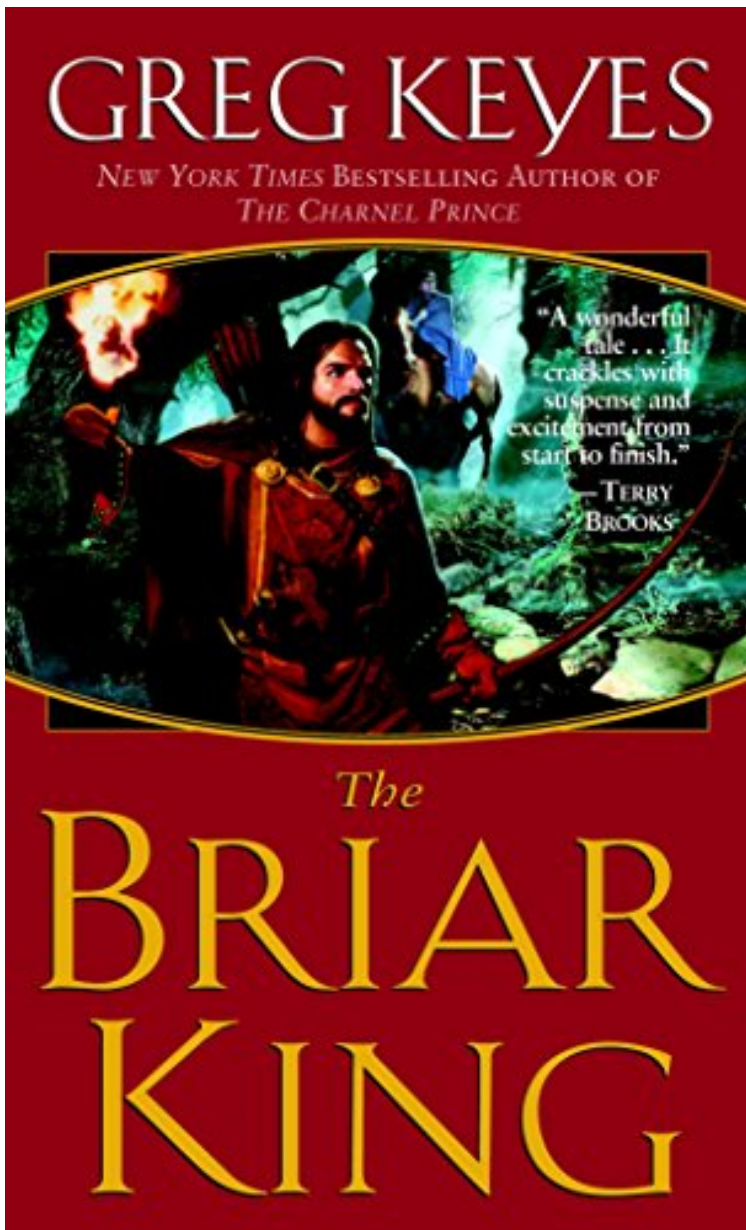


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The Briar King



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurTwo thousand years ago, the Born Queen defeated the Skasloi lords, freeing humans from the bitter yoke of slavery. But now monstrous creatures roam the landand destinies become inextricably entangled in a drama of power and seduction. The kings woodsman, a rebellious girl, a young priest, a roguish adventurer, and a young man made suddenly into a knightall face malevolent forces that shake the foundations of the kingdom, even as the Briar King, legendary harbinger of death, awakens from his slumber. At the heart of this many-layered tale is Anne Dare, youngest daughter of the royal family . . .

