

Aodhan of Annwyn

By Lorenzo Buenviaje

The horses careened forward in a furious panic, bashing the cart violently against the massive trees of the Aduaine Forest. "Hold on and keep your heads low!" Father Alistair cried out to us as he urged the horses forward, narrowly ducking a low branch that tore off most of the wagon's canvas covering. Blood was pouring from a massive gash in his side, and I could see the red soaking into his torn tunic. I heard several of the other children around me scream, faces painted in a mask of horror as they witnessed the creature giving chase. I glanced back, stomach knotting at the sight of the massive form. The deep black of the creature's bristling hide made it difficult to identify any discernable features, save its mouth, a ravenous void lined several rows of misshapen teeth, almost humanoid in appearance. The creature gnashed those teeth viciously as it lunged at the rear of the wagon, tearing off the back railing and nearly taking poor little Owyn with it. I felt a pang of relief when Murtagh caught a hold of his coat sleeves as he tumbled out, pulling him in as the creature lunged again, snapping at the empty air. Lyra shot up beside me in a flash, eyes flashing a bright gold, the telltale sign of a mage gathering magic. She shouted an incantation and fired off a sizable bolt of magical flame from her outstretched fingertip, square at the face of the pursuing beast. I had once seen Lyra use the same spell to immolate a charging wild boar back at the convent, blowing it back a dozen yards and roasting it to a crisp. This time, we watched in disbelief as the spell bounced off the monstrosity's hide and dissipated entirely. I reached up and yanked Lyra back down, just as another low branch swept over the wagon, this time whipping into the creature's gaping maw with a loud crack! The creature staggered and slowed, giving considerable space between it and our fleeing cart. As it stopped the creature tilted its head upward and released a guttural wail, something between a pained howl and the death throes of a wounded animal. With that sound,

there came a voice, a whisper. *Aodhan, my child*. It felt as if the voice was asking me something. *Come to me*. It wasn't asking, I realized, it was demanding. I covered my ears to block out the wailing, but the voice continued, growing louder and more incessant inside my head. Suddenly, the creature's wailing ceased, along with the mysterious voice. The abomination was quickly shrinking away in the distance, and we looked on intently until it disappeared completely from our sight.

As we sat in silence at the back of the wagon I leaned my back against the cart railing to try and catch my breath. What kind of nightmare had this journey evolved into? When our wagon had first set out from the convent, the mood had been joyful, and full of excitement. Our destination, the massive tower known as The Dagda, was where we magical acolytes would be taken to further our education. Even from the Convent, we could see the great pillar of golden light shooting up from the top of The Dagda, where *Beatha*, or magical energy, leaked out to the rest of Annwyn. Father Alistair recounting his experiences at the magical academy had been the highlight of Convent evenings. From the colorful festivals in the Annwyn capital, Caer Sid, to the grand feasts in the halls of The Dagda, his laughter would light up the dining hall as he conjured illusory images of masked dancers and fiddling bards. Along with the occasional tale of Matron Aine's romantic trysts with Caer Sid nobles, the stories left us children starry eyed and eager to continue our studies. That mood had quickly dampened when Father Kirwin, the mage sent to retrieve us from the academy, had informed us the path through the Killaraus, a massive mountain range separating our convent from the capital, had been blocked by a mudslide a few days prior. It was Kirwin who suggested our detour through the Aduaine Forest to Father Alistair. "It will take too long to clear the path," Kirwin had announced, with a slight

tone of annoyance, “and I’ll be damned if I have to spend a single day more in the countryside amongst the insects and the filth.” Kirwin’s eyes had shifted to us children in the cart as he spat that last word. Father Alistair had pulled him aside, and the only part of the conversation that I was able to catch was Kirwin scoffing loudly in his shrill, haughty voice, “You believe those fairy tales?” He should have. My mind wandered back to the creature, and the look on Father Alistair’s face when he first saw it. It had attacked our camp on the third night after we had entered the forest. Pouncing from the darkness of the trees, it tore through Kirwin’s oversized tent and dragged him screaming into the darkness. We all heard the loud *crunch*, as Kirwin’s screaming came to an abrupt stop, and Father Alistair began frantically shouting for the children to run to the wagon. Father Alistair conjured a great wall of flames to cut the creature off from the wagon, but like Lyra’s firebolt the creature was unhindered in its rabid pursuit. In all my years living under his care, that was the first time I had ever seen Father Alistair afraid. The implications only furthered my discomfort.

