

Chapter One

The first sight to greet Bodhmhall's eyes when she came to her senses was the muscular curve of Fiacail mac Codhna's buttocks. Consistent as ever, the big warrior stood naked outside the little cave, hands upraised in salutation to the mighty yellow orb of Father Sun.

Cossetted in the woolly remnants of sleep, Bodhmhall couldn't quite make out what her husband was saying, although that didn't particularly bother her. The murmured pattern of words from outside the cave would hardly be much different from those uttered when they'd lived together at Dún Baoiscne.

With that, her forehead creased into a series of deep furrows.

Husband?

Cave?

Stirred by a pressing sense of alarm she didn't quite understand, Bodhmhall sat up brusquely from her bed of crushed fern, exclaiming painfully at the sudden burning sensation in her lower left arm. Looking down, she hissed at the sight of the rough wooden splints and the crude strapping bandage that encased it.

The shock of the injured limb and the associated flare of pain seemed to dislodge her logjam of confusion. Suddenly unimpeded, a wave of muddled memories flooded her head, all competing furiously for her attention: her father's summons to Dún Baoiscne; the arduous traverse across the Great Wild with their *Lamraighe* allies; the ambush at An Bearná Garbh and the subsequent leap from the waterfall with her nephew to escape their pursuers.

She actually felt her breath catch as she recalled the latter, the choking sound in her throat loud in the tight confines of the cave. The leap from the high cliffs had been one of the hardest things she'd ever done and even now the memory of it caused her hands to shake. Striking the water at the foot of the falls, she'd broken a bone in her arm. Afterwards, in the watery maelstrom of the mountain river, she'd also come close to drowning. Ironically, having miraculously survived both experiences, she and her nephew had subsequently been seized by 'The Brotherhood', a group of Tainted Ones who'd been stalking her nephew over several years since his birth.

Eaters of the dead.

A surge of bile rose in the back of her throat and she had to close her eyes and focus to keep from throwing up. When the nausea finally cleared, she shook her head in an ineffectual attempt to clear it before looking out at the naked warrior with fresh appreciation. Had Fiacail mac Codhna not arrived to save them, Demne would have been taken by 'The Brotherhood'. She however, of no value to their malevolent endeavour, would have accompanied them only as an ingredient in their stew pot.

With a shudder, she pushed those gruesome images aside and set herself to inspecting the injured limb, delicately loosening the rough bandages so that she could examine it more closely. Her probing fingers produced another involuntary hiss of pain but she ignored it, pleased to find that the swelling had almost completely subsided. Several days of rest had allowed the bone to mend and it now appeared to be healing well. Tentatively testing the limits of the limb's extension, she found it sensitive but nowhere near as painful as it had been.

Clicking her tongue in satisfaction, she slowly rose to her feet.

'Ah! The *Cailleach Dubh* – the Black Hag – awakes!'

Bodhmhall blinked as the Seiscenn Uairbhaoil man moved into the opening of the cave, a wide space between the two pillar-like standing stones. In reality, the cave was little more than an old place of worship, a rocky recess at the base of a steep cliff where the long-departed Ancient Ones must once have gathered in homage to their own gods. Displaying no fear of Otherworld consequence, Fiacail leaned against one of the standing stones and grinned broadly. He made a lazy gesture towards a glorious shaft of sunlight that struck the floor of the canyon just beyond.

'See, Bodhmhall. It pleases Father Sun to see you stir.'

She gave a desultory wave at the golden benediction. Whatever Father Sun's feelings on the matter, his golden rays were now showering Fiacail's bronze skin with disconcerting intensity, highlighting the tightness of his torso and the muscular sinews of his arms and legs. Flustered, she

averted her eyes from the prominent *bod* that dangled between his legs, a shadowed sausage silhouetted against the brightness of the canyon behind him.

Fiacail, of course, exhibited no such self-consciousness. Oblivious to her discomfort, he advanced into the cave with his habitual aplomb, retrieving a pair of leather leggings and a short-sleeved, blood-spattered tunic that he lazily pulled on. ‘Do you have a hunger on you?’ he asked. ‘A portion of yesterday’s porridge remains.’

Bodhmhall felt her stomach clench at the prospect of food. Despite her hunger, her belly felt swollen and queasy. In addition to the intellectual cloudiness, this was another unpleasant side effect of the herbs she’d been using to alleviate the pain over the previous days.

‘Is it hot?’ she asked, biding for time as she struggled to pull her thoughts together.

‘Of course it’s not hot! We can’t risk the smoke from a fire.’

Bodhmhall bit her lip as she attempted to absorb this fresh nugget of information. Her head had quietened and although more manageable snippets of memory were now shooting through her mind they dispersed too rapidly for her to grasp effectively. With an effort, she managed to rein in some of those scattered impressions and coral them into a vague sense of coherence. ‘Gob An Teanga Gorm and his warriors. I thought ... I thought they had left.’

Although he made no immediate response, Fiacail regarded her with visible frustration. He tugged at the whiskers of an impressive moustache that protruded from either side on his upper lip, then scraped the thick stubble beneath his chin with his fingernails. The Seiscenn Uairbhaoil man had always had a preference for a clean jaw and invariably followed his ritual greeting to Father Sun with a shave but recent circumstances had curtailed that particular practice.

