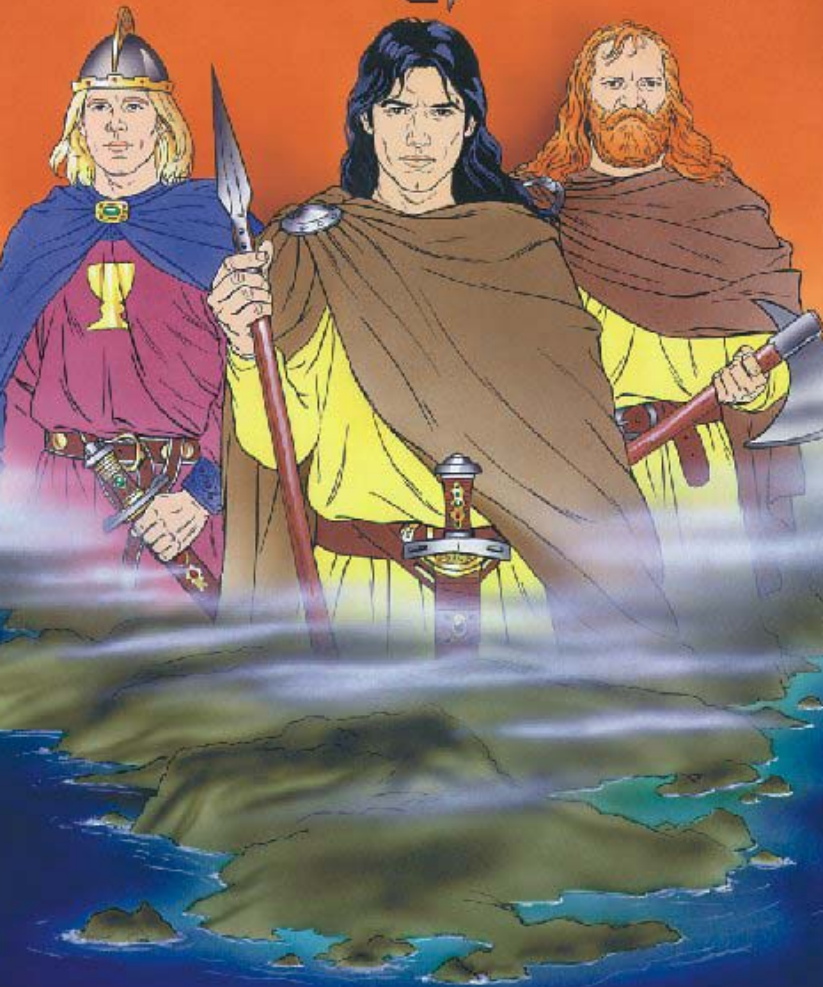
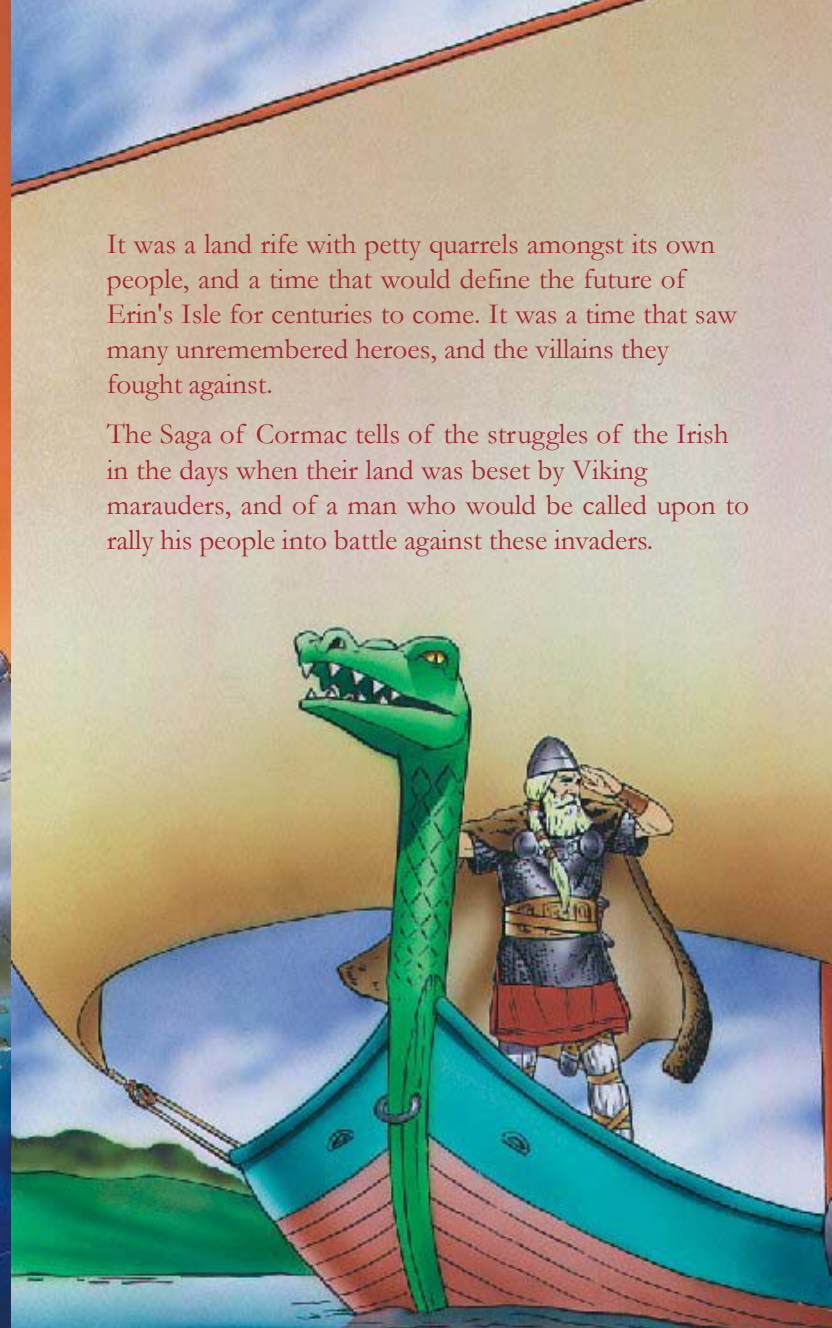


The Saga of CORMAC



It was a land rife with petty quarrels amongst its own people, and a time that would define the future of Erin's Isle for centuries to come. It was a time that saw many unremembered heroes, and the villains they fought against.

The Saga of Cormac tells of the struggles of the Irish in the days when their land was beset by Viking marauders, and of a man who would be called upon to rally his people into battle against these invaders.



The Saga Of
CORMAC

SCOTT MacGREGOR

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dear Finnian C., I could not have done it without you and your wisdom, guidance, knowledge of Irish lore, sense of humor and, most of all, patience.

And to my dear wife and the other typists who labored so long over transcribing this text, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Cover and illustrations by Hugo Westphal

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INTRODUCTION

In the ninth century, an unknown Irish monk stopped to scribble a short prayer in the margin of the illuminated manuscript¹ that he was working on. Who the monk was has long been forgotten, but what he wrote encapsulated the hopes, prayers, life and history of the Irish of his day.

Lord, keep us from the fury of the Ostmen.

The Ostmen, known more commonly to us today as the Vikings, were ruthless, savage pagans with seemingly no fear of God or man. The Ostmen sailed out of Scandinavia, bringing terror and destruction to the hapless victims in the path of their raids.

The first recorded raid on Ireland was in 798 A.D., and for the next 200 years they not only attacked the coastal communities, but because of the sleek design of their long ships, were able to penetrate deeply into the Irish hinterland by way of the many navigable rivers. The attacks went from small raids to the landing of whole occupation armies. Eventually

¹ **Illuminated manuscripts:** hand-drawn scrolls and books enhanced with decorations and paintings. Manuscript illumination is the use of embellishment and illustration to enhance the pages of a medieval manuscript. Illuminations are also called miniatures.

the Ostmen were to found towns such as Dublin, Waterford and Wexford, the first urban settlements in Ireland.

The Celts of Ireland called themselves Gaels or Scotti, and when these tribes eventually conquered the northern part of Britain, they gave their name to that land—*Scotland*. The Ostmen gave the Celts of Ireland a new name, the *Irish*, and it is from this that their land became known as *Ireland*¹.

The Irish, at the time of the Ostmen ravages, were divided into many petty kingdoms called *tuaths*, which might be translated as tribe or clann². Each was ruled by a king or chief, called the *ri*. There were as many as 150 tuaths throughout Ireland. The tuaths were then formed into five major kingdoms: Leinster, Munster, Ulster, Connaught and Meith. The king of one of these kingdoms, usually Ulster, was the *Ard Righ*—the High King—and he had nominal overlordship over the other four kingdoms of Ireland but, in truth, his power usually did not go beyond his own kingdom.

The Irish had been a fierce and warlike race before their conversion to Christianity by missionaries such as Saint Patrick. Many then turned their passion for war into a passion for Christ. During the dark days of the destruction of the Roman Empire by the barbarian hordes, Ireland remained one of the few places untouched, a sanctuary of peace, and a repository of the Holy Scriptures and of learning. Eventually, Christian missionaries from Ireland were largely instrumental in bringing back

the Gospel to the benighted lands of Europe.

Sadly, however, the Celtic Church (as it was then known), with its emphasis on missionary work and learning, came into competition with a resurgent and better-organized Roman Catholic Church. A synod in Whitby, England, where Catholic practices were accepted as right and the Celtic Church's as in error, sealed its fate. The result was a general retreat of the adherents of the Celtic Church to Ireland, until centuries later this final bastion of its faith was absorbed into the Catholic Church.

¹ For the sake of simplicity, however, the names "Irish" and "Ireland" are used by our protagonists themselves throughout this story.

² The Irish spelling is usually with two n's, whereas the Scottish spelling has only one.



-1-
CORMAC

Our tale begins in the eastern kingdom of Leinster. Cormac—the hero of our story—was the eldest of five sons. His father was Muircheartach, the ri of his tuath, and his mother’s name was Niamh. They lived close by the others in their clann in a fortlike structure that ringed the top of a gently sloping, low-lying hill. Cormac was about twenty years old at the time this all began—a young man of fine features, upright bearing and nobility of heart, with long black hair that flowed down his back.

As was the common dress amongst the Irish, Cormac wore a long linen tunic called a *léine*, girded at the waist with a leather belt. Over that a long woolen cloak, called a *brat*, was fastened on his shoulder with a brooch. Both these garments were dyed yellow, as were almost all the other clothes worn by others, the yellow dye being obtained from the abundant crocus flowers that grew in the land. His shoes were made of rawhide.

Cormac carried a javelin as a weapon, but, more mundanely, it usually served as his cowherd’s staff. He tended his father’s personal herds, which consisted of pigs, goats, sheep and a few cows. A man’s wealth was usually measured by his herds, and bulls and milking cows were prized possessions. Cattle had to

be guarded because rival clans would sometimes engage in cattle rustling.

One day Cormac heard the war cries of the clann O’Hooley¹ from the neighboring valley. Sensing that there was to be trouble, he quickly started to round up his herds to try to lead them back to the safety of the fort. But before he could get very far, he found himself surrounded by twenty men of the clann O’Hooley, all dressed in warlike fashion.

“Well, if it isn’t wee Cormac mac Muirheartach!” shouted Brian O’Hooley, the leader of the band. “Out here all on his lonesome, guarding his father’s flock.”

Now Cormac was a goodly lad, strong and not afraid of this neighbor.

“Aye, it is!” he shouted back at Brian. “And what would you be doing on my father’s land with your swords hanging by your side and your faces painted as for war?”

Brian was several years older than Cormac, and the eldest son of Fergus, the current Chief O’Hooley. Brian threw back his head and laughed.

“Why, I should think it’s obvious,” he said. “We are come a-raiding. It’s just a pity that there’s but the one little wee lad here guarding all these flocks. I’d dare say you’ll ne’er be able to stop us taking them.”

Cormac was seriously outnumbered, and even though he thought he could hold his own in a fight,

¹ At this time in Irish history, not all clans had family names. This did not become universal till the eleventh century. So while the O’Hooleys were known by their family name, Cormac’s clann was not. Incidentally, the name *O’Hooley* cannot be found in the annals of ancient Irish surnames.

This book contains a mixture of the Gaelic and Anglicized spelling of Irish names. Being that more readers are familiar with English spelling and pronunciation, the Anglicized spelling is favored. However, the Gaelic spelling is used for those names that have no Anglicized equivalent.

he knew that all he could do in this situation was to stall for time, hoping help would come. The O’Hooleys had announced their arrival in the typical way—shouting at the top of their voices—so he hoped that somehow, someone from his clann would have heard it, and run and raised the alarm.

“We are well knowing how poor at fighting the O’Hooleys are!” shouted back Cormac. “My father figured I could handle any that came this way by myself.”

Brian’s face flushed for a moment, and his smile turned into an angry frown. But then he burst out laughing, holding his sides tightly.

“Oh, you little pipsqueak!” he shouted back. “You audacious little pipsqueak! Seize him!”

Cormac stood back and held his javelin high. “The first man of you that comes anywhere near me is going to feel this javelin go through his heart!” he shouted.

The men of the O’Hooleys hesitated as Cormac stood poised with his javelin in his hand.

“I must admit this wee one has a lot of spunk in him!” cried Brian. “Now what will we do here? We don’t want to sacrifice one of our lives.”

Cormac’s eyes darted around from one man to the other, to another, seeing who would be the one to make the first move. The O’Hooley men eyed each other nervously.

“Oh, come on, Cormac,” said Brian. “Put that thing down! You’re just going to get one of us hurt and yourself hurt in the bargain.”

Cormac shouted back, “That’s what it’s going to cost you if you’re going to take the herds! These are my father’s and I’m not going to let them go.”

By the time Cormac noticed, if he even did, it was too late. Oisín O’Hooley, Brian’s younger brother, had crept around behind him. Now this Oisín could walk upon the ground without making a twig break or even a blade of grass bend—or so they said. Crouched low,

he had silently made his way behind Cormac. The blow on the head—and it was a mighty blow at that—left Cormac a senseless heap upon the ground.



Cormac groaned. Opening his eyes, he tried hard to focus on the unfamiliar surroundings. He lifted himself up on one arm but then fell back, dizzy because of the pain. As he lay there, the sounds of singing and laughter from nearby became more audible. The flicker of light from a campfire danced around the inside of the wattle-and-daub¹ hut that he found himself in. The light was being let in from the crack in the wicker door. He struggled up on his arm again, and then he saw the fetters on his legs that were attached to a main central pole in the hut. He crawled along the floor to get closer to a large crack between the branches that made up the wall of his prison. He could make out shapes of men and women sitting around the campfire just outside.

As he tried to focus on the figures, unexpectedly there was another face, barely a few inches away on the other side of the wall. The young girl—for that is who the other face belonged to—was staring directly back at him. The two locked eyes for a minute, and then she hurriedly took off in the direction of the campfire.

Cormac could make out the figure of Fergus O’Hooley seated at the place of honor. At a word from the girl, he turned his face in the direction where Cormac lay bound. The light from the flame of the fire flickered on his face, accentuating the man’s rather ghoulisish countenance. Cormac saw the man break out into a great smile.

¹**wattle and daub:** method of constructing walls in which vertical wooden stakes, or wattles, are woven with horizontal twigs and branches, and then “daubed” (covered or smeared) with clay or mud.

Although Cormac couldn’t see him very distinctly, his memory filled in the blanks, as he had seen the O’Hooley chief enough to know that his front teeth were all gone, having either rotted out or been knocked out in various fights.

Fergus leaned over to the figure next to him, and Cormac saw that it was Brian. He whispered something into Brian’s ear. Brian turned and looked in Cormac’s direction, then stood up and started coming towards him.

Cormac crawled back from the wall of the hut and sat up. Brian O’Hooley opened the thatched door, his generous bulk silhouetted in the doorway.

“Ah, you’re awake, are ya, wee Cormac?”

“I’m awake, you brigand!” Cormac snarled back.

“Well, don’t be like that, for goodness’ sake. You’ll make your stay here for both of us miserable if you keep on snapping and snorting like that.”

“What do you expect me to do?” asked Cormac. “Have a big smile on my face, in gratitude for the fact that you’ve gone and dealt my head such a bloody blow that it aches with such pain that not even the holy martyrs would have felt? You’ve no doubt stolen all our cattle, and here I am chained up like a dog.”

“Tsk, tsk,” said Brian. “Like a dog, is it? Maybe we should throw you a few scraps. Oh, Cormac, you know we have to chain you up like this, or you would have been getting into all kinds of mischief when you woke. But come now, my father wants to see you.”

“Well, I don’t want to see your father,” Cormac snapped back.

“Are you still being so impolite?” barked Brian. “My father is the chief of this clann and you’ll be needing to respect him of that. Did your father not teach you manners?”

“My father taught me lots of manners,” said Cormac, “obviously ones that *your* father seemed to have lacked in teaching you. My father taught me

not to go raiding and stealing, that it was against the Christian code.”

“Oh, Cormac, for goodness’ sake, we are as Christian as you are, but you know it’s our tradition to go raiding and stealing. It’s our way of life. Your father would do it to us, if he had the chance.”

“No, my father wouldn’t,” said Cormac. “For he has foresworn those ways of old.”

“Ah, you stubborn puppy,” snarled Brian. “Now, I’m going to get down there and I’m going to take these fetters off your feet, then we are going to go out and see my father. Do I have your word that you’re not going to try any funny business?”

“I don’t give my word to the likes of you,” replied Cormac.

“Oh, stop it, for the love of all the saints. You’re driving me crazy.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have took me in the first place then, should you?”

“Well, what did you expect us to have done, leave you out to bleed to death or something, or get eaten by the wild animals? For goodness’ sake, we carried you all the way back here, and you can show a little bit of thankfulness.”

“Hoo, you carried me all the way back here to your village and put a chain around my legs, and now you’re expecting me to be thankful.”

“You’re making me very angry, you are, Cormac!”

“Good, I’m trying to,” Cormac retorted.

Brian huffed and puffed around the room. “Look, my father said to bring ya. Now, he’s going to be wondering what in the name of all the holy saints is taking so long to bring you a mere twenty paces or so, from over here to the fire. Come on, behave yourself, for the love of mercy and Mary the Holy Mother of God.”

Cormac had enjoyed taunting Brian. Brian was a big, solid oak of a man, not someone that you would

want to tangle with too lightly in a fight. He also wasn’t the most fast-witted of men. But Cormac had sized up his situation now, and he knew that if he kept this up that he would probably just be left tied up for longer. So, he figured that it would be better to let Brian unlock him from his chains, and go see what the O’Hooley chief wanted.

“Go on and unlock me then,” said Cormac sullenly—or at least pretending to be sullen. In actuality, he had enjoyed seeing Brian get into such a state of agitation.

“Will you promise me that you’ll behave?” said Brian.

“Aye, I promise,” replied Cormac quietly.

“Promise on the memory of your great-grandfather!”

“What are you bringing my great-grandfather into this for?”

“Promise on the memory of your great-grandfather,” said Brian again, this time more forcefully.

“Aye, I promise on the memory of my great-grandfather,” replied Cormac.

“You promise by all the saints of holy Ireland, Saint Patrick and all?”

“Oh, my God,” said Cormac. “I’ve got to be saying all these oaths just to unlock these chains?”

“Promise,” said Brian.

“Alright, alright, I promise. I promise on all the holy saints of holy Ireland and on holy Saint Patrick.”

“Good,” said Brian. “I’m going to unlock you now.”

Brian bent down, cautiously looking Cormac in the eyes the whole time, his hands feeling for where the lock was to undo the fetters.

“Would you stop stroking my legs, for the love of mercy,” taunted Cormac.

“I’m not stroking your legs,” snorted Brian.

Taking his eyes off Cormac’s eyes for only a second, he found the keyhole. Then he turned the key and

the fetters swung loose.

“All right then, get up and let’s go out and see my father.”

Brian swung the door open and the two men marched out. Cormac was still wobbly on his feet from the blow on his head, but he straightened himself and mustered all the dignity he could.

“What took you so long?” Fergus O’Hooley asked Brian.

“We were having a conversation,” said Brian.

“You obviously found much to talk about,” Fergus replied.

“Aye, we did, Father,” said Brian quietly.

“Well, Cormac mac Muirheartach,” said Fergus. “I apologize to ya for how you came to be in our camp. Now my son Brian here informs me that you were most uncooperative this afternoon, so Oisín had to give you a wee tap over the head to help you come to your senses.”

Cormac looked at the O’Hooley chief, who stared back at him with his one good eye. “That wee tap on my head almost splattered my senses all over the ground,” complained Cormac.

“Oh, well, enough of that,” said Fergus dismissively. “Now we’ve got a wee situation. Your father and the men of your clann are going to be certainly coming here to try to get back your cattle, and of course to try to get back you, the eldest son.”

“What less can you expect of him?” said Cormac.

“I’ll tell you what I want to do,” said Fergus. “This whole thing is not going to be prosperous for either of us if your father comes a-whooping down from the hills on top of us in the middle of the night, as I dare suspect he’s figuring to do. So what I want to do is, I’m going to charge you with a message to take back to your da. Tell him I’m letting you go back home freely and I’m letting you take most of your flock back, except the milk cow and the young heifer with her.”

“Those are my father’s prized possessions.”

“Aye, well, they may have been, but they’re mine now. I’m sending you back on the condition that your da does not try to get them back come these ninety days.”

Cormac thought for a minute, *Ninety days! Ninety days without our only milk cow—this is a hard saying! But what are the alternatives?* he wondered. The alternative was to say no, to remain stuck here with all the cattle and flocks and his father to get nothing back. The ninety days would pass and in that meantime, they could plot how to take their revenge on the O’Hooleys.

“Well, what do you say, young Cormac?”

“I say it’s a bad bargain,” replied Cormac.

“Aye, maybe it is to you, but consider the alternatives,” said the O’Hooley chief.

Cormac stood staring the O’Hooley chief in the eyes, then slowly nodded.

“So you give your word?”

“Aye, I give my word.”

“The word of the eldest son is as the word of the father,” said Fergus.

“Aye, it is.”

“Very well then. You can be staying here tonight and leave in the morning. Come, join us for a drink.”

“I don’t feel like a drink tonight,” mumbled Cormac.

“Have it your own way then. I tell ya, you should have cause for rejoicing just to have your life.”

“Aye, maybe,” said Cormac.

“But you’ll sit down and eat with us; you’re in my camp and you will enjoy my hospitality.”

Cormac sat down in the place that Fergus pointed. He stared solemnly into the fire. One of the girls from the O’Hooley clann brought him a bowl with meat broth and another with meat. Cormac sipped the broth slowly.

Fergus, satisfied that the young man was properly

situated, shouted for the singing and merriment to continue; for during the whole conversation, everyone's eyes had been glued on the encounter between the chief and young Cormac. Seeing that the conversation had ended satisfactorily for them, they all returned to their singing and dancing and making merry.

Cormac turned to look at the members of the clann O'Hooley as they sat around the fire. As he was looking from one to the other, a girl—her back turned to him—walked over to Fergus and leaned down to whisper something in his ear. She then turned and looked at Cormac, and Cormac's heart almost stopped. For, as the glow of the fire illuminated her face, he beheld the most beautiful creature he had ever laid eyes on.

-2-
FIONA

Cormac rose with the sun the next morning, anxious to be getting home. He knew that by now his father and his men would be out looking for him, wondering what on earth had gone wrong, that he hadn't led the herds home the night before.

Cormac's father, Muirheartach, was a sensible and unexcitable man, qualities that were quite rare amongst the rest of his kinsmen—or his neighbors. While others would have been jumping to conclusions and blaming everything from goblins to leprechauns to the O'Hooley "bandits," Muirheartach would be looking for more reliable evidence before determining a judgment and plotting any retaliatory action.

Cormac knew his father well, but he didn't want to wait too long before returning, for the longer the wait, the more excitable the rest of his kinsfolk would become.

And so he headed off to the primitive corral where his animals had been penned overnight. As he walked over, he was joined by Brian. Now Brian wasn't much of an early riser, preferring to carouse long into the night and sleep late in the morning. But Fergus had made Brian responsible for Cormac while he was in his village, so Brian had dragged himself out of bed uncustomarily early—and a good thing too, he noted,

for already the young Cormac looked like he was up and on his way.

“We’re up bright and early,” said Brian as he hurried to catch up to Cormac.

“Well, I didn’t want to impose on your hospitality any longer than was necessary,” said Cormac, with a notably sarcastic tone in his voice.

“Aye, well I can be understanding that,” said Brian. “Your visit hasn’t been on the most amicable terms.”

“You could be saying that,” muttered Cormac.

“Well, I’ll be helping you to get on your way, then.”

“Humph,” grunted Cormac, as they reached the pen.

Cormac rounded up his flock and drove them out the gate, wistfully looking around to see the milking cow and the heifer tied up.

“Don’t worry, old Jenny,” said Cormac. “You’ll be coming back to your rightful home soon. You might consider drying up while you’re here.”

“Ah, Cormac! Such bitter words!” said Brian mockingly. “That kind of attitude will get ya nowhere in this world.”

“Perhaps I want to go nowhere in your world,” said Cormac.

“Ah, ya cheeky puck!” said Brian.

“Well, there’s gotta be some satisfaction in all this for me,” said Cormac.

“Well, all yer taunting’s not making ya any friends, that’s for sure.”

“Friend? Some friend you would turn out to be! Banging me on the head when I’m not lookin’!”

“It wasn’t me that banged ye on the head, it was m’ brother,” said Brian.

“As if ya didn’t want him to,” replied Cormac.

“Hmm,” mused Brian. “Well, maybe he was just trying to knock a little sense into you.”

“Humbug,” said Cormac, as he left.

“Hey, Cormac,” said Brian, as if in afterthought. “I

see you’re rather taken with my wee cousin, Fiona.”

“Your what?” said Cormac.

“My wee cousin Fiona,” repeated Brian, looking at him. “I saw ya staring at her last night.”

“Oh, you mean the little girl with the pretty face,” said Cormac.

“Aye,” said Brian.

“I hadn’t seen her before, and I was just lookin’ at her,” Cormac tried to say casually.

“She is an orphan now, the ward of my da. Her father and mother died when she was young, and so she was stayin’ with her aunt in the convent. But she is way too spirited for that kinda life. And by the way, ya didn’t stop *just lookin’* at her for the whole time she was there. And what is more, ya didn’t look at anybody else the whole night!”

Cormac turned and looked Brian in the eye. “Perhaps I did look at her a little long, but yer exaggerating things. I didn’t stare at her all night!”

“Hmmm,” said Brian. “Have it your way then.”

“So is yer cousin spoken for at all?” asked Cormac.

“Maybe,” said Brian, teasingly.

“And who by?” said Cormac, the inquisitiveness beginning to show even though he didn’t want it to.

“Oh, someone... But of course, ye needn’t worry yerself. Someone from the O’Hooley *clann* would not be to yer matrimonial liking, I’m sure.”

“Who’s talkin’ about matrimony?” said Cormac.

“Why, you are!” said Brian. “You’re the one who was asking if she was spoken for.”

“I was asking if she was spoken for...” Cormac couldn’t think of anything quite right to say. “Oh, never mind.”

“Oh, look,” said Brian. “Speak of the angels! Isn’t she a charmer?” He looked across to the huts about fifty paces away. For out through the door had stepped the beautiful Fiona.

Cormac turned to stare in the direction that he

saw Brian looking. Once again his eyes beheld the unearthly beauty that had captured his imagination earlier. The saffron yellow robes that Fiona was wearing clung to her lithe and nubile body as the light breeze blew the garment against her figure, and Cormac found himself staring stupefied in her direction.

“There ye go again!” said Brian. “Just staring, staring, staring!”

Cormac shook himself, and said, “I was not staring. I was just trying to make out who ye were looking at.”

Brian nodded his head. “Hmm, do ye suffer from blindness perhaps? ’Cause ye had to stare for a long time before ye apparently saw her. Well, Cormac, are ye gonna stand here all day, or are ye gonna be goin’?”

Cormac shook his head again, turned around and saw that Brian was grinning from ear to ear—obviously very amused.

“Stop grinnin’ at me, ye great bear!” he said.

“Oh, a great bear is it?” said Brian, feeling the satisfaction of having won this little round of jab and counter-jab.

“Well, I’ll be goin’,” said Cormac.

“Let me walk ye a ways.”

“No, thank you,” said Cormac, “I’ll find my own way.”

“Ye sure you wouldn’t like my comp’ny?” teased Brian.

“Quite sure. I’m sure there are others here who need yer comp’ny more. ... The pigs, perhaps!”

Brian smiled, and then broke out into a deep, hearty laugh. “Oh, Cormac, yer getting desperate now. Go on, be off with ya!”

Cormac herded his animals out of the pen and in the direction of his home. Several times he stopped to turn around, hoping to catch one more glimpse of Fiona. The first time she was there. The second time, she was gone.

Such a vision of loveliness, thought Cormac. And to be cursed as part of the O’Hooley clann! The poor child.

“Hai, hai!” Cormac yelled, as he prodded on his flock towards his home.

He was lost in thought, when he was suddenly startled. For out from behind a bush jumped none other than Fiona O’Hooley!

“What are ya doin’ here?” said Cormac, startled.

“I thought perhaps we could walk and talk a little on yer way,” said Fiona.

“And why would ya be wantin’ to talk to me?” asked Cormac.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Fiona. “When I saw ya there last night and I thought of the terrible bang that ya had on the back of yer head, I thought, ‘Maybe that’s the reason he spent the whole evening staring at me.’ Then when I went to sleep last night, I thought, ‘Hmm, maybe there’s another reason.’ So this mornin’ when I saw ya leavin’ I thought, ‘I’ll catch up to him and ask him.’”

Cormac became very flustered. It was one thing to exchange jabs and barbs with Brian O’Hooley, but quite another to talk to the girl he found so wonderfully attractive. So he walked along in silence for a bit, then suddenly he turned to Fiona and said, “I stared at you because you are the most beautiful, lovely woman I have ever seen in my life. There, now you know the reason.”

Fiona blushed a little. Then, with a naughty twinkle in her eye, she turned to Cormac. “I thought so,” she replied. Then she turned and ran off, in the direction of her home.

“Oh, my God!” said Cormac. “I’ve really made a fool of myself! Ah!” He kicked out at the grass ahead of him. “How could I be so stupid? I’m so stupid! Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid!” he shouted.

Cormac swung his javelin wildly at the tall grass

that lined the path he was leading his sheep along. A loud stream of self-deprecating expletives poured forth from his mouth. It was while he was in this self-obsessed and oblivious-to-anything-else frenzy that he was spied by his father and two of his kinsmen.

Muircheartach exchanged puzzled glances with the other two. As they stared down at Cormac, Muircheartach said in a low but plain voice, "My son has become a raving lunatic!"

Muircheartach looked down, in a mixture of pity and surprise.

"Ah, the poor lad! What a disturbed young man he is! Hoy, Cormac!" he cried.

The first two or three times that Muircheartach hailed, the words fell on deaf ears, for all Cormac could hear were the words of his own mouth calling himself every derogatory name he could recall. However, in a momentary pause, as his mind raced to find another slur with which he could label himself, the sound of his father's voice reached his ears.

Startled, Cormac looked up to see his father and the two other kinsmen not more than twenty paces away, looking down at him from a small hillock. Well, if Cormac was embarrassed before, he was now embarrassed fifty more times over. What a day this had been! He had made a fool of himself in front of pretty Fiona—that was bad enough! But now he'd obviously made an even greater fool of himself in front of his father and kin.

Cormac stared through his stupor at his father.

Muircheartach made his way quickly down the hill. "My son!" he cried. "What in God's name has gotten into ya? Have you been touched by the full moon?"

Cormac stood there, mouth gaping, not having a clue as to what on earth to reply to his father. "Speak to me, lad!" Muircheartach repeated. "Come on, speak to me." He reached over to the boy and, clasping both of his shoulders in his hands, stared deep into his

eyes.

"It's the wee people," said Diarmaid, one of Muircheartach's companions. "It's the wee people. I've seen it before. They sneak up on someone unsuspecting-like and cast their spells on him—and that's what he comes out like."

"It's not the wee people at all," said Turlough mac Domnall, the other companion. "He's seen a banshee and the ugliness of it has left him witless. I know it!"

"Will you two blithering idiots be quiet!" said Muircheartach. "Let the boy speak for himself. Now snap out of it, Cormac, and tell me what happened."

Cormac moved his lips but nothing came out.

"Cormac, what happened to you, and where is the milkin' cow and the heifer?"

"F-f-father," said Cormac. "Oh, I've had a bad day an' night of it!"

"That's obvious," said Muircheartach, half-relieved that at least the boy could speak. "Now speak up, man, and tell me what's going on."

"Ah, Father! The O'Hooleys—they bandits, them brigands, them hellions—snuck up on me, they did. Twenty men a-whoopin' and a-wailin'. While I withstood them, one of them snuck up behind me and banged me on the head, knocked me senseless on the ground. The next thing I know I waked up a-shackled as a prisoner in the O'Hooley fort!"

"The O'Hooleys!" said Muircheartach. "Why, that ol' bandit, Fergus! Wait till I get my hands on him!"

"It's worse yet, Father!" said Cormac. "They made me swear an oath."

"An oath?" said Muircheartach, staring deeply into Cormac's eyes. "And what type of oath would ye be a-swearin'?"

"Oh, Father!" said Cormac, casting his eyes down. "In exchange for my freedom and for the bulk of the herd, I've had to leave the milkin' cow and the heifer at the O'Hooleys, and I had to swear for ninety days

we wouldna try any retaliation, or try to get it back.”

“Ninety days!” said Muircheartach.

“Aye!” said Cormac. “I know it’s a disgrace, Father. But I had no choice. It was either that or they’d keep it all and keep me a prisoner there, and God knows what woulda’ happened if you’d a come a-lookin’ for me.”

“Why that ol’ bandit Fergus must be losin’ his touch!” shouted Muircheartach in surprise. “Only ninety days? Why, son, that’s a bargain for ya life. It could’ve taken us that long to get organized and figure out what to do. My goodness, I wonder why he only chose ninety days,” Muircheartach mused, stroking his chin. “There’s somethin’ fishy here, but I canna put my hand to it.

“Well, son, I should be rejoicin’. It’s only ninety days. We can survive for ninety days without the milkin’ cow. ’Tis true we could use the milk, but we’ve got the goats we can milk as well. And you got the rest of the flock back, and y’are safe and sound. You shouldn’ta need to be beratin’ yourself over losing that milkin’ cow for just ninety days. I know ye were probably very worried about it, thinkin’ that I would be angry with ye, but I’m not. Oh, Cormac! You needn’t have been so angry with yerself.”

“Oh, but Father...”

“No buts about it,” said Muircheartach. “Oh, I can see ya, torn up by all ya were goin’ through. But ya needn’t worry. I’m just so happy to have ya back.”

Cormac stopped for a minute and thought, his senses returning to him. *My dear father thinks I was a-wailin’ and making such a terrible fuss because I was concerned about the deal I made with Fergus O’Hooley. Then I need not tell him about Fiona, and the real reason I was kickin’ and swearin’ and carrying on.*

“Father, you’re not angry at me, then?” he asked.

