

Steven Messner 1406 Nutana Place NW Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2K5B9 1-587-228-5980 Stevenjmessner@gmail.com	11,282 words
--	--------------

The Brier King

by Steven J. Messner

"Who goes there?"

Connor leaned on his father's spear to show that he was armed. A sliver of pale sun draped over the dense mist that yawned before him, gilding it in amber. From where he stood perched on the stone wall of his ringfort, Connor could see for leagues. But neither the snow-bearded mountains or the rising smoke of a nearby hamlet held his attention. Instead, he stared down at the

visitor that had come at such an early hour.

The man's head and shoulders was covered by a thick auburn cloak that couldn't hide his menacing size. But he was just one person, and Connor had these walls to protect him.

"Connor?" the man said, looking up. "Connor Mac Tomoltach?" He pulled back his hood to reveal red hair, flowing down either side of a chipped and ruddy face. A craggy island bisecting a river of blood.

Connor's eyes bulged, but he stifled his surprise. His heart railed against his ribs so violently he felt it in his ears. All these years spent watching ghosts shifting in the morning fog. Now one of them had come knocking on his door.

"Blath," he rasped. "What are you doing here?"

Blath glanced over his shoulder as if worried that someone might see him. "I need to see you."

For the first time since his father died, Connor felt afraid. Without a word, he jumped down from the wall. The front gate groaned as he pulled it open and stood before Blath, unsure if he really wanted him to step inside. It had been over a decade since he had seen him this close. Some scars he remembered, others not so much. The bags around his eyes couldn't dim the flames within them. Had the years tarnished Blath or tempered

him? Connor found either outcome unnerving.

"May I come in?" Blath said, shifting the weight of the travel sack. Connor wanted to hold his ground for longer, but he stepped aside out of instinct. Time, apparently, had not dulled his need to please. Blath nodded at Connor in appreciation and strode past him. "So it's all yours now, eh?"

"Aye," Connor sighed, following. "Just what I always wanted. Goats." He thought about closing the gate but decided against it. Blath needed to know that the terms of this conversation were open to renegotiation. Truth be told, Connor didn't even know if he even had the right to refuse him entrance. But protocol and law had no sway over legends. Men like Blath always got their way.

If Blath picked up on the gesture, he didn't show it. He walked over to the rickety kennel and held out a hand to Connor's goat. It pressed against the fence, bleating angrily, tongue searching for a morsel of food that Blath did not have.

He dropped the travel sack at his feet and spun, taking in Connor's meager lodgings. "You've been keeping it well," he said. It was a lie, of course. His home was anything but well kept. The wall crumbled along the southern rim. The kennel fence was one strong gust from blowing over. And, try as he did to

keep it fed, his goat was always bony and irate. "It's a lot of work for one person. You haven't married yet?"

"What are you doing here, Blath? I have more work to do than hours in the day."

Blath pulled at his rusty beard and nodded. "I've come to ask you a favor." Before Connor could interrupt, Blath raised a hand to silence him. "Please, hear me out."

This was not the Blath that Connor remembered. The Mountain of An Chliabhán, favored by the gods, blessed by the King. A warrior who surged into battle with all the screaming terror of ocean waves in summer storms.

Blath took Connor's silence as permission to continue. "King Eogan has sent me on a quest, and I want you to come with me."

"Absolutely not," Connor waved his spear at the ringfort that surrounded him. "The spring sow is beginning soon. There's far too much work--nevermind the fact that I haven't seen you in years, Blath. You can't just traipse through my door and drag me on one of your adventures. We're not kids anymore."

Blath smiled. "My wife, Sorcha, will tend to your goat. It will only be a few days."

"I said no."

Blath shrugged and shook his head, as if that answer wasn't

acceptable. He moved suddenly, snatching the spear from Connor's hands and, before Connor could even respond, marched off toward the roundhouse. Connor stood frozen, eyes fixed on empty palms. "That bastard," he whispered. Then, turning to chase after him: "You bastard!"

Ducking under the low threshold into his roundhouse, Connor found Blath stuffing some tunics into a travel sack. He flushed. It had been years since anyone had been inside his home. It was a mess. Flies danced around unwashed dishes, soot stained most of the surfaces. Connor couldn't stand to spend much time here. The memories were too sharp. Once the sack was full, Blath stood and handed it to him. "You'll need this."

"Blath--" Connor started, but Blath wasn't listening. He turned and began picking through a pile of possessions that had once belonged to Connor's father: talismans carved of bone, a brass goblet, rings and sheep skins, a tattered, bloodstained cloak. The last vestiges of a violent man now neglected and forgotten.

"You need to go. Right now."

"Or what?" Blath turned and pointed the spear at Connor. Inches from his face, Connor could see little fingers of turquoise tarnish crawling across the bronze spearhead. When the

soil had finally thawed enough to dig father's grave, he had made a vow to never let this spear lose its gleam.

Now just another broken oath.

Blath smiled. "You'll kill me?"

Connor's cheeks burned red. Years might've weathered him, but Blath could still be an infuriating ass. Before he could argue, Blath spun the spear and extended the haft toward him. Connor dropped the sack of clothes to the floor and took his father's weapon back.

"There's no point in arguing, Connor," Blath said with a shrug. "I'm sorry it has to be this way." He rolled up his tunic sleeve to reveal a brass armband around his right arm. It was engraved with what Connor assumed was King Eogan's family emblem. He'd never actually seen it before. "I'm afraid you've given me no choice. I invoke the will of King Eogan mac Muirdag, Ruler of An Chliabhán. As the King's Man and heir to the Alder Throne, I bind you, Connor Mac Tomoltach, to my temporary service... under pain of death."

Blath's emphasis that this binding was provisional did nothing to dull the sting of the words that followed. Connor knew it was just how the speech went, but those words still hung like a noose in the morning air. Connor couldn't resist a sardonic

twist of a smile.

Men like Blath always got their way.

#

No matter what their business was, everyone stepped aside when they saw Blath. Most bowed or whispered blessings, some called out after him. Two soldiers barked salutes, a woman shrieked with glee when Blath nodded at her. A throng of children followed for a minute or so before trailing off to play out a mock battle. No one had eyes for the rangy farmer that followed him.

That didn't bother Connor. He found it darkly amusing that these people had only heard the stories. He had lived them. He had felt the aura of myth that surrounded Blath like a feathered cloak. Watched, terrified, as he pried a man's head clean from his shoulders with just his hands. Blath was blessed by the gods, of that there was no doubt. Connor couldn't even rule out that he might one day become one. But, despite what people might believe, he was still just a man.

Blath led Connor to his own roundhouse. It was easily twice the size and many times more impressive than his. Instead of wood, its walls were made with stone. The thatch roof was finely kept. Emerald banners flanked either side of the doorway.

