

Extract

A History of Her

CHAPTER ONE - Màiri of Morvern

The Herb-Wife at Dusk

Morvern, 1520

Epigraph

"In the gloamin', when the tide pulls back its breath, the women who came before us walk the shore unseen." - Old Morvern saying

The light was slipping toward the edge of the world, that strange hour when day loosens its grip and night stretches out a hand. Dusk in Morvern never fell quickly. It seeped. It softened. It crept into the hollows of the land the way water finds the dips in rock. And Màiri liked to be outside when it happened, walking the tidal flats with bare feet and a basket swung lightly from her wrist.

Her mother had always said *the herbs kent the time better than folk*. Plants gathered at dusk held their secrets closer, their bitterness sharper, their cures more willing to be learned. So Màiri timed her work carefully: not before the sun turned bronze, not after the sky bruised purple. Only in that in-between place, that thin seam where worlds touched, did she feel most herself.

She bent now at the water's edge, fingers skimming the silverweed. The tide was pulling back, leaving trails of glistening foam and the glimmer of shells. Sea thrift nodded faintly in the breeze, its pink heads small as pinpricks in the fading light. Màiri reached for a sprig of bog myrtle, holding it gently between thumb and forefinger before cutting it with her small bone-handled knife.

"Aye," she murmured, lifting it to her nose, "there ye are."

The scent - sharp, resinous, almost holy - always calmed her. It reminded her of her mother's hands working fever poultices by the hearth, of warm summers when the air hummed with bees, of the quiet certainty that knowledge had weight and purpose. She placed the sprig in her basket beside yarrow, bladderwrack, willow bark. Enough for the MacPhee girl's cough, enough to ease a fever, enough to be of use.

She had never questioned this life. A healer was needed - as needed as the smith or the fisher. No one else had learned the old ways: when to harvest, how to steep, what to whisper over wounds. She carried her mother's knowing, and her mother's

mother's before that. A line of women stretching back further than Màiri could imagine.

Yet lately, she'd felt the air shift around her.

Not in the wind or the tide, but in the eyes of her neighbours.

She rose and brushed the sand from her knees, lifting her gaze to the village above the shore. Smoke curled from chimneys, faint as lifted hair. Somewhere up the slope a dog barked twice, then fell silent. A child cried briefly, the sound carried thinly on damp air. Nothing unusual, nothing alarming - and yet the unease sat under her ribs like a cold thumb.

People had been whispering. She could taste it.

At the well that morning, two women had broken off their conversation the moment she arrived. One tightened her shawl; the other murmured something about "strange cures." Màiri had pretended not to hear, but the words had clung to her like burrs.

And then there was the new minister.

He preached sharp these days - hard lines, hard eyes. He had the voice of a man who loved the sound of his own warnings.

"Temptation creeps in familiar form," he'd thundered the Sabbath past, gaze raking the congregation. "Beware those who claim knowledge not given by God but whispered by darker tongues."

Some in the kirk had turned to look at her then. Only briefly, but enough.

She felt again the prickle on her neck. Watching. Always watching.

But the tidal flats were safe ground. The sea did not judge her; the wind did not flinch from her touch. She crouched again, running her hand over a patch of wet moss where a fox had crossed earlier. The memory of its movement still trembled lightly in the greenery - a faint indentation, a story left behind. She smiled. Animals never feared what humans feared. They had clearer senses, clearer hearts.

Still, something around her felt tight tonight. The light dimmed faster than usual, as though the sun wanted to slip away before trouble found it. The air thickened, carrying not just the smell of peat and brine, but another scent - faint, waxy, unmistakable.

Tallow.

Rushlight.

Torches.

Her shoulders stiffened.

She hadn't imagined it, then.

Someone was out there.

She didn't move at first. Standing very still, she let her breath settle, let her eyes adjust to the gloaming. The rise of dune grass ahead rustled softly - too softly for footsteps, too evenly for someone creeping. A bird trilled once and fell silent. The sea sighed. The world held its breath.

