of their own death).

Some seventy years had passed since the Sword Rulers fell, and the travelers grew fewer and fewer as Corum of the Vadhagh people became more of a legend in Lywm-an-Esh than he was remembered as a creature of ordinary flesh. He had been amused when he had heard that in some country areas of that land there were now shrines to him and crude images of him to which folk prayed as they had

prayed to their gods. It had not taken them long to find new gods and it was ironic that they should make one of the person who had helped rid them of their old ones. They magnified his feats and, in doing, simplified him as an individual. They attributed magical powers to him; they told stories of him which they had once told of their previous gods. Why was the truth never enough for the Mabden? Why must they forever embellish and obscure it? What a paradoxical people they were!

Corum recalled his parting with his friend, Jhary-a-Conel, self-styled Companion to Champion and the last words he had spoken to him—"New gods can always be created," he had said. Yet he had never guessed, then, from what at least one of those gods would be created.

And, because he had become divine to so many, the people of Lywm-an-Esh took to avoiding the headland on which stood ancient Castle Erorn, for they knew that gods had no time to listen to the silly talk of mortals.

Thus Corum grew lonelier still; he became reluctant to travel in Mabden lands, for this attitude of the folk made him uncomfortable.

In Lywm-an-Esh those who had known him well, known that, save for his longer life-span, he was as vulnerable as themselves, were now all dead, too. So there was none to deny the legends.

And, likewise, because he had grown used to Mabden ways and Mabden people about him, he found that he could not find much pleasure in the company of his own race, for they retained the remoteness, their inability to understand their situation, and would continue to do so until the Vadhagh race perished for good. Corum envied them their lack of concern, for, though he took no part in the affairs of the world, he still felt involved enough to speculate about the possible destiny of the various races.

A kind of chess, which the Vadhagh played, took up much of his time (he played against himself using the pieces like arguments, testing one strain of logic against another). Brooding upon his various past conflicts, he doubted, sometimes, if they had ever taken place at all. He wondered if the portals of the Fifteen Planes were closed for ever now, even to the Vadhagh and the Nhadrach, who had once moved in and out of them so freely. If this were so, did it mean that, effectively, those other planes no longer existed. And thus his dangers, his fears, his discoveries, slowly took on the quality of little more than abstractions; they became factors in an argument concerning the nature of time and identity and, after a while, the argument itself ceased to interest Corum.

Some eighty years were to pass since the fall of the Sword Rulers before Corum's interest was to be re-awakened in matters concerning the Mabden folk and their gods.

And this interest was awakened in a strange way when Corum heard voices in his dreams. The voices craved his help and called him a god, called him Corum Llaw Ereint—Corum of the Silver Hand. And Corum denied the voices until Jhary-a-Conel, his mysterious old friend who seemed able to cross between the planes at will, advised him to heed their call, for they were the descendants of Rhalina's own folk—the folk of Lwym-an-Esh. For Corum was the Champion Eternal and it was his fate to fight in all the great wars involving the most crucial and profound events in mankind's destiny.

So at last Corum agreed and he garbed himself in all the martial finery of the Vadhagh and he strapped on the best of his artificial silver hands (which could perform all the functions of a flesh hand) and he went riding on a red horse into the future to meet the folk of Cremm Croich and to battle the horrible Fhoi Myore, the Gods of Limbo, the Cold Folk, the People of the Pines.

He found a world attacked by winter—a world fast freezing to death as the Fhoi Myore drew all the heat from the land, wherever they conquered; and they poisoned whatever they conquered, without thought for their own existence, for they were moved by primal desires, not by intelligence, and they desired death. And many had already perished of the Mabden folk and the Treasures of the Mabden.

had been stolen or scattered and their Great Kings had been slain or captured or sent into hiding. And only a few small tribes in the remote west or in the distant north had not yet been in conflict with the Fhoi Myore—seven gods in seven crude wicker chariots drawn by seven foul beasts, seven gods who could destroy whole armies with a glance and whose leader was Kerenos who controlled a pack of hellish hounds.

From King Mannach of Caer Mahlod, from Medhbh, the king's daughter, Corum learned that only the Black Bull of Crinanass could drive off the Fhoi Myore in some unknown way. And the woman was fair, this Medhbh, and she was strong and a warrior and Corum was reminded of Rhalina, his dear love, and he was stirred by Medhbh.

He was told of his quest. His quest was to the land of Hy-Breasail, beyond the sea. This land was enchanted and no mortal returned from it. But Corum, they said, was a god, a Sidhi. He could go to Hy-Breasail.

