

**Liath Luachra: The Grey One**  
**The Fionn mac Cumhaill Series - Prequel**

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## Chapter One

Liath Luachra, the Grey One of Luachair, watched the raiders slip in before dawn. Blurred figures barely distinguishable against the shaded grey background of the surrounding forest, they slid through the long grass at the edge of the clearing like wolves on the hunt.

*Wolves.*

She considered that for a moment. It seemed ... apt. This particular band of raiders styled themselves in the manner of a wolf pack to the point of naming themselves *Na Madraí Allta* - The Wild Dogs. Their leader, a big man with black hair and a distinctive black beard, even went so far as to insist on being called *An Mactíre Dubh* – The Black Wolf.

As she watched, the Grey One chewed quietly on a stale slice of oat bread. The texture of the loaf was tough and leathery and she could feel pieces of the original kernel when she crushed it between her molars. Her belly twinged. She hadn't eaten since noon the previous day and her stomach, flat at the best of times, now seemed to have recessed even further into her torso. Fortunately, the morsels she was chewing would keep the worst of the craving at bay, hold the hunger weakness off until she had a chance to eat again.

Or didn't need to eat again.

With that depressing reflection, she resumed her scrutiny of the raiders. Sprawled on her belly, she was lying in the treeline on the forested southern crest of a high, U-shaped ridge. The ridge formed a natural enclosure around a wide clearing and from that height she had an unobstructed, if murky, view of the little settlement situated directly below. In all, the settlement consisted of three rectangular thatched buildings and a number of lean-tos lying off to the side. The larger buildings formed a rough semicircle around a well-established fire pit located at the centre. Low flames cast a dull orange glow onto the mud and straw-daubed walls.

A herd of about fifteen cattle milled about the buildings and out around the pasture in the rest of the clearing. A squat figure was silhouetted against the fire. A sentry for the cattle, he'd proven lax in his responsibilities. Overly confident in the security offered by the settlement's relative proximity to the *Uí Bairrche* stronghold and the natural concealment of the encircling ridge, he'd simply left the cattle to fend for themselves and retired to the fire to doze.

'One, two, three, four.' A pause. 'Five, six ... shit!' Another pause. 'One, two ... three.'

The Grey One turned a sideways glance to Canann an Súil – Canann the Eye – who'd paused in his counting to scratch an itch through the thick fistful of whiskers enveloping his chin. Foiled by the bushiness of his facial growth, he settled for a quiet curse instead. The Grey One made no comment. Something of a simpleton, Cannan was one of the least effective members of their *fian* – war party. He rarely said anything worth listening to and was beside her uniquely because of his exceptional night vision. Cannan, it was claimed, could make out the contours of a pig's arsehole at the end of a deep mine shaft. There was no pig to be found anywhere for any great distance – except, perhaps, in the settlement below – but that claim would be sufficiently tested by his ability to identify how many raiders they faced.

'By The Great Father's testicles, shut your gob, Cannan.' An infuriated whisper, laden with venom, this time originating from her left.

The Grey One frowned as she considered the darkness beside her. Bressal Binnbhéalach – Bressal SweetTongue – of the *Uí Loinge*, was usually the most articulate and self-disciplined of individuals. Almost completely obscured by the shadow beneath the forest canopy, she struggled to make him out.

'Calm, Bressal. They approach from the northern gap. They're too far away to hear us.'

'They'll hear us if that cretin doesn't stop counting out loud.'

The Grey One left the discussion at that. As *rígfénnid* – leader of the *fian* – Bressal could demand what he liked of its various members. For the most part a rational and reasonable man, his current belligerence belied an intelligent mind and a superior facility when it came to sheer rat cunning.

Despite his intellect however, she'd noticed a recurring pattern of abominable hostility over the course of the current season. Usually just before a fight.

It was the tension of course. Bressal was no fool. It was he, after all, who'd organised this particular action, who'd conceived and developed the plan for taking down the raiders. Now unfortunately, just prior to the battle, his behaviour was becoming a dangerous liability.

Liath Luachra reached across and placed a hand on his. The slim man's forearm was greasy with nervous sweat, the skin about his wrist warm and slimy. She forced herself to hold it there for a moment or two. As a general rule she avoided close physical contact with others and particularly with Bressal for the man had been seeking her caress for almost two years. Over that time, she'd done everything in her power to discourage such interest but right now he needed to be distracted.

As she anticipated, he started at her touch and with the shock of that contact she sensed the tension gush out of him. The leaves crackled softly as he shifted his weight and she pulled her hand back before he could interpret it for something more than it was or, worse, respond in kind. To prevent any further interaction, she turned away to face Canann. The keen-sighted buffoon was still counting but at least he'd reduced his voice to a muted whisper.

'Nine, ten, eleven ... eleven, twelve.' He was silent for a moment. 'Twelve,' he declared suddenly but with obvious satisfaction. 'There are twelve men, Liath Luachra. Twelve men.'

'Are there twelve men or is it that you can only count to twelve?'

A momentary silence passed between them.

'There are twelve men,' he insisted, an aggrieved tone to his voice.

'Good, Canann. Good. She tossed him the compliment thoughtlessly, much as she'd toss an unwanted bone to a hungry dog. Despite the fact the warrior was more than twice her age, he lapped the praise up like an excited puppy, moaning softly and nodding to himself as though in confirmation of his count.

Ignoring both men, she turned her focus back to the approaching raiders. She didn't have Canann's keen eyesight but she still managed to catch glimpses of movement in the moonlight as the raiders spread out from the clearing's northern entrance and formed a rough arc along the treeline on either side. When they were ready, she suspected they'd swarm out around the settlement in that formation. For the moment however, they seemed happy enough just to sit and observe.

*The guard should have been waiting at the entrance. Not warming himself by the fire.*

That simple negligence irritated her, which was unusual. Few things roused the Grey One's emotions one way or the other but acts of carelessness in a combat situation occasionally worked their way under her skin to provoke a stir of anger. She frowned, placating this uncharacteristic indignation with the knowledge that the guard would probably be the first to die. For the settlement below however, she felt no particular sense of sympathy, no empathy. By ignoring the most fundamental of responsibilities, they'd brought the consequences on themselves.

Crawling forwards, she edged out of the enclosing shadows until she could look down on the base of the ridge where the other *féinnid* – the other members of the *fian* – were concealed. Like the raiders, the settlement's inhabitants were unaware of their presence, an instruction from Mical Strong Arm who'd also shown them the secret route up from the far side of the steep ridge. Her *fian* were spread out down there, having formed a similar half-circle sometime after nightfall.

*My fian.*

She felt a momentary twinge of frustration at that. Bressal's *fian*, she corrected herself. *Na Cinéaltaí* of the *Uí Loinge* clan. Even their name – The Kindly Ones – bore Bressal's typically caustic sense of humour.

Raising her head again, she looked across the clearing to the trees where the incoming force was assembled.

*Twelve raiders.*

She bit at her fingernails. *Na Cinéaltaí* had seven *féinnid* in total, eight including Bressal. Two of these – Senach and Sean Fergus – were concealed off to the right. Three more – Murchú, Conall

Cacach and Biotóg – off to the left. Although numerically inferior to their enemy, the odds didn't overly disturb her. *Na Cinéaltaí* would be working with the element of surprise. Absorbed in their slaughter, the raping of women and the pillaging of property, any possibility of opposition would be the last thing on the raiders' minds. She was also comforted by the fact that each of the *féinnid* carried two metal-tipped javelins. With the initial volleys, any numerical advantage would quickly be countered.

She experienced a small sense of satisfaction at that. The javelins had been her suggestion. Bressal, who'd laid out the *fian's* original placement, had made a big deal of humming and hawing as he'd considered it but he'd approved it in the end, as she'd known he would. Over the previous season of engagements, he'd increasingly deferred combat responsibilities to her. Despite his agreement, he'd also made a point of letting the other men know that he was accepting it only as it aligned well with his own plan.

And that his own plan was a good plan.

Liath Luachra wasn't too sure about that. It certainly wasn't so good for the settlement. A sub-branch of the *Uí Bairrche* clan, its people had been cruelly sacrificed as bait to ensure the destruction of *An Mactíre Dubh*. Mical Strong Arm, the *rí* – king – of *Uí Bairrche* had even gone so far as to increase the likelihood of a raid at that particular settlement by spreading false rumours of a treasure cache hidden within one of the buildings.

Liath Luachra had initially been surprised by Mical Strong Arm's callousness towards members of his own clan until Bressal, always well connected, had informed her of reasons behind it. According to one of Bressal's many cousins, the leader of this particular branch was a potential rival to Mical's son for the future leadership of *Uí Bairrche*. By allowing the settlement to be destroyed in the course of the raider's destruction, the *rí* was killing two birds with a single sling shot.

