

REVIEWERS ON

The  
**C**hildren  
of Gods and  
**F**ighting Men

*'Highlander meets The Last Kingdom... in this assured and captivating debut. Themes of motherhood and conflicted obligation lie at the heart of Shauna Lawless's historical fantasy, explored through the eyes of two powerful women compelled to navigate a land where men hold sway, or think they do. I was hooked from page one.'*

ANTHONY RYAN

*'Gripping and beautiful. A Celtic Last Kingdom with wild magic and fierce heroines.'*

ANNA SMITH SPARK

*'A beguiling blend of fantasy, history, and politics. The Children of Gods and Fighting Men deftly tells a story of intricate and fraught family relationships. To read this novel is to fall into a richly imagined web of lives. A gripping start to this series.'*

D.K. FIELDS

*'A vividly written story that makes the ancient past feel contemporary.'*

JOSEPH O'CONNOR

*'Lawless writes historical fiction steeped in fantasy and mythology like Bernard Cornwell, Mary Stewart, and Stephen Lawhead at the top of their games... If you are an admirer of those books, you will absolutely love this.'*

**OUT OF THIS WORLD SFF**

‘An atmospheric journey into a thrilling historical fantasy world that feels like it should be real.’

**R.J. BARKER**

‘Rife with atmosphere and armies, magic and compelling characters, it swept me along and refused to be put down.’

**H.M. LONG**

‘Lawless plunges us into a brutal yet painfully human world of power-hungry kings and bloodthirsty warriors, and yet it is two women – two mothers – who lead the way... A novel that celebrates the extraordinary history and cultural traditions of Ireland while giving voice to the women who helped shape it. Highly recommended.’

**LUCY HOLLAND**

‘An epic historical fantasy that weaves myth and history into a sprawling tale of magic, intrigue, and war. Lawless weaves a complex and enticing narrative... A must-read for those who love Irish mythology and history.’

**IAN GREEN**

‘*The Children of Gods and Fighting Men* is a compelling and fascinating tale, written with great skill... With all the complex political machinations of *A Song of Ice and Fire* and the bloody battles of *The Warlord Chronicles*, it’s ideal for fans of both.’

**STEPHEN ARYAN**

The  
Children  
of Gods and  
Fighting Men

SHAUNA LAWLESS



*An Ad Astra Book*

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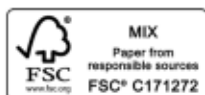
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*For my family*



# IRELAND

981 AD







## CHARACTERS

### *The Descendants of the Tuatha Dé Danann*

Tomas (To-mass) – Leader of the Tuatha Dé Danann and a druid.

Fódla (Foe-la) – A healer, mother of Aoife.

Aoife (Ee-fa) – Daughter of Tomas and Fódla. Born giftless, now deceased.

Rónnat (Roe-nat) – A witch and sister of Fódla.

Broccan (Brock-an) – Son of Rónnat and Egil of Dublin. Born giftless.

Colmon (Cole-mun) – Leader of the warriors and a cousin of Fódla and Rónnat.

Fiachre (Fee-ach-kra) – Leader of the weapon-makers.

Gobnat (Gob-nit) – Leader of the witches.

Affraic (Af-frik) – Leader of the healers.

Laeg (Leg) – Leader of the cupbearers.

Shae (Shay) – Leader of the harpists.

Gráinne (Grawn-ya) – Last leader of the prophets, now deceased.

Cerball (Kyar-ull) – A warrior.

Ardál (Ard-el) – A warrior.

Echna (Echk-na) – A druid.

