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ARTHUR'S HEIR

by

Holly Elizabeth McGinnis

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

The University of Memphis

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Dedication

To my parents, who stressed with me over every story decision with zero context,

and

To my classmates, who stressed with me over the outcome of every story decision, with
only slightly more context.

Abstract

Arthur's Heir is a coming-of-age fantasy novella, in a pseudo-Medieval world, that follows teenage Hew as he leaves his home for a new employment opportunity— at the king's castle in the bustling capital city. The story follows Hew and his friend Saerlaith as he navigates the hurdles thrust upon him in an uncertain world, his important relationships, and his own identity. Readers will be challenged to consider each of our potentials for bravery, heroism, and evil. What do we believe about our forefathers, our heroes, and ourselves? Who do we trust and how far will we go for the ones we love— and who are they?

The work uses suspense, intrigue, and humor to describe Hew's life and relationships in a setting rife with political turmoil, crafted to push back against a contrived view of the European Middle Ages.

Table of Contents

Chapter	Page
Chapter 1.....	1
Chapter 2.....	16
Chapter 3.....	34
Chapter 4	41
Chapter 5	49
Chapter 6.....	70
Chapter 7	75
Chapter 8	87
Chapter 9	99
Chapter 10.....	107
Chapter 11	114
Chapter 12.....	121
Chapter 13.....	128
Chapter 14.....	135
Chapter 15.....	142
Chapter 16.....	151
Appendix- Pronunciation Guide.....	159

Chapter 1

It had been a long night for Hew. He wasn't one prone to dreams—of any kind—but all night long, as he tried to sleep nestled, squished, between his two sisters, visions of isolation, change, and failure infiltrated his drowsy mind. He must have slept at some point, though, because he awoke with seventeen-year-old Brighid's drooling face squashed into his back and young Ciara's knee in his abdomen. He had extricated himself from his family's resting pile and now here he was, standing outside in the open air, awaiting his mother's morning return.

Leaning against the cracking daubed walls of his small home, he scanned the inclined horizon for the figure of his mother. All he saw were two outlines walking past the only other house he could see. *The cousins*, he guessed. They lived atop the hill on the edge of Lochmara. They walked away from him, off to begin working in the lord's fields. *That's what respectable tenants do*, Hew thought, *work and live alongside the manor. They don't raise their children alone and work mostly from dusk to dawn.*

He never dared to ask the type of commerce his mother was able to procure during the night. He was fifteen now; he could guess, but he didn't really want to know. All he knew is she returned each morning, cloak still carefully draped over her tunic and her hair arranged under her veil as neatly as it had been when she left the evening before. She would rest while Brighid made breakfast and attended the fire and while Ciara managed to collect eggs while valiantly defending herself from their lazy hens. Hew had let them outside this morning, and they currently pecked at the ground, making contented clucks as they found morsel after morsel.

He was a lot like those fowl, he realized, and not because Ciara frequently called him a chicken for the things he left unsaid—the defenses of Brighid he didn't feel compelled to make, the unscrupulous actions of his employer that he never told anyone but his family. These birds lived their whole lives in one space, happy to have food and shelter. As chicks, they sheltered beneath their mothers, and as adults they roosted comfortably with their family. In then out were all the changes they needed; they didn't leave. Hew didn't want to, either.

He wanted to live right where he was, in this small village of Lochmara. He wanted to be there to fix the cracking of their hut walls. He wanted to stay working at Alban's inn, using the skills his mother taught him to make the finances right, even when Alban gave his cronies free beer and his wife Meadhbh used cheap ingredients to make the beer and ale. Ciara used to tease him about the days that he spent following Meadhbh around, schlepping the barley and wheat for her. "Hew, the alewife!" she would tease. She didn't so much now, since the priest, Father John, had publicly chastised her for yelling and brandishing a stick in the church (she had been trying to remove a family of swallows). He said nothing when her chicken corralling looked suspiciously like swordplay, and she said nothing when he sat with Brighid, tablet weaving intricate patterns that his sisters could not.

On the windy horizon, he could now see his mother approaching, every article of clothing neatly arranged, as he knew they would be. Isobail slowly walked down the hill, past the cousins' house, past boulders and rocky fields, until she finally reached her waiting son.

"Good morning, Mother," he offered.

“Good morning, Hew!” she cheerfully replied, hugging him close. “Are you already ready for your journey?”

“I suppose.” Isobail looked into his eyes. His mother had always been able to read him like a text, his soul open before her searching gaze. He knew she could feel his reluctance and his anger just beneath the surface. In a well-practiced dance, he studied her face in self-defense, searching her eyes for shame. He thought his mother’s white face was beautiful, though tired for her thirty-five years. Her hair was still a straight, bright red, no greys in sight, but the age in her eyes revealed she had lived through more than her share. Isobail never told her children her full story, but he had examined its effects in her deep brown irises. And his very existence implied a grand adventure, some foreign lover.

Usually, Isobail never peered farther into the window of her son’s soul than he wished, but, when she did, Hew stared back, fishing for the emotions that would force Isobail to pull her eyes away from her son’s stirring sapphire ones. Eyes that he knew he must have gotten from his father, along with his unique dark complexion, though he had never been told so. Eyes that he wondered if his mother wished were someone else’s.

The unfairness of it all fueled his silent battle, until his mother turned and went inside, brushing her hand on his shoulder in recognition. He stared out around him, turning his eyes from rocky horizon on his left, to the forest at his back, waiting for the merchant who would come take him far away, to a different life at the castle, where his mother wouldn’t have to see his strange blue eyes and brown face.

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As the sun continued its climb into the sky, and the temperature became almost bearable, a man appeared on the horizon, leading a mule pulling a bulky, covered wagon. This must be Cormac, the merchant who had agreed to transport Hew along with him to the king's castle. Hew had seen him in Lochmara before but didn't know what he did, or why this humble, mule-dragging man had any business trading at the castle. Isobail had merely talked to Alban, who knew people, and Cormac had materialized to transport her son. Hew hated him already.

Slowly, the man worked his way down the hill, guiding the beast around holes and divots, though the mule seemed young enough to render this sort of care unnecessary. Hew went inside to collect his things. If he had to make Cormac wait for a moment, it wouldn't matter *too* much. Inside, weary Isobail was sitting by a newly made fire, drinking ale and eating porridge. Brighid sat next to her, smiling widely, presumably because she had successfully fed her mother with no accidents. Ciara was still splayed out on their small rush bed, though she was grumpily awake.

"Can you see Cormac yet?" Isobail asked.

"He's coming down the hill," Hew replied. "Slowly."

"He's an older man," she nodded. Hew sat next to Ciara on the mat and picked up his satchel, placing a few last items in it: a plain brooch, a pile of cards for weaving, and the small straw man that Brighid had made for him as a keepsake.

"Why does Hew have to go?" Brighid asked. "I want him to stay." Hew could always count on Brighid to say what he was thinking. To Lochmara, his older sister was strange, too simple for her years. Her unusual almond-shaped eyes, innocence, and round face often sparked ridicule, or, at the very least, curious, cautious stares. But Hew loved

Brighid. He would never disparage Ciara by saying so—not that she would care— but Brighid was his favorite sister. She loved unashamedly, constantly doing what she could for her family, smiling to see them smile. She felt deeply, his sister, and he loathed to leave her.

“He’s going to the castle, Brighid,” his mother explained. “Important things happen there. Perhaps he will be part of them. Don’t you want Hew to have the chance to be important?”

“We’re important,” Brighid uttered.

“Not as important as the king and queen in their big, ole castle,” Ciara interrupted. “He has to go or the whole place will fall down!” She rolled over, spreading her arms wide and chortling.

“Ciara! Don’t make fun!” Isobail swatted her youngest, looking at Hew. “It’s a good opportunity. You’ll make more money.” Hew looked around their tiny hut, from the two flat pallets stamped almost completely into the ground to the thatched roof dripping moisture and dirt onto their reed-strewn floor. No doubt they could use more money than Alban wanted to part with or that Isobail could attain. *But why do I have to get it from a job in a city miles away?*

“Ho, there!” a voice came from outside, and Hew looked up to see the mule from his seat on the ground. Cormac had finally made it down the hill. The animal looked no worse for wear. Only slightly smug.

“Coming!” Isobail called, shooing her children out the door. Brighid hugged Hew tightly as their mother collected their few tradable goods and Hew drew on his shoes and

tied his belt. As Isobail handed the bundle to Cormac, Ciara leaned in and gripped Hew around his waist.

“Be careful,” she whispered. “Please come back soon.” Hew drew an arm around her and squeezed.

“I will. Just as soon as I can.” Ciara smiled, released him, and returned to standing dignified beside him.

“Ready?” Isobail questioned.

“One minute. I need to inspect the goods,” the merchant replied.

“Of course.” She turned to Hew and gave him a final hug, wishing him good fortune and Godspeed.

“Mother,” Hew choked. “Please let me stay.”

“Hew,” she answered. “You need to go.”

“Why!” He had to make one last plea. “Because you don’t want me here? You think our life isn’t good enough for me? Or maybe because I’m not who you want me to be. Maybe you want to send me away because I’m good at card weaving and ale brewing. Maybe you’re ashamed that Ciara is more of a son than I am!”

Hew had seen his mother angry a handful of times. When it happened, her eyes outshone the fire of her hair, and her voice was shrill and heavy. Now, though, the fire burned steady, and her voice was even and measured.

“Hew, I have had many reasons to be ashamed in my life. You have never been one of them. Do not speak to me of shame again. You will go with Cormac, and you will work hard. You will accept this job in the king’s palace, and you will think about what

we have done to make them for you.” His mother’s eyes were no longer reading him; they were writing.

“So,” Cormac interjected oblivious to the conflict, “Everything’s prepared. These belts are nice weaving. Your daughter make them?” He nodded to Brighid.

“Yes,” Hew stated, knowing fully well that the intricately patterned sash Cormac was examining was his. Brighid made the smaller, round pieces for hems. Isobail glared at him for his lie. This time, Cormac recognized the tension, and he glanced from mother to son uncertainly. Isobail moved first, taking Hew’s face in her hands and kissing his head.

“I hope you know all I do is to try to give you the best life. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Hew squeezed his mother’s arm and turned to climb in the cart.

“What are you doing, lad?” Cormac exclaimed. “Only goods go in the wagon. Elinor’s delicate!” She was half asleep standing up. “We walk.”

And walk. And walk. And walk. By the afternoon, Hew believed his mother actually wanted him dead. His feet would crumble and fall off within the next few days, stranding him in deep forest to be eaten by wild animals and the biting cold. *I said one too many harsh words to Ciara, he thought, and mother decided I had to go. Brighid’s gotten too good at tending the house; I’m just unnecessary.*

“You’re a quiet one, boy,” Cormac said, after a few hours of silence. “Me, I’m not much on chatter, either. Nope. Elinor could tell you. Her ears are the keenest because they’re never bothered by the sound of my tongue flapping. All she ever hears is the quiet cracklings of the forest. Isn’t that right, girl? Now, I met a man once who traveled with

me for two days, and I swear to you, he never stopped talking the whole time we walked. And the faster our feet moved, the faster his mouth did. He was like some fancy machine a wizard had cooked up. If you had heard him..." As Cormac droned on, not pausing for any response, Hew returned to his brooding, his mood soured by a new pain in his foot and the headache he would surely have soon.

Whatever life Cormac had, whatever life awaited him at the castle, he didn't want it. He knew the individuals within the castle would be made of the same stone as the fortress walls around them. He stewed over what sort of people he would live with, and what sort of person he would need to be. Who would he become, surrounded by the castle sort? His mother hoped that, like the stones of legend, he would transform into a diamond in the pressure of the citadel. He believed he would become coal in their fires.

He would live and die there, turned into an old, sick young man who either dreaded the world or cursed it. This was not the future he had wanted. For the first time, he pictured the life he would have led at home. One day he would move his family to the proper of Lochmara. He would slowly create his own ale business. Where Meadhbh cut corners, he would draw them carefully, creating new, better brews, slowly putting Alban out of business and providing his family with the life they deserved. He would someday marry one of the village girls— maybe one of the cousins— and add to his family. His mother would be a fine grandmother and his sisters doting aunts. He would love and provide for his children, making sure to be in his home each night from dusk to dawn. That was what he wanted— if he had ever thought to put it into words.

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As evening shadows grew long, Hew spotted a small structure in the distance, and Cormac pointed. "That's our stop." The knotty pines lorded over them, filling their vision with trunks and the sky with needles. If one wasn't careful, he could drown amongst the foliage. Hew knew the trees blocked much light, and they would prepare for darkness earlier than was necessary back at home. Not that he minded. His feet were about to fall off.

He was also curious about their accommodations for the night. They hadn't passed any other travelers on the roads that day, and Hew was shocked to see a little inn farmhouse in the middle of the forest. But there it stood.

It was a simple wattle and daub structure as large as the nicer homes in Lochmara, and outbuildings and fenced enclosures surrounded it, extending into the woods. Hew could hear chickens clucking and a hog shuffling in the dirt. *Who would live out here?* It wasn't exactly the most hospitable of environments. As they approached, an older man stepped from the door and ushered them in.

He wasn't exactly the most hospitable of men. His mouth was wrinkled into a firm scowl, and his hair was thinned and scraggly. But he quickly gestured for Hew to sit at their table and eat, and he gestured for a young boy to help Cormac settle Elinor into their barn for the night. Hew hesitantly sat at the large wooden table and pulled the bread from his pack, nibbling at his stale provisions as the man offered him ale.

The home was larger than his own, though every house Hew had ever seen was larger than his family's hut. In the room he was in, the large dining table stood on the right side, while working tables were along the wall opposite him, and a woman stood cooking a stew over the central fire. It made his mouth water, but even that couldn't keep

the bread from being dry on his tongue. He could see a door on the back wall, and a ladder up to a loft where a man was now descending.

The man came and sat across the table from Hew. He was dressed in sumptuous clothing, in a style Hew wasn't familiar with. His tunic was short, and his trousers hugged his legs. On his torso, he wore a rich, red fur vest, and his hat was decorated with feathers. Hew could tell he was a wealthy man, but he had taken pains to not display any valuables— as if his clothes weren't luxuries themselves. They made Hew's tunic look ragged, though he had added some of his best weaving to adorn his cloak.

“Ho, fellow traveler!” he said. “I was beginning to believe I would have to spend the night alone. Mind if I eat alongside you?”

“Nay,” Hew answered.

“It speaks!” Cormac exclaimed, reentering the house. “I was beginning to think this one couldn't!”

“Ah, you seem a jovial fellow!” the man returned. “It's a dark wood we're in; it's good to have company.” Hew noticed the inn keeper's wife glance at the man with a strange expression. If he thought the man's statement was rude, Cormac didn't show it.

“Aye, company's grand. My name is Cormac.”

“Killian. And you, son?” Hew introduced himself, and Cormac called to the woman, asking for stew, and bought a bowl for each of them. “Just for tonight, boy,” he whispered. “Don't get used to it.

“What brings you to these parts, Killian?” he said aloud.

“Oh, I have family in Lochmara. I haven't seen them for years, but I felt it was time to visit.”

“I’m from Lochmara. Maybe I know them,” Hew responded. From experience, he knew it was better to meet the obligations of small talk through the most solid connections one could find. Cormac gave him an approving glance.