And so he went. Through a winter world he went (though it was not wintertime) and had many adventures, encountered many strange folk, talked with wizards and with Sidhi, made bargains and heard a prophecy. An old woman warned him that he should fear a harp, a brother and beauty. Corum was puzzled by the prophecy and particularly puzzled as to why he should fear beauty. But he went on to Hy-Breasail, the only remaining part of sea-covered Lwym-an-Esh, and there he found the spear, Bryionak, one of the lost Treasures of the Mabden which could, in the right hands, control the Black Bull. And many more adventures followed until he returned to Caer Mahlod as the Fhoi Myore attacked in all their dreadful might—seven malformed gods, together with their servants, the lost, the evil, the damned and the undying, led by Corum's old enemy Prince Gaynor, who could not be slain but yearned for death. And there was a battle at Caer Mahlod and the battle went ill for the Mabden until the Bull was summoned and drove off the Fhoi Myore's undead slaves and slew one of those crude, cruel gods and caused the others to flee.

Then took place the final rite and the land was made green again around Caer Mahlod and the Black Bull of Crinanass and the spear, Bryionak, were never again seen in mortal lands.

And Corum and Medhbh lay together in love, but still Corum brooded on the prophecy, for he knew he was the Champion Eternal and as doomed to struggle as was Prince Gaynor.

And the Fhoi Myore, the Lost Gods of Limbo, remained upon the Earth.

— *The Chronicle of Corum and the Silver Harp*

BOOK ONE

IN WHICH PRINCE CORUM FINDS HIMSELF CALLED TO
PURSUE THE SECOND OF HIS GREAT QUESTS...

THE MEETING OF THE KINGS

AND SO RHALINA had died.

And Corum had found Medhbh, King Mannach's daughter, and in a short while (as Corum reckoned time) she too would die. If it was his weakness to fall in love with short-lived Mabden women, then he must reconcile himself to the knowledge that he would outlive many lovers, must experience many losses, many agonies. As it was, he did not think much about it, preferring to avoid the significance of such ideas whenever possible. Besides, the memories of Rhalina were growing dim and it was only with difficulty that he could remember the fine details of the life he had led in an earlier age than this, when he had ridden against the Sword Rulers.

Corum Jhaelen Irsei, who had been called the Prince in the Scarlet Robe (but, having since traded this robe to a wizard, was now known as Corum of the Silver Hand), stayed at Caer Mahlod for two months after the day when the Black Bull of Crinanass had run its fecund course and brought sudden spring to the land of the Tuha-na-Cremm Croich, the People of the Mound. It was two months since the misshaped Fhoi Myore had tried to slay the inhabitants of Caer Mahlod, to freeze and to poison this place so that it might, too, resemble limbo whence the Fhoi Myore came and to which they were unable to return.

Now the Fhoi Myore appeared to have abandoned their ambitions of conquest. They were stranded upon this plane and had no love for its inhabitants, but they did not fight for the joy of fighting. The Fhoi Myore were only six. The Fhoi Myore had once been many. But they were dying of long-drawn-out diseases which would eventually rot them. In the meantime, however, they made themselves as comfortable as possible upon the Earth, turning the world into bleak and perpetual Samhain, a midwinter world. And before they expired they would, casually, have destroyed the entire Mabden race as well.

But very few of the Mabden were in a mood to think about such a prospect. They had triumphed over the Fhoi Myore once and won their freedom. It seemed enough, for the summer was the richest and the hottest any remembered (some sweated and joked that they would welcome the return of the Cold Folk, they panted so much in the heat), as if the sun, giving no warmth to the rest of the Mabden lands, poured all its power into one small corner of the world.

The oaks were greener, the alders were stronger, the ash and the elms were the lushest they had ever been. In the fields there was wheat ripening where folk had never hoped to see another harvest.

There were poppies and cornflowers and marigolds, buttercups, woodbine, hollyhocks and daisies growing everywhere in profusion.

Only the cold, cold water pouring down in the rivers which flowed from the east reminded the folk of Tuha-na-Cremm Croich that their countrymen were all dead, or vassals of the Fhoi Myore, or both; that their High King—their Archdruid Amergin—was under a glamour, a prisoner in his own city of Caer Llud, a city now used as their capital by the Fhoi Myore. Only that reminded them, whenever they bent to drink. And many were made gloomy, brooding upon their incapacity to avenge their dead cousins, for the best they had done was defend their own land against the Cold Folk and even then they could not have accomplished the defense without the help of Sidhi magic and a demigod raised from his deep slumber beneath the Mound. That demigod was Corum.

The water flowed from the east and it fed the wide ditch they had dug around the conical mound of which was built the fortress city of ~~Caer Mahlod~~, an old city, of grey and bulky granite; a city without much beauty but with considerable strength. Caer Mahlod had been abandoned at least once and reoccupied in times of war. It was the only city that remained to the Tuha-na-Cremm Croich. Once they had had several fairer cities, but these had been swept away by the ice which the Fhoi Myore brought.

