

Foxmask

Juliet Marillier

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CHAPTER ONE



... if anyone can understand, it will be you; I have always respected your intellect. I had so much to offer here. I could have achieved great things, and in time all would have thanked me for it. Yes, even the Wolfskin. That he has been the one to wrench the possibility from my grasp is bitter indeed . . .

EXCERPT FROM LETTER

The day Thorvald's mother gave him the letter, everything changed. Creidhe was weaving, hands busy on the loom, shuttle flying, a fine web of blue and crimson unfolding before her in perfect pattern, testimony to the skills Aunt Margaret had taught her. So industrious was she, and so quiet, that it seemed she had been forgotten. The bestowal of such a perilous gift as that letter was surely best suited to a moment of complete privacy. Aunt Margaret spoke to her son quietly, in the long room before the hearth. Creidhe could see them through the doorway from the weaving chamber. They did not argue. Voices were seldom raised in this most orderly of households. But Creidhe heard the front door slam open, and she saw Thorvald go down the three steps in a single stride, then vanish across the yard and out over the

spring fields as if hunted by demons. She saw the bloodless, driven look on his face. And although she did not know it at the time, that was the moment Thorvald's life, and her own, took a twist and a turn and set off on an entirely different path.

Creidhe knew Thorvald better than anyone. They had been childhood playmates, and they were fast friends. Thorvald had few friends; the fingers of one hand would be more than enough to count them. There were perhaps only two to whom he ever spoke freely, and whom he allowed close: herself, and Sam, the fisherman on whose boat Thorvald sometimes helped. As for Creidhe, she understood Thorvald well: his black moods, his lengthy silences, his sudden, brilliant schemes and his rare times of openness. She loved him, for all his faults. In her mind there was no doubt that one day they would marry. He wasn't a real cousin, just as Margaret wasn't a real aunt. The tie was one of old friendship, not kinship. If Thorvald hadn't seen yet that he and Creidhe were destined to be together forever, he'd realise some time. It was just a matter of waiting.

The shuttle slowed to a stop. Creidhe stood gazing out the doorway across a landscape dotted with sheep, new lambs at foot. From Aunt Margaret's house you could see all the way to the western ocean, where stark cliffs marked the margin of land and sea. Far off now, there was the small, dark figure of Thorvald, running, running away. Creidhe had seen a terrible change in his eyes.

'Finished?'

Creidhe jumped. Margaret had come up beside her without a sound.

'N-no, but maybe I should go home. Father's due back from Sandy Island, and I should be helping—' Creidhe fell silent. Aunt Margaret had tears in her eyes. Such a

phenomenon was astounding. Her aunt was a model of propriety and restraint. She never lost control.

This household, run by Margaret's long-time retainer, Ash, but ordered by Margaret herself, operated to a strict routine, with little allowance for errors. This approach was reflected in Margaret's own appearance. She was a handsome woman of around six-and-thirty, her hair a rich auburn, plaited neatly and pinned up under a snowy lace cap. Her linen gown was ironed into immaculate pleats, her woollen overdress fastened with twin brooches of patterned silver polished to a moon-bright shine. She bore the accoutrements of a good housewife: knife, scissors and keys hanging from a chain. Margaret was capable. Some found her intimidating. She had never remarried after her husband died in the very first year of Norse settlement here in the Light Isles, before Thorvald was born. Creidhe did not find her aunt frightening; there was a bond between them. Creidhe might not be skilled in the arts of a priestess, as her sister Eanna was. She might not be beautiful in the style of the island girls, slender, dark and graceful. But she had other abilities. Young as she was, Creidhe had the best hands for midwifery in Hrossey, and had advanced quickly from assisting the island expert to taking a full share of responsibility. The women valued Creidhe's deft touch and cool head; these made her youth irrelevant. The same clever hands gave her a talent for spinning, weaving and embroidery. Margaret valued that talent, and over the years she had taken pleasure in fostering this buxom, fair-haired niece's skills.

If Thorvald never comes round to marrying me, Creidhe told herself sourly, some other man surely will, just so he can say his wife's the best weaver in Hrossey.

It wasn't as if nobody was interested. Creidhe was never short of partners for dancing. Sam had made her a

whalebone comb with sea creatures carved on it. Egil had composed a poem for her and recited it, blushing. Brude had kissed her behind the cowshed when nobody was looking. The problem was, she didn't want sweet-natured Sam or scholarly Egil or handsome Brude with his merry blue eyes. She only wanted Thorvald. Thorvald had eyes dark as night and smooth auburn hair like his mother's. Creidhe loved his cleverness, his wit, the way he could always surprise her. She loved his moments of kindness, rare as they were. She wished, sometimes, that he were a little less aloof; she'd heard other girls call him arrogant, and she didn't like that. He did keep himself to himself; she was lucky to be one of those he considered a friend. Creidhe sighed. Thorvald was taking a long time to realise she could be more than just a friend to him. At sixteen she was a woman, and ready to be married; more than ready, she thought sometimes. If Thorvald didn't wake up to himself soon, her father would start suggesting likely husbands for her, and what could she say then? As her mother's daughter, she must wed and bear children. It could not be long before Eyvind began to apply subtle pressure.