“Come on, Cormac! I’m glad I have ya back in one piece. I be tellin’ ya, a person is much more important

than a milkin’ cow, and don’t ya be forgetting that. A lot of people go and have all sorts of squabbles and fights over things, losing their limbs and even losing their lives in the process. But I tell you this—a wee word of wisdom from someone who’s been around for a few years longer than some other clannsmen I’ve known—a human life is the most important thing. You never get them back again. Possessions ... well, they come and go.

“So there, you two old women,” said Muircheartach, turning to Turlough and Diarmaid, “making such a fuss about banshees and little people and ghosts and the whatnot. You see m’ son was just concerned because those bandit O’Hooleys stole from him and gave him a terrible night. He hasn’t lost his mind ’tall!”

“Aye, well,” said Diarmaid, “but I have seen it before! I have seen these people get touched by dark things in the night.”

“Aye!” said Turlough. “Like banshees!”

“No,” said Diarmaid. “By the little people ... the leprechauns!”

“Oh, would you two stop it!” said Muircheartach. “Bunch of old women. Come on. Let’s help Cormac get the herds back to the village. Turlough, go and tell the other searchers that we found m’ son, and tonight we’re gonna call a council and try to figure out what this rascal Fergus O’Hooley is up to in requiring a milk cow for ninety days. ... I wonder what the reason could be?”



That night, Muircheartach and all the adult men from Cormac’s clann gathered in an *oenach*, that is to say a solemn meeting, to decide what the next step should be. It had been an odd day for Cormac. The thing that had really bothered him, of course, was his embarrassment over the baring of his heart to Fiona, and her seemingly flippant handling of it. But to Muircheartach and the rest of the men, the reason

for Cormac's frenzied state when they had earlier come across him was that he had lost the milk cow to the O'Hooleys, and that he was upset and angry—and rightly so—about it.

Cormac had spent most of the rest of the day trying to find a place of solitude where he could collect his thoughts and figure out what to do next. But what with his mother fussing over him about the bang on his head, and his father coming in periodically to try and reassure him that he was not in trouble, and his younger brothers wanting to know every detail of what had happened, Cormac had not been able to find much privacy. He now found himself taking his place with the rest of the adult men around the fire.

Muirheartach's cousin, Conn, sat next to Muirheartach. He was a fine and able warrior, several years younger than Muirheartach, and it was acknowledged by all that when Muirheartach died—barring some unforeseen circumstance—Conn would assume the leadership of the tribe. He was the *tanist*.

Now the Irish, at this time, did not practice a hereditary succession to the leadership or kingship of a clann or kingdom. It was not the firstborn son of the chief or the king who would usually take on the leadership role. Rather, the elders would gather and choose the ablest leader from amongst the eligible members of the family. That way, a more seasoned ruler would take control upon the king's death, rather than the role falling upon an often young, untried and unproven eldest son. This system was called *tanistry*, and Conn was known by all as the *tanist*—the next in line to the leadership of the tribe.

It could well be that upon Conn's succession, Cormac might be chosen as the *tanist*. But that was not for now. There was a sincere respect between Muirheartach and Conn, and the two men spent much time together. Moreover, each had a deep regard for each other. Each respected the other's counsel,

but Conn knew that the last word on any matter belonged to Muirheartach; Muirheartach also knew that Conn's counsel was usually helpful and often valuable.

Muirheartach rose in the assembly. "You all here now know what happened to my son, and you all know that we are bound to take some sorta action. My son Cormac has sworn an oath that no retaliatory action shall be taken for ninety days, and we must honor that oath, for the oath of the son is as the oath of the father. But the question that begs for answers is why Fergus O'Hooley—that old fox—made the terms so lenient. There is somethin' more to this than meets the eye.

"Now hopefully we've got all the wisest heads here. Between your collected wisdom," Muirheartach said with a goodhearted smile on his lips, "we should be able to figure out what on earth is goin' on. I am open for any counsel any of you may have. If any man has ought to say, say on."

A murmuring and mumbling went around the circle of men, as they looked at each other, exchanging muttered comments between themselves.

Turlough mac Domnall stood up. "I am thankful to Muirheartach takin' me in to the clann after I was left homeless and clannless at the destruction of my tribe. So I speak here out of gratitude. I know that some of you might be scoffers, but I see sinister hands workin' here. I see the hands of the goblins and spirits, bringing chaos and disorder. For why else would Fergus O'Hooley—that fox—be so addled in his mind as to give such lenient terms?"

A round of mumbling, grunts of approval mixed with grunts of dissension, arose from the crowd of men.

Conn stood up. "While not meaning to mock the fine counsel of Turlough mac Domnall, I think perhaps the answer might be found in more earthly

means. We all know that the Ostmen invaders have attacked other tribes to the north, coming in their long ships, and rapin' and plunderin', killin' and enslavin'. I fear that Fergus has other plans, and I think the ninety-day keepin' of the milkin' cow was only a face-savin' device.

"You see, I dunna think he's tryin' to aggravate us that much, but that he's lookin' for possible allies to help him if indeed such an attack would happen near here. For we are told that these devils in their long ships are heavily armed, and care not for human life, that they worship gods terrible and hungry for blood sacrifice.

"Although the O'Hooleys have a reputation for being bandits and cutthroats themselves, Fergus is no fool. I willna be surprised if this raiding expedition that Brian O'Hooley led did not have the sanction of his father, and that once he returned to the camp, Fergus had to come up with some amiable compromise. Yes, I think Fergus O'Hooley is looking for allies."

"Allies?" mumbled the rest of the group. "Allies with the O'Hooleys?"

"Aye," said Conn, "allies."

"Well, it's a fine way to look for allies, stealing another's cattle!" someone chimed in.

"Aye," said Conn, "I think it was not as Fergus planned. Well, this is the only reasonable explanation I can think of—that he's not trying to antagonize us too much, but keep us peaceable for ninety days. He also knows that we'll be plannin' some sort of retaliation, and so we'll be ready for war of some sort. So he has us plannin' and preparin' to fight, and if anything happened, and a fleet of these long ships would come sailing up the river here, then he can quickly come and ask us to unite with him in common cause against them.

"I dunna like Fergus O'Hooley, and I dunna like

O'Hooleys in general, but from what I've heard, the O'Hooleys are angels compared to these marauders." With that, Conn sat down.

All eyes now turned to Muirheartach. "'Tis a good argument you put forward, Conn, one that needs deep reflection. For it is one thing to make uncommon gestures, and it is another thing to rightly know what brings him to make them. Fergus O'Hooley is a proud man, and perhaps his pride prevented him from talking so forthrightly to us. And so he sends his message in a puzzlin' way.

"I propose that myself and Conn and Cormac and the priest Finian go tomorrow to the fort of the O'Hooleys to speak of these things. Do I have the assent of all of you?"

"Aye!" came the united reply.

"But only the four of you?" said Diarmaid. "Surely that's not wise! For if they set upon ya, you would not be able to defend yourselves."

"I dunna think we have to worry about that, Diarmaid. If Fergus was in the mood for killin', Cormac wouldna be sittin' beside us tonight. Nah, I think we need not fear the sword of Fergus O'Hooley. I fear that worse, nastier and more vicious enemies lie just beyond our borders."

THE MEETING

The sun had barely risen when the four men were on their way to O’Hooley territory. To pass the time, Muirheartach started off singing a well-known ballad. Muirheartach was an unusual personality for a minor king, in that he also fancied himself as somewhat of a bard. Normally a king would have his own bard, but Muirheartach had dispensed with that, thinking that he could sing and write songs as well as any traveling bard that he knew.

So Muirheartach marched along singing, at the top of his voice, a ballad based on the ancient tale of the Cattle Raid of Cooley. Now there’s no time to get into detail here about what the Cattle Raid of Cooley was, but suffice it to say that Ireland and the Irish are full of stories—great, fanciful stories, of all sorts and types of mythological creatures and supernatural beings, strong warriors and noble kings, and beautiful damsels—but also of dark and sinister forces that often come very near to wiping out the good.

Muirheartach was still quite perplexed about all that was going on, and what exactly Fergus O’Hooley was thinking. He wasn’t quite sure if Conn’s conclusions were right, but old Fergus was up to something.

Muirheartach had often found that singing a good

old song helped to clear his mind of his present worries and perplexities, and that afterwards, some of these things seemed to come a little clearer. And so he sang away, in his deep, baritone voice, at the top of his lungs as he marched on. Conn followed him, followed by Cormac, who in turn was followed by Finian, the priest.

Now this Finian the priest was an interesting character, but men of his sort were not uncommon in this wonderful land of Ireland. Finian was a hermit monk who lived most of his time in seclusion, in a small hut several leagues away from Muirheartach's home. It was in a lonely and wild spot, high on a crag. He was a member of the Ui Niell clann, the dominant clann of the north of Ireland. Moreover, he was specifically related to the family of the Ard Righ, the high king. Finian had chosen the hermit's way of life after being involved in a quarrel with a friend and kinsman over who should marry the pretty daughter of one of the more important men of his clann. The two had fought, and Finian had slain his opponent. Although the fight had been judged fair, Finian had been overcome with the remorse of the deed, and had sworn himself to the life of a monk, as penance for his act. And the poor girl? Well, she had to wait several more years to find someone brave enough to marry her. The Irish were a superstitious lot, and the bad luck that had fallen upon her first prospective husbands tended to squelch the ardor of future suitors.

Since settling on Muirheartach's land, Finian would often not be seen for months on end, as he went through periods of prolonged fasting and contemplation. But the recent events had taken place at a time when he was being more active in the community. Muirheartach had been happy to see him at the oenach, and had decided on taking him along for this parley with Fergus O'Hooley, for it would

serve three purposes:

One, in bringing Finian he could make use of the good offices of the Church.

Two, Finian being a relative of the high king would make Fergus O'Hooley think twice about doing any harm to the party.

And three, Finian had an uncanny way of seeing the truth behind any pretense that someone was putting up. Muirheartach wanted Finian to hear what O'Hooley had to say, so that he could later question the priest about what he felt was really behind the whole scheme.

Finian was a veritable giant of a man who stood nearly a head taller than most. Had he not taken on the gentle nature of a monk, he would probably have been the most formidable warrior in all of Ireland. Even though his times of prolonged fasting and meditation had caused him to lose some of his bulk, the hard and vigorous life that he led made him sinewy and muscular. He was an impressive-looking sight—with his head shaved from ear to ear in the tonsure of the Irish Church and with the rest of his hair flowing long down his back.

Muirheartach was coming to the end of his song. One of Muirheartach's songs could last for an hour or more, as had this one, so they had by now traveled several miles past the place where Cormac had first run into such mischief with the O'Hooleys. Soon they were getting into the territory claimed by the O'Hooleys. Muirheartach knew that Fergus probably had already heard he was coming. That was another reason why he had sung so loudly: He didn't want it to be any secret that he was coming to visit.

Muirheartach stopped and turned to Conn. "Have you seen anything yet? I haven't, but I do swear, I can smell O'Hooleys all around us!"

Conn nodded his head. "Aye, they've been watchin' us. Won't be long now till we see them comin' down

the way to meet us and ask us what we be doin'."

"Aye," said Muirheartach. "Well, when you've got a perplexity, you need to get it cleared up, and I'm not gonna sit back at home mullin' over in my mind what's goin' on. We've gotta get this sorted out. Cormac, lad, are ye bein' well?"

"Aye, Father," said Cormac.

"How's that bang on yer head? You feeling all right now?"

"It still aches, Father," said Cormac, ruefully rubbing the spot.

"Well, maybe you'll get a chance to hit some O'Hooley over the head with somethin' soon, but right now let's mind our manners as we go in. We came to find out what's goin' on."

"Aye, Father, but to tell you the truth, I wasn't itchin' to get back to the O'Hooley fort for some time, after my last experience there."

"Aye, son, but chin up. We need to go in holdin' our heads high. He's lookin' for a favor from us, I think."

"Aye, Father," Cormac replied.

"Well, Father Finian, do ye have any thoughts for us?"

"No, Muirheartach," said Finian in his deep and raspy voice as he stretched out his arm, pointing in the direction ahead, "though I think that we shall soon be finding out."

Muirheartach turned around and saw a party of twenty-odd men approaching through the low-lying mist that had settled across the vale that they were crossing. He could barely make out Brian O'Hooley in the center of them. "Well," said Muirheartach, "if you see twenty of them, you know there's twice that number somewhere around, hiding amongst the bushes. Here's the reception party, so we'd best get on with it."

"Aye," the three others replied in unison.

Muirheartach, staff in hand, marched on in the direction of the approaching figures.

Nearing up to ten paces from Brian O'Hooley, Muirheartach stopped, planted his staff firmly in the ground, and looked Brian O'Hooley in the eye. There was silence between the two men.

After a minute or two, Brian spoke. "Well, Muirheartach, what brings ye here? And why are ye lookin' at me like that?"

"I'm lookin' at the man who needed twenty companions to capture my son and steal my herd."

"Ah, Muirheartach, he was grazin' on our land!"

"On your land?" said Muirheartach.

"We have claimed all the land up until the oak grove."

"To the oak grove? What is this! That land's been common territory. No man's claimed it up till now."

"Well, we have now," said the O'Hooley scion.

"And by what right and authority do ya claim it?"

"By ancient and true claim. This was O'Hooley land before it was anyone else's."

"Ah, rubbish!" said Muirheartach. "No family can claim living on this land any longer than my clann, and that goes for you thievin' O'Hooleys as well!"

"Don't go callin' us names, now, Muirheartach! We can trace our genealogy all the way back to Finn McCool¹."

"Ooooh! Finn McCool is it now? Next you'll be tellin' me you traced it all the way back to Adam! I'm sure with your father's inventiveness, that wouldn't be too hard."

"Now don't ye be saying derogatory things about my honorable father!" said Brian.

"And where is yer father? He isn't comin' to see me?"

¹ *Finn McCool* was a mythical Irish hero, the stories of his exploits being much loved by all Irishmen.

“My father has not been as well as he used to be. He doesn’t venture out much these days.”

“Well, that’s nay surprising,” said Muirheartach. “Probably suffering from the wounds received on his many thievin’ raids.”

“Now listen here, Muirheartach,” said Brian, lowering his eyebrows and glowering, “I’ll be getting no more insults on my father.”

“Humph,” Muirheartach grunted. “Very well, but I came here to talk to yer da.”

“What about?”

“I’ll tell yer father about that,” said Muirheartach.

Brian stood there, sizing up the older man. “Bah! Alright, come talk to my da, then.”

With that, Brian swung around and Muirheartach fell into step behind him, followed by his three companions. The rest of Brian’s men fanned out in loose formation and walked behind them.

Brian and Muirheartach didn’t talk again until they reached the fort of the O’Hooleys, which like that of Muirheartach’s clann, ringed the top of a hill.

Fergus O’Hooley was sitting on a wooden bench outside of his hut. He rose to his feet as Brian and Muirheartach came up to him.

“Muirheartach mac Rory,” said Fergus, looking at Muirheartach. “And to what do I owe the pleasure of yer company in my camp?”

“I’ve come to talk,” said Muirheartach. “I’ve come to talk about what you did to my son.”

“You got him back in one piece,” said Fergus.

“Aye, no thanks to you,” said Muirheartach.

“Och, Muirheartach!” said Fergus. “I think it’s a lot of thanks to me. The young rapscaillon was grazin’ his herds on our land!”

“Yer son here has been tellin’ me about this new claim to common land,” said Muirheartach.

“It’s not a new claim, we’re just reviving an old one,” said Fergus.

“Enough of this red-herring business!” said Muirheartach. “I want to talk to ye, Fergus, man to man, and find out what is really going on.”

Fergus looked through his one good eye at Muirheartach. “I want my son here, and Malacy m’ tanist,” he said.

“Aye,” Muirheartach agreed. “I want Conn and Cormac, and the good Finian to be here as well.”

“Very well,” said Fergus. “Come, let us sit around the fire. Ah!” he groaned, as he turned. “I’m not as young as I used to be.”

“None of us are,” said Muirheartach.

“Ah, Muirheartach, I think my days of usefulness are comin’ to an end,” said Fergus.

“Yer days of usefulness?” said Muirheartach, raising one eyebrow.

“Oh, don’t ye go givin’ me that self-righteous look now,” grumbled Fergus at Muirheartach. “I know we don’t get to see eye to eye on many things, but we’ve lived peaceable for many years now.”

“Until you knocked my son on the head!” said Muirheartach.

“That was unfortunate,” said Fergus, scowling a little at Brian. “It was not planned—at least not by me.”

Brian looked embarrassed.

“Humph,” grunted Muirheartach. “We suspected there was somethin’ more to this.”

“Aye,” said Fergus, “there *is* more to this.” He pulled his cloak around him tighter, and stared into the fire. “Things are changing, Muirheartach,” he said quietly. “I realize we’ll not be able to be the same from here on in.”

Muirheartach looked quizzically at Fergus, unprepared for this quick philosophical turn in Fergus’ conversation. “You’ve not been one to worry about your way of life before, Fergus O’Hooley.”

“No,” said Fergus. “I know I have a reputation for

being more opportunistic in my way, and—let us say—ingenious with my husbandry.”

Muircheartach looked physically shocked, never imagining that he'd ever hear Fergus talking in such a way. “What's come over ya, man?” he asked. “If I didn't see you with my own eyes, I'd be wonderin' if this was Fergus O'Hooley speaking!”

“It's me, Muircheartach,” said Fergus, looking at Muircheartach with a sadness in his eyes, “and there's a plague comin' to our country. A plague of barbarous murderers—foreigners!”

“The Ostmen,” said Muircheartach slowly.

“Aye,” said Fergus, “coming in greater numbers than we can handle.”

“We've heard about the dreadful deeds they've done to our monasteries.”

“Aye,” said Fergus. “I received word two days ago that the monastery at Trim had been sacked.”

“My God! That's about two days' march from here!”

“Aye,” said Fergus, “and we don't know if they're comin' here or not. There's no holy house to raid an' burn an' steal from around here—but you can never tell! These Ostmen are vicious creatures. They kill, they maim, they rape and they enslave. Then this morning I was brought the news that...”—at this, Fergus O'Hooley broke out crying.

Brian raised his hand to comfort his father, but Fergus shook it off and controlled himself. “They killed my sister—raped her first, then left her body hangin' over the high cross.” Fergus broke down again with his head between his hands. “She was so kind!” he sobbed. “So kind she didna deserve to die that way!”

Brigid, Fergus's younger sister, had become a nun after her husband had died. She had become well known as a pious and charitable woman—traits that were not commonly associated with O'Hooleys—and eventually had become abbess of her community just a mile or two from Trim. It was her that Fiona had

stayed with at the convent, though Fiona had departed from there only days before all this had happened.

“God's tooth!” exclaimed Muircheartach. “God's tooth!” he said again, louder. “What animals are these?”

Fergus looked at Muircheartach. “I dinna know, but I fear they are more powerful than we are. I fear for the safety of my people. I fear for the safety of yours. I never thought I would care much about the other clanns, but I wouldna wish these hellions on anyone.”

“So what do we do?”

“Muircheartach mac Rory,” said Fergus, “you are an honorable man, and a noble warrior. I propose that if it comes down to battle with these heathens, you will lead your clann and mine together in the fight.”

Brian opened his mouth to protest.

“Hush, Brian,” said Fergus, putting out his hand to still him. “I mean this as no affront to you, my son. But you have not been battle-hardened as Muircheartach has. And Malacy, you are not a man of war. But between our two clanns, we can put a hundred or more fighting men in the field, and we need the most experienced leader. I am too old—although, by God, if one of them Ostmen devils comes near me, I will use what strength I have to run him through and send him to his hell! But Muircheartach, will ya do it? I pledge my men to fight alongside yours. Will you lead them?”

Muircheartach was completely stunned now. He looked at Conn.

“If it comes down to it, Muircheartach,” Conn said, “we'll need you to lead us.”

“But,” questioned Muircheartach, “how many men does this raiding party have?”

“I fear many more than ours,” said Fergus. “There were several ships. We canna fight them like we've

always done, Muircheartach. We need a different tactic.”

“But it is only honorable,” said Muircheartach, “to stand and fight like men!”

“Honorable,” said Fergus, “but hopeless. They are heavily armed, and wear armor and helmets—things which we spurn, but which nevertheless help them to win. We need to fight them with cunning.”

“Then why did you ask me to lead us?” said Muircheartach.

“Because you’re smart, man! And you know that if we can’t beat them one way, we have to figure out how we can.”

Muircheartach now turned and looked at Finian. “What say you, Father?”

Finian remained silent for several minutes. It was obvious that a great inner turmoil was at work inside this saintly man’s mind. Finally, in a low but deliberate voice, he spoke, “God knows I don’t like killin’! I’ve tried these many years to understand why I killed my kinsman and friend, and the reason still fails me. God dinna like killin’, but we canna stand around and be slaughtered either when these devils intend to fight us. Your good sister ... I knew her well ... I stayed at her convent at times and she cared and tended to us in a most charitable way. By the grace of God, I won’t stand by and let what happened to her happen to any other! You can be sure of that.”



-4-
THE PRIEST

Finian slowly got to his feet. “If you will excuse me, I must go and walk. What I have heard today has disturbed me greatly. Emotions have welled up inside of me that I have not felt in years. I have tried so hard to dispel anger and hate, and let the glorious love and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ flush out the blackness that once inhabited my heart, replacing it with His mercy. Yet, I am afeared that all my years of tryin’ have, in this one moment, been washed away.

“I have been told by His Holy Script that I should love my enemies, and the hand that would strike me on the right cheek, I should turn to it the left. I am afeared that all my resolve has well-nigh vanished. I feel a loathing and hatred has risen in my heart. I must go and find some solitary place where I can commune with my God and find out what it is that I am supposed to do.”

With that, the priest walked dejectedly out of the fort. Fergus had stopped crying to stare in astonishment at the priest.

Muircheartach, too, had been shocked into silence by the force of the anguished words of the monk he looked to as a friend and respected as a spiritual seer.

Conn, Malacy, Cormac and Brian remained silent in respect of the elders’ silence.

Presently, Fergus turned to Muirheartach. “What say you, Muirheartach mac Rory? Will you take up this challenge?”

Muirheartach turned and gazed into the fire that burned in the center of the small gathering, as though hoping to see in it some sign as to what he should do.

After a strained silence, Muirheartach turned to Fergus and nodded his head.

“Good then! It is done!” exclaimed Fergus. “Now you’ll be accepting some hospitality from us. Stay for the midday meal, and after that you can be making your return.”

“Thank you for your hospitality,” said Muirheartach, in a subdued tone. “Today I came here with a great perplexity, and now I will leave in a great consternation. O, sons of Ireland, what have we done to bring on us this hellish terror?”

Fergus offered no reply, but shook his head sadly.

Muirheartach turned to Conn and said, “Come, we have things to talk about.”

“Aye, Muirheartach, and plans to make,” replied Conn.

“Cormac, can you find something to do over the next wee while until we eat? Conn and I have much to talk about. There are many plans to be made.”

Cormac turned and wandered out of the fort, not really sure what he was going to do. He had taken no part in the conversation between the two clann heads, but he had observed with great interest the gravity with which the two men had reached their decisions.

But Cormac himself, far from feeling the gravity of his elders, felt excited at the prospect of battle. The thought of sitting in on the long deliberations of it bored him, though, and he was glad not to have to take part in those. As most young Irishmen of those days, to him the thought of battle and fighting was an exciting thing, a chance to perform noble deeds and exploits of valor. It remained to older men who

had seen more conflict and experienced the pain of seeing comrades-in-arms die or horribly maimed, of seeing widowed mothers and fatherless children become an all-too-common sight, of seeing these and the other horrors that war brings, to be more tempered in their approach to the news of impending conflict.

Cormac had been horrified at hearing of the barbarity of these brutish Ostmen devils. Surely if he met one, he thought, he would take his javelin and run the devil through and send him to Hell. Was he not strong? Was he not agile? Had he not faced up to the pack of O’Hooleys? He was brave!

“I am ready to do battle with these heathen,” he said aloud to himself. “By the Lord God’s grace we will slaughter them. They will come at us and we will send them fleeing to their long ships.”

“Brave words for one so young and untried,” said a voice from behind him. Cormac whirled around to see Fiona standing about ten paces away.

“Oh!” said Cormac, surprised. “It’s you again.” His face flushed.

Fiona looked down awkwardly. “Aye, it is me again. And who would you be turning on, making them flee? It wouldna be O’Hooleys, would it?”

“No, of course not,” said Cormac, flustered. “I’m talking about devils far worse than O’Hooleys.”

“Far worse than O’Hooleys?” said Fiona indignantly. “Why, you stuck-up...”

“I’m sorry,” interrupted Cormac. “I’m hotheaded today. I’ve just been in counsel with my father and your chief. The Ostmen are raiding near here, and the fear is they will come this way. So we must be ready to fight them.”

“The Ostmen...” said Fiona, a shiver going down her back. “I have heard of them and the evil that they do.”

“Aye,” said Cormac, realizing from her answer that she did not know yet of her aunt’s cruel death. “They

are cruel and heartless savages, who worship gods of war and thunder. We must send them to their death.”

“But they are strong,” said Fiona. “Too strong for a boy like yourself, I fear.”

“I am not a boy,” said Cormac. “I am a man! And I stand at my father’s right side.”

“Aye,” said Fiona sadly, “and I fear you will fall by his right side too.”

“I will not fall,” said Cormac. “We will meet these devils and we will fight them, and we will inflict great pain and slaughter on them and send them packing, back to their devil ships.”

“I heard you sayin’ that speech before,” said Fiona.

“Aye, and it’s the truth,” said Cormac.

“Perhaps,” said Fiona wistfully, “but I hear these are not ordinary men, and they fight not in ordinary ways. No, I fear for you, and I fear for all the lives of our menfolk. I fear for my own safety, too, and that of all of my family.”

Fiona started to cry.

Cormac walked over and put his arms around her. “Don’t cry, child, don’t cry. Stop, you blubbering lass!”

Fiona hugged him tightly, and Cormac was overcome with a warm sensation as the young woman nestled in his arms. Fiona’s weakness made Cormac feel strong.

Suddenly, the two young people heard a dreadful wailing coming not far from where they stood.

Fiona and Cormac looked at each other, startled.

“Shhhh,” said Cormac, raising his finger to his lips. Then he whispered, “Come!” He grabbed Fiona’s hand and darted into the bushes.

“What is it?” asked Fiona anxiously.

“I dunna know,” said Cormac. “I havna heard such a thing in my life.”

“It sounds eerie, like I imagine a ghost or a banshee to sound.”

“Aye,” said Cormac, “but I fear that it is not a ghost

but a man.”

“What should we do?” said Fiona.

“Come, we need to find out what it is.”

“Oh, no, I’m scared!”

“Don’t be scared, girl. I’ll be protecting you.”

Fiona looked apprehensively at Cormac.

“Come on, girl! Buck up! Have some courage.”

Cormac stealthily made his way in the direction of the wailing. Fiona crept closely behind him.

After a few minutes, they came to the edge of a clearing in the woods. There knelt Finian. He looked a mess. His clothes had been rent, his head bloodied from banging on the ground, and he was now covered in dust. He held out his arms, crying and crying.

“The priest has gone mad,” whispered Fiona.

“Shhh,” said Cormac. “He is grieving.”

“Grieving over who?” asked Fiona.

“I think over himself,” said Cormac.

The wailing and sobbing continued. Huge tears dripped down the man’s face and mingled with blood that oozed from his battered forehead.

“O God! O God! O God!” cried the man. “Oh sweet and holy Jesus, why, why, why do I have these wicked feelings in my heart again? I’ve tried so hard to have love, and now I have hate. I’ve tried so hard to don mercy, and now I feel vengeance in me.

“God almighty, blessed Jesus, please help me. What do I do? What do I do?” Then his speech faded into sobs and crying and wailing again.

Cormac and Fiona stared, mesmerized at the sight. Then the miracle happened. The two watched as first Finian lifted up his head, seeming to look at something. He then fell back, his hand above his face as though shielding himself from a great light. The two youngsters saw nothing, although Finian certainly did.

“What is it that You want? What is it that You want to tell me?” said Finian.

The two then heard a low whistling and felt a warm wind blowing through the trees.

“But I have failed! I have failed!” cried Finian. Then the wind blew again. Still the two young people heard no words—just the whistling of the wind.

“I am unworthy!” cried Finian. “I am unworthy!”

Once more the sound of rushing wind filled the air. “Yes, Lord! Yes, Lord! O my Lord, thank You! Thank You for visiting Your humble servant!” cried Finian. “I will do as You have commanded.”

Then there fell a tranquil stillness on the scene, a serenity and peace that could almost be reached out and touched. The two young people crouched still in the underbrush, their mouths agape. Obviously, Finian had been talking to some supernatural being, and from his words they guessed that he had been talking to the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

Finian now knelt, his hands clasped in prayer, and Cormac and Fiona watched the tears flow down the big man’s face. But these were not now tears of anguish, but of joy and happiness. The two dared not move, for they did not want to risk breaking the spell of rapture that was now surrounding dear Finian.

After what seemed like an eternity, Finian got to his feet and left in the direction of the O’Hooley fort. The two crouched low, as he passed not more than five paces from where they were hiding.

When the giant of a man had walked past them about twenty paces, his voice boomed out, “You two can come out now!”

Finian didn’t stop, though, but kept on walking. Fiona and Cormac lay there, stupefied.

“How did he know we were here?” whispered Fiona.

“I don’t know,” said Cormac. “But any man who talks to God, by God, what doesn’t he know?”

“Aye!” agreed Fiona. “I think we’d best be going.”

The two scurried back to the fort. They arrived

just as the midday meal was being served.

“Where have you two been?” asked Brian, as Cormac and Fiona walked into the camp together.

“Uh ... we ... ahh ... we bumped into each other and decided to walk together,” said Cormac, half-truthfully.

“Hmm,” said Brian. “A fortuitous bump, I think.”

Fiona blushed and ran off in the direction of her hut.

“You would not be thinking of more serious intentions towards my cousin, would you now, Cormac?” said Brian, somewhat jokingly.

Cormac flushed.

“Oh, my goodness, but you’re getting all red in the face there.”

“Oh, stop it, Brian,” said Cormac. “If we’re gonna be goin’ into battle together, let’s not now be fightin’ between ourselves.”

“Och! Stop it, Cormac. I’m only joking.”

“Well, I don’t like to be joked at,” replied Cormac.

“Oooh, touchy, touchy, touchy!” said Brian. Then he turned away and went to get a bowl of the mutton stew that was being served in the central area of the camp. Cormac followed after him, got his meal and sat down.

Everyone was already eating when Finian walked into the camp. As he marched in, all eyes turned towards him. His clothes remained ripped, but he had taken pains to wash the mud, dirt and blood from his face and forehead. He looked composed and serene, and an inexplicable glow seemed to radiate from his face. It was noticeable to everyone.

“I’ll have a plate of that stew, if I may,” said the priest.

“Aye, Father,” said the astonished woman who was serving. “But I did not think ye ate at midday.”

“Well, I am today and will be from now on. For I’m gonna need every ounce of strength I have.” Taking

his plate and sop, he walked over to where Fergus and Muirheartach sat.

“Well, Finian, did you make peace with your God?” inquired Muirheartach.

“Aye, and such a peace it is. For after these many years, I have had a visitation. A holy messenger has come, and now I have a mission and a message.”

“Come on, man,” said Muirheartach impatiently. “Tell us what it is.”

“All in good time. First, I’m going to eat my meal, and then I’m going to pray some more. But for now let it be known that the Lord Jesus is in control, and His hand is upon us, and He will work the miracle. For it must needs be that through terrible tribulation we all shall come. But the victory is ours. The victory is ours!”

-5- AMBUSH

Recent events now changed forever the lives of the two formerly feuding clans.

Fergus O’Hooley seemed to lose his zest for life after the death of his sainted sister. Although it was not the custom, the leadership of the O’Hooley clann had fallen on the shoulders of his son, Brian. Normally the leadership of the clann would have been bestowed on the next most eligible male, which was Fergus’ cousin, Malachy, who until that time had been the tanist. But Malachy no longer had the inclination to be the leader of the clann. So he had deferred, and Brian—though still a young man and untested in the ways of leadership—had been designated the tanist.

Although Fergus was still the ri and nominal head, the day-to-day running of the clann was Brian’s responsibility, with his father acting as his counselor. This had changed Brian considerably from the happy-go-lucky, carefree and unrestrained brigand that he had been. He was now a more serious and sober soul.

So it was that one day Muirheartach talked to Brian and Fergus together about the growing friendship that existed between Fiona and Cormac. Both sides saw the benefit of these two being wed—the date of their wedding was yet to be determined according to what events would transpire in the

months to come.

Meantime, Muirheartach, Conn and Brian had rehearsed possible scenarios of how they would deal with the Ostmen invaders. Yet it wasn't a natural thing for the O'Hooleys and Muirheartach's clann to become integrated into a fighting force, because there was a mutual distrust, which some might even have called hatred that existed between them. It took some firm discipline on the part of the clann chiefs to keep their quarrelsome warriors in line.

After one altercation between two hot-tempered members of the clans, Muirheartach spent an hour or more berating the two in front of all the other clansmen, taking the opportunity to strongly make the point that now was not the time for quarrels and squabbles between the clans, but a time to unite against the common foe. Then Muirheartach told the men most solemnly that if any more of these altercations would arise amongst their ranks, the troublemakers would be stripped of all their property and chattels and banished, sent forth alone to fend for themselves. Such was the seriousness of the task that lay before them.

One day a family of refugees that had escaped the Ostmen slaughter and plunder of their small farm wandered into Muirheartach's fort seeking refuge. From them, Muirheartach learnt of the Ostmen's intentions of traveling further up the river in search of plunder.

That night, in counsel with the O'Hooleys, Muirheartach planned their attack. It would require the cooperation of the abbot of a small monastery that was in the path of the Ostmen raid. As the abbot was a relative—albeit distant—Muirheartach was more than sure that he could enlist him in the scheme. Muirheartach reckoned that the Ostmen would not tarry long before they ventured forth again, so he had the clans' warriors prepare to leave early the next

morning. It would take them a day-and-a-half's march to reach the monastery.

Before leaving on the march, Cormac, now for the first time amongst the ranks of warriors marching off to battle, bid farewell to Fiona. Cormac thought hard for the words to say, but found himself unable to speak as he looked longingly into Fiona's eyes.

Fiona bravely put on a smile, but inside she felt like crying.

"Come back to me, Cormac," she whispered in his ear as she hugged him tight. "I will pray for you every day and all through the day. May God bring you safely back."

Cormac nodded, fighting back tears himself. With some difficulty he tore himself away and joined the ranks of the troops.

Muirheartach stood at the side watching the men march by—brave hearts all of them, going into uncertain battle against the enemy—an enemy who had proven to be stronger than several other clans who had stood up to fight them. *Would these brave souls, Muirheartach pondered, be able to stand against the fury of the Ostmen?* The question hung over his head for the rest of the day. But he knew that he could not in any way show a lack of fortitude or a lack of belief in the ability of his men to come forth victorious. The leader must always show confidence and faith in his men to win, for if he did not have it, neither would his troops.

After the last man had passed, Muirheartach ran to the front of the line to join Conn and Brian O'Hooley. "Well, Conn," he said, "I think it's time for a song." And with that Muirheartach launched once again into one of his long and famous ballads. The rest of the men joined in with him, the song bringing courage to their hearts as they marched on.