*The Kingdom of Dublin*

- Amlav (Am-laff) – King of Dublin, now deceased, father of Ragnall, Harald, Dubgall, Gluniairn, Gytha, Muire and Sitric, husband of Gormflaith.
- Gormflaith (Gorm-la) – Wife of Amlav, mother of Sitric, daughter of Ethlinn, half-sister of Raoul, sister of Máelmórda, a prince of Leinster, also a Fomorian.
- Ragnall (Rag-nall) – Son of Amlav, brother of Harald and Dubgall, half-brother of Gluniairn, Gytha, Muire and Sitric.
- Egil (Eag-il) – A bastard son of Ragnall.
- Dubgall (Du-gall) – Son of Amlav, brother of Harald and Ragnall, half-brother of Gluniairn, Gytha, Muire and Sitric.
- Gluniairn (Glorn-i-arn) – Son of Amlav, also known as Iron Knee, half-brother of Ragnall, Harald, Dubgall, Gytha, Muire and Sitric on his father's side, also half-brother of High King Sechnall on his mother's side.
- Mór (More) – Wife of Gluniairn, a princess of Ulster, mother of Gilla.
- Gilla (Gill-a) – Son of Gluniairn and Mór.
- Harald (Harr-ald) – Son of Amlav, brother of Ragnall and Dubgall, half-brother of Gluniairn, Gytha, Muire and Sitric, husband of Frigg, father of many daughters and one son called Leif.
- Frigg (Frig) – Wife of Harald, mother of many daughters and one son called Leif.
- Leif (Leaf) – Son of Harald and Frigg.
- Gytha (Guy-tha) – Daughter of Amlav, half-sister of Ragnall, Harald, Dubgall, Gluniairn, Muire and Sitric.
- Muire (My-ure) – Daughter of Amlav, half-sister of Ragnall, Harald, Dubgall, Gluniairn, Gytha and Sitric.
- Sitric (Sit-rik) – Son of Amlav, and only son of Gormflaith, also

- known as Sitric Silkbeard, half-brother to Ragnall, Harald, Dubgall, Gluniairn, Muire and Gytha.  
Falk (Falk) – Shipbuilder and friend to Gluniairn.  
Arni (Arni) – Son of Falk.  
Freya (Frey-a) – Daughter of Falk.  
Onguen (On-gwen) – A slave, originally from Cornwall.  
Edysis (Ed-yah-sis) – Daughter of Sitric and Onguen.  
Asfrid (As-frid) – A Dubliner, daughter of Svanhild.  
Svanhild (Svayn-hill) – Mother of Asfrid, a settler of Dublin.  
Ulf (Ul-ff) – A wealthy trader of Dublin.  
Ulli (Ooh-ley) – Ulf's mother.  
Valdemar (Val-de-mur) – The Seer of Dublin city.  
Ivar of Waterford (I-var) – King of Waterford, friend of Amlav.

*The Kingdom of Munster*

- King Brian (Bry-an) – King of the Dál gCais and King of Munster.  
Murchad (Mur-ca) – Son of King Brian.  
Tairdelbach (Tur-lough) – Son of Murchad.  
Tadc (Tayg) – Son of King Brian.  
Sláine (Slaw-nya) – Daughter of King Brian.  
Bébinn (Bay-vin) – Daughter of King Brian.  
Caomibhe (Kee-va) – Companion to Sláine and Bébinn.  
Eocha (Oh-kha) – Nephew of King Brian.  
Father Marcán (Mark-on) – Cousin of King Brian.  
Lonán (Low-nawn) – A man of Munster, friend of Murchad, son of Muirenn, husband of Sadb, brother of Sorcha and Caillech.  
Sadb (Sigh-ve) – A woman of Munster, wife of Lonán.  
Muirenn (Mur-in) – A woman of Munster, mother of Lonán, Sorcha and Caillech.

- Sorcha (Sore-ka) – A girl of Munster, daughter of Muirenn, sister of Lonán and Caillech.
- Caillech (Cale-ach) – A girl of Munster, daughter of Muirenn, sister of Lonán and Sorcha.
- Lucrecia (Luk-reece-ia) – A freed slave, mother of Maria and Felicia, married to Dáithí (Dah-he) – A kinsman of King Brian, now deceased.
- Maria (Mar-ee-a) – Daughter of Lucrecia and Dáithí.
- Felicia (Fel-eece-ia) – Daughter of Lucrecia and Dáithí.
- Pátraic (Pod-ric) – A man who lives in Killaloe and a distant relative of King Brian.
- Crínoc (Creen-oc) – Wife of Pátraic.
- Cassair (Cas-sir) – A warrior of Munster.
- Sister Martha (Mar-tha) – A nun.
- Diarmaid (Dur-mid) – A kinsman of Lonán.
- King Muad (Moo-ad) – A former King of Munster, now deceased.
- Ímar of Limerick (Ee-var) – A former King of Limerick, a Viking city within Munster, now deceased.