'Creidhe?'

'Oh! Sorry.' She'd been daydreaming again. 'Are you all right, Aunt Margaret?'

'Well enough.' The words belied the red eyes, the tight mouth. 'Go on then, if Nessa's expecting you home. This can wait for tomorrow. The design's coming out well, Creidhe. You're quite an artist.'

Creidhe blushed. 'Thank you, Aunt.' She paused. 'Aunt Margaret—'

Margaret raised a hand. It was a gesture that said plainly, no questions. Whatever it was that had sent Thorvald out of the house like a man pursued by dark dreams, it was not going to be shared just yet.

'Creidhe,' said Margaret as her niece hovered in the doorway, small bundle of belongings in hand, 'don't go after Thorvald. Not today. Believe me, he's best left alone a while.'

'But -'

'If he wants to tell you, he'll tell you in his own time. Now off home with you. Your father's been away a long while. I expect he'd enjoy some of his daughter's fine cooking, perhaps your roasted mutton and garlic, or the baked cod with leek sauce. Off with you now.'

The tone was light, kept carefully so, Creidhe thought. It was her aunt's eyes that gave her away. Thorvald's had held the same shadow.

Sometimes Creidhe did as she was told, and sometimes she didn't. Thorvald was sitting on the ground, his back to a low stone dyke overlooking the western sea. He had his head in his hands, his face concealed. His sleek red hair had escaped its neat ribbon, and the wind whipped the strands like dark fire in the air around his head. He was very still. Behind him in the walled field, sheep bleated and lambs answered. Above in the sky birds fluted songs of spring. Creidhe climbed over the wall and sat down by his side, saying not a word. She had become quite good at this kind of thing.

'Go away, Creidhe!' Thorvald growled after a while. He did not open his eyes.

There was a little boat out in the swell, coming in from fishing. The wind was picking up; the scrap of sail carried the vessel forward on a fast, rocking course southwards, perhaps to Hafnarvagr, or some point closer. Creidhe raised a hand in greeting, but they did not see her.

'I mean it, Creidhe,' snapped Thorvald. 'Go home. Go back to your embroidery.'

She took a deep breath and let it out, counting up to

ten. It was useful to have wise women in the family; one might not learn the mysteries, for those were secret, but one did at least pick up techniques for staying calm.

'What is it?' she asked him quietly. 'What did she give you?'

'I don't want to talk about it. Not to you, not to anyone.'

'All right,' Creidhe said after a moment. 'I understand. When you do want to, I'll be here to listen.'

Thorvald balled his hands into tight fists. His eyes were open now, staring out to the west. It seemed to Creidhe that what he saw was not cliffs, gulls, clouds, a wind-stirred ocean, but something quite different and much further away.

Time passed. Father would be home soon; the remark about roast mutton had been true. Such simple pleasures had the power to bring a smile to Eyvind's lips and a light to his eyes that warmed his whole family. It was not so much the good food that did it, as his daughter's thoughtfulness and skill. Creidhe rose to her feet, picking up her bundle.

'Creidhe?'

It was a dark whisper. She stood frozen in place a moment, then sat down again without a sound.

'A letter,' Thorvald said. 'From my father. She kept it all these years. She never even told me.'

Creidhe was at odds to understand the bitterness in his tone. His father had died before he was born, and that was indeed sad, though surely sadder for Margaret than for this son who had never known the father he had lost. From what folk said, Margaret's husband Ulf had been a fine, noble chieftain who had led the first Norse expedition here to the Light Isles. He was a father to be proud of. A letter was good, wasn't it? It seemed not inappro-

priate that Margaret had saved it until her son was a man.

'From Ulf?' Creidhe asked gently. 'I suppose that is distressing; it reminds you of what you might have had. It is a sorrow he was not here to watch you grow up.'

'I didn't say it was from my mother's husband, the worthy Ulf Gunnarsson.' Thorvald's voice was sharp-edged. 'I said it was from my father. The man she tells me was my real father, that is. Here, if you're so interested. Why not find out all about it, since it seems half the island knows already?'

He drew the little roll of parchment from the breast of his tunic and thrust it into her hand. Creidhe was mute. What could he mean? She untied the cord that bound the letter and uncurled it to reveal row on row of neat, black script. It was old, the edges worn, the characters smudged here and there as if by drops of water. There was a pale line all across the outside where the cord had fastened it, as if the small scroll had lain long untouched.