Composing myself, I reached up and picked a leaf off one of the passing branches, setting it near the back of the cart where the creature had torn off the back railing. “Galvyn, help me with this,” I pleaded over the sound of creaking wheels and rushing wind. “So, the great Aodhan is asking me for assistance? I should be so honored,” he shouted back mockingly. I shot him a disappointed glance, “This isn’t the time Galvyn, I can’t fix this on my own.” Galvyn returned my look with a glare of his own, but reluctantly crawled his way over to the back of the wagon. We placed our hands on the leaf, focusing and muttering an incantation. After some time, vines began to emerge from the leaf and wrap around the back of the cart, twisting and knotting to form a makeshift railing. I crawled back over to Lyra and sat down, noting the

puzzled look on her face. "It didn't even flinch," she muttered, "It was as if the magic simply dissipated." I shrugged, shaking my head to express that I was just as bewildered as she was. Sighing, I slumped down and observed the others in the wagon. Owyn was breathing heavily, his terrified gaze locked to the distance where the monster had once been, while Galvyn had already returned to his corner, muttering impatiently to himself. The twins, Driskell and Donia, sat side by side, with Driskell attempting to comfort Donia as she buried her face in her hands, shoulders heaving while she sniffed and sobbed. It was a far cry from the usual scene. Back at the convent Driskell and Donia were notoriously high-spirited pranksters. I remembered the day the pair had enchanted Matron Aine's shoes, so they would squeak like mice as she walked; the Matron was terrified of mice. Even later, as Matron Aine was scolding the twins in front of the rest of the convent, they exchanged sideways glances and sheepish grins, nudging each other and trying unsuccessfully to hold back their laughter. This time the look on Driskell's face was one of abject horror, and the gravity of his expression sent shivers down my spine. The last child, Murtagh, turned to me and gave a slight nod of assurance, "I think we're safe for now." Safe didn't quite feel like the right word. "What *was* that?" I asked. Murtagh shook his head, "I've never read of any creature like that, magical or otherwise. We should ask Father Alistair when we stop to make camp, I would like to know myself." Murtagh nodded once more and I reciprocated, leaning back once more to give in to the exhaustion, drifting further and further from the realm of consciousness.

It was a dream I had often. In it I could hear my mother screaming, and I could see my father embracing her, holding her back as the mages took me away to the convent. Her face, though I should have been able to see it, was fuzzy, likely because I was too young to maintain a

clearer memory. In fact, there was very little I could remember about my family from before that day. I remembered the warmth of the fireplace as my mother sang me to sleep on her lap, father stoking the fire with a hot poker. I remembered my sister, and how the sound of her laughter echoed throughout our cozy wooden cabin. But not their faces, never their faces, never their names, all lost in the ether of a time long past. I focused intently as I tried to hear the lullaby my mother was singing. It sounded different this time, more vibrant and soothing, and I could almost make out the words. The song was of the river of *Beatha*, which flows under the earth and gives life to all of Annwyn. It was beautiful, almost hypnotizing, and as she sang I could hear my mother call out my name. *Aodhan, my child*. But it wasn't my mother's voice. Panic began to grip me as the voice called out once more. *Aodhan, they were stolen from you, your family*. I tried to move, but my body would not listen. *Come to me, my child, I too, know the pain of loss*. The voice had changed now, it was no longer the voice of a woman, but of something otherworldly, both menacing and captivating all at once. It felt as though I was being held hostage by my own body as the beckoning voice echoed louder and louder in my head. *Aodhan*. I summoned up all the strength I could muster, focusing the magic inside of me to try and expel the voice from my mind. *Aodhan!* I looked up at my mother, to where her face should have been, only to see the gaping maw of that creature staring hungrily back down at me, a deep void of endless black. "AODHAN!"

I jolted awake to a still, empty wagon, and I could hear Lyra calling out my name. She sounded panicked, as did the other voices engaged in fevered conversation. I heard Owyn cry out from somewhere ahead of the wagon, "Donia, what's happening, he's still bleeding." "I-I don't know, my magic isn't working," came the reply. I hurried to the front of the wagon, where

