

A woman with her eyes closed and hands clasped in prayer stands in a dark, misty forest. She is wearing a black hood and a long, flowing red dress. The background is a dense forest of tall, thin trees with some bare branches, creating a somber and mysterious atmosphere. The lighting is dim, with a soft glow around the woman's hands and face.

Inflationary Faeries

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Inflationary Faeries

a novel by
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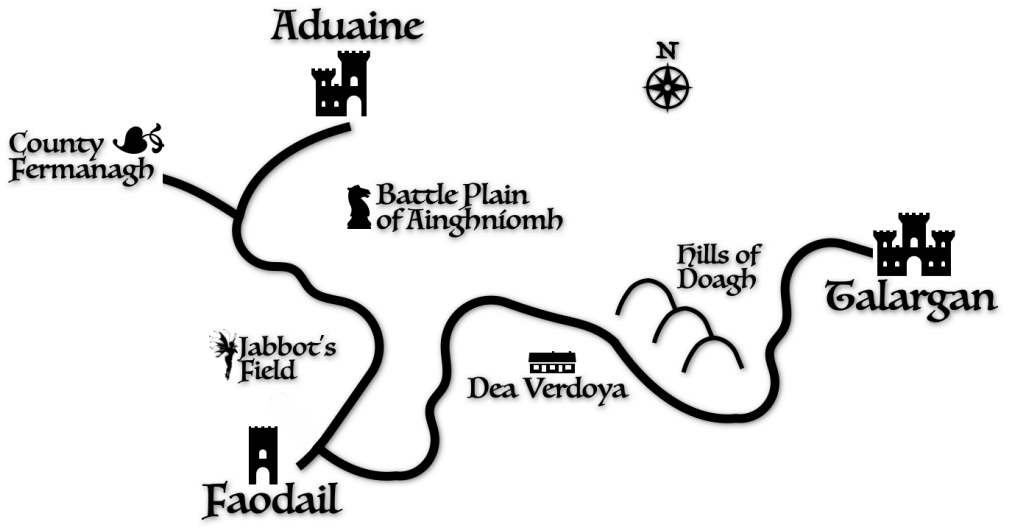
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Character & Place Name Pronunciations

Saoirse (SEER-sha)
Leannán (LAN-awn)
Echternach (EK-ter-nah)
Gavenleigh (GA-ven-lee)
Láidreacht (LIDE-ract)
Draíocht (DREE-ar)
Uachtarán (WOK-ter-awn)
Eònan (AW-nan)
Mealladh (MAL-uh)
Aoibhneas (EEV-ness)
Nádúrtha (NA-dru)
Beochaoineadh (bee-OH-kween)
Ainghníomh (ANG-nee-yu)



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Chapter 1 Cobnut

A glitter of fresh snow swirled an eddy above the castle's white parapet as Tewey sat huddled in a cold corner of Bawn Guelph's feasting hall, studying his woolen socks and waiting to speak. The grey stone floor absorbed what meager light fell from frantic candles standing man-sized at attention on this frigid January afternoon. The winds of Ulster blew blinding and beautiful against the brickwork of Bawn Guelph while a pounding of steins and clinking of forks filled the air of its massive hall.

Brighid, the faery, stayed hidden, but in visible attendance at the Feast of the Snows were all ten members of the northern Comhairle of Clans: Lord Uachtarán, his cousin Láidreach, Eònan of the West, the Six Broad Arm chieftains from all about Aduaine, even the Ugly Mouth of Mealladh. The

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small man waiting to speak was not of their number, but from the small Aduaine shire of Faodail southerly situated on the shaded bend of the Ragaire. This rickety little man was known to everyone as Draíocht the Shortshanks, though the faeries knew him as Tewey.

The purpose of any gathered Comhairle had always been threefold: to eat boiled meats and weigh threats and argue strikes. Such violent purpose spoke sweetly to the hearts of the larger men of Aduaine. Smaller souls, with their fumbling and their doubts and their hurriedly locked doors were rarely invited to speak before the Comhairle. But Tewey, however sleight a man, had something to say. He rose from his stool and approached the table of grasping fists and gorging jaws. “Good men of Aduaine,” Tewey’s tone held forth with great solemnity, “I bring dire news of a found frog in Ireland.”

A gasp passed through several beards in attendance. Everyone at table understood the threat of a found frog.

“Hoppin’ over drifts in the fields of Dea Verdoya it were, and carried to court, *alive*, at Talargan!”

The men contemplated this loudly. Someone asked if perhaps the frog were green, and when Tewey confirmed that it was, the brave men clucked like chased hens. Ulf and Magfindgail, two of the Broad Arms, implored Tewey to tell them more of this frog.

“Men!” Uachtarán had heard enough. “Surely the frog twas carried over on a frigate from Scotland.” To the brainsick Comhairle, this explanation seemed unlikely.

