

Clontarf

We are in the year 1014, on the coast of Ireland. Brian Boru high king of the emerald isle awaits the battle that will either crush the rising rebellion, or mark his defeat. This battle will go down in history as the battle of Clontarf...

A cool gust of wind buffeted from the sea, ruffling the lush green grass as it tore across the plain. His woolen cloak drawn closely around him, Aengus paced before the tents. Many faces were staring anxiously at the grey horizon as they went about sharpening swords, counting arrows and getting readying for the battle to come. In the distance a flicker could be observed at the base of the horizon. It grew to form a small group of riders who hustled across the plain as they saw the host by the Clontarf coast. Brian Boru rode at the center, his white beard tussled by the wind, the banner of his clan, the dal Cais, blowing behind him. In that that day no man in Ireland did not know of Brian Boru, and his name was uttered countless times. No man before had done what he had done. He alone ruled the south half of Ireland, having left the entire north to his former enemy Maél Sechnaill. Now with a rebellion from Leinster and Dublin on the rise, Brian was calling on this Sechnaill in hopes of gaining his support in the inevitable battle.

Murchad appeared silently behind Aengus. "*Dia dhuit?*" he greeted.

"*Dia is Muire dhuit.*" Aengus answered absently.

"You think they bring good news?"

"I hope, the Norse of Dublin are a force to be reckoned with- we need all the help we can get."

"Aye, but I'd rather that it weren't from a snake like that Sechnaill."

Murchad had been something of a brother to Aengus for as long as either of them could remember. When Aengus was no taller than a man's knee, his father had died in the battle of Belach Lechta. Being one of the dal Cais clan, and a kinsman of Brian, Aengus had been fostered by Brian's family until he was old enough to fend for himself. Following Brian on his campaign for Ireland Aengus soon proved himself an able warrior. Spending his early years in Munster with Murchad were some of Aengus's fondest memories. He hoped that with Ireland united under Brian, peace might come to the peoples again.

Then came the years when Aengus had attacked the province of Leinster by sea. Brian had allied with some of the Northmen from Munster thus gaining some valuable seamen. It had been Aengus's first great battle, and he hadn't escaped quite unscathed. Many skirmishes, especially with Maél Sechnaill the former owner of Leinster, followed. After a few years Brian resigned to rule the southern half of Ireland while Maél could have the north. Peace might have come, but these rebellions in Leinster had sent Brian's troops running back to war. That's were they were now, by the coast, waiting to rout out the rebellion.

Brian rode straight toward Aengus and Murchad as they stood at the head of the camp. Telling his guard to wait a few yards behind, he dismounted next to them.

"*Dia dhóibh boys?*" he greeted them warmly as he dismounted. They hadn't seen much of him in a while, ever since the men of Leinster began rebelling.

"*Dia is Muire dhóibh.*" The two replied, glad to see him again. His wrinkled face cracked open into a bit of a smile.

"Will Maél be joining the fight, Father?" Murchad asked urgently before anyone else spoke.

"Ah, alas the old hog felt the need to taunt me by watching the battle from afar." Brian said with a hint of his usual grim humor.

"He's going to *watch* us fight without giving us help?" Aengus blurted outraged.

"Probably still thinks Leinster should be his, if you ask me." Brian's smile withered and died on his face, he suddenly looked old and tired, his eyes sunken like a dead man's. With over seventy winters to tell about, Brian was certainly past his prime.

"We'll meet by my tent at dusk." He said and with that he walked back to his patiently waiting guard.

Aengus made his way to his own tent and sat cross-legged in front to examine his sword. Far in the distance he could hear the gentle sloshing of the sea as the tide raised.

"Our second, great battle, what do you think?" he asked Murchad.

"Hmm, I don't know, you think it will be big?" he said thoughtfully, then added more lightheartedly- "Try not to lose anymore fingers, all right?"

Wincing Aengus looked down at what remained of his left hand. He had dropped his shield in the attack on Leinster and paid the price.

"Well what was I supposed to do?" Aengus protested "have you ever jumped onto a village dock from a moving boat? With archers..."