*The Kingdom of Ulaid*

- King Sechnall (Seh-nie-ull) – King of Meath and High King of all Ireland, half-brother of Gluniairn of Dublin.
- Flann (Flann) – Son of King Sechnall.
- Torna (Tor-na) – Uncle to the King of Ulaid.
- Colum (Coll-um) – A mortal man, now deceased.

*The Kingdom of Leinster*

- King Donnchad (Donn-a-kha) – King of Leinster and of the Uí Donnchada, son of Domnall Clóen (Doe-nall).

Máelmórda (Mal-mor-da) – King of the Uí Fáeláin, son of Ethlinn, half-brother to Raoul (Rao-ooll), brother to Gormflaith, also a Fomorian.

Ethlinn (Eth-lin) – A former Queen of Leinster, wife of Murchad mac Fionn (deceased), mother to Gormflaith, Máelmórda, and Raoul, also a Fomorian.

King Tuathal (Too-u-hul) – King of the Uí Muiredaig, a clan within Leinster.

Conchobar (Kruh-hoor) – Cousin to King Tuathal.

*The Isle of Orkney*

Sigurd the Stout (Sig-gurd) – Earl of Orkney.

Gilli (Gill-ey) – Cousin to the Earl of Orkney.

Olaf Tryggvason (O-lav Trig-vass-on) – Earl of Wendland, friend of Sigurd.

Leon (Lee-on) – A slave.

*Northumbria*

Waltheof (Wolth-e-off) – Ealdorman of Northumbria.

Uhtred the Bold (Uht-red) – Son of Waltheof.

Ethelwold (Ethel-wold) – Nephew of Waltheof, cousin of Uhtred the Bold.

Edward (Ed-ward) – Northumbrian warrior.

*Men of the Christian Church*

Abbot Francis (Fran-sis) – Abbot of Seir Kieran.

Brother Abdomnán (Ah-dun-awn) – A monk.

Brother Bécán (Becc-on) – A monk.

Brother Scuithin (Skuh-heen) – A monk.

*Animals*

Senna (Sen-na) – Tomas' crow.

Toirneach (Torn-ya-ach) – Tairdelbach's horse.

Enna (Enn-a) – A large mare, Fódla's horse.

## PROLOGUE

### IONA MONASTERY, AD 981

#### *Gormflaith*

Amlav's armour, sword and axe gleamed as if new. His beard, washed and bathed in lavender-scented oils, glistened in the soft candlelight and curled elegantly over his chest.

I leaned forward and rubbed my finger over his lips, down his cheek, until I touched the wolf-fur cloak which covered the stone slab he lay upon. Only a stray lock of hair that had fallen across his forehead marred the effect. The nuns had dressed him well, but it was my duty, as his wife, to ensure he crossed over to the afterlife looking like a king. I pushed the curl back, sweeping it into line with the others.

Once satisfied, I smiled.

Lying down, eyes closed, had always been the way I preferred Amlav. But this was better. Death had a finality that sleep could only imitate.

Death suited him in other ways too. His right hand had stiffened to grip his sword tighter than I'd ever seen him hold it in life. He'd been a warrior once, true enough, but by the time my father inflicted this marriage upon me, Amlav had been almost

seventy, his fighting days over. When his armies left Dublin to fight the Irish, he had gone with them, but I knew when the battle was at its worst, he sat on his fat horse while our warriors drew their swords. Well-deserved, the warriors said, for Amlav's reputation preceded him. The number of men he'd slain in his prime numbered over a thousand. No one dared to call him *coward* – only *old*.

