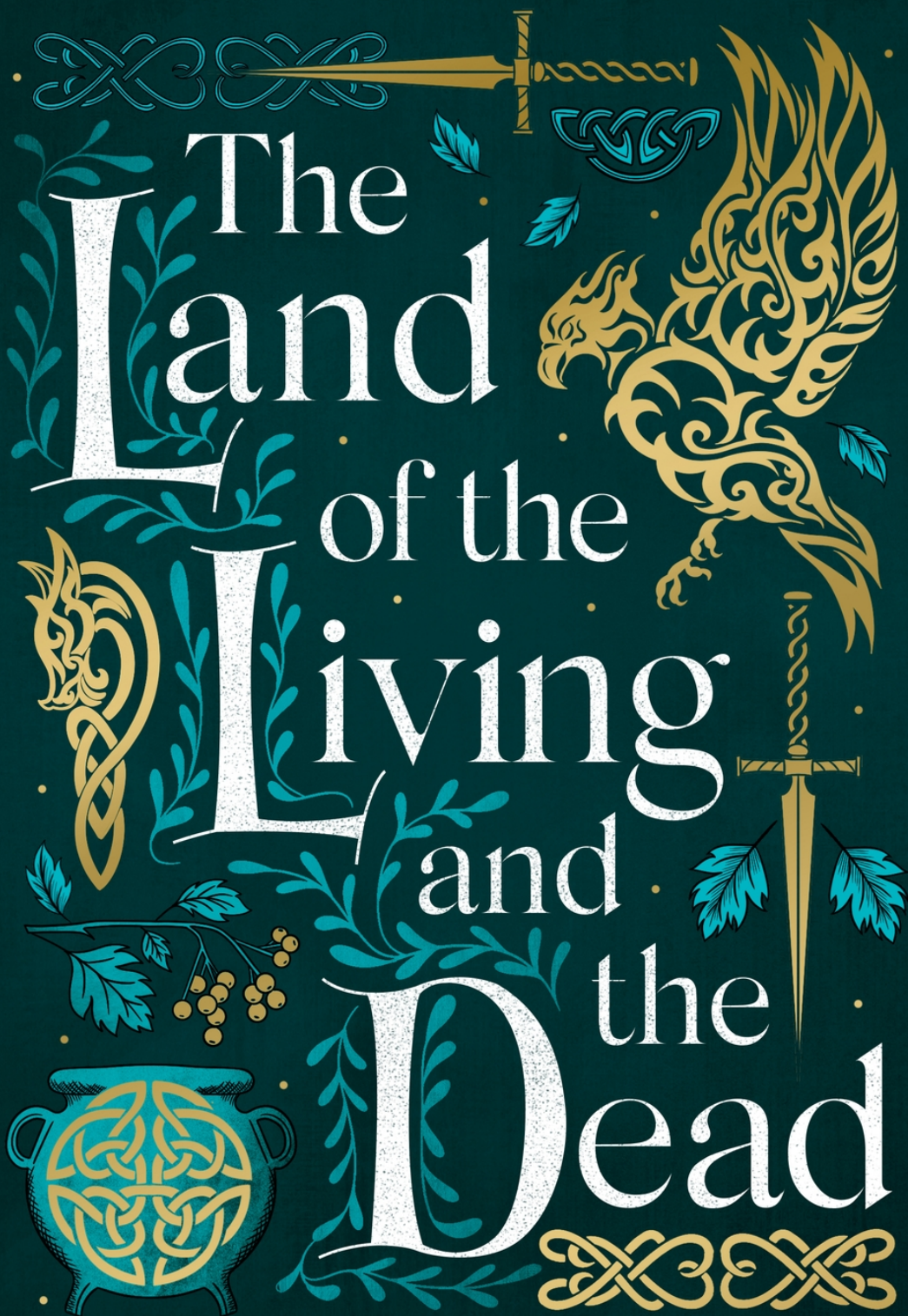




SHAUNA LAWLESS

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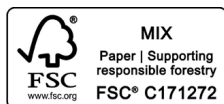
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PROLOGUE

Munster, AD 1011

Gormflaith

I walked into the old church.

It was derelict, overgrown with ivy and weeds. A hovel, if truth be told. Mice scurried in the corners, birds nested under the thatch, and a pungent smell seeped into the air when the breeze blew in. The smell of life and rot intertwined.

Sad, really, that the people should leave a once-loved building to decay like this. *It was cursed*, I'd heard them say. *Pagans had spilled Irish blood on consecrated soil*. Yes, that was true. The downfall of this church began the day the Vikings raided it. Amlav the Red, my late husband, had killed the bishop, and after that, no one had dared to rebuild it. Instead, the priests had constructed a much grander church, a little further inland. A shame. Despite the fact the thatched roof had collapsed by the door, the wooden beams had held steady above the altar. It was dry here. Earthy. Much more welcoming than the cold, grey stone walls the monks and priests now favoured.

