



SHAUNA LAWLESS



Reviewers on  
**THE GAEL SONG SERIES**

**SHAUNA LAWLESS**

‘Shauna Lawless is an unbelievable talent.’

**SARAH UNDERWOOD**

‘The perfect blend of magic, mythology, and history... captivating.’

***GRIMDARK MAGAZINE***

‘If you enjoy historical fantasy, do give this series a try. It’s so well researched and full of memorable characters.’

**LUCY HOLLAND**

‘Lawless writes historical fiction steeped in fantasy and mythology like Bernard Cornwell, Mary Stewart, and Stephen Lawhead at the top of their games.’

***OUT OF THIS WORLD SFF***

‘Lawless’s writing, particularly in the descriptive passages, is absolutely luminous... A huge, epic, admirable sweep of a novel.’

***IRISH INDEPENDENT***

‘Lawless blends fantasy with historical fiction to great effect.’

***SFX***

‘A fine piece of storytelling.’

**MARK LAWRENCE**

‘*Highlander* meets *The Last Kingdom* as feuding clans of magical undying vie for control of tenth-century Ireland... I was hooked from page one.’

**ANTHONY RYAN**

‘Gripping and beautiful. A Celtic *Last Kingdom* with wild magic and fierce heroines.’

**ANNA SMITH SPARK**

‘A beguiling blend of fantasy, history, and politics.’

**D.K. FIELDS**

‘A vividly written story that makes the ancient past feel contemporary.’

**JOSEPH O’CONNOR**

‘An epic historical fantasy that weaves myth and history into a sprawling tale of magic, intrigue, and war.’

**IAN GREEN**

‘A compelling and fascinating tale... With all the complex political machinations of *A Song of Ice and Fire* and the bloody battles of *The Warlord Chronicles*, it’s ideal for fans of both.’

**STEPHEN ARYAN**

‘Rife with atmosphere and armies, magic and compelling characters, it swept me along and refused to be put down. I simply loved it, and I cannot wait for Lawless’s next work.’

**H.M. LONG**

‘An atmospheric journey into a thrilling historical fantasy world that feels like it should be real.’

**R.J. BARKER**

‘Lawless blends the fantasy, myth, and historical elements with a masterly hand. There is a wonderfully atmospheric sense of place, I slipped into the pages and visualised my surroundings as I explored... I could feel this world balancing on an edge ready to plummet. An enthralling and entirely satisfying read.’

**LIZ ROBINSON, *LOVEREADING***

‘Lawless continues to weave a tale of power, magic and ambition...  
brimming with tension and a real love of Ireland and its history.’

***SciFi Now***

‘Fully showcase[s] Shauna Lawless' impressive flair for originality and her  
mastery of the historical action/adventure fantasy genre.’

***WISCONSIN BOOKWATCH***



# **THE LAND OF THE LIVING AND THE DEAD**

**ALSO BY SHAUNA LAWLESS**

THE GAEL SONG SERIES

NOVELS

*The Children of Gods and Fighting Men*

*The Words of Kings and Prophets*

NOVELLAS

*Dreams of Fire*

*Dreams of Sorrow*

# THE LAND OF THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

SHAUNA LAWLESS



*An Ad Astra Book*

[www.headofzeus.com](http://www.headofzeus.com)



First published in the UK in 2024 by Head of Zeus,  
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Copyright © Shauna Lawless, 2024

The moral right of Shauna Lawless to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in  
accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or  
transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or  
otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this  
book.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either  
products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (HB): 9781803282725  
ISBN (XTPB): 9781803282732  
ISBN (E): 9781803282701  
ISBN (Broken Binding HB): 9781035914609

Cover design: Micaela Alcaino  
Map design: Jamie Whyte

Head of Zeus Ltd  
First Floor East  
5–8 Hardwick Street  
London EC1R 4RG  
[WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM](http://WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM)

For my family

# Contents

Reviewers on The Gael Song Series

Also by Shauna Lawless

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Map

Characters

Prologue: Munster, AD 1011

## PART I: LATE SPRING 1012

Kingdom of the Northern Ó'Neills

Rathlin Island

Atlantic Ocean

Rathlin Island

Kingdom of the Northern Ó'Neills

Ulad

Kingdom of the Northern Ó'Neills

Ulad

Kingdom of the Northern Ó'Neills

Kingdom of the Northern Ó'Neills

## PART II: SUMMER/AUTUMN 1012



Fennit Island

Kingdom of the Northern Ó'Neills

Fennit Island

Travelling to Fennit Island

Dublin

Fennit Island

Leinster

Fennit Island

Cashel, Munster

Fennit Island

Killaloe

### PART III: WINTER 1012/SPRING 1013

Kingdom of the Northern Ó'Neills

Killaloe

Killaloe

Killaloe

Saint Bran's Nunnery, Munster

Fennit Island

Saint Bran's Nunnery.

### PART IV: SUMMER/AUTUMN 1013

Killaloe

Saint Bran's Nunnery.

Killaloe

Dublin

Killaloe

Dublin

Killaloe

PART V: WINTER 1013/SPRING 1014

Dublin

Killaloe

Dublin

Travelling to Fennit Island

Fennit Island

Fennit Island

Fennit Island

The Beach at Berrúin

Dublin

The Road to Dublin

Dublin

Clontarf

Clontarf

Dublin

Ulaíd

Clontarf

Dublin

Travelling to Ulaíd

Clontarf

Dublin

Clontarf

The Seven Hazel Trees

The Seven Hazel Trees

Fódlá

Rathlin Island

Historical Note

Acknowledgements

About the Author

An Invitation from the Publisher



## Map



# Characters

## *The Descendants of the Tuatha Dé Danann*

Tomas (To-mass) – Leader of the Tuatha Dé Danann and a druid.

Fódla (Foe-la) – A healer, mother of Aoife.

Aoife (Ee-fa) – Daughter of Tomas and Fódla. Born giftless, now deceased.

Rónnat (Roe-nat) – A witch and sister of Fódla.

Broccan (Brock-an) – Son of Rónnat and Egil of Dublin, a warrior.

Colmon (Cole-mun) – Leader of the warriors and a cousin of Fódla and Rónnat.

Fiachre (Fee-ach-kra) – Leader of the weapon-makers.

Gobnat (Gob-nit) – Leader of the witches.

Affraic (Af-frik) – Leader of the healers.

Laeg (Leg) – Leader of the cupbearers.

Shae (Shay) – Leader of the harpists, uncle to Gisela.

Gráinne (Grawn-ya) – Last leader of the prophets, now deceased.

Cerball (Kyar-ull) – A warrior, father of Méabh, now deceased.

Ardál (Ard-el) – A warrior.

Tigernach (Teer-na-ckh) – A warrior, now deceased.

Echna (Echk-na) – A druid.

Anaile (An-nalya) – A druid, father of Tomas, now deceased.

Báine (Bawn-yeh) – A witch, daughter of Affraic.

Eilis (Ayh-lish) – A witch, daughter of Báine, now deceased.

Étaín (Ay-teen) – A witch, daughter of Affraic.

Neasa (Nee-sa) – A healer, daughter of Étaín.

Méabh (Mayve) – A cupbearer, daughter of Cerball.

Cenn (Ken) – A weapon-maker, son of Fiachre, husband to Gisela.

Gisela (Giz-ella) – A harpist, wife of Cenn, niece of Shay.

Sárnait (Sawr-nit) – A witch, now deceased.  
Airmid (Eer-mid) – A giftless Descendant, daughter of Sárnait.  
Senna (Senn-a) – A witch, daughter of Airmid.  
Siobhán (Shiv-awn) – A healer.  
Cillian (Kill-ee-an) – A cupbearer.  
Yala (Yal-la) – A cupbearer.  
Íde (Ee-deh) – A witch.  
Clíodhna (Klee-uh-na) – A healer.  
Ríona (Ree-uh-na) – A witch, aunt to Tomas.

### *The Kingdom of Dublin*

Amlav (Am-laff) – Former King of Dublin, now deceased, father of Ragnall, Harald, Dubgall, Gluniain, Gytha, Muire and Sitric, late husband of Gormflaith.  
Ragnall (Rag-nall) – Son of Amlav, now deceased.  
Egil (Eag-il) – A bastard son of Ragnall, now deceased.  
Dubgall (Du-gall) – Son of Amlav, now deceased.  
Gluniain (Glorn-i-arn) – Son of Amlav, father to Gilla, now deceased.  
Gilla (Gill-a) – Son of Gluniain.  
Harald (Harr-ald) – Son of Amlav, husband of Frigg, father of many daughters and one son called Leif, now deceased.  
Frigg (Frig) – Wife of Harald, mother of many daughters and one son called Leif.  
Leif (Leaf) – Son of Harald and Frigg, husband to Freya.  
Gytha (Guy-tha) – Daughter of Amlav, wife of Olaf Tryggvasson, now deceased.  
Muire (My-ure) – Daughter of Amlav, now deceased.  
Sitric (Sit-rik) – King of Dublin, son of Amlav and Gormflaith, also known as Sitric Silkbeard, husband to Sláine, father to four sons including Amlaíb.  
Sláine (Slaw-nya) – Daughter of King Brian, wife to Sitric, mother to four sons including Amlaib.  
Amlaíb (Am-lav) – Eldest son of Sitric and Sláine.  
Falk (Falk) – Shipbuilder and friend to Gluniain.

Arni (Arni) – Son of Falk.

Freya (Frey-a) – Daughter of Falk, wife of Leif.

Onguen (On-gwen) – A slave, originally from Cornwall, first wife of Sitric, now deceased.

Edysis (Ed-yah-sis) – Daughter of Sitric and Onguen.

Ulf (Ul-ff) – A wealthy trader of Dublin. Husband to Orlaith.

Orlaith (Or-la) – Wife of Ulf, formerly from the Kingdom of Munster.

Valdemar (Val-de-mur) – The Seer of Dublin city.

Ivar of Waterford (I-var) – King of Waterford, friend of Amlav.

### *The Kingdom of Munster*

King Brian (Bry-an) – King of the Dál gCais, King of Munster and High King of all Ireland.

Gormflaith (Gorm-la) – Wife of King Brian, formerly married to Amlav the Red, mother of Sitric and Donnchad, daughter of Ethlinn, half-sister of Raoul, sister of Máelmórda, a prince of Leinster, also a Fomorian.

Murchad (Mur-ca) – Son of King Brian.

Áinfean (Awn-fyun) – Wife of Murchad, deceased.

Tairdelbach (Tur-lough) – Son of Murchad.

Tadc (Tayg) – Son of King Brian.

Bébinn (Bay-vin) – Daughter of King Brian.

Donnchad (Dunn-a-kha) – Son of King Brian and Gormflaith.

Caomibhe (Kee-va) – Companion to Sláine and Bébinn.

Eocha (Oh-kha) – Nephew of King Brian, father of Fionnbharr.

Fionnbharr (Fyun-var) – Son of Eocha.

Father Marcán (Mark-on) – Cousin of King Brian.

Lonán (Low-nawn) – A man of Munster, friend of Murchad, son of Muirenn, husband of Sadb, brother of Sorchu and Caillech. Now deceased.

Lucrecia (Luk-reece-ia) – A freed slave, mother of Maria and Felicia, married to Dáithí (Dah-he), a kinsman of King Brian, now deceased.

Maria (Mar-ee-a) – Daughter of Lucrecia and Dáithí, wife of Colgú.

Felicia (Fel-eece-ia) – Daughter of Lucrecia and Dáithí.  
Pátraic (Pod-ric) – A man who lives in Killaloe and a distant relative of King Brian.  
Crínoc (Green-oc) – Wife of Pátraic.  
Cassair (Cas-sir) – A warrior of Munster.  
King Aedha (Aid-ha) – King of the Uí Fidgenti clan.  
Colgú (Col-gooh) – Grandson of King Aedha, husband to Maria.  
Ealadha (Al-a-ha) – Munster warrior.  
King Muad (Moo-ad) – A Former King of Munster, now deceased.  
Ímar of Limerick (Ee-var) – A former King of Limerick, a Viking city within Munster, now deceased.  
King Donn (Dun) – King of Osraige.

### *The Kingdom of Meath*

King Sechnall (Seh-nie-ull) – King of Meath.  
Flann (Flann) – Son of King Sechnall, now deceased.  
Congalach (Cunn-hal-ukh) – Son of King Sechnall.

### *The Kingdom of Ulaid*

Colum (Coll-um) – A mortal man, now deceased.

### *The Kingdom of the Northern Ó'Neills*

Flaithbertach (Flah-ber-tach) – The Ó'Neill king of the Cenél nEóghain, King of Aileach.  
King Ruanaid (Ru-an-it) – King of the Cenél Conaill.  
Onchú (Un-choo) – Cousin to King Ruanaid.

### *The Kingdom of Leinster*

Máelmórda (Mal-mor-da) – King of the Uí Fáeláin and King of Leinster, son of Ethlinn, half-brother to Raoul (Rao-ooll), brother to Gormflaith, also a Fomorian.

Ethlinn (Eth-lin) – A former Queen of Leinster, wife of Murchad mac Fionn (deceased), mother to Gormflaith, Máelmórda and Raoul, also a Fomorian, now deceased.

King Dúnlaing (Doon-lang) – Kin of the Uí Muiredaig.

### *The Isle of Orkney*

Sigurd the Stout (Sig-gurd) – Earl of Orkney.

Ethla (Eth-la) – Mother to Sigurd the Stout.

### *Norse Kingdoms*

Olaf Tryggvasson (O-lav Trig-vass-on) – Former king of Norway, married to Gytha.

Svein Forkbeard (Sven) – King of Denmark, father to Harald and Cnut.

Olaf Skötkonung (Ol-aff) – King of Sweden.

Styrbjörn (Styr-byr-orn) – Cousin of Svein.

Brother Benedict (Ben-ey-dict) – A Christian priest.

Lambi (Lam-bi) – A warrior.

Oittir (Oyitt-ir) – A warrior.

### *Isle of Man*

Brodir (Braw-dir) – Warlord and berserker, brother of Ospak.

Ospak (Oos-pak) – Warrior and traveller, brother of Brodir.

Tura (Tuu-ra) – Cousin of Brodir.

### *Wessex*

Ethelred (Ethel-red) – King of Wessex.  
Elgifu (Elg-if-u) – Daughter of Ethelred.

### *Northumbria*

Uhtred the Bold (Uht-red) – Ealdorman of Northumbria.

### *Men of The Christian Church*

Abbot Francis (Fran-sis) – Abbot of Erin's Eye.  
Brother Abdomnán (Ah-dun-awn) – A monk.  
Brother Bécán (Becc-on) – A monk.  
Brother Scuithin (Skuh-heen) – A monk.

### *Animals*

Enna (Enn-a) – A large mare, Colmon's horse.  
Ruádgán (Roo-awn) – A large mare, a horse of the Descendants.

# **PROLOGUE**

## **Munster, AD 1011**

### *Gormflaith*

I walked into the old church.

It was derelict, overgrown with ivy and weeds. A hovel, if truth be told. Mice scurried in the corners, birds nested under the thatch, and a pungent smell seeped into the air when the breeze blew in. The smell of life and rot intertwined.

Sad, really, that the people should leave a once-loved building to decay like this. *It was cursed*, I'd heard them say. *Pagans had spilled Irish blood on consecrated soil*. Yes, that was true. The downfall of this church began the day the Vikings raided it. Amlav the Red, my late husband, had killed the bishop, and after that, no one had dared to rebuild it. Instead, the priests had constructed a much grander church, a little further inland. A shame. Despite the fact the thatched roof had collapsed by the door, the wooden beams had held steady above the altar. It was dry here. Earthy. Much more welcoming than the cold, grey stone walls the monks and priests now favoured.

I stopped moving as the fallen autumn leaves crunched outside the door, the weight of my visitor's footsteps hastening the leaves' transformation to dust and nothingness.

"Sister," Máelmórda said. He paused before he spoke again, all humour in his voice absent today. He glanced around the dilapidated church, forehead furrowed, lips curled, nose pinched. "Your husband is away. You should have invited me to the dun."



“Brian will be home tomorrow, but I’ve told you before, the dun has ears, and I don’t want him to know we have spoken.”

Máelmórda shrugged, bored by my caution. “He’s called me and my army up again, you know. To the very north this time. We are to leave once winter wanes. The Northern Ó’Neills won’t submit to him, no matter how many times we fight them.”

“The strength of the Ó’Neills is fading now. So many battles fought among themselves, and now so many against Brian. This is their last stand. Their young king, Flaithbertach, must flex his muscles one last time before he can bear the shame of bowing to a southern king.”

Máelmórda made a show of wiping a moss-covered bench with his gloved hand. Spiders and earwigs scurried away, and he just about forced himself to sit opposite me. “Get on with it. Say whatever you wish to say.”

“Not yet. Sitric’s not here.”

“I’m not waiting for him. Tell me now.”

“No.”

Máelmórda stood, moving swift and hard. He’d been fighting for Brian these last nine years. Connacht, Bréifne, Airgíalla. Now the Northern Ó’Neills. The pompous Prince of Leinster from years gone by had vanished and something rougher had been left behind. A *king’s* fingers gripped my neck, golden eyes burning.

“Your mortal son has no—”

The leaves outside the door crunched again and Máelmórda reluctantly let me go.

Sitric walked in. Smiling and windswept, he gave me a kiss on the cheek. He smelled of salt and sweat, which no doubt was why he looked so happy. The sea agreed with him, just as it had his father.

He clasped his uncle’s shoulder. Máelmórda nodded back, though there was something in both their eyes that showed all was not well. Sitric had been fighting for Brian too. Uncle and nephew had perhaps spent too long in each other’s company.

Whatever the cause of this conflict, Sitric didn’t dwell on his uncle’s lacklustre greeting and instead shoved a mouse away with his boot. “What a delightful hall you keep, Mother. It suits you well.”

Laughing, I gestured for him to sit. “It suits me better than my current residence, I’ll give it that.”

“Is that what you’ve summoned us for? To tell us you have left your husband to be queen of all this.” His hand gestured toward the fallen-in roof. “Your own church. Just what you’ve always wanted.”

“What I have to tell you is much more exciting than that.”

Máelmórda and Sitric turned to face me, their eyes unable to conceal their curiosity.

“Word has reached me that Svein Forkbeard is planning to invade England. He has called his jarls and warriors together. They are building more ships, shoring up their alliances. He is giving everyone three more winters to prepare, then his fleet will set sail.”

Máelmórda snorted. “How can you know this?”

Sitric stared at his uncle, giving him a small smile. “I have heard rumours of this. Nothing for certain and not that he gave the order to build more ships.” He locked eyes with mine. “Are you sure this isn’t just another drunken story? Who is your source?”

“I am sure the news is correct, and I believe Svein has the power and the ambition to see it through. He will be King of England, mark my words.”

“How do you think it will affect us?” Sitric asked, his interest building.

“It means you also have three years to plan. With so many Viking warriors in England, there will be many mercenaries who you can pay to fight for you. Brian’s own army is weak. He wins only because he has bound the men of Connacht and Leinster and the Viking kings of Wexford and Dublin to fight for him. If you both turned on him, his other allies would quickly fall away. Many would want the high-kingship, but only you two, with planning, can muster an army so big that no other Irish king can stand against you.”

Máelmórda stared at his feet while Sitric watched me.

“That was Olaf’s dream, was it not?” Sitric said. “That he would be King of England, and I would be King of Ireland.” He smirked at his uncle. “So, if it’s my money, my connection to the Vikings that will win us the war, who is it that you propose should be High King?”

“You, of course, my child,” I answered.

Máelmórda frowned. Sitric stared at me wide-eyed. Neither had expected this response. “As you say, it is your wealth, your connections, which will win the war. It is you who must be High King. But for this plan to work, you must fight together. You must both abandon Brian when he expects it least.”

“You don’t wish us to fight against the Ó’Neills?”

“Oh yes, you must fight them. Crush them. With the Ó’Neills destroyed, their claim to the high-kingship will disappear. Yes, you must fight with Brian for now. Win his wars for him. Keep him close. Make him trust you until all the pieces are in place.”

My brother snorted, kicking the base of his log-chair. “And what do I get in this grand scheme of yours? All the smoked fish of Ireland? All the poets and their wine? I am the King of Leinster. An *Irish* king. It is I who should be the next High King.”

“And who will you procure to fight for you? Sitric is kinsman to many of the Viking jarls. His father, Amlav, was a legend. Men will fight for him and not for you, no matter how much you promise to pay them. When we win, I propose that Sitric’s son marries one of your daughters. That way, our lines will continue to be joined and prosper.”

Máelmórda seethed, but I ignored my brother, for I’d already known what his reaction to that suggestion would be, and instead turned to Sitric. “Reach out to your Viking cousins. Build a bigger fleet. Increase the taxes at the Dublin port. If you look weak, Svein may be tempted to invade Ireland himself. If he sees your strength, he will seek to keep you as a friend instead. And above all, make sure the walls are sound.”

Sitric nodded, though his lips twisted as he thought. I linked my arm with his and walked him to the door. “What is wrong?” I whispered.

“Sláine won’t be happy about this. She loves her father.”

“Then remind her that it is her sons who will benefit from this. She is her father’s daughter, yes, but you are her husband. You must bend her to your will. If not, you should divorce her and send her to a nunnery before the war starts. You don’t want an enemy spy in your bed.”

He gave me an uncertain look.

“Don’t tell me you would let her stifle your ambition?”

“It’s complicated... I love her, but this is what I’ve always wanted. I will do as you say.” He stooped to kiss my hand. “Thank you, Mother.”

Sincerity swam in his eyes. Love. Or was it greed? I couldn’t quite tell anymore. I’d spent too long away from my eldest son to know the true feeling behind every glance and gesture. That would need fixing. I tugged at his sleeve, pulling him closer. “Remember. Strengthen the walls, build more ships, store up more gold and silver. We will speak again.”

He left me and ran toward the coast, his ship anchored close to the beach. With a good wind, he'd be home in a few days. Once he was gone from sight, I made my way back inside the old church.

Máelmórda turned to me, eyes hard, as I approached him. "When are you going to tell Sitric that you lied to him?"

I smirked. The rage in him was deliciously close to boiling over.

"Lied to him? About?"

"The high-kingship."

"I didn't lie. Not completely. He will be High King... for a time. We need him."

He stepped closer. "You promised to be on my side. Once again, you choose your mortal son over me."

"I am on the side of the Fomorians, brother. Do not doubt that."

"I do doubt it. You still have not located the fortress. You still don't know —"

The church shuddered. The beams over the altar crashed onto the stone dais. Birds flew from their nests and the mice scattered. Along the floor and walls, root and ivy twisted around each other, crawling toward us. More rushed in through the thatch and door with slimy, green shoots sliding along the newly exposed roof.

"What is...?" My brother drew his sword. "The Descendants are here, sister. They have found us."

The ivy kept coming, snaking along the floor and walls. Máelmórda bolted toward the door, without giving me a second thought, as I knew he would. But the ivy and roots were too quick for him, and they pulled him down. Twisting around his ankles and legs, they dragged him back toward the altar. He called on his fire-magic. Flames danced along the roots closest to his arms, but they did nothing to break through. "Help me, sister," he wheezed.

I stood above him, and using my fire-magic, put out his flames.

"What are... you... doing?" He stared into my eyes. "Is this... you?"

"Yes. It is." I made the roots drag him down into the soil until the lower half of his body was underground. The ivy tightened, crawling around his shoulders, up and up, until it reached his neck and tightened.

"How...?"

"I've been practising, brother. Patiently. The witch gift that I stole all those years ago is now mine to command at will. And now everything is in

place for us to begin our war. To claim the high-kingship, there are many things we must do, but the most important one is that we kill the Descendants of the Tuatha Dé Danann.”

“We need to know... the fortress... we don’t...”

“Oh, I do, brother. I’ve known its location for years.”

Even buried to his waist, Máelmórda could not conceal his rage.

“Why hide it?” I asked for him. “You talk often about not trusting me. However, it is I who does not trust you.”

His face turned red, the ivy squeezing harder and harder.

“And so, before we start, I need you to agree on our plan and make some vows. Firstly, you will never arrange another marriage for me. Secondly, you will never harm or threaten to harm Sitric or Donnchad in order to sway me.”

“I want...”

The ivy squeezed, removing the words from his mouth.

“You’ve wanted a great many things, Máelmórda. You’ve wanted power, the location of the fortress, more Fomorian children, but it is not you who has provided any of these things. It is me. I have the power. I know where the fortress is. I have a Fomorian child. You will do as I say.”

He glared at me, the whites of his eyes turning red.

“And in return, I will give you something you want very badly... a gift.”

I took the Descendant knife from my cloak and waved it in front of him.

Holding out my hand, I loosened the ivy. Instantly, it fell away from his throat. Choking, Máelmórda inhaled, greedily sucking in deep breaths, then coughing as the dust and soil from the ground flew in the air. Once he had sucked in a few breaths, the redness left his eyes, only to be replaced by a red tinge in his cheeks. Shame. The shame of being bested by a woman. His sister. He pushed and railed against the roots, trying to hoist his body out of the ground, but my magic held him firm.

“Let me out,” he growled.

“No. I don’t think so.”

I walked out of the church. Now that the ground had stopped moving and the ceiling stopped shaking, the birds and animals returned. Spiders crawled along the rotten leaves. Mice scurried back to their dens.

“Sister!” he shouted. “Come back.”

But I had no intention of going back. Not yet.

\*

It was dark when I finally returned. Fire had singed the fallen thatch and burned mice littered the floor, but the roots, buried underneath the soil that held his legs tight, had remained untouched. I, of course, had seen to that. While he had cried and struggled and soiled himself, I had drawn in his fire. I let him burn the mice, let him set fire to a few blades of straw. Not because I felt sorry for him, but because I wanted him to have hope, and then to shatter it entirely when I drew his flames away.

“Evening, brother.” I held out my hand, and a ring of fire ran around us. He stared at the fire, his eyes despondent, knowing, deep in his heart, that I had bested him. That I was stronger. *That I was in control.*

“We are Fomorian, brother. There can only ever be one leader. You must concede that it is me.”

“My men will come looking for me.”

“And who will they find here, do you think?” Pressing his hand with my finger, the hairs along his knuckles and arm turned white. His beard followed. Skin sagged until it hung from his bones. “An old man. Crazy and rotten. They will certainly *not* find the King of Leinster.”

“You bitch. Mother would—”

“Mother would do nothing for you. She knew what strength was, and even she’d know by now that I am the strongest of us. Stronger even than her. If she were alive, she’d be buried right beside you.”

Spittle pricked at his lips.

“Well, I shall go. Until you are in a more favourable mood.” Strolling toward the door, I dampened the flames until only darkness and the sound of scurrying mice remained.

“No. Don’t!” It hurt him to say those words. “Tell me your plan.”

I walked back and sat on the bench he had cleared earlier.

“Next year, Brian will win in the north. You will help him. He plans to celebrate his success by building churches and fortresses all over Ireland. During that time, you and Sitric must build up your armies. Then, when Svein invades England, you will both turn on Brian and go to war, and while this battle for Ireland causes chaos, you and I will go to the Descendants’ fortress with your men and kill them. The war between Brian and Sitric is our distraction, but ultimately, Sitric’s victory will be good for us too.”

Máelmórda stared at me, unconvinced. “You assume too much. First, that Sitric can defeat Brian, and then, that we can defeat the Descendants with ease.”

“We must act now, Máelmórda. We are more powerful than any of our ancestors. They fought together, fire alongside fire, but you and Sitric have mortal armies at your call. They are weak, these mortal men, but thousands of them together might be enough to win.”

“Surely we should focus on defeating Brian first.”

I shook my head. “Understand this, brother. We will not be able to *keep* the high-kingship until the Descendants are all dead. A war on both fronts is the only way to do this. It provides us with the cover to surprise the Descendants and the numbers to defeat Brian. Chaos will become our greatest friend.”

Finally, my brother nodded.

“For this plan to work, you must do as I say. At first, men will assume you want the high-kingship. Then they will realise Sitric is better placed and follow him. You must not fight this. You must not let your pride get in the way. And you must agree to the conditions I set earlier.

“In return, I will find a Descendant for you to kill.” Once again, I pulled out the knife. “But it is my rules, brother. My plan. Do not work against me, and the high-kingship will one day – when Sitric is old and grey – be yours.”

He stared at the ground, then at last, nodded his head. “One day, I will be High King?”

“Yes.”

“Then... Then I agree.”

I touched his arm once more. The white hairs turned back to black, and inch by inch, the roots retreated and pushed him up to the ground.

Now he was free, his eyes burned once again.

“That was very easy for me to do, Máelmórda. Remember that.”

Holding out my hand, I took a step closer, watching as the fire dampened within him. “But I’d prefer it if we worked together. We are the last of our kind – you, Donnchad and I, and this is our last chance.”

He took hold of my hand, his face calm as he pressed my palm over his heart. “Yes, Gormflaith,” he whispered. “I will do as you say.”

**PART I**

**LATE SPRING 1012**



# **Kingdom of the Northern Ó'Neills**

## *Murchad*

The wind blew, bitter and damp. Swirls of mist danced on the grass.

The north was colder than the south, but I liked it here, even so. No fires had been lit. We did not want to give away our location to the Ó'Neills, so for tonight, the overpowering smell of burning turf and wood was replaced by the gentler scent of wet fern and tree sap.

I moved out from the camp-line and walked toward the forest, where the chances of a surprise night-time attack were greatest. All seemed at peace. Nonetheless, I waited there for the guards to switch over. The first to return from the forest was a young man, one I didn't know. He bade me a good morning, even though the sun had not yet risen, then hastily added he'd neither seen nor heard anyone. The second to return was an older man, one I'd spoken with many times. Ealadha was his name. He smiled at me, his gums dark and with plenty of teeth missing. He clapped me on the back, grinning, glad, I guessed, that his duty was over and that he was not expected to fight in the approaching battle, and nor should he be. His fingers gripped his spear at odd angles, his knuckles swollen after being broken in battles from before I was born.

"All quiet?" I asked.

"Oh, aye," he replied, and he pulled out his sword. "*Name Taker* saw no man's blood tonight. No doubt your sword will see plenty of the red stuff tomorrow."

I didn't nod at this, but the man did not wait for one in any case. The rest of the guards trudged in behind him, reporting that they too had seen no one, while new guards took over for the final watch. None of them stopped to talk. It was too cold, and walking quickly to their positions was all they had to warm them.

I glanced behind me, watching as Ealadha re-sheathed *Name Taker* and walked into his tent.

Once I was alone, I pulled out one of my own swords and examined the blade. Razor-edged, and tapering to a needle-sharp point. Dangerous, though I had given it no name.

The old gods of Ireland named their weapons. The Tuatha Dé Danann and their children. *Fódla's kin*.

It was said Nuada, the first High King of Ireland, had a sword called *Fragarach*, also known as *The Whisperer*. He was a druid, and when Nuada held his sword at his enemies' throats, they could tell him no lies.

Cú Chulainn, son of Lugh, had a spear. *Gáe Bolg* was the name upon it. A fearsome weapon that could kill thirty men with one strike.

The old gods' weapons were like the old gods themselves. Full of magic. Full of wonder. Full of terror. And I supposed there was a desire in men's blood, or else in their hearts, to emulate the gods.

Over the years, I had met many a warrior who had spoken a name when touching his sword or spear. When I was younger, I believed men wished for the glory of the old gods to fall upon them, for their names to be spoken in the same breath. *Did Ealadha have this wish?* For his name and Cú Chulainn's to be toasted in the feasting hall together?

Maybe. Maybe not.

As I'd grown older, I had seen other reasons for naming a weapon.

\*

Dawn broke as I walked along the camp boundary, still no movement from within the forest. Fears of a raid fell away. They must still be waiting for us at the foot of the mountain close to Flaithbertach's dun. They held the high ground there, food and shelter, and Flaithbertach was wise not to give it up. Feeling certain that no raid would come now, I stilled and looked toward the horizon. I would be alone only for another minute or two before the rest of the camp stirred, so I watched as colour seeped upward from the horizon, enjoying the last moments of silence.

The sky turned from black to shades of red and pink, as if it wanted to foretell the colour the ground would be by the end of the day. It was bad luck for the morning sky to turn red. *Bad luck for who?* was always the

question. Perhaps it was bad luck for all of us, for by the evening, the ground would be stained red with the blood of men from all parts of Ireland.

It gave me no pleasure – the thought of men dying. I had fought without rest for six years now. Moving north, foot by foot. Only the O'Dónaills of the Northern Ó'Neill kingdom stood in my father's way. Only they were left to concede that King Brian was High King over all of Ireland.

A last fight then, and perhaps the hardest. It was said that the men in the north fought like dogs. It was said by way of insult, and in truth, they did not fight like dogs. They fought like wolves. That was why the Viking kings could not take any land here. Amlav the Red and his kind had not ravaged the north the way they did the south. The men here were too strong.

But they had not suffered.

Not the way we had.

And that had made us stronger.

\*

Voices whispered behind me, rising into the air with the breeze. The camp was waking with the dawn, the men preparing for battle.

I walked over to my tent and peered through the door. Tairdelbach lay asleep inside. My son had travelled north for this battle. My father had told him he must, that the monks must record his name as having fought for the high-kingship if he wanted to hold it himself one day. He was much older than I had been when I started fighting, but in my eyes, he was still too young.

He had a smile that lit up any hall. I saw the men and women turn to look at him when he threw his head back and laughed. There was music inside him, and the people heard it. He was handsome too. His skin soft and smooth. I would have it stay that way. My scars ran everywhere, deep and twisted. Outside and in.

*That was the true reason men named their swords.*

They wanted the guilt of killing given to someone else, but when you were the one who held the blade, there was no one else. *Something else* then would have to suffice. *Oathbinder has killed thirty warriors*, a man would say. *Retribution has taken forty*, another would reply. But it was not truly *Oathbinder* or *Retribution* who had taken anything. These were not the

weapons of the gods, filled with their own magic and desires. The spears and blades we used now were made by mere men. Steel and iron. Nothing more. It was men who had taken the lives they spoke of. It was their sin. Their guilt. And that was why they denied it.

I could not deny my own guilt. There was plenty of it. I, Murchad mac Brian, had killed more men than anyone else I knew, save for my father. Hundreds of faces haunted my dreams. Some of them I knew well. I saw their eyes, their last breaths, their fear. Some faces were featureless, eyeless, mouthless, for I did not know them. I only remembered that they died at my hand.

My family said I had become quiet. That I lived in my head. I supposed that was true, for that was where she lived now. *Fódla*. That was the only place I found my peace, when I thought of our time together, alone, under the trees.

I was a wretch indeed. Tormented by a love that I did not deserve and one that was lost. If, one day, she was to come back, what would she find? An old wreck, like an oak tree stricken and hollowed out by storm and rot? A ghost of the man she once knew.

\*

“Murchad.”

I turned to find Eocha walking toward me, and I moved away from my tent, letting Tairdelbach have his last moment of sleep.

“What do the scouts say?” I asked, once Eocha reached me.

Eocha shifted his weight. “They have more than us, as expected, but their army hasn’t split. The scouts don’t think they know that Tadc and Sitric’s men are closing in on them.”

“Let us go now. Then it will be over.”

Eocha held out his hand to clasp mine.

I held it tight. “You remember what to do if I fall?”

Eocha nodded. “I will take Tairdelbach to Munster. I have four men who will remove him from the battlefield if he does not comply, just like you asked.”

“Good.”

Eocha gave me a small smile. “But enough talk of that. We will win.”

I slapped his shoulder and gave him a wider smile than the one he gave me. “Come. Let’s show the men of the north what the men of Munster are made of. An early attack. What do you say?”

Eocha ran ahead to call the leaders of each clan to their positions.

I felt for my right sword, then for the left one. I touched both their hilts.

Just steel. Both of them nameless and guiltless of what was to come.

Unlike me.

# **Rathlin Island**

## *Fódla*

Rathlin was a sparsely populated isle located along the north-east coast of Ireland. The few locals who lived here said the Vikings had massacred the inhabitants when they first came raiding these shores, sparing only the young people, who they took as slaves. Three families had escaped by hiding in caves, and it was their descendants who now remained. None left living remembered those days, though the trauma of such a violent history was written on their faces. Grey, they looked. Solemn. Wary.

They ignored us for the most part. They said the dead haunted the land where we lived, for the Vikings had not known to cut the noses and ears away from those they had killed. Ghosts and daemons remained, they said, and they did not wander here as a result.

Colmon had laughed when I told him their gossip. The spells cast by the Tuatha Dé Danann granted protection to Colmon's land, and these spells gave the mortals such a sense of unease that it drove them away. *Ghosts did not exist, and daemons lived only in our minds*, he told me.

And so I awoke, eleven years after arriving here, and stared outside. Empty the view was. Desolate. Devoid of laughter and surprise. No man or woman or child dotted the horizon. We were alone.

Leaving Broccan and Colmon asleep, I left the ráth, picked up my basket, and walked toward the beach. What we lacked in terms of mortal company was made up for by the birds. Thousands of puffins nested here in the spring and summer, and though the air was still cold, they had already started to arrive, chirping and nestbuilding as they readied themselves for the weeks ahead.

As I ambled down the path to the beach, I smiled, enjoying their tenacity and the din they made when I clambered over the boulders and rocks to

reach the sand. To them, Rathlin Island was a paradise, even with the rain and icy winds that blew in from the north. It was a paradise in many ways for me too. The island provided everything we needed. Food, water, shelter, firewood... and yet, if I had my way, I would not be here.

Walking closer to the tideline, I collected the seaweed that had washed ashore, all the while looking out to the mainland, which was only a few miles south. The sea between Rathlin and the Kingdom of Ulaid swirled this morning, white tips on the waves, and narrow torrents where the waves didn't crash, revealing the strong currents that had pulled many a ship under. Was it strange that I felt the land of Ulaid calling to me? It was almost as if I heard voices on the air, and when I closed my eyes, I saw my daughter, Aoife, smiling. Then my father opening his arms for me. And I saw Murchad.

I sat on a rock, letting these visions linger. The ring Murchad had given me felt heavy on my finger and I twisted it around, rubbing the engraving etched into the gold. He had told me to keep it until I returned to him. I held on to this memory. The way he had smiled, the way he had touched me the last night we were together.

*His lips on mine. His fingers running through my hair.*

If only I could let those thoughts stay with me always, I would let them... but they were not for now. No, not when there was so much work to do. Standing, I hoisted the basket further up onto my hip and busied myself with harvesting the seaweed, which could be used to fertilise my garden. Every so often, though, I looked out to the sea and the land beyond. I couldn't help myself. Aside from the puffins, the only thing to move was a small fishing boat in the distance. The fishermen from Ulaid sometimes rowed quite far out in search of shoals of mackerel, though the high waves and dangerous tides meant they seldom came as far as the island. I continued along the beach, picking and sifting through piles of seaweed before the sun rose higher and dried them out, leaching their goodness into the barren sand rather than the soil beside my ráth.

I didn't stop until the basket was full, or at least as full as I could manage, and I set it down, giving myself a moment to stretch out my back.

The fishing boat was closer, I suddenly noticed. Almost at the beach. Only one figure sat inside, back toward me. Whoever it was, they were in a hurry.

It was too late for me to return to the ráth without being in shouting distance of the fisherman, so I sat on a boulder, thinking it best to let him get ahead. The part of the beach I walked upon was within Colmon's domain, but it ended at the path this man would take to reach the small settlement further inland. From this distance, I might be a curiosity, but by the time he came close, the old Tuatha Dé Danann spells would persuade him to continue on his journey.

The boat finally beached. The man jumped out and hauled the boat along the wet sand so the incoming tide would not take it back out to sea while he was away.

To my dismay, the man did not walk toward the path. No, he walked toward me, close to the border of Colmon's land, and that's when I noticed it wasn't a man at all. It was a woman. Black cloak, black dress. Pale face. Green eyes. She stopped at the border, unable to pass through, but she saw me.

*She was one of our kind. A Descendant.*

I did not know her, though the colour of her eyes revealed she was a witch. The children I had looked after in the fortress when Aoife was alive flashed through my mind. Could she be Laeg's granddaughter? Hair darkened as she aged? No, her features were too slight, her nose snub instead of long and straight.

I supposed it didn't matter.

The fact she was here meant that Tomas had at last discovered our whereabouts. I was only thankful she was unable to cross over into Colmon's land. Colmon had told me it was impossible, that the spells were cast by the powerful witch wives of Ogma to keep other Descendants away from his home. I had always feared that Tomas would find a way to get around these spells, clever as he was. Standing, I braced myself for what was to come. What message would she deliver? My stomach churned. *Was Tomas already here? Watching.*

Walking forward to meet her, I tried to conceal my fear. "Morning. What message from the fortress?"

"I have come to give you a message, yes, but not from the fortress. From Rónnat."

*Rónnat? Impossible. My sister lived alone.*

"How do you know my sister?"



“I have lived with her for many years now. She is teaching me.” The woman briefly met my gaze, then lowered it.

“Why don’t the witches in the fortress teach you?”

The woman lifted her head, just a little, jaw clenched. “I cannot go back there.”

Oh, so the council had banished her too. I looked her over. Her eyes were bright and open, her shoulders and hips narrow. Not long in her adult years, I guessed. Perhaps the age she looked to be. Twenty or so. That was, of course, if her form was true. Witches could change it as easy as breathing.

As if reading my mind, she pulled out one of Rónnat’s rings from her cloak pocket. “She said you would trust me if I gave you this.”

I reached over the boundary line to take the ring. Touching the red stones set in the silver band, the tightness in my chest loosened. It was Rónnat’s.

“Your sister wanted me to tell you not to worry about Tomas. He cannot reach you here.”

I took a deep breath, but even with Rónnat’s words of comfort, the familiar knot in my stomach did not disappear. It was the woman, I realised. Her presence irked me. Why was that? Was it simply that eleven years of solitude with Broccan and Colmon on this island had made me wary of strangers, no matter their form or intent?

I slid Rónnat’s ring onto the same finger as the one that held Murchad’s ring. Gold and silver together. “Why did Rónnat send you? Why does she not speak to me through the wind as she used to?”

“She is finding it harder and harder to do... and her mind wanders more than it used to. She is not always herself. Besides, this message is... She wanted you to hear it first.”

A secret? I raised my eyebrow.

“When Broccan draws blood from Colmon,” the woman said, “he will make a request. You must allow it. It is time.”

“Time for what?”

The woman’s eyes widened, and she smiled as she glanced up at the sky, then at the mainland behind us. “To become part of the world again.”

“Where does she—”

“Rónnat said nothing else. There are no more answers. She says your destiny must be allowed to unravel. Does that make sense?” She pushed her hair from her face, giving me a lopsided smile. An expression so like

Rónnat when she was trying to explain something difficult that I almost reached out and hugged her.

She stepped back now her message was given, glancing at the boat as if steeling herself to go back in.

“You can stay for dinner if you wish. I can ask Colmon to invite you.”

“No. I must go. Now that I can control my magic, I too have a world to discover.”

“You do not return to my sister?”

She shook her head.

“And you don’t intend to go to the fortress?”

“Only two people there know I exist, and they both think I am dead. I’m now free to live as I want.” She turned and walked toward her boat, shoulders hunched over, and her step quicker leaving than it had been to arrive.

Curiosity took hold of me, and I ran after her, moving past the boundary. “Wait. You didn’t tell me your name.”

She stilled. “My name is Senna.”

“What did you say?”

“Yes.” She turned back to face me. “You heard me right. My name is Senna. I know you well, Fódla, though you do not truly know me.”

I walked closer, my legs shaking, though I tried to control myself. So many questions ran through my mind that I couldn’t quite form them on my tongue. *How could this be Senna?* The Senna I knew was a crow. Tomas’ crow who had followed me, followed Aoife, and told Tomas everything we had tried to conceal from him. Senna had hurt me so many times I had lost count, but I had never expected this. How could it be that a woman stood before me claiming this name?

“My mother was a mortal child born to a Descendant,” Senna said, her voice low and cautious. “When I came along, she realised I had a gift and brought me to Tomas’ father, Anaile. He agreed to take me in and sent my mother away. Tomas said he would help, but instead, he gave me a love potion to bind me to him, and Gobnat transformed me into a crow.” Her jaw clenched again. “I am only a few years younger than you, believe it or not, but Tomas kept me in crow form for nearly a hundred years and I did not age. Rónnat saved me when I flew over her crannog. She undid Gobnat’s spell and has taught me how to use my gift.”

“I am sorry. I did not know.”

“How could you? Tomas hid it from everyone. He has hidden many things.”

I stood there staring, mouth open, unable to reconcile this young woman to the yellow-eyed crow who had haunted my every step. Frozen in time for nearly a hundred years, how had she borne it? Tomas had told me he used his gift to train the crows, and I had believed him, for Senna had always done his bidding without fail... and once again, I had fallen for his lies. Anger spread within me now. I should have realised that Senna was too clever and too devoted for it to be natural. I should have questioned Tomas more.

Senna reached out to touch my hand. “I am sorry. For spying on you. For all the things I told Tomas about you. It was the potion, you see. It made me obey him... it made me *want* to obey him. His every wish, every desire, became my wish and desire too.”

“Does he know?” I asked, holding her hand. “That Broccan is alive?”

She shook her head. “Not when I last saw him. But he has spies everywhere. More than anyone knows. Not just Descendants either. Mortals.”

“Mortals?”

“Yes. He has cultivated lots of friends within the nunneries and monasteries. And there are others like me. Children born to giftless Descendants. Once my mother brought me to his father’s house, Tomas realised that our gifts could skip generations, and so he sought out giftless children who’d left the fortress. He found other children like me. He told them what their gifts were so they would trust him, and then he used them for his own ends. He wants to know everything that happens, everywhere.” She paused a moment. “Rónnat says he knows you are here, and that once you return to the mainland, there will be no protection from him. When you leave, be sure to remember that. You must be careful.”

She stepped back, folding her arms around her chest, shivering as an icy gust blew in. “I cannot tell you anymore. I’ve already said more than Rónnat told me I should. But I just wanted to say...” Her eyes swam with tears. “To say that I am sorry for the hurt I caused you. I couldn’t help it.”

She walked away then. I followed her, though kept my distance, and watched as she pushed the boat back into the sea and jumped in. Hauling out the oars, she began to row.

“Tell me more about my sister,” I shouted after her. “Is she well?”

She shook her head by way of an answer. Either she didn't know, or she couldn't tell me. *But why?* Why had Rónnat told her to tell me no more? *Her mind wanders more than it used to*, Senna had said. Rónnat had not been well the last time we met. How bad was she now?

Gathering my thoughts, I moved back onto Colmon's land and collected the basket of seaweed. The last eleven years had not been easy. I had found it difficult to be so far away from the life I'd created in Killaloe and to be away from Rónnat. However, all these difficulties had been worth it, knowing that by doing so, I'd kept Broccan safe. It had been a privilege to watch him grow from a boy to a man. Now Senna had suggested that this time was ending.

I turned in the direction of our ráth. Smoke rose into the sky. Colmon and Broccan must be up and boiling the stew. They might even be at their training, swords and axes swinging over their heads.

*When Broccan draws blood from Colmon, he will ask for something.*

What would he ask for? My nephew looked out to the Irish mainland when he thought I wasn't looking. He missed his friends from Killaloe, missed his mother. Would he want to see them? Or would he want to go to the fortress to meet others of our kind? Colmon and I had agreed that when Broccan was ready, we would return to the fortress to tell the other Descendants what Tomas had done. It would be dangerous. And as Senna had just revealed, he had committed even more crimes than we'd previously known. What would he say when challenged?

Sighing, I made my way up the path. The wind picked up for a moment, and I paused, hoping to hear my sister's voice. But no words came.

I was alone.

And for the first time in eleven years, I was afraid.

# **Atlantic Ocean**

## *Gormflaith*

The wind filled the sails and thrust us forward along the western coastline. Brian, to his credit, managed to keep his seasickness hidden, only venturing to the side of the ship when his stomach needed to empty. Donnchad was not so stoic. My son whimpered and groaned and followed his father around like a chick chasing after its mother hen. At the mere sight of Brian retching, he would retch himself and spew bile down the side of the ship, all the while holding on to his father's cloak, fearing that he might fall overboard.

This was one such time, and Brian, though trying to sit peacefully and wish the sickness away, finally gave up and walked to the back of the ship so he could vomit overboard without anyone watching. Donnchad, now twelve years of age, ran after his father. On watching his father be sick, Donnchad heaved, just as I knew he would.

The Vikings rolled their eyes, though the Irish warriors watched their prince with pity. Those who agreed to sail on Brian's fleet were hardened to the roll of the waves now, but it had not always been so. At first, they too had complained of the wave sickness and of rowing until their hands bled. At least Donnchad did not have to endure pulling the oars for days upon end, though the gods knew it would do him good.

Donnchad wiped his lips and turned around, taking deep breaths. His pale skin and dark hair were the image of mine and Máelmórda's, only set within a frailer body. The long face, however, he had inherited from his father. The same long nose and blue eyes, though the edges of Donnchad's blue irises glowed yellow like mine.

I watched him a moment longer as he spoke with his father, Brian comforting his son and telling him all would be well soon. Donnchad

nodded his head, pushing his thick, dark curls from his face. He was so different to Sitric at this age. Sitric, of course, had been born mortal and without my gift, but even so, by the age of twelve, he was thumping and crashing his way through life. He'd had no father to cling to, for Amlav had died when he was eight, but even if that had not been so, Sitric had not been the sort of boy to cleave tight to anyone. On board a ship at Donnchad's age, he'd be climbing the mast, stealing Gluniain's trinkets, or trying to spot seals and porpoises.

As my mind drifted to my eldest son, so did my gaze, for Sitric was sailing with us today. He was a boy no longer but a man of thirty-nine. A king. A husband. A father. Dublin flourished under his rule, and his men revered him. Oh, what a Fomorian he might have made. A bitter thought it was, that fate had allowed the wrong son to inherit my gift.

"Donnchad," I called out. "Give your father some room." Tapping the bench beside me, I widened my eyes so that he knew to do as I bid.

Sitric ruffled his younger brother's hair as he passed him by. "We are nearly there, little one," he whispered. "We'll make a sailor out of you yet. You've done much better on this voyage than the last."

"Only because I haven't eaten," Donnchad muttered, rubbing his stomach gingerly as he sat beside me. He set his chin on his hands and stared out at the land we sailed past, longing, I was sure, to set foot on it once again.

"Don't let the men see you discomforted," I hissed in his ear. "No need for *everyone* to know you're sick."

He nodded sullenly and wrapped his cloak around his arms, then clung on to me as I had taught him.

"There are the other ships," I heard one of the men shout. *Finally!* As we veered inland, I counted ten of Sitric's ships anchored within a calm bay. In the distance, his men patrolled the beach. Falk was there. I could see him limping along, shouting orders to Leif.

Brian ventured over to our side of the ship, looking better now that his stomach had emptied, and sat beside his son, wrapping his arms around him. "There we are, Donnchad. Land at last. Remember, the Vikings are the water, the Irish are the earth."

Donnchad beamed at his father, and his eyes roved over the beach and the land beyond it. Brian's warriors had set up this camp over a month ago, and their tents stood tall in the afternoon sun. Hundreds of them dotted the landscape. However, one stood higher and grander than the rest. A tent fit

only for a High King. Donnchad's eyes found it and then didn't stray. I could see the longing for comfort in his expression. Cushions, blankets and furs. He was soft. *So soft.*

"Sechnall is already here," I said, pointing over at another large tent. His emblem of a brown deer flew on one of the tent poles.

Brian nodded. "Good. It flies at three-quarters mast, which means Murchad and Sechnall's men have already left to march north."

"Does that mean we have to march into Ó'Neill land too?" Donnchad stared into the forests along the horizon, his face paling.

"Yes," I said. "You must block off Flaithbertach's retreat if Murchad is to —"

"No," Brian interrupted. "You will stay in the camp with me. The warriors can block the retreat without us."

"But I thought Donnchad was going to march with Tadc and Sitric?"

Brian gave me that cold stare of his. I was used to it by now, for he reserved the only warmth in him for his children. "No," he said, his voice firm. "Donnchad is too young to fight. He can stay in the camp with me and help read my messages. Father Marcán and I are getting old. Our eyes are not as good as they once were."

Donnchad shot his father a grateful glance, while Sitric smirked at me. "Come, little brother," he said, "why don't you help me with the ropes, and I'll show you how to navigate the ship into the shallows."

My youngest son scampered to the back of the ship to stand beside my eldest and get away from my scathing gaze. Donnchad was clever. An expert with his letters, already proficient in Latin, Saxon and Norse. An eager pupil, he enjoyed learning something new, as long as it wasn't dangerous.

"You can't shelter him forever," I said to Brian. "Donnchad is eleven, not eight. He needs to start acting his age or the men will never respect him."

"He's my son. They'll respect him well enough."

"Tairdelbach is off fighting. Eocha's boy, Fionnbharr, is going this time, too."

"Tairdelbach is twenty, and I held him back for as long as I could. Eocha's boy... well, he is a big lad for his age."

"Fionnbharr's younger than Donnchad, though, isn't he?"

"No arguing," Brian said. "Tairdelbach will be king one day, Donnchad won't." He leaned closer to me, keeping his voice low. "And even if I had

no other son but Donnchad, there are others in my family who are more suited to be king than he. I love him, I do, but he is not a warrior. He has not the heart for it.”

Even though he only voiced similar thoughts to my own, I frowned. *Brian believed Donnchad weak?* This was not what I expected, for Brian had always seemed blinkered to the faults of his children.

“If Donnchad is not a warrior, what life do you see for him?”

“The Church.”

“The Church?”

“Yes. I have spoken to Father Marcán about it. He agrees.”

“Why was I not consulted? I am Donnchad’s mother, after all.”

Brian paused and sighed, no doubt wishing he’d not started this conversation on a ship where he could not escape.

“Raising sons is a hard job. You did a good job raising Sitric, Gormflaith.”

Out of all the things I’d expected him to say, this was the last. The shock momentarily stilled me.

“He is a strong man,” Brian said, speaking before I could recover. “He has enough wit about him to keep his throne. Amlav died when he was young, and I know you worked hard to protect him.”

“Harder than you know.”

“Oh, I think I do know. His life must have been in danger many times with so many older brothers who wanted the kingship.” He stood up. Stretching out, taller, straighter. The white in his beard glistened in the afternoon sun, but his back did not yet bow the way many other men’s of his age did. “Dublin was violent, yes. Sitric survived against the odds, and I suppose Munster appears gentle in comparison. But it is not. As a daughter of Leinster, you must know this, even if you have forgotten. The kingship of Munster is a prize that men outside my own family circle crave. Cousins, second cousins, even cousins I have never met, are eligible for the kingship if they believe they could fight for it and win. Even if all my other sons and grandsons were to die, the kingship is not something I’d want for Donnchad. He is too gentle. He would be dead before the end of the year or, worse, blinded, just like the man I named him after.”

Brian gave me a pointed stare when he spoke of the blinding. Máelmórda had blinded the previous King of Leinster to ensure his own path to the kingship. It had proven so effective, kings from other kingdoms had started



doing the same. Brian hadn't meant to provoke me, though. He had only seen what I had seen myself. Donnchad was weak. Both in physical strength and in mind.

That would be fine if he was a mortal. But a weak Fomorian? No, it couldn't be. *That would have to change.*

"I understand, Brian," I said, keeping my voice soft, conciliatory, the way he liked it. "You are doing what you think is best for him. The Church, however, is a hard place for a boy his age. It's too serious, the monks too old and dull. In a year or two, I could let him go. Not yet."

Brian nodded, pleased that I had compromised, and it was an easy compromise for him to give. He liked his youngest son. He enjoyed his curious mind and petted after him now that Tairdelbach had grown too old. I glanced down at my hands, skin wrinkled around my rings, my long hair turning grey. Yes, time was marching on for all of us... but soon that would change. For me anyway. But what of my son? If my husband was not going to train him to be a warrior, I'd have to find someone else who would. When the great war against the Descendants came, I couldn't afford to have a weakling at my side.

As soon as we dropped anchor, Brian and his men jumped overboard and made their way from the beach toward the war camp, Donnchad keeping pace with his father's long strides. I didn't bother rushing. It would take some time for my tent to be erected, and I had no desire to wait in Brian's tent or in the war camp, which by now would smell overwhelmingly of piss and churned mud.

Instead, I waited for one of the warriors to row me ashore and then sat on a boulder, watching the waves. It didn't take long for my brother to find me. His left shoulder slumped forward as he came closer, his steps slow and slightly out of rhythm.

"A hard ride, brother?"

He grunted as he sat, rubbing the muscles along his inner thigh. "Much harder than sailing, yes, and it didn't stop raining the whole time. I swear that my bones still ache."

I smirked. It must have taken him two weeks to ride here. With Sitric's ships, it had only taken us five days.

"I'm sure it's nothing a hot bath won't fix. When do you leave for the north?"

"In the morning."

*“The men of the north are hard men. Isn’t that what our father always said?”*

“He did. If I had it my way, I wouldn’t be here.”

There was no anger in Máelmórda’s eyes, just frustration. The face of a man who was unused to following a plan that wasn’t his.

“The high-kingship is within Brian’s grasp. Of course he has called on all the kings who swore their vows to him. In this instance, I don’t blame him. In fact, this is what *I wanted*.” I emphasised the last two words. If Máelmórda was going to throw a fit, best it was now rather than later. If he thought I’d be too afraid to remind him of my power when surrounded by a war camp, a nasty surprise awaited.

“I remember what you said, and I am here.” He rubbed his chin, his usual sly grin absent. “It’s not the plan that’s troubling me. It’s Sitric. His heart isn’t in it, not the way you assumed it would be. Your plan may not be as sound as you think.”

*Ah yes, Sitric was too comfortable. But no worry, that would all change soon.*

“Oh?”

“I’ve asked him for more gold. I need to pay the mercenaries I’ve hired, otherwise when I next call them up to fight for me, they won’t come.”

“What did Sitric say?”

“He said yes, but the amount he suggested is not enough.”

“Leave Sitric to me.” Lowering my gaze, I took a deep breath. Gold was an easy fix. Sitric had plenty of it. I guessed his reluctance to give it away was only because he wanted to watch his uncle beg. Such were the little battles these two kings liked to wage between themselves.

“Our time is coming, brother. Once this battle with the Ó’Neills is over and the power of the north is diminished, it will be time for us to make our move. I will pull Sitric into line and make sure you have all the gold you need.”

Máelmórda nodded. Before our last meeting, he might have issued a threat of some kind, said something harsh to push me into action. I was glad to find no threat was forthcoming. *Perhaps... perhaps now was the time for me to push him instead?*

“While I’m dealing with my eldest son, I’d like you to help me with Donnchad.”

Máelmórda turned his attention to Donnchad, who was scampering around along the edge of the beach, bored with waiting for the tents to be pitched. On seeing us sitting on the rocks, he waved and ran toward the sea, examining the dead crabs and jellyfish that lay on the damp sand rather than helping the men with their work.

“His control over his fire-magic is adequate. He struggles to keep it a secret from his father, though. In fact, that is the problem. He is with Brian too much. They need to be separated, otherwise he will never progress. I want you to suggest a fosterage. Say that Donnchad should see his mother’s land before he is trained in the Church.”

“The Church?” Máelmórda snorted. “When was that decided?”

“This morning was the first I was told about it. Brian has it all arranged. He thinks Donnchad is weak... which he is. I need you to change that.”

Máelmórda appraised his nephew, his head tilting as he observed Donnchad poking through a jellyfish with a stick. I couldn’t fathom his expression, though. Too serious to be mocking, too calm to be reluctant. “Leave him with me. I will ask for a fosterage and give him my undivided attention. You have my word.”

Glad that my brother had done as I asked without argument, I stood and kissed his cheek. My tent was ready. Cushions and blankets awaited.

\*

We feasted that night, though a feast in a king’s tent in a war camp was not the same as a feast within a king’s dun. Only Brian’s family members and closest friends were permitted inside. It made for a less exhausting occasion as there were no women and children to fawn over, though there was a poor selection of food and scant ale. However, the biggest difference between Brian’s dun and his war tent was the mood. There was no joy here, only grim faces and furrowed brows.

It was to be expected. The army was to march in the morning. The hope was that Murchad’s army would already be in place to fight the Ó’Neill army, and that the men here would surprise the Ó’Neills from our southern position and cut off their retreat. Brian did not expect the fighting to go on for long. He believed Flaithbertach would opt to negotiate and save his men’s lives, rather than fight it out to the end.

I hoped Brian was wrong. The more men that died tomorrow, the less to stand against Máelmórda and Sitric when we made our move, but there was little I could do about that tonight. Young Flaithbertach would decide his strategy when he saw Brian's army. It was not within my power to influence him. This young king, *the Red Wolf*, they called him, was his own man, and who knew what he'd do when his blood was up and battle underway. Any sensible man would negotiate, of course, but there was always the chance that Flaithbertach might have a wish to enter the scrolls of poets, to be whispered of as a legend – and to make an end to surpass all ends.

Tadc sat down in the chair beside me to eat his food. He was ever dull, made even more so in the absence of his older brother.

"Tell me about Flaithbertach," I said to him as I picked the bones out of my fish. "Didn't you meet him before he decided to fight against us? The Red Wolf, isn't that what they call him?"

Tadc nodded. "They love to fight in the north, and they say he loves it best of all."

"I must confess, I hadn't heard much of him before he refused to declare that Brian was High King."

"He is young," Tadc said. "His uncle, Áed, was a young king too. He was a tough man, ruthless, and no one expected him to fall in battle. I hoped Flaithbertach would see sense, but it seems he is cut from the same cloth as Áed."

"Will we win?"

At this, Tadc smiled. "We have too many men to lose."

Such confidence. I admired it.

"You leave tomorrow with Máelmórda and Sitric?"

"Yes. Murchad will be attacking them from the north-east, and we can't let Flaithbertach escape into Airgíalla."

"I should think not. A king of his ilk needs to be killed on the battlefield, or else he will come back to bite you."

Tadc didn't respond and instead busied himself with eating his dinner. *Oh, so they didn't plan to kill him.* Interesting. He was the most troublesome of the northern kings and would be a thorn in Brian's side. What else then did they have in store for him if not death?

I glanced over at Brian, who was talking with Father Marcán. Brian loved his children, truly he did. But he used them too. Just as Sláine had been used to bring Sitric into line, he might use another of his children to

bring this northern king to heel. Was this why his youngest daughter, the lovely Bébinn, was still unwed? A prize kept in Brian's pocket for when he was most in need? I mulled this over. Bébinn was sweet, but she was no Sláine. My daughter-in-law had a sharp tongue and a shrewd eye and had somehow managed to ensure Sitric followed her father's plans. Bébinn didn't like to cause arguments, and always sought to please. She loved her father, but I guessed her affections would be easily transferred to a husband... as long as he treated her well. Again, I had no answer to this question. Great warriors and kings could make great husbands and be the very worst of men. I'd have to make up my own mind when I met him, which I surely would if they meant to take him captive.

At last, the hour grew late, and I made my way to my own tent. Removing my jewellery, I set it inside the jewel box I had insisted on bringing with me. It was a luxury, to be sure. Brian had taken me to a war camp. I was here so I could see his victory and so the men of the north could bow to their High Queen, not because Brian desired my company or admired my beauty. Neither was the jewel box here because of my love for gold rings and trinkets. No, this box was dearer to me than that.

Carefully, I took out the wooden tray that sat on top, then pulled out the trays underneath. A work of art by the carpenter I'd hired, to make something so precise and beautiful. At the bottom of the chest, I tapped the edge to expose a small wooden latch on the other side. I lifted it, releasing the wooden floor to reveal the hidden compartment beneath.

The Descendants' knife gleamed in the soft candlelight. The white handle and long, thin blade. Too scared to leave it in Killaloe unguarded, I'd taken it with me. How could I have left it behind? Anyone might steal it... and yet the real reason was that I felt complete when I touched it. At peace.

After I held it a while, I set it back in the box, for tonight. I couldn't look at it too long. *It was safe.* That was all that mattered. Gently, I set back the secret wooden floor, reset the latch, and put the jewel box back together. Without stopping to drink my ale, I undressed and fell into my bed, grateful that no ladies with their inane chatter had accompanied me north.

Silence, elusive and brighter than gold, was all I desired in the long, dark nights.

Silence. And dreams.

\*

*“Olaf.”*

*Through the haze, a man in a threadbare woollen cloak sat against the hull of a Viking ship, hand on the steerboard to guide them to their destination. He wore a hood that shielded his face so I could not see him, though his eyes shone brightly. The other men on the ship slept.*

*“Olaf,” I said again.*

*Olaf lowered his head. “Gormflaith,” he whispered. “It is good to hear your voice. You have not found me in your dreams for some time. I feared you had forgotten me.”*

*“Forget you? Never.”*

*He closed his eyes, casting his face into complete shadow.*

*“Where are you, Olaf?”*

*“On my way to you.”*

*“You have news for me?”*

*“Svein is sending a messenger to Sitric. Make sure Sitric is ready for him.”*

*I smiled, though uncertainty pricked at my mind.*

*“How do you know this? You are hiding from Svein, are you not? How can you know his plans so well?”*

*“I have my ways,” he whispered. “As it turns out, I am on the ship to Dublin with his messenger.” He pointed further down the ship. In my dream, I turned around. A large man, with a long, light brown beard and ruddy face, slept upright against the mast.*

*When I next looked at Olaf, he held up his hand. “Goodnight, Gormflaith. We will meet soon. And all will be revealed.”*

# **Rathlin Island**

## *Fódla*

As I walked up the hill toward our house, I heard Broccan and Colmon long before I saw them. Shouts, cries, grunts, the thudding of their training swords crashing against their shields. They moved in blurs, leaving only smudges of colour against the dark green ferns and bushes behind them.

Broccan stopped suddenly, the swirl of blue and yellow and white turning into something opaque and solid. Panting, he picked up the sword that lay on the sandy ground at the edge of the fighting square. Beads of sweat trickled down his brow and dripped onto his boots.

Colmon came to a stop too. His dark skin, slick with sweat, glimmered in the morning sunshine. Chest heaving, he tightened his grip on his shield, then began to inch closer to his opponent, slow enough that I could see.

Wiping the blood from his lip, Broccan shifted his feet and raised his sword. His gaze flickered over Colmon, studying my cousin's feet one moment, then his sword-arm the next.

Charging forward, Colmon struck at Broccan. They moved fast, but not so fast this time that I couldn't see Broccan slide onto his side and smash his training sword against Colmon's thigh. Now it was Colmon on the ground. He lay there, gave a shout, then rolled over and rushed to pick up his sword before Broccan could stand and charge again.

Only a year ago, Colmon had had the upper hand by quite the margin – height, muscle mass, and years of practice heavily outweighing Broccan's enthusiasm and lean frame. However, this last year, Broccan had grown, he could move faster, and his shoulders were now as wide as my cousin's. These practice matches lasted longer, and Colmon could be heard groaning and shouting as much as my nephew... *but I had never seen Colmon lying in a heap on the ground before.*

“You’re getting slow, old man,” Broccan called out, laughing. He circled Colmon, waiting patiently for his mentor to stand. When he came to the side of the square, he reached for a cup of water and gave me a sly wink. Now I was closer, I could see that his blue tunic had turned dark with sweat, and that nearly every inch of his pale skin was marked with red welts.

Colmon laughed, deep and rumbling as he mopped his brow. “Then why can’t you defeat me?” He jogged back to his side of the square and took a sip from his own cup of water. “All right, young cub, new rules for the next fight. Mortal speed. Mortal strength. If you move too fast, you lose. Strike too hard, you lose.” Colmon raised his sword. “Ready?”

Broccan threw his sword into the air, catching it by the handle as it fell. “Too tired to fight at warrior speed? If you want me to go easy on you, you only have to say.”

A roar. Colmon charged, lunging right. Broccan swung his sword to meet Colmon’s, then their bodies blurred. *Warrior speed it was then.*

I watched them, the dancing of colours, expecting them to fight like this all morning, but then suddenly Colmon skidded to a stop. His sword had sliced through nothing but air. *It had not touched Broccan.*

My nephew twisted, and as he slowed, I could make out his sword touching Colmon’s neck. “I told you,” he said, rubbing the blade along Colmon’s shoulder before pulling it away. “You’re getting slow, old man.”

Colmon raised an eyebrow, but instead of giving a dry retort, he inclined his head. “Good work, Broccan.”

The praise wiped the grin from my nephew’s face, so seldom did Colmon ever give him any.

“You are a fine warrior,” Colmon added. “Or perhaps I am a good teacher. I haven’t decided yet.”

This made Broccan smile again, and he set his weapons down.

“Come here, the both of you.” I hauled the seaweed basket back into my arms. “Help me spread this over the soil.”

Broccan ran over to help me, arms already out to take the basket. “You should have waited for me to carry this up for you. It’s much too heavy.”

Colmon joined us. “Yes, I’ve told you, Fódla, there is no need for you...” He trailed off as something on his sleeve caught his eye. I looked to see what it was. The white woollen cloth was stained with dirt and sweat as always after these training sessions, but this time, the colour red bled along the fabric.



“You’re bleeding,” Broccan said, his mouth open.

Colmon rubbed at the stained fabric, the furrows in his forehead deepening. “Yes.”

I dropped the basket, and it landed with a thud at my feet. *When Broccan draws blood from Colmon, he will make a request.*

Broccan watched my cousin, eyes wide, as Colmon pushed up the sleeve to reveal a large welt where the skin had broken along his upper arm, deep enough that a thin trickle of blood had dripped down to his elbow. Suddenly, Broccan erupted into a fit of laughter.

“What is it?” I asked. “What’s so funny?”

Colmon sighed, shaking the sleeve back down to his wrist so he could no longer see the cut. “I told Broccan, many years ago, that when he was good enough to blood me, I would consider him trained, and that I would no longer be able to tell him what to do.”

“And?” Broccan asked.

“And when that happened, we would take turns to clean the training weapons after practice.”

Broccan slapped Colmon on the shoulder. “Your turn today then.”

Colmon rolled his eyes, but as he picked up my basket of seaweed, a proud smile pricked at the corners of his lips. “I suppose it is, but I believe my first chore is to scatter this for your aunt.”

Colmon ran off, leaving Broccan punching at the air and grinning from ear to ear.

Even if Senna had not visited this morning, I would have known that this was a momentous occasion. *Broccan could outfight Colmon.* If we had lived at the fortress, Colmon and I would have presented Broccan at the next gathering, to show all the Descendants that he had passed the warrior test. There would have been a feast held in his name. I thought of my first gathering, of my father, who had been so proud of me.

But thoughts of feasts and ceremonies for Broccan was not something I dwelt on for long. Senna’s words lived in my mind now.

*When Broccan draws blood from Colmon, he will ask for something. You must allow it. It is time.*

Once Broccan calmed down, he stared after Colmon, who was running toward the bottom end of our crop field where the tall hawthorn tree stood. Once again, Colmon was a blur, and it didn’t take him long to disperse the

fertiliser. He returned to the two of us, barely out of breath. “See. Not so slow, after all.”

Broccan gave a small nod, the laughter and smiles from a few moments ago completely gone. Now he stared at the two of us, a shadow of words and thoughts dancing in his eyes.

“What is it, Broccan?” I asked.

These were the words that tumbled from my mouth. *What do you want?* was what I wanted to know. *What must I allow you to do?*

Broccan ran his hands through his blond, shoulder-length hair, the dirt and sweat turning it darker. “I always promised myself that when my training was over, I would go to the mainland. I want to meet Tomas. And bring him to justice.”

“I thought you would say that,” Colmon said. “It will be dangerous. Not just for you. He will be angry at me and Fódla. He will know by now that I have the sword and the spear of our ancestors and that I have hidden them from him here.” My cousin reached forward, resting his hand against Broccan’s shoulder. “And lest we forget, he tried to have you killed once already.”

Broccan bit the side of his lip. “It is dangerous, but he has done much worse than try to kill me. You must tell the Descendants what he has done. All of it. They have a right to know.”

“Aye.” Colmon scuffed his boot against soil, thinking a moment, then taking a deep breath. “I swore to return to the fortress once you were ready. I just want to make sure you *are* ready.” Colmon removed his hand from my nephew’s shoulder and stared at Broccan, examining him in earnest. “You need not come. No one knows you are alive. The reason I’ve spent so much time training you to fight and move as a mortal, is so you can live among them if you wish.”

Broccan considered this, then shook his head. “No, I must do the right thing. I will go with you and tell my story to the council.”

*Would they believe us?*

We had many accusations to lay at Tomas’ door. The murder of Eilis, the attempted murder of Broccan, and Tomas’ use of potions on Descendants, including Tigernach, who he’d sent to kill Broccan. He’d also used his potions on Aoife. He’d taken away her memories and left her to live in a darkness that I could not save her from, so I would let her go and stop using

my healing gift on her. Now, after Senna's visit, I had another crime to lay at his door. The enslaving of children born to giftless parents.

"There is something I need to tell you."

Broccan and Colmon listened to me as I told them about Senna's appearance.

"And so we cannot travel together either," I said. "Tomas knows you are here, Colmon, and he has spies watching us. As soon as we leave and forgo the protection of the spells here, we'll be in danger. He may even try to prevent us from reaching the fortress."

Broccan's cheeks flushed. "Colmon and I will go. You should stay. It's safer."

"But I cannot stay, Broccan. It is time for me to live again. Just like you cannot help me carry every basket of seaweed, you cannot protect me forever. Besides, before I came here, I had made a choice and I mean to see it through. I will go to the fortress with you, if that is your decision, but then I mean to go my own way. To live. With the mortals."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I will ask the council to make me mortal so I can live among the friends I made in Munster. I will be able to visit Rónnat and look after her. I will no longer be bound by the rules of the council, and I will be free."

Colmon frowned. "The knife of immortality has not been used in many hundreds of years, but still, it frightens me. You would truly forfeit your gift?"

"Death doesn't frighten me, Colmon. Not even a mortal death, for Aoife has walked that path already. If the price of living is giving up my gift, I will pay it."

Colmon ran his hands over his chin, refusing to meet my eye. "It should not be that way. If we can explain to the council what Tomas has done, maybe we can change the laws. The other Descendants are tired of being locked away in the fortress too." He paused. "Broccan. Pack your bags, but give me time to think."

Broccan gave me a nervous smile as Colmon marched to the hawthorn tree, then he came over to me, arms opening to pull me into a hug. I fell into him, my head resting against his shoulder. It didn't feel like so long ago that his head rested on mine when we embraced. Sometimes, I still thought of him as a child, as my ward, but in truth, he had long outgrown that.

Standing at over six feet, broad-shouldered, and with the beginnings of a beard on his chin, he was a man now.

“We haven’t talked much about leaving before,” he said quietly.

“It’s always felt so uncertain,” I replied, nodding an acknowledgement that what he said was true. “I half expected that Tomas would break the spells and find us. Somehow, I never expected it to be our decision. But you are right. It is time.”

Broccan ran his fingers through his hair again, the grim set of his jaw relaxing now that I had agreed with him. “Before we go to the council, I would like to see my mother again.” He smiled at this. “If I can, I will ask the council to rescind her banishment.”

“This is my wish also.” I pressed his hand. “Which is why you should consider what Colmon said. You don’t have to come with us to the fortress. You can stay with your mother for a while. Let Colmon and me deal with the council.”

“I can’t do that. You are afraid of them, aunt. I can feel it. How can I let you go there while I stay behind?”

“There is nothing they can do to *me* that frightens me. It is what Tomas might do to you that haunts my nightmares. I don’t know what he has said to the council in my absence, and I would rather know before I bring you there.”

“But when we tell the council everything, they will know what he has done. They will punish him. What is there to fear?”

There was something left of the child still in Broccan. He saw only right and wrong. Truth and justice. When I told him of my life with the Descendants, he felt pity for me, but did not truly understand. He thought I was weak – I saw that much reflected in his eyes. He knew that Tomas lied to the Descendants, but he did not see that perhaps some of them enjoyed the lie more than they wanted the truth. That was what worried me. How would the Descendants respond to the veil being lifted? Would they see a brighter future, or lament the loss of a vision that had shrouded them for so long?

“Broccan. I’m afraid... we have to assume that some Descendants might be under the influence of Tomas’ potions. We also have to assume that others may support Tomas of their own volition. Either way, we will be in danger the moment we set foot inside the fortress.”

Broccan rubbed his mouth, his lips pressed into a thin line. "I hate him so much."

"Enough," I said. "Enough for now. We will travel to Rónnat before we decide on anything."

"Yes. She will know what to do." He took both of my hands in his, then dropped them gently. "I will pack my bags and gather food for our journey."

"Yes, we need food. The blackberries will not be out yet."

This earned a faint laugh as he ran into the house, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

It would be dangerous at the fortress, no doubt about that, but it was Senna's words that played on my mind. My sister had not wanted to *tell me any more*, and her *mind wandered often*. What was my sister keeping from me?

I ambled along the path toward the hawthorn tree that marked the end of Colmon's land. Colmon sat there, resting against the trunk, carefully cleaning the training swords. It made me smile to see him sitting there, cleaning up after Broccan. "How long has it been since you lost a fight?"

"Oh, over a hundred years. Back when Cerball and your father were in their prime."

"Those were good days."

Colmon edged over to make room for me beside him.

I sat and rested against the tree. "Are you as worried as I am?"

Colmon glanced inside the house, watching Broccan through the open door as he folded his clothes, then nodded.

"We will go to Rónnat's first. We must be careful and not draw notice to ourselves. Once we speak with her, we will have a better idea how to proceed... and I hope she can persuade Broccan to stay with her for a while."

"That is my hope too... but Senna said something else that troubled me."

Colmon set down the sword and cloth.

"She says Rónnat's mind wanders more often now. What if she cannot tell us anything?" This time it was I who felt a sudden rush of anger. "What if she's gone, and she's suffering and had to go through this all alone? I should be with her. It isn't right."

"Nothing is right. That is what we now set out to change. I am ready for whatever comes. Are you?" He reached forward, gently twisting the gold ring around my finger. "What if you don't see Murchad again?"

“I am ready,” I said, ignoring the question.

“Then pack your belongings. This is the end of our time here. We leave tonight.”

# **Kingdom of the Northern Ó'Neills**

## *Gormflaith*

Donnchad sat on the grass. Alone. Scowling, as usual. He had his back toward me, his head resting so that it faced the direction of his father's tent. He was so obvious with his feelings, which today irritated me more than the argument itself. What did he want from me? *Praise*? How could I give that to him when he performed so poorly? All I had asked of him was to practise his fire-magic. *No*, he'd said at first. *Father needs me*. I'd pinched his arm and forced him out of the tent and into the forest, where at length, he gave in and practised, but his performance was lacking in every way.

"Son," I said, keeping my voice calm. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing."

"Exactly."

I gestured for him to stand, which he did with transparent reluctance. He stepped forward to stand at the mark I had pointed to, hesitant and head low. "It's too difficult. And I am tired. Can't we go back to the tent? Father might have some messages that he needs me to read."

He stared up at me, his face so like his father's. Almost. Only the tinge of gold around the iris differed, and it was that colour that made him mine.

"This may be our last chance to practise, Donnchad. The messengers who returned last night said the battle was imminent."

"I should be there, then. Not here. Other boys are there. Did you hear Father say that Fionnbharr was going?"

I smiled at this. He didn't mean it, of course, only saying it in the hope it would pacify me or that he'd impress me with his bravery. And yes, Fionnbharr would be there, travelling alongside his father Eocha where all the warriors could see him. It wasn't as dangerous as it sounded. The boys went mostly to assist the men with horses and to hold the standards, though

of course, some of them would die no matter how far back they stayed, if there was a hasty retreat and they could not outrun those who gave them chase.

“No, Donnchad. This is exactly where you should be. There will be more wars. Many more. But for you to learn your fire-magic, there is only so much time. It is difficult to control, I know, but if you do not learn before you become a man, it is the fire that will control you.”

Donnchad’s lips pressed together. Not even a nod this time.

“You don’t believe me?”

“It’s not that. I just...”

“It’s hard to believe in what you haven’t seen. I know. I was just like you as a child. My mother trained me, and she beat me many times. Much more than I have beaten you.” I moved beside him and crouched down, so our eyes were level. “She had ten children with fire-magic. Her eldest son was killed by the Descendants, but her second son didn’t live long enough to join that battle. My mother loved this second son with all her heart, and it pained her to train him, for he didn’t like it. One day, when he was a young man, he was attacked by three mortals. The fire came to him. He burned his mortal attackers, but his rage was so great, he burned himself and died. It is possible, you know, for a Fomorian to die by fire. Control is so important.” I waited until he stared back and met my gaze. He was clenching his toes, waiting for me to slap him for his ineptitude, but the time for that was over. There was nothing more he could learn from fear of me. No. The best teacher now was fear of himself.

“Follow me.” I walked further into the forest, toward the abandoned ráth Máelmórda had located. Today was the best day to do this. The men who were meant to be guarding me and Donnchad were distracted, waiting for signs of our men returning from the battlefield, or worse, a messenger to say the Ó’Neills had won. I had no such concerns myself. Flaithbertach Ó’Neill was fierce, they said. It didn’t matter, though. He would not win this battle. I felt it in my bones. Brian was too good for these young men. He knew them better than they knew themselves – what would push them, what would make them pause, what would break them. And he had broken so many kings by now, I could not imagine this final one escaping.

“Come, Donnchad. Hurry.” As we wove our way into the forest, I heard my son’s steps behind me. I kept walking, not turning back, like a braver



version of Orpheus, one who might have successfully reclaimed Eurydice from Hades.

Donnchad's steps faltered, reluctance seeping into him. He didn't like change or surprises, but then, who did? I kept moving. We were nearly there. The ráth ahead of us was just as I asked. A wreck of a house and abandoned. Those who once lived here were either dead or had fled somewhere safer.

"Why are we here?" he asked as he came to a stop outside the ráth wall.

I gave him a smile and jerked my head toward the door of the house. "I'll show you."

Donnchad followed me inside, hunching his shoulders away from the spiderwebs that hung over the door. I placed a candle on the table and waved my hand over it so that the wick burned.

"This is the last test, Donnchad. We have run out of time."

Donnchad's eyes met mine, anger swimming there. "I'm not a man yet. Why must I be tested?"

"Our enemies are everywhere, and I cannot afford for there to be any weakness on our side."

Donnchad glanced at the door, a wistful expression on his face, perhaps imagining his father walking toward him, arms open, ready to save him.

I slammed the door shut. "You cannot leave until you attempt it."

"What must I do?"

"You must survive."

I held out my hands over the candle. It was a decoy. To take his focus away from what was about to unfold.

"Ready?"

He focused on the candle and nodded his head.

Without another word, I cast fire onto the walls behind him and then the roof. Flames ran up the wattle and across the wooden beams and thatch, then all over the dry leaf-and-moss-ridden floor. Holding the fire back so that it did not touch me or my clothing, I watched it spread closer to Donnchad. He screamed and fell to the ground. Urine ran down his legs as he crawled under the table, which the fire had not yet reached.

"Stop the fire, Donnchad," I shouted. "Use your magic."

We had practised with candles and campfires. Never something like this, and it showed. Sweat dripped from his brow and he spluttered out a deep, wracking cough as the smoke caught in his lungs.

“Push it away from you,” I shouted. “Use your magic.”

“I can’t. It’s too big.”

“You can. Speak to it. Bend it to your will.”

Donnchad held out his arms. His magic pushing against mine. It was weak, but not as weak as I’d feared. I felt the strength of it, and the flames closest to him moved away. Still, it was not good enough.

“Do you want to live, or do you want to die, Donnchad? I cannot afford weakness.”

He pushed harder, his face contorted. “Help me. I am your son.”

I pulled the fire back for a moment, so that it danced in a circle around the walls. He gazed up at me, staring at the fire and the control I had over it.

“Yes, you are my son and I love you. I want you to be with me. We are on the cusp of winning everything, but you must understand, if you are weak, you could ruin it all. Do you want that? Have you no pride?”

He stared at me, the fear in his eyes moving toward acceptance. I could have spoken harsher words. I could have told him that I’d rather he died today than ruin our plans. I could have told him that I would kill him if I thought he was not up to the challenge ahead. But it was not the right time for harsh words and harsher deeds. No, not yet. A final chance.

“I... I don’t want to ruin your plans. I want to be strong like you.”

“Good.”

I thrust the fire back into the room. This time, the fire ran to where he crouched and spread over the wooden table.

Donnchad closed his eyes. He was working now. His whole mind focused, using his fire-magic to pull in the fire, to make it obey his command and will. I forced the fire closer to him, then suddenly, the fire disappeared, leaving behind only wisps of smoke singeing the thatch.

*He had done it.*

Surprised that he had put out the fire so quickly, something even Máelmórda could not do against me, I grinned, an unexpected laugh escaping from my lips.

Donnchad watched the smoke, picked up a piece of straw that had fallen underneath the table and twisted it between his fingers until it turned to dust in his hands.

I held out my arms and embraced him. “I am proud of you, son. You worked hard and passed the test, as I knew you would.”

He stood, his arms slowly wrapping around me, his hands pressing so softly that I could only feel him against the fabric rather than my skin.

“I’m sorry I’ve had to say such horrible things and push you so hard, but I had to see what you could do.” Holding him tighter, I softened my voice and knelt so now he looked down to me. “I love you, Donnchad. More than anyone. More than Sitric.”

“You do?”

“Of course.” I brushed his hair behind his ear. “You are my son and a Fomorian. All the hard lessons I’ve taught you are only because I was afraid of what the Descendants would do if they discovered us. You don’t remember, for you were only a baby when a warrior Descendant visited the dun. He smelled your fire. If he had been stronger, we would both be dead. Don’t you see? I’ve taught you like this to keep you alive. To save you. If Sitric had been a baby in the crib when the warrior arrived, I would have left him. A mortal child is not important. Not like you.”

Donnchad nodded.

“Mother’s second son, the one I told you about earlier, he is dead because he could not control his fire. Another brother of mine, Raoul, is dead because he was not careful with his tongue. I am only hard because I want you to live. Because I love you. Can you understand that?”

A whisper of a smile grew on Donnchad’s face.

“And so now you have passed this test, you must move on to the next stage.”

The smile slipped. “Which is?”

“This evening, Máelmórda will suggest taking you into fosterage. You will tell your father it is your wish to go.”

“No, I won’t. Father will never allow it.”

So quickly had his petulance returned. “You put such faith in your father, don’t you? All his soft words and smiles have worked. Do you know what your father’s plan is for you? Where he sees your future?”

“At his side.”

“No. He plans for you to go into the Church. To be a bishop, most likely. Or an abbot.”

“He wouldn’t do that.” Donnchad clenched his jaw. “I don’t want to go —”

“Oh, I know you don’t, but it’s all arranged. That is how your father works. He loves you, yes – it’s very easy to see that – but in the end, all his

children must do as he wishes. He will pick your life out for you, your wife or, in this case, no wife. With me, the future is whatever you wish it to be. If we win, if we can regain the high-kingship of Ireland, you will one day be king, not just of Munster, but of all Ireland. You can have everything you want. Anything. Anyone. Wouldn't you prefer that to reciting prayers day and night?"

Donnchad shrugged, though the sullen look remained. "Yes."

I pulled out a clean pair of trousers and tunic from my bag and handed them over. "Then get cleaned up. It's time to return."

\*

When we arrived back at camp, the horns sounded. I stared down the hill and watched the distant line of men trailing their way toward us. Brian's standard, that of a yew tree, the great Mag Adair, flapped in the wind at the front of the line. Walking, not running. Brian's army was victorious. Just as I had expected.

The men who had stayed to guard the camp, old warriors and those injured in previous battles, began to cheer and chant as the men reached us. Donnchad laughed and raised his hand in the air, then ran to his father.

Brian stood outside his tent, dressed in his finest, a broad smile on his face for all to see. He hugged his youngest son as he crashed into him. "Where were you?" Brian asked as he ruffled his son's brown locks.

"Walking in the forest with Mother," Donnchad answered, smiling back.

"I was worried you'd miss this."

"Did you know they were coming today?"

Brian winked. "Of course. I know everything."

Donnchad giggled and hugged his father tighter.

I decided to play along and kissed Brian on the cheek. "Congratulations, husband. This victory is well-deserved."

Brian smiled, though he kept his eyes focused on the warriors in the distance. Murchad, Tadc, Tairdelbach. His victory would not be a victory if his sons and grandson did not return. My eyes roved over the army too. Sitric had fought, so had Máelmórda.

"There they are." Donnchad pointed at the men riding on horseback at the front of the army.

“Who, who is it?” Brian squinted as he gripped Donnchad’s shoulder.

“Murchad, Tadc and Tairdelbach. They are riding beside Sitric and Máelmórda. Look, there are their standards. The raven and the harp.”

“Ha, I told you we needed you for your good eyes, son,” Brian said, the relief palpable in the relaxing of his shoulders and the way he held Donnchad close.

“Our victory is complete,” Father Marcán chimed in, clapping his hands.

\*

Murchad reached the camp first, with Tairdelbach at his side. Both bloodied and weary, they made their way toward Brian’s tent. The men didn’t clap or cheer as they passed them, instead, they stood back and bowed their heads as Murchad walked by. A reverence I had never seen, not even for Amlav, not even for Brian. Some reached out to touch Murchad, fingers brushing against his bull-hide tunic. A few did the same to Tairdelbach. The son smiled at those who did so, but not Murchad. He passed them, unsmiling, unspeaking.

Behind the princes of Munster came Sitric and Máelmórda, followed by King Sechnall’s only remaining son, Congalach. Then came the other princes from Connacht, Bréifne, Ulaid and Munster, sons and nephews of lesser kings, all of whom now fought for Brian.

Next came the main body of the army, with a group of sixty men shepherded between them. These men huddled together, all of them pale and bloodied. No swords or weapons were on their persons, and no smiles of victory were on their faces. Rope bound their hands. These were the Northern Ó’Neills and those who Murchad had selected to be taken hostage after their surrender, as was the way of the Irish kings. They lowered their heads as they entered the camp, ignoring the insults fired at them by the crowd.

Two of the younger men held back their tears. Not because they had any fear of death, but because they were hostages who would be taken south and split up among the Munster royal families. For the most part, they would be treated well, not made to toil or work... but they would not be at home. That was their punishment. It was said that to take an Irishman away from his home was the greatest punishment that could be inflicted upon

him. They said it gave him a sickness, a longing that would haunt him for the rest of his days, for even if he returned home, he would be changed by his absence, and the land would no longer recognise him.

One man, however, did not look down as he entered the camp. It was a young man with long, brown hair and a beard. *Flaithbertach*. It had to be. Defeated, yet still arrogant. I supposed that quality, to think they were better than everyone else, was bred into the Ó'Neills. *They guard the Lia Fail at Tara*, my father had said. *A great honour for them, and it is this honour that sets them above us*. My father had never questioned this order, for even though he was Christian, the old pagan myths were hard to shift from his mind. The Lia Fail, the Stone of Destiny, guarded the passage to the otherworld where the Tuatha Dé Danann dwelt. The famed old High Kings of Ireland had been crowned there. And holding this land gave the Ó'Neills their position as High Kings over Ireland, or at least it used to.

It had amused me as a child that my father believed in these old stories, for while he told them in good humour, Mother assured me he would kill us if he knew we were Fomorian. *Why?* I had asked over and over. *Why would he not worship us?*

Mother sighed and closed her eyes. *Men are not made to worship women. They are not made to worship those with no strength. And we have no strength. Three is too small a number. Once, we were great. No more.*

Brian had not always been great. Once he'd been the youngest son of an inconsequential clan from the least famous kingdom in the whole of Ireland. Now he was king of it all.

Murchad stopped before his father. "My king, we defeated the Ó'Neills of the Cenél nEóghain in battle and have taken hostages."

Brian leaned forward to kiss his son on the forehead. "Well done, Murchad." He stepped beside Murchad next, standing tall, and shouted out to the crowd. "I congratulate all those who fought in my name. Feast tonight! Pray to God and thank him for our glory and know that your king is pleased." He waved as the men cheered him, then turned and walked into the tent, allowing Donnchad to run ahead of him. I followed behind, giving Murchad and Tadc a welcoming smile. Tadc returned it. Murchad didn't even seem to notice I was there. His mind was elsewhere, as it usually was.

Sitric followed Brian's sons, bringing in the young Ó'Neill with the long, brown hair, a rope tied around his hands. Chairs were provided for the men

who fought for Munster, while the young Ó'Neill was made to stand before my husband.

"What do you have to say to me, Flaithbertach?" Brian said to the young man.

*Ah, so I was right. It was him. The Red Wolf himself.*

"I say that you won the battle today, King Brian. Your warriors defeated ours. Your numbers were too great."

Flaithbertach spoke calmly. No anger in his words. His voice only rose to emphasise the word *numbers*, as if to suggest, had they been equal, the men of the north would have won.

Brian did not rise to the slight.

"You surrendered to my son, Murchad. Do you agree that I am the High King of Ireland?"

Flaithbertach didn't speak. Now the pain was evident. It seeped in slowly. In the way he clenched his jaw, in the way he held his breath and his hands strained against the rope binding them together.

"You will find generous terms, Flaithbertach," Brian continued. "I want the north to be with us, not against us."

"The men of Munster and the Northern Ó'Neills can never be one."

"No. We cannot. Munster is set above the north now. We are greater. However, we can be friends."

Flaithbertach's scowl wound tighter with every passing second.

This made Brian smile. "You don't think that's possible? Not even if your children are of both the north *and* south."

Flaithbertach raised his head a little at this.

"My daughter Béinn needs a husband," Brian continued. "You have no wife. What better way to bind our peace than by joining our families?"

Flaithbertach glanced around the room, hoping, I guessed, for a glimpse of his potential bride. This made Sitric snigger, which Flaithbertach caught, and the captive quickly refocused his gaze on Brian.

Yes, this Flaithbertach was clever, certainly clever enough to realise it didn't matter what Béinn looked like. It was the match that was important. Brian was offering him a gift in exchange for agreeing to surrender – and more importantly, for it to stay that way. Brian had not offered Béinn to anyone else. Not to the kings of Bréifne or Airgíalla. Not to his allies in Connacht or Munster. Brian must have had this in his mind for his youngest daughter for years. A gift for the king who needed the most taming.

Brian was cunning, I'd give him that. He strove to discover what his enemies wanted. Flaithbertach was young. Glory could wait. But to wed the daughter of a High King? Such offers did not come often.

"If I agree to this, will you release my men?" Flaithbertach asked.

Brian laughed. "No. I will keep your men to ensure you keep your word. If you do not wish to wed my daughter, there are hundreds of kings willing to take your place. Once you have proven yourself, they can return. Not before. Peace must endure."

Murchad stood and moved to stand beside his father. Still bloodied and dirty from battle, he looked Flaithbertach up and down. "I do not think you should marry my sister to this man, Father. She is too good for him."

Brian glanced his son's way, giving a small smile, though the smile was tight. Murchad's words were not expected.

Murchad sauntered forward until he stood nose to nose with Flaithbertach. He pushed Flaithbertach, and the Red Wolf stumbled back, eyes still trained on Murchad. Brian's eldest son tutted. "He ran very fast to get away from me, Father. His back shall forever be in my mind, growing smaller and smaller, until he was nothing more than an ant, scurrying to hide in the dirt."

"It is not my fault you can't keep up, Murchad," Flaithbertach returned.

Murchad grabbed a cloth from the table, giving a quiet laugh as he wiped the dirt from his face and hands.

"Oh, I can keep up, Flaithbertach. Don't worry about that."

I couldn't help but smile as I followed this exchange. Murchad was always so quiet, so still. This taunting was very out of character, and yet, despite his laughter, there was no humour in his words. Only danger. *Did the Red Wolf hear it?* Did Flaithbertach know he spoke with Murchad the warrior, for it did not seem as if Murchad had left his anger on the battlefield today.

"Now, your rebellion has failed," Murchad said. "Your army fled, as we knew they would, because they ran right into the ambush we'd set up for them." Murchad set the dirty rag back on the table. "Now, we can kill you all, or you can call my father your king, because God knows, I am sick of fighting you. This is it. The last chance. Kneel or die."

Flaithbertach stared at the rope bindings around his arms, then he bowed his head. "I surrender. I will pay tribute to you, King Brian, as High King of all Ireland, and accept tributes from you, as my king, in return."



*The Red Wolf was clever enough then.*

Murchad suddenly strode forward, gripping Flaithbertach by the back of the neck, and pushed him to his knees.

“Murchad,” Brian said. “Enough.”

Murchad released Flaithbertach but did not move away. “I lost men today. Good men. Betray my father and I will kill you.”

He stormed out of the tent, leaving the rest of us to find a way out of the shocked silence.

It was Brian who recovered first. Standing, he walked to Flaithbertach. “Say your vows. Do you accept me as your High King?”

Flaithbertach straightened, his cheeks a little more flushed than they had been before Murchad pushed him down. “I do.”

“Do you accept me as your overlord and swear to do my bidding when I command it?”

“I do.”

“When I call you to war, will you bring your army and fight for me?”

“I will.”

Brian smiled, took out a knife, and cut the rope fastening Flaithbertach’s wrists. “Sitric will send his ship to Munster to collect Bébinn. In two weeks’ time, there will be a wedding to forever seal the bond between our families. I have many gifts for you as my new son-in-law, which will be exchanged after the wedding.”

Flaithbertach nodded.

“I will let you return to your men now to tell them the good news.”

Despite the fact Brian had removed Flaithbertach’s bonds, the King of the Northern Ó’Neills was escorted to the hostages’ tent, where I expected him to remain until he made his wedding vows to Bébinn.

The rest of us sat around Brian’s table, and the younger boys who’d come with the army brought in our food. Máelmórda sat between Brian and me, giving his brother-in-law a warm smile as he sat.

“You are glad this is over, Máelmórda?” Brian said.

“I am.” My brother poured himself a cup of wine. “A few years of no fighting, of being at home with my family, would suit me well.”

Brian smiled at this. Máelmórda had caught the tone just right. Not complaining about being here. That would never do. Instead, speaking of longing to return to his family, which was something Brian understood.

“I was thinking,” Máelmórda said, “why don’t I take Donnchad to Leinster with me for a while? We could even make a fosterage pact.”

Brian shook his head. “No. I don’t think so.”

“It is up to you,” Máelmórda said, shrugging. “But the land of Leinster is in his blood. It would be good for him to learn about his grandfather and the history of his family. Perhaps even make friends with my children.”

I glanced at Donnchad. He, ever so briefly, caught my gaze. He shifted forward. “Could I, Father?” he asked. “Just for a while? I’d like to see where Mother was born.”

Brian eyed his son, the quick dismissal I expected not coming.

“It’s not very interesting, Donnchad,” I said, “and your father has plans for you. Don’t you, Brian?”

“Plans?” Donnchad smiled. “For what?”

Brian, not eager to tell his son that the life of a bishop awaited him, took Donnchad’s hand in his. “Nothing is certain yet. Maybe it would do you good to see more of Ireland. Yes. For a year, I will let you go. It would be nice for you to visit your cousins. Besides, there will be many feasts this year to celebrate our victory. I will see you often.”

Donnchad smiled and thanked his father, then turned to eat his food. He was upset. Angry that his father had not fought to keep him. Another hard lesson, but one that he had to learn.

Playing my part, I didn’t smile as I ate my food, instead I frowned, giving Máelmórda a sullen silence and one-worded answers as we feasted. It took him a moment to work it out, but once he did, he found my act amusing. Not wanting it to wear thin, after I had finished my food, I excused myself and stood.

“Where are you going, wife?” Brian asked.

“To my tent. I am tired.”

He caught my hand before I moved away. “You are upset about the fosterage, but I think it would be good for Donnchad.” I said nothing, but he pulled me closer to whisper in my ear. “Don’t worry, I won’t send him to the Church as soon as he returns home. I’ll let you have him another year before he starts his training.”

I thanked my husband and left, trying not to smile until I reached my own tent. Brian was clever. Oh, yes. *But not clever enough.*

# **Ulaíd**

## *Fódla*

The three of us travelled separately.

Not knowing who was watching made us fearful. Was it only the crows flying above, or could it be the people tending their sheep and cattle? I didn't know, neither did Colmon, so we walked under the cover of darkness, alone. Broccan first, then me, then Colmon.

I walked, head bowed, red hair wrapped underneath a thick woollen shawl. Red was an unusual colour, even with the influx of Vikings who had settled here. The crows would notice it among the black and browns, and it would give me away quicker than anything else. I also wore an old dress with padding around my waist and chest, so that from a distance, my figure was not visible. Everything about me was ageless, indistinct and plain. The land was quiet at least. Colmon took us along goat paths and secret passages through the boglands. Cattle and their herders became a rare sight, a ráth or crannog, rarer still.

The solitude suited me well, for there was much to admire as I trekked south. From the land beneath my feet to the far-away horizon, everything felt new. A welcome change from Rathlin Island. Every path there was well-trodden, every tree and branch memorised. I could have walked about it, eyes closed, and still have found my way from east to west. Here, everything was a discovery. Vivid. New. Red clover grew in places, this plant too fragile for the bitter winds of a northern island, and I plucked the reddish-purple flowers and weaved them into bracelets just as I had when I was a girl.

This was how we travelled for two weeks. Far apart and not speaking. The only communication was reading the markers Broccan left to show that he had passed this way and the direction he had taken next.

