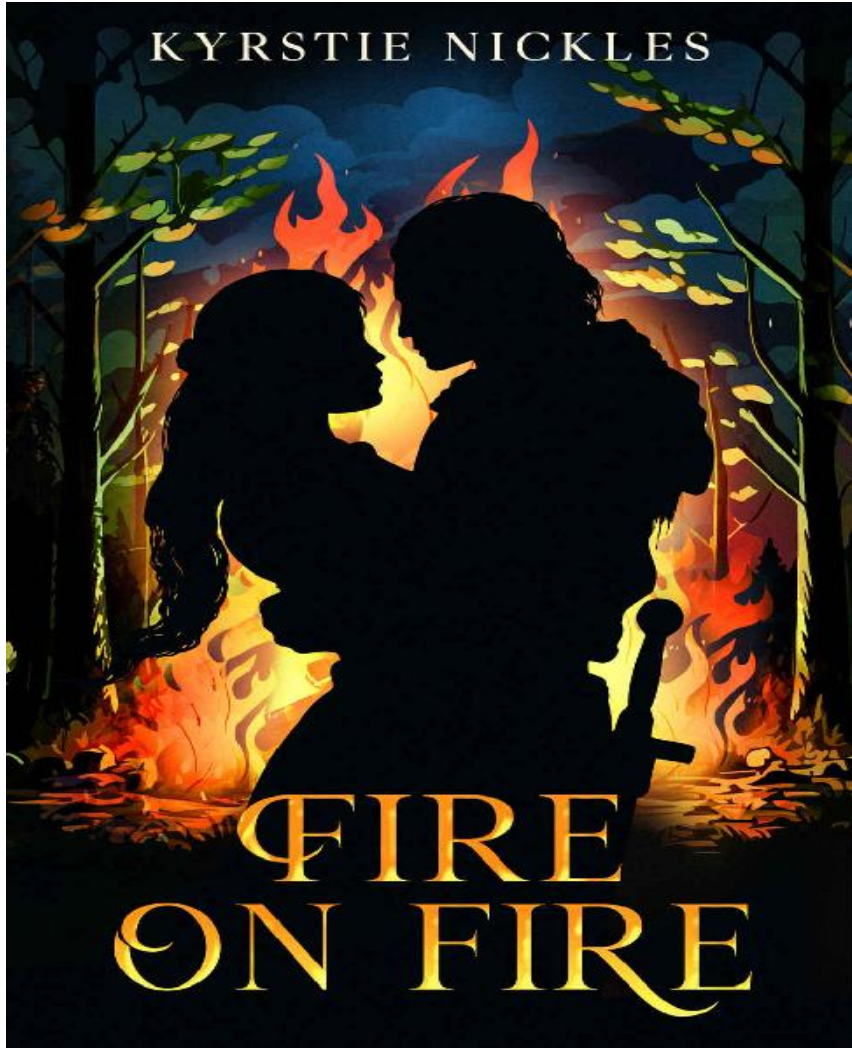


KYRSTIE NICKLES



FIRE
ON FIRE

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TRIGGER WARNING:

This story depicts scenes of violence, death, POW treatment, kidnapping, and consensual adult intimacy. It explores the effects of PTSD and alcoholism, and it mentions an incident of SA. Please practice self-care.

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To all those fighting their own silent battles. You are not alone.

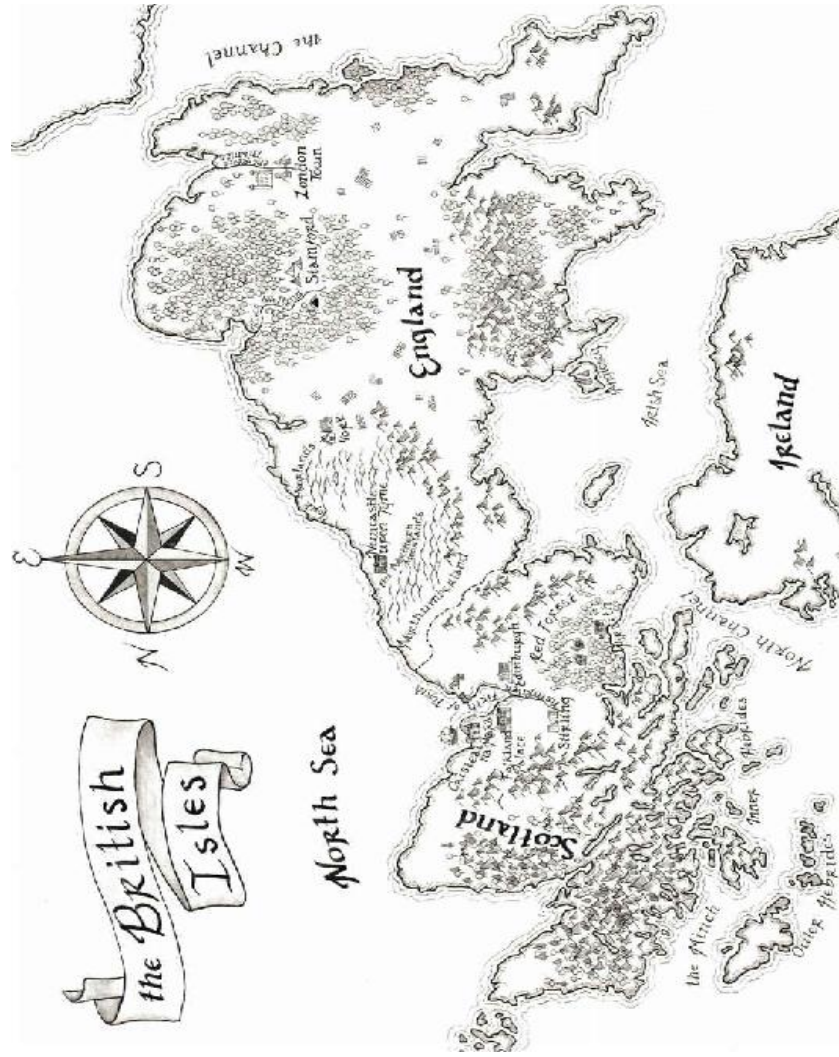


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PROLOGUE

EIGHT YEARS AGO

The long grasses of a dark West Scotland field sway softly. An unsteady Aiden Shaw limps among them, desperately struggling to remain upright, making his way toward the shadowy forest beyond.

The lack of moonlight leaves the scene void of color, except for his piercing blue eyes. What should be a young, handsome face is lined, sallow, and coated in mud. Dried blood has trailed from his tangled, raven locks down to his scraggly bearded chin.

Pausing, he leans over his knees to take heaving breaths. His arms are covered in cuts and purplish, yellowed bruises. As he regains his stance, the breeze shifts his baggy, tattered clothes just enough to expose how starved his beaten body has become. He takes a final profound lungful of air and ambles on, dragging his sprained ankle behind him.

Suddenly, the forest is consumed by flames.

Aiden halts, transfixed, but the echoing screams that soon commence jerk him back to his senses.

“Evelyn!” A low rasp is the only sound able to escape his parched lips.

He grimaces as he forcefully straightens his posture and runs for the forest. The pain fogs his vision. Though nauseous and battling with his mind to stay conscious, he keeps moving. For her. He has to get to her.

Soldiers in English uniform break from the trees, rushing directly at him. He braces for capture, but as they race past him, he quickly realizes he is no concern of theirs. Whatever they are running *from* is far worse.

As he reaches the tree line, he can barely stand the heat. The forest has completely succumbed to the fire. He holds his hand against his forehead to shield his eyes, and there before him is a floating, humanoid beast with feminine features. The thing holds fireballs in both hands. Her long, glowing curls violently whip about, and flames have completely consumed her frame.

He looks directly into her searing red eyes, as she screams demonically. Even though he knows he should run, he is frozen in her gaze, too captivated to move. It is as if they are connected in some way. But the heat is too strong, and his dehydration gets the best of him.

The world goes black.

When Aiden awakens, it is morning. The trees are charred, smoke floating in the air. He notices something resting in the ash on the ground in front of him. He crawls to it and dusts it off, to find a scorched wooden horse. His eyes grow wide. It cannot be.

The figurine belongs to his baby daughter.

He looks out at the ruinous village around him. They are gone. It is *all* gone.



CHAPTER 1

THE BLUE MEN

The best journeys take you home.

The smooth, wooden keel of a large merchant ship cuts through the frigid waters of the North Sea. Low clouds drown out the starlight, and the ocean is calm as far as the eye can see.

On deck, besides the soft rustle of linen sails and the gentle creak of the gaff as it adjusts to the light wind, all is quiet. The crew rests in their quarters below, in preparation for unloading their haul later that evening.

Two well-worn sailors stand in the lantern light of the quarterdeck, looking out into the dark abyss ahead. One rests his elbow on the helm. The other leans against the banister of the steps that lead to the main deck. He downs the last drops from an amber bottle of ale.

Without warning, the ship jolts to a halt.

“Wha the hell?” The sailor against the banister bounds down the steps to lean over the starboard side. He ponders into the blackness below, “Did we hit a reef?”

The puzzled sailor is wrenched over the side. A loud splash follows.

A blood-curdling cry pierces the night air, while the massive shipping vessel groans, slowly lurching to the side.

Below deck, shouting ensues as sleeping sailors are dumped from their hammocks. One dazed sailor sits on the floor, watching his shipmates jump to their feet and charge up the steps to the main deck.

In the stores below the crew's quarters, a hooded figure slouches against several wooden barrels. As the ship rocks, a sizeable, empty ale bottle rolls across the floorboards. From the main deck above, the ship's bell rings violently.

Piercing blue eyes appear from beneath the black wool cloak. Aiden Shaw stumbles to his feet as he realizes the floor itself is rolling out from under him. He pulls the hood from his head, revealing his slicked-back, raven locks oily from weeks at sea and a chiseled, unshaven face worn by the wind and sun. He looks up to the cries reverberating above his head.

Rolling his eyes, he complains in a deep, gravelly voice resembling thunder rolling across the open skies, "An' there was me sleepin' good, too. Fer once."

A whinny resounds beside him. A brown Clydesdale mare, partially covered by a wool blanket, adjusts her stance to maintain the balance of her enormous weight on the shifting floor.

Aiden glances her way and replies, "Haud yer wheesht, Gara. We're no' even meant ta *be* here. I'll hae a look."

He rips the wool cloak from his shoulders and tosses it over one of the wooden barrels. While his tall, muscular figure is laden with leather armor, it does little to hide the scars on his neck and hands that peer out from beneath his ivory blouse.

He jogs up the lurching stairs in front of him.

He stumbles and catches himself on the railing, his head

suddenly swimming. “Och, I shouldnae’ah drank the whole bottle.”

Regaining his footing, he takes exaggerated steps to save his balance on the remaining stairs.

As he reaches the main deck, he analyzes the situation. Before him is the strangest storm he has ever witnessed. There is little wind, but massive waves bash both sides of the ship.

A colossal swell rises above the deck. Bluish humanoid creatures ride inside of it, their legs fading into the black water. Aiden locks eyes with one of the blue men, and time seems to slow. He stares into its bright yellow orbs for what seems like an eternity. Then, the flow of time resumes, and the surf splashes onto the deck.

As the wave recedes back into the sea, the creature drags a kicking, screaming sailor over the side with it.

These blue men, these protective beings of the ocean, are familiar to Aiden, though he has never seen them outside the Minch before. These boys have no idea what they are in for.

Three sailors hoist the halyard lines in unison, desperate to release the jib sails and get the ship moving.

The middle of the three commands, “Come on, lads! Let’s pull! Come on!”

Four additional sailors hang across the gaff of the foremast, unwrapping the sails.

While untangling a line, a sailor above notices another enormous surge rising from the deep.

“Watch out!” he shouts to those on deck below.

The wave crashes onto the deck. When it recedes, the sailors on the gaff look on in terror as all three halyard lines are left hanging. There is no one attached to them.

The ship begins to roll to the opposite side. Struggling to keep himself upright, Aiden grasps onto the doorframe he came through. One by one, deafening blasts ring through the

air. He looks up as the cannons begin to break loose and roll to the other side of the ship. A young deckhand, no more than thirteen or fourteen-years-old, grabs hold of a cannon and attempts to push it back into place.

The ship jerks, pinning the boy against the side of the vessel.

“Help!”

Stowaway or not, Aiden has no choice but to get involved now.

He steadies himself and takes off at a sprint across the deck. Grabbing hold of the cannon, together he and the boy haul it off of him. Aiden leans his leg into the gun and ties it back off to the ship. Through the sea spray, he yells to the deckhand, “Go on, greenhorn, I’ve got it!”

The terrified boy nods and runs off to help secure another cannon.

As another swell rises into the air, sailors grab axes and spears from compartments around the deck and charge at the blue men. One of the creatures seizes Aiden by the foot and drags him across the deck. He hastily grasps the small knife tucked inside his leather boot and stabs the blue man in the hand. The creature emits a metallic scream before releasing Aiden’s foot and sliding back into the water.

Aiden springs to his feet as another blue man sails at him through the air. A spear spirals over his shoulder, piercing the creature in the chest. The blue man falls to the deck, watery green ooze seeping from the fatal wound. Aiden looks back to see the young deckhand.

Aiden smirks. “Thanks, laddie!”

A dinghy is thrown overhead by another wave. Aiden and the deckhand duck and throw their hands over their heads as the small rowboat breaks into hundreds of pieces that scatter across the deck. One chunk thwacks the helmsman on the head, and he falls to the ground. The ship rolls more violently.

Aiden crawls to the helmsman to find him knocked out cold. Seizing the helm, he steadies the ship, but the resistance on the rudder is overwhelming. He is unsure how much longer he can sustain it. He looks up and realizes the foresails are still not down.

“Wha’s goin’ on up there?” he calls up to the gaff.

A voice yells back down, “The mast still winnae clear!”

Aiden looks over to the young deckhand, who is in the process of stabbing another blue man. “Ey, greenhorn, take the helm!”

The boy nods and stumbles over to Aiden. He braces his stance and fights to keep the ship on course.

Aiden sprints to the shroud of the foremast, shoves his blade between his teeth, and climbs the rungs. A blue man comes at him from below. Aiden kicks it in the face, and it falls, landing on the deck like a reeled-in fish.

Three more sail at him within a swell to his left. He does not have time for this. He takes a deep breath, stares at them intently, and faces his outstretched palm toward them. The air in front of his hand begins to fold and morph, and the blue men are blasted backward. He exhales and keeps climbing.

At the top of the shroud, he finds a solitary sailor still manning the gaff.

The sailor is desperately clinging to the line and kicking at blue men to keep them off him. Aiden has to think quick. He grabs hold of the line and saws at it with his blade.

As he works, he looks to the sailor and asks, “Where’s the cap’n, son?”

The sailor replies, “Pulled o’erboard, sir.”

Aiden rolls his eyes and shakes his head. Of course, he was.

The line breaks, and the sail finally flies out. The ship lists port side. Aiden grabs the frayed line, reaches for the sailor’s

hand, and they ride it back down to the deck.

As the waves continue to rise, the sailors wearily endure the battle with the blue men. Aiden takes the helm from the exhausted deckhand and spins its starboard side into the wind.

The ship slowly creeps forward.

He then jerks the helm port side, and the ship sluggishly slides sideways.

He calls out to the rest of the deck, "Trim the sails!"

A few of the sailors return, "Trim the sails, aye!"

They cease fighting the blue men and charge toward the rigging. They hoist the lines to control the wind in the sails.

The ship rocks as Aiden spins the helm starboard side into the wind. The waves get even higher, and the sailors hold on to anything they can to keep from going overboard.

Under his breath, Aiden utters a prayer.

With one final pull, he slams the helm port side, and the ship swings around once more. He can feel an enormous force releasing hold of the ship, and the waves instantly subside. The vessel glides on through calm waters once more.

He takes a deep breath and attempts to shake the adrenaline from his twitching muscles.

From beside him, the young deckhand questions, "Who *are* you, sir?"

Promptly, Aiden turns to the boy and extends his hand. "Aiden Shaw, lad."

The deckhand's mouth falls open. He drops his limp hand into Aiden's palm. "*Admiral* Aiden Shaw?"

Aiden shakes the boy's wilted hand, another smirk dallying at the corner of his mouth. "Well, I'm no Scotland's Admiral anymore, but unfortunately, it appears I *will* have ta remain yer cap'n 'til we make port."

The deckhand removes the wool beanie from his head to

reveal matted black tresses. He holds the sodden hat to his chest and bows. "Pleasure ta make yer acquaintance, Mister Shaw."

Aiden's simper cracks into a hearty smile. "Wha's yer name, laddie?"

"Edward Thache, sir."

Aiden nods. "A pleasure ta make yer acquaintance an aw, Mister Thache. An' ta be sailin' alongside ye thus far."

As the sky overhead clears, a flicker appears in Aiden's periphery. He leaves Edward in charge of the helm as he walks over to the side of the ship. He steps up onto a rung of the shroud and looks out at the ocean ahead of them.

In the distance, the beacon fires of Leith shine. Scotland. Beyond the port, he can just make out the outline of the castle on the hill. He takes a deep, uneasy breath. He is almost home.



CHAPTER 2

AIDEN SHAW

The perpetually dewy, cobbled streets of the closely packed town of Edinburgh glisten in the firelight of their many lamps and torches. A hooded Aiden staggers along the uneven stones, Gara in tow. Their footsteps are the only sound, and the stench of chimney smoke coats the droplets of mist suspended in the air.

As they reach one of the inns near the Grassmarket, Aiden ties Gara off to a hitching post. Closing his eyes, he removes the hood of the damp cloak from his head and heaves a sigh of relief to have finally reached the end of his long journey.

Tiny footsteps break the eerie silence. A young boy appears from the shadows of the alley beside the inn, his tattered clothes and muddy boots illuminated by the weak light of the lantern he carries.

“I’ll make sure she’s stabled an’ fed fer the night, sir.”

“Thanks, laddie,” Aiden mumbles in his low, gritty tone.

The boy raises his nose and nods back as if to imitate the same masculinity Aiden exhibits. A slight grin creeps across

Aiden's weary face as he watches the wee boy pull the knotted reins from the post and reach up to stroke the white-blazed face of the Clydesdale.

"Hey, boy." Aiden shuffles over.

The boy looks his way as Aiden roots inside the satchel draped across his shoulder. Pulling out a few silver coins, he bends down to place them in the boy's hand. "Now, dinnae tell yer pa. These are fer you, awright?"

The boy grins, nearly from ear to ear, and says, "Thank ye, mister." He quickly shoves the coins into his boot and returns to petting the mare.

"Thank *you* fer givin' ma girl a comfortable stall tonight. She's had quite the journey."

The boy beams and nods at Aiden.

"Night, hen," Aiden mutters, patting Gara's mahogany withers.

Aiden pushes open the inn's wooden door to reveal a bright, joyous tavern full of chatter, music, laughter, and the aroma of yeast and malted barley.

Several of the men play cards, and some have women sitting on their laps. Couples dance along to music played by the local band, and all are drinking deeply from mugs of ale.

But, as soon as the door closes behind Aiden, the music stops. The townspeople all stare. In the tense silence, Aiden grunts, removes his cloak, and hangs it on a nearby hook.

Even in a pub accustomed to shabby sailors, he stands out. No matter his longing to disappear into the crowd, his large build, uncommon leather armor, ragged clothing coated in green ooze, and the steel longsword that hangs in the leather scabbard at his side draw all eyes to him.

He chooses not to acknowledge the other patrons and instead crosses the floor to the bar. There, the short, gray-haired innkeeper awaits him with a look of concern, drying out a mug with a rag.

Aiden continues to feel the eyes of the townspeople on his back as he leans against the bar. He keeps his head lowered as he drops a bag of coins on the resin-coated oak bar top.

“Ma ship came in later than expectit. Needin’ a room fer the night.”

The innkeeper eyes him wearily over the top of his spectacles and continues to dry the mug.

Aiden does not wait for a response. “An’ a dram.”

The innkeeper strolls to the set of shelves behind him and picks up a ceramic jug. He pours its contents into the mug he has been drying and slides it across the bar to Aiden. With this gesture, the tavern springs back to life.

Aiden takes a sizeable swig from the mug.

The innkeeper hobbles the length of the bar to Aiden and leans close to speak quietly, “These good folks dinnae take kindly ta strangers, sir.”

Aiden chuckles, “Well, dinnae fash. I willnae be makin’ maself comfortable. I dinnae wan’ ta be here anymare than they want me here. The annual council meetin’ is the morra.”

The innkeeper raises his thick, bushy eyebrows in familiarity at Aiden’s voice, but then he laughs. “Ye’re the roughest-lookin’ knight *I’ve* ever seen. I wish ye luck, but I suggest ye get a bath an’ clean up ‘afore ye heid oot.” He drops a battered key on the bar top before Aiden and says with surety, “Yer room, Shaw.”

Aiden raises his head, and his sharp eyes meet the inquisitive gaze of the innkeeper.

“So, it *is* you, Aiden,” the innkeeper declares.

Aiden smirks and retorts, “Gid ta see ya again, Mac.”

Without allowing Mac another word, Aiden snatches the key and pockets it. He swallows the rest of his drink in one gulp and sets the mug down briskly.

As he turns away from the bar, the townspeople fall silent

once again. He sighs and looks straight ahead as he crosses the wooden floor toward the stairwell. Thankfully, as soon as he takes to the stairs, the patrons go about their business again.

Upon reaching the upper landing, Aiden spies the room number written on his key and strides toward the door. A middle-aged woman leans against the wall between his room and the next, her heavily corseted bosom spilling out of her dingy smock. He eyes her cautiously, though with an air of sympathy. He can tell she has seen better days.

The woman swiftly slides across the wall in his direction. “Wad ye like some company tonight, deary? I on’y charge twenty coin an hour,” she inquires in a nearly maternal tone.

He smiles genuinely and responds, “Nae, lass. Early start the morra.” Against his scruffy complexion, his teeth are startlingly white, accentuating his pronounced canines.

She looks him over, noticeably appalled by his grimy appearance. She nods and says pensively, “Awright, dear. Gidnight.”

The woman hurries off to greet another guest climbing the stairs.

Aiden unlocks his room, turns the knob, and steps inside. He swiftly shuts the door and pushes his back to it, leaning his head against the musky wood and closing his eyes. His racing heartbeat thuds like a heavy iron mallet caulking a ship. He counts his ragged inhalations to breathe through his anxiety.

“Thank God,” he exhales. This is almost over.



AIDEN PERCHES ON THE WOODEN WINDOWSILL OF THE HUMBLE GUEST room and stares through the rain-streaked glass. He gazes down at the empty cobblestone street and then up at the ominous castle set upon her ancient volcanic throne. Her shadowy, stone turrets and battlements seem to touch the sky as she keeps watch over the burgh below.

Out of the corner of his eye, he notices a pair of young lovers stumbling down the street on their way home from the tavern. For a moment, the couple blurs into a vision of a younger, tidier version of himself and a beautiful young woman with long, curly brown hair and deep green eyes. Aiden holds his cloak over their heads to keep her dry from the rain pouring down, and they kiss under the firelight from the lanterns.

Aiden clenches his fist but quickly realizes his error. He releases his grip and looks down at his calloused hand. In his palm rests a small, silver locket with a chain attached. The face of the ornament depicts Saint Michael, patron saint of sailors and soldiers, his foot holding down the neck of a demonic beast and his sword raised to impale it.

He flips open the locket, revealing a delicate painting of a little girl no more than two years old. She has blonde hair, long and curly, and his own unique blue eyes.

Aiden feels the tears dampening his weathered cheeks. He pushes away from the windowsill.

Tossing the locket onto the bed, he readies himself to wash. The fire in the hearth has suffocated, but the iron cauldron hanging over it still steams. He picks it up and pours the water inside into the large wooden bathtub.

Aiden pulls a leather flask from his pocket and takes a swig of the liquid inside. He grimaces from the taste and shakes his head. He pulls the string on his blouse, which drops from his shoulders, revealing his painstakingly sculpted frame. The flickering candlelight traces the scars that weave across his torso.

His body is a machine, a toned weapon crafted by years of training and abuse. The sight of it is a daily reminder of how much the years have changed him. Shaped him.

He slowly slides into the tub and closes his eyes as the soapy bath envelopes him like a blanket.

The music from the tavern below floats up through the

floorboards of the washroom. Another image of the beautiful brunette dances through Aiden's mind. Dressed in a lacey, golden-hued gown, she waltzes around the tavern to the tune played by the bard and the band.

A young Aiden leans back in his chair, his boots propped up on the table. The woman looks his way, and he raises his mug to her with a cheerful smile and a noticeable gleam in his eye. She smiles in return, races over to him, and pulls him up to dance with her. He laughs as he is dragged to his feet. They dance off into the back of his mind, and his awareness returns to the warm water of the soaking tub.

Aiden opens his eyes and takes another drink from the flask, causing another sour face. He sinks into the tub until his head is completely submerged beneath the water. After a few seconds, he surfaces slowly from beneath. He sighs as the steam rises off his body. His muscles ease for the first time in months.

After relaxing a bit longer, he carefully climbs out of the tub, towels off his tired body, and stumbles onto the bed. He is asleep before his head hits the pillow.



AIDEN IS ABRUPTLY AWOKEN BY A COMMOTION IN THE HALLWAY outside his room. Footsteps shuffle across the upper landing as the other guests clear out of the inn.

A rough knock sounds at his door, followed by a bellowing voice, “Ey, Shaw, ye better get goin’.”

Aiden groans as he sits up in the bed and shields his eyes from the sunlight pouring in through the window.

“Am I still whittled?” he asks himself.

He slides his legs over the side of the bed and attempts to stand.

“So far, so good.”

He tries to pull on his trousers and almost trips and falls. He catches himself on the bedside table.

“Aye, still fu’.”

He shrugs, grabs the flask from the table, and takes a swig. He makes a bitter face, steps into his boots, and takes a clean, folded blouse from inside his satchel.

Sliding the shirt over his head, he opens the door to find Mac waiting outside. He grabs his belongings and skirts around the innkeeper, taking another swig from his flask. He greets him grumpily, “Mornin’, Mac.”

Mac purses his lips and follows him down the stairs. Aiden leans against the front of the bar while Mac makes his way behind it. The innkeeper dips some porridge from a huge pot, spoons it into a bowl, and plunks it down on the bar top.

Eyeing it cautiously, Aiden makes a repulsed face at Mac and laments, “Nae meat or fruit back there, auld man? I’ve been at sea fer weeks eatin’ rats an’ the like. The las’ thing I want’s parritch.”

Mac laughs. “Aw, eat it, Shaw. It’s nae that bad. Keeps ya regular.” He leans back against a shelf, picks up his own bowl, and swallows a spoonful.

Aiden draws an exaggeratedly deep breath and takes a bite.

The innkeeper ignores Aiden’s protests. “Wha’s it been, seven years? It’s good ta see ya alive, Shaw. Looked a right fright last night, though. Folk’ll be talkin’ about ya fer the next month.” He sets down his bowl, picks up a cup of tea, and takes a sip.

Aiden motions for Mac to hand it over, so the innkeeper pours him a cup and places it in his outstretched hand. He takes a sip and sighs delightfully. “This place is hard ta return to, Mac. It’s a lot ta take in. There’s a fair few memories fer me here.”

With a nod, Mac responds tenderly, “It’ll take a lot more than time ta heal that heart o’ yers, boy. Just ken ya still have

pals here who care about ya. Ye've been like a son ta me fer as lang as I can remember."

Aiden uses a mouthful of the tasteless porridge as a means to avoid interacting with the conversation.

Mac continues, "Dae ye think about 'er often?"

Aiden looks up from his bowl as if he has seen a ghost, but then his face softens. "Every day," he replies, his voice almost a whisper.

Spooning the cooked oats around the inside of his bowl, he changes the subject. "Have ya met thon wee Edward Thache?"

"Aye, a wild loon, that yin. Ready fer everythin' an' itchin' ta see the werld. Jus' like ye were back in the day."

Aiden scoops another spoonful of the porridge and watches it drip back into the bowl. He then drops the spoon and hastily pushes the bowl away. It is time to go. There is nothing for him here.

"Could ye spare some o' this fer Gara?" he says hurriedly. "An' wid ye tap me aff?" He slides his flask across the bar.

"Sure thing. Canna believe ya still have that ol' bat." Mac spoons more porridge into the bowl and refills Aiden's flask with whisky. "Give wee King Jamie a pat on the heid fer me, ya hear?"

Aiden nods and heads for the door. Looking back toward the bar, he says, "I'll see ya around, Mac."

"Haste ye back. Be safe, ma boy-o."

Aiden lets the door swing closed behind him. He makes his way down the alley beside the inn and into the stables. He leans over Gara's stall door as she ambles up to him with a surly look on her face.

With a chuckle, he says, "I ken, lass. We willnae be stuck here much longer. Look what I've brought ya, though." He hangs his arm over the door to show her the porridge.

She brays and nudges him with her muzzle.

Laughing, he places the bowl in her feed bucket, and she immediately begins to lick the dish clean.

“I’ll be back, hen,” he says as he pats her neck.

When Aiden returns to the cobblestone street, he looks up at the castle on the hill.

He takes a deep breath and heads toward it.



CHAPTER 3

THE CASTLE ON THE HILL

The knights of the Order of the Thistle are gathered around a long, oak table inside Edinburgh Castle. They rant and bicker with each other as they drink ale, telling tall tales of their recent adventures, and slapping each other's backs to celebrate their endeavors.

King James V sits at the head of the table, his back to an array of opulent stained-glass windows. His soft face and slender body betray his age, and he cannot be far past his early twenties. He has one leg draped across the table and one elbow propping up his disinterested face on the arm of his chair. His falcon, Sain, sits on an ornamental golden perch next to him. The bird's large, keen black eyes observe the room intently.

The massive double doors to the room burst open, and in strolls Aiden. The entire room falls silent.

King James launches from his seat, startling the bird, "Ye're late!"

Aiden retorts, "Aye, Jamie, I made it. Ma trip was brutal. Thanks fer askin'."

He surveys the hushed room, all the grandiose knights. He squints his eyes at their elaborate garments and ornaments. Most of them avoid his gaze.

Jamie rushes to catch Aiden in an embrace. “Brither, I’m so glad ye made it.” He then faces the table. “Our retired Admiral, Sir Aiden Shaw, ma Lairds!”

He pats Aiden on the back and shows him to an empty seat at the table.

Aiden sits and slides his scabbard onto the tabletop in front of him. He grabs the goblet nearest to hand and drinks deeply. As the knight at his elbow clears his throat in an attempt to reclaim his dram, Jamie shakes his head and strides back to his place at the table. The knights begin to murmur but swiftly cease when Jamie taps his goblet.

“I want ta thank ye all fer yer attendance today. We have some important matters ta discuss this mornin’.”

The men collectively stiffen, their faces stern.

“Relations with England are on’y gettin’ worse. As ya ken, there have been several raids at the border; two o’ our watch towers have been captured an’ burned. The English forces will not allow any o’ our merchants past Northumberland, which is heavily affectin’ trade. There are rumors that King Henry is now enslavin’ druids across the islands, making his offenses more threatening than ever.”

He slides a royal proclamation onto the table. The letter sports the Great Seal of England, boasting the king’s will. The seal portrays King Henry VIII riding valiantly on horseback in full armor, his sword outstretched and his faithful greyhound running alongside.

“They have not yet crossed into Scotland, as far as we can tell, but it’s on’y a matter o’ time afore they make their way back ta Edinburgh. We have been assistin’ the French in their war against England an’ Spain, but at this point, we must agree on a plan o’ action fer addressin’ King Henry’s boldness against our homeland.”

Jamie gestures toward an armored, gray-haired gentleman with a creased face and his helmet in his lap. “This will be Laird Campbell’s domain.”

The knight nods in reply.

Aiden clinches his jaw as he looks from Jamie to Laird Campbell. He clears his throat and states, “If I may interject, Yer Majesty.”

Jamie hosts a slightly perturbed expression as he looks to Aiden. “Aye, go aheid, Shaw.”

“If this matter is involvin’ trade, may I suggest sailin’ fae the West Coast.”

Jamie huffs as he side-eyes Aiden. The knights look at one another in clear apprehension. Whispers carry across the table.

Jamie addresses the room, “In our next matter of business, as ye all recall, some years ago, there was a very unfortunate happenin’ ta the West, in what we now call the Red Forest.”

Aiden feels the blood leave his face. It is almost time.

The whispers cease, and the knights watch Jamie intently.

Jamie continues, “While the loss of life we endured that day will forever plague our hearts, our inability ta transit goods through the Forest ta the Inner Hebrides has heavily affected our trade wi’ Ireland an’ France, especially since King Henry retains privateers up an’ down the Southern Coast an’ throughout the Channel.”

His tone grows sinister. “Somethin’ is guardin’ the Forest, an’ any merchants who have entered since the incident have either disappeared or been killed. To avoid confrontation with King Henry’s forces an’ ta use the West Coast fer trade again, we must clear out whatever beast or malicious intent still resides in those woods.”

Laird Campbell responds, “If I may, Your Majesty, this proposal sounds all well an’ good, but... respectfully, we’ve tried. We canna get anywhere close ta the thing’s lair, an’ wi’ the need ta protect the border, we simply canna afford ta lose

anymore men.”

Jamie sighs, while Aiden tries to swallow the lump in his throat and breathe out the rising apprehension flooding his body.

The other knights go back to barking and arguing.

Aiden throws his leather gloves on the table and declares, “I’ll go.”

As he stands, his ornate chair scrapes across the stone floor. The room goes quiet.

Jamie rises. “Absolutely not, Shaw. Ye’ve done yer time. I would never send ye back there.”

Aiden reasons, “Someone has ta dae it. If it’s between this an’ another war wi’ England, I’ll go.”

He neatly pushes in his chair and turns to leave.

Jamie follows him. “No, Aiden. Ye canna dae this alone! I forbid it!”

Aiden turns to Jamie, looks him in the eyes, and puts his hand on the king’s shoulder. “I have unfinished business in the Forest, Jamie. Ya ken as well as anyone that I am capable o’ takin’ care o’ masel’. I work *better* alone. Let me dae this. Fer me.”

Jamie’s face softens into acquiescence as he hears out the older man’s request. Aiden turns and makes his way toward the large wooden doors. Even with his nervousness, he makes sure to leave with the same confident stride he used to enter.

Jamie watches the doors swing shut. After two or three heartbeats, he takes off running through them, leaving the knights around the table baffled.

Aiden strolls down the stone hallway lined with torches and high, open windows. Jamie catches up to him.

“Aiden! Stop!”

Surprised by the abrupt noise, Aiden turns around.

Jamie hardens his face, but his eyes are red, welling with tears. “Why are ya doin’ this? It’s been over a year since last I saw ya. Ye jus’ returned. Don’t ya remember what happened the last time ya went inta that forest? I dinnae want ta lose ya again.”

Aiden’s face bears a pained expression. “I’ve told ya, Jamie. Ye’re a man grown. Ye dinnae need me anymare.”

Jamie argues, “I feel so alone, Aiden. I have advisors, ministers, councilors, but I long fer ma regent, ma confidante... ma brither.”

Aiden’s smile is genuine. “Ya need ta find yersel’ a wife, son. I canna be lookin’ after ya ferever.”

Jamie forces a soft grin. “Why, though? Why dae ya have ta go back there?”

“We’ve had enough bloodshed at the hands o’ King Henry o’er the past fifteen years. I canna, in good conscience, support mare war. If there’s another way fer Scotland ta survive, I need ta find it.”

Jamie sighs. “It’s fruitless in the end, ya ken? We canna hide behind the walls we’ve built around this city ferever. With his army of druids, ma cousin grows mare powerful by the day. He *will* come fer Scotland, an’ we will have nae choice but ta fight or lose our homeland. Instead of goin’ off alone ta chase a ghost, why not spend this time of peace we have left with those who care fer ya? An’ then, on that day, we can face England together.”

Aiden returns, “I hear ya, boy, but I’ve nae mare fight left in me ta give. I need ta rest.”

He cups Jamie’s shoulder and gives him a warm smile. Jamie pulls him into a fierce embrace. Aiden is caught off guard but squeezes him tightly and pats him on the back.

He pulls back and holds Jamie by both shoulders to look at him. His eyes crinkle at the seams as he admires his boy. His king.

“Nae matter what happens ta me, son, you will be awright. You are an incredible king, an’ yer father wad be so proud eh ye. I love ya, boy.”

Jamie smiles through his tears. Aiden feels his cheeks flush. He must leave now before he loses the courage he has taken so long to generate. He releases the king, turns, and leaps down the stone steps ahead of him.

The sound of fluttering wings echoes from the window above Jamie’s head, as Sain lands upon the sill. The falcon’s white, speckled chest contrasts with the bluish-gray feathers of his head and wings that glimmer in the rays of sunlight that shine through the window.

“Go.” Jamie motions with his chin. “Watch over him.”

Sain squawks with understanding before he takes to the sky.



AIDEN TROTS GARA DOWN A ROCKY DIRT ROAD PARTING A LUSH, green field. As he swigs from his flask, in his peripheral, a silhouette dances up in the sky. He looks up to see the falcon circling overhead.

Aiden roars upward, “I said I dinnae need help, Sain!”

The raptor screeches as he flies off toward the vast, dark forest ahead. Aiden takes a deep breath, squeezes the silver locket in his hand, and kicks up Gara to gallop after the bird.



CHAPTER 4

THE RED FOREST

Aiden reaches the edge of the Red Forest and jumps down from Gara. The mare paces back and forth, visibly distressed by the sight before her.

Aiden grabs hold of her bridle to calm her. “Dinnae fash, Princess. I’ll walk fae here.”

He smacks the horse on the flank, and she takes off in the opposite direction of the forest. She comes to a halt under a tree within sight of her master and begins to graze.

Aiden looks back at the forest, dark and foreboding against the bright emerald grassland behind him. A soft breeze surrounds him, making the hairs on the back of his neck stand. He closes his eyes to take in the sweet smell of the pines. But it is the faint scent of smoke that greets his nostrils.

A vision hits him, a nightmare from long ago: the forest is aflame. Cries fill the woods. Figures clamber, blindly, to escape the fire. There, before him, the blazing beast with fireballs in her clenched fists. Her burning red eyes meet his, and he cannot move. The heat of the fire overwhelms him...

Aiden awakes with a start. Flat on his back against the cold ground, Gara's shape blocks out the sun as she leans over, sniffing and nudging him. His skin is clammy, and sweat has pooled on his face. He wipes his brow and slowly climbs to his feet. He again peers into the forest. A gnawing sense of dread flourishes within the pit of his stomach.

He takes the flask from his pocket, and without breaking his gaze with the wood, he carefully places it in Gara's saddlebag. The mare nickers quietly, still grinding grass with her bottom jaw.

“Got ta keep ma wits about me in there, hen.”

He pats her withers, steels himself, and slowly treads into the trees.

The daylight quickly leaves him as he makes his way into the thick wood of winding yews and still healing evergreens. He picks up a broken tree branch and mutters under his breath, “*Cychwyn tan.*”

The edge of the branch catches fire, illuminating the underside of the forest canopy.

Another vision strikes Aiden: burning trees crack and crash to the ground. Small village homes are aflame. His tongue is parched, and he can practically feel the blistering heat on his skin.

He shakes his head in the attempt to rid himself of the terrifying feeling quickly overtaking him. He holds out the torch ahead of him to light his way down the charred path. A patch of fog settles in over the blackened vegetation coating the forest floor.

In barely a whisper, he finally speaks, “Hello?”

Silence answers him. He breathes out some of his fear and continues his trek through the seared undergrowth.

At the end of the trail, he reaches what evidently used to be the entrance to a small village. The stone wall that once enclosed the little settlement is in ruin. The broken chains that

held the village signpost still dangle from the decaying archway. It is hard to believe it would ever have been habitable here.

While shining his torch side to side, he slowly crosses under the archway. No birds singing. No crickets chirping. No toads croaking. The absolute stillness is unnatural and unnerving.

Aiden walks through what would have been the town square. The remnants of a smashed stone well mark the center. Through the windows of the burned houses, he can make out scorched children's toys, cutlery still laid out for dinner, and wood furniture that better resembles kindling now. Despite the destruction, Aiden can practically feel its previous inhabitants. The sorrow overwhelms him.

He reaches a house at the end of the lane. He pauses briefly, and then he steps over the threshold.

A vision appears before him that puts the little house back in order, as it looked in a previous time. The younger version of himself sits on the floor by the fireplace. The little girl from the painting in his locket hangs off his neck. He tickles her, and they laugh together.

The young woman with green eyes and long, brown curls watches from the kitchen, where she scrubs clothes on a grate in a wooden bucket. She smiles at them.

Her speech is less stressed and more nasal than Aiden's guttural, lilting delivery, "Look at the pair of you." Her soft tone dances along the air like the breeze across the glen.

Aiden looks up at her and smiles. He attempts to get up from the ground, but the little girl grasps his leg. He laughs as he drags her across the floor. She giggles more and more with each step he takes.

Aiden peers down at the little leech. "Now, now, Alice, I've got ta give yer mither some attention too."

Alice releases his leg and seizes one of her little wooden-hewn horses. She plays before the fireplace while Aiden walks

up behind the young woman and wraps his arms around her.

The woman looks up and asks, “Do you *have* to leave tomorrow, my love?”

Aiden sighs, “Aye.” Then he perks back up. “Ya ken Jamie canna go too lang wi’oot someone ta boss ‘im aboot. He’ll be runnin’ the palace halls an’ swingin’ fae the chandeliers. We have a raid on some merchant ships in a few days, but I promise I’ll be home in time ta hold this new wee bairn.”

He places his hands on her belly, and their positions show she is with child. He looks down at the young woman tenderly. “I love you, Evelyn. One day, I hope ta come ta ya an’ never leave again. One day, we wonnae have ta hide anymare, ma bonnie wife, an’ I’ll bring ya home ta that big castle on the sea we’ve always dreamed about.”

“One day.” Evelyn smiles. She leans back against Aiden for a moment, and then she delicately removes his arms from around her. She turns to face him and says, “Here, I have something for you.”

She reaches into the pocket of her dress and pulls out the silver locket. She stands on her tiptoes, and he meets her halfway so she can clasp the chain around his neck. “Saint Michael the Archangel, defend him in battle. Keep him safe and bring him home to me. Amen.”

He leans in and kisses her passionately.

Aiden blinks, and the house is once again scorched and in disrepair. He pulls the silver locket from his pocket and studies it. Placing the chain around his neck, he can practically feel her touch as he secures the fastening.

He tucks the locket into his blouse and walks over to Alice’s bed. He picks up what used to be a blanket and runs the fabric through his fingers. His tears drip onto the blackened threads.

A low growl sounds behind him. He turns around to see two red eyes at the doorway to the house. As the creature stalks into his firelight, he can make out a huge black wolf.

The wolf barks. Charges. Aiden outstretches his palm, and the force field blasts the beast backward over the threshold. It disappears into thin air.

Perplexed, Aiden stares at the empty doorway. He walks out the front door and shines his torch around, bracing for an attack. Nothing. He extinguishes the flame to better see in the dark and tosses the baked tree limb to the side. Cautiously, he approaches where the wolf should have landed and feels around in front of him.

With each step, the temperature grows warmer and warmer. The air smells sweeter. It feels as if there are currents of energy coursing through the atmosphere. It feels strange; it feels... magical.

Aiden takes one more careful step.

And falls through an invisible curtain.



