

The sequel to The Raven & the Wolf trilogy's 2010 debut novel Blood Oath, Land of Ire continues the dramatic saga of two Anglo-Danish brothers on the isle of Britain embroiled in a bitter, dark age blood feud.

The Raven & the Wolf: Land of Ire

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The background of the cover features a raven perched on the head of a snarling wolf. Below them is a Viking longship engulfed in flames, with a figure visible on the deck. The scene is set against a dark, atmospheric background.

The
Raven

& The
Wolf

chronicle II

Land of Ire

CHRISTOPHER
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PROLOGUE

Vengeance is daunting for it has no limit. Of that I had been warned by my fosterer who himself was ensnared in the web spun from my own want of reprisal; it was reprisal wrought from an oath sworn in blood and infringed upon by the most ominous treachery. In these waning days, the skies threatening as winter sharpens its claws, I am neither inclined to reflect on the deeds which reaped me such woeful consequences nor upon how I endeavored to disentangle the pitiless threads sewn by the three fate-spinners; those ever wayward Norn-maidens. But I do so, for if my words prove prelude to the less astute, those who choose to adopt the burden of a blood oath, and unaware of the perils of disloyalty, then perhaps they who heed my tale shall ward off the ills invoked by such haste.

Hitherto I have related how the blood union between my brother and I was defiled, summoning such a grave consequence that it brought he and I together in the fury of sword against sword on the outskirts of that terrible battle at Brunanburh. Though a writ of death he had thus earned from me, it was through my fidelity to the oath given at the urging of my father that I spared my brother's life. Even as he lay defeated and awaiting the killing stroke of the axe in my hand, I understood well what result might come if I were to allow him to leave that battlefield alive. Yet, for all the hatred and thirst to sate my vengeance, I relented and Hereric, or Brandubh as he was known then as a jarl in Eireland, rose up from that mire and sought his vanquished and departing fleet. I was not without quarrel when I was reminded that permitting him to escape would one day come to haunt me. I knew as we glanced a final time at one another, blood still spattered across our faces, that our feud was nowhere near resolved.

I'd no intent to ever seek him again and, as my hope was to remain in England for all time, thought never to have to depart my homeland out of either revenge or the necessity of others.

Alas, Norn-craft is manifest, and the mercy I had exercised proved as reckless as I feared it might.

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To speak of that land afar in the westward sea, that lonely isle at the edge of the known world, is to speak of a land with green fields as vibrant as its faultless lakes, hills and heaths spanning into far-off mists. To reach its shores one must brazen out a cold and forlorn ocean, unruly and blue-gray, crested white with spume churned up by the frosty breath of autumn gales. For many, it is a land of beauty, more so to those who come in sudden fleets to plunder its riches and leech from its wealth of fertile land, robbing silver and gold from its holy places and gathering slaves from the hives of villages and towns that speckle its vulnerable countryside.

When I am disposed to summoning memories of that place, I have none but those that are shrouded in shadows dark with lament.

It is but a land of wrath as sharp as winter's breath, a land of iniquity and distrust, of soils turned sodden-red by murder.

It is a land of unforgiving toil and inimical quarrels, of reddened spears, and swords and axes forever primed for the labor of war and revenge.

It is the land that blackened my heart and turned me against the whole of the world; a place where the nobler part of me forever died.

A land of scars and purest sorrow.

A land of ire.

1

Force of will. It was in my earliest days that I was taught such a thing was the sum of my strength, that which would carry me onward when fortune was exhausted. And even as a warrior I should not fully know the boundary of that will until I was forced by obligation to seek it. I, Wulfric, the son of Orvar Hæreksson, he who once spirited me from the certainty of death through the fire and darkness of a chilled Northumbrian night, was made to seek the frontier of my will in that year of Nine-Hundred and Forty.

That year the gods frowned on England. For in that time they honed winters gray talons, iced over the thatch and despoiled the harvests while commanding a sickness as grim as the very season from which it was born. It crept over frosted heaths, thieving the young from their mothers as it ravaged, hastening villages and towns to huddle grievously over shallow graves dusted white with snow.

The gods, they were restive in that year. Not since Æthelstan's great victory had Odin's hall of the slain in Valhalla collected such a bounty of fallen warriors. The wolves were famished and despairing, and the ravens, for all their fortitude, were thickening under gray skies.