'You know I can't read, Thorvald. What is all this about?'

'I'll tell you what it's all about. It means I'm nobody. Worse than nobody, I'm the son of some evil madman, a crazed killer. Forget Ulf; forget a conception in the respectability of marriage, and the sad demise of my father before I saw the light of day. Ulf was not my father. She kept that from me all these years. And they knew: your father, Nessa, Grim, everyone who came here in those first days. Even that stick of a serving man, Ash, knew the truth and kept quiet about it. A conspiracy of silence.' His voice was shaking; he stared fixedly at the ground by his feet. 'How could my own mother be so cruel?'

Creidhe was lost for words. She wanted to put an arm around him for comfort, as she would do if this were one

of her sisters. But she did not; Thorvald would shake her off the instant she touched him. This news was indeed terrible, if true. What if such a thing had happened to her? Her own father was the centre of her world, the warmth at the core of the family. Indeed, sometimes it seemed Eyvind was father to the whole community, guardian and loving protector to them all. To hear your father was not your father would be like the snatching away of everything safe. It would be like sundering the heart from the body. There seemed no way to comfort him.

'You're very quiet,' Thorvald said suddenly, turning his head to glare at her. 'No ready words of advice? No quick solutions to my problems?' His eyes narrowed; his mouth went tight. 'But perhaps you knew this already. Perhaps I am indeed the last to be told the truth about my own heritage. Did you know, Creidhe?' His tone was savage; Creidhe shrank back before it.

'Of course not! How could you think -?'

Thorvald's shoulders sagged. His anger was turned inwards again. 'That's just it. I don't know what to think any more.'

'Who - who was he?' Creidhe ventured. 'Was this letter written to you? Where is he?'

'Ask your father. He knows the answers.'

'But -'

'Ask Eyvind. He was the one who exiled my father from this shore, so that he never knew he had a son. The letter was to my mother. It says nothing of me. It attempts to explain to her why her lover killed her husband. It tries to justify his murder of his own brother. You see the delightful heritage my lady mother has chosen to make me aware of now I'm deemed to have reached years of maturity?' Thorvald picked up a stone and hurled it out beyond the cliff edge. A cloud of gulls rose,

screaming protest. His face was sheet-white, the eyes dark hollows.

'What was his name?' Creidhe asked, playing for time as her mind searched frantically for the right thing to say. In such a situation, there probably was no right thing.

'Somerled.' He threw another stone.

'Why don't they speak of such a man? They must all have known him.'

'Why don't you ask them, if you're so interested?'

She breathed slowly. 'Thorvald?'

'What?'

'Aunt Margaret was wise not to tell you this before. You're grown up now. Couldn't you see this, not as a reversal but a challenge?'

His brows rose in scorn. 'What can you mean, Creidhe?'

'You could find out about Somerled. As you said, there must be plenty of people in the islands who knew him back then. Maybe he wasn't as bad as you think. Everyone's got some good in them.'

'And what comes after that?' Thorvald snapped. 'I jump in a boat and go off looking for him, I suppose?'

The words hung between them as the silence stretched out, giving them a weight Thorvald had not intended. Blue eyes met black; there was recognition in both that this crazy idea was, in a way, entirely logical.

Thorvald rolled the letter up and knotted the cord around it. He put it away and leaned back against the wall, arms hugging his knees, eyes firmly closed. She waited again. At length, not opening his eyes, he said, 'I know you're trying to help, Creidhe. But I really do want to be by myself.' There was a pause. 'Please,' he added.

It was not possible to bestow a gesture of affection, a

quick hug, a hand-clasp, although Creidhe longed to touch him. 'Farewell, Thorvald,' she said, and made her way home under darkening skies.

She couldn't ask them straightaway. This was not a topic that could be broached amidst the general joy and chaos of her father's return, with dogs and children jumping about making noise, with Nessa failing to hold back her tears, and Eyvind himself doing his best to hug everyone at once while burdened with axe, sword and large pack of belongings. He was not a man who asked others to fetch and carry for him, not even now he bore such authority in the islands. When he had married Nessa, he had allied himself to the last royal princess of the Folk. This had conferred a status above that of ordinary men, and Eyvind had built on it by dedicating himself to the establishment of a lasting peace between the two races that had once been bitter enemies - the Norse invaders and the Folk who had inhabited the islands since ancient times. It was due more to Eyvind than anyone that the two now lived so amicably side by side, and indeed together. It was almost possible to forget that it had all begun in blood and terror. As for Nessa herself, she had never lost the respect due to her as both priestess and leader of her tribe, a rallying point in times of terrible trial. Now Eanna was priestess, Nessa no longer enacted the mysteries nor withdrew to the places of ritual. She had her husband, her four healthy daughters, her household and her community, and played a part in councils and negotiations, as befitted her special status. For all that, there was a sorrow in it. Eanna had been the first child for Eyvind and Nessa. The next had been a son, and the sea had taken Kinart before he'd seen five years in the world. After him there were only girls: Creidhe

herself, then Brona and Ingigerd. That was not as it should have been; not as the ancestors foretold it.