Soon, however, the need for markers fell away. The land close to the crannog had once been my home. Trees I had climbed in my youth, grassy pastures, rocks and bracken and wildflowers, all as well known to me as the skin on my body. Step by step, the heaviness that had rested in my heart since Senna had visited me began to lift. I would see my sister soon. *I would hold her.*

An hour away from the lough, storm clouds blew in, dark and low, while the temperature plummeted. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and soon the clouds opened, heaving rain and sleet onto the land below. I ran toward the forest just ahead, hoping to find cover there, but the wind grew and grew, strong gusts pushing me back. The lough was only a few hundred feet away, and my legs burned with fatigue by the time I reached the trees. The sleet had turned to hail too, the stones pounding my head so hard it ached. Once within the cover of the trees, branches and leaves sheltered me from the worst of it, but still the wind howled. I kept going until I found a bedraggled Broccan waiting for me at the lough edge, peering around the trees, to watch the crannog.

“I have never seen a storm like that,” Broccan said, pointing upward.

I followed the line of his finger and gasped. I had seen my fair share of winter storms during my life, but this was not like any of those. Above the lough, the clouds spun, creating a funnel that came from the island in the centre of the lough.

*From the crannog. From Rónnat.*

Round and round, the funnel spun, sucking up branches, leaves and uprooted trees with each rotation.

Broccan pushed me behind him as the funnel grew outward, closing in on the forest, and causing the surrounding trees to creak and groan. “You stay here,” he said. “I’m going to swim across.”

“No.” I tightened my grip on his arm. “It’s too dangerous. The current will pull you under.”

Broccan shook his head. “The storm is my mother’s doing. Can’t you smell it? She will stop when she knows I am here.”

No, I couldn’t smell it. A heightened sense of smell was the gift of a warrior, not a healer, but I knew he was right all the same. The way the water and wind moved was too strange to be natural. *But why would Rónnat do this? Was she afraid?*

An uneasy knot twisted inside my stomach. Did she want to keep *us* away? Senna had said Rónnat had no more to tell me. Perhaps she did not want to see me again.

“Be careful. Come back if...” Broccan slipped out of my reach and ran into the lough, swimming toward the crannog and his mother. Fear filled me. What if she didn’t stop? What if, when she realised it was Broccan, it only made her increase the violence of her storm?

Colmon came running into the forest shortly after Broccan disappeared into the water, his long, dark braids dripping rainwater down his chest and back. “It’s getting worse,” he panted. “I wasn’t sure if I’d make it into the forest.”

“It’s Rónnat. Look.” I pointed at the whirlwind and watched as his face fell. “Broccan is swimming to the island.”

Colmon set down his bag and wiped the water from his face, noting the worry on my face. “Give Broccan his chance. If the storm doesn’t stop soon, I’ll swim out and find him.”

I nodded, but the question of why she wouldn’t want us with her played over in my mind. *There are no more answers*, Senna had told us. *Rónnat says your destiny must be allowed to unravel. Does that make sense?*

But why did it matter that she had no more answers? Why did that mean she wanted to keep us away? If she couldn’t talk about the future, I would happily sit with her and talk of other things. Anything, just to be with her.

Colmon and I waited, neither of us speaking. The storm blew harder, the hail turning to snow, sharp and bitter, and falling through the leaves. Colmon pulled me behind a large oak tree, then stood over me, using his body as a shield, and I using my healing gift to alleviate the pain of the welts and slices on his skin that the flying branches and ice made.

Then, just as suddenly as the storm had come in, it stopped. The wind calmed and the clouds cleared. Bright sunshine filled the sky, and everything was bright.

“Come,” Colmon said. “Before she changes her mind.”

We ran to the lough. A small rowboat drifted on the water, the current pulling it in our direction. Colmon strode into the shallows, grabbed it, and lifted me inside. Jumping on board, he sat on the wooden bench and rowed us over.

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply to recover my strength. My gift could easily cure a hundred cuts and welts, but I found meditating afterward

meant my gift replenished more quickly. Gifts, like all things, required practice, and when I had lived in the fortress with Tomas and Aoife, I had not practised as often as I ought. That had changed on Rathlin. Colmon and Broccan trained every day with their swords and shields, and so I had practised by healing their wounds. I practised on flowers and plants and animals too. I was stronger than I'd ever been. Even so, focusing on recovery always helped. When I reached Rónnat, I wanted to be awake, not drained and tired.

"There she is," Colmon said.

I opened my eyes and spotted Rónnat waiting for us at the water's edge.

As soon as the boat slid onto the muddy island, I climbed overboard and wrapped my arms around her. "How are you, Rónnat? I've missed you."

"The water, you can't listen to it," she whispered in my ear. "It tells lies." Her hands rushed to her hair, which was tangled and covered in leaves and flowers. "Did it tell you to come? Or is it the war? The war within a war."

Colmon frowned as I held Rónnat in my arms. She was weary, thinner than ever, and she fell into me, barely any strength left in her legs to hold her up.

"We came because we wanted to see you, Rónnat," Colmon said gently.

Colmon and I helped her inside her house. Broccan was already inside, lighting the fire and throwing vegetables from a small basket into her pot for a stew. He gave us a worried look as we helped his mother sit on the chair closest to the fire. She smiled, but her hands began to touch at the air in front of her face. I remembered how the old prophetess, Gráinne, used to do that.

"Did Senna not give you my message?" she said at last. "You shouldn't be here. Tomas is watching."

"I wanted to see you, Mother," Broccan said, "before we go to the fortress."

This broke her out of her daze. "No," she said. "No!" She looked at me, her eyes wide, skin pale. "You can't let him go there. Not now. Promise me." She reached for me, her fingers, nails long and sharp, digging into my skin. "It is not the right path – I told you before. The seven hazel trees. They will save you."

More words fell from her lips, incoherent and mumbling, her head shaking again. "The threads have been unwoven and must fall now. Do you see? No, Broccan. Don't go to the fortress. The snake will kill you."

Broccan glanced at me as his mother rubbed her hands over her face. *The snake will kill me?* he mouthed. He, like me, could make no sense of her words.

Colmon kneeled down and took her hands in his. “Broccan doesn’t need to go to the fortress if you don’t want him to.” He paused and brushed Rónnat’s hair behind her ear. “I am sorry, cousin, for not understanding you sooner. I will go to the council. Fódla and Broccan can stay in the north. Perhaps they should return to Rathlin, where they will be safe? Or they could stay here with you?”

But Rónnat shook her head. “No. They must find their place. Find it. Search.” She picked up a bowl and laughed, the lines around her eyes creasing. “My head is cracked. It is cracked.”

Tears pricked at the edges of Broccan’s eyes, while Colmon stared at Rónnat in silence as she continued to cackle.

Nausea swirled in my stomach. Gráinne had spoken these words before she died too. She had spoken in riddles, feeling at the air in front of her face, and she had only deteriorated as the years passed by. I didn’t want this for my sister. I didn’t want her to disappear into her madness.

*But what could I do?*

Colmon handled the stew, the smell of trout and carrots swirling inside the small house, while I found her comb and brushed the knots and clumps of twigs out of her hair. Broccan held her hand and told her about Rathlin Island, told her all about his training. She smiled when he spoke, rocking back and forth as if he were singing her a song. Her eyes began to close.

“I am glad you are here, Colmon,” she said, her voice gentle, barely more than a whisper. “Don’t listen to the harp, Colmon, or the song it sings to you. Do not despair and weep.”

\*

Night fell soon after dinner. After swimming and rowing across the lough, it didn’t take long for Colmon and Broccan to fall asleep, but I lay awake, watching my sister. She was lying on her bed, eyes closed, but I knew she wasn’t in a deep sleep. I walked outside, and after a few minutes, she followed. She looked more peaceful this time. Her hands at her side. Herself.

“I want to stay here with you,” I said. “I want to look after you now that Senna has gone.”

“Why would you want to stay here with me? There is life out there.”

“You are my sister. I love you. You are my life.”

“No.” She pressed the palm of her hand gently against her head and her finger tapped at her temple. “Do not worry about me. Senna will be back soon, and you, my dear sister, you must watch over Broccan as you promised me all those years ago. Do not break your word now.”

“He is grown. I can—”

“No. Not yet. He needs friends. A home. He needs you to help him find these things. A man in body, yes, but not a man here yet.” She tapped her head.

“What about the fortress? I cannot let Colmon go there alone.”

She trembled, her hands grasping at the air in front of her face. “It is too dangerous, sister. The threads are rewoven now. I don’t know where they fell. Look for the seven hazel trees. They will save you. Promise me.”

“What do they—”

A gust of wind blew at my side, throwing me to the ground.

“You must leave!” Rónnat’s eyes widened, and she clutched at her chest. “I cannot tell you any more, and it’s not safe for you here. They are coming for you.”

She held up her hands to the sky, and the wind blew up again, the funnel of wind blowing at the edges of the island.

“Is that why you created the storm? To keep them away?”

“Yes. They are watching, always watching, and they are coming closer. I can feel them. It’s time for you all to go. Wake them up.”

“Who is coming?”

She fell to the grass and crawled closer. “Tomas’ crows. They can’t find you. They can’t find Broccan. You must all leave.”

I pushed against the wind, forcing myself forward until I could hold my sister. “What have you seen, Rónnat? I want to help you.”

She shook her head. Her eyes were red around the edges, teary, and she tapped at her head again. “There is only one more chance. You see. I must save it. The water... it tells lies, and I am cracked. I must save the last chance, or we will all burn.” She shook as she spoke, her every muscle taut with agitation. She was slipping away into her madness. My sister was leaving me.



“Why don’t we speak of something else?” I shouted over the wind. “Don’t we have any time at all? Why don’t we speak of when we lived here as children?”

Rónnat nodded, her pale skin at last finding some colour. “We have until dawn.” She lowered her hands and the wind fell away on the island, though I could see the funnel spinning around the land beyond the lough.

“Tell me a story of Father,” she said, sitting on the grass. “I can still see him. His eyes. Mother’s smile. Your laugh.”

Wrapping my arms around her, I spoke of a time Father took us hunting. I told her about how they used to laugh at me, unable to thread a trap or draw a bowstring. And how they stopped teasing once I found a hidden bush of elderberries, and they begged me to ripen them. Silly stories. Silly stories about almost nothing at all except shared laughter and a man who we both missed.

Rónnat laughed and listened to me until she drifted off to sleep in my arms.

“I am so sorry,” I whispered in her ear. “I am so sorry I didn’t understand in time. What have you sacrificed for me, Rónnat? You fool. I do not deserve it.”

Regret consumed me as I held her. Over a hundred years ago, when I moved to the fortress and had Aoife, my daughter had taken over every thought. My mind had completely focused on her, protecting her, trying to not fail as a mother, and then failing all the same. I hadn’t noticed Rónnat’s struggle, for she had been the crutch that I rested against. I hadn’t noticed that she had held such a burden within her. A prophet. A prophet who had seen such a terrible future that she had kept her gift hidden from everyone. Even me.

*What had she seen?*

I stared out at the water. The storm she had set in motion on the other side of the lough was building. The water spun and the wind blew so hard the trees creaked and branches snapped, flying into the air, circling the ground below.

Chaos. That is what she had seen. Chaos.

# **Kingdom of the Northern Ó'Neills**

## *Gormflaith*

“What is it?”

I groaned as hands shook my side. The wedding wasn't until the day after tomorrow, so what fool had come into my tent without permission, and more to the point, what hour of the day was this to be waking a queen?

“A ship from Norway has arrived,” a voice hissed.

Turning around, I opened one eye to find Máelmórda standing over me.

“And?”

“They have asked Sitric for a meeting. They say it is about a trading issue. An urgent one.”

I closed my eye and pulled my blanket tighter around my body. “Trading issues are death to everything joyful. Why would I want to know this?”

“Because” – my brother flicked my head with his fingers – “there is no trading issue. It is bound to be a messenger from Svein, and I told you, Sitric needs to be watched. His wife has his heart, and your husband has his balls. Who knows where his head is.”

As sleep and the muddle of an ale-filled evening fell away, I knew my brother had the right of it. It was Svein's messenger, of course it was. Anyone with a *trading issue* would have simply waited for Sitric's return. A few weeks in Dublin was a much more exciting prospect than sailing to this ragged part of the north. Here, there were tents and ale. In Dublin, there was every manner of pleasure – whores, imported wine, spiced meat, pickled fish, jewellery and nightly fights in the square. Only a man with a king's message on his lips would sail here.

Could this be the ship Olaf had shown me in my dream? *Did that mean he was here?* Olaf. Only a few minutes' walk away from me.

I scurried to my chest of clothes and pulled out a green silk dress, my hands running down the soft fabric. No, it wasn't the right shade of—

“Silk?” Máelmórda scoffed, pulling the dress from my grip. “For a messenger we aren't supposed to know about?” He threw a woollen travelling dress at me. “We've decided to take a morning walk to clear our heads. Nothing fancy, otherwise it will look suspicious. Now hurry. Sitric needs to be watched.”

I pulled on the dress Máelmórda had picked out, then my cloak, and followed him out of the tent.

“A wonderful idea, brother,” I said, loud enough for the guards to hear. “A morning walk is always so pleasant.”

We wove our way to Sitric's tent, which was close to the beach and his fleet of ships. I saw the new ship right away. Smaller than any of Sitric's. Dull. The prow plain and undecorated. Full of wooden barrels and men wearing worn leather tunics. Sailing alone and full of cargo to trade, a ship of this size would not raise anyone's suspicions. A clever ploy, and already the false tradesmen had boarded a small rowboat, rowing it to shore. Sitric and his men stood on the sand, waiting to greet them.

“Quick,” Máelmórda said, dragging me along the path onto the beach.

Sitric smiled at me as I approached. He didn't bother to ask why we were there, neither did he seem annoyed that we were. This was good. It meant he was still on board with my plans.

“Their messenger said they are from Rygjafylke and were turned away from Dublin,” he said to me.

“What do you think?” I responded.

Sitric shrugged.

“There is a chance they are Svein's men. Be careful, son.”

“What should I say? Am I to be friends with Svein or not?”

“Friends. For now. Make sure this messenger sees your strength. He is here to test you.”

Sitric walked forward as the rowboat beached on the shore, Falk and Leif at his side. Máelmórda and I walked behind them. Máelmórda could not speak the language of the Vikings, but I could, and I wanted to hear what was being said.

“King Sitric, greetings.” A tall man with a ruddy face stepped forward. “My name is Styrbjörn.”

“Greetings, Styrbjörn. What can I do for you?” Sitric asked.

Styrbjörn stood to his full height, chest pushed forward, and rested his hand against his belt, not touching his axe but moving his cloak enough so that we could see it. “We landed in Dublin a few days ago. The price to dock there was high. Too high.”

Sitric laughed. Falk and Leif joined in. “The price is the price. If you cannot afford to pay it, I suggest you sell your goods in Bristol.”

“There is no money in Bristol.”

“Ah, yes.” Sitric smirked. “The English have a silver shortage and cannot make new coins, but that is not my problem. I am King of Dublin, and we have plenty of it. If you have goods to sell, the docking fee is worth the price. You will make it back and more.”

Sitric stared at the ship, then eyed Styrbjörn up and down. “You have enough goods to know this, so tell me the truth. Why are you really here? It’s clear you’re no trader.”

I held in my smile at this remark. Sitric was handling Styrbjörn better than I expected. This was good, for I couldn’t join the conversation. An interruption from the king’s mother would only lower Sitric’s standing in front of Styrbjörn... and we couldn’t have that.

Styrbjörn grinned at Sitric’s question, his ruddy face finding a semblance of good humour. “I heard you were clever, King Sitric. Yes, let’s speak the truth. I am a cousin of Svein Forkbeard, and he asked me to come here to speak with you.”

Sitric stilled, lifting his chin a fraction. “Svein is a name I know well. He killed my brother-in-law Olaf Tryggvason, did he not?”

Styrbjörn nodded. “I was at the Battle of Svolder myself. Olaf fought well.”

“Who killed him? Was it Svein?”

“No one’s blade touched him. He jumped into the sea rather than be captured. Thor has him now.”

Styrbjörn repeated the story we had already heard. It wasn’t true, though. My dreams had shown Olaf, captured and tortured by Svein, and rotting away in a prison before he escaped. After this, I’d not seen him for a long time, not until a few years ago when he came to me in a dream and told me of Svein’s plan to invade. The dreams afterward were sporadic and short, and always Olaf wore a thick hood over his face to conceal his identity. *But on a small ship such as this, how could it be that Styrbjörn did not recognise a man he claimed to have fought?*

I scanned the men standing behind Styrbjörn. They all wore their hair shorn at the sides and long at the back, as must have been the fashion for the Northmen of Rygjafylke. There was one, however, who walked with a bowed back and wore a hood over his head. His chin jutted out from under the shadow of the fabric, and then he moved, changing position until his face caught the sunlight and a pair of pale blue eyes locked with mine. I gasped as I took in his ruined face. And ruined it was, not just the few scars he'd had when I saw him in Svein's prison, but now so many that they crisscrossed over his eyes and nose and chin, leaving an unrecognisable husk in place of a once mighty king.

Máelmórda nudged me. The conversation had progressed, a question had been asked. But who had asked it? Quickly, I returned my attention to the negotiations. Olaf would have to wait.

Sitric sighed and muttered something to Falk, who nodded back.

"If you are Svein's messenger," Sitric said to Styrbjörn, his voice edged with boredom, "then tell me the message."

"He wants to be your friend."

Sitric pressed his lips into a hard line and waited for Styrbjörn to continue.

"He wants access to your trade routes along the Irish sea."

"Anyone can have access to the trade routes for the right price. He doesn't need to be my friend for that. He just needs enough gold and silver."

"Friends don't ask their friends to pay."

I bit my lip. *Don't agree to this, Sitric. Don't let Svein think he can buy you without giving anything in return.*

"The trade routes are mine," Sitric said, seemingly unmoved by Styrbjörn's request. "Everyone must pay. Especially friends. Especially friends who are kings."

*Good, Sitric. Good.*

Styrbjörn scowled, and he turned to walk away.

"That's it?" Leif said, spitting into the sand. "That's the message?" Harald's son, younger than Sitric and less astute, gave Styrbjörn a puzzled look. "It is a shit message, no offence. I almost fell asleep listening to it."

Styrbjörn shrugged. "It is all Svein has to say to the king of a piece of land so small that when you stand on the beach, your piss can hit the city gate."

Sitric tapped the hilt of his sword for a few moments. “You are not being honest, Styrbjörn, and you promised you would be. That’s disappointing. I don’t think this is all Svein wants. If Svein wants my friendship, tell him to send a more honest man next time.” Sitric waved his hand at his men positioned in the dunes, and the warriors of Dublin raised their spears, aiming them at the strangers on the sand. “Now, get off my beach.”

Sitric walked, turning his back to Styrbjörn. Falk and Leif followed.

“But it isn’t your beach, is it? It’s your father-in-law’s,” Styrbjörn called after him. “And Dublin isn’t really yours either, is it? You pay gold to King Brian Boru for that. You borrow it. You are not a king at all.”

Sitric stopped. Fool that he was, he let the taunts get under his skin.

Styrbjörn grinned, his hands hooking his thick leather belt. “If you want to truly be a king, there can be no man who you bow to. It is the truth, whether you like it or not. You are a jarl. That’s what I’ll call you from now on. Jarl Sitric.”

Sitric laughed, loudly this time, and when he next looked at Styrbjörn, it was with his head held high and chest out. “Tell Svein he has my attention. My friendship too, should he wish it. But the gold and silver price to cross my sea and enter the port at Dublin must be paid. I wish him luck when he invades England. Tell him to give Uhtred the Bold my regards.”

Styrbjörn retained his stupid, smug grin until my son spoke of the imminent English invasion. Then it fell, surprise flashing across his face.

“Oh, I know many things, Styrbjörn,” Sitric said. “Many things. I am a good friend to have, some would say. Much better to be my friend than my enemy.” He threw a silver coin at Styrbjörn, one with his own face imprinted on each side. “If Svein needs anything of me, he only needs to ask. Ireland is my concern. England can be his. It had best stay that way if our friendship is to have any chance of blossoming.”

Styrbjörn rubbed the coin between his fingers. Very few kings had their own mint. Sitric was one of them, and despite all the Viking had said about Sitric not being a true king, wealth sang its own song. Not a song of thrones and crowns, but a song of power. And power was a song all Vikings heard deep in their bones.

“Which is exactly what King Svein wants too.” Styrbjörn walked back up the beach, standing close to Sitric so he could lower his voice. “He wants to claim England as his. He has no interest in Ireland, and he is happy for this land to be yours.” He held out his arm for Sitric to take. “We will be sailing

to England in two summers after this one. Svein wants your word you will not fight for Ethelred. Nor for Uhtred. He was married to your sister, was he not?"

"My sister, Gytha, was married to Uhtred's grandfather. For a short time." Sitric clasped hold of Styrbjörn's elbow. "I have no interest in fighting for Ethelred or Uhtred the Bold, so I am glad we have reached this understanding. Why don't you and your men join me for food and wine in my tent and rest here tonight before you sail home in the morning?"

"Do you charge friends for your hospitality?" Styrbjörn asked, grinning.

"No. Not for hospitality. Never that."

Styrbjörn waved at his men to follow him. His warriors, with their worn leathers and expensive swords, walked after Styrbjörn, eager after weeks of sailing to eat good food and drink.

The man at the back of the group, the one covered in the plain brown robe, stepped forward as Styrbjörn called his men. "I will stay with the ship, my lord."

Styrbjörn gave a curt nod.

Sitric shook his head. "There is no need. Your ship will be safe. No one will dare touch it here."

"I mean no offence, my lord," the man in the brown robe said, his head bowing lower. "It is only that I am fasting. God is at work here. I must pray to him."

Styrbjörn sighed and shrugged at my son. "Let him stay. The priest has been good luck for us, but best he remains here. After a long voyage, the men grow tired of his sermons from Rome."

Sitric began to walk. "Bored of sermons? I thought your men were all Christian now."

"They are, but we all have our limits as to how much of God's Word we can listen to. Not that I blame Father Benedict for being so devout. The Caliphate did that to his face, you know. Jesus came to him in a vision and helped him escape."

Sitric grunted, then changed the conversation to Styrbjörn's recent travels, while the rest of his men followed them into the camp.

The monk joined his hands together, then turned toward the rowboat where he kneeled inside it to pray, the picture of Christian piety. *But he wasn't a monk, was he? He was Olaf.*

"Come, sister," Máelmórda said, "we must go with them."

I dragged my gaze away from Olaf. "I am weary, brother."

Máelmórda looked surprised at my lack of interest.

"As his mother, I cannot speak plainly in front of Styrbjörn. As his uncle, you can. Why don't you go and make sure that Sitric doesn't give anything away once he drinks his ale."

Máelmórda nodded and followed my son into his tent, while I made my way to Brian's, my mind a whirl of emotion. *Olaf was on the beach. Alone. After years of being apart, I might finally be able to speak with him. Tonight, it would have to be. Yes, tonight.*

Reluctantly, I entered Brian's tent, which was loud and full of laughter. Bébinn was expected tomorrow, and the wedding would take place the day after that. Brian, who might usually have taken an interest in an unexpected Viking ship, was preoccupied with the ceremony, and barely raised his head to bid me good morning once I had told him the Viking traders had come to discuss the longphort price with Sitric.

I took a drink of ale to settle my nerves. Nightfall was hours away and I had a part to play, otherwise I might never get away. I also had plans in place that needed stoking. I could not neglect them. Once again, I glanced about the tent. Who of interest was here?

Ah, there was Flaithbertach. He sat at the table, eating his food in silence as the ceremony was discussed in detail by Brian, Father Marcán and Eocha. Oh, they had every detail planned. All Flaithbertach could do was sit there and agree.

*A feast. The best musicians. Poets to recount the glory of the day. A selection of games to be held for two days afterward. Prizes made by Brian's best craftsmen to be awarded to the victors.*

Brian was putting on quite the show. I only hoped his attempt to impress the newly subdued north worked long enough for me to put my own plans into motion.

"What a happy day awaits you when your bride arrives, Flaithbertach," I said, sitting beside him.

Flaithbertach gave me a sullen stare. "Was your wedding day the happiest of days for you?"

"Which one?"

Flaithbertach picked at the barley bread on his plate, and when he next looked at me, his expression had softened. "Tell me, then, seeing as you are an outsider too, what is Bébinn like?"



“Oh, she is beautiful. Murchad was right. She’s much too good for you.”  
Flaithbertach smirked, his shoulders relaxing.

“Is this all that plays on your mind? Her beauty?”

“Many things play on my mind. My new wife’s beauty is of no concern. I was just curious.”

Despite the earnest tone, this wasn’t true. His relief at my words had been too palpable. It was a sentiment I understood. He was young. A wife was still something he might have hoped to pick through desire, rather than a political arrangement, as both of mine had been... as most marriages among the Irish royal families were. But the northern clans were not so keen to marry outsiders. I wondered if there was a sweet girl at home who he’d picked out as his queen, and if so, why he hadn’t already married her.

“You are a little old to have no wife,” I said, looking him up and down. “And you are not so ugly that every maiden would have refused you.”

“It is difficult to have a wife when your life is on the battlefield.” He glanced at the men in the room. “But now, we must have peace. So, a wife it is. And hopefully it is a good match, such as your own marriage to Brian.”

I raised my cup and smiled.

“You were married to Amlav the Red before Brian, weren’t you?” His tone hardened, and when he next lifted his eyes to catch my gaze, he didn’t look away.

“Yes.”

“He killed my father. Did you know?”

“No, but then he killed many fathers. Many sons. Many brothers. Before he got old and fat, making widows and orphans was Amlav’s favourite thing to do.”

He nodded outside the tent doors, his gaze fixed on Sitric’s tent. “It is strange that soon I will be a brother-in-law to Amlav’s son.”

The hardness in his eyes now made me wary. Did his grudge against Amlav extend to Sitric? A blood feud was the last thing I needed. “I suppose it is, but that is the world that Brian is creating. He forces enemies together in the hope that peace can be forged. Will you help keep the peace, Flaithbertach? Sitric is a good king. He doesn’t kill for pleasure like Amlav did.”

Flaithbertach nodded, blinking away the steel in his eyes. “After so much fighting, I am looking forward to a time of peace. Brian will have no more

trouble from me.”

Time would tell if this was honest or not. He might be useful, or might be a thorn in my side, but there was no telling for now, and so his use to me today was at an end. I finished the rest of my breakfast in silence, then walked toward my husband and kissed him on the cheek.

“I’m going to my tent, husband. I’ve a lot to do to ready myself for the wedding.” I pressed my hand against my hair. “Tomorrow will be taken up with helping Bébinn prepare. Today is my last chance to organise myself.”

Brian, face slightly flushed with the ale he’d drunk – which wasn’t like him, given the early hour – gave me a warmer smile than usual. “Very well, not that you need much time to prepare.”

Oh, and a compliment. How odd.

“You are too kind, husband, but we all know that, when you get to my age, it’s not so easy to shine. A day of readying my hair and clothes, followed by an evening of peace and a good night’s sleep is essential. I don’t want to be at the wedding with crow’s feet and sagging eyes.” I glanced around the tent, knowing full well Donnchad was outside with Tairdelbach. “Where is Donnchad? He should come with me now.”

“No. He can stay with me,” Brian said. “Now he’s older, it is good for him to talk with the men. I’ll keep him with me tonight. You get ready and rest, Gormflaith. You are right, once Bébinn arrives, we will be busy.”

“Oh.” I faltered. “You don’t mind?”

“Not at all.”

I nodded, saying more farewells to Eocha and Father Marcán, then to Murchad and Tadc. They gave me polite greetings in return, though none would miss my presence. Already I could smell it. Male pride wafting around the tent. There would be no fighting like in Dublin. No wrestling in the square pit. Instead, it would be an evening of chess, song, and tales of times gone by, and I had something much more interesting planned.

\*

Once the sun fell and the guards left their postings to change over, I crept out of my tent and ran to the beach.

The monk still knelt inside the rowboat, muttering words to God under his breath. I climbed aboard, and he halted only when I came to a stop

beside him. He turned, his head still lowered so I could not see him, and I pulled down the hood. It was clear why Styrbjörn had no idea who really rowed alongside him. Olaf was no longer Olaf. Most of his teeth were missing. Broken nose. Hair shorn. Scarred face. The skin along his neck where the dragon tattoo had once lived was gone, the skin scraped away so that the blue ink was no longer visible.

“You are... changed, Olaf. Or should I call you Father Benedict too?”

“Years in a prison cell will change a man,” he answered, his eyes taking me in.

Yes. Changed was the man before me, but still the icy blue of his eyes shone through.

“You are changed too.” He rubbed a strand of my white hair between his thumb and finger.

“I am this way because society expects me to be. But the true Gormflaith is the same as she has always been.” I closed my eyes, using my stolen witch-magic to pull the spell away. My white-and-grey hair turned to black, my skin smoothed out, and when I next looked at him, I was just as he had known me all those years ago.

This was forbidden, or at least my mother had always said so. To show a mortal our magic and who we truly were. *It would only lead to the Descendants finding us*, she had said. But I didn’t care anymore. Soon I would want them to find us.

But that wasn’t the only reason I showed myself. It was more than that. I wanted Olaf to know me. I wanted him to see me.

“Ah,” he brushed the side of my face, his hands calloused and rough. “You are a volva.”

“Not a volva. Something else.” A Viking volva was a witch who claimed to speak to the gods, and I spoke to no god. I brushed my hand down Olaf’s face and neck. My magic flowed through me, transforming his face and body, recreating the man who I had known all those years ago. Long, blond hair, straight nose, all his teeth and smooth skin, dragon tattoo. It was like time had paused, and we were in Dublin. Perhaps that day outside the city at the river.

He stared at his reflection in my silver brooch, laughing. “Ah, I’ve missed this face. Almost as much as yours.”

“So, you did miss me?”

“Yes.” He turned serious now, the laugh fading. “You are my one regret. Do you remember that day we met on the beach at Northumbria? I suggested marrying you instead of Gytha. I meant it. If you had said yes, I would have taken you.”

“It didn’t make sense for us to marry.”

“It didn’t.” His right hand moved, interlocking his fingers into mine, while his left hand brushed my cheek. “But that didn’t change how I felt about you, and then when I started to know you, to understand you, I realised the great mistake I had made.”

I shook my head. “Easy words, Olaf.”

“No. Not easy.” His hand moved from my cheek to my mouth, his fingers pressing against my lips. “Words for me are not easy, as well you know, and words of regret are the hardest of all.” He inched closer, his lips finding mine. His other hand ran along my leg, moving up to my thigh.

*I wanted him.*

Desire that I had long forgotten suddenly reawakened inside me. His face, frozen in time, the toned muscles under his tunic. I had imagined these when I closed my eyes. Dreamed of him, of touching him, of him touching me. And here he was. Mine.

But of course, I couldn’t let him have me. Not yet.

Smiling, I pulled back, staring at him as his hand fell away.

“You, as always, are too clever, Gormflaith.”

“I’m exactly as clever as I need to be. Now talk.” I wrapped my hand around his long blond hair. “What is it you came here to say to me that you could not say in a dream?”

“I’ve come to make amends. You still want Sitric to be King of all Ireland?”

“Yes.”

“Then I am here to help. Tell him to reach out to Sigurd the Stout. He is older now. Less ambitious, but also less of a drunk. Svein has already asked Sigurd to fight for him, but Sigurd said no. There are so many jarls on Svein’s side that the pickings of land in England grows smaller by the day and Sigurd does not believe it is worth the risk. However, in Ireland, that is not the case. There is plenty of land to offer Sigurd here.”

“What land would Sigurd want in Ireland?”

“Land in Ulaid, for a start. A port in the north would be useful to set up trade links between Orkney and Ireland.”

I thought of Sigurd the last time we had met – purple-faced and fat. Then I thought of the young Flaithbertach. Sigurd would have a hard time taming the north, though perhaps it was better he wasted his men trying to capture it, rather than Sitric.

“I think Sitric would offer the land, but Sigurd is not strong enough to help alone. He has how many men? Eight hundred? To overthrow Brian, we will need more men than that. Who else is there?”

“Brodir of the Isle of Man is another. He is crazy though. A berserker. He doesn’t own land, but many men follow him. A pagan through and through. He won’t fight for Svein, because he hates his Christian beliefs. He will fight for Sitric though.”

“How many men does he have?”

“Six hundred.”

“That’s still not enough.”

“Careful, Gormflaith. The Norse fight among themselves more than the Irish. You invite too many to fight in Ireland, you will find them difficult to control. These two are enough, and if they join you, smaller warbands will come looking for glory. Very soon, you will find Dublin has fifteen thousand men willing to fight.”

I traced his skin with my finger, finally coming to his snake tattoo on the side of his hand and arm, and I trailed my fingers along its coiled skin.

“What happened to you, Olaf? Tell me.”

“I overstretched. Acted too quickly.” His hand moved back to mine, this time staying there and pulling me closer. “You, meanwhile, have been patient, and it has paid off. Sitric is wealthier than ever. Your second son is a prince of Munster. Your brother a king of Leinster. Your power grows.”

Olaf leaned in, his lips brushing against my cheeks. Such compliments were not given to me often. Not for my mind, anyway. I couldn’t help but smile.

“Show me,” Olaf whispered. “Apart from your dream-magic, apart from changing appearance, what else is there?”

“Oh, there is more. One day I’ll show it to you. If you stay.”

“You want me to stay?” He licked his lips. “It means I won’t be able to tell you anything new about Svein.”

“I know enough about Svein. I need you here if Sitric is to fight for the high-kingship. You know war better than anyone.”

“You would trust a failed king?”

Leaning forward, I kissed him. “No. But I trust you.”

# **Ulaíd**

## *Fódla*

The next morning, Broccan, Colmon and I crossed the lough, wordless and silent.

I had given Broccan and Colmon a few hours to sleep as I held Rónnat, only waking them just before the sun rose over the horizon so we would leave before dawn as I had promised my sister.

My sister had woken with us, though she wouldn't speak. She kneeled on the ground, her arms wrapped around herself, and only looked up to give a small wave as we clambered into the boat. No more farewells, no more advice. She wanted us to leave, that was clear, and to leave now while the morning was dark.

The storm on the other side of the lough was wild, having grown throughout the night. Once again, Rónnat was using her magic to help us, pushing away whatever spies Tomas might have sent to follow Colmon on his journey here. That was why she was so drained now, barely able to keep on her knees. I watched her until we disappeared, all hunched over and her hands moving to conceal her face. It was all I could do not to cry... but I had promised her I would stay with Broccan, and I would keep that promise.

On reaching the other side, Colmon moored the boat, while Broccan carried me, using his strength to push against the wind that would have blown me back into the water. He and Colmon ran deep into the forest, where we could avoid the worst of the weather, and only set me down once we'd reached a place where the wind and sleet didn't reach us.

"Broccan," Colmon said, once he'd caught his breath. "What do you wish to do? It is still your choice."

My nephew licked his lips, his expression calm, though his eyes were full of emotion. "I will do as my mother asks. I think... when I see her like that... I hate the Descendants." The last words came out in a rush. Hot. "I hate them all for sending her here by herself. I no longer care what happens to them."

"Broccan, many of them do not know—"

"They vote, don't they?" he snapped. "That's what you told me. They vote for the council and the decisions they make." He stared back at the island. "Did you see her? How could anyone send her away and let her be like that? Alone. Afraid. I don't understand."

"Tomas is lying to them," Colmon said. "He is good at that. I fell for everything he said and did for years. For too long."

"I know, but here you are. You saw through him in the end. Others could have done this too." He looked at me, touching the left side of my face that was once scarred and red. "My mother doesn't want us to go back to the fortress, and I think we should listen to her. Why waste a single breath on the Descendants, when all they have done is hurt you both?"

Colmon sighed and rubbed the leather guards at his wrists. "If you no longer want to go to the fortress, what do you want to do?"

"If my mother doesn't want us to stay with her, then I want to live." He pointed at the wilderness ahead of him. "I've lived the last eleven years of my life on an island, the horizon forever hidden. Now I intend to learn about the land I was born into. To make a life for myself. To have friends, maybe a family of my own one day."

Colmon, at last, nodded. "Fódlá, you stay with Broccan. I will go to the council and speak with them. I must explain why I took both the spear and sword away and explain what I believe Tomas has done."

"You cannot do that alone."

"I can. I swore vows when I became a gift-leader. It is my duty to expose Tomas and save the other Descendants from his lies, but this is my duty. Not yours."

"That is not—"

"Fair?" He shook his head. "Dear cousin, I think perhaps it is the council, me included, who have not been fair to you or to Rónnat." He stood tall and wrapped his fingers over the hilt of his sword. "We should respect Rónnat and listen to her. She didn't want Broccan to go and she wanted you to stay



with him until he found a home. You two should stay together. And when I can... when it's safe, I will find you."

Colmon shook hands with Broccan and pulled him close. "Remember what I told you. Mortal speed. Mortal strength. You don't want to injure someone unintentionally, and you don't want to be found out. If it is your wish to live in Ireland without the council's knowledge of who and what you are, this is important."

Broccan nodded and held Colmon tight. "Thank you, cousin. For teaching me. I will never forget your kindness."

"And you, Fódla." Colmon wrapped his arms around me. "I promised your father I would look out for you. It pains me to leave you now, but I have no choice."

"You have fulfilled your vow, Colmon. Many times."

Colmon hugged me, resting his chin on my head. "Stay safe. And if I do not return to find you, keep away from the fortress. Don't ever go back."

"I can't promise this, Colmon. I cannot stay safe while others are at risk, but for now, I will stay with Broccan until I am sure he is settled and happy."

Colmon gave no further argument. "As long as you know I do not expect you to seek me out or seek justice on my behalf. What will be will be." He picked up his bag, hoisting it onto his shoulders. "Now, I will leave first and draw away any of Tomas' spies that have survived Rónnat's storm. Wait a while before you move out of the forest." He turned, gave us one last smile, then walked away, taking the southern path.

Tears fell from my eyes at the sight of his back moving further and further away. Colmon had been my rock over the last eleven years, caring for Broccan alongside me. I was not prepared for him to leave. Worry washed over me too. He had not done as he agreed at the last council meeting and had hidden the treasures of the sword and spear. There would be consequences if he could not sway the council away from Tomas.

Broccan and I waited under cover of the trees, moving a little closer to the edge of the forest so we could watch as Colmon disappeared from sight. A large bird, not a crow nor a starling, a hawk perhaps, flew after him. Moments later, two travellers followed behind, one carrying a fiddle, the other a pipe. They could have been travelling musicians, save they stared at Colmon's footprints in the mud.

Once they left our sight, Broccan stood.

“No. Wait,” I hushed, holding Broccan back. The storm rose again, the wind blasting against the trees and gorse. A foul smell seeped into the air, as mud and sludge from the bottom of the lough swirled into the air with the whirlwind.

Broccan closed his eyes, his ears pressed to the ground. “Someone on horseback is approaching,” he mouthed. “They are coming this way.”

We shifted our bodies behind the thick trees and waited. I could hear nothing, only the wind and the trees groaning. Peering around the trunk, soon I saw the horse pass along the path that Colmon had just taken. Broccan brought his finger to his lips and the two of us pressed our bodies tighter against the tree, leaning into its twisted roots and the gorse surrounding it.

The horse came to a stop by the edge of the lough and the person on the horse dismounted. I watched as his feet met the ground and his hood fell about his shoulder.

*Ardál*, I mouthed to Broccan. This was worse than I had feared. Tomas had sent his cousin, and the only remaining warrior he had left, to spy on Colmon. Had he seen Broccan and I? Did he know we were here? *Could he smell us?*

We stayed still, hardly daring to breathe. The bird we spotted earlier, the hawk, came back. It circled over *Ardál*, then flew over the path that Colmon had taken. *Ardál* checked the footprints one more time, then mounted his horse and galloped away.

“Do you think he knows we are here?” I whispered.

Broccan shook his head. “Colmon stood inside our footprints after he moored the boat, and the wind blowing up the lough mud has hidden our trail and scent. I can’t smell him because of it, which means he cannot smell us.” He looked at the path for a while then stood. “He rides after Colmon. I think if he knew we were here, he would have tried to capture us.”

What did that mean for Colmon? *Ardál* had a hawk and a horse. He could catch—

“Come, Aunt Fódla,” Broccan said, tugging at my arm. “Colmon will know how to avoid him. We must go.”

The storm had died down, now that *Ardál* had left, and the sounds of the forest returned. Birds singing, squirrels running along branches, mice scurrying.

“You cannot call me Aunt Fódla any longer,” I said, brushing the dirt from my dress. “If we are to truly hide from Tomas and his spies, we need new names and a past that will convince other mortals that we are one of them.”

This made Broccan smile. “A new name? You will always be Aunt Fódla to me. I don’t know if I can call you anything else.”

“Similar names will help,” I said. “I shall take the name Finsha. You should take the name Bróg.”

“Bróg? Not too similar? What if we meet someone we used to know?”

“It’s a little similar. But you are twice the size you used to be. Your hair has darkened too, gold now instead of pale straw. And this beard is developing nicely. No one will see the boy inside of this man.”

“Yes, I’ll take Bróg,” he said at last. He rubbed his hand over the growing hair on his chin. “It is you who must be more careful.”

“You think people will recognise me?”

“Not the mortals. You are twice the size too – now that you are not bent over a stick. Your scars have gone. Your hand and shoulder are no longer withered. It is Descendants and their spies that worry me.”

I took out my shawl from my bag. “I will keep using this as a headscarf to cover my hair. That way Tomas’ spies won’t see the red.” I took his arm in mine and gave him a stronger smile than I felt. “So, what is our story? Who are we? Where have we come from? Where are we going?”

“We are brother and sister,” he said. “We are from Rathlin, no point changing that. It’s isolated enough that no one is likely to contradict us, and we are travelling south to find work.”

“What work is it that we do?”

“I am strong. May as well play to my strengths.”

“No, Broccan... Bróg. You will only be asked to fight. You should stay away from that path.”

“I will offer my services in a forge then.”

Broccan cheered up at this suggestion, but it wasn’t as plausible as he believed. He was big and strong, yes, but the mortal weapon-makers took on their sons and nephews to work with them, and there was more skill involved than simply pounding metal. Still, there was no point worrying about this now. Work as cattle herders or shepherds would do for a start. I could spin and weave wool too.

“What direction shall we take?” he asked as he gazed at the horizon.

Broccan's eyes sparkled. Hope burned inside this question. Of course, I knew he wanted to go back to Munster. But that would not be a good idea, not yet, to move so close to the fortress and back to a place Tomas knew we had ties to.

"We will go west." I pointed at the path that wound along the north side of the lough. "We need to keep clear of Colmon for a while, best we go in a different direction to him."

My nephew grinned. "Good idea, Finsha. Let's make a start."

# **Kingdom of the Northern Ó'Neills**

## *Gormflaith*

“Which one is he?” Béinn tugged my sleeve as she peeked out the gap between the tent door and the leather binding sealing it shut.

I played with my rings and bracelets, taking a deep breath before answering. “Which one is who?”

Béinn rolled her eyes. “Don’t play games with me, Gormflaith. You know my meaning perfectly well.”

Smirking, I walked over to the tent door and stood beside her. She was taller than me now, her long, blonde hair in a braid down her back. Eyes blue and curious, just like her father’s. And now, her curiosity was focused on her husband-to-be. Staring out of the gap in the binding, I saw Flaithbertach and two of his men standing outside Brian’s tent waiting for the ceremony to start.

A makeshift altar had been constructed at the edge of the campsite where Father Marcán had blessed the land, and of course, the thorn of Christ was in a box, set in the centre of the altar, alongside a painted scroll of biblical scripture.

I didn’t believe that a wedding in a war camp on unconsecrated ground was in keeping with Christian doctrine. My time in Northumbria had taught me about these things, as the English cared more for these Roman rules than the Irish. But Brian, as High King, and with the Bishop of Armagh in attendance, could do whatever he wanted. No dogmatic monk or bishop dared contradict him, least of all the faithful Father Marcán, who beamed with pride at the thought of conducting the ceremony.

“Which one?” Béinn nudged my arm.

I glanced once more at the groom, though I didn’t recognise the two men who stood beside him. Probably brothers or cousins. The man to

Flaithbertach's right didn't look pleased, despite the fact my husband had allowed him out of the hostage tent for the day. The other was trying to smile and appear cheerful, though I could see through the act, even from here. I appraised all three men. Flaithbertach was smaller than Brian and the other men in his family, wiry rather than muscular. Long, brown hair and a beard. Not attractive in the way that some men could be, but not unpleasing either. The two men who stood beside him were less impressive specimens. Smaller again, one with a dour expression and balding at the front, while the other was stout with no chin.

"Which would you prefer, Béinn?" I asked. "The one with no hair or the one whose face melts into his neck."

Béinn marched away and sat in her chair, cheeks pink. This only made me laugh.

"If you aren't going to be any help, there is no point talking to you."

"It is the one with the long, brown hair and beard. He's not so bad. Not too much older than you, either. Lucky girl."

She leaned back and closed her eyes, not entirely sure I was telling the truth, but resigned to her fate, nonetheless. An older cousin, Caomibhe, came over and threaded wildflowers into her hair. That former slave, Lucrecia, and her daughter Felicia followed with more flowers and jewellery. These three friends who had sailed with her from Killaloe made a fuss over Béinn, and eventually she began to smile and laugh along with them as they prepared her hair.

It wouldn't be long now until the ceremony, so I paced along the new rug. Brian had brought it in especially for the wedding, so that the well-trodden ground wouldn't ruin the ladies' dresses. Meadowsweet flowers were woven into them, giving the tent a sweet smell that was much superior to the damp moss the men usually trampled in with them.

"How is everyone on this fine day?" Tairdelbach bounded into the tent, grinning. His mop of thick, brown hair was tied back this morning. He was twenty now, as tall as his father, but his face was still not ready for a beard, which gave him a more youthful appearance than other men of his age.

"Excited," Donnchad said, rushing over to hug him.

"Morning, Donnchad," Tairdelbach said, lifting my son up onto his shoulder. "Urgh, I can hardly take your weight anymore. You're getting too big."

“Put him down, Tairdelbach,” I snapped. “Your sister is getting ready for a wedding. She doesn’t want an oaf like you causing a commotion and getting mud everywhere.”

“An oaf like me?” Tairdelbach set my son down and placed his hand over his heart. “I am deeply wounded.”

Donnchad giggled, gazing adoringly at Tairdelbach, who next to Brian stood as a god to my son. Only eight years older, he was the big brother that Sitric could never be, such was the age difference between them.

“Come, Donnchad,” he said, lowering his voice into something like Father Marcán, and holding his hands together. “Let the ladies have their tent, away from disgusting men and their brutish oafishness.”

“No, you don’t have to go, Tairdelbach,” said Béinn, holding out her hand for her nephew to take.

“I think I do.” Tairdelbach spun Donnchad around and walked toward his aunt, who was not much older than he, arms opening. “I only came to tell you how beautiful you are.” He flicked his half-eaten apple into the air, which Felicia caught, half laughing, half scowling at the young prince.

“The queen is right,” Lucrecia said. “Out! Before you ruin Béinn’s dress.”

Tairdelbach scampered away, dragging Donnchad with him. “Come, let’s leave the women alone. We can practise for the games.”

“Practise what?” I could hear the fear in Donnchad’s voice. “You know I’m not fast or strong.”

“You are good with a bow and there’s an archery competition. You can enter that one.”

“Oh, yes.” Donnchad’s voice brightened as he walked out through the tent door.

“There you go,” Tairdelbach said, sealing the tent door shut behind him. “Let’s show these northerners what we are made of.”

Béinn rolled her eyes but gazed fondly after her nephew and half-brother.

“Father says there will be two days of games after the wedding,” she said to me. “It seems excessive.”

“You are the daughter of a High King. Excessiveness is to be expected.” I smiled at my stepdaughter, whose hair was now finished. “Hundreds of years ago, there were games in Ireland called the Tailteann Games, where

men from every part of Ireland competed. Your father wants to bring back the glory of those days to the Ireland he has conquered.”

“Father told me about them once. What games did they play?”

“Oh, much the same as the ones he has arranged for today. Wrestling, charioteering, archery, running and sword-fighting for the men who are strong. Chess for those who believe themselves to be wise. In the Tailteann games, there were also competitions for singing and craftsmanship, but, well, there was no time to organise those.”

“It all sounds a bit barbaric to me,” Bébinn said, twisting at the sleeve of her dress. “Why must fighting and wrestling be included?”

“Men are barbaric,” I said. “That is why.”

“But they also want there to be peace,” Lucrecia added, kneeling at Bébinn’s feet, tears gleaming in her eyes. “That is why this wedding is so important. The Cenél nEóghain are the last clan to surrender. With their defeat, at last your father can hold all of Ireland together. You have made this possible, princess.”

I turned and moved to the back of the tent, so I didn’t reveal the expression on my face. Why was Lucrecia crying? *What was Bébinn’s marriage to her?* If anything, it should irk her, as it did me, that women were handed out like chattel to hold men to their promises. She had been a slave once. She should know better than anyone what it was like to be bought and sold. Why couldn’t men give their word and keep it, without needing flesh in their beds to hold them true?

But I couldn’t say this today. Bébinn took pride in the fact she had helped forge the peace her father desired, and perhaps this marriage would be a good one. Sometimes that happened. Sitric and Sláine, after a rocky start, had found something between them. Perhaps that was possible for Bébinn too. And even if it wasn’t, she was not my concern. A daughter of Brian was not so special that she could forgo the fate all other women in the land endured.

Glancing outside through another hole in the seam, I noticed Sitric and Murchad talking. All the men of the royal families were standing by Brian’s tent now. Father Marcán held the thorn of Christ in his hands. Waiting.

Many men and women stood on the hills beyond. Thousands. People from every clan that Brian had conquered. King Sechnall and his son. The King of Wexford. The King of Connacht and the King of Bréifne. All here.



But it was another man who held my attention. Standing beside Falk, Leif and Sitric was a scarred man in a plain brown robe.

“What is it?” Béinn asked.

I raised an eyebrow.

“Why are you smiling like that?”

“The wedding is about to begin,” I said. “Everyone is here. All of them waiting for you.” I slipped one of my rings from my hand, one that Sitric had given to me when we lived in Dublin. “I want you to have this. I never had a daughter, but it’s been a joy to watch you turn from a child into a beautiful young woman, and now a wife.”

She stared at the gold engravings and the red gem embedded within, her eyes narrowing.

“I can’t take this. It is too generous.”

“Yes, you can.” I pressed it into her hand. “It is for you. A gift. Keep it. From one queen to another.”

She gave me a sweet smile, then a kiss on the cheek. “Thank you, Stepmother. It is beautiful.”

The tent door opened, and Brian walked inside, just in time to see Béinn and me embrace, which during our whole eleven years living in Killaloe together had never happened before.

“Look, Father! Look at the present Gormflaith has given me.” Béinn showed him the ring, which made him smile too.

“That is very kind, Gormflaith. Thank you.”

“It is a beautiful gift for a beautiful woman. I am very proud to be her stepmother.” I regurgitated a handful of rehearsed platitudes and their smiles widened. In fact, I’d go as far as to say that Brian’s smile right then was the warmest he’d ever given me.

“It is joyous for me to see our family so happy.” He looked at his daughter, his expression moving to something tender. “Now, Béinn, are you ready?”

Béinn held her father’s hand tight. “Yes, Father. Lead the way.”

“Wait.” I beckoned Sitric over and he walked toward us.

“You can escort me to the wedding, my son.” I smiled at Brian. “We should walk out united, yes? Show everyone what Ireland can be when we join together, rather than fight.”

“A wonderful idea, Mother.” Sitric smiled at Béinn and kissed her on the cheek. “You look very beautiful, and I know that Sláine would have

wanted to be here. She will be very happy for you when I tell her the news.”

This made Bébinn blush, and her father patted her hand. “Come, my love. It is time.”

Together they walked out of the tent and the crowd hushed as all tried to see Brian’s daughter. Was she as beautiful as the rumours? From the gasps and whispers, I gathered she satisfied them all.

“Come, son,” I said. “Our turn.”

Sitric took hold of my arm. As we walked into the crowd, I pulled him closer. “There is something I need to tell you.”

“Yes.”

“Brian will announce something after the wedding feast. It will upset you. You must react, but do not let your temper get the better of you, and in the end, you must tell Brian you accept his word.”

Sitric smiled wider, waving at some of the men he recognised in the crowd.

“Can you tell me what this news is?”

“No. The news will pain you and that must show. Best that the reaction is natural.”

He nodded, and we continued to walk. The roars of the crowd rose into the air, filling it. All of it for Brian. This was a joyous day for him. He had everything now. Peace. The high-kingship. I hoped in the days to come he remembered it.

For it was all about to fall apart.

# **Kingdom of the Northern Ó'Neills**

## *Fódla*

The rain was soft in the morning, the type of rain I loved the best. Gentle and nourishing, and never intended to last for long. The first few days we had travelled slowly, Broccan doubling back to make sure no one was on our trail. So far, he was satisfied that we had avoided the spies Tomas had sent to watch Rathlin Island, and that all of them tailed Colmon.

It meant freedom, and yet I couldn't relax. My cousin was much in my mind. A warrior, a strong one, but not immune to Tomas' strength should he wish to unleash it. I could only hope that Colmon had avoided the spies until he reached Fennit Island and could speak to the Descendants on his own terms.

"Who is the king of this land?" Broccan asked on the fifth day of walking. "An Ó'Neill, no doubt, but which one?"

"This land belongs to the Cenél nEóghain." I pulled some edible flowers from the gorse and handed a few to Broccan. "My father always said they were the most fearsome warriors in Ireland."

"Is that true?"

"My father rarely exaggerated, so I would say yes. From my own experience, I would also say that the people of the north can appear cold, but they are noble at heart. Don't worry. They won't see travellers pass by without offering food and drink."

I spoke of food, but that was not what Broccan was thinking of. He wanted to know what kind of life he could make for himself here. What awaited him? Was this the right place to stop? I had told him of what happened to the mortal children when they decided to leave the fortress. With no family to look after them, they usually found work tending cattle. Herding was hard work, and it did not earn much. The winter months were

cold and wet, the summers cool and damp, the days monotonous. Broccan would not be content with such work, and given his height and frame, I also guessed kings would offer him something else. Warrior. Guard. Scout.

This was who he was. This was his gift. I just hoped he would control it as Colmon had taught him, and I hoped he understood fully what this would entail. Guards may spend much of their time patrolling their king's dun, but when the battle cry sounded, the king expected them to line up on the field and bloody their swords. So far, Broccan only knew training – bruises and cuts the only consequence of holding a weapon. If he pledged allegiance to a king, that would change.

"I think we should move south. Connacht is the most peaceful kingdom. The kings there—"

"What is that?" Broccan pointed in the distance, over the hills to the west.

"I can't see anything."

"I can. There are hundreds of tents. Thousands of people."

"Is it a war camp?"

Broccan stared into the distance. "No. Not a war camp. I can hear music on the wind. Can you not?"

"You are a warrior. Your sight and hearing are better than mine."

Tightening my grip on my shawl, I continued along the southern path. After a few paces, I realised that Broccan had not followed.

"Can we go there?" my nephew asked. "I'm curious. What could be happening, do you think?"

"We haven't been invited, Broccan."

"You said yourself the people of the north won't see travellers go without food and drink. Even if that's all we receive, it will satisfy my curiosity." He grinned, his face flushed with excitement at the thought of being around so many people.

How could I say no to him? This was what being mortal was meant to be. Meeting new people, finding friends, finding love. Warnings and words of caution swelled within me. Decades of living in the fortress made these thoughts difficult to shift, but Broccan had lived among the mortals, and his experience was one of friendship and camaraderie. He wanted that again.

"Then we should go. Just for a short while. If it's not a war camp, it could be the coronation of a new king, or perhaps the funeral games of one who has passed."

“Games?”

“Aye, sometimes to celebrate a new king or mark the passing of an old one, they hold competitions for the young men and women. Archery and singing and the like.”

Broccan’s eyes sparkled, and I could tell he strained his ears to try to make out what was happening. Despite looking desperate to run, he linked arms with me, and together we walked toward the campsite. “This will give us a chance to practise using our new names. Bróg and Finsha. Bróg and Finsha.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “A bit of practice is no bad thing. It is hard to lie, you know. At first, when you don’t know the person, the lies roll off the tongue, but when you get to know them, it becomes harder. The closer to the truth you stay, the better.”

“Is that from your experience at Killaloe?”

Broccan tensed as he spoke. I had told him lies there. It had nearly broken our relationship when he found out. The young saw things as good and bad, and it had taken him a long time to understand those lies had protected us. But in truth, my lies to him had not been the hardest. I had found it much harder to lie to Lucrecia and Murchad. They had seen through me at times and did not understand why I kept my secrets from them.

We continued walking, and when we crested a small hill, I saw what he spoke of. Hundreds of tents. Thousands of people. *Why were they all here?* The peace treaty I had witnessed between King Brian and King Sechnall had not been half as great as this.

“Are you sure this isn’t a war camp?”

“Yes. The men are not wearing armour. They are dressed in silks and jewels. I can hear laughter too. I think you are right. It must be a coronation.”

The sound of laughter and the sight of brightly coloured silks alleviated my fears, and I walked toward the camp with less trepidation. Indeed, as we approached the edge of the camp, I could make out men dressed in fur cloaks. Some walked about with cups of ale in their hands, while only a handful of guards stood along the perimeter, and even they chatted among themselves, all at ease.

It was only as we came closer that one of these guards noticed us and walked our way.

“Good day,” Broccan said to him, smiling.

“You are here for the wedding?” The guard, an older man with grey hair and very few teeth, looked us up and down. Our garments were travel-worn, the hem of my dress and Broccan’s trousers splattered with mud.

“No. My sister and I are looking for work.” Broccan peered past the guard, impressed by the huge crowds of people. “Whose wedding is it, if you don’t mind me asking? It’s a grand one, by the look of it.”

The guard nodded up the hill to where a large tent stood in the centre of the camp. “It’s the wedding of Bébinn, daughter of High King Brian Boru, to Flaithbertach, the King of Cenél nEóghain.”

“Bébinn?” Broccan stepped forward, his eyes scanning the crowd.

“You know the princess?” the guard asked.

“No.” I shook my head, pulling Broccan back into line.

My nephew quickly rearranged his expression. “No,” Broccan agreed. “We have heard of her beauty, though, and of course we have heard of her father. I wish Princess Bébinn and King Flaithbertach a good day for their wedding and many years of happiness to follow.”

I tugged Broccan’s arm. “We should go. We are not invited.”

The guard smiled. “It is King Brian’s wish that all may attend. Anyone who wants to join in the games may enter them as well.” He clasped Broccan’s shoulder and laughed. “I’d guess a big lad like yourself might be good at some of them. You should have a go. There are prizes to be won.”

The guard let us pass, and as Broccan stepped inside the perimeter, a large grin spread over his face. “Come, Finsha.” He held out his arm for me to take. “Why don’t we watch the games? It will be fun.”

I fixed the veil around my hair, making sure that all strands of red were concealed under the fabric, then followed my nephew, head lowered.

“This is not a good idea,” I hissed, once we moved away from the guard.

“Why?” Broccan gazed into the crowd, glancing right, then left. “Don’t you want to see your friends?”

“We cannot speak to them, Broccan. They cannot know what we are.”

“I know that, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t see them. I only wish to know if they are well.”

“Didn’t you hear what the guard said? Brian is the High King now. Tomas will have spies at such an event as this. What if they recognise us?”

“I’m twice the height and size I used to be, and Tomas’ spies don’t know what I look like, while you...” He glanced at the padding under my dress

and tightened the shawl over my hair. “Keep your head down and no one will notice you. We won’t stay for long. If I notice any Descendants or birds circling, we will leave right away.”

“Broccan,” I shook my head. “This is—”

“It’s fine,” he said. “I know you are scared. But I have to do this. I have to see my friends again. I won’t speak to them, and we will leave before nightfall. Please.” He held out his arm, his eyes bright and full of confidence, and so I took his arm again and followed his lead.

He was right, of course. No one would recognise us. The field was filled with thousands of people, and with my hair covered and padding under my clothes, I doubted even Tomas would notice me if I passed him. However, it wasn’t only this fear that held me back. It was my heart. It wasn’t ready for this. I wasn’t ready to see Murchad, and so unexpectedly. When we met again, I had imagined it to be in Killaloe. I would have a speech rehearsed. Now I had nothing. My mouth had turned dry, and words escaped me.

Would he notice me if I walked by his side? What would I say if he did? Even worse than the thought of being a stuttering fool was the thought that he might not be alone. He could be married by now, his love for me a faded memory. There could be a beautiful woman at his side, children about their feet.

A loud roar centred me in the present. “An archery contest,” Broccan said. “Let’s go and see.”

We moved to the side of the competition square. A line of men queued to have a go at striking the target, which was a straw man, distanced a good hundred foot away from where the archer stood. A wooden board was set over his chest with a red dot at the centre.

We stood a while, watching as the competitors took their turns. Only a few of the men were both strong and skilled enough to hit the target with the arrow, even less able to hit the dyed red circle in the middle.

As the queue dwindled, a young man with long, light brown hair stood forward, a younger boy with dark curls at his side. Cheers from the crowd went up as the younger of the two stepped forward.

“Good luck, Donnchad,” the young man shouted.

The young boy scrunched up his face, took a deep breath, then lifted the bow. His arms quivered as he strained to pull back the string and he released too quickly. The arrow drifted wide and short of the mark.

“Not to worry, Donnchad,” the young man said cheerfully. “Another year or two and you’ll be able to reach. You did much better than Fionnbharr, though don’t tell him I said that.”

Donnchad, momentarily saddened by his failure, broke into laughter. “You try. I bet you won’t be able to hit it either.”

The young man picked up the bow and a new arrow. “Stand aside, Donnchad,” he said, winking. “Watch and learn.”

Donnchad sniggered and stepped back.

“Good luck, Tairdelbach,” someone in the crowd shouted, and a wave of raucous cheers filled the air.

I stared at the young man again. Was this *the* Tairdelbach? *Murchad’s son*. Yes, I could see that it was. Like Broccan, he had grown at least two feet, and his rounded cheeks had disappeared into sharp edges, his body lean and muscular. I nudged Broccan, but his eyes were already fixed on his old friend. This was why he had wanted to come here, I realised. His warrior eyes and nose had located Tairdelbach before he had suggested walking this way.

Tairdelbach pulled back the string until it was taut, held it firm, then released. The arrow flew forward, striking the target, not quite centre, but only a little to the left.

He raised his hand in triumph and cheers erupted once more from the crowd. Donnchad clapped his hands and hugged Tairdelbach. “You make it look so easy,” I heard him say.

“I’m older and taller,” Tairdelbach replied. “When you grow, everything is easier. Promise.”

“That’s the best of the day,” the organiser of the competition shouted. “Is there anyone else who wishes to take their turn? It is not every day you have the chance to compete against a prince, and not just any prince, the grandson of the High King!”

“I’ll have a go,” Broccan shouted.

“Of course,” the man said. “What is your name and clan?”

“Bróg mac Colmon. From Rathlin Island.”

The man raised an eyebrow at the mention of Rathlin Island, it being so far away, but handed over the bow and a new arrow, nonetheless.

“Good luck,” Tairdelbach shouted over, but he gave Donnchad a smug wink at the same time.



Broccan, grinning, held up the bow and arrow, focused on the target, and then released. Unsurprisingly, the arrow hit the centre of the target and the crowd cheered. I bit my lip. What was he doing? This would only draw attention our way. I glared at my nephew, but he did not look my way.

The organiser examined the mark. “Bróg and Tairdelbach’s marks are close. Very close. Who wants to see them compete against each other, one-on-one, to see who the true victor is?”

The crowd erupted, and the men along the sides of the competition chanted Tairdelbach’s name. Tairdelbach laughed, buoyed by the commotion. Broccan smiled too and bowed to acquiesce.

“Come, Murchad,” I heard someone shout. “Your son is about to win.”

Unease turned to discomfort, and I shuffled back a little, hiding my body behind the woman next to me as Murchad came onto the field. Eocha came with him, followed by Tadc and someone I thought must have been Tadc’s son, for he looked so like his father. They spoke among themselves, smiling and laughing, talking to the people around them. “Come on, Tairdelbach,” Eocha shouted. “Do us proud. You’ll not be allowed to drink with us tonight if you lose!”

The insults and counter-insults started, Tairdelbach giving back as good as he got, with Donnchad chiming in now and then in support of Tairdelbach. Now that I thought on it, I realised that this boy was the son King Brian had had with Queen Gormflaith. He had the same dark curls as the queen and the look of his father about the face. One by one, I examined each of the men of Munster who had come to watch. I couldn’t take my eyes away from them. How well I had once known them. How well I knew their voices. Eocha, Tadc, Murchad, but Murchad most of all. And once my eyes found his face, I could not look away.

“Let me in,” I heard a young voice say. “Come, Mama! Tairdelbach is winning.”

“Ha! Of course he is.” My old friend, Lucrecia, and her younger daughter walked through the crowd, the men parting to make way for them so they could stand beside Eocha. Felicia grabbed her mother’s arm and bounced on the balls of her feet with excitement. Lucrecia’s hands linked into Eocha’s, and he placed a gentle kiss on her cheek.

Lucrecia grinned, her warm, brown eyes taking in the scene before her. Eocha said something to her, and she nodded. *She was happy*. I could see that. She had more lines about her face than when we last met, but the

worry that had plagued her coming up to the wedding of Maria had left her. Joy had replaced it, merriment, and a hint of mischief.

The crowd roared as Tairdelbach and Broccan lined up, waiting to take their turn.

Tadc and his son shouted words of encouragement to Tairdelbach. Murchad, however, said nothing. He watched his son, smiling, but silent. He stood tall, his fur cloak thick and rich, his clothes made of the finest silks, yet there was something in the way his shoulders hunched forward, in the way his eyes glazed over, that concerned me. Was he injured? Unwell?

I found myself wanting to go over to him. To speak as we used to. Or at least to find a way to touch him so my gift could take away any pain.

“First to take up the bow and arrow is Tairdelbach, son of Murchad, Prince of Munster!”

Tairdelbach strode forward, his expression more serious than it had been before. He picked up the bow and arrow and stepped on the mark to take his shot. Once again, his aim was true and his strength enough to see the arrow hit the mark. This time, dead centre of the red circle.

The crowd cheered.

“Well done,” Broccan said to Tairdelbach.

“I’m sorry,” Tairdelbach replied as he handed over the bow.

“Don’t be apologising yet,” Broccan returned, picking up a new arrow. “After I shoot, I might have to apologise to you. It would be a shame if your family don’t allow you to drink with them on my account.”

Broccan moved over to his mark, took a deep breath, raised the bow, then released. The arrow flew forward with such force that it hit Tairdelbach’s arrow dead centre, slicing it into two pieces, both of which tumbled to the grass, leaving Broccan’s arrow as the only one on the centre of the mark.

The crowd silenced until Tairdelbach shouted and raised Broccan’s hand in the air. “We have our champion,” he said, grinning. The crowd’s cheers grew, and the talking started.

“I’ve never seen that happen before,” said the man beside me.

“No, me neither. It was the angle, you see,” the man beside him replied, “or else Tairdelbach’s arrow had a weak hold on the wood.” To my relief, these remarks were one of enthusiasm rather than suspicion, and as I examined the crowd, I could only see expressions of delight rather than intrigue.

“You must come into my father’s tent to celebrate,” Tairdelbach said to my nephew. “And to receive your prize.”

“Are you sure you’re allowed in now that you lost?”

Tairdelbach chuckled. “Ah, don’t you be worrying about me. I’ll get into whatever tent I want to.”

Broccan nodded, his eyes turning to search for me in the crowd. Pushing a smile onto my lips, I flicked my hands at him, waving him away. *I had to let him do this. I had to let him go.* Broccan smiled and nodded, then left the tournament square with his friend, walking toward the huge tent in the centre of the field. The rest of his family followed behind, some commiserating with Tairdelbach, others shaking Broccan’s hand.

I followed behind, keeping my distance. Tairdelbach and Broccan were laughing together, just like old times. It made me smile. This was everything Broccan had wanted.

I held back while they walked into the tent. Despite its size, it was full of people, with barely any room to move. Inside, music played, pipes and fiddles and harps, while over at the far-right side of the tent, some men and women were dancing.

Even from the outside edge, I felt out of place. The tent was for the kings and queens and their friends. Winners from the competitions were allowed in, but most of them were dressed in fine furs and silks too. The men who had the most time to practise their sword skills, charioteering and archery were those in the royal families who had no other work to do. Only a few, Broccan being one of them, seemed to hail from poorer families, dressed in wool and plain cloaks.

My eyes roved over the musicians and dancers. Lucrecia and Felicia were there, dancing. Such was the scarcity of women, they had no shortage of partners. Behind the musicians hung the various royal colours of the Irish kingdoms. Symbols of Munster, Connacht, Ulaid, Bréifne and now the Ó’Neills of Ailech.

*So many people from all over Ireland together.*

It was a wondrous thing. “Would you like some ale?” a voice asked. “You look cold.”

I turned.

Lucrecia stood behind me, out of breath from dancing, but now holding a cup of ale in her hand. “I was about to get more for myself and my daughter, but then I noticed you didn’t even have a cup.”

“Oh, thank you,” I said, taking one of the cups from her. “I am here with my brother,” I pointed at Broccan. “He won one of the competitions.”

“Oh, yes. He did very well. It’s been a wonderful day.”

“Yes. A princess of the south marrying a king of the north. That doesn’t happen often.”

“It doesn’t, but that is how peace is kept once the fighting is over.”

“King Brian was fighting with the Cenél nEóghain?”

Lucrecia narrowed her eyes, and I licked my lips. “I am from a small island off the northern coast. We don’t hear much about what happens on the mainland. Excuse my ignorance.”

“Oh, I see,” she said. “Yes, they were fighting, and now there is peace. All the kings of Ireland have sworn to honour King Brian as their High King. I’m sorry... I’m sorry I stared at you just now... It’s just, the way you looked, you reminded me of someone. She was from the north too... but never mind that.” She nodded at the dancefloor. “I’d better keep an eye on my daughter. Come and join us if you wish.”

“Oh,” I smiled, “I’m not much of a dancer, but thank you for your kindness.”

Still smiling, she walked away, her attention now on Felicia.

So, there had been a war. And now peace. It was what Murchad had wanted.

My gaze travelled to the top table. The bride and groom sat there feasting and talking to each other. King Brian sat by their side. As cold-eyed as ever, he watched the people inside the tent. Occasionally, he whispered to Father Marcán or watched his daughter and new son-in-law. His eyes sometimes drifted over to Murchad, Tadc and Donnchad, who stood talking in the corner. Broccan was still with them.

Finally, I let my gaze rest on Murchad. Polite as always, he replied to those who spoke to him, but he was not engaged. *Was he as lost as me?* No wife stood at his side, no children. Had he truly waited for me like he promised? Twisting the ring he had given me about my finger, I closed my eyes and imagined what he would say to me, how he would look, if he realised that I was here. In my head, he smiled. A slow one, building.

“Kings and queens of Ireland and all my guests, may I have your attention.”

I opened my eyes to find King Brian Boru standing. The music stopped, the dancers came to a halt, and the conversation stalled.

“Firstly, I wish to give congratulations to my daughter and Flaithbertach on their wedding.” He raised his cup, and everyone raised theirs in return.

“However, I also wish to speak to you as High King, for my happiness today cannot just be for myself and my own kin.” He gestured to the men at his side. I recognised a few of them. Sitric, King Máelmórda of Leinster, King Sechnall of Meath. “All the provincial kings have now sworn oaths to me, and as High King of this land, I have made a decision, a decree, that all must obey.”

A deathly silence descended on the crowd. A decree? High Kings did not usually tell other kings how to rule their own kingdoms. Fear and curiosity flashed in people’s eyes, though none dared to whisper them out loud, at least not yet.

“When the Vikings first came to this land, it changed our society,” Brian said. “The raiders killed and maimed. They stole men, women and children, and sailed them north. Many of my own family and friends were killed or captured in these raids. I am the youngest of thirteen sons. In years gone by, I would never be king. But here I am, speaking to you all now, my brothers all dead and gone.

“Of course, times have changed. Dublin and Wexford are the homes of the Viking people now. They trade with us. Our daughters marry their sons, and their sons marry our daughters, and life has returned to what it was before. Save for one thing.”

He held one finger in the air. “Slaves.”

Lucrecia smiled as he said that word, though I could see concern among the men in the crowd. King Sitric stared at King Brian, his face very still.

King Brian continued. “When I fought against the Vikings, I did so, fully accepting I might die. It was right that I might die, for my father had died, my grandfather too, and the land of Ireland is full of the bones of our ancestors. Death is natural. But to be taken slave? No, I could never be a slave. My father was not a slave. Neither was my grandfather. To take freedom away from a person is the worst thing a man can do to another. And so, tonight, I have made a new law. To take another as a slave is forbidden. To keep a slave is forbidden. To hold men or women or children in your possession with the intent of selling them is forbidden, even in the Viking ports. From this day forth, all those whose feet touch Irish soil are free.”

His blue eyes searched the other kings. Many of them bowed their head instantly, a sign they agreed to his words, but others did not. Many of the Irish kings had slaves in their households, and they would now have to give them up or pay them.

But it was not the Irish kings who would be most affected. No. That would be King Sitric of Dublin, as it was his port where the slaves were brought into and traded from. It was his face that most of the people in the tent stared at, waiting for his response.

King Sitric glanced at his mother, then finally spoke. "If Vikings can no longer port at Dublin and sell their slaves, they will go to Bristol instead."

"Aye," Brian said. "That is true. However, I'm sure many will come to trade in the other goods we all need. Fur, butter, wood, jewellery, food. That must be enough."

Sitric pondered his words a while, sighed, then stood. "I must confess that I have thought on slavery often. That might surprise you, but I think of my grandmother, Ethlinn, a former queen of Leinster, who was a slave. I also think of Onguen, my first wife, who was a slave and never was able to recover... and I understand why you do this." He bowed his head. "As my High King and father-in-law, I agree to follow your new laws, painful as they may be for the traders in my city."

Now that Sitric had acquiesced, every other king bowed their head too.

King Brian held up both hands and gazed around the room. "Ireland must become a land that is free. Free of slavery. Free of theft and robbery. A woman from the northern tip of Tory Island should be able to walk to Killaloe in the south with a crown of gold on her head and not be harmed. That is the land I envisage for my people. A land that is safe. A land where our women and children do not live in fear."

He gestured to a thin man who sat beside Father Marcán, dressed in a fine silk tunic and with a golden chain and cross about his neck. "The Abbot of Armagh agrees with me. And I've also pledged to send monks and priests to England and Frankia and Rome, so that our holy men can record all the teachings we lost due to Viking raids." He smiled. "Rome says we are an uncivilised nation, but that is not true. With the Church's help, we will become an enlightened people. That is my pledge to you as your High King."

Once again, he held out his cup, and every man and woman in the tent held out theirs.

I watched Lucrecia as the news sunk in. The smile on her face was like the sun. This was all she had desired. It was the promise Murchad had given her when Sitric had made the ships for King Brian all those years ago. Finally, King Brian had acquired enough power to bend every king in Ireland to his will, and he had put his promise into action.

Tairdelbach's laughter caught my ear once conversation in the tent resumed. He was talking to Broccan, and Broccan was laughing back. My nephew was happy here. And for once, I believed that the good life I wanted for him might be possible. *This was where he was meant to be.*

But what about my life?

I was not free. Not when Tomas and his spies searched for me. Another image came to me. One of Tomas and Murchad together. One where Murchad lay dead at my feet. No. That could not come to pass.

Now that Broccan had found his friends, the only way to take control of my life was to return to the fortress. Colmon, once again, had taken on so much, but this time I could not let him. No more. No more hiding away and letting others take on danger for me. It was time for me to return to Fennit Island, so I could stand at his side when he confronted Tomas.

Then, when I returned to Murchad, I would be truly free to live as I wished.

I walked over to Broccan and tapped him on the shoulder. "Can we speak a moment?"

He moved away from his friends, eyes bright. "I'm so glad we decided to come here. It's just like old times, Tairdelbach has even asked me to join his guard."

"And what did you say?"

"I haven't said anything. We agreed to leave at nightfall and so..."

"But you want to join?"

"Yes."

"Then that is your choice. Your mother wanted me to help you find your friends. Family. A new home. Perhaps this is it?"

Relief spread over Broccan's face. "We can find a ráth to live in. Close to Killaloe but far enough away that no one will come looking for you."

"No, Broccan. Now that you have found your place, I have something to tell you. I must go to the fortress."

"No," he said, taking my hand in his. "Why?"

“You are safe, Broccan. With friends. This is what Rónnat wanted, but I can’t stay behind when Colmon is going to the fortress alone. I must confront Tomas and be free of him. Any life without doing that will only ever be a half-life. I will always be afraid, scared of being caught. I don’t want that anymore.”

“Then I will come with you.”

“No.” I said the word louder than I intended. “Your mother did not want you to go there. This is what she wanted for you.”

“I can’t let you—”

“Yes, you can.” I squeezed his hand. “I am over one hundred years old. I have lived longer than you, and I tell you, I can walk to Fennit Island myself. Didn’t you hear what the king said? A woman wearing a gold crown can walk from one end of Ireland to the other without fear. If that is the case, I can travel to the fortress alone. Promise me you will stay with your friends and not follow me.”

Broccan paused, then glanced back at Tairdelbach. “I will let you go if that’s what you want.”

“It is.” I smiled, brushing his hair from his shoulders. “Good luck, nephew. Find life. Find love. I will see you again.”

I turned and walked away quickly, lest he should change his mind and come after me. He watched me leave, his smile gone. It would come back though. Tomorrow, when the day was new, and his friends were with him.

As I moved past the entrance to the tent, I stared back inside. Murchad still sat at the top table. He stared at the plate in front of him, seeing and yet not seeing.

Twisting the ring around my finger, I left the tent and began my journey to Fennit Island.



**PART II**

**SUMMER/AUTUMN 1012**

# **Fennit Island**

## *Colmon*

The sandbank bridge looked as beautiful as it ever had. A path bathed in gold as the dry sand shimmered in the afternoon sun. The fortress beyond, however, held no allure, not in the way it once had. Dark and grey, my stomach sank as I beheld it. No longer did it represent strength and unity. Only control and oppression.

I inhaled, pausing to hold the air in my lungs. The sky was full of cloud, white and yellow and grey, the air thick with salt, and sharp with it. Was this the last time I would breathe fresh air, clean and in the open?

*Most likely. Tomas would be angry that I had deceived him. Others too. I had no Cerball at my side anymore. No Ciarán to guide me. One by one, my friends had fallen. And what of Fiachre? What had Tomas made of his betrayal?*

Crows, twenty at least, circled overhead. Most of them had been following me for weeks. I'd made no efforts to elude them. In fact, I had made myself visible often enough that had any lost my trail, they quickly rediscovered it, for I wanted them to follow me. Then their eyes would be far away from Fódla and Broccan. Ardál, on the other hand, oh, I'd had fun evading him.

This hadn't been the first time he'd tried to reach me. Over the eleven years I'd lived at Rathlin with Fódla and Broccan, he'd tried to make his way onto the island several times. Tomas was his cousin, and so I had expected it. It had taken a little longer for him to visit than I expected, though. Tomas had trusted me, and it must have taken a while for him to realise that my compliance at the last council meeting had been an act... but Tomas should have known that sending Ardál to Rathlin was pointless. As the gift-leader of the warriors, the ancient spells obeyed me and only me,

and no one could come into our camp without my permission. Not even another warrior. Ardál had tried though. And then tried and tried again. First as himself in the day, then an attack during the night, then Gobnat had come with him, disguising him as another man. Then as a bird. Then a rat. Nothing worked.

Now I was no longer on Rathlin, and the spells no longer protected me, Ardál was free to find me, but still, he could not. It wasn't lack of effort or skill, for I had taught him all I knew. So had Cerball. Ardál was a talented warrior, no doubt about that. Quick. Strong. Deadly. But not clever. And it seemed during my time away, he had not improved in that regard, not even with Tomas as his new mentor.

The sound of hooves echoed in the distance, maybe ten miles behind me, and I could smell Ardál, even from here. I smelled his fury, his rage, his questions. *Why had I left him? Why had I not trusted him?* I wished I could have, but he was so close to Tomas that I couldn't risk Broccan's safety by revealing my plans to him.

I made my way to the sandbank and looked over at the other side as I stepped onto the sand.

Tomas already stood on the opposite side, two crows perched on the stone wall beside him. Arms folded, he watched me. Behind him stood more Descendants. At least fifty. Gobnat was one of them. Shae and Laeg. *No Fiachre. No Affraic.*

Any joy that remained in my body, faint though that emotion had been for many years now, leached out of me. The path before me led to death. I knew it now. The sea lapped at the sand, the waves like fingers of dark-haired spirits clasping for my feet, hoping to pull me under. A thought came to me, *run away*, but no... I didn't want to. *Did I?* I felt like letting the spirits take me. To swim with them deep under, to die in their arms with the sunlight far above and the dark reaches of the sea beneath. Who would miss me? Who would know of my despair and weep? *No one.*

My heart ached with the thought of it and a tear trickled down my cheek.

*Don't listen to the harp, Colmon, or the song it sings to you. Do not despair and weep.*

Rónnat's words edged into my mind. They had made no sense at the time when we were safe on her crannog, but now I saw their meaning clearly. Shae, who stood beside Tomas, was a harpist. His mouth moved, singing a song, low and under his breath, weaving his magic over me.

The song of melancholy was strong indeed. I had so much of my own that his words had almost killed me. My speed and strength protected me from many things, but songs... my ears were open to them. This was a song to make my soul heavy and my body weak. A song that would make me run and appear guilty, or one that would make me jump into the water and never return. Either one would work for Tomas.

I clenched my fists and used my warrior-magic to block my ears from song spells and enchantments. After a few moments, the dark thoughts lifted, thoughts of spirits faded, and I raised my head. I stared at Shae, keeping my eyes trained on him until he had the decency to stop singing and look away. It was forbidden to use gifts on another Descendant. He knew this as well as I. But Tomas had broken this promise many times over and now others followed his example.

"Colmon, son of Darius, you have returned home," Tomas said once I reached him.

Even with him standing on the step leading into the fortress, I stood taller than him, and I made a point of lowering my chin to meet his gaze. "I have."

"Do you come bearing the treasure you were sent to retrieve?"

"No."

"Then you have violated the agreement passed by the Descendants."

"As have you, Tomas. As have you."

Tomas gave a cold laugh. He pushed his blond hair away from his face and glanced at his supporters, who laughed with him. "Jealousy is an ugly thing, Colmon. I did not think it of you."

"I am not jealous, Tomas, but I would like to talk about why I don't have the treasures. Why don't you call a gathering? That way, everyone can hear what I have to say."

Tomas gestured for me to approach. "A gathering, is it? If we go to the main hall, you can speak to everyone now."

Surprised he agreed to this so easily, I searched the faces of those here, all of them Tomas' friends or possible new recruits to his cause. "You still have spies in the monasteries and nunneries. They should have the opportunity to listen too."

"We've been expecting you for weeks, Colmon. All those who wished to make it have come." He glanced up at the crows, then turned and made his way into the fortress. "Come."

“What about Eilis? Is she here?”

He sneered as he turned. “She still has not returned to us. You would know this if you had stayed. You might have even helped find her.”

He turned his back to me and marched into the great hall, the other Descendants moving behind him, and I followed. Other Descendants came out of the fortress wings as I passed through the hallway, their whispers growing behind me. Some gave me hard stares, others looked frightened. Some faces didn’t appear to register any emotion at all.

As I entered the great hall, I watched to see who took seats at the top table. Tomas, *druid*. Gobnat, *witch*. Laeg, *cupbearer*. Shae, *harpist*. Cenn, Fiachre’s son, sat in the weapon-maker’s chair. No healer. No prophet. No warrior.

The warrior seat would be filled soon, for I could hear Ardál’s horse crossing the sandbank bridge. He had pushed his horse hard. The mare panted as she crossed over. Sweat gathered along the blanket that Ardál sat upon, and I could sense the heat from her leg muscles as she galloped into the courtyard.

My attention moved quickly to Cenn. If he was leader of the weapon-makers, it meant Fiachre was dead. Guilt washed over me. How? Was it self-inflicted or had those who craved his power destroyed him? He’d been in a bad way when I left, that was true. It was why he’d given me the location of the sword. Given to drink and bouts of despair, both had consumed him in the last years of his life, eaten him from the inside out. I could not chastise him for it, for despair had often claimed me too. I would almost believe that his death was self-inflicted save for the last conversation we’d had, where he told me the location of his treasure, the sword, because he didn’t trust Tomas or Cenn.

Glancing next at the final two empty chairs on the high table, I paused. I didn’t expect to see a prophet, but a lack of healer surprised me, for there were many of them here.

“Where is Affraic?” I asked.

“She is searching for Eilis. We sent her a message, but it seems she didn’t want to ret—”

“No,” a voice said from the back of the hall. “I am here.”

Surprise flashed across Tomas’ face as Affraic walked along the aisle, two of her daughters, Báine and Étaín, at her side, but he recovered quickly. “I didn’t expect to see you, Affraic. We all thought you were too far away.”

“I’ve travelled far and wide looking for my granddaughter, but I have returned to hear what Colmon has to say. I was lucky that one of my grandsons heard of it. Whispered of, should I say. Strange that the message you sent *me* never arrived. It appears to have arrived for almost everyone else.”

“It is strange,” Tomas answered, his expression even. “All are welcomed, and all were summoned. If you don’t wish to tell me where you are going, then it is not my fault the messenger struggled to find you.”

Affraic shrugged and walked to her seat at the top table, but she eyed the rows of chairs as she passed. The hall was more than half empty, which went against what Tomas had said at the outside steps. Many were missing. Many of Eilis’ family and friends, in particular.

“Where is Fiachre?” I asked. This time I did not address Tomas, but rather Fiachre’s son.

Cenn gripped the arms of his chair and licked his lips as he met my gaze. “My father is dead.”

“How did he die?” I leaned in, using my gifts to see if he spoke to the truth.

“It is no surprise, Colmon. He drank himself into his grave. A new drink arrived. Something the monks brewed. Whiskey, they called it. He drank so much of it that it poisoned him.” He paused to catch his breath. “It was not long after you left.”

“I am sad to hear that. Fiachre was a good man.”

Cenn nodded his head. “He was.”

Relieved that I detected only truth in *his* words, I turned my gaze to Tomas. “No healer came to his aid in time?”

Tomas shook his head. “He knew what he was doing. He locked himself in his room, hid away. The will to live had left him and he did not want to be saved.”

Lies simmered within Tomas’ words. He had done something to my friend. Or had Shae? Had my friend heard the song of melancholy and been unable to resist?

“Talk to us, Colmon,” Tomas said abruptly, his voice sharp. “Where have you been? Why did you break your promise to the council to bring back the spear of the Tuatha Dé Danann? And I know you have Fiachre’s sword in your possession.”

I cleared my throat. "When I was last here, we spoke the night before the gathering. In the high tower. Do you remember?"

Tomas nodded. "You were my friend that night, or at least I thought you were. Such treachery is in you, and I did not see it. I could not believe it when you did not return. Truly, it was as if you had stabbed me in the heart."

"You are right, Tomas. I was not your friend that night. My mission was to discover what had happened to Eilis."

Affraic shifted in her chair while her daughter Báine tilted her head to the side, holding her breath.

"I spoke to Cerball before he died, Tomas. He met me in Dublin. He said that he had smelled Eilis' blood on your clothes. That night in the high tower, I asked you questions about Eilis and what you knew about her disappearance. I know you lied to me when you said she ran away."

"You suspected me of hurting her?" Tomas' voice boomed over the hall. "Me? Your friend? If you harboured such suspicions, why did you not just ask? Why not say to the council then and there?"

I turned around. Taking in the empty chairs in the hall, the sullen faces. So much fear.

"What is going on here, Tomas? I see a hall with no warriors. No prophets. No more weapon-makers. Witches who cannot transform and druids who cannot brew the harder potions. We are dying. Our magic is fading. Is keeping hold of power so important to you, Tomas, that you cannot see how to save us?"

Tomas slammed his fists against the table. "I can see how to save us, you fool! The treasures will save us. It is you, in your pride, who has prevented us from regaining our strength. No children have been born with a gift since you betrayed us, and of those born in the last fifty years, all of them have powers which are lesser than their parents. Why did you not do as you were told? If only the treasures were here, we would..."

"No," I snapped. "You do not want the treasures to see if our powers will grow stronger. You want them for yourself. You want to be the next High King of Ireland. I saw that ambition in you when we last spoke. You even admitted it. Fiachre knew it too. That is why he told me where to find the sword. Affraic knows I speak the truth. She knows that Eilis' disappearance is not because she ran away. You killed her because she vowed to stand against you."

Tomas shook his head.

“I’ve always thought you too hard, and I did not agree with the new laws that made us live here, but I believed you thought they were for the best. That was until you sent Tigernach to kill Rónnat’s son, Broccan.”

“I did no such thing.”

I spread my hands. “Then where is Tigernach? What excuse have you given for his disappearance?”

“I assumed he grew weary of being confined in the fortress and decided to leave us. He’ll return in time and will be punished for his absence.”

“He will never return because he is dead. You sent him to kill Broccan, son of Rónnat, because you had discovered that Broccan was a warrior, and you didn’t want the other Descendants to know that children born between Descendants and mortals could have gifts.” Whispers rebounded round the hall. “And Broccan’s gift was strong. Very strong.”

“You talk nonsense,” Shae interjected. “How could Rónnat’s son have been a warrior? He was born of a mortal father.”

“Because, as Tomas knows, children born of mortal parents *can* have a gift. He also knows that gifts skip generations. Tomas has withheld this information from you because he doesn’t want us to live alongside the mortals anymore, despite the fact he knows there is power in their blood. Where is your crow, Senna?”

“Senna is dead,” Tomas said. “Sadly, crows cannot live forever.”

“Senna did, however, live for an unnaturally long time. That is because she was no crow. Senna was the granddaughter of Sárnait, a witch, but also the daughter of Sárnait’s giftless child, Airmid. When Airmid brought Senna to your father, seeking counsel, you promised you would help her. Instead, you gave Senna a love potion to force her loyalty, then turned her into a crow to spy for you.”

“Lies! Lies and wicked insinuations which I will not suffer!” Tomas gritted his teeth. “Let us move back to you. If Tigernach is dead as you claim, who killed him?”

“I did. I did it to... try to save Broccan. Before Tigernach died, he said you had given him a potion and he couldn’t remember why he was there.”

“You killed Tigernach?” Tomas shouted. “You come here, throwing accusations at me, when it is you who is in the wrong.” Spittle flew from his lips, and he threw his hands in the air. “Tell me this, where is Fódla? She is also missing. Did you kill her too?”



“No.”

“Then where is she?”

“I don’t know.”

“You lie, Colmon,” Shae said. “I can sense the change in your mood. Tell us the truth.”

“I don’t know where Fódla is.”

That was the truth. I didn’t. Not anymore.

Tomas shifted in his seat, giving me a hard stare. “If you had only come to me, said what Cerball had told you, I could have explained. When I captured Eilis, Gobnat put chains around her ankles. They chaffed her. Gobnat can confirm. The blood was merely from when I bandaged the wounds. Nothing more.”

“You lied to me when you spoke of not knowing what happened to her. She did not run away.”

Tomas placed both hands on the table and leaned forward. “Let us get this right. This Broccan, he’s dead, so cannot testify. Is that correct?”

“He cannot testify. That is true.”

“And Senna, where is she? Gone?”

“I don’t know where she is.”

“Gone. Just like Fódla. A pattern is emerging. Oh, and Tigernach is dead, who you’ve just admitted killing.” He glared at me, his skin as pale as I’d ever seen it. “If anyone is guilty of heinous crimes, it is you, and one of them by your own admission!”

He stared out at the Descendants sitting behind me. “Did you hear him? He killed Tigernach! He killed a fellow warrior.”

Gobnat stood, her chin quivering. “All those who think Colmon is guilty, raise your hands.”

Before I could turn, ivy sprung from the walls and wrapped around my arms and throat. Gobnat had summoned it to hold me in place, just as she had done to Rónnat twenty years ago. I had expected it and quickly unsheathed my sword, using it to cut through them. I had no intention of being imprisoned by Tomas.

Shae stood up, and he began to sing. His song was haunting. Slow. Sad. I could feel it weigh down my arms, my thoughts. *Surrender*, the song said.

Quickly, I used my warrior gift to block out the song-magic.

More ivy came, more witches came to Gobnat’s aid, and the vines wrapped around my legs and arms, my stomach too. Ardál crept ever closer,

moving out of my vision, hoping to hold me so that the vines could pull my sword from my hand.

But even with the ivy snapping at my ankles and wrist, he could not touch me. I was too strong. Too fast.

“Stop this,” Affraic screamed, running from her seat to stand in front of me. She pushed the ivy away. “Tomas! This must stop!”

The ivy stilled. Ardál paused. I stalled too. It was right that I let Affraic speak before I escaped.

Affraic sighed and turned to face me. “Colmon, the truth is very important. Please lower your sword. We must speak without the threat of violence.” She smiled at me. Stern, but then Affraic was stern, yet always fair. “Gobnat,” she said, “remove the vines.” She stepped closer to me, her hand reaching up to touch my cheek.

The vines loosened, and slowly I lowered my sword. “You are right, Affraic, we should—”

It was only as the blade pierced my side that I realised what Affraic, my old friend, had done. My attention had been on Tomas, on Ardál, on the witches and Gobnat. Not on Affraic.

She pushed the blade deep, twisted, then pulled the knife out of my body. Blood poured down my legs. I fell to my knees.

Kneeling beside me, she kept hold of my face. “I will hold my hand here, Colmon, so that I can heal you. You will not die, but you will weaken.”

The ivy crawled over me again, sliding up my legs and arms now that I could no longer cut it away.

“Why?” I whispered into her ear.

“I told you,” she replied. “The truth is important to me.”

I glanced at Tomas as my vision blurred. Confusion marred his face as he glanced at Affraic and the knife she had thrust into my stomach, but triumph swiftly replaced it. He had me where he wanted me.

Affraic’s healing gift flowed into me, and the flesh began to knit together. Now that the ivy had me in its grip, I could not move, and I was too weak from the blood loss to struggle.

Tomas and Gobnat stood and walked along the back of the table.

Quickly, Affraic crouched down and held her bloodied knife by my face, pointing the tip at my throat.

Magic drifted from the blade. I could smell it. Despite its lack of ostentation, this weapon was powerful. So powerful that it had a name,

though I did not know what it was.

“Did you kill Eilis?” she whispered into my ear.

“No.”

“Were you there when she was killed?”

“No.”

She lowered the blade and secreted it into her cloak as Ardál came over to lift me. Tomas and Gobnat approached, and Ardál raised my head so I could see them. Then he slammed something hard against the back of my head and a dull blackness filled my eyes. Stars. Light.

And then nothing.

Just words. Tomas’ in my ear.

“Time for you to give me the sword and spear, Colmon.”

“Never.”

Tomas didn’t reply to this. Instead, he laughed.

\*

I awoke in a cell. Dark. Underground. Only the faintest sliver of sunlight came from the ceiling, and I could hear the tide crash against nearby stony rock. I was underneath the high tower, I realised. The scent of old blood filled the air. I recognised a few of them. Fiachre’s was one. Did I smell Fódla’s also? It was very old, but most certainly hers.

It took a while for the pain to register, but once it did, it caught my breath. The skin along my legs burned and throbbed.

“It’s the tendons on the back of your legs,” a voice said. Tomas’ voice. “I’ve cut them. And I’ve smeared a toxin on the wound. It aches, yes?”

I felt a blade cut my leg again.

“It’s made from a spice they grow in India. A trader in Dublin makes the most wondrous poisons from it. It causes paralysis first. If left untreated, it will kill you, just as it killed Fiachre. Don’t worry, though. Before you die, a healer will come and take the poison away... and then we will start this all over again.”

Saliva built up in my mouth, then slid down my chin. I couldn’t move my limbs. I couldn’t speak. A garbled noise was all that left my mouth, but Tomas, clever, always so clever, knew what the question was.

“Why am I doing this?” he asked. “You think I want information, I suppose, but that is not it. If I wanted, I could simply force you to drink the potion of truthfulness to learn where you’ve hidden the treasures, but I suspect that would not reveal anything new. I’m not stupid. You’ve left them on Rathlin Island. Once you die, the ability to control the magic surrounding the island will transfer to Ardál. So, no, I’m not worried about the treasures. They will be mine soon enough... and Fódla. I have many spies searching for her. She will be with me before long. And despite your noble attempt to protect Broccan, I know he is alive. I will find him too.”

The next question came to me. So obvious that I didn’t even try to summon the energy to ask. Tomas would tell me. Pride edged his voice. He would want me to know.

“The poison is merely to keep you company while you stay here,” he continued. “A gathering has been called. Everyone will be summoned back from the monasteries and nunneries. Everyone. I want every Descendant to see you die. Killing Tigernach was a big mistake on your part. Admitting to it, utter folly.”

His knife sliced my skin again, and this time I felt a cold liquid rub over the skin.

“All of your accusations have been spoken before, but there is no proof. In the end, not even Affraic believed you. The only choice I leave you with is how you want to die when the sentence is passed.”

The chair he sat on slid across the floor, followed by his footsteps as he climbed up a ladder and the thudding of a trapdoor shutting.

The sound of the waves crashing against the rocks moved over and over in my mind. Until at last the pain in my legs became so great that my mind fell into darkness.

# **Kingdom of the Northern Ó'Neills**

## *Gormflaith*

I walked toward my husband, smiling, but not too much. I had added a few more white hairs this morning and made my skin a shade paler, the wrinkles under my eyes deeper. Weddings were tiring affairs after all, especially ones where the celebrations lasted for weeks.

“Husband,” I said, my chin trembling, just a touch. “Sitric and Máelmórda leave today. Donnchad too.”

Brian gave me a sympathetic smile. “Yes. The festivities are at an end. My army leaves tomorrow. So does Sechnall’s.” He rolled up the leather map he studied so often, deep in thought.

He was right. It was time to leave this place. For everyone. I spared a thought for poor Sechnall. Once High King of all Ireland. Now not even the greatest of the kings in the north. That was Flaithbertach. To add salt to Sechnall’s wound, Brian had also ordered the men of Meath to leave the campsite at the same time as the army of Munster. It might appear to anyone unschooled in how Brian operated like a mark of respect, but it was far from that. It wouldn’t do to leave Sechnall behind, to plot or to fall out with Brian’s new son-in-law. Either would give rise to a headache for Brian. No, it was best the egos of the Northern and Southern Ó’Neills were separated by both distance and winter.

“I was thinking of travelling with Máelmórda,” I said. “That way, I can make sure Donnchad is settled in Leinster.”

Brian’s smile faded. “I don’t think so.”

I shrugged, giving the slightest of pouts while I took a step closer. “It’s been so long since I was at the place of my birth, Brian. I had hoped to see it again, just the once. Perhaps I could even bring one of Máelmórda’s daughters back to Killaloe? It might be nice to have some company now

that Béinn is wed and I won't stay long. I'm sure that by the time I'm finished I will be able to meet you in Cashel. Isn't that where your new fort and church are being constructed?"

His jaw remained firm set.

"Also, if I stopped in Dublin on my way back, I could see Sláine and our grandchildren too?"

My husband ran his hand along his neatly trimmed beard. Family. *Sláine*. Ah, that had made him think. I waited. To push any harder would only undo all my good work.

My husband didn't speak for quite some time, so I busied myself with folding his garments, playing the part of a dutiful wife. By every god that men prayed to, Brian was infuriating. Why did every decision always take so long? He stared at me when he thought I wasn't looking, studying me carefully. I hoped he caught the white hairs and wrinkled skin. That would help. I was no longer the Dublin beauty that kings and Viking earls might sail south to capture. I was a mother. A *grandmother*.

"Very well," he said at last. "But don't be away for long. We will only be at Cashel for a month, two at the most, and then I ride back to Killaloe. I don't want to have to send my men to fetch you."

Grinning, but not too widely, I kissed him on the cheek. "You won't need to. That's long enough for me to make sure Donnchad has made friends with his cousins, and to see Sláine and the children. Thank you, husband. I'll send Donnchad in to say farewell."

Brian frowned, and for a moment I thought I saw his chin waver. Quickly, he steadied himself. "I wish I hadn't agreed to the fosterage now. I'm not ready to let Donnchad go. He is my autumn child, and your brother is not the most careful man. I..."

"I have the same misgivings as you, Brian, but it will do Donnchad good to see more of the world than the view from a war tent or a *church*."

"Yes. I know."

Brian and Amlav had many similarities, though Brian would balk if I said so. However, this was where they differed. Amlav had scarcely noticed Sitric. With five sons and a flock of daughters already grown, his younger son had held no interest for him. Brian was the opposite. The youngest of his children, Béinn and Donnchad, earned more sentiment than the others combined. Not that he didn't love the older ones. He did. Murchad especially could do no wrong. But affection? That was reserved for the

weaker and most fragile of his offspring. I couldn't tell why. He had lost many of his relatives as a child. Viking raids. Betrayals from other Munster kings. Not to mention his favourite sister had been executed by her husband. Did he see any of these lost relatives in his youngest children? I could think of no other reason for such sentimentality in a man who was otherwise made of stone.

