

GLASS ISLAND

by

GARETH GRIFFITH

BOOK EXTRACT

For Eleri, it was her first sight of the Red Cloaks of Caer Baddan. Her heart lifted to see them. All around there was pride and hope. She could see it in people's faces, their eyes lighting up. Eleri saw her friend Rhian waving and calling out.

Riding from the east under the standard of the cross, Eleri counted thirty-one of them, two abreast, in the lead a white stallion, a war horse, bold and headstrong, ebullience in its every step. The distinctive cloaks the riders wore were carried on the wind, proud banners in their own right. Unlike the men of the Summer Land, these warriors wore helmets that caught the sun, as did the mail they wore, glinting like jewels. In fact, there were thirty-three riders in total, with what looked like two women at the very back of the column. Eleri assumed they were hangers-on of some sort. Only when the horsemen drew nearer did she notice that the rider carrying the standard of the cross was dressed in priestly brown.

In her father's absence it was Eleri's place to welcome them across the threshold where the rowan tree stood, heavy with berries at this time of year. There was no reason to be nervous, for something to be niggling at her in the pit of her stomach. "They're with us," she told herself as she made her way to the gate. As Mared of the Silver Wheel would say when she could think of nothing better: "There doesn't always have to be a reason."

On they came, pounding towards her.

For years Eleri had heard about the Red Cloaks of Caer Baddan; the last of the legions on British soil, people called them. Everyone in the Summer Land, Eleri included, was dying to get a glimpse of this rare breed of warriors, to see if they matched up to the stories that were told about them, to see if they were indeed the inheritors of the glory of Rome and of Arthur all in one.

They came in a great wheel of horse flesh, grey and black and red-brown – the coppery chestnut colour of Eleri's hair, or near enough. At their head was the white stallion, its power and its pride captured in its massive flanks.

Instinctively, Eleri looked for Cwion at her side, only to find that he had held back. Standing amongst the people of the village, he nodded to her, his black eyes speaking encouragement.

The war horse would not be ignored, snorting its arrival for all to hear. Its rider was of the same mind.

Unaccountably, shockingly, it took only an instant.

GLASS ISLAND – GARETH GRIFFITH

When the rider on the white stallion dismounted he landed with a thump directly in front of Eleri Gwir. Even before she had the chance to welcome him, the warrior had removed his helmet from his sandy hair and, bowing slightly, he had swallowed her whole with his dangerously playful pale blue eyes.

It was that need, that hunger again.

Eleri in her turn acknowledged the young warrior, remembering and forgetting everything she had been told about men by the women in the weaving room, every detail of every warning. She had always marked herself out as different from her companions – like her friend Rhian who seemed to be a slave to her unpredictable feelings, defining her very existence around whether this or that man had smiled or winked at her over the mead cups. Now here she was, the rational, sensible Eleri Gwir drowning in a sudden flood of feelings, all hot inside, another slave to nature's urges. Everything fled from her heart, or so it felt in that instant, to make space for the captain of the Red Cloaks.

"His name is Gwalchwen," – White Hawk – the warrior said, referring to the stallion, his hand caressing the horse's mane, the warrior bending towards Eleri, as if telling a secret, every bit as familiar as the horned god.

Speechless for a moment, a thing unknown to Eleri Gwir, she had to take a deep breath before she said: "On behalf of my father Arawn son of Edern, I welcome the men of the Red Cloaks to Tre Wyn." Although whether the words were said in that order or in some other, she couldn't say.

Then, bringing her to her senses, she heard someone call out: "There's a man wounded. Get help."

"My healing bag," she called to the curly-haired boy. "Fetch it, will you?" The order was no sooner given than the boy was haring away in the direction of the chieftain's hut. Seeing him dash off, the Red Cloak captain laughed and Eleri laughed with him, in danger of losing herself again.

It was just as well that Cerys, the healer, was there organising matters, showing where the wounded horseman was to be taken.

"Come on, Eleri Gwir!" she called, not one for formalities. "There's work to do."

"I have to go," Eleri told the Red Cloak, pointing needlessly in the direction Cerys had gone. Again, she looked for Gwion, but he too was gone.

"It's all right," the Red Cloak captain said, a wicked, hungry smile in his eyes. "Go with the healer. You have a wounded man to attend to."

Walking away, Eleri imagined those hungry eyes fixed on her, which made her horribly self-conscious. She felt her insides burning up. She was glad to see the boy Gereint running to her, the healing bag in his arms. She thanked him for the second time that morning.

Across the yard she saw Gwion with his father, heading for the slaughterhouse. There was work to do. There was a red cow of the Summer Land to be butchered if their guests were to be feasted.