‘They have left,’ he confirmed. He picked up a nearby stick and rolled it absently between his palms. ‘But you may recall the abrupt nature of their departure. Something drew them away from this valley. They’re just as likely to reappear when they discover that whoever or whatever they’re chasing isn’t you or the boy.’

Ah!

She was starting to remember. While out hunting, two days earlier, Fiacail had had the good fortune to spot Gob and his *fian* [war party] making their way down the river valley without having been seen in return. Immediately backtracking to their refuge, he’d alerted Bodhmhall. There, after a hurried discussion, they’d reluctantly agreed to remain where they were, concealed within the hidden canyon. Bodhmhall’s injuries meant she’d have been unable to move at speed and as a result any attempt at flight would have been perilous. If they stayed where they were however, chances were high that their enemies would eventually grow discouraged and leave.

This had been their belief, at least.

Coated with dense forest, littered with rocky hollows and interspersed with rivers and streams, the valley must have been a nightmare of a space to search. Despite this, the *fian* had displayed an unexpected tenacity, doggedly scouring both sides of the river, beating through the forest and combing any natural tracks or trails with resolute determination. It was as though they’d known with absolute certainty that their quarry was located somewhere in that particular area.

Which, of course, was impossible.

For two days, Bodhmhall and Fiacail had huddled by the entrance to the ravine, listening fearfully as the calls of the hunters drew ominously closer then mercifully faded once more. The canyon was accessible only through a narrow cut in the ridge, a gap choked with holly trees and other heavy growth. This meant their hiding place was difficult to find but it also meant that, if discovered, there was no other route of escape. Neither of them had any illusions as to their fate if it were discovered.

Towards the end of the second day, one particular group of warriors had passed closer to them than at any other point during the previous searches but, once again, failed to spot the entrance. Peering through the thick screen of foliage, Bodhmhall had fearfully observed them pass by: five lean, hard-faced men in padded tunics, bearing cruel-looking, metal-tipped javelins and other weapons. Shivering, she’d watched them leave, thankful that section of the valley was so broad. Had they been

caught further upriver where it was substantially narrower and, consequently, easier to search, the outcome could have been drastically different.

On the morning of the third day, Bodhmhall had awoken to an unusual silence, a hushed stillness that seemed to pervade not only the canyon but the entire valley itself. Nervous, she'd remained at the hidden entrance with Fiacail for the better part of the day but over the course of the morning, heard no sound of voices, no sound of movement, no indication of any kind in fact that the *fian* remained within the environs.

It was late afternoon before Fiacail finally dared venture forth to investigate further. Crawling through the undergrowth on his belly, he'd worked his way towards the river where a decayed tree on a high mound overlooked the waterway. Concealing himself within the mildewed hollow of the trunk, he'd waited and watched in silence.

For the remainder of the afternoon, he'd observed no indication of the *fian* warriors' presence. Towards nightfall however, a great ululation had arisen from the far side of the river, spreading quickly along the valley as it was taken up by different groups of warriors. The fading light and the thick forest canopy had prevented him from seeing the opposite bank but Fiacail had managed to catch a glimpse of warriors on their own side of the river, returning at a run from some point upstream. Speeding directly past him, they hadn't even paused to look in his direction. He'd scanned them, as well as he could in the gloom, and had spotted the hatchet-face Gob An Teanga Gorm, at the forefront, urging his men on with bellows of excitement.

Bodhmhall's frown tightened as the memories returned. Clearing her throat, she made to swallow but gagged on an unexpected bitterness at the back of her tongue – yet another unpleasant side effect of the herbs.

Fiacail passed her a wooden bowl half-filled with water. She swallowed most of the liquid but kept a few drops to trickle onto her fingers which she then used to scrub her face. She needed no reminder of the precarious situation with respect to food and water. The presence of the *fian* had prevented Fiacail from leaving the canyon to hunt or replenish their water supply. They'd survived on what untainted food they'd managed to scavenge from the Brotherhood's supplies and the rainwater they managed to collect but that meagre hoard was now almost exhausted.

Bodhmhall tested her arm again. 'I am strong enough to leave, to depart for Ráth Bládhma.'

Fiacail's gaze rested on the stick between his fingers. 'Yes,' he said at last. 'I believe you are.'

The *bandraoi* gave him a quizzical look, surprised by the uncharacteristic vagueness of his response. 'Then we should leave as soon as possible. As you say, the *fian* might return.'

The warrior tapped the ground absently with one end of the stick. 'There is a ... complication.'

Something in the way he said that caused the hairs on the back of her neck to rise.

'A complication?'

'Earlier this morning ... I found tracks at the entrance to the canyon.'

The *bandraoi* felt her heartbeat stutter. 'The *fian*?' The words came out as a kind of garbled croak.