Sinking into the chair next to Amlav's body, I waited for the abbot to arrive. The monks had taken an age to dig the grave, rain and storms hindering them from their work. Last night, finally, they finished. I almost pitied them, though pity was wasted on the clergy. They'd chosen a life where misery was a virtue. If they felt closer to God by freezing to death on this hateful piece of rock, who was I to tell them otherwise? Not even the gold crosses that Amlav had gifted the monks, and which now adorned the altar, could give this miserable hovel any glamour, and somehow, the morning sunshine seeping in through the windows made the stone walls look more tomb-like than when lit by candlelight alone.

I supposed I enjoyed the irony, if nothing else, that these same monks, knee-deep in muck, had once prayed fervently for Amlav's death. The Viking King of Dublin, Amlav the Red, had been a famous slayer of priests and raider of churches in his day, a scourge to the followers of Christ. And yet, here he was, converted, blessed and absolved of all his earthly sin. As free to go to heaven as any of them.

Of course, if Amlav had been in his right mind, he'd never have asked the priests to baptise him. The horror of watching Ragnall die at the Battle of Tara had crushed him and turned him from the Old Gods. I remembered so clearly the day last year when Amlav and his defeated army had returned to Dublin.



Tears streamed down his face as he cradled his dead son in his arms. I hardly knew why. Ragnall had been a fool. But firstborn sons had a way of gripping their father's heartstrings that defied reason and forsook the children who followed. Our own sweet boy, Sitric, only eight, was twice as clever as any of his other sons, and yet Amlav had never noticed him.

Sitric's face flooded my mind. My boy. My love. And so far away from me. Tears sprung to my eyes though I brushed them aside before they could fall. Damn Amlav for deteriorating so fast. It had given me no time to think. My only option had been to do as he asked and bring him to Iona, the sole monastery who had accepted his bribe for performing a Christian burial. It meant leaving Sitric behind, but I had no choice. Letting Amlav die in Dublin had been out of the question. I didn't trust Gluniarn, Amlav's eldest living son, not to slit my throat and burn me on the funeral pyre along with his dead father. *King Amlav would need a wife to fuck in Valhalla*, he'd say. But I'd had enough of fucking Amlav these last ten years without facing the prospect of doing it for all eternity.

Footsteps rang out as wooden clogs hit the stone floor.

Quick steps. *Good*. It meant the funeral was about to start. I opened my eyes and smiled. A small one, half-sad, half-coy – more than enough to make the abbot blush. Tormenting the monks had been my only consolation on this hateful island, and it gave me no inconsiderable pleasure wondering how many self-induced floggings had taken place on my account.

"Is the grave ready?" I said, once the footsteps stopped beside me.

"How should I know?"

I turned, straining to see the face hidden by the dank, early morning gloom. "Mother, is that you?"

The figure stepped closer, and the familiar golden eyes of Ethlinn, former Queen of Leinster, came into view. A black cloak shrouded her body, and a veil covered her hair and mouth. For once, she was dressed appropriately for the occasion.

“What are you doing here?” I hissed. “Two of Amlav’s men are outside. They might have recognised you.”

Mother waved away my concern. “I’ve come to speak with you, and less chance of being spotted here than in Dublin, don’t you think?”

I straightened and suppressed the scream reverberating inside my head. Mother never came to see me unless she brought ill tidings, and seeing her the day of Amlav’s funeral made the fluid in my stomach freeze over. My thoughts turned to Sitric. His half-brothers wouldn’t have hurt him, would they? Not a boy. As violent as Gluniain’s rages were, he’d never vented them on children... but then, no other child in Dublin was a son to the dead king and born to a woman who wasn’t his kin.

My voice shook, not heeding my wish to appear calm. “Has something happened to Sitric?”

Mother tutted. “Honestly, Gormflaith, you can’t get yourself into such a state over your mortal children. You will see many of them die over your lifetime. You need to harden your heart and heed the advice I give you.”

A strange expression lit Mother’s eyes that made me curious enough to bite back my reply. Besides, arguing with her always ended up with me saying something I regretted. Perhaps a different tack would be better today? I passed my hand over Amlav’s body. “Have you come to tell me you were right?”