Liath Luachra tried to wipe the fatigue from her eyes. Following reports of *Na Madraí Allta's* incursion on *Uí Bairrche* territories, it had taken two days of frantic travel to get here in time for the raider's assault. There was little prospect of rest any time soon.

With an effort, she turned her focus to the distant trees. Now that the movement of the raiders had ceased, the clearing had taken on a derelict, deserted appearance. Settled comfortably in place, they'd most likely wait for dawn to have sufficient light to launch their attack.

The Grey One pulled her grey wool cloak about her shoulders. The autumn season was upon them and this would be the last *fian* action before the pre-winter dispersal. If they survived, the *fian* would travel back to Bressal's home place at the *Uí Loinge* stronghold where any loot would be distributed and the *fian* would disband, some members drifting back to their tribal territories for the winter, others *éclann* – clanless – like her, finding alternatives to pass the frozen months.

She shuddered at the thought of winter. For her, the cold season would involve a return to Luachair, a desolate valley by the marshes far to the south-west. She'd spent the previous two winters in a small cave there. With a flap over the entrance passage and a low fire, the cave could, on occasion, feel relatively warm but mostly the cold would drive her to her blankets to sleep like a hibernating animal. In the heat beneath her furs and blankets, she'd nibble on *Beacáin Scammalach* – Cloud Mushroom – to smear her mind and avoid any chance of self-reflection. Most of her time would pass in an incoherent blur and, on occasion, she would not see daylight for days.

In the past, Luachair had contained four separate families, scattered along the length of the forested valley floor but a band of passing marauders had put paid to most of them. Nowadays, an old couple – the only other survivors and the last occupants of the valley – would come up to the cave every three days or so to leave food at the entrance: vegetables, broth and if she was lucky some kind of meat. The smell of food would eventually rouse her from her blankets although, once or twice, absorbed in her dream oblivion, she'd managed to ignore hunger for periods of up to four days.

Later, sitting beside the fire, she'd gobble the food down until she felt strong enough to venture outside and walk the valley before returning to the warmth of her blankets.

As a child, Liath Luachra too had lived in that valley. Now, with sixteen years on her, it was the only place that retained any semblance of home although 'home' was already a concept she no longer truly believed in. The old couple had been friends of her mother from a time before she could truly remember but, nowadays, she rarely spoke to them and voided their attempts at conversation. The interaction she wanted with them was simple but limited. In exchange for the food, firewood and privacy they provided over the course of the winter season, they received her share of booty from *fian* activities: the skins, the goats, metal, anything of value. It was a relationship very much stacked in the old couple's favour and although she knew this she didn't really care. The arrangement was a means of surviving the winter and prolonging her existence for another year, although the ongoing futility of the latter was something that was never far from her mind. All the same, it wasn't as though she had any realistic alternative.

*Apart from an offer to share Bressal's bed.*

She shivered.

*Stop thinking. Focus on your enemy.*

She looked across the clearing to the northern trees.

*Soon.*

\*\*\*

The raiders made their move shortly after dawn, just as Liath Luachra had predicted. The attack was faultless, carried out with methodical coordination and precision. The twelve men rose from the trees as one, in response to some silent, predetermined signal. Advancing at a crouch, they moved forward in a wide semicircle, creeping purposefully towards the unsuspecting settlement.

By that time, Liath Luachra, Bressal and Canann had already worked their way down the ridge, using a slight dip to conceal their descent. Rejoining the others, Bressal had the *fian* form a curved line just inside the southern treeline so they had a clear view of the raiders' advance, unobstructed by the bulk of the buildings.

Crouched behind the bulky buttress of an ancient oak, Liath Luachra could feel the hunger for violence building inside her, the physical and emotional 'stretch' as her nerves pulled on her muscle tendons, twitching for release.

At Bressal's insistence, Murchú – their most recent and inexperienced recruit – was crouched alongside her. The *rígfénnid's* nephew, he was a handsome youth of fifteen years or so but also inexperienced and overly nervous. He repeatedly twisted the javelin haft between the palms of his hands and every now and again he'd raise the weapon as though preparing to cast it then quickly lower it again.

Patience tested by that irritating repetition, Liath Luachra released a feral growl from deep within her throat. Startled, the boy looked toward her and, noting the fearful widening of his eyes, for the briefest of moments she wondered what he saw. A girl in faded leathers, no doubt. Probably bigger than most girls he knew, lithe as a whipcord and strong.

She knew that most young men like Murchú didn't really know what to make of her. Her fine features and lack of facial hair revealed her gender for what it was but the contrast of those austere features with hair cropped close to the skull, the mass of white scars along her lower back and the tangible ferocity in her smoky grey eyes often left them confused as to how they should act with her.

'Breathe,' she instructed him and although it was expressed in a whisper it lacked no authority for that. 'Breathe in, breathe out. Focus on your breath and try to relax your muscles until I tell you what to do next.'

In the colourless light of dawn, Murchú's face looked pale but he dipped his head in acknowledgement. Satisfied that he wasn't going to panic, the Grey One turned away to check her weapons, making sure that the sword pulled freely from its scabbard, that the metal tips of the javelins were firmly affixed and wouldn't break loose under pressure. She also slid the leather sling coiled around her left arm further up towards the elbow to make it sit more securely. A small bag of stone bullets lay inside her tunic but she doubted she'd have opportunity to use them in the coming engagement.

With that, she focussed on her own breathing for she could feel how her body had grown rigid from mounting tension, the muscles of her neck and shoulders involuntarily cramping to the point where they felt as taut as deerskin on a tanning frame. The sensation was one she was familiar with but no less uncomfortable for that. Her body always reacted in this manner before battle, tightening up like an enraged but restrained hound just prior to being unleashed.

In a strange sort of sympathetic symmetry, her mind also seemed to coil tighter at such moments, as though her intellect was battling to repress the animal bloodlust inside her. Ironically, she always felt that her mind never functioned so well as it did leading up to that point of release. Just before battle, her thoughts were pure, crisp and as sharp as the finest blade. At the surrender to that physical action however, all reason was discarded as she reverted to a slaving force of violence.

A hand tapped her left thigh and she twisted on her heel to find Bressal regarding her with mute intensity. A slender, sallow man with a narrow face that was always freshly shaven, his misleadingly benign appearance gave no hint to the deep well of fury that could erupt if he was obstructed or displeased. He jerked his head towards the settlement fire pit. Following the gesture, her eyes locked onto the indistinct form of a large man with a thick black beard, crouched in the shadows near the sleeping guard, a long knife in his right hand.

*The Black Wolf.*

She nodded her understanding. Bressal was instructing her to mark the man, to prevent him from escaping in the turmoil to follow. She repressed a quick flicker of irritation at that. If he'd followed another of her suggestions – concealing one of the *féinnid* by the clearing entrance – they could have effectively sealed the battleground. Fearful of the bandit numbers however, he'd insisted on having all of his force to hand.

With these last instructions transferred, Bressal hissed, held her eyes for a moment then abruptly raised his hand in a sharp passing gesture to alert the others that he was turning combat leadership over to her.

She stared at him but Bressal simply repeated the gestures with greater insistence and turned back to study the raiders.

The Grey One breathed deeply as she attempted to absorb what had just happened, but looking down to the settlement, she saw that she had little time to do so. By now, had he been awake, the guard would have been alerted by the uneasy shuffling of the cattle as the dark shapes moved towards them. One or two of the animals began to low quietly but the dozing guard slept on. Liath Luachra watched in silence as the black bearded man crept up behind him. Moving forward with ruthless efficiency, he clasped a hand about the guard's mouth, yanked his head up and sliced his throat open from ear to ear.

Disturbed by the smell of freshly spilled blood, the cattle started moving again, this time crowding towards the southern side of the clearing, obstructing both the *fian's* proposed route of attack and their view of the settlement. Liath Luachra hissed in frustration. Through the milling of the frightened cattle she could see the raiders cluster around the entrances to the dwelling where the settlement's inhabitants still slept soundly. This would have been the perfect time to launch their initial javelin volley but now the opportunity was lost, the field of casting ruined by the position of the shifting cattle. On either side, the men glanced towards her, waiting for her lead. She, in turn, looked to Bressal but he completely ignored her. Scowling, she made a pressing motion with her right hand. They would have to wait.

There was a sudden roar from the settlement as the raiders surged into the various buildings, a roar echoed almost immediately by shrieks of agony or the screams of women and children as the settlement's population awoke to their fate.

The screaming did not last long as *Na Madraí Allta* once again upheld their fearsome reputation for ruthlessness. Soon, the only cries were the victorious yells of the raiders and an occasional scream of pain. Frightened by the noise and the violence, the cattle had shifted position once more,

this time stampeding off to the grassy area beyond the buildings, closer towards the entrance of the clearing.