He shook his head. 'No. A single person, a big man from the depth of his print. Whoever he was, he was familiar with the canyon for his tracks led directly to the entrance.' Fiacail sniffed, tossed the stick over his shoulder and raised his eyes to consider the *bandraoi* directly. 'He was careful. He tried to hide all trace of his visit but I found a heel print he'd overlooked in the darkness. After that, it was a simple matter to find the others.'

Bodhmhall clutched her wounded arm. 'We should leave. Now. They could ret - .' She stopped abruptly for the warrior was regarding her with a knowing, unharried expression. The certitude in his eyes triggered a sudden flash of insight as all the facts converged in her head: a single man, a big man, a knowledge of the canyon's location, reconnoitring and then subsequently withdrawing.

'You think it was Futh.'

Fiacail maintained his steadfast gaze but he dipped his head in acknowledgement. Bodhmhall felt a glacial frisson pass through her. One of the Brotherhood's more brutal members, Futh had treated her with great cruelty over the time she'd been held captive. Despite her broken arm, he'd dragged her by the hair through the Great Wild without regard for her screams of agony. He'd also held her down

during an attempted rape by one of his comrades and the memory of the merciless amusement in his eyes still made her sick to the stomach. There'd been no pity to the man, no empathy of any kind and now, given the death of his brother during her rescue, there was even greater reason for his antipathy towards her.

Bodhmhall looked down at her hands and realised they were trembling.

'The possibility of that man stalking us ... It troubles me.'

'And so it should. That big, bald fucker troubles me as well.' Fiacail unconsciously reached one hand up to touch the wound on his shoulder. Futh had sliced him there with a quarterstaff tipped at either end with a metal blade and although the wound had scabbed over and was healing, he hadn't forgotten how close he'd come to being killed. Futh and his brother had been the most dangerous members of the Brotherhood and although Fiacail had succeeded in slaying one, it'd been a close thing. Disconcerted by the unexpected deaths of his comrades, Futh had panicked and taken off into the forest. In that respect, they'd been exceptionally fortunate. Had he decided to remain and fight it out, it was more than likely he'd have killed them all.

A sudden thought struck the *bandraoi* and she peered anxiously over the warrior's shoulder, out into the canyon. 'Where's Demne?'

'He keeps a watch on the entrance.'

Bodhmhall's eyes widened. 'You left him to guard the entrance? By himself?'

'I left him to watch it,' he corrected her. 'And to call out at any sign of danger.' He scowled then, vexed by the *bandraoi*'s accusatory tone. 'I needed rest, Bodhmhall. In your dream stupor, you were of little use and even I can only go so long without sleep.'

Rebuffed, Bodhmhall shrank back, momentarily lost for words. She raised both hands, palms outwards, in apology. 'Forgive me. The sleeping potion leaves me ... cranky.'

Fiacail shrugged, dismissing the slight with an airy gesture. 'You have endured great hardship. Some crankiness is to be expected. But...' He eyed her closely. 'Do not take the potion again. I will need your help when he returns.'

She became aware that her hands were clenched. 'You believe he'll come back?'

'If someone killed my brother I'd come back.'

Bodhmhall frowned at that, knowing Fiacail had the right of it. Futh and his brother Ruth had formed a true Man Pair, physically and mentally identical to the point of mirroring each other's actions at times. Unrestrained by the instruction of Rogein or Regna of Mag Fea, the two leaders of the Brotherhood, Futh would almost certainly be determined to avenge his brother, something Fiacail was quick to affirm.

'From what little I have seen of Futh,' said Fiacail. 'I judge him a man of basic instincts. He's had days to mull over his purpose and without the guidance of his leaders he'll fall back on basic emotions. And none are as basic as the yearning for vengeance.'

He rolled his head back and yawned loudly. 'And so you see. Our situation is ... complicated. We should depart for Dún Baoiscne with haste, but we cannot. Futh has had days to prepare, to scout the terrain and the most viable routes from the valley. If we leave the safety of this little canyon, there's little doubt he'll be awaiting us, preparing an ambush we're unlikely to survive.'

'But ... Then what should we do?'

'As to that...' The warrior gave a lop-sided grin. 'I confess I have no answer. But rest assured, I will put my mind to it.'

Leaving Fiacail to take her place on the bed of fern, Bodhmhall exited the cave to find her nephew standing outside, several paces to the right of the entrance. A slight figure with little more than seven years on him, he looked a fragile defence against the potential return of the brutal Brotherhood warrior.

And yet, she reminded herself, he'd taken Regna of Mar Fea down with a single sling cast, smashing his skull from the force of the bullet when the fat man had attempted to kill her.

My nephew has always been more than he appeared.

She stood and watched the boy in silence for a moment. Oblivious to her presence, he continued to stare towards the thick stand of holly that marked the passage into the canyon. His sling dangled loosely from his right hand, a smooth river stone cupped snugly in the woven reed pouch. Studying him, Bodhmhall experienced a heady outpouring of affection and pride, a sensation so intense it caused her lips to tremble. She took a moment to compose herself before she called out to him.

‘Demne.’

The boy’s head snapped around and he stared at her briefly before twisting back to face the distant entrance. ‘*A Aintín*, I can’t talk. I’m on watch duty. So the bad man can’t creep up on us.’