“Clement and Ocean Collson?”

“I don’t know them.” Hew couldn’t remember anyone in Lochmara by those names. He did, however, know a Cliaman and an Oisin. Neither were sons of Coll.

“Ah, perhaps you’ve never met them.” *As unlikely as Elinor sprouting wings.* Hew chewed the meat in his stew. *Why was this man claiming relations he clearly didn’t know?*

“Seeing family is good,” Cormac interposed. “All the family I’ve got is Elinor out in the barn there.” He gestured toward the mule. “If I could, I’d bring her into the house!”

“A fine steed. Where will she be taking you?”

“To the palace of King Flannagan himself in Noldan. We’ve got business there, isn’t that right, lad?” Hew nodded.

“Ah, an exciting place for sure! Loyalty to the good king!” Killian raised his stew in a toast. Hew noticed Cormac stiffen as he raised his own bowl, “To the king.”

This is intriguing. Hew had listened to Cormac talk all day with never an inkling of hostility. He talked to mules, squirrels, birds, unfriendly innkeepers, and strangers, but, suddenly, a toast to the king unsettled the most good-humored man Hew had ever met.

“The king’s a great man,” Cormac continued. “Love the king.”

“As do I,” Killian returned. He turned to the cooking woman. “An ale please,” he asked. Cormac said nothing as she poured the beverage, and Hew thought it was the longest the man had probably ever gone without speaking. *Fascinating.*

“I’ve actually met the king,” Killian offered, swirling his ale in the glass. “He’s a great man. I would give my life for him.”

“I’m sure ye would,” Cormac answered, his lip twitching.

“It’s what any loyal subject would do.”

“He’s probably the greatest king we’ve ever had.” Cormac’s mouth twitched in the opposite direction this time. *He should never, ever gamble, Hew thought. By God’s toes, he’s a terrible liar.*

“I’m not sure about that, my friend,” Killian countered. “King Arthur is pretty hard to beat.” Cormac answered with a bit-too-hearty laugh.

“Course, course!” he said. “To the founding king!” The three toasted to King Arthur.

“So, tell me, Cormac,” Killian began, “what is so special about that mule of yours?” The rest of the meal was spent in a cheery conversation dominated by the merchant telling stories of the best mule on Earth, in his humble opinion.

When they were through, Cormac turned to the inn keeper’s wife. “Our lodgings are upstairs, I presume, milady?”

“Indeed, sir,” she smiled. “Goodnight.” The three men climbed the thick ladder to the loft, where a large bed stood, suspended by a frame and taut ropes.

“I’ll sleep in whichever position you gentlemen would prefer,” Killian offered.

“Let the lad sleep in the middle,” Cormac suggested, shoving Hew towards the bed, his fingers tight around the young man’s shoulder. “He’s the smallest.”

“Fine by me,” Killian answered, removing his fine outer layers and preparing for sleep. Hew wasn’t too happy with the arrangement, though he couldn’t argue that he was

the smallest of the three. But Cormac seemed so eager to distance himself from Killian; it was all shaping up to be highly suspicious—but entertaining. Cormac and Hew removed their tunics and climbed into the bed in their linen underclothes.

As the men beside him drifted off to sleep, Hew tried to enjoy the accommodations. The bed was luxurious compared to his pallet back home, but nestling between the suspicious Killian and the large Cormac was making the experience less than ideal for sleeping, though Hew's body ached from the day's walking. After lying still for what seemed like eons, Hew decided to shift his weight, using Cormac's snore-crescendo's peak to hide the ropes' squeaks.

"Hew," Killian whispered, making him flinch, almost leaving the mattress. "Sorry, my boy," Killian laughed. "I just wanted to talk to a fellow Loch Country man alone." Hew noticed his pronunciation was more "lock" than "loch." *Yeah, cause you're real Loch Country through and through.* "Your man Cormac is a good fellow, but he doesn't understand."

"What doesn't he understand?" Hew whispered.

"What it's like for Loch people in Noldan. You seek out the Order of the Lady when you get there. You'll find brothers among them. But, by the Rood, be careful. People are quick to persecute a Loch man standing up for himself."

"I'll do that," Hew answered. "If I ever sleep enough to have the energy." Killian chuckled.

"Right, my good fellow. Rest up." Hew lay awake for what felt like hours, staring at the timbered ceiling. He decided he would mine Cormac for information tomorrow, away from the shifty Killian. Though he thought the decision would bring him a sense of

comfort, he still lay anxiously awake. *What have I gotten myself into? What has Mother gotten me into?*

The next morning, the travelers parted ways. Cormac swiftly packed and prepared Elinor. Hew was eager to see if he would spend as much time as he could chatting with Killian, seeing as his only company for the next week would be the reticent Hew. Instead, he silently walked away from their fellow voyager. Hew and Cormac walked in silence for ten minutes, and as soon as he was sure Killian was out of earshot, Hew asked, “What was that all about?”

“What was what about?” Cormac dodged.

“You didn’t say one word to Killian this morning. And I know *for a fact* he’s not going to Lochmara to see family.”

“It doesn’t matter, lad. You just stay far away from people like him.”

“Like what? Wearing fancy clothes? That’ll be easy in a castle.”

“Ach! You don’t need to know of his doings, just to be wary.” *Now you clam up, old man?*

“But how can I be wary of his doings if I don’t know what they are?”

Cormac studied Hew’s face. “You’ve got more going on in your head than I give you credit for.”

Elinor took ten steps before he spoke again.

“That man’s loyalty to the king is in question. If anyone ever tells you ‘Loyalty to the *good* king,’ you just make sure you respond with ‘To the king.’”

“What else would I say?” Cormac grew annoyed.

“I liked you better when you didn’t talk. Don’t associate with anyone who answers that toast with ‘Wherever he may be.’ They’re not toasting King Flannagan. It’s a traitor’s signal.” They walked in silence for a few hoofbeats.

“Have you ever heard of the Order of the Lady?” Hew ventured.

“You pain in the arse! Do you want to talk treason?”

“I just want to know the dangers of castle life. My mother would be distraught if I unwittingly got caught up in trouble.”

“You eel! Ugh!” Cormac drew a deep breath. “There are those, like that man and the so-called Order of the Lady, who believe that King Flannagan should not be the king. They believe that only a descendent of Arthur should sit on the throne.”

“But there are none,” Hew pointed out. “King Aengus didn’t have any children.”

“Yes, no legitimate ones. But there are rumors of mistresses and children, and some believe a child of Aengus, bastard or no, should sit on the throne.”

“But if no one knows if such a person exists, how can they overthrow the king?”

“They’re searching. I would bet my Elinor that he’s traveling to Lochmara to search. Or to gain support from the lord. With enough support, it doesn’t matter if they find an heir or not.” Lord Cathair of Lochmara was a deeply religious man; he disliked any talk of King Arthur and his magician. Hew doubted Killian would find what he was looking for. Unless it was trouble.

Chapter 2

The next few weeks created their own normal, and the plethora of new faces became part of the routine. They stopped at inns, homes, churches, the occasional hospital or abbey while slowly making their way southward. After three weeks of travel, Hew noticed a change in scenery; Cormac told him they were lower in altitude. Pines made way for elders, oaks, and the like, and he found the grass more lush and less dotted with stones. The daytime wind bit less, though the nighttime temperature still dropped low enough to feel frigid on the rare occasions they had to camp. Hew found that the low country experienced a much warmer early spring than did the Lochs. Cormac and Hew observed Sundays as best they could while on the road, and Hew found himself a part of a range of services, both large and small, grand and sparse, wrathful and loving.

Hew's body grew used to the walking, though his feet would still often feel tired and sore at the end of the day. He hoped his shoes would last. Thankfully his cloak kept out the cold. On cold nights, Hew would wrap it fully around himself, closing his eyes and burying its face in its woolen fringe, thinking of his family. He missed his sisters and his mother, and his bitterness at being sent away was turning into resignation at having to travel for a more lucrative future. If he wasn't going to provide for himself by farming, he needed to be in the city, where tradespeople and guilds existed. Perhaps his mother even wanted him to meet more people, including eligible young women who had no preconceived notions about his background. He had to admit he was encouraged by the thought of new companions. His only real mates back home were his sisters. He wasn't sure if he anticipated their arrival to Noldan or if he still dreaded it with anxiety.

After weeks of travel, his feelings weren't to matter any longer. They were to reach Noldan the next day.

The morning began bright and sunny, and within an hour, the nighttime chill had departed. Spring was beginning to make way for summer, and Elinor began to leave floating specks of hair behind them as they traveled. Cormac chatted about the capitol city, giving Hew a chance to stew in his emotions while also learning the geography, history, and economics of his new home.

“Noldan is a trading port, you see,” the man explained. “It’s just a half day’s journey down the River Aibhne to the coast, and ships from La’Mar will dock here to trade and repair boats. You’ll find you won’t stand out as much here.” It was true that Hew was the only dark complexioned person from the Lochs he ever met, but he couldn’t help feeling that it was in poor taste for Cormac to have mentioned it. “You see,” Cormac continued, “foreigners can’t stay in the country for longer than three months, unless—” he smiled— “he is becoming a citizen. So, your ship repair takes four months, and ‘bam!’ you find yourself becoming a citizen of Tribian.

“We’ve got citizens from everywhere. Lots just stay here forever building ships and running trade companies rather than traveling themselves. We’ve got people with La’Marian names whose grandparents were the last to see its shores.” Cormac chuckled at his own explanation of Noldan’s diversity. “There’s even a small population of folks from Pérkin.” Hew was intrigued to find out how these people fit into Noldan society. In Lochmara, you were either Loch Country for generations or you acted like you were. If

so many people in Noldan were from other places, what was this city like? *Would* he fit in better here?

After two hours, he could begin to see the city walls. They passed by farm after farm and home after home on their way; they were at Noldan's outskirts. Once they were a furlong from the wall, they had to stop. A queue of carts, carriages, and walking persons extended from the large gate entrance right to where Elinor stood, having immediately closed her eyes and propped up her back hoof.

"Not all the city is walled," Cormac said, "but this is an important trade entrance to the city, so they check who goes in and who goes out. It usually doesn't take long. We've just got to be patient like Elinor here." He lovingly patted her rump, leaving his hand to rest on her hindquarters. She flicked her tail and switched her weight bearing leg.

"What are they checking for?" Hew asked.

"Ah, you know, the usual things. Extra people, wanted criminals, illegal goods. Rotten food." Hew found the whole experience quite intimidating. The wall was in gray stone and loomed high over their heads. Towers on either side of the grand gate reminded him of the ease with which the city could be defended. Or he could be kept out. An armed knight kept watch above, while several patrolled the entrance, interacting with each entering person and their goods.

Soon, Hew, Cormac, and Elinor had reached the wall. Cormac spoke kindly to the guard, and the man displayed some familiarity. He gave Elinor a pat, accepted Cormac's explanation of Hew, and let them pass without so much as lifting the cover on Cormac's cart.

“Henry’s a nice fellow,” he said. “Been seeing him since he just a youngster. Looked too small to be doing the job, he did. Now look at him!”

They passed under the arch of the city wall, and Hew was immediately overwhelmed by the crush of people and buildings. At home, the only occlusion of the sky had been by roofs, here, the sides of houses and buildings did that job. Each road they traveled down was narrow, and the multiple stories of timber buildings jutted out overhead. Churches towered over the neighborhoods, and imposing carvings festooned their eaves. Every now and again, the men would pass an ornate stone building, and Cormac would enlighten Hew on the name or business of the wealthy owner thereof. After half an hour traversing over alternating cobbled and bare streets, they reached a market bustling with people and goods.

The shouts of peddlers and shoppers bounced off the buildings surrounding the cobbled square, and each side street provided a market for a different commodity. Hew studied the people he saw hustling through their business or errands. He noticed that clothes were different here, though not by much. Men wore their tunics shorter, on average, and he saw not another bare leg in sight; every man had hose or trousers. His fringed cloak seemed to be an anomaly, as well. Some women were clad in dresses that fit more snugly to their shapes, but most looked as if they would fit in fine in Loch Country.

The colors and fabrics, though, were varied and bright to his eyes. Besides Lord Cathair’s family, no one in Lochmara much used expensive dyes, and they were limited to those naturally available. Here, he was introduced to many new shades of fabric, and he had to wonder if these people had purchased or found the dyestuff. *What is the*

average wealth of a family here? The beggars he had seen scattered about the city made him wonder if wealth was something you either had much of or had little.

As Hew pondered, Cormac delivered some large parcels and bundles to various merchants, receiving his payment in return. Elinor showed no relief at having her burden lightened, though she acquiesced to the noise and pats of children without so much as flicking her tail.

As he waited for Cormac to finish his business with a surly cloth merchant, Hew watched a young boy, around seven or eight, shyly step up to Elinor and, reaching up, run his hand down her soft shoulder. He had black hair, coiled in tight, dense curls, and his face was a deep brown, darker than Hew's own complexion. For the first time in his life, Hew was seeing a child who looked like him. Not some old traveler or trader from far away, but a child. The boy gently leaned his head against the mule's warm side and smiled, closing his eyes for a moment. When they opened, he glanced at Hew, who smiled in return. "Her name is Elinor," he offered.

"Elinor," the boy repeated, patting her belly. "She's a good mule."

"Yes, she is," Hew replied, running his hand down her spine. Elinor's skin twitched, and she released a sigh. "So, where are you from?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm from here," the boy answered, glancing at Hew with some confusion in his dark eyes. They were interrupted by the arrival of a woman, who placed a pale hand on the child's shoulder before reaching down his arm to clutch his palm. "Jinau!" she said, "you cannot leave my side to pet other people's mules!"

"Sorry," Jinau responded with a smile that said he probably wasn't. "My son loves animals," the mother told Hew, in apology, turning her blushing face to his. "Horses,

mules, cats, dogs— he'll befriend anything!" She guided Jinau by his hand as they stepped away. "Come along; we have much more to accomplish." She placed an arm around his shoulders, and Hew watched as the fair mother wove through the crowd with her dark son. Perhaps Noldan really was a different kind of place after all.

After another hour or so of trading, Cormac led Hew out of the market and stated they were heading to the castle. Elinor plodded no faster, and they slowly made their way down more narrow streets. Hew tried to watch his footing along the hazardous paths, but he couldn't take his eyes off the array of humanity passing by him. He saw a man with skin so dark it was nearly black, with hair short and seeming to float like a cloud capping his head. He saw children with skin of varied hues, running and playing through the streets whilst yelling to one another. And he even saw a woman with features like none he'd ever seen. She smiled at Hew from a doorway as they passed.

They turned another corner and turned onto the largest road Hew had yet experienced in Noldan. He soon saw why. In front of them about two furlongs sat Noldan castle, an intimidating structure, with towers that he could see above its vast walls. A towered gate, wide enough for three of Elinor's carts to travel side-by-side, was their goal. They traveled uphill to reach the castle, and their slowed pace contrasted his rapidly beating heart.

Even from here, he could tell the castle was unlike any location he'd ever experienced or imagined. It seemed like a city within itself, huddled behind solid stone fortifications. Lord Cathair's dwelling back home would hardly be in the same category

as this. As great as Hew had considered Cathair's fortified home, it enclosed at most six or seven rooms. This palace... he couldn't even hazard a guess.