“I’ve heard tell,” Tewey was now almost whispering, causing the large men to crane their necks toward his low words, “that Duvenold, King of Ossory, found a frog near Waterford, and told those in his presence that the frog portended an invasion by the Prince.”

“Well, of course,” they agreed, sitting back. These were

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fighting men, well acquainted with the signs of impending war.

“Comrádaí,” Eònan objected, “Duvenold stands an ally of Prince Balor!” This was of no use, however, as the Comhairle was no longer entertaining objections. A strategic plan of strike was needed.

“We stand unprepared for invasion,” Láidrecht reminded everyone.

“We require,” spat the Ugly Mouth of Mealladh, “some gallowglass.” At this, the men cheered.

“Aye!” Tewey agreed. “If the Scots can afford to part with their frogs, they can send over some fightin’ men an’ all!” His conclusion, now consensus, was approved by more pounding of steins.

Talk turned to how a clan in Aduaine might solicit a group of gallowglass. Tewey spoke again, telling the men of a recent offer of *lánamnas comthinchuir*, a dowried marriage. The family, MacLeish of Stane, was known to Tewey and could provide forty-seven mercenary gallowglass, along with a small spouse.

“My lord Leannán Echternach will make the bond,” Tewey assured the Comhairle. “He can offer their daughter the castle at Faodail and his three servants an’ two hundred sheep. Tis more sheep than any other laird possess in Aduaine!”

Eyebrows raised and steins lowered. The men muttered at this suggestion, worried that the little man had gone mad. Their muttering was interrupted by Lord Uachtarán, often called upon to speak sense.

“Nay, Draíocht,” he frowned, “Laird Leannán is already married.”

Tewey folded his arms. “Tas never stopped a wedding for the strategy of clans.”

Láidrecht jumped in. “Leannán be married to the niece of King Pfennig, himself! And I’m doubtin’ the church will permit

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a divorce.” Láidreach’s son was a parish priest, and so his word was accepted on this second point.

“Nor another wife; a lucky cur, indeed!” This third point was well received by the Comhairle and rewarded by nods and renewed drinking.

“Tis naught of issue,” Tewey swung back. “Annulment’s enough. Lady Beochaoineadh tis but a niece: four sons, two daughters, and a male cousin removed from the throne.”

The men mused that Leannán would never agree to this, but Tewey persisted. “Leannán has a secret, and when I speak to him of this secret, he will agree to this request.”

Enough mead had been swallowed that trifling details no longer mattered. The men left the matter of marriage in the hands of the Shortshanks and went back to chewing and toasting the arrival of sharpened sparth in Aduaine.

And so the marriage of Leannán to Saoirse, a faery’s maneuver on the chessboard of Ulster, was arranged by eleven mortals at a well-laden winter table nestled in the pillowed hills of the north. Over the coming months, the folk of Ulster would weave this feast of January into lore, telling of a young Scottish wife and defeated Irish husband, joined not for love but for war.



The maneuvering faery Brighid descended from the rafters of Uachtarán’s feasting hall on a cool draft of air. She careened through corridors of Bawn Guelph masonry, knicking her bees’ wings on the icy stone and feeling nothing. Her tiny brain focused, instead, on this happy result from the Comhairle.

Brighid returned to faery form to warm her tiny toes before the fireplace in the castle’s kitchen. Flames danced under a turning pig that dripped fat to feed the fire, and she saw in those lapping flames the flanks of a coming war whose armies

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were still just images seen through a hole in her mind. With a grin, she watched a silent battle formation undulate on the plain of Ainghníomh and slowly fade back into the hearth fire.

Her grin remained like a berry stain.

Brigid's initiation into the Trio Morrígna, the Three Sisters of Strife, depended on this war. Without it, her initiation task seemed impossible: Brigid must steal Laird Leannán's small hoard of monies in Faodail without using faery magic. After eight failed attempts, a more matured determination began to form. Early defeat had caressed her ego like a nurturing mother, and whispered of the necessity of a more thoughtful, a more elaborate, a more patient plan... *this* plan.

With a start, Brigid recognized an urgent need to be planting angry herbs in the battlefield's loam, seeds of leafshard and bloodnip. She would speak to the roots of the strangling fig regarding a graft. And more blue-blood ink would be required to compose a cursive list of poetic stratagems, preferably in red garnet.

So much still to do!

And yet, her impatience to complete the planting was immediately constrained by the lack of spring thaw, and a warmth in her mind began to tug at the corners of the moor's blanket of silencing snow.

Brigid startled as the lady of the castle bustled past, her notice not on faeries but flavors. The lady's name was Aoibhneas, wife of Lord Uachtarán, her tongue engaged in the tasting of the buttered tubers bubbling up in the spit's hookpot.