Only when her heartbeat slowed did Màiri straighten, lifting her basket to her hip.

"If ye're there," she said softly into the dark, "then come oot. Shadows dinnae frighten me."

No one emerged.

But silence is sometimes a kind of answer.

She turned away from the flats slowly, walking the path toward the village with steady, deliberate steps. Running would have been foolish. Running was what guilt looked like. And she had no guilt to carry - only knowledge, and fear, and the memory of a mother dying because frightened men thought herbs wicked.

Never again, she had vowed at eleven years old, wiping her mother's brow as the fever took her. *Never again will I stand by and let a woman die because fools fear what they dinnae understand.*

That wound, still tender beneath the years, shaped every step she took.

She walked now between the rocks, the sky deepening to a bruised plum over the Sound. Stars pricked through like shattered needles of light. A faint mist drifted off the tidal pools, curling around her ankles. She felt the familiar hum beneath her feet - the land breathing, the ancient pulse that tied her to this place.

Her mother used to say the earth held memory better than any book.

Màiri believed it. She felt it tonight - that faint thrumming, as though the soil itself carried the stories of all the women who had walked this path before her. Healers. Midwives. Keepers of songs. Keepers of knowledge. Keepers of wounds.

Sometimes, when she walked here, she imagined she wasn't alone.

At the bend in the path she paused, turning toward the sea. The horizon was a dark line now, the last light leaking out of the day. The air tasted metallic, like rain waiting to be born. Her hair lifted in the breeze.

And then, faintly - like the echo of a voice pressed into the earth centuries ago - she thought she heard a whisper.

Not words exactly. More the shape of them.

A breath.

A longing.

A plea.

She closed her eyes.

Màiri...

The sound was so soft she could have dismissed it. But she didn't. She had learned to listen to things most folk ignored. The land held stories. The sea held griefs. The wind carried truths too fragile for human tongues.

"Màthair?" she whispered back before she could stop herself.

A foolish thought. Her mother had been gone for fifteen years. But grief made strange echoes. And the land - well, the land often felt like a vessel for the lost.

She opened her eyes. The mist shifted, thinning into nothing. The whisper was gone.

Still, her heart beat faster.

She continued up the path, the basket heavier now, though the herbs inside weighed almost nothing. At the edge of the village she paused again. A faint glow flickered behind the row of crofts - not hearthlight, but something sharper. Torches. Moving.

She swallowed.

Not yet approaching but waiting.

Watching.

Gathering.

Her pulse thudded in her ears.

"Fear," she murmured, "is the only sickness that spreads quicker than fever."

She squared her shoulders. Walked on.

As she neared the first cottage, she felt the prickle of eyes behind shutter slats. A curtain twitched. A door latch clicked. Not welcoming. Not hostile. Something colder: uncertainty sharpening into suspicion.

She passed the well. Its bucket swung slightly as though someone had left it in haste. She kept walking.

Near her own cottage - the small stone croft with smoke curling from its chimney and a herb rack hanging beneath the eaves - she stopped.

Someone had left a mark on the door.

A simple one: a cross made of ash smeared across the wood.

A warning.

A ward.

An accusation.

Her breath tightened in her throat, but she did not look away. She reached up, touched the mark with her fingertips. The ash clung to her skin like soft dust.

“So,” she whispered, “it begins.”

A gust of wind swept across the village, carrying with it the scent of the sea and the faintest echo of that earlier whisper. She closed her eyes, letting the air move through her hair, around her shoulders, through the spaces between her ribs.

The night felt full - swollen with meaning, with threat, with history stirring beneath the surface.

Then, quietly, from somewhere deep - deeper than bone, deeper than blood - she heard the truth rise in her:

“The women of Scotland were never lost,” she murmured into the dark. “Only unfound.”

The torchlight on the hill wavered.