I thought I had endured the cruelest fortunes wrought by the Norns, those three sisters who are the deciders of men's destinies, nefarious fate-weavers who at every turn in my life had thus far cast me beneath the shadow of death at every turn. Upon that field called Vinheidr, which I had sought so that I might confront the wickedness crafted by my half-brother, Hereric, the Norns had fated a great slaughter of men; that battle of which I speak was waged outside Brunanburh, one long in memory and hallowed I must think, for it settled the course of rule and dominion on the isle. And it was there that I and the warriors I had collected and led away from the dark vales of Cumbria all the way to that fated field, stormed our enemies

from atop saddled horses to fall upon them unawares, our swords, spears and axes ringing and clanging a hopeless death-song as we set to wreaking a terrible judgment. My own fight that day was not so much for the aspirations of our king in Wessex, who'd proclaimed himself England's only high-king in the wake of that dire bloodbath, but rather I weathered all that the Norns placed before me in order that I might eliminate all impediments between myself and Hereric, who had so egregiously betrayed me. To levy the hand of justice upon him was worthy of bleeding white for and nearly did I lose my life in that tempest of hissing, flashing blades and gore-slathered screams, the bodies writhing and thrashing like gutted eels round my feet while all about the ravens gathered thick and black at the edges of the field. But when he and I met on a friendless stretch of marshland, beyond the echo of the rout, and our swords met in what I had intended to be the final confrontation that should have for all time reconciled by death our shattered oath, I wavered.

There, as he entreated me with tears in his eyes, wounded and shamed, and with an axe blade in my hand raised high for the stroke of vengeance, I failed to complete my vow. And I knew even as Hereric lay blinking in bewilderment over his life having been spared that I should come to regret my mercy.

Bound eternally by a blood oath in our youth, I was sworn never to betray nor act in malice toward my kinsman. But in the fury he had stoked in me in those later years, having thieved a great and revered sword from me, raped the woman who would become my wife, and placed me in the chains of thralldom, I had neglected to consider what consequence was earned by acting on what I believed was due reprisal. Hereric had betrayed the oath, not I. It was he who sullied and blackened his blood - blood sown into me by the sword-wounds inflicted on us by my father, Orvar, in our childhood so that we might not ever fall into disunity. Yet when Hereric's father, Asgeirr, who proved to be the brother of Orvar, drove a horde of ill-intentioned warriors from Northumbria and set upon our village inside Mercia, putting to the sword the menfolk and ravaging the women while the thatch blazed and children wailed, he and Orvar were swept up and shepherded off to Eireland.

For what reason the Norns chose to pattern my survival from their inauspicious threads I long pondered, though I have come to accept it was so that I might finally break the circle of revenge that has cursed my bloodline. That day of Æthelstan's glory, the day the ravens feasted and the wolves gorged over the mounds of the defeated, I was given such power as to end that blood feud before Hereric and the remnants of his beaten army reached their ships, fleeing vanquished across the swale of Thingsmere in tattered throngs, having been bested by the combined might of Wessex, Mercia and her scattering of allies from lands near and far. Toward the gray sea we drove them, gored and broken, and it was in that ignominious flight that I committed that gravest error of all - not killing my half-brother.

Hereric had returned to England from Eireland a haughty and boastful jarl, one who'd warred and plundered to ascendancy and so regarded it his right to assert a mandate upon me that I honor our blood oath through a pledge of fidelity to both he and his king, Anlaf of Duibhlinn - an enemy of Æthelstan. But he had not come solely for such a purpose as to find me but to reclaim for his king the weapon most coveted of all - the Sword of the Uí Ímair - which I had been forced to inherit when his father raided our settlement. That sword, so grand in its construct, was regarded as the underpinning of all triumphs in war, a scepter of invincibility forged in the kiln of the gods, or so legend held. And when I refused Hereric's appeal for such an adherence, though it was more a threat than an opportunity for glory, he and his loyalists sought me out, confiscated the sword and murdered my fosterer. But his ultimate act of reprisal was to inflict upon the woman I was to marry the worst indignity so as to not only punish and dishonor me for the show of defiance I had bore against him but also to brand his enduring legacy upon me through his iniquitous seed.

Athilda, forced into a nunnery in our childhood, was the only woman for whom I had ever had eyes for; she who lured me unknowingly into the despair of love and survived to grant me her hand. After the ruin and bloodshed of Brunanburh I had sought her in that walled city of Legacæstir, where she'd been exiled by the

church for having suffered defilement by my kinsmen. There she was to make penance by order of the man who I hated near on as dreadfully as Hereric. Father Ætheric, the priest who presided over all holy matters in Thelwæl, was to me as much an enemy as him, for it was the cleric's betrayal that led my brother to Athilda and so set in motion the awful chain of misfortune I was to abide. It was by such a great deed of treachery that Athilda was to bear a child not of my blood but of Hereric's - a son - and one who, as I held him in my arms, wept over as I recognized that the blight of that shattered blood oath was from that instant one certain and lasting.