As they neared its gate, its keep towers fell hidden behind the ramparts. Hew's vision was entirely taken up by the soaring wall, topped with grand parapets. Cross-shaped openings dotted the structure, demonstrating where threats could expect to be sliced through with an arrow. Or thousand. Their approach through the grand tower gate was halted by armed guards, clad in the colors of the king. The guard addressed his questions to Cormac, hardly glancing at Hew. At the moment, Hew was grateful. He wasn't sure his dry mouth could produce sound. Having produced the expected answers, Cormac and his charge were allowed entrance.

Passing through the tower gate was an experience in itself. It was no less than ten paces, and the roof arched high overhead, the grand stones intricately carved to create a dazzling ceiling, which echoed the clip of Elinor's hooves on the cobblestones below. The whole structure seemed to remind one that your arrival is not inconspicuous, though your personage may be.

The entryway opened into a vast grassy ward. To his left and right, buildings lined the outer walls which he had just passed through. Various types of guards and tradespeople moved about, and Hew wondered what each building was for. Before him on the left, a tall church loomed, its tower and exterior exquisitely adorned with all manner of carvings and statuary. Its windows were comprised of colorful stained glass, and the overall effect of the building was nearly inconceivable opulence and holy grandeur. Hew supposed that was the aim. Before him on the right, stables and other buildings dominated his vision.

But directly in front of him, the largest building of all, the Great Keep, stood before him, its lime-covered walls reflecting the sun's light and nearly appearing to glow. The keep's front consisted of a central round tower, jutting out towards those approaching. Judging by the distribution of windows, Hew realized the structure must be at least four stories tall. Where the building's sides were flat, the gracefully arching windows continued to bespeckle the walls, but here were also vertical bands of a varying stone, creating textured strips on the castle's exterior. If the chapel exuded a reverent luxury, this structure spoke of a mighty sumptuousness, a wealth that produced and cared not about its own extravagance.

Cormac guided Hew not towards the Keep's entrance, but to its side, where a squattier building juttled forward about ninety yards. "To the tradesman's entrance we go," he said, jutting his chin towards their goal. This collection of buildings was only two stories, and its entrance was a small arch, just large enough for a cart to pass through and very close to the castle's right wall. Its stones were of a darker hue than the keep's and its architecture more plain. It seemed more aged.

They passed closer to the stables on their way, and Hew got a closer glimpse of a fantastic array of horses, from larger draft breeds than he had ever seen to splendid destriers and chargers. Donkeys and Elinor's contemporaries were notably absent. "Could do with a couple of Elinors, I'd say..." Cormac muttered. Hew couldn't help but smile to himself. After several fortnights of the mule as traveling companion, Hew's thinking was becoming remarkably like Cormac's. She *was* a splendid animal.

They passed through a modest roofed gateway, into a small, cobbled courtyard, framed by offices and buildings. Cormac halted their party as they were met by several

men, and two more approached after exiting from offices. These two wore clothes with expensive trims and fabric, while the rest were appareled in muted blue tunics with unbleached trousers. It struck Hew as some kind of livery. As the finely dressed men appraised Cormac's goods, they directed the blue-donning men, who grasped the bundles and boxes and began moving them. It took but a moment, as only a handful of items were to be delivered, the rest being removed at the market. Here again, Cormac seemed to be known and trusted. As the last share was removed from the cart, Cormac tied Elinor to a door handle and addressed the men.

“Need to get this one to the kitchens, if you'll excuse me.” Hew wondered which direction they would continue. A few steps to Hew's right a long, narrow passage, created by offices on either side, continued straight on farther than he could see. It was to the left that Cormac beckoned, and Hew was led around a corner, down an even narrower route created by yet more work rooms. It was hard not to feel stifled as he walked along; dark building stones and little sunlight made the whole channel feel dreary. Hew twitched with a chill as wind brushed his neck. Cormac chuckled.

“Fish Court,” he said. “Meant to be cold. Keeps food from spoiling.” Before reaching the hallway's end, where a thick wooden door stood, Cormac stopped at an office, where man sat working at a desk, writing something or another. Cormac called through the window, “Richard!” I've come with that able-bodied lad I promised.” Richard glanced up, grinning, and greeted Cormac warmly.

“Hello, you!” He rose from his chair and beckoned them inside. “Let me see you, boy,” he addressed to Hew. Cormac opened the door, nodding for Hew enter swiftly, and

Hew stepped inside. Richard stood in his chamber, rubbing his hands together and continuing to smile.

The room was small but of great quality. White walls and clean floors enclosed a workspace with two desks, a chest, and two tall cabinets, while a lovely arched window opened into the Fish Court.

Richard folded his arms and appraised his new charge. “He seems like an able lad,” he remarked to Cormac. “Are you an able lad?” he asked of Hew. Unused to such questions from a stranger, Hew responded without thinking, “I think of myself so.” Richard let forth one hoot of laughter, and answered, “As we all,” before directing to Cormac: “How have you found him?”

“A pleasant-enough travel companion, certainly,” Cormac started. “Respectful of my Elinor—”

“The highest praise!” Richard interjected.

“Yes,” Cormac continued. “He works without complaining, excepting his face when he’s tired. He’s quiet, ‘less he has something to ask you. He’s a thinker, too; especially when his hands and feet are moving. Can have a whole different task going on up there.” Cormac poked Hew’s head good-naturedly, and Hew remembered a few droll conversations they’d had while plodding along muddy roads.

“Well, we don’t need a thinker, but we could use a worker. Do you agree to this?”

“Yes, sir,” Hew replied with a solemn nod.

“Good!” said Richard, clasping his hands together. “First, you need a servant’s apparel.” He strode to a cabinet along the wall and removed a blue tunic, plain hose, and a bolt of wool— for an apron or cloak, as needed. From the chest on the other side of the

room, he removed a pair of shoes, different in style from Hew's own, but of no lesser quality. He handed the garments to Hew. "Here's your kit," he said. "Take care. The king is generous to provide them; do not impose on his generosity. If you want them to be washed by the laundresses, you will need to mark them. Remove your *accoutrements*, as well," he added, gesturing to Hew's pouch, trimmed with Loch patterns Hew had tablet weaved. Hew nodded. "Step aside and change while we discuss business."

Hew stepped to the office's wall and let the men "discuss business" (or the economic state of the mule trade, as Hew heard) while he slid out of his long tunic and removed his shoes. He slid the hose onto his legs, over his braies, and tied them up. At home, he hardly ever wore hose; he wore his braies under a long tunic. Here, it seemed, it was dictated that he must go through the hassle of tying the hose each day.

He affixed the shoes on his feet, and finally slid the new blue woolen tunic over his head. It fell to just below his knees and hung loose around his frame. Swinging his arms, the fabric swirled around his torso. It wouldn't do without a belt.

His only belt was one he had made, and he didn't know if Richard would consider it *accoutrement*. The belt was a strip of weaving in three colors— one the unbleached natural color of the wool, one chosen by Brigid, one chosen by Ciara. He had created a spiraling pattern, challenging his powers of foresight to their limits. It was the only belt he had, and it was the one of which he was most proud. He tied it around his waist, tugging at his tunic to even the belt's pull. Not knowing what he would be doing, he was unsure how to use the extra swathe of cloth. He decided to fold it with his Loch cloak, pouch, and shoes, and he created an easy parcel in which to carry his belongings. He

approached the conversing men and stood silently until they formally recognized his presence.

“Well, I suppose I should acquaint you with the Cook,” Richard said, and took the bundle from Hew’s hands. “I’ll send someone with your things to the men’s quarters, and you can collect them this evening.” He addressed Cormac once more. “It was good to see you again, and I thank you for bringing this lad safely here.”

“Don’t mention it, don’t mention it,” Cormac answered.

Hew was promptly led through the kitchens. The first room could easily fit three or four of his home back in Lochmara. Against the far wall, a bread oven was built, and servants walked about kneading dough, shaping loaves, and checking and tending fires.

In the next room—“The Boiling House,” Richard called it— stone cabinets had been built along the walls. These were only about waist high, and they were truly marvels, Hew realized. Cauldrons were placed atop the counters at intervals, above small arched openings where fires crackled beneath. In this arrangement, six cauldrons were able to be boiled at once. “Mùirne leads in here,” Richard instructed, gesturing to a woman stirring a bubbling pot while deep in conversation with several young servants.

In the largest and final room, “the Great Kitchen,” Richard pointed out the Cook before returning to his work. The Cook was large man who seemed to be as heated as the working environment of his profession; his face was mottled with splotches of pink and red, and his voice matched the fervor of the bustling kitchens. As Hew approached, Cook shouted at everyone he saw, and, at the entrance of a man dressed in a bright surcoat lined with fur, he escorted the man out with hurried discourse. Hew was left without any

direction. No idea where he was needed or what task he should begin. At home, he was always an asset with baking, brewing, or broiling. He wondered if these were tasks to be done.

Before he could decide, a girl approached him. She appeared to be around his age and was no taller than he. Her face was rounded and warm, and the hair he could see from beneath her loose veil was an acorn brown. She welcomed him with a smile that reached her gingerbread-colored eyes.

“Greetings!” she said. “You must be the new lad...”

“Hew,” he offered.

“Hew! I’m Saerlaith, and the Cook is just out at the moment, but he told me to get you started at a task. It’s a very simple task, so don’t be alarmed, but it’s also a very important job.” Her hands moved as she spoke, and Hew wondered why she had the authority to direct him. He had better idea for making himself useful, however, so he complied.

“Alright.”

“Have you ever roasted meat on a spit before?” she asked. He replied that he hadn’t at this scale, but he was disposed to try. She led him across the room to a grand fireplace, where three spits, loaded with sizeable cuts of meat were positioned above a consistent fire.

“You just turn one or two at a time—if you can use both hands without tiring—making sure that the juices don’t fall into the fire and every side is evenly cooked. Easy!”

“Alright,” he answered. He grasped the handles of the thick metal bars and began turning, feeling the weight of the meat pulling against the movement. Still, he couldn’t describe the task as even challenging.

“You’re a natural,” Saerlaith said. “I’ll leave you to it.” She turned and headed towards the Boiling House, leaving the Great Kitchen room entirely.

While he adjusted to the rhythm of his new monotonous task, Hew studied his grand surroundings. The soaring walls were a plastered cream instead of plain wood or daub, except above the numerous extraordinary fireplaces, where ash and soot had turned the wall black. *Hearths and chimneys*, he thought, *what masterpieces*. Everywhere in Lochmara had a central fire and a smoking ceiling. The great fireplace, fitted with row after row of spits for roasting, stood tall and wide, large enough for six men to lie inside, and he was positioned at a smaller, though still impressive, fireplace beside it. Throughout this room, tables stood, each a bustling workstation for various tasks.

On the central table stood several sugar figurines and numerous molds. Amidst this chaos, it seemed as if some miniature building was beginning to take shape out of sugar paste. Hew couldn’t fathom the cost of these edible ornaments. Sugar was perhaps two shillings per pound, and these decorations might encompass ten pounds of sugar, meaning there were roughly twenty shillings worth of sweet grit on the table before him. *A full quid spent on one portion of supper!*

He tried to reckon how many meals a quid would create for his family. They received eggs and meat from their own chickens, so it was hard to say what that was worth. Their garden provided their vegetables and herbs. He knew precisely what flour and wheat cost; he purchased that with his earnings from Meadhbh. Every time he

switched spits, the numbers slipped from his mind as he tallied them, and he had to force himself to begin again. He had almost reached his final calculation when he was started by a clear “You’re doing a fine job!”

With reflexes honed by a decade of living alongside an impish sister, he responded as such: he tucked his arms into his sides, to protect the flesh most vulnerable to attack, and, as he turned to repel the perceived attack, he turned his forearm out in just a position to sweep away any striking arms. Unfortunately, he was not at home, and the threat was not a little sister with poking fingers, but Saerlaith, conveying a tray bearing two freshly boiled soups.

The sweep of his arm knocked the tray back into her chest, where it tipped towards her. Instinctively, she dropped the soups, attempting to push them away from her, though her hands were pulled from handles upon Hew’s first impact. The ceramic bowls shattered as they hit the ground, and both Hew and Saerlaith hopped back from the splatter.

With hot liquid spilling down her front, Saerlaith—to Hew’s alarm—seized her dress and began furiously wiggling out of it, until she flung it to the floor and grasped her linen smock, fanning the undergarment away from her. After a moment, she ran her hands along her front, taking a deep breath. Seeming to be satisfied that she had not been burnt, and, seeing no wetness on her underlayer, she let the fabric fall back against her skin and glanced at the scene around her.

People had stopped working to watch the tableau unfold and now stood staring at their workmate clad only in her shoes, hose, and shift. Hew didn’t know whether to look

away from her or to meet her eyes. Fleeing might also be an idea; he wasn't sure how much of the blame he would receive for this accident. His wondering was soon answered.

The Cook stormed towards them, his face cherry-red and grimacing to such a degree that Hew could see his teeth. In one motion, he lunged forward and grabbed Saerlaith by the front of her shift and drew her within range of his spoon, which he promptly began smacking against her body. As the blows landed, thwacking against her skin, she struggled against his grip, trying to escape his grasp. Even as she cried out, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry, Cook! It was an accident! I'm sorry!" he was undeterred.

"By God's nails, I'll make you sorry!" he swore. "If this is how you act in my kitchen, let's put you somewhere more fitting! You, too!" He grabbed Hew by the back of his shirt and dragged the two down out of the kitchen. Hew tried not to trip over his own feet as they were coerced down corridor after corridor, enduring stares, until they came to a chamber. Cook pounded on the door until it was opened by a broad, sleepy looking man.

"These two aren't fit to work with what goes into mouths," Cook stated, "so I figure they should work with what comes out the other end! They're all yours for however long you want them." Saerlaith and Hew were shoved through the doorway into a small living quarter. It was nothing special, but there was a slight odor. The man nodded his head, "Suits me," he said.

Saerlaith ventured, "May I retrieve my clothing now?"

"No." Cook stalked away, leaving them alone with the grumpy stranger.

"We start work at dark. Might want to rest until then. If you disturb me, I'll return you to the Cook— in pies."

Hew and Saerlaith sat silently for hours as the man slept. She glared at Hew. He glanced at her before quickly shifting his gaze to a very important spot on the wall. Chemise-clad women were by no means new to him. But interactions with unfamiliar, angry smock-clad women were. He had no way of knowing what she would perceive as courteous.

He could tell she was self-conscious; she tried to pull her hose higher on her legs, and she sat slouched to keep her shift loose around her chest while she crossed her arms. At least her shift was made of thicker material than some; it wasn't particularly translucent. Still, Hew couldn't bring himself look at his new companion for more than a few seconds before glancing away.

She didn't seem confined to that courtesy. Hew could tell she blamed him for their punishment, and she vented her frustration by staring at him just until he turned her way, then she pretended to have been looking at the room's painted walls the whole time.

Granted, these were something to behold. The man had clearly spent some time transforming the plastered walls of his apartment into an exhibition of swirling patterns, fantastic animals, and dancing figures. These were the handiwork of a castle servant, an expression of his mind. Hew ran his fingers along the texture of his patterned belt, thinking of his sisters, his mother, his home. Without realizing, his hands found their position to weave. Between his hands and his head, he could still remember the pattern of turns that created his belt. His fingers rotated imaginary cards and threads until the sights before him melted away. Closing his eyes, he leant back against the wall, desperately attempting to rest.

