

STONE HEART

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MEDIA KIT SAMPLE CHAPTER

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Chapter 1

Áed was eight years old when the first skirmishes from an invading army brought their foreign battle cries to Éirinn. He was forging a bronze bowl in his father's smithy, hammering the heated metal against the rounded stump of a thick branch, when a messenger arrived from the northern Ó Mordha tribe to request the attendance of all capable fighting men. Áed and the other boys from the sept brandished wooden swords and brawled in the fields as the men gathered their collective means and kissed their wives goodbye.

'Let me come,' Áed demanded of his father.

Airic took his sword and planted it firmly in the ground between them. At its height, the pommel came to the boy's chest. 'Take the sword and hold it up with your arm outstretched,' he said.

Áed eyed the sword and set his jaw as he gripped the hilt and tried to pull. He blew at his fringe and heaved with all his strength but it would not come free. He looked at his father.

'When you can take the sword,' Airic said, 'and hold it aloft, then you can join

the men on the battlefield and slay as many foreigners as your will desires.' At Áed's crestfallen face, he added, 'Until then, learn the metals and protect your mother and your sisters.'

He touched the runestone at Áed's neck. It had been placed there at his birth when the old druid thought he might not make it through the night. His mother's labour had been difficult.

'You wear the symbol of strength,' Airic said. 'It is time to be strong.'

When the men of the settlement took their swords and their shields and set out north to the Ó Mordha, the women cooked, cleaned and scolded the children for their misdeeds when it was called for. With only the young and the elderly left in the sept it was a quiet time.

Doirean insisted that Áed and his younger sisters take on more chores in their father's absence. The youngest, Maebh, was known among the settlement as Bec, meaning small, since the moment that her tiny legs could carry her around and she was capable of crawling through the narrowest gap in a fence or barred doorway. Grainne, on the other hand, was shy and homely. Only a year younger than Áed, she seldom left her mother's side, preferring to pick berries for cooking and learning the dye process of linens. The druid, aged beyond reckoning, said she would make a fine acolyte one day if he lived to see it, and Grainne smiled, hoping she would not be picked for the privilege.

Áed was not worried about his father at war. Armies were made from the skilled men of each allied tribe and when the battles were done the men who survived

would return to their families and their work, and a period of mourning would be had for those that did not come home.

As the man of the house, he made trinkets of bronze jewellery, not old enough yet to master the art of iron forging, and traded them to the women for as much as could be earned. He made for his mother a clasp to pin her cloak together at the neck, the rounded fastener carved with a pattern of his own design, based on his father's work. He stood on a chair to secure it for her and beamed when she told him how lovely it was. As he hawked his clasps and simple bracelets, he thought of his father and decided he would forge a shield for him for his return. He took a sheet of hammered bronze, strengthening it with a wooden backing, and measured it against himself so that it was as tall as he. He edged the shield with a wrap of leather and inset metal studs along its rim. Into the bronze he carved the likeness of Néit, the god of war, and below that he carved the knotted representation of three interwoven elk, their tribal marking.

It took him three months to complete and his father had still not returned from war.

When the druid succumbed to a dying cough and he was unable to walk far without help, his acolyte was called out as his replacement and was to be sent to the archdruid for instruction. The old man—carried the length of the settlement by two initiates sent by the archdruid—came to Doirean and bid her a good day, asking for Grainne that she would travel to the chief of the druids for testing and induction into the Order. Doirean could not contain her anxiety. She had the druid brought into her

home, made him a drink and said, 'With the men away at war and no sign yet of their return, the children are needed here for the good of the sept.'

'For the good of the earth,' the druid said, 'your daughter has something within her spirit that calls to me.'

'She is but a child,' Doirean explained.

The druid said, 'As was I when I was called forth. Even before your father's birth, when I was little more than Bec's age, I showed the signs of earth and sky in me and was chosen. I have not the will to enforce it,' he said, and coughed, his fit lasting an eternity before he was composed enough to continue. 'But she has the gift. I can sense it in her.'