Despite their near-royal status in the islands, Creidhe's family dwelt in a compound that was more farm than palace, a sprawling set of low stone buildings surrounded by walled infields, somewhat east of the tidal island known as the Whaleback. The Whaleback had once been the centre of power in the Light Isles. Nessa had lived there; her uncle had been a great king. When the Norsemen first sailed out of the east, Margaret and Nessa and Eyvind had been not much older than Creidhe was now. That voyage of discovery across the sea from Rogaland to the sheltered waterways of the Light Isles had begun as a search for a life of peace and prosperity. It had turned, in the space of one bloody year, into a bitter, destructive conflict that had come to an end only after most of Nessa's folk had been cruelly slain. It was Eyvind and Nessa, Norse warrior and priestess of the Folk, who had won that peace: the two of them side by side.

What different lives they had had, Creidhe thought, watching her mother and father as they stole a quiet moment together. Nessa brushed Eyvind's cheek with her fingers; he touched his lips to her hair. The way they looked at each other brought tears to Creidhe's eyes. Their youth had been full of adventure: journeys, battles, struggle and achievement. Looking at them now, she could hardly imagine that. One did not see one's own parents as heroes, even if that was exactly what they were. One simply saw them as always there, an essential part of one's existence. Where would one be without that?

She had to ask them. But not yet. Supper first. There were men and women who lived in the household: housecarls, Eyvind called them, in the manner of his

homeland. These were capable folk who seemed almost part of the family. The women had become used to Creidhe taking charge in the kitchen, especially when she wished to prepare a special meal for her father. Today someone had been fishing, and there was fresh cod; Creidhe sent Brona out to the garden for leeks, and fetched garlic and onions herself. Small Ingigerd was soon persuaded that cutting vegetables and stirring sauces and grinding herbs would be tremendous fun, and it was possible for Nessa and Eyvind to retreat to the inner room for some time alone. Creidhe told her sisters a story as she prepared the fish. It was a tale about the Hidden Tribe, those tricky spirit folk who were seen from time to time in ancient, underground places, and she made sure it was long and exciting, and allowed the children to interrupt with questions as often as they liked. It grew dark. The folk of the household gathered around the table for supper. Creidhe's efforts were rewarded by Eyvind's smile and Nessa's quiet words of approval. Brona ate every scrap and carried her platter to the wash trough without being asked. Ingigerd was falling asleep even as she finished her meal.

Respecting the family's need for privacy with Eyvind so newly returned, the men and women of the household did not linger after supper, but retired early to their sleeping quarters. It was night outside, and a sudden chill crept into the longhouse, though its walls of stone and earth were thick and sturdy. Eyvind put more turf on the hearth and they moved in closer. One on either side of the flickering oil lamp, Creidhe and Brona worked on their embroidery. Brona was making laborious progress with a row of small red flowers across an apron hem. Creidhe's project was more complex and more personal. She called it the Journey, and worked on a small section at a time, keeping the rest folded out of sight.

It was quiet now. Ingigerd drowsed on Eyvind's knee, held safe by the arm he curled around her. It was a shame, Creidhe thought, that the whole family could not be here together. That would happen increasingly rarely now that Eanna had completed her training as a priestess of the mysteries and retired from ordinary life to dwell in the hills alone. She must ask them tonight. This could not wait. Eyvind carried Ingigerd to her bed and tucked the covers over her. Brona pricked her finger and yelped; she sewed doggedly on for a while, then sighed, yawned, and packed her work away.

'Goodnight, Brona,' Creidhe said a little pointedly. 'I'll help you with that in the morning if you like.'

Brona flashed a grin and turned to hug first Father, then Mother. She bent to light her little oil lamp with a taper from the fire, then disappeared along to the sleeping chamber she and Creidhe shared.

'More ale?' Nessa queried. 'What about you, Creidhe? Don't strain your eyes with that fine work, daughter. You look tired out.'

'Come, sit by me,' said Eyvind. 'I've missed my lovely girl. Tell me what you've been doing while I was gone. I expect Aunt Margaret's been working you hard.'

Creidhe sat; she took the cup of ale her mother offered. Her father put his arm around her shoulders, warm and safe. If the topic were to be raised, there could be no better time for it.

'Father, Mother, I want to ask you something.'

They waited.

'It's about Thorvald.'

Silence again, though there seemed a change in the quality of it, almost as if they had expected this.

'Today - today he was very upset. It was because - because Aunt Margaret told him about his father. His real father.'