*Na Cinéaltaí* waited, concealed in the thick undergrowth just inside the treeline. They watched in silence as the raiders dragged bodies from the buildings, piling them in an untidy heap by the fire. The Black Wolf had settled himself on a low grassy hummock, laughing and talking loudly with two of his men while he watched the others rummage through the buildings and ransack the little settlement.

The Grey One forced herself to unclench her javelin, conscious of the fact that if she continued to grip it too tightly the tension would strain her arm muscle, throwing off her cast when it was time.

And it wasn't yet time.

Despite the tempting proximity of the Black Wolf, too many of his men were still scattered in places she couldn't see, inside the longhouses or out of sight on the far side of the buildings. For the javelin volley to achieve the effect she wanted, it was essential that the raiders were clustered more tightly together. They would have to bide their time.

As she continued to watch, a high-pitched scream came from the nearest building and, a moment later, two females were dragged through the doorway and into the open. Both were skinny, fair haired girls, dressed in loose wool shifts. The older girl looked to have no more than seventeen years on her, the younger less than fourteen. Both were almost out of their wits with fear.

Their captors dragged them to where their leader was sitting and cast them onto the ground to cower before him, weeping and clinging desperately to each other. The Black Wolf scratched his beard while he looked them over. Slowly, he rose to his feet.

With surprising alacrity, the big man reached down and ripped the shift from the eldest girl, provoking a cheer of delight from his men. The girl screamed and desperately tried to shield her breasts from the guffawing raiders who'd started to gather around, eyeing her with undisguised hunger.

From the corner of her eye, Liath Luachra noticed Murchú turn his head to look at her but she ignored him. Further along to her right, she heard an evil chuckle and a whisper from one of the *féinnid*. 'There's a pair of beauties worth waiting for.'

*Conall Cacach*. *No surprises there.*

Her lips compressed as a snicker of laughter repeated down the line. She made a sharp hissing noise and they settled down.

'Where is it?'

The Black Wolf's voice carried surprisingly well in the stillness of the clearing, his deep, bass tones reverberating loudly in the windless morning air. Petrified, the girl turned her head away and wailed and he had to slap her across the face to get her to stop.

'Where is the treasure?'

Given the absence of any treasure, the girl's stricken confusion was understandable, from Liath Luachra's informed perspective at least. The raiders, lacking her insight into the matter, were less generous in their interpretation.

The Black Wolf sighed. With menacing deliberation, he lifted a heavy wooden club, hauling the head up from where it rested on the earth beside him. A brutal but effective weapon, it looked to be about the same length as his arm and terminated with a large knob carved into the shape of a mallet with a short metal spike indented at its centre. He hefted it threateningly in his right hand then poking it under the girl's jaw, he forced her head up so that her eyes met his. He bent down slightly. 'Where is it?'

'Grey One!' Murchú whispered urgently. She flashed him a furious glare and he flinched, hurriedly lapsing into silence. Turning her gaze back to the settlement, she refocused her attention on the position of the raiders, counting them out in a silent whisper.

'Your final chance. Where is the treasure?'

The panic-stricken girl released a terrified wail, provoking a flash of anger in the big man's eyes. Swinging back the club, he brought it crashing down.

The sound of the smashing skull carried clearly across to the trees and caused even the battle-hardened members of the *fian* to flinch. The warriors watched wordlessly as the girl toppled to one side, hitting the ground with a heavy slap, the left side of her head a broken, bloody mess.

'Well, that's a waste!' A bitterly disgusted whisper from Conall Cacach.

Liath Luachra would have turned on him but she was too preoccupied with her count of the raiders. The black-haired leader, meanwhile, had turned his attention to the second terrified girl who, traumatised by the sight of her murdered sister, sat soundlessly clutching herself, staring at the body with a blank expression. The raiders closed in, curious to see what happened next.

'Javelins', whispered Liath Luachra. Taking a fresh grip on her weapon, she stood up and raised it, drawing the haft back until her right hand was well behind her ear. She held it there, noting the action reproduced down the line of waiting men. '*Scaoiligi!*' she hissed.

And cast.

The whistle of the incoming hail must have alerted the raider standing closest to them for he turned around and looked towards the treeline. A puzzled expression had barely formed on his face when the first missile stuck him in the chest, the downward momentum of the metal head punching it through his sternum to emerge two hand-widths from the base of his spine. The other raiders had no time to register what had happened for the other javelins were already falling in amongst them.

The second volley hit them before they had time to react to the first. Six raiders were down, three unmoving, three screaming in agony as though in counterpoint to the screams of challenge from *Na Cinéaltaí* charging out of the trees towards them.

Surrendering completely to the battle frenzy, Liath Luachra led the charge, literally frothing at the mouth as she stormed across the open space to where the shocked survivors were gathered. Her throat was already raw from roaring, her vision reduced to a blinkered red haze. Consumed by her desire to reach the raiders, she was barely conscious that she was running.

By the time she bowled into the remnants of *Na Madraí Allta*, they were over their initial shock but she could almost taste the despair that filled their eyes. They knew they had no hope of survival, that no quarter would be given, no mercy spared. In a retaliatory surge of desperation and fury at the unfairness of it all, they brought their weapons up to bear, intent on going down fighting.

A skinny man with a face coated in black tattoos lunged at Liath Luachra with a metal-tipped spear but consumed in the throes of her battle frenzy, to her he seemed to be moving ponderously slow. Even as the wicked looking metal point came up to take her in the gut, she'd dropped to the ground, hitting the earth with her haunches and sliding forwards on the dewy grass. The warrior attempted to change his grip and jab downwards but she'd already slid past his left leg, gouging a vicious gash along the rear of his knee. Even as the hamstring warrior toppled, the rest of the *fian* broke over him and his comrades in a violent wave of screaming violence and sharp-edged metal.

The Grey One used her remaining momentum to regain her feet, her eyes flickering around to locate the Black Wolf. Unlike his comrades, the bandit leader had not frozen in shock at the first volley of the javelins but responded with impressive instincts of self-preservation. Recognising their predicament, he'd bolted, ducking behind one of the buildings so that he was not only hidden from sight but sheltered from any further javelin cast. By the time Liath Luachra caught sight of him, he'd already cut around the corner of the longhouse and was galloping at full speed for the gap leading out of the clearing.

*Good plan, Bressal!*

She took off after him, leaping over the body of a raider with a javelin through his skull, careering past a protruding lean-to. Finally on open ground, she yelled and waved to scatter the startled cattle who once again had gathered to obstruct her path.

Because of his size, the Black Wolf would most likely have outrun her if he hadn't been hampered by the wicked gash in his arm, the result of her first javelin. She had hoped to hit him in the chest but because he'd turned at the last moment, the missile had streaked past, ripping a deep streak of skin from his arm. The resulting wound wasn't lethal by any means but it was enough to upset his usual running gait, slowing him down.

She pursued him through the gap, in her excitement releasing a bloodthirsty ululation.

Glancing back over his shoulder, the Black Wolf now realised his sole pursuer was a single female. This seemed to provoke some misplaced sense of outrage for he suddenly slid to a halt and twisted about to confront her.

'You threaten *me*?' He roared as she drew towards him. 'You threaten *me*, little girl!'

With this, he lunged for her, swinging the wooden club with wild force. Once again, her swift reactions vastly exceeded those of her opponent and she slid into a crouch, driving forwards with *Gléas Gan Ainn* as the club whistled overhead in a poorly calculated overextension. Realising the danger he was in, the big man belatedly attempted to pull himself back from the swing but he was too slow. The sword plunged a full finger length into his gut and the twisting movement he made as he attempted to pull back caused the blade to slice along the skin, opening his belly even further.

He pulled back with shock even as the Grey One was reversing her hold on the sword. She smashed the hilt into his face, so savagely that he tottered backwards and tripped over a fallen branch. And then she was on him, stabbing and stabbing, repeatedly, sinking the metal blade deep into his chest.

She was still stabbing when the blood haze finally cleared and she became conscious of Murchú and Bressal standing nearby, observing her with shocked expressions. Straddling the corpse, her hands were coated in a thick sheen of blood and entrails, her clothing and face drenched with blood. Pushing herself off the body, she rose on trembling legs, her chest heaving.

'She's cut him to pieces,' Murchú looked up from the shredded carcass to her blood-stained face but, cowed by the insane venom of her glare, dropped his eyes again almost immediately.

Bressal shrugged. 'She's left the head. That's all we need.' He turned a glance towards the panting, heaving woman warrior. 'Good work, Grey One. You've saved the day.'

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After the earlier shrieks and brutality, the settlement seemed relatively calm when she returned although it was hard to ignore the iron stink of blood, the smell of gore and shit and the corpses strewn about in contorted poses. *Na Cinéaltaí* had come out of the battle exceptionally well, the single casualty a simple gash on Senach's arm. Their victory was substantial.

