

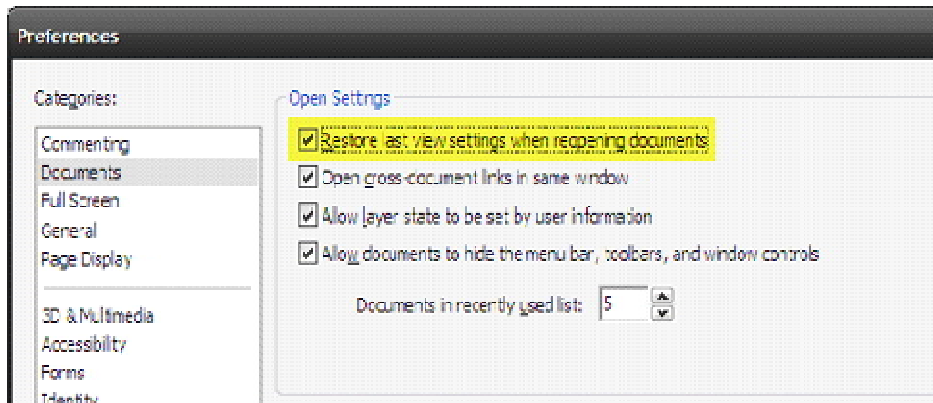
## IMPORTANT NOTE

### How to bookmark a page in Adobe Reader (So it automatically opens at the page you are reading)

Each time you open Adobe Reader, the book opens at Page 1 & you have to scroll through to find your place. But help is at hand - <http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/bookmark-page-pdf-document-open-adobe-reader/>

Here are the instructions copied from the above link -

1. In Adobe Reader, go to Edit – Preferences (or CTRL + K).
2. Click on Documents under the listed categories on the left.
3. As shown in the screenshot, enable the feature that says – Restore last view settings when reopening documents. Click OK and exit.



The instructions did not work until I resaved Finn Mac Cool Pt1.

With book open in Adobe Reader click FILE – SAVE AS & overwrite the original file. Book now opens at the page you were reading.

The above link also mentions a Java Script at PDF Hacks that installs bookmarks in Adobe Reader. I haven't used it & don't know anything about it. Use the above link to find it, or the direct link below - [http://www.pdfhacks.com/bookmark\\_page/](http://www.pdfhacks.com/bookmark_page/)

**Good luck & good reading**

# **Finn Mac Cool**

# **Part 1**

**Paul Andruss**

**RDG - you made this possible**

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*But I, who write this history or rather fable, give no faith to many of the things contained herein. For some are deceits of the old one; while others are naught but figments of the poet's mind. And whereas some are like the truth, some are not; whilst some are but for the amusement of fools.*

**Latin colophon to the Táin Bó Cuailnge (the Cattle-raid of Cooly)  
From the 12<sup>th</sup> century Book of Leinster**

# **Book 1**

## **The White Goddess**

# CHAPTER 1

## **S (saille : willow) Sidhe.**

*The huge, turf-covered hills littering the Irish countryside were traditionally believed to be Sidhe (pronounced shee), the homes of the Tuatha de Danann; the fairy people of Irish myth. They are now known to be Neolithic monuments dating from around three thousand to five hundred years BC*

When Erin was a child, her grandmother told her about the little people, the Tuatha de Danann, the fairy folk who lived in the hollow hills. They were creatures of legend, old stories to scare children into being good and going to bed early. They were not wicked Grandma said to sooth her, but they were capricious and you must not trust them.

That night in bed, Erin rolled the word capricious around her mouth, tasting it for meaning. Although she never admitted it, Grandma's tales had terrified her. She used to lie huddled under the covers, wide awake, rigid; flinching as wind whipped branches scratched the window.

In those days, Erin was convinced the Tuatha de Danann were coming to get her. They never were of course. But they were now. She could hear them coming: coming for her. With all her old fears flooding back, she

lay frozen, staring into darkness, listening to the unholy racket from their cars and trucks.

The noise was loud enough to wake the dead. But thankfully not Dermot; not after the amount of drink he put away last night. Telling herself not to be stupid, Erin shook off her childish fears and struggled out of the bedroll. Grabbing her shawl against the chill night, she made her way up the ragged bluff guided only by starlight and the campfire's dying embers.

A convoy of headlights crawled up the valley below. When it stopped, Erin waited out the long minutes while the lorries laboriously see-sawed back and forth into a big circle, like a wagon train in a cowboy movie. Once still, banks of blinding white lights snapped on, flooding the central area. In the dazzling glare, a gang of people in what looked like space suits swarmed like ants, unpacking and inflating a huge ghostly dome.

Having never been so close to the Tuatha de Danann, Erin watched them work, not daring to move. Even though they must have known she was there, she found herself holding her breath, as if she would startle them into flight.

It was first light before the last of the space suits vanished inside the dome. Caught off guard when music blasted from loudspeakers on the trucks, Erin made the mistake of looking down at the fairy camp. Instantly, the massive dome became a grass covered hill with ornate bronze gates, which she recognised from television as a fairy shee. According to TV, looking at a shee when fairy music played left you spellbound. With that thought, the huge bronze gates swung open.

**The shee's interior glowed with a thousand candles. In the golden flickering light, handsome fairy lords and ladies feasted in splendour. Portly cooks roasted suckling pigs on turning spits. Jolly servants bustled back and forth, sloshing tankards of frothing mead over the floor and tables. To one side was a band with pipers, harp and drum; to the other, tumbling acrobats and motley clad jesters.**

**It was all so enchanting Erin could not bear to look away. She had only ever seen fairies on the television. And this was nothing like television. The sounds and colours were so absorbing, she could think of nothing else. Soon even time itself ceased to exist.**

**Erin had no idea how long she was under the fairy spell. She remembered hearing an old school hymn called 'Morning Has Broken' and laughing at the de Danann for playing the song as the sun appeared over the distant hills. When she laughed the fairy hill, bronze gates and elfin court vanished, leaving the shiny inflated dome surrounded by helicopters on haulage vehicles in a field of churned up mud.**

**With the spell broken, Erin noticed the music, which seemed so mesmerising only moments before, now sounded like a scratchy old record. Under the hisses and clicks, barely audible whispers created the illusion of the shee. If she ignored the music to concentrate on the noise, she almost heard it telling her what to see. For a moment the fairy hill flickered back into view, superimposed on the dome's slick surface. Shaken, Erin refused to even look at the camp until she was firmly back in control of herself.**



A solitary figure standing by the dome's entrance searched right and left like a lost astronaut. The early morning sun catching the helmet made the visor blink like an enormous eye. The effect was unnerving, but not quite as unnerving as the way the figure cheerfully waved when it spotted her. Here was the reason Erin came to this forsaken place. Now she was here, she wished she had never come at all. Slowly, she stood up and began walking back down the path to the fairy camp.

Passing the sleeping Dermot, she saw the music had penetrated his dreams, leaving him restless. Worried he might start asking awkward questions if he saw her with the de Danann, she wondered if she could use the fairy magic to her advantage. If the music told Dermot what they wanted him to see, could she make him not see her?

She bent down and poking Dermot in the shoulder received an insensible acknowledgement.

'Dermot it is me,' she said. 'Can you hear me?'

"Aye," he groaned.

'Dermot listen to me. I am not here. You do not see me. You do not hear me. Do you understand? You do not see me. You do not hear me.'

She paused for a few seconds before asking. 'Dermot, are you listening to me?'

Relieved when Dermot gave no answer, Erin continued walking to the dome.

When Erin reached the edge of the camp, the space suit came to meet her. She faltered, looking longingly back to Dermot; her last link with the familiar. Dermot, now wide awake, was staring at the dome. He looked stupid with wonder and she knew he saw the same illusion she saw

earlier. Relaxing her guard, she heard the insidious whispers in the music nibbling at the edges of her mind.

“I wonder what your friend thinks of you being here.” It was a man’s voice, harsh with a slight accent. Amplified through a speaker on the chest of the suit, it made her jump.

“I doubt he even sees me,” she replied coolly. A cool she did not feel.

“Please forgive me I am forgetting my manners,” the artificial voice boomed, “I am Doctor Rupert Todt, pleased to meet you. I would offer to shake, but...” He waved an outsized gauntlet in her face, voice box rumbling like thunder as he laughed at his own joke.

When Donnelly, Erin’s mobile phone contact, spoke about Tod, he referred to him as ‘The Chief’. If Tod was in charge then his presence confirmed the importance of her first ever meeting with outer-worlders from the shadowy Tir na mBeo, the Land of the Living.

‘Are you with the World Health like the man on the phone?’ Erin had to yell to be heard over the music.

“A moment please,” Tod boomed back in unconscious and deafening sympathy.

After a pause, the music from the loud speakers dimmed.

“That is better!” his speaker rumbled. “Yes, yes I am.”

In the relative quiet, Erin heard the suit’s exchange filters scrubbing the fresh air clean. This sharp reminder of what the outer-world thought of her plague stricken land left her tongue-tied and self-conscious.

Fortunately Tod did not notice but blithely carried on. “How much do you know?”

Wary, Erin played dumb. ‘I know about the coastal blockade and that you in the World Health watch over us as the Toooha day Danan,’ she hesitantly admitted. ‘But to be honest, I don’t know much more.’

“I meant, why we asked you here.” Tod sounded gentle.

“Only what your man Donnelly said.’

When summoned to the meeting, Erin’s phone contact told her about some outer-worlders washed up on the coast after a shipwreck. When he added they survived the plague, Erin was intrigued.

“An unfortunate accident with a naval patrol frigate caught in last week’s freak storm.”

‘Your man said some survived,’ she prompted.

“And are now prisoners in your High King’s fortress of Evin Macka. We are bringing in an undercover agent to liberate them.”

Erin was blunt. ‘Kill them you mean. We both know you can’t risk the plague escaping Ireland.’

“I am a medical doctor Miss Macca. I have taken an oath to preserve life. The agent is their saviour. Inoculated against the plague he can pass on immunity with a blood serum transfusion. So... will you take him to the High King’s fortress to rescue these unfortunates, or not? It is a simple enough request.”

‘Yes,’ she muttered breathlessly, ‘of course I will.’

Inside, Erin was reeling. Tod’s words had struck like a physical blow. For over twelve years the outer-world isolated her land. Now, suddenly, here was an outer-worlder speaking of immunity to the plague. Did Tod know what he said? If the outer-world had a vaccine, then the

plague was over and her world ending. How could he sound so casual?

“The agent’s name is Corporal Robert Davis Finn,” Tod added.

‘Finn?’ she blurted out, feeling like he had delivered another body blow. Not so long ago, the druids foretold the coming of Fionn Mac Coull at the end of the world. Was this coincidence?

Tod did not answer because his ear piece buzzed as Erin spoke and he switched to an internal channel.

Guided by two featureless space suits, a small mechanical trolley holding a man-sized red egg glided through the dome’s entrance seal. It’s a glain, thought Erin in awe, the mythical egg of rebirth from the druids’ prophecy. The couplet sprang, unbidden, to mind...

‘From beyond the Ninth Wave, through air, over sea, Handsome Son of Wisdom comes, hatched from a glain by the side of a Shee...’

In the Gaeltacht, the words ‘Handsome Son of Wisdom’ were Fionn Mac Coull.

“To ensure his safe delivery... since the Tory Island base...” Tod abruptly broke off, as if he said too much. “Corporal Finn has been sedated for a long time. You may find he experiences cramps from dehydration. Transfusion equipment and a battery powered centrifuge are in his kitbag, along with medical supplies and his antidote capsules.”

Staring at the glain, Erin realised something was wrong. Why the elaborate procedures if Finn was inoculated? Why was Tod in a space suit? Why weren’t inoculated marines storming the walls of Emain Macha to rescue the captive sailors? It was all lies. There was no

cure. She was so relieved she did not know whether to laugh or cry.

‘Take him to Dermot,’ she commanded, voice betraying none of the emotion she felt.

As Tod relayed her order and the space suits moved off with the trolley, Erin began to wonder what Dermot would make of it.

‘It would be better if my companion slept,’ she informed Tod.

“There is no time to prepare him,” he protested in a fluster.

‘Just do it anyway,’ she insisted. ‘Dermot believes what he wants to believe.’

“Have you taken an antidote capsule?” Tod asked.

‘Of course.’

“Well, if you insist.”

Tod switched back to internal communication. The music ceased. A single shuddering word filled the abrupt silence.

“SLEEP!”

## CHAPTER 2

### **A ( ailm : Pine ) Ard Ri.**

*As sacred High King the Ard Ri (Ord Ree) was the embodiment of the land; for his three crowns were of corn, flowers and oaks. When an Ard Ri ruled it was not possible to drink from the waters on account of the numbers of fish. Or travel the forests on account of the abundance of fruit. Or traverse the plains on account of the wealth of honey. And to each man's ear his neighbour's voice sounded sweet as the harp*

Erin had a pretty low opinion of prophecy. When not simply guesswork, foisted on the credulous by the unscrupulous, it was usually vague enough to mean anything. Although even she had to admit today's events were enough to shake the most ardent sceptic.

At the Bullfest during Halloween, a druid drank some filthy concoction called 'bull's blood'. After falling into a prophetic trance, he raved on about Fionn Mac Coull killing the High King at the end of the world. Unsurprisingly, the prophecy spread like wildfire.

When Erin heard it, she immediately thought the druids were trying to make trouble; as in her opinion, trouble was the druids' middle name. Thinking about it, she realised the druids did not have the backbone to stand up to the High King. Despite claiming to not have any truck

with Conor Mac Nessa, they generally truckled remorselessly.

Erin watched the space suits take the unconscious Finn from the glain, laying him opposite the sleeping Dermot. Finn wore a padded black cotton overall. The sight of an outer-worlder shocked Erin like an obscenity. Ignoring him, the anonymous space suits began thoroughly spraying the glain, prior to resealing.

If the plague is cured, why disinfect the glain, she thought, watching them work. Why wear those silly space suits, or bother to maintain the whole complicated charade about being fairy people? There are no outer-world prisoners in Conor Mac Nessa's fortress. Nobody could keep a secret that big in Emain Macha. She would have heard something and she hadn't heard a whisper. Or did she, and simply not realise?

About eight years ago, Conor Mac Nessa seized power crowning himself High King. However, only Great Queen Maeve could make him Ard Ri, or the true ruler of the land. When she refused, point blank, to accept him, Conor's claim to the throne vanished; leaving him vulnerable to every challenge. With each passing year, he became more afraid of rebellion, which left him more tyrannical. This, in turn, only increased the likelihood of rebellion, making him yet more tyrannical still. It was a classic vicious circle and one that tended to erupt, like clockwork, every Halloween.

About a month after the Bullfest prophecy, Erin heard talk of an offshore raid, but nothing came of it. Then at mid-winter, Conor and his army inexplicably left early in the morning, only to return before midnight. At the time Erin thought nothing of it, even though she heard some

very strange rumours. Now, with Finn's arrival, she wondered if a raid had taken place. She was sure Tod mentioned a base on Tory Island. If Conor did break through the blockade, he must have given the outer-world a right good fright. Maybe this was the reason they sent Finn. Maybe he was here to kill Conor Mac Nessa.

After sealing the disinfected glain, the space suits guided the trolley back to the dome, which was, Erin saw, already half-deflated as the de Danann prepared to continue their ceaseless patrol of the land.

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Finn was like a parrot, repeating phrases as though rehearsed. Erin passed him the water bottle, an antidote capsule and a salt tablet from the meagre medical kit. As Tod said, Finn was cramping from dehydration. He was also suffering from memory problems. Something Tod failed to mention. Erin wished she had let him sleep.

"I'm supposed to go straight to Evin Mocka, the High King's fortress near Armar," Finn insisted.

'I know,' she replied, speaking patiently as though to a child or an idiot. 'But you will have problems getting in and out. Security's the best there is in this Land of Ayrin, not though that's saying much. And there is no way you pass for an Irishman.'

"You mean like him?" Finn nodded at the sleeping Dermot, long haired and unshaven.

Erin sighed with relief. Finn was beginning to notice his surroundings. Perhaps she would make him see sense after all.



**‘It is best if I take you to Rathcrooan,’ she persisted. ‘We will sort it out from there.’**

**“I’ve only got a week,” he repeated.**

**Erin was exasperated. ‘What good is a week, if you are caught in the first five minutes?’**

**“I still think I should go straight to Evin Mocka, you know...”**

**‘As I said...’**

**“But I’ve only got a week!”**

**‘Oh my God, he’s awake!’**

**“Who?” Finn asked.**

**‘Dermot!’ She looked hard at Finn. ‘Keep your mouth shut and let me do the talking.’**

**Finn checked out the waking man. He was one of the wild Irish, a race of impetuous braggarts, quick to anger and violent when roused. Watching the massive muscled body yawn and stretch, Finn was surprised to see that despite his great size and mature physique, Dermot was barely out of his teens. Erin was dismissive when he originally asked about her friend, but now she looked worried.**

**Erin was not exactly worried, but as Dermot liked to boast and gossip it would be better if he thought she’d already left. She decided it was time to shape-shift, while Dermot was between waking and sleep and at his most susceptible.**

**To shape-shift successfully, Erin needed to become someone Dermot trusted. But more importantly, someone he would not question. Only one person fitted that description. Dermot’s landlady, Bridget, was well known for her irrational mood swings and foul temper. Behind her back, Dermot’s mates whined that Bridget must be**

permanently on the rag, the bloody way she carried on. They never said it to her face though; they didn't dare. Pouring scalding coffee from the jug on the primus stove, Erin walked over to the yawning man.

'Dermot it is me, Bridget,' she said. 'Bridget. D'ya hear me Dermot? It's Bridget. D'ya see me, son? D'ya see ya aul mammy, Bridget?'

## CHAPTER 3

### **T ( tinne : holly ) Tánaiste.**

*The Tánaiste (tawnishta) was the successor to the Ard Ri or sacred High King. In the old myths, the Tánaiste slew the Ard Ri and took his place. The word survived into modern times as the title of the Deputy Prime Minister of the Irish Republic*

Stretching and yawning, Dermot remembered hearing the Three Noble Strains of the fairy harpers, the sons of the goddess Bóann of the Shee. The Song of Lament made him weep. The Song of Laughter made him laugh. Finally, the Song of Slumber put him out like a light.

Slowly, he focused on the woman offering the coffee. Looking at her meaty hands and voluminous breasts, he recognised plain, sweet-faced auld Bridget, who was like a ma to him.

“Ta fa me coffee, mam.”

‘Ah, yer all right son,’ Bridget replied.

Dermot spotted Finn. Clean-shaven and with cropped hair, he was the strangest thing Dermot had ever seen.

“Jeasus fuckin Christ, would ya look at the hack a him? He looks like shite beaten up in a bucket!”

‘By Jeasus Dermot, would ya leave the man alone!’ Bridget warned.

**“Well, looka rim,” he replied. “He looks like a fuckin soft woman!”**

**Looking at the fucking soft woman and seeing her meaty hands ball into fists, Dermot hastily added, “Aww, no offence missus!”**

**‘None taken I’m sure!’ she replied grimly.**

**Menacingly, Dermot rose to his feet. At two meters tall, he was more than a hundred kilos of pure muscle. Staring at his bulging biceps and massive fists, Finn quickly forgot Dermot was barely more than a kid. He turned to Erin saying, “I hope you can stop this before I get hurt!”**

**Even before the words were out of his mouth, Erin turned on Dermot screaming like a banshee. ‘For fuck’s sake Dermot, didn’t I tell yer to leave him alone? D’ya never listen ta aul Bridget? This is Fionn Mac Coull, d’ya hear? An d’ya know what that makes ya?’**

**What it made Dermot was a hero. Diarmuid O’Dyna was once, and would be again if he chose, the friend and companion of Fionn Mac Coull. While Erin wondered if Dermot felt any resentment at the way Fionn of the old stories betrayed and murdered the original Diarmuid O’Dyna on the Rock of Ben Bulben, she was not really surprised to see him look overjoyed at the thought.**

**“Dead on!” Dermot beamed at her. “An I’m his tawnishta, king a the wanin year. Fuckin dead on that!”**

**Hearing the word ‘Tánaiste’ and remembering his Gaeltacht lessons, Finn wondered why the man was calling himself the Deputy Prime Minister of Ireland. He almost asked Erin, but she was talking and he wanted to listen.**

**‘Aye, an you hear me good Deermith O’Dyna,’ she snapped, poking a finger in Dermot’s thick chest. ‘This man was hatched from a glain of a shee. I put a geis on ya,**

**guard him with yer life or yer aul mammy Bridget'll cause such a satire, boils'll appear on yer face. Yer bowels'll turn ta water, an in nine days yer'll surely die a shame.'**

**In response, Dermot grinned shamelessly. Approaching Finn with a mix of familiarity and awe, his massive hand reached out to rub the bristle of Finn's army crew cut.**

**"I can take yer fuckin ead like that," he said, snapping his thick fingers. "But how can I hang it from me belt when yer've got no fuckin hair!"**

**And he roared laughing in Finn's face.**

**\*\*\***

**Finn was fascinated by the constant shift between Irish English in Dermot and Erin's conversation. As far as he could see, there was no reason why they chose one over another. His Gaeltacht lessons had left him unprepared for this sort of jumble. He would have to be careful to get the mix right if he were to pass for a native.**

**When Dermot went to pee, Finn took the opportunity to speak to Erin. "I didn't follow everything," he said, speaking in English.**

**'Like what?' she answered in English.**

**"A geis?"**

**'A geis is a cross between an obligation and a spell, with a bit of curse thrown in for good measure. I made him swear to protect you.'**

**"Like a Deputy Prime Minister?"**

**'You're quick on the uptake!' She hesitated. 'People don't remember much about the old days anymore. Tawnishta means something different now, more like a brother. It's very complicated.'**

**“And the king of the waning year?” he asked.**

**‘Don’t worry your head about it!’**

**“You mean the one he wanted to take and hang from his belt?”**

**Erin allowed herself a thin smile. ‘That reminds me. You would be a lot less conspicuous if your hair was longer. You need a disguise. Going straight to Ayvin Macka would be suicide.’**

**When Finn did not argue, she heaved a sigh of relief.**

**Dermot re-joined them. Having been listening, he was both curious and delighted by the strange language they spoke when alone together. Thinking it sounded almost familiar, he wondered if it was the language of the shee.**

**From a battered leather satchel, Erin drew an even more battered ordnance survey map, spreading it on the uneven ground. As she spoke, she traced a route with her finger.**

**‘Why did they have to drop him here!’ she complained to herself, staring at the far western point of southern Ireland.**

**“Tonn Cleena,” Dermot said.**

**“What’s that?” Finn asked in English.**

**‘A famous landmark,’ she answered in English. ‘Tonn Cleena’s an old place where a great wave washed some lovers out to sea. I guess they knew we could find it.’**

**Turning back to the map she said to Dermot, ‘We’re goin ta Rathcrooan, but first I wanna make a detour.’**

**Dermot looked at her. “There’s loads a Garda on the roads between here an there. We’re better off cross country.”**

**‘Depends on the weather,’ she replied.**

**They looked skywards where incoming clouds, dark with rain, had ousted the promising morning. The temperature was dropping, leaving Finn suddenly cold.**

**While Dermot and Erin dismantled the camp, Finn weighed up his companions. With Dermot you got what you saw; dumb muscle. Erin was different. Here was a woman used to getting her own way, equal measures of prickle and sparkle, and gorgeous to boot. She even looked sexy in men's dungarees and lumberjack shirt.**

**Erin's blonde hair, tied in a thick braid running half way down her back, framed a classic heart-shaped face with high cheekbones, a slight Roman arch to the nose and full generous lips, red, ripe and inviting. But it was her eyes that got you. Sometimes blue, sometimes green, they changed like the sea and looked just as deep and dangerous. Right from the start, they bored into Finn with a flick of impatience that said she had one hell of a temper. Catching him staring, those astonishing eyes blazed again as she snorted in contempt and continued packing her haversack.**

**Dermot dumped his rucksack at Erin's feet. Shaking off Finn's offer of help, she manfully shouldered both bags, one almost as big as her, and started down the track. Finn watched the way she flowed in the denim with naked admiration. Dermot, seeing only Bridget, felt nonplussed by Finn's interest in the dumpy old woman. Still, he thought, it takes all sorts, but speaking for himself, he wouldn't want to take a ride on auld Bridget if she came with pedals.**

**The car was about half a mile away.**

**"Wow," Finn cried out, excited to see it, "an old Shogun petrol 2-litre four-wheel drive. This is a classic. They don't make them like this anymore."**

**“There yers go again, talkin the talk a the shee,” remarked Dermot, getting into the driving seat.**

**“Is he for real?” Finn asked Erin in English.**

**‘You don’t know us, so don’t judge us!’ she snapped back in English. Getting into the seat next to Dermot, she slammed her door shut.**



## CHAPTER 4

**M (Muin: blackberry or vine) Maeve.**  
*Warrior Queen and Goddess of ancient Ireland*

It started to rain, dissolving the spectacular views of southern Ireland Finn saw from the car. To pass the time, Erin asked Dermot to tell Finn something of the history of this Land of Erin. Dermot needed no persuading. Finn appreciated her thoughtfulness. It would be useful to learn the strange mix of Irish and English they spoke.

“In a happier time,” Dermot began, “when Art the son of Conn ruled as Ord Ree from Tara, the place of the wide prospect, all was well in this land of Eirenn.

“It was not easy to drink from her rivers on account of the numbers of the fish. It was not easy to travel in her forests on account of the abundance of fruit. It was not easy to transverse her plains on account of the wealth of honey. And no one slew another in the five kingdoms, for to each man his neighbour’s voice sounded sweet as a harp.

“When it was time for Art to die, as die kings must, Conor Mac Nessa, the King of Ulster, took him to the iron house where he died the death of air, water and fire. And his head was carried to the Spiral Castle on the Isle of Glass to speed his rebirth.

“After Art’s death, Conor Mac Nessa expected to be crowned Ord Ree. But Great Queen Maeve would not have him. She called him a false prince, saying nothing would

**grow: no corn, nor flowers, nor oaks to give acorns for the swine.**

**“Beautiful is Maeve of the nine husbands. Fierce and strong, knowing no law but her own wild will. But married she must be. And so they called a great assembly for the choosing of a new husband.**

**“Now Crunhu had no wife until one day a woman came into his house to dwell as his wife. Her name was Macka and they loved each other dearly. She was a fairy wife who could only live with him in secret.**

**“At the time of the great assembly for choosing Maeve’s husband, Macka reminded Crunhu not to speak of her. No surprise that he did then, boasting how his fairy wife could outrun the very horses of Conor Mac Nessa.**

**“In disbelief, Conor Mac Nessa summoned the fairy wife and forced Macka, though she was heavy with child, to race against all his king’s horses to prove good her husband’s idle boast.**

**“During the race her labour pains started. Although she was winning, Conor Mac Nessa would not call off the race. As Macka passed the finishing line, she was delivered of twins. Macka died in childbirth, cursing the whole of this land of Eirenn because Conor Mac Nessa showed her no pity.**

**“The curse of Macka is still upon this land of Eirenn: upon all the men of this land of Eirenn; and upon all the chattels of all the men of this land of Eirenn: their cattle, their sheep and their women.”**

**\*\*\***

By the time Dermot finished his tale, Finn realised it was useless for learning the language. Dermot's story was in an old formal style, meaning it was like trying to learn English from a Shakespeare play.

“With Macka’s curse upon this land of Eirenn,” Dermot continued, “Conor Mac Nessa declared himself High King an his Red Branch, the bastard Black an Tans, ravaged the land. Fer no gentleman was he an no true king.

“Stealin the royal beast a Ulster, the great bull a Coolna ta humiliate Conor Mac Nessa, Great Queen Maeve fled ta Athelone in the Kingdom a Connacht. Thus begins the tale of the Tarn bo Coolna.”

The cattle raid of Cooley, thought Finn. He had heard enough to try out his Irish. “I thought all the cattle perished with Mocka’s curse.”

Erin’s head turned in surprise; her eyes pure sapphire, all light and fire.

‘So they did,’ she spoke Irish. ‘A few survived, but most of the livestock are new types of beast brought in by... the fairy folk.’ She nodded slyly in Dermot’s direction. ‘They are... resistant to the curse of Macka.’

“The fairy people, the Tooay day Donon, brought many herds ta rebuild a wealth. Fairy cattle, white with pink ears,” Dermot said placidly.

‘They make them that way to prevent them being smuggled out. Imagine the damage one infected animal could do to Europe,’ Erin added in English.

As if to lend emphasis to her words, the drizzle cleared momentarily to let Finn see spectral pale cattle grazing on the brown scrubby fields.

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**Delivering Finn stirred old memories in Doctor Tod, making him think about the first days of his life's work in Ireland.**

**The plague started on the day after Christmas. The day the shops opened for the January sales was marked by a bomb exploding in a small Northern Irish town. Although peace settlements had been in force for over half a century, a new wave of extremists still pushed old grudges.**

**With it being deepest winter, flu-like symptoms did not excite the concern of local hospitals. When patients developed violent diarrhoea and boil-like lesions, the public health authority suspected anthrax, a controlled disease, and quickly closed air and sea ports. By the time quarantine was in place, the plague was out of control. Infection had reached epidemic proportions, overwhelming accident and emergency units. Mortality rates peaking around ninety percent was the first indication of a biological attack.**

**Anthrax is a bacterium. Yet the disease was immune to both vaccines and antibiotics; even the powerful new generation varieties. Analysis showed the host pathogen was a form of measles, a human virus that had evolved within the past thousand years from rinderpest in cattle. Inside the virus were plasmids; short pieces of DNA widely used in commercial cloning to introduce foreign genes. The plasmids contained DNA from the deadly and highly contagious, weaponised Vollum strain of anthrax.**

**Measles is a paramyxovirus, a group known as super-spreaders because they are easily transmitted by the breath or touch of an infected person. They are over ninety percent contagious and highly virulent. In addition to**

human measles and bovine rinderpest, the group includes various animal distempers, mumps, human para-influenza virus and other respiratory diseases.

As with the Spanish Flu of World War I, which killed more than the actual fighting, the plague was so deadly because it caused a cytokine storm; an over-reaction of the immune system that forces the body to shut down. With the young and fit having strong immune systems, they died more easily than the old and weak.

In much the same way as influenza and the common cold, the plague picked up new genes as it moved across species; meaning the techniques developed to arrest a variety of viral diseases - from herpes and hepatitis, to hemorrhagic fever, Ebola, and human immunodeficiency syndrome, were useless to researchers. As a final blow, the plasmids created tough anthrax-like endospores that lingered in soil for decades.

Soon there were outbreaks all over the world. Governments hastily agreed to limited-yield strikes on their own sovereign territories, using nuclear artillery developed for the battlefield. Civilian losses were considered acceptable to destroy infection and eradicate endospore contamination. The program was quickly expanded to cover non-nuclear allies, and subsequently any other state deemed not to be acting in the global interest. Ironically, Ireland was not sterilised. Without natural barriers, the plague had already crossed the land. Resources were needed elsewhere.

At the height of the panic, a terrorist website claimed responsibility. He called himself Jeff: the Destroyer of Worlds, a cheeky reference to Oppenheimer's comment after successfully detonating the atomic bomb. Quickly

arrested, Jeff's behaviour during the show trial led many to regard him simply as a harmless lunatic. With the world needing a scapegoat, Jeff was nevertheless executed. Injected with the plague, his agonising end was televised live in the 'eye for an eye' spirit which still dominates the Christian West in much the same way Sharia dominates the Islamic East.

Fresh outbreaks ceased after the sterilisation of infected areas: transport hubs, municipal zones and in some cases, even entire cities. With the plague defeated, attention shifted to Ireland where over ninety percent of people and livestock had perished. Society had catastrophically collapsed. Diseases such as typhus and cholera ran rampant in the wake of malnutrition and poor sanitation. The cataclysm ranked alongside major natural disasters, such as volcanic eruption, earthquake or tsunami. The dispossessed and traumatised Irish resembled death camp survivors. Yet because Ireland remained infectious, the United Nations could not send aid workers without exposing them to the plague. But, in all conscience, how could they stand by and do nothing?

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With a lucrative funding package on offer for anyone resolving the Irish dilemma, senior academics scrambled to find a solution; Rupert Tod among them. While many scientists sought a solution in psychopharmacology, Tod doubted anti-depressants were enough. He believed the Irish needed a new life to replace what they lost. One they could build by working together, rather than feeling isolated and abandoned like refugees in their own country.

**As an assistant psychiatry professor with the Jung Institute, he was naturally drawn to the gestalt approach which aimed to treat cause as well as effect.**

**Tod had successfully treated anxiety and low self-esteem with messages flashed at levels below conscious perception. His work was based on a series of largely discredited mind control experiments from the nineteen fifties called subliminal conditioning. Conspiracy theorists claim the American Government banned subliminal conditioning and the military secretly took it over. In reality, the military lost interest because it did not work unless accompanied by large doses of psychotropic drugs.**

**Overhearing his students discuss Eamon de Valera, Tod began to seriously think about applying his work to the 'Irish Problem', as it was euphemistically called. An early president of the Irish Free State, de Valera's politics dominated twentieth century Ireland. So much so, many historians argue his social and cultural conservatism, along with his preferment of Catholicism, retarded the new republic's industrial development, leaving it agricultural and backward looking, enslaved by outdated ideas.**

**Tod wondered if this was de Valera's plan. Perhaps he realised subsistence farmers in dispersed communities were easy to control. With survival a constant struggle they are content with what little they have, value the things they work hard for and unite to face hardship. Governed by tradition and deeply superstitious, they fear change, distrust outsiders and are cowed by religion.**

**When Tod suggested using the Church to police society, as de Valera had, his grad students fervently disagreed. If survivors blamed God for the plague, unconscious resentment would undermine the priests'**

authority. There was also the residue of religious bigotry and sectarian violence. Did Tod really want to open that old wound?

Almost self-consciously, one student proposed the ancient gods and heroes instead. Educated in Ireland, she had learned about the Irish myths as a child in school. With the old stories already in the survivors' unconscious, they would merely need drawing out. She recommended showing myths and legends on TV, half-joking many people could not distinguish the soaps from reality.

Conscious of public opinion, the World Health Sub-Committee rejected Tod's proposal. However, when NATO destroyed four refugee ships fleeing from Ireland, they gave Tod substantial funds to make the Irish forget the outside world. Rather than helping the survivors, their only concern was containing infection.

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Tod's assistant disturbed his thoughts.

"Donnelly from Communications needs to speak with you Doctor Todte."

"Put him on speaker. Donnelly, you have something for me?"

"Doctor Tod, the eye in the sky reports the car with the agent is on the Kildorrey road. You know what that means!"

"Way ahead of you," Tod replied. "I suppose she could be taking a detour."

"It's a funny way round to go," Donnelly protested. "Do you want me to ring her cell and let her know?"



**No, if they are driving into Morrigan then the agent must take his chances. He was supposed to go native, let this be his baptism of fire.”**

**“But what if we lose him Doctor Tod?” Donnelly persisted.**

**“The drugs of Morrigan cause no permanent harm,” Tod answered shortly. “However, please check the area afterwards. Simply a precaution you understand. And Donnelly, thank you for your concern.”**

## CHAPTER 5

### **F (fearn : alder ) Fionn Mac Coull**

*Finegas the druid caught a salmon nourished on the hazelnuts of wisdom. He told the boy to cook it, warning him not to eat a morsel. However, when three drops of fat spat out, burning his thumb. The boy sucked it to ease the pain and was filled with knowledge. Seeing this, Finegas named the boy Fionn Mac Coull, meaning fair and wise, granting him the two most prized possessions of the Celts: brains and beauty*

In the late afternoon the car turned up a rutted track leading to a tiny cottage outside a village. As Dermot parked, Erin announced they would spend the night; making Finn wonder what happened to all the Holiday Inns.

A huge overstuffed sofa and armchair dominated the tiny, furniture crammed, room. In the corner, an ancient boxy twenty-four inch television provided the only light. The large rechargeable battery powering the television struck Finn as jarringly modern, in a way the set did not with its polished veneer casing and small black and white screen. An old woman got up from the armchair, nodding to Finn and Dermot as she picked her way to Erin.

“Fuckin dead on this,” said Dermot staring at the television screen. “Fionn Mac Coull, same as you!”

Erin looked up from her conversation with the old woman and half-heartedly said, ‘Mind yer gob an front a the weans, Dermot.’

“Right Ma,” said Dermot absently, and with eyes glued to the telly added, “Suppose we mays well make ourselves comfortable.”

Squeezing past Finn, he flung himself into the comfortable armchair the old woman vacated. On the sofa, Finn found three identical girls about eight years old, not yet tall enough for their heads to show over the back of the couch.

“Oh!” Finn said in surprise.

‘My girls Finn: Bonva, Foala and Airin,’ said Erin.

“An where’s yer howyiz fer yer Uncle Dermot,” said Dermot, who did not seem bothered when the girls ignored him to examine Finn with a strange intensity, sexual beyond their years. It left Finn feeling like a mouse watched by cats. Wordlessly they shuffled up, opening a space. Uncomfortable, he scouted around, but there was nowhere else to sit.

The television programme was awful; cardboard sets and wooden acting. An unseen narrator gave an irritating commentary explaining everything except what was going on. It seemed to Finn very little went on. Like a form of ancient drama all action took place off screen, which seemed entirely appropriate to the ancient television they were watching it on.

The old woman slopped out three bowls of stew from a saucepan bubbling on the range. Relieved, Finn escaped the girls, gingerly squeezing past them to a dining table rammed against the back of the sofa. He sort of felt obliged to compliment Erin on her three beautiful daughters. Ask if

they were triplets, say she did not look old enough; all the usual niceties. Not having the heart, he ate his stew in silence, washing it down with surprisingly good beer. After the meal, it was back on the couch for more TV. The girls snuggled up, making him edgy.

One television show ended and another began without any commercial break, which was weird - like something on the old BBC. The new programme, called 'The Children of Lir', was about some kids turned into swans by a witch. Finn found it engrossing. He liked the way the narration complemented the action and the bright flowing colours accentuated emotion. It was almost too late before he realised.

"Oh my God, it's in the food and drink! For Christ's sake you could have warned me!" he groaned.

Shoving his hand into his pocket, Finn clicked something with his fingers. Sticking to his thumb was a jellied antidote capsule, which he slipped under his tongue.

The commotion stirred Dermot out of his stupor. "It's true, y'are Fionn Mac Coull!"

Finn looked sick. "What's he talking about?"

Erin smirked at the television. 'The programme you were watching before was about Fionn Mac Coull. How the youngster got burned cooking a druid's salmon of knowledge and was filled with wisdom when he sucked his thumb to ease the pain. From then on, Fionn only had to suck his thumb to see things as they were.'

Finn looked at her blankly. The television was fading back to dull monochrome. Losing the thread of the plot, he began to relax. Finn's actions had the opposite effect on Dermot, who could not settle after seeing TV so dramatically brought to life. After a quarter of an hour of

shuffling in the armchair he announced, “Fuck this, I’m off the pub.”

‘Dermot!’ Erin snapped.

“Sorry Ma!” he muttered before repeating to Finn in a huge stage whisper, “I sed fuck this, I’m off the pub. Are ya comin?”

As anything was better than sitting there watching crappy television, Finn took his leave of the weird sisters.

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The pub was a barn guarded by a couple of large bouncers. Frisking Dermot for weapons, they added a twenty four inch machete, two combat knives, a flick knife and a steel comb to the substantial pile. Judging from the size of the weapons heap, the place was packed. This struck Finn as odd because the hamlet was tiny.

Once again a boxy black and white television dominated the room, but the sound was down so you could hear the jukebox. The records, some almost a century out of date, were loud and friendly and hissy with subliminal messages telling people: don’t worry, be happy.

Dermot made straight for the bar, a couple of tables haphazardly stacked with beer bottles and stone jugs. Finn followed timidly behind. A group of men hailed Dermot as they passed.

“Ows youse goin me boyos,” he grinned sitting down with them.

Someone pushed a stool to Finn and poured a colourless liquid from a stone jug into a couple of plastic glasses.

**“Ah whiskey,” Dermot said. “Water a life. Health an life ta all a yers, me fine men.”**

**“Health an life,” the boys replied.**

**“Health and life,” Finn echoed, grimly choking down the clear fiery liquid. Whiskey! It tasted more like surgical spirit. “Jesus Christ!” he rasped, “who ever called this stuff ‘the water of life’ should be pickled in it as an example of what it does to your liver.”**

**The boys thought this a huge joke and poured him another.**

**There was no doubt about it; the men were in high spirits. As the night wore on, those who could get higher got higher. While those who could get no higher, slept it off where they fell. In such an atmosphere, it is hard to know how a fight starts. Finn distinctly remembered hearing someone screaming at Dermot, “Are ye startin on mey? I’ll knock yer owt big lad a wull!” Then, in a very reasonable voice, Dermot answering, “Hush yer slabberin, wee man and get yer thick ead outta mey bake, an gimme sam pace befer A kick yer the fuck in.”**

**And that seemed to be it. The ‘it’ in question being a bar room brawl, larger than life and twice as ugly.**

**Finn managed to stay out of the rough and tumble until he saw some bloke come at Dermot with a broken bottle. The giant was occupied fighting three or four others and did not hear his warning over the din. Bugger this for a lark, thought Finn, thumping the man with a chair. The chair broke. The man went down. And Dermot shouted his thanks. At that moment, Finn thought Dermot looked the happiest he had ever seen him, but then it was every man for himself and he rather lost track.**

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Finn woke up wrapped around a naked, sweaty body. His hand moved casually from the shoulder to the neck, feeling rough stubble. A horrible realisation dawned as his fingers inched over a muscular chest to a whorl of hair around a small flat nipple. Opening a wary eye, he saw he was staring over a set of rippling abdominals at a pair of bright plaid trousers, straining with the pressure of a piss-hard-on.

Moving like a scalded cat, senses coming alert all at once, Finn realised he was in a barn. He was sleeping in a communal makeshift bed of hay and sacking among a knot of drunken Irishmen. The sudden move brought on a ferocious hangover. Slowly it all came back: the pub, the fight. He had a lot to drink last night but no one deserved this! His antidote capsules must have reacted with the alcohol. Thinking he needed air and if he could get it, some coffee, he staggered outside into a bright warm morning.

In the river at the end of the meadow, a group of naked men were washing and playfully splashing each other. Embarrassed Finn tried not to stare, but they called out to join them. Tempting as a cold dip looked as a substitute for hot coffee, Finn didn't think he could. Apart from everything else, the Irishmen left him self-conscious. At a loss to say why, he wondered if it was the long hair, piercings, lavish tattoos or simply the muscle. All the men were well built, not just stacked but visibly glowing with health. It was a shock to see how pale and skinny he looked. His arms and legs were scrawny and his ribs stuck through his chest. Finn didn't remember looking so feeble. When he

tried to think how he used to look, his headache increased until it bent him over with the pain and he vomited.

“There yer go,” he heard someone solicitously say. “Yer’ll feel better now it’s out.”

Then everything went black.

When he regained consciousness, he was lying on the turf. Someone had placed a cold wet rag on his forehead.

“Doan move,” a burly silhouette said.

Defiantly Finn sat up, but was so weak he settled for propping himself on an elbow. Irishmen were lounging about and chatting. Quite unselfconscious in their nakedness, they combed and braided each other’s hair, shaved and massaged each other, wrestled and generally horsed around. While they thought nothing of nudity or physical intimacy, the sight of all these naked men together freaked Finn out. It wasn’t normal.

Everyone stopped to watch Dermot wander out of the barn, eager for a nod or word as he passed. Walking towards the river he began to strip, leaving his clothes in untidy heaps behind him. Releasing his hair from its ponytail, Dermot shook out his curly black locks, while absent-mindedly tugging on his long bull cock.

Finn had to admit, even in this world of magnificent naked male animals, Dermot was king. Feeling jealousy rise like bile, he was suddenly obsessed with his weight loss and irrationally angry over his hair. Everyone here had long hair, facial hair too, whereas he was clean-shaven with a crew cut. No wonder Erin said he looked conspicuous.

Once bathed and dressed, Dermot suggested going back to the cottage for breakfast. Much to Finn’s annoyance, some of the men trotted behind them like



puppies. Remembering last night's meal he reached for an antidote capsule.

**“Well fuck me!” said Dermot. “There yer go again.”**

The men crowded round to watch him slip the capsule into his mouth. When Dermot told them he was Fionn Mac Coull, Finn found himself enjoying the attention.

Reaching the cottage, they were astonished to find Erin gone, taking her daughters, the old woman and the car with her. The men, tagging along, also expressed their dismay. With cars being something of a luxury, Dermot had expansively offered them all a lift to Rathcroghan. Quite how he expected to fit ten of them, himself, Finn and Erin into the six, maybe seven at a squeeze, Shogun, was beyond Finn.

When one of the boys asked how they were getting to Rathcroghan now, Finn sarcastically replied, **“We walk!”**

The men looked at him in amazement. **“It's fuckin miles!”** they moaned, **“fuckin miles and miles!”**

**“Well, it looks like we have to walk fucking miles and miles then!”** snapped Finn.

They nodded in mute agreement. They were not upset or annoyed. It was simply as if the solution had not yet occurred to them. As Dermot shouldered the camping gear, Finn heard him proudly say: **See, A tole youse he had knowse!**

They all nodded, shooting sly glances at Finn, who had the grace to blush.

Walking with them, Finn noticed despite a fierce display of knives no one carried a gun. When he asked why, they treated it as a tremendous joke. He quickly realised they were not laughing at him. They were more like adults laughing at a child who unwittingly said something funny.

**“Carry a gun,” one said, “he must think we’re the fuckin UDR, not the IRA.”**

**They kept repeating this phrase and chuckling, until Finn was sick he ever opened his mouth.**

## CHAPTER 6

**M (Muin : blackberry or vine) Morrigan.**

*The word Morrigan means Great Queen. She was the goddess of war and the changing seasons that brought life in the dead of winter and death at the end of summer. Her symbol was the crow, a bird most often seen on the barren field after harvest and the battlefield after slaughter*

Walking with Dermot and the boys past the village, Finn noticed a crowd in a field off the road. He thought it odd, especially with more people coming to join them. As no one commented, he did not say anything. Less than a quarter of a mile further on, he heard angry buzzing, like a monstrous swarm of bees. The boys dropped their bags and froze.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Morrigan,” Dermot answered.

“What?”

“Mother War, goddess a strife, healin an plenty!” cried Dermot dropping his rucksack and running off with the rest, leaving a puzzled Finn to stay or join them as he pleased.

As the men ran they sang, some taking the verse and others the response. At first, Finn could not make out the words. But the chant was short and they kept repeating it.

“I am the Queen Bee, May Queen of Summer, bring to the hearth, sweet from the heather,” sang some. To which the rest answered, ‘Bringer of birth.’

**“I am Lord Raven, singing head me. Feasting up high on the Winter King’s tree,” sang the first group. And were answered, “Bringer of rebirth.”**

**Finn heard the people in the field singing the same song. Above their voices, came the whirring blades of military helicopters, whose distant noise he mistook for bees.**

**When a cargo-copter landed at the far end of the field, Finn saw someone in a biohazard suit push out supplies as two others loaded crates of spent batteries and recyclables. Around it buzzed three small bug-eyed copters armed with machine guns, obviously acting as guards.**

**Finished with the delivery, the cargo-copter flew off accompanied by two of the smaller craft. The third two-man copter rose with the others. Gaining altitude, it hung motionless as if awaiting a signal. After a few moments, the little copter banked, heading back to the crowd. When directly overhead, it released a fine white dust as though crop spraying. The chanting ended. People collapsed. When some started convulsing, Finn popped an antidote capsule and in panic, popped another.**

**The helicopter was turning around when a wave of gas washed over him. As the mist cleared, Finn saw the machine whirring off to the west, where it dissolved into a flock of crows. He shook his head, rubbing his eyes. By the time he looked again it was too far away to see what it was. Still, the vision left him pretty shook up. Especially when he realised whatever was in the gas was strong enough to get through his antidote capsules.**

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**Dermot was convulsing like an epileptic. Without thinking, Finn pushed an antidote capsule past his lips and strong white teeth, sliding it under his tongue. Seconds later Dermot rewarded him with a weak, “Fionn?”**

**Delirious, Dermot started rambling incoherently. Putting it down to the mix of drug and antidote, Finn only gradually realised what Dermot was saying.**

**“I was a weyane when thee all died,” Dermot mumbled. “It was fuckin shockin. Mey ‘ead was steamin an I was burnin ot. I doan remember nothin, just wakin up an knowin I’d shit mey bed an thinkin mey da wud gimme a good hidin.”**

**If Dermot were twenty, thought Finn, he would have been about eight when the plague struck.**

**Dermot’s voice, stronger and more urgent, wailed as he remembered, “Thee was all dead: mey brothers, mey sisters, mey mammy and mey da. I weren’t gurnin, I weren’t brave or nothin, I just weren’ gurnin.”**

**Despite Dermot’s tales of curses and cattle raids, the true story laid buried deep in his subconscious. As the antidote broke the dam of repressed memories, the tale flooded out.**

**“I didn’t know what ta do so I gets dressed an went ta school. But it was shut up fer Christmas. The roads was dead quiet. There was cars everywhere with dead people in em. Dead people was everywhere, in the streets an everythin. An half a town was burnin down. Lucky fer me there was no fires round our way.**

**“So I sits down outside a school an wanted ta die. But I didn’t. When I starts gettin cold I gets up ta ead back ome. On the way I sees this shop all smashed in by a car. By this**

time mey stomach thinks mey thout's cut so I goes in ta get some crisps.

“This woman follas me callin me Brendan an sayin, thank God I found ya. Brendan musta been her wee lad. She bursts out slabberin an I'm slabberin an she's slabberin back at me. An then she sez lets look after each other. So we do, livin in the shops an eatin out a tins. One day I starts callin her mammy cause she wants me to. But she weren't mey mammy cause mey mammy was dead.”

Dermot started crying in wacking great dry sobs. He pushed his huge frame against Finn's frail body, seeking comfort. Not knowing what else to do, Finn said: hush, hush now, as if Dermot were a child. But Dermot would not be hushed, the years of bottled up truth earned him the right to be heard and Finn did not have the heart to deny him.

Hesitantly, the big man continued... “Sometimes we saw people. First we ran away, but then we got talkin an ended up all livin round the shops together, nickin stuff.

“Months later these soldiers come round with some a the gards. Thee sed they'd come ta take care a us but thee looked more fucked than we did. There was a load a us by then. All a us kids was playin out late when thee turned up in these fuckin big lorries. The soldiers cleared us out in the trucks, goin on about igene an clean water. But we was alright cause we ad bottles an cans an juice...”

It terrified Finn to hear Dermot's lone sane voice in the land of the mad.

“Thee moved us t' all these tents like some fuckin big oliday camp an starts splittin us up. I was took from me mammy an put with the men, though she sed I wasn old enough. But see thee could only push us round so much. An

soon everyone's callin em the basted RUC. An were throwin stones. An theer usin tear gas an water cannon. An when thee threatened to ang the troublecausers, the camp got burnt down.

“The next thing we know theres all these tellies an radios an we settle down. Then thee seys we was goin up the country, mey an mey mammy an loads a uncles an aunties ta a big farm, like we was all a load a fuckin bogtrotters.”

Dermot stopped to wipe his nose with the back of his hand and seemed to calm down, only to become agitated again almost immediately. His big hand grasped Finn's scrawny forearm with so much force, Finn thought he felt the bones grind together.

“Fionn, I'm ascared,” he whispered. “Bejeasus I think I'm goin mental sometimes. I get these fuckin shockin nightmares. Old missus O' Flannaghan went off er nut when her son Terry was killed an all a us kids used ta laf atta, until one day thee come an took er away. I doan wanna be took away, Fionn. Doan let em locked me up. I'll be sound. Yer know I will.”

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By the time Dermot sobbed himself into a fitful sleep, Finn knew what he had to do. He had to get the drugs back in Dermot. There was nothing else for it.

The gas spray had settled into a fine white dust covering everyone and everything. Finn idly began scraping it into a pile. There were a few cottages down the lane. Finding a lit stove, he put a pan of water on to boil and dropped in a handful of the white powder before

rummaging round for coffee, sugar and milk. Back with Dermot, he began to worry he hadn't put in enough and scrapped together another mound for the pot. Satisfied, he gave Dermot a shake, watching the big man come to, frightened and uncertain.

"Here," he said holding up his head to help him drink. Finn got a whole mug down Dermot before he began to sit up and take notice.

"Fuckin hell Fionn," he said thickly, "must a been some craic, everyone's flat out. Looks like Bloody Sunday it does, fuckin shockin!"

Relieved the drugs were working, Finn let go of Dermot and poured another mug. Reaching out to cradle him again he said, "Come on big guy, let's get this down you."

Dermot shook him off. "Fuck-off man, yer doin mey fuckin nut in. I'm no fuckin weyan. I've been rat arsed before!"

He took the mug from Finn, gulping the contents down in one. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand he held it out for a top-up. When Finn obliged, Dermot emptied it again and sat there staring into space, before saying, "Yer grand Fionn, yer know. But if thee all think yer a soft shite thee'll take the mickey." Then he looked up and smiled like an overgrown child.

Hesitantly, Finn smiled back. But Dermot was not even looking at him.

"What?" he asked the big man. "What's up?"

"Jeasus fuckin Christ Finn, wud yer look at the knockers on that wan!"

Following Dermot's gaze Finn saw an attractive woman, about forty, had loosened her blouse to reveal pale



pendulous breasts. She winked at them with a comic lasciviousness that sent shivers down his spine. Dermot stood up, fumbling with his flies. Finn was embarrassed to see Dermot's large cock rock hard in his trousers. Swiftly looking away, his eyes fell on a woman and two blokes in a threesome. Another man was trying to join in, stiffy indifferently prodding one and all, until the obliging woman took it in her mouth. Other people had woken up and were acting just as shameless. Everywhere Finn turned they were at it. Twos became three and threes, four. Sex hung so thick in the air he could smell it, taste it: salt, sweat and slightly rank.