Áed heard his words from outside the door and winced when the coughing fit began. He ran to Grainne who was in the field with the lambs and told her of the druid's intention.

'I won't go.'

'If Mother makes you, you'll have no choice,' Áed told her.

Grainne fled from the field in tears, away from the settlement, and made Áed promise not to tell anybody where she went.

She was found after dark in the lower reaches of the valley amid the bramble and heather, curled up in her torn dress, cold and scared. She had no sooner been brought home when Doirean slapped her and hugged her. 'I won't go,' she told her mother.

'It's not for me to say it,' Doirean said. 'The druid sees something in you.'

‘Then let him find someone else to look at.’

They resolved to speak with the old man in the morning, but when the dawn broke, a cry went up from the druid’s acolyte that he had passed in the night. He was laid out in his room that was filled with his herbs and his liquids, and his acolyte, a man of twenty, bathed his body so that his spirit would be cleansed before entering the Otherworld. He was waked for seven nights and on the third, a feast was held in his honour. Knowing that it was the druid’s last insistence, and that he was right about Áed and his lost sibling, Doirean couldn’t help but look at her eldest daughter to determine what the old man had seen in her. She went to the acolyte with Grainne beside her, shy and reticent, and asked him for his thoughts.

The acolyte, a man named Odhran, looked at the wide eyes of the girl and said, ‘The old man saw many things, much more than I could ever dream to.’ He knelt before Grainne and smiled at her. ‘Do you want to learn the ways of the druids? Do you want to become a part of the earth and the sky and the sea?’

Grainne lowered her head. She did not, but even at seven years old she knew better than to say so.

Odhran stood and faced Doirean. ‘You know my mother is of this tribe,’ he said. ‘We nurture children better than any other and you do it well, just as my mother did. But in some children, there is the will to nurture life. If the old man saw it in your daughter, I believe him, though I cannot see it myself. My training is incomplete. I am just an acolyte and have many trials ahead of me before I can assume the old man’s responsibilities and walk in his shadow. If you allow it, she can come with me

to the archdruid for testing. There is no man more understanding of nature than he. Only he can decide whether your girl is right for the Order or not, and if she is not, you have my word that I will return her to you myself.'

'Do you have news of the fighting men?' Doirean asked him.

He shook his head. 'Not yet, but when I travel north I will enquire.'

As Áed lay in bed that night, he heard his mother talking to Grainne. It was the will of the druid, not her own, she told her. And the work of a druid was vital to the order of the world. She would not force her, but asked that she go for testing and if it was not for her, she could return. Áed fell asleep to the sound of Grainne's soft crying.

After the druid's remains were buried, the acolyte, the initiates, and Grainne travelled north, leaving the settlement to its quiet longings. The summer months passed and the women worked the hardening fields, picking up the slack in the absence of their husbands and fathers, and Áed continued his personal studies as a metalsmith.

There had been word of the war only once when, true to his promise, Odhran had sent a messenger back from his travels to inform Doirean and the other women of their enduring plight. The foreigners, a vicious and brutal band of men, had arrived on their eastern shores in massive ships and fought their way west towards the Ó Mordha territories. Ó Mordha's men were holding strong and the foreigners were weakening. It would not be long, the messenger said, before the war was won.

'How many casualties?' Doirean asked.

'I do not know,' the messenger told her. While his words were spoken with a warming sense of victory, they did not soothe Doirean's heart. By the winter solstice and the yule celebrations of the following year, there had been no further word about the men.

Áed, who spent his days between the fields and his father's workshop, collecting wood for the frozen months, and beating metals into delicate items, had been tasked with three other boys to chop and carry the logs to the field for the yule fire that was burned for twelve days when the sun stood still. His hands, toughened from his metalworking labours, bore calluses from the axe when they had finished chopping the trees and stripping the logs of stray branches. The logs were brought to the central field and applauded, until the last—the largest—was dragged to the staged area. Áed jumped on top of it when it was in place and bowed low to the uproarious amusement of the gathered women and elderly. 'May the yule be short and quick to spring,' he shouted.