I stopped moving as the fallen autumn leaves crunched outside the door, the weight of my visitor's footsteps hastening the leaves' transformation to dust and nothingness.

"Sister," Máelmórda said. He paused before he spoke again, all humour in his voice absent today. He glanced around the dilapidated church, forehead furrowed, lips curled, nose pinched. "Your husband is away. You should have invited me to the dun."

“Brian will be home tomorrow, but I’ve told you before, the dun has ears, and I don’t want him to know we have spoken.”

Máelmórda shrugged, bored by my caution. “He’s called me and my army up again, you know. To the very north this time. We are to leave once winter wanes. The Northern Ó’Neills won’t submit to him, no matter how many times we fight them.”

“The strength of the Ó’Neills is fading now. So many battles fought among themselves, and now so many against Brian. This is their last stand. Their young king, Flaithbertach, must flex his muscles one last time before he can bear the shame of bowing to a southern king.”

Máelmórda made a show of wiping a moss-covered bench with his gloved hand. Spiders and earwigs scurried away, and he just about forced himself to sit opposite me. “Get on with it. Say whatever you wish to say.”

“Not yet. Sitric’s not here.”

“I’m not waiting for him. Tell me now.”

“No.”

Máelmórda stood, moving swift and hard. He’d been fighting for Brian these last nine years. Connacht, Bréifne, Airgíalla. Now the Northern Ó’Neills. The pompous Prince of Leinster from years gone by had vanished and something rougher had been left behind. A *king’s* fingers gripped my neck, golden eyes burning.

“Your mortal son has no—”

The leaves outside the door crunched again and Máelmórda reluctantly let me go.

Sitric walked in. Smiling and windswept, he gave me a kiss on the cheek. He smelled of salt and sweat, which no doubt was why he looked so happy. The sea agreed with him, just as it had his father.

He clasped his uncle’s shoulder. Máelmórda nodded back, though there was something in both their eyes that showed all was not well. Sitric had been fighting for Brian too. Uncle and nephew had perhaps spent too long in each other’s company.

Whatever the cause of this conflict, Sitric didn’t dwell on his

uncle's lacklustre greeting and instead shoved a mouse away with his boot. "What a delightful hall you keep, Mother. It suits you well."

Laughing, I gestured for him to sit. "It suits me better than my current residence, I'll give it that."

"Is that what you've summoned us for? To tell us you have left your husband to be queen of all this." His hand gestured toward the fallen-in roof. "Your own church. Just what you've always wanted."

"What I have to tell you is much more exciting than that."

Máelmórda and Sitric turned to face me, their eyes unable to conceal their curiosity.

"Word has reached me that Svein Forkbeard is planning to invade England. He has called his jarls and warriors together. They are building more ships, shoring up their alliances. He is giving everyone three more winters to prepare, then his fleet will set sail."

Máelmórda snorted. "How can you know this?"

Sitric stared at his uncle, giving him a small smile. "I have heard rumours of this. Nothing for certain and not that he gave the order to build more ships." He locked eyes with mine. "Are you sure this isn't just another drunken story? Who is your source?"

"I am sure the news is correct, and I believe Svein has the power and the ambition to see it through. He will be King of England, mark my words."

"How do you think it will affect us?" Sitric asked, his interest building.

"It means you also have three years to plan. With so many Viking warriors in England, there will be many mercenaries who you can pay to fight for you. Brian's own army is weak. He wins only because he has bound the men of Connacht and Leinster and the Viking kings of Wexford and Dublin to fight for him. If you both turned on him, his other allies would quickly fall away. Many would want the high-kingship, but only you two, with planning, can muster an army so big that no other Irish king can stand against you."

Máelmórda stared at his feet while Sitric watched me.

"That was Olaf's dream, was it not?" Sitric said. "That he would be King of England, and I would be King of Ireland." He smirked at his uncle. "So, if it's my money, my connection to the Vikings that will win us the war, who is it that you propose should be High King?"

"You, of course, my child," I answered.

Máelmórda frowned. Sitric stared at me wide-eyed. Neither had expected this response. "As you say, it is your wealth, your connections, which will win the war. It is you who must be High King. But for this plan to work, you must fight together. You must both abandon Brian when he expects it least."

"You don't wish us to fight against the Ó'Neills?"

"Oh yes, you must fight them. Crush them. With the Ó'Neills destroyed, their claim to the high-kingship will disappear. Yes, you must fight with Brian for now. Win his wars for him. Keep him close. Make him trust you until all the pieces are in place."

