

The Fianna is on a hunt.

The sun was low. A couple of hours and the light would be gone entirely. Finn kept a steady pace. The others had urged him more than once to make camp or turn back. Hunting in the dark wasn't natural, they kept saying. But he knew there was nothing natural about what they were hunting.

The forest was quiet. Caoilte moved at Finn's right shoulder, like he normally did. Lean as a whittled spear, a single white scar running along his jawline, a souvenir from a hunt two summers past. He caught Finn's eye before he spoke. "Getting dark. Whatever this thing is, it's picked its ground well."

Finn stopped. He knelt and pressed his left palm into the earth, feeling its cool give. The ground didn't feel right anymore. It was soft and wet, like the bloated belly of a thing long drowned. A deep hum rose from the soil, singing of invading blight.

"As suspected," Finn whispered.

"We have to be close," Caoilte said, looking at him.

"We are."

"I hope so. I've no desire to trade steel in the dark." Caoilte crouched, studying the ground. The tracks were huge. The edges slick with dark briny ooze that didn't belong in any forest. The ferns they'd touched had now wilted to a sickly grey. He prodded one with the tip of his spear. "Traces of the blight all around here."

"There is," Finn answered.

Caoilte stayed quiet for a moment. "Is it the same as what we came across in Dún Móna? And Kilbrack?"

"Seems so," Finn replied as he stared at the blackened earth in front of them.

"Did your *draíocht* tell you that? What does it mean?" Caoilte asked.

"It means we are right where we should be. Let's go."

Finn's voice was low and steady. He pushed himself up and wiped his palm on his worn black cloak. He was solidly built. Dark red hair with grey streaks through it hung loosely around a weathered face that was calm yet hard to read.

Behind them, the rest of the Fianna moved like shadows between the trunks. Their breathing had gone shallow. The air tasted of salt. The trees began to crowd in closer.

Diarmuid came up on the left flank, the many silver bells in his braided beard chiming softly. On the right, Aoife had her bow half-drawn and an arrow nocked. Her golden hair and ocean eyes always looked a little out of place this deep in the wild.

"It's getting colder," Aoife mumbled as they moved.

"Aye," Caoilte said as he scanned the tree-line.

Finn raised his fist. Everyone went still. Ahead, the path dipped into a shallow glen. The mist swirled slow and rhythmic, as if something massive breathed at its centre.

Diarmuid nudged Aoife with his elbow and glanced toward Caoilte. "If this thing breaks cover and decides it likes the look of us, we'd best hope Caoilte remembers how to use his gift of speed. I'd rather not be the one playing bait while he's standing around admiring the scenery."

"Don't worry about me, I'll be fast enough," Caoilte shot back. "It's the rest of you I'll worry about when I'm back at camp."

"Enough, the both of you," Aoife snapped at them.

"There," Finn breathed.

A massive, hunched shadow took shape in the churning mist, less animal and more a boulder of muscle. It made a sound like a heavy chain dragged across jagged

rock. Diarmuid tightened his grip on his spear. Aoife aimed her bow. Caoilte drew his blade. Finn carried no weapon.

Silence stretched. “Get ready,” Finn said eventually. The mist heaved. The big beast charged.

“Now!” Finn shouted.

Aoife loosed. Her arrow hit the jaw of the beast, drawing dark blood, but it barely slowed. Diarmuid broke left. Caoilte went right.

Caoilte darted in fast, his blade flashing toward the hindquarter. A thick tail whipped out of nowhere and smashed him backwards. He hit the ground hard and rolled, came up spitting mud, face unchanged.

The boar spotted Finn and charged at him. Finn stood his ground. He lifted his foot and drove it into the earth, hard.

The ground answered.

Stone spikes tore upward through the soil in a ragged line beneath the beast, catching its shoulder and foreleg. It staggered with a bellow.

“That,” Aoife said, catching her breath, “is no ordinary boar.”

“Aye, we noticed.” Caoilte said, eyes fixed on the beast.