They reached their destination as planned, and

after some pleasantries, Muirheartach explained the purpose of their arrival to his kinsman the abbot. The abbot was not such a man of peace as might have been expected from a man of the cloth. In those days, it was not unusual in Ireland for an abbot to be married and to be more a man of the world than someone dedicated to the ways of a cloistered monk. It took little persuasion for the abbot to let them plan their attack, but it did take some time before he consented to what would be his and his monks' role in the battle.



The sleek ship knifed through the waters of the slow-moving river. Standing at the very front of the boat, with one hand resting on the carved wooden dragonhead that decorated the prow and the other shading his eyes from the midday sun, the Ostmen commander, Olaf Svensson, scanned the landscape. On either side of the river the land arose gently, a mixture of woods and pastureland.

The keen-eyed Norseman was on the lookout for anything that would seem worth plundering before having to rejoin the nearby larger force of Vikings under his elder brother's command. He glanced back and saw the twenty-eight crewmen pulling hard on the oars, their bare and ruddy backs shining from the perspiration of their toil.

At the stern of the ship, the helmsman deftly moved the steering oar back and forth, keeping the ship in the dead center of the river. Two other ships followed in single-file.

The Norse leader had heard there were rich monasteries situated along the river, homes of those cursed priests of the Christian religion that he so despised. He derived great satisfaction from stealing their gold and silver and anything else of value, and then burning what was left, killing the monks and nuns—or better yet, capturing and enslaving those

who seemed that they would return him a profit in the slave markets of his homeland. And all this he did for the glory of Woden, the Norse god of war, a god who reveled in the killing and slaughter, and who would welcome him to the halls of Valhalla if he were to die fighting in his name.

This was a god worth fighting for and worth living for—not this meek Christian god who turned the men into weaklings and compelled the women to remain virgins. Being a man of blood, Olaf found such a waste of warriors and wenches abhorrent.

“Pull harder!” he yelled at the straining oarsmen. “You murderous pack of pirates,” he called out, “pull, for we have killing ahead of us today.”

He left his post at the end of the boat and marched up and down the narrow space in between the rowers. “Look at you, you merry slaughterers,” he said with a laugh. “Today each of you will get to send some of these weak-kneed Christians to their deserved graves. Pull, for the day is far spent. We should have found our prey by now. Pull, you warriors of Woden! Smell the blood of your enemies in the air, for today we will kill and loot, and tonight we will feast and drink and bed Irish widows whose husbands we have killed but an hour before.”

He lifted up his head and roared with laughter, then abruptly stopped, turned and made his way back to his position at the bow.

Turning a curve in the river, his keen eyes spotted a cluster of buildings at the top of a hill. “Aha,” he yelled, “we’ve found it.”

He turned and waved at the helmsman, who leaned into the steering oar to turn the boat towards the shore. The other boats had seen the signal from the first, and they were also heaving, ready to beach on the low-lying banks of the river.

The rowers made three or four hard pulls, and then lifted their oars high as the boat glided into the shore.

The flat bottom and shallow helm made it easy for the bow to slide easily onto the shore and hold fast.

The rowers stowed their oars, grabbed their shields and weapons and jumped overboard. Soon the whole war party was gathered. Leaving one or two men to guard each ship, the Vikings started up the hill.

The Viking commander led the way. Though not overly tall, he was still an imposing figure. He wore a short-sleeved shirt of chain mail over a dark red tunic. His legs were covered in sheep's fleece tied on with bands of leather. He wore boots of lambskin.

In his left hand he carried a round wooden shield with a metal conical boss in the center that had a dragon's head roughly engraved on it, and in his right hand he carried a battleaxe. On the top of his head he wore a round, pointed helmet. His long blond hair, tied in a single fat and tangled braid, bounced up and down on his back as he jogged.

His beard was mixed blond and gray, and forked in the middle. His eyes looked more like slits on his weather-beaten face, as they had grown used to squinting against the sun on his many long sea voyages, and they were crowned by heavy, bushy eyebrows. His men jogged after him in a long, irregular "V" formation.

On either side of the meadow that sloped down from the monastery to the river were woodlands. Even from a distance, the shapes of the monks working in the fields and performing other labor in the monastery grounds could easily be distinguished. It seemed that the arrival of the Ostmen boats had not even been noticed. The Vikings were confident that this was going to be easy pickings.

They were halfway up the hill and it still seemed to Olaf that the people at the top of the hill had not yet noticed them coming.

Funny, he thought. *It's almost as if they're ignoring us.* The awful truth suddenly dawned on him.

Frantically, he started to yell the words, "It's a trap!"—but they were cut short in a horrible gurgle as the first wave of arrows hit—one of them landing in the leader's neck. Blood spurted from both the wound and his mouth.

More arrows flew from the woods on the left side. The Vikings turned, screaming, and charged the woods in the direction where their antagonists fired from.

Already ten or twelve men of their party were lying on the ground, dead or dying. But the Vikings were not a timid lot. Rallying around one of the other senior warriors, they charged, only to see the attackers melt into the woods.

Then another volley of arrows, this time from the woods on the other side, flew through the air, striking many of their targets in the back.

"To the ships! To the ships!" came the cry.

Those that were left turned to flee, only to find they were blocked now by a double line of one hundred or more Celtic warriors, their faces, arms and legs decorated in blue paint.

The Vikings re-formed their ranks and rushed down the hill. The Irish held rank till the last minute, and then split down the middle, each flank wheeling to the side. The Vikings, carried by their momentum, soon found themselves tripping and falling headlong down the hill, in between two lines of Irish warriors.

A voice bellowed, "Now!" and fifty javelins flew through the air from close quarters, killing and wounding many more of the now diminished band of Norsemen. The Irish, throwing off what clothing they had, charged naked (as was their custom in battle) into the melee.

Irish swords clashed against Norse. The Vikings fought hard and furiously but were now seriously outnumbered. The Norse were better armed and better protected, but soon found themselves completely

overcome by the wild Irishmen. They asked no quarter and none was given. The Ostmen were killed to the man—including those who watched the ships.

Muirheartach lifted his horn and blew three times. A great yell of victory was raised by all the Irishmen.

Conn looked up at Muirheartach and smiled. “Today was a great victory!”

“Aye!” said Muirheartach somberly. “Aye, today was great victory.”

The tall figure of Finian lumbered over. He placed his hand on Muirheartach’s shoulder. The sword he carried was red with blood.

Brian O’Hooley leaned wearily on his spear as he breathed heavily.

This was Cormac’s first battle. He had escaped harm, and had even killed a Viking with his javelin. He looked around at the carnage and then unexpectedly threw up.

Muirheartach slowly walked over to the boy.

“Death like this is a horrible sight,” he said.

Cormac turned around. “I didn’t think it would be like this, Father. I thought I would rejoice to see my enemies slaughtered. But now I just feel sick to my stomach.”

“Aye, and I am glad that you feel sick to your stomach and that you are not rejoicing. For each man lying here is a father, a husband or a son. And his woman and children are never going to see him back again.”

“Aye, Father.”

“Let it never be said that war is a glorious thing. War, death and destruction are horrible, horrible things. But sometimes we have to fight to save and preserve that which is precious to us. But never go fightin’ and killin’ just for the pleasure of it.”

The Irishmen then set about gathering the weapons and other valuables from the bodies of their vanquished enemies. The monks of the monastery had

come down. Some prayed over the few Irishmen who had died, and carried their bodies back up to the monastery, while others dragged the bodies of dead Vikings over to a deep trench nearby and rolled them in. Once the grim task had been completed, the mass grave was covered in dirt.

Muirheartach and the other Irish warriors turned and made their way slowly up the hill to the monastery. They were greeted at the entrance by the abbot and a few of his followers.

“The Lord has answered our prayers, Muirheartach mac Rory,” said the abbot.

“Aye, Father, He has,” said Muirheartach.

“Come, and I will now say a mass of thanksgiving, as well as mourn our dead.”

With that he led the warriors into the monastery enclosure. An outdoor altar stood in the middle. All the warriors knelt and bowed their heads, and the abbot gave thanks to God on behalf of them all for the victory that had been given.

After the service was over, Brian O’Hooley turned and spoke to Muirheartach. “I don’t understand! Today we had glorious victory and you’re acting so sober.”

“War and mayhem is a sobering thing,” replied Muirheartach.

“Well, I think we ought to at least be having a little celebration tonight and sing and dance and make merry.”

“Aye,” said Muirheartach, “we should. However, I fear that this is but a skirmish won, for this was only a small party of these Ostmen. The next time it won’t be nearly so easy. When these ships fail to return to their main force, the Ostmen’ll be smartin’ to avenge the destruction of this day.”

“All the more reason to celebrate now,” said Brian, a wry grin passing over his face. “You might not get to celebrate again.”

Muircheartach managed to smile. “Aye, young man. Aye.”

-6-

SUMMONED

Now that the skirmish was over (for that indeed was a more precise description of it than a battle), Muircheartach thought on the future and what this would mean. Indeed, an Irish victory would be a demoralizing blow to the Ostmen, just as it was an inspiration to the Irish. But Muircheartach knew that the Ostmen would now be motivated not only by loot and plunder, but by savage revenge. When they came again—and he knew that they would come—they would come in greater numbers. The Irish had outnumbered the last Ostmen force. That and the element of surprise had won the battle, even though the Ostmen were better armed.

Muircheartach’s thoughts drifted back to the life his clann had led so far. Although they had squabbled often with the O’Hooleys, and even others of the Irish clans, the seriousness of the invasion of these foreigners far surpassed any dangers they had faced before.

Outside of the hut that he sat in, he could hear the merrymaking. The jubilant clansmen were celebrating their victory. He’d been at the celebration for a while, but then had excused himself.

Ah, it’s not right, he thought, to be feeling so melancholy after the victory that we achieved today!

But I cannot shake this sadness.

Muircheartach was a God-fearing man. But that night he felt more desperate than ever to seek solace from above.

“What ails me, God?” he cried. “Dear Jesus, what ails me? Why am I in such dark and downcast spirits? I pray Thee, to reveal to me why I am so despondent—if indeed there is any reason at all. I know the dangers still lurk, and great dangers they are, but I should be rejoicing in the victory that You gave today. For being in such a melancholy humor is not good for the soul. It drains the spirit out of man. Dear God, help me to shake it! I cannot look so despondent and downcast in front of the men.”

As Muircheartach finished his prayer, he heard footsteps approaching.

“Muircheartach, are you in there?” came a voice.

Recognizing it as the voice of Finian the priest, Muircheartach replied, “Aye, I’m here. What be the trouble?”

“The men are asking why you are not there.”

“I knew there would be some such talk.”

“Well, why aren’t you there?”

“I wouldna’ tell this to anyone else, but you being a priest and a man of God, I’ll tell ya. I’m overwhelmed by a strange melancholy—a peculiar foreboding. We are all still aware of the dangers of the Ostmen, knowing that they will come again, but why I am in such a strange, dark mood after such a victory as we had today, I do not know. Can you tell me why?”

Finian entered the hut. “No, I cannot tell you why you are so downcast, but I can tell ya, you must not show this feeling to the men. The sad spirits of a man can act like a cancer, bringing all down into gloom, especially if that man be the leader. You must put on a brave face, Muircheartach. You must put on a glad and happy face, and come and celebrate. Join in the dance and song.”

“Aye, you’re right,” said Muircheartach. “Come,” he said, putting his hand upon the giant’s shoulder. “Let us march back and join in this celebration.”

The two turned and walked back to the campfire. Upon seeing their leader return, a roar rose from the men. “To Muircheartach!” came the cry from one. “Long may he live, to lead us into glorious battle.”

“Aye!” came the chorus of shouts. “To Muircheartach!” they all said, as they raised their drinking vessels high.

Muircheartach put on a brave smile and acknowledged the cheers of the men. When they had all quieted down, he raised his own goblet. “Aye, and to God who gave us the victory, and to all you brave souls who fought today for your children and your wives and your land. To you, my merry men, may God long give us victories over our enemies and His!”

Another roar, twice as loud, came from the men as they all drank deep of the heavy ale.



Haakon Svensson, the older brother of Olaf, sat slumped in a drunken stupor in the tent near the riverbank. He had waited now seven days in vain for his brother’s ships to return.

Haakon looked through blurry eyes out of the tent’s window, and could see his twenty ships pulled up on the riverbank near the mouth of the river. “That cursed brother of mine...,” he grumbled. “We sit here doing nothing, waiting for him. Guthred and the others are expecting us. Yet we sit here in this bloody Irish bog while they’re away plundering and raiding.

“Enough of this!” he shouted, bursting through the tent’s opening. “To the ships! I cannot wait any longer. To the ships!” he shouted again to the large encampment of Vikings who were sitting around campfires, drinking and eating.

Haakon was a big man who wore a large bearskin cloak. Grabbing a battle-axe in one hand, he marched

toward the closest of the beached ships. On his way, he swung wildly with his axe at a kettle hanging over one of the fires, knocking it and its boiling contents into the air, narrowly missing three seated Ostmen warriors.

“Come on, you lazy scum!” he shouted. “To the ships! We have to go. We can’t wait for Olaf and his cursed raiding party any longer. Guthred is expecting us, and we are already three days late for the rendezvous. Once we have reached his camp, then we can decide what to do about finding out what happened to my brother—that worthless dog.”

The Viking horde jumped into action. They were all tired of sitting in the cold Irish drizzle waiting for Olaf’s return, and were glad to be breaking camp. They would now be heading south to join what was expected to be an armada of a hundred ships that had gathered around the leadership of the Ostmen warlord Guthred.

Quickly the men carried aboard the booty they had pillaged from the neighboring area, as well as their gear, and stowed them in the bottom of their boats, covering their cargo with oiled canvas to keep out the rain and sea spray.

The men standing in the shallow water heaved and shoved the boats off the bank, then clambered over the side back into the ships as the vessels started to float free. Oars that had been stowed along the side of the boat were soon mounted into their brackets, and dipped into the water as the men started to stroke in unison.

Once the boats were out to sea, the sails were hoisted as the winds were favorable. They started on their journey to their rendezvous point at the mouth of the great river.

As he stood at the bow of his boat, Haakon Svensson’s mind began to clear some.

Obviously, Olaf bit off more than he could chew, he

thought. *Such was the way of my little brother—impetuous, vicious, without a lick of sense of danger.* Olaf had come to his end, Haakon mused, just the way he had imagined that he would. “The idiot. Now, I’m going to have to find a way to avenge your death,” he thought aloud. “Well, it’ll have to wait for now. There are other more pressing matters. I’m now going to have to answer for my tardiness. Guthred expected us a few days ago and he’s not going to be that pleased.”

From the woods, Irish eyes watched as the Viking fleet disappeared from sight. Men, women and children who had taken refuge in the hills for the last two weeks—since the arrival of the Ostmen—had come back to their burnt huts and homesteads. Most wept at the destruction and death they saw around them. Some of the more stoic ones sadly began the job of rebuilding their homes, and burying the bodies of the unfortunate ones who had not been able to escape in time from the Ostmen’s raid. All the cattle, sheep and poultry were gone—slain for the ravenous appetites of the Ostmen. Only an eerie quietness remained.



Over the next few months, news of Muircheartach’s victory over the Norse raiding party spread throughout the area. Soon other chieftains were seeking him out and expressing their readiness to rally to his banner. News also filtered through the land about heavy concentrations of the Ostmen further south. The king of Leinster also heard word of Muircheartach’s growing popularity with the other minor kings who were nominally under Leinster’s leadership, and so it was not unexpected that one day a messenger appeared at Muircheartach’s fort. The king of Leinster wanted to see him.

Muircheartach gathered the oenach together that night to discuss what should be done. Brian and

several others of the O'Hooleys were also present. Muircheartach opened the oenach.

"The king of Leinster requires my presence. We know he jealously guards his dominion over us. He's left us alone these many years, asking only that we acknowledge him as our sovereign. Now, word of our victory has reached his ear, as it has many others. I'm asked to come and see him and so, before I go, I've come to consult with you all. For go I must, but I do not have much confidence that he is going to be much pleased with our victory. So what do we? And how are we to act?"

The men turned to each other to see who would be first to offer counsel. It was, as expected, Turlough mac Domnall who rose to his feet.

"The king of Leinster is jealous of you. For you have done something that he hadna the guts to do, and that is stand up to these invaders. But he is powerful and his clann is strong. So I say proceed with caution."

"Wise words, Turlough," said Muircheartach. "Are there any others?"

"If it comes to a fight," said Brian O'Hooley, "we will fight by your side."

"You speak well, Brian. I'll be thanking you. Let's hope we aren't having to fight other Irishmen. We're having big enough battles with these demon Ostmen."

"Aye," said Brian. "But the king is going to look at you as a threat."

"Aye, he will, Brian. Aye, he will. Any threat to him he will oppose by any means possible, whether by force or by treachery. Well, I think we all have the measure of our king, but then we can also appeal to the Ard Righ."

"Aye, the High King will be glad for an excuse to try and spread his power over the land of Leinster," said Conn. "But I don't know if he would be any better or more trustworthy."

"So 'tis a narrow pathway we tread," said Muircheartach. "And whether it be from a foreigner or fellow Irishman, we are surely threatened with trouble and possible war with one or both."

Diarmaid stood up, "Aye, Muircheartach, and yours will be a difficult position, but let it be known this day that I do declare with all here that our loyalty is with you."

"Aye!" came the response from the other men.

"Aye!" added Brian O'Hooley. "For you have led us to victory. We are with you. For as long as you do treat us rightly, we will be your allies."

"Well, with that we'll declare this council closed then," said Muircheartach. "But tomorrow I must leave. Conn, I will not be taking you with me, for I do not trust the king of Leinster. And so I must needs ask you to stay, for if anything happens to me, the leadership falls on you."

"Aye, Muircheartach."

"Cormac, you will go with me. Brian, would you want to be coming?"

Brian was anxious to go, for he had never been to the courts of the king of Leinster.

"Aye, I will go with ya."

"Good, then the three of us will set out tomorrow."



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THE COURT OF LEINSTER

Muircheartach, Cormac and Brian were up at dawn's first light. As they headed out of camp, Brian turned to Muircheartach. "Can I be saying something to ya?" he asked.

"Aye."

"Well," went on Brian somewhat sheepishly, "everywhere I walk with you, ya be singing at the top of your lungs."

"Aye," replied Muircheartach inquisitively. "That is my way."

"I..." stammered Brian, not knowing quite how to say it, "I ... like your singing and all, but do you have to do it all the time?"

Muircheartach looked sternly at the younger man. "Are ya not liking my singing?"

Brian swallowed hard. "Well, I ... you've got a fine voice, Muircheartach," stammered Brian, "but it's just that sometimes I like to walk in silence." Brian looked nervously at the ground, wondering how Muircheartach was going to react.

The older man stared at Brian for what seemed like a very long time until he suddenly burst out laughing at the top of his voice.

"Well, finally someone had the guts to tell me. I knew it all along, but by all the holy saints of Ireland,

I love to sing anyway. But because you had the guts to say something I'll tell you what I'll be doing, I'll only sing a wee bit."

Brian smiled, relieved that the older man had taken it with such a sense of humor.

"I'd be thanking ya," Brian said with a grin.

"Come, Cormac," said Muirheartach. "We've got a long walk."

"Aye, Father," said Cormac. "We'd best be going."

"Aye, let's be going."



It was several days' journey before Muirheartach and his company arrived at the fort of the king of Leinster. Now you might be thinking that the king would have a fine castle or palace or some such thing. Yet though his abodes were not as humble as some, the houses of the king of Leinster were not anywhere near as spectacular as might be imagined. For it was not the way of the Irish noblemen of those days to have great and fancy houses. Nevertheless, the king did have an extensive retinue of retainers—his attendants and servants—and warriors.

Muirheartach was whistling as he and his companions marched into the fort. Women looked up from their chores and men stood up and leant on their staffs as they watched the bold Irish chieftain march towards the central building, his long black hair flowing in the breeze and his head held up as he gaily whistled.

Turning to Brian and Cormac, Muirheartach mumbled, "I have to put on a brave show for all these folks."

As Muirheartach stood at the front of the building, a servant scurried inside to let the Leinster king know they had arrived.

The figure that bent down as it walked through the doorway to the outside was not as impressive as one might expect of a king. His long gray hair was

tied in two braids and hung down on both sides of his head. What looked like gravy dripped down his scraggly, unkempt gray beard. His face was old and wrinkled, but his eyes betrayed a cunning and shrewdness that age had not dimmed. He wore no ornaments that would have made him seem regal, save a large brooch that pinned the corners of his *brat* on his right side. He drew himself up to his full stature and looked squarely at his visitors.

"Well, Muirheartach, you have come," said the king.

"Aye."

"Good. I hear you had victory over the Ostmen."

"A small one," said Muirheartach.

"Humph," grunted the king curtly. "And who be these?"

"This is my son, Cormac, and this is Brian, tanist of the O'Hooley clann," said Muirheartach.

"So you be allied with the O'Hooleys?"

"For the sake of this fight against the invaders, we are allies," said Muirheartach.

"Humph," grunted the king again. "And why did you not ask me before you engaged in this battle?"

"I didna know that you were wanting to be asked," said Muirheartach.

"Well, is it nay normal before engaging in battles to first consult with your overlord?"

"I would ask," said Muirheartach, "where was my overlord when I needed to engage in battle?"

"You're impertinent," snapped the king.

More of the king's clann were gathered around now, and some of them fingered their weapons nervously.

"I'm known for speaking bluntly," said Muirheartach. "Is it a fault that I am straightforward and honest, not as some?"

"I know you dunna like me, but I am your overlord and you should have talked to me before you engaged

in battle.”

“There wasn’t time,” protested Muircheartach. “We were being attacked. Our villages were being raided and pillaged, monasteries desecrated, our priests, monks and nuns murdered.”

“Humph,” grunted the king for a third time. “Well, I suppose you would like now to meet my guests.”

Muircheartach’s eyes narrowed. “Guests?” he asked.

“Aye, my allies even,” gloated the king. With a wave of his arm, a burly figure walked through the door, clothed in a great bearskin cloak. “Meet Haakon Svensson, with whom I’ve had the pleasure of forming an alliance for the mutual benefit of my kingdom and his people,” sneered the king. “Seize them!”

Before they could reach for their weapons, Muircheartach, Cormac and Brian were each set upon by several of Leinster’s warriors.

Haakon swaggered up to Muircheartach and put his face a few inches away from the Irish chief’s, and looked him intently in the eye.

“So you are the one who murdered my brother, as the story goes,” snarled Haakon.

“If it was your brother we killed, he was a raider and a pillager—a murderer. We killed him in honest battle,” countered Muircheartach unflinchingly.

“We don’t care if we kill you in battle, or if we kill you here, but kill you I will,” said Haakon. “But first I’ll let you suffer for awhile.”

By now, about twenty Ostmen warriors had appeared from the other huts, and the troop surrounded Muircheartach, Brian and Cormac. A rough-hewn pole was placed across the shoulders of each prisoner, and his hands were bound to the ends of it. In addition, a rope was strung between the prisoners, tied around the neck of each one, so that the three were linked in a chain, with the ends being held by two of their captors.

“You’ll die,” said Haakon to Muircheartach. “And you two,” he continued, pointing to Cormac and Brian, “I’ll sell as slaves.”

“Thank you,” said Haakon turning to the king, “for living up to your end of the bargain. Now I will live up to mine in not raiding your lands. What we conquer and pillage afterwards you may claim as your domain, for we have no use for settling here. We’ve only come for plunder.”

With the yank of the ropes, Haakon, his men, and their three captives left the Irish fort behind.

Although they had been somewhat prepared for treachery, the depth of perfidy that they had experienced had left Brian, Cormac and Muircheartach dumbfounded.

Brian had put up somewhat of a struggle when they grabbed him to bind his hands, and one of the Ostmen had kicked him viciously in the groin. He now limped sorely along.

After about an hour’s walk, they came to the long boat that was pulled up on the banks of a river. Muircheartach, Cormac and Brian were bundled into the boat and forced to sit in the middle. Needing the rope around their necks for some other purpose, a Viking roughly pulled it off, noting with some glee the rope burns this left on the captives’ necks.

The boat was pushed off into the river, and was soon gliding along in the direction of the sea. Muircheartach and Cormac ended up sitting facing each other.

In a low voice, Muircheartach spoke to Cormac. “I am a dead man, my son. I’ve heard what these men do. The death they inflict in torture is slow and painful. I will not submit like a dumb lamb to the slaughter.”

“Father, what will you do?” asked Cormac with a shrill of desperation in his whisper. “We must escape.”

“Aye, you must. You they will sell as a slave, as

they will Brian. You must bide your time, for when that time comes you must escape. And when you have made your way back to our clann you must avenge this treachery. Conn will know what to do. But as for me, at the first opportunity I'm going to try and escape, whether it kills me or not."

"How, Father?" said Cormac.

"However I can. If I don't see your mother again, look out for her and care for her when you have returned." With that Muirheartach motioned for Cormac to be silent.

It was as they came to the mouth of the river that Muirheartach's opportunity arose. Large breakers were crashing over a sand bar. When the Viking ship rose high on the swell as it rose over one of the breakers, Muirheartach took his chance. Quickly he rose to his feet, and swung the wooden pole to which he was bound, hitting the nearest rower heavily in the face with the end of it. The man shouted in pain, letting go of his oar and reaching his hand up to his face. In the same instant, Muirheartach leapt over the edge of the boat.

His hands bound the way they were, he had ne'er a chance of swimming. For a few minutes his head bobbed above the water as he kicked with his feet to try to get away from the boat. Cormac looked on in horror as the Vikings, cursing and swearing, tried to head the boat in his direction to retrieve him. Being unable to, one of them finally took a long spear and threw it hard to where Muirheartach was still struggling against the water.

It was difficult to tell whether he had been struck or not, but all the same, Cormac watched with tears in his eyes as his father suddenly ceased moving, and then disappeared below the churning surf.

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THE OSTMEN CAMP

Brian and Cormac sat in despair in the middle of the Viking longship, as it made its way down the eastern coastline of Ireland. What a day this had been for them! To first be betrayed by the man they looked to as king into the hands of the vile Ostmen, and now also to experience the dreadful loss of Muirheartach.

The Vikings had scoured the area for some time before they finally gave up looking for Muirheartach's body. Haakon, in his fury at being cheated of taking full revenge against the man responsible for his brother's death, considered killing both Brian and Cormac, but his mercenary side gained the better of him, and he realized that nothing was to be gained by killing them. At least some money would be gained by selling them as slaves. Dusk was already settling by the time the helmsman had recognized the landmark he looked for on the coast. He pushed his weight into the steering oar to turn the boat once more toward land.

The glow of many campfires became visible as they rounded a headland, and Cormac and Brian realized that they were headed towards a huge encampment of Ostmen raiders. Their mouths dropped in awe as they saw the silhouettes of what seemed like a hundred or more ships pulled up on the sandy

beaches near the river's mouth. This was no mere raiding party, but a virtual army of these Norse devils encamped on the shores of their beloved Ireland. Each ship would hold between twenty to thirty-five men, so they were not only looking at an army of two or three thousand, but a highly mobile army at that.

Haakon Svensson looked down at his captives and again considered his decision: Should he sell them, or would it be better to derive wondrous pleasure from seeing these two die slowly through torture?

Never mind, he thought, I would rather have the money. His brother's killing had been avenged by the death of his killer. Nah, it would be a much sweeter revenge to have these accomplices, even the son of the slayer, sold into a lifetime of captivity and labor away from their homeland.

As they neared the shore, the Vikings once again stowed their oars and rode into the beach on the surf. With a crunching sound, the shallow-bottomed boat beached.

The Ostmen jumped out and pushed and dragged the boat further up on the shore. A long rope attached to the bow was taken up way beyond the shoreline, and tied to a heavy boulder.

A kick in the ribs was the signal for Cormac and Brian to stand up and climb over the side. With their hands bound the way they were, this was not accomplished easily. Brian fell heavily and had to struggle to his feet under the continual kicking and jabbing of his tormentors. Once again, a rope was placed around their necks.

Haakon led the way through the myriad campfires, each surrounded by a contingent of drunken, swearing and laughing Ostmen.

Cormac noted a few Celts amongst the Vikings. *Collaborators!* he thought. *Traitors to their native land!*

There were also some Irish women engaged in serving the Vikings food from pots that hung over the

campfires, as well as serving them ale and mead. Cormac cringed as he noted more than one Viking chieftain drinking from what was obviously a holy chalice pillaged from some church.

Haakon led them on as they marched toward a tent notably larger in size than the others that were scattered about. Cormac surmised that the tent belonged to the leader of this horde.

As they drew closer, a man stood up in the middle of a semi-circle of Viking warriors who sat around the fire in front of the tent.

"Haakon, you're back," said the man.

"Yes, Guthred," said Haakon.

"Your endeavor went well?"

"It could have been better," muttered Haakon.

"Are these the men that ambushed your brother and his war party?" asked Guthred, motioning to the two captives.

"Their leader, the father of the younger one there, jumped off my ship and drowned," cried Haakon.

"Ha," roared the other man. "You fool! You didn't have him tied down?"

"His hands were bound in the same manner as you see these, but the fool jumped overboard to his certain death"—Haakon spat on the ground—"and deprived me of the pleasure of killing him slowly."

"Well, kill one of these instead," said Guthred.

"I considered that," mumbled Haakon. "And maybe I will, but for now I'm resolved to sell them and gain some money for my effort."

"And what of the king of Leinster?" said Guthred.

"That sly dog," said Haakon. "He thinks he's now our ally. I'll use him as long as I want, then I'll have him slain. For what manner of dog would sell out his own kind?"

"A useful dog for our purposes," commented Guthred.

"Ya, maybe he is," said Haakon. "But every dog

has its day, and his day will not be long in coming.”

Haakon turned to the Viking who held the rope fastened around the necks of the two captives. “Take them to the pen and leave them there with the others.”

The Viking tugged viciously on the rope, pulling Cormac and Brian in the direction of the far end of the camp. There they came upon the crudely fashioned stockade guarded on the outside by several Ostmen warriors. The stockade was crammed full of Irish captives—men, women, children, and even babies.

“These are Haakon Svensson’s,” said the man who had led them there. The head guard of the stockade took a piece of twine and fed it through a hole in a small piece of wood. With the point of the dagger he made Haakon’s mark on the wood, then went over and tied it around Cormac’s neck. He repeated the process with Brian.

He then grabbed the rope from the other man who had led the prisoners up to the stockade gate. Two of the other guards came up behind the new captives and held spears at their backs. The man removed the rope from around Cormac’s and Brian’s necks, and then opened the stockade gate. From the prodding of the spears Cormac and Brian (literally) got the point that they were supposed to go inside. The gate was closed and fastened with a chain.

Cormac and Brian awkwardly moved through the crowd, their arms still tied to the poles across their shoulders. A kind-faced old man walked up to them and said, “Bless you, my children. Let me take those ropes off your hands and free you from your bindings.”

“I’ll be thanking ya,” grunted Brian.

“Aye,” replied Cormac. “I’ll be thanking ya too.”

“An’ who are you, my children?” asked the old man.

“I take it that you are a priest, to talk to us in that way.”

“Aye, I am,” replied the old man. “A monk from

Clontarff, captured many weeks ago and kept here ever since.”

“Why would they be keeping monks alive?” asked Brian. “I thought they had no use for our Christian priests.”

“Aye,” said the monk. “But for some reason, though I know not what it is, they have kept me alive. So tell me, who are you?”

“I am Cormac mac Muircheartach,” said Cormac.

“I am Brian, the tanist of the O’Hooleys,” said Brian.

“I’ve heard of the O’Hooleys,” said the monk. “Your reputation has preceded you.”

Brian blushed. “It’s an undeserved reputation.”

“Well, are you not hooligans and thieves?” said the priest.

“No, we’re not,” said Brian quickly.

“Ah, then it is my *impression* that must be wrong then.”

“Aye, it is,” said Brian.

“And you, Cormac mac Muircheartach, are you the son of the Muircheartach mac Rory who is said to have won a battle against these Ostmen?”

“Aye,” replied Cormac. “And aye, we did win a battle.”

“Ah, that news gave us all such fond hope,” said the old man with a sigh. “Now it seems that fortunes are reversed.”

“We were delivered by treachery,” growled Brian. “That mongrel dog, the king of Leinster, betrayed us into the hands of the Viking devil, Haakon Svensson.”

“Aye, Haakon! I see you wear his mark around your neck.”

“And I’ll rip it off as soon as I get my hands free,” said Brian.

“You can’t do that,” said the old man. “It’s best to just go along with it for now.” All the time they had talked, the old man had been working on getting their

knots undone.

“So they let you take our bindings off us?” said Brian.

“Aye. Once you are in here they don’t care. Besides, how would you feed yourself with your hands all tied? You’re here because they intend to sell you as slaves. A skinny, weak slave is not going to bring a good price. No, they feed us.”

The twine that bound their hands had been tied tightly, but the monk’s persistence paid off, and slowly the knots loosened. He untied Brian first.

The moment his hands were free, Brian reached up to grab the rope that held the wooden tag.

“Brian, leave it for now,” said the priest. “Defiance just brings death, here. Best to bide your time.”

The priest continued to work on the knots in Cormac’s bindings, and after some time they also came free.

“Come over here and sit. There are others I would like you to meet.”

Placing one hand on Brian’s shoulder and the other on Cormac’s, the kindly priest moved both of them towards the center of the stockade. Seated in a circle were several Celtic warriors, obviously important men by their actions and demeanor.

“This is Brian O’Hooley,” said the priest. “And this is Cormac mac Muirheartach. They have recently been added to our unhappy company.”

One of the men motioned for the two to sit down. “Is your father the Muirheartach who won the battle against the Ostmen raiders?” he asked Cormac.

“Aye,” said Cormac. “He was.”

“Was? And what has happened to him?”

“We were betrayed by the treacherous king of Leinster into the hands of the Ostmen. My father tried to escape by jumping overboard, but I fear he drowned.”

“I’m sorry,” said the man. “Your father’s fame has

spread far and wide. He was a hero and shall sorely be missed. As for the king of Leinster, he is a fawning dog, and his time shall surely run out.”

“Aye,” said Cormac. “I heard Haakon himself say that he was only using him, and when his usefulness is over Haakon would then turn on him and destroy him.”

“A fitting end for a traitor,” piped up another one of the men. “And so, you fearsome warriors, you are now captives like the rest of us.”

“Aye,” said Cormac.

“And by all the saints, I will have my revenge upon these Ostmen,” said Brian. “Or I shall die trying.”

“Aye, and most likely you will die, because we Irish are hopelessly divided amongst ourselves. We don’t know how to unite against the common enemy, so when these Ostmen come we are helpless. The uniting of your two clanns under Cormac’s good father was an example to us all, but now he is dead. Once again, undoubtedly we are divided.”

“God’s tooth,” exclaimed another. “If we could just put our own petty differences aside we could mount a war against these Ostmen. For they have to travel far across the sea to bring their men here, but we are here and we can assemble an army far more in number than theirs. Aye, if we could just stop our petty squabbles!”

“Well, look at us here,” said Cormac. “I can tell that you are all from different clanns, but you sit here in harmony.”

“It’s only because we are forced to by our circumstances. But it’s not our nature to unite against the enemy. It’s our nature to fight single-handedly or only alongside our kin.”

“But it’s a grave weakness,” said Cormac.

“Aye, but it is our way and it is our nature, though it is dooming us to disaster.”

“Well, why can’t we change that?”

“Aye, we can,” said one of the men, rising to his feet. “If we can find a leader noble enough to lead us.”