My brother snorted, kicking the base of his log-chair. "And what do I get in this grand scheme of yours? All the smoked fish of Ireland? All the poets and their wine? I am the King of Leinster. An *Irish* king. It is I who should be the next High King."

"And who will you procure to fight for you? Sitric is kinsman to many of the Viking jarls. His father, Amlav, was a legend. Men will fight for him and not for you, no matter how much you promise to pay them. When we win, I propose that Sitric's son marries one of your daughters. That way, our lines will continue to be joined and prosper."

Máelmórda seethed, but I ignored my brother, for I'd already known what his reaction to that suggestion would be, and instead turned to Sitric. "Reach out to your Viking cousins. Build a bigger fleet. Increase the taxes at the Dublin port. If you look weak, Svein may be tempted to invade Ireland himself. If he sees your strength, he will seek to keep you as a friend instead. And above all, make sure the walls are sound."

Sitric nodded, though his lips twisted as he thought. I linked

my arm with his and walked him to the door. "What is wrong?" I whispered.

"Sláine won't be happy about this. She loves her father."

"Then remind her that it is her sons who will benefit from this. She is her father's daughter, yes, but you are her husband. You must bend her to your will. If not, you should divorce her and send her to a nunnery before the war starts. You don't want an enemy spy in your bed."

He gave me an uncertain look.

"Don't tell me you would let her stifle your ambition?"

"It's complicated... I love her, but this is what I've always wanted. I will do as you say." He stooped to kiss my hand. "Thank you, Mother."

Sincerity swam in his eyes. Love. Or was it greed? I couldn't quite tell anymore. I'd spent too long away from my eldest son to know the true feeling behind every glance and gesture. That would need fixing. I tugged at his sleeve, pulling him closer. "Remember. Strengthen the walls, build more ships, store up more gold and silver. We will speak again."

He left me and ran toward the coast, his ship anchored close to the beach. With a good wind, he'd be home in a few days. Once he was gone from sight, I made my way back inside the old church.

Máelmórda turned to me, eyes hard, as I approached him. "When are you going to tell Sitric that you lied to him?"

I smirked. The rage in him was deliciously close to boiling over.

"Lied to him? About?"

"The high-kingship."

"I didn't lie. Not completely. He will be High King... for a time. We need him."

He stepped closer. "You promised to be on my side. Once again, you choose your mortal son over me."

"I am on the side of the Fomorians, brother. Do not doubt that."

"I do doubt it. You still have not located the fortress. You still don't know—"

The church shuddered. The beams over the altar crashed onto

the stone dais. Birds flew from their nests and the mice scattered. Along the floor and walls, root and ivy twisted around each other, crawling toward us. More rushed in through the thatch and door with slimy, green shoots sliding along the newly exposed roof.

“What is...?” My brother drew his sword. “The Descendants are here, sister. They have found us.”

The ivy kept coming, snaking along the floor and walls. Máelmórda bolted toward the door, without giving me a second thought, as I knew he would. But the ivy and roots were too quick for him, and they pulled him down. Twisting around his ankles and legs, they dragged him back toward the altar. He called on his fire-magic. Flames danced along the roots closest to his arms, but they did nothing to break through. “Help me, sister,” he wheezed.

I stood above him, and using my fire-magic, put out his flames.

“What are... you... doing?” He stared into my eyes. “Is this... you?”

“Yes. It is.” I made the roots drag him down into the soil until the lower half of his body was underground. The ivy tightened, crawling around his shoulders, up and up, until it reached his neck and tightened.

“How...?”

“I’ve been practising, brother. Patiently. The witch gift that I stole all those years ago is now mine to command at will. And now everything is in place for us to begin our war. To claim the high-kingship, there are many things we must do, but the most important one is that we kill the Descendants of the Tuatha Dé Danann.”

“We need to know... the fortress... we don’t...”

“Oh, I do, brother. I’ve known its location for years.”

Even buried to his waist, Máelmórda could not conceal his rage.

“Why hide it?” I asked for him. “You talk often about not trusting me. However, it is I who does not trust you.”

His face turned red, the ivy squeezing harder and harder.

“And so, before we start, I need you to agree on our plan and

make some vows. Firstly, you will never arrange another marriage for me. Secondly, you will never harm or threaten to harm Sitric or Donnchad in order to sway me.”

“I want...”

The ivy squeezed, removing the words from his mouth.

“You’ve wanted a great many things, Máelmórda. You’ve wanted power, the location of the fortress, more Fomorian children, but it is not you who has provided any of these things. It is me. I have the power. I know where the fortress is. I have a Fomorian child. You will do as I say.”

He glared at me, the whites of his eyes turning red.

“And in return, I will give you something you want very badly... a gift.”

I took the Descendant knife from my cloak and waved it in front of him.

