

# The Nesslands 1 – The Legend of the Shield of Querqus

## Prologue



The mist crept through the town. Like an ice-cold hand, it gripped everything in its path. It whirled, gathered itself again, and moved on in its search for the hut. The sound of shattering glass mixed with the snaps of crackling flames. A horse neighed with panic and jumped through the thick haze. The mist led an army.



There was a bang on the door of the hut, where a man and a woman had sought refuge. A birth pang surged through the woman's body. She gasped and her breath turned to small, white clouds in the ice-cold air.

Her shift was soaked with fluids and blood, and she shivered with pain and cold. She threw up over the edge of the bed onto the cold earthen floor.

At the entrance, the man tried to barricade the door. His bare chest was smeared with blood and dirt. He roared with the effort of lodging wooden pole between the floor and the door. He threw a glance at the woman curled up in the bed.

A stone smashed through the windowpane close to the bed and shards of glass rained down on the birthing woman. Quickly, he ran over and picked her up.

The woman groaned and writhed with pain as he put her down. She leaned over a table and gripped the edge. Then she slumped down with her forehead against the table, screaming. The man lifted her from the floor, and the child slipped out and into its mother's arms. She trembled and pressed the child to her chest. The man grabbed his knife and cut the umbilical cord.

A crash sounded from the door, and the noise of splintering wood drowned out the infant's cries. The upper door was torn from its hinges, and a thick cloud of dust rose from the floor as it landed behind the man. He turned, drew his sword and gasped. A spear flew through the dust cloud and pierced his chest.



A shape moved at the rear of the dark hut. Ingwarr, crouching in a corner, had watched his parents' desperate fight. Now it was over.



A soft tinkle of bells floated on the wind. A whirling snow-storm approached the town. The snow condensed, and slowly the shape of horsemen appeared.

It was an army of white horsemen, moving swiftly through the terrain towards the town. No sound of clanking armour or weapon accompanied them nor any creaking of harness or hoofbeat against the frozen earth. Not even any laboured snorting or neighing escaped the horses, which quickly reached the wide-open town gate. Hundreds of Albinari galloped through the town and with their ice-swords struck down the Radix warriors. The stronghold was in flames and

the streets were an inferno of screams. The town, Five Mills, was close to its downfall, and the Albinari came too late.



In the hut, Ingwarr hastily grabbed the new-born baby, threw himself backwards and deftly squeezed through a hole in the wall. He just managed to get his feet through, before the first warrior stood before his mother. Vivien sat slumped on the dirty floor in a pool of her own maternal blood. On the floor in front of her was the man she loved. He lay on his side, and his eyes gazed into hers. He made a gurgling sound, reached out his hand to her and tried to say something.

A Radix warrior came between them, and she lifted her head and calmly looked up into the ugly grinning face above her. More people who had their faces hidden in the large hoods of their cloaks stepped into the hut. One of them wore jewelled boots and was clearly a woman. The boot-clad woman kicked the dying man, drew the hood from her face and glared at Vivien.

Vivien gasped as she recognised the woman.

A long death-rattle was released from the man's open mouth. He lay on his back with closed eyes, and Vivien trembled at the sight of the broken spear protruding from his chest.

'I order you to look at me,' hissed the woman and stepped up to him. He opened his eyes and froze when he recognised the woman's face. Then he gasped for the last time.



The eight-year-old Ingwarr dashed between fighting figures, torn limbs and charred corpses. Black smoke filled the air between the town's houses, occasionally concealed the fleeing boy, and then rose above the large town. He hugged the little girl tightly and leapt to safety behind an overturned

oxcart, as a sword came flying and cut into one side of the cart. A blood-smeared Radix warrior made his way through the fray, roaring something in a language that Ingwarr did not understand. But the gist of the words was clear. Ingwarr tried to creep away from the cart, but more warriors turned their eyes on him. He rose quickly, turned, and bolted into an alley. Blood roared in his temples and his heart thumped in his chest. The alley was just wide enough for a boy of his size to wriggle through. He prayed that no one would be waiting at the other end, when he reached it. The end of the alley was like a shining door, where the naked branches of Hearth Forest reached for the winter sky.

