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WREN & WOOD: "OAK MOON"

By J.L. Hilton

Oak be strong, he prayed, inching his body along the branch. *Sap be thick. Hold this, your child, and keep me safe.*

The tree swayed in the wind and his stomach lurched. Legs clamped tight against the bark, Dreolan felt himself sweating, despite the cold. He took the golden knife from his clenched teeth and applied it to a clump of mistletoe whose waxy berries gleamed like pearls in the moonlight. Sprigs of the parasitic plant fell into a linen cloth stretched over the holly below.

If there were anyone near enough to bother looking, and if it had been day instead of night, they could have said his eyes were the color of mistletoe, golden green. Something like a wolf's eyes, some people might even say. Himself, he knew well his eyes were nothing like a wolf's, but that's a tale for another moon.

Finished with his task, Dreolan retreated back to the tree trunk and climbed down, which went faster than going up, truth be told, and maybe too fast at that. He snagged his cloak and heard the fabric rend as he dropped to the ground.

"Show mercy, Quercus," he said to the tree, using its Latin name. "I wear more stitches than cloth, of late."

As he thrust a hand through the new hole, a very un-oakish voice replied. "It's wearing rope

'round your neck, you'll be. Poacher."

By equal parts instinct and luck, Dreolan dodged a staff that swooshed at him from the dark, but caught it in his hand with a stinging slap.

"Have I offended you, friend? Let me make amends," Dreolan said pleasantly, as if he'd just met his assailant in a tavern, and not while trespassing on the private lands of Lord Carrick.

"My lord is a good Christian and will not abide witchery," the man growled, jerking his head toward the linen cloth.

"If he is a Christian, Carricksman, then he should render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto the Devil that which is the Devil's," Dreolan suggested. "Neither the good and merciful lord of this wood, nor the Lord of the heavens, will have any use for witchweed."

"So, you cavort with the foul creatures of the devil, do you?"

The man – Lord Carrick's gamekeeper, he was – pushed Dreolan against the tree trunk and pressed his staff against Dreolan's neck. Dreolan pressed back, to keep the man from choking him, but only barely so.

"Well, no, not typically," Dreolan answered. "Just the once. But I was convinced that succubus was entirely human up until the point when – *glug!*" His hand slipped and the staff crushed his throat.

"We'll hang, burn and drown you!" the man roared at Dreolan, his voice carrying through the crisp winter night. "Thrice dead is all undone. And you'll not be coming back to haunt us!"

There was nothing funny about that, but Dreolan smiled. He worked his thin fingers between the staff and his skin, so he could gasp out, "Where have you been, *mo chroi* ?"

"What's that you say?" The man squinted at him. "Are you loony?"

Then a phantom materialized from the wintry wood. Lord Carrick's servant saw it and leaped back, letting Dreolan go and making the sign of the cross. Next, he made a very large pile of unconsciousness, having been knocked on the head with the knob of a blackthorn stick.

“I like my women the way I like my drink,” Dreolan said. “Strong... and armed with a shillelagh.”

“I waited,” said the shadow with a woman's voice. “To see if you might talk your way out of it.”

“*An té nach mbíonn láidir ní folláir dó bheith glic*,” Dreolan quoted the proverb. “A man who's not strong must be cunning.”

“But then he had to go and get murderous on you.” Pulling back the hood of her cloak, she revealed that she was not a phantom at all, but a very real woman in her mid-thirties. She made a tsk-tsk sound with her tongue and teeth, and prodded the heap of gamekeeper with the toe of her boot. “The gods-cursed eejit.”

“Leave the man be, Cuilleen. He was just doing his job.” Dreolan assessed the mistletoe. “And we've done ours. It's a good haul.”

With the edges of his eyes, for you cannot see a thing in the dark if you look directly at it, Dreolan searched for any sprigs that had fallen wide of the linen. These he picked up and tossed onto the cloth with the others.

“I thought they weren't supposed to touch the ground,” she said.

“It doesn't matter.”

“Then why the linen cloth?”

“Well, it might.”

She picked up a stem of mistletoe he'd left in the dirt, and tucked it behind her ear.

“You'll have to kiss me, now.”

“No, I don't. There aren't any berries on it,” he said. He knotted the corners of the linen together.