Holding out my hand, I loosened the ivy. Instantly, it fell away from his throat. Choking, Máelmórda inhaled, greedily sucking in deep breaths, then coughing as the dust and soil from the ground flew in the air. Once he had sucked in a few breaths, the redness left his eyes, only to be replaced by a red tinge in his cheeks. Shame. The shame of being bested by a woman. His sister. He pushed and railed against the roots, trying to hoist his body out of the ground, but my magic held him firm.

“Let me out,” he growled.

“No. I don’t think so.”

I walked out of the church. Now that the ground had stopped moving and the ceiling stopped shaking, the birds and animals returned. Spiders crawled along the rotten leaves. Mice scurried back to their dens.

“Sister!” he shouted. “Come back.”

But I had no intention of going back. Not yet.

It was dark when I finally returned. Fire had singed the fallen thatch and burned mice littered the floor, but the roots, buried

underneath the soil that held his legs tight, had remained untouched. I, of course, had seen to that. While he had cried and struggled and soiled himself, I had drawn in his fire. I let him burn the mice, let him set fire to a few blades of straw. Not because I felt sorry for him, but because I wanted him to have hope, and then to shatter it entirely when I drew his flames away.

“Evening, brother.” I held out my hand, and a ring of fire ran around us. He stared at the fire, his eyes despondent, knowing, deep in his heart, that I had bested him. That I was stronger. *That I was in control.*

“We are Fomorian, brother. There can only ever be one leader. You must concede that it is me.”

“My men will come looking for me.”

“And who will they find here, do you think?” Pressing his hand with my finger, the hairs along his knuckles and arm turned white. His beard followed. Skin sagged until it hung from his bones. “An old man. Crazy and rotten. They will certainly *not* find the King of Leinster.”

“You bitch. Mother would—”

“Mother would do nothing for you. She knew what strength was, and even she’d know by now that I am the strongest of us. Stronger even than her. If she were alive, she’d be buried right beside you.”

Spittle pricked at his lips.

“Well, I shall go. Until you are in a more favourable mood.” Strolling toward the door, I dampened the flames until only darkness and the sound of scurrying mice remained.

“No. Don’t!” It hurt him to say those words. “Tell me your plan.”

I walked back and sat on the bench he had cleared earlier.

“Next year, Brian will win in the north. You will help him. He plans to celebrate his success by building churches and fortresses all over Ireland. During that time, you and Sitric must build up your armies. Then, when Svein invades England, you will both turn on Brian and go to war, and while this battle for Ireland causes chaos, you and I will go to the Descendants’ fortress with your men and

kill them. The war between Brian and Sitric is our distraction, but ultimately, Sitric's victory will be good for us too."

Máelmórda stared at me, unconvinced. "You assume too much. First, that Sitric can defeat Brian, and then, that we can defeat the Descendants with ease."

"We must act now, Máelmórda. We are more powerful than any of our ancestors. They fought together, fire alongside fire, but you and Sitric have mortal armies at your call. They are weak, these mortal men, but thousands of them together might be enough to win."

"Surely we should focus on defeating Brian first."

I shook my head. "Understand this, brother. We will not be able to *keep* the high-kingship until the Descendants are all dead. A war on both fronts is the only way to do this. It provides us with the cover to surprise the Descendants and the numbers to defeat Brian. Chaos will become our greatest friend."

Finally, my brother nodded.

"For this plan to work, you must do as I say. At first, men will assume you want the high-kingship. Then they will realise Sitric is better placed and follow him. You must not fight this. You must not let your pride get in the way. And you must agree to the conditions I set earlier.

"In return, I will find a Descendant for you to kill." Once again, I pulled out the knife. "But it is my rules, brother. My plan. Do not work against me, and the high-kingship will one day – when Sitric is old and grey – be yours."

He stared at the ground, then at last, nodded his head. "One day, I will be High King?"

"Yes."

"Then... Then I agree."

I touched his arm once more. The white hairs turned back to black, and inch by inch, the roots retreated and pushed him up to the ground.

Now he was free, his eyes burned once again.

"That was very easy for me to do, Máelmórda. Remember that."

Holding out my hand, I took a step closer, watching as the fire dampened within him. “But I’d prefer it if we worked together. We are the last of our kind – you, Donnchad and I, and this is our last chance.”

He took hold of my hand, his face calm as he pressed my palm over his heart. “Yes, Gormflaith,” he whispered. “I will do as you say.”

PART I

LATE SPRING 1012

Kingdom of the Northern Ó'Neills

Murchad

The wind blew, bitter and damp. Swirls of mist danced on the grass.

The north was colder than the south, but I liked it here, even so. No fires had been lit. We did not want to give away our location to the Ó'Neills, so for tonight, the overpowering smell of burning turf and wood was replaced by the gentler scent of wet fern and tree sap.

