

LANN DÀN - BLADES
OF DESTINY

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OF
DESTINY

DÀN CYCLE ONE

JAMES RAQUEPAU

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Lann Dàn – Blades of Destiny

Dedication

For my family – Cynthia, Jereme, and Gwyn

Thanks for supporting my dream!

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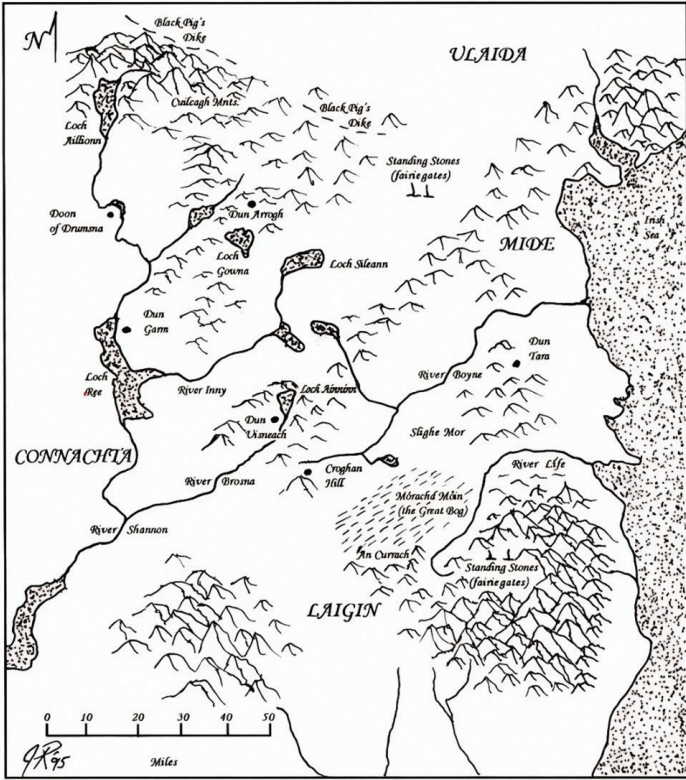
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As the Tuatha Gods spread all of this author's musical talents to other worthy humans, I want to recognize Claire Odlum and Emy Smith for evolving my lyrics and creating compositions of the songs in the Destiny Cycle books and on the website (www.destinycycle.com). I found Claire and Emy on the Airgigs website.



Map of Eastern Erin

CELTIC MAGICAL CONSTRUCTS

In the fantasy-adventure genre, authors develop magical constructs for their envisioned world, whether a newly created world or one based in semi-historical or mythical times. In the *Dàn Cycle* series, the author's magical construct revolves around Celtic mythology, especially Irish Gaelic mythology, which has had many interpretations over the years. It makes for rich and fertile ground for creative minds to till.

Celtic Gods were said to wield celestial powers, imbuing artifacts and weapons and bestowing portions of their unique magical aspects to key mythical characters. It is a common theme among the various tribes, often using the same or similar names for their deities, such as the Gaels and the Picts.

In the *Dàn Cycle* series, the author has followed this familiar path, with the Gods of Erin being the mythical *Tuatha Dé Danann*. That last word refers to the Mother Goddess Danu's pantheon and the mortal druid and warrior worshipers upon whom they bestowed their gifts.

With these magical constructs in mind, the author uses *italics* to highlight magical items or weapons of Tuatha origin or seizing states of being. Examples of the latter would be *void* and *sight*, and druids, whose power comes from Tuatha Gods, are called *Aos Dána*. Likewise, telepathic speech between two or more parties is in *italics* without quotes, as that speech is made possible via Tuatha magic.

The author also *italicizes* most Gaelic language to ensure the reader knows it must sound different from English. When a character speaks Gaelic, it is in quotes. Additionally, some characters have not only a name but also a title, like Erin's Hero. It is the same with Gods, where they usually have multiple formal names which require capitalization. Likewise, when Gods make new Gods, they would be Mother, Father, Daughter, and Son to each other.

Hopefully, this will help make it easier for readers to follow this semi-historical fantasy adventure.

GUIDE TO GAELIC PRONUNCIATION

While this novel occurs in fifth-century Ireland, the author uses modern Gaelic for certain words over early or old Irish versions. Yet, even with this, there are Irish and Scottish Gaelic variations to consider. Because certain vowels and consonants in Gaelic have no equivalent in English, it can be a complex language to read. A Gaelic-English dictionary (or an online source) helps to translate between the two languages.

Below is a summary of some differences, which can assist with some of the pronunciations of these words. I have included phonations in parenthesis to aid in sounding out names on the Central Characters & Places and Glossary pages. For those less inclined to make such an effort, sound out the word as you like. How it sounds to you will not insult the Tuatha Gods! I can't say the same for native Gaelic speakers, though.

Vowels and Vowel Combinations: Individual Gaelic vowel sounds are as follows: “a” is typically pronounced “ah”, as in father; “á” or “à” takes on a longer sound, as in Dàn taking on the sound dawn (note: the author chose Scottish Gaelic

spelling of Destiny over the Irish Gaelic spelling, as cinniúint is too lengthy); “ae” takes on the sound “i”, as in high; when words end in “e”, it is always sounded out, as in fairie; “i” rarely takes on the sound “eye”, and instead is usually an “ee” or “ih” sound, as in feel.

Some vowel combinations take on different sounds from English to Gaelic; “aoi” takes on a long “e”, as in peel; “ao” takes on “ay”, as in pay; “au” takes on the sound “ow”, as in pow. Accents such as ` and ´ lengthen the sound.

Consonants: As with vowels, a few Gaelic consonants also take on different sounds from English; “c” always takes on a “k” sound, as in Celtic being pronounced Keltic; “ch” and “kh” are guttural, as in ache; “g” sounds are hard; “h” is not strictly a letter, but rather it’s a function to aspirate or lengthen a consonant, and thus “lh” would take on the sound full.

The author hopes you have some fun with Gaelic!

CENTRAL CHARACTERS & PLACES

Badb Catha (Badh-uv Kae-Thah) – Goddess of Death and Knowledge, commonly called Goddess of War, and the Mórrígan, often taking the form of a battle crow on the earthly plane.

Beatha (Kae-Thah) – A prophet or Fáidh near Dun Arrogh, one of the *Aos Dána*.

