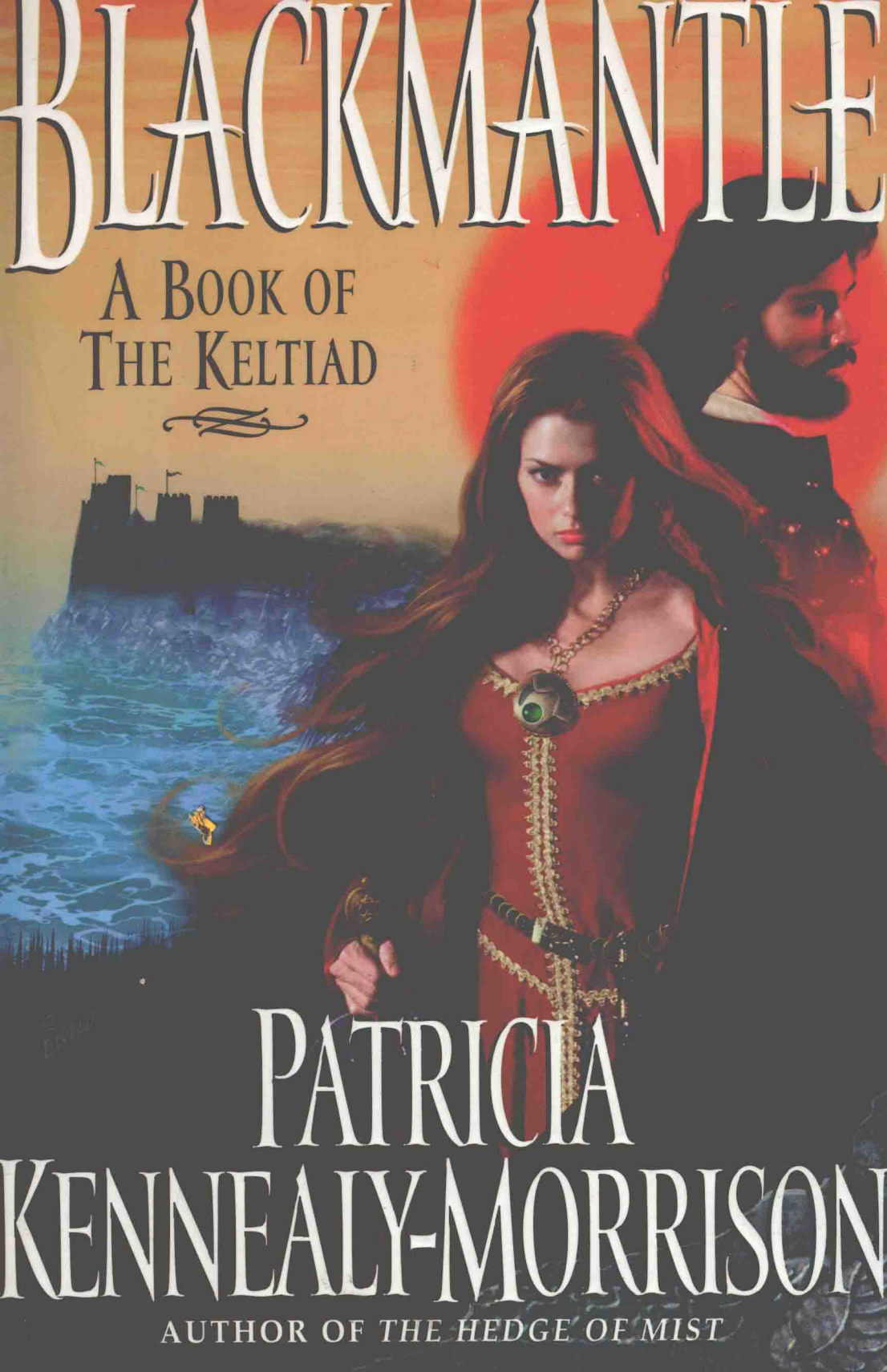


BLACKMANTLE



A BOOK OF
THE KELTIAD



PATRICIA

KENNEALY-MORRISON

AUTHOR OF THE HEDGE OF MIST

A BOOK OF THE KELTIAD

BLACKMANTLE

A Triumph

PATRICIA
KENNEALY-
MORRISON



HarperPrism