The sound of water reached his ears and he stopped abruptly. He was at the end of the alley and the ground sloped steeply down and ended in a wide, frothing river.

He looked around frantically.

To the north, he spotted the large waterwheel of Joy Mill. The wheel turned with formidable power through the foaming water. It was the lowest lying watermill in Five Mills and it was the largest of the four mills in town. No one knew why the town was named Five Mills; there was no fifth mill.

Hesitantly, he stepped forward. To the south-west, the river swept along the edge of the woods and, further down, disappeared into the forest. He glanced over his shoulder. The alley was alive behind him. The houses groaned and yielded to the steely figures who pushed through the narrow passage. One of the houses caved in behind the warriors. Ingwarr made a quick decision and jumped.

In a heartbeat, the noise of the bellowing warriors and crumbling houses disappeared, and the cold of the water encased him. Then he broke through the surface to an infernal cacophony, but realised that he was already a long way down the river. The racket drowned out the crying of the

infant, and he tried in vain to calm her by putting her cheek against his.

On the bank, the warriors hesitated for a moment before they resumed the pursuit. Some horsemen rapidly gained on him. The river became wider and curved into the forest, where the trees hindered the horses. The woods became thicker and in the end the horsemen gave up.



Ingwarr drifted further into the forest. He could hear the roars and grunts from the foot soldiers in the thicket. Then he noticed a strange ripple in the surface of the water ahead. His senses were dulled by the cold and his vision blurred. He saw that the river branched off to the right. The branch was almost concealed by withered reeds and a weeping willow which dipped its long, limp limbs into the water.

He felt the current grip his body and pull him towards the willow. Frantically, he tried to swim the other way, but in vain. He had to hold his sister's head above water. She had stopped crying and hung limp and blue in his arms. Without the use of both his arms, he was lost. He fought fiercely until he felt the pull beneath him. He was dragged under the willow's foliage. He just managed to take a large gulp of air before he was yanked beneath the surface.

The sound of his pursuers disappeared, but this time it took longer before it came back. The water sucked him down and, blind with fear, he realised that his body no longer obeyed him and felt his lungs screaming for air. A heavy grinding sound suddenly permeated the water. The sound intensified as he was sucked further down. It was deafening. At last his head popped out of the water and he spluttered and gasped for air. The grinding sound changed to churning and splashing, and he noticed a large, glistening water-wheel turning in the river before him. The current pulled him

towards the wheel which threatened to thrash him to bits, but his body was numb from the cold. The only thing he could think of was that he could not let go of his sister.

To the left, steep stone steps led up from the water to the top of a tall, grassy hill. He managed to grasp some tree roots and drag himself towards the stairs.

Finally, he reached them. He crawled stiffly onto the edge and continued up the first slippery, mossy steps. He shivered and glanced at the small child lying motionless in his arms. A wave of fear washed through him.

Was she breathing? He lowered his face to her mouth, but could not feel her breath on his skin. What if she was dead?

He had seen his mother whisper something to the baby girl right after the birth. His mother had given him the child in the hut. Her silent eyes had been enough for him to understand what he had to do. They had said their farewells then. Their final farewells.



His mother's whispered words were age-old knowledge, handed down from mother to first-born daughter, which he had heard about and understood the importance of, despite his young age.

He stared at his sister. What if that knowledge was lost forever?

He continued up the stairs as swiftly as he could. He had to find help.

A neat, well-maintained farmhouse appeared between the trees, as he reached the last step. The windowpanes glinted in the setting winter sun, making the hoar frost glitter on every blade of grass.

Suddenly, someone took hold of him and he froze. He had not seen the man who had sprung towards him. It was a tall, gaunt man clothed in white. On his head he wore a

white cap, which drooped down over one ear. The man's old, lined face had a sorrowful but friendly expression. He gently helped Ingwarr to his feet, but when he noticed the baby, whose head poked out of Ingwarr's cloak, his expression changed. His eyes widened and his lips trembled, as if there were numerous words trapped behind them, unable to get out. At last, some broke free, and he shouted something incomprehensible.

