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Ita Daly

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KING NUADA AND THE SILVER ARM

Though King Nuada ruled Ireland for many years, his arrival to that country was not a happy one. The Tuatha Dé Danann had come from the Mediterranean, sweeping up in their boats through the storms of the Bay of Biscay and hoping to find a country where they could settle in some comfort. Things were getting crowded down on the Mediterranean.

When they sighted Ireland, green and misty and inviting, they decided to land there. They sent some scouts ahead, young warriors who swam ashore and scrambled up the rocks to take a look around. When they returned it was to tell their king that the land looked rich, that there was a stream nearby and, most important of all, no signs of any other human beings. So the Tuatha Dé Danann dragged their boats from the water onto a long, white beach, made a bonfire, cooked the fish they had caught earlier, and fell asleep, well content, each one looking forward to tomorrow and their new life.

King Nuada was the first to awake the next morning. He had been given the best place to sleep right beside the fire and now as he turned to warm his back (for the dawn was chilly enough) he opened one eye and let out a most unmajestic

scream. For, staring down at him, sitting perched on a high rock was a small, hairy creature, contentedly biting his nails and spitting the bits out in the direction of the king.

'Good morning, your worshipful majesty,' said the small fellow sarcastically. 'And what has brought you to this neck of the woods?'

King Nuada, purple with indignation, hauled himself up as straight as he could before he replied. 'I might ask you the same question, for the last time I saw you and your friends you were heading east. And I was glad to see the end of you and hoping I might never have to look at your miserable faces again.'

For the king had recognized the rascal as a Firbolg—a lowly band of bow-legged bag carriers who used to serve the Tuatha Dé Danann in the old country but who had upped sticks and left one night—every single one of them—to seek their fortune and their freedom in the far east where they had heard that there were countries without kings and where a bag carrier wouldn't be condemned to the life of a servant.

'Ah, we got terrible seasick and the ould boats were blown off course. But—' the little fellow had leapt agilely off the rock and was standing in front of the king, fists raised, '—don't you think you can come here now, lording it over us in our new home. This land belongs to the Firbolgs and you lot can get back into your boats and be off with yourselves.'

With that, he blew a final piece of nail into the king's face, turned round, and was running across the beach and up on the rocks, as fast and sure-footed as a mountain goat.

The rest of the Dé Danann were awake by now and they gathered round Nuada, outraged by what they had heard.

Were they not the Tuatha Dé Danann, the children of the Goddess Danu? How dare a former servant talk to them like that?

'They were always a bad lot those Firbolgs,' said Nuada, 'always looking for wage rises and skiving off when they got the chance.'

An hour later a delegation of five Firbolgs came down to the beach. One of them threw down a long wooden spear in front of the king.

'We give you one hour to get back into your boats and clear out of this place. If you are not gone by then our army will see you off and you will be sorry that you thought to take on the mighty Firbolg. I speak in the name of Sreng our leader and chief.'

The other four threw down their spears then and they all turned and marched back the way they had come.

'It's war then,' said Nuada wearily for he had hoped to leave all that sort of thing behind him. But the young warriors were already rooting around in the boats for their shields and head armour, delighted with the chance of a good fight.

You'd have to feel sorry for the Firbolgs for they were no match for the Tuatha Dé Danann. Smaller and skinnier and less well equipped, their first rank was run through in minutes by the swords and spears of their old masters. By sundown, as many of them lay dead and the white sand had turned red with their blood, they had surrendered.

The Tuatha Dé Danann, being descended from gods, were a noble sort of people and they were generous in victory. They

told the Firbolgs that they could start walking away and when they had walked for five days and five nights they could stop and whatever land lay beyond that point would be theirs. (The land the Firbolg occupied was the province we now call Connacht and they lived there very happily for many generations.)

Nuada made this declaration from a litter on which he was carried, for he had been seriously wounded during the battle, his right arm having been cut right off halfway between his shoulder and his elbow. Now as the Firbolgs departed the warriors rushed him into a cave where Diancecht, who was a bone setter and a healer and famous among the Dé Danann for his gifts, began to tie up the stump to stop the bleeding.

This new land was full of herbs and Diancecht, picking them when the dew was still on them, made poultices which he applied to the wound and it began to heal nicely.

'And now I'll make your majesty a silver arm,' he said, 'and you'll be as good as new.'

But that was a lot of nonsense. Firstly, the silver arm had no feeling and was clumsy to use even though it looked well, shined as it was every morning by the king's valet. Secondly, and more seriously, Nuada had to agree to step down from the kingship for there was a rule among the Dé Danann that the body of the king must be free from all blemish.

