

Fionn: Defence of Ráth Bládhma

Also by Brian O'Sullivan

The Beara Trilogy:

Beara: Dark Legends

Beara: The Cry of the Banshee (forthcoming)

The Fionn mac Cumhal Series:

Defence of Ráth Bládhma

Short Story Collections

The Irish Muse and Other Stories

Fionn: Defence of Ráth Bládhma
The Fionn mac Cumhal Series - Book One

BRIAN O’SULLIVAN



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Many ancient Fenian Cycle texts were essential for the completion of this work. These included *Macgnímartha Finn* (The Boyhood Deeds of Fionn), *Acallam na Senórach* (The Colloquy of the Ancients), *Tóraigbeacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* (The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne) *Aided Finn meic Chumail* (The Death of Finn Mac Cumail) and many more.

Foreword:

This book and its characters are based on oral and written narratives from the Fenian Cycle and in particular from the *Macgnímartha Finn* (The Boyhood Deeds of Fionn). The *Macgnímartha Finn* was a twelfth century narrative that attempted to collate a broad range of oral stories based around the adventures of Fionn mac Cumhal and the Fianna. It was originally edited by Kuno Meyer in 1881 for the French journal *Revue Celtique*.

Many of the personal and place names used in this novel date from before the 12th century although many have common variants (Gaelic and English) in use today. For those readers who would like to know the correct pronunciation of these names, an audio glossary is available at <http://irishimbassbooks.com/> .

Prologue:

The animal appeared in the afternoon, when the best of the sunshine had faded. The first indication of its presence was a shudder of movement between the distant trees, then slowly but surely, the shadows congealed to form a grey timber wolf.

It took time before the beast emerged into the wide clearing that separated the two sections of darkwood. There it paused, cautiously assessing the surrounding terrain as it sniffed the chilly air.

Seated on a patch of rock at the opposite side of the clearing, Muirne Muncháem observed the predator's arrival with a tremor. She had traversed that same space not much earlier and her footprints – two staggered lines of blunt impressions – were still visible against the otherwise virgin surface.

Although a young woman of less than twenty summers, Muirne was close to the limit of her physical endurance. Two weeks of trekking through the Great Wild, trudging through the snow-stained forest and woodland, had sapped her of vitality. Despite her youth, the journey had been arduous, due in no small part to the weight of the child in her swollen belly.

She'd stumbled upon the clearing around noon, halting to recover her strength and enjoy the rare sensation of sunshine upon her face. Despite the internal drive to press onwards, she'd been unable to rouse herself and had tarried, reluctant to leave the sunlight for the relentless gloom of the forest that lay before her.

She bit her lip as she continued to watch the animal. *Na mactíre* – literally, “the sons of the land” – were not uncommon but few sightings had been reported for a very long time. Prior to her flight from Dún Baoiscne, Muirne had made a point of listening into any discussions concerning wolves, hoping to identify a time for travel that would increase her chances of avoiding such an encounter.

Muirne Muncháem feared wolves. As a child, she'd spent many evenings on the palisades of Almhu, her father's stronghold, listening as the creatures circled unseen in the darkness below. The blood curdling howls echoing out from the surrounding gloom had terrified her, despite the solid height of the tall stone walls, the fortifications patrolled by kinsmen with iron-tipped spears.

Predators by nature, the wolves generally avoided men. Over several generations they had learned the painful lesson of sharpened metal and tended to focus their energies on easier prey: the deer, hare and other wild animals that inhabited the surrounding countryside. On occasion, they were still known to attack humans, however such attacks were mostly restricted to the weak, the isolated, the foolish or the unlucky. Two seasons earlier, a warrior travelling on horseback to Cruach had dismounted to attend to nature's call, carelessly leaving his weapon in the scabbard attached to his saddle. His grisly remains had been discovered later and the tracks indicated that the horse had bolted, leaving the man defenceless against a passing wolf pack.

Dagán, the storyteller at Almhu, had a favourite tale of one particularly harsh winter when a starving pack of wolves had penetrated the *ráth* – the ringfort – where he'd lived in as a child. The animals' desperation had driven them through the narrow gateway to attack the tethered livestock and their handlers. Although the pack had eventually been driven off, the settlement had lost two cows and one of the men died of the injuries he'd sustained.

Muirne, too, had experienced the animals' deadly nature. As a young girl, she'd been present when a wolf pack had set upon a group of women and children collecting winter flowers in the nearby woods.

She remembered the attack predominantly for its ferocity. They had been chatting and laughing, passing through a pleasant glade on their way back to the fortress, when a horrific howl had halted them in their tracks. An instant later, the little glen was seething with a mass of grey-coated wolves.

The bulk of the pack had launched themselves upon her cousin, a happy, ten year old boy who'd been running several paces ahead of the group. Surging like a wave of shadows over the terrified child, they bore him to the ground. The vicious sound of snarling and ripping flesh had, mercifully, drowned out most of his screams.

The remainder of the wolves had launched themselves at the larger party. Panic-stricken, the women and children had dropped their baskets and scattered. As the group fled, two girls had been knocked to the ground by the pursuing animals. Several women, including her cousin's mother, managed to escape by climbing onto the branches of the nearest trees. Helpless, a babe clutched in one arm and another younger child hanging desperately from her dress, the woman could only cling to the higher branches and scream her despair as her son was dragged into the forest and, literally, eaten alive.

The attack would have ended even more tragically had it not been for the timely arrival of Fiacail and Torlach, two youths from another clan who'd been passing by on their way to visit Almhu. Hearing the screams, they'd rushed towards the commotion and, wielding their weapons, charged straight at the wolf-pack.

The sudden appearance of the boys took the wolves by surprise. Startled, the attack had wavered as the animals withdrew in momentary disarray. Fiacail howled at the top of his voice as he swung his axe in vicious, humming arcs. His companion, meanwhile, took the opportunity to grab the two fallen girls, who were screaming in pain and bleeding profusely from lacerations to their arms and legs.

The taller boy had hoisted the children up to the women in the safety of the trees then quickly clambered after them, calling to his friend to follow his example. By then, however, the pack had reassessed the situation. Realising that this new threat was not as intimidating as originally supposed, they began to advance once more.

The majority of the wolves returned to feast on the remains of Muirne's unfortunate cousin, now little more than an unrecognisable pile of gore and bone between the distant trees. Three of the larger animals, however, converged on Fiacail, hemming him into an open space beside a deep gully that cut him off from the safety of the trees.

Everyone watched helplessly as the boy was pressed backwards. Whirling the axe to keep the snarling animals at bay, he backtracked slowly, keeping his head as he tested the ground behind with his heel before placing his weight on it. Suddenly, the nearest wolf lunged for him but the boy managed to sidestep the attack, swirling the axe to strike the beast in the ribs with the blunt edge of the blade. It yelped as it landed heavily, stumbling and twisting around to snarl at its opponent.

The two other wolves growled menacingly, gnashing their teeth as they circled for the next attack. The remainder of the pack, having devoured what remained of their initial victim, also drew close, aligning with their fellows to circle around and test the boy's exposed side.

Fiacail was saved only by the arrival of a party of warriors from Almhu. One of the girls, miraculously, had made it to the edge of the forest and encountered a group of men returning from the hunt. The warriors arrived at a run, javelins and clubs in hand. Realizing that they were outnumbered, the wolves had simply disappeared, absorbed back into the shadows of the surrounding trees. Nothing remained of their presence apart from the bloody remains of Muirne's cousin and the wails of terrified women and children spilling from the trees like the juice of bitter fruit.

Since that event, Muirne had never lost her dread of the animals and it had only been her desperation that allowed her to overcome her fear and set out on this perilous journey through the Great Wild.

'Malach,' she muttered quietly to herself, then paused to wonder at why she'd drawn on the name of her deceased cousin.

An unconscious prayer perhaps.

Or a self-fulfilling prophecy.

She released a long breath and tightened her grip on the ash staff she'd used as support during her journey. Just beyond the distant tree line, the wolf paused, nuzzling the ground as it sniffed the earth.

It follows my spoor.

She stiffened, her hand automatically dropping to her stomach, as though to reassure the swollen belly. It was an unconscious reaction, an instinctive maternal response.

The wolf halted abruptly, somehow sensing it was under scrutiny. Raising its head, it stared directly across the flat in Muirne's direction and, even at that distance, she could sense its pitiless evaluation. An icy bead of fear trickled down her spine as her eyes scanned the distant trees for other signs of movement. If the animal was part of a pack, she would have little chance of surviving the encounter. The thought provoked a tremor of despair that she fought to overcome.

Fight. Fight for your child.

If the animal was a lone wolf, ejected from a pack, it would be more cautious without the support of the others and, therefore, less likely to attack. If she kept her head she and her baby could avoid a confrontation and come out alive.

Across the snow, the creature had not moved but continued its cold assessment. Muirne stood and raised her staff, brandishing its full length above her head. Apart from a small iron dagger, it was her only weapon and a poor one at that. From a distance, however, the slender pole would have the appearance of a spear. If she was able to maintain the illusion of an armed and capable opponent, the wolf would likely keep its distance. If it saw through the deception, identified her for what she truly was: a lone, terrified girl – it would not hesitate to come for her.

Turning her back on the animal, she gathered several handfuls of snow and coated the exposed patch of rock she'd been sitting on. When the rock was completely covered, she pulled on a fur hat and mittens and strapped a bulging leather satchel across her back. A moment later, she started on the rough trail up the incline leading to the trees high on the hill above her.

Moving slowly, she forced herself to maintain a steady pace, to disguise any indication of the fear bubbling up inside her. Burdened by the weight of her stomach, however, she was distressed to find how heavily she was breathing by the time she'd reached the tree line. Over the past weeks, she'd grown accustomed to the increasing weight of her belly but it was a dangerous restriction at a time when she could afford no such vulnerability.

Halting at the tree line, she turned to look back at the clearing and a queasy sensation curdled in her stomach. Much smaller from this height, the figure of the wolf was still clearly visible as it traversed the clearing. Slowly, cautiously, but advancing nevertheless.

Alarmed, she plunged forward into the forest, the high, closely packed trunks immediately filtering the sunlight and swathing her in shadow. After the brilliance of the sun on the expanse of white snow, the sombre environment of the forest was claustrophobic, the eerie silence sinister and unnerving. As she shuffled through the brittle scrub and briars, she imagined evil faces in the twisted bark and branches but comforted herself with the fact that, at least, the ground beneath the canopy was free of snow and relatively easy to traverse.

She maintained an uphill path through the trees, in the direction of a gap in the crest that she'd spotted from the clearing. As she climbed, an occasional easing or thinning of the trees permitted her to see the undulating forest spread out around her as far as the eye could see, the smooth green mantle broken in places by individual clearings and waterways. Off to the west, the mass of the Sliabh Bládhma mountains was tantalisingly closer than the last time she'd seen it. Working her way around them she would reach the serpentine weaving of a broad river. One of the tributaries feeding this waterway, she'd been informed, originated from the valley where Ráth Bládhma was located. Another day's walk at least.

Shivering, she bowed her head and trudged onwards, a solitary figure engulfed by the immensity of the forest.

After a time, fatigue crept up on her and she could hear the sound of her heart pounding from the effort of climbing. Her awareness of time and place began to fade, her step faltered and her fortitude was eroded by the ongoing exertion. The cold temperature under the trees did little to revive her. When she inhaled, the frigid air burned her throat. Each breath she released stuttered out like the vaporous gasps of a damaged bellows.

Exhausted, she came to a halt and braced herself against a tree, sucking in deep, greedy breaths, until her heartbeat slowed and her blurred vision began to clear. Peering uphill, she found that she was unable to perceive either the ridgeline or the cutting through the densely packed trees and scrub. For one horrible moment, she was convinced that she'd lost her way. Overwhelmed by despair and exhaustion, she was tempted to give up, to collapse onto the frozen ground and sleep until the frost, that lulling thief of life, came to pluck her final breath away. In the end, it was only the insistent presence of the child in her belly that kept her on her feet.

She'd regained her breath and was on the point of pushing onwards when a sudden instinct prompted her to twist her head, just in time to catch a flicker of movement from a distant thicket. She held her breath, stared, then released a muted whimper as the wolf slowly, brazenly, emerged from the trees.

From somewhere inside her, a great fury erupted. Wielding the staff with renewed vigour, she shouted at the creature and advanced, stamping her feet. The wolf, unmoved by this display of aggression, simply stood its ground and regarded her almost sullenly. Slowly, its lips curled back, exposing a set of vicious-looking fangs coated with strings of mucous-like saliva. A threatening growl echoed in the empty air.

Bending down, she grabbed a nearby stone and flung it but, unfortunately, the recent changes to her body weight affected her aim. The missile landed on a sliver of snow several paces in front

of the animal. The beast glanced at it contemptuously before returning its attention to her, a wide snarl drawn along its muzzle.

Grasping another stone, she threw again and this time her aim was true. The missile struck the animal in the side of the head, drawing an immediate yelp. Startled, and momentarily unnerved, it turned tail and fled back into the cover of the vegetation.

Muirne exhaled in relief but knew it was a short reprieve.

It will attack soon.

She forced herself to start walking again, controlling her breathing and maintaining a slow, measured pace while scanning the forest for any further sign of her pursuer. There was now no doubt in her mind that the wolf was actively stalking her. Unless she was able to find a secure refuge, it was only a matter of time before it attacked. In desperation, she halted to look up at the surrounding trees and wondered if she could climb the higher branches. Immediately, she discounted the idea. Scaling those brittle, lower branches would have been a challenge at the height of her physical ability, impossible in her present condition. In truth, such a course of action would have done little more than stave off the inevitable. The wolf had her scent. He would merely wait her out until sleep or the cold took her and she fell from the tree.

She struggled onwards, so consumed by the sheer effort of walking that it took a moment to realise she was no longer moving uphill. Raising her eyes she stared around to discover that she'd actually entered the pass she'd been seeking, the cutting spotted earlier from her resting place in the sun. A wide, barren gorge bordered by low granite cliffs on either side, it carved its way through the upper section of the ridge for several hundred paces before dipping gradually, veering downhill in the westerly direction she needed to follow.