Chapter 3

They had been waiting for an indeterminate amount of time, which had stretched interminably while he sat on the cold, reed-strewn stone floor, and the girl named Saerlaith shot glances his way that were even frostier than the ground. Hew felt he had endured quite enough of this treatment. It was Saerlaith's startling that had caused the accident, after all. Now she was treating him as if he had singlehandedly doused her with soup. He tried to study this girl so determined to be his adversary. It was difficult without looking at her for more than a few seconds at a time.

He could tell her appearance contained no conspicuous beauty, though it had no particular ugliness, either. Her face was round, lacking the narrow chin so prized among fine ladies. Instead of the coveted milk-white complexion, her face and arms had a yellow tan, with a few speckling blemishes. He had to credit her vivid eyes, though they resided below thick eyebrows. Altogether, she seemed a very approachable girl, the kind of person he'd like to know, but her bearing towards him so far had betokened an unfortunate temperament and a hint of self-importance.

He tried to set his hands to weaving again, but now the motions just felt empty, and they made him ache for the levity of his family. *Ciara would be making so many jokes right now*, he thought, smirking. She would take the piss out of anything in her sights, which was usually Hew. But in the few moments when there were other targets, the siblings did their best bonding. What an opportunity disheveled, undressed Saerlaith would have made. She was even still wearing her cap and veil, already an extra step of modesty for someone so young. It made quite the humorous foil to her bare arms and lack of layers.

The light from the small window in the apartment was finally beginning to wane when the sleeping man finally turned over and awoke.

“Almost time,” he grumbled, swinging out of his small bed. “Been putting off the big job, but with you two, guess that’ll be tonight’s task.” Hew looked over at Saerlaith, judging her reaction. To his satisfaction, she seemed daunted, almost fearful. *Serves her right*. He was fed-up with her “righteous indignation.”

The man stood a few sleepy steps toward the sitting youths, heading towards a chest in the corner of the small room. As he approached, his stench migrated with him. A horrible reek, and one Hew could identify— feces. *Oh, this is not going to be a pleasant night*. Hew knew his face must match that of Saerlaith’s, and for a moment their eyes met in mutual apprehension. They were going to be dealing with dung.

“Name’s Tassach,” the gong farmer introduced himself as the trio walked along keep’s western side. Here, a small stream, a manmade offshoot of River Aibhne, gurgled between the keep and the castle’s outer wall. Saerlaith and Hew walked a few steps behind Tassach, carrying buckets and pushing a wheelbarrow, respectively. “I do my job quietly, get paid, and don’t complain. I expect the same from you two.”

“Yes, sir,” Saerlaith muttered. Quiet fell amongst them.

“You understand, too, boy?” Tassach interrogated, turning on Hew and stopping in front of him. Hew nodded his head. “You mute?”

“No,” Hew replied.

“That’s too bad. No complaining if you’re mute.” Tassach turned and began walking once more.

“We won’t complain, sir!” Saerlaith said. “Will we, Hew?” She stared at him pointedly.

“Of. Course. Not.” He returned her stare, trying to bore his gaze through her soul. *This girl does nothing but make trouble*, he thought. To his satisfaction, Saerlaith was the first to look away, though she did so with anger.

“Stop kissing my arse, girl,” Tassach called back to them. “There’ll be dung on your face anyway by the end of the night.” He laughed aloud. Hew smiled despite himself and noticed Saerlaith’s face turn red. She remained silent for the next few minutes of walking.

Finally, they stopped under the overhang of a garderobe beside a hole in the ground covered by iron bars. A pungent odor rose from the void, and the bars were coated in a layer of brown muck that Hew knew wasn’t merely mud.

“Alright, churls. This,” Tassach said, opening his arms, “is the big job. That up there”—pointing to the garderobe— “is the privy closest to the Great Hall. And this”—pointing at the pit— “is where the soil of the most important people in the kingdom has been gathering for the past six months. And tonight, we’re going to start cleaning it.”

Hew snuck a peek at Saerlaith, expecting her face to be wrinkled in disgust. Instead, he saw her face blank and her fists clenched. She seemed to stare unseeingly at the hole, sucking in breaths of air through pursed lips. He looked up, to where a circular opening was visible in a shallow, narrow overhang above their heads. This was the garderobe, where the nobles could relieve themselves while remaining indoors. The filth would fall into the hole below and collect until removed.

Tassach walked over to the pit and wrapped his hands around the grate.

“Boy, help me lift this.” Hew bent and grasped the bars, trying to ignore the squelch of nearly-dried dung between his fingers. *Our Father who art in Heaven: please help me not to vomit.* Together, the men lifted the covering off and placed it beside the hole.

“I’ll go down and shovel the soil into buckets. Girl, you pull it up, and the boy can take wheelbarrow-fulls down to the moat and drop it there. Just make sure you don’t fall in the pit. If the fall doesn’t kill you, you’ll drown in the muck faster than you can say ‘Hail Mary.’” With that happy thought, Tassach grabbed the buckets, walked a few meters farther along the wall, and entered the castle through a side door. Hew and Saerlaith stood alone.

“Things could not be worse,” she said.

“They could be,” he retorted. “We could both have rotten attitudes.”

“Curse you!” she said, whirling around to face him. “This is your fault anyway.”

“Mine? I just got here!” Hew looked her in the eyes. “And I was doing what *you* told me to. Therefore, by extension, you’re at fault for all this.”

“No, I’m not! You spilled the soup!”

“You startled me!”

“Who turns around like that?” she gesticulated wildly, mocking his earlier movements.

“Someone whose always in danger from a younger sister who has a better sense of humor than you!” Forgetting any sense of propriety, he jabbed his thumb into her side, between her ribs and hip, the spot where Ciara would poke if left unguarded. The reason

why he smacked first and asked questions later. Saerlaith shrieked, her body instinctively recoiling and curling around the assaulted point.

“What *are* you?” she screamed.

“I don’t know!” he spat back. Saerlaith studied him for a moment, her breath bursting from her mouth in furious spurts. “You’re a menace to society, that’s what you are.” Hew looked her up and down and turned again to face the wall.

“Saerlaith, you know what I admire about you?”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Saerlaith wheeled around and charged him, raising her fist. “By the Rood, I will—” She chased him as he dodged, mostly unsuccessfully.

“Hey! Throw the rope down here!” Tassach called. “It’s time to pull the first load up!” Hew leapt over the hole, fleeing Saerlaith’s blows. “That’s your job, remember?” he reminded his attacker. Fuming, Saerlaith lowered her arms, collected herself, and turned to fetch some rope from the wheelbarrow. Hew approached the cart cautiously and rubbed his arm where one of her strikes had landed. *If anyone’s a menace to society, it’s that wench!*

It took Tassach two barrow-fuls of dung to realize that his laborers were not much help topside. Saerlaith struggled—slowly—to bring the heavy loads to the surface, and it took Hew much too long to roll the wheelbarrow the twenty meters to the flowing River Aibhne, which functioned as the castle’s moat. The problem was that Tassach had only

eight buckets, which meant that if a bucket hadn't been unloaded by the time the others were full, he stood unable to work. Ultimately, he returned to the opening of the cesspit.

“This isn't working,” he grumbled. “Might as well be up here if you're incapable of matching my pace. Down you go, churls.”

He led them down winding tunnels and stairs until they reached the pit. The odor was overwhelming, and Hew covered his nose and mouth with his tunic as they entered the cavern. By lanternlight, Hew could see that it was about ten meters in diameter, tapering upwards to the hole they'd been standing near. Shallow steps led down to the center of the pit. Hew saw that Tassach had cleared the stairs and spot in the middle of the hollow just large enough for a person to stand. Even on this path, the refuse reached Hew's knees as he walked to the edge of the feces.

“Stay on the steps or where I've cleared until you've reached the bottom of the heap. There's a platform in the middle there, but around it is five feet of not-so-solid muck. You'll be swallowed up in dung if you step in the wrong spot.” Tassach handed them both shovels and quickly exited. Hew turned with a biting taunt on his lips, but he fell silent when he saw that Saerlaith wasn't looking at him.

She stood motionless, a few steps up from Hew, staring down at the excrement, her eyes blank. She hardly blinked. Her shovel hung from arms limp by her sides, and not a muscle twitched. Then, after a few moments, she breathed deeply through her mouth and slowly plodded down the remaining steps. Hew plunged his shovel into the slurry, trying to keep the neckline of his tunic from slipping down his nose. He had to raise his shoulders awkwardly, and he realized he would have to let it return to its normal drape. Hesitantly, he let it slide off his nose, and he took a breath through his mouth. It made no

difference. Immediately, his last meal made a bolt for the exit, rushing upwards. He could hear himself gagging, and knew Saerlaith, dazed as she was, would know what was happening. *No, no, no!*

Hew vomited. Retching and gasping in the noxious air, he heaved continuously for many moments, doubled over. Finally, he had nothing to expel, and he was able to right himself. *Well, that was one prayer God chose not to answer.* Hew glanced at Saerlaith. She said nothing, only stood watching him.

“I’m a strong Loch man, can’t you tell?” he whimpered. Saerlaith snorted and returned to shoveling. His stomach settled, and he began working again.

With each shovelful, they carved out bits from the mound of sludge, reaching older and older excrement. Each bucket was filled with a different hue of droppings. The freshest varied from tawny to walnut, but, as layer after layer was revealed, the buckets filled with hickory and umber ordure. And the smell! Hew’s nose grew numb to the stench, but his head began to swim.

The moon- and candlelight danced before his eyes. The cavern looked brighter than it had before, and he could see the fumes rising in the air, like heat from warm cow patty on a cold winter day. His shoes were covered in feces, but that was alright. He could have Brigid and Ciara help him clean them. Saerlaith would like Ciara; they would tease each other. He turned to tell Saerlaith so and found himself sliding into unconsciousness, falling face-first into the crap.

Chapter 4

Hew was lying on the ground. He could tell not because he could feel the ground beneath him, but because he could see a stone ceiling above him. He couldn't feel his body hardly at all. He just managed to tilt his head and gaze at the scene around him. Saerlaith stood slumped against a hallway wall. She was covered in smears of feces, and her head was nearly bare; a cap was slipping from her crown, and she held what he presumed to be her veil in her hand. It was soaked through with brown. He didn't know what to ask.

"What?" His voice came out in a croak.

"You swooned, boy," Tassach elucidated. "We had to pull you out." The man was standing over Hew, by his head. Hew's felt he was returning to his body; he could feel the heat rise in his cheeks, and the tears begin to burn his eyes. In less than a day he'd spilled food, broken pottery, and had needed to be rescued from certain death. What more proof was there that he was incompetent?

"Tassach said it was the vapors," Saerlaith offered.

"Bloody serious things, vapors," Tassach rejoined. Hew pulled himself into a sitting position and wiped his face with his sleeve. Dried refuse crinkled on his skin, and he retched once more as he cleaned.

"Sorry." Hew's voice echoed into silence. Saerlaith slid down the wall to the floor.

"I'll get me shovels," Tassach said, "That's enough for tonight. Don't need to be near vapors if we can help it. Go up when ye can." He left them sitting on the stone floor.

A moment, a breath, and a silent resignation. Saerlaith turned to Hew. “Think you can make it topside?” she asked.

“Yeah. Slowly.”

“You can lean on me if you need to.” He glanced at her, wondering her intentions. She seemed just as worn as he did, and he didn’t need to prove her the more enduring. He silently declined her offer, pulling himself up against the wall. Plodding, they began to make their way up the stairs and halls to the outside.

He wondered just what had happened in his absence. How much was he indebted to this cross girl?

“Did you...”—Hew paused for a beat—“did you pull me out or did Tassach?”

“I pulled you out of the soil, but Tassach helped get you up the stairs. I didn’t think you could breathe.” Hew nodded, and they walked upwards in silence, straining with effort, their bodies all but spent. He noted her concern for his life, as well as her willingness to portion credit. She seemed much altered in temper.

Finally, they emerged into the cool night air. Unspeaking, they crossed the stony path and unanimously collapsed into the lush grass. Saerlaith flung her arms wide, lying like Christ on the Rood; Hew had not the energy and placed his hands on his chest. They could see the stars from here. Stars that his family could see back in Lochmara, where he had never felt his value so little. There, his mother loved him, and his sisters took pride in him; they didn’t know he was rubbish. They hadn’t known what a failure he could be. Hot hollowness filled his chest, and tears flowed from his eyes, down his cold cheeks. At least it would help clean the filth from his face. *I’m worth about as much as the shit on my face.*

“We’re a mess to behold,” Saerlaith muttered, turning to glance at him. Hew closed his eyes, as if this would hide his tears. Instead, it forced even more stinging liquid down his face. Saerlaith turned her face to the sky once more.

“I’m sorry,” she said. He didn’t know how to respond. “This is my fault,” she continued. “Cook has it out for me, and I should have just kept my head down. I was supposed to be on spit duty, and I tricked you to take a task I wanted.” This explained her initial approach of him, and her kinder temper since their misadventure. She was nearly responsible for his death. And certainly responsible for his punishment.

“You won’t get sacked, I promise. I’ll make sure of it,” she added. Hew smiled.

“I wish I would,” Hew answered with candor. “I could go home. At least there I’m more than a sniveling, dung-covered failure.”

“You’re not a failure,” she retorted. “You’re just new here. And you almost died by drowning in shit.” Hew snorted. “People recover from that,” she continued. “Loch people recover from that. We’re a hearty bunch.”

“You’re from Loch Country?” He had wondered, based on her complexion, but—after meeting Jinou—he had been hesitant to assume appearance corresponded with heritage.

“Lochlira,” she answered.

“Mara!”

“How is your lord?” she asked. “Ours is old and generous. My parents are able to keep most of my salary.”

“Lord Cathair is a serious man. But he’s just, usually.”

“I’m surprised you’re here,” Saerlaith said. “My cousins say he doesn’t let his vassals travel.”

“Oh, my family is free.” That shocked her, to be sure. Her surprise lifted his spirits. Perhaps he was more than a mess-covered miscreant. He could sense her thoughts racing.

“What does your father do?” she asked.

“Haven’t got one.” He had at one point, naturally, but this phrasing was more dramatic. He had no memories of his father, and his mother declined to speak of him, excepting vague positive recollections of his character. To Hew satisfaction, Saerlaith’s mouth dropped, and she studied him with a mixture of pity and awe. She took a deep breath before rising to her feet and offering him her hand. “Come on, I know what’ll help us now.”

She led him farther along the castle walls, deeper along the keep’s side, nearly to where the castle walls met in a corner. They arrived to an unassuming courtyard, where a small well resided beside a chicken coop and a few small shrubs.

“Let’s clean you up a bit,” Saerlaith offered, pulling the bucket upwards. She gestured for Hew to come closer, and he nearer, preparing himself for a dousing. She grabbed the bucket by its handle and the bottom and lifted it over Hew’s head as he leaned under it. Slowly, she tipped the water out as Hew wiped the mud and dung from his hands, face, and arms. He shuddered at the cold water, but in rivulets of brown sludge, the muck began to fall from his skin and clothes. It seemed like it had only begun

to make a difference when the last drop fell from the pail. Brown patches still clung to his tunic and trousers, and the soil in his hair hadn't been touched.