"I know you will miss him," I said, reaching to hold his hand, "but this will be good for him. And Máelmórda and Sitric will join us at Killaloe for Lughnasadh. I'll tell Máelmórda to bring Donnchad so we will not be parted for long. Just think of how excited Donnchad will be to tell you of his adventures?"

"Yes, yes. He will like that. He has a way with words, does young Donnchad." Brian inhaled and tapped his knuckles against the table. "Send him to me now, then. Best you both leave while it's early and the weather is still good."

I smiled and left the tent. Thank the gods he had agreed. I would have left anyway, perhaps saying that I was too distraught to leave Donnchad's side, but it was much better that I had the veil of Brian's permission. He would soon discover my betrayal, but the longer I could keep it secret from him, the better.

\*

Sitric and Máelmórda waited for me on Sitric's ship. It had been agreed that we would sail to Dublin, giving Donnchad a shorter ride to Máelmórda's dun in Leinster than if we rode out from here. Brian kissed and hugged his son and I worried that he might change his mind, but at last we were given leave to go.

Falk and Leif rowed Donnchad and me to Sitric's new ship. Not quite as grand as the legendary *Long Serpent* that Olaf had once sailed, but perhaps more beautiful. Sitric and Máelmórda were busying themselves with readying the ship and their men, so did not notice our departure from the mainland. The only one on the ship who watched the rowboat was a solitary figure dressed in a plain brown robe.

"You are as uncomfortable as me, Gormflaith. I can tell," Falk said.

"With what?"

“With that monk. Father Benedict.” He glanced at Olaf, then turned away, shuddering. “I wish he’d stayed with Styrbjörn. He’s... unnatural. Always watching. Always silent. Like a rat.”

“What was his reason for staying with us?” I asked Falk.

“He said he wanted to offer his prayers to Sitric,” Falk growled. “What nonsense. And if Sitric had any sense, he would not risk the anger of Thor and Odin by allowing such a creature to follow him.”

“Sitric has converted now though, hasn’t he? I suppose sometimes he must please the new God and take pity on His followers.”

Falk spat overboard and pulled the oar all the harder. Leif rolled his eyes and gave me a sly grin.

The Christians had taken hold of Dublin in the last few years, from what I heard. Outnumbering the pagans for the first time. I could only imagine how much this irked Falk and others like him. They knew that Sitric’s conversion had been lip service to Brian, but still, a monk at Sitric’s side would only make this feeling of unease worse.

“He’s more likely here as a spy for King Svein,” Leif said, tapping the side of his head. “Sitric will have to watch what he says in front of him.”

“That might be the only clever thing you’ve ever said, boy,” Falk said, sweat dripping from his brow and grey hair.

“Gormflaith, you must tell Freya that her father gave me a compliment. She will never believe it otherwise.”

“I’m not sure I believe it myself.” I grinned. “What’s happening to you, Falk? Getting soft in your old age?”

Falk smirked. “Old age! Pah, I am young yet.”

As if to prove his point, he rowed even faster, and within minutes, he and Leif had us alongside the longship.

“Ready, Mother?” Sitric said as he helped me, then Donnchad, aboard. “Ready to see Dublin?”

“I cannot wait, son,” I said. “But before we go to Dublin, we must go to Orkney.”

“Orkney?” He frowned.

“The Viking war in England is set in motion, my son. We need to find our own allies before it starts.”

Sitric rubbed his hands against the woven fabric of the sail and shouted at his crew to tighten the ropes. “To Orkney.”



\*

*Orkney.*

Still part of Scotland.

Still perpetually caught in a storm.

Still a barren wasteland.

Who knew why Sigurd had fought so hard to keep this squalid piece of rock, though everyone knew he'd dug deep many times to defeat prowling warlords who'd tried to take it from him.

This time, the landing was not as bad. A storm did not howl at our backs, nor did we have to wait to plead our case with Sigurd's guards to enter the fort. Small mercies indeed. Instead, the guards listened to Sitric's name and brought us directly to the feasting hall.

Sigurd greeted us at the front doors. He was older than when we last met. Some twenty years separated this sudden arrival and my last visit, and yet, he was more impressive than before. Something I'd seldom seen, this ageing in reverse. His ugly purple veins were gone, so were the fleshy chins and red skin. What had happened? Had he stopped drinking the red wine he so favoured or had war breathed life into the man who had fallen into a life of comfort and decadence? Perhaps that was why he fought so hard for this land. Not for the rock and soil, but for the soul that lay beneath his flesh.

"Gormflaith," he said, smile growing. "Welcome to my home. Who is it you have brought with you this time?"

His gaze roved over my eldest son first.

"Sigurd," I said. "This is my son, Sitric Silkbeard, King of Dublin."

Sigurd's smile grew as he took in my son. "Sitric, I have heard much about you. You are the image of your father Amlav."

Sigurd's eyes met mine as he said this, though only for a moment. Ah, yes, I had led him to believe that Sitric's parentage was in question the last time we spoke, hadn't I? A ploy to earn favour and to make him think of the match between Olaf and Gytha. It had worked, too. I'd have to find a way to make amends.

"This is my second son, Donnchad. Son of King Brian, High King of all Ireland."

Sigurd held out his hand to my youngest son. "An honour to meet you, young prince."

Donnchad gave an awkward grin, then shuffled behind me.

“What brings you here, Gormflaith? Another storm blew you off course?”

“Not this time. This time we are here with purpose, if you will listen.” I gave him a look of absolute sincerity, like a nun taking her holy vows. “May I ask a favour before we enter your hall?”

“Anything for an old friend.”

“Do not toast mine or Donnchad’s names when we feast this evening. We are here to talk of secrets, and it would do no good for word of our presence to reach my husband.”

“Very well. I will toast Sitric, Falk and Leif. Their faces will be known to many, but you shall remain as nameless as the ghosts who haunt my hall. I could introduce you as Falk’s sister and nephew. Would that do?”

“Aye, it will do very well.”

Sigurd nodded, and we entered his feasting hall. Sitric first, then Falk and Leif. I held Donnchad’s hand and let Sitric’s men walk around us, then past us and over to an empty table at the back of the hall.

Olaf walked beside me as I waited for the men in front of me to move. “Does he know who you are?” I whispered in his ear.

Olaf shook his head. “I am a ghost myself.”

Quietly, he made his way over to the table with the rest of the men.

“Go with the monk.” I nudged Donnchad, who stared around the fortress with wide eyes and an open mouth as he walked. This was much grander than anything he’d seen before. Antlers and walrus tusks adorned the walls, alongside axes and swords, and he gazed at them all in turn, hardly seeming to hear me. Serving girls brought over a fish stew, and the men ate greedily as soon as the bowls landed in front of them. *Sea air made a man hungry*, Amlav had always said. I believed it to be true. Even Donnchad dove into the strange food, though I noted he also accepted a glass of wine from one of the serving girls. He was too young, but somewhere like this was the best place for him to first indulge in it. No prying relatives and priests to keep him in check.

Satisfied that he was safe, I made my way to the top table and sat beside Leif and nodded agreeably when I was introduced to Sigurd’s friends as Falk’s sister. We ate and drank, letting the hours pass by. Sitric relaxed enough to talk and laugh with Sigurd and his friends, but I remained silent and watched. Sigurd didn’t drink. Not even a drop. He ate and talked of

trade with my son and Falk until his hall emptied and those who remained were engrossed in their own conversations.

“So why are you here, Sitric?” Sigurd waved his hand over his hall. “What do I have that you need? You have more gold and silver than any other king I know.”

“I need men,” Sitric said. “I’m sure you know what Svein’s plans are.”

“England?” Sigurd shrugged. “That has been a dream of his for a long time. Ever since he killed my friend Olaf, for it was also Olaf’s dream to be King of England, and Svein knew that two men could not harbour such an ambition at the same time. One had to die so the other could succeed.”

“Will Svein succeed?” I asked, no longer able to hold my tongue.

“I think so,” Sigurd replied. “He has the men. The fleet. And England is weak like never before.”

Sitric drummed his fingers against the table. “Then you will know that once he has conquered England, he will not be satisfied. He will look north to Orkney and west to Ireland. We must put on a united front, or else he will see us as weak too.”

Sigurd nodded. “What do you suggest?”

“I suggest that when Svein invades I also go to war – with King Brian.”

Sigurd choked back a cough. “Go to war with your brother’s father? Your mother’s husband? Your wife’s father?” He grinned at all the links he’d conjured and snorted. “That will cause a falling out, no?”

Sitric shrugged away the question. “Many of the Irish kings do not like that he has won, nor do they like the rules he has placed upon them. The only way I can keep Ireland out of Svein’s hands is if I am king there. It will be safer for my brother, mother and wife if we are united against Svein. The Irish kings will see the sense in this too.”

“And the only way you can become the High King of Ireland is with my men, I suppose?”

“Yes. Men is what I lack. Dublin is rich, but the population is small. The numbers of those who can fight for me, smaller still.”

“Life in Dublin is too good,” Sigurd said. “An easy life makes men soft. You need the sea and the wind to keep you hard.”

“It is true, but unfortunately, I cannot call the wind to my shores any more than you can stop it coming to yours.”

Sigurd chuckled at this. “What will you give me in return for my men?”

I widened my eyes at Sitric from where Sigurd couldn't see. *Don't give away too much*, it reminded him.

"A port within the Kingdom of Ulaid."

Sigurd's smile faded into something more serious.

"I will make you jarl there," Sitric continued. "You can set up a longphort and trade as you wish. It will strengthen your position in Orkney, and the isles along the northern coast of Ireland will be yours too."

*Too much, Sitric. Too much. You should have let him ask for the isles, not granted them before he'd even contemplated the port.*

Sigurd sighed. "A port and the isles? I think I should need more farmland too. But... I'll think about your offer. For now, I shall retire to my room." He waved one of the slaves over and asked them to show Sitric and the rest of his guests to their rooms, then promptly disappeared.

"Can you take Donnchad into your room?" I whispered to Sitric as we stood to follow the slaves.

"Why can't he stay with you?"

"If you want an army without giving away swathes of land, then I need to speak to Sigurd. Alone."

"Don't." Sitric grabbed my hand. "Don't debase yourself."

"Debase myself?" I hissed. "Who do you think I am? I said I wanted to *talk* to him. We are old friends, and I am not a whore."

Sitric, embarrassed at what he had insinuated, left me to follow the slave girl to my room, and took a yawning Donnchad with him. "Come, little brother," I heard him say. "It's been a long day. And you did well on the ship. Only sick twice. You are improving."

The door closed behind them, and I made my way toward Sigurd's room.

Carefully I opened the door and stepped inside. "Evening, Sigurd."

Sigurd held out his hand, a gesture that welcomed me into his room, though he did not smile. "I thought you might come to plead your son's case."

"I believe he spoke well enough himself this evening." I closed the door behind me. "He is right, you know. Once Svein has England, he will look north. Orkney is positioned so conveniently between England and Norway. Svein will want it."

Sigurd grunted and sat on his bed.

"Is that why you have stopped drinking? Why you look younger than you did last time we met, even though nearly twenty years have passed?" I

walked over to him and ran my hand over his arm, feeling his muscles underneath his woven shirt. “You are preparing for war, I can tell. Why not fight with Sitric? You have men, but not enough, and nowhere near enough gold to tempt more to fight for you. Sitric has plenty.”

Sigurd stared at me, stared at my fingers that ran over his wrist. “You know, I believed you when you said Sitric was mine.”

“I know. I am sorry.” I sat beside him. “I came here all those years ago when I was friendless and alone. I thought that perhaps you might not even remember me, for it had been nineteen years since we’d last met.”

The stony line of his jaw relented, his eyes flashing hot. “Not remember you? How is that possible? Look at you. You have the face of a woman half your age. More beautiful than any other.”

I brushed my hand against the white hair and lines on my face. “Maybe once that was true. Not anymore.”

Sigurd put his finger under my chin and lifted it. “You are a treacherous beauty, Gormflaith. Just like the ocean. I am drawn to you, even though I know you would pull me beneath the waves where I cannot breathe.”

“Harsh words,” I said, a little breathless. “I am not as dangerous as you think. Not to my friends.”

“Am I your friend?”

I nodded, lowering my eyes just a little.

“I would still make you my wife.” All pretence at stoicism left him with those words. Despite the rediscovered muscles in his arms, the control over his drinking, his renown as war chief, he was as vulnerable in this moment as a newborn babe.

“I have a husband,” I said, “but if Sitric has his way, maybe one day soon I won’t.” I grinned as I peered up at him, and he pulled me closer.

We kissed as we undressed each other and fell onto his bed, giggling like we did the first time we lay together in Dublin under Amlav’s roof. Oh, these kings of men. What fools they were.

\*

Once Sigurd fell asleep, I lit a candle and crept out of the room. The night was dark, and the halls were quiet. Hopefully, no one would see me.

“Enjoy yourself?”

Jumping at the unexpected voice, I stared into the darkness and thrust my candle out. Olaf, hood covering his face, stepped forward into the dim candlelight.

"I hope you did," Olaf added. "Was it worth it?"

"I cannot tell yet."

"He is in love with you, you know."

"Is he?"

"As am I."

Love? Did I dare think such a thing from Olaf? Could a man like him truly love anyone other than himself?

"If that's true, then why did you not knock the door down and pull him off me? He had me. Twice."

"Why would I do that? Who am I to thwart your plans and deny your pleasure? I'm only a monk. Not a king."

"Then why are you here?" I inched closer, so close I could feel his breath on my skin. "Did you watch?"

Olaf smirked. "I'm here to introduce you to someone."

He stepped back and gestured for me to follow him before he slipped out of the candlelight. His footsteps led me to the room at the very back of the hall. I half thought he meant to seduce me, but the further I walked, the less likely it seemed. Dark corners might be a welcome place for secret lovers, but not this dark corner.

I placed my hand over my nose. "It stinks. Where are you taking me? The pigsty?"

"No. This is where Ethla, mother of Sigurd, lives. She is a witch, just like you, and she wishes to speak with you." He opened the door, and a fresh waft of foul air washed over me, making my eyes water. I glanced at Olaf again. This wasn't a trick, was it? He wasn't going to imprison me here? The thought made me pause. The old me might have refused. Walked away. Shouted. But I was a Fomorian. A witch. Equal to any foe, and I was not afraid.

I stepped inside. The smell became more pungent as I neared a bed at the back of the room. I clenched my stomach to keep myself from vomiting.

"Come closer," a low voice hushed. "Closer."

Olaf ushered me forward, and I made my way over to the chair beside the bed.

"Gormflaith. I have seen you in my dreams."

The voice was old, low, and the candlelight not strong enough to make out the owner. I set down my candle and held out my hand. Fire rose from my fingers into the air and spread along the torches covering the walls. There. Now I could see.

The image matched the smell. An old woman, withered and frail, lay on the bed. The bedsheets looked clean and freshly made, which made me wonder how the smell was so strong. Was it simply her? Decaying and rotting before my eyes?

“Dreams of me?” I repeated her words. “Have you?”

She nodded, revealing a set of black teeth. “I am a witch. I see things.”

I examined her more carefully. She might have been a beauty once, her cheekbones still high and her eyes a dark emerald green.

Giving her no reaction, I held her gaze. “You are of the Tuatha Dé Danann, are you not?”

“Aye, born of them. But not one of them. They cast my mother out. One hundred and twenty years ago. She had no gift. Mud on their boots, she was, but then she had me... and I had a gift. A gift they craved, but my mother did not want to give me to them after how they had treated her, and so she taught me from the lessons her mother had tried to pass on to her.”

I didn’t know if I believed her. Was this a trick? Was she a Descendant spy sent to test me?

“Tell me of your dreams, old woman.”

“I cannot remember them all. My mind, it often wanders far away. I am lost for years, my son says. Talking nothing but gibberish. That is why he keeps me here, locked away. At first, I embarrassed him with my ramblings, then he became fearful that I should share my visions with his enemies. It is difficult, my dear. You cannot trust the water, you know, it tells so many lies.”

She inched a little closer, her face contorted with the pain of moving her bones even a little. “But today, I am awake, and I see, and I have something to tell you.” She smiled. A black, tar-like saliva ran over her teeth and tongue, bringing with it a fresh wave of the odour that permeated the room. I held my breath and swallowed the bile that had rushed into my throat.

“A vision like the one about Sigurd’s battle standard?”

“Ah, yes. That was the first dream I had about my son. Of course, Sigurd told everyone. The idiot. He had not yet learned how to hold his tongue.”

I thought of Sigurd's battle flag and the rumours surrounding it. It was said that when his standard was raised in battle, he would win, but the man holding it would die. Rumours like this circulated for every king. *The gods had blessed them, their sword was forged by dragon fire, they were Odin reborn.* Men flocked to such rumours, but of course, eventually, these kings died, and the rumours died with them. But this one... the story about Sigurd's standard, it had held over the years. Sigurd had never lost a battle when his flag was raised, and true enough, every standard bearer had died. None of his warriors would hold it for him anymore, it was said. Only slaves or old men, tired of living and dreaming of Valhalla, their blades tied with rope to their other hand. Of course, untrained slaves and old men were always more likely to die on the battlefield, and as such, I had never paid it much heed.

This dismissal had been a mistake. There was power in Ethla's dreams. Truth.

"Tell me, Ethla. What have you seen of me?"

She took me in, pausing a moment for her blackened tongue to wet her lips. "You have two futures ahead of you. In one, you are Queen of All Ireland. I have seen it. Seen the men and women of the land bow down to you. I have seen scorched earth and the dead lying in heaps. I have heard their weeping and wailing, but still, the living, they kneel."

"What is the other future?"

"Death. A hard death before you can realise the first path. A woman will kill you. I've seen her face flash before me."

My fingers gripped the fabric of my dress despite myself. "What does she look like?"

"I do not know. To see her face clearly, I need to summon another dream."

"Then do it."

The old woman coughed, her thin body shaking and a black tar trickle running down her chin. "My magic is fading, Gormflaith," she wheezed. "I'm ageing now, just as one day you will."

"You don't have enough power to summon a dream?"

She croaked and spluttered onto the pillow beside her, black and red droplets splattering against the woven sheet, and a fresh wave of her putrid smell rose into the air.



“I do,” she gasped. “When I have my wits about me. But I need you to promise me something first. Before I use the last of my energy to see this for you.”

I raised an eyebrow. I hated making promises. “Go on.”

“You must look after Sigurd when I am gone.”

“That will be difficult when I live in Dublin, and he lives here.”

“Marry him then. I know he asked you. He is my only boy. My only boy. The kings of Norway are greedy and will take this land when I can no longer warn my son that they are coming.” Her bony hands reached out to hold mine. “You can have more children. One son is King of Dublin, another could be King of Munster. Why not have another that will be King of Orkney and the Isles?”

A marriage to Sigurd did not sit well with me, even though I had suggested it could happen when we lay together. I didn’t hate him the way I hated Amlav or Brian... in fact, I had once desired him. But why would I be queen of this piece of rock, when I could be Queen of All Ireland?

I pushed those thoughts away. They were not important right now. Getting this rotting piece of flesh to see my future was all that mattered. Promises did not need to be kept. And with a mortal man, even a promise kept, didn’t need to be kept for long.

“When the vision comes to you, Ethla, and you can tell me who stands in my way, send a messenger to Dublin. In return, I promise that I will marry Sigurd.”

I stared at Olaf, who stood beside me, eyes peering out from under his hood. He didn’t move an inch.

Ethla nodded as I rose from the chair. “Yes. Good.” She tugged my hand. “A word of advice. You must also try harder to see your own dreams.”

I paused. *How did she know about my dreams?*

“You must think on what and who you want to see before you fall asleep. You must ask your dreams to find your enemies so you can see what they plan.”

“Thank you, Ethla, for your words of wisdom.”

Deep in thought, I drew away the flames from the torches around her bed and left her room.

# **Fennit Island**

## *Colmon*

The ache swam up my leg. It festered, the smell foul and bitter. My mind swam too, drifting over times long gone, but not true memories – they were more sinister than that. Instead of joy and laughter, I saw only death and tragedy. My friends died in battles that they had survived. My family screamed instead of smiled. Over and over.

Tomas had sent a healer in five times since he last spoke to me, though I did not know who the healer was. At first, I didn't understand how that was possible, for I knew all the Descendants, the sound of their steps, their smell, their voices. I could only assume that this was another child like Senna, who Tomas had kept hidden away.

I tried to speak to them, but they would not answer.

Whoever it was, their healing gift was strong enough to heal my wounds and draw away the poison. But no sooner did they heal me, than they cut me again on my back and legs and poured fresh poison over the wounds.

Days bled into each other, and I had no sense of whether an hour had passed or seven or twenty. Just poisoned dreams and poisoned flesh. Darkness and despair.

*Wake up, Colmon. Wake up.*

I forced my eyelids to open. The healer had just left, having prevented my heart from giving out, then pouring fresh poison onto new cuts. The poison hadn't fully seeped into my bloodstream yet, though already I couldn't move. The rope and ivy held me tight, and my muscles wouldn't react to my commands, paralysis the first symptom to visit my body. However, for a while at least, my mind would be alert, not yet pulled into twisted memories and dreams. I raised my eyes and stared around the cell. While the dreams didn't have me in their grip, I had to think about how to

escape. Thick vines wrapped around my wrists and ankles. Iron chains fixed to the walls and wrapped around my neck also held me firm. I could wrench myself free of the iron if I wasn't so weak, so sick. If I could...

Something rustled on the roof. Gingerly, I lifted my head, the muscles around my neck already aching. My eyesight was good, much better than other Descendants', but the effects of the poison and the gloom meant I could only just make out something moving... something that looked like two snakes slithering through a hole in the stone ceiling where the roots and ivy had come through.

*Snakes? In Ireland?* It couldn't be. The Tuatha Dé Danann had driven them out of Ireland so the mortals would not suffer their poisonous bites.

I watched them, incredulous, as they dropped onto the floor and made their way toward me. My confusion died then, for slowly they unfurled and straightened, the scales and thick skin turning pink and soft. As the magic unwound, two women appeared before me. Affraic and her witch daughter Báine.

Affraic's long hair hung over her pale skin. The Tuatha Dé Danann did not see the naked form as shameful the way the mortals often did. In our previous fortress, earth-warmed pools made for a regular meeting spot, and I'd seen Affraic there many times. She had laughed back then, though she was not prone to laughter anymore. Controlled. Stoic. Thoughtful. These were the characteristics that most described our chief healer, but today, she looked vulnerable too.

Her daughter Báine was no different. She was Eilis' mother and desperation filled her eyes. *Fear*. Her thick, black curls reached to her knees, covering the smooth olive skin beneath, but not so thick as to disguise the fact she was shaking.

"Colmon," Báine whispered. "We need your help."

"I am sorry I hurt you," Affraic said, her fingers touching where she had pierced my side with her knife. "I needed to be certain that you hadn't killed Eilis, and it was necessary to gain Tomas' trust." She pulled her finger away. "Which is also why I can't heal you now or help you escape."

"Why do you want his trust?"

"Tomas has called a gathering. Everyone is coming. He plans to humiliate you. Before you are called to give evidence, he will use his potions on you. A potion of truth first, so you will confess to killing

Tigernach, followed by a potion of forgetfulness. He doesn't want you to remember Tigernach's words before he died."

Báine stepped closer. "You will be executed once this happens, Colmon. He has turned many against you already."

"Do Descendants know he uses his potions on them?"

"A few. A handful of others suspect. Other Descendants work for him. Harpists, witches. They use their gifts on his behalf. At first, they did it because they believed that finding the treasures was for the greater good, but as the years have passed, they do it for other reasons."

"After you left," Báine said, "many Descendants grew restless with life in the fortress. He uses the harpists to subdue them, to feign happiness in their hearts, and to make them go along with the new laws he introduces."

"And this hasn't worked on you?"

"No," Affraic said. "I've been absent for almost as long as you, and my family have been suspicious of Tomas for many years. Much longer than you." Some of that familiar sternness entered her expression, and as she came closer, she lowered her voice. "Báine and a few other witches have placed protective spells on themselves, though they must act as if this is not the case. We have twenty Descendants who we trust now. Tomas has double that number who work for him. Everyone else is an unwitting pawn in this game."

The poison started to seep into my mind, my eyes blurred, and the features of Affraic's face disappeared. "Did you find Eilis?" I managed to ask, though my lips felt numb.

"No. I knew many years ago that my granddaughter was dead." She pulled out the long knife that she had used to stab me at the last meeting. "Instead, I looked for this."

I stared at the knife. Breathed in its scent as best I could. The magic within it was stronger than I had thought at the gathering, but then that was to be expected when so much other magic competed with it in the great hall. Here, I could see colours whirl around the steel. Old magic.

"The knife's name is *Fragarach*," Báine said.

"The Sword of Truth?" I couldn't quite believe it. Our ancestors thought the blade lost to us. "Where did you find it?"

"Let's just say a mutual friend of ours knew where it was and sent me to find it," Affraic said.

"Rónnat?"

Affraic smiled but said nothing more. She was afraid, I realised. She had come out of the shadows of deception to speak with me here. Uttering secrets that until now she had kept close to her inner circle.

“Why do we need it?”

“Tomas has such power over the Descendants because he is able to weave his lies so well and because he has powerful friends who help him.” Her fingers wrapped around the hilt. “We hope that at the gathering, this one that Tomas has called *everyone* back for, we can find out what happened to Eilis and why he wanted to kill Rónnat’s son. There is more he isn’t telling us. I know it. Without magic, however, he will never confess.”

I sucked in a deep breath, holding my wits tight, fighting against the poison. “You will need to get close to him for the magic to work. The blade must taste his blood and see his throat. He might trust you more than before, but he will not let you close enough to him to attack him.”

“You are right,” Báine agreed. “However, there is one who he would touch without hesitation.”

She held her breath. Even with my dulled sense and poisoned mind, I knew who she spoke of.

“It is too late. Fódla will not come here.”

“How little you know your cousin. She is already on her way,” Affraic said. “My witch grandchildren have been watching her. She comes to help you, it seems. When Fódla arrives, we need her to agree to speak at the gathering and say what we wish her to say. Tomas must trust her. Believe her, if she is to stab him with the sword and learn the truth.”

*Could Fódla do this?* I didn’t think so. She was brave, kind, honest, but not violent, and Tomas was the father of Aoife. So much history...

“Don’t ask this of Fódla. It isn’t in her.”

“It is. She is stronger than you think. She won’t do it for me, though. But she will for you.”

Báine stepped forward and wiped the beads of sweat forming on my brow. The pain was building. My head spinning.

“We cannot bring her here, so we must prove to her that you want this.” She crouched down beside me, lips against my ear. “What secret can you tell us that will earn her trust?”

# **Travelling to Fennit Island**

## *Fódlá*

The journey south hurt. Not my legs and feet, though they throbbed in the evenings. No, it hurt my very being. Every part of me wanted to run away. Run north. Run back to Broccan. Run to Rónnat. Escape to open arms and hearts.

No part of me rejoiced at confronting the past, just as no part of me wanted to see Tomas again.

Hiding, however, would no longer serve me well. Aoife was dead and Broccan had found a new life for himself. There was no one to protect, no one I needed to live for, and so I walked toward Fennit Island, knowing that death very well might await me there.

Death was a risk I was willing to take to be free and live without the threat of Tomas hanging over me. I had lived in fear for so long that I had grown used to it. The aching stomach, the raw skin around my nails, the lack of appetite... it had all become so normal. That was until I had found a life outside Tomas in Killaloe.

Even now, eleven years since I had last set foot there, I saw a future for myself in that small ráth outside King Brian's dun. But if I went back there, it had to be for a full life, not one half-lived in the shadows.

The long journey from the north of Ireland to the south took many weeks. Even so, I kept moving, and before long, I reached a land I recognised. Footpaths I had trod with Aoife when we hunted for wild herbs and plants. Salt filled the air, seagulls flocked overhead, and the wind, though warmer than in the north, nipped at my cheeks and hands.

It was dusk by the time I reached Fennit Island, and everything was quiet. No people keeping watch or crows flying overhead. I was also relieved to find no one had followed me on my journey south. It meant Broccan and I

had not been followed after leaving Rónnat's crannog, and that meant, should I die, he'd be left alone to live his life as he wanted to.

This thought gave me courage as I walked across the sandbank bridge, toward the fortress and the high tower that cast a shadow over the sand. I gazed up at the small window in the top room, half expecting to see the dull glow of candlelight as Tomas worked. Tonight, it was absent.

The fortress door opened, the iron handle rattling as it hit the stone wall. Someone had finally spotted me, which was no surprise. To be alone on Fennit Island for long was not possible. I glanced up to discover who had come to greet me. A woman with long, blonde hair stood on the first step outside the door. She did not smile and folded her arms in front of her chest.

"Fódla," she said, voice low. "Where have you been?"

"I've been about my own business, Gobnat." I walked up the steps, coming to a stop where her body and folded arms blocked my way. "Stand aside."

"No." Her frown grew as she stared at me. All pretence at friendship gone. "Why have you returned?"

"I've returned to speak with the council." I placed my right foot on the step, only for her to shift to the side. Her shadow loomed over me, so did her displeasure, but this was my fortress as much as hers, and she had no right to bar me entry. I pushed forward, shoving myself past her and onto the top step.

Her hand gripped mine just before I walked inside. "Haven't you done enough damage?"

"Damage?"

"You nearly destroyed Tomas. You come and you go. Always snivelling and demanding sympathy, even though you bring every disaster upon yourself. Just go. Go now before he discovers you are here."

"Did you always crave his love? It's so obvious to me now that I cannot believe I didn't see it." I shook my head. There was no point in having this argument. If she wanted his love, she was welcome to it. "Get out of my way."

"Not until you tell me why you have returned. You've missed so many gatherings, why come for this one?"

*A gathering? Now?*

Her expression evened, knowing she'd given something away, but I'd had enough of her. Pulling my hand free, I moved into the fortress, ignoring

her questions. She, however, was not content with ignoring me and followed.

“Are you here for Colmon?” Her fingers gripped my arms, her nails digging into my flesh.

I shoved them away.

“Do you love him?” she snarled, then gave a low laugh. “He is your cousin, but in times past, cousins did marry. Why didn’t you just say to Tomas, instead of pretending for all these years?”

“I love Colmon as a member of my family and as a friend. Nothing more.”

The corners of her eyes creased, and something of my old childhood friend stared back at me. “Then don’t think to speak for him at the gathering. His fate is sealed by his own words and the killing of Tigernach. Death to Colmon will be our ruling tomorrow night. Everyone knows it.”

I stopped walking but held my tongue. *Had the whole council turned against Colmon? Had they not believed anything he said?*

“Blame Affraic, not me, for Colmon’s fate,” she added, as I continued to walk. “She is the one who helped Tomas to arrest him. The council has not been so united in years.”

She pointed to the west wing, the healers’ side of the fortress, and smiled, all traces of my old friend disappearing with it. “You can ask her yourself if you don’t believe me.”

I said nothing as I entered the healers’ wing and made for my room. I needed to sit down a moment, to gather my thoughts.

“Fódla!” Neasa, one of the healers, called out as I passed, her mouth dropping slightly. “You are alive!” More healers poured out of the reading room and came over to hug me. Siobhán, another healer I had taught, pulled me into a hug.

“I am, Neasa.” Welcoming the embraces of my old pupils and friends, I told them I was well and asked after their wellbeing but did not answer their questions regarding me. “Later,” was all I said. “I am weary. Later.”

I wished I could have said more, but I didn’t know what to say. If I’d given in and spoken, they’d have asked question after question, when I needed to think on what Gobnat had told me. *Colmon was arrested. To be tried tomorrow evening? Death awaited him.*

I walked into my room and slammed the door shut and closed my eyes, taking a moment to calm my breathing.



“Evening, Fódla.”

I opened my eyes to find Affraic standing beside my bed. She walked toward me, open-armed. “Where have you been, gift-daughter? It is forbidden to leave the fortress without permission.”

“Yes, I know, gift-leader.”

Affraic enveloped me in her arms, the palm of her hand pressing against the back of my head, pulling me closer to her. “When the night is dark,” she whispered into my ear, “and everyone is asleep, we need to talk.”

She released me, then stepped away to the door, opening it. Neasa and the other healers peered in.

“You must speak at the gathering,” Affraic said, her voice loud and sharp. “Ready yourself, gift-daughter. You have much explaining to do.”

# **Dublin**

## *Gormflaith*

The ship sailed toward the Dublin longphort. The city was bigger than when Brian had led me away as his battle prize after Glenmama. Much bigger. Sitric had extended the walls along the western and northern boundaries too. Expanding the city hadn't solved all problems, for the extra room appeared to be taken up with new houses rather than the market. Indeed, the market had expanded too, sprawling outside the walls and into the land beyond. Stall after stall after stall. As far as the eye could see. Even from the sea, spices filled the air. Spices and excitement.

Falk ordered the sails furled as we approached, and the men took up their oars to row us in. The men smiled as they pushed and pulled the oars. Home was at hand. I just hoped Sitric was right about their loyalty and their ability to hold their tongues about our visit to Orkney. Olaf sat at the back, silent, eyes down. I wondered if the sight of Dublin was painful for him. It had been his home for a few years, after all, back when his star still shone brightly, but I couldn't glean any clues from his face, shattered and broken as it was.

I returned my gaze to the fast-approaching longphort, for I could not give Olaf any more of my attention. There was work to be done.

Sitric smiled as he watched Dublin, his eyes finally resting on the fort. Home.

"You've been busy, son," I said to him.

"I have. Dublin is ever growing, ever changing. You will enjoy looking around it, seeing all that has improved since you were last here. The fort is bigger. More rooms at the back, and the feasting hall itself is much grander. More like Sigurd's, the way the walls are decorated. Sláine has an eye for such things."

He grinned as he spoke, a smattering of pride in his tone when he spoke of his wife. His eyes drifted away from mine and back to the buildings along the shore, and he didn't look away until the ship docked at the harbour.

Hundreds of people gathered along the longphort. Goods, slaves, traders – all moving back and forth between the ships and the market. Somehow, in the midst of all the madness, two small boys pushed their way through.

“Dada!” The two of them sprinted along the wooden boards and leaped into their father's arms. One, all Sitric. The other, all Sláine. Covered in sand and dirt from playing on the beach, they held their father tightly. I hadn't met these grandchildren yet, for Sláine had not visited Munster in some time, and Sitric had never brought his children with him whenever he answered Brian's war call.

They seemed pleasant enough as they patted and kissed their father's cheek, but much too young to be interesting, so I walked toward the city. Sitric could introduce me to his boys later when they were properly clothed, and a table separated their dirty fingers from my dress.

The familiar rattle of the wooden boards underfoot brought an unbidden smile to my face. *Ah, Dublin, I had missed this place.*

I breathed in the spice and salt air, and watched as the people went about their business. I recognised many. Some were older now with bowed backs, others I'd known as children had youngsters of their own with them. Most I had never seen before. New faces, new mysteries. New friends or foes to unravel. Traders, from every corner of the world where Vikings sailed, walked about the markets. Slaves too. Men. Some children. Lots of women. Two slavers pushed a line of slaves to a ramshackle hut outside the gates for inspection. Times had changed. The Irish kings bought them now too.

Even before his decree, King Brian had not approved of Irishmen buying slaves, but with such large herds of cattle to care for, the kings came to the markets, nonetheless. And, of course, female flesh always had its own allure. Wherever the Vikings sailed, female slaves were bought and sold. In Khazar, harems needed concubines. In Rome and Paris, the lords and princes wanted whores for their pleasure houses. The world over, men needed new wives to raise children when previous wives died on the birthing bed. Two of the slave women wailed as the slavers dragged them along, causing the traders to slap them both about the head. I felt like doing

the same myself. *This is life*, I wanted to tell them. A woman's lot. *No point crying about it*.

I moved my gaze elsewhere, away from the crying and toward the laughter. The traders behind the slaves carried barrels of food and ale, rolling them past me and toward their ships. New spices filled the air, smoke from the forges, and meadowsweet brewed ale. I loved it. I loved the chaos. Killaloe was so ordered, so mundane. The boredom had nearly broken me. But Dublin. How could you be bored with Dublin? Especially this version of it, the one my son, Sitric, had created.

Exploring, however, would have to wait for another time. I was the High Queen and duty called, and so instead of exploring the markets as I wished, I walked up the steps to the fort.

The sight of those thick wooden doors had once filled me with dread. The thought of Amlav waiting for me inside, wanting me, *touching me*. Not now though. Now I was free... well, almost free.

The fortress was busy, though not frantic. Slaves readied the food and prepared the tables. Sláine walked alongside them, smiling and directing. The slaves smiled back. It was more ordered inside than outside. But then, Sláine was her father's daughter.

"Dada!" Another little boy of about three years ran over to Sitric and leaped into his arms.

Sitric laughed and ruffled the boy's hair, holding him tight. Another boy, this one of an age with Donnchad, charged over too. Donnchad, who had entered the fort with his half-brother, stared at this bigger boy. This was Amlaíb, only a few months younger than Donnchad. When they were babies, Donnchad had been the larger of the two, but now it was Amlaíb who was the taller. Broader, too.

Amlaíb hugged his father, a little bashful, as if he were too old to embrace his father in this way, but not old enough to know how else to act. He laughed as Sitric gave him a playful punch in the arm and retaliated with one of his own. Now he was smiling, I could see both grandfathers in the features of this one. Brian and Amlav at war once again.

Sláine laughed at her husband and son, sat in her seat behind the table, and opened her arms to take in the three-year-old who'd had enough of his father and wanted his mother again. Sitting beside Sláine was another woman, young with long, red hair. The image of her mother, Onguen. So, this was Edysis. How old was she now? Fourteen? I ran my mind back to

the year she was born and how I had looked after her once Onguen died. The rowboat, cresting the waves, with Onguen wearing Glunairn's fur cloak, flashed in my mind. *Foolish girl. Foolish to have left all this behind. Such a pretty daughter she might have raised.*

Edysis roared with laughter as Sitric's playfighting with Amlaíb continued, but then she stood and waved. "Grandmother!"

She flung aside her embroidery and ran toward me.

"Edysis," I said, opening my arms just in time. "You are so tall."

"Am I as tall as you? Father says not, but I think I am." She spun around and stood beside me, examining the height of our heads. "Yes, we are the same. Your curls just make you look taller than me, that's all." She giggled and took my hand in hers and dragged me to the top table. "You must be hungry. I made some honey cakes this morning. Do you want one? Father said you liked them, but maybe your tastes have changed with you being so long away. What do they eat in Munster? It can't be as nice as the food here."

Sláine sighed as Edysis collapsed into a chair beside her. "If you stop speaking, even for a moment, your grandmother could tell us what she wanted."

Edysis snorted and held up the plate of honey cakes, eyebrows wriggling. "She doesn't need to tell us. She wants my honey cakes."

I took one from the plate, laughing at her exuberance. Now she was beside me, I could see past the red hair that her mother gave her, and instead, saw much of myself in her features. The same high cheekbones and pale skin. The same smirk that Máelmórda had when he was amused by something flitted across her face.

"These will do fine, Sláine." I bit into the cake. Too sweet, but certainly welcome after a five-day sea-crossing. "How are you, daughter-in-law?" I kissed Sláine gently on the cheek. "Keeping well, I hope."

"Yes," she said. "The children are all in good health too." She summoned each child forward to give a rehearsed greeting asking after my health before scampering off to play with their father, who was now showing Amlaíb the new swords he had won from the Cenél nEóghain.

"Ah," Sláine said, standing, looking beyond me and at the doors. "An old friend has come to say hello to you."

I turned. A woman walked toward me. She used a walking stick, her left leg limping and unable to hold her weight. She glanced up at me,

straightening her back, and smiled. The woman was missing two of her front teeth, and her lower lip bore the faint outline of a yellowish bruise.

“Queen Gormflaith!” she said, her voice much too cheerful for the body it inhabited. “I am so happy to see you!” Slowly, she pulled her veil away from her hair and let it settle on her shoulders.

“Orlaith? I’m... I’m so happy to see you again.”

I walked forward and wrapped my arms around her as she reached me and felt her frail body sink into mine. Two children came in behind her, smiling up at me with the same overlarge eyes their mother had once had. Behind them, more children followed, older ones. Not hers. These were Ulf’s children to his previous wife. They looked better fed and better dressed since I’d last lived in Dublin. The oldest son, almost a man, held out his arm for Orlaith to hold once I released her from our embrace.

Ulf came into the fort last and jovially rested his hand around Orlaith’s shoulder. She smiled up at him, her eyes searching his face. The oldest son inched away, though when he stared up at his father, his eyes narrowed, and his smile faded entirely. The older daughters also gave their father a furtive glance, one winding, then unwinding, the hem of her scarf around her fingers.

“What happened to your leg, Orlaith?” I asked.

“I fell,” she said. “You know how clumsy I am.”

“And what about your teeth? Another fall?”

“Oh.” Her eyes fell to her feet and her forehead furrowed. “Yes, another fall. I need to be more careful.”

“She does.” Ulf laughed and lowered his arm, so it now held her waist. “I do my best to help her, but it’s not enough. If I’d known she was such an oaf, I’d never have married her, but there we are. I was a fool for a pretty face.”

The older son and one of the daughters glared at their father from behind his back. The older son was now as tall as Ulf, though not filled out. One day soon, Ulf might have a fight on his hands from someone who was strong enough to stand up to him, but that day was not today. Berating Ulf would do Orlaith no favours either. Besides, I needed Ulf to be on Sitric’s side. His comeuppance would have to wait.

“What a wonderful family you have, Orlaith.” I kneeled down to the youngest child, whose cheek I stroked. “You are truly blessed.”

I stood back up, faltering for something else to say. “Will you eat with us tonight in the fort? I would love to talk with you, Orlaith. It has been too long since we last spoke.”

Orlaith’s eyes brightened, but before she could accept, Ulf shook his head. “She is too busy. The new sail for my ship is not ready yet.”

“One night off surely isn’t too much to ask,” I said, smiling as sweetly as I could.

“Once that might have been, but I’ve heard rumours that we are to let all our slaves go.” He turned to glare at Sitric. “So, if I have no slaves, who else will do it?”

“You can pay your slaves the same way as you’d pay a freeman,” I said. “You are wealthy, are you not, Ulf? Better to tire them out than your wife, who looks after your children and has so many other responsibilities.”

“Let her attend the feast, Father,” one of the girls said, before quickly bowing her head.

“Maybe another time. Not tonight.” He cocked his head to one side and gave his lips a quick lick. “A pleasure to see you again, Queen Gormflaith. A pleasure, Queen Sláine.” He eyed Sitric at the back of the fort and pulled back his shoulders. “I need to speak to the king. Orlaith, children, time for you to go home.”

Orlaith quickly gave me a curt nod and a breathy farewell, then scurried out of the hall with the children. Even Ulf’s older son, who was old enough to take a role in his father’s business ventures, disappeared with his younger siblings.

As Ulf pushed through the crowd that had gathered around Sitric, Sláine inched closer to me. “He will punish Orlaith for your defiance. It’s best not to push him. Orlaith is the one who ends up suffering for it.”

Edysis scowled. “If I was his wife, I’d cut his balls off and throw them into the fire.”

“Edysis!” Sláine exclaimed. “You will never find a husband saying things like that, and besides, you wouldn’t do such a terrible thing.”

“Yes, I would. Leif’s shown me how to wield a sword and knife.”

Sláine massaged her forehead, giving me the impression that this wasn’t the first time she’d lectured Edysis on her choice of words. “What *you* would do doesn’t matter. It’s not for others to interfere in a marriage. Orlaith has a hard lot, but she has her children. She could leave if she wanted, but she chooses to stay. We must respect her choice.”

I tried not to roll my eyes. Oh yes, women could divorce their husbands if they wished. Leaving bruises was a good enough reason in the eyes of the Brehon laws, and from the look of Orlaith, she'd had plenty of beatings in her time. But what of the children? It was not so easy to take them from their father after a divorce. Fathers had rights over their children, and Ulf, though he seemed to care little for them, would surely keep them to spite his absent wife.

No, Orlaith could not leave Ulf. But perhaps my granddaughter was right. A man with a missing set of balls might be preferable. Fire-magic came to the tips of my fingers, though I quickly pushed it away. Ulf's time would come. But not yet.

\*

That evening, I found Sitric sitting in the great hall with his family. I sat at the end of the table, beside Edysis, who had kept a chair for me. Gilla, his wife, Mór, and their son, then Leif, Freya and Falk, sat at the other side. All much the same as I left it, though Leif had taken the place of Harald and Freya the place of Frigg. Old Frigg sat on one of the lower tables now with her daughters, gossiping and eating – as well as she could for a woman with no teeth.

As the night waned and the hall emptied, Sláine, Edysis, Mór and the children made their way to bed, while Gilla, Leif and Freya made their way outside to the fighting square. Letting them all leave, I made my way over to Sitric. Just the two of us, like old times. He smiled as I approached, and I guessed he had been waiting for us to be alone.

“We have not spoken properly since we left Orkney,” he said. “I took you to Sigurd and have not questioned your plans once. Now we are in Dublin, you must talk to me. Tomorrow, I must tell the traders that slaves are forbidden in the markets. They will not like it, so I must know how best to play it.”

I sat beside him, leaning into the groove in the cushion left by Sláine.

“You must go along with Brian's law for now. Punish those who disobey you.”

He sighed. “It will cause chaos. How long had you known Brian would say that at the wedding?”



“A long time.”

“Why did you not tell me? It was humiliating, having to find out like that with everyone watching me.”

His brow furrowed, the tone of his voice hardened. Pride. That was what I had wounded. Sitric the king had much of it, more than he used to.

“I told you what I could. You’ve built up your fleet and hoarded your wealth. That is good, for you will need it now.”

Sitric spun a piece of thread between his thumb and forefinger. “Every bit of it, if I’m still to tempt traders here, for many will pass on to Orkney and York if they cannot buy and sell their slaves here. I’ll have to halve the port taxes. I’ll have to buy more wine and whores to lure the warriors here.”

“That is true. You must do everything you can to entice them. Don’t worry. It won’t be for long.”

Sitric took a sip of his wine and pointed down the table to where Gilla had been sitting.

“He wants my throne. So does Ulf. I’d place a good wager that Svein Forkbeard does too. The three of them could be plotting against me as we speak. Having Brian as my ally all these years has kept my rivals in check. If I turn against Brian, and it goes wrong, my kingship is at risk, as are the lives of my children.”

“I know. The stakes are high.” I poured myself a glass of wine and took a drink. The wine here was nicer than in Munster. Richer.

“I want to trust you, Mother, but I cannot trust you unless you tell me everything.”

“Then I’ll tell you this. You worry about your kingship, but it is already at risk. Once Brian has destroyed the trade here and weakened you, it’s only a matter of time before he kills you and sets Amlaíb on the throne instead. A grandson, led by Sláine, will be much easier to control than you. Your days, with Brian as your ally, are numbered.”

Sitric twisted his lips. It took a moment for my words to sink in, but once he saw the truth of it, he nodded his head.

“After all my years of obedience, of fighting for him, this is how he would treat me?”

“It is how he treats everyone who is not of his blood.” I took another sip. “But we have an advantage. He does not yet know about Svein. He is caught up building new forts over Ireland, thinking to compete with the kings of Frankia by putting his footprint on every corner of this land. While

he is distracted, you must continue to gather your strength. Once he discovers that Svein plans to invade England, he will try to bind you even tighter to him.”

“How?”

“He will take something dear from you.”

Setting my hand on his, I lowered my voice. “When he suspects, he will ask to foster your son, or perhaps ask for Sláine to come and visit. He might even try to capture them. You cannot let any of them leave the city now. Do you understand?”

Sitric leaned forward and ran his hands through his hair. “When I was younger, I did not value you as I should. I did not see your wisdom.” He looked at me, eyes soft, and took my hand in his. “Truly, I am sorry.”

“It is the way of the world for children not to see their parents as they are. Do not worry. We are both still young enough to work together and put things right.”

“Then advise me. What is the plan?”

I paused a moment. Did I trust him enough to tell him everything? What if he told Sláine? I knew from overhearing messages spoken late at night between Brian and Father Marcán that Sláine wrote to her father concerning the business of Dublin. But the plan needed to be set in motion soon. It was time for me to throw the dice and talk to my son.

“You need to continue building up your Viking allies. A man called Brodir from the Isle of Man is someone you need to win over. He hates Svein, so will not fight for him. Use his hatred for Svein to shore up your defences. Sigurd alone is not enough.”

“Are you certain we have Sigurd on side?”

“Yes, we do. I have agreed to marry him if he comes to our aid.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Do not worry. Sigurd and I are old friends. I am willing to do it and you will need every warrior you can find to win this battle against Brian.”

Sitric nodded. “Brian’s army is vast. We will need more than Leinster, Dublin and Orkney. Even this Brodir may not be enough.”

“You are right, my son, which is why I go back to Munster for a while. The key is not just to find more men, it’s to work out who will betray Brian. None of the other Irish kings will fight for you, but we may be able to persuade them not to answer Brian’s call.”

Sitric’s hand closed around mine. “Are you sure you are safe?”

“Yes. With Donnchad safely in Máelmórda’s care, Brian cannot hurt me. When I send you an invitation to attend Brian’s dun with my ring, it is a sign for you to come to Munster and that the war with Brian is to start. Remember, do not bring Sláine, no matter how much she begs.

“When you come to Killaloe, you and Máelmórda will argue with Brian, cast your oaths to him aside and bring me back to Dublin with you. Brian will think to win you back, that this argument can be smoothed over, but you will act instantly. You will kill any men that Brian sends to Dublin to treat with you. That way Brian will have no choice but to go to war. However, you will have a huge army already amassed, while he will have to pull together an army from all over Ireland and from kings who resent him. At Glenmama, he had the numbers. This time, you will. Last time, Sechnall set the battlefield. This time, you will pick it. And this time, you will win.”

“He could still crush us,” Sitric said.

“No. Everything will crumble around Brian. And when Svein fights and wins England, you will call his Viking warriors to your aid. Ireland is yours, son. I feel it in my bones.”

“When does all this start?”

“I leave for Leinster tomorrow with Donnchad and Máelmórda. I hope to hear word soon from a friend in Orkney... but... it is expected that Svein’s plan will be common knowledge by the winter after this one. That is when we must make our move too. Otherwise, it won’t be Brian you are fighting. It will be Svein, and there is no hope of winning against him. Indeed, you might be the only man in Ireland capable of preventing his invasion of this land.” I smiled at my son, the way I used to when he was a boy. “You could be named as Ireland’s saviour when all this is over.”

Sitric stood, downing the rest of his wine, a bit of colour returning to his face. “Yes. I see that it is the only way. Too many foes are circling now for me to do nothing. I will fight.”

# **Fennit Island**

## *Fódla*

Footsteps echoed along the west wing of the fortress, the other healers and cupbearers making their way into the great hall for the gathering. Affraic had come to my room in the dead of night and left me with a great many thoughts. I could only be grateful that I had been left in peace to dwell on them. Only healers and cupbearers were allowed in the west wing of the fortress, so Tomas could not reach me, though I gathered from the constant stream of footsteps outside my door that his spies within our ranks checked on me often.

Deciding it was time to finally leave, I made my way to the great hall. Everyone was there by the time I entered. It seemed Affraic was right: every Descendant still alive was here, bar Broccan who nobody knew about. It made sense to me that Tomas would want all to witness Colmon's trial and humiliation. To witness his triumph.

As I stepped into the hall, everyone turned to face me. None looked surprised by my return, and I guessed that news of my arrival last night had already travelled. A few muttered a greeting, some of the healers smiled. Everyone else transferred their glances to Tomas to see what he would do.

*And what would he do? What would he say?*

I guessed that all depended on how badly he had tortured Colmon, and what secrets had spilled alongside Colmon's blood onto the floor? Affraic had not visited Colmon in recent days, giving Tomas more than enough time to extract information from him should he wish it. Everything I was about to do was a gamble, but how could I not go through with it after all Colmon had done for me?

My hand inched into the folds of my apron to feel for the wooden hilt and the edge of the blade that Affraic had given me, but at the last minute I

pulled back. No. I shouldn't touch it. *Not yet.*

In the centre of the aisle was Colmon. Bound with ivy, pulled taut, he hung a few inches off the ground, just as Rónnat had done during her trial all those years ago. His face was smooth, unblemished, no signs of torture. It was only when Colmon's grey eyes found mine for the briefest of moments that I saw the pain flash within them.

I gave Colmon a hard look and then sharply turned away, nose turned up. Years of living in Munster had improved my ability to act out a role. I turned my attention to Tomas instead. Hatred filled me, but again, I was acting. The old Fódla, the girl who adored this clever man, would peer up from under her hair, a desperate desire to please clear within every expression and gesture. I acted this role one final time. A fleeting smile. A forlorn downward glance, shoulders hunched in.

Tomas stared at me, a slow smile building as I approached the front row. Gobnat frowned. She went to speak to Tomas, but he put up his hand to silence her.

Affraic stood as I reached the top table. "Gift-sister, you have been away from the fortress for many years now without permission. What do you have to say to us?"

I bowed my head and repeated the words she had told me to say. "Affraic, Colmon took me to his camp on Rathlin Island and would not let me leave."

Gasps filled the room.

Tomas stood, his hands clasping the arms of his chair. "He held you captive?"

"He was jealous of our relationship, Tomas. He... he wanted to punish you by keeping us apart. I begged him not to, but he would not listen."

Tomas' eyes widened and his eyes moved from me to Colmon. "How you deceived me, old friend," he said, the confidence in his voice building. "Even knowing that you killed Tigernach, I did not believe you could be so cruel to your own flesh and blood." Tomas held out his hand to me, beckoning me forward.

"Wait," Gobnat said. "We must question her properly."

Tomas lowered his hand, the excitement in his eyes dampened, and he nodded.

Gobnat held out her hands. More ivy slid over the walls and floors. They slithered along my legs and arms, wrapping tight around me.

“I don’t believe you, Fódla,” Gobnat said. “Tell us the truth. Where have you been?”

“Tomas,” I looked at him directly. “Our life together has not been an easy one. Many have come between us. Many have tried to part us. After Broccan’s death, we spoke of being together again, but once again, these forces have conspired against us. When I left the fortress, Colmon found me on the way to Rónnat’s crannog. After I told Rónnat what had happened to Broccan, Colmon told me of his plan to steal the treasures. I acted as I always do. With emotion. Without thinking... I tried to run back to Fennit Island to warn you. Colmon knew what I was trying to do, which is why he took me with him to Rathlin and kept me prisoner. While I was there, I had plenty of time to think. To think over my faults. To do what I thought you would do in my position.”

The vines tightened, moving around my torso, my chest, and they pulled me upward so that I hung suspended in the air beside Colmon.

Tomas stared at me, but his gaze was still tempered with distrust. Gobnat’s warning rang in his ear.

“And so I waited for Colmon to trust me. I was patient, like you are. Once he left the island, I removed the treasures from his land, so the spells there no longer shielded them. I can show you where they are.”

“You have the treasures?” Gobnat stood, eyes wide. “Tell us where, and I will let you go.”

Tomas, beside her, pressed his lips together. He wanted to believe me. I could see that.

I broke then, wept, and shook my head. “How can you do this to me, Tomas,” I sobbed. “When we last spoke, you told me you wanted us to be with each other. Now you treat me like this. Once again, people are trying to pull us apart, and this time it is you who cannot see it.”

“Gobnat, release her.”

“No. She’s lying.”

Blinking, more tears spilled over and fell down my cheeks. “I will take the potion of truthfulness to prove that I am not.”

Tomas smiled, the final vestiges of doubt falling away.

“I trust you, Tomas. You can give me the potion and ask anything you want.”

“Give me the potion,” Gobnat said to Tomas. A vine moved down and unfurled beside her hand. “She can drink it where she is.”

“No!” I snapped. “She will poison me, Tomas. Long has she tried to turn you against me. Last night when she greeted me at the doors and begged me to leave, she told me as much.”

The story had finally led where I needed it to, and I watched to see if Tomas would fall for the story I had weaved for him.

Tomas frowned at Gobnat. “You spoke to her last night? You told her to leave?”

“I...” Gobnat stuttered. “She has such control over you. I do not understand it. Every time she comes back into your life, it only upsets you.”

“That was not your choice to make, Gobnat. Now release her.” Tomas’ voice was firm this time and Gobnat reluctantly pulled back her hand, allowing the vines to release me.

Still crying, I wiped my tears away as the vines dropped me to the floor. “Tomas, thank you.”

Tomas stood and took out a small vial from his belt. The dull black liquid swirled inside. *The potion of truthfulness*. “Come,” he said. “Come to me and drink this and all will be well.”

Gobnat’s fingers pulled at Tomas’ sleeve. “Be careful,” she whispered, but Tomas brushed off her hand as if it were nothing. He didn’t even look at her as I walked toward him, moving behind the table, then behind Cenn’s chair. Closer. Closer.

Strange. I knew he’d believe me, for no matter what he accused me of, he always forgave me. I’d never understood why. Gobnat was beautiful. In love with him. Subservient. I knew she would have a child with him, something he’d wanted ever since Aoife was born and discovered to be giftless. He didn’t love me, not really, and yet he did always set others aside in my favour. Why? Why was he like this? I couldn’t explain this infatuation, but it was there. I could see it. He wanted me. His eyes were greedy as they watched me moving closer. Not lustful, but covetous for a prize he wanted to hold in his hands and let no one else touch.

Tomas walked away from Gobnat, opening his arms to hold me as I made it to Colmon’s empty chair. I glanced into the hall. Affraic’s daughter Báine sat in the front row, keeping her eyes trained on Gobnat, her fingers already weaving her spells.

My feet rushed forward, as if I were eager to hold Tomas. I grinned at him, throwing out my left hand to embrace him, and moving inside his own arms that stretched outward to take me.

“Fódla.” He opened his arms wider, and as my name left his lips, his hands began to curl inward, ready to envelop me within the fabric of his sleeves. Quickly, I pulled the blade Affraic had given me from my apron and plunged it deep into his side.

His eyes widened in agony. Not only physical, but from the knowledge that I had betrayed him. Once I would have borne any amount of pain to save him from the slightest inconvenience, but no more. Never again.

Pressing my fingers against his arm, I healed him as I pulled out the knife.

Báine stood and held up her arms. Before Tomas could speak, ivy wrapped around his arms and legs and raised him into the air above me.

“Tomas!” Gobnat screamed. She held out her own hands to call the ivy back, but three witches stood, two of them cousins of Affraic, using their magic to counteract hers. The hall filled with screams and shouts. *What are you doing? Let him go! Why are you doing this?*

But no one rushed forward. Not yet. Rarely did gift-sisters and brothers turn on each other, and never before had they turned on the council leader.

“I hold the blade of Dagda known as Fragarach,” I shouted, before the demands Tomas be released turned to violence. “You will all know that whoever holds it can receive only the truth. Tomas’ blood is on the blade, and it is his truth I seek. That is all I want from him today. The truth. I ask that you be patient and let me ask him my questions.”

Some within the crowd continued to shout and Gobnat screamed to her fellow witches to trap me. Three witches stood, one of them Ríona, Tomas’ aunt, but before any had the chance to use their magic, I pointed the knife at Tomas’ throat.

“Did you kill Eilis?” I shouted.

“Yes.”

The hall silenced.

Now that I had their attention, I addressed the crowd again, holding the gaze of those who had spoken on Tomas’ behalf. “Please allow me to ask my questions. Then we can let him down.”

The three witches, one by one, sat back down. Even Ríona.

“No,” Gobnat shouted. “Tomas is our leader. Fight for him!”

No one uttered a word, and the room filled with an eerie silence. Only Tomas moved, his fingers clawing at the ivy that wove around his wrists and hands.



I held the knife in front of his throat. “Did you send Tigernach to kill my nephew, Broccan, son of Rónnat?”

“Yes.”

More gasps this time. Louder than before. Whispers.

“Why?”

“Because he is the son of a mortal and does not deserve to hold the power of the warrior gift.”

*He did not deserve to hold power?* Mortal blood ran through all our veins. Who was he to tell anyone that they were undeserving?

I pushed that accusation from my mind. Instead, I focused on the facts. “You ordered the warrior, Tigernach, to kill my nephew. A young boy who holds a gift and is a Descendant. That is against our laws, Tomas. Punishable by death, according to the new laws you suggested.”

“Rónnat lay with a mortal man when it was forbidden. The child should never have been born.”

“But he was born. He had a gift, whether you liked it or not.” I shook my head. “We elected you to guide us, Tomas, not to murder and kill our members according to your own whims. And even worse, before Tigernach died, he was confused. He did not know why he was there or why he had tried to hurt the boy. Why was that? What did you do to him?”

“I gave him a potion of forgetfulness to drink so he would remember his order to kill Broccan, but not that it was I who gave it to him.”

Chatter filled the room. Questions. *What else had he done?*

Báine stepped forward. “Has he used potions on the rest of us? Ask him that.”

I nodded and focused once more on Tomas. “Have you used the potions on other Descendants?”

“Yes.”

“How many?”

“I’ve used potions on almost everyone here. Too many times to count.”

Affraic walked toward me, her anger now clear for all to see. “Ask him.”

I tightened my grip on the blade. “How did you kill Eilis?”

Tomas struggled to keep quiet, even held his breath, but the magic of Fragarach could not be ignored. “It was the night after we had left you in Killaloe. Gobnat left us to find food. When I spoke to Eilis, she said that many Descendants wanted to remove me from my position as council leader. We argued. She said she hadn’t slept with the King of Connacht, but

I did not believe her. My spies all agreed she had. And so I used the knife of mortality on her.”

Affraic’s hand rose to her mouth. “That’s how you killed her? You made her... mortal? Why?”

“She did not deserve to go to the otherworld.”

*Deserve.* Again, that word. Tomas, still clawing at the ivy, was afraid, but not sorry for his actions.

“You murdered her,” Affraic shouted, “let her die in pain, all while taking away her chance to live with her family in the afterlife.”

Báine sobbed into her hands, her sister, Étaín, holding her as she wept. Tomas’ supporters, those who had shouted out for him to be released, now shouted at him.

*How could you? How dare you! Did you use your potions on me?*

Anger. Hatred. Horrible emotions, and yet I could not stop now. There was more.

“Tell everyone about your crow, Senna. Who is she really?”

He stared at me, his head shaking, holding his lips tight in an attempt not to answer.

I made the question clearer. “Senna is not a crow. Correct?”

“No, she is not.”

“What is she?”

“Senna is a woman. Gobnat transformed her into a crow.”

I turned once again to face the crowd. “Senna. You all know the name of Tomas’ favourite crow. He told us all he had used spells and potions to train it, to give it a longer life. None of this is true. Senna was the daughter of a giftless child. Some of you will know her mother: Airmid, daughter of the witch Sárnait. Her gift skipped a generation, and when Senna’s mother realised that her daughter was a witch, she brought her to Tomas’ father so he could take her into the fortress and train her. However, instead of bringing her here, Tomas gave Senna a love potion so that she would always do his bidding, then had Gobnat transform her into a crow. They made her a slave. A possession.

“Tomas has met many more children like this, including my own nephew Broccan, who he ordered Tigernach to kill. He tried to keep this from you because he didn’t want you to know that our blood, mixed with mortals’, can produce gifted children. Tomas believed that if we knew this, we’d

never agree to distance ourselves from the mortals. He did this so we would not see ourselves in them.”

I tightened my grip on the blade, a new question forming in my mind, though even to think it made my heart thud against my chest.

“Did you poison our daughter, Aoife? Was she *undeserving* too?”

Tomas trembled, the scorn and fury in his expression, for a moment, falling away. He nodded.

Gobnat snarled. “He did this for us. No one else would do what needed to be done.”

Báine and Ríona stood, both holding out their hands. Báine threw a coil of ivy around Gobnat to hold her back, while Ríona called away the ivy that held Colmon.

My cousin dropped to the floor. He stood gingerly, swaying slightly as he leaned against a chair for support. “Fódlá, ask him... did he kill Fiachre?”

I pointed the blade back at Tomas’ eye. “Did you kill Fiachre?”

“Yes.”

“Did you act alone to kill him?”

“With the help of Gobnat.”

Cenn, who’d listened in silence during the proceedings, stood. “I believed you, Tomas. I turned on my own father to support you. Did you use your potions on me too? Yes, I believe you did. You have done so much harm that there is no choice but to pass the harshest of judgements.”

“You craved the position of gift-leader,” Tomas snapped. “Don’t pretend you weren’t happy that your father died.”

“I was not happy that my father died. Drunk as he was, he was still my father. You manipulated me as you have done so many. You have admitted using your potions on us and to killing Eilis, and you’ve admitted to using the offspring of our giftless children for your own ends. I say the punishment should be death.”

He turned to the other gift-leaders. All of them nodded. Colmon, too.

“I will make it quick.” Cenn pulled his axe from his belt and jumped onto the table, raising the weapon over his head, and bringing it down toward Tomas.

The ground suddenly cracked open, large roots tearing the tiles apart. The force of the movement pushed me and Affraic back. Cenn stumbled and dropped to his knees.

Gobnat, free of the ivy Báine had summoned, held out her arms. The roots of the oak tree outside broke through the wall, sending stones scattering across the floor, paste and thick dust blowing up into the air. Through it, I could see a large root shoot forward, piercing Cenn in the chest, while another tore through the ivy holding Tomas captive.

Cenn fell from the table, his axe crashing onto the ground in front of him.

I coughed as the dust fell upon me and crawled to reach Cenn. As the dust settled, I made out his body, lying still on the floor. I reached out to hold his hand, but it was too late. The root had pierced his heart.

“Look,” Neasa shouted, pointing upward. I followed the line of her finger to find two birds flying through the hole in the wall and up into the night sky.

# **Leinster**

## *Gormflaith*

*A blond man huddled in the corner of a room, tears streaming down his face.*

*“How could they do this to me?” he sobbed. “Why can they not see how I have given my life to them?”*

*“Because they are fools, Tomas.” The witch, the one with the beautiful face, handed Tomas a bowl of soup.*

*He stared at it despondently, lifted a spoonful, and let it drip back into the bowl. It was a thin nettle soup. Dark and watery. He raised his head, eying the witch.*

*“You saved me, Gobnat... and have stayed with me. Why? You didn’t have to. You could have told them I gave you a potion to make you do as I commanded.” He set the bowl down. His green eyes, now clear of tears, stared intently at the witch. “If the other Descendants catch us, you will be in as much trouble as me. Death is what they called for. Death.”*

*“They would know I was lying, don’t you think?” Gobnat watched him, brushing her hair from her shoulders, feigning nonchalance but not quite succeeding. “I did what you asked because I believe in your plan. The mortals have too much power. Ireland would be safer if we were in charge.”*

*Tomas gave her a small smile. “Do not worry, Gobnat. Your faith in me will be rewarded. We will return home one day soon. If only I had the knife, we would be home already... When I used it on Eilis... I don’t understand where—”*

*“We are running for our lives now,” Gobnat interrupted. “Every Descendant wants our blood. Forget the knife and think of where we can go.”*

*Tomas opened his mouth, answered Gobnat, but there was no sound to his words, only a hissing, until the vision in front of me disappeared, the colours turning to grey, then white.*

\*

I opened my eyes as my dream vanished. *The Descendants were hunting Tomas and Gobnat. Why?* I closed my eyes, hoping that sleep would find me once more, but alas, my mind was too awake, and the dreamworld would not envelop me.

Despite my disappointment, I could not be angry. After weeks of focusing on the Tuatha Dé Danann, like Ethla had told me, I had finally dreamed of them. This Tomas, and the beautiful witch, Gobnat, how strange that it was they who came to me.

Was it familiarity? I had spoken to Tomas twice before. Was that why my mind found him before the others? Or was it his heightened emotions that caught the attention of my witch-magic?

I closed my eyes and went over the details of all that I had seen. He wasn't in Ireland. The house was stone, not wattle. Frankia perhaps? Cornwall? I had smelled salt air, tasted it in my mouth.

Questions upon more questions rattled inside my brain. Why had he fled? Why were his own kind chasing him? And most curious of all, why would the knife I had stolen after he had killed Eilis save them?

When I slept tonight I would try to find him again. I couldn't ignore this opportunity. A Descendant on the run from his own kind was a rare find. *I could do something with that.*

Movement from outside the door caught my attention. It was early, but the other residents within my brother's dun were already waking. Máelmórda had three wives, twenty daughters, and a handful of cousins living here with him. The women went about the work of a household the same way as the slaves of Dublin. Tragic, really. That queens and princesses kneeled upon floors to wash them. At least in Munster, it was Brian's distant cousins' children and friends who did this work, not his close family members. Máelmórda, however, didn't seem to have any interest in preserving the fragile skin and beauty of his female relatives. Yesterday, his youngest wife had cooked all day, her hands chapped and cut to pieces, and

her skin reddened by the summer sun. No wonder his wives didn't stay beautiful for long. His daughters worked hard too, their hands rough as bark to the touch. I was supposed to be bringing one of them to Munster with me, but they were so dull I couldn't bring myself to do it. Máelmórda had little to do with them and could offer me no suggestions either. He wasn't even sure of all their names.

Thankfully, despite all his obvious failings as a husband and father, he'd taken to training with Donnchad, and had devoted hours of his day to his young nephew. So far, I had left Máelmórda to his own devices, but perhaps it was time to discover what improvements, if any, had come of all this training.

I dressed and made my way to the feasting hall to see what Máelmórda's daughters had prepared for breakfast. I wrapped myself in my thickest cloak, knowing that the hall would still be cold. Máelmórda's hall was as tragic as his wives. The front doors bowed inward from the rain and damp, so any heat generated by the fires left the hall almost immediately. The furniture was old and worn, and aside from his own family and warriors, very few people visited. So dull. I had never expected Leinster to be as lively as Dublin, but I had to admit, it wasn't even as lively as Killaloe. What had my brother done with his riches? For I knew Brian paid him tributes for fighting on his behalf. Why did he live such a colourless existence when he didn't have to? I pondered my brother's odd choices until one of Máelmórda's daughters brought over a cup of milk and a tray of cheese and boiled egg.

"Where is Donnchad?" I asked her.

"Training with Father," she mumbled, before scampering away.

I continued to examine the dun of my youth as I ate. Fighting wars for Brian had depleted Máelmórda's army of men, leaving behind a hive of women and children. He was not as ready as I would like. If he wanted to join with Sitric to challenge Brian, other Leinster kings would have to come here to swear fealty to him. They would not be impressed by what they saw, certainly not by the lacklustre breakfast I'd just been offered. The first and only Fomorian High King, Brés, was cast out of his own hall for showing poor hospitality, for giving out poor food and drink to his guests. It would not do to win Ireland and then lose it because my brother would not spend his coin.

Setting aside the half-eaten meal, I made my way outside. Just beyond the ringfort, I could see my son and brother training. Máelmórda was skilled with the spear, and this was the weapon he was training Donnchad with today. I watched them as I walked. Ducking and weaving and thrusting. Despite the boredom and the dreary company of the Leinster household, I had stayed here for a month, endured it, only to see if Donnchad had it within him to improve. From what I could see, Máelmórda had whipped my son into better shape already. More muscle rested on Donnchad's bones. His skin finally had some colour, and when he swung his sword, there was some intent behind his blows.

Given my dream this morning and the fact I could see where two Descendants were, separated from the others, it might mean my brother and son would have a Descendant's gift one day soon. But could they handle it, that was the question? Or would it burn them through, as it had nearly done to me that night I had stolen Eilis' gift?

A horn sounded by the dun gate. I turned to see a dapple-grey mare galloping toward me, and a man wearing the colours of Munster riding her. Ah, it was Cassair. As he approached, he jumped from the horse's back, landing on the soft grass. One of my cousin's sons, who worked in the stables, came running from the dun to take the horse to be watered and fed.

"Queen Gormflaith," Cassair said, smiling. "I have come to escort you to Cashel."

I smiled back, but inwardly I groaned. I had promised Brian that he would not need to summon me like this. I should have left already.

"Then we will ride to him today, Cassair. Why don't you eat something before we leave?"

Cassair nodded and made his way toward the dun.

"Who is with the king at Cashel?" I called after him.

"Eocha, of course," Cassair replied. "Tadc too, though Murchad and Tairdelbach have returned home. Oh, and King Flaithbertach is there. He came to see the new church."

*Flaithbertach was there.* It seemed Brian was already bringing his new son-in-law to heel.

"And what of Béinn? Is she there?"

"No, Queen Gormflaith. She remained in her new home."

I gave him an expression of abject disappointment at these words but waved him off to the feasting hall. Good. No Béinn. Even better.



“Brother!” I called Máelmórda over.

He set down his training spear and walked over to me, leaving Donnchad to rest. “What is it?”

“I must leave today. Brian has summoned me.”

“The church must be finished. It’s only two days’ ride from here. An easy journey for you, and plenty of holy houses on the way to take you in overnight.”

“Keep up the good work with Donnchad.” I moved closer. “Last night I dreamed about the Descendants. I have a feeling that we will be able to find gifts for you and Donnchad soon. Make sure he is ready. Make sure you are too. It took every bit of energy for me to stop the witch-magic killing me. Every ounce of control. There is a chance it will kill you both if you are unable to tame it. Practise your fire-magic. More than ever before.”

“You know the gift I want the most?”

Máelmórda peered at me until my golden eyes met his. It would be hard enough getting any gift, let alone the precise one he had set his heart on. This wasn’t quite like picking over the spoils of war and deciding which trinket you wanted to keep for yourself. This was life and death.

“You’ll take what we can find.”

“No,” he said. “If we are doing this, we are doing it right. No point putting our lives at risk only to become a healer. The warrior gift is what I want. Remember that. Anything else is not worth it for me.”

I pondered my brother’s words. He wanted the warrior gift, but I had the scent of a witch and a druid... I would just have to ensure that when we caught up with them, Máelmórda would find it too hard to say no.

Nodding an agreement, I didn’t press him. There would be time for that later. “Has Sitric sent you more gold yet?”

“Some.”

“Then spend it on your hall. You will never be High King if your dun is so poorly tended. And on our mother’s life, please buy your wives some nicer dresses and find other women to do the cooking.”

“They like to cook.”

“Only because they are bored. Where are your musicians? Your poets? Each evening, your hall should be full of guests and the Uí Fáeláin kings. Your hall should be a place of welcome.”

Máelmórda snorted.

“You seem to forget, brother, that the Kingdom of Leinster is passed around three clans. If I were a king of the Uí Muiredaig clan, I’d already be thinking of plucking out your eyes when you were asleep and taking Leinster. And remember, you can’t be High King if you are blind.”

“Have no fear, sister. No mortal man shall take my eyes. And if Sitric sends more gold, I will do all of that right away.” Máelmórda turned and waved Donnchad over, agitated by my conversation. “Say your goodbyes then. I will do my best for him.”

Donnchad approached us, face drawn and grim.

“Your father has called me back,” I said. “It is time to say goodbye.”

Donnchad mumbled a farewell, the expression on his face not shifting.

“Keep practising as your uncle asks. Make sure to practise your fire-magic too. Tighten your control.”

“I will. I want... I want to make you proud.”

“Good.”

I bent down and kissed his cheek, while he stepped forward, smiling awkwardly.

Affection. It fell short for us. And yet, in this moment, something deep within me wanted to reach out and hold him. This might be the last time I saw Donnchad the boy. For if he was to survive what came next, when we next met, I needed to see a man. I held out my arm, then at the last moment, pulled it back so I gripped his shoulder instead. “When I call for you, be ready. You are a Fomorian. A true child of mine.”

\*

As Máelmórda had expected, Cassair and I were at Cashel before nightfall of the following day. My husband didn’t give much in the way of greeting, though he didn’t seem overly upset that I had remained in Leinster beyond what I had promised. Indeed, my praise of Donnchad pleased Brian, and nothing more was said about my absence. *A mother found it hard to tear herself away from her youngest child*, I said by way of apology. Nobody argued. Brian was in a gregarious mood, enthused by the new church, and offered to show it to me in the morning.

That night, I feasted with him, listened to his stories, asked Flaithbertach after Béinn’s health, and played the part I had been practising for the last

twelve years. When I left to retire for the evening, Brian kissed my hand and bid me a good sleep.

But I did not go to my tent merely to sleep. Oh no. I went there to dream.

\*

*A man in a brown hood sat in the doorway of an old house. The port of Dublin in the distance. Alone. Rowdy men filled the streets, and a poet stood in the square entertaining the crowd with tales of Fáfnir the dragon and Sigurd, the warrior who slayed it.*

*‘Olaf,’ I whispered.*

*Olaf raised his head and walked into the house. The room was plain, the roof slanting downward with the weight of another house that had been built on top of it.*

*“Yes?” His lips twitched, and he sat on the wooden bed in the corner of the room.*

*“I have need of you.”*

*“What to do?”*

*“You will ride to me at the new fort at Cashel. Use the gold I gave you to find someone to show you the way. Brian is here, but so is another king called Flaithbertach who you must find a way to speak to.”*

*Olaf grunted. “What am I to say?”*

*“You are to mistake him for King Ruanaid of the Cenél Conaill and say you have a message from Svein. When he corrects you as to who he is, you must leave. Act embarrassed. Refuse to say any more.”*

*“That’s it?”*

*“Yes.”*

*Olaf nodded, though I thought he might press me harder to discover the fruit I expected this plan to deliver. “Your wish is my command, my queen.”*

*“Be quick, Olaf. Much depends on this.”*

# **Fennit Island**

## *Fódla*

I stood in line to pay my respects to Cenn. Even from here, I could see that Gisela, his wife, had dressed him in his finest clothes. His jewels and rings, his hand-woven cloak, spun with ten different colours. Hair swept back from his face and curled over his shoulders.

There had been much talk of Tomas and Gobnat's escape in the hours after the gathering, but for now, these conversations stopped, and we turned our thoughts to Cenn. He had died, rage-filled, as he'd discovered Tomas' web of betrayal. All of us had felt that rage with him because any one of us might have died in his place, had it been one of our loved ones Tomas had just admitted to killing.

Everyone had gathered in the courtyard to watch Colmon carry Cenn down the stone steps and lay his body over the roots of the hawthorn tree that grew in the centre of the garden. Grief clung to us like an evening mist as we watched our friend lie there. His body with us, but his spirit, gone.

I'd been to many wakes in my time, but the first had been my father's.

I remembered weaving flowers into his hair and into his cloak, Rónnat at my side, as he lay underneath the hawthorn tree with the others who had fallen in a fight against the last clan of Fomorians. Uncertainty had filled me that day. I knew from my father's stories that our ancestors came to claim our bodies and brought them to the otherworld... but that no one ever saw them. The light they brought with them was too bright for us to see. It was only when we opened our eyes after the light had faded, that we would find the body of our fallen friend had gone.

It was not this that had unsettled me. It was the stories of the Descendants who were *not* reclaimed. The bodies, that after three days of waiting, no ancestor came for. *What if that happened to Father?* I had thought. Nobody

knew why this happened to our kind, so there was no way of knowing if Father would suffer this fate. The fear that had swirled in my stomach had overpowered even my grief.

That same fear swam in Gisela's eyes now, though she hid it better than I had.

She greeted each Descendant as they took their turn to walk by Cenn, whispering words of farewell in his ear and holding his hand. When it came to my turn, I kissed Gisela on the cheek. "I am sorry, Gisela, that I brought this sadness upon you."

"No. It is not your fault. Tomas deceived so many of us. It was time that he was unmasked." Tears trailed her cheeks as she spoke. "Cenn will be glad to see his father again in the otherworld."

I nodded, not knowing what else to say. Cenn and Fiachre had always had a tempestuous relationship that Tomas had further soured in Fiachre's final years. I only hoped that Cenn and Fiachre would reunite as friends. *If the ancestors came for him.*

Moving on, I kneeled beside Cenn, and took his hand in mine. "Goodbye, Cenn. I am sorry for what Tomas did to you and to Fiachre. When you see your father, I hope you will rediscover the love you had before Tomas' words poisoned us all."

The farewells continued, and with all of us here, all two hundred and twenty, it took some time for each of us to mutter our final words to Cenn, and then move to our places in the courtyard. The singing started once we had all spoken. We sang songs of our past, stories of Cenn's life and deeds. Gisela and the other harpists led the way, playing their instruments and imbuing their voices with the emotions of the stories they told us. Sadness, joy, relief, fear and elation... and it passed the time while we waited.

When my father died, the bright light came almost as soon as we laid their bodies out, but on other occasions, it had been known to take the whole three days for our ancestors to come. Throughout those days and hours, we remained with our fallen, kept vigil with them, so we could tell those who could not attend that the ancestors had taken them. If those three days passed without the ancestors coming, then it was the duty of those who had waited with the body to bury them in the graveyard at the other side of the sandbank bridge. The graveyard of the giftless and the unwanted. *Where I had buried Aoife.*

Today, the ancestors did not come quickly, and the day ebbed into night, and then the night turned to dawn. I began to shake on my feet, fatigue taking me over.

“Are you well, Fódla?” Siobhán said, tapping my shoulder. Affraic, who stood in front of me, glanced my way, but said nothing.

“You should go rest for a while,” Siobhán continued. “I can...”

She stopped speaking. From the roots of the hawthorn tree, a small light began to glow.

Growing in strength and brightness, it wasn't long before it filled the courtyard with a brilliant light. I held off closing my eyes for as long as I could, but as the light intensified, I had no choice but to seal them shut.

“Mammy,” a voice whispered in my ear. “Mammy, it's me.”

“Aoife?” I felt something brush my hand, fingers weaving into mine. “Daughter, is that you?” I held on to the hand, rubbing my own fingers over the palm. Familiar lines greeted me. I tried to open my eyes, but the searing light was too strong.

“Yes, it is me.”

“How... how are you here?”

“I can move through the veil. Not far, but far enough to speak with you now.”

“Can you stay? Can you—”

“No, Mammy. I cannot be in this world for long, nor move very far from the tree. Only when the veil thins.” Her hand pulled away. “I will see you again.”

“No. Don't go.”

“I must,” she answered. “Do not worry about me. Grandfather came for me. I told you he would.”

Her footsteps, soft against the grass, grew quieter, and with her, the light faded too.

When I opened my eyes, I stared at the tree. Cenn's body was gone.

“Was that Aoife?” Siobhán asked, her voice breathless. “I heard her. She spoke to you.” Affraic turned to stare at me, her eyes wide, a strange glint burning within.

I nodded. And then I ran to my room.

Affraic was the first to find me. “Can we speak?” she asked.

I nodded, and the gift-leader entered my room, closing the door behind her.

“I have an apology to make.”

“You do?”

“I have not always been kind to you. I am not a warm person, but to you, there has always been an added tension. That was wrong of me. I was your gift-leader. I should have treated you the same as the others.”

“Why didn’t you? Because of Tomas?”

She sat on the chair opposite me and glanced at Fragarach’s blade, where it lay on my table. She reached over to take it, rubbing her hands over the wooden handle.

“Your sister told me where to find it.” She leaned forward, speaking low. “She is a prophetess – I know that now. I wish I had known earlier, but Rónnat has her reasons, I suppose, for secrecy, so I will not waste my time by lamenting what might have been.”

My mind felt too muddled to think on how to reply. It didn’t seem important in any case, as I expected she didn’t want a conversation and would leave now she had retrieved the knife. Instead, she settled into the chair and pulled it closer to mine.

“I never held any stock in prophecies. They are flimsy, and even those with the gift will tell you that the future can be changed, the threads rewoven. This opinion is why I never listened to Gráinne when I became gift-leader. And it is why I never used my privileges as gift-leader to read the ancient prophecies that Tomas stores in the high tower.”

“Nobody reads those.”

“Tomas did. He read them all.”

“And?” I knew it was rude of me to be so impatient, but I could not help it.

“There is an ancient prophecy about a woman who would have two daughters. One would conquer death and the other would conquer fire.”

Already confused by Rónnat’s riddles about the future, I could not bear to listen to the words of another prophetess born and died hundreds of years ago. “What is your point, Affraic?”

“Tomas believes this woman is you. That was why he could never let you go.”

“What?” I shook my head. “If this were true, Rónnat would have told me.”

Affraic pursed her lips. “As I said, I thought it nonsense, but when I heard Aoife’s voice earlier today... it made me wonder. By slipping through the veil and speaking to you... has she conquered death?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know anything. Why are you telling me this?”

“Because Tomas has lived for too long in your head. He wanted you because of the power he thought you would give your children. *His children.*”

I laughed. “You come to tell me that the love Tomas said he had for me was a lie? Don’t trouble yourself, Affraic, I know this already.”

“I don’t mean to be unkind, I just...”

“You don’t need to apologise, Affraic, but if you will excuse me, I don’t wish to talk of prophecies and the things Tomas believed in anymore.”

Affraic nodded and stood. “All I want you to know is that he believes it. And if that’s the case, it is why he will come looking for you.” She gave the wooden handle one last rub, then placed it on my lap. “This is yours now. I suspect you will need it more than I.”

She walked to the door, pausing as she opened it. “Colmon has called another gathering. Tomorrow. No one is allowed to leave until it is over, and everyone must attend.”

I ran my finger over the knife, staring at my reflection along the blade, then nodded. Now Cenn was buried, it was time to understand. Recriminations and retribution would surely follow, and a great sadness fell over me as Affraic shut the door behind her.

\*

The next morning, I walked to the great hall for the gathering. Unlike the gatherings of old, there were no whispers, no guesses of what might be spoken of, and I went there with fear in my heart, but also hope that we could find a way forward.

“Morning, Fódla,” Méabh said, sitting down beside me. “How are you?”

“Fine.”



She pressed her lips together. “Who would have guessed, two gatherings in the space of three days?”

I returned her smile, though said nothing, being in no mood for small talk. Yet, I took her curiosity as a sign that I should drag my mind away from thoughts of Aoife and think about what was to come and what needed to be said.

The hall was already noisy. A wall of chatter, fifty different conversations all happening at the same time, until at last, Colmon stood. Affraic, Laeg and Shae stood with him, and they asked for the new gift-leaders from within the witch and druid communities to declare themselves. With Tomas and Gobnat no longer with us, the witches and druids had spent last night voting among themselves. It was no surprise to me that it was those who’d been open in their criticism of Tomas who had won the election. Báine, the new gift-leader of the witches, walked toward the table. Echna was the new gift-leader of the druids, and he too made his way over to the top table.

“What is our path going forward? That is the question we all ask,” Affraic said, once Báine and Echna reached their seats. “We now know that mixing with mortals is not diminishing our gift. Our giftless children are out there alone when they do not need to be. Do we unwind all the laws made by Tomas today, or do we take our time?” She sighed then, running her hand over her cheek. “We know there are those among us who helped Tomas commit his crimes. Some under the influence of his potions, but others not. How do we deal with that?”

I stood and Affraic stopped.

“You wish to speak, gift-daughter?”

“I do.”

She held out her hand, gesturing for me to begin.

I walked to the top of the hall, then turned so I could see everyone, and so everyone could see me. “You all know that I have been quiet most of my life, a follower. Frightened. But I would like to speak now. This fortress is a blessing. A home for us when times are hard, or when we need sanctuary. The mortal world can be dangerous, but it is not as Tomas would have you all believe. There is kindness there. Friendship. The mortals are like us in so many ways. We know that, don’t we? I suggest we should be allowed to mix with them again. Travel and explore and love. We should be able to come and go from this place as we wish, making this fortress our home, rather than our prison.”

“What of the laws forbidding us to meddle in mortal affairs?” Laeg asked.

“In centuries past, we lost our warriors to the mortal wars,” Colmon answered. “That was why we withdrew. All our warriors are gone now save for me and Ardál. We have no weapon-makers. I agree that involving ourselves in the mortal wars is wrong, but I cannot see that we have much power to sway them now, anyway.”

“Witches and druids have more than enough power,” Laeg said, his voice dark. “Look at what they did to us.” He turned to gaze at Shae. “Even the harpists can be dangerous when they put their minds to it.”

“That is true,” I said, “but fear is not the right path. We cannot continue to keep ourselves locked away. As for who helped and didn’t help Tomas, I don’t see how to answer this. Only that I wish to see us united rather than torn apart, and that I wish to have honesty rather than punishment.”

Colmon set his hands on the table. “I propose that we stay here for now. Before we can move forward, we must understand what happened during Tomas’ tenure as leader. We must reconcile, and we must search for Tomas and Gobnat.”

“The druids have also discovered the knife of immortality has gone,” Echna said. “Tomas admitted to using it, and so when we find him, we must discover where it is. I dread to think what would happen if this knife fell into the wrong hands. The magic contained within the blade is powerful.”

“Gobnat must lift the spell that traps Rónnat on her crannog,” I added, my voice rising. “Too long has my sister been left alone.”

All six of the gift-leaders nodded, and I was glad to find that other Descendants around the room voiced their agreement too.

“Who will go to search for them?” Colmon asked. “Are there any here who wish to take on this task?”

Ardál raised his hand. “If you are to remain here, as the only other warrior, I should lead the search party. Tomas is my cousin. He will see sense when I speak with him.”

“You did your cousin’s bidding and often, Ardál. How can we trust you?” Affraic asked.

“I did his bidding, but I did not know the extent of his actions. I apologise for the part I played in helping him. Let this be my way of showing my remorse.”

“I will go too.” Yala, aunt of Méabh, stood up, pushing one of her thick braids behind her shoulder. “You will need the strength of a cupbearer on your travels.”

Íde, a witch, the eldest still living, stood next. “They disappeared in bird form. It will take a witch to pull away such disguises.”

“And you will need a healer in case we find danger in our path.” Clíodhna was the final Descendant to stand. A distant relative of my mother’s, and like my mother, she had long, chestnut hair that reached the back of her knees. Her slight frame made her look fragile, but Clíodhna was tough and well able to keep up with the others.

“Very well,” Colmon said. “Gobnat is strong. You will need to be careful, but I think the four of you can bring them home.”

“That is it.” Affraic stood, for once smiling. “Let us eat and talk long into the night. Let us learn how to be friends once more and discover how to become part of this world again.”

Before the hall could fill with chatter, I raised my hand. “I wish you good luck, but I am leaving you now. You all know I had no part in Tomas’ schemes, and I need to live my life free after so many years of living under his influence.”

“Will you return for the gathering next year?” Affraic asked. “I hope by then we will have made our own plans for friendship with the mortals.”

“I will, Affraic. But I cannot say I will return every year. I’ve chosen a path now and I mean to walk it to its end.”

With that, I walked through the hall, into the outer hallway and out of the fort.

# Cashel, Munster

## *Gormflaith*

The fort at Cashel was beautiful to be sure, the church beside it even more so. The men had built a shrine to Saint Brigid inside, made of carved wood, the stone base inlaid with silver and gold. Beside the church, Brian had ordered his men to build a bruiden for the travellers who passed by. The large bruiden was furnished with tables, chairs and beds, and Brian had even agreed to pay for two women to cook food in the *fulacht fiadh* all year round, so that whoever wished to rest at the bruiden could enjoy a feast fit for a king at any time of day.

The people building the bruiden did so with smiles on their faces. So *generous was the new High King that he would feed all the travellers and all the weary who crossed his land.*

It wasn't just the people who rejoiced. *Blessed are the meek*, Father Marcán had taken to saying as he followed Brian around the new construction. *Blessed are the poor.*

Teachings from Christ, though I didn't understand why Father Marcán said them to Brian. My husband was not meek and certainly not poor. The wives of the builders, however, lapped up these words, and happily collected large rocks to heat in the fires. The old crones would wait until the rocks were scalding hot then, using a net, move them into the *fulacht fiadh* so the water would continuously boil the venison and vegetables within.

Over the next few days, the Bishop of Armagh came to consecrate the land, and his entourage of monks and nuns knelt on the dirt to give prayers of thanks for the new church. Jesus had fed his flock with only fish and loaves. Brian fed his with the wealth of conquest and war. The pious and the hungry saw no difference. For the clergy, these riches were Brian's

right. For the poor... well, food was food, and a belly filled was eternally grateful.

Brian was clever too, selective with his words when he spoke to the locals and those less educated in the new faith, for he didn't only play to the new faith – he did plenty to please those who still sang of the old kings of Ireland. Despite most Irish following the Christian path, many in their hearts lived by the old ways and old laws. The giving away of wealth spoke to the legends of King Guaire of Connacht, who gave away every last possession to those who asked for them. A king who would have been ridiculed in Norway for his weakness was prized in Ireland for his generosity. Indeed, in Ireland, men did not count wealth by how much they had, rather by how much they could afford to give away. And Brian appeared to be giving much away. No one knew how little it was in comparison to what he had.

I supposed in any case, that the cost was irrelevant to him. This church was his showpiece, a way to show all that he was a conqueror, like Alexander of Macedon and Julius Caesar of Rome. And it wasn't just the people of Munster he wanted to impress now. Brian was erecting his buildings in other kings' lands. Because as High King, their lands were now his. *Mine*. That was what he was saying. *Mine*.

King Donn mac Gilla Pátraic of Osraige had come this morning to inspect the fort and bruiden, lauding its beauty, while Brian told him of another church he planned to build in Osraige next year. King Donn nodded and agreed, giving no sign of irritation that Brian was telling him what was to happen on Osraige land.

And Flaithbertach watched on too.

*Was this why Brian had invited the Red Wolf to come?*

To show him what happened to kings who stood against him, I guessed. To show Flaithbertach he could build on his land if he wanted to. Maybe, maybe not... He spoke to his new son-in-law often and asked his advice. Perhaps he was merely trying to bring him into the family fold. He hadn't done this with Sitric, but Sitric was Viking, and Sláine much more capable than Béibinn at bringing a man to heel.

Flaithbertach stayed at Brian's side much of the time. He nodded and smiled at all the right things, laughed and joked, made suggestions, even offered to have some of his own men come and help with the building work.

Of course, I heaped praise on the church and bruiden too. I examined every stone, every table, every carving around the shrine. Oh, I cooed as loud as the rest. I praised every new technique, every idea my husband had. I made many suggestions in an attempt to showcase my husband's ideas to greater effect. Anything to delay our departure. *More candles*, I suggested. *More furnishings to make the bruiden more welcoming. Woollen blankets for the travellers who stayed there. Might we pay another woman to keep a vegetable garden? Was there enough ale?*

My patience was finally rewarded. On the fifth day, Olaf came. Just in time too, for Brian had already commanded that we were to leave in the morning and begin our long trek back to Killaloe.

\*

No one noticed him at first, head bowed and shrouded in plain woollen garb, wooden crucifix around his neck. He prayed at the shrine just as other monks and nuns had come to do. After this, he took a bowl of venison and stewed vegetables, but like an eagle he kept his eyes trained on Flaithbertach. As soon as Father Marcán distracted King Brian with some business, Olaf walked over to Flaithbertach and whispered into his ear.

Flaithbertach gave a furtive glance in his father-in-law's direction, then followed Olaf for a stroll as if they were contemplating a life of prayer and all things godly. Round the fort they walked, then the bruiden, then into the church, then back to the fort again. Why was it taking so long? All Olaf needed to do was introduce himself as a man of Styrbjörn and Svein, ask if he was King Ruanaid of Cenél Conaill, then apologise for having the wrong man and leave.

Finally, as they approached the path leading to the bruiden, I noted Olaf bowing his head deeper, his hands pressed together in apology. Then, just as I instructed him, he left Flaithbertach's company and disappeared into the forest.

"Afternoon, Flaithbertach," I said, walking toward him. I eyed the part of the forest that Olaf had walked into and frowned. "Did the monk have news for you?"

"No. Nothing."

He moved to walk past me, and I caught his arm. “The thing is, I recognise that man from my time in Dublin. He’s not one of your monks, is he? He is one of Styrbjörn’s men, and Styrbjörn is a cousin of Svein Forkbeard. So, what did he want? He wasn’t here to admire the church.”

Flaithbertach stared at me, too stunned to disagree.

“Tell me. Or else I will tell Brian who you are conspiring with, and all these weeks of licking his arse will have been for nothing.”

“You mistake everything, Queen Gormflaith.” Flaithbertach pulled his arm out of my grip. “It was nothing important at all.”

“Listen, whatever that monk told you, you must not listen to what King Svein has to say. The offers will be tempting... but...”

“Queen Gormflaith, I am telling the truth. There was no offer. He didn’t even know—”

“Fine. Don’t tell me. But heed my words. It is the Viking way to talk to kings of the land they are about to invade. They look for the strongest king or lord in the region and offer them terms of friendship.” I pointed my finger at Flaithbertach. “Then they take the land of this king’s neighbour, and the Viking pronounces himself the new king of this land. To prove they still want friendship with the first king, the Vikings marry his daughters and nieces. It seems like a good deal at the start. That was why my father married me off to Amlav, but in the end, the Vikings turned on him. Remember that.”

Flaithbertach’s neck and cheeks flushed red.

“Is this what he offered you? A marriage pact?”

Flaithbertach tightened the clasp on his cloak. “No. He didn’t. You are too suspicious, Queen Gormflaith. The man I spoke to, whether or not he knows Svein, is a monk, and it was only God he wished to speak of.”

I let him leave me, frowning and agitated, trying to work out what Olaf’s words now meant.

\*

Later that night, once my tent door was sewn shut, I transformed into a crow.

Transformation was not always pleasant, the feeling of feather and claw. It also meant that your clothes could not travel with you, which was why I

seldom did it. Tonight, however, I had absolute need of secrecy, and for once, no need of clothes.

Olaf sat in the forest, waiting. He'd lit a good fire and made a makeshift hut out of leaves and branches, and his fur cloak lay atop the ground like a rug.

I landed on the log beside him, then transformed into myself. My true self. Beautiful and young. Reaching out to hold his hand, I made him who he once was. Beautiful too. Strong. His scars left him, his back straightened, and his long hair hung over his shoulder, his dragon tattoo visible in the flickering light.

Smiling, he lowered his hood. With the scars all gone and his teeth straightened, I could now focus on his icy blue eyes staring into mine. His eyes roved over my body, up the pale skin of my legs and over my stomach, my long hair covering all the places he wanted to see the most.

"I want you to go to a church close to Killaloe," I said. "Saint Bran's is the name. I pray at the nunnery there often. You will live at the church until I have further need of you."

Olaf nodded, listening, but disinterested in the details of where he was to go. "You are so beautiful, Gormflaith. It is a shame to see you ever in the company of old men."

"How old are you?"

I knew, of course. He was younger than me and would still be handsome if Svein had not tortured him so cruelly.

"Age is not my issue. It is my value. I am not worthy of you."

"No man is." I held out my hand so that the fire beside us burned hotter and brighter. "But you are who I'm with, all the same. You are the only person I trust to help me win this war, Olaf." I tapped his forehead, then ran my fingers through his thick hair, clasping it tight. "You left me before, though. I have to remind myself of that."

Olaf took my hand in his and pressed it against his lips. "I won't leave you again. I live for you now. My chance, I took it, and it didn't work. But where I failed, you will succeed. I want you to become the queen you deserve to be."

"Make a blood vow to me," I said. "Like the old warriors and old gods did."

He picked up his knife and cut the skin on his palm. Red blood pooled there, and he licked it. "I swear that I will not leave you unless you



command it. I swear I will not take another woman, and I swear that I will defeat your enemies.”

I kneeled, crawled forward and licked the blood from his hand too. “I accept your vow, Olaf Tryggvasson. Beware, I will kill you if you break it.”

He laughed at this, his head shaking. “I don’t need threats to make me keep my vows.”

“Don’t you? You broke a vow once before.”

“I was a fool then.”

Smiling, I lay beside him and opened my hand. A ball of fire hovered over my fingers.

Olaf closed my hand into a fist. The fire must have burned him, but he said nothing. Then he pulled me to him. Kissing my lips, he locked his fingers into my hair, his other hand moving downward and parting my thighs. Now we were together, I could not stop myself. I sat on top of him, kissing back, biting, groaning.

I had known lust before, but never like this. Sex had only ever been a weapon to wield or something to endure. There had been brief flashes of passion. Sigurd the first time he came to Dublin, the slave boy on Orkney whose name I could no longer remember. Fear of discovery and delight in the forbidden added to the excitement of the build-up, but never the act. The act itself always disappointed.

But now there was no fear. For I feared no one. With Olaf, his blood on his lips and on mine, there was only joy.

# **Fennit Island**

## *Fódla*

“Goodbye, my love,” I whispered as I brushed my hand over Aoife’s grave. Despite my excitement at the thought of returning to Killaloe, I could not leave this part of Munster without tending to my daughter’s grave.

The breeze fluttered against my hair as I kneeled on the grass, pulling weeds from her cairn and setting the fallen stones back on top. Next, I set my hand on the grass and fresh blooms of red clover and cowslip wove around the grass and over the grave. It was a tradition of mine. Silly, perhaps. She couldn’t see the red and yellow petals or smell the fragrance, but somehow, I used to think that wherever she was, she might see this and know I was thinking of her.

“I love you, Aoife. I will be back here for the next gathering, but now I am leaving to live the life you wanted for me.” Pressing my fingers against my lips, I touched the grave, then stood.

Her words came to me once again. *Do not worry about me. Grandfather came for me. I told you he would.* She was in the otherworld. With her grandfather. The ball of grief in my stomach unwound suddenly. She was happy where she was. Happier than she had been in life.

Sadness replaced the grief. The overwhelming sense that I had failed her, that I had been too weak to save her, took hold. I stared at the withered hawthorn tree at the end of the field. A sister tree to the one in the fortress, it had been planted out here when it failed to bloom, and a new tree grown from the cauldron was planted in the fort. But withered as it was, could it also be a portal to the otherworld? If I walked over there, would Aoife hear me? What would I say to her? How could I apologise and explain my failures?

Tomas had admitted to poisoning her. And I, her mother, had not uncovered it. She must have known he was killing her, and she didn't tell me. She only asked for me to be happy.