Bradaigh (Bra-daigh) – Bastard son of Hakon Skadi.

Braoin (Breen) – Bastard son of Hakon Skadi.

Breanna Ban Morna (Bree-an-na Bawn Mor-na) – A Red Branch warrior from Dun Arrogh who is of Clan Dálaigh (Daw-lee) and the daughter of Morna and Nevan.

Brede – Dreadrider of Garm and the oldest of Hakon Skadi's warriors; he is also one of the Norvegr leaders known as Dreadriders.

Cuilcagh Mountains (Cuilcagh) – Northwest of Dun Arrogh.

Dagda (Dahg-duh)– All-Father of the Tuatha pantheon, Dagda is the God of Life, Death, and Fertility over the land and its people; he is also the first druid and a master of all things magical, often considered wise, witty, and wily. Dagda typically resides on the Tuatha island of Murias.

Danu (Dah-noo) – Mother, Earth, and Moon Goddess of Erin, also known as the Triple Goddess and the Silver Huntress, when she takes her wolf form; she is co-creator with the Dagda of the entirety of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* pantheon.

Dun Arrogh (Doon A-ruhg) – A moderate-sized ringfort was where Clans Mórdha and Dálaigh splinters settled.

Dun Garm – The Dreadlord of Garm’s massive ringfort near Loch Ree.

Dun Uisneach (Doon Ish-nach) – A substantial Celtic ringfort located in southwest Mide along the High King’s Road, also known as *Slíge Mor* (Slee-geh More). Chief Faolán and Chieftess Falyn in southwest Mide oversee it.

Eoin Mac Cairbre (Owen Mak Car-bree) – Dun Arrogh and Red Branch Chief of Clan Mórdha, cousin of Fergal, and a Prince of the Blood from Uliadia

Erin (Eh-rin) - Four primary provinces or kingdoms comprised what the Gaelic called old Ireland. Connachta (Kon-akh-ta) is in the northwest; Mumu (Moo-moo), later called Munster, is in the southwest; Ulaida (Ul-ay-duh) is in the northeast;

and Laigin (Lay-gin) is in the southeast. Royal Mide (Roy-uhl My-de) was carved out of the latter two provinces, which held the High Kings in Tara. Unfortunately, this last kingdom did not survive as a province by itself once the heroic period of the fifth century passed; High Kings would not reemerge until four to five centuries later.

Falias (Fall-eece) - One of four fairie islands where the Tuatha resided with Danu and Lugh. Often called *Tír na nÓg* (Teer na nOg).

Fergal Mac Conall (Fur-gul Mak Koh-nawl) – Dun Arrogh Red Branch warrior of Clan Conall, a subordinate clan to Clan Mórdha (Mur-dha) and cousin of Eoin Mac Cairbre.

Hakon Skadi (Hah-kon Skah-de) – Dreadlord of Garm, son of a Norvegr Jarl, and killer of his father.

Kyras (K-eye-rass) – Dun Arrogh Smith of Clan Dálaigh, brother of Nevan, husband to Lissa, Toal’s father, and Breanna’s uncle.

Lang – Dreadrider of Garm, brother of Lunt.

Lissa – Wife of Kyras, Toal’s mother, of Clan Dálaigh.

Lugh (Loo) – Sun God and wielder of Tuatha’s magical *Jewels* and other items of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, sometimes seen as a great white stag in his animal or familiar form known as Cernunnos.

Lunt – Dreadrider of Garm, brother of Lang.

Mórrígan (Mohr-ree-gan) – Goddess of War, Fate, and Knowledge, also known as Badb Catha or the Dark Goddess.

Morna Ban Cahir (Mor-na Bawyn Kah-hee) – Wife to Nevan, mother of Orla, Ronat, and Breanna of Clan Dálaigh.

Nevan – Warrior husband to Morna, brother of Kyras, and of Clan Dálaigh.

Niall Noígíallach (Nye-al Nee-Gal-ach) – The High King in fifth-century Ireland, also known as the *Ard-Rí*; the ancestor of the Uí Néill dynasties, which governed significant parts of the Emerald Isle for many centuries; his son, Lóegaire Mac Néill, follow him as the next High King.

Runa – Norvegr Völva or seeress of Dun Garm, whom the Gaels called a *baobh*, a fury, a *cailleach*; to the Norvegrmen, she is their *seið-kona*.

River Shannon – Divides the Kingdoms of Connachta, Mumu, Laigin, and Mide.

Toal Mac Kyras (Toe-al Mak K-eye-rass) – Dun Arrogh Red Branch warrior of Clan Dálaigh, cousin of Breanna.

Ulicia (You-Lee-see-ah) – Healer or Ollamh of Dun Arrogh, one of the *Aos Dána*.

GLOSSARY

Aos Dána (Ees Daw-nuh) – Led by All-Father, wise ones of the Celts known as druids; made up of four sects and wield some Tutaths powers, with others having control over the elements.

Ard-Rì (ard-ree) – The High King of Ireland, the Chieftain to which all Clan Chiefs swear allegiance.

Bards – History keepers, storytellers, and master musicians of the *Aos Dána*.

Breitheamh (Breh-huv) – Judicial sect of the *Aos Dána* that acts as judges, lawmakers, interpreters, and negotiators.

Celts (Kelts) – People who once occupied a greater part of Europe and the northern Isles, with those hailing from southwest France and northeast Spain known as Galicia, considered ancestors of the Gaelic.

Claimh Solais (Kly-vuh Soh-lish) – One of the Four Treasures or *Jewels* brought to Erin by Dagda and Danu and wielded initially by the Sun God Lugh; it was gifted to Nuada of the Silver Hand,

one time King of the Tuatha; once unsheathed, no enemy could resist the Sword of Light, or escape from its path.

Crói Dàn (Kree Dawn) – Created by the Mother Goddess Danu, known as the Heart of Destiny, a heart-shaped ruby pendant that endowed heroes of the land to rise above their mortal beings, become true defenders of Erin and rally clan warriors to their cause.

Danu (da-new) – Mother Goddess of the Tuatha pantheon.

Druids (drew-id) – Known as *Aos Dána*, Dagda's masters of law, music, foreseeing, healing, and elemental magic.

