

# RIAN

## THE WINGED ISLE

Rian couldn't sleep. She sat up in bed, tugging tangles out of her hair. It was still her best feature, the colour of amber, as Pytheas used to be so fond of pointing out. She was no longer the wraith she was when she ran away from him. Her fingers were toughened by years of scrubbing and pounding, milking and churning, grinding and peeling. Who could imagine food and herbs could make a woman's hands so rough? They were always worst at this time of year, chapped and stinging after the winter. She had yarrow butter to soften them, but never remembered to use it, always leaving it until a cut became sore. One of those nail-edge rips that refuse to heal caught on her hair with a twinge. She sucked it, worrying.

Eventually she shook Manigan awake.

'There's something wrong about that woman.' She spoke in a whisper, even though the cliff-top house walls were thick stone. Sound moved in strange ways around these buildings: you could hear voices from places you couldn't see.

She lit a lamp. They had been given a splendid room. The bed was solid, with curtains on three sides, including the one she

was on next to the wall. The cloth was well woven and the warm colours shone in the flicker from the wick: a deep red and mellow brown with light green patches. It made her think of rowan trees. The coverlet was a patchwork of furs that had been so warm she'd had to throw it off in the night. Despite the comfort, she had hardly slept.

Manigan grunted and groped for her hand. His thick braid of hair was shot with a touch of silver, but she still found him the most beguiling person she had ever set eyes on. Still lithe, his smile still wonky. His beard was short-cropped and it suited him. After a night's sleep he was looking comfortably tousled again, a bit scruffy, and his sea-weathered skin was more relaxed than the day before at the party. She always thought he looked like a naughty child when he was freshly scrubbed. It wasn't his natural state.

When he stirred again, she said, 'There's something not right. She gives me the creeps.'

'Who?' His voice was woolly with sleep.

'Cuilc. She's too happy. I don't believe in her.'

He opened his eyes and gave her one of his baleful stares. 'Of course she's happy. It's only the bride's mother that gets sad at handfastings. She just got herself a daughter-in-law to do her laundry for her and cut the hay.'

Rian snorted. 'Can you imagine?'

They both chuckled at the picture of Rona attempting to wield a scythe or thump a laundry tub.

'She'll have to grow up now. She'll be fine. They're good people,' Manigan said.

It was true, she knew this. The handfasting had shown the community in a good light: plenty of funny stories and more food than you'd expect for spring. The boy Eadha adored Rona and she bore a mad passion for him. The only wrong note was his mother.

She pulled her hand out of Manigan's grasp. 'What if she's my mother?'

‘Ach, be quiet. What on earth would make you think that? She’s not old enough.’

‘How old was I when I had Soyea?’

Manigan sighed. ‘Did you drink too much last night?’

She sulked for a while at that. ‘Did you hear Uill Tabar is dead?’

It had been the sort of gathering where you heard news about people you hadn’t seen for years. The old mystic had died, seemingly, on a boat headed for the Long Island. He’d been helping with a tack and the boom had slipped out of the hands of the boy at the bow and caught Uill on the head. He had never come round.

Manigan pushed himself into a sitting position and took her hand again. ‘I see where this is going. Yes, I did. Poor old fellow. I’ll miss him.’

‘He never told me who my parents were.’

‘No. You never did get it out of him, the old teaser.’

She tried to clench her fist but Manigan had tight hold.

‘It really bothers you, doesn’t it?’ he said.

‘I can’t bear not knowing. Sometimes it feels like I’m being eaten up by it, the sense that it’s just out of reach. Danuta once told me everything would change when I found out who I came from. I have to ask her. Will you take me to Assynt?’

‘Is that wise?’

‘I have to go. I spoke to Ishbel, you know, the priestess, and she thinks Danuta’s still alive. Hasn’t heard otherwise, anyway.’

‘Of course, if that’s what you want to do, I’ll take you.’ He wrapped his other hand around the one he was already holding. ‘But is it safe? Bael has a bad reputation. Worse than his father. And Ussa still goes there. It’s one of her haunts.’

Rian shuddered at the mention of the slaver, her nemesis. ‘I have to risk facing them. If Danuta dies I’ll never know. Nobody else knows who I am.’

‘Ach, Rian. I’ve told you a thousand times and I’ll tell you again, you’re whoever you let yourself be and to me you’re the Queen of

the Sea.' He thrust his head down into her belly, rocked her under him, and wrestled with his big arms until she cuddled him back.

Their leaving was sore next morning, and Rian would have willingly stayed for days or weeks rather than part with her youngest daughter. But Manigan said they should abandon Rona to her new life, and the wind was easterly and ideal for the journey north to Assynt.

Soyea and Manigan were already installed on *Bradán* by the time Rian made her way to the cleft in the cliff where the boat had been hauled up. She followed Eadha, who led his mother, his new wife and his mother-in-law down the path. His head was high and he stood, legs a little apart, hand on one hip, as Rian gave Rona a final hug. Then he wrapped his other arm around Rona's shoulder, as if to show possession. Cuilc was hovering, so Rian briefly hugged her too, and was surprised, even so early, to smell strong drink on her breath.

Trying to keep from crying, Rian turned away to clamber onto the boat. She knew she should be happy, but Rona was so young to say goodbye to. Once aboard she faced the young couple. Her daughter was alight with excitement, gazing up into the flawless beauty of her husband's face.

Cuilc stood a few steps aside, watching, and when Rian waved to her a delighted smile broke onto her wrinkled face and she raised a hand, mouthing, 'Come again soon.'

Rian nodded.

Rona was waving goodbye with both hands, then laughing turned to say something to Eadha. He stood as before, his pose struck and held, arm raised as if bearing a torch, the other clasped around Rona's shoulder.

*Bradán's* sail lifted and they drew away from the shore, heading south down the loch. Rian stayed at the stern, watching until the three figures turned away and strolled back towards the cliff-top tower.