

Chapter 3

AOIFE



An Insult to the King of Brefni

My sister Urla liked to pretend she knew more than anybody else. She was older than me, and she spied on people and told tales. I didn't always believe the stories Urla told. I thought she made some of them up to make herself seem important.

One day she came to me with a gleam in her eyes like a stoat stealing eggs. She was still angry about the pony, I think. 'I know something you don't know,' she chanted.

I tossed my head. 'Why should I care?' I turned my back on her. 'Because it's about Father!' Urla hissed.

I paused. 'What about Father?'

'He did something very wicked once.'

'You're lying. I'll tell my mother.'

'I swear on the Holy Family that it's the truth,' Urla said solemnly. I had to listen, then. She would never have sworn such an oath for a lie.

'It began a long time ago,' she went on. 'A very long time ago ...'

'Tell it!' I said. I was losing patience with Urla. She liked to drag out a story too much and I was always in a hurry.

Urla sat down on a bench and folded her hands. I sat beside her. 'When Father was sixteen years old,' she said. 'Turlough O'Connor was King of Connacht – and also claimed the high kingship of Ireland.'

‘Father’s father was King of Leinster, but he died. His enemies killed him and buried a dog in his grave with him, as an insult. Then Father was supposed to become King of Leinster, but Turlough O’Connor wanted one of his own sons to rule Leinster instead. There was a war about it.’

‘I should think so! And Father won. He’s King of Leinster now and has been for a long time.’

‘He is,’ Urla agreed, ‘but it took many years and many battles. One of the men who fought on the side of O’Connor, against Father, was Tiernan O’Rourke, the King of Brefni. O’Rourke killed most of the cattle in Leinster and burned the houses. He even burned Father’s home here at Ferns. O’Connor and O’Rourke wanted to make Father feel so small and helpless that he’d never even try to be king.’

No wonder Father looked so sad sometimes, and sat staring into space with his chin on his fist. ‘How did he ever win over them?’ I wanted to know.

Urla’s eyes danced. I never knew anyone who enjoyed telling awful things as much as Urla did. ‘About three years later, when O’Connor and O’Rourke were fighting in some other part of Ireland, Father took revenge.’

‘Father’s aunt had been Abbess of Kildare, but O’Connor had made one of his own kinswomen abbess instead. So when his enemies were busy elsewhere, Father raised an army and broke into the abbey. He looted it, and he hurt the abbess very badly. That was his wicked deed.’

‘He’d never!’ I cried.

‘Ah but he did. I swear it. Then he made a woman of his own clan abbess. People were afraid of him after that. O’Connor and O’Rourke left him alone to be King of Leinster. But they never stopped trying to make trouble for him. Particularly O’Rourke, who hated him.’

‘Then Father struck a terrible blow against O’Rourke. A few years

before you were born, Aoife, Father stole O'Rourke's wife.'

Now I was sure she was lying. 'How could you say such things about Father?' I shouted at Urla. 'You're an awful person and I'm glad Father gave me the pony instead of you, because I know he can't love you at all!' I whirled away from her and ran before she could hit me.

I ran straight into the arms of my half-brother, Donal Mac Murrrough Kavanaugh. 'Here, what's this about?' he wanted to know.

Sobbing with anger, I told him. He listened to me with a grave expression on his face. 'Urla told you the truth,' he said at last. 'Father did indeed steal O'Rourke's wife. At least, he took her away from Brefni. I was here when he brought her to Ferns.'

'You were?'

'I was indeed. He rode through the gates with her slung across his horse, and his men-at-arms following them, laughing and winking at one another. As she came into the courtyard the woman pretended to scream, so people would believe she had been taken against her will. But she didn't scream very loudly and no one believed her. She and Father were too friendly. He gave her one of the best chambers and kept her here for a year or two, in great comfort.'

'What did his wives say about it?' I wanted to know.

'They didn't like it very much, nor did they like the woman, who was called Dervorgilla. But Father never offered to marry her, so they put up with her. Most of the Leinster folk approved of what Father had done. O'Rourke had insulted him, so he had returned the insult in full measure. And he never even paid O'Rourke an honour price for his stolen wife, which Father should have done under the law. It was a mighty insult to the King of Brefni and we thought he deserved it.

