

Brendan of Kilrush

Chapter 1

Brendan poked a stick into the pile of coals. As he did so, the light gray ash fell away, exposing the yellow-red glow which reassured him adequate heat continued to radiate from this pile for his purpose. The wind behind him snatched up some of the ashes as he did so, transporting them toward the red ball of the sun sinking into the sea far beyond him. The wind felt good on the back of his head. It tossed his tangled mass of bronze hair about his shoulders and toward his face. The hair didn't quite match the lighter tint of facial hair just becoming visible below his nose and on his sun-tanned cheeks near and just below his ears.

As the wind passed his ears, they sensed something: a sound out of resonance with this pastoral environment in the year of Our Lord 812. Often Brendan would recognize wisps of voices as they drifted up from the village on the river below, but something was different. The faint sound he sensed more than heard was both familiar and alarming; enough so that he decided to abandon his fine catch of salmon, now roasting over the coals, and the sheep he tended and head toward the village. Brendan knew he risked his master's lash if caught abandoning the sheep, but something in the wind-born signal compelled him toward the village.

Brendan relied heavily on his staff for mobility. His right leg was immobile below the knee. The ankle and toes were locked since birth. When he was younger, some of the other village children teased him by telling him that he had been lucky that St. Patrick had brought Christianity to their land or surely his parents would have left him to die on the hillside. As the distance between Brendan and the village diminished, the signal on the wind strengthened. Moving still closer, he recognized it as a voice. It was not just any voice but a familiar voice. It belonged to Kaileen!

Brendan bent his direction toward the sound of her voice. He had a special fondness for Kaileen and he knew something was wrong. To hear her from such a distance meant she was screaming. He must hurry. Why wasn't he born with

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two good legs like the other people in his village? He now slowed as he came upon that portion of the trail which wound through limestone outcroppings. Here he could easily stumble on any of the many gray stones protruding through the ground surface at random. A small hare suddenly jumped up, scurried a short distance down the path in front of him, and disappeared into the brush on the side of the trail.

After passing through a dense clump of conifers, Brendan viewed the village from a distance. It looked as though the whole village was burning! Dark plumes of smoke rose from several dozen locations and coalesced into a large single cloud hovering over the small community. What could have caused so many fires? The question bewildered him. He had to get down there—fast! He pressed on, throwing his cloak behind his shoulders to hasten his movement.

By the time Brendan reached the outskirts of the village, the smoke had thinned, dispersed by a strong breeze moving in from the west. Where there had once been thatched-roof homes, now he could only see a few unburned poles and remnants of walls scattered here and there across the patch of land where the village once stood. Brendan then began to notice the corpses. Men who only yesterday sold their grain, cattle, sheep, and other goods in the town, the man who made things of iron, the man who formed bronze bowls and goblets, all these lay dead, their eyes staring blankly into the sky. The dirt around the bodies was dampened near the points where heads were split, limbs severed or bodies pierced.

Brendan spotted the remnants of a cooking fire. He walked over to it. A pot of stew still boiled over the smoking pit. Brendan reached down and lifted the wooden spoon from the pot scooping some of the meat and vegetables from the broth. He gobbled down the contents of the spoon, savoring each morsel. Starved, he was about to dip in for a second spoonful, when he heard Kaileen scream in the distance. *Kaileen, yes, where was she? In fact, where were any of the women and girls of the village?* He decided eating would have to wait until he found Kaileen. He last saw her yesterday morning. She'd asked him what he'd thought of her new tunic. Oh, and what a tunic it was! Bright dyed green linen ran across each shoulder and down the side of the body. Between these the portion which covered the main part of the front and back contained bright multicolored designs on a black background. Surely there wasn't a more fanciful tunic in the entire Shannon Valley. As beautiful as the tunic was, however, it couldn't compare to Kaileen herself. Brendan could picture her lovely sun browned face framed by bangs of red brown hair across her forehead with matching locks falling below her shoulders on either side of her face.