Dun (Doon) – Earth mounds and pickets that usually surround a settlement of several clans for defensive purposes; duns or ringforts typically consisted of the main hall and several small conical-shaped huts serving as living quarters.

Isle of Erin | Érie (ay-rah) – The Emerald Island known as Ireland.

Fáidh (faw-ee) – The prophetic sect of the *Aos Dána* typically called seers or ovates.

fianna (f-ee-AE-n-uh) – Initially, freeborn Fir Bolg warriors – and after a time, interbred Gaels – who once made up the army when the High Kings in Tara ruled in Royal Mide; the *fianna* were made up of *fians* (fi-ann), or bands of nine, who eventually served local chieftains and kings when the first reign of the High Kings ended.

Fragarach (frea-gar-thach) – A sword, also called Answerer, brought from the otherworld by Lugh, the Celtic God of the Sun; known to be able to pierce any armor, and later gifted to the Celtic God of the Sea, Manannán Mac Lir.

Filídh (fil-id-h) The bardic sect of the *Aos Dána*, keepers of the histories, storytellers, and master musicians of the *Aos Dána*, commonly known as bards

Fir Bolg (feer-buhl-uh g) – The original people of Erin were subjugated first by Fomorians, then by the Tuatha.

Fomorians (foh-mawr-ee-uhn) – A race that settled in Erin after the fall of Atlantis and subsequently defeated by the Tuatha.

Gaelic (gay luhk)– A people who came to Erin after the Tuatha, arriving from a part of the Celtic empire called Galicia.

Lann Dàn (Lanna Dawn) – Blades of Destiny, created by Badb Catha, the Goddess of War, were a pair of long diamond-bladed weapons with oak hafts imbued with the power to battle invaders wielding magic.

Lia Dàn (Lee-ah Dawn) – Stone of Destiny is a round crystal brought to Erin by the Mother Goddess Danu that enables those holding it to see both the past and the many future time-lines.

Lugh (Loo) – Tuatha Sun God.

Maorgairme (May-o-r-gair-mee) – The Dark Goddess created an amulet ring to aid the bearer with fickle magic and summon Tuatha Gods in great need.

Ogham (OH-am) – Typically only used by the *Aos Dána*, it is the written language of the Celts.

Ollamh (O-lam) – Healer sect of the *Aos Dána*.

Red Branch – A band of warriors in old Ulaid led by Rory the Red; in Gaelic, they were called *Craeb Ruad* (krayb roo-ad); it was a name resurrected by Eoin Mac Cairbre of Clan Mórdha when he organized the young warriors in Dun Arrogh to fight the Dreadlord.

Rune Stones – Black stones used by *Asgardian* magic wielders like Runa, etched with symbols to help divine the future.

Sidhe (shee) – What the Gaelic people call fairie or Tuatha mounds and living places.

Sight – A common name for the vision state of the *Aos Dána* used to touch the *wheel of time* to see a possible future.

Tir na nÓg (Teer-Na-Nug) – Alternate name for Tuatha realm.

Tuatha Dé Danann (Too-ah-ha Day Dah-nawn) – Magical beings who came to Erin after the fall of Atlantis, the same as *Tuatha Dé Danann*, often referred to as Faerie.

Tuatha Dé Danann Islands – Falais (Fall-eece); Findias (Fin-dee-us); Gorias (Gore-us); and Murias (Mord-us)

Urghabháil an neamhní (ur-guh-vawl un nyow-nee) – Means to seize the *void*. This state allows some of the warrior class who have reached mastery level to access the magic of the Faerie realm, similar to the *sight* typically used by Tuatha's *Aos Dána* to access Erin's *wheel of time* through *Lia Dàn*, the Stone of Destiny.

PROLOGUE



Hakon Skadi, warlord and son of a Norvegr Jarl, ripped his sword across his latest opponent's gut. A moment later, the startled Celtic warrior was collapsing, his sword slipping from his fingers as he crumpled to the ground, slowly dying as he bled out. With no other opponent ready to challenge him, the Norvegr warlord smiled in pleasure as he watched his warriors dispatch the remaining Gaelic fighters facing them. He took a particular delight in watching those white-haired warriors who had joined him in his exile, knowing they would be stalwarts in his goal to dominate a section of his newly adopted homeland. Covered in blood, his warriors taunted the locals as they cut down the Celts they faced, who lived south and west of his Norvegr compatriots on their Isle of Erin.

Hakon and his warriors had ripped through the local Celt defenses at their latest stop as they traveled up the Shannon River, using their greater steeds to their advantage. Yet they had not found the ideal spot to build a fort to defend. He insisted his warriors leave enough of their rivals alive to tell the story of

each assault on the Gaelic Clans of Erin, each successful and bloody assault that sent the cream of their warrior class to the otherworld. Enough to let the rumor spread that a new warlord had come to this green land and would not be easily displaced. Let them throw their lives away.

He had searched for a spot to establish a fort for months while battling locals along the way up the River Shannon. Still, the lowlands on the ribbon of water had not yet revealed a suitable place to establish his presence as a new overlord in this strange green land. Finally, however, rumor had it there was a place upriver at the intersection of three powerful kingdoms where he might be able to settle.

Runa, his *völva*, had foreseen where he sought; she was rarely wrong. While far from her Gods, she remained an essential resource in his quest to carve out a place for himself while in exile in this land. If he could establish himself in this strange new country, he would undoubtedly draw additional warriors from his crowded ancestral lands. With these other resources and their worship of their *Asgardian* Gods, Runa's powers would grow much more potent. And, in turn, sap the strength of the local Celtic Gods. Power was more than having muscle—he had to utilize every available resource to ensure victory.

Lost in his thoughts, Hakon nearly missed a Celtic warrior who had broken through the lines and charged him with a sword drawn back and ready to take off his head. Instead, he spun left and let his blade flash out as the Celt overreached his mark, and his exquisite timing allowed him to slice through the back of the wild warrior's neck as he passed. Blood sprayed as the Celt tumbled dead to the ground, his head nearly severed.

As the battle drew to a close, Hakon Skadi and his warriors showed how capable they were of dismantling their local rivals in power. But, before long, he would begin dismantling more than

just opposing warriors—soon, he would rip at the very fabric of this land that the Celts held dear. Those he would come to rule would wish for his death a thousand times over, as would the Tuatha Gods of the land called Erin.



