

Ancient Rubble

Angus Gregson and his wife Lillian walked across the hillside toward an ancient oak tree nestled down the hill at the edge of the forest. Their three grandchildren ran about enjoying fresh air, sunshine, and this unusual hillside. Stopping short of a pile of rock, Angus gazed across to the loch below.

“I am going to see Belinda,” Lillian told her husband. Kissing his cheek gently, she continued down an old worn trail toward the majestic oak which dominated the tree line.

Angus nodded and looked to the three children. Liam, an eight-year-old boy with more energy than six lads his age, picked up a stone from the pile and pulled his arm back for a mighty throw.

“STOP!” Angus commanded. “Whit are ye doin’ there lad?”

“I was gonna see if I could reach the loch from here,” the boy beamed with pride.

“Dinna ever take a stone from this place! Any of ye!” the old man scolded.

“Why, Seanair?¹” Alex asked, picking up a stone and examining it. At eleven years, he was the oldest of the three.

“These stones once formed the seat of power in these mountains, back when these Hielands were first settled by Celts,” Angus replied with pride. “Dae ye see that great black streak on the edge of those two large stones? Dae ye see how they fit together, those two? This was once one massive rock, split by lightening to make two chairs of glorious importance. Decisions were made upon and around these stone seats that shaped our Hielands to be as we know them today.”

Lillian returned to her husband, telling him, “Belinda said the herbs I need are still growing in the old thicket of morning grain.”

“Who is Belinda?” ten-year-old Marian asked.

“Belinda is Comleidh of the cavie² in the old oak tree,” Lillian replied. “The cavie is home to Hieland Faeries, and Belinda is thair leader, teacher, counselor. Kind of a wise old seanmhair³.”

Alex slowly rolled the stone in his hand, forming a question in his mind. His grandparents talked of stone splitting lightning and faeries as though they were common, yet, looking around the hillside he felt

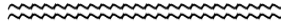
¹ *seanair* - SHEN~ed - grandfather

² *cavie* - CA~vee - a faerie community, often hidden in old trees or rocks

³ *seanmhair* - SHEN~e~ved - grandmother

something very uncommon had happened there. “Seanair, when did this happen? This lightning and seat of power you talked about.”

“Ye might want to get comfortable, this tale will take a bit of time to tell ye,” Angus replied, leaning on his walking stick. Lillian arranged the children on the hillside above the old storyteller and looked at him with anticipation. Looking to the faces of his bride and grandchildren, his heart began to swell, pounding with excitement. Angus was a storyteller of rare quality. Within each of his tales he shared not only a story but his heart, drawing his audience into other worlds. His love of this particular story gave him more passion than any other legend for this was his story. A story he inherited by birth and tradition, a legend handed down from his grandfather with this same fervor. The air around him became charged with his subtle excitement. Controlling his breathing and words, Angus carefully opened doors to an exciting new world as he began his story, the birth of his great Highlands.



Many years ago, before these mountains were appreciated by man, regions of Britannia and Western Europe were ruled by a powerful people, the Celts. Their origin is a mystery of lost history, however it is believed that these roaming warriors were cousins of ancient Norse Vikings. The trail of their existence begins in the mists of northeastern Europe from whence they emerged fearlessly with sword in hand. Many Celtic groups made the lands they captured their home. Settling among those they conquered, they would draw what they fancied from the land, the people, the people’s traditions. Whatever they wanted they would take and make their own. They also left their mark behind when they eventually moved on, for they were craftsmen and masters of metals and stone. Captives were trained in the commanding art of Celtic warfare. Then, as their armies moved on some Celts would remain in their new homes while trained captives marched off as new warriors.



Angus looked at his grandchildren and saw Marian was barely listening but the boys were drawn to his voice. He continued.

There was, however, a troop of Celts who wandered in search of battle, seeking only conquest. These warriors, the fiercest of the Celtic nations, traveled throughout Europe conquering and taking only the richest, most valuable spoils of war. Their families followed behind them but these warriors never stayed any place longer than it took to

restock and revitalize. Because they had families in their company, these Celts adhered to a stronger code of honor in warfare. They never attacked any unarmed man, never struck down a woman or child, and never burned homes. Their conquest was military. They had no use for unnecessary death or waste.

