

Fionn: Traitor of Dún Baoiscne

The Fionn mac Cumhal Series - Book Two

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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), *Fotha Cath Cnucha* (The Cause of the Battle of Cnucha) *Aided Finn meic Chumail* (The Death of Finn Mac Cumail) and many more.

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Foreword:

This book and its characters are based on ancient 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 number of much earlier oral tales about the legendary Irish hero 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) that are in use today. **For those readers who would like to know the correct pronunciation of these names, an audio glossary has been developed and is available at <http://irishimbassbooks.com/>.** A more basic pronunciation guide for character names is available at the back of this book.

Prologue:

Sárán an Srón smelled it as he emerged from the rock-strewn pass of Bealach Cam. Drifting in on a gentle breeze from the south, it hung heavy in the air around the rocky entrance, striking his nostrils with a meaty intensity that stopped him in his tracks.

Stew!

His body reacted immediately, from instinct, even as his head struggled to register the presence of a scent so alien to the Great Wild. Slipping into the shelter of the nearest tree, a tall holly thick with green fern and scrub about its base, he crouched in silence, scrutinising the surrounding terrain, as he subconsciously worked through the individual elements beneath the smell.

Some kind of meat. Wild mushrooms and onions. Herbs ... but not any he immediately recognised.

His mouth watered as he turned his eyes to the south but beyond the rocky entrance to the pass there was little enough to see, nothing but a rough landscape choked in places with oak and pine. Despite his habitual caution on encountering strangers so far Out in the Great Wild, Sárán allowed himself to relax. There was no evidence of any immediate threat, he was well concealed and the smell was not one to provoke any particular sense of dread. It was not, for example, the putrid stink of urine and shit, the tang of adrenalin or the iron-tinged stench of freshly spilled blood, all distinctly foul odours he'd encountered in the past and which still had the ability to raise the hairs on the back of his neck.

A long period of time passed without incident and Sárán slowly rose to his feet, although he made sure to remain within the shadow of the holly tree. A big, shaggy-haired man of twenty-seven years, he had a muscular frame and a range of scars on his left cheek and shoulder that marked him as an experienced warrior. In his right hand, he carried a javelin with an easy grip that, although loose, allowed him to raise and cast the weapon at speed should the need arise. At the small of his back, tucked into his belt, he felt the reassuring weight of a small - but deadly - hand-axe. Three additional javelins were strapped to a wicker basket that hung from his shoulders. Intended to transport the game he'd caught, the basket was dispiritingly empty.

He tugged at a greasy moustache as he stood in the shadows, closing his eyes to better appreciate the scent of stew. Raising his hand, he wiped a gob of saliva from his lips for it did smell delicious.

He found himself drooling happily at the prospect of food. It had been over five days since Sárán an Srón had left his wife and two boys at Seiscenn Uarbhaoil, a settlement far beyond the eastern swampland. Since then he'd eaten nothing but hard tack and water cress, drunk nothing but river water. Such hardships would have been borne more easily with company but, on this occasion, he was travelling alone. Both his usual hunting companions had remained behind at Seiscenn Uarbhaoil, preoccupied with more pressing matters of their own. Domhnall Dubh, a keen hunter, was awaiting the birth of his first child. When Sárán had called on him to propose the expedition he'd looked longingly at his own javelins but his wife, an irritable woman rendered all the more ill-tempered from the pregnancy, had threatened him with no sex if he dared to leave.

Dalbach, his other regular companion, was also unavailable due to a twisted ankle obtained during a romantic tryst with a local girl on the rocks at Carraig. Flaunting his leaping ability, the warrior had slipped on one of the moss-coated boulders and fallen from a substantial height. He'd been lucky not to break his leg or worse but that hadn't stopped him moaning when Sárán informed him of his intention to go Out alone. He'd consoled his friend by promising to bring him back a haunch of venison. A big one.

Given his lack of success to date, that boast now looked overly optimistic.

Sárán scrutinised the southern forest once more, this time pleased to note a tendril of smoke rising up from the green canopy not too far to the south-east.

A campfire.

That would be the source of the smell. He stroked his nose, an overly large proboscis that had earned his nickname: Sárán an Srón - Sárán the Nose. Because of its size, many of the people at Seiscenn Uarbhaoil believed that he had sensory skills beyond that of ordinary mortals, that he could in fact 'sniff out' potential threats or dangers. Although he encouraged the stories because he enjoyed the attention, Sárán knew there was no truth in them. His sense of smell was no better, no worse, than most others at the settlement.

Staring at the distant plume of smoke, he frowned and scratched at the stubble on his jaw. He should be moving east, using the remaining sunlight to travel back in the direction of Seiscenn Uarbhaoil before he was obliged to set up camp for the night.

A dry camp.

With hard tack.

And cold water.

He sighed. Travelling alone as he was, he knew it would be wise to avoid strangers in the Great Wild, despite the fact that he was a fearsome warrior, a fact that several opponents - now dead - had discovered to their detriment.

His stomach grumbled in counter argument.

Sárán mulled over the possibilities. He could always, he reasoned, scout out the source of the odour. If the people responsible for it looked in any way dangerous, he could simply slip away and continue his journey.

He stared to the south. The smell of the stew was delectable.

And he was hungry.

Once Sárán had reached the trees, he worked his way through the forest with the ease of an experienced hunter, carefully avoiding sections of woody debris where branches or twigs might crack beneath his feet and alert others to his presence. As he advanced, the smell of stew grew perceptibly stronger. Soon he was able to make out the muffled sound of a distant conversation.

Dropping to his stomach, he wriggled forward, working his way towards a heavily vegetated mound coated with a thick copse of ash trees and heavy foliage. As far as he could tell, the voices were coming from somewhere on the other side and this particular route offered both the best concealment for his approach and his possible flight, if that were required.

It was almost dark when he reached the crest of the mound. Shuffling sideways to one of the wider tree trunks, he cautiously eased his head around it.

Ah!

The campsite was located in a little grotto, part of a long gully carved out of the ground by some ancient waterway and still strewn with smooth, green boulders. That section of the grotto closest to Sárán's hiding place was relatively level and held a flattened rock that reached up to waist height. In the centre of this boulder was a deep depression full of rainwater from the previous night's shower. Beside the rock, an impressive fire was crackling. Sárán's eyes, however, were drawn less to the flicker of the flames than to the metal cauldron that dangled over it, the source of the delicious odour that now completely filled the air.

He licked his lips.

It was something of an effort to pull his eyes away to study the grotto's human occupants. All six were seated at the fire, three each in a single line on separate logs, facing each other across the flames.

They were a strange looking group. Of the trio looking in his direction, two were big men, bald but stocky. Because of their size, both would have drawn the eye even if it hadn't been for the fact that they were completely identical. From the bald, sunburned skulls, right down to the rough dark robes they were wearing, each was a perfect copy of the other.

A Man Pair.

Sárán bit his lip. He had heard of man pairs before but he'd never actually seen one. Apparently, there'd been such a family at Seiscenn Uarbhaoil in the past. It had been before his time but people still spoke of the cursed mother who'd given birth to two sets of Man Pairs. On both occasions, the babies had died and, after the second pair, the woman had succumbed to fever. Grief-stricken, the father had wandered out into the Great Wild, never to be seen again.

The man seated to the left of the Man Pair, staring into the flames, was a skinny, old man. He too was bald but had countered the absence of hair on the back of his head with a thick growth of beard on his face that fell all the way to his waist.

Although he couldn't see the faces of the threesome on the closest side of the fire as they had their backs to him, they too looked quite odd. One of them, a cowl pulled tight over his head, looked to be extremely short and was probably a child. Seated beside him, another, taller, individual seemed all the taller for the shortness of his companion. He too was completely bald. On the far right of this trio, the final figure appeared to be of a more normal height but rather rotund given the tightness of the material around his girth and frame.

Sárán nodded in approval at their choice of campsite. It was a good location, one that provided shelter from the wind and which was well hidden. He himself would have bypassed it, completely unaware of their presence, if it hadn't been for the smell.

With this, his lips formed into a thin line. Despite their clever choice of location, this little group did not appear to have taken any other precautions. There was no-one standing guard and, as far as he could see, only two of them sported weapons – the two staffs carried by the Man Pair.

He gave a scornful shake of his head. Out in the Great Wild, death lurked behind every tree, lay waiting in every shadow for the unwary. Wolves and other predators prowled the land. If he had been a bandit, he could have snuck in and murdered them all without too much difficulty.

Reassured by this initial assessment and confident in his ability to deal with any threat that might arise from this particular group, Sárán got to his feet, stepped out of the trees and started walking down towards the fire.

Naturally, because they were facing in his direction, the Man Pair were the first to spot him. Startled, they quickly jumped to their feet, pulling their staffs up to hold them at the ready.

Sárán suppressed a smile. He could take both of them out easily with a javelin cast, leaving him with the hand axe to take care of the others.

And he was deadly with a hand-axe.

Seeing the Man Pair's reaction, the others had also turned about and quickly stood up to examine the unexpected arrival. Only the old man with the beard took his time, stiffly rising to his feet to face the newcomer.

Sárán raised a placatory hand. 'Hallo, Travellers,' he called out. 'I come in peace.'

The six strangers looked at one another. In the end, it was the bearded elder who finally stepped forward. He coughed and cleared his throat. 'I see you, stranger. I am named Rogein.'

'I see you, Old One. I am named Sárán ua Baoiscne.'

'Welcome to our campsite, Sárán ua Baoiscne. We are preparing our meal. Would you care to eat with us? There is not much but we are happy to share.'

The old man's voice sounded oddly brittle as though he'd done some damage to his throat in the past.

Sárán glanced at the steaming cauldron and nodded curtly, not trusting himself to successfully disguise his hunger for its contents. He advanced further into the little grotto and stood closer to the fire. 'I will join you,' he said, taking a seat on a small rock set back at an angle from the two logs on which the others were seated. As he sat, he made sure to keep his javelin close to hand. The men seemed harmless enough but he did not intend to take any chances. If necessary, the rock was sufficiently far from the group to allow him time to respond to any hostility.

And they will pay dearly if they tried.

If the old man noticed his caution, he showed no sign of it. Instead, he plunged a ladle into the little cauldron and scooped out a portion of stew which he slapped into a wooden bowl. He passed it to the big warrior who took it in one hand and held it under his nose. Briefly closing his eyes, he inhaled and savoured the aroma one last time before raising the bowl to his mouth and swallowing the contents whole.

'Aaah!'

He smacked his lips with relish. The food had tasted every bit as good as it smelled. He glanced at his empty bowl then back towards the cauldron but Rogein seemed to miss the hint. The other members of the group, meanwhile, were regarding him quietly as though unsure what to make of him. After a moment, they all sat down again.

'From where do you hail, Sárán ua Baoiscne?' asked Rogein.

'From Seiscenn Uarbhaoil. It is located to the east.'

'You are far from home.'

'I am on the hunt. Seiscenn Uarbhaoil is a growing settlement. The local forest has been hunted out.' He glanced at the other members of the party. 'Who are your friends?'

'Forgive me,' the old man answered. 'I am a poor host.' He pointed to the Man Pair. 'These are Futh and Ruth. They are brothers but you may have already noticed the family resemblance.'

