

JULIET MARILLIER

"A fine new fantasy writer." Anne McCaffrey

DAUGHTER
OF THE
FOREST



Daughter Of The Forest

Sevenwaters 01

Juliet Marillier

Chapter One

Three children lay on the rocks at the water's edge. A dark-haired little girl. Two boys, slightly older. This image is caught forever in my memory, like some fragile creature preserved in amber. Myself, my brothers. I remember the way the water rippled as I trailed my fingers across the shining surface.

"Don't lean over so far, Sorcha," said Padriac. "You might fall in." He was a year older than me and made the most of what little authority that gave him. You could understand it, I suppose. After all, there were six brothers altogether, and five of them were older than he was.

I ignored him, reaching down into the mysterious depths.

"She might fall in, mightn't she, Finbar?"

A long silence. As it stretched out, we both looked at Finbar, who lay on his back, full length on the warm rock. Not sleeping; his eyes reflected the open gray of the autumnal sky. His hair spread out on the rock in a wild black tangle. There was a hole in the sleeve of his jacket.

"The swans are coming," said Finbar at last. He sat up slowly to rest his chin on raised knees. "They're coming tonight."

Behind him, a breeze stirred the branches of oak and elm, ash and elder, and scattered a drift of leaves, gold and bronze and brown. The lake lay in a circle of tree-clothed hills, sheltered as if in a great chalice.

"How can you know that?" queried Padriac. "How can you be so sure? It could be tomorrow, or the day after. Or they could go to some other place. You're always so sure."

I don't remember Finbar answering, but later that day, as dusk was falling, he took me back to the lakeshore. In the half light over the water, we saw the swans come home. The last low traces of sun caught a white movement in the darkening sky. Then they were near enough for us to see the pattern of their flight, the orderly formation descending through the cool air as the light faded. The rush of wings, the vibration of the air. The final glide to the water, the silvery flashing as it parted to receive them. As they landed, the sound was like my name, over and over: Sorcha, Sorcha-. My

hand crept into Finbar's; we stood immobile until it was dark, and then my brother took me home.

If you are lucky enough to grow up the way I did, you have plenty of good things to remember. And some that are not so good. One spring, looking for the tiny green frogs that appeared as soon as the first warmth was in the air, my brothers and I splashed knee deep in the stream, making enough noise between us to frighten any creature away. Three of my six brothers were there, Conor whistling some old tune; Cormack, who was his twin, creeping up behind to slip a handful of bog weed down his neck. The two of them rolling on the bank, wrestling and laughing. And Finbar. Finbar was further up the stream, quiet by a rock pool. He would not turn stones to seek frogs; waiting, he would charm them out by his silence.

I had a fistful of wildflowers, violets, meadowsweet, and the little pink ones we called cuckoo flowers. Down near the water's edge was a new one with pretty star-shaped blooms of a delicate pale green, and leaves like gray feathers. I clambered nearer and reached out to pick one. "Sorcha! Don't touch that!" Finbar snapped.

Startled, I looked up. Finbar never gave me orders. If it had been Liam, now, who was the eldest, or Diarmid, who was the next one, I might have expected it. Finbar was hurrying back toward me, frogs abandoned. But why should I take notice of him? He wasn't so very much older, and it was only a flower. I heard him saying, "Sorcha, don't-" as my small fingers plucked one of the soft-looking stems.

The pain in my hand was like fire-a white-hot agony that made me screw up my face and howl as I blundered along the path, my flowers

dropped heedless underfoot. Finbar stopped me none too gently, his hands on my shoulders arresting my wild progress.

"Starwort," he said, taking a good look at my hand, which was swelling and turning an alarming shade of red. By this time my shrieks had brought the twins running. Cormack held onto me, since he was strong, and I was bawling and thrashing about with the pain. Conor tore off a strip from his grubby shirt. Finbar had found a pair of pointed twigs, and he began to pull out, delicately, one by one, the tiny needlelike spines the starwort plant had embedded in my soft flesh. I remember the pressure of Cormack's hands on my arms as I gulped for air between sobs, and I can still hear Conor talking, talking in a quiet voice as Finbar's long deft fingers went steadily about their task.

"... and her name was Deirdre, Lady of the Forest, but nobody ever saw her, save late at night, if you went out along the paths under the birch trees, you might catch a glimpse of her tall figure in a cloak of midnight blue, and her long hair, wild and dark, floating out behind her, and her little crown of stars..."

