

ERINLANDO



KATHRYN BERRYMAN

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For Cec 'n' Eil

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Chapter 1

The Beginning



The wind of the boglands howled, shrieking with the voices of tortured souls entwined with the steaming peat.

‘We must protect the chalice and the sacred writings!’ cried Niamh of the Golden Hair. The sound of her commanding voice reduced the sound of the wailing wind to a frustrated whisper. The woman wheeled her powerful steed around and galloped off towards the distant bog lights, leaving a flurry of mud in her wake.

The sign had come. Tadhg the great warrior knew that Niamh of the Golden Hair would only appear if the sacred relics were in danger of being destroyed and absorbed into the dark culture of the barbarians. He had to go to the Abbey and protect the sacred objects from defilement. A primal howl made him spin around to see the brutish face of his aggressor. Metal clashed against metal, war cries wailed, flesh and bone hacked until Tadhg fell on the battlefield.

‘AAARGH!’ Tadhg gasped, fighting for air as he sank to the ground, choking in the mire of mud and blood. Clasp ing his cleft sword, his breath came in ragged gasps then finally faded. Tadhg’s face and body contorted, shimmering as he

slowly grew fainter and seeped into the boglands. It had been his battlefield and now it was his final resting place. A huge Viking towered over Tadhg, howling triumphantly. The howling continued until the whole scene faded to grey.

Niamh of the Golden Hair's face popped onto the computer screen. Her serene voice came out of the speaker. 'Erinland is at risk of disappearing. The chalice and writings have fallen victim to the barbarous Vikings. You have lost another incarnation. Be careful, small one.'

Amy grabbed the sides of the computer screen and shook it savagely. 'Bloody hell, this virtual reality world is driving me crazy! I've lost another incarnation. Useless Irishmen, no wonder the Vikings invaded them. Stupid bloody Vikings, stupid Tadhg! Sacred objects? Yeah right, Niamh of the Golden Hair. What a load of horse crap! Tadhg needs a good kick up his hairy butt.'

'Amy Bradshaw, stop that language at once! What do you think you're playing at? I do my best to raise you to be a *lady*! Why do you think I send you to that expensive private school? Not to learn language like that! You're a disgrace. When is the last time you brushed your hair? This bedroom is a garbage dump!' The last word came out as a hiss.

Amy jumped at the sound of her mother's voice. She thought her mother was in the kitchen washing up after dinner, totally out of earshot.

Amy's mother continued with the tirade as Amy cringed on the bed. 'Anyway, you are supposed to be doing your homework, not surfing the net. You're banned from the computer for a week, it is only to be used for homework. Oh, and I'll be supervising you, so don't get any ideas!' she exclaimed.

Amy had to think of something quickly. 'But, Mum, this *is* homework. In History we are learning about Vikings and

how they were forced to migrate and invade other lands. It's really interesting. We have to research their culture, art, and craftsmanship and what influence it had on the places they conquered,' cried Amy. 'I was researching,' she added, trying to sound as indignant as possible.

Amy's mother looked at her suspiciously. 'Researching?' she said a little more calmly. 'Then *why* did I hear all that yelling and screaming?'

Amy thought she could sense a crack in her mother's armour. She decided to weave a bit of truth into the lies—half-truths usually had a ring of plausibility to them.

'Well ... We have to go onto a virtual reality site to give us a hands-on view of life in Viking times. We make a village and even get to design our own Celtic jewellery!'

On the virtual reality site, we learn how to simulate Viking warriors sparring with each other. I was yelling at the warriors fighting!' she said.

'You know about this, Mum! Mr Lord gave us the website details in our history class today, and I gave you the permission note last week. Remember? Anyway, you can ring him if you don't believe me.' Amy uttered these last words in an almost accusing tone.

Her mother's expression softened, slightly. 'Oh, I see. Well ... I suppose if it's for school ... But you know, I might just contact that Mr Lord. This research seems to be encouraging a bit too much passion in you. Now get to bed before I change my mind, and don't forget to clean your teeth.'

Amy snapped off the computer and stomped off to the bathroom. At least she had fooled her mother into thinking that she was concentrating on her school work, which couldn't be further from the truth. And she could still play *Erinland* without her mum knowing what she was doing.

I could even buy one of those VR headsets to make the game more real. I bet Mum wouldn't even work out that I had it! I wonder ... She would probably find out sooner or later but it would be worth it, Amy thought absently as she spat the slimy residue of toothpaste and saliva down the sink.

She rinsed her mouth and splashed her face with cold water, staring hard at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. It wasn't a bad face. Not too pretty, but not too ugly either. She imagined herself in ancient Erin fighting at Tadhg's side, away from the bitchy girls at school with their bitchy texting and sniggering behind their hands. School. God, Amy hated school. School, no way! But talking to gods and minor deities? Protecting ancient manuscripts and chalices from the Raiders? She could live with that. She might even be a goddess herself! Niamh of the Golden Hair? No ... Amy of the Spotty PJs! Yep, that would be fun. No bullying, no one to nag me to death, and I wouldn't even have to clean my teeth, she silently told her smiling reflection.

'Night, Mum,' Amy called out.

'Night, Amy. Lights off, straight to sleep now,' replied her mother, almost back to her normal self. Amy was tempted to wait until the house was quiet and play online again, but contented herself with the major win over her mum. She had to admit that she was becoming a bit obsessed with the virtual reality world. At least in *Erinland* she had some control. In her 'real' life she had no control. She didn't have any friends. Not even one. The 'lovely private school girls', as her mother called them, were proper cows.