Sárán considered them uneasily. Seeing them sitting there side by side was like looking at a reflection in still waters. It seemed unnatural. Despite his disquiet, he smiled politely and nodded a greeting which the two men returned. Rogein, meanwhile, had moved on to the corpulent man to Sárán's left. The warrior observed the fleshy face and pendulous jowls hanging below his jaw with silent censure. The folds of fat almost obscured a small tattoo of a spider on his right cheek.

'And this is Regna of Mag Fea,' said Rogein. 'He is the man who prepared the repast which you are enjoying.'

Sárán stared at Regna's stomach which protruded obscenely, pressing against the material of his robe like the belly of a pregnant woman. Although he'd never seen a man with so much useless bulk, he hid his distaste and nodded.

'This,' Rogein was indicating the extremely tall figure with the cowl, 'is Temle'. Temle lowered his cowl to reveal another bald head, a muted pair of eyes and a strikingly bulbous nose. Like Regna of Mag Fea, he too had a spider tattooed on his left cheek. Sárán glanced at the Man Pair and realised that they too had the spider marking although he'd missed it in the flickering shadows thrown up by the fire.

'And finally,' said the old man, gesturing towards the smallest figure at the far end of the log. 'This one is named Olpe.'

Sárán leaned forward in order to see the little shape more clearly.

'Hallo, little one.'

The figure turned to look at him but beneath the shadowed cowl it was impossible to tell if it was a boy or a girl.

The big warrior grinned. 'I have two boys about your age.'

With this a small pair of hands appeared from out of the sleeves and reached up to pull the cowl back. To his horror, Sárán found himself staring at the wizened face of a very old man. Like the others, he was completely bald.

Regna of Mag Fea roared with laughter. 'I very much doubt that!'

Sárán bristled, angered at being embarrassed in this manner. 'Who are you?' he demanded. 'Why does such an odd group travel Out in the Great Wild?'

Rogein quickly made a mollifying gesture. 'Forgive Olpe's little joke, Sárán ua Baoiscne. We are like you. Simple travellers.'

'I am not a traveller. I am a hunter.'

'Of course, of course.' He nodded. 'My comrades and I ...' He paused. 'We too are hunters of a sort. Hunters of knowledge.'

'Hunters of truth.' Sárán could not hide the scepticism in his voice.

'Indeed. The stars reveal their secrets to us and we hunt their associated knowledge.'

Sárán continued to look at him blankly.

'If you can read them, the stars reveal many secrets. Some years past, for example, the stars told us that a great leader, a most powerful figure, had been born. Since then we have been travelling the land to seek him out.' He made a shrugging gesture. 'The problem is that although the stars tell us of such events, they do not tell us where they occur. That is why we travel now, seeking the one who was born.'

'Why would you seek out a baby?'

'To pay homage to him.'

Sárán struggled to keep the incredulity from his voice. 'To pay homage to a baby?'

'Yes.'

'How would you pay homage to a mewling infant?'

'Well, we are not wealthy men but we have gathered gifts of significance.'

'Oh?' asked Sárán with renewed interest.

'Temle.' Rogein looked to the tall man. 'Show our guest.'

With a sigh, the tall man reached down to open a little backpack resting on the log alongside him. Undoing the upper cord that sealed it, he withdrew three large clay pots and laid them on the ground before him. Removing the sealed lid of the first container, he tilted it forwards so that Sárán could see its contents: a large mixture of some papery bark, paired leaves, and flowers with white petals and a yellow or red centre.'

'Flowers. Very nice. I'm sure the babe's mother will appreciate that.'

'These are no ordinary flowers, Sárán of Seiscenn Uarbhaoil. They come from the lands far to the East and produce an alluring fragrance.'

Sárán ignored him, peering at the other containers. 'What else do you have?'

Temle opened the second pot. This was full to the brim with a powdery, reddish resin. Sárán leaned forward to examine it more closely only to draw back in alarm as he caught a whiff of the overpowering scent it gave off.

'This is another fragrance from the Myrrh trees. Again, they are found far to the East. And finally ...'

The last clay pot was opened. Sárán stared. It seemed to contain a large collection of shiny metal disks.'

He looked at Rogein with a quizzical expression.

'They call this gold,' explained the old man. 'It is of great worth.'

'Of course, of course.' Despite his disappointment, Sárán suppressed a great desire to roll his eyes. He had been hoping for more food of the quality of the stew, some weapons or even jewellery he could have appropriated to bring back to his wife in compensation for the lack of food. He tried not to

laugh as he imagined the expression of the babe's family when this group arrived offering homage and pots of useless junk. The thought prompted his next question.

'You say you have been seeking this child for some time.'

'Yes. For some years. Although we know the child was born, we do not know where. Recently, we learned that he was to be found in a settlement said to be led by a woman.'

'A woman!' Sárán scoffed. 'What settlement would let a woman lead them?'

'It's true,' the old man conceded. 'It is difficult to believe but we were also told that this woman was a Gifted One and has received training as a *bandraoi* - a female druid. Have you heard of such a place?'

The warrior thought about that. 'I know of no such settlement in these parts but I have heard tales of a place far to the west, in the Sliabh Bládhma region. My sister's man once told me that it has links to *Clann Baoiscne* but I do not know what those links are.'

Rogein looked eagerly towards his companions who were now all whispering excitedly together. 'You see, brothers! Our informant did not fail us.' He quietened then as though absorbed in deep thought but after a moment he returned his attention to the warrior.

'You have our gratitude, Sárán. Can we offer you more stew as an expression of our appreciation?'

Sárán looked guiltily at the little cauldron. There did not seem to be enough for everyone but the flavours were still raging on his tongue, demanding more.'

'Very well.' He did his best to sound as though he was doing them a kindness accepting the reward that was his due for helping them in their bizarre search.

Rogein ladled another measure into his bowl and he immediately lapped it up, fearful that he might have to share. When he was finished, he wiped the leather sleeve of his tunic across his lips. 'Do not take this the wrong way, Rogein. It is not my intent to insult your hospitality but you are foolish to wander about in the Great Wild without protection. These lands can be very dangerous.'

As he spoke, he eased his javelin onto his knees and slowly, casually, allowed his left hand to drift behind his back to where his hand-axe waited. It was ungrateful of him, he knew, but he had come to the decision to rob this little company. They could keep their smelly pots but he intended to leave the camp with that cauldron. If they did not attempt to stop him, they did not need to die.

'I have a weapon,' said Regna of Mag Fea. The fat man held up a short boning knife that, although sharp, would have done little more than cause a gash in a real fight. 'And both Futh and Ruth have their stout staves.'

Sárán bit his tongue. These men were fools. Simple-minded idiots whose bones would inevitably litter the floor of the Great Wild's forests.

'You would not frighten a sand fly with such a knife. Staves are useful up close but they are no match for a sword or a battle axe. And they offer no defence against spear or javelin. You would require real weapons, Rogein.' He tapped his own javelin to emphasise his point. 'Something to strike fear into those who would attack you.'

Rogein looked at him in surprise. 'Why would anyone attack us? Apart from our gifts - which we keep concealed - we have nothing of value, nothing that anyone would want.'

Sárán glanced guiltily at the cauldron from the corner of his eye.

'You should fear travellers in the night,' the big warrior said. 'Death comes easily in the Great Wild.'

'We are six,' insisted Rogein. 'How can you claim to advise us when you are but a single man?'

'Because I am a warrior from Seiscenn Uarbhaoil. My blades are stained with the blood of many enemies. I am not one to be waylaid or interfered with. I am strong. I kill easily, without passion. You cannot compare us.'

There was a dull thump.

Sárán looked down to find that the wooden bowl had slipped from his fingers, hitting the rocky ground. He started to laugh and was about to make a joke of it but when he attempted to speak only a barely audible croak came out of his mouth.

Surprised, he raised his fingers to touch his lips and tried again. Once again, there was no sound but a croak.

Rogein was looking at him with mild curiosity. ‘What is it, Sárán ua Baoiscne? Is the stew not to your liking?’

Sárán pointed urgently at his mouth and grunted.

‘You cannot speak?’ Rogein leaned forward and peered closely at his guest. Annoyed, Sárán opened his mouth wide, offering the old man a better view in the hope that he could see what was wrong.

After a moment, the old man pulled back and tugged thoughtfully on his long beard. ‘I believe I know the cause. It will be the white root, an ingredient Regna of Mag Fea adds to his stews. It enhances the flavour, magnifies both the taste and the odour. Manipulation of scent is one of the many secret skills he learned in his travels through the Eastern Lands.’

Sárán glanced at the fat man who returned it with a smug smile then chuckled loudly. ‘On occasion, it has the interesting effect of rendering an eater silent. A perfect antidote for boastful guests.’

Furious, the warrior made to reach for the javelin lying across his knees but found that his hand did not move. Alarmed, he tried to stand but found that his legs were not responding either.

‘Ah, yes.’ Regna of Mag Fea was stroking the smooth skin of his meaty jowls as he observed Sárán’s efforts. He got to his feet, waddled towards the warrior and squatted down before him. ‘That is another side effect. The more common one in fact. The white root causes a great lassitude of the limbs. It makes a person still and unmoving.’

He smiled at the growing alarm in Sárán’s eyes. ‘You are a man of sage advice, Sárán of Seiscenn Uarbhaoil. One should not travel without care within the Great Wild. It is a dangerous place. And it is a shame you are unable to follow your own counsel.’

Pulling the javelin from the warrior’s knees, he tossed the weapon aside.

‘I am glad you enjoyed our cooking. You were aware there was not much food but that did not stop you. Still, it can be said you enjoyed your last meal. The last visitor to our campfire enjoyed his meal just as you enjoyed him.’

He nodded at the horrified comprehension in the frozen man’s eyes.

‘And now you see the truth of it. Yes, that is how we travel so light. When we are low on supplies we set our web at sites such as this valley entrance where travellers are, eventually, bound to pass.’

He pulled out the little boning knife and held it up in front of the stricken man.

‘But you will forgive me, I’m sure. The night grows late and my companions grow hungry.’

Chapter One

The butterflies were swarming, despite the early hour.

Sprawled across the moss-coated bough of a great oak tree, Liath Luachra watched the fluttering wave of orange, black and white wings drift across the pasture, settling like coloured rainfall on the wildflowers and trees to the south of the clearing.

The woman warrior stared in fascination. She'd always enjoyed the erratic movement of butterflies and, over the years, she'd seen many but never in such numbers and never swarming in such an unusual fashion. She looked again to where enormous clumps of the creatures were visible, hanging off the distant trees, the powdery undersides of their wings making them look like dusty clusters of some strange, grey fruit.

Liath Luachra chewed thoughtfully on the inside of her cheek. Although not one to ascribe a mystic explanation to events she didn't understand, she couldn't help wondering if this rare phenomenon heralded a prophetic occurrence, some dangerous consequence that she was unaware of.

Bodhmhall. I will ask Bodhmhall when I return to Ráth Bládhma.

Bodhmhall would know.

Pushing such thoughts aside, Liath Luachra stretched her limbs and yawned, focussing her attention on more physical distractions: the simple touch of sunlight on her skin, the lilt of birdsong, the busy hum of bees and crickets, the combined beauty of her surroundings. In her mind, all of these were good omens. Moreover, the softness of the morning promised a pleasant day, one that was all the more pleasant for being Out, back in the freedom of the Great Wild.