The tide whispered against the distant shore.

And Màiri stepped into her cottage, carrying centuries on her back.

INTERLUDE I - After Màiri

The smell hits her first - the faintest ghost of peat smoke, herbs, and sea brine. It rises from the scrap of fabric she’s lifted from the cardboard box, though she knows that’s impossible. Still, she holds it close, breathing in as if scent alone might fill the hollow under her ribs.

Her grandmother’s flat had always smelled like that too.

Warm earth. Burnt sugar. Something old and kind.

Eilidh sets the scrap down gently. The air in her living room feels different now - not heavier, but attentive. As though the quiet has shifted its weight.

She opens her notebook, the one she's barely dared touch since university, and writes a single line:

"Some women carried knowing the way others carried lanterns."

Then she sits back, surprised by herself.

She reads Màiri's chapter again, tracing the edge of each sentence with her eyes. The old healer walking the tidal flats. The unease rising around her. The neighbour's glances. The minister's voice tightening the air like a rope.

Fear spreading like fire.

Eilidh closes the book and presses her palm to her chest.

Why does it feel like she's remembering something she's never lived?

A message buzzes on her phone - work emails, two missed calls, a calendar reminder for a meeting tomorrow - but she turns the phone facedown.

Tonight, she wants only the quiet.

Only the tide she can almost hear.

Only the feeling that something has begun.

CHAPTER TWO - Fionnaghal the Fisherwife

The Children of the Sea

Morvern Coast, 1590

Epigraph

"The sea keeps what it takes, but it never takes wi' silence." - Western Isles saying

Morning on the Morvern shore always began with the same sound: the long, low sigh of the tide pulling itself back like a weary giant. Fionnaghal woke to it every day, the rhythm so familiar it settled into her bones before she opened her eyes. The gulls were already calling - harsh, hungry cries - and the smoke from neighbouring cottages rose in thin blue threads as the village stirred.

But today felt heavier. The air carried the scent of coming rain, the kind that crawled across the water long before the clouds were seen. She pressed a palm to her lower back as she stepped outside, stretching away the ache of yesterday's labours. Her

hands were raw from gutting fish, her shoulders tight from hauling nets. A fisherwife's life was endless work - early mornings, late nights, and everything in between.

She tucked a loose wisp of hair under her kerchief and looked toward the shoreline where her two boys usually played at this hour, chasing cockles or skimming stones across the shallows.

But the shore was empty.

A sting of fear pricked beneath her ribs. Not the sharp fear of danger - just the soft, familiar worry of a mother whose children were too quiet.

Then she spotted them: two small figures near the tideline, bent over something in the sand. Relief softened her shoulders.

"Callum! Tam!" she shouted, her voice carried crookedly on the wind. "Keep away from the deep water till I'm doon there, aye?"

The younger one - Tam, wild as a winter squall - lifted his head and waved both arms in the air. Callum, the steadier older brother, gave a single nod before turning back to whatever treasure they'd found.

Fionnaghal smiled despite herself. If the sea had moods, so did her boys. Tam was the tide - always in motion, restless, unpredictable. Callum was the rock - grounded, observant, slow to speak but quick to understand. Both were hers. Both had been shaped by wind and salt before they could walk.

She made her way down the path toward them, skirts lifted to keep from dragging through the damp grass. The sea smell grew stronger as she approached - a mixture of salt, rot, life. It reminded her of her own childhood, playing here with bare feet and bruised knees, her mother shouting warnings that she ignored just as her boys did now.

"What've ye found?" she called as she reached them.

Tam held up a small object triumphantly. "A boat, Mam! Look - see the wee sail?"

It was a piece of driftwood carved into a crude shape, no larger than her hand. Someone - a child long gone, perhaps - had scraped lines into the wood for planks and carved a tiny notch where a twig mast could fit. There was no sail now, only the ghost of one.

Fionnaghal crouched beside them. The wood was pale and smooth from the sea's polishing. It felt like bone.