“Hold on for one moment.” Saerlaith refilled the bucket and again poured it over Hew. The sensation of removing such filth from his skin was delicious, and it began to renew his spirit.

It took several bucketfuls to finally satisfy them that he was sufficiently clean. It had taken a whole bucket to work the mess out his curly hair alone.

“Better?” she asked, rinsing her own bare hands and arms in a bucket.

“As much as it's going to get for right now.” He shivered in the cold and tried to wring out the water from his clothes and hair. “Your turn,” he said, reaching for the bucket.

“I can't!” Saerlaith blushed, keeping the bucket from his reach. Hew saw her hesitation. If her shift became wet...

“You can still rinse your hair out, can't you?” Hew responded. “I'll be sure not to splash your clothes. Just lean your head down.” He leaned over entirely sideways, crouching a bit, as he had done. “Like this. Or this—” he rolled his torso forward to face the ground where he could stand flatfooted. Saerlaith smiled.

“Alright,” she said. “But be careful.” Hew hauled a bucket up as Saerlaith released her dirty hair from its fastenings and let it hang in front of her.

“Ready?” Hew positioned the vessel over her head.

“Mmhm.” Hew dribbled the water out of the bucket, onto Saerlaith's scalp. She hissed at its temperature. She ran her fingers down the strands of her hair, carefully

working out any clumps of dirt or refuse. All too soon the droplets ceased falling on her head.

“Hold on; I’ll grab another bucket,” he offered. He had needed multiple douses; he should return the favor.

“That’s fine,” she insisted. “I think I got it all out, anyway.” She began to wring her dripping hair.

“What now?” Hew pondered.

“My friend Órlaith works in the laundry. She can get us some dry clothes and figure out how to clean these ones.”

“Should we wait until the morning?” Hew questioned. He didn’t know how he would rest in wet, still odiferous clothes.

“No,” she countered, “I think this is best done in secrecy.” Scanning her clothes—or lack thereof—Hew nodded. “I think you’re right.”

“Follow me,” she ordered. “It’s best to take the road less traveled for our purposes.”

Saerlaith led them past the courtyard. Following the curve of the castle’s outer back wall, the two slipped between houses, gardens, stables and the stony ramparts until they reached an area Hew recognized. They were approaching the tradesman’s entrance from the rear. From here, she led Hew not the small courtyard and down the Fish Court, but to a small entrance on the keep’s eastern wall. She gave three small raps on the wooden door, making sure to pause before the final knock. A bright blue eye peeked out from a small crack.

“Dubhgall!” she whispered. “It’s me, Saerlaith, and I’ve got the new boy with me.” This man Dubhgall gently swung the door open, revealing an old, arthritic body. He looked like he was one stiff breeze from keeling over. He possessed loose, nearly translucent skin crossed by visible blue veins, a similar hue to his vibrant eyes. A familiar shade— a disconcerting shade.

He ushered them inside and let them into a small vestibule. The room itself was small and being used for storage; a few vats of assorted foodstuffs lined the walls, and dried herbs hung here and there. Hew could see the warm glow of the kitchen fires from the doorway.

“Thank you!” Saerlaith whispered. She endured the man’s giggles at her state of undress but smiled back at him.

“Dubhgall keeps the kitchen fires going at night,” she explained to Hew. “If you’re ever in need, that man always has something at his disposal.” As Saerlaith led them out of the small room and into the kitchens, Hew shot once more glance towards Dubhgall, this impish, elderly man.

Once in the Great Kitchen room, Saerlaith led him to an unassuming door. Upon opening it, she gestured for him to follow. Down a handful of steps he went, into pitch black.

“Follow me closely,” she warned, and placed his hand against a wall. “These passages are from the oldest parts of the castle. Just keep your hand against the wall, and I’ll tell you where the stairs are.”

“I’m guessing that’s where the light is coming from?” Hew said, his tone teasing as a vague brightness could be perceived farther along the hall.

“No...” Saerlaith slowed. “The stairs are down a corner to the right.” But, before their eyes, the light grew, and voices could be heard. She crept towards the noise, placing a finger in front of her lips and meeting eyes with Hew. He followed her, matching her caution. They stopped before a door on the hall’s left wall. The room within was fully lit, spilling illumination under the door and into the hall. It was clear, someone was having a late-night meeting in the most deserted place in the castle.

Chapter 5

Hew watched as Saerlaith slowly moved her fingers from her lips. She obviously hadn't expected to find anyone else down in these cold, disused tunnels. Her eyes were trained on the sliver of light shining from underneath the door. She stood still, trying to piece together what was being said in serious tones on the other side.

The thing was, though, that Hew didn't care. These halls were drafty, and he was shivering. He had taken his wet shoes off for traction on the slick stone floor, and now his toes seemed cold enough to preserve meat. He wanted to get away from danger, out of the cold, and into some clean clothes. That didn't involve eavesdropping on super-secret midnight meetings. On a better day, maybe he would have felt up to it, but this was not a banner day for Hew. He could still feel the dried tears on his cheeks.

He tapped Saerlaith on her shoulder. He circled his hand in the air: *Let's go!* She raised her palm to him: *Hold on!* He widened his eyes in exasperation. She widened hers in surprise.

Listen! She pointed at the door. Displeased but pacified by her serious expression, Hew leaned towards the door and focused on the voices inside. They seemed to be deep, male voices, speaking in an orderly but impassioned sort of way.

"The king knows the heir is out there; that's the only reason he would have created the legislation! He's narrowing the search. I say we beat him to it!"

"Or he could be amassing wealth!" another voice chimed in. "You know how greedy he is, and this means he can draw more resources from his vassals."

"And what type of wealth do you think his vassals can draw from unwed, free peasants?" Hew's heart pounded in his chest. His mother was an unwed, free peasant.

“Some, Conn! How do you think they manage to be unwed and free? Can’t you see? Searching the whole wide world for a *possibly*- existing heir is a waste of time! We should focus on the option we do have.”

“Lukas, she’s not an option! You want to put the crown on her head, yet you treat her like a pawn. What sort of plan is that?” *Who in God’s name are they talking about now?* Hew wondered.

The man named Conn rose his voice to answer in a yell, but steady, small voice entered the conversation: “Dividing and conquering has worked before, you know. We are enough in number to move from two fronts.”

“Oh, are we, old man?” Conn sneered. “I guess we should break off into two factions? Divide our resources?”

“Not our resources,” the older man replied. “But our time. I can lead a group. It should be smaller since I would be a great advantage.” The room chuckled.

“That’s enough from you, Dubhgall,” the other man— Lukas— said. Saerlaith gasped beside Hew.

“Dubhgall?” she mouthed. Hew didn’t see how it could possibly be the same man who they had just seen. It would have taken an even more secret tunnel for him to have gotten there before them. But, sure enough, the man was on the other side of the door.

“That little imp!” Saerlaith whispered. “Keeping even more secrets to himself!” Hew wanted to know more about this legislation. What would it mean for his mother?

“And talking treason!” Saerlaith continued to whisper. This time it was Hew’s turn to press a finger to his lips. *Hush!* Now, Hew might as well have had no feet, they were so irrelevant. He was desperate to know what was happening.

“If you do not want my help,” Dubhgall continued, “that is fine. I shall see myself out now.”

Hew realized what was occurring before Saerlaith did. He rushed past her, further along the passage, grabbing her hand as he went. Still distracted, she did not move. She gathered her bearings in a moment, but, instead of moving, she pointed behind them. She had taken them past their turn to the laundry.

“It doesn’t matter!” he hissed. “Come on!” As Saerlaith took a few steps back, the door opened. Hew and Saerlaith scattered into the darkness like cockroaches, trying to escape the extra light spilling from the doorway. Saerlaith spun on her heel and rushed back the way they’d come, while Hew rushed forward. It was fruitless.

Like a hawk clutching its prey, the elderly man tore into the hall and seized Hew by the arm, towing him farther along the darkening hall. Hew was drug against his will by a wizened servant with the strength of a knight.

“Dubhgall!” Hew whisper-yelled. *It is Dubhgall, right?* “What are you doing? I’m Hew! We just met?” Dubhgall didn’t slow, but continued down the hall. Hew tugged at the man’s hand around his arm, to no avail. His heart pounded, and his lungs burned. His feet throbbed with every frigid, pounding step. As his stomach dropped, he had to wonder: *Why do I have to die after I’ve just thwarted death?* He was too weak to fight and too weak to care about the fear overwhelming his gut.

Dubhgall suddenly turned, dragging Hew down a narrow flight of steps. Dubhgall may have floated down them, but Hew found himself stumbling, leaning most of his body weight on his captor.

“Hup, hup, son!” the man said, “quickly!” Hew responded with coherent “Puh-huh-ah,” and let Dubhgall drag him along the last few stairs.

At this level, there was water seeping through the bare stone walls. Hew found himself stepping in shallow puddles as the hall dipped even deeper into the earth. At last, the two came to a thin, rotting wooden door. Dubhgall pulled a key from beneath his tunic, inserted it, and with a dubious rattle, the door leaned inward.

“After you!” He gently shoved Hew into a black room and shut the door behind himself.

“Please don’t kill me.” Hew didn’t know what else to say, but he turned himself around to face his abductor. It felt better to die facing the danger. More like a man. There was no one there to give him his last rites, but purgatory could be okay.

“I’m not going to kill you,” Dubhgall responded. “Sorry for frightening you, but it was a necessity.”

With a strange twist of reality—a whoosh he felt instead of heard— Hew found himself no longer in a dark room, rather in a cozily lit chamber. Where Hew would have expected to see bare, dank stone, he saw dry, plastered walls, bedighted with rich, colored tapestries. Expensive candles sat atop a deep mahogany desk where they flickered but did not smoke. A grand bed occupied a corner, festooned with silk and damask bed curtains. Strangely, the room contained four windows, high up near the room’s intricately carved ceiling. Hew could see the moon. *Impossible!*

“Are you... Can you do...” Glancing around the unfeasible room, Hew couldn’t keep his eyes off of the luxurious bedding. He was so tired, and he was sure it was comparable to the king’s bed itself. *It could buy all of Lochmara.*

“That’s not the point,” Dubhgall responded. “What’s your mother’s name?” Hew looked straight in the man’s eyes. The eyes that were six inches below his own, but the same hue of cobalt. Of course, against Dubhgall’s pale frame, they didn’t look out of the ordinary. But Hew had looked at them in every mirror and puddle he had ever come across, wishing he knew how he’d gotten them. Now, looking in Dubhgall’s, he saw, instead of his own insecurity and fear, the calm, guarded gaze of wisdom.

“I don’t think I should tell you,” he responded. Dubhgall sighed. “Probably wise, but unnecessary. Tell me this, what did she teach you?”

“She taught me to read and write...”

“Of course, of course! But what else?” He began to pace the room. *What else? I’m the only peasant in Lochmara who knows how to read. And in two languages!* “I can read and write... Latin.”

“You said!” Dubhgall nodded. “But what skills do you have?” *Isn’t that enough?*

“I can tablet weave pretty intricately. Mum sold them.” Dubhgall slumped into his desk, his face in his hands. Hew lifted his belt’s end. “See?”

“It’s lovely...Egh!” Dubhgall had seen the feces still lodged between its fibers.

“Oh, sorry!” he began, “I was just working...” With a rustle, Hew’s clothes were clean, his body, too. Probably as clean as he’d been since birth. Dubhgall wiped his hands together with a smug smile before continuing,

“Yes, but you’ve just heard plotting against the king. You’re a liability to every knight in that room. What skills do you have to save yourself?”

Hew felt like he was back in Lochmara, standing in front of the priest, having forgotten the catechism. Only this time, he was facing assassination, not an outlandish belief in his impending excommunication.

“No one saw me but you. I can ignore what I heard; cause no problems.”

“I highly doubt that,” Dubhgall said. Hew thought about his family and the King’s new law that had something to do with free, unwed peasants. Hew still wanted to know more. He had to know more.

“You said you had to grab me. Why?”

“Because I know you’re not going to merely make a fantastic woven belt with the information you just heard. Not that you should,” Dubhgall added, sensing Hew’s incoming protest. “But you can’t do anything about it until you know how to protect yourself. How to not be...yourself.”

Of course. Hew wasn’t enough. *I should have known.* He wasn’t enough for his mother to keep him at home, and he wasn’t enough to provide for his family, and he wasn’t enough to even keep himself from getting slain immediately upon arriving at the castle. This was just the confirmation he needed of his own worthlessness.

“Ouch,” he said.

“No, I don’t mean...” Dubhgall responded. “Not until you can...” With a rush of reality, Hew was staring back at himself, seated at Dubhgall’s carved desk, with his forearms confidently leaning on its flat surface. “They’ll never know what you know if they never know who you are.” *This is absurd.*

“I can’t do that. No one can do that.”

“I can do that.”

“I know you can do that! I just saw you do that! Who are you?” It was frustrating, looking back at himself calm, cool, and collected, when Hew knew his own features must be frantic.

“Can’t tell you. The less you know, the less that can be tortured out of you.”

“And the less tools I have to end said torture!” *People torture here?*

“What priorities you have,” Dubhgall said, rising from his chair and sniggering. “I noticed you haven’t questioned the state of your companion once, either.”

With stinging cheeks, Hew lied through his teeth: “What companion? I was alone.” Dubhgall looked Hew in the eye.

“I know you and Saerlaith were together, and I know you haven’t been here long enough to know of these tunnels without her. Plus, you’re a very bad liar. Saerlaith, the lass can feign anything. You, I can already tell, haven’t the composure.” For the second time in one, very long night, Hew felt his eyes begin to water; still, he did not let his chin dip but looked Dubhgall in the eyes. Or just slightly to the left of his eyes.

Moving past him towards the door, Dubhgall placed a hand on Hew’s shoulder. “You don’t have to worry about Saerlaith, my boy, she’s probably already sleeping soundly in her normal quarters. You’ve been through enough, tonight. It’s time you join your friend and rest.” Hew let his head drop. He was reminded of his clean clothes.

“Is she—”

“I’ll be sure she no longer reeks of dung.” Dubhgall smiled. Hew returned the grin, surprising himself. He also noticed that Dubhgall looked like himself again, but attired with robes instead of rags. “Return two nights from now,” the man continued, “and I’ll teach you how to protect yourself.”

“But I don’t know how to get here. Or get out of here, either.”

“You will,” Dughgall replied, shooing Hew out of the door. “It will be arranged.”

There was still one big flaw in Dubhgall’s plan that Hew could see.

“And I can’t do magic,” he said. Dubhgall shut the door:

“Of course you can’t!”

Soon, the second night arrived, and Hew walked through the kitchen, ready to wander up to Dubhgall’s door. He gave himself no time to think about what he was doing.

It’s necessary. He needed to be able to protect himself, to protect his family. The man had answers. Hew had to know what the King’s law was, and he had to learn from Dubhgall first. Though what the man thought he could teach Hew was anyone’s guess. Hew knew he was a quick study, but magic was another matter altogether.

First of all, he’d never known anyone who could do magic. He’d heard rumors here and there; some traveling magician to be avoided, some minor curse affecting children another town over. But, for the most part, the consensus was that magic had gone with Merlin. Some said that old King Aengus had worked with him, but in King Flannagan’s reign, magic was a nonentity.