I saw Father Alistair laid out against the trunk of a large tree, the rest of the children gathered around him. Donia's hands were stained a deep red as she pressed them to Father Alistair's gushing wound. Lyra cried out once more, "Aodhan, we need you, Father's wounds aren't healing!" I rushed over and crouched beside Donia, inspecting the wound and preparing a magical incantation of my own. "It's no use," came Father Alistair's hoarse voice, "the wound is resistant to magic, just like the creature." Father Alistair groaned weakly as he tried to straighten himself up against the trunk. "To think I would meet my end in this horrid place, that damned Kirwin." His words gave me pause. My end? No, no that couldn't be. I began to search frantically for something, anything to stem the bleeding. "Galvyn, tear some canvas from the wagon! Owyn, can you conjure some water, we need to clean the wound." Owyn had broken down alongside Galvyn, sobbing uncontrollably, but cupped his hands and tried his best to form the spell he needed to fill them with water. "Aodhan, look at me." I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes as I tried again in vain to cast a spell of healing. "You need to lead them to the tower Aodhan, they trust you. I trust you." Father Alistair's face was a ghostly white now, and though his eyes were locked with mine it felt as if he was through me, into some faraway place. He reached up and placed his hand atop my head, scuffling my hair lightly as he did so many times back at the Convent. "I'm sorry, Aodhan, there isn't enough time, lend me your ear." I was crying then, all of us were, as I moved closer to Father Alistair. He whispered something in my ear, and I froze. Leaning back, I nodded, "Thank You," as I wiped the tears streaming down my face. Father's eyes began to glow a brilliant gold, as if every ounce of *Beatha* in his body was being gathered all at once, "Morrighan keep you safe, my children." And then it faded, and Alistair O' Quinn along with it.

We sat for a long time gathered around father Alistair's body. Murtagh had been the first to move, reaching out to Father Alistair's expressionless face and shutting his eyelids. I couldn't bring myself to look at any of the others, but I got up and began to clear a spot beside the tree. I muttered an incantation and a chunk of dirt shifted out of the ground and settled off to the side of the newly formed hole. The other children joined in and after some time a sizable hole had been formed at the base of the tree. We gently lowered Father Alistair's body into the hole using some vines that Galvyn had conjured from the surrounding trees and the remaining shreds of canvas from the wagon. We marked the tree overlooking his grave, *Alistair O' Quinn, our guardian, our teacher, and loving father to us all.*

Driskell and Donia took turns steering the wagon, both having the most experience with horses from their time at the Convent. When we finally settled down that evening, the air around the camp that was silent and somber, and I did my best to organize our efforts as night approached. Our supplies had been left back at the first camp where we were attacked, and so I asked Driskell and Donia to start gathering branches and leaves to form makeshift tents to take shelter in for the night. As it grew dark, Lyra threw some sticks in a pile and ignited it with a spell, the fire providing a warm solace to a cold and dreary mood. "Galvyn, you need to help me conjure some more vines, it's too dark to go out searching for more and were all trying our best here," I pleaded. "Why should I have to listen to you?" Galvyn shot back. "Just because you were Father's favorite, you think you can just boss us all around." Galvyn spat at my feet and threw down the bundle of vines he was already holding. "I am tired, I am hungry, and our *great leader* has done nothing to fix that." My fists balled up tightly, and it took the whole of my discipline to refrain myself from punching Galvyn in his stupid face. "We have to work together

here," I replied through gritted teeth. "I agree with Aodhan, this is no time to be fighting amongst each other," Murtagh had stepped between me and Galvyn, placing a hand on both of our shoulders, looking back and forth at us as he spoke. "Father Alistair asked Aodhan to lead us to The Dagda and I agree with that decision, as I'm sure we all do." I relaxed, giving Murtagh a nod of appreciation, and turning to the others to gauge their reactions. Lyra was the first to speak up, "Aodhan has been doing a fine job." Emphasizing her words with a smile and a nod. Owyn seconded this, looking on nervously at Galvyn, who face had scrunched up in a sour expression. Driskell and Donia both nodded their approval as well, albeit a bit less enthusiastically. "There you have it," Murtagh exclaimed, and patted both our backs heartily before returning to his work around the camp. Later that night, as we were stewing a broth made with herbs gathered around the forest, I sat down beside Murtagh in the far corner of the camp, "Thank you for that, I've never really gotten along well with Galvyn." "It's not his fault, he has always been a bit envious of the attention you got from Father, I think on some level we all were." I jolted, taken aback by Murtagh's forward response, but Murtagh simply laughed and smiled warmly. "It's nothing to be worried about, jealousy is a natural emotion, Galvyn just tends let's his emotions get the better of him." I sighed, he was right, "Well I'm jealous of how composed you are right now," I started, only half-jokingly, "It should have been you, you know, you would make a much better leader for us right now. I think I might be going crazy trying to keep all my feelings in check." Murtagh sighed, and after a long pause asked, "Did you hear it too?" I shot him a quizzical look, "Hear what?" I asked, although I already knew the answer. "The voice. Before we stopped the wagon, I heard you mutter something in your sleep about your family, about remembering them." Murtagh had been taken from his family at around the