Kaileen, yes, he must find out why she was screaming. The food would have to wait. Instinctively he searched around for a weapon. In the hands of a slain

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villager, he spotted a sickle. The man had obviously died trying to fight off his assailant. Brendan moved to the corpse and pried the sickle from the dead man's grip. He tucked it into the rope fastened about his own waist, then moved in the direction he'd last heard Kaileen's screams.

As Brendan reached the edge of the village, he could see down to the banks of the Shannon. The first things he saw were the ships. He had never seen anything like them before. They were long, three or four times as long as any boat he had ever seen on the banks before. There were two of them. Each had a tall mast in the center with ropes running from the top of the mast to the sides of the ship. Between the two ships on the beach, Brendan saw many men form a circle around a large fire. The evening breeze blew the noise of their revelry to Brendan from Shannon. Brendan darted behind a bush of heather. The heather and tall grass could conceal him if he tried to move closer; so he decided to move as close to these strange men as he could. Slowly, he crept forward on hands and knees. He carefully moved among the brush, stones, reeds and grass, trying to disturb as few of these as possible, striving not to betray his presence by any sound.

He ran out of cover about ten yards from the boisterous group. Brendan decided to be content to observe from the last concealing bushes on the fringe of the opening. Brendan scanned the scene before him. These were strange beastly creatures, like nothing he'd ever seen before. Most had yellow hair, long, down to their shoulders. Their facial hair, equally as long, mixed with that protruding from under their metal helmets that the two were indistinguishable. Those helmets, many had horns protruding from each. Brendan wondered *what kind of men had horns?* Then he remembered Father Sweeney, who said Sunday Mass in the burnt village Brendan had just left. *Hadn't Father Sweeney spoken of devils as "horned beasts?"* A chill raced through Brendan's body. How could he, a mortal, fight the powers of Hell? He prayed silently to the Virgin Mary. The prayer made him feel better. Somehow he sensed now that these were only men, and men could be defeated. The question now was, how?

Brendan pondered this question as he continued to study the scene before him. To the right of the fire he spotted Kaileen. She sat on the ground with a group of about twelve women, some trying to comfort crying babies. It appeared all of these women were tied to a rope staked into the ground. The ones with children had only one hand fastened. The women without children had both hands tied. Most of the captors were eating and drinking, talking boisterously in a tongue strange to Brendan. A couple of spits alongside the fire contained pigs, undoubtedly stolen from the village, roasting over coals. Now and then, one of the strange men would walk over to the fire, pull a dagger from a scabbard on his

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waistband, slice off a strip of meat from one of the pigs and return to his place in the sand.

Brendan studied everything about these strangers. They all wore some kind of short tunic. The tunic only reached to mid-thigh, but wore some sort of trouser-like garment that covered each leg separately. Some of the tunics appeared to be woven from iron thread. Each man wore about his waist and over his shoulder a massive leather belt with a sword in scabbard attached. Here and there, scattered around the circle, were javelins with accompanying wooden shields, standing upright as though they had sprouted from the sand. As Brendan surveyed the mob, he looked for some weakness, some way to get Kaileen away from these men.

Darkness descended rapidly. "Good," Brendan thought. Brendan had keen night vision, sharpened by spending most of his nights in the pasture with the sheep. As the sky lost its light, an idea brightened in Brendan's head. The spark of an idea grew into a roaring flame within Brendan's head, much like the bonfire before him on the beach. With satisfaction, Brendan watched one of the barbarians stand before the crowd and begin to talk in the strange language. The man standing was obviously a storyteller, judging from the way all the others gathered about him. Soon his was the only voice audible around the great fire.