“About what?” Her eyes narrowed.

“Amlav didn’t live long, just like you promised. I suppose I should be grateful.”

“So you should. The marriage I arranged for you made you Queen of Dublin.”

Shaking my head, I gritted my teeth. “You married me when I was thirteen to a man older than my great-grandfather.”

“Did your golden necklaces and brooches not compensate?” She caught my sideways glance and sneered. “You think you understand pain, but you don’t. You knew me as a queen, but only two years before you were born, I was a slave, captured from Normandy by Viking raiders. The great Murchad mac Fionn, King of Leinster, bought me. From the moment I laid eyes on him, I could see his teeth had rotted away and his hair was gone. Did I care? No. I thought of nothing except how to become his wife.”

“And you succeeded. Good for you, Mother.”

“You think such matches are easily made between kings and washed-up urchins? It was unheard of for a woman so low to marry a king. You’ve no idea how hard it was to persuade him... the things I had to do. If you did, you wouldn’t complain about Amlav.” She tapped the silver pendant hanging around her neck. The sound of her nail hitting the metal thudded dully in the damp air. “How many years was he even able to hump you before his strength failed, anyway? Four, five? That’s nothing.”

I’d had to lie under Amlav’s rancid body and smell his foul breath right up until six months ago, though there was no point complaining to Mother about that. Father had been every bit as grotesque as my husband.

How strange that I could see that now. The anger I usually had balled-up inside me evaporated. I didn’t look at Mother with resentment anymore, rather understanding and pity. Yet, I could not allow those emotions to sway me. Mother was up to something. Scheming, and no doubt, once again, I was the unwitting pawn. Well, no longer. I was not a naïve thirteen-year-old girl anymore.

Shrugging, I smoothed Amlav's fur blanket. "It doesn't matter. Amlav is dead, Father is dead... and, oh yes, aren't you also meant to be dead? I remember your funeral. A grand affair you'll be pleased to hear. Even High King Sechnall attended."

Mother said nothing. She only stared at the engravings along the blade of Amlav's sword.

I tried not to let my grin widen and pushed on. "So, why are you here? I thought you would have found yourself a plump Frankish lord to marry by now."

"Raoul is dead."

The raw pain in Mother's voice dampened my joy at her discomfort. She loved her sons, I'd give her that. Máelmórda, my full brother, had been pampered and praised as if he were a god. And Mother spoke of Raoul, a distant half-brother I'd never met, in such glowing terms that when I was younger, I had imagined him to be Achilles himself.

"How did he die?"

"The Descendants of the Tuatha Dé Danann came for him."

My chest thudded, and a momentary paralysis stilled my lungs. "I'm sorry for you, Mother. Truly. I know you loved Raoul, but I don't see why you risked being spotted to tell me in person. A letter would have sufficed."

"No, not this time."

Mother pulled her veil away. I waited for her long, black curls to spring forth – her crowning beauty, so my father had said – but they didn't come. Thin wisps of white, thread-like hair lay lank against her scalp.

I reached out into the darkness, and the flame on the nearest candle shot up, the fire rising high and wide, licking the damp walls and hissing as the moisture touched it. Under the glare of the bright firelight, I took in the face of my mother. Wrinkles

pulled at her once smooth cheeks, and the skin beneath her eyes sagged. The way Fomorian descendants aged was strange. We lived hundreds of years in the bloom of youth, and then in the last year, age rotted us like over-ripened fruit.

“Stop it, Gormflaith,” my mother snapped.

“There’s no one else here.” I knew it to be true, but put my hand down anyway. The flames receded. “So, you’re dying. For real this time.”

She nodded. “Three hundred years is all I’ve been given. I have until the summer, I think.”

My throat tightened as if I had just swallowed something too large. Though Mother stared at me, chin held high, I knew she was upset. “Do you need anything?”

“No. I’ve joined the nunnery here and paid the nuns enough gold to ensure they look after me until I pass away.” She shuddered and shoved her white hair back within the confines of her veil. “No need for you to witness all that.”