same age as myself. We had arrived at the same time, and I remembered how calm Murtagh looked, even back when we were still very young. "It spoke to me too," he said, staring out into the darkness of the forest. "It promised me I could meet them again." A mix of relief and confusion washed over me as Murtagh revealed his shared experience. "What was it, do you think the creature was trying to talk to us?" I asked him. "It could be some magical trick, to be honest I am not sure," he replied, "But somehow I feel as if it wasn't the creature that was speaking to me." We sat in the darkness for a while longer before rejoining the rest of the group for supper, and then one by one we reluctantly made our ways into our tents to get some much-needed sleep.

When we woke the next morning, we found Murtagh's tent empty and the horses and wagon gone, with no sign of him anywhere around the camp. "The creature must have taken him, we shouldn't have all gone to sleep!" Driskell cried. "We need to go and find him," I said, still trying to gather my thoughts, "He may have just wandered off for a bit, his tent is still intact." I couldn't understand what Murtagh had been thinking, why would he just wander off like that? "We need to find him? We do? Who's fault is it that no one stayed up to keep watch?" Galvyn pointed a sharp finger in my direction, "It was *your* responsibility to keep us safe, Aodhan, and you've been doing a fine job of that." Galvyn mouthed the last words mockingly, a satiric mirror of what Lyra had said the night before. "Oh, shut it Galvyn," Lyra snapped back, "you've done nothing but complain the whole time we've been here, you're only making everything worse." Galvyn made a rude gesture in Lyra's direction and turned back to me "I can't stand this anymore, you and your stupid friend can go and get yourselves killed, I'm leaving." Galvyn turned furiously and stormed off in the direction of the Dagda's light, shouting

back one last time “And anyone who wants to live can come with me!” Lyra and Owyn remained, but Driskell and Donia started off after Galvyn. “I’m sorry Aodhan,” Donia had said, before following her brother. My head was still reeling at the thought of Murtagh being lost in the forest, or possibly worse. It wasn’t like him to make a rash decision like that. Suddenly, a scream came from the direction that the three other children had ran off. All of our heads shot in the direction of the sound. “Driskell!” came another cry. We sped off fast as we could until we spotted Driskell and Donia. A massive black form had Driskell pinned down by one leg, and Donia was off to the side crying out for help. Without thinking, I conjured a stone in my hand and chucked it as hard as I could at the creature’s head. It turned, lifting its dangerously clawed paw off Driskell’s leg and howled in my direction. This creature’s howl sounded different, and the voice reverberating in my head took on a softer, almost pitiful tone. *Aodhan, I’m sorry, he promised.* The creature lunged at me, and I barely managed to dive out of the way of its snapping jaws. Owyn had circled around to help Donia pick Driskell up. Driskell’s leg swung limply as the two propped him up and carried him off. “Run,” I cried out to the trio, narrowly ducking another swipe of the creature’s massive claw. “This way, mangy mutt” I heard Lyra cry, as she shot a bolt of fire from her fingertips from behind the creature. Again, the bolt bounced off the creature’s hide and dissipated, but it was enough to distract the beast while I looked around for something that could help us fend off the creature. Lyra sidestepped the creature masterfully as it charged her, firing off bolt after bolt at the creature’s face, legs and torso, but to no effect. I remembered back in the wagon, while magic did not affect it, the tree branch that had smacked the creature in the face had caused enough damage to force it to retreat. I scanned the treetops for any large branches and then called out to Lyra to follow me. Lyra

nodded and, after firing off one more bolt of magical fire at the creature's face for good measure, ran off to the side to join me. I pointed up to the treetops, "When I say now, hit the base of that branch up there with a fire spell." The creature turned and gave chase, quickly gaining on us as we fled between the trees. "Now!" I shouted. Lyra and I both wheeled around and shot a firebolt to the spot where the thick branch connected to the trunk of the tree, snapping it off and sending it careening down towards the pursuing creature. The branch landed on the creature's back with a loud *crack!* Piercing through its bristling hide and pinning it to the ground where it lay wailing in agony. *Aodhan, I can see my family again.* The voice sounded so familiar, but I didn't have time to register it as Lyra and I continued to flee towards the direction of Owyn and the twins.