Another woman, getting banged doggy style, saw him gawking and went wild with excitement, writhing, groaning and tossing her hair. Impatiently pushing off her lover, she beckoned to Finn. When he didn't move, she indolently allowed the man back on.

“Jeasus Fionn, shake that minga an the dicks'll fall outta er. I wudna wanna shag that aul cocktrough wit yours!” said Dermot, before adding confidentially, “Let's get us some fresh fanny before some other cunt gets in.”

Not knowing where to look, Finn found he couldn't stop staring. As a brawny hand started to pull down the zipper on his overall, he tore his eyes away from the shocking scenes, or fuckin shockin as Dermot might say. The big man was bollock-naked, with a stiffy fit to bust.

Finn recoiled from his touch, straight into the arms of the older woman with the large pale breasts. She had someone with her. It could have been a daughter, or at least a younger sister. Neither of them had a stitch on. Succeeding where Dermot failed, the women unzipped Finn from neck to crotch. When the daughter squeezed his dick

through the thick cloth of his thermals, Finn realised he was as hard as Dermot.

It took no more than a wink from the older woman for Dermot to leap on her. They collapsed to the ground together in a torrent of limbs and squeals of girlish laughter. As Finn stood watching in horror, the younger woman grabbed his attention by pulling his hands onto her small firm breasts. Reluctantly he began to massage her stiff nipples, while her hand crept into his underpants to grip the shaft, rolling his foreskin back and forth with the ball of her thumb. When she snapped down the elastic waistband to roughly yank out his prick, he gasped, coming everywhere.

She watched him flex, spastically shooting arc after arc of milky fluid into the air; hitting her breasts, belly and face. When she started desperately masturbating his softening penis he pushed her hand away, suddenly overwhelmed with disgust at all the filth and perversion; especially her - the dirty bitch. With a brief puzzled look, she threw herself on the ground to join Dermot and her mother. All around Finn, the orgy plumbed new depths of depravity. People rutted like animals. They even grunted like animals.

Dermot had attracted quite a crowd. He was lying there with a great big fuck-off grin on his face while a wild woman rode his cock as he played with her tits. Another woman doggedly attempted to suck his balls without getting her face smashed in by the first woman's banging arse. A third leaned over Dermot, hanging her breasts above his mouth for him to suck and chew like bunches of ripe grapes.

Covering Dermot like flies, people gnawed at every inch of him, armpits, nipples, neck and groin. They sucked his toes, or nibbled his arms and legs. While in turn they were kissed, licked, sucked, fucked and even spanked, which shocked Finn most of all. It was as if Dermot's desirability had leached into each of them. A heady mix of horror and jealousy consumed Finn. Though he would never admit it, envy over the popularity Dermot's physique brought, tinged his disgust.

The older woman, Dermot's first lover, moved off with her own group. As pools of squirming flesh flowed like restless amoeba to her from Dermot, others swarmed in to fill the gaps. Emerging from a writhing knot around Dermot's genitals a tall, blonde woman made her way up his muscular torso in a flurry of feather-lite kisses.

Leaning forward to grab the back of her head, Dermot pulled the blonde towards his mouth. Finn noticed the woman's hairy arms, blue with tattoos, thick with muscle and roped by knotted veins. Dermot's big hand tenderly brushed back her long soft tresses revealing a delicate arched nose, thick pale moustache and chin dark with unshaven bristle. The blonde was one of the men Finn met last night, a big burly bloke who looked like a boxer and kept himself to himself. Now here he was kissing Dermot. And Dermot was kissing him back.

With tongues leisurely exploring each other's mouths, Dermot's legs opened to welcome the slim hips and beefy rump of the blonde. As the fair twin of Dermot's darkness settled between his heavily muscled thighs, Dermot wrapped his strong legs around the man's thick waist. Crossing his ankles tight over the small of his powerful back, he squeezed hard. With heels gouging deep into the

**sturdy buttocks, Dermot drew his lover into him, clinging like he would never willingly let go. Feeling sick at the sight, Finn ran; blindly stumbling over couple after fornicating couple.**

## CHAPTER 7

### **D (duir : oak) De Danann.**

*The People of the Goddess Dana were once the gods of ancient Ireland. After the advent of Christianity, they were demoted to the fairy folk who live in the great Neolithic burial mounds known as Sidhe*

When Finn cooled down, he decided to go back to Dermot. He knew he had no chance of surviving alone in this strange, insane land.

The village's main street was hung with bunting and lined with trestle tables groaning under mountains of food. At the end of each table stood brown jugs of foul whiskey and good bottled beer cooling in water butts. Having missed breakfast, the smell of sizzling bacon and new baked bread was irresistible, so he sidled up to the nearest table to grab himself some. Before eating, Finn was careful to take his antidote. Slipping a capsule under his tongue, he spotted Dermot and the boys staring at him from across the street. When Dermot said something, the men looked over full of curiosity. Pretending not to see them, Finn quickly took his food elsewhere.

After stuffing himself silly, Finn went looking for Dermot, finding him and the boys sleeping off lunch. Just plumb shagged out, he thought bitterly. Wanting to punish Dermot, he gave the sole of his foot a hearty kick.

“Wha?” came the bleary response.

**“We’re going,” Finn said.**

**It was already late afternoon, only leaving about four hours of daylight. Or so Dermot argued, until Finn silenced him with a look. When Dermot asked the boys if they were still coming along, another row started. It was stupid setting off so late. They wanted to enjoy the party. Finn stormed off in a sulk, leaving Dermot to argue; when he agreed with the lads and wanted to stay too. The argument went on for almost an hour. Another hour of daylight lost, making Finn’s urgency even more stupid.**

**\*\*\***

**Kerry boasts the mildest, wettest climate in the whole of Ireland due to the Gulf Stream’s warm current washing its south-west shores. Although lashed in winter by wild Atlantic storms, it is never cold and spring comes early. This year, although March, there was not a hint of spring. Despite the warm weather, the bare fields showed no signs of sprouting and the pastures of blasted hay, no new green. No birds sang in the thickets, while buds remained tight clenched fists. It was as if the land slumbered.**

**Making up for lost time, Finn made them push on until the failing twilight forced them to bivouac in a rundown cottage. Here they made a hasty supper, before settling down to get seriously pissed and stoned. During the night there was torrential rain. It came in through the roof, soaking them to the skin and putting out the fire; meaning there was no breakfast, not even a cuppa. It rained all the following day too, leaving everyone morose and touchy. By late afternoon, weary of their gripes, Finn was at the end of his tether.**

**Making Dermot knock at a lonely farmhouse, they asked the farmer to spend the night in the barn. The genial farmer asked them in, insisting they warm themselves with a dram or two while he went to tend his animals. After supper, the boys sang along to sentimental songs on the radio while getting smashed out of their tiny minds on rough homemade cider. Everything was bobbing on nice and cosy like, when suddenly there was a knock at the door. The farmer brought in a stranger, explaining he too was a traveller seeking shelter from the filthy night.**

**The small, slight man was soaked to the skin. Dressed in black overcoat, trousers and shoes, and clutching a sopping homburg battered by the weather, his sober attire presented a very odd spectacle when compared to Dermot and his gaudy companions. Looking at him, Finn thought the strands of thin sandy hair plastered over his scalp, and pinched sallow complexion, made the man look older than he probably was.**

**As the boisterous men turned to greet the newcomer, they fell strangely quiet. When he took off his sodden overcoat to reveal a priest's collar, the silence deepened. Appearing not to notice, the little man chattered on about the shocking weather as he alternately warmed arse and hands by the roaring fire. The priest smiled broadly as he helped himself to a drink from the farmer's jug and topped up the boys' glasses; although they all mumbled refusals. Unperturbed, he offered a toast to better days, before turning off the radio and asking where they came from. The night dragged on.**

**Next morning the boys remained uneasy, for the priest slept with them in the barn. On waking, there was no release of tension with comfortable farts and easy laughter.**

No scratched bollocks or arses and crude jibes around the latrine about sly wanks in the night. Instead they behaved like choirboys on a church outing.

The tension deepened when the priest said he would away with them as far as the bridge on the Shannon. The boys were panic-stricken, for although it was tragic to be stuck with a priest, it was just plain bad luck to cross one.

The priest made the day worse than the one before. The boys spoke very little except to complain. Even their complaining stopped when it started raining. In the evening, the priest went to pray and the atmosphere lightened for an hour. By the time he returned, the boys were so well oiled, he did not dampen the mood at all.

Feeling sorry for the priest, Finn tried to start a conversation. He quickly noticed the priest was bright and interested when asking questions, but taciturn and evasive when questioned. At the end of a long weary evening, Finn felt obliged to offer the sorry little man his place in the tent with Dermot. When Dermot found out, he insisted the priest have his place instead. Finn was struck by Dermot's unexpected kindness until the big man told him, "I'm not sleeping with that fucker. I'll bunk up with the boys."

Bet you will, Finn thought uncharitably, remembering what Dermot got up to in the orgy.

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Around midday, they reached the banks of the River Shannon on the border of the rebel kingdom of Connacht. Knowing they were almost home, the lads immediately cheered up. Following an old track along the riverbank, they saw a small shee in a field. The men



became excited, refusing to let the priest put them off when he crossed himself and started muttering, “With backs towards us and faces away; may God and his Holy Mother save us from harm.”

Amused by his companions’ reaction to the inflated dome, Finn did not mind when Dermot suggested waiting for the fairy folk to appear; for despite land vehicles and helicopters littering the meadow, there were was no sign of any personnel. Once the boys settled down, Dermot started telling them how he found Finn by a shee. The priest’s interest instantly picked up.

Fortunately, loud martial music silenced him before Dermot said much more. The music was thick with sibilant echoes, betraying the subliminal messages telling the observers what to see. Although Finn took an antidote capsule, suggestion ran riot in his head.

When a team in biohazard suits emerged from the dome to start the decompressors, the boys immediately began jabbering excitedly about the fairy folk’s beautiful clothes and the wondrous beauty of the maidens. Focusing on one bulky figure, indistinguishable from the next, they started passing lewd comments about what they could do with that wee beauty. Even the priest joined in; although his comments were more evangelical in nature. Despite the priest’s interest in the fairy folk, Finn could not shake off the belief the little man was shamming. If he was not seeing what Finn saw, he certainly was not sharing the group hallucination either.

By the time the dome was packed away, Finn knew why Dermot and the boys were so miserable. The priest was not the reason, although he did not help. It was because they were far from the subliminal messages in

music and television giving constant unconscious reassurance. Without them the boys suffered withdrawal and in withdrawal lost their blithe disregard for the world. Becoming more perceptive, they noticed their tiredness, the weather, the terrain and most of all, each other. Normally they sustained themselves by grumbling about shared adversity. However suspicion of the priest stopped them coming together even for that slim support.

The convoy pulled away with music blaring from speakers on the trucks and the underbellies of the copters, which flittered off without even bothering to inspect their audience.

...And the Tuatha de Danann passed by in carts and chariots of fine wood with silvered wickerwork, moving on wheels rimmed with white bronze. The chariot poles were of silver and the mountings of white bronze. The horns of the white oxen pulling the cars were bright-clad with gold. Maidens, with eyes demurely downcast, dressed in robes of finest silk, rode in carts adorned with enamel and gold. Lords decked out in scarlet and green sat on high prancing geldings that kicked up the earth in a fine dust to obscure their passage....

The spellbound men did not even need to look at the de Danann. They had seen it all on television, a thousand times before.

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With the de Danann gone, Finn quietly mentioned his doubts about the priest to Dermot.

**“Doan you worry,” he grimly retorted. “I’ve got his number.”**

**Towards evening, they camped in a barn by an abandoned farmhouse which showed signs of being recently burned down. When the priest went to pray, Fergus, mimicking the priest’s voice and clasping hands in prayer, announced he was going for a fucking good shite.**

**On his return, Fergus picked up the priest’s duffel bag and flung it at Dermot, hissing, “Holy Joe met a fuckin Ulsterman.”**

**Dermot emptied out the duffel bag, finding a compass, a flashlight and a biro clipped in small notebook. Finn pointed at the book. Dermot picked it up.**

**“What does it say?” Finn asked.**

**Dermot held it to his ear and shook it. “It don’t fuckin say nothin!”**

**Finn stared in disbelief. “Can’t you read?”**

**He looked at the lads, gathered round them. “Can’t any of you read?”**

**“You might as well ask them to fly to the moon.”**

**It was the priest speaking. He saw what was going on and was weighing his chances of making it back to the door. He started moving slowly and calmly, so as not to spook the dumb animals. When Dermot flew at him, the priest bolted.**

**Dermot was too quick. Picking up the priest in his massive fist, he began shaking the little man, screaming in his face, “Yers a spy, a fuckin dirty wee spy.”**

**The priest tried to protest.**

**“Stop blatherin shite, yer lying wee cunt!” raged Dermot, smacking the priest against a supporting beam.**

**The priest’s reply was a broken wheeze.**

**Finn saw the little man had narrowly missed one of the iron spikes driven in the wall to hold tools. He called out for Dermot to be careful.**

**“An you can fuck off too!” Dermot warned him, eyes never leaving the priest. “I said whose ya spying fer?”**

**Again, he slammed the priest against the beam as he answered for him, “It’s the fuckin Ulsterman, isn it!”**

**The priest weakly shook his head. His voice came in thick gasps. “The Chieftain’s eldest lad... threatened to burn the church... Said we were Provo lovers... Swear to God almighty, I never even knew about him,” he looked shiftily at Finn, “the outer-worlder.”**

**“But yer’ve tole him now, haven’t ya?”**

**The priest did not answer.**

**“Yer wee fuckin bastard yer fuckin tole him!”**

**Once more Dermot slammed the priest against the beam. When Dermot let him go, the priest did not fall to the ground in a heap. He had hit a spike. The force drove it through the back of his neck into his brain. He died instantly. His body hung twitching in mid-air. The blood running down the back of his overcoat and trousers dripped off his shoes onto the floor. The drops sounded unnaturally loud in the shocked silence.**

**“Yave dun it now,” someone whispered.**

**Finn looked up from the notebook. The priest spoke the truth when he said he was working for a local chieftain trying to track down Provos.**

**Fergus piped up, “So he was a fuckin spy! Looks like ya hit the nail on the ead there, Dermot!”**

**“Shut the fuck up will yer!” Dermot blazed**

**The priest’s body stopped twitching.**

**“We betta get the fuck outta ere befere it’s too fuckin late,” one of the lads said as a small canister rolled hissing into the barn, straight into the fire. A chorus of ‘it’s fuckin tear gas’ accompanied the explosion.**

**The men staggered blindly out, choking from fumes and bleeding from shrapnel. When their eyes cleared, they saw the circle of guns. Dermot roared, charging the nearest gunman, who deftly side-stepped and battered the back of his head with the butt of his rifle. Dermot went down and the man kicked him in the head until he stopped moving.**

**“Now,” said the leader, “who’s this Finn we’ve eard about?”**

**“I bet it’s the cunt with the aircut,” cried out one of the gunmen.**

**Finn stepped forward. “Let the others go.”**

**When the gunmen stopped laughing, one stuck his revolver in Finn’s ribs, while another bundled a bag over his head. As he was led away, he heard someone say, “Can we shoot them up a bit, boss eh? Can we eh? Can we? Go on, can we?” And bursts of automatic gunfire followed.**

**\*\*\***

**Finn was uncomfortable bouncing about in the van on the short journey back to camp. With head in a bag and hands tied behind his back, it was impossible to hang on to anything, meaning he suffered every bump in the road.**

**Bundled out when the van stopped, he heard people talking and stuff clattering around. Lying face down where he dropped, Finn willed himself invisible, fighting the impulse to jump at every sound. As time dragged on, he smelled cooking, heard eating, and was still ignored.**

Eventually, Finn only had two options: risk drawing unwelcome attention, or pissing himself where he lay. When potty training won, he called out in a pitiful voice, “I need the toilet!”

This provoked a hearty response. With the hood roughly dragged off, he blinked in the campfire’s harsh light as his eyes adjusted.

An Irishman grinned in his face. “We can’t have ya shittin in your pants now can we?”

“Oh fuck think a the stink,” another laughed, “an with us in the van.”

As the first man hunted through his pockets for the handcuff key, the second told Finn not to get any ideas or he’d shoot him like a dog.

“What d’ya mean, a dog?” the first asked.

“A doan fuckin know!” the second growled. “It’s a fuckin sayin, it doan mean nothin, ya dick!”

“Fuck off! Ou’a yew callin a dick!” his mate replied.

“Fuck auf, yer doin mey fuckin heed in, yer gobshite!”

“Fuck off with yer fuck off! If yer want mey ta fuck off come an fuckin make mey, ya twat!”

“Eh an oud’ ya think yor fuckin talkin to. Quit yer slabberin, befora fuckin gob ya.”

“Have a fuckin go then if yer fuckin think yer ard enough. Come on then, A fuckin dare ya!

Dare mey! Dare mey, ballix! D’ye wanna fuckin piece of mey then? Do yeh eh? Do yeh?”

While screaming at each other in drunken fury, they methodically took the handcuffs off Finn’s wrists and put them on his ankles, where they chaffed and made it impossible to walk; so he had to hop everywhere. But it wasn’t so bad.

**“Thanks!” said Finn when they finished.**

**They stopped arguing and glared at him for an instant.**

**“Aw, yer alright lad!”**

**“Go on, goan hav ya piss an wull sort yer out some dinner.”**

**“If there’s any fuckin left ya greedy bastard!”**

**“Doan yew fuckin start on mey agen!”**

**After the piss, his captors made room by the fire, giving him a bowl of stew and a bottle of beer.**

**They tried their best to be good company, but all Finn thought about was them murdering Dermot and the boys. After a few drinks, Dermot and the boys didn’t seem to matter so much. Finn felt good! Damn, he felt the best he had since arriving in this mental hole. He knew it was down to the drugs but thought what the hell, he’d been through enough.**

**“There is only so much shit a man can take,” he murmured philosophically.**

**The men nodded in sage agreement, toasting him with a chorus of ‘Health and life’.**

**Finn passed a pleasant enough night and in the morning woke without a hangover. The journey was easier because the drugs cushioned mind and body. Not blinded by a hood and with the handcuffs round his ankles, he could see and hold on as the van lurched about trying to avoid abandoned cars and potholes in the road.**

**By the middle of the morning, Finn felt cheerful enough to sing along with the boys to the sentimental country and western songs blaring out of the stereo. Towards midday, they passed through a small hamlet where they saw a crowd of collapsed and convulsing people**

covered with white dust. Finn guessed they missed the helicopters by minutes.

Morrigan caused a furious row, all but drowning out 'Ruby, Don't Take your Love to Town'. Half the men wanted to stay, while the others argued they did not deserve what they hadn't earned. Finn found it hard to believe they considered Morrigan desirable. Even the supposed good bit, the sex, was horrific.

As the van left the village, the men sang the Morrigan song with such plaintive longing it began to rub the edge off Finn's buzz. The song petered out after five minutes. A bit later and it was like nothing had ever happened. Without something right in front of them, the men were incapable of sustaining any thought or emotion for long. It was literally out of sight; out of mind. The driver switched the stereo back on, banging in some 'Chieftains' music. Despite the crippling volume, Finn failed to recapture his previous good humour.

An hour or so down the road, they picked up a hitchhiker standing on the roadside with his thumb stuck out in the time-honoured fashion. Finn looked at the nondescript man climbing into the van. Tall, thin and middle-aged, with a drawn face and prominent beaked nose, he had the front of his head shaved in a three-inch band from ear to ear and wore a rusty-red plaid cassock. Not knowing what to make of him, Finn decided he was a monk.

While the man looked like a cleric, he got a very different reception to the one the little priest got off Dermot and the boys. The men fell over themselves to make him welcome. When settled, the hitch-hiker began a ceaseless chatter of jokes and wild improbable stories, which the



**blokes in the van lapped up. Later, Finn learned he was a druid and according to his captors, druids were worth their weight in gold.**

## CHAPTER 8

### **B (beth : birch) Bullfest.**

*The Bullfest is a rite of divination used to choose an Ard Ri. A white bull is killed and a druid drinks its blood as a spell of truth is chanted over him. This induces a vision of the shape and appearance of the new Ard Ri*

After the evening meal, the druid performed an impromptu magic show for the men drinking round the campfire. His sleight of hand amazed and delighted his befuddled audience. For the grand finale, he pulled a bottle of pale amber whiskey from thin air, asking if they would be so kind as to have a dram with him. Despite no shortage of the local firewater, the men fell over themselves. Passing round the bottle, they emptied it in great slugs before it finished the circle. The druid smiled, magically producing another.

When Finn took the bottle, he was surprised to see the druid shake his head and make a sly cutting motion. Not certain if he imagined it, he plugged the bottle mouth with his tongue, faking a few swallows. A minute or so later, he was even more surprised when he saw bubbles racing up the length of the bottle as the druid took a hearty swig. But then the man was a magician.

Roughly shaken out of sleep, Finn opened his eyes to see the druid bending over him. In the firelight he saw everyone else sleeping soundly, so closed his eyes again.

**The druid gently slapped him across the face, urgently hissing, “Did you drink the whiskey?”**

**Finn shook his head.**

**“Good.”**

**Finn heard metal on metal as the druid unlocked his shackles.**

**“What about the guard?” Finn whispered, now wide awake and rubbing his chaffed ankles.**

**“There is no need to whisper,” the druid whispered back, adding more forcefully, “They are dead to the world,” before dropping his voice again as if embarrassed by its volume. “At least temporarily,” he elaborated, quietly. “We have about eight hours and a long way to go. Please take an anti-toxin.”**

**Finn looked blank.**

**“One of your antidote capsules.”**

**Once he obliged, the druid set off at a punishing pace, leaving Finn struggling to keep up.**

**\*\*\***

**A warm south westerly breeze kept the sky clear. The risen moon left it bright enough to see. Although the pace was hard, the druid was an affable companion.**

**“Where are we going?” Finn asked when he got his breath.**

**“I am taking you to friends who will help you find Erin. It was her fall-back plan if you were separated. We have been watching since you arrived. You might say we anticipated you when we saw you in a vision during the Bullfest.” The druid gave a little laugh.**

**Finn took a breath. Despite the man's friendliness, he was still in the land of the mad.**

**"You look nothing like the prophecy," the druid continued conversationally. "Our Fionn was a tall, regal, broad-eyed warrior with a face like the moon on its fifteenth day, small trimmed beard and red blond hair."**

**He turned to look at Finn, teeth flashing a smile in the moonlight. "I suppose it shows how wrong you can be."**

**"I think I was ill," admitted Finn.**

**"We think so too."**

**"Everything's foggy...."**

**"When you think about the past, do you get headaches?"**

**"How did you know?" Finn asked.**

**"Educated guesswork! How is the head now?"**

**"I can feel it starting."**

**"Try and put your worries out of your mind. We have people who can help. Right, what else can we talk about?"**

**"Where are you from? You know originally," asked Finn.**

**"Up and down the east coast; do you know Boston?" replied the druid. "In the US," he added seeing Finn's blank look.**

**"I thought I recognised an accent. People don't travel so far anymore."**

**"I had a guest professorship in Modern History at Liverpool U."**

**"What's a Liverpool ewe?" he asked the druid.**

**"How soon they forget," muttered the druid. "Still, it is not your fault. I came to Ireland with my family for the holidays. It was horrific, one minute everything was Happy Christmas and the next, welcome to the Dark Ages. They**

never let us mourn, you know. I was so angry! I lost everything: family, work, reputation. Sorry, you do not want to hear this....” The druid stammered to a halt.

“Don’t apologise, I’ve heard worse,” Finn said, thinking about Dermot.

They fell silent, negotiating a particularly treacherous piece of bog. After slipping in a pool, Finn paid more attention to the druid, carefully following the man in single file as the water in his boots squelched unpleasantly round his toes.

A few hundred yards later, they came to a stream. The druid stopped to take off his sandals. Finn strode fearlessly through the icy water, reckoning his feet could not be more uncomfortable.

On the other side of the stream, he again found himself following the druid, hopping gingerly from grass clump to grass clump, seen black against moon-silvered water. Eventually, they reached a wooden walkway running just above the marsh and invisible to the eye.

“Not far now,” the druid reassured him, putting on his sandals.

They trudged through the marshes over miles of causeway, before following broken down dry stone walls for another hour or so towards distant hills.

“Nearly there,” the druid promised, gesturing expansively.

Peering into the dark, Finn thought he made out the silhouette of a cottage, darker than the dark of the sky. As he stared, a point of light swam into focus.

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Inside was a young woman with two middle-aged men, skinny as the druid and sharing the same fretful expression. Like Finn's druid, the men sported a three inch shaved band from ear to ear over the forehead. The young woman's hair was shaved too; at the temples over the ears. It made Finn think it was a sign they were druids. They each nodded in turn as the druid introduced them. "Rory, Brian, Catleen: Finn."

"Hi, call me Rob, pleased to meet you."

"Where is Fand?" Finn's druid interrupted.

"I was with Rory," replied a woman, coming from an inner room. "I've just got him down."

Fand was the same age as the men. Like the girl, Fand's hair was shaved at the temples. Unlike them all, she was well fleshed with the comfortable sensual curves of an earth mother goddess.

Finn's druid frowned. "Can you wake him? I don't have much time and do not want to push him too hard. You know how grumpy he is when tired."

"Take one of the cars, we can scrunch up," one of the men said, concern obvious in his voice.

"I don't know. I can't think," replied the druid. "What if it causes problems? They might wonder where it came from."

"You're not going back there?" Finn cried out, startled.

"I must. There can be no loose ends. Is there any coffee? I'm beat. It's having to be so damn cheerful all the time!" Finn's druid began to pace nervously.

Fand nodded for Catleen to fetch coffee. Catleen went to the stove as Fand went back into the bedroom.

**“We brought two cars,” said the first man. “I’ll drive you and wait somewhere close by. Don’t argue, it will be easier all round.”**

**The other man, the one called Brian, reached for a nine-foot long ornately carved wooden staff leaning against the wall. “I’ve brought a staff of invisibility, in case things get dangerous. You know the incantation?”**

**Finn’s druid nodded dully.**

**“We’ve been promoting it everywhere lately, so they should know what it is. We can’t guarantee it works yet. If the worst happens, you can always hit someone with it and run like billy-o.”**

**A ripple of quiet laughter ended as Fand brought a large ungainly child from the bedroom. The men cooed hello, while Catleen rushed to cuddle the boy.**

**“Not when he’s just woken up,” Fand said sharply. “You know he doesn’t like it.”**

**On cue, the lad let out a thick and sleepy, ‘No!’ He stopped rubbing his eyes to survey the room. Even before he raised his head Finn saw he was no child, but a young man with Downs Syndrome.**

**“What in god’s name is going on?” he demanded. “You can’t take him there.”**

**“We are replacing you with a changeling.” The druid’s voice was flat and brittle. “The fairies came to snatch you away in the night. It happens all the time! They won’t even bother looking for you.”**

**Finn stared at him in disbelief.**

**The druid’s voice broke as he said, “I don’t like this any more than you Finn, but I’m his father. I will make sure he comes to no harm.”**

The lad's face brightened at his father's voice. "Da!" he cried rushing into his arms, almost bowling the druid over.

Fand went to join them. "He'll be safe, Finn, I promise. People are superstitious about changelings."

Despite the brave words, Finn saw what it cost them to put the boy at risk. How could they think he was worth so much?

The goodbyes were brief but touching. Everyone told the lad to be good and then hugged the druid. Fand, looking worried, lingered in the man's arms, whispering. He pulled back and laughed, "Take care, with not one, but two Rory O' Connors looking after me."

He turned to wink at Finn, "Rory O'Connor was the last true Ord Ree of Ireland."

"You stupid aul' fool!" Fand muttered fondly. Their kiss was long and passionate.

On reaching the cars, it struck Finn the few vehicles he'd seen were old models, almost antiques. While the black and white, boxy televisions looked new, or at least not like something out of a museum. As mad as it seemed, perhaps someone was deliberately keeping Ireland frozen in time.



## **CHAPTER 9**

### **T (tinne : holly) Tir na mBeo**

*One of the names for the Celtic underworld, meaning Land of the Living*

Though Brian drove through the night like a maniac, the old four-wheel drive coped admirably on the appalling cracked and potholed country roads. As far as Finn could see, the only problem was the rusting car wrecks that seemed to leap out of the darkness from nowhere. He soon gave up counting the times he thought they would crash and burn.

As day broke, Brian slowed right down; which made no sense at all. Quietly, so as not to disturb Catleen, dozing with her head on his shoulder, Finn asked what he was doing. Brian replied it was fine driving like a maniac at night because the Garda thought they were just another patrol, but in daylight it was obvious they weren't. There wasn't much civilian traffic on the roads and he did not want to attract attention; especially with Finn on board: not after pulling the old switcheroo. As the saying went, their ignorance is your bliss, so why go looking for trouble?

Hastily assuring Finn there was nothing to worry about, Fand added they were heading for a safe house to wait out the day. Soon after, Brian turned up a track and picking up speed drove to a farm. After parking the car in the barn, they headed to the house. Something was wrong.

**They all felt it. Catleen, the young woman who had slept on Finn's shoulder, started crying.**

**"She's a sensitive," Brian said. "She has premonitions."**

**"You mean she sees the future?" asked Finn.**

**"It's not quite so straight forward," Brian told him, "more hit and miss; like piecing together impressions and feelings to get a picture. It's not like listening in on the radio."**

**Fand shook her head for both of them to be quiet.**

**The women stayed outside, Fand taking the time to calm down Catleen. Finn followed Brian through the half-open farmhouse door. The first thing to hit them was the stench. A split second later, sensing their presence, flies rose in a frenzied cloud.**

**"Jesus Christ," Finn gasped.**

**Under the cloud of flies were four or five bloated bodies.**

**"Something's wrong with them!" Soon as he spoke, Finn realised the bodies had no heads. His stomach lurched as the flies, used to the intrusion, settled back down.**

**Though Brian's face was ashen, he seemed calm enough. "We better take a look around. We owe them that much. You never know, they may have missed one of the children."**

**Brian walked into the room. Again, the cloud of flies rose from the corpses. From outside came a strangled scream. Dashing out, Finn and Brian found the two women behind the barn. Catleen, the sensitive, mumbled how she felt him call, while Fand dumbly held her close.**

**What appeared to be a bundle of rags was a child's headless body, badly savaged with the guts ripped out.**

Shreds of bloodied flesh were littered all around in a big circle. An arm torn off at the elbow made Finn think something had been eating the corpse.

“Wolves,” Brian said to his unasked question.

“Don’t talk stupid!” snapped Finn. He was glad to have something to focus his anger on. “There are no wolves in Ireland. There hasn’t been for centuries.”

“Have it your own way,” Brian replied quietly.

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Making themselves comfortable as possible in the barn, Catleen fell into a restless sleep, troubled by dreams. Unable to even think about sleep, Finn regarded her with a mixture of disgust and envy. Angry and frustrated by the gruesome murders, he quickly became agitated. Itching to do something, he said he would bury the dead. Fand whispered it was not a good idea. They should leave everything alone in case patrols came back.

“When she wakes up,” Brian said, nodding at Catleen. “We should contact Sanctuary.”

“She’s too upset,” Fand replied. “She won’t be able to operate for days.”

“What about the radio then?”

“They may be monitoring the frequencies.”

“Why did they cut off the heads?” Finn asked. It was bothering him.

“Standard practice,” Brian answered. “They’re more than just trophies, the head contains the soul. Take the head and the spirit becomes your guardian.”

“All this is so... weird,” Finn complained.

Brian shot him a venomous look.

**“Oh for heaven’s sake Brian, you can’t hold the man personally responsible,” Fand snapped.**

**“He isn’t,” Finn told her. “It’s what I represent.”**

**“Tir nam Bo, the otherworld,” Brian murmured quietly, smiling. “Actually, you are not too bad... for an Englishman.”**

**“Should I take that as a compliment?”**

**“You better had,” Fand advised, “he doesn’t dish them out that often.”**

**They left at twilight. Opening the barn doors, Finn thought he heard baying in the distance.**

**“Wolves,” Brian told him with a hint of ‘I told you so’ in his voice.**

**As they pulled away, Finn thought he saw eerie yellow eyes reflecting the headlights and dark loping shapes struggling to keep pace with the car.**

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**Approaching a village near the farm, Brian slowed the car. Catleen, who was sleeping again, suddenly sat bolt upright, screaming, “No!”**

**Brian ground to a halt in a screech of brakes.**

**Fand punched him in the arm. “Go back for heaven’s sake... Reverse!”**

**Brian stalled the car. Frantically turning the ignition while gunning the accelerator, he almost flooded the engine. Headlights blinded them from the top of the road. Crunching the gears, Brian threw the car into reverse, driving furiously backwards while looking for a place to turn.**

**“Here, on the left,” Finn called out, pointing to a turnoff.**

**Wrenching the car round, Brian threw it into first, second, then fourth as he picked up speed. Another set of headlights appeared behind them, and though he drove like a mad man, the lights slowly gained.**

**“Gun!” Brian grunted.**

**Fand reached into the glove compartment bringing out a pistol.**

**“Can you shoot?” Brian called to Finn.**

**“Of course I bloody can!” he said, taking the gun.**

**He emptied the gun making the other cars slow down and increasing their lead. No shots were returned. “I need ammo!”**

**“That was it. I thought you said you could shoot!” Brian snapped.**

**“I was aiming for the tyres,” he told him.**

**“You stupid bastard, you should have been aiming for the drivers!”**

**Finn aimed for the tyres because he thought the druids might object to murder. “I wish you’d bloody told me!” he growled.**

**The car, going flat out, shook ruthlessly over the potholed roads. Finn feared they would blow a tire, but thought he better keep his mouth shut. The road stretched straight for mile after mile. With each passing mile their pursuers slowly gained.**

**“Now, if I remember!” Brian said, passing a rusted triangular ‘yield’ sign.**

**At the last minute he turned off the headlights and swung the car on to a slip road. When Brian switched the**

lights back on again, Finn saw they were on a highway with thousands of wrecked cars.

“Fuck me!” swore Brian, slamming on the brakes to avoid hitting the wrecks.

It was a good five minutes before Finn saw distant headlights trailing them. Turning off at the next junction the car tore down a narrow country lane winding into darkness.

Catleen screamed, “We’re going to die! Stop the car!”

She threw herself at Brian, causing him to swerve dangerously.

“Fuck’s sake,” Brian wailed.

Deciding if they were going to die it was because of Catleen, Finn flung himself on her; pinning her under his weight. All fight gone, she slumped, sobbing helplessly.

The wreck blocking the road was on them before they saw it. Brian swung the car hard to the right, shearing a hedge, then immediately turned right again into the gateway of a field. Cutting the lights, he cruised under the shelter of the hedge for a quarter of a mile or so before turning onto a country track, where he pulled up; waiting.

The first car tried to avoid the wreck by tacking left. Too late, it clipped the wreck, lost the road and tumbled down a steep embankment, ending up in a ditch. The second car braked heavily just in time. Finn clearly saw its headlights continue down the road they had just left.

As the beams faded in the distance, Brian smiled. “Lucky I remembered that from when we passed this way. The road divides in a couple of miles. They won’t know which one to take. And in the meanwhile, we can keep to the back roads.”

Convinced by Catleen's psychic powers, Finn was bitterly disappointed. "It's a fix!" he complained. "She only remembered the route."

"I remembered the route, I can't say what prompted Catleen," replied Brian flatly.

Driving more steadily, Brian turned off the road at first light onto an overgrown woodland track. Finn thought he was taking them somewhere to wait out the day. Half a click on, Brian parked in some bushes and told Finn to wake Catleen; they would be walking from here on.

Following the faint trail, Finn noticed other cars parked among the trees. He counted twenty, but was not sure of the exact number. Ten or fifteen minutes later, they skirted the overgrown ruins of a small town, turning back into the woods when they met a road. At least Finn presumed it was a road; once. Now, it was covered with potholes and gashes in the tarmac where tree saplings, bracken and twisted briar ran rampant.

On the far side, the trail continued to a large stream where the forest opened up, making the trail easier to follow. Dense conifer gave way to the naked branches of broad-leafed trees, pregnant with bud. In the undergrowth nestled swathes of yellow narcissi, cowslip, dandelion and daisy. Here was the life Finn thought missing from the rest of the land. A delicate rope bridge hung over the rocky entrance of a shallow gorge. High above, partially obscured by trees, loomed a fairy-tale castle webbed with ivy.

"Wow, what's that?" he asked.

"Home!" Fand replied without bothering to look up.

"Sanctuary!" Catleen answered.

## CHAPTER 10

**C (coll : hazel) Conor Mac Nessa.**

*King of Ulster in the time of Great Queen Maeve*

He is running through dark corridors, breathing hard. Legs feel like jelly, lungs like bursting. He is almost done. Behind, his pursuer shows no signs of tiring. He does not know how he knows, but he knows the pursuit will not stop until he is dead.

Against his better judgement, he looks back and stumbles on the uneven floor. Flinging out his arms to break his fall, he lands on his right wrist. It breaks. He hears the snap, but feels no pain. Where is the pain? There should be pain. This is not real.

Struggling to his feet, he risks another look. It is too dark to see. He hears the hunter's breath; hears the pounding of the hunter's feet, relentless as a frantic heart. He struggles to get going. Every movement is an effort. Even the air conspires against him. It feels like he is stuck in glue. Breath, congealing in his chest, floods his lungs.

The hunter closes. Louder and louder come the pounding of his feet, indistinguishable from the sound of his own crazy blood rushing past his eardrums, driving him insane. A hand grabs his shoulder. Strong fingers turn him around to face his pursuer.

Conor Mac Nessa screams.



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The sweat streaming off Conor Mac Nessa left him clammy and shivering. It took a moment to recognise his surroundings. He was sitting up in bed, his own bed. In the thin dawn light, he recognised his chest of drawers, wardrobe, television, dumbbells on the weights rack; all his familiar things. Realising it was only a dream, Conor started to laugh.

The laughter died in his throat when he heard a whimper. Turning, he saw a woman huddled in a corner of his bed. Her long straight hair hung over heavy breasts. Arms were crossed protectively over drawn up legs to make a small a target as possible. She nursed her face. He must have hit her in his sleep. He wanted to console the frightened woman, but it angered him to think she saw him so afraid.

"Get out, get out! Get the fuck out!" he screamed at the woman, like a woman.

She leaped from the bed, dragging her robe from the floor in a single sinuous movement made graceful by terror. Once gone, Conor forgot her, obsessed as he was by trying to remember the dream. Why could he not remember the dream?

Wrapped safe in her robe, she returned with a bottle of whiskey and a glass, offering them to Conor. It was as if she knew he was more afraid of sleep than she was of him. He took the bottle, ignoring the glass and the woman. Uncorking it, he gulped down a deep long swig, feeling the raw alcohol burn his throat like life returning.

**The woman left. He did not notice. The dream still eluded him. In the darkness of his room, in the light of consciousness, all that remained of the dream was the ghost of fear settling into his skin like drying sweat.**

**In the small hours of morning, suspended between night and day, Conor Mac Nessa knew he was going to die. He had known he would die ever since the Bullfest Prophecy. The knowledge of his death sat in the centre of his head, between his eyes, like a brain ball that one day soon would simply explode.**

## CHAPTER 11

### **F (fearn : alder) Fomoire.**

*The Fomorianians were evil supernatural creatures with a single eye in the middle of their foreheads. According to legend, they lived in a place called Balor's Fort on Tory Island, an impregnable rocky islet of steep cliffs and treacherous currents off the Donegal coast*

Every Halloween, the World Health Taskforce took two thirds of the harvest from the Land of Erin. It was not appropriate for the blessed Tuatha de Danann to steal food from the people's mouths. So they came as Fomorianians, evil undersea creatures possessing but a single eye; a particularly apt description of the helmet visor on a positive pressure isolation suit.

The Taskforce took the food to a base on Tory Island off the Donegal coast for canning and freeze-drying. Surrounded by cliffs and with no natural harbour, Tory Island was ideal. The only way in and out was through an underwater tunnel carved from a fissure, made so legend said when St Columba threw his staff from the nearby summit of Mucklish Mountain.

The Fomorian visit was always a difficult time in Conor's Mac Nessa's kingdom. The people let their resentment spill over into civil disobedience. Usually Conor had to hang a few before things calmed down. The Bullfest prophecy of his death could not have come at a

worse time. Although Conor pretended to shrug it off with fierce arrogance, it preyed on his mind, creeping into his dreams. If only that bitch Maeve had married him, he would be true Ard Ri instead of just High King. And no one would dare raise voice, or hand, against him.

Some days, bitterness gnawed so deep at Conor Mac Nessa, he could think of nothing else. One such day, he spat out his resentment to Padraig of Keeva. The Christian Archbishop was another outsider, hated and mistrusted by the people of Erin. To his annoyance, the Archbishop offered no sympathy but coolly replied if Conor had the Sacred Treasures of Erin, not even Maeve could deny his right to be Ard Ri.

With the Sacred Treasures of Erin never mentioned on television, it was no surprise Conor Mac Nessa had not heard of them. Knowing all about them, Padraig chose to enlighten the High King.

“In ancient days,” began the Archbishop, “this land of Erenn, or Ireland as she was then called, was a great land with many beautiful cities.”

Conor nodded eagerly. He had heard of Ireland and knew of the ruined cities, now forbidden places, inhabited only by ghosts.

“Each of the four cities of Ireland held a sacred treasure,” Padraig continued. “From Gorias came a bloodthirsty sword. Falias held a spear of destruction which never missed its mark. Finias had the Lia Fawll, the Stone of Destiny, which cried out with joy when touched by a true Ord Ree. And Murias held the cauldron of the Dogtha that brought the dead to life.

“The Lia Fawll was lost, snatched away to the desolate and haunted Isle of England. While the Fomoire stole the

sword and the spear. Thus the land of Erenn fell into ruin. In desperation, kings and druids gathered together to beg Mother Church to protect the Cauldron of Dogtha, the last sacred treasure, from the dark Fomoiré menace.”

Conor laughed loud and long at Padraig’s fanciful boast, knowing full well kings and druids would never beg a thing from this man’s worthless church. Taking his mockery in good grace, the next evening the Archbishop showed the High King the last surviving sacred treasure of the Land of Erin, the Cauldron of the Dagda.

The cauldron was a wide and handsome double-handled gold chalice, encrusted with precious stones. Padraig demonstrated its curative power by ordering a frightened priest to take poison. Then, after chanting a spell, or prayer, in some foreign tongue, he revived the man with a draft from the cup.

Conor was astonished and humbled by the miracle. Slyly, he asked Padraig about the other sacred treasures. In equally sly tones, the Archbishop repeated, that apart from the Lia Fail, which was in England - that terrifying and distant land of the dead - the rest were in Balor’s fort on Tory Island.

The High King complained Tory Island might as well be mythical England. For it lay off the coast of the rebel kingdom of Connacht and was surrounded by high cliffs without harbour or inlet. Imperiously, Padraig dismissed his gripes with a casual wave of the hand. He knew a secret way into Tory Island. In Balor’s Fort, the High King would not only find the sacred treasures, but earthly treasure, in heaps of greater size than the treasures stored in heaven for the righteous man.

Conor's eyes blazed with greed as he schemed deep into the night with Padraig. Next morning, when the High King summoned his new favourite, he found the Archbishop gone. In the following weeks, Conor believed Padraig hid because he could not make good his boast.

The day before the christian feast of Christmas, Padraig sent word. Conor and his warriors were to meet him at dawn, on the shores of Lough Swilly; the very border of the rebel kingdom of Connacht.

An old priest met Conor and the pride of his Red Branch on the loch shore. When Conor arrogantly demanded to know how they were to reach Tory Island, the priest pointed to a number of upturned coracles. The warriors began to laugh. In response, the old priest started to pray. His voice rang out over the still lake like a summoning. As the waters boiled, a terrifying beast rose through the chill mist. The soldier's mockery died in their throats.

Conor did not know what he saw. Or rather he knew and did not want to know. The sight of the sea-beast brought back too many memories, waking old ghosts and speaking of a past he did not want to recollect. If someone asked about the creature, he would have called it an aughisky, an oillpheist, a fabulous sea-beast. Deep in his subconscious, suppressed by the weight of years, he would have thought it a submarine.

The short time in the beast's belly brought back too many memories, subduing the men into silence. They felt only relief when escaping through the hatch. Until seeing what they had escaped into; a vast cavern of hewn rock and iron machinery.

**Taking charge of his nervous flock, Padraig led them through the underground harbour to great metal doors; the entrance into Balor's Fort. Tracing a blessing in the air above the Irishmen, the Archbishop sent them on their way. While no one believed in Padraig's foolish and worthless god, each made the sign of the cross in response and was grateful for his christian magic, a sure charm against the old ones.**

**The High King and his warriors wandered aimlessly through a maze of corridors. Behind the many doors were rooms of strange machinery piled high with tins and bottles, packets and sacks, sound systems and televisions, pots and pans, plates and silverware, candles, light bulbs, bottled gas and rechargeable batteries. There were no sacred treasures, or heaps of fabulous wealth.**

**With the Red Branch feeling cheated by the Archbishop's broken promises, Conor began to suspect Padraig had some other motive in bringing them to this infernal place. He was debating whether to press on or retreat, when all hell broke loose in a pandemonium of flashing lights and deafening siren calls. With his terrified men looking as if they would bolt, Conor swiftly decided there was no shame in running.**

**No one felt like a hero that day. This was not the stuff of saga and praise song, boasted of in the banqueting hall. If this were spoken of again, it would be on Halloween, the night the dead walked.**

**Conor and the Red Branch arrived at the underground harbour to see Padraig load a pointed white tube into the belly of the aughisky. The High King was surprised how deftly the Archbishop handled the great grappling tractor. He was even more surprised when he recognised what he**

handled. It was the weapon of untold destruction which never missed its target. It was nothing less than the sun god Lugh's magical spear from the City of Falias; the second Sacred Treasure of the Celt. Padraig had proved as good as his word.

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The mission was a success. Padraig had the nuclear missile needed for God's divine plan. It was just as his master, the Prophet, said. There were missiles stored on Tory Island in case it should ever prove necessary to sterilise Ireland.

Steering the submarine back to Lough Swilly, Padraig remembered the first time the Holy Prophet spoke. In those days, the Prophet was the captain of a nuclear submarine patrolling the waters of plague stricken Ireland and Padraig, a junior officer. He did not understand the Prophet saying the UN would move heaven and earth to recover a nuclear submarine and its payload of weapons. However, an old craft with a troublesome crew was an entirely different matter.

Things soon became clear after the crew transferred to an old diesel cargo submarine. Their new duties were transporting materials to build a library in the south. The Prophet claimed it was the sign he waited for. A month later the submarine went missing, presumed lost at sea.

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Padraig had every confidence he could guide the submarine through the coastal shallows to Lough Swilly. For years he trained the old priest to help navigate the



**craft. They knew every foot of coastline between Tory Island and the loch, and could steer the ship so close to shore, it hampered radar.**

**As far as Padraig could see, his only problem was keeping the weapon long enough to remove the warheads. He could not imagine the High King letting the missile out of his sight; not after hearing him call it the Sun god Lugh's sacred spear.**

**Ready for Conor Mac Nessa, Padraig planned his next move with the same care he used to trick the High King and his army into providing a diversion on Tory Island. He unloaded the missile before reaching shore; while Conor Mac Nessa and his Red Branch cowered in the submarine's bowels.**

**In the heart of Lough Swilly, a group of monks waited in coracles for his arrival. Padraig deftly used a rope and pulley to haul the missile onto a pontoon of the tiny leather and birch crafts. Rather generously, Padraig had already decided to give Conor the missile as his reward for Tory Island. Once he removed the precious warheads, of course.**

**As Padraig had expected, Conor was suspicious and reluctant to let the Archbishop out of his sight. More cunning than Padraig knew, the High King concealed himself and saw the monks take the sacred spear. While Padraig hid the sea beast in the shallows, Conor Mac Nessa ordered a contingent from his Red Branch bodyguard to take the tube from the priests and leave no witnesses.**

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**The skeleton staff, covering the Tory Island base over Christmas, knew contact with the wild Irish brought death**

from the plague. Sealing up the command centre, they switched off the air conditioning, turned on the alarms and radioed for help. All the time praying the Irish would panic and leave.

With the rocky coastline interfering with sonar and radar, it was impossible to track the submarine until it entered the clear channel of Lough Swilly. When fighter planes later found it poorly concealed, they destroyed it.

Ariel photographs identified the submarine as one lost six years ago. At the time, the Admiralty assumed the unbalanced commander committed suicide, taking the crew with him. Security footage from Tory Island, matched to crew photographs, showed one crewman survived and by the looks of it, had gone native. It was of overwhelming concern that he retained a sufficient grip on reality to steal and possibly arm, a nuclear weapon.

The United Nations Security Council issued a top priority order to recover the missile and eliminate the traitor. Even in the planning stage, military intelligence referred to the undertaking as Operation FIN, due to the words find, infiltrate and neutralise, headlining the mission objectives. Somewhere along the line, when wondering how to buy the agent enough time to fulfil his task, the idea of Finn Mac Cool was born.

## CHAPTER 12

### **E (eded : aspen) Emain Macha.**

*The archaeological site of Conor Mac Nessa's iron-age hill fort occupies eleven English acres on the Hill of Navan outside Armagh. The ruins have the remains of bank and ditch fortifications and the foundations of three great halls, traditionally believed to be a banqueting hall, treasury and armoury*

Erin returned to the village on the evening of Morrigan to find Finn and Dermot already gone. Assuming they struck off across country, and as only a fool would attempt to track them through open countryside, she decided to wait at the rebel stronghold of Rathcroghan. A few days later, she learned of the massacre, and Finn's capture, from a survivor.

Erin felt responsible for what happened to Finn, even though she had no choice but to abandon him. The old woman, Nana, wanting to warn her about Morrigan, refused to leave with the excluded groups: the elderly and infirm, pregnant women, nursing mothers and children. Erin's first priority had to be getting her girls and their nurse to safety. Besides which, Erin did not relish being trapped in Morrigan. She hated Morrigan and had avoided it for years. To her Morrigan was more than just bad sex. It got inside your head and messed with your mind.

When she first heard the news about Finn, Erin wondered about texting the Tuatha de Danann for advice. On reflection, she realised they would probably do something drastic like send in the marines or bomb Emain Macha, which while solving some problems would, to be honest, only create others. No, it was best to let events run their course. After all, if Conor Mac Nessa had Finn, it was almost as if fate had brought them together. However, knowing the fickleness of fate, she decided it would not hurt to be there when things needed a bit of a push in the right direction.

Three miles from Conor's fortress, Erin left the Shogun in the garage of a crumbling semi-detached to continue the journey on foot. She stashed her phone with the keys; thinking if she lost it in Emain Macha, or worse, if it rang, she would have one hell of a time trying to explain it away. People would think it black magic.

The walk in the sharp morning air left Erin feeling surprisingly light-hearted and optimistic. If Finn was successful, Conor Mac Nessa would soon be dead and Queen Maeve would be married to Finn. It did not matter who Finn really was, only who people thought he was. She wondered if the rest of the population would accept Finn as the legendary Fionn Mac Coull as easily as Dermot had.

The brooding walls of Emain Macha, topping the hill of Navan Fort, rose dark and dank from a chill ground hugging mist, the legacy of cool nights and warm wet spring days. When Conor Mac Nessa built his fortress on the archaeological site, he wanted to replicate his ancient namesake's palace as a monument to his rule.

Somehow, things never quite worked out in this Land of Erin. His new fort was a shantytown of grim walls topped by razor wire and punctuated by machine gun nests. Erin thought it ugly and forbidding. In her eyes, it was the perfect reflection of Conor Mac Nessa's mind.

Approaching the wooden causeway, bridging the bank and ditch defences carved out of the side of Navan Hill, a soldier in a wooden sentry hut challenged her.

'Hello,' she shouted back casually.

"Sorry Erin didn't recognise yer there. Didn't see yer go out."

She smiled vaguely. 'Nice morning for a walk but a bit chilly still, isn't it?'

"Yer telling me! This helps." The sentry offered her a stone bottle of local firewater.

'Better not, it's a bit early.'

"Suit yerself," he replied amiably, waving her on as he settled back down to doze over a charcoal brazier.

The ambivalence of Erin's position in Emain Macha never ceased to amaze her. The people in Rathcroghan treated her like the goddess she was; always asking her to bless cattle and babies, or cure aches and pains or something. In Emain Macha, Erin was simply one of the court women. Yet everyone deferred to her and nobody questioned her coming and going. It was as though they pretended she was one of them.

Reaching another sentry box, the sentry greeted her. "Alright there Erin, didn't see ya go out."

She shrugged and smiled.

Erin had to admit Emain Macha was imposing; for a blot on the landscape. However, it failed to match the scope of Conor's grandiose ambition. The original plans showed

a series of bank and ditch defences topped by three concentric stone walls, each with four gateways and iron reinforced oak gates.

During construction someone pointed out Conor would not be able to get his armoured cars through the bank and ditch defences. This resulted in the front and sides bristling with fortifications, while the back wall was intersected by a broad tarmac road leading directly to the service sheds and garages. It made the fortress look stupid, like a mean old nun with the back of her habit tucked into her knickers. Sadly, it appeared Erin and Maeve were the only ones to ever see the joke.

The heart of the palace, the royal precincts of the Rath Roi, always reminded Erin of a builder's yard. Abandoned years before, Conor had never resumed construction, despite always banging on about it. The Rath Roi consisted of three adjoining buildings called the arsenal, treasury and banqueting hall. Of the three, only the beautiful ornate banqueting hall was finished.

When visiting court, the nobility usually bunked down communally in the ornate hall, with Conor's Red Branch bodyguard and the rest of the court officials. Some did, however, occupy private apartments, including Conor Mac Nessa and his prisoner, Erin's mother, Great Queen Maeve.

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Every legend has a core of truth, thought Erin, and so it was with Maeve. Before the plague, her mother was influential in the Women's Movement. After the plague, when society reorganised, Maeve used her experience to

help it along. It was not a conscious act to take charge. Maeve was simply one of those women who respond to any hurt by kissing it better.