But now many of those who had occupied the fortress town had returned to rebuild their ruined farms and tend the crops which had been revitalized by the Black Bull's lifeblood and only King Mannach and King Mannach's warriors and retainers and King Mannach's daughter and Corum remained at Caer Mahlod.

Sometimes Corum would stand on the battlements and look towards the sea and the ruins of his own home, which was now called Castle Owyn and thought a natural formation, and wonder upon the matter of the spear Bryionak and the Black Bull and the magic which had been worked. It seemed to him that he dreamed, for he could not explain the magic or how it had been brought about. He dreamed the dream of these people, who had called him from a dream. And for the most part he was content. He had Medhbh of the Long Arm (the nickname she had earned for her skill with sling and tathlum), with her thick red hair, her strong beauty, her intelligence and her laughter. He had dignity. He had the respect of his fellow warriors. They had become used to him now. They accepted his strange Vadhagh looks—"elfin" looks, Medhbh called them—his artificial silver hand, his single yellow-and-purple eye and the patch over the other socket; the patch embroidered by Rhalin, Margravine of Moidel's Mount, who lay a thousand years at least in the past.

He had dignity. He had been true to this folk and he had been true to himself. He had pride.

And he had fine companionship. There was no question that his lot was improved since he had left Castle Erorn and answered the call of this folk. He wondered what had become of Jhary-a-Conc Companion to Heroes. It had been Jhary, after all, who had advised him to do King Mannach's bidding. But Jhary was the last mortal Corum knew who could still travel through the Fifteen Planes apparently at will. Once all the Vadhagh could move between the planes, as could the Nhadragh, but with the defeat of the Sword Rulers the last vestiges of this power had been denied them.

And sometimes Corum would call a bard to him to sing one of the old songs of the Tuha-na-Cremm Croich, for he found such songs to his taste. One song was attributed to the first Amergin, ancestor of the High King, now a thrall of the Fhoi Myore, composed upon arriving in their new homeland:

*I am the ocean wave;
I am the murmur of the surges;
I am seven battalions;
I am a strong bull;
I am an eagle on a rock;
I am a ray of the sun;
I am the most beautiful of herbs;
I am a courageous wild boar;
I am a salmon in the water;
I am a lake upon a plain;
I am a cunning artist;
I am a gigantic, sword-wielding champion;
I can shift my shape like a god.
In what direction shall we go?*

Shall we hold our council in the valley or on the mountain-top?

~~*Where shall we make our home?*~~

What land is better than this island of the setting sun?

Where shall we walk to and fro in peace and safety?

Who can find you clear springs of water as can I?

Who can tell you the age of the moon but I?

Who can call the fish from the depths of the sea as can I?

Who can lure them near the shore as can I?

Who can change the shapes of the hills and the headlands as can I?

I am a bard who is called upon by seafarers to prophesy.

Javelins shall be wielded to avenge our wrongs.

I prophesy victory.

I end my song by prophesying all other good things.

And then the bard would sing his own song as a kind of amplification of Amergin's:

I have been in many shapes before I attained congenial form.

I have been a narrow blade of a sword;

I have been a drop in the air;

I have been a shining star;

I have been a word in a book;

I have been a book in the beginning;

I have been a light in a lantern a year and a half;

I have been a bridge for passing over three-score rivers;

I have journeyed as an eagle;

I have been a boat on the sea;

I have been a director in battle;

I have been a sword in the hand;

I have been a shield in a fight;

I have been the string of a harp;

I have been enchanted for a year in the foam of water;

There is nothing in which I have not been.

And in these old songs Corum would hear echoes of his own fate, which Jhary-a-Conel had explained to him—the fate to be eternally reborn, sometimes fully grown, as a warrior to fight in all the great battles of mortals, whether those mortals be Mabden, Vadhagh or some other race; to fight for the freedom of mortals oppressed by gods (for all that many believed the gods created by mortals). In those songs he heard an expression of the dreams he sometimes had—where he was the whole universe and the universe was him, where he was contained by the universe and simultaneously contained it and everything had an equal dignity, whether animate or inanimate, an equal value. Rock, tree, horse or man—all were equal. This was the mystical belief of many of King Mannach's folk. A visitor from Corum's world might have seen this as primitive worship of nature, but Corum knew that it was much more than that. Many a farmer there was in the land of the Tuha-na-Cremm Croich who would bow politely to a stone and murmur an apology before moving it from one place to another and he would treat his earth, his ox and his plough with as much courtesy as he would treat his father, h

wife or his friend.