'Spring from the yule,' they replied with vigour, and he jumped into the arms of the women who caught him with a grunt. 'You're getting bigger every day,' his mother said.

On the evening of the darkest midnight, six days into the fire celebration, when the day was at its shortest and the night felt eternal, the four boys who were honoured with the cutting of the logs were awarded food and gifts for their efforts. Standing on a raised platform in their red deer furs, they sang songs and acted the heroic deeds of their ancestors. They were given pride of place on chairs in front of

the burning log and the women bowed to them each in turn. In the absence of a druid, for Odhran had not yet returned, the chieftain was called upon to lead the sun praises and the festivities carried on until near dawn. The four boys were the last to retire, long after the elderly and the women, and as they tended the fire to keep it stoked, warmed with pride, Áed said, 'Our fathers will be home soon.'

'How can you know?' the others asked him. 'It has been over a year without sign of them.'

He shrugged. 'I feel it.'

'You're not a druid,' one said. 'That's your sister's job.'

'Maybe she bit him as a child,' one of the others said, 'and gave him some of her ways.' They laughed and although he joined in, Áed's words were said with hope rather than certainty. He had spent the day trying to recollect the face of his father but could summon to mind no more than a red moustache and the single braid that fell to the left of his eyes, eyes that were either blue or grey or green; Áed could not remember.

As the sky brightened with a sluggish approach in the east and the moon's bright face was still visible in the darker regions, a cloud descended from the north and brought with it the men of the settlement, returned from battle, sore and exhausted from so long away. They approached the field where the fire burned and stood before the four boys. Litters were carried behind them with men covered by sheets, and Áed looked from one face to another in search of his father. He recognised most of the men, but some were strange to him. As he walked among

them, calling his father's name, Airic stepped before him and said, 'Son.' He had grown a beard, like most of the men, but Áed saw now that his eyes were unmistakable. They could never have been forgotten, or at the least he recalled them when he looked at them.

'Green,' he said. And as his father came to his knees, Áed wrapped his arms around his strong neck and smelled his thick hair and choked to stop from laughing.

When the women were brought out and the men each found their wives and mothers, Airic swept Doirean into his arms and kissed her. 'We need to go to the chieftain,' he said. 'This war is over but others will follow. Where is Grainne?'

Airic was a respected man among the tribe. Those men and women in positions of skilled work formed the basis of the chieftain's counsel. Ruari, son of Dalaigh, ruled the tribe with a strong heart and the ear of the people. He had been elected into power over thirty years ago when his predecessor had lacked the confidence of his tribe. There was no battle, no contest; Ruari was the stronger man and everyone knew it. He would have gone into battle with his tribesmen in the north, but he was in the winter of life and walked with a slight limp, though he was no lesser man because of it. 'What news?' he asked of the men.

Airic spoke. 'Invasion wasn't their goal. They raided, pilfered and retreated, forcing their way west. They were testing our strengths. When the Ó Mordha reinforced their side, the foreigners came in stronger and harder than before. We brought the war to them, for no man takes our shores and leaves uncontested, and we lost many good fighting men in the process.'

'Hostages?' Ruari asked.

'One,' Airic said. 'But he dishonoured himself by attempting to flee and he was killed. At first, we thought they were Albannaich or the people of Ellan Vannin, but we have trade agreements with them. These men, they fought like hardened northerners and died like bitter southerners. The Ó Mordha is calling for an army, to train them. It's unprecedented at this level, we train our boys and we fight when we must, but with a unity across all the northern tribes, the time is right. Our boys are to go north to the Ó Mordha for formal instruction.'

Ruari considered this before saying, 'Let us grieve the loss of our men. This is not a time for discussions of war but a time of respect for the dead. Until the feast of Imbolc, this will be a mourning period. You, the returning men, are the strength of our tribe and there will be a feast tonight in your honour. After that, the mourning will begin. When Imbolc is over, all boys past the age of eight and below the age of marriage will travel to Grianán Ailigh for training under the Ó Mordha.'

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