CHAPTER 5

THE IVY-COVERED MANOR

As Aiden appears on the other side of the curtain, the ground falls out from under him, and he tumbles down a hill. He lands in a bed of soft grass and bluebells. Sunlight pours through the trees.

He leaps up, rips his longsword from the sheath at his side, and circles around, the blade outstretched and his back against the hill. He blinks his eyes and then shields them from the sun. He can see nothing beyond the beams of light that flood the woods. The forest is alive with singing creatures, and the plants are all healthy and green. He can still feel the electricity in the air, but the desolate forest has been transformed.

A caw resonates above, startling him. A raven sits on a tree branch, head cocked, staring down at him. Its eyes look as if they are made of glass.

He watches the raven in wonder. It is as if they have met before, but he cannot place when. The raven flies off toward the tall, wrought-iron gates ahead of him.

He takes a deep breath to steady himself and sheathes his sword again. He follows the bird toward the menacing gates.

Faint, low growls reverberate throughout the surrounding woods, so he remains vigilant as he makes his way over the lush vegetation.

The gates are of ancient elven design, though vines have long overtaken them. As he gets closer, they open, slowly, of their own accord. Aiden's curiosity compels him to keep walking, and he enters a damp, mossy courtyard surrounded by a tall stone wall.

In front of him stands an enormous, three-storied gothic manor house. Its eccentric stone face is wrapped in climbing ivy, and its wooden shingles have been eaten away by centuries in the moist climate. The roof is adorned with chimneys and spires, and a large cupola rises from the center, crowned with a wrought iron weathervane in the shape of an arrow.

As he continues to take in his surroundings, a scraping sound echoes across the courtyard. The huge wooden doors to the manor house slowly begin to creak open. Aiden stops dead in his tracks, captivated by the movement of the cast iron hinges.

The iron gates slam closed behind him, and he spins around, immediately hunting for another exit route. The doors continue to open, and there before him stands a woman in a long black gown.

She has deep green eyes and long, curly, brown hair.

She holds up her right hand, and a ring of fire surrounds him.

Every resolved part of him washes away, and his body goes limp. He drops to his knees.

He whispers, "My God."

Evelyn studies him, her eyes growing wide.

A ten-year-old girl with long, curly blonde hair and radiant blue eyes appears in the doorway behind Evelyn. She recognizes the armor from fragments of her youngest

memories.

“Daddy?” she asks.

Aiden remains kneeling. Utterly frozen. He must have died in the Forest, by the jowls of that red-eyed wolf. He must finally be home. This must be *Anwnn*, his otherworld, his heaven.

Evelyn holds up her left hand, and the doors slam shut, trapping Alice inside. She motions with her right hand, and the flames subside.

She questions, her voice shaking, “Aiden?”

Aiden breathes, “Evelyn.”

At the confirmation of his voice, she runs down the stone steps to him. He clamors to his feet just in time to catch her in his arms. She wraps hers around his neck, and he picks her up and spins her around.

As their lips meet for the first time in eight long, miserable years, his knees buckle, and he struggles to remain upright. He is terrified by the overwhelming flood of emotions, but he has no ability to control them. She feels so real, so worldly. He holds her head tight to his face, suffocating himself in her sweet-scented curls, tears rolling down his face.

She jumps down and grabs his lined, scruffy cheeks.

She whispers, “Is this really you? You’ve come back to us?”

He smiles but struggles to speak, “It’s... really me. I’m really here.”

She releases his face and looks back at the closed wooden doors behind her. She grabs his arm. “Come.”

Pulling him up the steps, she waves her hand and the doors of the manor house open once again. He is astonished by her power, but follows her weightlessly, as if floating along the wind.

Once she draws him inside, the doors slam behind them.

Their sound seems to shake him back to reality. He looks back at the door, and then his eyes canvas the foyer of the house.

“What is this place?”

She smiles. “This? This is Hiraeth. Our sanctuary. Our home.”

She flicks both of her arms upward, and all the torches in her vicinity light up in flame.

She peers into a sitting room off the foyer and says, “Alice, you can come and see your father now. It truly is him.”

The young, blonde girl sprints from the room.

She stops feet from Aiden, a look of uncertainty in her features. But then Aiden smiles, and she charges him full force. “Daddy, you’ve come home!”

He picks her up and pulls her tight. She feels exactly like warm rays of sunshine peeking through the trees on a brisk, chilly morning. The more he squeezes, the more she giggles, bringing forth a happiness and solace from within that he truly believed he would never feel again.

He says, “Ma wee bairn! Ye’re awright.” He holds her out to have a look at her. “And so *grown!*”

A silhouette emerges from the hallway to Evelyn’s left. She notices the shadow, smiles tenderly, and then looks back at Aiden.

“Would you like to meet him?”

Aiden gently sets Alice down and repeats curiously, “Him?”

A little boy about seven-years-old, with raven hair and green eyes, steps out from behind the wall.

Evelyn places her hand on the boy’s shoulder and says, “This is Colin Aiden Shaw.”

Aiden drops to a knee and reaches out his arms. “My son.”

Colin looks to his mother for approval. She nods, and he

walks slowly toward his father. Aiden carefully wraps his arms around the little boy, afraid he might dissipate into nothingness, but as they touch, he finds the boy solid, corporeal. A son, *his* son, for whom he had prayed to God for years, was here before him. He existed in this world.

Colin backs away. He questions, “You’re my father?”

“Appears so, laddie. Ye were still in yer Ma’s tummy the last time I seen ya.”

Colin stares at Aiden.

Evelyn leans down to the children’s level and asks with a smile, “Would you both like some dinner?”

The children both reply, “Yes, Mama!”

They race toward a room on the opposite side of the foyer.

Colin stops abruptly and looks back to his parents. He asks, “Can my father eat with us too?”

Evelyn’s smile drops as the gravity of what just occurred sinks in. She turns to Aiden. As she watches him, she responds to Colin in a distant tone, “Of course, he can.”

She gently moves toward the room the children have scurried off into, but she soon realizes her paces are alone. She looks back to Aiden, who remains in the doorway.

He watches her longingly, like a pauper in a store full of priceless rarities that he could never afford. He cannot comprehend that what lies before him could be real, but he knows it cannot be heaven; the sorrow he feels is too great.

In one, singular, miraculous instant, his whole life has changed. The past eight years wasted. Every crippling emotion endured, invalid. All the sleepless nights, unfounded. Every grueling punishment he has subjected his body to was all for a lie. He is rooted to the spot, at a complete loss on how to proceed forward after this moment.

Evelyn appears to recognize his pain and relaxes her face into a small but loving smile.

She reaches out her hand to him and says, “Come. It’s alright, my husband.”

He studies her, trying to paint a picture to tuck away safely in his mind.

Her delicate hands are paler than he remembers, and her fingers are strangely black. Her dark, regal dress has a red tinge under the light of the torches, and her eyes shine like daggers.

This is not real; he continues to reason with himself. Surely, this is just another fever dream that will have him waking in a cold sweat momentarily. However, he remains at a loss as to how his mind could envisage a place as grand as this, an interaction so tangible.

He can feel her gaze pierce through to his soul, and he feels uncontrollably vulnerable. Resolving to ride the high as long as his brain will allow, he sighs and pulls the longsword from the sheath on his side.

Evelyn pinches her lips, her fingers taut. She takes a step backward.

Aiden smirks and holds out his empty hand to show he means no harm.

“I dinnae ken much about bairns these days. D’ye have a place I can store this, so it doesnae turn into a play toy?”

Though still offput, Evelyn nods. She leans into the dining room and exclaims, “Darlings, I’ll return in a moment. I’m just showing your father to his room. Please begin without me.”

Alice and Colin both nod and dig into the plates of food on the table.

She turns back to Aiden and speaks more quietly, “This way.”

She leads him down the hallway Colin emerged from, her dress flowing behind her in the breeze of the drafty manor house. They pass an elderly man and a middle-aged woman discussing the quality of two linens under the firelight. Evelyn

nods, and they both respond, “Ma lady.”

Aiden barely notices them for watching his wife.

They climb a flight of stairs. Aiden tries to think of something witty to say, anything to break the silence, to bring her attention back to him, but he finds himself at a loss for words. He tries to imagine what she is thinking, read her energy, but she is so cold and closed off to him that insecurity begins to flood his thoughts. He attempts to shake it off.

She leads him over a landing and pushes open a large, weighty door. She waits inside as he walks in ahead of her, scanning the room.

The bedroom is grand, its margins donned with red tapestries. Soft candlelight exudes from torches set in sconces along the walls and candelabras resting on the furniture. The dust on the coverlet of the four-post bed shows the room is not often used. This is a long way from their modest cottage in the village.

Aiden looks back at Evelyn and snickers, “So, who’d ya steal the castle from, Evie?”

She smiles and shakes her head. “We just kind of... found it.” Her voice fades away as she explains, “When we fled the village, I somehow created a portal, and we found the manor, covered in vines. I was able to use my powers to call off the plants, and here she stood.”

His eyebrows knit with confusion. “Wait, I dinnae... Ye’ve been here since the raid?”

She nods her head and looks down at her feet. Her distant tone continues, “There’s no other place left for us now.”

He looks her over with a pained expression. At that moment, he realizes this is not a dream. What lies before him is, in fact, real. And this angers him.

“So, ye’re tellin’ me ye’ve been here aw this time, an’ ya never came lookin’ fer me?” He pauses as he attempts to control his breathing. “I’ve mourned ya fer eight years, Evie.

Eight! We had a funeral, fer Christ's sake!"

Inflamed, she looks up at him. "When King Henry's men came and took our village hostage, they told me you were dead. How could I go looking for a ghost? How was I to know if there was any world left out there after those beasts destroyed our home?"

He swallows the knot in his throat and hangs his head. She is right, of course, and he cannot take out his frustrations regarding their unfortunate circumstances on her.

He pulls off his scabbard and lays it across the back of the dresser in front of him. He takes items out of his satchel. He sets vials of elixirs and potions onto the part of the dresser closest to him. He then takes the blade from his boot and sets it down, followed by his satchel.

Evelyn squints. "What is all this?"

Aiden does not catch her inquisitive gaze. He is not especially proud of how he makes a living these days.

He just looks straight ahead and replies, "I'm still a warrior, Evie. I jus' dinnae fight people anymare. I fight monsters." He motions to the bottles. "These are all that keep me alive sometimes."

She drops her gaze. "Is that why you're here?"

He pauses taking items out of the satchel, and without looking up, he replies with a comical undertone, "Are ya a monster now, Evie?"

She is silent.

He looks over to see the firelight flicker in her eyes. He flashes back to the forest on fire, the demonic beast suspended before him, the screams surrounding him.

He drops the vial in his hand, and it shatters on the floor. At last, he understands his connection with the beast.

"That was *you* in the Forest?"

She studies him intently but does not say a word.

His frustration and relief mix as he briskly strides to her side of the room. She watches him, frightened, as he pulls the door closed. Then he pushes her against the wall. She flinches, but he grabs her face, and with ravenous passion, he kisses her again.

He says with a rumble in his voice, “I dinnae care what ya did, Evelyn. All I ken is ye’re safe.”

He delicately kisses down her neck, his hand gently gripping her arm. With each tender graze he lays upon her soft skin, the tension in her muscles releases a little more. She closes her eyes and leans back against the wall.

She whispers, “You cannot be real, Aiden. You’re dead. They said you were dead.”

Her words break his trance with her flesh and pheromones. He looks up at her and backs away.

“They thought I was deid. I was layin’ in a puddle ‘o my own blood... but I escaped. The last I saw ya, we had a raid planned fer a group o’ English merchant ships. The English Navy caught us by surprise, an’ they hunted our fleet down the River Forth ta Sterlin’. They chased us onto land, an’ they took me ta the Tower o’ London. They said they wad kill everyone I cared aboot if I didnae give up the secrets of our kingdom. They tortured me fer weeks, but all I could think aboot was you. Alice, Jamie. Scotland.”

It pains him far more than he ever anticipated to release these thoughts from the confines of his soul. Like rose thorns, it hurts just as much to pull them out as it does to leave them be.

His wife’s eyes lament for his misfortune, and this makes him feel unbecomingly weak.

He sighs. “Unfortunately, someone on ma crew did talk. Henry found oot aboot yer father an’ yer powers. I overheard ‘em plannin’ ta take you, make ya their weapon... So, I bid ma time.

“After another brutal round wi’ the warders, I lay still, so

they thought I was gone. They threw me down the midden shoot with the other bodies, an' I was able ta climb ma way oot. I trekked the countryside fer weeks tryin' ta get back ta our village. But by the time I made it home..."

He rubs his forehead and paces the room, staring at the floor. "Ye were gone. It was *all* gone. There was nae reason left fer me ta go on."

He looks up at her with glossy eyes. He has unwittingly released the flood waters of all these buried emotions, and he is terrified. He feels he has lost control.

"I found the whisky store under the floorboards o' the auld tavern an' tried ma damndest ta drink masel' ta death. On one o' the rounds ta find survivors an' clear debris, some soldiers found me passed oot on the floor o' our hoose. They took me back ta Holyrood an' cleaned me up. Jamie allowed me ta keep quarters there, but I was useless, a shell o' a man.

"I slept fer days an' couldnae stand the sight o' the sun. Jamie tried so hard ta be there fer me, an' he needed me ta be there fer him as his regent, but I was so numb. I jus' dinnae care about anythin' anymore.

"Jamie knew I needed a purpose, so he sent me ta Anglesey ta train wi' the druids. They taught me how ta use potions an' spells ta make me more powerful in battle. Taught me how ta identify the currents in the air and morph them to my whim.

"I threw masel' back into the war. I was either drunk or trainin'. I went from town ta town an' fought beast after beast ta gain intel on Henry. I was resolved that, if Jamie wouldnae let me kill masel', I wad kill the man who had taken everythin' from me."

He notices Evelyn's posture stiffening, and he feels shame for his explanation, for her potential judgment against him.

"I was finally able ta overtake one o' his battle processions. I picked off his generals an' soldiers one by one an' knocked him from his horse, but when I had him on his

knees, about ta slash his throat... I saw yer face.”

He pauses to regard her complexion.

“Ye wouldnae want me ta dae it, ta kill another man fer revenge. Ya kenned it wad ruin me, make me like him. So, I walked away. I let him live. Now, he an’ his men still ravage the countryside, but that isnae on ma conscience.”

He sits down on the edge of the dusty bed, his head in his hands while his elbows rest on his thighs.

Evelyn goes to him and pulls his arms down to rest in her hands.

He looks up at her. “Goddamit, Evie. I dinnae think I’ve said that many words since the last time I saw ya eight years ago.”

She rubs his back, a once typical way she would comfort him. Amusing how easy it feels to just fall back into the physical roles of their phantom selves.

He brushes a piece of hair out of her face but cannot let it slip between his fingers. It is as soft as he remembers, but all at once, he is timid to touch it. It is strange to remember that they once belonged solely to each other, that there was no emblematic space between them.

He leans in to kiss her, missing the warmth of her being. When their lips meet, his worry dissipates. He is gone; once again, bewitched by her aura.

As he pulls back, he searches her face. “I canna believe I’m lookin’ into yer eyes again, ma bonnie wife.”

Evelyn smiles. Carefully, she places his hand in his lap.

She says, “I have to tend to the bairns.”

She stands, and he follows her.

She turns back to him. “Take your time, Aiden. Rest. I’ll bring you up some food in a wee while.”

He nods and takes a seat back on the bed, as she leaves the

room. He stares at the closed door, still reeling from everything that has happened since he fell through that invisible curtain this afternoon.

Aiden stands and heads back over to the dresser. He slowly removes his armor, carefully laying each piece over the chair next to him. He meticulously picks up each piece of the broken potion vial from the floor, and then he steps over to the giant hearth to toss the glass shards inside the fire. He continues over to the window and looks down. There sit at least twelve tiny stone houses with thatched roofs, their windows all aglow with firelight.

He utters, “She saved them. She saved them all...”

Out past the houses, the thick forest surrounds the new village like a barrier wall. He realizes just how brilliant the light is that shines off the leaves of the trees. He looks up at the full moon, and it is brighter than any moon he has ever witnessed. He can clearly make out every crater on its face. He basks in its splendor.

After a few moments, he exhales. He heads back to the bed and flops down on top of it. Dust shoots off in every direction. He lies still, staring at the fabric canopy of the four-poster. He then closes his eyes and swiftly drifts into an uneasy, though well-earned, slumber.



EVELYN QUIETLY CLOSES THE BEDROOM DOOR BEHIND HER. SHE TIP TOES across the floor, a ceramic plate loaded with roasted meat, potatoes, root vegetables, and bread in her hands.

Aiden sits upon his elbows.

She daintily places the dish on the bedside table and whispers, “They’re asleep.”

He smiles and snatches a piece of bread from the plate. She sits down next to him, but then she stands back up. She cannot seem to stay still.

With her back to him in the attempt to contain her emotion, she closes her eyes. “I still don’t know how to feel about all this. And then, part of me... part of me just wants to keep you to myself. For a wee while, at least.”

Aiden seems to understand her subconscious request and slides his legs over the side of the bed. He responds, “Yer wish is ma command, ma lady.”

She smiles to herself.

Standing, he crosses in front of her. She watches his eyes caress her shape. She can feel her breathing quicken just to be within his gaze.

He asks, “May I?”

She smiles coyly. “You may, my laird.”

He looks closer at her dress and scratches his head. “On second thought, I may need some help.”

She giggles and unpins the front placket of her gown, revealing its laces. She begins to untie them.

He gently takes her fingers from the laces. “Ah, I think I’ve got it now. It’s like lacin’ a boot, eh?”

She laughs, but then her soul shudders. Even through the layers of clothing, she can feel his fingertips as he delicately unlaces the gown. Each inadvertent touch sends sparks through her body, warming and chilling her simultaneously.

Aiden gracefully removes the gown from her shoulders, an undeniable look of triumph on his face. It sinks to the floor in a heap. He runs his hands down her arms as he circles back around her. She closes her eyes and holds her breath as he begins to untie her kirtle, but with each lace he removes, the tension between their bodies grows.

She exhales in parts in an attempt to keep her poise. She asks, “How did you find us?”

He answers absentmindedly, distracted by the task before him, “The portal is still there. I fell through it. It’s invisible,

but if yer accustomed ta magic, ye can sense it.”

He drags his finger across her skin. “Feel it, even.”

She closes her eyes and breathes, “Interesting...”

She is surprised by the way her body almost involuntarily leans into his touch. He smirks, and she fears he can read her thoughts.

Finished with the kirtle, he delicately lifts it over her head. He takes advantage of the opportunity to stand behind her, his firm body pressed against hers. Her breathing hastens again, but she continues to fight to maintain composure.

He touches her chin and pulls her in for a passionate kiss.

She can no longer resist.

She rapidly loses the rest of the world, her existence focused only on needing him. Her senses have been captured, her very being seized by his irresistible presence. She cannot help but submit every part of her body and soul for any will he wishes to exert against her. Willingly, she belongs to him.

She grabs his face and pulls him closer.

She sighs as she feels his rough hands running down her back; she shivers from the uncontrollable yearning he ignites with each touch.

She turns to him, and he clutches the back of her head, his hand in her hair. He whispers, “I dinnae ken if I remember how ta dae this.”

She pulls him in for a deeper kiss.

Fevered, he blindly attempts to pull off her petticoat. He looks down. “Why dae lasses wear so many clothes?”

She laughs and hikes her skirt up over her leg to expose her bare thigh. “Is this better?”

He growls and falls to his knees. He gently pulls down her silk stocking and delicately lays light kisses up the inside of her thigh, until his head is submerged beneath her skirt.

She sighs and closes her eyes to focus on the feeling of his lips against her skin.

He pulls her hips closer to his face as he relishes the sweet nectar of her body.

She moans with pleasure as he takes his time. As her body tenses, she awaits the overflow of warmth and gratification. Still, just as she reaches the precipice, he halts.

He does not plan to let her off that easily, and this makes her feral. She pulls him into an animalistic kiss, gently biting his bottom lip.

He growls and picks her up into his arms. She wraps her legs around his waist as he scrambles to unbutton his trousers. He pushes her against the wall.

He grabs her hips and thrusts into her as she supports her weight against the sconce. She clutches his raven locks, and he tightly grips her tender flesh.

As he manually satisfies every inch of her body, he leans his forehead into her shoulder. His mouth hangs open, respiring rough, erratic breaths as he works.

She cannot keep up, each thrust more gratifying and all-consuming than the last. This pleasure is undoubtedly evidence of some further plane of reality. He pulls back to admire her form as he moves inside her, and she catches his gaze. She loses sight of the room and falls into his cerulean eyes.



AIDEN LIES ON HIS BACK, HIS HEAD RESTING ON HIS ARM AS HE stares up at the fabric canopy. Beads of sweat rest under his hairline and down the piece of his muscular chest exposed by his un-tied, white blouse.

He looks over at Evelyn, who appears to be fast asleep. Her form is absolutely angelic in the dim candlelight that frolics across her flawless skin. He leaves the bed as quietly as

he can, picks up the plate of food from the bedside table, and makes his way across the bedroom. He closes the large wooden door gently behind him.



EVELYN HEARS THE DOOR SHUT, PROMPTLY WRAPS THE SHEET around her slender frame, and walks over to the dresser where all of Aiden's belongings still sit. She picks up a vial and smells it. The stench is so potent that it almost induces vomiting. She makes a face and puts it back down.

She pulls the longsword from its scabbard and runs her finger along its engraving: *nemo me impune lacessit*.

She squints as she translates, "No one attacks me with impunity..."

She scrunches her nose and sheaths the sword again.



AIDEN MAKES HIS WAY DOWN THE STAIRS, EATING A BITE OF FOOD from the plate with each step. He explores the lower level of the large house. As he passes an open door, a clinking sound drifts from inside. He peeks into the massive kitchen to discover a plump, elderly woman scrubbing dishes in a wooden bucket full of water.

He sits down at the large prep table in the middle of the room and continues to shovel food into his mouth.

The old lady turns to him and asks, "D'ye want a spoon, son?"

Without looking up, he replies with a mouth full of food, "Aye. Thanks, mistress."

The old lady hands him the spoon she just finished washing. She cocks her head and squints at him. "Laird Shaw?"

Aiden's eyes grow wide as he looks up at her.

He replies energetically, “Agnes?”

He jumps up and runs around the table. He hugs the old lady tightly.

With his head over her shoulder and a his mouth full of bread, he mumbles, “Ye’re alive!”

Agnes hugs him back fiercely before she pulls away. She pats his scruffy cheeks and says, “Speak fer yerself! We were telt ye were deid!”

Aiden returns to his stool. He continues to devour his plate but does not take his eyes off Agnes.

“Tell me everythin’. What has life been like o’er the past eight years? How’s auld William?”

Agnes replies, “Life quickly went back ta normal after the raid, thanks ta that incredible wife o’ yers. But ma dear husband’s not been wi’ us fer about a year now. He went quiet. Peaceful-like.”

Aiden’s brows are drawn together as he responds, “I’m sorry ta hear that. I was sure that crotchety auld man was goin’ ta live ferever.”

She chuckles, “Same here, boy-o, same here.”

She passes over a plate. “Here, I have some berry tarts left o’er fae dinner.”

He snatches them up. “Aw, how I’ve missed yer cookin’, Agnes.”

She beams in approval at his appetite.



EVELYN PICKS UP AIDEN’S SACHEL AND FEELS SOMETHING rectangular inside. She flips open the lip and pulls out a ragged, maroon-hued book. She recognizes it as his journal.

Inside, hundreds of tattered pages are covered in Aiden’s handwriting.

She flips through page after page, reading obsessive musings about the traits and tendencies of the fire monster in the woods. She also comes across spell wordings and potion ingredients said to repel or harm the monster. Folded into the pages are multiple bounty proclamations from merchants if the monster might be handled properly.

Evelyn's eyes grow wider with each comment she reads as she continues to turn over each page. Her heart aches. Her hands begin to shake. She can barely breathe.

The love of her life is planning to betray her, for stature. For money. This is why he came back, to finish her off at Jamie's command. Her husband, the monster slayer.



TAKING TWO AT A TIME, AIDEN SPRINGS BACK UP THE STAIRS WHILE munching on another berry tart. He has more energy today than he has had in years.

He makes his way down the silent hallway to the bedrooms. Quietly, he opens the door to the children's room. They are fast asleep. He smiles, softly closes the door, then heads back to his designated room.

He opens the door and sees Evelyn at the dresser, his journal in her hands. His heart drops to his stomach. She should not have seen that. Not yet, not without an explanation.

He closes the door behind him, trapping them in the room together. He has to squash this at once.

At this, Evelyn turns to him. She bellows in an infernal tone, "I'll give you one last chance. Why did you come here, Aiden?"

He steps toward her, but she backs away, fire raging in her eyes.

The calm night outside the window bursts into a raging storm. Lightning blazes across the sky, followed by booming cracks of thunder.

He reaches out to her. “Wait, wait, Evelyn. Let me explain!” He is terrified. He has to fix this.

She raises her hands at him, and he is blasted onto the bed. Vines wrap around his wrists and bind him to the headboard.

He yells over the deafening thunder, “Evelyn!”

Her hair whips about as if she were standing in a wind-blasted tunnel. “How dare you threaten us!”

The flames of the candles around the room extinguish in unison, and the doors and shutters of the house begin to bang. She leaves the room.

Aiden wrenches himself free of the vines and stumbles into the hall. Evelyn turns, and with a flick of her wrist, blasts him into the wall at the end of the hallway, breaking a small table and the vase on top of it.

He clumsily climbs back to his feet. He surveys the rubble around him and growls through clenched teeth, “Evelyn, stop!” He rushes toward her. He has to make her listen.

She turns to face him and conjures a ball of white light in her hand. She throws it in his direction, but he ducks. The glowing orb shoots over his head and hits the wall, leaving a scorched hole.

“Evelyn, listen ta me!”

She flicks her wrist again, and the door to the children’s room swings open. It slams shut behind her.

He grabs the doorknob but quickly releases it. It is blistering hot. He watches the metal knob melt before his eyes. He begins to kick the door.

He shouts, “Evelyn, jus’ talk ta me. Be reasonable!”

No response.

He continues to kick the door. One kick, two kicks, three. It finally bursts open.

Evelyn stands between Alice’s bed and Colin’s. The

commotion has woken them, and they jump down to hide behind their mother, clutching the backs of her legs. She throws another ball of light at Aiden. He weaves out of its way.

She glares at him menacingly. “Don’t come any closer. Leave us.”

If he can just get her to hear him out, he knows she will understand. He steps toward her, and she throws another ball of light his way. As the white orb heads for his chest, he raises his arm, the back of his fist facing outward. The air in front of him warps into a transparent shield. He bows into it as it deflects the ball of energy. The glowing sphere ricochets and hits a vase. The vase explodes into hundreds of pieces.

Evelyn searches the room for an escape route. She is cornered.

She points her hands down at her sides, and water pours in through the windows. Strong winds fill the room, and the water begins to swirl around her and the children.

Her voice is a booming echo. “Aiden, I said leave us. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Aiden pushes through the wind with his invisible shield.

He shouts, “Evelyn, ye have ta listen ta me!”

Large chunks of hail and icicles as sharp as daggers pelt him from all directions. He grimaces and pushes through the storm. His body soon gives out, and he falls to his knees. He looks up at his wife. She closes her hands and drops to his level in defeat. He collapses into her arms.

He clutches desperately at her hand. “I’m nae leavin’ ya again, Evie.”

Aiden closes his eyes and releases his grip, as he loses consciousness.



CHAPTER 6

BIRDS IN CAGES

Aiden awakes to sunshine streaming through the window. He assesses his surroundings to find he is in a bedroom, though not the one he was first shown. The fresh flowers and moon water by the window and the dark green robe draped across a chair lead him to believe it is Evelyn's bed he has awoken in.

When he attempts to sit up, he becomes acutely aware of just how sore he is. He looks down to find a bandaged arm and a bound chest. He grumbles and flops back onto the pillows.

There is a piping cup of tea and a plate of scones, cream, and berries on the bedside table. He smiles as he notices two pieces of parchment with colorful pictures painted on them propped up against the candelabra. His attention shifts to the door where four little eyes are peeking.

He laughs, "Come on in, ye two. Stop spyin' on me."

Colin shrieks, "He's alive!"

The two children charge into the room, jump on the bed, and curl up next to their bruised father.

Aiden grimaces. “Ow, ow. Careful.” He readjusts the children so they no longer lie on his wounds. He asks, “Are ya both awright?”

Alice replies, “Yes! We thought *you* were dead.”

Colin adds, “Yes, Daddy. You weren’t moving.”

Aiden says, “Aye, yer mither really did me over.” He chuckles but quickly stops and says, “Ow.” He looks around the room. “Where is Mama anyway?”

Colin answers, “By the water. She’s sad.”

Alice says, “Yes, I think she’s sad because she loves you, but she loves us too. She wants to do the best for our family but make sure we’re protected.”

Aiden touches Alice’s soft face with the back of his fingers. This wee burd, no longer a wean, but now a growing girl. He says, “Aye, but she canna protect ya ferever. Someday ye’ll have ta see the real world.”

Colin asserts, “That’s what I keep saying. I want to see the city. I want to ride a horse.”

Alice agrees, “Me too. I want to go to school. I want to make friends.”

Aiden touches both of their shoulders. “All in good time. Now, ye both run along. I have ta go an’ talk with yer mither.”

Both children reply, “Alright, Daddy!” They kiss their father on either cheek and proceed off down the hallway, running and laughing.

Aiden hears something crash from outside the door, and then Agnes yells, “Ei, ye ogres, be careful!”

Aiden raises his brows and shakes his head. The bedroom door slowly opens, and Agnes hurries over the threshold. She almost drops the fabric in her arms when she sees him.

She asks incredulously, “What’s happened ta ya?!”

Aiden smirks. “Ma wife.”

Agnes raises one eyebrow. “I’m no’ even goin’ ta ask, so lang as ye’re awright. Now, Evelyn said she didnae see a seabag or chest with ya, so she asked me ta get some clothes thegither fer ye. I believe ye’re a wee bigger than the last time I seen ya, so I had ta guess at the sizin’.”

She places some blouses and trousers on the bed. She pats the stack of clothes and says, “Jus’ let me ken if I need ta adjust any o’ them. I’m off ta tend ta the gairden.”

He nods. “Thank ya, Agnes.”

“O’ course, ma boy.”

Turning on her heel, she scurries back out of the room. She shouts down the hall, “Hey, you two! Enough of that!”

Aiden chuckles under his breath.

Grunting and moaning, he gradually rolls out of the bed. He draws on his new trousers and pulls the soft, crisp blouse over his bandages. He finally makes it to his feet and slowly treads the cold hardwood floor. He feels like a dead man with a hangover. With each step, he grows increasingly nauseous.

He skulks down the stairwell, down the bottom floor hallway, and then out the western side door of the manor house. He looks out to see Evelyn perched on the moss-covered steps at the edge of the sea. She sways her finger back and forth to make the waves of the Atlantic approach and recede at her leisure.

The sky above her is a brilliant blue, accented by thin wisps of bright white clouds. The colors are so potent, the lines so crisp, that the scene appears to have been painted by a brilliant artist with a quality, thin-bristled brush. The ambiance is utterly tranquil and every sound fades into the next in an organic symphony. The weather is serene, unblemished, as if God himself curated an endless summer with no sign of midges. This must be the equivalence of being conscious inside a dream.

Tearing himself away from the beauty of this hidden world, Aiden finally clammers down the steps. Startled, Evelyn looks

up, but when she sees her injured husband stumbling over to her, she drops her head again to stare at the water. Her lovely face is stricken with grief.

As he reaches the shore, Aiden looks out at the calm, green-hued water and then back down at Evelyn. She and the sea are the only two who have ever truly made him feel like he belonged. Taking a seat beside his wife on the stone steps, he groans audibly.

“Can we talk now?” He offers a prodding half-smile as she gazes up at him.

She quickly stares back down at the water and replies, “I mean, aye, say what you need to.”

He studies her and asks playfully, with a slight undertone of concern, “Ye’ll no throw anythin’ else at me, will ye?”

She rolls her eyes. “No, Aiden.” She looks out across the water, still avoiding his gaze. “Please... speak freely.”

“So, I really thought that fire beast in the Forest killed ye. An’ our bairns. I thought it was somehow under Henry’s control, like so many o’ the druids an’ dark creatures o’ the islands. I’ve been obsessin’ o’er how ta kill it fer years. Years. But it was... impossible ta find. There isnae one word written about it, no’ in any book I’ve read. No man or druid could say what it was or had any experience fightin’ it. Makes sense now I guess.” He side eyes her. She refuses to look at him.

He continues, “I took down any speculation I heard, any idea I could dream up. I was champin’ at the bit ta get a go at it, but Jamie wouldnae let me back near the Forest.

“This last time though, now that the merchants canna get through England over sea or land, he *had* ta let me come. I jus’ had ta get rid o’ this monster so that Scotland could move on. So I could move on an’ aw. I had nae idea that the... that it was *you*. I dinnae ken why I couldnae tell.”

He looks to her for some sort of response or reaction, but her expression is distant as she continues to stare straight ahead. He coaxes her chin to face him, and she does not fight

it.

He looks her in the eyes. “I wad *never* try ta hurt ya, Evelyn. Ye *have* ta ken that... An’ I dinnae ken whit agony ye’ve been livin’ wi’ fer aw these years, but ye saved them. Aw the villagers, they’ve been here aw along. Flourishin’, by the looksy it. Ye kept our neighbors, our friends, our bairns from gettin’ hurt.”

Evelyn responds nervously, tears welling up in her eyes, “But they did hurt us, Aiden. And you weren’t there.”

Aiden’s forehead creases. “Wha d’ye mean?”

She takes a deep breath and drops her tone, “They chained me up. They took our beds, and all our food. Used my body for their comfort.”

He feels the blood drain from his face; his jaw lock, his breathing hasten. Out of all the things man can do, to take a woman’s choice from her. From *his* wife, the woman he swore before God he would protect for the rest of eternity. If he could get his hands on this animal, he would...

She takes his hand in hers, as if to soften the blow. He has no idea why she feels she should comfort him, when she is the one who endured the horror. He refocuses his attention back on her.

She continues, “But... when they went for the wee ones, I...” She shrugs her shoulders. “I just snapped: a rage I’ve never known erupted from me. I screamed, and when the smoke cleared, all the soldiers in the house were... There was nothing left but ashes. The house was in ruin, the whole village in flames. Villagers were running away, and soldiers were charging toward me. I looked down, and there were balls of fire in the palms of my hands.

“I didn’t have a plan. I just knew I had to get us out of there. I grabbed Colin and made Alice close her eyes and hold on to my skirt. I threw the balls of fire at the soldiers as they tried to capture us. A general and his men blockaded the end of the street. It was obvious the brigade was there for me.

“I turned and ran back toward the house, to find a weapon, a shield, something. I was so scared. As I reached our front door, they were right on my tail. I prayed for help, for the Earth to save me and the bairns, to save us all, and then I... I fell through the portal.

“I hid Alice and Colin in the woods, asked the animals to look after them, and pulled in all the survivors I could find. We’ve made a life here ever since, and the animals of the forest have chosen to protect us. I think it’s the wolves picking off the merchants. They must be passing through the portal.”

Aiden’s eyes dart back and forth as they drop to his lap. “I... I dinnae ken what ta say. I’m so sorry, Evie. I’m so sorry I wasnae here ta protect ya.” He looks up at her. “Please forgive me, ma love. I should’ve been here.”

She grips his hand and leans her forehead against his cheek. “You didn’t know, Aiden. How could you know they would come here? You were doing your duty for your country, but my duty was to keep our bairns safe, and you entrusted me with that while you were away. And they *are* safe. And I’m... I’m alright.”

She sits up, and he watches her. She says, “I am very sorry for last night. I am not fully in control of my powers. I don’t really know... I haven’t quite mastered them. Honestly, they frighten me. Maybe I *am* a monster. A beast.”

He wrinkles his brow and cups her hand in between his. “No, Evie. Ye are nae a monster. Ye’ll never be at fault fer protectin’ yer bairns. I am ta blame fer continuin’ ta push ya last night.”

She forces a small smile, takes her hand from him, and stands. She swings the tie to her satin robe in lazy circles, again staring out across the water. “I was thinking of taking a swim. Would you like to join me? Might soothe your wounds.”

He sighs unhappily. “As much as I wad like to, love, I can barely stand, much less give any exertion.”

She shrugs. “Suit yourself.”

She drops her robe, revealing her perfect, porcelain skin. She takes a last look at him before swan diving into the water. Only her head resurfaces. She wipes the droplets from her eyes and pushes her dark, wet hair out of her face.

She says, "I'll be up to tend to your injuries shortly. You need to rest, my love."

He smirks. "Mmhmm."

He carefully pulls himself up off the steps and heads back toward the manor house. He mumbles to himself, "More like I need a cold bath to calm my hot blood now."

On his slow way up the steps to the house, he notices a peculiar room to his right, comprised of broken windows. It seems to be an old winter garden, but its ominous appearance piques his curiosity.

He staggers over to the door and opens it to absolute magic. Climbing vines, exotic ferns, and tropical trees line the walls, as if nature has taken the space as her own. Fountains and waterfalls course through the room, and giant, rainbow-hued birds he has never seen fly from one side of the atrium to the other. He touches one of the large, oval leaves to see a small, bright green tree frog resting on it. He marvels at the haven his wife has created as he makes his way through the glass dome.

When he can stand no longer, Aiden stumbles up the stairs to his bedroom and over to the dresser. He takes a swig from one vial and gently removes the bandage from his arm. The wounds heal right before his eyes.

Agnes appears from the hall, already talking. "I've prepared a chamomile bath fer ya, ma boy."

Aiden jumps. He closes his eyes as his heart returns to his body. He has grown too used to solitude. This having people around all the time bit is going to take some getting used to.

He grunts and nods. "Thanks, Agnes."

"O' course, ma laird. Should help ya heal quicker."

He smiles out of courtesy, and she hurries out of the room, pulling the door closed behind her.

He walks over to the side of the wooden tub full of steaming water. Agnes has laid cloth liners around the inside, to keep him from getting splinters. He takes another gulp from his vial and carefully unwraps his chest bandages. He slides down into the warm water and closes his eyes.

A sigh escapes from him. He had forgotten what it felt like to know this peace. To be at ease, home.

He drifts off to sleep while the water soothes him.



AIDEN AWAKES WITH A START TO A TAPPING ON THE BEDROOM window. He groans and sluggishly hoists himself out of the tub. His body is pruney from his nap in the scented water. He wraps a hand-woven, linen towel around his waist and makes his way to the window. He opens it to find Sain looking in at him, his downy head curiously cocked to the side.

Sain squawks.

Aiden looks around in alarm. With a finger to his lips, he whispers, “Shhh, wheesht!”

Sain squawks in a lower tone.

Aiden responds, “Tell him I’m nae comin’ back. Things are perfectly fine here. Tell him ta stay away. There is nae fire monster o’ the Red Forest.”

Sain gives a final, plaintive squawk before he takes to the sky.

Aiden rolls his eyes. “Eejit bird.”

He turns to leave the window, but a glare on the water below catches his eye. He peers down to see Evelyn’s bare body swimming through the calm surf. Her head breaks the water, and she slicks back her hair with both hands. He unconsciously bites his lower lip as he watches her. He

perceives his immodest behavior and snickers at himself, as his constant wanting for her is no less than when they were younglings. Though preposterous, it feels as though no time has passed since they were last together.

She seems to feel his eyes upon her and looks up. He grins. She smirks and flicks her wrist. The curtains shut in front of him, and he laughs.

“What’s this?” A little voice emanates from the corner of the room.

Aiden turns to see Colin swinging around the longsword. He jumps into his trousers in the process of hopping toward Colin.

“Dinnae touch that!”

Colin giggles and runs out of the room, wielding the heavy sword awkwardly in both hands.

Aiden says under his breath, “Yer ma is goin’ ta kill me fer *real* this time!”

He sprints into the hallway while pulling his blouse over his head. He raises his hand and calls out, “*Dod yn ol!*”

The blade shoots back to him, and he catches the grip in his hand.

Colin turns around. “That’s not fair, Daddy!”

Aiden sets the sword just inside his bedroom door and looks back at Colin. He responds, “If ye wanted me ta chase ya, all ya had ta dae was say so!”

He charges down the hallway after Colin. Colin turns and flees, laughing and screaming. Agnes walks out of the children’s room and sees them. She chuckles and rolls her eyes.

Aiden reaches the landing as Colin rounds the corner, out of sight. Aiden abruptly halts, his concentration with their game broken. Something seems to call out to him.

Squinting, he notices a crack in the wall that looks...

strange. Not a crack, he assesses, but a door. There is a door, almost invisible to the naked eye, hidden in the wall at the end of the hallway. He hears Alice talking with Agnes in the foyer below and Colin's noisy steps as he runs toward the main staircase. With a quick glance over his shoulder, Aiden carefully pushes the secret door.



CHAPTER 7

THE FORBIDDEN CHAMBER

The door opens with a stiff creak, revealing a dimly lit chamber. Heavy curtains are drawn, and the only illumination emanates from the melting candles lining the room. The space instantly makes Aiden's gut churn, an unpleasant metallic taste filling his mouth. The surrounding air is so electrified, he feels it could catch fire at any moment. The tarnished wooden floor does not appear sturdy, and the scarlet walls seem to breathe in and out. It is as though he is standing inside the belly of a beast.

As his eyes adjust, he notices the bones, gemstones, strange talismans, and vials of black and red liquid that litter the surfaces of the room. Tall bookshelves hold volume after volume of ragged, dull-hued books.

Aiden feels a small hand grasp his thigh but recognizes it immediately. Colin peers around his father's leg to survey the room. He looks up at Aiden, his voice lined with alarm, "Daddy, we're not supposed to be in here."

Aiden's voice trails off, "Clearly..."

As he stares around the room, he realizes he can feel his

own heartbeat, and his eyes begin to lose focus. He looks down at Colin to steady himself, concentrating on his anxious face. “Have ya been in here before, son?”

“No! Mama never lets us in here. This is her... it’s a special room. Where she has quiet time. No bairns allowed.”

Aiden looks back out at the room. “Hmph.”

He notices a large book on the desk directly in front of him and steps over to it. He swiftly flips through the pages, seeing Celtic incantations and multiple symbols on each sheet. Some are written in ink, and some are recorded in a dried-out reddish liquid.

As he continues to leaf through, he reaches a page marked with a ritual circle. Several symbols are etched within its diameter.

“What the...?” He immediately drops the page and backs away. This is not what the druids teach. It is something far more ancient and sinister. This is dark, dark magic.

A caw breaks the restless silence of the room, and Aiden jumps. His eyes follow the sound to a corner of the chamber. Perched on what looks to be a human skull is the glass-eyed raven from the woods.

To the left of the raven is a bowl of glowing opal liquid. It grows brighter and brighter the longer Aiden gazes at it. He perceives it calling out to him, the same sensation that initially showed him to the room. He steps toward the liquid, and he reaches out his hand to touch the bowl.

The raven caws again, snapping Aiden from his trance. He pulls back his hand and looks to the bird. The raven steps up and down on the skull. Aiden feels eyes upon him. He turns around to find Evelyn standing in the doorway. His heart skips a beat at the sight of her cold eyes glaring at him. Colin hides behind her skirts.

Evelyn looks down over one shoulder and says, sweetly, “Go and get cleaned up for dinner, love.”