As a result, life among the Tuha-na-Cremm Croich had a formal, dignified rhythm which did not rob it of vitality or humour or, on occasions, anger. And this was why Corum found pride in fighting the Fhoi Myore, for the Fhoi Myore threatened more than life. The Fhoi Myore threatened the quiet dignity of this folk.

Tolerant of their own foibles, their own vanities, their own follies, the Tuha-na-Cremm Croich tolerated these qualities in others. It was ironical to Corum that his own race, the Vadhagh (called Sidhi by this folk now) had at the end been possessed of a similar outlook and had been robbed of it by the ancestors of this folk. He wondered if, in achieving such a noble way of life, a people became automatically vulnerable to destruction by those who had not achieved it. If so, it was an irony of cosmic proportions. And so Corum dismissed this line of reasoning, for he had become weary of cosmic proportions since his encounter with the Sword Rulers and his discovery of his own destiny.

* * *

Now King Fiachadh came a-visiting, risking much to cross the water from the west. His envoy arrived on a steaming horse which was wrenched to a skidding stop at the edge of the great water ditch surrounding the walls of Caer Mahlod. The envoy was clad in billowing pale green silk, silver breastplate and greaves, a silver battle-cap and a surcoat quartered in yellow, blue, white and purple. He panted as he called his business to the guards upon the gate-towers. Corum, running from the other side of the battlements, saw him and was astonished, for he was dressed in a style unlike anything he had seen before in this land.

“King Fiachadh’s man!” called the envoy. “Coming to announce our king’s arrival on your shores. He pointed to the west. “Our ships have landed. King Fiachadh begs the hospitality of his brother King Mannach!”

“Wait,” cried a guard. “We shall tell King Mannach!”

“Then hurry, I beg of you, for we are anxious to seek the security of your walls. We have heard many tales of late concerning the dangers to be found abroad in your land.”

While Corum remained in the gate-tower, looking with polite curiosity at the envoy, King Mannach was summoned.

King Mannach was astonished for other reasons. “Fiachadh? Why comes he to Caer Mahlod?” he murmured, calling out to the envoy: “King Fiachadh knows that he is ever welcome in our town. But why journey you from the land of the Tuha-na-Manannan? Are you attacked?”

The envoy was still panting, at first managing only to shake his head.

“Nay, sire. My master wishes to confer with you and only recently we learned that Caer Mahlod had been freed of the Fhoi Myore frost. Thus we set sail speedily, without the usual formalities. For this King Fiachadh wishes you to forgive him.”

“There is nothing to forgive, unless it be the quality of our hospitality, tell King Fiachadh. We await him with pleasant anticipation.”

Another nod and the silk-clad knight forced his horse round to ride towards the cliffs, his loincloth, jerkin and surcoat flapping, his silver cap and horse furniture flashing as he disappeared into the distance.

King Mannach laughed. “Prince Corum, you will like my old friend Fiachadh. And at last we shall have news of how the folk of the Western Kingdoms fare. I had feared them conquered.”

“I had feared them conquered,” King Mannach said again as he spread his arms.

And the great gates of Caer Mahlod were opened and through the passage (which now led under the moat) came a great parade of knights, maidens and squires, bearing banner-decked lances, with samite cloaks, with buckles and brooches of finely worked red gold set with amethysts, turquoise and mother-of-pearl; with round shields engraved and enameled in complicated, flowing designs, with silver-bound scabbards and gilded shoes. Tall, handsome women sat astride horses with ribbons plaited in their manes and tails. The men, too, were tall, and had long, thick moustaches of fiery red or war-torn yellow, their hair either flowing freely below their shoulders or bound in plaits or secured in bunches with little clasps of gold, brass or gem-set iron.

At the centre of this colourful party was a barrel-chested giant of a man with a bright red beard and piercing blue eyes and wind-browned cheeks, dressed in a long robe of red silk trimmed with the fur of the winter fox, and wearing no helmet, only an ancient iron circlet in which runes had been set in delicate, curling gold.

King Mannach’s arms were still spread as he spoke joyfully:

“Welcome, old friend. Welcome, King Fiachadh of the Distant West, of the old, green land of our forefathers!”

And the great giant with the red beard opened his mouth and he bellowed with laughter, swinging one leg free over the saddle and sliding to the ground.

“I come in my usual style, you see, Mannach. In all my pomp, in all my bombastic majesty!”

“I see,” said King Mannach embracing the giant, “and I am glad. Who would want a Fiachadh otherwise? You bring colour and enchantment to Caer Mahlod. See—my people smile with pleasure. See—their spirits rise. We shall feast tonight. We shall celebrate. You have brought joy to us, King Fiachadh!”

King Fiachadh laughed again, with pleasure at King Mannach’s words, before turning to regard Corum who had stood back while the old friends greeted one another.

“And this is your Sidhi hero—your name hero—Cremm Croich!”

