

*This wee story, told from Granuaile's point of view, takes place concurrently with the events of HAMMERED, book three of The Iron Druid Chronicles.*

## A Test of Mettle

By Kevin Hearne

Already I am made wholly new. Though I probably do not look any different, I feel as if the world *must* see me in a new way now that I can see the world as it truly is. I am no longer a barmaid or a philosophy major but a Druid initiate, and it feels as though I have emerged from a long and febrile sleep in a poorly made cocoon. The name Granuaile MacTiernan hardly matters anymore; it is just something that people call me. The elemental, Sonora, calls me Druidchild, and that is who I am now.

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The cottonwoods drinking from the East Verde River are poets even without their leaves.

Their branches speak to me of silence and death and a promised renewal that will come in its own season. And time is measured in those seasons, in buds and flowers and seeds, not in the gears of a clock or in the turning of a calendar page.

Their rough bark speaks to me of wind and rain and protecting oneself from harm.

Their roots are fingers that do not clutch but rather clasp in friendship, and they say to the soil, Here will I grow and be nourished for a span of seasons, and soon enough I will nourish you. All that is given shall be returned.

I see that they are like Druids, and tears spill down my cheeks to think that now I am like them, and not the leech on this world I once was.

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It is good that I have this labor of Sisyphus to perform, else I think I might go mad in that British Tom o' Bedlam way. I worry about Atticus. What if he doesn't come back? But of course this is yet another test. All of it is a test, and all of it is beautiful, babbling madness. I have lost my coat of normality and am set naked in the wild—

These are but wild and whirling words, my lord—

//There// Sonora says in my mind, and my attention is drawn to a rock sloping gently out of the dark green waters of the East Verde River, a curling eddy downstream forming a whitecap like a shot of whipped cream on coffee. With Sonora's guidance, sensed through the turquoise sphere at the base of my throat, I can feel the flow of water there, feel the gentle slowness under the rock, the place where a large crawdad has made its home. A crawdad from the Midwest that doesn't belong on this side of the continental

divide, an invasive species that's been killing off the native fish by eating their eggs. Elementary school kids dumped them in here at the end of their crustacean unit, and their teachers, who should have known better, let them ravage an ecosystem in the process.

I flick my wrist, and the baited line whips upstream with its lead sinker to drop into the current and drift past the rock. The fish guts on the hook call to the crawdad like a siren: It emerges from its shelter and latches on with its pincers, and I gently pull it out of the water to dangle it over a white bucket until its tiny brain realizes it is no longer in the water and it lets go. It joins dozens of its brethren there, and I feel a tiny pulse of satisfaction from Sonora.

I smile until my cheeks hurt. Recycling can feel good, or conserving electricity, but it is nothing like this, receiving personal thanks from the earth for something you have done to help.

Atticus has an expression that sounds a bit weird—"May harmony find you," he says, and people look at him like he's trying to say "May the Force be with you" and failing—but now those words make perfect sense. That is the joy I feel, the fulfillment, the purity of thought and deed perfectly matched, the grateful acknowledgment and acceptance of my place on earth: It is harmony.

I never knew it until today. My eyes blur at the enormity of my good fortune, and the river becomes an Impressionist canvas of water-soft edges and earth tones kissed by the sun.

It is just as well Atticus is gone while I acclimate myself to these feelings. I have alternately giggled and wept since I got here, and he probably would doubt my fitness for Druidry—or my fitness for anything—if he saw how much my emotions ruled me right now. But it's not as if he isn't ruled by his own emotions and loyalties. He has gone off with his buddies to give manly battle to a thunder god, and for what?

For a fantasy and trick of fame, they go to their graves like beds . . . and the Morrigan cannot help him in Asgard.

But now I am looking through the same window as he. I will see all that he sees soon enough. It's clear now that he cares nothing for politics because there is no harmony to be found in the squabbles of men. It is found in the song of this river, in the taste of desert wind, and in the stark verses I see in the winter branches of cottonwoods.