Blath's wife, Sorcha, was waiting in the yard. A plait of raven black hair fell over her shoulder while she swept a whetstone across the edge of a dagger. When she looked up to see Blath, her dark eyes shimmered in the morning light.

She stood and stuck the dagger into the stump she had been sitting on. "So he convinced you after all," she laughed.

Connor stammered and bowed awkwardly. He didn't know what to say.

"Gave you his little speech, did he?"

"Sorcha."

"He must've been rehearsing it for weeks--"

"Sorcha!"

Blath surged toward her and she squealed, trying to run. But she was too slow. Blath wrapped her in his arms and went to kiss her. She tried to push herself free from his indomitable embrace, but it was hopeless. "Get off me you brute!"

When Blath finally obeyed, she straightened her emerald dress, looked at Connor, and said, "Let's make a deal, you and I. I'll watch your goats, if you watch mine?" She stuck a thumb toward Blath, who balked.

Connor didn't know what to say, so he replied with a nod. He felt deeply uncomfortable. So many years apart and now Blath had

dragged him back into his life as if nothing had happened. Why?

Before Connor could fret over it any longer, Blath let out a ferocious "baaaa!" and went to steal another kiss from Sorcha, but she was too quick and fled inside. As he turned to leave, she reappeared with a length of cord and a small wooden pendant she had whittled. It was shaped like a man, its head dipped in what Connor guessed was blood. Standing on her toes, she reached up to tie it around Blath's neck and then kissed him. Deeply. Connor looked away.

The next day, while trekking through woods, the questions sprouting in Connor's head began to entangle him. All manner of terrifying futures began to branch out from this moment. Futures that ended in violence and death. This was Blath, after all. Killing was his craft.

They marched east through groves of rowan and across rivers far outside the King's domain. They slept pressed between the tangled, reaching roots of ancient oaks, shared strips of dried mutton and cheese that Sorcha had packed. Despite the long hours they shared, Blath said little. The silence between them crystallized--too rigid for Connor to break.

Until he saw the boat.

"You cannot be serious!" Connor pleaded as Blath calmly loaded

his pack onto the currach.

The warrior turned to Connor and held out his hand. "Spear."

Connor's throat was dry with fear. He had never been out to sea, and the sight of its massive blue maw filled him with a terrifying sensation of being swallowed whole. "You can't do this..."

"That's the beauty of it," Blath chuckled. "I'm the King's Man, I can do whatever I want!"

Before Connor could act, Blath pounced and wrapped his enormous arms around him. The sudden attack caught him by surprise. He struggled and writhed, but his arms were pinned hopelessly to his sides. He screamed--not the scream of a warrior, but a shrill cry that was devoured by the crash of waves. Blath hauled him toward the boat but lost his footing on the stony beach. Both men tumbled sidelong to the earth. Connor sprang to his feet and brandished his spear. The dulled tip inches from Blath's flat, crooked nose.

"I will kill you if I have to!"

But Blath wasn't listening. He was laughing. A guttural bark Connor could feel in his chest. "Connor Mac Tomoltach, you are a warrior!"

Connor stiffened as shame lashed him like a whip. His heart

sank. But before he could defend himself, Blath continued: "Do not fret, mo dhuine beag. I mean you no harm." He pushed himself up and clapped the dirt off his hands. "I did not bring you on this journey for your skill in battle."

"Then why did you bring me?"

Blath gave him a searching look. For a second, Connor thought he saw something in his beryl eyes. Distrust? No, something worse. Fear.

"I will not force you onto this boat," Blath said at last. "But in all the years we've been friends, have I ever lied to you?" Blath stretched his arms wide, showing he had nothing to hide. "I am not here to lead you to ruin, Connor."

Connor's hands trembled from the residual rush of adrenaline. "Then what are you here to do?"

"The King has asked me to venture beyond the sea in search of a garden where I will find a magical brier patch. A burr of which I am to bring back to him."

"Why?"

Blath shrugged. "I am the King's Man, not the King's ear. It is not for me to know the wisdom that guides him." He turned and pushed the boat out into waves that lapped at the animal skins stretched over its hull. "So what's it going to be?"

Connor took a deep breath, feeling the sting of salt in his nose. He lowered his spear.

#

When the green slopes of his homeland first disappeared, Connor was seized by a quiet terror. If a storm were to sink them, no one would ever know; the entirety of his life digested by whatever hell lurked in the black depths below. Though dark storm clouds menaced them from the horizon, that is where they stayed.

The wind was favorable. It filled the sail embroidered with Blath's family crest most hours of the day. Blath seemed tense and alert. His thick fingers moved with a surprising nimbleness as he fidgeted with the sail, adjusting it relentlessly to catch the fullest wind. But as the sun began to set he seemed to calm. Connor, meanwhile, stared out at nothing until it filled his mind.

Blath sat opposite of Connor and reached under his bench to produce a crudely crafted box. It was flat and wide, and he opened it to reveal a set of equally crude stone dice. He retrieved a skin of miodh from his pack, which he drank from and then offered to Connor. The honey wine eased him.

"I have to admit, I barely recognized you when I saw you,"

Blath said, taking another drink. "I hadn't been to the western moors in years, let alone your father's home. I thought I had the wrong one. You look well."

"I wish I could say the same. What happened to your nose?"

Blath touched it gingerly and smiled. "Caught a throwing ax with my face. You should've seen the blood."

Connor grimaced.

"That was about eight years ago, now," Blath said. "When we were still at war with the Cnogba."

"No more wars now."

"No more wars now."

"I guess that's what happens when you butcher all your enemies." Connor couldn't resist the jab. The wine was making him reckless.

Blath sucked his teeth but didn't take the bait. Connor was impressed. The Blath he knew wasn't so measured.

As the wine flowed, however, their conversation became less tense. Blath told Connor about how he came to be the King's Man and how he was chosen by the clans to succeed King Eogan mac Muirdag. Eogan had sons, Blath explained. Men with fiery hearts and valor whom he clearly hoped would take the Alder Throne after him. But the people loved Blath. He was their hero. And so

Blath Ua Blath, the Mountain of An Chliabhán, was elected heir.

"Do you want to be king?" Connor said, passing the miodh.

Blath's smile was as bleak as the clouds that gathered to the south. "I don't have much choice, do I?"

"Could you not abdicate?"

"Sorcha would kill me." Blath sighed and half-heartedly tossed the dice into the box, not bothering to see how they fell. He was staring across the sea toward home. His fingers found Sorcha's pendant around his neck and tenderly held it. "Do you know how we met?"

Connor shook his head.

"Her foster father was a blacksmith--one of the best. When my great uncle was king before Eogan, and I was just a lad, he sent me to him to commission a sword. She was there, helping work the forge. Even covered in soot, I could see the beauty of her spirit shining through. Before I knew it, I was blurting out my intent to marry her. And do you know what she said?"

Connor shook his head.