I moved out from the camp-line and walked toward the forest, where the chances of a surprise night-time attack were greatest. All seemed at peace. Nonetheless, I waited there for the guards to switch over. The first to return from the forest was a young man, one I didn't know. He bade me a good morning, even though the sun had not yet risen, then hastily added he'd neither seen nor heard anyone. The second to return was an older man, one I'd spoken with many times. Ealadha was his name. He smiled at me, his gums dark and with plenty of teeth missing. He clapped me on the back, grinning, glad, I guessed, that his duty was over and that he was not expected to fight in the approaching battle, and nor should he be. His fingers gripped his spear at odd angles, his knuckles swollen after being broken in battles from before I was born.

"All quiet?" I asked.

"Oh, aye," he replied, and he pulled out his sword. "*Name Taker* saw no man's blood tonight. No doubt your sword will see plenty of the red stuff tomorrow."

I didn't nod at this, but the man did not wait for one in any case. The rest of the guards trudged in behind him, reporting that

they too had seen no one, while new guards took over for the final watch. None of them stopped to talk. It was too cold, and walking quickly to their positions was all they had to warm them.

I glanced behind me, watching as Ealadha re-sheathed *Name Taker* and walked into his tent.

Once I was alone, I pulled out one of my own swords and examined the blade. Razor-edged, and tapering to a needle-sharp point. Dangerous, though I had given it no name.

The old gods of Ireland named their weapons. The Tuatha Dé Danann and their children. *Fódlá's kin*.

It was said Nuada, the first High King of Ireland, had a sword called *Fragarach*, also known as *The Whisperer*. He was a druid, and when Nuada held his sword at his enemies' throats, they could tell him no lies.

Cú Chulainn, son of Lugh, had a spear. *Gáe Bolg* was the name upon it. A fearsome weapon that could kill thirty men with one strike.

The old gods' weapons were like the old gods themselves. Full of magic. Full of wonder. Full of terror. And I supposed there was a desire in men's blood, or else in their hearts, to emulate the gods.

Over the years, I had met many a warrior who had spoken a name when touching his sword or spear. When I was younger, I believed men wished for the glory of the old gods to fall upon them, for their names to be spoken in the same breath. *Did Ealadha have this wish?* For his name and Cú Chulainn's to be toasted in the feasting hall together?

Maybe. Maybe not.

As I'd grown older, I had seen other reasons for naming a weapon.

Dawn broke as I walked along the camp boundary, still no movement from within the forest. Fears of a raid fell away. They must still be waiting for us at the foot of the mountain close to Flaithbertach's dun. They held the high ground there, food and

shelter, and Flaithbertach was wise not to give it up. Feeling certain that no raid would come now, I stilled and looked toward the horizon. I would be alone only for another minute or two before the rest of the camp stirred, so I watched as colour seeped upward from the horizon, enjoying the last moments of silence.

The sky turned from black to shades of red and pink, as if it wanted to foretell the colour the ground would be by the end of the day. It was bad luck for the morning sky to turn red. *Bad luck for who?* was always the question. Perhaps it was bad luck for all of us, for by the evening, the ground would be stained red with the blood of men from all parts of Ireland.

It gave me no pleasure – the thought of men dying. I had fought without rest for six years now. Moving north, foot by foot. Only the O'Dónaills of the Northern Ó'Neill kingdom stood in my father's way. Only they were left to concede that King Brian was High King over all of Ireland.

A last fight then, and perhaps the hardest. It was said that the men in the north fought like dogs. It was said by way of insult, and in truth, they did not fight like dogs. They fought like wolves. That was why the Viking kings could not take any land here. Amlav the Red and his kind had not ravaged the north the way they did the south. The men here were too strong.

But they had not suffered.

Not the way we had.

And that had made us stronger.

Voices whispered behind me, rising into the air with the breeze. The camp was waking with the dawn, the men preparing for battle.

I walked over to my tent and peered through the door. Tairdelbach lay asleep inside. My son had travelled north for this battle. My father had told him he must, that the monks must record his name as having fought for the high-kingship if he wanted to hold it himself one day. He was much older than I had been when I started fighting, but in my eyes, he was still too young.

He had a smile that lit up any hall. I saw the men and women turn to look at him when he threw his head back and laughed. There was music inside him, and the people heard it. He was handsome too. His skin soft and smooth. I would have it stay that way. My scars ran everywhere, deep and twisted. Outside and in.

That was the true reason men named their swords.

They wanted the guilt of killing given to someone else, but when you were the one who held the blade, there was no one else. *Something else* then would have to suffice. *Oathbinder has killed thirty warriors*, a man would say. *Retribution has taken forty*, another would reply. But it was not truly *Oathbinder* or *Retribution* who had taken anything. These were not the weapons of the gods, filled with their own magic and desires. The spears and blades we used now were made by mere men. Steel and iron. Nothing more. It was men who had taken the lives they spoke of. It was their sin. Their guilt. And that was why they denied it.