We caught up with the trio dragging Driskell pitifully between the trees, Driskell's moaning drowning out the other two's grunts as they hurried him along. "The edge, I can see the edge of the forest!" Owyn cried. He freed one of his hands from Driskell's side and pointed out towards to the distance. I looked up, and sure enough there was light peeking out from the sides of the trees, and I could just make out the faint outline of the Dagda, a way off in the distance. We had made it. Suddenly, some movement behind me and to my right caught my attention, and I saw a figure stalking about the trees. "Galvyn!" I cried, but the figure disappeared behind the tree, only to reappear behind another shortly after. "Go on ahead," I shouted out to the others, changing directions towards the figure in the trees. "I think I see Galvyn, i'll meet you outside the forest." "Wait!" Lyra called out to me, but I had already started off to find Galvyn.

I spotted the figure standing behind another tree. It was dark in this part of the forest, almost unusually so, and the shrubbery grew thick around the base of the tree trunks.

“Galvyn!” I called out once more, “Galvyn were close to the exit, stop fooling around.” The figure laughed and disappeared behind the tree once more. “This isn’t the time to be playing games,” I pleaded, “There was another creature nearby, Driskell is badly hurt, we need to get out of here.” Suddenly, I heard wailing fill the air, it was coming from several different directions. There must have been hundreds, even thousands of the creatures, spewing forth their guttural cries and forcing me to cover my ears in agony at the horrid sound. Within the cacophony of wailing, I could hear the voice in my head once more, the voice from the first creature, the voice from my dream. *Aodhan, how could you hurt your friend like that? Friend? What was he talking about? I doubled over, trying to focus the magic within me to block out the voice and the dreadful sound of wailing. I made a promise to you too Aodhan, I can give your family back to you.* The creatures sounded so close now, and I could feel the hot breath of their gaping maws closing in around me as I lay curled up on the forest floor. *Just let me in Aodhan, I can give you everything.* The voice was intruding my mind, some force was trying to break past the magical barrier I had formed around my mind, and the pressure became heavy and ominous as the wailing grew louder. “No!” I cried aloud and tried to push the voice out of my head, to distract myself with other thoughts. I thought back to the Convent, to memories of my friends. *They will join us too, in time.* I thought of my family and tried to recall the songs my mother sang to me as a child. *Let me in Aodhan.* I thought of the last thing Father Alistair had said to me, what he had whispered in my ear, a name. My mother’s name. The voice pushed deeper into my mind, it sounded so sweet, so enticing, but buried within all of that I could still

sense a feeling of overwhelming malice. I summoned every ounce of magic that I had, and I pushed back with my all my might, holding on to my mother's name as the only thing that could keep me grounded, the last foothold of my sanity. And suddenly it was gone, the wailing had stopped, and the voice had recoiled, and standing in front of me was Galvyn, shivering and pale. "Galvyn, you're ok?" I cried, reaching out and grabbing his shoulders, still reeling from that otherworldly experience. "Aodhan...I-I..." Galvyn was shaking now and beginning to sob. "We have to leave Galvyn, we're almost at the edge." I shook him and tried to get him to move but he would not budge. "I'm scared Aodhan, I don't want to die," Galvyn moaned through his sobbing. "I know Galvyn that's why we have to leave" I was panicking now, looking around for any signs of the creatures nearby. "But he promised me, I don't have to be scared anymore." I froze. Galvyn looked up at me and where his face should have been there was only a void, a black, endless abyss lined with misshapen humanoid teeth, gnashing and gnawing in its endless hunger. I thought back to the creature that had attacked Driskell and Donia. "No, t-that's not possible," I mouthed. The darkness of the void began to envelop Galvyn's body and transform him. I heard the cracking of bones as Galvyn's body grew and re-formed, and I turned and ran, towards the edge of the forest, and away from that thing that was no longer Galvyn. As I ran, I heard a final voice in my head, pitiful and weak. *I can be special too Aodhan, just like you.*

I kept my pace for what felt like an eternity before breaking out past the edge of the trees and into the warm sunlight. I caught up to Lyra, Owyn and the Twins, not daring to tell them what I had encountered back in the dark parts of the Aduaine forest. We travelled towards The Dagda for couple more days, each taking turns helping Driskell limp along on his broken leg before a traveling merchant caught sight of us and escorted us to a nearby town.

From there I could see the Dagda even closer now, and something about it reminded me of the voice in the woods. I stared up at the massive spire, looming ominously in the distance, and I wondered what that could have meant.