"No!" Blath laughed, his cheeks red. "Said she'd only marry a hero like Cú Chulainn! Can you imagine that? So, you know what I did?"

"You didn't--"

"I stole her the most fertile bull you'd ever seen! Took it from a farmer in Glendalough. Took days to pull the damn thing home."

Connor laughed. He laughed even harder when Blath drunkenly stood and used his arm to crudely demonstrate the size of the bull's genitals. And he laughed harder still when Blath lost his balance and, windmilling his arms, fell back in his seat, upending the box and the dice.

Blath wiped a tear from his cheek, still chuckling. "My Great Uncle almost had me flayed for that. But if she wanted Cú Chulainn, then Cú Chulainn I'd be."

Their laughter trailed into silence. Connor was reminded of the last time he could remember drinking with Blath. Samhain bonfires reaching toward an autumn night sky, the smell of oily meat offered to the Aos Sí. Two friends, arms locked together, singing battle hymns between generous gulps of wine while the rest of the village cheered. The lingering warmth on his forehead where his father had planted a drunken, affectionate kiss.

The wine in Connor's mouth turned sour when he realized it was that following spring that he and his father--along with every other able-bodied man--had received their summons from the King.

Connor shook his head, trying to chase away the memories that lay just on his periphery. The distant screams, the taste of blood. The vile stench of burning flesh and hair. Somewhere in the distance, a mother howling in grief.

"Connor."

Connor fixed his eyes on him and the wounds he thought healed and scarred over now felt raw and tender. Blath was not his friend. Not anymore.

"Craven," Connor croaked.

Blath blinked in surprise. "What?"

"That's what you called me, wasn't it? Craven."

Darkness spread across Blath's beastly face.

"Connor, I--"

"Eleven years, Blath. Eleven years. You were my friend, my brother."

Blath's cheeks flushed. "And you were mine," he said. "But then one night I wake to find you sneaking off--deserting! The King would've had you beheaded."

"Then so be it! Better to lose my head than spend another day butchering for that vile bastard."

"Connor." It was a warning, but Connor didn't care.

"Don't you 'Connor' me," he spat. "This might shock you,

Blath, but not everyone aspires to be you. Not everyone finds fame and fortune in dashing innocent peoples' skulls against rocks for having the audacity to be born to a different clann."

Blath's eyes radiated violence.

"I do as my king commands," he growled. "I protect my people. You abandoned them to save yourself."

"That's not true."

Connor remembered the day his father returned from the campaign. A proud man now broken. Swordarm hewn at the elbow, ravaged by infection. Connor blinked back tears, recalling all the horrible things his father said to him as he slipped between consciousness and fever dreams. Curses that persisted until the cold winter morning when Connor woke to discover he was now all alone.

Craven. Bastard. Disappointment.

Somewhere deep down, Connor still yearned to find the words that might justify what he did. That perfect sentence that, like a key, would've opened the door to mutual understanding between his father and him. Words that could give shape to the agony he felt spilling blood in the name of a man he'd never met. That could encompass the burning self-loathing he carried ever since he left Blath standing in that moonlit clearing, his name

drifting on the breeze.

But there was no key. No words. Just a pile of painful memories and a spear.

"I need to tell you something, Connor."

Connor heard the words but wasn't listening. His eyes had settled on something in the distance that materialized out of the gloom of dusk. A dark ridge that reached up like black teeth to chew at the amber sky. Land.

Blath caught the look on Connor's face and turned slowly to see it himself.

"Ah," he said soberly. "We have arrived."

#

By the time the boat touched land, the veil of darkness had become absolute. The only light came from the mushrooms that dotted the shore. Each glowed shades of sapphire, barely illuminating the roots of the tall trees that stood a few paces up the beach. Their light pulsated almost imperceptibly, a quiet thrumming that made this strange shore feel otherworldly.

Blath ordered Connor to stay where he was and grabbed his own spear. He disembarked, and quickly tied the currach to a nearby tree, careful to step around any of the mushrooms at his feet.

Connor retrieved a torch from their stash of supplies, but

Blath waved it away.

"Too dangerous," he whispered, just loud enough so that Connor could hear him over the waves lapping against the stones. Those words made Connor tremble. He grabbed his father's spear instead.

With a thrust of his open hand, Blath wordlessly ordered Connor to stay. He then disappeared into the darkness. The sound of his footsteps scraping against rock faded until at last Connor was utterly alone.

Then, after a time, he returned. Blath quietly crawled onto the boat. He pulled Connor close, so that the bristles of his red beard scratched at his ear.

"Do not fear. But this place is strange and magical and we should be cautious. This beach is small, hemmed in on all sides by forest. A good spot to land. No fire tonight, though. Get some sleep. I'll take the first watch."

"Are you sure?"

Blath patted him on the back and stepped toward the bow. In the black of night, Connor could just make out his burly figure, silhouetted by the lazuli glow of mushrooms.

Connor pulled his cloak around him to ward off the slight chill that wafted in from the sea. He tucked into himself on the

currach's deck between the benches, resting his head along the hull. His mind raced with the immensity of this moment--an acute feeling that after so many days of travel, he was teetering on the threshold. Of what, he couldn't perceive.

That night on the strange shore filled Connor's head with even stranger dreams. When he opened his eyes to a dreary, granite sky he had forgotten all but one.

He was standing in a great hall. The green in Blath's eyes shimmered against the red of his braided hair and beard. Deep wrinkles disguised a quiet ferocity that made him radiate with authority. A crown of gold upon his head.

Blath sat on a throne of knotted brier. The thorns bit into his flesh. Blood wept from countless cuts and ran in thick, sticky rivulets down twisted branches. It dribbled onto the stone dais upon which he sat, forming black ichor pools that shimmered in the dancing fire of the hall's iron sconces. The smell of sap and death was nauseating.

A soft weeping noise escaped Blath's lips. With a groan like an oak tree bending in the wind, thorned branches burst from Blath's eyes, nose and mouth. They blossomed outward, wrapping around him, cocooning him, stifling his whimperin, until king and brier throne became as one.

#

The journey inland was a short one, but each step would be carved into Connor's memory until the day he died. He was convinced that no forest such as this existed in all of Eriu. Colossal oaks towered over them. Thick roots thrust from the earth, verdant moss draping over their boughs like sheets drying on the line. The morning gloom had cleared and dappled sunlight filtered down through the canopy above, caught by white pedals that fell like fresh snow. They collected in the nooks of broken earth, whispering when displaced by Connor's footsteps. Each breath filled his nose with the rich smell juniper and soil. Connor was not a spiritual man, but even he knew that this was sacred ground.

Blath waved a hand at him. Looking up, he could see they were on the threshold of a circular glade. It was no more than 300 paces across, judging by the trees on the far rim. The earth heaved here, creating a large mound upon which sat a single, massive willow tree. Its dangling fronds, which enveloped much of the hill, were wreathed with delicate, white-pedaled flowers.