Bodhmhall looked towards the holly trees and slowly drew on her *tíolacadh* – her *Gift*. After a moment, her view of the intense green foliage shimmered, fading into a beautiful pattern of tiny yellow flames, the internal lifelights of every living being within that space. Studying the vibrantly glowing spectacle, she finally allowed herself to relax. There were no flames of any substance to be seen, confirming the absence of anything larger than small birds, rodents or insects. Loosening her hold on the *Gift*, she watched the yellow colours gradually dissolve back into different shades of green and brown once more.

‘You can relax for now,’ she told the boy. ‘I’ve studied the trees and no-one is in hiding. We can continue to watch while we talk.’

Because of his familiarity with his aunt’s abilities, the boy accepted her assurance without dispute. His shoulders drooped with relief and he surprised her by moving forwards to wrap his arms about her waist, embracing her firmly. With a mild sense of bemusement, she stroked his head as she returned that embrace. The child’s scalp was still shorn as a result of the Brotherhood’s preparation for his initiation ceremony but now, after a few days of growth, a fine fuzz was discernible against her fingertips. Bodhmhall briefly wondered whether her nephew’s hair would grow back a darker shade or whether he’d retain the dramatic blond colouring of his father.

With a start, she realised the child was shivering, his head trembling against her stomach. Pulling his hands away, she went down on one knee and clasped his cheeks between her palms, forcing him to face her. ‘What is it Demne?’

The boy chewed his lips anxiously. ‘I’m scared, *a Aintín*,’ he confessed at last, his shame at the admission evident in his tone. ‘Fiacail says that Futh wants to hurt us.’

‘I know, little one. But an intruder cannot get to us without crossing that open ground and Fiacail is just inside the cave. We’ll have more than enough time to call him should we have need.’

‘Futh scares me.’

‘And me,’ she confessed. ‘But we must find the resolve to face him down. Otherwise we allow him to win and we do not let cruel men win, do we?’

Demne thought about that. His jaw firmed up and he shook his head.

‘Besides,’ the *bandraoi* continued. ‘I’ve seen you stand and fight. You killed Regna of Mar Fea when he was about to spill my blood.’ She stroked his cheek. ‘Do not doubt yourself, Demne. You have a rare inner strength, a mark of greatness.’

A mark that others too had noticed. According to Regna, the Brotherhood had been seeking the child since the year of his birth, drawn by some mysterious prophecy in the stars that only they could comprehend. The Adversary – that mysterious and relentless opponent – had also gone to great lengths to lay his hands on the boy, dispatching two separate war parties to capture him.

Bodhmhall irritably played with a loose thread on the hem of her dress. It infuriated her that, after all this time, she remained ignorant to the identity and the motivation of the individual who’d created such havoc with their lives.

And you bear responsibility for at least a portion of that.

That much was true. After the first assault on Ráth Bládhma, she’d foolishly allowed herself to grow negligent, lulled into complacency by the passage of time and the incessant grind of leading the settlement. Now it was clear the Adversary would never give up, would never abandon his efforts until Demne was in his grasp.

Without thinking, she drew on the *Gift* once more, using it to re-examine her nephew's lifelight. As always, the boy's unusually intense internal flame radiated power, a deep yellow flare that pulsed with the regularity of a beating heart. The *bandraoi* bit her lip. Even after all these years, the sight never failed to impress her. The exceptional fervour of that flame alone was enough to confirm her nephew uniqueness, but as to how that uniqueness might one day manifest itself, she didn't have the foggiest notion.

'Bodhmhall, is my mother dead?'

The sudden question took the *bandraoi* completely by surprise and as the *tíolacadh* faded she struggled to conceal her reaction. Since their rescue from the Brotherhood the boy had spoken very little and rarely on issues beyond those related to their immediate survival. The specificity of this particular question therefore intrigued her. 'I don't know,' she admitted.

Demne appeared to mull over the subject for a time. As he did, he pulled the stone from the pouch of the sling and rolled it between his fingers, enjoying the firm sensation of smoothness. Bodhmhall caught a glimpse of the crude image of a deer on one side. Painstakingly carved into the hard surface by Liath Luachra, it would have taken the woman warrior a substantial period of time to create, and she'd fashioned more than a dozen such stones for the boy.

How typical! The Grey One openly scorns any thought of tenderness towards the child and yet, when least expected, performs such acts of great affection.

Her good humour bled away at the thought of the missing woman warrior and she had to resort to her druidic training to calm herself, slowing her breathing and her heartbeat to regain her composure. The Grey One had been supposed to follow her and Demne off the falls after the ambush at An Glenn Teann. When the *bandraoi* and her nephew had broken free of the white water and waited on shore however, she'd never shown up. And many days had passed since then.

'Can we go home to Ráth Bládhma?' Demne asked, mercifully interrupting such bleak considerations. 'Can we go back there now?'

He pulled back to look up at her. Close to despair, she made to embrace him again but he backed away even further. 'My mother took me away from Ráth Bládhma. I didn't want to leave. It's my home. All my friends are there.'

'None of us wanted you to leave, *a bhuachaill*. But, as your mother, Muirne had the right to make that decision.'