Colin responds, “Aye, Mama!” He turns and runs down the hallway.

Aiden starts toward Evelyn. He reaches with both hands, motioning around the room, and asks, “Evie, what is this?” His eyes wander from the ominous items surrounding them down to her black fingers. And it clicks. “That’s why... This is how ye’ve become so powerful? Evie, this is killin’ you.”

Evelyn whispers, “I know.”

She looks down at her feet and wrings her decaying hands.

A deep voice whispers in her ear, “Mmm. He looks delicious. Might we have a taste?”

She looks back up at Aiden. Pain radiates from her eyes as she says, “It’s not safe in here for you, Aiden. Please leave.”

He protests, “But Evelyn...”

She screams, but another, deeper voice backs hers, “Leave!”

His eyes grow wide as he watches hers turn red before him.

Before he can react, he is back in the hallway outside the room. The door slams shut behind him. In shock, he stares at the wall.

He hears a little voice at his feet, “Daddy...”

He looks down to find Alice and Colin. Leaning to his knees, he wraps them both up in a hug. He kisses Alice’s head as he looks back at where the secret door used to be.



BACK INSIDE THE ROOM, EVELYN ROCKS ON HER KNEES, SOBBING. She wrings her hands as black veins travel from her darkened fingertips and creep up her wrists.

The deep voice sounds right behind her ear, “It is time.”

She shakes her head in protest, but her objections are muffled. Even though she is the only one in the room, it is as if

someone is holding their hand over her mouth.

She jerks and screams as if she has been stabbed. She falls to the floor, writhing in pain. Her cognition slips away, and a thick red liquid seeps from beneath her. It quickly dissipates, absorbed through the floorboards.

A transparent being slowly takes corporeal shape before Evelyn's unconscious body. Its form is eely green and covered in boils. It resembles a corpse with skin hanging off its emaciated frame. It has massive, white, lamp-like eyes and gray, sparse, stringy hair that runs the length of its body. A skeleton smile with long, pointy teeth set in a black, retracted gum line leers down at Evelyn. It stands upon hooved back feet and holds its boney, clawed hands before it.

The being ambles across the floor, its carriage as rigid as a risen cadaver, and it disappears through the outside wall of the room. The liquid in the bowl turns as dark as storm clouds.

Evelyn remains on the floor, motionless.



CHAPTER 8

EVELYN SHAW

Eight years ago, Evelyn stands outside the iron gates to the manor. Her clothes are scorched, and her face is covered in soot. An infant Colin grows heavy on her hip, and two-year-old Alice grips her hand tightly. They are all she has left in this world; them and the traumatized villagers who stand in a loose crescent behind her. Some hold the tethers to cows and sheep, and others clutch their own small children.

The house looks more akin to a grass-covered knoll than a place of residence, weeds and vines choking the stone. The villagers gasp as they watch the plants slowly crawl off the enormous house. They look to Evelyn in wonder, though she is just as taken aback.

The iron gates open of their own accord. The group passes through, wearily surveying the courtyard. Evelyn climbs the steps, tugging little Alice. She carefully pulls the door handle. The large door creaks open to reveal a pitch-black corridor. Evelyn cautiously steps inside.

The torches along the walls ignite into flame. The foyer

illuminates, revealing cobwebs, broken floorboards, and crumbling stairs.

Agnes bustles around Evelyn. “Well, I guess we had best get ta work!”



A FEW MONTHS LATER, EVELYN SITS AT THE KITCHEN PREP TABLE OF the now-repaired manor house. She separates hawthorn berries from their stems with three other women, while Agnes stirs the cauldron in the hearth.

Mushrooms, wild garlic, apples, dandelion leaves, and hazelnuts fill the bowls scattered around the table.

“The workdays are getting’ longer,” one woman tells Evelyn, “since we have to go oot farther an’ father fer these each time.”

Evelyn feels the weight of the statement; the inquisition for next steps. The others all depend on her for answers, and though she does her best to remain stoic, she is just as lost as the rest of them.

The door to the kitchen swings open. A young, tall, slender man rushes in, followed by several others.

The man exclaims, “The boys jus’ got back from the forest, an’ it looks like the boar have moved on. We’ve also been tryin’ fer weeks now, an’ we canna seem ta grow anythin’ in the ground. It all turns black. I’m nae sure how we’re goin’ ta survive the winter at this rate.”

Agnes huffs, “What are ya goin’ on about, Thomas? Wha d’ye mean ‘turns black?’”

“It... look, just come an’ see fer yersel’.”

The women follow the group of men out to the garden.

Each of the plants down the rows has withered and died, as if the ground is poisonous. Evelyn leans down and cups both hands around one of the darkened plants. She closes her eyes

and prays to the Earth to bring it back to life. The others look on, still and silent, eagerly waiting to witness what more she is capable of.

She opens her eyes and releases her hands. She sits back on the ground and shakes her head. The plant remains unchanged.

Agnes puts her hand on Evelyn's shoulder. "We'll manage, ma lady."

Thomas sounds from Agnes's side, "Aye, maybe, but the brambles an' sloes arnae goin' ta hold oot ferever."

Evelyn looks out at the crops with trepidation. She wonders why she was able to tear open a portal to another world but cannot revive a tiny plant. Her mind further leads her down the ambiguous path of what this means for her, the villagers, and her children's futures. What does she do now?



EVELYN RESTS AGAINST A WINDOW FRAME OF HER MANOR HOUSE bedroom. It is night, and the light from the fireplace dances around the room. Consumed by the lonely silence, she closes her eyes to imagine Aiden's gaze upon her. She can see the ringlets in his raven hair, the way they curl around his ears. And the dimples in his cheeks when he smiles that sly, crooked grin; the same one Colin gives her when he is up to mischief. She runs her fingers down her arm and can practically feel his calloused hands against her skin. When she opens her eyes, they are wet with tears.

It is impossible to comprehend that she will never again watch his brow cock at her elaborate whimsies, witness his eyes light up when he speaks of something that excites him, feel her own heart burst when he rocks little Alice to sleep in his arms. Her soul aches as she tries to shake all the what-ifs and the dreams lost. They will never be free, and he will never come home.

She gazes out the window at the stone houses that make up their newly assumed village. The abodes are weathered and

worn from the ages, but many have new stones and fresh thatch worked in to make them sound. Torches light the little dirt lane that parts them to either side, and smoke rises from the chimneys. A man, older than her by a score of years or more, chases three head of sheep into a small fenced area beside one home. Nearby, two fluffy, brown cows graze in the moonlight. The grass is scarce, so they pick carefully to avoid the briars.

As she peers further into the forest beyond, she notices a luminous, white light escaping from under the tree cover. She leans closer to the window as she watches the incandescent glow radiate before her eyes. It beckons to her, enchanting her like a raven enthralled by a crown of shimmering jewels.

She tiptoes over to the chair by the fireplace to grab her robe. While she wraps the garment around herself, she looks down at Alice and Colin, peacefully sleeping on a fur pelt near the fire. Disinclined to take any chances, she picks up a small, sheathed blade from the table next to her and slowly creeps across the floorboards to the bedroom door.

She quietly closes it behind her, and barefoot, she makes her way down the main staircase, down the back hallway, and out onto the veranda. She steals toward the woods, silent as a specter.

Once under the tree canopy, she stands up straight and makes her way toward the light. Down a brae, she finds a shallow ravine filled not with water, but with glowing, opal liquid. She is captivated. The light warms her; filling her with the first bit of peace she has felt since the raid. She reaches out her hand and touches the liquid.

An abrupt hush falls upon the forest.

Before her eyes, the opal liquid swirls and rises, transforming into a cyclone. Then, the bright light dissipates, and before her is a creature, the likes of which she has never seen before. Corpse-like with massive, white eyes, its body sparsely coated in long, stringy, gray hair. The thing bares its teeth in a grotesque smile as its gaze meets Evelyn's. Her body

goes rigid, eyes wide. She is frozen in fear.

The being greets her in a deep, hollow tone, “Hello, my pretty. I was hoping you would come.”

Evelyn stammers, “Me? Why me?” She crawls backward on her hands in the attempt to make her way back up the brae.

The being steps closer to her and reaches out a boney claw. “Your power. It speaks to me.” It grasps at the air and proceeds to sniff its ashen fingers. “That day in the Forest, I could feel your pain. Deep enough to taste it. You called out to me, and I obliged.” The being licks where its lips should be. “However, it seems you might be having trouble making a home here in Hiraeth. Perhaps I could help with that.”

Evelyn regains her posture at the top of the brae. “What do you mean?”

“What if I made it so your village would never go hungry, so that all your crops and livestock forever grow healthy and strong?”

Evelyn squints her eyes. “Why would you do that?”

It shows more teeth as its smile grows. “Because your power is pure chaos, Evelyn. The purest I’ve ever seen. You see, I am immortal, but I grow weaker with age. With the rage you hold inside, you could restore me for centuries.”

“What would I need to do?”

“I only ask that when I come to you, you allow me *in*. For just a little taste. In return, I will ensure you and your children shall never go hungry.”

Evelyn stares at the being in silence. She finally queries, “How would it work? Would it hurt me?”

The being replies calmly, “You will feel it, yes. But you won’t remember it.”

“And this would ensure everyone in the village stays fed and healthy?”

“Yes.”

Evelyn scrutinizes the being. “How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

The being responds incredulously, “Well, because I’m a sluagh. I’m a fallen angel, you see. I cannot lie. Once I have made a promise, it cannot be broken. Not until one of us perishes.”

Evelyn takes a deep breath and resolves herself. She straightens her pose and says, “Alright, I accept.”

A demonic grin creeps across the sluagh’s face. It reaches out its hand and says eagerly, “Perfect.”

Evelyn returns the handshake, and the opal liquid surrounds their clasped hands like an intricately twining vine. An excruciating pain devours her and grows worse and worse by the moment. It feels as if she is being cut apart slice by slice. She begs for the pain to end.

As the iridescent vine dissolves, her body fails her. The last thing she sees is Aiden’s ocean eyes. She falls into them.

The sluagh licks its fingers before it disappears.



EVELYN AWAKES TO THE SOUND OF CHEERING. DIRT ON HER FACE and leaves in her hair, she sits up and shields her eyes from the sun. She is still in the forest, though the ravine before her is now devoid of liquid. She scurries to her feet and wraps the robe - now coated in twigs - around her slender frame. When she grasps onto a tree to help her traverse the undergrowth, she notices the tips of her fingers are black. With each step of her soiled feet, she perceives the immense power surging through her.

As she steps out from under the canopy, she sees most of the villagers huddled around the garden. They all chatter excitedly, so she makes her way over to learn what the commotion is.

Thomas notices her first. “Evelyn, ye look a right fright.

Are ye well?"

"Yes, yes. I'm fine." She brushes her matted hair out of her face and wraps her muddy rope tighter around her. "What's going on?"

Thomas replies, "I've never seen anythin' like it." He steps to the side and ushers her into the throng of villagers.

She makes her way to the front of the crowd to find every plant in the garden has grown to full term overnight. She exclaims, "I can't believe it."

Thomas laughs, his eyes bright with wonder and relief.

A man comes running down the dirt path, yelling at the top of his lungs. Everyone turns to look.

"The coos! They both gave birth last night! I didnae even ken they were pregnant! Twa healthy calves, and we have milk!"

The crowd cheers.

From around the corner, another man pulls the carcass of a deer on a large piece of cloth. He looks to the group and says, "It jus' walked up ta me! I barely had ta aim!"

The crowd cheers again.

Evelyn looks around in exasperation. The sluagh kept its word. Now, she must keep hers.



CHAPTER 9

THE THREE CHARAIDS

Back in present day Hiraeth, Aiden lies on the plush, green grass overlooking the sea. A piece of wood he has been carving into a horse and the small knife he has been using to do so rest on his chest. Alice sits by his feet, playing pretend with the first one he has finished for her. Colin plays along the tide lines with a miniature, wooden boat, linen sail and all. He has somehow coaxed a squirrel to ride upon it as he pushes it around the water. They appear to chitter back and forth to each other.

Aiden loves listening to the sound of their little voices as they merge with the whispering breeze floating through the trees. He hears the side door to the manor house, so he sits up and opens his eyes. Resting back on his hands, he turns to see Evelyn on the landing to the steps. Her eyes are recessed, and she wears long gloves on her hands. Their eyes meet, and she gives him a weak smile. He chews the inside of his cheek in an attempt to suppress all the things he wants to ask her, say to her.

Evelyn calls to the children, “It’s time for dinner, my loves!”

Aiden rolls over and jumps to his feet. “Alice, Colin, come on. Let’s eat.”

The children run the length of the lawn and up the steps, past their mother and into the house. Aiden leisurely makes his way behind them. He climbs the steps but pauses when he reaches Evelyn. He clutches her shoulder and looks her deep in the eyes, but he does not say a word.

His heart breaks to see her in pain, but he knows he has no right to intervene. No matter how strong his love for her remains, the way they once were is still a distant memory. He releases his grip and makes his way into the house.

The dining room is lavish with its large, velvet-curtained windows and garnet red walls with gleaming golden accents. There is a long rectangular table with a huge candelabra at each end. Aiden crosses the floor to take a seat at the head of the table in front of the enormous fireplace at the back of the room. Once settled, he looks over at his bonnie children, drinking their soup with their spoons.

Evelyn takes her seat at the other end of the table and sends Aiden another small smile. She attempts to raise her glass but winces. She clutches her side in order to finish the toast. “To family!”

Aiden watches her with concern. She avoids eye contact.

Alice raises her goblet of milk. “To Daddy coming home!”

Aiden quickly raises his glass and takes a swig, still eyeing his wife.

Colin raises his juice, too. “Hear, hear!”

Aiden laughs and almost spits out his wine.

Evelyn smirks. She says, “I have a little surprise tonight.” She then projects her voice, “Let dinner be served.”

Through the side door, multiple maids rush in, holding dishes overflowing with delicious entrees, sides, and desserts. The children cheer and dig in. Agnes hurries into the room with a bottle of whisky.

Aiden's eyes are bulging as he pulls a massive goose leg onto his plate. Agnes pours him a glass and sets the rest of the bottle down in front of him. He looks at her and then back at the food. "Agnes, ye have truly outdone yersel'."

Agnes rests her hand on his shoulder. "Nonsense, ma laird. We continue ta have a bountiful crop, an' our livestock have all been in good health. It jus' seems ta always be Spring here. Time ta fatten ya up, ma boy."

Aiden smirks at her and takes a bite of the goose. He then proceeds to serve himself from the many dishes that fill the enormous table.

A commotion resonates from outside the manor walls. Men's yells and barking wolves are soon followed by the clanging of metal.

Evelyn stands from her chair and glides to the window. "It sounds as though the wolves have found something, but they're really close. Should we be expecting anyone, Aiden?"

Agnes grips Aiden's shoulder as she looks toward the window.

Aiden answers with food still in his mouth, "Naw, ma lady." He lays down his silverware and pushes out his chair. "Evelyn, take the bairns upstairs an' find a place ta hide. I'll take care o' this."

She looks at him in exasperation. "You're still healing, Aiden."

He says, firmly, "I'll be fine."

She stares at him blankly.

He raises his voice, "Go, Evelyn! Now!" He points toward the stairs.

She does not change her stance. She looks to Agnes, and Agnes nods. The caretaker motions for the children to follow her. "Come on now, the pair o' ye. Come, come."

Alice and Colin hurry over to her. Then she leads them out

of the room and up the stairs.

Aiden looks out the window and then back at his wife. “I canna have anythin’ happen ta ya, Evie.”

“I’ll be fine.”



THE GLASS-EYED RAVEN SITS PERCHED ON A BRANCH, OVERLOOKING the woods outside the manor. A horrified yell interrupts the serene babble of the nearby brook, as a lean, dark-eyed man with an olive complexion, long, silky black hair, and leather armor tumbles through the portal curtain and down the hill.

He sits up on his knees and exclaims in a heavy French accent, “Where did that *stupide* bird lead us?” He feels around the bed of vegetation for the sword he lost during the fall.

A taller, more muscular blond, clearly of Norse descent, falls through the portal and lands on top of the Frenchman, knocking him back to the ground just before he grips the handle of his blade.

“*Merde!*” the Frenchman shrieks, aghast.

The Norseman sits back against the hill and brushes off his armor, while still partially sitting on the Frenchman. The newly found sunlight highlights the long, healed scar that begins at his sunburned forehead and runs the length of his left cheek.

The Frenchman forces the Norseman’s legs off of him and rolls over to push himself to his feet. He then sets to wiping off his blade.

The Norseman says in a deep, scratchy tone, “Me apologies, mate. The ground jus’ fell out from unda me.”

The Frenchman rolls his eyes but quickly moves to pull the blond to his feet as a succession of five more men fall through the portal. Some land more gracefully than others, and they groan as they climb to their feet.

A short man with a hefty red beard brushes himself off and looks to the Frenchman and the Norseman. He asks in a heavily Irish accent, “What in the name of God was that?”

A low, deep growl sounds from the trees behind them. The last two men to fall through the portal clamber to their feet as quickly as they can. One by one, each man draws his sword. The Frenchman, the Norseman, and the Irishman circle around to shield their backs. Their eyes canvas the tree line as the growling echoes from every direction. They are clearly being surrounded.

The Frenchman squints into the woods. “We must move.”

The Irishman agrees, “Ye’ll hear no complaints from me.”

Shouting resonates behind them as two men are pulled out of sight from either direction.

The Frenchman yells, “Run!”

The group races down what appears to have been a path in a previous life. Two more men are pulled off into the forest as they all sprint, jump, and tumble over the high vegetation.

The Norseman points at the iron bars ahead of them. “A gate!”

They keep on as fast as they can toward the gates. They hit them at full force and begin yanking on them, desperately.

The Frenchman notices a firelight inside the window. He yells, “Help! Help us!”

The others follow suit.



THE WROUGHT-IRON GATES TO THE COURTYARD RATTLE FROM outside the manor.

Aiden looks to Evelyn. “Ready?”

His worry turns to terror at the sight of her. Her eyes are ruby red, and there are balls of fire in her hands. Before he can

utter another word, the doors open, and his wife floats over the threshold. He cautiously follows behind her.



EVELYN RAISES HER HANDS, AND THE GATES SWING OPEN. THE THREE men sprint into the courtyard. The Norseman and the Irishman slam the gates shut and brace their bodies against them. The Frenchman hunches over on his knees, and they all gasp for air. The Irishman peeks through the bars behind him, but there is no sign of the wolves.

One by one, they look toward the manor house doors to see Evelyn standing there, her eyes blood red. She lowers her hands and then raises them again. Starting at the stone steps to the house, the ground begins to fracture. Closer and closer, the cracks advance toward the men.

The Frenchman yells, “No, wait!”

The Irishman notices Aiden. “Shaw!”

Then, Aiden shouts, “Evie, stop!”

Aiden grabs her shoulders and turns her around to face him. This breaks her concentration, and the ground immediately stops shaking beneath them. She allows her faith in him to overpower the protective rage that drives her. She relaxes her muscles into his hands. With sighs of relief, the intruders all sink to the ground.

Aiden kisses her forehead and releases her. He then turns to the men. Evelyn follows suit, and her face drops. She knows each one of them. Her eyes well with tears as her past life is resurrected before her.

Aiden leaps down the steps and over to the men. He grabs the Irishman by the hand and yanks him up off the ground.

He pulls him in for a hug. “Godfraid O’Reilly!” He then pulls the Norseman up with more effort. He pats him on the back. “Erik Peerson! Ya awright there, Lachland?”

Erik nods with a smirk. “Aye, good ta see ya, ye mangy Scot!”

He wraps Aiden into a headlock and rubs his knuckles against his cranium. Aiden laughs and fights the bulky man off playfully.

The Frenchman bows toward Evelyn with his arm extended in front of him. “Madame Evelyn. It is so good to see you alive and well.”

Evelyn curtsies. “And you, Jacques.” She looks around the courtyard and exclaims in a breathy tone, “It is so good to see all of you again.”

Aiden pushes off of Erik’s brawny chest. “Aye, but *why* are we seein’ ya? Dinnae ya have important Royal Navy business ta attend to?”

Godfraid responds, “We were on a raid wit the French, but we ported yesterday, an’ the king sent us ta retrieve our salty, retired, fearless leader. Somet’in’ abiut us bein’ the only ones he’d listen ta...” He winks at Evelyn as he elbows Aiden in the side.

Aiden flinches, still on the mend from the night before.

“Although...” Godfraid motions to Evelyn. “Ya seem fine, mate. But, wha’s with the...?” He motions around the overgrown courtyard. He looks toward the ghostly wolves that wait patiently just outside the iron gates. They wag their tails as they continue to lick the blood of the less fortunate men from their lips.

“Ugh, we just got those recruits, too. Were supposed ta train ‘em up for the king. Poor Frenchies, Francis is goin’ ta be ragin’...”

Evelyn redirects the conversation, “Gentleman. We have dinner waiting for us. Come, please. Be welcome.”

Erik says, “Ya don’ have ta tell me twice, ma lady.” He walks up the steps, past Evelyn, and through the manor house doors.

Godfraid studies the ancient, ashlar masonry of the mansion as he follows Aiden inside. “Nice diggings, Shaw.”

Aiden motions for the men to find a seat at the table while Evelyn goes upstairs to retrieve Agnes and the children. He pulls some glasses from the cupboard and fills each with whisky as he passes them around the table.

When the children enter the room, Jacques stands and bows. He motions to Alice. “So good to see you again, Mademoiselle Alice. My, how you have grown!”

Alice curtsies and returns, “*Bonsoir, Monsieur Jacques de Portau. Que c’est agreable de te revoir.*”

Jacques’s eyes light up, and he looks around at the others as he laughs and claps for Alice. Evelyn smiles warmly at her daughter.

Jacques then turns to Colin. “And your father must be so proud of you. He always wished for a son! What is your name, *garcon?*”

Colin smiles sheepishly and bows. “Colin, sir.”

Jacques beams and returns the bow. “Nice to meet you, Monsieur Colin. Such a strong, ‘andsome name.”

Evelyn and Agnes bring in plates and silverware for the men, and they all dig into the meal. As she cuts her meat, Evelyn observes the dining room around her with all its laughter and playful banter.

Between the children’s smiles and Aiden’s jokes, she feels at home for the first time in ages. Years of tension melt away, and relief and peace wash over her. She had quite forgotten how this same group of people once brought so much life and happiness to their formerly tiny, modest home.

Aiden raises his glass. “*Slàinte mhath, mo charaids!*” The men cheer, and the children giggle as they all clink their glasses together.

After dinner, the group heads to the sitting room across the foyer. Jacques and Colin practice sword fighting techniques in

front of the fireplace. Evelyn reads a book on the chase, and Alice lies on the floor by Evelyn's feet, drawing pictures on parchment. Aiden and Godfraid play a round of cards, and Erik remains in the dining area, working on his third helping of venison.

As Jacques duels with Colin, he notices something floating out of the corner of his eye. He glances over to see Alice call one of her pigmented chalks to her hand. He looks on in intrigue. Then, he feels the air from a blade brush his armor.

Colin yells, "Aye, got ya! At last!"

Jacques snaps back into his play battle. He smiles and presses his arm to the blade to trap it. He yells, "Oh no, you have me!" He falls to his knees and keels over on the floor.

Colin's eyes grow wide as he stares at Jacques's motionless body.

Jacques then sits up abruptly and lunges toward Colin.

Colin shrieks, smiling with relief.

Evelyn peeks over the top of her book at them and laughs. Jacques smiles back at her, but Aiden catches her gaze and smirks. She blushes. The glimmer in her deep green eyes sends him back to the first time he ever met them.



CHAPTER 10

THE WILLOW TREE

Fourteen years earlier, Aiden stands in the corner of a scarlet-painted ballroom, a goblet of wine in his hand and Godfraid and Erik on either side of him. They talk around him as he focuses on the intricate woodworking of the hammer-beam roof.

An extravagant masquerade ball proceeds around the trio in the great hall of Edinburgh Castle. Jamie's mother and father, King James IV and Queen Margaret, lounge on their thrones overlooking the party. Beside them sits the king's chancellor and druid, Evelyn's father, Gwydion Lewis. Sain is perched on the arm of his chair, and he pets the bird pensively as his grayish-blue eyes monitor the crowd.

Gwydion looks up as Evelyn passes him at a brisk pace. She is dressed in a black satin gown and wears an embellished black mask. Her curls cascade down her back, styled in an elegant, jeweled headdress. She hurries up the left side of the two flights of stairs that flank the ballroom, but two of her court diplomat friends, Elizabeth and Dauphine, catch up to her.

Elizabeth calls out in her clipped, English accent, “You cannot *possibly* be leaving already. There are so many eligible bachelors here tonight!”

Evelyn drops her skirt and looks back to Elizabeth. “You know this isn’t my inclination, Beth. I hate to dance, and I hate to show face. I would rather be out practicing archery or something.”

The bard and the band start up a jig, Dauphine implores in a French accent, “Come, Evelyn! Just one dance more.”

The ladies pull Evelyn back down the stairs and out onto the dance floor.

Evelyn laughs as she tries to avoid being torn in half by her friends.

Godfraid and Erik also head for the dance floor, but Aiden stays behind, refilling his goblet from a flagon of wine.

Erik looks back and asks, “Aren’t ya comin’, mate?”

Aiden raises his drink. “I’m content here. You pair go on without me.” He chuckles as a commotion catches his eye, and he sees Evelyn being dragged onto the dance floor by her friends.

Evelyn lifts the layered skirt of her eloquent gown to dance the ceilidh. She holds Elizabeth and Dauphine’s hands, and they all laugh as they surge in and out to tap feet with the line of men in front of them.

As the women dip and run under the arms of the men, she looks up. And locks eyes with Aiden. Aiden gulps the wine in his mouth, almost dropping his goblet. He sets it down on the banquet table and walks toward the dance floor, never taking his eyes off her. In a trance, he steps in line with the other men.

The ladies’ line merges back into the men’s line. The men bow, and the women curtsy. As he stands back up from his bow, he meets Evelyn’s eyes again. Even with the masks, he is entranced by her beauty. As the lines break, those across from

each other couple up. They spin around one another, alternating arms and sides. In an intoxicated daze, he does everything he can to remain in her sights.

The tune ends, and Evelyn begins to walk away. Aiden grabs her hand, and she turns back. He quickly releases his grasp, his face reddening. As her dainty fingers slowly slide from his palm, he asks, “What is yer name, ma lady?”

Evelyn smiles and replies, “Evelyn, sir.”

She turns away and hurries over to her friends. Aiden releases a deep exhale, as he realizes he has barely breathed throughout the entire dance. He shakes it off and exits the floor to stand back in his corner. He is reunited with the goblet he assumes to be his and sips without tasting. It is as if he is slowly awaking from a dream.

Elizabeth looks to Aiden, then to Evelyn. She remarks, “The captain seems to be quite taken with you.”

Evelyn smiles sheepishly.

Elizabeth looks back to Aiden. “He is a fine man indeed, with many admirers, but I have never known him to so much as smile at a woman. Perhaps *you* might be the one to finally ruffle his feathers.”

Dauphine cuts in, “Beth! He is a privateer. Evelyn should not be seen with the likes of him.”

Elizabeth huffs, “He’s *also* the king’s private captain. Any woman should be lucky to have the favor of a man who works with his hands so well.” She winks, then turns to hear Evelyn’s opinion, but she has gone.

Jacques steps in front of her, breaking her stride across the dance floor, and bows. “*Mademoiselle.*”

Evelyn looks over his shoulder as she replies, “Monsieur de Portau, *bonjour*. If you will please excuse me.” She skirts around him and continues upon her trajectory.

He turns and stares after her, bewildered.

Aiden notices her walking toward him, and he has the urge to run. The way her aura seems to capture him is terrifying. However, she appears to be on a mission, so he plants his soles to the ground and braces himself, while planning his escape route through the nearest door, should he need it.

Evelyn reaches him and curtsies. She asks, “Would you like this dance, captain?”

Aiden gulps and bows hesitantly. “Ma lady.”

He follows her to the dance floor. She curtsies; he bows. She reaches out, and he takes her hands. They spin so that his arm is over her shoulder, and they walk. Then, she laughs as they quickly switch sides so that his other arm is over her shoulder, and they walk. Her giggles make him smile as he spins her around under his arm. He feels the skirt of her gown graze the legs of his trousers, and he shudders at the strange, electrified tension building inside him. They take each other’s hands and waltz across the floor. Then, it starts over.

On the next waltz, he pulls her closer. The smell of her sweet perfume, star jasmine after a midday rain, surrounds him, enchants him. He feels weak from the sensation of her breath on his skin, and he can feel beads of sweat on the back of his neck. Inexplicably, he is nervous.

Finally, the song ends, and she lets go of his hand for a second time. She turns and walks away. However, this time, he hurries after her. He lightly touches her shoulder. She turns to him, startled, but he hesitates. There was not a second phase to this plan.

He puts out his hand. “H-hi, uh, ma name is Aiden.”

She smiles and says, “I know who you are.”

He takes his hand back and nervously runs it through his hair. He asks, “You do, d’ye?”

She replies, “Yes. You’re a productive merchant captain, who moonlights as a privateer. The king fancies you, I hear.” She nods toward King James.

Aiden looks over, and King James smiles and nods. Aiden bows his head toward the king.

He says, “Aye, ma lady. Well, since ya ken aw about me, would ye tell me more about yersel’?”

Gwydion follows the king’s gaze over to Aiden and realizes he is speaking with none other than his daughter. He stands up and bellows across the hall, “Evelyn!”

She halts the sentence she was about to express to Aiden and looks toward the thrones. Gwydion motions to her and heads up the right-side flank of stairs. She turns to head his way.

Aiden hastily reaches out to grab her arm. “Wait!”

She turns back to him.

He asks, “Can I see ya again?” His hand slips down her arm into her palm.

She replies, “Later. The West Sally Port.” She then pulls her hand from his grip and hurries after her father.

Aiden watches her take to the stairs. For the first time in his life, he is absolutely petrified.

Evelyn looks back at Aiden as she climbs the stairs with her father.

Gwydion notices. He speaks quietly and curtly, “You are not to associate with that man, Evelyn. He is not of noble blood. He is merely an insect feeding off the king’s hospitality and good graces.”

She looks to Gwydion and says, “Yes, father.” She then hurries off ahead of him and out of the banquet hall.



LATER ON, IN A DIM ROOM INSIDE THE BOARDING HOUSE, MEN LIE passed out in beds, slumped in the chairs near the fireplace, on the floor. While surveying the room to ensure no one is still conscious, Aiden quietly picks up his black wool cloak before

he slips out the door. For a moment, he listens for any noise to come from the other side. Silence. He should not be doing this. But he has to see her again.

He hastens down the stairs and to the stable. He mounts Gara and rides off up the hill, toward the castle.

As he reaches the guard at the torch-lit drawbridge, he pulls his hood off his head and jumps off the horse.

The guard stands at attention but gives a puzzled look. “Cap’n Shaw? What are ye doin’ here so late?”

The guard’s words are muffled by the wall of the spell Aiden is under. His answer is soft and just as distant as his own thoughts, “I left somethin’...”

Confused by his tone, the guard looks in the direction of Aiden’s gaze, around the right side of the castle wall. He shrugs, accepting it must be over his head.

Shaw straightens his posture and states, “I require a boat, Gatekeeper. I have ta pick up a prisoner fer transfer this mornin’.”

The guard responds, “Aye, cap’n!” and moves to untether a boat for Aiden.

Aiden steps into it and nods toward the guard. He quietly rows around the castle wall to the West Sally Port. When he reaches the dock outside, he ties off the boat.

He hears footsteps and looks up to see Evelyn emerge from the shadows inside the castle doorway. He feels faint at the sight of her beauty. She wears a stunning green gown that makes her eyes gleam. She pulls her cloak from her head.

He has trouble breathing, and his heart has a noticeably different pattern. A frighteningly unexplainable force draws him to her.

He steps off the boat, takes her hand in his, and bows to kiss it gently.

“So lovely ta make yer acquaintance again, ma lady.”

She smiles down at him.

Motion resonances from inside the castle, and the flicker of a torch appears on the stone walls.

She pulls away from him with a fearful look. “We must go.”

He repeats, “Go? Go where?”

The footsteps are louder now, getting closer. Evelyn lifts the skirt of her gown and holds Aiden’s hand to step into the boat. He carefully shuts the door to the Sally Port and looks back to find her untying the boat from the dock. He steps in, carefully, and grips the oars. With every stroke of the water, he contemplates the numerous illegal acts he is presently committing.

As they reach the drawbridge, the guard awaits them. Evelyn pulls the hood of her cloak over her head as the guard ties off the boat, and Aiden delicately helps her onto the cobblestones. The guard again looks confused as he notices the elegant material of Evelyn’s cloak. Evelyn steps into the stirrup and throws her leg over the side of Gara. Gara steps around nervously, unused to her feel and smell.

Aiden grabs the reins and whispers, “Woah, hen.” He jumps up on the saddle and pulls Evelyn’s arms around him. She grips his abdomen tightly, and he fears he might faint from her touch. He kicks up Gara and says, “Ya!” The horse gallops down the street.

Gara comes to a stop as they reach Cragingalt, a hill on the outskirts of the burgh that overlooks the castle and loch to the west and the North Sea to the east. Aiden jumps off the mare and outstretches his hand to help Evelyn to her feet. She runs ahead of him and into the reeds of a giant willow tree. He raises his eyebrow and stalks after her.

As he pulls apart the curtain of willow reeds, he sees her standing there, her eyes sparkling, her porcelain skin dazzling in the beams of moonlight that slip through the leaves. She beckons for him to come closer, and he obeys her command.

She grabs the collar of his coat and pulls him into a passionate kiss. His stomach bottoms out. A warmth consumes his whole body. He has never felt more at peace in his entire life.

He pulls away from the kiss and looks into her eyes. He touches her face and leans in once more. When they release again, he asks, “Dear God, what have I done?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve fallen in love with me, Captain Shaw.”

He smirks and chuckles, but his eyes well with tears. She takes his hand and spins beneath it. He laughs, pulls her in, and they dance together. He dips her over and then pulls her in for another kiss. She leads him toward the trunk of the tree as she leans against it.

He rests his hand against the bark as he leans over her. He asks, “What if I did love ya, lass?”

She looks up at him. “Would you marry me, then?”

Aiden backs away as he answers, “Yer father would never allow it. Ye saw how he looked at me.”

Evelyn follows him. “Should we just be lovers, then?”

Aiden pulls her body close to his and replies, “My, I could love ya ‘til the sun rises, lassie. But I dinnae think it’d ever be enough.” He brushes the hair out of her face. “I crave ta know ya, Evelyn. Yer mind, body, an’ soul.” He clutches the back of her head and kisses her passionately.



CHAPTER 11

THE SECRET GARDEN

Two months after their first meeting, Aiden stands atop a massive merchant ship. The vessel gently rocks as waves roll into the harbor and fog slinks across the bustling port of Leith. The air is alive with voices as the crew works to unload her cargo. Hard-working port laborers and busy townsfolk scurry past the vessel in both directions.

Aiden slings his seabag over his shoulder and heads down the gangway. He barely pays attention to what is ahead of him. Until he meets her eyes. Evelyn stands near one of the many wooden market buildings scattered around the port. Every sight and sound around him disappear as he is taken with her. He walks toward her blindly, as if sleepwalking. As if he is on a completely different plane of consciousness.

Then, he hits what feels like a brick wall. He snaps back to reality as he discerns he has slammed into the shoulder of a passerby. He pats the arm of the mammoth man carrying a barrel over his shoulder. The man grunts and keeps walking.

A husky voice calls out, “Cap’n Shaw!”

Aiden follows the sound over to one of his employers,

Andrew Halyburton. Andrew beckons him over. When Aiden looks back, Evelyn is gone. He searches the shipping yard, but there is no sign of her. He turns at a tap on his shoulder.

Andrew asks, “Whoa, boy. Are ye alright? Ye look like ye’ve seen a ghost.”

Aiden replies distractedly, “Evelyn... What? Oh.” He shakes and rubs his head.

Andrew laughs. “Evelyn? The druid’s daughter? Dinnae go fallin’ fer her now, Shaw. She’s so high above yer station ye couldnae even comprehend.”

Aiden smirks.

Andrew smacks him on the shoulder. “Good haul, lad. We’ll get ‘er unloaded. Now, go get some rest!”

Aiden nods and walks over to a group of men loading a cart. He asks, “Ey, Rob, ya got room fer one more scallywag?”

The old man grunts and nods him up. Aiden sets his bag on the back of the cart and jumps up beside it. He takes one more desperate look around the port, wondering if he just imagined her. Then, just as they begin to move, he catches the smell of star jasmine on the foggy breeze. He smiles as the cart bumps along the cobblestones, on its way to Edinburgh.



AIDEN THROWS OPEN THE DOOR TO THE INN. HE CALLS OVER TO THE bar, “Ey, Mac! I need a room!” He then charges up the stairs.

Mac replies, “Noo jist haud on a wee minute there, boy-o!”

Aiden leans over the stairwell. “Oh, ya ken I’m good fer it, Mac! I havenae bathed in weeks!”

Mac walks over to the stairs with a basket in his hands. “Lady Evelyn left this fer ye.”

Aiden almost falls off the banister.

Mac eyes him over his spectacles. “What does she want

with ya, boy? I've never seen her leave Gwydion's side 'til today, an' she wasnae keen on him knowin' she was here."

Aiden flushes a deep red and shrugs. He cannot help but smile.

Mac swats at him like a fly. "Naw, away wi' ye..."

He hands Aiden the basket. Aiden looks down at it, still as a statue.

Mac waves him up the stairs. "Well, go on, boy. Ye smell like shite."

In his room, Aiden carefully sits down on the bed with his basket. He delicately pulls the cloth off the top to reveal strawberries, blueberries, cheese, and freshly baked bread. He grabs a piece of the bread and takes a bite, but then, he notices the note inside:

Dearest Aiden,

I hope this letter finds you well. I was sure you would be famished after your journey, so I brought some gifts from the castle stores. Meet me at our garden. Midnight.

-E

He drops his bread.



AIDEN STRIDES THROUGH THE GRASSMARKET, HIS FACE CONCEALED by the hood of his cloak, his heart pounding in anticipation. He reaches the stairway just below the castle, and he jogs up the steps. Silently, he slips inside a hidden gate that reveals a magnificent terrace garden. He hears the castle clock tower strike midnight. Overwhelmed by both terror and excitement, his heart feels like it is in his stomach.

His eyes trace the outline of the menacing castle on its volcanic rock above, and then he searches the grounds in front

of him.

Out of the shadows, Evelyn steps into the moonlight. He is left breathless. No matter how often he sees her, every time feels like the first.

He whispers, “Ya wanted ta see me?”

She smiles. “Didn’t you want to see me?”

He gulps. As she walks toward him, he backs away, speaking as quickly as he can, “Ma lady, I dinnae want ya ta think me rude, but...”

She touches his arm, and his knees buckle.

He attempts to continue, “Evelyn, I...”

She puts a finger to his lips, and he closes his eyes at her touch. He breathes in the scent of her skin. He whispers, “We canna keep doin’ this, Evie. Yer father is goin’ ta find us.”

She removes her finger and kisses him. He grabs her face and pulls her in. He growls, “Ye’re goin’ ta be the death o’ me, lass.”

She responds breathlessly, “Oh, I’ve missed you, Aiden.”

He plants yearning kisses all over her face and hair.



AIDEN STRADDLES THE SIDE OF HIS SHIP, SANDING DOWN THE WOOD after applying new sealant. He looks up to see Evelyn skipping down the dirt street to the dock below the vessel. His eyes grow wide, and he throws down the sandpaper. She steps up the gangway, and he rushes to catch her hand.

He asks her sternly, “Really, lass? In broad daylight?”

She smiles and hands him another basket. “I’ve brought you lunch.”

He takes the basket and returns to his seat. He grabs a piece of cured meat and tears it in his mouth as he talks, “The kitchen doesnae find it odd, you always pinchin’ stuff?”

Evelyn sits down beside him and responds, “No, you daft boy. There is so much that goes to waste at the castle, they would never notice the difference.” She wipes brine off the corner of his mouth.

Down in the yard, Andrew sticks his head around the wooden door of his office. He goes to speak but notices Aiden sitting with Evelyn on the side of the ship. His jaw drops.

Erik walks up behind Andrew and asks, “What are ya gawkin’ at, Drew?” He sees Evelyn kiss Aiden on the cheek. His mouth falls too. “Bloody hell, Shaw.”

Evelyn looks down at Aiden’s sanding work and then stands back up. She marches over to a shroud and climbs two of the rungs. Aiden watches her curiously. She hangs off with one hand and says, “So, Captain Shaw, teach me how to be a pirate!” She flattens her hand above her eyes and squints as she looks out at the horizon.

He laughs. “I’m nae a pirate, Evie! I’m merely a merchant cap’n who... makes it difficult fer the adversary ta pass through sometimes... an’ sometimes commandeers their freight fer Scotland. I’m nae different from an official Navy cap’n really.”

She looks to him and raises her eyebrows. “If you say so.” She then looks back out at the sea. “Say you’ll take me sailing someday?”

He walks up behind her and places his hand on her back. He looks out at the open ocean as well. Then, he looks up at her and replies, “Women are considered bad luck on ships, ya ken?”

“Why on Earth would that be?”

He again stares out at the water beyond and responds, “Ye see her? She gets angry when she’s no the on’y woman being tended to.”

She follows his gaze and then looks back at him, confused. “You mean... the ocean?”

He continues to stare out at the bay. “Aye, lass. She’s temperamental, she is. She wants her men ta hersel’. If not, she’ll throw a fit an’ take it oot on us aw.”

She looks on with him. “Hmmm.”



EVELYN, ELIZABETH, AND DAUPHINE STROLL DOWN A PATHWAY through the majestic castle gardens, arm in arm and laughing with every step.

Evelyn feels something grab her arm. She is pulled into one of the hedge nooks, but the shadows make it hard to see. She looks around and asks, “Who’s there?”

Aiden pulls his cloak off his head, and his eyes glow in the darkness. He smiles at her.

She punches him in the arm. “Aiden! You scared me!” She looks around. “What if we get caught?”

They can hear Elizabeth and Dauphine calling Evelyn’s name from the main garden. She can only imagine what her father would do to him if he found them here.

She replies upward over the hedges, “Just a moment! I-I’m fixing my shoe.” She looks back at Aiden. “What are you doing here?”

In answer, he pulls her into a kiss. She throws her arms around his neck, and he picks her up. As he sets her down again, he replies breathlessly, “I was here fer a contract from the king, but I saw ye an’ yer ladies walkin’, so I jus’ had ta see ya.”

She puts her hands on either of his cheeks and kisses him again. They hear rustling in the hedges, so he quickly pulls away. He steps backward and asks, “Meet me at Mac’s tonight?”

She nods as she hears footsteps behind her. He pulls the hood over his head, and with a flash of his cloak, he

disappears back into the shadows.

Elizabeth and Dauphine appear behind Evelyn.

Elizabeth asks, “Who was that?”

Dauphine demands, “We ‘eard a voice.”

Evelyn turns to them both and puts her fingers to their lips. “Promise you won’t say a word.”

They both nod.

“It was Captain Shaw.”

Dauphine squeals, exasperated, “You are seeing him?!”

Evelyn pushes her finger against Dauphine’s lips. “Shhh!”

Elizabeth beams. “Oh, *how* intriguing.”