Where does Dubhgall fit into all this? The most Hew could guess was that there were magicians out there, living in secret, Dubhgall among them. *And now the poor man thinks he can teach me magic. Bonkers.* Still, the idea of gaining some sort of mystic power kept him from avoiding the meeting entirely.

Hew let his feet take him across the kitchens, through a corridor, and down into the drafty tunnels. He tried to remember the turns he took, but every time he recited *right turn, left, right...* he would find himself forced to stop, unsure of how to proceed. It was only when he cleared his mind that his feet would lead him on. *Paranoid old bugger.*

When he reached the decaying wooden door, it opened before he could knock. Dubhgall stood before him, dressed that day in a green tunic with plain, clean trousers. Hew noticed he had to look up into Dubhgall's eyes this time, and the elderly man seemed...not elderly. Perhaps just over middle age. And very energetic.

"Come in, come in! I was wondering if you'd come, you know, what sort of man you are." Hew wasn't sure what to say to that. "Glad to see you," Dubhgall continued. "Ready for Disguise 101?"

"Um, I just wanted to reiterate that I really can't do magic," Hew began, stepping into the chamber, "I don't have a magical bone in my body."

"Of course you do. All bones are magic." *What?!* Dubhgall gestured for him to sit, seating himself behind his desk. "Magic comes from within, so, technically, all bones are magic."

"But I've never had any magical inclination!" At this, Dubhgall sighed, a sound Hew was starting to recognize.

"Did you have an inclination to read before you knew the alphabet? Before you knew what it was to read?"

"No..."

"You don't just *exude* magic, my boy." Dubhgall leaned forward. "You have to mine it. From deep within yourself. Like gold, like a precious metal."

“But what if I don’t have magic in my blood?” Another long sigh.

“Magic is in the blood, the bones, the core. If you’re alive, you’ve got magic in your blood.”

“Then anyone could learn magic!”

“Yes.” *Why aren’t people flying around and curing every illness, then?*

“Then why aren’t people—”

“How many people do you know who can read?” Dubhgall interrupted.

“A few,” Hew said. “Lord Cathair, the priest, some nobles, my mum, me.”

“And would you say that anyone can learn to read?”

“Yes, but it takes time, and you have to have someone to teach you...” He could see Dubhgall’s point now.

“Magic is hard to learn, my son. And there are few in the world to teach it. You’re in a privileged group— you’ve found a teacher.”

Hew felt warm. He had never felt this grateful for his body before, though he felt strangely detached from his physical form; it contained untapped power. Abilities beyond his imagination. He’d never dreamed of magic, never wished for it. He had to wonder, as he did when he left Lochmara: who would he become?

“Right,” Dubhgall began, rubbing his hands together, “what to start with...Perhaps a magic word or two would be in order.”

“There are magic words?” he questioned. Dubhgall hadn’t used any.

“Well, the words aren’t strictly magic, except that they’ve been made that way.” Cheekily, Dubhgall grinned. “Centuries ago, certain words were enchanted so that when

they're uttered, followed by a snap of the fingers, they will mine the magic from your body for you until you get a feel for using it yourself."

"I don't understand." Hew was starting to feel slower than he ever had in his life. He could usually learn quickly, just from listening and watching. Not only was the shock still slugging his thoughts, but magic was a whole new concept. Dubhgall took a deep breath, and his sigh was almost subtle.

"Like I said, magic has to be mined from your body. You'll learn to pull it from your lifeforce yourself, but until then, these enchanted words can do it for you. To be honest, it's not very pleasant, though."

"Why?" Dubhgall paused, thinking for a moment.

"Raise your arm." Hew did as he was told, bringing his arm perpendicular to his body. "Alright," said Dubhgall. "Now pretend you haven't learned how to connect your head with your arm, so I've got to do it for you." Dubhgall reached over and yanked Hew's arm up, one hand on his forearm, the other on his bicep.

"That's not so bad, though," Hew countered. It had been wiggly and unexpected, but not unpleasant. Again, Dubhgall smirked. "Now," he said, "jump and raise your arms at the same time." Hew did as he'd been told. "Was that difficult?" Dubhgall questioned.

"No."

"How about now?" With Dubhgall's question, Hew felt as though invisible arms had grabbed his body. He found feet moving upwards, without his consent, while his arms were also roughly forced into the air. It was all he could do to keep himself upright; his middle wanted to collapse while his limbs moved independently of his wishes. Then, his arms snapped back to his sides, and his feet fell back to the ground, while he jerked

his torso in the opposite direction, trying to not fall. Unfortunately, his feet hit the ground unevenly, apart from his control, and he pitched toward the floor.

Hew pulled himself off the tile and rose to stand. “I see.” Every muscle in his body seemed to twitch, and he was exhausted as if he had run all the way from his home to Alban’s inn back in Lochmara; plus, his arms and legs felt as if they had just recovered from muscle spasms. If you weren’t in control of the magic, it controlled you. And it wasn’t pleasant. Like being a marionette who had to provide the energy for your own performance without any of the command.

“Now imagine that feeling, but at the level of your soul,” Dubhgall continued. “Magic comes from your life force, the magic that makes you alive. It changes reality. The simplest magic is the magic that affects you most directly: changing your own appearance. Once you move to changing the reality outside of yourself, you’re relying on even more power. Like exercising your body, you must condition your soul to express that much energy at once. It’ll take time—and a lot of practice. Magic flows through your body uniquely and indescribably. You must figure it out from experience.” Hew’s feeling of hopefulness at his own potential power melted away. He felt like he’d been given a giant’s calvary sword; he would always be too small and weak to use it to much avail. Dubhgall must have noticed Hew’s sudden crestfallenness.

“You’ll get there eventually. Let’s start small, so you can feel what it’s like to access magic. Does that sound okay?” Thinking of Brighid and Ciara, Hew gathered his strength. Even if he could never wield a giant’s sword, perhaps he could make use of it in other ways, like cutting firewood or slaughtering chickens. “I’m ready.”

“All right, then, do what I do.” Dubhgall stood smiling in a jester’s stance, rotating his hand ready to snap his fingers. “Shunshi shivi!” he said, following with a “pop!” from his thumb and finger. His wispy, white and silver hair, unkempt and thin, suddenly morphed into long, neat, dense braids. “Ta-da!”

Hew realized a problem with this plan. “Can I control what color my hair changes to? Me having blonde or white hair might not be... inconspicuous.”

“Ah, good point, my boy. For now, just focus on what you want it to be, picturing it in your mind. That’s adjacent enough to how it works that you might have some control until you get a feel for it.”

“This all seems very... imprecise.” Dubhgall smiled.

“Yes, I suppose it does,” he answered. “But, just as how I can’t explain to you how to move your arms or legs, I can’t explain to you how to wield magic. But that doesn’t mean you can’t figure it out with some help. Magic is just less instinctual than moving your limbs.”

“Lucky me.”

“Yes, lucky you! And lucky your mother! If magic was instinctual, you would have been altering your appearance from day one. You and every other baby. Now, give it a go.” Hew took a deep breathe, focusing his thoughts. He pictured the long, fine chestnut hair of his mother and sisters. It was lighter than his own, dark curls. “Can you say the words again?” he asked, his eyes closed. Dubhgall repeated the enchanted words, and Hew pictured the letters.

“Shunshi shivi!” he said and flicked his finger against his thumb. Abruptly, a sensation rushed from his body; he thought it rushed through the nerves from his right leg

to his head. It was a tingle, a cramp, a pull, and it took a few seconds to subside. Blowing a small breath from his pursed lips, he slowly opened his eyes. Dubhgall stared back at him, his blue eyes inscrutable. He shrugged, “Eh.”

“So?” Hew asked, putting a hand to his hair. It was still curled. Dubhgall walked back to his oaken desk, opening a drawer, and pulled out a small hand mirror. He passed it to Hew, who eagerly glanced at his reflection. At first glance, nothing had changed. His hair was the same color, and it still sat curled atop his head. However, he realized, as he ran a hand through his hair and took a second glance at his head, that his hair’s texture had changed. His curls were looser, and his hair reached past his ears; he felt its movement when he shook his head.

“Hey, my hair is longer!”

“Yes, yes it is,” Dubhgall replied. “I really couldn’t expect much more for your first try.”

“Wait...” Hew said, realizing another hitch in the plan. “How do I get it to go back?”

“Don’t like your new look?” Dubhgall grinned. Hew watched Dubhgall’s hair, sure he was going to receive a demonstration. Instead, Dubhgall’s hair stayed in neat, dark braids, and he began to teach. “Take a moment to relax, then—and this is important— *whisper* the same words and snap the fingers on your opposite hand.”

“Okay.” Hew took a deep breath and whispered, “Shunshi shivi.” He then snapped using his left hand. A slithery, cold feeling slid down from his head, making a muscle in his belly twitch, before the feeling tugged down his leg, ending at about his

shin, he thought. Once the sensation subsided, he reached for his head again, relieved to feel his normal, tight curls.

“Ah, it seems you’re better at returning things to their normal state than you are at changing them,” Dubhgall mused. “Change comes more readily to most wizards I’ve known, eager as they are.” But it wasn’t Dubhgall’s mention of his magical propensities that caught Hew’s attention. “Does that mean...*I’m a wizard?*”

“Well, it depends on who you ask,” Dubhgall began with a deep breath. “Some folks say that the title can only be bestowed once you’ve reached a certain level of proficiency, of mastery. Others think that, if you’ve done magic, you’re a wizard. And the folks who think the title is exclusive don’t take kindly to those who use it more broadly. I say, do whatever you’d like. If you feel confident, call yourself a wizard; if you *feel* like a weak, inefficient novice, hold off on the title for a while. Doesn’t really matter.” He shrugged. Hew felt a bit overwhelmed. *Wizard...*

“Can I be your apprentice? I don’t feel particularly ‘wizeded’ yet.” Dubhgall studied him for a moment, those bright eyes looking Hew up and down.

“I guess that’s what you are, huh?” he smiled, ever so slightly, and then cleared his throat, clapping his hands together. “Alright! Another go!”

Hew spent the next few hours trying to change his hair over and over again, each time picturing the locks he’d seen every day of his life on his mother and sisters. His first attempt proved to be his most effective, and before long he struggled to even feel the magic be summoned at his command.

At this point, Dubhgall suggested practicing more difficult reversals instead, and he created for Hew opportunities by transforming his hair. In turns, Hew's mane was fire-red, black and past his bum, and held up under an elaborate veiled headdress. Each time, Hew summoned his natural hair, feeling the magic rush back through his body, following the same path. It was like feeling a drop of water rush down your skin, but knowing exactly where it would drip. Emboldened by the sensation's predictability, he attempted a reversal sans magic words. He snapped his fingers, using the moment to focus his energy. He felt the magic respond; it trickled sluggishly from his head down his shoulder, but then it dissipated, leaving the headdress a few layers lighter, but still covering his hair.

“Getting smug, are we there, apprentice?” Dubhgall teased.

“I almost had it!”

“Mm-hm. Sure. Try a change again,” Dubhgall smiled.

Once, twice, three more times, Hew attempted to change his hair, and with every subsequent effort, his hair changed even less. He could feel the magic responding, but it seemed that it had stopped listening to where Hew wanted it to go. Instead of feeling it dissipate into his scalp, it veered off toward his ear, or toward the back of his neck. Once, it seemed to veer all the way to his shoulder. After several tries with no discernable change, Dubhgall stepped in.

“All right, maybe that's enough for today.”

“Why won't it work?” Hew pulled on his noncompliant hair, groaning as the kinks refused to alter themselves. “The first time I tried it, I was able to get to work at least a little. Now I can't get it to do anything!”

“All right, all right, my boy. You’re tired. You don’t notice, but you’re focus is weaker. You need to rest. Can you read a manuscript after learning half the alphabet?”

“I need to get it one more time! Shunshi shivi!” Under his hand, Hew’s hair stayed the same texture. He lifted the hand mirror from Dubhgall’s desk and looked into it. A frustrated, small teenage boy stared back at him, with the same dark curls he always had. “Hgh!” He set the mirror down, and leaned his weight against the desk, one hand staying on top of the mirror.

“It’s fine, my boy,” Dubhgall consoled, gliding over to lean on the desk beside Hew. “You’re worn out, and magic is always easier after a rest. Go back to your chambers. Sleep.” He moved toward the door, reaching for its handle. “Try the spell again tomorrow morning, but only do it when you’re hidden. I promise you’ll find yourself improving.” He opened the door.

“Wait!” Hew interjected, suddenly feeling the depth of his own powerlessness. “Do you know what the king’s new law is? I need to know what’s going to happen to my family.”

“Is that the only reason why you came today?” Dubhgall questioned, his eyes narrowing. “Because you want to protect your family?”

“Yes.” Hew didn’t even have to think about it. Again, Dubhgall surveyed him, sizing him up.

“How noble. Still, you’re not ready. I can’t have you go charging off until you know how to protect yourself. And, sorry, I don’t think an extra inch of hair length is going to fool anyone of your identity.”

“But I can do other things! Something’s going to happen to my family, and I have to know what it is!”

“No, you don’t!” Dubhgall gestured toward the cracked door.

“But what if something bad happens to my family and I didn’t do anything?”

Dubhgall’s eyes seemed to pierce through Hew’s soul. He left the door, and strode the few steps separating them, lifting a hand and placing it against Hew’s shoulder. He swiftly pressed Hew against the plastered wall of the exquisite room.

“And that, my friend, is what will get you killed. Tell me, what can you do to save your family, all the way in Lochmara? What resources do you have against the king and his government? Against treasonous plotters who will kill you without a second thought to protect the ‘greater good’ they wish to create?” Dubhgall’s voice was deep whisper. “Why are you so keen to get yourself murdered?” Looking into his eyes, Hew saw the anger and concern there, and perhaps a bit of panic. He could hear Ciara’s teasing voice in his head: “Gonna tablet weave our way to safety, are you, alewife?” Hew suddenly wished he was back at home, snuggled between his sisters on their mat. He tried to meet Dubhgall’s eyes, but the fierce stare overcame him after a few moments, and his gaze drifted slowly down to his feet.

“I understand,” he choked.

“Good lad.” Dubhgall placed his other hand on Hew’s shoulder and pulled the younger man to him, clasping the boy in a tight embrace. It lasted only a moment, and he gave Hew a few stiff slaps on the back upon releasing him. “And remember, tell no one of this. The less people know about this, the less people will try to control you. Stay secret; stay safe.” He ushered Hew out the door, closing it behind him, leaving him in a

dark, wet hall, dazed by Dubhgall's lesson, his injunction, and his demeanor. This wizard was an enigma the likes of which Hew had never encountered.

Hew had no misgivings about Dubhgall's command to keep his magic lessons secret, but, no matter what the old man said, he believed in his own ability to act wisely with even bad news; thus, he decided to try and unearth the king's plan for his new law. He started with the only person he really knew.

Despite his inclination to dislike her based on the attitude she had displayed during their initial meeting, Hew trusted that, because Saerlaith had saved his life once, she had no reason to get him killed going forward. Besides, he realized, perhaps her first impression hadn't been demonstrative of her true personality. Hew noticed that, in the past few days, she had been remarkably quiet and attentive to her work. Even when he tried to talk to her, she kept her head down and wouldn't pause her task, instead she kept her eyes roaming for Cook and other supervisors.