Her fascination for the virtual reality game was starting to worry her though. Not only was it taking up all her spare waking moments, but she was starting to dream about it too. The mists of Erin were invading her slumber. Tadhg spoke to her, whispering of the beauty of ancient Erin. His voice

was like a bubbling stream, hypnotic and fresh, but it had an underlying strength that commanded respect. The words he spoke weaved a tapestry of images of the heroism of battle and the struggle to save the holy relics from the barbarians.

As Amy jumped into bed and pulled the doona up to her chin, she didn't notice the dark shadows gathering in the corner of the bedroom. She switched off the bedside lamp and closed her eyes. Her mind was still racing, an adrenalin high, mentally logging past fatal mistakes and planning future strategies for her next session in *Erinland*.

God! Why can't I sleep? she moaned to herself. Oh well, I'll have to say some prayers, that always puts me to sleep. She sighed deeply and started to pray, mouthing the words absent-mindedly. But her mind was still awash with thoughts of ancient Ireland, craggy mountains covered in moss and mist, and boglands, full of treacherous sinkholes and mystical beings. She found herself praying to the Holy Bogg Demon and Our Tadhg instead of the usual Christian deities. Finally, she drifted off to sleep. She was in *Erinland*, dreaming of the moist, green land and the heroes that fought and died for their cause.

Then a curious thing happened. The shadows in the corner of her room began to gather and become a dense black mass drifting slowly towards her bed. It exuded a pungent smell. The scent was intoxicating, causing her to sink into a deeper slumber. A draught stole its way through the open window, bringing a heavy mist into her bedroom. The mist twisted with the shadows, creating an energy that was concentrating itself above Amy's sleeping form. She stirred slightly in her sleep, as if she sensed another presence.

Sensuously, swirling tendrils of mist played around Amy's feet, massaging her like hundreds of tiny pulsating fingers.

They beckoned with a silken touch and oppressive sweetness to slide into the suffocating decay of the boglands. She felt herself being wooed by an unseen presence. Heavy blackness descended and she felt herself being sucked into the soft, moist peat. She waited, not daring to breathe.

'Follow me,' the fetid gurgle bubbled up from the depths of the bog, making Amy's head swim. There were other sounds too. Guttural voices and desolate moaning swished around the room making her feel nauseous. *'Follow me,'* intoned the voice, as old and enduring as granite, yet with enough venom to become a deadly, scorching lava. The compulsion to obey was almost overpowering. Yet fighting deep within Amy's psyche was a strong urge to reject the evil command and to emerge out of the blackness into the clean, bright light.

The fear and desolation she felt was tightening its grip. Gone was the sensuous feeling of massage; now all she could feel were icy fingers grasping at her neck and torso pulling her down into the bog. The guttural voices became louder, drowning out all other sounds, making her blind with fear. Amy violently shook her head trying to rid herself of the evil sensation but the movement increased the demon's hold on her.

A vague speck appeared in the distance, something resembling a light. Amy concentrated on the light and tried to block out the voices. She continued to concentrate, trying to force away the panic that shrouded her. She repeated to herself, *'Look at the light, the light is my salvation.'* These words became a kind of prayer as she repeated them constantly.

Gradually, the tendrils of mist and the icy fingers lessened their hold. Amy chanted the words louder and with every fibre of her being. Finally the grip became a grasp, then it vanished. The voices trailed off, dissolving into an eerie wind—the catchcry of the boglands. A shrill sound, like the neigh of a

horse, lingered then died away. Amy thought she heard the sound of a horse galloping in the distance.

She opened her eyes. Her face and body were dripping from the exertion of her experience. She got out of bed for a drink of water and it was then she noticed something strange. A faint glow emitting from the corner of her bedroom. It was coming from her laptop. The glow started blinking in a staccato rhythm, gaining brightness. Amy stared hypnotically into the strobe. The glow grew larger and brighter. An electronic surge overflowing from the monitor and onto the floor. The tide edged its way across the carpet and came to rest at Amy's feet. It started to rise from the floor, undulating and pulling, crashing against itself like a deadly rip in the ocean. Gradually the atoms composed themselves into the recognisable form of an old woman.

The old woman looked like those Amy had seen on park benches, the kind that carried all their belongings in a couple of shopping bags. They were usually dirty, drunk, and abusive. This woman was approximately 160 cm tall; her hair was dark brown and it seemed to be caked in mud and dead leaves. Her skin was grey and very lined. Her unblinking eyes were dark brown. She stared at Amy steadily. The woman wore a simple brown tunic. It was well worn and patched in several places. Her hands were large and her nails were ragged and putrid. These hands had seen some very hard work in their time. She had an overall earthy smell, giving the impression of an ancient relic. For one so dishevelled, the old woman seemed to radiate a strength which commanded respect from those in her presence.

'Oh ... my ... god ... shit!' yelled Amy.

'Be still! You shall *not* profane the higher power in my presence! Profane with your tongue no more, lest you block your path to the highest power,' replied the old woman.

‘Ditto what I said before. Who are you?’ hissed Amy.

The old woman spoke, ‘Do not be afraid, small one. You are not in the land of the walking shadows. Your destiny weighs heavier than that. I am Heiran, Cailleach, or wise old woman.

‘I am old. I am as old as the earth, and older than mankind. I have come in many forms and returned many times through the ages. I have been ridiculed and even killed in ignorance, yet all who have known me have been made richer by my passing.’