I walked over to the hawthorn tree and placed my hand over the bark. "I will try harder now, Aoife. I will fight for Broccan and Rónnat. Do not worry, I remember your words, and I will try to make you proud of me."

Resting against the trunk, I closed my eyes, recalling the times where Aoife had sat beside me here, head resting on my shoulder as we shared our secrets.

I might have fallen asleep if the sound of leaves crunching had not made me start.

"I thought you'd be here."

"Colmon." I smiled as I opened my eyes. "Why didn't you call out to me?"

My cousin drew his horse closer. Ah, Enna. I had missed her. I held out my hand, and she lowered her nose to brush against my fingers.

"You are going to Killaloe?" Colmon asked.

"Yes."

"Where is Broccan?"

"At Killaloe, I believe. When you left us, we happened upon a wedding between Béinn and Flaithbertach, who is now the King of the Cenél nEóghain. Tairdelbach was there and Broccan could not leave him."

"Does Tairdelbach know who he is?"

"Broccan calls himself Bróg now. I told him to keep up the act, but now the council has ruled that we can live with the mortals, does this need to be so?"

Colmon dismounted and brushed Enna's side. "I think he should keep it quiet for now, at least until we have decided how best to live among the mortals. And of course, everyone believes Broccan to be dead. At the next gathering, if Broccan wants to, he should come here and tell everyone the truth."

"What if they accuse him of interfering with the mortals by fighting for King Brian?"

"That I do not know."

"Then I'd rather his true identity remained secret for now, from both Tairdelbach and the council. I am glad the council moves forward, but those

who once worked for Tomas are still there... and until Tomas is caught, I do not wish to endanger him."

"A question remains though. Should he be fighting at all?"

"I don't wish him to fight," I answered. "I don't want him to at all, but Brian is doing good with his kingship. After the wedding feast, he banned slavery in Ireland. Did you hear?"

"Then he is a better king than many before him. Murchad is a good man too." Colmon handed me Enna's reins. "Take Enna with you. Broccan will need a good horse to keep up with such company."

"I cannot. A poor woman like me should not have such a fine horse, but thank you, Colmon, for all your kindness."

"There is no need to thank me, and every reason for me to thank you." He took my hand in his. "I would be dead if you had not come here."

"I spoke the truth. That is all."

"If speaking the truth was easy, everyone would do it."

I pulled Colmon into a hug. "You are happy to stay here?"

"For a time. Until Ardál finds Tomas and Gobnat, anyway. And until we've thought about how to live once again in this world. I hope that soon we will all be free to roam this land as we once did."

"You are a good man too, Colmon. Never forget that."

My cousin pulled back and laughed, perhaps one of the few genuine ones I'd heard from him for many years.

With that, I watched as Colmon mounted Enna and rode onto the sandbank, then giving Murchad's ring a twist around my finger, I began my own journey. How long would it take to reach Killaloe? Not long. *Not long at all.*

# **Killaloe**

## *Gormflaith*

The feast was magnificent for the king's return to Killaloe. Crínoc had outdone herself this time. Another gaggle of young unmarried cousins had been brought in to help with the serving of food, and endless casks of wine and ale passed around the tables. Beef, salmon, mackerel, roasted pork, venison, buttered boiled roots and honey-baked fruit. My mouth salivated at the endless parade of food. Even the wine, imported from Sicily, matched the best that could be found in Dublin.

For once, I gorged myself. After weeks of riding, it was long overdue. Besides, now we had returned to Killaloe, I was free of the need to chat to visitors and guests. No more smiling and courtesy. Now I could eat in silence, for there was none here I needed to impress.

The top table was filled with close family members. Eocha, Tadc and Father Marcán to Brian's left, with Murchad seated, as always, to the right side of his father, while I sat beside Murchad. Father Marcán spoke to Brian, while the other men spoke among themselves, occasionally shouting over to Tairdelbach, who sat with his own friends at the table closest to ours. The inclusion of his friends at this front table made the conversation more lively than usual. Young men fresh from the battlefield were always raucous.

When I was newly married, Amlav always sat his young warriors close to our table. He had liked the chatter of young men, and he was generous to the younger warriors who fought for him. He had no time for the battle-weary and morose. *War is for killing*, he'd say to the men who wept. *The dead do not want your tears*. Sometimes these tears were for their friends who they'd lost, sometimes for the men they'd slain. Amlav didn't care. War was war. But whether he liked it or not, the older men who fought

often grew quiet as the years passed, and so it happened that Amlav, eighty years of age, found himself often in the company of men in their late teens and twenties. Their enthusiasm for war kept him entertained. They made him feel young.

He would have liked Tairdelbach. Murchad's son laughed loudly, felt every emotion keenly, and was never sad for long. Tonight, he and his friends were enraptured by their conversation. A young man with fair hair sat beside him, and the two of them could hardly breathe for laughing at each other. Even Murchad laughed when he watched them.

I could see now why Amlav had wanted the young men with him. When I was his wife, I did not pay any attention to his older warriors, but as I looked along the row of men at the high table, I noticed how solemn they were. Thoughtful. Boring. As Amlav had discovered, the merriment of the young was catching, and soon the entire table, even Father Marcán and King Brian, were joking with the young men.

It was only when Tairdelbach and his friends left to play a game of hurling that the sombre mood resumed. Murchad turned silent then. He glanced every so often at Tadc and Tadc's son, and only then did anything resembling a smile flash across his face, but then he'd look away and his face turned to stone. *Why so sad?* He should be happy. He had won the north of Ireland for his father and was a prince of Munster, heir to the high-kingship.

At length, I set aside my food and poured us both a drink.

"Tairdelbach is enjoying himself this evening," I said. "It makes me miss Donnchad even more when I see everyone having fun like this."

"Yes. Donnchad would enjoy being with Tairdelbach and his friends," Murchad agreed. "Though they are getting rowdier by the day. And drunker."

"Who is the new friend? A bad influence?"

"No, I don't think so. If anything, I'm sure Tairdelbach is a bad influence on him. His name is Bróg. He won the archery competition at Béinn's wedding. He's a good warrior." Murchad took a sip of the wine, then set the cup down on the table.

"And what of you?"

"What of me?" His voice tightened.

"You look sad."

“Not at all. You mistake me.” He sat up in his chair, stretching out his back, and gave me a smile that did not reach his eyes. “Just tired.”

I could feel him inching away from me, glancing around the room to look for an excuse to leave. Even after all these years, he did not trust me, though I wondered if he really trusted anyone.

He need not have bothered searching for a reason to leave, for one presented itself without any effort as a messenger ran into the hall.

“King Brian,” the messenger shouted out, running toward him.

I didn’t know the messenger, though some of Brian’s men seemed to. Cassair stood in front of him before he could approach the table, making the man pause.

“Cassair,” he panted, lifting a scroll into the air. “You know me. I am Onchú, cousin to King Ruanaid of Cenél Conaill. I have come to tell you that King Flaithbertach has invaded our lands. He has taken gold and hostages from my cousin, including his son.”

Murchad walked over to Onchú and took the scroll from his hand. “What reason did Flaithbertach give?”

“He said that he was the king in the north. King of Leith Cuinn. And that the other kings in the north had to give their vows to him.”

“There is no such thing as the King of Leth Cuinn anymore,” Murchad said. “There is only a High King.”

“I know,” Onchú said, still out of breath. “My cousin, King Ruanaid, fought Flaithbertach in one-on-one combat, over the insult. My cousin lost and gave over the hostages Flaithbertach demanded. Flaithbertach brought his army with him, you see, but it was to you that Ruanaid swore his oaths, and it is you he asks to come to his aid. It is not right this has happened. It goes against everything you promised. This is not peace.”

I leaned forward in my chair, trying not to smile as I watched the dilemma dance over Brian and Murchad’s faces.

Onchú, now recovering his strength, took a step forward. “Flaithbertach did not return home when he defeated Ruanaid. He marched east. Toward Ulaid... and Meath.”

“Insolent pup,” Brian snapped, pushing his food plate away. “After all I have given him. The favour I have shown him.”

Murchad sighed. “I will ride north. Cassair, tell the men to ready themselves. Tell Kerthialfad to ready the ships for the morning. We will sail up the Shannon, then ride to Cenél Conaill.”

“Which clans will you call up to fight?” I asked. “Sitric is—”

“I don’t need Sitric,” Murchad snapped. “The men of Killaloe will do.” He fixed his rings on his fingers, straightened the leather bindings over his wrist. His face was not red with rage like Brian’s, but rather pale and cold.

Brian raised an eyebrow at this. “If you go to the Cenél nEóghain unprotected, Flaithbertach will try to kill you. This is a northern problem. Why not have Sechnall deal with it?”

“Sechnall is too weak.”

Murchad stood slowly, then walked out of the hall. Cassair and his men followed him, already bellowing orders for the warriors to gather their belongings. Tairdelbach and his friends rushed into the feasting hall, having heard the shouts to ready themselves from outside. Grim stares on the older men, wide eyes on the younger. But none of them matched Murchad for intent as they left the hall to ready their clothing and weapons.

Brian stared after his son. The stony façade had fallen away, his frustration plain on every feature. Rebellion was expected, yes, but not so soon. He sat there, still, head lowered, trying to work out Flaithbertach’s motives for lashing out at the King of the Cenél Conaill. Only I knew. Olaf’s lie had worked as expected.

If Svein were to attack, Flaithbertach wanted to be who he came to. He needed to be the first of the northern kings. And so, when Olaf had asked to speak with the King of Cenél Conaill, Flaithbertach feared that *this* was the king that Svein would wish to talk to. Not himself. This act of demanding hostages from other northern kings set out to put him on top.

*It was all going exactly as I had planned.*

Excitement, however, was for fools. This was merely the first turn of the wheel. Many more threads had to be woven before I had my way.

Shouts of the men calling their friends to war filtered back into the hall. Shouts to ready the ships, shouts between husbands and wives to ready food for the journey. The serving girls packed away the leftovers from the feast. Chaos reigned as I stared out the front doors and watched Murchad staring at the river. He stood there, completely still.

What was he thinking of? The battle ahead?

The men in the north fought like dogs, it was said, but this Murchad mac Brian... well, he fought like death.

As I swirled the wine in my cup, I remembered Máelmórda’s words. *Only a warrior gift would do.* Perhaps he was right, after all. For who could



fell this mighty warrior of men other than a warrior with the gift of the  
Tuatha Dé Danann?

**PART III**

**WINTER 1012/  
SPRING 1013**

# **Kingdom of the Northern Ó'Neills**

## *Murchad*

I rode into the ringfort of the Cenél nEóghain, the guards standing aside to allow me passage through the gate.

It was a grand dun. The finest I had seen aside from my father's and King Sechnall's. The strength of the Northern Ó'Neills had stood for centuries, enduring all the storms and plagues that gods and men had sent them.

My men rode behind me. Cassair, Tairdelbach and his new friend, Bróg, kept closest. There were not many of us, only sixty, and it wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that Flaithbertach would order his men to kill us here and now. He could do it if he so wished. The walls of the dun were high enough to conceal hundreds of his warriors.

That was what my father had warned, but I did not think it would be my new brother-in-law's way. Flaithbertach was young and reckless, but proud. As Hector met Achilles outside the walls of Troy, Flaithbertach would meet with me.

Once I dismounted, I made my way toward the feasting hall, only to find Bébinn standing outside the doors to greet us. Her willowy frame and long hair made her ghost-like in the morning gloom.

"Brother," she said, "how glad I am to see you." She smiled, but a warning flashed in her eyes as her hand reached out to touch mine. "My husband is inside the feasting hall. You and your men are welcome to eat with us."

"Thank you, sister." I wrapped my arms around her. "Don't worry," I whispered in her ear, "all will be well."

I shouldn't have said that, for I did not know it would be so, only that I wished it. Who knew what Flaithbertach would say when I reminded him of

the vows he had so recently sworn? I turned to my men and held out my hand. None were to follow me inside, only Tairdelbach and Cassair.

\*

“Brother-in-law!” Flaithbertach grinned as I walked through the doors of his feasting hall. He held his arms out as if coming to embrace me but didn’t rise from his chair. How things had changed. When taken captive, he’d been so sullen, so bitter, and then so... compliant. What was this? Satisfaction? Yes, he was proud of what he had done.

I let go of Bébinn’s hand. “I have come to speak with you, Flaithbertach.”

“About?”

“Why did you break the peace?”

“I wasn’t aware I had.”

“You broke the peace when you invaded the Cenél Conaill and took hostages from King Ruanaid. You broke the peace when you rode into the Kingdom of Ulaid and asked the King of the Dál Fiatach to submit to you.”

“That is a private matter between the kings of the north.”

“No,” I replied. “It is not. How can it be when these kings have already sworn their vows to my father? You cannot make oaths to two kings.”

Flaithbertach eyed my sister. She nodded, then slowly walked behind her husband’s chair and over to her own. Flaithbertach smiled as she passed him, his hand holding her still a moment so he could kiss her on the cheek.

*Arrogant pup.*

And that’s all he was. Arrogant. His army had been soundly crushed, and my father had humiliated him. He had kneeled on two knees before him, and now, as soon as the shadow of the High King had gone, he decided to throw his weight around. If he rebelled, more would follow. The peace we had so carefully won, now balanced on the tip of a needle.

I heard Tairdelbach grind his teeth behind me, and I gave him a warning glance. I had told him not to react or speak, but he was young and the sight of Flaithbertach grinning and smirking while kissing Bébinn was difficult for him to endure.

Indeed, I could feel my own temper rising.

“Fine,” Flaithbertach said at last. “I will allow King Ruanaid to forgo his vows to me. Does that make you happy? King Ruanaid is about as helpful as a three-legged doe on the battlefield anyhow.”

Flaithbertach’s family and friends laughed.

“You must also return his hostages and cattle.”

Flaithbertach shook his head. “I’m afraid I can’t do that. The hostages are safe here, and the cattle are already mixed in with mine.”

More laughter. More smirking.

I took a step closer to the table, took out my right longsword and set the tip on the ground, holding the pommel between both hands. *Silence.*

“Do not take out your sword in my hall, Murchad. It is forbidden.”

“You made vows to my father to act in good faith and keep the peace. I declare that you have broken your vows and Munster will act swiftly.”

I turned to my son. “Tairdelbach, we are leaving. Tell the men.”

“Wait.” Flaithbertach burst out laughing. “Murchad, wait a moment.” He finally stood and came away from the table so that he stood before me. “Why, you’re a hasty man. I had not thought that of you, Murchad mac Brian.”

“Are you afraid, Flaithbertach?” I sucked in a breath. “You should be. We defeated you easily. Much quicker than I thought we would, if I speak plainly.”

“You insult me and my people,” he snapped, the laughter suddenly gone.

“No!” I roared, my voice bellowing across his hall. Several of the men flinched at the sudden volume. That was my intent. “You insult my father, who is your High King.” I stepped closer again, this time lowering my voice. “You either agree right now to send back what you stole, or it is war.”

“Please, brother,” Béinn said, voice trembling. “Do not say that.”

Flaithbertach stared, his eyes flitting between me and Tairdelbach, hoping perhaps that my son might show some sign of support for Béinn.

“Or,” I said, “you can fight me.”

“Fight you?”

“Yes. I hear you like challenging kings to one-on-one combat to settle your disputes.” I opened my arms, taking out my second longsword. “Fight me to decide who keeps King Ruanaid’s vows, hostages and cattle.”

He licked his lips, rubbing his hand down his beard, though I sensed his pride growing within him. “And have your father come here crying because

I hurt his favourite prince?”

“My father won’t come crying. Not if the fight is fair, which I mean it to be.”

Flaithbertach shook his head, lowering his eyebrows and making a face to his men. “Murchad, you are a warmonger, through and through. Drink some wine. Enjoy yourself. There is no need to fight.”

He waved a hand as if to dismiss me.

“Ah, so you are a coward. Farewell then, Flaithbertach ingen Muirchertach.”

This made him pause. Instead of calling him the son of his father, I had used the word *ingen*, which meant ‘daughter of’. A crude insult, but a hard one for a new king, full of pride, to take. I knew this when I taunted him. But what choice did I have? To make Dublin banish slavery in their markets, they had to see that we would stand firm when our allies betrayed us. That we would not watch as our power eroded. That we would not allow the slave markets to return any more than we would allow this petulant pup from the north to march into territories that were not his.

“Fight me!” I roared so loudly that he stopped in his tracks. “Either order the hostages and cattle released or meet me outside. I will be waiting.”

\*

In the short grass outside the ringfort, I stood.

“Are you sure about this, Father?” Tairdelbach hissed.

I nodded. Then I turned my attention to Bróg. “You are my son’s friend, yes?”

Bróg nodded.

“If I fall, you do not seek retribution for my death. Nor will you allow my son to do so. You will take the men and go home and tell my father what happened, and that it was I who issued the challenge. Do you understand?”

“I do.”

“Do you understand, Tairdelbach?”

My son bit the side of his cheek, his face flushed red. “I can’t leave you, Father.”

“You will take my body with you. But you will not fight. Not today. Swear to me.”

Tairdelbach locked eyes with mine, struggling to compose himself.

“Swear it.”

“Yes. I swear.”

I nodded at Cassair, who nodded back.

Now my son’s safety was secure, I could focus. I felt the weight of my swords in my hands, felt the binding of the hilt, tightened my grip.

*Was it worth it? Another fight?*

So many lives had already been lost in my father’s cause to become High King. I would have said no to all of his plans, save for his desire to see all men and women on this island freed. It was the one thing that bound us tight together. The slave ships that came to Ireland when he was a boy, that took his family and friends away, still lived in his dreams. They lived in my dreams too. Different ships, different family, different friends. But the same outcome.

When I next looked up, Flaithbertach was walking toward me, his sword and a shield in hand. The men and women of his household followed behind him, worried expressions on every face. Anger on his. Terror on Bébinn’s.

Flaithbertach stopped in front of me, fixing his sleeves and leather armour.

“You think the gift of a woman was enough to keep me in check?” he said as he tightened the belts around his waist. “Your sister is nice, I grant you, but I would hand her back to you without a second thought. I am not Sitric.”

“No, you are not Sitric.” I held out my two swords and steadied my stance. “Ready?”

He frowned, as if not quite believing I’d go through with my threat, but the Ó’Neill pride, as ever, won through, and he raised his weapon.

He ran toward me first. Sword raised, shield to his side. He was fast. Young men are. And I was growing old now. My limbs ached in the morning. My back groaned when the sun set. Years of war, however, had made me hard. I hit him with all my might, swinging both swords against his shield. He spun, running past me, smirking again, as if he’d won the round by blocking my strikes.

But the impact of my steel against his shield had hurt him. His wrists. His forearms. The muscles in his left arm and shoulder would be aching already.

I jogged forward, spinning my left sword in my hand, not to fight, but to scare him. To make his eyes shift away from my right arm. I aimed high with my left sword, and he raised his shield to block, while I thudded the bottom of the shield with the guard of my right. The extra momentum made the shield slam against his nose. Blood spurted onto his lip, and using my left foot, I swiped his ankle so that he fell onto the ground.

Men say, to fight with a sword and shield is safer, and there are many of those who say a shield can be as effective as a sword, for the sharp upper edge can do as much damage as the tip of a blade if aimed correctly. The downside to fighting this way is that every boy and man in the country is taught to defend against it. I could see Flaithbertach's next move before he'd even thought of it himself.

Fighting with two swords was a harder act to perfect. In many ways, it left you open. But when two blades came swinging, most men's minds froze, and that pause gave me a window to strike.

Giving Flaithbertach a moment to stand, I ran toward him, my two blades giving blow after blow. He was a skilled warrior himself, but his lack of experience against my fighting style rendered him unable to gather any momentum.

He blocked and parried, shifting right and left. Sweat dripped from his brow, his shield inching lower.

Seizing my chance, I ran forward and slammed my shoulder into his shield, using both my swords to pin him down. "Why are you doing this?" I asked.

"Doing what?" he panted.

"Trying to win the high-kingship back."

Flaithbertach struggled to free his sword. The muscles in his arms were already shaking.

I pushed him back, letting him know that I saw his strength was failing. "When the Vikings started to invade the south, where were you?"

"Protecting our own people."

"Then stay king of your *own people*. If you don't want to help all of Ireland, you have no business being king of it." I charged forward, swinging my left sword up, while slashing the right against Flaithbertach's bull-hide armour, hard enough to break his ribs.

He winced, though the full impact of the blow hadn't registered with him, at least not yet. He swung up with his shield, aiming for my nose, while



parrying my left blade. Using the hilt of my right blade, I yanked the sword from his hand, sending his blade flying. He slumped to the ground, disbelief shining in his eyes.

I stood over him, both blades touching his neck.

He squirmed under their sharpness, then stilled. He glanced at his sword, too far away, and then at his shield, which his weary arm could no longer lift.

“You, King Flaithbertach, are sworn to the High King,” I said, my voice loud enough for the crowd to hear. “You have broken your oaths. As recompense for this, you will be punished.”

The sixty men I had with me made their way into the fortress. The men in the crowd flushed red as they watched but could do nothing with their king under my sword. My men went to the stables as I had instructed them and led all of Flaithbertach’s horses outside and tied these new horses onto the reins of their own.

“The hostages from King Ruanaid are to go home. You are to give him his cattle back or else give a payment in kind. And you will release King Ruanaid and the King of Ulaid from their vows, which by right belong to my father.”

I inched the sword closer to his neck so that the blade pricked at the skin. “If you don’t want Béinn, I’m sure we can find her another husband. In fact, perhaps I’ll take her, anyway. The ease with which you said you would give her up was... upsetting.”

“No,” he said, “do not take her away. I am sorry I acted as I did. I will do as you ask. You have my word.”

I glanced at my sister. If she’d shown any sort of desire to leave, I’d have taken her, but instead she stared at her new husband, tears in her eyes. Did she love him? Foolish as he was, I thought she did.

So, I removed my sword and stepped back.

Flaithbertach hauled himself up and brushed the soil from his tunic, then held out his arm to hold mine. I took it, and the tension in the crowd fell away.

I pulled him closer, and embraced him, a show that we were family once again. In agreement. Friends. “Trying to prove your worth by provoking my father is not the way to keep your throne,” I said. “There are Vikings raiding along the northern coast again. Make them your enemy. Not us.”

Flaithbertach nodded, a small smile moving over his lips. "I think Svein's men will be easier than you."

"Who?"

"Svein Forkbeard. The King of Norway."

"Yes, I know who he is. Why do you speak of him?"

Flaithbertach bit his lip, cautious. "A Viking I spoke to said he is planning to invade England next year."

"Then," I said, "even more reason to do as I say. If Svein has his eyes on England, his jarls will be looking at land for themselves. You need to build defences along your rivers so they cannot come inland. We can help you with that."

"No need. It's already underway."

Was that Flaithbertach's concern? Invasion? Was that why he wanted kings' oaths to fight for him?

"If they attack in number," I said, "let us know. We will come to your aid."

Flaithbertach patted my arm, then turned to speak to the crowd. "It is a foolish man who takes on the famous Murchad mac Brian. Or perhaps just a rite of passage for a new brother-in-law. We are friends and cherished family once more. Murchad, come back to the fort to eat with us. You and your men are welcome."

I nodded. "We will eat in your hall, Flaithbertach."

The scowls lifted from the faces of the Ó'Neills, and my men, relieved that I was alive, and peace agreed, made their way inside the dun.

If I could, I would have left then. But to refuse food after a fight like this would be rude, even ruder than suggesting the fight in the first place and shaming Flaithbertach in front of his men. So I stayed. Stayed to play my part. Tomorrow, we would ride to our ships, then sail home, and swiftly.

My father needed to know what Flaithbertach had said, and we needed to plan for Svein's arrival. War was coming for us, whether we wanted it or not.

# **Killaloe**

## *Fódla*

When I reached Killaloe, music filled the air and a huge bonfire burned beside the river, a few hundred feet downstream of the dun. It was not a festival, but this was something more than the usual nightly feast. Perhaps there had been a birth or a wedding. I watched from the treeline for a while. King Brian was generous. He always had been with his own people, but this was nothing like I'd ever seen before.

Platter after platter of meat and barley breads came out of the dun. Fruits and pickled fish. Cheese and flatbreads. Honey cakes and boiled vegetables. The ale and imported wine flowed freely too. The young men and women, even some children, carried them around the bonfire and offered them to whoever passed by.

Crínoc's voice echoed in the wind, and I smiled at how some things can change so much while others remain the same. A large gathering like this once would have filled me with dread, but today, I was glad of it. It meant I could walk by the river and the dun without every eye turning toward me, for the people were caught up in their own revelry, and I was determined to find Murchad before he noticed me.

It had taken me longer than I expected to reach Killaloe. Determined to use my gift for the good, I had healed many of the men and women I passed, giving them herbs to brew in their teas, saying they would help them, and all the while I touched their arms and healed the illness that ailed them. Growths and tumours, brittle bones, and inflamed lungs. It felt good, and I felt stronger for it... but this was the time to find my own joy.

As I walked to the river, some people's heads turned as I passed by. All of them smiled, some called out a greeting. Even the warriors who guarded the dun welcomed me and told me to go to the hall to partake in the feast.

How different to when I first arrived all those years ago, when I was scarred, back bent over a stick, with a young boy at my side and no man at the other.

*Where was he?* That boy who had become a man. I let my ears guide me and it wasn't long before I caught the sound of his voice. Broccan and Tairdelbach had always made a din when they were younger, and it seemed doubling their height had only made this worse. They were not in the dun as I had guessed. No, they were outside, playing a game of hurling with their friends.

An ancient game, it had remained popular throughout the years. Played with large ash-wood sticks, the aim was to hit a small leather ball up the pitch and over a goal post to score a point against the other team. More than one nose got broken at every match I'd ever watched, fingers sometimes too. It was fast though, points scored back and forth, and thrilling to watch. I stood beside a group of spectators for a while, watching as the game unfolded.

Broccan turned as his team scored a point, his eyes searching. *He had sensed my arrival.* "Finsha!" he shouted as his eyes found me.

Glad he had remembered my new name, I waved.

He wiped his brow and beckoned to another man to take his place on the team.

"Who is that?" I heard the young men behind him ask.

"My sister," Broccan answered. "I sent for her to join me here. Don't you remember me saying?"

"Aye," the men said, glancing at me again. "You didn't tell me she looked like that, though. Is she married?"

Broccan scowled, shoved his hurling stick into the arms of his replacement, and jogged over to where I stood, pulling me into a warm hug.

"I was worried," he whispered in my ear.

"There is no need. I have much to tell you, but all is well." I nodded at the fire by the river. "What are you celebrating?"

"The return of the warriors of Munster," Broccan smiled, tapping his own chest. "We are only back this morning."

"Where were you?"

"We sailed north to quell a rebellion. I thought there might be fighting, but Murchad... You should have seen him. He asked Flaithbertach to meet

him in single combat. He had Flaithbertach on his backside before he knew what was going on.”

I let him tell me the story, watching the animation in his face as he spoke of the fight and how Murchad had put the northern king in his place.

“You look happy,” I said, once he finished.

“I am. It’s just like old times. Better even.”

“Because I’ve not been here to make you behave, I guess.”

He laughed, not disagreeing with me.

I pulled him closer. “How is Tairdelbach? He doesn’t know who you are?”

“No,” Broccan said. “Everyone calls me Bróg. I’ve told them I have a sister called Finsha and said you might join me. Nothing more.”

“Good.” I gazed beyond him. People were watching us. Curious. “You’d better introduce me then.”

Broccan led me into the crowd. I greeted Crínoc and Padraig. Eocha and his son. Tadc and his son and twin daughters. Lucrecia stood over by the path talking to a woman I did not recognise, everyone smiling and eating. But no King Brian and no Murchad. They must be inside the hall.

“Lucrecia,” Broccan said, noting the direction of my gaze. “This is my sister, Finsha.”

“Oh yes, we spoke at the wedding.” Lucrecia gave me a kiss on the cheek. “I worried when Bróg said you travelled alone.”

“Oh,” I answered. “Thank you for your concern.”

The four of us stood in awkward silence for a moment. I didn’t know what to say to my old friend and felt strange pretending that I did not know her.

“Where is your daughter?” I asked.

“She is over there, making hair-dresses for the children.” I followed the direction of her finger and saw Felicia weaving flowers together, just like she and I had done together for Maria’s wedding.

“They are beautiful,” I said.

Lucrecia grinned. “Yes, she has a great eye for colour.”

I watched as Felicia laughed with the children. It made me wonder that she had no husband or children of her own. Not all women wanted to marry, of course, or perhaps she hadn’t found anyone she wanted to leave her mother’s house for.

“You have another daughter, I hear. Does she live in Killaloe too?”

“No,” Lucrecia said, her eyes sparkling. “She lives in the Uí Fidgenti lands with her husband Colgú. Close to the sea. She has five children of her own now.”

“Do they come here often?”

“In the summer, they come to see me. And I go down to see them too. The ships make it so easy.” She rubbed my arm. “You can use the ships too, you know. King Brian lets us travel on the trade ships if we need to.” Her eyes ran to the hem of my mud-covered skirt. “Have you only just arrived?”

“Yes. I—”

“Bróg, fetch your sister some food. She must be starving.”

“No, it’s fine,” I said. “Bróg, you go back to the game. I’ll go inside the feasting hall and find something to eat. Please don’t make a fuss.”

Lucrecia nodded, though her eyes narrowed a moment. “You really do remind me of someone, even more so now that your hair is loose, and I can see your colouring. You don’t happen to be related to a woman called Fódla? She would be twenty years older than you by now. She was scarred on one side of her face from a fire in Lusk, before she came here.”

I shook my head, trying to steady my voice. “Sorry. I don’t know her.”

“That is a shame.” Lucrecia sighed and took my arm in hers. “Come. I’ll walk you inside and get you some food.”

Not wanting to argue, I agreed, and let Broccan return to the game, while Lucrecia and I made our way toward the feasting hall. Warriors guarded the perimeter, though they swiftly stood aside for Lucrecia and me to pass through.

“Wait here,” she said. “I will find you a plate of food.”

I ventured inside, stepping along the side wall. Musicians played at the back of the hall, and men and women spun each other around, enjoying the rhythm. *More memories.* This time, they were of a peace treaty and of Lonan dancing with me and Bébinn. The memory caught me. That had been over twelve years ago. We had laughed that night. Enjoyed the music and the prospect of peace. And a month later, he lay dead at my feet, having saved me from the Viking warriors at Glenmama.

“Here.” A teenage girl thrust a goblet of wine into my hand. “It’s the last of the new wine. After this, there is only ale.” She giggled as she offloaded her final cup of wine and then ran toward the dancers, starting to skip before she reached them.

Smiling, I stared around the hall. Murchad was here. He had to be...

I wove through the crowd until, finally, I saw him. Murchad sat beside his father, though King Brian was talking to Father Marcán and one of the provincial queens. Murchad was in the group, but not engaged in the conversation. His eyes drifted to those dancing, then to the doors.

I watched him, my eyes focused on him and him alone.

There is a nameless sense we have. All of us. Descendant and mortal. Sight, smell, taste – we have names for those, but the secret sense is an older one. It's that feeling we have when we know we are being watched. Colmon told me about it. Warrior as he was, he understood the animal instincts within us more than most. He called it the prey sense. Once we were hunted, not just by wolves, but bears and other monsters. Our memories have forgotten such times, but our bodies have not. We feel it when eyes are upon us. Know it.

Murchad shifted in his chair. He nodded at something his father said, glanced at the door once more, but this time, his gaze ran along the wall to where I stood.

His hands gripped the side of his chair and he looked down. When he next looked up, his eyes locked with mine. And he smiled.

I smiled back.

"Here is some food," Lucrecia said, thrusting a plate into my hands, though I suddenly found my appetite had disappeared. My gaze locked on the food, my mouth dry, and I found words would not form in my mouth.

"Is it not to your liking? Do you want to try something else?"

"Oh no, it looks lovely, Lucrecia. I just can't decide what to eat first."

"Ah!" Lucrecia's eyes brightened. "The salmon is very good, as is the—"

"Lucrecia." I looked up from the plate of delicacies to find Murchad standing beside us. "Who is your friend?"

"Evening, Murchad. This is Finsha. Sister of Bróg."

Murchad smiled. "Bróg is your brother?"

"Aye," I said. "Believe it or not, he used to be much smaller than me. Not any longer."

Lucrecia laughed. "As is the way with young men. They are children, then they shoot upward, and all of a sudden, they are men. And speaking of young men, he didn't take you to his ráth, did he?"

"No."

"Then come, I will point you in the right direction so you can set down your bag. It's beside my ráth, you know. We will be neighbours."

I gave Murchad one last look as Lucrecia pulled me away.  
And once again he smiled.

\*

Lucrecia left me once she had taken me to the ráth. Oh, the irony that Bróg had been given our old home was not lost on me, and I ran my fingers over the beams, remembering them as if it had only been a month since I'd left, rather than eleven years. But I didn't want to stay here, not now. Instead, I walked along the riverbank until the light of the bonfire was only a small speck in the distance, then I sat down on the grassy bank. It felt good to be back in Killaloe. Safe. It felt like it could be home. The home that had been offered but I had never felt free to accept until now.

Hugging my knees close to my body, I closed my eyes and waited. The prey sense finally pricked at the edges of my mind. Someone was watching me.

"Is it really you, Fódla?"

I opened my eyes to find Murchad staring at me, his head shaking ever so slightly as if he didn't believe what he saw in front of him.

"Yes. It is me."

He walked toward me, slowly at first, then faster, until he kneeled beside me, his arms wrapping around my shoulders.

"I have missed you."

His voice cracked as he spoke. Pain seeped through. I peered up at him. Grey hairs mixed with the light brown now. Wrinkles creased his brow. But his eyes were the same. The same deep blue, the same intensity burning within.

"I have returned, Murchad. To stay if you want me to."

His breath caught.

"Tomas no longer has any control over us or my people. I am free to live how and where I want... and I want to live here." I leaned forward and kissed him. His fingers ran up through my hair, his body touching mine. His chest was warm, and I inched closer, so that my shoulder moved inside the folds of his cloak, then slowly, I moved backward, pulling him with me, so that we lay side by side on the grass.

We had lain with each other once before.



In a similar place to here. Close to a river, hidden among the trees. But to touch him felt different this time. There was no fear. No knot in my stomach. No voice in my head telling me that this was dangerous, or that Senna might see.

This time I was free.

I undressed myself. My red hair tumbled down the pale skin of my stomach and thighs, with only the moonlight and Murchad to watch me. Murchad grinned as he pulled me back to him, kissing me, holding me, though he raised an eyebrow when I removed his shirt, for it was not the way of women to so openly show what they wanted.

But I'd had enough of pretence and lying and suiting the whims of others. Life was for living. Even within all the sorrow and pain that I carried with me, and that Murchad carried with him, pleasure was possible. And I would take it. We would take it. Together.

# **Killaloe**

## *Gormflaith*

*A man with blond hair and green eyes ran through the forest. A young woman was with him. Gobnat. The sea came into view. Then a ship. The sun shone brightly, and a strange language swam in the air. Cornwall, perhaps?*

*“Why are we here, Tomas?” the beautiful witch asked, pulling at his arm.*

*“We must return to Ireland, Gobnat. To find the knife. The one I killed Eilis with.”*

*Gobnat sighed. “Why? Why are we wasting time? We need to leave before Colmon finds us. We should be travelling further east. Not returning home.”*

*“No. We are not running anymore. Not without the knife.”*

*“Why, what does it—”*

*“When Colmon finds us... because he will find us... we need to protect ourselves.” Tomas paused and pressed two fingers against Gobnat’s chest. “If we stab him here with the knife of immortality, he will lose his gift. Then we will have the upper hand.”*

*“There are others who can find us. Ardál is on our trail. Only last week, he and Íde nearly found us. Yala and Clíodhna were with them too. A warrior is difficult to outrun, but with a witch and cupbearer at his side, it’s even harder. They can travel across sea and river quicker than we can. We must stay at least two steps ahead if we are to avoid capture.”*

*“But Colmon is the one who won’t let us go. The others... they will want to listen to us... then they will forget.” Tomas patted the leather bag strapped around his waist. “That’s why I have made this.” He took out a large blue vial, both wrapped in sheep’s wool and oiled leather.*

*Gobnat stared at the vial, tapping her nail against the glass. “Do you have enough?”*

*Tomas nodded. "We must kill Colmon first. With him gone, you can sneak in at the next gathering and pour this into the wine." He spun the blue vial in his hand. "This will make them sleep, and then we can give them the potion of forgetfulness."*

*"Everything will be forgotten?" Gobnat stared at him uncertainly.*

*"Yes. I will make them forget everything that happened after Colmon returned to the fortress, to forget the gathering, to forget everything Fódla said too."*

*"That old hag," Gobnat seethed. "Your trust in her is what ruined you."*

*"Yes," Tomas agreed. "I see that now. I have been blind to who was... is the most important person, the most loyal person."*

*Gobnat smiled and Tomas pulled her into a hug, gently pushing her hair from her shoulder, then lightly kissing her lips.*

*"What if it's not there? What if another has found it before us?"*

*Tomas kissed her again. "Then we will run. Anywhere you want us to. But it is worth looking for. Believe me, Gobnat. Trust me."*

*Gobnat gave an uncertain smile but nodded her head. "A quick look, then we go."*

*"Yes. Now, let's go while Ardál still follows the false trail. That ship leaves for Wexford in the hour."*

*Gobnat took hold of Tomas' hand and walked with him toward the ship, which darkened, the sky too, turning grey and blue and then black.*

\*

I woke with a start.

Ah, there he was. Tomas. I closed my eyes and remembered the dream, the colours, the smell, the words. I had to remember. This was important. They had decided to return to Munster... to find the knife.

Now was my chance to find them and steal their gifts for Máelmórda and my son. Another witch and a druid would make for fine gifts. Even better, these two were vulnerable and without the protection or friendship of their kind.

I got out of bed, glad that I had decided not to attend last night's celebration feast. I'd complained of pains in my stomach, but in truth, it was Murchad's bloodless victory that had galled me. Flaithbertach was

useless, after all. Imagine having a mere sixty men at your gates and still not being able to defeat them? Oh, I couldn't bear to speak with any of the returned warriors or join in the festivities... which made my departure this morning all the easier.

Quickly, I dressed and made my way to the stables. Brian stood at the dun gate with some of his men, chatting among themselves about going hunting for deer, while others moaned about their sore heads from the night before, all of their breaths misting in the cold early spring air. I ignored them and waited for the stableboys to bring me my horse.

"Where are you going?" Brian walked over to me, surprised to see me up so early. His tone of voice indicated he wasn't overly concerned, not like how he used to be. Not even my late arrival from Leinster had aroused his suspicion. The plentiful white hairs on my head and wrinkles on my face had worked like nothing else could.

"I'm going to pray at the church of Saint Bran," I said, taking the reins of my horse. "I won't be long."

Brian raised his eyebrows. "You haven't had your breakfast yet."

"It's my stomach, Brian," I said. "It's been sore for a while now, so I've decided to fast and dedicate my suffering to the holy saints."

The nonchalant expression on Brian's face changed, his brow furrowed.

"I am sure it is nothing serious. Too much rich food and wine." I laughed. "A few days of simple fare will do me the world of good."

Brian nodded.

"I also wanted to say a prayer for Donnchad. I dreamed of him last night. He was... unhappy."

A flash of real concern ran over Brian's mouth. "I think of him often too. Worry is ever the lot of a parent."

"It truly is. Sitric is forty years old now. A grown man, and still, I fear for him. When I was younger, I believed all the danger lay in their first few years when plague and fevers might strike them down. I never imagined that I'd be worried for him when he was six feet tall and had children of his own."

Brian smiled. Even gave a little laugh.

I kept going. "And Donnchad, well, I'm not sure how I'll ever let him go." I sighed as I mounted my horse and Brian reached out to hold the reins.

"Do you want me to ask the men to accompany you?"

"Oh no," I said. "It's only a twenty-minute ride away. I'll be safe."

Brian smiled and let go, patting the neck of the horse.  
I returned his smile. "I won't be long."

\*

The church was not far away, and though I came here seldom, it wasn't unheard of either. I donated gold to this church and had founded the nunnery beside it. As such, Brian let me come here from time to time, and as I'd grown older, my visits had become more frequent. Not because I wanted to listen to the priests, but to get Brian used to my coming and going. For what dutiful husband could say no to their wife attending mass and praying to God? Certainly not a king like Brian, who had become more devout as the years passed.

On arriving, I tied the horse to the gate post, then walked inside the church and sat on the wooden bench. After a while, a priest walked in. He was one of the priests I paid. Several of the nuns were in my service too, though I had yet to ask them for any of the favours they'd promised to provide. The priest, so far, had only been asked to fulfil one request. A simple one. So simple, he didn't even seem to consider it. After all, it was unchristian for a priest to refuse hospitality to another man of the cloth.

"Good morning, Queen Gormflaith. It is a lovely—"

"Where is the monk?" I asked, cutting him off. "I want to talk to him."

The priest stammered, his words sticking in his mouth as he realised I had not come to give him more gold today.

"The monk," I repeated. "Bring him here."

"Has he offended you, Queen Gormflaith?"

"No. Not at all. I want to talk to him."

I looked away, then flicked my hand toward the door, lest he should feel the need to ask any more questions. He walked out, head held as high as if he were the pope himself.

It didn't take long for Olaf to come into the church.

He noted the grin on my face. "Is it time?"

"Not quite. Something else needs to happen before the war starts. For that, I need you to go to Leinster and fetch my brother and son here. They must be discreet. I also need you to set up a distraction. Brian must be away from Killaloe while Máelmórda and Donnchad are in Munster."

“Can I ask why?”

“I will need to leave Killaloe for a time. An impossibility if my husband is there to watch my every step.”

Olaf nodded. “I will see it is done.”

He stared at me, perhaps thinking to kiss me or slip his hands underneath my dress. I shifted away. I felt no such desire this morning, not with his scarred face and broken teeth staring down at me. Next time, when I could use my magic to fix him, it would be different. Perhaps... perhaps once Brian had lost the war, I could keep him the way he used to look. *Marry him, maybe.*

“Hurry, Olaf,” I said, taking his hand in mine. “That this happens quickly is important. We will be together soon enough. My time in Killaloe is coming to an end.”

# **Killaloe**

## *Fódla*

Murchad ran his hands through my hair. He must have thought I was still sleeping, for his touch was so light. My eyes were closed, but I could feel his gaze upon me. I liked it. Only here a week, I'd already grown used to waking with him at my side. I inched closer to him, breathing in his scent. If only we could stay like this a while longer... but it could not be. Birdsong filled the air and dawn drew ever closer.

Opening my eyes, it took a moment to adjust to the dark room. Broccan's ráth, or rather, my old ráth, was small, dull, but well-made, and the room had retained the heat of last night's fire. The door was still on the latch, which meant Broccan had not come home last night. He must have stayed with Tairdelbach in the dun, probably drinking and laughing until he fell asleep on the floor or chair, where no doubt he'd be for the rest of the morning. This thought eased my nerves. Murchad didn't have to leave just yet. We had a while longer.

Slowly, I turned around to face him.

"What are you thinking?" he asked as he brushed the hair from my face.

"I was thinking Broccan may catch us together if we're not careful."

This made Murchad laugh. "You think he will fight me for your honour?"

I rolled my eyes, hating the idea that men would fight over a woman's virtue when it was her own body to do with as she wanted.

"What if he insisted?" he teased.

"He..."

"If I married you, do you think he'd be less likely to fight me?" He kissed my hand as he said this, his hand brushing against my cheek.

"Is that a marriage proposal?"

"Yes."

I sat up, all vestiges of sleep falling away. “Murchad, we can’t.”

“You said you were free now to do as you wanted.”

“I am. You aren’t.” I took his hand in mine, wanting to ease away his hurt at my reaction, but knowing he had to listen. “You are the son of a High King. By not marrying *anyone*, it keeps all the kings happy... everyone is equally insulted by your refusal to marry their daughters. But to marry me, a nobody, when you could have a princess... It would offend the whole of Ireland, would it not?”

Murchad shrugged. “I am getting old. When it comes to marriage, everyone’s attention turns to Tairdelbach and Donnchad. Indeed, negotiations have begun for Tairdelbach already.”

I ran my hands through my hair. *How to make him see that I was right?* “I cannot have the peace you have created fall apart because of me.”

“It’s already falling apart.”

“No. It’s holding. Men will always test you, but you are strong enough to endure. You convinced Flaithbertach easily enough.”

Murchad played with my hair, giving a small smile. “Flaithbertach is just one king, but all the kings have had to give up their pride by submitting to my father. When an Ó’Neill was High King, it was tradition. For that to change, for kings to bow to Munster... they don’t like it. And we ask much of them. Banning slavery. Asking Sitric to turn the slave ships away.” He paused, struggling to put his thoughts into words. “Safety from invaders by uniting ourselves. This was my and my father’s dream. But I fear that holding Ireland together will be even more dangerous than winning it in the first place.”

“Then we cannot marry. To make the peace hold, you need friends and allies. One day, when you’re older and greyer, we can make our vows, but not now. Not yet. It is too soon.”

“Then we will marry in secret.” His eyes stared at mine. “We only need to tell my father.”

I raised an eyebrow. “He won’t like it.”

“No. He won’t. But he’ll say yes.”

“Are you sure?”

Murchad nodded. “When you were Fódla, a healer, I had many reasons to talk with you. To talk with you of herbs, to ask you to heal my men, to heal my son. And we did speak many times, and no one thought anything of it.



But Finsha, she is a different creature altogether. I cannot talk to Finsha every day without people noticing.”

“Is that right?”

“Aye. It is. What reason does an unmarried man have to speak with an unmarried woman so often?” He kissed my mouth. “Why would he visit her house?” He kissed my shoulder. “Why would he go inside her house?” His lips moved down along my collarbone. “And what will people say when they notice I cannot look away from you?”

“Fódlá was unmarried. You visited her house too.”

“She was—”

“She was too ugly to be taken seriously as a romantic prospect?”

Murchad shook his head. “No. That’s not it. But when you first came to Killaloe, you hardly looked up from the ground. You helped people, but you did not laugh. You were not a woman, perhaps, who appeared to desire a marriage.” He smirked. “But Finsha, she looks up at the sky and smiles when the sun shines on her. You are alive in this world. That is why men look at you. And why the women will want to know who you are talking to and which man you prefer.”

He was right, I supposed. Killaloe was busier now, too. There were more people to notice. “Being together when not married is not sinful, Murchad. Marriage doesn’t mean the same thing as love to me.”

“No, but I want to be with you. Always. I don’t want us to sneak around. I want you at my side. Not just in the scraps of time that we can find and in the darkness of night.”

“And what about what I want?” I pulled away, locking eyes with his. “My happiness cannot come above others’. Peace keeps everyone safe, and I would willingly forgo my own desires so other families can rest easy in their beds.” I rolled around so that I lay on his chest. “No, my love. We will do it this way for a while longer. Give the people here a chance to know me, at least. Give the peace a little longer to take.”

Murchad sighed, pulled me tighter to him, and gave me a final kiss before he had to leave, lest he be spotted. As he slipped out of the bed, I had to hold my hands tight to stop myself from pulling him back into the blankets.

“Come into the dun for breakfast,” he said as he pulled on his leine. “Make sure that *brother* of yours introduces you to everyone. You’ve been

too quiet since your arrival. If we are to convince the people of Killaloe, you need to know them again.”

“Broccan, I mean *Bróg*, isn’t used to society. I’ll do my best to train him up and ask him to make more introductions.”

“I am glad to know it is him,” Murchad said. “When he won the archery contest and took to Tairdelbach so, I worried he was a spy. Now not only do I know this isn’t true, but even better, he has the warrior gift. It gladdens me to know my son will always be safe in Broccan’s company. Even so, if he doesn’t do his duty by you, he’ll know all about it at training tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry. I will make sure he introduces me.”

Murchad smiled and then, without another word, left the ráth. As the door opened, I noticed the tinge of yellow stirring above the horizon. Morning. A new day, but not one I was ready for yet, and I covered myself in the blankets and closed my eyes once more, hoping that sleep would ready me for what was to come.

\*

I spent the day cleaning the ráth and stitching some of Broccan’s clothing while he trained. Then I walked to the river to talk with the other women there, laughing and smiling, doing my best to fit in with them as Finsha, rather than Fódla.

As the sun set, Broccan returned home, already washed in the river after his day of training.

He set his sword on the ground and gave me an amused smile. “So, Murchad had a word with me about introducing you. He seemed very... insistent. Is there anything you want to tell me?”

“We love each other. We fell in love when we lived here the first time.”

“Ah.” He sat on the chair and removed his boots. “I suppose I should have known.” He smiled, rubbing his face with his hands. “And this is allowed now?”

“It is, or at least I think so. They might decide on their new rules and one day come and tell me that my gift is forfeit if I wish to live among the mortals, but I do not care.”

“Tell me, then. What happened on Fennit Island?”

Since my arrival, he hadn't asked about the gathering, and I had not pushed him. However, it had caused a strange tension between us, for I couldn't understand why he wouldn't want to know. Yet, he'd been so happy in his new life I didn't want to drag his mind to an unhappy place.

Relieved that we could now break down this barrier, I sat beside him and told him everything. Colmon's imprisonment, how I stabbed Tomas with Fragarach, Tomas' confessions, and his escape with Gobnat.

"I should have gone with you," he said, anger rather than relief holding sway. He'd stood throughout my story, pacing back and forth. "It was selfish of me to choose my own path. I—"

"No. Do not feel guilty. All these conflicts between the council and Tomas had gone on for decades, none of which were your doing. And your mother did not want you to go. She saw something... perhaps you might have died as well as Cenn. No, it was right you stayed behind, and things have turned out as I hoped." I stood and wrapped my arms around Broccan, holding him tight. "Once Ardál finds Gobnat, she will be sent to your mother's crannog to remove the spells surrounding it. Then Rónnat can come here and live with us."

He pulled back, some of the anger assuaged by the thought of his mother coming here.

"When she comes, you can both travel to the fortress. Colmon is there. He can—"

"I don't think so." He lifted his hand and cupped my cheek. "I am sorry, Fódla, that you went through so much, and I am glad the Descendants are free from Tomas, but my place is here, with Tairdelbach. Not to live with a people I don't know and certainly not to be told where I can and cannot go. In fact, I'd rather they continued to believe I was dead."

He turned and busied himself with readying his clothes for the evening, his back toward me. His heart thudded – I'd felt that when I hugged him. Emotions bubbled within him, more than he was used to. And not just anger. Not just relief. Perhaps I had spent so long worrying about my own secrets, that I had not looked for any in Broccan. But he had some. *What could they be? A lover of his own, perhaps?*

"You will make more introductions tonight?" I asked, keeping my voice light.

He glanced at me, flashing his usual smile. "Of course."

\*

The feasting hall was busy as usual. Broccan linked arms with me and introduced me to those I hadn't spoken to since my arrival. Some of these people I already knew from my past life here. Crínoc, Pátraic, Lucrecia, Felicia. Sláine's old chaperone, Caomibhe, sat with her son and daughter-in-law. Others I had known from giving herbs to, but aside from their names, knew nothing more about them. This time, I made sure to talk, to listen, to smile. To not look at the ground as was my habit.

I did so well at making conversation that Broccan began to edge me away from them so we could sit and eat.

He took me to one of the tables at the back of the hall, where the other young warriors sat. Two young women were quick to come over with two bowls of boiled meat and roasted vegetables.

"Thank you. I'm starving!" Broccan said as the bowl clinked onto the table. Without pausing to take a breath, he shoved a spoonful into his mouth and chewed, mouth open. The girl who had smiled at him as she set the bowl down gave a small frown as a piece of carrot came flying out of his mouth.

"Bróg." I nudged him. "Try not to eat like a dog. Your mouth is hanging open."

"Sorry," he mumbled, wiping his mouth.

"You're turning off the young ladies with your savagery."

He shrugged his shoulders, grinning suddenly as Tairdelbach entered the fort.

"No more wine, ever again!" Tairdelbach said as he slumped down on the bench. "Remind me I said that. No more wine. Ever. Again."

"Sore head?" I asked.

"It's been pounding all day. I swear Father worked us harder because of it." He frowned at Broccan. "And you barely broke sweat. How do you do it?" He glanced up at the top table, not waiting for an answer. "Where is Father, anyway?" He scanned the top table where King Brian sat with Tadc and Eocha and two of the other Munster kings. "It's not like him to be late."

"There he is," Broccan said, pointing toward the door.

I watched as Murchad entered the fort, then looked down. I wasn't meant to be looking at him. Instead, I turned my attention to the top table. "Where is the queen?" I asked Tairdelbach.

“She isn’t feeling well,” Tairdelbach answered. “She’s gone to one of the nunneries to pray and sent a letter to say she wanted to stay for a while.” His eyes narrowed, and he shoved his bowl away.

“You’ll have to introduce me when she returns, Bróg,” I said. “Her beauty is famous.”

“I won’t be able to. I haven’t met her yet myself. She went to visit her brother and son after Béinn’s wedding, and the few days she was here, she scarcely came out of her house. Indeed, the only time she entered the hall was the night the messenger came to tell us what had happened to King Ruanaid, and then we all had to ready our horses and weapons.” He reached for another slice of salmon. “Tairdelbach will have to do it.”

Tairdelbach gave a curt nod, then sipped at his water.

“Perhaps you should rest this evening,” Broccan suggested, his voice soft rather than teasing. “Your head will be all the better for it.”

Tairdelbach looked like he was about to agree when the fort doors opened. One of the warriors who guarded the gate came into the feasting hall with a monk at his side. The monk walked slowly, face down, only a small brown crucifix to adorn his brown robe.

“Who is that?” I asked.

Tairdelbach eyed him up and down. “I don’t know. I’ve never seen him before.”

Nobody knew him, it seemed, and the hall filled with whispers as more and more people noticed him. The warrior whispered something to King Brian, which caused the king’s eyes to widen and then beckon the monk to come forward. The monk whispered in the king’s ear.

Once he had finished, Brian gave him a nod, and the monk stepped into the centre of the hall and spread out his hands. “Men and women of Killaloe,” he said. “A miracle has happened! A miracle so great that a letter has been written to the Pope in Rome.”

The hall filled with gasps. Even those who had looked nonplussed by his arrival, now gave him their full attention.

“At the new church at Cashel, a blind man came to pray. He said he prayed for King Brian, asking God to bless the new High King for the peace he delivered. As soon as he finished praying, he opened his eyes and realised he could see.”

The priest in the dull brown robe lowered his hood. His face, scarred and broken, gazed out at the people in the hall. Some flinched at the ruin of his

face, the scars and shattered teeth, but the monk did not falter under their pity. "As you can see, I have travelled all around the world and borne many hardships in my time. Taken as a slave, wounded in battle and left to die, I heard God calling to me. Ever since, I have travelled the world, spreading the Good Word in His name, but never before have I seen a miracle like this. Already, the Bishop of Armagh has come to witness it."

"Who is the man?" Murchad asked, taking a seat at the top table.

The monk bowed. "I don't understand your meaning."

"What is the name of the man who was blind and can now see?"

"He is a beggar man," the monk said. "Turned out by his family, for they could no longer care for him, and so he gave me no name. But God is generous where people cannot be. God alone saves us from our sin. Blessed are the poor." The monk smiled, his crooked teeth and broken nose twisting. "Will you come to Cashel, King Brian? The priests there ask for you to witness this for yourself."

Father Marcán clasped his hands together. "You must go, King Brian. A miracle in your name. It is a wondrous thing."

King Brian gave a slow smile, raising his hands to calm his friend, which I expected. He'd never been taken to emotional displays or overt pride, but I could tell from the way his eyes shone that the monk's story had interested him.

"Aye," he said. "I will ride to Cashel and speak with the beggar and the bishop." He glanced at his sons. "What do you say?"

Tadc nodded his head. "Why not, Father. The Rock of Cashel is our ancestral seat. There is nowhere better to visit."

Murchad smiled. "Yes, I think you should go, Father. Tadc too. I will stay to watch over the fort this time."

King Brian agreed. "Yes, you are only back from the north. You stay." He gazed at the hall. "And anyone else who wishes to join us is welcome to. Be ready to leave at first light."

A great many of the men stood and cheered, including Tairdelbach and Broccan.

"Are you going to go?" I asked my nephew.

"I don't know."

"Of course we are!" Tairdelbach said, punching him in the arm. "A miracle in Ireland. Can you believe it? And in Grandfather's name."

The warriors ran out of the feasting hall, Broccan along with them, to ready their provisions and horses for the following day, leaving me alone at the table.

Raising my eyes slowly, I glanced up at the top table to find Murchad smiling.

# **Saint Bran's Nunnery, Munster**

## *Gormflaith*

Olaf returned at last.

He sneaked into my bedroom, quickly whispered that my husband was on his way to see me, then vanished into the bowels of the monastery, where he told me Máelmórda and Donnchad had already hidden themselves.

*The game had started.*

Despite my promise to Brian that I would return to the dun quickly after my visit to the nunnery, I had sent one of the novices to tell Brian that I was unwell and had decided to remain so the nuns could tend to me. I had not planned it so, but as my nerves rose, my ability to conceal my emotions completely left me, and I knew that Brian would notice. Staying away from his wary eyes was the only way for this to work.

Thankfully, Brian had agreed to my convalescence, though a messenger had come every day to check on my wellbeing. Each time they came, I would come out of my room to prove I was still there, using my magic to tinge my skin yellow and make the bags under my eyes darker.

My stomach churned as I lay in my bed. *How had Olaf found a way to convince Brian to leave his dun? What if he changed his mind?*

Despite my inner turmoil, I forced myself to stay in my bed until a young novice came running in.

“King Brian is here, Queen Gormflaith! He wishes to speak with you.” The novice blushed even to say his name, innocent thing that she was, then raced back outside to watch him. It made me laugh. As unattractive as I found him, to the common folk, he was adored like a god. He looked the part too, with his long furs and gold rings; white hair and beard combed and curled to perfection.



I roused myself, using my magic to make me look even more unwell than on previous days, and walked outside.

Brian was there, waiting, still astride his horse. Smiling. Only two of his men with him. *The most beloved King of Munster did not need protection from his own people.*

“Gormflaith,” Brian said, “I have come to tell you the news. A monk came from Cashel. A miracle has happened there, he says. God returned sight to a blind man.”

“That is wonderful, Brian. And for it to happen at the new church... it is a sign from God that He approves of you.” I smiled widely as I spoke, returning my husband’s enthusiasm.

“Tadc and I, and many of the men and women of Killaloe, are riding there. The group is to set out once I return, but I wanted to come and tell you myself, and to say that while at Cashel, I will pray for your recovery.” He stared at me, his eyes running to the yellowed skin and dark shadows under my eyes.

“You are too good, husband. I already feel a little better. The nuns have been very kind.”

“You wish to stay here while I am away?”

I nodded. “If it pleases you. Their prayers are reviving me, Brian. And if you are away, I think this is the best place for me.” He didn’t reply, so I pressed on. “Who are you leaving to look after the dun in your absence?”

“Murchad is staying behind.”

“Ah.” I smiled again. “Then Killaloe is in good hands.”

Brian dismounted and walked over to me. He took my hand in his and raised it to his lips, giving me a gentle kiss. A more affectionate gesture than I was used to. Perhaps I’d used too much magic, and he thought me on my deathbed? I tried not to flinch as his hand held mine, for it was unusual for us to touch. Our relationship, aside from our wedding night, had existed as a formal one, and then primarily as the shared interest of parents. My façade, this new Gormflaith who prayed at nunneries and cooed over his projects, seemed to have roused some sympathy within him.

“Then stay here while I am away,” he said. “I will send word for you to come home when I have returned.”

“As you wish.”

Brian gave a curt nod, then left, briefly returning my wave as he rode back to Killaloe with his men.

I held in my smile until he disappeared from sight, then I let it break free. *Oh, Olaf. How he had played my husband.* The great High King now danced to the tune of a failed one. I should never have doubted Olaf's ability. Olaf knew the Christian religion well and had spotted Brian's reliance on it, perhaps even recognised a genuine faith burning underneath that could be used. For my part, I had never been sure if Brian's faith was genuine or not. He surrounded himself with holy men, but he still adhered to the pagan Irish festivals and did not quash the old beliefs in favour of the Christian doctrine. Old stories about the Tuatha Dé Danann were still told around the night-time fire. In Northumbria, all mentions of the old gods were forbidden among the Saxons now. No talk of Woden or his wife. Only Jesus, Mary, and the One God.

I returned to the nunnery. *Yes, this had all gone better than I expected.* The only possible flaw in the plan was that Murchad might insist on seeing me in person during his father's absence. I had to pray that he either didn't come or would believe the nuns when they said I was too unwell to have any visitors.

"Will you ask the abbess to come and see me?" I said to the novice who had woken me that morning. "I will wait for her in the church."

\*

I sat on a wooden bench, steadying my breathing as I waited for the abbess to arrive. At last, she came into the church, head lowered as she passed the altar. No beauty existed within her short body, long face and squashed nose. No family connections sang for her either. It appeared she had risen through the ranks of this nunnery on account of her piety.

"Queen Gormflaith," she said pleasantly. "You wish to see me."

"I am leaving the nunnery for a time. If anyone calls for me, you will tell them that I am here, but too unwell for visitors."

These words wiped the smile from her face. This was the first favour I had asked that was unpleasant. I could only hope that as well as being pious she was clever enough to realise that the gold this nunnery received depended on my good graces.

"I will return soon," I added. "And you will find my gratitude to the nunnery exceeds your expectations."

“It is sinful to lie, my queen.”

“Then think of how many men, women and children you can help with the donations I give you. So many widows after years of fighting, no?” I gazed up at her, hoping that during her humble start, hunger had visited her enough that she remembered it. “Do we have an agreement?”

She bit her lip, then nodded her head.

“Do you swear it?”

“I do.”

“Then tell the monk and his guests to meet me outside.”

She trudged off, still frowning, her hands clasped together. Her promise would have to do. I doubted she would hold true to her word, especially if Murchad insisted on seeing me. But there could be no holding back now. Máelmórda’s lack of courage was something I had long lamented. I could not find myself guilty of the same flaw.

I walked outside and waited for Olaf, Máelmórda and Donnchad to find me.

“Greetings, sister,” Máelmórda said. “You took your time. Donnchad and I have been here since daybreak.”

“Ah,” I said, lifting my cheek for him to kiss. “I had to talk to Brian and then convince the abbess to conceal my absence.”

“Do you believe she will?”

“I’ve promised more gold on my return. That has placated her for now.”

I turned my attention to Olaf. “King Brian didn’t want you to ride with him to Cashel to witness the *miracle*?”

“He did, but he understood when I said that too much riding pained me. So, here I am. Your slave to do with as you wish.”

*Good. I was glad he had stayed, for what lay ahead of us would not be easy.*

Donnchad walked forward to kiss me. Taller than when we last met, broader. In this light, his eyes appeared more gold than blue, and while his legs shook, I believed it to be with anticipation rather than fright. I patted his face with my hand, giving Máelmórda an appreciative nod. He had done well in his task. Better than I had dared hope.

“Do you know where we are going?” my son asked.

“Yes. And it’s time we left. Brian will be away for ten days at most. We need to be back before then. Come. We head north, along the river path for the first while.”

I led the way, enjoying the fact that three of the most powerful men in my life walked behind me. And why not? I was the expert here. I'd examined the maps Brian used to plan his wars and trade missions. As his own ships sailed up and down the Shannon, the path it cut into the land had been drawn in detail by his men, no longer rendering it a mystery. I'd studied and studied, and now knew the location of the stone circle well.

"Are you sure about this?" Máelmórda asked, pulling my arm.

"No." I stopped. "You should go back to Leinster. I to Killaloe. This is all a mistake."

"You know what I mean."

*And I did. For he was afraid. As was I.*

"Brother..." I tempered my voice. "Is this dangerous? Yes. Very. But we won't move forward without you and Donnchad having gifts. If you want to help, you start by praying that the two Descendants are where I dreamed they would be. Then you can pray that the other Descendants who were sent to capture them aren't hard on their trail." I stared at all three of them. Lover. Brother. Son. Their eyes watching me. "This could go badly wrong, but to conquer, we must be brave. If we can do that, the gifts of a witch and a druid are ours for the taking."

Máelmórda nodded, even though these gifts were not the ones he'd told me he desired. Donnchad stared. Olaf grinned. His crooked nose and broken teeth made my breath catch in my throat. I reached out to touch him, and when I next looked up at him, he was Olaf once more. *My Olaf.*

Máelmórda's eyes widened. "Olaf Tryggvasson? You are supposed to be dead."

Olaf shrugged. "Supposed to be, yes. Svein Forkbeard tried very hard to make it so."

"So it's you who has been keeping my sister informed of Svein's movements. I wondered who it was."

Olaf smiled, those cold eyes of his taking in my brother.

Now I had their attention, I spoke my final warning. "If I say to run, you must obey me. I've met some of these Descendants before. I know how they act. If I feel we are in danger, you are not to question it. Understand?"

All three nodded.

"Máelmórda?" I prodded. "Swear it."

"I swear it, sister."

I felt a lie in his words. To have a gift was everything to him, and I had doubts that he would run from the Descendants if he believed he had even half a chance of using the knife on them. I patted my cloak, pressing my fingers against the thick fabric, moving them away once Máelmórda's eyes flickered. A trick. The knife was not there. Last night, I had sewn it into a concealed pocket under the skirt of my dress.

"Then let's go. We should be there before nightfall if we keep a good pace."

"No," Olaf said. "I had Máelmórda and Donnchad escorted here by boat. We should sail along the Shannon. It will be quicker."

Olaf held out his arm for me to take and the two of us made our way toward the river, listening together to the footsteps of my brother and son, who walked behind us.

\*

As the evening waned and the sun began to set, we reached our destination. Olaf guided our boat toward the riverbank and the four of us climbed onto the grassy verge. Tomas and Gobnat were not far away from here according to my last dream. I expected them to already be at the clearing, their search for the knife underway.

"How far is it, sister?"

"A ten-minute walk. Slow and quiet. No talking."

Máelmórda nodded and Donnchad followed his uncle. They'd only been together ten months, but already my son seemed to trust my older brother. To Máelmórda's credit, he had done well with my son. Muscle grew where once he was only skin and bone. I hoped he had the strength to endure the pain of stealing a gift as I had all those years ago. The memory of how it had burned me from the inside out was not a pleasant one. It had taken every bit of strength and control to keep going, to stop the new magic from tearing me apart.

As we approached the stone circle, I gestured for us to halt, and we crouched behind one of the larger stones.

"Look. They are in the clearing below," I whispered. "I will go right and follow the path down to the clearing. I will speak with them while you

sneak around to the left side. Once they are distracted, attack. Remember, the witch is the strongest of the two.”

Máelmórda gazed hungrily ahead, then glanced at the part of my cloak where he believed I had hidden the knife. *Power lay there.* He felt it and his impatience grew by the moment.

“I hope you understand, brother, that by bringing you here, I am trusting you.”

The hungry look in his eyes faded. “We will work together, Gormflaith, I promise. But know this: the witch, her gift is mine.”

“Then listen. Stay back. Strike when the time is right.”

A look of worry flashed over Máelmórda’s eyes as I rose, which was strange to see. We’d been rivals for so many years... but he understood the perilous nature of this plan as well as I. Either, or both, of us might lose their life today.

“The forest is quiet,” Olaf whispered. “Are you sure the Descendants trailing them have not caught up?”

“I’m sure,” I answered, though it was a lie, and I turned quickly away so Olaf could not see it in my eyes. They were on the trail. I knew that, and much closer than Tomas and Gobnat expected, for I’d had a dream showing me that they had landed on Irish soil. Fear gripped me. *I did not want to die. Donnchad was too weak to tame a gift. I did not want my brother to have the witch gift and once again be equal to me.*

But I stepped forward, then stepped again, and slowly I made my way to the clearing. Low voices whispered ahead of me, and I forced myself to continue. They were close. Very close. Carefully, I made my descent, using the thick tree trunks to conceal my movement. As I reached the level of the clearing, I made out a bundle of sticks in Tomas’ arms and a dead rabbit in Gobnat’s. I kept going, for the first time letting my feet step on the fallen leaves.

The witch heard me first and placed her arm in front of Tomas.

“Good morning, Gobnat,” I said. “Good morning, Tomas.”

The two of them stilled, eyes widening with panic.

“Don’t worry. I’ve not come here to cause trouble. Only to talk.” I sat on a rock, smiling up at them both.

Tomas was the first to recover. “Queen Gormflaith, isn’t it?” He licked his lips. “How pleasant to meet you here. But how—”

“How did I find you?”

I held out my hand and the tree root behind him lifted above the soil, causing the hardened ground to crack open and the long green-white tips to shoot into the air.

“Because I am like you. Though I’ve been in hiding for many years now.”

Gobnat stared at me, eyes narrowing. “You are a witch?”

“Did you not know that some giftless children went on to have gifted children of their own?” Ethla and her black teeth came to mind just before I spoke, the magic eating her alive from the inside. If she was a witch born of mortal parents, then there could be more. Lies laced in truth always worked best. “Not many of us survive, but my mother knew enough to train me, and here I am. Still breathing.”

“Your grandmother was a witch? What was her name?” Tomas asked.

I didn’t answer this question and gave a small grin instead. “You are looking for something. A knife.”

Tomas couldn’t hide his interest and stepped closer. “Do you have it?” He did not speak the question like a question. Confidence radiated out of him, his smile sweeter than any other I’d seen, both in life and in my dreams.

“Maybe.”

Gobnat scowled. “You have overheard our conversations, nothing more. What do you really want?”

I kept my gaze focused on Tomas. “It has a white handle, beautiful. The blade is long and thin. Old Irish words are engraved into the pommel.”

Tomas gave a small nod, though his eyes were still cautious, more cautious than before. “Can I see it?”

“What a shame I cannot hand it over to you right now, for if you see it, you will want to keep it. And I cannot give it back if you plan to return it to the Descendants who cast my mother aside so cruelly. Besides, they will not grant you the clemency you hope for. Especially now they know you killed the witch woman with no tongue.”

Tomas’ face paled.

“How do you know all of this?” Gobnat asked.

It was part of the plan for me to keep them talking so as to give Máelmórda, Donnchad and Olaf time to creep closer, but indeed, I was curious about my gift and here was an opportunity for me to ask some questions. “You tell me. I have dreams. I see things that are happening far

away as they occur. My mother did not know enough about my gift to explain this to me. But you are a witch. A powerful one. I am sure you know more about it than she did.”

Gobnat nodded, though her scowl remained. “Witches can have different strengths. Some can summon mist and rain, but dream-magic is another.”

“I have dreamed of you both often. You should know that your plan to give the Descendants a potion of forgetfulness is not a workable solution. Too many know the truth.”

“What do you suggest?” Tomas asked, his smile still sweet.

“You need to summon your supporters to your call. The only problem, as far as I can see, is that you don’t have *a calling*. There is no purpose. Or at least, if there is one, you have not been honest about it.”

“Oh, believe me, I have a plan.”

“Then why not come out and say it, instead of all this weaving and lying? Why poison people into believing your words when they could listen to you and come to the same conclusion on their own? Is self-belief not more powerful than ideas forced upon us?”

Tomas glanced at Gobnat, doubt and mistrust flitting over his face. I pushed onward. There was no more time for caution, not with Máelmórda and Donnchad so close.

“Admit it,” I said. “The time of the mortals having power in Ireland must end. Look at them. Fighting over every rock and bog. Fighting over less than that. My husband, King Brian, is one of them. My first husband, Amlav the Red, was another. They have ruined this great land with their greed. You know it. I know it. It is only the Descendants, hidden away in their fortress, who cannot see the truth. They have forgotten the treachery that lies in the heart of man. You must help them to see it.”

Gobnat smiled, her caution falling away. “You understand... but of course you do. You grew up with the mortals. You see them as they really are. As we see them.”

“Yes.”

Tomas, buoyed by Gobnat’s agreement, gave me a sly grin. “Then you would help us?”

“Help you? I would be one of you.”

I edged a little closer, trying not to look at the left side of the clearing. Surely Máelmórda and Olaf were close now, or had fear once again stricken my brother’s heart? Perhaps I should make this easier for them.



“However, there are things I need too,” I said. “If you want the knife back, you must earn my trust.”

“How can we prove ourselves?”

“Let me bind you in roots and ivy. It will hold you while I let you examine the knife. That way, you will know I am telling the truth about the blade, but you cannot run off with it. Once you have finished examining the knife, I will release you.”

“No.” Gobnat took a step back. “I will not let...”

A spear flew from the trees, an arrowhead finding its way into Gobnat’s stomach and another ripping through Tomas’ leg.

“No,” I shouted. “Don’t kill th—”

I shut my mouth. The spear hadn’t come from the left side of the clearing, but from the right. *If it wasn’t Máelmórda or Olaf, then who?*

I dropped to the ground as another arrow flew over my head. A tall man with shoulder-length hair strode into the clearing, three women at his side. *Descendants*. The ones who had been chasing Tomas and Gobnat. One of the women, tall, with cropped, black hair held out her hands and wove roots around Tomas and Gobnat. Gobnat screamed, using her own magic to push the roots away, but blood from the spear wound pooled underneath her stomach, forcing her to use her hands to rip the spear away. Her eyes rolled in her head, and as her strength faded, new roots slid around her legs.

The tall man ran, blurring as he moved. Once he reached Gobnat, he took a thin golden chain from a leather bag and bound her hands together. My stomach sank. *He was a warrior*. He would smell me. Sense the Fomorian within. *And Máelmórda and Donnchad*.

“Quick, Clíodhna,” the warrior shouted. “Heal Gobnat before the blood loss kills her.”

The youngest-looking of the three women, with knee-length chestnut hair, ran over and placed her hands on Gobnat’s wounds. The skin closed over and the seeping blood came to a halt. The warrior took another golden chain from his bag, and this time tied it around Gobnat’s ankles. Now the healer had pulled back the worst of the pain, Gobnat began to scream and wrestle against the roots and chains.

I crawled back, though it was too late to escape. They had seen me. They had probably been listening to our conversation before they attacked. I glanced to my left. *No sign of Máelmórda, Donnchad or Olaf*. Where were they? Had they run away? Abandoned me to my fate?

“Ardál,” Tomas groaned as the roots held him firm. “Cousin. Please, let us go.”

“I can’t,” Ardál replied. “You are to be tried before the council. I love you, cousin, and I will speak on your behalf, but you must come. There are many questions to answer.”

The third woman, the one with auburn tresses woven into thick braids, was the first to look at me. She pulled her hands apart and a ball of water spun between them. “Be careful, witch,” she said. “Ardál says Fomorians are close. The air is thick with their scent.”

“Fomorians?” I stammered.

“Aye, we cannot believe it ourselves, but he is certain. They are close.”

The healer stood once she’d finished healing Gobnat, while the witch with cropped hair continued to hold out her arms, summoning more roots to hold Tomas still, so Ardál could finish tying Tomas’ legs.

“You are a witch?” the healer, Clíodhna, asked me. “Born to a giftless parent?”

“Yes. That’s right.”

“We only just found out that the giftless could have gifted children. I wonder how many of you there are?” She smiled. “You can come to the fortress with us if you like. The older witches can teach you, can’t they, Íde?”

The witch with the short hair nodded.

“That would be nice,” I said. “I already can do a lot.” I raised my hands and the roots of the nearest oak tree ripped out of the soil and flew into the air. “See. Just like your witch.”

I raised the roots higher, closer to the healer, making one of them brush against her hand.

Ardál looked up now that he had secured his prisoners. “Impressive that you learned how to do that without instruction, however, I think you should hand over the knife to Cli—”

Tomas muttered something to him, which broke Ardál’s concentration, and it caused him to kneel at Tomas’ side. Gobnat screamed and spat, demanding to be set free. The other Descendants watched as Ardál leaned over Tomas to better hear his words.

None of them seemed to notice when a bird cawed from the trees behind me. The sound of a golden eagle, not indigenous to these parts. *Olaf*.

“Now!” I shouted.

Olaf's spear flew through the trees and plunged into the chest of the healer. I lowered my hands, and the roots dropped, falling on top of the warrior and cupbearer, then wrapping around their bodies to hold them tight. Tomas and Gobnat strained against their restraints as this happened, but neither were able to break free of the roots and chains that Íde and Ardál had woven around them.

Máelmórda charged into the clearing, his hands alight with fire, and he threw a ball of flame at the witch. The fire engulfed her and Máelmórda threw another ball, then another. The witch didn't even scream. He'd used so much of his gift that it burned through her before she hit the ground.

Donnchad came out from behind his uncle, his hands trembling as he watched the witch die, then stared at the healer who lay on the ground, Olaf's spear imbedded in her chest. She tried to crawl backward, crying, and gulping blood as she slid over the moss and soil. Her hands reached over the wound.

"Do it," I shouted at my son. "Burn her before she heals herself."

My son stared, arms shaking.

"No," the healer begged, edging away, ripping the spear from her flesh. "No."

Slowly, Donnchad raised his arms.

"Do it!" I screamed.

Donnchad clenched his hands into fists and dropped them back to his side, weeping. Coward. Instead of my son fulfilling his duty, I had to watch as Olaf ran toward her, his axe swinging over his head, then crashing into her neck. *To think I agreed to Donnchad being here. How could he capture a gift if he couldn't even kill a sworn enemy?*

I refused to think of him anymore. To hold down the warrior and cupbearer required all my attention and I focused on that. Both struggled against the roots, the warrior most of all. My hands shook, beads of sweat dripping along my neck. "Hurry, Máelmórda. I cannot hold them both!"

My brother, exhausted from using so much fire-magic to kill the witch, summoned his energy and lunged forward, attempting to pin the warrior down. The warrior freed his arms and pushed him. My brother flew backward, slamming into a tree trunk. The warrior's strength was building, ripping at the roots as he tried to stand. The cupbearer broke free too. Olaf leaped out from behind me and jumped onto the cupbearer. Falling to the ground, he wrapped his arms around her, holding her tight against his chest.

I wanted to help Olaf, but I couldn't, not while the warrior was free.

Using as much energy as I could muster, I summoned more roots to wrap around the warrior's ankles and drag him under the ground, but he had so much strength, he was able to rip through them. I summoned more. More.

"Gormflaith," Olaf shouted. "Gormflaith!"

Even though Olaf had now wrapped his legs around the cupbearer to hold her, she had freed her hands and had a ball of water spinning between them. She pushed the water down until it covered Olaf's face, drowning him.

*No!*

I opened my palms and summoned fire. Flames danced up my arms, over my chest and I pushed the fire out and onto the cupbearer. Then another ball of flames onto the warrior. The fire caught him, burning his clothes, and I called on more ivy and roots to creep up his legs. In the corner of my eye, I could see Máelmórda standing, slowly rousing from his collision with the tree. Fire ran along his hands, but not strong enough to make a fireball, and so he threw himself at the warrior instead, using his weight to help the roots drag the burning warrior down. Quickly, I summoned another fireball to help him when something flung me back. *Water.*

The cupbearer must have used her gift to put out my fire. She stood, pushing a now unconscious Olaf from her and twisted her hands over her stomach. Suddenly, a huge stream of water swirled around her. She flung it at Máelmórda and the warrior, extinguishing the flames that burned her friend.

The warrior groaned as the water hit him, smoke rising from his burnt skin, but he was a warrior, and warriors were strong. He ripped through the roots, one hand reaching for his sword, the other gripping my brother by the hair.

"You bastard," I screamed. "You scum..."

A ball of flame shot over my head and the warrior turned into a huge fireball.

I swung around to find Donnchad, flames still dancing on his hands, staring at the warrior who had collapsed to the ground, screaming.

My son ran forward, this time focusing on the cupbearer, throwing a fireball at her while Máelmórda watched the warrior burning on the ground beside him.

I ripped the knife from my dress and threw it to my brother. "Máelmórda," I screamed. "Take the warrior gift. Quick. Before the fire

kills him.”

Máelmórda caught the knife and plunged it into the warrior’s heart. His whole body trembled with the effort. The warrior couldn’t defend himself, shaking with the pain of the burns that ravaged his flesh. *Hurry, Máelmórda.* The warrior could die at any moment, and then the gift would be gone.

But the warrior wasn’t dead yet... and just like the last time the knife had pierced a Descendant’s heart, white mist seeped from his body.

“Call your fire-magic, brother,” I shouted. “It will capture the white mist for you.”

My brother did as I commanded, and his fire began to form a circle around the mist seeping from the warrior’s heart.

“Mother, what do I do?”

Donnchad had come to a stop. The cupbearer lay on the ground in front of him. Her lower legs had burned away from Donnchad’s fire, but her top half, wet from her water-magic, had not caught alight, and so she lay there, moaning in agony.

“Donnchad. Take her gift. Water-magic is powerful. Better than a witch or druid.” I ran toward the warrior and watched as the last of the white mist left his body, then ripped the knife from his heart. The warrior’s fingers twitched. He gulped in a breath of air, then as the blood oozed over his chest, finally he stopped breathing.

“Here, son. Take it. Stab the cupbearer in the heart.” I ran with the knife to Donnchad. “Her gift will be yours.”

My son took the bloody knife from my hands and stared at the cupbearer. Now I was closer, I could see that her fire-singed thighs were not letting her blood seep away from her body, not letting her die. Her eyes opened, pleading. Donnchad once again lowered his hands.

“You must do it, son.”

I shoved him forward. Reluctantly, Donnchad kneeled beside her, while I summoned roots to pin her arms against the ground.

“Don’t,” she whispered. “Don’t take my gift. Just kill me.”

Donnchad tightened his grip on the knife and, without a word, plunged it into her chest. The white mist rose from the wound in her heart and his fire-magic formed a ring around it, bringing it toward him. He screamed as the mist entered his body, then collapsed.

*Silence.*

Máelmórda and Donnchad both lay on the ground, shaking with pain as the white mist took over their bodies. The cupbearer and warrior lay dead beside them. Yet, I couldn't make myself move.

"We must carry them to the boat."

Olaf spoke. I'd almost forgotten he was here. Blood ran down the side of his head, and he continued to vomit up mouthfuls of water, but that aside, he looked uninjured.

"Come. We can use the Descendants' horses to carry them."

"Yes. Yes, you are right." Forcing myself to move, I walked toward the dead cupbearer, pulled the Descendant knife from her chest, and secreted it inside my cloak. Taking a few deep gulps, I examined the carnage around us. Our field of victory.

*But as Olaf hauled Máelmórda onto the horse, I realised, it wasn't just Donnchad and my brother who needed to be moved.*

Gobnat and Tomas wriggled against the gold chains that had held them tight during the fight, blood seeping from their ankles and wrists as they had struggled to break free.

"Kill us," Gobnat snapped. "Do it and have it over with."

"No. You are coming with us. I have questions."

"I will go nowhere with you," she replied, spitting at me.

I picked up Tomas' bag, the vials of many coloured liquids rattling inside. Some of them made them sleep, others made them forget, wasn't that what Tomas said in the dream. I lifted the blue vial out, the one that Tomas had said made them sleep in my dream, and opened the cork stopper.

"Oh, I think you will."

# **Fennit Island**

*Colmon*

*The gift of the warrior, 'tis a strange gift.* My father said that to me as a boy, as did my grandfather.

Many think of the gift only as strength, skill with the blade, speed, better sight and hearing. They see us, tall and broad, and imagine the bears that used to roam this land, all muscle and rage and fury.

There are truths to these thoughts, for the gift of the warrior is all those things. But there is more to it. There are some senses we have that cannot be seen or easily explained, and it is these senses that truly make us who we are.

*What are these senses?* other Descendants ask us. We do not tell them. It is too hard to explain, we cannot show it. How can you show a *knowing*? It is not prophesy or vision. It is not an ache or a pain. No. It is merely the knowledge within us that something has happened or is about to. It is the knowledge that danger lurks around the corner, even when there are no other signs to show it.

Today, I felt that same feeling. A knowing. Something terrible had happened.

I made my way to the stables. One of the healers stood inside, feeding the horses and healing their muscles with their gift. I made my way over to Enna, already fed and rested, and brought her outside. Stroking her nose, I took a deep breath and leaned against her neck. The knowing grew within me. I felt so much danger, but also pain.

“Where are you going?”

Méabh walked over, grinning at me the way she used to.

“Riding out.”

“I’ll come with you.” She walked past me and into the stables to get one of the other horses. “It feels so good to be allowed outside. I can’t get enough of it. I’ve ridden out every morning since the gathering. Is that too much? As soon as we vote on the new rules, I swear that I am leaving here and never coming back.” She laughed as she took hold of her horse’s reins, but the laughter faded as her gaze reached my eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I evened out my expression. “It’s just... I was going further afield today. You can join me another time.”

Méabh cocked her head to the side. “One hundred years ago, those words would have wounded me.” She shrugged. “But you don’t hurt me anymore with your indifference. You want to brood and be alone, fine. Go on.”

“It’s not that...” I bit my tongue. I might be riding toward danger – that was the truth of it. And keeping Méabh safe was important. I owed that much to Cerball.

“Then what is it?”

I grabbed my blanket and set it over Enna’s back. “I would like you to stay here today. Tell the other gift-leaders to have witches and cupbearers stationed at the sandbank bridge when the tide is out.”

“What?” She strode over to me and grabbed Enna’s reins. “Something’s wrong, isn’t it? I can see it in your eyes. My father had the same look sometimes. What is it?”

I shook my head. “Do as I ask.”

“I’ll follow you, if you don’t tell me.” She held her head high, strands of her hair catching the wind.

“Don’t. Stay.”

“You seem to forget I am the daughter of a warrior and I know how to look after myself. Seeing as there are no other warriors here, I’m coming with you.” She mounted the horse, her jaw set, eyes defiant. “Where are we going?”

Where indeed? I did not know exactly. All I knew was it was out there somewhere. Somewhere not too far away.

“I intend to follow the river north.”

“Wonderful,” she replied. “I love the river path.”

I mounted Enna and used her long body to block Méabh from riding past me. “If I say to ride home, you must do it. If I say to hide, you must do that too.”



She nodded and we both rode to the sandbank bridge where Báine was standing guard.

“Have more witches and cupbearers on patrol today,” I said to her before I left.

“Anything serious?” she asked.

“I don’t know for sure... but maybe.”

Méabh pushed her horse forward, already eager to be away. “Come on,” she shouted. “And keep up.”

\*

It wasn’t long before I caught the scent of Ardál and Yala. I thought they had sailed to Wessex, but their quest to find Tomas must have pulled them back to Ireland, which did not bode well. Other smells mingled with theirs too, including Clíodhna and Íde, though their scent was much weaker. The knot in my stomach tightened as we rode on. The *knowing* filled me once more.

I felt something else now too. *I felt death.*

Pushing Enna on, I only came to a stop when the scent veered away from the river path and into the forest.

Dismounting, I took Enna’s reins and tied them to a tree. Not so tight that she could not escape if needs be.

“Are we close?” Méabh asked. She slid off her horse and tied her up next to Enna, then followed after me. She was slightly out of breath, though took pains to hide it lest I order her home. Thankfully, she had a light step and made sure to keep her footprints within my own. Cerball had taught her well.

“Yes. We are close. I smell Ardál and Yala. Íde and Clíodhna too... and I smell Tomas and Gobnat... and others as well. And I smell...”

I trailed off. *Did I truly smell Fomorians?* Their burning stench hit me in the pit of my stomach, and I knew it was them. *But how?* It had been so long, nearly one hundred years since I had last met Fomorians in battle. Afterward, Tomas had questioned the Fomorian known as Balorach before he died. Balorach, constrained by a potion of truth, had said all that was left of his kind had come to the battle, bar one – Raoul, who we had killed

many years later. We had accounted for all the other Fomorians on the battlefield. How then could any be here?

I mulled over Balorach's exact words, for truths could be concealed by those clever enough. *What if all the Fomorians did come to battle... But one had run away when they saw the Descendants arriving to fight them?*

Méabh caught up with me, and I turned to her, keeping my voice low. "I smell Fomorians. And blood. Lots of it. You should return to the fortress."

Méabh's eyes widened but she shook her head when I suggested turning. "Yala is my great-aunt. I have as much right to be here as you. Besides, if they are still here, you will need my magic." She held up her hands, showing the water spinning between her palms.

"There is more than one. Two, I think, or even three."

Her chin tightened, though she didn't shake. "I was there when we fought them the last time. I know what I'm doing. Lead the way." She locked eyes with mine, and for once, the wall we had built between each other fell away. We had not been open with each other for many years now, not even when she came to see me in Dublin to visit her father.

"Then follow. If I say run, run. If I say hide—"

"Hide." She nodded. "I will do as you ask."

We walked in silence, going slowly so we did not make a sound. The smell of fire grew in strength, overwhelming me. Yes. Three Fomorians. *How had they stayed hidden all this time?*

"Here." I came to a stop. "They stood here, but I can tell they are gone. The smell is old. At least, the burning..."

"These are the stones of Danu, are they not?" Méabh said. "Wasn't this where Tomas said Eilis escaped?"

She was right. It was, or rather, as we now knew, he had killed Eilis here. So why had he returned? Why endanger himself by being so close to the fortress when he'd already made the crossing to Wessex?

A mound of freshly dug soil caught my eye. I moved closer, though I did not need to dig to know what lay underneath.

"Ardál, Clíodhna and Yala are here," I said gently. "They are dead."

"What about Íde?"

I didn't want to point out the charred remains on the ground to Méabh. Death by fire was a fate we all feared. To have no body meant we could not go to the otherworld, or so our legends said. How could the ancestors

reclaim our body if nothing of us remained? And no fire burned hotter than Fomorian fire. All that was left of Íde was ash and dust.

“Colmon.” A warning lay in her voice. *Tell me*, it said. Coward that I was in this moment, I didn’t want to. Had living under Tomas’ control made me so used to concealing the truth that I found it difficult to be honest? Or had I always been this way?

I pointed out the patch of black ash that had settled underneath freshly fallen leaves.

Tears ran down Méabh’s face, and she kneeled by her remains. “Fomorians did this?” She wiped her cheeks. “What about Tomas and Gobnat?”

I closed my eyes, feeling out with all my senses. “They were here. A mortal too. Three Fomorians.” Turning, I began to walk and examined the tracks. “These footprints belong to Tomas and Gobnat. They walked as if they were chained by the ankles. Then here, they must have been lifted onto horses. They all went this way.”

Méabh ran after me, and together we followed their scent which led back to the river, though further downstream than where we had ridden.

“There are tracks over here,” Méabh said, crouching low by the riverbank. “But then they disappear.” Quickly, she used her gift to forge a pathway through the river, the river water moving above her head so she could pass through to the other side.

“Can you see more tracks?”

Méabh ran down the riverbank, then back. “No. Nothing.”

“Then they have travelled by boat. The scent of them is gone. It means they travelled quickly.”

Méabh ran back across the river path, the water falling back into the riverbed behind her. Before I knew it, her hands held mine. “What do you want to do?”

“We must dig up the bodies of Yala, Clíodhna and Ardál so we can bring them to the hawthorn tree. We must tell everyone what has happened, then we must find these Fomorians, and rescue Tomas and Gobnat.”

“Why do you think they didn’t kill Tomas and Gobnat?”

“Information would be my guess.”

“You think they mean to torture them?”

I nodded.

Méabh dropped my hands and ran toward the horses. I followed. Yes, we needed to be quick. We had to assume, at some stage, Tomas and Gobnat would tell them everything, tell them where the fortress was... which meant we had to prepare for an attack.

## **Saint Bran's Nunnery**

### *Gormflaith*

The abbess stared at my brother and son as they shivered in their beds, and quickly set down the vase of water on the small bedside table. She offered me a slight curtsy, glancing at the motionless figures of Gobnat and Tomas on the floor, before dashing back outside, hand covering her mouth.

*A sudden sickness had taken him and my friends*, I had told her. *A fever*. It was an excellent excuse for solitude. Nothing was more certain to keep people away than the threat of a new pestilence.

The silver coins I'd given her over the years should have afforded us somewhere more comfortable than this old outhouse, but under the circumstances, it would have to do. Secrecy was vital, and she had provided us with that at least. The other nuns avoided us altogether. Whether that was due to the abbess' orders or fear of sickness, I did not know. Nor did I care.

Murchad had not ventured to check on my whereabouts either. So far, everything had gone according to plan.

*Almost.*

"Sister," Máelmórda whispered, his hands wrapped around his neck. "Water. My throat is burning."

I poured water into a cup and let him sip at it, then wiped his brow. He was still scalding hot, and the water did little to cool him. He lay back as he slaked his thirst, groaning and twitching until he fell into a fitful sleep. At the other end of the room, Donnchad was doing the same, fitting and wailing, sweat trailing down his forehead. Olaf sat beside him, wiping his brow with cold water and holding out a bucket for when he rolled over to vomit.

"How is he?" I asked.

“It’s the worst fever I’ve ever felt, and I’ve seen many during my travels. One along the coast of Tripolani turned men yellow before they died, ravaged them into hollow husks, and still, they did not burn as hot as this.”

He spoke slowly, not adding the details of gore to impress. No, he was warning me. Death wasn’t far away for Donnchad. The fever had him in its grip and wasn’t letting go.

*Was I wrong to have brought him with us?* He was young. Weak. Yet despite his failings, in the end he had pulled through to save his uncle and had killed the cupbearer.

*What if they both died?* Where would I be? My plans hinged on having them both at my side when I fought against the Descendants. Even better than I had dared to dream, we now had the gifts of a warrior, cupbearer and witch between us, if they survived. Dabbing the cloth in the bucket of river water, I pressed it once again against Máelmórda’s forehead. *Live, damn you. Live.*

“How long will they be like this?” Olaf asked.

“Another day or two.” I didn’t say *if they make it*, for Olaf already knew both lives hung in the balance. “When they come out of the fever, they will be tired, but as soon as they are able, they must train themselves in their new gift while relearning to control their fire-magic. That was hard for me at the start.”

An image of Donnchad’s charred crib came to mind, and I shuddered, thinking about how everything might have been so different.

“How long does it take to master the new gift?”

I set down the cloth. “Why so curious?”

“Svein is planning to leave soon. I didn’t want to tell you before, but he leaves this summer. Not the spring of next year like I told you. You have only half a year before his invasion of England starts, and you must revolt against Brian before that happens, otherwise Svein will eye Ireland for himself. Is that enough time for them to master these gifts?”

“That is sooner than expected.” I didn’t look at him, angry that he had concealed this information from me, and dabbed Máelmórda’s forehead with the cool cloth.

“An autumn invasion is an odd strategy,” he continued. “It caught me by surprise.”

“It did?”

“If he sails south in late summer, he will land in England as the autumn sets in... and well, he must be quick to win, or else winter will cause hardships he could have gone without.”

“What does that mean for us?”

“The plan is the same. Svein and his jarls will be busy fighting for some months. England will be in chaos. However, I believe that Svein will have the whole of England under his control before the winter solstice. He must believe this will be the case, otherwise he wouldn’t have altered his plans.” He paused. “If things go as I expect, there will be fighting men ready to come to Dublin’s aid as soon as the winter frosts wane.”

I set down the cloth. “If you were me, how would you play this? I must find a way to leave my husband while also giving Sitric time to prepare for battle.”

Olaf ran his hands to the back of his neck, his fingers trailing the dragon tattoo. He was thinking. I liked to see him like this, happiness alight on his every feature, his face still looking how it used to. “It is time for you to return to Dublin. As soon as the ships leave Norway, Brian will hear of it and will either be suspicious of Sitric or else seek to talk to Svein himself. You don’t want either to happen, so you must tell Sitric to strike against Brian before Svein leaves Norway. This has the added benefit of signalling to Svein that Sitric is beginning his conquest of Ireland.”

“Brian will move against Sitric.”

“Ah, but now Dublin’s walls are strong and high. Sitric can hold out until the Vikings come to his aid in the spring.”

“How will we find these Viking warriors?”

“You already have Sigurd, but to find more, you must send a messenger to the Vikings once they are encamped in Wessex.”

Now it was my turn to think. Sitric did not know these Northmen, despite being related to most of them. If he were to ask himself, they might kill him and take his city in one easy strike.

“Will you be that messenger? Will you go to England to find men to fight for Sitric?”

“I will do whatever you command.”

“Then I command it. As soon as Svein has England under his control, you must go over. You will know the best men to call to our aid. The ones who can fight, but who won’t try to take land for themselves. Even better, try to find men who will swear themselves to Sitric.”

Olaf nodded. Reaching forward, I touched his cheek, glad that, for now, his scarred and mottled skin could stay away. He was so beautiful like this.

“You are a wonderful woman, Gormflaith.” He stared at my brother, then my son. “You are still set on giving one of these men the kingship and not taking it for yourself?”

“This is not Norway, nor even England. Women do not rule here. Sitric can conquer Ireland for us, but when he ages, it will be time for Máelmórda and me to show all of Ireland who we are and what we can do. With our new gifts, no one will be able to stand against us. I do not really care about ruling. I just want to live as I wish.”

He stood and walked over to me, rubbing his thumb over my lips. “And how is that?”

I bit his thumb, then tugged his shirt, pulling him closer to me so that I could feel his warmth against my skin. He kissed me, his cold, blue eyes filled for once with fire as he lifted my dress and pressed me against the wall.

Amlav used to groan when he fucked me. He thrashed around like a man possessed, hands pawing and squeezing, and I had never understood it. *I did now with Olaf*. I knew what true possession felt like – to want someone so badly, to need them. I screamed as he thrust himself inside me and lost myself to the madness of my desire, not caring who heard. Not my brother or son in their fevered dreams, not the two sleeping Descendants on the floor, nor the nuns outside.

\*

Afterward, Olaf dressed. The blue and green of his faded tattoos glowed in the candlelight. He noticed me watching and smiled. I thought he would speak of his desire, of how much he had wanted me, or wanted me still.

“What do you want to do with those two?” He nodded at the two Descendants.

My lust faded as he brought my attention back to another of my problems. Yes, he was right. We needed to concentrate on the danger before us. Now my son and brother had stolen their Descendant gifts, did we need to keep these ones alive? It was a danger to be sure, for they could escape



and run back to the fortress... but this Tomas and Gobnat... they knew so much. *There were so many more secrets to unlock.*

We had used the sleeping potion on Tomas and Gobnat, giving a drop to each at a time, but already the blue vial was running low. There was only one blue vial left, though there were at least two of other colours: red, black, white, yellow and violet. *What did they do? And which one was the potion of truthfulness?*

“I could smother them right now if you wish.”

“No.”

“They are powerful,” Olaf countered. “Especially the witch. What if they turn against you?”

Indeed, I expected them to. And yet I desired to know more about my magic. The witch would know the most, but I suspected the druid would be an easier target to question. Even better, he was the key to understanding how the fortress worked – he used to lead the Descendants, after all.

How many warriors, witches, cupbearers and weapon-makers would stand against us? How could we infiltrate the fortress without being seen? I had so many questions that I was willing to let Tomas awaken one more time. Gobnat, on the other hand... Did we need her? Perhaps as a way to coerce Tomas into helping us? In my dream, he had kissed her.

“Before we fight Brian,” I said, “the Descendants must be killed.”

“Then it is you who needs warriors, not your son.”

“I need men I can trust. Men who can fight. Men like that are hard to come by.”

Olaf bit his lip. “Brodir is your man. When you leave your husband and come to Dublin, we will sail to Man and speak with him.”

“Why him?”

“He hates Christians with a passion. A pagan through and through. Reputation is everything to him and he is a good fighter, but crazy enough that he could speak of attacking a fortress of the Tuatha Dé Danann without too many people believing him.”

I turned my gaze to Tomas and Gobnat. Tomas twitched. The sleeping potion was wearing off. Olaf walked toward the desk to grab the blue vial.

“No,” I said, holding out my hand. “Give it to Gobnat, but not Tomas yet. I want to speak to him first.”

Olaf did as I asked and gave Gobnat another drop, then we waited until Tomas opened his eyes. It didn’t take long. He groaned as he wakened, the

burns on his arm still hurting, but as he focused and noticed me standing over him, he pulled in his signs of pain and glared.

“Fomorian,” he hissed.

I sat down beside him and smiled. “Why do you hate me so? I stopped those Descendants taking you prisoner.”

“You killed them and took their gifts for yourselves. I saw you. Don’t pretend you did that to help me.”

“No,” I said. “I won’t. I simply point out that those Descendants were not your friends. They wanted to kill you because they have lived in the fortress, hidden away for so many years. They do not understand how the mortals are destroying this land.”

“Ah yes, you spoke of this before, when you lied to me about what you were.”

“I didn’t tell you I was a Fomorian, because otherwise you would not have spoken to me. For thousands of years, our kind have tried to kill each other. *But why?* We are the same.”

“No. Not the same.”

“Oh, really? When the Tuatha Dé Danann came to Ireland, who was the first king?”

“The Dagda.”

“Who was the second?”

He paused a moment. “Brés.”

I nodded. “Yes, King Brés. Half Tuatha Dé Danann and half Fomorian. You see, our two tribes used to marry. We used to be friends before the mortals drove a wedge between us.”

The tight clench of his jaw relaxed ever so slightly. “What do you want, then? You haven’t killed me, so there must be something.”

“I want to go to the fortress on Fennit Island.” He flinched when I said the name. This made me smile. “Don’t worry about betraying your friends. As you’ve just discovered, I already know much about you.”