Elated, she advanced with renewed buoyancy, slowing her pace for the downhill section where the thawing ice made the surface dangerously slick.

It was in this gorge that she finally discovered a potential refuge, a cave at the base of a particularly steep crag to the northern section of the gorge. In fact, it was more of an alcove than an actual cave, a tight hollow beneath the overhanging cliff face, enclosed from behind by the curving rock and, at the front, by a contorted wall of tangled tree trunks. Sometime in the distant past, a cluster of ancient pine trees had tumbled from the summit of the cliff above. Now they lay twisted, interwoven branches wedged tightly together to present a substantial barrier that reduced access to the hollow to a narrow gap between the logs and a bulky rock that protruded from the cliff.

Approaching this restricted opening, Muirne Muncháem threw a quick glance inside, surprised to find that the interior was larger than she'd expected and the floor comprised not of rock but compacted earth. Further investigation revealed that much of that space was cluttered, strewn with broken slabs of rock, the ancient droppings of previous animal occupants, and a substantial mat of dried vegetative matter blown in over the years by the prevailing wind.

As she edged into the enclosure, Muirne threw a wary eye back at the wolf. The animal had grown bolder, reducing the distance between them and now stood back along the pass, watching warily from a fish-shaped rock less than forty paces away. As she moved out of sight, it released an anxious whine.

It's hungry.

It would not be long now, she knew. The beast's hunger was almost at a point where its craving would overwhelm its natural caution and it would attack. Ravenous and tenacious, it would not be stopped, forcing its way through the tight little aperture to get at her.

Unless she could prevent it.

She immediately set to building a fire at the entrance, placing it close enough inside the rocky overhang to remain sheltered from the wind or rain. Scooping up the cave's accumulated debris into a little mound, she overlaid this base with dried twigs and branches. She then proceeded to build a second, additional mound of fuel using larger branches and segments of wood broken from the ancient tree barrier.

From her satchel, she produced two sharp pieces of flint and holding them at the ready, assessed her situation. It would be a delicate business. The blaze would need to be sufficiently substantial to discourage her pursuer from entering, yet not so large or so high that the ancient trees might, themselves, catch alight.

A sudden rustling sounded outside. Startled, she panicked and struck the two flints together. Several bright sparks sprinkled over the pile of kindling and it ignited almost instantaneously. A moment later, the first yellow flames had taken hold and a small cloud of greasy smoke rose, tainting the air with a distinct odour of pine.

As the fire began to take hold, she added some of the smaller pieces of wood, gradually feeding larger portions until it was blazing strongly. Outside the shelter, above the sound of the wind, she heard a frustrated whine and she shivered with relief.

The temptation to sit and rest for a moment was almost overwhelming but she forced herself to remain standing. Her ordeal was not over. The wolf was still outside, growing ever more desperate. She had merely bought herself a brief respite, a respite she would have to utilise if she was to survive.

With an exhausted sigh, she reached into her bag and withdrew the iron dagger.

It was time to get to work.

Eventually, there came a time when she was simply too tired to do any more. Her body was coated with sweat, her hands worn raw from her labours. Eyes clouded from exhaustion, she clumsily waddled two or three paces to the rear of the cave, panting deeply as she ungainly lowered herself onto one of the flatter slabs.

Outside, the sunlight had all but faded and the gorge was growing rapidly darker. A cold gust brushed through the gap, stirring the flames and throwing a dirty yellow glow onto the bare rock behind her. Despite the sudden flurry and the failing light it remained quite warm within the makeshift refuge. Muirne drew a forearm across her sweat-dampened cheeks and forehead and leaned back against the smooth base of the cliff, appreciating the cool touch of the stone against her neck.

When she'd recovered her breath, she forced herself off the rock, turned and knelt to use it as a platform for her next piece of work. Grasping the nearby staff, she dragged it onto the flattened stone then, using the iron knife, began to sharpen one end, carving it slowly to a narrow point. Soon she had fashioned a crude but serviceable spear. Twisting the haft in both hands, she lay the point in the ashes of the fire to harden it, watching as the white wood curdled and carbonised.

Eventually, she pulled the staff from the ashes. Raising it to eye level, she held it out before her and examined its length with a critical expression. As a weapon, it had its limitations but,

realistically, it was the best she could achieve in the circumstances. If the wolf got past the fire and penetrated her defences, its length might serve to keep its jaws from her. For a time, at least.

Task completed, she lay the new spear aside and slumped back onto the rock. Now there was nothing else she could do but await the dawn and, hopefully, outlast the beast that lurked outside. By morning, she hoped, the wolf would have moved on, compelled by its empty belly to seek food elsewhere in the forest.

A ripple stirred through her stomach as the child shifted inside her. The infant was restless, she supposed. Possibly in response to her own distress.

While she'd been working, she had continued to feed the fire and the stock of larger wood segments was substantially depleted. She could, she knew, break or cut some more from the tangled branches of the fallen pines but she was reluctant to undermine the structure of her principal defence or, possibly, create new openings that the wolf might attempt to penetrate. With a sigh, she continued to stare at the fire, watching how the flames curled greedily around each precious item of fuel from her meagre stockpile.

Muirne yawned.

She was exhausted and desperate to sleep but could not afford to do so. Outside, the predator maintained its vigilance. If she stopped feeding the blaze, it would take its chances as soon as the flames reduced.

Then it would be on her and one day, far in the future, some other passing stranger would discover this cave and find her gnawed bones.

With a scowl, she brushed such defeatist thoughts aside.

Fight, damn you. Stay awake. Save your child!

The exertions of the day were working against her. Her shoulders sagged beneath the weight of fatigue, her eyelids flickered and drooped. In desperation, she slapped herself across the side of her face then immediately repeated the action across the other cheek. The sting from the blow jolted her to alertness but, despite the tingling sensation, she was obliged to repeat the process several times as fatigue wore her down.

So tired. So tired.

Her eyes closed.

And snapped back open.

It was completely black outside the cave. There was no sound to be heard but the crackle of flames. She jerked upright, staring around in panic. Had she fallen asleep? How long?

She glanced towards the fire, horrified to discover that it had shrunk to half its original size.

Cursing under her breath, she hurriedly leaned forward to grasp some of the remaining lumps of wood and tossed them into the blaze. Staring down at the little pile she'd created earlier, she realised with a sick feeling that there were less than eight or nine logs remaining. Certainly not enough to last till morning.

Groaning, she raised herself awkwardly off the rock. Now she had no choice. She would have to cut more wood from her precious defensive wall.

One more effort. Just one more.

She was reaching for the knife when a ferocious snarl spilled into the cave. Suddenly, the wolf was there, filling the gap as it launched itself over the flickering barrier, black eyes locked directly on her.

With a cry, Muirne staggered backwards, dropping the spear in her panic. The beast cleared the fire, great jaws wide and slavering. Landing on the inside, its snarl transformed to a surprised

yelp for it tumbled, not onto the floor of the cave but into the shallow pit she'd dug out of the earth after setting the fire.

Spurred on by her terror, Muirne reacted with frantic alacrity and sheer instinct. Grasping one of the broken stone slabs from the small heap she'd prepared, she hoisted it in both hands, advanced on the hole and flung it down with all her strength. There was an unpleasant, liquid crunch as it struck the wolf on the top of the skull. The animal crumpled.

She immediately hoisted a second boulder and flung it after the first. This time there was a softer crunching noise, no less repulsive, as the missile struck the creature's side, smashing the ribcage beneath.

Gasping for breath, Muirne grabbed a third rock but, on this occasion, she paused for the creature was sprawled unmoving in the hole below, a viscous yellow liquid pooling around its muzzle. She hesitated momentarily but then launched it, smashing the creature's head with the gratifying crackle of bone and gristle.

Several moments passed before she finally found the strength to draw back from the hole and stagger against the rock wall. Collapsing onto the rocky floor, she huddled, shivering, heart pounding, mouth sour with the taste of adrenalin.

The beast was dead.

She had survived.

Her child would live.

She released a low keening of relief. Hands tightening about her knees, she rocked silently backwards and forwards.

Some time passed before she finally ceased, roughly brushing away the tears that had formed beneath her eyelids. Hauling herself to her feet, she retrieved her woollen cloak and wrapped it around herself. Approaching the fire, she tossed the remaining wood onto the flames. With a sigh, she curled up as close to the snapping flames as she dared. A moment later, she had fallen fast asleep.

Chapter One

As ever, when winter showed signs of releasing its grip on the land, Bodhmall was to be found to the north of Ráth Bládhma, overseeing the work being carried out on her *lubbort* [vegetable garden]. Over the three years since first occupying the *ráth*, she'd created an impressive series of raised stone-edged, earthen beds that stretched along the gently curving gradient of a nearby, north facing mound. The produce of her garden – an annual bounty of herbs, onions, carrots, parsnips and other vegetables – was of reliable consistency and quality. The nutritional variety it provided also proved popular amongst the inhabitants of the ring fort given a diet otherwise restricted to dairy and cereal products.

Perched on the crest of the mound, Bodhmall brushed a fist-full of black hair back from either side of her forehead. With a deft twist of her fingers, she looped the strands into a more controllable shape and bound them in place with a bronze hair clasp. By anybody's reckoning, she was a striking woman. Tall and slender with a generous mouth and intelligent, brown eyes, her looks had been spared the ravages common to many of her contemporaries: the trials of childbirth and the arduous physical labour required to sustain the community. Daughter of Trénmór, *rí* of *Uí Baoisne*, Bodhmall had enjoyed a privileged childhood in the fortress of Dún Baoisne, something she increasingly appreciated as the years rolled by.

Standing with hands on her hips, she considered the garden as she planned out the next stages of work. It was too early for her efforts to produce any substantial results (the low temperatures ensured that any growth remained minimal to non-existent) but she was determined to do as much as practically possible to get an early start on the growing season. Experience had demonstrated that turning the cold earth of the raised beds helped to break down the cow manure mixed in over the autumn. When the warmer weather finally kicked in, the soil creatures would already be hard at work, merging precious nutrients to provide the initial spurt of growth for the herbs she needed to replace her dwindling supply of remedies.

She pointed to a patch of soil at the lowest ridge, positioned so that the gradient might drain the winter rains away.

'There, Cónán.'

Her hand moved, two slender fingers indicating another area.

'And there.'

With a sigh of resignation, a dark-haired boy of about eleven years moved forward, lifted a metal-headed hoe and began to turn the soil at the indicated areas.

Bodhmall watched him work the earth, mixing in the remaining traces of manure with almost effortless ease. She felt no rancour at the boy's undisguised frustration. Working under her instruction could be taxing at the best of times and Cónán had demonstrated heroic tolerance to this point. Over the course of the morning, she had directed him from one section of the mound to another, a pattern of activity that, from his perspective, must have appeared meaningless. What the boy did not understand, however, was that his perspective differed substantially from her own. Where he saw indistinguishable lumps of frozen soil, Bodhmall's *tiolacadh* – her 'Gift' – revealed patches that radiated with varying degrees of biological activity; the teeming life force of worms, ants, beetles, and other tiny creatures. Some of these – the areas that she directed him to avoid – glittered like a hundred, thousand stars in the sky at night; minute, exquisite sparks of brilliance. These, she knew, were the secret of her garden's success, the powerhouse that

converted the base organic matter to a bountiful food source. She was adamant that such potential should be protected as far as practicable.

It was in her seventh year that Bodhmall had come to understand how she differed from the other children at Dún Baoiscne. They did not perceive the flickering lights she associated with life in all its forms and therefore struggled to understand her reluctance to partake in the occasional activity that might extinguish such brilliance. Although she worked it out over time, Bodhmall's innate stubbornness also meant that she did not attempt to alter her behaviour to align with that of her peers. This approach gained her a reputation for eccentricity but, more importantly, it brought her to the attention of Dub Tíre. And the cold scrutiny of the druidic order.

But that, of course, had been a lifetime ago.

Bodhmall pushed such dark memories away, buried them deep within the soil of her garden. Over the years, experience had made her adept at dealing with such unpleasant reflections, developing numerous effective mechanisms and distractions to keep the dark thoughts at bay.

Like the simple action of gardening.

'To your left. Cónán. No, your left.'

Grumbling, the boy did as he was told.

'Don't be cranky, *a bhuachaill*,' she chided. 'You'll be glad of this effort when your stomach is riddled with gut cramp. That's where I intend to lay the *peirsil chatach* and there's no better remedy for the runs.'

She chuckled to herself for the boy was pretending to ignore her, sighing melodramatically as he helped her to turn the earth. Buoyed by the morning's accomplishments, Bodhmall stopped teasing him and turned to gaze up the length of Glenn Ceoch – Valley of Haze – at a view that never failed to give her pleasure.

To her delight, the morning had dawned with clear skies, the habitual early chill diminished by the unexpected rays of watery sunshine. Bathed in this welcome glow, the valley had taken on a beauty that was even more dramatic than usual, patches of dew-lined pasture and the nearby stream glittering like silver in the soft, yellow hue.

Glenn Ceoch had been Bodhmall's home since departing the fortress of Dún Baoiscne more than three years earlier. A wide V-shaped spread of flatland, it was enclosed on either side by two steep, tree-coated ridges that converged at the east of the *ráth* to form a steep and impassable barrier. The spring that fed the stream was located on the lower slopes of this formidable buttress, pooling in a small pond of clear water that emptied down onto the valley floor and flowed out to the west.

Set at the extremes of *Clann Baoiscne* territory, the isolated Glenn Ceoch was known predominantly for the bloody history associated with the previously deserted *ráth*. Two earlier attempts at settlement had taken place there many years before Bodhmall was born. Both had ended disastrously with the colony destroyed, its inhabitants massacred by reavers. Despite the valley's excellent pasture and the potential of its loamy soil, there had been little appetite for a third attempt. Because of its history and isolation, the territory was still considered too dangerous, a section of the Great Wild best left to the wolves and bandits.