Erin knew the people believed Maeve set up the rural communities, but it was not true. Rural society and the resurrection of the old gods and heroes were down to the Tuatha de Danann. But as most people did not know how the de Danann manipulated them, they thought it was Maeve's work. Maeve and her advisors were responsible for the matriarchal head-woman, priestess and goddess system governing the communes. Maeve claimed women had been under the thumb of men for too long. She argued while men thought with their dicks, women thought with their wombs. It was the difference between rape and nurture. Erin often suspected the main reason Maeve so vehemently rejected christianity was because men ran the show.

The pagan alternative, promoted by Maeve, was tied to the seasonal festivals of ploughing, sowing, lambing and harvest. Ignoring christianity with its emphasis on misery and guilt, it concentrated on the joy of life; a happy, easy religion celebrating belonging and jobs well done. At the time, it surprised Erin how fast the people embraced the new belief system. Their spontaneous acceptance seemed a beacon of hope, even a miracle; rather than the cynical manipulation of a bunch of outer-worlders masquerading as the ancient fairy race.

During Maeve's early days, Northern Ireland remained separate from the rest of the country. Erin suspected this was due to the remnants of the old peacekeeping forces in the province. The de Danann had used the military and para-military in the very early stages

**of reorganisation and it caused a lot of resentment. In fact they probably, unwittingly, sowed the seeds of the civil war between Maeve and Conor Mac Nessa.**

**From what Erin heard, Conor Mac Nessa had been a British Army Officer, who chose the name of the mythological High King of Ulster because he was stationed there. In the third year of Maeve's reign, Conor and his bastard Black and Tans swept out of the north. Many bloody battles ensued as the desperate communities tried to defend themselves. But as Conor's army were organised, and had guns, there was never any real doubt about the outcome.**

**Making a valiant last stand in the wilds of Connacht, Maeve watched the last of the Free Irish beaten into the ground. When she was captured, Conor Mac Nessa offered to marry Maeve. He knew such an alliance would consolidate his power by making him the sacred Ard Ri; a romanticised central figure in the new political theatre. Also knowing it, Maeve refused him. That was seven years ago. Maeve was still his prisoner. And still saying no.**



## CHAPTER 13

### **S (saille : willow) Setanta.**

*There are many tales of the boy Setanta, not least among them how he received arms from Conor Mac Nessa, the King of Ulster, and gained his manly name of Cu Hullen*

Conor Mac Nessa, High King of the Five Kingdoms of the Land of Erin, was drunk. Not falling down drunk or even stupid drunk, just drunk. There was always a good reason for Conor to drink and very few for denying himself. He drank when he was feeling good. And he drank when he was not. Recently Conor was not feeling good. Nightmares troubled him. He woke in the night sweating and afraid, but never remembering his dreams. No wonder he needed a drink.

Conor knew his subjects hated him because he was not the sacred Ard Ri, but he could not understand why they hated him so much. He was not such a bad king and was certainly not blind to his faults. He admitted to a suspicious nature and violent temper. Not necessarily bad qualities in this violent and uncertain Land of Erin.

As a ruler, he was strong and brought peace. Canny and even-handed, he kept the headstrong warlords and barons on a very short leash, reining them in to bring fair taxation and justice to all. There was none of the bickering that took place under Maeve, where one village slaughtered

another and called it a football match. He even reunited Ulster, the so-called fair fourth field, after its long separation from the fatherland.

Although Conor Mac Nessa understood all this; what he could not understand was his people hated him because he was an Englishman. Deep down that gnawed at the Irish psyche. He could not grasp what Maeve instinctively knew. The passionate nature of the Celt craved a healthy dose of anarchy. Celts were individuals; leaders not followers, thorns not roses.

Setanta, Conor Mac Nessa's teenage son, stood patiently awaiting acknowledgment. Conor let him wait while he poured another whiskey and brooded. Conor Mac Nessa hated his son; hated him as much as the people loved him. He bet Maeve would marry the lad tomorrow. He was type of weakling pretty boy she liked.

When Conor Mac Nessa first became King of Ulster, the barons insisted he choose an heir, hoping he would choose one of them. Knowing that was suicide, Conor chose a sickly infant who came from Tir na mBeo before the troubles. Like all changelings, he did not expect the child to live.

When the boy's dying mother said she was born in Liverpool, the druids named the child Setanta after the ancient Celtic hero, who was the ward of Conor Mac Nessa and later, under the name Cu Hullen, one of his best champions. They justified the decision by claiming during Roman times a tribe of Celts called the Setantii had lived in the Merseyside area and so the name was appropriate. In giving the child such an illustrious name, the druids also gave him the ancient hero's fate. Much to Conor's annoyance, the boy prospered under his new name,

growing strong, handsome, intelligent and kind, and was admired by all.

As much as Conor hated his son, the boy loved his father. Watching him drunk and unhappy, he pitied the High King. The throne was a lonely and dangerous place. His father did no good disregarding his chieftains and barons. Overwhelmed by concern, Setanta could stay silent no longer. Screwing up his courage, he urged, “Poppa Conor! Sire! They wait for you in the Great Hall. The feasting cannot begin until you award the hero’s portion.”

Thinking his father needed help getting to his feet, Setanta stepped forward. Uncoiling like a spring, Conor was out of the chair in a single movement, arm out, hand closing around the boy’s throat. The collision carried them halfway across the room to collide with a chair that overturned, causing Setanta to fall sprawling on the floor, while Conor swayed unsteadily over him.

The sight of what he did to his son filled Conor with drunken remorse. Years ago, when the boy was small and cried himself to sleep at night, Conor loved Setanta. Loving him now, he stretched out his hand. The lad reached up and grasped his father’s arm. In pulling himself to his feet, he almost pulled Conor over.

Man and boy stood eye-to-eye, each as tall as the other. When Conor nodded in rough acknowledgement, Setanta smiled. His handsome youthful face, radiating joy, was unmarked by time or bitterness, whereas Conor felt his own face was worn to the point of being worn out. No wonder they love you, he thought. Perhaps they were right and it was time to move aside for his glorious son.

“Give your old man a kiss,” he said.

As their lips met in the kiss of peace, he seized his son's jaw, viciously forcing the boy's mouth against his own. Gripping the boy's lower lip with his teeth, he bit hard enough to taste blood.

"Remember," he hissed, pulling away from his son's bloodied mouth, "though they love you and want you for High King, they cannot save you from me."

"Yes father," the boy mumbled.

"I can't hear you!"

"Yes father!" Setanta looked like he would burst into tears.

With his rival reduced to a snuffling child, Conor's pride was satisfied. Deliberately turning his back on his son, he calmly put on his rings, torque, gold fillet and finally the Roth Croi, the royal brooch of Macha; a large brooch in the shape of a wheel, signifying sovereignty. He felt better than he had in weeks.

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Conor followed Setanta to the Banqueting Hall. In contrast to High King's apartment of naked concrete blocks, the round chamber was luxuriously decorated in the traditional style. Its pillars, facades, carvings and lintels, gleaming red, green and gold, were unsurpassed in material or workmanship. The Banqueting Hall's circular shape echoed the circle fortress of Emain Macha. This, in turn, reflected the circular royal brooch of Macha, the symbol of Conor Mac Nessa's suzerainty over the entire land.

Wickerwork screens covered in richly gilded leather divided the hall into stately compartments. Floored with

colourful rugs and furnished with inlaid tables and brocade divans, draped in velvet and scattered with damask cushions, each compartment housed a nobleman and his household. With the High King's table at the head of the hall, the closer the compartment, the more important the noble.

Conor Mac Nessa strode regally towards the high table without a glance right or left. A wave of silence followed him as the assembly saw his son's bloody mouth. Conor noted their shock and was pleased. He wanted them to remember how he held their sons and daughters hostage and to ponder on what he was capable of doing to his own flesh and blood.

Flanking the High King's table were a hundred soldiers from the Red Branch. Conor Mac Nessa's personal bodyguard had been with him since the early days in Ulster. The Pride of the Red Branch, relatively sober and spoiling for a fight, eagerly watched the drunken lords for a careless move or gesture of disapproval. In turn, the nervous lords watched the Red Branch for any sudden movement that might signal slaughter. Watching them both, Conor allowed himself a tight smile. All was as it should be. There would be no rebellion this night.

## CHAPTER 14

***M (muin : blackberry or vine) Maeve.***

***The name Maeve means intoxicating. A legendary Great Queen of Connacht, Maeve of the Nine Husbands gained Conor Mac Nessa's ill will after spurning him. Renowned as a warrior queen and a drunkard, her seat of power was Athelone and later the fortress of Rathcroughan***

While at court, Erin helped chaperone the chieftains' daughters held hostage by Conor Mac Nessa. On formal occasions, she sat with the girls and the other women in the upper gallery of the banqueting hall, concealed behind a lattice screen to protect their modesty from the lustful eyes of men.

Hearing Deirdre's stifled gasp, she followed the girl's gaze to Setanta's bloody mouth. Reaching for Deirdre's hand she squeezed it sympathetically; slyly warning her to betray no emotion. Conor Mac Nessa had eyes everywhere. Deirdre had a crush on Setanta and Erin suspected Setanta felt the same, for the boy always seemed awkward in her presence. She thought they made a lovely couple, but knew if Conor ever found out, he would take the girl for himself rather than let his son have her.

Erin had no doubt the girl's father, foolish old Cu Roi, would let Conor Mac Nessa take his thirteen-year-

old daughter as his mistress. It was said the old man did nothing when his son, Egan, raped his little sister Deirdre at the age of nine. Unlike the other girls, Deirdre was not a hostage to her father's loyalty but lodged at Emain Macha for her own protection.

Egan sat with his father in Cu Roi's panelled compartment. Looking at him now, Erin could well believe the tales of his monstrous behaviour. For all his good looks, the twenty-year-old showed no modesty or restraint. His face betrayed self-indulgence and temper. While he pouted and sulked like a spoilt princess, he had the hungry eyes of a wolf.

With the award of the hero's portion, followed by the usual disgruntled complaints from the losers, the feast commenced. When the men finished eating, the women would join them. With the court occupied by merry-making, Erin would go to Maeve. Despite her mother's imprisonment, Maeve did not miss much and Erin was anxious for word of Finn.

Erin's ambiguous position in Emain Macha did not help her to shape-shift within the fortress. She was too familiar a figure to fool crowds of people. In order to see her mother, she would need to disguise herself as Fedelm, Maeve's personal maid. This was dangerous. Fedelm had a reputation as a healer and was as well-known as Erin in Emain Macha. The thought of impersonating Fedelm always left Erin anxious. The court was full of busy bodies, not to mention the ambitious, desperate to kiss Conor Mac Nessa's royal behind. Betrayal was only ever a word, or sometimes merely a look, away.

Creeping down the backstairs after taking leave of her charges, Erin almost collided with the stout figure of

**Cathbad the druid. Peering myopically through thick, wire-rimmed spectacles, he thrust a fan of playing cards under her nose and greeted her with “Pick a card, Erin!”**

**Sighing, Erin did as she was told.**

**“Is it the six of clubs?” he asked hopefully.**

**She looked at him with pity.**

**Snatching back the card Cathbad eyed it suspiciously as if she had somehow played a trick on him. Finally he pushed it into the pack and shuffling furiously, said, “It never works! I wouldn’t mind but I’ve been practising all day. I’m the magician for tonight’s do. I hate bloody magic, but the boss insists this is good PR and who am I to argue with the boss?”**

**Sympathetically, she told him to break a leg, meaning every word.**

**“I thought you might be interested to know we have Finn,” Cathbad’s owl eyes gleamed bright and large under the domed lenses.**

**‘How?’ she asked in a strangled voice; thinking, this was a disaster.**

**Cathbad tapped the side of his nose, leaving Erin to think he was using the druid’s stupid sign language. Until she realised he was telling her to mind her business.**

**“When you see Maeve, tell her our offer is still on the table,” Cathbad said, unable to conceal a smirk.**

**Erin resisted the temptation to grind his fat round spectacles underfoot. Preferably while still on his fat round face.**

**‘No chance Bathtub,’ she sneered dismissively. ‘Maeve hasn’t held out this long for nothing.’**

**“I would have thought our protection and her freedom wasn’t such a bad deal, all in all.”**



**‘Oh piss off!’**

**\*\*\***

**Cathbad had a great reputation with the Court, not as a magician but as a comic. His totally unconscious sense of timing, earnestness, and absolute despondency as every single one of his magic tricks failed, had the court in stitches.**

**With each botched trick, his patter became more suicidal. The court, drunk as skunks, lapped it up, laughing harder and clapping louder in their appreciation of his huge talent. When Cathbad announced he intended to saw a woman in half, the audience erupted in cheers and rapturous applause. Blood on the stage was more than any dared hope for.**

**“If I could just have a volunteer,” Cathbad added, peering into the darkened auditorium with finger outstretched, ready to choose a sacrifice. Try as he might, he could not find Erin anywhere in the audience.**

**\*\*\***

**Maeve’s cell was a tiny room with an en suite bathroom, and it stank of booze. She grinned mischievously as Erin entered in disguise. ‘And who on earth are you supposed to be, my girl?’**

**Returning a grin at her mother’s usual silly greeting, Erin felt the smile freeze on her face. Maeve looked terrible. In the past few months, her mother had aged years. And she was losing weight again. Maeve was always a big woman. Voluptuous; some might call it Junoesque.**

Arse, hips and tits was the way Maeve described herself, claiming men liked women with a bit of meat on the bones. These days she looked gaunt. The flesh hung from her neck and arms like pricked balloons and her dyed blond hair, still twisted into three formal plaits, was dirty grey at the roots.

Only half way through March and it's already been a long year, Erin wearily reflected. She watched her mother heavily get up to turn off the television. Maeve made a half-hearted attempt to tidy a couple of bottles on her way round the room. Erin knew her mother drank like a fish, but had to admit it never left her befuddled, which somehow made it all right.

Maeve was out of breath by the time she got to Erin. It left her even more concerned for her mother's health. Her anxiety found release in outrage. "He should not keep you like this!"

'No pleased to see you. No you look well? Straight to business; that's my girl!'

Sheepish, she apologised to her mother.

Maeve dismissed her with another grin before turning serious. 'Don't worry about me, Erin. I am perfectly safe. He knows if anything happened to me the whole of this Land of Eirenn would turn on him like wolves. He'd have nowhere to run.'

"But, look at this place. It's not right." Erin was visibly upset. She fought for control, realising Maeve needed her strong.

'You dear sweet child, you mean it is not dignified. I have no dignity. I gave it up when I became Great Queen. Neither I, nor the country, could afford it. If it were not for

the fact you would take my place in prison I would abdicate and retire to a convent.'

"Oh bugger off Mother!" Erin laughed through her tears. "You do talk crap!"

'No, truly,' continued Maeve in the same pious tone. 'I find great comfort in the arms of mother church generally.'

"And one young priest specifically, according to Fedelm," Erin retorted.

Maeve's eyes sparkled, the first sign of life in her dying face. 'I take it, it is not worth saying it is only platonic.'

"I would be gutted if you did."

'Oh well then,' Maeve sounded gleeful. 'I am undone. Shamed by my best friend to my own daughter; how very cosy! Now, dry your tears, we haven't got time for you to have hysterics!'

Erin wanted to be strong for Maeve, and here was Maeve being strong for her. How she wished she could be more like her mother. She kissed Maeve, ignoring the appalling smell of sickness.

'How did it go with the Toooha day-Donon?' Maeve asked.

"You don't know?" Erin was shocked. Somehow, she assumed Maeve knew everything. "It's a terrible muddle Mother. The day-Danann delivered someone called Fionn Mac Coull, like in the prophecy. When Mac Nessa captured him, I thought great. I figure he's here to kill Mac Nessa anyway... But just now, that fat little bastard, Bathtub told me the druids have got hold of him."

'Isn't it always the way, just when you think things are looking up, the bluebird of happiness craps in your eye!' groaned Maeve. "What did Cathva say?"

"Only they would exchange him for you," she told her.

**‘Then they would have the complete set, you, me and your Fionn Mac Coull.’ Maeve replied sharply.**

**“What are they up to Mam?”**

**‘No good! I think the prophecy went to their head and they are begining to believe their own publicity.’**

**“But the day-Danann want Finn to kill Mac Nessa, so why are the druids thwarting them and defying their own prophecy?” she protested.**

**‘I wish I knew child. Perhaps they are playing with us.’**

**“Or holding out for a better deal?”**

**‘That’s more like it,’ Maeve agreed. ‘You say Cathva offered an exchange, so they can’t want him too bad. I think they might let him go... If we had something else they wanted bad enough.’**

**“Apart from you.”**

**‘Now that is not funny my girl. If I won’t go to Mac Nessa, I certainly won’t go to the druids. They may say all the right things, yet underneath they are as bad as Mac Nessa - power mad, the whole lot of them!’**

**“What if we could lead them on,” Erin suggested. “I might find out where Finn is and if I do, I bet I could get him back.”**

**Maeve had no doubt Erin could get this Fionn Mac Coull back, if she knew where he was. But she could not see how Erin could manage to find out.**

**‘They probably have him in Sanctuary,’ continued Erin, thinking of the druid’s legendary headquarters. Although druid manses openly existed all over the Land of Erin, the location of Sanctuary was so secret, some wondered if it existed at all.**

**‘Speaking of secret places,’ Maeve said. ‘I wonder if we could tempt them with the Tech Screpta?’**

**“Now, I thought that was the legend!” Erin declared. After the book burning days of the plague, the fabled christian library was the last refuge of the written word.**

**‘Only as much as Sanctuary!’ Maeve replied smartly.**

**“Are you thinking of a bluff?” she asked her mother. After weighing up what she just said, Erin added, “It might work, you know! The druids hate books as much as they hate christians. It might be worth Finn, but...”**

**‘It’s no bluff. My priest told me the Tech Srepta exists. We discuss books a lot. The latest is Augustine of Hippo’s the ‘City of God’.’**

**“Does he know where it is?”**

**‘The City of God? No, none of them do... despite what they say!’ Maeve was teasing. ‘And I doubt he knows where the library is either; although you can never be sure.’**

**“Perhaps you can worm it out of him,” suggested Erin.**

**Maeve shrugged without committing herself. She was afraid to admit to her fearless daughter that if the priest discovered she was using him, he would abandon her. Erin did not understand the loneliness of imprisonment. The priest was the only person Maeve saw, apart from Fedelm. If she lost him, she would end up one lonely old queen indeed.**

**‘Let’s ask Fedelm about the library,’ Maeve said neutrally. ‘Fedelm has ways of finding things out.’**

**Erin nodded, thinking Fedelm had ways of finding things out which seemed positively supernatural. For years the woman had been the ears and eyes of Maeve. Fedelm could shape-shift too. It was Fedelm who taught Erin how to do it. But, even she could not teach Maeve. As the Great**

**Queen of this whole Land of Erin, Maeve could only ever be, uniquely and gloriously, Maeve.**

**When teaching Erin to shape shift, Fedelm asserted it was possible to change form, sex and even shape at will. Erin doubted such wild claims, believing a woman could change to another woman, but never a man or an animal. In turn, Fedelm scoffed at Erin's lack of faith, insisting it was all down to belief. The belief others had in you and the belief you had in yourself.**

## CHAPTER 15

### **T (tinne : holly) Tech Sreptas.**

*In the Dark Ages, Ireland was a beacon of learning, famed throughout Europe for the libraries of the Christian monks called tech sreptas in the Irish tongue*

Erin arrived back in the hall to find she had missed Cathbad's magic act, the jug band and the blue comic. The jug band and the comic were known as Gleemen. They were outside the druid franchise but very popular with the ordinary people.

A bard was setting up video equipment and a TV projector screen. Bards were a branch of the druids and as official entertainers were easily recognised by their red coats. Erin had no love for druids and even less for Redcoats, finding their interminable sagas unendurable, but being only human, she did love a good film.

Two John Wayne features were on tonight's double bill. The first was 'The Conquerer' a bloody tale of Ghengis Khan and his triumphs in the mythical land of China. While the second, 'The Quiet Man', a more sedate although no less mythical tale, was based in old Ireland. 'The Quiet Man' was a great favourite with the crowd, second only to the Disney classic, 'Darby O' Gill and the Little People'.

As the talkers fell silent in anticipation of the film show, the outer doors were flung open. A black clad figure

strode the length of the hall brandishing a walking staff topped by a celtic cross. Dramatically whipping back the hood of a stained travelling cloak to reveal a grey, gaunt face, he announced, "I have returned from Ath Cliath."

A gasp rose from the crowd.

"In the great necropolis of Dublin, I walked with the twittering dead, protected by our Lord Jesus and his holy mother the Virgin and all his angels and saints."

The man dropped his head in exhaustion. Like a druid, the head was shaved, but the shaved spot was a circle on the crown, the tonsure of a churchman. After a significant pause he looked back up, raising his head as if raising an unbearable weight. "In the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit," the grey man uttered, making the sign of the cross.

"Amen," responded the crowd unconsciously.

"At long last, I have returned."

"Yes, I see that Padraig," Conor Mac Nessa snapped, voice booming like brass though the great echoing space of the hall.

Ignoring the High King's sarcasm, Padraig held up his hand to silence the already silent audience. "I have important news from Dublin, for your ears alone my lord king!"

Padraig knew Conor would love being singled out for news from a city of the dead.

Erin loved it too. When on form Saint Paddy, mad old fraud that he was, was every bit as good as any pompous Redcoat.

Padraig was quite aware of the effect on the gathering and having planned his entrance for effect, was not disappointed. Everything was going to plan, right down to



the look of awe and envy written on the faces of the lords and petty kings. He knew each of them would love to command the High King as he had done; just as each would love to hear the mysterious news from a city of the dead.

High on his own boldness, Padraig did the unthinkable. Turning his back on Conor Mac Nessa, he left the room without the High King's permission. Striding out of the hall, he noticed, with some satisfaction, the look of utter fury on the face of the bard.

While waiting for the High King to follow him out of the Banqueting Hall, Padraig wondered if he had gone too far. Fearing he had, he blamed the bard. Unlike the lowliest druid, the clergy had no official status in the Land of Erin. It never ceased to grate how his Church was so little thought of. He calmed his nerves with his lorica, his own special prayer, 'Today I bind unto myself the holy name of the Trinity'. Thus armoured with faith, Padraig was the stuff of martyrs.

It was an unimaginable shock to discover the missile stolen before he took the warheads. Padraig was convinced Conor Mac Nessa orchestrated it. He knew all along it was a mistake to involve the High King, but he needed a diversion on Tory Island. Now Conor had the weapon it did no good to accuse him, for officially the High King owned everyone and everything in the Land of Erin. Therefore Padraig reasoned, it was better to play up to Conor and await his opportunity.

Conor entered the anteroom.

"I am here Padraig, as you commanded." The High King was being ironic.

"Not commanded my lord, humbly requested. I have a gift for you."

Conor liked presents. In Padraig's experience a present was the ideal way to start any conversation with the High King. From beneath the folds of his dirty stained cloak he drew a small square covered in stained, red watermarked silk, still showing the ghost of intricate gold leaf tracing. Shyly he presented it to the High King, privately doubting Conor realised how priceless it was.

Equally shyly, Conor received the gift. Gingerly fingering his way through the leaves he noticed the edges stained by damp and the pungent smell of mildew. Conor had no doubt what a rare and precious thing this was. It was more precious than the Cauldron of the Dagda, the first Scared Treasure the Archbishop provided.

He stared at the object in his hand for a long time, thinking it truly fit for a High King. Finally, in a voice cracked with emotion, he said, "It is a book."

A book was a fabled thing from the time before time. Possessed of its own life, like an oracle or a prophet, a book spoke from age to age. No one in Conor Mac Nessa's world dreamed of touching a book, yet alone owning one.

The book Conor held was almost a hundred and fifty years old, an Edwardian first edition of Irish Mythology. In the section concerning the Ulster cycle, there were tales of the High King Conor Mac Nessa and the heroes of the Red Branch. Optimistically, Padraig hoped Conor would find the original version of himself edifying; improved as the mythical king was by the pen of a Victorian moralist.

"Is it wise Padraig?" the High King asked, sounding like a child.

"Its wisdom is beyond price, my King," he reverently intoned.

**“They say the past speaks to the future in books. How? Does it speak and prophesy like the oracle heads? Do I eat it and see visions like a druid at the Bullfest?” asked Conor, voice tremulous.**

**“You read it, Sire.”**

**“Read?” Conor rolled the unfamiliar word around his mouth as though tasting it for old associations. “Read?”**

**Carefully the High King turned the crisp pages as though his eyes would wear the ink from the line, the line from the page.**

**“How?” he finally asked the priest.**

**\*\*\***

**The book Padraig gave Conor Mac Nessa was from a pile of books found in the vault under the ruined church of St. Comcille’s House at Kells. The ancient town of Kells, chosen as a book repository because of its association with the illuminated Gospel, once housed vast libraries. Until this find, Padraig thought all the books smuggled into Kells in the early days of the plague were already in the Great Tech Srepta.**

**There was a need for places such as Kells in the early days: places to hide precious books from the mass burnings. Although the druids claimed book-burning a conscious ideological rejection of the past, Padraig suspected many were simply burned because of fuel shortages.**

**When the Abbot of the nearby monastery of St. Columban’s at Navan discovered the cache of books, he wrote to his Archbishop asking if they could remain at the abbey. Padraig thought the request dangerous. He did not**

hesitate to let the Abbot know that in his view, such independence of thought led only to heresy. When Padraig first came to this Land of Erin, the church was full of self-will. Each holy house acted independently. There was no central organisation, no common creed.

The Celtic Church had always been bedevilled with individualism. So much so that in Rome its name was once synonymous with schism. Only in the sixth century, during the Council of Whitby, did the pope regain control of Christianity among the wayward Celts. He made the clergy abandon the false calculation of Easter and adopt the church tonsure. Before that, Celtic priests shaved their foreheads like the heathen druid.

Imitating the nameless pope Padraig so admired, the Archbishop made the Abbot abandon his independence and send the books to the Tech Screpta. As a reward for his obedience, he issued the Abbot a library card.

Padraig still found it hard to believe years ago, when the United Nations built the library, he was a Petty Officer in the Royal Navy. His job was to supervise the loading and unloading of building materials transported across the Irish Sea. The library was to be a monument, a beacon to shine over a land once known for the host of books housed within its monasteries. When finished, Padraig thought it only fitting the United Nations entrusted its care to the Holy Mother Church.

## CHAPTER 16

**P (pin : dwarf elder) Padraig of Keeva.**

*Saint Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland. According to legend, Padraig was kidnapped as a boy and sold as a slave in Britain, where he became Christian. This may well be true, for Padraig is not an Irish name. There is no letter 'P' in the early ogham or the pre-Christian Irish alphabet. The letter 'P' first occurs in words derived from the British and Latin languages*

**Padraig dreamed he was performing mass. Elevating the consecrated host, the bread began to glow. As the Son became the sun, and he thought his fingers would blacken and burn to the bone, Padraig fell into the light.**

**Padraig remembers a day from six years ago, his first day in this Promised Land of Erin. The sun is setting, a cold, angry, bloody ball. The evening is chill from the breeze and a day of rain. Damp mists rise from the lakeside meadows. Padraig walks with a group of men, clothes wet through from the swim in the waters of Lough Swilly, where they hid the submarine.**

**Staggering through the deepening gloom, the men look for somewhere to wait out the sickness, already descending on them. They know the sickness comes. It is inevitable. They do not wear hazmat suits. The plague sleeps in the soil and maybe even in the very air they breathe.**

The sickness will take each and every one of them, making some martyrs in heaven. The remainder, the blessed few, will live as saints in the New Jerusalem of Ireland as the Prophet foretold. The men steal sly scared looks at each other, wondering who will die and who will prevail. Padraig is so afraid, he wants to scream and rage, but contains himself for fear of his fellows.

They find a barn. There is no food, but the water-pump works. When some of the men are scared to drink, the Prophet comforts them by saying they are already infected. Everything is now in the hands of Almighty God. A few hours later the fever begins, signalled by vomiting.

“Many are chosen but few are called,” booms the Prophet stoically, the rod and staff of God. The Prophet’s forehead is awash with sweat. He turns his face to vomit. As he does, Padraig sees ulcerating lesions swelling under his master’s jaw.

Later, in the fever heat of the night, the Prophet becomes rational enough to see the sickness has broken in Padraig. He calls the young man to his side, to drill him in the vision of their common creed and hand over the roughly photocopied weapons manual. Padraig has heard his master’s vision a hundred times before, but it is comforting to hear it again, especially now.

The Prophet tells him Ireland, washed pure by suffering and purged of all evil, is now innocent as the original Garden of Paradise. Although wallowing in abject ignorance, its people are the sons and daughters of God. Padraig must swear to protect this holy land and if necessary use the missiles as the instruments of the one true, omnipotent and indivisible Lord. The weapons stored on Tory Island by the spawn of Satan are surely ample

**proof, if any more is needed, that even the fallen unwittingly work His Almighty Will. Gesturing wildly at the barn's grubby interior, and with fading breath, the Prophet instructs his acolyte, the weakest disciple of all his flock, "Do not let this perfect beauty be corrupted!"**

**\*\*\***

**A young monk timorously shook Padraig, urgently muttering the High King was asking for him. The Archbishop, waking groggy from dream, tried to clear his head. He could not remember the dream, for on waking it slipped away like so much smoke. Leaving his darkened cell, Padraig was shocked to see it was already morning.**

**Conor watched the morning game of hurley, but the game had not improved his mood. On the pitch, two fifties of fosterlings were busy with sticks, fists and feet battering a hard leather ball, and in the process each other, around a field. The overweight, balding and out of breath Cathbad was trying to keep order.**

**As the druid Cathbad had proved so popular at court, his boss recently instructed him to take an interest in sports like a red blooded Irishman. It was for this reason Cathbad hauled his asthmatic bulk around the hurley field blowing furiously on his whistle, until it seemed his apple red cheeks, not to mention apple red lungs, would burst.**

**Conor, having bet against his son's team, was losing heavily, as the hated Setanta, lip healing without a hint of infection, carried the match. On the field, Cathbad abandoned his whistle in favour of a hockey stick taken from one of the players and was lavishing it on two young antagonists.**

**“Cafbad may be a brilliant magician, but he’s a shite referee,” was the High King’s greeting to the Archbishop.**

**Looking at the beleaguered Cathbad, now alternately wiping his pebble glasses and forehead with the sleeve of his robe, Padraig saw Egan Mac Roy give Setanta a vicious crack on his shin, while the referee was temporarily blind.**

**“Nice one Egan,” Conor muttered, visibly cheered up.**

**As the myopic Cathbad wearily waded into yet another fracas, Conor affectionately draped an arm over Padraig’s shoulder. Padraig hated being touched and muttered his lorica under his breath, “Today I bind unto myself the holy name of the Trinity.”**

**“Walk with me,” Conor commanded, steering the Archbishop back towards the palace. Behind them, came the roar of spectators.**

**“Foul!”**

**“Get some fuckin specs ref!”**

**“Yer aul blind bastard yer!”**

**Unable to shake his dream, Padraig wanted to ask Conor if he too dreamt dreams, but it was not protocol to speak before the High King. Padraig rarely dreamed. When he did, it disturbed him for days. It left him feeling as if his mind was filled with the memories of memories, rather than the memories themselves.**

**Conor broke the silence. “How long have you been with me now?”**

**“Three years Sire.”**

**“And before that?”**

**“Simply a humble priest.”**

**“Never humble Padraig, not you!” Conor liked his little jokes. “I remember how you brought the church**



together with vision and ruthlessness. Admirable! I am thinking of appointing you Seneschal.”

Padraig nodded modestly, while his heart leapt with joy. Seneschal was the closest thing to a Prime Minister in this Land of Erin. If appointed Seneschal, an immense amount of power would fall into the hands of the Church. For the first time since his arrival in this godless country, he saw the possibility of converting the heathen population.

“I must be sure of the loyalty of the man I make Seneschal, you understand. I believe she already has a priest. So I think she may soon be tempted to convert.”

The Archbishop cursed under his breath. He should have expected duplicity from the High King. Conor Mac Nessa was the one serpent he wished he could drive from the Land of Erin.

“After she converts, she must obey her Archbishop. Is that not so?” asked Conor.

Padraig tried to divine the meaning behind the High King’s words, obscure as a heathen oracle. His heart sank when he realised Conor meant Maeve.

“Sire, I doubt she will ever convert. I think she toys with us,” Padraig stammered.

“For your sake Padraig and the sake of your Church, let us hope she does not.”

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Fedelm’s stout figure bowled up to Erin. Boanna and a guard were with her, both looking like naughty children being taken to task by a stern aunt.

**“Clean the High King’s chambers will you!” Fedelm off-handedly instructed Erin. Then, more kindly, said to Boanna, “Give her the key, dear.”**

**The guard opened his mouth. Fedelm froze his protest stillborn. “Boanna isn’t at all well. Are you dear?” Fedelm winked broadly at Erin, as on cue Boanna gave a wan moan.**

**“It’s her period!” Fedelm spat the words in the guard’s face, knowing how uncomfortable men were about women’s things. Obliging, the guard turned the colour of boiled beetroot and looked just as appetising.**

**Fedelm continued, “I was going to do it myself, but I really should take care of Boanna and give her a poultice or posset or posy or posse, or something like that anyway.”**

**Taking the key, Erin noticed a mischievous glint in Fedelm’s green eyes.**

**Conor Mac Nessa’s rooms were private to everyone. Boanna was the only woman known to have gone in sober and stayed vertical. This was largely due to a cast in her left eye, giving her the evil eye, or so people muttered. Boanna never gossiped about what she saw in Mac Nessa’s apartments, she didn’t dare. She was too scared.**

**Erin stood in the doorway, minutely examining the room as if she could somehow understand the nature of the beast Mac Nessa in a flash of inspiration. There was no one thing she could put her finger on, but she knew right away this was his place. She could almost feel his breath on her neck and a shiver went down her spine.**

**The apartment was not as opulent as she thought it would be. In fact, there was a military precision in its bare walls and neatly arranged furniture, with tidy squared**

edges. Idly, she ran a finger over the surfaces to look for a trace of dust and found none, as expected.

When Erin first saw the book, she dismissed it, little realising what she saw. The shape was strange yet familiar, and resonant with memory.

“It’s a book!” she muttered to herself in wonder as she walked back to pick up the volume.

Gently, she touched the fragile and stained red silk cover with her fingertips. It was soft, worn with antiquity and use. She could not believe she held a book in her hands. She rubbed the old silk against her cheek as if to confirm it was real. Touched it to her lips and smelled the mildew. Carefully, as if she might damage it, she opened the cover of her first book in more than a decade. Inside, there was a stamp saying, ‘Queens College Belfast.’

‘Belfast,’ she said aloud. Enraptured, she said it again, ‘Belfast!’

‘Belfast! Belfast! Belfast!’ she repeated in quick succession; making the half-forgotten word echo off the empty walls of Mac Nessa’s quarters. She kept repeating each syllable, louder and bolder: Bel-fast, Bel-fast, Belfast; until the sound filled the room like a prayer.

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Erin heard footsteps in the corridor. Engrossed in the book, she had lost track of the time. Hurriedly, but carefully, replacing the book, she retreated to the furthest corner of the room, trying to look busy with a duster as Conor entered. With heart hammering, she threw a deep curtsey to the High King, thinking it the worst possible luck he was with Pdraig.

Conor flashed a gracious royal smile at the demure maid who stole awe-struck glances at her sovereign king.

“Who are you child?” he asked, voice booming brazen and hard.

‘It is I, Boanna, sire. Boanna.’

Erin carefully rose from the curtsey. Everything depended on this.

Conor looked at her. She was a beautiful woman, strong and sensual, capable of fighting by the side of her man, of running his household and bearing his sons. She was the type of woman poets eulogised; a woman to stir men’s hearts to passion, jealousy, violence. But for all that, she was only a woman and therefore insignificant. He immediately forgot her.

Not so the Archbishop who greeted her with, “Hello Erin and what mischief brings you here?”

As Padraig’s eyes searched for the book, Erin kept her gaze forward. She knew what he was looking for and was terrified she would give herself away.

Apparently satisfied, he added pleasantly, “Are you perhaps hoping to surprise me with a sudden willingness to convert to the true faith, like your esteemed Queen Maeve?”

‘I would rather spend three hundred years as a swan on the Straits of Moyle,’ she hissed back at him.

Padraig stared at her, smile gone.

There were not many men in this Land of Erin who frightened Erin, but Padraig was one of them. The thought of those thin, grimy fingers, touching, stroking, choking, made her shudder.

Conor Mac Nessa paid no attention to the exchange between the two of them. He believed Erin was Boanna and

that was enough. If Boanna was standing next to Erin, both calling themselves Boanna, the High King would have accepted both as the same person.

Erin cottoned on to this extraordinary anomaly quite early on. She believed it was a by-product of the drugs. As a student she read an article called 'The Three Christs of Ypselanti' in something like the Reader's Digest. It fascinated her at the time and in the years since the plague, it often came to mind.

Ypselanti was a state mental institution in Michigan. It enjoyed a brief moment of fame in the early nineteen sixties when psychiatrists brought together three patients claiming to be the one and only Jesus Christ, to see how they would get on. Much to the psychiatrists' annoyance, each accepted the other two as the same true Christ as himself. A sort of holy trinity, she supposed. Erin suspected the drugs used in Morrigan caused a similar psychotic breakdown in reasoning. She believed it was the basis of her power to shape-shift.

Conor Mac Nessa, having already dismissed the woman from his mind, started a conversation with Pdraig. Once the priest was distracted, Erin gratefully fled the room.

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Erin could not see Maeve until the following day, so spent the whole night wondering if she should text Donnelly, her contact with the de Danann, to request a call on some pretext or other. She hoped she might learn something about the library from Donnelly. It was amazing what he let slip in their chummy, wee chats. Although sorely

tempted, Erin knew Donnelly would ask about Finn and so reluctantly decided not to do anything until she spoke to Maeve. Besides which the phone was with the car, and Erin could not be bothered traipsing all that way to fetch it.

Maeve was crying when Erin entered the room. Shocked at the speed of her mother's continuing deterioration, she went right over and hugged her. "Are you alright?"

'I'm fine.'

"Really Mother?"

'Don't start me off again,' Maeve wiped her eyes. 'Things get on top of me sometimes. I need a drink.'

"I'll get one for you," she said hastily.

While she poured the drink and had her back to her mother, Erin asked if Maeve was ill. She did not turn around to ask the question. She was afraid what she might see when Maeve answered.

Maeve was grateful Erin did not turn round because it made lying easier. It was not that she did not want to tell her about the cancer, but she knew Erin would sacrifice herself in her stead. And what would that achieve? Maeve tried very hard to see the cancer as another part of life; death, the circle closer.

Hesitantly, Erin asked her mother if she had heard her.

'I was trying to think of the right words,' Maeve carefully answered. "The land is sick. And when the land gets sick, I get sick.'

Erin thought this was nonsense, but bit her tongue. A part of her wanted to believe Maeve was tied to the land, the health of one reflected in the health of the other. It was what Australian Aboriginals and Native Americans believed. All the old religions said the gods made man from

the very earth itself. Even the christians claimed the name Adam meant 'red man' because of the red river mud of Eden.

Feeling such a bond of love for her mother it threatened to overwhelm her, Erin slyly wiped away a tear with the back of her hand. Quickly composing herself, she took the drink to Maeve.

'My priest told me he reads stories to Conor Mac Nessa,' Maeve excitedly told her; probably desperate to change the subject.

"I saw the book," Erin answered equally excited; equally desperate.

Back on safe ground, both women relaxed.

'He said I was in the stories. He was a little overawed. I think he may be in love with me,' Maeve confessed.

"Well he wouldn't be the first would he?" Erin shook her head in mock despair.

'I know, but it is nice to have the old spark back. He doesn't know where the book came from,' Maeve added casually. 'I asked.'

"It came from Belfast. There is a stamp in the front."

'Belfast? I don't think so. He told me Padraig gave him a letter from a brother in Navan. And before you say it, I know this is Navan but this is Navan Fort. We're looking for another Navan, one near Dublin.'

"Why Dublin?" Erin asked.

'Padraig doesn't like lying, it's his religion. He will twist the truth to suit himself, but he avoids outright lies.'

"Paddy said he went to Dublin to speak with the dead, didn't he!"

'My point exactly! Now to my way of thinking, the only way to talk to the dead is through books because

books are the thoughts they leave behind. And lo and behold, suddenly...’

“...Conor Mac Nessa has a book.”

‘Will you stop finishing my sentences?’

“Sorry Mam!” Erin paused for a moment in thought. “Fedelm said Boanna had never seen the book before Paddy came back.”

‘So he went to their Great Library to get it. Have you got your map?’ Maeve asked.

“Never without it!” Erin fished in the voluminous folds of Fedelm’s skirts.

Maps, like all printed matter, were destroyed in the book burnings. It was not lost on Erin how their disappearance coincided with people no longer believing in the outside world. For months she badgered her contact Donnelly for a map, saying she could never find anywhere. The one they eventually issued confirmed her darkest suspicions. It was an old map printed in Dublin in the nineteen seventies.

She spread the map on Maeve’s bed.

“There’s Dublin,” she said to Maeve.

‘You’ll have to find it. I can’t see a thing since I threw away my reading glasses.’

Erin scanned the surrounding area in an outward spiral, inch by scaled down inch.

“Navan, there, An Uev, they print the English name under the Irish one in red. And it’s on the fords of the Rivers Blackwater and Boyne in the Kingdom of Meath, about twenty miles from Dublin.”

‘I think you should check it out before we talk to Cathva,’ said Maeve.



**“I don’t know,” replied Erin, thinking of her mother’s failing health.**

**‘You’ll be back in a week! And if it isn’t the fabled library, you’ll be back even sooner. You never know what those stupid druids are doing with your Finn.’**

**“If they’ve done anything, I swear...”**

**‘I know,’ said her mother, sympathetically patting the back of her hand. ‘If they have harmed a single hair on his pretty wee head, you will spend the rest of your life, kicking the arse of every sorry druid from here to eternity. As stupid as they are, I think they figured that out already.’**

**\*\*\***

**“She’s going then. You should have said something.”**

**Maeve did not ask Fedelm if she had been listening because she knew Fedelm would not dignify the question with an answer. Instead she countered, ‘So what do you suggest Fedelm. Tell her I am dying? We’ve been through all this.’**

**Fedelm was hurt. “I meant about the priest badgering you to marry Mac Nessa.”**

**‘What could she do, tell me to stop seeing the priest? I know that already, but he is the only man I see these days and I miss men.’**

**“What are you up to?” Fedelm asked Maeve.**

**‘Nothing!’ Maeve was defensive.**

**“You might as well tell me because I’ll find out in the end.”**

**‘If all else fails, I decided to marry Mac Nessa,’ she said.**

**“I had a feeling you might, if pushed hard enough!”  
Fedelm replied sharply.**

**Maeve was peevish. ‘Yes, well there it is then, you were right. Happy now?’**

**“There’s more to it though, isn’t there! You want her out of the way too quick. You’re up to something!”**

**‘Nonsense!’ protested Maeve.**

**“Don’t you nonsense me! You want her out the way because you think the shit’s going to hit the fan!”**

**Maeve thought for a second, before saying, ‘I would have told you once she was gone. Promise you will help me, because to be honest, I can’t do it without you. I’m not strong enough.’**

**“Of course I will,” Fedelm indignantly replied. “I’m surprised you even had to ask!”**

**‘No matter how terrible the thing is I want you to do?’**

## CHAPTER 17

**T (tinne : holly) Tara.**

*The principal Royal Rath or fortress of Ireland and rightful home of the Lia Fail, the Stone of Destiny that shouted with joy at the touch of a true Ard Ri. Archaeological remains have been found at Tara dating date back to 2000 BC*

Erin went by bicycle to look for the library at Navan. The Shogun was too conspicuous. Also, she did not have a travel warrant, meaning soldiers might impound the car if she couldn't convince them otherwise. She spent most of a day exploring the outskirts of the ruined town, but failed to find any trace of what she was looking for. Sadly, she realised ignorance and disinterest held the christian secret more effectively than anything else. As darkness fell, she pedalled to nearby Tara to grab a hot meal and a good night's sleep.

Tara, the Land of Erin's spiritual centre, was the summer palace of Conor Mac Nessa. Now spring was here, the site was a hive of activity as handymen and domestics repaired the winter damage. The foreman at Tara expected everyone to work for their keep. To work for Conor Mac Nessa's comfort, irritated Erin more than the constant hammering or the smell of whitewash. Exhausted and defeated, she decided to return to Emain Macha the following morning and report back to Maeve. Almost as soon as she made up her mind, another idea popped into

her head. She should have known desperation would never let her down.

Liadan was Erin's foster sister. In the land of Erin, the bond of fosterage was often tighter than blood, speaking as it did of shared tribulation. A long time ago, Liadan was closer to Erin than Maeve. The women first met as students at Trinity College in Dublin, when occupying adjacent rooms in the new halls of residence. In the second year, they shared a flat. By this time, Liadan was already making a name on the Dublin folk-rock circuit. There was even talk of a recording contract and a trip to New York.

That both women survived the plague was enough reason for their friendship to deepen into sisterhood. In the early heady days of Maeve's revolution they were inseparable. Then, as different demands came along, they drifted apart. Erin accompanied Maeve into exile and imprisonment, while Liadan became the foremost poet on the Ollave Cuairt. In her heyday, Liadan not only sung at royal courts but also druid manses. In recognition of her prodigious talent, the druids awarded her the precious golden bough, even though she was not one of them.

The last time Erin heard of her foster sister, Liadan had become a christian nun. Erin was shocked by this betrayal of Maeve, and thought such contrary behaviour typical of Liadan's constant craving for attention. As a nun, Liadan was sure to know the location of the library in Navan. Or if not, she could find out from someone who did. Liadan owed Maeve that much. It was time to let bygones be bygones thought Erin, and renew an old friendship.

Erin could guess where her foster sister went to earth. For Liadan the nun, there was only one place: the simple christian community at Drumcliffe. Years ago Liadan told

**Erin how she stayed with the monks and nuns when visiting the grave of her hero, the poet William Butler Yeats. She claimed Drumcliffe was the best of all possible places. But then Liadan always was a hopeless romantic.**

**The prospect of tracking down Liadan so excited Erin, she could not sleep. Lying in the darkness, she found herself thinking of her lost sister and wondering if she had somehow failed her. Liadan's story would be comical if it happened to someone else, but once you knew how naive Liadan was, the comic turned tragic.**

**It all started when Curithir, a minor hero with ideas of being a major poet, held an ale-feast to celebrate Liadan's talent and beauty. During the piss-up, Curithir desperately tried to seduce Liadan. At the time, Erin thought his behaviour had more to do with his ego than any genuine feeling for her foster sister. Watching the slimeball work his dubious charms made her think of her own drunken night with Curithir and left her blushing. Curithir used Erin like she was nothing more than a blank sheet on which to scratch his own praise song. Afterwards, she spent hours in the bath trying to scrub off his traces.**

**It was embarrassingly obvious Curithir intended Liadan to be another notch on the bed post. To put him off, Liadan drunkenly joked: no wed; no bed! And no handfasting either, it would have to be a proper wedding; not something you could change your mind about when it suited. In his drunkenness, and carried away with his own sense of importance, Curithir surprised Liadan, and no doubt himself, by instantly proposing marriage; proper marriage. In her drunkenness, Liadan surprised everyone by accepting. When Curithir called next morning, Liadan realised he was not joking. He intended to hold her to her**

**drunken promise. There and then, she swore never to be his wife. Yet how could she renege on her earlier commitment, when as an honorary bard her word was her bond.**

**On the wedding morning, Liadan publicly made a vow of chastity. That night, she slept in the same bed beside her new husband, but did not allow him to touch her. And it was the same every night. Curithir put up with it as long as he could, but he was only human. Eventually he made blustering drunken advances to his wife, who promptly screamed rape and fled. Having had enough of her shenanigans, the druids ordered her to return to her husband. In defiance, Liadan became a nun.**

**Erin lay in bed calculating the distance from Tara to the Sligo coast, and Yeats' Land of Heart's Desire. It had to be well over hundred and twenty miles. Even by bicycle, at ten hours a day, that would mean... In the wee small hours, the mathematics defeated her. She could only think if she got as far as River Shannon and the border of Cormac's rebel kingdom of Connacht, then she could probably cadge a lift the rest of the way.**

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**Setting off at first light on her bicycle, Erin made good progress across the plain of Tara. Pedalling to meet her past, it was inevitable she would think about Conery Mor, the King of Connacht's brother. Conery Mor was the man Erin loved and the father of her daughters. Thoughts of Liadan brought back all her old ghosts.**

**Erin last saw Conery during the time she spent waiting for Dermot and Finn at Rathcroghan. She only saw him from a distance, first spotting the thick braid of black hair**

reaching half way down his back. Seeing him, Erin could not help but remember hearing from the townswomen how Conery braided his hair to hide his bald spot. Apparently, he was self-conscious about losing his hair, but then he always was vain.

She wanted to tell him that he was being stupid. The bald spot did not matter one little bit. He was still sexy; always would be. There wasn't one man in the whole of this Land of Erin to hold a candle to him. But as they never spoke, what could she say?

It was funny to think of her and Conory not speaking. Once they shared everything. All their secrets, in a big dusty bed with the afternoon light catching the angles of his face and making the sweat from their lovemaking glitter on his naked body. She remembered Conery had the palest pale blue eyes. When she looked into them, she felt lost. It was like falling through summer sky.

The babies were almost two the last time Conery Mor asked Erin to marry him. It was the last time he asked her anything. And the last time she refused him. Once more he played hurt and angry to her silent and resentful. He bleated on about feeling used; whereas in reality, the boot was on the other foot. It was her who should have felt used.

Marry Conery Mor? Even now the thought left her furious. If it were only so simple! One day Erin would be Great Queen in Maeve's place. And her husband would be Ard Ri, the sacred High King. According to law, at the end of five years the Ard Ri's Tánaiste, or deputy, would murder him, and in turn marry the Great Queen. It was a wise policy. It kept peace among the proud and headstrong nobility by ensuring only someone prepared to pay with his life assumed the mantle of ultimate power. But knowing

**Conery Mor's fate, how could she marry him? She loved him.**

**When Erin tried to explain she could not watch him die, Conery told her he was born to be Ard Ri and she could not deny him. He claimed to accept his fate; accusing her of not loving him enough. Perhaps he was right and she acted selfishly. Maybe she was not so much afraid for him, but for herself. Knowing the temptation to save his life by changing the law, perhaps she did not trust herself not to weaken and fall, even though her actions would plunge the Land of Erin into chaos.**

**It was stupid torturing herself by going over the past. The past was gone and no one could bring it back. Abruptly, Erin stopped the bike and took out her map. Roughly unfolding it against the cold wind, she plotted a route away from Rathcroghan. As she put the map safely back in her rucksack, she could not help checking the pair of wallpaper scissors taken from a workman at Tara.**



## CHAPTER 18

### ***D (duir : oak) Drumcliffe.***

***An important early Christian monastic site founded by St. Colmcille in the sixth century. Unlike the rest of Europe, early Irish monasticism modelled itself on the Egyptian aesthetic tradition, where monks isolated themselves in stone beehive shaped cells for a life of solitary contemplation in the wilderness. Ironically, some aesthetics became so famous they attracted imitators, who would build their cells close by, resulting in little communities of solitary hermits***

Years before Erin met Liadan, she had learned all about Drumcliffe from a summer job for the Irish Tourist Board. Drumcliffe, an important community in the early Celtic church, was founded by St Colmcille a couple of hundred years after Fionn Mac Coull murdered his best friend Diarmuid O'Dyna on Ben Bulbin, the flat-topped mountain overshadowing Drumcliffe Bay. It was also the burial place of the nationalist mystical poet William Butler Yeats. Having spent his childhood in his mother's home in Sligo, Yeats later immortalised the area as his spiritual home, a land of heart's desire.

Arriving in pouring rain, Erin suddenly pulled to a halt in front of Yeats' plain grey headstone. She was surprised to find someone had moved it from the graveyard

to the road leading to the religious community. Given Yeats' views on the church's stranglehold on Ireland in his day, she doubted he would be very pleased about that. If Yeats still lived, she had no doubt he would choose Maeve every time.

'Cast a cold eye, on life, on death, Horsemen pass by,' she muttered, reading his epitaph.

Wet and chilled, worn out from the journey and fractious from lack of sleep, Erin's low spirits left her critical of Yeats. Like all the mystical poets, Yeats refused to see the world for what it was. Even when abandoning his christian upbringing, he sought new gods to dress up uncaring unforgiving reality in the cosy folds of some divine plan for man's great purpose. If you want to see how the world works and where we fit in, cast your cold eye around the old place now buddy, she thought sourly. Shit happens and that's all there is to it.

Free-wheeling along the road, bypassing the Church of Ireland church, the Round Tower and the sculptured High Cross, all showing signs of recent renovation, she turned down a slippery mud path winding to a raw looking settlement of domed stone huts, looking like giant beehives, clustered around a rough, rectangular building.

In the long timber and wattle hall, serving as a refectory, she met the prioress. The portly middle-aged nun, in a coarse brown habit, shook out her umbrella, while sternly regarding Erin.

"Why do you want to become a nun?" the prioress began without preamble.

It reminded Erin of her school days. A variety of irreverent thoughts flittered through her head. She wondered if she dare fake a Joan of Arc and say it was

because she heard the voices of St. Catherine and St. Margaret. Or do a Song of Bernadette and tell the stern old nun a beautiful woman in blue appeared and said to her: Get off your fat lazy arse and build me a shrine.

‘I want peace,’ she answered, surprising herself with honesty.

The prioress nodded.

‘I want to serve some larger purpose. I want faith and certainty. I am sick of feeling ground down by the world and afraid of life. I have a friend here, Liadan. I think she found peace.’

“Are you a celebrity too?” asked the suspicious prioress.

‘No, I was her... domestic.’