Situated at the centre of a large clearing known as An Folamh Mór – the Big Empty, her vantage point on the branches of the giant oak offered an unhindered view across a stretch of rough grass for several hundred paces in every direction. In the distant past, the trees on this spot had been felled by the Old Ones but for some reason they'd left a single, solitary oak standing in the centre. She had no idea why. It was hard to fathom the minds of the Old Ones, a folk that left impressive stone monuments in the strangest of places: on tops of steep hills, deep in the darkwoods, half-submerged in swampland.

Despite the intervening years, the forest had never fully recovered its grip on the land. The clearing had become a favourite spot for deer who enjoyed the sunlight and the sweet taste of its green pasture. Generations of the animals had regularly grazed the encroaching shoots sent out by the surrounding trees, preventing any reclamation.

Because of its position, the giant oak served as an ideal hunting platform. Its height, and the screen offered by its leaves, provided a perfect location from which to cast a javelin at those deer that wandered too close.

A soft breeze caressed the upper branches of the oak, stretching the thick wooden limbs to produce a series of drawn out creaks. A noisy crackling sound filled the clearing as bushy clumps of leaves brushed against each other.

Despite the idyllic setting, An Folamh Mór had its less favourable aspects. Earlier that morning, for example, the grass had been submerged by a thick, knee-deep mist that had hovered above the ground and showed no signs of dissipating. Up on her perch, Liath Luachra had fretted about that, aware of the deer's dislike of wet grass. Shortly after dawn, the situation had become even more complicated when a pair of grey timber wolves had detached themselves from the northern tree line, gliding quietly through the mist, the dark curves of their backs just visible above the brume.

Liath Luachra had observed their arrival with even greater trepidation for the wolves presented a potential encroachment more significant than the mist. If the animals remained in the area, they'd interfere with her hunt by scaring off the deer or, worse, competing with her for the kill.

After working through her options, the woman warrior had finally decided on a direct course of action. Grabbing two javelins, she lowered herself smoothly to the lower branches and dropped out of the tree, hitting the ground with an audible thump that caused the wolves to stop in their tracks. Two pairs of ears poked above the ghostly wisps and turned in her direction.

She made no attempt at silence as she moved forward towards them. In fact she did everything she could to make as much noise as possible: stomping and shuffling her feet, growling and cursing, banging the two javelin shafts together.

The two beasts weren't completely discernible until she was within almost ten paces of them and as soon as the grey forms congealed into something more substantial, she quickly drew to a halt. They were much bigger than she'd expected. They were also facing her, crouched low in preparation for attack. A bloodcurdling growl rumbled from the back of their throats as they bared jagged fangs, the skin around their muzzles drawn back in a vicious snarl. Liath Luachra responded with a snarl of her own, raising her arms to make herself look bigger as she brandished a javelin in either hand.

For several moments they'd faced one another, menacing and threatening, both attempting to intimidate the other and force them to back down. In the end, it was the wolves who'd conceded. Unwilling to risk engaging with such an undefined threat, they reluctantly relinquished their claim on the clearing, withdrawing back in the direction from which they'd first appeared.

Liath Luachra watched in silence as they slunk away, stopping occasionally to throw a vengeful glance back in her direction. She did not relax until they'd disappeared into the trees and, even then, she continued to keep an eye on the treeline. *Na mactíre* – literally 'sons of the land' – were not to be taken lightly. By themselves, the animals were relatively safe and could usually be scared off unless they were desperate or starving. When there was more than one, however, it tended to embolden them. The animals had a natural ability to work effectively against an opponent as a pair or as part of a pack. They could also be remarkably sly at times and moved with startling speed when the mood took them.

Satisfied that her competitors had truly departed, Liath Luachra allowed the tension to ease from her body and stretched repeatedly to relieve the stiffness in her neck and shoulders. In some respects, it had been foolish to confront them in the way she had. Wolves had a tendency to attack when threatened, particularly where approached within their own territory or at a place where they felt cornered. That had been the reasoning behind the initial commotion she'd made on dropping from the tree. By alerting them to her presence, she had allowed them ample opportunity to back away. As a general rule, she tended to avoid the animals and, indeed, would have done so on this occasion if they hadn't posed such a serious encroachment to her hunt.

The woman warrior returned to the oak, grabbed a low-lying branch and hauled herself back into the lower limbs then, subsequently scaled the trunk to the higher branches. Although unusually tall for her gender, she moved with impressive dexterity, slipping between the gnarled branches and curving around contorted angles with an ease that revealed impressive flexibility and upper body strength.

It took her surprisingly little time to regain the flat section she'd occupied since late the previous night. Making herself comfortable, she quietly rested the javelins alongside the reed basket that contained her supplies and settled down to wait.

She was used to waiting. Solitary by nature, she'd always tended to hunt alone, this habit of a lifetime broken only for Bearach, son of Cairbre, who she'd allowed to accompany her for a time. Somehow, the boy had won her over, undermining her austere personality with a disabling sense of humour she'd found herself unable to resist.

But Bearach's dead now.

She still missed Bearach's company and sometimes the simple memory of his laugh caused a twinge in her belly, like an old stab wound that had never properly healed. Six years had passed since the boy's death. Six years yet, even now, she sometimes found herself reaching to point out an object of interest or a view that he might have appreciated, only to remember that he was no longer beside her. At such times, she felt as though she'd somehow made a misstep, blithely treading off a steep height that she'd badly miscalculated.

With a grimace, she brushed all thought of the boy from her mind. She knew better than to dwell on black memories, traumatic occasions or events that she could not change. Such regrets were pointless. Best not to think of them.

Yet she knew that Bearach would slip back into her head.

To pop up with a grin when she was least expecting it.

It was a relief when the deer finally revealed themselves, their arrival dispelling the dark thoughts like morning sunshine on a bad dream. The first indication of their presence was a flicker of movement in the trees to the west. She'd expected that. The previous evening, she'd spotted substantial deer sign in that area, suggesting it was their usual route of approach to the clearing. Raising her head, she studied the movement of the nearer branches before nodding in satisfaction. The wind was coming from the west too. There was little risk of the animals catching her scent.

A large buck tentatively emerged from the trees and advanced onto the pasture. The animal came to a halt just beyond the treeline and stood there, waiting. Liath Luachra remained perfectly still. She knew the buck was surveying the area, relying on its exceptional hearing and sense of smell to alert it to any hint of danger. A long time passed before it finally relaxed and dropped its head to eat. When it did, four other deer emerged from the scrub to join it, picking at the lush grass with cautious gusto, regularly raising their heads to survey the clearing.

Liath Luachra released a deep breath as she studied the deer herd, pleased to see that they were healthy looking animals. All looked well fed and had shed their grey winter coats for the red of summer. The fingers of her right hand tightened around the haft of a javelin but she forced herself to relax and release her grip. The animals were still too far away to be certain of a kill. If the cast was not perfect, she would end up chasing a wounded animal through the forest until it bled to death. A poor outcome for all involved.

Slowly, tantalisingly slowly, the animals wandered closer to the oak. In minute, gradual movements, Liath Luachra raised the javelin, drawing it up to eye level then back in preparation for a cast. Her attention was focussed completely on the buck.

Closer, soft-eyed one. Just two or three steps closer.

Suddenly, the animal stiffened, raised its head and stared fixedly towards the north.

What ...?

And then it was off, bounding back across the pasture and into the shelter of the western trees, the rest of the herd immediately behind it. Up on the oak branch, Liath Luachra gnashed her teeth in silent fury as she stared at the now deserted clearing. The deer would not return. The entire morning had been wasted.

Despite her anger and a burning curiosity to learn what had spooked her prey, the woman warrior forced herself to turn slowly on the wide girth so the movement wouldn't draw any watchful eyes.

It wasn't long before the cause of the animals' flight became apparent: a distant crashing of bush to the northeast as someone made their way through the forest. As Liath Luachra watched, a figure surged out of the treeline, slowing abruptly on finding himself in such an open expanse after the tightness of the forest.

Liath Luachra studied the newcomer. The man was a stranger, slender with long, dark hair tied up in a knot at the back of his head. He had a short shaggy beard - more like several day's growth than a beard - and was dressed lightly in a loose fitting leather jerkin and leggings. A knife scabbard was tucked into a leather belt about his waist and he carried a spear in his right hand.

The stranger started running again, crossing the clearing at an easy pace but, even as he drew nearer to the great oak, she could tell that he was moving with a definite destination in mind. No hunter, then. And unlikely to be a bandit.

He makes for Ráth Bládhma.

She had no evidence to support this theory but, instinctively, she knew she was correct. The runner was headed in the right direction and out in this part of the Great Wild there was nowhere else he could be running to.

Putting the javelin aside, she grabbed a leather waterskin and swung herself to the lower limbs for the second time that morning. Quickly reaching the bottom branches, she dropped from the tree.

The runner skidded to a halt as she hit the ground several paces in front of him but he recovered quickly enough. By the time she'd regained her balance and stood up to face him, he was bringing his spear to bear. Liath Luachra considered the wicked looking spear head, impressed by its steadiness given the runner's obvious fatigue and the laboured attempts at recovering his breath. A strong odour of fresh sweat hit her as she raised her eyes from the weapon to the newcomer's face. Despite his beard, he was younger than she'd originally imagined, certainly no more than seventeen or eighteen years.

He has Bearach's face!

Liath Luachra stiffened for the resemblance was truly startling. This youth looked like an older version of her friend, the young man that Bearach would have grown up to be had he still lived.

She swallowed hard and examined the newcomer more closely. The beard was wrong of course. Bearach had favoured a wispy little moustache that he'd been ridiculously proud of. The eyes, too, were the wrong colour – green instead of blue – and sat slightly too close together. Otherwise, everything else was the same: the soft brown hair, the prominent cheekbones, even the laughter crinkles about his lips and eyes.

Not that this youth was laughing. His eyes were wide but that was a result of his shock at seeing her appear out of nowhere. She could see the internal struggle reflected in those eyes as he tried to work out how best to react to such unanticipated circumstances. Liath Luachra took a deep breath and pulled herself together.

'I see you, Running Man.'

Even to her ears, her voice sounded harsher than she'd intended. Bearach's ghost continued to stare back at her, nostrils flared, his breathing heavy.

She tried again. 'How are you named?'

This time she could see the young man weigh up whether to respond or not. Finally, he seemed to come to the conclusion that she didn't pose an immediate danger for the tension in his shoulders loosened and the spearhead dropped slightly. 'I am named Fintán,' he said. 'Of *Na Lamhraighe*.'

Liath Luachra looked at him blankly. This was another surprise. *Na Lamhraighe* were a nomadic tribe far to the north-east. To find one here, so far from his tribal lands, could not bode well. 'I know of *Na Lamhraighe*. Six years ago, Bodhmall ua Baoiscne of Ráth Bládhma delivered a woman into the safekeeping of your leader, Gleor Red Hand.'

'The youth nodded in acknowledgment. 'I am bound for Ráth Bládhma. I bear news for Bodhmall ua Baoiscne of Gleor Red Hand's imminent arrival with his company.'

Liath Luachra grunted softly to herself. This young man would be *Na Lamhraighe's* fastest runner, then. Travelling as a member of Gleor's retinue for the greater part of the journey, he'd have been

dispatched ahead both to scout the trail for danger and to alert the settlement so they'd have sufficient notice to prepare the expected hospitality.