“And how d'you know there aren't any berries? It's darker than the arse end of a black goat out here.”

“The moon is full.”

“The arse end of a gray goat, then,” she amended.

“There are no berries on it,” he said, a chuckle in his voice.

“The crows take you! I'll kiss myself.” She threw the sprig on the ground, for he was right about the berries. Or lack thereof.

He whispered a charm over the bundle, to bind it. She abandoned her ire to inhale the chilled moonlight and touch the nearby oak, drawing the numen from these, and from the earth beneath her feet, channeling the power to Dreolan. The knots of that cloth would not be undone by any natural force now, nor would a single leaf be lost, until all was delivered to Edan MacDwyer.

Three days later, they emerged from the graywood and entered the village of Luglen, which was downriver of Crag Faolan, MacDwyer's stronghold. It was nigh unto Winter Solstice, but the river still flowed. Taking a boat would be faster, easier, and safer than walking.

Pursuit by Lord Carrick was unlikely. His man would wake up with a powerful headache and an even more powerful belief that the pair were not of this world, and therefore could not be followed. Unless one wanted to enter a fairy mound. Or Hell.

But Cuilleen was still tetchy. “I'm feeling their eyes crawling on me,” she said, watching the handful of villagers. She was always uncomfortable in towns, even in a place like Luglen, which could barely claim to be one.

“They are wise to be wary of strangers,” said Dreolan.

“What ever happened to hospitality? Things were different when I was young.”

“You were different when you were young, is all. The world is ever the same.”

“No, the Old Ways are being forgotten,” she insisted, as if she'd never said so to him before. “Soon, there won't be a brook, bowl nor fountain that hasn't been pissed in by a Christian. Then what do we do?”

“Go deeper into the wood,” he replied, as if he'd never replied so before.

“And when there's no more wood?”

“The wood will always be.”

“I hope you're right about that, *mavourneen*.”

By the end of that brief conversation, they'd already passed through the village and reached the banks of the river. Cuilleen approached a group of men unloading cargo from several currachs.

“Is it upriver you're heading?” she asked a sandy-haired giant of a man with muscles like cromlech boulders.

All work ceased, then, and suddenly. The shuffle of boots, the heave of breath, even the river – a wide, whirling waterway flush with trout – seemed to cease gurgling. When that sort of hush fell in a forest, it meant you'd better start running.

“We'll go no further up this river,” the man said. He spit, as if ridding himself of a bit of foul meat. All his lads were watching Cuilleen and Dreolan.

“You'll make no Yuletide delivery to Crag Faolan?” Cuilleen asked.

“Are you MacDwyer's?” the man asked, in a way that suggested they'd better say no.

“We travel on an errand of commerce, Master Riverman,” Dreolan replied, smooth as glass.

“Errand,” the man repeated.

“And we owe allegiance to none but ourselves,” Dreolan said.

The man grunted.

“A real skald, that one,” Cuilleen grumbled under her breath to Dreolan, who was already doing the math. Five men here. Two of him and Cuilleen. They had the village behind them and the River Bray before, which might make escape a problem. If escape turned out to be necessary.

“What errand?” one of the lads demanded.

“The sort that's none of your business,” Cuilleen said, tossing her dark brown cloak back over

one shoulder just to make sure they could see her shillelagh.

“We've been woodside awhile,” Dreolan explained, stepping between Cuilleen and the rivermen, “and the wind has not brought us news.”

The large man gestured downriver toward a ringfort on a small hill. “Rath Mellan was attacked by MacDwyer, two nights ago.”

“Did it hold?” Cuilleen asked.

“Shining Ones protect it,” he said.

“Was blood shed?” Dreolan asked.

“Not yet.”

The ominous reverberation of those words hummed in Dreolan's ears. “Then I believe I will hie home and remove myself from the entanglements of this feud,” he said.

The men stared at him blankly.

“Thank you, Master Riverman.” Dreolan bowed, then made a small beckoning gesture to Cuilleen as he turned and walked away. She leaned on her shillelagh for a moment more, waiting to see if the men would return to their tasks or whether they would leap upon Dreolan. Only when they went back to working did she walk away.