upon whom the fate of her world may depend..comThe Briar King, Greg Keyes's latest elegant entry into the world of high fantasy, lays the groundwork for what promises to be a mesmerizing four-book series--the Kingdoms of Thorn and Bone. Keyes spins his tale in a meticulously crafted fantasy realm on the brink of apocalyptic change. The Briar King, a legend cobbled from children's stories and rural folklore, is waking from his slumber to an unknown but cataclysmic end. Dark agents are afoot in the land, stirring war and edging an ancient prophecy closer to fulfillment. In destiny's path are a king's woodsman, his headstrong lover, a bookworm priest, a cocksure swordsman, and the embattled (from within and without) kingdom of Crotheny. Keyes masterfully intertwines far-off courtly intrigue with the personal quest of the woodsman and his brave companions who seek to unravel the secret of the Briar King before all is lost. Although The Briar King will suffer the inevitable comparison with George R.R. Martin's Song of Ice and Fire series, it should be said that Keyes's work is no mere rip-off. This is excellent world building, applied with a dark, powerful touch that should convince Martin fans to become Keyes fans, too. --Jeremy Pugh

Chapter One

The Holter Aspar White smelled murder. Its scent was like a handful of autumn leaves, crisped by the first frost and crushed in the palm. Dirty Jesp, the Sefry woman who had raised him, told him once that his peculiar sense came from having been born of a dying mother below the gallows where the Raver took his sacrifices. But Jesp made her living as a liar, and the why didn't matter anyway. All Aspar cared about was that his nose was usually right. Someone was about to kill someone else, or try. Aspar had just walked into the Sows Teat after a week of hard going in the Walham Foothills. His muscles burned with fatigue, his mouth was grittier than sand, and for days he had been dreaming of the cool, dark, honeyed sweetness of stout. He had just one sip, one moment of it dancing on his tongue, one kiss of foam on his lips, when the scent came and ruined the taste. With a sigh, he set the grainy earthenware mug on the pitted oak of his table and looked around the dark, crowded interior of the tavern, one hand straying to the planished bone grip of his dirk, wondering where death was coming from and where it was going. He saw only the usual crowd: charcoal burners mostly, their faces smudged black by their trade, joking and laughing as they drank away the taste of soot on their tongues. Nearer the door, which had been propped open to let in the evening air, Lohthe miller's boy, in his clean, lace-trimmed shirt, gestured grandly with his mug, and his friends hooted as he drained the whole thing in one long draught. Four Hornlath merchants in checkered doublets and red hose stood near the hearth, where a spitted boar dripped sizzling into the coals, and around them gathered a clump of youths, faces eager and ruddy in the firelight, begging stories about the wide world beyond their tiny village of Colbaely. Nothing that even looked like a brawl about to start. Aspar picked up his mug again. Maybe the beer was a little off, today. But then he saw where murder was coming from. It came in through the open door, along with the first tentative trilling of whippoorwills and a faint, damp promise of rain. He was just a boy, maybe fifteen. Not from Colbaely, Aspar knew for sure, and probably not even from the Greffy of Holtmarh. The newcomer swept a desperate, hurried gaze around the room, squinting, trying to adjust his eyes to the light, clearly searching for someone. Then he saw Aspar, alone at his table, and lurched toward him. The young fellow was clad in brain-tanned elkskin breeches and a shirt of homespun that had seen better days. His brown hair was matted, caked with mud, and full of leaves. Aspar saw the apple in his throat bobble convulsively as he pulled a rather large sword from a sheath on his back and quickened his pace. Aspar took another pull on his beer and sighed. It tasted worse than the last. In the sudden silence, the boys' buskins swish-swished on the slate-tiled floor. You're the holter, the boy said in a thick Almannish accent. The kongsman. I'm the king's forester, Aspar agreed. It's easily known, for I wear his colors. I'll be Aspar White. And you'd be? . . . Ham the man is going to slooter you, the boy said. Aspar lifted his head just slightly, so he was looking at the lad with one eye. He held the sword clumsily. Why? he asked. You know why. No. If I knew why, I never would have asked. You know saint-buggering well! tho ya then manns slootered meen kon. Speak the king's tongue, boy. Grim take the king! the boy shouted. It's not his forest! Well, you'll have to take that up with him. He thinks it is, you know, and he's the king. I mean to. Right after I take it up with you. This goes all the way back to Eslen before ham done. But it starts here with you, murderer. Aspar sighed. He could hear it in the young man's voice, see it in the set of his shoulders. No use talking anymore. He stood quickly, stepped inside the sword point, and slammed his beer mug against the side of the boy's head. The kiln-fired clay cracked and the fellow screamed, dropping his weapon and clutching his split ear. Aspar calmly yanked out his long dirk, grabbed the boy by the collar, hauled him up easily with one large, callused hand, and pushed him down roughly onto the bench across the table from where he had been sitting. The boy stared defiantly at him through a mask of pain and blood. The hand holding the side of his head was shiny and dark in the dim light. You all see! the boy croaked. Witness, all!