In the blanket of shadow cast by the rising sun, Connor saw a man.

He was seated, arms resting on his knees. A spear nestled in

the crook of his elbow. Connor glanced at Blath, who had already started walking toward the willow tree. For a second Connor faltered but then remembered Blath's promise: He had not brought him to fight. He stepped out into the glade and followed his companion up the hill.

Several paces in, the man beneath the willow began to stand. He moved as if the weight of centuries clung to his bones. When he at last stood tall, he slammed the butt of his spear into the earth. The message was clear: You cannot pass.

Blath stopped and Connor heard him heave a deep sigh. He looked over his shoulder at him and his expression bristled with violence. "Stay back."

The man at the top of the mound stepped forward out of the shadow of the tree and Connor couldn't help but gasp. He was no man, but a monster of bramble and thorn. It wove tightly around its flesh, like armor. Errant branches protruded at odd angles, small buds of white-petaled flowers bloomed all over his body. Through gaps in the knot of branches, Connor thought he could see flesh, ripped and red. A stench like rancid corpse meat radiated from him. Blath wrinkled his nose in disgust.

"Stand aside," he said calmly. "I am here at the behest of King Eogan mac Muirdag, Lord of An Chliabhán. I do not wish to

inflict harm upon you."

"You should not have come, Blath," the man of thorns hissed.

Blath turned his spear downward and jabbed it into the earth. He pulled his shield over his shoulder and dropped it, then unclasped the brooch securing his green cloak. It billowed to the grass at his feet. He then pulled off his tunic and goatskin boots and stepped out of his trousers. Completely naked, pale skin glowing in the morning sun, Blath picked up his shield. Felt the weight of it in his left hand. With his right, he plucked the spear from the earth and brandished it toward his opponent. "Stand still and I will end your misery."

He looked more Tuatha Dé than human; a warrior of the old gods. His red hair shimmered in the sun's light.

The monster struck with surprising agility. In three great bounds he was on Blath, his spear firing forward with enough force that it whistled on the wind.

Blath was quicker.

In one fluid movement, he ducked beneath the stab and brushed the spear aside with his shield. Then, spinning around, he swept his own spear in a low, slashing arc. The demon was nimble, too. He leapt and brought one brambled foot crashing down on Blath's spearhead, pinning it to the earth. Rotating slightly, he tried

to snap the spear haft in two by stomping it with his other foot. Blath pressed his shield against the spear for leverage and pushed forward lifting the haft high so that the thorned warrior couldn't get his other foot on it. His balance suddenly shifting, the monster stumbled backward. Before he could recover his balance, Blath pressed the attack.

With a savage roar he thrust his spear forward, aiming to catch his opponent's torso. Again, and again. But the thorned man dodged each strike effortlessly. He twisted to the side, slimming himself and sprung backwards, buying some precious distance from Blath's furious onslaught.

The smell of corpses now permeated the battlefield. Connor watched with horror as black ichor seeped through the cracks in his bramble armor. It splattered onto the green grass, glistening like tar, reeking like death. Connor remembered his dream and shivered.

The thorned demon swung his spear around in a wide, sweeping arc with such tenacity that the head whistled where it cut the air. He passed it from hand to hand, a blur of wood and iron. A ridiculous flourish, Connor thought. The kind of thing you'd see a haughty nobleman do in the training yard to show off. On the battlefield, though, that kind of display was worthless.

Pretentious. Dangerous.

Blath watched intently, an assured smile on his face. The demon was just giving him a moment to catch his breath, Connor realized.

Before he could finish the thought, the demon took a sudden step forward. He swept his spear high, loosening his grip so the momentum pulled it forward, extending the reach of it by several fatal paces. Blath tried to duck the blow but was too slow. The spearhead raked across his face, releasing a shower of blood that fanned out across the grass and down his naked torso. He roared, clutching his eye with his shield hand, doubling over himself. His spear fell to the grass.

"Blath!" Connor screamed.

It was too late. The brambled monster couched his spear with both hands and charged. Every muscle in Connor's body froze. He wanted to run to Blath, to join him in this desperate struggle. But his legs wouldn't move. He was shackled by fear. Blath had brought him here not to fight--so for what? To watch him be slaughtered by a monster that would undoubtedly turn on him next?

Just as the spear tip was about to impale Blath's unprotected torso, he twisted toward it. The tip missed. It slid through a

gap between his stomach and elbow. He wrapped his arm around the haft and pinned it to his ribs. Then, with a savage battle cry, he brought his shield crashing down. The spear shattered in two.

The momentum of the demon's charge could not be diverted. He thundered into Blath. Both bowled over each other, tumbling down the gradual slope of the hill leaving a smear of black and red behind them. They rolled to a stop with the demon on top. The thorns in his thighs bit into Blath's stomach. Blath's agonized scream cut short as barbed hands wrapped around his neck.

Connor found what small measure of courage he possessed. He dropped his shoulder, charged and tackled the monster. Pain lanced up his arm where the barbs cut him.

Blath rolled with the momentum of Connor's tackle, reversing the grapple so that he now had the monster pinned. Pulling his shield from his arm, he held it high in both hands--pausing just long enough for the man of thorns to raise his arms in surrender. "Please, listen!" he cried.

Blath brought the rim of the shield down with terrible force. Connor, laying on the grass a few paces away, had just enough time to look away. The repeated crunch of branch and bone made him wince. His fingers bored deep into the soil.

A long silence settled over the glade. When Connor opened his

eyes, he saw Blath sitting on his haunches, inspecting his slain enemy. His head was a splintered red thicket of bone and bramble.

Blath was no better.

His eye was a ruin. The spear had cleaved it out. Blood poured down his cheek, seeped into his beard and dripped onto his chest as he stared down at the fiend. Around his waist, Connor could see hundreds of cuts where thorns bit into him. Even more around his neck and thighs.

For a moment Connor could only stare in shock. Then, all at once, he sprung into action. He jogged up the hill where Blath had discarded his tunic and tore it into strips. Blath remained still. Frozen.

"Blath, your bleeding needs to be stopped or..." Connor couldn't bring himself to say it. Slowly, Blath twisted his head to look up at him. His ruined eye glistened in the sunlight.

"So do it."

Connor wrapped his eye first with several strips of cloth, doing what he could to provide pressure and stem the bleeding. Then he squatted down behind Blath and awkwardly wrapped his arms around his stomach to bandage the thorn cuts. When he turned his attention to Blath's neck, he waved him away.

"Enough."

Blath retrieved his shield and stood. Connor watched quietly. With his eye patch, bloodied and beaten, Blath was even more of a terror.

He turned and strode up the mound, stopping to pull on his trousers and boots. He then retrieved his spear where he dropped it. Turning to Connor, he said, "If you ever tell anyone I dropped my spear, I'll gut you."