“'Hie home'?” she chided Dreolan as they went back through Luglen and into the wood. “More like, we're going north along the River Bray until we find a vessel loyal to MacDwyer. Or at least loyal to money.”

“Of course.”

“And now it's going to take us that much longer to deliver the bundle.”

“I know,” was all he said, and it was enough to earn her silence.

After a day of trekking through the frosty foothills, they sheltered in an abandoned stone

cottage.

Dreolan placed his hand on the doorway – the door was long gone – and stood there silently, his head bowed to his chest and eyes closed. Cuilleen did not so much as shift her weight nor exhale till he said, “Empty.”

When he said it was empty, it was empty, by the gods, and there wasn't so much as a mouse, let alone a ghost. You couldn't be too careful.

Cuilleen entered first and dropped an armful of sticks and kindling near the crumbling hearth, then she tossed her pack on the ground for lack of a table. Any furniture, like the door, was long gone. Burned for fuel, stolen, rotted away, only the graywood knows.

Dreolan followed her over the threshold, murmuring and tracing symbols in the air. “You are safe, *seanleannán liom.*” *My old love*. It referred not to her age – though, granted, she had seen several winters – but to their many lifetimes together.

When he said she was safe, she was safe, by the gods, and she believed in him utterly. With a sigh, her shoulders relaxed. She unlaced her leather vest, which was covered with steel rings and made a racket when she tossed it aside. Himself, he sat quietly on the ground, wrapped in his heavy gray cloak and examining the latest hole in it. It wasn't long before Cuilleen had flames dancing in the hearth for him like a troupe of drunken grogochs. And Dreolan knew exactly what a troupe of drunken grogochs looked like, but that's a story for another moon.

She gathered up enough wood to keep the fire going through the night, then sat beside him. “You're tired.” She said as she removed her bracers and her boots.

“I'm always tired,” a wry smile touched his lips, “at the end of a day.”

“Are you cold?” she asked, stretching across his lap like a cat.

“Not now.”

Had there been no blaze, her body and her breath would still be warm. Cuilleen burned with

her own inner fire. His eyelids dropped shut and he felt her warm spirit, her thoughts, her soul, her bones, as if they were his own, closer even than her flesh, as her buxom chest moved against his knees when she breathed. Stroking her wild nest of short hair, which was tangled with bits of leaf and twig, he plucked out a piece of holly and tossed it aside. Not in any vain attempt to straighten up the mess, but only because it pricked his hand.

“Are we still going to take him the gods-cursed mistletoe?” Cuilleen rolled over, her head on his thigh, and looked up at Dreolan. Her eyes were flecks of chartreuse across blue-gray, lichen on slate, if you saw them in the sunlight. In the firelit dark, they were obsidian mirrors.

“I'd assumed MacDwyer wanted the stuff for protection, or a healing potion,” he said.

“Or solstice decoration, good heathen that he is,” she said.

“But now I'm thinking he'll use it to poison Red Finn, the lord of Rath Mellan. Not exactly my idea of Yule cheer.”

“Poisoning him with mistletoe is a lousy plan, at best. Why can't he find a hedge hag with a bit of hemlock? Or, if he wants to keep with a Yuletide theme, you know, holly would do.”

“Mistletoe killed Baldr, son of the All Father,” Dreolan said. “And tales tell of mistletoe in the cross upon which the son of Jehovah died.” He stared into the flames, ruminating as his fingertips affectionately traced the curve of her cheek, her chin, her lips. “It is a potent substance, which may be used for good or for ill.”

“But if he's going to poison Finn, anyway, why attack him?”

“MacDwyer's impatient. There's something more at work here.” He could see that quite clearly, without a vision in the flames.

She sat up. “You're thinking to defy him.”

“I am.”

“If we don't deliver the goods, we don't get paid.” She leaned close and spoke quietly to him.

"*Cé gur beag díol dreoilín caithfidh sé a sholáthar.*" *As little as the wren needs, it must gather it.* "We need the money if we're goin' to winter at an inn this year. Y'know, cinnamon apples and ale? Rooms with doors? Big logs making big fires?"

She rested her forehead against his, as she continued to speak. "We don't show up, he'll come after us like an angry boar, and we've no fey guardians like Red Finn. Let it be on Edan MacDwyer's soul, what he does with the mistletoe. Not on ours for breaking the *geas* he placed on us to deliver it."