“Surely we can unite under the Ard Righ,” said Brian.

At that, a chuckle of laughter rippled around the circle.

“The Ard Righ! The high king! The high king of what? He’s no more a high king than I am, for no one gives him allegiance. He’s not strong enough to have our allegiance.”

“Aye, but he could be,” said Brian. “If our people united under him, he could be!”

“We are not going to unite under him. Each one of our clans values its independence, and will only submit to another by force,” said another man.

“So we’re doomed to be sheep to the slaughter,” said the priest. “Well, isn’t this a woeful council. Very well, I suggest we start trying to unite, otherwise we will all indeed be dead men. Oh, Lord God, sweet Jesus, please help us now to unite as one. For unity is strength and in division is weakness,” the priest prayed.

“Amen,” the men in the circle chorused.

“And what are we to do now?” asked one of the men.

“Well, I know what I am going to do,” said Brian. “I am plotting my escape.”

“Brave words, but how? Have you seen the numbers here? Nay, we shall not escape this stockade—not now at any rate.”

“There will come a time, a moment of weakness,” said Brian, “and then I shall take my chances. What say ye, Cormac?”

“Aye,” said Cormac.

“Well, then I suggest you get a good night’s sleep,” intoned the priest gravely. “For it is good to be well rested before you face foolhardy death.”

And so Cormac and Brian, along with the other prisoners in that miserable pen, lay down that night. Huddled together for warmth, they dreamt of loved ones, of home, of freedom and vengeance.

AT THE SLAVE MARKET

A lone rooster crowed in the distance, its cry piercing the early morning air. Cormac huddled deeper into his cloak. His sleep had been fitful at best, but now it was over as everybody in the stockade was also starting to stir. Soon babies were crying, and children were up and playing.

It's funny, thought Cormac, how even in these pitiful conditions, children can think of playing.

He propped himself up on his elbow and looked around at the mass of people, most of whom were still lying on the ground.

Poor wretches! he thought wryly, and then looked down at himself. *And I'm just as much a wretch as any of these. What a discouraging thought!*

His thoughts turned to his father, that valiant man, that kind and gentle man who had cared for and nurtured him. It made Cormac feel more despondent than ever. A tear rolled down his cheek.

Brian, who was sleeping next to him, grunted and rolled over. "Can a man ever sleep in this sort of misery?" he mumbled.

"Oh, shut up," said Cormac.

"And who would you be telling to shut up?" said Brian, popping one eye open and looking angrily at Cormac.

“That would be you, you big oaf.”

“You little pipsqueak,” growled Brian. “I oughtta get up and mash your little head into the sand.”

“Good, and put me out of my misery,” said Cormac.

“Bah!” grunted Brian. “That would be too good for you.”

“I see you two fellows like each other very much,” said the old monk, who had slept the night next to them.

“Aye, we’re great chums,” Brian said sarcastically and rolled over.

“And you two allies?” said the priest. “God help us!”

Cormac remained sullenly silent.

“Are ya paining for your father?” asked the priest.

“Aye,” said Cormac.

The priest nodded and sighed silently. “Aye, there is a lot of pain throughout our beloved country,” he lamented as he got up on his knees. Then he bowed his head, and started saying his morning prayers.

Cormac looked at him and wondered what type of God it was who would take a man so dedicated to Him and put him in such terrible conditions as these. Indeed, what type of God was it who brought such misery on these people, who all claimed to love and worship Him, while outside their drear stockade, the heathen worshippers of devils reveled in the spoils of victory? *Surely, God has it upside down*, thought Cormac.

“Will you join me in my prayers?” asked the priest.

“No, thank you, Father,” said Cormac. “I’m beginning to have my doubts about a God who seems so impotent. I fear the gods of the Norse are stronger than ours.”

“God’s ways are not man’s ways, my son,” replied the priest gravely.

“All well and good,” said Cormac. “But what reward is there in worshipping a God who neither cares for

us nor protects us?”

“Dear Jesus,” prayed the priest, “please help this dear boy see.” Turning, the priest gently put his hand on Cormac’s shoulder. “He’s with us in all adversity, my son. For it is not in this world that we have our reward, but in the eternal one to come. All they have to look forward to is eternal damnation, and the infernal gods that they worship shall drag them all down to it. But we will walk in the halls of Heaven with all the holy saints, where all shall be joy and peace and happiness.”

Cormac returned to his sullen silence. The priest’s words had rung true in his heart, but he did not want to acknowledge the truth of them.

It wasn’t long before a group of Irish women approached the stockade with pots of food for the captives. Brian and Cormac, who hadn’t eaten for more than a day, were famished, and rapidly consumed the meager portions of food they were given.

The old priest looked at them, “Here, my boys, take my plate. I think you need it more than I.”

Cormac and Brian put up a pretense of refusing it, but their weak protestations of not being ones to take a priest’s food soon gave way to their hunger, and they quickly devoured the priest’s meal.

Cormac turned to the priest, “Thank you, Father,” he said, “and I also thank you for your words earlier. I know you speak truth. It’s just that I am not in the mood for receiving it.”

“Aye,” said the priest. “I understand, my son.”

Soon after they had eaten, a troop of Ostmen marched into the stockade. The prisoners were all lined up in rows, and the Viking in charge marched up and down the lines, looking at each one. He selected around thirty men, including Brian and Cormac. Once again, ropes were tied around their necks, and these thirty were marched out of the compound, to where two boats had been pulled up a

little apart from the others on the shore.

“What’s going on? Where are they taking us?” asked Cormac to the man in front of them, who was one of the men they had talked to the night before.

“This man is the slave trader,” he said, motioning to the lead Viking. “And we are no doubt being put on the boats to be sold in some Godforsaken place.”

Cormac looked desperately around, and saw that Brian was three men back on the rope. Cormac saw that Brian was extremely agitated. What would this mean—being so quickly sent off? Where were they to be taken? Across the seas? To what strange land would they be going—to the Norse kingdoms? And how would they ever make their way back to Ireland? A shiver went down Cormac’s spine. Things were going from bad to worse.

The men were marched single file to the ship, then ordered over the side and made to sit down amidship. Their hands were bound to a series of iron rings. Two men were bound to each ring. By providence, Cormac and Brian found themselves once again partners. Once the prisoners, soon to be slaves, were secured, the Vikings pushed the boat off into the water. The tide was on the turn and the slave trader wanted to take advantage of this.

Soon the boat was in the water and the Ostmen were straining at their oars, rowing the boat out to sea.

The Viking trader, who stood at the bow, motioned the helmsman to steer towards the northwest. Soon a favorable wind sprang up and the sail was set. The Vikings stowed their oars and settled down to enjoy the voyage.

Cormac stared quietly as he watched the shoreline of Ireland slip over the horizon. He wondered when he would be seeing those melancholic shores again.

Brian was also sadly staring in the same direction.

Well, God, Cormac wondered, what am I to do now?

Late in the afternoon, the trader, who had stood in the bow of the ship the whole time, spied the land they were heading for. Soon the boat sailed into a strange harbor. This time the Ostmen did not beach their boat, but pulled it up alongside a short wooden jetty that jutted out from the land.

The place was something new and different for Cormac to see; for indeed this was a small town situated on the Viking-ruled Isle of Mann. This was a stopping place on the Viking trade routes. It also had a booming slave market, and it was here that this trader intended to sell the slaves. A greater return could have been gained if he would have taken the prisoners all the way back to Scandinavia, but the Viking trader who had bought these slaves from the Ostmen commanders wanted to take in a quicker profit on these slaves.

Once again, under the watchful eye of the well-armed Ostmen warriors, the slaves’ hands were unbound from the iron rings, and the slaves herded off the boat.

While walking the small gangplank between the boat and the jetty, Brian seriously considered diving off, but obviously the Viking traders were well aware that slaves might try something like this.

When the thought had hardly passed through his head, Brian’s eye locked with that of the trader who was standing on the jetty. The trader wagged his finger in the air, and Brian knew that this was not the time to try anything foolhardy, so he compliantly walked the few paces on the gangplank and lined up with the other slaves on the jetty.

This time no rope was placed around their necks, but the group was herded along by several well-armed warriors. There was little place to run, and if any of them had, they would have soon been caught.

The slaves were marched into a stockade, this time made of stone and mortar. The grillwork door was

quickly locked behind them. Brian and Cormac had never seen a building like this before. All the structures they'd known had always been of wattle and daub. The floor was hard, but strewn with straw, and in the far corner a hole served as a latrine.

Just before dusk the slaves were fed, and night soon fell.



The following morning, the slaves were led out in single file and marched to the slave auction. One by one they were pushed up onto the wooden platform and sold to the highest bidder.

Cormac fetched a good price, and the trader gleefully took the money from the buyer, a tall, flaxen-haired man who had a more noble bearing than the others in the crowd. Cormac didn't see to whom Brian was sold, as Cormac was hurried off before Brian's turn on the auction block.

"God be with ya," cried Cormac to Brian as he left.

"Aye," cried out Brian.

Cormac thought he saw a tear in the big man's eyes.

That's the last I'll be seeing you, I expect, thought Cormac. Although you were a pain to be around at times, I had grown fond of ya.

The young man who had bought Cormac was not a Viking, but an Angle from the land of Britain named Aethelwulf. Cormac was the only slave that he had bought.

Cormac looked quizzically at his new owner as he was led down the dirt road of the town.

"I wonder myself why I bought you," said the Angle, with what Cormac thought was a twinkle in his eye. "I have no need of an Irish slave. I guess I was just taken by ya. Well, we'd better be going," said the man.

"Going where?" asked Cormac.

"To Britain, of course," said the Angle.

"Britain?" replied Cormac.

"Aye," replied the Angle, "to Britain and the kingdom of my father."

Aethelwulf, as Cormac would soon learn, was the fourth son of the king of Mercia, and as such, a man of privilege and wealth. The kings of the Angles were not like the kings of the Irish. The Angles were much stronger people and the kings lived in much more splendor than the more humble circumstances of the Irish.

"Well, you'd better carry my bag," said Aethelwulf to Cormac, as he tossed it to him. "Don't want people to wonder why I bought a slave and I'm carrying my own bag. Tonight we'll stay at yonder inn," he said, pointing towards a low-lying stone building, "and tomorrow we sail to your new home in England."



-10-
COMPANIONS

The sun had barely risen when Aethelwulf woke Cormac with a nudge in the ribs from his boot.

“Time to be up, boy,” said Aethelwulf. “The sun’s shining and we must soon be gone.”

Cormac rubbed the sleep from his eyes vigorously.

“I see you are not used to the role of a servant, are you?”

“Truly, I was a free man two days ago,” said Cormac quietly. “The son of the chief of our tribe.”

“The misfortunes of war,” mused Aethelwulf. “How lives change, and how quickly they do. Well, I regret the sorry state you are in, but that doesn’t change things. You’re my slave, I bought you yesterday, and now you have to do my bidding. Go down and grab yourself some food in the kitchen, and be back here smartly. Don’t try anything funny, like running away. There’s nowhere to run on this little island, and I shall surely catch you. We must be hurrying. There is a boat waiting for us.”

Cormac turned to leave.

“One more thing,” said Aethelwulf, “you are going to have to learn that before you leave my presence you bow.”

Cormac obediently bowed his head and turned and left. Obtaining a few slices of bread and some pottage

from the inn's kitchen, Cormac ate quickly and came back to the room of his new master.

"You're a mite tardy, boy," said Aethelwulf.

"I'm sorry," said Cormac.

"Well, we'll soon get you whipped into shape, won't we?"

"Aye, sir," mumbled Cormac apprehensively.

"That's better. Here, grab my bag," commanded Aethelwulf, standing up from the bed he'd been sitting on, strapping on his sword and slipping a dagger into his belt. Throwing a cloak around his shoulder, he marched out the door.

"Come on, boy!" he ordered Cormac, who meekly followed him out the door and down the steps.

The sun shone brightly, but a cool wind whipped through the air as they made their way down to the dock. There, awaiting them, was a trading vessel. It wasn't built to the sleek design of the Viking ships, but was wider in the bow and had a deeper draft in order to carry cargo.

Aethelwulf sprang across the small gangplank and onto the ship. Cormac followed. There, much to Cormac's surprise, he found Brian O'Hooley sitting on a sack of grain.

"What are you doing here?" said Cormac.

"This morning your master there sent someone to purchase me from the man who bought me yesterday. I have no idea what he wants with me," said Brian, "but I was brought here and told to sit until he came."

Up until then Aethelwulf had been talking to the master of the vessel, but he now turned and looked at Brian. "Stand up, man," Aethelwulf commanded imperiously.

Brian got up on his feet.

Aethelwulf looked him up and down. "I remember now why I didn't bid for you myself," he said. "But what is done is done. You'll have to do. Well, you both had best make yourselves comfortable for the

trip."

Then Aethelwulf went and sat down on a bale of wool stowed toward the bow of the ship.

Nodding to the vessel's master, the captain turned and barked out orders to the rowers, who were obviously slaves or prisoners, as they were shackled to their oars. The gangplank was hauled on board and the moorings loosed. The men pushed off from the dock and rowed out of the harbor's mouth.

The wind was contrary to the way he wanted to go, and because of the type of sail that was on the boat, it couldn't tack into the breeze, so the rowers were left with the arduous task of rowing into the wind.

After about half an hour of heavy going, the winds shifted and were favorable, so the sail was hauled aloft and the cumbersome little boat suddenly seemed transformed. It started to cut quickly and gracefully through the water, heading southeast. It wasn't long before the western coast of England became visible on the horizon.

The master of the vessel surveyed the sun to see what time it was, and then started scanning the shoreline for familiar landmarks, trying to determine how far north of his intended destination he was. It wasn't long before he got his bearings. Not wishing to sail too close to the coast, so as to avoid being spotted by soldiers from Northumbria—who would not hesitate to engage in acts of piracy on a rival Mercian vessel—the captain turned the ship due south, keeping the dim outline of the English coast on the horizon.

Several hours later he ordered the sail hauled down and the boat, now powered only by the rowing of the slaves chained to the oars, turned due east towards the coast. The gentle shoreline of England became more distinguishable, and soon the vessel headed into the harbor of a small town.

Once the boat was docked, Aethelwulf strode off, motioning the two Irish slaves to follow him. Soon a small delegation led by the *ealdorman*¹ of the town met him on the street, having been notified of the arrival of the king's son by a runner sent ahead by the captain of the boat.

The ealdorman, much older than Aethelwulf, treated the young man deferentially. It was late afternoon by now, and the ealdorman led Aethelwulf and his little retinue to his house.

"Welcome to my home, my lord," he said as he crossed the threshold.

"Thank you, Cenwulf," said Aethelwulf. "I'm grateful for your gracious hospitality."

"The son of my king is welcome to my hospitality at any time," said Cenwulf.

"Nevertheless," said Aethelwulf, "I thank you for your care. It's good to see you again; it's been a long time."

"Aye, it has, my lord. These two yours?" asked Cenwulf, nodding in the direction of Brian and Cormac.

"Aye, Irish slaves I bought while onst the Isle of Mann," explained Aethelwulf.

"Celts!" sniffed Cenwulf scornfully. "I've never had much time for Celts. We have our hands full of dealing with the ones beyond the march. These two look a sorry pair."

"They were free men until just days ago," said Aethelwulf. "I had pity on them. The smaller one is the son of a minor Irish king from all I can gather."

"Well, they can sleep in the barn!" Cenwulf said, then turned to one of his retainers. "Take them in there and shackle them. We don't want them running away."

¹**ealdorman**: the chief officer in a district (shire) in Anglo-Saxon England

"It won't be necessary to shackle them, Cenwulf," said Aethelwulf. "They won't be going anywhere. They are strangers in a strange land and if they escape, then they shall be regarded as outlaws and anyone can kill them. They've more sense than that."

"Perhaps so! Well, your orders are my wishes—or should I say your wishes are my orders," said Cenwulf.

With that the retainer, obviously a free man from his bearing, motioned to Cormac and Brian to follow him out the back door. A few paces across a muddy courtyard stood the barn.

"There you go," said the man. "You can sleep in that stall. I'll have the kitchen woman bring you some scraps. See that you don't go wandering around. You're now slaves of an English lord and you'd do well to learn obedience quickly, for those who are disobedient to their masters soon learn how cruel they can be to their chattels."

Brian and Cormac settled down in the empty horse stall.

"Ah," sighed Cormac, "what will we do now?"

"We will keep our spirits alive," said Brian, gritting his teeth, "with dreaming of the vengeance that we will wreak on those who have led us into this sorry mess. Every night I shall dream of the hideous deaths that I shall inflict upon the king of Leinster, and on that Viking devil Haakon Svensson."

Cormac pondered Brian's words, and wondered if the thought of vengeance would be enough to keep him motivated and his spirits high. *We shall see*, he thought.

After being fed, the two Irishmen fell into a fitful sleep.

The next morning they were awakened by Cenwulf's groom. "Up, you two," he snarled. "Your master's ready to leave."

"My God," grumbled Brian. "Why does this man have to get up so early every morning?"

He and Cormac stood up and brushed the loose straw off their clothing.

“Here,” said the man, throwing a pile of garments at them. “You’ll need to change out of those rags and put on some clothes that are more fitting to the station of your master.”

Cormac and Brian looked at each other and down at their clothes. The fine cloaks and tunics that they had freshly donned at home just a few days earlier were now indeed looking like rags.

Reluctantly, they took them off, tossed them to the side, and then put on the simple sleeveless tunics that they had been given. Walking outside, they saw Aethelwulf already mounted on a horse.

“Do you two ride?” asked Aethelwulf, looking at them.

“Never have,” replied Cormac.

“I have once or twice,” said Brian.

“Well, you are going to have to learn today, for I have to travel quickly.”

Cenwulf’s groom came with two other horses.

“I need to make my way to my father’s house, and I have not the time to wait while you two drag along on foot, so get on these two horses. You’ll have to learn as we go.”

Brian climbed on his steed awkwardly, but Cormac hesitated.

“Get on, boy!” said Aethelwulf. “I don’t have all day.”

Cormac put one foot in the stirrup and, grabbing ahold of the saddle, went to haul himself up. Suddenly the saddle slipped from off the back of the horse and around to the side, sending Cormac tumbling into the dust.

The Anglian laughed hard.

“First lesson in riding, boy,” said Aethelwulf, “before getting in the saddle, check the cinch—that’s that strap there that goes under the horse. Walk the

horse a few steps and give it a nudge in the belly to get the air out, then tighten it until it’s good and tight. *Then climb on.*”

“Aye,” said Cormac, struggling to his feet.

Cenwulf’s groom grabbed the horse by the bridle and walked him around a bit. “Like this, boy,” he said. “This smart old horse blows her belly up with air, and when you tighten the saddle she waits and then lets the air out, and the saddle is loose. See? And then you jump on and you fall off. She’s a clever old horse, this. But you’ve gotta show her who’s boss. Yes, even some slaves are a little higher than animals.”

The groom stuck his elbow in the horse’s belly and tightened the cinch belt. “Now try again,” he said.

This time Cormac managed to get up in the saddle. The groom handled him the reins.

“All right now, you just follow behind your master here and you’ll soon get the hang of it.”

And so the English lord and his little retinue of two Irish slaves rode out of the town, and headed towards Tamworth and the fortress of Aethelwulf’s father, the king of Mercia.

At this time England was divided into seven small kingdoms, which were often at war with one another. When through might of arms the king of one of these had suzerainty over the others, he was known as the Bretwalda. However, none of the kings could claim this at the present. The kings had often fought, trying to add more territory to their kingdoms, but for several years now the land had been at peace.

It is an unnatural state, Aethelwulf had always thought. It won’t last long. We will be fighting and marauding on each other’s land soon.

When the Romans had left England centuries before, the land had reverted back to the ownership of the Celtic British tribes that had lived there before, and had divided into many small, petty kingdoms. One of the British kings, trying to keep his land from

the attacks of the others, had hired the services of Jutish mercenaries. These Jutes had soon not only beaten the enemies of this king, but had set up a kingdom of their own in an area that became known as Kent. Soon other Germanic tribes, the Saxons and Angles, landed in England.

The Saxons settled in the south, and gradually made their way north, conquering more territory and dividing themselves into several small kingdoms. The Angles landed in the east and soon pushed westward. It was the Angles who had founded, among other kingdoms, the kingdom of Mercia. It had taken its name from the marches, meaning the borderlands, between what was the westernmost expansion of the Angles and the territory still ruled by the Welsh (as the Angles and Saxons called the British Celts).

Gradually, through intermarriage and the conquest of one another, the Angles, Saxons and Jutes became one homogenous people known as the Anglo-Saxons. From Angle—or Engle, as it was sometimes spelt—came the word “English,” and so the people of these lands became known as “the English,” and their land as “England.”



It was a ride of several hours before they came to the town of Lichfield. This was quite a town, the biggest collection of buildings Cormac and Brian had ever seen. The dwellings and other structures were made of stone and mortar. A cathedral was one of the biggest buildings.

The Mercians had been converted from their paganism centuries before, by Celtic missionaries from Ireland, no less, but they had since embraced the Roman Catholic Church and its hierarchical church system as opposed to the loosely organized church system of the Irish Celts. As recognition of the importance of the Mercian kingdom, Lichfield had been elevated to the status of an archdiocesan seat,

which meant that it was the home not just of a bishop, but also an archbishop.

Passing through Lichfield, our party continued on to Tamworth, the capital of the kingdom of Mercia. Through the king’s wise policy of peace, the kingdom was prosperous, and Tamworth was one of the richest towns in England. However, there was a strong war party amongst his ealdormen and *thanes*¹, who wanted to increase the territory of Mercia at the expense of the southern Saxon kingdoms and the more cultured, but militarily weaker, kingdom of Northumbria.

And there were always the troublesome Welsh on the western border. These Welsh, distant relatives of the Celts in Ireland, had proven to be a stubborn and difficult lot to control. The land of the Welsh, being not one of rolling countryside as was much of England, but more hilly, forested, and sparsely populated, was a more difficult land to conquer and rule. The Welsh were, in the opinion of the king of Mercia, not worth the cost in men and material that would be needed to bring them to heel.

The king was holding his daily council in the great hall of his fortress when Aethelwulf’s presence in the city was announced. “Show the young prince in,” called the king.

Aethelwulf marched into the great hall.

“Well, my son, welcome home.”

“Thank you, Father,” said Aethelwulf, falling on one knee before him.

“Rise, my son.”

Aethelwulf and his father looked fondly into each other’s eyes.

“So, tell me of your mission, and what you have

¹ **thane**: A freeman, ranking above an ordinary freeman and below a nobleman, granted land by the king in return for military service in Anglo-Saxon England.

found.”

“It’s as you feared, Father. The Norse have come in great numbers. But it seems that they have settled on attacking and despoiling Ireland, and so we do not have to worry about them attacking us in this season. I have brought back two Irishmen who can give us firsthand knowledge of the Vikings, their numbers and the extent of their conquest.”

“Well, that is bad news for the Irish but good news for us,” said the king. “I fear we will have enough on our hands with the Kingdom of Wessex. I have heard news that the king there is raising an army, that he has called for the gathering of his ealdormen, thanes and freemen, and they are even now massing.”

“It is good. We need some war,” said Aethelstan, the king’s oldest son.

“You hothead,” growled the king. “Always looking for war! We don’t need war. War brings destruction of food, livestock, and most of all people. We don’t need to hear widows and fatherless children crying in the streets for their slain husbands and fathers!”

“That is our glory,” replied Aethelstan, “that we as warriors die with swords in our hands and the blood of our enemies on our garments.”

“That might be well to your glory, but it is not to the glory of our kingdom,” remonstrated his father. “It is not to the glory of our kingdom, or to the glory of our God.”

The king looked with a mixture of sternness and sadness at his oldest son and his two likeminded brothers, Bernwulf and Ludican, who stood beside him, and wondered what peace there would be when he died, knowing their warlike nature and rivalry. There was no love between them, and they would all undoubtedly stake their own claim to his throne and bring his land into civil war.

He secretly hoped that Aethelwulf, his youngest son who was his favorite, would manage to become

the king in his stead, rather than leaving the kingdom to his hotheaded older brothers.

I can only hope that their hot tempers and warlike natures will get them killed before I die, he thought in his heart. *These are terrible things for a father to be thinking of his sons, but when you are a king you have to consider the needs of your kingdom first before that of your family.*

He was startled from his thoughts as a messenger rushed into the hall.

“News from the south, my lord,” said the exhausted messenger. “Wessex is in arms and their army marches towards our borders even as I speak.”

The king slumped into his chair. “Oh, my God! I had hoped beyond hope that it would not come to this. Now it all starts again. War and mayhem, killing and destruction.”

“What are we to do?” asked Aethelstan eagerly.

“Raise the levies,” said his father wearily. “Send out messengers to order our subjects to rally to my standard which I will raise on Tamworth Field. I don’t like war but, by thunder, if it is war they want, then it is war they’ll get!”

AETHELWULF'S DEAL

While all of this was going on inside the great hall, Cormac and Brian stood outside by the horses. Tamworth was a busy town, being the capital of a prosperous kingdom, with many people coming to and fro. Because they had arrived in the city late in the day, the market area was already closed, and Cormac was imagining how much more crowded it would be when it was open.

While they were talking, a group of boisterous Englishmen walked out of a nearby tavern, obviously having imbibed great quantities of ale or some other drink that had left them very intoxicated. The leading figure amongst this small group was a lanky but muscular man whose mouth seemed turned up in a permanent sneer. The man's most outstanding feature, however, was his thick white-blond hair.

"What have we here?" the man slurred as he walked by Cormac and Brian. "I smell a foul pong in the air. It's a Welsh pong." The man spat on the ground, his spittle landing very near Brian's feet.

Cormac looked at Brian and saw his face turn red. He knew Brian was about to do something violent and most probably stupid in the circumstance.

"Control yourself, Brian," Cormac whispered. "Don't waste your energy on this oaf."

Brian breathed deeply.

"And since when have we allowed Welsh scum on our streets?" the Englishman snarled again, speaking to his companions. "Look at the big tub of lard! Why, if I stabbed him with my dagger, the fat would probably run all over the street."

His companions laughed. Emboldened by their encouragement, the Englishman drew closer to Brian and looked him in the eye.

"Steady, Brian," said Cormac again.

The Englishman thrust out his arm and gave Brian a heavy shove, but much to his surprise Brian did not budge an inch. The Englishman took both of his hands and pushed on him hard; Brian stood firm, looking him in the eye.

With that, the Englishman swung to punch Brian, but in the same instant Brian ducked, and the Englishman's fist swung wildly through the air with such force that he lost his balance and fell to the ground.

Cursing, he got up. "Why you...!" he said, as he drew his dagger.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," said a voice from behind the drunken man.

He swirled around to find himself eye to eye with Aethelwulf.

"Cedric, you drunken swine," said Aethelwulf. "Save your fighting for the Saxons."

"So you would stand up for these leprous Welsh dogs," said Cedric.

"These leprous Welsh dogs, as you called them, are not Welsh at all. They are Irish, you ninny, and they are my companions," said Aethelwulf.

"Companions!" cried Cedric. "Companion to these?"

Cormac and Brian looked at each other quizzically. *Companions?* they both thought to themselves at the same time.

Why would he call us companions and not slaves? Cormac wondered to himself.

"They are allies of ours from Ireland," said Aethelwulf.

"Allies?" growled Cedric again.

"Yes, allies! Didn't you hear me?"

Cedric shook his head. "What is it coming to when we are allies with the likes of these!"

"Dangerous times make strange bedfellows," said Aethelwulf.

Cedric, cursing and growling, put his arms around two of his companions and stumbled off down the street.

"You know that man?" Brian asked incredulously when the raucous group was out of earshot.

"Unfortunately, I do," Aethelwulf replied. Then, after a slight pause, he continued, "Well, don't just stand there. Let's be going."

"You ... you called us your companions?" quizzed Cormac.

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" said Aethelwulf. "I decided to give you your freedom, in exchange for your services."

"What services?" asked Brian.

"Future services," said Aethelwulf.

"What future services?" asked Brian again, hesitantly.

Aethelwulf turned to Brian. "War, fighting, killing—things like that," he said flippantly.

"What war? Whose war? Where? When?" rattled off Brian.

Aethelwulf turned serious. "There's going to be a war. The West Saxons—or Wessex as we call them—have attacked us in the south, and my father is raising the levies and has called for our men to gather at Tamworth Field. From there we will march south. You two look like you could be fine warriors with a little training. So, since slaves are not permitted to fight, I

have now granted you your freedom in exchange for your fighting with us.”

“And why should we fight in an English war?” challenged Brian.

“Out of gratitude for your freedom, perhaps,” said Aethelwulf. “But then again, it isn’t your war, is it? I tell you what, if you fight with me I will do all in my power to get you back to your homeland once we are victorious.”

“That is a bargain,” said Brian immediately.

“Aye, a bargain,” Cormac also replied.

The three men held out their arms and grasped them together. “So, come. I’ll need to outfit you if you are going to be soldiers in our cause.”

“Foreigners like us will be accepted in your army?” asked Cormac.

“You are the companions of the king’s son. You will be accepted,” said Aethelwulf.

The three marched on down the street and presently came to a wooden building that Aethelwulf entered. “This is my house,” he said, climbing the stairs.

A pretty woman in a long gray dress stood at the threshold of the house.

“This is Aelfthryth, my wife. She is even now expecting our first child.”

Brian and Cormac bowed their heads respectfully in her direction.

“These are my friends from Ireland,” said Aethelwulf to his wife.

“From Ireland?” the woman’s eyes opened wide.

“Aye, from Ireland,” said Cormac quietly.

“Please treat my guests well,” said Aethelwulf kindly to his wife.

The lady looked intently at them, then, determining that they were worthy of her husband’s friendship, said warmly, “Come in, gentlemen. Friends of my husband are welcome in our home.”



By dusk, Aelfthryth had prepared a meal which she then served to the three men.

After eating, Aelfthryth departed to another room, and Brian and Cormac were left with their host.

“My Lord Aethelwulf,” said Cormac deferentially, “I have seen many strange turns of events in my life of late, but this is one of the strangest.”

Aethelwulf looked at Cormac kindly. “I never intended to keep you as slaves.”

“Then why did you buy us?” asked Brian.

“I’d gone on a mission for my father. We heard that Norse ships had been sighted in the Irish Sea, and I was sent to find out what their intentions were. Could we expect raids and incursions? This has happened on the east in Northumbria by another type of Viking—Danes, they call themselves. They have been raiding and causing havoc, and their numbers are growing. The raids grow bolder, and my father suspects that it is but a short time before we find ourselves at war with them. So to hear that ships had been sighted in the Irish Sea caused him great consternation, and I was sent to try and discover what their plans may be.

“That is how I happened to be on the Isle of Mann. I was making my way to Ireland to try and gather firsthand knowledge of what is going on, when I saw a Viking ship arrive with Irish slaves. So I thought, ‘Why go to Ireland when I can buy a slave and thereby find out what I need to know from them?’ When I saw you,” he said, looking at Cormac, “I took a liking to you. But I did not want to make my intentions obvious, because as you know, the crowd in Mann was mostly Vikings. So I bought you. When I heard you say ‘God be with you’ to your friend when I left, I knew that, in all good conscience, I couldn’t separate you two.

“So I inquired who had bought Brian, and I then offered the man a goodly sum above what he had paid.

The man took it gladly. But now I had to keep up the pretense that you were my slaves to get you off of Mann, for anyone guessing that I was spying could have brought danger to us all. Once we arrived on English shores, I couldn't help my mischievousness in wanting to carry on the pretense at least a little longer. Please forgive me for that. But once I saw that stupid idiot Cedric ready to stab you, I knew it was time to stop the ruse.

"Nevertheless, it might have saved your life, because if you had known you were not slaves I'm afraid you would have started to fight, and Cedric would have killed you. There is no penalty here in my father's kingdom for killing Celts, for those from Wales are our enemies, so he could have done it with impunity.

"But now you must tell me all that you know of the Norse, and their intentions in Ireland—what are their strengths, and where they are encamped?"

So Brian and Cormac told Aethelwulf all that they knew. Aethelwulf asked many questions, and they answered them all as best as they could.

It was late at night before he was done. Turning to Cormac, Aethelwulf said, "I'm very sorry about your father, Cormac. He sounds like he was a brave and honest man, much like mine."

"Aye," said Cormac. "He was the most magnificent man in the world."

"Well, once this is all over with Wessex I'll see if I can get you back home, for Brian tells me that you have a marriage to attend."

Cormac had not thought much of Fiona—that is, up until now. It was too painful to think of not being with her. At that moment tears sprang to his eyes, as he thought of the loveliest girl in the world.

"I understand how you feel," said Aethelwulf, "for I am newly wed myself, and I find my wife the most wonderful companion and friend. And now she carries

our child! So rest assured, if all goes well, you will see your betrothed again."

"Aye, Cormac," said Brian. "Rest assured you'll be seeing Fiona again, but for me there's another face that is planted deep in my mind. I have thought long and hard on this. Haakon Svensson is our sworn enemy, a despoiler of our people, a vicious cruel beast, but my passion is not stirred for him as much as it is for that traitor to our kind, that king of Leinster. I shall not rest until I dance upon his grave."

"I see you hate the man very much," said Aethelwulf

"With every ounce of my strength, mind and body, I hate that man," said Brian.

"Hate is a powerful thing, but it is a cruel master."

"That may be," said Brian, "but it keeps me going."

Aethelwulf looked at the big Irishman. "I pray for you, my friend, and I pray that deeds of kindness that I and others show you may one day outweigh the pain and hatred that you feel."

Brian stared at the tabletop. "I cannot let it go," he said, raising his eyes to look at Aethelwulf. "I cannot let it go, for I will not let it go."

"Then I pity you. For I am young in years as you are, and I fear that it will make you old before your time. For some time I was destined to become a priest. I read the sacred writings of Saint Augustine as I sat in learning under our bishop, and it is his words that I speak."

"I have not time for tender bishops and even less for tender saints," said Brian.

Cormac had remained silent the whole time. He thought of his own life and of the death of his father and the loss of his loved ones, how he was separated from kith and kin in a strange land, relying on the hospitality of strangers. He thought of the loathing he felt at having been betrayed and enslaved, but as he looked at Brian, at the bitter turmoil the man was

going through, he wondered if he wanted to carry that for his life. He knew that Aethelwulf had spoken truth, just as the priest in the stockade had spoken truth.

Aethelwulf broke the silence. "Well, my friends, I think it is time for bed. Tomorrow will be a big day, for the levies and my fathers' thanes and ealdormen will start arriving at Tamworth Field. I must equip you with weapons. There is much to do, so until tomorrow I pray you sleep well."

For the first time in many days Cormac and Brian slept peacefully, not as slaves but once again as free men.



As the rising sun shone through the small window into the attic where the two slept, Brian and Cormac were awakened by a loud knocking on the front door of the house. Soon they heard men's voices raised in urgency.

Brian and Cormac quickly rose and opened the door of their room to look down to the main room of the house. Aethelwulf was at the door, talking with two other Englishmen who stood outside.

The two soon left, and as Aethelwulf walked back into the house, he looked up, and saw the two Irishmen.

"Things are moving faster than I expected," said Aethelwulf. "Those were messengers from my father. I've been summoned urgently. It seems the army of Wessex has marched further north than we'd imagined it would in such a short time. Please make yourself at home. Aelfthryth will take care of you until I return." With that, Aethelwulf grabbed his cloak and marched out the door, putting it on hurriedly as he jogged down the street.