I held out my hands in front of his face and let the flames grow on them. “Fire is always spoken of as destructive. People speak of heat, of the smoke and the ash it leaves behind. But fire is also a symbol of renewal, for once the heat fades, the smoke disappears, and the ash washes away, new life grows. You see, nothing has truly been destroyed. Rather, the old has made way for the new.”

Tomas didn’t speak, his eyes fixated on the fire in my hands.

“I only want to speak to the rest of your kind, to talk to them about a shared future where we are friends rather than enemies. Do you think you could bring me into the fortress and ask the Descendants to listen to me without one of your warriors driving a sword through my heart?”

“No.”

“How many of you are there in the fortress?”

Tomas laughed. “Thousands. Over a hundred warriors, each of whom would cut you down the moment you set foot ashore.”

“What if I was with you?”

Tomas shrugged. “As you saw, they already want to kill me. I don’t think I will be of much help.”

Olaf kicked him in the stomach, then kicked the burn on his arm.

Tomas howled in agony.

“You are lying to her,” Olaf hissed in his ear. “I can smell it.” Olaf took out his knife and pressed it against Tomas’ ear. “I can cut this off very easily, you know.”

Tomas closed his eyes, trembling, and his bladder emptied.

“Olaf,” I said softly. “Let him be. I want him to be friends with me, not to fear me.” I sat beside Tomas and sighed. “Do you know that I’m scared of you too? I have kept my identity secret for all my life. To share it with you is difficult for me.”

I stared at the beds where my brother and son lay, teeth chattering, and shivering under their blankets. “There are only three of us left. That’s my truth. Why don’t you tell me yours. How many of you are there?”

Behind my back, I felt Olaf inch forward. Staring into Tomas’ eye, I saw my lover reflected there, his fingers lifting his knife to touch his tongue. Tomas shook when he saw this gesture. This threat.

“Just over two hundred.”

“You lie.”

“It is the truth.”

“Why so few?”

Tomas licked his lips, cheeks flushed red, either from soiling himself or from the shame of telling me the Descendants’ secrets. “Our magic is fading and has been for years. Not many of our children have gifts anymore. It was mixing with mortal blood that did it.”

“We are the same. My brother has many children with his mortal wives and none of them have his fire-magic. I had never thought about why.” I

gave him a sympathetic smile. “Did you ever stop to think it is because we have stopped mixing? That Descendant magic and fire-magic want to be together rather than apart? I wonder if we had a child, what gifts it would have?”

I stood then, letting my words have time to work on the druid, and moved to sit with my brother.

“What will you do with us?” Tomas asked as I walked away.

“When the time is right, I will have you take me to Fennit Island. I want to talk to the other Descendants.”

“To kill them?”

“No.” I pointed at my siblings. “There are only the three of us, and each of us has taken a gift, which we did only to protect ourselves. To make ourselves more like you. Now that we have done that, why would we kill anyone? We should be friends. We should be ruling Ireland together.”

“If that is true, you can trust me,” he said, his eyes brightening.

“Will your friend think the same way as you?”

Tomas stilled. “She will do as I say.”

“We will see.” I nodded at Olaf, who thrust the blue vial in front of Tomas. “When you wake up, you will be in Dublin. We will speak again. Drink.” Tomas opened his mouth, allowing Olaf to pour a drop inside. Moments later, his eyes closed over.

“Can you take them to Dublin with you and keep watch over them? The sleeping vial won’t last much longer. You will need to guard them and, while there, try to work out what the other potions do.”

Olaf nodded. “I will take them to the house you gave me. No one ever goes there. Where will you go?”

“I will stay here until Sitric and Máelmórda are ready to turn on Brian.”

With that problem taken care of for now, I turned my attention to my brother and son, for Olaf could not take Tomas and Gobnat to Dublin on his boat before Máelmórda and Donnchad were well enough to travel. Judging by my own experiences, I guessed that their fever would either kill them or break tonight. Sitting on my brother’s bed, I set the cloth back into the bucket of water and soaked his forehead.

Máelmórda rose first, shivering and shaking, but at least able to do something other than beg for water. “What is this doing to me?” He stood, retching up the water he’d just sipped, but when I reached out to help him, the fever no longer burned his skin.

“It is hard, brother, but you will feel better soon.”

He looked at his hands, turning them over. “I don’t look or feel any different. Just sick. And hot.”

“All the changes are on the inside, and they will stay there, dormant, unless you practice.”

I beckoned him outside and took him into the forest. “Pick up that rock,” I said, pointing at a huge boulder.

“I can’t.” He rubbed his shoulders, still shaking. “I’m too weak.”

“You can. Try.”

Máelmórda stepped closer, his hands set either side of the rock. At first, the rock didn’t budge. He groaned, and he groaned. Then he slipped, his left foot flying upward. Fire shot out of his hands, setting the leaves on the tree closest to him alight.

I drew the fire back.

Máelmórda groaned, holding his head.

“This is why you must practice. The fire-magic doesn’t want to behave anymore. You need to practise your new gift, while also containing the old one.”

“Tomorrow,” he panted.

“No. Now. You don’t have much time. Svein is leaving Norway soon. I need to have a warrior at my side, well before Sitric and Brian start fighting.”

“And what about a cupbearer?” My son staggered outside, a cup of water in hand, his fur blanket draped over his shoulders.

“Yes,” I smiled. “I will need you too.”

Donnchad squinted up at the midday sun. He came to a stop beside me and raised his left hand over the cup. “Look, Mother. Look.”

I stared down at the cup and watched as droplets of water rose upward and into the air.

**PART IV**

**SUMMER/AUTUMN 1013**

# **Killaloe**

## *Fódla*

The festival of Lughnasadh was a beautiful time of year. It was a time to celebrate the harvest, to rejoice that we lived in a time of plenty.

In the past, I had always found myself melancholy on this day, strange as that seemed, but somehow Lughnasadh signalled the start of shorter days and colder winds. The festival of Samhain came next. A festival where we remembered the dead.

For this Lughnasadh, King Brian had invited the kings of all the clans within Munster to attend a feast at Killaloe. It was to be a symbol that Ireland had entered a new era of safety and protection.

There were no frowns in Killaloe today. Only joy.

Life in the fortress had been one of privilege, in some ways. We did not hunger there. We did not thirst. Not like the mortals. For them, a good harvest was everything. And indeed, this year the harvest had bloomed. Laughter drifted into the ráth from outside. It was time to join in.

Putting on my dress, I made a promise to enjoy myself and not to worry. Not to worry about Broccan, for he was a grown man now and had to make his own decisions. Not to worry about Tomas, for what more could he do to hurt me? I also vowed not to worry about my sister, who'd increasingly been in my thoughts of late. Colmon had promised to find Gobnat. He might have already found her and be on his way to free Rónnat. Soon, she would be with us, and finally I would have my family back.

"Are you ready?"

Murchad rapped on the door and peered inside.

I finished brushing my hair and stood. He had bought me a new dress. Dark green and made of silk. It was too good for someone like me, but Broccan had agreed to tell his friends he had bought it.

Murchad leaned close, his hands running down the fabric. "You look beautiful."

"As do you."

He shook away the compliment, handing me a bunch of buachalán instead.

"Oh, you do listen to me," I said, taking it from him. "Where did you find it?"

"By the river when I was there yesterday. I told you it grew around these parts. What does it do?" Murchad twirled the yellow flowers between his fingers. "Farmers say it kills their cattle. Are you sure it's safe?"

"It's harmful to cattle, yes, but the leaves are good for poultices, and the juices cure cuts and ulcers."

I set the flowers in the vase, hoping to preserve them as much as possible until tomorrow, when I could grind the petals and leaves into powder.

"Do you like it here?" he asked, his voice low and soft.

"You know I like it here. I always liked it here."

"That's not true. Fódla didn't always." His lips twitched, a small smile growing. "What about the mysterious Finsha? How does she feel?"

I sat beside him, enjoying the feel of his body beside my own. "The first time I came here, I was frightened. Priests spoke ill of me because I looked different." I stared up at him. "Finsha doesn't have to deal with those things. I am young, unmarried. I am not frightening or frightened. Though that will change if you are serious about telling your father about us."

"Why would that scare you?"

"Because I'm an outsider. Because people will be jealous and think I'm undeserving of you. If any ill fortune befalls you, I will be blamed."

"I won't let them." He kissed me gently. "They will see how happy I am and rejoice that you have come to me."

But, oh, he was wrong. When it came to whispers and gossip, there was no protection. *And he was mortal. One day he would not be here to protect me.*

"Do not worry. I will not force a marriage upon you. It's your decision, Fódla. I will be with you in whatever way you are comfortable." He kissed me, and this time I kissed him back. His arms wrapped around me, pulling me closer, my stomach filling with butterflies.

When I was younger, I imagined desire faded with age and wondered at times that my mother had given birth to me in her fourth century of life. But



the truth was, even at over one hundred years old, the tug of love and lust and passion had not disappeared. Every time he touched me... my face, my stomach, my lips... my want of him filled me.

"Come here," I hushed, kissing him again.

"Finsha!"

The shout from outside made me pull away. "It's Lucrecia," I hissed.

Murchad stepped back, grinning, an expression of *I told you so* all over his face. *If we were married, we would not have to hide.*

"Tell Bróg I was looking for him," Murchad said, his voice raised enough that Lucrecia could hear him from outside. "I need him to help me with the horses."

"I will indeed," I answered.

"Morning, Lucrecia," he said as he walked out.

"Murchad, good morning," she replied, smiling at him as he walked outside and toward the dun.

"Do you want some bilberries, Lucrecia?" I asked. "Please sit down."

"No, I'm not hungry. I just wanted to speak with you. Alone."

"Yes?" I looked up from my bowl of bilberries.

She closed the door behind her. "I've noticed that Murchad pays you many visits. Late in the evening and sometimes early in the morning."

"He does from time to time. Bróg often sleeps in."

Her lips pressed into a thin line. "If you forgive me, his visits are a little more frequent than that."

"Are they?"

Her eyes widened, scepticism in every feature. She didn't believe me, and why should she? If she'd spotted us with her own eyes, she knew the truth.

"Are you going to tell anyone?"

"No." She snorted. "Of course not. It is not my business who loves who and when they love." She stood and walked over to me, reaching out to take my hands in hers. "Do you remember when we first met at Béinn's wedding? I said you reminded me of someone?"

I nodded, my palms sweating.

"You really do remind me of my friend. She was older than you, scarred from a fire, but even so, you have the same shape of face, the same voice, the same eyes."

"I don't—"

“Oh, I know you don’t know who I’m talking about, but I think you must be related somehow. A distant cousin, perhaps? It doesn’t matter. It’s just when I saw you, I decided I would look out for you. In some strange way, I owe it to my old friend to do this because she looked after me and my daughters. She was the kindest person.”

“Oh... I see... I...”

“Grief took her when her nephew died, and she left Killaloe. I never saw her again and never was able to tell her how much her friendship meant to me.” Tears formed in Lucrecia’s eyes, and it took every bit of strength in me not to reveal that I was Fódla and that I had never forgotten her either.

She patted her eyes with her apron, her thick curls falling over her shoulder. “I do not mean to cry, but life is hard for women who are alone. I know that, and my friend, Fódla, she knew that too... which brings me to my point.” She took a deep breath and pressed both her hands over her stomach. “There are consequences to lying with a man. Did your mother tell you?”

I frowned. “You mean making a baby?”

She nodded. “Unmarried mothers have a hard time, even harder than widows.”

“I’m not with child. You don’t need to worry...”

“But I do worry.” Her eyes ran to my stomach. “Are you sure you are not? Have a think on it. I’m a mother and a grandmother. I know how to spot the signs.”

She moved back and walked to the door. “I will leave you to think, but you are always welcome to speak with me. Anytime.”

Lucrecia left and I fell back onto the bed, my hands immediately rushing to my stomach. *I couldn’t be pregnant. I had taken precautions against it.* Using my gift, I felt within myself. I had put on weight, that was...

My heart stuttered. *There it was.* A heartbeat, faster than mine, beating inside.

# **Saint Bran's Nunnery.**

## *Gormflaith*

*Olaf sat in his house in Dublin, sitting alone by the candlelight, staring into nothingness.*

*The dim light caught his scars, all red and pink and swollen. When he left me at the abbey to go to Dublin, I'd had to transform him back to himself, but it pained me to see him like this, even in my dreams.*

*"Why so serious?" I whispered.*

*Olaf smiled, his vacant focus moving to the flame dancing upon the candlewick. "I am always serious when thinking about you."*

*Flatterer. It suited him to not always be so cold.*

*"Máelmórda and Donnchad arrive at Killaloe today for the Lughnasadh festival. As does Sitric."*

*"Yes. Today is the day." He leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath. "Are you ready?"*

*"You doubt me?"*

*"It is a big thing to throw your fate to the wind."*

*My heart pounded inside my chest as he spoke the truth I'd been too stubborn to admit. He was right. Everything was about to change. This morning, I stood upon the edge of a cliff, nerves and excitement bubbling up into a fever, and a rush of tears came to my eyes.*

*Stupid woman.*

*I bit my lip until the feeling passed, glad that Olaf could not see me. Why should I cry when all my dreams were on the cusp of coming true? What was the alternative? Staying here to fawn and pander to a man I couldn't stand?*

*That was no alternative. The nerves only came to me because I was afraid, though it shamed me to admit it. I was so very good at planning,*

*weaving and plotting... but acting and driving events forward, that had never been my strength, or at least, no one had ever allowed it to be.*

*Men made all the big decisions. My father, Amlav, Sitric, Brian. Never me. I advised from the shadows. To truly step outside of the shade, I had to admit, felt daunting.*

*“By the end of today, you will be riding toward Dublin. Toward me.” Olaf nodded over at two bodies sleeping on the bed by the wall. “I have much to tell you.”*

*“Yes. I should like to hear everything you have discovered. In person.”*

*“Take this chance to prove yourself, Gormflaith. Svein only landed last month, and already he has won the north of England and half of Wessex. Only London stands against him, and his name already is legend. If you go through with your plan today, I promise you that your name will be spoken through the ages alongside his.”*

*He smiled, smugness showing in his grin, his broken teeth and face unable to ruin this joy.*

\*

I woke myself from the dream. It was time, and I could not afford to think of Olaf on a day like this. Today, I needed my brother and youngest son. I needed to know their fire was with mine... and they would be here soon. As would Sitric.

As the late summer sun began its slow rise from the horizon, I readied myself and walked to the edge of the abbey's land and stood by the gate.

I didn't have to wait for long. As agreed, Máelmórda, Sitric and Donnchad rode along the path at the breaking of the dawn. Now sunlight lit the valley, I could see their men resting in the distance, giving their horses a brush before they entered the dun of the High King. Fools. But of course, they had no idea what today would bring them. They had no idea it would be better for them to sharpen their swords.

“Are you ready, Mother?” Sitric said as he dismounted. He stood tall when he spoke, his face slightly flushed with excitement, and any lingering doubt that he might betray us for his wife left me. He was a son of Amlav today. A warrior. A conqueror in the making. Taking a step closer, I pressed my hands against his leather armour. No chain-mail, that would be too

obvious on a feast day, but I was glad he had protected himself as best he could. Arguments had a nasty habit of turning to violence whether you wanted them to or not.

“Yes, son. I am.”

I smiled as I spoke, making my voice sound strong. Whatever fears lingered in my head about this path, I could not show them to these men. To them, I could only be steel.

Once Donnchad and Máelmórda greeted me, I beckoned them closer. “The plan has not changed. When Máelmórda falls out with Brian, he will leave Killaloe. Sitric, you will also leave to show your support for him. The falling out must occur before he gives you his tribute, which will happen once night falls and the bonfire is lit. When you leave, you must both ride to Dublin with your men immediately and refuse to treaty with any messengers he sends after you.”

“Is the timing right?” Sitric asked. “Svein is not yet in control of England. London still fights for King Ethelred.”

Máelmórda glared at him. “Scared?”

“No,” Sitric snapped. “Cautious.”

My brother snorted. “The timing—”

“Svein will be king soon enough,” I said, interrupting the retort Máelmórda was about to unleash on his nephew. I didn’t want them to fall out just as we were about to make our move. “Uhtred the Bold and the whole of Northumbria have already sworn vows to Svein, as has Mercia. Only parts of Wessex hold out, but it cannot last much longer. That is why we must act now.” I moved closer to Sitric and held his hand. “Believe me, son, if you are not free of Brian before Svein’s conquest is over, your kingdom will be next on his list of targets. You must be independent, so he respects you enough to stay away. The time is now.” Staring my son in the eye, I squeezed his hand tight. “Did you bring Sláine or any of the children?”

“No. I told you I wouldn’t.”

“Does she know?”

Sitric bit his lip, his eyes lowered a moment. “No. I’ve kept all of this from her.”

“It is for the best,” I said. “She would not like what is about to happen. Now off you go. Your men should arrive ahead of Máelmórda’s. No one can suspect we have spoken in private.”

Sitric looked over at the nunnery. “He will not think it odd that you are away so early this morning?”

“No, son. I have lived here these last four months. He no longer questions my absence. Patience... it always wins in the end.”

Sitric nodded and made his way back to his men, who then promptly galloped west. In another twenty minutes or so, they would be at Killaloe.

Máelmórda smirked, grinning from ear to ear, rubbing his hands against each other.

“You,” I snapped. “Stop provoking Sitric and don’t get too excited. We need Brian to think *he* acted wrongly, not that you arrived this morning already determined to seek out offence.”

“Why?” Donnchad asked.

“Your father cuts down his enemies. When we leave, he needs to think he has a chance of winning us back, or else he’ll have his men chase us down and slaughter us. When he realises that we have turned against him, we must be behind the safety of Sitric’s walls.”

Donnchad frowned. “I am to go to Dublin?”

“No, not you. You must stay with your father.”

I quietened my voice. For all my scolding of Máelmórda not to be too excited, I found that I was feeling that way myself. This wouldn’t do. “Brian loves you and will regard you even more highly if you defy me in his favour. When the time comes, however, you will act for us. Do you understand?”

Donnchad stared at me, pausing before he nodded. Ah, the weakest shield in the wall. What to do? *Could he be trusted without myself or Máelmórda to guide him?*

“Donnchad...” I smiled. Just as I had done with Sitric, I took both of his hands in mine. “After we stole the gifts, you were so unwell and then Máelmórda had to take you back to Leinster. We did not have a chance to speak. I want to take this opportunity now to say how proud I am of you. You have mastered your fire. Your uncle tells me you are excelling with your water-magic. You truly are a Fomorian. A prince of the oldest race in Ireland.”

A tentative smile brushed his lips.

“I was hard on you growing up. I had to be, to keep us safe. That will all change now. No one sits above you anymore. The three of us are equals.”

His smile grew, cheeks flushing red. But he didn't quite believe me. *Not truly.*

"I know you love your father and that this will be difficult for you. He will tempt you with his kindness to stray back to his side. He will show you the church he wishes you to be bishop of, maybe even Armagh..."

"I don't want to be a bishop."

"Well, I know that, don't I? But your father places his children where they can best serve him and the king who will replace him once he dies."

My son's eyes narrowed. "Murchad."

"Yes. Murchad. Then Tairdelbach." I pressed my fingers between his, rubbing his skin softly with my thumb. "Any life with your mortal family will never be a true life. That is because you are not one of them. You are a Fomorian. If your father or half-brothers were to discover what you really were, oh, they would kill you in an instant. What a waste that would be. Your fire has already killed a Descendant cupbearer and a *warrior*."

"I understand, Mother," Donnchad said. He pulled his hands back. "I know who I am."

I held out my palm, a flame filling it. Then I pulled the fire away and used my witch-magic to wither and rot my hand with age and decay. A moment later, I turned the skin back to as it was.

Donnchad answered me by holding out his hands and summoning the groundwater from under our feet, then spinning it between his hands. He let it spin and spin, then flung it forward, the water bursting against the gate so hard that one of the wooden struts snapped in half.

Máelmórda grinned.

"And you?" I asked him.

"Gormflaith, you doubt your brother, as always, but you do not need to worry. In fact, one day I will show you what I can do with my warrior gift and enjoy watching the surprise on your face."

Máelmórda was in fine form, so I pressed him no further. "Then farewell and good luck. Brian will be at his most pompous today. It shouldn't be too hard to press him into insulting you."

Máelmórda opened his arms wide. "Never fear, sister. I have a talent for coaxing ill-tempered words from the mouths of even the most temperate of men."

He did. It was true. I just hoped his wits didn't fail him today when we needed them the most.

I let Máelmórda ride back to his group of men. They had to double back on themselves so as to come from the right direction, which would take an hour or so. It meant that I had to arrive later than that again.

\*

The waiting was difficult, but I forced myself to stay at the nunnery until midday. By the time I made it to Killaloe, the Lughnasadh games were already underway. As tradition would have it, the games came first at a festival like this. Hurling and the spear-throwing competitions were the most highly anticipated, though games of chess had been set out too. Queens and their daughters walked around, talking among themselves, though clearly showing off their daughters' beauty to the men who might be seeking wives for themselves or their sons. A cattle market of sorts, female flesh for the buying. Brian complained about the slave markets in Dublin, saying that people should not be bought and sold, but what then was marriage really? Fathers and husbands-to-be haggled over dowries. Girls left one house to move to another, often without their permission being sought.

I rode into the dun alone. Only last week, I had told Brian I was still too unwell to come, and so he would not be expecting me, but I believed he would understand my change of mind. He thought I had not seen Donnchad in nearly a year, and motherly love could move even the sickest of women.

When I rode through the gates, I saw my husband standing outside the feasting hall. Huge tables had been brought outside, each topped with chests of gold and silver, tributes for each of the kings he had invited. If wealth was demonstrated by how much a king could afford to give away, then King Brian was Midas himself.

"Gormflaith," he said, surprised, but smiling. "I did not think you well enough to attend."

"I found I could not stay away." One of the warriors helped me dismount my horse. Feigning fragility, I walked over to Brian slowly. My hair was fully white now, my skin yellowed, though not as much as when he and I last spoke. "This morning, I felt a little better, and so... here I am. Where is my son?"



“He is about.” Brian turned. “Cassair, tell Donnchad his mother has arrived.” My husband stepped forward to take my arm in his. “It is good to see you are a little better. Come, sit with us, and eat.”

I did as commanded and sat on one of the chairs behind the tables and watched the scene before me.

“Call up the kings,” I heard Father Marcán say.

“What is happening?” I asked Tadc.

“Father is giving the tributes now. That way he can relax and enjoy himself without the ceremony hanging over him.”

*No. This couldn't be. He always gave out the tributes after the evening feast.* If Sitric and Máelmórda were forced to receive the tributes before falling out, the other kings would turn against them. To break an oath on the same day it was made was unthinkable.

I eyed Máelmórda, who stood by the dun gates, and flicked my hand at him. *Hurry. Act now.* My brother understood, perhaps having overheard Father Marcán, and began to walk toward King Brian. Sitric followed after him. However, the other kings, hearing the tribute was to be given, had also started to crowd around my husband, each of them seeking to be first to swear their loyalty.

“King Brian! We must talk,” Máelmórda shouted as he pushed through the crowd, though not able to break through. King Brian looked up to return a greeting, but just before he could speak, Father Marcán rushed over. “King Brian,” he said. “The Bishop of Armagh has sent you a message. Come into the hall and read it.”

Brian nodded and handed a scroll to Tairdelbach. “I’ll only be a moment.”

The other Munster kings and family members waited by the tables filled with the tribute, while a group of priests followed Brian into the dun, creating a ring around the door to the feasting hall so that Máelmórda couldn’t find a way in, even when he tried to push.

The young warrior beside Tairdelbach stared at my brother, his forehead furrowed, and he began to walk toward Máelmórda, arm reaching out as if to force him back in case he tried to touch the tribute. A rush of vomit and bile rushed up my throat, burning – my every nerve on edge. Máelmórda had acted too rashly in his desire to speak with Brian, and now this young warrior had noticed.

“Máelmórda,” I shouted. “Sitric!” Waving, I caught their attention. “Brother! My son! Come to me and tell me how you are.”

Máelmórda and Sitric came back from the door to where I sat behind the table, and the young warrior paused, though he still stared at my brother.

“What is it?” Máelmórda whispered in my ear.

“Brian is surrounded by priests now, and as soon as he comes back outside, he’s going to give out the tributes.” I glanced outside the dun. There. At the bottom of the hill, Murchad was playing chess with Donnchad. If we couldn’t get to the king, we’d get to the prince.

Máelmórda and Sitric followed the line of my gaze and nodded.

The three of us walked through the gate and made our way down the hill, though I made sure to stand a little behind them. Three tables had been set up at the foot of the ringfort, and Murchad and Donnchad had chosen to play at the table with the blue and green counters. Cassair stood beside them, obviously deciding to let Donnchad finish his game before telling him I had asked to see him.

Máelmórda and Sitric moved over to them, feigning interest in the game.

It was not so crowded here, though a good number stood around Murchad and Donnchad, watching as the contest unfolded. Two older men, standing beside me, whispered to each other behind their hands, commenting on the last move and what strategy Murchad might be pursuing.

“Move the warrior,” Máelmórda said to Donnchad, standing over his nephew. “You can use it to block Murchad’s brehon.”

The two old men’s eyes widened, and another man cleared his throat. To give advice during play was against the rules of the game. Murchad gave my brother a weary glare. “Leave Donnchad be,” he said. “He’s old enough to decide the moves himself.”

“Just offering the lad the benefit of my wisdom,” Máelmórda said. “He’s not a man yet.” He glanced at the board, staring at Murchad’s queen. “Though he might not find beating you hard. Your queen is unprotected.”

“Who are you to be directing anyone?” Murchad asked, his eyebrow raised. “I’ve never even seen you play.”

“I don’t need to play a game with little counters on a board to know how to win. Truth is, chess is a game of war.”

Murchad laughed, eyes now glistening. “You think you know war, do you?”

Máelmórda smirked. “Men are like chess pieces, are they not? So yes, I suppose I know it well enough. Only the king is important. Everyone else can fall. It is their duty to save him.”

The crowd laughed, Murchad joining in. “Ah, Máelmórda, I am not surprised by your words, but that is not how I see my men. They all have names and faces and families. Unnecessary sacrifice is never the way to win.”

“Murchad, I don’t know how you can say that with a straight face. I look around the hall and see only old men and boys. Where are all your friends? All dead, are they?”

Murchad’s face turned pale.

“Yes, all dead,” Máelmórda twisted. “Or else, Amlav the Red and his sons sent them to Iceland. Although if that was their fate, they are still probably all dead by now.”

“Too many of my family and friends are dead and gone, yes,” Murchad answered.

Murchad spoke well and with no bad humour in his voice, but I could tell by the flush in his cheeks that Máelmórda had provoked him, as he was so good at doing. He could get under the skin of any man or woman, given enough time.

“And yet, look at you now. The heir to all of Ireland. I’m sure your father would agree with me when I say that, if you can’t sacrifice what is needed, you are no king. Not a good one, anyway.”

“We all have times where we are not at our best, eh, Máelmórda? Last time we fought, you hid in a yew tree.” Murchad pulled his chair closer to the board, focusing once more on the game. He rubbed his chin, then moved a poet. One of the older men clapped his hands, and Murchad gave him a small smile. “What do you think, Naoise,” Murchad said. “Are you up for a game next?”

“I am indeed, Murchad.” The old man laughed. “I’ve not been beaten tonight.”

The conversation moved on, and Máelmórda fumbled for something to say, unable to find a way to reinject animosity into a conversation that Murchad had already resigned from. I glanced up at the dun, watching as Father Marcán called the first of the kings to receive their tributes.

Quickly, I stormed over to Máelmórda and slapped him hard across the cheek. The sound of my hand on his face stilled the men around us.

“Murchad has insulted you, brother,” I snapped.

“Gormflaith,” Murchad said. “I did no—”

“Indeed, you did,” I interrupted, glowering at my stepson, then my brother. “Máelmórda, I don’t know how you can bear it. Our father would never have allowed a prince of Munster to insult a king of Leinster in this way.” I spat at my brother’s feet.

Murchad stood, arms held out. “If you believe I insulted your brother, I apologise, Gormflaith.”

“It is too late for that.” I kept my gaze on Máelmórda as I spoke and stared into his eyes. “Our father would be disappointed in you. And our mother! To see you slither on your belly like a worm to a king of a lesser kingdom.”

Máelmórda’s golden eyes gleamed. “I believe you are right, sister. My parents would be ashamed. I shall rectify that without delay.”

He stepped away from the game and shouted to his men. “Men of Leinster, it is time to return home.”

His men ran to their horses, a couple of his most trusted advisers pushing the younger ones to the field holding their horses. His small company now made sense. Much easier to gather up twenty men than a hundred.

“What about you, nephew,” Máelmórda said, turning to Sitric. “Will you stay when your uncle has been insulted so?”

Sitric set down his cup. “The hospitality of Killaloe is not as I would expect. Peace cannot be kept when old battles are brought up to humiliate those who didn’t win. I say the rules of hospitality have not been met, and so I will leave too.”

Murchad reached out to hold Sitric, but my son pulled his arm away and walked to stand with my brother.

“Máelmórda, Sitric, do not go. It was unkind of me to speak of the battle between us. It is in the past and I apologise for bringing it up. Please stay.”

Sitric stopped walking. Conflict rose inside him. I felt it. But before I could speak, a sudden feeling of nausea swelled up inside me, and I turned around, afraid that I might vomit on my dress.

A young woman who’d been walking down the hill stopped in front of me, her grin fading at my sudden movement. She glanced uncertainly at Murchad, sensing that something was wrong, but not knowing what.

“Sister!” The young warrior who’d stood beside Tairdelbach earlier ran to the dun gate. “Finsha, come here.”

“In a moment, Bróg.” The young woman held out her hand to steady me. “Are you well, Queen Gormflaith?”

Not understanding the cause of my sickness, I couldn’t move, and as she stepped closer, the pain stabbed at me. Growing stronger and stronger. *I’d felt like this before.* This time I focused on the woman in front of me. Full lips, pale cheeks, long, red hair. She had to be a Descendant.

She was a Descendant. *It was her... It was Fódla...* but with the spell that disfigured her face no longer upon her. The man behind her, the young warrior, he was one too. My head pounded as he came closer. I recognised him now that I saw them standing together, even though the last time I’d seen him, he’d been a boy. *Broccan.*

“Mother? What do you say?”

Shaking, I turned in the direction of the voice. It was Sitric. His voice raised like he had shouted my name already and I had not responded. “Do you come with us?”

“Aye, I do.” I forced myself to walk, and the feeling of nausea faded as I moved away from the two Descendants.

“Donnchad,” I held out my hand. “Are you coming?”

My son glared at me, playing out the part as we planned.

“My name is Donnchad mac Brian, and I will stay with my father.” He spoke with confidence, voice raised so the crowd could hear.

I rushed to hug him and whispered in his year. “The man and woman behind you are Descendants. There must be more here. It’s no longer safe for you to remain here. Once we leave, say to your father that you wish to beg for us to return. We will wait at the edge of the forest for you.”

Sitric grabbed me, pulling me along. “Hurry,” he hissed. “It was you who said we need to leave before Brian has a chance to act.”

I hurried to one of his spare horses. We had to get away from here. *How many Descendants were here? Fifty. One hundred? Did they know us for what we were? Had they been waiting for us?*

“What is it?” Máelmórda asked as he saw my face.

Pulling my horse over to his, I whispered, “The red-headed woman beside Murchad. That is Fódla. The man beside her is a warrior. There could be more of them. We need to leave right away.”

He glanced behind us. “What about Donnchad?”

“He will follow us. I said we would wait at the edge of the forest.”

Máelmórda frowned. “We can’t wait long.”

“I know.”

“Wife!” My husband’s voice caught my ear, and I turned my head. Brian stood at the gate of the ringfort. He stared at me, his head tilted to one side, face like thunder.

I had surprised him. I could tell. Good mothers stayed with their children, and out of all the faults attributed to me, my love for my sons was not questioned.

“If you go now, Gormflaith, I will divorce you,” Brian shouted.

“Good.”

Kicking my heels into the flanks of my horse, I bolted along the river path to the north. Sitric and his men to my right, Máelmórda and his men to my left.

War had begun.

# **Killaloe**

## *Fódla*

The queen stared at me. Hatred burning in her eyes, even as she hugged Donnchad in farewell. I couldn't understand what had happened, but I didn't seem to be alone in that regard. The crowd standing by the chess tables stared on in stunned silence as the queen mounted her horse, agreed to a divorce, then rode away from Killaloe with King Máelmórda, King Sitric and their warriors.

King Brian was the only one who seemed able to break out of this trance, and he strode down the hill toward Murchad and Cassair. Tairdelbach, Broccan and Tadc followed behind him, though they looked as shaken as the rest of us. Donnchad scratched his head, then ran up the hill and into the dun, not listening to his father's call for him to stay.

"What happened?" King Brian asked his eldest son. His voice was cold, but I sensed a furious anger burning underneath.

Murchad ran his hand along his beard, his fingers shaking. "The King of Leinster took insult at something I said to him. Then he asked Sitric where he stood on the argument, and Sitric agreed that I had insulted him. They decided to leave."

Brian stared at the path the horses had taken, his jaw clenched tight, fists tapping the side of his leg. "And Gormflaith agreed you had insulted her brother?"

"Yes, Father. She slapped Máelmórda for not reacting to my words sooner."

Brian grunted.

Murchad, still stunned, took a breath, and set his hand on his father's shoulder. "I will go after them. Put this misunderstanding to rights."

“No,” Brian answered, his voice sharp. “Send a messenger to ask them to return and receive their tribute. They do not deserve to be chased by a prince.”

“I will go.” Donnchad, who I thought had run away because he was too upset to speak with his father, had in fact left to find his horse, and he now rode toward us and pulled to a stop beside his father. “Mother will listen if I go. And you know Máelmórda and Sitric will listen to her.”

“Donnchad, no,” Brian said. “I cannot let you leave.” He held out his hand, pulling in his bony fingers to indicate that Donnchad should dismount.

“We need to keep the peace, isn’t that what you’ve always said?” Donnchad raised his voice, though I sensed a tremor in the flow of his words. He was frightened. Probably scared of what a divorce between his parents might mean. “Mother was upset when she hugged me, and I know she will come back if I ask her to. Please let me try. I’ve been away from you both for so long.”

King Brian glanced out, watching as the last of the Leinster and Dublin riders rode to the forest and out of sight.

“Please, Father. Máelmórda was drunk and goading Murchad. You know what he is like. He will regret it as soon as the drink has faded, but he is proud, and if you don’t offer him a way back, he will find it impossible to apologise.”

Brian’s youngest son spoke sense. Yes, this was surely a drunken argument. Too much ale and imported wine had been offered to the guests. The gathered people stared at the king, waiting, breath held, to hear what he would say.

Brian shook his head. “I will send a messenger with words of peace and reconciliation. Come, Donnchad. Off the horse.”

Donnchad eyed the path. “Sorry, Father. I must try.” With that, Donnchad urged his horse forward.

Brian groaned, his eyes desperately scanning the men around us. “Cassair, follow him. Bring him back to me.”

“Don’t worry, Father,” Tadc said. “They won’t hurt him.”

But Brian took no consolation from these words and stared anxiously after Cassair as he ran into the dun to take a horse from the stables. It didn’t take long for Cassair to ride out, and he galloped at full speed down the hill after Donnchad, a cloud of dust rising behind him.



I couldn't help but look at Murchad as this unfolded. His face still pale, lines furrowed along his brow and cheeks.

"Now tell me," Brian asked, "what did you say to them, Murchad?"

"Máelmórda was advising Donnchad on how to play chess, saying it was a war game and that it should be played as such. Then he... It doesn't matter. He provoked me and I spoke of him hiding in the yew tree after Glenmama. That was what offended him."

"That is all?"

Murchad nodded, then turned away from the crowd, hands set on the back of his head. How I wanted to run to him and hold him. To pretend not to notice his anguish was agony.

"Do you think they planned it?" Broccan asked.

Tadc frowned "What do you mean?"

"I heard most of the argument, if you could even call it that. It was King Máelmórda who insulted Murchad by speaking of all your kin and friends who had died in the Viking raids. And Queen Gormflaith, she slapped her brother across the face. I can't understand why she would do that unless they wanted to be offended."

Tadc tutted. "You talk nonsense. Why would they want—"

"No. It is a fair point." King Brian bit his bottom lip. "The young man is right to think like this. The offence is clear, yes, but hardly the worst insult Máelmórda has heard, and he has never run off before." Brian lifted his head, and for the first time offered the surrounding people a smile. "Have no fear. Whatever it is, I am sure we can rectify it. Tadc, why don't you see to the other kings and prepare them to receive their tribute. I will be there in a moment."

Tadc did as the king commanded, and some of the other people followed him. Now that all the excitement was over, watching the tribute ceremony offered more entertainment than staring at the empty path.

Murchad moved over to his father once the crowd left. "You think this has anything to do with Svein Forkbeard?"

"The war in England is not good for us, but I can't imagine how Sitric and Máelmórda think to benefit from it. Svein is as much a danger to their kingdoms as to ours. United, we would be surer to defeat Svein if he thought to invade. In fact, I had planned to speak to Sitric today about how we might help him defend the ports. Surely, he underst—"

“What if Svein and Sitric are already colluding? Svein might fight for Sitric against us.”

“Then we are in trouble.” Brian held out his hand to halt further interruption. “But now I must ensure the other kings hold firm. That means increasing their tributes and securing new vows today. Come, Murchad. They need to see you with me. That we are of one mind. You come too, Tairdelbach.”

Murchad followed his father up the hill to the dun, giving me a grim backward glance. Deciding not to follow, I made my way over to Broccan, who was still staring in the direction that Sitric and his uncle and mother had taken.

“What is wrong, Bróg?” I asked. “Why did you call me earlier?”

He licked his bottom lip, the muscles in his arms flexing. He looked so fierce. No longer a child or an adolescent, but rather a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders.

“Broccan,” I whispered. “Please tell me.”

He took my hand in his and led me toward our ráth. Only once we reached the isolation of our home and shut the door behind us did he speak. “I can’t explain it, but when Tairdelbach was speaking to the King of Leinster, the most terrible feeling came to me. The hairs on my arms stood on end, and my warrior gift came to me so strong that I think if I had touched anyone they would have fallen over. I felt that they might try to hurt Tairdelbach, so I moved to stand between them and that’s when I smelled something.”

“Smelled something?”

“It was strong when I came close to the queen, too, but I don’t know if it was her or only her brother, because then they left so suddenly. What do you think it can be?” Broccan ran his hands over his face. “I’m sorry. That sounds strange.”

“Not necessarily. Can you describe it?”

“It’s unlike anything else. Putrid. Like melted flesh, only not that either.”

“The warrior gift is complex. It is more than just fighting, Broccan. It heightens all your senses, and we have lived on an island since your gift started to show. Colmon was always there to protect us. Perhaps what your body was showing you was danger. I know Colmon can sense many things. Did he not say so when he trained you?”

“He did, yes, but never anything that described how I felt today.”

“And you’ve never had this reaction before?”

Broccan shifted. “I did once. At Béinn’s wedding, though not as strong. Inside the tent after I had won the archery competition, I knew something felt off.”

“Which is why you wanted to stay with Tairdelbach?”

“Yes.”

I sighed. “You must go to the fortress. You need to speak with Colmon about this.”

Broccan shook his head. “No. My place is here with Tairdelbach. Next time you see Colmon, you can ask.” Broccan moved to the door, pulling it ajar, and his eyes fixed on the dun. He didn’t even glance my way. Already he had lost interest in learning more about his gift.

“You love him, don’t you?” I whispered.

Broccan stilled.

“It’s all right to love, Broccan.”

“Is it? The priests don’t agree with you.”

“You are of the Tuatha Dé Danann, and what the priests say is of no concern to you. At the fortress, we love whoever we wish – they are the old ways.” I walked over to him, feeling that he was on the verge of leaving the ráth, of wanting to push these truths away somewhere so deep I could no longer see them.

“Broccan. We are the same as mortals in so many ways, but there are differences. Our long life is one of them. That is why, even when we were allowed to mix with the mortals freely, we did not often stay in their company. To love is beautiful, but with mortals it is always tinged with sadness because we cannot be together always. Death separates us.”

“That is why I want to stay here now. I value the time Tairdelbach and I spend together all the more, because it won’t be for long.”

“Does he love you?”

“There are... feelings... between us, I think, but we have not spoken of them.” He sighed. “His grandfather is negotiating a marriage, and I would not ask him to break a vow he made to another.”

“Mortals marry for many reasons, Broccan. Sometimes it is merely to continue the family line and love doesn’t come into it. Tairdelbach has a marriage like this ahead of him. His grandfather will make the match based on alliances and politics, but you are right, he will be wed, nonetheless.”

Broccan nodded.

“You should come to Fennit Island. Live among your...”

“No,” he snapped. “Did you not hear me? I am staying here.”

“Even if Tairdelbach marries? Even if you have to hide this love for the whole of his life?”

“Yes. Even then. Love isn’t dependent on it being returned.” He put on his cloak. “Do you only love Murchad because he returns it?”

“No. But I’ve loved him from afar too, and it is not easy.”

“I know that, but I am content. I’m content to be Tairdelbach’s friend and protect him. When he marries, I’ll protect his wife and children too. He is my friend, and he bears a huge burden as grandson of the High King. I will not leave him.”

I gripped his hand, pressing until he turned to look at me.

“Don’t,” he said. “I don’t want pity. We left Rathlin so I could live, and now I am living.” He gave a small smile. “We can’t all be as lucky as you and Murchad.”

“You deserve to be.”

“I am happy enough.”

I smiled back at him and let his attention wander back to the dun. “You wish to go to the feasting hall?”

He nodded. “It won’t be long before Cassair returns with Donnchad. I want to hear what they have to say.”

“Very well. In the next couple of days, I will travel to the fortress and ask Colmon about what happened to you.”

“There is no rush.”

“Yes, there is. I need to speak with him, anyway... about something else.”

Broccan grunted, his attention already on the hall, and walked out of the ráth.

I closed the door behind me and followed.

\*

As we made it to the top of the hill, Broccan stopped, turning his head so that his ear faced the river path. “A horse is coming.” He stared out along the path, then shouted to the warrior guarding the gates. “Two horses are riding this way.”

“Cassair and Donnchad?”

“I can’t see clearly from here, but I think so.”

I stared at Broccan once the warrior ran inside, watching as his face fell and eyes widened. “What is it?”

Before I could ask another question, King Brian and Murchad came outside.

Broccan tensed beside me and squeezed my hand. *Something was wrong.*

From this distance, I made out very little, only the dapple mare and her rider coming toward us. Another horse rode behind them, or at least I thought so, but men began to pour out of the feasting hall and blocked my view. Broccan rushed forward.

What was it? *Broccan felt danger again.* I knew it. I walked after him, weaving through the crowd.

Crínoc screamed, and the high-pitched wail silenced the crowd. Loud and filled with grief, it rang out in the evening air, and as I reached her, I found her crouched on the ground, her head buried in her hands.

I ran to kneel beside her and held her tight, then looked down the hill.

The horse, the dapple mare, was covered in blood. A rider sat on top of her, though now I could see, he had been tied to the horse, the ropes pulled in such a way to make him sit upright. But that was not why Crínoc had screamed.

The man riding toward us was dead. Throat slit, so that blood had poured over his body and legs. Whoever had killed him had cut away his nose and ears, too.

“Is it Donnchad?” Brian cried out.

“No,” Murchad replied, voice shaking. “It is Cassair.”

“Where is my son?” the king cried. “Where is he?”

Everyone stared out at the horizon, but the second horse had no rider.

“They have taken him hostage,” Tadc said.

King Brian roared. A roar of pain and desperation, but also of anger. One by one, the people of Killaloe walked to their ráths, and the visiting kings returned to the feasting hall, dark faces and silent tongues as they watched the mighty King Brian break down, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“Come, Finsha,” Broccan said, taking hold of my arm. “We need to return to our rath.”

\*

That night, I lay in my bed, unable to find sleep. I placed my hand on my stomach, listening to the heartbeat inside. If I told Colmon about the baby, he'd want me to return to the fortress, where it was safe. And yet, the thought of being apart from Murchad was like a knife to the heart.

As the hours passed, I grew weary from lying and put on my shawl. Broccan, after hours of restlessness, lay fast asleep on his bed, and so I crept outside to let him sleep undisturbed. A cool wind nipped at my skin, and I walked to the river, picking at the heather that grew there. Not that I was planning on making any of my pastes tomorrow, but old habits were hard to shift.

The grass rustled behind me. It was not the warrior gift I'd been born with, but I knew even without looking that it was Murchad.

"Finsha... Fódla, are you well?" Murchad wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me tight to his body.

"I could not sleep."

"Neither could I."

When I didn't reply right away, he turned me around, and ran his hand through my hair. "You are upset. I can tell. Talk to me."

"I'm pregnant." It came out as less than a whisper.

He smiled. "That is good news."

"Is it? With the threat of war so close?"

Murchad cleared his throat. "Don't worry. I will try to mend this situation. I promise."

"I know."

"Marry me, Fódla." His eyes shone as he set his finger under my chin. "I need you at my side. I cannot do this alone anymore."

I rested my head against his chest. I took a breath. Broccan was right. Life was for living in the now, rather than worrying about all the things that one day might be.

"Yes," I said. "I think I will."

# **Dublin**

## *Gormflaith*

We rode into Dublin with the wind blowing through my hair, lifting it so high that it rose up behind me like a sail. I smiled like never before. Free. I was free. Truly free. And all my plans were coming together. When the war began, I would need courage. To see my plan through would require resilience. Men would fail. Their resolve would waver. But they were problems for tomorrow. This time, right now, was all for me.

Time to be savoured never lasts for long, but determined to start things well, I rode through the city gates and to the stables. Sitric, riding just behind me, stopped at the gate, ordering his men to secure the walls. Not that he needed to do that – the walls were always well manned. He just didn't want to go to the fort. *Not yet*. My son was no coward by any means. On the field, he fought as fiercely as any other. But, oh, when it came to women, he was the biggest craven of them all. He'd been the same with Onguen, never able to truly question the truth within her heart because he didn't want to hear that she still loved another. It would be the same today with Sláine. He wanted to be High King but did not want to bear her wrath. As his mother, it was only right that I ensured he didn't falter before we had begun.

"Queen Gormflaith!" I heard someone shout as I walked into the fort.

"Grandmother!"

Through the crowd, I heard, then saw Edysis running toward me. Without hesitation, she threw herself into my arms. "Grandmother, if I'd known you were coming, I'd have made something for you! Here." She took off her scarf. "Take this."

"No, child." I laughed at her exuberance. "You keep your own finery. I like to see you in it. It matches the green in your eyes."

“Then I shall buy you one so we can match,” she said, wrapping it around her hair again. “It’s from Venice. It feels so smooth against my skin.” She leaned in close. “Not like the itchy wool Sláine always buys!”

Glad that I had one friend in Dublin, I walked with her to the top table.

“Queen Gormflaith.” Sláine stood, and I noticed a rounding to her stomach as she held out her hands to greet me. A new child grew within her.

“I did not expect you,” she said, smiling. “Has Sitric returned too?”

“He has.”

“You came for another visit?”

Her voice had turned a little higher in pitch. Curiosity rather than dismay. *She was in for a shock.*

“No. To stay. Your father and I are to divorce, and so I have returned home.”

Sláine set down her embroidery, her eyes scanning my face. “I am sorry, Gormflaith. Do not judge my father too harshly. He loved my mother and never—”

“There is no need to explain his coldness, Sláine. Besides, it was I who left him. It was my wish to return here. Not his.”

Sláine frowned. “Father agreed for you to come here?”

“He’s lost the right to tell me what to do. I can go wherever I please.”

Edysis snorted into her apron, the thought of a queen leaving a king of her own volition amusing her. Sláine scowled and attempted to conjure the right words to reprimand her, or perhaps to reprimand me, but no words came, for Sitric chose that moment to enter the hall.

His sons ran to him, holding him and leaping onto his back. Sitric returned their kisses, but quickly hustled them away. “Later,” he said. “I need to speak to your mother first.”

The boys moved on, the younger two wrestling each other, while the two older boys glanced between their parents and stayed silent.

Sláine gave an icy smile as Sitric approached. “Your mother tells me she and Father are to divorce and that she came here without his permission. Please tell me *you* thought to speak to my father before you left Killaloe.”

“No, Sláine. I did not.”

“You have fallen out with the High King over your mother?”

All pretence at cordial relations fell away now. I was no longer *Queen Gormflaith*. Now I was *your mother*. How low I had fallen in the space of a



few minutes. Edysis covered her mouth with her hands, and I winked at her, which nearly set her off in a new state of convulsions.

“No. I’ve fallen out with him because he tells me how to run my own kingdom. Trade is falling away because I cannot have slaves on my land. But it is *my* land. It is my people’s customs that he insults. Máelmórda and I decided we could no longer bear such high-handedness and left the festival early.”

Sláine clicked her tongue. “Before you received your tributes?”

“Yes.” Sitric nodded. “We are at war, wife.” He gathered his two younger children about him. “If you wish to return to your father, you can once the baby is born. Otherwise, your place is here, and I demand your loyalty. To me. Your husband.”

Edysis stopped laughing as her father’s voice rose, and she eyed her stepmother, eyes wide.

*What would Sláine say?* Edysis’ expression told me her thoughts as loud as if she had spoken them. She wasn’t sure. And if Edysis wasn’t sure, neither was I.

“My place is here,” Sláine said, pausing only briefly, then resting her hand on her stomach. “Of course, husband. I will not leave you. This is my home. My family.”

Sitric relaxed and walked up to the table, where he kissed her and held her tight. His relief was so palpable that even a blind man could have seen it. She wrapped her arms around him, kissed him on the cheek, and smiled, which made me wonder how much of this was an act. I’d have to keep a close eye on her, for I knew Sitric wouldn’t have the balls to. Any signs of letters and messages being sent to her father needed to be uncovered quickly. And I knew just who to ask to perform this task.

Winking at Edysis again, she gave me a sly grin, then set about her own embroidery in an attempt to placate her stepmother.

Sláine left the hall shortly after with her youngest son. The child needed a nap, she said, and she rested her hand against her stomach saying she also felt tired. I stifled a yawn myself. Days of travelling had left me weary, though I couldn’t go off to bed in the middle of the day. Instead, I remained in the hall with Sitric and Edysis, waiting to see who came to speak with my son. News of his early arrival would be spreading, and no doubt Máelmórda’s men would be in view of the city walls by now, for he had not been far behind us.

Ulf and Gilla were the first to arrive. Then Falk and Leif came in. More men trickled through the doors behind them.

Sitric sat on his chair, his eldest son, Amlaíb, taking the chair beside him. Sitric stared at the men, appearing vaguely confused as to why they had come. Good. He had learned how to play the role of king.

“Is it true?” Ulf demanded, eyes overbright.

“Ah, Ulf,” I said, before Sitric could speak. “Where is your wife? I do long to see the lovely Orlaith. I hope she hasn’t fallen again since the last time I was here.”

The smug smile fell from Ulf’s lips. “My wife is my own concern. Sitric, control your mother.”

Again, I was *your mother*.

Sitric chuckled, which only made Ulf angrier. The laughter continued as Máelmórda and Donnchad came into the hall.

“What do you think, uncle?” Sitric said, before my brother had taken more than ten steps inside. “How do I control my mother? Ulf is already tired of her quarrelsome nature. Perhaps you will know what to do.”

My brother grinned and circled Ulf. “Is my sister causing problems? It wouldn’t be like her to do so, I am sure.”

Ulf grunted. “Of course she is causing problems. That is all she ever does.”

Máelmórda laughed, then swiftly pulled out his knife and set it under Ulf’s chin. He moved so quickly I had not even seen his arm move. “Do not speak of my sister like that. In fact, don’t speak of her at all.”

Ulf’s hand rose, gripping Máelmórda’s hand to push it away. But nothing happened. Máelmórda’s arms did not move, not even an inch. Ulf’s face reddened, the veins under his eyes bulging and his arms quivering with the force he put into them. Still nothing.

Shifting to the side, Máelmórda released his grip and punched Ulf in the stomach, causing Ulf to fall in a heap to the floor. “You have been warned, Ulf. Let your king and his kin do the talking. War is not the business of a *trader*.”

The hall silenced. This was not the King of Leinster they remembered. That man had hidden in a yew tree and crawled into Dublin at the feet of Murchad mac Brian. That man had cut out the eyes of a rival while in chains. Murmurs of respect floated around the hall, and Máelmórda offered

me a sly grin. Using his gift in front of me for the first time on Ulf had not changed our lives, though it had been amusing – I'd give him that.

Leif stepped forward, giving a small smirk at the sight of Ulf scrambling to his feet. "Is there to be war, Sitric?"

"Yes, nephew," my son replied. "We can no longer accept being dictated to by another king. My uncle, King of Leinster, is with us. As is Sigurd of Orkney. Messages have been sent out to others."

"They won't come," Ulf said, cheeks and neck flushed red. "All the Danes and Northmen are fighting for Svein now."

"Svein has already won." Olaf stepped forward from the shadows.

"Who are you?" Ulf snapped. "What does a monk know of Svein Forkbeard?"

"I am a simple priest, but I sailed with Styrbjörn, cousin of Svein, for many years. Only London is left to be taken, and I've heard that Ethelred's sons have already fled to Normandy. Sitric will have his pick of warriors who will want to fight for him. He has only to send word, and men will come."

"You must be careful," Falk said. He limped as he walked forward, but everyone parted for him as he made his way to sit on the seat beside Amlaíb. "You must not pick those who would want to take Dublin for themselves."

Sitric nodded. "I am mindful of this, old friend. I have offered Sigurd land in the north. The ports of Wexford, Waterford and Limerick are also gifts that can be won."

"But then they will rival you, uncle," Leif said. "You said before, it is not good to have too many ports in Ireland."

"It is not my plan to remain only King of Dublin," Sitric said. "The high-kingship itself is what I desire. If Svein Forkbeard can make himself King of England, then why cannot I do the same in my own country?"

A few of the men at the back clapped their hands. Others glanced about the hall, startled by the news. "And so, Ulf, when you complained to me like a bitch dog about King Brian's law to free the slaves, I was already plotting against him. Look around you. Dublin has never been so rich. In fact, we are wealthier than the whole of England. We have more ships than ever before. More fighting men. Gold enough to pay for more. If Brian Boru thought Amlav the Red was the scourge of Munster, he thought wrong. War is coming. A real one this time."

He stamped his foot and stood. "Bring in the wine and the ale. We feast today so we may plan tomorrow."

The men in the hall cheered, even Ulf, and they hurried away to tell their families.

\*

"Well done, son," I said.

"It is not done yet," he replied. "I need your help."

*Already? Surely nothing could have gone wrong yet?*

"With?"

"Brodir. He won't fight for me. I visited him as you suggested, but his answer was no."

"Is he still on the Isle of Man?"

"Yes."

"Does he fight for Svein?"

"No. He has sworn to never fight for him. I think he waits to see if Svein fails in his conquest, hoping to pick up the pieces of a ravaged Wessex."

"Then I will go to him directly. Have a ship readied for this afternoon."

Olaf, who had remained in the hall, stared up at me, his piercing blue eyes reaching me from under the shadow of his hood. "I apologise if I have intruded, but I heard you speak of Brodir. I know him. If you need me to help you in any way, I am willing."

"Isn't Brodir a pagan?" Sitric asked. "A monk might annoy him."

"He was a Christian once, King Sitric," Olaf said. "He knows me from olden days, and we are still friends. But yes, you are right, he is a pagan, and will now only fight to win glory for the old gods as atonement for his previous conversion."

"I shall be glad of your knowledge, priest," I said. "Ready your belongings."

Olaf nodded and walked out of the fort.

Sitric stared after him. "He is a strange man, is he not?"

"He is useful to us for now. That's all that matters."

Edysis nudged my arm. "Grandmother, can I come with you? I should like to see the Manx kingdom."

I eyed Sitric, who I knew had heard her request. He also knew what the consequences of her visit to the Isle of Man might be. Brodir could want a wife as part of a deal to fight for Sitric. If so, could he bear to part with his eldest daughter?

“Edysis is a woman grown now,” he said. “She can decide for herself.”

Edysis grinned while Sitric sank back in his seat, his face brightening as his friends came in, having heard the news about the pending feast and future war. His warriors came in too, bowed to their king and swore their fresh vows of loyalty. I stood, thinking to ready myself for the journey. A wave of nausea rose inside me. Anxiety after all that happened these last few days. I paused, took a deep breath and took another sip of wine.

“Mother,” Sitric said, breaking away from his own conversation. “I prepared our old house for you as there is no room inside the fort. I’ll have my servants bring you fresh clothes within the hour.”

Grateful for the privacy this afforded, I nodded my head and smiled. “Thank you, my son.”

\*

The journey to the Isle of Man was an easy one. The late summer weather gave a good wind, though the swell of the sea was strong. Edysis didn’t feel it and bounded up and down the ship with excitement.

“Grandmother,” she said, holding my hand. “How did you feel the first time you sailed on a ship?” Her wide green eyes sparkled and the freckles on her nose scrunched up as spray landed on her cheeks.

“Like I was going to die.”

“Truly?” She shook her head. “I suppose you have no Viking blood in you.”

“I grew to enjoy it, though. Being on the sea... it feels like...”

“Freedom,” Edysis finished for me.

“You don’t have freedom in Dublin?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes. “I have some. Father is not strict, but Sláine thinks I should marry, and I don’t want to. At least not to anyone I’ve met so far... and I can’t really imagine it either. When I dream, I don’t dream of children and a man in my bed. I dream of far-away lands and music and adventure.”

“Ah, child. That is possible for a man, not a woman.”

“That’s what Sláine says.” She sighed. “But then, why are the sagas so full of women warriors? Why can I not be like them? Lagatha *rescued* Ragnar Loðbrok. If she was a warrior, why can’t I be an explorer? Why must I live only in one place, when there is a whole world out there?”

I pulled her closer to me. “You are right, but the world is hard for women... though it does not have to be so. What if I promised you that, should your father win this war, I could give you all you wished for?”

She stared at me, eyes sparkling. “Truly?”

“If your father wins, I will have the wealth and power to give you a ship and pay for a crew. They could take you anywhere in the world you wanted to go.”

“I knew you’d understand me, Grandmother. I’m so happy you’ve come to live with us.”

She grinned and snuggled into my side as the longphort of the Isle of Man came into view.

\*

Falk’s men stayed on the ship, while Falk, Olaf and Edysis came ashore with me. The guards led us to the hall at our request, then asked us to wait so they could tell Brodir who we were.

“Who will be here, Brother Benedict?” I asked once they left.

“Brodir will be here with his younger brother, Ospak. They are inseparable, although it is Brodir who is in charge.”

“Wives?”

Brother Benedict shrugged. “Not that I’m aware of. Ospak has two sons and a daughter from his first marriage. Brodir has plenty of *women* and plenty of bastards running around but has never taken a wife. An older cousin called Tura runs the household for him, but you won’t find her in the feasting hall. She likes to weave.”

“She *likes* to weave?” Edysis giggled. “Is such a thing possible?”

“Oh yes,” Olaf said. “She says it brings her closer to the gods. She is good with the slaves and keeps them in order, but she doesn’t enjoy feasting or drinking and keeps to herself. I don’t think Brodir is overly fond of her, but he can’t do without her, either. If he doesn’t want a wife, then someone must organise his household for him.”

The doors opened and Olaf's whispering stopped. We walked into the hall.

"Queen Gormflaith," Brodir shouted. "Welcome."

"Thank you, Brodir, but it is only Gormflaith now. I am a queen no longer."

He laughed at this. "So I have heard. Please, sit. I'd like to speak to the woman who threw away a kingdom."

Slaves ran to bring food and wine to the table and Brodir himself pulled out two chairs for Edysis and me to sit upon. We came closer and I rapped my knuckles on the table, beautiful as it was. Made of thick wood and engraved by a master craftsman. Trinkets adorned it. Ivory tusks, and an orange and black pelt of what looked to be a giant cat of some kind.

The Viking berserker smiled at me. Long, black hair hung down to his waist, almost as long as mine. He wore his armour too – not like any I had ever seen before. And his smile widened as he noticed me looking at it.

"A gift from my cousins in Paris. A new style of armour that no sword or axe can pierce."

"It is heavy though, is it not?" Edysis asked.

"It is, Edysis Sitricsdottir. That is why I have to wear it often, otherwise my muscles will forget the weight of it when it comes to battle."

"Are you expecting to go to battle soon, Brodir?" I asked.

Brodir smirked at another man who sat quietly by the fire. "What do you say, Ospak?"

"We are always prepared for battle, Gormflaith," Ospak answered, standing and coming over to inspect his guests. He didn't look impressed.

"What is your necklace made of?" Edysis pointed to the white teeth dangling from a chain around Ospak's neck.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Ospak answered. "I killed the beast when I last visited India." He ran his hand over the giant cat pelt, then held up his necklace of teeth and claws, showing me the long talons he'd cut out of the beast. "As you can see from the pelt, its face had stripes of orange and white, and it fought like fire."

"Not as impressive as a bear," I said, letting the teeth fall from my hands.

He laughed. "I've killed so many bears, I've lost count, so I know you are wrong. Nothing compares to a tiger."

I shrugged and ran my fingers over the walrus tusk which lay on the edge of the table, my finger moving from the thick shaft to the tip. "If you say

so.”

Once we finished eating, Brodir poured himself a glass of wine and glanced at Edysis, who spoke to Ospak. She was talking about the necklace again, asking him to describe the beast he had fought in more detail. *How did it sound? How did it walk?* Falk joined in every so often, more interested in the trade routes Ospak had used and how long the voyages had taken. Olaf sat at my side, listening, but silent.

“Edysis is a sweet girl,” Brodir said at last.

“She is,” I answered. “Not looking for a husband, might I add.”

“Oh? She has a man already?”

“No, but she is allowed to pick who she wants, and so far, she doesn’t want one. She’s certainly not going to be offered up as part of any deal.”

“I’ve already told your son there is no deal to be made. I don’t want to fight for him.”

This one might be more difficult than I had thought. Holed up on his own island, he’d made a kingdom for himself. Women, wine, wealth. Everything was here that he might need. Exploration fuelled his brother’s appetites, but there must be something more to him. He had once practised the Christian religion, but then turned against it, returning to his pagan roots. Men of low intelligence did not do such things.

“Does my priest offend you?” I asked. “I’ve heard you despise Christians.”

“No. Not at all. I used to be one.”

“Why did you turn from it?”

“It’s all a lie. Can you not see it? Christians use the religion to crush those beneath them. Priests and monks take money from those who don’t have any and say the Kingdom of Heaven can be bought for a price. What god allows such things to happen?”

“I also see your kind taking men and women from their homes. You are stealing wealth too, just a different kind.”

Brodir nodded, running his hand around one of the young women working in his hall. “No one here is crying. I look after my slaves. My women will come to Valhalla with me when I die, and they shall feast at my table. I share everything I own with them. My men, some kin, some slaves, they are free to seek their own destinies and may feast in Valhalla too, if the gods deem them worthy. There are opportunities for all here. In the Christ



lands, there are not. The priests tell the people that everyone must stay in their place.”

I grinned, leaning closer. “What would you do to these priests?”

He leaned in too, mirroring my movement, and pressed his hand to the hilt of his sword.

“Come,” I said. “I have something to show you.”

Brodur chuckled as his hand reached out to hold mine. “Is this how you convinced Sigurd to fight for you? I wondered what might have caused him to agree to leave Orkney.”

“You imagine too much. I have something to show you outside, but believe me, it is not what is underneath my dress. Come.”

Pulling my hand away, I walked outside. He’d follow in a while. He was too curious not to. Sure enough, after a few minutes, he met me by the fort door.

I turned and walked toward the firepit so he could see me in its light. And then I unwound my witch-magic from my hair and face. The white hairs left first, then the grey. The wrinkles on my cheeks smoothed over. The yellowed skin under my eyes changed to milky white.

It took a moment for him to understand what I was showing him. And then he stared, paralysed by wonder.

“You are a god?” he whispered.

“Yes. I have walked among the mortal realms for many years now. Soon, I return to Asgard, the land of my father and brothers. Odin weeps for my return. I hear his tears. Do you not?”

He stammered. “I-I do not hear the gods, no.”

“But you know they are angry with you. Angry that you won’t fight against the Christians who destroy our world. You, out of all the warriors alive today, know the truth of what the new religion is.”

“Yes.” A fervent look reached his eyes, which were half full of tears. “I know they destroy our way of life. Is it true what our seers say? Are the gates of Valhalla closing? Is Ragnarök soon to be upon us?”

“Soon.” I reached for his hand and pressed it to my cheek. My pink cheeks and lips caught the firelight, my fingers reaching out to make the fire rise higher.

“This war is the first battle. A war between Sitric and Brian. But there are other enemies too, and I have come to call upon you, Brodur of the true faith, to lead the way.”

He bowed before me. “What must I do?”

“There is a fortress in Ireland, set on a tiny piece of land on the south coast. It is full of Christian priests and witches. They use their magic to disguise their home, but I know the way in. Will you kill them for the gods, Brodir? Will you take your army there and destroy them?”

“You... You do not wish me to fight for your son?”

“I do, but it is the gods who want this. I merely offer you a chance to redeem yourself. This is the only way.”

I held out my hands and let my magic flow through me, pulling the ferns around me, around him. Ivy ran up his legs and over his face. No fear showed on his face, only awe.

“Yes, Gormflaith. I will do as the gods ask.”

# **Killaloe**

## *Fódla*

“Finsha, will you come with me?”

Murchad walked into my ráth, finely dressed in a thick, fur cloak and gold rings on his fingers. He even wore a silk tunic, a fabric he rarely favoured.

“Who do you go to speak with?” I asked. “The King of Connacht or Meath?”

“I was hoping we might go to the church.”

I stared up at him, watching as he gave me that shy smile of his. My mouth turned dry at the meaning behind his words. My heart pounded, and inside, I felt another heartbeat speed up too. I set the bunch of dried meadowsweet, that I had been weaving into a floor covering, on the table.

“Have you told your family?”

“I’ve told my father, Tadc and Tairdelbach.”

My breath caught. *He had told his father?* Oh, it pained me to think of what King Brian’s response had been. “Did he agree to it?”

“Aye.”

“You expect me to believe that?” I rubbed the skin between my fingers, pressing down and kneading my knuckles. “Or perhaps I should ask, how long did it take to convince him?”

“I wouldn’t ask you to come to the church unless I had his blessing. Come.” He held out his hand. “If you will have me.”

Brushing the grass from my apron, I stood, then put on the new green dress he had bought for me.

Smiling, he took my hand in his and we walked along the path to Saint Mel’s church, a church that King Brian had founded in recent years. The cooler air was blowing in now, all traces of summer fading, but there was

something beautiful about the morning and the gold and orange leaves that we walked upon.

When we reached the church, I was surprised to find King Brian, Tadc and Tairdelbach already standing inside. Tairdelbach knew me well and smiled. However, the other two had only seen me at feasts and bigger gatherings. Their faces were stern and neither hid the way their eyes roved around my face and body.

I was glad to find that Broccan was in the church too, standing behind the others. His smile was wide and bright, which gave me the confidence to smile too.

“So, this is the young lady who has caught your eye,” King Brian said, his expression still not given to any emotion. “You are Bróg’s sister, is that right?”

“Yes, King Brian,” I answered.

“Where are you from?”

“Rathlin Island.”

“Your father is the king there?”

“No. I am not related to any kings from the north.”

Brian stared at his son, this time giving an appraising scowl.

Murchad held my hand tighter. “You want me to marry a king’s daughter or sister – I understand that. But look at what has happened to Sláine and Béinn. Marriage is not the key to keeping kings close. It never has been. All it does is buy their gratitude for a time.”

“New alliances are not my concern. This marriage will offend almost every king in the country at a time when we need them. The timing couldn’t be worse.”

“The timing is what it is,” Murchad said. “We are at war. I could be dead tomorrow or the day after that. I’ve found some happiness, and I will have it.”

Brian gave Murchad a curt nod and pressed his hand to Murchad’s face. He loved his son, even though I’d never heard him say it.

“Why not wait until after we go to war with Sitric?” Tadc suggested. “Why the rush?”

“Finsha is pregnant,” Murchad said. “I want my child to be recognised.”

Tadc sighed and eyed me with the same hard look he’d given me when he knew me as Fódla. I was a sinner now. Just as she had been. I didn’t lower

my chin as I once might have, instead I raised it and held Murchad's hand tighter.

"We can keep the marriage a secret for another few months, until she starts to show, if that is your wish, but after that, she will stay with me. Tairdelbach is of an age now where he can marry, as is Eocha's eldest boy. If you need alliances, we have many that can be made."

Tadc frowned. "So you don't want to offer yourself up for marriage, but Tairdelbach is—"

"If we need an alliance, I will marry whoever Grandfather picks," Tairdelbach said. "Father married my mother as he was told to. Now he should marry Finsha, if that is his wish."

King Brian nodded, his scowl easing. "Then it is decided. We need to keep the King of Connacht close to us, and he has proposed his granddaughter as a suitable match."

"Agreed," Tairdelbach said. "I do not mind who I marry."

I glanced at Broccan as this conversation took place. His smile had dimmed, but when he noticed my stare, he gave me a small nod and walked to take my hand in his. "I wish you well, sister. You are the kindest person I've ever met, and you deserve this happiness."

With that, Murchad took me to the altar where a priest awaited us.

What unfolded wasn't the usual wedding of kings and princes. There were no chests of gold or jewels. No talk of dowries. It was not even a wedding like Maria's, with music and dancing afterward, but it was what I wanted, all the same. No fuss, no eyes staring at me, no endless well wishes from people I did not know.

Once it was over, Murchad walked with me to the dun. Our marriage was to be secret for a while longer, but at least, with his family, we no longer needed to pretend, and so for the first time, I was able to enter his house and lie with him without keeping watch for the rising sun.

\*

"Are you hungry?" Murchad said. "It's dark outside. I think it's safe for us to leave."

"No. Not yet."

Murchad rested his hand on my stomach. “You are showing a little already.”

“Yes. Soon you will feel her moving.”

“You know it is a girl?”

I nodded.

“That is good. I should like to have a daughter. Hopefully, she isn’t as mischievous as Tairdelbach.”

This made me laugh. I hoped so too. I didn’t think my nerves could take a daughter trying to ride wild horses or sneaking away on ships in the hopes of going to battle.

“What will you do if—”

Someone knocked on the door.

“Who is it?” Murchad called, rushing to the door.

“It’s Bróg,” came the reply. “Sorry to disturb you both, but Colmon is here.”

I threw off the blankets and pulled on my dress. *Had he brought Rónnat with him?* I rushed to fasten my cloak around my shoulders.

Murchad stood too. “This is your cousin? The warrior?”

I nodded.

“Will there be trouble... because of the wedding?”

“No. Not with Colmon. You should come and meet him. You’ll like him. I hope he has my sister with him.”

Murchad smiled. “Then if that’s the case, I will let you and Broccan go first. I will meet you by the river in a while.”

\*

I left Murchad’s house. Broccan was waiting for me close to the stables and walked with me out of the dun.

“What did Colmon say?” I asked.

“He wouldn’t say without you there, but I don’t think it is good news.”

My heart sank at these words, and I also knew from Broccan’s muted expression that his mother was not here either. *What could it be, though?* Tomas and Gobnat were clever, but could they be so clever that they still eluded Ardál and the rest of the search party?

Colmon waited for us by the river, dressed in his monkish attire. If Broccan's words had not warned me of bad tidings, Colmon's face would have done so. "What's wrong, cousin?" I pulled him into a hug. "I had so hoped that, when you came to Killaloe, Rónnat would be with you. What has happened?"

"We haven't found Tomas or Gobnat yet."

"I see."

"But even worse..." He paused. "Even worse is that Ardál, Yala, Clíodhna and Íde are dead. They died not far from here."

"Do you think Tomas and Gobnat killed them?" Broccan asked.

Colmon licked his lips. "I don't think so, though I know Tomas and Gobnat were with them when they died. Others were there too. And I smelled fire. Fomorian fire."

"Fomorians?" Broccan shook his head. "You told me they were all dead."

"I... We all believed so. But I cannot deny my senses. Méabh and I followed the trail to the river and then it disappeared. Whoever it was had a ship and sailed downstream. We have been searching for the last couple of months, and eventually we found a trail close to the nunnery at Saint Bran's, but we couldn't pick it up again."

*Fomorians? At Saint Bran's?* That was close to here. So close. But how was this possible? How were they still alive?

Broccan tilted his head. "The church is—"

"Broccan!" I shouted, startling both my nephew and Colmon. "The smell. The one you said was putrid... like... like melted flesh." I turned to Colmon. "At the Lughnasadh festival, Broccan smelled something. Could it be Fomorians?"

Broccan's hand slid away from his sword. "It was the King of Leinster who made me react. He had a strange smell, like flesh burning, but there were lots of people around him. I cannot be sure it was him."

"It is a good lead," Colmon agreed. "And yes, it is unlikely to be the king, but perhaps one of his men could be Fomorian and has infiltrated his army." He nodded, his face less grim-set now that he had something tangible to follow. "We will ride out in the morning, Broccan, and find the King of Leinster and his army."

"No," my nephew replied. "My place is here."

"We are the last warriors," Colmon said, his voice cold. "It is your duty to come and fight for us."

“No,” Broccan said again. “It is not my duty to fight for a people who did not welcome me in because of who my father was. This is my home, and I will fight for my friends.”

Colmon stared at his young student, disbelief on his face. “We cannot free your mother until we find Tomas and Gobnat. I believe the Fomorians have them.”

“Don’t bring my mother into this. If you cared about her so much, you wouldn’t have voted for her to be banished in the first place.”

“Broccan, that is—”

“Unfair?” My nephew clenched his jaw. “No. It’s the truth. Tell me this, has anyone gone to my mother since Tomas left? Or is she still alone on the island?”

“Báine tried to break the spell but was unable to. And your mother is not alone. Senna is taking care of her. What about you? Have you visited your mother since you discovered Tomas no longer posed a threat to you?”

“Stop it, the both of you!” I pressed myself between them and pushed them apart. “This is not the right time to argue.”

Broccan moved away but kept his gaze on Colmon. “When you have found the Fomorians or Gobnat or Tomas, come for me. Until then, I will stay here.” Broccan marched away, returning to the dun and his friends.

Colmon stared at me, eyebrows raised.

“He has found friends here,” I explained. “Love... maybe. He needs time to be himself for a while.”

“The Fomorians will affect us all. Mortals too, if we don’t find them.”

“I know. But he is young, and he was alone with only us for too long,”

Colmon rubbed his head, slowing his breathing. “You are right, and he spoke the truth. He owes us nothing.” Colmon took my hand in his and lifted it to his face. “Your steps were heavier today than usual. I suppose it is the weight of this?” He rubbed his finger over the gold ring Murchad had given me.

“We married each other today.”

“I am happy for you.”

“And I am pregnant.”

“So soon?” Colmon wrapped his arms around me, not quite able to shield the surprise from his expression. After Aoife, I had tried for years to give her a brother or sister, to no avail – back when I still loved Tomas and wanted to please him. “I am happy you have found happiness in your life. I



do not wish to alarm you with my news, but there is much danger around you. Vikings have all but taken England and their eyes will turn west once they have control. Now there are Fomorians among us again, and they have taken Gobnat and Tomas with them. If you feel you are in danger, return to the fortress. Without Broccan if needs be.”

“I cannot leave without him.”

“Yes, you can.” He placed his hand on my stomach. “You have another to protect now. With Aoife, the fortress became your prison. Do not be hesitant to return because of painful memories.”

“If I am in danger here, I promise I will return, but I am safe with Murchad. Don’t worry about me. Worry about yourself.” I ran my fingers through my hair, taking a moment to take in his news. “Fomorians? I can’t believe it... and when our numbers are so low. How do you plan to find them?”

“I have sent scouts to each of the kingdoms. Broccan’s suspicions about Leinster is a promising lead, but the King of Leinster and his men are holed up in Dublin at the moment, and they will be hard to reach. Nonetheless, we will do what we can to search for Tomas and Gobnat, and the Fomorians who took them. I intend to join the search myself, once this coming winter is over.”

“Why wait so long? Why not go now?”

“If Broccan is unwilling to go with me, I need to wait. The number of us who remember how to fight Fomorians are few. We need to ensure that, once we find them, we have enough strength in our number to take them down. The cupbearers need more training, so do the witches. That is my plan for the winter months. When our scouts find where they are, we need to have the strength to act.”

He sighed, releasing my hand. “Farewell, Fódla. I must return to the island now. There is much to do. Hopefully, when spring comes, Broccan will have changed his mind.”

I waved Colmon goodbye but could not return his hope. Broccan would not leave Tairdelbach now. The search for the Fomorians weighed on Colmon’s shoulders, and his alone.

# **Dublin**

## *Gormflaith*

Edysis rowed the ship to shore alongside the male warriors. It made me smile to see her happy. To be so free. Falk teased her, of course, but by the time we came into the longphort he commended her on her strength. *Better than some of the Irish men*, he said, though in truth, that was no compliment from Falk.

Edysis practically skipped off the ship and ran to speak with her friends, who were eager to hear of her adventures. Two of her father's dogs greeted her too, jumping up on her dress with their muddy paws and licking her face.

"She is a handful," Falk said. "But that is no bad thing." He turned to say something else, then his grin suddenly faded.

I turned to see what had caused such a change in his mood. Smoke. Rising in the distance. Grey as it met the clouds, but thicker, darker plumes bloomed underneath.

We rushed to the fort to find Sitric pacing up and down, his best warriors gathered around him. Máelmórda sat at the table with Donnchad, Sláine and Gilla, though no one's gaze was upon them, rather everyone stared at a travel-weary Leif who stood by one of the firepits.

"Tell everyone what Sechnall has done," Sitric commanded his nephew, his voice so deep it seemed more a growl than speech.

Leif, face solemn, rubbed his tongue along his teeth. "King Sechnall has burned our land to the north and his army is raiding the land west of our walls as we speak, burning our people's crops and stealing their cattle."

Sitric snarled. "The old man seeks the glory he was too frightened to find at Glenmama."

Falk nodded and his gnarled fingers reached for his axe. "Let's ride out to meet him. Show him what happens to those who are weak." Some men in the hall cheered at this, for all had seen the smoke rising over the walls. Soon the wind would blow it over the city, and we'd have to breathe in the stale ash that was once our food.

Gilla stood, his chair scraping against the floor, and he banged his fist on the table. "Who fights with him? Are you certain he has come alone? This could be a trap."

"Why does that matter? If he has one hundred men or one thousand, he still insults us." Sitric punched his chest. "Warriors of Dublin. Let us go out and meet the king who burns our land and thinks he can get away with it. Anyone who is too afraid can stay here with the women and children." He glanced at Máelmórda. "Are you and your men coming?"

"We are with you, nephew." Máelmórda nudged Donnchad, who ran off to call the men of Leinster to the stables.

"Gilla?" Sitric snapped. At first, I thought he was going to humiliate Gilla by forcing him to stay behind, but then I saw the flash of fear in Sitric's eyes when Amlaíb ran by the table. "You ride beside me."

Gilla nodded, hiding any reluctance he might have felt, and followed the rest of the men to gather their weapons and horses.

"Can I come, Father?" Amlaíb asked.

"No, son, another time." Sitric patted his son on the cheek, but Amlaíb jolted back, for he was big and strong now for thirteen and did not like to be petted so, especially when he did not receive the response he had wanted.

"There will be no other time," Sláine said. "Amlaíb is not to fight against my father."

"He's my son. When I say he is ready, he will come." Sitric marched out of the hall, barging through the fort doors. Sláine had the good sense not to argue and watched in silence as her husband made his way to the stables. Amlaíb scowled, though after a few moments of reflection, he ran after his father.

Ulf walked out of the hall last. Orlaith reached out to hold his hand as he passed by, mumbling a blessing and making the sign of the cross.

"Enough, woman," Ulf hissed, wrenching his hand free as soon as Orlaith had finished her prayer.

"You see, Sláine," I said. "Some of the Irish women who marry their husbands remember their wedding vows. You do your husband wrong by

siding with your father over him.”

“I do my best to keep the peace for the Viking people as well as the Irish. No good will come of this war, but I think you know that.” She stormed off, leaving me standing beside Orlaith and Freya on the fort steps. The other women and children, including Donnchad and Amlaíb, had congregated by the gates, but I had no interest in muddying my dress to stand beside them.

Freya stared after her husband, waving at him as he mounted his horse. He waved back and blew her a kiss before he rode away. How he reminded me of Harald at that moment. He used to do the same to Frigg before he rode out.

“You are a lucky woman, Freya,” I said.

“The gods have blessed me with the best husband, yes,” she said, though I couldn’t help but detect the sorrow that tinged her voice. She noticed my stare and gave me a sad smile. “But they don’t bless us with children.” She shook her head before I could speak. “It is my burden. There is no need for pity.” With a burst of energy, she took Orlaith’s hand in hers and walked with her out of the fort, steadying Orlaith’s limp with her strength. “Let’s go, Orlaith. I will help you with your weaving today. It will help keep our minds off the fighting.”

I watched the two of them go, arms wrapped around each other, Orlaith’s head resting on Freya’s shoulder. Then I turned to watch the gate closing behind the warriors who rode out to defend their land.

\*

Only a few hours later, the horns sounded out to signal that the warriors were returning to the city.

My heart pounded as it always did when my son was at war. I couldn’t help it, and this time, there was more on the line than a simple skirmish. Had Sitric defeated Sechnall, or merely given him chase? Had Brian fought alongside his old enemy?

I sat in the feasting hall, sitting beside a pale and silent Sláine, who hugged her children over and over. Even Edysis didn’t speak. The three of us sat in our close-quartered solitude, waiting for the men to arrive and tell us what had happened.

Sitric entered the fort first, followed by Gilla and Leif, all of them covered in blood and mud and gore.

“Well?” I asked.

“We won,” Sitric said, though there was no joy in his voice.

“Did Sechnall’s men retreat?”

“Not at first.” Sitric began to pull his blood-soaked armour from his chest. It was Sláine’s duty to help him remove the armour in the feasting hall, but she did not move. After a few moments, Edysis ran forward to help her father.

“We killed a great many. Including Sechnall’s son, Congalach,” Sitric said, once Edysis had pulled his chain-mail shirt away.

Sláine lowered her head. There was no going back now, even she had to see this. Sechnall would go straight to Brian, and the argument would escalate. Sechnall’s last boy, last heir, was gone. The blood price for his death was high, and Brian would have no choice now but to avenge his death or else demand a fine that Sitric would be too proud to pay.

“They raided your land, Sitric. It was your right to kill them,” I said, keeping my voice strong.

Sitric nodded, though said nothing more. His blood was up, and he was unreasonable when this was the case. The evening could be one of celebration, or one of quiet trepidation, depending on which mood of his won out.

It was Leif who broke the silence. He took a cup of ale and roared. “For Dublin!”

The men who had followed them into the fort joined in the cheer, and more followed. “For Dublin. For Odin. For Thor. For the gods.”

Sitric smiled at them all, grinning that false smile of his, then walked to his bedroom, leaving the revelry of others to conceal his true feelings. *The war, the true war, had started.* Which meant it was time for the next phase of my plan to commence.

I walked to my brother as he entered the fort. He too was covered in blood, but unlike previous battles, he did not show any sign of fear or trauma. Instead, he smiled. It was as well, because the next stage of my plan was about to begin.

“Máelmórda.” I threw my arms around him. “It is time for us to visit Olaf.”

“Do I have no time to feast and clean myself?” He glanced over at the vases of wine the serving girls brought in, though his eyes rested on one of the girls rather than the goods she carried.

“You can wash, yes, but there is no time for that.” I tilted my head toward the woman he’d been watching. “Later. Come. And bring Donnchad with you.”

\*

Máelmórda, Donnchad and I walked into Christ Church together and asked to see Father Benedict. It didn’t take long for Olaf to appear, head bowed under his heavy hood. We spoke of the weather and church until we made our way outside and the other priests fell out of sight.

“Where are our guests?” I asked.

“The church has given me a small house while I contemplate on whether I wish to join them. It is small, built beside the west wall.”

“Do the other priests know they are there?”

Olaf smirked. “Come. I’ll show you.”

We entered his house, only to find it empty save for a wooden bed, chair and old floor covering. His smirk only grew at our reactions, and he continued to walk to the far end of the house. He bent down and lifted the worn woollen rug and threw it into Máelmórda’s hands. His knuckles rapped the planks and a hollow sound echoed around the room. *Ah, a trapdoor.*

“The soil here is damp, but when they built the church, they decided to build a stone cellar to keep the priest’s wine cold. The bishop didn’t approve, and it was sealed shut. I reopened it.” Olaf climbed down the ladder into the storeroom. We had to crouch as we walked inside, the head height kept low due to the dampness of the soil. Even with the stone walls, pillars and wooden beams, everything felt moist. Five barrels of old wine were in the corner, but there was also a table with ink and spare pieces of parchment littered across it. Tomas and Gobnat sat at the table. Tomas was chained to the wall and writing on a scroll, his fingers covered in black ink. Gobnat, however, was free to move about and was cleaning chain-mail armour with dedicated vigour.

“Have they tried to escape?” I whispered, pointing at Gobnat and her lack of restraints.

“No. The reason why is what I wanted to talk to you about. The bag Tomas had with him – it had many potions inside. Not just sleeping draughts. Come and see for yourself.”

Tomas stared at us as we came closer, skin pale and clammy, but Gobnat smiled as she rubbed the dirt from the chain-mail shirt with her cloth.

Olaf nodded his head at the table where Tomas’ bag rested. He put his hand into the leather bag and pulled out six vials, all different colours. Tomas frowned as Olaf’s hands touched the glass, like it pained him to watch another man hold something he once possessed.

“As you know, the blue vial put them into a sleep, but we ran out of that not long after we arrived in Dublin. When Tomas awoke, I asked him about the other vials. He wouldn’t tell me at first, but I started to experiment and discovered that the black one, beside the ink, is the potion of truthfulness.”

Tomas set down the quill he was writing with and gave Olaf a resigned frown.

“I tried it on one of the priests. This one had been accused of stealing, though he denied it and swore on the Bible. When I gave him a drop of this potion, I quickly realised he could only speak the truth. He told me everything, from how he did it, to how much he took, and the names of others who had helped him.”

I fingered the other glass vials. One was violet, one white, one yellow, another a dark red with flecks of emerald swirling within.

“After that, finding out what the other potions did was easy, wasn’t it, Tomas?”

Tomas lowered his face, giving the most imperceptible of nods.

“What does this one do?” Donnchad asked, holding the red vial out.

“That is the potion of death,” Olaf answered. “To drink a drop is deadly. The white is the antidote.”

“The yellow?”

Olaf smirked and his eyes focused once more on Gobnat. “It makes you forget.”

Interesting. This was why Gobnat was free to walk about. She had no memory. She didn’t remember that she hated us, or that she wanted to escape. She didn’t even remember Tomas.

The witch continued to polish the armour with such diligence, only pausing once she noticed I watched her. She returned my smile. “May I help you?” She glanced at Olaf to see if she had said the right thing. How sweet.

“Gormflaith, meet Gobnat,” Olaf said, taking Gobnat’s hand in his. “Poor Gobnat hit her head and cannot remember anything. I’ve asked her to live with me until her memories are restored to her. I’m sure any day now, they will come back. God is good.”

Gobnat gave Olaf a look of deep gratitude, then turned her attention to me. “Did I know you before?” she asked. “I am sorry if I did and cannot remember you.”

“We knew each other a little, but do not think on it,” I said, taking the cloth from her hand. “Perhaps you could fetch me some warm milk?”

“Yes.” She smiled. “I will heat some over the fire for you.”

Without hesitation, she climbed the ladder and lit the firepit.

I smiled at Olaf. “It is better than iron and rope, to be sure. How long does it last?”

“The truth potion wears off by the end of the day, but I’m not sure about the memory one.”

“What does this do?” Máelmórda pursed his lips and picked out another vial, this one the horrible shade of violet.

“That one is love. It must be given by the person who wishes to receive the love of the recipient.”

I picked up the black vial. Olaf had done well to discover what he had, but I had no more time to waste being patient. Not when there was so much to do.

“Tomas, you will drink a drop of this for me.”

Olaf took out his knife and Tomas reluctantly opened his mouth.

I held out the yellow vial. “Is the loss of memory permanent?”

“One drop to forget,” Tomas answered. “Two drops to remember.”

“And it wipes out all memories?”

Tomas straightened in his chair. “It can do, but you can also whisper to the drop of potion what you want the person to forget. You can talk of years or of specific memories.”

“How long does it take for the memories to return once given the two drops?”

“Not long.”

“What about the potion of death?”



“One drop is lethal. One drop of the white potion is the antidote, but it can only reverse death if given within a day.”

Next, I held up the black. The potion of truth. “How long does this last?”

“The potion of truth wears out once the sun sets. The love potion remains forever,” he said, pointing at the violet vial before I had the chance to lift it, “but can be broken sometimes.”

“How?” Máelmórda tapped the glass with his hand, watching the purple liquid within swirl.

“Death of the person who is the object of their ardour. Or if the drinker sees someone they truly love, the potion will no longer work.” He sighed. “The heart remembers the truer love, you see, and realises the new love is false. There is also an antidote, but I do not know how to brew it and the last of our stock in the fortress has been used up.”

“Did you ever use it?” I asked.

He nodded, shame filling his expression.

“Often?”

“Yes. Many times.”

“Why?”

“There was a woman,” he answered. “She loved me very much. And then we had a daughter who she loved more than me. The potions never worked for long then. Once she returned to her daughter, her greater love would break the strength of the potion, and the next day, I’d have to give her another dose.”

Máelmórda snorted. “So many women in this world, it is pointless to waste so much energy on one.”

“Excuse my brother,” I said. “He has never loved anyone more than himself.”

My words did not amuse Tomas, whose expression had moved from resignation to one of pained regret. What woman had thrown away such devotion? It seemed strange to me, especially when they had a child together. “What was your woman’s name?”

“Her name is... Fódla.”

Máelmórda’s eyes flashed. “The woman who lives in Killaloe? The spy?” Tomas nodded.

“Ah.” I thumbed the red potion. “She’s back there. Did you know?” I eyed Tomas. “Sniffing around Murchad again.”

“She would never stoop so low.”

Oh, how wrong he was. Not many women could resist the famous Murchad.

“Have you used the potion on the witch over there?” I glanced at Gobnat, who I could see through the trapdoor, heating milk in a pan over the fire.

“No.”

“No?” I grinned. “So, it is true love for her.”

“I believe so.”

“But you don’t love her back? How sad.”

Leaving him to his writing, I climbed onto the first step. “Is the milk ready, Gobnat? Why don’t you bring a cup for both of us, and we can talk.”

Gobnat smiled as she stood over the trapdoor, the cups of warm milk in hand. “Will you tell me how we know each other? How long ago did we last speak?”

“Not well, I’m afraid, and we last spoke a few weeks ago.” I held out my hands to take the cups from her so she could climb down the ladder. While her back was turned, I picked up three of the vials and poured four drops into the milk. Máelmórda raised his eyebrows once he saw the colours I had used but did not interrupt.

Gobnat sat on the stool, still smiling as I handed over her cup. I drank from mine and watched as she drank hers.

Reaching out, I used my magic to draw up the roots from underneath the house. Thin and spindly they were, more like thread than rope, and they crawled along the ground, winding their way around her feet.

“What’s happening?” she said, standing, then tripping over. “Get it away from me!” Her fingers tried to rip the roots, tear at them, but it was no good. They continued to wind around her until they held her firm.

“I don’t understand,” she cried, eyes shut tight. “I am going mad. I know it.”

I let her scream and cry, waiting for the first potion to work. Indeed, as Tomas said, it was not long before the crying and wriggling ceased. When I next lifted my head to meet her gaze, this time her eyes burned with hatred.

“Gobnat, you have returned to us.” I grinned. “Uh, uh, don’t be trying to use your magic to push the roots away. I’ll set you on fire before you get very far.”

This didn’t stop her. I could feel her magic working against mine, testing for a weak spot, perhaps searching for a way to pull herself underneath the soil and escape.

I pointed over at the far end of the room, where Tomas sat, chained to the wall. "Or perhaps I'll set him on fire."

That stopped her. Oh, how predicable women were. Sacrificing themselves to save men not worthy of them.

Setting a chair in front of Gobnat, I sat down so that our faces were level. "I have given you Tomas' potions. Two drops of the yellow to return your memories. I also gave you a drop of black, so you cannot lie."

"Why? What do you want to know?"

"First, let me tell you my truth. There will be a huge battle in Ireland in the spring. My son, Sitric, will win and be High King. For a time, that is. He is mortal, and one day, not too far away, he will die. Then my brother Máelmórda will become High King, and after him, another Fomorian."

She hissed and turned her head away.

"You don't think this is for the best?" I edged my chair even closer. "Your powers are weakening. It is the absence of us, of our blood mixed with yours, that has caused this. Tomas agrees."

She shook her head, but the ferocity with which she did so lessened this time. She searched the room, her eyes finding Tomas. He did not react.

"Do you agree, Tomas?" Her voice was quiet.

"Oh, he agrees, he just doesn't want to admit it. And as well you know, he is distracted by someone else. He thinks of her when he should be thinking of the future."

Gobnat's mouth parted a fraction.

"Did you know that Fódla lives in Killaloe again? Her and that nephew of hers. Broccan."

Gobnat kept quiet.

"We need to kill her. She will fight for the mortals once this war starts, for she has used her gift on Murchad already." I turned to Tomas as I spoke these words, for I knew they would hurt him the most. "That night on Dalkey Island when he was sick. My brother poisoned him. He would be dead if not for her."

"She healed him?" Tomas' eyes widened, hurt seeping into his every feature.

I nodded and turned my attention back to Gobnat. "That is why I need you to kill her. I cannot leave Dublin now, and there is no one else to ask. You must do it for Tomas and for your own people."

Gobnat turned her head away from mine. "No. I can't kill her."

Frowning, I walked over to Tomas. “Perhaps Gobnat does not love you, after all? Is this your curse? To be abandoned by all.” I picked up my cloak and set it over his head. “But I will put this on you just in case.”

“What are you doing?” Tomas asked, which earned him a thump over the head from Olaf.

Quickly, I moved back to Gobnat. Waiting patiently, I watched her face move from anger to... desolation. She blinked, then slowly moved her head to stare at me, her cheeks flushed. “I am sorry,” she finally whispered. “I am sorry, I said no. Please forgive me.”

I held out my hand, and the roots slithered back into the ground. “I am disappointed that you will not help me. I am not sure I can forgive you.”

“But I will help you,” she replied, kissing my hand. “I don’t know why I said I wouldn’t help you before.” She stared around the room. “If Fódla is a danger to you, of course I will kill her. Anything to keep you safe.”

Máelmórda grinned as he listened to her rising panic. Donnchad stared in confusion until Máelmórda tapped the violet vial.

“Good,” I answered Gobnat. “Fódla and Broccan are my enemies. While they are alive, you are right, my life is at risk.” I ran my fingers down her hair and settled a curl on her collarbone. “Once you have done this for me, I will know I can trust you.”

“That is all I want,” she said, almost crying. “I love you more than life itself. I will not let you down.”

“Take my cloak. The winter winds are starting to blow in now and it is cold. Take my brother’s knife, too.”

“I could transform,” she said, eyes brightening. “I will be able to travel much faster than by foot.”

“No. By foot is best. It is too cold for you to fight with no clothes on your body. And remember, you must wait for Murchad to be absent before you attack Fódla. Once she is dead, her nephew will mourn her and carry her body to the fortress. That is when you should kill him.”

She nodded and took both my cloak and Máelmórda’s knife with revered gratitude, then immediately left the house.

Máelmórda, Donnchad and I watched as she ran toward the Dublin gate.

“Are you sure about this?” Máelmórda asked.

“It’s time to act, brother. The war between the mortals is about to start. We need to focus on the Descendants now.”

“You think she can kill Fódla and Broccan? He is a warrior. Strong.”

I shrugged. “If she kills them, it is two less Descendants to worry about. If they kill her, it will be no loss to us.”

Despite my brother’s misgivings, a sense of confidence built inside me. Gobnat was strong – I had felt it. The image of Fódla and Broccan lying dead on the grass in Killaloe filled me with happiness. The Descendants, our true enemies, were about to feel our wrath.

# **Killaloe**

## *Fódla*

I spotted Lucrecia leaving her ráth, water bucket in hand as she walked toward the river. She usually began cooking her dinner at this time of day, and I'd been waiting to find her on her own for some time.

"Lucrecia!" I walked over to her.

"Yes, Finsha," she said, smiling and linking her arm into mine. "How may I help you?"

"I wanted to tell you something."

"Oh?" She glanced at my stomach, already bigger than the last time we spoke, though I'd taken pains to hide it by adding fabric to my skirt. "Are you well?"

"I am well. In fact, I'm married."

Her face froze with shock, her eyes moving between my stomach and face. "What... I mean, when...?"

"Murchad and I married each other last week. King Brian, Tadc, Tairdelbach and Bróg were there to witness it."

"I cannot believe it," she said, then a huge smile broke through. "I mean, of course I can. You are so beautiful and kind. I just never thought Murchad would marry again. And I never thought King Brian would allow it with... but it is good that Murchad has found happiness again." She threw her arms around me. "I'm happy for you both."

"It's to be a secret though," I said, "Just for a while longer."

"A secret?" she said, her smile vanishing. "I see. You are good enough to marry, but not good enough to show?"

"It's not like that," I said. "I wanted it this way. I don't want them to lose any allies because of our marriage while relationships with Dublin and Leinster are so fraught."

Lucrecia nodded. In the bright light, I noticed the soft wrinkles around her eyes crinkling. “Do you really love him?”

Now it was I who was shocked.

“Forgive me,” she said. “You must think me rude. It’s only that I have seen many women try to catch his eye over the years. You are one of the few who has caught his gaze in return.”

“One of the few?”

“The healer I told you about. Fódla. He cared for her. I’m not sure in what way, but he loved her, I think.” She stared at me thoughtfully, then sighed. “I should not have said that. I do not mean to be unkind by speaking of a love that is long in the past. Murchad has been at war since he was a boy. I am glad he has someone to share his peaceful moments with.” She stared at my stomach and ran her hand along the fabric of my dress. “And a new baby, too. It is a joyful time for you both.”

“You are a good friend, Lucrecia.” I wished I could have said more to her, told her all the ways in which her friendship had been important to me, but instead I helped her ready the dinner, talked with Felicia when she returned home, and found joy in being in their company, hoping that they found joy in mine.

“Mama,” Felicia said, once we had finished eating. “What do you think of the spices I used in the lamb stew?”

Lucrecia smiled. “Nice. Better than Crínoc’s herbs, though don’t tell her I said so.”

Felicia giggled. “Don’t worry, I won’t.”

Lucrecia smiled and was on the verge of saying something else when the sound of people cheering and laughing outside pricked at our ears. “I will wash up. Why don’t you go and speak to your friends?”

Felicia rolled her eyes. “Now why would I want to do that when Finsha is our guest?” She turned to stare at me. “Was your mother like this? Always trying to marry you off?”

I shook my head, laughing. This change in Lucrecia was most unexpected. She had been so desperate for Maria *not* to marry that I couldn’t understand why she was so desperate for her younger daughter to find a husband. I decided to pry.

“Was Lucrecia like this with Maria?”

“No,” Felicia said, rolling her eyes. “She wept for days when she married... but she was the favourite.”

Lucrecia slapped Felicia's hand. "Do not say that. I love you both the same. I just want you to be happy and not end up a nurse for your old mama."

"You're not old, Lucrecia," I said. "Perhaps it is you who should find a new husband."

Lucrecia grinned. "Perhaps I will."

Felicia snorted. "Eocha has already asked, but Mama said no."

Lucrecia dissolved into a bout of laughter. "Hush, child. You shouldn't be telling my secrets. Besides, I'm just making sure he is as keen as he says. He needs to ask at least another five times before I will relent."

Felicia laughed at her mother. I laughed too. Oh, I had missed my old friend. Her joy for life filled my heart.

"Listen!" Felicia said, her eyes widening. "It's music!"

"Pipe players came this morning," Lucrecia said. "King Brian must have agreed for them to play tonight."

"Why didn't you say so?" Felicia grabbed her shawl. "Come. We can dance and give Eocha a chance to ask Mama to marry him again."

\*

The feasting hall was full when we walked inside. The other people who lived around the dun had heard the music too, and the king's warriors and family had already gathered inside the feasting hall for dinner, which now appeared to be over.

It didn't take long for Murchad to make his way over to me and take my hand in his.

"What are you doing?" I whispered.

"When I announce we are married, the people of Killaloe at least need to be expecting it."

I couldn't help but smile. "Then we should dance."

"You don't like to dance."

"I think I should with you."

He placed my hand in his and led me to the dancefloor. We moved with the music, spinning and weaving around each other and those already dancing. Murchad did not take his eyes from me, smiling wide as we moved to the music.



His fingers brushed against my palm every time we touched. My hand ran across his stomach. To dance was a seduction. That was why I had never enjoyed it before. To be close, to keep my gaze upon only one other person, had felt difficult before Murchad. Now I could not get enough of him.

Only when the dance stopped, did we break apart. People were watching us now. Whispering. Lucrecia and Felicia smiled, with Felicia wriggling her eyebrows in excitement. This made me laugh.

“I love that sound,” Murchad said. “It makes me truly happy.”

A blush rose into my cheeks. “I like to hear you laugh too.”

