

Prologue

~Geiléis~

Rain had swollen the river to a churning mass of grey. The tower wore a soft shroud of mist; though it was past dawn, no cries broke the silence. Perhaps he slept, curled tight on himself, dreaming of a time when he was whole and hale and handsome. Perhaps he knew even in his sleep that she still kept watch, her shawl clutched around her against the cold, her gaze fixed on his shuttered window.

But he might have forgotten who she was, who he was, what had befallen them. It had been a long time ago. So long that she had no more tears to shed. So long that one summer blurred into another as the years passed in an endless wait for the next chance, and the next, to put it right. She did not know if he could see her. There were the trees, and the water, and on mornings like this, the mist lying thick between them. Only the top of the tower was visible, with its shuttered window.

Another day. The sun was fighting to break through; here and there the clouds of vapour showed a sickly yellow tinge. Gods, she loathed this place! And yet she loved it. How could she not? How could she want to be anywhere but here?

Downstairs, her household was stirring now. Someone was clanking pots, raking out the hearth, starting to make breakfast. A part of her considered that a warm meal on a chilly morning would be welcome – her people sought to please her. To make her, if not happy, then at least moderately content. It was no fault of theirs that she could not enjoy such simple pleasures as a full belly, the sun on her face, or a good night's sleep. Her body was strung tight with waiting. Her heart was a constant, aching hurt in her chest. What if there was no ending this? What if it went on and on for ever?

‘Lady Geiléis?’

Senach tapped on the door, then entered. Her steward was a good servant, discreet and loyal. 'Breakfast is ready, my lady,' he said. 'I would not have disturbed you, but the fellow we sent to the Dalriadan court has returned, and he has some news.'

She left her solitary watch, following her man out of the chamber. As Senach closed the door behind them, the monster in the tower awoke and began to scream.

'Going away,' she said. 'For how long?'

'King Ruairi will be attending the High King's Midsummer council, my lady.' Her messenger was grey-faced with exhaustion; had he travelled all night? His mead cup shook in his hands. 'The queen will go south with him. They will be gone for at least two turnings of the moon, and maybe closer to three.'

'Who will accompany them? Councillors? Advisers? Friends and relations?'

'All the king's senior councillors. Queen Eabha's attendants. A substantial body of men-at-arms. But Cahercorecan is a grand establishment; the place will still be full of folk.'

'And this son of King Ruairi's, the one you say will be looking after his father's affairs while they're gone – what manner of man is he? Of what age? Has he a wife?'

'Prince Oran is young, my lady. Three-and-twenty and newly married. There's a child on the way. The prince does not live at Cahercorecan usually, as he has his own holding further south. He is more man of scholarship than man of action.'

'Respected by his father's advisers, those of them who remained behind?' A scholar. That might or might not be helpful. 'Is he a clever man?'

'I could not say, my lady. He's well enough respected. They say he's a little unusual.'

'Unusual?'

'They say he likes to involve all his folk in the running of household and farm. And I mean all, from the lowliest groom to the most distinguished of nobles. Consults the

community, lets everyone have a say. There's some at court think that odd; they'd sooner he just told folk what to do, as his father would.'

'I see.' Barely two turnings of the moon remained until Midsummer. She'd need to ride for Cahercorcan soon – but not too soon, or she risked arriving before the king and his entourage had left. She needed to speak to this Prince Oran, not to his father. If the prince liked to give all manner of folk a hearing, perhaps he would listen to her. How best might she present her case? Perhaps this scholarly prince loved tales of magic and mystery. She must tell it in a way that would capture his imagination. And his sympathy.

She rose to her feet. 'Thank you,' she said to the messenger. 'Go to the kitchen; Dau will give you some breakfast. Then sleep. I'll send for you later if I have further questions.' Though likely he had told all he knew. They'd sent him to the royal household in the guise of a traveller passing through and seeking a few night's shelter. There'd be limits to what a lad like him could learn in such a place. If he'd seemed too inquisitive, he might have aroused suspicion.

'Senach,' she said after the messenger was gone, 'it seems that this time we have a real opportunity.' Her heart was beating fast; she had hardly dared to dream this might be possible. 'The king, the queen, the senior councillors all absent ... It seems almost meant to be. I will travel south. You will remain here in charge of the household. I'll require an escort; speak to Onchú about that, will you?'

'Of course, my lady.' A pause, then he added, 'How soon will you wish to depart?'

'Best if we wait a few days. Let's say seven. No longer.'

'When might I expect your party to return, my lady?'

Her lips made the shape of a smile, but there was no joy in her. She had forgotten how it felt to be happy. 'Well before Midsummer. Assume I will be bringing a guest or two. We

must hold on to hope.’ Hope, she thought, was as easily extinguished as a guttering candle on a day of spring storm. Over and over she had seen it tremble and die.

‘Leave it to me, my lady. All will be ready for you.’

Later still, as her household busied itself with the arrangements – horses, supplies, weaponry – she climbed back up to the high chamber and looked out once more on the Tower of Thorns. All day its tenant had shouted, wailed, howled like an abandoned dog. Now his voice had dwindled to a hoarse, gasping sob, as if he had little breath left to draw.

‘This time I’ll make it happen,’ she murmured. ‘I swear. By every god there ever was, by the stars in the sky and the waves on the shore, by memory and loss and heartbreak, I swear.’

The sun was low; it touched the tower with a soft, rosy light that made a mockery of his pain. It would soon be dusk. There was just enough time.

With her gaze on that distant window, she began the nightly ritual. ‘Let me tell you a story.’