The decision to settle Glenn Ceoch, leaving Dún Baoiscne and the security of home and clan, was not one that Bodhmall had taken lightly, even though she'd had limited alternatives at the time. In the opinion of her few supporters, the venture to re-establish a colony at that infamous location was doomed to failure. She had recognised the many valid reasons for such pessimism.

The population of the proposed colony had been ludicrously small: Bodhmall; the woman warrior Liath Luachra; the old servant Cairbre – now her *rechtaire*; his woman and their three son: Cónán; Aodhán and Bearach. The supporting livestock had also been woefully restricted, consisting of little more than eight cows, four goats, four pigs and a selection of fowl. On the day of their departure, their entire possessions and all of their equipment – including the metal workings – had fit into three ox-drawn carts lent to them by Tréanmór. This unexpected act of generosity from her father had surprised her at the time until she realised that the gesture had not been a kindness so much as a desire to see the back of them as quickly as possible.

When the little caravan moved out of sight of the only home she'd ever known, Bodhmall had felt great desolation and struggled to conceal her rising sense of panic from the companions who had so loyally aligned their fates to hers. Over the course of their journey through the Great Wild, a nerve-racking period of thirty-two days with the carts and cattle on the untamed topography, – that sensation had diminished only to return even more strongly when they reached Gleann Ceoch and observed the ruins of Ráth Bládhma for the very first time.

Their new home was a significant earthwork centred on the summit of a low drumlin. The original settlers had carried out extensive work to create a high, circular earthen bank that enclosed the central courtyard – the *lis* – surrounded, in turn, by a flat-bottomed ditch. After more than twenty-five years of neglect, much of the original structure had fallen into disrepair. Several sections of the embankment had caved away, sliding into the waterlogged ditch to bridge the *ráth's* principle defence and leave it exposed to attack from a number of different quarters.

Within the *lis*, there was little visible evidence of the previous colony apart from some rotted wattle, fragments of the ancient habitations buried beneath the fibrous roots of long-established grass. Work on clearing the area, however, had exposed several charred post stubs and a number of human bones, chilling reminders of the settlement's fate. Bodhmall had immediately halted all other work and insisted on a cleansing ceremony, removing the remaining bones and burying them solemnly in the neighbouring woods.

Despite their miniscule workforce, the new settlers had launched themselves into the task of reconstruction with a vigour driven by their dread of the Great Wild as much as by their hopes for a new beginning. Out in the isolated wild lands, livestock and goods were an irresistible draw for wolves and marauders. The shelter of the *ráth* offered their only realistic hope for long-term survival.

In many respects, the new colony was fortunate in that much of the original backbreaking labour had been carried out by the original inhabitants. In truth, all that remained – although it was a substantial piece of work – was to repair and to build on the original.

The initial efforts focussed on creating internal and external revetments to consolidate the earth embankment and prevent further collapse into the ditch. In those areas where slippage had occurred, the fallen detritus was removed and support posts inserted around the inward base. Once this was completed, gaps in the embankment were repaired using upcast from the trench.

Each member of the new colony had taken an active role in the reconstruction. Despite the gruelling physical labour, Bodhmall had experienced a fierce sense of personal satisfaction as the results of her efforts came together. Ironically, the toil and sweat had also proven a welcome contrast to the years of stifling intellectual training imposed upon her by Dub Tíre during her druidic apprenticeship at Dún Baoiscne.

As Bodhmall's *conradh* – military champion – Liath Luachra had assumed overall responsibility for the defence and security of the new settlement. Conscious of the fate of the previous colony

and the ever constant threat of attack, she'd insisted on enhancing the earthworks with further fortifications, palisades constructed from split oak poles retrieved from the surrounding forest. She also oversaw the strengthening of the west-facing entrance, expanding the ditch further to create a causeway to the narrow gateway reinforced with sizeable blocks of stone.

The most substantial elements of the reconstruction took the little colony more than four backbreaking months of work but, on completion, they had a secure base from which to grow. Over the intervening years, their defences had been tested on two occasions when they'd been attacked by bands of passing reavers. In both cases, the attacks had been little more than opportunistic raids that they'd withstood by simply withdrawing within the walls. After one or two half-hearted assaults, both raiding parties had withdrawn, their urge for booty dampened by the effectiveness of the defences and the evident preparedness of its defenders.

Bodhmall shivered as the sun disappeared behind a passing veil of cloud, uncertain as to whether the sense of unease she was experiencing was stirred by unpleasant memories of bitter times or simply the sudden physical drop in temperature. Reverting to one of her tried and trusted methods, she knelt and started to clear some weeds, intending to submerge her anxiety, once more, in the soothing routine of her garden.

It was not to be.

The 'Gift' manifested itself with its habitual subtlety, easing in so softly that it was on her before she'd even noticed. Her first inkling of its expression was an unpleasant tingling sensation tugging at her nerves like a loose thread snagged on a branch. Instincts stirred by some provocation she didn't quite fully understand, she straightened up and anxiously scanned the valley.

Something... there is something ...

She was only vaguely conscious of her heart rate increasing, the flush of blood pulsing through her veins. Then, all at once, it was as though every sense was intensified, each physical sensation magnified one hundred fold. The cheerful murmur of the nearby stream increased in volume until it had taken on the vociferous roar of a surging flood. The rustle of leaves on the surrounding trees crackled like static before an incoming storm. An overpowering smell of iron filled her nostrils and the very texture of the air seemed to scrape her skin.

For a moment her sight blurred then abruptly cleared to focus on the thick line of trees that bordered the far end of the valley. For some inexplicable reason, the sight of those trees suddenly terrified her and, somehow, even at that distance, she could feel them shiver as some invisible force brushed through them. Bundling up into a violent squall, the intrusion gathered impetus as it rolled down the length of the valley towards her. Unable to move, she helplessly watched it draw closer, stirring up dead leaves and moss, casting them skywards like a swarm of angry ravens.

She closed her eyes just before it struck, pummelling her with such ferocity that she was almost knocked from her feet. Somehow, she managed to maintain her balance, standing firm against the onslaught as it screamed and howled like a gale about her. Head bent and shoulders hunched, she channelled her energy into repelling an assault that was not physical so much as mental. Despite her skill at creating such intellectual barriers, she had the vaguest sensation of being probed by some intelligence, prodded like a farmer might prod an animal at a market to see how it would react. When she resisted, her response seemed to provoke an odd sense of outrage, as though the trespassing entity resented her ability to detect it. Enraged, it began to pummel her, to psychically strike again and again.

She had no idea how long the offensive lasted, how much time had passed before the air grew still, the roar dissipating to a jaded background wheeze. Numbed and emotionally drained from her efforts, she wearily opened her eyes. On the pasture south of the *ráth*, the small herd of cattle were lowing contentedly in the calm of the early afternoon. Beside them, the stream gurgled happily, like a gush of amused infants. Close by, bent over the vegetable garden, Cónán worked with quiet industry. Bodhmall stared, struggling to understand what had happened. No one else had seen or heard anything.

Off to her right, on the western ridge, a murder of ravens suddenly took flight, crowing up from the trees in an angry flutter of wings. With a shudder, Bodhmall forced herself to open her mouth and stuck out her tongue to taste the air. Almost immediately, she withdrew it with an expression of revulsion.

‘Lady’.

Absorbed in her contemplation, she barely noticed this fresh disruption. Startled, she turned to find Cairbre the elderly *rechtaire*, standing beside her. The old man was studying her with quiet intensity, his left eyebrow curved upwards in a thoughtful arc. From his expression, it appeared that he had been standing there for some time.

‘Are you not well, Lady? Was it the Gift?’

Somehow, she found the strength to nod.

‘Does it bring good tidings?’

‘When does the Gift ever bring good tidings?’

She immediately regretted her brusqueness. Cairbre was a quiet man, a gentle man and had been a loyal advisor to her family for as long she could remember. He did not deserve such discourtesy and yet she felt almost too overwhelmed and distraught to care. Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to calm her mind.

‘Forgive me, Cairbre. The wind brought something new today. Something that leaves a taste of shit in the air. Even the ravens are disturbed.’

Cairbre, who was more familiar with her Gift than most, reacted to this news with concern.

‘Should I alert the others, mistress?’

She shook her head in irritation, exhausted by the never ending burden of the Gift and its unsolicited, unwelcomed associations. Over the years, the *tiolacadb* had revealed many positive manifestations such as the ‘light of life’ but also negative manifestations such as the one she had just experienced. Either way, she had tired of them many years earlier. In the isolation of Glenn Ceoch, she had hoped to find respite, to avoid much that stimulated the Gift and identified her as a *bandraoi*, a female druid. She had achieved some success in this objective, experiencing no major expression of it for more than two and a half years.

Until now.

‘I don’t know, Cairbre.’ She poked at a loose sod with the toe of her fur-lined boot as she attempted to work out what had just taken place. ‘I think there is another *draoi* roaming the Great Wild,’ she said at last. ‘He or she has some deliberate intent but I was unable to tell what it was. It didn’t bear me any specific malice or interest but it was not pleased to discover I could detect it.’ She paused then, inspired by sudden flash of insight. ‘It was seeking something. Or somebody. Whatever or whoever it was, it did not find it here so it moved on.’

She looked at the old man.

‘Is Liath Luachra returned?’

‘Not yet, mistress. No sign of her or Bearach.’

Bodhmall frowned. Liath Luachra had left to hunt the local forests in the dark hours of the previous morning, accompanied by Bearach, Cairbre's second son. Vaguely conscious of the warrior woman rising from their bed, Bodhmall had been too entangled in the viscous threads of sleep to waken properly and wish her safe travels. Now she regretted that lapse. The hunters had been due to return by nightfall that same evening but were a full day overdue. Although there were many reasonable explanations for such a delay, the thought of Liath Luachra out in the Big Wild at a time when a fellow *draoi* was stalking the land, filled her with unease.

Bodhmall took a deep breath. Her mind was still reeling from her altercation with the intruding *draoi* and thinking of such complications was making her head spin. A sudden realisation helped to draw her back to more stable ground.

'You came to seek me out, Cairbre. What is it?'

'There's a wan, lady. Seeking refuge.'

'A wan?'

Even after all these years, Bodhmall still found the old *rechtaire* difficult to understand at times. When he spoke, his barely articulate mumble was muffled not only by a dense mat of grey beard but by a thick, guttural accent as well. According to her father, he had been snatched as a child during a raid on the warm lands across the southern sea and this accent was the last vestige of his native tongue, unspoken since his abduction from his people.

Many years later Cairbre had ended up at Dún Baoiscne, traded on as spoils of war when his previous owner had perished on the battlefield. Purchased from a travelling merchant to provide crude brute labour for the maintenance of the fortress walls, his intelligence and natural aptitude for administration had gradually seen him transferred to lighter, more intellectual duties. Twenty-five years later, despite his tragic origins, Cairbre had adapted well to his environment at the *Clann Baoiscne* stronghold. Over that time he'd become a trusted assistant to Tréanmór's household, obtained his freedom and had even taken a woman of his own, another ex-slave who subsequently bore him three sons. All of Bodhmall's earliest memories included the old man for he'd become her father's key administrative advisor. Consistently reliable in the running of the stronghold, he would probably still hold this position if she hadn't convinced him to accompany her and Liath Luachra to Ráth Bládhma.

'A wan, lady. A young wan.'

Ab! A young one.

Bodhmall nodded, the mists of incomprehension finally cleared.

'Who is she?'

The *rechtaire* ran one wrinkled, leathery hand across his forehead then down the silver stubble of hair cut close to the scalp.

'I don't know her. She would not give her name.'

'She was accompanied?'

She held the old man's gaze and he shifted his weight awkwardly from one foot to the other. Every winter for the last few years, he'd suffered increasingly from the curse of stiffening joints. On their first winter at the *ráth* he had developed an awkward-looking walk that helped him avoid the stinging sensation in his knees. This year, he could barely move without the occasional hiss of pain.

'No company?'

Bodhmall grunted in surprise. A single girl, a stranger, travelling alone in the Great Wild without escort or protection? She frowned, suspicion already forming in her mind. The arrival of

a mysterious visitor in this isolated land so soon after the revelation of a hostile *draoi* could hardly be coincidence.

‘The wan’s with child.’

Bodhmall’s expression conveyed her otherwise silent astonishment.

‘Near to dropping, I would say,’ the old man continued. ‘Yes. Definitely near to dropping.’

Unsure how to respond, Bodhmall bit on her lower lip and gestured towards the settlement. ‘Our guest is within?’

‘Yes, lady. I left her in your house with Conchenn.’

‘Very well. I suppose we should offer her the hospitality of the *ráth*.’

Wiping her hands on the rough material of her tunic, Bodhmall left her instructions with Cairbre for the final section of the *lubgort*. Circling the embankment with a heavy heart, she curved around to the entrance of the ring fort and traversed the causeway leading up to the stone gateway. Aodhán, Cairbre’s eldest son, was on sentry duty on the top of the stone structure. Taking a brief respite from his scrutiny of the surrounding countryside, he grinned and gave a brief wave as she passed into the passageway below.

A tall and pleasant youth, Aodhán had inherited his father’s easy manner but was already an *óglach*, a competent young warrior. Like his brothers, he had undergone martial training with Liath Luachra since their occupation of Ráth Bládhma. Under the woman warrior’s tutelage, both he and Bearach had become more than proficient with sword and shield while Cónán showed promise with the sling. All three boys were adept with the javelins and harpoons that lined the wooden rack on the gateway rampart, however Aodhán, in particular, had demonstrated an uncommon aptitude for casting weapons. After years of practice, the *óglach* was now lethal with javelins at distances of up to fifty paces, something the reavers had discovered, to their cost, during those early raids.