"What's worse, Cuilleen? Breaking a geas, or destroying a good man?"

"Do we know he's good? Are we certain of that?"

"I'll know if I take mugwort tonight," he said. "I need to dream..."

Anything else he might have said or thought was lost in a tumult of sensations: her lips on his, his blood rushing through his veins, his soul spreading through her like roots through rich soil, the woodsy scent of her, the reaching for bare flesh beneath the layers of wool and linen. Dreolan thought no more coherent thoughts and later slept like a stone, as the saying goes, though in truth stones never sleep.

He'd forgotten all about the mugwort, and he had no dreams. Cuilleen, however, was always dreaming, mugwort or no.

"The Riverman was right about the Shining Ones," she told Dreolan the next morning. "They protect Rath Mellan. Lugh's long arm! Weren't they crawling all over the hill like ants, when I went there in my sleep last night? Finn has the Old Blood in him, so his cattle thrive and his stones stand and his babes never take ill. MacDwyer may want Rath Mellan, but if it were his, wouldn't the ringfort fall and all would be barren? MacDwyer doesn't have the favor of the Sidhe."

"And what, exactly, will MacDwyer do with the mistletoe?"

The look she gave him asked, *Are you an eejit?*

"Kill him," she answered, as if, yes, he were an eejit.

“How? He must have some plan for delivering it – a potion, an arrow?”

“That, I didn't dream, *mo chroi*. Your snoring woke me up.”

“I don't snore. It was the creaking of the cold cottage.”

She gave him a grunt of disagreement, but let it go without further argument.

“We need to tell MacDwyer that he will destroy the thing he covets,” Dreolan said. “He'll know we speak true, one heathen to another. We'll swear on his ring, or his fire – ”

“Or his two wee acorns,” she suggested.

“ - or *whatever* will make him take us seriously,” Dreolan agreed.

It took them four more days to reach Crag Faolan, and they never did find a boat. MacDwyer apparently had few friends, even so close to home. At one point, Cuilleen suggested they strap salmon to their feet and jump in the river, only the salmon, being wise, probably hated MacDwyer, too.

MacDwyer himself was angry enough when they finally arrived, he only roared all the more when they tried to impart Cuilleen's dream to him.

“I don't care if Rath Mellan is green! I don't care if its stones stand! Where's the gods-cursed herb?” MacDwyer's one milky eye twitched under a bushy brow, and his other eye practically popped from his head. They had never seen him so angry nor so eager, not in all of the jobs they'd done for him before.

“Outside,” Dreolan said calmly. “We're under *geas* to bring it to Crag Faolan, and that we've done. But we've no obligation to place it in your hands.”

“I'll drive a hot nail through your tongue, wizard!” MacDwyer cursed.

Every shadow in the room seemed, in Cuilleen's sight, to converge around the lord of Crag Faolan like storm clouds. She gripped her blackthorn stick, and Dreolan could hear her thinking she'd like to knock some sense into the man. But at Dreolan's light touch on her arm, she held.

“This is more than murder,” Dreolan said. “And I will not help you unsoul a man you've no claim

upon. He has no debt to you. Has he taken your cattle? Murdered your kin? Seduced your wife?"

"Don't speak of wives to me!" MacDwyer snorted and stomped like an old bull, overturning several objects in the room. It occurred to both Dreolan and Cuilleen, in the very same moment, that MacDwyer would not see reason because he was blind with lust. It was known to them that Red Finn had a woman whom MacDwyer had admired, before.

"Has a single stem of it touched the ground?" MacDwyer demanded, bringing the conversation back to the mistletoe job.

"We're not amateurs." Dreolan was indignant.

"I'll play hurling with your good eye, you don't get a hold of yourself, Edan," Cuilleen warned. But she and Dreolan had already begun inching away from him and toward the chamber door, discretion being the better part of valor, here. Even Cuilleen could see that.

"Is it more money you're wanting?" MacDwyer demanded. "If I give you one coin more than our agreed price, may a toothless cat eat me, and a banshee eat the cat!"

"I know where to find a banshee," Cuilleen offered.

"We don't want your money," Dreolan said.