The old woman’s clear eyes continued to stare into Amy’s. They bored into her thoughts, exposing her soul. Amy frantically backed towards the bedroom door. ‘Mum!’ Amy yelled. ‘Mum, Mum, *Mum!*’ Amy thought she might be asleep or hallucinating. She had heard of this sort of thing happening before. Her friend at school had a psychotic episode after taking some illicit drugs. She thought she could see spiders coming out of the walls. She ended up curling herself in a ball in the corner of the classroom screaming. But Amy had never touched any kind of drugs.

‘Your mother can’t hear you,’ said the old woman.

‘Mum! Mum, please come, I need you, I am so scared!’ Amy screamed.

‘Your mother cannot hear you,’ the old woman said calmly. ‘She has not been chosen by the Niamh of the Golden Hair. She is to remain on this earthly plane.’

Amy winced at the mention of the name ‘Niamh of the Golden Hair’. An unbelievable thought occurred to her. ‘No ... no,’ she whispered.

Amy looked more closely at the woman. Bloody hell, this old bag is straight from the virtual reality world! Thinking quickly, she lunged towards her laptop and snapped off the

power switch. The computer sputtered, the light extinguishing with a visual ‘pop!’ Amy turned, satisfied that she was once again by herself.

Heiran stood peering at Amy with a quizzical expression. She wasn’t going anywhere. ‘Child, why did you still the droning creature? Killing the droning creature will not rid you of me. It is a portal to *Erinland*. Do not be foolish, small one! I have come to you for a purpose. I am the messenger of Niamh of the Golden Hair. She is the mystical mistress and hand-maiden of the highest power. She has sought you out. Your strength is known to the Lady. She has witnessed your battle with the evil Bogg Demon. You have been tested and have overcome its tempting advances. You have proven your worth to the Lady. The darkness in your soul has succumbed to the clean brightness of the highest power, this time.’

Amy stood still, disbelief washing over her. She wondered how the old woman, the Cailleach as she called herself, knew about the nightmare she just had. Her skin crawled at the memory of the stinking, suppurating bog; the invisible icy fingers clutching and dragging her down into a world of darkness and evil. An involuntary shudder racked her body.

The old woman continued, ‘Tadhg the great and noble war chieftain is closely acquainted with you. You and the droning creature have sent him to his death many times by the steel of the Vikings’ blade. Now he has come to his last incarnation. If he dies and the sacred relics fall victim to the barbarians a final time, our way of worship and our way of life as we know it will be drowned in a black tide of paganism.

‘The holy objects must be saved and hidden, so that future generations can realise the dedication of the faithful. Their beauty must be emulated and revered as a mere shard of the glory of the highest power—that which you call God. Even

now there is another from your world who is being wooed by the Raiders. Time is running short!’ cried the old woman.

‘But it’s only a stupid virtual reality world, it’s not *real*. It’s not my fault!’ Amy cried. She ran across the room and reached for the door handle. Heiran raised her hand. From her stubby dirt-grained fingertips came a light so dazzling that Amy’s eyes watered trying to fight the glare. The light sparked, crackled, and twisted past her to the door handle where it fastened itself—a supernatural forcefield that no human could break.

‘*Be still!* You cannot run from your fate. Face your destiny, lest it follow you until the end of your incarnations, festering and growing like a great mortal wound. The highest power will buoy you and deliver you to your fate.’ The dark eyes bored through Amy, compelling her to obey the Cailleach.

Amy put out a tentative hand. She brushed Heiran’s hand with her fingertips. Vibrant, glowing warmth flowed from the Cailleach, swamping Amy’s body. The force sent her body into spasms as her heartbeat quickened, blood pounding in her ears. She squeezed her eyes shut and cried out for her mother.

‘Amy? Amy, is that you? I thought I heard you calling.’ The far-off reedy voice of her mother tried to puncture the veil of energy with intermittent stabs. Amy tried to speak. When she opened her mouth, nothing came out. She could hear her mother speak again but her voice trailed off.

Then the blackness came. Amy was sucked and pummelled through a tunnel of rushing air as though in the slip-stream of some giant racing force. The air was dry and electric and Amy could feel sparks fly from every shaft of hair on her body.

Gradually, the wind died down and she thudded onto her back into a soft, mushy surface. Amy opened her eyes. Directly above her was the majestic form of a white stallion. Its barrel chest overshadowed her as it snorted and pawed

at the ground, spraying tiny smuts of peat into Amy's face. Steam rose from the beast's body as he danced and wheeled, eyes rolling back and ears flattening against his head, shrieking a terrified neigh. Just below his forelock in the middle of his forehead was a protrusion that looked like a horn. Amy had heard of the fabled unicorn and its magical powers. She realised she was face to face with a legend. Well almost face to face. She dragged herself out of the mud and shook off the bog water, evading the powerful thrashing hoofs of the unicorn.

'Greetings, small one.' The musical voice came from atop the unicorn. Amy gazed at the dazzling brightness and saw a lovely woman astride her steed. Her face had the translucent glow of a deity, and her skin was unlined and beautiful. A crown of gold was on her head. A halo of golden tresses wound around her head and trailed down her back. She was dressed in a flowing garment of mauve silk which was richly decorated with intricate gold and silver constellations. The garment fell around her and trailed to the ground. The Lady looked not much older than Amy herself, but her eyes beheld a wisdom and grace belonging to an ageless soul.

The Lady sat effortlessly atop her substantial steed, controlling it with a subtle movement of a leg, a gentle verbal command, or the brush of a hand. Amy could see no tack whatsoever on this 'horse' and stood in awe at the Lady's obvious power and control over it.