After a time the size of their families grew cumbersome, slowing the army's pursuit of conquest. There were many discussions about how to manage the ever increasing numbers. Some of the strongest warriors wanted to simply leave wives and bairn⁴ behind and continue alone. Others wanted to send their families to a land safe from enemy retaliation. A land where they could build a home village. A place warriors could rest between campaigns.

Marian had tilted her head and tuned in when Angus told about the families. He now prepared to hook the boys, permanently. His voice deep, soft, and silken, the gifted storyteller released his words with a mesmerizing cadence.

Iain Gregor was a respected leader of these wandering warriors. His personal magnetism called people to join and fight beside him. A warrior of great honor, Iain's reputation as a victor and leader spread far ahead of him. When it was decided to send the families to build a village, Iain was selected to protect them. He chose a brother and cousin to stand beside him. They in turn chose twenty additional men. This guard of twenty-three seasoned and tested warriors was charged with the task of moving one hundred nine families to mountains in the northern region of Britannia.

Another of Iain's brothers rose as leader of the wandering troops. Their plan was to continue their campaign for two or three years and then find their families. At that time, when warriors, wives and bairn were reunited, they would discuss their future.

Journeying west toward Britannia, Iain's numbers grew. A village facing starvation joined these Celts on their quest, swelling their number to nearly one hundred fifty families.

Arriving in the mountains of Britannia, Iain and his families found a landscape of mountains reaching skyward and endless hills rolling one into another. While breathtaking in its beauty, it was not a welcome land for such a large population. A single settlement had been planned

⁴*bairn* - bear n - children

but difficult terrain did not offer enough space for one large village. After exploring the region, eight smaller villages were born, tucked into glens and glades of the vast mountains. Many months were exhausted settling families into workable pockets of this new land. Each village required a source of water, room to grow crops and space to build huts. Some villages began with a small group of twelve families and only two protectors. The largest group with forty-two families had nine trained warriors. One group found welcome within an established village. Two scribes, who recorded travel and battles of the Celts, kept a roster of which families went to what villages so their warriors could join them when they arrived.

“Seanair, was our family on one of those lists?” Marian asked, her eyes dancing in reflected sunlight.

Aye, we were with Iain’s group. Ye see Iain attracted the largest group, settling here, on the shores of that great loch ye see in front of ye. Water in this loch was sweet and crystal clear.

“Seanair, the water in our loch is not ‘crystal clear,’ it is black,” Liam interrupted.

“Aye, ye are right, lad. Today, it is black but when the Celts arrived it was clear, and ye will not find out whence the black came from if ye keep interuptin’ me story.”

Now, if ye look around, ye can see how this hill rises sharply from the banks of the loch, to where a great boulder once rested, where those broken stone sit now. This boulder measured three ells⁵ long and nearly two across. Standing on this great stone one could look out across the loch below, and the clearings and forests to either side. This area to my right, yer left, was thin forest and ye can see its gentle slope, good for building huts. To the other side of the boulder, the hill slopes downward toward dense forest. Behind ye, rests that expanse of flat, briar-filled meadow before the rise to the hill beyond. This stretch of wasteland was once spongy, made so by a stream meandering to the loch below. Liam, ye wanted to throw a stone? Well, few men could throw a rock across those briars to the other side. Look how the hill then rises once more toward the clouds. Angus looked thoughtfully up the hill in front of him for several seconds before turning and pointing

⁵ *ell* - early Celts used a measure of ell, the distance from the tip of the finger to the elbow, termed the “ell”, a measure of about a yard, 37 inches

toward the loch. Down below, that narrow strip of trees along the bank of the loch was wide enough, then, to hide this hillside and the village that grew up here.