He stalked towards Corum and placed a huge hand upon Corum’s shoulder, looking deeply into Corum’s face and appearing to be satisfied. “I thank you, Sidhi, for what you did to help my brother king. I bring magic with me and we shall talk together later of that. I bring a weighty matter, also. . .” he turned to King Mannach, “and that we must all discuss.”

“Is that why you visit us, sire?” Medhbh stepped forward. She had been visiting a friend in a valley some way distant and had arrived just before King Fiachadh. She was still in riding costume, in leather and white linen, her unbound red hair flowing down her back.

“It is the main reason, lovely Medhbh,” said King Fiachadh bending to kiss the cheek she offered. “You are grown as beautiful as I predicted! Ah, my sister lives again in you.”

“In all ways,” said King Mannach, and there appeared to be a significance in his words which Corum failed to identify.

Medhbh laughed. “Your compliments are as huge as your vanity, Uncle!”

“But they are as sincere,” said Fiachadh. And he winked.

THE TREASURE BROUGHT BY KING FIACHADH

KING FIACHADH HAD brought a harpist with him and for an instant Corum felt a shiver run through him, the harpist's music was so unearthly. Corum thought he heard the harp which had sounded at Castle Owyn, but it was not that harp. This was sweeter. The bard's voice merged with the harp so that at times it was hard to tell which one heard. Corum sat with all the others in the great hall of Caer Mahlod, at a single vast table. Hounds ranged among the benches, nosing through reeds strewn upon the flagstones for scraps, for pools of sweet mead. Brands flared brightly, merrily as if the laughter on all sides actually brightened the hall. Taking after their master, King Fiachadh knights and ladies sported with the men and women of Caer Mahlod and many songs were sung, many boasts shouted, many improbable tales told.

Corum sat between King Mannach and King Fiachadh and Medhbh sat next to her uncle, all at the head of the great dining board. King Fiachadh ate as lustily as he spoke, though Corum noticed that the king took little mead and was by no means as drunk as his retainers. Neither did King Mannach drink overmuch, and Corum and Medhbh followed his example. If King Fiachadh chose not to get drunk, there must be a particularly good reason, for evidently he liked to drink. He told several tall stories concerning his capacity while they ate.

The feasting went well, and slowly the hall emptied as, usually in couples, the guests and residents of Caer Mahlod bowed goodnight and left, and soon there were only a few snoring squires sprawled along the table, a big knight of the Tuha-na-Manannan spreadeagled under the table, a warrior and a maiden of the Tuha-na-Cremm Croich sprawled in each other's arms near the wall.

And King Fiachadh said in a deep, serious voice:

"You are the last I have visited, old friend." He looked hard at King Mannach. "I knew already what you would say. I fear I knew, too, what the others would say."

"Say?" King Mannach frowned.

"To my proposal."

"You have been visiting other kings?" said Corum. "All the other kings whose folk are still free?"

King Fiachadh nodded his great, red head. "All. I see that it is imperative we unite. Our only defense against the Fhoi Myore can be our unity. First I went to the land south of my own—to the folk called Tuha-na-Anu. Secondly I sailed north where dwell, among others, the Tuha-na-Tir-nam-Beo. Mountain people and fierce. Thirdly I sailed down the coast and guested with King Daffyn of the Tuha-na-Gwyddneu Garanhir. Fourthly I came to the Tuha-na-Cremm Croich. Three kings are cautious, thinking that to attract the attention of the Fhoi Myore will mean instant destruction to their lands. What does the fourth king say?"

"What does King Fiachadh ask?" said Medhbh reasonably.

"That all those who remain—four great peoples as far as I know—unite. We have some Treasure which the power of the Sidhi could put to use in our favour. We have great warriors. We have your example of defeating them. We should carry the attack to Craig Dôn or Caer Llud, wherever the still remaining Fhoi Myore dwell. A large army. The remains of the free Mabden. What say you, king?"

"I say that I would agree," said Mannach. "Who would not?"

"Three kings would not. Each king thinks himself safer by staying in his own land and saying

nothing, doing nothing. And all three kings are afraid. They say that with Amergin in the hands of the Fhoi Myore there is no point in fighting. The elected High King is not dead, so a new one cannot be made. The Fhoi Myore knew this when they spared Amergin's life..."

"It is not like your folk to let superstition bind them," said Corum softly. "Why do you not change this law and make a new High King?"

"It is not superstition," said King Mannach without offence. "For one thing, all the kings must meet to elect the new High King and I gather some are afraid to leave their own domain lest those lands be attacked in their absence or lest they are attacked while in other lands. An election of a High King takes many months. All the people must be consulted. All must hear the candidates, speak with them if they wish. Can we break such a law? If we do break our ancient laws, are our customs worth fighting for?"