"Then what do you want? What's the lord of Rath Mellan to you?"

"He's your downfall, you stubborn old goat," Cuilleen said.

"Coyle! Rury!" MacDwyer yelled for the men just outside the door, the ones with scarred faces and spears.

"You had to call him a goat," Dreolan reproached Cuilleen, as they turned back-to-back.

Cuilleen herself took on the guards. Swinging her shillelagh, she knocked Coyle's spear aside, then brought the knob of her stick up under his chin. As he reeled from the blow, she crouched under Rury's wild thrust and whacked him across the knees. Rury toppled.

Dreolan faced MacDwyer. "*Is maith an scáthán súil charad*," he murmured, glaring at the lord

of Crag Faolan. *A friend's eye is a good mirror*. Dreolan's gaze froze the angry blood in MacDwyer's limbs. In truth, MacDwyer was trapped by the reflection of his own sick soul there in Dreolan's enchanted eyes.

Then Cuilleen and Dreolan ran.

Between Cuilleen's shillelagh and Dreolan's dirk, they made it past a dozen more of MacDwyer's men who, really, weren't very bright or well-trained. But just outside the dun in the darkwood, they were set upon by wolfhounds, giant animals the size of small horses. Who *were* bright and well-trained. One clamped down on Dreolan's leg and brought him to earth, but he refused to use his weapon on the creature.

“Oh, the worms eat you, you mangy pup!” Cuilleen raged, swinging her stick at the animal. Not as hard as she'd whacked Coyle, though. Just enough to make the beast let go. Dreolan's leather boot took most of the bite, but his leg was bruised all the same. He found himself thinking, *Is cuma le fear na mbróg cá leagann sé a chos*. *The man with the boots does not mind where he places his foot.*

Unless that foot's in the mouth of a wolfhound.

Cuilleen continued swinging her stick as the hounds lunged and snarled around them. “Do the thing, the thing, like you did with the wolves!” she yelled at him, as one beast got past her and bit Dreolan, tearing his sleeve. Blood ran down his arm. She cracked the animal on the shoulder and it yelped.

“I can't!” Dreolan said in his defense. By which he meant that he couldn't communicate with the animals because dogs are too closely connected with their masters, whereas wolves were... no, never mind explanations. Dreolan and Cuilleen heard horses approaching.

“God's wounds!” he cursed, a Christian curse he'd picked up years ago.

“Which god?” Cuilleen asked peevishly, as the hounds ran back at the call of their master.

“We can't outrun dogs and horses,” Dreolan said.

She grabbed his arm, the one that wasn't bleeding, and helped him up.

“Cuilleen.” The way he said it, the word contained half a conversation.

“Go,” was all she answered, providing the other half. Then she ran to intercept the horses. Dreolan, crouched and hidden, watched as MacDwyer's lantern illuminated Cuilleen.

“Where's your man?” MacDwyer demanded from the back of his horse.

“Gone,” she said.

MacDwyer looked around at the dark forest suspiciously, swinging his lantern about. “Gone to get the goods and finish the job, I hope,” he said loudly. Then, to his men, “Take her.”

“Keep your festering hands off me!” she threatened. “I'll come on my own feet! Touch me again, you lose a finger!”

When the horses, hounds, men and Cuilleen had all returned to Crag Faolan, Dreolan reached down and picked up her shillelagh, which she had left behind to keep him company. Right well he knew what she wanted him to do. It's what he wanted to do, too.

When he'd said, “Cuilleen,” he'd meant, among other things, “Cuilleen, I love you and I don't want to leave your side, but one of us has got to go to Rath Mellan, warn Red Finn, and get help. It's the only way.”

And when she'd said “Go,” she'd meant, “You be the one to go, you've got a way with words and it's best you talk to him. I'll be alright. MacDwyer doesn't have the nerve to torture or kill me, he'd be too afraid I'd turn cailleach and hag-ride him to an early grave. Go on. I love you, too. Of course, you daft man.”

So, Dreolan took one of MacDwyer's own currachs downriver, which went must faster than walking in the other direction. When he finally dragged the boat ashore, he took the wide path leading up to Rath Mellan from the river. Dreolan staggered, shivering cold, in his wet cloak and boots that were both still stained with his own blood. But he was colder still at the thought of being without

Cuilleen.