'It was the wrong decision.'

She continued to regard him closely, struck by the adamant condemnation. In their conversations together, her nephew had an unusual trait of switching from the typical speech of a child to that of someone with much greater maturity. Despite her familiarity with that peculiar mannerism, Bodhmhall still found such conviction in a mere seven year old quite disturbing.

Demne continued to stare at her, as though challenging her to deny the truth of it.

Bodhmhall sighed. 'Home is that place that's most dear to us, *a bhuachaill*. The place where we are – or have been – most loved. Ráth Bládhma's your home now but in later years you'll call other places home, places where you find or create love of your own.' She clasped her hands together, carefully preparing the words at the heart of what she intended to say. 'Your mother never experienced love at Ráth Bládhma. When she came to us, it was under trying circumstances and she was alone amongst strangers. I suppose, from her perspective, Ráth Bládhma was never much of a home. That may be why she was keen to take you away.'

How very diplomatic, Cailleach. You defend a woman you despise out of love for her son.

'Liath Luachra says my mother is untrust-.' Demne's tongue fouled on the syllables. He tried again. 'She says my mother is un-trust-worthy.'

Bodhmhall's lips gave a wry twist. 'Liath Luachra is forthright. Perhaps overly so.'

'But she never lies.' Demne raised his hand and looked wistfully at the smooth stone held between his fingers. 'I wish Liath Luachra was here. I miss her.'

Bodhmhall looked at her hands. 'So do I,' she said.

Hampered by her broken arm, there was little of practical use Bodhmhall could do to pass the time but keep her nephew company while he remained on watch. This was not something that displeased her however. Over the course of their journey across the Great Wild, Muirne Muncháem had done everything in her power to prevent the *bandraoi* from spending time with the boy. The ambush at An Glenn Teann and their subsequent capture by the Brotherhood had also meant there'd been little real opportunity to talk.

Occasionally, in the quiet periods between the various topics of discussion, her thoughts turned to Ráth Bládhma and the people she'd left behind. She wondered vaguely how her *lubgort* [vegetable garden] was faring, whether Aodhán was maintaining a sufficiently close guard on the valley and whether the slender Morag was swelling at the belly. At the thought of the pregnant young woman, Bodhmhall exhaled heavily in displeasure. Aodhán's wife had specifically asked her to be present for the birth and given the couple's previous misfortune with a stillborn child, she'd given her word to do so. It was a promise she'd had every intention of keeping, although at the time of making that commitment she could hardly have imagined her current predicament. Liath Luachra and their *Lamraighe* allies were missing or killed, the relative safety of the *Clann Baoiscne* stronghold was still some distance over harsh and unforgiving terrain. They were being hunted by killers and now, to make matters worse, they had the additional threat of Futh to contend with.

Her lips turned down as she looked around the little canyon. It was hardly the most defensible of refuges were an enemy to penetrate the entranceway. Roughly rectangular in shape, it extended from the narrow cluster of holly trees, widening gradually for a distance of sixty paces or so until it reached the rock wall set at an oblique angle to the entrance, where the cave was located. On the southern side of the canyon – where the sunlight rarely touched – there was minimal growth, mostly sickly grey grass and lichen. On the northern side however, a thin stand of mountain ash – about two or three trees deep – stretched three quarters of the length of the canyon, terminating abruptly at a point opposite the cave entrance and offering a direct line of sight into the rocky hollow.

Rising to her feet, Bodhmhall traversed the rough stone floor to the ash trees. There she delved about in the undergrowth before returning to Demne, a thick bunch of *slánlus* [ribwort plantain] clutched in her right arm. Taking a seat on the rock beside her nephew, she began to instruct him on the rules and tactics behind *Gaiscíoch* [Warrior], a game she'd enjoyed playing with the other Dún Baoiscne children.

Before being selected by the draoi Dub Tire for less childish instruction.

The *bandraoi*'s grip on the cluster of *slánlus* grew tighter as she banished those memories, turning her attention instead to explaining the rules of the game.

To play *Gaiscíoch*, both players had to pull a *slánlus* stalk – the *gaiscíoch* – from the bunch, the thicker and more flexible the better. The object of the game was to behead the other's *gaiscíoch* by decapitating the seedcap. This was achieved by both players taking it in turns to hold their *gaiscíoch* out in a horizontal position and allowing the other player to make a downward strike with their own *gaiscíoch*. Sometimes, if you were lucky, you obtained a particularly hardy stalk that outlived your opponent's for the course of several 'combats'. As in life however, the wear and tear eventually took its toll and the winning stalk was, in turn, beheaded by a new victor.

They were still immersed in play later that afternoon when a bare-chested Fiacail emerged from the cave, announcing his return with a booming yawn. Standing alongside them, he stretched the muscles of his shoulders before pulling on a fresh green tunic. Bodhmhall regarded the item of clothing with interest, noting the delicate needlework of the spiral designs about the neck and cuffs. The big warrior had never wanted for good clothing, she recalled wryly. There'd always been plenty of women willing to make him a quality garment in exchange for a smile.

Or more.