Hell murder me like he slobbered mine family. Boy, just calm down, Aspar snapped. He picked up the sword and set it next to him on his bench, with the table between it and the boy. He kept his own dirk out. Armann, bring me another beer. You just busted one of my mugs! the hostler shouted, his nearly round face beet-red. Bring it or I'll bust something else. Some of the charmen laughed at that, and then most of the rest of them joined in. The chatter started up again. Aspar watched the boy while he waited for the beer. The lad's fingers were trembling, and he couldn't look up. His courage seemed to be leaking out of him with his blood. That was often the case, Aspar found. Bleed a man a little, and he grew less heroic. What happened to your family, boy? As yet you don't know. You want another cuff? Grim eat you, but I'll beat you till you come out with it. I don't take to threats, and I don't take to being called a killer unless I did the killing. And in the end I don't care what did or didn't happen to a bunch of squatters except that if something ill happened in the forest, that's my job, to know about it, ysee? Because if I don't care about you, I care about the forest, and about the king's justice. So spell me it! I just—they're dead! And suddenly he burst out crying. As tears ran through the blood on his face and trailed down his chin, Aspar realized that even fifteen had been an overestimate. The lad was probably no more than thirteen, just big for his age. Scat on this, Aspar grumbled. Aspar White! He looked up to see Winna Rufoote, the hostler's daughter. She was less than half his age, just nineteen, pretty with her oval face, green eyes, and flaxen hair. Strong-willed. Trouble looking for lodging. Aspar avoided her when he could. Winna Don't Winna me. You burst this poor boy's brains all over and one of our mugs and now you're just going to sit here and drink beer while he bleeds on everything? Look I won't hear a word of it. Not from you, sposed to be the king's man. First you'll help me get this boy to a room so I can clean him up. Then you'll put your mark on one of them royal notes or else pay good copper for our mug. After that, you can have another beer, and not before. If this weren't the only hostel in town But it is, isn't it? And if you want to stay welcome here You know you can't turn me out. No. Turn out the king's man? Sure I can't. But you might start finding your beer tasting like piss, if you understand me. It already tastes like piss, Aspar grumbled. She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. He suddenly felt a little weak in the knees. In twenty-five years as a holter, he had faced bears, lions, more outlaws than he could even count. But he had never learned how to handle a pretty woman. He did come in here to kill me, the little scat, Aspar reminded her sheepishly. An how is that such a strange thing? I've been tempted myself. She pulled out a rag and handed it to the boy. What's your name? she asked. Uscaor, he mumbled. Uscaor Fraletson. Your ears just a bit cut, Uscaor. It'll be okay. Aspar blew out a long breath and stood back up. Come on, boy. Let's get you cleaned up, hey? So you'll look nice when you come to murder me in my bed. But as the boy swayed to his feet, Aspar caught the scent of death again and noticed, for the first time, the boy's right hand. It was bruised purple and black, and the sight of it sent a tingle up his spine. What happened there, boy? Aspar asked. I don't know, Uscaor said softly. I don't remember. Come on, Uscaor, Winna said. Let's find you a bed. Aspar watched him go, frowning. The boy had meant to kill him, all right, though he hadn't come very close. But that hand maybe that was the thing his nose was trying to tell him about all along. Uneasily, he waited for another beer. He's asleep, Winna told Aspar some time later, after she'd been alone with the boy for a while. I don't think he's eaten or slept for two or three days. And that hand it's so swollen and hot. Not like any sort of wound I've seen before. Yah, Aspar said. Me either. Maybe I ought to cut it off of him and take it for the apothecary in Eslen to have a look at. You can't fool me, Asp, Winna said. You're rougher than an elm at the skin, but in your heart there's softer stuff. Don't convince yourself of that, Winn. Did he spell why he wants me dead? Same as he told you. He thinks