When it was done, they bound up my hand with Conor's makeshift bandage and some crushed marigold petals, and by morning it was better. And never a word they said to my oldest brothers, when they came home, about what a foolish girl I'd been.

From then on I knew what starwort was, and I began to teach myself about other plants that could hurt or heal. A child that grows up half-wild in the forest learns the secrets that grow there simply through common sense. Mushroom and toadstool. Lichen, moss, and creeper. Leaf, flower, root, and bark. Throughout the endless reaches of the forest, great oak, strong ash,

and gentle birch sheltered a myriad of growing things. I learned where to find them, when to cut them, how to use them in salve, ointment, or infusion. But I was not content with that. I spoke with the old women of the cottages till they tired of me, and I studied what manuscripts I could find, and tried things out for myself. There was always more to learn; and there was no shortage of work to be done.

When was the beginning? When my father met my mother, and lost his heart, and chose to wed for love? Or was it when I was born? I should have been the seventh son of a seventh son, but the goddess was playing tricks, and I was a girl. And after she gave birth to me, my mother died.

It could not be said that my father gave way to his grief. He was too strong for that, but when he lost her, some light in him went out. It was all councils and power games, and dealing behind closed doors. That was all he saw, and all he cared about. So my brothers grew up running wild in the forest around the keep of Sevenwaters. Maybe I wasn't the seventh son of the old tales, the one who'd have magical powers and the luck of the Fair Folk, but I tagged along with the boys anyway, and they loved me and raised me as well as a bunch of boys could.

Our home was named for the seven streams that flowed down the hillsides into the great, tree-circled lake. It was a remote, quiet, strange place, well guarded by silent men who slipped through the woodlands clothed in gray, and who kept their weapons sharp. My father took no chances. My father was Lord Colum of Sevenwaters, and his tuath was the most secure, and the most secret, this side of Tara. All respected him. Many feared him. Outside the forest, nowhere was really safe. Chieftain warred against chieftain, king against king. And there were the raiders from across the water. Christian houses of scholarship and contemplation were ransacked, their peaceful dwellers killed or put to flight. Sometimes, in desperation, the holy brothers took up arms themselves. The old faith went

underground. The Norsemen made their claim on our shores, and at Dublin they set up a ship camp and began to winter over, so that no time of year was safe. Even I had seen their work, for there was a ruin at Killeavy, where raiders had killed the holy women and destroyed their sanctuary. I only went there once. There was a shadow over that place. Walking among the tumbled stones, you could still hear the echo of their screaming.

But my father was different. Lord Colum's authority was absolute. Within the ring of hills, blanketed by ancient forest, his borders were as close to secure as any man's might be in these troubled times. To those who did not respect it, who did not understand it, the forest was impenetrable. A man, or a troop of men, who did not know the way would become hopelessly lost there, prey to the sudden mists, the branching, deceptive paths, and to other, older things, things a Viking or a Briton could not hope to understand. The forest protected us. Our lands were safe from marauders, whether it be raiders from across the sea or neighbors intent on adding a few acres of grazing land or some fine cattle to their holdings. They held Seven-waters in fear, and gave us a wide berth.

But Father had little time for talk of the Norsemen or the Picts, for we had our own war. Our war was with the Britons. In particular it was with one family of Britons, known as Northwoods. This feud went back a long way. I did not concern myself with it greatly. I was a girl, after all, and anyway I had better things to do with my time. Besides, I had never seen a Briton, or a Norseman, or a Pict. They were less real to me than creatures from an old tale, dragons or giants.

Father was away for much of the time, building alliances with neighbors, checking his outposts and guard towers, recruiting men. I preferred those times, when we could spend our days as we wished, exploring the forest, climbing the tall oaks, conducting expeditions over the lake, staying out all night if we wanted to. I learned where to find

blackberries and hazelnuts and crab apples. I learned how to start a fire even if the wood was damp, and bake squash or onions in the coals. I could make a shelter out of bracken, and steer a raft in a straight course.