She awkwardly shifted her position on the rocky seat. The uncharacteristic flush of resentment had surprised her. When she and Fiacail had lived together, his tomcat ways had caused her no end of distress but such days were long past and she hadn't considered them for many years. Any romantic

notions she'd held for the Seisenn Uaribhaoil man had long since been extinguished, even before she'd left Dún Baoiscne for a new life at Ráth Bládhma.

Despite Fiacail's own feelings on the matter.

She suppressed such considerations beneath a smile as the warrior moved closer, standing behind her right shoulder and staring towards the holly-screened entrance to the canyon. 'No movement?' he asked. He scratched absently at an itch under his arm.

She shook her head. 'Nothing.'

'You used the *Gift*?'

'Yes.'

'And there is no-one concealed there now?'

'Not at the moment.'

He grunted. 'Good. Warn me if you see anything, anything at all.'

With this, Fiacail returned to the cave, reappearing a few moments later with a set of three metal-tipped javelins. Standing directly outside the cave, he set them point first into the ground.

He took some time to place his feet, meticulously adjusting his stance before shaking his arms and allowing his hands to hang, relaxed, by his sides. Suddenly, in what seemed like a single, seamless movement, he grasped the haft of the first javelin, raised it shoulder height and launched it directly at the foremost tree of the ash stand across the canyon. Even as the first missile left his hand, he'd grasped the second and cast it, followed immediately afterwards by the third.

The first javelin shot left of the tree, smacking hard against the cliff face behind before tumbling noisily to the ground with a metallic clatter. The second passed to the right, falling into the undergrowth between the trees. The third missile, however, slammed into the trunk with a heavy *thunk*, the sound of the haft quivering violently from the force of the impact, audible even at that distance.

Bodhmhall watched her nephew nod appreciatively, impressed by the warrior's cast. The Seiscenn Uaribhaoil man however, had an unsatisfied expression while he considered the results of his efforts. Clicking his tongue non-committedly, he walked off to retrieve the javelins.

A few moments later, he was back again, taking up the exact same position, adjusting his stance and repeating the entire process.

It continued like that all afternoon, the big man targeting his tree, casting tirelessly then retrieving the missiles and trying again. As the afternoon progressed however, Bodhmhall grew increasingly uncomfortable for she could see that Fiacail's accuracy was not improving. If anything, the fading sunlight seemed to cause his aim to deteriorate for by the time the sun was out of sight behind the southern wall, he was barely striking the tree trunk once for every nine casts he made.

Finally, covered in sweat, he stopped and laid the weapons aside, gratefully accepting the bowl of water Bodhmhall was offering him. 'You should rest,' she told him. 'You press yourself too hard.'

He looked at her, arching one eyebrow.

'Are you using your *Gift* to read me, *Cailleach*?'

She couldn't repress the guilty smile. 'How did you know?'

'It's an old habit of yours.'

'What old habit?' she asked, genuinely surprised.

'Back in Dún Baoiscne, whenever you used your *Gift* to examine me, you always nagged afterwards.'

Bodhmhall stared at him.

'Don't look so shocked. A sensitive man like myself can pick up on such womanly ways.' He guffawed loudly at the sardonic expression on her face. 'I have a question, *Cailleach Dubh*. A serious question concerning *An tíolacadh*.'

Amused but curious, she gestured for him to continue.

'When you consider me with your *Gift* ...'

'Yes?'

'Is my internal flame as handsome as my external features?'

Her lips curled into a sardonic smile. 'It is even more handsome.'

'I knew it!' he exclaimed effusively, slapping his knee with enthusiasm. 'I knew I had the right of it.'

Both laughed with genuine good humour.

'Tell me,' he said and his voice was suddenly all serious. 'With your *Gift*, do you see the life force of the plants and trees as well as those of animals?'

Bodhmhall took a moment to prepare an answer. 'It is more ... indistinct. Like a blur. There is some light but it merges together and ... It forms a moody background.'

Fiacail nodded sagely. 'So you could not, for example, distinguish that tree that I've been striking with my javelins all afternoon from the others?'

She looked at the tree. The surface of the trunk bark on the closer side was badly pitted from the rare strikes the Seiscenn Uairbhaoil man had succeeded in making and white parts of the inner trunk were exposed. 'No,' she said, shaking her head.

'Ah,' he said simply. He sounded oddly disappointed.

Bodhmhall stroked her chin between thumb and forefinger. 'You display uncommon interest in *An tÍolacadh*. Back in Dún Baoiscne, it never seemed a subject of great significance.'

His eyes dropped to her breasts and he grinned broadly. 'When we lived together there were always other ... distractions. I suppose that my interests extend with age.' He raised both hands in the air and regarded her with exaggerated shock that could not disguise the true humour behind it. 'Perhaps I am growing wise!'

She gave a cynical smile. 'I never noticed your interest extend beyond a comely shape.'

He shrugged with unforced nonchalance. 'I cannot extend beyond a comely shape. You cannot distinguish between the life force of the trees.'

'I may not be able to distinguish the tree but I can make out the bird's nest in the upper branch.'