Dauphine pushes Elizabeth. “But what will your father say, Evelyn? You know what he thinks of that man and the way he lives.”

Evelyn responds, “Well, I’ll figure something out. Maybe we’ll run away. But right now, I have to keep things quiet. Alright?”

Dauphine inflects, “Run away?! Evelyn, you cannot be serious! You do not even-”

Elizabeth interrupts, “Well, I think he’s dashing, Evelyn. Glad to see you finally have a suitor in your life.”

Evelyn looks at them both and asks, “You *will* keep quiet, won’t you?”

Dauphine looks hesitant.

Evelyn gets closer to her. “*Won’t* you?”

Dauphine replies, “I will. Of course. But please be careful, Evelyn.”



THE DIM, COLD CORRIDORS OF EDINBURGH CASTLE ARE SILENT

except for the flames of the torches guttering against the damp stone walls, illuminating the tapestries that line them. Evelyn quietly closes the door to her chamber, pulls her satin cloak over her head, and tiptoes down the hallway. Dauphine and a young guard stand in the shadows, just out of sight.

As Evelyn turns the corner, Dauphine commands in a low whisper, “Follow ‘er but stay out of sight. Make sure she is safe.”

The guard nods and strides off after Evelyn.



THE GUARD WATCHES FROM BEHIND A STONE BUILDING ACROSS THE street as Evelyn enters the inn. He crosses the cobblestones and peers through one of the illuminated windows.

Evelyn sits on Aiden’s lap, and he kisses her neck. They sit at a round, wooden table with Godfraid and Erik.

A barmaid makes her way over to the table with a tray of mugs and sets them down in front of the group. Erik pulls the maid into his lap, and the maid giggles.

Evelyn reaches out for a mug and takes a deep drink. Aiden holds her tighter around the waist. She turns back and kisses him.

The guard has seen enough.



EVELYN DO-SI-DOS WITH GODFRAID TO THE TUNE OF THE BARD, while Aiden and Erik lean on the bar, sharing some back and forth with Mac.

The door to the inn bursts open to reveal several of the king’s guard. The bard stops playing, and many of the women cry out in surprise. Several of the men shrink down behind their drinks.

Mac moves from behind the counter. “Ey, wha’s the

meanin' o' this?!"

The lead guard ignores Mac. "Lady Evelyn. Ye are ta come with me. Immediately."

Evelyn freezes. She stares at the guard in fright.

Aiden stands up straight off the bar and says, "Guard, I..."

The guard looks over to Aiden and speaks in a more condescending tone, "And *you*, cap'n... I suggest ye haud yer tongue 'til ye're 'afore the court. Lest ye incriminate yersel' further."

Aiden walks toward the guard. "Incriminate maself...?"

The guard looks to the colleague beside him and commands, "Seize him."

Aiden holds up his hands and shouts, "Wait!"

Two guards grab Aiden and place chains on his wrists. He elbows one of the guards and shuffles his weight to maintain his balance.

As they begin to escort him away, Evelyn runs to him and grabs hold of his arm. She cries, "Stop! He didn't do anything!"

The lead guard pulls her away from Aiden.

Aiden glares at the guard but speaks softly, "It's awright, Evelyn. I'll be fine."

Evelyn breaks away and grabs Aiden's face. She kisses him and says, "I love you."

The guards again wrench them away from each other.

Aiden stares after her as she is assisted into a carriage and whisked away to the castle. Her words repeat over and over in his head. Then, it hits him: she is it. She is the rest of his life.

His heart has given him no choice. He has to find a way to be with her.



AIDEN SITS IN THE CASTLE'S VACANT COURTROOM. THE SUN HAS long risen; the daylight streaming through the stained-glass windows of the columned room. His chained wrists rest on the desk in front of him, and he wears his disheveled clothes from the night before.

His eyes hurt, and he can smell the booze still on his breath. He wishes he had not drunk so much, as this is not a good look for his residence at court. But, in a way, none of it matters.

"I love you," he hears her say, and he smiles.

He glances at the guard next to him and snaps back to reality. He rolls his eyes and drives his back into the support of the raised wooden box he has been stored in. Maybe he can somehow achieve a more comfortable position.

Finally, Gwydion briskly enters the room. The door slams shut behind him, seemingly of its own accord. He glides over to Aiden and slams his hands down on the desk in front of him. He bellows, "You slimy, dim-witted little cockroach, how dare you soil my daughter?!"

Aiden backs away from Gwydion as much as he can, his eyes wide. He replies, "Soil, Your Grace? I dinnae understand."

Gwydion gets closer. He grabs Aiden's arm, and it gradually begins to burn beneath his touch. "I know how you sailors are with impressionable young girls. Quite the prize to claim, wasn't she, boy?"

As Aiden's arm smolders, he rips it away. "I would never disgrace Evelyn's honor. I would never... I love her, Your Grace."

Gwydion yells, "Love?!" He raises a ball of green light at Aiden. It grows larger and larger before his eyes.

A voice thunders across the courtroom, "Gwydion!"

King James strides into the room.

"What on Earth is goin' on here, Chancellor?!"

Gwydion closes his hand, and the green light disappears. He turns to the king and replies, “Shaw here...”

King James looks over Gwydion’s head and talks over him, “Are you referrin’ ta *Captain Shaw*?” The king addresses the guard nearest Aiden. “Release him at once!”

The guard mutters, “Aye, Your Majesty.” He rushes over and unchains Aiden’s wrists.

King James looks to Gwydion and demands, “I expect a legitimate explanation as ta why ma acquired son has spent his night in the vaults without ma consent.”

Gwydion responds, “Shaw has been conspiring to bed my daughter outside of the royal court.”

Aiden stands in the box and retorts, “I wish to wed Evelyn, Your Majesty, not bed her.”

King James raises his hand to settle Aiden. Aiden immediately returns to his seat. King James looks back to Gwydion and asks, “An’ what does Evelyn think o’ bein’ courted by Captain Shaw?”

Gwydion roars, “I will not have some dirty, blood-thirsty pirate take away the only thing I have left in this world!”

With a flash of his cape, King James whips around Gwydion and puts his hand on Aiden’s shoulder. He speaks low and resolutely to Gwydion, “I beg yer pardon, Your Grace, but this man is no some common criminal or vagabond. Aiden Shaw is one o’ the most formidable sea captains Scotland has ever witnessed. He has almost solely protected our shores from English attack fer the past three years, not ta uphold some military contract, but merely out o’ love fer his king an’ country. I would trust this young man wi’ ma life. Regardless o’ the rumors or tales told at court, I cannot imagine a more suitable match fer yer precious Evelyn, ta care fer her an’ protect her lang after ye’re dead an’ gone.”

Gwydion clenches his jaw but bows politely before the king. As he stands back up, he glares at Aiden. Gwydion speaks to King James, “My apologies, Your Majesty, as it

seems I have acted irrationally and out of character. I find I am remarkably protective of my daughter and just want the best for her. If Your Majesty and Master Shaw are obliged, I will excuse myself for my daily duties.”

King James nods and responds, “You are excused, Your Grace.”

Gwydion bows and turns to leave. As he opens the door to exit the courtroom, Aiden calls out to him, “I mean ta marry her, Your Grace. I wish ta take her as my wife.”

Gwydion continues through the door as he responds, “I forbid it, boy!”

The door slams behind him. Aiden looks to King James in defeat. King James frowns and pats him on the back.



CHAPTER 12

JACQUES DE PORTAU

Back at the manor house, Aiden and Evelyn tuck their children into their beds. Aiden pulls the blankets over Alice, as Evelyn kisses Colin on the forehead. Their little bedroom is quaint, with fresh flowers, dyed wool blankets, and matching wooden bed frames carved with woodland creatures.

Colin sits back up in the bed and asks his mother, “Now that Daddy is back, can we leave here and see the world? He will keep us safe, Mama.”

Evelyn smiles and runs her fingers through his dark hair. “One day, son.”

Aiden sits down and pulls the cover back over him. He adds, “Aye, one day soon, we’ll go ta Edinburgh, ma boy. I’ll introduce ya ta ma pals, Mac an’ Jamie. I even have a horse. She’s called Gara, an’ I can teach ya how ta ride.”

Colin’s eyes light up.

Aiden looks over to Alice and continues, “An’ there are some wonderful schools in town fer clever lassies like you. Ye

could make so many friends.”

Alice claps her hands and exclaims, “Oh, yes, Daddy!”

Evelyn sits down next to Alice and caresses her face. “Yes, all in good time, my love. Now, sleep.” She begins to sing them a French lullaby about a little boat setting sail for the very first time.

Aiden watches Evelyn affectionately as she twirls Alice’s golden locks around her fingers. Both children settle into their beds and close their eyes.

Evelyn stands, and Aiden grips the backs of her arms. As she looks upon their children, he kisses the side of her head. She takes his hand and leads him from the room. She reaches to close the door.

Colin calls out, “Goodnight, Mama and Daddy.”

Aiden smiles and Evelyn replies, “Goodnight, my sweet Colin. Sleep tight.”



A FEW HOURS LATER, JACQUES CREEPS DOWN THE HALLWAY OF THE upper landing. As he sneaks across the threshold of the children’s bedroom, he sees Alice conjuring apparitions of translucent, polychrome dragons from her bed. They float around the room, and her brother watches them in wonder.

Colin whispers, “Ah, Allie, I wish dragons were real. Oh, what I would do to see one in real life. Out of all the creatures of the world, it would be the most amazing.”

Jacques’s weight causes the floor to creak.

The dragon specters disappear.

Colin sits up, and Alice jumps out of bed, nimble as a cat.

Jacques exits the shadows and whispers, “I did not know you could do that, Alice!”

Alice pleads, “Please don’t tell. I’m not supposed to.”

Jacques leans to one knee. “Now, why would you ever be forbidden from doing something you are so good at?” He pats his knee and Alice sits. “Look what I have got.” He pulls his hand out from behind his back and holds two gingerbread muffins before her. “You should explore all you are capable of, *non?*”

Alice’s eyes light up, and she reaches for the treats. Jacques laughs and moves them just out of her reach. He says, “No, no, you have to work for it, *ma cherie*. If you can take them without taking a step, you and your brother can have them!” He pats her back.

She gets up, and he steps backward about five feet. He asks, “You want to be just like Maman, no?”

Alice nods. She closes her eyes and grasps her hands. With little effort, the muffins slowly float over to her. She opens her eyes again and plucks them both from the air. Laughing, she hops onto her brother’s bed to hand him the prize. They both gobble down the cakes. Crumbs coat their faces and fingers, landing upon their handcrafted quilts.

While finishing their last bites, the children’s eyes become heavy. Alice falls back onto the pillows beside Colin, and in moments, they are both breathing deeply. Sleeping. Jacques sneers. There was clearly more than ginger and honey in those muffins.

The Frenchman wastes no time. He struts over to the bed and pulls from his pocket a folded letter with a broken wax seal, the English king upon his horse, the greyhound running beneath. He lifts Alice’s arm and directs it toward the corner of the room. Then he reads a spell from the bottom of the letter.

A bright, glowing portal appears. He tosses Colin over his shoulder, picks Alice up in his arms, and strolls through.



CHAPTER 13

THE BAIRNS ARE GONE

The morning sun peeps in through the bedroom window. Aiden swiftly sits up as he realizes the rays of light are floating in on loose clouds of smoke. The smell of ash fills the room.

In a blink, the sky outside darkens, and sheets of rain pour down. The scent of smoke grows stronger. From the window, Aiden can see that the forest is aflame. He pulls on his trousers and barrels downstairs, out of the house.

Through the pelting, milky rain, Aiden can make out Evelyn's shape walking, spheres of lightning in each fist. Every few steps, she throws a beam through the wood. Though his hearing is muffled, it sounds like she is calling for the children. When he approaches her, she turns to him. She is soaking wet, her hair matted to her face.

Aiden yells over the wind and thunder, "What is it, Evelyn?! What happened?!"

Evelyn drops her hands to her sides and replies, "Our bairns, Aiden..." She falls to her knees and stares at the ground. "They're gone."

The burning trees smoke and sizzle as the rain comes down harder.

His jaw trembles. “Wha d’ye mean, Evelyn? How-?”

He does not need a reply.

He sprints back to the house. The children’s bedroom is empty. He charges through the other rooms, flinging open doors and calling their names.

He nearly collides with Godfraid and Erik in the hallway. He seizes Erik by the shoulders and shouts, “Have ya had eyes on the wee ‘uns?!”

The large man is terrified, speechless.

Godfraid grabs Aiden’s shoulder and says, “Shaw, Shaw. We need to talk to ye.”

“Wh-wha d’ye mean? About the weans?” He fears he may collapse.

Aiden follows Godfraid and Erik down to the dining room. Godfraid sits down, followed by Erik.

Aiden stands behind a chair, dripping wet and shaking from adrenaline.

“Good God, man. Spit it out.”

Evelyn, soaked and silent, appears in the doorway.

Godfraid says, “Ya both may wanta sit down for this.”

Aiden and Evelyn do not move.

Godfraid continues, “Oh-kay... well, it’s Jacques.”

Aiden pinches the bridge of his nose. He splutters, “Jacques, what about Jacques?” He looks around the room and continues, “Where *is* Jacques?!”

Godfraid replies, “He’s gone... And we think he may have taken the chil’ren.”

“What?!” Aiden and Evelyn respond in unison.

Evelyn clenches her fists.

Godfraid raises his hands in submission and says, “Now, lass, wait a moment. We had nothin’ to do wi’ it. I promise ye that.”

Evelyn nods curtly and lays her palms flat against her thighs.

Godfraid pulls out a copy of the proclamation with the English seal. He lays it before him and rolls it out on the table.

He taps his finger on the letter. “As ye’ve heard, Shaw, King Henry has decreed hefty bounties for druids brought to him as manpower to fuel his war. I mean, we’re pretty sure that’s what he wanted Evelyn for.”

Aiden responds, “Aye, sure, we ken... but what does this have ta dae wi’ Jacques?”

Godfraid continues, “Last night, Jacques was... well in his cups. Goin’ on and on, he was, about how he had finally found his path ta power, royalty, an’ riches. How he finally had an in with King Henry’s court and how he was goin’ ta be a Duke an’ lead the English army. But he was drunk!

“We ignored him... God, ye know what he can be like, full o’ grandiose stories and pure nonsense. He’s always been so jealous o’ ya, Shaw, and yer glory, so we figured he would be over it as soon as we were able ta get past those shite ghost wolves an’ back ta Edinburgh.

“I thought nothin’ o’ the bounties because... well, we’re practically family. An’ even if someone still wanted Evelyn, she’s too bloody powerful. But this mornin’, when we woke ta Evelyn callin’ for the weans... I woke Erik, but Jacques was gone, along with all his belongin’s.”

Evelyn crosses the floor to Godfraid and places her hand on his shoulder. She examines the letter before him.

Godfraid looks up at Evelyn and asks, “Can Alice or Colin do magic?”

She looks from the parchment to Aiden and says, “We have to go.”

Aiden's vision tunnels, and a horrid pain tears at his heart. His wife's words are muffled as they attempt to pierce the wall of rage that has ascended before him. King Henry has taken his family from him for a second time. This time, he will pay.



CHAPTER 14

FOR KING AND COUNTRY

Jacques stands at attention in the golden light of the columned throne room in Greenwich Palace. London, England. King Henry VIII bustles in, followed by a huddle of his advisors. He steps up onto the rug-covered platform and plops down on the ornamented throne in front of Jacques. Jacques removes his brimmed hat, lowers to a knee, and bows.

King Henry clasps his hands together and asks, “Jacques de Portau, is it?”

Jacques replies, his head still bowed, “*Oui*, Your Majesty.”

King Henry waves a hand. “You may rise.”

Jacques returns to his feet and again stands at attention.

“I hear you have some news for me about my little cousin’s kingdom up north?”

Jacques responds, “*Oui*, Your Majesty. Gwydion’s daughter, she lives. I have found her.”

King Henry jumps up off the throne and shouts, “What?!”

He looks around the room and demands, “Why am I only hearing of this now?”

His advisors shrug and shake their heads.

He sits back down on the throne, his elbows on his knees, hands holding up his chin in complete devotion toward the Frenchman. “Yes, go on!”

Jacques continues, “She is extremely powerful, Your Majesty, so I had no way of capturing her. I do, however, have on good authority that she will soon come here, to you.”

King Henry wrinkles his brows and shakes his head. “And what makes you say that, Jacques de Portau? If Little Miss Evelyn is alive, as you say, she has been in hiding for years.”

“Because I have brought you her children, Your Majesty.”

King Henry’s eyes grow wide as he beams. “Is that so?”

Jacques nods. “*Oui*. Your men have secured them in the Tower until she arrives in the attempt to retrieve them.”

King Henry jumps up again and exclaims, “Oh, that’s fantastic!” He looks toward one of his advisors, coated in metal armor and holding a helmet in his hand. “We must make sure we are ready for her.”

The advisor nods and exits the throne room to undertake his vocation.

King Henry approaches Jacques and grabs him by the shoulder. “Truth be told, I’m not used to the French being so cooperative and resourceful. I am surprised I’ve never heard of you, Jacques de Portau.”

He walks him into the main hall, declaring, “My dear friend, as a token of my gratitude, you will join me as my guest of honor today for our court festivities.

“This glorious news you bring my kingdom will surely allow our Holy War to prevail. I am certain the court would love to revel in the tales of travel and conquest such a distinguished sailor and fierce warrior as you would have.”

“Of course, Your Majesty. It would be an honor.”



JACQUES SITS TO THE LEFT OF KING HENRY’S WOODEN THRONE IN the crowded, covered stands surrounding the dirt-floored jousting arena. There are colorful flags and tapestries draped throughout the tiltyard.

King Henry nudges Jacques with his elbow. “You’re French, so you’re no doubt well-acquainted with this courageous act of chivalry. But these, I assure you, are the best lancers in the world.”

Trumpets sound, and a steel-armored man mounted on a white war horse in full dressage trots up to the tilt. A boy clothed in bright motley hands the knight a wooden lance.

The announcer states, “The Duke of Suffolk will joust *a plaisance* with Sir William Compton.” The crowd applauds.

Another armored knight lines up against the opposite side of the tilt. A flag is waved, and the men charge at each other with high speed, their lances outstretched.

The Duke of Suffolk’s lance connects with Sir Compton’s slitted helmet, and the tip shatters into thousands of tiny wooden splinters. The knight falls from his horse and hits the hard, unforgiving ground. Dust fills the arena as the duke reaches the end of the tilt line. His fervent charger prances around as he grips the reins to settle it.

The announcer states, “*À terre*. Three points for the Duke of Suffolk.”

The duke throws open the lid of his helmet and beams. The trumpet sounds again. King Henry, along with the rest of the stands, applauds joyfully. The duke waves to the crowd.

The trumpet sounds again, and another rider trots up to the tilt.



AS THE CROWD EXITS THE TILTYARD, KING HENRY TOUCHES Jacques's shoulder to give him pause. He calls over to the Duke of Suffolk, who is dismounting his steed.

The duke removes his helmet and looks back. "Ah, Your Majesty. Well met." He struts over as elegantly as he can manage in his cumbersome armor. They embrace.

King Henry makes introductions, "Jacques de Portau, I would like to introduce you to the Duke of Suffolk, Charles Brandon. My dearest and most loyal friend."

Jacques reaches out and kisses the duke's hand. "Your Grace."

Charles nods.

King Henry continues, "And Charles, I would like to acquaint you with Jacques de Portau, Master of Arms for the Royal Scots Navy."

Charles raises an eyebrow.

"He has found Gwydion's daughter."

"Really now?" asks Charles.

King Henry ushers them to follow the crowd into the banquet hall for dinner. They all huddle around the magnificent feast sprawled across the long tables.

King Henry nudges Charles and looks to Jacques. "Do you know what this means for England, now that I will soon have Evelyn in my possession?"

Jacques leans in.

"For far too long, I have lived in the shadows of my ruthless father and my perfect brother, but from now on, the books will all be written for me.

"I have clearly been anointed by God to be his voice here on Earth, and soon, the Pope will see that I am not to be toyed with. Rome will have no choice but to back my efforts. I will finally be able to secure my birthright as king of France and Scotland. With Cerridwen's heir in my hold, no one will dare

challenge me. With her power, I will be immortal.”

He touches both Charles and Jacques’s shoulders. “My good sirs, England will soon be the most powerful kingdom in the world!”

Charles grins and pats King Henry’s back as he tears into a pheasant leg. He then looks to Jacques. “So, what is it like being part of the Royal Scots Navy?”

Jacques replies, “Incredibly disorganized. Since the Admiral abandoned his post eight years ago, leadership has been in shambles, and the king is a child, so...”

King Henry muses, “Ah yes, Admiral Aiden Shaw. That traitor’s time is coming. He and I have some history, you know?”

Jacques cocks his head in curiosity.

King Henry changes the subject, boasting, “My naval fleet and my army are second to none. We have the best of the best, especially with Charles here as commander.”

King Henry raises his glass to the duke, and Charles returns the toast.

The king then raises his goblet a second time as he addresses the hall, “My loyal subjects, recent developments indicate that we will soon win the war against France. The rest of the Continent will shortly follow. Under my rule, England is on track to conquer the world!”

Those around the table raise their glasses and cheer.

As Jacques sips his wine, he notices a beautiful, blonde lady-in-waiting. Enchanted, he watches her. She seems to feel his gaze and smiles at him.

Henry notices the interaction and side smirks, his blue eyes twinkling mischievously. “Charles, after dinner, please take Jacques to enjoy all the luxuries the court has to offer.” He nods to the lady-in-waiting.

Charles affirms with his own nod. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

King Henry winks at Jacques.



JACQUES AND CHARLES SPRAWL ACROSS A LARGE, ROUND BED draped in silk, lilac-colored sheets that only partially cover their undress. On the walls hang heavy velvet curtains of the same purple hue.

They recline on down-stuffed pillows, their lathered skin gleaming with fragrant oils. Scantly clad women surround them, resting in their arms, stroking and kissing them, feeding them food and drink.

The lighting and perfumes have been carefully curated to create a euphoric, sensual experience. In this room, it is clear men are treated like gods.

Charles alternates between eating fruit from the palm of a woman with pale, freckled skin and kissing her lustily. Jacques leisurely takes a sip of wine and sighs heavily as a young woman with a thick braid of black hair massages his chest. He looks to Charles. “What do you think he will do with her, Your Grace?”

Charles replies absentmindedly, chewing, “Do with who?”

“Evelyn... Gwydion’s daughter.”

Charles turns to Jacques. “Who *is* this druid to you? ... You seem to care for her. Why turn her in?”

Jacques picks a focal point on the wall before him and responds, “Because this may be the only way for us to have what was meant for us from the very beginning.”

Charles pushes away the woman attending him. “What do you mean?”

Jacques answers, “She was stolen from me when she was eighteen years of age. I was sent to the Scottish court to serve as a diplomat. She was meant to be betrothed to me by her father, Gwydion, to continue the alliance between France and

Scotland, to maintain the dwindling druid lineage, procreating druid advisors to serve at the French court, as well as their allies' courts.

“Without her, King Louis shunned me, and I was stranded at court in Scotland. I took a position in the Royal Navy so that I would be granted land and payment by the king for military service, but alas, King James, and now his *morveux* son, have never paid me any mind.

“This devil, this Aiden Shaw, who stole my rightful fiancée, has long been a favorite at court. They knighted him, gave him rule over the Navy, gave him the greatest warship ever built. He was the acting king until James was old enough to rule.

“And why? Because he fought some pirates, stole some cargo, took the deceased king on some pleasure rides? He has no right. He is not of royal blood. He is a hielander's son!”

Charles says, “I am hearing a lot about this traitor admiral today. So, the druid is his wife?”

Jacques nods.

“Interesting... Well, once His Majesty has the druid's powers, I can't see him having any more use for her. What would *you* have happen to her?”

“I wish for her life to be spared. She and the children are far more useful alive. That would afford us the opportunity to continue the druid lineage. I-I do not wish her harmed.”

“By no lance but your own, hmm?”

“She belongs to me.”

“And you believe imprisoning her will endear her to you?”

“If the king demands it, she will have no choice, no?”

“So, a forced marriage.”

“I do not think that will be necessary. She has never had the opportunity to fall in love with me. She will finally get that chance.”

Charles looks unimpressed. “Well, if your goal is to establish yourself here at court, let’s get your feet wet. His Majesty is drawn to those who have a strong alignment with force and military achievement.

“Come with me to York tomorrow. We have an outpost there that’s functioning poorly. We have some disputes to settle, and some of the locals are refusing to pay their taxes. The way to earn His Majesty’s favor is loyalty. He is a gracious king. If you serve him well, he will grant you anything your heart desires.”

Jacques nods. “Much obliged, Your Grace. I appreciate your care and understanding in this matter.”

Charles waves him away with a lazy hand, and they each return to the business of pleasure.



CHAPTER 15

THE SLUAGH

Evelyn hurries about the manor house, shoving clothes and supplies into a leather travel bag. Two of the huge, bright-colored birds fly about the room, following her frenzy.

Aiden keeps her pace. “Evie, what about the village? Ye’re literally keepin’ this place alive! We need ta talk about this...” He grabs hold of one of her arms and rips the glove from it. The necrosis has almost reached her elbow. He raises his voice, “This! We need to talk about this!”

She yanks the glove from his hand. “And what would you have me do, Aiden? The reason I am on this Earth has been stolen from me.” Exasperated, she throws up her hands. “These people are just going to have to learn to grow some crops!”

She turns to stalk off, but he grasps her shoulder. “We canna jus’ go runnin’ off, Evie. Goin’ ta London is like walkin’ into the lion’s den. We need a plan.”

“We have days on the road ahead of us, Aiden. We can come up with some sort of plan then. Right now, we just need

to get out of here.”

“An’ what dae we tell Agnes... Thomas, Alex, Duncan?”

One of the parrots squawks.

“They’ll be *fine* until we get back.”

The other parrot lands on Aiden’s shoulder. He shoves it off and questions, “An’ what about this demon that’s devourin’ yer soul, Evelyn? Will it even *let* ya leave?”

She clinches her jaw as she takes in a deep breath of air and exhales. She feels the heat rising inside her as she turns to him. “Fine!”

She rotates on her heel and tramps toward the room at the end of the hall.

He charges after her.

She swipes her hand, and the door swings open. As she reaches the belly of the chamber, a sharp pain cuts through her body, as if she is being torn apart. Before she knows it, she is on the floor.

Aiden’s footfalls reach the threshold. Monster hunter or no, he does not know what he is up against here. She throws up her hand, and the door slams shut in front of him. She blinks, and the creases of the door fade back into the wall.

He bangs. “Evelyn!”

Evelyn holds onto her chest and fights to pull her head up. Her torso and wrists are bleeding.

The slugh appears before her. It speaks in a voice that shakes the room, “How dare you challenge me?”

It takes hold of her throat and picks her up off the ground. Flailing her feet, she gasps for air. She can still hear Aiden in the hallway, kicking the panel in the wall, scrabbling to find the door. She has to be the one to finish this.

As the oxygen leaves her brain, she begins to lose consciousness. She has the sensation she is floating. She sees

her father's grayish-blue eyes, and her rage and fear dissolve.

With his spirit cradling her, she finally has clarity. Gwydion taught her that magic is give and take; nothing new can be created, and nothing is free. If the slugh needs her power to thrive, it is she who has the ability to weaken it. If it can take her power, she can take it back.

She summons every last ounce of energy inside her and drives her hands straight down. The room shakes violently. The slugh stumbles and drops her. Books and trinkets around the room fall to the floor.

She sits up on her knees as the slugh staggers to regain its balance. It advances on her with its long, slender fingers outstretched. It is too strong, her powers too chaotic.

Over its shoulder, she can make out the bowl of glowing opal liquid. The light. She needs a conduit. She closes her eyes to see a bright green luminescence surrounding her. Protecting her.

She reaches toward the being and clenches her hand. The slugh ceases to stagger toward her as its body goes rigid. It begins to implode, loose skin folding, bones cracking. It releases a guttural scream. Finally, the being falls to the floor, motionless. Every piece of its body crumpled in on itself.

Exhausted, Evelyn collapses.



AIDEN AND ERIK HEAVE AXES INTO THE WALL PANELS, RIPPING THEM back out and going again. Finally, they begin to make out slivers of the hidden chamber on the other side. Aiden gives the wall one more good kick, and the panel finally comes crashing down. Tossing his axe into Godfraid's hold, he rushes into the room. He pulls his spent wife into his lap.

Aiden pleads, "Evelyn!"

She opens her eyes and looks up at him. She breathes, "I did it. It's gone."

He examines her body, from the blood coating her arms to her scarlet-stained dress. He holds her close to his chest. “Good God, ya stubborn lass.”

Godfraid and Erik finally break through the wall, while Agnes cries from the other side.

“What the hell happened, boy?”

Aiden looks up at them while rocking Evelyn in his arms. “She’s goin’ ta send me ta an early grave, this one. I dinnae ken how much more ma heart can take.”

Erik notices the lifeless slugh in a heap across the floor. “Wha’ is *that*?”

The rest of them follow his gaze. Suddenly, the floorboards of the room begin to split apart, and the walls around them start to crumble.

Aiden scrambles to his feet and looks to Erik. “Peerson, get ‘er oot o’ here.”

Erik nods as Aiden drapes his wife over his friend’s brawny forearms.

Aiden then looks to Agnes and Godfraid. “You two, warn the villagers. Tell them ta grab anythin’ they need an’ get ta the portal entrance immediately. Stay close thegither. The wolves willnae hurt the villagers.”

Agnes asks, “And *you*, Laird?”

“I’ve got ta get ta ma potions. She’ll need them. Go, go!”

The group hurries from the room, as Aiden steels himself.

He sprints down the hallway as the house convulses, rocky debris tumbling all around him. He dodges stone, wood, and slate as he moves, and he is nearly crushed by a huge clock.

Once inside his bedroom, Aiden chucks his vials into his satchel, packs in his leather armor, and slings his scabbard over his shoulder. He rushes from the room and grabs Evelyn’s travel bag from the hallway. Then, he secures Erik and Godfraid’s scabbards and satchels from their room.

As he races toward the stairway, the hallway splits in half. He grabs hold of the banister to avoid falling through. He watches as Alice's toy horse slides off the wooden floorboards and into the dark abyss below. Stones continue to fall around him. He is trapped.



GODFRAID, AGNES, AND THOMAS COURSE THROUGH THE VILLAGE, herding the villagers out of their houses and through the gates. The grass around them sears, and the trees burn and fall. The immaculately blue sky tears away like a melting canvas painting. Screams ring out as the villagers run for their lives.

Erik waits on the bed of charred vegetation at the bottom of the hill leading to the portal. He holds an unconscious Evelyn across his lap. He delicately moves a blood-soaked strand of hair out of her face. "I guess it's high time I return the favor and rescue *you, kvinna.*"

The raven is perched on Erik's shoulder, watching Evelyn's chest rise and fall. Its eyes are no longer made of glass, but more resemble shiny black marbles. One of the large, once spectral, wolves dozes against Erik's leg and another sniffs Evelyn's hair. Erik scratches the beast's densely furry neck, and it wags its tail, panting.

As Godfraid, Agnes, and Thomas reach them, the sleeping wolf jumps up, startled. The raven looks up at them and caws.

Erik asks, "Where's Shaw?"

They all look toward the wrought-iron gates. As the last of the villagers make it through, the massive manor crumbles to the ground, shooting dust in all directions.

Eyes wide, Godfraid whispers in disbelief, "Shaw..."

They look on at the rubble in desperation.

Finally, Aiden comes running through the dust, laden with weapons and supplies.

Agnes exhales, and the villagers cheer.

Aiden leans on his knees, wheezing. He is caked in dust and besieged by the weight of his cargo.

He looks up at his concerned pals. “What? Ye didnae really think that was it, did ye? Efter aw’ve been through, it’s goin’ ta take more than an auld hoose ta take me oot.” He sits down on the ground. “Och. I’m gettin’ too auld fer this.”



AS THE SAILORS AND VILLAGERS TREAD THE DARK, SMOKY WOODS IN silence, the scorched bracken crunching underfoot is the only sound.

Evelyn murmurs, breaking the silence, “I can’t feel them!”

Erik pauses and looks down at her cradled in his arms. “What is it, ma lady?”

Evelyn lethargically opens her eyes and looks up at Erik. “I can’t feel them anymore. My powers, Erik. They’re gone.”

Erik gently squeezes her and responds, “Shhh... ma lady. Rest. Everythin’ will be alreet.”

At the front of the group, Aiden spies his previously used torch and snatches it up off the ground.

He utters, “*Cychwyn tan*,” and the end of the tree limb reignites.

The group remains close as they navigate the narrow, winding trail out of the charred village and through the seared coppice.

As they reach the edge of the forest, sunlight creeps back in. They tug branches out of the way as they step into the green grass of the open meadow.

Eight horses graze peacefully in the field ahead of them. Gara looks up, notices Aiden, and gallops toward him. She comes to a swift halt with her muzzle in his face. He chuckles and strokes her velvety nose. She snorts at him grumpily.

More hoofbeats follow, as the rest of the horses trot over.



NIGHT HAS FALLEN AS THE GROUP MAKES CAMP UNDER THE TREES IN the lush, open field.

Inside a newly mounted canvas tent, Aiden sits on the ground by Evelyn's mattress side. He puts a potion vial to her lips and says, "Here, drink."

He turns it up, and she delicately swallows the saffron-colored liquid.

"Now, rest," he says.

She closes her eyes.

He exits the flap of the tent to Godfraid and Erik sitting around a campfire.

Erik asks, "So wha's the plan, Shaw?"

Agnes hands Aiden a skewer of rabbit. He nods in thanks as he rips into it with his teeth. His mouth full, he states, "Well, we've got ta get the villagers somewhere safe. I'm sure Holyrood Abbey will be able ta accommodate, so we'll make our way back ta Edinburgh first. An' I need ta brief the king.

"Efter tha'? I'm thinkin' they wad've taken the bairns ta the Tower. I ken the inside decently well. It's just gettin' there an' gettin' inside that's the difficulty."

He draws his satchel to him and pulls out some blank parchment, along with a piece of graphite. He rolls the paper across a large, flat rock.

"So, Londontown is about a fourteen-day ride fae Edinburgh."

He draws an "x" on the parchment, and then draws a line to another "x." "We'll stop in Newcastle fer supplies. Evelyn an' I have friends there. Then, we'll plan our route ta London. We'll have ta stay off the main roads; Henry has patrols all over the interior, especially with the recent unrest in

Northumberland.”

He absentmindedly doodles in the coasts of the island, and where the Scottish and English border sits. He marks Northumberland, and the mountains surrounding the path he plans to take.

Erik surveys Aiden’s desired route and adds, “The moorlands are fulla beasts though. Is it worth keepin’ off the main road?”

Aiden responds, “I think we’ll have ta test our luck because deid is better than imprisoned.”

Erik returns, “Aye, but we’re na good ta Alice an’ Colin dead.”

Aiden concedes, “Agreed. O’Reilly, want ta weigh in?”

Godfraid answers, “I agree wit Shaw. Keepin’ ta the moors will be much easier ta navigate than avoidin’ the English. We’ll jus’ keep our wits about us. It’s nothin’ we haven’t managed before.” He then looks to the tent and asks, “Is she going ta be able ta make the journey?”

Aiden responds, “I willnae be able ta convince ‘er ta stay behind. We’ll keep our ridin’ ta daylight hours.” He grips Godfraid’s shoulder. “Let’s get some rest, lads. We’ve done enough belly-achin’ fer wan day.”



GARA PRANCES AROUND AS AIDEN LOADS UP HER SADDLEBAG, BUT she soon pauses, her nose in the air. She peers over Aiden’s shoulder to see Evelyn exit the tent. The mare watches her approach.

Evelyn smiles. “It’s me, Gara.”

The Clydesdale’s ears perk up, and she whinnies loudly. She trots over and hangs her head over Evelyn’s shoulder, wrapping her in a furry embrace.

Aiden smiles softly at them, but as Evelyn hands him the

reins, he waves her away.

“Ye take ‘er. It looks like ma lasses need some time thegither. I’m sure she’s missed ya as much as I have.”

Gara fumbles Evelyn’s hair with her lips. Evelyn smiles and puts her forehead against the mare’s muzzle. Gara closes her eyes and snorts happily as Evelyn pets her cheek.

After loading up the camp, Aiden grabs the reins of Jacques’s glossy black Friesian and hoists himself into the saddle. The horse shuffles around as he gets settled. He shushes her and pats her neck in an attempt to calm her.

Godfraid pulls himself up onto a dark gray Percheron with a piebald face, and Erik swings himself onto a palomino Belgian gelding.

Aiden holds the reins tight as he trots over to Evelyn. He asks, “D’ye need h-?”

Before he can finish his question, Gara bows her head and bends her front knee to the ground. Evelyn quickly hops up in the saddle. Gara stands back up and saunters over to Aiden.

Aiden is astonished. “Ma God, ye spoil her, Gara.”

He turns Jacques’s horse toward the road leading into town.



THE GROUP REACHES THE TOP OF CRAGINGALT, OVERLOOKING Edinburgh. Aiden looks from the colossal willow tree to Evelyn, and she smiles back at him.

A beam of light flashes off her flowing brown hair. He squints to see a comb nestled in her curls, golden and encrusted with emeralds. He looks out at the castle on the hill as he is transported back to twelve years earlier.



CHAPTER 16

CLOTH, STRING, AN' A WEE BIT O' POWDER

Aiden and Evelyn lie on the soft grass of Cragingalt, beneath an indigo night sky. Aiden points out the different stars and constellations he has used to navigate the open ocean. They both gasp as a falling star blazes across the heavens.

The searing light jogs Aiden's memory.

"I almos' forgot." He pulls a golden hair comb from his pocket and hands it to Evelyn. "I got this fer ya in Bruges. Ages ago."

Evelyn takes her gift from him and examines the details of it. It is studded with green emeralds. "Oh, my word. It's beautiful, Aiden."

He slips it from her grasp and carefully places it in her hair. "Ye'll always have somethin' ta remember me by, even when I'm away."

She smiles, lies her head back against his arm, and looks up at the sky once more. She muses, "Maybe one day you'll

never leave me again.”

He follows her gaze back up to the blanket of stars. “One day. I miss ya more an’ more e’ry time I go.” He turns over to her. “But who kens what the future holds now, after Flodden.”

She studies him, as if searching his soul for its intentions. He tries to keep her gaze, but her eyes hold too much power over his thoughts, so he looks down at the grass.

Noticing a yellow primrose, he picks it. He holds it out to her.

She croons, “Why, thank you, Laird High Admiral Shaw.”

He grins. “Has a certain *je ne sais quoi, non?* Think yer father will approve now that I’ve rescued the king from certain death?”

She giggles and shakes her head.

He chuckles, and then he slowly drags the flower along her neck and down her corseted bust, leaving goosebumps behind. She plucks it from his hand. He leans over and plants light kisses down her chest.

She closes her eyes and sighs, “Why do you torture me so?”

He smirks and lays his head against her chest. “Ye have nae idea what yer body does ta me, lass, but I’m courtin’ ta have it be mine ferever.” He breathes in the scent of her skin. “I can bide ma time, but God, dae I want e’ry inch o’ ya under my fingertips.”

He looks up at her and says, “Ya ken, the king has granted me land in Fife fer ma service at Flodden. We could make us a home there, you an’ me. I’ll build ya a big castle on the sea, an’ we can have a huge gairden, huntin’ dogs, an’ Gara will have all the room ta run wherever she pleases. I’ll build ya a big library ta hold aw yer books, an’ maybe we’ll have a bairn or two runnin’ around once everythin’s all said an’ done. I want ta take ye there, once all this mess blows o’er wit England, if ye’ll come?”

“That sounds like a magnificent dream, my love. Hopefully, one day we can make it come true.”

“We will. I promise you, we will.”

He lays his head back against her chest to listen to her lulling heartbeat. “I have nae idea how I ever convinced a lass like you ta want the likes o’ me.”

She giggles, “What, a knight? I think I’m doing well, my laird.”

He snickers and turns back over to stare up at the starry sky. As he admires its pale crescent moon, he notices something floating in his peripheral vision.

He quickly jerks his head. The yellow primrose instantly falls to the ground, but he catches Evelyn’s finger tracing its outline.

He looks from her finger to where the flower used to be, and it clicks, “Was that you?”

She looks terrified.

He sits up, waiting for an answer.

She whispers, “Aiden, hush. What are you-?”

“It’s awrigh’. I winnae say anythin’ ta anyone, if that’s what ye’re afraid o’.”

She evaluates him, apprehensive.

“Can ye dae it again?”

She hesitantly raises her hand, and the primrose floats again.

He looks on in awe as she makes it dance on the breeze. “Oh wow. What else can ya dae, lass?”

“I don’t really know. My father doesn’t allow me to use my powers. He says it’s dangerous.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Well, we should practice sometime. See what all ye can dae. It’s no like ya dinnae dae other things ye’re father’s forbidden...”

She laughs.

He continues, “We could dae it together. Maybe I could help ye hone yer skills.”

She responds, “I’d like that.”

They hear screams reverberating down the hill. They stand to witness men in metal armor marching up to the castle. Fires begin within the ramparts.

Evelyn looks to Aiden and exclaims, “My father!”

They both sprint to Gara, jump on her back, and charge down the hill. Crowds of people line the cobblestones. Aiden puts his fingers in his mouth to whistle. The crowd parts as they barrel down the street.

He yells to the townspeople, “Get inside. Barricade yerselves. The castle is under siege.”

Panic ensues as the townspeople race back to their homes.

As they approach the inn, Aiden yells, “Woah!”

Gara comes to a halt, and he and Evelyn jump down from the mare. He hands her reins to the stable master.

Aiden looks up at the castle on the hill. “They’re everywhere. How’re we goin’ ta get past ‘em?”

Evelyn’s eyes shift back and forth as she stares at the ground. She finally looks back up and exclaims, “The tunnels!”

Confused, he repeats, “The tunnels?”

She pushes open the door to the inn. Mac stares out the window facing the castle but turns to them as they enter.

Evelyn asks, “Mac, there’s an old tunnel to the castle that runs under the inn, right?”

A startled Mac replies, “I mean, theoretically, ma lady. I’ve never taken it. But why...” He looks from her to Aiden. “Oh, naw. Naw. Ye’re baith stayin’ here, whaur it’s safe.” He grabs Aiden’s arm and grasps for Evelyn.

Evelyn steps out of reach and says, “I can’t, Mac. My father is in there.”

Mac walks after her. “Gwydion is the most powerful man I ken, Evelyn. If anyone can handle it, it’s him.”

Aiden stands between Mac and Evelyn and interjects, “We canna just sit here, Mac. I have a duty ta the king an’ ta Scotland. We need yer help ta get in withoot bein’ seen.”

Mac shakes his head one last time before he acquiesces, “Oh, come on.”

He shuffles off through the door behind the bar and into the storeroom. Gesturing to a shelf, he says, “Here, lad. Help me move this.”

He and Aiden push the shelf across the floor.

Mac leans down and opens a hidden door that blends in with the wooden floorboards of the storeroom.

Aiden grabs the lantern hanging on the wall. “Thanks, Mac. See ya in a bit.”

He jumps down through the door and into the tunnel below. Mac helps Evelyn down after him. Aiden grabs Evelyn’s hand, and they race through the steep tunnel.