Unhampered by the wound, Senach – a lean, dark-haired *Uí Loinge* man with more than thirty years on him – was down on his knees, working with Biotóg to rifle the corpses, looting both raider and settler alike. Sitting off to the left on a pile of firewood, Sean Fergus – Old Fergus – watched them with an exhausted, worldweary expression. The eldest member of the *fian*, his grey hair was tied up in braids and he sported a heavy moustache – also grey – drenched and dripping from the bucket of water he'd just immersed his head in.

Connall Cacach and Canann were standing by one of the longhouses with the troubled young girl. They had her up against the wall and Conall, a big muscular streak of malice with rotting teeth and greasy black hair, was groping her small breasts through the shift as she stared blankly into open space. With a brutal twist, Conall ripped the hindering garment to shreds. The girl displayed no reaction.

'Uncle!' Murchú nudged his uncle and gestured angrily towards the scene. Bressal slowly shook his head. 'No survivors,' he said quietly.

'But, Uncle! You can't let Conall Cacach have –'

'No survivors,' Bressal insisted. 'Such was my agreement with Mical Strong Arm. If Conall wants to yield a share of the booty for the girl then that's his decision. I'm not going to -'

He broke off suddenly for Liath Luachra had brushed past, striding purposefully towards the warrior and his prize. The two *Uí Loinge* men stared in shock as she pulled a razor-sharp knife from her belt but before they could even call out a warning, she'd barged in between the two *féinnid* and slashed the mute girl's throat. A great spurt of blood gushed out over Conall and Cannan, causing both men to jump back in alarm. The girl collapsed without a sound, folding over onto the ground with a gentle thump. Conall Cacach stared down at the shuddering corpse in disbelief, breathing in heavily before raising his eyes to the woman warrior.

'You can't have her,' said Liath Luachra.

Conall Cacach's jaw almost dropped to his chest. 'What?' he bellowed. Furious beyond belief, he lunged forward, swiping at her face with one meaty fist. Anticipating this reaction however, the Grey One had already stepped lithely to one side. As the fist swept past her head, she jabbed the haft of her javelin up into his guts.

With a whoosh of expelled air, the warrior dropped to his ground, crouched on all fours as he whooped and gasped desperately for breath. Liath Luachra stepped forward again, gripped a handful of greasy hair and held her knife up to his throat. 'Do you want to challenge me?'

Wheezing, Conall quickly shook his head.

Releasing him, she stood up straight and turned her eyes to Bressal. The *rígfénnid* was watching her intently, all emotion concealed behind a mask of complete impassivity. She was suddenly aware that the other *féinnid* were also watching her, gaping in fascinated silence. 'I claim this girl as my share of booty,' she said.

The *rígfénnid* stared at her then down to the corpse by her feet which had finally gone still. Shaking his head in bafflement, he gave a noncommittal shrug. 'Very well. Conall gets your share of the remaining booty. As for the rest of you, get your equipment together. Our work here is done but we have a great distance to travel.'

## Chapter Two:

On the morning of the *fian's* triumphal return to the *Uí Bairrche* stronghold, Mical Strong Arm gave them a warm reception, praising them lavishly in front of his people at the news of the Wild Dogs' destruction. The *rí* of *Uí Bairrche's* personal satisfaction at the Black Wolf's demise was not only evident in his welcome but from the obvious pleasure he obtained impaling his enemy's head on a stake outside the stronghold entrance. Roaring triumphantly as the crowd cheered him on, Mical's subsequent victory speech was short but effective, the single low point his half-hearted attempt at regret for the annihilation of the *Uí Bairrche* sub-branch. Even to Liath Luachra's ears, those particular sentiments rang hollow.

In contrast to his actions in terms of family competitors, Mical Strong Arm proved honourable in his dealings with *Na Cinéaltaí*. Over the course of the morning, the reward for the *fian's* services - twenty deer skins, five goats, ten swords, five iron daggers and numerous other products - was handed over without dispute. Organised as ever, Bressal had an *Uí Loinge* vassal, three horses and three strong slaves awaiting them at the *Uí Bairrche* stronghold to help transport the booty. Mical had insisted on retaining the cattle and other possessions from the destroyed settlement but, all in all, it wasn't a bad haul combined with the bounty of arms, clothing and other belongings already retrieved from the bandit group.

Following the transfer of the booty however, the warmth of the relationship began to wane as Mical quietly urged Bressal to take his men as far from the stronghold as possible before nightfall. Envisaging a night of festivity at *Uí Bairrche* expense, the *féinnid* weren't pleased when they learned of this development although the Grey One understood the *rí's* motivation well enough. It was common knowledge that *fian* tended to celebrate their victories in an excessive manner and that such celebrations had a tendency to spiral out of control and end in violence. Mical wasn't such a fool that he didn't apprehend the potential threat to his people of having a dangerous group like *Na Cinéaltaí* within his walls at such a time.

Shortly after noon therefore, the *fian* departed for the journey back to Briga, an easy march of about four days. The stronghold of Bressal's *Uí Loinge* clan, Briga was the unofficial staging point for the initial raising of the *fian* and its subsequent place of disassembly. Setting these rituals at the *Uí Loinge* stronghold served not only a symbolic tradition but also a practical one as it allowed the *Uí Loinge* leaders to oversee their share of any booty obtained from the *fian* raised under its name.

Given the well-established relations between the *Uí Loinge* and the *Uí Bairrche*, the trade route between both strongholds was a well-worn and frequently travelled trail that allowed the *fian* to cover a respectable distance over a short time. That first evening, they halted by the bank of a slow-flowing river that carved a serene path through the forest. A clearing of trees provided an excellent site to camp with ample supplies of fresh water and firewood. The open view to the west allowed them to catch the last rays of sunshine before Father Sun slid behind the distant hills.

Although it was relatively early when they stopped and plenty daylight remained, Liath Luachra knew that Bressal was keen to set up camp as quickly as possible. The *fian* were angry at their expulsion from the *Uí Loinge* stronghold and needed to vent some of that resentment before it manifested in bloodshed.

The *Uí Loinge* vassal and slaves set up the camp with the ease of practiced repetition, unloading the horses, setting up the campfire and preparing the basis of a large meal. When they were done, they established a second fire for themselves upriver from the *fian*. While they worked, the *féinnid* lounged by the river bank or bathed in the shallows.

Rearranging the contents of her pack, Liath Luachra noticed Bressal standing by a cluster of grey boulders just ten paces downriver from the fire. The *Uí Loinge* man made a subtle gesture for her to join him, grinning broadly with a full set of white teeth as she approached and settled on one of the rocks alongside. The *ríféinnid* was quite a handsome man and generally made the effort to keep a clean-shaven jaw, although the previous days of travelling meant his features were now shadowed

with stubble. In the gleam of the late evening sunshine, she noted that his hair was thinning above his forehead and realised he'd be bald in his later years. If he managed to live that long.

Bressal, unaware of such matters, appeared in exceptional good humour, chuckling happily to himself as she made herself comfortable.

*And well he should. It has been a good fighting season.*

Like Bressal, she knew *Na Cinéaltaí's* reputation would spread as a result of their recent accomplishments. If a fresh *fian* was raised after the winter season, there was a high likelihood of numerous *óglachs* [young, unblooded warriors] and other individuals lining up to join *Na Cinéaltaí*. The *rígféinnid*, consequently, was becoming a person of influence both within and beyond his own tribe.

'Come closer, Grey One. I would have quiet words with you.'

With some misgivings, Liath Luachra shifted a little closer. Bressal reached into his pack, pulled out a tanned waterskin and tossed it to her.

Grasping it with one hand, she pulled the stopper loose with her teeth. Raising it to her lips, she paused, wincing at the unusually strong smell of alcohol that assailed her nostrils. One deep swig sent a mouthful of the acrid liquid to the back of her throat, burning a trail down her gullet. She wiped her lips and regarded the *rígféinnid* with suspicion. Whatever Bressal had in mind, if he was offering her this taste from his own personal stash, he was clearly hoping to soften her up beforehand.

Or rut her.

'The season has been a great success, Grey One. A great success.'

An image of the young girl from the *Uí Bairrche* settlement popped unbidden into her head. For one brief, grisly moment, she recalled the sensation of her blade cutting through skin and gristle. She hurriedly took a second swig from the skin.

'But it is also a time of opportunity,' the slender man continued. 'Future opportunity for a group such as *Na Cinéaltaí*.'

Knowing what was expected of her, Liath Luachra took a deep breath and dutifully asked the question. 'Is it?'

'Yes, *mo láireog liath* [my grey, young mare]. With our achievements this season, tales of *Na Cinéaltaí* will spread through the country like fire in dry brush.' He looked at her with an intensity that unsettled her. 'It is my intention to help spread those flames.'

Liath Luachra shrugged, unclear what point he was trying to make.