A mist covered the village area most mornings, as it did earlier this day, giving rise to the name Ceo Dhachaidh, which means Home in the Mist. What they dinna know when they first settled here was they also had friends ready to help them with struggles they were about to face. Great and powerful companions living at the edge of their village in yon ancient oak tree.

Angus pointed to the tree Lillian had been visiting.

“The faeries lived here then, Seanair?” Marian asked, her face scrunched up in a puzzle.

Aye, lass, the faeries were here then, as now. A great colony, or cavie as they call it. Today, Belinda is thair Comleidh, but then it was Resbith who led the faeries. That old oak tree [Angus pointed to an ancient oak tree] was home to great wee spirits who saved the hielanders many a time, especially a special faerie born of pure love, called by the name of Vreinessbith.

Unseen Shroud

Angus surveyed his audience, seeing each was hooked on his story, he asked a question.

“Now, as ye might imagine, Celts brought new things to these mountains but they also brought something they dinna even know they were carrying. Can ye imagine whit that might be?”

The children and Lillian looked at Angus with puzzlement filling each face. Delighted with their response, the old Scot resumed his tale.

One day, Resbith flew slowly to the top of a great oak tree which hid her home, the home of those faeries in her charge, their cavié. As Comleidh of this cavié she was responsible for its well being and safety, the welfare of all who lived within its branches and beyond, within this region. Her task had become much more difficult since the arrival of strangers on the hillside. Men and women unlike any she had ever seen had nearly destroyed the peace of her community. More than one hundred people had planted a village near her tree.

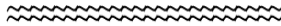
Arriving at the topmost branch, Resbith settled and looked across to the valley. She often watched these people. “How am I to learn about them?” she once remarked to another elderly faerie. Morning sunlight streamed across a mountain ridge, filling the village with promise of a grande day. Mist, which normally hid this village was uncommonly light and served only to soften these first rays of morning. Beginning a stretch and search for greater comfort, Resbith abruptly stopped all motion and stared into the village.

Watching men, women, and children begin their day, the Comleidh saw something normally not visible through heavier morning mist. Nearly every man and woman bore a shapeless shroud of grey. Darker on some than others, this shroud clung to each person in a different fashion. Some carried it lightly flowing down their back, as though a faint wisp had dropped to rest and would quickly move on. Others lumbered under its dark weight, stooped in posture and struggling to move about.

Curious as to the nature of this anomaly, Resbith flew straight to a woman carrying a darker version which poured off her shoulders enveloping most of her body in its heavy vapor. The wee faerie stopped suddenly on her approach due to a frigid reeking about this woman. Air about this woman was unbearably cold and choked all senses of this

faerie who lived by her sensitivity to nature. Trying to clear her head, Resbith realized it was not truly an odor or cold but an absolute sense of total dismay. Feeling its freezing anxiety reaching to wrap around her, the wise Comleidh understood what she had encountered. With the heavy shroud encasing her own being, Resbith burst free and rose to a safe distance. An arm of the shroud, which had stretched briefly to include the inquisitive faerie, faded into nothing. Resbith sighed softly with regret, “*Gleò ar ùspairn cùlaigean*, you are the suffocating struggle of survival. I have heard legend of you but never before witnessed your presence. Had I returned to gré⁶ without this day I would have been happier.”

Not knowing what to do, the disheartened faerie returned to her oak tree. Looking back, she could not see any *gleo* for the sun was no longer filtered by the light mist. Reaching her cavie, she sought the warmth, love, and support of her family.



“*Seanair do we have gleo around us?*” Marian asked, interrupting her grandfather.

“*Aye, I imagine we have a bit though I cannae say I hae felt it of late. Ye see, we canna see it with our eyes. Ye feel it in yer soul. When life is difficult, old gleo becomes dark and heavy, making things worse, but when we celebrate all that we have, we cannae feel its presence at all.*” Angus looked at his granddaughter and smiled. “*Are ye ready for a bit more of this story?*”

All three grandchildren nodded with expectation.