A tall woman ran across the grass towards them with white garments billowing around her. Her apron puffed flour. When she saw the baby, she held her hand in front of her mouth, aghast. She pulled the cloak aside, and saw the blanket with the royal seal. Instinctively, Ingwarr gripped the woman's wrist and tried to pull the cloak back. He glared at her.

The woman sighed and crouched before him. 'Calm down, my friend,' she whispered. 'Don't be afraid. You are safe here, and we won't hurt you. This place cannot be seen by others although we are still in Hearth Forest. Welcome to The Fifth Mill.' She stroked his hair gently and he let her take the baby.

## Chapter 1

# Muldness

200 years later



The cuckoo bent over the branch and let its call fill the air over the meadow. It had not yet noticed the tall, skinny girl who had carefully snuck up behind it. The bird was known for being alert and easily startled, but this late afternoon it was so engrossed in itself that it neither saw nor heard anything else.

The air was filled with large, fluffy flower seeds, whirling around each other before they silently drifted to the ground or were caught in the thick brambles.

The girl held her breath in suspense. It was seldom she came so close. Small pearls of sweat ran down her dirty forehead, and sticky, dark locks of hair stuck to her skin over one eye.

Slowly, she lifted her hand and tried to brush the hair away. A twig snapped beneath her foot, and she froze as she stared at the cuckoo.

The bird fell silent in the middle of a cuck-koo and twisted its head to find the source of the sound. Its puffed-up feathers had smoothed around its slender body. Quickly, it turned

and flew away with rapidly beating wings. Like a small grey hawk it disappeared over the meadow towards the village.

'Damn,' she muttered and tucked the hair behind her ears. She wiped her sweaty palms in her trousers. Then she remembered her errand, and twisted the sickle on her hip free of her belt. She turned and went back through the undergrowth to the meadow, bringing her knees close to her chest with every step. Humming, she gazed at the thatched roofs, which appeared on the other side of the meadow.

The village was in a hollow between the forest and the sea a few miles to the west. On the outskirts was the large meadow, which bordered upon the forest.



Here was the lake and the bathhouse. Swarms of damselflies, dragonflies and butterflies made the air above the reed beds quiver.

She reached the meadow, found what she sought and cut the valerian stems which she had come to find. As usual she collected the pale red flowers in a small bunch and avoided inhaling their unpleasantly pungent smell.

Then she pulled up some roots, shook the worst of the dirt from them, and fastened them in her belt with the posy. She lay down in the long grass. It was almost evening. Some children were playing on the shore of the lake close to the jetty. They were on their way home from the large, communal bathhouse. A crowd of men and women came out of the bathhouse with ruddy, sweating faces, and the girl watched as they took the children by the hand and plodded up the small path to the village. The talk and laughter slowly faded.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, but a rustle in the grass made her open her eyes again.

'Good evening, Oona,' a mock-formal voice said above her.

'Linn!' exclaimed Oona at the sight of the familiar face and yellow curls. Linn sat down in the grass beside her, and Oona sat up. Behind Linn, some boys came wading through the grass. One of them carried a homemade sling. It was Aril, Linn's big brother.

Aril's face was covered in a myriad of freckles, which on the bridge of his nose gathered in large, regular patches. He had unruly, red hair, sticking out in every direction. It looked like the rays of the sun had set his hair on fire. He already had broad shoulders for his age. It was clear to see that the smith's apprentice was kept busy. But that probably suited him, thought Oona with a wry smile. That is, to have bigger muscles. She had noticed how he puffed himself up every time Frigga, daughter of one of the village farmers, came by the forge.

Her own big brother, Bjorn, who walked beside Aril, was slender and athletic. He had neck-length hair, gathered in a ponytail. Bjorn lifted his bow in greeting, adjusted his quiver, and continued his quiet conversation with Aril.