He tried to converse with her while she stirred soup in the Privy Kitchen; she shooed him away to productivity after a few pleasantries. He attempted a tête-à-tête when she came to fetch some firewood that he was splitting outside; she stayed only long enough to gather an armful. Finally, he had a failed dialog while she had a small break; she couldn't talk while she inhaled a snack of cheese.

Late in the afternoon, he had his chance. Saerlaith had been placed on spit-turning duty, which she accepted with seemingly uncharacteristic demureness, and Hew's supervisor, Roger, had given him a short break from plucking the dinner's fowl. Hew

quickly wiped his hands and headed for the massive fireplace, trying to casually stroll over. No need to attract attention.

“Hello,” he greeted. She glanced up at him, her light brown eyes setting on him. Hew noticed she wasn’t wearing her veil today; she hadn’t worn it since their dung pit “adventure.” Hew supposed it must have been ruined. Instead, she wore only a simple coif, holding her hair back but revealing a section near her forehead. Her hair was a light shade of brown—a fact he hadn’t noticed during the night— with a twinge of red when the firelight flickered.

“Hi,” she responded. “Roger going easy on you?”

“Only a little,” Hew smiled. “I don’t think I’ve really earned much leniency.” Saerlaith’s good humor retreated even further. “No, I don’t suppose he would think you had,” she agreed. Sensing he’d made a misstep, Hew changed his direction.

“So, I wanted to ask you what you remember from the, uh, meeting we...overheard.”

“Hew!” she answered, suddenly dropping into an anxious whisper “we can’t talk about that in the open!” Glancing around, Hew catalogued the individuals within earshot. With the crackling of the burning wood, he doubted anyone would hear them, but the courteous move would be to defer to her increased sense of risk. Perhaps she was right. Dubhgall would agree, anyway.

“Alright, but we still need to talk about it. Whatever’s happening will affect my family, and I have to figure out what’s coming.”

“I understand.” Saerlaith dropped one hand from the spit handle and grasped his arm, pulling him closer. After a quick appraisal of the other people present, she

whispered: “Meet me at the bottom of the stairs leading to the men’s quarters in the dead of night, during first sleep. Wait until everyone’s asleep; we can talk then. We’ve got a lot to go over.”

After being released from her grip, Hew was shooed away, back to work. He had to wonder, though, what all they had to ‘go over.’ What did Saerlaith know?

Chapter 6

That night, Hew struggled against sleep. His mind raced, and he was eager for his meeting with Saerlaith, but his body was exhausted, and he found his eyes jerking awake every few minutes, despite him not remembering having closed them. After about an hour, the men's sleeping room was mostly quiet, and there was no light coming in through the window, save a few twinkling stars. Hew decided to wait for his best estimation of "the dead of night" sitting up.

Sitting there in the dark, Hew couldn't help but turn over in his head what they had heard. The king had cooked up some kind of legislation that would possibly gain him resources from free, unwed peasants. The men had been arguing over whether this was in search of a possible heir. *Royal heir*, he had to wonder. Some of the men had said they already had an heir, but the others had been angry, saying she wasn't a real option and they belittled her. They couldn't seem to make up their minds whether there was an heir actually out in the world or not. *Are they talking about Arthur's heir?* Hew thought back to what Cormac had told him weeks ago on their journey. *That must be what they were talking about!* The men had been talking treason, hoping and working toward the deposing of King Flannagan in favor of a blood descendant of Arthur, and some even had a particular person in mind. No wonder Dubhgall wanted to protect Hew; if the knights ever knew how much of this he knew, they would kill him without qualm.

Unable to keep still any longer, Hew decided to go to the meeting spot. Hopefully, this was "dead of night" enough. He slipped on his shoes and carefully worked his way around the sleeping figures on rushes around the room, slipped out of the door, and softly trod down the hall and stepped down the spiral stairs. Saerlaith was

sitting at the bottom, back straight up, not slouching, with her cap still on, and her eyes alert.

“Finally,” she said. “I’ve been waiting for a good ten minutes.”

“You said ‘the dead of night.’ Everyone’s only been asleep for an hour.”

“That’s dead enough. Now, follow me.” Saerlaith beckoned for him to follow her, and she led them back through the kitchens. He could only assume she was looking for seclusion. And privacy. *Is this really necessary?*

As they glided through the all-but empty kitchens, Hew took in the peaceful sights, so different from the chaos of the day and the confusion in his mind. Saerlaith nodded at the sleepy boy tending to the fire, and passed through the Privy Kitchen and into the corridor of the pantry. This was an outdoor hallway, with offices, larders, and storage on either side. It was designed to create a breeze, and Hew was glad that, on this nighttime excursion, he had dry shoes. Saerlaith led him into a small office, closing its door as they entered. They could still see into the corridor through windows, but they had the most privacy Hew figured they would get.

“Where are we?” he asked.

“Welcome to the buttery.” The butler’s working chamber was efficiently furnished, a desk in one corner and scale on a table. A thick door set into the wall revealed the locked buttery, where the wines, ales, and brews were kept.

“Alright, I think this is sufficient.” Saerlaith began. “I wanted to talk to you about what we heard that night. And where you went. I know you’re not telling me everything.” Hew didn’t expect this line of questioning, but he wasn’t sure he should tell Saerlaith about his magic lessons with Dubhgall. After all, he was in disguise for a reason; he

obviously didn't want everyone to know what he was capable of. And neither did Hew, at the moment, though Saerlaith was his best chance at a comrade.

"First, I want to know what you know about the new law," he said, trying to muster as much authority as he could. It was difficult when he could tell Saerlaith's shoulders were broader than his, even if he was taller. "My mother is a free, unwed peasant, so this new law will affect my family."

Saerlaith didn't look pleased at his change of subject, but she answered anyway. "News can get garbled along the way as it passes amongst the castle staff, but, from what I've heard, the king is commanding all unwed free peasant women to become vassals under the responsibility of a lord. They have to either be under the care of a husband or a lord." Hew felt his mouth go dry.

But before he could answer, however, Hew saw Saerlaith's eyes dart towards the hall, and she abruptly grabbed Hew's shoulders. "Get down!" Hew realized she must have seen someone approaching in the corridor, and he followed her lead. Saerlaith shoved him under the table in the dark corner, while she rushed underneath the desk against the opposite wall.

As Saerlaith scuttled into her hiding place, Hew heard a faint noise. The door to the butler's office opened, and a woman in elegant nightclothes strode into the room. She had no candle, and she quietly closed the door behind her. She approached the table and began to search for something in the office, moving objects around on the tabletop above Hew. Around glimpses of skirt, Hew looked to Saerlaith. She was pale as a ghost, and almost as quiet. She quickly touched her middle finger to her forehead, chest, and

shoulders. Hew figured she had the right idea. *In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost...*

Frustrated, the woman turned from her work and faced the door, standing perfectly still in thought. Hew had little idea who this woman was. She obviously wasn't a servant, yet he had never seen her before. And she had the audacity to sneak about the butler's office in "the dead of night." After the length of three breaths, she moved again, wiping a tear from her cheek.

Quickly, she strode forward, toward where Saerlaith was trying to remain unseen. Saerlaith squeezed herself into the shadows as best she could as the woman floated to the desk, her robes swishing as she walked. Her skirts blocked Hew's view of Saerlaith, but thankfully this also hid her even more. The lady opened each drawer one at a time, rifling through its contents for roughly a full "Our Father." Hew wasn't sure if he was even breathing. He even thought to himself the only magic words he knew, but the only magic he conjured without snapping or speaking the words aloud was a faint tingle along the outside of his shin.

Finally, the lady turned and strode to the buttery door, facing away from both the table and the desk. Feeling the lay of the stones under the plaster with her hand, the woman counted three stones over from the door handle and four stones down. After retrieving a sheathed knife from a pouch around her waist, she began to cut the plaster and mortar from around the stone, until finally she was able to wiggle it out of its place in the wall.

What is she doing? Hew now thought perhaps the woman was a thief, and they should intervene rather than let her continue to destroy castle walls, but Saerlaith put a

finger to her lips and pointed ardently to the floor. *Stay put!* Trusting his companion, Hew turned his attention back to the weeping thief.

Reaching in the small nook left empty by the removed stone, she retrieved a small item. She turned it in her fingers, and Hew realized as she lifted it to the door lock that the lady had just retrieved a hidden key to the buttery.

She entered, and Hew thought they should take the moment to sneak way, but Saerlaith glared into his eyes and repeated her motion. *Stay put!* Finally, the woman reemerged, a wine bottle in hand. She wiped another tear from her face, locked the door, slipped the key into her pouch, and replaced the stone, though now it was clear from the plaster that it could be removed from the wall. Hew saw silent sobs shake the woman's back as she floated out of the office, again, taking the time to silently open and close the door. When she had exited and several moments had passed by, Hew crawled out from under the table.

Hew squatted down to where Saerlaith remained in her hiding place, leaning against the stone wall. He extended a hand, which she took, seemingly grateful.

“God's wounds, I thought we were done for!” she gasped.

“Shouldn't we have called for help? She stole a bottle of the king's wine!”

Saerlaith looked him in the eyes, incredulity in her gaze.

“Hew, did you not know who that was? That was the queen!”

Chapter 7

“The Queen?” Hew breathed. What would she have done if she had seen them hiding? What terrible punishment could have befallen them? Hew breathed deeply, trying to calm his racing heart, and he wiped his damp palms on the wool of his shirt.

“What puzzles me,” Saerlaith began, touching a fingertip to her chin, “is why the queen felt the need to sneak around. She could have had a servant fetch her whatever she wanted.”

“Maybe she didn’t want to wake the butler?” Hew proposed, knowing it was a foolish suggestion as he said it, but a bit too taken aback by his companion’s lack of panic to think straight. To his surprise, Saerlaith nodded thoughtfully.

“Queen Eva *is* known for her consideration,” she replied. “And she obviously knows more about the castle than anyone else does. How did she know there was a key hidden there?” Saerlaith strode across the dark room and ran her finger along the line of now-missing plaster. “If we had known it was there, we could have had anything from the buttery we wanted.”

“We’re not thieves,” Hew retorted. Saerlaith gave him a soft glare, but she nodded. “I wonder if she just wanted privacy,” he continued, thinking of the queen’s tears. “I wouldn’t consider a glass of wine worth the butler seeing me weep.” Saerlaith looked Hew in the eye, and he almost turned from her gaze as she spoke, a bit taken aback by the way she answered him with something akin to respect. “You’re probably right. She would have had to wake the butler or retrieve the king’s key. Either way, her

emotional midnight drink would likely be heard about by her husband. She wanted secrecy.”

“Apparently, this is the place for it.”

“You’re right,” Saerlaith announced, businesslike. “We came here for a reason.” She glanced around the butler’s office and decided to crouch beside the butler’s desk, where she could lean back against its side and remain unseen through the office windows. She indicated that he should sit as well. He obeyed.

“Alright,” she began, “so I’ve told you about the law. It requires free peasant women to either marry or become tied to the lord. You say your mother and family are free peasants, and this worries you.”

“Absolutely.”

“But why?” she asked, slouching into the desk. “My family are vassals. Most families are vassals. Why does it matter so much?”

“You’d have to understand my mother,” Hew began. “She’s fiercely independent, and she says freedom is like gold. ‘Let no man have any claim to you’ she says. ‘Let the only lord over you be God Almighty.’”

“She sounds...intense.”

“She’s wonderful!” he protested. “It’s just that my family... has its own difficulties. My sister Brighid has certain limitations, you see, and Lord Cathair’s strong hold on his vassals would be ruinous. He’s a very religious man, and he sees her infirmity as a punishment from God on my mother. If he had control over them, I don’t know what he’d do.”

“I’ve always heard that the afflicted are closer to God. They’re suffering Purgatory on Earth,” Saerlaith whispered, horrified. “Why would he assume sin on your mother?” Hew realized how much he took for granted the assumptions made about his family just by looking at them. It was even harder to have to spell it out.

“Well,” he began, trying to keep his eyes pointed at her honest face, if not making eye contact. “My mother doesn’t speak of my father, or Brighid’s. And Ciara just appeared one day. Mother said she was our sister, and that was that. My mother appears... not holy.” Hew let his eyes drop, and he studied the hem of her skirt and the tip of her shoes on the floor, instead, feeling his cheeks burn and his gut writhe in shame.

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

Taking a deep breath, he managed to look in her face once more. He could see the retreating judgement she was wrestling with, but he could also see her mind at work, her thoughts moving from his strange family to new possibilities.

“So, you don’t know your father? And your mother will be impacted by this new law, whereby King Flannagan is searching for an heir of Arthur.”

“Supposedly. It’s a theory of many.”

“But it’s a good guess,” she continued, her eyes darting side to side as she observed her thoughts instead of the room about her. Hew noticed she pointed her index finger as she spoke, tracing an invisible line from one idea to the next. He realized how dainty and feminine her hands were compared to the rest of her.

“Hew, do you think you could be King Aengus’s bastard? Maybe King Flannagan is looking for *you*.” Startled by the thought, Hew sat up straighter. It was certainly a leap,

but not one out of the realm of possibility. Saerlaith's gesticulating hands were now eagerly stowed in her lap, awaiting his answer.

"I don't know," he replied. It would explain much, but there was one problem. *I don't recall anyone ever saying King Aengus looked like his ancestors were from La'Mar.* "What did he look like?"

"He looked, you know, like a man." Saerlaith pondered. "Wait!" She reached under her dress, rifling through its fabrics until she finally pulled out a small disc. "He looked like this!" She placed the coin in Hew's palm, and he looked down at the tiny, tarnished portrayal of a regal man, an etched crown atop his dented head. "My mum gave it to me for good luck." She leaned towards him, awaiting his reply, pushing against the floor with her palms.

King Aengus, or what Hew could see of him, looked indistinguishable from any king on any coin. His hair was drawn curling above his shoulders, and his nose was too flattened to tell its shape. It wouldn't have answered Hew's question, though.

"What was his complexion?" he asked.

"I don't know," Saerlaith seemed surprised by his question. "Normal, I guess. I never saw him, remember?"

"Was he pale or dark?" Recognition began slowly growing on Saerlaith's face.

"Pale, I think."

"So is my mother."

"Oh." Saerlaith muttered, disappointed. She slouched against the desk once more, folding her arms across her chest. "I just thought she must look..." *like me*, Hew finished

in his head as Saerlaith dropped her eyes and chewed her lip. “Nope,” he said, instead. “She and my sisters look like everyone else in Loch Country. And then there’s me.”

“Your family is quite the enigma, isn’t it?” Her hands returned to her lap.

“I always thought so.” Hew mustered a bemused smirk, and Saerlaith answered it with a good-natured smile. “Well, it wouldn’t do to let this enigma of a family be ruined by Cathair’s lordship, would it?”

“God’s wounds, no!”

“Well then, we’ve got to find a solution, don’t we?” Hew noticed Saerlaith’s smile now bespoke her calculating mind.

“But where would they be safe?”