As these thoughts rolled through her head, she realised the youth was observing her with an oddly curious expression. 'What?'

'You are Liath Luachra, *conradh* – champion – of Ráth Bládhma. They call you "The Grey One".'

Liath Luachra shrugged. The epithet had been one assigned to reflect her preference for grey-coloured clothing and the colour of her eyes. 'I am.'

'You used to lead *Na Cinéaltaí* – The Kindly Ones.'

'Long ago.' She tossed the water-skin to the youth, anxious to change the topic and disassociate herself from her days with that now discontinued mercenary band. 'You must be thirsty. Drink your fill.'

The youth had to release one hand from his spear to catch the leather container but he did so with surprising swiftness. Raising the water-skin to his mouth, he teased the stopper out with his teeth, spat it aside and tipped the contents into his mouth, swallowing greedily as it gurgled down his throat.

'Why does Gleor Red Hand travel to Ráth Bládhma?'

Fintán picked up the stopper and reattached it then tossed the leather container back to the woman warrior.

'He seeks counsel with Bodhmhall ua Baoiscne.'

'He comes a long way to seek Bodhmhall's counsel. Do *Na Lamhraighe* have no advisors of their own?'

The warrior looked embarrassed. He rested the base of his spear haft on the ground and tapped awkwardly at the earth with the heel of his foot. 'In truth, he was prompted to do so by his woman.'

'His woman?'

'Muirne Muncháem.'

The woman warrior was not one to openly display her emotions. When shocked – as she most surely was now – her immediate instinct was to clam up, to unconsciously suppress any emotional expression. Over time, she'd become aware that this reaction was misinterpreted as one of hostility and often made an effort to soften her expression but, in this case ... 'Muirne Muncháem.' She repeated the name softly. Even after six years, the name left a sting like nettles in her mouth. 'Muirne Muncháem is with Gleor Red Hand?'

'She has been with him for five years.'

'I understood Gleor Red Hand already had a woman.'

'He did. She died of fever. Five years ago.'

'Uh,' Liath Luachra grunted again. Who would have guessed? She'd clearly read the omens wrong this morning.

The Flower of Almhu wastes no time lying in the hollow of another woman.

She knew she should feel no sense of surprise. Muirne Muncháem was a driven woman, desperately ambitious and with great political astuteness. It would have been a natural move for her to link herself to the lynchpin of power in whichever community she'd found herself. Nevertheless, the news disturbed her. Strife and death followed close in the footsteps of Muirne Muncháem. *Muinntir Bládhma* – the people of Ráth Bládhma – had already paid dearly for their association with her. Bearach had paid dearly.

'And *Na Lamhraighe* are happy with this union?'

The young man said nothing. That didn't surprise her. Tribal members rarely revealed much on the inner workings and conflicts with people from outside the tribe. She continued to observe him, quietly pondering the ramifications of Muirne's return. Bodhmhall would not be pleased. That much was certain, particularly given her efforts to protect Muirne and subsequently secure her a hiding place where she could live in safety. When Muirne had left, there'd been a clear expectation they would not

see her again. Given everything that had happened, the costs and the sacrifices made, nobody would desire her back. Liath Luachra certainly didn't.

And then of course there was Muirne's son to consider. Seeking advice from Bodhmall certainly wasn't the true reason for this visit to Ráth Bládhma. Although Liath Luachra personally had no trace of maternal instincts, she knew enough to recognise the intensity of that bond between a mother and her child. Six years earlier, Muirne had been forcibly separated from her son in order to conceal and protect them both. She would be desperate to see him again.

Liath Luachra released a sigh as she looked at the youth with her dead friend's face. 'Ráth Bládhma is located in a narrow valley called Glenn Ceoch – Valley of Mists,' she said stiffly. 'It lies a good half-day's march to the southeast of where we now stand. You will only find the entrance by approaching the mountains from the west. Keep the steepest mountain to your right and the lower hills to your left. Otherwise, you will miss it. If you can run swiftly you will reach it by noon.'

'Muirne Muncháem has provided me with directions,' the youth responded with calculated smoothness. 'But are you not going to run with me?'

In some respects, his indignation was to be expected. When a messenger was encountered in tribal territory, it was considered good manners to escort him to his destination out of respect for the news he might carry. Liath Luachra, however was still smouldering at his unintentional disruption of her hunt. And then, there was the youth's unsettling resemblance to Bearach.

She shivered. She did not wish to run with a ghost. She needed some time in her own company to think things through and make sense of the matter.

The warrior woman considered the youth more closely again, carefully scrutinising his features to make sure she wasn't seeing something that wasn't really there. Discomforted by that rigorous examination, Fintán took a step backwards. 'Why do you stare at me in that manner?'

'You bear the features of a friend.'

'A close friend?'

'He was.'

'Then he is dead.'

She held his eyes. 'Yes,' she said flatly. 'He is dead.'

'What is that?'

She was surprised by the sudden change in topic but knew immediately that he was referring to the tattoo on the left side of her face where a thick, black line descended from the mid-point between her ear and her temple. On either side of that line, a number of smaller horizontal bars projected outwards from it at irregular intervals.

'It's a tattoo.'

'I know it is a tattoo. I am not a fool.' He frowned at Liath Luachra's provocative grin. 'I have not seen its like before. What does it symbolise?'

'Death.'

He looked at her askew, clearly wondering if she was mocking him but appeared then to take her at her word. He looked around the clearing, coughed and shuffled self-consciously. 'Would you flatten the grass at my side?'

Liath Luachra's response was a chilling silence.

'Well?'

'You wish to rut in the long grass?' She found her fingers running down the stitched leather edge of her knife sheath.

'Yes.'

'You feel untroubled by any burden of restraint?'

'I can run all day,' the youth boasted. 'I am full of *teaspaí* [energy – mischievous or sexual]. I could rut and then run for another day without need of rest.'

‘I was not speaking of physical fatigue.’

Fintán looked confused. He clearly had no idea what she was referring to.

‘You know my name,’ she said. ‘You know of my position at Ráth Bládhma.’

He nodded. ‘Yes. You are Liath Luachra. *Conradh* of Ráth Bládhma.’

‘So you must also know of my relationship with Bodhmhall ua Baoiscne.’

‘*An Cailleach Dubh* – the Black Hag? Yes.’

‘And this does not make you pause, even for an instant?’

‘Aaaah!’ He nodded in comprehension. ‘You do not care to taste pleasure for fear *An Cailleach Dubh* would hear of it. His face split in a roguish grin and Liath Luachra winced inside for that expression was Bearach to the core. ‘Perhaps *An Cailleach Dubh* would not know.’

‘Oh, she would know,’ Liath Luachra laughed, despite her discomfort. ‘She would know.’

‘That is a poor tale, then,’ said Fintán. He nodded ponderously as though to give weight to his own words. ‘Yes, a poor tale.’

Liath Luachra considered the youth with sudden insight. ‘You are Gleor’s son.’

Fintán looked at her then scowled. ‘How could you know that? You do not know me.’

‘Despite the offensive nature of that tactless beak, you are puzzlingly ... undead. That means that within *Na Lamhraighe* you are either someone of importance or under the protection of someone important. You strike me as ill-suited for importance and you are too young to be Gleor Red Hand. Therefore you must be his son.’

The young man glowered. ‘I am my own man.’

‘Good. Then you will have no problem making your own way to Ráth Bládhma.’

Liath Luachra exhaled slowly as she watched Fintán depart, moving at speed across the clearing to disappear from sight in the tightly clustered treeline. The youth had left in a foul humour, embarrassed by her rejection and insulted by her refusal to accompany him to Ráth Bládhma. He had also been completely oblivious to how close to death his provocative missteps had drawn him, how close to her limits he’d actually pushed her.

Now that he was gone, Liath Luachra felt stricken by a bone-numbing weariness. Slumping onto the grass, she lay on her back, plucked a long stalk from a nearby clump and ground it aggressively between her molars.

It was the sight of Bearach’s face that had thrown her. Seeing her friend’s face on another had been bad enough but with Fintán’s subsequent sexual advance, that uncanny similarity to Bearach had distressed her even further.

Because, for one moment, you felt a flush of desire.

Liath Luachra scowled then, frustrated by the situation and angry at her own reaction. She didn’t understand where such a twisted desire might have emerged from or what had provoked it. Nevertheless, the incident had left her feeling soiled and corrupted and, worse, it had tainted the memory of her friend. She felt as though she had somehow let Bearach down and she despised the *Lamhraighe* youth for that.

The warrior woman closed her eyes as though that might somehow banish the sensations she was feeling. Throughout her life, she’d always struggled to make sense of her emotions, a task that few others appeared to find as difficult. The only emotion she truly felt she could distinguish with certainty were the affection she felt for Bodhmhall and the spiralling fury that had formed so much of her earlier life. She was aware that much of the latter had to do with her exceptionally violent upbringing but *Na Cinéaltai* had almost certainly exacerbated the problem. During her time leading that mercenary group, she’d ingested vast quantities of potions, hallucinogens and other mind-altering

substances. Sometimes these had dulled the fury, other times they'd simply intensified it and the consequences were significant. To this day, there were great swathes of time and events she couldn't recall with any clarity.

When she'd first come to Ráth Bládhma, that internal fury had eased, its intensity dampened by a new life of relative peace. Then the settlement had come under attack and it had flared into being once more. In the six years since the *fian* attack, that internal rage had dissipated and she'd truly believed that it was gone for good. Now, this simple encounter with a vainglorious youth had demonstrated how easy it was to topple her from her pillar of calm, how close beneath the surface the dark killer lurked.

'GAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!'

The great roar erupted from deep within her but it still took her by surprise. Her body was shaking violently and she was sweating as she got to her feet. Around the clearing, the silence swelled as the sound of birds, bees and crickets around An Folamh Mór instantly, fearfully, ceased.

I must run!

She knew that much. She was thinking too much and too much thought never led anywhere but dark places that were difficult to escape. She needed to move, to flatten the anger inside her, to push herself physically to such an extent that she could no longer feel, no longer think.

And emotion was extinguished.

A sudden noise from the southern edge of the clearing prompted her to turn in that direction. There, as though in response to her ululation, the butterflies were swarming again. Swelling up from the wildflowers in a great, vivid cloud, they quickly transformed to a quivering veil of colours that was twice the height of a normal man. It started to drift across the clearing towards her.

She exclaimed in surprise as the unnatural wave drew closer. Just as it loomed above her, she closed her eyes then felt it wash over her, the gentle scrape of a hundred-thousand wings against her arms, her face, legs, anywhere where skin was exposed. The sensation was strange but not entirely unpleasant. It was like being gently stroked by many, tiny hands.

The experience lasted for several moments and when it finally faded, she opened her eyes and turned about to find that the swarm had floated past her and was now headed for the giant oak. As she watched, the butterflies washed up against this mighty obstacle and, bizarrely the cloud seemed to break apart. Almost instantaneously, it dispersed into several hundred smaller clouds of undulating colour all made up of many, many individual insects, flickering and tumbling about the clearing.

Or a hundred thousand concepts converging in her head.

Slowly, the smaller clouds drifted away into the surrounding forest and soon An Folamh Mór was empty once again. Liath Luachra stared around the clearing, unsure as to what she'd actually witnessed, unclear as to how she felt, but knowing, instinctively, that she should leave immediately.