“*Good. Where were we? Ah, yes. . . .*”

None of the people of this young village knew their days were made difficult by the *gleò ar ùspairn cùlaigean*, they just knew their lives were difficult. Also, Resbith was the only faerie who could see this weighty shroud worn by the people. Few of the other faeries had enough life experience to allow them to see what was hidden from our sight. She did ask other elder faeries and while some had heard of the *gleo*, as she called it, none had ever actually seen it. As Comleidh of her cavie, Resbith woke early each day in hopes of checking on the *gleo*, ready to do whatever was needed to keep it out of her oak tree.



⁶ *gré* - grEE - natural essence of the world

Slowly these strange settlers became accustomed to life in the mountains and their struggles became less severe, more like daily challenges. Years rolled past peacefully, until the time their wandering warriors were expected to arrive.

Unfortunately, it was not the husbands and sons of the Celtic settlers who found *Ceo Dhachaidh* but a group of Roman soldiers. Early one morning, these unexpected Romans surrounded the village and waited until most of its men left to hunt. Finding a brief period where they had an advantage of numbers as well as surprise in their favor, the Romans launched a swift and devastating attack. A Roman captain, who had hunted and slaughtered many Celtic warriors, led a ruthless charge on women and children. Families of the Celts were being destroyed.

Hearing anguished cries of attack, hunters immediately turned and ran with all their strength back to *Ceo Dhachaidh*. Emerging from the edge of the wood Iain saw a Roman Captain pursuing his own children. Iain's older son, twelve years of age, struggled to defend his younger brother against the merciless attack, blocking blows with his dirk⁷. He was no match for the Roman Captain.

Summoning every ounce of his legendary strength, made even greater by his raging fury and boundless love, Iain launched his spear. Time stopped for this Celtic father as his spear sped across the village toward the soldier. Passing slain and maimed women and children, the instrument of rescue sailed through the bloodied village and burning huts, gaining power from its purpose. As the scream of time resumed, the spear impaled the captain, lifting him and pinning him, still alive, to a tree more than six feet from where he had plunged his sword through both boys less than a second before the spear's arrival. Iain's heart exploded at the sight of his children being slaughtered; he fought with unbridled passion, an erupting fury, that could not be matched by the Romans. Only two Roman soldiers survived their attack, a young lieutenant and the captain pinned to a tree. Iain forced the lieutenant to his knees in front of his captain.

Turning to the Captain, Iain declared with a voice that caused all to stop what they were doing and turn toward him, "Ye have done a disgraceful act! Ye are not worthy of yer rank. Ye have used your sword against innocence! Ye have led your men in a battle against

⁷ Dirk - the Celtic dirk was approximately eighteen inches long, including the handle of bone or dense wood. It is a one-handed thrusting weapon.

nature!” With one blow of his mighty sword, Iain beheaded the captain then turned to the Roman lieutenant. His voice filled with anguish, sending icy chills down backbones of all within its reach, Iain asked, “Ye have destroyed our village . . . murdered our families! . . . WHY?!”

Struggling to find his voice the lieutenant replied weakly, “Our emperor wants all Celts killed, no matter where they live.”

“WHY?!” Iain growled, his anguish changing to anger.

“We conquered your armies,” the lieutenant replied, finding courage in his response. “But it was costly. We lost legions. Yet, even as Celts were being executed, they sang ‘Iain Gregor will avenge us.’ Over and over. It became their song of death. Our Emperor wants the head of Iain Gregor presented to him on a spike.”

Without hesitation Iain responded with conviction, “Ye return to yer people and tell yer emperor that if I ever see another Roman soldier in this land, I will cut them down. Then I will find him and personally destroy his family as he watches. Dogs and crows will devour their carcasses.” When he finished, Iain stood tall and surveyed the death which filled his village. “Show this soldier the road home and burn these worthless bodies.”

Surviving villagers gathered the bodies of their loved ones and neighbors, laying them carefully on a funeral pyre. They then gathered Roman bodies, throwing them into a pit of fire. Iain wept that night as he lit the flame that carried his bairn, brothers, and sisters to their afterlives. All surviving Celtic warriors joined in a promise to never leave their village unprotected and to unite with other villages in defense against the Roman insanity.

