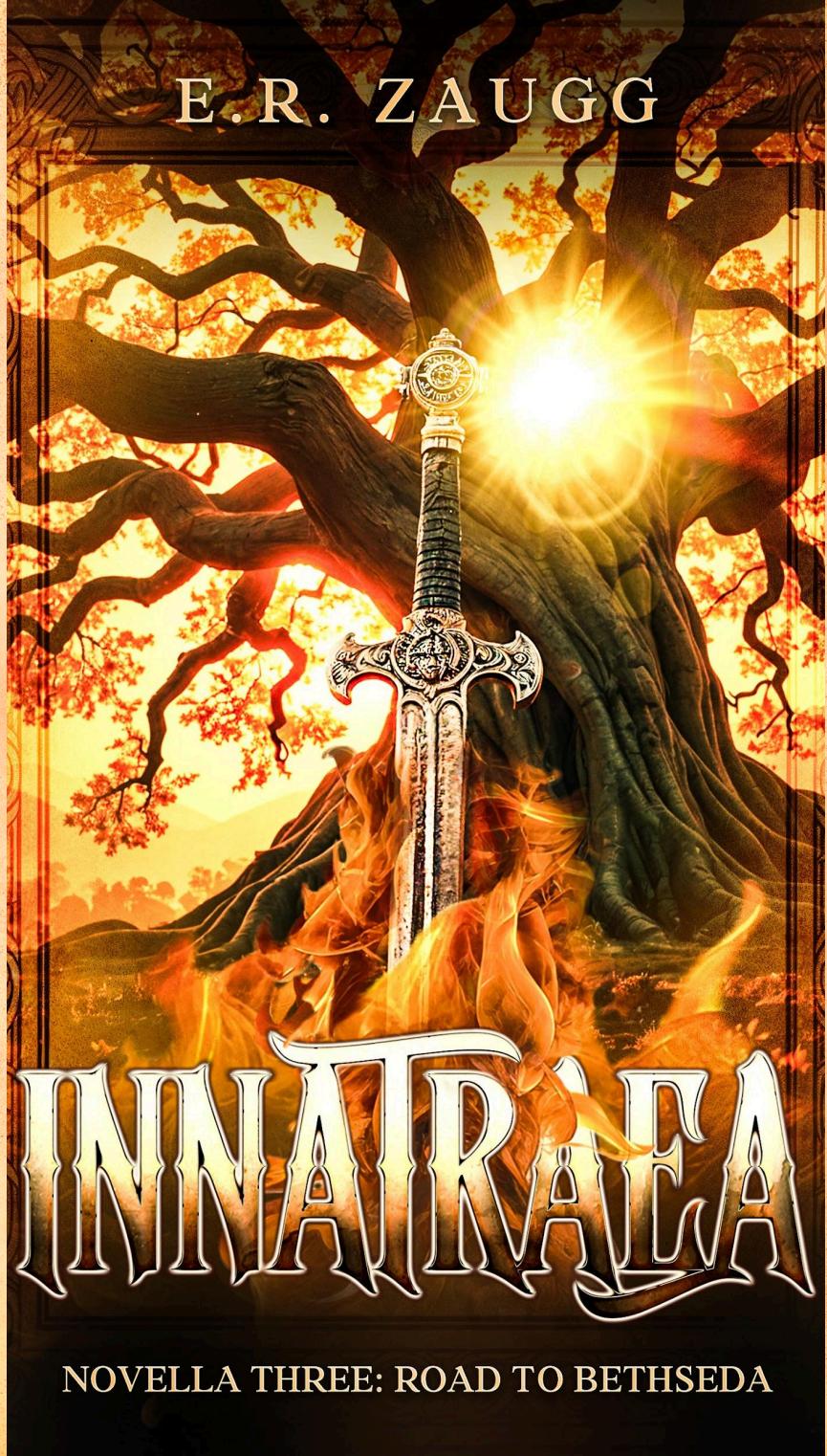


E.R. ZAUGG



Innatraea

Novella Three: Road to Bethseda



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*"Gallwch chi golli brwydrau neu
ryfeloedd, ond peidiwch byth â gadael
i'ch calon gael ei threchu.*

*You can lose battles or wars, but never
let your heart be defeated."*
-Old Cathyoran Saying



(CONTENT WARNING)

Prologue:

Gwyntoedd Ansicr (Uncertain Winds)

“Mae'r gwynt yn siarad wrth y rhai sy'n gwrando.

The wind speaks to those who listen.”

-Old Cathyoran Saying

About 18 years ago...

Gregoire D'Arganse, High King of Aedonia, held the relic up to the light of one of his small study's candles. The relic felt strange, its touch a sharp pang, as if judging him for sins he couldn't name. It was fashioned from the bones of some ancient beast, and encased a bundle of what looked like long petrified fangs. “This thing, will it accomplish what I need?”