After half a mile, they feel heavy movement above them. Evelyn holds up the lantern as Aiden presses against the top of the tunnel. Ahead of them, they see a frame of light illuminating from the wall.

Aiden uses his sidearm to pry open the ancient door, revealing a stone, spiral staircase. At the top, Aiden forces the recessed stone partition to the side, and they find themselves inside a retired fireplace. Now within the castle, they are greeted by the sounds of women screaming and metal swords clashing.

Then, an enormous explosion. The side wall of the castle blasts apart. As the rubble falls, Aiden forces Evelyn against one of the inside walls and lays over to protect her.

He breathes, “They’re usin’ our own guns against us!”

Once the dust clears, he pulls her into a run.

As they reach the entrance to a long corridor, an English soldier marches toward them.

Aiden yells to Evelyn, “Go! Find your father!”

The soldier charges him. Aiden rips his longsword from the scabbard at his side, crossing and blocking the soldier’s sword as it comes down on him. Using his blade as leverage, he pushes the soldier off him.

They both regain their footing, and they take gathering steps toward each other. He is ready, itching for the clang of the metal. They duel back and forth, as Aiden’s steps strategically push the soldier down the hallway in the direction Evelyn ran.

Another soldier advances on Aiden from behind, swinging his sword. Aiden side steps and spins around the new combatant. He kicks him into the first soldier. Both stumble and fall to the ground.

He hears Evelyn scream. Not on his watch. He takes off down the hallway.

As he exits the corridor, he finds her pinned against the wall. A soldier with his sword to her throat.

Aiden yells, “Ey!”

The soldier turns, and Evelyn knees him in the groin. The soldier drops to his knees. Aiden walks over and kicks him in the face for good measure.

He then grabs Evelyn’s cheeks. He looks her over and asks, “Are ye awright?”

She touches the blood smeared across her neck and replies, “Just a scratch.” She then pulls away, tugging his hand. “We’ve got to go!”

They enter the throne room and freeze in their tracks. King James lies motionless on the steps leading up to the throne, his

sword close to his outstretched hand.

Aiden kneels next to him. “They didnae have a chance.”

Evelyn looks from the king to Queen Margaret lying in a pile close to the door of her chambers. “Where’s Jamie?”

She notices that the door to the queen’s chambers is slightly ajar. She races into the queen’s room.

Aiden looks up and yells, “Evelyn, we dinnae have time!”

She replies, “Give me just a moment.”

Her eyes search the room. In the corner closest to the bed, she spies the prince curled up against the wall, covered in blood. She rushes over and kneels down next to him.

“Jamie? Jamie, can you walk?”

Jamie looks up. He bursts into tears and grabs her neck. “Lady Evelyn!” He looks over at the door. “My mother...”

Aiden carefully steps over the queen’s lifeless body and into the room. He notices Jamie and hurries over. Gently, he pushes the boy’s blood-soaked hair aside and kisses his forehead. He picks him up, and the boy wraps his arms around Aiden’s neck.

Aiden squeezes the prince close and says, “Awright, Jamie. We’re goin’ ta get ye oot o’ here. I need ya ta close yer eyes now an’ dinnae open them until I tell ya it’s safe, dae ye understand?”

“Aye.”

Aiden passes back through the throne room, his hand shielding Jamie’s eyes. The three of them make their way down the next corridor, toward Gwydion’s office and chambers. Gwydion is nowhere to be found.

A burst of green light illuminates the castle windows. Evelyn rushes over to peer outside.

“It’s coming from the great hall!”

The group turns and races back the way they came.

As they exit the hallway from the throne room, they see Evelyn's father standing on the landing leading down to the banquet hall. He has both arms outstretched, and bright green light is radiating from his hands. He slowly raises them up as he builds an enchanted viridescent wall in front of the castle doorway. English soldiers in the courtyard attempt to break through.

Another soldier exits the corridor on the other side of the terrace and sprints toward Gwydion.

Aiden yells, "Gwydion, on yer right!"

Gwydion looks just in time. He takes one of his hands away from building the wall and blasts the soldier high into the air. The soldier hits the stone wall of the hall and falls to the ground, unconscious.

The green wall gradually begins to falter. Gwydion hurls his hand back into position and fortifies it again, as soldiers use their body weight to push against it.

A group of six soldiers hike up the stairs from the bottom floor. Aiden hands Jamie to Evelyn and commands, "Take cover! I need ta help yer father."

Evelyn pulls Jamie into the closest corner and conceals them with her cloak. Aiden watches them settle, readies himself, and then runs to meet the soldiers before they reach the landing. He will not let this end the way they want.

With little forethought, he swings his longsword and connects with the soldier's blade closest to him. With the soldier's hands engaged, Aiden kicks him in the side. The soldier tumbles down the stairs, taking two others with him.

The remaining three soldiers dissolve to the edges of the stairwell, and one runs to meet Aiden. Aiden successfully evades the soldier's sword strike and responds with a swing of his own. The soldier dodges the blade and rams Aiden into the banister. Aiden loses grip of his sword, and it falls over the side, striking the stone floor below.

As Aiden hangs over the side of the banister, the soldier

leans into him, constricting his body, the sword to his throat. Aiden pushes against the soldier's forearms to keep the blade off his neck, but he slips farther and farther by the second. This is beginning to get uncomfortable.

He looks up at the soldier and head-butts him. Disoriented, the soldier stumbles into the wall behind him.

The last two soldiers rush him. Unarmed, he takes a deep breath, preparing to go again.

Gwydion blasts the three soldiers down the stairs and returns to maintaining the magic wall at the castle doors.

Aiden looks up at him. "Thanks."

Gwydion winks.

Several leather-clad men exit the corridors under the terrace. They are all engaged in hand-to-hand combat with English soldiers.

One man is Erik. He stabs his opponent, then notices the gleam of the sword lying on the ground next to him. He recognizes the hilt of the blade and looks up to find Aiden leaning against the banister, trying to catch his breath. Erik grabs the sword.

He yells up, "Shaw!"

Aiden looks down, and Erik tosses up the longsword as clumsily as a cumbersome sack of grain. Aiden barely snags it by the hilt.

He yells down, "Thanks, Lachland! Next time, cut ma heid off, why don' ya?!"

As five more soldiers rush him, Erik returns, "Aye, I should! Now, do some work, ya lazy Scot!"

He and the other men run headfirst into the army.

Aiden heads down the stairs to aid Erik, when a whistling sounds from overhead. Evelyn screams. He gazes up at the landing, witnessing Gwydion's eyes widen in fear. A pool of blood spreads across his chest, and he stumbles backward. The

green wall falls, and soldiers rush in to meet Erik and his men below. Aiden realizes there is an arrow in Gwydion's chest. He looks up at the castle window opposite the landing.

A hooded archer is perched on one of the castle walls, peering through the window with his bow coiled. He has a full beard, and the hand holding the grip of his bow has been severely burned. Evelyn leaves her cloak over Jamie and runs toward Gwydion.

Aiden reaches out his hand. "Evelyn, no!"

An arrow grazes past her as she flings herself down beside Gwydion. Aiden searches his surroundings for something to fend off the archer.

The flutter of wings echoes above him. Sain launches at the archer, bearing his hooked, bright yellow beak and sharp talons. The archer exudes a toothy grin. A gold crown on his right canine is illuminated by the destructive fires of the castle. He runs off, down the wall.

Aiden leaps up the stairs and falls to his knees beside Evelyn, who is leaning over Gwydion. She holds her father's hand to her chest, and tears wet her face. Aiden looks from Evelyn to Gwydion. Gwydion's face grows pale. Aiden has never felt so helpless.

Gwydion speaks faintly, "Son..." He reaches out for Aiden.

Aiden takes his hand. "Aye, Your Grace?"

Gwydion's words tremble. "Yes. My answer to the question you asked me is yes. You are a good man, Aiden Shaw. Take care of my daughter. God save the new king and Scotland too."

Aiden's bottom lip quivers as tears well up in his eyes.

Gwydion releases Aiden's hand and grips Evelyn's with both of his. He says, "I love you, my *pili pala*. You look so much like your mother."

Evelyn's eyes are puffy as lines of tears stain her face. She

squeezes his hands. “I love you too, father. You’ll be back with her soon.”

Gwydion’s eyes close, and his hands relax. Evelyn lowers her head and silently weeps.

Aiden notices more soldiers marching up the left stairwell. He jumps up and takes the whimpering Jamie into his arms. “Evie, we have ta go!”

He pulls her to her feet. She looks back in anguish as she is forced to release her father’s hand.

They make for the righthand stairwell. A soldier fighting Erik’s men notices them and climbs the stairs to meet them. Aiden shifts Jamie to his left hip to put a barrier between the prince and the soldier. The soldier draws his sword.

Evelyn, in a fit of rage, rips the longsword from Aiden’s sheath and positions herself between him and the soldier. The soldier swings at her, but she slides down the banister and slices the inside of his knee from behind. He yells in pain and turns to face her. She meets his sword, pushing him backward with her body weight. Aiden grabs the blade from his boot and stabs the soldier in the neck. The soldier falls to the ground.

Aiden and Evelyn reach the bottom of the stairs, finally meeting Erik and the other men. Another cannon ball bursts through the side of the castle, and the force of the blast knocks them all to the ground. The terrace above them begins to crumble. Those who can stand try to outrun the rubble falling around them, but Evelyn trips and tumbles over a piece of debris.

Aiden spins around and watches in terror as the immense pieces of stone from the stairwell fall in what feels like slow motion. There is nothing he can do.

Evelyn has no choice. She whispers, “Forgive me, father.”

Looking away and closing her eyes, she raises her hands. The stones stop midair, and then they reverse, blowing backward. Erik takes a deep breath and pushes himself to his feet. He helps Evelyn up. The English soldiers stare in terror,

then run off into the interior of the castle. Erik squeezes Evelyn's shoulder and chases after them.

Aiden watches after Erik, compelled by the instinctual urge to follow, but he shakes it off. He has something far more precious in his care. He kisses Jamie's head and grabs Evelyn's hand. They sprint toward the opening to the tunnel.

They close the door just as another explosion reverberates throughout the castle. Smoke seeps through the outline of the door as they race through the passageway.

A crash is heard, and the tunnel behind them starts to collapse. They run faster.

They pull themselves up into the inn and slam the door behind them. Mac hears the commotion and rushes into the storeroom. The three of them sit there on the worn wooden floor, breathing fast, covered in blood and soot.

Mac exclaims, "What the-?" Then, he notices Jamie curled up in Evelyn's arms. The boy holds onto her for dear life, his eyes still shoved shut. Mac's eyes grow wide. "The prince."

Aiden wipes soot off Jamie's face and looks up at the innkeeper. "I need ya ta hide him, Mac. At least until this is all over. King Henry's men will be comin' fer both of them, the boy and Evelyn. They both have targets on their heids, an' it is ma duty ta keep them safe."

Aiden stands up and brushes himself off. Mac helps Evelyn to her feet and leads her and Jamie to his bedroom off the storeroom. Aiden turns on his heel.

When the innkeeper realizes he is not following, he looks back. He demands, "Well, where're *you* goin'?"

Aiden replies, "I have ta go back."

"It's over, boy!"

"It's no' over. We canna let them take our home." He marches out the storeroom door.

Mac hears the front door to the inn shut.

As Aiden steps onto the cobblestones, carnage surrounds him. Fires ravage many of the homes along the street. A child cries, tugging on his lifeless mother's blouse, as she lies partially covered under the wooden rubble of their home.

The sounds fade away, and he can hear only a ringing in his ears. He cannot seem to focus his eyes. There are so many lights.

Then, in front of him, he sees Godfraid hobbling down the street. Erik is slung over his arm. Aiden runs to his shipmates.

Godfraid looks up at Aiden and struggles to speak. "He's in a right shape, he is."

Aiden throws Erik's other arm over his shoulder.

Erik looks over at Aiden and says, "Good ta see ya, Shaw." His head drops again.

Aiden looks from Erik to Godfraid. "Here, let's get 'im into the inn."

Aiden turns the knob and pushes the door open with his foot. They carry Erik inside and slouch him into a chair at one of the round wooden tables.

Mac comes running from behind the bar. "Dear God, Shaw!"

Aiden responds, "He's really hurt, Mac." He looks down at the deep, bloody gash across his friend's broad chest. "I need some cloth if ye've got any."

Mac huffs and hurries back through the storeroom door.

"Whisky, O'Reilly."

Godfraid nods and walks around the bar. Mac exits the storeroom with some old rags but almost drops them when he sees Godfraid with his spirits.

Mac retorts, "Is this really the time, boy-o?"

Aiden rips Erik's shirt off and calls, "Mac!"

Mac shakes his head and continues over to Erik. He

grumbles as he rips the rags into strips, “Bleedin’ all o’er ma bloody furniture. Ain’t never gonna get that oot.”

Aiden walks over to the fireplace and picks up the poker. He looks to Godfraid and says, “Awright, go ahead. Let’s flush it out.”

Godfraid grabs Erik’s shoulder and says, “Hold on, lad.” He pours whisky over the wound.

Erik winces, already too far into his pain to feel much else.

Aiden plunges the fire poker into the coals and strides back over to where Erik sits slumped in the chair.

Erik raises his hand. “Hang on.”

Aiden pauses right before the poker reaches Erik’s skin. Erik grabs the bottle of whisky on the table and takes a large swig. He then motions for Aiden to come on. Aiden presses the fire poker against Erik’s skin. Erik howls in pain. The poker cauterizes Erik’s wound, and the bleeding stops.

Evelyn bursts through the storeroom door. “What the hell is going on in here?”

Erik grimaces in pain, as the rest look up at her. With a distressed expression, she looks back and forth between Erik and Aiden. She then whisks back into the storeroom, grabs a wooden bucket, and heads out the back door. She quickly draws water from the well, keeping a constant watch on her surroundings.

Screams and explosions sound all around the city, and fires blaze in the alley behind the inn. She takes some willow bark from the stores she keeps there for Aiden, as well as another of Mac’s rags, and then she hurries back to the men. Godfraid wraps Mac’s homemade bandage strips around Erik’s wound. Erik’s face is pale and clammy.

Evelyn hands the willow bark and damp rag to Aiden. She says, “Here, see if he’ll chew on this, and pat his head. He’s going into shock. We need to keep him with us.”

Aiden obliges.

She walks over to the bar and says, “I’ll make him some tea to bring him down.” She looks at Mac. “Do you have any chamomile or valerian root?”

“Aye. Come with me, ma lady.”

As Mac and Evelyn search the stores, Aiden and Godfraid help Erik up the stairs to find a bed.



AFTER STEEPING THE GROUND VALERIAN ROOT AND CHAMOMILE flowers in hot water, Evelyn strains the tea into a cup. She locates some heather honey behind the bar and adds two spoonfuls, to deter infection.

As Mac takes the tea to Erik, Evelyn sets to work making a poultice of comfrey root and marigold to apply to the cauterized wound.

She is startled by Aiden’s hand on her shoulder. “Is there anythin’ ye need?”

She stops mixing the paste and places her hand on his. Feeling his warm chest against her back and his steady heartbeat, she closes her eyes and breathes for what feels like the first time in hours. A tear rolls down her cheek. She opens her eyes again and whispers, “Excuse me.”

She takes the paste and hurries up the stairs.



THE FRONT DOOR TO THE INN FLIES OPEN, AND IN STRUTS JACQUES. Aiden looks over with a start. Jacques looks surprised to see Aiden. “Made it out, I see, Admiral.”

Aiden nods. “And you, shipmate. Where were ye anyway?”

Jacques’s eye twitches as he replies, “On the wall, fighting the lot of them.”

Aiden crinkles his forehead and looks around the room. He is confused by the tension.

Jacques looks up as Godfraid makes his way down the stairs. He says, “Godfraid, Murray said he saw you pulling Erik in here. Is he...?”

Godfraid answers, “Hangin’ on. Lady Evelyn is tendin’ ta ‘im now.”

“Evelyn...?”

Aiden quickly changes the conversation. “Well, who’s left? What does our opposition look like?”

Jacques responds, “I mean, as far as we know, we are looking at it.”

Aiden rubs his brow. “Since we canna get back ta the castle, we need ta get into the city armory.”

Godfraid retorts, “Admiral, we *three* cannot take down the English army.”

Aiden grabs some cloth and string from behind the bar. He looks up and says, “Aye, we can. I’ve got an idea.”



TOWNSPEOPLE SCURRY IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION, AS AIDEN, Godfraid, and Jacques sprint up High Street, toward the castle. The men hear braying coming from a nearby close. They peer around the corner to find two horses tethered to a cart. The driver is slumped over, and there is blood trickling down the crown of his head.

They roll the body off the driver’s seat and quietly round the horses into the alleyway behind the close. When they reach the rear of the city armory, Jacques jumps down from the cart and kicks in the door.

Jacques and Godfraid move for the guns and swords, but Aiden picks up a barrel of powder. He looks to them and says, “This!”

Godfraid and Jacques exchange confused expressions. One sets down a hand cannon while the other conceals a blade within his boot, and then they both proceed to assist their leader. They roll the barrels in an assembly line from the back of the armory to load up the cart.

Once satisfied, Aiden states, “We have ta get ta Cragingalt. I’ll drive the soldiers there, so ye both can get back ta the cannons at the castle. Mons Meg should make ‘em retreat. If we can get the castle back, we can force ‘em out.”

Godfraid positions his hands on his hips and retorts, “An’ how’re ye going ta carry ‘em up there all on yer own, Shaw? Are ye daft?”

Aiden points to his eye, then out at Godfraid. “Ye’ll see.”

As another group of townspeople flee past, Godfraid and Jacques roll into the back of the cart. Aiden drapes the linen cover across them and pulls the dead man’s hat over his head. He slaps the reins against the backs of the horses and yells, “Ya!”

The horses trot onto the High Street.

As they reach the edge of the city, two English soldiers hold up their hands to stop the cart. Aiden reins in the horses and wraps the dead man’s shawl around him.

One soldier walks up to Aiden and says, “We must examine your cargo, traveler. We have reason to believe some persons of interest are being harbored by some of the citizens of Edinburgh.”

The other soldier walks along the side of the cart.

Aiden eyes him. He responds in a timid tone, “Well, I’m in an awfu’ hurry, good sirs. I have ta make it ta Leith within the hour. Could ya no’ let me through, just the once?”

As Aiden chats with the soldiers, Godfraid and Jacques slide out the back. The second soldier continues to canvas the cart slowly, when Jacques steps in front of him. He covers the soldier’s mouth and stabs him in the neck. The soldier drops to

the ground.

The first soldier hears the commotion and looks toward Jacques. Godfraid crosses in front of the horses and slits the soldier's throat from behind. He sinks into Godfraid's arms, so he drags him into the shadows. Jacques follows with the other soldier. They cover them with the linen and then hop back into the cart. They continue on their mission.

Aiden brings the horses to a stop as they reach the hill overlooking the burgh, the place he rested peacefully with Evelyn just hours before. He jumps down from the cart, and Godfraid and Jacques slide off the back.

Aiden says, "Now, there should be a boat down by the shore. Take it ta the West Sally Port, an' that should get ya back into the castle unseen. Grab whoever can still walk ta help ya. Get ta the cannons, an' once you see 'em climbin' the hill, *fire*."

Godfraid replies, "Aye, cap'n." He runs off toward the loch.

Jacques cups Aiden's shoulder and says, "If this works, we will be heroes."

Aiden puts his hand on Jacques's shoulder in return. "If this works, naeb'dy will ken we were here. Now, *go!*"

Aiden gets to work using the powder from the armory and the string and cloth he took from the inn to create the illusion of two thousand matchlock muskets firing in the direction of the castle.

In the pitch-black of night, the English soldiers mistake the flashes of light for an approaching attack. Considering the castle won, the troops head for the hill. They leave behind a few men to guard the fortress, but Godfraid, Jacques, and the others quickly pick them off one by one.

As the soldiers climb Cragingalt, the opposition has a clear view of them from the ramparts. Aiden takes cover in the reeds of the willow tree as the cannon balls ravage the hill. The explosions go on for hours as Aiden hears the cries of

men meeting their maker just feet away from him.

As the sun rises, the smoke begins to settle, and those left alive realize they have been defeated. Aiden hears the calls and cheers of excitement from his men across the loch as the English soldiers retreat from Edinburgh. They have won.



CHAPTER 17

THE PURPLE MOOR

Twelve years later, three canvas tents dot the outskirts of the expansive moors of Northernmost England. The sun slowly sets below the endless horizon, and darkness creeps in over the purple heather of the hills. Evelyn slips off her leather gloves and warms her hands over the roaring fire that she, Godfraid, and Erik are settled around.

Only half of Evelyn's fair-skinned face peeks out above the thick, fur collar of her riding coat, and her breath rises into the brisk night air. The horses graze freely nearby, seemingly unbothered by the cold. Godfraid attempts to keep a woolen blanket around his shoulders while tending to the stew simmering in the small iron cauldron hanging above the fire.

He swears through shivers, "Damned weather; miss ma warm ship."

Erik is propped back on his saddle, sharpening his knife. He shouts at Godfraid, "Ey, stop yer chitterin'! It's not that bad. At least there's no snow on the ground yet."

Aiden appears from the dark of the forest, a pile of tender laid over his outstretched arms. He strategically places each

piece of wood around the pit, and then he stokes the ashes with a tree branch to make the fire grow.

He looks over at Erik and inflects his voice above the sound of the flames, “Lachland, can ya gie me a hand?” He signals toward the misty forest.

Erik nods and replies, “Aye.” He sheathes his knife and jumps to his feet.

Aiden touches Evelyn’s shoulder. While bundling her coat closer, she looks up at him and he smiles warmly.

The two men stride off into the dark fog.

Godfraid hands Evelyn a steaming bowl. “How ya holdin’ up, ma lady?”

Evelyn spoons a few bites into her mouth. She shrugs. “I just feel so helpless. I can’t figure out how to get us there any faster.”

Godfraid eyes her sympathetically. He reaches over and touches her arm. “I see the wheels turnin’ in yer mind. Ya don’t have ta do this all on yer own any longer. We will get them back, Evelyn, and we will do it together.”

Evelyn forces a smile and says, “Thank you, Godfraid.”

Aiden and Erik exit the forest, both with armfuls of large wooden beams.

Evelyn’s eyes widen. “What are those for?”

Aiden rams one into the ground and grunts, “To keep the kelpies away.”

She squints her eyes and questions, “How’s that?”

As Aiden continues to shove the beams into the ground around the circumference of their campsite, Erik looks her way and replies, “They’re scared a fire, the mangy, sticky devils. This’ll keep ‘em away fer the night.”

Aiden circles the beams, citing the spell to light them aflame. As he ignites the last one, Gara trots inside the ring of

torches and settles down.

Godfraid chuckles, “That mare trusts ya too much, Shaw.”

Aiden huffs at his mate but strokes Gara proudly.

Gara nuzzles the back of Evelyn’s coat. Evelyn sets down her bowl for Gara to finish and stands.

She curtsies and states, “I’m off to bed, good sirs.”

The three men nod in her direction. “Ma lady.”

She heads toward the middle tent.

Erik sighs and sulks back down against his saddle. Godfraid hands him and Aiden bowls, and both men gulp down the meal.

Erik pries at Aiden, “So, what’s it like to have yer lady back, man? She’s always been tough, that one, but I never imagined she’d have come outta the Red Forest unscathed. Now, she’s out here ridin’ with us as well as any cavalry.”

Aiden’s mouth is sticky with stew as he replies, “I mean, it’s braw ta be around ‘er again. She’s the on’y person who’s ever really made me feel like I belong. I’ve been existin’ fer all these years, but she makes me feel like a twenty-year-auld lad again. Fu’ o’ life. So much has changed though... sometimes it feels as though we’re different folk awthegither. Y’ken?”

Erik returns, “Nae, I don’t know, actually. I’ve on’y laid with lasses from town ta town since I was a welp. Ya know women love their sailors. I couldn’t imagine someone makin’ me feel like that. Ye’re one a the lucky ones, Shaw.”

Aiden says dejectedly, “Aye, I ken. I’m jus’ ready ta get our family back thegither. As soon as I come back in, they’re in harm’s way again...”

Godfraid interjects, “This isn’t yer fault, Shaw. They must have Jacques on somethin’. He would never turn on us like this.”

Aiden changes the subject, “Well, I guess I’m headed ta

bed as well. See ye lads in the mornin’.” He watches Erik take a gulp from his flask and continues, “An’ dinnae get too blootered. We have a lang ride themorra.”

Erik quickly swallows the whisky and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. He responds, “Since when d’ye care about stayin’ sober, mate? We don’t all have nice-lookin’ lasses ta lay under the covers wit. Wha’dya want me ta do? I barely sleep fer the nightmares.”

“I dinnae ken, write a poem ta one o’ those many lassies or somethin’.” He heads toward Evelyn’s tent.

Erik retorts, “A poem, Shaw? I ain’t no bloody bard!”

Aiden rolls his eyes at Erik’s protests, but he also feels for his friend. In truth, this is the longest he has been sober in many years.

Erik looks to Godfraid with a furrowed brow and says, “I mean, I can barely write. I can’t even read Shaw’s maps past the pictures.”

Godfraid looks to Erik, grabs his lute, and begins singing *The Wild Rover* as loudly and off-tune as he can.

Erik interrupts, “I’m not sure we have *enough* drink with us fer this...”

Godfraid gets right in Erik’s face, “An’ it’s no, no, never; never, no more!”

Erik laughs and pushes him over as he takes another ladle of stew from the cauldron.



INSIDE THE TENT, EVELYN RESTS AT THE FOOT OF THE PALLET ON THE ground, reading a book. As Aiden enters, she tucks it into her travel bag. She then stands and heads for a hook attached to a beam of the tent. She removes her riding jacket and begins to unlace the front of her gown.

Aiden revels at the opportunity. “Here, let me help ye wi’

that.”

Evelyn giggles as he walks up behind her and delicately pulls her sleeves from her shoulders. Gently, he kisses her neck, along her back, between her shoulder blades. She closes her eyes and sighs at the sensation.

As he unhurriedly removes her smock, he kisses each inch of skin he uncovers. He worships every curve that lands beneath his tongue. As he leans to his knees, he runs his fingers down her sides and delicately kisses the small of her back. She turns to him, and he admires her flawless form before him.

She pulls him to his feet and grabs his face to kiss him ardently. He is ignited. He grasps the back of her hair and presses his lips to hers, drinking her, devouring her with animalistic passion. He yearns to feel the warmth and solace of her body surrounding him. He breathes in the scent of her hair and her skin. That smell. Star jasmine.

He picks her up and carries her to the bed. He leans over her, basking in her radiance, running his fingers through her hair. She pushes him over on the bed and climbs on top of him. He freezes, panicked that anyone else might have control of his person.

She smiles and moves his short raven locks out of his face. She presses her lips to his neck, the exposed parts of his chest. Next, she gently unties his blouse.

He grabs her wrist and tosses her back onto the bed. He attempts to conceal his distress by ravishing her with kisses. Then, his locket falls out of his shirt and hangs in the space between them.

She caresses the pendant and scrutinizes it. Astonished, she says, “You still have it.”

He smiles shyly. “It hasn’t left ma person since ye gave it ta me.”

She tries to pull the blouse over his head, but he stops her hand. She squints at him and asks, “What are you afraid of,

Aiden?”

He sighs and eyes her helplessly. “I’m no proud o’ what I’ve become, ma love. I fear I no longer have the body o’ the man ya fell in love wi’.”

“I’ve seen the scars, Aiden. And I feel the scars on your heart. But your past is not who you are, my husband. Do not be afraid of me. I will never judge you, just as you have never judged me.”

He slowly pulls the blouse over his head, all the while keeping Evelyn’s gaze for reassurance. He tosses the shirt across the room. As he leans back over her bare body, he feels exposed, infantile even, in his battle to wrangle his reservations.

She delicately clutches the back of his neck and pulls him into a kiss. When their lips part, he exhales as her touch restores something deep in his soul. She gently runs her fingertips down his arms and across his back. He shivers at her touch. The ecstasy of the charge between them combined with the fear of being completely exposed intoxicates him. He can feel his pulse quicken.

She subtly coaxes him back onto his back, and she climbs on top of him. She kisses down his body, and in turn, he melts into her hands.

He closes his eyes and drifts off to the first night they made love, to a time when she was the only thing in the world that mattered. As he opens them again, for a split second, he sees the young maiden he fell so deeply in love with so many years ago. Before his eyes, he watches her bloom into the spectacular woman she has become. His gifted, ever fierce lady. His wife.

She gradually pulls off his trousers. He loses his thoughts as he lays his head back and enjoys every touch of her fingertips. He cannot help but moan from the irresistible euphoria that overtakes him as he sinks inside of her.

He watches her every move, traces every motion, never

wanting to lose this moment. The way her skin shines with the heat shared between them. The way her body reacts to his. As she rides him, he instinctually grips her hips to pull her deeper. She tosses her head back, sighing from the pressure.

It quickly becomes too difficult to remain a contented observer. The pleasure is so overwhelming that he can barely catch his breath. He sits up as she continues to move against him. He massages her breasts with his lips. She sighs and pulls him against her.

He clutches her close, further motivated by her fervent heartbeat. He grips the back of her neck as he releases, and she leans in to kiss him, to breathe in his surrender.

They pull back and hang in the interim, their foreheads resting against each other while they try to catch their breath. He caresses her cheek, utterly enthralled by her presence, her physique, and the power she holds over his psyche. Even in the frigid air, his heart feels warm, as if he is being mended from the inside out.



COVERED ONLY SLIGHTLY BY THE SHEET, SWEAT COATS AIDEN'S bare, muscular body. Evelyn lies in the crevice between his chest and arm with her head resting on his shoulder. Her slender hand is elevated on his chest, toying with the Saint Michael's pendant.

She looks up at him as he stares at the ceiling of the tent. Using her index finger, she follows the scars on his skin. She touches one on the inside of his arm and asks, "What is this one from?"

He continues to stare at the ceiling as he replies, "A Cuelebre from ma time in Spain. They paid me ta clear it oot o' a cave because the locals wanted ta mine the precious stones from it." He motions with his free hand. "It's this huge serpent thing wi' bat wings. The bugger got a good chunk oot o' ma arm."

“And this?” She touches a long slash that runs down his chest and side.

“A Plaaggeesten. They’re poltergeists in the purest sense. He threw a whole cart at me, horses an’ aw.”

She traces a circular scar on his left shoulder. “What about this one?”

“Well, that was from a Centaur’s arrow, but that story has a happy endin’. Helped ‘em agree ta a peace treaty.”

He suddenly gets up from the bed, rubbing his hands together while blowing on them to ease the chill. He digs through his satchel.

Aiden’s back is encased in an array of raised slash marks, and he is expecting her next question when it comes. “Are those from-?”

“The Tower, aye.”

His back still turned, he finds his water skin and takes a long drink.

“I’m sorry, ma lady. I’m no really used ta all the questions. I’m usually alone. An’ if I’m no’, then I usually have ma clothes on.”

She laughs, “Usually?”

He almost chokes on his water. He wipes his mouth and answers, “I mean, I suppose O’Reilly an’ Peerson’ll have seen me nakit, but they dinnae ask questions.”

She giggles, and he smiles back at her heartily. He strolls back over to the bed and slides under the covers.

She turns to him, her head propped up on her hand. She asks curiously, “Have you ever held another in the way you held me tonight?”

He faces her, propping his head on his hand as well. “Since holdin’ you?”

“Yes, my love.”

“Never, Evie. All these years, I’ve never been able ta look at another lass without seein’ yer face. I thought I’d never feel again, but here ye are. I feel risen from the deid, like I have another chance at salvation. Ye’re the on’y thing that has ever set ma heart on fire.”

She smiles and curls up to him. He pulls her close, rests his chin on the top of her head, and breathes in her scent deeply. He runs his fingers through her long tresses. She looks up at him, and he smiles as he settles into his pillow and continues to play with her hair.

“It’s good to see you smile, Aiden. I wish I could save you from all the pain you’ve been through.”

He closes his eyes. “With you, another piece o’ ma soul heals e’ry day, Evelyn. I’ve no’ slept this well in years. Now that I’m wi’ ye though...”

Within a few breaths, he is sleeping soundly.



CHAPTER 18

RED SKIES

Aiden stands in an open field beneath blood red skies. His heart thumps in his skull, and his peripherals are so blurry that he cannot make out the faces of the hundreds of men who swarm past him, so close he can feel the breeze off their armor. Shouts echo in every direction, and the clashing of metal swords rings out, over, and over, each clang jarring to his core.

Hoofbeats advance swiftly from behind him; Aiden receives a solid blow to the back of the head. He falls to the ground.

Lying face down in the mud, barely conscious, he can feel the warm blood on his temple. He clambers to his knees and can make out the piles of dead bodies before him. As he crawls, he touches the stiff arm of one of the men. The face of the man materializes to reveal it is Erik. Godfraid's lifeless frame rests next to the Norseman.

As his eyes continue to canvas the mass grave, he sees Evelyn and the bairns lying there, motionless and bloody. At that moment, he is dragged backward. He fights against the

faceless soldiers' grips, crying out to his family.



AIDEN GASPS. HE OPENS HIS EYES TO FIND HIMSELF IN THE TENT ON the moorlands. Leaping from the bed, he rushes to his satchel. He retrieves the flask and takes a hurried gulp from it. He gingerly returns beneath the blankets. Restless, he watches the ceiling of the tent flutter in the breeze and listens to the river flow outside.

He looks over as he hears Evelyn stirring. She gives him a sleepy smile. Though still shaken, he is redirected by her company. He touches her face, and they share a tender kiss.

The horses bray and stomp outside the tent; something is wrong. Aiden and Evelyn jump up from either side of the bed.

He throws his hand out at her and whispers, "Stay here."

He pulls on his trousers and grabs his sheath. He then stealthily leaves the tent.

She quickly dresses and steps into her shoes. Still pulling on her coat, she scurries out, nearly colliding with Aiden. He is frozen just steps away from the tent.

A strange black horse with empty, yellow eyes stands by the edge of the river. The kelpie and Aiden watch each other quietly, neither moving a muscle. However, as the horse-shaped beast notices Evelyn, it quickly transforms into a figure of peat moss and pondweed, then dives into the water.

Evelyn whispers, "Oh. They're far less pleasant-looking in real life."

This breaks Aiden's concentration. "Aye." He looks back to see her concerned expression. Smirking, he says, "We've got ta get ya oot o' the hoose more, ma lady. There's on'y so much ye can learn from yer books." He looks around at the circles of ash that surround the camp. "Keep yer wits about ya. The fire on'y got us ta dawn."

The buttery orange sunrise gleams off his sword as he slides it back into the sheath.

Erik still sleeps on his saddle next to the smoldering campfire, undisturbed by the horses or the kelpie. Godfraid walks out of his tent. He pulls his blouse over his hairy belly and scratches his auburn hair. He throws his boot at Erik, striking him in the chest. Erik's snoring falters as he starts and opens his eyes.

Aiden laughs and says to Erik, "So nice o' ye ta join the livin'." He ducks back into his tent to finish dressing.

Erik notices the boot and throws it at Godfraid's head. Godfraid sidesteps neatly and laughs. Erik groans and rolls over. He stands up, stretches, and cracks his back and knuckles. Godfraid pulls on his shoes.

Aiden exits the tent again and says, "Well, let's rustle up some breakfast. I'll take the horses down ta the river fer a drink. Then, we'll get this stuff packed up an' get movin'. We've got a lot o' ground ta cover today."

Evelyn starts some porridge over the fire, while Erik and Godfraid begin to take down the tents. Aiden dunks his head in the icy burn and flips it back up to get the sopping wet hair out of his eyes. Gara kicks some water at him. Shocked, he splashes some her way. She neighs and prances around. He cannot help but laugh at the silly creature.



THE GROUP TROTS ALONG A TRAIL THAT WEAVES BETWEEN THE rolling emerald peaks. The sun is high, and the sky is clear, but the chilly air still cuts through their coats. Aiden rides Gara, while Evelyn keeps Jacques's Friesian at their flank. Godfraid drinks from his flask, and Erik lets his Belgian fall in line while he fades in and out of a nap.

As they reach the top of a hill, Gara whinnies.

Aiden holds her reins steady and asks, "Wha's wrong,

hen?”

He follows her sightline as she flares her nostrils and stomps.

She rears up onto her hind legs, as a huge, bird-like creature forms out of the mountain heather. Aiden dismounts, landing on his feet. He slaps Gara on the rear, and she takes off back down the hill.

The beast resembles a feathered pterodactyl and is about the size of a whale. It hovers off the ground and into the air. The features of its body flow as if it is made of floating water. It dives at them, screeching like a demonic hawk. Evelyn lays flat against her horse while Godfraid and Erik spread out across the pasture to make the group harder to target. Their horses snort and paw at the ground.

The feathered beast circles the group. Aiden whips his longsword from its sheath and holds it out toward the bird. The beast swoops back down, this time in Evelyn’s direction.

Aiden yells, “Evie, move!”

She dives off her horse, as the beast grabs it with its claws. It drops the Friesian a few feet away. As the horse attempts to stand, the beast stomps on it with its sharp talons and rips into it with its huge, toothed beak.

Evelyn stares at the beast, pale from fright. She picks herself up from the ground and sprints toward a lonely tree at the bottom of the hill. The beast squawks and chases the moving target. She stumbles, falls, and the beast dives for her.

The men bang their belongings, hooting and hollering.

The noise loosens the bird’s concentration, and it slows mid-flight.

Evelyn heaves to her feet and leaps out of the way, not a moment too soon, as the beast gouges where she lay. She dashes as it pecks at her.

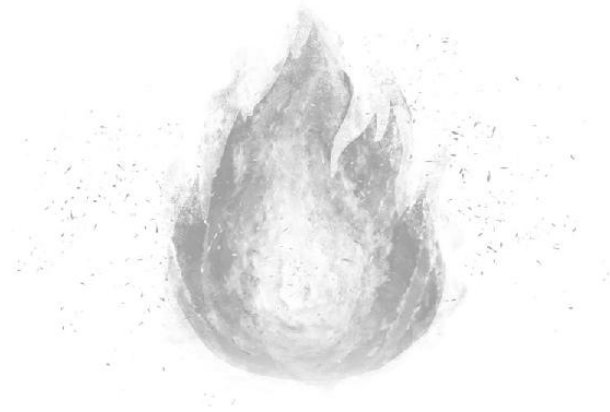
Aiden whistles as he steps onto the top of the hill. He yells, “Ey, ye great, ugly pigeon! O’er here!”

The beast takes to the sky once again and dives at him. He holds out his palm, and the bird is blasted backward. It circles back around, and he uses his other palm to shoot it back. The bird swoops down from behind him. He stands still and closes his eyes as he listens to its gliding feathers. At the last moment, he points his sword up under his arm and leans forward. The bird is sliced across the entirety of its abdomen. It continues overhead for a few hundred feet before crashing into the purple hillside.

Aiden straightens up and shakes his dripping hands. Too many times in his life, he has been drenched in beastly bodily fluids.

Evelyn runs to him. She grabs his arm and asks, “What *was* that thing?”

He wipes his mouth with his sleeve and answers, “That was a boobrie. Largest I’ve ever come across.” He looks over at the lifeless beast lying on the ground and continues, “Wad make fer a decent meal if we wernae heided ta Newcastle.”



CHAPTER 19

THE HILDYARD ESTATE

The group gallops to the peak of a rocky crag at the edge of the moor. The expansive sea stretches out before them.

Evelyn peers over Aiden's shoulder and points. "There it is!"

On a cliff overlooking the ocean sits a massive, white stone manor house surrounded by a tall, crenelated wall. Its flat face hosts an off-center, round-headed entrance framed with cable molding. Turrets, dormers, cannon water spouts, and a black slate roof embellish the impressive four stories.

The group ambles down the side of the crag and gallops the remaining distance, prudently navigating the many meticulously tilled fields. They calm their horses and trot through the open gate of the manor, into the courtyard. A few stable hands rest on barrels while eating their bread and stew. They are surprised by the unexpected commotion and spring up to meet the guests.

Aiden jumps down from Gara before she even comes to a halt. One of the stable hands drops his bread as they each look

from Aiden to Evelyn in shock. As if they are seeing ghosts.

From atop Gara, Evelyn projects, “We request an audience with the Earl of Northumberland, Lord Hildyard and the Countess, Lady Hildyard.”

The large double doors to the manor house open, and there stands Elizabeth Hildyard. Evelyn’s blonde friend from court has adorned her full figure with a magnificent, Tyrian purple gown. Her outfit is richly decorated with gold beading across the bodice, a golden broach, and sleeves tipped with honey brown fur. Her hair is pulled back into a French hood, and she wears a pearl necklace with a pendant of amethyst, emeralds, and rubies.

Elizabeth looks faint as she witnesses her best friend standing before her. She touches her skirt and exclaims, “Oh my God.”

She rushes down to meet Evelyn. Evelyn smiles as Elizabeth squeezes her in a hug.

Elizabeth touches Evelyn’s face. She cries, “You’re alive!”

A tall, burly man with a bald head and lavish clothes steps over the threshold, leaning on a cane. In a deep voice, John Hildyard bellows to Aiden, “Bloody hell! A jester come to entertain, is it?”

He slowly hobbles down the steps. Aiden struts up to him, firmly takes his hand, and they embrace.

Aiden pulls back and says, “Good ta see ya, John.”

John’s cheeks are rosy. He motions to Erik and Godfrid and says, “Come in! Come in! We’d love some company!”

He grabs Aiden’s shoulder and leads him toward the steps to the house.

Elizabeth takes Evelyn’s hand and says, “We’ll add some extra plates for dinner!”

They all gather around a long oak dinner table dressed in damask table linens. Elaborate tapestries drape the pastel blue

walls, hand-painted with charming florals and picturesque scenes. Intricate carvings embellish the room's trim pieces, and exotic vases, bowls, and trinkets line the stands around the room.

Spread across the table is a pig's head with a bright red apple in its mouth, pheasant, hare, fresh oysters, lamb pie in pastry coffins. Baskets of manchet bread, roasted turnip, penny bun mushrooms, honey glazed carrots. Bowls of blackberries, custard, and a wild garlic and potato soup complete the lavish feast.

Aiden and John tell crude jokes and laugh, while Evelyn and Elizabeth eye each other and giggle in their own conversation. Godfraid and Erik stare uncomfortably at the overwhelming amount of food. They both look to Aiden for guidance. Aiden smirks back at them. The Hildyards always did spare no expense.

John interrupts the staring match. "Eat up, boys!"

As Godfraid and Erik take their cue to dig in, John looks back to Aiden. "Ya know, you've become quite the legend around these parts, Lord Shaw. I've heard so many tales of your war stories over the years. I couldn't believe it was my old friend from court who had such an honorary and fearsome reputation across the Continent. I'm quite pleased to see you alive, and with dear Lady Evelyn here in tow. What brings you all the way to Newcastle this day?"

Aiden's stomach drops as he replies, "We're nae here fer the best o' reasons, ma laird. Our son an' daughter have been stolen from us an' taken inta what we believe ta be King Henry's charge. We're heided ta London ta sort it oot."

"What?!" John slams his fist down on the table, declaring his rage. His entire face turns a bright crimson red.

Elizabeth cries, "They've got your babies?"

She grabs her husband's hand, and the heat in his face begins to dissipate.

In an attempt to regain his composure, John leans back in

his ornate dining chair and pats his sizable belly. He asks as calmly as he can, his voice shaking, “What can I do to help, my brother? I’ve got weapons, ammunition, horses, men... what do you need?” He loses his coolness. “I’m ready to start another uprising against England!”