I loved to be out-of-doors and feel the wind on my face. Still, I continued to teach myself the healer's art, for my heart told me this would be my true work. All of us could read, though Conor was by far the most skillful, and there were old manuscripts and scrolls tucked away on an upper floor of the stone fortress that was our home. These I devoured in my thirst for knowledge and thought it nothing unusual, for this was the only world I had known. I did not know that other girls of twelve were learning to do fine embroidery, and to plait one another's hair into intricate coronets, and to dance and sing. I did not understand that few could read, and that the books and scrolls that filled our quiet upstairs room were priceless treasure in a time of destruction and pillage. Nestled safe among its guardian trees, hidden from the world by forces older than time, our home was indeed a place apart.

When my father was there, things were different. Not that he took much interest in us; his visits were short, and taken up with councils and meetings. But he would watch the boys practicing with sword or staff or throwing axe as they galloped and wheeled on horseback. You could never tell what Father was thinking, for his eyes gave nothing away. He was a man of solid build and stern appearance, and everything about him spoke of discipline. He dressed plainly; still, there was something about him that told you, instantly, that he was a leader. He wore his brown hair tied tightly back. Everywhere he went, from hall to courtyard, from sleeping quarters to stables, his two great wolfhounds padded silently behind him. That, I suppose, was his one indulgence. But even they had their purpose.

Each time he came home, he went through the motions of greeting us all and checking our progress, as if we were some crop that might

eventually be fit for harvest. We hated this ritual parade of family identity, though it became easier for the boys once they reached young manhood and Father began to see them as of some use to him. We would be called into the great hall, after we'd been quickly tidied up by whatever servant currently had the thankless task of overseeing us. Father would be seated in his great oak chair, his men around him at a respectful distance, the dogs at his feet, relaxed but watchful.

He would call the boys forward one by one, greeting them kindly enough, starting with Liam and working gradually downward. He would question each of them briefly on his progress and activities since last time. This could take a while; after all, there were six of them, and me as well. Knowing nothing of any other form of parental guidance, I accepted this as the way things were done. If my brothers remembered a time when things were different, they didn't talk about it.

The boys grew up quickly. By the time Liam was twelve, he was undergoing an intensive training in the arts of war, and spending less and less time with the rest of us in our joyous, undisciplined world. Not long after, Diarmid's particular skill with the spear earned him a place beside his brother, and all too soon both were riding out with Father's band of warriors. Cormack could scarcely wait for the day when he would be old enough to join seriously in these pursuits; the training all the boys received from our father's master-at-arms was not enough to satisfy his thirst to excel. Padriac, who was the youngest of the boys, had a talent with animals, and a gift for fixing things. He, too, learned to ride and to wield a sword, but more often than not you'd find him helping to deliver a calf or tending a prize bull gored by a rival.

The rest of us were different. Conor was Cormack's twin, but he could scarce have been less like in temperament. Conor had always loved learning, and when he was quite little he had struck up a bargain with a

Christian hermit who lived in a hillside cave above the southern lakeshore. My brother would bring Father Brien fresh fish and herbs from the garden, with maybe a loaf or two scrounged from the kitchens, and in return he was taught to read. I remember those times very clearly. There would be Conor, seated on a bench beside the hermit, deep in debate on some fine point of language or philosophy, and there in a corner would be Finbar and myself, cross-legged on the earthen floor, quiet as field mice. The three of us soaked up knowledge like little sponges, believing in our isolation that this was quite usual. We learned, for instance, the tongue of the Britons, a harsh, clipped sort of speech with no music in it. As we learned the language of our enemies, we were told their history.

They had once been a people much like us, fierce, proud, rich in song and story, but their land was open and vulnerable, and had been overrun time after time, until their blood became mixed with that of Roman, and of Saxon, and when at last some semblance of peace had come about, the old race of that land was gone, and in its place a new people dwelt across the water. The holy father told us that much.

Everyone had a story about the Britons. Recognizable by their light-colored hair, and their tall stature, and their lack of any decency whatever, they had begun the feud by laying hold of something so untouchable, so deeply sacred to our people, that the theft of it was like the heart had been torn out of us. That was the cause of our war. Little Island, Greater Island, and the Needle. Places of high mystery. Places of immense secrecy; the heart of the old faith. No Briton should ever have set foot on the islands. Nothing would be right until we drove them out. That was the way everybody told it.

It was plain that Conor was not destined for a warrior. My father, rich in sons, grudgingly accepted this. He could see, perhaps, that a scholar in the family might be of some use. There was always record keeping and