Connor returned his smirk. He watched him continue up the hill toward the willow tree and then raced after him.

The white-petaled fronds of the willow draped like a curtain. Connor pulled them aside to step into its canopy. Blath was crouched down, inspecting something. As Connor's eyes adjusted to the dimness, he saw that the trunk of the tree was enshrouded by the creeping tangles of a brier patch. A great knit of branches that spiraled up the trunk and wove among the boughs. Enclosed in this secret space, the smell of sap and death overwhelmed him. Black ichor oozed from the tree, like oily tears. Connor felt dizzy. Midway up the trunk, he saw a face molded in the willow's trunk. It was frozen in a ghastly howl, agony etched in bark.

There was evil here, Connor knew. A strange, ancient evil.

"Blath," Connor whispered. "We should not stay here. This is an unholy place."

Blath's expression was terrible. His eyes fixed on the face etched in the willow and Connor saw a flash of recognition in them. He asked who it was but Blath did not respond. His gaze had fallen to the burrs that dangled from the thicket. Unlike the delicate white pedals of the willow's flowers, these were large and menacing. The straw-colored hooks that radiated out at every angle were tipped with a deep, fleshy violet. It was unlike any plant Connor had seen.

Blath reached out to take one. Connor put his arm on his shoulder, stopping him. "What are you doing?"

"This is why we're here. The King asked me to retrieve a burr from the base of the willow tree in Gairdín na mBrón."

It was the first time Connor had heard this place given a name. Before he could further protest, Blath's hand snapped forward and plucked one of the burrs from its stem. He turned away, stepping out of the canopy and into the sunlight to examine his prize.

Connor watched him disappear behind the veil of fronts and flowers. He then hung his head and sighed. The strangeness of this place was beginning to wear on him. He was exhausted. And

while Blath had emerged victorious in his duel, it had cost him an eye. More than ever, Connor began to fear. He feared what strange twists this journey might still have, he feared what would happen if Blath had to take up his spear again. He feared Blath. Both of him and for him. For the burden this quest had clearly laid on his heart, and for the reasons which he seemed unwilling to share that burden.

Connor's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of grunting. He hurriedly stepped into the sunlight beyond the willow's canopy. Blath was holding his prized burr in his hand, his one good eye glaring at it in complete, untethered horror. His arm trembled violently. Blath's muscles tensed and pulled against an unseen force. "I can't..." Blath groaned.

"Blath, what's--"

Blath howled. His fingers closed around the burr, pressing it deep into his palm. The hooks punctured the skin, releasing strings of blood that seeped through the cracks in his fist. Blath fell to his knees. "Connor! Help me!"

The sheer, childlike panic in Blath's voice filled Connor's veins with ice. He rushed to his side and grabbed his arm. It vibrated violently as the muscles spasmed. Blath's fist had shut completely. Connor dug his fingers into it trying desperately to

pry it open. It was hopeless. A strength far beyond his sealed Blath's hand shut. Blath cried out again, tears from his one good eye streaking down the muck and blood on his face. He lurched back violently, slamming himself to the ground. His spine so rigid that it lifted him off the grass, his limbs hard as stone. Connor shouted for him, but Blath didn't respond. White, sticky foam bubbled at the corners of his mouth. He let out a disturbing gurgling noise. His one bloodshot eye rolled back into his skull. Then, all at once, his muscles relaxed and he fell still.

Connor dropped to his knees beside Blath and leaned over his mouth, listening for any signs of life. He was breathing. A whisper of breath so faint that it took Connor several minutes to assure himself it was there. But it was. Blath was still alive.

#

On the second morning of their voyage, Connor woke to Blath's pained breathing. His eyes blinked open at the gentle kiss of spring rain. A gray sky stretched from horizon to horizon. Sitting forward, he saw Blath tucked against the bow like a child pressed into a parent's arms. He moaned quietly and clutched his arm.

"Are you okay?"

Blath looked up at him, his one eye dull with pain and the miodh he drank endlessly. Without saying anything, Blath pulled his cloak back from his arm and held it so Connor could see. Horror spread across his face.

The skin of Blath's arm was marked with spots of deep violet, green and yellow. Scattered bruises, some the size of a coin, others a fist, reached all the way up to his shoulder. Puss and blood wept from open sores where the skin had broken and peeled back to reveal what looked like black spikes. At first Connor thought it was bits of bone, somehow splintered and driven through Blath's skin. Crawling closer, however, he discovered small thorns protruding from each spike. It wasn't bone. It was branches. A thicket of brier sprouting from within.

"It's growing," Blath said distantly. "I can feel it growing."

"The burr?"

Blath nodded. "It's a seed, and I am its soil."

#

Connor had been watching his goats graze when he heard men approaching on horseback. He had just enough time to climb the wall before they reached the gate. There were three, each clad with a red cloak. The King's colors.

"In the name of the King," the lead rider shouted. "Let us in."

Connor obeyed without a word. He raced to pull open the gate and the three men strode in atop their horses, ducking under the stone archway above.

The lead rider dismounted and removed his helmet, revealing long brown hair that fell in lazy curls about his shoulders. He carried himself with the cocksure poise of a captain. The soldier breathed deeply, wincing slightly at the smell of goat shit that wafted over from the kennel, and gave Connor's ringfort an appraising look. He clearly didn't think much of it.

"Connor Mac Tomoltach?" the Captain asked. Connor nodded. He was about to continue when Connor held up a hand.

"Save you breath."

The soldier frowned, anger flashed in his eyes. He began to protest when Connor interrupted him again. "I know what you're here for, so let me save you some time. I don't know where he is."

The Captain glanced over his shoulder at the two still atop their horses and sighed.

"It's the same thing I told the riders who came last week. And the ones the week before that," Connor grumbled. "And the ones

the week before that. I don't know where Blath is."

The soldier reached for his belt and, for a brief, terrifying moment, Connor thought he was about to draw his sword. Instead, he unclasped a cloth pouch and tossed it onto the ground. Gold rings and coins spilled out into the mud. One coin rolled along the trampled earth, stopping just short of Connor's boot. He bent down and picked it up, examining it.

"The King has doubled the bounty on any information that leads to the whereabouts of Blath Ua Blath."

"I can see that."

"His lordship is very concerned for the wellbeing of his friend and heir. You were the last person in his company, surely you must know something."

Connor, still on his haunches, flipped the coin with his thumb. It spun through the air, landing next to the others that had fallen loose.

"Wellbeing, eh?" Connor chuckled.

The soldier chewed his lip. His patience was drying up.

"If you continue to refuse to cooperate, Connor Mac Tomoltach, the King may begin to suspect you are hiding something."

Connor stood and laughed. "What, you think I killed him? The bloody Mountain of An Chliabhán?"

One of the mounted soldiers laughed but was silenced by a glare from the Captain. "Not in the least," he said, returning his attention to Connor. "But there may be other explanations."