"...yes, yes and an entire host of Leinstermen chasing after you probably..." Murchad butted in amused.

"...I've heard the story at least a thousand times- what happened to your original account of you simply slipping on the dock and dropping your shield?"

"I was getting to that part, but you can't forget about the Leinstermen after me." Aengus retorted laughing. Murchad had a way of making light of drastic situations, it was one of the things that made him such a good leader. The truth was, that losing most of his hand in his first battle had been quite a blow to Aengus. Tasks that had once seemed simple became difficult when he was missing two-and-a-half fingers on one hand, plus he would not be able to carry a round shield ever again. Sometimes he wondered what the point had been in it. Why did he have to fight this war anyway? He supposed that with the tribes united under Brian there would be no more wars. But what about occasions like this, when the Leinstermen and the men of the north isles united in rebellion against Brian. The fights over the past few weeks had been brutal but relatively short lived, Aengus was used to this, he had seen it his entire life. What now however, with the amassing opposition bent on a large-scale rebellion?

Sharpening their swords in companionable silence Aengus and Murchad waited for dusk to come. It was a nice day; little finches were swooping down from tents to steal the men's rations, and the smell the lush green grass drifting across the encampment. When the setting sun began to dye the sky blood red, Aengus and Murchad made their way to Brian's tent. They arrived at the tent where a group of people had already assembled. Amongst them was Murchad's son, who greeted Murchad cheerfully and the two of them began talking happily. Aengus scanned the crowd for familiar faces; there was Ulf who everyone knew as Wolf the Quarrelsome his eyes darting back and forth taking everything in darkly. Beside him stood two bearded messengers who Aengus had seen before, exchanging news- and there was Brian making his way out of his tent under his mane of white hair.

"*Fáilte* my friends," he welcomed the company in.

Slowly the men sidled in and began to take their seats inside the expansive tent. Brian himself sat at the back of the tent and slowly the group quieted down. "My friends," Brian began. "The forces in Leinster are amassing, as are the Northmen in Dublin, they seek to defy my authority. But I doubt that Maél Morda and Sigtrygg Silkbeard, who lead the forces, will stop there. Certainly they will attempt to take Ireland from me. Ruin the peace we have worked so hard to achieve. If Morda and Sigtrygg want battle we will give them one. If we lose however, another fifty years of war will follow. Do you want that?" The fire blazed high.

"No," The men gave their fierce reply.

"Then we cannot lose."

As the dark closed in the fireplace at the center of the tent burnt on and the men began to share their news. Men brought news that the rebellion seemed almost ready for their attack. Good news came from a pair of battle-hardened scouts who had seen an entire fleet leave Leinster and take to the sea. The ships had traveled away from the camp so they were probably deserters to the rebellion. Then Brian held counsel on the strategy for the upcoming battle, Murchad and his son, both would be commanding a division of the army. Aengus and Ulf would be accompanying Murchad as he lead the 2,000 warriors from Munster in his division.

The next day dawned good Friday; Aengus breakfasted, and prepared to revise the weapons of the Munster men he would be fighting alongside. Brian had ruled against fighting on this holy day, but the men were still tense. Walking through the Munster divisions tents Aengus noticed a dark smudge appear on the grey sea just below the horizon. A boat? Others had noticed it to, before our eyes we saw a fleet unfold out of the nothingness. Had the supposed deserters not deserted after all?

Suddenly the camp became a flurry of motion, men running to their tents frantically strapping on their weapons and the little armor they had. Murchad began to shout for the men to assemble. Aengus dashed into his tent, sword already in his belt he fumbled for the strong leather mitt he used to protect his left hand. Pulling over a chainmail tunic and his leather cap he dashed back out of his tent and tried to locate Murchad in the crowd. Following a troop of men from Munster he made his way to the front of the camp. All around him men shuffled into position, Aengus scrambled on to the front through the ranks of men. He emerged suddenly, finding himself at the tip of the army next to Murchad. The two of them greeted.