Behind the teenage boys, Eiric appeared, slightly out of breath and sweating. His knock-kneed, bare legs struggled through the grass to keep pace with the two sixteen-year-old boys. His face lit up, when he saw his big sister in the grass, and he threw himself down beside her. The two older boys took the opportunity to slip away on their own.



'Well, Eiric,' said Oona, 'I thought that mother had put you to bed?' She stroked his blond hair and pulled him closer. They all three lay down in the soft grass.

Eiric yawned, squeezed his hand into Oona's, and closed his eyes.

The sun was setting behind the pale wall of beech and oak trees which marked the edge of the forest. The grass

swayed above their heads and wafted the gentle breeze down into their faces.

'I'm looking forward to tomorrow,' muttered Oona.

'Mmm,' Linn answered sleepily, 'I'm sure it'll be nice. Do you think Racnar will be coming?' She turned onto her stomach with her face towards Oona. 'He has done all he could to be close to you recently,' she continued, and waggled her eyebrows.

Oona grimaced and scowled at Linn.

Linn laughed. 'Do you like him?'

Oona put one end of a long straw of grass in her mouth and chewed it. Linn's eyes followed the quivering straw, while Oona looked up at the sky. A black beetle clung desperately to the straw.

'What's beyond the Outermost Holloway?'

Linn raised her eyebrows in surprise. 'Why do you ask that all of a sudden?'

Oona hesitated. 'I mean, I'll be fourteen years old tomorrow. I've lived here all my life, and no one has ever told me why we aren't allowed to cross the Outermost Holloway. Not really, anyway.' She turned her face to Linn, oblivious to the woes of the beetle at the end of the straw. She spat out the straw and continued, slightly piqued. 'What are you smiling at? I mean it. Aren't you the least bit curious about what's out there?' She waved a hand at the forest behind them.

Linn's smile disappeared. She cleared her throat and looked at Oona seriously. 'Well, when we left Moegelhaim, we sailed to Lower Norbluff, so we didn't cross the Holloway by land. All I know is that it runs east around Woodridge then in a loop from Upper Norbluff down to the mouth of Broadbay.' She drew with her finger in the grass and tapped the invisible map. 'I expect the forest just continues on the other side.'

'But what'll happen if one were to cross it anyway? Do you know anything about it?'

Linn looked at her horrified. 'Well, I don't think you'd die outright, but I know that it's dangerous.' She paused. 'Do you remember the wool-pedlar who came here from the south?' Linn's eyes were wide. 'It was just after we moved here.' She hesitated. 'He was badly injured and delirious. Mother Melia had him in her hut for days, but nothing worked. Neither herbs nor witchcraft.' She hesitated again. 'He died in great pain. I don't think anyone ever found out what happened to him.'

'Or they didn't tell us,' Oona answered testily. 'I remember. He screamed so loud that none of the neighbours got a wink of sleep for several nights.' She sulked for a while. 'I bet they knew. They just didn't want to scare us children.' She sneered the last word.

Linn sighed. 'You're probably right. I think it has to do with someone or something from the south.' She turned onto her back. 'I remember someone at the harbour in Moegelhaim talking about it, when we lived up there. They talked of a people down south, who sometimes send scouts up here. And when it happens people always go missing, never to be found again. Mostly, it's women, but sometimes it's men. Young, strong men. My mother says that the Holloway is there to protect us. Also, it's many days travel away.' She glanced at Oona. 'You're not going to try to get out there, are you?'

Oona did not reply.

'You know we'll get in trouble,' continued Linn. 'Last time we slipped away, we were only gone a couple of days, but my mother was furious, when I came home. I can still feel the slap she gave me, and it cost me weeks of work in the stables. Alone. Aril was thrilled, I tell you!' Linn's voice had become shrill. 'Also, I don't dare!' She gave Oona a fierce look and sat up.

'I'm just thinking, if, Linn... If it were possible, do you think everything would be the same afterwards?' Oona gazed

pensively into the air. 'I mean, it could change things, don't you think?' She picked a new straw and put it in the corner of her mouth. 'Besides, I'm not a child anymore,' she snorted.