It is in unchained laughter and aged whiskey, and in those rare moments when words can capture the shirttail of something ineffable.

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Oberon startles me with a couple of barks from the riverbank. Atticus asked me to look after him, but I rather suspect he also asked Oberon to look after me. I know Oberon can understand what I say perfectly well, but I cannot hear him like Atticus does, and I won't be able to until I'm a full Druid.

"Just checking in?" I ask him.

Oberon barks once and gives me a very human nod.

"You're not too bored entertaining yourself while I work, are you?"

This time he barks twice and then shakes his head, wagging his tail all the while. I feel like I'm in an old episode of *Lassie* where they ask the collie, "What's that, girl?"

Farmer Bob fell down the well and has a compound fracture of his left tibia?” or something ridiculously complex like that. But I get the feeling Oberon would just laugh at Farmer Bob if he was dumb enough to fall down a well.

“All right, thanks for checking in,” I say. “I’ll stop for the night soon.” Oberon chuffs at me, but I pretend not to notice. Atticus told me that when Oberon chuffs, he is highly amused. In this particular place, he cannot be laughing at anyone but me. I must look extraordinarily stupid and not like a badass Druid at all. One last bark and he returns to his canine pursuits, disappearing into the brush.

It is good he is here, I think. My mother taught me never to wander alone upriver in a wet suit when it’s near freezing outside. Or she would have, if such behavior had been imaginable to her. Thank all the gods of twenty pantheons I’m not in Kansas anymore.

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In my stepfather’s house there are many rooms. None of them is mine.

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I am stiff as I lie down for the evening between a small campfire and Oberon. I made it halfway upriver thanks to Sonora’s assistance in locating the crawdads. Tomorrow I will go the same distance and then turn downriver and clear out the opposite bank. I expect to be epically sore in the morning—and crispy. Oberon had been laughing at my sunburned face; I am susceptible even in winter.

//Rest Druidchild// Sonora says. //No creatures will disturb//  
//Gratitude / Harmony// I say, already losing consciousness.  
//Harmony//

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Birdsong wakens me. I do not know what kind; I am miserable at identifying them, but that’s only because I’ve never bothered to pay attention. Usually all I hear is the purring coo of pigeons; the more melodic species usually avoid the city. Now that I am going to spend more time in the forests, I think perhaps I should take the trouble to identify them by name.

Half wincing, I stretch, expecting loud complaints from my legs and back from the abuse they suffered yesterday. I expect to feel a warm tightening across my cheeks from sunburn. But I feel nothing like that; instead, I feel quite refreshed and not the least bit sore. It’s so disorienting that I wonder if perhaps I dreamed yesterday—but then I dismiss it, because I clearly wouldn’t have woken up here if that were the case.

//New day dawns / Sonora greets Druidchild / Query: Sleep well?//

I say “Yes, thanks,” out loud before I remember to concentrate my thoughts and emotions and let the turquoise send these to the elemental.

//Druidchild greets Sonora / Slept well / Feel well / Query: Sonora healed me?//  
//Yes//

Smiling, I send her my gratitude. //Will continue work soon//

//Harmony//

Oberon yawns loudly and stretches his long back legs. Then he swoops in unexpectedly and delivers a sloppy lick up the side of my face.

“Eww! Oberon, gross!” I try to slap at him, but he already has bounded out of reach, chuffing at me. I smile at him. “Crazy dog.”

He barks joyfully and trots off into the bushes, presumably to answer the call of nature. I trot in the other direction for the same reason. We eat a dry breakfast of jerky—Oberon somewhat mournfully, no sausages for him—and then I squidge myself back into my wet suit for another day of crawdad collection.

“Are you off to hunt for something more substantial?” I ask him.

Oh, yes, yes, Oberon lets me know his intentions very clearly.

“All right, then, good hunting.” He disappears in the scrub, and I spend a few minutes rolling up my blanket and organizing the small pack I brought.