The Lady spoke, 'They call me 'Niamh of the Golden Hair'. My messenger, Heiran, has transported you here with the help of the ultimate power. She has performed her task well. She has other duties. She will leave us now.' Amy turned to see that the old woman was gradually fading to grey, dissipating into the atmosphere. A faint smile played on Heiran's lips and then she was gone.

‘Please don’t leave me,’ Amy pleaded. ‘I need you to get home!’ Her eyes darted from side to side, taking in her surroundings like a trapped animal. A feeling of panic was rising from the pit of her stomach, causing her throat to constrict. She realised she was in boglands, probably in ancient Ireland ... straight from the virtual reality world, in *Erinland* ... oh shit!

The large, spongy, and uneven surface of the bog looked treacherous to the uninitiated. Amy could see small bodies of water, sinkholes, between the drier hummocks. She saw tracks made from planks of wood and thin branches meandering their way across the soggy mass. Amy wondered what they were for. She wondered if she should run away. Where would she go? How could she get home? She was cold and covered in bog water and a bloody great unicorn was standing over her. ‘Shit! Shit! Shit!’ she hissed.

The Lady’s voice demanded her full attention. ‘Are you willing to help regain the sacred objects from the barbarians and transport them to a safe place, yet to be ordained? The war chieftain Tadhg is depending upon you. You are responsible for his last incarnation. He is a fearless warrior with unmatched integrity and the will to lead his followers to victory. It is written that one will come with strength to match that of our greatest warrior and together they will lead us to victory and cleanse *Erinland* of the barbarous intruders. I believe you are the one,’ said the Lady.

‘Amy of the droning creature,’ she continued, ‘behold your brother, Tadhg, who is bound to your soul.’ Slowly, the Lady spread out her arms. Gradually, a shimmering mist rose from the bog. The mist moved, darting in front of Amy’s face making her eyes smart. The mist increased in size, brightness, and form to become a tangible, living, breathing human being.

The young man now standing before Amy was shorter than some boys in her class at school, but he boasted a powerful physique. He had long, thick, curly black hair which was held at bay by a piece of leather thonging tied around his forehead. His neck was thick and powerful and his muscles rippled as he shrugged his body, stretching his limbs like a beautiful butterfly emerging from a chrysalis.

Tadhg was dressed for battle. Covering his body was unusual armour. It was cloth, but it was stiffened with a tar or a pitch-like substance. The armour was padded and layered to absorb the shock of the heavy weapons of his foe. Amy could see the slashes and dents in the surface as if it had been bludgeoned with some heavy instrument, wielded by someone with incredible force. In his hand Tadhg held a heavy sword that looked sharp and lethal but well worn, as if it had hacked many a limb and thirstily let litres of blood from the veins of its opponents.

Tadhg spoke, ‘Amy of the droning creature, I know you well. Come forward and witness your handiwork. My body is young but well used and greatly scarred. See the great wound that my enemy hath wrought. This is the wound that would claim me for the land of the walking shadows. See how it grows and festers, as our enemy’s reign over this fair land. Will you let them plunder and kill all in their path, or will you draw on your deep well of strength and aid me and my followers?’

‘Answer me. The evil forces are gathering power. The Bogg Demon grows restless, there is one from your land who is being wooed by it. Hasten with your answer, little sister, time is very short.’

‘*No!*’ Amy screamed, shaking her head. ‘I don’t want to be here anymore, *please* let me go home! I don’t believe this is happening! I really do not believe this is happening. *Please*, let me go!’

After a long silence Tadhg continued bitterly, 'Make no mistake, little sister, this is no dream. This is real. You are here. By your rebuff you have foresworn me to eternal damnation. My soiled soul will never know true fulfilment. I can never attain the pure white light or see my father's face. With your turning away, I have failed the task appointed me. The sacred objects and all they stand for are lost forever,' he gasped.

A look of pain crossed Tadhg's battle-stained face. 'Aahh, the burning, it begins again. My wound is growing. See the gore rising, ready to burst forth from the banks of my flesh. I feel myself slipping ... slipping into the land of the walking shadows. Alas, I have failed! The Bogg Demon awaits my soul for eternal torture. Farewell, Amy of the droning creature, my death be on your head. Farewell my Lady, Niamh of the Golden Hair,' he whispered.

Amy watched as Tadhg writhed in agony. The great wound gushed blood and putrefied; hundreds of tiny maggots crawled in it, feasting on his flesh. The stench stung Amy's nostrils as she felt the bile rise in her throat. It was as if the cycle of decay had hit the fast forward button as Tadhg's body disintegrated before her. She knew that she was witnessing something real, something she apparently had control over. She wanted desperately to stop it. 'My Lady!' Amy screamed. 'Please help me!'

The Lady looked steadily at Amy. 'Are you resolved to assume this task appointed you and help the noble war chieftain?' she said.

'Yes, yes, I'll do anything, just make it stop!' Amy cried.

The Lady slowly replied, 'It is up to you to halt the cycle, child. Listen with your heart and you will know the answer.'

Tadhg, close to death, had fallen into the mud succumbing to the loss of blood and the bitterness of his failure. His

life force was barely hanging on. Amy could hear a dull roar building up in the distance. It seemed to be resonating in the depths of the bog. She instinctively realised that the Bogg Demon was gathering force, ready to usurp and conquer Tadhg's soul.