Folding my arms, I gave the slightest of nods. Perhaps I should insist I stay. Wouldn’t that be the dutiful thing to do? But the truth was I had no desire to watch her die. Amlav’s death had been painful enough, and the gods knew I’d prayed for it to happen at least once a week since our wedding night.

“Then what do you want?”

“To give you some advice about how to raise your children... should any of them be like us.”

My head rolled back, a deep, nervous laugh erupting from my mouth. It bounded round the empty church, echoing into the distant dark.

“I’m being serious.” Mother grasped my hand, and for once, I saw fear swim within the eyes that were always so cold. “Sixty children I’ve had. Fifty of them born mortal, but ten of them

with magic. We are Fomorians, descendants from the line of King Balor himself, and with fire-magic in our blood. You and your brother, Máelmórda, are all that remains of our kind. Once I die, you two will be the very last.”

I snatched my hand away. “And whose fault is that?”

“Mine. I can see that now.” She bit her lip. “It was the Descendants of the Tuatha Dé Danann who struck the fatal blows, yes... but it was I who didn’t teach my children how to use their magic properly. I didn’t teach them how to be careful.”

I breathed out slowly. Hearing Mother admit her guilt was a strange and unnerving thing.

“I was arrogant in my youth,” she whispered. “My brothers were alive then, and I was convinced we would kill the Descendants of the Tuatha Dé Danann. We planned to attack their fortress... but they found us before we could discover where it was. None of my children lived long. Neither did my brothers.”

“And yet you got away.”

Mother nodded. “You judge me harshly for that, I can tell.”

The wooden cross hanging at the top of the chapel caught my eye. There was a small, wooden man pinned to it, with a crown of thorns on his head. It seemed there was no shortage of parents willing to sacrifice their children to achieve their own ends. To save themselves.

“I have asked you to tell me about your other children before, and you always refused. Why now?”

Mother drew a deep breath. “I want you to know that I haven’t made the same mistake with you. I taught you how to control your fire-magic, and I married you to a king. You may not have liked Amlav or your father, but they cloaked us. The Descendants of the Tuatha Dé Danann do not mix with the royal families anymore, especially not the Viking ones. It gave me the time

needed to teach you and your brother how to hide your power." Mother lifted her chin as she spoke. Defiant as always. She stared at me straight in the eye. "That is why you're still alive."

"Will I be much longer?" I held her stare, not crumbling as I had when I was a child. "Or have you come to tell me the Tuatha Dé Danann Descendants tortured Raoul and know where we are?"

Mother gripped the back of the chair with both hands. At first, I thought fatigue ailed her, but then the shaking of her skirt caught my eye. I had never seen her tremble before.

"Raoul never gave away my identity, or yours, or your brother's."

"How can you be certain?"

"Because I killed Raoul before the Descendants reached him."

My breath stuck in my throat.

"I had to," Mother hushed. "He was one of us... but he was a drunk and wouldn't listen... and I had to protect you and Máelmórda." Her voice lowered to a whisper. "I hid when they came. I saw them stand over his body as he choked on the poison I put in his wine."

"You saw them? In the flesh?" The hairs on my arms stood on end. The Tuatha Dé Danann warriors were so dangerous that no Fomorian has ever survived an encounter with them. That my mother was the first made me almost forget how much I disliked her. "Well, what did they look like? What did they say?"

"Very little. One was called Tomas, fair skin, blond hair and green eyes, dressed in red silks and fur. The other's skin was black, with dark braided hair and grey eyes. He dressed in monk's robes. Brother Colmon, he called himself." Remembering the scene, her eyes filled with tears, and she stared off into the distance.

Standing quietly, I waited until she collected herself.

"They think Raoul was the last," she finally said, her voice now

regaining its strength. “It must stay that way. You must remember how to hide. Follow the rules I taught you.”

I took her hand in mine. She pulled back to take it away, but I held it tight. “I’m sorry about Raoul, but there is good news here too. With these descriptions, Máelmórda and I can search for them. There can’t be many places in Ireland that would hold them all.”