"A bonnie find," she said softly. "The sea gives gifts when she's in the mood."

"But she takes too," Callum muttered, not looking at her.

The words chilled her more than the wind.

She glanced at him - his small face solemn, eyes too old for his years. He had his father's quietness. His father's worry. His father's way of watching the sea as though it were a beast that could be tamed if studied enough.

"Aye," she said carefully, "she takes. But no more than any living thing. The land takes. The fire takes. And life..." - she brushed sand from the driftwood boat - "life takes most of all."

Callum said nothing. Tam had already begun digging in the sand again, searching for more treasures the tide may have dropped.

Fionnaghal turned her gaze to the horizon. The water was silver-dark, shifting like something alive beneath a thin skin. Her husband, Iain, was out there somewhere in his small fishing boat, accompanied by two of the village men. They'd gone before dawn to try their luck further from shore where the deeper nets might bring better catch. Times were harder lately; the waters seemed leaner, more reluctant.

She'd felt uneasy watching him leave.

"A storm's brewing," she'd said as he pulled on his boots.

He'd kissed her forehead. "It'll no' break till tonight."

She wasn't so sure.

Now, standing with the driftwood boat in her hand, she felt that same unease curl tighter.

The wind shifted. A small wave slapped the rocks, harder than before. The sky had a strange brightness to it - the kind that wasn't light but warning.

"Tam, enough digging. Callum, help me carry the creels in. The tide'll be up again soon."

They obeyed, though reluctantly, and the three of them moved up the shore. Fionnaghal tucked the driftwood boat into her apron pocket without thinking. Something about it felt important - a message, a memory, or maybe just a reminder that the sea was always watching.

The day thickened with tension.

By mid-morning the clouds gathered, bruised and low, and the wind flicked spray against the cottage windows. Fionnaghal salted the fish laid out for drying, checked the nets twice, and kept glancing toward the horizon.

By afternoon, a few men had returned from their boats early, faces grim. The sea was turning. A storm was pushing in faster than expected.

"Where's Iain?" she asked one of them.

"Further oot," the man replied. "They were tryin' for deeper catch. Should've been back by now."

Fear tightened like rope around her ribs.

She wrapped her shawl around her shoulders and stepped outside, wind slapping her hair loose. Callum and Tam stayed close, sensing her worry. The driftwood boat weighed in her pocket, small and ominous.

She walked toward the shore again, scanning the waves.

And then she saw a shape.

Not a boat - too small. Something bobbing, rising, falling, disappearing.

A plank?

A barrel?

No - something else.

Her breath snagged.

Not again.

Her firstborn had drowned at five years old - caught by a sudden swell when the tide turned faster than anyone expected. She'd been steps away. Just steps. And yet the sea had taken him without ceremony, without sound.

A shadow of that old grief rose now, hot and sharp.

She moved closer to the water, ignoring the sting of wind-driven sand against her face. The waves thrashed, lifting and dropping the shape again.

"Mam?" Callum whispered, clutching her skirt.

She braced him with one arm, squinting against the glare.

The shape rolled. Turned. Revealed itself.

A broken creel, its ropes frayed. Not a child. Not a man. Not a message from the sea demanding payment.

She exhaled shakily, closing her eyes.

The sea never took gently. But it did take everything eventually.

Behind her, Tam tugged at her apron. "Mam, look!"

He pulled out the driftwood boat she'd forgotten in her pocket.

"It's floatin'," he said, tossing it into a shallow pool left by the tide.

The tiny boat rocked, caught by a wavelet, spun once, and drifted toward the open water.

Fionnaghal's heart lurched.

"No," she breathed.

The sea reached for it - greedy, inevitable.

Like a child slipping from grasp.

Like a memory swallowed whole.

She stepped forward instinctively, but the next wave surged higher, pulling the boat into its churn. It bobbed once more, then vanished into the froth.