Lugh rode before his army of *Tuatha Dé Danann* warriors wearing a grim expression of determination. With his glistening, golden hair streaming behind him, he rode his great white steed, Énbarr of the Flowing Mane, who had been gifted to him by the Sea God, Manannán Mac Lir. His stallion carried him faster than the swiftest wind, able to cross over land or sea without missing a heartbeat or a stride. With *Ćrói Dàn*, the Heart of Destiny, pressed against his chest, held there by a golden chain, the Sun God lifted his magical sword, *Claimh Solais*, high over his head and linked it with the heroic magic of the Heart of Destiny.

The combined power of the Sword of Light and *Ćrói Dàn* lit the sky ablaze with a rose-colored hue. It provided his host of warriors a path through the darkness woven by the mages of his enemy, casting magic that gave his warriors the courage to ride against the demons arrayed across the field in front of them. Over each shoulder was slung *Lann Dàn*, two long, diamond-bladed weapons with oak hafts that cast *balefire* into the demon's ranks, their power drawn to the dark magic flowing through the demi-giants.

The Sun God rode before staggering defenses of the foul Fomorians and drove his frontal assault into their ranks without mercy. He let *Gae Assal* fly, his magical spear seeking out the misshapen, magic-twisted creatures created by the dark mage-king Balor. They held the enemy front lines, each standing eight to ten feet tall and swinging massive clubs studded with

iron spikes. Yet *Gae Assal* dodged their swipes to deflect it, and it impaled first one, then another, and another until five of the dark, foul monsters had fallen. Then, with his shining armor blinding his opponents as if they had gazed directly at the sun, the spear slapped back into Lugh's hand. Taking a moment to pick out his spear's next target, he cast it again.

Seeing that a sea of enemy warriors was collapsing nearer on his left, Lugh let his treasured sword, *Claimh Solais*, swing first to one side and then the other to clear a path, lightning flowing from its tip. Like *Lann Dàn*, the great blade was created by Badb Catha, also known as the Mórrígan, the Goddess of War. She had endowed it with the same potent Tuatha magic, and with it in his hand, he seized the *void*, the *urghabháil an neambní*, and dealt out death like white-hot rain, cleaving even the most heavily armored of his opponents from head to heart.

Around him, the battle cries of his fellow warriors joined their cheers with the dying screams of the Fomorians. After countless years of fighting, years of throwing men and magic at each other, Lugh knew victory was close this time. As the Sword of Light sizzled, he drew his golden spear back to his free hand again by simply calling to it with his mind. As *Gae Assal* leaped across the battlefield, taking Fomorian demi-giants in the back and out through their guts along the way before slapping back into his hand, he rallied his Tuatha warriors once more, leading them away to regroup for one final charge.

The Fomorian leaders, watching the destruction of their mightiest fighters, knew of but a single recourse to save the day. And so they wheeled out their monstrous, misshapen mage-king, the cursed Balor of the Baleful Eye. He had not always been this way, but a powerful Fomorian sorcerer had caught him trying to steal a spell and cursed his eye. After that, the prince who became king was slowly corrupted, body and soul, by the foul

magic of the sorcerer. Balor was now no more than a wretched soul turned into a demon, a demon who wanted to see everyone who opposed him dead, and his baleful eye possessed the power to carry out those desires.

The king's attendants pulled open his huge, malevolent eye, causing nearly a thousand Tuatha warriors to wither and die under one sweep of the dark gaze of its corrupt magical power. Such was its allure that few could resist looking at the darkness spewing from the Fomorian mage-king's eye. Even Balor's warriors on the battlefield were lost, but it was the price they had to pay for stopping the Tuatha.

Sensing what would happen if he did change course, Lugh called out to his men to break off their assault and let his fleet-footed horse carry him away from the king's foul gaze. He watched in horror, his army's front line crumpling under his grandfather's wicked gaze, and his brave warriors were suddenly just mounds of dead bodies. Then, unable to hold the evil eye open any longer, the attendants to the Fomorian mage-king let the massive lid sag shut.

Fury burned in Lugh over what Balor had done to his warriors, and without thinking of the danger, he sent his steed Énbarr speeding back toward the battlefield, back toward the cursed mage-king, a protective shield of magic springing to life around him. As the Fomorians struggled to pull Balor's eye open once more, Lugh set his enchanted sling, his *cloich tabaill*, swinging around his head. Through the darkness, it pulled sunlight through the clouds, parting them to form a rainbow, and Lugh's combined magics drew that rainbow from the sky, creating it into a sharp-faceted crystal, commonly called a *tathlum*. His magic-imbued stone, made of light, dazzled the Fomorians as he let it fly. Then, after years of battle, Lugh's aim was true, and it drove Balor's baleful eye into the back of his skull. The king

died instantly, and with that death, Lugh finally pushed the Fomorian followers from the land of Erin.



Lugh pulled his attention away from *Lia Dàn*. He could not remember how many times he had allowed the Stone of Destiny to draw him into the past, to relive that battle and live in those memories as if he were there. How many years had it been? Indeed, a few thousand. But now, time mattered little to one such as Lugh, for he was a God. The people of Erin called him the Sun God, an endearment of which he was rather fond.

The fleeting thoughts faded as the Stone of Destiny reclaimed his attention. In it could be seen the past, his days of glory, the battles he had fought, the victories he had won for Erin and the Tuatha. He had been the focal point in the final defeat of the Fomorians. Accepting that role had been hard initially because his mother was of Fomorian blood, and King Balor of the Baleful Eye was his grandfather. Nonetheless, his father's Tuathan blood sang in his veins, and knowing how twisted his grandfather had become made it easier to crush that part of his family. He held no remorse about the day he killed his foul grandsire, for the corrupt Balor had deserved to die.

As Lugh let go of the past, the *Lia Dàn* drifted to scenes of other battles, battles yet to come. The Stone of Destiny also held portents of the future. As it had many times before, its depths revealed yet more invaders coming to his land. This time, though, he could not be there to lead his mighty Tuatha warriors to save Erin. From the otherworld Tuatha city of Falias, he could only touch the land of Erin in a limited way. No, these were threats that the fierce fighters of the Gaelic Clans of Erin

would have to deal with alone, and he had faith they would live up to the challenge.