The *lis*, the central area of the *ráth*, comprised a wide circle that held two round houses, a small stockade for holding the cattle at night and a large fire pit over which a metal cauldron had been suspended. Two sturdy lean-tos had been constructed against the internal wall of the embankment to the left of the entrance. Predominantly used as a shelter for the *ráth*’s precious metal implements and tools, the structures also contained their supply of firewood, a resource well depleted over the cold winter months.

As she emerged from the gate passageway, Bodhmall noted the ongoing consumption of firewood as Conchenn, Cairbre’s grey-haired woman, fed the fire pit’s insatiable flames. The bubbling of the cauldron’s contents, a vegetable based broth flavoured with bones, was audible from the gateway. Clouds of steam coiled upwards into the frigid air like a veil of angry ghosts.

The smell of food made Bodhmall’s stomach growl and she realised she’d neglected to eat since rising that morning. Glancing at the sluggish, dark broth, she experienced a sudden, inexplicable craving for the fresh tastes and colours of summer: blooming red strawberries and raspberries, blackberries and blueberries, even the tangy sweetness of rowan.

Approaching the fire she ruefully discarded such notions. Summer was still some way off and harbouring such fancies was not only pointless but foolish to boot.

‘Conchenn. Where is the visitor?’

A deaf mute from birth, Conchenn said nothing but jerked her head in the direction of the nearest roundhouse. With this, she closed her eyes and raised her hands into the form of a pillow to mime a sleeping person. Bodhmall smiled at the representation, nodded and turned towards the domed abode she shared with Liath Luachra. Pausing before the oak frame entrance, she

stared at the leather flap, oddly reluctant to proceed any further. Privacy was a luxury that most communities could not afford but she'd grown fond of the personal retreat. Over the first year in Glenn Ceoch, she'd invested significant emotional and physical effort into creating that building, arranging the two concentric ring walls of hazel wattles and the insulating layers of straw. She'd also worked hard weaving the thatched reed roof. She had then spent a further two years making that space a home so the presence of an uninvited stranger unsettled her.

Setting her jaw, Bodhmall lifted the flap and stepped inside.

The interior of the roundhouse was dark and it was difficult to see anything at first. Intimate familiarity, however, allowed Bodhmall to automatically assign definition to the blurred shapes and contours; the curved brushwood sleeping platform, the narrow posts supporting the roof, even the wooden stand holding Liath Luachra's leather fighting harness.

A distinct scent of oil competed with the odour of wood smoke from the fire. Although not the most fastidious of housekeepers, Liath Luachra was meticulous when it came to the maintenance of her armour and weapons and spent hours cleaning and oiling them when the weather confined her indoors.

The central feature of the hut was the small, stone-kerbed fire pit where the fire she'd laid down that morning had settled to embers. It was still radiating sufficient heat to repel the chill from outside and its dull glow illuminated the fur-wrapped figure curled up on the floor beside it.

Bodhmall stood and stared in silence as a gentle snore rustled through the confines of her living area. Their guest was facing the fire with her back to the entrance, however, the *bandraoí's* unique Gift allowed her to see the blue-yellow hue of her visitor's life-force. Within that haze, but slightly lower, she could make out another separate glow; a strikingly vivid yellow.

Cairbre had it right, then. The visitor's with child.

She studied the fiery glimmer with curiosity, surprised by the intensity of colour in one that had not yet been born. In her experience most people, even those not yet fully formed, tended to exude a pale blue or green coloured aura. There were occasional exceptions like Liath Luachra where tinted flickers of orange or red could also be observed. She had never before, however, seen one burn as bright and intense as the flame from this unborn child.

Advancing towards the fire, Bodhmall tossed in some scraps of dried turf from a wicker basket beside the hearth and stoked it up as quietly as she could. Puffs of blue smoke drifted slowly to the roof of the hut and there was a brief crackle as the turf caught alight. A sudden flicker of flame briefly illuminated the face of the sleeping figure. Bodhmall's eyes widened.

She buried her shock in a surge of activity, busying herself until she had regained her composure. Crossing to a low, rough bench she grabbed a handful of dried herbs from one of the many that had been ground and stored in a series of little bowls, to be steeped as the need required. Sprinkling the herbs into a fresh clay beaker, she added some warm water from a pitcher sitting in the embers and started to stir. The sounds of swirling liquid and the sharp tap of a wooden spoon against the lip of the beaker did not rouse the sleeping woman.

Settling onto her haunches beside the fire, the *bandraoi* reached over and shook her roughly. It took several attempts before her visitor finally released a low moan. Rolling onto her back, the woman opened a pair of sleep-ridden blue eyes.

'Hallo, cousin,' said Bodhmall.

The girl attempted to rise but was thwarted by the bulk of her stomach. Blinking and stupid with sleep, she succeeded in sitting upright on her second attempt and gazed about her in bleary-eyed confusion. She looked depleted. Pale and exhausted, despite her slumber.

Understandable, given the rigours of travelling in winter. And the weight of that child in her belly.

‘Bodhmall.’

The voice was husky, tight with tension.

Bodhmall busied herself with her potion, silencing her guest with a raised forefinger as she poured the mixture from the beaker into a smaller bowl. The extended silence seemed to disconcert her visitor. She shrank back on herself, clutching her woollen cloak and drawing it more tightly about her.

She was scared, Bodhmall realised with a start. Muirne Muncháem, Flower of Almhu, wife to her brother Cumhal, was scared.

Unsettled by this realisation, she stared at her visitor, once more recalling the spectral assault she’d repelled at the *lubbort*. The convergence of events did little to reassure her.

‘I come seeking sanctuary.’

Bodhmall’s posture tensed as she glared at Muirne Muncháem. It was rare for her to experience true fury but she knew that the contorted emotions twisting up inside her could be nothing else.

‘Sanctuary. You come to Ráth Bládhma, refuge of *An Cailleach Dubh* to seek sanctuary?’

Muirne blanched at the mention of *An Cailleach Dubh* – ‘The Dark Hag’ – and Bodhmall found herself unable to repress a bitter sense of satisfaction. It had been Muirne, after all, who’d originally contrived that cynical epithet and there was a righteous sense of balance in using it back against her.

Muirne let her head drop, unable to bear the wrathful expression of her host.

‘Cumhal is dead.’

‘What?’

Bodhmall stared, her fury deflected but still too inflamed to completely absorb what the younger woman had just told her.

‘Cumhal is dead.’

Bodhmall studied the woman’s face more carefully, scrutinising it for any sign of deceit, any trace of duplicity. The pain she saw in those features served only to confirm the tone of her words. Muirne was telling the truth. Which meant that ...

Cumball!

Her brother, future leader of *Clann Baoisne*, blond, vivacious and full of life was ...

Dead.

Bodhmall stiffened, the news striking her like a blow to the stomach. Her guts lurched and shoulders sagged as though compressed by some sudden, unfathomable burden. Head whirling, she struggled to assemble some coherent thought through the maelstrom of questions and notions in her head.

Muirne tactfully looked to one side until her host gathered herself together.

‘How?’

Under normal circumstances Bodhmall would have been embarrassed by the catch in her voice, the exposure of such brittle weakness. Now, gutted by shock and grief, she simply didn’t care.

‘A battle with *Clann Morna*. There was a dispute about stolen cattle from an earlier raid. A confrontation was arranged by the *draoi* of both clans ...’ Muirne’s voice trailed off momentarily as an involuntary blaze of contempt flickered across Bodhmall’s features. ‘It was to be a limited engagement, a clash of champions but *Clann Morna* treacherously broke the established tradition. The party from Dún Baoiscne was ambushed as it passed through Cnucha on its way to the agreed battle lands. Our men were taken completely by surprise. They fought well but they were overwhelmed. Cumhal fell. And seventeen other warriors.’

Seventeen!

Bodhmall gasped. Seventeen warriors! Most of them individuals she would have known, played with as children and watched grow into young men. She shook her head in disbelief. Such a loss of manpower, of leadership, was catastrophic for *Clann Baoiscne*, a substantial threat to the ongoing survival of the clan.

‘And Crimall. Is he –’

‘Your other brother lives. They say he’s fled to the West.’

‘Lugaid the Lightning Stroke?’

‘Dead.’

‘Ernán mac Donn?’

‘Dead.’

‘Fergus?’

‘Alive. But he will never use his right hand again.’

Bodhmall paused. ‘Fiacail mac Codhna?’

There was a silence as Muirne looked away. Her exhaustion was evident now, her posture slack, her natural beauty strained and haggard.

‘He lives. He was at Seiscenn Uarbhaoil during the battle. A new love is said to detain him there.’

As always when distressed, Bodhmall compressed her emotion beneath a mask of impassivity, submerging all trace of sentiment in the depths of a bottomless black loch, sunk and hidden deep within herself. The reaction was an instinctive response, a coping mechanism developed during her time with *draoi* Dub Tíre. She imagined her lips curve in a cynical smile, a grimace that was not reproduced on her face. The bitter lessons of that time, it seemed, served some practical purpose after all.

Fiacail? How typical! The man’s cock has saved his life.

‘My father?’

The Flower of Almhu shrugged. ‘What do you expect? His favourite son is dead. His second son fled like a coward. All his plans died with Cumhal. Cumhal was the *tánaiste*, the heir destined to lead *Clann Baoiscne* to great deeds. There is no clear replacement.’

A burning sensation in the palms of her hands made Bodhmall look down and she realised that she’d unconsciously gouged the soft skin with her fingernails. Blood was now trickling freely down the inside of her wrists. Folding them onto her lap, she exhaled slowly and drew upon all her reserves to focus solely on the issue confronting her. She nodded at the stomach of the younger woman.

‘This is Cumhal’s child?’

A protective hand dropped to cradle the bulge.

‘Yes.’

‘Huh.’ A muted grunt of comprehension. Muirne’s departure from Dún Baoiscne made some sense then. With their victory at Cnucha, *Clann Morna* would move quickly to establish dominance over their old rivals, *Clann Baoiscne*. A direct assault on Dún Baoiscne was unlikely given the cost in men needed to capture the fortress. They could, however, sue for peace under advantageous conditions. With the death of their future leader and the loss of so many warriors, *Clann Baoiscne*’s power was seriously diminished. *Clann Morna* would be determined to eliminate any future challenge to their dominion by obliterating the hereditary lines of *Clann Baoiscne* leadership.

For Muirne, the ramifications were serious. If male, *Clann Morna* would demand the death of her child or, at the very least, insist on fosterage with one of their own. To cement their hold, it was also likely they would demand her union through marriage with a suitable member of their sept.

Bodhmall sighed and got to her feet. She suddenly felt weary, much older than her twenty-three years. On leaving Dún Baoiscne, she had thought to leave this world of tribal politics and kingship squabbles behind.

Despite her personal anguish, she experienced an unexpected surge of sympathy for Muirne and the threat to which she was now exposed. Almost immediately, she smothered that reaction. Previous experience with Muirne Muncháem had too often demonstrated that such goodwill was unlikely to be reciprocated. In this particular case, there were also significant ramifications to becoming too involved.

‘You are the raven, Muirne Muncháem. You bring pain and dismay wherever you descend to rest your feet.’ She brushed her hands and sighed. ‘Why have you come here?’

‘I come seeking sanctuary.’ The blond haired woman raised her hands, palm outwards. ‘I have nowhere else to go. Would you deny me refuge?’

‘Of course, I would. The wrath of *Clann Morna* is not a threat we would willingly bring down upon ourselves.’

The bluntness of the response took Muirne by surprise. She stared at the taller woman with wide eyes.

‘Clann Morna does not know where I was headed.’

Bodhmall ignored her. ‘You turned your nose up at us for years with your airs and graces. Now, when misfortune pulls you from your heights of privilege you throw yourself at our door. You know full well you are neither welcome, nor have any rights to hospitality here.’

‘Of course, I know! There are many places I could have sought help; family and bonds that owe me fealty and protection. Everyone is well aware that you and Liath Luachra bear me no love. Our antipathy is well known.’

‘And yet here you are.’

‘Because I carry Cumhal’s child.’

Bodhmall took a deep breath.

Clever. Oh, very clever.

The *bandraoi* scowled. Although not a stunt that she was in a position to appreciate, she had to admire the younger girl’s political astuteness. As spouse to the *tánaiste* of *Clann Baoiscne*, Muirne automatically inherited the ancient rights of fealty due from the clan retainers, subject families and associated allies. Such networks of obligations and alliances had always cemented the authority of the ruling lineage. In times of adversity it was expected that these would be drawn on, that all favours would be called in.

Because of the circumstances behind Bodhmall's expulsion from Dún Baoiscne, Ráth Bládhma and its inhabitants were outside of such conventions. Despite this, Muirne had come here in secret, gambling her safety on Bodhmall's personal loyalty to her brother as opposed to the loyalty of clan obligation.

Yes. It was a very clever manoeuvre. *Clann Morna* would certainly not have expected it and by telling no-one of her destination, her location would be secure.

Provided Bodhmall responded as anticipated.

She held the girl's eyes. Muirne returned the stare with an anxious expression then, unable to withstand its intensity, dropped her own eyes to the floor. 'Cumhal would always defend you,' she whispered. 'At Dún Baoiscne, when the people turned against you, he argued to let you stay. And yet ...' Her voice filled with bitterness. 'You would deny sanctuary to his son, your nephew. Your blood kin.'

'So it's a boy, then?'

'It kicks like a boy,' Muirne snarled and despite her fatigue, some of the woman's natural fieriness flared in her eyes. 'But you're *An Cailleach Dubh*. You tell me.'

With a sigh, Bodhmall considered her guest and suddenly wished her gone. Departed with her tragic news, her lust for power, her games and abrasive personality. Right there and then, she wished nothing more than to lie down in the darkness, to grieve in silence for her brother, and to worry over Liath Luachra until she could find the strength to face the world again.

Of course, that was a luxury she did not have. Muirne Muncháem's gamble had been well played. Her loyalty to her brother, even deceased, was too strong. There were some responsibilities she could not shirk, irrespective of the circumstances.

She exhaled very slowly, as though she had been holding her breath for a very long time.