Fiacail looked at her blankly and she laughed out loud. 'The nest, oh wise one. The nesting season is well over but a *spideog* – a robin – is using it as a refuge. I can see the *spideog*.'

The warrior's eyebrows raised at that and his face broke into a satisfied smile. 'Well now, *Cailleach Dubh*,' he declared. 'Well, that is truly more interesting.'

With their supplies exhausted, dinner that evening was a particularly lacklustre affair consisting of the previous day's porridge sweetened with a handful of berries. Sharing a single bowl, the trio ate with appetite but without enthusiasm, despite the fire that Fiacail now permitted. Normally a man who enjoyed his food more than most, Bodhmhall noticed that the warrior refrained from any comment over the course of the meal. It was evident that, even with the threat of Futh, they'd be obliged to leave the canyon if they wanted to eat.

Nightfall slunk in with the tenacity of a hungry predator. Absorbed in her contemplation of the campfire flames, when Bodhmhall looked up she was shocked to discover the darkness already enveloping the canyon beyond the immediate circle of light thrown out by the fire. The Seiscenn Uairbhaoil warrior had stacked the base much higher than normal and Demne had gathered so much firewood that a substantial pile now lay nearby, ready to be tossed onto the flames.

Bodhmhall considered the reddey blaze with some misgivings. The rocky confines of the canyon seemed to amplify the noisy crackle of burning logs and she feared the yellow glare reflected off the walls might draw Futh to them in the same way moths were drawn to a flame.

Turning to the side, she glanced uneasily towards the canyon entrance and stiffened, a gesture which did not go unnoticed by the big warrior. 'Do you see - ?'

'Lifelight,' she confirmed.

'Is it him?'

'The flame is too large for an animal,' she confirmed. Her voice was short, her vocal chords tight with tension, but she managed to control the quaver.

Fiacail muttered something unintelligible under his breath. ‘Do not turn your face towards the passage. Keep a watch from the corner of your eye.’ He transferred his gaze across the fire to her nephew. ‘Or you Demne. Do not reveal that we’re aware of his presence. Understand?’

The boy looked frightened but he gripped his sling tight and nodded silently.

Bodhmhall realised she was scratching the inside of her palms with her fingernails, a nervous habit she’d thought to have overcome. She purposely pushed both hands down by her sides, taking a deep breath before she addressed the warrior. ‘What should we do, Fiacail?’

‘We will ignore him and finish this delightful meal.’ The Seiscenn Uairbhaoil man wiped a smudge of porridge from his chin, stroking his stubbled jaw with disfavour. ‘This lack of water vexes me however. I have need of a shave.’

The *bandraoi* continued to stare at him, confused by his apparent nonchalance. ‘Fiacail, the entrance way is the single point narrow enough to prevent him gaining entry to the canyon.’

‘Rest easy, Bodhmhall. The Bald One will not be the match of me.’

She gaped, the warrior’s brash confidence doing little to reassure her.

‘Fiacail, I -’

‘Bodhmhall please. Let me savour the full flavour of this repast.’

The *bandraoi* lapsed into anxious silence as she watched him chew on the last of the gritty porridge. Despite his instructions, she struggled to avoid using her *Gift* although she repeatedly peeked furtively towards the cluster of trees at the canyon entrance. ‘Futh is inside,’ she hissed urgently. ‘He’s positioned at the far end of the mountain ash. I told you we should have-’

The warrior’s hand reached across to grip her wrist, silencing her. He turned then to the boy who’d been anxiously following their interaction. ‘Demne,’ he said, his voice surprisingly light. ‘You should return inside the cave. Take your sling and remain within its shelter. Whatever you do, do not look towards the ash trees when you stand. And do not run. Do you understand?’

With a gulp, the boy nodded. Swallowing again, he rose stiffly, eyes focussed on the entrance to the cave. As he walked towards it, Bodhmhall could see the tension in his shoulders as he resisted the natural inclination to run.

Fiacail picked up a loose twig and absently began to pick his teeth with it. Spitting out a loose white glob of crushed kernel, he spoke to her from the side of his mouth. ‘Where is he now?’

She started to turn but his hand abruptly shot out, grabbing her arm and preventing her from moving. He shook his head. ‘From the corner of your eye, dear one. From the corner of your eye.’

Disconcerted and angered in equal measure, she furiously tugged her hand free but did as he asked. ‘He remains in the trees by the entrance,’ she said after a moment or two. ‘He probably watches us, forming his plans.’

‘Probably.’ The warrior appeared unfazed.

‘Fiacail,’ she pleaded. ‘Futh has had several days. He may have prepared javelins.’

‘I would think so. That’s what I’d have been doing had I been in his place.’

She stared at him incredulously. ‘But he might cast them!’

‘From that position? I wouldn’t think so. Even your young Aodhán, good as he is, would struggle to make an effective cast at such a distance in this light.’

‘But he can move closer, work his way through the trees.’

‘Then we will join Demne in the cave. The angle of the entrance means that no javelin strike will hit us.’

‘Not if he proceeds to the end of the ash stand. From there, he can see directly into the cave and the strength of the fire means he’ll view us clearly.’

‘Bah! You worry too much, *Cailleach*.’

