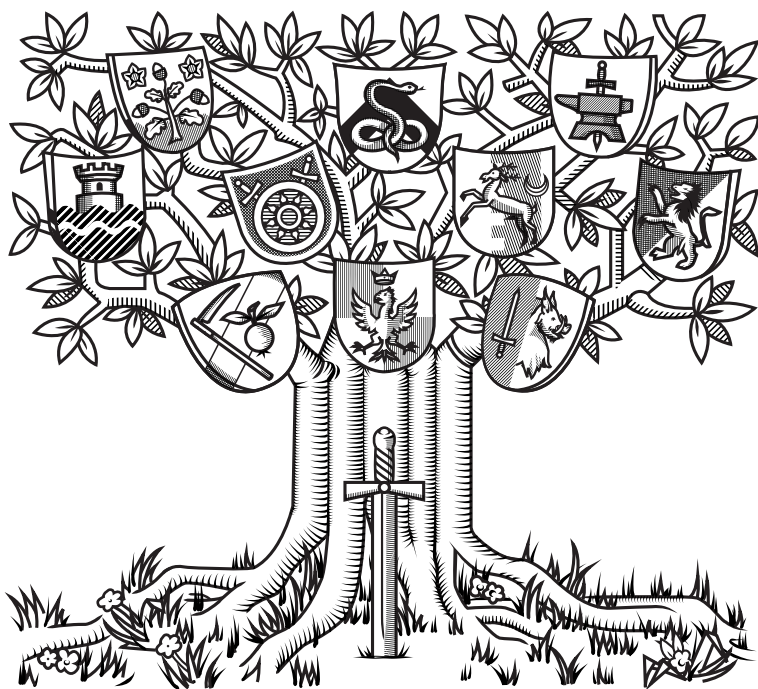


THE SUNDERED KINGDOMS TRILOGY VOLUME ONE

GAMBIT

OF THE

GLASS CROWNS



ETHAN RISSO



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*Dedicated to
those who have gone before me
and once again dwell
in the undying lands among the stars.*



*And to you
who, through pain, inspired.*





CHARACTERS IN THE STORY

[†]*Denotes a character's death occurred prior to the beginning of the book.*

Inhabitants of Cærwyn and its Provinces

Connor – Heir apparent of Helygen and nephew to the high king.

†Duke Cadfael Helygen, father of Rhodri and Connor.

†Lady Seren, mother of Rhodri and Connor.

Duke Rhodri Helygen – Connor's older brother. Heir presumptive to the throne of Cærwyn.

Lady Siana, his Meïnir wife.

Declan Morehl, steward of Helygen. Younger brother of Lady Seren.

High King Alric Gwalchgywn II – High king, seated in Cærwyn, to whom Gweliwch and Helygen hold their fealty.

Gruffudd Barciau, Cærwynian ealdorman.

Gawain, native name: *Dáire Máthramail* – Half-breed son of the Duke of Gweliwch.

Duke Rodric Gweliwch, his Hume father.

Eithne, his Meïnir mother.

Lady Gwynedd, his stepmother.

Drustan, Lady Gwynedd's son, and heir to Gweliwch.

†Kedigor Gweliwch, first Duke of the province of Gweliwch and Gawain's grandfather.

Ivor, Rodric's second hand.

Sir Garth, one of the men at Gawain's command.

Ioan, the youngest at Gawain's command.

Reverent Father Andras – Religious leader of The One in dweomer, and abbot of Northfeld Abbey.

Elis, a life-long novice in Northfeld Abbey.

Inhabitants of Annwyd

Bronwen of Annwyd – Queen consort of Cærwyn.

King Braith Denorheim of Annwyd, her father.

†Lady Seren, mother of Rhodri and Connor.

Owain, Bronwen's tutor.

Mara – Bronwen's Ordanian nursemaid and lady in waiting. Cærwyn.

Madoc of Annwyd – Bronwen's younger brother and Heir Apparent to the throne of Annwyd.

Tristram – Steward of Annwyd and Madoc's trusted advisor.

SENATE HOUSES OF ANNWYD

House of the Serpent	Braith Denorheim
House of the Boar	Culhwch Valifor
House of the Tower	Grigor Boraste
House of the Anvil	Einion Malik
House of the Wheel	Vaughn Garanth
House of the Scythe	Kendric Pahne

Mihangel, head of Annwyd's Senate.

Caden, Kendric Pahne's lover.

Merideth, Kendric Pahne's wife.

Ellen, Servant in Castle Rotham.

Inhabitants of Arlais

Rhiannon – High Priestess of Arlais.

†Blodueyn, founder of Arlais, Rhiannon's predecessor.

Cynan, her bodyguard and servant.

Ceridwen – High-ranking priestess, Rhiannon's attendant, and Connor and Rhodri's nursemaid when they were children.

†Mari, Ceridwen's mother.

Rhys, instructor of the proselytes.

Aife, the mistress of herbal teachings.

Maeve, keeper of the arcanum.

Cairbre – High Priest of Arlais and a Meïnir elder.

Llewelyn, instructor of the proselytes.

Sawyl – Young Hume boy who resides in Arlais.

Duamor of the Gabraëth Mountains

Heid Ivatholl – High Priestess of Arlais.

King Gorbran Ivatholl of the Gabraëth Mountains, her father.

