

# Celtic Sacrifice

## CHAPTER ONE

*Dungannon, Ireland - April 24, 1587*

I listened intently to the inflections in the High Priestess' voice. My mother barely responded to the touch of the holy woman, who smoothed away damp locks of copper curls from Ma's forehead. A tear stole down Auntie's cheek.

"What song is Philomena singing, Aunt Muireann?" I asked.

"Philomena is singing your ma to sleep, Ceana."

"Why?"

Aunt Muireann didn't answer. I gazed around the small bedchamber filled with druid novices. Why were the women so still and silent? I looked from one solemn expression to another, my heart pounding so loudly, it sounded within my ears.

"Mama?"

I slipped from my perch on Muireann's lap. Four halting steps took me to my mother's bedside. Cautiously, I entwined my fingers with hers. This time, she didn't return my squeeze. I felt her usual soft warmth replaced with what seemed an unnatural coolness against my skin. Did her fever finally break?

"Mama?"

Her eyelids fluttered to reveal dull, olive pools dotted with scarlet.

"Ceana." Her voice came low and raspy, barely a whisper. "I need you to be strong for me."

"Why, Mama?" A sudden tightness wedged in my throat. I sensed one of the novices move behind me, a familiar prayer flowing from her lips. Hands came to rest upon my shoulders.

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The novices bathed my mother's body. Lilac blossoms floated upon the surface of the water, their pungent aroma filling the air. My attention moved to the linen recholl with which the women wrapped her form.

Wide-eyed, I clung to Aunt Muireann. "What are they doing to Ma?"

"Your mother is the wife of a chieftain, Ceana. Her office demands that the priestesses of the Grove of Brigit cleanse her body and perform the caoine until her clan members arrive."

The wails of the grieving women rang sharp and resounding to my ears. I imagined their laments flying on the wind to faraway Connacht, their woeful songs guiding the O'Connor along their journey.

No one shuffled me from my vigil. A novice tenderly held my hand, explaining each task performed. "Death, after all, is also a part of life, Ceana. One day," she predicted, "you will be responsible for overseeing your clan's funeral rites." I stared aghast, beholding the novices work the crisp, linen wrappings around my mother's neck and over her face.

"No! She will not be able to breathe." I waited for Ma to sit up and pull the cloth from her face, but her body lay heavy and motionless.

My chest hurt with each intake of breath. Every nerve-ending felt exposed and chopped in two. Silent until that fraction of a second, I lifted my voice to Queen Maeb. "Please, Your Majesty. Please have the Faerie return my mother to me. I will be a good girl and attend to my lessons. I promise."

Muireann pulled me onto her lap. Philomena sang the Nuall-guba, telling of my mother's generosity, her virtue, and loyalty to her tribes.

The lamenting women tried to soothe me with their words, but I clasped my hands over my ears and shook my head. No solace could fill the gaping hole left from losing the center of my world. Streams of tears flowed down my cheeks; I cried myself to sleep within the warm embrace of Muireann.

Strange voices and heavy footsteps filled the manor. I slipped from my bed with great caution, espying the O'Connor, who must've arrived during the night. I rambled about in bare feet, thanking the goddess for ceasing the piteous wailing of the mourners.

My brothers seemed too eager to engage in wrestling with children I guessed to be our cousins—one, a dark-haired boy, slightly taller than Déahglán. I scooted warily past their sport, but glanced back. The boy was following me. What did he want?

“Will you join us, Ceana? Or sit at the fire and listen to the stories?”

I stopped and turned full to face him. He gazed with eyes the same chestnut brown as a fawn's new downy coat, and wore a gentle, pleasing smile. But my heart would seek no joy in play this day. I shook my head, rudely continuing on my way toward the manor.

Forlorn remembrance of my mother holding me tight, whispering the O'Connor stories, filled my heart while I sat on the rough, wooden steps of my home. I hugged my knees and buried my head into the crook of my arm, silently weeping.