'You have the safety of Ráth Bládhma for tonight, Muirne Muncháem. But you have no friends here and the news you bring makes you all the more unwelcome. You also place *Muinntir Bládhma* in potential conflict with *Clann Morna*.'

'*Muinntir Bládhma*?' Her sister by marriage arched one eyebrow in surprise.

'We're our own clan now, Muirne. *Muinntir Bládhma*.'

Bodhmall had plucked the words from the air. *Muinntir Bládhma*; the household of Bládhma. And yet as she'd said it the words had felt right to her. The settlement was not associated with any particular ancestor or family dynasty, nothing but the location in which they were settled. *Bládhma*. Its members were outcasts or misfits, every one of them. A disgraced *bandraoi*, a female warrior, an old slave, a deaf mute woman, three landless sons. It was a new beginning for all of them.

Such aspirations were lost on the likes of Muirne Muncháem who continued with her habitual obtuseness. 'Well, *Muinntir Bládhma* has a limited future if it lacks the men to procreate. That is unless you intend to depend on the likes of your old slave and those boys I saw earlier.'

The *bandraoi*'s expression hardened but she could not deny the truth of her visitor's words. Over the past three years, the settlement had clawed its way to a state of relative security but it was still a precarious existence. Despite their achievements, it did not have a future while its population remained so restricted.

Not that she would ever admit as much to Muirne Muncháem.

With exaggerated assurance, Bodhmall smiled and brushed a loose strand of hair back from her face. 'I understand you're tired after your hardships in reaching us.' She leaned forward so

abruptly, her face so close to Muirne Muncháem's, that the other woman drew back in alarm. 'Nevertheless, you should not forget that you remain here by my leave.'

Bodhmall got to her feet. 'I will leave you to rest now. You may use this roundhouse for tonight. I will consult my *rechtaire* and my *conradh* with respect to your request for sanctuary and inform you on my final decision after we have eaten this evening.'

Picking up the beaker that she'd let settle on the ashes, she gave it a final shake, added a dollop of honey from another pot and held it out to her visitor.

'Drink this. It will ease the pains and help you to sleep.'

Cowed, Muirne accepted the vessel but considered its contents with a dubious expression.

Bodhmall stood up to leave. 'I may be *An Cailleach Dubh*, Muirne Muncháem, but I have yet to cause hurt to a child or a visitor in my home.'

Without waiting to for Muirne's reaction, she departed through the doorway. The thick leather covering dropped back in place with a heavy flap.

Bodhmall's fury carried her several paces from the roundhouse before she was finally able to rein it in. Trembling, she halted beside the nearest lean-to, fists clenched so tight that the knuckles on her hands matched the colour of dirty snow. She leaned forwards, resting her forehead against one of the vertical support poles and felt the cool sensation of the wooden surface draw some of the anger from her.

She wasn't sure how long she remained standing there, staring at the ground, resisting the urge to fall to her knees and weep. It was all too much, and all at one time: Liath Luachra's disappearance, the assault from the *draoi*, the shocking news of her brother's death and now the arrival of her old rival.

Taking a deep breath, she released the air slowly in little gasps as she straightened herself up and pulled back from the support pole. Wiping the cold patch of skin on her forehead, she turned and strode across to the fire pit where Conchenn was seated on a reed mat peeling skin from a pile of wrinkled vegetables heaped in a wicker basket. Lowering herself onto the mat beside the old woman, Bodhmall retrieved an iron knife and furiously started to hack the skinned tubers into smaller pieces.

Glancing at her in surprise, Conchenn considered her briefly then, sensing her turmoil, shuffled over on the mat to make room. Bodhmall did not acknowledge it but she appreciated the old woman's gesture and felt a sudden gratitude for her silent presence, a perfect antidote to the vexing company of Muirne Muncháem.

Using an old druidic technique, Bodhmall slowly submitted herself to the quiet rhythm of the physical action, the mindless repetition of cut, turn, cut and turn that allowed her to retreat deep inside herself. It was only there, in that monotonous routine, that she at last found the inner space to grieve, to mourn and empty her heart.

'Bodhmall!'

Startled, she opened her eyes. The wicker basket was empty. A pile of perfectly chopped vegetables lay on the mat in front of her.

'Bodhmall!'

She looked around in confusion, struggling to locate the source of the shout before spotting Aodhán on the gateway, beckoning for her to join him. For a moment, she stared dumbly at the

slender guard then, abruptly, pushed the vegetables aside. Rising to her feet, she crossed the *lí*, brushing her hands against the rough material of her smock.

Several long strides brought her to the base of the ladder leading up to the rampart. Aodhán moved aside to give her room as she reached the top rung and stepped out onto the stone platform.

‘What is it? What’s wrong?’

The young warrior pointed wordlessly towards the northern end of the valley. Squinting, she stared in the indicated direction until she found what he wanted her to see; a faraway figure crossing the flatland at speed in the direction of the *ráth*. Despite the distance, she immediately recognised Bearach’s distinctive stride.

Aodhán leaned forward, hands pressed against the edge of the wooden palisade. He said nothing as he peered at the runner but scratched at his beard with a wistful expression.

‘Bearach’s not carrying any game. And there’s no sign of Liath Luachra.’ He sounded equally perturbed by both observations.

‘Why is he running at such speed?’ The *bandraoi* unconsciously voiced her concern aloud but when she glanced at Aodhán and saw the expression on his face, a chill trickled down her spine. A sick feeling filled her stomach as she gazed around the valley, the familiar shelter of the surrounding hills suddenly appearing to close in around them like the jaws of a triggered bear trap.

‘Aodhán, your brother and father are at the *lúbgort*. Fetch them quickly, gather the livestock and drive them inside.’

The youth stared at her in alarm, a crease wrinkling across his forehead.

‘What is it, Bodhmall?’

‘I think the *ráth* may be under attack.’

Chapter Two

They'd been stalking deer sign for the best part of the morning, following the meandering tracks through the frozen hill country east of Sliabh Bládhma. Liath Luachra estimated that there was one, possibly two, animals. Bearach was convinced there were at least four.

But then he'd always been an optimist.

Liath Luachra relaxed and slowly eased her grip on the javelin. She'd come to a stop in the murky shadow of one of the many trees coating the lower slopes and although she continued to scrutinise the terrain for movement, she was relatively sure the animals were not present.

As sure as she could be.

It was difficult to be certain from the most recent imprints they'd found. The snow cover was inconsistent among the hills and the substance of the previous fall had melted in the unexpected morning sunshine. Adding to the challenge was the fact the tracks alternated between dense wood land where the ground was still soft enough to leave a clear track, and rockier ground where the prints were easy to lose on the rough stone surface.

Liath Luachra exhaled a mouthful of ghost breath into the chilly air and watched the breeze snatch it away. Although she'd never admit to it, she didn't particularly enjoy hunting in winter. In her experience, the physical effort and the sheer discomfort greatly exceeded the rewards. Certainly there was no comparison to the hunt in warmer months. In summer, late spring and even early autumn you could simply choose a comfortable hiding site at one of the animals' favourite feeding grounds, easily identified with experience and patience, and wait for the animals to come to you.

In winter, of course, such an approach was impractical. The cold and the risk of hypothermia made it impossible to remain stationary or inactive for long periods of time. There was no real alternative, therefore, but to stalk the animals, to locate a trail in the snow and follow it, keeping downwind as much as possible in the undulating terrain.

In theory, this was relatively straightforward. Find trail. Follow tracks. Kill deer. In practice, of course, hunting deer required equal measures of skill and good fortune. At this time of the year, the deer had already shed their rich, red coloured coat for a greyish brown that blended perfectly into the background. This natural camouflage rendered the animals practically invisible when they were standing still and hunters were obliged to remain alert for minute traces of movement, the flicker of an ear or the glint of an antler.

Liath Luachra and Bearach had been moving ponderously all morning, passing through the woodland at a pace that allowed them to follow the sign while advancing silently. Avoiding the ridgelines and open spaces, they took only three or four steps at a time. To counter the deer's sensitive hearing, they had tied sheepskin to the soles of their boots, muffling their footfall. They surveyed the ground ahead at regular intervals to avoid debris on the forest floor that might create noise and alert the animals to their presence.

Putting the javelin aside, Liath Luachra scratched at an itch inside her thigh but found relief impossible through the thick furs she was wearing. She slipped a hand inside the furs and then the wool leggings beneath, sliding her fingers down to the area of irritation. After a moment or two of scratching, she located a tick embedded in the skin. Teasing it out between her thumb and forefinger, she withdrew it for closer examination. Even in the dappled sunlight the insect looked bloated. It had feasted well on her blood.

Time to change the bedding again.

With an expression of distaste, she flicked it off into the trees then proceeded forward, using the limited vegetation and shadows to best advantage.

Even at a crouch, the warrior woman eased through the undergrowth with remarkable grace. Strong legs, toned from years of trudging the rugged landscape, bore her over obstacles with ease. An innate sense of balance allowed her to manoeuvre past barriers that would have tasked the most flexible of acrobats. She had wedged her thick, black, shoulder-length hair beneath a wool-lined leather hat to avoid the snagging branches but halted abruptly as something snagged her attention instead. Dropping to one knee, she brushed aside a tangled clump of fern to discover a small pile of deer dung half-hidden beneath the brittle, red fronds. Lowering herself onto her belly, she examined her find more closely, poking at the individual pellets with a broken twig. As she studied the droppings, she chewed thoughtfully on the inner side of her cheek.

With a sniff, she sat up, transferring her attention to her fellow hunter, Bearach, who had sidled up into the shadow of a neighbouring oak. A slim, dark haired youth of fourteen years, Bearach had always been her favourite of Cairbre's three sons for he laughed easily, a trait only one as solemn as Liath Luachra could truly appreciate. The boy also had a toughness to him that she respected. Although six years her junior, he'd forced himself to keep up with the gruelling pace she'd set on departing the *rúth* that morning and maintained until the first sight of deer sign.

'Bearach,' she whispered.

He glanced towards her and she pointed down at the deer spoor.

Slithering over to where she was crouched, he dropped to his knees and poked at the droppings, pressing one of the pellets with his index finger. It was moist and when he raised it to his nose, it remained fastened to the digit.

'It's fresh.'

'What else?' she pressed.

He looked at her blankly. Her face, pale from the winter season, was as inscrutable as ever and provided no clue to a possible response. She had noticed that when some people, particularly strangers, talked with her, their eyes often slid off to the right, distracted by the ladder of tattooed black lines that scaled the side of her face from below the ear to the forehead. Familiar with it to the point of indifference, the boy's eyes did not veer away.

'It's shit,' he hazarded.

'I know it's shit. What about the shape of it?'

'The pellets are small. Oval shaped.'

'Which suggests ...?'

'The deer have been eating leaves. Browse and twigs instead of grass.'

She nodded, satisfied with the response then waved him on to proceed ahead of her. The freshness of the droppings meant that the deer were not too far ahead. Up front, Bearach would be the first to sight the animal and have the best chance of making a cast. Patient and without complaint during the hunt, he deserved the opportunity and it would be good for his confidence to take the kill.

She continued to observe the boy with the critical eye of an instructor as he moved forward. Slowly detaching himself from the cover of the oak tree, he slipped smoothly from cover to cover down a steep, wooded incline that funnelled into a little valley between two broad hills. She nodded appreciatively as he changed direction at the appropriate times to remain concealed in shadow.

You've turned into a teacher, Grey One. A mentor of unblooded children.

The thought entered her head unbidden and she frowned, unsure whether the notion pleased her or annoyed her. Unable to decide, she ignored it and turned her attention to the surrounding landscape. Undulating hills and valleys shrouded by snow powdered forest as far as the eye could see. It was a beautiful sight and she took the time to appreciate what she was looking at.

It is good to be Out.

Her lips twitched in a rare expression of humour. Despite the cold and the discomfort it *was* good to be Out again. It had been a hard winter and three months of toil and domesticity at Glenn Ceoch had gnawed at her more than it had ever done before. The previous month had been particularly onerous. Preoccupied with treating a run of disease at *Coill Mór*, their nearest neighbors at more than a three day march, Bodhmall had been away for much of that period, only returning to Ráth Bládhma two days earlier. During her absence, severe late winter storms had battered the land with depressing frequency to the point that Liath Luachra had barely ventured beyond the gate for weeks.

Constraints of any kind, physical or social, had always distressed Liath Luachra, legacy of an insane father who'd repeatedly chained her to a rock as a child. Consumed by fits of madness associated with his regular bouts of drinking, the deranged farmer had been convinced she was trying to poison him. The stomach upsets he suffered had, in fact, been associated with the rotgut liquor he consumed although that possibility had never seemed to occur to him. Instead, he'd interrogate her without respite, beating her when she tried to tell him the truth and then beating her when she made up lies in a desperate attempt to mollify him. In the end, she'd simply shut up and took the punishment, saying nothing as she nurtured a cold hatred in her hardening heart.

Now, many years later, her father was long dead but physical constraints still had the potential to send her into a sweat-stained panic. The living constraints at Ráth Bládhma, admittedly, were nowhere near as dramatic but they were still enough to spill her into that familiar pattern of behavior she'd come to recognize.

At first she would grow despondent, increasingly antisocial and withdrawing further and further inside herself. Attempts at interaction from the other members of the settlement would provoke a snarled response. Sensing her explosive hostility, they had wisely left her to her own company. Sitting alone in the empty roundhouse, she had fought the temptation of temporary oblivion from the settlement's supply of alcohol and, slowly but surely, felt herself fray at the edges.

It had been an immense relief when the storms had finally blown themselves inside out, dark clouds unfurling to reveal skies that were clear, if distinctly cold. Aodhán's complaints at the lack of venison had been a convenient excuse to pull on her furs, quit the *ráth* and leave all of its entanglements behind.