Inquisitor Durand nodded, looking serious as always. “Yes. The detestable godless witch who gave it to me swore it would.” Durand shuddered, dry washing his hands, as though he were scrubbing off filth. “It came from Djel'mden's depths, wrested from the Weavers at great cost.” Gaining control of himself, he crossed his arms and slipped his hands into the voluminous sleeves of his white robes. “Once activated, it will sever *Trefn Cyfiawnder*'s connection to their Dryads, rendering their magic useless. I believe it can work for nearly a league, it will break them.”



Gregoire slammed the relic down, shaking off its judging sting. Aedonia was his kingdom, and it was their right to conquer. War always exacted a cost, even if that price meant dealing with the godless.

He looked at Durand while rubbing his chin in thought. The man was far from his favorite Inquisitor. There was cruelty in him, a deep hunger cloaked in faith, wielded like a shield. Then again, that was in the nature of all Jhorian Inquisitors, they had earned their more common name long ago, *Crows*. He didn't particularly like them, especially this one, but the Jhorian faith's cruel anointed served him well, allies despite their methods.

"How do we activate it?"

"With blood. Your majesty." Durand stepped closer and pointed a long pale finger at the sharp spines within the relic's core. "One must prick their finger on the thorns."

Gregoire nodded. It made sense. Most godless witchery required blood or sacrifice. "We will need to test it."

Durand's lips curled into a thin humorless smile. "Yes. Though I believe these plans represent the Will of Jhoras, a test would be prudent."

Gregoire nodded and looked toward the door of his study.
"Stanislav!"

The commander entered almost immediately, shoving the study door out of his way as if it was an enemy barricade. He was a bit overzealous, but Gregoire often found that very useful.

"Yes, Majesty?"

"Find several of your best men. I have a special mission for you, that will require some delicacy."

The man saluted, placing a hand on his sword pommel. "Of course, Majesty, anything you need."



Gregoire motioned toward the relic. "Take this thing. Its abilities need to be tested." He refused to call it magic. "Inquisitor Durand will accompany you, both to observe the results, and show you how to activate the relic." Gregoire placed both hands on his desk and took on an even more serious demeanor. "Speak to no one of the results, save myself."

Stanislav stepped up to the desk. "Yes, Majesty. I will do as you command and remain quiet." He reached for the relic.

Gregoire blocked the man's arm, and met his eyes. "Find a box to carry the thing. Holding it is... unpleasant."

Stanislav's jaw tightened as he glanced at the relic, eyes flickering with unspoken questions, but he knew better than to speak. "Yes, your Majesty, right away." He pivoted and left the study, the man was loyal.

Gregoire turned to Durand. "He will get the task done. Make sure to find one of the *Trefn Cyfiawnder* witches for the testing. That is the only way we can be sure it works."

"Your majesty is wise, as always"

Gregoire dismissed him with a nod. "Now leave me. I need to think."

Durand left without further comment, quietly closing the door behind himself. Gregoire opened his study window before returning to his desk to think. Fresh air always helped his mind see more clearly.

For years, he had never been able to plan an open confrontation with Cathyor. Though small, the kingdom wielded an advantage unlike any other, the godless witches of *Trefn Cyfiawnder*. Those damned women and their abilities, he refused to call it magic, counted for thousands of swords in battle, making them an unstoppable force. But if he could sever that advantage? The eastern kingdoms would all finally be his.



He unrolled a tactical map of Cathyor, the most accurate depiction his cartographers could produce, and laid it out on his desk. Opening his small box of miniatura he kept nearby, he started to set them out in a divining game of war.

A sharp breeze blew through the window and knocked over his personal miniatura. Gregoire righted it immediately, but his hand paused for a moment still touching the miniatura, lingering on his lost family's faces, brothers fallen. It would all finally be over, with this last bloody campaign. He reached for the next miniatura in his box.

It was time to plan.

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A few weeks later Durand was walking his horse past the anointed, and then the common Aedonian soldiers, guiding the animal slowly with his knees. The beast had no name, not one that he knew anyway. What was the point of naming a single tool, when you had so many others? Names have power that tools did not need. The men had apprehended one of the *Trefn Cyfiawnder* witches this morning, she'd been on patrol by herself. A circumstance those of superstition would give credence to luck for, but he knew the Will of Jhoras when he saw it. Durand suppressed another wince of pain as the cloth he was cleaning his forearm with rubbed his new wound the wrong way. It had been necessary to cut himself, activating the relic required blood, and he'd wanted to test it himself.

Stanislav resisted handing it over at first. The man had been ordered by his king to perform this test and told that Durand was only there to instruct, and observe the results. But the use of power required Jhoras' hand. Once they'd left Bethseda, and the man realized Durand's anointed outnumbered his own men two to one, convincing him to hand over the relic had proven much easier than expected, given the man's original protestations. Fear was a great motivator, and one Durand had learned how to use at a very young age. The situation was now much more tenable.