Bressal absently tapped his hand against his thigh. 'I have been pondering the future of *Na Cinéaltaí*. I believe it has potential to become the most famous *fian* of all time.'

'Uh-huh.'

Liath Luachra took another swig. Bressal's ambition came as no real surprise. The man was always scheming, planning his machinations for power play and leverage. What she didn't understand was why he was bothering to share such thoughts with her. She was his creature and obeyed his orders without question. That was how it'd worked for the previous two years and that was how she'd imagined it working for the foreseeable future – although she still struggled to imagine a future beyond the immediate day or two.

She looked down at her feet and dug her bare toes into the soft, sandy soil.

Bressal seemed put out by her visible lack of enthusiasm. 'Don't you see?' he demanded. 'With this most recent *fian* we fulfilled a task for a *rí* that his clan could not have achieved, even if they'd raised a *fian* of their own.'

*They were fast enough to get rid of us once the deed was done.*

The *rígféinnid* suddenly reached forward and grasped the skin from her hand. 'Stop slugging that down, Grey One. I need you coherent, for a little while at least.' He raised the skin and swallowed a mouthful of the caustic liquid himself, grunting and shaking his head at the sting of it. 'Where was I. Ah, yes! It is my belief that there are other *rí* who will reward us well for similar services. Think about it! *Na Cinéaltaí* can offer a band of seasoned warriors to protect tribal lands from raiding parties and

other threats. And then of course ...' He paused. 'There are those tasks we could fulfil for a *rí* that a tribal *fian* could not.'

Liath Luachra continued to look at the ground for she didn't know what to say. She'd noticed a slight trembling in her hands and fingers as her body reacted to the alcohol, already pre-empting the heady disassociation that lay so tantalisingly within its grasp. She ached for the oblivion the drink offered but she also knew she had little chance of getting it until Bressal was satisfied with her response.

Pushing the craving aside, she forced herself to focus on the *rígfénnid's* argument although much of what he was saying made little sense. A *fian*, generally, tended to be clan-based or, on occasion, multi-clan based. Raised primarily in response to an identified threat such as bandit groups like *Na Madraí Allta*, a perceived grievance or an injustice, a *fian* was also – on occasion – raised simply to raid a competing clan for cattle and goods. In a general sense however, a *fian* lasted only as long as the threat existed or until the grievance was settled and was disbanded almost immediately afterwards.

In that respect, *Na Cinéaltaí* was – admittedly – something of an oddity. Originally raised by *Uí Loinge* in response to attacks from an unusually savage wolf pack, it hadn't disbanded immediately after destroying the animals but, on Bressal's suggestion, offered assistance to a neighbouring sub-tribe suffering from a similar predicament. By the time Liath Luachra had joined them, the *fian* had already been raised on three subsequent occasions and although it had consisted predominantly of *Uí Loinge fénnid*, the proportion of *éclann* had also grown substantially. With the *Uí Bairrche* action, Bressal had also taken the unprecedented step of offering *Na Cinéaltaí* services to clans outside of the *Uí Loinge*.

'What sort of tasks?' the Grey One asked carefully.

Bressal glanced towards the campfire. The flames were still building but the other *fénnid* had gathered close around it, shouting at each other and roaring with laughter. It wasn't possible that they could overhear the conversation but he lowered his voice nevertheless. 'We could fulfil tasks for a *rí* which would not generally be spoken of in the light of day. Secret tasks, acts of depredation that would permit his personal goals to be achieved while at the same time protecting his honour. Enforcers, persuaders. That would be our role.'

'So you would transform *Na Cinéaltaí* from *fian* to *díberg*?'

Bressal's expression darkened. Unlike '*fian*' – a term generally referring to a clan-sanctioned war-party, *díberg* was a term used to describe a band of simple marauders such as *Na Madraí Allta* or those men who'd laid waste to everything in the valley of Luachair. 'Of course not! No. Well ... not exactly.' He paused. 'Something in between. We would provide service directly to the *rí*, not to the clan. Just as we did with Mical Strong Arm.'

Liath Luachra shuffled uncomfortably. Bressal knew of her strong hatred for marauders. 'Why do you tell me this? I am a simple sword wielder. As *rígfénnid* that is your decision.'

'Because I want you to take the role of *rígfénnid*, battle leader for *Na Cinéaltaí*.'

She stared at him, genuinely shocked. 'But it is an *Uí Loinge fian*.'

Bressal returned her stare with a somewhat affronted expression. '*Na Cinéaltaí* is my *fian*. It's been my *fian* far longer than it's been an *Uí Loinge fian*.' He hesitated, looked at her guiltily as though he'd given something away. 'But that hardly matters.' His right hand made an expansive gesture. 'What's important is that I wish to take ... a less visible role. I'll continue to raise the *fian* of course but otherwise I'll remain hidden in the background, a shadow whispering instructions. You however...' His eyes drilled into hers. 'You will act as battle leader, the person people will see as leading *Na Cinéaltaí*.' His eyes continued to pierce her, as though seeking to compel her agreement on the strength of conviction alone. Unable to bear that scrutiny, Liath Luachra nervously averted her gaze, grunted and nodded vaguely in an effort to buy herself some time to think.

'You have nothing to say?'

'The ... the other *fénnid* will not follow a woman.'

He laughed at that. ‘Yes, they will. They followed you during the attack on *Na Madraí Allta*. They’re scared of you but more importantly, they respect your fighting ability.’

Uncharacteristically flustered, the woman warrior gazed longingly towards the forest and shook her head in confusion. Bressal misinterpreted the gesture. ‘You do not care for my proposal?’ His voice had grown cold.

When she didn’t answer, Bressal tugged his chin and mused aloud. ‘Let me see. You’ve been a *fénnid* for ... How long has it been? Eight seasons?’

She shivered, kept her head down and made no response. Bressal knew very well how long she’d been with him. He was simply playing his games.

‘You are in my debt, *mo láireog léith*’ [my grey, young mare]. He gave a sour smile. ‘You were nothing when I found you. A ragged savage. Now, I offer you a rare opportunity, the chance to carve a name, to lead a *fian* of reputation.’

Liath Luachra said nothing, recognising the truth in what he was saying but liking none of it. She had no desire to lead the *fian* but it was true that Bressal had probably saved her life. For his own ends, admittedly, but still, she was in his debt for that.

She chewed on the inside of her cheek, recalling how the *Uí Loinge* man had discovered her at *An Áenach Tailteann* – The Tailteann Fair –, a three-yearly festival where inter-tribal bickering was temporarily put aside to trade, socialise and engage in competitive bouts. Liath Luachra had washed up there more than a year after the raid on Luachair. A solitary, damaged refugee, she’d been in a bad way, so desperate for supplies that she’d entered a competition of hand-to-hand combat with another woman far bigger than her. The prospect of a vicious fight between two women had been a big draw, hence Bressal’s presence in the excited crowd, cheering on the brutal competition that followed.

Through sheer desperation, Liath Luachra had somehow succeeded in winning that vicious bout. Spurred by her feline looks and fighting ability (and no little amount by the flask of *uisce beatha* he’d consumed) Bressal had stood on a high mound and publicly pledged his intention to offer her a place in *Na Cinéaltaí*.

The following morning, although the sincerity of his offer had dwindled with a correspondingly escalation of sobriety, Bressal had no choice but to hold to that pledge. Grumbling and resentful, he’d engaged her with few expectations, equipping her with little more than a rusted sword. Over the course of the remaining season however, instead of getting herself killed she’d proven a surprisingly effective fighter. Taller and stronger than most others of her gender, her natural physicality gave her a distinct advantage in combat, as did her capacity for, and her ease with, violence. When Liath Luachra fought, she fought to maim and destroy. She gave no quarter and displayed a total absence of mercy.

Sensing greater potential within the silent girl, Bressal had organised additional lessons in combat with an old *Uí Loinge* veteran in debt to him from a previous service. Once again, Liath Luachra’s natural martial ability took everyone by surprise when a mere two seasons later she succeeded in defeating her instructor.

Although Bressal had tried to hide it, Liath Luachra sensed the *rígfénnid*’s satisfaction with his investment for, within half a year of her joining the *fian*, he’d gained not only a competent fighter with a natural aptitude for warfare but one with an innate strategic ‘knowing’ of where to be and when to be there. More importantly, from Bressal’s perspective, he also had someone who obeyed his every instruction without question and who, because of her gender and prowess, added an appealing mystique to the reputation of his *fian*.

From her perspective, Liath Luachra too benefited from the outcome. Unaccustomed to success in any form, the fact that she had a skill which others appeared to appreciate – albeit a brutal and potentially short-lived one – was a tremendous comfort. More importantly however, she now had a purpose of sorts. True, it was a twisted and poorly formed one but it was more than anything else she’d had for a very long time before that.