Most of the others were reluctant to stray too far from Glenn Ceoch or venture into the cloistered forests of the Great Wild beyond the valley entrance. She understood that. On a sunny day, the forest could be a pleasant place, a familiar friend with its abundant firewood, food supplies, and medicines. At other times, however, particularly when the weather changed, it could take on a dark and sullen personality, that familiar friend suddenly becoming menacingly unrecognisable.

Liath Luachra knew that she had something of a love-hate relationship with the Great Wild. Like most people, she was cautiously respectful of its sheer immensity, the potential for danger

that lurked within the thick scrub or slunk through the shadows of the great trees. When humans walked within the forest, their voices echoed thinly amongst the towering trees and in places the green shadowed so much it was almost black. In the Great Wild, people could fan out, spread among its vastness only to be swallowed up by that immensity, never to be seen again.

She recognized that it was this exact same characteristic of the Great Wild that made it so compelling. There was something deeply attractive about a force so immense it could swallow up all trace of one's existence. Some nights, sitting alone on guard duty, she would stare out and shiver at the mysterious noises that echoed in from the encircling blackness. And yet, at the same time, part of her recognized the tug of that emptiness, the irresistible pull on her soul and it took a determined effort to resist the idea of dropping her weapons, clambering down the wall and giving herself up to that dark.

Liath Luachra breathed in, filling her lungs with bracing mountain air and slowly let it out again.

These things don't matter. Focus on the hunt.

She stared down to the heavily wooded valley at the bottom of the slope. From previous hunts, she knew this was a favoured haunt of many deer. The tree cover concealed a rocky fracture in the nearest hill and further in, this widened to a narrow canyon that cut through the hill and emerged out onto the twisted pass known as *An Bealach Cam*. The route, therefore, offered a secure and safe passage to the higher forest on the other side of the ridge.

Secure and safe, until today at least.

Taking a firm grip on the haft of the javelin, she pushed herself off the trunk of the tree with her free hand, using the gradient and the slippery grass to slide quietly down the slope.

Bearach was waiting for her at the entrance to the crevice. As she drew close, he put a finger to his lips and pointed at the ground where a hoof print was visible in a soft patch of exposed earth. Clucking her tongue quietly, Liath Luachra studied the track with interest. From the size of the imprint, the animal was likely to be a buck. And a big one at that. From the direction of the track, it looked as though it had passed directly into the canyon.

Bearach grinned with excitement, his teeth a broad slash of white in the shadows. Once again, she gestured for him take the lead. Javelin at the ready, he entered the rocky gap at a low crouch.

Several paces in, the tight walls of the fracture broadened out into a narrow canyon but the light remained murky, the high cliffs on either side filtering all power from the sickly, grey sunlight. Icicles dangled the length of the cliff tops on either side and the constant patter of dripping water echoed hollowly between the rocky walls. The vegetation here was sparse, consisting of little more than a few mildewed ferns, scraggly plants and a thick layer of moss that coated the various rocks and boulders. Three or four hundred paces down the passage, a dense clump of beech trees occupied the space where the canyon broadened out and marked its intersection with *An Bealach Cam*.

Bearach looked at her with an uncertain expression but she shrugged then nodded towards the trees. Possibly the buck was hidden there, possibly it had already sensed their presence and slipped forward into the pass.

Slowly, they advanced towards the little wood, weapons at the ready, Liath Luachra remaining a safe distance to the rear so that the boy could make a clear cast if the opportunity arose. Eventually, he entered the thicket but two or three steps inside the tree line she saw him lower his weapon, glance back over his shoulder and shake his head. The animals had moved on again.

Liath Luachra cursed. She could see that although the wood was less than twenty paces deep, it was clogged with interlinking branches, withered foliage and brambles. The resulting field of debris would be difficult to negotiate without making any noise. Unhindered by such requirements, the deer would be able to get ahead of them again, advance onwards from An Bealach Cam and disappear up into the higher ridges.

It took a time but they eventually managed to traverse the little wood without creating too much of a racket and it was Bearach who was first to step foot onto the floor of An Bealach Cam. A tight, but barren, valley weaving through a series of steep hills, it was still mostly covered in snow. Five hundred paces south of where he'd emerged, its steep sides flattened out to a gentle, downhill gradient.

From behind, Liath Luachra watched the boy step out of cover then halt stiffly as he stared down at the ground. Curious, she pushed her way through the last of the scrub and twisted tree trunks to join him. Emerging onto the pass, she realised what he was looking at: several lines of crushed footprints on the snow covered floor.

Bearach!

Liath Luachra grabbed the youth's cloak and yanked him backwards with her. The force of her action was such that momentum carried them both inside the tree line to land heavily on a layer of dead fern and brambles. Taken completely by surprise, Bearach was too startled to react at first, his exclamation of shock smothered by the hand clamped around his mouth. As he gathered his wits, however, and started to struggle, Liath Luachra brought her lips close to his ear.

'Quiet.'

Accustomed to obeying her commands, the boy ceased his attempts to break free. Slowly, she removed her hand and released him.

Bearach immediately shifted his weight off her and rolled to one side, completing the turn with a smooth upward movement onto the balls of his feet. He stared at her in an aggrieved manner which she ignored as she snapped a loop around the javelin haft and slung it across her back to join the other two. Gesturing for him to follow, she dropped to her belly and wriggled closer to the tree line, concealing herself behind the bulk of a bramble-choked elm. Following her example, the boy crawled closer and both stared out through the scrub at that section of the empty pass. There was no sound to be heard, no noise but the muted whisper of their own breathing and the lonely moan of wind gusting through the valley. Finally, satisfied that they were in no immediate danger, Liath Luachra turned her face close to Bearach. 'No-one,' she mouthed.

The boy opened his mouth to respond but before he had a chance she'd already risen to her feet, warily stepping forwards onto the open ground.

Shaking his head, Bearach stood up and followed.

Despite her conviction that they were alone, the woman warrior remained close to the edge of the tree line for a moment or two, eyes flickering from the western end of the pass to a distant curve at the eastern end where it veered a corner and disappeared from sight. Reassured, she approached the trampled snow and bent down to grasp a handful of the powdery material. Raising it to her nose, she sniffed, exhaled through her mouth and sniffed again.

'Not fresh.'

She stood, tossed the crumpled powder aside and headed for the mouth of the pass, studying the ground as she did so. From her interpretation of the scuffed surface, a large party passing

through An Bealach Cam had entered from the east and temporarily halted at this point. A significant number of separate footprints had splintered off from the main trail to gather in smaller clusters, probably to converse with friends or comrades. Others had veered off to the side to piss against the cliff walls or amongst the trees where yellow traces of urine still stained the snow.

Liath Luachra collated different elements of the story written across the ground before her and finally came to her conclusions. Whoever they were, the party had not remained at the mouth of the pass for very long. Some discussion had taken place, there had been a brief respite for the men – they were all men’s footprints – to catch their breath and wolf down some food. This much was clear from the scattered depressions where people had sat together and the scatter of crumbs and discarded scraps of food.

While they were waiting, the party had been joined by a single individual, possibly a scout, who’d entered the pass from the west. Perhaps this newcomer had told them something or perhaps they had simply rested enough. Whatever the reason, shortly after his arrival – his tracks were notably fresher – the group had assembled once more, formed a single column and headed out of the pass. They’d departed in a westerly direction, angling towards some hills that avoided the marshes and offered an easier track through the wilderness.

She raised her head to look Bearach in the eye.

‘What do you see?’

The young man looked surprised to be tested at such a time but obediently bent down to examine the nearest tracks, using the tip of the javelin to sift through the layers of trodden snow.

‘Twenty to thirty men.’ He paused and bit his lip. ‘Carrying a lot of weight. But moving fast. In a hurry. They didn’t stay here long.’

His forehead creased in concentration and he glanced up at Liath Luachra.

‘Bandits?’

She shook her head.

‘Too many. And from the weight, too well equipped. It’s a *fian*.’

Bearach stared at her in surprise. ‘A war party? In winter? Travelling out here in the wild lands? That doesn’t make sense.’

‘No,’ she admitted. ‘It doesn’t.’

‘So where are they going? There aren’t any settlements to the west except for An Coill Mór. Or maybe Ráth Dearg.’ He scratched his chin then his hand rose to nervously pick at the pitiful moustache he’d been attempting to grow over the previous months. ‘But An Coill Mór’s at least three days march north-west. Ráth Dearg’s more than four south west. With nothing but forest and marshland between.’

Liath Luachra gave a shrug.

‘It doesn’t matter. If they keep moving west, they can march to their heart’s content. They’re not our concern as long as they stay clear of Gleann Ceoch.’

‘Shouldn’t we warn An Coill Mór?’

‘We don’t have the supplies to make a three-day trip. Besides, Coill Mór is small. This war party will never find them.’

With this, she turned her back on the youth and examined the ground once more. Despite her apparent indifference, however, she was frowning. The tracks had roused her curiosity. Bearach had the right of it and his incredulity was well warranted. It was hard to believe a *fian* would be headed for either of the two other settlements out in the Great Wild. An Coill Mór was little

more than a farm and had a total population of five people. Ráth Dearg, an admittedly larger holding, was the property of the old warrior Cathal ua Tuarsaig and his extended family. Back in the day, Cathal had the reputation of a ferocious fighter but he'd withdrawn to the isolation of the Great Wild many years ago. It was difficult to imagine anyone still cared enough or held resentment strong enough to lead a war party to attack him.

She exhaled slowly, feeling the weight of the boy's eyes on her shoulders as she walked parallel to the trodden snow trail, scanning the ground for anything else out of the ordinary. Suddenly, she gave an exclamation of triumph and gestured for Bearach to come closer.

'Here.'

He approached and she pointed out a faint deer print on an untouched stretch of snow. Several paces further on, there was another, similar print.

Having anticipated further discussion on the *fian*, Bearach looked at her with an expression of frustrated incomprehension.

'There's an animal that shows wisdom,' declared Liath Luachra. 'Veering east to avoid the *fian*. Let's follow that sensible example and do the same.'

With a wide grin, she turned and abruptly moved off in an easterly direction, quickly breaking into a powerful, ground-eating stride.

'Come on, Bearach. We may get venison for your brother's belly yet.'

By mid-afternoon, it was clear that they had lost the trail. Presumably alarmed by the presence of so much human activity, the deer had warily moved on, departing from its normal feeding territory and moving further into the Great Wild. It soon became evident that it was headed for the dense forest to the north-west where there would be little chance of finding them.

The hunters halted to discuss their options, disgusted by such a poor outcome after a long period stalking the animals. Disheartened, it took but a brief discussion for both to agree to return to Ráth Bládhma. Aodhán would, no doubt, grumble at their lack of venison but it was better that the settlement were informed about the *fian* even if they did return empty-handed.

No longer constrained by the need to stalk their quarry, the pair knew that they could now make good time and, if they pushed themselves, there was a good chance of reaching the *ráth* by nightfall. Despite their eagerness for the comfort of the hearth, however, the threat of the *fian's* potential return prompted Liath Luachra to ignore the direct route. Opting instead for a more circuitous path, the hunters followed the hills, staying inside the trees and avoiding any open flat land. Later that afternoon, her caution proved well founded when Bearach, who'd taken the lead, slipped on a loose section of snow while hurriedly traversing a stretch of open terrain. Tumbling face first into a nearby drift, he spluttered and brushed the snow from his face, then struggled to his feet.

'Liath Luachra!'

The hoarseness of the boy's voice would have alerted the woman warrior but, running close behind him, she'd already spotted what he'd seen; the worn trail of footprints. Twenty or thirty men. Moving in single file.

Frowning, she studied scuffed up tracks in the snow for the second time that day. Her lips pressed tight together as she went down on one knee, slipped a hand out of her mittens and scooped up a handful of snow. After sniffing she threw it aside and stood up again.

It was the same party. She was sure of it. Here and there, she recognised distinctive markings from the trail encountered earlier that morning: an uncommonly wide boot heel, the one-sided imprint of someone with a limp in their left leg, a sharp triangular impression of a damaged spear haft shaft used like a staff. On this occasion, however, the party was headed in an easterly direction, directly opposite to the one it had taken that morning when departing An Bealach Cam.

Which meant they'd curved in a wide semi-circle, looping back onto their original track.

Now why would they do that?

Her curiosity prickled, an incessant itch too deep beneath the skin to be effectively scratched.

They can't be lost. The sky is clear and they can work their direction from the sun.

Brushing the snow from her knees, she glanced south in the direction of Gleann Ceoch.

Bearach cleared his throat nervously.

'These tracks are fresher. Less than two hours old. We should get back to the *ráth* and alert them.'

Liath Luachra stared around at the empty landscape. Black, forest coated hills, broken here and there by white patches of snow. Apart from the long trail of broken snow there was no other evidence that the *fian* had passed this way.

'No.' She shook her head. 'We stay Out.'

Bearach stared, surprised by this sudden change in plan. Liath Luachra, however, continued to survey the surrounding landscape. Finally, her gaze ceased to drift, focussing in on one of the many forested ridges off to the south-west.

'Up there.' She glanced at Bearach. 'I found a cave to the left of that cleft on the ridge last year. It won't be comfortable but it'll serve as shelter for the night.'

The youth continued to regard her in bafflement. Suddenly, his eyes flared with comprehension.

'The snow. They might see our tracks.'

'Leading them straight back to Ráth Bládhma.' Liath Luachra nodded. 'A *fian* that big, they'll have scouts out, covering the vanguard and flanks. We've been lucky so far. We've missed them on two separate occasions.'

She twisted her shoulder, adjusting the arrangement of the javelins strapped across her back.

'But this set of tracks is more recent. They'll be closer.' She nodded decisively to herself as though agreeing with the logic of her own conclusions. 'The best thing we can do now is to go to ground. Leave as little evidence of our existence as possible.'

By the time they'd climbed to the cleft on the hill crest, the sky was beginning to darken, the light turning brittle and grey. The wind had also increased, whipping icy gusts down from the summit to spatter their eyes and faces.

'There it is!'