Now the relic, and the box it had been placed inside of, rested within Durand's satchel. High King Gregoire had been correct, holding the relic was indeed uncomfortable, he shuddered for a moment thinking about the recent experience, while tucking the now bloodstained cloth away next to that very same box. He would keep the bloodied cloth later—it might hold secrets beyond the relic; blood shed through magic often did. Though initial results had been beyond his expectations. Durand had been nearly a league away from their target when he'd first cut himself to activate the relic, and his anointed had reported it working almost immediately.

Everything would have to be carefully verified however, dealing with godless relics required caution. Further study would be needed, after this test, and he'd make sure that his order had the task, since the relic was in his hands now.

Durand dismounted, brushing off his wound's sting—Jhoras' Will outweighed discomfort.

"Unhand me dogs!"

Durand smiled at the sound of panic in the godless *Trefn Cyfiawnder* witch's voice. The very fact that she was being held down by his anointed, while her now useless "magic" sword lay on the ground next to her, was evidence enough that the relic worked. But he had to push her, to make sure it could truly contain her. Innatreaans were at their strongest toward the end, a lesson he had learned when first becoming an Inquisitor so many years ago.

Durand smiled as he neared her, she was younger than he had expected, perhaps a new recruit, he also noted that there was no Catena covering her eyes. The anointed used those cloth veils to suppress magic. One not being necessary here was even more evidence that the relic worked. Durand drew one of the *Sica*, Jhoras' divine dual-edged daggers, he kept at his waist as he stopped above her.



The ceremonial daggers were blessed by Jhoras and every anointed carried at least one of them. The look of pure terror in her eyes brought a pleasant smile to his face.

"Now then witch, the real test." He smiled as she tried to break free again, arching her back with the effort. Durand kicked her now useless sword away and knelt near her. "It was unwise of you to be so far from your godless sister witches. I am afraid your death will not be a merciful one, Jhoras has decreed your sins unforgiven, and has requirements of you."

Durand smiled while he leaned over her and slowly pushed his *Sica* into the ground near her eyes. The godless witch traced the movement, watching the blade slide past her face. She flinched in pure terror, eyes widening as a drop of his blood landed on her.

Durand took the bloodied cloth out again, and very gently wiped away the tears streaming down her face. Her eyes widened even more, seeing the blood as her body shook with fear. Pain was nowhere near as effective a tool as terror.

Durand glanced at her hands, and seeing one of them flexing feebly, trying to reach for her sword, he looked further away at the blade. It wasn't moving. Her magic would not help her now, her Dryad was gone.

Durand turned back to her and smiled at the look of complete terrified despair in her eyes. The relic worked, the godless witch had no power left and she knew it. Durand pulled his *Sica* out of the ground, as she closed her eyes, giving up on life. This was over now, he knew what he'd come here to learn. He looked at the men with him. "Do what you want with her. Make sure she's nice and *pretty* for her sisters to find."

A sharp breeze blew over him while they dragged her away, as if the forest itself was mourning.



A few days later...

Cormac pushed open the balcony doors and closed his eyes, inhaling a deep breath, enjoying the fresh air and bright sunlight on his face. It was chilly outside, but the air would do his newly born son good. Prince Cian, their new baby boy, started crying, and it was the most glorious sound Cormac had ever heard. He looked back at the Royal bed, and smiled, as his beautiful Isolde leaned down to kiss their baby on the head.

She looked up and met his eyes, and in them joy and love sparkled brightly. She nuzzled their son, her expression tender. He knew she would be upset once everything settled down, because she hadn't given birth to a daughter. Though she would never speak of it. Isolde was a woman of pure love and respect. It was a great honor for the women of *Trefn Cyfiawnder* to have a daughter first; and she would always carry that in her heart.

Cormac loved her beyond reason and wished he could have spared her that pain. But his new son still made them both smile, which was happiness enough for now. Cormac's son, Prince Cian would solidify House Ahearne's reign by virtue of inheritance, which gave him joy as a father and a king. He smiled, knowing they would try again. There were many children in their future, and by *Rhiannon*, most would be girls. Cathyor, as a kingdom, was ruled by its king, but the real power behind their people was the women of *Trefn Cyfiawnder*.

Their family biume Brianna sat by the bed, tending Isolde and Cian, eyebrows arched.

He smiled sheepishly. "The fresh air will do my son good."

Brianna's eyebrows moved higher, though the woman didn't speak.



Cormac laughed. "I know, I know. You're still the same woman who paddled my backside as a child."

As Cormac turned to close the balcony doors, a cold wind blew over him, piercing his tunic and making him shiver. He shrugged it off and latched the doors.

Both women laughed at him. To which he just smiled, these were the two most important women in Cormac's life, and they both loved him.

