



# **Tir Nan Beo – Cursed Lands**

## **Tales of a Bard**

### **Old men in a tree**

Part of Dumnonni

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## Old men in a tree

It had been a coming and going of warbands sent by Oswald, King of the Usipetii, to find the place riddled by the Druid Araturix who he met while being in Bructerii lands. Find a place on the borders of four clans, he had said, four clans who are at war. Find an old man in a tree and at that place, just a few moons after winter and before Beltane, there will be a festival to honor the Gods. No one could have guessed what secrets would emerge from this strange riddle, but then again we are mere mortals and do not possess the insights of a druid. It is humbling to know that their wisdom stretches far beyond mere thoughts of war and curses and that their insights are far greater than we could possibly comprehend. Now I speak to you, bereft of such wisdom, but full of words waiting to be spoken. I bring a tale of riddles, of war and deceit. So listen closely, for this tale might well be the first step into clearing our lands of dark and horrifying curses. It might fill your heart with hope and despair, but will never leave you untouched. It all began with a summoning of a King and a quest to find a secret.

After a cold winter and a warm summer King Oswald travelled towards the Valeda of the Bructerii. Her words were whispered to reveal only truth and while weaving them with wyrd, she could see beyond the present day. That day her words were harsh and full of warning. Oswald, she said while the air shimmered with unseen powers, Oswald, 'Every last banner man will someday betray you except those who have kneeled before you'. A dark future indeed, but this tale does not follow these visions, it only begins with them. For with these words came many more and somehow in the darkness these prophesies were woven into the future of these lands. It is unknown how many of these visions came to pass, but what we do know was that a Sicambrii Giant came to Oswald that very night and asked him to aid his people in the heart of winter. Oswald agreed, knowing the value of the Sicambrii and what their purpose was. For the Sicambrii ward Tir Nan Beo against the hordes of Formorians that roam the Bloodlands and without them the Batavii and Bructerii would surely find themselves against unstoppable numbers of honorless warriors. No, King Oswald knew well what he did when he sent his best people deep into the Bloodlands. Knowing that no one ever returned from these lands, except for those whose minds were broken. 'Find out', the Sicambrii had said, 'why there are so little Formorians coming to our borders. Seek beyond our borders why the drums of war are silent for it makes our guards far too restless'. A secret or a riddle that made my heart beat fast the first time I heard it, for the very thought of the answer would haunt even the most brave in their sleep.





Now, I admit, the story gets difficult for I have heard only rumors and these rumors came from people I did not know. They spoke of returning Hero's and of a handful Formorians they encountered in the Bloodlands. The riddle was said to be solved. Most of the Formorians were simply gone. Where they went was everybody's guess, but somewhere in Tir Nan Beo the earth trembled when their boats run deep in the sand of a coastline. Many of us Bards have tried to find the stories about the quest in the Bloodlands, but until now I have not found a single truth. Words came to me through rumors and traders and that is what made the story so unnerving. For what would happen if it was all a lie. A fear made flesh through eager ears and willing hearts offering themselves as beasts of sacrifice. Was hope so lost that it would take dishonor to find it? I must admit that these questions haunted me for quite some time until I found myself around a campfire in Gall Heim, surrounded by wounded warriors who fought for days against the might of the Formorians. The Riddle of Araturix is solved, a bard said hopeful, the old man is found. He began to speak about a small warband who had found this place and in the night I sat myself closer to him to not miss a wor

After the order was given, many warbands scattered out across the lands to find the old man surrounded by clans who had to be at war. One of these warbands decided to go to Five Stones, a small trading post between the lands of the Semnoness, the Menapa, the Nervii and the Atribatii. They knew only three of them were at war, for the Atribatii had not seen battle for a very long time, but there was a route from Five Stones that went all the way to the Sicambrii borders and by taking that route they would cross many fighting clans and hoped to be lucky enough to find an old man somewhere in a tree. It was a quest made for luck, but luck is something to be conquered. It is a bull stag hiding in the forest. You know it is out there, but without entering that forest you will never find it. The warband that went had many known names, starting with the spokesman of King Oswald himself, Theodoric the Forgiving, brave warrior of the Batavii. He was accompanied by the Batavii warrior Isengrim and the female Batavii healer Hildegard. Next to them there were the Frisii warriors Hendrik, named the war stallion and Tjerk, advisor to Theodoric the Forgiving and who some call the Giant. Then there were the Nervii. In absence of his exiled prince there was Covis of the Dead Heart, who had brought Frigur, son of Oskur to accompany him. As always the Menapa Menapii were present with Finn the bard, Maon the healer and Una, whose name is heard more often since Oswald named her advisor to Theodoric the Forgiving. Last there was Skallagrim of the Tir Nan Beo Norse, also advisor to Theodoric the Forgiving and well known Ovate to those who have heard the tale of "the weaving of words".