Roman patrols continued to litter the mountains. Communications between patrols was almost nonexistent as these small groups hunting Celts wandered aimlessly. Whenever a patrol stumbled into a village, Celtic warriors answered their presence with death. Iain grew weary of their frequent intrusions and sought to keep the Romans out of his village. Entrances to *Ceo Dhachaidh* were hidden with bushes and other natural plants. Traps were laid to announce the arrival of unwanted visitors.



Marian stood and looked down the hillside toward the loch.

Lillian reached a hand out to her husband who gently helped her to her feet. She then stood behind Marian placing her hands on the girl’s shoulders, asking “Whit troubles ye, wee one?”

“I see the hillside and trees, or bushes, at the edge of the loch but I don’t see any traps.”

“Aye, and ye would nae hae seen them then, either,” Angus replied with gentle confidence. “Those bushes are gone now for this was many years ago. But even then, Iain and his Celtic warriors knew well how to hide their village.” Angus smiled at his wife, acknowledging the pain, love, and excitement in her eyes. “Tell ye bairn whit. Why don’t we return to our lodge and I will continue the story a bit later. Ye will all want to be fresh for the Great Battle for The Hielands.”

Lillian nudged up close to her husband, kissing his cheek as she quietly scolded him, “Ye dinna hae to be so graphic wi’ the violence.”

Angus smirked with satisfaction as he and Lillian collected their grandchildren, herding them back toward home.

Both boys groaned disappointment. They were not ready for Angus to stop.

“Dinna moan so, lads, we can continue back at the hoose,” Angus encouraged with a hand on each of the boys’ heads. “I might even show ye ‘the book’.”

“WHAT!” Liam exclaimed, reeling around in disgust. “You got this story from a book?!”

“No, lad, I dinna. No exactly. I will show ye when we get home,” Angus replied with a gleam in his eye.

“Wait,” Lillian cried out as they left the hillside. “I forgot my herbs. Come children, ye can help. Comleidh Belinda said they were along the briar thicket so be careful of thorns.”

The boys grumbled as they followed their grandmother to a meadow across the hillside. Marian took Lillian’s hand, skipping along beside her. Angus looked out across his beloved hillside, across the loch and to the mountains beyond. Breathing a deep sigh of contentment, he followed the others to a small glen overgrown with briars which hid several desirable plants beneath their thorny cover.

The Book

Lillian gently washed her herbs in a wooden bowl filled with cool water. Marian watched with interest, then asked, “Why do you use a wooden bowl and not rinse our herbs in the sink?”

“Ah, lass, because these are fresh wild herbs. They are traumatized from when we gathered them and now I want to soothe them so they will release their flavors more fully. Like when I stroke yer head to awaken ye in the morning.”

Just then Liam called out through the house, “SEANAIR!”

“Marian, go tell yer brother to look in the library and not call out so loudly,” Lillian requested, gently shaking water from her herbs.

Marian found Liam standing at the base of the steps to the bedrooms.

“What is the shouting all about?” Alex asked from the top of the stairs.

“I want to see the book! Seanair said he would show us the book!” Liam insisted.

“In the library,” Marian said, shaking her head.

Alex tripped down the stairs and all three went in search of their grandfather, who was napping in his library. Alex poked Angus in the shoulder, not so gently.

“Whit?” Angus growled, not pleased about being awakened from his afternoon ritual.

“You said you would show us ‘The Book’!” Liam demanded with all the authority an eight-year-old could muster.

“Aye, I did that,” Angus acknowledged, rising from his favorite resting chair. After stretching a wee bit, he crossed the room to the book shelves. Pulling a step-stool to a section near the rightmost side, he turned back to the children. “Now, ye must understand. These books are rare, the only copies anywhere, and they are old. Dinna pull them down without yer seanmhair or myself here to read with ye.” Seeing agreement and wonder on their faces, Angus climbed the steps to the next highest shelf, removing one of two matched leather volumes. Crossing to a nearby table he reverently placed the book down and opened it to a page near the front.