A soft knock came at their bedchamber door.

Brianna made to stand, but Cormac waved the woman back to her seat. "I'll answer it, I may be king, but I can do some things myself, and they need you more than I do." She sat back down and leaned in to dote upon baby Cian.

When Cormac opened the door, he was greeted by Elspeth Anwyl, her hand resting on the pommel of the sword at her waist. She nodded, the only salute he required, which she knew well.

Elspeth had been amongst *Gwarchodlu Brenhinol*, his royal guard, for a number of years now, and he trusted her implicitly, which is why she was here today, for the symbolic honor of guarding their son's birth. He remembered recently hearing that she was now romantically involved with one of their soldiers. He wanted to ask her about it, and make sure the soldier was a good man. But at the moment, her usual smiling face was somber, her eyes and voice both shaken. "Majesty, I am afraid I have been given ill news. One of our sisters, she..."

Cormac held up a hand, interrupting her. He looked back at his wife and newly born son, basking in their warm glow. Bad tidings had no place here, not on this day. He gestured toward the antechamber, wordlessly instructing Elspeth to step back.

But of course, Isolde had a different opinion. "My mind's still sharp. Let her in, my love."



Cormac nodded and silently stood aside. As a man of Cathyor, even as their king, he understood that certain matters belonged to the women of *Trefn Cyfiawnder*. That was simply the way of things. Elspeth walked past him and knelt near the bed, head lowered, and placed her hand on the pommel of her sword. "Sister, it's Ailbhe, they..." She choked, and wiped tears from her eyes. "A patrol found her this morning. She's been taken from us! Someone killed our sister."

Shock and heartbreak swept Isolde's face. The women of *Trefn Cyfiawnder* were unilaterally respected everywhere they went inside of Cathyor's borders. This was an unheard of tragedy, and worse, Ailbhe was Isolde's distant cousin. Ailbhe's face flashed across Cormac's mind, she had been such a kind child, and had only recently become a full sister of *Trefn Cyfiawnder*, the memory made him want to kill whoever was responsible with his bare hands. His hands clenched into fists and he stepped closer to Isolde. She however sat up and quietly handed Cian to Brianna's waiting arms. Cormac offered his hand. She didn't speak to him but her hand gripped his in a way that indicated both her gratitude and loving respect. With his help, she knelt by Elspeth, and the women embraced, touching their foreheads together. Isolde's voice shook with emotion.

"What happened to my cousin?"

Elspeth startled back in shock. "Your cousin? I am so sorry, I did not know."

Isolde laid a hand on the other woman's cheek. "It's alright, what happened to our sister?"

Elspeth laid her head on Isolde's shoulder as the other woman hugged her closer, putting a hand on the back of her head. 'She was dismembered, nailed to a tree.'

Isolde gasped. "*Rhiannon*, preserve us, who did this? How?"

Elspeth looked toward Cormac, her face saying that she was judging whether it was wise to speak the next part in his presence or not.

Isolde squeezed her shoulder gently. “He’s my husband and our king, it’s alright, speak.”

Cormac shivered, wondering what matter was so dire, it must be ill tidings indeed.

Elspeth choked, but sat back up and wiped her eyes before meeting Isolde’s gaze. “There is more. Her magic, it didn’t work. Her Dryad was there weeping, when they found our sister, saying she couldn’t feel Ailbhe when it happened.”

Cormac shook with uncertainty and rage, ill tidings indeed. Every woman of *Trefn Cyfiawnder* was bonded to a Dryad, the magical titans of nature who gave the women their magic and purpose.

Isolde’s eyes took on an inner fury. “Who did this and how?”

Elspeth sat up, eyes wet but steady. ‘We don’t know. Gwendolyn has dispatched *Cysgod* to investigate.

Cormac nodded to himself silently. The *Cysgod* would hunt the truth.

“That is well. Gwendolyn knows what she is doing. I’ll speak to her. Isolde’s eyes grew more compassionate as she hugged Elspeth again. “They brought my cousin...” There was a pause in Isolde’s speech. “Our sister, back home?”

Elspeth’s voice still shook with anger and sadness. “Yes, she is home.”

Isolde stroked the other woman’s hair. “*Rhown ein chwaer i orffwys, bydded iddi gael heddwch yn y Byd Nesaf.*” We will lay our sister to rest, may she find peace in the next world.

She looked at Cormac. “I don’t care if you have to carry our Royal bed outside, I will go to my sisters. They need me. We must honor Ailbhe, and find out what happened.”

Cormac didn’t argue, there was no point. This was his duty, and theirs. He also couldn’t help but feel a chill deep in his bones, wondering what this meant for all of their futures.



If the women of *Trefn Cyfiawnder* were no longer safe then what did that mean for Cathyor? A gust of wind rattled the latched balcony doors, as if answering.