Desperate to remain in Bressal's favour, she'd refused no task, no matter how demeaning and trained with relentless fervour. Naturally, being the person he was, Bressal had also attempted to ease that fervour into other areas, more specifically his bedroll. It was here however that he'd finally encountered the limitations to her acquiescence. Unaccustomed to refusal, he'd not taken it well and, a short time later, deep in his cups, he'd attempted to force the issue only to end up with a split lip and a black eye for his efforts.

That incident had marked a particularly low point in their relationship and although she'd disguised it well, Liath Luachra had been terrified at the prospect of expulsion. Bereft of hope or goals and barely capable of interaction with people who weren't as broken as herself, the *fian* was her sole connection to other human beings, her sole connection to life itself in fact. This was a situation she'd always instinctively known to conceal from the *Uí Loinge* man. If Bressal had any inkling of her true dependency on him and the power he potentially wielded over her, he wouldn't hesitate to call her bluff. If he did, she knew she'd have no choice but to submit to his desires or leave.

In the end, to her immense relief, Bressal had refrained from any further untoward action. Although infuriated by the Grey One's rejection, he'd had the wit to reflect both on the value of his investment and the little matter of his wife. Daughter to a senior member of the *Uí Loinge* tribal Council, it was a strategic relationship he'd nurtured for a considerable time and one which he'd have jeopardised if he'd involved himself in an open dalliance with another woman, even a broken *éclann* [clanless one] like Liath Luachra.

Subsequent to their unfortunate fracas, Bressal had maintained a more correct interaction with the warrior woman, restricting himself to the odd leer and occasionally referring to her as *mo láireog léith* or, more disparagingly, *mo láireog deas gleoite* – my pretty young mare. Every now and again however, she'd catch him studying her with hungry eyes and on one occasion, she'd overheard him bragging to some *Uí Loinge* comrades, referring to her as his *lián ghraí* – his stud mare. At that point, she realised that the matter had never truly been resolved.

'I... I'm aware of the debt I owe you,' she answered the *Uí Loinge* man at last. 'But I don't understand. Why you want me to lead your *fian*.'

Bressal shrugged, 'It's very simple. First, if the *rígfénnid* is *éclann*, other clan leaders will see the *fian* as less influenced by *Uí Loinge* goals and will be more open to seeking our service. Secondly, I know I can count on you to obey me - it's in your own best interests to do so. Thirdly, having a female *rígfénnid* of proven prowess distinguishes *Na Cinéaltaí* from other *fian*. Potential *fénnid* will be intrigued and will travel far to join us. That can increase our numbers and our influence.'

Noting the silent disbelief in her eyes, he added, 'I've already overheard people speak in hushed tones of the Grey One and her battle prowess. They say you are a giant woman with great breasts and flaming red hair. They don't know you're a flat-chested whelp with a boy's arse.'

*An arse that you want.*

She said nothing. She knew from experience that there was no stopping Bressal when he had the flow of words on him.

'So,' he continued, playing his strongest card. 'The choice is simple. Should you wish to lead *Na Cinéaltaí* you will do as I command and take on the role of *rígfénnid*. If you do not, you will no longer be a *fénnid* of this *fian*.' He raised his eyebrows and gave her his gravest consideration. 'What is your answer?'

For a long time she did nothing but stare at the ground. Finally, with evident reluctance, she dipped her head a single time.

'Excellent!' Satisfied with her capitulation, Bressal was all smiles again. 'Believe me, Grey One, you will not regret this decision.'

Liath Luachra continued to stare bleakly at her feet.

'There is one more thing, however. A minor issue that barely merits mention. To lead *Na Cinéaltaí*, you will need to let your hair grow out.'

Liath Luachra raised her eyes to stare at him blankly.

‘To look like a true member of your sex, Grey One. I need a *rígfénnid* who will inspire men, who will stir them to surpass their abilities. Do as I ask and warriors will be fighting each other for a place amongst us.’

Liath Luachra shuffled awkwardly, increasingly disturbed by the direction the conversation had taken and resenting Bressal’s evident enjoyment of that discomfort. ‘Long hair catches,’ she protested.

‘Then tie it up in braids. It’s hardly an onerous task.’ The *Uí Loinge* man rose to his feet and took a step backwards as though to better examine her. His gaze transferred from her face to her chest and then down to the sword strapped to her side. ‘And you must have a sword, a decent sword. You’ll use a weapon with a hero warrior’s name. *Gléas Gan Ainm* is a foolish name.’

Liath Luachra felt a stir of irritation at that. *Gléas Gan Ainm* [Tool Without A Name] had been the first sword, the first object of any value she’d ever owned. The prospect of losing it was repugnant to her. ‘A name like *Slisneoir na Mhagairlí*,’ she suggested in a rare expression of recalcitrance.

‘Testicle Slicer? Yes,’ the *rígfénnid* agreed with enthusiasm, oblivious to the sarcasm of her response. ‘That would be an excellent name.’ He raised his hand as though about to slap her heartily on the shoulder. Thinking better of it, he dropped it again.

She glanced glumly towards the fire where the other *fénnid* were chatting and laughing. ‘Is there something else you wish to ask of me?’

‘Yes. There’s a little matter of your reward.’ Reaching inside his leather tunic, Bressal pulled out a small leather pouch tied up with string. He laid it casually on the stone beside him. Despite herself, Liath Luachra couldn’t help staring hungrily at it and although she tried to pull her eyes away, found herself unable to do so. Her reaction, to her dismay, did not go unnoticed by the *Uí Loinge* man. Given the creaky smile spreading like a stain across his face, it had probably been anticipated. His lips curled. ‘You see your reward, Grey One? *Beacáin Scammalach*. Cloud Mushroom. I always keep a special reward for my favourites, don’t I?’

He seemed to mull on that for a moment. ‘Actually, I do, don’t I? I always provide you with your reward, I treat you well, I show you favour.’ He frowned and rubbed the stubble on his chin. ‘And yet I feel that, of late, you show less respect than I deserve. I mean, what was all that with depriving Conall Cacach of his prize back at the settlement? Honestly! It’s as though my efforts mean little. After all I have done for you.’

He sighed.

‘I have been considering this ... this lack of fealty. I have come to the conclusion that you should make some display of fidelity, some evidence to demonstrate your loyalty. I think it’s the least I deserve, don’t you?’ He gave a broad smile and reaching across, he cupped her chin in his hand, lifting her head so that she had to face him.

‘Now, as you know, I am a simple man. I do not demand great ceremonial rituals like the *rí* or the *draoi* – druid – brotherhood so let us keep it simple. Bend your head here and kiss me.’

Liath Luachra stiffened, her loose posture suddenly as tense and contorted as a twisted storm tree.

‘Just here,’ continued Bressal touching his lips with the tip of his forefinger. ‘Nothing more.’ He continued to watch her and she could feel her entire body start to tremble. She kept her eyes down to avoid looking at him. In her lap, she could see her hands were shaking, quivering uncontrollably like the rest of her body.

Bressal roared with laughter. ‘Gods, Grey One, you are an odd one. You are the most ferocious fighter I know, you throw yourself without thought into the thickest part of battle and yet the prospect of a simple peck on those lips is enough to send you into convulsions of fear. You comport yourself like a ten year old virgin.’

He picked up the pouch and tossed it into the ground before her. ‘Here. Take your reward, *mo láireog deas gleoite*. I know I have your fealty and never let it be said that Bressal denies those most loyal to him what they truly desire.’

Liath Luachra scrambled for the pouch, grasped it and took off at a run towards the trees. Heart pounding, eyesight blurring, she pushed deeper and deeper through the undergrowth, further into the forest, ignoring the thorns and branches that scratched her arms and face, desperate to get away from Bressal's laughter.

A natural parting through the trees led her further from the campsite and the sound of the guffawing *Uí Loinge* man.

*Pretty Young Mare!*

She shivered, made to spit and then changed her mind. Pretty, ugly – the terms were meaningless from a man's perspective once he had the blood horn on. At that point all most men really cared about was plunging their *slat* into some soft, moist orifice and, from her experience, neither the precise location nor the form of it had ever caused much grounds for consideration.

Such reflections stirred up a quiet pool of bitterness and she felt a cold sliding hatred. For a moment, she had to physically stop and lean against a tree trunk while she struggled to refocus her thoughts, pushing that dark combination of memory and reflection back into the slimy crevice from which it had emerged. She cursed bitterly, for such thoughts led to places of shadow, places from which it was not so easy to come back.

Eventually, she started walking again, following a vaguely natural trail through the trees, regularly looking up to study the forest canopy until she located what she'd been looking for. The oak tree she selected was ancient, its bark gnarled and twisted and so ideal for climbing. She clambered easily up to one of the higher boughs, a wide platform she could walk along for several paces before it narrowed to a point where it wouldn't support her weight.