Liath Luachra pointed towards a narrow slit in the side of a steep incline, just above the tree line. Pleased to find it exactly where she'd remembered, she approached the craggy cave mouth. It seemed a bit narrower than she recalled but it was definitely the place.

A rocky passage curled inwards from the entrance for a distance of about seven or eight paces before veering off sharply to the left. Here it widened to form a circular chamber with a high

curved ceiling. In one wall, there was a wide ledge at the height of a tall man's head. Accessible using a rough series of hollows and notches that pockmarked the rocky surface, it provided a secure place to sleep.

Liath Luachra dumped an armful of kindling and branches onto the floor then left Bearach to coax a fire to life while she went outside and down to the trees to seek additional fuel. After returning several times with armfuls of the driest wood she could find, she hacked a number of branches from a nearby gorse bush and used them to plug the entrance to the cave. As a barrier, the spiny shrub did not present a serious obstacle, however its voluminous branches would serve as a credible windbreak to prevent the worst of the gale from entering the cave. More importantly, they would also help to shield any light from the fire that might seep out from the inner chamber.

When the gap was sealed to her satisfaction, Liath Luachra joined the youth, sitting by the small fire he'd managed to put together. Bearach had also laid their rations out on a flat rock beside the fire; two portions of salted fish, blood cake and some hard bread, all wrapped in broad, green dock leaves.

They ate the frugal meal in silence, the woman warrior chewing without relish on the tasteless hard tack. It was hardly a feast but it was certainly not the worst she'd eaten. With her habitual pragmatism, she accepted the food for what it was; simple replenishment to keep the hunger pangs at bay.

Beside her, somewhat more forthright, Bearach sighed and grimaced melodramatically with each mouthful.

'Some roasted meat would have been nice.'

Liath Luachra gave him a sideward glance, one eyebrow raised.

'You're as bad as your brother.'

'But Aodhán has a point. He likes his meat. This is like chewing dog turds. I wish we'd brought some decent food with us.'

Liath Luachra rewarded his opinion with a look of disdain. Tossing the empty dock leaves aside, she slowly got to her feet and then twisted her hips so that she could slip her right hand down the back of her woollen leggings. Bearach watched in growing bewilderment as she grunted loudly, forehead creased as though in immense concentration.

'What are you doing?'

'Be quiet. I'm trying to pull some nice fresh venison out of my ass for your dinner.'

He stared at her blankly then suddenly his head rolled back and a raucous guffaw echoed around the cave, resounding off the hard chamber walls to fill the enclosed space with laughter. Infected by his contagious good humour, Liath Luachra started to laugh as well and, for a moment, a great weight slipped from her shoulders.

When they'd finished eating the last scraps of food, Bearach climbed up to the rocky shelf to unroll their bedding; two double-layered wool blankets. He spread these out across a cushion of spruce cuttings that he'd trampled flat on the rock base and strewn with dead leaves bundled up from the cavern floor.

Liath Luachra regarded the sleeping arrangements with little enthusiasm.

Hard dreams tonight, then.

'You go ahead and sleep,' she instructed the boy. 'I want to think and I need to be alone to work out the way of things. I'll come join you when I'm ready.'

Shrugging, Bearach retired to his bedroll and lay down, fully clothed, on the thin bedding. They would have no covering layer tonight, relying on their shared body heat, the fire and the shelter of the cave to keep them warm until morning.

Exhausted from the day's exertions, it did not take the boy long to fade and within a short period of time, a soft snore emanated from the huddle he made.

Liath Luachra remained seated before the small fire, adding some dry sticks then rubbing her palms together before the brief flare of heat they produced. Outside, the temperature would have plummeted but it was still pleasantly warm within the cave, the rocky walls reflecting the heat of the fire back on her. Later in the night, when the fire had died down, the accumulated heat would slowly seep out through the cave entrance, despite her best efforts to seal them in.

She glanced back over her shoulder and up to the ledge where Bearach was visible, sleeping quietly. She released a long sigh. Originally intending to travel alone, she'd allowed the boy to beat her resistance down with his good humour and boundless enthusiasm, somehow convincing her to let him come. She was still unsure how he'd actually managed to do that, to weasel his way past her habitual resolve.

The fire crackled and a low draught stirred the scent of burning pine up to her nostrils.

She had never been particularly good with children, unable to relate to their weakness, their innocence and complete dependency on adults. Her own childhood had taught her that there were only two types of people: those who were tough enough to survive and those who died. It was a simple as that.

And yet it wasn't, of course.

Three years at Ráth Bládhma had changed her beliefs on many things. Somehow, over that time, the routine domesticity and Bodhmall's calming influence had mellowed her, worn down her more jagged edges. Until accompanying Bodhmall to Ráth Bládhma she had never really known such an extended period of calm, of tranquillity. In the new settlement, for the first time in her life, she was surrounded by people she actually liked, people who respected her presence there as much for her company as for her martial skills.

You are getting soft, Liath Luachra. Life at Ráth Bládhma has made you soft and fat.

Sometimes she wished she could cut old memories from her mind, peel them away in the same way she'd peel the skin from a potato. If such things were possible she would have pared away all the pain, all the memories, long ago and tossed them into the air to let the wind take them away.

She chuckled at her own inanities. She was only fooling herself. The pain made her who she was. The pain made her hard and ruthless and, sometimes, ruthlessness was necessary to combat those who threatened you.

And there was always someone who would threaten you.

*Someone like the *fian*.*

The thought of the war party instantly dissolved any remaining trace of good humour, burning it off like frost on a sunny morning. She stared at the fire and cursed softly. For the sake of the boy she'd feigned indifference throughout the afternoon but the presence of the *fian* concerned her greatly, particularly as she could not work out the rationale behind it. It made no sense to rouse a war party at this time of the year, a time when most people were struggling to survive the hardships of winter. Its presence in these lands made even less sense. Settlements were few and scattered and none had sufficient booty to warrant a raid of such a large group of men, none that she was aware of at least.

And then there was the question of the *fian*'s erratic behaviour. Why would they make such fitful changes in direction? There had been no threat for them to respond to so they had to be searching for someone. Or something.

A chill trickled down her spine with that particular conclusion. Ráth Bládhma was isolated and had had no contact with other settlements since the beginning of winter. It was possible that some event had taken place, some political situation had changed that they were not yet aware of and which might have placed them at risk. With both Bearach and herself absent, the settlement had a single effective defender in Aodhán. The others, without doubt, would do their best to assist but, in reality, only Aodhán had the martial training needed.

Irritable and worried, she left the fire and climbed up to the ledge where Bearach was snoring. Lying down beside him on the uncompromising surface, she nestled in close to share his warmth but found that she was unable to relax. Sleep remained elusive, slithering away like a greasy eel between her hands each time she thought to clutch it.

She sighed. It was going to be a long night.

'Bearach. Wake up.'

The youth opened groggy eyes, struggling to come to full alertness. His hand moved, grasping for the dagger lying on the rocky floor beside the bedding. Liath Luachra, crouched alongside him, deftly moved it out of reach.

'You don't need to use that. Get up. We have to leave.'

She could barely see him as he sat up and peered blearily around. The fire had died out some time ago and now the little cavern was embedded in shadow as dark as a black pig's hole.

'It's snowing.'

For a moment he could only return her stare, struggle to work out what she was talking about. Finally, she saw comprehension seep into his exhausted brain. He understood. If it was snowing, they could travel without fear of tracks. They could return to their valley and Ráth Bládhma without fear of leaving a trail that might reveal its location.

Without further protest, he rolled off the bedding and started rolling up the blanket.

It was still dark when they emerged from the cave and into the icy air. Standing at the craggy entrance, Liath Luachra stared up at the perforated layer of white flakes cascading out of the darkness overhead. She shivered and pulled the hood of her cloak down lower over her forehead. The snow fall was not heavy but it was steady. The absence of wind meant that it would settle on the ground, leaving a fresh layer to obscure all trace of their passage. She exhaled slowly and a phantom mist momentarily frosted the air about her lips. Night still cloaked the land but her instincts told her that it would not be long before the first grey tinge appeared on the horizon, followed soon after by the streaky white blur of dawn.

'Stay close now, Bearach.'

The youth took a deep breath and nodded. Like Liath Luachra, he had packed lightly, bedroll and three javelins strapped tight across his back to allow maximum freedom of movement. Both wore their fur mittens, wool hats pulled tight over heads crowned with wide oilskin hoods.

They set off in a southerly direction, dropping from the hill to the flat ground that snaked between the ridges, trudging through snow that was ankle deep in places. South for Ráth Bládhma thought Liath Luachra. South for home.

Still struggling against the gluey clutch of sleep, the boy relinquished all responsibility for their path. Liath Luachra pushed them forward with her characteristic intensity but maintained a measured pace that kept them warm without causing the thick film of sweat that could pose a lethal risk if they were forced to stop and their body temperature dropped.

They'd been travelling for some time when the woman warrior stopped abruptly, so abruptly, in fact, that Bearach ran into her, buffeting his nose against the javelins strapped across her back. For a moment, the boy teetered and struggled to regain his balance. Ignoring his predicament, Liath Luachra peered forward into the gloom. Although Bearach knew better than to interrupt her when she was preoccupied, she sensed him easing up alongside, curious to see what she was looking at. Both of them stared at the dim smear of light in the distance, set at the base of a broad hill known as Drom Osna – the Ridge of Sighs.

'What is it?' Bearach asked at last, finally running out of patience.

'It's a fire. But it's distant. Or reflected off the trees. Hard to tell at this distance.'

Liath Luachra frowned up at the darkness stretched tight across the heavens and scratched her cheek with a mitten. The snow was easing but the sky was still black and viscous as a bog pool.

'Do you think it's that *fián*?'

She grimaced at the boy's enthusiasm, shaking her head in exasperation. 'They were headed east. They couldn't have come back this way so quickly. Besides, a single fire for so many? It ...'

Her voice trailed as off as her mind became absorbed with the possibilities. Eventually, she swore, unable to come up with a feasible explanation. Curious by nature, she hated not knowing the detail of things. 'Hell's testicles! This country is busier than a spring fair! People are traipsing all over the place.'

She bit her lip and squinted at the distant glow.

'Bearach,' she said at last. 'I'm going closer. I want to see who it is.'

'Wouldn't it be safer to go back to the *ráth*?' He stared at her with serious eyes from beneath the cowl of his hood.

'Safer perhaps. But we'd be no wiser on the nature of those parties tramping around our territory. Better to look them over before running back to cower behind the walls, no?'

Uncertain, the youth refrained from comment, stamping his feet to keep the circulation flowing.

Liath Luachra removed her javelins and blanket then divested herself of her heavy woollen cloak as well. She handed the awkward bundle across to Bearach. 'Keep these safe until I get back.'

'I'm not coming with you?'

The question took Liath Luachra by surprise and she looked at him blankly. After a moment, she pointed to a nearby clump of forest. 'You see those trees?'

He nodded.

'I want you to hide there. Stay out of sight when I leave. If you hear a noise, any commotion at all, you run directly for Ráth Bládhma and you don't stop until you get there. Understand?'

Bearach swallowed and nodded nervously, fingers struggling to get a decent grip on the meagre substance of his budding moustache.

‘You don’t stop,’ Liath Luachra insisted. ‘If there’s trouble here you need to warn the *ráth* about the *fian*. Bodhmall and Aodhán will know what to do but tell them if there’s any trouble they should leave and make a run for Dún Baoiscne. They’ll ... they’ll protect our people.’

She grimaced involuntarily. Even naming the Baoiscne fortress out loud left a bitter taste in her mouth.

Without another word, she turned and started walking, intent on reaching the mysterious light. After only a few steps, however, something made her halt and look back over her shoulder. Bearach’s face, staring miserably after her, was a pale moon amongst the shadow of the trees and she blinked, confused by the sensation it stirred up inside her chest. Unsettled, she shook it off, brushing all thought of the boy from her mind as she turned and focussed once more on achieving her objective.

The distant light proved an effective beacon, drawing her in towards it like a moth to a flame. Unhindered by javelins or blanket, she was able to move swiftly, slipping easily over the crusted snow until she reached the densely forested hill several hundred paces south of Drom Osna.

Pausing, she considered the light once more. It was a fire all right. Now that she was closer she could see that it was situated in some kind of hollow or depression at the base of the hill, just in front of what seemed to be a large cavern in the rock face. Although the source of the light was out of her direct line of sight, the glow from the flames reflected off the frozen surface of the leaves on the nearby trees and a light haze of ice crystals hanging in the air.

Foolish.

Liath Luachra sniffed in disapproval. The hollow was a poor choice to site the fire. Not only did it signpost their location but the occupants were more than likely night blind as a result of the fire’s proximity.

All the better for me.

Moving at a low crouch, she followed the hill to a point less than a hundred paces from the cave. Here, she dropped to her belly and started to slide forwards across the snow. Fifty paces out, she stopped and lay motionless as she took the time to scan the trees for any flicker of movement, any unusually shaped shadows. She was relatively confident that she was safe where she lay. Around her the surface was rough and uneven, the snow folded up into low banks by the prevailing wind that would obscure her from most eyes.

She remained in the same position for a long time, before finally satisfied that there were no guards posted, none at the extremities of the hollow, none along the tree line of the lower hill. It was hard to believe but the occupants appeared to have taken no precautions of any kind.

What are these strangers thinking! They must have a death-wish.

She was about to move forward again when a sudden sound reached her ears and she froze in place. Startled, she drew her feet up, ready to take flight but as she listened to the low, humming drone, she began to relax. It was a chant. Someone below in the hollow was chanting.

Very thoughtful. That should cover any noise I make.

With one last sweep of the tree line, she began to move again, circling away from the hill to approach the hollow from a different angle. Further out from the hill the surface of the snow flattened out, becoming smoother and unblemished. Another slow, careful crawl brought her to within spitting distance of the lip of the depression but, spotting a fallen tree off to one side, she began to manoeuvre herself towards it, intending to use the trunk as cover when looking down into the hollow.