The creature was massive, its hide like wet slate, sharp tusks long enough to gut a horse. Dark ooze wept from its joints. Its pale eyes moved wrong and unnatural, like something else was controlling the animal.

Diarmuid surged forward and leapt, driving his spear down with everything he had. The iron head struck... and the shaft splintered. Before he could react, the boar’s tusk caught him square in the chest and flung him backwards into a pine. He crumpled, motionless.

“Diarmuid!” Aoife’s voice cracked with fury. She drew until the bow groaned and loosed three arrows fast. *Thwip. Thwip. Thwip.* Each one found the soft flesh

around the jaw. The boar roared, a sound that hit like a shockwave, lifting the golden hair huntress off her feet and slamming her into the ground. The breath exploded from her lungs. She tried to rise, but couldn't.

The boar lowered its head. Its tusks gleamed as it dug into the mire and charged, ready to trample her into the earth. Then the world slowed.

Caoilte moved so fast he became a blur. He slid beneath the beast, grabbed Aoife by her collar, and dragged her clear just before the hooves came down. He skidded behind a big rock, chest heaving.

"Finn!" he shouted. "Do something! Finish this!"

Finn stood in the middle of it all, eyes closed, hands raised. He reached down through the rot, searching for the deep, ancient heartbeat still buried beneath. His eyes flared yellow. He slammed his palms together.

Massive roots erupted like waking serpents, thick as a man's torso, old and heavy. They coiled around the boar's legs, bound its snout, locked over its shoulders like living chains. The beast thrashed and shrieked, but the roots held. Finn's knuckles were white. The veins stood out along his neck as he poured his will into the earth.

"The belly!" Finn roared. "Caoilte, now!"

Caoilte didn't hesitate. He sprinted, dropped into a slide across the slick mud, and drove his blade deep under the violet-veined underbelly. With one brutal slash he opened it. Black bile came pouring out. Caoilte moved clear as Finn brought his foot down one last time.

A pillar of black flint punched upward through the open wound, tearing out between the shoulders in a spray of dark blood and bone.

The blight-boar collapsed.

Finn let out a long sigh and dropped to both knees, breathing hard, the warmth draining out of him. A moment later Diarmuid staggered over, clutching his chest and groaning.

“Nice of you to join us,” Caoilte said dryly as he helped Aoife up.

“Oh piss off,” Diarmuid hissed. He stared at the monstrous carcass. “Well.” He rubbed his shoulder and winced. “What part are we taking for the trophy?”

“The head is always the best way to go I think,” Caoilte said, as he and Aoife slowly looked at Diarmuid.

“Wait...I nearly got my ribs crushed, surely I’m not the one who should be cutting that thing’s head off?”

“If we show up with no trophy, you can explain to the others why we’re all drinking water instead of ale tonight,” Aoife said, brushing mud from her tattered red cloak. “And sure you broke your spear. You’ve got nothing else to carry anyway.”

“Carry? Do you think the horses will have disappeared?”

Caoilte let out a short laugh. Finn finally rose, though unsteadily. He didn’t look at any of them. “Just get it done,” he said as he turned away.

Caoilte tossed Diarmuid his blade. “You heard him.” Diarmuid stood alone beside the reeking carcass. He rubbed his bruised ribs, looked at the foul ooze still leaking from the boar, and let out a long, tired breath.

“For fuck’s sake.”

II

The path back to the caiseal had been long.

Aoife led two packed horses by hand, the nearest carrying a large sack across its back saddle, wet with dark patches seeping through the cloth. Caoilte walked just a pace behind her, leading his own mount in silence.

Diarmuid moved slowly behind them, the small silver bells in his braided beard chiming softly with every step. Even injured, he still managed to make more noise than the rest of them combined. He had one arm still cradled against his ribs, saying little for once. Finn followed at the rear, saying little as usual.

The sky had gone fully dark now, though the moon was not yet up. As the dense canopy of the forest finally gave way on the hillside, the thick circular gray stone walls of the caiseal rose ahead of them. A weed choked ditch circled the base, crossed by a narrow path of packed earth and stone that led up to the wooden gate.