The road they had taken was strangely peaceful until they encountered a band of Formorian warriors who made it quite clear what their intentions were. A fierce fight ignited and the first blood of the quest fell to the earth which consumed it eagerly. The party looked at each other knowing that this warparty of Formorians was all but a coincidence. They were still in Menapa lands in which the settlement of Gall Heim remained. They cleaned their swords and fastened their shield-straps before venturing forwards towards the trading post called Five Stones. Little did they know then, upon what secret they had stumbled. A small distance before they reached Five Stones they encountered two traders named Laya and Wolfram. They told the party that they had fled Five Stones due to a warband of Formorians who had charged in there without any warning. The traders had scattered to all four winds and made quick promises to each other to return to Five Stones in the cover of night. They had some knowledge about Five Stones, but told the party that others knew more. There were a few standing stones they knew of, but an old man in a tree they knew nothing of. The party then decided that they had to retake Five Stones so returning traders could be questioned. Hearts were beating fast now, for to retake Five Stones they had to fight off a large Formorian warband, who would probably be unwilling to go quietly. Silently they marched towards Five Stones all occupied with thoughts that could help them to overcome the fury of the Formorian host. When they came close a Nervii warrior named Ness, came walking through the forest his eyes fixed on the settlement what had to be Five Stones. Seemingly he had travelled these lands on his own, earning many questions when this was overheard. Now, however, was not the time for these things, for the Formorians had spotted them and strongly urged them to leave. A battle of words followed, where Skallagrim was challenged by a veteran Formorian, who regretted his words as soon as Skallagrim made clear that his power did not come from weapons, but from the flow of wyrd. Suddenly the battle commenced and shields groaned under the might of Formorian sword arms. Spears were thrust and axes hurled and everywhere warriors fell to the wounds inflicted upon them. Shouts of pain and wyrd filled curses were flung to either side until all Formorians were dead on the ground. When everything was over the healers of the party rushed in, helping those who would otherwise be lost. Armor was shattered, but somehow all of them survived. Luck it seemed had indeed travelled with them. For a short while the party tried to regain their breath, realizing again that this was no ordinary warparty of Formorians. The brute warriors had told them to go away in such a manner, that some of the party thought twice about their "needed" presence there.





There was power in Five Stones, every wyrd-user felt it, but it was difficult to sense where it came from. The party decided they would find the standing stones Laya and Wolfram had told them about, hoping to gain some knowledge of this place and after the light would leave them they would wait for the surviving traders who hopefully could tell them even more. As they went into the forest they found three standing stones. All three still breathing wyrd, although their power was almost gone. One stone was different though; it was surrounded by blood and clearly used as a sacrificial place. As this was Semnoness land the group instantly understood what all of it meant. Then, between wandering and searching, Maon, healer of the Menapa Menapii was drawn to a tree. Just off the road, between a few fallen trees, she looked at a wooden mask carved as if it were an old and wise man. It looked with hollow eyes into hers and without saying she knew she had found the place riddled by the druid Araturix. But how could this be, some of her companions wondered, for the Atribatii were not at war. All gathered around the tree and watched the mask look back at them. It was a strange thing to behold. Not because it was a mask, but because none of the party could understand the power it breathed into the air. Questions arose that they could not answer and more than ever they hoped that some of the fleeing traders would return to them and have some answers. The riddle of Araturix was almost solved, save for the fourth clan that had to be at war. As the sun started to set and the air grew colder they went back to Five Stones, knowing that they had almost fulfilled their quest. The mask however seemed indifferent to their needs and the party decided to go back to Five Stones and think it all over again. Thoughts now seemed to feel urgent as darkness drew near, and many of the party members feared the coming of night. The quest had been filled with luck and unknown powers and after finding the mask more and more wyrd-users felt sure that their presence had not gone unnoticed. Darkness was closing in fast and for some reason this seemed more important than ever before. Why was not yet clear, but daytime had proven to be more than significant and for no obvious reason some felt clearly that things of importance were moving all around them. It was an ill fate that Tir Nan Beo was yet again moving deeper into darker times and that none could escape its fate.

As they watched the sun set the mystery that began moons ago started to unravel. The weaving of words whispered unheard between the trees and the earth. Between warriors who stood up to see a few screaming people running as fast as they could from a few Formorians and the watchful eyes of some wyrd-users who felt a binding of fates, was brought in silence an unseen power. Our lands are riddled in mysteries and few understand even half of them, but on that moment there were powers colliding, powers that had tried to avoid each other for many generations. After the warriors had defeated the few Formorians they talked with the people that survived. They were Atribatii refugees and their tale was one of great suffering. They had fled their lands which lay in ruins. Great numbers of Formorians had landed upon their white beaches and had slain all who had tried to oppose them. Due to the sickness that haunted their lands few warriors had remained and though their courage was worthy of song, the lands were taken within days. They had seen strange creatures with heads of rats, that ravaged their lands and whose foul presence made crops decay. While few of the party did not feel sympathy, there was a strange hope coming from the fate of the Atribatii refugees, for if the Formorians had conquered their lands then the lands of the Atribatii were finally at war. The riddle of Araturix was solved, although many had hoped it had been under better circumstances.