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To
Jim & Patricia Morrison

For
Silksteel & Fireheart

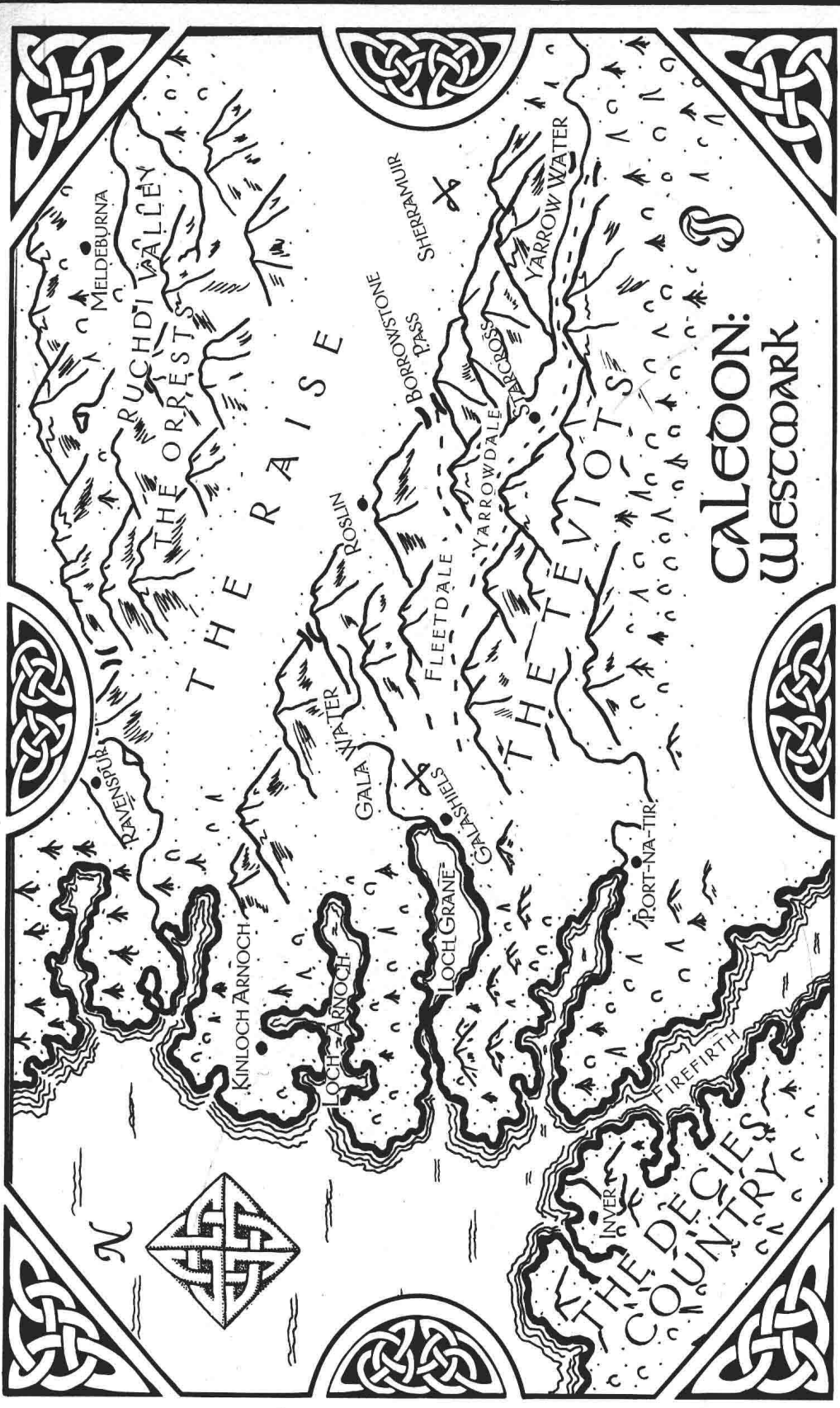
*To the poet & the sorceress. . .
Sailor's son & soldier's daughter
Heir to the serpent clan
& princess of the wolves*