“That is refreshing,” the prioress beamed. She raised her voice. “The concept of service is so severely lacking in many of the young women we receive here.”

Erin could not resist the temptation to turn round. Behind her stood a flushed and excited Liadan, making a muddy puddle on the wooden floor.

“I saw you arrive I..”

The prioress raised a warning eyebrow.

“Couldn’t believe it was you,” Liadan mouthed silently, unable to contain herself.

“We are a simple community.” The prioress’ voice remained loud and held an edge Erin had not noticed before. “There are no special friendships here. We all are equal in the service of God. There are no favourites. No one is thought more of than another.”

The prioress looked approvingly at Erin’s savagely cropped hair but warned, “There is a fine line between

humility and pride daughter. Always question your motives.”

Daughter she said. She was in. Erin could have laughed out loud, instead she humbly murmured, ‘Yes, Mother.

“Tonight, you will observe a fast and a vigil. Tomorrow, and until you build your own quarters, you may stay with Sister Joseph. She will act as your spiritual counsel.”

‘Yes Mother.’

“Joseph,” the Prioress said to Liadan.

“Mother?”

“I am entrusting a very precious thing to you, the first spark of a new soul coming into the light of faith. Do not let her, me and more importantly yourself, down.”

“Yes Mother.”

Dismissed, Erin turned to Liadan. This was the first time she had seen her foster sister for years. She was shocked by the changes in her. All Liadan’s plump prettiness was gone, worn to skin and bone. Her lovely hair, of which she had been so proud, was also gone. She looked old and tired. So much for spiritual peace, thought Erin, bitterly.

Convinced they were out of the prioress’ hearing Liadan hissed vehemently, “He’s here!” Closely followed by, “You look a right twat.”

‘So do you.’

“Girls,” piped up the Prioress, not unkindly. “You know the rules, no chattering until after the vigil.”

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**At the bell for Angelus, Erin dutifully bent her head over the hoe. While pretending to be in silent prayer, she almost dozed off. After last night's vigil, all she wanted was sleep.**

**Erin was in the monastery garden with the other female novices, scratching the cold, sodden earth in the hope vegetables would flow as freely from the soil as blood from the Saviour's wounds. So far, much like the saviour, the Earth remained unresponsive. And how could our Mother Earth do otherwise, thought Erin the pagan, with her Queen in prison and no true King on the throne?**

**Catching sight of the shadow of her cropped head, Erin turned away. The loss of her hair, depressed her more than she could say. Fortunately, there were no mirrors here.**

**After a brief period of intense prayer, her fellow workers began to move as one creature, so she resumed hoeing. This was only the first day and already she felt like a prisoner. Perhaps it was her fate to remain trapped here, like Maeve at Emain Macha. What if Liadan would not help? Or there was no Tech Screpta? Or the druids would not exchange Finn? She had to speak to Liadan, but felt at a loss what to tell her.**

**Erin saw her foster sister toiling at the far end of the garden. What could she have meant by saying, he's here? She had wracked her brains all night and kept coming up with the same answer. Liadan could only mean her husband, Curithir, was here. If true, it was too horrible to even contemplate.**

**On the first evening, when the two women were finally alone together in the tiny damp cell, Liadan told Erin her sorry tale. Curithir was indeed at Drumcliffe. And as Erin suspected, it was too horrible to contemplate. On finding**

himself deserted, the egocentric and unpleasant Curithir began a relentless pursuit of his bride. This led to him following Liadan to Drumcliffe. When the Abbot refused to yield to his threats of force, Curithir became a monk. But only on the understanding they assigned him to the same monastery as his wife.

The church, delighted at capturing two accomplished pagan poets, readily agreed to his demands. Once he became a monk at Drumcliffe, Curithir did not find the Abbot so amenable, having not forgiven Curithir's arrogant behaviour from his first visit. While unable to deny him admittance to the community, he was determined to make the poet's life as unpleasant as possible.

The Abbot gave Curithir a choice between seeing his wife without speaking, or speaking without sight. As a poet, Curithir chose speech. For one hour each evening, he was allowed to circle Liadan's stone cell reciting love poems. Liadan thought this demeaning, but when she complained to the Prioress was told it was a lesson in humility.

Helpless, Erin watched her foster sister's decline as the hour approached for her husband to resume his abuse. After ten minutes of hearing Curithir singing his own praises and telling Liadan what she was missing, Erin had had enough.

'This is inhuman. No wonder you look ill,' she hissed.

"It is a judgement for the vanity and the wrong I have done."

'Is it shite! It's so those bastards can have two top notch Ollaves in their clutches and say to everyone, 'See, they prefer us to the druids!' You're a prawn girl!'

"I think you mean a pawn!" Liadan ventured timidly.

**‘I know what I mean! Don’t you smart mouth me when I’m fighting your corner, buggerlugs! I said you’re a prawn and I meant it...a prawn in the great prawn cocktail of life. If you remember what one of them is.’**

**Receiving a wan smile, Erin grinned back. ‘That’s more like it! Right, now you’re sorted out, let’s go and deal with the gobshite out there!’**

**As Curithir’s poem reached fever pitch, Erin stuck her head out through low entrance of the domed stone cell. Seeing a woman’s face, the poetry faltered.**

**‘Hey, Speedy Gonzales, it’s me Erin, remember? You are probably under some misapprehension about why the girls called you Superman. It wasn’t because you were great in the sack. It was because you were faster than a speeding bullet. So unless you want to become a standing joke in these parts, fuck off and don’t come back.’**

**As Curithir turned red and balled his fists, Erin scrambled out of the stone hut. In one hand was a two-foot long piece of four by two, a leg from Liadan’s bed.**

**‘I would love you to take a poke at me,’ she snarled, brandishing her weapon, ‘because if you do I will break every fucking bone in your body. Now you heard me, fuck off.’**

**With that, she hastily ducked backwards into the hut. If Curithir came after her, he would be on all fours when she got the first crack at him with the bed leg.**

**Curithir looked uncertainly at the low entrance.**

**Liadan was outraged. “Is it true?” she asked.**

**Erin nodded. ‘I thought you knew.’**

**“When?”**

**‘More to the point why didn’t you?’ she replied.**

**“I was pissed when he proposed and when I sobered up I thought oh shit, I can’t stand the man!”**

**‘So you never... ever!’ Erin started laughing.**

**“No,” Liadan smirked.**

**‘Never?’**

**“Oh shut up you!”**

**‘Well you missed nothing. It was crap,’ Erin laughed. ‘Mercifully brief, but crap none the less.’**

**Liadan giggled. “I bet it was!”**

**The sound of laughter was more than Curithir could bear. He fled as the two women, faces buried in the thin straw pallet, tried to constrain their tears.**

**‘Well, at least we have something to look forward to tomorrow night,’ Erin said, hysteria finally subsiding.**

**“If he dares show his face again,” giggled her sister.**

**\*\*\***

**During the dawn service of Matins, the Abbot announced it was the special feast day of Pentecost. From what Erin remembered Pentecost was the day when the Holy Spirit descended upon the gathered apostles. She wondered why it should be so different from all the other innumerable saints’ days and feast days in the christian calendar.**

**As the old man continued speaking, she quickly realised Pentecost was his name for Morrigan. So Morrigan came even to this sterile sexless place. Was there no refuge?**

**His announcement left Erin feeling sick, physically sick. The thought of participating and perhaps even being made pregnant by the likes of Curithir, made her want to vomit. So much so, she seriously considered abandoning**



her plans and leaving. Was it worth sacrificing everything to avoid Morrigan?

A nudge from Liadan shook Erin out of her fret. Obediently, she stood up and filed outside with the rest of the congregation. Instead of going to the refectory, the monks and nuns assembled in the vegetable garden. No wonder nothing grows, Erin thought bitterly before realising why they were there.

‘Is it Morrigan now?’ she hesitantly asked Liadan.

“Not Morrigan, Pentecost.” Liadan firmly grasped her hand. “Don’t worry. It’s all right, you’ll see.”

Although she possessed a natural immunity to the everyday drugs in food and drink, those sprayed out during Morrigan were another matter. She doubted even antidote capsules would provide much protection. She had to escape.

‘I just want to nip to the toilet.’ Erin struggled to keep the panic out of her voice.

“Don’t be silly.”

‘No, I mean it,’ she whined. ‘I really need to pee! I can’t...’

The whole congregation burst into song. Erin was struggling, desperate to run, but Liadan’s grip was like iron. The sound of the hymn drowned out the helicopters’ snickering rotor blades. Liadan let go of her hand for the final alleluia as they released the gas cloud from the tanks.

In desperation, Erin hauled up her plain homespun robe and began rooting in the waistband of her panties for the small clipper of antidote. The cloud washed over the congregation as she popped a capsule and then, to be on the safe side, popped another. When the chemical spray washed over her, she tensed herself against the horrors to

come. Seeing the helicopter circle back for another pass, she remembered to drop down to the ground with everyone else.

As the congregation woke, Erin looked back over the distance she had put between herself and the flock. Sex was the last thing on their minds. Many did not bother to shift from where they fell, but lay mesmerised by the vision of a private heaven. For others, religious ecstasy took the form of contortion or speaking in tongues. She even saw a couple of individuals levitate, but reasoned this was a hallucination caused by the drugs on her weakened system.

After Morrigan there was usually a celebration and Pentecost proved no exception. This was a christian feast of creamy porridge, soft boiled eggs, soda bread, butter, orange juice, tea and coffee. It reminded Erin of her First Holy Communion breakfast.

There was a feeling of genuine friendliness and the congregation was warmer with each other, which Erin put down to the effects of the drugs used in Morrigan. The bright forced cheerfulness left her feeling so depressed she whispered to Liadan, ‘I’ve got to get out of here.’

“What do you mean?”

‘Read my lips,’ Erin hissed.

“You mean go for good?” Liadan gasped, incredulous.  
“Where?”

‘Navan,’ she mumbled. It was a long shot.

“You mean the Monastery House?”

‘You know it?’

“Very well.”

‘Can you tell me how to get there?’ Erin begged.

“Better than that, I’ll take you,” Liadan answered quietly.

**‘They won’t let you go.’ It was Erin’s turn to sound incredulous.**

**“They have no choice,” Liadan whispered back, still high from Morrigan. “You made me see I’m a big fish in a little pond. They will understand, at least the Abbot will. The Prioress is just a cow.”**

**‘What about Curithir, they won’t want to lose both of you.’**

**“Maybe I’ll suggest to the Abbot we let Curithir circle my empty hut for a couple of months,” Liadan slyly murmured. “Let people think I am in retreat and you were exiled for your outburst. What do you think?”**

**‘And this is just a rough plan is it?’**

**Liadan shrugged, grinning.**

**‘Well I think it’s bloody marvellous!’ Erin chortled.**

**The girls, for that is what they felt like... girls on the first day of the hols... left quietly early that afternoon, during the hour of private meditation. Seeing them off were the scowling Prioress and the smiling Abbot, who waved until they were out of view on the winding road leading into the gentle blue rises of the Bricklieve Mountains. They had dried food in the saddlebags, plastic water bottles attached to the handlebars and enough catching up to do to last a lifetime, never mind a one day bike ride.**

**Talking about it with Liadan, it came as no surprise Erin failed to find the Monastery House. Its location was at Dunsany Castle, which though miles from Navan was only a mile and a half from Tara.**

**Their journey took them back through part of Conor Mac Nessa’s territory in the kingdom of Meath. When Erin expressed concern about being recognised, Liadan told her not to worry; what red-blooded Irishman would bother to**

**look at two bald skinny nuns notorious for a vow of chastity?**

**\*\*\***

**During the first few hours of the journey across Connacht, Liadan became more as Erin remembered; brilliant, witty, scatty and finding the humorous side to everything. It was as though there was nothing to hold her down.**

**They were pedalling over an easy stretch of road when Liadan mentioned the druids. Suspecting Liadan's loyalty to the church, and probably the druids too, Erin told her sister nothing of her plan to swap Finn for the library's location.**

**Liadan stopped chattering and said outright, "You still don't trust them, do you?"**

**Erin felt slightly embarrassed at being put on the spot. No, she did not trust the druids, but when put into words, did not know why.**

**'Maeve doesn't trust them,' she answered, realising this sounded more defensive than intended. 'She never trusted them. She doesn't like organisations, reckons they're all out for themselves.'**

**"Aren't we all?" replied Liadan casually.**

**'No actually, some are only trying to do what is best.'**

**"You mean like Maeve?" asked Liadan.**

**'Yes, like Maeve.'**

**"Maybe Maeve is wrong about the druids."**

**'Maeve is never wrong.' Erin was sharp. 'You should know that!'**

**"Sorry I spoke!"**

They rode on in sulky silence, until Liadan's high spirits got the better of her again. "They're not really organised you know, more of a fellowship."

'Like a religious order,' Erin offered.

"If you like." Liadan was wary.

'Organised religion is the oppressor of the masses,' Erin snapped.

"Maeve?"

'Marx actually.'

"Is it shite! You just made it up."

Erin was convinced it was Marx, or someone like that anyway. She was remembering what a smart-arse Liadan could be. Fancy pulling her up!

"You don't know them, so you shouldn't judge," Liadan continued. "Their place is beautiful, like something out of a fairy tale, a castle in an enchanted wood..."

'Which one is that then? They have hundreds of places,' Erin replied.

"That's where you are wrong. They have manses but the Demesne is special..."

Liadan's bicycle wobbled dangerously.

'Are you all right?' Erin asked. 'You're white as a sheet.'

"Oh, I just came over a bit bilious. Don't worry I'm sure it will pass. They used to be on Fota, but something happened they wouldn't talk about. Then, they went to... Oh sugar and shite, I can picture me and Mog Roith standing there."

'You've met Mog Ruth?' Erin bet the druids would take Finn to Mag Ruith.

"He lives there."

Although the road was relatively good, Liadan had trouble with her balance. Finally getting the bike under control, she continued, “You’d love him. He’s lovely, like a little leprechaun and so charming. Funny too, never stops talking, loves his trees, but that’s Druids for you, mad for their dark sacred groves, even if they are just part of an old arboretum.”

Liadan’s bike wobbled straight into a ditch.

‘Are you all right?’ Erin asked.

‘I think I’m going to be...’

This was as far as Liadan got before vomiting.

‘Oh my!’

She vomited again.

Erin waited patiently and when Liadan stopped heaving, asked her, ‘So where is this place then?’

“Oh, thank you very much. No, are you all right? How are you feeling? What can I do to help?”

‘Come on, this is important.’

“So am I!” Liadan looked despairingly at her vomit stained homespun habit. Angrily, she attempted to bang her bike out of the ditch.

Erin self-consciously dismounted to help.

Mollified by the gesture, Liadan replied, as one tugged and the other heaved the bike from the muddy water, “It’s somewhere famous. Oh damn where is it now? It’s on the tip of my tongue, but I can’t get it out!”

The blood drained from Liadan’s face. Erin had never seen anything like it.

“It’s..... it’s....” Liadan managed to stammer.

There was very little left to come up, a thimble full of bile and a lot of dry shudders.

**“Can we stop for a while? I feel really ill,” said Liadan, when she finished vomiting. Erin manfully heaved her friend’s bike out of the ditch as Liadan complained, “Oh bloody hell. It must have been something we ate.”**

**‘It can’t be something we ate, because I’m all right,’ Erin told her.**

**“You would be, Brenda Bloody Belly. Bully for you! Me, I want a bath and a kip and not necessarily in that order.”**

**‘So where’s this druid place then?’ Erin asked.**

**“Piss off!”**

**Liadan refused to speak about the place or druids and finally to speak at all, until Erin promised to drop the subject. Erin wanted to drop the whole damn thing but annoyed by Liadan’s selfish attitude, was determined to hold out the longest, especially as the woman liked nothing better than to talk.**

## CHAPTER 19

Anticipating the unfavourable reception christian nuns would receive in pagan Connacht, Erin was reluctant to stop at the village. However, as Liadan felt poorly, she had little choice. Reluctantly, she allowed Liadan to persuade her Connacht was civilised; unlike Ulster. Here they respected goddesses and poets. What harm could they come to?

With the villagers, Liadan found an audience much more appreciative than Erin ever was. To overcome the locals' mistrust of her nun's habit and cropped hair, Liadan put on her red coat and shook her golden bough, both kept carefully wrapped in waterproofs in the middle of her rucksack, as befitted treasured possessions.

Initially the people gathered around because they were simply curious about the mad christian who mocked their pleasures. Very quietly, Liadan began singing the opening song to a popular story cycle, her hands clapping out the rhythm. Soon others were clapping and singing along to the chorus.

At the end of the performance, some sent youngsters running to fetch relatives in outlying farms and nearby hamlets. An hour later there was such a crowd Liadan did not have the heart to refuse them another show.

In the audience were a handful of itinerant storytellers, old men with memories so remarkable they could remember, word for word, a page of print seen twenty years earlier, or so they claimed. Before the plague the art



of storytelling was almost extinct, but now with some areas so poor there were hardly any televisions or radios, the people welcomed any entertainment in the long hours of winter darkness.

After the audience finally drifted off to their beds Liadan sat deep in conversation with the storytellers; learning new tales and correcting old ones. She was still up when Erin, unable to keep her eyes open, retired to sleep, exhausted.

The next day, progress was slow due to stiff muscles and general fatigue. Reaching a village around lunchtime, a welcoming committee insisted the women stop to eat and rest. It seemed Liadan's fame preceded them.

By mid-afternoon quite a crowd had gathered, not only locals but more professional storytellers and other wandering gleemen. The gleemen had brought their own instruments, turning Liadan's simple performance into something of a gala concert. They accompanied her on accordion, fiddle, whistle and drum, while she thumped away on the out of tune pub piano, or strummed a borrowed nylon string guitar like the Singing Nun.

Erin watched in amazement as wonder and joy replaced weariness and mistrust in the villagers' faces. If someone had told her about Liadan's spell, she would not have believed it. It amazed Erin to hear Liadan singing songs and telling stories that although known by heart, gained new depths of meaning when retold by a magician. Whether at an outdoor gala concert or a solo matinee in a mean hall with a peat fire in the middle of the floor and a few dozen people in the audience, Erin saw Liadan work her magic. It was infectious, leaping like sparks from the children to the adults.

**“Tell us about Fionn Mac Coull!” someone called from the back. Others echoed the request: Fionn Mac Coull, Fionn Mac Coull: once and future king.**

**Why Finn Mac Cool? Why now? Erin asked herself, shaken. She was to ask this question time and again. Something was happening in this Land of Erin. Somehow, someone put Finn’s name on everyone’s lips. It was almost as though someone was doing her and Maeve’s work for them, but who?**

**“Fionn Mac Coull it is then,” Liadan quickly conceded, clearing her throat.**

**Instantly, the chatter stopped around the smoking peat fire. You could cut the silence with a knife. Listening to her friend speak, even Erin had to admit Liadan had a way of making the adventures of Maeve and Conor Mac Nessa, Dermot O’Dyna and Fionn Mac Coull, Cormac Mac Art and Conery Mor seem real. And even though Erin knew better, she found herself believing in them as glorious heroes, rather than the vulnerable and sometimes thoroughly unpleasant people she actually knew.**

**“Long, long ago, when things were many and people few, there was a happy land....” Liadan began.**

**This, Liadan’s favourite opening, never ceased to irk Erin. Thanks to the plague, things were many and people were few, but this Land of Erin was not a happy place. Why should it be any different long, long ago?**

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**No matter how tired she was the previous night, each morning found Liadan fresh and cheerful. It was as if performing to an audience exhilarated her. But they were**

wasting time Erin did not have. It was already the third day on a journey that should not have even taken one at the most. Erin had to get to Dunsany and find the library. Maeve was depending on her.

Wrestling with her conscience, Erin decided to give Liadan one more night, one more concert in one more village. Knowing it would break her sister's heart to put away her red coat, she decided to start speaking again.

Erin did not bother with an apology. In the Land of Erin, apologies were a waste of breath, for they could not undo what was done. What Erin offered in compensation was a gift made of precious words and worth more than she could say. She took her sister into her confidence.

“You know how they ask for Fionn Mac Coull,” she began.

Liadan nodded cautiously, staying silent.

Her silence was all Erin needed for it to come tumbling out: the prophecy and the Bullfest. How Finn had come and was here to kill Conor Mac Nessa. She spoke of Maeve's hopes for Finn as High King and how he had disappeared. Here she stopped, for she could not bring herself to tell Liadan the druids had him. Instead, she spoke of finding the book in Conor's quarters and finished by saying she was looking for the Tech Srepta.

“I always thought the library was a myth,” Liadan confessed. “You know like Mog Roith,” she added slyly, being ironic.

‘And his fabulous demesne! Where did you say it was again?’

“Don't start. I said I couldn't remember. Every time I think about it, all I see is me in that ditch losing my lunch.”

**‘It’s no good, if you can’t remember where it is,’ Erin observed.**

**“I do know where it is, I just can’t think. Anyway I promised I wouldn’t tell.”**

**‘You mentioned no promise to me.’**

**“Well I did promise and I can’t break my word.”**

**‘If you could, you wouldn’t be in the mess you’re in with that twat, Curithir,’ Erin replied sharply.**

**With that small cloud on the otherwise blue horizon, they pedalled on companionably. A little later, the heavens opened. Realising she had been sharp and to keep up their spirits in the driving rain, Erin told Liadan about Maeve. Liadan listened sympathetically. She loved Maeve and was appalled when Mac Nessa captured her. The sooner Finn killed that dreadful man, the better.**

**Maeve had been responsible for reuniting Liadan and Erin after the plague. Hearing about Liadan, and suspecting she was Erin’s old friend, Maeve brought the two women together. Erin was thrilled, but not half as thrilled as Liadan to find her old chum a Princess Royal, fought over by the sons of the King of Connacht.**

**Erin was courting Conery Mor at the time and his elder brother Cormac was madly jealous. Cormac complained to Maeve how as next High King he should marry Erin. Maeve laughed, telling him he was going to marry her. Maeve later told Erin when she told him that, Cormac Mac Art fainted! She presumed with joy.**

**“About Finn,” Liadan said. “I can’t think who has him. I haven’t heard anything from the Christians, but I could ask them. I could ask the Druids too.”**

**“No! Forget it.”**

**“Why?”**

**‘Promise me you’ll forget it!’ Erin persisted.**

**“Okay.” Liadan could see she was serious.**

**‘Is that a ‘Yes’, a ‘No’ or a ‘Maybe’.’ Erin would not let it go.**

**“It’s a yes, if you want to insist on it.” Liadan laughed uncomfortably.**

**They rode on in silence for a while, concentrating on the driving rain.**

**“Do you really think the Tech Screpta is at Navan Abbey,” Liadan asked. “It would make a lot of sense if you think about it; with it being so near Kells and all.”**

**As Erin was slightly winded from pedalling, all she could manage was a shrug. Deep down she was shocked. She had forgotten how intelligent Liadan was.**

**“Oh I do hope so,” Liadan said for her. “It would be so exciting.”**

**\*\*\***

**“What is that?” asked Liadan.**

**Erin stopped daydreaming to look where Liadan was pointing. Set alongside the road was a cairn of stones, piled up without mortar like a dry stonewall. Although Liadan must have seen hundreds of them on their journey, she had never commented before.**

**‘They’re shrines,’ Erin told her. ‘They’re all over the place.’**

**“Yes, I know. Let me see one.”**

**Liadan swung her leg through the bike frame and sitting side-saddle, freewheeled to the shrine, where she dismounted.**

**‘It’s pagan. You won’t like it!’ Erin warned, stopping next to Liadan, but not dismounting.**

**Behind a dirty, cracked pane of glass, the flame of a small oil lamp cast spluttering shadows on a primitive statuette with a small head and vestigial arms and legs. The torso consisted of enormous breasts, generous hips, fleshy arse and the deep gash of an exaggerated vagina.**

**‘It’s the White Goddess,’ Erin explained.**

**“Hang on a mo,” Liadan replied. Not taking her eyes off the figurine, she opened the dirty glass and reverently took the statue from behind the lamp. “I thought she looked familiar, it’s Maeve!”**

**Erin looked. On the white plaster, someone had sketched a cartoon face in wax crayon, the features crude but recognisable.**

**‘Doesn’t surprise me,’ Erin answered. ‘Your Jesus god is dead.’**

**“I know. He was born, died, laid in the tomb and came back to life.”**

**‘No. I mean, dead!’ Erin insisted, ‘as in God is dead!’**

**“Nietzsche?”**

**‘No. Plague!’**

**“Jesus isn’t dead.” Liadan was equally adamant. “He was born in winter as the new-year child, the sign of hope. Hung on a tree as the sacrifice and reborn every year in the spring like the land itself. He is the Green Man. It’s simply Christian ersatzology.”**

**‘It is not the same thing!’ Erin snapped, outraged by Liadan’s blasphemy against the religion of the Goddess and the Green Man; even though she did not believe a word of it herself.**

**“Oh yes it is!” Liadan insisted. “Who was his mother? A virgin. Who took him off the cross? His mother. There she is virgin, mother and layer out, the three aspects of the White Goddess! With a hint of blue in the robe to show she is brand spanking new.”**

**Erin could not believe her ears.**

**“Even the name Mary means the Sea, the mother of us all! Ireland never worshipped Jesus. The important one was always his mother, Mary. Christianity is better than paganism, because it is more compassionate. Think about it Erin, the Christ dies and is reborn each year, so nobody else needs to die for the land. He is the eternal King because he is recycleable.” Liadan finished triumphantly.**

**‘It doesn’t sound like what I was brought up with,’ Erin protested weakly, aware of losing ground.**

**“It is exactly the same.” Liadan was firm.**

**‘Says who?’ she demanded.**

**“Everyone, but like in the old days not everyone admits it. All the priests talk about is the heavy-handed God the Father, with his one false move and that is your lot! But it is only because they need to keep control and fear change. It doesn’t make the rest of it less true.”**

**Liadan tenderly kissed the idol and put her back in the niche, saying, “Maeve eh! Well now, there’s a turn up for the books.” Gently, she closed the fragile door.**

**A few hours later, Liadan and Erin arrived at the boundary stone where the Kingdom of Connacht gave way to the kingdoms of Meath and Ulster on either side of the triple divide. They stopped their bicycles and looked at the rolling land before them, which looked no different to the land behind. Although exhausted, they were in high spirits, but Erin doubted these would last. If they wanted to get to**

Navan Abbey, they could no longer put it off by skulking around Connacht as they had for the past few days. They had to cross the border.

Unlike the rebel province of Connacht, in Conor Mac Nessa's domain they must assume the High King's spies, and Padraig's priests, were everywhere and be nothing more than simple christian nuns. This meant no more entertaining for Liadan, and so with a heavy heart, she carefully packed her golden bough and red coat back into her rucksack.

As simple christian nuns, Erin and Liadan did not find the people of Ulster or Meath as hospitable as those of Connacht. The sight of their habits caused suspicion in the poorer hamlets and attempts at friendliness were ignored.

Wearily travelling past yet another undistinguished collection of run-down cottages, littering a rough muddy track, Liadan said, "These are the villagers Spenser said would rush out to greet a traveller asking what newes, what newes? Look at them now."

Erin felt some sympathy with the mud dwellers of Conor Mac Nessa's proud kingdom. When was the last time a stranger brought them good news, or even let them be? She understood the fear in the faces half glimpsed behind tattered curtains, or wooden slats hastily nailed against broken window panes. Here people were so poor she doubted there was a single television or radio in the whole district. And if there ever had been, it was looted by now; along with everything else.

Liadan treated her to the poet's view. "These people are the true backbone of this Land of Erin. Their ancestors were probably here before the Celts. They are the spirit of the land."



Erin held her tongue, even though Liadan's brand of romantic lyricism got right up her nose. Maybe Liadan missed the comfort and company of the Connacht villages, but so did she. Their luxuries were gone; recklessly eaten. All they had for lunch was a half loaf of barley bread, weighing three pounds and so dry it had to be hacked into pieces and boiled in water before being edible. They looked so poor even Conor Mac Nessa's imperial guard would not steal from them. Or maybe they would, for in this dismal land even water was valuable.

At the first place they stopped, the farmer refused them water, saying nuns drinking from the pump might blight his fairy cattle. A few hours later, another sent slaves to stone them from his land. Though the stones were meant to guide more than injure, the incident infuriated Liadan. It took all of Erin's persuasion to prevent the poetess from satirising the farmer, turning his bowels to water and face to boils, so in nine days he would surely die.

The curse, a legacy from days of the plague, was the worst thing you could wish on someone. Erin did not restrain Liadan through any misplaced sense of kindness to the farmer. She was genuinely afraid they would be captured as spies. She was convinced there was not one person in this wasteland who would not turn them in.

After the stoning incident, too tired to talk and too scared to rest, they pressed on. Erin was amazed how the journey had opened the eyes of a poet and a goddess. Previously, she and Liadan had always found welcome in the meanest hovel. If there was only one loaf of bread, it was theirs by right. If they chose to share it with their hosts, then all honour upon them. No wonder Liadan took it so hard.

Then there was the religion thing. Despite Liadan's pretty speech about the christ god being the Green Man, ordinary people did not see it that way. Christians were outcasts. And what was worse they flouted society by clinging to their religion. She wondered if all christians were as lonely as they felt right now.

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Erin had never felt such a sense of relief as when they arrived at St Columban's Abbey, the old house of Dunsany Castle; where they were welcomed with open arms.

When Liadan complained to the Abbot about the journey, he was more than sympathetic. Quietly, he confided how a few years earlier the monastery had been forced from its original home, the Priest's Training College at Dalgan Park. The frothing mob, as the Abbot described them, had only allowed him to take the Chinese art collection and a fraction of the antiques. He sounded very bitter.

As Erin listened to Liadan and the Abbot chattering comfortably about their tribulations, it seemed to her that persecution was an integral part of the christian identity. Even when everything was going well, she bet they felt persecuted. She suspected persecution sharpened the feeling of community, uniqueness and, of course, superiority. However, even Erin had to confess it was nice to feel part of something again and not shunned by everybody.

After a welcome of hymns and a thanksgiving service, Erin and Liadan were escorted to the refectory, where they anticipated a banquet. Between a pair of Van Dykes, items

of chinoiserie, fine china, cut crystal and sterling silverware, they sat down to salt fish and dry bread. It was a feast where the water flowed like wine.

“A bit like the wedding at Canaan in reverse,” Liadan dryly remarked.

“Friday,” a jolly nun answered.

During their introduction to the Abbey, Erin marvelled at the contrast to Drumcliffe, her previous limit of the christian world. Saint Columban’s was prosperous. It had a reputation for the quality of its gold work and enamels, honey and medicines, and was making a name as a school for the younger sons of poor but noble families. Considering its fame, Erin was surprised she missed it, especially as it was barely ten miles, from the area she searched.

The Abbot had toned down religious observances due to the artisans and scholars the Abbey attracted. Some said he did not want to offend the minor nobility, who came to purchase the jewellery and stayed to vet the school. In the list of house rules, fasting was not obligatory except on Fridays and feast days. Even smoking and drinking were allowed in moderation, except during Lent. The only rule, apart from chastity, was a broken fast prevented you taking communion.

The Abbot strongly believed each must serve God according to ability. To fail to appreciate paradise because you were used to hardship was nothing less than a slap in the face of the Lord. He had often been overheard commenting heaven would be a dull place without the benefits of interior decoration and good furniture. But luckily, God had all the great artists; just as the devil had

all the best music. Present company excepted, he hastily assured Liadan.

The Abbot's lax governance was not without its critics. Repressed passions periodically erupted in a backlash of verbal violence and intolerance, tearing the community apart. Recently, some brethren had decamped to an area behind the impressive walls in pursuit of a more fundamentally Christian way of life.

While being shown around, Erin asked about the collection of daub and wattle huts erected in what the Abbot called his treasured Knot Garden. When the Abbot sadly shook his head, gently complaining how they made the place look untidy, Erin could not resist a quip about how these people took all the fun out of fundamentalism; leaving her host to smile wanly.

The artistic elite immediately took up Liadan, the country's foremost Ban-Ollave. Because of her cover story of being Liadan's domestic, they dispatched Erin to the kitchens where a prioress informed her how the Abbot frowned on personal servants. Erin was not pleased.

The practical prioress assigned Erin to the scullery. The devout nun thought it sinful to waste a skilled worker, no matter how high and mighty she thought herself. She reminded the sour-faced Erin of the Abbot's view about each serving God according to ability.

First the hair and now the hands, thought Erin as she stoically set about her sculldruggery. Life was hard. No wonder christians found the prospect of release from this vale of tears so appealing.

## CHAPTER 20

### **D (duir : oak) Druid.**

*The priests of the Celts conjure up images of savage human sacrifice. This largely false picture is the legacy of monks, who in the doctrine of the soul's immortality, and the crucifixion and resurrection of God-Kings, found uncomfortable parallels with Christianity. The Celts even worshipped a carpenter god called Esus, a member of the druids' holy trinity. The druids, despising a scholarly reliance on books, left no defence of themselves*

Arriving at Sanctuary, Finn went straight to the kitchens for his first proper meal in days. As a precaution, he took an antidote capsule before eating, although the others insisted there was no need. After he ate, Fand showed him to a small bedroom in the attic, suggesting he had forty winks before meeting Mag Ruith, the boss. Despite protesting he was not tired, he was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Finn thought he had only closed his eyes for a moment, but when knocking woke him, found he had no sense of how long he slept.

“Come in, I’m not asleep,” he said thickly.

Knocking on the already open door was a small, heavy man with a mane of white hair atop an ugly but cheerful

face. He was dressed in a bright red tunic and trousers, cinched under his expansive paunch by a broad black belt. Except the man was beardless, Finn might have thought Christmas had come early. When he saw the shaved forehead, he realised why Santa had no beard. Fand had told him druids were required to be clean-shaven under law.

Smiling, the little man introduced himself. "Mog Roith, Arch Druid. Let me tell you what a great pleasure it is to be meeting you finally." He offered his hand, so Finn wearily got off the bed to shake it.

Mag Ruith had a light tenor voice, made lyrical by a soft Southern Irish accent. Finn found it relaxing and quite charming; fortunate as he was destined to hear little else for the next few hours. Without further ado Mag Ruith took his elbow, propelling Finn through the door. The castle's spacious rooms were subdivided into apartments, dormitories and classrooms. Whenever they interrupted a class, Mag Ruith asked students to ignore him. After giving him the briefest glance, they did just that. This casual attitude to the boss, struck Finn as nothing short of remarkable.

Finn noticed that while the classrooms looked old fashioned with benches and ancient desktop computers, they also had mnemonic feeds for speed learning, which although seemingly cobbled together from electronic junk appeared fully functional. Seeing his puzzled looks, Mag Ruith assumed he questioned the mixed groups of children and adults in the same lesson, and so started lecturing Finn on the principles of ability level learning.

As the subject was a bit of a hobby horse, his lecture continued all the way through the rest of the ground floor,

only ending when the tour ended in the old library. Seeing the room lined from floor to ceiling with empty shelves Finn asked where all the books were. It struck him he had not seen a single book anywhere, not even the teachers had one. Instead they conducted lessons in singsong recitation, until it seemed the whole building resonated to the rhythm.

“Books you’re after, is it?” replied Mag Ruith. “We do not hold with books here. Books are the products of simple vanity, teaching nothing. Academics build whole careers arguing how many angels dance on the head of a pin, without ever dreaming to ask if angels dance at all.”

“I would have thought the real question was whether angels exist at all.” Finn remarked quietly.

The Arch Druid ignored him. “Academics are blinded by the need to publish. Their careers are built on a commitment to produce an article a year, a book every five. With nothing to say, they pick at colleague’s arguments, contradicting contradictions, speaking words without meaning, meaning without insight. Knowledge, real knowledge is hard to put into words because it lives in the heart!”

Mag Ruith pointed dramatically to his chest with one hand, while his other snuck into a pocket to withdraw a paper bag, from which he offered Finn a toffee.

Finn shook his head as Mag Ruith grandly continued, “Would you be catching a doctor learning to heal the sick from a book, or musicians tearing the heart with melodies from a book?”

It seemed perfectly reasonable to Finn for medical students to learn from books, or musicians to read music but he thought it wiser to hold his tongue. Taking silence

for assent, the Arch Druid triumphantly popped a large lump of sticky confectionary in his mouth.

“There is magic in the living word.” In attempting to hammer home his point, Mag Ruith found toffee not so easily defeated as Finn proved to be. Gamely struggling on, he vehemently spluttered, “All books should be burned!”

Ruminating on the evil of books and no doubt sugar boiled with butter and cream, Mag Ruith pushed open the French windows to step outside and took gasping breaths of fresh air. Finn wondered how he breathed.

Following the old man onto the terrace, he was momentarily blinded by sunlight reflecting off foliage made black and silver by recent rain. When his eyes adjusted, the majestic sweep of the formal garden took his breath away.

“When I came to Ireland, I thought it would be like this,” he whispered, stumbling over putting perfect beauty into imperfect words.

Mag Ruith nodded in wordless encouragement.

They were facing a lawn bound with azalea and rhododendron, plate sized clusters of blossom ranging from dawn peach through fiery scarlet to twilight mauve. In the shadows beneath the dark green, glossy foliage, narcissi and primrose winked, perfect as evening stars.

“It isn’t like this anywhere else here. Everything’s dead. I thought it would be....” Realising he was repeating himself, Finn stopped talking.

“It is because Great Queen Maeve is prisoner and there is no true High King,” Mag Ruith uttered piously.

“Come on, not you too!”

The old wizard shrugged. “It is a valid enough reason. No doubt you would prefer a proper scientific explanation, something about conditions forming a microclimate around



the Demesne. Well, it may be so, but it does not explain why the rest of the land suffers.”

Ignoring Mag Ruith’s mumbo jumbo, Finn felt his mood lighten as the garden lifted his spirits. “When I was young I used to come to Donegal for the holidays.”

“So you do remember,” Mag Ruith commented.

“Some,” Finn replied.

“Good.”

“I can’t really remember much more.”

“I am sure you can if you try,” Mag Ruith insisted.

“Maybe but you know, it’s not important, is it?” Finn felt suddenly tired.

“It is to me,” pressed Mag Ruith, “and what of your parents?”

“They were with the UN travelling most of the time so I spent the holidays here with grandma.” Finn started to struggle for breath. “But never Christmas though. Christmas I was skiing with them, but here for Easter... and most of summer. I was in a military prep school in Sussex, something to do with dad’s old regiment...”

A vein drumming in Finn’s head masked his memories, making them hard to recall. A point here and there shone like daffodil stars under the azalea hedge. He seized on these few sparse bright points, clinging to them as though for dear life as his mind struggled with the insistent clamour of memory.

Lost hot summers seemed compressed into a fleeting afternoon. Swimming in a lake or lying under trees and watching the combine harvesters at work in the corn fields. Finn almost saw the skinny boy he was, but could not see his face. The features were there. He recognised his pale

eyes, narrow nose, prim mouth and tumble of sun-bleached hair, but he could not grasp the whole.

“Go on,” Mag Ruith encouraged him.

Finn wondered if he was speaking aloud, for the pounding in his head made thought indistinguishable from speech. “I can’t remember my grandmother.”

He felt her love. A flood of emotion threatened to drown him as he remembered how he felt when they said she died. Waves of pain retreated, leaving him marooned. Finn, sweating in his overall, was conscious of the wetness trickling down his spine, of the heavy damp fabric sticking at crotch and armpit, clinging to his back and thighs. His skin screamed from a million pinpricks.

“Your grandmother died,” Mag Ruith gently prompted.

“About two years before the plague. February, I think. We flew over for the funeral. I was eleven, maybe twelve, I don’t remember.”

A wave of pain racked Finn and it felt good, almost like genuine grief.

“I’m glad we went to say goodbye. It was the first time I saw her place in winter. It seemed to be waiting for her to come back. Waiting. Just like now.”

Mag Ruith nodded gently, no longer listening. Instead he thought about his earlier argument with Moira. He had maintained the original person was still inside Finn. Of course, Moira told him not to be stupid. No personality could survive what Finn went through. Now, after Finn’s confession, Mag Ruith felt very pleased and a little smug.

It was time to enjoy his victory while Finn came to terms with the presence of another person inside his head,

**his real self; the one who might hold the key to his true purpose in this Land of Erin.**

**\*\*\***

**Unknown to Finn, the druids kept him unconscious for a week of psychological evaluation, while using the time to clear his system of antitoxins and psychoactive drugs. Of course, Finn remembered nothing, thinking he was only asleep for a couple of hours, or overnight at the most.**

**Despite the extensive process, the druids failed to discover anything significant. In despair, Moira likened Finn to an old blackboard. Erased and rewritten so many times, his blacks and whites were reduced to smudges of grey. Beneath each layer was another layer. Like peeling an onion, it made you weep.**

**She painted a grim picture for Mag Ruith, military doctors infecting young volunteers with plague. The few survivors having their lives systematically erased a memory at a time, to be replaced by Robert Davis Finn, a loose sham persona with just enough coherence to mop up any lingering threads of original personality.**

**Of the few survivors, one came to the Land of Erin as Finn. The others, damaged beyond repair, were put down if lucky, or if not.... well, that didn't bear thinking about. As to the rest of it, Moira could not say. Although she could tell Mag Ruith how the doctors did it, she had no idea why they would want to.**

## CHAPTER 21

### **O (onn : furze) Ogham.**

*The Druids' alphabet of trees is named after Ogma Sun Face, the god of eloquence. He is shown in carvings as leading men bound by golden chains reaching from the tongue of one to the ear of the next. Each letter of the ogham is named after a tree that came into leaf, flowered or fruited in a different month, making the alphabet a calendar*

Mag Ruith was explaining the principles of gardening with his customary enthusiasm. Quite how they got on to this subject was a mystery to Finn, but then everything was confusion with Mag Ruith.

“You should see the place in summer. It is far too early to fully appreciate its true beauty yet. Our approach to gardening, you may like to know, is the same as our approach to life: holistic with minimum interference. What appears a jumble of flowers, herbs and vegetables is a highly organised natural system. Welcomed predators eat garden pests, confused by the conflicting sights and smells of mixed planting. We guide here, we do not dictate; unlike your world where nature is bent to the hand of man.”

Catching Finn staring at a row of tall feather-fronded pot plants, basking against a warm brick wall in the physic garden, Mag Ruith defensively protested, “Yes marijuana

what of it! We use all Nature's gifts without fear or prejudice. Your world is afraid of everything; so you legislate. You never learn, the more you try to control, the more force you need to exercise the same level of control. It is a vicious circle. To abolish lawlessness, you must abolish law."

Wondering what the hell the old man was going on about, and not really caring, Finn let Mag Ruith rattle on, hoping he would eventually wear himself out.

"What do we substitute for law?" the great wizard continued without breath. "In my humble opinion, I would say kindness and moral responsibility. The Christians fail to do this by choosing sin and guilt to motivate. Powerful sticks no doubt, but we prefer to reward good. Praise effort rather than blame failure. Not only carrots, but sugar lumps and apples too. If you expect people to be decent, they usually are, by and large.

"How I go on. Am I boring you?" Mag Ruith asked with rare insight, and no intention of pausing to let Finn answer. "Let me show you the gardens. I am very proud of my arboretum, as I call it, even though I cannot take any personal credit. Many of the trees are hundreds of years old and despite my decrepid appearance, I can assure you, I am not.

"Or we could visit the telescope. I had the 1.83-meter telescope practically rebuilt from the original drawings. As the ancients believed occurrences in the heavens were reflected on earth, I see no contradiction in looking at the sky through a reflecting telescope."

Mag Ruith offered a piece of toffee to Finn. Gladly Finn accepted, sucking it thoughtfully. "How about the

telescope?” he suggested. “I can’t tell one tree from another.”

“Naughty boy,” the Arch Druid laughed, patting Finn’s back and leaving his hand resting there, “if you want to know our secrets, you must get to know our trees.”

Speaking at some length about the ancient Irish alphabet of trees called the ogham, Mag Ruith led Finn through a maze of nursery groves, past newly erected stone circles, and cabins shrouded by camouflage netting. Once Finn thought he saw the telescope over to the left, but when he mentioned it, his host smartly replied they were going by a scenic route.

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As Mag Ruith led him deeper into the dark sacred groves, Finn began to think he saw things through the trees. Weird things seemed flash-burned directly into his brain; copulating naked flesh, birth pangs, death throes. In less time than it took to blink an eye, he witnessed a journey through the uterus to the embryo in the womb. A seed burst into growth, from plant to flower to fruit to mould and was gone leaving no trace. A succession of people aged from infant to ancient in an instant. There were so many people Finn thought he witnessed the whole of human history.

Despite their strangeness, the images did not unduly disturb Finn. He believed they were simply Mag Ruith’s words unfolding in his head. The old man claimed there was magic in the spoken word. Perhaps he was drunk on eloquence.

**“Ogma lost his precious ogum to the sea god Mannanorn Mok Leer,” Mag Ruith gravely intoned in his hypnotic sing-song voice.**

**“Realising the dangers of reading and writing, Mannanorn carried the ogum in a crane skin bag to his castle on the Isle of Man. He used crane skin because it is immune to magic and keeps secrets.**

**“Mannanorn was so afraid of the written word he set cranes to guard his castle, with instructions to turn away the unwary. The sea god knew if man discovered the ogum’s secrets, he would lose innocence.”**

**As Mag Ruith spoke, a couple of birds flew over the trees to the left. The birds, all neck and legs with great broad wings, were probably herons, but to Finn they could only be Manannan’s faithful cranes. He half expected them to cry out, ‘keep away, keep away’ and felt disappointed when they did not. Disappointment seeded doubt. If Finn were drunk on eloquence as he thought, then all would be magic and the birds would cry a warning.**

**“The ancients augured from the flights of birds,” Mag Ruith informed him, spitting for luck before continuing.**

**“Later, Fionn Mac Coull inherited the crane skin bag from Mannanorn and learned all its secrets.”**

**“I am not Finn Mac Cool,” Finn said levelly.**

**The image of a huge wood frame came flashing through the trees, a frightened man caged inside fought to escape as it burst into flames.**

**Although Finn did not seem unduly perturbed, being far too young to remember, Mag Ruith felt embarrassed at the old film clip from ‘The Wicker Man’. Heads would roll for this wanton act of carelessness. Attempting to cover the**

mistake, he began gabbling so fast he lost track of what he said.

“Eighteen is the number of the trees and the number of letters in the ogum. Thirteen are the months in the year. Twenty-eight are the days in each month of the moon, five the number of quarter days and the number of vowels.”

Feeling the danger pass, he slowed down, making an effort to make sense. “We only write messages nicked in twigs or standing stones. More often we use a deaf and dumb language, called the Hand Ogum.”

Ticking off the letters on his left hand with the index finger of his right, he skilfully demonstrated the Hand Ogham. Focusing on him, Finn realised the finger language was something he saw Fand and Brian do on the journey to Sanctuary. In the middle of an argument they suddenly fell silent and holding hands, teased each other’s fingers, when they thought he wasn’t looking. He thought it sweet, a guilty betrayal of illicit affection. Now he realised it was this ogham thing Mag Ruith showed him.

Their deceit hurt. Despite apparent openness the druids kept secrets, telling only what they wanted him to know. It was the same with Mag Ruith. These were not visions. He saw what he was meant to see. Mag Ruith had drugged him somehow. It was the piece of toffee. It was all Finn needed to clear his head. He reached into his pocket searching for the antidote dispenser, but it was gone.

“No,” Mag Ruith cooed, gently persuasive. “You do not need them. Do not be afraid. Fear breeds fear and dependency, dependency. If in hot water, take a bath.”

Defeated, Finn slumped against the short, stocky druid. The headache returned and with it came panic. He began choking as his airway squeezed shut.



Realising Finn was reaching crisis and needed help, Mag Ruith spoke slowly, encouraging him to breathe deeply. He forced him to walk and take a breath with each pace. Finn did not resist; could not resist. He stumbled blindly on, clutching the druid, gasping for air.

When Finn was calmer, Mag Ruith retraced their steps. After a few hundred yards, he pulled Finn to a stop in front of a copse of pale ghostly tree trunks. Amid fluffy yellow catkins, leprous branches betrayed traces of burst bud green. Through Finn's unfocused eyes, the papery flaking bark glowed delicate blue. The colour came from tiny blood vessels in his retinas, beginning to burst under the dangerous increase in blood pressure.

To Finn, the patterns of light and shade made the trees a visceral world of wet flesh and heaving organs, which he needed to touch to confirm reality. As he moved forward, a pair of eyes opened on a tree trunk. A wood nymph stepped forth. Her skin was paper white and flaky, with delicate blue veins, her lips the cyanic blue of a heart attack, her white stiff hair matted with twigs and yellow catkins. She was naked with nipples and private parts daubed a crusty blue. She touched Finn, fingers icy cold on the back of his hand.

“The Birch is my first secret,” Finn heard Mag Ruith say, “for the ogum was first cut on a switch of birch. It said unless the birch is her overseer, seven times will thy wife be carried off to fairyland. The message, scratched seven times as the letter B, was only revealed when the sun god Lug grouped the vertical lines with diagonal strokes to make the words Shee and Ferand, the name of his wife.”

As Mag Ruith spoke, the sprite pushed back Finn's sleeve, and with a dirty blue tinged fingernail scratched

seven vertical slashes on his arm, making the magical transformations in the rising welts with diagonal lines.

“B is the first letter as the birch is the first tree of the year,” Mag Ruith intoned. “It tells the farmer when to plough and sow the spring wheat. Her month starts after the winter solstice extending from the plough days of late December to the 20th of January. Amergin, the poet, sang of this month, I am the stag of seven tines. White is her colour, the colour of fresh fallen snow. The pheasant is her bird, like on Christmas cards.”

Taking Finn’s hand, the sprite tweaked the tip of his thumb and mouthed the word, ‘Beth’.

“Birch rods are used to beat out evil spirits from lunatics and criminals. Do not be afraid of her Finn, embrace her and she will ease the demons in your soul.”

The sprite embraced Finn. She was ice cold and her arms wrapped around him forever.

As Finn passed out, druids rushed out of hiding places in the grove to resuscitate him.

“Oh damn!” Mag Ruith muttered.

“Is he all right?” asked the sprite.

“I think he may be dying.”

“Shit. I’m sorry.”

“It is not your fault my dear. You must be cold, put on some clothes. We won’t need you again tonight.”

She looked relieved. When Mag Ruith saw her again, the pale spectre was wearing a duffel coat and drinking something hot.

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The doctors informed Mag Ruith when Finn was out of immediate danger, adding it would be some time before his vision returned. Fortunately, he passed out before the damage became irreparable. Mag Ruith thanked them in an absent-minded way, not looking forward to his meeting with Moira.

There were few women fiercer than Moira, whose name was, appropriately, the Gaelic word for fate. He berated himself for not listening to her plea for caution, and his own impetuous eagerness. Taking a deep breath, he opened the door.

Moira stood up when he entered the room. Was it a residue of respect or merely politeness for his position? She towered over him, her height and bulk intimidating. Both were equally well fleshed, but where Mag Ruith was short; at almost two meters, Moira was tall. Where Mag Ruith was parchment pale, Moira was so black the pigment in her skin yellowed the whites of her eyes and stained the pink of her gums.

“The UN is wilier than you gave them credit for.” She sounded quietly victorious. Although Moira was Irish, her voice betrayed a transatlantic bark, as befitted a John Hopkins Professor and world authority in cognitive psychology. “It is obvious from Finn’s violent reaction they would rather lose their agent than have his secrets revealed.”

Mag Ruith could not believe his luck at her geniality. He smiled graciously. In response, she sent a shot across his bows, warning him not to get cosy.

“Why didn’t you notice the signs; the accelerated heart rate and increased blood pressure?” she demanded. “The first was the headache and the last would have been

a stroke. Or perhaps you did and didn't care; blinded as usual by your own pig-headed stubbornness!"

Outburst over Moira walked to a darkened window, nodding for Mag Ruith to join her. Finn was on the other side, lying on a bed in a dimly lit cubicle, with a stone for a pillow and another on his chest. The discomfort prevented full sleep; keeping him in the trance-like state required for hypnotic learning and speed healing. Mag Ruith saw the rhythmic movement of Finn's fingers and lips as he repeated his lessons in the ogham.

"As I told you, the ogum holds the key because it uses different parts of the brain to speech for language processing," Moira told him. It was only what she had said umpteen times before, but who knew, perhaps this time the old fool might listen.

"As you said before," he replied.

"Then why do you never listen?" she snapped.

"But I thought I did!" he protested weakly.

"You mean the piece of stupid mummery with that poor girl. What were you thinking! Anyway it confirmed my theory about them gerry-rigging Finn's speech centre. Sheer laziness of course, but at least I now know what I am dealing with. So, I suppose some good came out of your fiasco, even if it was only by accident," she grudgingly conceded, crushing Mag Ruith beneath a withering look. "But from now on, we do this my way or not at all."

"I see you are teaching him the ogum," he commented, carefully neutral.

"I have started his complete education: history, poetry, rhetoric, augury, mythology, philosophy, mathematics, geography, astronomy, entomology and Brehon law. He might be blind but he is not stupid.