The noise I hear in the brush doesn't register at first; I assume it's just Oberon. But a decidedly porcine snort draws my eyes up from my contemplation of fishing line. Standing less than fifty yards away, half-concealed by a manzanita bush, is a fairly large javelina. It's supposed to be called a “collared peccary”—a snooty zoologist corrected me once—but I've never liked that name because my mind does terrible things with free association: *peccary* sounds too much like *pecker*, and before you know it I'm thinking about a penis in a collared shirt and tie, and that reminds me of my stepfather, so fuck that, I'm going to keep calling them javelinas. Their eyesight is poor, but they can hear and smell extremely well. As I watch, another javelina joins the first. Then another. And another. Their snouts twitch in agitation at my scent, and I suspect they are less than grunted. I am reminded of the Hitchcock movie where the birds just sit in the park and stare at people with a giant side of ominous sauce. It's somehow creepier when wild pigs do it. And then they bellow in chorus and charge at me.

“Oberon!” I call as I drop my pack and run for the river. “Come get your bacon!”

It's only about twenty yards to the river, but the javelinas are a whole lot faster than me. One of them gashes the back of my calf with a tusk as I hit the river and tumble into a deep pool, hands out in front of me and hoping I don't hit my head on a rock. Already hammering in my chest from adrenaline, my heart goes into B-movie scream mode as the shock of cold hits my skin. The wet suit will reduce the water's ability to conduct heat away from my body, but it doesn't do a thing to reduce that first temperature dive.

Avoiding rocks, I tuck my legs up and head farther into the current, letting it take me downstream a bit before I surface and drop my legs to find the bottom. It's not there—I stopped for the night at one of the deeper pools in the river.

I have to swim a bit toward the shore to find something underneath my feet. The javelinas are there, squealing or rasping or whatever that unholy noise is coming out of their throats. I leave my feet and continue downstream. The javelinas follow along the shore, ready to attack if I should get close enough. Great.

My calf stings, but I can't tell how bad the wound is. And I realize, belatedly, that because of the wound, the wet suit isn't working the way it should. Water isn't getting trapped between the suit and my skin because of the tear; instead, it's flushing through, and I'm still chilled to the bone—at least, all the way up that leg. Hopefully it won't

spread to my core. If that happens, hypothermia will set in if I remain in the river for long. My strength will ebb until I'm no longer able to fight the current, and I'll drown.

Still, I'm temporarily safe, and the brief measure of time I've bought myself allows me to wonder where Oberon is and call for him again. I also wonder why Sonora allowed this to happen. Didn't she keep me safe all night from everything from mosquito bites to skunk humping? I collect my thoughts and ask her what's going on.

//Druidchild attacked / Query: Help?//

The answer is perplexing. //Sonora not responsible / Cannot interfere//

That implied that someone else *was* responsible for the attack. //Query: Who is responsible?//

//Very old Druid / Flidais//

*Flidais* is here? The Irish goddess of the hunt is sending javelinas after me? Why? I have to get out of the water. I decide to cross the river since the javelinas won't let me return to the north shore. I swim across, which thankfully isn't too far, only to meet another angry animal waiting at the water's edge. It is a crouching mountain lion with its ears laid flat against its head, and it hisses at me menacingly and swipes at the air in my direction with unfairly sharp claws.

Ho. Lee. Shit. I think I'll take the javelinas. I start to swim back and think through the problem set.

Flidais cannot want to kill me—if she did, I would already be dead. Atticus said she's a master archer and can pull off true invisibility; she can shoot me any time she wants and I'll never see it coming. She is also supposed to have complete control over animals, which means she can force these creatures into the water if she wants. The fact that she hasn't means she wants to either trap me in the water or see how I deal with the obstacles. The latter makes the most sense. I recognize it as another test; Atticus does this sort of thing to me all the time. Not threaten me with wild animals, I mean, but spring tests upon me without warning and without telling me I'm being tested.

But why now? Irrelevant to solving the problem, come back to it—

*What* now? Better question. The javelinas, seeing a predator on the opposite shore, aren't retreating as they should. They still guard the riverbank against my egress. And I am getting awfully cold. Breathing hurts.