you killed his family. Why would he think that? Hey, Winna! someone yelled, from across the room. Leave off the king's bear and come wet me! He banged an empty mug on the table. Do as you usually do, Banfwet yourself. You know where the tap is. I'll know what to charge you by how much you throw up later. That got a burst of jeers at the fellow's expense as Winna sat down across from Aspar. He and his family put up a camp down near Taff Creek, she continued, a few leagues from where it meets the Warlock Right. Squatters, as I reckoned. So they squatted in the royal forest. Lots do that. Does that mean they deserve to die? I didn't kill them for that. Ravers' teeth! I didn't kill them at all. Uscaor says he saw the king's colors on the men who did it. No. I don't know what he saw, but he never saw that. None of my woodsmen are within thirty leagues of here. You sure? Damned sure. Then who killed them? I was not. There's plenty of room in the King's Forest for all manner of outlaws. But I suppose I'll be finding out. He took another drink of his beer. By the Taff, you say? That's about two days. I'll be leaving at first light, so tell Paet to have my horses ready. He finished the beer in a single long swallow and rose from the table. See you. Wait. Don't you want to talk to the boy some more? What for? He doesn't know what happened. He probably didn't even see anybody. I'll bet the part about the king's colors is a lie. How do you reckon that? Maunt my words, Winn. Squatters live in

terror of the kings justice. They all reckon theyre going to be hanged or beheaded or hunted down, and they think Im a two-headed uttin. I dont discourage stories like that. I spread em, in fact. Somebody killed this boys kin, and he didnt see who. He reckoned it was me. The rest he made up when he started feeling foolish. But someone killed them, she said. Yah. That much of his story I believe. He sighed and stood. Night, Winn. You arent going by yourself? All of my men are too far away. I have to go while the trail is still warm. Wait for some of your men. Send word to Dongal. No time. Why so nervous, Winn? I know what Im doing. She nodded. Just a feeling. That somethings different this time. People coming up out of the forest have been . . . different. I know the forest better than anyone. Its the same as its always been. She nodded reluctantly. Well, as I said, good night. Her hand caught his. Be careful, you, she murmured, and gave it a little squeeze. Certain, he said, hoping he turned quickly enough that she couldnt see him blush. Aspar rose at first cockcrow, when the light out his window was still mostly starborn. By the time hed splashed water from a crockery basin in his face and shaved the gray stubble sprouting there, cinched on his elkskin breeches and padded cotton gambeson, the east was primrose. He considered his boiled-leather cuirass; that was going to be hot today. He put it on anyway. Better hot than dead. He strapped on his bone-handled dirk and settled his throwing ax into its loop on the same belt. He took his bow from its oilskin case, checked the wood and extra strings, counted his arrows. Then he recased the bow, slipped on his high boots, and went downstairs. First light, eh? Winna said, as he passed through the common room. Getting old, Aspar grumbled. Well, have some breakfast as youre not too early for it. That reminds me. I need to buy Ive packed you a weeks worth of food. Paetur is loading it up for you. Oh. Thanks. Sit. She brought him a trencher of black bread with garlic sausage and fried apples. He ate every bit of it. When he was finished, Winna wasnt in sight, but he could hear her knocking about in the kitchen. For an instant, he remembered having a woman knocking about his own kitchen, in his own house. A long time ago, and the pain was still there. Winna was young enough to be his daughter. He left quietly, so as not to attract her attention, feeling faintly cowardly. Once outside he made straight for the stables. Paetur, Winnas younger brother, was busy with Angel and Ogre. Paet was tall, blond, and gangly. He was what? thirteen? Morning, sir, Paet said, when he saw Aspar. Im not a knight, boy. Yah, but youre the closest we have hereabouts, except old Sir Symen. A knights a knight. Sir Symen is one; Im not. He nodded at his mounts. They ready to go? Ogre says yah, Angel says ney. I think you ought to leave