Linn shook her head. 'You're insane.' She smiled.

'Oh well,' said Oona, 'I'll control myself.' She had a teasing look in her eye and she rose with a sigh. 'It's just that it can be so boring, always being here. I've never been further than Lower Norbluff, and that was only to buy cloth!'

Linn could not keep herself from laughing, and Oona smiled reluctantly, picked up the sleeping Eiric and began carrying him home over the meadow. 'At least I'll get a taste of it, when I go on my pilgrimage with Mother Melia after the ceremony tomorrow.' She turned and called to Bjorn.

Linn stopped and glanced at her. 'You didn't answer me before. About Racnar...'

Oona made a face and turned towards her. Linn just would not let it go.

'I admit that he's good-looking...' She attempted and blushed. 'Are you satisfied?'

'Quit it, Oona! You're practically crimson!' Linn nudged her, clearly satisfied that she got what she wanted. 'I knew it!' she said gleefully.

'You don't know anything,' she scoffed, but the anger did not really reach her voice. She snorted. 'I don't even know him.'



Oona's mother was sewing in the main room, when Oona stepped through the door.

'Hi, mum!' She put Eiric on the storage bench. He yawned, stretched, put a hand under his cheek and slept on.

The golden evening light shone through the window in the dark room and lit up her mother's face, which was deep in concentration. She looked up and smiled at Oona. Her

eyes were tired, but the smile was warm. 'Come sit, dear,' she said quietly. 'Where's Bjorn?'

'He'll be here in a moment.' Oona smiled and put the valerian on the kitchen table. 'He and Aril shouted something about finding some cats mating. Typical!' She giggled and rolled her eyes. Then she went over to Eiric and shook him gently. 'Come on Eiric. I'll put you to bed. Shall I read for you a bit?' she asked.

Her mother smiled at her. 'You should go to bed too.'

Oona's stomach did a somersault, as she thought about her imminent birthday. Tomorrow she would be fourteen years old. Her mother shook and smoothed a large piece of cloth. 'I'll make my own tea tonight, dear. Will you hang the fresh herbs up to dry?'

Oona nodded and scooped up Eiric from the bench. He was asleep again. She usually made the sleep-inducing tea for her mother every night. She had done it since she was about eight. Her mother had not slept well since Oona's father disappeared in the early spring six years ago. His body had never been found, but the men of the village found so much blood in a clearing several days travel south-east of Woodridge that it was unlikely that a human could survive whatever had happened. Also, her father's weapons had been scattered around the place, and his horse lay dead. The clearing had signs of violent struggle, and the forest floor was covered in unknown footprints.

She had never given up hope that her father was still alive, but she kept it to herself. Her mother had never been the same again, but she was still a good and affectionate mother, who loved her three children unconditionally. Bjorn had become old and strong enough to manage most of the work around the house which required a man. And he was good at it. He fixed the things that needed fixing and took good care of all of them. But he was still just a boy, and he missed his

father. Sometimes, she heard him crying in the main room at night. Then she got out of bed, and squatted beside him, as he sat with his head in their mother's lap. Then they all cried silently.

Oona left the door ajar to the room she shared with Eiric and went over to kiss her mother goodnight.

Her mother was once more bent over the needlework. The sun had set behind the light-green woods, and Oona felt that there was something ominous about the dark silhouettes of the trees with colours no longer discernible in the twilight. The pleasant light which had streamed through the window was gone, and her mother's face seemed grey and tired. Her slender hands worked quickly and confidently with the needle and thread. She still wore her wedding ring; a thin gold ring with a small rectangle enamelled in green.

Oona gave her a quick kiss, stood a while watching her mother work and then, hesitantly, went to her room. She thought that her mother had seemed a bit tired and quiet the last couple of days. She had been very busy. Although they had helped as well as they could, there were still many things that that her mother wanted to do herself. It had been a tough spring. Part of the roof had blown off in the late winter, and they had had to repair it in the early spring, which had been unusually wet. Fortunately, they had had plenty of help from several of the men of the village, so Bjorn had not worked alone.