She concentrated inwards, blotting out the horror that was before her. But there was no answer, only the sound of her terrified heart. Amy concentrated harder. She was close to despair when a voice inside her head said, 'Look to the bog. A herb growing at your feet is Tadhg's salvation. It is the herb used by the druids, it will restore the war chieftain.' Amy frantically grabbed for the plant at her feet. As she ripped the roots from the sodden peat, she noticed that the herb was bathed in a bright light giving off a brilliant, shining, living aura. A beautiful chant, more like a prayer, came drifting from the air around her:

*All hail thou holy herb vervain
 Growing on the ground
 On the Mount of Calvary
 There thou was found
 Thou helpeth many a grief
 And staunchest many a wound
 In the name of sweet Jesu
 I lift thee from the ground.*

Amy stood up, a bunch of the herb clutched in her right hand. Her strength and confidence seemed to return, getting stronger by the moment as she held the holy herb. 'Game on!' she muttered to herself, and then turned to the Lady. 'Let's see how far this stuff gets Tadhg in his last incarnation!'

Chapter 2

Aidan



Brother Aidan never tired of looking at the holy manuscript. The beautiful, intricate plait-work and spiral knots, and the complex panels with their ornamental and sometimes comic figures, could hold him entranced for hours. The volume he now held in his hands contained the Gospels of the four Evangelists. It was a masterpiece of richly decorative art. The vibrant yellows, reds, blues, and greens cascaded and swirled, jumping from the pages in a brilliant cacophony of colour.

Scribes and artists had worked together on this and other texts to create magnificent works of art—symbols of the Christian faith. The gospels and accompanying summaries Aidan was studying were of the mixed text incorporating Vulgate, with many words and phrases of old Latin. It was bound in a carved leather casing. The swirls and knot-work of the volume were faithfully reproduced on the leather casing, a beautiful, enticing prelude to the breathtaking symphony it housed. The text itself was written on calf-skin or vellum, a longer lasting medium

than parchment, and one that absorbed the pigments in a more permanent manner. Aidan pored over the large full-page illustrations in the gospels' text, a practice employed by the monks to emphasise the significant parts of the story. Key events such as the arrest of Christ, the crucifixion, and the resurrection were illustrated as complex full-page designs.

Throughout the whole of the manuscript appeared the symbols of the Evangelists, four of Jesus' apostles: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Matthew was represented by a man, Mark by a lion, Luke by a calf, and John by an eagle. Other animals, such as fish, cats, mice, hens, snakes, dragons, and many kinds of birds, were used also; sometimes clearly symbolising a section of text and at other times simply for lively decoration. A knot of emotion welled in Aidan's throat as he paid homage to the holy manuscript, a precious icon to his faith. Reverently, he replaced the precious manuscript in its niche.

Brother Aidan was visiting the monastery in Armagh. In the past, this area had been the centre of the church in Ireland but now it was a monastery, a major library, and scriptorium, housing some of Christianity's greatest treasures. Over the centuries, since the life of St Patrick, the Christian Church had gradually dominated the society of Ireland. Monasteries were built as religious fervour grew throughout the country. Aidan was here to borrow some of the monastery's lesser texts. He would take these back to his monastery in Durrow to be copied by his scribes for the library, then the originals would be returned to their rightful place in Armagh. It was common practice among the monks and it enabled other monasteries to have a wider

range of working texts so that knowledge could be passed on to the faithful.

He wandered into the scriptorium and glanced at an open manuscript currently being worked on. The intricate carpet designs and illuminations were absolutely perfect, the work of a true artist. But his keen eye noticed errors in the text itself. The scribe undertaking this manuscript had poor Latin skills. The text had been corrupted almost to the point of confusion. Aidan thought this was a poor copy for a scriptorium of repute, so he made a mental note to bring this to the head librarian's notice.

'Aidan.' Brother Colman, the head librarian, brought him back to reality. 'I have found the volumes you have requested. The Missals, Psalters, and Lives of the Saints are all ready for you,' he said.

'Thank you, Colman, I am in your debt. As the day is drawing in, if it is your wish, I will pray and sup with you and be on my way on the morrow,' replied Aidan.

'That would be most pleasing, Aidan,' said Colman.

'Your brothers here would hear all your news and welcome a fresh face. But first, I would enlighten you on a matter most pressing. We have had grave news that concerns us all. A fellow brother from Bangor has sent us a message of warning. Raiders are said to be on the move not far from that area. It is thought to be the Vikings again, come to claim this land and defile it. The messenger told of many evil deeds. It is rumoured that they torture and use us for sacrifice to their pagan gods.' Colman handed Aidan a crumpled piece of manuscript. It was a beautiful piece of illumination but it was not finished. 'Look to the margin, our brother has written a message,' said Coleman.

Aidan read the hastily scrawled passage:

The Northmen are coming from the sea ... they appear under cover of evil fog, killing, defiling, stealing ... crumpled bodies strew the land, blood stains the soil ... brothers hang from the trees ... women raped, defiled ... we are animals to them, bound for slaughter ... brothers left, gone, deserters from our monastery ...

Who will stand their ground when the pagans rain their worst on us? Who? What will become of us? What will become of our faith?

Aidan was horrified. He had heard of previous raids by the Vikings, led by a most vicious and merciless leader, but he thought that the noble Taoiseach Tadhg had stilled his thirsty blade forever. Coleman's voice interrupted Aidan's thoughts. 'The Abbot wishes to speak to you. I believe it is a matter of great urgency. Come, Aidan, we will go to him now.' Aidan hurried with Colman to confer with the Abbot, wondering of what possible use he could be.