**“It seems rather a lot to take in. Are you sure he is strong enough?” He sounded doubtful.**

**“It will give him something to think about while he recovers.”**

## CHAPTER 22

### **L (luis : rowan) Lia Fail.**

*Each of the four mythical cities of Ireland held a sacred magical treasure. Gorias had a bloodthirsty sword, while Murias the Dagda's cauldron, which brought the dead to life. Falias held the sun's spear that never missed its mark and Finias the Lia Fail, the Stone of Destiny, which sang in joy when touched by the foot of the true Ard Ri. Although a stone pillar in Tara is identified with the Lia Fail, another ancient tradition states Fergus the Great took the true Lia Fail to Scotland in the the year 500 for his coronation. Rechristened the Stone of Scone, it was subsequently captured by Edward I of England. Set in a throne in Westminster Abbey, for many centuries the Lia Fail played a silent part in the coronation of every English king*

**“Congratulations Sire!” Padraig was joyful.**

**Maeve's young priest had hinted the Great Queen was on the point of agreeing to marry the High King. Naturally, when Conor Mac Nessa summoned him, Padraig thought it was to discuss the wedding. Padraig wanted a large Church wedding, for if Maeve had agreed to marry Mac Nessa, she would not be far from embracing the one true faith.**

**“What are you congratulating me for?” asked Conor.**

**“Your wedding Sire.”**

**“What wedding?” he snapped impatiently.**

**“You and Queen Maeve, Sire.”**

**Conor looked at him as if he had taken leave of his senses. “You are not here to talk about marriage.”**

**Padraig blushed.**

**“It’s your oillpheist, your submarine beast, the aughisky.”**

**It was Padraig’s turn to look at Conor Mac Nessa as though he had taken leave of his senses; but saw the High King was serious.**

**“It was destroyed Sire,” he stammered, aware of making the truth sound like the blackest lie. “The Fomoir destroyed it after Tory Island.”**

**Conor looked past him, nodding. “We suspected as much.”**

**Padraig followed the look. Maeve’s young priest, Aidan, was at the back of the room. Suddenly remembering Aidan had volunteered to read to Conor Mac Nessa, Padraig wondered how he could have allowed himself to be so careless.**

**As Aidan genuflected to his Archbishop, Padraig saw the young priest held a tumbler of whiskey. His worst fears were confirmed when Aidan gave the glass to Conor. It was the Seneschal’s place to act as cupbearer to the High King and Conor had virtually promised him the job.**

**“It’s a pity, we could have done with the aughisky to go to Tir nam Bo to recover the Stone of Destiny,” Conor said.**

**Padraig wondered if Conor used the royal we, or meant to include Aidan.**

**“His majesty will take the sacred spear and there will be great bloodshed,” Aidan piously recited.**

**Padraig felt horrified at the thought of Conor taking the nuclear missile to England. Aidan was right on one point; there would be great bloodshed: that of Conor and his men. He clutched his rosary, muttering his lorica, ‘Today I bind unto myself the holy name of the trinity.’**

**“What are you are whittering about now?” Conor snapped.**

**Padraig stopped praying and thought fast. “Tir nam Bu is many leagues over the treacherous sea, Sire. It lies beyond the Castle of Manannawn.”**

**“Nonsense, it is not far or dangerous, look!”**

**Aidan passed the precious book to Conor. Confirming Padraig’s suspicion that Aidan’s ambition would be the undoing of them all, Conor gave the young priest the glass. Conor opened the book to show Padraig a map of Ireland. The coast of Scotland was no more than a hair’s breadth away.**

**Conor handed the book back to Aidan, who opened it at a mark and read the fatal words...**

**“Fergus Mac Erc took the Lia Fawll to Alba for his coronation. After his coronation, Fergus refused to return the Stone of Destiny. Many years later King Edward captured it and ensconced the Stone of Destiny, now known as the Stone of Scone, in Westminster Abbey.”**

**“Westminster Abbey, that is in London. I know. I remembered.” Conor sounded proud of himself.**

**Padraig wondered if Conor had any idea where London was, before realising he probably did.**

**“The true Stone of Destiny! No wonder the Lia Fawll at Tara is silent at my touch! Things will be different when the true stone sings. Maeve will beg me for marriage.”**



**Padraig accepted the fact everything was his fault. He tempted Conor with the beautiful Derryflan Chalice and took the High King to Tory Island in search of Sacred Treasures. Conor believed a chalice was the Cauldron of the Dagda and a nuclear missile, the invincible spear. Now he wanted to stand on the Stone of Scone and have a piece of rock declare him Ard Ri.**

**“We’ll go to Belfast. They have ferries. I remembered that too. We’ll take the ferry Padraig, or even an aeroplane. What a tale of wonder it would make. To fly through the air like a bird! You have been to Ath Cliath. You will be our guide.”**

**When Padraig bragged about visiting Dublin, he never thought it would lead to this. He had no choice but to humour Conor and hope the madness passed.**

**“Of course Sire,” he smoothly demurred. “I will need an able assistant. Might I suggest young Aidan? It can be his reward.”**

**“Capital idea!” Conor beamed.**

**The young priest went pale and stammered, “But Majesty, who will administer to Queen Maeve.”**

**Padraig was sharp. “Who is more important Aidan; Queen Maeve, or our lord and master, the High King?”**

**Aidan looked trapped.**

**Padraig was merciless. “Well?”**

**Hesitation betrayed Aidan. It was obvious he did not expect them to return from Belfast. In a flash, Padraig realised Aidan was not clever enough for such mental gymnastics. The mind which conceived this subtle plan could only belong to Maeve. Rather than Maeve falling for Aidan’s charms as intended, it appeared she had bewitched the young priest.**

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The helicopter manoeuvred back and forth, attempting to land on the muddy field outside the inflated dome. Despite having set the air conditioning to maximum Doctor Tod sweated inside his positive pressure isolation suit. He was not looking forward to seeing Smith. The man intimidated him.

“Damn him,” Tod muttered to himself, “I am in charge here!” He decided to complain to the World Health and they could take it up with the Supreme Council of the United Nations.

Once the helicopter landed, and the blades slowed to a lazy circling, technicians wheeled the portable disinfectant sprayers towards the copter and started them up. Their engines provided a counterpoint to the dull mechanical thwack of the cooling rotors.

A hatch in the copter’s belly slipped back and a solitary figure in a biohazard suit stepped through the curtain spray of bleach. Todd was not pleased to see the suit was brand new and of much better quality than those issued to him and his staff. Behind the figure, the hatch slammed shut as workers began to decontaminate the helicopter prior to take off.

Tod’s internal transmitter buzzed inside his helmet. He activated the switch. What is it?” he snapped fretfully.

An unidentified voice stammered, “A message from World Health Windsor Euro-Region HQ, Doctor Toat. It’s Professor MacDonald with an urgent message about General Smith.”

**“What does he have to say about the arse?” Tod asked. Realising his mistake too late, he added hesitantly, “Is this circuit secure?”**

**“No, it fucking isn’t!” boomed the arse Smith. “Todd. I’ll see you inside.”**

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**Tod’s private quarters consisted of pre-fabricated walls set against the shee’s double membrane. Inside, an agitated Tod attempted to read a hard copy of the San Francisco Chronicle that one of the staff picked up on leave a few weeks ago. The news channel had gone from strength to strength since its outstanding coverage of the great quake which all but destroyed the city. He had already scanned the day’s headlines on his personal, but wanted to create the right impression for General Smith, especially in the light of MacDonald’s nervous message; a military takeover indeed. It was important to start right, grab the bull by the horns and show the man who was boss.**

**Proud of its broadsheet heritage, the old Chronicle still produced a weekly print edition; despite the ruinous cost making it as expensive as a glossy. Tod flicked the page straight with studied impatience, relishing the crack of stone-paper. Smith need never know the issue was almost a month old. Let him think he had the sort of budget to requisition newsprint.**

**Nervously, he glanced over his quarters, now stripped of anything military or even utilitarian. Tod had also changed out of fatigues into casual shirt and trousers. He wanted to present an image of a civilian, a civilised man.**

Why Smith, he worried. The thought kept nagging. Smith was the Presidential Rottweiler with a motto running, 'no shit too deep'. Wherever there was trouble in the world, be it natural disasters or anti-American governments, there was Smith to keep the lid on things. The man had an enviable track record and a savage reputation.

Tod turned over the page, causing another pleasant snap, and saw a headline answer his question. **THE BEST MAN** spoke about Smith as the vice-presidential running mate for the favoured Republican candidate. After a précis of his career to date, it posed the question whether he would change the army for politics.

How stupid Tod thought, of course he would. As the world became more right wing, generals became more popular. It was like a law of nature. And the man was a born politician.

In the absence of a door to knock on, there was a cough outside.

"Come," Tod cried imperiously, thinking it was Smith.

A nervous technician poked his head through the flap, "Excuse me Doctor Toat, but the General said he will see you now, sir."

"He said what!"

\*\*\*

Tod faced up to the General for a second, before lowering his gaze. Smith's square face was all lines and angles, his eyes were like flints of granite, even his hair was battleship grey. He loomed over the shorter man.

"Read these, Todd." He thrust a thin sheaf of papers at Tod, who accepted them without murmur.

The first paper was an order from the UN Supreme Council giving General Smith full military authority in Ireland. Tod saw it was countersigned by the provisional Irish Government in Troy, upstate New York; the new Federal Capital of the United States. The rest of the papers were even more unpleasant and he read them with growing agitation. Occasionally he asked questions in a breathy, strangled voice. The General, treating his questions as statements, did not bother to answer.

Finally Tod said, "Why was I not told any of this?" He thought his voice sounded too high.

"Don't ask me, I'm a simple soldier carrying out orders."

"A simple soldier they speak of as the next Vice President."

The general merely shrugged.

"Nuclear weapons in Ireland," he squawked. "Was Corporal Finn involved in this?"

"If you were meant to know, they would have already told you."

"General, if you expect co-operation, you must learn to co-operate. You may have the authority but I have the staff. Corporal Finn has been missing for three weeks and may well be dead. More worrying is the fact our contact, Erin Mocka, has been out of reach for the much same time."

"We know. We monitor all communications here."

"That is outrageous!"

"Events justify it."

Tod saw the politician in the soldier and so framed his next question with care. "Can I take it Corporal Finn's experimental inoculation against the plague was also a lie?"

The general shrugged.

**“Yes a lie General, not political expediency or anything else, but a lie. For more than a month, my staff and I have been working night and day on the second stage of Operation Eire: the inoculation of the wild Irish based on the successful outcome of Corporal Finn. Now, I take it, we are no nearer a cure than we ever were.”**

**“You want the truth Todd? Your precious library caused this mess. I don’t suppose you remember the supply sub that went missing years ago.”**

**“Of course I do, it set us back weeks.”**

**“The Irish used it for Tory Island.”**

**“How?”**

**“A survivor from the submarine crew stole a nuclear weapon while the wild Irish had the Tory Island staff pinned down.”**

**Tod went pale.**

**“Corporal Finn came to neutralise the warheads and the traitor. To prevent him causing a similar problem in the future, they implanted fail-safes so Finn would die after completing his mission.”**

**“What did they do to him?”**

**The General did not answer but said, “It is possible he is already dead.”**

**“We are talking about a human being.” Tod knew he sounded hysterical. Hysteria from the Greek word for womb, because psychiatrists once thought it only affected women. How times had changed, were changing still.**

**“The man was a tool Doctor Todd, and a tool without use is nothing at all.”**

**“That is... immoral!” he blustered, aware every utterance made him sound weak, or worse, irrational.**

**“Have you ever thought your attitude is the reason you were not told any of this? Consider the hundreds of thousands who will die when those warheads go off. I have a job to do. Once it is done, I will leave you in peace and get on with my own career.”**

**“What are you going to do?” Tod stammered.**

**“At present? Wait for the nuclear missile to surface and take it back. As for the traitor, without weapons or submarine he is no longer a threat,” Smith barked.**

**He let his words sink in, adding in a less aggressive voice, “Understand me Todd, I will honour your policy of non-interference as far as I am able, but realise my time is limited.”**

**Tod weighed up his options. It appeared he had pitifully few left and of those few, cooperation seemed the best policy.**

**“I realise that General Smith. Thank you for your frankness.”**

## CHAPTER 23

**A (ailm : pine) Aos Dana.**

*The name the druids gave themselves literally meant the Gifted Folk, a reminder of a twenty-five year educational apprenticeship from which they would emerge as either Brehon, Fathi or Filid, doctors of law, science or the liberal arts*

Finn was chuffed to be finally getting out of the draughty cramped bedroom in the castle attics. His new room, in a converted house in the town of Birr, was bright and warm. There was a bathroom down the hall and a small communal kitchen for snacks and drinks. He even got shelf space in the fridge.

Birr was the ruined town they skirted on the way to Sanctuary. He passed so close and never suspected a thing. Damn clever these druids. Clever as they were though, the town would not stand up to a thorough investigation. Yet who in this of Land of Erin would ever bother looking?

He marvelled at the druids' ingenuity as he walked back up to the Demesne. Shrubs and trees ran wild down the length of Castle Street. The houses had weeds and brambles growing through the facades, making them look derelict. You would never guess they concealed cosy dormitories and apartments.

Turning a corner, Finn saw his teacher, Oona, deep in conversation with Fand and Moira. Fand was the woman



who brought him to Sanctuary of course. Moira was someone he'd seen around the Demesne; an aristocratic, commanding black woman dressed in the full red robe of a senior druid. The women were so intent on their conversation they did not notice him approach.

Finn watched their hands fly with blinding speed as they ticked off the ogham letters on their fingers. While still finding it strange to see this as language, he was amazed how much he had learned in a few short weeks. He recognised all the letters and some words, including his own name, when Oona spelt it out. But at this speed he simply was not quick enough to catch a full sentence.

Spotting him, Oona called, "Hello handsome, I'm ashamed to say you caught us gossiping."

"About me?" he asked mischievously.

"Oh, well done, I knew you would soon pick it up!"

This was praise indeed from Oona, the most exacting of his teachers. A middle-aged woman with a ruddy complexion and the type of figure best described as motherly, Oona was a brilliant unarmed-combat trainer, possessed of panther like agility, and so smart it seemed like she knew what you would do before you knew it yourself. It was incredible how fast his combat skills returned under her tutelage.

Oona rewarded Finn's diligence by adopting him as a favourite pupil. On his part, respect quickly developed into liking, forming the basis for a hesitant friendship. Recently, she invited him to join her highly regarded philosophy class, which showed a distinctly oriental bent. After a week of being star pupil there too, he also enrolled in her natural history, astronomy and medicine classes. Since joining philosophy, Oona took to rolling back her eyes back until

the whites showed and calling him 'Glasshopper' whenever he was particularly clever. The fact her actions mystified him, only appeared to add to her amusement.

"You remember Fand," she said casually.

Finn acknowledged her. "I thought you left."

"I had," Fand replied, "just passing back through with Shamus and Rory."

"He was alright then."

Fand smiled, "There was never any doubt, but your concern at the time was touching and appreciated. I'll tell them you said hello."

"Thanks."

Turning to include everyone, Fand announced. "We're off on holiday to Glennagalt for a month, a whole glorious month of heaven!"

Recognising the word Glennagalt from his mythology lessons, Finn wondered what was so great about a month in the Valley of Madness.

Catching his questioning look, Fand answered, "A lot of people had breakdowns after the illness. Glennagalt helps them get better. My sister's down there and she dotes on Rory, of course. Everyone does, which means he will be high as a kite most of the time." She sighed dramatically, rolling her eyes. "Perhaps not much like heaven after all! Well, better be going."

Moira looked at her watch. "And me."

"Nice to see you, Finn," Fand said, kissing his cheek.

"It was great to see too and you Moria."

After the two women left he commented to Oona, "That Moira seems a nice old bird."

"I'll tell her," Oona replied. "She'll split her sides laughing."

**“You better not. What does she teach?”**

**“She teaches how not what. Moira’s masterminding your education to make the learning experience more effective, Glasshopper.”**

**“What is it with all this Glasshopper shit?” he asked for the umpteenth time.**

**In answer, Oona attempted an enigmatic smile.**

**As he stared quizzically, she burst out laughing, “I’ll never make a woman of mystery, will I?”**

**“You’re weird enough for me.”**

**“Very sweet of you to say so dear, but it’s quite not the same,” she assured him.**

**They continued up the road, silently enjoying each other’s company.**

**“Finn, would you care to come for a wee jaunt tomorrow?”**

**Despite the fact Finn counted himself almost a friend, he felt distinctly flattered to be asked on one of Oona’s precious private outings.**

**“Love to!”**

**“Oh heavens, I forgot I have a class!”**

**“So have I,” he replied. “Mug Ruth won’t mind.”**

**“Maybe not with you, but he’s hell on earth with us poor sods at the coalface!” Picking up speed she toddled off, shouting back over her shoulder, “Seven thirty sharp mind you, at the refectory.”**

**\*\*\***

**They set off with the dew still twinkling on the grass like a million tiny diamonds. Oona took great delight in showing Finn the countryside, continually stopping to point out**

**intricate systems of life unnoticed by the pedestrian. Although a natural teacher blessed with infectious enthusiasm, all in all she was a bit much. It was not long before Finn found himself tuning her out to enjoy the day's relative freedom.**

**As a hawk plummeted out of the sky, a group of rabbits fled in panic. Finn watched the bird fall like a stone, bowling over in a ball as it hit the ground. For a moment it looked dead until he glimpsed something struggling, caught in the talons. The bird righted itself in a flurry of feathers, head jerked up and beak fell like a hatchet.**

**“Isn't she perfect?” cooed Oona, unable to let any opportunity pass. “Obedient to nature, she never thinks beyond the necessity of feeding her chicks. They need to be fledged for when the young songbirds leave the nest. It's hard rearing a brood this time of year. She often has to leave the weakest to starve.**

**“Rabbits on the other hand, have been breeding since February and are on the second or third litter by now. From the looks of that wee one, I'd say it was not long out of the birthing stop, where it's been sealed up with mum against weasels and stoats; probably its first time out, poor thing. But, that's life. We all dance to its tune, whether we want to or not.**

**“When it comes down to it Finn, we're no different to them. We react at the same knee-jerk level of instinct. Despite our big brains claiming we're special and doling out pity and regret like we were halfway between god and the angels, believing anything else is just vanity. Our species has an infinite capacity for deception, especially self deception.**

**“That’s what Nietzsche was getting with his Supermen; although the word *Übermensch* is probably better translated as ‘superior man’. He saw it as the next stage in human development, different to us as we are from monkeys. Not a physical evolution, but self-realisation bringing the necessary intellectual and moral development to liberate oneself from the slave mentality church and state use to imprison society.**

**“People claim Hitler misunderstood Nietzsche, but he understood him perfectly well; as did the world when deciding to abandon us to the plague. Liberty, equality, democracy is all a sham to keep us in line. Priests bleating on about god are in cahoots with politicians, looking no further than the next election. They know god is dead. He was an inconvenience so they killed him, keeping his memory alive to control us.**

**“But even that lie pales to insignificance against their mealy mouthed hypocrisy. Those in power are fully aware human instinct, like animal instinct, is about survival of the fittest; about rising above adversity and triumphing over others. The will to power is their driving force and it must be ours too. To save the future, we need to cut the past’s apron strings; become responsible to no one but ourselves. Or as Nietzsche said, ‘we must become as gods’.**

**“The idea isn’t new. The superior-man pops up time and again in philosophies the world over. Gurdjieff urged us to wake from eternal sleep. Buddhist scripture speak of the Arahant; ‘one who sees reality as it is.’ The ancient Chinese oracle, the I Ching or the Book of Changes, defines the superior man as gifted with instinctive wisdom.**

**“For you see, understanding when and how to act cannot be worked out by weighing alternatives and worrying if the time is right. It’s a gut reaction, an impulse to do what needs to be done, when it needs to be done. And having the courage to see it through without apology, no matter how bad it looks... Oh, hang on a mo...”**

**“What’s up?” Finn asked. Despite happily ignoring Oona, he knew she would never stop talking unless it was important.**

**Impatiently, she shushed him, dropping to her knees.**

**Seeing her sniff a bush and desperate to lighten the mood, Finn wittily inquired, “Getting a natural high?”**

**“Wolves,” Oona answered grimly. “Generally they don’t come this close to people.”**

**Joining her, Finn saw Oona examining a pile of large dried turds. Breaking one up, she crumbled it under her nose sniffing loudly before gingerly tasting it.**

**“Oona!” he cried, horrified.**

**She wiped her hand on her robe, ignoring his outrage. “A bitch, pregnant and sick, could be dangerous. She’ll be after scavenging around rubbish dumps.”**

**Finn had heard wolves mentioned before, and perhaps even seen them. But he still found it hard to swallow.**

**“Are you sure?”**

**She pointed to footprints in the soft damp earth. The tracks looked like those of a large dog. Despite Finn’s doubts, it looked as if there were wolves after all. He could only think they had escaped from zoos.**

**“Mind if we take a trip to Rath? They might have seen something.” Heaving her wicker basket, packed with**

collected roots and herbs, onto her other arm, Oona linked him. “It’s not so very far away, shouldn’t take long.”

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Rath was a small village of a couple of dozen houses clustered round a ruined church. Oona headed straight for the church hall, which housed the television set, working bathroom and communal kitchen. The villagers had no news of wolves, but they were delighted to see her. And it was easy for Finn to see why. She was very good with them.

While dispensing herbs for rhumatics and regular bowels with the elderly, she sympathised over their aches and pains. Then, obviously out of Finn’s hearing, it was babies and female troubles with the women; potions to ease the cramps or help conception and prevent miscarriage. Everyone got their little bit of Oona. She taught the teenage girls love charms and philtres, and all the youngsters got boxing and judo tips.

“The men don’t come until later,” she explained to Finn. “I think they feel self-conscious. Do you mind if we stay for dinner. Being farmers they tend to eat early.”

Finn said he did not mind at all, but secretly he was a little jealous of the way Oona lavished her attention on everyone. He sort of thought of it as their day out and he didn’t like sharing her.

Very few men came round after dinner, which Oona put down to Finn’s presence. Consequently, they left before sunset. The villagers accompanied them part of the way. Finn thought they would never finish saying goodbye. In the end he used the threat of wolves simply to get rid of them.

Although he was not sure, Oona appeared to be going a completely different way home. When Finn got so worried he asked if they were lost, Oona merely laughed. Stopping on a low bluff, she reminded him they had not eaten their packed lunch. Suggesting an alfresco supper, she took out individual wallets of folded grease-proofed paper, each containing a doorstep thick, hard cheese, sandwich.

It required all their efforts just to chew the by now stale bread. Sometimes, when mouths got too dry, they gagged down chunks with swigs of cold, sweet mint tea from a stoppered bottle.

In the meadow by the river, mad hares gambolled under a dying crimson sun, boxing as though their lives depended upon it. Which it did; for as Oona explained, after choking down a lump of sandwich and swallowing hard, if the female beats the male in a fight then he's no good to her.

“No surprise there then!”

“Like I was saying before Glasshopper, it's about survival of the fittest. Strong men sire strong children. No matter how much they might protest, there isn't a woman on earth who wouldn't let the most brutal man in the world have his way in the hope her child would grow up just as fierce. It's not for nothing they say nice guys finish last.”

“I'll bear it in mind!”

“Make sure you do!” she laughed.

Manfully chewing their sandwiches in comfortable silence, they watched the sun sink behind a copse of blasted pines crowning a gentle hill. Finding he had enough spit to speak, Finn wondered aloud if the distant grey haze was the sea.



Oona smiled shyly. “If you want it to be Glasshopper, then it probably is.”

As the bloated red ball slowly set into grey, that could be the sea if he wanted it to be, he watched the woman beside him; plain and matronly but shining with peace and inner confidence. Seeing her large coarse hands he imagined her life of cooking, cleaning and laundry; the tasks of a loving mother and wife. Some Roman called Ammianus, he seemed to remember, said fighting a Celt was bad enough, but it was nothing compared to fighting his missus, with her huge snowy arms striking like catapults.

Finn could quite easily see Oona as an ancient Celtic matriarch, fighting alongside her man to keep the family together during the bad times. She was a born mother and a born fighter. He found himself wondering how it felt when the fight was taken out of her hands as she watched her brood die from plague. If she had family, and if they died. He knew so little yet presumed so much.

Oona’s thick red hair was scrapped back into a plait, exposing her profile. Finn looked at her round ruddy face, now stained crimson by a fireball of a sun that made her freckles stand out like dark stars. Her small blue eyes, dusted with fair lashes, sparkled with laughter. Her cheeks dimpled as she took a generous bite of sandwich. She was never a beauty, but there was something beautiful about her.

She caught him staring and grinned. “What? What are you looking at Glasshopper?”

In reply, he shyly reached over and took her hand, overwhelmed by an inexpressible affection for this woman, almost twice his age.

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During the afternoon of Oona and Finn's visit to Rath, Morrigan visited Sanctuary. With preparations to attend to, Mag Ruith, deciding Finn was better out of the way, gave Oona strict instructions not to bring him back until dark.

After dropping supplies, the copters, following their familiar pattern, sprayed the congregation and left as the people collapsed, convulsing. Once the helicopters were out of sight, the clean-up began.

The young, sick and heavily susceptible, including the Sensitives, had been moved to the town earlier, leaving about two hundred and fifty for Morrigan. Armed with swimmer's nose plugs, and with some even wearing goggles, they had taken the brunt of the spray.

Despite the precautions, there was always a danger of chemical seepage through the skin. Immediately after the helicopters left, the communicants stripped naked and hosed each other down, before dressing in fresh clothing. Robes were laundered as the residue was sluiced from the castle garden. Only then was the house unsealed and the others allowed to return.

Mag Ruith knew such measures seemed extreme, but bitter experience taught it was pointless to take risks with Morrigan. Long-term exposure to chemical residue in the soil was bad enough, without adding direct exposure once a month.

To combat toxic build up, the druid's main vegetable gardens and orchards were kept far away from the house. The chemicals of Morrigan were much too

**expensive for indiscriminate spraying across the countryside, hence the need to gather people together by giving them something they would never want to miss.**

**By the time Finn and Oona returned, all evidence of Morrigan was removed.**

## CHAPTER 24

Finn rushed out of his room, up the stairs and out into John's Mall. Having lived in town for the past week, he should have known it did not do to hurry through Birr at twilight. But he was late. Once or twice, he nearly came a cropper on the pot-holed pavements, broken up to allow Mother Nature to run rampant. In his haste, he took a shortcut through an alley overgrown with bramble and sycamore saplings, cursing as he promptly got lost. After a few blind turns, he came out a couple of hundred yards from where he started.

Trying to calm down, he took a second to catch his breath. In front of him was a mounded tangle of ivy. It was the Seefin Stone, once proud monument in a once proud tourist town. This made the shapeless mass of vegetation, over to the right, the Russian cannon captured at Sebastopol in the Crimean War. Spotting the top of the ruined church, he saw he was a few minutes away from Castle Street and wondered how on earth he ever got lost.

Mag Ruith greeted his arrival with a slight sigh and a barely perceptible glance at his wristwatch. With such subtlety Finn was increasingly treated more like a druid than a guest.

“Sorry,” Finn apologised, lamely.

As Mag Ruith began his usual polite preamble, enquiring after his health and progress, they set off down an anonymous trail leading to the woods. It reminded Finn of the alley he was recently lost in. After a less than a

hundred yards, Mag Ruith held up a hand for silence, even though he was the only one talking. Following his nod, Finn spied a couple of young lovers, wrapped arm in arm, walking in the deep shadows. His thoughts jarred back to something almost forgotten.

“When I first arrived,” he whispered, “there was this sex thing called Morrigan.” Finn fell silent, embarrassed at blurting it out. Feeling like some sort of pervert, he wondered how Mag Ruith would respond. Sex, like religion, could be a touchy subject.

Mag Ruith almost choked on the huge wad of toffee in his mouth.

“Morrigan,” he eventually managed to splutter, launching droplets of spit into the cool evening air like shooting stars. “And what brings that to mind?”

Frantically pondering why Finn chose to ask about Morrigan so soon after the last visit, he wondered if Oona had said anything, while knowing she would not. Was this an example of synchronicity or incidents beyond coincidence? A lifetime of experience taught Mag Ruith even naive questions were rarely asked by chance.

Currently Finn was working as a gopher, ‘Go for this ‘n go for that’, in Communications. He was told it was a good way to learn the organisation, when in fact it was to expose him to Sensitives. Everyone had a degree of prescience, although usually not enough to train in communication or divination. Exposure to Sensitives helped develop perception and tune intuition.

The drawback with Sensitives, thought Mag Ruith, was you could only tell them the truth. With the truth being something people seldom wanted to hear, it was no wonder they were all neurotic. In some complicated way, Sensitives

blended impression and information to predict a likely future. Prediction was such a fragile thing it could shatter on a single inadvertent lie. Shatter the vision too often and not only was the talent ruined, but also the person. Mag Ruith was not aware Finn possessed any outstanding ability, yet despite this, decided to proceed with caution.

“As you know the name Morrigan means Great Queen.” he said. “She was the ancient Celtic goddess of battle, death and plenty; the death aspect of the Triple Goddess of birth, growth and death.

“While some prefer to see the Great Mother as three separate goddesses called ‘Moirai’ or the fates. I believe in one goddess, the White Goddess. Her symbol is the moon which governs the tides, the seasons and the menstrual flow of women; all the sources of life. The moon has three faces, the new, full and old, representing virgin, mother and hag, the three aspects of the Goddess.”

Finn hummed the chant Dermot and the others sung while Mag Ruith supplied the words.

“I am the bee queen, bringer of summer.... The bee has long been revered for industry. Did you know all the working bees in a hive are female and are all sisters? The result of a single mating by the queen with a drone male, they are a sisterhood of one mind, working to a single purpose: the creation and sustenance of life. For without the bee to fertilise plants there is famine, even extinction.”

The UN in their blind and foolish haste, thought Mag Ruith, had no idea of the forces unleashed when their drugs tapped into the collective unconscious of the Irish.

“Sweet from the heather is a pun on the supplies of food, fuel and electrical goods they bring as handouts to sustain the population.”

It also referred to the sexual arousal caused by the drugs which shortened life, caused sterility, miscarriage and in the end much, much worse. He wondered how much he could safely reveal.

“That’s it!” Finn interrupted, “Queen bee, summer, heather; what’s the rest?”

Mag Ruith, heaving a sigh of relief at having escaped further explanation, proceeded to the second verse. “I am Lord Raven singing head me.

“The raven is a psychopomp, literally a guider of souls, escorting the newly dead to the afterlife. Its reward is the flesh on the corpse left behind. Morrigan as death takes the form of a raven and as such is the opposite side of the same... What is that word? Ah... coin!

“The singing head speaker is the great god Bran whose name means Raven. Bran met his death in this Land of Erin, his head continuing to speak and prophesise for seven whole years, until buried under Tower Hill in London to protect the city against invasion.

“Bran is the Green Man, the personification of the land’s fertility. Each winter he is ritually sacrificed to bring new life by being hung, or crucified on a tree. He is then reborn, like the crops from the seed. There are strong parallels with the mysteries of Demeter, and legends associated with Osiris, Attis, Orpheus, Odin, and of course, Jesus.”

“I’m not being funny and I don’t mean any offence, but isn’t that a bit sacrilegious. I mean I’m not religious or anything...”

“Christ was only one of a long line of dying and resurrected god-kings,” Mag Ruith explained. “Originally,

the year was divided between the green king of summer and the winter serpent, called his tawnishta.”

“Erin said Dermot was my tawnishta,” Finn exclaimed.

Mag Ruith thought they were skating on thin ice and so picked up speed to quickly glide over it.

“Serpents were believed immortal because by shedding their skin they appeared to regenerate,” he interjected. “It is no accident Saint Padraig is said to have driven all the snakes out of this Land of Erin, which he did not as there were never any snakes here to begin with. What the legend shows is the serpent god’s transformation from a benign to a malign presence.

“By crushing the serpent’s head under heel, the christian Virgin Mary, as the new Eve, refuses the serpent’s offer of wisdom. Presumably choosing ignorance, she rejects ancient scholarship and cuts the cords of history, marking the change from Paganism to christianity. It is no more or less the triumph of blind faith over knowledge.

“In their wilful ignorance, christians cling blindly to hope; the last evil to emerge from Pandora’s box. Where they see hope as a virtue, to prolong life in the face of overwhelming despair, the ancients considered it a great evil because it stopped people committing suicide, ending torment and agony when all else was lost.”

“Are you making this up?” Finn asked.

“Why should I do that? Most of what I said can be found in Sir James Frazer’s ‘The Golden Bough’.

“Is that a book?”

“More of a confession really.”

“You old fraud, it’s all from a book, isn’t it!”

“We keep them locked up in the cellars, where they can do no harm,” he added gleefully.



**“You should write a book, you know,” Finn laughed, “It would be brilliant!”**

**“I write in the book of life,” Mag Ruith claimed grandly, before remembering Finn needed the truth. “If I did, you would never dream of reading it, but look how you like our talks.”**

**He gestured to the tree before him and Finn knew he was right. In the half light, he could see it was an ash. The ash month of the ogham extended from February 18th to the 17th of March, the month of floods. Its colour was clear, the colour of the mad winds of March and its letter Nion. Mentally, Finn flexed the tip of his little finger, ‘N’, Nion, the letter of the ash.**

**Of the five sacred trees of this Land of Erin, three were ash. The trees of Tortu, Dathi and the branching tree of Usnek, whose tragic fall in the year 665 AD symbolised the triumph of christianity over Paganism.**

**A descendant of the tree of Creeva, also an ash, stood until the nineteenth century in Killura, when it was carried away piecemeal by migrants to the New World fleeing the potato famine; who thought it would protect them from drowning. This was why coracles were made of ash; for ash is the wind’s voice over deep water.**

**A small shape, hurtling through the gloom, collided with Mag Ruith, interrupting Finn’s reverie. It was a child. Although Finn knew most of the druids and their families, he failed to recognise the boy.**

**“How did he get here?” he asked. “I thought this place was secret?”**

**“When the need is great, providence provides.”**

**“Don’t you ever quit?” he laughed.**

**“Great wizard, great wizard!” The boy tugged at the old man’s sleeve. Finn arched an eyebrow as Mag Ruith shrugged and mouthed something inaudible. It was too dark to see what.**

**“Come quick. Please!” the child begged.**

**Mag Ruith looked kindly at the child. Fishing in his pocket, he brought out a lump of toffee. He seemed to offer it to the child, before ramming it in his own mouth and sucking ruminatively.**

**“Finn, I am going with the child to Rath. Go to the house and send others,” he said, struggling to speak through the sticky confectionary.**

**“How? I’m lost.”**

**“Nonsense!” Mag Ruith called back indistinctly. “Didn’t you hear me say providence provides?”**

**\*\*\***

**When Finn arrived back at the Demesne, Brendan was waiting for him. Brendan told him the others had already left. On the way to Rath, he explained to Finn the Sensitives had forewarned the druids of a murder. Finn knew the Sensitives were having premonitions, but he was not aware of anything definite.**

**Approaching the village, Finn and Brendan saw a circle of lights. As they got closer, it reminded Finn of a scene from an old horror film, terrified villagers viewing the carnage by torchlight. Except, these torches were electric.**

**A druid told them it was a wolf attack. They were holding an inquest in the church hall. The victim was an**

elderly woman from the village. Finn wondered if he met her last week.

All around them, Sensitives shrieked and wailed in psychic pain. Finn, suspicious of their antics, was suddenly overwhelmed by a feeling of violence and horror. His legs turned to jelly and he collapsed into Brendan. He was still wobbly when he entered the hall to hear the inquest verdict.

Having just finished examining the body, Oona washed her hands. Looking at Mag Ruith, she confirmed it was a wolf attack.

“No!” Finn shouted from the back. Oona could see the evidence before her, why did she lie? He felt the wrong in her words like a physical wound and wondered how the others could accept her verdict. “Wolves do not rape!” he shouted.

A shocked murmur went round the hall. Mag Ruith calmly motioned to three young druids to bundle Finn out. Turning to the villagers, he used a gesture to indicate he was screwing something back into his head.

Despite his outward calm, Finn’s outburst disturbed Mag Ruith. If this was evidence Finn was a Sensitive, it complicated everything. He could only hope the talent would ebb and flow, as it did with most people, emerging only in times of emotional stress. In all honesty, Mag Ruith did not like the thought of an Ard Ri who could predict, some might even say create, the future. That was far too dangerous.

Seeing Oona affected by Finn’s outburst, he beckoned her over, overtly to offer thanks for her support of his story to the villagers, but really to sound her out. Finn was right of course, the old woman was raped and then beaten to

death. Wild animals only ravaged the corpse. With stomach turning at the ferocity of the injuries, he confided his suspicions about Finn to Oona.

Oona agreed to tell Finn as much of the truth as she thought was practical. Like Mag Ruith, she believed their work with him had come too far to be jeopardised by a lack of trust. As she went to Finn, Mag Ruith stayed with his thoughts, wondering how the de Danann could allow this to happen. Surely they knew such incidents were a reaction to the drugs of Morrigan.

In some perverse way, Morrigan struck Mag Ruith as a sour joke. Reaction to the drugs resulted in violence and sex crime. The very things Morrigan was designed to prevent by relieving pressure on the unconscious mind. With Morrigan, natural appetites condemned by christianity were given free reign. Once a month you could fulfil your darkest desires. If a man desired a woman, he need only be close when the Morrigan called. It did not matter if a man desired a man or a woman, a woman. Except for children and animals Morrigan obliged all tastes, no matter how perverse in the cold light of day. Old taboos were extinct and consequently sex crime was virtually unknown in this Land of Erin. As were most other types of crime.

But even Mag Ruith had to admit this was mainly because most crimes were no longer considered criminal. Murders still happened of course, although in many cases they were not treated as murder. If a husband beat his wife three times, she could kill him in his sleep with impunity. If two people wanted to beat each other to death and it was a fair fight, they got on with it.

**The life of a slave was worthless. A warlord could slaughter a whole village, if they were his property. And any transgression against the state was punishable by death. As it was a demonstrable fact, dead men did not re-offend.**

**All that was in theory; in practice people were rarely killed. If you were stupid enough to kill unjustly and the druids ruled against you, it could cost you everything. You might spend your whole life working off a debt to a man's family. And in this Land of Erin, everyone had family.**

**Theft and armed robbery were also eradicated by the simple expedient of no longer being crimes. If the thief worked for the warlord, it was taxation. On the other hand if a warlord was robbed, it was treason and punished by death. Ordinary people seldom suffered robbery because communities tended to be small, where everyone knew each other. And also they had so very little to rob.**

**Mag Ruith racked his brains for other examples of crime in this fair Land of Erin. Dostoyevsky had once written a whole book on crime and punishment, while he, Chief Magistrate of Brehon Law, could barely manage a paragraph.**

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**The rusted wolf traps, brought from the Demesne, caught no wolves. Druids, hunting with Sensitives, captured a psychotic wild man, who was secretly brought to Sanctuary for examination.**

**The man, thought to be in his thirties, looked older. He was half starved and covered with ulcerous wounds and tumours from malignant cancers. His body bore recent**

scratches, now beginning to fester. The doctors who examined him believed the wounds were consistent with violent struggle. They were also able to confirm he suffered from irreversible toxic reaction with the same certainty the Sensitives confirmed his guilt in the old woman's murder.

The man was drugged and taken in secret to Galway. Although the druids knew any coastal city would do, Galway was simply the nearest seaport after the sterilisation of Cork. Here, he was left, bound and sedated, along with the boxes of provisions and crates of good strong beer delivered at Morrigan.

As the druids waited, robed figures emerged from an isolated stone house standing in the no man's land between the bank and ditch fortifications topped by rolls of barbed wire. Silver crucifixes were prominent in the collection of charms hanging around the necks of the robed figures, although there was no reason to believe these monks were christian.

The robed figures waited for the druids to retreat, before laying down a simple causeway of planking over the boundary. A druid, observing through binoculars, caught a glimpse of a half-eaten face under a monk's woollen cowl and shuddered. Heaven forbid he should become a victim to toxic cancer. But if he did, he could think of no better way to end his life than as a guardian of the cities of the dead.

## CHAPTER 25

The dry weather had reduced the scrubby games field to dust, which lapped and billowed in small waves around Padraig's long, dirty feet. Dust to dust, he intoned piously; thinking from the look of the weather it would soon be dust to mud. He coughed in the clouds of choking exhaust fumes spewed out by the revving engines.

At first, Conor's announcement about Belfast was coolly received. But once the preparations were under way, it seemed everyone wanted to go to one of the legendary cities of the dead. It was as though Emain Macha was in the grip of fever. Even Padraig and young Aidan felt infected by the sense of recklessness in the air.

Padraig wondered if this was what the lemming felt as it plunged over the cliff. Or the beaver as it castrated itself and threw its musk to the hunter rather than lose its precious life. There was joy in desperation, freedom in the unalterable and relief in the knowledge any action, no matter how foolhardy, is better than doing nothing at all. He believed if Conor Mac Nessa told the Red Branch they were going across the sea to Tir na mBeo, they would cheer and follow him to the ends of the earth, which in their minds amounted to much the same thing.

Some vehicles were already leaving, even though priests and slaves still frantically loaded the last crates of supplies. Padraig smiled to himself. Having put young Aidan in charge, he did everything he could to sabotage his efforts. Let Conor see what sort of Seneschal the young

upstart would make. Too late, he realised he had not been assigned a place in a vehicle. Aidan was in the Royal Armoured Car with the High King, while his Archbishop scabbled about for a seat. Well, they would see about that!

The elderly priest responsible for inventory stopped his furious charge to the Royal Armoured Car.

“Oh please forgive me, my Lord Archbishop!”

Padraig watched helplessly as the royal car pulled away and searching his conscience decided he could not forgive the old priest, never in a million years.

“I do not know what to do,” the elderly priest was saying. “The contents of yonder vehicle do not appear on the manifest.”

The priest pointed to the back of the convoy, where trucks honked irately at a large box van. It had the words ‘O’Grady’s & Scn Furnit rc Rernev ls’ and underneath, ‘Nc job to srnall’, emblazoned in cracked and peeling paint. A young man standing in front of the van was arguing with some priests.

Padraig accompanied the elderly priest, consoling himself with the thought that at least he now had a lift. He would sort out Aidan on tonight’s stopover.

The driver was beginning to lose his temper, but the priests were adamant. Unless they checked the contents against the manifest, the wagon could not leave.

“I told yer,” the driver was saying, “I doan know an I’ve bin tole notta even look...”

“What is all this?” Padraig interrupted authoritatively. Imperiously, he waved the lorries behind the van to move on.

Both the priests and the driver began talking at once. He motioned the priests to silence, letting the driver speak.



**“Yer honour I carn open this. It’s more than me life’s worth!”**

**Padraig nodded, asking patiently, “You know who I am?”**

**“Yis I do, yer honour.”**

**“Then I take responsibility. Open it!”**

**“But sir, I was tole I shouldn...”**

**“Then don’t look!” snapped a priest.**

**Padraig was gentler. “I understand your orders but were you specifically told not to let the Lord High Seneschal, friend to the High King, inspect it. Remember my son, I know everything in Avin Macka and therefore I already know what is in your van.”**

**“If yer already know what’s in there why d’ya need ta look?” the driver bravely asked.**

**Ignoring him, Padraig turned to the priests. “Open it.”**

**The corrugated flap rattled up noisily, revealing the truck to be empty except for layers of tarpaulin sheeting on the floor.**

**“It looks like there is something under the tarpaulins my Lord,” said the elderly priest.**

**Padraig had already seen the suggested shape of a long tube, thicker than a man. It could only be one thing, the missile Conor was taking across the sea to England. Hastily, he rattled the door back down; almost decapitating a nosey priest.**

**“No, the young man is right,” he said. “If I already know, I do not need to open it. Mark the manifest inspected by me.”**

**The driver turned to the priests with a smug, “I tole yer!”**

**“Now young man, it appears I have lost my lift so I will ride with you,” Padraig informed him.**

**The driver looked considerably less pleased than he had moments before.**

**“And as you have lost your place, I suggest we wait until the others leave.”**

**Settling himself comfortably in the cab next to the driver, he said to the young man, “Did you hear I went to Ath Cliath, the city of Dublin. It was the most terrifying experience of my life. I almost lost my wits. Still, I expect Belfast will be no worse. Let me tell you all about it.”**

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**“Missile’s on the move.”**

**The computer screen showed a flashing blip on a projected relief map of Ireland.**

**“How do you know?” Tod asked the technician.**

**“A homin chip, Doctor Tode. Put in the code an the computer traces movement an direction. Old Ironsides reckoned thee’d haf ta move it sometime.” The young man paused uncertainly, but seeing his impertinence went unchecked continued, “Jeez Prof, he’s one smart hombre that General.”**

**When Tod looked helpless, Donnelly came to the rescue. He appeared as excited as the young technician, but was happily more understandable.**

**“What our friend means is there are directional locators in the missile’s circuitry. By accessing them, it is possible for fighter planes fitted with scanners to track the projected path and check for deviations from the set course.”**

**“Then why couldn’t these scanner things trace it before?” Tod asked.**

**The young man looked at him as if he knew nothing. Which was true, Tod reminded himself.**

**“Jeez Prof!” he exclaimed in exasperation. “It’s gotta be movin! Don’t ya know nothin bout trigonometry?”**

**Donnelly smiled, rolling his eyes at his impetuous young colleague. “It is a design feature, Doctor Tod. Only moving missiles register on the scan. Otherwise all our missile silos would be open to surveillance from enemy planes.”**

**“And the General commandeered these planes from the mainland?” Tod was impressed.**

**“Jeez Prof, he’s just usin copters.”**

**“Why is the blip not moving?” Tod interrupted.**

**“The missile’s going too slow, it’s probably in transit and the resolution is too high.” Donnelly opened his hand over the display making the area expand. “It looks like they just left Evin Macka.”**

**As the young man’s remark about using helicopters slowly sunk in, Tod asked, “Where did the General get helicopters?”**

**Both men looked sheepish.**

**“Well?” he demanded.**

**“Thee weren’t doin nothin important, just deliverin supplies,” the younger man protested.**

**Donnelly was no longer relishing his role as his colleague’s translator. “He took them from the southern quadrant rural communities. The General needs three to cross-reference signals.”**

**“Morrigan!” Tod was furious. “He took them off Morrigan!”**

The monthly rounds of Morrigan, sustaining the population with psychoactive drugs, were on an extremely tight schedule. Smith may have set the programme back months.

“How long has he been doing this?”

“Two weeks,” Donnelly replied.

“Two weeks! Good grief Donnelly you should know better! I am going to give Smith a piece of my mind!”

“Aw Prof, come on!” The younger man jumped to the General’s defence.

“And as for you young man...” Tod admonished him.

“Good day Doctor Todd.”

It was General Smith. Tod briefly wondered how much he heard, before realising he did not care.

“General, I must protest most strongly.”

“Later Todd. Hello son, what have you got for me?”

“Emin Moka,” said the young man.

“Hang on that’s weird,” Donnelly said.

“What’s going on?” Smith asked.

The young man looked at the floating display. “They’re goin back! Not even five clicks out an they’re goin back!”

The general looked puzzled. “Show me.”

“Here.” Donnelly expanded the visuals. The map filled with detail. “Evin Macka. General it could be a false reading. We need to confirm the signal. Otherwise it could be a wild goose chase.”

“There’s a couple of old navy satellites still comin’ ova Ireland. If you can sort somethin out General, I can reboot the missile’s homin chip. It’s not much, a tiny blip, but now we know what we’re lookin for it should be enuff.”

“When are they due?” the General impatiently asked.

**“There’s plenty a time. The first one’s not til after midnight,” the young man piped up, busy at his keyboard. “It’s a bit far south though, might be dodgy. The next one’s betta; a couple of hours later. We can cross check the signal.”**

**The General audibly sucked in his breath.**

**“Sir, if the missile moves in the meanwhile, we’ll know it’s not a false reading,” Donnelly boldly said.**

**Smith was already ahead of him. “And if not then the satellites will confirm the location or not.”**

**“It could save a lot of embarrassment.”**

**They had all been ignoring Tod until Donnelly mentioned embarrassment. It was just the ammo he needed. As they looked at him Tod burst out, voice almost a screech, “General. This is inexcusable.”**

**“What free resources have you Todd?” asked General Smith.**

**“All helicopters, except for those under repair, and of course those you illegally commandeered, are on Morrigan; an unbreakable schedule!”**

**If Smith did not know what Morrigan was, he did not think to ask.**

**“Not helicopters, I mean people, trucks. I need those helicopters as well. Son, see what you can rustle up for me.” He turned back to Tod. “I want personnel carriers and a HGV for the missile. And I want to be ready to move as soon as we get those satellite readings.”**

**“I am in charge here General,” Tod bleated.**

**“Very well Herr Doctor, if you feel so strongly about it, you order the mobilisation because the plan remains unchanged.”**

**Tod wondered if it was the fate of all civilisations to be ground down by the imperative of the military machine. What chance had mankind?**

**“My staff are not soldiers, General,” he protested weakly. “They are people of science and humanity, engineers, technicians, medics!”**

**“Don’t you worry Todd; if they’re anything like these two, they’ll do just swell.”**

**The young technician thanked General Smith for the compliment. Tod turned on his heels and walked out, thinking it better to ignore them.**

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**It was not hard for Padraig to persuade the driver he did not want to go to Belfast. They were not carrying essential supplies and would not be missed. If questioned, the driver could plead illness or mechanical problems. It was better to return to Emain Macha and spare themselves the madness and horror of Belfast.**

**Arriving back at Emain Macha, Padraig instructed the man to park near the maintenance sheds at the rear. Being located far from the main part of the Rath for fire safety, they afforded some degree of privacy.**

**Recognising the furniture van, a priest came running over. “Trouble, my Lord Archbishop?”**

**“Where are the mechanics and guards?” Padraig demanded.**

**“Everyone is drunk my lord!” The priest sounded disgusted. With Conor away, it did not take long for those left behind to treat it as a holiday.**

**“Praise be to God!” muttered Padraig, starting to give orders.**

**With help from a couple of strong, young priests, it was a relatively simple task to open the missile, remove the individual warheads and reseal the casing. After loading the warheads into a transit van, Padraig was ready to depart. Seeing the Archbishop so exhausted, one young priest volunteered to drive. Thanking him, Padraig refused. He did not want to involve others. This cross was his alone.**

**Padraig drove the transit to monks outside Rath Enniskillen Fort. From here they would take the warheads onto their final hiding place. The island shrine of Saint Patrick’s Purgatory in Lough Derg was traditionally reputed to be the gateway to hell, and as such was avoided by the superstitious locals. With luck, he would be back at Emain Macha before midnight.**

**Worn out on the return journey, Padraig found driving on the treacherous country roads difficult in the dark. No matter how he tried, he could not keep his mind from wandering back to the past. It was a long time since he thought of the Prophet and he suddenly felt wracked with guilt for forgetting his spiritual father. It was a comfort how, even now, his master inspired love and fear in equal measure.**

**When Padraig was a novice, who feared the Prophet more than loved him, the Prophet announced his plan for a stolen nuclear missile. He called it God’s holy instrument for keeping Ireland pure. Afraid and ignorant, Padraig joined the crew in saying amen.**

**When the plague ended, Ireland would be brought back into the modern world. The Great Tech Scepta would be used to make the new Eden fall as surely as the**

**fatal apple holding the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This was not progress but corruption, thundered the Prophet; his voice raising the hairs on the back of Padraig's neck. When that fateful day came, they must brandish God's own weapon, telling the sinners to leave Ireland alone or inherit the storm!**

**Padraig remained true to his master. It took him more than three years to unite the church and turn it into a power in Ireland and then, two more to work on Conor Mac Nessa. He wondered if the Prophet would be proud of him, even though he knew the Prophet was never satisfied.**

**"I never failed you Master," Padraig whispered to the face reflected in the dark glass of the rain-streaked windscreen.**

**His heart felt light, as if the Prophet comforted him with his presence. A line from a song ran through his head and he began to sing, 'A little piece of heaven fell down from the sky'. Padraig did not know the rest of the lyrics, or even the tune, and so sang the same few words over and over, tunelessly keeping rhythm with the flicking windscreen wipers.**

**No longer looking out at the night, Padraig stared only at his own reflection. His face had lost all meaning for him. All he recognised was the light of belief in reflected eyes.**

**"For the light of the lord shone on my countenance."**

**In his words, he heard his master's voice.**

**"Oh, how I have missed thy rod and thy staff," he murmured to his reflection.**

**There were tears in the Prophet's eyes, like those running down Padraig's face. He remembered the Prophet foretelling his death in the land of milk and honey. As his master's beloved face dissolved into a scene from long ago,**



the van swerved and crashed into a spindly hedge, coming to rest unharmed. Padraig did not notice. All he saw was the rundown barn in Donegal.

Wrapped in blankets from the submarine, they shivered and vomited. Yet no one travailed against the Lord God's mercy. Twenty-three good men and true came to Ireland with the Prophet, now they were two, the Prophet and Padraig, the least of them.

Young Padraig's eyes burned with fever, his cheeks hollowed by exhaustion. Once again his head ached in sympathy with the memory of memory. Absently, he wiped his running nose and eyes with his hand.

The boil-like lesions under the Prophet's jaws had burst, staining his uniform with black blood. It would not be long before he passed into eternal sleep. Respectfully, the young man mopped his master's fevered brow, little noticing the sweat running down his own clammy face, mixing with his tears.

The Prophet coughed up blood. Despite great pain, he spoke, in a dry cracked voice, "The last will be first and the first last." He sounded very resentful.

Another bout of coughing brought more blood. Once more Padraig wiped his master's mouth.

"This is my punishment for pride," the Prophet raved. "I shall not cross the valley of Hebron."

The effort drained the last resources from the holy man. It was some moments before young Padraig realised his master was not breathing. When he did, huge empty sobs broke from him. He implored Lord God to take him, instead of His holy servant.

Then the miracle happened. His master's dead face filled with light. Opening pale opaque eyes the Prophet

**spoke clear and strong; as if his body was whole and his mind sound. “Do not let me down!”**

**At that moment, thinking God took him at his word, young Padraig panicked. Realising just how much he wanted to live, he offered a new prayer begging Almighty God to let the old man die. He had his life. Spare me Lord, spare me, he beseeched in desperation.**

**Behind the stalled van’s steering wheel, Padraig’s tears were for himself. He hung his head in shame as he wept in the darkness, unable to deny the great relief when the light in the Prophet’s eyes finally died.**

## CHAPTER 26

On the outskirts of Belfast, Conor Mac Nessa's army came to a halt. A series of bank and ditch fortifications, topped by rolled barbed wire, stretched right and left far as the eye could see. Conor sent scouts in both directions. Returning a few minutes later, they reported there was no way through. When he heard this, a frustrated Conor ordered his men to tear down the banks and use the earth to fill the ditches.

It was backbreaking labour for the men, who had little to work with but their bare hands. All the while, they complained of being warriors not navvies. Despite such brave words, no one was man enough to risk Conor's anger by refusing to dig.