Easing in beside it, she lay with her face pressed against the trunk, her cheek stinging from the touch of the ice-coated bark. Shivering, she briefly regretted her decision to leave the wool cloak behind but almost immediately dismissed the notion. The extra fur-lined layer would have been welcome but the garment's bulk would have been too restrictive for what she needed.

Without warning, the chanting ceased. Once again, Liath Luachra froze in place. With shallow breaths, she sniffed the air but smelt nothing other than wood smoke and the sharp scent of snow.

Removing her right mitten, she gripped the wooden handle of her knife and drew it silently from the leather scabbard tucked into her belt. Placing the blade against her palm, she felt the coldness of the metal surface suck the warmth from her fingers. She hefted the weapon in the palm of her hand, comforted by its solid weight. If discovered, she had no intention of staying around to fight but the weapon would give her a slight edge – literally – if someone tried to stop her.

Drawing her knees up close to her chest, she carefully adopted a crouching position. Craning her neck forwards and around the side of the tree trunk, she cast a quick glance into the hollow, withdrawing back into cover in a smooth movement. Back in the lee of the log, she paused as she attempted to make sense of what she'd seen.

The hollow itself was wide, circular in shape and, unlike the land around it, empty of any snow layer whatsoever. In some ways that didn't surprise her. It was clearly a site of old knowledge, a place of the Old People who'd gone before and whose origins were now lost to memory. Two standing stones were situated at its centre, ancient monoliths for one of them had cracked in two a very long ago, the upper half tumbling to lie alongside the remaining stump.

The fire, an impressive blaze, was located next to the standing stones, surrounded by one or two sleeping forms lying huddled on the ground. As far as she could tell, there was only one person awake, a single figure seated on a rock before the flames, back turned towards her.

Liath Luachra bit her lip as she worked through the scene in her head again. It all felt wrong, smelled wrong. This group, whoever they were, were either insane or believed themselves under no threat of attack from man or wild animals. Curiosity burned her up inside.

She edged around the log again to get another look, shielding her eyes against the flare of the fire. The bedrolls she could see were occupied, the sleeping figures swathed in blankets and furs against the cold. Despite the size of the fire, it was impossible to distinguish their features because of the flickering shadows cast down by the flames.

In the cavern, beyond the blaze at the other side of the hollow, she caught a stir of movement. An equestrian snort confirmed the presence of at least one horse tethered within and she was suddenly very relieved that she'd decided to approach from downwind.

Fixing her eyes on the figure before the fire she studied it carefully. Wrapped in a shapeless black cloak and hooded cowl, any indication of sex or features were obscured. She continued to stare.

This isn't right.

Some intuition stirred a tremor of fear in Liath Luachra's belly and, unnerved, she decided to withdraw. Slowly backing away from the edge of the hollow, she saw the figure by the fire stiffen then stand straight up, turning slowly to stare directly at where she was hiding.

He can see me!

A spasm of panic spiralled through her and she almost screamed as she realised what she was staring at. There was something wrong with the face staring towards her, something terribly

wrong. Even at that distance, she could tell that the figure had no eyes, nothing but an empty pair of ragged sockets. Beneath them, the nose had also been removed or cut back to the bone and the lips of its mouth had been crudely sewn together with rough black stitches.

For a moment, she was so terrified, so completely overwhelmed with fear that her bladder loosened. Ironically, the sensation of warm urine down the inside of her leggings distracted her, freed her enough to act.

Rolling desperately from the lip of the hollow, Liath Luachra got to her feet and took to her heels, no longer caring if she was seen, desperate only to flee the hideous sight behind her. The knife slipped from her fingers but she ran on, boots stirring up puffs of snow as she left it discarded in her wake.

The sound of cursing rose up from behind her, raised voices and muffled demands for clarification hurled into the night. Stirred by the uproar, the horses started neighing furiously. Even though she was running, she could hear hysterical high-pitched laughter so close that it terrified her until she realised it was her own.

Despite having succumbed to a fully-fledged panic, some part of Liath Luachra recognised that she was reacting completely out of character but, inside her head, her mind continued to scream, drowning out all rational thought. She felt her intellect diminish, reduced to an animal-like terror, a clutching desperation to put as much distance as possible between herself and the creature behind her.

After that, everything blurred. She was cognisant of nothing but the most basic of sensation: red fog, pain, the never-ending impulse to run, to keep on running.

At some point, she stumbled, hit the ground and cracked her head against something solid. Although stunned by the impact, the blow had the additional, secondary, effect of clearing her mind and for a moment, it was as though some tight mental leash had been loosened.

Where ... Where am I?

The sky was light, if slightly overcast. From the position of the sun, it looked to be well past dawn. Apart from a few shadowed patches, the snow had for the most part melted away. She gasped in pain as she tried to raise her head and discovered that she was lying on some frosted stones, the frozen detritus of a dried-out river bed. Her body was twisted on the uneven surface, blood pooling on the large boulder where she'd hit her head. Physical sensation overwhelmed her and she was suddenly wheezing, barely able to breathe in freezing air so cold it scalded the back of her throat. Her head pounded from the stress of extreme physical effort. She was, she realised, barely on the right side of consciousness.

Gods! How long have I been running?

She vomited then, the meagre but warm contents of her stomach creating minute swirls of vapour on contact with the freezing stones. Too exhausted to move, she lay where she had fallen, threads of saliva and phlegm dripping from her lips. She was close to passing out when she felt the terror building up inside her head again, a hollow wave of dread surging up to engulf her once more.

Then she was up and running again.

Out of the river bed stones, scrambling up the snow coated bank.

Deep into the forest.

For a time, nothing existed but the seething of dreams, a darkness thick and murky as swamp water. It was a slight rustling that finally roused her to consciousness, a rustling and a soft whistling that sounded like a tune she'd heard as a child a very long time before.

The memories flooded back as she drifted upwards, to awareness. Memories that stirred a hollow sense of panic.

That face!

She became aware of a soft weight pressing down on her chest. It took a moment to understand that she was conscious again, that the blue-whiteness filling her eyes was the play of clouds splayed across the heavens. Not the ethereal blank backdrop of nothingness.

The transition to sensory perception was not as gentle as her visual recovery, accompanied by a discomfort as deep as a battle wound.

It hurts.

Awake now, she could feel the ache across her entire body. Intense but profound, as though she had done herself some great internal injury. Although the pain felt acute it was also oddly generic and difficult to isolate. The muscles in her legs, however, burned with a distinctness of their own, as though the very tissue and sinew had been stretched beyond its limits. A ferocious thirst arose in a throat that was parched and dry and sore. Her stomach rumbled, ravenous for food.

Another rustle.

She struggled to rise but found she was lying on her back, spread-eagled on a bed of furs. Each hand and leg had been separately tethered to a small stake in the ground. A heavy fur cloak had been tossed across her chest.

'Are the rages still on you?'

The voice, masculine, came from behind. She struggled to raise her head and although she succeeded in tilting her neck at a slight angle, she was unable to make out the speaker. Fortunately, the source of the query moved into view a moment later, taking a seat on an overturned log lying on the ground by her right hand.

He was a young man. Broad shouldered and handsome with a full moustache and a thick mane of black hair that spilled down to his shoulders. The thick strands had been tied up in braids around his face, exposing the tattooed patterns on his left cheek and forehead. His noble heritage was evidenced by the embroidered, coloured tunic and pants of good quality. A green wool cloak hung draped over his shoulders, fastened beneath his chin with an elaborate bronze pin.

Liath Luachra struggled to focus and she blinked, pupils and eyelids burning. Her stomach hurt from heaving. Her joints were swollen, disjointed by strain. Her scalp and face felt scratched and torn and a headache pounded inside her temple. She stank of sweat and stale urine.

She ignored the pain. She knew how to deal with pain. It was the restraints that terrified her, the unfamiliar sense of powerlessness. She tried to speak but the word came out as a hoarse croak, her parched lips unable to articulate the sounds correctly.

'Gaaahh.'

The response, oddly enough, seemed to satisfy her captor for he gave an easy smile. 'Good. The rages have passed.'

With a nod, he rose from his seat and pulled a long knife from the scabbard on his belt. Unable to move, Liath Luachra watched him approach with mounting apprehension, glaring in defiance as he crouched down beside her. She forced herself not to flinch as he lifted the knife

but he didn't seem to notice her relief as he used the weapon to cut the leather thongs around her right hand. Keen and freshly ground, the blade made short work of the bindings, the severed strips falling to the ground with a single slice.

Free at last, she made another desperate attempt to rise but it was a dismal failure. Her body, pushed beyond its limits, simply refused to respond to her mental commands. She was left lying as helpless as a fish left beached in the shallows by the departing tide.

Beside her, the squatting man continued to watch her as though anticipating some particular reaction that she was unable to provide. When it became apparent that no response was forthcoming, he sighed, slipped a hand underneath her back and hauled her into a sitting position. As she was pulled upright, the fur cloak shifted and slid off to one side. She was suddenly aware of the chill touch of air against the exposed skin of her arms.

Satisfied that she was not about to fall, the man grabbed a water skin lying on the ground beside them.

'Drink.'

He held out the leather container and she grasped it with weak hands, hauling it to her mouth to gulp the water down. Much of the liquid splashed down one side of her face but she succeeded in getting some through her parched lips.

After several long swallows, she continued to drink despite feeling sated. She could feel the water swell her internal tissue, filling her dehydrated body from the inside out.

Finally, she dropped the skin and considered the tall man who had returned to his seat on the rock. Stroking the tender, red welts on her wrists, a consequence of the bindings, she made a point of ignoring him while she looked around and assessed their surroundings although the effort set her head spinning. A muscle at the side of her face twitched, the nerve shot, but she ignored that too.

They were in a crude campsite. Located in a tight clearing, it was surrounded on all sides by forest, tall trees with wide, spanning limbs that blotted out patches of sky. She noted that her 'benefactor' had also constructed a rough lean-to, a shelter constructed with branches hacked from the surrounding trees. She placed a hand palm downwards on the ground beside her. It was cold but free of snow.

'Fiacail mac Codhna!'

The young man made a pretence at a bow.

'It always pleases a man to be recalled by the fairer sex, Liath Luachra.' He smiled, revealing the perfect set of teeth – *fiacla* – from which his nickname had been derived.

Her response was a growl.

'Even,' he continued, completely undaunted 'If it be for all the wrong reasons.'

'You had the good sense to cut me loose. Don't provoke me, big man.'

If he was in any way perturbed by the threat, the young man certainly showed no sign of it. He slapped his knee and roared with laughter, a deep, rollicking guffaw that only served to infuriate her further.

'You prancing cockerel. What are you doing here? For that matter what am I –'

She stopped in mid-sentence for she had suddenly noticed two other men sitting cross-legged on the other side of the little clearing, separated from her by a roaring campfire. Both were dressed in colourless, woollen jerkins and cloaks and bore the facial scarring and tattoos of seasoned warriors. Stocky and dark-haired, they shared similar pug noses and narrow foreheads, a strong resemblance that left little doubt of their close kinship. Although they were sitting half-

shrouded in shadow, Liath Luachra was angry with herself for not spotting them straight off. Despite her open scrutiny, they stared back at her in silence.

‘What are you doing here?’ Fiacail completed the question for her. ‘Well, there’s an interesting tale.’ He paused to reach back to the fire and pulled a wooden bowl from the embers. The strong smell of a warm meaty broth hit her nostrils and it took all of her self-control to prevent herself from licking her lips.

Fiacail handed her the bowl. Making no pretence of manners, she raised it straight to her lips and shovelled the steaming contents down her throat, ignoring the scalding it gave her tongue.

‘You know,’ continued Fiacail, politely ignoring her lack of finesse. ‘It’s always been a matter of some amazement to me, the efforts to which some young women will rise to seek out the pleasure of my company. Now, I’m hardly the one to brag but ...’

‘Fiacail,’ she snapped, tossing the empty bowl aside with a frown of regret. She could happily have gorged another bowl or two.

‘But your approach was somewhat more original.’ He grinned that infuriating grin, completely indifferent to her glowering expression. ‘Never let it be said that Liath Luachra fails to make a dramatic entrance.’ He coughed into his hand and took on the sombre tones of a professional storyteller.

‘There I was, settled down with a fire, a warm meal and the congenial company of my kinsmen. He gestured towards the two men across the fire then widened his eyes for dramatic effect. ‘Suddenly, who should come thundering out of the undergrowth but Liath Luachra, the Grey One of Luachair.’

He raised his eyebrows, shaking his head with an exaggerated expression of incomprehension.

‘Not that we recognised you at first, of course. Your eyes bulging like a constipated toad, your mouth frothing, gibbering like a crazy woman. Without care or concern, you stampeded through our camp, trampled our little fire, and stomped on the girdle cake we’d been saving for ...’

Fiacail’s melodrama tailed off quietly.

‘Tóla and Ultán were particularly upset at the loss of that girdle cake. They’d been looking forward to the sweet taste for days. To be honest, I was none too pleased myself. That cake was a present from a close friend in Seiscenn Uarbhaoil.’

‘Fiacail,’ said Liath Luachra, her head drooping with fatigue. She closed her eyes as a pounding headache flowered up behind her temple. She had never felt so weak in her life. ‘Please just tell me what happened.’

The young man considered her in silence. After a moment he nodded to himself as though he’d made some private, internal decision.

‘Very well. Quite simply, you ran through our camp, tripped over the stones about our fire and hit the ground hard. The fall must have knocked the air out of your chest for you were wheezing and drooling, unable to even breathe. Despite this, you attempted to rise again, growling and snarling at us when we tried to restrain you. You truly had the strength of the mad, Liath Luachra. In the end, it took all three of us to restrain you, to tie you down so you could not harm yourself. Or us, for that matter. Despite your restraints, you kicked and you bucked for some time before you finally passed out.’

He looked her directly in the eyes but this time none of his earlier humour remained.

‘You were possessed by a demon, Liath Luachra. If we had not stopped you, you would have run yourself to death.’