Abbot Bede was a sombre holy man. His rough woollen tunic did not detract from his presence, in fact the very plainness of the garment enhanced the calibre of the man it robed. Though the Abbot was small and solid of stature, he was a man of strength, one not easily fazed, with a body hardened by the harsh lifestyle of the times. His hands were large; hands befitting a stonemason or a simple herdsman used to manual labour, not a cleric of intellectual prowess. His hair was jet-black and cropped short in the monastic style. From his face shone a pair of piercing eyes filled with intelligence and the total conviction of a zealot. Today those eyes were troubled and the huge hands were clasped in a gesture of concern.

‘Welcome, Aidan. It is always a pleasure to have our southern brothers stay with us a while. Please, sit down. I trust your needs have been catered for adequately. Did you find the resource material you required?’

‘Yes, thank you,’ Aidan replied. ‘I have been successful in finding the manuscripts our monastery requires. I will have them returned to you as soon as my scribes have finished with them. By years end, would that be satisfactory?’

The Abbot locked eyes with Aidan. ‘Do not trouble yourself on that account, brother. If the news that has just reached me is true, I fear that you will have possession of these and other treasures for years to come. You see, the Raiders have travelled more quickly than anticipated. Come, come. Walk with me.’

Abbot Bede breathed deeply. His eyes became troubled and his brow furrowed. Aidan listened intently. ‘Aidan, the noble war chieftain Tadhg has disappeared into the boglands and is feared perished of a great wound, or devoured by the Bogg Demon.

‘His army is mostly dispersed, lacking the courage and leadership befitting true warriors. They have left us to our fate. Tadhg’s sibling Gráinne has disappeared from our midst, either killed or captured. If she is alive, I dare not think of the torture in store for her. Our time for preparation is very limited. I had estimated two full moons before thoughts of barricading and battle would come to pass. As it stands now we will have to take our chances and try to stand our ground with the weapons we can find. The messenger gauged just two weeks before the marauders are upon us.’

They continued walking and the Abbot moved closer. ‘I am glad only the two of us will hear what I am about to say. You see, Aidan, not only do the Raiders burn and plunder our

villages and religious sites but they also destroy any evidence of the existence of our way of life, and more importantly, our faith. Already, many valuable manuscripts and sacred icons have been destroyed, while other holy things have been profaned in the basest fashion. Our monasteries to the north have been totally razed and all their treasures laid waste. They raise pagan icons in place of our most beautiful monuments and practise idolatry to their foul gods on consecrated ground. It is not only our lives that I fear for, but our very souls and the souls of future generations.’

The Abbot paused for breath as he nodded to a fellow monk walking toward them. He quickened his pace and looked around furtively to check that no one else was about. He pushed a thick wooden door in the wall of the passage. It creaked open to reveal another narrower passageway. They continued walking. Abbot Bede did not speak again for a while, so Aidan had time to take in his surroundings. They were entering a part of the monastery that Aidan had not visited before. It was very dark and dank. An occasional torch attached to the thick stone walls gave off a meagre light. It was an insipid glow, but threw off enough brightness to guide their feet on the uneven surface. The wall of the passageway looked slick with moisture. Aidan realised that this part of the monastery was a secret place. The Abbot continued speaking in a hushed voice, filled with emotion. ‘These barbarians may break our bodies and burn our villages, but they must not destroy our faith. We need to protect our most precious treasures. Aidan, I believe a man such as you is worthy of the task. It is your duty to take these holy things from here to a haven, far from the marauders, and protect them from defilement by heathen hands. Quickly! Come into the inner sanctum.’

The inner sanctum was a tiny room behind the altar in a private chapel. It was a place where no light penetrated, yet a light always burnt—a constant reminder of the presence of God. This holiest of places, where the most precious manuscripts and relics were kept. Aidan felt very privileged to be here. The Abbot's eyes darted about nervously to check that they were alone, and then he pressed a stone protruding out of the smooth surface of the wall. With a loud scraping noise the stone receded to expose a niche. The recess was smooth and rounded, big enough to store a small barrel of wine. From the niche exuded a yellow glow, a light dissipating through a richly decorated covering. Aidan could not stop staring at the glow.

Abbot Bede spoke gently, almost seductively, 'Beautiful is it not? I will get to that presently. For now, I will show you this most important and precious relic. The most exquisite and powerful manuscript your critical eye will ever live to see. Look upon it. Can you see a flaw in its text or illuminations? Could it not have been crafted by the Archangels themselves?' A glow of fanaticism had crept into the Abbot's face and Aidan felt a tingle of fear up his spine.

The manuscript Abbot Bede spoke of was similar to the leather-bound volume Aidan had admired in the library, although on closer inspection there was no comparison. This manuscript had a distinct ethereal quality in its perfection. The vibrant colours fairly hummed in their brilliance and the volume almost breathed with intensity—a reflection of the love and faith that created it. Aidan could only stare transfixed, tears of joy and respect unashamedly rolling down his cheeks. Once he had composed himself, he studied the manuscript. The illustrations were so exact and the colours were vivid. It was a work of true artistry.

‘The origin of this manuscript is unknown. It is thought to have been transported from Ionia or Northumbria some centuries ago but, before that, its history is very sketchy. It may have come from the Continent, even Rome itself, so shrouded in mystery is this treasure. But it must be preserved, this I know to be God’s will, for the sake of those who created it and for future generations. I can sense that you, Aidan, have been chosen for this task. Now, for the *real* prize, the most holy of relics ...’

Abbot Bede spoke rapidly, oblivious to Aidan’s presence. ‘Did you know that tonight is the anniversary of that most courageous act by our Father Patrick? Patrick, who challenged the High King and his evil druids this very night, centuries ago. On the hill of Slane, Patrick lit the paschal fire on pain of death, in violation of the High King’s law. No other fire was to be lit in the vicinity of the great festival fire on the hill of Tara. King Laoghaire saw Patrick’s fire and called his druids to quell it. The druids’ response was, “If this fire which we now see is not extinguished it will overpower all our fires and he that has kindled it will overpower thy kingdom.” The King immediately summoned the stranger to appear before him.