“Who goes?” rang out a melodious voice, better suited for singing in a hall than guard duty on a mid-winter night.

“I am one called Dreolan,” he answered. “I have urgent business with the lord of Rath Mellan.”

Dreolan's head began to spin and he leaned against a tree for support. When he regained his composure, he saw a guard on the road ahead of him.

“You are cold and weary, Dreolan,” said the guard. “Join us for a drink.”

The guard's spear flashed orange in the firelight. There had been no fire before, Dreolan was sure of it. He would have seen it from the river.

“Forget your cares for a spell,” said the guardian.

Dreolan could feel the warmth of the flames, and it was comforting. He could hear voices, too, and singing, though he couldn't place the song. It seemed familiar, where had he heard it before?

He shook his head and placed a hand to his ear, to mute the sound.

“My woman is being held hostage by a man who would kill Red Finn,” Dreolan said, fighting the urge to step toward the fire. He reached for Cuilleen's shillelagh, which was tucked into his belt, and his hand closed around the smooth, reassuring wood. “These are cares I wish not to forget.”

The guard only smiled, so comely and compelling a smile as would have made virgins swoon at his feet, even though his helmet obscured most of his face. Dreolan saw no glint of natural firelight on steel or iron. Both spear tip and helm were polished copper. The fairy metal.

“Remove your helm, guardsman,” Dreolan requested, “so I may look upon the face of the one who extends hospitality.”

But whether the helm masked a horned brow, silver eyes, or a fox's ears, Dreolan would never know. He threw open his cloak to reveal a small iron disk, hanging from a cord round his neck. The singing turned to shrieks of anger, and the forest whipped around him like a cyclone. The pendant felt

terribly heavy, as if it would drag Dreolan down to the earth, and he grasped the leather thong of the necklace in both hands, trying to hold himself up.

The firelight, the guard, and the wind disappeared, and the iron disk went back to feeling its usual weight. Dreolan was sweating, and breathing hard.

“Well, that's one way to get warm,” he said to the trees, who quivered.

Continuing up the road, he met the human sentries of Rath Mellan, gave his name again, and was led inside the ringfort. All within was bedecked in holly and ivy, and alight with Yule candles. Red Finn's family, folk and friends were gathered there to feast. And all eyes were on Dreolan when he strode straight to Finn's table and spoke in a voice rasped with exertion and winter chill.

“I have come from Crag Faolan without food nor drink nor rest, alone on the darkest night of the year, to impart that Edan MacDwyer would kill you and take what is your own,” he said.

“I thought that was obvious when he attacked us,” Red Finn answered with good natured humor, and several guests laughed. Finn was a large man with piercing blue eyes, a golden-red beard, and a scar across his ruddy cheek which in no way diminished his overall glow.

“A sapling may split a mountain, if it finds a crack,” Dreolan replied, stepping even closer to Red Finn, separated from him only by the table laden with savory food. Which Dreolan ignored, but it was there, all the same. “MacDwyer knows your weakness,” Dreolan explained in a low voice. “He holds my woman hostage against the delivery of a linen pouch filled with Oak Crown – mistletoe, procured from an oak tree, on the night of the Oak Moon, with a knife of gold.”

The hunched old druid at Finn's side turned paler, if that was possible. “The *geas*,” he said with a voice like the distant rumble that portends a storm.

Red Finn said sharply to his counselor. “Carve the ogham when I am ashes, Taranis, and not before!” He turned to Dreolan, speaked in hushed tones. “Does such a linen pouch exist?”

“It does.”

“And would your lady know where it is?”

“She helped me to obtain it, to hide it, and to escape MacDwyer when we discovered his true purpose and refused to hand it over.”

Red Finn nodded. “Will he torture your worthy woman to find it?”

Dreolan's jaw clenched at the unpleasant thought. “She is, as yet, unharmed.” This he knew, for if a single nail was removed from her hand or a blow struck her cheek, he would surely feel it, too.

“Might he send his men, or dogs, or seers, to search and find it?”

“It would take them a long time to search this far.”