Her mother put down the needlework. Then she spread her arms towards Oona. 'Come here, my dear.' Her mother held her close, and Oona did not see the tears running down her cheek. 'Sleep well, my child,' she said quietly.

## Chapter 2

# The Night



Oona had slept for quite some time, when she suddenly woke up. She saw the moonlight shimmering on the sea. The light made a wide, shining trail across the dark sea.

The cool night air drifted into the room through the open window and made the pale curtains flutter. Something was wrong. She had a sense of not being alone and wondered what had woken her. However, the room looked the same as it always did, and there was no sound from the rest of the house. She usually slept like a log, so why had she suddenly woken up now?

She thought about it. Had there been a sound? The sound of a voice?

She had been dreaming and, as always, she could not remember what the dream had been about. Slowly, she sat up in her bed. She knew it had not been a pleasant dream, because she noticed that her heart was hammering in her breast. She rose from the bed to close the window and caught sight of something which she had not noticed before. She had not been able to see it, when she lay on the bed looking out of the window.

She stared back at the moon bridge; the glimmering trail on the water. There was something different about the light. She approached the window hesitantly. The summer sky

was unusually dark for this time of year. Heavy black clouds sailed slowly across the sky. Then one of them came between her and the moon and the moonlight framed the cloud's silhouette with a glowing outline.

She froze and gasped for breath. Something was moving outside in the darkness. Several small shapes were on the other side of the chestnut fence which surrounded the house. A bleat escaped one of the dark creatures, and she felt relief surge through her body. She took a deep breath and shook her head at herself. Eogan's sheep had broken out of their pen again.

She grabbed the hasp of the window and began pulling the window to, but stopped when the moon became visible again. Slowly the cloud continued its voyage across the sky. At once, it was completely clear to her what was wrong.

The moon bridge stretched from the horizon to the grey sandy beach. Or that was what it usually did. She squinted and furrowed her brow. The ribbon of light on the sea continued across the beach, over the dunes and meadow towards the village. The light was dimmer on the ground than on the water. What was this? Where the light touched it, the sand and grass glittered unnaturally. She had never seen anything like it and stood petrified at the phenomenon.

Some of Eogan's sheep were caught in the light. It gave their wool a silvery sheen like the light on the sea. It was as if the sheep grew and changed their shape. She closed her mouth and slammed the window shut. Her heart galloped though her chest again, and her stomach heaved.

The contours of the sheep dissolved into a mist whirling up from the grass. The mist condensed into a face. The mouth moved slowly, pronouncing words she could not hear. She pushed the window ajar. A whisper reached her, but she could not understand the words; they were foreign.

The face rippled in the cool night air. Oona was not sure whether she was afraid anymore. Driven by curiosity, she opened the window a bit more.

‘... Annitempora...’ The face fell silent.

Then she noticed the eyes. They had not been visible before, when the face was speaking. They had just been dark, blurry smears in the light grey mist. But now it was the mouth that faded and the eyes which emerged. The grief and pain she saw in them hit her like a blow. Never before had she experienced a gaze so intense.

A whirlwind of pictures blew through her head, and she grabbed the windowsill for support. Faces contorted in fear and the cruel visages were so hideous that she had to fight back a scream. Men, women and children in flight. Chaos.

She felt her head was about to explode, as the voices and screams from the images increased. When they finally ceased, she was on the floor panting with sweat running down her face. She struggled to her feet and looked out the window.

The moonlight was back on the sea, and the sheep, which she could hear rustling the bushes outside, were wandering harmlessly about as black shadows as if nothing had happened.

Deep in thought, she closed the window. What just happened? She tried to convince herself that it had been a dream. She had never heard of anything like it. But deep down, she knew that what she had experienced was just as real as the feel of her bare feet on the wooden floor. She decided not to tell her mother. She would just worry. No, it was better to ask Mother Melia about it tomorrow. Maybe she could sneak down to the old wise-woman before the feast.

A heavy unnatural drowsiness overtook her, and she dragged herself to bed, where she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.