The Fianna stopped at the edge of the causeway. A handful of torches could be seen flickering along the wall walks. Smoke from peat fires drifted over the tall and imposing stone walls, carrying the faint scent of roasting meat. The ringfort was substantial. Strong enough to protect not just livestock, but a small community.

A figure appeared above the gate. A young looking boy with tousled red hair and a spotty pale face. "Who goes there?" He shouted down at them.

"The Fianna returns. Our hunt is complete." Finn answered.

The young guard peered down from the wall, torch wavering in his grip. He looked at each of them. They were muddy, bloodied, and there was something wrapped in dark-stained sacking that was leaking blood. His eyes widened.

"Is that... the beast?" The young guard stuttered.

"Yes," Aoife replied. "Well, what's left of it."

"The one touched by that blight?"

“The same.”

A long silence stretched from above. The torchlight flickered across the young man’s nervous face. He took a small step back on the wall walk, clearly unsettled, then glanced over his shoulder as if looking for support.

“Just open the gate,” Caoilte sighed.

More silence. Diarmuid straightened to his full height, winced immediately.

“Ideally we’d like entry before one of us falls asleep standing up,” he said.

The guard hesitated a moment longer, then called down, “Hold on... I’ll fetch the Rí,” as he disappeared from view. Caoilte swore softly under his breath.

A short time later, a heavy-set man in his middle years appeared atop the wall. He had a soft, fleshy face and small greedy eyes that darted nervously. His fine white wool cloak strained across his broad belly, and a thin sheen of sweat glistened on his forehead despite the cool night air.

He stared down at the dripping bundle attached to the horse with clear unease.

“The Mother Goddess blesses us,” he exclaimed. “You have all returned, masters of the Fianna!”

“Rí Breccan,” Finn greeted him. “Nice of you to join us.”

The man known as Rí Breccan cleared his throat. “I must now ask for your forgiveness,” he began. “I know the law of hospitality dictates I should offer food, drink, and shelter before asking who you are and why you have come...but given the situation and...our arrangement, perhaps we can skip the ceremony?”

“If that is your wish,” Finn replied. “We won’t claim you broke *óigidecht* as long as we settle the matter quickly.”

“Yes... yes.” Breccan nodded, looking relieved. “You say your hunt is complete? Tell me now then. The dreadful beast that plagued my lands has been vanquished?”

“Yes.”

“How excellent,” Rí Breccan said as he wiped at his forehead. “How excellent indeed.”

Diarmuid shifted his weight and let out a slow breath through his nose. “So much for no questions before we’ve eaten,” he muttered quietly. Caoilte and Aoife paid him no attention, their eyes drifting from Breccan to the gate in front of them, still closed.

Rí Breccan cleared his throat again. “And the beast. It was...” He trailed off, searching for the words. “As we feared? Tainted by this blight?”

“It was,” Finn said.

“Ah. Yes, yes.” Breccan nodded several times, as though the motion might settle something in him. “I see. Well. That is—” he stopped again.

Caoilte glanced sideways at Finn, who didn’t look back. “Rí Breccan,” he began. “We’ve been three days on this hunt and we return to you with the job complete. If there’s a concern, we would rather hear it than stand out here guessing at it.”

Breccan’s hands tightened on the wall’s edge. “The head,” he said finally. “The blighted, infected, head of this beast. I cannot, that is, I am not certain it is wise to bring such a thing inside the walls. What if the blight still lives and it spreads inside my walls? Are you all yourselves clean and free from this nastiness? If the corruption still lingers...”

“It’s dead and we are fine,” Caoilte said, staring blankly at the stone walls in front of them.

“So was the ground it walked on,” Breccan retorted, “and look what became of that.”

Finn held Breccan’s gaze for a moment. “The head will stay outside the walls, then,” Finn told him. “But we carried it three days back here as proof of the hunt. You can see it here, by your own torchlight. After that it’s your choice whether that satisfies you or not.”