Sweeping back his heavy, wet cloak, Dreolan pulled out the knotted bundle of linen cloth, which he dropped on the flagstones before Red Finn's table. Prodded with Cuilleen's shillelagh, the binding spell broke, the knots slipped open, and the mistletoe was revealed.

“You did not take it to MacDwyer, though he holds your woman?” Red Finn asked, standing up to see over the side of the table.

“I did not.”

“And you would sell this mistletoe to me, to buy your woman back?” he said.

“I think the only thing which would buy her back, Lord of Rath Mellan, is your wife.”

The woman at Red Finn's side made a cry of revulsion and reached for her husband's hand.

Red Finn nodded gravely. “So, that is his purpose, after all.”

“ 'Tis.”

“And what will you do now, raggedy man?”

“Beg humbly upon the renowned good will of the lord of Rath Mellan,” Dreolan said sincerely, “and plead for your aid in restoring my woman to me. That is my price, my only price, for making this delivery to you and not to Edan MacDwyer.”

“It is a fair price,” Red Finn agreed.

“Good. Then throw this herb upon the earth,” Dreolan insisted. “Burn it, and throw the ashes into the Bray. Thrice dead is all undone. Don't you agree, *ollamh*?” Dreolan turned to the druid, who had come around the table to examine the open bundle.

“Of course,” Taranis said, kneeling down and sifting through the mistletoe.

“Is it as he says, Taranis?” Red Finn demanded.

“It is, but not much longer,” the druid said solemnly. He re-wrapped the linen cloth and summoned a boy, Aidan, not of Mellan blood but an orphan servant. “Take this outside.”

The boy nodded, took the bundle and ran out.

“Shouldn't you oversee its disposal, yourself, Old One?” Dreolan asked.

“A drink first.” Taranis said, reaching a shaking, feeble hand across the table to take his drinking cup, which he then lifted it to Dreolan. “To our enemy's enemy, who is our friend.”

“Indeed,” agreed Red Finn, lifting his own cup. “I owe much to you, even my life.”

But Dreolan did not pause to enjoy the good will. He lunged at Red Finn, swinging Cuilleen's shillelagh. The blackthorn stick connected with Red Finn's cup, knocking it out of his hand with a crash. Voices cried out. Several men rushed forward to seize Dreolan, who did not resist nor struggle.

“What ho! What ho!” roared Red Finn.

“'Tis the stick!” the druid pointed at Cuilleen's shillelagh. “It must contain mistletoe. Burn it!”

“No!”

Dreolan did not yell, exactly, yet somehow his voice reverberated through the air and an uncanny stillness fell over all. One of Red Finn's cousins who'd taken the shillelagh from Dreolan, dropped it as if it had bitten him.

Dreolan spoke in the silence. “Look to your mead, lord of Rath Mellan.”

Red Finn looked down at the liquid spilled across the table. The cup had gone flying, and he followed its path to where it lay broken several feet away. It took him a few moments, but then he

spied several waxy mistletoe berries.

“Such a small thing,” Dreolan said when he saw Red Finn's face darken.

“But, how? How did they get there? And how did you know?” Red Finn demanded.

“Someone had to tell MacDwyer your weakness,” Dreolan said. “And my guess is that only one man, a man of most intimate counsel, would know enough about the geas, about enchantments and about the Sidhe who live under the hill of Rath Mellan, to be able to betray you.”

Dreolan's eyes went to Taranis.

“You were my father's friend,” Red Finn said to the druid with deep regret.

“You cannot believe this wild wren!” Taranis protested. “Who is he, to come bedraggled from the wood and accuse me? The beggar thief!”

But truth has its own harmony, and true words are like a harp well-played.

“He sifted through the bundle, took the berries, and passed his hand over your cup when he insisted on a toast,” Dreolan said.

“You think these withered old hands capable of such dexterity?” Taranis asked.

“I think the withered old heart capable of treachery,” Dreolan answered.

Taranis lunged at Dreolan, gnarled hands extended like claws. Grasping at the front of Dreolan's tunic, he said, “Why accuse me? Lay blame where it belongs, with his lady! Herself is in league with MacDwyer.”

“Never!” cried Red Finn's wife. “I'll wring the breath out of your with my bare hands for even suggesting it!”

“You just try it, Una O'Bannon!”