I cannot use magic since I am not yet bound to the earth—and the earth has already told me I'm on my own. Flidais must know this. She's presented me with two choices: Stay in the river to avoid a fight and eventually lose myself to the cold, or fight for my life without any weapons. I know that calling out to her and begging for mercy is not an option. That would be an automatic fail.

I'm not built for pig wrestling, especially eight at once, so what—?

The answer is underneath my feet as I approach the shore: rocks. I'm going to rock those pigs. Big, smooth river rocks will crack a skull or two. And if Flidais has them come after me, well, I can swim better than they can.

I dive down and pry a rock about the size of my head out of the mud, though it is fairly flat, almost like flagstone. It's heavier than I thought it would be, but it's ideal for the job. I wrestle it to the surface and gasp for a fresh breath. The javelinas erupt into new clamor at my appearance. I walk forward on the river bottom until I'm only waist deep, and I raise the rock in both hands above my head, choosing a target. And there I pause, assailed by doubts.

Killing any of these poor creatures seems a shame. They would not have been this persistent without goading. Wounding them would be the same as killing them, just more painful and cruel. Perhaps this test is truly a test of my compassion for animals and not a test of survival after all. Perhaps I will fail if I harm them.

But I don't see another way out. My teeth begin to chatter and the rock twitches above my head as I shudder involuntarily, my body trying to warm itself up. I have to get out and stitch up my wet suit—and very likely my leg as well—but the javelinas won't respond to a polite request. Or will they?

"Please move on and leave me alone. I don't want to hurt you," I say. They continue to squeal angrily at me, and I'm actually a bit disappointed, then disgusted with myself. Hanging around with Oberon has conditioned me to think that all animals will naturally respond to modern American English. But it was worth a try, I suppose. I send a thought to Sonora: //Regret deaths / Blame Flidais//

I get no response. And the rock isn't getting any lighter. Channeling my rage at the situation, my desperation to get out of it, and my worry over Oberon's whereabouts, I hurl the rock as best I can at the herd of javelinas, aiming for the closest one. My aim is a bit off, and the rock sails high to hit the javelina behind him square on the back. The blow breaks something, and it collapses, shrieking in agony. I nearly collapse myself with the guilt.

Whatever's holding the will of the other javelinas breaks, and they scatter, leaving their crippled companion behind. The mountain lion on the opposite shore also stops prowling and roars.

I turn in time to see it leap into the river and begin to swim in my direction. I don't know if Flidais is forcing it. Big cats rarely swim; they are not that buoyant, so this is extraordinary behavior. The piteous cries of the javelina might be an irresistible dinner bell, however.

I will not let the javelina suffer any longer. If the mountain lion wants to eat it, fine, but I'm not going to let its throat be torn out. My legs surge through the water and carry me back to shore. The rock I threw lies near the javelina. I pick it up and, crying over the necessity, bring it down on the poor creature's head. The squealing stops. I back away from the body but keep the rock in my hands. The mountain lion emerges from the river, pissed and walking low, baring its fangs at me and hissing. I keep backing away, slowly. I want to run, but that will just get me killed. My best chance is to get in a lucky blow with the rock.

"What say you, Brighid?" a voice says to my right.

I dart a quick glance in that direction and see three figures there who weren't there before, but the panicked part of my brain tells me they are not the immediate threat that the mountain lion is, so I return my gaze to the bad kitteh. As I watch, the lion sprawls on the ground, sphinx-like, and eyes me coolly as if it hadn't just swum across a river to threaten me. On a Creep Scale from Hello Kitty to Cthulhu, I award it a Freddy Krueger.

Another voice draws my attention back to the three figures. It is contralto and layered like a parfait, caramel and orange peel and topped with whatever victory tastes like.