Callum's hand tightened in hers.

"Mam... is Da comin' hame?"

She swallowed hard.

"Aye," she said, though she could taste the lie like bitter salt. "Aye, mo ghille. He'll come hame before the dark."

But the storm rolled faster. The sky bruised deeper. The wind rose to a keening wail.

And the sea - that vast, hungry thing - roared loud enough to drown any promise a mother might make.

Night fell early, swallowing the coastline. Fionnaghal paced the shore until her legs ached, scanning the waves for lantern-light, for voices, for anything. The other women gathered too, shawls clutched tight against the wind. No one spoke loudly. No one needed to.

By full dark, when the first flash of lightning cracked across the Sound, she knew.

The sea had taken again.

Not with malice.

Not with warning.

Simply because that is what the sea does.

She lifted her face into the spray, tears indistinguishable from saltwater.

Behind her, the boys huddled together, their small bodies shaking from cold and fear.

She knelt between them, pulling them close.

"We're still here," she whispered into their hair. "We're still here."

The storm answered with a howl.

And somewhere beneath the crashing waves, the driftwood boat - that small, carved relic of some other mother's child - drifted deeper into darkness, carrying with it the memory of all that had been lost before.

INTERLUDE II - After Fionnaghal

When Eilidh dreams, she's standing on a shore she's never visited. The tide pulls back with a long, sorrowful breath. Somewhere in the distance, someone is calling a name she doesn't recognise, but it feels like she should.

She wakes with her heart thudding, hair damp against her forehead.

The flat is dark except for the streetlamp outside. She pads barefoot to the kitchen, fills a glass of water, and watches the ripples settle. Her chest feels tight - not painful, just... full. As though someone else's grief has brushed past her like a sleeve.

On the table lies the driftwood boat she found in the box - small, pale, smooth as bone. She hadn't noticed before, but holding it now, she feels a faint, aching tug low in her stomach. Loss, sharp and clean.

She whispers into the quiet, "I don't know why this hurts."

No answer comes.

Not that she expected one.

But when she sets the boat down, she places it carefully - reverently - like setting down something that deserves gentleness.

She returns to bed and lies awake, staring at the ceiling, thinking about women who waited by the sea, about storms that swallowed the people they loved, about children whose names the waves kept.

She doesn't know why she's crying until she feels the warmth on her temples.

"It's not my story," she whispers. But still - the grief feels real.

CHAPTER THREE - Sorcha the Traveller Bard

Firelight Stories

River Spean, 1630

Epigraph

"A story's like a spark: it leaps, it lights, it burns, it lingers." - Traveller saying

The fire cracked like laughter beneath the darkening sky. Sparks jumped and twirled upward, scattering themselves into the night as though trying to join the stars. Sorcha watched them go with the half-mischievous, half-melancholic smile she wore more often than any other expression. Her bone-carved whistle hung from a cord around her neck, tapping lightly against her collarbone with each movement.

Around her, the camp stirred. Pots clanged, a baby fussed in someone's arms, a pair of dogs circled each other in slow suspicion, and the smell of hare stew mingled with woodsmoke. The air buzzed with its own rhythm: the muttered bickering of families who'd spent far too many days on the road, the deep belly-laugh of men telling tales that grew grander each time they were told, the clatter of wheels settling for the night.

It was the sound of home - or at least, the closest thing Sorcha had ever known to one.

She leaned over the fire and gave the pot a stir with a stick. A few children hovered nearby, sniffing hopefully.

"Dinnae look at me like starving lambs," she said, tapping one boy lightly on the nose. "It'll no' be ready till the carrots surrender."

"They surrendered hours ago," the boy muttered.

"Aye, well carrots are liars," she replied solemnly.

A ripple of giggles followed. Sorcha winked.