Brian stretched and yawned and rubbed his eyes. "First good night's sleep I've had in so long a time, and it's over so quickly."

Aelfthryth looked up and smiled at the two men.

"Will you be coming down to eat now?"

"Aye," said Cormac with a cheery smile. "It feels so good to be free again that it has given me a wonderful appetite."

"Hmmm, me too!" mumbled Brian.

As both of them came down the short ladder to the main floor of the house, Aelfthryth set a simple meal before them, consisting of porridge and eggs. The two men devoured it, grunting appreciatively as they went.

"So you two are both the sons of kings," said Aelfthryth.

"Aye," said Cormac.

"Well, it's not so often that we get to treat foreign royalty at our house," said Aelfthryth.

"I don't feel like royalty," said Cormac. "Ours was a much more humble lifestyle than what you are used to here."

Aelfthryth smiled a pleasant smile. "Well, you two had best relax and take it easy, for I'm assured that once Aethelwulf returns, your life will take on a more hectic nature."

"Aye," said Brian. "I think I might try to get more sleep." With that he belched and stood up. "Thank you," he said to Aelfthryth. "That was a pleasant meal."

He climbed the ladder again to the room in the loft.

"My husband tells me that you are betrothed," said Aelfthryth to Cormac once Brian had left.

"Aye, to Brian's cousin, Fiona," Cormac replied.

"Is she a lovely girl?"

"She is the most lovely thing I have ever seen in my life—begging your pardon."

"That is all right," said Aelfthryth with an understanding smile. "Every man's beloved should be the most beautiful thing in the world to him."

Cormac smiled. "I have been afraid to even think

of her, for the pain of being apart is too much to bear. I miss her very much.”

“And so you should,” said Aelfthryth, sitting down at the table with him. “I’m sure she’ll be waiting and praying for the return of a fine man like yourself.”

Cormac’s eyes moistened. “I’m sure she is, although she is a mischievous one too.”

“It is the folly of young girls to be mischievous,” said Aelfthryth, “but I think menfolk love it so.”

“Yes,” Cormac said with a smile. “That’s what first attracted me to her. No, that’s not true. When I first saw her, I couldn’t take my eyes off her, and then I made an utter fool of myself telling her that I found her the most beautiful thing in the world. I thought that I had made myself an absolute fool in her eyes forever, but I found that she loved me. I could forgive her a thousand things because of that love.”

“Your absence has obviously caused you to grow even more fond of her.”

“Aye,” said Cormac. “Every day I miss her more.”

“Well, you’ll soon be going home to your country and to your love.”

“Aye,” said Cormac, “if I can survive this war.”

“You’ll survive,” said Aelfthryth. “I know it. Call it woman’s intuition or whatever you like, but I know you will survive. But I fear for my husband. His brothers are jealous of him, even though he is not an ambitious man. Cormac, could I ask a favor?”

“Aye, surely,” said Cormac.

“When the fighting starts, guard my Aethelwulf’s back. I fear that one of his brothers will try to use the opportunity to dispatch him, and I don’t want to be a widow or have the child in my belly growing up not having known his father.”

“Your husband has saved me and my friend from what could have been a very cruel fate. I believe I owe that much to him. Thus indeed, with all that is in me, I will do my utmost to guard your dear husband,

as God is my witness.”

“Thank you,” she said grasping his hand. “I know it seems funny that I have to ask strangers to do this, but when you are the king’s son, you have many enemies, and sometimes a stranger is more trustworthy than he you think of as a friend.”

“I hope I will not be a stranger to you for long,” said Cormac.

“Thank you, my friend,” said Aelfthryth. “Thank you!”

ON THE MARCH

The next morning the king's throne was moved from the great hall to a small hillock in the middle of Tamworth Field. It was the custom of the Angles and the Saxons that when a king called his thanes to come to battle, he would set up his throne and standard in a designated place, and they would all gather to him there. So the king sat on his throne surrounded by his sons and the ealdormen of the city. The standards of Mercia fluttered in the breeze behind him.

Brian and Cormac, uncomfortably arrayed in the armor provided them by Aethelwulf, stood to one side of the small hillock and watched as the king's subjects converged on the site from all over the country. By midday, hundreds had gathered, and news was coming in of many more on the way. The king alternated from greeting the subjects as they arrived, to discussing the details of the upcoming campaign with his sons and closest advisors.

Brian and Cormac stood in awe of the army that was gathering. For although at first it did not match the host of Vikings that they had seen massed on the shores of their lands, still to see the hundreds of well-acoutered warriors was an impressive sight.

"This is what we need to do at home," said Cormac to Brian. "Our battle tactics and our weapons are

ancient and ineffective! But you see these here gathered in their fine armor and the weapons of tempered steel, while we try to fight our enemies with javelins and iron swords! And in such small numbers as we have, we are easily overrun by superior armies.”

“Aye,” said Brian. “We’ve much to learn in the art of warfare. See that you study all of this well, Cormac. For what things we learn here we can put to good use when we return.”

“Let us pray,” said Cormac, “that we live long enough to return. For if this great host is for now our army, I imagine that the host of our enemy must be equal in number. I fear that it will be a bloody battle with many lives lost.”

“You always did have a morbid side to you when it came to fighting—just like your father,” said Brian, as he looked at Cormac. “Always fretting about getting hurt when you should be reveling in the glory of it.”

“I’m not going to ignore the possibility of death.”

“Nah, but it does no good to brood on it. We have come too far and now are so tantalizingly close to getting back to our kindred and our loved ones. I feel it in my bones, Cormac. Fortune at last is turning in our favor. All of these things that have happened we can learn from, and we shall use that knowledge to our greater advantage upon our return.”

Cormac looked at Brian. “Aye, I think that you’re right. Best not to be brooding of death. But I do notice a certain new and unusual propensity from you to be interested in learning. This is indeed strange.”

“Aye, well,” said Brian. “Strange times do strange things to a man.”

While they stood there, a tall, lanky Englishman walked over to them. “Ah, the two Celts,” he said, “ponging up the air again.”

Brian turned around. “Oh, it’s the drunk! I see you’re standing on your two feet. That must be a new and strange sensation for ya.”

Cedric stared at them.

“Ya have to do a mite better than that,” said Brian. “Trying to kill me with your looks isn’t going to do much.”

“Mark my word, Welshman,” growled Cedric, “You best be fighting with one eye looking forward and one eye looking backward, in this battle.”

“First of all, I’m not a Welshman,” replied Brian. “I’m an Irishman. An’ secondly, when fighting alongside people like you, I learnt to fight the way you advised long ago.”

“Mark my word, Welshman,” said Cedric, again, waving his finger at Brian. Then he turned and walked away.

“Charming,” said Brian, turning to Cormac. “These Englishmen have a wonderful way with words.”

Cormac laughed. “Aye,” he said. “But we’d best be watching out for him. He seems to be no friend of Aethelwulf either.”

All day the men stood in Tamworth Field until the sun began to set. By now, Brian and Cormac could only guess at the numbers that had gathered. “Over a thousand,” Cormac supposed.

“Closer to two thousand,” countered Brian.

Just before dusk the king of Mercia rose from his throne and spread his arms out wide. A hush fell on the host.

“Men of Mercia,” cried the king. “Loyal subjects, I acknowledge each of you as a true warrior and a loyal subject.”

A loud murmur of assent went through the crowd.

“Our enemies of Wessex are even now pressing forth on our borders. Tomorrow we march south to meet them and to do them battle. Each of you is a man of war and a man of peace. You know that my ways are peaceful, but tomorrow as we leave here, we march forth as men of war to defend what is ours and to turn back the invader. Let us call on God, the

Just, the Merciful, the Avenger of injustice, to steel our arms and strengthen our bodies, hearts and minds—that, in the bloody combat that we are going into, He will give us victory over those who seek to bring us injury.”

At this the men around the king started beating their shields with their swords. Soon every man was beating in unison, and the dreadful din continued for about the space of ten minutes. After this the king raised his hands again.

“So, eat now your evening meals and sleep well, for at dawn’s light we depart. God save Mercia!” he yelled.

“God save Mercia! God save the king!” replied the crowd.

With that, the host dispersed to their various encampments on Tamworth Field, and set about lighting fires and cooking food.

Some time later, having at last been dismissed from his father’s presence, Aethelwulf came over to Brian and Cormac. “Come this way, to the campfires of my retainers,” he told them.

This Brian and Cormac did, and soon they were sitting in a ring of English warriors around the campfire. There the men ate heartily, drank even more heartily, and sang songs of victory. Brian joined in most lustily, while Cormac sat a little aloof, contemplating the events of the day and pondering Aelfthryth’s words of the night before. Would anyone of these try to kill Aethelwulf in the battle tomorrow?

Well, Cormac thought, I can only wait and see.

Soon he moved a few steps away from the circle, lay down on the ground and looked up at the stars. He pulled his cloak tightly up to his neck to keep him from the chill of the night air.

His thoughts once again wandered back to his loved ones. Muirheartach’s smiling face danced before his eyes, to be joined by that of his mother

and others of his clann. Fiona’s face soon came to the fore.

“I’ll see you soon, my love,” he whispered as he fell asleep.



The birds had already begun their morning singing before the first rays of sunlight peeked over the horizon. Cormac opened his eyes and sat bolt upright. His eyes scanned the unfamiliar scene in front of him. Hundreds of smoldering campfires still smoked from the fires that burnt the night before.

Cormac gave Brian a nudge. The big man rolled over and opened his eyes. Soon they were both on their feet, as were others in the camp.

Cormac looked oddly at Brian.

“Well, what are you looking at me like that for, boy?” said Brian to Cormac.

“Do you notice anything unusual this morning?” asked Cormac.

“Well, we’re sleeping in a field of a thousand English warriors—that’s a bit unusual. I haven’t done that before in my life. But aside from that, no, I haven’t found anything that unusually unusual about this morning,” said Brian testily.

“Oh,” said Cormac. “Well, I did.”

“Aye, then go on,” urged Brian inquisitively.

“Well, I’ve known you for awhile now, haven’t I?” asked Cormac.

“Aye,” said Brian.

“Well, this is the first morning that I’ve not heard you complain about getting up.”

“I must be turning over a new leaf,” he said, smiling at Cormac.

“Well, this is a mite disturbing,” said Cormac. “Just when I’m getting used to something about you, you go and change on me.”

“You mean to say you *liked* my complaining?” questioned Brian.

“No, I don’t like your complaining, but when you go changing your routine on me, it’s a mite disturbing—especially on a day like this. I think it is not a good omen for the day ahead.”

Brian shook his head. “I don’t know what to make of you,” he muttered. “Nothing seems to satisfy you. And now, to add to your brooding of yesterday you’ve gone and got superstitious on me with omens and the like.”

“What do you mean, nothing seems to satisfy me?” asked Cormac, sounding agitated.

“You know what I mean by nothing seems to satisfy you,” replied Brian.

“No, I don’t know what you mean!”

“Just listen to you now,” said Brian. “Nothing seems to satisfy you.”

Aethelwulf, who had slept not far from them, rolled over. “Would you two mind being quiet?” he asked emphatically.

“What?” they said in unison.

“For goodness’ sake, you two! No wonder your country is so weak! You spend all your time arguing.”

Cormac and Brian looked at Aethelwulf with stupefied expressions, and then turned to each other and laughed, slapped each other on the back and went about their chores.

Aethelwulf shook his head. *And they say these two are allies? God help the Irish—for they surely can’t seem to help themselves*, he thought.



Soon everyone was up and the morning meal was prepared. Most ate heartily but some, more nervous about the day ahead, only nibbled on their food.

Soon the men formed ranks. Aethelstan, the king’s oldest son, went to the head of the column and started leading the army south. Brian and Cormac lined up with Aethelwulf and his retainers and marched off also.

As they marched, more groups of warriors caught up with and joined them from the further extremities of the kingdom. The newly arrived ealdormen and leading thanes, most on horses, rode up to the king to make their arrival known. The king acknowledged each one with respect and courtesy.

Around noon the column stopped. Food was once again prepared. This time it was more of a hurried affair, for the king was anxious to cover a good distance in this day’s march.

Messengers continued arriving with news of the West Saxons rapid advance. By nightfall they had received intelligence that they were only ten miles away from the Saxon host, which had already pitched camp for the night. The king ordered his men to do likewise. This time numerous sentries were posted to guard the camp. The watch was rotated every few hours.

Brian and Cormac were not required that night to stand watch, perhaps because some Mercians had doubts about their loyalty. Cormac and Brian didn’t mind, however, preferring to get a good night’s sleep. Cormac marveled at how calm he felt, and how his feelings contrasted somewhat to his first taste of battle, the skirmish against the Ostmen that seemed to have happened so long ago.

The next morning the men arose and breakfasted quickly on bread, cheese and other cold foods. There was no time to stoke the campfires and cook. The warriors formed ranks again and proceeded to march south. Those Mercians most familiar with the area had been consulting with the king the night before about the best place to do battle. Five miles from where they had camped was a low-lying range of hills, on the other side a plain. It would be good—in fact, vital to the battle to come—for the Mercians to have the advantage of being on high ground when the battle started.

After an hour's march they had reached the foot of a small range of hills. Scouts had gone ahead to make sure that Wessex had not already claimed the higher ground. These came back with the good news that the hills had not been claimed, but that the advance units of the army of Wessex could be clearly seen on the plains below.

The Mercian king hurriedly barked out orders to his commanders to have their forces occupy the heights. The army had drawn up into battle formation. The long column in which they marched had split into three divisions.

Aethelwulf had been given command of the left flank, along with Cenwulf, the ealdorman from the town where Cormac and Brian had first landed in England, and a formidable warrior. Aethelstan commanded the center, where the bulk of the army was concentrated. The king's two other sons commanded the right flank. The king was situated in the rear of the main body, surrounded by his personal guard. Once the battle began, he would situate himself at the top of the hill, so that he would be able to direct the battle.

Aethelwulf led his men east of the main body of soldiers, and after a gentle climb of half an hour, they were only a few steps from the top of the ridge. Here Aethelwulf motioned for all his men to stop and to sit, while he and Cenwulf carefully crawled to the top of the hill.

As they looked to the west, they saw that all the other units in the army had also stopped just short of the crest of the hills. The Mercians did not want to tip their hand and let the enemy know that they were there, without first knowing themselves what was on the other side.

Aethelwulf and Cenwulf peered cautiously over the top of the hill. The army of Wessex could clearly be seen, still marching in one long column. They had

not yet regrouped into any sort of battle array.

"They don't know we're here," said Aethelwulf. "We have the advantage."

"Aye, that is what it seems," said Cenwulf, "but look over there!"

In the east, another column of enemy soldiers could be seen coming.

"The army of Sussex, no doubt," said Cenwulf. "Wessex and Sussex always stick together."

"Yes," said Aethelwulf. "That tips the scales, doesn't it?"

"It certainly does. Still, we have the higher ground—and I think we're a match for them."

"By God, I hope so," said Aethelwulf.

Cenwulf and Aethelwulf scrambled back down from the top of the ridge, and sent one of their men running to the king to report that Sussex was coming from the east. Since they were positioned on the left flank and therefore the most easterly part of the Mercian army, they were not sure if the king from his position could have spied the second army approaching. Presently the runner returned.

"The king thanks you and said, yes, he had spied the second column."

The messenger then went on to describe to Aethelwulf his father's modified battle plans, in light of having to face the combined armies of Wessex and Sussex. Their foes' armies hadn't merged yet, so they would not have a cohesive battle plan. Mercia needed to attack before their enemies got themselves organized.

About the third hour of the day, as the armies of Wessex and Sussex started to converge, the Mercian king gave the signal. At this, the main body of the army began to beat their swords against their shields in the same way they had done on Tamworth Field. Still they didn't show themselves at the top of the ridge.

The Saxons below halted in their tracks as the sound of the clashing swords and shields reached their ears. Aethelwulf, from his vantage point behind a boulder, watched as the ranks of Wessex milled around in confusion for several minutes before their commanders restored order in the ranks.

The Mercians in the center kept up their rhythmic beating, and then at the signal of their commander, marched to the top of the hill in ranks three deep and looked down on their consternated enemies below.

-13- TO BATTLE

Cormac and Brian watched from their position, as the men of Mercia in the center formation, still beating their shields with their swords, marched up to the top of the ridge. It was an incredible, and even awesome sight.

“Just wish I could see the faces of those down there,” said Brian. “They must be making an awful mess in their breeches at the sight of such a host.”

“There’s more of them down there than those of us up here,” said Aethelwulf. “So I don’t know if they would be making too much of a mess in their breeches, as you put it. Our advantage is that we have the heights, and we have to attack before they regroup into battle formation. Otherwise our advantage is minimized and their superior numbers will start telling on us.”

“Can I peek over the edge?” asked Brian.

“No!” answered Aethelwulf. “We’ve been told to stay here. Don’t worry—there’ll be plenty of fighting for us to do.”

“Aye,” said Brian. “I just want to get this battle over with so I can be going home.”

“You’ll get home soon enough,” said Aethelwulf.

The men in Aethelwulf’s division were getting anxious, and some were craning their necks to see

what they could.

“Every one of you stay down!” Aethelwulf called out sharply. “Our job is to follow orders, so we’ll stay hidden until we are ordered forward.”

“’Tis more noble to be in the center column,” said one disgruntled soldier.

“Perhaps it is,” said Aethelwulf. “But it is nobler still to follow the bidding of your king, and he has asked us to wait here. Let him be our general today, and not every one of us our own.”

“The young man speaks wisely,” said Cenwulf. “There’ll be fighting enough for all of us.”

After what seemed an eternity, but had only been a minute or two, Aethelstan in the van of the Mercian center raised his sword high over his head, and with a yell that could be heard far and wide, ordered the charge. Down the hill the Mercians started to charge, slowly at first, and in tight formation. Then they picked up speed, so that by the time they reached the bottom of the hill each man was running as fast as he could, with his sword held high, or his spear pointing out in front of him.

With a loud clash, the two armies joined in battle. The Mercians’ attack formation was like a wedge, and it rammed into the disorganized center of the Saxon army. They broke through the first line of the Wessex men in several places.

Aethelstan fought like a man possessed, for he wanted the glory of killing the king of Wessex. His Mercian warriors followed hard behind him. The men of Wessex, initially very disorganized, were even more scattered by the fierceness of the Mercian onslaught. But slowly their extra numbers began to tell as they closed ranks. The battle at first was going Mercia’s way, but now it was hard to tell who had the advantage.

The army of Sussex formed battle ranks in a more orderly manner and started to march in a wide

flanking movement on the eastward side of the battle. Their intention was to try and fall on the Mercian rear, trapping them between their army and that of Wessex.

This tactic had been foreseen by the Mercian king, and was the reason that Aethelwulf and his men had been held in reserve until now.

Once the army of Sussex had completed its flanking maneuver, it started to move in to close the trap. Aethelwulf had crawled up to the top of the hill again, looking and waiting for the red flag that was his father’s signal to them to advance.

It soon came, and Aethelwulf roused his men. They then started beating their swords against their shields as the left flank of the Mercian army showed itself at the top of the hill. Cormac and Brian joined in the dreadful racket.

Aethelwulf had been given about five hundred men to command, so it was quite a host that stood on the top of the hill looking down. The men of Sussex now realized that instead of catching the Mercians between themselves and the army of Wessex, they were now themselves caught between two wings of the Mercian army. This time it was Aethelwulf’s turn to raise his arm and yell the war cry of the Mercians. With that the men swarmed over the hill, with Aethelwulf and Cenwulf in the vanguard. Cormac and Brian took up positions directly behind them as they ran down the hill.

Within moments they clashed into the men of Sussex, who had reformed to face this new attack. The momentum of the charge down the hill took a bloody initial toll on the men of Sussex. But soon everyone was engaged in deadly hand-to-hand combat.

The melee was so confusing it was hard to tell friend from foe at times. Cormac had left his sword sheathed and was using a long spear, similar to his

javelin at home.

At least, he thought, I know how to wield this kind of weapon effectively.

But he had two missions here: to fight the enemies of his new friend, Aethelwulf, but also to guard his back. It was difficult, indeed, to keep an eye on his commander as he repeatedly disappeared into the thick of the battle.

“Brian, guard Aethelwulf’s back,” cried Cormac, as he lunged with his spear at one of the Sussexmen, piercing him in the arm.

The Saxon cursed loudly as he fell to the ground in agony. Cormac looked at him in pity, but was soon shaken out of his reverie by the sight of another Saxon lunging at him with his sword.

Cormac crouched, stuck the rear end of his spear into the ground, and pointed the tip at his Saxon opponent while holding his shield high to parry the oncoming blow of the sword. The Saxon had not been prepared for this maneuver and impaled himself on Cormac’s spear.

A look of horror flashed across the Saxon’s face as he fell. The spear twisted out of Cormac’s hand and snapped under the weight of the dead opponent. More Saxons came at him, but by this time Brian was at his side.

“Get up, man!” he yelled above the din of battle. “You can’t fight kneeling down.”

Cormac stumbled back a few paces and drew his sword. Other Mercian soldiers rushed by them into the fray, and Cormac slipped back behind them to catch his breath.

It was then that Cormac noticed that Cedric was running past him, towards Aethelwulf.

Oh no! thought Cormac. *He’s going to assassinate Aethelwulf!* Turning to run after him, Cormac slipped and fell heavily on the ground. All he could do was watch hopelessly as Cedric drew closer and closer to

where Aethelwulf was.

Then, to his surprise, Cormac saw Cedric plunge his sword into the back of a treacherous Mercian soldier, who had at that moment raised his sword above his head to strike Aethelwulf in the back.

Aethelwulf turned at the same time and saw what had happened and nodded his appreciation to Cedric. “Thank you, good Cedric,” he yelled above the clash of armor. “You have saved my life again.”

“All in a day’s work,” yelled back Cedric.

Aethelwulf stepped back a few paces to catch his breath and to see where next to attack, just as Cormac struggled to his feet and ran to his side.

“I failed your wife,” panted Cormac. “She charged me to look after your back.”

“Well, it’s a good thing that Cedric was there,” Aethelwulf replied.

“I thought that he was going to kill ya,” said Cormac, still breathing heavily.

“Cedric is my boon companion of many years,” replied Aethelwulf.

Cormac shook his head. “He sure had me fooled.”

“I’ll explain later. Right now we have a battle to fight.”

Cormac turned to see Brian swinging wildly in a bruising one-on-one fight with a blond-headed Saxon who could have been his twin in size. Another Saxon joined in the fight with Brian and the big Irishman found himself quickly being forced backward by his two assailants.

Cormac rushed over to help, but before he could, Cedric was once again there. He swung his sword heavily against one of the Saxons, and that unfortunate man fell dead with a gaping wound on his neck.

“Come on, you Celtic manure shoveler!” said Cedric to Brian. “Finish the man off and let’s get on with the battle.”

Brian paused, bewildered by the contradiction between Cedric's intervention and his insult. The lack of concentration almost lost him the fight, as the Saxon bore down on him. But at that moment, Cormac intervened. Picking up a spear that lay discarded on the ground, Cormac threw it with all his might at the Saxon. It pierced him in the upper thigh. The Saxon screamed and fell.

Brian turned to Cedric. "I'd be thanking ya to stay out of my fights!" he yelled. "My goodness! How can a man fight with all this interference?"

Cormac and Cedric looked at each other and shrugged. Then they all turned and ran back to where Aethelwulf was now fighting.



The battle went long and hard. The Mercian king had sent the right flank into battle shortly after Aethelwulf's men had attacked. These had performed a similar maneuver to what the men of Sussex had, but this time they ran around the side of the army of Wessex and had fallen heavily on its weak left flank. The Saxons were no cowards, though, and fought long and hard. Noon came and went and still there was no respite.

Soon warriors were collapsing, not because of wounds but due to exhaustion. The Mercians had held back one hundred men in reserve and as a guard around the king. The king realized that somehow the battle would have to be turned into victory from the stalemate it was now in. Keeping a chosen group of six warriors as bodyguards, he sent the rest into the battle.

It was a dangerous tactic, but this infusion of fresh troops into the Mercian ranks—even though small—gave them new vigor and turned the tide decisively in Mercia's favor.

At first in only a trickle, but then in increasingly larger numbers, the Saxons began fleeing the field.

Soon all of them joined in the flight. After five hours of pitched battle, the Mercians had won the day, but at a heavy cost.

Aethelstan, that bloodthirsty scion of Mercia, lay dead in the center of the field. Ludican, his brother, died with him. The king of Wessex was also dead, as were several of his sons. The king of Sussex had fled when the battle had turned hopelessly in favor of Mercia.

Aethelwulf, Cormac, Cedric and Brian walked back to the foot of the hill and sank to the ground, too exhausted to exult in the victory.

Cormac lay down for a long time staring at the blue sky. *God, it's awful!* he thought. *There's no glory in war.*

After a long time catching his breath, Brian propped himself up on one elbow and looked over at Cedric, who still lay there.

"And who would you be calling a manure shoveler back there?" said Brian.

"You, you obnoxious Celt," Cedric retorted, without doing Brian the honor of looking at him.

"The only manure I'm going to be shoveling is you—and that I'll be shoveling with my sword," bellowed Brian.

"You big tub of lard," growled back Cedric, "if it hadn't been for me, you wouldn't still be alive today."

"I'd be thanking ya to get back up on your feet and say that again, you ugly-faced heathen," said Brian, struggling to stand up.

"I think I might be doing you the favor," said Cedric as he stood up, sword in hand.

Cormac looked on horrified at what was happening. "My God! Stop them, Aethelwulf."

Aethelwulf let out a laugh. "You two deserve to kill each other," he yelled. "Here we just won a victory and now you're fighting between yourselves."

"You heard what he called me," protested Cedric.

"You heard what he called me," asserted Brian.

"And I'd be calling you both idiots," said Aethelwulf.

"Lucky for you I don't have the energy to get up, let alone keep you two blockheads from fighting. But for God's sake, stop it!"

"What's God got to do with it?" yelled Cedric.

"Aye, why are you bringing God into it?" growled Brian.

Aethelwulf groaned. "Enough! Stop it! I order it!"

Cedric reluctantly lowered his weapon, as did Brian.

"Oh, thank God," sighed Cormac in relief.

Aethelwulf presently struggled to his feet and made his way over to where the king of Mercia was surrounded by his surviving ealdormen and leading thanes.

"I'm glad you're alive," said the king, as Aethelwulf came over to greet him. "Your brothers Athelstan and Ludican are dead. That leaves only you and Bernwulf. The king sighed deeply. "We have the victory today, but at a bloody cost."

"Yes, Father," said Aethelwulf quietly.

"I see you're exhausted, man. Take your men away from this fearful place, and go back over the hill and make camp. Bernwulf is bearing the bodies of your brothers back to your mother. We'll gather the rest of the dead and bury them in the morning."

Turning to one of his ealdormen, the king commanded, "See that the wounded are cared for as best as you can."

"Yes, my lord," said the man.

"Oh, and ride to the monastery at Malmesbury and ask the abbot to send monks to preside over the funerals. And as many as are skilled in the art of healing, send them to care for our wounded."

"Yes, my lord," said the man again.

With that, the king and his retinue trudged wearily back over the hill and set up camp for the evening.

After he had eaten, he summoned Aethelwulf.

"So tell me what happened today, my son."

"We fell upon the Sussexmen and fought them until we won," answered Aethelwulf.

"And what peril came to you, my son?" the king further inquired.

"None, my lord," said Aethelwulf.

"I've been told that you were in danger, not only from the Sussexmen but also from our own."

"Yes, Father."

"What happened?"

"My brother Bernwulf sent someone to try to kill me, but Cedric was guarding my back and killed the would-be assassin before he could strike the blow."

"And you knew of this conspiracy beforehand?" inquired the father.

"I suspected it. That is why Cedric and I had been seen to quarrel and fall out, so that he would be recruited by those who hated me and brought into their confidence."

"I wondered why you and Cedric had come to bad terms," said the king. "It seemed like you two were inseparable before."

"It was a hard thing to do," explained Aethelwulf, "to treat one I loved with such scorn in public, and him me, but it paid off."

"Aethelwulf, you have shown yourself wise to foil such intrigue."

"Yes, Father."

"So will you bring this accusation against your brother?"

"No, for what good would it do?" said Aethelwulf. "It would only divide the kingdom between him and me."

"Indeed, that's what it would do," said the king. "Bernwulf is a bloody man, as his other brothers were, and now he's in line to become the king, upon my death. He will always be my heir as long as he lives."

“Yes, Father,” said Aethelwulf.

“But if he dies, then you would become king upon my death,” the king said with a tone of speculation.

“Yes, Father. Yet I cannot raise my hand against my brother.”

“But he would against you,” replied the king.

“That is his business,” said Aethelwulf. “But I could never live with it.”

The king nodded sadly, “Neither could I,” said the king. “So continue to guard your back well, my son. And your brother, we’ll have to leave in God’s hands.”

“Yes, Father.”

“One thing more before you go back to your companions,” said the king. “Those two Irishmen that you told me about, did you gain from them the knowledge of the Norse we need?”

“Yes, Father, I’ve learned all I can from them.”

“Then they have served their purpose.”

“Yes, Father, they have, and it’s time for them to be going home.”

The king nodded. “That is best, my son. To see you in league with those two will only give your enemies further with which to cast aspersions on you.”

“Yes, Father,” Aethelwulf nodded.

“But they served you well in battle?” asked the king.

“Yes, sire.”

“Good! Now go, my son, for I have other business to attend to this night.”



A BITTER MASTER

Brian sat morosely looking at the campfire. Directly opposite him, on the other side of the fire, Cedric did the same. Cormac lay a ways off looking at them.

Presently, Aethelwulf returned from visiting his father and sat down next to Cormac. They said not a word for a long time.

Finally, Cormac spoke questioningly. "So, will we be leaving?"

"Yes," said Aethelwulf. "As soon as it can be arranged to get you safely back to Ireland."

Cormac nodded. "Good," he said. "I think we need to get Brian back there, before he does himself some harm amongst your people."

"That's right," said Aethelwulf.

"Why does Cedric hate him so?" asked Cormac.

"His family had a farmstead near the Welsh march. One night the Welsh swooped down on his farm. Killed them all—father, mother, brothers and sisters. Cedric escaped because he had gone out to sleep on the hillside next to his sheep. He was but a lad of eight at the time. Ever since then he's had a burning hatred of the Welsh—understandably so, I assume.

"His neighbors found him the next day standing in the burnt-out farmhouse, not saying a word. An ealdorman took him into his family and raised him

as his son. That ealdorman was a close counselor to my father. Cedric and I grew up as brothers, more or less. I had nothing in common with my own older brothers. But there was a deep, sad side to Cedric that I was attracted to. I think I thought I could help him in some way. Well, he grew and I grew but he was never able to put the past behind him. His hatred of the Welsh has never dimmed.”

“We are not Welsh,” said Cormac.

“Well, you’re Irish, so you might as well be Welsh in Cedric’s eyes. He doesn’t make much distinction between Celts.”

“We didn’t have anything to do with the killing of his parents and family.”

“He knows that, but hatred and bitterness are blind.”

Cormac shook his head.

“Cedric will be better once you’re gone,” said Aethelwulf.

“And what happened to the attackers?”

“My father launched a punitive raid and many Celts in the nearby area were slaughtered. Probably those involved in the attack on Cedric’s family were killed in that raid.”

“Surely if he seeks vengeance then that would have satisfied him,” said Cormac.

“I think the shock of seeing your family slaughtered before you must be too great to ever overcome. Cedric never has.”

“You once told Brian that vengeance was a bitter master,” said Cormac. “It seems like Cedric could use your advice.”

“He’s the one I learnt that from,” replied Aethelwulf. “I wasn’t just quoting a nice maxim when I said that to Brian, for I have seen hatred devour Cedric’s spirit.”

“Well, I’m not asking him to forgive his family’s murderers,” said Cormac. “I’m just asking him not to hold it against us.”

“To tell you the truth,” said Aethelwulf, “I don’t think he would be freed from that hatred *until* he forgives his family’s murderers.”

“Isn’t that a tall order?” questioned Cormac.

“Well, when you have had the opportunity to study the works of the Church fathers as I have, then you can see that things like this were spoken of by them. If Christ forgave His tormentors on the cross, then must we do likewise if we want any relief from the pains we feel inside.”

“Sounds like you should have been a priest,” smiled Cormac. “You dispense such holy advice.”

“Well, I couldn’t see myself living in a monastery, studying books all day,” said Aethelwulf. “And so I begged my father to release me from that life. And he did.”

“Well, thank God for that,” said Cormac. “I know one lady who is happy for it.”

Aethelwulf turned to Cormac and smiled. “Yes,” he said.

With this Cormac stood up, and walked off several paces, looking up at the sky. The stars shone brightly. The moon was just rising, and that golden crescent somehow made Cormac feel as if God were smiling down on him.

How tranquil it is, he thought. There’s peace up there.

Cormac’s thoughts turned once more to Cedric. Then he thought of the course his own life had taken. Would he, Cormac, hate all Vikings for the death of his father, as Cedric did the Welsh? The thought of it seemed to give rise to a woeful melancholy. Cormac wandered back to the fire and sat down not far from Cedric.

“Thank you for saving my friend’s life today,” said Cormac to Cedric.

“Huh?” grunted Cedric, aroused from his thoughts. “Oh, you mean the manure shoveler? I don’t know

what came over me,” he answered caustically.

“Well, whatever it was,” said Cormac, “I’m happy.”

“Believe me,” said Cedric, “making your kind happy is the furthest thing from my mind.”

“You hate us that much, huh?”

“My joy in life is thinking how I can rid the Earth of you Welsh.”

“But I’m not Welsh.”

“You’re a Celt just the same,” he snarled.

“But I’m just a person. I’m not a whole race.”

“You might as well be as far as I’m concerned.”

“Can I ask you a question? I’m not going to stop to get your permission, for I shall ask it anyway. Is your life happy filled with such hatred?”

“My life, happy?” said Cedric in a tone of astonishment at the stupidity of such a question. “Of course my life isn’t happy. My happiness died when I was eight years old.”

“The slaughter of your family was indeed a horrible thing.”

“Thank you for stating the obvious,” snapped Cedric.

“But I mean it,” said Cormac. “I mean I’m honestly sorry that happened. And I wish there was something I could do to change that, but I can’t.”

“There is something you can do,” snarled Cedric. “You can stop talking to me about it.”

But Cormac pressed on. “You know, the Vikings took my father, and Brian and me captive. We were sold out by the man we called our king. My father drowned trying to make his escape. I’m sure by now that great hardship has come to my family, as they lost both the father and the oldest son. I don’t know what has happened to my family. It’s only been a few short weeks I’ve been gone, but it seems like years. But I don’t hate every Viking in the world, and I don’t hate every member of the king’s clann for what he and they did.”

“Why not?” questioned Cedric.

“I don’t know,” replied Cormac. “I suppose it is because people are individuals, and I can’t hate all of a certain kind for what some of their people do. Although, quite frankly, the way the Vikings are pillaging, murdering and raping in my land, I could well hate them all. But somehow, I think there must be some good among them. They must have children and wives who aren’t of that vicious a bent.”

“I hate all Welsh,” growled Cedric. “Down to the littlest baby, I hate them all.”

“No, you don’t,” said Cormac. “You couldn’t look at a little baby and say, ‘I hate you, because of what someone else did.’”