A man called Bres was appointed regent but nobody liked him and to make matters worse, Nuada, whom everybody loved, seemed to be fading away before their eyes. The flesh of what was left of his arm was hot and swollen and he was in constant pain. And Diancecht had gone off on his travels to search the land for new herbs.

* * *

After three or four years the Dé Danann had spread throughout Ireland (apart from Connacht) and the nobles and king settled in Meath where Bres built a fine palace on the Hill of Tara for himself and Nuada. Though Nuada was still king he had no power and he found the days long and boring and the nights wakeful for it was then that his arm pained him most.

One morning his most loyal servant, Ronan, was up on the battlements keeping watch. Ronan had fought by his master's side at the battle against the Firbolgs and whereas Nuada had lost his arm, Ronan had lost his right eye. Now he stood turning his head, peering with his one eye, when suddenly he saw two young men approaching, riding fine, black horses. They stopped just below Ronan and called out a greeting.

'What do you want?' Ronan was suspicious by nature.

'We've come to see King Nuada. We heard he's not too well,' the dark-haired one said.

'And what business is that of yours?'

'We're the sons of Diancecht and we're healers too and we think we can be of some use to the king.'

'Healers, are you?' Ronan peered down at them with his one eye. 'Then let's see what you can do.' He pointed to his empty eye socket. 'How about magicking me a new eye.' He laughed loudly at his own cleverness. But the two young men didn't seem fazed.

'No problem,' said the dark-haired one. And with that he got off his horse and picked up a tabby cat that had been lying asleep in the sun. He began rubbing the cat and talking to it, then he snapped his fingers together, made a fist with his

other hand and, raising it, seemed to throw something at Ronan.

The cat jumped from the young man's arms with a squeal. 'Thief, thief,' he cried and his cat voice sounded hoarse and more like what you might imagine coming from a dog. 'How am I supposed to catch mice now with only one eye?'

'Ah, stop complaining,' the young man said, clicking his fingers again. 'There, you will never get through that feast of mice that I'm giving you now.' And three fat mice appeared in front of the cat's paws. 'As soon as you think you've swallowed the last bite they'll just appear all over again.'

Meanwhile up on the battlements Ronan was leaping around, feeling his new eye and trying it out. 'It's better than my own,' he said. 'Sharper like.'

'Why wouldn't it be? Sure everyone knows that cats see better than humans. Now, will you let us in to see the king?'

It so happened that Diancecht's two sons Miach and Omiach were far better healers than their father and when they saw the king they diagnosed immediately what was wrong.

'The silver is poisoning your system, your majesty, and it will have to come off,' said Miach.

'But how can I go round with an ugly stump where my elbow used to be?' Nuada asked. 'After all, I'm still the king.'

'Leave that to us,' said Omiach, 'for we never half-do a job. Now, look over there.'

And while the king was looking in the other direction Miach yanked off the silver arm. 'That'll make a fine tankard,' he laughed, 'and you'll have a new arm to raise it with before the end of the month.'

The king's wife put him to bed and gave him some mead

to drink to dull the pain while the two young men went back onto the battlements to find Ronan again.

'We want you to take us to the battlefield where the king lost his arm,' Miach said.

'It's two days' ride from here but I'll enjoying finding the spot with the help of my new eye.'

And Ronan found the spot, for the arm had been buried with some ceremony and a small pile of stones still marked the spot where it lay. When they dug down deep they came upon yellow bones, bare of flesh but still in good nick, right down to the finger bones. Carefully they carried what was left of Nuada's arm back to Tara, washing it first in the Boyne River.

'Now, your majesty,' Miach said, 'this will take three days and in those three days you must do as we tell you and remain perfectly still.'

The first day they laid the arm across the king's heart, the second day they laid it across his head, and the third day they placed it carefully against the stump, aligning the bones as best they could. Then they secured the bones with ropes made from rushes, for rushes have great healing powers, and they covered the whole arm, from shoulder to fingertip, with herbs and then covered the herbs in goatskin.

'By Lá Bealtaine your flesh will have grown to cover the bones and you will have a new arm.'

And sure enough, by May Day, when Miach removed the goatskin and the herbs, there was the arm, a bit pink, it's true, and bruised around the joinings but in perfect working order.

Nuada resumed the kingship and Miach and Omiach became his official healers.

The only one among the Tuatha Dé Danann who wasn't completely happy was Ronan, for now, when he tried to sleep at night, the cat's eye was wide open on the look-out for a mouse, but when he was out on the battlements keeping guard and if the sun shone, that same eye would close and poor Ronan, after a sleepless night, would find himself nodding off.

The cat, meanwhile, had grown so fat from the reappearing mice that all the children called him Tiger and gave him a wide berth.