"She acted swiftly once surprise had worn off, and she worked out the rules of the game." The speaker is a tall woman in full plate armor that somehow manages to convey

the invulnerability of a juggernaut and the poetic grace of bounding deer. She cradles a helmet in her left hand, rests her right hand lightly on the hilt of a sheathed sword, and looks positively regal. I am looking at Brighid, First among the Fae, and when my mouth drops open, the rock almost drops with it. She tilts her head, considering me, then continues her summary of my behavior: “A strategic retreat at first, a cool assessment of the field, and then decisive action. Nor did she run from the predator. There is none of the coward in her.”

I am not sure if I am supposed to volunteer my thanks. I just close my mouth and gulp so I don't look like a complete mouth breather. My eyes flick to the other two figures. One is Oberon, who looks utterly miserable and cowed. He is under Flidais's control and looks deeply embarrassed that he can do nothing to help me. Flidais, the third figure, is a feral vision of frizzy red hair and suede leather in earth tones. The goddess of the hunt carries a bow in her left hand, and a full quiver of arrows peeks over her shoulder. She responds to Brighid's assessment, saying, “And yet she paused and spoke before throwing the rock at the peccaries.” She addresses me directly. “Why did you pause, Granuaile MacTiernan?”

Instead of answering her question, I shudder with cold and ask through chattering teeth, “Is it safe to put down this rock now?”

Flidais nods impatiently, and Brighid lifts her right hand from her sword hilt and points at me. “*Téann tú,*” she says, and I begin to feel warmer. I check on the mountain lion; it is still quiescent, so I drop the rock and cross my arms in front of me, suddenly self-conscious in the presence of two goddesses who look like comic book heroines.

“I spoke my true feelings at the time. I did not want to hurt them,” I answer. “I was trying to think of a way out that did not involve killing. Unfortunately, I couldn't think of one.”

Flidais nods in approval. “Respect for life. Good.”

I want to ask where *her* respect for life is, why she thinks it is all right to treat animals like puppets and force me to kill one of them in some sort of sick game. But Atticus told me never to sass one of the Tuatha Dé Danann no matter how much they might deserve it. And Brighid chooses to answer some of the unspoken questions anyway.

“Granuaile MacTiernan, you just underwent the *Baolach Cruatan*, the Dangerous Trial. All initiates must pass it to continue their training. It is always administered by a Druid unknown to the initiate in conditions similar to these. Explain why.”

Another test.

“An initiate's master may have difficulty administering a properly dangerous trial,” I say, immediately recognizing the truth of it. “And the initiate must believe herself alone and in true danger for the test to be effective.”

A curt nod from Flidais. “What is the purpose of the test?”

“It is a test of courage and resourcefulness in a situation where magic and weapons are unavailable.” Then, remembering how Flidais questioned me on my pause, I add quickly, “And, to a lesser extent, morality.”

I get a patient redirection for my efforts. “That is the nature of the test, but not its purpose.”

Oh. I am supposed to provide them with a rationale for what they just did to me—and to Oberon, the javelinas, and the mountain lion. This time I don't have a quick answer.

"Will you release Oberon to me, please, while I think about it?" I ask.

Flidais looks to Brighid to inquire if she approves. The First among the Fae gives the barest nod, and Flidais drops her vision to Oberon, who gets up and hurries over to me, his head and tail lowered in shame. I bend down to greet him and whisper, "Hey, head up. You did nothing wrong." I cup my hand underneath his jaw and smile into his eyes. His tail wags weakly in response.

"How long have you been conducting this *Baolach Cruatan*?" I ask the goddesses.

"Since the Tuatha Dé came to Ireland," Brighid says.

I nod and consider, trying not to be overwhelmed by the sheer number of years that represented. Atticus would have gone through this same trial, and he must have known that I would have to face it before long. He might have even arranged for this to happen during his absence, and I saw how he had tried to prepare me for it, showing me all that gore and death back at Tony Cabin and warning me that magic users rarely die in their sleep. I remember him forcing me to look on the severed head of a witch held in a werewolf's jaws, and my answer comes.

"It is character evaluation through crisis," I say. "You cannot take a person's true measure until they are threatened."