Sitting on the mossy crotch at the intersection of the trunk and the bough, she opened her backpack and removed a coil of woven flax which she then knotted around the stubbed remnant of another long-broken branch. Tugging it to make sure it was firmly attached, she tossed the remainder of the coil over the side of the branch and used it to slide back down to the forest floor.

Hitting the ground, she immediately started back towards the campsite, mentally marking prominent natural features that would help her relocate the tree when she returned that way again.

She was almost back at the river when she heard the sound of voices and instinctively slithered into the shadow of one of the nearer oaks. Crouching low in the undergrowth, she scanned the surrounding forest until two figures emerged from the thick undergrowth off to her left: Sean Fergus and Biotóg both carrying armfuls of wood that were destined for the fire.

Rising to her feet, she stepped out into the open. Sean Fergus was the first to notice her. He raised his head and squinted. 'Grey One,' he said with a nod of greeting.

'Sean Fergus.' She returned his nod with one of her own. 'You're not celebrating?'

He shrugged. 'No-one has *uisce beatha*.'

'Bressal has a supply.' She transferred her gaze to Biotóg, a thin faced youth with large, protruding eyes and an unshaven chin that was liberally sprinkled with pimples. Originally from a sub branch of *Clann Morna*, he'd been fostered to *Uí Loinge* but by all accounts his family were in no particular hurry to take him back. The *Uí Loinge* leader responsible for his care had asked Bressal to instruct him in the warrior path by accompanying *Na Cinnéaltaí*. Pleased at the prospect of having a clan leader beholden to him, the *Uí Loinge* man had happily obliged.

Liath Luachra had no strong feelings, positive or negative, towards the youth. She didn't particularly trust him but then, she didn't trust any of her comrades-in-arms. He was, admittedly, something of an odd one. He listened carefully to everything but spoke very little himself. When the booty from the *Uí Bairrche* settlement was being distributed, he'd surprised everyone by requesting the clothing of the dead womenfolk be included in his share.

'Go ahead to the campfire,' Sean Fergus instructed the youth. 'I wish to have words with the Grey One but I'll catch you up.'

Although curious as to what the old warrior wanted of her, Liath Luachra remained silent, waiting patiently with him as Biotóg walked out of earshot. The pimply youth paused at the edge of the

camp and looked back over his shoulder. His eyes rested on the Grey One for several moments before he turned and entered the camp. Sean Fergus shook his head. 'Strange lad, that.'

When no response was forthcoming from the woman warrior, he turned his gaze to her.

'Can I ask you a question?'

'Yes.'

'Do you feel remorse?'

She regarded him in confusion. 'Remorse?'

The old warrior compressed his lips. 'The *Uí Bairrche* settlement. The girl.'

Her grey eyes considered him coldly, giving nothing away.

'I know why you killed the girl.'

'Then you know nothing.'

'Bressal made it clear there could be no survivors. You didn't want her to suffer and Conall would have made her suffer. I respect you for that.'

They continued to regard each other in silence, the older man curious, the woman warrior hostile, unwilling to concede anything. 'Go away,' she said at last. 'There's nothing to talk about. That girl is dead. As you will be if you don't stay out of my path.'

With that she spun around and stalked back into the forest.

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The men had slipped into a surly mood, bellyaching bitterly about their dismissal from the *Uí Bairrche* stronghold when Bressal approached the fire with a set of bags strewn over his shoulders. At that point, their blood was up, roused by Conall Cacach's suggestion of a retaliatory return later that night.

'Shut your ugly gob,' snapped Bressal contemptuously. Pulling two skins of *uisce beatha* from the bags, he tossed them in amongst the gathered *féinnid*. The complaints ceased instantly as the men pounced on them, fighting savagely in a free-for-all for the triumph of the first drink.

Chuckling at the consequence of his contribution, the *Uí Loinge* man quickly edged away from the spillover of violence, joining his vassal and the slaves at the safety of the second fire. There he sat on a long log and watched the scuffle ensue.

From the shadows of the treeline, Liath Luachra also watched the boisterous brawl, chewing nervously at the inside of her cheek. Following her brief discussion with Sean Fergus, she'd been unable to return to camp and lingered uneasily on the outskirts, salivating silently as her comrades filled their bellies on the roast pork and tubers prepared by the slaves. Ignoring her own hunger, she fought down the rising sense of anxiety that always accompanied the post-combat celebration. For Liath Luachra, this was the period in which she felt most exposed. After the savagery of a *fian* season, the *féinnid*'s blood was up and this event almost invariably involved a cathartic expulsion of the bloody residue of fear and the relief of survival through any means available.

On such nights, anything could – and did – happen. Over her two years with *Na Cinéaltaí* she'd seen one man who'd survived countless battles die from alcohol poisoning, another murdered by his best friend during a drunken argument. There'd also been less lethal injuries, the result of accidents from fire, falls and, occasionally, self-inflicted wounds.

Standing upright, she growled, unsheathed her sword then nervously replaced it almost immediately. Once more, she dropped to a crouch, almost pulled the sword free a second time but forced herself to leave it sheathed.

*Foolish. Foolish.*

Had she been a man, there wouldn't have been an issue. To vent the season's toxic residue, she could have simply strode into camp, sat with the others and let herself slide into the welcome stupor of drunken inebriation. As the single female in a company of violent men however, that course of action just wasn't an option. She had to manage the conditions of her own 'release' more carefully.

As a *féinnid*, she expected death, she expected violence. These were realities she dealt with on a daily basis but she was also realistic enough to know that she was just as likely to die at the hands of her own comrades as she was from the weapons of her enemies. Bressal had delusions of enticing

the sons of powerful families into *Na Cinéaltaí* but, in reality, most of the current *fénnid* were fugitives, murderers or thieves. They followed *Na Cinéaltaí* not out of loyalty but out of a love for bloodshed or simply because, like her, they had nowhere else to go.

For herself, she had no illusions. She knew that, despite their shared camaraderie, at the slightest sign of weakness her companions would be all over her like the rabid wolves they were. The only sure way to prevent that from happening was to make them more terrified of the consequences than the action, to intimidate them, to swagger and display a set of balls so much bigger and tougher than theirs they'd think twice before attempting to challenge her.

With a quick curse, she swallowed her fear and lunged forward into the circle before she could change her mind. Having committed herself fully, her body took on the brasher, more aggressive mannerisms she unconsciously adopted when she was with the others. Stepping into the illuminated circle around the fire, she slid confidently onto a fallen log alongside Senach. As the others were watching Conall Cacach smash Canann in the face, no-one but the po-faced shepherd with the missing ear even noticed her sudden reappearance and he didn't say anything. Looking around the little company, she realised that most of them were already half-cut. Even Bressal, returned to the fire to join them, was red-faced from drink and tears of laughter streamed from his eyes. The only one who didn't look completely sozzled was Sean Fergus and he simply looked sad. Sitting off to one side, he drank with silent determination, as though complete inebriation was a goal that could only be achieved through sustained effort.

Liath Luachra settled in straight for the *uisce beatha*. It was rare enough to get a fresh supply although Bressal, through his contacts, always seemed to manage. She shared the skin with Senach, Sean Fergus and the young *fénnid*, Murchú. With all four passing it around and taking it in turns to drink, none of them noticed the fact that she was swallowing far less than they were, taking one draught for every two of their great sucking swallows and merely moistening her lips and pretending to swallow the rest of the time. It was some indication of the strength of the alcohol that, even with this restraint, she soon felt its heightening wash in her blood, the warm flush in her cheeks and the tightening of the skin between her lips and her nose. Fortunately, for her, this minor intoxication was a soothing balm, dampening down the fury in her head and allowing her to think, if not lucidly, at least less feverishly.

The night was dark and the blazing red of the fire looked blurred, yet oddly intensified, through the sheen of the alcohol. Her stomach felt hot when she rose to her feet and pulled the sword from its scabbard, dragging its blade along the base of a nearby boulder to create a scraping metallic sound that drew the others' attention. Most of the men, seeing her stand, started to leer and catcall. Swaying and grinning, she commenced a wide circle of the fire and the men gathered about it.

Bressal and one or two of older *fénnid*, having seen all this before, sat back to watch the spectacle.

The Grey One stopped and felt the heat of the fire burn against the skin of her knees and the inside of her thighs. She stared about at the surrounding circle of hideous faces, features looking deformed and even more hellish in the flickering red light of the fire. 'I seek blood!' she bellowed 'What scumfucker takes my challenge?'

Someone groaned. 'The Grey One's completely addled.'

'Who said that?' she snarled, swinging around to where the voice had seemed to come from. 'Was that you, Canann? You wanting to challenge?'

The burly simpleton held up two placating palms. 'Not me,' he protested. She sneered at him, noting the silence of the surrounding men grow increasingly turgid. 'Not me,' he repeated but she continued to glare at him until he dropped his eyes to the ground.