Frar Dareid Ginnar Horbori xxiv – Merchant and former noble.

Frar Dareid Ginnar Horbori i – Duamor King during the Amaeth Age and Signatory of the Atgyweiriedig Dirio, Repaired Land, treaty with Rhiannon.



CHAPTER I



CONNOR TREMBLED AS HE woke from a deep sleep. He remembered the sensation of falling, and a fierce pounding in his chest wracked through him. He kept his eyes shut, breathing in the comforting scent of burnt tallow that still hung in the air like a lullaby as his heart slowed. Sleep crept closer, only to be frightened away by the shouts of men in the courtyard. He rolled over from the window and burrowed beneath the pillows. But still, the clamor came.

A shrill scream cut through the air. And another.

He threw the blankets to the side and sat up in bed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, seeing that it was not yet daybreak.

The screams grew louder. But these, he knew, were not the sounds of festivities.

He ran to the window; his fingers trembled as he pulled back the tapestry. When he looked down upon the courtyard, he collapsed against the sill.

A deluge of arrows rained upon the scattered crowd. Bodies lay in piles. Husbands protecting wives, mothers protecting children—all in vain. Noble blood caked in the dirt and stained the grass. People scrambled throughout the yard, but the assailants eluded their sight.

He tore himself away from the window. Not bothering to dress in anything more than his nightclothes, he dashed into the hall.

The terrified frenzy from outside echoed down the inner castle corridors. He ran by the bank of windows that faced the courtyard. The sound of biting steel clashed together and joined the chorus of screams. He skidded to a halt and braced himself as he looked out at the slaughter.

The archers moved quickly, but Connor caught a glimpse of the sigil they donned: the mark of the Féinmhuinín.

“They planned this all along!” he said through gritted teeth.

Some slithered across the tops of the wall and shot at will. Others descended onto the courtyard, dual blades in hand, and fell upon the guests.

Connor felt his stomach tighten as an attacker leapt onto a nobleman, skewering him through the abdomen with one blade and slicing through his neck with the other. Blood sprayed forth as the man collapsed in a bloody heap. Ealdorman Amaetha. Connor recognized the kind old man who frequented the castle.

A small group of men tried to raise the portcullis with brute strength alone. Two women ran across the courtyard in the group’s direction, followed by one of the insurgents.

Connor could not bear to watch, and turned away. But he heard the screaming gurgle as the first woman was run through. Her death cry filled his head, and he cried out, unable to contain his emotions.

He felt a hand on his arm, and his throat clenched shut. As he crashed to the floor, he tore at his assailant's flesh with dull nails, attempting to wriggle away from the tight grip.

"Connor! Connor, it is me!"

Recognizing the voice, Connor stopped struggling. He squinted. In the dim light from the windows, he could barely make out the face. "Gawain?"

His new friend, who was visiting the castle for the first time, pointed up to the arrow protruding from the door. The arrow that would have struck Connor, had he remained where he was.

Gawain held out his hand and pulled Connor to his feet behind the safety of the stone wall.

"What happened?" Connor asked, his back against the wall.

Gawain shook his head. "I only woke when I heard the commotion."

"I need to find my uncle." He looked down the hall, both directions. "And Rhodri."

"I must reach my father."

He saw the worry on Gawain's face. "Go. Find your father. I will be all right."

Gawain stared at him for a moment. "No. I will help you find your brother and the high king. It would not be proper for the son of Duke Gweliwch not to fight for his king's protection."

"The dormitories are this way," he said as he led Gawain down the hall toward the spiral stairs.

"Wait." Gawain pulled at his shoulder, whispering. "Listen."

Connor looked toward the stairs. He heard the slow creaking of the wooden door below.

"Back!" Gawain snagged Connor's sleeve as the door exploded in a flurry of splinters. Their legs tangled, and they tumbled

against the wall. Boots thundered up the stairs. Gawain pushed him back, drawing his sword. “Run!”

Connor spun on his heel. His fingers clawed at the wall. He dashed down the corridor toward his uncle’s quarters until he reached the top of the central staircase.

More rushing footsteps. More screaming.

Connor skidded to a halt. He staggered backward, side-stepped and clung to the wall until the noises died away. He needed something—anything!

Two guards lay dead on the stairs nearby. One still clutched his sword. Connor slid to his knees beside him. He quietly pried the sword from the armsman’s hand, but when he strained to lift it, the tip of the blade scraped against the stairs. The sound was anything but quiet.

Connor held his breath, his lungs burning.

A man wearing the white marks of the Féinmhuinín slid into view, leather boots scraping against the floorboards. His lips twisted into a gaping, yellow smile.

Connor’s heart throbbed in his ears.

The man drew a knife from his belt and lurched forward.

Connor lifted the sword into the air, but toppled to the side under its weight. When the man lunged, Connor brought down the sword, losing his grip when the riser smashed into the side of his attacker’s head.

The man tumbled down the stairs. He twitched only once as blood poured from his scalp.

Connor’s stomach churned. He bent over and heaved, coughing up slurry, splashing it onto the stone floor. His abdomen still contracting, he looked to the bottom of the stairs to see his attacker crawling away.

As he straightened, he felt a sharp sting in his shoulder. He heard his name called out. Then, only darkness.