“Ohhhhhh,” the children cooed in wonder. The pages were yellowed with age, but more impressive was the exquisite handwriting.

“Did you write this book, Seanair?” Marian asked with awe.

“Nae, I dinna write this one. I am trying to complete its story in a second volume.” Angus moved his head toward the upper shelves where the book had rested. All three children looked up and saw a twin to the book Angus held.

“If you did not write it who did?” Alex asked, his face glowing with curiosity and anticipation.

“Ye will not believe whit I am about to tell ye. Ye will want to see for yerself. Alex, climb up on that stool and retrieve the wooden box next where I got this book,” Angus instructed.

“No, I will get it,” Lillian interrupted. “I am sure ye could manage it Alex, but if ye were to fall, yer parents would never let ye come again.”

Angus stood behind his wife as she ascended the steps of the stool and reached for the box. Holding it close to her chest with one hand, she put the other out to Angus for balance. Lillian then placed the polished oak box, measuring about fifteen inches long by ten inches wide and eight inches deep on the table beside “The Book.”

Angus retrieved a key from his desk and returned to the box which was secured by a small but solid lock. Placing one hand on the box, he turned to his grandchildren.

“When I was about Marian’s age my seanair found an old leather bag filled with even older parchments. Believing them to be of some value, he had a friend help him treat them so he could unfold and unroll them. Make them so he could read them.” Angus then unlocked the box and removed one rolled up golden parchment. Unrolling it with extreme care, he lay the ancient document out so the children could see it, blocking Liam’s hand when it came too near. “These parchments bear no author’s name, but after years of study Seanair believed they were written by two women of Ceo Dhachaidh, Sarah and her daughter Erial, possibly even Erial’s daughter-in-law, Rachel. Not having any schools, they developed their own language, a written representation of how they spoke, which was mostly a mix of ancient Norse, Celtic, and Gaelic languages. Very few could read or write then and it was unheard of for women to read. Using legends he had heard about our hillside, Seanair spent years just learning their language.”

“Where we were this morning?” Liam asked with excitement.

“Aye, that very hillside,” Angus continued. “Seanair then began to translate each of these parchments into our language. He wrote their story in this book. About ten years before he died, Seanair realized he would not be able to finish this task so he taught me to read the

parchments. As yet, I have not quite finished, but hope to within a few months.”

“Why did they write these stories?” Alex challenged. “People did not write anything back then.”

“Oh, but they did,” Lillian replied. “Paper, or parchment, was difficult to come by and was expensive. Part of what makes these scrolls so valuable is many of them are hand made from grasses of our hillside. I think Sarah saw the way listeners became entranced when warriors told their stories and knew the stories might not survive if they were not recorded. On one scroll she talks about having seen her father write on a parchment; a talent he learned as a sailor.”

“There are not so many parchments in that box, Seanair,” Liam observed.

“Parchments,” Angus corrected. “And ye are correct. These are those I am working on now. We have many many more stored away for safety.”

“So, how did Sarah and Erial learn these stories?” Alex asked, honestly curious. “Did they hear them around campfires or what?”

“Mostly they lived them. Every day,” Angus replied, locking the box.

“I believe they also talked with the faeries,” Lillian added. “Sarah talked with Resbith, the Comleidh of that day, and Erial and Vrenessbith were friends.”

“Other parts may have come from Ingrid, Seumas’ wife and yer great so many times grand. Then from Vidar, Erial’s husband, and some may have come on the wind,” Angus confirmed. “As Iain once said, if ye listen to the wind ye can even hear how yer enemy is tossing sleeplessly with worry about facing ye in battle the next day.” Angus looked at the entranced faces of his grandchildren. Assuming a smile he lifted the first book, offering “Would ye like to hear the next chapter of their story?”

Three grandchildren quickly sat on the floor in front of Angus’ chair. Angus carefully stepped over his audience to his seat of honor and Lillian took her chair opposite her storyteller. Laying the book across his lap, Angus turned over a few pages at the beginning and began reading as he told the story from the book.