“I have hated all my life that I can remember. I can hate that little baby.”

“I don’t think you can. It is impossible to hate a baby,” said Cormac.

“Oh, all right! Maybe I can’t hate that little baby,” said Cedric. “But everyone else I can.”

“Well, what about a child. Can you hate a child?”

“Where’s all this leading to?” asked Cedric.

“I’m just asking questions,” said Cormac. “Come on, tell me, can you hate a child?”

“Well, I suppose not.”

“What age does the person need to be before you can hate them?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” growled Cedric, obviously unsettled by all of this. “You’re bothering me with these questions.”

“I know I’m bothering you, because you wouldn’t be reacting the way you are otherwise.”

Aethelwulf had lain down in the grass to go to sleep, but he had overheard the conversation so far. *Keep going, Cormac*, he said in his heart. *You are getting through to him like I never have been able to.*

“So, what age does someone have to be before you hate them?”

Cedric's lip quivered and shook. The mouth, which seemed so naturally turned into a sneer, drooped. He bit down hard on his bottom lip, trying to stop the tears that were coming to his eyes.

"I don't know," he moaned.

Cormac moved over to the man and put his arms around his shoulders. Cedric started crying uncontrollably.

Brian, who had been oblivious to what was going on up till now, looked across the fire and said, "What is the fellow blubbing about?"

"Oh, be quiet, for goodness sake," said Cormac.

Cedric, oblivious to Brian's comments, continued crying. Cormac didn't know what to do except to keep holding the man tight.

Aethelwulf crawled over to Cedric's side and stuck his hand on his shoulder.

"Gotta let it go, man!" said Aethelwulf. "Let it go!"

Cedric continued to sob uncontrollably. After a long time, he stopped crying and looked at Aethelwulf.

"I'm sorry. I'm acting like a silly woman," said Cedric, smudging his hand roughly across his face.

"No, you're not," said Aethelwulf. "You're acting like a man, instead of an animal."

Cedric managed a sheepish grin. "I'm sorry, Aethelwulf. You've been trying to tell me this for years but I just couldn't bring myself to acknowledge it. I felt like I would be dishonoring my parents if I didn't keep the hate alive."

"It's dishonoring your parents to not live the life you should."

Cedric nodded and then looked over at Brian, who ever since Cormac's rebuke had sat sullenly staring at the spectacle on the other side of the fire.

"Will you forgive me?" said Cedric.

"Forgive you for what?" said Brian.

"For calling you a big tub of lard and a manure shoveler."

Brian laughed. "For sure," he said. "You're not far wrong with the tub of lard comment anyhow."

Cedric laughed, as the others joined in as well. "I feel so damn good—for the first time in years," said Cedric. "I feel so damn good and I haven't drunk a drop of ale."

"Speaking of ale," said Aethelwulf, "I propose we have a drop." He got to his feet and stumbled over to one of the other campfires. He returned shortly, carrying a small barrel on his shoulder and four drinking horns in his hand. "They're all passed out over there. I don't think they'll be missing these—at least not until the morning."

Passing around the horns, he then filled each one from the contents of the barrel. "There!" he said, raising his drinking horn. "To new beginnings!"

"To new beginnings," they all said.

"And to new friends," said Cedric.

"Aye, to new friends," said Brian. "And by the way, thanks again for saving my life today."

Cedric beamed back, "I suppose I did, didn't I?"

"Well, don't take too much credit," said Brian. "I could have handled it."

"Aye," said Cormac mockingly.

"I could have," said Brian testily.

"No doubt, my friend," interjected Aethelwulf, not wishing for the newfound friendship to sour over the other's penchant for petty squabbling. "Here's to a good night's sleep, and may God watch over us." With those words he downed the remaining ale in his vessel.

"Amen to that," said Brian good-naturedly.

"Amen!" they all chorused.



The next morning Cormac and Brian found themselves marching back towards Tamworth with the victorious Mercian army. There was some grumbling in the ranks from those who felt that the king should have pressed home the advantage of his

victory and pillaged into Wessex territory, thereby providing some booty for the returning warriors. Others were just happy that they were returning alive to their families.

Aethelwulf and Cedric walked a ways apart from Brian and Cormac, and the two Irishmen noticed their friends in animated conversation, their hands in constant motion. They would stop every once in a while and talk more in depth. After some time they joined up again with Brian and Cormac.

“You two talk like Irishmen!” laughed Brian, whirling his hands around in mock imitation of the two Englishmen. “Why so lively a conversation?”

Aethelwulf looked askance at Cedric.

“Is everything all right between you two?” asked Cormac.

“We’ve been discussing our future,” offered Aethelwulf.

“Your future?” said Brian. “I thought your future would be looking quite rosy right now—the son of a king, second in line to his throne. A powerful man in a powerful nation.”

“Perhaps,” said Aethelwulf, “but then again when one lives close to power he usually becomes the object of intrigues and squabbles not his own.”

Cedric remained tightlipped.

Brian shook his head. “Well, I don’t understand all this intrigue stuff. I’m a brigand, I admit it, but I always knew where my family stood with me.”

Aethelwulf and Cedric exchanged glances. “Go on and tell him,” Cedric blurted out.

Aethelwulf turned to Cormac and Brian. “I would like to return with you to Ireland.”

Cormac’s eyes widened. “Return with us? Why?”

“It was my brother, Bernwulf, who sent the assassin against me in the battle. And of all my brothers, he’s the one left alive and he’s the one destined to become king. My life would not be safe, at

least not for now. If it were just me, I would not care so much, but I am married and my wife carries a child within her.”

“But we don’t live in the grandeur that you do,” said Cormac. “Our dwellings are much more humble. Our way of life is much less developed than yours. You live in fine houses made of stone and mortar with wooden roofs and stairs—all of which I’d never seen before. Our homes would be simple, even primitive to you.”

“Well then, we’ll just have to get used to living a little more simply,” said Aethelwulf.

“What think you, Cedric?” asked Cormac.

“Aethelwulf is right,” replied Cedric. “It is my counsel that he leaves this land, at least for now. Now that Bernwulf’s way is cleared to the throne, I fear for Aethelwulf with only his father to protect him. His father is a just man, and neither he nor Aethelwulf would conspire against Bernwulf, although that man is a bloody man and motivated by greed and power. But I fear that Aethelwulf will soon be dead, for Bernwulf fears his rivalry to the throne.”

“But do you want to be king? Are you indeed a rival for the throne?” asked Cormac.

“No, I’m not. If I ever become king, it would be reluctantly. But there are many in the kingdom who no doubt believe Bernwulf will bring ruin on the nation by provoking wars with our neighbors. They know I would follow my father’s policy of peace, and they might seek to overthrow Bernwulf and place me on the throne instead.”

“So if you have powerful friends, why flee?”

“When a man has a family, that man has an obligation to protect them. I could leave and go live in one of the other kingdoms of England, but then I would just be used as a puppet for the ambitions of the kings of those nations. No, I must go somewhere away from all these intrigues. If God wills that

Bernwulf dies, and that on my father's death I become king in his stead, I will leave that in God's hands. But I will not raise my hand against my brother. Cedric would come with me."

"You too?" asked Brian incredulously, looking at Cedric. "You would live amongst us manure shovelers?"

"Ahhh," Cedric groaned. "Please forgive that comment."

"No sooner asked, than forgiven," said Brian. "But seriously, man, you would want to live with us too?"

Cedric sighed. "It is the best choice of a poor lot," he said with a half-smile. "But I say I'll make the best of it."

"God knows you're welcome," said Cormac. "But the decision if you would live amongst my people is not ours but it would be up to the oenach, the council, to decide on granting you asylum in our midst."

"The same goes for the O'Hooleys," said Brian. "We ne'er make these decisions on our own, but they must be made in the council."

"Then I shall have to trust in your fair councils, and I trust you two will be my advocates," said Aethelwulf.

"Aye," said Cormac, "there's no problem there. I would plead for you to be allowed. But remember you are not a Celt, you are an Englishman. Our ways are different than your ways, and as all of this has been strange and different to me, so will our lands seem strange and different to you."

"Well, I'm resolved to still try," said Aethelwulf. "Once we return to Tamworth, our preparation must be swift."

"Aye, and your dear Aelfthryth, I wonder what she will think of it," said Cedric.

"She will put the baby's life above her own comfort. That's the kind of woman she is," said Aethelwulf.

-15- RIVALS

The march back to Tamworth was done at a more leisurely pace than the march south before the battle had been. Along the way, different groups of warriors left the main body to head back to their farms and villages. That night the remaining warriors camped about twenty miles south of the town. The next day they reached the town around noon.

Aethelwulf went straight to his home. Aelfthryth embraced him. "My darling, you're safely home!" she cried. "My heart has been constantly in prayer for you."

"We had complete victory," said Aethelwulf. "But in this victory are also sown the seeds of defeat. Two of my brothers are dead."

"I know," said Aelfthryth. "I was informed last night by a messenger from your mother."

"Bernwulf is now in line for the throne. During the battle he sent an assassin to try to kill me. If it had not been for quick-witted Cedric, my body would have been lying alongside those of my dead brothers."

Aelfthryth bit her lip at that awful thought.

"My darling," Aethelwulf went on, "for our sake and for the sake of the baby in your womb, we need to leave this place and go into exile, until such a time as it is safe for us to return."

Aelfthryth nodded.

Aethelwulf continued, "We must make plans quickly and leave swiftly, for I fear if our plans become known to my brother he will seek to do us harm before we leave."

"I can leave by nightfall," said Aelfthryth. "We need but a few things."

"Good," said Aethelwulf. "I would like to go out of here this night, before Bernwulf acts. But now I must go and see my father. Cedric, Cormac and Brian can help you with anything you need to prepare for leaving. Take only those things that are necessary, my dear. The more we carry, the slower we travel."

"Yes," Aelfthryth replied.

Aethelwulf now turned and faced his friends, who stood there watching.

"See you take good care of her today and help her in every way you can," said Aethelwulf gravely. "I must go and take leave of my father." With that, he turned and walked hastily out the door and headed towards the great hall.



A short while later, Aethelwulf strode into the great hall. His father was once again seated on his throne surrounded by his counselors, amongst which Bernwulf was most prominent.

"Ah, Aethelwulf," said Bernwulf sarcastically. "You're finally gracing us with your presence."

"I came straightway when I returned to the town," said Aethelwulf.

"Good for you, my son," the king interjected, cutting off Bernwulf before he could make any more derogatory comments. "We must make arrangements to bury our brothers."

"Yes, Father," said Aethelwulf.

"I've placed Bernwulf in charge of that, but your cooperation will be necessary."

"Yes, Father."

"Now that Wessex is no longer a threat, and Sussex is in flight, I feel that we can rest in peace for some time," said the king.

"No, Father," said Bernwulf, "we must press home our advantage. I don't understand why we dismissed the army. We could have swooped down on Wessex and brought such destruction upon them that they would have wished they had never marched on us."

"I will write that comment off to the callowness of your youth," said the king. "You're a bloody man like your brothers, and now I must live with the thought that you shall be king after my death. God save Mercia."

"And indeed He shall," said Bernwulf, burning with the rebuke. "For when I am king, Mercia shall be basking in glory as the greatest nation on this isle. Why, we could subjugate this whole land. But no, you don't want to do that. You want to push your peace at any price. Mercia could be glorious, but no, she's just one amongst many..."

"And her men alive, and her women and children free, and not the subjects of tyranny. They are not widows or fatherless as many would be if we followed the mad, warmongering policies of some. No, my son, I despair for this land when you become king."

"I suppose you would want Aethelwulf to become king in my stead."

"That is a thought that has crossed my mind at times," said the king sharply. "But I will honor the laws and customs of my land, and the oldest of my surviving sons shall be king after my death, God help him. Just see that you stay surviving."

Bernwulf burned with anger. "By your leave, Father, I will depart to take care of the funeral arrangements for my brothers who died in glorious battle."

"See you do," said the king.

"Come, brother," said Bernwulf to Aethelwulf.

"No, I want to speak to the young man," said the

king.

“Go, I shall be with you shortly,” said Aethelwulf calmly to Bernwulf, who then turned and marched out of the room, followed by his close retainers.

“Leave us,” said the king to the remaining people surrounding the throne. “I need to converse with my son in private.”

When the remaining men had left, the king motioned to Aethelwulf to come closer. “The walls have ears, my son,” he said, “so we’ll speak in hushed voices.”

“Yes, Father,” said Aethelwulf quietly.

“Your life is in jeopardy, my son.”

“Yes, I know it is, Father.”

“So, what will you ask the king?”

“I’ve come to say goodbye, Father,” said Aethelwulf. “Tonight I leave with my wife and my friends to go into exile in Ireland.”

“My God, with the Celts?” exclaimed the king.

“They have no ambitions towards our land,” said Aethelwulf. “I’ll be safe there, and I’ll wait for the day when I can return. I will send word how I can be reached, should you ever need to contact me.”

“It is with a heavy heart that I will see you go. And in the meantime, you must keep up pretenses.”

“Yes, Father.”

“Don’t let on that you’ll be leaving, my son, for they’ll be onto you as quick as a wink.”

“Yes, Father.”

“Come and embrace me, my son, for you have my heart.”

“Thank you, Father.”

“Cedric will go with you?” asked the king.

“Yes, Father.”

“And the two Irishmen?”

“I will seek refuge in their land.”

“Well, they should be beholden to you.”

“Yes, and I have become friends with them, my

lord.”

“All the better. Now, go with your brother and keep up the pretense.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Aethelwulf left the room, and presently found his brother who was huddled in conversation with some others.

“Ah, Aethelwulf, you’re here,” said Bernwulf.

“Yes, brother, I am.”

“It’s surprising you came out alive from the battle.”

“Surprises do happen, my brother.”

“I see you are reconciled to your friend, Cedric.”

“And so we are.”

“Hmmm,” said Bernwulf. “I find him a very untrustworthy fellow.”

“He’s never been false to me,” replied Aethelwulf.

“Hmmm,” said Bernwulf again. “When you next see him, tell him I would like to speak to him sometime.”

“I’ll do that. But don’t you think we need to be about the burial arrangements of our brothers?”

“I suppose so. Stupid idiots! Of course, their stupidity worked to my advantage, didn’t it? Number one and number two out of the way, and there I am. Third brother lucky, so to speak.”

“I suppose so,” said Aethelwulf noncommittally.

“Well, they did like to fight, but now they’re dead. But in every calamity there’s opportunity, don’t you think?” Bernwulf said sarcastically. “It seems for you, brother, there is. One more calamity and you would be king on our father’s death.”

“Then we need to take every precaution that no more calamities occur,” said Aethelwulf.

“I should think so. Well, on to the funeral arrangements. After high mass in the church, I thought of carrying our departed brothers in great procession to the hill yonder,” said Bernwulf, pointing out a nearby window to the prominence in Tamworth Field.

“There we shall light a great funeral fire, and burn their bodies with much fanfare, as was the way of our ancestors.”

“Sounds more pagan than Christian,” commented Aethelwulf.

“Perhaps,” said Bernwulf. “But then I find so much more affinity with the gods of war than I do with the God of peace and charity.”

“That sounds like blasphemy, brother.”

“Hmm, it does, doesn’t it?” smiled Bernwulf. “But then when one is a king, one need not worry about those sorts of things.”

“The God which sees in secret knows all these things,” stated Aethelwulf calmly. “Do you seek to hide it from Him as well?”

“Perhaps,” replied Bernwulf. “But then again, maybe not. I keep forgetting that you almost became a priest, brother. Pity you didn’t. Life would be much safer for you if you had.”

“And why wouldn’t it be safe for me now?” asked Aethelwulf.

“Well, you are next in line to the throne after me,” replied Bernwulf. “That places you in grave danger. Because those who do not want me as king could—most reluctantly, of course, I am sure—try to place you on the throne in my stead. With you gone there would be no one to rally to. Our nephews are too young and their squabbles would more likely result in civil war. People don’t want that. Better a bad king than no king, as the proverb goes. Anyway, let’s get down and finish these funeral arrangements. Tomorrow night we will immolate our fine brothers’ bodies on the fire of glory.”

Aethelwulf shuddered. “So be it,” he said quietly.

“Good, then we are agreed. There’s really no need for you to be involved anymore. I think I can arrange it from here. You may go.”

“I’m not used to being dismissed from your

presence,” said Aethelwulf testily to Bernwulf.

“I suppose you aren’t. But I do suppose that’s something you should get used to,” Bernwulf replied with a sly smile. “Consider it practice for the day when I take over the kingdom.”

Aethelwulf gave his brother a slight nod, then turned around and left.

Bernwulf walked back to his companions. Aethelwulf could hear them laughing as Bernwulf said something to them which was inaudible to Aethelwulf. Yet he could be sure that it was some joke shared at his expense.

Aethelwulf spent the rest of the afternoon engaged in various business around the town. He so wanted to get back home to finish preparations for leaving, but he didn’t want his brother’s spies to know what was going on. So he decided to lead them on a merry chase around town, first in this tavern and then in this shop, and at the market and another tavern, and so forth throughout the day.

He even spent time in the church where the bodies of his two brothers lay side by side before the altar, awaiting the funeral. He walked over to them and looked down at their ashen faces.

I wonder if you have found peace? thought Aethelwulf. *I hope you have, but I am almost sure you have not.*

Once the sun had gone down, Aethelwulf returned home. The preparations made by the others during the day had gone about unnoticed. Hidden from sight at the back of the house, six horses were saddled. A seventh was ready to carry extra baggage.

In the dark of the early night, before the moon had risen, Cormac, Brian, Aethelwulf, Cedric and Aelfthryth mounted the horses. Aelfthryth’s maid-servant mounted the sixth. Cedric grabbed the reins of the packhorse, and the small procession rode out of town, hopefully unnoticed.

“Did you get the message to Cenwulf?” Aethelwulf asked Cedric.

“I told him before we parted company. He’ll be waiting for us.”

“Good,” said Aethelwulf. “I suggest we make haste while we can.”

The small group rode through the night. Aethelwulf and Cedric being familiar with the countryside knew the quickest way to take, leaving the roads at times and cutting across the country.

By dawn’s light, they could see the sea in the distance and the small town nestled in the harbor where Cormac and Brian had first set foot on English soil. As they drew closer to the town, a horseman could be seen coming in their direction. They all soon recognized Cenwulf.

“Welcome, my lord,” he called out to Aethelwulf. “Welcome, friends,” he said to the others.

“Dear Cenwulf,” said Aethelwulf, “I’m sorry I do not come for a more pleasant reason.”

“This is the way of kings and kingdoms,” said Cenwulf, with the wisdom that comes from many years near the seat of power. “There is a boat in the harbor upon which I have secured passage for you and your retinue. It leaves on the tide, which will be in about an hour. You must make haste.”

“Thank you, Cenwulf,” said Aethelwulf. “We do intend to.”

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THE VOYAGE

Aethelwulf and his companions dismounted, and then walked down the short pier to board the boat. Once their belongings were on board, Aelfthryth’s servant begged to stay behind. Her request was granted graciously and readily, knowing the poor woman was now full of dread for the life she would have been embarking on. The woman tearfully hugged her mistress, and then stood on the quay as the master of the vessel ordered his crew to shove off and head out to sea.

Cenwulf stood on the pier waving. *There goes the hope of Mercia*, he thought, as the boat headed out the harbor’s mouth. *May God keep us all from your brother’s stupidity, and may you one day come back and take the throne.*

The sea was turbulent as the small craft made its way west. The vessel was bound for the south of Ireland, which was on the shipmaster’s regular trading route. The voyage would last a day and a night in good weather.

“Pray we don’t run into any Viking ships or any that belong to the Welsh,” said the shipmaster to Aethelwulf.

The sea continued to be choppy, so the shipmaster thought it more prudent to sail initially in sight of

the Welsh coastline. The going was slow as the rowers heaved at their oars. About midmorning, a favorable wind sprang up and the sail was hoisted.

By nightfall, they were well out at sea, and far from the sight of land. Aethelwulf had spent the day trying to be some comfort to Aelfthryth. On top of the nausea expected when carrying a child, she now was feeling very sick from the rocking of the small boat.

By evening, however, the sea had calmed. The shipmaster, nervous about marauding Viking ships seeing any lights in the night, ordered that no lanterns be lit. He and his helmsmen maintained a steady course, looking to the stars to guide their way on the cloudless night.

When morning dawned, they were still far from sight of land. After some further consultations with the helmsman, as the sun rose, the shipmaster ordered the boat turned to a northwest heading. Several hours later, land was spotted.

"There's Ireland," said the master of the ship to Aethelwulf.

Cormac and Brian looked at the gray shape in the distance.

"Well, Brian, did you think we'd be back so soon?"

"Nay, but isn't it a fair sight to see land in the distance and realize we are not far from home?"

"So, that's Ireland," said Cedric.

"Well, they tell us it is," replied Cormac.

"Don't look like much from here," said Cedric in jest.

"It's a wonderful place," said Brian. "You're going to like it."

"Well, we'll be seeing about that," said Cedric. "My God, here I am, once a sworn enemy of Celts, and now look at me. I'm going to live in the land where everyone is a Celt!"

"You might find that we're not so bad after all," said Cormac.

"Well, I'm not holding my breath," said Cedric with a laugh.

As they headed toward the land, the shapes of the hills of Ireland became clearer. The shipmaster walked over to Aethelwulf, and the two of them got into an animated conversation. Presently, Aethelwulf came over to the others, "Well, I wish he would have told us this before we left."

"Told you what?" asked Brian.

"He says he can't go up the east coast for fear of running into the Norse, so we are going to get dropped off some place in the south. We are going to have to make our way back to your clann by land."

Cormac rolled his eyes. "My God, that's going to take weeks."

"If we survive the journey," added Brian. "My goodness, this is a fine pickle."

Aelfthryth made her way over to the menfolk. "So what's the matter?" she asked.

"We are going to put ashore in Ireland, all right, but far from our destination. It'll be a several-weeks' overland journey to get to our clanns. There's a lot of rugged terrain inhabited by plenty of people who are not going to like us," explained Brian.

To their surprise, Aelfthryth showed more determination than the men. "Well, we've come this far," she said, "and we can't exactly turn around either. We're not going to give up now, are we?"

"No," said Aethelwulf, as he put his arm around her. "No, we've not come this far just to give up."

It wasn't long before the boat anchored in a small bay. Its passengers' presence was soon noted by an inhabitant of this desolate spot, and before long a small *currach*, a wicker-framed boat covered with hides (that was the typical Irish vessel of the time) made its way from the shore to the bigger boat.

A rugged and ragged Irish fisherman clambered onto the boat. The shipmaster went over to him and

the two started talking, the shipmaster pointing frequently to his small group of passengers. The man looked over at them suspiciously.

The shipmaster came back. "He's agreed to ferry you to the shore, in return for something of value. He said also that you can be provided with some victuals and some supplies to help you on your way."

"Do we have a choice?" asked Aethelwulf.

"No," said the shipmaster. "This is as far north as I am going to go."

"So, who am I taking first?" asked the Irishman.

"Me," said Brian. "I want to be first to touch the gentle shores of mother Ireland."

"It's a good choice," said Aethelwulf with a nod. "Only one can go at a time in that little boat. It will be good to have someone a bit intimidating on the shore in case there's some funny business."

So beginning with Brian, they were ferried one at a time from boat to land. After ferrying the last one to shore, Aethelwulf gave the man a gold coin for his trouble.

The Irishman looked at it in wonderment. "What's this thing that he's giving me then?"

"It's a coin," said Cormac. "It's what they use to buy and sell things across the sea."

"A coin!" said the man.

"It's gold," said Cormac. "It'll serve you well."

The man looked at his newfound treasure, tossed it into the air and caught it again, then slipped it into a small pouch that was attached to his belt.

"One of the wonderments of the world that I know nothing of," he said. "Where are you all going?"

"We're headed north."

"It's a long way north," said the Irishman. "And how would you be getting there?"

"On foot it seems," said Aethelwulf.

"Well, the best of luck to you. And what would you be needing in the way of provisions?"

"Something to eat, like bread or some of the like."

The Irishman nodded, "Well, if you be waiting, my wife can bake you some bread so you be taking it with ya."

"Very well. My wife would like to rest anyway," said Aethelwulf.

"You can be resting in my house," said the man. "Come this way."

He then led them on a rocky path from the shore to a cluster of small buildings made in the wattle-and-daub style as Cormac and Brian were used to. But to Aethelwulf, Aelfthryth and Cedric, it seemed entirely primitive.

"You live in these?" asked Cedric incredulously.

"You not be liking my house now?" said the Irishman, with a show of indignation.

Cedric's eyes obviously showed his disdain for the primitive conditions.

"They'll do just fine," said Aethelwulf, hoping to placate the man.

"Well, the other fellow here thinks he's all high and mighty and doesn't want to sleep in my house."

"We are not used to the style of house that you have," said Aethelwulf. "He means no disrespect to you."

"I have my doubts about the disrespect part," said the man, "but I will be giving you the benefit of the doubt."

Brian and Cormac watched with amusement as the Englishmen walked tentatively through the door of the hut. Some animal skins were on the floor.

"You can make yourselves at home and lie down," said the man. "I'll go get the wife so she can begin the baking."

With that the man walked out of his hut and started bellowing his wife's name at the top of his voice. Presently a scrawny figure came down from up on the hill where she had been observing all that was

going on. The Irishman barked out some commands and she began the process of baking some bread in the primitive rock oven.

It would be several hours before everything was ready, and Aelfthryth took the time to sleep. In fact, it was so late by the time the bread was made that the men concurred that it was better to wait until the next morning to begin their journey.

Gaining the Irishman's consent to stay overnight, the five went to sleep.

"Cormac," whispered Brian when the others were asleep. "Doesn't it feel so good just to be back home, back in Ireland?"

"Aye," said Cormac, "but we are a long way from home."

"Yes," whispered Brian again, "but we're almost there. You know I'm not much of a believer in God. I'm not much of a pious person."

Cormac rolled over. "Really?" he said mockingly.

"Ah Cormac, you know what I mean. I believe in God the same as every man believes in God. But He's never really done anything for me before, not that I knew of anyway. But I feel that He's brought us back. It looked so dark there just a week or so ago, and now I can't believe so much has happened. First, we get sold as slaves, then we get freed, then we get involved in a great big war and now our patron has to flee into exile. Ah, it's a funny business all of this, isn't it? But I just feel it in my bones. The tide has turned."

"Aye," said Cormac. "And right now I just want to fall asleep."



The next morning they were up at daybreak. After eating and paying their host with another gold coin for their room and board, the party set off to the north. Fortunately, there were some prominent landmarks on the way, and even though a trail was nonexistent,

they were able to make good progress on their first day's journey.

That night they slept out under the stars, under the cover of a giant oak tree. The next morning they headed off again. After about an hour's walk, the strains of someone singing loudly came to their ears. The singer was coming closer and closer, so the five slipped into the underbrush nearby.

Presently, riding along on a mule, came a jolly old fellow with a long red beard, singing at the top of his voice. The harp slung on his back, the style of his clothes, and most of all his singing earned him instant recognition with regards to his profession.

"Hello there, bard," said Brian, walking out from the underbrush.

"An' who would you be?" said the bard in his high-pitched voice as he looked at Brian in astonishment. "Are you be a robber, come to take m' gold?"

"No, I'm no robber," said Brian.

"Then you are a cutthroat, just out to kill me."

"No, I'm not a cutthroat."

By this time, the other four had made their way out of the underbrush.

"Ah, look! A wild pack of outlaws ready to accost me. What say you to that, mule?"

"We're not a wild pack of outlaws," said Brian, getting somewhat agitated.

"Well, whatever you are, I shall have your names—and let them be vilely sung if you so much as lift a finger to disgrace me, you sorry brigands," said the bard.

"We are not brigands of any kind. We are travelers."

"Travelers?" said the bard in a questioning tone, then threw his head back and laughed. "Well, then you're the sorriest bunch of travelers I've ever seen in my life."

"Well, that we might be," said Brian, "but if you keep up like that you're going to be a sorry little bard."

“There’s no need to get threat’ning-like. I told you, mule, that they were dangerous, didn’t I?” said the bard. “And where would you be going?”

“North,” said Brian curtly.

“Big place, north,” said the bard. “And a mighty dangerous place it is too, these days, with the dreaded Ostmen plundering our shores, killing our men and raping our maidens. Oh, it’s a terrible thing to sing about, but it must be sung nonetheless.”

“You have no need to lecture us about Ostmen,” said Brian. “For we have been their victims, but by thunder we shall be their scourge now.”

“Oh, you mighty pack of warriors,” said the bard mockingly. “And you four men and one woman are going to take on all the Ostmen in the country, no doubt?”

“Well, we’ll take on a few,” said Brian, “but right now we think to go north.”

“Is this all you are going to tell me? I must still have your names. I am Congal the Bard.”

“I’m Brian O’Hooley, tanist of the O’Hooley clann, and this is my companion, Cormac mac Muircheartach.”

“Muircheartach?” asked the bard. “Not that Muircheartach mac Rory who defeated the Ostmen?”

“Aye, the same,” said Cormac.

“Why, I’ve been singing his praise ever since I heard the news of the battle. A man who beat the Ostmen! Why, it’s never been heard of, hardly, though he hasn’t been heard of since, neither. Might you know what has happened to him?”

“I was there when he died,” said Cormac quietly.

“Died?” the bard gasped. “And how was that?” The bard was now looking at Cormac intently.

“He jumped to his death in the water from the Ostmen boat as they were carrying him away a prisoner, betrayed by the king of Leinster, may God damn his soul.”

“Oh, it’s such a tragedy,” said the bard, “and such

a subject for a new song. All that was known was that he was taken by the Ostmen, sold out by that scumbag, the king of Leinster, but they all said he was still alive and that he would someday return and lead us to victory against the Ostmen.”

The bard continued, “But come, I’m going north and you can come along with me. You know that, traveling on these roads, you could well be in danger. But no one touches a bard, for we have the pass to travel to and fro through all the country. No one harms us because they know the power of our songs. If they hurt one of us, they incur the wrath of all of us. They know we can destroy them with our songs, for they will be sung of as the most base of villains, devils incarnate, hated of all in our fair land. Ah, songs are powerful things, you know! We both sing of the glory of our heroes, and defame and destroy those of infamy in our land. And we bards get to choose who is who—who is a hero and who is a villain; it’s one of the benefits of our job.”

Aethelwulf, Cedric and Aelfthryth had remained silent through all of this, watching the encounter with some amusement.

“And who would these fine gentlemen be with you?—And this fine lady too, of course.”

“These are our friends from England,” said Cormac.

“From England? So you’re some of them savage Saxons?” asked the bard.

“No, they’re Angles,” said Brian. “They fight Saxons.”

“Oh,” said the bard, breathing deeply. “I’ve heard of your kind. But this is the first time I’ve even seen the sight of you. Look at your blond hair! You are indeed a pale-looking lot, aren’t you?”

“To us, it is you that looks odd,” said Aethelwulf with a smile.

“Oh, he talks! These Englishmen can talk,” said the bard in mock agitation. “My goodness, is there

nothing that they can't do? Well, what a lovely traveling bunch I have, two sons of kings, two English warriors and a beautiful woman. Well, mule, what think you? Would these be nice traveling companions?"

"I've noticed that you talk to your mule often," said Cormac, "and I havna heard its answers."

"Ah," said the bard, wagging his finger at Cormac, "he knows that the wise do not say all that is on their mind. So, whenever I have things that perplex me, I talk to my mule about it, and I'm always surprised at how wise he is."

Cormac shook his head and smiled.

"Don't scoff, my boy! One day you'd be grateful ta have the wisdom of a jackass to counsel ya. But come on, let's be away. We're off to the north," said the bard, as he broke into a long, spontaneous and extemporaneous song about the exploits of Muirheartach mac Rory, and how he put the Ostmen to flight and then destroyed them all.

*Muirheartach mac Rory, a giant among men,
With a sword so long you couldna see the end.
Yet he could slay with just a look the bravest of men,
And cast into Hell all the Ostmen.*

As the song went on, Cormac turned to Brian and smiled. "My father was truly an astounding man," said Cormac. "Yet hearing this man sing of him, I hardly recognize him. Truly fantastic!"

"Aye, truly," said Brian with a wink.

In the late afternoon, the small party of six arrived at a river, in the midst of which was an island where the monastery of St. Fin Barr was situated. The visitors were treated well by the monks.

The next day they set off early, but had to make do with sleeping under the stars that night. After several more days of this, and being constantly enter-

tained by Congal the bard (which got to be rather wearying for the Englishmen), they came to a craggy limestone hill with a ring fort at its summit. The bard was freely let in, but the resident warriors looked with suspicion on his associates.

"These are my companions," said the bard indignantly. "An insult to them is an insult to me," he added, waving his finger at the warriors. "Ya would not be wanting the raw side of my tongue telling of how you mistreated my friends, would ya?"

The Irishmen grumbled amongst themselves, but let the little entourage pass into the fort. As they drew near, an impressive figure strolled down the hill to meet them.

"Where are we, bard?" said Cormac.

"This is the fort of the king of Munster."

"The king of Munster?" exclaimed Cormac.

"Aye, the king of Munster," said a familiar voice behind them.

THE BARD'S IDEA

Cormac and Brian whirled around at the sound of the familiar voice. About ten paces behind them, having just emerged from the doorway of a small hut, stood Finian, arms outstretched and a broad smile across his face.

Momentarily stunned, Cormac and Brian then both let out a whoop and rushed over to the priest. The three flung their arms around each other in a great hug and then, to the surprise of all, Finian broke into a jig. He was dancing around, laughing and clapping, tears coming out his eyes and rolling down his big cheeks.

“My God, I thought you were dead, or worse...,” he said, as his voice cracked. “But, praise God, you’re alive! You’re alive! I can hardly believe it, you’re alive!”

“Aye, we are,” said Brian.

“Aye, by God, we are,” said Cormac.

The three kept hugging each other, and then Finian would break away and dance around some more, and then they would come back and hug each other again.

Aethelwulf, Aelfthryth and Cedric looked on in astonishment at the show of happiness and affection. Congal had unslung his harp from his back and was now playing a tune and dancing around as well. Others in the encampment began to gather and form

a large circle around the newcomers, watching with emotions ranging from happiness to confusion and bewilderment at the spectacle going on in front of them.

One tall man—the others had been observing as he earlier walked down the road towards them—stood with his arms folded, watching. Presently, he threw his head back and roared with laughter. At this cue, all the other inhabitants of the village also started to laugh.

Before long, everyone had broken into a spontaneous dance, Congal leading the merriment with his songs and harp.

After quite some time of all this gaiety, the tall man walked over to Finian, Cormac and Brian. “I see that the reunion has been a happy one,” he said.

“Aye, it has, my lord,” said Finian.

“My lord?” Cormac asked, looking at the man.

Finian spoke. “My friends, this is the king of Munster.”

The two stepped back a pace or so and bowed deferentially.

“Ah, come on, we’ll have none of that here,” said the king. “But pray tell me, what is all this?”

“My, lord, let me introduce my friends,” said Finian. “The young one here is Cormac, son of Muirheartach mac Rory, my late benefactor and victor over the Ostmen. And this is Brian, tanist of the O’Hooleys. They were betrayed into the Ostmen’s hand, along with Muirheartach, by that vile dog, the king of Leinster. May he and his seed be damned forever. Of their companions I know none, but I take them to be trustworthy if they travel with these men.”