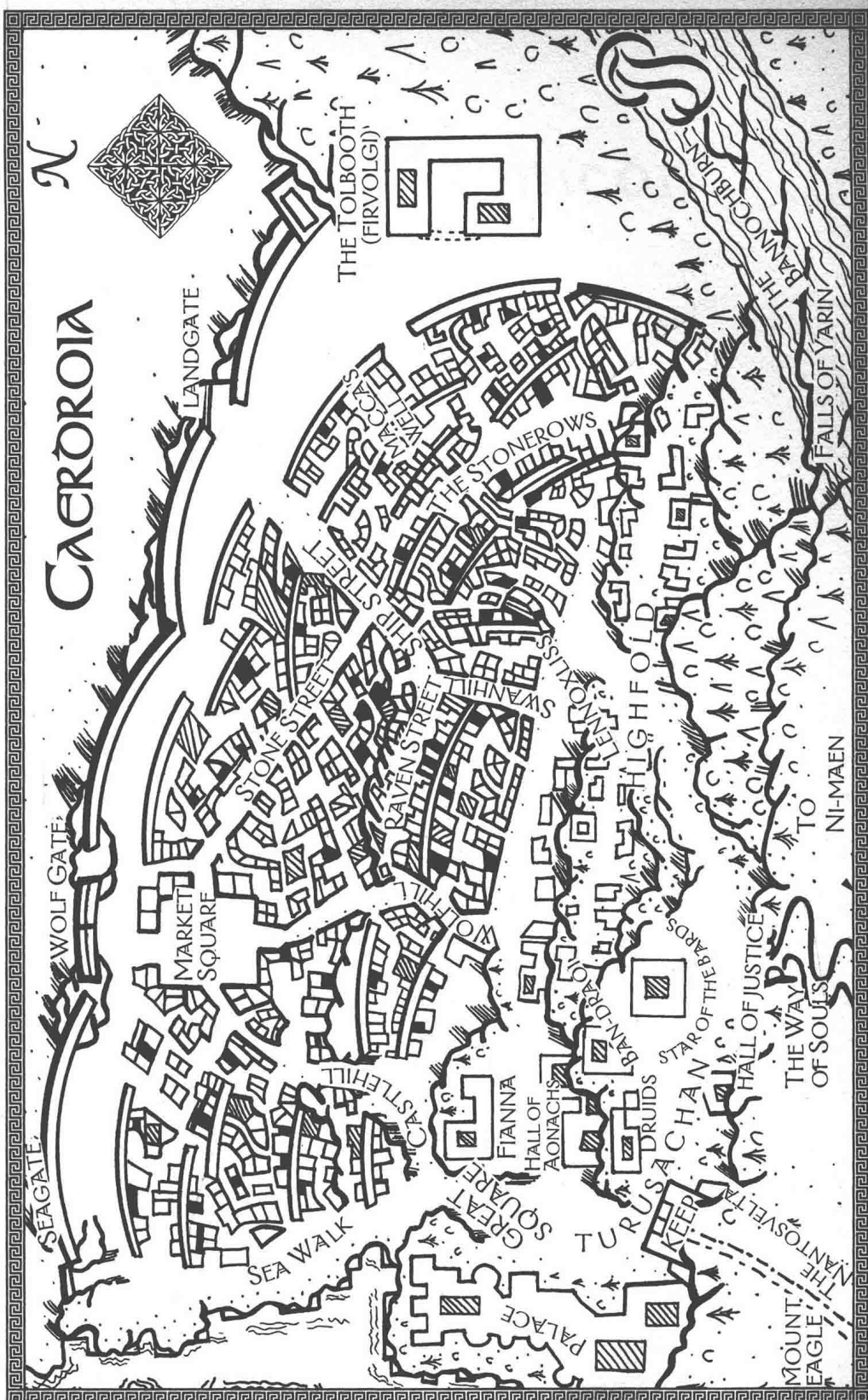
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And to Athyn's enemies and Morric's, who are—also, ever—ours: You are here also. Iadsan a dh'àras euceart.







