



PROLOGUE

She soared over the ocean, searching the horizon. Far in the distance the outline of land was visible. She flew closer. Soon mountains and valleys took shape and muted colors became bright and clear. Never losing sight of her destination, she dipped her shoulders first one way and then the other, sweeping back and forth through the air, rejoicing in her flight. Abruptly she dove and followed the rugged coastline, low enough to see the current rippling along the surface of the water and feel the spray from waves that broke against an offshore wind. High surf pounded sandy beaches, interrupted only when a rocky point signaled a protected cove. Then the current's force waned and weaker swells moved slowly to shore until met by a freshwater creek rushing into the ocean, diluting its salty weight momentarily. Upstream, the creek curled through an inlet of green and yellow grasses and craggy copses. She could imagine lush meadows beyond, beckoning her inland.

In an instant the coastline changed. Sandy shores gave way to towering cliffs with huge, granite fingers jutting into the ocean and barring her way. Thick clouds blocked the sun and the smell of acrid smoke and the tumult of a desperate battle assaulted her. The wind that had moments ago buoyed both her

body and spirit now buffeted her mercilessly. She struggled forward, her mind roiled by dark, chaotic thoughts. If she faltered, all would be lost.

Her body was but a feather against the powers of nature, and so she cast aside all fear and allowed the wind to grab her, sending her twisting and tumbling through the air. She gained strength with each second of its embrace and soon was flying in accord with the wind as it carried her far out to sea and then back, skirting perilously close to the granite cliffs. Looking ahead she saw a massive promontory. Eagerly, she flew toward it. The clouds had now disappeared and the sun's rays felt warm against her skin. She rounded the promontory and a wondrous sight awaited her. There, perched in hollows along the cliffs were what appeared to be cottages. But not the stone, mud, and thatch cottages she knew. These were magnificent, with sharp angles, multiple levels, and sometimes reflective surfaces that gleamed against the bright sunshine. She flew closer and noticed a footpath winding precariously down to the ocean.

On that path was a man.



CHAPTER ONE

KEELIN OPENED HER EYES.
“Only a dream,” she sighed.

No, that was not true. It was *the* dream, visiting her with ever increasing frequency over the past year and leaving her with the same feelings of both exhilaration and frustration. Sometimes, like today, it also left her with a fleeting sense of apprehension tinged with melancholy. Beautiful and familiar, the dream drew her in, delighting her senses, only to abruptly end before she reached the cliff’s edge.

To be so close and not to see his face, she thought angrily.

“But I was flying! I felt . . . *free!*” she exclaimed, her anger forgotten as quickly as it had risen. She stood up and absently brushed leaves and twigs from her damp, wrinkled clothing. She frowned slightly, scanning the heather-dotted meadow that spread across the upper reaches of her family’s land. Bordering the meadow was a great oak forest. Keelin came here in search of healing herbs that grew in the shadows, protected by the oaks’ sheltering branches. She also visited the meadow to escape. It was her secret refuge where her racing mind could relax.

“Do you ever dream of flying, my handsome Rua, with great wings of gold?” Keelin asked the powerful horse grazing quietly nearby.

Rua raised his head and responded with a low whinny. He calmly walked over to her, nudging her hand with his soft muzzle.

“Of course you do not,” said Keelin, stroking the stallion’s sleek neck. She was the one who wanted to fly away, not her magnificent Rua.

“I just don’t understand why the gods would choose such a life for me. I am sure, however, that you, my big red beast, will always be my fearless protector,” Keelin said, laughing off her doubts.

It was then that she felt the chill of evening. The warmth of the late summer sun had all but disappeared, and the damp of evening was setting in. She had slept longer than she had intended. Her mother must be worried, thought Keelin, her expression softening.

Keelin picked up the satchel she always carried to store the herbs, flowers, and roots she collected and walked over to Rua, who had resumed grazing while she gathered her belongings. He towered over her, the top of her head barely reaching the middle of his shoulders. At the touch of her hand on his left foreleg, he slowly bent one knee and lowered his heavy body, allowing Keelin to spring onto his back, her rough linen skirt hiking up around her knees.

“All right, Rua,” whispered Keelin into her stallion’s ear. “Let’s go.” With only the lightest of pressure from Keelin’s slender legs, Rua charged forward, sensing her excitement and welcoming the signal for speed.

Taking a short cut across the gully that divided her family’s land from their neighbor’s, Keelin would reach home in a fraction of the time, avoiding the longer but safer path down the mountain.

As the stallion’s stride lengthened, Keelin felt the wind grab

her loose blouse and hold it billowing behind her like an air-filled balloon. She never tired of this wonderful race home. Charging down the mountain—the hedges, trees, and sheep a mere blur—left her breathless and exultant. Speed was intoxicating, and riding Rua was the closest thing to flying she had ever experienced.