Someone behind her cleared their throat - a soft, pointed sound that was unmistakably Ruaidhrí's. Her younger brother stood a few feet away, lankier than

last summer, his ponytail wind-tangled, his face already taking on the angle-sharp weariness of a Traveller boy too often watched with suspicion.

"You're causin' chaos again," he said, though there was affection beneath the words.

"I'm causin' charm," she corrected.

He snorted. "You're causin' hungry bairns to stare at stew like it's heaven."

"Aye, well, it might be. Depends if the hare had any sense of humour before it died."

Ruaidhrí rolled his eyes, but he smiled - that rare, sideways smile that made Sorchá's heart warm. There were precious few people who smiled at him these days. Settled folk distrusted Traveller boys; the kirk distrusted anyone who carried a tune. Ruaidhrí, who carried dozens of them, was seen as trouble before he ever opened his mouth.

Sorchá nudged him with her hip. "Come sit at the fire. Ye look like the wind's been fighting ye all day."

"The wind fights everybody," he muttered, but he sat.

She slid down beside him, the warmth of the fire licking at their shins. The children gathered closer, sensing a story on the air - they always did. They had the instincts of fox kits, nose-sharp and quick to pounce.

"A tale!" one girl said, practically vibrating with anticipation.

"Aye, tell us the one about the woman who spoke to the stars!" another boy cried.

"No, the one wi' the kelpie!"

"No, the bannock thief!"

"Naw, the bannock thief was *her*," someone said, pointing at Sorchá.

She gasped in theatrical outrage. "I've ne'er stolen a bannock in my life!"

Seven children stared at her with wide knowing eyes.

She sighed. "Fine. One bannock. But it was lonely on the plate and wanted company in my stomach."

Laughter exploded around the fire. Even Ruaidhrí's shoulders shook.

Sorchá lifted her whistle and twirled it between her fingers. The smooth bone caught the firelight, gleaming softly. A hush fell without her asking - as always, her stories didn't require command, only the quiet inhalation before they began.

She drew a breath and let her voice settle low, warm, and steady.

“Listen close, bairns o’ my heart. I’ll tell ye a tale o’ a woman who wanted answers from the sky.”

A murmur rippled through the crowd. Even the older folk edged nearer.

Sorcha began.

“Long before any o’ us walked this earth,” she said, “there lived a woman named Muirenn who had a question burning in her chest like a banked fire. Folk said it was foolishness - the kind o’ question nae sensible body asks.”

“What was the question?” a child whispered.

“Oh, ye ken,” Sorcha replied, eyes sparkling. “The kind o’ question only the bold or the daft dare speak.”

“What kind?” another child insisted.

She leaned forward, voice dropping to a dramatic whisper.

“She wanted tae ken where souls went when they left their bodies.”

Some children gasped; one crossed himself; Ruaidhrí snorted.

Sorcha continued, unfazed.

“Muirenn went to the kirk. The minister told her tae hush her wild thoughts. She went to the elders; they said the same. So, she turned tae the sky. She waited until the darkest night o’ winter and climbed the highest hill she could find.”

Sorcha swept her arm upward as the fire popped behind her, sparks flying like startled fireflies.

“She shouted up at the stars: ‘Tell me! Where do souls go when the breath leaves the body?’”

The children leaned closer.

“And the stars - prideful wee things - didnae answer. So, she shouted louder. And the louder she shouted, the more the stars trembled.”

Ruaidhrí tilted his head. “Stars dinnae tremble.”

Sorcha flicked his forehead. “Real ones dinnae. But *story* ones do.”

He grinned.

She went on.

“At last, the stars answered. Not wi’ words - they’re stubborn about that. They answered wi’ light. A great streak crossed the sky, bright enough tae blind her. And in that light, she saw...”

She paused, letting the silence stretch.

“What did she see?” a child breathed.

Sorcha smiled gently. “She saw every soul she’d ever loved - and every soul she had yet tae meet. All of them, bright as fireflies, dancing between the stars like sparks from a fire.”