Medhbh said: "Make Corum your War Leader. Unify the kingdoms under him."

"That suggestion has been made," said King Fiachadh. "I made it. None would hear of it. Most of us have no reason to trust gods. Gods have betrayed us in the past. We prefer to have no part of them."

"I am not a god," said Corum, reasonably.

"You are modest," said King Fiachadh, "but you are a god. A demigod at very least." He stroked his red beard. "That is what I think. And I have met you. Imagine, then, what those kings who do not know you think. They have heard the tales by now and those tales must have been greatly magnified by the time they reached them. For instance, I thought to meet a being at least twelve feet high!" King Fiachadh smiled, for he was taller than Corum. "No, the only thing which would unite our folk would be the release of Amergin and the restoration of his full senses."

"What has become of Amergin?" Corum asked. He had never heard the details of the High King's fate, for the Tuha-na-Cremm Croich were reluctant to discuss them.

"He is under a glamour," said King Fiachadh soberly.

"An enchantment? What is its nature?"

"We are not sure," said King Mannach. He continued reluctantly: "Amergin is said to think of himself now as an animal. Some say he believes he is a goat, others a sheep, others a pig..."

"You see how clever are those who serve the Fhoi Myore?" Medhbh said. "They keep our Archdruid alive but destroy his dignity."

"And a gloom settles over all those who remain free," King Fiachadh put in. "That has much to do with why our fellow kings will not fight, Mannach. They have no soul for it, with Amergin crawling on all fours and eating grass."

"Do not continue," said King Mannach raising his hands. His old, strong face showed much grief. "Our own High King symbolizes all our pride..."

"Do not confuse the symbol with the reality, however," said Corum. "Much pride remains among the Mabden race."

"Aye," said Medhbh. "It is true."

"Nonetheless," said King Fiachadh, "our people will only unite under an Amergin free from enchantment. Amergin was so wise. Such a great man was Amergin." And a tear came to his blue eye. He turned his head away from them.

"Then Amergin must be rescued," said Corum flatly. "Should I find your king for you and bring him to the west?" He did not speak impetuously. From the beginning he had considered this. "Disguised, I might reach Caer Llud."

And when Fiachadh looked back he was not crying.

He was grinning.

“And I have the disguise,” he said.

Corum laughed aloud. He had been considering a decision, plainly, which King Fiachadh had also been considering—perhaps for much longer.

“You are a Sidhi...” began the king of the Tuha-na-Manannan.

“Related to them,” said Corum, “as I discovered upon my last quest. We have looks in common, and, I suppose, certain powers. I fail to understand, though, why I should possess such powers...”

“Because all believe,” said Medhbh simply, and she leaned towards him and touched his arm. The touch was like a kiss. He smiled tenderly at her.

“Very well,” he said. “Because all believe. However, you may call me ‘Sidhi’ if it suits you, King Fiachadh.”

“Then, Sir Sidhi, know this. In the land of the Distant West, the land of my folk, the Tuha-na-Manannan, came a year since a visitor. His name was Onragh...”

“Onragh of Caer Llud!” gasped King Mannach. “In whose keeping...”

“...Were the Treasures of Llud, the Sidhi gifts? Aye, and Onragh lost them all from his chariot as he fled the Fhoi Myore and their vassals. Because the Hounds of Kerenos followed, he could not get back. So he lost them—all save one. And that Treasure he brought across the water to the Distant West, to the land of gentle mists and rain. And Onragh of Caer Llud was dying from his wounds which were of great variety. Half of one hand had been gnawed by the hounds. An ear had been severed by a Ghoolegh flencher. Several knives had found his offal. Dying, he presented into my safe-keeping the only Treasure he had saved, though it had not saved him. He could not use it. Only a Sidhi can use it, though I do not understand why, save that it was originally a Sidhi gift, like most of Caer Llud's Treasures, and must have worked for us once. And Onragh, doomed to die believing that he had failed our race, brought news of Amergin the High King. At that time Amergin was still in the great tower which stands by the river close to the centre of Caer Llud. This tower has always been the home of the High King. But Amergin was already under the glamour which makes him believe himself a bear. And he was guarded by many Fhoi Myore vassals—some of whom came with the Fhoi Myore from their own realm and others, the half-dead like the Ghoolegh, drawn from slain or captured Mabdeir. But guarded right well, my friends, if Onragh is to be believed. And not all the guards have human shape, I heard. But that is where, doubtless, Amergin is.”

“I will need an excellent disguise,” mused Corum, who privately felt he was doomed to fail in his quest, but who also felt that he must attempt it if only to show his respect for these people.

“I hope I can suggest one,” said King Fiachadh and his massive bulk began to rise as he stood up. “Is my chest where I asked it to be put, brother?”