Keltichronicon

In the Earth year 453 by the Common Reckoning, a small fleet of ships left Ireland, carrying emigrants seeking a new home in a distant land. But the ships were not the leather-hulled boats of later legend, and though the great exodus was indeed led by a man called Brendan, he was not the Christian navigator-monk who later chroniclers would claim had discovered a New World across the western ocean.

These ships were starships, their passengers the Danaans, descendants—and heirs to the secrets—of Atlantis, that they themselves called Atland. The new world they sought was a distant double-ringed planet, itself unknown and more than half a legend, and he who led them in that seeking would come to be known as Saint Brendan the Astrogator.

Fleeing persecutions and a world that was no longer home to their ancient magics, the Danaans, who long ages since had come to Earth in flight from a dying star's agonies, now went back to those far stars; and after two years' desperate wandering they found their promised haven. They named their new homeland Keltia, and Brendan, though he refused to call himself its king, ruled there long and well. And Nia his mother, who was of the race of the Sidhefolk, brought to the new realm the grace and magic of her people, so that in time to come the Kelts did call her blessed, and looked to her as saint and protectress of their worlds.

In all the centuries that followed, Keltia grew and prospered, becoming a star-kingdom of seven systems and a power in the galaxy. The kings and queens who were Brendan's heirs, whatever else they did, kept unbroken his great commandment: that until the time was right, Keltia should not for peril of its very existence reveal itself to the Earth that its folk had fled; nor forget, for like peril, those other children of Atland who had followed them

into the stars—the Telchines, close kin and mortal foes, who became the Coranians as the Danaans had become the Kelts...

This tale takes place in the centuries between Brendan and Arthur: in Earth Reckoning, around the year 1650.

It is a time when the sovereignty of Keltia stands vacant, when no High King or High Queen rules from the Throne of Scone. In these days the sovereignty does not always descend from monarch to heir as a matter of course but can be contested and won by a successful aspirant, always provided that that one be of the blood royal, however remotely traced.

And, just sometimes, that one might even prove to be the soul best fitted, or most fated, for the task: to ride into legend...

When the aged King Conamail dies, leaving not even a remote heir, the many factions and families claiming a right to the Copper Crown start squabbling bitterly amongst themselves, too bitterly to notice that the Firvolgians, whom Saint Brendan had so decisively cast out of Keltia so long since, have been creeping back like a secret stealthy tide.

By the time it dawns on anyone to think to resist, the Firvolgians—or Fir Bolc as the Kelts turn the name, after an old Earth enemy—are too firmly entrenched to be cut out by swords alone, and they and the Kelts settle down to an uneasy coexistence. A merchant people, the Firvolgians have introduced to Keltia all manner of unwanted innovations, most of which merely stir up discontent and some of which are utterly loathsome, adding nothing of merit, debasing much that has long been deep-rooted in the Keltic soul; they also seize a near monopoly on star travel, so that the Kelts, who a thousand years before had made their great voyagings through the galaxy, now must come and go at the pleasure of others.

Even the nobles, long time the guardians of the Keltic way of life, have grown disheartened, and try to scrape along with their unwanted neighbors—the Incomers, as they are called publicly; Kelts have rather less courteous names for use behind their backs—as best they can.

Over the years fierce battles have often erupted between Keltic lords and powerful Incomers, but nothing ever comes of them, save that the Kelts are left dispirited and drained, less eager than ever to

try to oust the insidious invaders. By the time this tale begins, most Kelts have resigned themselves and accepted the situation, without hope, despairing, acquiescent to what they think must ever be.

But not all...

*There was a young queen in a far town
Born on field of battle, she came to wear the crown
Her hand in war had earned a warrior's name
And love of justice burned in her like flame.*

*There was a dark king from the lands west
With poem and song he fought his battles best
He sang to her or ever they did meet
Fate conquered them, but it was no defeat.*

*They met in winter, joy'd in autumn fair
These fated two did hearts' true union share
Forswearing of all others, free in thrall,
They fell in love, and by love they would fall.*

*This king rode east alone one day in spring
In golden May he gave his love a ring
He asked if she would be his bride and wife
She answered they would vow past death and life.*

*Midsummer Day this royal pair did wed
Lay in each other's arms in a bless'd bed
A moonyear's joy they had, all love their own:
Then banished rival made a widowed throne.*