Aiden leans over to John, cups his shoulder, and responds, “That all may be needed in good time, John, but fer now, we need ta rely on stealth. I’m sure Henry has ‘em locked in the Tower. I jus’ need a way in.”

John nods, breathing heavily and rubbing his shiny chin.

Aiden looks to Evelyn and continues, “An’ I also wouldnae mind gettin’ ma lady a warm bed fer the night. We’ve had quite the trek so far.”

John claps his hands and bellows around the room, “Well, then, it’s settled, you’ll all stay here until you’re ready for London.” He then looks to Aiden. “And add you in a bath too, my good man. You smell as though you’ve rolled inside a whale carcass.”

Aiden nods back at John and says, “It was a boobrie carcass, John, but close enough.”



EVELYN AND ELIZABETH MOSEY DOWN ONE OF THE MANY HALLWAYS of the manor house. Their arms are interlinked, and they lean against one another.

Elizabeth asserts, “Come, let’s get you into something more exquisite!” She turns to a lady-in-waiting by one of the open doorways and commands, “Mary, please bring us some silks and fabrics.” She turns back to Evelyn, looks her up and down, and continues, “I’m thinking royal blue.”

Mary nods, “Aye, ma lady.” She turns and hurries down the hallway, rounding up two other waiting ladies in the process.

Elizabeth pulls Evelyn into her chambers and flops down on a couch. She coos, “Now, my love, tell me everything! It’s

been ages!”

Evelyn takes a deep breath and smiles. She responds, “I wouldn’t know where to begin, my dearest.” She slumps down next to Elizabeth and lays her head on her shoulder.

Elizabeth frowns and pets Evelyn’s soft hair. Mary and the other ladies soon enter the room with multiple piles of blue linens held out in front of them. Elizabeth, beaming, leaps up to greet them and gathers a heavy, midnight silk in her arms.

“We’ve got plenty of time!” she exclaims.



IN THE DRAWING ROOM, JOHN OFFERS BRANDY AND CIGARS TO HIS unexpected guests. The men discuss a strategy to retrieve the children. John relays he has contacts in York who are part of his northern-based resistance against the crown. These soldiers have rebelled against the king and are in hiding. They know the Tower well.

Aiden and John use a chessboard to brainstorm logistics. Two of John’s best-trained men enter the room, and John ushers them to join the small party. The six of them continue devising a final plan to ensure Aiden and his family make it out of London alive.

Aiden and John step out onto the balcony with their glasses of brandy. They look out across the gorgeous, green lawn to see their wives strolling down the gravel pathway, through the precisely manicured shrubbery. Each of the ladies holds a leash to one of Elizabeth’s little spaniels. They head toward the small pond, which plays host to two majestic swans, several ducks, and many more lily pads.

John looks to Aiden and says heartily, “I don’t know about you, but seeing those two beautiful birds together again warms my heart. It’s been too long, my friend.”

Aiden nods and responds, “Aye, that it does. They keep us young an’ make us auld at the same time, those two. I’m glad

they have each other again.”

John holds his belly and chuckles. He extends his glass to Aiden and says, “To your health.”

Aiden clinks his glass against John’s. “*Slàinte mhath.*”



CHAPTER 20

THE RESISTANCE

The next morning, Elizabeth tucks a pack of food into a saddlebag as Evelyn preps her new, white pony for travel.

Elizabeth complains, “York? John’s got you off to York? Such a lawless city it is, full of thieves and convicts.”

Aiden pats Gara’s withers as he finishes loading his share of the supplies.

“Quite right, ma lady. What better place ta find folks who’ll undermine the crown?”



THE GROUP TROTS INTO THE ENGLISH TOWN OF YORK. THEY STEER their way through the crowds that line the incredibly narrow streets. The town appears to be made entirely of grimy, hay-covered cobblestones and shabby, timber-framed structures. Farm animals amble amongst the townspeople, and Gara snorts at the constant stench of urine. Merchant booths line the lanes, manned by traders with few teeth, and featureless

people walk about, cloaks over their heads in broad daylight.

Aiden notices an image etched into the side of one of the white-washed, tile-shingled buildings, its second story comically looming over the first. The impression is of a cross, its arms all the same length, each limb dwindling in the middle and then expanding again to appear almost like the bottom of a triangle, giving a hammer-like appearance. Saint Cuthbert's Cross, the symbol of the Patron Saint of Northumbria. Aiden looks down to find the same symbol on the parchment John gave him to locate the safehouse.

He jumps down off Gara and strides up to the uninterested man who stands with his arms crossed near the window of the building.

Evelyn, Godfraid, and Erik all bring their horses to a stop and dismount as well. Godfraid begins to tie off their steeds to a stake.

Aiden opens his hands to show them empty. "Hail. I'm lookin' fer a Tobias."

The man peers out from under the brim of his grubby hat, revealing an eye patch and a scarred chin. "Who's askin'?"

"Hildyard sent me."

The man grunts and unhurriedly strolls into the building. He slams the door behind him.

Godfraid looks to Aiden. "Friendly folks around these parts, eh?"

Aiden shrugs.

The door re-opens, and the grumpy guard holds it ajar with his back. He stares at them.

Aiden returns his gaze for a moment and then steps over the threshold. The other three follow.

The group enters a small room with a low ceiling. A dark-skinned man with white hair and a trimmed, ivory beard sits behind a desk, and a smaller man with a slicked-back ponytail

and a longer beard sits next to the desk, his arms crossed and his legs outstretched and overlapped.

The dark-skinned man calls, “Yes?”

Aiden asks, “Tobias?”

Tobias replies, “So, Hildyard sent you, huh? What’s yer name, brother?”

“Shaw. Aiden Shaw, sir.”

The man next to the desk rises quickly. Tobias stands up and throws his palms down on the table. Evelyn jumps.

Tobias shouts, “Hildyard sent King James’s Regent, the Admiral of the Scots Navy, here!”

Aiden steps closer to the men and says, “Now, I dinnae care one way or the other about yer Resistance, lad. I’m here on a different matter.”

Tobias asks, “Which is?”

“I need ta get into the Tower o’ London. Hildyard says ye have some deserters workin’ fer ya who might ken about the inner workin’s. Guard schedules, an’ such.”

Tobias circumvents the table and questions, “What’s in the Tower of London?”

Aiden answers with his own question, “Is transparency goin’ ta get me the information I need? Because the less ya ken, surely the better.”

Tobias crosses the floor to Aiden, his head reaching only the top of Aiden’s breastplate, and he squints into his eyes. He then turns and paces around the room.

He says, “I’ve heard of you, Aiden Shaw. I’ve heard what ye’ve done ta the English merchants, the Turks, fer the Dutch, the Spanish. There’s even a rumor goin’ around that ya took back Edinburgh Castle from the English with nothin’ more than some powder, cloth, an’ string, so I imagine ye’re quite useful in a fight.”

Aiden questions, “What are ye implyin’, good sir?”

Tobias replies, “We have a raid on the English soldiers’ supply shipment tonight. Say, if you help us with the logistics, we’ll get ye what ye need fer the Tower. Deal?”

Aiden squints and follows Tobias in his circle around the room. “There are English soldiers here?”

Tobias answers, “Aye, since the uprising, they’ve occupied the town at King Henry’s command ta ‘keep order.’ They’ve paid off the reeve, an’ they make the townsfolk pay them fer protection.

“Otherwise, they pillage, rape, an’ murder. Half a them do it regardless... Anyway, we’ve been conducting nightly raids on their supply deliveries in an attempt ta force them outta town. If we can get them out, we can push them down. We always get a few a theirs, but they also routinely get a some a ours. We could benefit from learnin’ off a military strategist such as yerself.”

Aiden’s jaw tightens. “Fine.” He takes a seat in front of the desk and asks, “What ya got?”

Tobias makes his way over to his chair and sits down across from Aiden.

Aiden turns back to Erik and says, “Peerson, go with Evelyn ta stock up on supplies. We’ll need ta feed an’ water the horses as well.”

Erik nods. “Aye.”

Aiden then makes eye contact with Evelyn and winks.

He motions for Godfraid to join him. Godfraid strides over and leans against the beam protruding out of the wall next to Aiden.

Aiden provides introductions, “This is Godfraid O’Reilly, ma former Quartermaster an’ dear friend.”

Tobias nods and reaches over the table to shake Godfraid’s hand. Aiden then waves behind him as Evelyn and Erik head

for the door. “An’ this is Erik Peerson, ma former First Mate, an’ this is ma bonnie wife, Evelyn Shaw.”

Tobias nods their way. Evelyn and Erik return the gesture, then exit the safehouse.

Tobias motions to the man next to the desk and says, “This is Roland. He’s my second in command. An’ that was Nick you met outside.”

Aiden nods and reaches over to shake Roland’s hand. As Roland obliges, Aiden notices the severe burn on Roland’s hand. The hairs on the back of his neck stand up, but Tobias’s discussion quickly resecurates his attention.



ERIK USES HIS BURLY FRAME TO MUSCLE HIMSELF AND EVELYN through the crowded streets. Evelyn buys a woven basket, and they purchase a few supplies from each vendor booth they encounter.

A woman’s wails fill the air. Evelyn and Erik halt and search their surroundings for the source of the sound. As the cries continue, the townsfolk carry on with their daily business. This cannot just be a daily occurrence. Evelyn pinpoints the sound to an alley to their right and tosses her basket into Erik’s hands. She sprints down the alleyway.

Erik smiles awkwardly at their current retailer. He sets the basket down on the table and apologizes, “Excuse me, we’ll be right back.” He charges down the alley after Evelyn.

Evelyn reaches a crying young woman, who sits on the ground, holding a wee boy across her lap. She falls down beside the woman and asks, “What’s the matter?”

The woman looks up and replies, “He’s not breathin’.”

Evelyn pries, “Did he eat anything strange?” She touches the boy’s arm, and his sleeve rises. He is covered in red bumps. “What happened?”

The woman answers, “He was playin’ in a tree, an’ a hive a bees overtook ‘im. He jumped down ta flee ‘em, but then, he just fainted an’ couldna escape the stings. I saw ‘im, grabbed ‘im, an’ got stung by a few meself. D’ye know what ta do?”

Evelyn leans over the boy and listens to his chest. He has a terribly slow pulse. “He’s still alive, but just barely. We have to work fast.”

She places one hand on the boy’s shoulder and one hand on his wrist. Then she sits up straight, chin raised, and closes her eyes. Nothing happens. She cannot feel anything.

The woman exclaims, “What’re ya doin’?! Stop, ye witch! I won’ allow ya ta use dark magic on me boy!”

Evelyn opens her eyes. Perplexed, she stares at the woman.

The woman continues, “I know yer kind, ye’re a the devil’s makin’. Ye’ve sold yer soul fer yer powers. That’s why King Henry has captured the druids, ta make ‘em use their magic fer respectable an’ virtuous obligations.”

A shaky voice sounds, “Now, Joan, this isn’t the way to greet a new visitor, is it? I’m sure Evelyn here would never hurt a fly, seeing as how she has babies of her own.”

A hunched-over, elderly woman with scraggly gray hair and grayish-blue eyes steps out of the shadows of the alleyway. Evelyn looks up in surprise, as the aged woman hobbles over to them, supported by a crooked wooden cane.

Joan looks up at the woman and says, “Oh, Baba Edith. Me boy. Me poor, poor boy.” She rocks her son back and forth in her arms.

Baba Edith returns, “We can absolutely help your boy, Joan.” She then looks to Evelyn. “Now, concentrate, child. Find the problem.”

Without question, Evelyn knows to trust the strange old woman. She closes her eyes and straightens her posture, but once again, she only sees darkness. Baba Edith touches her shoulder, and the blackness explodes into her father’s bright

green light.

Evelyn enters the boy's body through a tunnel that resembles a bolt of lightning. Before her, she observes the heart laboring to beat. She continues through the pulmonary artery and into the lungs, where she can see his airways have been constricted.

She can hear Baba Edith's muffled voice just outside her subconscious, "You know what to do, child."

And somehow, she does: With her hands on the boy's chest, Evelyn uses her thoughts like surgical instruments to narrow each blood vessel, allowing oxygen back to the organs. She then manually opens the trachea, as well as each airway throughout each lung, so that the muscles can expand and contract freely.

The boy sits up, gasping for air.

As Evelyn falls back on her hands, she and Baba Edith both open their eyes.

Joan rocks her child in her arms. She grabs Evelyn's hand, and with tears streaming down her cheeks, she whispers, "Thank you."

Baba Edith pats Evelyn's shoulder and says, "See, I knew you could do it."

As Erik pulls Evelyn to her feet, she looks to Baba Edith in awe. Then she looks down at her hands. Who knew they were capable of such a thing?



ERIK DROPS A BUCKET OF WATER IN FRONT OF THE HORSES AND PICKS up Godfraid's Percheron's foot to clean out its hooves. He looks up at Evelyn and says, "When I'm done here, I've got some mendin' ta do on me saddle, an' then I plan ta head ta the barber fer a proper shave, so ye can go on an' head inside, ma lady."

She smiles and responds, “Thanks for all your help, Erik.”

He nods, and she enters the safehouse with the woven basket slung over her arm, filled to the brim with smoked herring, fresh fruit, bread, oats, and candles.

She hears a commotion from above, so she climbs the stairs that lead to the second story.

Aiden has cleared the wooden floor, and five men are practicing sword fighting techniques with wooden sticks. He adjusts one’s stance and then stands behind another to show him a proper swing. Taking hold of his own stick, he walks through a quick round with another man. He points to his hand and shows what the move with the sword will cause for the opponent.

He then steps back and relays to the group, “Yer body is just as important as any weapon yer wieldin’, lads. Learn it, hone it, sharpen it, an’ ye’ll n’er find yerself off-guard.”

He motions to Godfraid, who takes over training. He then strides over to Tobias, who pours over papers scattered about a table. Tobias points to a map, and Aiden rubs his chin and nods his head. As he hears Evelyn’s footsteps reach the landing, he looks up and smiles at her.

Tobias stands and says, “Shaw, I have some civil matters to attend to, so I will be back shortly. I’m not sure where Roland has wandered off to, so I hope to leave my men in yer capable hands fer a time.”

Aiden nods and responds, “Not a problem.”

Tobias heads for the stairwell. As he passes Evelyn, he bows, “Ma lady.”

Evelyn curtsies in return.

Tobias jogs down the stairs, and they hear the door shut behind him.

Aiden strolls up to Evelyn and kisses her on the cheek. He peeks over her shoulder and into the basket. “Wha’d ya bring me?”

Evelyn laughs and reaches into it. “I did get you some fruit, my dear sweet tooth of a husband.”

Aiden beams. “Yes!”

She tosses a ripe red apple at him. He catches it and takes a large bite. He struts off joyfully.

With his other hand, he grabs one of the wooden sticks. He asks, “Now, have *you* been keepin’ up with yer swordsmanship, ma lady?” He tosses her the stick and continues, “Shall we go a round?”

She sets the basket down on the floor and giggles. Then she lunges at him with the stick.

He chuckles and rounds his back to avoid her cheap shot. He then picks up another stick, and while continuing to eat his apple, they playfully spar with each other across the floor.



CHAPTER 21

THE ENGLISH

Francis, the youngest member of the Resistance, bursts into the safehouse, laden with a heavy bag. He slams the door behind him. The cap on his messy, blond head is off-kilter, and his smudged, freckled face is flushed.

Aiden looks up from journal writing at Tobias's desk, a perturbed expression on his face.

Out of breath, Francis struggles, "Th-the soldiers... they've taken Tobias!"

Aiden jumps to his feet. "What, boy? What happened?"

Francis answers, "I was at the market pickin' up those things you asked for, sir."

He hoists his bag onto the desk and produces the items: a few pieces of leather and a bottle of lanolin oil from the tanner; a sharpening stone, a sheet of chain mail, and some arrowheads from the blacksmith; some goose feathers, some poplar tree shafts, and a vial of beeswax.

"An' I saw him givin' rations a food an' coin ta the needy so they can pay their taxes ta keep the soldiers at bay. Then,

they just took ‘im in!”

Hearing the commotion, Godfraid, Erik, and Roland bound down the stairs.

Aiden asks, “Did ye see where they took ‘im?”

Francis nods.

Roland interjects, “I used ta be one a these guys, so I know how they work. I’m goin’ with you.”

Aiden nods. He then looks to Godfraid and Erik. “We’ll be right back. Make sure the men are ready ta leave fer the raid. If we’re nae here in time, leave without us.”

Godfraid nods. Aiden, Roland, and Francis exit the safehouse.



THE THREE MEN STAND IN THE DANK, BACK ALLEY BEHIND THE reeve’s house, looking up at the second and third-story windows.

Roland asks, “How’re we gonna get in there?”

Aiden replies, “I have an idea, but it’s no ideal.” He looks to Francis and says, “Ye hurry on back now, lad. The others will be leavin’ soon, an’ we need our best men oot there, awright?” He winks.

Francis nods. “Aye, sir.” He hurries off, back to the safehouse.



TWO ENGLISH SOLDIERS STROLL DOWN THE ALLEYWAY. THEY LAUGH and tell crude jokes.

Out of the shadows, Aiden and Roland overtake them. In unison, they wrap their arms around the soldiers’ necks, bending their elbows and flexing their biceps in a blood choke. Both men faint into their arms.

They drag the soldiers back into the shade and strip them of their armor and uniforms. They leave them fast asleep in the mud and hay that coats the cobblestones, dressed in only their small clothes.

Aiden and Roland pull the metal helmets down over their eyes and their kerchiefs over their mouths to conceal their identities. They hear voices nearby. Two more English soldiers round the corner of the alley, their halberds - spearheads mounted on long wooden shafts - laid over their shoulders. Aiden and Roland fall in line behind them.

One soldier hears the clink of the armor and looks back at Aiden and Roland. He asks, "Where've you two been?"

Roland answers with his English accent, "The ladies at the stew wouldn't offer up their shares willingly, so we had ta give 'em a little reminder as ta who runs this town."

The two soldiers snicker cruelly.

Aiden side-eyes Roland with a look of disgust. He was a wee bit too quick with that one.

The two disguised men follow the soldiers through the front door and into the sitting room of the reeve's house.

Before them, Jacques sits behind a desk, his feet propped up on it. Aiden's blood runs cold. He clenches his jaw, and the vein in his neck begins to throb. Roland notices him ball his fists and elbows him in the arm. Aiden exhales, trying to relax his posture.

Jacques stands. His doublet bears the English flag, and he wears a black feather cap on his head. "So, what is our haul today, men?"

The two leading soldiers place sacks of coin onto the desk. They peel off, leaving Aiden and Roland.

Jacques struts over to them, his hand cupping his wrist behind his back. They keep their heads down to maintain their cover.

Jacques gets close to Aiden's face and questions, "And

you?”

Aiden’s frame stiffens as he attempts quiet breathing exercises to keep himself calm.

Roland scrambles through his pockets and pulls out a bag of coin. He tosses it on the desk and responds, “We just finished up at the stew, Lieutenant.”

Jacques looks to the bag of coin and then back at Aiden. He squints his dark eyes as he leans into him. Aiden can feel the rage rising in his body.

Jacques asks, “What is...”

The door from the kitchen bursts open, and two soldiers drag a kicking and cursing, dark-skinned man in bloody clothes into the room. It is Tobias. They toss him into a wooden chair and tie his torso, wrists, and ankles to it.

Jacques turns and grins. “What do we have here? Robbing from the king, *non*? My men tell me they found you giving out supplies listed on our shipment manifest to the peasants down at the market. It seems we have finally found the leader of the pesky little raids that keep happening on our supply deliveries. Well, *monsieur*, unfortunately, the king must have... how do you say *un oeil pour oeil*? An eye for an eye?”

He looks to one of the soldiers and nods, and the soldier picks up an axe. He raises the blade over Tobias’s forearm. Tobias closes his eyes and turns away.

Roland interrupts, “Lieutenant...”

Jacques raises his hand, and the soldier with the axe pauses. Jacques turns to Roland and responds, “*Oui*, soldier?”

Roland continues, “Doesn’t royal decree dictate that unless decided upon by the king, laymen are to be allowed a proper trial before being sentenced to punishment?”

Jacques glares at Roland. “Look, I do not have time for this. I have business to attend to in London, but I have to make sure affairs are in order here first.” He looks back at the soldier with the axe. “Get on with it.”

The soldier raises the axe again.

Aiden elbows the soldier to his right in the face and breaks for Tobias.

The injured soldier cups his bloody nose, shrieking in pain and surprise.

The soldier with the axe halts once again. He and Jacques both look back as Aiden holds out his palm and blasts them to the other side of the room.

The injured soldier shakes his head to regain his bearings, and he and his partner unsheathe their swords. As Aiden attempts to untie Tobias as quickly as possible, he looks back to see the soldiers advancing on him. Roland mirrors the steps of the soldier to his left and plants his foot in front of him. He then elbows the soldier in the back, knocking him to the ground.

The soldier with the broken nose redirects his focus to Roland, and they lock eyes. He changes his stance and rushes Roland. Roland drops his weight and elbows the soldier in the ribs. The soldier careens to the floor, breaking Roland's fall.

During the commotion, four more soldiers enter the reeve's house. They move to control the situation. Roland springs to his feet to assist Aiden but is restrained by arm bars on both sides. The soldiers shove Aiden and Roland side-by-side, in front of Jacques.

Jacques strolls up to Aiden and rips his helmet off. He smirks. "I knew you would come for him, Shaw. Your martyrdom is too predictable. It would be tiresome, were it not so... convenient."

Aiden responds with nothing more than a glare.

As Jacques opens his mouth to speak once more, Aiden head-butts him sharply in the face. Jacques stumbles into the desk, and Aiden's sudden forward momentum throws the soldiers' balance off, allowing him to thrust them forward. He kicks them both in the back, and they hit the floor.

Roland simultaneously elbows both his captors, breaks free, and grabs a sword hanging on the wall. He holds the soldiers off, as Aiden finishes untying Tobias from the chair. Aiden helps the leader of the Resistance to his feet, and they race into the kitchen. Roland walks backward with the sword outstretched toward the soldiers. When he hears the back door to the alley open, he turns and follows after his companions.

The soldiers charge after them.

Jacques commands, “No, let them go!”

As the soldiers halt and return to the sitting room, Jacques cradles his bleeding nose.



EVELYN WARMS HER HANDS ON A CUP OF HOT TEA AS SHE SITS AT A small, round table in Baba Edith’s cottage. There is little lighting, and flowers and herbs hang, drying, from the low-slung ceiling. Spindly, wooden furniture dominates the one-room abode, but there are crocheted accents and potted plants scattered about all the same. Baba Edith drops some herbs into the cauldron hanging over the fire. Fragrant smoke rises into the air.

Evelyn asks, “How did you know I could do that?”

Baba Edith replies, “I can feel your power, Evelyn. It radiates from you. You have the strongest connection with Awen that I have ever encountered.”

Evelyn questions, “Awen?”

“Yes, child, Awen. Awen is the force that beats with the essence of life. It is the ebb and flow of all existence.” She stirs the cauldron as she speaks. “You see, while inside the womb, we swim within it, but as we age, we feel as if we have lost that connection. It feels as though it is something to be searched for and obtained, but it is already inside every one of us.”

A pink mist rises from the cauldron, and a floral scent fills

the room.

Baba Edith leaves the cauldron and sits down before Evelyn.

She continues, “We each hold within us the answers we seek. Every person has the ability to use the wisdom of our ancestors to guide them. However, those who come from the old ones, those like us, have the power to not only find Awen, but to speak to it, to wield it to guide and heal the world.”

Evelyn grips her teacup tighter and stares at Baba Edith intently. “Can you show me how?”

Baba Edith takes Evelyn’s hand and holds it flat. She places a seed on her palm and says, “Close your eyes, child. Awen is in the Earth, the water, the sky, the trees, the blades of grass on the ground. If you just listen, *it* will guide you.”

Evelyn closes her eyes and falls into the darkness. She listens to the world around her. Water drips from the well pump outside the cottage. A soft wind blows through the branches of the trees on the outskirts of the town. A majestic stag treads through the crunching leaves of the forest. Thunder rumbles within the clouds of the coming storm.

Suddenly, she sees her father’s face. His kind, grayish-blue eyes embrace her, and the bright green light overtakes her. She feels warmth from her head to her toes.

The seed in her palm softly shifts. The top gradually breaks open, and a little green bud slowly reveals itself. As Evelyn breathes in, the bloom grows into a beautiful white rose.

She opens her eyes and watches, amazed, as the flower blossoms before her, needing no soil, no water, no sunlight.

Baba Edith leans over and cups her shoulder. “See? You already have everything you need inside you. You just have to accept it and learn it. Nature is not something one can dominate, but we may harmonize with its energy and shape it to our will.”

Evelyn looks from the flower to Baba Edith. For the first

time in her life, she does not feel shame or fear for using her abilities. A new world has opened up right before her eyes, and she, she has a place in it.



AIDEN, TOBIAS, AND ROLAND RETURN TO THE SAFEHOUSE. THE door hangs on its hinges, the interior exposed. They rush in to find the place completely turned over.

The man with the eye-patch lies on the ground, bleeding out. Tobias falls to his knees beside him. “What happened, Nick?”

Nick stammers, “The druid...”

Aiden’s stomach drops. He breathes, “Evelyn!”

He sprints up the stairs to the second story.

As Tobias tends to Nick, Roland searches the bottom floor. Aiden tears through each bedroom throughout the upstairs hallway.

They meet back up in the loft.

Aiden says, “There’s naeb’dy here.”

Roland responds, “They must’ve already left fer the raid.”

Aiden sits down on one chair at the table, his head in his hands. He drags his fingers down his face.

Roland says, “They didn’t take any money from the coffers. From what I can tell, they didn’t take anything, just made a mess. What the hell did they want?”

Aiden looks up at Roland and responds, “Her. They’ve always wanted her. An’ now...”

“What happened here?” Evelyn’s voice resounds from downstairs.

Aiden looks at Roland as though he might faint. He jumps up and bounds down the stairs. He grabs Evelyn’s face and kisses her, catching her off guard.

He pulls back and says, “Where were ye?”

He does not wait for an answer; instead, he presses his lips to hers again.

He breathes, “Dinnae ever...”

He kisses her again. “Go missin’ on me...”

Another kiss. “Like that again...”

And once more. “Awright?”

Evelyn laughs. “I was just gathering herbs from Baba Edith. I didn’t know what kind of shape you boys would be in when you got back.”

She looks around the room. “What happened here?”

She notices Nick, bandaged and bloody. She rushes over to him.

Tobias sits beside him against the wall. The rolled-up sleeves of his blouse are soaked in both his and Nick’s blood. He looks to Evelyn and says, “I... I think he’ll make it, but he’s in and out...”

“I’ll take it from here, Tobias.”

Tobias nods. He climbs to his feet and walks over to Aiden and Roland. He asks, “Who would’ve told them? How did they know where the safehouse was?”

Roland shrugs, and Aiden shakes his head. Aiden then rubs his chin and stares at the floor.



IN THE DARK OF THE NEW EVENING, THE REST OF THE RESISTANCE has returned safely from the raid. Nick is on the mend and resting on a pallet on the floor. The others sleep soundly, scattered about the upstairs loft and the bedrooms of the safehouse.

A shadow silently slides through an open a window on the second floor. Unseen, it sneaks down the hallway.

Aiden and Evelyn rest inside one of the bedrooms on a weathered bed with tattered blankets. The door to their room gently opens, as the figure enters. Aiden hears the motion and cracks his eyes. Soon, faint breathing levitates above him, and a blade near his neck is illumined by the faint street light seeping in.

He grabs the intruder's wrist with his left hand; he uses his right to bend the figure's arm in the inverse direction.

He grumbles, "If ye're comin' fer me, son, ye best no hesitate."

He swings his left leg around and knees the intruder into the wall of the bedroom. The figure crumbles to the ground as Aiden jumps to his feet.

Evelyn awakes abruptly, and when she sees the intruder, she screams.

Aiden commands, "Get ta Peerson an' O'Reilly. I've got this."

Evelyn hops off the opposite side of the bed. She skirts around the intruder, but then she pauses and looks to Aiden.

"Go!"

She rushes out of the room.

Aiden stands over the intruder. As the young man attempts to get up, Aiden kicks him in the chest. The intruder drops the knife, and Aiden boots it across the room. He leans down over the man and pins his neck to the wooden floor.

Aiden growls, "Ye canna have me. I willnae leave 'er alone again."

The intruder chokes and claws at Aiden's arm as Godfraid and Erik appear in the doorway. Erik keeps Evelyn behind him.

Godfraid says, "Good God, man. Don't kill 'em. He may prove useful."

Aiden looks up at Godfraid, glowering. Though he is right,

he does not like it. “Fine.”

He drops the intruder’s neck, stands, and storms from the room. The man clutches his throat, gasping for air.

Aiden slams his hand into the hallway wall and roars at the top of his lungs. Evelyn jumps. She grasps Erik’s arm, as Aiden paces his breathing and tries to walk off the fear and rage pumping through his veins.



THE INTRUDER IS TIED TO A CHAIR IN THE MIDDLE OF THE BEDROOM floor. Godfraid, Erik, Tobias, and Roland are propped against the walls. Aiden bursts in.

“How dare ye enter the room where my wife sleeps an’ haud a blade ta *ma* neck?!”

He throws his palms down onto the arms of the chair, his face right in front of the intruder’s.

He growls through his teeth, “Who sent ye? What dae ya want?”

His breath tottering, the intruder clasps his chops. He does not say a word.

Aiden bites the inside of his bottom lip and smirks. If this devil wants a game, he will surely play. He paces the room. Noticing the intruder’s knife, he picks it up and toys with it in his hand.

He advances toward the man and leans over him again. “You ken how this goes, boy-o. We can dae it the easy way...” He holds the blade an inch from the intruder’s eye and turns it in his hand. “Or the hard way.”

The intruder responds, his voice resolved but shaky, “There’s nothin’ you can do to make me talk.”

Aiden’s smirk grows. Challenge accepted. He clinches his jaw and stabs the knife into the man’s bound hand.

The intruder yells in pain.

Aiden leaves the blade transfixed as he walks away. He says, "That's fine. Take yer time. We've got all night."

The windows throughout the house blast open, as uniformed English soldiers flood in. Fighting ensues.

His wife. Aiden rushes into the hallway and nearly plows over Evelyn. He clutches her hands.

A soldier draws his sword and advances toward them. Aiden pushes Evelyn against the wall, blocking her. "Stay behind me."

The soldier commands, "Give me the druid, man."

Aiden growls, "Not while I'm breathin'."

The soldier rushes Aiden, but he is ready. He grabs hold of the soldier's sword arm and kicks him in the side. The soldier stumbles but soon regains his composure and charges Aiden again. He swipes at the side of Aiden's head, but Aiden side steps.

They repeat their stances, and Aiden clasps the soldier's sword arm once more. The soldier pushes into Aiden, toward his throat. Aiden drops his weight, and they proceed into a power struggle up the hallway and into the upper loft. Evelyn follows them, Aiden trying his best to keep her within his sights. It is too hard to protect her while pinned down like this. He has to break free.

Arms locked, Aiden attempts to kick the soldier, but the soldier keeps just enough space between them to avoid contact. Aiden notices the table. In a split-second redirect, he drops his shoulder and pushes the soldier over it. With his opponent leaned on his back, Aiden punches him in the side of the face.

In a daze, one of the soldier's hands loses the grip of his weapon. Aiden forces his other wrist onto the table and tries to knock the blade from his hold. If he can... just... get... the sword. The soldier grasps his hilt tightly, resisting release. He then uses his free hand to punch Aiden in the temple.

The inertia knocks Aiden to the ground, but he immediately attempts a roll. The soldier firmly plants his foot on Aiden's chest, pinning him down. He raises his sword to finish Aiden off.

Aiden rattles his brain; how to continue the fight, to claim an exit strategy. Then, the soldier is cracked over the head. He falls to the ground. Evelyn stands over him with the remaining pieces of a ceramic vase in her hands. Disoriented, the soldier groans in pain.

On the bottom floor, Tobias scatters straw and hay throughout the safehouse. With a flickering flame, he ignites a wooden crate brimming with handwritten plans and signed documents, before dumping it onto the ground. Flames swiftly scatter.

Evelyn screams. Two additional soldiers grab her from either side. She fights to break free. Aiden's original opponent crawls across the floor, reaching for his sword. Aiden picks it up and kicks him in the face. He then takes his own longsword from the corner of the wall by the table. He flips them both over his wrists to weigh their balance. The flames make their way to the second floor.

Aiden's eyes darken as he stalks toward the soldiers. They would be wise to take their hands from his lady.

One soldier releases Evelyn and raises his sword in defense. The other detains her with her hands behind her back. She stands deathly still, as if patiently awaiting his next move. Aiden slams one sword against the first soldier's neck and uses the other to slice right through it.

He then looks at her. "Get down!" Evelyn drops, and he stabs the second soldier through the throat.

As both soldiers grasp for their respective wounds, Aiden drags Evelyn over to the window. He breaks out the rest of it with the side of his forearm and yells, "Through here!"

He helps her over the sill, as two more soldiers charge at them. He turns back, but Erik and Godfraid impale them both

from either side.

Aiden follows his wife over the sill and onto the roof. He watches the flames engulfing the walls of the house. Fiery ceiling joists begin to fall around Erik and Godfraid.

Aiden calls to them, “Get out o’ there! It’s comin’ down!”

Erik yells to Godfraid over the crackling timber, “Get ta the horses!”

Godfraid and Erik dodge the falling debris as they race down the stairs and toward the front door.



CHAPTER 22

THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

Aiden and Evelyn sprint across the clay-tiled roof. Evelyn screams as a fiery hole opens at her feet. Aiden grabs her arm to prevent her from falling. As they reach the edge of the roof, they both look to see a merchant tent below. Aiden hesitates. As the house below and behind them continues to crumble, Evelyn gives him a firm look. “Jump!”

They both leap for the tent; as they land, it tears down the center. Evelyn closes her eyes as they tumble through the fabric. They both halt midair, inches from the ground.

“Well, that’s new,” Aiden says, watching himself float. She smiles as they land on their feet.

As they race down the cobblestones, they hear the heavy footsteps and clinking metal of the English soldiers close behind.

They round a corner and are instantly greeted by a soldier. He exclaims loudly, ready to alert the others, but Aiden kicks him in the groin, and they keep it moving.

In their haste, they almost collide with a carriage stood by two horses. Bulky and ornate, it seems out of place in this filthy city.

Aiden opens the door and looks to Evelyn. “Get in!”

She climbs inside, and he hops on top. He hurriedly calls for the horses to move.

As they round onto the main street, Aiden looks to the left to see Erik and Godfraid laid flat against their own horses, speeding toward them. Erik has a lead rope around Gara and Evelyn’s pony’s necks. They gallop alongside him.

Godfraid motions at Aiden and yells, “Go, go!”

There are a dozen English soldiers on horseback hot on their trail. Aiden allows the Resistance to barrel past him, and then he rounds the carriage into the street, cutting off the soldiers. Many of their steeds rear up, as he proceeds to charge his horses after his men. To break up the chase, he rounds the carriage onto another side street. He motions for the ambling peasants to clear the way.

“Move, move!”

As the soldiers gain on them, Evelyn throws open the door to the carriage. Bales of hay lay stacked on a cart up ahead. As they race past, she compels them to her, causing an avalanche of straw to fall behind the carriage. Many of the remaining horses come to staggered halts, but three still clear the jump.

When they reach the end of the thoroughfare, two more soldiers on horseback round the corner. Aiden yanks the reins back, and his steeds rear up. Evelyn grabs onto the roof as she is almost thrown from the carriage. They are cornered.

Aiden spies an opening. He circles the carriage around and slaps the reins, sending the horses down a narrower street. It opens into the market, and the horses charge through the thankfully scarcely occupied town square, toppling vendor tents and livestock pens. Two additional soldiers exit another street to the right, but Aiden pushes the horses past them at full gallop.

As they reach the edge of town, Aiden looks back to see the cobblestone street behind them empty, but he refuses to chance it. He charges the horses on. Rain begins to pour down.

They continue along the main road until Evelyn calls out, “There!”

Fresh footprints are planted firmly in the mud.

Aiden leads the carriage into the woods, onto a hidden trail. While the horses fall into stride, Evelyn opens the partition and takes hold of Aiden’s blouse. He laughs and drops the reins as he is pulled into the carriage. As he lands on the floor, he looks up at her, and helpless to resist, their lips meet.

This interaction redirects his adrenaline, and he craves to feel her. He sits up on his knees and pulls her in. Consumed by passion within a frenzy of kisses, he hikes her dress and unbuttons his trousers.

She braces herself against the roof of the carriage as she takes him inside of her. He grips her tightly and kisses her neck and chest, as his thrusts are intensified by the bounce of the wheels. She runs her hands through his muddy locks and down his damp skin. The sounds of their pleasure are lost in the roaring thunder.

The carriage begins to veer off to the side of the trail. Aiden pauses and looks out the window. With the reins slack, the horses come to a rest to graze on the undergrowth of the forest. He turns back to his wife as she exhales, her lips slightly parted in a lazy smile. He smirks and goes in for another kiss, as the raindrops pelt down upon the carriage roof.



EVELYN LIES AGAINST THE BULK OF AIDEN’S CHEST AS THEY REST ON the floor of the carriage. Their clothes are dirty and torn.

As he runs his fingers through her curls, he breaks the silence between them, “I’m sorry, Evie, fer losin’ ma temper

back there. I promised maself I wouldnae show that side ta ye.”

“There shouldn’t be a whole side of you I’ve never seen. You’ve always protected me from the world like some sort of precious treasure. You needn’t.”

He returns stoically, “I made yer father a promise, Evie. An’ I took a vow on our weddin’ day. I am bound to ye ‘til the day I die. Committed ta love ya, provide fer ya, an’ protect ya ferever.”

“But I’m not helpless, Aiden. I understand my power now, and I’m not afraid anymore. I... I can help. I think you need me to help. Let me fight alongside you.”

Aiden responds, “I ken ye’re nae helpless, Evie. Ye never have been. Ye’re the strongest, most capable woman I’ve ever ken, but protectin’ ye is... it’s my purpose in life.”

He drops his head. “Though, I’m no sure I’m worthy o’ the privilege any longer. It seems I am a hinderance to ye an’ our bairns. Ye were much better off, safe an’ protected, afore I wandered back inta yer lives.”

She asks, “What do you mean, my love?”

Too pained to keep her gaze, he stares at the ceiling, struggling to find an answer. “This anger inside o’ me, it terrifies me. I attract danger an’ violence. It finds me wherever I go, an’ I thrive off it. If we continue down this road, I will inevitably put ya in harm’s way again, whether that be from others or maself.

“I just see red sometimes, an’ sometimes I jus’ canna control it. I dinnae ken if I can be redeemed, an’ because o’ that, I dinnae feel I deserve the honor o’ carin’ fer ya an’ our bairns. I dinnae ken if I can live a normal life, Evie.”

She says, “Aiden, your entire life has revolved around service and sacrifice. For once, can you think about yourself? Tell me what *you* want, Aiden. What makes *you* happy? Would you rather be alone instead of with us?”

“With you, Evelyn, I am at peace. I am satisfied, an’ I am whole. However, as a husband an’ a father, I am no at liberty ta be selfish, and I dinnae ken that I deserve peace after all I’ve done. Aw the pain an’ death I’ve caused. Worse than that, I couldnae bear ta lose ya again. Apart, even though I wad be half a man, at least I wad ken ye an’ the bairns were alive an’ safe.”

“I think you’re just scared, Aiden.”

He looks her dead in the eyes. “Excuse me?”

She continues, “You have the quickest wit of any man I have ever met. You can fix anything, make something from nothing. You will do anything required to get to your desired outcome. So, tell me, why is *this* too hard for you? Why is *this* the one thing you’re willing to give up and walk out on?”

“Ye dinnae understand.”

“Don’t I? You’re either in this with me, Aiden, or you’re out. You can’t forever be running off to fight someone else’s war just because you’re afraid to face your own battles within your soul.”

Frustrated, he kicks open the door and moves to exit the carriage.

She grabs his arm, and he turns back to her. His face is stern, and his body is tense.

She says, “You promised me, Aiden.”

His face softens. “Promised ye?”

“You promised you would never leave me again.”

His impatience disintegrates, and the gravity of her words hits him full force, like an ocean wave. He grabs her face and kisses her lips.

She pulls back to speak, but he continues to cradle her face in his hands. He does not deserve it, but he needs her desperately, to be held by her incessantly, to serve her endlessly.

“Aiden, you are not your past, but you can use the anger inside you for good. All that fire and passion hold everything you need for us to make it out of this and back home. With our bairns.”

His daydreams cease. Unsure, he listens intently.

“I’m going to tell you something, and since you have had more training in the old ways than I have, I know you will understand. Magic, you say you can feel it just like me, but what if I told you there is no such thing as magic?”

He is now truly confused.

She explains, “What the normal person calls magic is merely a profound understanding of the world around us, the ability to realize the particles of energy in the air, the Earth, the sea... then manipulate them as needed.

“You may not have druid blood, but you *have* been taught by them to be one with the essence of life. You can feel it, and you can harness it. You have the ability to control the anger and pain inside of you and use it. You have a connection with Awen.”

“Awen?” He finally understands.

He closes his eyes, relaxes his muscles, and releases his thoughts. He listens to the rain. In his mind’s eye, he sees the water droplets. He watches them slip off the green, waxy leaves and collapse in flat pools on the wooden roof of the carriage. He can feel the chilly precipitations on his skin, and they give way to goosebumps down his arms. He can taste them on his incredibly thirsty tongue. He connects with them in a greeting of sorts, as if they are personified in their own right. As he meditates, he opens the palm of his hand, and a small ball of blue light appears in it. He then opens his eyes again.

The ball of light levitates as he speaks. “Aye, the druids on Anglesey told me o’ Awen, but I dinnae really understand ‘til now.”

“It may be easier, more convenient, to be alone, to hide, to

keep your emotions bottled up inside. But if you use that rage inside you for its intention, energy, you will be ten times as strong as you are on your own. You cannot be concerned with how myself or others may perceive you anymore. We don't need a judicious leader this time, Aiden. We need the furious warrior."

Then it clicks. He looks her way. "Ye're her."

She questions, "Her? Her who?"

"The one fer whom the druids have always spoken; the one ta wield the powers o' the divine. I thought ye legend, but ye've been ma wife the whole time. Yer abilities, yer instincts. I've never seen a druid, even a priest, be able ta dae what ye can dae with nae spells, nae potions, wi' just a snap o' yer fingers, a thought even. Ye clearly have goddess blood in ye. Ye're the White Witch."

Guilt floods her expression. "Is this my fault, Aiden? Did they take the bairns just to get to me? Godfraid said I was their mission in the Forest... And when they broke into the safehouse..."

"I'm no sure aboot the bairns, but they definitely want ye. They've always wanted ye, because o' yer power an' yer lineage, but now I ken why. I've tried ta hide ya away from the world an' its villains, but ye're right, ye an' the bairns dinnae deserve ta be caged."

She trails off pensively, "My lineage..."

"We're strong enough, Evie. Me an' you, we can dae this. We can get through this together. We always have, an' we always will."

His words seem to bring her back to him. She curls up into the small of his arm, and he kisses her on the forehead. She smiles up at him. "I know we can."