The Gods of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* had held sway over Erin for millennia. With Lugh's help—for which efforts he had been transformed from Hero of Erin to the Sun God by the All-Father God and Mother Goddess of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*—they had defeated the Fomorians and subjugated the Fir Bolg. While most of the Gods of these vanquished peoples withered and died because few were left to worship them, the costs to the *Tuatha Dé Danann* had also been high. It had taken great works of magic to attain victory, magic that had cost the Tuatha their vitality and virility. Over the ages, their numbers dwindled.

When the Gaels came to Erin from the mainland region called Galicia, the Tuatha, as rulers of the land, were eventually supplanted. The old Gods, led by the All-Father known as Dagda and the Mother Goddess Danu, had survived this setback because the Gaels took to worshipping them. At that time, the Gods created otherworld spaces for the magical *Tuatha Dé Danann* people to live in the underhalls, places often referred to as the fairie realm, giving them pathways of light to their original island homes of Falias, Findias, Gorias, and Murias. It left the Gaels to settle over the entire length and breadth of the land called Erin.

The Mother Goddess Danu approached the Sun God and pulled his attention from the Stone of Destiny, its Gaelic name being *Lia Dàn*. Lugh could not help noting that her radiance was as bright as ever. The Mother of his beloved Erin sat quietly next to him, asking, “Will that crystal ever lose its luster?”

“Not as long as it continues to show me those glorious battles I once fought.”

Danu smiled at that, for they had often bantered over his addiction to the mystical power of *Lia Dàn*. Then the expression faded, and she said softly, “I am more concerned about what's

to come. Centuries have passed, and Erin has enjoyed a time of relative peace. Aye, the Gaelic clans war among themselves, but our shores remain mostly untouched. Even the Romans barely took enough notice of our emerald isle for trading, something Alba cannot claim. I would say the same thing about the Saxons.”

Lugh frowned, unsure of what the Mother Goddess was trying to say. “Are you concerned about the Romans or Saxons? The former’s influence in Alba is on the wane, but the latter has established a hold in eastern Alba. Celts in the north remain strong in keeping faith with their old Gods, but many of these invaders seem to be bringing their Christian God and his martyred son Jesu with them from the mainland as the Romans did.”

“It’s not a few followers of another God who concerns me,” Danu replied, her tone almost derisive. “Many Gods have come and gone over our time, and since these Christians do not believe in magic, I am not alarmed about such fools. They will soon be unimportant, and our *Aos Dána* will prove as much in time.”

Lugh countered, saying, “I have felt the old Gods of Alba weakening, and now these followers of the One God have come to Tara, the heart of Erin.”

“They are only a handful, and even those in Tara do not see them as conquerors,” Danu maintained. “Our Gaels will never desert us. Yet, as the Book of Invasions foretold, more than raiders are coming to Erin, and I saw one who just arrived.”

Lugh frowned, asking Danu, “Do you know something I do not? Have you seen something that I missed? I also use *Lia Dàn* to search out invaders who will come from beyond the Ninth Wave, but there are so many stretched out on the river of time I’m unsure which of them to be concerned with. Since the Stone of Destiny has a different view of time, we could easily focus on the wrong invader.”

“I saw in the Stone an arc on Erin’s *wheel of time*, where the white-haired warlord who recently brought his longboats up the River Shannon will eventually draw hordes of his kind to our land like the Saxons went to Alba. I looked across the water and found he comes from Norvegr, a land squeezed between the Celtic Gauls, the Slavs, and the Germanic tribes, with nowhere to go except to sea. They follow the Gods of Asgard.”

“Along with others, I saw these white-haired ones as well,” Lugh said as he finally rose and left *Lia Dàn* to the Mother Goddess of Erin. She caressed it while he asked, “If you think he is just a vanguard of another wave, what do you propose? As you’ve often reminded me, your *Leabhar Námhaid Steach* foretells that as long as the people worship you, the land will produce Heroes who will rise to meet any invasion. Am I not proof of that? Did the Book of Invasions not foretell my coming? Did not your land produce me? Did not *Ćrói Dàn* choose me to lead the Tuatha in victory over the Fomorians and the Fir Bolg?”

“Yes, but—”

“But what? Is this invader different?”

“Something tells me he is,” Danu mused, unsure how to explain her concerns about this white-haired warlord. Her dour expression didn’t mar the finely etched features of her face as it would have with most, but it was enough to tell Lugh she took this invader more seriously than any other in the previous thousand years.

Setting the Stone of Destiny back on the white marble pillar on which it usually rested, the Mother Goddess continued, saying, “It is something in the *sight* when I touch the *wheel of time* which says—*be vigilant*. If they displace enough of our Gaels, we’ll have a new set of Gods, a mighty collection of their *Asgardian* Gods, to contend with. *Lia Dàn* confirmed this when it showed

me that to remove this white-haired lord from the land, a Hero like you, one bound by the blood of both sides, will be needed.

“We must look beyond the *Ard-Rì* and his spawn, especially since our High King, Niall Noígiallach, often looks abroad for excitement and conquests,” Danu continued, her gaze drawn back to *Lia Dàn* as if it would tell her something, something she had missed.

“This new white-haired warlord only arrived recently. How could such a Hero already exist among the Gael?”

Danu shrugged. “There are several with the potential, but they are very young. Some have not been born yet and are still in their mothers’ wombs. I cannot say which will blossom and bear fruit, only that one must, or Erin will die under a wave of white-haired warriors like the foul wretch who recently came across the sea, bringing his new *Asgardian* Gods with him. Something tells me the Blades and Stone Destiny will be needed to keep our land of Gaels safe. And likely our Heart.”

“Are you suggesting we help one of these babes blossom into our Hero, into Erin’s Hero?”

“I know there is little we can do directly,” Danu said with a sigh as she rose, her expression relaxing somewhat. She led the Sun God away, adding, “However, seeds planted in fertile soil can be watered and nurtured. It should be enough for Erin’s *wheel of time* to shape the destiny of one of our hopefuls to become Erin’s Hero, and that might just rid us of these new invaders before they draw more of their ilk to them.”

“And if we are needed to help these seeds directly?”

“While our time on the other side of the veil is limited, we can tend to our garden, Lugh.”

“As you tended to me?” the Sun God said lightly, and at that, Danu finally smiled.