The faery's arms fanned out, articulated spider's legs, feathered black and underfoot; she scuttled quickly beneath the crack in the old kitchen door. Frigid airs met her folding legs and, in a momentary change of intention, Brigid soared into the air on crow's wings, her feathers deflecting the cold down her back and off her tail.

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“Mother!” her thoughts called as her wings pumped higher, “I have news!” Brighid adjusted her flight toward the meeting mound of the Tuatha Dé Danann where all the higher ranks of the underground would convene at dusk. “Mum, where are the aunts?”

As she flew in over a smaller mound in Jabbot’s Field where her younger sister lived, the faery sensed a dangerous spark of energy. Mother! Brighid landed on the branch of a Tattling Tree and watched her mother materialize at her sister’s front door. Tiny leather boots, laced up with a sprig of thyme, wiped, wiped, wiped on the mat. But before Mother Babda could knock, her monocled eye caught sight of a cobnut leaf fluttering to the ground. She snatched at the leaf mid-flight and placed it, with precise fingers, in her monogrammed clutch.

Facing Babda was a round, wooden door that swung on a curlicued hinge. One’s will was imposed on this door by turning a tarnished copper knob that Babda now rubbed clean. She pocketed her dusting kerchief and mouthed aloud the signage on her daughter’s small residence:

143 Brinsmaid Trail, Jabbot

Abeyance Fritt and Peter Pendragon, inhabitants.

This obvious entrance betrayed a hidden home in a low mound of earth, a slight hill in a field just north of Faodail. Atop the little moundhouse, endusted in snow, a briar extended itself, flowered and thorned, and poking out in all directions, though leaning mostly to the southeast to feast on first sun. A cobnut tree crowned the mounding roof; it was from this tree that the leaf had found Babda.

Shivering, Babda determined to warm her environment. Fronds of ferns uncoiled carelessly down from the moundhouse roof. Strands of dead grass flopped flagrantly. Newly flowering

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petals dropped fragrantly. Colors emerged. The snow recoiled, melting clear and seeping into the soil that formed the roof of the mound.

Brigid marvelled that her mother already perceived the need for an early spring. The faery decided against interrupting her mother's manipulation of the season and flew on to begin a widespread warming of the entire shire. As Brigid flew east, Babda, clearing her throat, beat on the door's two printed names with her knuckles.

The door creaked back and a tiny face peered out. "Mother—" the greeting began, but the inhabitant was swished past by brisk boots.

"I always said, Abeyance, that when one of us became maritally disentangled, we should become devoted to each other." Babda looked around the room for a surface, found one, and cleared it. "And now, I've grown..." (Weary? Disillusioned? Words offered themselves up, but were rejected.) "...*divorced* of your father." She plopped down her grip, lowered her shoulders an inch, and held out her arms in defeat. Abey obeyed with a hug.

Babda handed her a piece of paper.

"What's this?"

"As you can see, Abey, I've been served with a writ!"

"A writ?"

"I have been physically removed from your father's premises."

"Well, mother, un-remove yourself, then."

Babda sighed. "Can't I stay here, my darlin'? Just for a time? You know, I've always believed we two should combine forces. This will be a chance for us to reconnect."

Abeyance Fritt frowned in the confusion of this mothered moment. "What of Brigid?" she asked. Surely staying with her eldest daughter would be easier on Babda. And everyone else.

"Brigid lives alone, my dear, and is so busy these days.

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Such a busy bee! And anyway, two is no fun, Abeyance. I require three souls, at a minimum, to be happy.”

Outside the window, the snows of January returned in a swirl, lifted by a brief winter breeze. “I suppose you can stay for a time.” Abeyance closed the window’s shutter with a shiver. “For a short time.”



On the morrow, the low sun had found Brighid padding her tiny faery feet down a rocky gravel road. The winter morning was a warmed and melting green, and Brighid veered off onto a low podzol moor, just drying of its unseasonable dew. She snuggled into the humid grass of the Faodail valley. A single cloud hung low to shade her eyes and she felt with fond fingers the curved line of her favorite feather pen. Brighid was ruminating on profits and powers, penning the verses of an idea that had been growing like a tendril in her brain.

“What ya writin’?” A small child from the shire stood before Brighid with mussed hair and a dirty nose. Children, like faeries, were in the habit of appearing out of an area of Faodail known as *no-where*.

“I am writin’ a love poem about war.”

“How strange!” the girl laughed.

“Tis not at all strange, child. Every war is fought for love, and all in love are *poised* for war. Tis simply the way of the world.” The faery looked into the child’s round face and placed a licked finger on the smudge across her nose. “Where be your mum and what be her name?”

“Maid Millin, at the shore of the Bann.”

“How is a maid your mother?”

“Maid Millin, she watches we orphans.”

“Well, she ought be dippin’ ya in the Bann, filthy scamp.”