"Yes. And why must we measure you this way?" Flidais presses.

"I will be bound to the earth someday," I reply. "You can let neither the cowardly nor the bloodthirsty be bound in such a way."

"Excellent," Brighid says. "I am satisfied. Are you hurt?"

For the first time, I examine my calf, which is beginning to throb painfully now that I'm warming up. The cold had numbed the pain somewhat, and adrenaline had let me ignore the rest. It is a shallow cut up the outside of my calf that would have been much deeper if the wet suit hadn't taken the brunt of the damage. It's still bleeding and needs stitches I don't have.

"I got scratched pretty well here."

"We will leave you to heal," Flidais says. "You have passed the *Baolach Cruatan*. Congratulations. We look forward to the day when you are bound with the earth."

"May harmony find you," Brighid adds.

"And you," I manage to reply before they wink out of sight, thanks to Flidais.

They probably will linger and observe me for a while, but I don't care. I am more concerned about the mountain lion. It rises underneath my gaze, gives a parting hiss to Oberon, and jumps back into the river, leaving us alone with the dead javelina.

I give Oberon a hug around the neck. "You are a fabulous hound. I'm sorry you had to go through that. I know you wanted to help, but you couldn't. You were under Flidais's control once before, weren't you?"

Oberon gives a small whine. I almost join in, because it occurs to me then to wonder what would have happened if I hadn't passed the *Baolach Cruatan*.

Sonora interrupts my morbid thoughts with an observation that puts to rest what might have happened if I'd failed: //Druidchild lives / Joy / Relief//

//Yes / Regret / Cannot work now / Must fix suit first//



//Must fix leg / Sonora will heal//

That was excellent news, because I hadn't been looking forward to pulling a Rambo and performing surgery on myself. //Gratitude / Harmony// I send.

//Harmony// Sonora replies.

\*

Oberon is so sweet. He doesn't leave my side now. He watches me try to sew up the gash in my wet suit with fishing line and hooks, which I'm sure must be about as exciting to him as watching grass grow. Or maybe he's just waiting for me to stab myself. There will still be some flushing along my leg no matter what I do, but it probably won't bother my core too much. I feel nice and warm now, thanks to whatever Brighid did, but I suspect that once I get back in the river, I won't be very warm again until we return to the rented truck.

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I have killed hundreds of crawdads and felt nothing, but I still feel guilty about the javelina. He will haunt my dreams, I think.

\*

A javelina is a collared peccary, which sounds like pecker, which sounds *exactly* like Beau Thatcher, my stepfather.

I do not normally wallow in symbolism, but perhaps I can save myself a trip to the therapist and indulge myself this once. In an odd way, perhaps the *Baolach Cruatan* has shown me how I can defeat him; if he stands against me, then the thing to do is *act*, not wait and hope he leaves.

When I chose to become a Druid, I picked up the rock. And when I am bound to the earth twelve years hence, I will be able to throw it in such a way that he loses everything, all to which he clings so tightly—except for his life. He will get to keep his life. No matter how much he squeals, there will be no mercy killing.

\*

It takes two more days to finish clearing the river and return to the rental truck. Sonora is pleased with me, and I am pleased with myself, aside from the fact that I desperately need a hot bath and a whole cake of soap.

“You know what, Oberon? After four days of living on nothing but water and jerky, I think we deserve a steak. A tenderloin wrapped in bacon and maybe a side of bacon for dessert. What do you think?”

He barks enthusiastically, and his tail scythes the air; he clearly believes this to be a fantastic idea.

“And that episode with Brighid and Flidais? Should we tell Atticus about that when he gets back?”

Oberon's ears droop, his tail goes still, and he barks twice for no.

“Yeah. I’m with you. Let’s keep that bit our secret.”

*The adventures of Atticus, Oberon, and Granuaile continue in TRICKED, book four of The Iron Druid Chronicles, coming in April 2012 from Del Rey. You can find Kevin on Twitter @KevinHearne or “Like” his author page on Facebook.*

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