Once the Gods Lugh and Danu had left *Lia Dàn* behind, the Stone of Destiny swirled into life independently. Images rolled within its glassy surface, images that played out the many invasions yet to come to the land of Erin. Some were violent, others deceptively dangerous, despite the apparent peaceful intent. The one centered on the white-haired invader revealed that he was more than four hundred years ahead of his fellow Norvegr warriors, warriors who would eventually be called Vikings. And that the two Gods' attempt to stop this young white-haired warlord would entwine them in a desperate act by a single young woman, an action that would affect the very fabric of time.

The most potent *Tuatha Dé Danann* Gods did not yet know that not only would the Blades and Stone of Destiny be needed, but the Heart of Destiny as well. All three would be required to invoke the most powerful magic ever created by the *Tuatha Dé Danann*. Only this would keep the land of Erin and their faithful Gaels from slipping away from them.

BLOOD BONDS



Beanna Ban Morna rolled to her left to avoid her opponent's sword stroke, the soft green grass of the glen cradling her shoulders for the briefest moment. Calm filled her despite her vulnerability, for she could see her rival's countermove in her mind before he had even started his arm in motion. Beanna had seized the *void*, a state of mind between the material world and the Tuatha realm, what the *Aos Dána* called *urghabbáil an neamhní*.

She was suddenly on one knee, the sinews of her arm and shoulder muscles snapping tight like drawn bowstrings, bracing her frame for his next strike. With her left arm raised over her head, her hand holding her weapon nearly where the iron joined the wood, Breanna caught her adversary's blade on her crossguard and drove in with her other blade.

As quickly as his body had been within range, he managed to leap clear of her thrust. His fierce expression made it clear he wanted to crush her in their dance among the blades; the slight upturn at the corners of his mouth added a taunting touch.

Confidence, she decided, was sometimes not enough. Being one with her blades, one with the ground at her feet, and even inside her opponent's mind—seizing the *void*, now *that* could bring victory.

Letting her mind slip into the *void* once more, where she was just an extension of her surroundings, she knew what his counter would be again a second before he did. Spinning to her right as she rose, Breanna blocked his roundhouse slash with the weapon in her slightly weaker right hand. His strength and height proved the advantage when their blades locked, and he pushed her over backward. Breanna let the motion flow over her, rolling to the ground like water poured from a bucket. Her challenger, thinking she would continue to counter with outside blocks, had followed his last move with an overhead swing.

Breanna anticipated his reaction again, and, to her opponent's surprise, she came up with her long blades crossed. She caught his heavy two-handed sword in the axis of her blades and swept the other's blade down and away. As her attacker lost his balance, Breanna promptly brought the black oak haft of the long blade in her left hand around and struck him in the side of the head. Then, she sprang clear of any possible retaliation in the same motion. Her blade would have sliced through his throat if he had been a genuine opponent.

The young man with whom she was sparring went down, his arms and legs sprawling ungracefully as his sword slipped from his hand. Confidently and with some bravado, Breanna whirled both long blades a few times before letting the smooth wooden hafts slap against the boiled leather vambraces strapped on her forearms. Then, finally, she released the *void*, as there would be no counterstrike from Fergal Mac Conall today.

“*Cum air do làimh!*” one of those watching cried.

Breanna Ban Morna stood down as commanded, letting the tension pour out as she calmed her pounding heart and heaving chest, hardly having even noticed the effort she had worked up during their dual. She wondered if maybe the *void* had shielded her from detecting her body's strains.

Dressed in a light green tunic and darker green leggings, Breanna looked down, taking in her grass-stained clothing, and took stock of her body, pleased to see not so much as a scratch. Wiping her brow, she rolled her shoulders and then turned to her chief, letting the smallest of smiles slip, one born of ultimate satisfaction.

Their band of young men and women were in awe of her talent, and they thumped their spears against their shields and cheered in approval. Except for Eoin Mac Cairbre, few had bested Fergal Mac Conal, certainly never with long blades against a heavy two-handed sword. He was their best warrior, having earned his gold Celtic Knot arm ring before most had even gained a silver, and Breanna had only taken what seemed like a few minutes to put him on the ground. The males would have gladly cut off their braids to move with such speed and grace, with such intuition.

In that moment of triumph, Breanna was transformed, as if something out of a bard's tale, the sun bursting through the morning mist while they fought, capturing her shimmering white hair tied back with her beaded green Connemara marble-laced thong into a ponytail. Some were murmuring that she rivaled Connachta's mystical Maeve, a female warrior who had built the mighty stronghold known as Cruachan of the Enchantments and led many battles against Cú Chulainn, the Hound of Ulaida.

Others disagreed, saying Maeve was no match, for she had personally never defeated Ulaida's greatest warrior and guardian of the great Dun Emain Macha. A better choice would be Macha of the Golden Hair, the first female warlord of Ulaida. Before Rory

the Red had founded his original Red Branch at the fort named after her, she'd been a great warrior woman known throughout the land, and most now thought Macha had transcended to be a Tuatha demi-Goddess.

Breanna Ban Morna sighed explosively, breaking the spell her fellow warriors had been weaving over her victory. Her impressions of the match were slightly different, her aching muscles and sweat-covered body telling her that their *comórtas* had taken much longer. Certainly not something for the bards to spin a tale over. Still, she held her head high, ensuring her shoulders were straight. There was no mistaking the firm set of her jaw nor the coolness of her expression despite her accomplishment. As her blue-eyed gaze swept over their band of young warriors, Breanna's finely arched, pale eyebrows and sharply lined face did not belie the elation she felt within.

Pulling loose the beaded tie passed down by her grandmother that held back her long white hair—she did not like it braided as many of her fellow warriors did—Breanna pointed to the warrior she had knocked to the ground and said, “Help him. Fergal and I might not agree often, but he at least deserves to have his head looked after. Go fetch one of the *Aos Dána* apprentices.”

Breanna's cousin, Toal, was the first to move to Fergal's side. The young redheaded lad had always admired the older warrior, following him like a hound's whelp, so the frown that fell over his boyish face surprised no one as they watched him survey the damage. Another lad took off at a run for their dun as commanded.

As Breanna turned away, their appointed chief said, “Well, Bre, you've proven you're the best and bravest of us, and it was clear you seized the *void* at will. Probably even better than I ever have, and likely better than anyone I've ever seen. You're now my champion, the Red Branch Champion. I think it's time you

help Fergal and me train these children who would be warriors of our dun.”