Scowling belligerently, she started a fresh circuit of the fire, her habitual reserve overridden by the *uisce beatha*.

She circled the fire twice in total, strutting with an exaggerated swagger, brandishing the sword in her right hand, swinging the blade carelessly but with a control that only the most drink-muddled could miss. Each man she passed looked down or pretended to be otherwise preoccupied. In some

cases they actually were. Biotóg was stretched out cold at the edge of the ring of light thrown out by the fire. As to whether this was from the drink or an earlier disagreement with his brothers-in-arms, she couldn't tell.

The single exception to them all was Conall Cacach who stared brazenly back at her when she stood in front of him. Cruel mouth twisted, he regarded her through narrowed eyes and a surliness fuelled by a full day of fermenting resentment fortified by *uisce beatha*. Liath Luachra realised she must be drunker than she'd thought for she experienced a sudden, irrational hatred for that pig-ugly, sneering face. Her nostrils flared and her eyes took on a dangerous, unhinged gleam but when she saw a bead of sweat break out on his forehead, somewhere behind the fog of alcohol a sudden realisation struck her.

*He's scared. He's scared of me but even more scared of backing down before the others.*

'Try your luck, Conall?' She poked his knee with the tip of the sword but he made no response to the provocation. Possibly the sharp prick had hurt him and he'd simply hidden it, possibly the *uisce beatha* had dulled his senses to the point that he couldn't feel anything anyway. Either way, he continued to glower at her, eyes full of hatred.

With a sneer, she spat on the ground in front of him, waited, and when he didn't make his move, continued her circuit.

By the time she'd completed her third round of the fire, she hadn't received a single challenge. She'd expected that but there was no harm in reminding them what they could expect. Two previous summers, at the start of her first season with the *fian*, an *éclann* by the name of Callach An Thóin Mhóir – Callach Fat Arse – had responded to similar provocation with a drunken hatchet swipe. Her own instinct-driven response to that clumsy assault had been sudden and to the point: a steel-tipped finger length of *Gléas Gan Ainm* straight through his throat.

That particular incident had shaken *Na Cinéaltaí* and even Bressal had paled at her viciousness. From her perspective however, the subsequent verbal abuse she received had been more than worth it. Earlier that evening, she'd overheard Callach An Thóin Mhóir boasting of his intention to take her by force when she was drunk, much to the delight of the other *féinnid*. Her action had forced them all to drastically reappraise her potential availability for cocksplay.

'Cowards!' She spat. 'Half-men!' She brandished her sword, swung it loosely as though she wasn't in complete control of the action but even that didn't incite anyone to challenge her. She spat again, unsure whether she was relieved or disappointed. Either way, she knew that for the moment at least, she was safe.

She retrieved her seat beside Senach. 'Move!' she snarled. The *Uí Loinge* man stared at her then hurriedly shoved up the log.

After that it was back into the alcohol and this time, like the men, she lapped it up. Within moments her challenge was forgotten, the raucous mood re-established and the boisterous laughter scaring the wildlife as though nothing had changed.

But she knew better.

As the alcohol flowed, the talk grew bawdier and a rowdy song was sung, followed by another and then another again. Soon everyone, including Bressal, was in a state of complete inebriation and even the surly Conall Cacach cracked a smile and laughed hoarsely. If any enemies had happened to pass, the Grey One realised during one brief moment of lucidity, they'd have been doomed, completely incapable of defending themselves.

But she didn't care. They didn't care. For the moment, they were alive and mindlessly carefree. And that was all that mattered.

Later, when she was barely able to distinguish physical darkness from the hazy fog behind her mind, she left the others, peeling herself out of the firelight to plunge into the shadows at the edge of the forest. She staggered forwards into the darkness until she managed to get her bearings then turned to peer blearily back at the camp site. Monitored by Bressal's *Uí Loinge* servant and the slaves, the fire was still blazing and the *fian*, an odd set of distorted black silhouettes, roaring with laughter around it.

Within the shadows of the trees, she felt her earlier anxiety subside, her sense of control slowly return. Many considered her strange for spending so much time within the Great Wild. Most, understandably, saw the wilderness as a dangerous and hostile place where death lurked for the unwary in every dappled shadow. Liath Luachra agreed with that interpretation but at the same time she knew that, for all its lethal nature, the Great Wild was not cruel. The true predators inhabited those spaces where people gathered. Out in the Great Wild there was no subterfuge. You always knew what dangers you faced and you fought, you ran, or you hid in order to survive them. She regretted the absence of such candidness in her other interactions.

With a grunt, the woman warrior finally managed to relocate the path she'd marked out earlier, tripping over a root and then crawling on her hands and knees until she found the oak tree. Somehow, she managed to clamber onto the bough, pull up the fibrous rope and attach herself to the makeshift platform. Lying back against its mossy bulk, she stared up at the heavens through a hole in the forest canopy. A distinct patch of sky was visible, the stars winking madly at her as though sharing some great joke she didn't quite understand. Fumbling about in her tunic, she located Bressal's pouch, poked her fingers inside and pulled out a morsel of fibrous organic material.

*Beacáin scammalach. Cloud mushroom.*

Breaking off a segment, she popped it into her mouth, chewing half-heartedly on the tasteless material before she swallowed it.

As always when she partook of cloud mushroom, she felt a certain forlorn regret. Back in Luachair, her father's use of the substance had intensified dramatically on her mother's passing. A harsh and brooding man at the best of times, the cloud mushroom had exacerbated those qualities and within a short period of time, she and her brothers had been obliged to tiptoe around him to avoid his increasingly erratic rages. At times, towards the end, he'd suffer from fits, falling and thrashing about on the ground, spitting and foaming at the mouth and catching the whiff of mushroom on his breath she had a fair idea what had been responsible. Other times, at night, he'd leave their hut, slip out into the forest and join the distant wolves up on the hills howling at the moon.

Such memories didn't prevent her own use of cloud mushroom, of course. Ironically, if anything, they seemed to provoke an even greater use of the substance. Such behaviour, she knew, could only be damaging and, yet, she remained powerless to change it. She was her father's daughter and she could feel that same self-destructive madness within herself at times. That was her destiny.

There was no impact at first but she knew this was just a normal part of the process. While she waited for its effect she remained lying on her back, staring up at the flickering stars that were faint and blurred from the *uisce beatha* she'd consumed. After a time, she realised the mushroom was starting to act, for the clarity and the detail of the stars had increased dramatically. A short time later, she heard the thunderous sound of crickets and the swish of owl wings as they spiralled through the trees around her. A little later again, she thought she heard voices, children's voices that called her name from some place very far away. The sound caused her heart to pound and she struggled to calm herself as the flush of her pulse pumped loudly in her ears.

*It's the beacáin scammalach, the beacáin scammalach.*

The voices persisted however, growing increasingly louder. Suddenly, she found that she'd slipped free of her constraints although she had no recollection of doing so. Sliding down the flax-fibre rope, she landed effortlessly on the forest floor and started walking in the direction from which the voices seemed to come. The voices were happy, carefree, punctuated by wicked giggles and the erratic, delighted whoops of children at play.

Soon, she came to a tall stretch of holly bushes and, dropping to a crouch, eased her way through the bulk of them. The leaves prickled and stung but she ignored them as she pushed deeper into the vegetation. Reaching the edge, she used her hands to part the branches before her and discovered a small clearing with a wide pond off to one side. For some reason, it was daytime within the clearing, sunshine pouring down on some children at play in the mud flat beside the pond.

There were three children in all: two fair-haired boys with about five and six years on them and a dark-haired girl about six or seven years older. The girl was instructing the two boys on the proper method of making mud cakes, rolling the mud out on a large flat stone that, judging from the tracks in the earth, had been dragged from the forest.

'It's like this,' she was saying, demonstrating with a large handful of mucky wetness. 'You roll them flat and then ... No, Feirgil. Like this. See?'

Liath Luachra trembled for she recognised this scene: the boys, the mud pool, the girl. The latter, in particular, she recognised for it was herself as a child, from what now seemed an impossibly long time ago. She continued to stare, her hands unconsciously moving to mimic the actions of her younger self, accurately recreating the movements from recollection alone.

'Num num,' one of the boys was burbling softly. He pointed at the mud cake his sister had just completed. 'Num num.'

The girl lifted the flattened circle of sludge and lifted it to her teeth. 'Should I eat it?' she asked her brothers. 'Should I eat this wonderful, tasty cake?' The two boys giggled and nodded enthusiastically. 'Num Num.'

'Num num,' she repeated, placing the mud into her mouth and biting down on it. The action provoked a marvellous response from the two boys who absolutely squealed with laughter. Spitting out the gritty sediment, the younger Liath Luachra began to laugh as well.

In the bushes, Liath Luachra turned and headed back towards the tree, the children's laughter haunting her like ghosts in the night.