My javelins.

She cursed then with the realisation that she'd left her javelins in the upper section of the oak. There was no question of leaving without the weapons for she'd spent far too much time and effort creating them. She wasted no time lamenting the fact but ran for the giant tree, jumped up to grasp one if its lower limbs and proceeded, once again, to climb. It didn't take long to regain her original position where the weapons were tucked safely into a hollow in the moss-coated bough. Retrieving them, she attached them to the wicker backpack with a long strip of fibre and slung it over her shoulder. Just as she was about to descend, she caught a flutter of colour from the corner of her eye.

Another butterfly.

Liath Luachra regarded the insect with curiosity for it'd become ensnared in the sticky fibres of a spider web that spread from the trunk of the tree to the lower section of the branch on which she'd been sitting. As she watched, she could see how the butterfly's feeble struggles to escape sent

vibrations along the radial threads. A moment later, a hairy spider appeared on the upper section and quickly scuttled down the silken threads towards its entangled prey.

Without thinking, the woman warrior grasped the butterfly by the wings and softly prised it from its silken trap. Releasing it into the morning air, she watched it tumble briefly between the branches before abruptly disappearing around the trunk and out of sight. Glancing down at the web, she saw the spider sitting there, unmoving, emanating an almost stoic dejection.

Enough! Leave this place.

Anxious to depart, she slid down the tree somewhat faster than she should have but she reached the ground without incident. Even as her feet hit the soft grass, she knew that she wouldn't return to Ráth Bládhma. The prospect of encountering Fintán or Muirne Muncháem again was not only repellent but, in her current state of mind, she couldn't guarantee that she wouldn't attack them. No. She would remain Out, wait until they had departed. Then she would see.

Liath Luachra left An Folamh Mór at a rapid pace, initially following the same route taken by the *Lamhraighe* youth. As she ran along the trail, she crossed sign of his passing on a regular basis, every ten paces or so, and her lips compressed into a tight line. Confident in his ability and fleetness of foot, Fintán was making no effort to cover his tracks, a potentially lethal oversight in the hostile lands of the Great Wild.

The trail she followed was a natural track from the low hills where An Folamh Mór was situated. Several hundred paces south of the clearing the forest faded into a stony flatland that resulted from the poor topsoil and the rocky terrain which she knew as An Slí Cráite – the Tormented Path. This rough flatland extended towards the south-east, spotted with occasional clusters of trees and scrub. Although Liath Luachra didn't like being out in the open, on this occasion her desire to get away from An Folamh Mór meant that she was willing to compromise safety for speed.

As she progressed further south-west, the forest gradually began to close in again on either side and An Slí Cráite grew more and more constricted. Further on, she knew, it would reduce to little more than a narrow passage through the forest before, eventually, petering out.

Soon she reached a natural fork in the path where a new trail branched off to the south-west along the remains of an old river bed. This turn-off marked the point where her shared route with Fintán ended for it was her intention to follow the south-westerly trail. Throwing one last look at An Slí Cráite, she veered off to the left.

And came to a complete stop.

Slowly turning about, she backtracked to the fork in the trail and stared down at what had caught her eye.

A footprint.

Dropping to a crouch, she reached around to the wicker basket on her back and slid a javelin free. After carefully scrutinising the surrounding scrub, she shuffled forwards on all fours and lay on her stomach in front of the track to examine it in more detail.

It was an impression of a bare foot. No boots, no moccasins. No missing toes either from the look of it. It was an adult size, big enough to assume it'd been made by a man but whoever it was, he'd been travelling light for the imprint wasn't deep. The footprint was also pointed in the direction of the north-east, the direction Fintán had taken.

Snapping a dry spine off a withered blackthorn bush beside the track, she used it to poke the imprint gently on its outer side. It did not crumble.

Recent then.

She frowned. Very recent. In this heat, the shallow imprint would have dried out very quickly and the brittle remnants crumbled apart at the slightest poke.

But it hadn't.

Studying the surrounding trees with care, she rose to her feet and cautiously advanced along An Slí Cráite once more. Sure enough, now that she was actively looking for it, she found another, similar, imprint several paces further on from the first. This one lay in the shade of the treeline where the soil was still soft, untouched from the sun.

A few paces on from that she found another and now she was able to see that the tracks were quite widely spaced. The person who had left them was running, apparently in a hurry. Unlike Fintán, this individual had made some effort to hide his passing but given the speed at which he was travelling he couldn't avoid leaving some trace, like this imprint, behind.

So why is he hurrying?

She frowned and chewed thoughtfully on her inner cheek, an old habit of hers when she was absorbed in concentration.

A stranger travels on An Slí Cráite. He is hurrying, trailing Fintán who also travels at speed.

She frowned. Perhaps she was being too suspicious. This new stranger might simply be on the same trail. It happened.

Except she didn't believe it. Her instincts were telling her that this was not right. In terms of timing, this person would have had to come across Fintán's track after he left An Folamh Mór and before she herself had left. Besides, as a general rule in the Great Wild, people tended to avoid contact with strangers and, when an unfamiliar track was encountered, would often take a more circuitous route to their destination to avoid any kind of engagement.

She bit her lower lip.

No. Whoever this person was, he was following Fintán. She was convinced of that. Given the freshness of the tracks, she was equally convinced that if she backtracked to An Folamh Mór, she'd find similar tracks somewhere along the edge of the clearing. This person had probably been watching while she'd been talking with the youth and then followed him directly once he'd departed.

A good thing there was no rutting in the long grass.

Liath Luachra cursed quietly under her breath. Once again, Fintán was unconsciously interfering in her plans. Despite her dislike of the youth she could not ignore the fact that someone was following him and possibly intended harm.

She considered her options a little further.

She'd directed him to Ráth Bládhma via the longer route that circled about Ros Mór and brought him into Glenn Ceoch from the west. She herself could return much more quickly via a route through the secret pass at Gág na Muice. Her directions for the slower Ros Mór passage had not been given out of spite so much as from simple necessity. The Gág na Muice route was a secret known only to the members of Ráth Bládhma and she didn't want it spread further than that. The western route was also more practical and easier for a stranger to find. If the youth strictly followed the topographical bearings she'd provided, he would find his destination. If he did not, he might wander the forests for years, despite the directions that Muirne Muncháem had given him.

If she moved fast, she could reach Glenn Ceoch before him and intercept him – and his pursuer – in the woods at the entrance to the valley.

She sighed as she replaced the javelin.

It was time to run.

Chapter Two

‘Think carefully before committing yourself. Impetuous acts generally carry unforeseen consequence.’

Bodhmhall ua Baoiscne, leader of Ráth Bládhma, looked across the square *fidchell* board to where Demne, her fair-haired nephew, was studying the pattern of black and white pegs with quiet absorption. The six year old raised his head to look at her and frowned. As always, she was bemused by the intensity of his regard, an expression more suited to a cynical old man than a young boy barely out of babehood.

‘Imagine,’ she suggested, ‘that you are a *laoch*, a warrior seeking to work your way across a bloody field of combat. How would you cut through your adversaries to achieve your objective, the other side of the board?’

She was amused to see the boy’s forehead crinkle in concentration as he focussed once more on the pegs. Martial comparisons always seemed to work with boys.

Satisfied that he was fully engaged in the task she’d set him, Bodhmhall raised her hands to remove the bronze clasp that held her full, black hair in place. The released mane dropped like an oil spill over her back and shoulders. With her generous mouth, smooth, oval face and prominent cheekbones, Bodhmhall was considered a handsome woman by most people she encountered although, for some, the penetrating intelligence of her brown eyes had a tendency to intimidate. This effect was further exacerbated when she rose to her feet for at full height, with the exception of Liath Luachra, she stood almost a head above the other women at Ráth Bládhma.

As she waited for her nephew’s response, she tapped the edge of the board with her fingernail and mused sadly at the solid wooden sound. The board game had originally been a prized possession of Cairbre, Ráth Bládhma’s previous *rechtaire*. Following his death, it had been inherited by his eldest son Aodhán but, preoccupied with activities of a more physical nature, the warrior had passed it on to Bodhmhall. Although she lacked Cairbre’s passion for the game, the *bandraoi* had been pleased with the gesture for the board prompted happy memories of his attempts to educate her in tactics, something she was now doing her best to replicate with her nephew.

Despite all Cairbre’s teachings, Bodhmhall knew that she remained a mediocre player at best. She understood the permitted movements of the pegs, the almost infinite number of sequential patterns that could be utilised but, to her mind, those patterns were too limited, too prescriptive. When developing a plan, she preferred to utilise a more organic approach, combining experience and intuition, amended to suit each particular set of circumstances. She also knew that she was most effective in clarifying her thoughts by discussing them with others. Although he may never really have appreciated it, Cairbre had acted as an excellent foil in that regard, considering her proposals then subsequently offering up his own dry and detached observations to tighten those initial plans.

But Cairbre is gone. And Conchenn. And Cumhal.

Looking at the child, she felt a great surge of affection well up inside her. Demne was her only remaining link to her brother Cumhal but she loved him as if he were her own. Although everyone in the little settlement contributed to his upbringing, over the last six years, it had been Bodhmhall who’d acted as the boy’s principal guardian, care-giver, advisor and teacher and ... mother?

She regarded the tussled mop of blond hair bent over the *fidchell* board. ‘So, have you a proposal for me?’ she asked.

To her surprise, the boy looked up and nodded enthusiastically. Reaching forward, he plucked one of his black pins from the board and, tapping his way through a complex trail of pin holes, demonstrated how he would weave a path through her white-pegged defence.

Bodhmhall watched in silence, her astonishment increasing with each movement Demne made. The pattern of the boy's attack not only accorded with the rules but did so in a surprisingly elegant manner, breaching what she had considered a stalwart defence with a fluidity that made it look effortless.

She was still staring gobsmacked at the board when the leather flap of the roundhouse brushed aside with a noisy flutter. The two players looked up at the slim woman in a sleeveless tunic who stood silhouetted against the bright square of daylight in the doorway behind her. The newcomer's long black hair was tied up but she reached up to brush a loose strand from her face as she entered the roundhouse.

'Morag?' The *bandraoi* was surprised. Generally, people respected her desire not to be interrupted during the instruction periods with her nephew.

'Bodhmhall. A *techtair* – a messenger – has come.'

Bodhmhall returned the younger woman's worried expression with one of surprise. Isolated in the vast loneliness of the Great Wild, Ráth Bládhma rarely received visitors. In the nine years since the current settlement had been established on the ruins of the original colony, it had never received a genuine *techtair* of any kind.

'Who sends this *techtair*?'

'He says he bears a message from Dún Baoiscne. From your father.'

Bodhmhall dropped her eyes and sighed.

When she emerged from the glum interior of the roundhouse, the intensity of the mid-day sun made Bodhmhall shut her eyes against the glare. She stood outside the doorway like this for several moments, torn between the desire to enjoy the simple pleasure of sunlight upon her skin and the necessity to talk to the mysterious messenger.

Needs must.