“I can tell you about our Great-Great-Grandmother Una,” the boy with stag-like eyes said before he sat beside me.

I rewarded him with a sour expression that deterred his pursuit not one whit.

“Do you know of her?”

I straightened slightly and punished him with a glower for interrupting my grief. “Do you think me simple?”

“Nay. We have but just met.”

“My mother told me the stories.”

“I was uncertain how much of our family history was known to you.”

“My Ma's lessons to me included the druid secrets and talents passed down from mother to daughter throughout generations. She also told me the O'Connor's feared the magic of our lineage has faded over time.”

“Well done,” he said. “And one day Una will come back through the veil separating the living world from the Faerie realm to choose a daughter from the tribe of O'Connor to continue her legacy. In that chosen child, she will instil the wisdom, strength, and power of the ancients.”

He made no impression on me with his knowledge, and his tone felt blanketed in condescension. I promptly stomped my foot, then plodded up the steps.

“Ceana? Come back. How did I offend you?”

I squinted at his inquest before slamming the manor door. Prophecy or no, Ma's dowry need pass to me as the lone daughter. Her possessions included books and scrolls written in Ogham, the ancient language of the Celts. She applied these instruments in the instruction of Cailean and me. But lacking formal training in the druid arts, how would I continue what she'd started?

The O'Connor and the O'Hagan clansmen carried my mother to the grave. Under torchlight, we marched to the top of the hill overlooking our sleepy village of Dungannon.

Two ropes extended beneath the flat, wooden fuat into the hands of men on either end. In slow motion, they lowered her into her final resting place. They heaved dry earth into the hole. The voices of the O'Connor women singing the Nuall-guba reverberated in my soul with each shovel-full falling upon Ma's body, separating her from the living, inch-by-inch. Separating me from my mother.

The men constructed the leacht the following day. Da gave instructions the memorial should be no less than one-half fertach high, and exactly one fertach across.

“Nessa looked after us in life,” he said. “So, we honour her with a proper burial mound to look after us in death.”

I thought the Christians would have us believe Ma ascended into the clouds to be with their one god for all eternity. I preferred to believe what the old religion teaches: now she's become an immortal soul, sitting atop her resting place and keeping watch over us in Dungannon. I imagined from time to time she might even alight upon one of our horses and ride amongst us, should she become lonely.

Twilight lay over the land when I trudged to my quarters, then paused to eavesdrop. The heated voice of a man arguing with my father drifted from Da's study. Hearing my name, I keened to their conversation. I crept to the door, pressing my ear to the keyhole.

"No, Chullain. I will not allow it," Da said. "Ceana is naught but six years old. Muireann will look to her needs."

"Aodhan, be sensible. Hers is a destiny gifted from Una. She is to become a healer and druid priestess. Philomena, herself, told you of the prophecy."

"The duties she carries of the O'Hagan mean nothing? I should have expected thus from the O'Connor chieftain."

My breath caught in my chest. My family, my fate, balanced upon this discussion. For generations, my father's clan of O'Hagan, part of the larger Tir Eogain tribe of warriors, has served the high kings of Ulster. Da instructed my brothers and me of our duty to guard the great stone chair in Turlachog, used in initiating each new king of Ulster, also known as the O'Neill. So long as the chair remained standing, Queen Elizabeth faced an ever-constant reminder that the people of Ireland wouldn't bow to her authority.

"You have three sons to take on that mantel, Aodhan."

"My answer is no, Chullain. Until Ceana comes of age, she shall make use of Nessa's books to learn the healer's art. I will not allow my daughter to be fostered and tutored in Connacht."

Deafening footfalls pounded toward me. Swiftly, I retreated to the safety of the darkened hallway before the study door flew open.

"Mark me, Aodhan O'Hagan. Ceana is destined to a path greater than you or I can imagine. When she is come of age, we will come to claim our rights to her."