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1169, The Approach to Duiblinn

The mists swirled about the Viking ship, shrouding their approach in an ashen veil. It seemed as though the clouds themselves were reaching toward the waters, parting momentarily to reveal their advance, silent and evil, an apparition on the deadly sea.

He moved as one with the great ship, his feet spread wide and firmly planted behind the dragon's head that graced the bow. Atop a platform, he had an unencumbered view of the gray waters; though they roiled and tumbled, the waves crashing against the sides of the vessel, he remained unyielding, secure in his position. He towered above those behind him who worked the sail or labored in the rowing stations. He could feel their eyes upon him.

Though he was a young man, his hair was white and reached nearly to his waist. It was wild at the moment, swirling about his body wherever the wind took it. His eyebrows and his lashes were pale against alabaster skin that stretched over taut muscles. His shoulders were broad and his arms powerful, though he now rested them idly behind his back, his fingers entwined. His

thighs were strapping and fought at the fabric that dared encase them, moving effortlessly with the sway and tug of the vessel that was more a home to him than any bed and table.

His eyes were the color of blue ice. The pupils were not black but appeared to lack any color at all. He had been told by his men that when he stood at the bow of the ship as he did now, his eyes appeared nearly completely white and otherworldly, a characteristic that unnerved his enemies.

His name was Baldr but he was known simply as Hvittr Bard, *The White Devil*.

He preferred the saffron tunic and slightly darker cloak that he currently wore, though he'd discovered years earlier that his wine-colored clothing was best in battle, as it hid blood splatters. He had never been injured himself; his arms were uncommonly long, his frame inches taller than his Norse counterparts; a giant among giants. And among the Celtic people he now approached, he was indeed a goliath. No swing of an arm, even extended with a sword, could reach his torso.

As the mists parted with the first peek of the rising sun, he spotted fishermen along the shorelines and sheep farmers on the hills. As they readied for their day, they stopped to watch the tall, sleek ship slide silently past them.

Gone were the days when necessity dictated a stealthy approach. The Ostmen had ruled Duflin—what the Gaelic people called Duiblinn, or Black Pool—for three hundred years. It was their village now, even if the Celts resented their presence; a bustling, thriving spot along the water that beckoned with good food, strong spirits, and an abundance of women to be had for the taking.

In the distance, he spotted an outcropping of buildings. He forced himself to remain perfectly still, completely rigid. His expression would remain chiseled still as stone. It was an integral part of what made him *The White Devil*.

The docks were alive with fishermen departing for a day at sea; a cacophony of voices reached his ears as they drew closer still. Women hawked pieces of bread and meat for men who would grow hungry before they would again see these shores. Men shouted to one another, inspecting the nets and tossing

them onto the decks, gathering their supplies for the hard hours ahead. In the distance, bells rang, their vibrations echoing in the mists of Eire.

Young boys rushed to greet the Viking ship, eager to assist for a coin, while the Celtic men eyed them suspiciously, warily.

Only then did Hvittr Bard remove his hands from behind his back. He raised one hand, and the rowing behind him stopped. With a gesture only his men recognized, they rose as one and prepared to come ashore.

The sail unfurled behind him as they pulled alongside the docks. Under the expert hands of his men, it would be folded and readied for the next voyage, whenever that should be. At a moment's notice, they could be called to the north or the south to quell some uprising against them or to settle an old score with either the Celts or the Normans, or simply to raid another monastery or castle.

Standing near the dragonhead at the bow, he loomed above the men on shore, but when he leapt to the dock below, it was with the fluid grace and agility of a smaller, more slender man. He landed on his feet, his knees only slightly bending, before rising to his full height. The crowds parted as The White Devil stepped among them, their eyes wide, unblinking, frightened. The women clasped their hands to their chests, backing away, while the men avoided his path and averted their eyes. Many of them had seen him countless times before and yet each time it was the same: he was feared. And he was reviled.