In that moment, cradling the infant who I was disposed to loathe, I understood without qualm why my father had warned so strongly that never must Hereric and I violate our brotherhood. Once broken, we were forever ordained to be at odds. As the Norns decreed, it was I who was condemned to endure the darkest consequence for it. For just as I myself had been ill-conceived, my father having impregnated the wife of his brother, Asgeirr, I was born and condemned by him to be devoured by wolves. Alas, I was likewise cursed with the burden of a child spawned by the iniquity of my brother. Though I held that boy while my eyes welled with tears as sorrowed as a winter famine, I'd never considered inflicting upon him a misdeed as cruel as what Asgeirr had intended for me as a newborn. No matter a child's origin, an infant bears no fault of its own.

Nonetheless, I still could not deny the hate in me that the child instilled from the moment it gazed at me vacantly.

I wanted no part in the boy's upbringing and cared not for its well-being, and when I set him back into Athilda's arms she sobbed disconsolately for she recognized the quandary we both had been cast into. She would nurture the boy in spite of his ill-descent from my worst enemy yet saw plainly the drape of gloom that came between her and I.

But it is the strength of one's will, so crucial to survival, which may sever the fetters of such hopelessness.

How a warrior endures on the field of battle as the axes whirl and the swords hiss and toll like so many strident bells is determined

not by bravery but through the will to see the end of the fight and to step from the carnage alive and undeterred. And like a tried warrior I chose to stand and weather what fate had delivered through the birth of that misbegotten child.

It was many days before either Athilda or I would bestow a proper name upon the boy, and so he remained nameless, shunned by me, until she saw that I could garner the strength to set eyes upon him again. And rather than allow hate to cloud my judgment I decided thus to embrace him as my own for I found justification through proclaiming I had gained a measure of mastery over my brother by having defeated him in battle. Then, in a sort of contorting of reason, I further decided I had allowed Hereric to escape death so that I could usurp his offspring while he lived. It was a contradiction of the true way of things but a denial I could not have done without so that I could marry Athilda without shame. In due time I came to regard that child as my true kin. So that I should better grow to accept him, Athilda asked that I honor him with a name of my choosing. The day I granted him his name I brought forward my sword, held the hilt close and allowed his tiny hand to touch the inscription etched across its iron guard.

Aidan.

My sword, granted by my murdered fosterer, Rædwald the Falconer, was handed down to me the very day before my brother had come thundering into our farmstead with a rabble of Norse-Gael warriors who set about plundering and burning our domicile. I had called that sword Aidan's Fire, it having been the weapon carried by Rædwald's son who died in the earlier wars against marauding Danes in Mercia during the rule of Æthelfleda, warrior queen. And it was Aidan's Fire that I swung in battle on Vinheidr's blood-swathed plains, drawing out the life of my foes beneath Hereric's banner, ultimately wounding my half-brother as we fought a protracted and desperate duel on Thingsmere. To adorn his son with the name of Aidan seemed apt, for it exalted my battle-deed and rightly scorned Hereric.

Aidan, I feared, would grow from the dark seed of Hereric, a seed of spite and covetousness, and so walk a wretched path much as

his father had. Lest I gather myself, shed the umbrage his birth had afflicted me with, and place myself in the absent shadow of his true father, Aidan was certain to bloom wrongly into manhood from that seed, and the legacy that the Norns had thus far unfurled before me would only darken.

I was committed to challenging the three sisters and the ill of their loomwork, trusting instead in the gods who I thought surely must still regard me in good favor for all that I had withstood up until that time. I would not allow the blackened blood inside Aidan to lead him astray. But it was Athilda who had truly made such a trial possible. It was for her that I set my life's course after Brunanburh. She had not given herself over to despair after Hereric had enslaved me, and even after her banishment from the church she'd gone on clinging to her faith in hopes that her Christ-god would deliver me unto her again. That I survived the ordeals of Cumbria and the great struggle against the enemies of Æthelstan and returned to her with but slight wounds was avowal that her prayers had been heard. Yet I had long resented her religion for it fixed between us a barrier that at times threatened to disunite us for all time. My gods are all that are true; I have and will always believe as such. But for Athilda, she who always gave light to a world gone dark, there was no trial I would not endure to honor her. And because, like the strongest will the gods can bestow a warrior, my love for her has always been without limit, I would journey to the farthest boundaries and endure the most arduous trials to find her should fate command it.

As winter ebbed and the hope of spring budded, gray clouds yielding to impart hints of pale-blue, the threading hands of fate were at work and the Norns, weaving vindictively, saw to it that I should be made to explore the depths of that will.

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