Seizing the opportunity, Brendan backed into the brush. He unbuttoned the brooch that fastened his cloak and flipped the cloak onto the ground. Rapidly he piled dry grass and twigs onto the cloak. Silently he compacted them with his hands and knees so he could carry as much as the cloak would hold. He then fastened the four corners of the cloak with his brooch and began to crawl toward the leftmost of the two ships. Both ships were partially beached with their bows resting on the shore. Staying in the shadows he made his way, dragging the bundle, to the bow of the first ship. The bow rose too high to climb over it at this point so he first threw the bundle over the bow. Next, he entered the cold water and swam to a point where he could reach the gunwale and pull himself over.

Performing this maneuver landed him abruptly on one of the hard wooden benches used by the crew. While he had made little noise, his left hip and upper thigh smarted where he'd contacted the bench. He crawled over the benches to the bow of the ship and located the cloak. Swinging one leg over a bench at a time, he made his way aft toward the main mast and the sail.

It was dark enough now that Brendan felt it safe to climb on to the main yardarm containing the massive sail. Pulling his knife from his belt, he shredded a large area of the wadmal fabric of the sail. Next, he pulled the grass and brush from his cloak. Brendan mixed the grass and brush with the fabric so that it would ignite the sail. Finally, he built a fire on the sail with dried grass which he ignited with a couple of strikes of his trusty flint stone against the steel of his knife blade.

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The sparks from the impact of the flint against the steel fell into a special bit of lamb's wool Brendan kept for that purpose. When he blew on the smoking embers in the wool, a small flame arose. He touched the flame to the dry grass. The fire spread along the sail so fast that Brendan nearly got burned before he dismounted from the yardarm. In a flash, he grabbed his cloak and dropped into the water on the side opposite the one where he had climbed aboard. He first swam to the port side of the second ship. Then he made his way toward shore alongside this ship. The warriors on the shore would soon notice the fire aboard the first ship and Brendan needed to remain concealed. For the moment, the shadow of the second ship would hide him; but Brendan knew he must make it to the brush on shore before the angry mob came storming down the beach.

Luck was with Brendan. He reached the safety of a salt marsh just as the first of the barbarians spotted the fire on the ship. Moments later, the gang on the beach was rushing to the ships as Brendan crawled into the marsh. Brendan made his way through the marsh, then back up the beach toward the fire the barbarians had just abandoned. Moments later, he reached a spot just opposite where the women were, trying desperately to free themselves from the leather thongs that prevented their escape.

Cautiously Brendan looked about. *Good, just as he'd hoped.* All the strange seamen had gone to the ships leaving the captives unguarded. He slipped from the cover of the brush and went to Kaileen first. With his knife he quickly slashed the leather thongs which bound her hands. He handed her the knife and instructed:

"Go to the other end and start cutting them loose."

Kaileen said nothing, but nodded acknowledgment and rushed for the other end. Brendan then pulled the sickle from the belt about his waist and set to work on the bonds of the woman closest to him. As he cut, he gave them the order:

"When you get loose, run in different directions. If we spread out, I don't think they'll try to follow all of us."

The women all nodded that they understood. Then, one by one, as they were freed, they disappeared into the bush, running in different directions as instructed. Kaileen cut the next to last captive free as Brendan was working on the last one. Instead of disappearing, she spoke to Brendan:

"I'm going to stay with you," she insisted. Then she continued, "With that bad leg of yours, you may need help."

The last thing Brendan was going to do was argue with Kaileen if she wanted to stay with him. He smiled and said, "OK, let's go."

As Brendan moved toward the brush, Kaileen said, "Wait."

Brendan then watched as Kaileen dashed toward the javelins and shields. She quickly snatched two javelins and rushed back to Brendan.

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“We might find these useful,” she announced.