Keelin knew that many of the villagers looked askance at her riding astride a stallion, thinking it “shameful.” What does it matter, let them talk, Keelin thought as Rua approached a large hedgerow, cantering in a ground-covering stride. As if performing a wonderfully choreographed dance, Rua met the hedge perfectly and sailed over it, landing lightly on the other side.



KEELIN HAD JUST reached the stone wall that bordered the main road and slowed Rua to a walk when she heard the sound of someone singing. The notes were clear and the voice pure. The song told of love and loss and had a melancholy turn like so many of the songs of Keelin’s people. The lilting melody rang through the air with such beauty that she was transfixed. In her sixteen years she had already seen the effects of brutal warfare, disease, and old age. It had been scarcely five years since the last battle between the neighboring clans, and she remembered vividly how few families had been spared the horrors it had wrought. How many new songs would she hear about those brave, doomed warriors?

The singing stopped abruptly, awakening Keelin from her reverie. She was greeted by a far less mellifluous voice.

“So it is the wee Keelin who has trespassed on our land again and frightened our sheep in the upper pastures,” remarked a tall

young man who stood alongside a small herd of dairy cows, his dog at his feet.

Keelin's eyes narrowed and her muscles tensed with anger. She hated the fact that she was small, almost tiny if she were to admit it. Her diminutive stature was made even worse because her parents were both tall, as were most of the people of her clan. When she was younger she would fly like a crazed terrier at anyone who dared to slight her. The girls of the village learned quickly to avoid any mention of her height. The boys, on the other hand, delighted in teasing her. Now it was only Brian, standing insolently in front of her, who still teased her. Strangely enough it was Brian who had put an end to the boys' harassment. He warned them off, and no one wanted to face his wrath.

"It wasn't I who scattered the sheep but you with your frightful crowing," said Keelin with an edge to her voice. Seeing that the barb had hit home, she added, "And what is a mighty warrior doing herding cows? I thought you considered such menial tasks beneath you."

Brian's dark eyes swept over Keelin, making her feel distinctly uncomfortable. "There is always that spare moment between slaying dragons and vanquishing foes," he said with a jaunty smile. "Besides, herding cows is one of the few tasks of the farm I do enjoy."

"And I can imagine why," said Keelin, unable to suppress a giggle. "The poor beasts are but captive listeners to your unceasing songs of glory. At least I see that you heeded my advice and have taken them down to the eastern brook. I told you they preferred the grasses there. Is not their milk sweeter now?"

"Yes," Brian said with a grin, "their milk is nearly sweet enough to quell the bitter taste I always get from seeing the likes

of you. Don't you ever comb that tangled mass of hair, you little witch?"

At that he laughed and turned to drive the cows home. His dog, a fine collie, gave a happy yip and bounded around the cows, biting at their legs and keeping them on the narrow road. Startled by the dog's sudden movement, Rua snorted and pawed the ground, impatient to be off as well.

Keelin smarted from Brian's words. Yes, she knew her hair was wild and tangled, but as hard as she tried to keep it neat and plaited in a long braid, it never failed to come loose when she was riding Rua. She was somewhat self-conscious and, if truth be known, sensitive about her looks. Keelin knew she was no beauty.

Curse him, she thought angrily. Brian knew just how to irk her. Admittedly, Keelin had always enjoyed the challenge of their verbal duels even though, as often as not, he got the better of her. Of late, however, Brian seemed to avoid her, and when they did meet he was often aloof and his comments were dismissive. She heartily disliked him. Perhaps she would never marry and instead live the life of a priestess like her intimidating and formidable teacher, Nuala. But no, that was not the life for her, whatever the gods may think.

"Let's go home, Rua," she muttered distractedly, trying not to think too much about her troubling future.

As she and Rua made their way slowly down the road, she called and waved a greeting to Pádraig, one of the clan's finest warriors and, although considerably younger than her father, Conall's closest friend. The two men had been spending a great deal of time together of late, often walking out onto the fields where no one would chance to hear their conversation. Conall would always come back with his face grave and full of purpose.

Pádraig returned her greeting. “Good evening to you, Keelin. Hurry home, your mother is beginning to despair, sure that you and Rua have come to grief.”



KEELIN REACHED HOME just as the last rays of sunlight glowed on the whitewashed walls of the family cottage. The split-rail fence surrounding the outer reaches of the yard cast long shadows on the bare ground. The yard was quiet and peaceful. Keelin could still see the roses and other flowers that grew in front of the cottage, lining the path to the door. On this late summer evening, their glory of color and scent had waned along with the heat of the season, but there were still those stalwart few, their petals reaching toward the sun, heedless of the inexorable approach of winter.