While his soldiers worked, Conor realised the magic spear was missing. He could not go back for it. If he was not there to watch them, his army would desert, drifting away in dribs and drabs. Neither could he take a group off digging to go and look for it. The men he sent would not come back, while those left behind would probably mutiny.

As Conor wondered what to do, Aidan reported Padraig was also missing. Conor immediately suspected Padraig was with the magic spear. At least Padraig knew its value. The thought should have eased his mind. It did not.

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The convoy of vehicles halted and Conor Mac Nessa's army spilled out to look, mouths open in wonder. They stood gawking at the ornate cast iron skeleton of a palm house, bone white and rusted blood red, like the remains of a Victorian dinosaur. The dying sun burnished the surviving clouded glass, making the men think it the most beautiful shee in the whole of this Land of Erin, a veritable pleasure dome of the Fairy.

In awed silence, small groups inched forward to peer through dirty, cracked panes. Inside, massive temperate palms soared skyward, flourishing triumphantly over their fallen tropical cousins. In the frond canopy, birds squabbled and chattered as though the magic contained within was something commonplace. With the hours of backbreaking labour forgotten, the men eagerly hurried to set camp amid the wonderland.

The palm house proved an ideal place to bivouac. The half-rotted timber of the fallen giants was good firewood, and the fallen palm fronds good bedding. While the glass remaining in the massive panes, gave some protection from the chill night breeze.

As drink flowed and tongues loosened, it became a matter of speculation as to what the High King was doing in Belfast. In all the excitement of going, no one thought to ask. The speculation was little more than idle chatter around the campfire. The men were not really interested in an answer. They felt better than they had for years, their muscles ached and they were with their mates on the adventure of a lifetime. It was more than enough.

Later, when most were asleep, a cold north-easterly wind picked up, making the panes of glass groan ominously. Those sentries who had not dozed off became

edgy, huddling together, exchanging ghost stories and tales of men snatched away to fairyland. Conor listened to his bodyguards whispering, scaring the bejeasus out of each other. Normally, he would mock their credulity, but tonight he had a bad feeling about Belfast. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed Padraig and the loss of the sacred spear were omens. Eventually, he fell into a fitful sleep.

When Conor woke, the sun was already up. The comfort of daylight did nothing to shake off his bad feeling. He made his rounds of the camp, waking dozing sentries with a well-placed kick. The cooks were already raking over the fires and preparing porridge in great black cauldrons, while all around his drunken army began to stir.

Looking at them, Conor felt he needed some time alone. He left the Palm House, heading away from the latrines on an overgrown path towards the University campus. Seeing buildings materialise through the naked treetops, his nerve failed. Swerving abruptly, he struck off down another path. Grown over and half concealed, it led around the campus into the residential streets beyond.

Past the university, he repeatedly saw small groups of his men heading back for breakfast. They must have been out looting since dawn. He thought they looked like children coming back from the fair, tired but happy, and loaded with booty. It was all useless trinkets of course. Toys, clocks, photograph frames and ornaments stuck out of the plastic bags they carried. He saw a man with a coffee maker, another with a microwave oven. One carried a six-foot high artificial Christmas tree, hung with tarnished baubles and shedding tinsel, sparkling dimly in the watery morning sun.

Two men argued over a plastic carrier bag. They put down the other bags of loot to have a free hand to punch each other with. The disputed bag ripped open. Conor watched as women's clothing and cosmetics spilled onto the pavement, gifts for the girls back home. The men started laughing and suddenly friends, shoved the disputed spoils into each other's bags.

Furious at their greed and stupidity, Conor determinedly ignored them. Spotting him, they came over; greeting the High King with a familiarity they would not have dared use at Emain Macha. And Conor did not like it. They rooted in the bags for jewellery and perfume, generously giving the best to him. Numbly he accepted the gifts, absently shoving them in his combat jacket pockets.

Unable to take any more of their idiocy, he stormed away. As he did, he heard one man call him a miserable cunt. Normally, no one dared speak in that way within earshot of the High King, but today they did not care and Conor cared even less.

Minutes later, he found himself in a street of terraced houses. A street miraculously spared by the fires that had engulfed many parts of the city. Seeing it, Conor could almost believe the world was normal and he had lived a nightmare for the past decade. The shadows of morning became the shadows of a summer evening, reminding him of the magic of teatime that emptied the streets as effectively as any plague.

As he reached into his pocket to pull out a half-empty whiskey bottle, necklaces, bracelets and rings clattered on the road. Somewhere, seemingly far away, a perfume bottle hit the pavement, smashing into a thousand fragments. The

air filled with the fragrance of dead flowers as though the ravaged gardens bloomed.

Unable to ignore the signs of neglect in the houses, Conor could not escape the fact his nightmare was real. The other world, the better world, was nothing more than a dream. If he half closed his eyes to blur the blistered paintwork, cracked window glass and wilderness gardens, he could almost see the peace and security of the world in his dream.

In this row of neat houses, wives cooked dinner and children did homework. At any moment, a husband and father, just like him, would get out of his rusted car and carefully pick his way up the broken path. He would put a corroded key in the rusting lock, or ring the extinct doorbell to announce he was home.

Would the husband be shocked to see the changes in his loving wife and adorable children? How time had rotted flesh and weathered bone. Or would he see the grinning skulls as smiles of welcome. As if he had never been away. Conor felt his face. It was wet. He wiped his cheeks with the back of his hand and took a long deep swig from his bottle. This place was too full of ghosts.

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Conor reached camp as breakfast was ending. When he asked for Aidan, a lieutenant told him the priest was missing. When he added two sentries were also gone Conor wondered what he was driving at. “Gone looting you mean!” he sneered dismissively.

The officer did not think so. He knew these particular men were good soldiers. Hesitantly he repeated a rumour

of spirits taking the sentries and the priest, before turning red and trying to laugh it off. This stupidity was all Conor needed. He furiously told the man if it was spirits he wanted, he need look no further than the bottom of a whiskey bottle. The two of them were probably sleeping it off right now in a ditch somewhere. The officer said no more, but looked unconvinced.

Despite his anger, Conor felt on edge. In an effort to convince himself as well as his men, Conor marched to the mess area. Using a portable bullhorn, he told the soldiers the missing men were deserters, gone in search of booty. And he would severely punish any more desertion. He finished by saying there would be enough plunder for everyone in the city. Generally, any mention of illicit gain set his men's greed aglow, but too many remembered the same promise made about Tory Island and his reception was cool.

Watching his army slink away in small discontented groups, Conor Mac Nessa knew he had lost. In a rare crisis of confidence, his nerve failed. He would be lucky if the men followed him into Belfast town centre, never mind to Tir na mBeo. Without the sacred spear to show to the men, or Pdraig to tell them how he survived Dublin, his dream of standing on the Stone of Scone and having the true Lia Fail announce his legitimacy, would stay just a dream. He could not let it end like this! He must drive his men on to Belfast and pray their interest picked up when they saw the plunder in the shops.

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As his army moved towards the city centre, it dawned on Conor the defences around Belfast may be there to keep things in as much as keep things out. He put down the disturbing thought to the fact he was anticipating trouble from the men and took another swig from his whiskey bottle.

The convoy moved slowly down University Road, following a tow truck, whose crane cleared the rusting cars from the middle of the street. The remains of old Christmas decorations still lined the intersection of Shaftsbury Square. When Conor saw the skeleton of a massive fir tree hung with lights in the road-island, he took a slug of whiskey to clear his head of the ghosts nibbling at the edges of his mind.

From his vantage point, looking down the forking roads out of the square, he was disappointed to see Dublin Road was blocked by car wrecks and the rubble of a half-demolished building. Making a quick decision, he ordered a dozen or so of his most trusted men out of the cars to act as an advance guard for the vehicles. With men on patrol, he felt less like a sitting duck.

The men fanned out, warily sticking like shadows to the buildings. Conor signalled for one of the officers to form a scouting party and reconnoitre ahead of the rest. After a minute or two, the officer waved back an all-clear for Great Victoria Street. Having no choice, Conor ordered the motorcade to follow it, hoping to find a way to turn off to the river and the docks later.

When the advance car did not move, Conor sent a man to see what the problem was. It appeared the driver refused to go any further. Conor felt disturbed. The driver, one of the Pride of the Red Branch, had been with him since the

early days. Getting out of his armoured car, he walked up to the lead car, motioning the man to wind down the window. When he did, Conor quickly punched him in the face a few times, before wrenching the door open and dragging the battered driver into the road. Standing over the cowering man, Conor gave him the choice of driving forward, or walking out of Belfast alone.

With bloodied nose and eye, the man was in no state to drive. Sheepishly, he got in the passenger seat, while his mate slid over. The High King walked back along the line of vehicles to the sound of door locks clicking shut and windows winding up. Within seconds, the lead car pulled off, leaving Conor to wonder if Dublin was all fear and uncertainty for Paddy.

Before the vehicles moved a hundred yards, Conor heard an explosion. The convoy edged together, shrinking as if it was a frightened living thing. The advance guard split into groups, stationing themselves to the front and the rear of the cars. Then, like a giant bristling caterpillar, the motorcade slowly inched up Great Victoria Street.

At the corner of Albion Street, Conor Mac Nessa saw a distant burning glow. He jumped out of the armoured royal car. Running in front of the lead car, he indicated to the advance guard with his automatic weapon. They glared at him for a second, before fanning into the street, covering each other with military precision.

A scout reported Albion Street was broken up and probably mined. They might just squeeze through, but they would be sitting ducks. This was Conor's biggest fear. While it was just possible they broke up the road years ago when they made the city off-limits, his gut said different. In situations like this, experience told him to trust his gut.

**Deciding it was no good throwing men away, Conor ordered the scouts to fall back to their vehicles.**

**As he saw it, he had two choices, go forward or retreat. He did not relish the thought of backing the whole motorcade down the way they just came. Seeing Great Victoria Street looking relatively clear, he decided to continue following it, in the hope of turning off later. Giving the order, the armoured caterpillar crept along the main road of smashed offices and gutted shop fronts.**

**Ventry Street and Wellwood Street were cut off, with rolled barbed wire strung over a barricade of rusting, tortured cars. At Bruce Street, he was able to turn right towards Dublin Road and the docks. With Bankmore and Ormeau Streets blocked off, Conor wondered if someone was edging him to the city centre. Ironically, the very place he tempted his men with. He began to suspect they were being driven into a trap, and the hunters would soon descend.**

**As they followed Bedford Street, Conor saw thick black smoke coiling from fires up ahead. When the column of vehicles shuddered to a halt, he leaned out of the window to see what was burning. Seven smouldering crucifixes were fixed to a building. On them hung seven men, the young priest, Aidan, and the two missing sentries among them. The men, tied and nailed to rough wooden crosses, were partly obscured by the solid greasy smoke pouring from the piles of burning car tyres.**

**From what Conor could see, two crucified men were dead. No one could survive the wounds from the metal spikes piercing their bodies. He imagined their black blood baked on the walls and the pavement by the scorching heat. Although not normally squeamish, his stomach turned. The**

other five men, charred but still alive, choked and groaned in the dense scorching fumes. He saw their heads turn towards the vehicles. Beneath crowns of barbed wire, empty eye sockets blindly scanned the street as bloody, tongueless mouths whimpered, pleading for help.

Reacting instantly, Conor snapped up the roof hatch of his armoured car and bringing out his gun sprayed the men with bursts of automatic fire. Killing them quickly was all he could do. It was a mercy. As the rattling echo died, he roared into the shocked silence, "This is it. Back up and be careful." He threw himself down into the vehicle, snapping tight the latch.

For a moment or two, no one moved. Then a car at the back of the column tried to turn around. This unwieldy manoeuvre in the confined space of the narrow road, left it stuck against an armour-plated Land Rover, which had begun to reverse. In the confusion, the whole convoy ground to a halt.

Conor waited, impatiently checking his watch as a full minute passed and nothing happened. Eventually, a soldier got out of the Land Rover. He tried to direct it forward, while at the same time attempting to persuade the cars in front to give them room. As Conor watched the man argue with a driver, he could not help thinking the exposed warrior made a perfect target. From any one of a number of empty windows, a gun could be trained on him. A single shot would take him out, leaving Conor none the wiser about the sniper's location. Another minute dragged by, and still nothing.

The armoured Land Rover successfully disentangled itself and the vehicles were able to move. The warrior walked up to the driver's side of the armoured car. The

door swung open. The driver leaned out to shout something to the warrior. They both laughed. A third man wound down his car window. His passenger opened his door to joke with the others.

A rocket exploding in front of a car, took out the windscreen and the occupants. At the same moment, a machine gun raked the cars with open doors and windows, leaving the exposed men dead or wounded at the end of the column. A second rocket overshot the vehicles. Exploding against the building opposite, it sent a deadly hail of glass and brick debris into the street.

The armoured car's passenger kicked his wounded colleague onto the road; scrambling into the driver's seat as a hail of bullets hit the windscreen grating, falling harmless as handfuls of gravel on the strengthened glass. Slowly, the convoy reversed.

As the Royal Armoured Car passed Holmes Street, Conor glimpsed the flash of a rocket being launched from an old battered transit van. Rockets are notoriously unreliable and easily miss their targets by yards, but if by chance one hit the rear, now the front, of the reversing convoy, everyone would be trapped like rabbits by weasels.

Shouting to his driver, the Royal Armoured Car pulled out of the column heading for the half demolished wall of a derelict building. Battering its way over a mountain of brick and torn up iron fencing, it approached the van from the front as two more rockets shot from the back. Flinging open the top hatch, Conor sprayed the defenceless transit with his machine gun.

Inside, a shadowy driver, watching his colleagues at work, turned around in time to see the windscreen shatter under gun fire. The bullets caught the man in the head and

chest. The force flung him over the seats into the rear of the van. Two ragged men tumbled out of the transit's back doors, only to be cut down in turn.

From the vantage of his armoured car, Conor saw a thin stream of petrol from the van's punctured tank form a puddle on the road. At any time, the transit could go up like a bomb, but irrationally, Conor wanted that rocket launcher. Sliding the side door open, he bawled at his personal bodyguard to go and get it.

Nobody moved.

“Fuck me, do I have to do everything myself,” he raged, voice hard and brittle as brass.

Grabbing an arm, he pushed a man out of the car and slammed the door shut behind him.

The arm Conor grabbed belonged to his son, Setanta. The fourteen year old boy stood alone, shaking with terror outside his father's armoured car. Springing into life, he ran to the transit and pulled out the heavy metal contraption. Panic lent him strength as he half-dragged, half-carried the launcher down the street.

At his back, the boy felt the heat from the ignited petrol leaking from the transit's tank. As his adrenaline kicked up a notch, he redoubled his efforts. Second by second, the distance between Setanta and the burning van increased. The Royal Armoured Car was now maybe fifty yards in front of him. And every second brought it closer. He had thirty yards to go; now twenty. Yet the heat behind him did not diminish. He prayed to the sky and the sea his strength would not fail.

The boy knew nothing as the scorching shock wave blew him from the rocket launcher and knocked him flat. As the van exploded hot shrapnel clattered harmless as rain

**around him and over his father's armoured car. It was a miracle he was not killed.**

**Shakily, Setanta got to his feet. Staggering back to the rocket launcher, he began dragging it, once more. When he heard a great roar, he looked up to see men streaming out of the Royal Armoured Car. Careless of their own safety, they ran, cheering, to help the boy.**

## CHAPTER 27

Padraig woke, and for a brief frightening moment did not know where he was. Then he remembered leaving the nuclear warheads with the monks at Enniskillen, before falling asleep at the wheel. Seeing the first glimmer of dawn already in the sky, he snatched a glance at the dashboard clock, cursing the time. The night was lost. It was an essential part of his plan to get the missile to Conor Mac Nessa before he missed it. Now he would have to think of an excuse. Holding his breath, he turned the key in the ignition, praying nothing would go wrong, and muttered a prayer of thanks as the engine coughed to life.

Padraig fully expected Conor Mac Nessa's army to have spent the night outside Belfast and hoped, in the cold light of day, they would be so bored with their adventure they would force Conor to abandon it. Even if they were determined, he doubted they would get through the barricades into the city, never mind steal a boat to Tir na mBeo. If there were any left; for he was pretty certain navy patrols had scuppered any seaworthy vessels long ago.

Once back at Emain Macha, Padraig was relieved to find the young priests had put the missile back in the furniture van as instructed. He just finished topping up the petrol tank from a jerry can when the first helicopter arrived. For a brief confused moment he thought Pentecost was here. It was his last rational thought as terror overwhelmed his mind.



**...It is the end of days; the apocalypse. The stars fall from the sky. Giant locusts with horses' heads swarm across the earth, devouring the whole world. Upon the back of a great horned beast sits Babylon, the whore, the woman in scarlet and purple. Her face is the face of Maeve. The Antichrist wears the face of Conor Mac Nessa...**

**A petrified Padraig could not run. Legs, heavy as lead, left feet sinking into the soft, clutching earth. Desperate for shelter, he crawled under the removal van as panic broke out over Emain Macha. After a mere minute, stretching like an hour, Padraig felt calmer. Cool rationality slowly returned, leaving him able to think. His first thought was the Tuatha de Danann were after the missile. Conor would blame him if they took it. All his work for Mother Church would be ruined and all his sacrifices count for nothing.**

**As he slid from under the vehicle, fear hit Padraig like a wall. Hastily he crawled back under his shelter, feeling the dread ebb. Padraig realised it was the helicopters. They broadcast terror. Somehow, being under the lorry protected him. He listened carefully, hearing a hissing sound under the rotor blades' thwock, thwock, thwock. Concentrating hard on the noise, he felt dull fear creep up his spine to lap at the edges of his mind.**

**Tearing his robe, Padraig stuffed his ears with cloth and gingerly moved his head from under the van. Once again terror hit like a wall, forcing him to retreat back to safety. From his vantage point, he saw people all around running and screaming in panic, while the helicopters hovered above as though herding them.**

**In desperation, he began stuffing his ears with mud. Stuffing them so hard, he thought his eardrums would pop**

and bleed. The pain felt good. Clean. He stuck his head out from under the lorry. Fear returned, but muted and no longer so overwhelming. He swung open the driver's door, scrambling into the cab. Fingers hunted blindly for the ignition key, before he remembered leaving it in the maintenance sheds when he got the fuel.

Padraig had no choice but to go back for the key. It was hundreds of yards to the maintenance sheds and he doubted he could reach them. Summoning his courage, he jumped from the cab, muttering his lorica, 'Today I bind unto myself the holy name of the Trinity'.

The first hundred yards were manageable as he was in control. Just when Padraig thought he might make it, terror hit like a physical force, making every yard a mile and every step a triumph. A helicopter settled over him, the down draft from the powerful rotor blades snatching his breath and bending him double. He managed another hesitant step before coherent thought dissolved into unimaginable and nameless horror. Struggling to take the next step, he fell on all fours, grovelling on the ground like the wretched sinner he was.

At ground level, the terror slackened. On his belly, fear became little more than nervous agitation. He pulled himself towards the shed, hand over hand; wriggling through the muddy grass like a worm in the presence of Almighty God. In desperation, he alternated prayers between pleas for mercy, his lorica and the words of the psalm, 'Out of the depths I cry to you, oh Lord'.

Inside the shed, the helicopter noise did not feel so threatening. The insidious threats sank to murmured whispers, which he was able to shake off. He searched for the van key, finding it where he left it. From the noise of the

rotors, he guessed the helicopter was hovering directly over the maintenance shed. He looked at the door, realising he did not have the strength to make it all the way back.

The rows of maintenance sheds made it easy for Padraig to move from one to another. The problem was every move took him further away from the van. As he moved from shed to shed, the helicopter followed, buzzing like a giant angry wasp when it spotted him. This gave Padraig an idea. If annoyed by wasps... burn the nest.

One of the sheds was littered with rubbish; engine parts, old tires and half-full jerry cans that people had never bothered returning to the fuel dump. Inside, he began taking the tops off the cans and soaking the piles of oily sacking and sawdust with fuel. Next door, he spotted a couple of ancient motorcycles, probably waiting to be stripped down for spare parts. A new idea came. Perhaps he need not worry about giving himself time to escape. Picking up a jerry can, he shook it. It was nearly full. Boldly, Padraig ran to the adjacent garage as the helicopter followed, buzzing in fury.

Choosing a motorcycle, an old cross-country rally bike, he kick-started the engine. After a few heart stopping attempts, the machine gunned into life. The fuel gauge showed the tank was a quarter full. He did not need the jerry can. Quickly splashing some petrol over a pile of rubbish, he dropped the can, leaving the rest to flood the room. Unlatching the double doors, he swung one open a couple of feet. Now, all he needed was something to make a spark.

When he returned with a box of matches, the garage stank so badly of petrol, he almost choked. Padraig carried another jerry can to splash over the walls. Dropping the

half empty can, letting the petrol flow across the floor in an ever-widening pool, he struck a match and gingerly threw it. It went out. He was about to strike another when he saw ghostly blue flames dancing on the surface. With fire running greedily across the floor, he fled to the idling machine. Pulling up his habit to waist level, he straddled the bike, praying to the Blesséd Jude, patron saint of lost causes, for help in his helplessness.

The pilot was investigating the smoke when Padraig burst through the garage door. He was about to bring the helicopter around, when an explosion hurled up a column of flame high into the air beneath him.

The blast caught the motorbike; bouncing the machine over the uneven ground as Padraig clung to the handlebars for dear life. By the second explosion, he was scrambling into the furniture van cab with the ignition key in hand. The engine caught first time.

Looking back, he saw columns of flame and oily black smoke rising to heaven. Since time immemorial, bonfires were used in Ireland to warn of invasion. He prayed Conor would see them, understand, and come to his aid.

As the van drove off, Padraig spotted the helicopter. Thrown into the hurley field by the blast, it was a buckled, burning heap of scrap. The other two copters, now strangely silent except for the thwock of their rotors, hovered over the fallen machine like anxious parents. All around Emain Macha, people came to their senses.

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A string of beacons were lit from Emain Macha to Belfast, where the High King was. Coner's army cheered when they

saw the distant flames, thinking Cormac Mac Art, taking advantage of their absence, had invaded Ulster. It felt good to fight flesh and blood once more, instead of ghosts. Conor Mac Nessa was also relieved. Belfast left his men unsettled. First, Tory Island and now Belfast; he doubted he could afford many more mistakes. More than ever, he needed to marry Maeve, stinking old bag that she was, and have her confirm him Ard Ri.

As the van holding the sacred spear sped towards him, Conor looked for the driver. Seeing it was Padraig, he flung open the armoured hatch to stand up, yelling to his driver to stop the car. Grinding to a skidding halt, Padraig jumped out of the cab, screaming, 'My lord, my lord, they are after it.'

"What? Who?" Conor shouted at him.

'The magic spear my lord, the day-Donon have come to take it!'

Shit, thought Conor, more magic, Fomorians, ghosts, and now the de Danann! His men were sick of magic. This was all he needed.

A soldier jumping out of the Royal Armoured Car ran to the furniture van. As Padraig scrambled into the High King's vehicle, Conor gave orders for the army to move into the adjoining field.

Although this was an emergency, Padraig was not above feeling gratified to see Aidan absent from the car.

'Where is Aidan?' he asked, unable to conceal his jealousy.

"Dead," Conor replied sharply, glaring at the Archbishop. Belfast was Padraig's fault. The priest should have warned him the dead were vicious.

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The men were already talking of the coming skirmish as the Battle of Teltown. Teltown was a mythological battle where the mortal sons of Mil defeated the immortal Tuatha de Danann, driving them underground into the shee and folklore.

Conor took his men's good mood as a good omen. The Red Branch were not scared to fight the de Danann, because the de Danann had never fought before. The de Danann were a generous, kindly people, who brought only good things. So consequently, the men thought they were soft in the head and expected an easy time of it.

Traditionally, every soldier carried a stone into battle. Before fighting, they piled the stones up into a mound and afterwards each would take one back. In that way they could see how many had fallen. The larger the remaining pile, the greater the mourning. As High King, Conor Mac Nessa was last to place his stone. White and twice as large as a man's fist, the king-stone crowned the cairn.

Conor wanted Padraig to bless his army; for according to legend, and the idle boasts of churchmen, christian magic countered de Danann enchantment. To his annoyance, he found the priest had vanished. How the fuck was he going to use the magic spear now?

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The Tuatha de Danann came across the plain, brilliant in their beauty. Fairy music played and fairy banners waved, although the day was without a breath of wind. They came into battle with their women and their chattels in ox carts

of wrought silver and finest gold. The chariot drivers and courtly knights on high prancing bay geldings were dressed in their finest finery, as becomes a man on the day he may die.

Above the de Danann, Conor's army heard the snickering wings of the war goddess, the Morrigan. She came hidden in a flock of ravens whose chattering, clattering voices were already quarrelling over the bodies of the fallen. Hearing the voice of Morrigan, the Red Branch realised the enemy's true power. The knowledge froze their limbs, making them easy meat for the fairy foe. In fear, weapons hung limply by their side, or were dropped to the soft mossy ground as unimaginable horror loosened tendon, sinew and bowel. Some peed. Some shat themselves. All wanted to run.

It was not the first time Conor wished he had a proper army. With a chain of command, he may have salvaged something, but taking orders was not a warrior's way. Argumentative and competitive at the best of times, warriors fought as individuals, champion against champion in single combat. Heroes were all right in their place, but an army of heroes was no army at all. When fear took the individual, he had no fellowship to give encouragement, no discipline to give backbone. The battle stood or fell on the courage of single men. And as far as he could see, none in his men had any courage left.

While Conor Mac Nessa was busy dismissing his men as cowards, he failed to notice the effect the subliminals, boosted with sub-sonics, had on his son. Setanta had never encountered the de Danann's full power before. Because of his tender years, the druids sent him away with the rest of

the children at Morrigan. Yes, the lad was at Tory Island with his father, but Tory Island was nothing like this.

Setanta shook so hard, it looked like he would shake limb from limb. One day, men would sing praise songs about this day, saying the boy shook with battle fury. To a dispassionate druid, his tremors were more akin to epilepsy. The lad twitched with violent, involuntary muscle shudders. His eyes, rolled back to show the whites, bulged as much as the veins in his neck. Small flecks of foam rimmed his bloodless lips, drawn in a rictus-like grimace.

The men around Setanta backed away. Superstitious by nature they thought him possessed. Seeing the vanguard back off and thinking they retreated, those behind edged away too, reluctant to be left at the front. What started as individual pockets of movement spread through the army in a sinuous wave. With row after row of backward shuffling men waiting for the call to withdraw, Conor Mac Nessa's army was one step away from stampede.

All this movement left Setanta a couple of dozen feet in front of the first rank of soldiers. Abandoned and vulnerable, the boy faced the approaching de Danann alone. Suddenly he started to howl with irrational and instinctive fear. The noise began low, coming from deep in his bowels and emerging as an animal keen. Rising higher and higher, it became a soprano aria of pain heard above the noisily squabbling ravens like the wail of a banshee.

All eyes turned to Setanta as Conor's men unfroze, distracted from their terror by his. Without warning, the boy's knotted muscles lurched, driving him forward in a single movement. Like the salmon leaping against the stream's swift current, he leapt into the advancing throng of the de Danann.



The technicians in their positive pressure suits were puzzled to see the boy charge. Tod assured them the wild Irish would be so afraid, they would drop their weapons and run. When the boy ran towards them, the technicians did not know what to do. A flurry of nervous radio messages bombarded the control centre.

As Setanta collided with the first row of bulky suited technicians, one grabbed the lad and tried to calm him. Believing the boy simply terrified, he made reassuring noises, unaware of the crippling volume booming from his chest speaker. The explosive noise made Setanta struggle even more frantically. A chance slash from Setanta's wildly clutched dagger slashed the suit's reinforced fabric, grazing the man's arm. A second blow dislocated the chest speaker unit, causing more tears.

The man let go of Setanta. Moments before, his colleagues heard him soothe the lad. Now they heard his shocked voice repeating, oh God, over and over. When he started to cry, his desolate sobs brought home how vulnerable they were. Once a positive pressure suit was compromised it was useless, leaving you exposed to a plague that killed more surely than any wound. As the half-mad boy took a step forward, the nearest technicians stumbled back.

The praise songs say Setanta, the hero of Belfast and Teltown, killed the Tuatha de Danann's finest warrior with his Gae Bolge, his famous barb-edged blade. By this courageous act, he released Conor Mac Nessa's proud Black and Tans from the chains of enchantment.

The technicians watched in horror as the wild Irish rallied, careering towards them. There was no escape when

even walking in a positive pressure suit was difficult. They were good as dead.

Tod was not so easily defeated. He anticipated things going wrong. Looking smugly at Smith, whose granite face was cracking, Tod ordered the helicopters to unload the gas tanks.

The helicopters, hovering over Conor Mac Nessa's army, rose vertically into the air. The power of the subliminal messages decreasing with increased height. Dropping like stones, they discharged the sedative payload in thick white clouds.

With defeat inevitable, it was no surprise the de Danann cast spells to summon the Fe Fiada. Under the cover of the magical mist they became invisible to Conor Mac Nessa's noble avengers and so escaped their righteous fury.

When the magic mist cleared, none of the de Danann remained. They had simply vanished, taking their chariots and their treasure, their women, their horses and their dead. On the battlefield, not a trace remained of their coming, not a trace of their rout, nor a trace of their defeat. It was as though they never were.

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Despite the victory, Conor Mac Nessa was not happy. Padraig was missing; as was the sacred spear from the furniture van. His son, the hated Setanta, was now twice a hero. The army demanded the lad receive his manly name of Cu Hullen and the hero's portion at the coming feast.

Conor felt the brain ball in his head throbbing between his temples as though ready to explode. It was like a premonition of death. He had made too many mistakes, Tory Island, Belfast and now Teltown. The Lia Fail was forever beyond his grasp. And Maeve would not marry him.

In one fell swoop he had lost his warriors' respect and the magic spear, the world's most powerful weapon. Worse he must bow to his men's demands and name his son after the ancient hero Cu Hullen, confirming him as heir to the throne. If he, Conor Mac Nessa, died right now, the boy would be Ard Ri and no man would mourn his passing.

Wandering through his army, praising one for this, another for that, giving little gifts and tokens of recognition, Conor wondered how many of his faithful retainers would kill him in the hope of gaining favour with his son, the future Ard Ri. He would need to be extra vigilant from now on.

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The praise songs of the Battle of Teltown speak of Setanta's battle fury. They say it was so great, Conor Mac Nessa ordered the women of Emain Macha to march from the Royal Rath with their breasts exposed so Setanta's modesty would overcome his anger. To cool off his rage, the half naked women repeatedly plunged Setanta into vats of cold water, until it no longer turned into boiling steam. That night at the feast, Setanta became a man. On receiving the name Cu Hullen and the hero's portion, the Land of Erin welcomed a shining new hero.

## CHAPTER 28

Proving to be a thorough, and latterly cheerful, worker in the kitchens of St. Columban's Abbey, Erin was quickly rewarded with a senior cleaning position. The prioress announced the good news after mass, down in the kitchens where Erin had been busy since five thirty black-leading the range and was now peeling a mountain of potatoes for lunch.

At last, Erin felt she was getting somewhere in her search for the library. For the past week the life of a scullery maid and the dull gossip of domestics had not given much hope. The Great Tech Srepta might as well be on the moon as among the refined world of artisans and academics, which, rather aptly, was a closed book to the likes of her.

Erin's duties, the prioress jubilantly explained, included the Monsignor's cell and the Abbot's rooms. As she spoke, the prioress puffed up with pride at having found such a gem as Erin. A few hours later, Erin was not happy to learn Liadan wangled her a post as an assistant and the cleaning job had gone to someone else. Worse, the prioress was not happy either, holding Erin personally responsible for thwarting her plans.

The following day after the morning service, a very annoyed Erin reported to Liadan. Thinking she had done Erin a favour, Liadan was hurt by her friend's surly attitude. This resulted in a row so furious a proctor had to call to tell the girls to put a sock in it.

It seemed to Erin that now Liadan was once again famous, she had reverted to her former slovenly habits. The cheeky mare probably wanted her to run around and wait on her hand and foot. This was confirmed when Liadan told her outright she expected Erin to run round after her and clean the place up a bit too.

‘I see,’ Erin bitterly retorted. ‘Assistant is just another term for skivvie.’

“Delighted you catch on so quickly,” Liadan brusquely replied.

Both were too tired for another argument so Liadan busied herself with the composition of a new Marian Antiphon, while Erin looked helplessly at the mess. How Liadan got three small rooms in this state was beyond comprehension.

Erin started in the bathroom, while Liadan lay on her bed with a pencil in her mouth and a cigarette in her hand. When Liadan managed to shake herself out of sloth and write something down, Erin took great pleasure in making as much noise as possible. Her tactics seemed doomed to failure, for the more disruptive she became, the more benign was Liadan.

When the doleful peels of angelus signalled lunch, Liadan told Erin to bring her a tray from the kitchens. She added, while Erin was there she might as well eat with the staff like she was used to. Ready to explode at this final insult, Erin deliberately kicked over a bin bag of rubbish she had just laboriously collected.

Liadan rewarded her with irritatingly sweet smile. Motioning her friend to sit down, and by implication, calm down, she asked, “Are you okay?”

Erin felt like screaming.

Pouring a shot of gin into a highball glass Liadan pushed it over the desk to Erin, before opening her packet of cigarettes and sliding them, and the matches, after the glass.

Erin seldom smoked, but she needed one now. She lit a cigarette with hands shaking in anger, took a swift drag and started coughing her guts up. Liadan patiently waited until the violent retching subsided and Erin was able to listen. Then, making a show of looking at her new watch, she burst out laughing and said, “April fool sweetie.”

‘What!’ Erin was so flabbergasted she started coughing again.

“April fool.”

‘You bitch!’ Erin was boiling.

Taking the glass of neat gin, she drained it in one gulp and holding back the cough slid it across the untidy, unpolished surface. Liadan promptly re-filled it for Erin to empty again.

Finally Erin asked, ‘Is it April already?’

“It was yesterday, sorry!” Liadan apologised. “That cow of a prioress wouldn’t let you go. What is it with these bloody women! I just thought it was too good a joke to drop, but to be honest, now I feel a bit stupid about the whole damn thing!”

‘No, no,’ said Erin absently, ‘it was a great joke... Honestly...’ She shook her head. ‘It’s just... Jesus Christ where’s the year gone? Anyway, you evil cow, how did you manage to keep a straight face?’

“It wasn’t easy sweetie!” Liadan giggled with relief, looking immensely pleased. As her chuckles subsided, she stared reflectively at Erin. “I hadn’t realised how much I missed you. Thanks.”

**Erin shrugged.**

**“Oh don’t give me that. I’d turned into a right miserable old cow. I got used to people taking me seriously and in the end, I was the only one taken in. You know, I still can’t believe I let that little prick bully me. I think you saved my life.”**

**‘Don’t be such a drama queen!’ protested Erin.**

**Liadan shrugged and smiled again. “I really enjoyed travelling with you, haven’t laughed so much for years, or felt so close to someone. Thanks Caity.”**

**Erin was touched and stunned. Touched by Liadan’s affection and stunned she remembered Caity. She thought the Caity part of her long dead. It was like meeting an old friend. She wondered how much Liadan remembered of the past, apart from their names; Caity and Maggie, the two musketeers, ‘all for one and one for fun’. They seemed such happy, carefree days in retrospect.**

**‘Maggie,’ Erin said to Liadan, ‘I never realised you were so unhappy. I would have done anything; anything I could, to have helped.’**

**“I don’t think I even knew I was unhappy. It sort of crept up on me,” Liadan replied thoughtfully. “What was it we used to say? Shit happens. I hadn’t even realised what a bollocks I made of everything because I couldn’t remember what I was like before. But you helped me remember.”**

**‘We all have so much baggage from the past. I think we do what we can to survive,’ Erin assured her.**

**“No, I would have fucked up regardless, except now I would probably be a druggie or a drunk.**

**Erin held up the empty gin glass and the cigarette, and said, ‘Oh yeah, poor you, life would be so different!’**

**“Piss off! I’m pouring my bloody heart out to you here!” Liadan grinned, lit another cigarette and continued reflectively, “You know Caity, I think always felt like a fraud. I mean who was I; some dull little convent school girl with a handful of songs. It was like I had to self-destruct just to prove I could write anything worthwhile.” She laughed self-consciously. “God, listen to me, I am so full of shit!”**

**Erin opened her mouth, but Liadan hushed her. “No, don’t. I’m not telling you this to ease my soul, Caity, so let me finish. I’m leaving here, and the Church, and everything. I told the Abbot I making the pilgrimage to Knock, you know the religious shrine where the Virgin appeared to those kids... the old Oirish Fatima begorrah! But it’s back to the real world for me. We only get one life and I’m going to make the best of it. Come with me.”**

**Erin shook her head.**

**“I didn’t think so. I want to ask a favour,” Liadan added thoughtfully.**

**It crossed Erin’s mind this was why Liadan called her Caity. But as the thought was beneath her, she put it out of her head.**

**“You know,” said Liadan. “I only ever slept with two men and neither was my husband. Apart from the odd Morrigan that is, and that doesn’t count; it’s like waking up from a wet dream. Oh shit, how do I say this! Promise you won’t hate me. He still loves you, but I thought....”**

**‘Conery Mor,’ Erin said for her.**

**There was a lifetime of emotion in that name. He was Erin’s first real love and the father of her children. And the man she humiliated by refusing to marry... because she**



would not be his murderer. After rejecting Conery Mor, what claim did she have on him?

Liadan was embarrassed and so forced a joke. “Cormac Mac Art not only has the best Rath in this whole Land of Erin but also the sexist brother.”

‘I know,’ Erin replied neutrally.

“All the poets flock to the rebel cause,” she added brightly.

‘Poets always do.’ Erin’s voice was flat.

“You are not making this very easy for me, Erin.”

So it is back to Erin is it, thought Erin.

“I could have done it behind your back,” protested Liadan, defensive. “But I won’t. If you say no, then it is no.”

‘Conery used to fancy you like mad,’ Erin told Liadan.

“I know I’m not much of a friend,” Liadan confessed.

‘Don’t be silly, you are a good friend. It’s my problem. Conery Mor is a good a place as any to start your career as... What was the word we used to use in the old days... A slapper?’

“Slappers!” Liadan cried, desperate for light relief. “Do you remember slappers? Weren’t we stupid then?”

‘I think we still are, if we are fighting over a man. I’m sorry Maggie, you go for it. Conery’s no saint.’

“Well, maybe it’s just as well,” Liadan slyly confided, “because from what I heard off some of the other girls, the paint rubs off the plaster when you er... oh well, you know what I mean...” Pulling a face, Laidan rolled her eyes down to her nethers and blushed scarlet.

Erin looked shocked for a moment as her friend’s crude remark sunk in. ‘Oh you dirty mare!’ she cried in

horror, and burst out laughing like the ex-convent-schoolgirl she was.

When they both calmed down Erin said thoughtfully, ‘Knocking off Conery eh? Well, at least you told the Abbot the truth... you are going to Knock... except it ain’t the place.’

“I wish I said that,” Liadan replied.

‘As Oscar Wilde once said, don’t worry, my dear you will!’

“You bitch!”

‘You cow!’

“I’ll miss you,” Liadan told her.

‘Don’t you dare cry, because you’ll make me start,’ Erin warned. “And if I do, I don’t think I’ll ever stop.”

“Now who’s the drama queen?”

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Before Liadan went to Knock, as it were, she said to Erin, “You did so much for me I wanted to do something for you. The library isn’t here. The Abbot knows where it is because he has library books. He even showed me his library card. I don’t know why you are after the library. What’s more important... and I’ve thought about this Erin... I don’t want to know! I’m not like you, I’m not political.”

Erin opened her mouth.

“Don’t you dare lecture me,” snapped Liadan. “I was with Maeve too remember!”

Erin shrugged. ‘Did the old boy say where it was?’

It was Liadan’s turn to shrug. “I didn’t think to ask. Now don’t go looking annoyed. I’ve got you a job as his

research assistant. You're discrete, hardworking and you studied Classics and Irish History at Queens."

'For one year!' Erin protested. 'And the only Latin I remember is: don't let the bastards grind you down. And I only remember that because it was on a T-shirt!'

"It doesn't matter, he won't care. He's a nice old man, a bit dotty maybe. He's writing a history of Ireland. You'll love it, Gerald of Wales and everything. All he wants is someone to take an interest and do a bit of typing on an old Remington. Christ, it looks like something out of the Ark! Probably doesn't even work. Oh shit Erin, say something!"

'Like what?' she asked.

"Well, thank you would be a start!"

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Erin quickly warmed to the Abbot. It was with genuine regret when towards the end of the second week, around half the time Liadan predicted, he asked her to renew his library books.

"I don't expect you will want to return." The Abbot smiled to disguise his feelings.

Erin looked at him, suddenly curious.

"You have the makings of a scholar and they don't you see. The scholars never come back. I suppose things are much more interesting up there. I would go myself, given half a chance, but you must promise to send the books back. Promise me that, won't you."

Erin found herself promising to send his books. She had developed a real affection for the old man and was almost sorry to be leaving.

## CHAPTER 29

### **B (beithe : birch) Blarney.**

*An Irish colloquial expression meaning to bullshit*

**Kiss the Blarney Stone, the tourist brochures used to say, and never be stuck for words. How could you be, thought Erin, with every word in the whole land held captive within its walls?**

**The books were not actually kept in the derelict medieval keep. The site of the last great christian library was Blarney House, a handsome eighteenth century Scottish style baronial hall of corner turrets and bartizans, standing less than two hundred yards from the ancient castle containing the legendary stone that bestowed the gift of eloquence.**

**No one greeted Erin's arrival. The place appeared deserted, except for a few maintenance men lounging in the formal Rock Close gardens and baking like lizards in the spring sunshine. Asking where she could park her bike, they casually directed her to the bike sheds round the back.**

**Erin wandered aimlessly through the empty ground floor of Blarney House, impressed by the spacious hall and lingering at the cabinet displaying church treasures. Eventually, she came across the housekeeper in the kitchens. The woman had her nose in Thackeray's 'Vanity Fair' and her feet in the oven of the wood burning stove.**

**“You can’t stay in the house dear,” were the first words she said, barely looking up. “You’ll have to stay in the prefabs, like we all do. I keep them aired regular, so take your choice, there’s plenty of room.”**

**Erin had already seen the prefabricated huts littering once immaculate picnic lawns.**

**“There’s facilities in the prefabs. If you want tea and biscuits, you can drop off a requisition form at breakfast an’ pick ‘em up at dinner. I do breakfast eight thirty to nine thirty, lunch twelve thirty ‘til two an’ dinner six ‘til seven thirty. The building closes nine sharp. I’ll issue sheets an’ towels, soon as I get a completed requisition form. Pick one up tonight in the commissary. They’re changed every week, Monday breakfast - laundry day.”**

**With a snort of finality, the housekeeper returned to her book.**

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**After confirming the library’s existence, Erin should have gone straight to Maeve at Emain Macha. The library was surely worth the price of Finn. However, before she left, she wanted to find the Abbot’s books and deliver them on the way home, as it was not so far out of her way.**

**While searching for his books, Erin discovered why the Abbot said few ever returned. It was not love of research holding them hostage, but finding the books. The library was a mess. Books were not catalogued, or if they were, they were mislaid. Stacks of hand scrawled index cards awaited filing, many illegible. As far as she could determine there was no consistent record of loans. Priceless treasures**

could be lost and no one would know, never mind care. Scholars, coming for a book, first had to find it.

She wondered how the christians could let their prized possession get into such a state, before realising the answer was obvious. There were no librarians. Even the little she knew about librarianship, which was mainly common sense, could improve the system no end.

Apart from a handful of maintenance men and a few housekeepers, the dozen or so residents were doddering old clerics, not interested in anything but their own obscure research. From dawn to dusk, they were found religiously copying page after page from priceless manuscripts or dog-eared paperbacks. Given the church's strict hierarchical nature, Erin could only assume anyone with ability was whisked away to act as an advisor at one of the regional courts, or to manage a religious community.

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Erin did not intend to fall prey to the Tech Scriptoria's allure. But the library was a trap and its bait was the peace lying thick as dust in the halls and corridors. One perfectly peaceful day rolled seamlessly into the next, with only the changing light to mark the passage of time. Diligently, she searched for the Abbot's books, pausing only to eat or sleep, and sometimes forgetting to do either. There were too many distractions, too many rediscovered joys. She had not felt this way for years.

Having a tidy mind, Erin began filing and returning books to their correct places. It was a thankless and impossible task, but in doing it she needed no other. Towards the end of the week, when the old academics

finally got round to noticing her, they began asking for books as if she was the librarian. After a lifetime of duty, Erin simply could not turn away those in need.

While searching for the Abbot's books, she began organising the Irish History-Mythology Section on the second floor of the mock tower faced wing. Here most of the books dealt with the druids. Thumbing through them, Erin found it strange there was enmity between the two sects. Christian and druid had many beliefs in common, such as a dying and resurrected god and the soul's immortality. The druids even had their own holy trinity, one being a carpenter god called Esus. In turn, the church took the word 'Easter' from the name of an old Celtic goddess and made a saint of another, the Goddess Bridgit.

It was increasingly apparent, the early church in Ireland was jealous of the druids. Saints like Patrick slavishly copied them, sucking up and making out everything was amiability and peaceful coexistence. Even old St. Colcumcille declared though he feared death and hell, the sound of an axe in the Druid's Sacred Grove at Derry frightened him more.

But almost overnight everything changed. Once the druids lost their monopoly on learning, druid colleges converted en masse to the new religion and Ireland was suddenly full of monasteries. As the Irish princes gradually lost the right to appoint bishops, the age of toleration ended and the righteous work began. The saint's horror apart, axes rose and fell on every sacred hill as the groves were cleared and churches built on the holy ground. As Liadan had said, the White Goddess became the Virgin Mary and the Green Man, Christ.

**It was easy for Erin to see why the druids hated christians; they feared history repeating itself. What she could not understand, was why druids hated books. The word 'book' came from the Irish word for beech tree, because druids once scratched the ogham onto beech wood tablets.**

**For a fleeting moment, Erin found herself wondering if Maeve was wrong about the druids. Quickly putting the heretical thought from her mind, she reminded herself the druids were a religion. After christianity's stranglehold on the land for almost fifteen hundred years, Maeve wanted no religion to become the central power ever again.**

**Instead, Maeve looked forward to a new age of independent communities guided by compassionate matriarchs. And look where it got her; crushed and imprisoned by Conor Mac Nessa. Was Maeve living in a fool's paradise, wondered Erin. Was the land simply too big to be ruled by the magic of the uterus; as Maeve claimed the world was in time's golden dawn, when a woman's power was the power of life itself?**

**It took men a long time to realise sperm played a role in conception. As Erin discovered in Pliny's book on natural history, even the Romans were not entirely convinced. Pliny thought mares turned hindquarters to the breeze to conceive, and that was why horses ran fast as the wind.**

**Once learned, the father's role in conception was a lesson man never forgot. So much so, that Erin found one venerable tome claiming men were entirely responsible. According to the wise old author - a man - each sperm contained a tiny homunculus, complete and entire, and the**



woman was nothing more than a passive container in which the seed flourished.

In such ways, far from being an equal partner in the mystery of life, men slowly acquired the priestess' prerogative, taking over agriculture and religion; reducing the Goddess to mistress, property and slave. Or so went the gospel according to Maeve. Erin now wondered if it was really all so simple.

Perhaps women's power was gradually lost in the social upheaval of agriculture and metallurgy as more efficient methods and new technology replaced the old ways and the population exploded. She remembered reading about an archaeological find of a seven thousand-year-old skeleton of a woman, whose arthritic bones showed she spent all her short miserable life grinding corn as a slave. So much for uterine power and woman as goddess, she thought bitterly. Erin did not know what was harder to stomach, women as victims or women as casualties. Perhaps the world simply refused to stay still no matter how much you wanted it to.

Sometimes it got so stuffy in the library, her head ached. Deciding she needed fresh air, she walked downstairs. In the vast entrance hall, Erin spotted a young man looking at the dusty cabinet containing the Book of Kells and a large gold cup of ornate Celtic knot work, which she recognised as the Ardagh Chalice even though it was mislabelled the 'Holy Grail'; a claim probably dating from the first enthusiastic days of the Library.

As she passed, he cleared his throat. The unexpected rent in the blanket of silence caused her to look and find him staring. Handsome, with black hair and violet blue eyes, he was dressed in technicians' overalls. She dropped

her gaze and hurried on before asking herself what the hell she was doing. Why was she acting like a frightened nun? She stopped and turned back. The man was still looking, so she smiled and said hello.

He grinned stupidly before asking, “Are you the nun everyone is talking about?”

When he asked if she was a nun, she had the distinct feeling he meant and all it entailed.

‘I’m no nun’ she replied, liking his directness.

“I wondered,” he said staring at her savagely cropped hair.

‘Nits,’ she joked. ‘It seemed the easiest way.’

His smile became uncertain as he wondered if she was making fun of him.

‘Only kidding,’ she laughed. ‘I was a novice but it’s not really for me.’

“I thought you were telling me to mind my business,” he answered.

He really did have the most beautiful eyes.

‘Not at all,’ she flirted.

He laughed.

And lovely, white teeth.

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Erin was collecting books from one of the reading rooms, when she saw the newspapers. At first, she did not realise what they were. When she did, could not believe her eyes. The newspapers were arranged ornamentally on a bureau at the far end of the room. Their presence lent gravitas, making it look like a real reading room in a real library.

She looked blankly at the yellowing folded papers as their importance gradually sank in. She counted them, five issues of 'The Times'. In her excitement, she thought they were the Irish Times. The sight of newsprint made long dead names flick randomly through her head. When she looked properly, she saw they were the English Times.

Quickly, she skim read headlines, feeling like she was doing something naughty and would be caught any minute. Empty words formed empty sentences. She looked at the date. She could not put her finger on it, but something felt wrong. When she realised, she thought it was a mistake. She flushed in confusion, getting the faint gnaw of a headache as the blood pulsed at her temples in a furious tattoo.

"Sister!"

There was a tap on her shoulder, making Erin jump out of her skin. It was one of the old clerics. Everybody assumed she was a nun and called her 'sister'.

"Sorry to startle you Sister, but the book I had yesterday, or was it the day before?" The old man's voice trailed off absently. "It was. Oh dear... and I left it... you know... somewhere.'

She thought for a moment, remembering the old man was reading Aristotle. She had replaced the book in Philosophy earlier that morning, after finding it left on a radiator. He politely thanked her and toddled off.

Turning back to the newspapers, she looked again; calmer for the interruption. Still doubting her eyes, she counted on her fingers. It could not be, but it was. The newspaper was only six years old. Checking the dates she saw they were all around six years old, even though the

plague happened twelve years ago. It was a miracle, or at least impossible.

Erin picked up the top issue, only to immediately put it down again because her hands shook so much. Her eyes greedily devoured the front page as it lay on the bureau. There was war in the Middle East, famine in Africa, floods in India, wildfires in Spain and Greece; a new European immigration policy offering food for labour; celebrities; sport and politics. Meaningless, it was all meaningless. How isolated her world had become. She almost wept.

Picking up a second issue, Erin fared no better, so abandoned it for a third. Telling herself to be calm, she forced her eyes to methodically scan each headline for the word 'Ireland'; instead of jumping about as photographs and words caught her interest. When sure there was nothing important on the front page, she opened the paper, looking for the weather map on page two. Erin was convinced English weather maps used to show England and Ireland or at least Northern Ireland, but this map ended at the Isle of Man.

Systematically reading the headlines, she did not discover the word Ireland or any mention of the plague. Wondering if she should run her finger under each column of newsprint or move on to another issue, she idly turned the page. A headline caught her eye, 'SUB DISASTER INQUEST REOPENED'. Tod said something about a disaster bringing Finn here; but that was a gunboat, not a submarine. Anyway, the newspaper was years too old. About to turn another page, the words 'Irish Sea' leapt out at her.

According to the article, an inquest was being reopened after a campaign by the family of a drown

seaman, John Davey, aged 43. The inquest court originally ruled death by misadventure, when an armed nuclear submarine on blockade duty in the Irish Sea fouled the fishing nets of a trawler, capsizing the ship and drowning the crew. The trawler men's families maintained the navy conducted a cover up, claiming they sunk the trawler because it was fishing illegally too near the Irish coast.

The submarine's commander was cleared of blame, but subsequently an ex-member of his crew presented allegations of religious mania and torture. Pending a new investigation, a source at the Admiralty assured the public the commander and crew were now transferred to a project in a non-nuclear submarine dealing with civilian matters.

Erin eagerly looked for the next dated copy. It was the first one had she picked up. Inside a two-page spread gave the whistle-blower's story. Deprived of sleep, food and even lavatory privileges, it likened his experiences to brainwashing by a cult. He claimed he was prayed over, prayed at, and made to repeat prayers, for hours on end. The article impartially concluded other crewmembers did not corroborate his story and the man had been discharged from the Navy on health grounds following a psychological breakdown.

A further issue repeated the story as the man gave evidence to a tribunal. It alleged his story could now be corroborated by a fellow crew member. This article was the first to mention Ireland by name; a single sentence saying the submarine commander was currently ferrying machinery for a project to restore Ireland once the plague was cured.

Scouring the rest of the newspapers for nuggets such as this, Erin eventually turned up an Admiralty quote tracing the Commander's instability back to the sterilisation of the Cork coastline and the destruction of a primitive community on Fota. Immediately, she thought of what Liadan said about the druids being driven from Fota which was, she remembered, an island outlying Cork city centre. A short panel in the last dated issue gave a brief resume before inferring a criminal case was expected to follow.

Erin put the newspaper down, head buzzing with questions. Why did submarines blockade Ireland's coastal waters? Obviously they wanted to stop anyone leaving Ireland. But were they really armed with Trident nuclear missiles as one reporter seemed to claim? Were they prepared to destroy Ireland rather than risk the plague escaping to the outer-world once more?

