

Fetcher's Song/Battlesong, by Lian Tanner (The Hidden series #3)

Chapter 1: Three hundred years later

Gwin stood in the muddy field outside the village of Swettle, counting the beats. *One, two, three—*

'Hup!' she cried, which was the cue for her twin brother Nat to vault onto the shoulders of their ox, Spindle. And, 'Hup hup!' which sent Spindle lumbering in a circle with Nat on his back.

Like all the villages in this part of West Norn, Swettle was dank and miserable. Spring was struggling to gain a foothold, and mud covered everything, including Gwin's bare feet. She curled her toes in the slush and glanced at Papa, who stood to one side with his fiddle tucked under his chin and his eyes half-closed as he played 'The Chase of Madden'.

It was supposed to be a dance tune, and there was a time when the villagers would've been stamping their feet and hallooing at the tops of their voices, no matter how tired and hungry they were. Nat would've worn a grin a mile wide and Papa would've laughed as he sawed at his fiddle.

And Mama?

Gwin swallowed the dreadful lump in her throat. Mama would've rattled out the beat on her tambour, and danced as if the world was as bright and beautiful as anyone could wish—

Even now, Papa didn't play badly; he was too much of a Fetcher for that. But his heart wasn't in it, and no one in the audience so much as tapped their feet.

They gaped, though. Everyone gaped when they saw Nat performing. They knew he was blind, knew that what he did would be hard even for someone who could see. But there he was, leaping off Spindle's sturdy shoulders and back on again, as quick and fierce as a wildcat, while the fiddle music wove around him.

The old ox lumbered round to the front of the circle again, and Gwin went up on her toes. *If I do this next bit perfectly, she thought, everything will be all right. Papa*

will be happy again. Nat will stop being so angry. Nothing bad will happen to either of them, if I do this perfectly.

On exactly the right beat, she dashed forward with her beaded plaits flying. ‘Hiii!’ she cried.

Despite his anger, Nat never got his timing wrong. He reached out in the direction of his sister’s voice, and she grabbed his hand and bounced off the ground onto Spindle’s broad back.

Her leap *wasn’t* perfect, of course. She and Nat might be twins; they might have the same strong limbs and the same red hair; they might both wear ragged knee pants and rabbit-fur bands on their upper arms, but Gwin had none of her brother’s natural brilliance. When she jumped, one of her legs always seemed to lag a little way behind. When she somersaulted, she felt more like a bundle of sticks than a wildcat.

All the same, she sat behind Nat for a count of seven, with a determined smile on her face. Then she leaned forward. ‘Eight, nine, ten,’ she whispered, and as Nat raised his hands in the air, she jumped from a sitting position to standing, gripped his hands and leaped onto his shoulders.

The audience gasped, and a group of ragged children in the front row opened their mouths and cried, ‘Ooooooh!’

Gwin smiled again, a wide Fetcher smile that covered up everything she was feeling. She smiled at the buds that were just starting to open on an apple tree. She smiled at Nat’s dog Wretched, sitting in the audience with his head on a little boy’s lap and his tail thumping gently. She smiled at the men and women whose children had died of hunger or been stolen by the Devouts, and who couldn’t take their eyes off Nat and Gwin.

And all the time she was smiling, she watched for signs of danger.

She saw nothing out of the ordinary. Swettle was just like every other village they visited. Dismal, hungry and muddy.

With a whoop, Gwin dropped onto Spindle’s back. And as the old ox skidded to a halt, she and Nat jumped off, landing with their knees bent and their arms wide.

If things were working the way they were supposed to, Nat would’ve reached for his clarinetto then, and Papa would’ve pushed the wooden box into the circle, then raised his bow, ready to play.

But hardly anything worked the way it was supposed to these days. Gwin handed the clarinetto to her scowling brother, then grabbed the box and dragged it forward.

‘Papa,’ she whispered. ‘It’s the Hope song.’

Her father started, as if he’d been miles away, and touched bow to fiddle.

When Gwin was small, Mama used to say, ‘Anyone can sing when they are happy, my darling, and the sun is shining. But to sing in the middle of a storm, when the winds are howling and it feels like the sun will never shine again, that’s different. That’s our job, as Fetchers. We help keep the heart of the world beating.’

Gwin still found it hard to think about Mama without weeping, especially when she wove the beads into her plaits in the exact same pattern Mama had always used, or stepped up onto the box and began to sing, as she did now.

‘How tall the tree,

The first to fall—’

Her voice wasn’t anywhere near as beautiful as Mama’s, just as her leaps weren’t as astonishing as Nat’s. But she didn’t even think of stopping. For the last couple of months she had been the only one holding the little family of Fetchers together. If she stopped, everything she knew would come to an end.