King Mannach also rose, smoothing back his white hair. Corum remembered that not long since his hair had also had red in it. But that was before the Fhoi Myore had come. And King Mannach's beard was almost white now, too. Still he was a handsome man, standing almost as tall as broad-shouldered King Fiachadh, the gold collar of his kingship around his firm throat. King Mannach pointed to a corner behind their seats.

“There,” he said. “There is the chest.”

And King Fiachadh went to the corner and picked up the heavy chest by its golden handles and he carried the chest to the table and, with a grunt, put it down. Then from a pouch at his waist he took some keys and unlocked five strong locks. Then he paused, his piercing blue eyes staring at Corum. And he said something mysterious. “You are not a traitor, Corum, now.”

“I am not,” said Corum. “Not now.”

“I trust a reformed traitor more than I trust myself,” said King Fiachadh, grinning cheerfully as he

opened the lid.

~~But he opened the chest in such a way that Corum could not see the contents.~~

King Fiachadh reached into the chest and carefully began to draw something out.

“There,” he said. “The last of the Treasures of Caer Llud.”

And Corum wondered if the king of the Tuha-na-Manannan were joking, still, for King Fiachadh was displaying in both hands a rather tattered robe; a robe such as the poorest of peasants might be too fastidious to wear. A robe which was patched, torn, faded so that it was impossible to tell the original colour.

Holding it almost gingerly and yet tenderly, as if in awe of the old robe, King Fiachadh offered it to Corum.

“This is your disguise,” said King Fiachadh.

CORUM ACCEPTS A GIFT

“DID SOME HERO wear it once?” Corum asked. It was the only explanation for the reverence with which King Fiachadh handled the tattered robe.

“Aye, a hero has worn it, according to our legends, during the first fights with the Fhoi Myore.” King Fiachadh seemed puzzled by Corum’s question. “It is often called just The Mantle, but sometimes it is called Arianrod’s Cloak—so that strictly speaking it is a heroine’s mantle, for Arianrod was a female Sidhi, of great fame and much loved by the Mabden.

“And so you treasure it,” said Corum. “And well you might...”

Medhbh was laughing, for she knew what he thought.

“You come close to condescending to us, Sir Silverhand,” she said. “Do you think King Fiachadh a fool?”

“Far from it, but...”

“If you knew our legends you would understand the power of that much-worn mantle. Arianrod used it for many great feats before she, herself, was slain by some Fhoi Myore during the last great battle between the Sidhi and the Cold Folk. Some say she slew a whole army of Fhoi Myore single-handed while wearing that cloak.”

“It makes the wearer invulnerable?”

“Not exactly,” said King Fiachadh, still proffering the mantle to Corum. “Will you accept it, Prince Corum?”

“Gladly I will accept a gift from your hand, King Fiachadh,” said Corum, remembering his manners, and he reached out and took the cloak gently, in his fleshly hand and his hand of gleaming silver.

And both hands vanished at the wrists so that it seemed he was again crippled, though this time worse. Yet he could feel his fleshly hand and feel the texture of the cloth with his fingers, for all that the mantle had gone.

“It does work, then,” said King Fiachadh in tones of great satisfaction. “I am glad you accepted it without hesitation, Sir Sidhi.”

Corum began to understand. He drew his fleshly hand away from under the cloak and there was his hand again!

“A mantle of invisibility?”

“Aye,” said Medhbh in awe. “The same mantle used by Gyfech to enter the bedchamber of Béa while her father slept across the door. That mantle was much prized, even amongst the Sidhi.”

Corum said: “I believe I know how it must work. It comes from another plane. Just as Hy-Breasail is part of another world, so is this mantle. It shifts the wearer into another plane, just as the Vadhag could once move from plane to plane and remain aware of activities on different planes...”

They knew not of what he spoke, but they were too delighted to question him.

He laughed. “Brought from the Sidhi plane, it has no true existence here. Yet why will it not work for Mabden?”

“It will not always work for Sidhi,” said King Fiachadh. “There are some—Mabden or others—possessed of a sixth sense which makes them aware of you even when you are invisible to all other

Very few possess this sixth sense so that you may wear the mantle without detection most of the time. However, someone whose sixth sense is well-developed will see you just as I see you now.”

“And this is the disguise I must use to go to the Tower of the High King?” Corum said, handling the cloak with care and equally as much reverence as had King Fiachadh, marveling as its folds hid first one portion and then another of his anatomy. “Yes, it is a good disguise.” He smiled. “There is none better.” He handed the mantle back to the king. “Best keep it safely in its chest until it is needed.”

And when the chest was locked with all five keys, Corum sank back in his chair, his expression thoughtful. “Now,” he said, “there is much to be planned.”