What was the project to restore Ireland? She suspected the library. But what use was a library? Would they educate everyone with the books held here? That seemed too ludicrous to contemplate! Yet if so, where were the machines the newspapers spoke about? The central heating vents in the big house were totally rusted up. They looked like they had not worked for centuries.

But then, why maintenance men if there were no machines? Were they simply left over from the construction? In that case, why train locals? And why were they still here six years after work finished? What did they do?

With this thought, Erin came full circle.

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Unable to sleep, Erin lay on her narrow cot staring at the dark. Her mind was torn between seeing the library as the written word's last refuge and some grand scheme to restore things back to how they used to be. She could not help but feel bitter towards the Tuatha de Danann. They played with the lives of thousands of people and did not care. Couldn't they see they had no right?

If only she could be sure the library was the project mentioned in the papers. Her only hope was to find the mythical machines. At the back of her mind was a thought so frightening, she dare not even think about it. If the library was not the terrible and mysterious project, where could she look next? What could it be? Who would help her? Riddled with uncertainty, Erin flung off the covers and got out of bed having only the faintest idea of what she was going to do.

Approaching Blarney House, an argument raged inside her head. Half of her thought it was madness sneaking into the library, which closed every night at nine o'clock and did not open until eight. The other half of her wanted to discover something earth shattering. She pulled her cloak closer to keep off the cool night air and reached for the handle on the great oak door.

As soon as she touched the doorhandle she felt the hum of machinery. Vibrations caught in the wood and metal made sinew, muscle and bone resonate in sympathy. Cautiously, she turned the latch and pushed. As she did, air exchange filters slipped into a higher pitched whine to cope with the influx of damp night air.

Inside, the library was alive with wheezes, like the gentle breath of a slumbering giant. With some trepidation, Erin followed the noise down to the cellars. She did not

know what awed her more, the machines' size or their sophistication. She had never seen anything like them, they were like a living heart, no a lung, no a heart, pumping life into the corridors of books.

**“Fancy seeing you here!”**

She spun round at the intrusion to face her handsome young mechanic.

**‘Hello,’ she said, feigning casualness.**

**“It’s off limits at night you know,” he told her.**

**‘I didn’t know. Sorry!’ she lied.**

**“Don’t matter,” he winked. “I’m on nights this month. It’s so boring, nice to have company.” He nodded to the huge machines. “Beautiful aren’t they.”**

**‘Awesome,’ she truthfully agreed.**

**“Like me to show you round?”**

As they moved between the engines, he explained how the library was hermetically pressure sealed each night to help preserve the books. It would be better to keep it totally sealed but the Church would not let them.

The power came from waterwheels up to five miles away on the River Lee travelling in cables to be stored in batteries, and he pointed to the rows of great black cylinders. The power loading system was designed like a spider’s web, so if one part of the river failed, other parts would take over. Even if the worst came to the worst, ancillary batteries and solar panels provided backup energy for months. The accumulated heat was vented out to warm the common areas and the prefabs, and produced the hot water. The whole beauty of it was nothing was wasted, a completely closed system.



Erin felt surprised by her stupidity. She took the luxuries of electricity, light and heating, hot water, and even flushing toilets, for granted.

“I thought you were a nun, you know. They all talk about the good looking nun.”

‘Do they really say I’m good looking?’ She was flattered. It was a long time since she thought of herself as good looking, or even a woman.

“Good looking?” he said. “You’re joking! You’re gorgeous, especially when you smile.”

She blushed furiously. ‘Look at me! I look awful!’ But she could see he was not teasing. Although being chatted up was the last thing on her mind, Erin was finding it surprisingly pleasant.

The young mechanic took her hand as he guided her down a steep step. She stumbled, her body pressing momentarily against his, feeling the hardness of his muscles as her breasts squashed against him. It had been too long.

He held her close. “It gets lonely here, especially at night,” he husked, voice low and intimate.

Lonely for you and me both, she thought as she reluctantly peeled away, staring boldly into his eyes.

He pulled her back, as slowly as she had pulled away. She did not resist. There was chemistry between them. They both felt it. Her lips parted as she fell into him and they kissed. His tongue moved lazily against her lower lip, attempting hesitant forays into the warm moistness of her mouth.

Her free hand moved up the side of his stomach, feeling muscle under his thin boiler suit as it moved from chest to armpit, with its patch of warm dampness. Her fingers trailed over his broad shoulders to play with the short hairs

at the back of his neck. He was naked under the boiler suit and she felt his heat slowly moving up hard against her, like one of his huge, terrible machines.

“I couldn’t believe my luck getting the job here,” he boasted proudly.

She smiled indulgently, thinking of nothing, caring for nothing but the moment.

“They put cell phones all over the Land of Erin, like a test, waiting for people to work out how to ring back. Do you know what a cell phone is?” he asked eagerly; looking crushed when she nodded.

Of course she knew what a cell phone was. It was the same trick they played on her. She remembered feeling so clever when someone answered.

“So I kept ringing them and we’d talk and eventually they asked if I wanted a job. Which they knew I did because I hated living out there; it was primitive and dirty. It’s what happened to all of us. I guess you could say we answered the call.” He made a little joke, sounding like something he heard somewhere before and thought witty.

Erin smiled weakly. She felt crushed because it had never occurred to her the Tuatha de Danann assessed her during their conversations. She should have known, or at least suspected. They were so damn tricky.

“We’re keeping the place safe until the sickness is over and things get back to normal.”

Things are normal she almost blurted out, but bit her tongue. She saw it all quite clearly now. How they would gradually release the books to improve literacy and introduce new concepts like democracy, money, work, religion, poverty and war; from Eden to Apocalypse in six easy lessons. How simple it sounded to modernise this Land

of Erin, her Land of Erin, out of existence and replace it with old Ireland. The very thought was her worst nightmare.

‘Do you still see them?’ she calmly asked.

“They used to come but they don’t come any more. We take care of the place now. You know, one of the officers once said I could go anywhere with my skills... after the cure, that is! He told me about opportunities in Australia. I’d love to go, I hate it here.”

‘Australia,’ she echoed.

She thought she would never hear anyone mention the outer-world again and was surprised to find it shocked her like a profanity. Never had she guessed her Land of Erin would end like this; people migrating to Australia or perhaps America, like refugees from another potato famine. It left her sick to her stomach. She berated herself for the time wasted at Drumcliffe, Navan and now here. She had to get to the druids and make them burn this unholy place to the ground.

The technician moved against her, kissing her neck, nibbling her ear.

She stiffened, not wanting him anymore; him and his god damned machines.

“Come on,” he husked.

All she wanted was to get away, but he was insistent. He drew her gently to his body so she could feel his raging hard on, burning hot above her hip. Slinging his arm around her shoulder he held her close. When she tried to twist out of his grasp, his grip tightened.

More than anything she wanted to get away from him and this abomination of a place.

**“Come on, you want it as much as I do.” He pressed up against her, hard.**

**‘No!’ she protested**

**“Relax!” he coaxed.**

**‘I said no!’ She began to struggle.**

**“Don’t be such a cock teaser!” he snarled.**

**‘Fuck off!’ Her voice sounded weak as though she was afraid. She was afraid, she realised; but not of him.**

**“I said, come on!”**

**The edge of his teeth grazed her cheek as he sought her ripe mouth. His hot hand dropped to her breast, rubbing the habit’s coarse fabric across her nipple with the callous on his thumb.**

## CHAPTER 30

### **B (beithe : birch) Beltane.**

*The fire feast of Bel celebrating the return of the sun and marking the first day of summer was traditionally a time of new starts. Held on the eve of May Day, Beltane was at the opposite end of the year to Samuin or Halloween, the start of winter, the night the two worlds merged and the dead walked the earth*

Finn was packing a minibus when Mag Ruith buzzed by with the mindless frenzy of a summer drunk bluebottle. He stopped, looking at Finn's work for an instant before saying, "Beautifully economic. Well done! However I cannot help but think it would make more sense if you considered the actual route and who will disembark first."

Then he buzzed off again. Busy, busy, busy.

Smiling, Finn started pulling the bags out. Mag Ruith had been like this for the past few days, convinced unless he supervised every detail, things would collapse in confusion. Things had not collapsed, but no thanks to Mag Ruith, who made druids with the patience of saints turn the air blue with murder.

The minibuses on the drive were taking the first wave of druids, those staying with relatives and making their own way to the festival. As they did not leave until evening Finn had plenty of time to re-pack and did not mind Mag Ruith's interference. The general air of excitement infected

**Finn as much as everyone else; although he did not have the foggiest idea about Beltane. Except for knowing it was May Day Eve and the start of summer.**

**When Finn quizzed Oona about Beltane, she responded with a mysterious smile, only answering, “Seeing is believing Glasshopper.”**

**Finn hated it when she acted all coy like a femme fatale. She was simply not cut out for it.**

**As Oona would not say, Finn asked Mag Ruith who could not keep his mouth shut if his life depended on it. The little man lectured him for an hour and a half on the traditions of Beltane, leaving him none the wiser.**

**The low, happy noise around Finn stopped. He had not noticed the hum of chatter and laughter, but its absence hit like a thunderclap. Looking up, he saw everyone staring at a ghost drifting through the heat devils playing on the drive’s metalled surface. The shimmering apparition of a woman solidified as she approached. Her haunted frightful look stirred nightmares best forgotten, deep in Finn’s soul. There was something about her that spoke of the world’s starving or survivors of disaster and genocide.**

**Weight loss had smudged her features to a cartoon sketch under a bristle of blonde hair. Cheekbones protruded through parchment skin. Nose, a pinched, hooked beak, overshadowed cracked, blackened lips, drawn into a rictus like grimace. Violet bruising under her sunken eyes emphasised the hollow stare. She looked terrible yet eerily beautiful, like old Black Anu or a banshee come to mourn the not yet dead.**

**Thinking the apparition would stagger and fall, Finn was unable to rush to her aid. Like everyone else he was rooted in horror to the spot. In an act of pure will, the**

woman jerked herself out of the stumble, straightening up as if a puppeteer had pulled her strings.

A babble of stage whispers sprung up; sharp, hissed arguments asking if she was the White Goddess. There was a half-heard hubbub of denial and affirmation with certainty growing at each repetition. He saw some make the sign against the evil eye. Others genuflected. Yet more hastily crossed themselves.

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As the racket slowly penetrated the dull haze of exhaustion, Erin became aware of the effect she was having on the druids. Good, she thought, let them think the White Goddess came. She deserved some respect for having walked the hundred miles from Blarney to Birr in two days.

The knowledge the druids were at Birr came while the technician mauled her. She would not demean herself by dignifying it with the term, rape. The thought came from nowhere. Promptly followed by the memory of Liadan saying Sanctuary came to those in need.

When it was over, and he wanted to tenderly hold and kiss her, and whisper sweet empty nothings, she smoothed down her frock and frigidly made her excuses. She walked out of Blarney House and continued walking. After what seemed like hours, she remembered Birr.

It had to be Birr. There were only a handful of places called demesnes and of those only Birr had an arboretum to act as a sacred grove. Fota had an arboretum too, or so she remembered from that long ago summer job with the

**tourist board. Birr was north of Fota and Liadan said the druids fled north; the druids' sacred direction.**

**In the end, Erin's conviction was nothing to do with inference or logic. It was something she felt in her soul, without needing explanation. Abruptly, she stopped to orient herself with the dawn. When she found she was already walking towards Birr, it felt like an omen.**

**Erin remembered little of the journey, only waking up with the full moon shining through the naked branches of a tree and wondering how on earth she got there. Coherent thought came in waves and then did not come at all. It was the price she paid for the demands made on her body by refusing to eat or rest.**

**Having no sustenance, she fed on herself, beginning with the energy rich glycogen stored in the liver, before moving on to the fat underlying the skin, then the fatty tissue cushioning organs and muscles. With reserves depleted, the body, sensing its impending demise, gorged on her exhausted flesh in a terminal orgy that left Erin euphoric. It was life's parting gift; a last defiant gesture in the face of death. She had never felt so alive. It was all she could do not to laugh out loud.**

**\*\*\***

**Finn recognised something familiar in the woman's mad, bright eyes. It was almost as if he knew her. Was she his guardian spirit or his fate? Did he know her from dream or life? Or the place where life and dream met? A name bubbled up from the half-forgotten past... Erin.**

**By all the stars in heaven, it was Erin, the very goddess of this blessed land. As though by telepathy, at the very**



moment Finn remembered her name, the apparition swerved and staggered in his direction. She stopped stone still before him, staring intensely.

Physical work and the warm day had left Finn stripped to the waist. He had put on weight in the past month and a half, filling out nicely. Where once his overall hung on skin and bone, there was now tanned flesh, lean muscle and whipcord veins defining arms, shoulders, chest and back. His hair was growing too. Although short in comparison with most men's, it was longer than Erin's.

The sun that tanned his skin had bleached his lengthening hair. It was now a dark ruddy gold, a shade or two darker than the fair-flecked moustache and neat chin-hugging beard. Seeing him, Erin could not help but think he looked exactly like the Fionn Mac Coull prophesied at the Bullfest.

An ugly little man in bright cardinal red tweed, hopped to Finn's side like a tame wild bird. From Liadan's description, this must be Mag Ruith. Grabbing the little man's robe, Erin pulled him towards her with surprising strength. 'I am the White Goddess and claim Fionn Mac Coull as my prize,' she rasped.

Mag Ruith stared at the phantom with undisguised horror. He first thought she was death herself, but her all too human strength dispelled that fear.

Cathbad came running to his master's side. "Erin, how nice to see you," he cried. "What a surprise!" The words tumbled out of the fat bespectacled druid in a series of wheezes.

Clocking his concern for the ugly little man, she sneered through clenched and bloody teeth, 'I'm here for the organ grinder not the organ you cock. Piss off!'

**Mission accomplished Cathbad did just that.**

**Thanks to Cathbad, Erin was not the only one to know who she dealt with. Mag Ruith also knew. It was as if her name gave him some mystical power over Erin, daughter of Maeve; heir apparent to the land which bore her name. White Goddess to Finn's Green Man. Great Queen to Finn's High King. He squared up to her, willing her eyes down.**

**Stony, contemptuous, she met his gaze. 'Don't try your tricks with me Mog Ruth,' she hissed.**

**He squirmed uncomfortably for a moment before forcing an engaging smile. Erin scowled back; unyielding, unforgiving, unblinking, intense. The violence behind her stormy eyes left Mag Ruith quailing. His hands trembled as though torn between the wish for, and fear of, contact with the unconquerable goddess. Finally, under her basilisk glare, his smile slowly ebbed away. Even his hands ceased their tremulous fluttering. Beaten, Mag Ruith looked down.**

**Erin smiled and collapsed.**

**\*\*\***

**Erin had the gift of emerging from sleep totally awake. Not for her the luxury of delicious, lingering dream. The charming haze of one world fading into the other; that is in reality the weary old brain clunking through a circuit check to make sure there was not an aneurysm in the night.**

**No, Erin came to each day fresh and eager to battle. However, today she lay confused and groggy in a blind orange haze. For a frightening moment, she did not know where she was. Until a tiny cough interrupted her panic and she remembered to open her eyes.**

As if this was a signal, a large woman checked her drip, before fluffing her pillows and propping her up in bed. Erin saw the woman's carrot hair twisted into a tight plait but further details were blocked out by huge freckled arms crossing and re-crossing her face as the woman fussed and fretted over her. Finally, when the woman was still, Erin looked into a round red face, where blue eyes sparkled behind short sandy lashes, and said, 'Thank you.'

"Just glad you're up," the woman replied, slightly taken aback. "You're looking better already. You went out like a light, you know; had us all worried."

She picked up a brown earthenware bowl. Sitting next to the bed she carried on chattering amiably as if soothing a cornered animal. "Your feet were a right aul' mess, but fortunately they're not as bad as they look, though you might have to stay off them for a couple of days. You have some some bruises too; like handprints...."

Erin's face snapped shut.

Falling silent, the woman spooned broth from the bowl. As she blew on the hot soup, Erin smelled meat.

'What happened to me?' she asked the woman.

Not expecting to be questioned, the woman looked at her sharply before remembering her kindly face. "You keeled over like a felled tree, right on the drive. You've been unconscious over twelve hours." She moved the spoon to Erin's mouth. "Come on, eat."

'I'm not hungry.' Erin pushed herself up so violently she almost upset the spoon. A wave of dizziness flooded through her.

"When I said eat, it wasn't a request," announced her nurse.

**Erin did what she was told.**

**Happy to have the invalid back, the woman fed her as rapidly as she could swallow. The entire time she clucked softly like an old mother hen.**

**Swallowing the soup, Erin frantically tried to piece everything together. Refusing to be marshalled into a conscious stream, her thoughts only yielded tantalising fragments, eluding analysis. Images came and went, flashing one against another. Faster and faster as stills gave way to action like the flickering start of a badly spooled home movie. With yawning blackness claiming her, Erin's last thought was the fear of relapsing into delirium.**

**\*\*\***

**A gentle cough brought Erin round. Eyelids flickered open to see Mag Ruith perched on a chair next to the bed. Perched was the correct word, for even in stillness he resembled nothing so much as a bold inquisitive sparrow. His bright eyes glittered below a freshly shaved hairline.**

**“A remarkable recovery my dear, you have slept the sun round and half again. It is a beautiful evening. Red sky at night, so on and so forth,” he replied to Erin's unframed question. A glass of water and two lumpy tablets magically appeared in his hands. “Take these.”**

**She viewed the tablets suspiciously.**

**“We have anti-toxin should you want it,” Mag Ruith said.**

**‘Is that what they are?’ she asked.**

**“No. Amphetamines, I am afraid. Inhospitable as it is, I need you up and about,” he replied. “Beltane presses and there is not much time left to us.”**

**She felt clearer, tired but no longer confused. Refusing the amphetamines with a shake of her head, she asked him, “Why do I need to be up and about?”**

**“A gesture of good will to you and your esteemed mother, Maeve,” he answered. “Finn is to be Green Man in fulfilment of the prophecy. Yet there is one more test he must undergo before he leaves his old self behind, and I would like you to witness...”**

**‘You make up a prophecy, manipulate everything to make it true and expect me to be impressed,’ she snorted with effort.**

**“I do not expect you to believe me, but we did not engineer the prophecy. Personally, I believe it came from this Land of Erin herself. Have you ever wondered if we are all unknowingly caught up in some great design? Ask yourself why everything you have done led you here, if not for this purpose. I will leave the amphetamines in case you change your mind. I wish I could say they were herbal, but I am afraid they are not.”**

**\*\*\***

**The red-faced woman, who nursed her earlier, introduced herself as Oona when she came to take Erin to the dining room in a wheelchair. Reluctant to be pushed around, Erin refused her offer. Despite her aching calves and feet, she preferred to walk.**

**Erin sat with Mag Ruith and Oona at one end of a huge dining table, candlelit as though for seduction. Both Mag Ruith and Oona were resplendent in red six coloured robes showing sanctity and status. The significance was not lost on Erin, who sulked in a loose**

**gown of simple acolyte white. Finn was nowhere to be seen.**

**A servant wheeled in a hot trolley and began to serve a meal of mashed potato, spring greens and fat slices of roast pork. Silently Mag Ruith and Oona eyed the servant as greedily as they eyed the food. It was as if by force of will they could encourage him to billow clouds of fluffy potato over the forest of greens and islands of pale flesh rising from the gravy lake.**

**Erin watched Mag Ruith and Oona demolish the world on their plates in great careless forkfuls, feeling there was much to be learned. Having no appetite of her own, she toyed with her food until it became the colour and consistency of fresh turned earth.**

**Rapidly passing the fork back and forth from plate to mouth, Mag Ruith slyly watched Erin, thinking how like her mother she was. Mag Ruith had been a fan of Maeve since the beginning. He was impressed by her ability to forge uneasy alliances between the remains of the various women's groups in the early days after the plague.**

**The sickness may have buried their members, but only Maeve could bury their differences. Her call for a return to matriarchy was a stroke of genius, striking as it did at instincts buried deep within men and women alike. The desire to be protected and loved as only a mother can love.**

**Not for the first time, Mag Ruith wished he had won over Maeve. Or at least made her see they were both on the same side. But, in those days, all he craved was Sanctuary. Now, he admitted ruefully, all he could hope for was success with the daughter where he had failed with the mother.**

With the main course cleared away baked, stuffed apples were served, in a sea of creamy custard. With the urgency of hunger abated, Mag Ruith began to speak. “Queens of the May became the Kings of Industry as men usurped the power of women.”

Erin slightly raised an eyebrow in surprise at hearing one of Maeve’s anecdotal sayings fall from the enemy’s lips.

‘And where did you learn that?’ she sneered.

“It speaks for itself but if you prefer chapter and verse, then try Marija Gimbutas; the Language and Civilisation of the Goddess of Old Europe or Sir James Frazer; The Golden Bough or even Robert Graves; The White Goddess.”

He let the magic phrase linger and Erin coloured.

“The sisterhood moved underground a long time ago, persecuted as witches and prostitutes in the dark age of christianity. What Conor Mac Nessa did to Maeve was nothing new. It was simply the male asserting power over the female, something history has witnessed a thousand times before,” he added.

‘And what makes you so different?’ she asked.

Sadly, Mag Ruith knew Maeve would never trust the druids. In them, she saw the spectre of a civil service; a collegiate of priests, old as god, but younger than the goddess.

When he failed to answer Erin commented, ‘There’s not much to choose between you and christians, you know.’

How that stung, he thought, before realising Erin was not being malicious.

“That’s not really surprising,” he answered frankly, “when you consider Saint Paul, the faith’s true architect,

was from Galatia an ancient Celtic kingdom of Asia Minor.”

‘Really?’ Erin sounded genuinely curious.

Now he had her interest, he pressed his point home, “Of course, Paul’s mistake was putting the god before the goddess, rather like putting the cart before the horse. We do not make the same error. Finn will be Green Man, a dying and resurrected god who is subordinate in all ways to the Great Goddess. What you only wish for, we achieve. All we ask in return is that you let us help administer the state for the good of the people.”

He paused before delivering the coup de grace. “This Land of Erin is too large to be run on anarchist ideals. Remember Erin, although it is hard to hear, everything of man is not necessarily bad and everything of woman is not necessarily good.”

Mag Ruith rose, and with dessert only half plundered, left the table.

Remembering the way villagers asked Liadan for stories of Fionn Mac Coull, Erin once more wondered if it was the druids’ doing.

“He’s right, you know!” Oona piped up, interrupting her thoughts.

Stupid fat cow, what did she know!



## CHAPTER 31

### **D (duir : oak) Dichetal do Chennaib.**

*To graduate as an Ollave, the highest druidic rank, a student needed to demonstrate skill in the three rites of oration. The Teim Leada or the Opening of a Poem; the Imbas Forasni or the Knowledge of the Hand and the Dichetal do Chennaib or the Recitation of the Fingers. Each involved composition by use of the Hand Ogham*

Erin changed into the dress Oona gave her. Despite doubts about tonight's ceremony, she liked the dress. The red linen tartan, sobered by five additional colours, seemed to sum up Mag Ruith's whole change in attitude.

On formal occasions, people were required to dress according to status. Slaves wore one colour, soldiers three. Only ollaves and royalty wore six with red predominant, as it was the holy colour of life. The literal meaning of Da Dagda, the first mythological Irish god-king, was 'Red King'. Just as the first man of the christian bible was called Adam meaning 'Red Man'. By giving Erin a six-colour dress, Mag Ruith acknowledged not only her sovereignty, but also her holiness as goddess incarnate.

Watching the sun set into a sea of shower drenched foliage, Erin waited impatiently for Mag Ruith. Her gnawing doubts about tonight's ceremony came from the

same place that said the druids were at Birr. It was inexplicable, but carried overwhelming conviction.

A small rustling movement spoke of Mag Ruith's approach. She turned towards him saying, 'This dike thing, feels wrong.' The words died on her lips. 'What on earth are you supposed to be?'

Mag Ruith was encased from head to foot in a carapace made iridescent by last rays of the watery sunset.

"My tujan," he responded asthmatically, pulling back the hood to the gentle rustle of feathers.

'You're a toucan?'

"Tujan," he corrected her.

"Isn't that what I said?" she asked innocently.

Mag Ruith wore an ornate cloak of black feathers, glistening iridescent indigo and highlighted with vibrant colours. She touched its crackling surface. 'I've never seen anything like it.'

"You would if you were more diligent in religious matters."

'I never had much time for religion.'

"All things considered not the best possible answer for a Goddess."

'Suppose not,' she agreed thoughtlessly. 'What's it made of?'

"Mainly magpie and crow, they are such a nuisance around the estate, skilfully woven with..."

'Don't tell me,' she interrupted, having seen the Victorian relics around the house, exotic stuffed birds under dusty glass domes. At least she now knew why they all looked so moth-eaten. She pulled a face. 'You look ludicrous.'

**“How kind!” He sneezed, wiping his nose with a handkerchief from his sleeve. “This plays hell with my allergies!”**

**“I’m not surprised!”**

**“If I am not mistaken you were about to say the Diketal de Kenna is too risky. You will grant you must empty the sherry barrel before maturing whiskey in it.”**

**“What has that got to do with anything?”**

**“You are no doubt concerned about the drugs,” he continued, not really listening as usual. “Mescaline is quite natural I assure you and comes highly recommended by Aldous Huxley for opening the doors of perception.”**

**‘I see,’ she said, not seeing why drugs should be involved at all. ‘But I still cannot allow it.’**

**“You have authority Goddess, but no authority in this matter.” He sneezed again, clearing his sinuses of Victorian dust mite shite. “I request your participation, not your permission. With or without you, the ceremony takes place. In Finn’s mind, you are both muse and goddess, the symbol of his fate. Your presence lends glamour and a certain authority, but is not essential. Trust me.”**

**‘Trust somebody who looks like a beetle?’ she sneered.**

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**Erin stood before Finn in a circle illuminated by pitch torches. The thick acrid smoke left her dizzy and made her eyes water. The apple of immortality was tightly clutched in her hand. A withered fruit taken from a tree whose roots were treated with the residue of Morrigan.**

**If only she could be sure she was doing the right thing. Perhaps she should throw the apple away. There**

would be other apples. Other goddesses too, come to think of it. Maeve taught her no one was indispensable. Slyly feeling the apple, she checked the deep incisions allowing the miracle. Already off his box on mescaline, Finn waited expectantly for her to begin.

‘This is the Apple of Inspiration, the quern, grinding the flour of the stars between the heavens and the earth.’ Thinking her voice small and unconvincing, she theatrically presented the fruit to Finn.

Placing her other hand over the top, Erin sharply twisted the apple, causing it to snap cleanly in two. Finn’s look of surprise left her feeling more confident. She held out the halves to show him the pentacle stars formed by the pip pockets of the core.

‘See the star, Stella Maris,’ she chanted, less shakily. ‘Star of the Sea, the Evening Star: our mother.’

She offered Finn half the fruit.

‘See the star, Lucifer, the Morning Star, her beloved son.’

Finn took his half of the fruit.

‘The five points show the stations of life: birth, initiation, adulthood, old age and death. Can you see a beginning? Can you see an end?’

Finn shook his head.

‘Life eternal, the greatest secret, he who eats of me shall live forever.’

Erin bit into the apple. Juice ran down her chin. Finn did the same, his throat moving to swallow. He took another bite and then another before sagging. Two druids rushed from the shadows to help him into a sitting position.

Erin gasped, spitting out the lump of apple. It was hard not to swallow and she was not sure she managed. To be on

the safe side, she rammed her fingers down her throat, vomiting up the pints of water Mag Ruith suggested drinking before the ceremony as a safeguard against intoxication by the ingested drug.

Rinsing and wiping her mouth, she saw Finn sitting slumped and cross-legged in the circle. During the ceremony, the circle was lit by smoky pitch-torches. Now it was floodlit with portable halogen spots. Mag Ruith, deep in the shadow of his feathered cloak, sat directly in front of Finn but behind the lights so he and his aides did not cast shadows.

‘Speak to me Finn,’ he coaxed.

Finn straightened and complied.

“Corporal Robert Davis Finn

“290323473

“Corporal Robert Davis Finn

“290323473

“Corporal Robert Davis Finn

“290323473

“Captain Michael Ashworth

“290323473

Erin saw Finn’s eyes fill with tears.

“Corporal Robert Davis Finn

“290323473

The tears coursed down his cheeks.

“Captain Robert Davis...

“Captain Michael Ashworth

“290323473

“Captain Michael Ashworth

“290323473”

‘Where has Finn gone?’ Erin cried out.

**“There never was a Finn,” hissed Mag Ruith. “We are giving back what was taken away.”**

**‘To take it away again,’ she countered.**

**“Yes.”**

**“Captain Michael Ashworth**

**“290323473”**

**Mag Ruith’s eyes were riveted on Finn’s hands. Following his gaze, Erin saw Finn’s fingers moving at an incredible rate. He was speaking in their damned hand ogham.**

**‘What’s he saying?’ she demanded.**

**“If you cannot keep quiet,” Mag Ruith snapped. “I shall be forced to have you removed.” He did not even look at Erin.**

**‘Oh yeah!’ she angrily retorted, taking a step towards him. She caught a blur of movement as one arm was forcibly twisted up her back and a meaty hand threatened to crush her windpipe.**

**“Yeah!” her assailant answered.**

**Struggling, Erin was rewarded with a blinding stab of pain shooting up her arm from wrist to elbow.**

**“Go ahead punk! Make my day!”**

**She recognised the voice. It was Oona. The cow!**

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**In the morning, Mag Ruith apologised for locking Erin in her room. In turn and rather graciously thought Erin, she apologised for her outburst. She put her overexcitement down to the amphetamines, while Mag Ruith dismissed the ensuing events as regrettably necessary. And so they maintained a wary truce.**

Over breakfast he told her what they discovered in the ceremony. Robert Davis Finn was not a real person but created to disable stolen nuclear weapons and prevent the perpetrator from presenting a threat to the outside world in future. Erin thought all this related to Conor Mac Nessa and Mag Ruith did not correct her. Positive Mag Ruith's candour concealed more than it illuminated, Erin let slip about the Tech Srepta and its place in the UN's plans for the future. As expected, the old man was extraordinarily interested in the great christain library. Biting back a smile at his pathetic eagerness to discover its location, Erin took great pleasure in thwarting him by saying she did not remember.

Mag Ruith solicitously put down her convenient amnesia to the strain of the past week; although he did not believe a word. It was perfectly obvious she was lying in revenge for last night. With Beltane pressing, he could not afford to alienate her and so decided to let her keep her secret; for the time being at least.

After breakfast, Mag Ruith announced they were leaving for the manse at Lakeland. Erin's arrival had already delayed their departure and Beltane loomed ever nearer. Erin, of course, was free to stay at the Demesne or leave, although he could not spare any transport. For his part, he sincerely hoped she would accompany him to Beltane. Guessing her recent experiences left her feeling vulnerable and lonely, Mag Ruith showed no surprise when Erin chose to tag along.

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**A vintage Rolls Royce crudely painted bright red waited at the front of the house.**

**“My official car,” he beamed benevolently, ushering her into the leather interior.**

**‘Where’s Finn?’ she asked.**

**“Here he is now.”**

**She saw Finn through the rear window, coming round the side of the house, supported by two burly male druids. Finn looked dreadful and she felt sorry for him. No one cared about Finn. They were only interested in his usefulness in their schemes, including her own. Wasn’t it the case with everyone, she rationalised. Would Mag Ruith bother with her if she were not Erin, or she with him if he were not Mag Ruith? Yet try as she might, Erin could not escape the fact Finn was different. She and Mag Ruith had some measure of control in their lives. What choice had Finn?**

**When she put her thoughts to Mag Ruith, the old man was briskly unsympathetic. “What choice do any of us have? Look back and consider how often you followed the expectations of others rather than your heart’s desire.”**

**‘It is not the same.’**

**“It is exactly the same. Freedom of action is largely illusionary. Yet there is a great deal of satisfaction in not letting other people down. For most of us, it has to be enough.”**

**The druids put Finn in the car behind the bright red Rolls. Out of nowhere, the fat cow, Oona, came to put a rug over his legs and sit with him.**

**As the vehicles left the vicinity of the Demesne, Erin noticed a subtle change in the countryside. Despite being the end of April, spring had not yet touched the land. Buds**



were unbroken and the ploughed fields barely showed the fuzz of new green. Unable to stop comparing the barren countryside to the Demesne's lush gardens, she wondered if it really was some kind of druid magic. Did the land really mourn because there was no true High King?

Remembering Birr was famous for its microclimate, she instantly felt embarrassed. She had no idea when the buds broke or the crops grew. Nothing like that ever really interested her. It was stupid to get swept up in the druid's bullshit and start attributing coincidence to magic. It was probably exactly what they wanted she thought, chiding herself for being gullible.

The further from the Demesne they travelled, the more the countryside seemed to slip into sleep. Despite her logical explanation, Erin found it deeply uncomfortable. However it was not as uncomfortable as Mag Ruith's snoring. For like a sylvan godling, tied to his woods and fields, he was not long in joining the land in its forbidding slumber.

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Erin woke to the car bumping down an atrocious track. From the greenery, she knew at once they were on druid land. Was this more druid magic or merely another microclimate? As the trees thinned to parkland, edged with meadows of deep velvet grass, the landscape's beauty took Erin's breath away. Whatever the cause, magic or microclimate, she was impressed by the effect.

Erin saw large circular buildings with conical thatched roofs, half-concealed by trees. They were hard to spot because they blended so well with the dappled shade. Because of this, she only gradually realised the enormous

size of the druid community. When she did, she felt admiration tinged with awe.

Unlike other official residences of dignitaries, priests and regional chieftains, this place was not a recycled pre-plague site. Here was something new, like Emain Macha, Tara or Rathcroghan; although each of those was an ugly scar on the face of the earth. Emain Macha in particular, reminded her of a police station under siege, which it was in a way. But here, the buildings looked so natural and in such harmony with the landscape, they almost seemed to grow from it.

‘What is this place?’

“Manse Lakeland.”

Mag Ruith sounded proud. Justifiably proud, Erin thought. Lakeland must be the druid flagship for the new Land of Erin. A harbinger of how the land would thrive under their care. Mag Ruith was clever bringing her to see this.

All along the curving drive were more buildings under construction. Erin saw groups of people working together. From this distance there was no way to tell the slaves from the overseers. It was in stark contrast to Emain Macha, which had been built entirely on slave labour.

In this Land of Erin, the people who never recovered from the devastation of the plague existed half alive, like zombies. Little more than automatons, they had to be continually supervised; told what to do, when to eat and even when to sleep. As every estate was responsible for a certain number, it was only fair they contribute by doing simple menial tasks. In most places, they were treated kindly enough, but during the construction of Emain Macha they died like flies.

**As the land dipped, Erin caught a glimpse of a large building. Square sided and simply built from overlapping planking, it was topped by a steep thatched roof. At the rear stood a cluster of local stone outbuildings, which she guessed were kitchens. As the building faced away from the drive, Erin was not prepared for the ornately carved pillars and lintels decorating the imposing covered veranda. Huge sliding windows at the front of the hall stood open to a view of breathtaking beauty. An emerald lawn ran to a jewel of a lake; the water reflecting gently undulating blue hills, and a fat, lazy evening sun, in its mirror surface.**

**Seeing Maeve's vision for the new Land of Erin made solid in stone and timber, Erin was convinced this was no work of man. Men built on the land, not from the land. This place could only be woman's work. Impulsively, almost irrationally, Erin decided she would very much like to meet the woman responsible.**

## CHAPTER 32

### **S (saille : willow) Sovranty.**

*A legend speaks of a youngest son who went to fetch water from a well. His elder brothers returned empty handed, and sulking would not say why. At the well, the youngest son found a filthy crone with grey hair, grey skin and disgusting green teeth. As with his brothers, the crone offered him water in return for a kiss. But unlike his proud brothers, he agreed to her demand. After filling his bucket, the young man looked at the old hag with stomach turning, but a bargain was a bargain, so he closed his eyes and pursed his lips. Opening his eyes after the kiss, he saw a beautiful young maiden standing before him. Her name was Sovranty and she made him the greatest Ard Ri the Land of Erin had even seen. And the kingdoms prospered in his hands*

An imposing, tall, black woman, resplendent in sombre red robe, came down the veranda steps to greet her guests. Ignoring Mag Ruith, she kissed Erin's left cheek, then her right, and the palms of her hands, before getting on her hands and knees to kiss the hem of her dress. Erin was shocked because the woman greeted her as though she were Great Queen.

After greeting Erin, she welcomed the rest of her guests with the traditional words, "May the sky fall with

showers of stars on the ground. May the earth be rent by earthquake and the waves of the blue sea come over the forests of the living world if a guest finds dishonour in this house.” Turning at last to Mag Ruith, she added, “Great wizard, I would never have thought you so welcome. You bring a precious gift.”

Erin thought she heard mockery in her tone.

Mag Ruith, looking annoyed and uncomfortable, responded stiffly, “Moira.”

‘I know you,’ Erin said to Moira.

“If the Great Queen’s daughter remembers me, then I am doubly honoured,” replied Moira formally.

‘You used to be with Maeve.’

Moira was once Maeve’s advisor, but they argued and went their separate ways. Looking at her, Erin suspected everyone eventually argued with Moira.

“I was honoured by her confidence,” Moira answered, voice carefully neutral.

She took Erin’s arm, leading her up the stairs, leaving Mag Ruith, Finn, Oona and Cathbad to follow. Woven wicker chairs, each with its own side table, were placed in an intimate circle to the front of the spacious veranda. A centre table, within the easy reach of the guests, held a tea of soda bread, hot crumpets and brack, sliced and potted meats, sweet and savoury pastries, soft-boiled eggs, cheeses and butter.

Moira sat Erin down, asking Cathbad to be mother. While Cathbad fussed pouring tea, Erin watched Finn flop into his chair looking exhausted. She wondered how much more he had to go through before this was over. Seeing Finn’s eyelids droop, she felt her own eyes close in sympathy and fought to stay awake.

Like Finn, Erin had no appetite. They both picked at the food while the others attacked the meal with the determination of picnic ants. Conversation lay dead amid the feast's ruins. No wonder they are all so fat, thought Erin.

When servants came to clear away, Finn, rather like a child, asked to be excused. Despite her apparent devotion, it was not Oona but Cathbad who volunteered to show him to his quarters. Once he had gone, Mag Ruith let out a low disarming chuckle, which sounded to Erin like a sure sign of guilt.

“The poor boy is worn out from last night.”

“The Diketal de Kenna,” Moira observed. “I did warn you. So, what happened?”

At last some concern for Finn, thought Erin, warming to Moira.

Mag Ruith hesitated. “We had so little time.”

“What?” Moira rumbled, like thunder in a clear sky.

“Before the drug peaked.” Mag Ruith looked nervous.

“Finn freaked out,” Oona piped up. “Lucky, his muscles were cramped from sitting. It took two men to subdue him before we could give him a sedative. The doctor said his nervous system was out of control, much longer and his heart would have burst.”

Mag Ruith shot her a dirty look before opening his mouth to speak. Maybe he intended to reprimand Oona. Whatever, Moira beat him to it.

“I warned you!” she roared. “There were a dozen ways you could do this, hypno therapy, muscle relaxants, anything, but you had to have your stupid ritual.”

He shrugged, feigning indifference, “What can I say, I am a slave to tradition.”

**“Tradition my arse! This is no game you old fool! You could have lost him!”**

**Mag Ruith paled. Erin felt the fine hairs on the back of her neck rise as if the air was filled with electricity. Oona looked horrified at Moira’s outburst in front of a stranger. Mag Ruith opened his mouth but nothing came. He fell into helpless, and for him rare, silence.**

**“Sorry,” he eventually muttered.**

**Bursting into tears, Erin forestalled further attack from Moira.**

**“My dear, what’s wrong?” Moira asked.**

**Erin’s reply was an incoherent babble. She was still exhausted and the massive discharge of emotion was too much.**

**“Look what you have done now!” Moira shouted at Mag Ruith. “Is there no end to the damage you cause?”**

**“Oh dear me, tears! Never really was very good at this sort of thing! Leave you girls to it should I?”**

**Beating a hasty retreat, Mag Ruith made a mental note to thank Erin for his timely escape.**

**\*\*\***

**-no mistake then- Moira’s fingers flew as she spelt out the words in the hand ogham.**

**-no- Oona’s fingers sped back, -filid adamant- futures merge- happen soon**

**- how- asked Moira’s fingers.**

**-violence- poor maeve**

**-poor erin**

**-poor us- she all we have left- came Oona’s reply.**

**-what he say- Moira’s fingers flashed.**

Oona knew the only he could be Mag Ruith. -keep erin away maeve- sacrifice self for her

-erin & mac nessa- all lost- agreed Moira.

Hearing the latch on the bathroom door, Moira's fingers hesitated.

-think she knows- Oona's fingers quickly asked.

-knows something- tears

As Erin approached, the women's hands fell swiftly to their sides.

Erin had scrubbed her face rather than attempt to repair her makeup. She looked fresh and innocent, like a girl.

Moira moved to her. "Child I did not realise you were so close to the edge."

Oona hurried forward, guilty hands wanting to console. "You are not alone. You have us."

'Are you joking?' replied Erin flatly.

"You are Great Queen....."

'Maeve is Great Queen.' There was an edge of hysteria to Erin's voice. 'What happened to my mother?'

"Nothing," said Moira truthfully. Seeing the look on Erin's face she added, "I promise on my life nothing has happened to Maeve."

"The land is no longer owned," chanted Oona, out of the blue. "It is she who owns us. For she is Mother and her bounty must be cherished for the generations to come."

Erin looked at Oona quoting from Maeve's great speech, which continued: 'I heard our Great Mother cry out in pain, 'No More, No More,' ...and finished... 'If she dies what then becomes of us all?'



**“History is no longer about the past,” said Moira, also quoting Maeve. “It is about what we hold in trust for the future.”**

**Erin once again burst into tears. And the three women clung to each other, weeping in the lengthening shadows of a darkening world.**

**After taking what comfort they could, Moira broke the gloom. She dried her eyes, speaking in a brittle yet jolly way. “Come on girls, rally round. The do starts soon. We cannot let everyone down.”**

**‘Do?’ Erin asked, not thinking she could face a party.**

**“Every manse sends a delegation for Beltane so I arranged a bit of a girls’ night out. You know a few drinks and a movie.”**

**“Is it Dirty Harry?” interrupted Oona. “I love Clint,” she confessed to Erin.**

**‘Slow down,’ Erin said. ‘Why am I included?’**

**“You are Maeve’s daughter,” Moira replied as though it was obvious.**

**Erin looked questioningly.**

**“You and Maeve are symbols of hope. Without hope, all that is left is good government. If that’s all there is to look forward to, we might as well have Conor Mac Nessa. Heaven help us!”**

**“When Mac Nessa persecuted the communes, Maeve’s supporters fled to the Druids or the Church,” Oona briskly interjected. “Mag Ruith is a massive fan of your mother, always has been. She inspired all of this. What do you think we’re doing here?”**

**‘Maeve’s army of women still exists?’ asked Erin, incredulous.**

**“Yes.”**

**‘So why did you never help her?’**

**“Maeve refused us.”**

**‘Why?’**

**“I suspect she feared success more than failure,” Moira answered, voice carefully flat with honesty.**

**‘Rubbish,’ Erin snapped. ‘That’s just rubbish!’**

**“Yes, Daughter of Maeve, it probably is rubbish.” Moira was meek. “It is only my opinion and on reflection, probably quite a thoughtless one.”**

**Oona jumped in. “Mag Ruith wanted me to ask you to play Sovranty at Beltane tomorrow night. Will you do it? It would mean everything to us; all of us.”**

**“As Maeve’s representative of course,” Moira quickly added. “It is important you inaugurate Finn as Green Man, on Maeve’s behalf. You know, to begin it properly.”**

**‘Why didn’t he ask me himself?’ Erin replied.**

**“He was convinced you’d refuse,” blurted out Oona. “Will you do it for us... for Maeve?”**

**‘Let me think about it,’ replied Erin. ‘One more thing...’**

**“Yes Daughter of Maeve?”**

**‘Who the hell is Clint?’**

**“Who the hell is Clint?” Oona muttered darkly. “Girl, you ain’t lived!”**

## CHAPTER 33

### **B (beithe : birch) Banshee.**

*Ban is the Irish feminine prefix. Ban-shee literally means 'woman of the shee', a wailing fairy who foretells death in certain royal families*

**Maeve nursed the wee brown bottle. This was her first plan. And now, after the failure of Belfast, it was her last.**

**She struggled to remember the contents Fedelm rattled off: belladonna from nightshade and the witch flower aconite, deadly in all its parts, flowers, leaves, stem and root. There was scarlet cap and digitalis to give a final rush of strength before the strained heart gave out and capillaries burst in the brain. And there were other poisons to dull the pain; outer-world drugs, so rare, their properties were legendary.**

**Placing the bottle on the dressing table, Maeve looked at her reflection. The cancer had eaten so much, she barely recognised herself. Her face was like a living skull wrapped in wax-paper skin. Skin so beautiful, so luminous, it was saintly.**

**Methodically, she began applying thick liquid pancake, taking particular care with the deep bruising under her eyes. Rouge came next, then bright blue eye shadow and lumpy mascara; so old she had to spit on it to get it on the brush. Carefully dabbing her cherry red lipstick with the edge of a towel, Maeve critically regarded the enamelled**

mask before tearing open the powder box. Loose powder fell like a drift of late snow or early cherry blossom as she dusted her face to mat the worst of the gloss.

‘You look like something made up by an undertaker,’ she muttered fiercely to her reflection. Feeling the tears start, she added sternly, ‘Don’t you dare! If you start blubbering now, you’ll look a right auld mess.’

Gingerly, she dabbed a twist of towel at the corner of each eye.

Although Maeve was glad Erin was not here to witness her deterioration, she wished she could see her daughter one last time. I love you, she mouthed to the thin air. Life was good giving her the daughter her body could not conceive.

Maeve often wished she could be more like Erin, always ready to have a go and damn the consequences. In that respect, Maeve felt like a fraud. People saw so much that simply was not there. She knew she was a good theorist, and obviously an inspiration to many, but daily management was beyond her. If the truth was known, it was a relief when Conor Mac Nessa locked her up.

There was a rap on the door. Talk of the devil and he’s sure to show, she thought.

Getting up, Maeve knocked a cup of camomile tea; watching helplessly as the liquid spread over the vanity unit, floating the film of powder and dribbling off the edge. Looking at the wee brown bottle, she began thinking how easy it would be to carelessly knock it over and give up the whole desperate plan.

Another knock came. Without further ado Maeve picked up the bottle, removed the stopper and swallowed its contents; washing away the bitter taste with a slug of

whiskey. With heart banging in her chest, she lightly cried out, 'Come on in, lover boy. My door's always open for you!'

Conor Mac Nessa entered, the bolts snapping hard as the door locked behind him. He was shocked by what he saw. The smell turned his stomach.

'Want a drink?' She shook the whiskey bottle at him. He nodded gratefully. As she passed a half full tumbler to him, Conor realised, with horror, the smell was coming from Maeve.

'Bottoms up,' she said sitting on the side of the bed and patting the space besides her.

He downed his drink, hastily pouring another before sitting down next to her. He kept reminding himself how lucky he was the old bitch finally consented to marry him and make him Ard Ri. At last she'd admitted defeat. Old and ill, all Maeve wanted was her final days spent in peace and comfort. Looking at her, he was relieved to see how short those final days would be.

'Now if you are going to ask me,' Maeve said, 'at least do it properly, down on one knee. I have the feeling this will be the first and last time you do anything I ask.'

Conor obligingly went down on one knee beside the bed. "Will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?"

'Oh, it's such a shock, I don't know what to say...' Seeing Mac Nessa was in no mood to be teased, she changed her answer to a simple, and hasty... Yes.

He smiled grimly.

'You may kiss me,' she announced firmly.

Conor shuddered at the thought. At the last moment, Maeve had the decency to turn her face and present her

cheek, but not before he caught a whiff of her appalling breath.

‘How about a wee something to celebrate,’ she said.

‘I’ll drink to that,’ he agreed with relief, refilling the glasses, emptying the bottle.

‘Now what about this wedding?’ Maeve drained her glass in one, encouraging him to do the same. She pointed to a dozen or so whiskey bottles by the television. When he brought some over, she refilled the tumblers.

‘I want something so big everyone will know about it,’ she told him, ‘I want druids, priests; the works. And I haven’t even started to think about the dress! Drink up, can’t abide a man who can’t drink like one.’

Conor marvelled as Maeve laid out the plans for the service and the wedding feast. She had an instinctive grasp of ceremony and prerogative. This was the Maeve of legend, capable of ruling the land with a word. He wished she was thirty or forty years younger, in the flower of her womanhood. What a match they would have made. What an empire. What a dynasty.

As Maeve voluptuously described every last detail, she plied Conor with drink. He relaxed. She could see he thought this might turn out to be a very pleasant evening. When he emptied the last bottle, Maeve went to fetch a few more. Half way across the room, she hesitated, clutching her stomach.

‘What’s wrong?’ he asked.

‘My medicine,’ she groaned.

She dropped the whiskey bottles. They shattered on the cold stone floor.

**Desperately, Conor looked for a medicine bottle. There were too many bottles in her cluttered room. He did not know which was which.**

**Maeve collapsed.**

**He stood over her.**

**‘What medicine bottle?’ There was a whine in his voice. It would be just his fucking luck if the old cow died now; before they were married.**

**‘Help me up,’ she croaked.**

**Swaying slightly, Conor braced and reached out to Maeve. As he bent over, his foot skidded on a piece of broken bottle. Losing balance, he fell on top of her. He was shocked by how thin her body felt under the voluminous gown. When Maeve started screaming, Conor apologised. Ignoring him, Maeve screamed even louder. Her fists pummelled his face, nails tore his cheeks. Like a mad woman, she had the strength of ten men. It was all he could do to break loose.**

**As Conor struggled free, Maeve grabbed the hem of his jacket. Refusing to let go, she was dragged over splinters of broken glass as he desperately tried to scramble away. Conor felt the fabric give. As his coat ripped, he slipped on the wet floor, landing heavily on his back, knocking the wind from himself. Before he knew what happened, Maeve was on him, hands raking face and chest.**

**The taste of blood was enough to shake the drink off him. He delivered a sharp shove to Maeve, spinning her sideways. Conor was almost on his feet when her fragile body hit him in a low tackle. Caught off guard, his knees buckled. They collapsed together in a heap; Maeve clawing her way up his body; beating him around the head with her bony fists. Angrily, he shook her off, managing to stagger**

to his feet as she gained hers. He slapped her hard across the face to calm her hysterics.

Outside, the guards fumbled with the locks. Hearing their muted curses, thinking it would be only a few seconds before help came, Conor relaxed; damning himself a fool for ever trusting her. Seizing her opportunity, Maeve rushed him. One hand snaked out for his collar, nails tearing his neck as she grasped it. With superhuman strength, she pulled him to her and spat in his face. He recoiled instinctively, leaving the collar in her hand. When he looked again, Maeve held his dagger. She clung to it with both hands trying to keep the blade steady.

Knowing she did not have the strength to finish him, Conor smiled generously. “Give me the knife and we will overlook this upset.”

Maeve glared at him with such hatred he hesitated. Seizing her chance, in one blinding flash she turned the dagger and rammed it home. The blade entered the base of the throat at an angle, slicing the thick artery in the neck and smashing the windpipe. Maeve collapsed in a growing pool of blood.

Conor’s first instinct was to hold the wound together until the druids came. He gripped the dagger to pull it free. Even moving it slightly made the blood flow faster. Maeve was alive, but sinking fast. Her lips moved, but no sound came. She smiled. Then she died.

The full horror only hit as the final bolt on the door slipped back. The door creaked open. He heard a guard say, “Oh fuckin hell, whata ya done?”

He turned to the men with the bloody dagger in his hand. As if noticing it for the first time, he shifted it to his



other hand, back and forth, smearing Maeve's blood everywhere.

'It's not what you think,' he protested. Rubbing at the scabbing scratches on his face, he opened them up. Stupidly, he wondered if they could smell the drink on him. He wiped his face with his free hand, not realising how he spread blood over himself.

Attracted by the noise, others came. The press of bodies forced more and more curious people into the room. They stared down at Maeve's tiny, broken body and at Conor holding his dagger. They looked too shocked to comprehend what had happened.

"I didn't do it," he said, voice breaking, "It wasn't me."

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Under a fat yellow moon, the women returning from their big night out were all slightly the worse for wear. Much to Oona's delight, the film was Clint Eastwood's 'Magnum Force', which Erin thought particularly violent.

Oona was volubly telling everyone what she would do with Clint if the opportunity ever presented itself. Given the film's age, Erin thought there was every chance if Clint was not dead already, the good drubbing Oona fervently promised would finish him off for sure. The other women good-naturedly tried to shush Oona between squeals of outraged laughter at the graphic, not to mention pornographic, contents of her imagination.

Erin laughed along with them. It was a long time since she felt this easy in a group of people. Moira had offered sanctuary to her daughters at Lakeland, and she was sure the girls could not be happier here, or safer.

Without warning, an inhuman howling shattered the night. It rose and fell in intensity, sometimes low like a sobbing child and then as though all the demons of hell were unleashed. The women stopped dead in their tracks.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph, it sounds like the banshee.”

“Doan be stupid, sure it’s only wolves.”

Around them, came movement from the huts and tents as the keening penetrated people’s sleep. Storm lanterns were lit. Electric torches searched for. Random beams of light picked out timid faces in doorways. In various states of undress, people congregated around the knot of women. Fear had drained all trace of sleep from their faces. The air was thick with questions.

“To be sure it’s only wolves,” someone else repeated.

“If it is, it’s the bloody hound of Ossar then.”

“And do ya think it’s comin for ya with its great saucer eyes and slavering maw.”

“Don’t talk so bloody stupid.”

“Shush, you’ll be frightening the life out of the wee ones.”

“Doan you shush me!”

“For Christ’s sake shut your faces all of you,” cried Moira, brusquely taking charge.