They soon drift off to sleep on the floor of the carriage.



THE CARRIAGE DOOR IS RIPPED OPEN, AND THERE STANDS GODFRAID, covered in mud, his face lined with worry.

He exclaims, “Here they are!”

Aiden shields his eyes from the daylight. Even with the clear, blue sky, it still drizzles outside. Evelyn sits up. Her hair is in shambles, and she holds her gown against her to cover her chest.

Aiden turns the handle on the opposite door, which he is leaned against, and almost falls out. He stands up in the mud and trips over Erik, who is crouched down by the back of the carriage. The Norseman has placed a large piece of tree bark under each of the wooden wheels.

Erik looks back toward the front of the carriage, as Tobias pulls the horses forward by the reins. He calls out, “Definitely stuck.”

The horses tuck their hind ends as they attempt to dislodge the carriage from the mud. The back wheels sink deeper and deeper into the muck. Tobias releases the reins, and the horses step around in the mud. Worried this may end in a broken leg, he unhooks them and leads them both onto the road.

Tobias says, “As useful as this thing would be, I think it’s lost.”

Finished with retying her kirtle, Evelyn carefully steps out of the carriage. She slowly tip toes through the mud and up to the road to meet Tobias.

Aiden slicks back his wet hair and says, “Come on, Peerson. Let’s take ‘er from the rear.”

Erik responds, “Aye, but shouldn’t we buy ‘er dinner first, matey?”

Aiden punches him in the arm, and Erik laughs as he follows him. They sink to their knees in the mud, pushing the back of the carriage. They rock it side to side, forward and backward, and with no one’s weight left inside, they slowly lift it out of the mudhole.

Tobias and Godfraid cheer.

The bark under the front wheels allows it to inch forward until they can finally navigate it back onto the road. Tobias pulls the horses around and reattaches them to the front of the carriage.

The group slowly makes its way through the rain, to the campsite.



CHAPTER 23

THE PUPPET SHOW

Meanwhile, in London, Alice and Colin are perched on the back of a wooden chair, staring through the tall window of a vast apartment in a turret of the Tower of London. The door to the apartment swings open, and in strides Jacques with his arms outstretched. He is decorated in opulent damasks and luxurious silks.

“Papi is here!”

Alice and Colin jump from the chair and race to him. He leans down and pulls them both into an embrace.

He places his finger on Colin’s nose and asks, “You two *petit tresors* were well-behaved whilst I was gone, I trust?”

Both children nod in unison.

He continues, “You took your baths?”

They nod.

“Ate your meals?”

They nod again.

“Said your prayers?”

They both reply, “*Oui*, Monsieur Jacques!”

Jacques chuckles and says, “Well, I guess you both deserve what I have brought you, then!”

He pulls an exquisite, French fashion doll and an intricately engraved, wooden, hobby horse from inside his magnificent, fur-lined box coat. They cheer, take their new playthings, and sprint back across the massive room.

Jacques smiles and takes a seat in the chair next to the window. Though the apartment itself has a cold disposition due to the barren stone walls and minimal lighting, two ornate bedframes sit against the wall opposite Jacques, covered in well-appointed linens. Additionally, two small desks run along the walls opposite each other, several books lined across to assist the children in their studies. Jacques has also filled the room with many playthings to keep the children occupied and entertained during their confinement.

Jacques says, “I have hired a puppeteer to come and give you your own personal show this afternoon. Would you like that?”

Alice looks up from brushing the hair of her new doll and asks, “When will we be able to see Mama and Daddy again, Monsieur Jacques?”

Jacques frowns and replies, “Maman will be here soon, *ma cherie*. It is a long journey from Edinburgh to Londontown.”

He pats his knee, and Alice and Colin race over to him again. He pulls them up onto his lap one by one.

He asks, “Do you like your new home here in London, *mon amours?*”

Both children reply, “*Oui*, Monsieur Jacques.”

Jacques smiles. “*Tres bien.*”

He kisses Colin’s head and runs his fingers through Alice’s golden curls.

He whispers, “Maman will be here soon, and we can be

one *content* family at last.”



CHAPTER 24

THE WULVER

Aiden and Evelyn follow Tobias, Godfraid, and Erik into a camp hidden amongst a thicket of tall pine trees. The ground underfoot is muddy, and injured, bandaged men are strewn throughout the site.

With the constant drizzle, Roland struggles to light a fire. Evelyn holds her hand up to the canopy, and the branches of the trees around the camp all turn inward, creating a cover to keep the rain out. The rolled bunch of twigs finally lights. Roland nods to Evelyn, grunting in appreciation.

She touches his shoulder, picks up a wooden bucket next to him, and relays to the group, “I’ll head down to the river to get some water to boil to clean these wounds.”

Aiden nods to her, as Gara trots up and nuzzles him in the face. He chuckles and scratches her cheeks, resting his forehead against her soft muzzle.

Evelyn steps through the trees but stops abruptly. At the edge of the river sits a figure holding a fishing pole out over the water. He is clothed in nothing but a kilt, and his arms are as hairy as a dog. When the being hears her footsteps, he turns

to her. He has the head of a wolf.

She cannot control the audible gasp that escapes her lips. She drops her bucket. He jumps up, and the fishing pole falls to the ground. Frozen in place, they watch each other.

Something touches her shoulder from behind, and she jumps.

Aiden's voice sounds. "It's fine, Evelyn. Go back ta the camp, awright?"

She looks back at him but cannot find words to respond. He steps around her and heads for the water.

He extends his hand to the wulver and says, "Well met, lad. Ma name is Aiden Shaw."

The wulver shakes his hand and returns, "Me name's Elias, an' I don't want any trouble, Aiden Shaw."

Evelyn looks on in astonishment.

Aiden says, "Ye'll get none from me, Elias. We're jus' passin' through."

Aiden sits down on the massive rock the wulver was perched upon, and the wulver follows the gesture.

Aiden motions to the river and asks, "Is the fishin' good oot here?"

The wulver nods and casts his line out again. He replies, "Sure, plenty a trout ta keep me busy."

Aiden grabs a stick nearby and asks the wulver, "D'ye happen ta have some extra line I might borra?"

The wulver nods and hands over some nettle-hemp line. Aiden wraps it around the edge of the stick. He reaches inside his satchel and pulls out a homemade steel hook. He holds it between his teeth as he ties a knot at the other end of the line. He then takes the hook from his mouth and secures it in the knot.

The wulver adds, "That's a nice hook, sir."

Aiden smiles and nods in acknowledgement.

He eyes the wulver's pack and says, "Ye're the professional, though. Look at those bonnie hooks!"

The wulver grins and pats his bag. "Thank ya, sir. Fishin' is the only real thing I'm good at."

"Oh, I doubt that. Look at that metalwork. Ye're an artist!"

The wulver asks, "Ya really think so?"

Aiden replies, "I ken a good smith when I see one. Ye've a talent."

The wulver smiles. "Thank ya, sir."

Aiden casts his line, and they sit there in silence as the river flows and the birds chirp.

Evelyn's fatigue causes her to unintentionally shift her weight - the leaves beneath her rustle. The wulver startles and looks back at her.

Aiden turns as well.

He says to the wulver, "Oh, Elias, this is ma wife, Evelyn."

He motions for her to join them.

The wulver stands and bows. Evelyn curtsies in return and sits down next to Aiden.

The wulver cannot seem to meet Aiden's gaze now that Evelyn is there. He asks, "Wh-what brings ya two ta Stamford?"

Aiden replies as he looks out at the calm, flowing water, "English soldiers have kidnapped our children, Elias."

The wulver looks to Aiden, his eyes wide.

Aiden continues, "An' we're on our way ta get 'em back."

The wulver asks, "Well, is there anythin' I can do ta help, Aiden Shaw?"

Aiden looks at him and responds, "What a kind thing ta ask." He scratches his head, but Evelyn knows he has been

leading up to this all along.

“We’re obviously no on the best o’ terms wi’ the English troops, an’ by the looks o’ it, ye prefer ta keep ta yerself an’ aw. D’ye ken where they usually make camp roun’ here? We want ta gee ‘em a wide berth, so ta speak.”

The wulver replies, “I don’t usually tread too far from me cave, but if ye have some parchment, I can surely mark what directions I believe they’ve been over the past few days. I have a keen sense a hearin’ an’ smell.”

He scratches behind his large, upright, triangle-shaped ear.

“Sure.”

Aiden pulls a rolled piece of parchment from his satchel and lays it across the rock between them. A light spray from the river sprinkles upon it. He hands the wulver a piece of graphite.

The wulver draws a lengthy line down the center of the paper. “Now, here’s the North Road a’course.”

He draws a line branching off the first and says, “An’ here’s the road ya turned onto.”

He draws a circle. “Here’s where yer crew made camp based on the smell, so about fifty paces away.”

He makes three circles to the south of the map, two on the west side of the road, and one on the east. He says, “This is where I believe the soldiers ta be.”

He draws a line around the eastern camp and says, “I know merchants have taken this road in the past for fear a bein’ run off by highway robbers. It’s high ground with nowhere ta hide, so ya can’t be ambushed, an’ then it’s also off the main road.”

He points to the line. “You should be able ta get through here undetected because last I heard, since it’s overgrown a bit, the soldiers aren’t monitorin’ the traffic through there.”

Aiden delicately cups the wulver’s shoulder and says, “Thank you, Elias. This will help us incredibly in the rest o’

our journey.”

The wulver smiles and nods.

Aiden lights up. “Say, wad ye like ta join us fer dinner? I mean, we dinnae have much ta offer other than our company an’ some hot parritch, but the more, the merrier, I always say.”

The wulver looks down again and replies, “I mean, I have loads a fish, sir. I can never eat it all meself, but wouldn’t the others...?” He looks to his bushy tail.

Evelyn’s heart sinks. She reaches over Aiden’s lap and touches the wulver’s furry hand. The wulver looks up into Evelyn’s eyes with surprise.

She says, “Let us handle that, Elias.”

Aiden smiles at her.

“Well,” He pats the wulver on the back and springs to his feet. He reaches out his hand to help Evelyn up. “Shall we?”

Evelyn picks up her skirt as she climbs to her feet.

They make their way up the brae from the river and into the clearing where the camp sits. The wulver follows close behind. A few of the men notice him and unsheathe their swords.

Aiden raises his hand to calm them. He says, “Good sirs, I wad like ta introduce ye ta Elias. He’ll be joinin’ us fer dinner tonight.”

The wulver pulls a rod of dangling, fresh trout from behind his back, and the men erupt into cheers. Elias beams brilliantly.



THE GROUP RESTS AROUND A LARGE, CRACKLING FIRE. AIDEN AND Elias sit next to each other on a sizeable log, Aiden eating a seared fish off the bone while Elias skins another. Upon another log, Evelyn lies against Godfraid’s shoulder, mending the tears in Aiden’s shirt. Godfraid quietly plays his lute, and

Erik lies on the ground asleep, his head resting against Evelyn's skirt. Tobias sharpens his knife, while Roland strategically moves rocks and sticks around in the dirt. Thinking.

Roland looks up at Aiden. "Tomorrow night's really the only time ta do it, man. The new moon will give ya the cover a darkness ya need ta slip into the Tower unnoticed."

Aiden nods. "Then, tomorrow night it must be." He tosses his fish bones into the fire and inflects his voice to the group, "Well, it's been fun, lads, but we'll be off ta London themorra. I want ta thank ya all fer yer candor, discretion, an' assistance wi' gatherin' information ta get ma wee bairns oot o' the Tower."

Tobias responds, "Sounds good ta me. I'm ready ta get on the road."

Aiden squints at him and asks, "Wha d'ye mean?"

Tobias replies, "I mean that we should all be rested an' well enough ta leave by mornin'." He looks around the camp to nods from all the other men.

"Tobias, I..."

Tobias cuts him off, "Ye saved my arm, Shaw... an' very likely my life. We've fought alongside each other like brothers. The least I can do is help ya get yer children back." He looks around and asks, "Is there anyone else comin' along with us tomorrow?"

Roland and Nick raise their hands, Francis's arm shoots up, and one by one, the other eight men around the camp raise their hands. Godfraid holds up Erik's limp arm as he continues to snooze, and as the hands loop back around to Aiden, Elias's hand rises beside him. Aiden raises his brows at Elias. Evelyn smirks at his baffled expression.



CHAPTER 25

THE TOWER

The next afternoon, the group settles in the North Woods; beyond the tree line, the Tower of London dominates the sky. They are spread about, preparing their weapons and armor.

Aiden sits upon a severed tree trunk, his right leg slung across the other, oiling his longsword. He is committed to keeping himself busy, trying his best to avoid contemplating all the ways this could go wrong. It does not help.

Tobias interrupts his intrusive thoughts. “I say we put Roland on the wall. He’s an archer by trade, an’ he can watch our backs as we make our way through the Tower.”

A whistling sound attracts Aiden’s attention, and he turns to watch Roland shoot an arrow into a makeshift target he has hung on a tree. He nods at Tobias in agreement and sets back to oiling his blade. He is still not quite sure about Roland, but he will trust Tobias on this one.

Elias comes over next. “Where do ya want me, Aiden Shaw?”

Aiden looks up briefly but then begins to sharpen his sword. He answers, “I need ye ta hang back, Elias.”

“I believe I would be good in a fight, sir.” He points to his sharp canines.

“That I *do* believe, Elias. Still, we’re relyin’ on stealth with this one. We get in, get the bairns, an’ get oot. No one gets hurt.

“However, since Tobias an’ Roland are comin’ wi’ me, I need someone ta be able ta heid a second wave should things go awry fer us in there. Can I count on ye ta get my wee ‘uns oot, should the need arise?”

Elias nods. “A’course, Aiden Shaw... If it did come ta that, where would ya want me ta take ‘em?”

Aiden stands and sheathes his sword. He cups Elias’s shoulder, looks him in his large, round, amber eyes, and replies, “God forbid both me an’ ma lady go down, but if we should, the bairns wad go ta their godparents, the Lord an’ Lady o’ Hildyard Estate in Northumberland. Take ‘em there. Ye’d be welcomed, an’ they’d be safe.”

Elias nods again and steps aside, as Aiden makes his way into the middle of the camp. He attempts to swallow the lump in his throat, though he is impassioned by the support surrounding him. He projects his voice, “Heids up!”

Around the camp, all look to Aiden.

“Fer almost two decades, I’ve been either a ship’s cap’n or a military leader o’ sorts, so I’ve had ta dae a lot o’ these speeches. Ya ken, the ones that are supposed ta motivate ya, that tell ya ye’re doin’ this fer somethin’ bigger than yerself. Well, this isnae one o’ those times.

“This isnae fer the Resistance, an’ this isnae fer glory. Whether ye’re comin’ with me directly or if a second wave is needed, this will be a drop in the bucket against King Henry. Though I’m eternally grateful ta ye all, ye’re doin’ this solely oot o’ the goodness o’ yer hearts fer me an’ ma lady, ta bring our bairns home.

“This bein’ said, we can have nae martyrs tonight, an’ we need ta draw as little attention ta ourselves as possible, so if any o’ ya are aidin’ me as a ploy ta avenge Northumberland, I ask that, fer the safety o’ ma bairns, ye sit this one oot.

“Afore we attempt ta infiltrate the maist fortified buildin’ in England, I ask once more if any o’ ya wish ta remain behind. I dae nae blame ya fer doin’ so; all o’ ye have already done ample fer me an’ ma family. All those who still wish ta assist us say ‘Aye.’”

Every member of the circle calls out with resolve, “Aye.”

Aiden sighs. He asks wearily, “Ye all have yer positions an’ fall backs?”

He surveys the camp as everyone nods.

He looks to Tobias. “Righ’. We move at nightfall.”



THE TOWER OF LONDON LOOMS IN THE DARKNESS OF THE MOONLESS night. Aiden, Evelyn, Godfraid, Erik, Tobias, Roland, and Nick move beneath the shadows of the eastern castle walls, to an old postern hidden within the battlements.

Once inside the fortress, Tobias and Nick move for the wall. They take to either side of the staircase to gain separate vantage points from the outer ramparts, while the others use the cover of night to sink back into the gloom.

A yeoman warder of the Tower watches diligently over the moat, clothed in a bright red uniform. Nick sneaks up behind him, his wide-brimmed hat concealing his appearance, revealing only a sliver of his scarred chin. In one silent, swift motion, he embraces the warder in a blood choke, and the warder falls asleep in his arms.

Footsteps reverberate behind him as another warder paces along the wall. He takes careful steps toward the sound, and once in range, he grabs the warder from behind. He tries to render the man unconscious, but he struggles. Nick has no

choice. He snaps the warder's neck and slowly lowers the body to the ground. He signals to the group in the shadows below and then runs off down the wall.

Aiden and Erik nod back and break apart. In unison, they silently creep along the walls beside the warders guarding the entrance to the inner ward of the Tower, swiftly cutting their throats.

Godfraid and Roland sprint past the group, as the remainder hug the inside of the archway. Making his way up an interior wall, Godfraid notices the flicker of a flame emanating from a turret. He gazes up at the large window to find a French fashion doll leaned against it, peering down at him. He cups his hands and imitates the sound of a crow.

The two warders guarding the turret entrance below glance up at the sound. They hold their halberds at the ready.

Using the distraction to his advantage, Aiden exits the shadows and marches toward the warders. By the time they notice him, it is too late.

He punches one in the face, seizes his halberd, and kicks him to the ground. The other warder backs away and swings his armament at Aiden. Aiden meets his weapon, causing a strong wedge between them. As he struggles to force the warder's arm downward, he rolls his shaft, and takes his opponent through the throat. The warder collapses.

The first warder regains his composure and draws his sword. He advances toward Aiden. The blade catches the shaft of the halberd, jamming the weapon, but Aiden thinks quickly. He lowers the spearhead and pulls forward, slicing through the back of the warder's calf. He notices Erik circle behind him, so he proceeds to knock the warder in the face with the butt end of the halberd and kicks him backward. Erik is ready and stabs the warder through the chest.

The commotion draws the attention of other warders nearby; Aiden and Erik are quickly surrounded. The pair fan out at each other's flank, sending quick side eyes to make sure

the other is whole.

Tobias and Nick exit the archway from the outer ward to join the fight. They subsequently stab two warders from behind.

Erik grins. "It's a party then."

He finishes off one warder, but another rushes him from behind. Seeing the motion in his peripheral, he catches the warder by the arm and rounds his back, using the man's inertia to throw him over his shoulder, body slamming him to the ground. He then impales him through the chest.

Aiden melee fights with one warder, when another warder approaches from the side. An arrow strikes the second warder in the back, and he falls to the ground. Aiden looks up to see Roland with his bow extended over the side of the inner ramparts.

The first warder advances at Aiden, sword raised, backing him against the wall. Trapped, blade against his halberd, he pushes back with his body weight. He contemplates his next move. He still has much farther to go, and this is already not looking great.

From the shadows, Evelyn clasps her hands together. The warder's body begins to constrict, and he writhes in pain as he tries to break free.

Aiden pushes the warder down and looks to his wife. God bless her.

He calls out, "Evelyn, get ta the bairns. I'll be fine!" He runs the warder through.

Another arrow sails past Aiden, almost hitting his boot. That was close. He looks up at the wall. "Ey!"

Godfraid yells, "Sorry! Gettin' the hang of it!"

Aiden rolls his eyes, twirls the halberd, and sprints to help Tobias fend off an additional two warders.

Evelyn jogs up the stairs of the left-side inner wall. She

looks left to Godfraid with his bow coiled, and he nods back at her. She rips open the wooden door to the turret.

As she hikes up the spiral staircase, toward the top of the tower, a warder who has followed from the right-side charges up after her. He grabs hold of her foot, and she screams as she falls to her hands. He drags her down the stairwell.

She kicks at him and tries to crawl back up the stairs. He climbs up her body in an attempt to restrain her. She turns back and grabs his face. He releases her as she melts the flesh from his cheeks. He yells in agony, clutching his face. She scrambles to her feet and continues up the staircase.

She throws open the door to the children's apartment and spills onto the landing. Alice and Colin sit up from their slumber. "Mama!"

Aiden notices two more warders entering the turret from the right-side wall. Absolutely not. Not on his watch.

He inhales, outstretches his palm, and blasts back the four men he is currently in combat with. He runs up after the warders.

The children jump from their beds, but more footfalls echo in the stairwell. She yells to them, "Alice, Colin, stay back!"

The two warders charge onto the landing. They advance toward her, swords at the ready. Evelyn circles her wrist and compels one of their blades to her. The sword obeys her, hurtling through the air and landing gracefully in her grip. She then blasts that warder back down the stairs and spars with the other.

As Aiden climbs the spiral staircase, the warder comes flying down and catches him. He reaches for the stone wall to keep from sliding all the way down, but his heart sinks as he hears the unmistakable clink of his longsword hitting the bottom of the landing. He does not have time to go back.

He growls, "Hell's bells, woman!"

He regains his stance and continues up the staircase.

Evelyn skillfully fences with the warder across the landing. But his combat experience competing against her controlled training ultimately leads to him outpacing her, and he slices her in the side. Bleeding heavily, she sinks to the floor.

Alice and Colin both yell, “Mama!”

The warder looks to the children.

Aiden enters the landing to find the warder looming over his wife, as she lies on the ground, clutching her side. The crimson spot on her dress continues to grow. The children run to her, and time decelerates. Their steps are in slow motion. Anguish and rage surge through him, clouding his thoughts and overriding any conscious action.

In an instinctual trance, he removes the corded tieback from the curtains over one of the room’s windows. His teeth clinched, he grips it in both hands and stalks up to the warder. Before the man can react, Aiden wraps it tightly around his neck, constricting his windpipe. The warder drops his sword as he violently thrashes, clawing at the cord. He quickly loses consciousness, and Aiden kicks him to the floor.

A new warder crosses the threshold and swiftly takes his place in the fight. He thrusts his sword at Aiden’s throat, but Aiden’s senses have peaked, and he anticipates the trajectory of the blade. He side steps, and the weapon strikes the stone wall behind him, sending sparks into the air.

Moving with abnormal speed, precision, and fluid grace, Aiden pirouettes around the room. He dodges every thrash the warder makes like an ethereal dancer in some sort of grotesque ballet. As the warder pulls back for his next swing, Aiden punches him straight in the face. The man falls to the ground, knocked out cold.

Four more warders step onto the landing, and they advance toward him. Aiden’s adrenaline rapidly dissipates, and he hesitates. They are trapped. Out of breath but seeing clearly once again, he perceives his dying wife. The children cling to her dress as they sob for her.

Evelyn struggles, “Aiden...”

She reaches out to him, and his heart drops. He takes her bloody fingers in his; she grips his hand with surprising force. He watches in wonder as their connected hands and arms illuminate in a dazzling golden light.

Evelyn cries out in pain as she focuses her energy, and a surge as sharp as a hot poker shoots through him. He yells as the boiling magma floods his veins. He grits his teeth as he fears his insides may burst. He just knows he is dying.

He then realizes what she is doing, what he must do. He outstretches his other palm. The warders reduce to ashes before his very eyes.

His muscles fail, and he collapses to his knees, his body trembling. His lungs burn, and he feels his heart may explode from the stress. Alice wraps her small arms around him. He holds her close, his weary arm encircling her tiny frame. He presses a kiss to the top of her head as he struggles to stay awake. Colin, covered in his mother’s blood, curls up next to Evelyn. She clings to him tightly as she fades.

Erik, Tobias, and Nick rush onto the landing.

Aiden looks up at them, smiling, his chin propped up on Alice’s head. Slightly delirious, he says, “I believe we deserve a few drams after thenight. How about it, lads? Ye ready fer the tavern?”

The three men rush to help. Tobias reaches out a hand to Aiden, but he swats it away and points to Evelyn, “She’s no...”

“Let’s get outta here, then we-”

A sword pierces Tobias’s chest. He falls to the floor, dead. The men look up from their friend’s body to find Roland holding the blade with his severely burned hand.

Clapping echoes from the shadows. Aiden fades in and out, but Jacques’s voice rings clear.

“What a performance!” He pats Roland’s back cheerfully.

“Especially from you.”

Aiden flashes back to the archer perched upon the castle wall, the one who killed Gwydion in cold blood on the night of the siege.

He struggles, “It *was* you... you traitor.”

Roland grins, exposing his golden tooth.

Erik and Nick fan out and raise their swords. Aiden attempts to climb to his feet.

Jacques steps onto the landing. He commands, “Seize them.”

A river of warders floods in from behind the Frenchman. They force Erik and Nick to their knees beside Aiden. Roland puts his sword to Aiden’s back and yanks his head backward by his hair to look up at Jacques. Another warder ties his hands together.

The chief warder appears behind Jacques and whispers in his ear. Jacques relays, “Well, sounds like O’Reilly evaded capture.” He swishes his hand. “No matter. I have who I was waiting for.”

He draws his sword and points it at Aiden’s throat.

Aiden glares at him, still breathing heavily. Alice continues to cling to his arm, while Colin cries in his mother’s weakening embrace.

Jacques softens as he looks to Evelyn and the children. He motions to the chief warder. “Take them to His Majesty’s chambers. I need the druid alive for the spell.”

The chief warder nods to one of his subordinates, who in turn picks Evelyn up in his arms and carries her down the staircase. Aiden struggles, but the blades are pressed closer to his throat and back. The children cry out to their father as they are dragged away. He watches after them helplessly. As they disappear from the room, he relaxes his muscles in defeat. He closes his eyes as the gears turn in his mind. He has to find a way to get them out of this.

“What are ye playin’ at, Jacques?! I’m past finished wi’ yer games!”

Jacques sneers. He paces around the detained men as he speaks.

“I *would* say our game is quite finished; our plan executed splendidly. Would you not agree, Roland?”

Jacques looks from Roland back to Aiden.

“You see, Roland here was an informant for the crown who we initially placed in York to infiltrate the Northern Resistance. However, when you showed up, Shaw, we gave him another part to play.

“We captured Tobias to lure you away from the safehouse, so we could retrieve Madame Evelyn for His Majesty. Unfortunately, she was not there, and then you both were somehow able to escape my forces when we came back later that night. However, even as slippery as you are, we knew you would be ending up here. We just had to keep Roland with you until then to keep you all on track and have you surrounded in the end.

“Now, we have been able to take down the leader of the Northern Resistance, His Majesty gets the power he wants, and I can finally rid the world of the scum that has been the bane of my existence for all these years, *you*, Aiden Shaw... all at the same time. Everyone is a winner today.”

Aiden questions, half curious and half stalling, “Why, Jacques? Why are ye doin’ this ta ma family? Ye were a brither ta me!”

“You are no brother of mine, Laird High Admiral Shaw, hielander’s son. You have always had it easy, constantly being in the king’s pocket. You deserve nothing you have, but you have managed to take everything from me!”

Aiden returns forcefully, “I didnae ruin yer life, Jacques. Ye stole fae King Louis’s coffers. That’s why ye were removed from the French court. Ye’re lucky he didnae have ya hanged an’ quartered an’ that King James allowed ya sanctuary in

Scotland. Ye want ma titles, take ‘em. I thought I’d made it clear, I dinnae want ‘em!”

Jacques laments, “But she was supposed to be mine. Evelyn was to be *my* fiancée, but you stole her away from me!”

Aiden shouts incredulously, “What?!”

“It was agreed that Madame Evelyn was to be betrothed to me. She was my way back to the French court, but you took her and... and soiled her.”

Aiden shouts, “She never loved you, Jacques, an’ she is no some piece o’ property ta be claimed!”

Jacques regains his composure. “None of this matters now. Thanks to *you* handing her right to me, we will use her powers to manifest King Henry’s ambitions of becoming supreme ruler. I will finally be appreciated and respected, and I will have everything I deserve from now on.”

Aiden grits through his teeth, “If ye hurt her or the bairns, Jacques, I *will* kill you.”

“Oh, there is no need to fret, *camarade*, as it is already done. The spell only takes a few minutes, so Madame Evelyn and the children are most certainly already dead.”

Aiden roars, “No!” He fights to break free.

Jacques grins. “Take him away. I am ready to be rid of his face for good.”

The warders drag Aiden from the room.

Jacques looks to Erik and Nick. “I will give you two one chance to join my ranks.”

Erik spits on the floor at Jacques’s feet.

Nick responds, “I’ll take me chances with the gallows, thanks.”

Jacques returns, “Oh, and you *will*.” He looks to the remaining warders. “Take them as well.”



CHAPTER 26

THE WHITE WITCH

Evelyn finds herself leaned against a cold stone wall, as she sits on the floor of Saint Thomas’s Tower. The air is warm from the blazing fire in the hearth, and opulent red and gold tapestries and rugs decorate the apartment. Her wrists are restrained by enchanted chains, and she is weak from blood loss. Her power is the only thing keeping her conscious. The happenings around her feel so far away, like she is amidst a bad dream, a dream she hopes endlessly to wake from.

Jacques finishes a tourniquet on her side and returns to his feet.

The king is slouched over his chair by the fireplace, while Charles leans against the mantel adorned with trinkets and figurines.

Noticeably concerned, Jacques relays, “She is dying, Your Majesty.”

King Henry swats with his hand. “Ah, doesn’t matter. I just need her to live long enough to finish the spell, so I can extract her power.”

Jacques stammers, “But, Your Majesty, I thought we had an agreement...” He looks to Charles, who shrugs.

Three blonde druids with somber expressions enter the room. They are all dressed in snowy, silk gowns with flowing trains. They carry summoning crystals, mystic herbs, black candles, and a bowl of blessed water.

King Henry interrupts Jacques’s thought, “Ah, perfect. Let’s get this over with.”

The druids’ eyes grow wide as they witness Evelyn before them. Evelyn sinks inside, letting her self-consciousness get the best of her. She wonders if their regards stem from admiration or terror, or if there is a difference at this point. She is quite used to being the special one, the different one... the dangerous one. However, these gazes reveal more kindness, more understanding, than usual.

As she observes the women continue across the room, she catches King Henry’s eye, and he holds a harsher stare, hungry, carnal. They watch each other.

Evelyn whispers, “Your Majesty...”

Released from his temperance, like flood waters through a dam, King Henry is compelled to her. He cascades to his knees and caresses her bloody cheek. “Yes, my beautiful dove.”

Jacques exhibits surprise and mild offense to the king’s candor.

Evelyn struggles, “Why am I here, Your Majesty?”

King Henry grins. “I’ve been after you for so long, my precious jewel.”

She watches his eyes, as they dilate. Knowing she has piqued his interest, she plays into it. “What do you mean?”

“Surely, you recall the siege on Edinburgh Castle? I was not after Scotland. *You* were my prize that night, my dear.

“I thought we had finally taken care of my useless brother-in-law at the Battle of Flodden, so there was an opportunity to

take the castle, and you were finally within my grasp. Your father was the only thing that still stood in my way.

“Even though we were able to take out Gwydion, you were still somehow able to slip through my fingers. And then in the Forest, when my men saw just how powerful you truly are, I wanted you even more. Alas, you thwarted my army once again.”

She squints as she questions, “So, you had your sister killed, Your Majesty?”

“Well, that wasn’t the intention, my lady, but... once you let soldiers go, I mean... my father shouldn’t have married her to that brute, anyway. It is indeed his fault we ended up with this outcome.”

His eyes wander to the blonde women, but Evelyn intends to keep his attention on her. She touches his wrist and feels him shudder beneath her fingers.

She breathes, “Why do you want *me*, Your Majesty? Why go through all this trouble?”

The longer she gazes into his eyes, the more and more she seems to feel his emotions, hear his thoughts:

Her eyes upon him make him absolutely feverish. It takes every ounce of self-control not to take her to bed and devour her. Visualizing all the power that courses through her veins is utterly intoxicating. However, in the back of his mind, he is concerned by the effect she seems to have over his psyche.

He stretches and clinches his fingers to decelerate his urges, as his mind envisions his future if this powerful, beautiful creature might be his queen. The heirs they could create, the influence they could hold. The way he could ravish her and feel her power from within.

He shakes his head to clear his thoughts. She must be using some sort of ancient, fiendish magic to make him succumb to such primal and unholy fantasies. He is stronger than this.

And just like that, she is forced back out.

He attempts to steady his breathing and responds, “Gwydion never told you?”

“Told me what?”

“Evelyn, you are the first female descendant of the oldest lineage of druids, the priests who created Anglesey. You are a progeny of the god, Cerridwen, the mother of all druids. This makes you the White Witch, the most powerful druid since Cerridwen herself. You’re practically royalty.”

She scrunches her face at this revelation. Aiden was right.

He continues, “I’ve been collecting druids for years, but I’ve never been able to complete the spell. They all die before it can be finished, but none of them are as pure as you are. The White Witch is said to be the most powerful being of her days, so I have no doubt the spell will work this time.”

She feels him fight the urge to touch her. “Do you ever feel something itching inside you? This rage you just can’t control? Cerridwen’s power, it’s just too much for your little frame. Luckily, I’ve found a spell to extract it, but it can only be performed under the dark moon. Tonight.

“Unfortunately for you, it will likely kill you, which is a shame because you are possibly the most beautiful creature I have ever laid my eyes upon. No wonder both Shaw and de Portau are willing to kill for you.”

The king looks to Jacques. Jacques frowns at the mention of Aiden’s name.

King Henry resumes, “However, your prodigious sacrifice will make me the most powerful ruler in creation. This will be the beginning of a New World order, Evelyn, one in which I am subject only to God.”

Evelyn has to keep the conversation going. “What will you do once you have it?” She fights the urge to watch the door, strains to hear his footsteps. Surely, any moment now, her husband will be bursting in to save her.

King Henry answers, “Well, I’ll probably start by burning

Scotland to the ground. I'm gravely tired of the kingdom to the North continually standing in my way of taking my rightful place as King of France. My brother-in-law sided with the French, sent them aid and fought alongside them, and now, my cousin does the same.

"The Scots have always been savage, uncultured swine, and their insubordination will never change, so better we just be done with them as a whole and use the Northern realm for more useful things, such as sheep and crops."

The clouds move from in front of the new moon. A druid states, "Your Majesty..."

This breaks the king from his trance with Evelyn.

He kisses her hand and rises to his feet. "It is time, lambkin. Thank you for your service to England."

His servants remove his robe, revealing a bright white gown. A collar of labradorite is draped over his shoulders.

In that moment, Evelyn realizes no one is coming for her. She is trapped. She prays for her children's safety and liberation beyond her.

One druid draws a magic circle on the long wooden table in the center of the chamber. She inserts ancient alchemic symbols between the spaces.

Another anoints King Henry's forehead with chrism. "To see."

Then his chest. "To feel."

And finally, his hands. "To hold."

The third druid places the bowl of water in the middle of the magic circle.

The blondes begin to chant polyphonically, "Ah... wen..."

The first druid lights the black candle from the fireplace and uses it to burn the mystic herbs. She drops them into the bowl of blessed water. As they simmer, the water turns a dark violet.

Candle still in hand, she backs into line with her sisters, who each hold a summoning crystal in their palms.

In harmony, they chant, “Power of Cerridwen rise, submit yourself unto our bidding.”

The druid closest to Evelyn pulls a dagger from within her gown and bends down, taking her hand and slicing it across the palm. Evelyn flinches as her blood drips into the small, wooden bowl the druid holds underneath. The druid then steps over to the magic circle.

The blondes chant in unison, “Let your powers pass from your vessel and unto another.”

The blood is poured into the bowl of water and herbs, and a thick, dark cloud of indigo-blue smoke rises into the air.

“Exalt our master with your powers. By our authority, make it be!”

The druid with the black candle drizzles the chrism over the flame, and the fire flickers and swells. King Henry sighs as his body stiffens.

An incandescent ball of white essence flows from Evelyn and suspends in the air above the bowl of blessed water. She cries out as she feels her insides contract, wrenching her tendons, her muscles throbbing, the life being sucked right out of her, as the black veins creep up her neck and her limbs. The pain is so excruciating, she can barely breathe.

King Henry’s frame illuminates. He admires his glowing limbs.

As the druids repeat, “Cerridwen, Cerridwen, *dod atom*,” the white sphere grows larger, and the black veins ascend longer and thicker. Evelyn loses consciousness and crumbles to the floor.

Jacques stumbles, and his elbow slams into the table, knocking over the bowl of blessed water. The druids immediately cease their chant and stare fearfully at the damp rug coated in seared herbs. The ball of white essence continues

to float in the air, but the black veins stop growing.

King Henry's radiance dissipates. Released from his hold, he roars with frustration.

Jacques expresses, "I solemnly apologize, Your Majesty."

King Henry growls to the druids, "Get more! We don't have much time!" He looks to Jacques. "Let me know when they're ready... I have one more prize waiting for me."

He charges from the room, and Charles follows close behind him. Two of the druids hurry to retrieve more ingredients; one remains behind to clean up the mess.

Jacques rushes to Evelyn. He looks to the druid and says, "I have to get her out of here. Please do not say a word to your master."

The druid nods, tears overwhelming her eyes.

Jacques picks Evelyn up in his arms, and as he carries her through the iridescent sphere, it dissolves back into her body. She gasps, but quickly loses awareness again.



KING HENRY STRUTS DOWN THE MUCKY, DAMP CORRIDOR OF A DARK tower. The orange torchlight and the absence of moonshine only add to the eeriness. Wails of pain echo throughout the keep.

Charles calls through the grimy bars of one of the holding cells, "His Majesty would like to see the prisoner."

A yeoman warder swings open the door and ushers the king inside. Two more men step aside to reveal a beaten and bruised Aiden lying face down over his knees, bound by his wrists and ankles. His bloody face still braced against the wet, stone floor, he turns to King Henry.

King Henry snickers. "So, we meet again, Laird High Admiral Shaw. The fearsome vigilante and protector admired the world over. Looks like I finally get to put your head on a

stake where it belongs, you filthy pirate. Perhaps you are wishing you would have slain me when you had the opportunity.”

Aiden rumbles, “Go ta hell, Henry.”

One of the warders pulls him up off the floor. He commands, “Ye will bow ta His Majesty when addressin’ him.”

He throws him down, facing the king, and drags him up by his hair. He kicks him in the back of the knees to make him bow.

King Henry sneers as Aiden glares up at him.

King Henry gloats, “I think deep down you always knew I was going to win, Shaw. I have God on my side. You and your little witch never stood a chance.”

Aiden returns, “Will that be all?”

King Henry’s smirk disappears. He looks to the warders. “Don’t give him a final meal, and make sure all of his men hang before him tomorrow. I want him to watch.”

With a swish of his cloak, he exits the cell.

The warder behind Aiden kicks him back to the ground, but Aiden remains quiet, refusing to show any indication he is in pain. He has no fight left in him. He wants it to come. He wants it to hurt. Each moment of agony gets him a wee bit closer to being with his family once again.



JACQUES BURSTS INTO A DARK, UNUSED SET OF OFFICER QUARTERS and kicks the door shut behind him. He lies Evelyn across the bed and leans over her. He wipes the damp, blood-stained hair from her face. “Evelyn?”

She does not respond.

He rocks her in his arms. “*Je t’amine, mon coeur.*”

A tear rolls down his cheek as he looks up at the ceiling, praying for both their condemned souls.

“I never wanted it to come to this. I just wanted to give you everything you deserve, that we deserve. More than a miserable cottage, raising the children alone...”

He buries his face in her soft, brown curls. “He thinks you and the children are dead. He will die happily tomorrow. If we can get through this, you and I can finally be together forever.”

Jacques’s words melt into Evelyn’s conscious, like rain against the sea. However, at the mention of her children, she forces herself to focus. They are alive. She must get to them. And this might be her only chance.

She slowly opens her eyes and looks up at him.

He cries, “Madame Evelyn!” He kisses her forehead.

She whispers breathlessly, “Jacques?”

He grips her tighter. “I will get us out of here, *mon amour*.”

Instinctually, he leans down to kiss her lips. She returns the kiss. She touches his face, and he falters. He pulls away and looks into her sorrowful eyes.

She breathes, “You say you’ve always wanted me, Jacques. Take me.”

She lies back on the bed and reaches a weak hand out to beckon him toward her.

He asks incredulously, “Here? Now?”

She replies, “*Oui*, Jacques. Make me yours.”

He kisses her, softly but fervently. He gently raises her skirt, careful not to put his weight on her. As he admires the feeling of her skin finally beneath his fingertips, she grips his upper arms and glares up at him.

His body freezes, every muscle locked into place as if he has been mummified. She pushes him over onto the bed, and he lands like a solid beam of wood. His dark eyes are the only

things to move, as they watch her scramble out of the chambers and back into the inner ward.



EVELYN RUNS AGAINST THE LOFTY BATTLEMENTS COATED IN shadow, but every turn reveals another dead end. Disoriented, the vast Tower has become a maze. Her head throbs, her heart races, and her black hands shake. She fears she will never find a way out. Alone and afraid, she closes her eyes and prays to the Earth for help.

Suddenly, she hears a familiar wing beat. She looks up to the sky. Sain dives and flits around her.

“Sain, I don’t know where they took the bairns.”

The falcon chirps and flies off toward a set of stairs leading down to the lower ward of the Tower.

“You know where they are?”

She races after him.

“Ey!” Warders on their rounds spot her and call out.

She flicks her wrist in an attempt to stun them, but she is too weak. She slams the door to the underground tunnel and locks it behind her. The warders bang on the door, shouting.

Sain leads her to a cell at the middle of the corridor. He lands on the upper lip of a stone column and squawks.

“Mama!” the children call out to her.

She falls to her knees beside the bars of the cell and reaches her arms through them.

As Alice grabs her hand, the black veins on Evelyn’s skin begin to recede. She looks on in awe. Alice notices and quickly releases her grasp.

She looks up at Alice and says, “Darling? Alice, do that again.”

Her daughter backs away and responds, “I’m sorry, Mama.

It was an accident. I know I mustn't."

Evelyn's heart breaks as she looks into her daughter's eyes. She was once that scared, confused little girl.

She says, "No, *I* am sorry, my daughter. I always thought I was protecting you both..." She looks over to Colin. Then, she continues to Alice, "But your powers are who you are. They are your gift to the world."

She reaches out to Alice. "See?" Alice places her hand in her mother's palm. Evelyn holds it against her heart and says, "Close your eyes, my darling. Tell me what colors you see."

Alice obeys and responds excitedly, "I see pink... and purple... some spots of blue!"

As her daughter speaks, the black veins regress from Evelyn's body, and her wound heals before her very eyes.

Evelyn says proudly, "I can't even do that, Alice. You have healed me."

Alice's eyes sparkle as she smiles.

The warders finally rip open the door to the tunnel. The sound of heavy boots pounds down the stone corridor.

Once again at full strength, Evelyn commands, "Alright, you two. Stand back."

She groans as she gradually pulls the iron bars apart. As soon as there is enough room, the children step through.

The warders' footsteps grow closer.

Evelyn takes the gold and emerald comb from her hair and holds it up to Sain.

"Aiden thinks the bairns and I are dead. Take this to him. Tell him I'm coming."

Sain takes the hair comb in his beak and flies directly into the crowd of charging men. They scatter and swat at the raptor. Evelyn's rage grows as she surveys the sheer number of men growing before her, threatening her two small children. She

holds out her hands, and balls of fire rest in each of her palms. The warders halt, weary of her next move. It is a standoff.

Then Colin tugs on his mother's skirt. Her hands still aflame, she looks down into his callow, green eyes.

"Mama, I... come with me. I know the way, to get outside. Come on." He points down a set of stairs to the right of the corridor.

Evelyn follows his gaze. "But..."