Breanna did not respond to his demand as she wiped the sweat from her brow again, her usually pale skin still flushed from her efforts. Instead, she watched two other boys several years younger than herself step forward to help Toal get Eoin’s barely conscious cousin into a sitting position. Fergal groaned when they lifted his shoulders off the ground, and then he hissed at Toal sharply as he pushed aside the muddy red, almost brown hair that covered the bump on his head.

Breanna sighed, relieved she had accomplished her goal without seriously injuring him; they couldn’t afford to lose him. That much was clear. It was doubtful Fergal thought likewise of her. Given they had already had this conversation many times, she turned to her chief as she wrapped her beaded thong around her neck to keep it safe and said in a clipped voice with a sharp, narrowed glare, “Eoin, not this again.”

“Are you questioning me?” he countered and stepped toward her, cocking his head defiantly. His newly braided bright red beard and plaited hair made him a fierce-looking warrior, and his muscular frame was as imposing as ever. While Breanna was tall for a young woman, he was a bit more than a head taller than her. When she did not answer, Eoin added, “If so, I will challenge you myself. Best me in combat, and you’ll have to accept the role of Red Branch Chief. That will leave you with no other choice.”

Breanna’s bright blue eyes went wide, the flecks of red within her irises dancing like sparks thrown by greenwood when burned. The nostrils of her thin nose flared as she said hotly, “No! As I have said before, it’s not my place to teach, and I don’t take kindly to your attempts to force me. Creating another Red Branch was your idea. You claim lineage to Ulaidian’s Clan Mórdha, back to Conal Cearnach himself, despite Dun Arrogh supposedly

falling under the *Ard-Rì*'s protection as part of Mide. Forming a *fian* might have been more appropriate for our dun, with you as our *Ceann-buidhne*. That would have allowed you to join the High King's army and request protection.

"Since you did not, Eoin Mac Cairbre, this is yours and your cousin's responsibility. But know that I'll do what I must when I have to. I'll be your champion, but no more. I have another charge that I have always focused on, and you know it!"

Eoin took a step back, surprised as much by her angry retort as her comments about their Red Branch; a *fian* was for Fir Bolg clans—not true Gaelic! With noble Ulaidain blood running in his veins, the thought of bowing to a Connachta-spawned king as a *buidhne* was appalling. Then he recovered his wits and said sneeringly, "Come, girl, you've seen seventeen summers, now turned seventeen! Any warrior here would give a finger for the honor of leading our Red Branch."

"Well, that shows you I'm not just any warrior, nor just any *woman*, you oaf!" Breanna shot back as she buried her long blades in the earth only inches from his leather-thonged feet.

She hesitated momentarily, letting her jaw jut out slightly, then turned on her heels and stomped away. Her streaming, stark-white hair sharply contrasted the surrounding green of the forest she was marching toward. Silence settled over the glen, except for the song of a few wrens or yellowhammers, with none of the others willing to step into the hornet's nest their chief had stirred up.

"The Red Branch needs you to be strong," Eoin called after her. When she kept walking and did not reply, he cast his gaze on those watching the exchange and barked, "Dawdlin' about isn't going to stop Hakon's Dreadriders. Go find something to do!"

“Like what?” one of the younger lads rejoined smartly. “Challenge one of them to a duel like I’m Breanna? If she can kick Fergal’s arse like that, a Dreadrider would kill me in a heartbeat.”

Despite earning the gold Celtic Knot tier of their warrior class, which should have commanded their loyalty, Eoin knew his grip on this band of young fighters was tenuous, for he was only a few years older than they were. Even though many considered him to be Dun Arrogh’s chief, their *Ceann-cinnidh*, he was, at times, still just another boy with whom they had shared their childhoods. He had to be strong for them to accept his leadership—something they had seen little of from the elders of their fort since the Dreadlord had killed their former *Ceann-cinnidh* and began his rule.

Eoin took a threatening step toward the boy, and then he remembered that one of the *Aos Dána* had once said words could be as powerful as blades. Maybe using a druid’s wisdom approach was best used here. Instead of striking the lad, as he had intended to do, he said fiercely, “The old Red Branch warriors of the Clan Ulaid were never foolish. They attacked when the odds were in their favor and were brave when the odds were not. We will challenge the Dreadriders in our own time. Until then, we have weapons to make and food to be harvested and gathered.

“At the very least, you can gather rushes and peat for the dun or fetch water. Set yourselves about those tasks for your impertinence. Remember, the Dreadlord benefits when we bicker and appear divided, allowing that *dubhchaile* to continue his ungodly rule. When we follow that path, it weakens our Gods and strengthens his Gods.”

With that, Eoin pulled Breanna’s long blades from the earth and turned after her with a swirl of his multicolored cloak, a cloak that proclaimed he was of royal Celtic blood. His followers said no more, knowing all too well the truth of his words.

The Dreadlord had kept them divided, kept them weak. Many of their fathers and older brothers had either died at the Dreadriders' hands or were now hostages—sometimes called *daor aicme*, even though they might once have been freeborn—to the white-haired invader.

Hakon Skadi had come to their land like a thief in the night, stealing what had been theirs before they knew it. His ways had been different and had caught them off-guard. What cost them most in battle was that they had used chariots and footmen, and Hakon's Dreadriders had attacked riding upon giant steeds. While Dun Arrogh's warriors occasionally rode their hill-bred horses, especially when pulling chariots, they were no match for his warhorses. While outnumbered, the Dreadlord's warriors carried the day with that one advantage.

Because their small dun lay between the major Ulaida, Laigin, and Connachta clans, no one came to their aid to keep them free and *saor aicme*. The provincial kings—and even the *Ard-Rì* in Mide—viewed the Dreadlord of Garm as a small buffer between rival clans. In the seventeen years since usurping control of their land, the Dreadlord had been careful not to engage those powerful clans in outright battle, especially those most in the High King's favor in Mide. He never posed a significant threat by keeping to small cattle raids. Only those living within the narrow strip of the territory he claimed suffered.

And so the Clan Mórdha's Red Branch warriors began to slip away to do as Eoin Mac Cairbre bade them, to do what they could to stop Hakon Skadi, the Dreadlord of Garm. Their chief could only wish that the elders of Dun Arrogh would stand with him and proclaim him as their new *Ceann-cinnidh*.