"I managed to persuade Brian not to join the battle," Murchad explained. Aengus understood this course of action, the old man would have been no use in battle and it was important to the peace of Ireland that he survived. Together the two of them stared out at the coast where the army of rebels and Northmen were assembling fast. The morning sun came through the grey clouds and the attackers glinted with a cruel metallic light- they were well armed. Brian's troops are going to have to fight hard to win this one, Aengus thought as the clouds closed in and the gloom tainted the sea green again. United under their many banners the rebels formed an enormous line opposite the Irish. Just within ear and just out of arrow shot they stood.

Men on both sides began to yell and beat their swords against their shields, working themselves into a frenzy. Aengus felt his adrenalin rising powered by fear of the army closing in. In his profile vision he saw men from both sides engaging in a two fight to the death at the center of the plain. More challenges were roared into the

wind, men dealt each other blows, knocked their opponents to the ground with their shields, all around the noise grew to an unbearable pitch...and the rebellion charged.

At their head a gigantic Northman charged, his full armor protecting him from arrows and javelins hurled his way. Aengus saw Murchad grimly hoist his shield higher, and stood up on the balls of his feet himself, ready for an attack. He had barely enough time to bring his sword into a defensive position. Then the men were upon them- the giant leading made straight for Aengus. Muscles clenching with panic, Aengus side stepped frantically and landed a useless stroke on the giant man's shoulder armor. Whipping his sword back to keep another charging axe man off his back Aengus shuffled back a few steps and saw Ulf emerging from the line of men behind. Yellowish eyes taking in his giant opponent that had just charged through, he carried a sword in each hand.

The rush of the charge swept Aengus with him, he lunged forward, shuffled back, landed wild blows and generally tried to leap out of reach of the Northmen's weapons as best he could. He saw snatches of Ulf beating down on his gargantuan opponent, watched an Ulster man behind him lunge forward and be dispatched by battle crazed Northman. He could see shadows of movement all around him, too his right he saw axed figures- Brian's Northman mercenaries, rushing forward to take on the rebels, to his left chaos and destruction stirred Brian's troops around in a horrible dance. Through rushing men he saw Murchad trying to assemble a charge.

Slashing an attacker in the wrist as he drew back his mighty sword, Aengus rushed to his left to join the attack. Beating his way through lines of brawling men, Angus made his way toward the assembling troop. Murchad was at the head calling for more support as the last of the chargers whirled past. About halfway to the assembling charge Aengus noticed a flurry of motion to his right and saw Ulf land a vicious kick to the midriff of his still fighting opponent, the giant of man fell back and Ulf continued his vicious assault on the warriors armor, driving him back along the blood sodden ground. With a cheer the Ulster men rushed forward and began to engage their attackers.

A charging Northman tore into Aengus, knocking him into the sodden mud. Winded and with a sharp ringing in his ears Aengus spat away the filth and struggled to his feet, something warm trickling along his chin. The assault had caught Aengus completely by surprise- he had to pull himself together. The Northman came to a halt and turned, sending his axe whirling at Aengus's head. Like lightning Aengus ducked, feeling a groan of complaint from his windpipe. Channeling his pain he smashed his sword into the Vikings midriff knocking him back into the line of fiercely fighting Munster men. Whirling around he caught a second charger with a lucky blow to his helm, knocking it into the mud. Seeing three more men, coming his way, he felt a sudden flush of hopelessness. Adrenaline built in him as his dazed assaulter turned on him and Aengus struck him down with a blow to his unprotected temple. His sword was spattered red as his opponent toppled into the mud.

The ringing in his head quieting Aengus looked up to see one of the oncoming Northman hit in the face by an arrow. With a quick side slash Aengus dispatched his surprised partner. The man fell, his astonished eyes staring up at Aengus as he hit the ground. A flurry of gore seemed to engulf the last of the men headed Aengus's way and Aengus saw Ulf's double blades knocking the attacker into the sodden turf. Ulf addressed Aengus with a vicious nod, his eyes battle crazed.

"You joining Murchad's charge?" He grunted.