He takes off running down the stairs.

Not taking her eyes from his trajectory, she pulls down her hands; the stone ceiling of the tunnel collapses in front of the warders.

She then turns, grabs Alice's hand, and they race down the stairs after Colin, as he leads them even further beneath the Tower.



AIDEN LIES CRUMPLED IN A PUDDLE OF HIS OWN BLOOD ON THE floor of his holding cell. It hurts to breathe as his guilt consumes him. His mind fashions horrific images of the fates his wife and bairns have met. Them crying out for him, pleading for their guardian who will never come.

He releases a primal, wounded yell and slams his balled fist into the cold, wet ground. He contorts into the fetal position, tears running down his cheeks. Teeth clinched, his aching body is petrified with anguish. He has failed at his life's most important job for a second time. He prays for his heart to cease beating.

No torment device in the tower is more tortuous than the thought of continuing on in a world without them again. He cannot fathom tasting another bite of food, hearing another note of music, feeling another breath of wind, or watching another sunrise without them here. He is ready to die, to be reunited with them. If he had a knife, he would do it himself.

It begins to rain heavily. He slowly climbs to his feet, his muscles weary and his heart heavy as a brick. He stares out the barred window, clinging to the Saint Michael's locket. Then, suddenly, he realizes his unconscious behavior and rips the chain from his neck.

Gripped in his fist, he studies it. "Ta be saved has been a curse fer maself an' all those who have cared fer me. How should I be protected, when it is others who should have been protected from me? I should've never crossed the threshold of Hiraeth, and they would still be alive."

He tosses the locket across the grimy stone floor. It clinks as it skips across the ground.

The sound of fluttering feathers fills the room. Sain lands on the windowsill.

Aiden shoos the falcon with his hand. "Go, Sain. I dinnae need any help."

He looks down at his feet. The raptor cocks his head.

Aiden looks back up at the bird and holds out his forearm. The falcon squeezes through the bars. Aiden smiles through his tears and pets the bird's feathers. He says, "Ye've been a braw friend, Sain. Now, I'm goin' ta need ye ta take care o' Jamie fer me, in ma absence..."

Sain squawks in a muffled tone. Aiden squints his eyes, and the falcon drops Evelyn's hair comb. Aiden leans down to pick it up.

His eyes grow wide as he recognizes it. "Sain, did she...?"

The falcon squawks excitedly.

"Has she escaped?"

The bird squawks again.

The torchlight strewing through the barred door illuminates the hairpiece. As Aiden turns, the gleaming green gemstones reflect off something on the floor. He takes a closer look, to discover his locket. He tucks the hairpiece into his pocket and

picks up the pendant.

He examines the scene of Saint Michael, his sword raised to stab the beast, and a revelation hits him: When he left his post as Admiral, Jamie sold his warship, the Great Michael, to France. However, rumor held it had recently been captured by the English.

With King Henry's constant need to boast the size of his fleet, the ship was most certainly docked in the harbor on the other side of these very walls. It was a powerful vessel, laden with twenty-four cannons. If he could just get to her, he could get them all home.

He hands the locket to Sain and says, "Take this ta Godfraid; he's with a wulver. They're camped in the North Woods." He grabs the falcon's feathered head and kisses it. The falcon nuzzles him in return.

Sain squeezes back through the bars of the window. He looks to Aiden.

Aiden says, "Thank ya, auld friend. Thank ya fer bringin' me hope."

Sain flies off into the sky beyond the Tower. Aiden watches as the reds, pinks, and oranges of the sunrise pepper the sky. He smirks as the trumpets and drums begin to play. It is almost time for him, Erik, and Nick to be hanged on Tower Hill.



THE SOUNDS OF THE TRUMPETS AND DRUMS REVERBERATE THROUGH the North Woods.

Godfraid stands in a circle with the rest of the Resistance. "Alright men, it's now or never. We have ta move."

He hears the rustle of feathers overhead. Sain soars down and lands on Elias's shoulder. He drops the locket into the wulver's large, clawed paw.

Elias studies the pendant.

Godfraid lights up. “That’s Shaw’s!” He snatches it from Elias. “It’s a message.”

He inspects the locket from front to back. He opens it and pokes around the painting of little Alice. He then rubs his forehead. “Why would he have Sain bring us this? What does it mean?”

Elias responds, “Maybe he didn’t add anythin’ ta it. Maybe he’s tryin’ ta remind ya a somethin’ already there.”

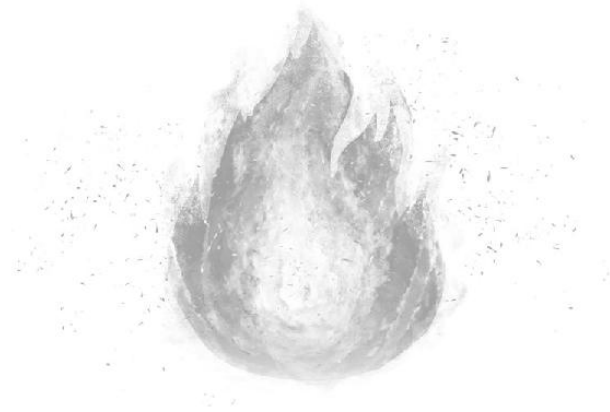
Godfraid looks to the wulver, brows furrowed. “Alice, aye, we’re tryin’ ta save ‘er, but we already know that.”

Elias pushes the locket closed and points to the engraving on its face. “Does *he* mean anythin’ to ye?”

Godfraid replies, “Saint Michael? I mean, Shaw named his old war ship the Michael fer Lady Evelyn because she always believed the Patron Saint would keep us safe an’ bring us back home...”

Godfraid has an epiphany, “The ship! Is she here?” He looks to Elias. “If so, she’s our way home! She’s armed ta the teeth, she is!”

He looks to the group and says, “Alright, lads, gather ‘round. We’re headed ta the Wharf. Shaw has a plan.”



CHAPTER 27

THE GREAT MICHAEL

The morning sun gleams off the bright green grass of Tower Hill, as Aiden, Erik, and Nick stand in a single-file line, awaiting their turns to hang. The chains around their wrists and ankles clank as they shuffle toward the gallows scaffold. Wind whips through the flags staked about the hill.

Jacques stands atop the stage, glowering down at them. Townsfolk begin to gather in a crowd. Aiden cannot help but smirk at the outrageousness of it all. He is sure Jacques has some elaborate speech to send him off with, but his dying wish is that his pompous, French arse should choke on his own saliva and croak right alongside him.

He leans over Nick's shoulder and says, "I might have a way oot. Just haud on, awrigh'?"

Nick grunts in acknowledgment. The one-eyed Resistance-member looks quite different without his signature grubby hat.

The chief warder of the Tower unrolls a piece of parchment. "Erik Peerson, on crimes against His Majesty, the King."

He hands the warrant to the town notary, who signs and stamps it.

Erik steps up the unvarnished, pine box steps and onto the stage of the scaffold. He looks out at Aiden and Nick, while disregarding the rest of the morbid mob.

Aiden stares up at his lifelong friend. If he is to do something, it is now or never. He closes his eyes and grips his hand. As the hangman drapes the noose around Erik's neck, Aiden whispers, "*Disgyn.*"

The beam supporting the noose tumbles from its stand.

Erik steps back and laughs. He looks to Aiden, who winks.

The hangman and assisting warders scramble to reassemble the gallows.

Erik shifts his foot and trips the hangman, who falls hard on the stage.

Nick bursts out laughing.

Jacques smacks himself in the forehead and shakes his head, cursing.



EVELYN AND ALICE SPRINT AFTER COLIN THROUGH THE BOWELS OF the endless caverns underneath the Tower. The caves are full of dripping stalactites, scuttling rats, and vast rooms. Calcite streams carve through the limestone floors. Eyeless salamanders and transparent crickets scatter beneath their feet. Thousands of bats nest on the expansive ceilings, cracking their eyes at the ball of light Evelyn holds in her palm to illuminate their path.

Colin comes to a sudden halt. He closes his eyes, and as if blind, he feels against the damp, stone wall.

Evelyn asks, "What is it, Colin?"

"Shhh, Mama. I'm not sure yet."

Dirt escapes the wall near Colin's hand. The cave appears to inhale and exhale, as if it is breathing. Then, the wall suddenly begins to break apart.

Evelyn quickly pulls the children out of the way as an avalanche of fragmented rock inundates the room.

The dust clears. Before them stands an enormous, white dragon with blood-red eyes. It is as tall as the cavern itself, with a long, slender body covered in translucent scales, each the size of Evelyn's hand, overlapping each other like armor.

Alice whispers in wonder, "They *are* real."

Not quite sure of her next move, Evelyn steps in front of her children, white orbs of energy in her hands.

The dragon rears back on its muscular hind legs and releases a deafening roar that vibrates throughout the chamber, causing pieces of rock to break off the ceiling and rain down on them. Evelyn shields the children as they cover their heads and brace for impact.

As the beast lands back on its front feet, a loud boom shakes the room and knocks them all to the ground.

Colin scrambles to his feet. Evelyn reaches out for him, a scream tearing from her, "No!"

He avoids her grasp and makes for the dragon. He hugs onto its leg like a long-lost family member. Evelyn watches in terror.

The dragon instantly relaxes and peers down at Colin. It lowers its long, winding neck to sniff his hair, and then it nuzzles him. Evelyn is, inexplicably, reminded of Aiden and Gara. Colin chuckles and rubs its leathery chin. Its barbed tail swats the ground like a pet dog, sending more dirt and debris in every direction.

Evelyn cannot believe her eyes.

Colin speaks to the beast, "Can you help us escape, friend?"

The dragon nudges Colin with its long, teeth ridden snout and growls so low it resembles a cat's purr.

Alice runs over to join her brother. They both begin scratching behind the dragon's massive horns. They giggle as the beast snuggles against Alice.

Colin looks to his sister and explains, "His name is Bryn, and he knows how to get us out of here."



THE WARDERS FINALLY HAVE THE GALLOWES BACK TOGETHER.

Jacques announces, "*Tres bien*, let us stop this messing around. These good people have come to see a show, *non?*"

The townspeople all cheer in agreement.

The hangman once again drapes the noose around Erik's neck.

At that moment, the hill around them begins to split apart in a huge earthquake. The expansive crack swallows everything in its path. Trees, buildings, and even part of the Tower wall descend into the fiery abyss below. The townspeople run for their lives. Many of the warders follow suit.

Aiden dives to avoid falling through, but then he scrambles to his feet once he notices one of the warders frozen in his tracks. He throws his wrist chains around the warder's neck and yells, "Keys!"

The warder struggles to escape his grasp.

Aiden squeezes his throat tighter. "Give me the keys, or we'll *both* be fed ta the hell hounds!"

The warder fumbles on his uniform and unlocks Aiden's chains. He then hands Aiden the key ring but continues to stand there, petrified.

Aiden yells, "Run, man! Go!"

The warder salutes Aiden and runs off down the hill. Aiden rolls his eyes and leans to remove his ankle chains. He then throws the keys to Nick and trips up the steps to Erik.

He removes the noose from his friend's neck.

Erik inflects above the chaos, "I was beginnin' ta think ya forgot about me, shipmate."

Nick tosses the key ring up to Erik, but he quickly jumps backward as the crack in the Earth continues to grow.

The hangman hangs onto the beam as the scaffold teeters over the side of the crack. He yells, "Oi! Get back 'ere!" He grasps for Aiden and Erik as they jog down the steps.

Jacques is trapped on the other side of the crack. He calls out to the scattering warders, "Where are you going?" He points to the escaping prisoners. "Get them!"

None of them respond. Frustrated, he snarls and mounts his steed. He charges off in the opposite direction.

The enormous white dragon emerges from the newly formed canyon. Evelyn, Alice, and Colin slide down from his back. The beast wraps his armored tail around the family to protect them. He then expels a huge stream of fire at all who remain near Tower Hill.

Aiden, Erik, and Nick crouch behind the scaffold, as its anterior is reduced to kindling. The residual warders and townspeople clear out.

Colin pats Bryn's tough hide. He says, "Thank you, friend. I hope to see you again one day. For now, be released from your captivity."

The dragon nuzzles Colin and expands his immense, batlike wings. He ascends from the ground and flies off into the blue sky.

As the smoke and embers clear, the men step out from behind the gallows scaffold. The children cheer, and the groups race to each other. Aiden grabs Evelyn in one arm and picks up Alice with the other. Colin grabs hold of his leg, and

Aiden pulls them all into a tight embrace.

Overwhelmed, he uses Alice's golden curls to wipe his tears as he says, "Alright, let's go, we dinnae have much time!"

They all follow Aiden. A screech echoes from the sky above. Aiden looks up and calls out, "Did they make it?"

Sain screeches again and flies off toward the Wharf.

Aiden licks his finger and holds it up to the sky. "Perfect!" he exclaims.

A few of the scattered warders notice them. They yell, "Halt!" and "Stop!" as they chase after them.



AIDEN'S BODY IS EXHAUSTED AND HIS LUNGS ARE BURNING, BUT HE pushes on. He looks for a way to put space between them and the warders; he pulls them onto a busy street that runs straight through Londontown. They duck under clotheslines and around the bustling citizens. Erik pulls a load of crates over into the street to block the warders, and their group quickly disappears into the crowd.

The street ends at the river, and there she is, filling the harbor and dominating the skyline, the Great Michael. The colossal, four-masted carrack designed by Jamie's father and Aiden, hewn from all the forests in Fife, still takes his breath away. With her elaborately painted, glossy hull and her protruding crown figurehead, she is still as bonnie as the day he left her.

As they break for the Wharf, another group of warders notices them and advances from the left. Yet, they are so close to freedom, and Aiden is too determined to get them there.

Aiden yells, "Get ta the ship!"

He hands Alice to Evelyn and kicks one warder in the chest to commandeer his sword. He then turns to spar with two

additional attacking warders.

Godfraid waves to Evelyn from atop the warship. Dragging Alice and Colin, she sprints for the gangway. Aiden knocks one warder into the river and follows them up. Nick is close behind.

Erik remains locked in combat with two of the warders, but more make for the gangway.

He calls up to the deck, "Go! I'll catch up!"

He kicks down the gangway and continues his brawl across the dock.

Godfraid calls out to those aboard, "Alright, boys. Let's move!"

Yelling ensues across the deck as the last sails drop. Godfraid twists the helm back and forth to force the ship out of port, and Francis directs those in the rowboat down in front to scull the ship along. The ship sluggishly follows the long ropes that lead to the anchors they have placed ahead to kedge them down the river.

Cannon balls from the ramparts of the Tower pelt the water next to the Michael.

An immense wind slams against the stern of the ship, causing the sails to balloon out. Surprised, Godfraid turns to see Evelyn, hands outstretched toward the sheets.

He cups his hands and projects over the gunfire, "We're sittin' ducks, lads! Trim the sails, or we'll n'er make it out alive!"

Men race to the rigging, hastily hoisting the halyard lines to trap the wind in the sails. The ship quickly picks up speed. Elias helps Francis and the other men winch in the rowboat, as they dodge the continuing cannon fire on the water.

Aiden yells up from the gundeck, "We on'y have ten cannons, Nick, but they'll have ta do. Let's get some men down here!"

Nick lays over the side of the access and replies, “Aye!”

A knicker sounds from the compartment below Aiden. He leans into the dark hatch to see Gara huddled together with the rest of the horses. He exhales, “Oh, thank God.”

Men rush down to the gundeck.

Aiden relays to the mare, “Dinnae be feart, hen. This is goin’ ta be loud.”

They load the cannons, light the fuses, and retaliate against the Tower. Two cannon balls pierce its thick, stone wall. The men on deck cheer, and the gun smoke makes it hard for the warders to hit the moving target.

Godfraid hands the helm to Elias, and he runs to climb the shroud of the mainmast to put eyes on what lies ahead.

As they make their way down the River Thames, arrows batter the side of the ship. Cries ring out as many sail over the side and connect with a few of the men.

Evelyn pushes the children to the deck and lays over them. She says, “I need you both to get below decks.”

Colin responds, “Just a moment, Mama! I want to help!”

He wiggles free and sprints to the other side of the ship. He raises his hands toward the archers along the shoreline, and a massive flock of geese swarms upon them. The archers wail and swipe their hands in the attempt to remove the pecking and honking birds from their faces.

Alice escapes her mother’s hold as well and hurries to heal Francis, who bleeds heavily from a wound to his shoulder.

Evelyn climbs back to her feet and puts her hands on her hips. “Well, if you two aren’t your father’s bairns.” She again manipulates the wind to quicken their getaway.

Aiden returns to the main deck and notices the children running amuck. He corrals them back toward Evelyn. “Awright’, come on, come on. I’ve got enough ta keep ma eyes on bar ye two. Yer Ma would kill me if we lost ya now.”

Evelyn pulls the children and Francis into the captain's quarters, but looks back to her husband before closing the door. She says, "Now, don't be a hero. Just get us home, alright?"

He nods. "Yer wish is ma command, ma lady."

She gives him a peck on the cheek, and he closes the door behind her.

In the distance, Erik plows over townsfolk as he sprints down the shoreline and away from the town guards. He dives into the river. Aiden tosses a line in, as his friend breaststrokes toward the ship, and musket fire powders the water. Erik grabs hold of the line, and Aiden hoists him up and over the side of the ship.

As he lands upon the wooden planks, Erik kisses the side of the Michael and says, "Ma God, it's good ta see ya ol' gurl!"

They approach London Bridge, but the drawbridge begins to lower in front of them.

Godfraid calls down from the crow's nest, "Wha's the move, Shaw?"

Aiden racks his brain. A quick inventory of the ship has found that the front and back basilisk cannons have been removed, but if they turn, they leave themselves defenseless from the side, and they would not likely be able to correct before ramming the bridge. However, a bailout would leave them exposed, stranded, and likely captured once again.

Monstrous blasts echo through the air, and townspeople scatter across either side of the bridge. The bridge is left in rocky shambles where the drawbridge used to be.

As the smoke clears, three ships appear on the other side. John Hildyard stands at the prow of the lead vessel, leaned against his cane.

Aiden sprints to the front of the Michael and calls out, "John!"

John bellows in his hardy tone, “Blame Elias and Sain for not letting you have all the fun!”

Aiden beams at his longtime friend. He then rushes back to help Elias lead the enormous ship through the ruinous bridge that was recently adorned with homes and shops. He cups Elias’s shoulder and looks him in the eye. “Thanks, mate. I owe ya one.”

Elias smiles and nods.



AS THE ARMADA REACHES THE MOUTH OF THE RIVER, AIDEN catches sight of the open ocean. He inhales a deep breath of salt air and exhales some of his fear and worry. They are finally home free.

Suddenly, three well-appointed war ships - the largest of which could rival his own - round the corner. Aiden’s relief turns to dread, as his stomach sinks like an anchor to the ocean floor. He looks up to the crow’s nest.

Godfraid calls down, “It’s Jacques an’ Roland.”

Aiden growls.

As the English naval vessels close the gap between them, cannon balls pelt the water.

Aiden calls out, “Ready the guns!”

The men on the gundeck below repeat, “Ready the guns, aye!”

He hears Hildyard’s fleet echo the same command to their men.

Within range, the reignited admiral yells, “Fire!”

An onslaught of cannon balls bombards the English ships. Jacques’s fleet quickly retaliates. A battle ensues, sending an eerie, floating screen of smoke across the water.

Jacques’s ship blasts a hole in the hull of Hildyard’s. The

explosion ignites the powder stores, and the ship catches fire. Bodies drop from the side of the vessel as it swiftly begins to sink.

Aiden dives into the water.

Godfraid yells, “Bloody hell, cap’n! I’m not comin’ in after ye!”

As Aiden resurfaces, he can hear shouting and fires crackling, but through the thick mist, he cannot make out any of the shapes on the water. He hunts through the wreckage and finally finds John floating on a piece of wood.

Aiden checks him over; though his arm has been injured, he otherwise just seems exhausted from his substantial, chronically-ill body treading water one-handed.

John opens his eyes. “You’re a bloody angel.”

Aiden throws his friend’s arm over his shoulder and responds, “Aye, that’s jus’ the fatigue talkin’, John.” He paddles back over to the Michael.

John mumbles, “I could kiss you.”

Aiden chuckles, “Ma breath’s a bit rank, maybe another time.”

John chortles.

Erik throws in a line to reel them in. He then begins to hoist other members of Hildyard’s crew onto the deck.

Suddenly, the front of Jacques’s ship slams into the bow of the Michael. The ship jolts, and her men are knocked to the ground. English sailors charge onto the Michael’s decks.

Aiden pulls John back to his feet. He looks him in the eyes, grabs his shoulder, and implores, “Please, protect ma bairns.” He nods toward the door of the captain’s quarters.

John nods and, while nursing his bloody arm, he hobbles over to guard the entrance to the quarters. Erik tosses a cutlass to John’s good hand, and they both take a fighting stance.

Jacques steps onto the deck and smirks at Aiden. He says, "So, you thought you could run away and hide again, eh? Not this time, Shaw."

Aiden glares up at his prior shipmate as he makes his way down from the forecastle deck.

A fierce battle rages around them. Erik and Roland have their swords locked, and Elias proceeds to rip sailor after sailor to shreds. Godfraid disarms a sailor and tosses the cutlass Aiden's way.

Aiden catches it as the Frenchman reaches the main deck. "Awright', Jacques, let's get this over with."

Aiden rapidly closes the distance between them. Jacques steps out of the way and knocks Aiden into a beam of the ship. Aiden steadies himself, while Jacques draws his sword and turns to him. He taunts, "I think you may be losing your touch, Shaw."

Aiden's heart pounds in his head as adrenaline and pure will are the only things keeping him moving. He glares and grits through his teeth, "I'm goin' ta relish killin' ye."

His grip tightens on his sword, his knuckles turning white. He is locked in. This ends now.

He pushes off the beam and charges at Jacques. Jacques does not block in time, and the blade slashes his arm. As he cradles it, he uses it to elbow Aiden. Aiden pushes him back and knees him in the stomach. Jacques stumbles backward and lands against the side of the ship.

Aiden points the tip of his sword inches away from Jacques's throat. "Aye, what's that ye were sayin', de Portau? Ye forget who taught ye how ta fight."

Jacques scowls at him.

Aiden continues, "We can end this right now, Jacques. No one else need die today."

"Impossible," Jacques uses his blade to push the cutlass away from his neck, and they continue to fence across the

deck.

Aiden rushes Jacques and smashes him with the butt end of the brass hilt of the scabbard. Jacques topples to the ground. Aiden charges him again, the blade of his sword outstretched this time, but Jacques manages to roll out of the way.

Aiden taunts, "Let me ken when ye're wearin' thin, Jacques. I can dae this aw day."

Jacques springs to his feet, but Aiden is crouched and ready for him. He motions for Jacques to come on.

Jacques advances, and again they spar across the deck. Jacques forces Aiden into the wall of the captain's quarters. Alice and Colin scream from within.

The sound catches Jacques off guard, and as he stares at the wall, Aiden seizes the opportunity to knee him in the groin. Jacques stumbles backward. Aiden lunges and tackles him to the ground.

They roll around, grappling with each other.

Aiden finally knocks Jacques's cutlass out of his hand. He then jumps up, but Jacques kicks his feet out from under him. Unable to brace, Aiden falls flat on his back, the wind knocked out of him. He attempts to move, but his lack of food and water over the past two days catches up with him. He cannot breathe. His muscles refuse to work. He is paralyzed.

He can only look up at Jacques in terror.

Jacques takes his chance. He grabs his sword and climbs onto Aiden. He rips the cutlass from Aiden's grasp and tosses it across the deck. He then holds his blade perpendicular to Aiden's chest. Aiden attempts to blast him back with his force field, but he is too weak.

Jacques sneers as he pushes his body weight into the hilt of his sword. Aiden musters enough strength to grab hold of the blade with both hands, but he cannot stop it from piercing his chest. Agonizing wheezes escape his lips as he desperately struggles against the determination of his assailant. His vision

blurs, and each breath becomes a monumental effort.

Aiden's grip on the blade wanes, blood staining his hands as he fights to hold on.

Jacques leans to his ear and whispers, "I was the one who told them she was in the Forest all those years ago."

From inside the captain's quarters, Evelyn feels Aiden's life force weaken. She gasps, trying to catch her breath.

She throws open the door to find Jacques over her husband, the sword through his ribcage. She screams demonically, sending out a shockwave that brings every man to his knees, holding their ears.

She rises into the air, and a titanic wave splashes onto the deck. As it recedes, most of the English sailors are washed into the water. However, Aiden's body remains perfectly preserved. Quickly fading, he is motionless.

She floats back down to the deck and rushes over to him. Both sides of the battle look on in terror. John holds the mortified children behind him. They watch through the curve of his arm, whimpering.

Jacques smirks as Evelyn pours over her husband's waning form.

Aiden's voice quivers as he looks up at her. "Dae it again, ma love." He breathes harshly, "Give me yer hand... Let me finish this."

The back of her throat hurts as she feels her heart breaking. "You're too weak, Aiden. You... you'll die."

He does not accept her refusal, sluggishly holding up his hand to her.

She sighs wearily and grabs hold of it. She closes her eyes and screams as she drives her power into him.

He cries out in pain as the energy floods every crevice of his frame. It feels like he is bursting at the seams.

Unable to sustain the power, his organs and tissues begin to

necrotize, and suddenly, he goes quiet, his body entirely rigid.

Both ship decks are eerily silent, as all men look on in fear.

Then, his eyes re-open, and they are bright red. Illuminated by a radiant, white light, he levitates from the ground. His muscles throb, his skin crawls, and his overwhelming restlessness assures him that he could pick up a mountain. The colors around him are brighter, and his surroundings are somehow more focused. He feels like he has the strength of a hundred men, like a god. This must be how the Dagda wakes up every day.

But then, he sees him, and a sweeping rage overtakes him. His enhanced vision tunnels like the barrel of a gun as he zeroes in on Jacques.

Jacques's eyes grow wide, and he turns and runs back toward his ship.

Aiden grins dangerously as he follows behind him, each step careful and calculated. Ashes from Hildyard's burning ship float in the air and land around them like a flurry of infernal snowflakes.

"Where're ya goin', Jacquey boy?" Aiden asks in a deep, spine-chilling tone.

Evelyn crumbles to the deck, convulsing with tears. Alice and Colin break free from their godfather and run to her.

Jacques takes brief glances behind him as he stumbles and falls over the bow and back onto his own ship. Aiden leisurely steps onto the deck of the English warship.

One of the English sailors advances on Aiden. With a wicked grin, he twists his hand, and the sailor's neck snaps. The man falls at his feet, dead. Aiden unhurriedly steps over the body. Another sailor rushes him. He cuts his eyes, and the man begins to convulse, choking up blood.

The rest of the sailors quickly lower their weapons and step back, making a wide circle around Jacques. Jacques realizes he is alone in the center of the deck. Aiden continues to stalk

toward him.

Jacques looks around at his men. “Do something!”

None of the sailors move.

Aiden stops feet away from him but does not say a word. He just stares at the Frenchman.

Jacques realizes he is at the end of his rope. He pleads, “Wait, Shaw. Wait. We are brothers, remember? Think of all the times we have fought side by side, all the times I have had your back. Be reasonable, *camarade*. This is not you!”

Aiden laughs fiendishly. His cynical grin is wide, displaying his pronounced canines.

“Aye, Jacques, ye’ve been by ma side all these years, an’ ye should ken by now, I’m anythin’ *but* reasonable. Ye’ve jus’ n’er been on the receivin’ end. But alas, ye’ve taken ma good hospitality fer granted far too long, an’ today, ye find oot what it’s like ta be ma enemy.”

He takes one final step toward Jacques, until they are face to face.

Jacques begs, “No, Shaw, please!”

Without strain, Aiden picks him up by the throat. His feet dangling in the air, Jacques wails as the skin on his body bubbles and boils. Aiden then puts a second hand to the Frenchman’s neck and casually rips his head from his body. He slams the lifeless figure into the deck. It plummets for three stories to the keel of the ship.

He surveys the rest of the sailors. They all drop their weapons and hold their hands up in submission. They watch him, fearful of his next move.

His glow gently dims. He looks over the bow of the Great Michael at Evelyn holding Alice and Colin. His once again blue eyes are distant and frosty as they meet hers one last time.

He mouths, “I love you.”

He then drops to his knees and proceeds to collapse into a

heap upon the deck.

Evelyn and the children rush to his side. The Resistance detains the English sailors, while Erik ties up Roland.

Evelyn places one hand on Aiden's shoulder and one on his wrist. Then she straightens her posture and closes her eyes. She tries to hear Baba Edith's direction over her own screaming thoughts, but no matter how much she strains her mind, there is no response. It is as if his life force just does not exist.

She looks to her daughter and pleads, "Alice, darling, make Daddy wake up."

Alice closes her eyes and feels across her father's chest. She quickly opens them again and looks at her mother fearfully.

"I cannot see him, Mama. There is no color. He's all dark."

Godfraid, Erik, John, Nick, and Elias form a circle around the small family.

Evelyn sits back on her knees in disbelief. "He's gone."

Erik rests a bloody hand on her shoulder and squeezes. She grabs hold of it and cries into his battered knuckles. He stares off at the open ocean, trying to swallow the lump growing in his throat. The other men look down at the lifeless frame of their once fearless leader. The children cling to their father's chest, sobbing.

As Alice cries, her tears land upon Aiden's bloodstained blouse, each one slowly seeping through the fabric and landing on the puncture wound of his chest.

With each drop, the gash closes a little more, until it finally seals and disappears completely.

Aiden opens his eyes. He looks down at his children laid against his chest and wraps his strong arms around them. He smiles.

"I'm glad we're all together again."

Alice and Colin look up at him in surprise. They cheer, “Daddy!” They hug him even tighter. He laughs and grimaces as he holds his ribs.

Evelyn leans over and achingly kisses his lips. He touches her face and uses his thumb to wipe the tears from her cheeks. He says, “We did it, ma love, you an’ me.”

She smiles as more tears fall from her eyes.

He then looks back at Alice and Colin and says, “Let’s get ye all back home now.”

He beams as he peers up at the friends huddled around him. They are all still standing. He sits up and says, “Awright’, O’Reilly? Peerson?”

They both nod.

He looks to John, Elias, and Nick. “So, how ‘boot that dram, lads?”

Erik pulls Aiden to his feet. “Aye, I’m sure Mac’s gonna love hearin’ this ‘un.”



CHAPTER 28

CAISTEAL NA MARA

The sun is high in the vibrant, cloudless sky of Fife, Scotland. Jamie and Colin play a game of *camanachd* on the bright green lawn of a massive, stone castle prominently placed on a cliff overlooking the North Sea.

The fanciful fortress has been painstakingly crafted with crow-stepped roofs, projecting turrets, extravagant chimney pieces, and hefty, oak, barrel-vaulted ceilings. All allied buildings are linked by battlements, and there is an eight-sided water cistern to represent the eight years Aiden and Evelyn had to live without each other, a daily reminder of how poorly they do on their own.

The ocean below is calm, as the Great Michael rocks back and forth in the lulling surf. Sain circles overhead, hunting for mice, and Gara and the other horses graze on an open field nearby.

Jamie says to Colin, “Ya ken, yer Pa taught me how ta play this game when I was a wee lad, just as *his* father taught him in the hielands.”

Colin grins sneakily and smacks the ball between Jamie’s

legs. Jamie chuckles, “Hey!”

Colin laughs and skirts around the king to catch up with it. A large, Irish Wolfhound chases after them as they run and squabble over the length of the lawn.

“Hail!” Colin yells as he scores.

Laid over with his hands on his knees, Jamie laughs between pants. He is out of breath.

Mac steps out onto the portico of the enormous castle with a dram in his hand. He sits down next to Aiden and Godfraid. Another large wolfhound naps next to Aiden’s chair.

Evelyn and Elizabeth follow with glasses of wine, giggling about a spot of gossip and taking their time.

John yells from behind them, “If you two don’t move your tushes, so I can get out the bloody door!”

They laugh and clear the way, heading down the stone steps to the garden to meet Agnes, who is teaching Alice about herbs. Alice looks up from her lesson and calls out, “Auntie Beth!”

John hobbles over to the rest of the men. He sits down on Aiden’s other side and huffs.

Aiden chuckles and holds up his dram. “A toast, ta family, an’ ta those we’ve lost. *Slàinte mhath.*”

Mac returns, “Lang may yer lum reek!”

Godfraid says, “To Tobias!”

John adds, “Hear, hear!”

They all clink their goblets together.

Aiden turns to Godfraid. He asks, “Wha’s next fer ye, O’Reilly? Ye goin’ back ta the Navy?”

Godfraid answers, “Nae, I’m gettin’ too old fer this battle rhythm, Shaw. They have an openin’ fer a new Harbormaster at the docks, an’ I think I’m goin’ ta take it.”

Aiden nods. “That wad be no bad fer ya.” He looks to Mac.

“What about you, Mackie? Wad ye ever consider retirin’ from the inn an’ movin’ up here wi’ me?”

Mac replies, “Maybe one day, boy-o, maybe. But right now, I still have a responsibility ta make a home fer scallywags like ye once were.”

Aiden smirks.

Mac continues, “I’m so proud o’ how far ye’ve come, ma boy.” He ushers to the lands beyond them.

Aiden responds, “Aye, we’ve got a wee bit o’ homemakin’ left ta dae ourselves.”

He nods to the new construction of stone village homes just beyond the green lawn. Thomas stands atop one of the roofs, installing thatch. He waves, and Aiden returns the gesture.

Aiden then looks to Jamie and Colin tussling through their brutal game of *camanachd*.

He stands and calls out to them, “Let me show ye two bairns how it’s done!”

He hops down the stone steps from the portico and charges toward them.

Erik ambles up the sandy drive on the back of his Belgian as he hears Aiden’s challenge. He jumps down from his steed and yells, “Not if I show ya first, old man!”

He races over to Aiden, and they shove, manhandle, and slam their shoulders together as they attempt to knock the cork-cored, leather ball away from each other. Erik trips Aiden, and he rolls to the ground, laughing and holding his stomach.

Jamie extends his hand to Aiden, and they grasp each other’s forearms. He says, “Happiness looks good on you, big brither. I guess it’s time I finally let you be a family man. I’m grateful fer everythin’ ye’ve done fer me, an’ all the times ye’ve been there fer me.”

Aiden jumps to his feet and wraps his arm around Jamie's shoulder. "Thank you, Yer Majesty, fer bein' there when I was sure everyb'dy else was lost ta me."

He pulls the king into a headlock and scruffs up his hair with his knuckles. Jamie laughs and ducks under his arm.

The king adds, "On the conditions that you come ta visit an' dine with me every once in a while... an' make it ta the annual council meetings. I still canna run this kingdom wi'out you."

Aiden pats Jamie's back and returns, "Will dae, son. Ye will always be ma boy, an' I will support ya fer the rest o' ma days. Ye ever need anythin', all ye need dae is ask."

He hits the ball over to Erik with one of the slanted sides of his stick.

Erik then hits the ball off to Colin.

Aiden asks, "Wha's next fer ye, Lachland?"

Erik looks back, and using his hand to shield his eyes from the gleam of the sun, he replies, "Ya know the fight is all I have, Shaw, an' there is still a war between France an' England. We're bound ta stay caught in betwixt it."

He motions to Jamie and continues, "Luckily, His Majesty, has promoted me ta yer ol' rank."

Aiden lights up. He rubs his chin and ponders, "Laird High Admiral Erik Peerson."

Erik responds, "Rolls off the tongue nicely, eh?"

Aiden replies, "Well, ye're no' a Scot... but I guess ye'll do."

Erik purses his lips and rolls his eyes as Aiden pulls him into a firm embrace.

He says, "I'm happy fer ya, lad. Ye have earned yer rank, an' I couldnae think o' a better sailor ta be protectin' the shores o' Scotland."

Colin pulls on Aiden's trousers and interjects, "I want to be a sailor one day too, Daddy. Could you teach *me* to sail?"

Aiden looks down and pats Colin's head. He leans to one knee and replies, "O'course, ma son. That bein' said, ye'll be needin' protection when ye're oot on those dangerous waters."

He removes the silver locket from his neck and clasps it around Colin's.

Colin picks up the pendant of the patron saint and studies it. He opens the face to find a painting of the four of them. He trills, "Wow, it's bonnie, Daddy."

Aiden grins. "Aye, it is indeed. Yer mither gave it ta me ta keep me safe when I was a young adventurer much like yersel'."

He looks over Colin's head to see Evelyn watching the exchange from the garden. He meets her loving gaze and smiles.

He continues, "Saint Michael is the patron saint o' sailors an' soldiers, an' havin' this has always brought me home safe ta ye. But since I have nae need ta be leavin' anymore, it's better suited fer ye an' yer life aheid o' ya. This way, ye'll always come home safe ta me an' yer 'Mama,' an' then yer own wife an' bairns someday."

Colin hugs his father's neck and says, "Thank you, Daddy!"

Aiden embraces his son tightly, and then he watches as he runs off to finish his game with Jamie and Erik.

He strides over to Evelyn. Leaning over the garden wall, he asks, "How are ya settlin' in, ma lady?"

She smiles. "I can't believe you've been building this all these years, and I never knew."

He touches her face and responds, "I promised ye, dinna I?"

"You did, love."

He grins. “Our Caisteal na Mara. We’re finally home, ma lady, an’ we’re nae hidin’ anymore.”

She smiles and repeats, “Our Sea Castle.”

The dogs begin to bark, and Aiden hears Colin call out, “Elias!”

He turns to see Colin sprint across the lawn to the wulver, the dogs close behind. Elias wraps Colin up into a furry embrace.

Aiden looks back to his wife. She hands him his satchel and says, “Go on! Have fun.”

Agnes adds, “Bring me somethin’ ta cook, boy!”

Aiden nods to the ladies and strolls after Colin.

As he reaches Elias, he says, “Good ta see ya, mate!” The two embrace and pat each other’s backs. Aiden asks, “How’s yer new cave?”

Elias replies, “Quiet. Jus’ the way I like it. It’s nice ta finally have somethin’ that’s jus’ mine.” Elias then looks to the king and bows. “Afternoon, Your Majesty.”

Jamie nods in return. “I hope ye’re well, Elias. I’m hopin’ fer some cod tonight, if you please.”

Elias smiles and nods. He then leans back down to Colin. “Are ya ready ta catch us some dinner, Colin Shaw?”

Colin responds, “Aye, please, ma laird!”

The two of them turn and head down the sandy path and toward the shoreline, their fishing poles slung over their shoulders.

Aiden takes a moment to look back and admire the acquired family displayed before him. He can hardly believe that just two weeks ago, he landed on these shores with nothing and no *one*, save Gara, and now, *this* is his life. He tries his best to paint a picture of this moment to tuck away safely in his mind.

He waves, and they all wave back. He then turns and jogs after Elias and Colin.



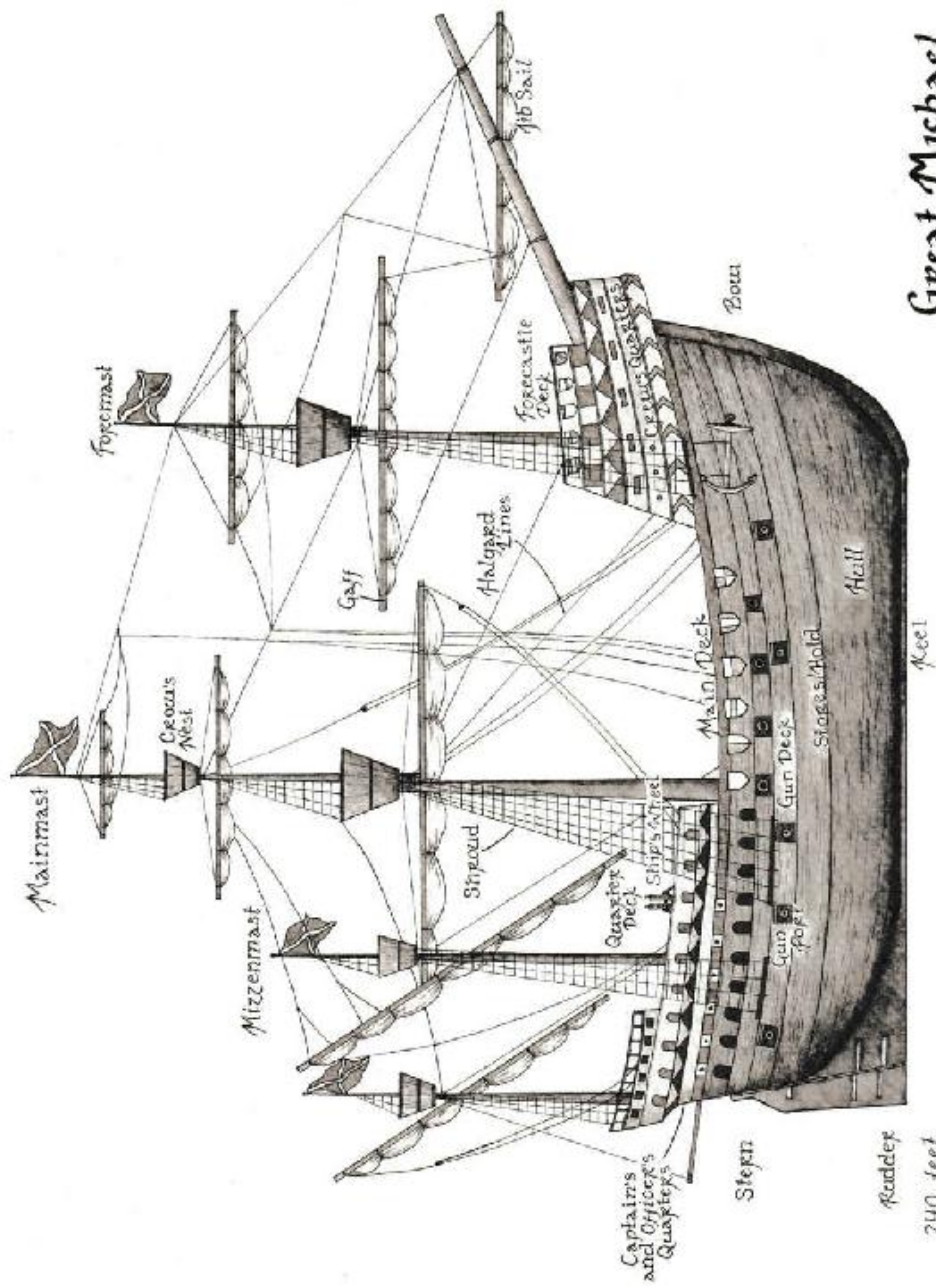
DOWN BY THE WATER, ELIAS AND COLIN CAST THEIR LINES. AIDEN sits down beside his son and pulls his journal from his satchel. He flips it open to the next bare page and looks out at the sun setting against the still horizon of the North Sea.

Colin expresses, “Adventures are all well and braw, Daddy, but there’s nothing better than coming home.”

Aiden looks to Colin and smiles. “That I agree with you, ma boy.”

He then looks down at the empty page before him and begins his next entry:

The best journeys take you home.



Great Michael

240 feet

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For the *Fire On Fire* glossary companion, inspiration locations, and more, check out [KyrstieNickles.com](https://www.kyrstienickles.com).

Look out for Aiden's prequel, *Fire On the Water*, and Alice and Colin's sequel, *Fire In the Sky*, coming soon! Visit [KyrstieNickles.com](https://www.kyrstienickles.com) to join the mailing list.

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