Connor let out a long, irritated sigh. "Look, I'll tell you what I told the others. We couldn't find the island the King sent Blath in search of. We returned here almost a month ago and went our separate ways. I haven't seen hide nor hair of him since."

The Captain bent and scooped up the gold coins and rings that had spilled out of the satchel. He held one up, so that it caught the light of the setting sun. It sparkled brilliantly. "Gold like this could do a lot for a farmer like you," he said, eyeing the coin. "Couldn't help but notice your wall has collapsed on the southern face. And that goat pen looks ready to do the same. Would be a shame if wolves or worse got in here. These are hard times, you know. Especially when you're all alone. You could hire a farmhand or two. Hell, maybe even find yourself a wife."

The Captain flipped the coin with his thumb. It spun through the air toward Connor, who caught it. He held it in his palm and inspected the crude engraving of what must be the King's face. He was right. Money like this would change his life forever. He

could buy cows and enough seeds to double his yield. He could renovate his roundhouse, buy new clothes and tools--anything he wanted. All he had to do was say a few simple words.

"Keep that," the Captain said. "As a token of the King's sincerity. We'll be back next week to see if you've changed your mind."

"I'm not going to--"

Before Connor could finish his sentence the Captain mounted his horse and with a yell and a kick sent the beast trotting off through the gate. The two other riders followed. Moments later, Connor was once again alone.

#

The setting sun cast harsh silhouettes of the surrounding hills when Connor slipped through the crumbling southern wall. A warm spring breeze swept northward, buffeting him the moment he crawled free from the gap where the stones had fallen free. Crouching low, he scanned the horizon for any sign that he was being observed. Then, keeping low among the tall grass, Connor clambered down the shallow hill behind his home. He moved faster this time, pausing only briefly to study the terrain that would conceal him best. After doing this for so many nights, it was all becoming instinct to him.

Half an hour of scuttling among loose boulders, brown grass, and rolling hills brought Connor to a meadow tucked between two bluffs. He risked moving briskly here. The bluffs would conceal him from prying eyes.

As the last crimson ribbons of sunlight faded, he arrived.

The walls of the abandoned ringfort had long since fallen, leaving now only a circle of stones--many of which his father had hauled back to build his own home when Connor was still just a boy. The wooden gate lay in splinters near where the entrance must've stood. Just beyond, in the center of the ruin, thin smoke guttered out of the gaps in a dessicated roundhouse. Connor whistled something akin to birdsong as he stepped over the remains of the wall. A signal to announce his arrival.

When nearing the doorway, he said, "Hello Blath, I brought you food." There was no response, but Connor could hear the creaking of branches. "If you want me to go, I'll just leave them for you."

"Stay."

Connor nodded. He ducked through the opening and into the roundhouse. It wreaked of piss and shit, blood and sap. A sickly sweet smell that made him wince. Near the door, a small fire sputtered and crackled. Opposite of it, at the furthest possible

edge, Connor saw a black shape sitting in the darkness. Blath. Squatting close to him, Connor offered the satchel.

"There's meat pies. Your favorite."

As Blath reached forward to take the satchel, his arm entered the sputtering halo of the fire. Connor could see the brambles jutting out and through it. Black blood dripped from a few of the thorns, old wounds freshly torn open by his slow, pained movement. Connor watched a drip fall to the dirt floor.

Turning away, he grabbed a handful of twigs to throw on the fire. The flames surged hungrily to devour them. Blath tensed. Connor had started to notice his aversion to flame, the way he winced whenever Connor fed the fire. More than once he arrived to find Blath sitting alone in the dark. Connor couldn't bear the thought of it.

"What's troubling you?"

Connor tossed another branch on the fire. "What do you mean?"

"Spill it."

Connor collapsed on a bench near his friend. Now that his eyes adjusted to the meager light, he could see the brambles that encased his head like a helmet. Atop it a crown of thorns, just like the one the Christians preached about. Blath's long red hair was hopelessly tangled in the thicket that enveloped

him. His speaking had become impacted by a branch that had grown through his cheek and jabbed out of his mouth like a tusk. He had long ago abandoned trying to trim any of them. They grew too quickly, he said. Through a gap between thicket, he stared at Connor with his one good eye. There was a dullness in his gaze, a detachment that made Connor feel invisible.

For weeks Connor had, in quiet horror, watched Blath succumb to the curse clutched in his hand. The seed from which brambles sprouted and bloomed, skewering, lacerating, and finally encasing The Mountain in a second skin of brier. He was terrifying as he was unrecognizable.

Connor pressed his hands into his eyes so hard he saw stars and sighed. "He's looking for you."

"The King?"

Connor nodded. "Three riders, every week. They try to bribe me for information, sometimes threaten me. I haven't said anything, Blath. I swear it." After a moment, he added: "You have enough to worry about. That's why I didn't tell you."

"He means to finish what he started."

Connor blinked in surprise. "What?"

Blath's one eye fixed on Connor with a sudden, unsettling lucidity. "This is Eogan's doing," he growled. "I am certain of

it."

Connor tried to swallow and found it impossible. He had his suspicions. Though Blath was heir to the Alder Throne, he was not of Eogan's blood. He had been elected by his deeds alone. But Eogan had many sons, men of valor in their own right. It wasn't a stretch to believe he secretly wanted one of them to inherit the kingdom he had built through blood and war. Until now, these were merely Connor's suspicions. Ever since they left that strange isle, Blath had become withdrawn. He spoke only seldomly, usually nothing more than a grunt--it was too painful to do much else. And so Blath wasn't the only one waiting in the dark.

But then, a flash of revelation: "The face. In the tree! You recognized it!"

Blath nodded. "I didn't want to believe it at the time."

"Who?"

"My Great Uncle, the King before Eogan." Blath sat back and let out an exhausted sigh. "I was always told he gave up the throne because he preferred sailing over ruling. Now we know where he landed."

Connor rubbed his chin, puzzled. "And the demon?"

"I recognized his voice. I believe it was his son--my cousin.

Heir to his throne before Eogan."

Connor felt sick. If Blath was right, Eogan's lust for power had no limits. "If Eogan did this on purpose, Blath, then he needs to answer for his crimes. You must denounce him. Reveal his treachery!"

Brambles creaked as Blath shook his head. "Absolutely not."

"What? Why? The people will listen to you, Blath. They love you!"

Blath laughed. A cruel, morose chuckle that made the thicket around him groan. "The people don't love me. They love the idea of me. They love the songs and the stories." Blath spread his arms, inhaling sharply as countless barbs carved fresh wounds in whatever skin was left beneath. "But this? Connor, no one will love this."

Frustration burned within Connor's breast. He wanted to scream. Where was the Blath he knew? Where were the flames that once burned so brightly within those emerald eyes? Day after day, Connor clung to hope that something would change. That some turn of fortune would save Blath from the curse that gripped him. And each day, Connor had to ignore the whispers from within: There would be no salvation.