The smallest girl’s eyes shone. “So, when folk die, they go tae the stars?”

“Maybe,” Sorcha said softly. “Or maybe the stars are just mirrors showin’ what our hearts hope tae see. A story can hold more truths than a kirk ever will.”

That earned a scandalised gasp from an older woman on the far side of the fire. Sorcha winked at her.

Ruaidhrí leaned toward her, murmuring, “Ye’re gonnae have the minister after ye again.”

“Och, let him come,” Sorcha whispered back. “I’ve more stories than he has sermons.”

The children laughed, though some cast nervous glances toward the path leading to the nearest settlement.

Sorcha clapped her hands.

“Right then! That’s the tale. Now off wi’ ye - go stir the stew, feed the dogs, or pick midges out yer hair.”

Most scattered with delighted squeals, but one girl lingered, her dark eyes serious.

“Sorcha?”

“Aye, mo bheag?”

“Is that story real?”

Sorcha paused.

Firelight danced across the girl’s face. Behind her, the camp hummed with ordinary sound - spoons scraping bowls, boots thudding, voices rising and falling in the familiar music of the road. But beneath it all, Sorcha felt the pulse of something older, deeper.

"A story can be real even if it's no' true," Sorchá said gently. "An' true even if it's no' real."

The girl nodded solemnly, then ran off after her friends.

Ruaidhrí scoffed. "That's no' an answer."

"It's the best kind," Sorchá said. "The kind that keeps folk listening."

He shook his head, though affection softened the gesture.

"You should be careful," he murmured. "Folk dinnae like it when women make people think too much."

"Folk dinnae like it when women *do* much o' anything," she replied.

He laughed once - harshly, quietly - then looked away.

Sorchá leaned her shoulder into his. "What's weighing ye the night?"

He hesitated. Then: "The minister in the last town. Said we were wicked. Said folk should drive us oot."

"Aye, an'?" She shrugged. "He wasnae the first. Will nae be the last."

"But what if they do?" he asked, voice thin.

Sorchá lifted the whistle from her chest and placed it gently into his hand.

"Ruaidhrí, listen tae me."

Her voice softened, a rare seriousness threading through it.

"When they fear folk like us, it's no' because we're wicked. It's because we remember stories they want forgotten. We carry the world in our mouths."

He looked down at the whistle.

"Ye're no' giving this tae me," he said, startled.

"No' forever," she teased, "or I'd never get another tune out o' it. I'm letting ye hold it. Just for the moment."

He turned it over reverently, tracing the carved spirals with his thumb.

"It feels like... something old," he said quietly.

"It is," Sorchá murmured. "Older than me. Older than Ma. Older than any o' us."

The fire popped again. A spark curved upward like a falling star in reverse.

Sorcha watched it rise.

Watched it flicker.

Watched it vanish into the dark.

Later, when the stew was eaten and the camp had settled into night's slow breathing, Sorcha wandered a little away from the fire. The moon was thin, a silver fingernail clinging to the sky. The River Spean whispered beside her, its currents carrying secrets downstream.

She lifted her whistle and played a soft, wandering tune - one of her mother's, one she barely remembered learning. The notes drifted across the water, bright and fragile as frost.

Behind her, Ruaidhrí's voice reached her.

"Sorcha?"

She turned.

But he wasn't looking at her - he was staring towards the path. Towards the dark beyond the trees. Towards movement.

Voices.

Footsteps.

Not friendly.

Sorcha's heart tightened.

"Pack the camp," she whispered. "Quietly."

"Who is it?" Ruaidhrí asked, already grabbing a bag.

Sorcha didn't take her eyes off the trees.

"The kind o' folk," she said, "who like their stories quiet and their women quieter."

The fire crackled behind her.

The river whispered.

The night held its breath.

Sorcha slipped her whistle into her pocket and squared her shoulders.

“Come then,” she murmured to the approaching dark. “Let’s see if ye can hush a story.”