My mother’s flowers, thought Keelin, they never fail to soothe my soul with their delicate beauty. Few people of their clan bothered planting flowers, finding little use for them, and preferred instead to focus on their vegetable gardens, which brought food to their tables. Conall also thought Saraid’s flowers were a frivolous extravagance, but he quietly indulged her. Naturally gentle and reserved, Saraid had a calming influence on all, especially on Conall, tempering his mercurial swings of mood and consoling him when demons darkened his soul.

What few people guessed, and even fewer saw, was Saraid’s steely determination and cold countenance once provoked. Recently, when Conall’s brooding melancholia turned to angry combativeness that had him shouting orders and cursing violently at the slightest provocation, Saraid stood watching him, her white face grim, waiting for his ranting to cease. Then she told

him in a clear, stern voice that if he continued to behave like a brutish animal, he could go sleep with the pigs, for she would not tolerate him in her home any longer. Without another word, Saraid turned from him and resumed preparations for dinner. Conall stormed out of the cottage only to feel regret later for provoking Saraid's censure, knowing he had deserved it. Conall also knew that Saraid would never mention the incident again or tally up her grievances against him.



THE TRANQUILITY OF the yard was abruptly shattered when a little brown and white terrier came charging from the direction of the vegetable garden, greeting Keelin with high-pitched barks, his short legs fully extended in his enthusiastic race to reach her. Successful, he bounced around Rua with his tail vibrating and body wiggling. Rua pinned his ears and angrily struck out at the manic little creature with a foreleg. The terrier jumped high into the air, easily dodging the stallion's lethal strike.

"Rua, behave yourself! Riley means no harm and is just happy to see us," Keelin reproached sternly. "Riley, go to the cottage this instant. My jealous Rua would like nothing better than to quiet your yapping for good." She watched as the little dog pranced happily toward the cottage, his right hind leg taking its peculiar little skip every few strides.

It was Saraid who had brought Riley home several years ago from one of her trips to the village. He had been the runt of the litter and Saraid had taken pity on him. When Conall came home he found the little pup curled up next to the fireplace, asleep on one of his old shirts. At first he was angry and exasperated with his wife. Conall loved his collies, but they had a

purpose: they were working dogs who helped herd and look after the sheep and cattle.

"This wee terrier," reasoned Conall, "will be of no use whatsoever." He glanced down again at the little pup and shook his head.

Saraid looked resolutely at her husband. "I am sure he will make an excellent mouser." Saraid's words were prophetic. Riley took to his job with such enthusiasm that before long, not a mouse or a rat could be found anywhere near the cottage yard. He also delighted in guarding the vegetable garden, always ready to chase any rabbits who ventured near. Quite often now, Riley would come strutting into the cottage, a rabbit in his mouth, and proudly present it to Saraid.



AFTER GROOMING AND stabling Rua, Keelin ran to the cottage. She was famished, and as she opened the door she was met with the savory aroma of stew and freshly baked bread.

"Keelin, thank heaven you are home safely," greeted Saraid as she stood stirring the stew. "Have you washed up yet? Your father has gone to fetch your Uncle Liam, and as soon as they return we will eat."

"No, not yet," said Keelin, kissing her mother on the cheek. "I wanted to bring the herbs I gathered from the meadow inside before I washed. They are very rare and I feared they might become moldy from the evening damp. If that were to happen, Nuala would surely give me the evil eye."

"Speaking of Nuala," said Saraid frowning, "she visited here today."

Keelin stopped short, at once alert, and looked at her mother.

The Priestess was not one to make social calls. “What brought Nuala here?” she questioned, noting the fine lines of tension on her mother’s brow.

Saraid hesitated for only an instant and then responded, “Your uncle Déaglán has returned from his voyage.”

“I thought perhaps she had come to complain about my sorry lack of scholarship. I try her patience far too often,” Keelin admitted, relieved. Almost as an afterthought, she asked, “Did Uncle Déaglán bring news of importance?”

Saraid smiled, the lines on her brow erased. “I spoke to Nuala only in passing and she made no mention of you. She wished to speak with your father and did not share with me the nature of Déaglán’s news. Undoubtedly we will learn more this evening. Now go wash up before the men return. I don’t know what is keeping them.”

When Conall and Liam eventually entered the cottage, Keelin was helping her mother serve dinner. As Liam stepped across the threshold, he inhaled deeply and smiled. “Ah, rabbit stew. Thank you, clever Riley. I do appreciate your hunting skills.”

Saraid, looking up from ladling the stew into a large bowl Keelin held, laughed. “Yes, and this rabbit greatly outweighed him, I assure you.”