‘How wise to flee

The worst of all—’

The rat appeared halfway through the first verse. Gwin had no idea where it had come from, but it crouched in the shelter of Spindle’s cart, peering up at her.

She slipped her hand into her pocket, took out a stone and threw it.

No one in the audience so much as blinked. There were rats everywhere in West Norn, spoiling what little grain the villagers managed to hide from the Devouts, gnawing holes in the thatch so the rain came in, burrowing into cellars and taking bites out of the last few stored apples. Throwing stones at them in the middle of a conversation (or a song) was as ordinary as scratching a flea bite.

This rat, however, ducked so that the stone flew over its head. Then, instead of running away as any normal rat would have done, it sat up on its haunches, crossed its front paws like an old man, and made a *tsk tsk tsk* sound.

It was so unexpected and so ridiculous that for the first time in weeks Gwin almost smiled. A proper smile. A *real* one, like a tiny spot of warmth in her overburdened heart.

‘But hear the song,’ she sang,

‘The singer gives,

The trunk is gone,

The root still lives.'

All the way through that first verse, the rat seemed to listen attentively. *Except it's not really listening*, thought Gwin. *Someone's trained it, that's all. But who'd train a rat? And why?*

And then, because she was being as cautious as possible, to keep what was left of her family safe, she thought, *Could it be dangerous? It doesn't look dangerous, but it's not ordinary either, not with those silver eyes. How can a rat have silver eyes?*

She was so busy puzzling over it that she didn't see the *real* danger signs until it was almost too late.

Gwin and her family had always lived on a perilous edge, fetching trouble just as surely as they fetched songs and stories out of the distant past. But until two months ago, Gwin had believed that nothing could really touch them.

Now she knew better; Papa or Nat could be snatched away from her in an instant, just like Mama. And so, wherever she was, she kept her eyes peeled for any sign of approaching disaster—

Like the woman leaning against the apple tree, her fair hair pulled tight against her head, her face worn almost to the bone by grief and hard work. She was one of those who had been watching Gwin and Nat so hungrily, but she wasn't watching them now. She was staring at her neighbour, who kept glancing over his shoulder towards the village, as if he was expecting someone.

The woman took a couple of steps towards him, so she could see the Northern Road. Her body stiffened. She turned back, her face a picture of dismay, and mouthed at Gwin, 'The Masters! Go! Run!'

But Gwin couldn't move. 'Masters' was what the villagers called the Devouts, who were the enemies of every Fetcher ever born. Last time her family had run from them, Mama had fallen—

Gwin tried to catch her breath, and couldn't.

Mama had fallen and hit her head. Gwin and Papa had managed to drag her up onto the oxcart in time to escape, but Mama had never woken up from that fall. A week later she had passed away.

And now the same thing was happening again! Only this time it might be Papa who fell. Or Nat. Or the Devouts might catch them and hang them—

Gwin wrenched her thoughts out of that awful spiral and did a quick dance step on the box – *thump thumpety thump-thump-thump*.

It was a Fetcher signal, almost as familiar as the hills that surrounded Swettle. As the music cut off, the villagers struggled to their feet, dragging their children up with them and scattering in all directions.

The rat ran too, though Gwin didn't see where it went. She grabbed the box with one hand and Nat's arm with the other, and dashed towards the ox-cart, with Papa only a step behind them. Spindle, who knew the signal as well as any of them, was already backing between the shafts.

While Nat scrambled into the cart, and Gwin's fingers flew over the straps and buckles of Spindle's harness, Papa jumped into the driver's seat and grabbed the whip. Wretched was tearing towards them, his ears flat, his tail tucked between his legs. Behind him, the woman who had warned them was struggling to get away from her neighbour, who held her by both wrists.

Wretched flung himself up onto the cart beside Nat, and Gwin jumped up next to Papa. Spindle threw his massive shoulders against the harness.

The woman broke free. She looked around frantically, then picked up her skirts and bolted for the cart. Behind her, three men in dark brown robes came out from between the huts, leading a mule.

The neighbour shouted, and pointed to the cart and the running woman. Two of the robed men broke into a sprint.

If Mama had been there, either she or Papa would have hauled the woman up onto the cart beside them. If there was one thing Gwin's parents had always loved almost as much as they loved music and laughter, it was snatching someone from the clutches of the Devouts.

But Mama was gone forever and Papa was not himself. So it was Gwin who grabbed the woman's outstretched hand and hauled her up onto the seat in a breathless, frantic bundle.

Papa cracked the whip. Spindle broke into a rocking gallop. And with a strange woman on board and the Devouts hot on their tail, the Fetchers ran for their lives.