With that, they disappeared into the brush. As they made their way through the bushes, brambles scratched their ankles and tore their clothing. Brendan didn't like trying to make his way through such thick brush in the darkness but he felt they must get as far from the strange sea warriors as possible. In the darkness, Brendan found his way by feel. He knew that to get away from the beach they must travel upward. He felt his way up the side of the Shannon Valley, noting that as long as they were climbing, they had to be moving away from the ships and the raiders. Brendan also resisted the temptation to move to the thinner brush or to follow any trails. He knew their pursuers would be more likely to spot them if he and Kaileen didn't stick to the heavy brush. Kaileen followed close behind Brendan. They each carried a javelin. Brendan found his useful for climbing but hard to manipulate in the brush. He didn't want to leave it; he might need it later to fight the bloody barbarians.

Brendan and Kaileen came to the edge of the brush they'd been traveling in. Ahead, they could see a silhouette of the ruins of the village which Brendan had been through earlier. The sweet aroma of the stew he'd tasted earlier drifted to his nostrils. The smell invoked pangs of hunger.

“I wish we could take time to eat that stew,” Brendan whispered to Kaileen.

“I know where we can get some food we can carry with us,” Kaileen answered.

Brendan listened to the sounds in the wind for a moment. Since he heard no voices approaching, his hunger prodded him to the decision.

“Let's find it quickly, then,” he urged Kaileen.

She led the way, leaving Brendan hobbling to catch up with her. She stopped at the site of a burned down hut. Using the tip of the javelin, she parted the ashes along the edge where a circular wall had stood only the day before. After parting the ashes, she pried up several boards, burned and blackened on the topside. She reached into a pit and began pulling things out. In the darkness, Brendan could only make out something in the shape of a loaf of bread and a skin-covered flask. She also pulled out a large sack with straps. Kaileen quickly put the items she'd retrieved from the hole in the ground into the pack. As Kaileen was fastening the sack on her back, Brendan heard the sound of voices approaching. The seamen must be coming to look for them, he thought. He grabbed Kaileen's arm.

“We need to get going, I think they're looking for us,” he said.

Kaileen needed no further prodding. She stood up and grabbed the javelin. Brendan led her into brush northeast of town. The voices grew louder as they began climb the side of the hill. The path wound through a forest of conifer trees

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that would obscure their movement. The sea raiders would not know of it and would have to search the area on the outskirts of the town to find it.

After traveling for a couple of hours, Brendan noticed he no longer heard the voices. He looked at Kaileen. She stooped badly under the burden of the pack.

“There’s a place I know, not too far away. I call it ‘fortress in the rocks.’ We can rest there. I don’t think they know which way we went. Those butchering pigs won’t be able to pick up our trail ‘til morning. Do you want to stop there and sleep until sunrise?” he asked Kaileen. “Yes, I’m exhausted,” she answered.

Kaileen then shifted the pack on her shoulders.

“Let me take that for a while,” Brendan offered and continued, “I don’t think they’re following us now. We don’t need to move as fast.”

“Thank you,” Kaileen cooed as she slipped her arms out of the straps.

She then helped Brendan into it, and they continued on. About an hour later, Brendan spotted a large outcropping of limestone.

“Up there,” he pointed to the rocks.

A few moments later they finished the steep climb and reached the rocks. Not visible from below was a natural crater formed by the rocks, which, indeed, made it appear to be a fortress. Brendan and Kaileen climbed down into the crater. He slipped the pack off and placed it under a rock overhang for Kaileen.

“Rest your pretty red head on this,” he instructed.

Kaileen said nothing; she just smiled at Brendan and laid her head on it. Brendan then unhooked his cloak and started to lay it on top of her, but she shook her head.

“No, you keep it. Mine will keep me warm enough.”

She smiled gently at him for a second time. Being alone with Kaileen for the first time, Brendan longed to talk to her, but fatigue paralyzed his body. He found a pile of dirt to use as a pillow and fell fast asleep.

The sun was nearly midway to its noon zenith when it struck Brendan. As he reached his hand to shade his eyes, a shadow blocked the sun. He lowered his hand to find himself staring at a heavily muscled body, armed with the same type of sword as the sea raiders.