Breccan hesitated, then nodded, relief plain on his face now that a decision had been made for him. “Yes. Yes, that... that would be acceptable.”

Finn nodded at Aoife. She worked the ropes free from the pack horse and unwound the sacking enough to show the monstrous head beneath. Breccan leaned over the wall to look and went pale. He straightened up again quickly. “Your hunt is indeed complete.”

“Now if this is all finally settled, there’s just the matter of our payment,” Diarmuid said.

“Yes, yes indeed. Open the gates for our fearless Fianna, lads! You all must be tired, perhaps hungry and thirsty! We don’t have much here as you all know, but we will do our best to look after the protectors of the realm. While under my roof you have my protection. And as far as the law is concerned, you know your obligations as well. And oh yes, your other comrades are still here where you left them.”

Rí Breccan and the others up high disappeared as the wooden gates slowly creaked open. “I feel safer already,” Aoife said.

Finn looked over at Diarmuid. “Stay here. Look after the horses. We will be back soon, once we have been paid and gathered the others.”

“We are not staying?” Diarmuid asked bewildered.

“Probably for the best we do not,” Caoilte said before anyone else could answer.

“We’ve left the people here alone with Goll and a steady supply of *cuirm* long enough.”

“Always the lucky one,” Diarmuid grumbled under his breath as the rest of the Fianna moved through the gates.

Inside the walls, Rí Breccan’s caiseal was smaller than its walls suggested. There was a scattering of low thatched cottages arranged without much order around a central path. A few pens held sheep and a handful of thin cattle.

At the far side stood the Rí's hall. It was a larger, rectangular building of stone and timber with a thatched roof and a heavy oak door. Off to one side, set slightly apart from the rest was the drinking house. This was a smaller structure, with long benches and a few barrels placed randomly outside.

Finn took in the surroundings as they walked. He thought that the ringfort could hold no more than forty, maybe slightly more if packed in during a threat or hosting guests.

A handful of locals watched them warily from doorways as Breccan led them across the open space. A small girl peered out from behind a doorframe, thumb in her mouth, watching them pass. Aoife slowed and crouched slightly toward her. "*Dia duit*," she said, softly. The girl blinked, then ducked back out of sight.

Breccan chuckled. "Take no offence, golden huntress. I find these days the young ones are more likely to speak the Mortal Tongue rather than the Mother Tongue. We persist with our lessons in the language, though."

The young red haired guard walked close to Breccan and looked over his shoulder at Aoife. "Some say there's power in it, for those who speak it full and true," he said.

"Oh, really? Is that where you get it, then?" Breccan asked Finn. "Do you get your *draíocht* from the language of the gods? I thought it was from the mounds...hence your name. Finn na Torrán...Finn of the Mounds, yes?"

"Maybe it's both," the young red haired guard cut in before Finn could speak.

"Maybe nobody rightly knows?" he continued, "that's usually how it goes with magic."

"Hush now, Cormac," Breccan said. "Enough of that talk. Master na Torrán isn't here to answer your intrusive questions."

They were now in front of the small building with long benches outside it. The air felt heavy with smoke. "We'll settle this business in the drinking house," Breccan

said, gesturing towards it. "It's warmer in there, and you all look like you could use a cup. Orlagh should have the fire going."

"Perhaps we will go for one," Finn said.

It was indeed warmer in the drinking house. A peat fire crackled in the center, casting flickering light across the low-beamed room. A few locals, mostly old men, sat at long wooden tables. All of them - without exception - were hunched over, staring expressionlessly into their cups. Finn thought they all looked miserable.

Breccan clapped his hands as he entered through the door. "Orlagh! Bring these fine hunters a cup of ale. The good stuff. They've earned it. And sure why don't you refill their companions as well." He waved a hand toward the three figures already seated near the fire.