*This King's true queen in wrath did then arise
Struck down her mate's betrayers and their lies
Avenge him on his slayer with bloody sword
Upon the Low Road sought her lost loved lord.*

*She found him in that kingdom all folk fear
Saved him alive when none dared venture near
Silksteel and Fireheart: Where all lost faith
By love and valor they won back from Death.*

*Long years now these two lovers have been gone
Slipped hand in hand away to ride the storm:
Together once, against all evils done,
Together for aye, with all their love has won.*

*This King and Queen shall never be apart
They gave their souls in giving hand and heart
Two things only kill or heal or save:
Love is first; and then it is the grave.*

—from *The Ballad of Athyn and Morric*,
by Brahm of Aojun

Taer y gwir an y'n golau.
(The truth is eager for the light.)

—*Lassarina Aoibhell ac Douglas*

FORETALE

By these signs shall a hero be known: an eye to see the truth, a heart to feel the truth, an arm to defend the truth. To that I would add: wisdom that strives to teach the truth, courage that dares to speak the truth, love by which the truth shall live forever.

—*Séomaighas Douglas Ó Morrighsaun*

She was born among the dead.

Drawn from a dying woman upon a stricken battlefield, she was very nearly never born at all. Her father had already perished in the terrible fighting, her mother was on point of following; and she would surely soon have joined them both had not a weary soldier, wounded himself—a galloglass in the vanquished host, passing footsore by on the bitter retreat—heard her tiny outraged cries, and turned fatefully aside.

Scooping her up from the bloody ground where she lay still half within her mother's body (which not-yet-faded warmth and unsevered link had surely saved her long enough to be rescued at all—the first, last and only gift, save life itself, the dying woman could give her living child), he cut the birth-cord with his own sgian, heard the last faint desperate whispered words and made solemn vow in answer, then swaddled the scrap of infant in the sword-slashed plaid of a clann that was none of hers.

Even in his fear and hurt and weariness, the galloglass had also the rare foresight, or the rarer sentiment, to take as keepsakes for the child orphaned at her very birth the brooch and ring from the dead woman's shoulder and finger, the sword and medallion from her belt and throat, the heavy battle torc from round her neck. He would have taken a swathe of her hair also, but there were reasons why he could not find a

tress fit to cut. He left her with a prayer for her speeding and a promise for her child; there was no more that he, or any, could have done.

And even he himself, in after years, could not say precisely why he had done it: why, in peril that very moment of his own life, he had turned aside to save a life that had scarce begun and looked to be almost as swiftly ended, to cumber himself on a desperate retreat-march with a newborn babe that was none of his and not like to survive even her first night. There had been no portents, no omens that he had perceived: no voice in his battle-dinned ear, no shadow against the sun, no wind of a dark and fated wing. But that which he did changed Keltia forever, and more than Keltia at the last.

So he carried the foundling home to his clann and his wife and his children, and she grew and thrived and was happy among them. But the jewels and the sword and the lastwords of a warrior were carefully and scrupulously set aside, given into the keeping of the clann brehon and the bard of the kindred, bound about with fearful oaths of secrecy, until such time as the child should be of an age to value them, and to hear their meager history; for just then that seemed all the heritage she was ever like to have.

Some evil crabbed souls in years to come did mock the gesture, jeering that the galloglass had but despoiled the unknown dead like any battle-field gleaner, of her child no less than of her jewels. Not only that, they giped further, but had the infant sickened and died, as seemed for many days the likeliest outcome, he would have simply pouched for himself all the bits of gold and stones and silver. For who knew, they sneered again, that the orphaned lass had even been given full and correct count of her dead mother's pitiful remembrances—it might be that the galloglass, in venality, had kept back more than he gave. Or perhaps, they even dared to suggest, he had lied from the start about the truth of her origins.

So, indeed, some loathly foul-far'd folk did say and think, in after days. But she was never among those who thought so or said so; and being one who did not suffer fools at all, much less gladly, when such mouthings did assail her ear she struck back, and struck hard.

And nor was that the only time she was to do so...

BOOK I

The heart is the hero's weapon.

—Morric Douglas