Opening her eyes, she squinted as she looked about the *lis*, the circular interior of the ring-shaped settlement that had been her home for the past nine years. Ráth Bládhma was typical of most *ráth* or 'ringforts', a circular hamlet surrounded by a deep external ditch and a high, inner earthen embankment created from the upcast of that ditch. Combined, the two provided an effective defence against all but the most determined of assaults. Nine years earlier when Bodhmhall's little party had first arrived to establish a settlement on the ruins of the original *ráth*, Liath Luachra had insisted on strengthening those defences further by embedding an additional barrier of wooden pilings along the top of the embankment. Three years later, this foresight had enabled them to survive a violent attack by a mysterious *fian* – war band – sent to capture her nephew.

Ráth Bládhma had, surprisingly, thrived since that deadly attack. Despite the losses they'd sustained, *Muinntir Bládhma* had absorbed survivors from the surrounding settlements to increase their own population to ten adults and seven children. To deal with the extra numbers, two additional roundhouses had been constructed within the *lis*, increasing the total number of dwellings to four. The need to secure the livestock inside the *ráth* at night, however, meant that the settlement had no space for further expansion. The roundhouses were now hemmed in closely beside the internal herd pens and one of the inner lean-tos formerly used as a wood store had already been dismantled and moved outside to free up additional space.

The dairy herd, Ráth Bládhma's principal food source and a measure of its wealth, had also expanded, now numbering nineteen cows and a bull. Admittedly, that bull would soon have to be replaced to ensure untainted blood lines for the future. Bodhmhall frowned. Yet another challenge to be addressed.

Although the settlement had grown a little stronger over the years, Bodhmhall was not so confident of their security to ever drop her guard. In the vastness of the Great Wild, theirs was still very much a precarious existence. As a community, they had no-one to call on for aid and since the attack of the *fian*, and the destruction of their closest neighbours, no-one with whom they could trade for essential equipment or supplies. In addition to this, they still had no idea as to the identity of ‘The Adversary’ – that unidentified opponent who’d instigated the attack against them. Despite the peace of the previous six years, Bodhmhall remained convinced that their enemy was still out there, biding his time for another attempt on her nephew.

‘Does this bode poorly for us?’

Bodhmhall turned to consider Morag. The younger woman had followed her out of the roundhouse and now stood beside her with an anxious expression on her face. Bodhmhall clicked her tongue. Although exceptionally competent, there were times when Morag’s lack of exposure to the world beyond her old settlement of Coill Mór meant that she could be naïve when faced with an unfamiliar situation.

‘In my limited experience of *techtair*,’ said the *bandraoi*. ‘I do not recall one ever being the bearer of good news.’

With this, she turned to traverse the *lis*, her bare feet hitting noisily on the hard earthen surface. Normally soft and muddy from rainfall and the regular movement of livestock, at present it was solid and baked firm from the intense heat of the sun.

Reaching the southern section of the *ráth*, she scaled a wooden ladder resting against the inner embankment wall and climbed up onto the rampart, a curving platform of beaten earth inside the pilings that had been overlain with flat slabs of wood. The rampart provided a good outlook over the narrow V-shaped Glenn Ceoch – Valley of Haze – in which the settlement was situated. Set at the extremes of *Clann Baoiscne* territory, it was a beautiful place, enclosed on either side by two steep, tree-coated ridges that converged east of the *ráth* to form a steep and impassable barrier. Up in the lower slopes of this formidable buttress, pooling in a small pond of clear water, a sparkling spring fed the stream – *Sruth Drithleach* – that emptied down onto the valley floor and flowed out towards its western entrance.

Bodhmhall paused for a moment to glance longingly towards the *lubgort* – the vegetable garden lying close to the eastern side of the *ráth*. Because it was mid-summer, that period of greatest passion between the Sky and Earth, her garden was flourishing. Unfortunately, the increased resource within the settlement also meant a wider range of issues that needed to be dealt with and, consequently, Bodhmhall was finding it harder and harder to spend time in the garden she loved so much.

As Morag clambered up the ladder to stand beside her, the *bandraoi* sighed, consoling herself with the possibility that she might get to the *lubgort* later that afternoon. Instead, following the curve of the rampart around to the west, the two women made their way towards the bulk of the stone gateway, the sole point of entry into the settlement. The granite structure had been built by the original inhabitants of the *ráth*, long before Bodhmhall had established her own colony there. Facing west towards the entrance of Glenn Ceoch, it was accessed by a narrow causeway that traversed the ditch to a constricted passage, penetrating the lower level of the gateway to the interior. Despite its impressive bulk, the structure had not saved the original settlement from slaughter, which was why Liath Luachra insisted on the presence of a sentinel at all times. On this occasion, the gateway was manned by both the woman warrior Gnathad and the red haired Ferchar and Bodhmhall was pleased to see that although there was but a single intruder to the valley, the substantial barrier designed to obstruct the passage had been erected and locked in place.

Gnathad and Ferchar were leaning against the rampart, gazing down at the *techtair* who was sitting on the grass just beyond the narrow causeway. The messenger was a muscular man with a round face, a small mouth and a sharply crooked nose that looked as though it’d been broken and reset

many times. Seeing the two women arrive onto the upper gateway, he quickly got to his feet, his eyes bright as he stared up at them.

‘I see you Bodhmhall ua Baoiscne,’ he called in an unusually gravelly voice.

The man was guessing, Bodhmhall assumed. He wouldn’t have known which of the two he was addressing although, possibly, he’d recognised her because of her height.

‘I see you, stranger. But I do not know you.’

‘I am named Cargal Uí Faigil.’

Bodhmhall nodded, recognising the tribal name. The *Uí Faigil* were a small tribal grouping from the coastlands far to the east of Dún Baoiscne, the *Clann Baoiscne* stronghold. An offshoot of the *Uí Muirde* clan – strong supporters of *Clann Baoiscne* – theoretically they were also allies to *Clann Baoiscne* because of that linkage. Apart from their name, however, Bodhmhall knew little else about them. During her childhood at Dún Baoiscne they’d had almost no influence or presence there.

‘You bear a message from my father?’

‘I do.’

‘Very well, then. Relay the heart of his words.’

The *techtair*e regarded her with a pained expression. ‘Out here? In the open? The sun is hot and I have travelled far. Some cold well water would soothe my parched tongue. Some food would comfort my empty belly.’

‘Of course. Food and drink is already being prepared.’ She looked to Morag who, taking the hint, nodded and quickly descended to the *lis* using the ladder by the gateway.

‘While we wait, perhaps you can share the news from Dún Baoiscne.’

The *techtair*e did not look impressed. ‘Is this, then, the hospitality of Ráth Bládhma? A welcome that greets a loyal messenger with closed doors and levelled spears? I have travelled long distances through dangerous territories to locate you here.’

Bodhmhall frowned at that for the man *had* appeared to find the settlement with remarkable ease. Secreted away in the secluded Glenn Ceoch, Ráth Bládhma’s best defence was the very fact that it was so hard to find in the vastness of the Great Wild. Although it was true that, as an old *Clann Baoiscne* colony, Dún Baoiscne would almost certainly have provided any messenger with exact directions, the idea that they could be found so easily after the horror of the *fián* attack was unsettling.

The *bandraoi* stared down at the *techtair*e and did her best to repress her instinctive antagonism towards the man. Although carrying out her father’s bidding, the messenger was not her father. He was also due the normal terms of hospitality.

Bodhmhall fretted as she tapped a foot against the base of one of the pilings. There was a responsibility for hospitality but then there was also a responsibility for the settlement’s safety. Given past events and her ongoing dread of the Adversary, she remained reluctant to trust any face she did not know. That situation was further exacerbated by the absence of Ráth Bládhma’s core fighting force. Liath Luachra had departed two days earlier to hunt the western lands. Aodhán, his brother Cónán and the eccentric warrior Tóla were hunting somewhere off to the north-east. Admittedly, Gnathad and Ferchar were capable defenders but, in her estimation, they formed an insufficient force to risk the presence of any strangers – even a single individual – within her walls.

She forced a placatory smile.

‘This is the caution of Ráth Bládhma. Our hospitality is reserved for our friends and precious few of them remain. Besides, I do not know you, Cargal Uí Faigil.’

‘You know my clan. And now you know how I am called.’

‘I know how the bitter storm winds of winter are called. I also know how the dark wolves that prowl the woods are called. That does not mean I treat either with any less caution.’

The messenger grew red-faced, offended at her suspicion.

‘I have been entrusted with my message from your father. I was hand-picked by Tréanmór himself for this undertaking.’

‘So then you know of the strained relations between us.’

‘I do. And all the more reason for you to let me in and hear my message. Your father seeks reconciliation. He seeks to make peace with his daughter.’

Reconciliation! Now?

Bodhmhall did her best to hide her distrust. ‘So, why would he send a man who is unknown to me? A clever man would send a friendly face, someone whose features would reassure me, encourage me to drop my guard. And my father is a clever man.’

‘Your father could not –’ He stopped abruptly. ‘I am here on a secret mission.’

‘The *bandraoi*’s forehead furrowed. ‘Go on.’

‘I can say no more. My words are for the daughter of Tréanmór’s ears alone.’

Exasperated, Bodhmhall felt her hands tightening into fists.

‘Bodhmhall.’

The *bandraoi* turned to Ferchar, glad of the interruption to such an irksome conversation. The red-haired warrior was pointing westwards, up the valley to where a distant figure could be seen running smoothly in the direction of the settlement. Both of them stared, studying the newcomer’s lope but it was not one that either recognised. Observing their reaction, the messenger turned to see what they were looking at. From the startled expression on his face, he was equally as surprised by this new development.

Everyone watched in silence.

The approaching figure took some time to make it all the way up the valley, allowing ample opportunity to observe him. He appeared to be a young man, dressed lightly and fit and trim as a deer. It was only as he drew closer and Bodhmhall was able to make out his face that the familiarity of those features caused her to gape in surprise.

The runner finally came to a halt just beyond the causeway. He stood there, puffing and struggling to catch his breath as he gazed curiously at the closed passage then glanced across at the brawny *techtair* who was observing him with suspicion.

Bodhmhall considered him in silence as she waited for him to recover, quietly wondering how Aodhán and Cónán would have responded if they’d been present to confront this older version of their brother.

‘Bodhmhall ua Baoiscne, I see you.’

‘I see you stranger. You know how I am named?’

‘Your name and features are familiar to me. I was present when you visited my father’s lands some years past. He remains one who counts your friendship dear.’

The *bandraoi* arched one eyebrow in curiosity. ‘Your father?’

‘Gleor Red Hand of *Na Lamhraighe*. He has tasked me to bring his greetings and to seek hospitality for him and his company at the hearth of Ráth Bládhma.’

Cargal Uí Faigil, who had been listening with increasing agitation, finally exploded. ‘What’s this? I was here first! I bear a message from Tréanmór, *rí* of Dún Baoiscne. It is my right to enter Ráth Bládhma and be heard before you.’

Startled by this emotive interruption, the youth glared fiercely. ‘I care little who sent you. I represent the intent of Gleor Red Hand, *rí* of *Na Lamhraighe*.’

Up on the gateway, Bodhmhall considered the visitors with a bemused expression. No *techtair* for nine years and then, suddenly, two at once. And both arguing for her attention, puffing out their chests and crowing like cockerels in an attempt to gain the rather sad prestige of entering first. She glanced over at Ferchar who was grinning wickedly, greatly amused by the situation.