Seeing Mag Ruith hurry towards her, she ordered him to take a group and open the gunroom. Only single men and women, she added unnecessarily. They all knew the drill: pair off and set sentry every twenty-five yards or so.

Mag Ruith wordlessly obeyed.

Although the sentries saw no marauding animals, the eerie sounds continued throughout the night, making sleep impossible. As a pale lemon dawn rimmed the velvet horizon, the wailing ceased. It was so sudden, Erin’s ears

**rung with a ghostly echo that left the silence even more unsettling than the nerve shattering noise.**

## CHAPTER 34

### **S (saille : willow) Senchus Mor.**

*The law tracts of the Senchus Mor say the world dies when the amity between the High King and the country is ruptured. 'Not a blade of grass will grow in the Land of Erin. There will be famine and the dryness of cows, the ruination of fruit, and a dearth of corn and acorns for the swine'*

Padraig was not surprised to receive the invitation to hunt with the High King. He saw it for what it was; a test of loyalty. It was May Eve, the day the court left for the summer palace at Tara, and Conor sent the invitation as a challenge. The nobles had to choose between leaving for Tara and becoming outlaw, or staying to condone Maeve's murder.

May Eve: Maeve. Funny, Padraig never associated the two before. Despite the fact Maeve's death stunned the court, leaving everybody sleepless and the corridors of Emain Macha as thronged at midnight as they were at midday, Padraig did not expect any of the spineless nobility to be missing from Conor's hunting party.

He himself was not unmoved by the news. His attitude was one of cautious joy, summed up by the phrase good riddance to bad rubbish. He found himself humming, 'Hey ho, the witch is dead, the wicked witch is dead,' until he realised it was neither Christian nor seemly.

**It really must have taken some bottle to murder the old girl, thought Padraig. Happily Conor Mac Nessa had plenty of bottle. Heaps and heaps of bottle. And most of them empty. It struck Padraig as richly ironic how Maeve's murder finally gave the High King the distinction he always craved. No longer first amongst equals, Conor Mac Nessa would now be a thing apart, like Cain after Abel. It would be interesting to see how he survived.**

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**Although Conor Mac Nessa hated to be kept waiting, he never minded the court waiting for him. Padraig and five fifties of noble knights huddled in the dismal rain while the court ladies, the hems of their dresses thick with mud, were forced to find what shelter they could. As Padraig expected, it was a full turnout.**

**Eventually Conor arrived, walking on a wooden path, hastily placed in front of him by a team of bobbing pages. The children, some young as five or six, shivering and soaked to the skin, dragged rough hewn planks, larger than themselves, with nothing but frozen and bloody bare hands. At the sight of Conor, a bleak and tremulous cheer went up from the frightened women. It left Padraig wondering if Maeve's death or the weather left them so dispirited. But in this land of omen and superstition, he knew one could easily cause the other.**

**There followed an embarrassing silence as the High King waited for some slavish noble to help him mount his horse. When it became obvious no one would volunteer, Cu Hullen, Conor's son, knelt down in the mud offering his back to the royal foot. Conor ignored the boy. The waiting**

dragged on with Cu Hullen kneeling in the mud and the High King standing on the sodden planking. Padraig finally broke the tension by signalling for a priest to crouch before the king.

As the full weight of Conor went on the priest's narrow back, the man staggered and fell face forward into the mud. Fortunately, Conor's foot was in the stirrup and the king safely mounted his steed. A few relieved guffaws at the hapless priest caused Conor to look round sourly. When he realised they were not laughing at him, he joined in. Although it would be a sad world if were not possible to laugh at the misfortune of others, this incident did nothing to shake Padraig's conviction the day had started badly.

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Despite the continuous bleak drizzle, the beaters had been at work since first light scouring the country-park for red deer. Rather in the style of wild-west cowboys on motorbikes, they rounded up the animals, driving them into a corralled enclosure of bare scrubby woodland barely an acre in size.

The High King, looking as though he did not have a care in the world, rode at the head of the hunting party, alternately trotting and galloping down the trails beaten out of the dead vegetation by the motorbikers. The sight of the dead land depressed Padraig. May Eve, Maeve. And not a leaf on the trees: not a blade of new grass. Tomorrow was the first day of summer and spring had yet to come.

About midday, the huntsmen arrived at the corral, where the deer herd patiently waited to be slaughtered. A hunting party was a grim business as the nobility assuaged

**their bloodlust on defenceless animals. It turned Padraig's stomach to witness the indiscriminate destruction of stags, pregnant does and yearling fawns. God's gift of life so thoughtlessly extinguished. It was meaningless and afforded no pleasure he could see.**

**The nobles approached the animals from the downwind entrance, which was carefully concealed behind broad brushwood covered gates so as not to panic the herd. The hunt's strategy was to sneak up on the animals and start shooting before they had a chance to flee into the scrub. Silently, the hunting party took up their places, awaiting the signal from Conor Mac Nessa.**

**To Padraig, the gentle-eyed beasts had the quiet dignity of early Christian martyrs. Like those sainted ones, these innocents were equally stainless. Not though innocence would save them, for already rifles were being slung from shoulders and revolvers taken from holsters.**

**The hunters froze when a white stag emerged from a thicket. Birds stopped singing as an eerie silence fell on the clearing. To the nervous nobility, the appearance of a white hart was a warning from the underworld, signifying the anger of the gods at Maeve's murder. As if they needed reminding.**

**Yet perhaps the beast was also something more. Perchance it betokened the passing of the awesome royal glory from Conor Mac Nessa, and the invulnerability such semi-divine power bestowed on him. Maybe the animal was a vessel to bear away High King's soul to the underworld.**

**Looking at the shining stag, the huntsmen could not help but recall the legends of loyal retainers, who killed such a radiant creature in the heat of the chase, only to find it their sovereign king transformed by magic. On this most**

**drear morn, would their lord and master, the High King, interpret shooting the animal as treason?**

**The magnificent beast walked unhurriedly to the place where Conor Mac Nessa hid behind wattle panel gates camouflaged with dead branches and bracken. Its massive head, bowed by the weight of huge seven branched antlers, burnished bronze by the low dark sky, spoke to Padraig of quiet strength, courage and wisdom. Stopping almost directly level with Conor Mac Nessa, the stag cocked its head, seeming to measure him with a solemn ruby eye as if a king regarded a king. Padraig thought Conor physically shrank in his saddle; as though judged by the beast and found wanting. With this thought, the Archbishop saw his opportunity to stop the massacre. No one would shoot while there was a chance of hitting the white hart. Surely Conor would not kill a beast symbolising his own perilous fate.**

**“Sire, for pity’s sake!”**

**Padraig’s words broke the spell.**

**The radiant beast cocked its head preparing for flight.**

**Bringing up his rifle Conor roared, ‘This one’s mine.’**

**Padraig saw Conor Mac Nessa as a lone high plains drifter, the last sharpshooter hunting the last buffalo: a relic, an anomaly; someone who by his very nature was unable to share an empty world with another species also on the edge of extinction.**

**The stag turned, leaping.**

**Padraig’s breath caught in his throat.**

**A single crack shattered the silence.**

**Birds took flight.**

**Bright arterial blood sprayed the air.**

**Crimson stained white.**

**The stag crumpled in mid leap.**



**Dead flesh hit dead earth.**

**The rain stopped.**

**The herd wheeled as one creature.**

**The bloodbath began.**

**In the long second between the stag's death and the commencement of slaughter, Padraig thought he heard a voice cry out, 'I am the stag of seven tines'. It was a line from the ancient poet Amergin, used in the coronation of an Ard Ri. Not sure if the voice was inside or outside his head, Padraig listened for the rest of the poem. If uttered, the rest of the poem was lost in the sounds of dying.**

**Watching the carnage, Conor reflected on what he had done. The stag's death marked the passing of a sovereign. He was now open game for anyone claiming to be his tánaiste. He might as well have put the gun in his mouth before pulling the trigger. Conor's tánaiste was his son Cu Hullen. Even though he considered the boy too cowardly to ever claim his right, it did not stop him wincing each time he heard a rifle shot.**

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**No celebration greeted the women disembarking from the Land Rovers and jeeps. The proud knights, huddled around smoking, sullen fires, speaking together in whispers, avoiding each other's gaze, ignored the womenfolk. Only the slaves were unaffected. Knowing no better they continued with the methodical flaying and butchering of the herd. Wandering up and down, inspecting the kill, the women absorbed the conflicting atmosphere of despair and anticipation. They formed**

groups around the men, harassing them for information. Everyone ignored Conor Mac Nessa.

“It’s all over!” Conor said quietly to Padraig, “Like it was for Art, Ayeleel and the others.”

Padraig did not think it prudent to remind the High King the reason it was over for his predecessors was that he, Conor Mac Nessa, had made it so in his furious lust for power.

“I suppose he will make his move soon.” Conor nodded over to Cu Hullen, deep in conference with Deirdre and her handmaidens. As Padraig looked at the young couple, he could not help but notice the abject horror on Deirdre’s face as she heard about the murder of the white hart.

“My reign has long passed the hundred moons and the druids say the end comes after a hundred months, the great cycle. Why can’t those damned druids be more definite, Padraig?” Conor asked.

Padraig thought it was not a good time to point out that even death, life’s one certainty, was uncertain. It was God’s final surprise.

“I try to make him afraid of me,” Conor continued as if thinking out loud, “so when the time comes, fear will make him slow. The Senchus Mor says if I kill my tawnishta, then my reign is extended by his.”

“Death is not the end, Sire.’ In attempting to console the High King, Padraig found himself merely sounding unctuous. With nothing else to offer he persisted. “There is paradise. If only you would accept baptism.”

“Padraig, they hate me now. If I was christian I would have no rights at all.”

“Declare yourself Ord Ree Sire, become another Rory O’ Connor. Finish what you have started. Defy them all.”

Conor clutched Padraig's hand. "I am too old and tired."

Padraig winced at the physical contact. Fortunately Deirdre broke the moment of intimacy by throwing herself at Conor's feet. Her pretty face was wet with tears. She had only known kindness from Conor Mac Nessa, who protected her from her depraved brother. Although genuinely tearful because the High King must die, she was also aware if Cu Hullen died too, there would be no one to save her from Egan.

Realising this, Padraig whispered sharply to Conor, "The child cries more for herself." Aware how his lack of charity may be interpreted, he hastily added, "Be strong Sire, if not for your own sake, then for this innocent girl-child."

Padraig's words stiffened the High King. All he needed was one person to depend upon him to do what he no longer had the stomach to do for himself. He spoke in his gruff but good-natured voice, the one reserved for children whose families posed no threat.

"Sweet child do not cry," his voice rung out over the encampment like the song of a dented trumpet. "Here, I have a gift for you, a fine deer hide and the brains to cure the leather."

As Conor signalled for a servant to fetch a hide, Deirdre's face lit up with adolescent greed. With the servant's approach, Conor remembered the white stag was his only kill that day. He was horrified he had been so careless, but could not take back what was freely given.

The hide of a white hart traditionally belonged to the Great Queen, the arbitrator of a High King's life and death. With Maeve's murder, Conor Mac Nessa had

**inherited her titles and privileges as though he were her tánaiste. As a man, he could not use such power. But, he could bestow it. By giving Deirdre the hide, he inadvertently made her Great Queen.**

**Deirdre was also horrified when she saw the gift. She too knew what it portended. Conor Mac Nessa had freely given her dominion over his life and death. She looked up seeking Cu Hullen. As the boy met her gaze, a wordless understanding passed between them.**

**When he next spoke to Deirdre, Mac Nessa's brusque yet kindly tone was gone. "I had no idea you and my son were so fond of each other."**

**The girl blushed guilelessly.**

**Padraig, shocked by what he saw in the High King's face, could not help blurting out, "But sire, they are only children."**

## CHAPTER 35

### **N (nin : ash) New Grange.**

*The Neolithic burial mound at New Grange is associated with Bruigh na Boinne, the Tuatha De Danann fortress on the River Boyne. The fortress was the home of the love god Angus Og and an entrance to the Otherworld. Findings in the mound chamber led early archaeologists to suggest the purpose of the site was more ceremonial than funerary*

A ground mist rising from the lake lent an air of melancholy to Lakeland. Smelly exhaust fumes from the idling vehicles congealed the clinging damp into oily smog. Fractious from lack of sleep and laid low by the dismal weather, nobody spoke as they boarded the coaches, charabancs, minibuses and campervans. So many, it made Erin think no example of man's desire for the perfect weekend get-away escaped the druids' round up.

When Mag Ruith abandoned Oona and Finn to join her, Erin suspected he was desperate for a private word about the ceremony. Maybe he did not want the humiliation of a public refusal. Thoughts of Beltane reminded her how horrific things got for the King of the Feast. Poor Finn, would they never leave him alone?

'No Bathtub?' she asked, waving cheerfully to the others. Her joke seemed forced, even to her ears.

**“He left early. The High King especially requested he supervise at Tara.”**

**If Mag Ruith was pleased, he didn't sound it. Maybe the gloomy morning had knocked the stuffing out of him too, for he was anything but his usual chirpy self. Erin sympathised. With Beltane not starting until evening, she was rather hoping to have shaken off her own mood by then.**

**Beltane began in the evening because the druids counted the day as starting at sunset. Beltane Eve marked the beginning of summer as All Hallows Eve was the start of winter. Lughnasa Eve in August was the harvest festival, a brief interlude of madness in the fat summer months, while Imbolc Eve in February marked the birth of lambs and the coming of spring.**

**The druids called each of those festivals a quarter day. They also classed equinoxes and solstices as quarter days too. By Erin's reckoning that made eight-quarter days in one year. Nine, if you counted New Year's Eve, another so called quarter day.**

**With what she thought of as typical contrariness, the druids claimed there were only five quarter days, to correspond to the five sacred directions of up, down, right, left and centre, otherwise known as north, south, east, west and here. Without any sense of irony, the druids maintained each sacred direction represented one of the five kingdoms of the Land of Erin; Ulster, Munster, Meath, Connacht and Leinster. In actual fact, there were only four kingdoms as Leinster never really got off the ground.**

**Long ago, Erin concluded the druids were as confused as they were confusing. Take the calendar for instance. Not satisfied with a perfectly good calendar, the druids devised**

one based on the ogham. Dividing the year into thirteen months, to fit the alphabet's consonants, they claimed the five vowels represented the quarter days. The only problem was the ogham had twenty letters; not eighteen. But ask Mag Ruith to explain and you would need to put a week aside. Not a seven-day week, but a ten-day week to fit the druid's year of three hundred and sixty days with five left over!

To think, Maeve feared their organisational ability. If Erin could speak to her mother right now, she was sure Maeve would laugh at her own fears. As for the quarter days thought Erin, nobody cared if there were four, eight or nine, as long as everybody had a jolly good knees-up at each and every one of them.

As expected, Mag Ruith asked her to play Sovranty. She had been considering her reply all night, but caught off guard when he blurted it out, she hesitated. Unsure what to say, she thought about the nine-quarter days, the five directions and the four kingdoms. Erin smiled to herself, perhaps Maeve, with her streak of wild anarchy, taught the druids better than she knew.

'Go on then, why not,' she answered almost immediately.

"That should be everything you need." Overjoyed, Mag Ruith pressed a carrier bag into her hands; the plastic crushed and moist from his sweaty palms. Inside was a crumpled green dress and long blond wig to cover her cropped nun's hair.

"And here is our car!" he crowed in happy relief as a red two-litre Volvo pulled alongside.

With Finn sitting in the front next to Oona, who was driving, it looked like Erin was expected to squeeze in

between bulky Mag Ruith and the equally hefty Moira; so much for the dignity of Sovranty.

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The Volvo braked heavily on the road running alongside the River Boyne to turn up a narrow track winding through a grim pine plantation.

“Of course this is the best way to approach it.” Mag Ruith nodded approvingly.

He had never stopped talking.

“I expect it will be deserted. Everyone will still be at Angus Bur, setting up the tents. Oh yes, they must be, it is only early. Plenty of time for a nice picnic lunch then! I expect you have one packed Moira?”

Moira, stony faced, did not spare him a glance.

“I’m so hungry I could eat, well I don’t know what I could eat. Whatever there is, I expect will be more than adequate.”

Pausing for neither confirmation nor dissent, he continued, “Be prepared Finn, to see the most beautiful sight eyes were ever made to see.”

Erin had to agree with Mag Ruith on this solitary point. For someone who had never seen the Neolithic tumulus of Bur na Boyne, or New Grange as it was also called, the first view was a thing of magic.

Oona parked the car in small clearing. When they got out Mag Ruith told Finn to close his eyes and the three women led him the twenty yards or so to the summit of a small grassed mound.

“Behold!” Mag Ruith commanded grandly.



The hill overlooked acres of emerald lawn, stretching the length of the river valley. The lazy breeze sweeping over the grass gave the illusion of silver tipped waves. Rising from the green sea was a sepulchral isle of fifty feet high white cliffs topped by a gently curved cap of grass. Its sides faced with a six-inch deep layer of bone-white quartz, caused the mound to glitter so much in the brightness of mid-day, it hurt your eyes to look. At its base lay a ring of ninety-seven pavement stones set edge to edge. To Erin they looked like a beach, breaking wind tossed waves of grass. In front of the stone beach, stood a semi-circular reef, twelve enormous upright herm stones; sentinels weighing eight to ten tons apiece.

“The glass mountain,” Finn muttered in amazement.

It was not surprising Finn saw a glass mountain. Ever since leaving Lakeland Mag Ruith had talked of nothing else but legendary glass mountains from where sleeping kings, like Arthur and Barbarossa, would rise again. Despite appreciating his ingenuity, Erin felt disgust at his callous manipulation.

“Inis Gutrin,” Mag Ruith whispered with reverence in his voice.

“That’s Glastonbury!” Moira sneered impatiently.

“My dear Moira,” Mag Ruith was imperious, “the geography may differ as might the language, but the sentiment is universal.”

“Well if you are going to say that...” Moira was in the mood for an argument. After three hours cooped up in a car with motor-mouthed Mag Ruith, she’d had enough.

Finn interrupted, “What’s that chair in the side?”

Erin saw Finn meant the entrance, which did indeed look like a giant throne from this angle.

**“I have been in an uneasy chair,” Mag Ruith chanted, “above Caer Sidon, whirling round without motion between three elements”**

**Recognising a quote from Taliesin, a sixth century Welsh bard, Moira was incredulous. “Good grief! We are pan-Celtic all of a sudden!”**

**Mag Ruith continued with blithe disregard. “You see the Revolving Isle. Revolving from the Latin ‘Volvo’ meaning, I go round; presumably referring to the wheels rather than any tendency to skid on icy roads. No, solid as a rock these old cars! Knew what they were doing when they made them!”**

**Mag Ruith flamboyantly gestured in the direction of the Volvo to make things clear. As if to emphasise his point, he began to revolve with arms held wide like a child playing aeroplanes. Turning in a great circle he stopped when spotting the baskets and blankets Oona was setting out.**

**“Oh lunch!”**

**Even Moira had to smile at this.**

## CHAPTER 36

**D (duir : oak) Dana.**

*The Irish trace their origins back to a mother goddess, Dana, who gave her name to the fairy folk, Tuatha De Danann: the Tribe of the goddess Dana*

When the sky was red in the west and violet in the east, the druids lit the rowan kindling of the need fires. All the need fires were lit from a single torch taken from the hearth fire where the sacred bannock cooked. The bannock, a large flatbread, was burned on one edge with a scorch mark the size of a thumb. When cooled, it was broken up and put in a sack from which the unmarried men each drew a piece like a lottery.

Waiting with the unmarried men, Finn looked as pathetically eager as the rest for his chance to pick out the burned portion. The lucky man was the King of the Feast, who led the procession and leapt the flames. At one time, he was savagely martyred; blood scattered and severed genitals secretly buried to ensure the fertility of the fields. Lucky for Finn, to whom the honour was destined to fall this year, the practice of human sacrifice was long abandoned.

“I can’t believe my luck,” he said, holding up the burned portion of bread.

‘Oh believe it buster,’ Erin replied, impatiently turning to Mag Ruith. ‘When do you want me?’

**“Not yet! There are preliminaries to observe before the crone appears,” Mag Ruith snapped.**

**‘Do I use a mask?’ Erin spoke as though Finn was too stupid to understand.**

**“Kind as your offer is,” Mag Ruith growled through gritted teeth, “another volunteered, in expiation for her sin. Hoping to end with new life what started with death.”**

**‘Dana?’ Erin paled.**

**As if on cue, wave after wave fell to the ground in prostration before an elderly woman with a long mournful face.**

**“Oh dear and she has her lovely daughter,” muttered Mag Ruith bowing his head in reverence.**

**‘Which is a bit embarrassing, now you have me,’ Erin hissed, dropping to one knee.**

**“Exactly!”**

**Finn stood, awkwardly gawking like a tourist.**

**Bowed nearly double by the weight of years, the small woman moved slowly and arthritically, leaning on a stout wooden staff. A stunning young blond guided her towards Finn, hand possessively at her elbow. Without looking right or left, the pair drifted through the wailing crowd, oblivious to their entreaties.**

**Ignoring both Erin and Mag Ruith, the old woman clung to Finn, fervently kissing his cheek over and over as she whispered, ‘Long have I waited for you.’**

**The stunning blonde, coolly looking Finn up and down, grinned as he reeled away, gasping for air. An appalling smell came from the old woman, bringing to mind lost memories of stable straw, sweat and urine. In the dim light Finn saw the old girl was filthy. Her great age was an illusion caused by dirt ingrained in every line and wrinkle.**

**Her rheumy eyes running with tears, left parallel clean streaks glistening on her cheeks.**

**“Come on mother!” The young woman firmly grasped the old lady’s elbow and pulled her away.**

**When she had gone, Finn asked Mag Ruith, “Who the hell was that?”**

**“Dana,” answered the druid, voice low and reverent.**

**“Well whoever she is, she could do with a bath! She stunk like an old horse box.”**

**“As befits the Celts’ eponymous goddess,” Mag Ruith replied. Mag Ruith rarely cracked jokes because he hated having to explain them: like now. “Eponymous from the Latin name Epona, meaning Great Horse, the Mother Goddess of the Celts.”**

**Finn wasn’t listening. He rarely did these days.**

**“Woosh! Erin cried in delight, indicating with a sweep of her hand, the joke going right over Finn’s head. ‘Dana is the wife of the man who caused the plague,’ she told Finn. ‘He was carrying it when blown to bits in the Christmas bombing. She blames herself...’**

**“The Goddess Dana created the Land of Erin.” Finn impatiently interrupted.**

**‘I know,’ replied Erin, annoyed by his obtuseness. ‘I live here.’**

**Continuing where he left off, Finn added the original Irish, called the Sons of Mil, came from the land of the dead. Erin had forgotten this. It left her wondering if that was why the outer-world was called Tir na mBeo, the Land of the Living.**

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**Finn quickly got bored with the procession. Leading a group of middle-aged women, in their best clothes, around New Grange while they beat the boundaries with brooms of rowan twigs tied to staves of willow, was not his idea of fun. From the corner of his eye, he saw choirs lining the route. Between them ran frantic druids, listening, consulting and awarding marks, leaving him to wonder if he would have to do the prize giving.**

**Large bonfires stood at the corners and at marker stones along the way. Here, gangs of young women, hair braided with ivy and in various states of drunken undress, danced barefoot in wild abandon, adding shrill ululations to the fevered beats of drum and jangling tambourine. When Finn approached, some broke off to roughly force strange tasting ale and sour cider down his throat, while others, with fierce cries, leapt the furious flames. Nearby, herds of white spectral cattle in makeshift pens lowed mournfully, upset by smoke and noise.**

**At some points, the boundary fires were close to those of the sister festivals in the Boyne valley. Here Finn caught glimpses of other kings leading other processions, other choirs and other druids running between them looking just as harassed. As evening deepened and people lit torches, he began to realise the size of the gathering on the plain. He guessed there must be thousands, little realising the druids had catered for over two hundred thousand across the three sites of the Boyne Valley. Together they formed the biggest single ceremony in the whole Land of Erin. The festivals at the Hills of Tara and Uisneach - serving Rathcroghan, the rebel stronghold in Connacht - followed with almost fifty thousand each, while the rest of the**

population, along with children and slaves, attended special festivals at local ancient sites all over the country.

Returning to the starting point, Finn felt grateful it was over. His head ached from the cheap liquor they'd forced down his throat, and his feet were killing him as he had to do the whole thing barefoot. If this was being King of the Feast, you could keep it next year.

Between the standing-stones marking the starting point, stood a fierce bonfire. As he approached, the crowd fell silent. Thick headed, Finn stopped, waiting to see what would happen. He forgot he too must jump the flames, until a druid dashed forward to prompt him. With no alternative, and reckless on booze, he decided a good run would see him through. As Finn backed up, the crowd chanted, "Jump! Jump! Jump!"

In a second, he was over the fire and safe on the other side. The crowd cheered ecstatically as masked men rushed forward throwing damp straw on the fire to make it smoke. Others pulled an X-shaped cross from behind the standing-stones. Once more the crowd fell silent. All Finn could hear was the cries of terrified cattle as druids drove the herds between fires to purify them.

When someone pulled a hood over his head Finn panicked, remembering what happened last time someone put a hood over his head; perhaps these very men. Pushed violently to the ground, he felt coarse rope tighten around his neck and rough planking against his back. Grabbing his arms they tied him spread-eagled to the cross, binding wrists and ankles.

The crucifix jerked wildly upright, leaving Finn queasy and disoriented. With heat beneath him and suffocating

smoke filling the hood, he pissed himself in fright. Mortified because he had, drunken shame brought him to his senses.

As acrid smoke stung eyes, nose and throat, he realised he was hung over the fire. He tried to console himself with the thought the druids would not let any harm come to him, but prayed to the star gods just the same. Holding his breath until lungs burst. Hoping he would pass out. Knowing he would not. Finn gasped and choked on thick green smoke.

The foul oily fumes left him heaving, desperate to vomit. He was scared to vomit in case he choked to death with the rope around his neck. Finn vomited, gagging on the rancid burning in throat and nostrils. Fearing he could take no more, his mind floated free. Drowning must be like this, was his last thought as rainbows raged, rampaging in his head.

Seeing Finn's body slump, the crowd knew the magic neared. In one voice, they chanted the sacred 'Song of Amergin', poet and judge, to help the King through the spirit changes of the year. These were the thirteen months and though the crowd did not know it, these were the secrets of the ogham. Finn's survival would bode well for the coming harvest.

**'I am the wind of the sea,' they sang.**

**Answering in antiphony, 'For depth'**

**I am the wave of the sea.**

**For weight**

**I am the sound of the sea.**

**For fear**

**I am the stag of seven tines.**

**For strength**

**I am the hawk on the cliff.**



**For sureness**  
**I am a ray of the sun.**  
**For brightness**  
**I am the dew on a flower.**  
**For clearness**  
**I am a boar.**  
**For valour**  
**I am a salmon in a pool.**  
**For wisdom**  
**I am a flood on a plain.**  
**For size**  
**I am a hill of poetry.**  
**For knowledge**  
**I am a battle-waging spear.**  
**For to slay therein**  
**I am the god whose head is afire.**  
**For inspiration**

**Who...**  
**Knows the markings on the dolmens?**  
**Who...**  
**Knows where the sun sets?**  
**Who...**  
**Knows the ages of the moon?**  
**Who...**  
**Knows the rising of the stars?**  
**Who...**  
**Brings the fishes from the sea?**  
**Who...**  
**Brings the weapons from the hill?**

**They chanted the questions beneath Finn's sagging body as if expecting answers.**

**\*\*\***

**As Finn was lowered from the cross, Erin thought he should count himself lucky. At Tara they put now Conor Mac Nessa in a sack and played the game of Badger in the Bag. Everyone got one good swipe at the High King with a hazel stick, a so-called 'wattle of knowledge'; to knock some sense into him as they literally beat the crap out. A small price to pay for dominion of this fair land, she thought.**

**Free, Finn struggled unsteadily to his feet. Eager hands pulled off the hood. He stood unsteady, swaying, blinking painfully in the blinding light. At the sight of his baleful red eyes, an almost sexual sigh rippled through those nearest, followed by a rising tide of rapturous moans and shrieks. As if a dam broke, everyone moved at once, crowding in. Strangers hugged him. Men slapped his back and shoulders. Women tried to snog him.**

**Hooded men fought through the crowd, pushing them away, giving Finn room to breathe. It was then he realised it was still night and the brightness came from banks of dazzling lights. Two great television screens, twenty feet high, showed Dana bathed in a spotlight, like a halo around her head, standing at the tunnel leading from the mound. It was the same the tunnel Finn mistook for a giant throne. Tottering unsteadily, leaning heavily on her cane, she staggered along the stage to stop at Finn. A druid put a leather bucket in his hand. Masked men lifted Finn up to her. The crowd murmured restively. Finn had survived the**

ordeal. He was King of the Feast. It was party time. So what the fuck was this?

‘In the beginning was the Mother.’ Dana said to Finn. Her voice was relayed through a radio microphone pinned to the neck of her robe. On either side of her, the twenty-foot high television walls flickered to show black space filling with bright gas-clouds, stars and nebulae: the birth of the universe in glorious technicolour.

Watching television, the crowd relaxed with a sigh of collective contentment.

‘Seeing only void, the Mother mated with the serpent. He was of the earth and all the things of the earth were of him.’ Dana now spoke directly to her captive audience. ‘From this union she brought forth the world egg which split into this Land of Erin below and the arc of heaven above.’

Dawn broke with the light of a billion suns, fading into a dizzying fly-by of the Land of Erin’s lakes and plains. Hearing her name, Erin snatched up the plastic bag containing the green dress and the wig, and hurried to change.

Dana continued in slow measured tones that reverberated over the plain. ‘In those days, the world was unformed. From three rivers and nine lakes the Mother divided the good earth. Mixing the red soil of the good earth with her spittle, the Mother moulded Adam. His name was Dogtha, the Red King and he was Green Man.’

When Finn’s face appeared on the giant screens, the crowd heaved the same sexual sigh as before.

‘So it came to pass, the Green Man laid his cloak of grass and dew over the brown naked body of Mother Earth, clothing her in white, green and gold, adorning her

with flowers, the jewels of meadow and field. With the Mother so bejewelled, the beloved son named the things of the living world and brought them into being. And the Mother saw this was....’

“Good!” the crowd yelled in joyful response, getting into the swing of things.

‘So great was her love for her first-born, the Dogtha, she offered him the apple of immortality. Her husband, the serpent, grew jealous. He bit her son, smiting him dead.’

“Nooooo....” wailed the crowd playfully.

Erin returned to see Mag Ruith manhandling a large horned viper.

‘What’s that?’ she asked.

“Rubber,” he wheezed and winked. He was dressed in his tugan, hence the asthma.

‘With the Red King dead, nature mourned. Winter came to the world. Yet the Dogtha was not dead, for with the sacred apple lodged in his throat, he only slept awaiting the kiss of life. After long dark months, the returning sun warmed his cold dead flesh. The Green Man woke from sleep. Mother Earth rejoiced. Spring came once more, as dressed in green the Red Man wedded Mother Earth and made her fertile. Who names King Adam?’ demanded Dana.

“I Mog Roith, name King Adam, Fionn Mac Coull!”

Recognising Finn’s name from the Bullfest prophecy, the crowd cheered deliriously. The liberator had come and if he lived, they would tell this story to their grandchildren; if they were lucky enough to have any.

‘Do you mark Fionn Mac Coull to die and be reborn as Green Man?’ asked Dana.

**“I do!” replied Mag Ruith. Glittering with iridescent darkness, he held the huge rubber snake aloft. The static in the feathers made his contact mic crackle and sing.**

**‘Do you Fionn Mac Coull accept?’ Dana asked Finn.**

**Not having a microphone, Finn could only nod when prompted.**

**A skilful play of lighting changed the atmosphere on the stage. Flooding the monument’s face, it turned the principle players into silhouettes. Spotlights highlighted Finn and Dana, Mag Ruith and the snake. The euphoric audience gasped in awe at the unfolding spectacle.**

**‘I am the land. Shall I wed my firstborn?’ Dana’s voice thundered.**

**“Aye!” screamed the crowd in ecstasy.**

**‘I am the crone at the well. Shall I kiss the youngest son?’**

**“Aye!”**

**Dana moved to Finn.**

**Erin crept from obscurity.**

**‘Kiss me Finn!’ the old woman demanded.**

**“Kiss! Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!” echoed the crowd.**

**The lights flickered momentarily, before flaring back up, painfully bright. When the glare died, the crone was gone. Erin as Sovranty, goddess of the land, was kissing Fionn Mac Coull.**

**When Finn broke away from Erin’s savage kiss, Mag Ruith swiftly brought the rubber snake’s open jaws to the back of his neck. With everybody’s eyes adjusting from the blinding flash, they could barely make out Mag Ruith and the snake, never mind the hypodermic syringe he slyly emptied into Finn’s buttock.**

Murmurs became cheers as the electrified audience replayed what they saw. The beautiful woman, Sovranty, was a puzzle. It was not Dana's daughter, so who could she be? When pilgrims from Connacht recognised Erin, the news rippled through the huge crowd.

"Erin," they chanted in a growing, rolling roar, like the voice of thunder in the mountains.

"Erin."

Hearing her name, love and pride flooded through Erin. This was her destiny and these, her people.

"Erin, daughter of Great Queen Maeve," tumultuous voices screamed in adoration.

"Erin.

"Great Queen!"

"Erin!"

"Queen of Queens!"

Over the hundreds of thousands reverentially yelling her name, Erin distinctly heard a woman at the front say...

"So that's Erin is it? Gees us Maryanne Josef, doesn't she look fucked!"

"Oh, not half!" her friend agreed.

## CHAPTER 37

### **G (gort : ivy) Green Man.**

*In Ireland the sacred High King or Ard Ri is the Green Man – the symbol of the land’s fertility. The Book of Ballymote makes this clear, for when talking of the Ard Ri’s reign it says, his is the wearing of three crowns, the crown of corn, of flowers and of oaks*

**A band of uilleann pipes, fiddle and drum struck up a jaunty jig as Finn vanished into the mouth of New Grange. Barbecue smells left mouths watering. Realising how hungry they were, the crowd cracked open beer bottles and passed round the whiskey jar while steaks sizzled over flames and potatoes baked in the embers.**

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**Disoriented and nauseous, Finn focused on the spiral markings carved at the mound’s entrance. The spirals revolved, gathering speed, faster and faster until the pinpricks of light blistering across his retinas formed a frantic whirling tunnel, spinning without motion. Far away, in the eye of the storm, Finn recognised the haunted place of dream; a desolate, frozen hell, featureless and white. This was the sepulchral isle, where the dead go to learn their fate: damnation or rebirth.**

Recognition brought movement. He started to fall, plummeting through blind swirling emptiness; smashing, at last, into the merciless shore. With head pounding to the raging surf, his empty stomach heaved, retching up bitter, thin bile. What Finn thought sand, was sun-bleached bone; a graveyard for all who came before him; a prison for those who never left.

With pupils contracting, the searing white landscape shrunk to a single point shining the length of a corbelled corridor, his entrance to the underworld. Inked in shadow, the rocky walls around him bloomed into a textured wonderland. Step by step, fingertip-by-fingertip, he explored the cracked uneven surface, searching for meaning; understanding only ever a heartbeat away. Some signs were easily read: leaves, ferns and spirals carved by man. Others, mere suggestions, were formed by aeons of slow dripping water. In themselves liquid and transmutable, they echoed ancient legends, or hinted at stories yet untold.

Gorging greedily on the sculptured walls, his hungry eyes distinguished subtle mineral hues glittering with mica and quartz; miniature diamonds sparkling with the flick of an eye or a shake of the head. Oily stains dimly gleamed in copper blue and malachite green. Bands of chromium yellow shaded from umber through ochre to blood red rust. The passageway, living and breathing, geometrically unfolded in a formless flowering. Shapes, suggesting men, mutated from animal to vegetable in such quick succession that features and parts of one were left worn by another.

Finn was no more than an instant, a frozen moment in time. A mote caught in a sunbeam, without aim or purpose, past or future, dancing on eternity's breeze. Crushed by the



weight of the world, he felt blood compress to oil, flesh to coal. Desperate to shake off the dark damp oppression of mother earth, he longed for sun on skin, to breathe clean fresh air. To lie on sweet green grass under acres of turbulent sky, reading protean cloud for signs and portents. To view magical lands and fabulous beasts in the ever-changing, never-ending, vapid billowing towers. To watch as they formed and reformed, drifting from one thing to another, even in the very moments of dissolution.

A rumble shook Finn from feet to fingertips. He saw a shock wave given physical shape by concentric rings of rock dust shaken from the ceiling. It hit with the speed of a car crash, snapping back his neck, forcing the air from his lungs. The impact sent Finn sprawling to the ground.

Hearing only the hollow whistle of ringing ears, Finn felt blood, tasted blood. A red hot blade snapped in his guts when he moved. Struggling to his feet, another wave came. Although he could no longer hear, he saw it in the careering dustcloud. Whimpering, Finn dropped back to hands and knees as it shook the eyes in his head, rattled his teeth and bones, and liquefied bowel. Through choked back tears, he watched the sandy floor dance for a single moment, before settling as spirals.

He met the next boom head on, hunkering down like a man in the face of a raging storm. The violence crashed through him from head to foot, leaving sinews wrenched to breaking. Cramps so unbearable, he thought he would shit out his insides and die. Spirals danced to circles. Another nerve grating boom made circles, chevrons in the sand. Boom! The chevrons smoothed to ripples. Boom! The ripples vanished as the floor fell flat.

Sweating, crying, dying a little under each assault, Finn slithered on his belly like a snake. Patterns in the sandy floor reformed in strict sequence; spirals to circles, chevrons to ripples, then back to flat. The patterns changed every few heartbeats. Each change brought such excruciating agony, he thought he would piss and shit blood. Inch by tortuous inch, Finn dragged himself through the dancing sand. His teeth ached. Bones ached. Blood thundered. His aching head banged so bad his eyes burned.

Eventually, he reached a small vaulted chamber. The booming stopped. All was still. Although his stomach cramps were ferocious and head raged, his vision cleared, muscles relaxed and skin no longer felt rubbed raw. In the hazy illumination of smoking torches, Finn saw a raised mound, topped by a single slab of rough hewn rock, dripping with flickering candles. At the altar's centre sat a tall three horned crown, golden and glittering. Slithering along the floor, he slid into a shallow boat-like depression. A voice thundered, 'I am the stag of seven tines.'

The words brought new agony; blistering pain, sharp as the lightning bolt, the lash of heaven. He started shaking and could not stop. Sure he would bite off his tongue, Finn curled into a ball, clenching his jaw, grinding teeth shut. A yawning pit swallowed him. He fell into darkness.

Not darkness but light; brilliant, blinding, scorching light. At its blazing heart, a stag-horned god wrestled a great horned snake. The figure was so skilfully wrought, it pulsed with life. Suddenly Finn was both god and the snake coiled around his hands.

**‘I am a stag of seven tines,’ he heard his own voice say.**

**God and snake wrestled still, but now at a distance. He saw every detail: each glittering scale, each sweating pore, knotted sinew and straining muscle of the naked god.**

**The god’s voice, no longer his own, echoed in his head. ‘I am a hawk on a cliff.’**

**The snake writhed in his hands, attempting to strike.**

**‘I am a boar.’**

**The horned god bent the snake.**

**‘I am a salmon in a pool.’**

**Abruptly the snake ceased struggling as slowly the god forced its tail into its mouth.**

**‘I am the god whose head is afire.’**

**Tail in mouth the serpent was a circle, without beginning or end.**

**‘I am!’ the horned god cried in triumph.**

**The vision died. Pain faded. Except for a headache Finn felt fine; aching in every muscle and stiff as a rag through a mangle, but thankfully fine.**

**\*\*\***

**There was movement at the chamber’s edge. What Finn took to be solid walls, were leather curtains. The chamber was not a circle but a Celtic-headed cross. The passage he crawled through was the stave, while three curtained recesses formed the arms and head. Jangling discordant music filled the room, wailing pipes and skittish drums like pounding hearts.**

From behind the curtains appeared three naked slim young women, with wide round hips and impossibly heavy breasts. One held a jug and drinking horn, the others golden water ewers. They moved in a sinuous rhythm matching the pounding in his head.

The smoky torchlight cast dancing shadows over the women's leprous white skin, concealing and revealing blood red lips, nipples and vulva. They had blue tattooing around the eyes and completely shaved bodies. Finn found their naked private parts erotic, yet vaguely repulsive. He watched them come for him, helpless as a fly in a web.

The first woman filled the drinking horn from the jug, solicitously holding his head to help him drink. The strange oily liquid tasted of bush fires and moonlit pools, heather from the moors, pine cones and honey. It cleared pain and weariness with the first draught.

Putting down the drinking horn and jug, she joined her sisters in soothing his limbs with tiny fluttering caresses. The room filled with perfume, at once both light like flowers and heavy as beasts in rut. A starving man at a feast, Finn strained every nerve to catch the fragrance. Their teasing touch left his skin erupting with raspberry blotches.

Becoming bolder, the women tore off his clothes with lazy but savage movements. Their heavy breasts slid over his naked sweaty flesh as he was stripped. Tossed between them like a doll, Finn's weakened body offered neither resistance nor assistance. He wanted and rejected them. Desired and feared them. He was sure their vaginas had teeth and would rip off his eager manhood.

When he was completely naked, the women washed Finn with gritty damp rags; dipping them into the water

ewers that smelled of rose and almond. Rubbing and kneading his flesh to remove sweat and grime, they rubbed and kneaded beyond the need for clean, giving him a raging erection, to pulse in time with his banging headache. The women scoured Finn so hard his skin glowed red like Adam: the Red Man, or the Dagda: the Red King. Unbinding long luxuriant tresses, they dried him with their hair.

When finished, each presented an object fetched from the altar stone: the crown, a golden torc and jade axe head. One laid the crown at his feet, and the other the axe above his head. The woman with the torc squatted over him, legs wide, twisting the coiled metal band around his neck. As she did, her tongue sought his lips. He opened his mouth, surrendering to her. While her tongue teased, she slowly and deliberately, rubbed her shaved mound against the flat length of his stomach from navel to groin. He felt the minute catch of each tiny bristle as her shaved pubis, pulling at his tender flesh, made his belly muscles ripple. Her moistness left a trail on his skin, like a mark of possession.

As she caressed Finn, her sisters massaged the soles of his feet. Tongues explored the gaps between his toes, licked the sparse hairs on the top of each foot and nibbled the calloused skin of his heels. Lips worked past the Achilles' tendons, along his calves to the back of the knees and up the sensitive inner thighs to where the root of his cock met the crease of his buttocks. As one licked the muscular ring of his anus, before moving on to suck and squeeze his balls in her mouth, the other fellated him. His sack tightened, preparing for ejaculation.

Arching her body, the woman sitting on Finn presented herself. Stretching up her belly and opening legs wide, he saw the hardened clitoris half buried in the soft folds of her vulva. He tried reaching up to touch her, but she held his arms. Arching her back, bringing her pelvis to his face, he smelled her coming. Her dark intoxicating scent, made his tongue flick out to marry smell with taste. Teasingly, she stayed out of reach, hips moving in time to a tiny vaginal pulse. With her honeyed scent despoiling his senses, Finn felt warm yielding pressure on his cock. It was pleasure so agonising, it squeezed out tears.

When he opened his eyes, the woman was gone and one of her sisters furiously worked his erection. Her long slim fingers separated her vaginal lips and with a flick, she took the last half-inch. Unsatisfied, she pushed down, until there was no more to give, no more to take; letting him fill her up.

With grim precision, she began pumping. Finn felt her tender insides caressing the length of his shaft. Her hands pressed hard on the long muscles of his thighs as she pulled herself off him until his penis barely penetrated. Swiftly, she plunged down with such fury that he felt their pubic bones crack together.

Her rhythm increased until it matched his throbbing head and he could hold back no more. His hardness hardened, thickness thickened. Sensing the impending explosion, she leaned backwards, jerking his penis down. With a final brutal thrust, she drove him deep. He felt the weight of her arse smack his balls. As he spurted in her, she gave a wild triumphant howl.

After climax, Finn did not go limp, but remained hard as the women's fingers, lips and tongues continued to work him. With the pressure building, a second woman lowered herself down. He felt the subtle difference between the two, this one tighter and dryer. She did not have the smoothness of the first, but a slight abrasion that left his whole length tingling with each movement. As he fucked, he kissed the others, playing with their impossibly heavy breasts.

Following the lines of smooth white flesh, his hand found a mound, electric with short bristle. He greedily reached inside, pawing at the swollen pearl. His other hand pinched a nipple, grazing a tender areola with a fingernail. Drops of milk rose from the pores like sap from a broken flower. As they melted into a sweet glaze, his mouth hungrily sought the breast. The breast was denied.

Cruelly, he rubbed the clitoris with an intensity to match the pounding on his own tender prick. At last, he came in a fury that made him feel his very life was being drained. He had come twice now and marvelling at his stamina, was convinced he could go all night. His ardour showed no sign of flagging. Quite the reverse, for his cock seemed harder, thicker and longer than it had ever been before. Like a bull's or a god's, it throbbed and flexed like the spear-plough eager for pastures to furrow.

I am a battle-waging spear.

The third woman was the first who tantalised Finn. She took her place on him, cream and fire. He could not wait to fuck her. Arrogant in confidence, he joined her gyrations with lazy thrusts of his own, until coming, almost unwilling, to spastic climax.

Now the three were serviced, it was time to service the three as one. The women encouraged acts as far beyond sex

as sex is beyond procreation; acts of pure pleasure, in equal measure selfish and giving. Unlimited by ego or the need to please, it was a form of sex running from skin to skin, from gland to mouth, bypassing intelligence, emotion and the fiction of romance. A sex of nerve endings and chemicals excreted and absorbed through the epidermis. It was an excess of sex, a luxury of sex, an end in itself, free of thought, desire and guilt.

In turn, each full moon arse was presented to be fucked doggy fashion in savage short thrusts; as the bull fucks the cow, the stallion the mare and the dog the bitch. After, when the breast was granted, he sucked greedily on the hot sweet milk, moving between the three women with their pendulous over full breasts like the infant reared by the she-wolf sucks at each of her many tits.

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He woke cold and alone, with the torches guttering in their sconces and the women gone. He sniffed the room smelling old sex, picking out each woman by scent. On their smells was his smell, where he had marked his territory. Crawling towards fresh air, he was blinded by sunlight, although his body said the day was young.

At the entrance to the upper-world he paused and sniffed the morning, smelling dew, dead fires, crushed grass, burnt meat and alcohol, the aromatics of lust, defecation and fear: all the smells of the herd. His ears pricked for sound but heard none. On all fours, he cocked a leg and pissed against the stone, before moving into sunlight.



Emerging into the open, Finn struggled to stand upright. A cheer burst from the pregnant crowd in a mighty roar; the sound of good news travelling fast. The noise hit like a suckerpunch. Instinctively he jerked back, wanting to turn and run. Memory returned with the shock of adulation. For a single moment the two sides of nature, body and mind, stood balanced, as though expecting him to choose. In the end, mind won and the beast sunk back to gut feelings, instinct and hunches. Finn remembered who he was, where he was and why he was here.

When Finn realised he was naked, his hands flew to cover his genitals. When the crowd cheered even wilder, he desperately looked for somewhere to run. He almost fled back into the tunnel, before realising why they cheered. He had survived the ordeal and was now Green Man. And his dick, in a manner of speaking, was what they waited all night to see. Taking his hands from around his stiffening prick, he clasped them above his head shaking them right and left in the universal sign of victory. Fionn Mac Coull, champion of the world.

Erin came from the shadows, throwing a cloak over his shoulders and handing him a pair of trousers. Feeling big, big as he looked, King Finn pulled them on, reluctantly covering his sceptre and orbs, the symbols of true authority.

A table and chair were hurriedly brought and Erin served him breakfast like a good wife. Piling his plate with food, she silently prayed he would not make a bollocks of things. Although to be fair, he had done pretty well so far.

Aware of a disturbance in the crowd, Erin looked up curiously as Mag Ruith, still in tugan, and Moira joined her and Finn on stage. Wearing the feather cloak all night had

brought Mag Ruith out in an allergic rash. His face was blotched from the shave of his tonsure to where the folds of sagging flesh disappeared into the high collared robe. His lips, nose and eyes looked baggy and sore.

The crowd parted noisily; the noise masking the sound of a car, racing for the monument. Out a tiny Mini Cooper, the overweight Cathbad flowed like a genie from a lamp. Wiping his balding shaved forehead, and then his glasses, he blinked myopically at the crowd, before struggling, breathless, towards the platform. When in hailing distance he wheezed to Erin, “Great Queen.”

Erin bowed graciously, thinking it part of the performance.

He turned to Mag Ruith, wheezing heavily as Mag Ruith wheezed back.

“Conor Mac Nessa... marrying Deirdre; Cu Hullen... rebelling.”

‘What?’ Erin cried out in astonishment.

“Made her... Great Queen...,” Cathbad explained in broken fragments. The best his broken lungs could manage, “... with white stag’s hide...”

‘How?’ she demanded. ‘How did he do that?’

“He... killed... Maeve.”

‘Maeve’s dead?’ she whimpered; the life draining out of her.

A wave of outrage rippled through the stunned audience. As each titbit was digested, the noise grew into an enraged roar. Erin wanted the crowd to shut up so she could concentrate on Cathbad’s voice. It was like a wall had descended that nothing could penetrate. What little got through made no sense. All she felt was a huge emptiness. Growing, gnawing, until only the mindless cry of a stricken

animal could free it. Erin was frightened if she let the pain out, the scream would never stop.

Cathbad struggled for breath. Allergy or exertion she wondered, before realising it was nerves. Why was Cathbad nervous?

“The five kingdoms... are behind Cu Hullen.”

It suddenly struck Erin that Cathbad’s real news was Cu Hullen’s rebellion. That was unexpected. The rest they already knew. Maeve’s death; they already knew about Maeve. It was no surprise. They expected it. Once Erin understood that, it was clear every word Cathbad spoke was confirmation not revelation.

‘You knew,’ she said to Mag Ruith in disbelief. It was a statement not an accusation. The realisation focused her yawning emptiness into growing rage.

‘You bloody knew... You bloody... knew... You...’ She wanted to hammer Mag Ruith senseless with her fists. Despite Maeve’s warnings, she trusted him. And he deceived her.

“It was the banshee,” Mag Ruith gasped back, words ending in a breathy whistle. He would not meet her gaze.

‘Liar!’ she screeched. ‘You knew before the banshee.’

Moirra looked destroyed. “It was to stop you sacrificing yourself for Maeve. Maeve did not want it and neither did we.”

Erin ranted at her, ‘Don’t tell me what Maeve wanted me to do. And don’t tell me what to do either.’

Moirra was solicitous. “You must not blame yourself.”

‘I don’t! I blame you bunch of conniving bastards!’ screamed Erin. ‘I’ve got to go to her!’

“And what would that achieve?” Mag Ruith had turned from red to purple, like an early morning sunset.

**‘Cu Hullen’s at Tara?’ Erin asked Cathbad.**

**“You cannot go to Cu Hullen,” Mag Ruith wheezed, “Fionn is Ord Ree.”**

**‘Your Ord Ree,’ Erin snapped back.**

**Mag Ruith cleared his throat of old dust mite shite in a mighty sneeze. “You cannot abandon Fionn now.”**

**‘Finn! Finn is it? You make me sick! Listen to me Finn, they’re using you,’ she roared in Finn’s face. ‘Mog Ruth, Moira, even your precious Oona, they’re all using you. You mean diddly-fucking shit to these people! You’re just part of some mad grand plan! King of the Feast, Green Man, it’s all no accident! Ask him, go on, ask him or ask your precious Oona. They killed Michael Ashworth and now they’re killing Robert Finn. And in the end they’ll kill Fionn Mac Coull. And when they do, you’ll be really dead. And there’s no coming back from that one.’**

**Mag Ruith opened his mouth to protest.**

**‘Go on,’ Erin screamed defiantly. ‘Tell him the truth. For once in your miserable life, tell the poor sorry bastard the truth.’**

**Mag Ruith shrugged.**

**“I am Michael Ashworth,” Finn said.**

**‘Yes you bloody are,’ Erin replied, and with that she stormed from the platform to trek across the field.**

**Men flocked in Erin’s wake, while the women set to keening, tearing their clothes and rubbing ash into their hair. If they were all that were left, then it was up to them to pay Maeve the honour due in full.**

**Watching Erin and her army depart from the ruined lawns of New Grange, Mag Ruith turned to Moira, wheezing piteously, “I fear, I may have snatched defeat from the very jaws of victory.”**

**“Oh shut up,” she replied without rancour.**

**Finn had started to convulse. He was down on the ground with limbs rigid, jerking and spasming like an epileptic. Grabbing a spoon off the table, Moira wrapped it quickly in her hem of her robe. Ignoring the smell of vomit and shit, she forced it through his jaws, so he would not bite off his tongue.**

**Mag Ruith looked on helpless; face contorted by the agonies of allergy. Now, when he could take off his tungan, he did not think to do so. He broke into a coughing fit as the first of Erin’s followers reached the edge of the conifer plantings. Oona came to his side and together they watched the men vanish into the plantation.**

**“She’s leading them wrong,” he wheezed.**

**“She thinks she’s doing what’s best,” Oona said quietly.**

**“No,” Mag Ruith gasped and pointed, “Tara’s that way.”**

**Where he was pointing, Oona spied a splash of white at the tree line. Overnight, a solitary hawthorn had burst into fragrant bloom. Hawthorn, or the Mayflower as it was called, was sacred to the White Goddess. It was a sure sign of hope if she ever saw one.**

# In Finn Mac Cool Part 2

Finn Mac Cool races to its explosive  
conclusion

*Dermot returns from the dead to bring Finn to the Land  
of the Living*

*Cu Hullen's geis*

*Dierdre of the sorrows*

*The lovespot*

*The Fianna & the rise of the wolfmen*

*Padraig: saint & martyr*

*The pursuit of Dermot & Gronya*

*The Red King*

*Slaughter at Ma Derga's*

*The White Goddess*

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