'Of course, it made O'Rourke hate Father more than ever. But Father was never afraid of him. When Turlough O'Connor died, an Ulster king called Mac Loughlin won the high kingship and Father made friends with him. So now he has as an ally the most powerful

king in Ireland, and he's safe from O'Rourke.'

'What happened to Dervorgilla?' I wanted to know, relieved to hear that Father was safe.

Donal laughed. 'Oh, after a time she and Father fell out and she went away. I think she went into a convent somewhere.'

Poor Dervorgilla, I thought. And then I forgot about her, which was a mistake.

Because Dervorgilla was not forgotten in Ireland.

By stealing her, Father had made O'Rourke hate him more than ever. Hate him enough to destroy him utterly, to become a deadly foe who would never rest until he saw my father in his grave. O'Rourke had become a man who would stop at nothing to hurt my father. And his family.

I did not know, then, that we were all living under the shadow of Dervorgilla.

That night in the hall I studied my father's face closely. He had made people fear him by acting brutally. That was not the man I knew. When he pretended to be a bear and growl at me, that was only play. Could there be a real bear hidden in my father somewhere? I wondered.

I stood in the shadows beyond the central hearth and watched his face in the leaping firelight. He was a very large man, I realised, and very strong. His cheekbones were like boulders, his nose was hooked and his jaw was heavy. How strange it was to know that other people were afraid of him! And yet, watching him, I could imagine that he might frighten people who didn't know him.

Then he saw me watching him, and winked at me.

After that, whenever Father rode away I knew he was going to do brave deeds and wonderful things in defense of Leinster. He had won the kingship against strong enemies, and was willing to fight anyone to keep it. He had even rebuilt Ferns after the wicked Tiernan O'Rourke destroyed it, and now our home was fine and grand, surely

better than it had been before.

He could do anything, my father.

How I envied Donal Mac Murrough Kavanaugh, who was old enough to fight at his side!

It didn't seem too fair to me that girls weren't allowed to do all the things boys could do.

'Why aren't girls allowed to go to war?' I asked my mother.

She threw up her hands. 'Who on earth puts such ideas into your head, Aoife?'

'No one does. I just want to know why I can't be a warrior like Father or Donal.'

My mother sighed. 'Because women don't fight.'

This was not exactly true. 'But you fight with Urla's mother,' I reminded her.

She sighed again. 'That's different. We merely argue. I'm Dermot's second wife and it would be wrong of me to fight with his senior wife. Especially since the senior wife has to give permission for a second wife to marry her husband. Mor gave that permission, so I try hard to be friends with her.'

'I try to be friends with Urla,' I said, 'but sometimes we fight. So why can't women fight in real battles?'

'You don't know what you're talking about, Aoife. War is dreadful, it's not a game played by children in a courtyard. Men suffer and die for nothing, because almost as soon as one battle is over another begins.'

'Only during the reign of Brian Boru as High King was there a time of peace in Ireland, but that ended with his death. Now the battles go on as before.'

'If Father were High King, he would make people keep the peace,' I said. 'I know he would.'

Mother stared at me. 'Your father? Bring peace? That's your oddest idea yet.'

‘Why? Isn’t he a good king?’

‘Dermot is a good king – for Leinster,’ Mother had to agree. ‘Since he began his reign there have been rich harvests every season, and the cattle are fat in the fields. If anyone tries to take what belongs to us your father drives them away. His strong sword arm, and his reputation, keep us safe here. Scholars even come long distances to study in the great library he built here in Ferns, and he endowed a new monastery here for the Augustinians.’

‘Indeed, your father is a good king for Leinster. But for many reasons, Aoife, I can’t imagine him being High King of Ireland. He has too many enemies.’

‘If anything ever happens to your father’s friend Mac Loughlin the High King, Dermot’s enemies will come down on him again like wolves onto a lamb.’

‘He can fight them off,’ I said confidently. ‘I know he can.’

‘I hope you’re right,’ said my mother. ‘But someday he must surely grow tired. His entire life has been a battle, and no man can go on forever.’

My father could, I thought.

I continued to play at war in the courtyard with the boys. I continued to push stones into the plaits of my hair and swing my head to keep my enemies at bay.

I was Dermot Mac Murrough’s daughter. Aoife Rua, they called me. Red Eva.