I could not deny my own guilt. There was plenty of it. I, Murchad mac Brian, had killed more men than anyone else I knew, save for my father. Hundreds of faces haunted my dreams. Some of them I knew well. I saw their eyes, their last breaths, their fear. Some faces were featureless, eyeless, mouthless, for I did not know them. I only remembered that they died at my hand.

My family said I had become quiet. That I lived in my head. I supposed that was true, for that was where she lived now. *Fódlá*. That was the only place I found my peace, when I thought of our time together, alone, under the trees.

I was a wretch indeed. Tormented by a love that I did not deserve and one that was lost. If, one day, she was to come back, what would she find? An old wreck, like an oak tree stricken and hollowed out by storm and rot? A ghost of the man she once knew.

★

“Murchad.”

I turned to find Eocha walking toward me, and I moved away from my tent, letting Tairdelbach have his last moment of sleep.

“What do the scouts say?” I asked, once Eocha reached me.

Eocha shifted his weight. “They have more than us, as expected, but their army hasn’t split. The scouts don’t think they know that Tadc and Sitric’s men are closing in on them.”

“Let us go now. Then it will be over.”

Eocha held out his hand to clasp mine.

I held it tight. “You remember what to do if I fall?”

Eocha nodded. “I will take Tairdelbach to Munster. I have four men who will remove him from the battlefield if he does not comply, just like you asked.”

“Good.”

Eocha gave me a small smile. “But enough talk of that. We will win.”

I slapped his shoulder and gave him a wider smile than the one he gave me. “Come. Let’s show the men of the north what the men of Munster are made of. An early attack. What do you say?”

Eocha ran ahead to call the leaders of each clan to their positions.

I felt for my right sword, then for the left one. I touched both their hilts.

Just steel. Both of them nameless and guiltless of what was to come.

Unlike me.

Rathlin Island

Fódla

Rathlin was a sparsely populated isle located along the north-east coast of Ireland. The few locals who lived here said the Vikings had massacred the inhabitants when they first came raiding these shores, sparing only the young people, who they took as slaves. Three families had escaped by hiding in caves, and it was their descendants who now remained. None left living remembered those days, though the trauma of such a violent history was written on their faces. Grey, they looked. Solemn. Wary.

They ignored us for the most part. They said the dead haunted the land where we lived, for the Vikings had not known to cut the noses and ears away from those they had killed. Ghosts and daemons remained, they said, and they did not wander here as a result.

Colmon had laughed when I told him their gossip. The spells cast by the Tuatha Dé Danann granted protection to Colmon's land, and these spells gave the mortals such a sense of unease that it drove them away. *Ghosts did not exist, and daemons lived only in our minds*, he told me.

And so I awoke, eleven years after arriving here, and stared outside. Empty the view was. Desolate. Devoid of laughter and surprise. No man or woman or child dotted the horizon. We were alone.

Leaving Broccan and Colmon asleep, I left the ráth, picked up my basket, and walked toward the beach. What we lacked in terms of mortal company was made up for by the birds. Thousands of

puffins nested here in the spring and summer, and though the air was still cold, they had already started to arrive, chirping and nest-building as they readied themselves for the weeks ahead.

As I ambled down the path to the beach, I smiled, enjoying their tenacity and the din they made when I clambered over the boulders and rocks to reach the sand. To them, Rathlin Island was a paradise, even with the rain and icy winds that blew in from the north. It was a paradise in many ways for me too. The island provided everything we needed. Food, water, shelter, firewood... and yet, if I had my way, I would not be here.

Walking closer to the tideline, I collected the seaweed that had washed ashore, all the while looking out to the mainland, which was only a few miles south. The sea between Rathlin and the Kingdom of Ulaid swirled this morning, white tips on the waves, and narrow torrents where the waves didn't crash, revealing the strong currents that had pulled many a ship under. Was it strange that I felt the land of Ulaid calling to me? It was almost as if I heard voices on the air, and when I closed my eyes, I saw my daughter, Aoife, smiling. Then my father opening his arms for me. And I saw Murchad.

I sat on a rock, letting these visions linger. The ring Murchad had given me felt heavy on my finger and I twisted it around, rubbing the engraving etched into the gold. He had told me to keep it until I returned to him. I held on to this memory. The way he had smiled, the way he had touched me the last night we were together.

His lips on mine. His fingers running through my hair.