She glared at him with a mixture of outrage and desperation then watched with horror as the warrior dropped another log on the fire.

What is he doing! He blinds us to the darkness.

She froze then, her posture rigid for a fresh flicker of movement had caught her eye. ‘He draws closer through the ash trees.’ The *bandraoi* shivered, recalling the expression on the bald man’s face

when he'd held her in place for his aroused little comrade, the gruesome leer and the bulge against the cloth in the crotch of his leggings. She suddenly felt very sick.

Looking down at her hands, she was disturbed to find she'd started scratching the palms again. The skin was now grazed with deep lines of red scored into the flesh. She growled unconsciously, hating the tremor in her voice, hating the Brotherhood warrior even more for reducing her to such a state of terror.

Unmindful of her mounting despair, Fiacail frowned. 'Very well. We'd better return to the cave. It would be pointless to tempt fate. Or the Bald One's casting arm.'

Bodhmhall rose to her feet and regarded him in consternation. The Seiscenn Uarbhaoil man seemed oblivious to the true extent of the danger.

'I'll put out the fire.'

'No time for that. Besides, if he traverses the canyon to the cave we'll be able to see him.'

'If he has javelins he will have no need to traverse. Fiacail, please! I beg of you.' There was real fear in her voice now, a discernible quaver that she could no longer disguise. The warrior caught it for he regarded her with quiet intensity. 'Do you truly believe, dear one, that I would place you in harm's way?'

With that, he started slowly towards the cave.

Bodhmhall stared, slack-jawed, after him then, rousing herself, stumbled hurriedly in his shadow. As she drew alongside, he reached out to grasp her arm and draw her close. 'Come take my hand. Steady now. Walk easy towards the cave. See! Isn't this pleasant? You haven't held my hand in such a long time. I'd truly forgotten how soft you were, *a chroí*.'

Once again, Bodhmhall struggled to make sense of the warrior's increasingly irrational behaviour. Terrified, she glanced back over her shoulder and caught sight of a bright yellow blur, moving purposefully down the southern side of the canyon towards them.

'He's almost on us!' She almost broke into a run but Fiacail's grip on her hand tightened, holding her in place. Fearing the increasing likelihood of a javelin arching in out of the darkness, it took all of her self-control not to struggle free, despite the knowledge that any shelter in that cave would be short-lived. As soon as Futh reached the end of the trees, shrouded in darkness, he could pick them off at his leisure.

'Look here,' Fiacail crowed proudly, gesturing towards his own set of three javelins that remained poking up out of the ground by the entrance to the cave. 'See how prepared I am.' She gaped, unable to make sense of the comment. It was all as though she was trapped in some kind of surreal dream.

Or nightmare.

Without any warning, he suddenly reached forward, clasped her in his arms and kissed her full on the lips. Taken completely by surprise, she struggled to think straight as she felt his dry lips clamped upon her own. Before she had time to react, he whirled her around so that she was facing the end of the ash stand directly behind him.

'Use the *Gift*, Bodhmhall. Where is he?'

Enveloped in his embrace, she suddenly realised that the tension of his body was not a result of passion but of stress. Looking into his brown eyes, she saw them flared with furious determination. 'Towards the end of the trees,' she managed to gasp.

'Where exactly?'

'At the very end of the ash stand, now. His stands upright, just beside the tree with the nest.' Her voice went hollow. 'He has moved to the left.'

He prepares to cast.

Suddenly, Fiacail whirled away, thrusting her aside with such force that she was pitched back against the stone pillar to the left of the entrance. In one single dynamic movement, he'd whipped up the nearest javelin and flung it out into the darkness. Even before her mind fully grasped what he'd done, the second javelin was in his hand and it too went whirring into the darkness. There was a sudden terrifying, agonised scream but already the third missile too was off, following the others.

Bodhmhall stared as the warrior lunged forwards, knife in hand, and disappeared into the darkness beyond the fire.

With belated insight, she realised Fiacail had been standing in exactly the same position from which he'd been casting that afternoon, that he'd even been holding the exact same stance.

He never missed his target this afternoon! He wasn't aiming for the tree but the position to the left. The position from which Futh was most likely to cast.

All that time, over the course of the entire afternoon, he'd been training his body, establishing a muscle memory so that when he cast, he'd hit that exact spot. She shook her head. It had truly been a plan of remarkable ingenuity.

Pulling herself off the ground, she drew on her *Gift*, staring across the canyon to the trees where the invader's lifelight was now stirring weakly, much closer to the ground than before. Even as she watched, another more brazen flame rushed in and leaped upon it. A moment later, the first flame was completely extinguished.

She sat staring in shock until Fiacail returned, emerging out of the darkness and into the red glow thrown out by the fire. He was breathing heavily and his clothing was scuffed but he contrived to put on a casual air as he drew closer. Drawing to a halt alongside her, he looked down with surprising gentleness. 'You can sleep easy tonight, dear one.'

Unable to speak, she nodded dumbly. Looking very weary, Fiacail continued on towards the cave, stroking his chin as he did so. 'And in the morning,' he said. 'I will celebrate this moment with a shave.'