Eoin found his new champion sitting on a fallen log just inside the tree line of the woods. She had just finished unlacing the vambraces from her arms and set them aside. She crossed her

arms tightly over her blossoming chest to emphasize she was still mad at him. Sitting next to her, he stuck her blades in the ground at her leather-thonged feet and said softly, “You forgot these.”

Breanna only nodded and continued staring at the small, now sun-filled meadow dotted with buttercups, where she had just defeated Eoin’s cousin. They had taken to calling it their Grove of Instruction, just like Ulaida’s old warriors of the original Red Branch used to do at Emain Macha many hundreds of years before. It was where their heroes taught the art of war to their children. Save for Eoin, Fergal was considered the best warrior in their offshoot Red Branch band. Because Eoin was their chief and forbidden to fight in single combat, Fergal Mac Conall had been named their champion.

Now, Breanna Ban Morna was their Red Branch Champion. And unlike others who sought to use arms like those wielded by the Dreadlord, she chose long blades. They were traditional in her clan, though many had given over to short swords, and some even to long ones, over the past few decades. As ancient weapons, long blades typically had tapered eighteen-inch copper, bronze, or iron blades and three-foot-long ash or oak hafts roughly two inches in diameter. A short crossguard lay where the metal blades and handle joined to protect the wielder’s hands.

Breanna had the fortune of possessing iron-wrought long blades, a set that had once belonged to her father. Before that, her grandmother Cahira had used them in battle many times; they had passed to Nevan, as his wife Morna chose not to take the warrior’s path as Cahira had. Given that many generations of Clan Dálaigh warriors had grasped the old blades in battle and training, the black oak hafts had worn smooth.

Unable to take the silence, Eoin heaved a breath forcefully as he ran a hand through his bright red curly hair. “Bre, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have pushed so hard back there, especially in front

of the others. It's just that you fought so brilliantly. You were like a warrior touched by the Gods. And Fergal and I could use an extra hand."

"Few want to train with the long blades," Breanna countered dryly, though she couldn't help blushing at his compliment on her developing skills. It seemed that, lately, she had been fighting with a confidence few could match, and her ability to anticipate an opponent's moves in battle when she could seize the *void* was growing sharper daily. With that thought, Breanna leaned forward to retighten the leather straps wound in a crisscross pattern from the feet to her knees, adding, "You know I won't bother with other weapons. Especially longswords like the one wielded by the Dreadlord."

"His Dreadriders make effective use of such blades, just like the Red Branch once did."

Breanna shrugged, unwilling to argue the point further. Long blades were lithe and quick and suited her fighting style well, with four edges she could dance and dazzle with when she was in motion. Instead, she let the Grove's peacefulness settle over them.

Fergal, the oldest of their band, was now sitting up and rubbing the side of his head. The sight made Breanna want to laugh, but she suppressed the urge as she watched him struggle to reach his feet. Only Fergal and Toal remained in the empty clearing, their fellow members of the Red Branch having slipped away into the woods to do as Eoin had commanded.

Spears, arrows, and bows were always in demand. Breanna's uncle, the smith in their small dun, often let her young warrior friends help make spears and arrowheads from the bits of molten bronze, copper, or iron leftover from his sword-making efforts for the Dreadlord of Garm. But, unfortunately, it seemed as if they all tarried in some way or another for that brooding lord.

Something she would change, Breanna assured herself, though she was not yet sure how to rid their land of his foul stench.

“Only a few days until Samhain,” Eoin injected, trying to make small talk. “Won’t be many more warm days like this until spring—nothing to look forward to except rain, sleet, and wind. Listening to Cahir prattle on about what it means for a Celt to wear the warrior’s arm ring is not how I want to spend the winter. Yet, I suppose our younger ones need such guidance. Maybe we can help them work on their *urghabbháil an neamhní* skills. That’s something even Fergal needs help with.”

“Aye,” was all Breanna would offer, as though she did not hear his comment about their bard. *Samhain, time of the spirits*, she thought. And with that, she wondered what her father had been like, wondered where his essence—his *anam*—wandered. Breanna had never known him, something the Dreadlord had made sure of before she was born. Her uncle was the only clan member who tried to provide a semblance of a father figure for her, and at that, Kyras always had his own family and worked hard to tend to it, leaving little time for her.

An older woman appeared on the far side of the meadow. Her green robe and red tunic signified she was an Ollamh, a healer among the *Aos Dána*. Around her pranced a young girl dressed in a simple brown shift. The druid hobbled along unsteadily on her walking stick, occasionally shooing the girl away from her. She took a long while to cross even half of the small glen with such a short gait. The Ollamh stopped briefly to examine Fergal, and she barked a demand to know what had happened.

Breanna’s cousin, Toal, who was still helping the former champion, made a motion and pointed in their new champion’s direction. The old hag chortled at the plight of their dun’s bravest warrior and reached into her pouch. She gave him a herb of some kind and moved on, leaving her young assistant to help

the warrior. Even from a distance, Eoin and Breanna could see the fire rising in Fergal's face, but they knew he would not say anything; one did not insult an Ollamh.

"It's Ulicia," Eoin commented. "Wonder what brings her out here? The druids usually only send an apprentice when we have a minor injury."

"Let's find out," Breanna suggested as she leaped up. Then, grabbing her long blades, Eoin's new champion slipped them into the harness on her back. She let her dark brown leather vambraces slide over the blades, then marched across the meadow toward their healer.



The Dreadlord of Garm, Hakon Skadi, bent over the shoulder of his gray-haired *völva* so he could watch her perform her magic in the dim light of her small, windowless hut. Runa turned her intact eye on her lord, the chill expression on her wrinkled face making it clear she wanted more room to work. Hakon ignored her. He had come to witness her use the magic of their homeland to see if rumors were true that neighboring Ulaida and Mide were readying themselves for a new round of raids on each other in the spring.

His presence on the northeastern side of Loch Ree had always been a sore point with the local clans on his north and east borders. Since he'd created a small buffer with Connachta, they had tolerated his presence, especially given that the High King was a Uí Néill clansman descended from that northwestern kingdom. With Niall's first wife being of traditional Ulidan lineage in the northeast, Hakon had to tread carefully there, so he mainly kept his raids to the southwest.