Aengus's adrenaline was fading and he suddenly couldn't get the slain Northman's eyes out of his head anymore, but he nodded and together they ran to

the group of men assembling behind Murchad. They had only just joined when Murchad yelled a fierce battle cry and the troop charged. Aengus lost sight of his adoptive brother between the sprinting Irish as they charged.

Aengus and Ulf were plunged into the Rebellion's ranks. Ulf fought like ten men, his twin blades becoming a blur, Aengus kept his back clear with a series of vicious jabs and hacks to the ranks intercepting the charge. Suddenly, Aengus saw a man fall next to him, his skull punctured by a falling sword. Turning, Aengus locked eyes with the attacking swordsman. He jabbed forward fast as a darting cricket. The man slashed upward knocking Aengus's sword aside and slashing for his unguarded midriff. Aengus snapped back and the sword mangled his chain shirt. Lunging forward Aengus attempted to smash at the man's shoulder pads, but to no avail, the skilled swordsman parried Aengus's blow easily.

In retaliation the man sent his sword whistling toward Aengus's head. Barely ducking under the blade Aengus felt the sword clip his shoulder, but he through himself at his attacker, tripping him with his foot. The man fell back and Aengus kicked him in the chest, not able to bring himself to land the final blow.

Suddenly a many-voiced cry rang through the air.

"Murchad son of Boru is dead!"

Aengus's vision went dark with anger and grief. What, where? His mind seemed to roar desperately. Then it settled to one, maybe final task: find Murchad, avenge him. Aengus saw only shadows as he hacked, slashed, kicked and bit his way through the surging crowd. Suddenly he heard it, a faint cry off to his right.

"Aengus, I'm here!"

Murchad was lying in the mud a gaping wound in his chest. All around Aengus shadows charged past him to the front.

"Brother," Aengus cried, "you're dying!"

"Aengus" he replied faintly clutching Aengus's forearm "You need find my father, he must lead the troops to victory."

Aengus nodded, he understood. Turning he seized up the backs of the Northman ranks. Tears were trickling down the front of his face. Filled with grief he charged toward the front of the battle, striking men down from behind, he battered his way through the ranks. Only as he stumbled onto the blood sodden battle plain Aengus realized what he might look like running back from the battle. Brian's troops would never let him pass.

A spark of an idea rising Aengus lifted his sword and roared "Times are dire, I bring Brian Boru to the fight, he will bring us victory!" The men in front of him stood silent for a moment. Then over the din from behind Aengus heard a loud shout of "Hear, hear!" - It was Ulf shouting his approval to Aengus's words! More shouts could be heard, and then as one the Munster men charged, driving the Northmen back across the plain and letting Aengus pass.

Aengus ran as fast as his legs would carry him until he reached Brian Boru's tent. There was a circle of armed guards around the high king's tent, they carried spears and large round shield, which they had locked together to form a sort of wall. Exhausted Aengus trotted toward the line and suddenly noticed something approaching fast on the edge of his sight. Before he could grasp what was happening Aengus watched a dark robed Northman leader his guard engage in battle with Brian's defenders. These slew the Northman's guard, but Aengus watched in horror as the man struck down one of the guards with his axe, and disappear into Brian's tent. Fear empowered Aengus's haste as he rushed forward. Aengus arrived just in time to see the Northman raise his weapon above Brian. The axe fell.

In horror and disbelief Aengus rushed forward, drawing his sword he struck Brian's killer with hopeless anger. The blow struck true and the Northman sank to the ground. Aengus rushed over to the dying Brian.

His psalm book that he had been reading still in his hands, the high king of Ireland lay there as he passed from the world.

Grief flooded over Aengus, so was it all for naught? Would peace ever come to this age? Overwhelmed he sank to his knees in the tent.

Note: the battle of Clontarf did take place on Good Friday 1014 and for all who would like to know, was won by Boru's forces. All of the events included in the battle were historically documented, except the tent council and the scene where Aengus inspires the troops. There are different accounts of how Brian died; I chose the Norse version of events. Brian Boru, Murchad and Ulf, were all real people, Aengus however is fictional.