It left Connor with one question that haunted him most of all:

"Why me?"

"Connor..."

"You called me a craven," Connor continued, old wounds burning raw again. "You told me that if you ever saw me again you'd turn me over to the King for deserting. Eleven years, Blath. Eleven goddamn years. And then you just show up at my door like nothing happened. Why?"

"Because I was wrong."

Connor stared, unblinking.

"Because you're not a coward," Blath said, his words stilted.

"I am."

Connor felt dizzy. He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"When you left, I hated you," Blath continued. "I hated you for being weak. I hated you for dishonoring your father. But most of all, I hated you for leaving me."

"Blath..."

"I've spent my whole life feeling unworthy of love, Connor. Straining with everything I have to be deserving of it. But no matter how hard I fought, no matter how glorious the tales, it never lasted. Sorcha, the King--everyone always needed more. I always had to be more."

Blath hunched forward and grabbed at the branches that encased

his head in anguish. "The things I've done to win love," he whispered. "The faces I see when I close my eyes..."

Connor wanted to but couldn't bring himself to put a hand on Blath's shoulder. He stared, unmoving, as Blath wept quietly for a long while.

At last, Blath sat up and sniffed. "You are no warrior, Connor, but that doesn't make you any less of a man. You were true to yourself, despite all that it cost you. I wasn't, and now look at what it has cost me."

"Blath, that doesn't make you a coward--"

"You don't get it," Blath snapped. "I'd rather be Eogan's butcher than acknowledge the truth. I've stared down death a thousand times, but I couldn't even muster the courage to apologize to you? Which of us was really the pretender here? You want to know why I finally came? Because I knew Eogan was plotting to kill me and that, in all likelihood, he would succeed. But I also know how Eogan thinks. If I brought you along, I knew he would attempt to buy your silence."

Connor's brow furrowed in confusion. "What does that have to do--"

"Connor. You have punished yourself long enough. You deserve what little happiness can be found in this life. I might not be

able to break that which chains me, but I can at least break that which chains you."

"I don't want his gold!" Connor shouted. He pulled the gold coin from his pocket and, blinking back tears, flung it to the dirt at Blath's feet. "I don't want your sacrifice, I don't want your apologies. Blath, I just want my friend back."

Blath stood and, reaching between the branches hugging his neck, pulled something free and handed it to Connor. It was the wooden pendant Sorcha had given him. The crudely carved figure of a man, head dipped in blood. "Take this to Eogan and tell him where I am."

"Blath, no!"

"Please! I know I don't deserve this. But do it for me, anyway. Eogan will want to see me slain personally. It's my only chance."

"Blath, no." Connor was shaking. He pressed his eyes into his hands to hide his tears. "You can't just leave me all alone. I have no one left," he whispered.

"Look at me."

"Blath..."

"Look at me!" Blath roared. Connor jolted back, terrified. In the flickering firelight, Blath was like something out of a

nightmare. A living, breathing, bleeding wickerman. "Why won't you realize that I am already dead?"

"You will be soon."

Both Connor and Blath jerked their heads toward the darkness of the doorway where the strange voice had come. A broad figure stepped into the firelight, the red of his cloak glowing in the feeble firelight. Connor recognized him immediately. The Captain. Before anyone could respond, he drew his sword and pointed it at Blath. "I won't let you within a league of the King. Blath Ua Blath, stand still so I can end your suffering."

Blath snarled like a wild animal. Drips of fresh blood splattered through the gaps in his brier skin. Before either man could strike, Connor saw a flash of silver. The Captain's eyes widened and he gasped, clutching at his throat. Just below his beard a red flower blossomed. He fell to his knees, gulping for air with terrible, soundless hisses. Behind him, a woman with black hair wiped a bloody dagger across her smock.

Sorcha.

Blath gasped and, covering his face, shrunk back into darkness. Sorcha paid him no mind. She hooked her arms around the dying soldier's torso and, looking at Connor, said, "Help me move him."

Connor was too shocked to refuse. He stumbled over to her and, grabbing the Captain's legs, helped her move him outside into the silver moonlight. They laid him on the ground near the door. By then, he was still.

"Don't worry. He's alone."

"How...?"

Sorcha laughed. "He wasn't the only one watching you. You lied to me, Connor."

Connor shrunk, averting his eyes from her terrible smile.

"Blath made me promise--"

Sorcha held up a hand to silence him. She then did something he did not expect: She embraced him. A warm, tight hug. "I'll forgive you this one time," she whispered, her face pressed against his shoulder. "Thank you for taking care of him."

Before he knew it, Connor found himself embracing her twice as hard. He fought back more tears.

After a moment, Sorcha pulled back and straightened her dress.

"How do I look?"

"Beautiful."

She beamed, her pale skin a reflection of the moon high above.

"Now I must be rude and insist that you wait out here while I talk to my husband. I hope you'll understand."

Connor bowed. "Of course."

Sorcha disappeared through the doorway, leaving Connor alone in the brisk night air. He stared at the corpse near his feet for a moment. The Captain's still eyes glistened in the moonlight. Connor knelt down to close them.

Thoughts raced through his mind. How he was going to conceal this? His disappearance would be sure to draw even more attention to him. Connor knew that the King's offer of gold would be exchanged for the mercy of the sword. He found these realizations almost amusing in how little they mattered to him now. Let the King sentence him to death. He already felt like a ghost, fading into nothing.

Turning away from the corpse, Connor stared as the cone of light spilling out of the doorway and wondered what Sorcha was saying to Blath. I am already dead. The words hurt Connor more than he could've ever expected. And as much as he wanted to scream and thrash against the truth of them, he knew Blath had died the moment he plucked that burr from the willow tree. The jaws of Eogan's trap closed shut, just as Blath's own hand pressed that cursed seed into his palm. There was no future for him now. At least not one where he lived with any dignity or freedom.

Connor walked to the ruins of the wall and sat on one of the stones. He looked up at the glinting stars and wondered where his father was among them. Did all his violence and glory earn him a place in the heavens just like he wanted? Or was he merely some bones in the ground? A feast for the apple tree that now sprouted where Connor had buried him.

"I'm sorry, father," Connor whispered. Cool tears ran down his cheeks. "I never wanted to disappoint you. I just couldn't be who you wanted me to be. I'm sorry you couldn't accept that."

Then more of Blath's words came to him: You were true to yourself, despite all that it cost you.

Hearing it had stung like alcohol on an infected wound. Connor had been ready to hate himself for the rest of his life. To pull the shame of his cowardice like a yolk. But, for the first time since his father died, Connor felt the specter of his disappointment lighten. He no longer needed to fear it.