‘Patrick, our valiant brother, and his followers marched to the castle. They sang ‘The Deer’s Cry’:

*Christ with me,
Christ before me,
Christ behind me,
Christ in me.’*

Abbot Bede paused, he seemed distressed. From the folds of his robes he took a small flask and drank deeply. His

breathing became more even. He offered Aidan a swig from the flask. Aidan declined; he wanted to keep a clear head.

The Abbot continued talking. ‘Patrick also carried a sacred cup. A chalice so beautiful and enticing that to look upon it unprepared could result in madness. A relic so holy that the unchaste cower before it, covering their heads in shame, aware of their unworthiness before the sacred vessel of God.

‘Many were cleansed by the holy chalice that night. The old rites of fertility were practised for the last time. Patrick had his first conversion on that Easter Eve and many a soul was cleansed by the one true faith—Christianity. The most beautiful and precious cup beckons. Cast your eyes upon the chalice and it will mesmerise you with its mystical quality. A mere glimpse of this most venerable object will prove your worthiness of the task before you.’

The Abbot spoke raggedly, breathing in quick gasps. His skin was oozing perspiration, a moist, shiny film formed on his forehead and upper lip. His hands had become clammy, shaking in anticipation. His hands darted covetously towards the silken covering then teasingly snapped back to his sides. Abbot Bede was enjoying the power he held over Aidan. He could feel a crescendo building up in the walls of the sanctuary, a tangible vibration bringing his nerves to breaking point.

Aidan held his breath as the Abbot continued, ‘It has been said that this object is the one true cup, the cup from which our Lord drank, transported in some mystical way to this place of sanctuary. Could it be, Aidan, that the highest power has placed it here for a specific purpose? Has it been hidden away to be preserved in this pure state until its purpose is made known and its time has come? I firmly believe that its time *has* come and that your fate is entwined with this most sacred of

relics.’ As he said this, the Abbot whisked the covering off in a sharp movement, catching Aidan off guard.

Aidan had never seen such a beautiful object. It seemed to be made of some unearthly metal, so unusual was its appearance. Embedded in the surface were what looked to be three jewels. These ‘jewels’ were placed equidistant from each other: a sapphire-like gem with its clean blue hue; a pearl-like gem with its cool chasteness; and a ruby-like jewel which appeared to throb and ooze blood. The significance of the Trinity formation was not lost on Aidan. He believed that the sapphire represented God, the Father; the pearl represented the dove, the Holy Ghost; and the ruby represented Jesus, the Son of God who shed his precious blood to save us. The chalice’s surface shone with an ethereal light pulsing with life force and purpose.

Aidan put out a tentative hand and brushed the cup with his fingertips. The result was extraordinary. A wind roared in the tiny room. It tore through his body. A cleansing tempest, exposing any self-doubts and tearing them from his soul. The searing wind cauterised the gaping wounds of his negativity, filling the space with love. Aidan was sure this strength came from God, the Father, working through the Holy Ghost. He felt renewed. A pure, white light radiated from within him—a furnace of faith that gave him true life.

At last Aidan spoke, ‘I feel ready to perform the task ordained for me, Abbot Bede. Have no fear, I now have the strength of spirit to carry this through. I will die protecting these most sacred relics and will do so willingly.’

Abbot Bede stared, his eyes full of respect. ‘I was right, Aidan. You are more than equal to this task. When you have succeeded and the barbarians are driven from this land, your name will be revered. Stories of your bravery and faith will

abound. But you must make haste, brother. Go to the kitchens and gather all you require for your long journey. I will pack the precious relics so they appear as nothing more than a monk's effects. Hurry, my friend, I will see you safely away.'

Within the hour Aidan had left the safety of the cloister, his heart full of courage and hope. He had decided to travel south-west from Armagh towards his own monastery in Durrow, a long journey but a route he knew well. He was sure the holy relics would be safe there. Aidan was travelling by foot, a common occurrence for the monks of his order. Any luxuries were avoided by the brothers so they could concentrate their energies on their craft and their faith. The advantage of travelling singly and on foot was that he could find cover quickly if the need arose, and a lone monk attracted less attention than a large group. He covered a great distance, being almost invisible in the darkness.

After travelling many hours towards the river, Aidan decided to stop for the night. He came upon a grove of ancient hazel trees, a perfect cover. They were nine in number and surrounded a pool, their ancient branches hanging over the water. Aidan ate a hurried supper of bread and cheese and drank some refreshing water from the cool, deep pool. He regarded the trees around him. They were most unusual. By the light of the moon Aidan could see that they had a quality about them, as if they were awake, responsive to their surroundings. The nuts on the trees were most curious. Crimson in colour, one tree held a particularly large nut. Its branch hovered over the deep pool, quivering with the effort of holding the fruit. As Aidan watched, the branch seemed to drop a little closer to the pool. Suddenly, all the hazel trees began to sigh and thrash their branches, shaking the leaves violently. The rhythm of the trees had a spellbinding effect on Aidan. Suddenly the huge

nut dropped towards the deep pool. A massive salmon jumped out of the pool and gulped the nut down greedily. Aidan, astonished by the strange scene he had just witnessed, was overcome with a feeling of drowsiness. As the trees gradually stopped thrashing their branches, all the remaining nuts in the grove withered and fell to the ground.