“Be still!” Red Finn demanded.

“Finn...” the druid began, but the Lord of Rath Mellan cut him off.

“Taranis,” said the lord of Rath Mellan, “*you* are personally going to ransom this man his wife.”

It was a tense journey back to Cuilleen.

“I was beginning to think you'd abandoned her,” MacDwyer said when Dreolan stood inside Crag Faolan again, and for the last time. “But, she swore by flame, stone and stars that you would come.”

“She was right,” Dreolan said.

Cuilleen ran into the room, several strides ahead of the men who were supposed to be bringing her. She embraced Dreolan, at the same time reaching under his cloak for the concealed shillelagh she knew would be there.

“I thought you said it was hidden nearby,” MacDwyer said. “Did you forget where it was?”

“No, Edan,” said Dreolan, as he placed the tied linen bundle on the table. “Red Finn and I have come to the conclusion that you are the proper recipient for this parcel.”

“So, that's where you've been,” MacDwyer said, tossing a small pouch of coins at Dreolan, who caught it. “And why, in this world or the next, would Red Finn let it come to me?”

“He sees no possible use you could make of it.”

“Then he's a fool!” MacDwyer laughed, untying the knots like a child unwrapping a Yuletide gift.

Layers of cloth fell away, and the grisly head of Taranis revealed.

“Balor's eye!” cursed MacDwyer. “Starvation and plague take you twice!”

Dreolan let go of Cuilleen and clapped his hands together. A bolt of lightning erupted just outside the window, a flash of pure white brilliance, then the air sizzled and the stones rumbled beneath their feet.

MacDwyer and his lads were stunned and blinded. Dreolan fell to his knees, his strength sapped by calling upon such powerful forces – though he was already tired enough from being chewed on by wolfhounds, going up and down and up the river again, resisting a fairy, and defying a

druid. Cuilleen, who'd shut her eyes because she'd guessed what was coming, had her shillelagh in hand and cracked the duo of guards so hard that their grandsons would feel it.

“Ye rotten bastards,” she said.

MacDwyer only laughed as he blinked away the effects of the lightning. “You missed me. Your aim's a little off, Stormbringer,” he said to Dreolan.

“But mine's not.” Cuilleen leaped onto the table and hit MacDwyer with one end of her shillelagh, then the other, cracking him across both temples. MacDwyer dropped like a rotted tree trunk. Then she punted Taranis' severed head off the tabletop.

Outside, raised voices called all to arms. Crag Faolan was being attacked.

“Can you stand, *mo ghrá*?” Cuilleen said as she leaped down and knelt at Dreolan's side, slipping her arm around him. “We've got to go, and quick.”

“No, we don't,” he said softly. “Red Finn attacks now, on my signal. Now that you are safe with me.”

She held him, her head against his, inhaling his breath as he exhaled, and forgetting all else. Like a lamp drawing oil up through its wick, she drew what strength she could from the stones under her feet, and her own spirit, and her love for him, up through the core of her being, and sent light to him.

Sacred fire of Brigid, heal this man I love, she prayed. Dreolan felt the warmth return to his limbs, and he stood up when he could.

“Are you yourself?” Cuilleen asked. Dreolan stretched.

“Near enough.”

So she grabbed him and kissed him, hard.

“Then let's go,” she said, finally. “That stinking druid's still staring at me.”

Just over her shoulder, Dreolan could see Taranis leering at them from the corner of the room.

“Red Finn's betrayer. How do you know he's a druid?”

“Because he told me.”

Dreolan looked from Cuilleen to the head and back to Cuilleen.

“Shut your gob!” she told the silent head.

Dreolan took her by the hand and they headed for the scullery at the back of Crag Faolan, which would be empty and undefended.

“So, where are we off to, next?” she asked.

“We've been invited to spend the winter at Rath Mellan.”

“Ah, see? Hospitality,” Cuilleen said.

“I smell smoke,” Dreolan said as they emerged into the open air. Crag Faolan was on fire.

“Nice of them to make sure we got out, first,” she said dryly.

“I think I may have started it, with the lightning,” he admitted.

Cuilleen began running off toward the kennels. “Help me rescue the hounds, then! We'll take them to Finn.”

Dreolan was right behind her.