If only I could let those thoughts stay with me always, I would let them... but they were not for now. No, not when there was so much work to do. Standing, I hoisted the basket further up onto my hip and busied myself with harvesting the seaweed, which could be used to fertilise my garden. Every so often, though, I looked out to the sea and the land beyond. I couldn't help myself. Aside from the puffins, the only thing to move was a small fishing boat in the distance. The fishermen from Ulaid sometimes rowed

quite far out in search of shoals of mackerel, though the high waves and dangerous tides meant they seldom came as far as the island. I continued along the beach, picking and sifting through piles of seaweed before the sun rose higher and dried them out, leaching their goodness into the barren sand rather than the soil beside my ráth.

I didn't stop until the basket was full, or at least as full as I could manage, and I set it down, giving myself a moment to stretch out my back.

The fishing boat was closer, I suddenly noticed. Almost at the beach. Only one figure sat inside, back toward me. Whoever it was, they were in a hurry.

It was too late for me to return to the ráth without being in shouting distance of the fisherman, so I sat on a boulder, thinking it best to let him get ahead. The part of the beach I walked upon was within Colmon's domain, but it ended at the path this man would take to reach the small settlement further inland. From this distance, I might be a curiosity, but by the time he came close, the old Tuatha Dé Danann spells would persuade him to continue on his journey.

The boat finally beached. The man jumped out and hauled the boat along the wet sand so the incoming tide would not take it back out to sea while he was away.

To my dismay, the man did not walk toward the path. No, he walked toward me, close to the border of Colmon's land, and that's when I noticed it wasn't a man at all. It was a woman. Black cloak, black dress. Pale face. Green eyes. She stopped at the border, unable to pass through, but she saw me.

She was one of our kind. A Descendant.

I did not know her, though the colour of her eyes revealed she was a witch. The children I had looked after in the fortress when Aoife was alive flashed through my mind. Could she be Laeg's granddaughter? Hair darkened as she aged? No, her features were too slight, her nose snub instead of long and straight.

I supposed it didn't matter.

The fact she was here meant that Tomas had at last discovered our whereabouts. I was only thankful she was unable to cross over into Colmon's land. Colmon had told me it was impossible, that the spells were cast by the powerful witch wives of Ogma to keep other Descendants away from his home. I had always feared that Tomas would find a way to get around these spells, clever as he was. Standing, I braced myself for what was to come. What message would she deliver? My stomach churned. *Was Tomas already here? Watching.*

Walking forward to meet her, I tried to conceal my fear. "Morning. What message from the fortress?"

"I have come to give you a message, yes, but not from the fortress. From Rónnat."

Rónnat? Impossible. My sister lived alone.

"How do you know my sister?"

"I have lived with her for many years now. She is teaching me." The woman briefly met my gaze, then lowered it.

"Why don't the witches in the fortress teach you?"

The woman lifted her head, just a little, jaw clenched. "I cannot go back there."

Oh, so the council had banished her too. I looked her over. Her eyes were bright and open, her shoulders and hips narrow. Not long in her adult years, I guessed. Perhaps the age she looked to be. Twenty or so. That was, of course, if her form was true. Witches could change it as easy as breathing.

As if reading my mind, she pulled out one of Rónnat's rings from her cloak pocket. "She said you would trust me if I gave you this."

I reached over the boundary line to take the ring. Touching the red stones set in the silver band, the tightness in my chest loosened. It *was* Rónnat's.

"Your sister wanted me to tell you not to worry about Tomas. He cannot reach you here."

I took a deep breath, but even with Rónnat's words of comfort, the familiar knot in my stomach did not disappear. It was the

woman, I realised. Her presence irked me. Why was that? Was it simply that eleven years of solitude with Broccan and Colmon on this island had made me wary of strangers, no matter their form or intent?

I slid Rónnat's ring onto the same finger as the one that held Murchad's ring. Gold and silver together. "Why did Rónnat send you? Why does she not speak to me through the wind as she used to?"

"She is finding it harder and harder to do... and her mind wanders more than it used to. She is not always herself. Besides, this message is... She wanted you to hear it first."

A secret? I raised my eyebrow.

"When Broccan draws blood from Colmon," the woman said, "he will make a request. You must allow it. It is time."

"Time for what?"

The woman's eyes widened, and she smiled as she glanced up at the sky, then at the mainland behind us. "To become part of the world again."

"Where does she—"

"Rónnat said nothing else. There are no more answers. She says your destiny must be allowed to unravel. Does that make sense?" She pushed her hair from her face, giving me a lopsided smile. An expression so like Rónnat when she was trying to explain something difficult that I almost reached out and hugged her.

She stepped back now her message was given, glancing at the boat as if steeling herself to go back in.

"You can stay for dinner if you wish. I can ask Colmon to invite you."

"No. I must go. Now that I can control my magic, I too have a world to discover."

"You do not return to my sister?"

She shook her head.

"And you don't intend to go to the fortress?"

