



Prologue

This was a time before Christ. In three thousand years a scene like this, with snow weighing down the branches of the trees, would be considered festive. Symbolic of a season of goodwill and excess. But to Corradh it meant only short days, long nights and poor hunting.

He had been tracking a solitary deer all morning, the one consolation for mid-Winter being the visibility of its tracks in the snow. He followed it into a clearing, treading as softly and slowly as he could manage.

There was blood on the ground, steam rising from a red pool three paces wide. The deer's tracks were random and scattered, as it had scabbled for grip and fought to escape. There were human footprints too. They looked like a man's bare feet but were larger and wider than normal, the ball of the heel flaring out and the toes spread. The prints were tightly grouped; this man had stood his ground as the deer thrashed and struggled. The same deer that Corradh had spent hours tracking.

A combination of footprints and blood splashes led out of the clearing. Corradh pictured the flat-footed man carrying the dead deer across his shoulders, the prints made deeper as the heavy carcass weighed him down. He followed the trail along a winding track that dropped down towards the river. The man had begun to run: the footprints were more widely spaced across the snow.

Bastard has to be big to sprint with a dead animal across his back.

The sound of the river came through the trees and there was the glint of winter sunlight on the water. He stopped and crouched. A figure stood in the shallows, splashing water over his arms and chest.

He was right; the bastard was big. Built like a tree and standing bare-arse-naked in the freezing water. His skin was covered in blue and green markings, patterns and lines across every bit of flesh. His hair was cut short, almost to the bone. He was muttering to himself.

The dead deer lay on the riverbank, its throat torn open and its head hanging at an angle. There was no sign of a weapon, no bloodied knife or axe in sight. Corradh looked at the man's enormous hands as they drew up the icy water. His red-stained fingers were capped with nails like a wolf's teeth. He'd torn the animal's throat out with his bare hands.

I don't care how big you are, that's my deer, you weird fuck.

Corradh's thumping heart rose up in his throat, his limbs tingling at the prospect of a fight over the dead animal. He didn't relish getting into a scrap but there were hungry bellies relying on him for food.

He moved forward slowly but was so intent on not losing sight of the painted freak, he didn't look where he was treading. A dead branch snapped under his foot and the man whipped his head round. His forehead jutted out and his nose was flat and swollen. The blue and green markings covered his face and there were scars running over his chin. He looked straight at Corradh, crouched at the base of a tree, then snatched up the deer carcass and sprinted away through the river shallows.

Corradh went after him. He'd put in a lot of effort hunting that animal and no bare-arsed fool was going to steal it from him. He splashed through the water and unslung his spear.

They headed upstream. The river swung left, then took a sharp right turn. Corradh knew it well. Better, he presumed,

than his prey. He left the shallows and climbed the riverbank to his right, dodging through the trees and heading round to cut off the naked man, but when he jumped back out of the cover there was no sign.

He walked further into the water and looked from bank to bank. Nothing. No hefty painted fella with his big swinging dick, no bleeding deer carcass. Just the river gurgling past his legs. He took another step forward.

Cold. Right over his head. Icy water swallowed him up as the riverbed beneath his feet disappeared. The shock of it forced the air out of his lungs. He kicked out instinctively but there was no point, the only thing below him was more water. He went down and it filled his nose, his mouth, his throat. The sun stopped shining and there was nothing but darkness and the freezing river.

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His eyes were closed. He wasn't actually dead. There was the smell of smoke and something pungent that made him want to puke. He opened his eyes. He was lying on the floor of a cave. To one side was a pool of black water. To the other, a crackling fire. He pushed himself up. The walls were smooth and there were lines and markings on the stone: figures of men and beasts. And other things he didn't like the look of. Things from nightmares.

The naked man crouched by the fire, warming his hands. He looked at Corradh and pointed at the water, jabbing with one of those monstrous fingers. Corradh straightened his legs and moved his back against a wall. His spear was way out of reach. He flinched as the man got to his feet and stood over him.

If he's not going to kill me, what the fuck is he going to do?

The painted man pointed down at him, then to the pictures on the walls. He spoke, but it wasn't something Corradh could understand, just a stream of grunts and snorts. The pointing became more excited. One big, ugly finger jabbed at

the drawings urgently. When Corradh's only response was to stare back, the jabbing and grunting stopped. The man picked a clump of white bark from the floor and went to the fire. He stood over it and spoke again, making a final gesture at the cave paintings before throwing the bark into the flames. There was a spark, and the cave filled with green smoke. Corradh put his hand across his mouth and coughed. There was a bitter taste on his tongue and his nostrils burned.

The man appeared out of the smoke, waving his hands. He wasn't to fight it; he had to breathe it in. The bitterness passed and became sweet. The smoke filled his lungs, and his vision grew dark around the edges, all light shrinking into a single point at the centre.

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There was a great hall made of stone, mightier than any he'd ever seen. It touched an orange sky and cast giant shadows on the ground. Before it, a battle was raging. No, not so much a battle as a slaughter. There were screams and a sound like animals feeding at the trough. He could smell blood and felt a wave of fear washing over him.

A figure was hoisted aloft by a great many hands, held up like a sacrifice to the gods. This was a man but those who gripped his limbs were less than that. They were the creatures who dwelt in the dark places and preyed on the weak and unwary. They moved as one, passing their offering from hand to hand above their heads.

Then there was pain and a great sadness and images he could not understand. The creatures were feasting.

A word rang inside his head. Its meaning was lost to him then but still it burrowed into his memory, to rest there unspoken. Featherfall.

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He stood in the clearing. Heavy snow fell, drawing silence down around the forest. The body of a deer lay at his feet, its

throat slashed wide, and its neck snapped back. His spear was beside it. The only footprints were his own.