The doors to the dun slammed open, making me start, and one of the warriors who guarded the dun gate came running into the hall. “King Sechnall requests entry into your dun, King Brian!”

Everyone in the fort silenced as King Sechnall came into the hall, covered in mud and dirt, the men behind him wary but also forlorn.

*What had brought the proud King Sechnall so low?*

The King of Meath, appearing much older than the last time I saw him, his hair white and his upper back stooped, walked toward King Brian’s table.

“King Brian,” he said. “Sitric and Máelmórda of Leinster rode out of Dublin and attacked me and my kin. My boy, Congalach, my last son, is dead at Sitric’s hands.” Sechnall held back his tears, but he was utterly broken. “What will you do? You are High King. It is your duty to bring Sitric to justice.”

“Where did he attack you, Sechnall?” King Brian asked.

“Howth.”

Brian moved out from behind his table and pulled Sechnall into a hug. “I am sorry for your loss, old friend.”

Murchad bowed his head to show his respect, but his eyes narrowed as his father pulled away. “What were you doing so close to Dublin?” Murchad asked.

“Doing as your father commanded,” Sechnall snapped. “Burning Sitric’s crops, stealing his cattle. A small raid, nothing more.”

Murchad stared at his father. “You ordered a raid?”

King Brian shrugged and poured himself and Sechnall a cup of ale. “We need to make him suffer behind those high walls, make his people go hungry. That way he will be forced to speak to us.”

“That might have been true before, Father, but Svein is in England now. The sea is awash with Vikings and traders, and Sitric has many ships that he can send out to search for provisions.”

Brian stared at Murchad, stony-faced. “That will take up his ships then, no? Stop him from using them to sail inland.” Brian cleared his throat. “Murchad, you and Tairdelbach will ride out to Leinster. If Máelmórda is so content in Dublin, let’s see how well protected he has left his home. Burn his farming land, take his cattle. It won’t be so easy for him to feed his people with whatever Dublin can bring into their city. Eocha, Tadc, take men to the city walls and lay siege. Sechnall, you too. No one is to enter or leave Dublin.”

Murchad licked his lips. “Before we do this, should we not send out one more message and ask for peace?”

Brian slammed his hand against the table. “You decided to keep the peace once before, Murchad. Do you remember? You and my brother Mathgamain. Then what happened? The same Viking clan that had already killed half my family, killed Mathgamain. Has that taught you nothing, boy!”

The High King threw his cup on the ground. “Ready your horses. You ride out at first light. There will be no peace. Only war.”

**PART V**

**WINTER 1013/  
SPRING 1014**

# Dublin

## *Gormflaith*

Máelmórda and I spent the morning walking along the Dublin walls, taking time to view the fortifications that Sitric had ordered. The warriors of Munster and Meath who had laid siege to our city had already turned home, the winter air and snow too cold for them to endure. They would be back though, as soon as the ice thawed, and when they returned, it would be with fresh determination.

I was glad to see the men digging trenches all around the walls, deep holes along the perimeter for sharpened pikes, to stop an invading army charging down our men on horseback. My son had learned much during his time fighting with Brian.

“Do you see the barrels of whale oil, sister?” Máelmórda said, grinning. “If anyone tries to climb the walls, they are in for a nasty surprise.” It was the first time I’d seen my brother smile since we’d heard word that Murchad had set fire to Máelmórda’s dun. *My father’s dun.*

Because of the siege, Máelmórda had been locked inside Dublin and was thus unable to respond. Whispers of vengeance grew in his heart, vows of revenge uttered in the dark of night. For it wasn’t just my brother’s dun that Murchad had burned, but huge swathes of his land too, not to mention capturing his herd of cattle.

I returned Máelmórda’s smile, but the walls didn’t hold my interest now that Brian’s army had retreated. Instead, I let my gaze focus on the longphort. It was busy, but not as busy as I had hoped. *Where was Sigurd? Where were the Vikings from England?* Svein must have won the whole of England by now. The most recent traders to come to Dublin had reported that Ethelred and his warriors had fled to Frankia. Surely the Vikings who’d been given no lands there were growing bored, and the thrill of new lands

and wars in Ireland would call them west. And yet, that hadn't happened. Trading ships filled the longphort. Traders and whale-hunters and fishermen. No warriors.

It was only as my gaze trailed to the edge of the longphort that I noticed two new ships had dropped anchor since yesterday. One had a flag with a tiger-tooth necklace sewn into the fabric. *Brodir and Ospak were here!* My mood instantly lifted, and I elbowed Máelmórda in the side.

"Look! Brodir has come."

Máelmórda stared at the ship, his face still grim. "He's the one you want to fight for *us*?"

"Yes."

"You still think he believes you are a goddess?" Máelmórda raised an eyebrow. "The war isn't starting today or tomorrow. If he stays here any length of time at all, the people of Dublin might disabuse him of this notion. What then?"

"You don't think I can pass for a goddess?"

Máelmórda snorted. "I know nothing about the Viking religion, but some people here have known you since you were a snivelling thirteen-year-old girl. You weren't always so self-assured as you are now. Didn't you cry when Amlav brought you here for the first time?"

I had. Cried bitter tears as I viewed the muddy streets and ramshackle houses, and heard the people speak in a language I didn't understand. *You will get used to Dublin*, Amlav said when he spotted my tears, his dry skin flaking as he removed his gloves.

\*

When we entered the fort, a fine feast was underway. No expense spared, every warrior who came was treated with the best food, the best wine and the best women that Dublin could offer; and it seemed that Dublin could offer quite a bit.

Sitric smiled as I entered. Sláine scowled. Edysis waved, grinning, wearing a tiger-tooth necklace around her neck.

"Grandmother," she shouted. "Look what Ospak brought for me." She growled like a tiger and leaped off her seat.

"Edysis!" Sláine shouted, rubbing her stomach. "Behave yourself."

Edysis' laughter drowned out the reprimand as she threw herself into my arms. "Sláine wants me to give the necklace back. Please tell her to let me keep it."

"Why does she want you to give it back?"

"Because it didn't come with a marriage proposal. But I told her, I don't want one. Once this battle is over, I want to explore the world. Ospak said he would take me on their next voyage as a shieldmaiden. He has three other shieldmaidens who travel with him, so I know I will be safe. Look, there is one over there. Isn't she fierce? She's called Hilda. She says she will help train me."

I hugged her tight. "Let me speak with your father."

Edysis giggled and ran off, her attention suddenly caught by the women dancing at the far end of the room. Taking one of their hands, she began to spin around the fire.

Laughing at her endless energy, I made my way to the top table and greeted our guests. Both Brodir and Ospak seemed preoccupied by the serving girls and whores, so I sat beside Sitric.

"Where were you?" he asked. There was a smile fixed on his face, but the tone of his voice was laced with irritation.

"Máelmórda and I walked around the wall. We are impressed with the improvements."

Sitric set down his cup. "Brodir seems to think he's fighting for you?"

"He is."

"Where?"

"Nowhere to—"

"Nowhere to concern me?" He turned to face me, his cheeks tinged red, and all traces of his false smile gone. "If you are moving against King Brian, I need to know. I am in the middle of a war that *you* created. So far, only a fraction of the numbers you promised have come over from England. And so here I am, fighting your husband, and you are commanding the warriors who have come to fight... where exactly?"

"I need Brodir to help me with something. It is personal. I am sorry. I can tell you nothing more."

Sitric's eyes narrowed. "Are you his whore?" He downed his cup. "Go and be with him, then. I can't stand the sight of you."

He stormed off to his room. Sláine's quick eyes followed him, though she didn't move. Instead, her hands rubbed again at her rounded stomach, her

mouth clenching as she shifted positions. Brodir had also noticed my son leaving, and smirked as he gestured for another serving girl to sit on his knee.

“What is so funny?” I asked him, watching as the girl kissed his chest.

“You women,” he said, “complain that men rule the world, and yet it is women who work so hard to pull our strings.”

“We only speak the truth. Men sometimes don’t have the stomach to listen to it.”

Brodir waved the serving girl away and pulled his chair closer to mine.

I gestured for him to come closer again, so that my lips touched his ear. Even from the other end of the table, I heard Sláine tut in disgust.

“Are you ready to do my bidding and sail with me to destroy the Christian witches?”

Brodir set down his cup of wine and stared at the women dancing in the hall. The dark-haired one who’d just left his knee still grinned at him, her eyes hopeful. “I don’t think so. You are beautiful, Gormflaith. A goddess to many a man, but you are not a *true* goddess. You had my head turned for a moment, to be sure. Your trick was well played, however you did it. But my place is here, readying myself and my men for the battlefield.”

“Is that so,” I said, my face falling. “The gods have noted your lack of faith and your fear. They will punish you now.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Whatever they do, they cannot offer me more gold than Sitric just has. The gods want to be entertained, do they not? Instead of killing witches, I will give them a battlefield of such misery and pain that they will remember me always.”

Brodir leaned away, gave me a serious nod, then moved to sit by his brother, gesturing for the serving girl to join them both.

Seething, I finished my drink in silence. Fucking *men*. Children, all of them. Oh, yes, they had big words and promises, but they all melted quicker than snow on a sunny day when it suited them. Well, I wasn’t done yet.

Picking up my glass of wine, I stretched my back, which ached this evening, and made my way to Sitric’s room. I’d have to make him see that he owed me this. After all I had done for him, who was he to refuse me now? All he had to do was pay Brodir more gold, and Brodir would sail wherever I wanted.

I found Sitric sitting on his bed, head in hands.

“Go away, Mother.”

“Go away?” I shook my head. “You need me. You wanted this. Don’t blame me for the decisions you have made.”

“I made no decisions other than those based on the ideas you have constantly put into my head. I don’t want to fight against Brian.”

“It’s too late to turn back now.”

“I don’t have enough men. Just like at Glenmama.”

Anger grew within me at yet another display of no faith, though I kept it from my voice, knowing my ire would only agitate Sitric more. “The Vikings wintering in England will come soon, my son. Ice lingers in the wind. Frost still gathers on the grass. We have weeks yet before Brian will march to Dublin. And your walls will hold them at bay for as long as you wish.”

Sláine came into the hallway, and moved past me and into the bedroom, her rounded stomach pushing me against the doorframe. “Father will forgive you if you ask him to.”

“Oh, hush, child,” I snapped. “You know as well as me that it’s too late for that.”

“You don’t know him as I do. He loves me and I know he would forgive Sitric if I asked.”

Sitric held out his arms and took Sláine into them. “It is too late. I killed Sechnall’s son. There is no way back now.”

“Father doesn’t care about Sechnall. Not really. He will make you pay a fine, but better that than bringing war to our home.”

Sitric stilled. Stupid boy. He was considering it. Imagining the size of the fine in his head and what he could bear to part with.

“Your father wants to wipe out all the Vikings in this land,” I said. “It is only Murchad who has stayed his hand. If King Brian has his way, he will kill you, Sitric, and he will kill your sons and put one of Tadc’s children here in their place.”

“He wouldn’t,” Sláine shouted. “He wouldn’t do that.”

“Brian would kill your children in a heartbeat, and if you don’t know that, you are both fools. The only way for you both to survive is to kill Brian.”

“No,” Sláine screamed. “Stop saying these things. You are wrong.”

She bent over, her hands wrapping around her stomach.

Sitric grabbed hold of her. “What’s wrong, Sláine?”



“The baby,” she gasped. “The baby is coming.” Her fingers gripped the edge of the bed and she pushed Sitric away. “Don’t,” she sobbed. “What world am I bringing this child into? How can I live when my husband and father want to kill each other?” She let the contraction pass, then stormed out of the bedroom and into another room at the back of the fort, where two of her servants ran to help her.

Sitric glared at me. “The baby is early. It’s your fault.”

“It seems everything is my fault.”

Sitric rushed toward me, pulling me by my collar. “Get out!” he shouted and shoved me out of the room. “You fucking whore. Leave.”

“How dare you call me that!” I stormed back into the room and punched his chest. “After all I have done for you. What would you be without me? Nothing. You are still a scared little boy who has never found his courage. If you had even a drop, you’d have killed Glunairn. But you couldn’t do it. I had to.”

Sitric stared. “You killed my brother?”

“Yes. I killed him because he was about to kill you. And for years before that, I shared his bed to keep you alive. You were a boy then, but now you are a man, so do your job. Stop making me do it for you.”

“Get out of my fort.”

“What?”

“You are not welcome here.” He grabbed my wrist and dragged me into the hall. “You are banished.”

*How dare he touch me in this way.* My fire-magic built inside of me, surging to my fingertips.

He screamed as he let go of me and stared at his right hand. The skin blistered and burned red over his palm. He stared up at me, mouth open, but the words he was about to say fell away.

*I shouldn’t have done that.*

I had never lost control with him, never. He had no idea of what I really was or that I had fire-magic. *What had I done?*

“Don’t worry, I’m leaving.” I turned, running out of his fort before he could question me. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I ran down the fort steps. This was all falling apart. All going wrong. Who could I trust to help me? Without thinking, I ran toward Christ Church.

\*

“Olaf!” I ran into his house, slamming the door shut behind me. “Are you here?”

Olaf got up from his bed and rushed toward me, holding me tight. “What is it?”

My fingers rubbed against the pitted scars along his neck. Using my magic, I transformed him, then pulled back to stare at his face. Those cold eyes and dark tattoos blurred through the tears, but I found suddenly that I could breathe again.

“So many problems.” Despite my best efforts, tears pooled at the corners of my eyes and spilled over. “No warriors have come. Sitric doubts me. Now Brodir says he will not fight for me.”

Olaf wove his hands into my white hair.

“I will sail to England tomorrow. I’ll ask Sitric to make me his emissary and speak to Svein and his men. Warriors will come. I promise. As for Brodir, he has arrived too soon. The battle song calls to him now and he wants to sharpen his sword. We must remind him of the song of the gods, and the eye of Odin.”

“How do we do that?”

“Leave it to me.” Olaf kissed my lips, pulling me closer to him. His hands moved to my shoulders, and I was about to change my appearance from that of old crone to my true self, but instead of removing my dress as I expected, he moved away.

“Now off you go. I must find Donnchad and a pig or two. Then we will have to act quickly for my plan to work. You should return to the hall. Brodir needs to see you at the feasting hall for the whole evening. Do not act annoyed with him. Rather be kind.”

“Sitric told me to leave. We argued. I said—”

“Fuck Sitric. He will come running back to you soon enough.”

He kissed me one more time and guided me toward the door. “Enjoy yourself tonight, my love. Before the sun rises, you will know if my plan has worked.”

Smiling, I touched him one last time, drawing away the magic so that his face once again became the ruined one that King Svein had destroyed.

\*

That night, I did as Olaf asked. I returned to the fort and danced with Edysis. We spun around each other, drinking and laughing. Freya danced too. Even Frigg got up with us a few times. The night blurred at the edges, the wine too strong, or else too plentiful.

Sitric ignored me. The music mostly drowned out Sláine's cries, though he flinched when they rose over the din, and he spoke to no one save Falk and Leif. I had no patience for his lack of courage, nor did I have words of comfort as his wife gave birth to a new baby. He seemed to have lived in this world and not understood how it worked. Perhaps tonight would teach him that lesson.

No, instead of comforting, I danced more, laughed louder, stamped my feet on the floorboards harder.

"King Sitric!" The shout sounded out over the din of the music, and everyone stopped dancing. It was Orlaith who came in, smiling, with tears running down her cheeks. "You have a new son! Sláine is well."

Sitric stood and cheered and the whole hall erupted. A new son was a good omen for the war to come, and the men smiled at the news as much as they might have when they heard that their own sons had been born.

It was only when two of Brodir's warriors ran into the hall that the cheering stopped. Two of them were covered in blood, their hair matted to their faces.

"Gunnar, Hilda. Are we under attack?" Brodir asked, standing.

"No," the man said. "At least—"

"We do not know," the shieldmaiden interrupted. "We were sleeping on the ship and boiling blood fell from the sky. Our shields protected us from the worst of it, but others were not so lucky." She glanced nervously at Gunnar.

Gunnar lowered his head. "Snorri is dead."

Everyone in the feasting hall ran to the longphort to see for themselves what had happened. I walked among them, hearing their gasps as those at the front saw Brodir and Ospak's ships and the men who had been left to guard them, covered in blood. One man lay on the wooden planks of the longphort. The skin had peeled away, blistered, and the fabric of his woollen shirt and trousers had melted into his flesh. An acrid smoke rose from the sockets where his eyes had once been.

“The blood rain killed him,” Gunnar said. “He has no wounds on his body, just the burns where the blood rain met his skin.”

“Did you see anyone?” Ospak asked.

“No one,” Hilda replied. “It came from the sky. From the gods.”

Brodir shook his head and examined the ships. All the while I stood there watching him, ready, so that when he glanced my way, I could smile.

# **Killaloe**

## *Fódla*

The darkening sky brought the day to a close, the night quiet, though not silent, for the crows cawed and forest wolves howled. I listened for a while, rubbing the goose-pimpled flesh on my arms. It was not the wolves that put me on edge. It was only that, with Murchad away to call the kings of Connacht to his father's aid, the usual noise of the dun was absent, leaving something hollow about the night, something empty.

I'd now reached the stage where I could sleep in Murchad's house in the dun, for most who lived in Killaloe knew of our marriage now, though had sworn not to tell anyone from outside. However, tonight I came to my old ráth anyway. It felt empty in Murchad's bed without him, and King Brian did not desire my company in the feasting hall, in any case.

Walking inside the house, I closed the door behind me, lit a few candles, and reached for a ball of fabric sitting on the table. On quiet nights like this, I had taken to embroidering a shawl for the baby. It had been many years since I had made something like this, and yet I found sewing the intricate patterns enjoyable and a way to ease the worry in my mind. So far, I had embroidered a deer, the flowers of the cowslip and red clover, and the yew tree of Mag Adair that represented Murchad's family.

It made me wonder if the baby would be more like me or her father. Not that she was a stranger. I sensed things about her when I reached inward with my gift. She was feisty and boisterous. She did not listen when I told her to calm. Aoife had been content to lie still inside me, sleeping and listening to my voice. This baby kicked and punched and wriggled, already imagining what it would be like to be free.

At night, I sang to her. She liked that. Her father spoke to her, his deep voice telling her stories as he rubbed his hand over my stomach. She liked

that too and would kick where his hand touched.

Tonight, she was agitated and whirled inside my womb. She missed her father. Perhaps was wondering why he had not spoken to her since he'd left the dun this morning. She moved so much that I couldn't face the prospect of eating any dinner. Anxiety did little to improve my appetite. Even though he'd only gone to speak with allies, I couldn't help but worry about him. Broccan, Tairdelbach and the rest of the men had gone with him too, and this made me feel more alone than ever. What if Murchad did not return in time to witness the birth of his daughter?

Outside, a wolf howled, a long, low wail. Too loud to be from the forest. This set off all the dogs in the dun. They barked and snarled, the low growl of the wolfhounds making the bones inside my ear vibrate. The baby swirled again and kicked my stomach so hard that it made me lurch forward.

"Calm," I hushed, pausing to replace the breath she had knocked out of me.

I set down the shawl and moved closer to the door. As the wolf howl trailed away, the dogs stopped barking too, leaving an eerie silence. The hairs on my arms rose as I peeked through the gap between the door and the latch. There was nothing out there. No crows or owls flying overhead. Nothing. But of course, I could not see beyond the confines of the ráth wall.

Stepping back into the room, I searched for the knife I had hidden underneath the rug – the one Affraic had given me. It was *Fragarach*, yes, but I guessed it would still help ward off someone looking for trouble. I also grabbed a pot, ready to make a noise. A wolf, so close to the dun, was unusual, but not unheard of. *Had a child run outside the boundary of Killaloe and found itself under hunt from the pack?*

I slid the knife into the pocket of my apron and held the pot tightly in my right hand, then walked outside, the damp, winter air sharp against my skin, my breath misting.

Slowly, I opened the gate, and walked to the river path.

"Hello," I shouted. "Is anyone there?"

My words echoed slightly, trailing away to leave a heavy silence. One of the dogs in the dun whimpered.

A woman moved out from behind a tree. Long, blonde hair, green eyes. Beautiful.

“Hello, Gobnat.” I lowered the pot, then froze, unsure of what to say. We had been friends once, close friends. Was that why she was here, to make amends? But then my mind moved past the fog of familiarity. *She’d been with Ardál when he died. With the Fomorians.* I ran my eyes over her body. She looked dishevelled, dirty, but not hurt.

“How are you, Gobnat? Are you well?”

She sniffed, her eyes also taking me in. “Well enough.”

“Colmon is looking for you. You should return to the fortress to speak with him.”

“Why would I do that? So he can put me on trial and humiliate me?” She shook her head. “I don’t think so. I have no interest in hearing the opinions of those who are ignorant of the truth.”

“Do you know that you killed Cenn when you escaped?”

She stared at me, her eyes hard. Angry. Not like herself at all. I took another step back.

“Wait,” she said. She held out her hand and walked toward me. “I am sorry about Cenn. Do not leave me. Please. I am frightened. That is all.”

“Then speak to Colmon and the council. If you told everyone the truth, they would be lenient. No one is out for blood. I promise.”

Gobnat’s whole body shook, her eyes filling with tears, and a strange red blush tinged her neck and cheeks. A wolf howled again, low and deep. *Something wasn’t right.*

“Don’t come any closer, Gobnat. Not until you tell me where you have been.”

She stopped shaking and wiped away her tears. “I warned you to leave the fortress, but you wouldn’t listen. You pretend to be so sweet and kind when really you are selfish to the bone. You ruined everything with my first love. I won’t let you destroy my second.”

“I... I don’t understand.”

“Don’t pretend to be innocent. You are a whore, and everyone knows it. And you don’t love him, do you? You just wanted power. That’s why you got pregnant.”

*How could she know I was pregnant?* I pressed my left hand over my stomach, and once again edged back. “There is nothing wrong with falling in love, Gobnat.”

She paced forward, her cheeks flushed, fist clenched. “Our kind find it so hard to fall pregnant, and you, you conceived right away. And even when

you gave him a child, she was an abomination, and you wouldn't leave him. You kept him, torturing him with your inadequacy."

"Are you talking of... Tomas?"

"Of course I'm talking about Tomas." She glared at me. "You knew I loved him, and you went after him anyway." Her voice rose, her breathing quickening.

"I've not been with Tomas in a long time, Gobnat."

She ran her hands through her hair. "I do not care about Tomas anymore. There is another I must protect from you."

Roots from the hazel trees behind me sprung up. Using the pot to hit away the roots, I ran. More roots snapped at my heels, while the ferns and long grass kept trying to trip me. I fell just as I reached the outer wall of Lucrecia's ráth, landing on my side to shield the baby.

The long grass wrapped around both ankles and roots from under the ground began to slide along my arms and wrists.

I struggled, pushing them away. "Stop this, Gobnat," I screamed. "Leave me be."

But Gobnat would not. She walked toward me, her eyes shining.

"What has happened?" I shouted, as I ripped the roots from my right hand. "This isn't you."

"I was weak before. Now I know the truth. I love Gormflaith. I would do anything for her... to be with her. You cannot be allowed to hurt her."

My mind struggled to process what she had said. She loved Gormflaith? *The queen?* Colmon's news, Broccan's reaction to the King of Leinster... It suddenly all became clear.

*Queen Gormflaith was a Fomorian.* So was her brother. They were the ones who had killed Ardál, Yala, Íde and Clíodhna.

The flushed cheeks, the fevered passion in Gobnat's eyes, now made sense too. She'd been given a love potion. *The Fomorians must have forced Tomas to brew it.*

The roots tightened around my foot, the weight of it starting to pull me under the ground. Screaming, I used my nails to rip at the roots on my hands then kicked my legs free. But for every root I tore and ripped, another two rose to replace it.

I scrambled to stand. *Hurry. Hurry.* I had to save my baby. I had to tell Colmon who the Fomorians were, and that they had Tomas under their control. *Move, Fódla.*



As I twisted, I looked up at the sky. Even through the panic, the strangeness of the clouds hit me. They were expanding rapidly, turning grey then black within seconds.

*Was it Rónnat? Had she summoned the wind to save me?*

Gobnat followed my gaze and glanced up at the sky, tutting, her mind moving to the same conclusion as mine. “Your sister is a meddlesome fool. Once I finish with you, I’ll kill her too.”

The roots tightened around my legs, this time dragging me under the soil to my knees. The one around my hands slithered downward, moving to my legs and waist to help pull me down. As I tried to push them away, I felt something sharp underneath the fabric of my dress. *The knife!* My fingers reached for the pocket in my apron. *If I could just reach it and slice the roots.*

The sky opened.

Rain poured from the heavens. Inside me, the baby thrashed around. Her tiny hands pressed against my stomach, pushing, and stretching my skin. Hailstones crashed to the ground, smashing into the roots, crushing and ripping them, and forcing them to unwind from my legs. Gobnat stumbled back, staring in shock at the size of the hail and the blood pouring down her arm and chest from where they had struck.

I curled into a ball, using one hand to heal myself from the welts and cuts the hail left, and pressing my other hand against my stomach to feel if the baby was scared.

What I found was a swirling ball of energy, so intense that I could sense her thoughts, all of which were focused on the storm. She was afraid but fighting. Calling to the sky for more rain to come. *She was doing this. Not Rónnat.* My baby was fighting for me, for us.

Now the roots had left me, I looked for Gobnat. She stood not too far away, using her magic to draw the roots into an archway above her head to shield herself from the onslaught. With her so distracted, and the roots no longer holding me, I dragged my legs out of the soil and crawled forward.

“Rónnat,” Gobnat screamed. “Leave us.” She held out her hand to counteract the spell she thought my sister had conjured, but nothing happened.

She screamed with rage, then noticed my escape and ran after me, braving the hailstones. I tried to move as fast as I could, but the baby was moving so quickly that I couldn’t sprint without hurting her. Gobnat

grabbed me by the hair. I heard the clink of steel as she drew out her knife and she slid the blade under my chin to make me look up.

"I hate you, Fódla," she said. "Look at you. So weak. So pathetic."

She drew her hand back, readying the blade to open my neck.

As she swung down, I moved, blocking her arm, and pushed myself up.

Too late did she see the knife in my hand. *Fragarach*. Too late did she realise that I had plunged it into her chest. She gave a slow outward breath as she slumped forward, her body falling to the grass.

Blood seeped from her mouth, and her arms moved to pull out the blade, only finding that they wouldn't move as she willed.

"Heal me," she whispered, her eyes overbright and frantic. "Heal me. Please."

I stepped away. I wanted to heal her, to do as she said and give her another chance. In years past, I would have... but not this time. My daughter needed me. She was my future, and I would protect her from those who sought to hurt us.

Instead, I kneeled beside my former friend. "For what it's worth, Gobnat, I've never hated you. I hope you find the happiness in the otherworld that you could not find here."

Gobnat nodded as I said this, tears streaming down her cheeks, her shaky breaths misting out into the cold night air. "I'm sorry," she said, her eyes finding mine, the strange anger fading.

I pulled out the knife from her chest, using my gift just enough to stop her blood rushing out. With my other hand, I held *Fragarach* in front of her throat. She would tell me the truth now. All of it.

"Why did you try to kill me?"

Her breathing slowed, her pulse ebbing away. When she opened her eyes, the strange brightness had fallen away.

"The Fomorians," she whispered. "They captured us. They know."

"Know what?"

"About Fennit Island. About you and Broccan. They mean to kill us all."

"Who are they? What are their names?"

Gobnat bit her lip, held her breath, but she had no choice but to tell me. "Gormflaith. Máelmórda... and... Donnchad."

"Did Tomas brew his potions for them?"

She blinked, her eyelids growing heavy. "He brewed potions to use himself, but it doesn't matter what his plans were. The Fomorians have

them now.” She sobbed then, looking down at her blood-soaked dress. “I love her. She loves me.” The flush returned to her cheeks, and she lunged forward, her fingers reaching for my throat.

I released her, pulling away my gift, and blood poured down her chest. She fell back onto the grass and exhaled, her body turning limp.

Falling back, I pressed my hands against the baby and reached inward with my gift. “We are safe,” I whispered. “We are safe.”

Grief hit me in waves. Grief for what might have happened. Gobnat’s knife had been so close to my neck. But grief also for Gobnat and all she must have endured in Dublin.

*The Fomorians captured us. They know. About Fennit Island. About you and Broccan. They mean to kill us all.*

I had to get to the fortress to warn Colmon. To tell him who our enemies were. Shaking, I stood.

“Fódla. It is you, isn’t it?”

Lucrecia moved out from behind her ráth wall. My best friend stared at me, eyes wide, her fingers shaking as she took in the blood that covered my dress and the body of Gobnat who lay in the grass beside me. “I saw everything. She called you Fódla. You *are* Fódla. I always knew it in my heart.”

“I’m sorry.” The words came out breathless, half whisper, half sob.

She held my gaze and then opened her arms. “You don’t have to say sorry.”

“I do,” I said, limping to her, then falling into her embrace. “I left without telling you where I was going.”

“You were always so afraid. Was that because you were in danger?” She stared again at the body of Gobnat. “There are others who are trying to kill you?”

I nodded.

“Will more come?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. It is Gormflaith, the queen. She is a Fomorian... she has magic, like me. Her brother too. They are the ones who sent Gobnat to kill me. Donnchad is also a Fomorian. That is why he followed them, even though his father forbade it.”

Lucrecia held me tight. “I don’t understand everything you say, but if there are people trying to hurt you, you must call for help. Murchad will return if you ask him to.”

“No. He is too far away, and I have friends I must warn. They are coming for all of us.”

“Then take my horse.” Lucrecia ran into her ráth and pulled out her mare. “What will I say to Murchad when he returns?”

“Tell him I have gone to the fortress of my people. But before I go, I need your help.” I led the horse over to Gobnat and we hauled her body over the horse’s back. If I could place her body under our hawthorn tree, then the ancestors might take her to the otherworld. I owed her nothing, and yet, I could not leave her here for the wolves and crows.

Lucrecia did what I asked without argument, then pulled me into a final hug.

“Stay safe, my friend. Come back to me this time.”

I held her tight. “Trouble is coming, Lucrecia. Make sure you and Felicia stay away from it. I am so sorry. All this time I’ve wanted to say to you how much your friendship has meant to me. How much I missed you when we were apart. When I return, I will tell you everything.”

She nodded, her lips quivering. “Godspeed to you, Fódla.”

Giving her a final wave, I rode off into the night.

# Dublin

## *Gormflaith*

I looked out over the sea. Large waves crashed onto the shore, the swell between them growing. *When the waves swell, it is a good night for sailing*, Amlav had always told me, though I suspected this was a joke. The swells made young men vomit, even ones who grew up on the sea, their stomachs not hardened enough to endure the slow rise and fall. Perhaps that was why he enjoyed it so, to see the young men suffer while the old men laughed.

Finally, Máelmórda arrived. Dressed in his finest armour, he appeared to have spent all the gold Sitric had given him on himself. He looked every bit a king.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked me.

He didn’t sound like a king with words like that. But I didn’t mind. Tonight, I’d be king enough for us both.

“Yes, brother. At first light, we set sail to Fennit Island with Brodir, Ospak and their warriors. We must attack and destroy the Descendants before Brian marches to Dublin and the mortal war starts. This is it. No more plans. No more waiting.”

Máelmórda glanced behind us, raising his hand. Donnchad came running onto the beach. My youngest son, now thirteen, who I’d not spent much time with of late, looked taller suddenly, his face pulled into an expression that mirrored his uncle’s.

“You have practised your gifts?” I asked them both.

“Yes,” Máelmórda said, “but what if it isn’t enough? We should—”

“No. We are out of time, Máelmórda. You have the warrior gift. Now you must find your courage.” I turned to my son and brushed his cheek with my hand. “Are you ready, Donnchad?”

His face still downcast, he glanced at his uncle's finery, but somehow found the mettle to nod his head.

"What is it, Donnchad?"

"I don't have any armour."

"Oh, my son." I pulled him into an embrace. "You don't think I'd take you to war and not have everything ready for you?"

I took his hand, led him to the chest that I'd had the slaves bring to the beach, and gestured for him to open the lid. Just because I'd had no time to talk with him, didn't mean I'd forgotten him entirely. "Everything inside is yours."

Donnchad ran his hands over what lay inside, his eyes widening as the chain-mail vest, bull-hide chest plate and brand-new sword, shield and seax came to light.

He held the sword up, moving it and letting the first rays of the dawn sunlight catch the sharp lines of the blade. "Thank you, Mother."

"You deserve it, Donnchad. Together, we are strong, yes?"

My son nodded. My brother too. This time, they both looked more confident than before.

I smiled at such a quick change in demeanour. They say that it is women who are bought with gold and silver, but perhaps it is the men who are the magpies of our race. Judas with his silver. Midas with his gold.

"Go, then," I said. "Ask one of the slaves to help you ready yourself. Máelmórda, come with me."

"Where do we go?" Máelmórda asked.

"To get Tomas. How did he look this morning when you gave him his breakfast?"

"He knows we are up to something. He doesn't look too happy about it."

"Then let's try to make him a little happier."

\*

Quickly, we made our way toward Olaf's house. I hated this little hovel now that my lover was gone, but the mission I'd given him to find more men was necessary. He knew Wessex well, knew all Svein's warriors and jarls. He knew those who would fight for a price and those who would want land. I tried not to worry about him, but still, I wished he was here with me.

The sun was rising now, and the sound of Brodir and Ospak's men readying their ships spread with the wind. Máelmórda followed me but said nothing as we entered the house and shut the door on their noise. He was nervous and, unlike me, could not push it away.

Tomas sat on the chair by the table, staring. His eyes glanced at Máelmórda's finery and then to me, trying to guess what was happening while chewing the skin around his fingernails.

"Ready, Tomas?" I asked.

"Ready for what?"

Despite the fact he had chains around his ankles, he was still trying to control the flow of our conversation. How amusing. "What is it that you think we are going to do?" I asked.

"You mean to attack the fortress and kill the Descendants." His fingers ran to his mouth, shocked at the words he had spoken.

Máelmórda smirked and lifted the black vial from his leather bag. "I put this into your water this morning while you were still sleeping."

Tomas pulled against the chain holding his leg to the wall, but he knew well that it wouldn't budge, and finally, he moaned with frustration. Tears leaked from his eyes, then he shut them tight as if, by doing so, he could make us disappear.

"What is the easiest way to get into the fortress without being seen?" I asked.

Tomas held his tongue, concentrating on keeping silent. Máelmórda came over, knife out, but I held him back. There was no need for violence. Tomas would not be able to keep silent for long.

"There is a cove on the west side of the island. A tunnel runs from a cave there to a small room underneath the high tower." He gritted his teeth, but still his words fell out of him. "There is a path that leads from the high tower to the fort. The back door of the gathering hall is there."

He pressed his hands over his mouth, his head shaking. Drops of blood wetted his lips. The fool had tried to bite his tongue to stop himself from spilling his secrets. "Don't ask me any more. Please."

"We need you to come with us."

"Why? Do you find pleasure in the thought of making me watch my own people die?"

"Will that truly make you suffer?" I shrugged. "I told you before I wanted us to work together. You said before that you weren't the only

Descendant to believe that mortals should no longer rule Ireland. Is that right?"

"Some of the Descendants believe that, yes... or at least they did before I fled."

"Well, if you come with us, I will let you save some of *these* Descendants. Máelmórda and Donnchad need wives to breed with. So do you. The mixing of our bloodlines will strengthen our magic, I'm sure of it."

"You will let me save my friends?"

"Some. See, we are not heartless. Together, we will unite our tribes against the mortals and put aside the hatred of each other that has marred our past."

Tomas stared at me, tears still falling down his cheeks.

"Or you can stay here, and we will kill them all, burn every stone, every treasure, every piece of parchment."

"No, no." He lifted his hands. "Release me. I will come. I will show you those who will come to your side. Please."

\*

The three of us made our way to the longphort. Brodir stood on his ship, his men already in their places, ready to row. Donnchad was there too, now dressed in his new armour, though he flashed me a warning glance as I approached.

I followed the line of his gaze, understanding at once the message he had wanted to convey. "Where is Ospak's ship?" I asked Brodir. "He does not know where to go."

"He did not want to come with us," Brodir said. "He thought the blood rain was a warning from the Christ God and has taken his men away to fight for Brian."

This was bad news for Sitric, but right now, it didn't matter. I had to remain focused on the job at hand. One hundred of Brodir's men were here. That would have to be enough. There was no turning back.

"And what do *you* think, Brodir? Do you still doubt me?"

Brodir pushed a small, green leaf into his mouth and chewed. "It is not doubt that irks me. It is reality. The old gods are dying, I know this. The



power of Valhalla is fading, but I will do this one last thing for Odin and kill these Christian witches you speak of.”

“Good.” Still smiling as if all was well, I sat on one of the benches and waited for us to set sail. I did not look back to the Dublin shore once. Sitric would be watching, I knew that, and I did not want him to see the fear in my eyes as we left. I did not want to see the hate in his.

\*

It didn’t take long to reach our destination. The current and wind were with us, and two days later, we approached the peninsula that hid Fennit Island from view. The journey was not without its trials. The ship was cramped. My stomach ached, so did my back; but I didn’t care. We were here.

“I’ll drop anchor for the night,” Brodir said to me. “It is too dark to navigate inland.”

“No. Sail now. Darkness is our friend. The Christian witches will not be able to see our approach.”

Brodir clicked his tongue, then nodded, telling his men to take down the sail and bring out the oars.

Glad he had agreed, I made my way to the front of the ship and watched as the island came into view. This was the perfect time to attack. It was dark and the tide was in, flooding over the sandbank bridge Tomas had told us about. The strong currents meant that the Descendants were now trapped on the island.

The island itself looked a small and inconspicuous piece of land. Sharp rocks pierced the sea and shoreline, and the shape of a ruined church was the only building visible from the ship. The spell that the witches had cast was quite something, and I watched, waiting to see if it lifted to reveal what truly lay there as we sailed closer to land.

Máelmórda had no such curiosity and I left him to ask Tomas to show Brodir the location of the cove he had told us about. At knifepoint, Máelmórda had forced Tomas to drink another drop of the potion of truthfulness, and so the answers fell from Tomas’ lips even as bitter tears fell down his cheeks. A better man might have let Máelmórda kill him by now, or perhaps thrown himself from the ship to drown, forsaking his own life for those of his friends and kin. Self-preservation was a wondrous thing,

but I'd have to keep my eye on him, lest he decide to act the hero at the final moment.

Brodir steered the ship and dropped anchor as close as possible to the beach, leaving us to jump overboard and wade toward land.

Máelmórda pushed Tomas along, the druid dragging his feet. "Where is the tunnel?" my brother hissed in his ear.

"There. There it is."

Brodir and his men followed us in silence, only stopping to light their torches once we reached the cover of the cove. Brodir himself led us into the tunnel, the air inside stagnant and damp.

I stood in front of Tomas, so he was forced to walk between me and my brother who held his shirt tight.

"Tell me about the fortress, Tomas." I asked. "Where will everyone be?"

"At this time of night, the gathering hall."

"How many?"

"I do not know."

"Who must we fear the most?"

"Colmon. He is a warrior. Deadly with a blade and spear. Báine too. She is a skilled witch, as are many of her sisters and nieces."

"What magic protects the gathering hall? Will anyone know what I am if I walk inside?"

"No. There is little in the way of magic surrounding the hall, as it is meant to be a shared space for the bearers of all gifts. The only magic is that once the front doors are shut, they cannot be opened from outside, and no sound can travel out. It was to stop the giftless children from eavesdropping or trying to sneak into our meetings."

I absorbed this information as we walked through the cave, though I had to stop my line of questioning as the ceiling became lower and we had to crawl to squeeze through.

Brodir, just ahead of me, came to a stop. "The tunnel has ended," he grunted as he shifted to lie in a position that was somewhat comfortable. Holding up his torch, he felt for the way out, his fingers moving over the sharp rocks ahead of him.

"Feel for the wood. It is a trapdoor," Tomas said. "Push."

Brodir punched upward, but the wood did not move. Only a faint rattling proof that it had felt any impact at all.

"It's been sealed shut with iron chains," Brodir hissed.

Máelmórda crawled past me and over to Brodir. Using his gift, he punched the trapdoor too, his strength breaking through both wood and iron, and he climbed up into the room ahead of Brodir. Donnchad crawled up beside me, his eyes curious, and together we followed.

The underground room the tunnel had led us to was small, not even big enough for all of Brodir's men to stand inside, and it stank of mould and seaweed.

Tomas pointed upward. "There is another trapdoor above us. It takes us to the ground level of the high tower. You will be able to see the fortress from there."

Brodir pulled the rope hanging down from the ceiling, and a wooden staircase slowly unfolded. The first of us through the tunnel climbed upward into a clean space, empty aside from the end of a long rope ladder that hung down from the room at the top, at least one hundred feet above. Three crows flew down from the roof and watched Tomas as he hauled himself out of the lower room.

"What do you keep up there?" I asked him.

"Our books. Our histories."

Brodir snorted at this revelation. "High towers should be used for gold and silver. Paper and ink are no use to anyone."

He pushed past Tomas and motioned to two of his warriors to scout out the land around us. I peered out the door after them, watching as they blended into the shadows. I had intended to keep an eye on them, but very quickly my attention wandered. No longer did a ruin lie before us, but rather a building of breathtaking and ethereal beauty. Stone sculpted into delicate curves and lines. Engravings of the Tuatha Dé Danann stood along the roof. Manannán, the Dagda, Lugh, Brigit. The stone itself was white and clean, no mark of dirt or sand or salt upon it. Tomas came to my side. He did not look at the fortress, rather continued to look upward at the top room of the high tower.

"When this is over, I will let you save your books."

His gaze lowered, perhaps thinking I did not mean this.

"But first you must help Máelmórda pick Descendant women who are suitable."

"To be wives for your family?" A hard edge entered his voice. A dash of courage building to speak to me so.

“And a woman for you, too, Tomas,” I said, still smiling. “This is your future as well.”

Máelmórda tugged at my shoulder. “Shouldn’t we go?” he asked, agitated. Frightened too.

Brodir grinned, and one of his men opened a leather pouch, passing around the contents between the men. “Soon,” was all Brodir said, chewing a shrivelled piece of white fungus between his teeth. “We are berserkers. You must be patient. Besides, the scouts are not back yet.”

It took longer than *soon*, and it took all of Máelmórda’s patience to keep quiet, but eventually the scouts returned.

“There are guards everywhere,” the first warrior said. “We cannot get to the entrance of the fort from here without being seen.”

The other warrior nodded his agreement. “There are twenty guards along the right side of the fort. I spied more guarding the stables.”

It was as I expected. This was it, then. *I had to make my move.*

“I have a plan.” Walking to Máelmórda, I held out my arm. “Cut me with your blade, brother. Tear my dress too. Donnchad, rub dirt from the walls onto the fabric.”

They did as I commanded, and as Máelmórda carefully sliced open my arm, I smeared blood all down my chest and dress, even rubbing some into my hair.

“What are you doing?” Máelmórda whispered in my ear.

I pulled him closer. “When you see my signal, tell Brodir to split his men into two groups. One should run around the left side of the fort, the other the right. Both sides should make for the front steps of the fortress.”

“What about the guards?”

“There won’t be any guards.” I took a deep breath. “Wait for my signal.”

My brother pulled me closer to him. Perhaps the only sign of affection I’d ever had from him, but the truth of it suddenly hit me. This was it. Only victory or death awaited us now.

We pulled apart, giving me time to take a deep breath. “Chain Tomas in the cell below,” I whispered, “until you need him to pick the women.”

Máelmórda nodded, and without another word, I opened the door.

Leaving the high tower, I ran toward the fort and banged my hands against the back door of the gathering hall. “Let me in!” I screamed.

I heard the sound of it unlocking, opening, and quickly I used my witch-magic to transform before I walked through. My black curls turned blonde,

my golden eyes a pale green.

“Gobnat!” a voice shouted.

“It’s Gobnat,” said another, and this time the talking stopped.

I ran forward a little. “Lock the doors,” I shouted. “Lock the doors. The Fomorians are coming!”

A dark-haired man with black skin stood, his braids falling to his waist as he did so. *This was Colmon. The warrior. The one Tomas had warned me about.* His nostrils flared as he stared at me, and he lifted his sword. “We know they are coming. The wind has brought their foul stench with them.” His eyes fixed on the blood trailing down my dress. His nose twitched again. He smelled the Fomorian scent from me.

“They took Tomas and me captive,” I said, keeping my voice high-pitched and frantic. “I’ve tried so many times to escape. It was only that they were distracted that I was able to stab one and get away.” Tears streamed down my face, and I wiped them away with my threadbare sleeve, then winced as the movement caused my cut to deepen.

“You are hurt, Gobnat,” one of the Descendants said, a young woman with rosebud lips.

“Aye. They stabbed me back, but at least I got away.” I stared down at my bleeding arm, then my blood-soaked dress. “Damn it. Their blood is all over me.”

An outbreak of chatter began to flitter through the room. A few of them asked what had happened to Tomas, others asked where they had taken me, but most stared at me in stunned horror.

“How far away are they?” Colmon asked.

“Close. Almost at the sandbank bridge.”

“How many?”

“Six, and their fire-magic is strong.” I held out my hands, tears falling from my eyes once again. “Please hurry. They will be here any moment. The strongest of us must fight, or we have no hope at all.”

“Cupbearers and witches,” Colmon shouted. “To the bridge. Shae and Affraic, we need harpists and healers too.” He ran out, sword held in front of him, and half the hall emptied as those he’d called followed him.

The young woman who had smiled at me when I entered came closer, but I pushed her away and ran toward the doors, as if I was following the rest of the cupbearers and witches.

“Gobnat,” she cried after me. “You are still bleeding.” I ignored her and made it to the doors, but instead of following, I pulled them shut behind those who had left.

A tall man walked toward me. “The doors must stay open, Gobnat. I know you are frightened, but they may need to retreat.”

I nodded but continued to move the bolt into the lock until it clinked. No one could unlock it from the outside now. No one could hear us. I smiled.

The male Descendant watched me, concerned eyes flickering to the blood dripping down my arm, while the rest huddled into each other, seeking solace and words of comfort. *These were the weak ones.* The healers, the harpists, the druids. The ones who couldn’t fight because their magic was so feeble that they’d be of no use. And if they were no use to the Descendants, they were no use to me.

“Let me heal you,” the man said, coming closer.

I held out my arm and let him touch me, the wounds sealing shut until the scar faded to nothing.

Then I summoned my fire.

# **Travelling to Fennit Island**

## *Fódla*

I pushed the horse onward, using my magic to heal his muscles, which ached from the constant gallop along the western path. This was the last stretch; I could already see the sea along the horizon and so I urged the horse into a canter.

Night had fallen, but I knew the path so well that I was able to steer the horse away from old fox holes and warrens. Everything looked so still, serene even, as we climbed the hill, and then the coast came into view. Pink and red smudges seeped upward from the horizon, the sky full of stars and moonlight. The sea, tempestuous as always, crashed along the rocky shore, and played out a melody I knew all too well. Could it be that I had arrived in time to warn them?

Quickly, I set the body of Gobnat at the foot of the withered hawthorn tree, the one close to Aoife's grave. If I had arrived in time, I would ask Colmon to bring her body inside the fort, but I could not take her any further. The horse was no longer able to run, and I had become too tired to heal him. Whatever strength remained in my body, I might need it, and so I let Lucrecia's horse graze, and contented myself with walking to my old home.

It was quiet tonight, though I could not see the fortress itself, for a low sea mist hung over the island.

I did not like that I couldn't see it, but hurried on anyway, and while I walked, I reached inward with my gift. The baby had not woken since the fight with Gobnat. She lay inside me, still growing, heart beating strong. But her mind was so quiet, it unnerved me.

On another night, I might have slept in the forest and let my body recover in the hope that my improved energy would transfer to her, but tonight it

could not be so. The sooner I spoke with Colmon the better. Taking a moment to build my strength, I waded into the water. The tide had come in, submerging the bridge, but I could not wait for the waves to recede.

The icy seawater met my lower thighs as my feet found purchase on the submerged sandbank. I had to hurry, the currents were strong here and would drag me away once the tidewater rose higher. I used so much energy in doing this, that my chest ached by the time I neared the other side. I went to my knees as I reached the stepping stones on the other side, once again watching to see if anything was amiss.

The mist had thickened, but it was the silence that made me pause. I could hear nothing. No one. Not even a guard doing their rounds. *Was I too late? Had the Fomorians already come?*

“Colmon,” I shouted, forcing myself to stand and pulling down my hood, so the sound of my voice was not dampened by the fabric. “Colmon! Can you hear me? Affraic! Laeg!”

The mist blew away, and suddenly I could see a great number of witches and cupbearers had gathered around the door to the fortress. A hundred of them, more than I’d seen in one place outside of a gathering. The cupbearers at the front had balls of water in their hands, spinning and whirling, and all of them stared at me intently.

“Fódla?” someone shouted. It was Affraic. She pushed past the cupbearers, gesturing for them to lower their hands. “Did you see the Fomorians? Are they close?”

“I don’t know.” I ran the rest of the way, coming to a stop once I reached the steps. So many eyes were upon me. I looked at them all, swords in the hands of the druids and harpists, the witches’ hands twitching, ready to summon their magic. “Where is my cousin?”

“Báine, fetch Colmon. Tell him Fódla has arrived.”

I waited, twisting the fabric at the bottom of my dress, letting the water seep away from me and onto the stone.

“Fódla, let me help you.” Méabh reached out with her hands and pulled the water out from the fabric, leaving me dry and suddenly much lighter.

“Where is she?” Colmon shouted. He ran out of the stables, carrying several bags of swords and spears in his hands. He dropped them to the ground, allowing the Descendants at the back of the crowd to pick the weapons they wished to use.



“You know the Fomorians are coming?” I asked him. “Did Tomas escape?”

Colmon shook his head. “Gobnat.”

“Gobnat? No. No. Gobnat is dead. It was she who warned me.”

Affraic’s eyes narrowed. “Gobnat arrived only a few minutes ago. She is in the hall. She told us the Fomorians were about to march along the sandbank.”

The anxious faces and readied cupbearers now made sense, only... *how could Gobnat be here? It was impossible.*

“No,” I shouted. “You must listen to me. It’s not her. I swear it. Gobnat is dead. I brought her body with me. It’s underneath the hawthorn tree, over by the giftless graveyard.”

Colmon pressed my hand against his nose.

“You can smell Gobnat’s scent on me, can’t you?”

“Yes.” Colmon frowned as he released my hand. “Whoever came into the hall, she said *their* blood was on her.” He unsheathed his sword. “Descendants, hold your position. Arm yourselves. I will not be long.” He ran toward the fort so fast I could hardly see him, yet I knew where he was headed.

He was faster than me, but still, I followed, and found him standing in the hallway, staring at the closed doors to the feasting hall. He grabbed my arm, stopping me from moving past him.

“I smell them everywhere,” he said quietly. “Tell me what happened with Gobnat?”

“She attacked me. She said she needed to kill me to save Queen Gormflaith, and that’s when I realised she had drunk a love potion. I fought her...” I stopped short of telling him about my baby and the rain. There was no time for that. “I used *Fragarach* on her as she died. The Fomorians are Gormflaith, Máelmórda and the queen’s son, Donnchad. She said they had captured them, that Tomas had brewed potions which they now possessed, and that they knew about Fennit Island. That’s why I came.”

Together we moved up the hallway toward the feasting hall. Colmon took out his shorter sword with his left hand. Frowning, his pace slowed.

“Do you think the person who came into the hall is a witch the Fomorians are using?” I asked. “Transformed to look like Gobnat?”

“Yes. I think so.” Colmon bit his lip, then glanced at my stomach. “Whoever it is, they will be dangerous. You need to hide.”

“I cannot stand by and do nothing.”

“Please, Fódla. Stay safe. The Fomorians cannot follow you into the healers’ wing. Go there for now. Do this for me.”

It was only that the baby inside me had not woken yet, that I agreed. “Stay safe, Colmon.”

I ran along the corridor, passing the courtyard to make my way into the healers’ wing. If there was to be a fight, I could at least...

*Sister.* A gust of wind blew past my ear.

“Rónnat?”

*Come to me. To the tree.*

I stopped running and moved back to the courtyard. Through the arched doorway, I stared at the hawthorn tree. It was swaying, a mighty wind blowing the leaves from side to side.

“Rónnat,” I called. “Sister, can you hear me? I need your help.”

*Sister,* the wind called. *Sister.*

“What must we do, Rónnat? The Fomorians are here.”

*Touch the roots,* the wind whispered. *Come to me.*

I pressed my hands against the roots of the tree, and they shuddered, moving apart, opening up under my knees. The thin white tips of the roots began to wrap around my legs.

“No.” I stood, pushing the roots away. “Rónnat, I cannot go and leave everyone else here.”

*Everyone will die.* Her voice returned, louder than before. *I have seen it a thousand times in a thousand different ways. No one leaves the island. It is already too late.*

“Then I must warn them. Tell them not to fight and to escape.”

*Too late, sister. Come to me. Save yourself. Save your daughter.*

The roots opened further, creating a passageway underneath the earth, big enough that I could start to crawl through.

But I couldn’t move. *How could I leave Colmon?* He had saved my life and Broccan’s, helped us with no thought of his own happiness. And what about everyone else? How could I leave any of the Descendants here to die and burn? No one deserved such a fate.

I set my hand on my stomach. The baby was still sleeping, her heartbeat steady, even though mine was pounding against my ribcage.

*But how could I remain and put my baby’s life at risk? She had saved me from Gobnat’s magic. Did I not owe it to her, to fight for her this time? To*

save her.

“What do you see, Rónnat? Tell me?”

*You are the queen of cowslip and red clover. Your daughters will defeat death and fire. You must live, Fódla. Climb under the tree. Let me save you. Let me save Isolde.*

I took out the silver pendant she had given me many years ago from the inner pocket of my cloak and rubbed my finger over the name etched into the metal. *Isolde*. I’d not looked at this since she’d given it to me. *You will know who to give it to when the time is right*, Rónnat had said. Since that day, I had never met or heard mention of anyone with that name. Until now.

*Rónnat believed that Isolde was my daughter?* How did she know my daughter’s name, and why did she speak of that prophecy, the one Affraic had told me about?

No. I stepped away. Rónnat was wrong about this. She had to be. Aoife was dead. If she could conquer death, as the prophecy said, she would still be with me.

“No, Rónnat. I cannot leave. I cannot live while everyone else dies.”

*I have seen it, sister. Over and over. The cupbearers will make a tunnel under the sea to save the Descendants from the fire, but none will make it out. It is too late.*

“But not all your visions are right, Rónnat, isn’t that what you said? That the threads are changing, and you can no longer see how they fall? There is a chance I can save them.”

*Come, sister. Come to me. Before it is too late.*

The hole in the ground deepened, and the roots wrapped around my legs to pull me under.

# **Fennit Island**

## *Colmon*

I slammed my armoured shoulder into the doors of the feasting hall, but they did not budge.

Someone had shut them from the inside.

I took a step back, thinking on what to do. Tomas had ordered the magic on the doors to be strengthened to prevent those he deemed as unworthy from attending our meetings. It would be impossible to open them now from the outside, nor could I hear what was happening inside. That, however, didn't stop *them* from being able to hear *me*.

"Shae! It's Colmon. Let me in!" I banged the door with my fist.

Quickly, I snapped my arm back. The door was scalding. I looked at my hand, the skin burned and blistered.

*The gathering hall was on fire.*

My throat tightened. It was Fomorian fire, it had to be to burn so hot in so little time. But what of the Descendants who had stayed behind, thinking the hall to be safer than outside? I had to get them out.

I ran along the corridor toward the front doors, my mind trying to understand how this had happened. *Fire. Fomorians. How many? How had they found us?*

"Báine!" I shouted as I reached the front steps. "I need you and your strongest witches. Méabh! I need you too. Come."

Affraic and her two daughters, Báine and Étaín, turned, running toward me when they saw the look on my face. Méabh followed with her gift-brother, Cillian.

"What is it?" Affraic asked.

"The doors are shut. When I touched them with my bare hands, they burned my skin." I held up my hand. "Fomorians are inside. They must be.

Báine and Étaín, you need to undo the spell that seals the door shut.”

Báine and Étaín ran with me to the great hall and held out their hands, unweaving the spells that held the door in place. I could only hope that the imposter had not thought to make her own spells to prevent such a move. *But who could this person be?* It had to be a witch to transform and take on Gobnat’s appearance. But all our witches were here, weren’t they?

“There,” Báine said, beads of sweat on her head. “I’ve set the spell aside.”

I pulled in my gift, siphoning more strength to my hands and chest. “Stand back, Affraic. You too, Báine. And Méabh, if there are Fomorians inside, call more cupbearers and witches to our aid.”

The witches took a step back while I charged once more toward the doors and pushed them open. Cillian ran in behind me, drawing on his gift to spin a ball of water between his hands.

Neither of us got very far. The whole hall was ablaze, every inch burning. Smoke billowed out, filling the corridor, the stench and the fumes making our eyes and noses run. Cillian cast his water, but it made not a bit of difference. The two of us fell back, gasping for breath at the doors. Every expression that greeted us conveyed the same realisation that no one wanted to say aloud. *Everyone who was in the hall when the fire started was dead.*

“Neasa,” Étaín shouted, voice thick. “Neasa!” She charged forward, running into the fire.

Affraic and Báine pulled her back, though she tried to push past them. “My daughter! She’s in there. I need to get her out.” Her legs buckled underneath her, sobbing as the flames roared high to the ceiling, the gold-spun tapestries falling to the floor and the blaze so bright it moved from red and orange to white.

Tears shone in my own eyes as Étaín screamed for her only child, but I could not afford to give sway to such emotion. I had to act. “Méabh and Cillian, use your water-magic to surround me. Let me run inside the hall to see if anyone has survived.”

Méabh had slumped to her knees, grief-stricken as she stared at the fire, but she found a way to pull herself together. Pushing her hands together, she summoned her gift. Water spun between her hands and Cillian did the same, casting their water over my body so it swirled around me, sealing clean air inside.

“Colmon! We need you!” At the other end of the corridor, Laeg ran in through the front doors. “They are nearly here!”

He ran toward me, slowing as he noticed the smoke billowing out from the hall. “Ríona turned into a crow,” he said, stuttering as he tried to keep focus. “She says there are warriors circling the fort. At least one hundred. Half come from the left. Half from the right. What do we do?”

I tried to use my gift of smell, of sound. But through the hiss of the fire, the burning tapestries, and wooden benches, I could sense nothing else. Danger was everywhere.

*It was time to move.*

The water still circling around me, I sprinted inside the burning hall. Using my speed, I ran around the room, forcing my eyes to stay open, despite the misery before me. So many of my friends lay dead on the ground, skin burned away, their bodies covered with soot and ash. I slowed for a moment and listened. I could hear something. Someone coughing. I ran toward the sound. Two bodies lay under the top table, the thicker wood somehow resistant to the flames but not the smoke.

I hauled the first body up. It was Shae. Underneath him was another Descendant. Gisela, his niece. Both were still breathing but unconscious. I flung them both over my shoulders, making sure the water surrounded them as well as me, and ran back into the hallway.

“Affraic,” I said, setting them onto the floor. “Heal them.”

Affraic touched them both, and slowly their smoke-filled lungs cleared.

“Was there no one else?” Étaín’s mouth trembled.

“No one. I’m sorry, Étaín.”

Again, there was no time to dwell on what that meant, and I focused on Laeg’s message. “We must go and save those who are still alive. Outside. Everyone.”

“But the fortress,” Báine said. Tears streaming down her face as she stared at the hall. “The fire will grow out of control if we don’t put it out.”

“It’s already gone, Báine. Don’t you understand?” I pushed her forward. “We need to save ourselves now. We thought we had time to find the Fomorians, but we were wrong. They found us.”

It pained me to say this, for already I knew that the blame for this was with me. I was their warrior. It was my duty to keep the Descendants safe and now a hundred lay dead on my watch.

“He’s right,” Affraic said, hauling the newly awoken Shae and Gisela into my arms, both still weakened by what had happened. Her voice roused me out of my self-pity, and I began to make for the entrance.

“Come, Méabh. Come, Cillian,” I said. “Hurry.”

We ran as a group until we reached the healing wing. *I had told Fódla to go there.* For the first time, emotion got the better of me and I roared with frustration. I couldn’t go in there and bring her out. Only healers and harpists could go into the west wing.

“What is it?” Báine asked.

“Fódla is in the healers’ wing. I told her it would be safe.”

“Don’t worry,” Affraic said. “I will find her. You go on. Help the others.”

Trying my best to dampen the voices of guilt and shame from my mind, I ran outside, setting Shae and Gisela by the gorse bushes that grew between the side wall of the fortress and the beach so they could catch their breath. They thanked me, squeezed my hands, but I could not linger. I heard footsteps. The clink of chain-mail. I could smell them, these mortal men. Vikings. They smelled of salt and sweat and fury. But I could smell Fomorians among them, too.

I ran to where the rest of the Descendants stood. The witches and cupbearers were readying themselves. Ivy and roots crawled along the stone wall of the fortress. The cupbearers had water spinning in their hands. Other gift bearers had picked up the swords and axes I’d given them earlier. Ready to protect themselves and their home.

*But there was no home. No home left to defend. They couldn’t see the flames yet, but it was only a matter of time.*

“We need to leave,” I shouted. “They are already inside the fortress and have burned the feasting hall. We must save ourselves now.”

The Descendants stared at me, uncertain.

“How?” Laeg asked. “The tide is in. The water is too deep over the sandbank for us to cross.”

He was right. Many of our number could not swim. Even for those who could, the currents would be too strong.

“Méabh, I want you and the cupbearers to create a tunnel through the sea to the mainland so that everyone can escape. Laeg, grab the horses. Give them to those who need them most.”

Méabh nodded, calling more cupbearers to her side. They held out their hands and the tide began to move back. Seawater rose into the air to create

a giant arch, and the sea parted to leave a path for the Descendants to cross.

“Those who can fight, stay,” I shouted. “We need to give everyone else a chance to make it across.”

“The witches I’ve trained to fight, with me,” Báine said.

“Positions,” I shouted. “They are nearly here. Weapons up!”

Báine waved the stronger of the witches closer to her side. “Call the ivy to—”

With a thud, an arrow pierced Báine through the eye and she fell to the ground.

*Chaos.*

Many of the Descendants screamed, and they began to run for the sea tunnel which Méabh and the other cupbearers were making, anything to get away from the onslaught of swords and spears they knew were coming our way.

One of the healers, Siobhán, grabbed hold of Báine. Étaín ran to Báine too, taking her sister’s other arm, and they dragged her to the gorse bushes, where I had taken Shae and Gisela earlier.

I unsheathed my sword, listening. The mortal warriors would be here soon. The Fomorians, too. I could hear them running. Quickly, I glanced at the sea tunnel, which was moving further into the sea, whipping up the sand and water on either side. Not even a quarter of the way across.

“Fight with everything you have!” I shouted to the Descendants who had stayed. “They have come to kill us, remember. No mercy.”

The two groups of Viking warriors, one from the left, the other from the right, charged at us, moving out from the shadows of the fort. The witches threw their hands in the air, summoning the ivy from the walls of the fortress, which fell and wrapped around the Vikings.

The cupbearers threw their balls of water, smashing the warriors’ bodies against the stone walls. I charged forward, the steel sword and spear in my hands singing.

I had not heard them sing for many years, but the song felt like it had never faded, never gone away. Using my speed and strength, I ran forward, cutting, slicing. Destroying those who had come here to kill me and my friends.

Ten warriors ran forward, then twenty, then thirty, then fifty. Axes, swords, spears, searching for my flesh and finding nothing but air. My sword and spear danced, their quarry the necks and eyes of my foes.



Screams sounded around me, some from those I killed, but some, some of them were from my friends who had fallen to the Viking blades. For the Vikings had swords and spears too, and they danced like mine.

But I fought harder. Faster.

When the last Viking fell to my blade, I stopped moving. Elated by my victory, elated by the sword song, I smiled. Then I fell to the ground, to my knees, as I saw what had happened around me. All my friends lay dead too. All who had stayed to fight. I had not been fast enough.

A scream sounded out, breaking the stillness of my grief.

I knew the voice. It was Neasa. Étaín's daughter.

I ran toward her scream, which brought me to the high tower. A Fomorian man in silver chain-mail was dragging her inside. A few of the Vikings were with him, another Descendant woman over one of their shoulders, though I couldn't make out who she was.

Building my strength, I hurtled into the Fomorian man, using my weight to push him down to the ground... but instead of sending him crashing, he bore my weight, stepped back, and it was I who tumbled into the grass.

Laughing, he threw Neasa through the high tower door, where a man reached out to take her.

*Tomas.*

I paused, staring at my old friend.

"You are helping them, Tomas?"

He nodded, his cheeks pink, but his jaw set firm. "We will rule the mortals now. Look at the Fomorian strength. If they can defeat us so easily, they can defeat the mortal kings too. Come with us."

"Never." I dashed forward, using my blade to strike the Fomorian who I had tried to push to the ground. In a blur of colour, he took out his own sword and fought back. Quicker and quicker, we danced around each other. *It was like he had the warrior gift within him.* I couldn't understand how else he could fight like this, but there was not time to ponder, only to accept what was.

I lunged forward, slicing him across the arm. Blood spurted from his wound. He leaned against the stone wall of the tower, exhausted now, drained of energy, the strength of his gift fading with it.

But instead of fear, he laughed and pointed at a ship sailing toward the sea tunnel.

“Can your cupbearers hold their tunnel?” he panted, grimacing, his hand gripping the tear across his arm.

“That is not the right question. The right question is, can your ship survive the strength of our cupbearers.”

“Oh, I’m not talking about the ship.”

I would have thought this an attempt to distract me, except that his smile reached his eyes. I glanced backward and that’s when I saw what he meant. A boy, nay, a boy approaching manhood, stood by the prow, arms outstretched. He was a Fomorian too, but he had a ball of water spinning in his hands. Huge swathes of water spun around him, growing, growing, and he stared intently at the tunnel as it grew bigger. He meant to use this water to crush the tunnel. To drown everyone who was walking underneath.

I spun and pierced the Fomorian warrior’s stomach with my sword, watching as he fell to the ground, then sprinted toward the tunnel.

“Out,” I screamed. “Get out of the tunnel!”

A spear from the fortress grazed my thigh.

“Where do you go, Christ priest?”

Blood trickled over my skin. Rage and impatience built up inside me as I watched a tall man with a long, dark beard run toward me. His eyes were large, pupils dilated, and he laughed as he swung his great axe.

Sliding to the right, I easily moved outside of his reach. The strange mushrooms the Viking berserkers ate gave them great strength and took away their fear, but it did not make them faster than me.

The berserker struck at me again, but using my speed and strength, I sliced him open. He thudded to the ground, his side streaming with blood that poured down his chest and legs.

I ran past him. “Descendants! Get out!” This time, I waved my hands, trying to catch Méabh’s attention. Standing at the fortress end of the tunnel, still using her gift to hold the arch upright, she turned toward me, her red lips forming the start of a smile. *She hadn’t seen the ship coming toward them.*

“Méabh! Get out of there!”

The ship sailed to the tunnel, the sails full of wind and moving forward against the wall of sea and sand that rose in the air. The boy, the Fomorian, threw his water ball at the tunnel. It shook, the water collapsing inward. The cupbearers inside the tunnel repaired it quickly, still trying to move forward, so close now to the other side.

“Again, Donnchad! Again!”

A woman with long white hair stood on top of the fortress and held out her hands. Roots from the oak trees on the opposite side of the sandbank soared into the air and thudded against the sea tunnel, piercing it like arrows against a failing shield wall. The young man took more water into his hands, more and more, another ball swirling around him. These Fomorians. Somehow, they had our gifts.

I ran faster toward the sea tunnel, which was going to collapse. Méabh and the others had noticed now. I heard them screaming. Screaming at the cupbearers to get them to the other side.

“Méabh!” I shouted. “Get out of the tunnel.”

A spear.

The tip of it shot through my chest, blood spilling onto my tunic.

Blood gurgled into my throat. The berserker. He had somehow crawled back onto his knees. He laughed. The words, *for Odin*, falling from his mouth.

I collapsed onto the grass, my legs losing their strength as blood seeped out of my veins, flooding my body and organs with fluid. My heart slowed and I couldn’t breathe. But I had to get up. I had to move. I had to save my friends.

Through the haze, I heard screams, the crash of water like thunder, deafening. Then I saw Tomas, standing above me. His foot slammed into my chest and pinned me to the ground. Pale and eyes hard-set, he held out a vial of dark red, flecks of emerald swirling within.

# **Fennit Island**

## *Fódla*

I pushed the roots from my legs and ran out of the courtyard, running up the stairs toward the hallway. I couldn't leave, not when I had a chance to save my friends.

"Where are you going, Fódla?"

The former Queen of Munster stood on the steps on the other side of the courtyard. But she wasn't just a queen, was she? *She was a Fomorian.*

Gormflaith smirked as she walked closer, her golden eyes like burning pits. She lifted her hand, letting a small ball of fire spin there, then stared me up and down, her eyes finally focusing on my stomach.

"Who is the father?"

I took a step back.

"Murchad, I suppose? He always did have a soft spot for you, even when you were hideous and bowed over like an old crone. Don't worry," she said, lowering her hand and the flame burning within. "I won't hurt you. Tomas wants you. I think he'd do just about anything for me if I was to bring you to him."

"Tomas is alive?"

"Who do you think helped us find our way here? He has told me many things. In return, I have promised he can have a Descendant woman. I know you hate him, but once you've drunk the love potion, you will be everything he wanted. I'll rather enjoy seeing the look in Murchad's eye when he realises you have left him."

Her upper lip curled, and she flung her hand forward. A circle of fire danced around me, trapping me inside. The fire burned so hot and climbed so high that I couldn't see over the top. It singed my hair and skin, even though it didn't touch me, so hot were the flames.

*What had I done?*

Remorse hit me. Guilt. I had put my own child at risk to save my friends... but had failed, just as Rónnat had told me. I should have listened to her. I should have done as she said.

Through the flames, I watched the outline of Gormflaith. In her hands, more fire swirled, and this time she threw it at the tree.

The hawthorn leaves hissed and wailed. The wind blew up and knocked Gormflaith to the ground, but still the tree burned, green leaves turning to black, red berries to ash – the fire too great and too strong for the wind to defeat.

*Run, Fódla. Get away from her,* the wind shrieked with its final breath.

I ran through the ring of fire, using my gift to heal myself as the fire burned. Fomorian fire was not like normal fire. It burned hotter, quicker, and my skin blistered and ached as I ran through it. Screaming, I reached for more of my gift.

Gormflaith followed me, walking through the fire as if it were a part of her. A knife glittered in her hand. A knife I knew very well. The knife of mortality. “Come back, Fódla. If you stay with me, I might even spare your nephew. Broccan. Or is it Bróg now?”

I kept running. With that knife in her hand, she did not mean to let me live. If I could get inside the healers’ wing, she would not be able to follow. Sliding around the corner, just as she threw a ball of flame my way, I ran through the arches that marked the start of the healers’ and harpists’ rooms. Her fire crashed against the wall, the flames taking hold of the wooden beams, but she, at least, could not follow. She screamed as I ran on, away from her reach. When I next looked back, she had gone.

How to get out of here? It wouldn’t be long before the fire consumed the whole fortress.

“Fódla.”

Affraic opened the door to her bedroom and pulled me inside.

“Come here and help me.”

“What... what are you doing?”

“Well, I came here to save you. But when I couldn’t find you, I decided it was time to retrieve the healers’ treasure. The cauldron. We must hide it from the Fomorians.”

Fatigue washed over me from the efforts of healing myself, and I fell onto the bed, rubbing my hand over my stomach. The baby was still

sleeping, quiet inside, still silent.

“Come, quickly!” Affraic snapped.

I gathered my remaining energy and followed her further into her bedroom. A stone slab had already been removed from the floor and set against the wall. A pile of soil lay in a heap beside it.

“It’s a false slab. Weightless,” she said, by way of explanation, and then slid into the hole. “Now give me the cauldron. It’s over there.”

She pointed to a small iron pot that sat on her table. A swirling mixture of black and brown and a burnt red ran through the metal, the scent of lavender coming from inside. Not something anyone would notice when passing. Small, too. Hardly big enough to cook a thin soup.

“Hurry.”

As I brought it over, she sliced her hand with a knife, allowing her blood to drip inside. She swiped the knife toward me, cutting my thumb. “Your blood too.”

“What are you doing, Affraic?”

But she didn’t answer, instead concentrating on wiping our blood over the inner surface. Only once she was satisfied that our blood covered every bit of it, did she set the cauldron at her feet, then climbed out of the hole, brushed the soil back in, and set the stone slab over it.

“Affraic, what are you doing?” I asked again.

“My duty. People think of hunger and thirst as a lack of food and water, a hunger of the stomach, but that is not true hunger and thirst. That is not true want. In the dark hours of the night, what do we wish for? We wish to see our loved ones again. We hunger for love, thirst for it. With the hawthorn tree now surely destroyed by fire, this cauldron will grow a new one. A new way to the otherworld, and now the cauldron will answer to both of us, should we need it.”

*Should one of us not make it, she meant.*

I nodded.

“Now it’s time to leave. Come, follow me.” She walked through her bedroom and tapped the wall at the back. A hidden door opened and led to a smaller, secret room. A room with a window that I had never seen before.

“With any luck, we can make it to the beach without the warriors catching us. You can swim, can’t you?”

“Yes,” I answered, though I didn’t know if I could right now. I felt so tired, my legs like iron weights.

“Take my hand, gift-daughter,” she said. “We will stay together.”

I took her offered palm, and together we crawled through the window and ran into the night.

\*

The first thing I noticed was the quiet. I expected to find men fighting, Colmon with his sword swinging over his head, witches calling the roots and ivy. Where were they? Had they escaped?

The need to know, as well as the need to get off the island, kept me moving, though I felt more exhausted than ever before. Worry drove me forward too, for the baby inside me still did not move.

“Affraic,” I said, the words scarcely more than a whisper. “My baby, she has stopped—”

“Mother!” a voice hissed from the gorse bushes further along the beach.

We scurried toward the sound and found Báine, Étaín, Siobhán, Shae and Gisela hiding. Báine was bleeding from one of her eyes. Siobhán rubbed her hands over it, forehead furrowed with the utmost concentration. She was one of the weaker healers, and it would take her hours to heal a wound like this alone.

“Thank you, Siobhán,” Affraic said, sitting beside her. “I will do the rest.”

“Where is everyone else?” I asked.

Shae shivered, arms wrapped around himself. “They were in the tunnel.”

“What tunnel?”

“Colmon and the stronger witches and cupbearers fought against the warriors. The other cupbearers made a sea tunnel for everyone else to escape. We decided to wait for Affraic...” He trailed off, his hands running to his mouth.

I knew what had happened without him having to say, for Rónnat had already told me.

*I have seen it, sister. Over and over. The cupbearers will make a tunnel under the sea to save the Descendants from the fire, but none will make it out. It is too late.*

“The Fomorians destroyed the tunnel,” Étaín continued. “One of them had the gift of a cupbearer, the other was a witch. I swear it. It shouldn’t be

possible, but it was. They used their magic to make the sea tunnel collapse.”

Then Rónnat was right. *But also... wrong.* She saw everyone die, but there were a few of us still left.

Forcing myself to move, I stumbled onto the embankment, now devoid of movement, and saw Descendants, dead on the ground. I moved over them, half walking, half crawling, checking for signs of life, for anyone that I could heal.

There. A pulse.

I rolled the body around, to find Echna, the druid still drawing breath.

“Echna is alive,” I hissed. “Affraic, help me. I am too tired to heal him alone.”

Affraic, tired herself from healing Báine, came over. Together we touched him, and the gash in his side and neck healed. Finally, his eyes fluttered open.

“We must hide,” I said. “And they must believe we are dead if we are to survive.”

“I know where we can go. Quick.” Báine ran into the long grass and beckoned for us to follow her. We crouched low, keeping in single file, and made for the beach on the north side of the island, the smoke of the fortress blowing above us and concealing our path from view. Étaín ran behind us, using her witch-magic to straighten the grass after we had trampled it, making it look as if we had never set foot here.

Báine reached the sea first and removed her dress.

“I will turn us into seals,” she said, “and we will make for the beach at Bearrúin. It’s the only way to swim through the current without them seeing us. But you must take hold of your clothes in your mouth, otherwise they will find them on the shore.”

“Are you strong enough, daughter?” Affraic asked. “There are eight of us.”

“I will have to be. Now, hurry. Remove your clothes.”

I did as Báine asked, running into the sea and taking hold of my dress between my teeth before feeling my legs fall from under me.

Silky smooth, rounded eyes, our bodies lowered into the waves, then beneath them, and we swam to safety, far away from the island of Fomorian fire and the ashes of our loved ones.



# **Fennit Island**

## *Gormflaith*

The warriors lay on the deck of the ship, their berserker drugs now fading and their fatigue pulling them into a deep sleep. Only a handful of them had survived, not because of their prowess with the blade, but merely by chance that they had been selected to guard the back door and hadn't faced the Descendant warrior. The only one completely unscathed was an older man who'd stayed with the ship and sailed it toward the sea tunnel for Donnchad. So far, he had only spoken to ask how Brodir had fallen as we carried him, bloodied and broken, onto the ship. I told him Brodir had fought with his sword in hand, having slain all the Christian witches. The old man smiled and touched his arm-ring, but he had wept too, when he thought we were not looking.

Indeed, Brodir had fought well, much better than the warrior Descendant had expected. The mushrooms he had eaten had given him a barrier to pain that I had not witnessed before. He was still dying though, this barrier not enough to save him from the blood loss he had endured.

Donnchad was the last to board the ship, one of Brodir's warriors at his side.

"Any signs of life?" I asked.

"No," the warrior said. "We checked the fallen. All dead, and there are no footprints that lead from the fortress ground to the beaches. We found no trails on the other side of the bridge either."

"The Descendant warrior?" I looked at Donnchad when I asked this.

"Dead. If Brodir's spear didn't kill him, the potion of death would have." He glanced over at Tomas who sat at the far end of the ship.

Yes. I had watched the druid give the death potion to the warrior myself. Strange, perhaps, and yet, understandable. Tomas had to work with us now.

Two Descendant women lay at the back of the ship too. Five boxes of scrolls lay on the benches beside them. We had given him more than he might have dared hope for.

I reached out to hold Donnchad's hand. "You did well, son. I am proud of you."

Donnchad smiled but didn't dwell on the praise like I expected him to. Instead, he sat beside Máelmórda. "How is uncle?"

"Alive." Only just, though. I'd had to drag him onto the ship myself. The warrior had inflicted a near fatal wound. Máelmórda was lucky Donnchad had distracted him.

My son lifted the blanket on Máelmórda's chest, grimacing at the wound. "He needs to see a healer. The wound smells."

*A healer.* That gave me an idea.

"Tomas," I shouted. "What gifts do these women have?"

The two Descendant women, arms and legs wrapped in chains, huddled close to each other.

"This one is a harpist," Tomas said, pointing at a pale woman with flaxen braids. "The other" – he pointed at the one with the olive skin and brown curls – "is a healer."

"Good. Bring the healer over here."

Tomas dragged the woman over, though she screamed and bit at him, dragging her feet.

Oh dear. I couldn't trust *her* with my brother's recovery, not with teeth bared like that. Rummaging around in my brother's leather bag, I found the violet vial.

"Máelmórda," I shook my brother, and he groaned as he tried to move, lips dry, skin pale and clammy. I helped him up and put the vial in his hand. "Pour a drop into the cup of water beside you." He did as I asked.

"Bring her closer," I ordered Tomas. "Donnchad, help him. Open her mouth."

Tomas and Donnchad held her tight and forced her lips open, while Máelmórda poured the liquid into her mouth. Quickly, Tomas clamped her lips shut so she couldn't spit the liquid out and held her nose so that, sooner or later, she'd need to swallow to breathe.

Amidst the struggling and thrashing, I sat back on the bench, closed my eyes, and waited.

The young woman cried. Sobbed. And I heard the footsteps of Tomas and Donnchad as they moved back to their benches.

“Are you unwell,” she said at last, her voice soft. I opened my eyes to find her staring at my brother, cheeks flushed.

“Yes,” he sighed.

She reached forward, her fingers touching his skin. “Don’t worry, my love. I will heal you.” She sat beside him, eyes closed in utmost devotion and concentration.

I waited at his side, expecting to see the skin seal together, but it didn’t happen like that. It took a good while for the skin to simply fade from an angry scarlet to red.

Moving over to Tomas, I sat beside him. “Why is she so slow?”

“Her gift is weak,” he replied. “Many of our kind are the same, especially the younger ones. That is why I begged the Descendants for years to unite our treasures, to give us our strength back... and they refused. This one here...” He stared at the woman lying at his feet, huddled in on herself. “Marga is a harpist. Her grandmother was a harpist too. She was so strong her voice could make you weep or laugh, depending on the mood she wished to convey. Marga here, if she is able to procure so much as a tear or a giggle, I’d be surprised.”

“You gave the warrior the potion of death yesterday. Does this mean you are truly on our side?” I asked.

“Yes. I’ve come to believe that you are right. We have more in common with each other than we do with the mortals. We were fools to not see this sooner.”

Sincerity swam in his eyes. Not that I believed him fully, but I believed it enough to trust him for now. I moved back to my brother and lay down beside him, at last closing my eyes. A pain in my ribs built as I rolled on my side, the pain in my back felt worse than ever. Yes, I had fought too. Fought and survived. And now my body needed to rest.

\*

“We did it, sister.”

I woke to find Máelmórda, fully healed, standing above me, a low laugh rumbling deep within him. “We killed them, and those who are left are

under our control. Can you believe it?"

"Calm yourself, brother. I did not see the warrior Broccan there."

"Then we will find him when the mortal war starts. It doesn't matter. We won. I've dreamed of this moment for years and now it is here."

I rubbed my eyes, noting the familiar coastline that we were sailing past. *How long had I slept for?* A day, maybe two? Sleep fell away from me quickly as my brother's laughter grew. Strange how it felt to smile when the smile was not false, how the muscles in my cheeks tingled. It didn't matter how my body ached or how I was covered in the black ash of the burning hawthorn tree. He was right. We had killed all who stood against us. They lay dead with Viking swords in their bellies or were charred ash within the fortress. Ireland was ours now. Ours for the taking.

I started to laugh, until my side twinged, and I gasped with pain.

Donnchad reached out to steady me. "What is wrong?"

"It was the hawthorn tree," I said, gasping, the pain quickly ridding me of the urge to smile. "When I set fire to it, a great wind knocked me over."

"Do you want the healer to look at you when she wakes up? It might take a while, healing me drained her of her energy."

I shook my head. "Don't worry, brother. It's just a rib. It's Brodir who needs your new woman's attention when she wakes."

Brodir coughed as I said his name, blood splattering the sail. He looked bad, his breathing shallow and rasping. If the healer didn't wake soon, he would die. It might have been better that we had left him at Fennit. For then, at least, he might have had the death the Vikings sang of in their feasting halls. I'd seen him cut Colmon down, the famous warrior Descendant, throwing a spear through his chest. To die while killing a mighty warrior was a glorious death, a death where the Valkyries would find him and take him to Valhalla. Now he would most likely die on this ship, or if we made it back to Dublin, inside a darkened room. No matter. When I became queen, I'd pay a poet to commemorate the fight and have it sung in my hall. One day, all of Ireland would sing of his name and glory forever.

"Dublin!" The old Viking at the steerboard pointed west and told the warriors closest to him to bring down the sails and row into the longphort. As we passed the land to the south of the city, long lines of men came into view. Brian's men. Marching. The siege would start soon. We were just in time.

Máelmórda stood, holding a large chest that he'd hidden inside one of the water barrels. He brought out the gold bracelets and rings that Sitric had given him to pay the Leinster kings to fight for him. "Warriors," he said, "Brodir is wounded, but he fought for us as he promised, as did you. Here is what we promised."

One of the warriors reached out to take a golden amulet, but Máelmórda snatched it back. "First, you must take a vow of silence until you leave the shores of Dublin. Sing your songs in your own halls, but not here. We cannot have the Irish kings know we defeated their Christian witches before the battle between Dublin and King Brian commences."

"I swear." The old man grunted and held out his hand.

"You *all* must swear."

Only once every warrior had pledged their oath, did Máelmórda hand out the gold, giving twice as much as I would have. Not that I thought it a bad idea. You could not keep war from the tongues of men forever, but we only needed their silence for a while longer, and that was what he bought with the gold and silver. Silence.

For a time.

\*

The longphort was quiet when we came into the bay. Only ten more ships had arrived since we had left. *Where was Olaf?* I couldn't understand it. He'd promised to bring us thousands of warriors, but he'd left months ago, and still so few had come. Why? Why had they not come?

Leaving Brodir's men to take Brodir to Olaf's house, I made my way to the hall. Máelmórda went to follow me, but I pushed him back. "Keep an eye on Tomas until I am back and ask the healer to heal Brodir when she wakes. Sitric won't be pleased with me. It's best you are not there to antagonise him further."

Máelmórda frowned. Newly healed and victorious, his blood was up, and I guessed he'd love nothing more than to tease Sitric. Sense thankfully won out, and he made his way to Olaf's house with the others. Donnchad followed his uncle, giving me a brief smile, before turning. I needed to speak with him soon, understand why he had fought the way he did and congratulate him, but for now, I had more pressing matters to attend to.

Slowly, I walked into the fort.

I expected to find Sitric embroiled in battle plans, with Gilla and Leif discussing tactics. I was therefore surprised to find him alone.

“How are you, son?” I held on to my side, the pain in my ribs suddenly coming in waves. Forget about Brodir, when the healer woke, I’d have her fix these broken bones first.

Sitric didn’t lift his head as I approached. “Where is Brodir?”

“He’s injured. Máelmórda and his men are tending him.”

“Will he recover?”

“I believe so.”

“And what about his men? Will they fight for me if he doesn’t?”

“They have sworn to, yes.”

“I didn’t see many come off his ship.” His frown deepened.

“Brodir decided to ambush a group of Irish warriors and some of his warriors died in the exchange. Like I said, he’s injured but will recover.”

“I also heard Ospak has gone to fight for King Brian.”

I came to a stop in front of my son. “What do you care? More Vikings have come since I left. Ten ships. Plenty of men have already replaced Ospak’s. Besides, my friend has gone to England to call more to your aid. He is confident many more will come.”

“Is he? I wonder if he knew Svein was dead when he left?”

“Svein?” My mouth dropped open. “Dead? How?”

“No one knows. Rumours ranging from murder to poison to curses are rife, but the truth of it is not within my grasp. It is said the other kings and jarls are fighting among themselves now to replace him as King of England and King of Norway, and that Ethelred has returned from Frankia with more men to fight them off. Falk and Gilla believe Svein’s kinsmen will abandon their conquest of England in favour of retaining the crown of Norway. How many men do you think will come now?”

“Many,” I answered, keeping my voice light. “Now that Svein is dead, so are the oaths the men swore. Perhaps even more will come than I expected.”

But Sitric did not look appeased by my words. His scowl only deepened. “Even Sigurd has not arrived. Our friends abandon us. They know we will fail.”

“Sigurd will come. I promise. So will the others.”

“They had better, or we are all doomed. My spies say there are four thousand men in Brian’s war camp and more come every day. They are

marching to our walls as we speak. Three, maybe even two, days away.” He licked his lips and leaned back in his chair. It was only then that I noticed how pale his face was, how red the skin was under his eyes. *Something else was wrong.*

Where was Sláine? Where were the children? If he didn’t want the hall for a war council, then they should be running about, or the slaves cleaning, or traders coming to ask for his advice.

“Where is your wife?”

“With the baby,” he said, his voice breaking. “We called him Gofraid. He isn’t going to make it.”

I felt myself deflate. The argument I’d expected us to have flitted away.

“What is wrong with him?”

Sitric shrugged. “He won’t feed. His lips are always blue. He cried for the first few days, but yesterday, he turned quiet. Frigg says he won’t last much longer. The monks from Erin’s Eye will be here soon to pray with Sláine.”

I moved past him and into the hallway that led to the back rooms.

“Leave her be if you can’t behave yourself,” he said, his voice snapping.

“Behave?” I frowned. “What do you imagine I’m going to do?”

“Sláine is upset. Don’t speak of the war, or her father, or of wherever it is that you have been. Offer your condolences and then go.”

*Offer your condolences and then go.* Why did he have to be so hurtful? I seethed over his words, yet as I reached her room, I regretted my decision to come. Grief was an ugly emotion. One that seeped into your bones no matter how hard you tried to keep it at bay. It was too late, however, to turn back, and so I walked inside Sláine’s room. My daughter-in-law sat on her bed, eyes red with tears as she watched her baby sleeping. I leaned over the crib, watching as his chest and stomach sucked in with every breath. His thick curls, so like mine and Sitric’s, lay lank against his forehead, and his thin arms lay motionless at his side.

Orlaith and Frigg sat beside Sláine, both of their faces filled with silent dread.

“Did you send for a healer?” I asked.

“She doesn’t know what’s wrong. Stupid woman.” Sláine’s voice cut me short. She didn’t want to talk about it. No mother wanted to talk about why their child was destined for the afterlife before they had been called there themselves.

“What do you think it is?”

Sláine shrugged, her bottom lip trembling. “He was fine to start off with, but he won’t drink my milk. He cried when I fed him, as if it hurt. I don’t know why. His breathing... it’s so quick, but I don’t know why that is, either.”

“Did you try a wetnurse? Or goat’s milk?”

“He won’t drink from a wetnurse. We’ve tried goat’s milk, but he spews that up. He screamed all day yesterday.”

She leaned forward, touching her son, tucking the blankets around his side. He didn’t stir.

Frigg folded Sláine into her thick arms. “It is hard, my sweet, but not every child is ready for this world. They are too good for it, my Harald used to say. We lost one ourselves, you see. He said the best of us are called early because the gods don’t want to see them suffer.”

These words did not comfort Sláine, who began to weep and covered her face with her hands.

The stench of grief. I could not bear to take another breath of it.

“I will wash up and come back later. I will say prayers too, that God may grant you a miracle.”

Platitudes. Well wishes. Sláine didn’t even wish me goodbye. Perhaps she didn’t even hear me. Having no further words that might comfort and my ribs starting to ache again, I left the room.

Freya stood outside, leaning against the wall, tears in her eyes, holding a tray of steaming hot food.

“Do you need help, Freya?” I asked.

“No. I am just sad for Sláine. I came to bring her dinner, but just wanted to control myself before I went in.” Her voice was a rasp, etched with pain.

I walked over to her, rapped my finger on her chin. “There is nothing you can do except be strong for your friend.”

She wiped her cheeks and nodded. “Perhaps that is why the gods do not give me a child. I am not strong enough to be a mother.” She steeled herself, pushed past me, and disappeared into Sláine’s room.

\*



Delighted to be out of the fort, I walked to Olaf's house. The warriors had placed Brodir on a fur cloak at the back of the room, while Máelmórda had put the two Descendant women in chains. Tomas was going through a salvaged bag of scrolls, and Donnchad sat beside him, reading one of the scrolls Tomas had set aside.

God, I hated it here. The house was devoid of all signs of the man I loved, as if he'd never been here at all. *And why wasn't he here?* He should have been the one to bring news of Svein's death. Not strangers who didn't know us at all.

"How is Brodir?" I asked my brother, pulling myself from my reverie.

"Fading," he answered. He pressed his hands on his stomach. "I, on the other hand, feel much better."

"Good."

"Tomas has assured me that the healer will wake soon. I just hope it's in time to tend to Brodir. How was Sitric?"

"Come," I said, gesturing for him to leave. "Donnchad can look after the guests. Let's go somewhere a little more private. Let's go to your house."

Máelmórda followed me to the house Sitric had given him while he stayed in Dublin, a new vase of wine swinging in his hand. I closed the door behind us and, using my magic, lit the firepit.

"So," he said, sighing. "Sitric. How is he?"

"His baby is dying. Added to that, not enough men have come, and apparently Svein Forkbeard is dead."

"Perhaps your lover has abandoned us."

"No," I said, rubbing my ribs as I took a seat. Why did my body feel worse than it did yesterday? Sitting down wasn't helping either. "Olaf wouldn't do that."

"My spies say that Brian's friends in Connacht are marching. They will be here in a few days and join with the Munster army. Sechnall has answered his war cry, too."

"And?"

"The Viking warriors need to be here before Brian arrives, or else we will lose this war and quickly."

The pain peaked when I breathed. The rib must be broken.

"You have brought us into a war, sister, that we cannot win."

"So spoilt," I spat. "I found a way for us to kill the Descendants. Now they are all dead, and somehow *this* is my fault. Well, it's not. This fight

between the mortal kings of Ireland is your responsibility. You are a king of Leinster, are you not? You find more men. You!”

Máelmórda sat beside me and poured me a glass of wine from his vase. “I’m sorry. You are right. I will find more men. It’s just that we are so close. So close. To see our dream die at the very end...”

The pain in my rib peaked again, and I groaned, sending my cup flying, the red wine pooling like blood on the floor.

“Show me,” Máelmórda said. “You should not be in so much pain.”

I let the wave of pain recede before removing my cloak and dress, then I let him unfasten the leather armour underneath.

“Not with you like this.” He fingered a strand of my white hair. “I won’t see the wound unless you remove the glamour.”

Pulling my spell away, I watched as the wrinkles on my hands faded, the grey and white hair turning black.

“Gormflaith!” my brother hissed. “Look at yourself.”

I stared downward, my hands searching for the wound.

But there was no wound. There was something else entirely. Something unexpected. No, it was not blood or gore that had made my brother curse. My stomach was huge. Rounded from under my breasts to my hips.

“Are you pregnant?”

“No. It’s not possible...”

*Or was it?* My mind rushed to my nights with Olaf. The night after my brother and son had taken their new gifts... *Yes, I was*, and the growing pain in my ribs over the last few days suggested the baby’s arrival was imminent.

I crouched down and felt myself underneath my linen underdress. Blood smeared my hands, and I felt the pressure of the baby. I could feel it now, moving inside me, my stomach cramping over and over to push him out. Another wave began to build.

“The baby is coming.”

I gripped the edge of the bed and set an old cloak of Máelmórda’s underneath me.

My brother ran his hands through his hair, pacing up and down as I groaned. “Do you need a midwife?”

“No.” I pushed, the contraction growing. “It’s nearly here.” I pushed again and again as the contractions came, one after the other. When I birthed Sitric, the contractions had tormented me for a whole day. With my

third child, they came fast and hard, and before long, a baby slid out between my legs. Rushing to pull it out from under the thick fabric of my dress, I lifted the baby up. Covered in blood and vernix, he sniffled, mouth opening. Blood seeped down my hands and arms, the cord that attached him to the afterbirth soaking into my dress.

“Pour wine on the bread knife,” I gasped. “Cut the cord.”

Máelmórda gathered his wits and did as I asked, then found a clean blanket to wrap up the baby. He stared at the face before him, studying the stranger who had just entered our lives. “Who is the father?” he asked. “He has blue eyes like Brian, except that was too long—”

“Olaf.”

Máelmórda rolled his eyes and wiped the blood from the baby’s face. “Is he one of us? That’s the most important question.”

I pushed myself up and beckoned him to bring the baby closer. Bringing a flame onto my finger, I pressed it against the baby. Máelmórda’s eyes gleamed, ever hopeful that the infant wouldn’t burn. That he would be one of us. I had to confess that I wanted that too. That I wanted Olaf’s son to be mine.

The baby, swaddled and content, screwed up his face the instant I touched him. I pulled my finger away and saw the red welt I’d left behind. Máelmórda sighed, then set his knuckle into the baby’s mouth and rocked him up and down until the tears faded away.

“Can you pass him off as Sigurd’s?”

“No. I lay with him more than a year ago.”

Sigurd would have worked if the dates had aligned. This was unfortunate. A bastard son wouldn’t matter to a Viking warrior like Sigurd who was already in love with me, not if he thought he was the father. My age could be explained away too. The baby would be a miracle. I’d be like Mary’s cousin, Elizabeth. Old and dried-up, until God gave her a baby. Oh yes, Sigurd would have treated this son like a true-born, like a prince. But a fatherless bastard would not do for a woman of my position. *Whore* would be my new name. And no one would listen to my advice again.

I stared at the child in his arms. He looked like Olaf, only with my dark hair. I brushed his cheek. Máelmórda smiled at him, using a basin of water to wash the rest of the blood from him. I couldn’t keep him, that was for certain, even though there was a fondness I had for him that had been absent for Donnchad.

“Can you give him to one of your wives?”

“Murchad has laid siege to the lands between here and my dun, and my wives have fled to their families. I cannot help you.”

*Who then? Who would care for him as their own?*

“We could swap him.”

The thought that arrived in my head shocked even me. *Did I dare do this?*

Máelmórda stared. “With?”

“Sitric and Sláine’s baby. Their boy has the same dark curls, but he is dying. Mine is healthy...”

“What will they think when suddenly their baby is well again?”

“That a miracle has happened. Isn’t that what these Christians believe their prayer does?” *Isn’t that what I had said myself when I left Sláine’s room?*

Máelmórda shrugged. “I don’t think—”

“I will call everyone out of the fort,” I said, not giving him time to argue. “To ask the monks to pray. You will use your speed to switch the babies, and when everyone returns, my baby will be in the crib instead of theirs. Healthy, all blue eyes and dark curls, just as they prayed for. No one will dare deny the miracle. No one will suspect.”

“And what of their baby?”

Limping over to the basin of water Máelmórda kept in his room, I began to rub the blood from my hands. “I will deal with him.”

\*

I cleaned myself, using my magic to transform back to the old woman everyone saw so often. Greying hair, wrinkles around my eyes and lips. A woman whose womb had long turned dry.

The fort was almost empty tonight, for no one wanted to spend time in a house where a child was about to pass into the forever sleep.

The monks from Erin’s Eye stood at the top of the room, talking in hushed whispers. Sitric sat in his seat, with only Leif at his side. A handful of his warriors stood by the doors, keeping solemn watch over their king.

I walked straight over to the abbot. “Brother Francis, isn’t it?” I snapped. “Why are you not praying?”

The abbot bowed his head. "We have prayed all day, Queen Gormflaith."

"Not enough." I clapped my hands. "All of us need to pray. Everyone. Even those not yet converted."

"Sláine will not leave the child," Sitric said.

"No," a weak voice came from the hallway. "Your mother is right. We must pray to God." She reached out for Sitric's hand. "Please, Sitric. Let Brother Francis pray for him and baptise him. Not for his life, but for his soul."

"Your wife is right, Sitric," I said. "Let God hear us now. Let us pray together. As a family."

Hands pressed together, palm to palm, I led the way to the outside entrance of the fort and went to my knees. "Dear God," I said, loud and clear for all to hear. "I beseech you, with all your grace, to care for the soul of my grandson, Gofraid. In your wisdom, grant him life, either with us on earth, or at your side in the Kingdom of Heaven."

One by one, the hall emptied, and the monks kneeled beside me. Then the women. Sláine too. Even Frigg, though she had not converted. At length, Sitric kneeled beside his wife, bowing his head and holding his hands together. Once the king did this, Sitric's warriors came outside too, kneeling with the rest of us, or else standing beside us, touching their amulets and trinkets, carved to pay homage to the Norse gods.

Brother Francis said a prayer, calling for faith and God to save us all and to show pity on the faithful. Finally, Máelmórda walked out from behind the fort and gave me a curt nod.

"Bring out Gofraid," I said to Sláine. "Let him be baptised so he can receive everlasting life."

My daughter-in-law made her way inside and brought out the baby, wrapped in thick swaddling so that only his face was visible.

Brother Francis brought out a small vial of oil from his bag, poured it on his finger and made a sign of the cross on Gofraid's head.

"Take the shawl from the baby's head, so I can pour water over him," Brother Francis said, once this was done.

Sláine did as he asked, and Brother Francis slowly poured the water over Gofraid's head, talking in Latin and making another sign of the cross.

The baby wailed. Loud into the night, his arms waving, legs kicking as he tried to move out from under the swaddling.

Sláine's eyes filled with tears as she held him, and Gofraid snuffled, his head turning toward Sláine's breast.

"He wants to feed, Sláine," Frigg said.

"But he won't take it..."

"Try," Orlaith said, coaxing her back into her bedroom. "He has more energy tonight. Look at his legs kicking the blankets. One last go."

Sláine hurried inside with the baby, leaving us to wait. It was Frigg who came out first, tears streaming down her face. "He is feeding," she said, sobbing into her apron. "I never would have believed it, except I have seen it with my own eyes. The prayers, they have worked!"

Brother Francis broke into sobs as loud as Frigg's, eyes shining bright as he shouted out words of gratitude to his god. Sitric walked over to him and pulled him into an embrace, raising the monk's hand in the air.

Leaving them to their happiness, I made my way to Máelmórda's house.

Máelmórda sat on the bed, the real Gofraid in his arms. "What will you do with him?" he asked.

"I will take care of it. That is all you need to know."

\*

Under the cover of darkness, I walked onto the beach. Brian and his men would be here soon, and the people of Dublin would no longer be able to leave the city walls. For now, however, the beach path toward Howth remained open, and I walked along the sand, only making for the land when I reached the edge of the forest.