Connor sat there for some time, staring up at the night sky. He wept for his father and for Blath, for himself and Sorcha, and for all the people whose destinies were shackled to the whims of fickle kings.

#

Connor woke to a gentle touch on his shoulder and saw Sorcha

kneeling over him. She smiled warmly, and wiped a lock of raven hair behind her ear. "Good, you're awake."

"I fell asleep?" Connor said, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. The eastern sky had grown pink and swollen in anticipation for the sun's rise.

Sorcha didn't respond. She stood and looked out toward the horizon. She closed her eyes and smiled. Fresh tears ran down here face. "It is done."

Connor grimaced. "What's done?"

Again she didn't respond. Only then did he notice the tiny cuts around her lips. More ran along her arms and hands. Little pinpricks of blood that drizzled like spring rain down her ivory skin. She absently ran her hand along her opposite arm, fingers tenderly probing the countless nicks. "It felt good to hold him again."

Connor turned and scrambled toward the roundhouse. His heartbeat thundered in his ears. "Blath!" he shouted, his voice echoing across the moor.

Inside, Blath lay on his back, next to the dead Captain, as if sleeping. The brambles that encased him didn't creak or groan with his breath because there was none. As Connor approached, he fell to his knees and cried out for him. But Blath did not stir.

He was gone. Connor howled in agony, pressing his forehead to the dirt floor, feeling hot, wet tears coat his cheeks. After a few moments, he crawled forward to lay trembling hands on his friend, ignoring the bite of his barbs. Connor thought back to their conversation the night before, and his reluctance to comfort Blath as he wept. Now it was too late. Then he noticed Sorcha's pendant clasped between the fingers of Blath's good hand. Looking through the gap in the briars that covered his face, he saw his one eye was closed, as if he were merely sleeping. Blath was at peace.

"I'm sorry you didn't get to say goodbye," Sorcha said from the doorway. "I know he would've wanted that."

Connor couldn't bring himself to look at her. It was too painful.

"And this?" Connor stammered. "This is what he wanted?"

"This is what he needed."

He turned to Sorcha, anger flashing across his face. "You murdered him!"

She bowed her head. "I saved him from himself." Connor stared at the pale curves of her face, etched in the morning light, drawn in anguish. "If he had attacked the King, Blath would be little more than bones, plucked clean by crows." She lifted her

head to Connor so he could see her swollen, wet eyes and trembling lips. "Now he will live on forever."

"What are you talking about? He's dead, Sorcha!"

Sorcha laughed and wiped the tears from her eyes. "You should come to town more often, Connor. You'd then see for yourself the crowds that gather to hear songs of the Great Blath Ua Blath. Already the bards have written new sagas for him. And as long as his fate remains unknown, the stories will only become more and more glorious. He will become a god."

"He's not a god, Sorcha. He was your husband!"

Sorcha bent down to pluck a log from the fire. Connor hadn't noticed that it was still going, now much stronger than the night before. She held the burning torch and stepped into the room. "He is so much more than that, Connor. He is a legend. A living legend!"

"He is dead!"

"No," she said. Her voice quivered with a quiet, terrifying intensity. "He lives. I can feel him. Already I look at the stars as they fade in the morning light and see him there. Again I know the peace I once found in his arms."

Sorcha took another step toward Blath and Connor instinctively moved to block her passage. For a long moment he stared into her

eyes, testing the strength of her resolve. She did not flinch or turn away. She had nothing left to lose.

"Connor, let me do this."

"I... I can't."

"We made a deal. I watch your goats, you watch mine. Now that deal is fulfilled. Let me tend to my husband."

Connor glanced at the torch in her hand, blinking away fresh tears. "I can't let you erase him."

"The songs people sing will immortalize him for ages," she said, bringing a warm hand to his cheek. The tiny cuts on her palm left a red smear. "People now and on the far shores of time will worship him. But only so long as no one finds out what happened here."

Sorcha brushed past Connor and, kneeling, placed the torch on Blath's chest. He turned to see the flames lick hungrily at his brambles and began to spread. With fire dancing in his eyes, Connor at last spoke: "He never wanted to be a god. He just wanted to feel loved."

#

A brisk autumn wind swept over the meadow, filling the air with the scent of lilac and juniper. Petals white as cotton drifted on the breeze, gathering in mounds against the stones of

the ruined wall and covering the earth like snow, so that each step he took left a trail of exposed earth until the next breeze erased it.

Connor hobbled along, his leg aching from the long trek. He paid it no mind. He didn't need another reminder of how old he was getting.

Once inside the wall, he limped to the curtain of willow fronds that now enveloped the entirety of the abandoned ringfort. The willow tree was of breathtaking proportions. Its trunk stretched toward the sky while its fronds drooped lazily, the few remaining flowers that hadn't been stripped away by the autumn winds almost glowing. It had grown impossibly fast for its size.

Brushing the fronds to one side, Connor ducked into the cool darkness of the canopy. He was met with the now familiar smells: sap and, somewhere beneath it, death. He didn't wince or gag, but relished the familiar scent.

"Hello, old friend."

Walking up to the tree, Connor placed a hand on its trunk, careful to avoid the brambles and violet-tipped bulbs that wove upwards, coiling through and around its branches. Connor followed their ascent, searching for the spot where the shape of

a familiar face could be seen crudely shaped in the wood. When he found it, he reached up, standing on his tippy-toes to tenderly rub his hand against its cheek.

Rubbing black ichor on his trousers, he then upended the satchel he carried. Dozens of figurines tumbled out. Some made of bone, others of rowen or poplar. Some intricately carved, with eyes and a nose and mouth, others just a crude shape of a man. All of them stained red where the head had been dipped in sheep's blood to resemble his fiery red hair.

"I brought these for you," he said. He stooped to pick them up, one by one, and arranged them along the roots of the willow next to the others that he had brought before. Hundreds of little carve idols--well beyond Connor's ability to count--that mysteriously appeared at his front gate each morning.

When he was done, Connor sat unmoving for a long, long time. His mind emptied of all thoughts and, for a time, he became an indistinguishable feature of this place. The loose stones, the fronds dancing on autumn winds, this distant sound of birdsong, and an aging farmer enjoying a moment of quiet with his only friend.

When it was time to go, Connor pushed himself to his feet and then fidgeted awkwardly. He reached into his sack and produced a

thick leather mitt and a small leather purse and stared at them for some time. He thought of the King, now gray and wrinkled. Infirm. Rumors swirled around nearby villages that he would soon abdicate to his elected heir and son.

Glancing up at that wooden face, Connor's mouth twisted into a cold, pained frown. He placed the mitt on one hand and, stepping to the base of the trunk, reached for one of the bulbs that hung from the briars that encased it. With a gentle tug, he pulled the burr from its stem and placed it in the leather purse.

"I waited so many years to hear your apology." He said to the wind, holding the pouch to his chest. "Sorry I made you wait so long for mine."

#