Without warning, Aidan fell into a heavy sleep. He dreamt of ancient warriors and fabled heroes fighting and falling for their cause. He dreamt of druids and monks, bishops and marauders, fighting and slaughtering each other. He dreamt of the sacred objects he carried and protected with his life. At first light, in the misty steam of the morning, a huge bead of moisture tumbled from one of the ancient trees and trickled into his ear. He woke up, shaking his head to rid himself of the icy drop. As the fog of slumber lifted, Aidan smelt the delicious aroma of fish cooking. He quickly gathered his things and followed his nose.

A short distance away he discovered a clearing. In the centre was a blazing fire. Over the fire was a spit with a huge salmon cooking on it. Aidan's mouth watered. He had his own meagre supplies to eat, but the wonderful smell of the cooking fish tempted him. He glanced around the clearing again, searching for signs of life. There was no one to be seen. Maybe he could just have a little taste of the fish. Before Aidan's conscience had a chance to gnaw at him, he reached down to pull a small piece of meat from the salmon. He burnt his thumb on the hot flesh and immediately stuck his thumb in his mouth to cool it.

It was then he felt warm breath on his neck and heard a soft voice in his ear, 'I see a holy man warming himself by my fire.' Aidan turned and saw a man dressed in resplendent white robes and carrying a staff. His tunic was tied at the waist

with a hemp girdle and belted to it was a bronze dagger and sickle. Aidan had heard tales of the ancient druids. Like most Christians, he thought (and prayed) that these ancients had long disappeared with the growth of Christianity in Ireland.

‘Yes, wise one, the warmth is very tempting on this brisk morning,’ Aidan stammered.

The druid sat next to the fire on a fallen oak log and motioned for Aidan to sit beside him. ‘Did you taste this salmon, holy man?’ asked the druid. Aidan looked at the ground guiltily and confessed that he had. The druid sighed deeply. ‘Then, I suppose this is for you,’ he said as he served the fish on a rough wooden platter and handed it to Aidan.

‘But ... this is food to break *your* fast, I only had a taste,’ replied Aidan.

The druid rubbed his forehead tiredly and exclaimed, ‘Christian, this is no ordinary fish! Have you forgotten the ancient tales? Has our history and folklore been snuffed out completely? Surely a learned man such as you would have heard the tale of the ‘Salmon of Knowledge’. Please eat your prize.’ Feeling very remorseful, Aidan took the fish. The druid looked hard at him. ‘Do not feel guilty, Christian. It is destiny that brings us to this spot. You were meant to taste the Salmon of Knowledge. Please ... eat. I am not displeased with you. While you eat, I will tell of the legend of Fionn,’ said the druid.

Aidan greedily ate the succulent fish.

The druid spoke, ‘Legend tells of a young man named Fionn, the son of Cumhail MacArt. His father was killed before Fionn was born. His mother, fearing for her son’s life, sent the boy away to be trained by a druid on the Isle of Skye.

‘We of the druidic order are great philosophers, striving to understand the elements of nature. In times past, we gathered

in groves and taught lessons, sharing tales in the shade of the oak trees. The name 'druid' means 'oak wise'. We are seekers of truth.

'In the time of Fionn, we ruled Éire, but our numbers are sparse now. As time has passed and beliefs have changed we have almost been wiped out—*almost!* But there will always be some of us left to guide the real seekers of truth.'

The druid paused for a moment, looking closely at Aidan. He continued, 'Fionn stayed on the Isle of Skye until he was a young man. He had learnt many things during this time. He could name all the trees in the wood. He knew herb-lore and the medicinal properties of herbs. Being a young man, he was not content with his simple life so he left the island to seek adventure. He searched for the ancient sacred well which is the source of inspiration of all Éire.

'He followed the river. He travelled further and further upstream into the mountains and the wild lands, the river becoming smaller and smaller until it was a tiny stream. Finally he came to a well from which the stream sprang. A circle of old and purpled hazel trees stood around the well. The ancients tell us that there is a certain time when one of the trees will drop a hazelnut. If the hazelnut is caught by a salmon before it reaches the water and if this salmon is caught by a druid, the salmon will bestow great wisdom and inspiration. The environment has to be perfect for the hazel trees to bear fruit and for the salmon to reproduce.

'Fionn circled the ancient trees curiously. They seemed more *alive* than normal trees; their branches thrashed as if in a strong breeze. The air was breathless, almost overpowering. His nostrils sensed the delicious aroma of fish cooking. The smell of simmering salmon made his mouth water and his stomach rumble with hunger. Fionn found himself beside the

hearth. The beautiful fish was before him. He was tempted. Just a taste, he thought. It was such a large fish, surely a small taste wouldn't upset the owner of the fish. He reached over to rip off a portion of flesh. He burnt his finger on the searing flesh of the salmon. Quickly, he put his thumb into his mouth to ease the pain of the throbbing thumb.

'A druid emerged from the grove of hazel trees and looked at him sternly. The druid questioned him closely. He knew that he was face to face with Demne, a special youth who was to be given a special gift. So say the ancients, so it is.

'The druid knew that this boy was the chosen one. He became a King and a leader of skilled warriors, known as the Fianna.'

The druid looked steadily at Aidan. 'I speak to you of this tale, I am sure you know why. The fish you have just eaten is the fabled Salmon of Knowledge. You are the chosen one. You are the Fionn of this generation. Whatever journey or burden you undertake will be lessened by the boundless knowledge you have absorbed. Just as Fionn gained his wisdom from the Salmon of Knowledge, so have you, holy man. So say the ancients, so it is.'