Using a knife, I cut away Gofraid's hair, removing the dark curls to leave him hairless and unrecognisable. "Hush now," I soothed, though Gofraid's whimper was barely audible. "It is not an easy life, my grandson. Truly it is not. You were born with a sickness, and of all the things in the world, that is the least fair."

I moved deeper into the forest.

"Your uncle Harald, well, we all thought him slow, but it was not true. He said it right. Some children are too good for the world they are born into. Perhaps that is why the gods did this to you. You suffer now to spare you from the suffering life gives to the rest of us."

Sitting on a log, I stared at the child in my arms.

“But in the short time you are here, better to sit out and watch the stars in the sky than see faces covered in tears.”

Tears rose to my own eyes, though I held them back. I could not offer him this last solace of freedom then let him see me cry.

“And fear not. Your grandfather was never one for babies, but others will come for you. Harald, perhaps, or even Gytha, for though she hated me, she loved your father.”

Underneath an oak tree, I lay him down. So weak, so fragile. In the cold night air, he would not last long. “Goodbye, little one, and travel safely into the dark night.”

I walked away, silent tears now working their way down my face. Life was cruel. It always had been, always would be. To live was to suffer, and this child had been born to endure only that. No joy, no love, no light. *Just misery and darkness.*

Leaves crunched from somewhere behind me. Footsteps.

I crouched behind a tree, searching in the dim moonlight to see what it was. A deer perhaps. Not a wolf, please, not that...

Slowly, I crept back to the oak tree, concealing myself in the shadows. It was not an animal at all. It was a woman, a large bag at her side, half filled with mushrooms and wild roots. The woman lifted the baby up, and turning, she smiled.

It was Freya.

“Who has left you here, little one?” she said. “Do not worry. I will take you to my home.”

# **The Beach at Bearrúin**

## *Fódla*

I woke in a haze. Others whispered, sobbed. I wanted to comfort them but couldn't move. My body seemed paralysed by a fatigue that didn't want to release its hold on my limbs.

Then I thought of my baby and felt inward with my gift. I could do that. My gift flowed into my body, seeking out my daughter. She was there, but still asleep. It was too long, too many days since the fight with Gobnat for this to be normal.

A rush of panic coaxed my body out of its petrification, and I pushed myself up from the grass and onto my side. Bleary-eyed, I looked about me. Shae and Étaín still lay sleeping, while Echna, Siobhán and Gisela foraged in the forest behind us for food.

Affraic stood alone, dress flapping in the wind on the shore, staring at a bird flying toward us.

I watched the bird too. A crow with green eyes and long wings. She landed beside Affraic, as I knew she would, and the bird transformed into Báine.

"Well?" Affraic asked, handing Báine her clothes. "Is it safe?"

Báine nodded. "They have sailed home. The warriors who survived scouted out the island first but didn't find any tracks."

"What about survivors?"

Báine shook her head.

"Then it is time we went back to the island," Affraic said. "We must recover our dead so the ancestors can take them to the otherworld."

Báine nodded and walked over to her sister and Shae, rousing them from their slumber.



Yes, we had much to do. So many of our kind were dead. I pushed myself forward, trying to focus on the task ahead rather than the tears threatening to spill over. My stomach was so large that I needed to go to my knees before I could stand. Affraic came over to help me, her strong arms hauling me to my feet. “I worry about you, gift-daughter. The baby makes you weary.”

“I am well, it’s just that...” I placed her hand on my stomach. “She has slept for days now.”

“Has she stopped moving?” Affraic closed her eyes, her gift seeking out my baby.

“No. It is her mind. I used to hear her thoughts, now I hear nothing.”

“When did this begin?”

“When Gobnat attacked me, she used her magic to summon roots to drag me underground. The baby sensed the danger. I don’t know how, but she summoned the rain and hail. The hailstones were so strong they ripped apart the roots and distracted Gobnat long enough that I could fight back. Since then, she has gone quiet.”

“I have never heard of such a thing with an unborn baby.” Affraic removed her hands from my womb and gently rubbed my arm. “If she used too much of her gift, it will have drained her energy, just like it drains ours. I expect she will waken soon.”

“But sometimes, when we overuse our gifts, we die... What if...?”

“Don’t think like this, Fódla. I feel her. She is moving, growing. She will survive. Have faith.”

Despite the comfort in her words, her frown grew. She tightened her grip on my arm and guided me toward the rest of the group.

“Everyone, we must leave now,” Báine said, “before the Fomorians have a chance to return.”

The group readied themselves, and I decided that I would go with them and search for survivors, for Colmon, but then I would go. This day. I could not afford to waste any more time. These Fomorians, Queen Gormflaith and King Máelmórda, they had twisted and plotted in the mortal realm for many years. War was nigh, and Murchad needed to know who to save his people from.

“Will we go as seals again?” Gisela asked.

“No,” Étaín answered. “We should walk. Look.” She pointed at the beach that wove between where we had landed and Fennit Island. Three bodies

had already washed up on the shore.

\*

By the time we reached Fennit Island, we had found fifteen bodies. All of them harpists, witches and cupbearers that the tunnel had collapsed on, their bodies and skulls shattered and fractured from the weight of the water. Shae and Étaín stayed with them, Étaín saying she would build a boat of roots and ivy that they could use to sail them over to Fennit for burial, and Shae wanting to help. The rest of us moved on.

The tide was in again by the time we reached Fennit, though the sandbank bridge was visible still above the sea surface. “How is that possible?” Siobhán asked.

“It was the sea tunnel,” Affraic answered. “The cupbearers’ magic pushed the sand and waves up so high that, when it collapsed, the sand and stone landed like this.” She looked sadly at the raised land-mass, the new sandbank bridge a permanent fixture between our old home and the mainland.

If only it had been like that always, everyone might have escaped. Similar thoughts shone in the eyes of Affraic and Echna, and in painful silence, we walked over the sandbank bridge and toward the ruins of our fortress.

It was peaceful now. Quiet. Only the rising smoke gave any sign of what had happened last night. The fortress itself was a husk, the smell of death and burnt flesh swirling upward and outward, flying in the air alongside the ash.

Pulling my scarf over my mouth, I turned my back on the fortress and took a few steps toward the sea, searching for some cleaner air. This was the rocky side of the island, no sand, just boulders and shallow pools full of molluscs and seaweed. I clambered over them, anyway, not caring if they cut my ankles. Breathing deeply, I stared at the water, white froth cresting the wild waves. Amidst the deep blue, however, something dark caught my eye, and I moved closer.

A body.

I waded further out, lifting my skirts. Yes, one of ours, face up, though so much hair matted over their face, I couldn’t see who.

Carefully, I pulled the hair away. *Méabh*.

Without thought, my fingers moved to her neck, checking for a pulse, though not expecting to find one.

She coughed as I touched her, water spewing from her mouth.

“*Méabh!*” I held her tight. Her stomach was punctured, and many bones were broken, but not her skull. She was alive. Just.

Weak though I was, I poured my gift into her, and bone by bone, cut by cut, she mended.

It took a while for her to speak, to get her bearings, and then she scrambled to her feet, the sudden healing in her body at odds with the trauma still in her mind.

“The tunnel,” she gasped. “It collapsed?”

“Yes.”

She stared out over the sandbank, her fingers rubbing her head. “I saw Colmon by the high tower... he shouted at me. I moved toward him because I couldn’t understand what he said. Then I saw the ship and the Fomorian standing on the prow.”

She wrapped her hands around her body, shivering, and trying to focus on the memory.

“It was strange,” she muttered. “I remember a young man, the Fomorian. When he leaned over the prow, water spun in his hands like he was a cupbearer too, and he used his gift to bear down on the tunnel.” She shook her head. “How could that be, Fódla? I can’t explain it. Then all I remember is Colmon screaming for us to get out... and then... everything went dark.”

I held her hand, letting the words spill out of her. Colmon had saved her, I realised. It was only because she had moved out from the tunnel that it hadn’t crushed her like the others when it collapsed.

“Did anyone else make it?” she asked.

“There are eight of us who escaped. Myself, Affraic, Báine, Étaín, Echna, Siobhán, Gisela and Shae. We’ve found no one else alive yet who was inside the tunnel. I’m sorry, *Méabh*.”

Her tongue smoothed over her teeth, her breath shaky. “What about Colmon? Where is he?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then let’s find him.”

She marched forward, eyes searching the ground. She was expecting to find a body, I realised then. For the first time, I allowed myself to dwell on

this reality, for deep down, I knew it must be so. Colmon had not come looking for us in the aftermath of the battle, and only death would have kept him away.

We walked to where she said she had last seen him, the smoke here so thick, that it was hard to see. “I am sorry, Fódla,” Méabh said, breaking the silence.

“For what?”

“For not opening my eyes when Tomas mistreated you.”

“He was so convincing,” I said. “I didn’t see it myself for a long time.”

“Yes, but over the last few years, when he began to try and sort us by strength, when he became obsessed with his search for the treasures and wanted to kill Colmon, I saw it then. And I realised, I’d always known what he was like. I just didn’t want to admit it. I so badly wanted to believe him when he told us we might return to our former strength that I was willing to overlook everything else.”

“Well,” I smiled, “let’s try harder to be honest now.”

She nodded, then continued to walk alongside me as we searched for my cousin.

“Look! There he is.” She ran toward a body lying on the grass. There was no denying it was Colmon, his long, dark braids covering the grass beside him.

A sob spilled from my throat to see him lying there. *So still*. Colmon had never been still, never in his life.

“Echna, Affraic,” Méabh shouted. “We found Colmon.”

All around me there was shouting, but I could not shout or even speak. Gently, I rested my hands on him. *No pulse*. I searched his body, looking for the blow that had killed him. The thick slice against his neck was bloody but his veins were still intact. A spear wound to his chest meant he had lost a lot of blood, but again, it had missed his major organs. Two of his ribs were shattered. This hadn’t killed him, and yet, this was the kind of injury only a warrior Descendant could inflict.

I pulled away once Affraic and Echna reached us, hope in their eyes when they saw Méabh was alive, which then faded as they saw Colmon.

Méabh burst into tears. Báine too.

Echna knelt beside me. “A spear to the chest is a fatal wound, even for a warrior.”

“That was not what killed him,” I said. “His heart is intact. So is his skull. The wound to his side is serious, but that didn’t kill him either, neither did the shattered bones.”

“What then?”

I reached inward with my gift again. “It’s a poison of some kind, I think.”

Echna took Colmon’s hand in his, then leaned forward, pressing his fingers against Colmon’s throat and mouth.

“He was given the death draught. That is what took his life. I can smell it on his lips.”

“Do you have the antidote?”

Echna grinned. “What sort of druid would I be if I didn’t keep the antidote to death on me at all times.” He fingered a thin silver chain that hung about his neck and pulled out a small silver pendant that had been hidden under his tunic. He broke the seal in half and poured the drop of liquid inside into Colmon’s mouth.

“What happens now?” Méabh asked.

“If we have found him in time, he will wake up by morning.” Echna frowned as he pressed his hand against Colmon’s forehead. “It is close, though, and even if he wakes, he might not be the warrior he was before. You cannot walk this close to death and come back unchanged.”

This brief flash of joy, among the grief, held us all together.

“Did you find any more survivors?” I asked.

Affraic shook her head. “Two horses made it. The ones who were too scared to go into the tunnel. Poor creatures. They do not understand.”

She took a breath, stared at us all as we fumbled to find something to say or do. “Fódlá and I will check on the new hawthorn tree,” she said at last. “Everyone else, bring the dead here.”

\*

I walked with Affraic inside the still smoking fortress. The Fomorian fire had burned through everything, including the stone. Our walls, our rooms, our great feasting hall, no longer existed. Only the stone foundations underneath the soil showed any indication of what had once been.

Affraic walked along what was once the corridor, guided only by instinct. We walked together, both of us knowing by heart how many steps it took to

reach the healers' wing, then turned and walked to where we thought Affraic's room should be.

On hands and knees, she crawled on the ground, until she came to where the false stone slab had been. She lifted it, then dug up the soil. The upper layers were burned, but under that, the soil turned brown and moist. It was here that a small shoot blossomed, tender and green, and alive among the dirt and ash.

"Come, gift-daughter, touch it with me."

I did as she asked, and both of us poured our gift into the tree, until it turned into a budding sapling and fresh leaves unfurled.

"There," she said. "Now our dead can be taken to the otherworld. When I die, Fódla, the tree will be in your care. Remember that. You must take a cutting from the tree when it is grown and keep it safe. Then this can be done again."

"Yes, gift-leader." I stared at the sapling, rubbing my head that struggled to understand my own thoughts.

"What is it, Fódla?"

"The other hawthorn tree. The one at the graveyard where Aoife is buried. Can it take our people to the otherworld?"

"No, Fódla. It cannot. That tree is dead."

"Then how did Aoife cross over?" I glanced up at her, shaking my head. "We both heard her voice at Cenn's wake. I know she is there."

Affraic rubbed her chin, smudging the dirt deeper into her skin. "I tried to speak to you of the prophecy after Cenn's wake and you did not want to. But it said one of your daughters would conquer death. Perhaps that is what Aoife has done? Perhaps she has found a new path to the otherworld?"

She left me then and told the others where to bring the bodies. Everyone worked hard, and after a while, Étaín and Siobhán arrived with their boat of Descendants who had washed up on the beach and coast. I was glad to see that Gobnat was one of them.

I helped lay out the bodies, exhausted by even this light work. Echna used the two horses to carry the bodies, which made the work of bringing the dead to the tree easier, but of course, there were so many missing. The sea had taken some, and those who died in the fire had no remains. This was hard for us, to know that our friends could not now travel to the otherworld.

"Is the sapling enough?" Báine asked, sceptical.

Affraic nodded, then sat in the ash, exhaustion finally taking over.

I looked at each of the survivors in turn. Colmon still in his death sleep. Affraic and Siobhán, the healers, Báine and Étaín, Affraic's two witch daughters. Méabh the cupbearer, and the harpists, Shae and his niece, Gisela. Finally, Echna the druid. When I was a girl, there were many hundreds of us. Now there were only fourteen, if I included Broccan, Rónnat, Senna and Tomas. Thirteen then. I did not want to include Tomas.

"How has it come to this?" Gisela asked. "I don't understand how they did it. The Fomorians, they won so easily."

I thought over the battle. Of how Gormflaith had found me inside the courtyard, of how Méabh said it was like the Fomorian had a cupbearer gift too, and on how Colmon's bones were so badly shattered.

"They have the knife of immortality," I said. "Tomas must have given it to them. Don't you see? They have stolen our gifts."

"How?"

"They killed Íde, Ardál, Yala and Clíodhna, didn't they? That is how they defeated us... because we didn't know what we were fighting. Not just three Fomorians, but a witch, a warrior and a cupbearer."

The more I spoke, the more I knew I was right. Gormflaith was the witch, for it must have been she who transformed into Gobnat. Her son, Donnchad, was the cupbearer. Máelmórda of Leinster had to be the warrior.

As the horror of my words sunk in, we turned once more to the dead.

"Shall we sing?" Shae asked. "To let the ancestors know we are ready?"

Everyone nodded and the two harpists began to sing their songs of grief – beautiful and sorrowful all at the same time.

I did not sing. I could only think on what to do next. The Fomorians were alive and stronger than we ever could have imagined. The queen, she knew about Broccan. And she had orchestrated a great war between Dublin and Munster.

Without saying farewell, I made my way over to the horses.

"Where are you going?" Affraic asked.

"I need to warn Broccan and Murchad about what Gormflaith and her family are. Then I go to Rónnat. She spoke to me on the wind during the attack. I need to understand what she knows about me and my children."

"Stay for a while," Affraic said, resting her hand on mine. "Your baby is due soon. Let us regroup first. Find somewhere to live. Báine says the monastery in Seir Keiran is empty. We were going to try there."

“No.” I smiled at my gift-leader, knowing why she held me back. “I can’t wait around to be saved any longer.”

Nodding, she let go of my hand. “Take Ruádgán. He is the quickest of the two.”

I mounted Ruádgán as she suggested, then just as I was about to urge him forward, stopped. White light grew from the centre of the hawthorn sapling. Brilliant and bright. So bright, I could not turn away from it and had to close my eyes.

When the light faded, I opened them.

As I had hoped, the bodies had disappeared. All of them gone from this world. Gone to the land of the dead.



# Dublin

## *Gormflaith*

“Sister, look at the horizon.”

I turned my gaze away from Leif and Freya’s house and followed the line of Máelmórda’s finger, which pointed out to sea. Ships. At least twenty of them. *I knew Olaf would not betray me. I...*

“Oh.” I frowned as I noticed the colours sewn into the sails. “It’s Sigurd’s fleet. He has arrived at last.”

Máelmórda roughly pulled me into a hug. “Your plots have worked, sister. I congratulate you. Thousands more men. At last!”

I smiled for the first time in days, though it was not a true smile, and watched as Máelmórda ran toward the longphort so he could greet the Earl of Orkney beside Sitric.

My brother was in fine form today. During the night, more of his Leinster warriors had arrived, making it through the gate just before Brian’s men reached the walls. He was not in such a weak position, now that he had warriors to bring to Sitric’s table.

Moving toward the longphort, he called King Dúnlaing, the Leinster King of the Uí Muiredaig clan, to follow him, and the other Leinster kings, also intrigued by the new arrivals, followed. Spirits were high when swords were sharp, and so the crowd cheered as the ships came into the longphort.

I made my way toward the longphort myself, though didn’t move with any speed. The people would make room for me, no need to rush. I stared about me, looking for Freya. *Looking for the baby in her arms.* But she was not here. Neither was her husband, Leif.

Clapping my hands and cheering with everyone else, I smiled. The joy was false, as was the relief. I’d always known Sigurd would come. It was Olaf I sought. Olaf I needed. *Where was he?*

But I couldn't dwell on him any longer. It was time to set Sitric's war in motion, and this was the first good piece of news he'd had in a while. With Sigurd's men, we could defend the walls of Dublin for some time, even start to send out raids to pick off Brian's men as they continued to muster.

As I approached Máelmórda, he made way for me to stand beside him. Donnchad stood at his other side. King Dúnlaing beside him. Gilla had wormed his way down to the very front, and reluctantly stepped back as Sitric and Sláine arrived. My daughter-in-law smiled this morning, carrying her healthy baby in her arms. *My baby.*

I moved over to them and brushed my finger over his cheeks. "He's looking so much better."

Sláine hugged him close. "Brother Francis has given us a miracle. Even Sitric has said he truly believes now."

She smiled, even as she looked out at the twenty ships coming into port, full of warriors that would soon be put out to fight her family. For now, she was doing as she was bid. Perhaps her mind was too full of her baby and the grief that had passed her by, or else she was collecting information for her father. Either way, I did not see true support for Sitric in her eyes. She did not look at him when she looked over the bundle in her arm. Only the sea.

It didn't matter what she was up to. *Let her send messages to her father.* News of Sigurd's arrival would spread anyway. Besides, today, Sitric looked happy, eyes bright, as he welcomed all the warriors into his city. Sigurd had done well to bring so many. Over two thousand. He must have called on his own allies to pull in such a number.

"Where is Freya today?" I asked.

Sláine rocked the baby as he squirmed with the sudden noise. "I think she went with Leif. He took his ship to scout out the lands to the south. You know how she can never bear to be away from him. Why?"

"Oh, no reason."

"Grandmother, what do you think?" Edysis half tumbled to a stop beside me. She wore leather armour and men's trousers, a sword on her hip and a golden arm-ring on her wrist. Finishing off her outfit was a tiger-tooth necklace.

"You think you'll find yourself a lover here?" I teased.

She wrinkled her nose. "I don't want a lover. I want to explore. When the war is over, Ospak says he will take me south with his crew. I told you this."

“Ospak fights for King Brian now.”

She shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. He said he wanted to see what King Brian had to say.”

“Why?”

“He finds him intriguing. He wants to know how he convinced so many kings to surrender to him.”

“By marrying off his daughters to his rivals. That’s how.”

Edysis laughed suddenly. “Look, Grandmother! It’s Sigurd. I have no idea why you are talking to me of lovers, when it is you who has one.” She grinned. “He’s got a lot of hair on his head for a man of his age. Lucky you.”

She giggled at the scowl on my face, then walked over to her father, who pulled her into a hug.

“Do you like the new sword I had made for you?” I heard him say.

“Oh yes,” she replied. “It’s very fine.”

Silence then. Waiting. Then cheers as the warriors disembarked. They were impressive, none of them slaves or farmers given spears for the day. Sigurd had brought warriors with him. Battle-scarred and ready. Sigurd himself looked every bit the warrior king. Axe, sword, seax, chain-mail armour. He had come ready to fight.

Sigurd greeted my son first. They clasped hands and vowed to fight against the Irish who threatened Sitric’s city. Two kings talking of war. Side by side. Agamemnon and Odysseus.

After all the required greetings and posturing, Sigurd followed my son and Sláine toward the feasting hall, while Falk led the warriors to the makeshift camp that Sitric had prepared between the houses and the beach.

“Gormflaith.” Sigurd smiled as he spotted me, arms reaching to embrace, and he kissed me upon the cheek. “I have thought often of you these last few months.”

“As have I of you.”

Gilla pulled a face behind my back, like he was about to vomit, and Edysis put her hand over her mouth to suppress her laughter.

“Why don’t we go to the feast, Sigurd?” I suggested. “I have set aside our finest wine for you. Please, let me pour you a cup, and you can tell me if it’s the best you’ve ever tasted.”

“As I told you last time we met, I no longer drink, but on this occasion, I will make an exception. It would be wrong not to toast the finest city and

the most beautiful queen.”

The crowd moved on ahead of us, but Sigurd didn’t move.

“What is wrong, Sigurd?” I asked.

“It is my mother. She is on one of my ships. She wishes to speak with you.”

“You brought your mother here?”

He nodded. “She is dying. She won’t be alive by the time I arrive home, and I did not want her to die alone.”

So, he wanted me to act as her nursemaid while a war unfolded? Why, when he had so many slaves at his disposal?

“It would be an honour for me to care for her.”

“Thank you, Gormflaith. I am so happy you would do that for me. Because of her illness, others find her presence... unpleasant.”

“Ah, do not worry, Sigurd. I am made of stronger stuff.”

“I know,” he said, pride flashing over his face. “That is why I am here. Fool that I am. A man at my age in love like a man of twenty.”

“You really are too kind.”

“No compliment for you is too much. Indeed, my mother is delighted we are to be married. She even has a message for you.”

I stared at the ship. “Does she?”

*Ah yes, the dream of who was going to kill me.*

It had slipped my mind. So many Descendants wanted to destroy me, it had seemed unimportant. But now they were all dead, it might be worth seeing what she had to say.

“Then I shall go and see her to let her know she is welcome in Dublin.”

I let him and the rest of Sitric’s men go to the fort while I walked to the line of docked ships, giving a quick backward grin to Sigurd as I left him. Then I rolled my eyes. God knew what land Sitric would offer him without me there to steer the conversation. Best to get this over with, so I could rejoin them before serious conversations had the chance to start.

The sails had been set over the sides of the last ship in the longphort, making a makeshift tent of sorts. No one had remained behind, no one even to guard the ship. Sigurd’s mother was here for anyone to get their hands on, and yet Sigurd had not bothered to protect her. As I got closer, I understood why. The ship stank, reeking of death, piss, and more besides. Oh, it was even worse than the last time I had visited her. I pressed the fabric of my sleeve over my mouth and nose and bent under the sail.

The old woman lay on her side, eyes open. Despite appearing to be awake, I sensed she wasn't really seeing me. She muttered strange words under her breath.

"Ethla," I said. "How are you?"

She didn't break her trance, her eyes remained open and unblinking.

"Ethla!"

She started, then broke into a fit of coughing. Lumps of black phlegm splattered her pillow, and I nearly vomited as a fresh wave of her stench exploded into the enclosed space.

"You have a message for me," I said, hoping she'd be lucid enough to remember.

She nodded and handed me a small piece of parchment.

"I wrote it down," she hissed, throat full of black tar. "In case I didn't make it here in time." She took a deep breath. "But first, you must promise to care for my son."

"I promise. Of course I promise."

She handed it over to me, then rolled on her back, her eyes now closed, worn out by her coughing and this sickness that was eating her from the inside out.

I unfolded the paper and read the scrawled words underneath.

*As Lugh killed his grandfather in blood,*

*The Fomorian queen will be killed by her granddaughter in words.*

*Red hair like fire. Dark eyes like death.*

Her scrawled words were hard to read, and it took a moment for them to sink in. The death she saw came from a granddaughter. A granddaughter with red hair.

"Thank you, Ethla." I walked out of the tent, even as her hand tried to grip mine, and looked to the shore, the message playing over and over in my mind. *Red hair like fire. Dark eyes like death.*

"Grandmother!" Edysis ran down the longphort. "Hurry, the feast has started!" Her long, red hair, braided down her shoulders, blew in the wind, the gold and silver thread matching her new armour. The new sword her father had gifted her gleamed in the sunlight.

At the feast that night, I watched Edysis. She spoke to Brodir's men often, laughing with them. One of them had given her a map to show her the last voyages he had gone on with Brodir and Ospak.

I nudged Sitric. "You are happy for Edysis to be like this?"

"Like what?"

"To dress like a boy. To talk of sailing off with a man you don't know and who is currently fighting for your enemy?"

"Why should I mind? What do you think I should do with her?"

"Marry her off. She's old enough. When the Viking jarls come over from England, there could be many useful alliances."

"Isn't that what you've always hated? Being married off. *A pawn for men's plans.*" Sitric laughed as he imitated my voice.

"Yes, but that's different. I don't—"

"It's different because it's you. *You* don't like being told what to do, but it's fine for everyone else?" He rolled his eyes. "She is my daughter, and she is allowed to do whatever she wishes. What is the point of being the daughter of a king if she can't do as she pleases?"

"What if one day she turns on you?"

Sitric stilled, his eyes suddenly so hard. "Then that is my fate. Now leave her be and don't include her in your schemes. I'll not have you scare her away like you did Onguen."

He walked away, withdrawing from the revelry, scowling the way he always did when his first wife was mentioned. What a fool he was. Onguen had betrayed him. Left him. And his daughter was doing the same thing.

*Once again, it was I who would have to set things right.*

The talk that evening moved to battle strategies. I tried to listen, but my mind was in too much turmoil. Would Edysis hurt me? I watched her throughout the night. Waiting. Snakes always slithered toward their prey in the end.

I wished, prayed even, that she would stay away and prove me wrong, but it wasn't long before she sought me out.

"Grandmother," she said. "What is wrong? You are not smiling."

"Ah." I ran my forefinger under her chin and tugged her closer. "I have a secret."

"A secret?" Her eyes lit up. "Can you tell me?"

"Meet me in the forest when the feast is over. I will tell you there, where no one can hear us."

Her eyes narrowed. "But the forest is out of bounds now. Brian's men are at the city gates."

"I thought you were a warrior. An explorer. Don't tell me you are afraid?"

Edysis raised her eyebrows, slightly affronted that I had questioned her bravery. "Tonight then. Nothing scares me."

\*

Edysis waved as she saw me walking toward her in the midnight gloom, the girlish impishness, that she used to carry, absent. A few months ago, I might have expected her to giggle, but no longer.

Instead, she held out her arm, much like her father when greeting his closest friends. "Grandmother," she whispered. "What is it? Tell me. What has happened?"

I linked arms with her and pointed further into the wood. "Keep walking," I whispered back. "I may have been followed."

Edysis glanced behind me, listening for the sound of footsteps, but Thor's Forest was too loud with the sounds of owls and scurrying animals for her to be certain we were alone, and so she followed my lead. Deeper and deeper into the forest we trod.

"Tell me," she said again. It had grown dark now, the foliage so thick and dark that the moonlight scarcely made it through.

I pulled her closer. "Someone is trying to kill me."

"Kill you?" Her eyes widened. "Why?"

I shook my head. "Have you heard the rumours about Ethla?"

"Sigurd's mother?" She shrugged. "Some say that she's a witch, but she's on her deathbed. She can hardly kill you. She can't even stand, and she smells like shit."

"Ethla has had a dream in which she has seen my death."

"By whose blade? Did she see?"

"That is the mystery."

Even in the faint light, I could see her face pull into an uncharacteristic frown. "Do you think it is a Dubliner, or do you think Brian has put a spy in our camp?"

"Who knows why a person would kill another."

We continued to walk, step by step, moving further away from the city.

“Indeed,” she said. “But we must think about this. Whoever it is, I will kill them for you.”

She smiled at me with such warmth. It made me angry. She thought she was strong, but really, she would blow in the wind like a blade of long grass, her mind moulded by whoever she fought for. In this case, it would be Ospak. His agreement to train her and the promise of a spot on his ship was the destiny she had chosen. That had been all well and good, until he had refused to go to Fennit Island and said he’d fight for Brian instead. I knew already that it would be he who would turn my granddaughter from me. And she, stupid girl, just like her mother, would be turned. Perhaps it had already happened?

“I have heard rumours,” I said. “There is one man who wishes me dead.”

“Who?”

“Ospak.”

Edysis froze. Her face, so unused to guile, flushed red. So, my guess was correct once again. Why were people so predictable?

“The blood rain frightened him,” she said, stammering. “He thinks you were part of it, though I told him he was wrong.”

“Did he say he wanted to kill me?”

“No.” She held her breath.

“Did he ask you to kill me?”

“No!” She shook her head. “And even if he asked me, I would never do it. But he wouldn’t ask. I know him. He’s not like Brodir.”

I took a step back. “A man you’ve only just met whispers poison in your ear, and you do nothing about it.”

“I told him not to speak of you anymore and he agreed he wouldn’t.”

“Aye, to you.” I clicked my tongue. “Who knows what he says to others?”

“He hasn’t said anything.”

“I cannot trust you, Edysis. You lied to me.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“When I asked you, *Did he say he wanted to kill me?* you lied. Admit it. I saw the truth in your eyes.”

“Well, yes, he did say it once, but he wasn’t being ser—”

“You are a liar. To your own grandmother.” Even though I already knew this was the case – how could I not after reading Ethla’s note? – it still



stung. To see her betrayal when I had trusted her so.

“You’re just like your mother. A liar. A whore. A betrayer.”

“Don’t talk about her like that. She wasn’t. Father said—”

“Your father was a fool and couldn’t see it. She rowed a boat to his enemies’ ship, leaving you behind without a second thought. I saw it myself.”

“Then why didn’t you—”

“Call her back? Oh, I did. She wouldn’t come. She had secrets to sell, and she was not for turning. That was why I killed her.”

Edysis’ mouth dropped. “You killed my mother?” Her fingers brushed her sword, her teeth clenched tight. “Everyone warned me about you. I always defended you. Even to Ospak.”

She took out her sword and aimed the tip at me. So sharp.

*Silly little child. I would have given her everything.*

I held out my hand, watching as she trembled with rage.

Roots sprung up out of the ground. They soared into the sky like a dragon, then dropped and wrapped themselves around Edysis’ waist. Her eyes widened, screaming, screaming. Tears and blood dripped from the corners of her eyes as the roots tightened their grip. I threw my fire at her, burning along her skin, and then she disappeared, deep into the underground. Into the dirt.

Where she belonged.

# The Road to Dublin

## *Fódla*

A horse of the Tuatha Dé Danann did not tire the way other horses did, and so I rode Ruádgán hard toward Dublin.

I kept Broccan and Murchad in my mind now. It was to them that I rushed. It was their lives at risk. Broccan, because he was of the Tuatha Dé Danann, and Murchad, because he was a prince of Munster.

I'd never had a mind for politics, but even so, years with Tomas had given me some insight as to what the Fomorianians wanted. *They wanted Ireland back.* They wanted to hold the high-kingship. Not a wonder Tomas had joined them, for this was his dream too.

The thought of Ireland returning to a time of slavery, torment and fear made me ride all the faster, past tiredness and past hunger.

It was only the baby and her continued silence that caused me to stop at all. I needed to rest, to give myself energy that she could draw upon, for only two weeks remained until she was due. When she was in my arms, I could help her more with my gift, but until then, I needed to give her time to heal. These thoughts of holding her made me smile, even as I rode toward danger. *I couldn't wait to meet her. I'd be able to smile at her, and she would smile back.*

As night fell on the sixth night of riding, I came to a stop. Exhaustion took over, even though Dublin was close. Only another day away, when riding a steed like Ruádgán. I remembered these pathways from when Broccan and I had travelled into Munster, otherwise I'd have been less certain, for I passed few people as I rode. It seemed that the Kingdom of Munster had emptied of men. All who were able had marched north with King Brian, and those who had remained clung to the safety of their ráth walls.

Dismounting, I let Ruádgán graze while I walked into the forest. Spring had finally arrived after many cold, wet months, and with it, new vegetables and edible flowers bloomed. The grassland had erupted with hares and their leverets. Nests were full of eggs. I thought of trying to climb a tree to where I could see a grouping of swallow nests but thought better of it. I was too full of the baby, the weight of her causing my back to arch and my hips to widen. The chances of me falling were too great, so I kept walking, looking for vegetables instead.

A horse neighed.

Not from where I had left Ruádgán, but ahead.

*Someone else was here.*

I stepped back, turning quietly.

“Stop!”

A man, hiding in the trees, ran toward me, spear in hand. He’d been watching for a while, I realised. And not just him. Two more men rushed out of the foliage, each of them with swords. They were Viking. I could tell from their attire and the way they braided their hair.

I stood up to my full height, feeling for my knife under the folds of my dress. “You are far away from home, are you not?” I asked.

“We have many homes in Ireland now,” the first warrior said. “Dublin, Wexford, Limerick, Waterford. So, no, we are not far away at all.”

Three more men came out from the trees, they a little further out. The taller of them – a man with long, brown hair, greying at the temples – approached me.

“Are you looking for Irish warriors?” I asked him.

He used his knife to scratch the stubble on his chin. “Something like that.”

“Well, as you can see” – I gestured to my rounded stomach – “I’m not a fighter.”

“Have you seen any?”

“No.”

The man pressed his lips together, still staring at me, the mirth from his voice now gone. “Take her with us. Tie her horse to one of ours. We’ll let her go once we reach the boat.”

I stepped back. “No, leave me be. Please.”

“We can’t have you warning anyone we were here. You must come.”

He walked off then, waving at the others, three of whom pushed me forward, spears digging into my back.

Another ran to take Ruádgán's reins. "What's a woman like you doing with such an expensive horse?" this warrior asked, his hands running down Ruádgán's mane.

"It a stallion," another shouted. "Eighteen hands. Perhaps we should keep this woman and ransom her. She must be related to one of the kings down here. Perhaps a wife." His eyes ran over my stomach. "And she looks ready to burst. If she has a son, we'll get double."

Another of the warriors suddenly laughed. "Wait! I remember her from when I was in Dublin at the Lughnasadh festival. She spoke to Murchad. She must be a princess of Munster. An important one."

"I don't know, Erik," another said, kicking up the hem of my dress. "She's not wearing any jewellery and her clothes are poor."

"She's pregnant, you fool," the first warrior sneered. "Much too big for her finery. I'm telling you. She's important. I have a sense for these things."

Lacking any kind of delicacy, the warrior with the greying brown hair shoved me up onto Ruádgán. "Let's go. Before it gets any darker. Let's see what Leif makes of her."

\*

It didn't take long for us to reach the sea. A longship was anchored not far from the shore, and a group of Vikings stood by the beach readying their rowboats and packing away their weapons.

"Did you find any warriors?" one of them called as our group arrived.

The warrior called Erik shook his head. "No. All we found was this woman. I recognise her though. From King Brian's dun. What do you think, Leif? Is she familiar to you?"

The Viking chief turned at the mention of his name and walked toward us. He was tall and broad, with a squashed nose and broad shoulders.

Leif. Son-in-law of Falk. I'd recognise his face anywhere, though it was older now. The childish wisps of hair no longer covered his chin. He sported a full beard instead. More scars covered his face, but still the same expression rested there.

Leif stared at me, coming close to examine my face. “I don’t know her. Keep her tied up until we are ready to leave, then set her free.”

Erik frowned. “Leif, listen to me. She was at the dun. I remember her. We should take her to Dublin and ransom her.”

“You want a woman, full of child, to win a battle for you?” Leif spat into the sand.

“No.” The warrior spluttered. “I don’t want that.”

“Then we will leave her here. We need to get back to Dublin quick. If the land is empty, it means the army has already amassed and I don’t want to miss the battle. She’ll only slow us down, and for what? A handful of silver coins?”

“She’s worth more than that. I swear to it. Sitric will want to see—”

“No, Erik. I’ve made up my mind. Tie her against the wooden post. Then get ready to leave.”

\*

It took a while for the men to ready themselves. First, the five horses had to be transported. A smaller, separate boat was used to carry them from the shore to the longship, and then the men secured them to a section at the back of the ship so they couldn’t move. I tried to take the time to rest, though constantly worried that Leif would remember me and change his mind. I was Fódla the crone when he last saw me, I reminded myself. Bowed over with a scarred face.

I waited for him to say something, but he did not, and eventually it was only Leif and four others who remained on the beach, the rowboat doing its penultimate trip to the longship, before coming back for the final passengers.

Leif came over as the other men watched the rowboat, a cup of water in hand.

“You can let me go now,” I said. “There is no one around for miles.”

He hunched down as I took the cup from his hands.

“I do know who you are,” he said to me. “I’d recognise you anywhere.” He lifted his shirt to reveal a long scar on his stomach, white and silver, but deep. The one I had healed after the fight in Connacht where King Sechnall had attacked our ships.

“You healed me when I was dying. I saw your face. It was the only thing I could see, and I’ve never forgotten it, Fódla.”

“My name is Finsha. I do not know of whom you speak.”

He sat.

“When I fell in battle that day, I knocked my head, and it affected my eyesight, though I have never told anyone this. It is not as good as it used to be, and I rely on sound and smell more than most. That is also how I know who you are. You smell just the same. Like red clover and cowslips.”

I stared at the sand, dumbly shaking my head. *Why was he asking me these questions?* Could it be that he worked for Gormflaith? That he’d been tasked with looking for survivors who had escaped Fennit Island?

“More than that,” Leif continued, “even with the poor vision I have left, I can see that one side of your face hasn’t aged a day. That is how I know you are a god. Like Odin and Baldr.” He tapped his sword on his arms, showing me a blue-green tattoo of the one-eyed Odin. “It is true that the gods walk among us. My father believed this too, though many have converted to the new god and tell me I am a fool to believe this.”

I kept silent.

“So here is what I offer you. If you do something for me, I will let you go. If you don’t, I will bring you to Dublin.”

“What is it you want me to do?”

“My wife cannot have children. It has been a source of pain for her for many years. I told her to lie with another man to make one, but this didn’t work either. The pain of not being a mother weighed her down, and year after year, I felt I lost more and more of my Freya to her sadness.”

*Freya.* She was Falk’s daughter. I remembered him talking of her. I found my fear slipping away, such was the sincerity in Leif’s eyes and the tenderness in his voice when he spoke about his wife.

“Last week, she was out walking and found a baby in the woods, abandoned. She decided to keep the baby to raise as our own, but the child is sick. She has done all she can to feed him, but still he fades.”

“You want me to heal the child?”

He nodded. “I would have my wife be happy again. She has already told the men that it is hers and that she didn’t realise she was pregnant. It would destroy her for the baby to die.”

He waved over one of the figures. As they approached, I saw that it was a woman under the big cloak, a small baby in her arms.

She held out her arms, giving the baby over and looking at me with hopeful eyes. Oh, yes, the babe suffered. So sick he had only hours left. I found myself unable to deny Leif his request, even though I knew I should.

“You will let me go?” I asked Leif. “You won’t attack me or shoot arrows at me as I leave.”

“I will let you go unharmed and will not come after you. You have my word.”

“If I do this, you must not tell anyone. You both must promise.”

Both Leif and Freya nodded their heads.

I reached into the baby with my gift. There was a hole in his heart. It was why he breathed so quickly, why he was so frail. Using my gift, I sealed the hole and made the muscle stronger.

Freya smiled as she noticed the baby’s breathing steadying, and when I nodded, she bowed her head and walked away. “Good boy, Ragnall,” she whispered. “You are well now. You are well.”

Leif gave a curt nod, then untied my wrists.

“Will you be in trouble for letting me go?” I asked.

“Better to be in trouble with men than gods.” He reached out with his sword and cut the rope around my ankles. “Take your horse and be gone. And thank you, Fódla. For saving my life and now Ragnall’s.”

He rushed off then, catching up with his wife and wrapping his arms around her shoulders.

# Dublin

## *Gormflaith*

I awoke with a throbbing headache. Two days of sleeping had not banished it, nor had the ill feeling that permeated through me.

I had done many unpleasant things in my life. *Onguen. Gytha. Orlaith.*

But the screams of Edysis lived on in my mind. I heard them over and over. The desperation. The fear in her eyes. *Why had she betrayed me?* Why had she forced me to kill her? It never had to be that way.

For two days, I had hidden away in my house, excusing my absence on a painful head. But today, that could no longer be. The war horns had sounded this morning. The shouts of men, as they readied their armour and weapons, filled the air.

I forced myself out of bed, dressed and made my way to the hall.

"Is it time for battle?" I asked one of the men who passed me.

"No," he said. "Not today. Sigurd's mother is about to pass. He says he will not fight."

"Oh." I switched the course of my path and walked to Ethla's ship. Sigurd was already there, holding the old woman's hand.

"She has not long left," he said. "No one else has come to say their goodbyes, but I am glad you are here. She liked you. Indeed, it gladdens my heart that you visited her when she arrived and have come again." His hand touched mine, his fingers rubbing the skin on my palm.

I stood there, unsmiling. Numb.

"You are sad, Gormflaith. And I have seen so little of you since I came here. Why is that? Why did you not visit my bed last night or the night before?"

"Oh, Sigurd, I am sorry, but I've had such a headache. As for your bed? This is not Orkney."



“Are you sure it is not that you have changed your mind? It is said that you sailed off with Brodir and did not return for a week.”

I raised an eyebrow, forcing a look of shocked despair. “You think our marriage is in question?”

“Do you prefer him over me?”

“He is an intriguing man, but I have no wish to marry him, and I will swear that on my life. He wanted to take me for a sail on his ship, and I obliged because he agreed to fight for Sitric. Then the fool decided to run ashore to fight the Irishmen and got a sword in his stomach for the trouble.”

“You do too much for your son.”

“All mothers do.” I pressed my fingers against his palm. “I have agreed to marry you, Sigurd. Promised you and your mother. I will keep my word.”

His hand loosened, and he pulled it away an inch. “I don’t want your word, Gormflaith, if your heart does not come with it.”

Sitting down beside him, I gave him my most winning smile. “You have my heart, Sigurd. You’ve always had it, or don’t you remember the love we had all those years ago? Before you were a jarl and when I already had a king in my bed. What truer show of love can there be, when I risked everything to lie with you and you risked nothing at all?”

The tightness in his jaw fell away, and when he turned to look at me, the distrust had faded. *Good, for I needed him still.*

Slowly, I moved closer and pressed my lips against his cheek. “I am only distant because of the great strain that is upon me.” I rested my forehead against his shoulder. “The war, it is what my son always wanted, but now he blames me because more men haven’t come. I feel responsible for him, for my grandchildren. For you.”

He pulled me closer so that my head rested against his chest, and he wrapped his arms around me. “Then more reason for us to be together. As your husband, I can shoulder this burden for you.”

Lowering my gaze, then peering up at him, I kissed him lightly on the lips. While I aimed to tease, he was overpowered by his passions. He kissed me back, his tongue moving into my mouth, his fingers running down my neck, then over my breast and around my waist.

“Why don’t we wed before the battle?” he whispered in my ear.

“I should like that,” I murmured. “That way, Ethla can know we are joined in marriage.”

At the mention of her name, the old woman coughed, and her hands drew the blankets down from her face. Her skin hung from her bones, making her appear more like a skeleton than a living woman.

“If you want her to see us married, you must find the Seer as well as a Christian priest. Our marriage can then join those of the old faith and the new. Valdamar hides away in a hovel along the beach. Falk will show you the way.”

Sigurd smiled and kissed my hand. “I won’t be long.”

I waved him off, knowing that Valdamar would never be found with a war looming so close. Even without a nose, he smelled war coming from miles away.

Ethla gave a weak smile as he left. “I am happy,” she croaked.

“As am I.” I leaned a little away from her. The stench was awful today, my stomach already churning and my head pounding harder than ever.

“He will help you,” she hissed, through her rasping breaths. “He will kill the red-headed granddaughter for you.”

“I do not need him for that. I killed her myself.”

The old woman shook her head. “No.” She coughed. “She is still alive. I feel her presence. Stronger now than ever before. So young. Younger than life itself.”

“What? How can that be? It was Edysis. She is the only granddaughter I have with red hair.”

“Edysis. She is a woman... The one to kill you... she is still a child. Edysis is a granddaughter of blood. My dream saw a granddaughter of words.”

“What? You never told me it was a child... and what does *a granddaughter of words* mean.”

Ethla gurgled, black tar rumbling in her mouth and tarring her teeth. “You didn’t ask. I tell you, the one who will kill you is still alive. I feel her. More today than yesterday. She is coming closer, but not here yet.”

“That isn’t possible. I have no other granddaughters with red hair.” I pressed my hands over my chest. Could it be Sitric had another bastard? Surely, I would have found out by—

“Did you not listen to me?” Ethla’s bony fingers reached for mine. “A granddaughter *of words*. Not a granddaughter of blood. Marriage. Not birth.”

“You mean, a granddaughter of Amlav or Brian?”

Ethla nodded.

My chest heaved, vomit swirled within my stomach and burned up my throat, and the contents of my stomach emptied all over the floor.

“I killed Edysis because of you,” I snapped, wiping the vomit from my mouth. “You stupid bitch.”

Ethla’s eyes widened, her mouth pulling into a frown. “It’s your own fault that you did not stay to talk to me.”

I gripped her, dug my nails into her arms until she groaned in agony. “Then listen to this. I will not marry Sigurd this day, or any day. And when you die, I will tell him that the curse you predicted has reversed upon your death. I will tell him that it is the banner bearer who will live and the man who stands in front of it will die, and when Brian and his men march to our walls, he will die, just as you saw all those years ago.”

“No!” The strength in her voice returned. “I will not let you. I will tell him the truth.”

“You will do no such thing.”

Pulling the knife from my dress, I pressed it into the back of her neck where her hair grew thick and coarse. No need to pierce her heart, for what use was a gift of the Tuatha Dé Danann that I already possessed? Blood oozed from the wound. Red blood mixed with the black tar that spewed from her mouth, making a pool of dark liquid on her pillow and blanket. She was too weak even to thrash or cry out. A mere matter of moments, and she was spent. I sat beside her, tears streaming down my cheeks. Not for her. For Edysis. *She hadn’t wanted to kill me, after all.*

“What happened?”

I pulled myself out of my daze when Sigurd came in.

“She took a coughing fit. Mouthfuls of blood came out, black tar too. It ran down all over her. I tried to turn her, but it was too late. She took a fit and stopped breathing.”

Sigurd’s eyes filled with tears.

“It didn’t last for long,” I said. “But before she went, we spoke, and she told me of her joy that we were to be married.”

Sigurd pressed his hands over mine, kissing them, his tears dripping onto my skin.

“She knew it was coming,” I said, wiping the tears I’d spilled for Edysis from my cheeks. “I think that’s why she told me something. It’s important that I tell you without anyone else listening.”

“Yes?” He peered outside the sail. “No one is close by.”

“She said that once she was dead, her vision would reverse. When you go to war, you are to hold your banner. That way, you will live and return to me.”

“Thank you, Mother,” he said, touching her forehead. “You always cared for me. Always.” He rested her hands over her chest and pulled the blanket over her body and face. He was about to speak again when the war horn sounded, blaring loudly across the city. Both of us walked off the ship.

“Ah,” Sigurd said, pointing toward the horizon. “More Vikings have come.”

Ten ships came into the bay. A thousand new warriors. Less than a sixth of what Olaf had promised me had come, but it was enough to excite the people of Dublin. I did not share their joy. Even with these men, we now only stood at six thousand strong, which was not enough to stand against Brian and the army he had gathered. We still needed more.

I looked out to sea, observing each ship in turn, until I found a scarred man, dressed in a plain brown robe, staring back. There he was. Olaf.

\*

The feast was the most raucous one I’d ever seen. The men from England, bloodied by battle and disappointed by the collapse of Svein’s army, lusted for wine and women and music and blood. Sigurd, having sworn he’d drink no more, had caved in to his kinsmen and drank with them to toast their fallen friends.

I sat with them, poured wine, then more, until Sigurd was too drunk to remember his own name, let alone mine, and left the fort, making my way toward my house.

Olaf sat there, alone, with only the candlelight to warm him. I poured him a drink of ale and sat beside him. I couldn’t stand to look at him like he currently was, all scarred and red, so I transformed him with my magic, until his skin turned smooth with threads of blue tattoos winding over his skin.

“That’s better. I am back to myself again.” He smiled.

I did not return it. “What happened in England, Olaf?”

“It all fell apart when Svein was killed. It should have been easy bringing enough men here. Twenty thousand should have come. Maybe more. But when Svein died, three weeks after he won the English throne, all the other leaders began to fight, trying to carve up England among themselves. It gave Ethelred and Uhtred the Bold time to rally, and then it was the English who began to pick off Svein’s men.”

“Uhtred the Bold has sided with Ethelred? Can he not be persuaded to turn from him again?”

“He has married Ethelred’s daughter, Elgifu, so I think not.” He sighed. “Svein’s eldest boy, Harald, is trying to rally the men, but he doesn’t have his father’s ability to lead. It is rumoured that Svein’s other son, Cnut, will sail over next year. He might stand a better chance...”

“Then you did well to bring the numbers here that you did.” I didn’t keep the bitterness out of my voice.

“Ah, but did you not hear? Another two thousand are coming. Due here in two days’ time.”

“Two thousand? I am so *grateful* for this news.”

“I wish it were more, Gormflaith. I do.”

Turning, I gave Olaf a hint of a smile. “None of the traders who brought the news were able to say how Svein died. There were so many rumours.”

Olaf shrugged. “Yes, all sorts of rumours flew around the camps. Murder, poison. But the other jarls and kings, they were all so shocked. I can’t see that it was any of them.”

“Strange that a man of his age should die so suddenly.”

Olaf stared up at me, his cold, blue eyes holding my gaze for the first time since we’d begun our conversation.

“That is true, but sometimes in battle, you receive wounds on the inside, ones that you can’t see, that fester.”

“Yes, that can be true.”

Olaf licked his lips and took a drink of ale.

“Was it you who killed him? Because he took the kingship from you. Ruined you.”

“I killed him, yes.” Olaf’s eyes widened and he stared at his empty cup. “You used the potion of truth on me?”

“Yes.”

His lips twitched. “I do not blame you. I should have been honest with you from the start.”

“Be honest now. Why did you do it?”

“Do you remember, I told you once, that to be king wasn’t my dream? That it was something else. You should have asked me what it was.” He ran his hand over the dragon tattoo on his arm, his fingers tracing the lines of the dragon’s scales.

“It was to avenge your mother.” I knew it was true without him answering. She’d been the only person who had elicited true emotion in his voice when he spoke of her.

“Yes. The pirates who captured my mother, they worked for Svein. He was the one who ordered them to sell her into slavery. I made a vow I would kill him. I nearly had him at the Battle of Svolder... and I failed, but I didn’t give up, and now he is dead.”

A look of self-satisfaction took over his expression for a moment. Validation. Pride.

“You said you loved me. Was that a lie?” I asked.

“No. Of course I love you.”

Olaf moved closer to me, his hand brushing mine. I could feel him, even before we touched. Feel his strength as I would flames from the firepit. He wanted me. Desired me. Loved me. *But he had still betrayed me. What use was a love like that?*

“My mother was everything to me. Clever. Beautiful. Tall. Her long, blonde hair was like gold in the sunlight. Her blue eyes looked like someone had popped the sky with a pin, causing all the colour to seep out. They were not the colour of the sea, not even of the shallows, like mine, but of blue ice. I still remember her kindness to me. Her love. I swore as a child to avenge her, and I had to keep to my vow.”

“But at what cost?” My jaw clenched. “Do you know what happened while you were away? I had our baby. I had to give him away. Do you understand that? And then the Descendants, a witch Descendant, she told me lies, and I...” I broke off, no longer able to stop the tears from streaming down my cheeks.

“We had a son? Where is he?”

Olaf tried to hold my hand, but I snatched it away.

“I want to see my son.”

“You can’t. He’s with another family, a family who can afford to look after him.”

“He should be with me. I am his father.”

“Quiet!” I screamed, my rage exploding. “You have no right to him because you weren’t here when I needed you. You were off, playing the hero for a dead woman who is dust and ash. You’ve ruined all my plans with your selfishness. We could have had everything. Could have had more warriors than we needed to crush Brian Boru, but now it will be a fight in the mud with no way of knowing which side will triumph.”

I took a breath, but the rage still burned hot. “Why is it that I can trust no one? The simplest thing is always too much. I must always bend and give and break, but no one will do it for me.”

“I am sorry, Gormflaith,” Olaf said. “Truly. I can see the great strain you have been under. I will not abandon you again.”

“I know you won’t.”

Olaf eyed me uncertainly. “You forgive me?”

“No. I will never forgive.”

Olaf filled, then drained, another cup of ale. “You want to kill me?” He stared at me, his eyes meeting mine. The fire had gone out of them now. “We both know you can. So do it.”

He set his hands by his sides, legs slightly apart. Waiting.

Only a few days ago, I might have granted him his wish, but now, now I was so sick of death. *Ethla’s blood and tar running down her throat, Edysis’ screams. Leaving Gofraid by the roots of a tree.*

“You are no good to me dead. You would return to the earth as your mother did. Gone and forgotten and utterly pointless.”

“You want me to fight? To fall in the field in your name? I will.”

“No. You don’t deserve the honour of that, either.” The emotion drained from my voice. I pushed my hair from my face, the strands there lying damp against my cheeks. “Tell me, Olaf. If you could own any bird, what would it be? Amlav used to have a golden eagle. But there is something beautiful about a red kite, don’t you think? Swallows too. I love the way they fly.”

Olaf smiled, relief that I had stopped shouting flashing across his face. “Easy. Golden eagle.”

“That is a good choice.”

“Do you want me to find you one?”

“No.”

I poured Olaf a glass of wine. He took the offered cup and drained it.

“What poison did you use? Will it be quick?” he asked, his voice soft, but not afraid.

“I didn’t put poison in that cup. I put something else in the jug of ale you drank earlier. Something else beside the potion of truth. It should start working soon.” I took out Tomas’ violet vial from the pocket inside my cloak and spun it between my fingers.

“Why, Gormflaith?” he asked. “I already love you. There was no need.”

I didn’t speak, only watched. The great Olaf, who’d always looked so cold, suddenly shook, a great fear now in his eyes, but the potion was already in his veins, and it didn’t take long for him to fall to his knees. “I am sorry, Gormflaith,” he said, his lips quivering. “I don’t know why I betrayed you. Please forgive me.” He set his head into my lap, clutching at my dress.

“There is one thing you can do for me to prove your loyalty.”

“Yes. Anything.”

“Ethla had a dream. In it, she saw who would kill me. A child who is soon to be born, or perhaps born already. A girl with red hair, born of one of Brian or Amlav’s children. With Brian so close by, I want you to go to his camp and see if you can discover who it is.”

Olaf stared at me with his flushed cheeks and desperate eyes. “Of course, Gormflaith. Anything you wish. Anything at all. Turn me back to Father Benedict, and I will infiltrate the camp with ease.”

“Oh no.” I stood. “Not as a man, but as a bird.”

I held out my hand and watched as Olaf transformed. I held out my arm and the beautiful golden eagle flew onto my wrist. “If you see the child,” I whispered, “come back and tell me where to find her.”

Olaf launched into the air, his golden wings soaring high above me and into the clouds. I stared at him, watching as he grew smaller and smaller, until I couldn’t see him at all.



# Clontarf

## *Fódlá*

I came upon the camp early, the horizon turning red as the sun rose above it. *An ill omen*, my father used to say. *It means blood will be spilled.*

The camp was beyond anything I had imagined. Thousands of men, maybe close to ten thousand, gathered for war.

The gates of Dublin loomed to the south. The camp had been erected a safe distance from the city walls, close to the shore and atop a meadowed hill known as Clontarf. I did not understand the strategic significance of this, though no doubt there would be one.

Warriors guarded the perimeter, and I quickly found one from Killaloe who would know me and let me through without me having to explain who I was. Grateful, I dismounted Ruádgán and led him into the camp, and moved from a world of tranquil quiet to one of mud and noise.

So many kings had come. A hundred different banners flew in the air, marking out the tents that belonged to each clan, and I made my way to those with the tree of Mag Adair sewn into the fabric.

I didn't know why, but I felt cautious when approaching, a sense of pending doom. I hadn't even stopped to think earlier... but those roving Vikings looking for Irish warriors to fight... might one of them have found Murchad or Broccan? *Were they even here?*

"Murchad." I moved around the tents, losing myself in the maze of small paths between them. Ruádgán snorted in my ear. Even with his calm temperament, he found the close quarters and constant shouting difficult to bear. "Murchad!"

"Finsha?"

*And there he was.*

Murchad ran toward me and wrapped me in his arms. “What are you doing here?” He pulled back, looking into my eyes as if, between seeing me and holding me, I might have disappeared. “You need to leave.”

“That’s what every woman wants to hear their husband say.”

Murchad rubbed his thumb over my cheek. “It’s not safe. More ships arrived yesterday. Our spies say more are coming. We will fight soon.”

I fell against him, wearied beyond belief by the journey.

“I am sorry. I am sorry.” He breathed the words, mere whispers that perhaps he had not intended to say aloud. “Forgive me, Finsha. Are you well? How is the baby?”

My resolve broke. The courage and strength I’d found in the days since the attack at Fennit, the steel I’d needed during the single-minded ride to find Murchad... It all left me now, and tears streamed down my face.

“You are with me now. It’s all right.” Murchad lifted me up and took me into his tent.

Once he’d set me down on the bed, he kneeled beside me. “Fódla, why are you here?”

“Fomorians attacked our fortress. They killed almost everyone. Only me and nine others survived.”

“I thought you said the Fomorians were all dead?”

“We all thought that, but it’s not true. Three have survived and have been living in plain sight... and you know them.”

His hand tightened around mine. “Who?”

“Queen Gormflaith, King Máelmórda... and your brother Donnchad. They all have fire-magic as well as other gifts at their disposal. They will be hard for you to defeat. Only by knowing what they are do you have any chance.”

“Murchad!” Eocha came charging into the tent. “Your father needs you.”

“Come,” Murchad said to me. “Come with me if you can. We will talk more later.”

I nodded and walked with Murchad into his father’s tent.

King Brian grunted when I appeared, stared at my stomach for a moment, but didn’t question why I was there. He merely gestured for his sons and kinsmen to come closer. Tadc stood beside Eocha. Tairdelbach stood at Brian’s other side with Broccan.

My nephew frowned when he saw me, sensing that something was wrong. I gave him a small smile, followed by an imperceptible shake of my

head. Such were the small gestures we had given each other over the years that he understood its meaning. *Wait. Not now. Later.*

Brian cleared his throat once Father Marcán sealed the tent and motioned for everyone to listen.

“My spies say there are six thousand warriors in Dublin now. Even worse, they believe more are coming. They say the war in England is lost until Cnut arrives from Norway, but that his friends are not his father’s friends. It makes sense that Svein’s men would come here looking for land and wealth, rather than go home or wait.”

Tadc rubbed his hand over his mouth. “What do you think? Can the siege hold out if more come?”

Brian shook his head. “We cannot win by siege. Dublin can easily bring food in from across the sea. It doesn’t matter that we have burned their crops and taken control of their farming lands, they will not starve. And when winter comes, we’ll have no choice but to leave. All a siege will do for us is have our own men die of sickness and drain them of their desire to fight. The kings who have come from Connacht and Meath won’t want to stay here for months either. Then our numbers will be even less. A little over nine thousand we have now, but that could fall to five thousand very easily.”

“Then we must strike,” Murchad said, “before the new warriors from England come.”

Brian sighed. “You urged me to strike before, and I said no, to wait for the kings of other kingdoms to come to our aid. It seems you were right and Flaithbertach won’t come. Neither will the kings of Bréifne and Caipre. No more kings of Connacht are coming either. They have sent their messengers to tell us so. We have our numbers.” Brian rubbed his head, for once showing the anguish he felt. “This is it.”

“Then it is best to strike quickly,” Eocha said, nodding at Murchad.

“When?” Tadc asked.

“After the festival of Easter,” King Brian said. “Five days from now.”

Murchad shook his head. “No. Tomorrow.”

“On Good Friday?” Father Marcán shook his head. “Tis a sin to fight on a holy day.”

Murchad stared at his father. “I have a spy in the camp. Many more are expected. All a delay will do is give us more men to kill and more of our warriors will die as a result.”

King Brian nodded. “Yes. You are right. Prepare the men. Everyone is to be ready for tomorrow.”

\*

The tent emptied, and Murchad walked over to his father. “I have a plan. First, I need my spy to send me a message and then I can share it.”

Brian nodded, his eyebrows weighed down so low they seemed to cover his eyes. His hair had turned whiter too, the skin along his neck and jaw sagging. Age had caught up with him. Fear too. And worry.

Murchad took my hand and swept me back to his tent, sealing the door shut behind him.

“You go to war, Murchad. Tomorrow.”

“What else can I do? A horde arrives in the morning, more the week after, all looking for wealth and land. Even Sitric will be too scared to leave his city once they arrive. He knows what these Northmen are like, that they take and they take.”

“I don’t want you to fight. I want us to go home.”

“If we win this battle, we can.”

I wrapped my arms around him, wanting to give him hope, even though I didn’t feel any. With so many of the other kings of Ireland not coming to King Brian’s aid, even if King Brian won, the Dál gCais clan would be weakened afterward. How could they hope to keep their fragile rule over Ireland? All that they had fought for – peace and the end of slavery – would fall away to nothing and everything would be as it was before.

“Have faith in me,” Murchad said, holding me tight. “The kings who haven’t come are scared. Those who are here have come with their hearts. That matters.”

“What about Gormflaith? Máelmórda? As well as having fire-magic, she is a witch. Máelmórda is a warrior. And Donnchad is a cupbearer. They will fight in ways you can’t imagine.”

Murchad brushed the hair from my face. “The queen won’t fight us. She will keep behind those high walls. We fight by the sea. Fire cannot hurt us there. And as for Máelmórda? You say he is a warrior, but warriors can be killed. By arrows and spears and swords. Don’t worry about him. My men will deal with him and kill him before he gets close.”

“And Donnchad?”

“Do not worry about Donnchad. He is my brother. He will not hurt us.”

“Yes, he will.”

I sighed and rested my head against Murchad’s shoulder. He pulled me closer and placed his hand on my stomach.

“She will arrive soon?”

“Another couple of weeks.”

“Then it is you who must be careful.”

The tent door rapped. “Murchad.” This time it was Tadc. “We need to speak with Sechnall about the plan. You know he won’t like it.”

Murchad sighed, but I kissed his hand. “Go. I must speak with Broccan. I’ll come back here when I am done.”

\*

Murchad pointed out which tent belonged to Tairdelbach, and I made my way there. Hushed voices made me pause at the door.

“Where is your chain-mail shirt?” I heard Broccan say.

“I’m not wearing it.” This was Tairdelbach.

“Why not?”

“The other men don’t have them. It is wrong that I should.”

Broccan tutted and the links of a shirt rattled. “You will be safer with it on.”

“No. I will not—”

“I am charged with protecting you, which will be hard enough as it is. Any Viking wanting a reputation will look for you. Do you want to make my job harder by not even wearing good armour?”

“No, Broccan. I don’t.”

*Tairdelbach called him Broccan.* I knew that Broccan would be unable to keep his secret from Tairdelbach. I found myself feeling glad for it, that he had someone in his life who he could trust.

I walked in, finding Broccan holding up the chain-mail shirt, a serious expression on his face, while Tairdelbach grinned, cutting into an apple with his knife.

“Your nephew is a worrier,” Tairdelbach said to me. “Worse than my father.”

Broccan smiled, then dropped the shirt on the chair and wrapped his arms around me.

Tairdelbach stood and gave me a lighter hug. "It is good to see you, Fódla. I'll give you two a moment."

He left the tent, and suddenly it was Broccan and I alone. As it always used to be.

"He used your real name."

"Murchad uses your real name too."

I nodded, smiling. "He does. Don't worry. I haven't come to shout."

"If not to shout, why are you here? It's not safe, especially with the baby so close to coming."

"I know. But I have news that could not wait."

Broccan tilted his head to the side, and I thought how handsome he looked, and how the smile on his face would disappear once I had spoken. And so it did. I talked him through Gobnat's attack, the Fomorians coming to Fennit Island, of each of them having one of our gifts, and of those who had died.

His face drained, turning white as I told him about Colmon lying dead on the grass.

"I should have been there," he said. "I would have made a difference."

"Maybe. Maybe not. They had Tomas on their side. He'd told them everything about the fortress and they used that to their advantage."

"And they are in Dublin? These Fomorians. I was right. It was Máelmórda."

"Yes. And his sister, and Donnchad too."

"Not Sitric?"

I shook my head. "Colmon has met Sitric. I think he'd have known if he was Fomorian. It is my belief that just as our gift doesn't always pass on to our children, neither does theirs."

Broccan sat on the bed, head in his hands.

"Please, Broccan. Don't despair." Tears formed in my eyes. Feeling his sadness compounded my own. "You will be here to keep Tairdelbach safe. That is important."

Broccan peered up at me and nodded, but there was pain in this look too.

"Have you spoken to him?" I asked. "About how you feel?"

"No. His betrothal to the King of Connacht's daughter has been announced. That's all there is to say. As I said to you before, I am happy to

be his friend, for his friendship means everything to me. I will keep him safe. I will keep his wife and his children safe too.”

I patted his hand, for what could I say? That he was young. That love would have many thousands of opportunities to bloom over the course of his lifetime. That love might even be possible with Tairdelbach one day, though it seemed unlikely now.

“Stop it,” he said softly, his eyes meeting mine. “No pity. No more talk of this. I am where I want to be.” He rubbed his hand over my stomach. “If you are not staying here, where do you go?”

“To see your mother.”

Broccan smiled at this. “When this battle is done, I will follow you.” He wrapped his hands around mine. “I look forward to us three being together again.”

“Me too. And while I’m there, I’m going to see what can be done about Gobnat’s spell. Perhaps Báine, Étaín and Senna together can break it.”

“When do you leave?”

I glanced outside. It was already past midday.

“I shall say my farewell to Murchad, then go as soon as I can.” I kissed Broccan on the cheek. “Stay safe tomorrow. Look after Tairdelbach but take a care for yourself, too. And keep a watch on the Fomorians. They mean to win this war. At any cost.”

Broccan nodded, standing tall and broad. And even though I had never thought he favoured Rónnat, I saw my father in him now. Ciaran the warrior. The mighty. And suddenly I did not feel so afraid.

When I arrived at Murchad’s tent, he was already there waiting on me.

“I should go soon,” I said.

“Yes.” He came closer, took my hand in his, and kissed it.

“I am going to my sister’s crannog. In Ulaid. A small island in a lough south of Carncormick.”

“Good.” He kissed my lips. “I am glad you will be far away from this.”

I lay back on the bed, pulling him with me. He kissed me again and again, his hands running through my hair. Gentle.

He lay on his side and rested his hand on my stomach. “You must be tired?”

“I am.”

“Then I will lie with you until you fall asleep. I will wake you so you don’t sleep too long.”

I smiled as he said this, moving closer to him. Closing my eyes, I let my tiredness consume me. The feeling of safety and love swam around me, and I felt something inside me move. The baby. Not awake but wakening. I reached inward with my gift and heard only one thought flow through her mind. *Father.*

\*

“Fódlá, you should wake now,” Murchad said. “Before it gets too dark.” He pointed to two leather bags on the table. “I’ve packed food for you.”

My head felt heavy, but I dragged myself out of the bed. He was right. If the war started in the morning, I needed to be well away from it. We walked outside, and he took me to my horse, giving me one last kiss.

“I will find you soon, my love,” he said.

I could not bring myself to say another goodbye, to say aloud that I feared for him, and so instead, I smiled. “Yes. You will.”

The campsite was full of noise now, the crows flying above the forest making the most sound, snapping beaks and cawing. Indeed, the sky was alive with movement. Seagulls flew above the crows. Swallows. And above them all was an eagle.

“Come, Ruádgán,” I whispered. “Ride on.”



# Clontarf

## *Murchad*

I could hardly bear to watch Fódla ride away from me. My heart felt as if it ripped then, and I was bleeding with it. It was only when Tairdelbach threw his arms around my neck that I moved.

“You will see her again, Father,” he said.

I patted his arms. “Yes, son, I know.” Holding him close, feeling his breath on my shoulder, gave me comfort, and also brought me back to what needed to be done. “Any news to report?”

“Aye.” He took a short, sharp breath. “Flaithbertach has come. He’s outside the camp with his men. He wants to speak with you.”

\*

A mile off camp, I found Flaithbertach and fifty of his men. With no army at his side, I already knew what he had come to say. He would not honour his oaths. Just like the kings of Bréifne, the kings of Ulaid and the other Northern Ó’Neills. But why come at all? Why not hide in his dun?

“I was right. You are a coward,” I shouted over to him. “It’s almost as if there is an invisible line at the northern border of Meath. Those below it have all the courage, while those above it have none.”

“No. Not a coward,” he replied. “The war is in the south, and they are not my people. I am a king of Ailech only, as you so kindly informed me when you visited me last.”

“If we aren’t *your people*, why do you want to be High King?”

This garnered a slight frown.

“Why would you let the people, who you want to rule, die?”

More silence.

“You think Sitric will stop with Munster?” I continued. “England is crawling with Vikings. Thousands and thousands of them, all wanting to make a name for themselves. He’ll have no choice but to let these warriors continue north in their search for land.”

“I have no intention of letting the Vikings take my land. I will protect it, just as my fathers and grandfathers did. We are not Munster. We do not let the wolves wander among our sheep.”

“You are a fool to think you have such power. If they cut us down, they will come for you next, and this time, they know all the pathways and river routes. They won’t only come for you by sea. But by river. By land. You will not win this time with your army so divided.”

Flaithbertach nodded. He knew I was right. I could see it in the way he hung his head.

“I did not come here to argue with you, Murchad.”

“Then why did you?”

“Our spies say more ships will be here tomorrow. More in the days after that. Do you know this?”

“Aye.” I stared at him, understanding that sharing this news was the true reason for his visit. Not to gloat. *Not to tell me that tomorrow he would be alive, while I would be dead.*

“You are ready then. I wish you good luck.” He moved his horse, clicking at her so she would turn. “Truly, I hope you win. I will pray for you.”

I sighed. “Flaithbertach.”

He stopped.

“Tell Bébinn I love her.” A final way to shame him.

“I will.”

I watched him ride away. Somehow, he bore the shame and rode straight-backed to the north. To my sister, and a warm bed, leaving others to fight for the freedom he enjoyed.

“Come,” I said to Tairdelbach, once Flaithbertach disappeared over the hill. “Let us go back to camp. Did Eocha bring the monks over early like I asked?”

“Yes,” Broccan said. “I saw him sail across to Erin’s Eye this morning.”

We rode back to camp and made toward the makeshift church the men had built. On a daily basis, we rowed out to Erin’s Eye to bring the monks

to say mass and pray for the men. I walked to the front of the crowd and kneeled. Brother Francis came to me, rested his hand on my head to give me a blessing. Then he pressed a small piece of parchment into my hand.

Reciting a short prayer with the monk, I quickly left and unfurled the note. Sláine's writing covered it.

*Brother,*

*I will do as you say.*

*2,000 from Northumbria tomorrow. Midday.*

*2,000 two days after. Sitric believes more will come in the days that follow.*

Two thousand tomorrow. That was more than I thought. Folding the parchment, I threw it into one of the campfires. I didn't want Sitric to know of Sláine's betrayal should I die and the message be discovered on my body, though I did not dwell on this thought, and quickly moved to how I might survive this. *How I might see Fódla and my daughter.*

"What next, Father?" Tairdelbach stared at me. His face so serious it was hard now to think of him as a boy who would steal my horse or climb my shoulders to swing about my neck. Broccan's face was serious too, and he inched closer to Tairdelbach, angling his body as if already shielding him from our enemies who were yet to come.

"Find me the local fishermen." I glanced over at the salmon weirs along the shore, a long line of thick, sharpened sticks that had been dug deep into the sand where nets could be hung. There were more weirs up the River Tolga too. More than one family fished here. One of them shouldn't be too hard to find.

Tairdelbach and Broccan did as I bid and ran off to find them.

"Bring me the old men," I shouted after them. "The ones who know the tides as well as you know your sword."

\*

Later that evening, with my plans in place, I arrived at my father's war tent. It was full. Every king from the Kingdom of Munster was there, King Sechnall with all the kings of Meath, and the King of the Uí Maine clan of south Connacht. However, so many, some of whom had so recently sworn oaths to my father, had not come to our aid.

We might have had an army of fifteen or sixteen thousand, perhaps more. As it was, we had only nine thousand men. Sitric had six thousand. Eight thousand by tomorrow. The numbers were still on our side. Barely. We had to keep it that way.

I waited until everyone was around the table and took a deep breath. "I've had one of the locals prepare this map for us. He says there is a high tide tomorrow. It will help us. Look."

The map showed the shoreline of Clontarf Bay, with a set of lines marking out where the sea at high tide and low tide reached.

"Tomorrow, we expect another two thousand Northmen to arrive. The fleet comes from Northumbria, and they will sail the route around Howth and toward the longphort at Dublin. My spy says that the Vikings will arrive at midday. At this time, the local fishermen tell me that the tide will be the full way out. If we can lure the Vikings into a land battle before they reach Dublin, we can win."

"How so?" Colgú of the Uí Fidgenti asked.

"These Vikings will not know that, once the tide comes in, their path to Dublin will be blocked off by the sea, and they will be stuck on Clontarf beach. Even better, by late afternoon, the sea will have become too deep for them to walk back to their ships. The Vikings who cannot swim will either be forced to fight or drown."

"But why would they fight us?" Tadc frowned as he stared at the map, staring at the close proximity between Howth and Dublin. "Their men will want the comforts of Dublin before they go to war."

"We must tempt them, brother. We must do this in two ways. The first is to make them think they cannot lose and that they will enter Dublin as heroes. The Irish forces they see from their ships must be small."

King Sechnall nodded. "They are arrogant enough to do that. They must already be working out what parts of Ireland they want for themselves. Defeating the Irish army for Sitric would do much to earn his gratitude. What is the second thing?"

"We must use our ships to capture the first Viking ship to arrive past the bay."

The men were silenced by this. War on water was not something they were familiar with. "A Viking warrior called Ospak has agreed to sail this ship, pretending to be one of Sitric's men. We will capture this first ship of Vikings and bring their leaders ashore."

“And then?” Tadc asked.

“We will prepare to execute the leaders on the beach so that the Vikings sailing behind will see. We must be slow, let them think they have a chance to rescue their friends. I believe they will drop anchor here and wade to shore to fight.”

I pointed to the map. “If our spies are right, the tide will be out when they come, and so they will anchor their ships here.” I put my forefinger on the map of the beach. “And we will fight them, though we must still conceal our full numbers. At this stage, I believe the Vikings in Dublin will see from their walls what has happened. Those that have already arrived from England will want to leave the city walls and fight too. They might march over, or they might decide to row. It doesn’t matter. When they arrive, the rest of the army should join in the battle, and we will overpower them with our numbers.”

Everyone nodded along, though none seemed convinced by my plan.

I pointed at the land between Clontarf and Dublin. “The Uí Maine of Connacht, your men will be stationed here and hide in the forest. You will allow the Vikings to join the battle if they come on foot. I hope that, by the time the Vikings sound the retreat, the tide will be in, blocking the sand passage back to Dublin, leaving the bridge over the River Tolga as the only access route to the city, which you will defend. We do not want the Vikings to make it back to the city only to fight us again another day.”

The King of Connacht nodded.

“That means the bulk of the fighting will happen on the beach, where the Munster warriors will fight.”

“That will be tough on the men. The sand is soft there,” King Sechnall argued.

“That is true. Which is why I plan to draw the Viking warriors here.”

I moved my finger onto the grasslands behind the beach, close to our camp. It had once been part of the forest, but my father had razed the land there, thinking to make room for the extra thousands of men he had expected to rally. However, with it vacant, it could be used to our advantage. With all the trees and shrubs burned away, it made for a perfect battlefield.

“We must lead them here where a portion of our army will be waiting. The rest of our army can conceal themselves in the northern woodlands, which is only a few minutes ride away. Another advantage of leading them

here is that the beach is not visible. We do not want the Vikings to notice that the tide is coming in and that they are blocked from both their ships and a retreat across the beach to the city, until it is too late. My guess is that, when the hidden army charges out of the forest, they will sound a retreat, and we will give them chase. They will find the bridge defended and their ships too far out to sea—”

“And we will win,” Tairdelbach finished, smiling.

My father, who had been silent the whole time, looked at me, his eyes completely cold.

He ran his fingers over the map and tapped his knuckles on the table. “Ready the men,” he said. “Tomorrow, we fight, and then, when this is all over, we will have a wedding. What do you say, Tairdelbach?”

The King of Connacht raised his glass, and all the kings in the tent toasted the upcoming wedding between my son and his granddaughter.

Tairdelbach raised his glass too, a smile on his lips that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

\*

In my tent that night, I could not sleep. It was hard to sleep the night before a battle. All men say the same, so instead of lying down, I decided to walk about the camp.

Pulling on my cloak, I crept to the tent door, not wanting to wake my son.

“Do you want company?” a low voice asked.

I turned to find Tairdelbach staring at me.

“You can’t sleep either?”

“No.”

Smiling, I crouched by his bed, glad to have his company, except that I noticed his usually cheerful face was drawn.

“What is wrong?” But I knew what was wrong, for I had noted when his mood first changed. “Was it the talk of your wedding?”

Tairdelbach shook his head, but I knew this was a lie.

“It is hard for people to be married off in the way that we are,” I said. “Father has done it this way with all of his children, to create alliances between different clans... but for me it has never worked. When this is

over, I am going to ask him to rescind this agreement with the King of Connaught.”

Tairdelbach bit his lip. “That will only cause another falling out.”

“No, it won’t. I think this is something that needs to change in all kingdoms. I’m sure the princess has someone who she’d rather be with, someone other than a reckless young man from Killaloe.”

This garnered a smile from my son. “But what if I loved someone you didn’t approve of? What if my choice disappointed?”

“I only ever wish for you to be happy, Tairdelbach. That’s all a father ever wants. You are the best of sons, and I am proud of you.” I leaned in closer. “I have never asked you if you want to be king after me, but I should have. That responsibility doesn’t have to be yours either, it can pass on to Tadc’s sons, or even Eocha’s. Life cannot be only about bearing the burden of responsibility. Do you understand what I am saying? We have responsibilities to our people, yes, but that doesn’t mean we have no choice in how to live.”

Tairdelbach leaned forward and wrapped his arms around me.

“You are my boy. There is nothing you could ever do that would upset me.”

I held him in my arms until he was ready to let go. Then we both returned to our beds and spoke of home. Of the smell of the grass and the trees and what it would be like to return there with this war behind us and the song of peace on our lips. And when he fell asleep, I watched him, breathing in and out. It was then that I prayed, prayed that this story of our future we had just told ourselves, might one day not only exist in words, but in truth.

# **Dublin**

## *Gormflaith*

I walked toward Olaf's house, which I supposed was now Tomas' house. He and the two women Descendants slept there, and now the siege was underway, and the gates of the city sealed, I had unchained them. Neasa was in love with Máelmórda, and the harpist now devoted to Tomas. And Tomas, so far, seemed content to follow my instructions.

Donnchad slept in the house with them, *to make sure Neasa healed Brodir when she woke up*, though I suspected the real reason was so he could stay clear of all the battle planning. He'd proven himself to be a competent fighter when wielding his fire and water-magic, less so when using a sword and shield. It didn't bother me. Better that he was safe and remained out of sight.

As I turned the corner past Christ Church, the sound of cheering rose into the air.

Máelmórda stood outside Tomas' house, helping to hold up Brodir with his shoulder and arm. The injured warrior ran his hand through his beard, squinting at the low morning sunlight, and limped forward to hug his men. Neasa had done well, albeit more slowly than I had hoped.

Brodir's warriors took turns to speak with him, telling him they had known, all along, the gods would not abandon him. Ulf stood alongside Brodir's men and walked forward to shake Brodir's hand when offered.

"You are the Ulf who has sheltered and fed my men," Brodir said. "You have my gratitude."

"It is not a problem. More Vikings come every day, and Dublin, as you can see, is not the biggest city. It has been my pleasure to welcome your men to my table. They have told me many stories of your exploits."

Brodir smiled, then turned, catching my eye.



“Brodir, you are up!” I walked over to him, arms stretched out in exaggerated delight. “You are walking, too. What a wonder that is. We did not think you would make it.”

Brodir hobbled forward, away from my brother’s grip, and folded me into his arms. “When the gods are on your side, they don’t let you die.” He then lowered his voice to a whisper. “Your brother tells me we killed them all.”

“It is true.”

“Then all is well.”

“Your men have promised to keep it secret until they leave Dublin and have said you were attacked by a war party of Irish warriors. I trust you can say the same?”

Brodir pulled away from our embrace and laughed. “It is the gods I wish to impress, not men. I shall not be bothering any poets until I am home and safe in my own hall.” He turned, stared at each of his men, watching them smile and laugh. He watched Ulf, too.

“My men say Ulf has been very generous with them,” he said to me in a low voice. “Too generous.”

No surprise there. Ulf was an opportunity hunter, and no doubt trying to convince Brodir’s well-trained warriors to fight for him so that Sitric might grant him land if they fought under his banner.

“You want me to tell Sitric?”

“No.” He licked his lips. “I will deal with Ulf myself.”

*Good. I enjoyed a man who solved his own problems.*

“Brodir!”

I turned to find Sigurd marching toward us. “You have survived!” Sigurd beamed at Brodir. He wore his finest cloak and jewellery today, I noted.

“Brodir,” I said. “You know my future husband, don’t you?”

Brodir must have heard the tension in my voice and laughed. “Yes, I know Sigurd well, and he knows more than most that I am a hard man to kill.”

“I do.” Sigurd took my hand in his. “How fortunate that you have woken in time for the real battle. Do you think you can fight, or will you stay behind with the women and children?”

Brodir’s eyes fixed on my hand, now joined with Sigurd’s. “Perhaps I will stay behind this time. I can comfort your wife in your absence.”

“Not my wife yet. We marry tomorrow.” Sigurd gave him a swift smile. “And Gormflaith doesn’t need comfort from anyone. I will survive this battle as I have survived every one before.”

“Are you two finished?” I said, trying to stop more insults before they got out of hand and to prevent Sigurd asking Brodir questions about where we had sailed to before he arrived.

“Come, sister,” Máelmórda said, walking over to me from the fort. “More of my men arrived through the siege lines yesterday. I have more ornaments for your dowry. Come and look at them with me.”

Sigurd released me into the hands of my brother, who led me away to a welcome reprieve.

“Should you not stay with Brodir?” I hissed at him once we were out of earshot. “What if Brodir says something to Sigurd?”

“Oh, he won’t. Not until he is at full strength, anyway.”

I kept walking, struggling to keep pace with my brother. “Slow down.”

“I can’t. Sitric is in the hall and about to talk tactics.”

“Now?”

“Aye. As soon as Sigurd returns, the doors are to be sealed.”

“Why did no one tell me?”

Máelmórda gave me a wry look. “Why do you think?”

*Because I am a woman. The same reason as always.*

\*

I walked inside, and took Sigurd’s arm once he entered the hall, thinking Sitric would not ask me to leave the hall if my husband-to-be was at my side. I was right. Sitric eyed me as I came closer to the top table, arm-in-arm with my betrothed. Gilla scowled, but neither of them said anything and the doors closed.

“Before we discuss tactics,” Sitric said, “I must tell you that my daughter, Edysis, has gone missing. I thought she had run off with Ospak, but we’ve received word this is not the case. Has anyone seen her?”

Everyone in the hall shook their heads.

“The last time I saw her was at the feast, the night Sigurd arrived,” I said. “Has no one seen her since then?”

Sitric shook his head.

“Not even Sláine?”

“No.”

“Then why am I only hearing of this now?”

“Sláine has been busy with the baby. She did not notice at—”

I clicked my tongue to show my disapproval, breaking my vow to not berate my son in front of the men. A silence lingered afterward.

Sitric bit his lip, then smiled to make light of it. “I am sure she will turn up. She always does.” He ran his hand along his beard. “Let’s talk of war instead. Tomorrow. Two thousand men are expected by midday. Another two thousand two days after that. That gives us ten thousand men.” He stared around the hall. “King Brian has close to nine thousand, my spies say. We did fear more were coming, but Leif says the south has already emptied.” Leif nodded a confirmation. *Ah, so he and Freya were back.*

Sitric slammed his hand on the table. “This is it. These are his numbers. Once the new ships arrive, it will be nine thousand against our ten.”

“I would prefer better odds,” Sigurd said. “This is still too even. Did I not hear more Vikings were coming?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Sitric said. “It doesn’t matter. Even with ten thousand, we can win. I have fought with the Irish for a long time now. Their warriors, save for the kings and princes, still wear bull-hide armour. We have chain-mail shirts. Their swords and spears will find us hard to kill.”

The Viking men remained quiet. The Vikings liked to fight, yes, but they liked to fight wars they knew they would win. Battles against seasoned warriors that they might lose? The Northmen did not like these battles. Life in their homelands was hard, the loss of thousands of their men would be felt keenly.

“I’ve studied their campsite, and I propose that a portion of our fleet sails north. They will sail inland once they meet with the estuary of the River Boyne and sail upriver until it meets with the River Tolga. Then the ships can sail downstream along the Tolga to where King Brian’s camp is. That way, we can co-ordinate an attack from both the east and the south of their camp.

“There is another way to even the odds, son,” I said, stepping forward and releasing Sigurd’s arm.

Sitric stared at me. “Yes?”

“How many men did King Sechnall bring?”

“Three thousand.”

“What if I could convince him not to fight for Brian?”

“I think you would find that easier if I had not killed his son.”

This was true. But still. It might not be impossible to sway Sechnall. I was about to say so when Sitric turned his back on me and pulled out a map of the riverways. He and the men talked, forming more battle plans for when the next four thousand warriors arrived. They spoke of rivers and seas. Of axes and chain-mail.

The ingratitude was staggering. Only because destroying Brian and his hold on Ireland was to my benefit would I help Sitric now. I had always thought to let Sitric have his time as High King of Ireland, but why? Why should this boy, who I’d done everything for, have any glory?

Máelmórda would be king, and I would be queen, and a new era of Fomorian rule would begin.

I held my tongue for the rest of the meeting, saying nothing, but listening to the final orders. *Wait three days for the rest of the army to arrive, and then half would be sent to sail the rivers to reach the east of Brian’s war camp by stealth. The other half would launch a land attack, and together they would encircle King Brian’s army.*

“All agreed?” Sitric asked.

The room filled with cheers. A plan. Men liked nothing more than a plan.

“For the next three days and nights, we will feast,” Sitric said, grinning. “And everyone is welcome to the wedding of Sigurd and my mother, which will take place tomorrow.”

More cheers. I even cheered myself.

“Go and spread the word to your captains. No one else just yet.” He turned to Leif. “Set up guards along the beach. No one can get in or out now, not even by boat, unless I say so. Not even the monks.”

The hall emptied, the men moving to their tents to prepare.

“Mother,” Sitric said.

“Yes?”

“I would like you to accompany the women in the church. They are praying today for our good fortune. Sláine is expecting you to join them.”

He held out his arm and two slaves came to my side, herding me toward the doors like a prized heifer.

“I shall see you tomorrow for the wedding, Gormflaith,” Sigurd said.

“I look forward to it,” I replied, before being swept out of the hall.

\*

The church was cold and smelled of incense and wax. The women of Dublin sat inside, some praying, some sewing. Freya sat on a chair beside Orlaith and Sláine, rocking a baby with short tufts of black hair and blue eyes.

“Whose baby is this, Freya?” I asked.

“Mine.” She grinned. “These last nine months I was pregnant and didn’t realise. When I sailed south with Leif, the baby arrived. He couldn’t believe it.”

I raised an eyebrow in surprise. “Indeed. A pregnancy with no signs is very strange.”

Freya nodded in agreement. “It is. But it happened to one of Orlaith’s aunts, didn’t it, Orlaith?”

“Oh yes,” Orlaith said. “She had no bump at all. My mother said she must have carried the baby in her back. Strange how a woman’s body works. We are a mystery, even to ourselves.”

Orlaith sighed, then offered a cup of milk to Freya. “Does baby Ragnall need his goat’s milk? I brought a whole jug.”

“Thank you, Orlaith. I don’t understand why, but my milk still hasn’t come in.” Freya dipped a rag into the milk and set it on Ragnall’s lips, which I noticed had lost their blue pallor. He breathed easier too. *How had this happened?*

Sláine stared at the baby, then walked over to run her finger over his chin. “So handsome. He looks even stronger than he did when you returned from the south. Three days has made such a difference.”

Talk of babies commenced in earnest then, the prayers all but forgotten. With a new mother to lecture, the women of Dublin spoke of their own babies and when they laughed and walked and spoke their first words.

I was so bored I could have screamed.

Damn it. I needed to get out of here. I needed to make Sitric understand that my idea to speak with Sechnall was a good one. If he would just let me send a message...

“The hour is late.” I stood. “I’d better find Donnchad and bring him here.”

“I was wondering when you’d remember him,” Sláine said, smirking. “The women *and* the children are meant to be here.”

“Only one of us has a missing child.” I gave her a hard stare, which caused a flush of red to run into her cheeks. “And he’s fourteen this year. That is hardly a child in any case. No doubt, he’s with Máelmórda. I just don’t want him to get any ideas about joining the battle. Now if you excuse me, I’ll be back to join in with the *prayers* later.”

Storming out of the church, the sunlight already fading, I made my way to Máelmórda’s house. If Donnchad wasn’t there, I would check Olaf’s house, in case he was guarding Tomas still.

Cheers sounded out from the fort as I walked past, and loud drums banged and horns blared along the wall. The Viking warriors were trying to scare the Irish men with the sound of their laughter and lust for war.

“Donnchad. Are you here?” I shouted as I entered my brother’s house.

The front room appeared empty, but I stepped inside, just to check the bed in case Donnchad was asleep under the covers, and that was when something warm and wet squelched under my boot. I looked down. *Blood*.

“Hello, Gormflaith.”

Ulf sat in the chair at the back of the room, his shirt stained red. Another man lay on the ground, between his feet and the fire pit. It was Brodir, his long black hair covering his face, lying in a pool of blood with a knife in his back.

“Poor Brodir,” I said. “What did he do to deserve such a fate?”

“He suspected me of trying to buy his men’s loyalty.”

“Were you?”

“Yes.” He shrugged. “He invited me here to talk and then tried to kill me. I merely protected myself.”

“Oh.”

“Before he died, he told me something. He told me you asked him to sail south to kill some Christian witches.” He chuckled, then moved over to pull his knife from Brodir’s back. “Did you go plundering without Sitric’s knowledge? He won’t like that.”

“He was lying.”

“He also said you offered yourself to him.”

“Another lie.”

“Oh, it didn’t sound like a lie to me... but how about you come here?” He patted his thighs and leaned back into his chair. “I’m sure you can do something to convince me to hold my tongue.” He pulled down his trousers. “Like using *your* tongue. On me.”

I smiled and sat on the bed, patting the covers. "The bed is more comfortable for what you have in mind."

Grinning, he stood.

"Do you like this house, Ulf?" I asked.

"Not particularly. Why?"

"I don't like it. I don't really like any of these new ones that Sitric had built when he extended the walls. He had to cut so many trees down. It made me sad."

Ulf's eyes narrowed as he removed his shirt.

"There are lots of roots under the ground. Some of them from trees outside the walls, still living and breathing, despite the destruction we wrought."

"What is your point, woman?"

I held out my hand and four huge roots shot up from the ground, wrapping around Ulf's legs. He fell back, thudding to the floor. One of his hands tore at the roots climbing up his leg while the other hand tried to pull himself forward.

"Help me," he screamed.

"Oh, I don't think so."

The ground seemed to groan as two more roots pushed up through the woven mats. These ones were thick and covered in dirt and slime. Wrapping around his waist, they dragged him toward the hole they had created.

Ulf grabbed hold of the table as he desperately tried to keep above the ground. Slowly his strength gave out, and the roots dragged him under, his screams fading into nothingness as he disappeared.

With Ulf gone, I walked over to Brodir's body. How stupid to take on Ulf when he wasn't fully healed. No matter. Perhaps there was something I could do with this mess, after all.

Quickly, I stripped Brodir's clothes from him, took his rings and armour, his belt and sword, then I sat on the bed and undressed. The roots returned and pulled Brodir's naked body into the underground alongside Ulf, leaving me alone, with nothing but the blaring horns on the walls outside to keep me company.

It took hours to tidy the house, to make it look as it always had before violence and greed had made its home there. Through the night, I scrubbed on hands and knees like a slave woman, mending the furniture and removing blood from the floor mats. It was only when I opened the door that I realised night had turned to morning. A cold morning it was too, a low mist hovering over the sea, with the sun only a faint light trying to shine through.

Despite the great feast that had lasted until dawn, Sitric already stood atop the city walls. Sigurd with him. Plotting and planning. I limped up the steps, my chain-mail shirt clinking as I climbed.

“Brodir,” Sigurd said, “Sitric and I were just talking of you. Are you and your men fighting? I suppose with only fifteen left, it doesn’t make much of a difference.”

“My men can fight. Not me.” I patted my leg. “I had hoped to advise you from here. I have fought in Normandy and Paris and have experience in siege defences if Brian tries to breach your walls.”

Sitric nodded. “That will do well. And you never know,” he added, grinning. “In three days’ time, you might be well enough to fight, after all.”

“I hope that is true.” I licked my lips. “I was also thinking about your mother’s suggestion that she should speak to King Sechnall.”

Sitric laughed. “Has my mother been whispering in your ear too? She doesn’t give up. I’ll give her that.”

“I haven’t seen her since the meeting, but it seemed a good idea. Why don’t you let her go—”

“There is no need,” Sitric said. “I spoke to him myself last night. You see, my mother has a problem. She wants to be involved in everything, when really there is no need. She’s not half as clever as she thinks she is.”

Sigurd gave a chuckle at this. “She will be my problem soon. I look forward to it.”

*Not clever. Sigurd’s new problem.* How lovely to be thought of in such terms. Not that these words surprised me anymore. I kept my anger to myself and leaned against the wooden post.

“What did he say? Is he going to fight?”

Sitric shrugged. “His men are still at the camp, but I made him a generous offer, which he says he will think on. It may be that, when the fighting starts, he will hold his men back. That works for us too. But



Sechnall is a slippery snake. Even Glunairn said so. In the end, he will do what is best for himself.”

The cloud cleared, and the sun, bouncing off my armour, blinded me. I turned to shield my eyes.

“Look, Sitric!” Sigurd punched Sitric on the arm. He pointed out to sea.

Squinting, I stared too. With the clearing of the mist had come the most wondrous vision of all.

Ships. Twenty of them. They had come.

# Ulaíd

## *Rónnat*

The wind howled through the thatch, beating the door, rattling, shaking.

I sat up and stared at my hands. Still young. Still young. Covered in dirt and mud. But not fire.

My mind had cracked, just as Gráinne's had. The old prophetess. The wind had savaged my mind, the same way time ravaged flesh and bone. Today, though, it didn't feel like that... I felt myself again.

The smell of fish and boiled cabbage drifted in the air. Broth. Garlic.

I ran outside to see how this could be.

"Hello, Rónnat."

A young woman sat on a stool and stirred the pot hanging over the fire.

"Senna?"

Yes, Senna was her name. I remembered her. She was my friend. My student. I had sent her away from here, told her to go and find some place where she might be free to live as she wished.

"You should be far away by now."

Senna stared at me and set down the pot, eyes wide with excitement. "You are having a good day!" She grabbed my hands and spun me round. "Do you not remember? It doesn't matter if you don't. I returned to you months ago. I missed you."

Oh, yes. I remembered now. I had seen that too. That she would return.

"Did you find anyone? To love?"

"Several. I still prefer it here with you, skin and bone, though you are. Forgetting to eat, forgetting to clean and brush your hair."

The wind blew up again. Words whispered in my ear, and I dropped to the ground. Shaking. Screaming. Fódla stood in front of me, a baby in her

arms. *Burning. Burning. Burning.* Seven hazel trees behind her. *Burning too.*

Senna shook me by the shoulders. "Rónnat. What is it?"

"The wind. It has spoken to me again." *For the last time, it had said.*

Senna crouched down beside me and took my hands. "Rónnat, you must ignore it. You are too fragile to listen anymore. You said so yourself."

I nodded, but still pushed her back. She wanted to hold me, to pour her sympathy into me, to hold me tight to my resolve. But I couldn't.

"The threads have changed," I gasped. "I can still save her. Them."

"Rónnat... what does that mean?" Senna held my hands tighter, her green eyes finding mine. "What do you want me to do?"

"Help me to the tree."

She hauled me up, not a bother to her, for I felt myself that I had withered away, my skin sagging against flesh that had once been full and pink.

I pressed my hand against the trunk, then quickly pulled away. No, not here. *Somewhere else. Somewhere safe. Tomas knew of the crannog. He would tell the Fomorians. The witch Fomorian would break through Gobnat's spells.*

"Rathlin. I must go to Rathlin. To Colmon's land and the hawthorn tree there." *Clever.* The Fomorians did not know about Rathlin and the protective spells there, and even if they did, they wouldn't be able to undo them. Not even the Fomorian witch.

Senna frowned. "But how will you get there?"

"I will transform into a bird. I have until nightfall to return."

"No!" Senna's fingers gripped my flesh. "If you don't make it back, Gobnat's spell will kill you. It's too far. Even for you."

"I will make it back."

Senna grabbed my arm. "I cannot let you do this."

"You must, friend," I replied. "Please. You must help me. Feed me. Give me the strength I need to make this journey. If I don't make it back, when Broccan and Colmon come, tell them what I did. Tell them where they will find Fódla and Isolde."

Senna, tears streaming down her face, handed me a bowl of broth.

"I don't need to tell them. You can tell them when you return. You will return?"

"Sweet Senna. Yes. I will try."

"Not try. Promise."

I looked to the water then. The water lies, wraps words around itself. The greatest deceiver of all.

“Yes, Senna. I promise.”

I hid my frown as I said those words. For now, I was water too.

# **Clontarf**

## *Murchad*

“Are you ready, Father?”

Tairdelbach came into my tent.

“I am.” I tied my belt tight around my waist and put on the Viking cloak Ospak had given me. “Walk with me to the ships.”

My son, devoid of his usual humour and mischievous grin, followed me, silent. Broccan, who had waited outside the tent, walked behind us.

“You remember the plan?” I asked.

“Aye.”

“You and Broccan are in charge of the men guarding the campsite. Colgú and fifty of his men will form a perimeter around you. If we lose, and the Vikings break through, you and Broccan must help your grandfather escape.”

“I was thinking,” Tairdelbach said. “Why don’t you let Eocha do this? I should be fighting with you.”

I shook my head. “There is no one else I trust more than you and Broccan to save my father. The campsite is your ground. You must hold it. Do you hear me?”

A flash of disappointment swept over my son’s face. He only saw the shame in being left behind. How could I make him see that this was not the case?

“If I fall,” I said, “you are the future. My father is the past. Do you understand? You both must live.”

He nodded, then threw his arms around me.

“You will look after him?” I said to Broccan.

“Of course.” Broccan smiled. “And don’t worry. We will follow your orders.”

I took Tairdelbach once more into my arms, remembering that once his entire body had fit between the crook of my elbow and my wrist. I wished he were like that again and did not have to be here. I wished that I had kept Ireland a safer place for him and for all the young men who lined up in our camp.

“Now I go to the ships. I will see you once this is done.”

“Yes,” Tairdelbach agreed. “After.”

I walked to the beach, head lowered, holding my chin tight, so the men wouldn't notice my tears or see in my expression that I didn't want to be here. *Because I didn't.* I wanted to be with Fódla. My hands on her stomach and feeling the baby inside her. I wanted to sit by the fire with my son and his friends and hear them laugh. War, however, had me in its grasp. Only by finishing it could I ever hope for those things to be true.

\*

Our ships set sail from the River Tolga, through the mist and early enough that the Viking ships coming toward us wouldn't notice that we hadn't come from the longphort. I sat on the first of our ships with Ospak, another two ships following behind. Sea spray hit my face as the ship sliced through the waves, droplets of saltwater running into my hair and woollen hood. I'd not taken to the Viking ships the way some of my kinsmen had, but the cold water on my face did much to calm my nerves. Maybe it was being out at sea that made me feel more animal than man, more at peace with fighting here than on my home soil.

I put these thoughts from my mind. This was our first move and we had to get this right.

Glancing at our men, I hoped that the Irish among us wouldn't stand out to the Vikings sailing our way and that Ospak's men would not betray us. So far, Ospak had done all he could to assist us with my plan and had even tied his banner to our mast. Viking colours. But still, you could never be sure if the words of men matched their true intentions, and I kept a hand on my sword's hilt.

Twenty Viking ships were close now, though two of them had sailed on ahead of the rest.