"Only two people there know I exist, and they both think I am dead. I'm now free to live as I want." She turned and walked

toward her boat, shoulders hunched over, and her step quicker leaving than it had been to arrive.

Curiosity took hold of me, and I ran after her, moving past the boundary. "Wait. You didn't tell me your name."

She stilled. "My name is Senna."

"What did you say?"

"Yes." She turned back to face me. "You heard me right. My name is Senna. I know you well, Fódla, though you do not truly know me."

I walked closer, my legs shaking, though I tried to control myself. So many questions ran through my mind that I couldn't quite form them on my tongue. *How could this be Senna?* The Senna I knew was a crow. Tomas' crow who had followed me, followed Aoife, and told Tomas everything we had tried to conceal from him. Senna had hurt me so many times I had lost count, but I had never expected this. How could it be that a woman stood before me claiming this name?

"My mother was a mortal child born to a Descendant," Senna said, her voice low and cautious. "When I came along, she realised I had a gift and brought me to Tomas' father, Anaile. He agreed to take me in and sent my mother away. Tomas said he would help, but instead, he gave me a love potion to bind me to him, and Gobnat transformed me into a crow." Her jaw clenched again. "I am only a few years younger than you, believe it or not, but Tomas kept me in crow form for nearly a hundred years and I did not age. Rónnat saved me when I flew over her crannog. She undid Gobnat's spell and has taught me how to use my gift."

"I am sorry. I did not know."

"How could you? Tomas hid it from everyone. He has hidden many things."

I stood there staring, mouth open, unable to reconcile this young woman to the yellow-eyed crow who had haunted my every step. Frozen in time for nearly a hundred years, how had she borne it? Tomas had told me he used his gift to train the crows, and I had believed him, for Senna had always done his bidding without

fail... and once again, I had fallen for his lies. Anger spread within me now. I should have realised that Senna was too clever and too devoted for it to be natural. I should have questioned Tomas more.

Senna reached out to touch my hand. "I am sorry. For spying on you. For all the things I told Tomas about you. It was the potion, you see. It made me obey him... it made me *want* to obey him. His every wish, every desire, became my wish and desire too."

"Does he know?" I asked, holding her hand. "That Broccan is alive?"

She shook her head. "Not when I last saw him. But he has spies everywhere. More than anyone knows. Not just Descendants either. Mortals."

"Mortals?"

"Yes. He has cultivated lots of friends within the nunneries and monasteries. And there are others like me. Children born to giftless Descendants. Once my mother brought me to his father's house, Tomas realised that our gifts could skip generations, and so he sought out giftless children who'd left the fortress. He found other children like me. He told them what their gifts were so they would trust him, and then he used them for his own ends. He wants to know everything that happens, everywhere." She paused a moment. "Rónnat says he knows you are here, and that once you return to the mainland, there will be no protection from him. When you leave, be sure to remember that. You must be careful."

She stepped back, folding her arms around her chest, shivering as an icy gust blew in. "I cannot tell you anymore. I've already said more than Rónnat told me I should. But I just wanted to say..." Her eyes swam with tears. "To say that I am sorry for the hurt I caused you. I couldn't help it."

She walked away then. I followed her, though kept my distance, and watched as she pushed the boat back into the sea and jumped in. Hauling out the oars, she began to row.

"Tell me more about my sister," I shouted after her. "Is she well?"

She shook her head by way of an answer. Either she didn't know, or she couldn't tell me. *But why?* Why had Rónnat told her

to tell me no more? *Her mind wanders more than it used to*, Senna had said. Rónnat had not been well the last time we met. How bad was she now?

Gathering my thoughts, I moved back onto Colmon's land and collected the basket of seaweed. The last eleven years had not been easy. I had found it difficult to be so far away from the life I'd created in Killaloe and to be away from Rónnat. However, all these difficulties had been worth it, knowing that by doing so, I'd kept Broccan safe. It had been a privilege to watch him grow from a boy to a man. Now Senna had suggested that this time was ending.

I turned in the direction of our ráth. Smoke rose into the sky. Colmon and Broccan must be up and boiling the stew. They might even be at their training, swords and axes swinging over their heads.

When Broccan draws blood from Colmon, he will ask for something.

What would he ask for? My nephew looked out to the Irish mainland when he thought I wasn't looking. He missed his friends from Killaloe, missed his mother. Would he want to see them? Or would he want to go to the fortress to meet others of our kind? Colmon and I had agreed that when Broccan was ready, we would return to the fortress to tell the other Descendants what Tomas had done. It would be dangerous. And as Senna had just revealed, he had committed even more crimes than we'd previously known. What would he say when challenged?

Sighing, I made my way up the path. The wind picked up for a moment, and I paused, hoping to hear my sister's voice. But no words came.

I was alone.

And for the first time in eleven years, I was afraid.