Angel with me. He patted the roan on the neck. She said that, did she? Aspar grunted. Could be shes tired from the running you gave her yesterday? I never Lie to me and Ill whip you good, and your father will thank me for it. Paet reddened and studied his shoes. Well . . . she needed a stretch. Next time ask, you hear? And for pitys sake, dont try to ride Ogre. The barred bay chose that moment to snort, as if in agreement. Paet laughed. Whats so funny? Tom tried, yesterday. To ride Ogre. When do they bury him? He lost two front teeth, is all. Lucky. The boys lucky. Yes, Master White. Aspar patted Ogres muzzle. Looks like you packed them well. You want to arrange my quiver and bow? Could I? The boys eyes sparkled eagerly. I reckon. He handed the weapon over. Is it true youve killed six uttins with this? Theres no such thing as uttins, boy. Nor greffyns, nor alvs, nor basil-nix, nor tax-counters with hearts. Thats what I told my friiths. But Rink says his uncle saw an uttin himself. Got drunk and saw his own reflection, more likely. But you did kill the Black Wargh and his bandits, didnt you? All ten of them. Yah, Aspar said curtly. Im going to do something like that someday. Its not all its made out to be, Aspar replied. With that, he mounted up on Ogre and started off. Angel followed obediently. So did Paet. Where do you think youre going? Aspar demanded. Down by the Warlock. A Sefry caravan came in last night. I want to get my fortune told. Youd be better off staying away from them, Aspar advised. Werent you raised Sefry, Master White? Didnt Dirty Jesp raise you? Yah. So I know what Im talking about. The Sefry had chosen a nice spot, a violet-embroidered meadow overlooking the river and embraced on all sides by thick-limbed wateroaks. They were still setting their tents. A big one of faded crimson and gold was fully erected, the clan crest three eyes and a crescent moon waving in a diffident zephyr. Hobbled horses grazed in the meadow, where ten men and twice that many children hammered stakes, uncoiled lines, and unrolled canvas. Most were stripped to the waist, for the sun wasnt yet high enough to sear their milk-white skin. Unlike most folk, the Sefry never darkened from the sun. In full light, they went swaddled head to toe. Hallo, there, one of the men called, a narrow-shouldered fellow with features that suggested thirty years but that Aspar knew were lying by at least fifteen. He had known Afas when they were both children, and Afas was the older. Do I see Dirts Bastard, there? The Sefry straightened, hammer swinging at his side. Aspar dismounted. Dirts Bastard. Not a nickname hed ever cared for. Hallo, Afas, he replied, refusing to let his annoyance show. Nice to see you, too. Come to run us off? Whats the point? Id just be wishing you on a different town, probably another in or around my jurisdiction. Besides, Im

on my way out. Well, that's generous. The Sefry tilted his head. She said you'd be here. She was almost wrong, ney? Whos she? Mother Cilth. Grim! She still alive? They rarely die, these old women. Aspar stopped a few paces from Afas. The two men were of a height, but there the resemblance stopped. Aspar had weight to go with his altitude, an oak to Afas willow. Close up, Afas skin was a map, the blue rivers, streams, rills, and rills of his veins plainly visible. He had six pale nipples, set like a cats on his lithe, wiry torso. His hair was midnight dark, tied back with a gold ribbon. Where'd you just come from? Aspar asked. South. Come through the forest? Afas indigo eyes went wide and guileless. You know better than that, Holter. We wouldn't travel in King Randolph's forest without permission. King Randolph died thirteen years ago. It's William, now. Nevertheless. Well. I'm going to Taff Creek. A boy came in last night saying his kin were murdered down there. I'd be grateful if you've heard anything worth repeating. I wouldn't ask too close where you heard it. Decent of you. But I wasn't nothing about that. But I'll tell you this if I had been in the forest, I'd be out of there now. I'd be going far away from it. Where are you going? Well tinker here for a few days, to earn for supplies. After that? Far away. Tero Gall, maybe, or Virgenya. Why? Afas jerked his head toward the largest tent, the one already set up. Because she says so. I don't know more than that, nor do I want to. But you can ask