



A bloody field south-east of Sligo, A.D. 971

“God, in your mercy, look kindly on the soul of this man who gave his life to protect our lands. Grant him eternal peace in your kingdom. We ask this through Christ, our Lord...”

The words faded into a weary sigh, and the priest turned his eyes up into the gloom overhead. In his thoughts, an imponderable question began to form only to be extinguished by a wave of frustration and self-reproach. He had seen it coming, there was no need to beseech God why. The disaster had been planned and executed with perfect precision.

He was angry at the world for the stupidity of men and mad at himself for betraying the code he lived by.

Sombre clouds, pregnant with rain, pressed down offering no solace. Could he have changed things? Should he have tried? Both questions were fatuous, but he couldn't dismiss them. A caustic voice of regret echoed again in his head. He'd spared his pride, but at what cost? Maybe he could have helped to save some, even if the day was doomed from the outset. Instead, he'd prayed for a miracle and waited out the carnage, hoping for something he knew in his head could never be.

So now this place had been defiled. Hundreds lay in tortured testament to the brutality and madness of unnecessary conflict. A flicker of resentment touched his mind. This place was his home. A home he had never looked for. The patient product of a virtuous life, not the spoils of avarice such as he'd known before. It was just a small parcel of land, given over to the church by a long-dead noble in exchange for a burial plot amongst the saints at Clonmacnoise. Its riches were measured by the spirit of its people more than in mere pecuniary wealth. Those spirits were now bruised by events the story of which would resonate long into the future. In a day of tragedy, their home had been transformed from a quiet idyll into a living purgatory.

But surely it wasn't his fight. Maybe once, but not now. He was a foreigner. Elevated to the priesthood by order of a dead king, only to be spurned by his prideful replacement whose army now lay destroyed.

His face betrayed confusion. He was pensive for the future and yet full of remorse for the past. These emotions gnawed at him while he fought a wave of tiredness.

As daylight had waned, he'd worked hard to galvanize recovery. Then he had toiled on through the night to find and help those who'd survived. Dawn had brought the appalling task of clearing the battlefield of those who lay inert and cold like so much winnowed chaff. His companions laboured on in a mood of subdued resignation, cleansing the field of its harvest of horror. A keening cry of despair marked misery for one family on finding the broken and twisted remains of a cherished son. The bodies of twenty score others were strewn out across a swath of mud-clogged ground below the looming presence of the hill they called Ceis Choran.

He looked back down and moved on, only to be jolted by a memory from the past. A familiar face stared back through sightless eyes from the turf at his feet. It was oafish Harald, a long way from his Orkney home and no more to enjoy drowning his dull wit in cups of björr.

A golden pendant, fashioned in the shape Mjölfnir, Thor's war hammer, dangled from a worn thong around his neck. The priest recognised it. A grim smile breached his lips as he reached down and touched the familiar trinket. It had once been his treasured talisman, but he'd lost it to this man in a drunken game of dice.

Impulsively he tightened his grip and tugged. The leather thong pulled against cold and stiffened flesh but held firm. He yanked it and the cord parted with a dull thunk that released a stab of guilt. What was he doing? A priest robbing the dead!

Then his guilt subsided into sadness for a lost past when he'd lived life in pursuit of selfish aims, hiding the consequences of his actions behind the tenets of a false creed.

He drew his fingers down across the cold eyes.

“Go in peace, even as you came for plunder.”

He stood again and brushed back an unruly lock of dark hair that had fallen in front of his eyes. He closed his grip on the pendant and wound the cord into a hank around his fist. Then he paused, his attention caught by the sight of the scars on the back of his hand. He flexed his cold fingers and saw the skin was now wrinkled slightly giving into the effects of time, the great destroyer. Soon he knew he'd no longer be able to sustain the physical presence and poise of his younger self.

He pocketed the reminder of his past and turned his slate grey eyes to survey the desolate scene. He wondered whether this was God's punishment. It was hardly that, but there was no denying the facts. Harald's lifeless body was a testament to an alliance that would be hard to resist. The invaders had come out of the north like a slow-moving plague. Vikings had been despatched by Sigurd, Earl of Orkney, whose rule extended from Shetland to the Inner Hebrides. They bolstered the Uí Néill from distant Ailech in Ulster, united as uneasy partners, both drawn by pernicious intent. The combined army had killed without mercy and then marched on southward, heading for Cruachan, the seat of kings in Connacht. Behind them, smoke rose from burned roundhouses to form a chain of misery across the land.

In the centre of the field, a grizzly stake cut from greenwood was buried half its length in the soft earth. Four branches pointed accusingly at the sky. Each was adorned with a severed head. The ghastly display was a deliberate symbol, but what it meant he couldn't say. He just knew that this wasn't their way. Ireland was a land full of men accustomed to the brutality of constant conflict, but respect for fallen opponents endured. It was deeply embedded in culture, arising from an era when reverence for the natural order was a well-spring for beliefs. Defiling the bodies of nobility was anathema. It spoke of a mind broken free from convention.

Cathal mac Tadhg had been King of Connacht for less than a year. His wretched reign was now over. He was kept company by his distant cousin Teague mac Murtagh, lord of the Uí Díarmada, a splinter tribe from the ruling Uí Briúin. Beside them swung the heads of the overlord of the great Uí Maine people and the chieftain of the Ó Flaherty clan. Their

defeat presaged slaughter across the land. Few warriors were left. Fewer still could stand steadfast in the path of Murchad Glun, the so-called 'King-in-the-North'.

At the foot of the battle-ground, a movement caught the priest's eye. He saw a gaunt-looking stranger outlined against the steel waters of the lough, breath misting the cold air. The ageing figure stooped to pick up an object and then raised his head, somehow aware that he was being watched. He began to approach, walking with the aid of a long staff. There was something familiar in his frame and gait. His feet were plastered with mud, and the hem of his full-length robe was soiled. The sleeve covering his right forearm had ridden up. The ornate arm-ring of an ollamh, the most senior rank of brehons, hung from his thin wrist. He was one of a cast of sages whose task it was to interpret the law and dispense justice.

Once within earshot, the law-speaker acknowledged the priest. "You must be Rannal, the old king's anointed priest in Duncarrow. My name is Morann."