As the night fell over Tir Nan Beo, the party began to talk about things that had happened in the past and one thing led to another, although I must admit that the real reasons for their sudden need to go to the sacrificing stone elude me still. As it were the whole group travelled towards the stone in the cover of darkness. Yet many creatures travel at night and that night some of the most feared had travelled after them. As the wyrd-users examined the sacrificing stone white faces began to emerge from everywhere. Within a heartbeat the party was surrounded by Aryans, whose strange clicking voices struck fear in whomever they could find. The party however moved quickly, hoping to outmaneuver the white ghosts, but tactics seemed to have failed before the battle even began. A fight in shadows erupted, as the Aryans charged fast between the ranks of the warriors. The flames of the torches danced as if possessed and right and left Aryans fell dead on the ground, but not only them. Their brutal ways cut deep into the warriors standing and some of the party fell screaming to the ground. More and more Aryans charged and the party fought as never before to outlive the next white face that hurled itself upon him. Shouting and screaming the party tried to defend everyone, but the way of wyrd had already tricked them. Whatever the Aryans seem to weave into the night, their clicking seemed to disrupt the very thoughts of the wyrd-users in the party. Unable to withstand the strange powers they felt, they broke formation and fell prey to the ever watchful eyes of the nightly terrors. In moments more than half of the wyrd-users lay dying on the ground. Their blood mingling with the blood of those who had died in front of the sacrificing stone. The warriors began to rush forwards, making short charges hoping to change the tide of the battle, but around them the screams turned to silence. Then, for no real reason they could think of, the Aryans were gone. With the same luck they had unraveled the riddle, they mustered their party and fled towards Five Stones. In the light of the fire they looked at each other and understood far too well, that their survival had not been because of their actions. Finn, the bard of the Menapa Menapii, said firmly, that they had not won this battle, but that the Aryans had left them victorious for reasons unknown to him. Again the white faces had charged without understanding why and had left them confused in their absence.

While the party sat weary around the campfire, discussions began to unfold between the different clans. Discussions of loyalty and honor and while different people spoke different things Ness, the newly arrived Nervii, saw distant lights coming through the forest. Nearby the standing stone, some called the warrior stone, he had seen movement. Some of the party leaped to their feet and began to run towards the warrior stone, but stopped when they saw what was coming towards them. In the shimmering light of the torches a few Rotting-Dyr were pushed forwards towards Five Stones. Strange creatures, half man, half rat. The stench immediately attacked their senses, as the smell of death was all around them. With swords and spears degenerated Formorians pushed the Rotting-Dyr forwards towards the party. The creatures stood nervously before their masters and then rushed forwards, their claws and mouths wide open to inflict grave damage. Foul smelling saliva dripped from their teeth as they hurled themselves upon the defenders, who tried to keep distance, not knowing what they were up against. The Rotting-Dyr charged and charged again, screaming hysterical when spears and swords stabbed them. As fast as it had begun, the battle was over. The stench was everywhere and after some examination the knowledge came that these creatures could well have been the cause of the sickness in the Atribatii lands. Underneath their nails there was rotting flesh and their skin was decaying while they looked upon it. The Formorians who had pushed them forwards seemed to be immune, though that could not be said for the sons of Mill.





Every one close felt the sickness preying on them and Gods forbid what would happen, when those nails had scratched someone. Hearts were beating fast, as this battle was something unheard of. There was no honor in those creatures, though the party had seen that the Rotting-Dyr had not charged them willingly. What the creatures were eluded them, but for now they concluded that they were used by the degenerated Formorians from the Bloodlands to sicken the Atribatii without them knowing it. More than one stomach turned when thinking about this dishonor, and next time they would meet these degenerated Formorians, there was even more reason to kill them outright. As stars passed silently over their heads the wounded were tended and the warriors began to mend their armor. They had found what they had searched for and on the morrow they would head back to Gall Heim to present King Oswald with their findings. The old man in the tree was found, together with the Formorians who had landed upon Atribatii beaches. As they listened to Finn telling his tales, a messenger of King Oswald came barging in and told them that a great host of Formorian warriors had attacked Gall Heim out of nowhere and that all warbands were summoned back to defend it. The party, still weary and many of them still wounded, gathered their belongings and went into the night, knowing that the Formorians would retake Five Stones again, without them defending it. Without anyone knowing it the Formorians had landed on the Atribatii beaches and had unloaded their warriors without contest. Had then travelled unseen by any Menapa guardian through the darkness of the night and had attacked Gall Heim when the first light had shown itself. The Party moved fast as they knew the importance of Gall Heim and hoped to arrive in time. Hoped to lock shields with their kinsmen and to make name while fighting the numerous Formorian warriors. There were also other thoughts. Thoughts that raised questions and doubt. How could the Formorians have done all this without anyone knowing about it. It was a new riddle and one that would not unravel itself easily and perhaps even not at all. Strange tides were clashing against each other and none knew for certain what it all meant. Perhaps that was what Araturix wanted them to understand. That they were mere mortals and that some things are beyond our understanding. Perhaps that was the reason he charged King Oswald with this festival in honor of the Gods, but then again, who really understands the teachings or the reasons of a druid?