* * *

So it was late before Corum and Medhbh lay together in their wide, low bed, looking out through the windows at the summer moon.

“It was prophesied,” said Medhbh sleepily, “that Cremm Croich should go upon three quests, face three great dangers, make three strong friendships...”

“Prophesied where?”

“In the old legends.”

“You have not mentioned this before.”

“There seemed no point. Legends are vague. You are not what the legends led us to expect, after all.” She smiled quietly.

He returned her smile. “Well, then, I begin the second quest tomorrow.”

“And you will be gone long from my side,” said Medhbh.

“That is my fate, I fear. I came for duty, not for love, sweet Medhbh. The love must be enjoyed while it does not interfere with duty.”

“You could be killed, could you not? For all you are an elfin lord?”

“Aye, killed by sword, or poison. I could even fall from my horse and break my neck!”

“Do not mock my fears, Corum.”

“I am sorry.” He rose on one elbow and looked into her lovely eyes. He bent and kissed her lips. “I am sorry, Medhbh.”

* * *

He rode a red horse, such as he had ridden when he first came to Cremmsmound. Its coat shone in the early-morning sunshine. From beyond the walls of Caer Mahlod came the sound of birdsong.

He wore all his ceremonial fighting gear, the ancient gear of the Vadhagh. He wore a shirt of blue samite and his breeks were doeskin. He wore a peaked, conical silver helm with his runic name set into it (the runes were indecipherable to the Mabden) and he wore his byrnie, a layer of silver upon a layer of brass. He wore all save his scarlet robe, his Name-robe, for that he had traded to the wizard Calatin at the place he knew as Moidel’s Mount. Upon the horse was a mantle of yellow velvet, and his harness and saddle were of crimson leather with designs picked out in white.

For weapons Corum took a lance, an axe, a sword and a dirk. The lance was tall, its shaft strengthened with gleaming brass, its head of polished iron. The axe was double-headed, plain and long-hafted, also bound with bands of brass. The sword hung in a scabbard matching the horse’s harness and its hilt was dressed in leather, bound with fine gold and silver wire, with a heavy round pommel of bronze. The dirk had been made by the same craftsman and matched the sword.

“Who could mistake you for anything but a demigod?” said King Fiachadh approvingly.

Prince Corum made a small smile and clutched his reins in his silver hand. He reached with his other hand to adjust the plain war-board which hung behind his saddle over one of the panniers containing as well as his provisions a tightly rolled fur cape which he would need as he advanced into Fhoi Myore lands. The other cape, the Sidhi cloak, Arianrod's Cloak, he had rolled and wrapped about his waist. Tucked into this were the gauntlets he would wear later, to protect one hand from the cold and to disguise the other so that he would not be easily recognized by any enemy.

Medhbh tossed back her long red hair and came forward to kiss his fleshly hand, looking up at him with eyes that were both proud and troubled.

"Have care with your life, Corum," she murmured. "Preserve it if you can, for all of us will need you even when this quest is over."

"I shall not throw my life away," he promised. "Life has become good for me, Medhbh. But neither do I fear death at this moment."

He wiped the sweat from his forehead. All his gear made him hot beneath the sun which was already blazing down, but he knew he would not be hot for long. He adjusted the embroidered eye patch over the blind socket. He touched her gently upon her brown arm. "I shall come back to you," he promised.

King Mannach folded his arms across his chest and cleared his throat. "Bring Amergin to us, Prince Corum. Bring our High King with you."

"Only if Amergin is with me will I come back to Caer Mahlod. And if I cannot bring him, then I will make every effort to send him to you, King Mannach."

"This is a great quest, this quest," said King Mannach. "Farewell, Corum."

"Farewell, Corum," said Fiachadh the red-bearded, putting a large, strong hand upon the Vadhagh's knee. "Good luck in this."

"Farewell, Corum," said Medhbh, and her voice was now as steady as her gaze.

Then Corum kicked at the flanks of his red horse and he went from them.

It was with a calm mind that Corum rode from Caer Mahlod, across the gentle hills, into the deep cool forest, going east to Caer Llud, listening to the birds, the rush of the little shining streams over old rocks, the whisper of the oaks and the elms.

Not once did Corum look back, not once did he feel a pang of regret, not once did he grieve or know fear or reluctance concerning his quest, for he knew that he fulfilled his destiny and that it represented a great ideal and he was, at that moment, content.

Such contentment was rare, thought Corum, for one destined to take part in the eternal struggle. Perhaps because he did not fight against his destiny this time, because he accepted his duty, he was rewarded with this peculiar peace of mind. He began to wonder if he would find peace only by accepting his fate. It would be a strange paradox—tranquility attained in strife.

By the evening the sky had begun to grow grey, and heavy clouds could be seen in the horizon towards the east.

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