Coming of Purpose

About five years after the Romans attacked *Ceo Dhachaidh*, an early blanket of white covered the mountains. Snow didn't usually fall until much later, but this year leaves on the trees were still golden when the landscape changed unexpectedly. All the world seemed to become still and quiet as the sun silently disappeared. A full moon reflected off freshly fallen snow casting a ghostly glow across the land. Still burdened with half their foliage, trees cast shadows resembling spirits from another world. Tree trunks appeared thin and dark with huge heads that changed shapes as wind blew through the forest crown.

Returning from a rare journey to a village beyond his mountains, Iain Gregor welcomed the soft light as he trudged through familiar forests made strange by eerie vestiges of dark shapes. A slight cape of deer skin covered his broad shoulders and his brown woolen kilt caught an occasional burst of wind. He carried a small pack over one shoulder. His own shadow stretched ahead of him, climbing over rocks and wrapping around trees as he moved.

The unexpected snowfall slowed his journey but he was determined to reach home without further delay. He had traveled this land countless times so unseasonable changes in terrain did not confuse his direction but the uncommon stillness did distract him. Pausing often, he listened to the mountains and trees. Nature had something to tell him, but he could not yet hear her secret. He was still too far away. Pushing onward, Iain listened intently for the concealed message.

A thrashing sound coming from a thicket about thirty-five ells off his trail, broke the unnatural silence. Thinking this was not the message he had been expecting he knew he must still check it. A young stag wrestled beneath a pile of briar and bramble. Its hind leg broken and tied by a rope to a big tree. Iain looked around, reasoning that someone had set a trap, a poor trap. The young stag had been caught but its weight was too much for the limb that was to have held him. Apparently the limb had fallen on his leg, breaking it and crippling the stag. Thrashing about in pain the creature had become tangled in every bush and growth within reach. Iain knelt beside the terrified animal, speaking softly. His powerful yet tender voice calmed the panicked animal. Gently, he put his right hand on the stags' face, stroking its neck with his left hand.

There was a conversation of sorts, an exchange of information. The young stag asked to be released from its pain, and if Iain would release him he would be rewarded with a valuable message. Iain understood. Carefully and gently he continued to stroke the stag. With one definite but gentle movement Iain broke the creature's neck.

Iain knelt in the snow holding the stag's head until its body was quiet. There was no more pain or suffering. The animal was free. Once its body had stopped quivering and was still Iain began to untangle him from the snare rope. He could take the stag home for food and there was always need of good rope. As he untied the line from the big tree, he found the promised message. Scattered debris from setting the snare was not only the mark of an inexperienced hunter, it was the mark of a Roman soldier. Carefully Iain examined marks on the tree and signs on the ground. He determined that the snare had been set after the snow had begun, earlier that day. It had been five years since the attack on *Ceo Dhachaidh* yet Romans still infested this land. Signs of clumsy movements in brush around the back of the tree led Iain to reason that there had been two, maybe three, soldiers. A small patrol to be sure. Was it large enough to be detached, moving on their own? Was it a routine scouting party from some new Roman outpost? Were they lost deserters trying to survive in these forests?

Finding no other signs of the clumsy hunters Iain lifted the stag to his broad shoulders and resumed his journey. Home was another hour distant but with the added weight and snow, maybe two.



The lodge of *Ceo Dhachaidh* was warm and dry. It was long, with animal skins hung on walls to help block the wind. It was dark except for light from a long trench fire burning in the middle of the floor. Remains of a small wild boar, which had provided dinner, continued to roast over a smoldering end of the fire. Women worked together to collect left over food for coming meals. Many feared food would be scarce in months ahead. This was not an every day gathering but the unexpected weather had caught many people unprepared. Collectively the community could survive, individually it would be difficult.

Young children ran around laughing and playing together. Men gathered about a large cask, enjoying a beverage similar to ale but more like mead. Their bellies were full and they were not worried about the