Lean and tall, Liath was sharpening her knife. She raised her head of short and curly black hair when she noticed them walking over. Faolán was the newest and youngest of the band. He sat forward with a restless energy, his sharp brown eyes scanning the room like a wolf pup eager for a hunt. Oisín sat a little apart from the others, but he was hard to miss in his deep purple jerkin, quietly strumming a small harp across his knee.

"About time," Liath said, a faint smile appearing at her mouth. "We were starting to think the beast had mauled you all."

"It put up a good fight," Caoilte smirked. "It just wasn't as fast as me."

"No one is, apparently," Faolán quipped.

Caoilte grinned at Faolán. "Keep training those legs, pup. Maybe one day you'll come close. Maybe."

They all sat down at the table as Orlagh, a sturdy woman with flour-dusted arms, brought over a tray of wooden cups filled with dark ale. "Drink up," she said as she put them down. Breccan sat at the head of the table. "You heard the woman," he said. They all lifted a cup each.

“*Sláinte!*” Aoife shouted as they all raised their cups and took long drinks. For a moment no one spoke, only the crackle of the fire and the quiet murmur of the old men at the far tables filling the space.

“Where is Diarmuid?” Oisín asked as the others laughed. “Did he get lost on his way back?”

Finn was going to answer, but Breccan cut him off before he could. “I think I can answer that,” he muttered. “Your other comrade, the one with the silver bells in his beard...an interesting fashion choice, by the way. But yes, yes, he remained outside the caiseal. I thought it best to keep the head of that horrible beast outside, in case that dreadful blight still remains. Better safe than sorry I always say...” Breccan supped long, then fell silent.

“Poor Diarmuid, outside in the cold while we’re here in the warm,” Oisín said, glancing toward the door. “If we were nice we’d bring him out a cup.”

“Yeah, but who said we were nice?” Liath chuckled as she took another gulp.

Breccan let Finn answer this time. “We won’t be long. Best we keep moving.”

Faolán frowned. “We’re not staying here tonight?” He asked. “We’ve got a roof and fire. Why ride out again?”

Finn glanced toward the door, thinking of the decapitated head outside the walls. “Diarmuid is out there waiting with our trophy from the hunt,” he then looked at Breccan. “And anyway, since it was infected with the blight I don’t think it’s wise to leave it all night to the animals or anyone passing by. Best we dispose of it soon.”

“If you think that’s best,” Breccan said, a little too quickly. “I would not want to keep you from your... necessary business.”

No one argued. Oisín started to lightly strum his harp again, slowly and with care before he spoke. “Speaking of the hunt, do tell. How did you all fare this time? Was it as bad as we thought?”

“The blight had touched the boar, making it a formidable challenge,” Caoilte answered. “We managed to track it down before it spoiled any more of our good Rí’s land.”

Oisín’s fingers paused on the strings. “And the fight itself? Did the beast put up much of a struggle, or was it already half-dead from the blight?”

“Both,” Aoife said, then took another mouthful. “Diarmuid took a nasty hit to the ribs. Caoilte’s gift of speed and Finn’s earth magic put an end to the beast though.”

Oisín nodded slowly, fingers still moving across the strings. “Should be enough to get me started on a verse or two, at least.”

“Well, it all sounds terribly awful,” Breccan chimed in. “And tell me, were you able to find the source of this dreadful blight?”

“Further investigation is required,” Finn said as he took another sip. “Also why we need to keep moving.”

“Yes, yes, right you are. All that’s left now I believe is the matter of your reward.” Breccan indicated to the young red haired guard who followed them in. “Cormac, go fetch their payment like a good lad.”

The young guard moved swiftly at his chieftain’s request. Another long silence settled over the table as the door closed behind him.

“I suppose you all will go west now?” Breccan said after a moment. “I hear many rumours of thin places on Mór Carraig. All kinds of horrible creatures crossing through the veil causing chaos.”

“I wish all these rumours paid as much erins as people paid attention to them,” Caoilte grumbled.