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“She were! Tis why I ran here!” The child settled into the warm grass next to the faery, looking for brief protection.

“Ahh,” sighed Brighid. She licked her feather pen and began to read aloud to the child:

*MORE than simply a bride be this lassie from Stane.
O'er the Maoile she came to our land, Aduaine.
Not a flower she passed was ignored by her brain;
Even bloodnip was sniffed and allowed to remain
Yielding poison and pain, adding strife to the strain.*

*FOR a price she supplies us her gallowglass men;
At her beck and her call they will ride oe'r the glen.
Echternach, his estate on the moor and the fen,
Rolling lands lost in contracts she signs with a pen.
Yards and stables by ten; Eire will own these again.*

*THRU this marriage did Leannán trade love for a war.
Hearing drum beats, his first wyfe was now shown the door.
Ere this young wyfe named Beo asked, Why, and Wherefore?
In his haste he prevented his wyfe's sad implore.
Raiding loved he the more and the building of corps!*

*THIRD and second and first, in these thefts lies an art,
Helping fund every skirmish and battle we start.
Eire should listen to knowledge the faeries impart
For our Leannán may find a new love in his heart,
Trading Beo for Saoirse, as bread for a tart.*

The little girl clapped. “Tell another!”

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Bridghid thought and laid down her pen. “Have you heard tell, child, of the great defeat of Balor’s army at the Battle of Ainghniomh?”

The little girl had not and was, furthermore, too young to know that battles were normally named only *after* they were fought. Had she known this, the little girl would likely have been content to believe that faeries might know things that other people did not, and out of order, too. One thing did puzzle her, though: “Why be yer stories only ‘bout war, wee faery?”

“They’re not!” Brighid barked. “But you’d do well to remember, child, that you can’t have a hero without one.”



Down in the southern shire, an hour’s wagon ride from Uachtarán’s castle in Aduaine, the tongues of its folk were a-flutter for months, remarking at the balmy air and divining the arrival of their laird’s new wife. Her name was only wondered at, her possible beauty, bitted and pieced. Her suspected virginity formed a weighty debate over pickled ales, but the greatest odds involved speculation on the hue of her hair.

Others worried, less lucratively, where she might be kept. Faodail was peopled enough. Was she really to live in the castle keep? And what of Beochaoineadh, the laird’s good wife for a year over last? The folk fancied Beo, for when she’d arrived at Faodail the castle walls had vined; shire folk recognized when garden faeries pushed forth an opinion.

And beyond all that, this new, mysteriously haired woman brought gallowglass. Forty-seven men were expensive to house. The older folk in the shire, living just off the lane, might need to upstake to Jabbot’s Field or farther. Making room for soldiers generated much frowning and many grunts, especially among the older Maids Maudlin, who collectively insisted that

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cottages less than twelve steps square were cursed with a layer of wiltrot dust, a blight that refused to be swept. And so, the maids logically refused to move to lesser quarters.

The shire decided that if any of the gallowglass brought wives (or worse, children) they would be wedged into the lodge near the castle gate. Otherwise, the stables would do well enough.

“Best breed them goats!” This was the final conclusion of most public conversations, faithfully passed along to Beagan, the shepherd, who thought it a painfully slow response to such an immediate need. Beagan did trod the shire for several days, though, collecting coins for the purchase of a twelfth cow at the autumn fair in Tamlaght O’Crilly.

Some of the womenfolk secretly welcomed the promise of new men. Many a lass had expanded a garden to make way for a bigger harvest. Maid Millin hoped to finally be trothed and two of the shire’s widows had been noticed sweeping their blighted floors more thoroughly than usual.

Some of the men were spied anticipating the arrival, too. The Ugly Mouth of Mealladh never tired of complaining about the threat of Prince Balor. Ulster clans were small and nimble by nature, but Faodail had lost twelve men in the battle of Crugh. Their flanks were few.

The promise of fighting men both comforted and concerned the older maids, who wondered whether this new Scottish wife would feel welcomed by the faeries. If the faeries angered this lass, would their new protectors leave?

“That’s the wrong worry,” sniffed Aelgar. “Ya best be worried this hairless wench may anger the *faeries*, not the other way ‘round!”

Once lighting on the right worry, most of the maids’ preparation for the Scottish lass involved a bribing of the trees. All manner of gifts were left to hang on the brindled branches of

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trees: bundles of dried herb and berrybead necklaces and bee bunting feathers. A hunt was undertaken for a seven-leafed clover, but none was found. That was worrisome.

Nádúrtha, the cook in the towerhouse at Faodail, was the only member of the shire who said not a word. She stood silent with her work just as she had always done, never crafting an opinion, never sculpting a sentence, never mentioning that her suppers' meat of hares had lately been replaced with the twitching muscles of thawing frogs.