her. In fact, she said you'd want to ask her. Hmm. Well. I suppose I ought to, then. Might be healthiest. Right. Stay out of trouble, hey? I've got enough to worry about without having to track you down later. Sure. Anything for you, Dirt. Mother Cilth had been old when Aspar was a boy. Now she might have been a ghost looking across the chasm of death. She sat on a pile of cushions, robed in black, coiffed in black. Only her face was visible, an ivory mask spidered with sapphire. Her eyes, palest gold, watched his every movement. Jesps eyes had been that color. And Qerlas. There you are, Mother Cilth rasped. Jesperedh said you would be here. Aspar bit back telling her how long Jesp had been dead. It wouldn't matter. Whether it was all pretense or whether the Sefry had come to believe their own lies, he had never really known. It didn't matter, because either way their constant talk of speaking with the dead was so much annoying sceat. The dead were dead; they did not speak. You wanted to see me? He made a small attempt to keep the irritation from his voice, but it wasn't something he was good at. I see you already. I want to talk to you. I'm here, Mother. I'm listening. Still rude. Still impatient. I thought my sister taught you better. Maybe her lessons would have taken better if she had had a little help from the rest of you, Aspar replied, unable to keep the bitterness from his voice. Take me as you find me or not at all. It wasn't me wanted to talk to you. Yes, it was. That was true, sort of, but he didn't have to like it. He turned on his heel to leave. The Briar King is waking, Cilth whispered. Aspar paused, a bright tickle like a centipede crawling on his backbone. He turned very slowly to face the old woman again. What? The Briar King. He wakes. That's sceat, Aspar said harshly, though a part of him felt as if the earth had opened beneath his feet. I've traveled the Kings Forest all my life. I've been in the deepest, black heart of it, and I've been places in the Mountains of the Hare that even the deer never saw. There is no Briar King. That's just more of your Sefry nonsense. You know better. He slept, and was unseen. Now he wakes. It is the first sign. Surely Jesp taught you. She taught me. She also taught me to cheat at dice, and to play the voice of a ghost for her seances. The old woman's face went even harder than it had been. Then you should know the difference, she hissed. You should know the difference between the cold and the hot, between the breeze and the storm. She leaned even closer. Look in my eyes. Look there. Aspar didn't want to, but her eyes had already caught him, like a snake about to eat a mouse. The gold and copper of her orbs seemed to expand until they were all he could see, and then . . . A forest turned into gallows, rotting corpses hung from every branch. The trees themselves gnarled and diseased, covered in black thorns, and instead of foliage they bore carrion birds, ravens and vultures, gorged and fat. In the depths of the forest the shadows between the trees shifted, as if something large were moving there. Aspar searched, but the movement stayed at the corner of his eyes, always still when he stared full at it. Then he noticed the nearest corpse. The rope that hung her was nearly rotted through, and mostly it was just bones and blackened flesh hanging there, but the eyes were still alive, alive and pale gold . . . The same eyes he was looking into now. Mother Cilth's eyes. With a harsh gasp, Aspar turned his gaze away. Mother Cilth grated out a laugh. You see, she murmured. Sceat, he managed, though his legs were trembling. A trick. Cilth drew back. Enough. I thought you were the one foretold. Perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps you learned nothing after all. I can only hope. A shame. Truly. For if you are not the one foretold, he is not yet born. And if he is not yet born, your race and mine will be wiped from the earth, as if we had never been. That part of the telling cannot be doubted except by fools. But maybe you are a fool. My sister perished for nothing. She reached up and drew a veil over her face. I dream, she said. Leave me. Aspar obeyed her, fighting an unaccustomed urge to run. Only when the Sefry camp was a league behind him did his breathing calm. The Briar King. What sceat,

he thought. But in the corner of his vision, something was still moving.