Rí Breccan snorted. “Well, by the sounds of it there is no shortage of work all across the islands. It should be no problem for the likes of all you.” He took

another mouthful of ale, then glanced around the table. “On that note actually, where is your other companion? The rather sourly fellow with the one - ”

Breccan never got to finish his sentence. The door to the drinking house flew open hard enough to bang against the wall. A young lad stood at the door, face pale with shock.

“Rí Breccan!” he shouted. “That one-eyed Fian has a knife to Cormac’s throat out there in the yard! He’s going to kill him!”

Finn was already up and moving before the lad finished the sentence, the others close behind him. The colour drained from Breccan’s face. “What in the name of the Mother Goddess...”

III

A crowd had gathered in the middle of the caiseal. At its centre, a tall, thin figure in dark green clothing stood with his hunting knife to the throat of the young red haired guard. Cormac’s face was white with terror, his hands raised uselessly in the air.

Finn and his Fianna appeared behind them through the cluster of people. Goll mac Morna paid them no attention as he tightened the grip on his blade.

“What the hell are you doing, Goll?” Caoilte said, face blanching.

“This little boy tried to short us,” Goll sneered, voice low and cold. “He brought twenty silver erins instead of the thirty gold we were promised. Then he thought he could talk his way out of it.” The knife pressed closer. “I don’t like being cheated.”

Finn stepped forward, slowly. “Goll. Put the knife down.”

Most of the onlookers took an instinctive step back. A few of the women pulled children behind them. An older man muttered a quick prayer under his breath.

“Oh, our fearless leader appears,” Goll spat, his voice thick with mockery. Young Cormac made a choked sound as a thin line of blood appeared under the steel pressing against his neck.

“You’ve either gone completely mad now Goll, or you’re too drunk to remember the law of hospitality,” Oisín said. “From the smell of you, I’m guessing the latter.”

“Listen to the little songbird squeaking,” Goll snorted. “Shouldn’t you be off writing another pretty poem while the rest of us do the real work?”

“This isn’t work,” Aoife said, arms folded. “It’s just you being a bully with a knife.”

Cormac’s breath hitched. “Please...” he whispered, voice cracking. “I... I was only doing what I was told. Please-”

“Quiet,” Goll muttered. “I should just slit your throat now and be done with it. We risk our lives for the likes of you, and this is how we’re repaid?”

Caoilte stared hard at Goll, his expression didn’t change. “You didn’t even draw a blade on this hunt.”

Before Goll could retort, Rí Breccan pushed through the crowd, the colour of milk. “Let him go, you animal!” he shouted. “You’ll be exiled for this...or...worse! Yes! My lads will kill you!” The remaining guards stood frozen, hands hovering near their weapons but clearly terrified to intervene.

“All you’ve done while you have been here is drink our ale, harass our women...” Breccan cut himself off and spun toward Finn, pointing a shaking finger. “He’s your man! Sort this out!”

“I’m no one’s man. Least of all his.” Goll didn’t even try to hide the disdain in his voice. Finn took another step forward, he was just behind Goll now. His voice was quiet but hard.

“What are you trying to prove here? How tough you are? How much of a great warrior you are? All these people can see here is a man with a knife to a boy’s throat. Look at him. Barely eighteen summers. I didn’t know this was how you did things in clan Morna.”

A long, tense silence stretched. The only sound was Cormac’s shallow, panicked breathing. “To hell with the lot of you,” Goll snarled and let out a sharp, disgusted breath. He threw the boy forward to the ground.

“Count yourself lucky, boy,” Goll growled as he fully turned around and faced his fellow members of the Fianna. He was not wearing his usual eye patch. The empty socket where his left eye should have been was a dark, hollow pit, the flesh around it scarred from an old wound. A permanent shadow on one side of his face

“This is a new low, even for you,” Caoilte said as Goll slid his knife away.

“Stop your whining, old man,” Goll shot back.

Cormac pushed himself up and staggered toward Breccan, one hand pressed to the thin cut on his neck. The chieftain caught him, face still pale, and immediately started barking orders at his remaining guards.