“I am honored to have such fine warriors and the son of a hero to visit my camp,” said the king. “Tell me, how came you here?”

With that Cormac and Brian broke into a jumble of words—whose incoherence certainly strained the

understanding of the listeners as they told, in rapid succession, of all that had happened to them, who their companions were and how they’d come to be there.

After patiently listening, the king clapped his hands. “Well, thank the good God,” he exclaimed, “that now you are safe and delivered from the hands of your enemies and into the camp of friends! You’ll be my guest for a day or two.”

“Thank you, my lord,” said Cormac.

“Aye, thank you,” repeated Brian, with a nod.

With all the merriment and excitement, Cormac realized that he had clean forgotten to ask about his family.

“Begging pardon, my lord,” he said deferentially to the king. “I would like to ask the priest here news of my family since the tragedy of my father’s death.”

“I understand. Question him at your leisure, and tonight I will meet you and your friends to discuss at length what plans we need to make in light of our upcoming wars with the Ostmen.”

“Wars with the Ostmen?” questioned Brian.

“Aye, wars! Now they’re attacking my lands, and we must needs defend our own. But enough of that. Tonight we can talk on these matters. For now, make yourself acquainted with all that has transpired in your absence.”

“Thank you, my lord,” said Cormac.

“But first,” said the king, almost as an afterthought, “you must make me acquainted with these other strangers. Methinks the woman is with child.”

“Yes, my lord,” said Cormac. “I’m sorry I have not introduced them so far. Come,” he said, motioning to Aethelwulf and the others. The three approached.

“This is Aethelwulf, the son of the king of Mercia in the land of Britain.”

“Mercia,” said the king of Munster. “I have heard of your country. It is a powerful one. What brings

you here, humbly walking the backwoods of our beloved island?”

“I have gone into self-exile, my lord,” said Aethelwulf.

“Exile, is it?” said the king. “And why would the son of a king go into exile?”

“To avoid the intrigues and machinations of my older brother, who seeks to kill me and mine in order to secure his prospective throne.”

The king shook his head. “Such a pity. And such is the wisdom of our ways, compared to yours. It is not the son’s place to inherit the kingdom in our land, but it rests in the wisdom of the oenach to decide who is the best and ablest to succeed.”

“I know the wisdom of your ways, and truly there is great advantage in that. But it is not our way and so we must live with what we have, and that means that for now my wife, my friend and I must sojourn in the land of strangers until such a time that it is safe for us to return.”

“Very well,” said the king. “I place you under my protection while you are in my land. No harm shall come to you from my people. That I promise.”

“Thank you, your highness,” said Aethelwulf.

With that the king turned and left, followed by several retainers who had been standing nearby. After the king had departed, Finian turned to Cormac. “Well, aren’t you going to introduce me, also?”

“Ah, I’m so confused and bewildered with all that is happening!” Cormac exclaimed. “Finian, these are my dear friends, Aethelwulf, Cedric and Aelfthryth, the wife of Aethelwulf.” Turning around he said, “And this is Finian the priest—and a finer monk and holy man you will never find in all of Ireland, for he knows not only how to commune with God—and I have with my own eyes seen evidence of the Holy Presence talking to him—but also how to commune with his fellow man. He knows how to stand up for right and how to fight for justice.”

“Enough, enough,” said Finian. “You make me sound like a saint!”

“Well, you are.”

“I am not a saint,” said Finian firmly. “I’m just a man humbly trained to do my God’s will.” Then, turning to his foreign guests, he continued, “I’m pleased to meet you.”

“I never knew Celts could grow that tall,” said Cedric, looking up at the Irishman.

“Well, you’d be surprised what we Celts can do,” said Brian. “Some of us grow this way,” he said, spreading his arms out wide to accent his considerable girth, “and some of us grow this way,” he said, raising his hands above his head to indicate height.

“Well, you’re growing on me,” said Cedric cheerfully, “and I am well glad that I am amongst friends here.”

Presently an older man came over to Aelfthryth, Aethelwulf and Cedric, “The king has instructed me to show you a place where you can stay,” he said kindly.

“Thank you,” said Aethelwulf.

“Please come with me, then,” said the man.

The three departed with him. Cormac and Brian then began to badger Finian about what had happened in their absence.

“Your father was a prudent man,” said Finian, “and he had asked Oisín O’Hooley, Brian here’s brother, to follow you to observe what would happen to you three when you went to see the king of Leinster. As you well know, Oisín has the most amazing ability to be almost unseen and unheard. He saw the whole encounter between you and that dog who unworthily calls himself Leinster’s king, and how you were sold out to that Ostman. He watched as you were led away. He saw you get on the boat and then ride out to sea, and that was all he could see.

“Presently, he returned to our camp with the sad

news of all that had happened. After much wailing and crying and despair, Conn conferred with Fergus O’Hooley. We realized that our lives were in danger, not only from the Ostmen, but also from the king of Leinster and his clann. Preparations were made to move further inland to try and hide. We formed one unit and took refuge on an island in the middle of the river, where we set up our camps. It was none too soon, for within days the king of Leinster and his cutthroats were at our doorsteps.

“They burnt all our old villages, but they did not find us. Ah, we would’ve fought them if they had, but there were many more of them than there were of us. After pillaging what he could, the dog of Leinster went back to his own. Conn and Fergus knew that to survive they would need the help of the powerful. I was to be sent as an emissary to the camp of the Ard Righ in Tara.

“But at the last minute I saw a vision of a man telling me to not go north, but south to the Rock of Cashel—to the king of Munster to seek his alliance in our battles. And now I see why, for I have the pleasure of finding you alive.”

“And my mother?” asked Cormac.

“Your mother and brothers are safe, although she is much dispirited over the loss of her husband and son.”

“And Fiona?” asked Cormac again, hesitantly.

“Fiona is safe, but she too is much broken in heart, thinking that you’re gone forever. That once carefree and naughty child has had the love of life drain out of her. It is most sad. But I know that news of your return will greatly revive her.”

“Oh, we must make haste, Finian! We must make haste to be home.”

“Aye, we must,” said the priest. “But I must first accomplish my mission to secure the protection of the king of Munster and to align our tribes with his, under his protection and no longer under that of

Leinster.”

The rest of the day passed uneventfully, and that night they gathered at the king’s table. After eating well—the first time they had done so in several days—the king indicated that it was time to talk.

Aelfthryth excused herself and returned to the dwelling where she and Aethelwulf were staying. The men gathered around for the council meeting. Several of the Munster king’s closest advisors also sat at the table.

The king opened the discussion with a benediction and petition, imploring God’s help on their deliberations.

“I should have had you say the prayer,” said the king then to Finian. “My apologies for that.”

“Not at all, my lord. All men may pray,” said Finian. “Whether he wears priestly garb or not has scarce to do with the prayers prayed and answered.”

“Aye, and that be the truth,” said the king. “But it’s rare to find a priest to admit it.”

“Ah, you’d be surprised,” said Finian gently.

“I hope I would,” said the king. “Now enough of this discussion about the efficacy of prayers and who should be the one praying. We shall certainly need all the prayers we can get, with what we have in store for us. You two are warriors, are you not?” said the king to Cedric and Aethelwulf.

“We’ve fought in our share of battles,” said Aethelwulf.

“And do you know how to fight these despicable Ostmen?”

“We know their tactics,” said Cedric. “The raids are quick and mainly for plunder. They attack the weak, not the strong.”

“That’s also what I have heard,” said the king. “They attack when they know they have the advantage, and avoid engagement when they are outnumbered or when for any other reason the attack

is not prudent.”

“In unity there’s strength,” said Aethelwulf. “A united people is not an easy prey.”

At this the king laughed. “Ne’er a truer word was spoken and ne’er an impossibility was ever prescribed as a solution to the problems of our dear land. We are many clanns, and unity amongst ourselves is as rare as hen’s teeth.”

At that some of the other men sitting at the table chuckled.

“Aye, it would be so funny if it wasn’t so tragic,” said the king. “But such is our way and such is our life, may God help us.”

“When we were taken captive by the Ostmen,” said Cormac, “we were sent to a camp south of the domains of the king of Leinster. There in the camp was such a terrible army as we’ve never seen, hundreds of their ships beached on the shore. There must be thousands of warriors, all heavily armed with weapons of fine steel. They come not to raid, but this time they come to conquer.”

“That conclusion is right as to the intentions of that vile host,” said the king, “and if it had not been for the rain, I’m afear’d they would have started marching against us before now. But God and His providence had the weather fight on our side, and I’m sure they are much disquieted and very wet from their stay on our shores. The way they intend to attack, I know not.”

“I overheard them casting their designs against the king of Leinster, saying that he thought they were his allies, but they were only using him for the meantime, as long as they needed him, and then they would turn against him.”

“Leinster is a petty man,” said the king. “He seeks always to aggrandize himself. It sounds like he is soon to feel the boot of his master, for one canna make a pact with the Devil and not be burned.”

“If we did attack the Ostmen before they attacked us,” said Aethelwulf, “we would have the advantage of the offense.”

“That is what I have been thinking,” said the king. “But gathering an army takes time, and not all who call me king are that willing to fight under my standard.”

“But is it not for their good? For surely if they don’t fight with you unitedly, eventually they will have to fight separately,” said Cedric.

“Aye, that is true,” said the king. “But see, they are always looking for their own advantage. If the Ostmen destroy or weaken some clanns, then others may be the beneficiary by using the others’ misfortunes to increase their own holdings.”

“But don’t they see that thus they are playing into the enemy’s hands?”

“Perhaps the wiser of them do,” said the king. “But those who are petty and pernicious amongst them do not. We are a land divided. We have no strong central authority.”

“But the people love a hero,” said the bard, who had also been invited to sit in on the discussions. “And here we have a hero’s son. The glory of Muirheartach mac Rory is now being sung throughout the land, and surely the spirit of a hero rests in the bosom of his son. A son who has escaped the Ostmen, who has gone off to foreign countries and fought victorious wars, has now returned, bringing the sons of kings with him. Surely, if this hero of a man amongst us would raise his standard on the field of battle, why, the Irishmen would flock to him! For is it not said in the Holy Book that Saul had slain his thousands, but David his tens of thousands? And shall we not say that Muirheartach has slain his thousands, but Cormac shall slay his tens of thousands?”

“What?” exclaimed Cormac. “What on earth are

you talking about?”

“I’m going to make you a hero,” replied Congal. “And the people from all over Ireland are going to rally to fight alongside ya!”

“But I’m not a hero,” said Cormac. “I’ve barely been in battle.”

“Ah, the people don’t know that. They’ll think you’re a legend.”

“Aye,” said the king, realizing that Congal was onto something. “You’re a legend!”

“Oh, my God!” cried Cormac. “I canna believe this is happening.”

“I can’t believe it either,” said Brian. “You? You a rallying point for all of Ireland?” At that unlikely thought the big man burst out into an uproarious fit of laughter. “Well, that is the funniest thing I’ve heard for a long time.”

“You do not know the power of the songs,” said Congal, a trifle wounded.

“Well,” said the king. “It looks we’re in the business of making a hero. Go to it, Congal! Spread the word!”

“I feel a song coming to me now,” said Congal. “By morning’s light I’ll be singing a ballad of the exploits of Cormac. And before long all the land will be singing of ‘Cormac the mighty warrior.’”

“Oh, God,” wailed Cormac, “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Be sick here, boy,” said the king, “but you better not be sick when you are in front of everybody. An’ look at these that will be in your entourage: Finian, the giant; Brian, as wide as he is tall; Aethelwulf, son of a king of a far country. And what about you? What shall we say you are?” said the king, looking at Cedric.

“Cedric, the dragonslayer?” said Cedric jokingly.

“Ah, that’s magnificent,” exclaimed Congal, “Cedric, the dragonslayer. Aye, aye, I feel a song coming to me now! Ah, ’tis glorious! ’Tis a glorious, glorious, glorious ballad I shall sing: “The Ballad of Cormac.”

-18- REUNITED

The morning after their evening meeting where Congal got the brilliant idea of creating a legend (which, incidentally, Cormac thought was the most stupid idea he ever heard in his life), Brian and Cormac headed out to find the new combined camp of the O’Hooleys and Cormac’s clann. Aethelwulf, Cedric and Aelfthryth had remained behind, accepting the hospitable offer of the king of Munster to stay in his camp for a while longer.

The journey had taken its toll on Aelfthryth. Although she had endured each hardship stoically, still it was good that she could now rest in relative comfort. Finian had gone with Cormac and Brian to show them the way to their new dwelling place.

Moreover, Finian also had to deliver the news of his negotiations, and that the king of Munster was very happy that the two clans wanted to switch their allegiance from Leinster to him. He would afford them all the protection he could.

After a journey of several days, the company drew near to the place where the two clans had settled. This new camp was situated on an island that was in the middle of a small lake. Although it provided a good natural defense, the pastureland available to the flocks was not sufficient for their needs. All

realized that it could only be a temporary refuge. The sooner they could return to their own ancestral lands, the better.

A small currach had been hidden amongst the reeds by Finian when he had first left on his mission. Now all three of the men climbed into the boat, which, with the weight of all three of them, floated precariously low in the water. Still, the little boat managed to get them all safely to their desired haven.

It was Fiona, standing on the island's edge, who first spotted the boat leaving the mainland. Although she spied the three figures boarding it, she could not make out who they were, as there was a light mist hanging over the lake.

Alarmed, she ran to tell Fergus and Conn what was happening. Fearing that the three men were possibly agents of Leinster, Conn ordered Fiona to stay back at the camp, and then, with several armed clansmen, rushed to the island's shore ready for trouble. But as the boat got closer, Finian yelled out a greeting.

"I'm back, and I've bought these two rogues with me—Cormac and Brian!"

With a whoop of joy, Conn and the others rushed out waist-deep in the water to greet their lost kinsmen and friends.

The reunion was everything one would imagine it to be. Niamh, Cormac's mother, hugged him and cried tears of joy mingled with sadness at having her son back alive, but knowing with certainty that her dear husband would never return. All the emotions that had been pent up inside of her since she first heard of their capture by the Ostmen burst forth.

Cormac held her tightly and cried also, their tears mingling on their cheeks as they pressed together. Cormac's younger brothers also came and hugged him at the same time.

Fiona had stayed deferentially to the side, knowing

that it was the mother's prerogative to get Cormac's attention and affection first.

After several minutes, Niamh remembered Fiona, and held out her arm for her to come also and join them in the embrace. Then Niamh pulled away, dragging her younger sons with her, so that Cormac and Fiona could embrace by themselves.

"Come outside, all of you," said Niamh to everyone else in the hut. "We need to leave these two alone for a few moments."

Cormac stared deep into Fiona's eyes. For a long time the words wouldn't come. They were both choked with emotion. When they finally burst forth, the words cascaded forth in a torrent of I love yous, I missed yous, I need yous, I want yous, I thought of you every moment of every day, I cared for you so, I feared that I had lost you, I cried for you. The two lovers then kissed, a long and passionate kiss.

After a long time their reunion was finally broken up by a loud voice outside. "Okay, that's enough, you two. Break it up and come outside! There's lots more people here wanting to greet ya."

Cormac and Fiona emerged from the hut to see a hundred or more smiling faces.

"Ah, it's grand to be back," said Cormac. "It's grand to be back with you all!" he shouted.

"Aye, it's grand," said Brian, himself choking back the emotions.

"It's good that you're home," said Fergus, embracing his son once again.

Conn came over to Cormac to hug him again as well.

"You're the chief now," said Cormac.

"Aye," said Conn. "But by God, it's a sad way to become chief."



Cormac now had his arm around Fiona.

"Well," said Conn to Cormac, "you'd better come

with us to the oenach.”

“I just got him back,” said Fiona staunchly. “I’m not letting him go anywhere.”

“Ah, my dear,” said Conn, with a fatherly smile, “I’ll get him back to you in as short a time as possible, but the men must gather to discuss and agree on the terms that the king of Munster has offered us.”

“Cormac, do you have to go?” pleaded Fiona.

“Aye, I have to go to this, but I’ll be right back, my darling. Meet you at this spot.”

“See that you do, and right away. I’ll not have you gone out of my sight long again.”

“You’ll be eating those words soon, lassie,” said Brian. “You’ll be sick of him in no time.”

“Will you shut up, you big beast?” she retorted, pretending to kick him.

“Well, I looked after him while he was away, and that’s the thanks I get!”

“You looked after me?” said Cormac, raising his voice in mock indignation.

“Aye, I did.”

“And who was it that slew the Saxon that was trying to kill ya?”

“Ya didna slay him, you just poked him in the leg,” said Brian.

“Well, it’s as good as slaying him,” said Cormac.

“Ah, humbug,” said Brian. “I watched over this laddie. You can be thanking me that he’s back here safely with ya.”

“I think you should be thanking God,” said Finian, breaking into the conversation. “From what I have heard, it’s nothing but a series of miracles that you’re with us today. You’d better not be taking too much credit to yourself, Brian O’Hooley, nor you, Cormac mac Muirheartach. Give glory to Him who is able to raise from the dead. By the heavens, you may as well’ve been raised from the dead! So you two, stop your bickering.”

“Aye,” said Cormac quietly.

“Aye,” said Brian somewhat reluctantly, but nevertheless knowing that Finian’s words were true.

“I’ll be back in a few moments, Fiona, my darling,” said Cormac. “Tis an important meeting, and it requires every man there.”

“All you men and your meetings,” grumbled Fiona, though in a good-natured manner. “Always leaving us to go to meetings and war.”

“Enough, lady,” said Finian in a stern but gentle way. “It’ll give you time to thank God also for your lover’s safe return. Perhaps you might want to give some thought to a slightly revised schedule for your wedding.”

“A revised schedule for our wedding?” said Fiona.

“Aye, as I think you two might be wanting to push your plans up a little bit.”

“What do you mean?” said Fiona.

“We’ll talk to ya later,” said the priest, gripping Brian and Cormac by the arms. “We’re off ta a meeting.”

The three marched off to where the rest of the men had gathered. Conn and Fergus sat at places of preeminence, and Cormac, Brian and Finian sat down next to them. Fergus, being the elder of the two leaders, stood and held out his hands wide. “Good men of the oenach, we’ve had much rejoicing today for finding those who we feared were dead...”

“But not Muirheartach,” interrupted Turlough, who had mourned the loss of Muirheartach more than any other.

“Aye, you’re right, not Muirheartach,” said Fergus. “Not Muirheartach,” he said again, quietly. “He is missed as he forever will be. But we must soldier on. Finian here has come back with terms from Munster. He said Munster welcomes us into his fold with all the rights and privileges previously accorded to us by Leinster. What say ye all? Do we pledge our

allegiance to Munster, and sever our allegiance to Leinster?"

"Aye," came the unanimous shout from the men. "Down with Leinster!"

"Aye, down with Leinster, I agree. But it's a big decision. Our ancestors were loyal to Leinster for centuries, and much must be said for tradition, even though the present king has treated us so cruelly. So I will ask you all one last time, and think well on it before ya answer, are we truly prepared to sever our loyalty?"

After a profound silence Conn spoke: "We have every reason to sever our allegiance to Leinster." And with that, the council unanimously voted to solemnize the severance.

"So be it then," said Fergus. "Now Finian also brings other news. Munster is raising an army to fight the Ostmen."

"To fight the Ostmen? We are going to take to battle with them again?" asked Turlough.

"Aye," said Fergus.

"Are ya all willing to fight with Munster against the heathen?"

"Aye," came the unanimous reply. "To the death!"

"We fought them once before and won," said Diarmaid, standing up. "And now with Munster's help and a mighty army, we Irishmen shall put the foreign dogs to flight!"

"Your enthusiasm is noted, Diarmaid, but I must tell ya, the Ostmen are not just in small fleets of ships, but they have a hundred or more ships on our shore now, and an army ready to do battle, thousands of men. Are you still anxious?" queried Conn.

Diarmaid stood there for a moment and stroked his chin. "No, I'm not quite as anxious, to tell you the truth. However, I'm not one to sit back and let them destroy any more of Ireland."

"Aye," agreed the rest of the men.

"So you'll fight alongside Munster?" cried Fergus.

"Aye!" came the unanimous shout.

"Good. Now, I believe our Cormac has something he wants to ask everyone."

Cormac looked at Brian, who motioned for him to go ahead.

"On our journeys we were befriended by an Englishman, who saved us from the slave market. A king's son he is, a true and noble man. But he has an older brother, a schemer who fears my friend is a threat to his throne, and seeks to slay him. I saw one assassination attempt foiled at the last minute right before my eyes."

"Ohhh!" A murmur of wonderment swept through the crowd of men.

"But our friend is an honest and just man. He will not raise his hand against his brother, even though his brother has raised his hand against him. Aye, he will not have his brother's blood on his hands, nor will he achieve the kingship of his people by striking down his brother. He therefore left his homeland, accompanied by his wife and a faithful friend. They have traveled with us to our beloved shores. He has asked that in his exile he may make his home with us."

"An Englishman in our camp?" remarked Oisín O'Hooley. "That would be a strange situation."

"Aye, that would be something most different for us all, for they are not like us, nor are their ways our ways. But I pledge to you on the memory of my father, that the Englishman is a good man, as are his companions, and if he ever did us harm let the retribution be upon me and mine."

A murmur of assent went through the crowd.

It was Brian who next stood up. "I too will vouch for this man, for he is a true and noble man, and I will pledge myself for him."

"Then so be it!" cried one of the men.

“Aye, so be it!” cried they all.

“And now,” said Fergus rising to his feet again, “there’s one more thing to make you privy to, a most unusual thing, and I’m going to leave it to dear Father Finian to explain it to ya all.”

Finian rose and said, “Peculiar times require peculiar tactics. And quite honestly what I’m going to describe to you now will sound most peculiar, I promise you.”

There was a silence in the camp. It had been an outstanding day for the men of the two clans, and now they wondered what could be yet more peculiar than what had transpired already.

“We have legends in our midst,” went on Finian. “Heroes of myth and might, leading us into battle against the Ostmen.”

“The priest is going mad,” whispered Turlough to Diarmaid.

“Shhh,” said Diarmaid, “listen on. We know that the wee people are going to be with us. Methinks they’d prefer pestering true Irishmen rather than these brute Vikings.”

“We’re not speaking of elves or leprechauns here,” continued Finian, “but real live heroes. Even now their glory is being sung throughout the land. Congal the Bard and those of his kind are spreading the word of these magnificent heroes that will lead us to fight the Ostmen. They sing of a victor over the Ostmen, and the victor’s son and his fabled companions.”

None of the men made a sound.

“But I will let you know the secret of these men of myth and might. They are but mere mortals, with whom some you are well acquainted. So you must say it to me tonight that what you will hear you will not go telling others. Will you swear?”

The oenach sat in silence.

Finally Conn spoke up. “Come on! Say it, for goodness’ sake, so the priest can go on with the rest

of it, or by thunder, if one of you tells, there will be hell to pay!”

Seeing and hearing this agitation of one of their leaders, the men all promptly spoke up. “Aye, we swear.”

So Finian went on to describe the plans that Congal and the king of Munster had devised. Cormac stared at the ground, embarrassed. After Finian had finished telling the tale to the enrapt audience, silence hung over the stunned council once again.

Then the laughter started. First it was a quiet titter somewhere in the back of the crowd, but it quickly spread like a wild contagion throughout the entire council. Soon all the men—including Fergus, Conn, Finian, Brian and Cormac—were all laughing hysterically. Many rolled on the ground, tears of laughter streaming down their faces.

Finally, Finian raised his hands. “I know, my friends, that this sounds exceeding funny!” he said, mustering all the self-control he could. “But I assure you that the king of Munster is deadly serious. And it is our responsibility to keep secret what manner of men we actually are, but to do everything we can to make Cormac and these heroes—including myself—be every bit the mighty champions that we’re supposed to be. Will you all swear again that you will keep this secret?”

“Aye!” they all shouted in unison.

“Come,” said Fergus as he stood up. “Stand up, Cormac and Brian! Come over here, Finian. Behold, I give you the heroes that will lead us to mighty victory!”

“Hurrah!” all the men shouted. “Hurrah!” they all shouted again. “Hurrah!”

Fergus raised his hands again. “This tale shall be sung for generations to come. But for now, let us keep the telling of it to ourselves, and not let news of this go any further. And now we must begin all our preparations, for Munster is calling us to his standard,

and all that are able to must rally to it. We have scarce time to prepare, but may God help and strengthen our arms each for the tasks that are ahead of us.”

“Amen,” said Finian.

“Amen,” echoed all the men of the oenach.



-19-
THE WEDDING

That night after the council, Cormac slipped away. He had secretly arranged a tryst with Fiona near the pebble beach where Cormac had first landed on the island. The full moon had risen, and the whole area was bathed in a pale silver glow. Cormac saw Fiona sitting on a log, her body silhouetted against the backdrop of the moonlight sparkling on the lake's water. She turned, hearing his approaching footsteps on the pebbles as he drew near.

"Isn't it beautiful, my darling?" she said.

"Aye, and so are you, my precious one."

"Oh, how I missed you, Cormac!" she said in a sultry whisper as he sat down next to her. She lay her head on his shoulder as he slipped his arm around her waist. "Oh, how my body ached to be touched by you, to feel you next to me! To think that I almost was a widow before I even got married...!"

"Well, you wouldn't actually be a widow."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, don't get wrapped up in details, you cruel, heartless creature," she said indignantly, pushing him away. "I would have been a widow in soul, if not in flesh. It would've taken a long time for the heartbreak to heal."

She then softened, as she smiled and fell into his arms again. "But oh, how joy has reached down into

me again. You could not believe the rapture I felt seeing you again! You couldn't believe what control it took not to rush at you when you were in your mother's arms. Oh, Cormac, how I love you."

"I thought of you night and day," said Cormac as he gazed into her eyes. "The thought of coming back to you gave me strength to carry on. Oh, how I despaired! Sometimes I couldn't think on ya because it was too painful. But thank God in His wonderful mercy He's brought me home."

"I was cursing God," said Fiona quietly. "I'm so ashamed of myself now. But when I first heard you were gone, captured, I cursed God for not looking after ya. He had brought such love in my life, only to take it away. I'm so ashamed of myself now, and I hope God can forgive me for my hard heart."

"I'm sure He can, my dear, but talk to Finian about it. He's wise in these matters."

"Aye. It almost killed dear Fergus too—the thought of Brian gone. What a change has come about in that old man! When I first knew him, what a brigand he was, but there's a sweetness there now that never was before."

"Well, Brian hasn't changed much," said Cormac.

"Ya don't think so?" asked Fiona.

"Why, do you?" replied Cormac.

"I saw tears in that man's eyes when he hugged his da. I never saw tears in his eyes before. I think you've been with him too much, that you don't appreciate how he's changed."

"The man has been the bane of my existence," said Cormac with a grin.

"Oh, you're joking, I know."

"Aye, you're right," said Cormac. "Actually, I've grown quite fond of the big oaf, even though he did claim that it was he that brought me back safely."

"But Father Finian certainly sorted that one out," said Fiona.

"Aye, he did," replied Cormac.

"But one thing," said Fiona.

"Aye?" asked Cormac.

"We've been sitting here talking about all these things, when we could be kissing."

Cormac laughed, saying, "Aye!"

And with that the two lovers embraced and kissed with most ardent passion.



Several hours later, as the two young lovers attempted to sneak back into camp, they were greeted by the stalwarts of their community.

"Where have you two been?" asked Conn, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Talking," replied Cormac, half-truthfully.

"Well, I suppose you two had lots to talk about," remarked Fergus, looking at them kindly.

"Aye," replied Fiona. "We had lots to talk about." She looked coyly at Cormac.

"Well, due to the unsettledness of current conditions, Fergus and I have a proposal to make," said Conn. "We've talked to your mother, Cormac, and she is in agreement. Fiona, since Fergus is your guardian he is all the agreement you need. We want the wedding to take place as soon as possible."

"The wedding, as soon as possible?" repeated Cormac.

"Aye, we think it proper that you make of her an honest woman," said Fergus.

"I *am* an honest woman!" replied Fiona indignantly.

"Good!" said Fergus. "And that's the way we aim to keep it," he said with a mock sternness.

"So, young Cormac," said Conn, "we would like to propose that the wedding take place tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" the two startled young lovers replied in unison.

"Aye, tomorrow. What think ye?"

"It's a mite rushed," said Cormac, flustered.

“You’re not wantin’ to be marryin’ me tomorrow?” asked Fiona, looking quizzically at Cormac.

“No, no, I don’t mean that,” said Cormac. “It’s just that, I wasn’t—I mean... Oh, of course I want to marry you tomorrow.”

“Then we’ll get married tomorrow,” said Fiona, turning to the two elders.

“It’s nice that one of you two can make up your mind,” said Fergus. “Conn and I will go and make the arrangements. See you two retire to your respective huts. I wouldna’ want to scandalize the rest of the camp.”

“Oh, Uncle Fergus!” exclaimed Fiona.

“No calling me Uncle Fergus. Now off you go.”

The two held each others’ hands, and then reached over and kissed. With a giggle Fiona turned and skipped away.

“Your mother’s expecting you, Cormac.”

“Aye,” said Cormac, as he watched Fiona disappear into the maze of small huts.



The next morning, Cormac rose with a start.

“Well, it’s good to see you up and about,” said Niamh, as she noticed her son awake. “It certainly wouldn’t be polite to sleep right through your wedding day.”

“No, Mother, it certainly wouldn’t be.”

“There’s a set of fine clothes of your father’s over there. They shall be your wedding garments.”

Cormac looked at the clothes, and his heart felt sad as he remembered his father.

“We all miss him,” said Niamh, reading her son’s mind as she came up behind him and hugged him. “He’d have wanted you to wear these. And this,” she said, as she came over with a beautiful gold and silver, gem-studded brooch with which to fasten his cloak. “Don’t go putting all these on just yet—you don’t want to be getting them dirty before the wedding.”

“When is the wedding? I never found out,” asked Cormac.

“In the early afternoon. Make the most of your morning as a single man. That’s the last you’ll be having it.”

“Well, to be telling you the truth, Mother, it’s the last I’ll be wanting it,” said Cormac with a smile, as he walked out of the hut. Everywhere he went he was greeted with happy smiles and waves. As he headed towards Fiona’s hut, several of the older women came up to him.

“Don’t you go any further than that, Cormac mac Muirheartach,” said one of them. “It’ll be bad luck for you to be seeing the bride before the wedding. Go on now, there’s plenty for you to do. We’ll be fixing up your bride beautiful for ya.”

“But I just want to say good morning to her.”

“No, you canna! Now, away with ya!”

Cormac turned reluctantly and headed towards the beach where he had spent such a wonderful time with Fiona the night before. On the way he met Finian, who threw a fatherly arm around the young man’s shoulder as they walked together for awhile.

“Well, are ya ready to be a husband, young Cormac?” asked Finian.

“I guess I’ll find out,” replied Cormac.

“Well, if it’ll be any encouragement to ya, I think you’ll make a fine husband, Cormac the hero,” he said, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

“Oh, Finian, quit kidding me about that. I feel silly enough.”

“Well, as long as you feel silly there’s hope for ya. I don’t want you to be getting too big of a head over all this hero business.”

“Oh, you know that I don’t deserve it at all,” said Cormac.

“Aye, I know, but don’t worry, my boy. Everything is going to turn out wonderful. We can worry about

the hero stuff in the days to come, but today you're just a scared wee husband-to-be. And that little girl has got your knees knocking, hasn't she?"

"I've never been a husband before," said Cormac. "I don't know what I'm getting myself into."

"You're getting yourself into a heap of trouble. Now's your last chance. You can become a monk like me, and then you'll never have to worry about that."

Cormac looked at the kind priest and thought for a minute. "That's not a bad idea, Father. And when do you think I can go and take my vows?"

"Oh, get away with ya, ya cheeky pup," said Finian. "I know you are not cut out to be a priest, so don't go pretending that you ever thought you would become one. Why don't you go and take a swim in the river and bathe, so you'll be smelling nice and pretty for the wedding?"

"Not a bad idea, Father," said Cormac. "Oh, and by the way, thanks for agreein' ta marry us today."

"It couldn't happen to a nicer fellow," said the priest.

With that, Cormac wandered off to the lakeside. Shedding his clothes, he waded gingerly into the cold waters to bathe himself. Now as luck would have it, his younger brothers spotted him and his pile of clothes on the shore. Sneaking up to them and grabbing them while Cormac had his back turned, the two young rascalions rushed them back to the hut.

As Cormac made his way back to the shore, he noticed with horror that his clothes were gone. It was a very hurried and naked trip back to his hut that he took that day.

Everyone took it good-naturedly and had a good laugh, and even Cormac (who felt acutely embarrassed) managed to laugh off the prank once he had gotten home.

"I see you are all nice and clean," said his mother

as he walked self-consciously through the door. "Two concerned individuals noticed your clothes discarded on the shoreline and happened to bring them home."

"Hmmm, well, we shall see about returning the favor some time," said Cormac.

"You've no time for returnin' favors today," said his mother. "It's time you were getting prepared for your wedding."



The wedding took place in the communal area of the camp where Finian had set up a makeshift altar. Cormac, looking resplendent in his father's finest clothes, stood nervously waiting for Fergus to bring the bride.

When the old man turned up with that vision of loveliness on his arm, it took not only Cormac back, but just about everyone else in the camp. Fiona not only looked beautiful, but she radiated beauty. She was dressed in a yellow gown, her hair bedecked with wild flowers.

Fergus led her slowly through the crowd of admirers to stand before Finian and next to Cormac.

Finian stretched out his arms and started the blessing as the whole congregation knelt and bowed their heads. The ceremony continued while Cormac and Fiona were both lost in another world. All they could see was each other; everything else became like a dream. It was only when he heard his name that Cormac came back with a thud to the land of reality.

"Cormac," Finian was intoning solemnly, "do you take Fiona as your bride, to be a wife to you and a mother to your children? Will you love her and cherish her and guard her with all due honor?"

"Aye," said Cormac.

"And you, Fiona, do you take Cormac for your husband, and will you honor him and respect him as the church respects Christ?"

"Aye, I will."

“Then the two of you are married. May your union be fruitful and full of all the good and holy things that God intends for those He joins in holy matrimony. Well, now you can kiss her,” said Finian.

Cormac and Fiona stared into each other’s eyes, smiles fixed on their faces.

“Go on, kiss her!” said Brian from the congregation.

“Aye, kiss her!” Others took up the call.

Cormac and Fiona laughed, embraced and then kissed a long, lingering, deep kiss, while a roar went up from all those gathered. Flowers were thrown at them, and well-wishers flocked to congratulate them. They were led to a table that was set up in their honor. Food and drink were set out in copious quantities, and the partying began. Soon everyone was dancing, eating or singing, and the merriment carried on for many hours.

Finally, Fergus came over to the happy couple. “Well, my young ones,” he said, “we’ve set up a hut for ya, where you can spend your nuptial night. I think it’s time that you two depart the scene now.”

Fergus stretched forth his hands and bellowed out: “The newlyweds are leaving. Let’s not give them too hard a time now.”

Nevertheless, the two young ones had to run the gauntlet through the whole community as they made their way to the hut assigned to them. The men slapped Cormac on the back, and the women gave Fiona a few last-minute words of advice.

“So Cormac,” said Brian, being one of the last people that Cormac had to get by, “you know what you are supposed to be doing tonight, don’t ya?”

“Aye,” deadpanned Cormac. “We’re supposed to be sleeping.”