‘Is this the baying of flea-ridden curs or two old crones bickering over their looks?’

The arguments ceased abruptly with the sound of that voice. Up on the gateway, Bodhmhall watched with interest how the *Lamhraighe* youth's jaw dropped as all eyes turned to the lithe figure strolling around from the western side of the *ráth*.

Liath Luachra had returned.

With the reappearance of her *conradh*, Bodhmhall felt a great burden shift from her shoulders. Liath Luachra's presence greatly improved her confidence in the security of the settlement, sufficiently so that she was prepared to allow their 'guests' to enter the *ráth*. Before the barrier to the gateway passage was removed, however, she drew Gnathad to one side and whispered in her ear.

'Gnathad, Demne is within my roundhouse. Once the visitors have been escorted to Morag's hut for refreshment, take the boy to the hunting booth and remain there with him.'

The warrior looked at her, her brow furrowed beneath the leather headband holding the great tangle of blond hair in place. Bodhmhall did not need to guess what she was thinking about, the same thing she was always thinking about: the safety of her own children.

Prior to joining *Muinntir Bládhma*, the young woman had been married to a landowner of *Ráth Dearg*, a neighbouring settlement destroyed by the *fian*. With her husband dead and her home destroyed, she had fled to Glenn Ceoch with her two girls and a number of other refugees only to find herself under attack once more as the *fian* descended on *Ráth Bládhma*. Through courage and sheer good fortune, the settlement had miraculously survived but her sense of powerlessness and inability to protect those she loved had preyed heavily on her.

Soon after the settlement's eventual recovery, Gnathad had approached Liath Luachra seeking instruction in the martial arts and, to Bodhmhall's surprise, the *conradh* had agreed. Ever since, she'd rigorously trained the woman in the use of spear and sword, weapons they had in surplus from the dead *fian* warriors.

Despite her faith in her *conradh*, Bodhmhall had watched developments with a somewhat pessimistic eye. Woman warriors of Liath Luachra's ilk were the exception rather than the norm and it was generally recognised that those adults like Gnathad who'd received no early training in weapons rarely, if ever, become completely proficient.

In hindsight, of course, Liath Luachra's decision had proven the correct one. Under the *conradh*'s tutelage, Gnathad's confidence and sense of wellbeing had increased substantially. *Ráth Bládhma*, meanwhile, had obtained an additional resource to protect its walls. Although it was true Gnathad would never be the most skilled of warriors, Bodhmhall was not so cynical as to ignore the fact that anything increasing the settlement's defensive capacity had to be a positive thing.

'Your children are in no danger, Gnathad. It is just my preference that these strangers do not see my nephew.'

The blond woman nervously twisted the haft of her spear between her fingers before nodding with some reluctance. 'Very well, Bodhmhall. I will do as you ask.'

With this, Gnathad descended to the *lis* to help Ferchar detach the barrier obstructing the passage. A thick slab of oak reinforced with metal strips, it was fixed in position by four iron rungs set into the gateway and a wooden brace that wedged firmly against a large boulder. It took several moments to roll the boulder away and lift the barrier free.

Cargal Uí Faigil was the first to push his way through the newly cleared access way, determined to be the primary dispenser of news within the settlement. Following in the irritable *techtair*'s footsteps and muttering softly to himself, came Fintán mac Gleor. Entering the *lis*, his grumbles trailed off as he looked around the little settlement with evident interest. A nomadic tribe, *Na Lamhraighe* had several

settled areas where they spent specific parts of the year but none of these would have been anywhere near as established as Ráth Bládhma.

Last to enter the *ráth* was Liath Luachra, strolling in with that familiar haughty, feline stride. As the *bandraoi* watched her cross the *lis* to the settlement's central hearth, her inclination was to rush over and embrace her. For formality's sake, however, she restrained that impulse, moving instead to address the visitors. Greeting the ill-matched pair with words of welcome, she quickly dispatched them with Morag to receive the food and drink that had been prepared, promising to speak with them shortly.

As their visitors followed the young woman into the nearest roundhouse, Bodhmhall approached the hearth where Liath Luachra had seated herself on one of the many reed mats surrounding the stone ringed fire-pit. Taking a seat beside her, she reached over to squeeze the Grey One's muscled shoulder.

'You return sooner than expected.'

Liath Luachra's response was one of those rare half smiles that softened the formidable severity of her habitual expression.

'I missed you, Grey One. The nights are darker each time you leave.'

Never one to speak easily of her feelings, Liath Luachra pulled a wooden ladle from a nearby water bucket and drank deeply. When she'd emptied the container, she adroitly turned the discussion to other topics. 'I crossed trails with Gleor Red Hand's son at An Folamh Mór so I know why he is here.' She dropped the ladle back into the bucket. 'But that other *techtair*. The grumpy one. Is it true he comes from Dún Baoiscne?'

'That is his claim.' Bodhmhall sighed. 'It appears that Ráth Bládhma will be the host for many visitors tonight.' She glanced at Liath Luachra, noting the solemnity in those deep grey eyes. 'What worries you?'

The woman warrior took a moment to choose her words carefully. 'It seems to me that the last time Ráth Bládhma merited such attention was six years ago.' She paused for a moment but Bodhmhall didn't need to ask to know that she was thinking of the *fian* attack. 'When are Aodhán and the others due to return?'

'Tomorrow.'

'We may have need of Aodhán's keen eye. And his casting arm.'

Bodhmhall looked at her, the gravity of the *conradh*'s expression prompting a growing unease. 'Why?'

Slowly, the Grey One told her of the mysterious trail she'd discovered and her subsequent return to Ráth Bládhma, recounting the events and her suspicions with her usual directness. As the *bandraoi* listened, she could feel the tension tighten her shoulders and by the time the Grey One had finished, she was forcibly holding her hands in her lap so as not to scratch her palms. 'What is your advice?' she asked in a voice that sounded gratifyingly level.

'I think ...' Liath Luachra's voice trailed off as her gaze snapped across the *lis* to where Gnathad was hurrying towards the gateway passage, Demne in tow behind her. The blond woman didn't glance in their direction but the boy saw them and waved. Bodhmhall felt a lurch of fear for the child and when she turned back to Liath Luachra she found the woman warrior regarding her with questioning eyes.

'They go to the hunting booth,' the *bandraoi* explained. 'We have two visitors within the *ráth*, both of whom are unknown to me. I do not intend to take any chances.'

Liath Luachra held her eyes for a moment then abruptly nodded her approval. 'The hunting booth is well concealed. They will be safe there as long as they remain hidden and do not move about or leave tracks.' She thoughtfully played with the ladle in the bucket for a moment. 'I think it best that

the cattle are brought inside. Early. We should do this now. And bar the passage. We should remain within the *ráth* until Aodhán and the others have returned. Then we can consider the matter further.’

As she listened to her conradh’s advice, Bodhmhall could feel her heart sink.

It’s happening. It’s happening again.

The warrior woman had clearly sensed her concern for she reached over, took her hand and squeezed it. ‘Do not despair, Bodhmhall. We are simply taking safeguards. Those tracks may well have been nothing more than curious strangers passing by.’

‘Perhaps,’ Bodhmhall agreed. Although her response lacked any conviction it did, at least, serve to stir a renewed sense of determination. ‘Let us talk to our visitors,’ she suggested. Once we learn what ill winds their news blows our way, we will be better placed to know where we stand.’

They met first with Cargal Uí Faigil, given that they already knew the reason behind Fintán mac Gleor’s presence. It was also obvious that the *techtair*e was anxious, almost desperate, to relate the message that had been assigned him.

While Fintán remained with Morag, it was Lí Bán – the eldest of the women within the settlement – who escorted the messenger to the roundhouse shared by Bodhmhall and Liath Luachra.

He entered their dwelling with tentative steps, looking around the circular living area with curiosity once his eyes had grown accustomed to the internal gloom. His gaze passed over the central fire-pit, the two roof support poles adorned with clusters of dried herbs for Bodhmhall’s remedies, the wooden frame holding Liath Luachra’s red leather battle harness and weapons. They lingered longer than necessary on the large sleeping platform layered with heather and furs.

The two Ráth Bládhma women, seated on wicker mats by the fire pit, noted this inspection but said nothing as Cargal advanced towards them. Although the base of the fire pit had been layered with tinder and dry wood, the fire had not been set alight given the balminess of the evening. The *techtair*e took a seat facing them.

‘So,’ Bodhmhall began. ‘You bring a message from my father.’

Cargal Uí Faigil looked at her, then pointedly turned to stare at Liath Luachra before returning his attention to the *bandraoi* once more. The meaning was clear. He did not wish to speak in the presence of the warrior woman.

Bodhmhall ignored the unspoken suggestion and continued to hold the *techtair*e’s eyes. As the silence extended, his brazen gaze wavered and he started to scratch the back of his left hand, a nervous tic of some standing given the abraded condition of the skin.

‘Very well,’ the *techtair*e conceded. ‘If it is truly your desire to receive the message in company then I have no option but to comply. It was, however, your father’s desire that you hear his words alone.’

With this, he sat up straight and cleared his throat and puckered his fleshy lips. Raising his head, he closed his eyes and opened his mouth to commence *An Dord Rúnda* – the Secret Drone – that vocal technique used by the more talented *techtair*e to both memorise and deliver their messages. Bodhmhall held up one hand. ‘Stop.’

The *techtair*e blinked and stared at her in incomprehension, bewildered by the interruption.

‘You are overeager to divest yourself of your responsibility. You have neglected to provide us with an *t-urra* – the surety.’

‘An *t-urra*!’ The messenger slapped his hand against his forehead. ‘Of course, of course.’ His eyes dropped to the floor, embarrassed by the gravity of his omission.

As he should be.

Bodhmhall was unimpressed. Prior to the delivery of any formal message it was customary for the *techtair*e to provide confirmation of the sender's identity in order to guarantee the authenticity of the message. Habitually, this was provided through the sharing of a confidence, a secret that only the recipient and the sender would know but other variations and codes were also used.

The *techtair*e was silent for a moment as he gave *an t-urra* he had been provided with. 'The surety is as follows,' he said at last and his eyes fixed on Bodhmhall. 'You broke one of two at three. You broke one of only one at sixteen.'

Bodhmhall returned Cargal's stare with a frosty expression but she made no response. The *techtair*e shifted uneasily under that hostile scrutiny. '*An t-urra* is not accepted?'

Bodhmhall made no response for several heartbeats. Finally she dropped her head for a single nod but the gesture seemed to lack enthusiasm. '*An t-urra* is accepted,' she said in a dull voice.

Relieved, the *techtair*e nodded. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath and, once again initiated the low hum that would slowly build up to the full-blown chant used to relay his message. Soon, the hum was a steady drone consisting of a throaty rhythmic breathing, powered from the *techtair*e's chest prior to the initial intonation.

*'Hear the words of Tréanmór, grandson of the great Baoiscne, rí of Dún Baoiscne.
His speech is untainted, unchanged in tone or sense.'*

The words dropped away but the drone continued, the messenger's torso swaying slowly backwards and forwards in time with the deep sounding rhythm.