Finn’s voice cut through the noise. “We’re done here,” he turned to look at his warrior band. “Everyone back to the horses, Diarmuid is waiting outside.” He gave a side-eye glance at Goll. “And sober him up.

Rí Breccan stared at Finn as he moved closer to him, the rest of the Fianna moving back the way they came. “You come into my home...and break *oígidecht*...” he trailed off, searching for the words. “I...I should have you fined...or arrested...”

“And within your rights you would be,” Finn said, bending to pick up the small brown sack on the ground. He felt the weight of it in his hand. “But you broke our contract.” He straightened and looked Breccan in the eye as he spoke. “Goll was right, wasn’t he? You were going to cheat us.”

The colour from Breccan's face drained again. He sighed, and lowered his head.
"You don't understand," he whispered.

"Then help me understand."

"The blight, or whatever it is called..." Breccan began, "it has taken much of our stores. We are a small people, we already don't have much. I had hoped to speak to you, to have a rational conversation with you...before this unpleasantness broke out, that is."

Finn could feel the frustration rising inside him. "So you couldn't pay what you agreed to."

"Well...when you put it like that it sounds worse...but...yes." Breccan rubbed his forehead. "What say you take the twenty instead of the thirty and we...forget about this unpleasantness with your comrade?"

Cormac's face went red. "But sir! That one eyed brute was going to kill me! You can't let him get away with that! What if he - "

"Hush now lad," Breccan cut him off sharply. "This ordeal is over and our business with the Fianna is concluded." He looked at Finn with a thin, forced smile. "Their good and brave leader will be looking to take his leave now from our humble caiseal, yes yes. I would also advise that after this unpleasant ordeal with master Mac Morna, that they do not return."

Finn had already turned and was walking away before Rí Breccan finished speaking.

Outside the walls, Diarmuid was waiting with the horses, still cradling his ribs. He looked at the group as they walked through the gate, somber expressions on their faces. He watched Goll staggering and raised an eyebrow. "Well," he said dryly. "Looks like someone had a more exciting evening than I did."

"Shut your mouth, silver bells." Goll snapped at him.

Diarmuid smirked. “Oh, that’s fighting talk Mac Morna. If I was you, I’d sleep with one eye ope - ”

That was all it took. Goll lunged at him, swinging a heavy, clumsy fist. He was far too drunk. The blow went wide, catching nothing but air. His momentum carried him forward and he stumbled hard, crashing to his knees in the mud. For a moment he stayed there, just swaying. Then his single eye rolled back and he toppled face-first into the dirt, out cold.

Aoife stepped forward, looking down on him. “Let him sleep it off. He’ll be slightly less of an arsehole in the morning. Slightly.”

“What the hell happened?” Diarmuid asked.

“Goll being Goll,” Liath sighed.

Finn slowly appeared behind them. “Get him on a horse. We’ll move on a couple of leagues and make camp. And someone burn that damned head before we leave. We’re not dragging it any further.”

“I was looking forward to sleeping in a feather bed for a change,” Oisín said as everyone started to get ready to move.

Caoilte and Faolán moved over to Goll, lifted him by the legs and shoulders. “I don’t understand why we have to put up with him,” Faolán said.

“It’s complicated,” Caoilte replied.

“Really? Seems simple enough to me. He’s just a prick. And always angry.”

Caoilte glanced at the younger man as they heaved Goll onto a horse. “You haven’t been with us that long, young pup, you have a lot to learn.”

“It’s clear to see he acts like he doesn’t want to be here, why does he stay then?”

Faolán wiped sweat from his forehead, looking at the scarred, unconscious face.

“It’s a long story. And like I said, complicated.”

“It seems like he hates Finn. And what happened to him anyway, why does he only have one eye?”

Caoilte thought about his words. “Finn happened,” he said finally. He looked over his shoulder back at Finn, who was standing alone at the edge of the dark road.

“Finn took his eye.”

Faolán stared at him. “But...what? Why?”

“Because Goll killed his father.”