Brian rolled his eyes. “Are you being straight with me, youngster?”

At that Cormac burst out laughing, “Aye, I know what I’m doing. I’ve watched my father’s flocks long

enough to have learned somethin’ at least.”

“Very well,” said Brian. “If you need any advice, I’ll just be sitting outside the door here, so you can poke ya head out and ask me.”

“You’ll be doing no such thing,” said Fiona, giving him a big shove. “You’re not be going to be sitting outside the door of my hut when I’ve just been married.”

“Well, I’m only there to give advice,” said Brian in mock seriousness. “He may have watched the sheep, but a lass is a different creature altogether!”

“No advice needed,” said Fiona sternly.

“But what if he runs into a snag or something?”

“There’ll be no snags,” said Fiona firmly. “Now be off with ya.”

He laughed. “Well, I leave you to your own devices then. But don’t say I didn’t warn ye.”

“Thank you, kindly. Come, Cormac,” said Fiona as she grabbed him by the hand. “Time to be away from all of these,” she said as they went inside their hut and pulled the door closed. The light from various torches held outside in people’s hands flickered through the wattle sticks of the hut on the wall.

“Go away, all of you!” shouted Fiona.

“Aye,” said Cormac. “Leave us be now.”

Laughter could be heard coming from outside the hut, but then voices of others were heard, admonishing them to leave the young couple be. Cormac lit a candle and the soft light filled the small hut. A simple bed was made, and flowers were strewn all across it.

Cormac picked up Fiona in his arms and gently lowered her onto the bed. “I love thee, most precious wife,” he said.

“And I love thee, my wonderful husband,” whispered Fiona.

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THE BALLAD OF CORMAC

The message was spread far and wide by the bards
of Ireland who sang the song that Congal wrote:

The Ballad of Cormac

When the hordes of heathen did come upon
The shores of our sacred land,
Then all the Irish wept in prayer,
And moved God's mighty hand.

For then did God send a deliverer,
Muircheartach, true son of the Gael,
Who nourished Cormac at his side,
His student in peace and battle.

Muircheartach did smite the vile
Ostmen in his wars,
So that the heathen trembled,
And thought to flee our shores.

But by trickery and treachery,
The evil king of Leinster did conspire,
To capture and slay our hero,
And to snuff out Ireland's fire.

And that noblest man,
Muircheartach mac Rory,
Did leap to freedom from their chains,
To meet his death in glory.

But Cormac, by God's high intervention,
Was delivered from evil hands,
And sojourned across the sea,
Fighting wars in foreign lands.

Kings and noble princes
Sought his help in war,
And under him the foreigner fought,
And smote their enemy sore.

And now this son of Erin's isle
Has returned to claim his bride,
Bringing with him sons of kings,
And others mighty to fight by his side.

For with him are four scarce human,
Bold heroes of immortality,
Whose hands are invincible in battle:
Two of Erin's and two from o'er the sea.

The one so tall, a giant,
With silver sword and golden shield;
The enemies fear him and tremble
When they see Finian on the field.

And from huge Brian of clann O'Hooley,
The Norse turn white and flee,
Because in his hands in battle,
He wields an axe the size of a tree.

And foreigners do follow,
Cormac's companions, yes, they be:
The son of a king from Angle's land,
A man of honor and nobility.

This prince of royal blood
Does come with armor strong,
And weapons great and mighty,
To scatter Viking throng.

And last the golden-haired,
The most feared name in Welsh land:
Cedric, slayer of dragons,
Is the fifth of this noble band.

These five march before us
To rally us to war;
And kings of Ireland follow
These champions of ours.

Noble Munster first,
Strongest of Ireland's kings,
Is patron of these heroes,
Of their glory he oft' now sings.

These five men most noble
Do not seek throne or crown,
But only to fight Ireland's battle,
To deliver her when she's down.

So, come all ye of noble heart,
And be fearless of the foe!
Because victory is certainly ours,
If into battle we will go.

These five most noble champions,
God has raised up this day,
They shall lead us into battle,
And victory in the fray.

Come and join the victor's army,
And to Cashel's Rock repair.
Come, prepared for fighting,
And bring your sword, your shield and spear!

Kiss your wives and sweethearts,
 Tell your children you're off to wars.
 Bid them pray most fervent for you,
 And for the victory of our cause.

Come, gather with your brethren,
 All true men of Erin's sacred isle,
 And fight that she may be free
 From the cursed rule of the vile!

And so the song was sung throughout all of southern Ireland, and the clans heard it, and many there were that gathered at Cashel's Rock. And on the first day of the week the king of Munster stood in the midst of the men of battle and bid them all kneel in prayer to ask for God's deliverance and strength, that He might give them all skill, strength and courage.

When the prayer had ended, one of the clann chiefs stood up and proclaimed, "I speak only on behalf of my own clann, but I believe I express the sentiment of many, that we here are willing to die this day in battle, that Ireland stays free. But the ballads have been sung of this Cormac and his companions, and yet we have been here many days and have not seen this man. When will he and the others come and show themselves?"

The king of Munster stepped forward and said, "That is a noble question, one worth asking, and it deserves an answer. Cormac mac Muirheartach has gone to a secluded spot with his companions that they might engage in contemplation and prayer to compose themselves for the titanic struggle that is ahead. He will be here on the appointed day that we march forth. Fear not, for you have not been deceived.

"And I would say that what he does is an example to us all. Let us all here make an oath that we will pray and compose our hearts and prepare for battle—

not by getting ourselves drunk and worked up into a frenzy, but by seeking the strength of God. Let those who are priests and monks amongst us read to us from the Holy Scriptures of God's promises of deliverance, and the stories of battles from the sacred pages. Let us all take note and learn from the lessons of the noble ones of times past."

"Aye, that sounds good to me," said one of the chiefs.

"And to me too," said another.

And all the chiefs that were gathered there with their men pledged this same thing.

And indeed, it was that Cormac and his companions had gone to Finian's former habitation in the hills, there to compose themselves for the battle. Each of the five in some way felt inadequate for the task that was before him, especially Cormac.

"Oh, Finian," said Cormac, "I'm afraid I shall not be able to live up to what is expected of me."

"In your own power it is true that you cannot," said Finian. "Therefore now is the time for you to rely on God."

"But will God bless us in this enterprise of war?" Cormac asked. "For surely it is by a ruse that all these men are gathered at Munster's camp, for I am no hero."

"You must accept that you are God's instrument in this matter. You did not wish this on yourself. You did not scheme to have it happen; you've been thrust into it. You must see the hand of God in that. And now that you are in this role, you must live it as best as you can, just as all of us here must rally around you. The men of Ireland are in need of a rallying point, for they are so hopelessly divided amongst themselves that they have no chance against the Ostmen. But you and the ballad have given them hope and a purpose. You must not disappoint them in that. And we, as the Scriptures say, are weak and in our own

selves can do nothing. So we all must compose our hearts and minds in prayer, seeking God's strength in our lives and limbs."

"Oh, Finian, I understand all that," replied Cormac. "I've been in battle and I fight fair enough, but war is a horrible sight to see—such carnage. The first time I threw up, and the second time I couldn't bear to look at all that had been wreaked on the field of battle."

"It is good that you glory not in the deaths of others, neither heathen nor foe. As your father truly spoke, war, killing and fighting is a dreadful thing, and we engage not in it for pleasure, but only out of necessity."

Cormac's other companions had sat in the circle listening to the conversation.

At last Brian spoke, "It is not in my nature to be either serious or profound, but I am feeling very inadequate myself. I never thought that I would be some sort of mythical hero. The funny thing is that now I find myself in Cormac's shadow, and I don't mind. I'm glad he has to carry the load of this one, and I'll just tag along being huge and wielding an axe as big as a tree, as the song goes.

"Remember, Finian, I fought in the army of Mercia, when they fought the Saxons. There the soldiers wore armor and carried weapons of fine steel. They were an army. But I'm afraid we don't have those kind of weapons here. Our swords are of iron and we wear no armor. I do not doubt God's power, but it's going to take a mighty miracle for our armies to beat these Ostmen, who come as well prepared for battle as we saw the Angles and the Saxons. It was through surprise and cunning that Muirheartach beat the Ostmen in his battle."

"Aye," replied Finian. "But by clever tactics we can also defeat them, even though our weapons are inferior."

"I suppose so," said Brian. "But Muirheartach was wise in the ways of battle. Who is going to devise the

battle plan that we will fight by?"

"Muirheartach looked to God," said Finian, "and God showed him what to do. Believe you me, I saw him agonize and I saw him despair that he would lose to the Ostmen in that battle, but God was with him, as He will be with us on that day!"

"Well, I hope so," said Brian.

"What say you two?" asked Finian to Aethelwulf and Cedric.

"We can only pray that God helps the hopeless," said Cedric, rather unenthusiastically.

"There's no lack of valor and patriotism amongst the Irishmen," said Finian.

"I did not mean to say that they were without hope," replied Cedric, "but that our forces will be hopelessly ill-prepared to take on such a formidable fighting force as the army of the Ostmen. The armies in our own country, who have superior weapons, are afraid to fight these marauders. You see, the Ostmen have no fear of death—God only knows why."

"Nevertheless," interrupted Aethelwulf, "our position isn't totally hopeless. We have a willing force, we have the numbers, we know the terrain, we have the dedication and we have prayer. These Ostmen are Devil-worshipping pagans. Surely our God is able to give us victory."

"Well spoken, sir," said Finian. "We are the chosen five. We will have to stand and fight no matter what, so we must go into this battle knowing that we do or we die. For if one of us turn around, the war will be lost. All eyes will be upon us."

"That's a comforting thought!" mumbled Brian.

"Well, you always wanted to be the center of attention," joked Cormac.

Brian looked up and smiled. "Nah, I'm just one of the companions. You are the real center of attention."

"Well," said Finian, "I suggest we stop the talk now and make God the center of *our* attention."

With that Finian led them in prayer, dedicating their hearts and minds to God and seeking His strength and blessing on their endeavors.

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BATTLE PLANS

The five were met by two of the king's trusted lieutenants, who spirited them into Munster's fort via a secret entrance. There they again met with the king and discussed preparations for the following day, when Munster had been telling the troops that the five would show themselves. The first day of reckoning had come.

The king of Munster gave them the finest weapons that he had. Even so, the steel swords and other Anglo-Saxon weapons that Cormac and his companions had brought back with them from England were of superior quality.

The king was able to provide wonderfully colorful clothes of elaborate design, and once they were dressed in them, they looked every bit the heroes that they were supposed to be. The two Englishmen's long blonde hair contrasted sharply with the dark- and red-haired Irishmen. Finian stood tall and majestic. Brian seemed massive, as the clothes he wore somehow accentuated his bulk.

But the most attention was bestowed upon Cormac, for he was the leader, and indeed would have to look incredible. And so he did, for once he was fitted with his armor and bright clothing, he looked every bit like one of those legendary heroes of times

past. Even Brian let out a low whistle to express his admiration.

And so the rest of the day passed uneventfully, as the five remained hidden from the main body. Only a trusted few knew that they had come back into the fort.

Having retired early to a little room which he had to himself, Cormac knelt and prayed fervently: "Oh, dear God, I still don't know how I got myself into all of this. You know and I know this is not my desiring, or my doing. Please, dear Lord, help me and strengthen me. Tomorrow I have to stand before a vast host of my fellows and inspire them to march out to battle against a fierce foe. How I can do this I have no idea, but I pray, dear Lord, that I do not let anyone down. I will do my very best, but I feel so weak.

"I pray that You will give me strength. I pray that even though I'm just a man, that those out there will see a hero, a champion, someone who they can follow. I cannot pray any more than this, and I know that You, God, do hear. I have seen Your manifestations in this world, and I know that it is You who have brought me out of bondage into safety." With these words Cormac closed his eyes and fell into a fitful sleep.

It was several hours later when Cormac awoke with a start. Someone carrying a candle, dressed in a cloak with a hood over his head, had entered the room.

"Who are you?" said Cormac, reaching for his sword that lay by his bed.

"Shhhh!" came the reply as the man's finger rose up to his face.

"Come on, be showing yourself," said Cormac.

"I will," said the man with a whisper. He reached up with his free hand and pulled the hood from his head, and then held the candle up to his face.

Cormac was thunderstruck. "Father!" he almost

yelled.

"Shhhh!" said Muirheartach again.

"Father, you're here!"

"Aye, I'm here."

"How did you get here?"

"You know me, son. I'm a resourceful man."

"Oh, Father," said Cormac. "We must tell..."

"Shhhh!" Muirheartach cut him short. "Quiet."

"Oh, Father, come here and let me embrace you."

"Aye, son," said Muirheartach. He crept forward silently and sat on the edge of Cormac's bed. Cormac and his father hugged for a long time. "I so despaired of ever seeing you again."

"Aye, me too," said Muirheartach. "But by the grace of God I'm here."

"Father, we must tell the others. ..."

"No, we mustn't!" said Muirheartach firmly, cutting Cormac off in mid-sentence. "For now, my presence here must remain our secret. You must trust me in this and not press me on it anymore. Agreed?"

"Of course, Father! Whatever you ask."

"Good!" said Muirheartach, grinning at his son.

"Father, this is wonderful. You wouldn't guess what is happening to me! I'm supposed to lead this whole army into battle tomorrow."

"Aye," said his father, with a little laugh. "I've heard the song. Well, you've come a long way in the last few weeks."

"You know I can't do it," said Cormac. "I'm so glad you're here, because now you can do it. You are the hero. You are the victor over the Ostmen."

"Oh, son, no. I cannot do it now," said Muirheartach. "You see, everyone is crying for you because you are the one who the bards have been singing about all over the country. It's you who they want to lead them, not me."

"Oh, Father, Father, Father, it's so good to see ya, but I wish you could take my place."

“Ah, son, I cannot. But I’ll tell ya what—I’ll be there with ya. I’ll just have to sneak up to your side once the battle is started, but I’ll be there with ya.”

“Father, I’m going to use the same tactics that you used. We’re going to draw them into a trap and then we are going to spring it. We are going to rain down on them from the sides and they’ll never know what hit them.”

“Yes, it was a good plan,” said Muirheartach. “But that Guthred is a smart dog, and he won’t make the same mistake as Olaf. They know how we did it before, and they’ll expect the same tactics.”

“But how do they know, Father? They were killed to the man, so none could have brought them the news.”

“News spreads. A boast here and a boast there, gossip here and gossip there, and suddenly it’s all the way back into the enemy’s ears. No, they’ll be ready for that tactic. Yesterday’s tactics won’t win today’s battles, and the ambushes of yesterday are the common knowledge of today. You have to think of something new.”

“But we march out tomorrow. And we have heard that the Ostmen are on their way, that they’ve already broken camp.”

“The Ostmen have also heard that the five immortals are leading the army,” said Muirheartach with a grin. “But they fear not God nor men.”

“Then what do we do, Father?”

“I don’t know. I’m going to have to ponder this. I’m getting an idea, but let me muse on it a little longer.”

“But I need to be able to tell people in the morning.”

“Well, all right then. I’ll stay, and we’ll muse on it together.”

“Father,” Cormac said, changing the subject, “Mother misses you so much.”

“Aye, I miss her, too,” said Muirheartach with a tear in his eye. “I long to hold her in my arms again.”

“Well, Father, you shall soon have your longing. But how did you survive? I had a small hope until I came home and saw that you had not returned. Then I was sure you were dead. But now you’re here—and alive. How?”

“There is no time for such questions now. We must talk tactics. Tomorrow the Ostmen will be expecting you to spring a trap, so we won’t. We’ll do the unexpected. So listen here...”



The next morning Cormac was awakened by Finian. “Come on, lad, time to get up,” he said, shaking Cormac’s shoulder.

“Oh, Finian, I’ve been awake half the night.”

“Well, time to go,” Finian said, stepping out of the room.

Cormac dressed quickly in his fine clothes.

“Ah, you look tremendous,” said Finian when he came back into the room. “Come on, the king’s expecting us.”

Cormac was dying to tell Finian about his father, but heeding his father’s strict instructions not to tell anyone, he bit his lip and followed after Finian to the king’s table.

The other three—Aethelwulf, Cedric and Brian—were already there.

“Ah, it’s good to see ya, young Cormac,” said the king.

Cormac nodded respectfully.

“Sit down,” said the king. “Eat up, man, for we hav’ta discuss the final preparations for our battle. And then around midmorning you get to make your showing in front of the host. Are ya ready for that, my boy?”

“I don’t think I’ll ever be ready for it,” said Cormac truthfully, “but...”

“Ah, but you’ve gotta do it. Everyone is depending on ya now,” admonished the king.

After eating, the king opened the discussion. “Now on to tactics. Muircheartach beat the small Ostmen force by springing a trap. It worked once—I say it’s worth trying again.”

The rest of the men around the table nodded in agreement, all except for Cormac. The king caught Cormac’s lack of enthusiasm for the idea. “Cormac, what are ya thinking?”

Cormac sighed, then said, “They’re going to be expecting us to be doing the same thing that my father did, and they are going to be prepared for that. We have to come up with something different.”

This statement caused a round of exclamation around the table.

“It worked so well that none of them survived to go back and tell!”

“Aye,” said Cormac, “but people talk, they brag, and the tale of Muircheartach has been told many times, and not only in the presence of Irish ears.”

“So what do you propose we do?”

“The unexpected,” said Cormac, “would be to use our normal tactics.”

“You cannot mean a head-on charge!” exclaimed the king.

“Aye, a head-on charge,” replied Cormac. “The Ostmen are going to hold back. They are going to not use their full force on us. They will think that we will be mostly hiding in the hills ready to spring a trap on them, so they are going to hold back. They are going to have their first formation bear the brunt of the charge. So, if we use all our forces, we will overwhelm them. Then we’ll crash into and through their second line, and then into their third line. Also, this is fighting that we know how to do best, so our warriors will be in their element. My father won a great and notable victory indeed, but once something like that has been done, it’s not likely to work a second time.”

The men around the table then fell to discussing

the merits and drawbacks of Cormac’s case.

Aethelwulf spoke up. “You fight not the way I would fight, but I agree that it would be best to allow your men to fight the way they know best. But there could be a modification. The ancient Greeks used to fight in a style called the phalanx. It consisted of their soldiers being five deep, each holding long spears. The spears were so long that even the ones five rows back would still stick out at the front.”

“Go on,” said the king of Munster.

“They then ran at the enemy in packed formation. It took a lot of training to run like that, but they moved like one person. They would all know when to wheel this way and to wheel that way, and when they crashed into the enemy’s ranks, it just brought devastation. So an army far smaller could inflict massive damage on a greater, less-organized enemy. Now, I don’t propose that we try to make spears that long, but I would say that a tight formation, each man holding his spear and running into the enemy would wreak havoc...”

“But they’re better armed than we are,” interjected Brian. “Surely they would stand strong and break the charge?”

“This is possible,” said Aethelwulf, “but it certainly would be a tactic they are not expecting.”

“Charging would be a noble way to fight, for it is not our way to run from a war. But it is better, I think, to have some sort of unity when we attack rather than every man on his own,” explained the king.

“It’ll take training to achieve a unity to fight like this,” said Cedric, “and we don’t have time for that.”

“Well, we have some time,” said the king. “We don’t have to march out tomorrow. We can wait a day or two. Right now everyone is just sitting down there eating, drinking and getting into arguments. I suppose a little training wouldn’t hurt them.”

“What about traitors?” asked one of the king’s

lieutenants. "Wouldn't someone from here see what we are doing and go and tell?"

"Aye, that's a possibility," said the king. "And that is one reason we have to convince everyone that our heroes will lead us to victory. Getting on the wrong side of such supernaturals as yourselves should surely discourage treason. Well, my heroes, are you ready?"

"No," they all said in unison.

The king laughed. "Good, so let's go and meet the warriors of Erin."

And so it was that the king marched out that day, and stood on a high rock before all the warriors that had gathered. He then brought out the five heroes who stood on either side of him. The king had skillfully arranged it that they would be standing on the rock behind and slightly higher than him, so that even though he was a big man, each one of the heroes appeared taller than him. "I present to you our heroes!" the king cried with a great voice.

And with a roar, the host raised their weapons in the air and cried, "For God, Saint Patrick and Ireland!"

The five heroes also raised their weapons high, and the chant continued for the space of half an hour. Then the king raised his hands again, and the tumult subsided. He dismissed the five, who then retreated back into the king's fort to the cheers of the onlookers.

Then the king called upon all the chiefs to gather with him for a council meeting, about beginning the warriors' training that day. Meanwhile, the blacksmiths had all their energies diverted to manufacturing as many long spears as they could turn out.

Muircheartach came again that night to visit Cormac, though only for a short time. He explained that he was having to slip out of the camp and wouldn't return until the day of battle. Cormac protested his father's absence, but Muircheartach asked him to trust that he knew what he was doing,

and again made his son pledge that he would tell no one that he had been there.

After two days of training and preparing as best they could, the king of Munster prepared to break camp and march out towards the Ostmen.

"It would be better to have more days of training," said Aethelwulf to the king.

"Aye, Englishman," said the king, "but we cannot. The Ostmen are on the move, and we must meet them on favorable ground."

THE DAY OF RECKONING

It was a good day-and-a-half march before the king and his army reached the spot where they were to give battle. It was a flat-bottomed valley with gently sloped hills on either side. The far mouth of the valley opened up to a plain. At that point the hills on its side became steep and precipitous, making the scaling of them almost impossible.

The Ostmen, accompanied by their traitorous Irish ally, the king of Leinster, had cut a destructive swathe from the coast, and were now camped on the plain that the valley opened into. The king of Munster sent companies of warriors to man the ridges, with orders to not only observe the enemy and find out what they were doing, but also to make themselves obvious doing so. Indeed, they did their tasks well, for Guthred, Haakon and the other Ostmen commanders easily noticed their presence on the heights.

“Trying to draw us into the valley and ambush us, like you did my silly brother,” cried Haakon, shaking his fist in the direction of the Irish. “We’re ready for that tactic.”

That night the Ostmen discussed their battle plans.

“We’ll line up our army in three columns, one behind the other,” Guthred began. “Haakon, you will command the van. I will command the next, and

Lagman Ericson will command the third column along with Leinster. Our first line will enter the valley, but when Munster's men begin their charge, our first line will pretend to break and flee back to the plain so that the Irish will be drawn out. But the retreat will be a feint, and once at the plain the van will regroup behind our second line. With half of their forces left sitting on top of the hills and not able to charge down upon us because of the steep cliffs, we will encircle and annihilate the rest as they charge out of the valley towards us."

Haakon boiled at the fact that he was to feign a retreat. "It is not right that I should lead my men in flight," he snarled. "It is dishonorable!"

Guthred glowered at his subordinate. "You will do as you are told!" he growled back.

The other Ostmen snickered at Haakon, who sat through the rest of the meeting in a sullen silence. When the meeting was over, he got up and stormed out.

"Haakon, remember—you will do as you are ordered!" shouted Guthred after him.

"You shall see what I shall do," muttered Haakon to himself.



The Irishmen rose before dawn, and as the first light broke over the valley they'd already prepared themselves in battle array. The five champions paraded out in front of the troops on horseback. Indeed, they looked marvelous, almost mythical, outfitted for war as closely as possible to the characters described in the song, the sun glinting off their shining armor.

The king of Munster, accompanied by the abbot of a nearby monastery, rode out also to the front of the troops. All knelt as the abbot prayed for God's blessings, victory in the battle ahead and for every man to have courage and valor.

Then the king of Munster stood up and raised his arms. "Today we go into righteous battle," he shouted, "for the heathen have invaded our lands, and they seek to slay us, and enslave our womenfolk and children; to take all our possessions, leaving our land desolate. God has called you all to fight. Fear not this day, for victory is given into our hands. He has raised up leaders for us—heroes, like the heroes of old."

With that he bellowed out the battle cry of Munster, and everyone took up the call. Then all the tribes let out their own individual battle calls, whilst all the men waved their weapons in the air.

After all the tumult died down, the king admonished the men again. "Remember our plans. Fight as a united body, and great shall be our advantage over the heathen."

With that, the five dismounted from their horses and took up their places in the vanguard. Lifting their weapons above their head, they gave forth the command to advance.

The Irish broke into a jog, keeping tightly packed, their spears held upright. Further down the valley, a mist had descended, shrouding the valley floor whilst the hilltops on either side glistened in the sun. The Irishmen made their way into the mist.

The troops stationed in the hills now also made a pretense of showing themselves again. They slipped back and forth behind boulders, advancing along the top of the ridges, all the while showing themselves time and again, letting the sun glint off whatever armor or weapons they had. They wanted the Ostmen to think there were many more of them up there than there actually were.

The Ostmen, meanwhile, had heard the commotion at the other end of the valley and hurriedly prepared themselves for battle, lining up loosely in their ranks. Guthred belted out orders to his warriors, invoking the names of Thor and Woden and other gods of the

Norse pantheon.

The men of Leinster and the Vikings in reserve headed up to take the hills, although the steep cliffs made this a long and arduous process. The Norse's van, led by Haakon, marched into the mouth of the valley. The second row of Vikings maintained their position in the plains.

It was then that the rains started. What had been a sunny morning quickly changed, and dark clouds rolled over the valley. Lightning tore through the sky and thunder rumbled deep through the valley. It started off as a slow drizzle, but soon a heavy rain poured down.

Haakon quickly summed up his situation. Where he was standing was fast turning into mud. Seizing this as his excuse to fight the way he wanted to fight, he ordered his men further into the valley towards a slight rise, where the ground was drier.

As the Irish continued their advance, they came in sight of the Ostmen van, which was advancing in loose formation towards them. Because many of the Irish host could not be made out because of the mist, Haakon underestimated their numbers, thinking everything was going as they had anticipated it to be.

The king of Munster gave the signal, and the Irish lowered their spears and formed into a large "V" pattern. The warriors at the apex had been given large oblong wooden shields with which they formed a virtual wall, their long spears sticking out. The five heroes who had been leading the charge up to this point slipped back several rows into the body of soldiers. The rain, which had somehow almost miraculously been confined to the area of the valley's mouth, continued to fall heavily, turning the ground there to mud.

The Irish, still running on dry ground, picked up speed. With a fearful clash, their apex drove hard into the center of the Vikings' line. The Vikings held for a

moment and then gave way. The Irish held rank well, their tight formation and their spears wreaking havoc on the Ostmen, throwing them all into confusion.

Guthred strained to see what was going on, as the mist hid much of the battle from his view. Impatiently he and the second line of Ostmen waited for Haakon to order the feigned retreat. However, Haakon was determined that the glory of this battle was to be his. He stood in the center of his forces, his cloak giving him the appearance of a great bear, his huge battle-axe swinging over his head as he bellowed out to his men to stand their ground.

The Irish now started to pour through the center, splitting the Ostmen vanguard in two and encircling both wings. The Irish formation now dissolved and the battle became a melee.

It was at this point that, like two titans from the past, Haakon and Brian came face to face. A glimmer of recognition flashed in Haakon's eyes as he saw the big Irishman with a huge battle-axe, shield and armor, standing in front of him.

As Cormac spotted the encounter, a familiar figure in a large, hooded cape appeared by his side.

"Told you I'd be here, son!" yelled Muircheartach over the battle's din, as he pulled the hood off his head and shook loose his hair.

Cormac looked over to see his father, sword in hand, smiling at him.

"Over there," said Cormac, pointing his sword to where Brian and Haakon stood staring at each other.

"I know," said Muircheartach.

Brian and Haakon started to circle each other warily. It was for these two as if the rest of the battle had drifted into a surreal haze.

"So, slave, come back to have your master teach you a lesson?" snarled Haakon.

"It's you who will be doing the learning," growled Brian, "learning the taste of an Irish blade in ya belly!"

Then they clashed, swinging their weapons at each other. Brian parried a blow from Haakon with his shield and then swung his axe in a wide arc, as Haakon, surprisingly nimble for his size, jumped out of the way. Haakon attacked again.

Again Brian parried the blow with his shield and lunged at Haakon, but again the huge Ostman moved out of the way.

Cormac and Muirheartach watched as Haakon struck again. This time the axe wasn't deflected off the shield, but struck right through it. The blade came perilously close to Brian's face, as he sank to one knee.

With a yank the Ostmen hauled his axe away and Brian's shield with it. As he swung his axe over his head again the shield flew off and Haakon, sensing he had the advantage, pressed in for the kill.

Muirheartach in an instant sprang from Cormac's side and now stood, sword in hand, directly behind the kneeling Brian. Haakon was just about to swing down when his eyes fell on Muirheartach. His eyes filled with terror, Haakon stood transfixed.

Brian hadn't seen the reason for Haakon's hesitation, but he saw his opportunity and with all his strength swung again, the head of his axe slicing upwards under the bottom of Haakon's breastplate. The Viking screamed, dropped his axe, and then fell down, stone dead.

Brian put his foot on Haakon's chest and pulled out his ax. Looking around, he could see nothing that would have caused Haakon's terror.

Cormac rushed off to help Aethelwulf and Cedric, who had become the focus of attack by several determined Vikings. Once again Muirheartach was by his son's side, fighting with what seemed like superhuman strength and skill.

"Father, it's so good to have you here with me," Cormac managed to blurt out in the middle of the

battle.

"Aye, son, it's good to be with you."

Soon the four overcame their attackers. It was then that the Ostmen started to break ranks and run. Guthred at first thought Haakon was finally ordering the feigned retreat, but seeing only a few men making their way out of the mist he realized that something had gone wrong.

Cursing Haakon, he paced back and forth, trying to decide what to do. It seemed that the only hope for saving the day was to move in with the rest of his men.

He yelled out the order to advance and, leading the way, he started running towards the melee. Then they hit the mud, and the more heavily armored Ostmen found it difficult to keep their footing. Many slipped, and their fellows stumbled over them. Furthermore, seeing many of the first rank truly deserting the field, others now started to lose heart.

The Irish reformed ranks in an uncharacteristic display of unity and discipline, and charged once again into the Ostmen. The more lightly armed Irish had the advantage and the agility to be able to fight less encumbered by the weight of armor in the terrible slippery conditions. It did not take long for the Ostmen's second rank to break, and soon the rout became general.

It was Aethelwulf who caught up with Guthred. The fight was brief and vicious. The Ostman was a mighty warrior, and Aethelwulf was sore-pressed. Soon Aethelwulf was knocked to the ground.

It was then that Finian came on the scene, forcing Guthred to halt in his attempt to finish off Aethelwulf. Standing over the fallen Angle, the Viking commander sneered and lunged at Finian. Finian agilely stepped to one side as the man lurched by him, and then he wrapped his powerful, sinewy arm around Guthred's neck. With a quick jerk and a mighty crack, the

Ostmen commander's neck snapped.

As quickly and torrentially as the rain had come, it stopped, and warm sunshine broke through the clouds. As the mist cleared, the men of Leinster looked down on the devastation from the hills that they and the Ostmen with them had finally scaled. The Irishmen who had been there were gone. They had slipped back along the ridges and down to the valley floor to eventually regroup with their army.

When the Leinstermen saw the cause was lost, they melted away. The Ostmen that were with them, seeing them desert, cursed their cowardice and one incensed Viking threw a spear at the Leinster king, striking him in the belly. The king's companions carried him away from the scene of the battle, but he died two days later after suffering in extreme pain and agony.

The jubilant Irish pursued their scattered foe for miles, and only a very few Ostmen made it back to their ships. These quickly put out to sea. The scores of boats left on the beach were torched by the Irish when they arrived at the deserted Ostmen base camp.

The battle over, Cormac lay on the ground, exhausted. Brian, Finian, Aethelwulf and Cedric gathered around him, and they all lay there for some time.

Finally, Cormac sat up and looked around. "Have ya seen my father?" he asked.

"Who?" said Brian.

"My father," Cormac replied

"Your father?" asked a puzzled Finian.

"Aye, my father!" Cormac asked again. "He came to me back at Cashel's Rock, but swore me to secrecy about him being there. It was he that told me that we shouldn't use the ambush tactics. And that was the reason why I held out like I did in the council. He told me he'd join us at the battle, and he did. He was magnificent. I never saw him fight with such strength and skill before. When you slew Haakon, Brian, he

was standing there behind ya. And then we were fighting next to Aethelwulf and Cedric. Oh, we've gotta find him, it's going to be so wonderful to have him back."

"But I didn't see anyone," said Brian. "I had no idea why Haakon stopped in his tracks like he did, but I didn't want to take time to find out. When I looked around, after killing him, I saw no one."

Aethelwulf then looked at Cormac. "We heard you talking to someone when fighting alongside of us, but neither Cedric nor I saw anyone."

"What?" said Cormac. "He was there! He was there right beside me."

"We didn't see anyone," confirmed Cedric. "We just heard you talking to someone but we saw no one."

"Oh, you must be mistaken. He was there. He was there right beside me," insisted Cormac.

Then Finian spoke gravely, "I didn't know when to tell ya this," he said, with his eyes cast down. "The day before the battle I was sent word from Fergus that Muirheartach's body was found washed up on the shore several weeks ago. The news of it only reached Fergus after we'd all left for Cashel. Conn and I did not want to give you such sad news before the battle, so we didn't tell ya."

"So Father *is* dead?"

"Aye," said Finian. "I'm so sorry. They found his hands still tied to the pole. He never had a chance in the surf."

Cormac's face turned white. "But I saw him! He spoke with me! He fought with us! He saved Brian's life!"

Finian nodded. "Aye, he was there. I'm sure of it."

EPILOGUE

And so ends the Saga of Cormac. A great battle was won, and for many years that part of Ireland remained free from the scourge of the Ostmen.

The Ostmen eventually came back. Many settled in Ireland, but were finally subdued by Brian Boru, the king of Munster, in 1027. By this time, many in their Viking homeland had given up the ways of the pagans and had embraced Christianity, although it took them a while longer to give up their warlike ways.

Cormac and his clann, as well as the O'Hooleys, went back to their ancestral lands, but now counted themselves part of Munster. The Leinster men left them alone. Cormac and his companions were not called forth to battle again for many years, but when they were ... well, that is another story.

Cormac and Fiona grew old together, surrounded by their children and grandchildren. On Conn's death, Cormac became the ri of his people and led them wisely for many years. Brian became ri of the O'Hooley clann, and the O'Hooleys forever gave up the way of brigandage. In time, Cormac and Brian even managed to have conversations without them turning into arguments.

Finian returned to his life of quiet contemplation as a hermit monk, but he often paid visits to his friends.

Aethelwulf never returned to Mercia. He and

Aelfthryth made their home amongst the Irish, and their children married Irishmen and women.

Cedric, former hater of all Celts, eventually married an Irish woman of Cormac's clann, and some say—although the origin for such a saying remains a mystery to many—that when any Irish man or woman is blond-headed, that somehow the *Seed of Cedric* is the cause.

And as the years passed, the story of the five heroes and the ghost of Muirheartach, of how they led the Irish to victory over the Ostmen, faded from memory. So why did the story come to be written now?

I'll add a post scriptum to this saga
Of our heroes and their times.
Methinks its writing had a purpose,
And there's a message in its lines.

For perhaps there'll come a time,
When we may also receive the call
To rise above the day to day,
And find the hero in us all.

For when tyranny would rise
To take away our freedom,
It is time for average men like you and me
To stand for what we believe in.

To fear not too much
The foe's strength, pow'r and might,
But rather fear what we hold dear
Will be lost if we don't fight.

For heroes are but mortal men
Who in the time of danger,
Find within them unknown courage
To face down the tyrant's anger.

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