Mother frowned, eyes now refocused, and her fingers turned rigid between my palms. “My time is up, Gormflaith, and the task of finding the Descendants of the Tuatha Dé Danann lies with your brother. Not you.”

I nipped my lower lip between my teeth and let her hand fall away. “So, how long do I have before I must fake my death? Ten years? Twenty?”

The bitterness returned. This was the other fate my mother had dealt me. Every woman in Ireland prayed at night for beauty and a long life... all except for me. They were my curse.

Mother examined my face. “Ten, if you’re lucky. Twenty, if you’re a fool. That’s how the Descendants catch those who conceal their fire-magic. Remember that. Just the mere whisper of a man or woman who isn’t aging, and they send one of their warriors to check. They can sense the Fomorian fire within us. Their warriors, they can smell it.”

“So, I need to lie low and marry. Then twenty years later pretend to die and escape undetected. Over and over I must do this until old age catches me. Is that your great final advice?”

“Yes... and no.”

That wasn’t the answer I expected. Despite myself, I felt the warm glow of curiosity grow. *Marry, breed, move on*, were the words she’d drilled into me. This deviation surprised me, enough to let the expression colour my features.



Mother smiled, the wicked twinkle in her eye shining once more. "If your brother becomes High King, he will have the authority, the wealth and the army to wipe out the Descendants of the Tuatha Dé Danann forever. If you can—"

"Mother." I shook my head wearily. "It won't work. Máelmórda isn't even King of Leinster, and even if he was, a King of Leinster has never been crowned High King before."

Mother stepped closer, her eyes widening. "Ireland is changing, Gormflaith, and the wealth of the Viking ports is behind it. If Máelmórda has the Viking warriors of Dublin on his side, who is to say the high-kingship is not possible for him?"

My heart stopped for a beat. "You want me to help Máelmórda?"

"Not you," she scoffed. "You will have moved on before this all happens. I mean Sitric. You must help him become King of Dublin before you leave. Then he can assist Máelmórda with his plans."

"No. My boy won't be a pawn for your ambition."

Mother sighed and gave me one of those frowns akin to rolling her eyes. "You will learn the truth of it before long. You may love your mortal children, but they are not the same as us. They live for the briefest of moments. Like a butterfly, they are pretty to look at, nothing more. If they can somehow help us, well, all the better. They're good for little else."

"My son is precious to me."

"I've said all I can." Mother stepped back. "Your brother will be in contact. If you have any love for me at all, you will help him. And if Máelmórda succeeds and kills the Descendants, you can stop running too. Think of that."

Mother's footsteps echoed across the church. No hugs or kisses of farewell, just like all the other times we had parted company.

I sat on the chair and let Mother's news ferment in my mind.

Damn it, but I was sick of being nothing, a woman beholden to male plans. *No. No more.* Sitric was more than what Mother said – he was everything to me. I loved him. In truth, he was the only thing I had ever loved. And so, I would make him a king, but not for my brother like she wanted – and I wouldn't leave him after ten years either. I'd make Sitric powerful, save him from the pain of being forced to marry or fight where he didn't wish. I'd give him what my mother and father had not given me. Freedom.

Time passed, though I couldn't say how much, when footsteps once again hit the stone floor. Many steps. Some that shuffled, some that marched. I glanced up to find that the abbot and Falk, Amlav's master shipbuilder, had come into the hall.

"The burial is due to take place, my queen," the abbot said, simpering as he bowed.

"Good." I pulled my cloak tighter about my shoulders. "Ready the boat, Falk. I want to leave as soon as possible."

"Then we must go now," Falk said grimly. "Before the tide turns."

"Very well."

The abbot's mouth gaped like a dead fish. "We haven't buried King Amlav yet. Surely, you want to see him receive his absolution and burial prayers?"

I held out my hand for Falk to take and gave the abbot a hard stare. "No. No, I don't."

Aware his mouth was still hanging open, I marched out of the church. It was time to go. My son needed me. Burying the dead was no longer my concern.