*The walls of Dún Baoiscne ring loud with silence.
My sons and daughter are absent, their places sit empty.
No one laughs at the feasting table.
Tréanmór grows old and sees the long night draw close.
He seeks the company of his remaining children for one last meal.
Come to Dún Baoiscne by the second day of the next full moon.
There are many truths to be shared.
Tréanmór grieves but seeks the closeness of family.*

Once again, the words ceased although the *techtair*e maintained the deep throbbing chant. Bodhmhall waited, her curiosity mounting. After three further cycles, the final part of the communication came forth.

*Children of Tréanmór, beware the wolf in the mist
The light foot in the night.
The merchant of loyalties.
The betrayer of Clann Baoiscne secrets,
Trust no-one.
Only through Bearna Garbh does safety lie.*

Bodhmhall continued to watch the *techtair*e but the chant was slowly but surely spiralling down. His message was coming to a close. After two more cycles, both decreasing in volume, it pattered out and stopped.

Cargal Uí Faigil wheezed and slumped forwards, suddenly looking completely exhausted. Bodhmhall studied him with interest. During her instruction at Dún Baoiscne, the druid Dub Tíre had always told her that once a *techtair*e's message was conveyed, it was erased from his memory. She'd always had her doubts about that. Although visibly tired from his travels and the focussed effort of

relaying the message accurately, the *techtair*e's eyes remained bright and vigilant as he awaited her response.

Bodhmhall caught a movement from the corner of her eye as Liath Luachra turned to glance at her but she remained focussed on the *techtair*e, absently tapping her lower lip with the tip of her index finger.

'Who advises Tréanmór now?'

'Who? What ...?' The *techtair*e fumbled, momentarily thrown by the unexpected direction of the question. He had clearly been anticipating either a direct response to the message or a question of a more clarifying nature. He licked his lips uneasily but under Bodhmhall's tenacious stare, finally responded to the question.

'The *rí* of Dún Baoiscne receives advice from many people,' he suggested with careful diplomacy. 'But, in the end, as leader he would make up his own mind.'

'But he will have a key adviser,' Bodhmhall insisted. 'Who advises him now that Dub Tíre is no longer about?'

This time the messenger regarded her in alarm. It was common knowledge that Dub Tíre, druid at Dún Baoiscne, had died by Bodhmhall ua Baoiscne's hand. This, indeed, was the generally accepted reason for her expulsion from the Baoiscne fortress some nine years earlier. To have the subject of the druid raised so blithely, visibly put him in great discomfort.'

'Well,' she pressed.

'Becal,' he said at last, the name grudgingly offered up with a voice that was stiff and muted.

'Becal,' the *bandraoi* repeated. She mulled over this item of information for a moment before addressing the *techtair*e again. 'The last words you spoke were words of warning.'

A stiff nod.

'Of treachery.'

'Yes.'

'This is the matter you did not wish to speak of openly?'

A quick twist of the eyes to Liath Luachra and back again. Cargal shuffled uneasily. 'Your father has learned that the battle of Cnucha where your brother Cumhal died was not an opportunistic skirmish. It was a pre-arranged ambush. *Clann Morna* were informed of the route the *Clann Baoiscne* men were taking.'

Bodhmhall stared at him, her face growing pale at the ramifications of what he was telling her.

'There is a traitor at Dún Baoiscne?'

Cargal Uí Faigil nodded. 'Your father has not identified the traitor but he is convinced of his existence and does not trust even those closest to him. This is why I, as an independent *techtair*e, was summoned and entrusted with the message for you. The 'friendly face', you expected might not truly have been so friendly.'

Bodhmhall's continued to stare, her head spinning. Someone in the clan, probably someone she'd known as a child had betrayed everything; family, friends, clan, to the *Clann Morna*, *Clann Baoiscne*'s long-time enemies.

Dark days. Oh, dark days.

It took her a moment to pull herself together but she disguised her consternation by quietly staring at the floor of the roundhouse as though in deep thought.

'Cargal Uí Faigil,' she said at last. 'You have my gratitude for conveying this message. Food and other supplies will be prepared for you before you depart tomorrow but, for tonight, please accept the hospitality of Ráth Bládhma.'

Cargal acknowledged her gratitude and hospitality with a nod. 'Do you have a response for your father?' he asked.

‘Not at present. I will require time to think on this. You will receive my answer before you leave in the morning.’

‘Very well.’ The *techtair* stood up to leave.

Bodhmhall also rose to her feet and accompanied the burly man to the doorway. Passing through the leather flap to the *lis*, they found Lí Bán waiting outside. The old woman glanced at Bodhmhall but said nothing as she’d been instructed earlier.

‘Lí Bán will take care of you.’

Cargal nodded his thanks once more and, escorted by the grey haired women, walked off to the roundhouse to which he’d been assigned.

Returning inside, Bodhmhall joined Liath Luachra by the fire pit and sat quietly pondering the *techtair*’s message while she stared into the ghosts of the flames. Finally she turned to her *conradh* who’d pulled a short branch out of the kindling and was twisting it silently between her fingers. ‘Do you have history with the *Uí Faigil*? Anything from your days with the Kindly Ones?’

The woman warrior shook her head. ‘They are a small grouping. They lack enemies powerful enough to warrant attention from those such as *Na Cinéaltaí*.’

‘The *techtair* says he is of *Uí Faigil*.’

‘You do not believe him?’

A shrug.

‘What do your instincts tell you?’

‘My instincts scream to slit his throat and cast him from the *ráth*.’

Liath Luachra considered her, impressed by the vehemence of that response.

‘*An t-urra* was not satisfactory?’

‘It seemed satisfactory.’

‘Your reaction did not suggest that.’

Bodhmhall frowned. ‘The surety was a riddle. Only my family and close family advisors would be aware of my love for riddles. Besides, this particular riddle makes reference to events only they could know.’

Liath Luachra tapped the branch against one of the fire pit stones but made no comment.

She sighed. ‘I broke one of two at three. I broke my leg when I had three years on me.’

Liath Luachra thought it through then nodded, impressed. ‘Clever. And one of one at sixteen?’

‘My sixteenth year marked the end of my love for Fiacaíl mac Codhna. A broken heart. And our wise ones always tell us that we have but a single heart.’

‘Oh,’ said Liath Luachra simply.

Bodhmhall shot her a subtle sideways glance, attempting to gauge her reaction but the woman warrior sat motionless, giving nothing away. She picked up a clay pot from the side of the fire pit and idly started to roll it in her hands. It wasn’t difficult to guess what was going through the Grey One’s mind. The reference to Fiacaíl mac Codhna would not have pleased her. Even at the best of times there was no love lost between Liath Luachra and the brash *Clann Baoisne* warrior. The additional complexity of Bodhmhall’s history with Fiacaíl would probably not have helped although Liath Luachra had always been adamant that wasn’t something that disturbed her.

‘So, the surety appears valid,’ she continued. ‘Despite this, in my heart I struggle to believe that such a message could come from my father.’ Her fingers beat a rapid cadence along the side of the little pot. ‘If I knew with certainty that it did come from my father, I would probably trust the message all the less.’

Liath Luachra observed her in silence. ‘Well,’ she suggested at last. ‘We have *Na Lamhraighe* to deal with, of course, but both Cargal Uí Faigil and Fintán mac Gleor will be billeted in Aodhán and Cónán’s dwelling tonight. I will watch over their door to ensure there is no treachery. With Gnathad at

the hunting booth, Ferchar will have to guard the gate alone tonight but we should be able to manage one night until the others return.'

'Another reason for resentment then. I would have preferred you by my side tonight.'

'There will be other nights, *a rún*. Many other nights.'

'Mmm.' The *bandraoi* nodded distantly. A moment later, she turned back to look at the woman warrior. 'That young man, Gleor Red Hand's son. When you first appeared around the *ráth* he looked shocked, then very angry at you.'

'I believe I may have broken his heart.'

Despite herself, Bodhmhall smiled. A joke from the Grey One, no matter how vague, was a rare occurrence. 'You do not find him pleasing to the eye?'

'His face is not unpleasant.'

'He has Bearach's face.'

'Does he? I had not noticed.'

Bodhmhall curled one sceptical eyebrow. 'Do not parry half-truths with me, Grey One. I know you too well.'

For a moment Liath Luachra remained silent then, suddenly, the branch she was holding snapped in two. She tossed both pieces back into the fire pit. 'Yes! Yes, he has Bearach's face. It burns me to see his features on such a fatuous youth when my friend lies cold in the ground. It burns me when he makes advances using Bearach's voice and mannerisms.'

Astounded by this new revelation, Bodhmhall could only stare back at her. The other woman growled.

'Forgive me, Bodhmhall. My anger bites. Fintán mac Gleor is but a child, a clumsy young bull who crushes the spring flowers. He has no idea of the damage he leaves in his trail.'

Bodhmhall regarded her with fresh concern. Following Bearach's death during the *fian* attack on Ráth Bládhma, Liath Luachra had steadfastly refused to discuss the issue. In the six years following the attack, although she had calmed, the warrior woman also grown ever more ... contained. She placed a comforting hand on the other's knee.

'These things happen, Grey One. It is not uncommon to see familiar features on another's face. I know that when Cairbre was younger he lived north for a time in *Na Lamhraighe* territory. It's possible he left a portion of his seed there. Even Conchenn, Bearach's mother, passed some time in that area. It is just ... unfortunate.'

Liath Luachra acknowledged what she was saying with a sharp dip of her head but her posture remained stiff and tense. She attempted to shrug the topic off. 'It's not important. We should prepare for *Na Lamhraighe*. They will be here later this evening.'

At the mention of their forthcoming visitors, Bodhmhall felt a great weariness settle over her. On the footsteps of the Dún Baoiscne message and the disconcerting information her *conradh* had just shared with her, the additional burden of organising hospitality for visitors was almost more than she could handle. 'Strangers,' she growled. 'They bring us poisoned words and deeds of ill intent. We might do just as well to slit their throats and bury their bodies deep in the forest.'

Turning, she found Liath Luachra regarding her with a strange expression.

'What troubles you?'

The Grey One hesitated for a moment before responding. 'The Bodhmhall ua Baoiscne I have always known would never speak such words. Even in jest. My blood burns to think others have troubled you in such a manner.'

'Given all that we have had to endure, I think that now I would seriously consider any and all responses. I have responsibility for protecting the settlement, protecting Demne. I will *not* let anyone take my nephew away. I will ...' Her voice trailed off as she heard the intensity of emotion in her own voice.

She took a deep breath and sighed deeply. ‘This time, perhaps, it is on me to apologise. Cairbre once told me that the leaders who prevail are those who can act with ruthlessness and brutality. Individuals who can make harsh decisions and sacrifice their people without conscience. That advice has always haunted me. It disturbs me to think that I could change, could harden to become such a person. Yet this may be what is required for my nephew and my people to survive.’

‘You have no need to justify your actions to me, Bodhmhall. Your leadership meant Ráth Bládhma and its people survived when other settlements were destroyed. We’ve all changed since that day. We saw our friends butchered. Such violence has the power to change a person for the worse. I know that better than most.’

Bodhmhall silently considered the woman warrior’s words. ‘Perhaps,’ she said simply, although she did not sound convinced. ‘This day has been a poor day. Let us be grateful it will soon draw to a close and cannot become any worse.’

Liath Luachra reached up and took the *bandraoi*’s face gently in both hands. ‘It pains me to tell you this, *a rún*,’ she said. ‘But, it can get worse. Muirne Muncháem returns to Ráth Bládhma.’