Ospak cleaned his teeth with the tip of his knife, staring at these two ships, his face devoid of all emotion.

“Do you know who sails them?”

Ospak fingered a necklace around his neck, full of sharp teeth and claws. “The one with the dragon prow further out to sea belongs to Oittir. The one that has stayed closer to the shoreline is Lambi’s.”

“We will take Lambi’s ship.”

“Are you sure? He and his men have fierce reputations. His ship will be harder to take than Oittir’s.”

“It’s closer to shore, so easier for us to capture. Besides, we have three ships to take down his one.”

Ospak grunted, adjusted his course, and waved his hand in the air. The two ships behind us began to move further out to sea, as if planning to move past Lambi’s ship and toward the group of eight ships further behind.

“Why do you fight your own people?” This might not have been the best time to ask, but a sudden need to know gripped me. If he was going to turn on us, better that I know now than after we reached Lambi.

Ospak shrugged. “I stayed in Dublin for a while, and I smelled fear there. I do not like to fight for fear.”

“But your brother fights for Sitric.”

“He does, and that’s Brodir’s decision.”

“And fighting against each other isn’t a problem for you?”

“I won’t fight directly against my brother if that’s what you mean. But it doesn’t bother me to fight against other Vikings. Life isn’t what we live for. Does that make sense? We live so that we might find a glorious death.” He turned and smirked, shaking his head as he stared at the cross around my neck. “The forever life of peace you Christians dream of cannot be, for we are not a peaceful people.”

I sat back, quietening now that we were closing in on the first ship.

The Viking lord, Lambi, finely dressed and already in his chain-mail armour, held out a hand in greeting. Ospak steered so that our right side would come up alongside his ship.

Ospak cupped his hand around his mouth. “A message from King Sitric!”

Lambi waved his hand to his men, and the mast rope was loosened to bring down the yard and sail. Only the rowers were moving Lambi’s ship now and it slowed. Ospak’s men brought down our sail. We slowed too.

My men were primed. Those who rowed on the right side of the ship had shields under their benches, while those on the left side had long spears. Our second and third ship moved past us, moving behind Lambi's ship.

"What news?" Lambi asked Ospak as our ship came to a near stop beside his.

"The longphort," Ospak shouted over. "It's too full."

Lambi laughed. "I thought this King Sitric was rich and lived in a land full of trees. Could he not extend it, or have so many come he has been taken unawares?"

My spearmen stood and flung their spears forward, then my shield men made a shield wall. Each of my spearmen had thrown two or three spears before the Vikings were able to find their weapons, all still stored under their benches. The two ships that had sailed past turned, and their spearmen threw spears at Lambi's men from behind. Half of Lambi's men fell in this first wave of attack.

"Board!" I shouted. Ospak and one of his warriors each threw a hook rope onto Lambi's ship, and ten of my men jumped from our ship to theirs. I followed. We slashed and stabbed at those who ran at us, while our men from all three ships continued to throw spears. More of the Vikings fell. Lambi, the only one wearing armour, swung his axe at an Irish warrior, cleaving the Irish warrior's arm off at his shoulder. As the warrior fell, Lambi kicked him into the sea.

Eocha threw a rope from his ship to ours. I picked it up, putting it over my wrist, and then ran at Lambi, using my left sword to parry his axe while using my right to slice his leg. He thudded to the deck, and I set the loop at the end of the rope around his neck. Weighted down by his chain-mail, Lambi struggled to stand, and his eyes bulged as Eocha and his men yanked on the rope and dragged him aboard our ship.

Lambi's ship was still now. Seven of my men stood, chests heaving, but alive, while every one of the eighty Viking warriors either lay dead or wounded.

I pointed at three men lying by the keel, alive, but with spears in their legs. "Take them onto our ship. Quickly!"

Our men, grinning at our easy win, cheered and did as I told them. I said nothing to douse their smiles. I didn't tell them that our speed had won out against men tired from rowing, that we'd won because we had three ships



against their one, and that none of them, aside from Lambi, had been wearing their chain-mail armour.

“We need to get back to shore. Turn now. Hurry.”

Oittir’s ship had turned to sail toward us now. I could tell from the way his men shouted that they understood what had happened to Lambi. If we could just reach the shore before they caught up, this plan might actually work.

“Row!” I screamed, and my warriors began to row. Ospak pulled the yard rope, so the mast rose and the sail filled with wind, and we sped toward the beach at Clontarf.

\*

As soon as we dropped anchor, we ran to the beach, dragging Lambi and his three injured warriors with us. Two hundred of us against the four of them, and we jeered at Oittir who sailed closer. I could see him sizing us up. Two hundred men had been a calculated move. It had to seem enough that it might be plausible that this was the entirety of our fighting force in this area, while small enough that they would believe victory was certain.

“Act as if you don’t believe they will come,” I told my men. “Laugh. Take all the arm-rings off the warriors and pass them around. Make sure they see Lambi’s face.”

Oittir, having waited for three of the other Viking ships to catch up, sailed closer to the shore. Their sails were down now, the men rowing the only thing propelling them forward. He stared at us, then at Lambi and the three Viking men with swords to their necks.

“Cowards!” Oittir roared at us.

“No. It is you who are cowards,” I shouted back. “You sail toward your high walls when we are all here waiting for you.” I raised my sword in the air. “Why do you run?”

The men behind me cheered, raising their swords too.

“Taunt them,” I hissed. “More insults.”

Oittir glanced at his ships and the city of Dublin. So close now.

*Don’t sail on, I prayed. Wait. Wait.*

The rest of the Viking fleet rounded the corner of Howth, coming into view. Now nineteen ships stood against us instead of one.

I pointed at the new ships. "Retreat!" I shouted. "There are more of them."

I pushed Lambi into the sand, my men having stripped him naked of his armour and weapons. He crawled then ran toward the sea, waving. "Fight them!" he screamed. "Oittir! Give me a sword so I can fight them!" The other Vikings, those with spear wounds in their legs, hobbled toward the sea too, calling for the ships to stop.

I left them on the beach, while the bulk of my men ran away. Fifty remained, pretending to panic or fight over the spoils of the Viking warriors. *Chaos. The Irish had no discipline.* That's what the Viking leaders would see. And our backs. They would see them too.

In my experience, there is nothing more tantalising to an army than the sight of men running away. I dared not turn around as I reached the grassy dunes. If they sailed on to Dublin, then this whole plan would fall apart. *They had to stay. They had to fight.*

Some of my spearmen threw spears at the ships, none of them close enough to hit. Again, this was as I had told them.

*Pathetic*, the Vikings would think. *Weak.*

As I crested the hill between the dunes and the clearing, I stopped. Taking a deep breath, I turned.

*They were coming!*

All nineteen ships had lowered their sails, pulled in their oars, and dropped anchor.

"To the clearing!" I said to my men. "Shields up once they come over the dunes."

The men who were pretending to fight on the beach, I'd chosen because of their speed. They played their part well, shouting and throwing punches to see who got the chain-mail shirt and axe. As the first of the Vikings came to shore, they pulled into a messy shield wall.

I raised my hand, and another thirty of my men ran over the dunes. They threw spears to hit the Vikings. To make them angry, while allowing my men to retreat.

Oittir raised his hand, and the men from his ship jumped over the sides and into the shallows, wading through the seawater which was hip-high. Their chain-mail gleamed in the afternoon sun. They roared at us, charging forward as they left the sea behind.

All our men fled up the sandy bank, speeding away from the Vikings and their swords, and onto the grassy field where the Munster contingent of our army waited. Half of the army crouched low behind the long shield wall so the Vikings from the beach could not see them all. Two thousand we looked instead of five.

If the Vikings saw too many men over the hill, they might run back to their ships. I needed them to engage in a fight. Their two thousand to our two might still seem worth it.

Sitric would see what we were doing, though. He'd see the trap these Vikings were charging into. And with any luck, his gates would open and more of his men would flood out.

I ran to my horse, jumped onto his back, and galloped along our shield wall. The Viking men had started to come over the hill now, the men from behind pushing those in front forward, and as they realised an army awaited them, they began to put up their shields.

"Shield wall!" Oittir cried.

His men did as they were told, but confusion lit their faces, perhaps expecting to be told to retreat instead.

This was where Tadc came in. He and a hundred of our men ran out from behind a sand dune and onto the shore. Some of the men who had lain low behind the main army followed them to bolster their numbers. The Vikings could either march forward, or try to run to the sea, with an army now in front and behind them.

"Oittir," I cried. "You have come to fight us. Welcome. You have more courage than your kinsmen hiding inside the Dublin walls."

Oittir laughed. "You think we are afraid of you? One of my men is worth three of yours."

"Let's find out."

I lowered my hand, and the men of Munster moved forward, step by step, toward the Vikings.

There would be a fight now. A fierce one. We had the numbers, but they had better armour and weapons. And still, I had to hope for the city of Dublin to empty, for their numbers to grow, otherwise we'd only finish a battle today to face another one tomorrow.

I stayed at the edge of the shield wall, and despite my better judgement, glanced back at the campsite. My father's tent was on the high ground

there, and just as I expected, he was standing on the hilltop, watching the battle unfold. Father Marcán stood beside him. Both of them unmoving.

Eocha grabbed my arm. “Look, ships are leaving the longphort. Your plan is working.”

I turned toward Dublin. Ten ships had left the longphort. No, twelve.

Sails up, full of wind, they sailed toward Clontarf Bay, the warriors aboard chanting to the rhythm of the drums. Good. They came ready to fight.

I held up my hand again, to warn the warriors on the beach to leave and run into the forests. But none of them saw me. The fighting was thick on the beach, with some of the Vikings trying to get back to the ships, despite being told by Oittir to join the shield wall.

“Tadc!” I roared. “Get out of there. To the forest.”

My brother did not hear me. He was fighting. Hacking at the Vikings, who had regrouped. My brother and his men were being pushed toward the sea and had not yet seen the twelve, no, fourteen, Viking ships sailing toward them.

“Look!” Eocha hissed. “Vikings are coming by land too. The gates have opened.”

I watched the Viking men running from the city. Only around two hundred, though. Sitric had managed to keep at least three thousand within his gates. He had not completely lost his wits.

“Tadc,” I roared. “Move!”

But the sound of war was too loud, and he was surrounded by too many foes to look away from the men facing him.

“Hold the line,” I told Eocha. “If any more men leave the city, hold up your sword and I will give the signal for King Sechnall to join in.”

I ran down to the beach, both swords in my hands. The Vikings wore thick chain-mail, that was true. Swords found it hard to pierce, but cuts to the thighs, arms and neck would work as they did on any man. And so, I fought, my swords moving around me, and together we cut a path of red to my brother.

“Tadc,” I shouted. “Where are you?”

No reply came. I kept going. The drums, the shouts, the screams of the men coming into shore, all so loud it sounded out over the thud of blood in my ears.

“Tadc!”

There he was, lying on the sand. Blood everywhere. I ran toward him, cutting down the Viking in my way.

Tadc vomited as he turned, his eyes rolling. As he moved, I noticed his left arm remained where it was. *He had lost it. An axe had cut clean through.*

Blood spurted from the stump, and clumsily Tadc tried to hold the flesh with his other hand.

I grabbed hold of him, putting his good arm over my neck and ran up the beach, helping him along. My spearmen gave us cover and we made it up the dunes, just as the Vikings on the newly arrived ships disembarked.

I set Tadc down and used his belt to stymie the bleeding.

“Leave me,” Tadc said.

“No. If we can stop the bleeding, you will live.”

I pulled the belt tight, and the bleeding slowed. Glancing at the army, I saw that the newly arrived Vikings were gathering on the shore and were moving to join Oittir’s men. Eocha raised his sword in the air. More were coming from the city too. The war was on.

“You!” I shouted, pointing at two of the men in the shield wall. “Take my brother to the war camp. Find a healer immediately.”

The two young men nodded and lifted Tadc away from the battle and toward the camp.

Standing, I shouted. “Sechnall!” I waved my hand. I could see him, staring at the battle on the plain from his hiding place at the edge of the forest. “Charge!” I lifted my sword high in the air, then brought it down, just as we had agreed.

But Sechnall sat on his horse. Unmoving. Unsmiling.

*What was he doing?* This time I swung both my swords in the air. “Sechnall! Charge!”

Sechnall’s white horse moved out from the forest, his hands resting loosely on the reins.

Screams and roars filled the air behind me. All of the Viking ships had anchored now. Thousands of warriors waded to shore. This was it.

“Charge! Sechnall, it is time!”

*But still Sechnall did not move.*

# **Dublin**

## *Gormflaith*

Sitric watched the battle from the wall. He was quiet. Barely moving. Gilla, Leif and Sigurd stood with him, their faces turning paler as the day progressed. The first blow came when the Vikings sailing to Dublin fell for Murchad's trap. The second came when the Vikings who'd recently come to the city decided to sail out to save them, against Sitric's command. Now it was a bloodbath.

"Come, Sitric," Sigurd said. "We must go out now, or it is lost. We can march across the beach and take the southern flank of Murchad's army." He turned and stared at me. "Surely you agree with me, Brodir?"

"I—"

"Yes, let's go out," a quiet voice said.

I turned to find Donnchad staring at Sitric. "We should fight."

Sitric wrapped his arms around his younger brother. "I would not ask you to fight, Donnchad. King Brian is your father and Murchad is your brother. If we lose, I will tell them you've been held hostage here, and they will take you back without a second thought."

"My uncle Máelmórda is readying for a land charge," Donnchad said. "I understand what you say, but I will go with him. I want to fight."

He ran off then. "Donnchad," I shouted. "Listen to Sitric."

This made Sigurd snort. "What do you care for the boy, Brodir?"

"He is young," I said, remembering to shrug and act as if I had no fear in my heart. "Young boys don't fare well on the battlefield."

"I suppose they don't. Warriors fare better." Sigurd pushed his finger into my chest. "Your leg is looking better. Why don't you go out with Donnchad and protect him?"

“Isn’t Donnchad to be your stepson?” I snapped. “Why don’t *you* fight with him?”

“Oh, I plan on fighting. Just not with a boy at my side.”

“Hiding behind your bannerman instead?”

Sigurd snorted, then raised his hand, moving to stare into the city. “Men of Orkney. We fight.”

His men congregated by the gates, like bulls waiting to be let out of their confinement. Sigurd climbed down the ladder to join them, and with a roar, his men ran through the gates.

I watched them go, noting that Sigurd was not holding his banner yet, despite his mother’s *final words*.

“Will we not go, Sitric?” Gilla asked.

“No,” my son answered, his voice sharp. “Not us.”

Gilla began to argue his case, but I didn’t listen.

It was the next gathering of men that interested me. The men of Leinster. My brother was at the head of this army, two hundred of his men on horseback, the rest on foot. He searched the walls, finding Sitric, and shouted. “Are you not joining us, nephew?”

Sitric shook his head. “Not yet. We will wait to see where the Munster army rallies and if Sechnall joins the fray. We will join you soon.”

“If you want to be king, don’t you have to fight for it?” Máelmórda said, spitting on the ground. “Isn’t that what you Vikings have told me at every feast I’ve ever attended? *We follow the strong, not a bloodline.*”

“I will be out when the time is right. Hopefully I won’t need to save you from Murchad again. Don’t crawl away from him this time. I think I might let him keep you if you do that.”

Quickly, I climbed down the steps and walked over to Máelmórda, pretending to fix the reins of his horse.

“Máelmórda, it’s me,” I whispered. “Gormflaith.”

I touched his hand and summoned my fire-magic. Not enough to burn him, but enough to prove who I was.

“Couldn’t bear to stay out of the action?” he asked, holding back a laugh.

“Something like that. The fact Ulf decided to kill Brodir didn’t help.”

Máelmórda whistled. “Where are they now?”

“Deep underground where no one will ever find them. But enough of that. Donnchad said he is riding out with you.”

“He isn’t. I told him to stay behind. He’s in the house with Tomas.”

“Are you sure? He was dressed in his armour when he spoke.”

Máelmórda turned around, searching for his nephew. “Donnchad! Are you here?”

No response came from the men behind him.

“See. He’s not here. He just said that to Sitric to act brave. There is no way he truly wants to fight.” He gave me a grim smile. “We are going to break through the army and ride to the war camp. I want to kill Brian. Murchad and Tadc, too. Broccan if I can find him. But Brian first.”

“Tadc’s banner has already fallen,” I said, smiling.

“Even better. I’ll replace his name with Tairdelbach’s. One man for every generation. Like plucking the leaves from a shamrock.” The gate clicked open, and he urged his horse forward. “Wish me luck.”

I moved back to the walls, watching as the men of Leinster rode out of the city. Those on foot ran, half moving over the sandy beach toward the Munster army, the rest making for the bridge over the River Tolga that was situated closer to Brian’s war camp. Dubgall’s Bridge they called it in Dublin, named after Amlav’s third son who had built it during his brief stint as king after Glunairn’s death.

It didn’t take long for the Orkney warriors and half of the Leinster army to reach the battlefield. King Brian’s army came to meet them. Those who had hidden initially from the Vikings were fighting now and they ran to form a new shield wall so as to hold back the new wave of warriors. From here, the numbers looked even. The nine thousand that Brian was rumoured to have were not on the battlefield. More like five or six thousand. With the Viking warriors from Wessex, the Leinster army, and Sigurd’s men, already we outnumbered Brian. If only Sitric would unleash his Dublin forces, victory would be a certainty.

“When do you fight, Sitric?” I asked.

Sitric shrugged.

This surprised me. He wasn’t usually so dispassionate, his pride kept so in check.

“The Vikings sailed out of the city into an obvious trap, despite me telling them not to. I don’t think it is my duty to save them. Besides, they may still win, even without my help. Sechnall has not entered the battlefield and I don’t see any of the Connacht banners either. Perhaps they left during the night.”

“You are waiting then?”



“Maybe. I haven’t decided. Maybe I won’t fight at all.”

“If you don’t go, there is a bigger chance you will lose. Won’t King Brian punish you if that is the case? Surely it is in your interest to secure a victory.”

“A siege with one thousand warriors will be just as hard to break as with ten thousand. Harder, actually. A small city with so many men can fall to infighting and chaos. With only my men here, we will manage. Our ships are still in the longphort. Safe.”

“But what—”

“Brodir,” Sitric snapped. “That’s enough. You’re asking too many questions. It’s like having my mother up here.”

“Thank God she isn’t,” Gilla muttered under his breath.

I leaned against the wall, holding my tongue, and watched my brother. Half of Máelmórda’s horsemen rode toward the camp, while the other half and the Leinster foot soldiers joined forces with Sigurd and moved into an arrowhead formation. With an attack this shape, they hoped to break the Munster line.

“I think our men will take theirs,” Leif said, also noting the shape Sigurd’s forces had taken. “There is no way the Irish will be able to keep up with our men once they break through the line. They already look tired.”

Sitric shrugged, his eyes roving around the battlefield. “Look. There is Sechnall. He’s in the forest. Past the beach where the Vikings landed.”

“Do you think he will join?” Leif asked.

“He hasn’t so far.”

“He’s my uncle,” Gilla added. “I don’t—”

The gates creaked open and Sitric leaned over the wall to see who it had opened for. “Don’t let anyone else out, I told you,” he shouted down at the men.

“It was a Leinsterman,” his warrior replied.

I looked over the wall. *Shit*. It was Donnchad. Stupid boy. Running toward the battle on foot, not even thinking of getting a horse.

“Gilla,” Sitric said, rolling his eyes. “Fetch Donnchad back before he hurts himself. If this goes badly, we’ll need him as a hostage.”

Gilla sighed but did as he was told and climbed down the ladder.

“I will go too,” I said. “I need to get out of the city. See what’s happening for myself.”

Sitric barely registered what I said and gave the smallest of nods.

I ran to the stables after Gilla, waited for the stableboys to ready me a horse, and then rode out of the gates. Donnchad had run fast, already over Dubgall's Bridge and onto the beach. Halfway to the battlefield. Gilla and I rode hard to catch him.

"Come back," Gilla shouted as we came within earshot. We were on the beach now, the sand flooding over with seawater as the tide returned. The horses' hooves splashed the water up over my hair and cloak, and as we moved further onto the beach, the water moved up the horses' legs, limiting them to a trot.

"No," Donnchad shouted back. "Return to the city if you want to. I'm staying."

Gilla dismounted, ran, and grabbed Donnchad by the collar. "It is only that Sitric is watching that I'm not killing you for being such a petulant fool. Get on the fucking horse and stay on it."

Donnchad tried to wrestle out of his grasp, but Gilla held him tight.

"Get off," Donnchad snapped. "What do you care about me, anyway? Let go."

"I care because, if we lose, we need to have hostages to bargain with. Your whore mother started this war. If needs be, you can end it."

Without thinking, I rode my horse toward Gilla and took out Brodir's sword. Light as a feather it was with my muscled hand, and I thrust it through Gilla's neck. I had such strength in these arms that my sword pierced his pink flesh with ease. Gilla fell onto the sand in a heap, his body submerged by the sea.

Donnchad stepped back, and within his fists, balls of fire grew.

"It is me, Donnchad. Your mother. Put the fire away." I held out my hand and let a small flame dance there. "I've transformed."

Donnchad straightened his tunic, took a breath, then took hold of Gilla's horse.

"Come back to the city," I said.

"No."

"Why? What are you doing out here, Donnchad? It's dangerous."

"It's dangerous, and I am a coward, and so I couldn't possibly want to be here." He licked his lips. "Isn't that what you think?"

"I... I don't think that. I..."

Donnchad mounted the horse. "Well, I am not. And I will prove it." He glanced at the beach we had just run across and at the waves flooding in. It

reached the horses' thighs now. If we didn't leave soon, they'd have to swim home.

"Come back, Donnchad. Please."

"No. You say I am a coward, but it is you who is a coward. Fomorian. Witch. Now in a warrior body, and still you want to hide behind the walls. You say that no one takes you seriously, but here you are, able to fight and you won't."

"I do want to..." My mind stuck. Words wouldn't come. This was not the Donnchad I knew. Not the one who clung to his father, who pissed himself when surrounded by my fire.

"Then follow."

Donnchad urged his horse forward, not toward the battle, but toward King Brian's camp, and I raced after him.

Máelmórda's charge toward the camp had failed. I could see that from here. The Leinster banners had fallen, and dead men littered the ground. Some of the tents were on fire, but not enough to allow the flames to spread.

I scanned the camp for signs of Máelmórda but could not see him. Some men in the Leinster colours were running toward Dubgall's Bridge. Retreating toward Dublin already. Chasing after them were a hundred or so Munster warriors.

Another smaller group of Leinster warriors ran onto the beach, not having noticed that the tide was in and was now surging into the river. Even the salmon weirs were flooded over. A few of the men tried to swim to get across to Dublin – none of them my brother.

A contingent of Munster warriors followed these men to the beach. The Leinster warriors who couldn't swim were trying to wade into the sea, or else fell into the river and were quickly pierced by the Munster spears and swords.

As we approached the river, Donnchad slowed, his gaze on two men wearing the Munster colours who had run from the camp to the river. "Protect the king! Return to your positions," one of these men shouted.

It was Tairdelbach. His friend, the warrior Descendant, Broccan, ran beside him.

Now the Leinster warriors were dead, the men did as they were commanded and ran up the hill toward the tents.

"Hurry," Broccan shouted at the men. "Off the beach!"

Donnchad took this moment to wave at Tairdelbach. "Tairdelbach," he shouted. "It's me! Donnchad!"

"What are you doing? He is with a Descendant," I said through gritted teeth, but my son didn't answer me.

Tairdelbach waved Donnchad over to him. "Quickly. Off the beach. The tide is coming in."

Broccan held out his arm and stood in front of Tairdelbach. "No. He could be here to hurt you."

Tairdelbach pushed Broccan's hand aside and shook his head. "You wouldn't do that, would you, Donnchad? I know you."

"Why didn't you come for me?" Donnchad asked, his voice turning quiet.

Tairdelbach moved onto the beach, wading closer to us so that the seawater reached his knees. Then he stopped, still a good distance away. "Sitric had you in his city, Donnchad. There was no way to get to you."

"You left me. No messengers came. Not even one."

Broccan followed his friend, pushing Tairdelbach behind him. "Get away from him!" he shouted. "He's going to kill you."

Donnchad held out his hand and suddenly the water surrounding Tairdelbach dragged him under. The current pulled him to where the river and sea met, and flung his body against the wooden spokes of a salmon weir.

Broccan ran to his friend. Using his warrior strength, he pulled hard enough that Tairdelbach's head came out of the water. Tairdelbach gasped for air.

*What a transformation in my son.* I couldn't quite believe it. When had this happened? I had been so busy with everything else that I hadn't spent any time with him since Fennit Island. A mistake. I would rectify that once we returned to the city.

I held out my hand too. Using my gift, seaweed and river moss wrapped around Broccan's feet and dragged him back, his hands slipping away from Tairdelbach. Donnchad's water-magic swirled around Tairdelbach again and dragged him back under.

"Tairdelbach!" Broccan screamed, trying to move his feet from the weeds holding him firm. The sludge-like sand gripped his feet too, pulling him down. I used all my might to hold him, for his strength was immense, so forceful that the sand and seaweed couldn't hold him.

Donnchad saw this and lifted his hand. A huge wave of water smashed against Broccan, so that he was flung against the salmon weir. One of the sharp wooden spokes pierced through his side, and blood poured from the wound, but still he screamed for Tairdelbach. Still, he tried to fight against the water holding him against the spoke and help his friend.

Donnchad turned his attention back to Tairdelbach and held him down under the water, forcing him tighter against the weir. Tairdelbach's hands grasped at the wood, legs kicking... until he stopped moving.

Broccan screamed. He lunged forward, pulling his body from the wooden stake, and he ran to Tairdelbach, pulling his body from the water. "Tairdelbach," he shouted. "Wake up."

Donnchad dismounted and, as he did so, he turned. This time, it was fire that danced in his hand, not water, and he flung it at Broccan. Fomorian flames danced on Broccan's skin, screams of anguish mixed with tears of pain filled the air and he disappeared underneath the water.

"Donnchad, be careful," I said. "People will see."

"What do we care about that? That was the last warrior Descendant, isn't that what you said? Now he is dead."

*He was right.* The warrior Descendant floated atop the waves now. Beside Tairdelbach. Hands brushing against each other. Both of their eyes shut.

Dismounting my horse, I ran as fast as Brodir's body would allow over the soft sand, but Donnchad kept ahead. Running now toward Brian's camp.

"Donnchad," I panted. "What are you doing?"

"Murchad's banner has fallen. So has Tadc's. Now Tairdelbach is dead. The only one left in my path to become King of Munster is my father."

"Donnchad." This time, I lunged forward and was just about able to grab him. "I... I don't understand?"

"You don't understand that someone might be as clever as you? That after years of watching your schemes, I might have some of my own?"

Incredulous, I let him go, then ran after him up the hill, though I could not keep up, the chain-mail armour weighing me down, while his long, thin legs ate up the ground.

By the time I made it to Brian's tent, Donnchad was already inside. "Father," I heard him say. "I escaped."

I peered through the tent in time to see Brian walk toward his son. He had grown so white-haired, even in the eight months we had been apart.

Standing up from his knees where he had been praying, he gave a cry of joy as he embraced his son.

“Donnchad,” he said. “I am glad you have come to me. The warriors who broke through. They killed Marcán. And my men tell me that Murchad’s banner has fallen. I do not think I can bear it.”

“It is all right, Father. I am here now.”

“You must go out and tell me what you see. Do you remember that, once before, you told me what was happening? I must ask that of you again.”

“There is nothing to tell you, Father. Murchad is dead. Tairdelbach too.”

Brian sank to his knees, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“Did you cry these tears for me, Father, when I followed Máelmórda and did not return to you?”

Brian wiped his cheek, his hands shaking. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I mean, did you sob like this when you thought I was dead?”

Brian stared at his son, his eyes hardening.

“You don’t have to shame yourself by lying. I know you didn’t. Your plan for me was a life in a monastery. I would be as good as dead there anyway. Silent and forever out of the way.” Donnchad thrust his sword into his father’s stomach. Brian fell to the floor in a heap, his eyes unbelieving, until suddenly he saw it. The ambition in his own son’s eyes, perhaps mirroring the ambition that had once been in his. He fell back onto the cushion he had prayed upon, his final breath leaving him. A quick death for the great war chief of Ireland. Quicker than many of the others who fought today.

*Too quick.*

“Congratulations, son,” I said, entering the tent. “You are truly worthy.”

“Thank you, Mother.”

I ran toward him, opening my arms. Finally, I had a son I could be proud of. Finally, a Fom—

Donnchad swung around and plunged his sword into my stomach, the same place he had pierced his father. The blade moved deep inside, and then turning it, he pulled it out. It burned. The pain and blood, hot and wet, poured down my skin.

“Why, Donnchad?” I gasped. “I came to help you.”

“No, you didn’t. You came to help yourself.”

Scowling, he kicked me out of the tent. Five Munster warriors ran toward us and stopped wide-eyed as I fell to the ground. “Brodir has killed my father,” Donnchad screamed, piercing me again with his sword. *My thigh.* Whirling his sword over his head, he launched another attack. This time I grabbed Brodir’s sword and met his blade, pushing him back. Then I stumbled away.

The Munster warriors ran to Donnchad. “The king is in the tent,” I heard my son sob. “Brodir killed him. That’s why I escaped Dublin. To try to save my father. But I was too late.”

Two of the men rallied around Donnchad, but the other three gave me chase. Half falling down the hill, I hobbled into the sea. I wouldn’t make it back. I couldn’t run. The warriors would catch me.

*Fool woman. You are a witch... and a witch can fly.*

I flung my body into the sea, letting the current sweep me out, away from the warriors and their swords. Using my gift, I transformed into a seagull and squeezed myself out from under the sinking armour.

Breaking through the surface of the water, I flapped my wings, and rose into the sky.

# Travelling to Ulaid

## *Fódla*

Ruádgán galloped along the path. The morning had turned to afternoon and the midday sun had a heat to it that usually did not come until the summer. A good day for travelling, and yet I already felt weary. Perhaps I should have rested for longer during the night? I was far enough away from the battlefield that I need not have worried about a quick departure, but a desire to see my sister had taken over.

Yes, I would rest awhile. A grouping of hazel trees up ahead looked perfect, and I made my way there.

“Come on, Ruádgán,” I said, brushing my hands against his mane. “Over there.”

Ruádgán veered from the path and trotted over the heather and bracken. This wasn’t good ground for galloping, too full of hare warrens, but a clever horse like Ruádgán knew this and slowed his speed accordingly. A sharp pain tugged at my insides, and I rubbed my hand over the baby. She was agitated, moving more than usual. I rubbed my stomach, touching the part close to where her head rested, hoping to soothe her.

But her heartbeat only quickened and the muscles around her rippled, squeezing tight before relaxing. She was afraid. It was her thought, but faint. I smiled, glad that once again I could hear her voice, even though her emotion was fear.

“Yes, little one,” I said. “There is not much room for you in there. But do not worry. Soon...”

The tightening happened again, but this time it was not her moving. It was my womb. Contracting. *She was coming.*

I dismounted once the pain had passed, then walked with Ruádgán toward the trees. The walking would help. The rhythm of my hips would



help her move downward.

Once I made it to the trees, I let go of Ruádgán's reins and lay against the trunk. Using a fur to lie on, I removed my dress, keeping only my shift on. Not a moment too soon, for as I sat again, a trickle of liquid ran down my thighs.

Another contraction. Still far apart. It might be some time before she came, so I settled back against the trunk.

The sun shone brightly, catching the wings of the golden eagle I'd noticed earlier. It flew away now, back to the sea, leaving me alone with the crows and swallows.

As the contractions subsided, I rubbed my stomach. Soon I would see my daughter... but what life was I bringing her into?

With Aoife, I'd birthed her with such certainty. She would be powerful with a gift. She would be safe. Loved. I knew nothing of the mortal wars. Nothing of the world at all.

In the end, none of those things came to pass. She had not been safe, not loved by her father, not had a gift. War and chaos and loneliness had found her, no matter my intentions.

And what of this daughter?

I had not called my daughter by her name yet. The one Rónnat had told me. Isolde. I did not want the things Rónnat told me to be true. One daughter to defeat death, the other to defeat fire.

A daughter destined to defeat fire would not be safe. She would be powerful, yes. She would be loved. But never safe.

I felt inward with my gift. *Isolde, it is time to wake up.*

She moved, responding to the name. She liked it. Her fear began to fade.

*Don't worry, Isolde. I will help you always. You do not need to be afraid.*

# Clontarf

## *Murchad*

The fighting continued for hours. Shield wall to shield wall. Our spears finding their necks and legs, their swords and axes slicing at our arms and chests. We fought bravely, but without Sechnall joining the fray, they had the numbers. Our men fell, the beach and meadow full of the dead. *And still Sechnall did not come to our aid.*

I looked out over the clearing. After hours of fighting in the shield wall, many of the Munster banners had fallen. The colours of the King of Corco Bascind had gone, as had the colours of the Ciarraige Luachra and the Déisi Muman. My own banner had fallen too. Pátraic and the men of Killaloe had fought under it when I left to help Tadc, and I knew in my heart that they were dead. Five thousand Munster men now stood at closer to two thousand, such were our losses.

Bile swirled in my stomach. *So many men dead, and for what?* Sitric had not left his walls. Sechnall had not left the forest. It was the men of Munster and Connacht who fought for this country, while those from the other kingdoms watched on or deserted us as we bled.

Still, my plan was working. The tide was coming in, enough that it had flooded the sand passage between Clontarf and Dublin. We only needed another half hour or so before it would become so deep that wading across would be impossible, but I didn't think the men in the shield wall could hold on for that long. We were exhausted. Our legs weary, our arms tired.

What could I do? I stared over the clearing and then into the forest. Pride had failed me before. *I wouldn't let it fail me again.*

I ran toward the forest. Mere minutes away, I struggled to keep my legs moving, so heavy did they feel. But I didn't care for my pain. Sechnall's

three thousand men would turn this battle. My men's lives depended on him.

"Sechnall," I said once I reached him. "You must join us, or all is lost."

Sechnall had the decency to look shamefaced but said nothing.

"Whatever Sitric has offered you, know this, if we don't win today, all of Ireland will be lost and we will be taken as slaves again. Is this the legacy you want to leave? That you watched while this happened, when you could have stopped it? That the shine of gold took precedence over the lives of your people?"

I wiped my face, wiping blood and sweat from my brow. He didn't say a word.

"I am going back to fight for our future. I hope you join us as you promised."

Sword in the air, I ran to rejoin the men. I could see from this higher ground that Sigurd's men had broken through our shield wall. *My men were dying.* Without the protection of the shields, our bull-hide armour was no match for the Vikings' chain-mail. Our spears no use against the swords and axes of the Northmen.

"Sechnall," I shouted, turning once more. "Now!"

I couldn't bear to watch him. To see the decision dance in his eyes, so I turned and tightened my grip on my two swords.

Then I heard it. The thud of horses' hooves as Sechnall's forces ran to meet Sigurd's men. They crashed through the Viking shield wall first, trampling warriors underfoot. Further along the line, the Vikings fell back to make way for the horses. For the first time, I could see fear in the Vikings' faces. Running further up the hill, so all could see me, I shouted.

"Men of Norway, Sweden and Orkney, you came to fight for your kinsman, Sitric Silkbeard." I pointed to the Dublin walls. "Look, there he stands. He will not fight with you, so why should you fight for him?"

As I spoke, Sechnall's warriors charged into the main body of the Orkney army. The warriors of Meath on foot continued to run through the gap the horses had opened in the Viking wall and formed a new line in front of ours. New blood. Fresh arms hacked at the Viking warriors. The fighting continued, bloody and frantic. A handful of the Viking men, weary from fighting and fearful of the Meath charge, ran to the beach. Then another handful. Then a hundred.

As they ran away from the clearing and over the dunes, I heard them cry out as they realised that their ships were too far out for them to reach.

“To the city,” I heard some of them shout.

But the tide had come in now, almost at full height, fully covering the beach path back to the city.

“To the bridge,” another called out.

I watched as they ran. Would the King of Connacht hold his nerve and stop the Viking retreat from making it across? I prayed like never before that the Connacht army would do as they promised.

Heart pounding, I couldn’t look away. The Viking men running, a trickle at first, then a stream.

*Please, men of Connacht, come to our aid. Do not break your word.*

As those words ran through my mind, the Connacht warriors ran from the forest to the bridge. *They had come.* The Connacht warriors threw their spears at the Vikings, but once they reached the riverbank, they fought with their swords, forming a line between the Viking retreat and the bridge. The Munster army chased after the Vikings too, and both Munster and Connacht forces hacked at our enemy from both sides.

Other Vikings ran to the sea, trying to swim to their ships. They did not know the currents here and the tide swept them out and pulled them under. Soon the sea was covered with bodies of men who could swim no more.

*We had won.*

My relief was interrupted by shouting from the campsite, and I turned.

*Was that Donnchad there?*

Some of the warriors who’d been left to guard the campsite had him on their shoulders. One raised his arm in the air. My stomach sank. He was my brother, yes, but Fódla had told me what he truly was. *A Fomorian.* Why had he come to our campsite? To help us... or to cause harm?

I ran toward the campsite. To my father’s tent. To Tairdelbach.

Fatigue seeped into every part of me as I ran over the hill, but I could not stop until I had found my father and son. I came to a stop as soon I reached the perimeter. Our dead lay on the ground. Warriors wearing the Leinster colours lay beside them. Máelmórda had come here. Coward that he was, he’d come to fight the old men and young boys while our warriors stood ready on the clearing.

“Father!” I shouted, running toward his tent.

“Father! Tairdelbach!”

I opened the tent door to find my father on the ground. His cloak was stained red, from blood that had poured from his stomach, though it had stopped now, congealing where he lay.

“Oh, Father.” I kneeled beside him, holding up his head with my hands. He was dead. I sat with him, holding his hand. A numbness grew inside me, shock, at discovering this giant among men was no longer with us.

A warrior ran into the room. It was Colgú.

“What happened?” I asked him.

“Brodir of the Isle of Man came into the tent and killed your father. Your brother, Donnchad, fought him off and pierced him twice with his sword.”

“Where is Tadc?”

“In the healer’s tent.”

“Is he conscious?”

“I do not know, Murchad.”

“Bring him to me if he is. I need to speak with him.”

Colgú nodded but did not leave right away. “Murchad. There is something else.”

# **Dublin**

## *Gormflaith*

I crashed through the opening in the thatch of Tomas' house, transforming once I hit the floor. Flying had been an agony with the wound in my side, worse than childbirth ten times over. I stared down at myself, my pale skin stained red from my breasts to my knees.

"Tomas!" I shouted. "Get Neasa."

The druid got up from the chair and stared at me. Eyes cold. "Who did this to you?"

"Donnchad," I spat. *To all the gods that claimed ownership of this earth, why did men ask such stupid questions?* "Neasa, where are you?"

The Descendant healer came running over, gasping when she saw me.

"Máelmórda would owe you such a debt," I said, breathless, "if you were to heal me."

She nodded, eyes widening at the thought of earning her true love's praise. She knelt beside me and reached for my leg.

"No, fool. The wound in my side. The blade pierced my stomach. I'm sure of it."

My insides burned. Amlav had always told me that a wound to the stomach caused the bile in your belly to seep out. He said it killed a warrior slow and from the inside, which was why men prayed to die a clean death on the field.

Neasa's hands moved to my side, and I lay there, waiting to feel better. It took many hours, but as the time passed, the intensity of the pain faded.

"The tear to your stomach is healed," Neasa said, smiling. "All that is left is the flesh wound. I should be strong enough to heal it once I rest."

I gripped her hand. "Heal my leg now. I don't want to limp about like an old crone."

“But it will drain me.”

“Do it. Or I will tell Máelmórda you were unfaithful to him.”

“No,” she sobbed. “Please don’t. I would never. I promise.”

“If you don’t want me to say anything, do as I ask. Heal my leg. Now.”

Her trembling hands moved back to my leg, as she snivelled like the most pathetic of beaten dogs.

More time passed, and soon my leg improved. Neasa’s eyes began to close as she held me.

“You need to let her rest now or she will die,” Tomas said, his voice empty of emotion.

“Take her away then.”

He came over and carried her to the bed, where his own Descendant lover lay. The harpist. What was her name again? Margo or Marga. She lifted the blanket for Neasa and tucked her in.

I stood, using the table to steady myself. There, it wasn’t so bad now. I could walk. Just about. No running or fighting, but I could get by without anyone knowing what had happened. I had fallen, was all I needed to say. Bruised my knee. No one would even question it, for old women fell all the time.

“Go and fetch my dress and cloaks,” I said to Tomas. “You will find them in my house. Under the furs on my bed.”

Tomas left and I cleaned myself with a cloth and bowl of water which I warmed with my fire-magic, ridding my skin of the stains of blood and the stench of feathers.

\*

Once I was dressed and ready, I made my way outside. Squinting in the low evening sun, I could see that Sitric still stood atop the walls, watching out over Clontarf Bay. Fearing the ladder would be too much for me, I shouted up at him. “How does the battle fare?”

“Why don’t you come up and see for yourself?”

Cursing inwardly, I moved to the ladder and slowly, step by step, made my way up, holding my tongue, lest I scream with the pain. The wound in my side ached as much as my leg, but I kept going and finally made it to the last step.

Sitric didn't even help me up over the edge. Instead, I had to crawl over the top.

"Brian's men tricked us again," Sitric said. "He fought us until the tide flooded back in over the sand passage and then had the Connacht army block the bridge. The Vikings who tried to flee were all drowned or killed as they made for the bridge. Your brother's men have met the same fate. All the Leinster banners are gone."

I followed the line of his gaze. The battlefield was a scar of red on the land.

"What of the Munster army?"

"Thousands of them are dead, too. Maybe a thousand of the Munster army survived. Probably not that many. Only twenty of the Connacht men survived the fight at the bridge. Sechnall joined late, waiting I suppose to see which side was going to win. I believe most of his men survived."

"That sounds like Sechnall." I rubbed my side. "He always makes sure he comes out best."

Sitric nodded, then looked back into the city and waved at one of the slave women walking close by. "Lirith," he shouted. "Tell Sláine I want her."

The slave ran off.

"What do you want Sláine for? She won't want to see this."

"She won't. But she must."

*What was wrong with Sitric?* He was so calm. Not like himself at all, neither full of joy nor melancholy. Always one or the other. And this strange desire for Sláine to see the battlefield. This was unlike him too. He was usually so wary of her, so eager to please.

I waited with him in silence until Sláine climbed up the ladder, shaking. She looked at her feet as she came over the top, refusing to look over the walls. "I hear the Viking army has lost, husband," she said. "I am sorry for you."

"Are you?"

She said nothing.

"I didn't think so. Do you want to see what your betrayal has done?"

He turned her toward the sea and gently lifted her chin. Her eyelids flickered, and tentatively she opened them and stared at the dead bodies floating there.



Of her own accord, she turned and looked out over the clearing too. There she saw the thousands of men lying dead. Tears streamed down her cheeks. “You are the one who brought war to our door. You dare to blame me for this?”

“All the men who came to fight for us are dead, wife. Because you betrayed me and sent word to Murchad. Don’t deny it.”

“I won’t deny it. But it was you who betrayed me first.”

Sitric tutted. “I’ve never betrayed you. Not once.”

“Then tell me, why it is that Ragnall looks so like you?”

“Ragnall?”

“Freya’s baby. He looks more like you than any of ours. He’s yours. I know it.”

Sitric shook his head. “I’ve never slept with anyone else since we’ve been married. Never even thought of it.”

Sláine snatched her hand away. “The Vikings who came here have gone to their inheritance. To their precious sea and to their Thor. I will not cry any tears for them.” She wiped her cheeks and steadied her chin. “You talked of family and of love, but this is what you have done to us. Where are my father and brothers? Are they alive? Do you even know?”

Sobbing, she moved to the ladder and climbed down, refusing to look at Sitric.

“Do not despair, my son,” I said, once she left. “The Vikings who came to fight are all dead, but so are most of those who fought against you. You kept your own forces inside the city walls. And what is left of Brian’s army hasn’t the strength to stand against you now. Negotiate and bring about a peace.” I smiled. “The high-kingship can still be yours.”

“Really? Have you not heard the rumours? They say King Brian, Murchad and Tairdelbach are dead and that Tadc has lost an arm. I’ve also heard that Donnchad made his way to the Munster camp, killed your friend Brodir, and named himself as the new High King and King of Munster. I know you asked me to fight against your husband. Do you want me to fight against your other son, too?”

*No. I did not.* I intended to punish Donnchad myself.

“Donnchad is not yet fourteen. The Brehon laws state that you must be sixteen to be king. I believe other candidates will put their name forward to be king. But in truth, it doesn’t matter who the King of Munster is. That kingdom is all but destroyed.”

Sitric nodded, his face still muted. What was this? Why no cheering? The Vikings were dead, yes, but none of his own people... well, aside from Gilla, and no one would shed any tears for him.

“No tears, Mother?” he said suddenly. “If not for Brian, then for Sigurd and your brother?”

I narrowed my eyes. I had forgotten the part I was playing. Shaking my head, I frowned. “Where do you think I’ve been these last hours? Just because I do not cry in front of you, does not mean that I don’t suffer.”

Sitric pointed out over the wall. “It seems some of your suffering was in vain.”

I looked over the outer wall. There he was. Máelmórda. Covered in gore and blood, but still walking. The only one who had made it over the bridge. His warrior gift had helped him, no doubt. Still, none of his men had made it with him.

“Never bet against Máelmórda to survive,” Sitric said, moving to stand beside me. “All his men are dead, and yet he walks to our gate, with not even a scratch or a limp. I wonder how many of his own men he pushed onto the Connacht blades so that he might live.”

\*

I met Máelmórda at the gate and led him toward his house.

“How are you, brother?” I asked, pushing my body underneath his arm so I appeared to take his weight.

“As good as can be expected when my whole army is dead,” he answered, his voice as grim as I’d ever heard it.

“What happened?”

“Tairdelbach and that warrior Descendant. They had the perimeter so well defended we could not get past.”

“Donnchad followed you out,” I said in a low voice. “He used his water-magic to kill Tairdelbach, then ran to Brian’s tent and killed him. I followed him, disguised as Brodir, though he knew it was me. Once he killed Brian, he tried to kill me.”

“He turned on us then.”

“You don’t sound surprised.”

“He is strong with his gift. I noticed that. His idea to use his water-magic at Fennit Island to collapse the water-tunnel, it surprised me. I think he’s been hiding much of his thoughts and ambitions from us for a long time.”

I could only agree. My youngest son, the one I thought of as weak and cowardly, was an unknown. How long had he played a part for? How long had he plotted against me? I had been too absorbed in my other schemes to notice.

As we turned the corner, a golden eagle landed on the roof of Tomas’ house. When I opened the door, it flew inside and Máelmórda closed the door.

Tomas stared at the eagle, startled by its sudden appearance.

Smirking, I used my magic and transformed Olaf back into himself.

“Gormflaith,” he said, covering his face with his hands. “I am truly sorry for what I did. I don’t know why—”

“Enough,” I snapped, not wanting to hear another grovelling apology. It turned my stomach to see him as pathetic as Neasa. “What news?”

“In the camp. I saw a woman, Finsha. She is heavily pregnant and I overheard her talking to Murchad. They married in secret, I discovered. He sent her away before the battle. She is valuable, no? This is who you wanted.”

“Finsha?” Máelmórda said. “This is Fódla? She survived Fennit Island?”

“It appears so. She ran away from me when I found her in the courtyard. She must have swum across to the mainland before Brodir’s men surrounded the fortress.”

Máelmórda removed his armour, already disinterested.

I had not told him of Ethla’s dream. Dared I share it? No, I dared not. It would only reveal my fragility, that Donnchad had already pricked at. I stared over at my brother, muddy and covered in blood as he was, though none of it was his. “We should find her and kill her now. Before she breeds and more Descendants are alive in the world who we do not control.”

Olaf grinned, eyes shining with desperation for my approval. “I followed her. She has stopped to birth her baby, but don’t worry, I know where that is.”

Máelmórda clicked his tongue, shrugging. “You really want to leave now? Shouldn’t we try to bring Donnchad back into the fold first?”

Back into the fold? That little coward had tried to kill me. Did Máelmórda think so little of my life that words of forgiveness were already

on his tongue? But rather than scold, I teased. Donnchad could wait. It was this daughter of Fódla that I needed to kill now, for I knew in my heart it was a girl. I had to kill her while she was too young to fight back.

“You don’t think you can handle a woman and a newborn and return in time for the negotiations between Sitric and Donnchad? You have the warrior gift, but to wield it, you must find your courage.”

Máelmórda frowned. “Do not provoke me, Gormflaith. It is not my son who tried to kill me. We each of us have our faults.”

“Come then. Olaf can lead the way. Can’t you, Olaf?”

“Of course, Gormflaith. Anything for you. You need only ask.”

“Tomas you must come too. Bring the potions. And thank you, Olaf, for bringing this news to me.”

Olaf smiled, grateful for my words, but before he could spew any more compliments, I held out my hand and turned him back to an eagle. “Once we have our horses readied, you can show us the way.”

Waiting for Tomas to open the door, I found my good cloak, the one I had stashed under Máelmórda’s bed, and put it on, feeling for the knife sewn into the hem at the bottom. I could sense the magic within the blade, the blade that could steal gifts... almost as if it knew I planned to use it.

# Clontarf

## *Murchad*

I did not believe Colgú right away. I didn't even believe it when Colgú and his men carried Tairdelbach and Broccan into my father's tent. They left quickly, not wanting to be with me when I saw the truth of their words.

*Tairdelbach.* I stared at my son. His face. So perfect. How could it be that he was gone? I fell beside him, my legs unable to hold my weight, and I pulled him to me, held him in my arms. If tears could have brought him back to life, then surely, he would have woken.

Tadc and Eocha came into the tent, though I didn't know how much time had passed. My brother was bandaged and weak, but still alive. Eocha limped, his thigh sliced open just above the knee. The two of them kneeled beside me, their tears joining mine. "I am sorry, brother," Tadc said. "We should lay him beside our father."

"I can't. I can't let him go." I held him even tighter. He was my boy. *My baby.* I rested his head against my chest, feeling his soft cheeks against my skin. "I am so sorry, Tairdelbach. Sorry you are gone, and I couldn't do better for you. I tried. God knows I tried, and still I failed."

Tadc and Eocha, leaving me to grieve alone, moved over to where Broccan lay. "Why is Bróg burned?" my brother muttered to Eocha.

Wiping my eyes, I looked over. Broccan's arms and face were red and blistered.

*Why was that?*

The redness of his burns tugged at me, bringing me out of my grief. How could he be so badly burned when fighting by the sea? Fódla's warning came back to me. The three Fomorians with their fire-magic that she had warned me about. Donnchad being one of them.

“Bróg is still breathing,” Eocha said as he set a pillow under Broccan’s head and reached for a bowl of water to pour onto his skin. “But for how long with burns like this?”

“I am... I can...” Broccan muttered. *The warrior blood in him had kept him alive.* The fire had not burned enough of him to kill him, and the gaping wound to his side was not deep enough to be fatal.

“Broccan, who did this to you?” I asked.

His mouth moved only a little, so weak was he. “Donnchad. Water-magic pulled Tairdelbach under. A Viking used witch-magic to fight... me. Gormflaith... I think. Fire-magic... burned.” His voice broke. “I couldn’t save him.”

“What does he mean?” Tadc said as he sat, holding the bandaged stump of his right arm with his left hand, pain etched across his face. “And why do you call him Broccan?”

“Tadc. Eocha. I have something I must tell you.”

I told them everything. All about Finsha and Bróg and that they were really Fódla and Broccan. About the Tuatha Dé Danann and the Fomorians. Then of Gormflaith and her brother Máelmórda and their attack at the fortress on Fennit Island and their wish to rule Ireland.

Tadc was the one who spoke first. “That is quite a story, brother.”

“I know, Tadc. And I know you don’t believe it now. I only tell you because of what this makes Donnchad. He used his fire-magic on Broccan. And he used his water-magic to force Tairdelbach under the water. Donnchad told the men that Brodir killed my father, but I say it was Donnchad. Who else would get so close?” I glanced around the tent. “There isn’t so much as a chair out of place.”

We sat in silence for a time, until Colgú entered the tent, a serious expression in his eyes. “The men are gathering around Donnchad,” he said. “The men think you are dead, for no one has seen you since Sechnall answered your call to charge, and the battlefield... it is a mess. Many of the fallen can’t be identified. Donnchad has said, with you dead and Tadc’s arm cut away, that he is king. You must go out there and show yourself. Now. Before Sitric comes.”

“Sitric?”

“Donnchad has already sent a messenger to call for a peace. Brother to brother, he says. The messenger has returned and said Sitric will meet with him.”

“What are the terms for the peace?”

“That Donnchad be recognised as High King and King of Munster, and that the Dublin tributes are paid to him. A higher value than before. And that no more Viking ports are permitted in Ireland, only those that already exist. In...” Colgú faltered.

“In exchange...?”

“Sitric can reopen his slave markets and do as he pleases inside his own kingdom. He has also asked for more Leinster farming land to be bequeathed to Dublin.”

“We cannot let Donnchad be the one to make a peace. And we cannot let these be the terms,” Tadc said.

I hated the terms myself, that the slave markets would be allowed to reopen. Strange too that Donnchad would agree to giving Leinster land to Dublin. Máelmórda was King of Leinster, after all, but I found I could no longer think on it. For what good had all my thinking and political manoeuvring done? All my work, all the movements toward freedom for all people, all my care for my son – it had come to nothing. All of it was dead. My father’s dreams and my own. *My son.*

“No. I cannot deal with Donnchad now. I will, once I return home.”

“But he killed Tairdelbach and our father,” Tadc said. “We must bring him to account now.”

“You believe me then?”

Tadc froze, his face so covered in the pain from his arm that I could not tell what he truly thought. “I believe that he killed Tairdelbach and our father, yes.”

“Aye, he did. And that will still be true tomorrow and the day after. But we cannot make our case here. Sitric’s men did not fight, and so he has hundreds of warriors who will do as he asks. Who do you suppose Sitric will ask these men to fight for, if it’s between Donnchad and me?” I shook my head. “Let the men go home. Better this peace than none at all. You need time to rest, to heal, Tadc. You need to get your sons to safety. And we need to plan how to beat Donnchad in our own land with our people to support us.”

“And what will you do?” Eocha asked.

“I must look after my family too. Fódla is out there, living and breathing with my child inside her, and I must go to them now. Do you see? What care do I have for a kingship if all those I love are dead?”

Tadc sighed, his pale face leaning against Father's chair. "Murchad, if you concede to Donnchad now, we will never win Munster back. The might of Dublin with the slave gold will reach our home. You know this. The weapons Sitric will give Donnchad to fight us. The armour. Please, brother. Fódla has gone north. She is safe. Let's settle this between Donnchad and us now. You know I am right."

"Who will fight with us? All the men from Killaloe are dead and the banner of every Dál gCais clan has fallen. The men who gather around Donnchad do so because he is a son of Brian Boru, and they say he killed Brodir to try to save our father's life. They believe he is worthy."

"But that's not true," Tadc said. "Donnchad killed our father. He killed Tairdelbach. Look at your son. Look at what Donnchad did to him."

I brushed my hand over Tairdelbach's face. At peace. But cold. I pondered Tadc's words. *Let's settle this between Donnchad and us now.* I had to confess, I wanted that. Tairdelbach's lips turned blue, while my blood turned red. Hatred burned inside me. All the hatred I had kept locked down, deep inside, for all my adult years. It bubbled up. Tadc was right. I needed to kill Donnchad. Now. And I didn't care if I died doing it.

"Yes. Yes. You are right." I crawled over to him, my younger brother, and held him tight. "I am sorry, Tadc."

He threw his arm around me and pulled me tight. "Don't apologise to me, Murchad. You have nothing to be sorry for. You did everything right."

*If only this were true.*

"You must go now to your sons, Tadc. If I don't succeed, Donnchad will come after them."

I stared up then at Eocha. "Go with Tadc. Your sons are also in line for the kingship. They aren't safe either."

"We will go to Colgú's land first. Lucrecia is already there with Felicia and Maria."

Colgú broke out of his silent reverie. "Yes, you will be safe there. You have my word."

Tadc nodded. Eocha too.

Plan made, they left. They would be slow, Tadc especially, but I hoped they had enough of a head start to prevent any of Sitric's men following them on behalf of Donnchad.



\*

I spent a while cleaning my swords, sharpening them too. Then, when I was ready, I sat beside my son once more. Holding Tairdelbach tight, I whispered in his ear. "I must leave you now, Tairdelbach. Do not worry. You are in my heart now. Always and forever. Until the day I die, I will never forget your smile nor your laugh, nor the light you gave me."

Standing, I carried him over to my father and lay him down.

"Murchad," Broccan whispered, his voice hoarse, "I will go after Fódla." He dragged himself up.

"No, Broccan. You must rest."

"You think I will get better quicker here than with my aunt?"

I couldn't fault him there, so I helped him up. Blood oozed from his wound, the skin along his chest and neck glowed red, and he hobbled over to the table, limping, wincing with every movement. "When it is dark, I will have more strength. Then I will ride north."

I held out my hand for him to take. "I will find you at the crannog when I am done."

"Careful, Murchad." Broccan's gaze fell to my son then, tears trailing his cheeks. "I want you to know that, if you fail to kill Donnchad, I promise you, one day, I will succeed."

Hating what Donnchad had done to Broccan, both his body and his spirit, I nodded, for there was nothing left to say. I knew the hatred that swam in Broccan's eyes only too well, for he had loved my son. He was young and thought revenge was the only salve to this pain. He was wrong about that, and yet, even with this knowledge, the blood song called to me too, and it led me out of the tent toward the one who had taken my son from me.

\*

Donnchad stood with the remaining men of Munster in a field in front of the Dublin gate. Only a few hundred warriors at his side, all bloodied and weary. Pulling a hood over my face so they wouldn't know me, I walked past the camp boundary and down the hill, feeling the hilt of my blade in my hand.

Slowly, I walked. Head down. The closer I got to Donnchad without anyone noticing, the better.

Suddenly, the gates of the city opened and a group on horseback rode through and toward us. It was Sitric, flanked by Leif and Falk. Máelmórda rode behind them, Gormflaith too. If I did this right, I could kill all the Fomorians who had hurt my family.

Soon I reached the men at the back of the crowd, those wise enough to keep their distance.

"I agree to your peace terms, King Donnchad," Sitric said, loud for all to hear. "It saddened me that our family argued the way it did. We are brothers and I wish for us to prosper now."

Sitric smiled, benevolent, his gold rings clinking as he stroked the mane of his horse. "I accept you as King of Munster and as High King. I will give you the tribute you ask for, and I will also prevent the claiming of more Viking ports along the coastline."

"This pleases me, brother," Donnchad replied. "In return, you can once again run your city as you see fit." Donnchad took a breath, gave a shaky smile. "I mean to take my father and the fallen kings and princes of Munster to be buried in Armagh, prayed over by the bishop. Now that we have agreed, we grant you leave to tend to your dead."

The warriors of Munster smiled at these words. The war was over. It appeared as if we were getting what we wanted. And the promise of no more Viking ports appeased them. But the promises were thin. With my father gone and the north abandoning us, Donnchad could not call himself High King. None of the northern kings would bow down to a boy now they had broken from my father. Donnchad was a fool, with foolish dreams and a murderer's heart.

I took another step. Closer. Closer.

Gormflaith pushed her horse forward, bowed down to both sons. She smiled at Sitric, though when she turned her gaze toward Donnchad, her eyes hardened. Donnchad looked away. "I am glad you have settled your differences, my sons. And now I go, with my brother, to pray for this peace to hold. I will see you when I return, Sitric. You too, Donnchad."

She urged her horse forward, riding north with her brother and a monk. I recognised him. *But from where?* Surprise lit Sitric's face at their sudden departure, but not anger. Certainly not disappointment.

Donnchad's shoulders relaxed. Then he scowled. "It was our mother who came between us, Sitric," he said, once she left. "That is why she leaves. She cannot bear the shame. Always scheming and talking of false

grievances. When she returns, I wish you to tell her she is no longer welcome in Munster. Neither is Máelmórda. They are banished from my kingdom.”

I should be closing in on Donnchad. He was only a handful of feet away, though a crowd of warriors, from both Munster and now Dublin, crowded around him to shake his hand and swear to the peace oaths he had made. But instead, I looked back. That monk. I knew him... he was the one who had hurt Fódla. *Tomas*. And he was riding with Gormflaith and Máelmórda... and a golden eagle flew above them. The same one that I spotted at the campsite when Fódla was with me.

My heart pounded hard against my ribs. They were going after Fódla. I knew it. To kill her.

My hand let go of the hilt of my sword and I hurried back to the camp. *I had to get to her before they did.*

Broccan was still in the tent, my son’s hand in his as he sat beside him in silence.

“Did you kill Donnchad?” he croaked.

“No. Gormflaith and Máelmórda are going after Fódla. Tomas is with them too.”

Broccan’s blistered face and bloodshot eyes filled with anger. “I will come too.” He rushed to stand, groaning with the pain in his side and bending over.

“Catch me up, Broccan, for I cannot wait. They have taken the northern path, but there is a shortcut through the forest. Follow my trail and we may both be able to get ahead of them.”

He nodded, limping. Struggling. Grief and fear and anger in his face. But I couldn’t afford to wait, no matter how much I wanted to. Heartsore and weary, I bent down to kiss Tairdelbach, and ran out of the tent, knowing that I left my son for the final time, leaving behind one piece of my heart as I ran toward another.

# **The Seven Hazel Trees**

## *Fódla*

The birthing of a baby is the most difficult thing on this land. The ripping apart of a mother's body is pain beyond belief, but women have endured it for their children since the beginning of time. I, a healer, a Descendant of the Tuatha Dé Danann, was as powerless in this moment as any other woman. My body did not need to heal; it needed to rip, to tear, for my womb to empty of the life it had created.

I laboured long into the night. It wasn't until morning that the contractions sped up and Isolde finally lowered enough so that I could push.

Excruciating though it was, relief flooded through me. It was nearly over. She was nearly here. Soon she would be in my arms. With a final push, she came into the world, and I wrapped her in my arms. She wailed only for a moment, then huddled against me as I pressed her against my chest. My warm skin and familiar smell settled her, and her hand brushed my neck.

She was beautiful. Wisps of red hair, eyes of dark blue, so dark they looked like the midnight sea.

I gave myself a moment to bathe in my joy, then set about making a harness from my spare undergarment to strap her to my body while we journeyed north. It would take many more days, and she needed to be secure against my chest as we rode. The sun had risen now, the sky clear and blue, though clouds gathered in the west. Not a storm. Rain perhaps. Something else in the sky caught my eye. A bird. It soared overhead, wings spread out, the sun catching its feathers.

It was the golden eagle. Back again. A chill ran down my spine. Golden eagles were rare in this part of Ireland, favouring the north and islands between Ulaid and Scotland. To have seen one three times in as many days...

“Ruádgán,” I called out. “We need to go.”

I stood, searching for my horse, but he was nowhere to be seen. Instead, another horse rode toward me, coming over the southern path. A grey horse, galloping and carrying Murchad.

I waved my hand, smiling, until I saw three more horses crest the hill behind him.

Tomas was one of them. Gormflaith another. The last Máelmórda.

Fear struck me so hard that my breath caught, and I stumbled back. What were they doing here? *How had they found me?* I stared back up at the eagle, now hovering over me like I was the prey he had been stalking. Of course, it was not an eagle. It was another Senna. Another poor soul bewitched and transformed to do Tomas’ bidding.

“Sister,” I breathed out. “Help me.”

But how could she? She was too far away.

“Ruádgán!” I shouted, finding my voice. “Ruádgán!”

Where was he? I began to run to the forest, but then stopped. Murchad was nearly here. He was the one I needed.

“They are coming for you,” Murchad said as he dismounted and wrapped me in his arms. I held him tight, feeling how weary he was. I tried to pour my gift into him, but I was so weak from birthing Isolde that I had little to give him.

“You must run into the forest,” he said. “I will hold them back.”

That wouldn’t work. No matter where I ran, the eagle would follow me, as it had already done. There was no escape.

“No, Murchad. Come with me.”

Murchad held my arms and shook his head. “Find your horse. Take him into the woods. Once you reach the other side, ride along the northern path to Bréifne. There is another forest only a mile away. If you can make it there, you will lose them. The eagle will not see you through the trees.”

The thud of hooves rumbled in the distance. They were not far away now.

“Run,” he said. He pressed his hand against my cheek, then against Isolde’s. “She is beautiful. Just like you. Take care of her.” Gently, he let us go and ran toward the Fomorians and Tomas.

I turned and ran. “Ruádgán!”

There he was. At the edge of the forest. I ran to the hazel trees where I had laboured and grabbed my bag. Ruádgán came out a few steps to meet me, then trotted toward a solitary hawthorn tree that stood between the

hazel trees and I. Crooked it was. Old and bowed over. I had not noticed it there before.

“This way, Ruádgán!”

*Sister. Come to me. The seven hazel trees will save you.*

The wind rose up around the hawthorn tree, the leaves quivering as the wind grew stronger, even though the leaves of the other trees in the forest did not move. The hazel trees – yes, there were seven of them – swayed too.

“Rónnat?”

*Come. The hazel trees will hide you.*

The leaves on the hawthorn tree shivered and I ran to the other side of it, where the branches bent over to touch the grass so I could conceal myself from the view of the Fomorians.

*Sister. Come to me,* the wind whispered.

“They are here, Rónnat. It is too late.” I set Isolde down on the roots, putting the silver pendant Rónnat had given me around her neck and setting *Fragarach* on top of her. “Take Isolde.”

I peered around the tree. The Fomorians had reached Murchad now. I saw Máelmórda facing him, smirking. Murchad took out his swords, turning the blades in his hands, but his shoulders were low, tired. Máelmórda smiled, and as his smile widened, he unsheathed his own sword and grabbed hold of his shield. Gormflaith limped along the grass, blood soaking through her dress around her stomach and leg, but still she goaded Máelmórda onward to fight.

*Come,* the wind said, blowing against my hair. *The tree will bring you to me. Trust me.*

The roots beneath me moved. Slowly at first, then quicker. Long, white tips, long-buried underground, rose out of the soil and into the air. As they rose, a hole in the ground opened up underneath the tree, just like it had on Fennit Island. The white tips wrapped around my baby and began to pull her into the darkness.

I trusted Rónnat with every part of my body, but how could I leave Murchad to die? Through the gap in the trees, my husband was still fighting. Fighting for Isolde. For me. Máelmórda roared as he thrust his sword against Murchad's. The force was so great that Murchad's right sword fell from his hand, and he fell back, still holding on to his left sword. Then he charged.

Murchad had followed me here. Done everything to save me. How could I leave him? *But with Isolde in my care, how could I not?*

A small wail came from Isolde as the roots wrapped over her legs. I held out my arm for the roots to take me and slowly one crept over my fingers and to my wrist.

“Where is the baby?”

It was Tomas’ voice, and I felt the tip of the blade at the back of my neck. He hadn’t seen Isolde or the roots pulling her into the soil yet, so I stood slowly, transferring the root on my finger to Isolde’s leg, and walked backward, using my body and dress to shield my daughter from him.

Turning, I locked my gaze with his. “Why are you with those Fomorian, Tomas?”

“Because they see, as I do, that the mortals have too much power.”

“Then you are like a Fomorian now. Greedy. Like Balor of the Evil Eye.”

He shook his head, but there was no true denial in his motion, not the way there used to be.

“Leave me be, Tomas.”

“No. If you come with me, they will let you live. Gormflaith promised me a woman. I still want that to be you.”

I tried with all my might not to glance backward at Isolde, to see her, check if she was safe. To look would only show Tomas where she was and give him an opportunity to pounce.

“I cannot live without my daughter, Tomas.”

“I saw you run here with her. I know she is behind you. They want her. To live, you must give her to them.”

“No. Help me. You can still be on the right side of this.”

Tomas’ green eyes shone bright, and he held out his hand for me to take. “We can make new children, Fódla. It is written. One child to conquer death, the other to conquer fire.”

“But you dance with the fire now, Tomas. Why would you want a daughter to conquer it?”

He moved closer. “Once they have taken control of the mortals, we will take everything from them. Our daughter will. It is her destiny. I do this for us. For you. And for our daughter who is yet to be born.”

I stepped forward, acting as if I contemplated his words, and this time, I let myself glance at the roots. They had sunk into the ground. Isolde was now inside the darkness of the soil, the roots pulling her deeper and deeper.

“Fetch Gormflaith. If she says I can be your woman, I will think about it.”

“No, Fódla. I should be enough to convince you. No one else.” Tomas grabbed my hand. I moved once again to shield Isolde from view, but he caught sight of the roots moving and ran forward, hands reaching out to pull Isolde back.

“Get away from her!” I threw my body at him, pushing him aside.

He tried to push me away, but this time I clung to him and clawed at his cheeks. “Leave her. Leave the both of us alone!”

“You cannot save her, Fódla.” He took hold of my hair, holding it so tight that it ripped from my scalp.

I spat in his face. Blood and phlegm spotted over his nose and chin. “Yes. I can.” I wrapped my arms around him, holding tight, not letting him move toward the hawthorn tree. Not until the last of the roots moved into the soil, the hole completely closing over. My daughter gone.

Sobs built in my chest. I didn’t know where Rónnat had taken her, and Isolde was now alone, without me. I let Tomas go, and he ran to dig at the soil with his hands, but he couldn’t reach her. She was gone.

While he was distracted, I stood and ran. Murchad and Máelmórda fighting caught my eye. Blood poured from a wound in Murchad’s arm, but Máelmórda was injured too, his leg sliced open by Murchad’s blade. Ruádgán stood close by. If I reached him and then Murchad, we could ride to Rónnat’s crannog together.

“Don’t,” Tomas shouted. “They will hurt you.”

I ignored him and kept running.

“Ruádgán,” I shouted. If I could just reach my horse, Murchad and I could get away.

“Stop.” Tomas caught me and pulled me back. I swung around and slapped him across the cheek. Without pausing, I ran again. Ruádgán galloped toward me now, hearing my call.

Suddenly I couldn’t breathe. Pain shot through me.

I looked down.

A silver sword protruded from my chest, my blood glistening on the heft of the blade. Tomas grunted as he ripped the sword out of me, and I felt myself falling.

“Gormflaith would have caught you,” Tomas said, falling to kneel beside me. “Why won’t you ever listen?”



My breath caught in my throat as I tried to reach inside myself with my gift. But my gift wouldn't work. He'd pierced my heart with the blade. I couldn't heal the wound. *I was dying.*

"She has the knife of immortality." He whispered in my ear. "If I'd let you run, she'd have taken your gift."

Blood, hot and wet, seeped down my chest, my stomach, my arms.

"It has to be this way." Tomas ran his hand over my hair. "Now they can't take your gift. This way, we can still be together in the otherworld."

A scream filled the air and my head rolled to the side. Máelmórda charged forward. His blade found Murchad, slicing open the skin along his neck, and Murchad crashed to the ground.

Murchad. I wanted to reach him, but I couldn't move.

His body lay still on the grass. Blood everywhere. I opened my hand out toward him.

"No!" Tomas grabbed my chin, forcing me to look at him. "You are mine. Not his."

The world faded. My vision and hearing disappearing.

"I belong... to... myself," was all I managed to say before my heart came to a stop. Screams sounded somewhere. Laughter. I reached out my hand toward Murchad... but he was too far away.

The sky above me turned grey, then red, then faded to nothing. All my senses left me, and when I opened my eyes for the last time, a last wave of light replaced the dark. A face appeared above me, strands of grey hair tumbling down through the brightness.

*Aoife.*

# The Seven Hazel Trees

## *Gormflaith*

My brother roared as he flung his sword across the neck of Murchad. Victorious at last. His strength and speed finally overpowering the mortal son of King Brian Boru.

Murchad had been a wolf among men. It was right that a Fomorian with the gift of a warrior Descendant killed him, for no mortal could have bested him. Only time would have done that. And one day, like his father, he might have sobbed in his tent while his men fought for him. Máelmórda had spared him that.

As Máelmórda stood over Murchad, watching the life leave him, my eyes searched the trees beyond. Where was Tomas? I knew he'd found Fódla, for I'd seen them arguing during Máelmórda's fight. *Had he suddenly turned on us and escaped with her?*

"Máelmórda!" I shrieked, my panic rising. "Where is Tomas?"

I limped across the grass toward the trees. *Ah, there he was.* Close to the hawthorn tree, on top of Fódla. Sobbing.

"What have you done?" Máelmórda reached him first and shoved him back. "You killed her?"

"You fool," I snapped, furious that my opportunity to speak with her before *I* killed her had vanished. Panting, I searched the surrounding area. "Where is her child?" I bent down and pulled the Descendant knife from the seam of my cloak.

"Underneath the hawthorn tree," Tomas replied, his fingers holding on to the limp hand of Fódla, staring as if he couldn't quite believe that she was gone. Máelmórda ran to the tree, leaving me to stand beside the snivelling druid.

"I thought you loved her," I said. "Why did you kill her?"

He shook, refusing to answer, only holding her hand tighter. He didn't need to answer, for I knew the truth of it. He had killed her because, when she was dead, she could not run away, and because now, eternally silent, she could no longer refuse his love.

"The baby isn't here!" Máelmórda called from the tree.

"The roots took her," Tomas muttered.

"The roots?"

Tomas wiped his nose. "Her sister, Rónnat. I heard her voice on the wind. She must have used her magic to make the hawthorn roots bring the child to her."

"What?" I did not like any part of this message. The baby was gone. Another Tuatha Dé Danann witch, one that he had not told us about, still lived, and who was powerful enough to make the roots of a tree carry a baby through the underworld.

"I don't understand how it is possible..." he stuttered. "Rónnat is powerful, but I never imagined as powerful as this."

"Where has Rónnat taken the baby?"

"To her crannog on an Ulaid lough, close to Carncormick. She is banished there and will die if she leaves."

"We will see about that." I limped over to the tree and held out my hands, summoning the roots. But they wouldn't come. "Bring the child to me," I hissed, but still, they would not bend to my will.

"Come, Máelmórda," I said to my brother. "We will ride to the lough and find her."

Tomas shook his head, jaw clenched. "Time is different in the underworld. It could be many years before the baby reaches the crannog. Decades even."

I screamed, ran my hands through my hair, clenching the strands tight as my frustration took over. Why could I trust no one to do anything?

Máelmórda ran to me and pulled me into an embrace. "What is it about this child that scares you so much?" he whispered.

"Sigurd's mother. She was a witch of the Tuatha Dé Danann. She told me a granddaughter of words with red hair would kill me." I peered up, my rage turning to tears. "I thought it was Edysis, but it wasn't. It's Fódla's daughter."

Máelmórda held my face with his hands and stared at me. "You have no reason to be afraid of anyone. We will find her one day. And we will kill

her. Just as we have killed all our other enemies.”

The confidence in his voice calmed me. Yes, he was right. We’d have other chances to kill Fódla’s daughter. Many. And this Rónnat, the one who had saved her... how dangerous could she be, banished and alone on her crannog?

“Let us go back to Dublin,” Máelmórda said. “Feast. Drink. With the knowledge that our time has come.” He lowered his voice. “When I was fighting, I could hear Tomas talking to Fódla. He told her he planned to take power from us once we had gained control of Ireland.” He glanced at the druid, who still wept over Fódla’s body.

Lifting the knife, I showed him the Descendant blade, let the light dance on the white hilt.

“No,” he said. “We cannot learn how to make the potions... but maybe we don’t need to.” He tilted his head toward the bag of Tomas’ potions lying on the grass beside him.

I nodded.

Máelmórda grinned and walked toward Tomas. I didn’t watch as my brother killed him, only turned once I heard his body thud against the grass. He had tried to run, I could see, though he hadn’t got very far. A fitting end for the traitorous little rat.

I limped over to my horse. It didn’t take long for Máelmórda to grab Tomas’ bag of potions, and then mount his.

“This is a good day, sister,” he said. “Our work is done. Now, to Dublin.”

I gave one final stare at the three bodies that lay on the grass, all enemies of mine, now gone. Máelmórda was right. Nobody could defeat us. Not anymore.

\*

We rode along the path to the Dublin gates, windswept and weary, the rain pounding us from above and turning the path to mud. Olaf soared above us, golden wings outstretched, but that aside, the roads and sky were empty.

As we approached the city, the rain eased away, and the sky cleared. I was glad to find the men of Munster were already gone from Clontarf, and the dead removed from the land. After so much death, I couldn’t wait to lie down and drink a cup of wine. I couldn’t wait to eat. Feast in the hall. To be

dry. The new treaty made by Sitric, told to us by Olaf, was a victory of sorts, more so, given that he had not sent his own men out to fight. I'd wager by now the Dubliners would see the benefits of no longer hosting such numbers of fighting men from Orkney and Norway, even appreciate the potential gained by their deaths.

"The gate isn't opening," Máelmórda said as we approached.

"Perhaps they are being cautious after the battle?"

It seemed unlikely, but I couldn't account for it, unless they were celebrating with such fervour even the guards were too drunk to keep a watchful eye on the roads.

The outline of one of Sitric's boys appeared at the wall. Which one was it again? The eldest? "Amlaíb," I called out. "Tell the men to open the gates for me and the King of Leinster."

The boy nodded and disappeared.

Time passed. Minutes.

Máelmórda gave me a wary glance.

I shrugged. *They were celebrating, that was all.* That was why boys were manning the walls and not the men. He probably was trying to find someone sober enough to help.

"Good day, Mother." I looked up at the gate to find Sitric looking down at me, Leif and Falk at his side.

Angry that he'd not yet opened the gate, I frowned. "It is an ill omen to make your mother wait so long to receive hospitality. Hurry and open the gates."

"It is a necessary sign if the king doesn't wish his mother to receive any hospitality."

I stared up at him, eyes narrowed. *What had I done this time?* He had not won the war as I had promised, no, but he had not lost. Indeed, if he were a true leader, he would see that Dublin was in a better position than before.

"Tell me, Mother, why did you really leave after the negotiations?"

"To pray. As I told you."

"And who did you pray for?"

"For the lives of those who had fallen in battle. For you."

"Not for Edysis? Your granddaughter who is missing."

The hardness in his voice was barely able to conceal the pain underneath. "Yes. Of course, for her too. Though to be honest, I thought you'd have found her by now."

“We did find her. While you were away, the strangest thing happened. After the negotiations, we opened the gates, and my dogs ran out to the forest. One of them, the one that always followed Edysis, dug into the soil, deep, so deep that I couldn’t understand what had possessed him. But then I saw. Sweet Edysis was there, buried under the soil. Someone had burned her body.”

Sweet Edysis indeed, and I had killed her because Sigurd’s mother had not told me the prophecy correctly. Hatred for that old woman boiled inside of me.

“I spoke to her friends then, to ask who she had said she was meeting. They all said you.”

The accusation in his voice stung, and the truth of it hurt as bad as his rejection. But he couldn’t *know* this, could he? An accusation was all it was. Then why shame me like this with no proof, based on the words of people I did not know?

“I never told you, Mother, but soon after Onguen went missing, her body washed to shore. She had burns all over her, too, and strange marks. Small spirals etched into the flesh. The same marks were on Edysis’ skin. And that is how I know it was you. Deep down, I always knew you killed Onguen, though you denied it many times. And that is why you are not allowed back in my city. Not now. Not ever again.”

“You cannot truly believe this, Sitric? How could I burn them?”

“Before the battle, we argued in my room, do you remember? You burned my hand. But that was not the first time I realised what you are. I have eyes, Mother. When I was a child, I watched you play with fire. You thought I was asleep, but I saw the flames, felt the heat in your hands. Back then, I thought you were a goddess, but now I see that you are a devil. I will allow you to torment my family no longer.”

Dogs howled from behind the gates. Growled. Their paws scraping at the wood. My horse began to step backward, his head jerking nervously at the sound.

“My dogs have learned your scent and will rip you, limb from limb, if you come to my city again.”

“You would cast us out?” Máelmórda said. “After all we have done for you? For what? A whore wife and a bastard daughter. You will find Leinster will not stand for such treatment.”

“Leinster?” Sitric laughed at this. “I have already sent my congratulations to the new King of Leinster. It seems you have lost your kingdom, uncle. Ousted because of your cowardice on the battlefield, it is said. By all means, try to take your kingdom back, but I suspect you’d end up with no eyes like your predecessor.”

My son took a step back from the wall. “And don’t think to go to Donnchad, either. He has declared you both banished from Munster.”

I began to shake. How could Sitric do this to me? “I demand you grant us entry. It is against the laws of Ireland to refuse hospitality.”

“This is Dublin, Mother. Danelaw holds sway here, not the Brehon laws, and I have declared you a murderer. A kinslayer. You will have no refuge here. But I do not wish to become a kinslayer either, and so, I will grant you one gift. On the shore there is a boat. A chest of gold sits inside, enough to allow you to survive in comfort wherever you go. But you must take it now. I do not want to see your faces ever again.”

He spat as he finished his proclamation, turned, and moved from sight. Leif followed. Falk was the last to stand there. He gave me a final hard stare before following my son.

The dogs, however, did not leave. Their growls only increased, the howls, the scraping against the gate.

“Come, sister. We must go,” Máelmórda said, and he urged his horse in the direction of the beach.

\*

The two of us rode along the sand until we found the rowboat Sitric had promised. The chest of gold sat inside, along with another, less appealing present.

“Neasa,” Máelmórda said, giving the young woman a small smile.

“When I heard you were to be banished, I ran here,” she said. “Marga ran away last night, but not me. Please take me with you. I couldn’t bear it if you left me behind.”

“Of course, my dear,” Máelmórda said as he pushed the boat into the sea. “Who else can heal me so?”

Neasa beamed and helped him with the oars, while I clambered over the side, the hem of my dress taking in the seawater. Máelmórda rowed us out

but, lacking the skills required to steer a rowboat, constantly let the waves crash inside.

“Olaf!” I called out.

The golden eagle flying overhead came to land on the wooden bench beside me and I transformed him into a man. Máelmórda gave him a spare tunic from his bag.

“Take us away from this land, Olaf,” I said, once he was dressed.

Olaf bowed his head, pulled up the sail, and the boat propelled forward. “I will take you to Bristol,” he said. “Then we can pay for a fare to anywhere you want.”

Máelmórda stared at me. “Where do you wish to go? We could go to Munster and see what that son of yours has to say for himself.”

“No. I don’t want to see Donnchad. Not yet. Not until he is so weak that he is ready to beg for our forgiveness.”

“Then what about England? They say King Ethelred has taken back control of Wessex.”

I shook my head. “We need to find an army if we ever want to take Ireland. The English are no good at fighting. It is only their greater numbers that has been their friend.”

“Then where to?”

I ran my hand over my hair. “Let us go to Normandy. Our mother always liked it there, did she not?”

Máelmórda nodded, and Olaf sailed us away until Ireland disappeared into nothingness.

I let my fire dance on my hand as we sailed east. One day, we would be back to reclaim the land that was rightfully ours, and with the Tuatha Dé Danann all but destroyed, there would be no one left to stop us.



## Fódlá

Everything stilled. Light shone over me and around me. So bright I could hardly see. But I could see *her*.

Aoife.

My daughter.

“Hello, Mammy,” she said, smiling softly.

I touched her face with my hand, her rounded cheeks full of lines and wrinkles. Not as old as she had been in the years leading up to her death, but still marked by age. I had loved this face, the wisdom that shone through these eyes. Gone was the panic and anxiety from the last time we spoke. Also gone was the fear and uncertainty that had blighted her in her youth. This was Aoife at her most contented. At her wisest.

“I’ve wanted to speak to you for so long.” I reached out to hold her, half expecting that her hand wouldn’t be there, that this was my imagination or a dying dream. But it was her. She was real, and I wove my fingers through her hair.

“I know, Mammy,” she said.

A small laugh broke out of me. Not of joy, though joy was within it too. It was an emotion that I couldn’t keep inside of me. A ball of pain and relief, of sadness and delight, though the pain and sadness faded as I stared at my daughter’s face.

Then, a sudden stab of panic shot through me. “Where is Isolde?” I tried to move but couldn’t. My legs wouldn’t work. “Is she here? The Fomorians want her.”

“They didn’t find her, and they are gone now. Don’t worry. The roots are carrying her to safety.”

“Can I see her?”

Aoife sat up straighter, her hand moving to hold mine that had been touching her hair. “No, Mammy. I am here to take you to the deepest realms

of the otherworld. Isolde still belongs to the land of the living.”

I nodded, focusing on the fact that my daughter was safe. My free hand reached for my stomach, to feel the place where Isolde had once resided. It felt flat now. Wet. And when I brought my hand to my face, it was covered in blood.

Aoife’s hand brushed against my cheek. “Your father and mother have come for you. Do you wish to see them?”

I stared into her eyes for a moment, then stared beyond. Into the light. There, a tall man stood, arms wrapped around a woman with long, red hair. I had not seen those faces outside of my dreams for so many years.

“How can this be? We are not at the hawthorn tree at the fortress.”

“When I died, I made my way to the otherworld. I found many gateways. They are closed... and yet, they open for me. One of the gateways is here.”

Aoife pulled me to my feet and helped carry me along into the white light underneath the shadow of branches which loomed high over us. The closer I got to the light, the easier it was to walk, and by the time I reached my father and mother, I was able to throw myself into their arms.

Every fear for Isolde tumbled from my lips, but my mother held me tighter, telling me not to worry. My father, Ciaran, the warrior, took my hands in his and kissed my cheek. “Daughter,” he said. There was so much in that word. Love. Pain. Fear. Just as I had felt overwhelmed with emotion before, so was he now. “I am so happy to be with you once more.”

“But I failed,” I said, my voice catching. “I let everyone down.” I pictured Rónnat, wild and alone on her crannog, then Isolde’s face, the red wisps of hair, her blue eyes and sweet mouth. The roots, they had wrapped themselves around her and dragged her into the dark. And Murchad... He had fought the Fomorians... fallen...

“Where is my husband?” I asked Aoife.

“I can show you him, if you wish.”

Aoife took me toward the edges of the light. Murchad’s body lay there, still on the grass.

“Can I touch him?”

“No. I alone can cross over between the lands of the living and the dead.”

*You will have a daughter who will conquer death.*

The prophecy was right, then. My first daughter moved between the veil, between the land of the living and the land of the dead.

“Can he come to the otherworld?” My voice filled with desperation. Even though he was mortal, I couldn’t leave him here. Alone.

“Yes.” Aoife smiled.

I stared at my daughter, surprised by her words, even though it was the answer I desired.

“Only if you loved him and he loved you in return. Father always told me that it was gifts that brought us to the otherworld, but he was wrong. It’s love. Love from those who have already passed over can carry us inside the light. That is why your father, mother and I came for you. Our love for you wanted to bring you to us. And your love in return woke you from death.” Aoife looked at Murchad, the edge of the light almost touching his hand.

“Talk to him,” she said.

“Murchad, my love. Can you hear me?”

He looked peaceful, the way he lay. All the lines of worry, that had deepened these last few years, relaxed. I worried that he wouldn’t move, that he wouldn’t come with me, but no sooner did that thought come to me than Murchad’s eyes opened.

The light edged forward, covering Murchad now too. His hand reached to touch my hair and I pressed my hand over his. “What happened, Fódla?”

Tears streamed down my face as I recalled our final moments. “Máelmórda killed you. Tomas killed me.”

“And Isolde?”

“Rónnat saved her. She will look after her now.”

Murchad rubbed my chin, then took in the white light around us.

“This is the gateway to the otherworld,” I explained. “My daughter says you can come with me if you wish.”

“I would go anywhere with you, Fódla. Anywhere at all. In this world, or the next.” Murchad smiled as he spoke, but a shadow fell over his eyes.

“What is it?”

“My son,” he said. “Tairdelbach. He died at the battle. I will miss him.”

Aoife came to my side. “I can ask Broccan to bring Tairdelbach’s body here if Murchad wishes. If Tairdelbach loves his father as he loves him, he can come to the otherworld too.”

Aoife pointed through the white light. I could see the shape of a man through it. Hear his cries of anguish. “Fódla!” the man shouted, and I watched as he searched the trees for me.

“Broccan!” I shouted. “Broccan. I am here.”

“He can’t hear you,” Aoife said.

“Can you speak with him? Tell him that I am well.” The pain of Broccan’s voice drove a knife through mine. “Please tell me that it is possible.”

Aoife nodded, and with that, she was gone, the light still covering her, but separate to ours.

I wished I could speak with Broccan myself, hold him. Tell him I loved him. Tell him that his life was important and that, now I was gone, and Murchad and Tairdelbach, he had to live for himself and find his own peace and joy.

Murchad held me tight until Aoife returned. “He will bring Tairdelbach’s body here tonight. Then he will travel to Rónnat’s crannog.” She gave me a sad smile, then looked away.

I could see Broccan staring into the light. “Goodbye, nephew,” I said, though I knew he could not hear me. “I love you.”

He disappeared then, moving away, and all beyond the light was still.

“We must go now, Mammy.” Aoife held out her hand and I followed her, until we found another body lying on the ground. Tomas.

“Máelmórda killed him,” Aoife said.

He didn’t move as we stood over him. I knew I had no love in my heart for him and that I could not bring him to the otherworld. Aoife, however, stared at her father a while, her forehead furrowed.

“Do you love him?” I asked.

“I do. Even after all he did to me, I find there is something left in my heart. I can’t explain why.”

“Then why does he not waken?”

“Because he doesn’t love me back. Once he realised I had no gift, his love for me vanished. He believed me... unworthy.”

“Do not say that.”

“Oh, I don’t believe it. Not anymore. I am Aoife, daughter of Fódla, and I have conquered death.”

I held her hand and looked around. No one else had come for him. Not his father or mother, nor any of his friends.

“They know what he has done,” Aoife said. “No one else is coming for him. The earth will take him now, the worms, the crows, the wolves. He will never enter the otherworld.” She kept walking, held out her hand, and

smiled. "Come. His fate is not yours. There are many who wish to see you and Murchad."

My daughter led us to where the light was brightest. It blinded at first, but then suddenly I could see, and the land before me filled with life. My father was there. My mother. Fiachre. Cerball. Eilis. My grandparents. Friends who had died at the fortress fire and those who had died many years before. They walked toward us, arms outstretched.

Tears of joy filled me.

The land of the living was behind me now. Gone. The land of the dead lay ahead.

My life was over, but my death was not one of dirt and worms and eternal darkness, nor one of godly punishment or forever wars. Only a place of love and the touch of those who loved me in return.

In this embrace, I felt at peace.

Whispers reached my ears. Of Rónnat. Of Broccan. Of Isolde. Their lives still lay ahead of them.

I turned back for a moment, staring at the haze behind us, to the outline of the hawthorn tree.

Tears of grief fell for those who I loved, and I was parted from. And yet, I knew I would see them again. We would embrace and hug and cry tears of joy and laugh and sing.

Aoife linked my arm, and Murchad took my hand and pressed it against his lips, and together we walked into the light.

# **Rathlin Island**

## *Rónnat*

As soon as I called Isolde to the hawthorn tree on Rathlin Island, I transformed back into a bird and flew to my crannog.

The sun was falling toward nightfall. To the dark.

I had to make it back to the crannog before the sun set or else I would be dead. I did not fear death the way some did. Yet, I needed to live. The wind had shown me pictures that I had not seen with my own eyes, and I had words that one day I needed to speak.

My eagle wings opened so that I soared high into the sky, the wind carrying me south.

After many hours of flying, the sun began to fall behind the horizon, setting... but in the distance, I could see the crannog. I pulled in my wings and let gravity take me to the land. Nearly there. Nearly there.

I kept my eye on the land, until the sun disappeared, and darkness surrounded me.

\*

“Rónnat.”

A pair of hands shook me. A young woman with dark hair sat at my side. Who was she? I couldn’t remember her name. I raised my hand to touch her, but black feathers still sprouted from my skin. Half woman, half bird. Mad. I was cracked. I was cracked.

Fit only for nothingness, I closed my eyes. The water spoke to me from the lough, laughing, singing its lies. “Never trust the water,” I whispered to

the woman with the dark hair. Did she know this? I couldn't tell. And so, I drifted with the wind, my mind moving with it, singing. Flying.

\*

“Mother?”

Another voice. A new one.

I opened my eyes. My head still hurt, but the wind had gone now. My head, for once, was silent.

“I told you,” another voice said. “She hasn't woken since she returned. Be patient.”

The woman with the dark hair pulled the man back. Senna, that was her name. And it was my son who had spoken.

“Broccan.” I held out my hand, trying to lift my aching body from my bed. The feathers were still there, and using my gift, I pulled them away. There, now I was myself. And for the first time in years, I felt myself too.

My son rushed to my side, his eyes red and bloodshot. His skin was red and scarred. “Where is Isolde?” he asked me. “Don't you have her?”

“The Fomorians know of this island,” I said. “I had to summon her to somewhere they would never reach. So I flew to Rathlin Island and used the power of the hawthorn tree at the edge of the warrior land to call her.”

Broccan deflated beside me. The air around him swirled with the colour blue. Sadness. Grief. It was the only colour around him now.

“You must wait for her there, train her. Teach her.”

Broccan nodded.

“It will take a long time for her to reach Rathlin. Decades upon decades, but still, you must wait.”

“I have a long life, or so Fódla told me. I will wait for however long it takes.”

The colour blue swam inside his words too. He did not want his long life, only saw it as a burden. Flashes of another colour came then. Red for the rage deep in his heart. But still, he was a gentle man, and he took my hand in his and fed me a bowl of broth.

He talked to me. We spoke of when I was a girl, and he a boy. He laughed. The air still blue.

But then the wind blew, and the sight of my son disappeared from my eyes. I was cracked. Cracked. I could speak no more, tell him no more.

The wind took my mind from me. There was more to see, so I let myself go, let my mind finally be free of the body that had chained it to the earth, and became part of the wind itself.

Once I had seen my sister and all the people of Ireland burning, but now a new vision played out in my mind. I had not saved my sister, but I had saved the land, the people.

Those older visions left now, giving me new ones in their place. Still visions of Fomorian fire. Still visions of the land burning, only now there was one vision that gave me hope. One vision with a girl.

She had long, red hair and dark eyes. She fought with two blades in her hands. The wind swirled over her, the soil moved at her touch, the rain burst from the sky at her command.

And upon her blade, fire danced.



## **Historical Note**

The Battle of Clontarf is one of the most famous battles in Irish history.

When I was in school, Brian Boru was named the victor, and depicted as a saint-like man who drove the Vikings out of Ireland, such as St Patrick drove out the snakes.

When I was a little older and started reading about Irish history, I realised how wrong this summary was, and indeed in recent years opinions have been revised by modern historians. The history of the tenth and eleventh century is much more complex than had perhaps been previously thought.

As I read the history, the relationships between the various protagonists, the battle, and the aftermath, several questions came to me.

Firstly, who won the battle? The army of Munster claimed victory that day, yes. The Viking forces that came to Ireland lost. Sigurd of Orkney and Brodir of the Isle of Man, the key Viking allies of Sitric and Máelmórda, both died. However, with Brian, Murchad and Tairdelbach all dying in the fray too, it is hard to say that Munster won outright. In fact, the person to come out best was King Sechnall of Meath, whose involvement in the battle varies between sources, some stating he fought for King Brian and others saying that Sechnall was not faithful to him.

What happened afterwards is also relevant to the concept of ‘winning’. The truth is that the Kingdom of Munster’s power diminished after Clontarf, the kingdom falling to infighting between Brian’s son Donnchad and his grandson Toirdhealbhach, Tadc’s son. A king of Munster certainly did not hold the high-kingship after Brian died. On the other side, Sitric ruled as King of Dublin until his death some thirty years later. This was a chaotic time in the history of Dublin, with many Irish princes viewing the city as a prize, but nonetheless Sitric kept hold of it and Dublin only continued to grow in importance.

Secondly, how significant was the concurrent invasion of England by Svein Forkbeard?

Very, I think. In general, I believe historians from previous centuries tended to look at the history of Ireland only by looking at what was happening within Ireland, and ignored the wider world. For me, the fact that a Viking invasion of England happened only a few months earlier than Clontarf is important. Surely it is not a coincidence that Sitric moved against his father-in-law at a time when his Viking counterparts were making a move to conquer England. Did Svein Forkbeard's ambition galvanise his own?

And lastly, did the battle of Clontarf break Viking control in Ireland? I think not. That phrase I heard in school – that King Brian Boru drove the Vikings out of Ireland – does not feel true to me. Mostly because this implies that the war was between the Irish and the Vikings, when really it was a power struggle between various Irish factions. The argument that starts the war is one that happens between Máelmórda of Leinster and Murchad of Munster. It is almost a Shakespearian tragedy in how the alliance of these families, joined by two key marriages, falls apart so quickly.

The Vikings came to Ireland to fight for Sitric (and it is also true that some Vikings fought for Brian) but not to make an outsider king as they did in England. They came to fight for Sitric who was born in Ireland, the son of an Irish princess, and a son-in-law of an Irish High King. The ports of Dublin, Waterford and Wexford continued to be important, held by Vikings or descendants of those Vikings who first claimed land in Ireland, for at least another one hundred and fifty years after Clontarf.

However, it is true that by killing so many of the Vikings who came to fight, King Brian and his army stopped any further conquest of Irish land. I suggested in this novel that as a reward for fighting, men like Sigurd or Brodir would have been offered ports within Ireland – and I think this is likely to have happened had Sitric won. So perhaps we can say that the battle prevented a further erosion of Irish power or the expansion in the number of Viking longphorts along the coast.

And so here we are; the end of my first era. It was always my quest to write about this era of history with an eye for truth. That might be an odd thing to say when I have Fomorians and Descendants of the Tuatha Dé Danann joining in – but I think you will find that, for the most part, the

build-up to Clontarf and the Battle of Clontarf itself are depicted as accurately as possible.

From the falling-out between Máelmórda and Murchad over a game of chess, to the shower of boiling rain over Brodir's ship, to the death of Tairdelbach at the salmon weir, these are all incidents that are supported by historical documents. The key historical documents that record this battle are the *Cogadh re Gáedhel re Gallaibh* and *Njál's saga*.

If you want to find out anything more about this time period (other than what you can find via a Google search), these books might be useful:

*Brian Boru and the Battle of Clontarf* by Seán Duffy

*Viking Pirates and Christian Princes* by Benjamin Hudson

*Irish Kings and High-Kings* by Francis John Byrne

*Wars of the Irish Kings* by David Willis McCullough

## **Acknowledgements**

Wow. I cannot believe this is happening. All those years I sat writing in my living room, I never expected to be published. Not really. And now here we are, releasing the third book in the Gael Song series.

Of course, I wouldn't be here without my family and friends.

A huge thanks must be given to my husband, Gerard, for encouraging me always. To my three sons, Darragh, Shay and Finan, for gifting me so much joy with their presence. To my Mum and Dad who have been constant in their support. And of course, a big thanks to the wider Davey, Kearns, Lawless and Moreland families. All of those texts and messages of congratulations have kept my spirits buoyed like nothing else.

Ed Wilson, my lovely agent, your words of wisdom are most welcome as is your endless patience. And of course, huge praise and gratitude must be given to my editor at Head of Zeus, Greg Rees. It's been a huge task to get all three books (and three novellas) written and delivered on time. Your passion for the books has given me so much confidence and I am delighted with the final product. Thanks for all those long hours you have put in. Indeed, the whole Head of Zeus team has been incredible to work with and has made this journey truly memorable. And of course, the books would not be the books they are without their amazing covers. Micaela Alcaino, you are such a talent.

To my friends, you know who you are, a huge hug. My nose has been hard-pressed to the grindstone this last while. The chats, the texts, the impromptu nights out, my critique group weekly meetings have all been needed to keep me sane. Oh, and I do have to give an extra thank you to both Paula and Terry for being my beta readers on this one. Your time is greatly appreciated!

*Go raibh maith agat agus slán go fóill.*

## About the Author



SHAUNA LAWLESS is an avid reader of Irish mythology and folklore. As an Irish woman, she loves that Irish mythology has inspired so many stories over the years, however, she wanted to explore the history and mythology of Ireland in a more authentic way. She lives in Northern Ireland with her family. *The Land of the Living and the Dead* is the third volume in the critically acclaimed Gael Song series.

Follow Shauna on [@shaunaLwrites](#) and [shaunalawless.com](#)

## **An Invitation from the Publisher**

We hope you enjoyed this book. We are an independent publisher dedicated to discovering brilliant books, new authors and great storytelling. Please join us at [www.headofzeus.com](http://www.headofzeus.com) and become part of our community of book-lovers.

We will keep you up to date with our latest books, author blogs, special previews, tempting offers, chances to win signed editions and much more.

Get in touch: [hello@headofzeus.com](mailto:hello@headofzeus.com)



[www.headofzeus.com](http://www.headofzeus.com)



[@headofzeus](https://www.instagram.com/headofzeus)



[@HoZ\\_Books](https://twitter.com/HoZ_Books)



[@HeadOfZeus](https://www.facebook.com/HeadOfZeus)





*Your gateway to knowledge and culture. Accessible for everyone.*



[z-library.se](http://z-library.se)

[singlelogin.re](http://singlelogin.re)

[go-to-zlibrary.se](http://go-to-zlibrary.se)

[single-login.ru](http://single-login.ru)



[Official Telegram channel](#)



[Z-Access](#)



<https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Z-Library>