“Well, where does the law affect? I mean, is this regional, or for the whole country? That would change where they might find refuge.” Saerlaith’s hands moved as she talked, and her index finger was pointing again. “All told, I think they’ve got to get out of Lochmara. They might be alright under the lordship of Tuathal in Lochlira. But if there’s a safe haven somewhere, that’s the best.”

“How would we know? Has anyone read the law yet?”

“The knights in the meeting spoke of the law as still a rumor, not yet sent out. But how would they have known of it?” Hew wracked his brain. Fighting knights operated under a military chain of command. Some of them may have been aristocratic enough to be in the king’s council, but not all of them would be. And those knights in the meeting would have known about the law with certainty if they were in the king’s circle. Saerlaith spoke first.

“They must have connections either to the king’s privy council or to the king’s scribes. Some friendship or family bond.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“That’s where we could get the information from.”

“We could see if the scribes have a copy of the decree that hasn’t been sent out yet,” he offered. He thought scribes would be more amenable than nobles, surely.

“We’d have to have someone read it to us, though. Do you know anyone trustworthy?”

“I can read.” Saerlaith’s questioning countenance transformed to shock in less than a moment. “You can read... But the decree will be in Latin.”

“I know.”

“How did you learn to read Latin?” Shocked, Saerlaith’s hands dropped to her side as she leaned against the desk.

“I learned from my mother.”

“And your mother isn’t noble? You’re sure you’re really not King Aengus’s bastard?” Saerlaith’s face was in shadow when she leaned back, Hew noticed, but he could see a glint of light reflecting off her eyes. She looked almost eerie, and, for the first time since she saved his life, Hew wondered how trustworthy she truly was.

“Certainly not.”

“It would have explained so much.” Saerlaith again leaned towards him, and into the light.

“Why do you care about my family so much, anyway? Why help me?”

Taken aback, Saerlaith straightened her shoulders. “Well, I don’t feel like I can’t anymore,” she answered. “Maybe we’ll end up solving the puzzle of your little family. Might lead to grand things. And besides, if I ever find myself a freewoman, I’d like it to be with *or without* holy matrimony.” This spoke of a vested interest, but it wasn’t exactly a ringing endorsement of her character. Hew needed more. If a rescue mission was to occur, he would need Dubhgall involved. He would have to tell Saerlaith about the magic. A dangerous proposition.

“Saerlaith, I know you saved my life in the gong pit, and I have no reason to believe you wish me ill, but if we’re going to work together, you’ve got to swear to me that you can do what I do to protect myself and my family. That you can keep your mouth shut.”

“I can do that and more!” she protested. He could tell that he’d caught her off-guard. Perhaps she wasn’t used to being second-guessed. She had a generally trustworthy face, after all.

“Still, I’d feel at ease if you swore an oath.”

“I can do that. Do you have anything to swear on?” Hew handed her back the coin: “It’s not exactly a reliquary, but if you hold it in high regard, it will do. Swear by God that you will keep my secrets, that you will protect my family as I do. Please.”

Saerlaith cupped the coin between her palms, and hardly blinked as he held his gaze. She spoke,

“In the Lord, whose holiness is foremost: to Hew I wish to be faithful, and to hold secret all that he holds secret. And to protect that which he protects. And neither willingly nor intentionally to carry out either a word or deed which to him is harmful. I wish to live

up to the regard with which he may hold me”— here a sharper tone and a stiff nod—
“and everything agreed between us I will carry out when I swear to him. And this I have
chosen.”

Hew let out a breath he hadn't consciously been holding. He felt a little ashamed,
but he reminded himself that his family's safety was worth Saerlaith knowing his distrust.
“We still need to figure out how to get a copy of the edict from the scribes,” he said.

“They don't work very long into the night. We could sneak in.”

“Couldn't we just convince a scribe to let us in? Or tell us about the law?”

“And let the king's messengers know that two kitchen-peasants are poking their
noses where they don't belong?” Hew's brain worked double-time. It was time to show
Saerlaith every hidden egg in the henhouse. “I might be able to keep them from knowing
who wants to know.”

“How?”

“I've learned some interesting disguise techniques. Watch.” He closed his eyes
and breathed deeply, attempting to clear his mind. *Please work...* He readied his hand,
propping his thumb against his middle finger. “Shunshi shivi!” he whispered, and he
snapped. The zing of magic rushed up from his leg, just as it had the other night. It
pushed its way up his neck, sliding around his veins and behind his ears. He shivered as it
settled in the pores of his head. Finally the sensation ebbed. Hew opened his eyes.

“What am I supposed to see?”

“My hair! It's—” Hew put a hand to his head. Sure enough, his curls were loose,
and this time, they reached to his cheeks. “It's straighter.” Saerlaith leaned closer,
examining his head. She reached out and gently pulled a curl. Like a loose spring, it

slowly bounced to its position upon her release. “I’m trying not to go mad because you definitely just performed magic, but, practically, this helps us not a smidgeon.” Hew knew she was right. Her idea of sneaking was better. “And how in God’s name did you learn to do this?”

Hew smiled, and he kissed his night’s sleep goodbye. Trusting God and Saerlaith to keep her oath, he began the tale of magic lessons with Dubhgall.

Ultimately, they decided that their best luck would be during the midday meal on Saturday. Proximity to the Sabbath would ensure no extra scribes present in the workroom during the meal, while the afternoon time would guarantee an unlocked office door. It wasn’t without certain risks, however. Hew would have to slip away at exactly the right moment. Too early, and he would be missed during the meal preparations, too late, and his exit would be conspicuous as the rest of the kitchen staff rested and ate. They had decided it would only be Hew; Saerlaith could instruct him on location of the scribes’ workroom, and he was the one between them who could locate the correct edict.

He couldn’t escape a certain feeling of apprehension about going alone. Saerlaith knew the castle better, and her wit and confidence (however annoying in day-to-day conversation) was a great asset in high-stakes tasks. To bolster his courage, he thought of Ciara, the thought of the way she regarded her big brother with a mixture of trust and derision egging him on.

Saturday morning dawned sooner than Hew would have liked. The weeknights had drug themselves along like heifers being goaded to pasture, but Friday night had sauntered on like a cow late for milking. As he stewed in his apprehension and roasted alongside the meat in the fireplace, Saerlaith strolled around the expansive kitchens, flitting from one task to the next, seemingly unbothered. When asked, she had told Hew that she slept like a baby, the castle cat Gib even snuggling against her. But he was clever enough to recognize the new darkness beneath her eyes.

After a while, he had been taken off of spit-turning duty and sent to chop wood. Thankfully, this served their plan even better, as he was semi-secluded in the storeroom. He waited until the hustle and bustle died down, and then poked his head into the kitchen. The last of the dishes were being approved for the king's table, and a few servants here and there were collecting their own meals. It was time.

Hew entered the kitchens, walking towards the storage hall he still associated with the queen's late-night foray. He decided a purposeful walk would attract less attention than a meandering one. *Best to look busy.* He could already tell that Saerlaith was the better actress from her morning nonchalance.

After passing the Soup Kitchen, he entered the cool, openair hall, passed the butler's office and the pantler's office, and several offices besides that he didn't know the purpose of. This breezy passage emptied into a small courtyard, framed by windows and other offices. He turned to his left, following the specific directions given by Saerlaith. Down another narrow corridor he went, here passing paned windows and locked, labeled doors. He didn't recognize the names on these plaques, and he only had a slight familiarity with the titles.

After the hawker's office, he found himself traveling down five stairs, leading him back inside. At the bottom, the hall ended with three doors, one ahead of him and one at his left and his right. The left was labeled "To Dispatch," while the right "For Royal Dispatch Only," and the middle said simply, "Vestibule of Communiqué."

Likely, a new law would need to be dispatched royally, but, if it had already been conveyed, it would now be stored, which is what he inferred was the purpose of the "Vestibule." *I want to read the full decree, he reasoned. If a copy for dispatch is complete, the king's seal is placed upon it in wax. I can't risk opening a sealed document. "Vestibule" it is.*

In an abundance of caution, Hew lightly knocked upon the wooden surface of the door. If scribes remained inside, it was best to feign an inquiry than to enter with no welcome. No sound answered. Hew pushed the door, cracking it and peering in. The room was large, with labeled shelves loaded with bound writings. Archways to the left and right opened into the dispatch rooms, and three small wooden tables furnished the room with a place to read. Without sound, Hew crossed the chamber, listening for any indication of scribes still present, any scritch of the pen, any rustling of paper. Silence.

The shelves were labeled by location. *Location of recipient*, Hew guessed. The bound books had a seal on their cover, signaling their sender. *This edict couldn't have been bound yet.* Scanning the room, Hew searched for any pile of loose papers, and he saw to his right a small desk, with a system of shelves atop it. These shelves were smaller, no more than six inches between them, stacked vertically. A through J was on the left, and K through Z was beside it. Instinctively, he reached for the "L" slot. *Lochmara, Lochmara, Lochmara*, he thought, sifting through meaningless dispatches to

Lochlira, Lochmorn, Lochhill, and others. Finally, a page with a thick royal seal caught his eye. *Lochmara!*

This is what he was searching for, “An Edict of Protection for Those Vulnerable.” *That’s one way to spin this.* It laid out those affected by this new decree, and that it would go into effect immediately. Nothing new to Hew. He devoured the page, stumbling here and there over the thick script, but continuing on. It stipulated good treatment of the vassals, a meaningless promise, and it required a registration of all assets at the lord’s command. *It does sound like they’re searching for someone...* At the bottom, a list of the counties under this new system. All of Loch Country, all of the mountain towns, the grasslands, the moors, and the lowlands. All female peasants were required to be wed or under the command of a lord. Except... Hew’s eyes widened, and his heart sped up. Here was his hope.

“The royal city of Noldan, being under the eye of the king and his appointed mayor, shall change not its functions, but continue under its usual taxes, regardless of status of freedom or vassalage.”

There were too many people in Noldan, too many merchants, too many free traders. The king was letting the tax system in his capital city to suffice. *This is it! This is my loophole!* If he could just get his family to Noldan, they would be safe!

Chapter 8

Hew finished scanning the few remaining sections of the edict, most of which seemed written directly to lords and solicitors— they went over Hew’s head, at least. His heart pounding in his chest, he smoothed the papers once more and placed them gently back in their section of the shelf, making sure to place them in roughly in the middle of the stack, where he found them. He wove his way past the tables, heading for the door. *Wait till Saerlaith hears about this!* He would tell her how the king was trying to cover his intentions with his wording.

The king was looking for someone, that much was certain. He was looking for a woman who he believed to be unmarried. A married woman would be recorded in the church records, and a vassal would be listed under the tax income of her lord. An unmarried free woman? Practically a ghost to the king. But why search for such a lady? Hew could only guess that King Flannagan hadn’t found that pesky descendant of Arthur yet. He was grasping at straws, crossing Aengus’s mistresses off his list, one by one as he found them. And he was framing it as helping the poor. *How had he phrased it?* Hew tried to remember the wording of the edict, how Flannagan’s scribes had described business as usual for Noldan, but the words were fast slipping from his visual memory.

Hew stopped at the Vestibule door. He didn’t want to tell Saerlaith incorrect data, and, more than that, he didn’t want to misremember and have his family’s safety ripped from them all because of his panic and faulty memory. He needed the accurate verbiage. Taking a deep breath and shoving down dread, he spun on his heel and made his way back to the shelf of copied correspondences.

He would need parchment and a quill. And ink. He would have to move fast; if he got caught, the consequences would be unimaginable. At least in the sense that he had no idea what the consequences might be. But he knew they would not be pleasant. He paused in his rifling. It was better to be caught with tools than an edict, so he changed his plans. Quill and ink first, then collect the file to be copied.

He turned left, entering through a large archway to the “To Be Dispatched” room. Several tall desks littered the room, standing beside thin windows that shone purposefully onto the wooden surfaces and made the room bright as the light bounced off the plastered walls. A squat table near the door functioned as the workspace for couriers and office staff, and a dusting of light feathers on the table spoke of a skirmish with a rowdy messenger bird.

Striding to the nearest desk, Hew listened for the dreaded sounds of a returning scribe. Hearing nothing, he opened the desk’s compartment and lifted a bottle of ink and sturdy quill from inside. He began to place the inkwell in his pocket before remembering it wasn’t there.

He missed his woolen pouch. Back at home, it was always around his waist, like a second skin; here he had to follow the servants’ dress. A four-inch-deep pocket with Loch Country embroidery wasn’t approved (even if the green threads pair with the muted blue uniform quite handsomely). He *could* secure the quill against him by shoving it under his belt, but he daren’t risk snapping the quill’s shaft.

Several large open boxes against the far wall held different types of parchment, and he rushed to collect some. With one hand, he collected a rough parchment piece from

the box with the lowest quality he saw. In the other hand, he held the inkwell, the smooth quill uncomfortably secured under his middle finger.

His tools procured, he flew back to the Vestibule, to the shelf with edict copies. He prepared himself to leaf through the stack once more before glancing at the title of the top page: “An Edict of Protection for Those Vulnerable.” Every page in the stack was the same edict. It had been copied over and over again, to be sent to each town in the kingdom. He hadn’t noticed before.

He snatched the top copy and plunked down at the Vestibule’s desk. He popped open the inkwell’s cap and carefully dipped the quill into the ink before furiously scribbling down the precise verbiage of the edict’s rules and its provision for Noldan. The inkwell was a nicer glass than he had ever used, and the cut of the quill was different than his preference. He struggled not to let his discomfort retard his progress.

Time seemed to slow as his quill scratched words on the parchment which would endanger his family. To the nobles and the scribes, they were but words on a page— to him and his family they were life-uprooting. An unfamiliar anger rose in him to think that these men could so easily order about his family. On paper, they were God’s chosen instruments of order. In practice, they were power-hungry and self-seeking.

Back in Lochmara, the lord didn’t affect him much. Just at feast days and special occasions did he really consider the noble presence. Being free meant you could live apart from the lord and his direction, especially since— quite unusually— Hew’s family didn’t farm. Hew worked for the alehouse, his mother did God knows what, and his sisters took care of their home. He feared how they would make their livelihood in

Noldan. His salary could not support them all. And they would need housing, somehow. *One step at a time, Hew*, he told himself.

In his task, he had tuned out the world around him. In pondering his family's predicament, he had neglected to be cautious. A fact he most ardently bemoaned as a throat clearing told him he was not alone. And he had been noticed. Glancing up in terror, he saw a small, round man staring him down, small spectacles perched on his nose.

"And what might you be doing, boy?" His tone was severe, though his glare was soft. Hew spent a moment in panic, knowing fully well that Saerlaith would have been charming her way out of this as he stared in shock. If only Saerlaith could read. He would be safely in the kitchens right now. Finally, he decided on a strategy that had always severed him well when Meadhbh chastised him in her alehouse. When all else fails, feign ignorance.

"Um, I'm sorry!" Hew rose, sliding the papers together, trying to neaten the pile. "I'm just... I can't read!"

"You cannot read, son?" Evidently confused, the scribe tilted his head back to glance at Hew through his lenses.

"No!" Hew replied, searching for a reason he would be here if he couldn't read. "I'm trying to learn!" he blurted, God blessing his endeavors with a spark of brilliance. "I'm copying the words, hoping I'll learn what they mean. So far, though, they're still just shapes on the page." He dropped his head, trying to convey a sense of shame and sadness at his non-progress. He hoped his face was cooperating and not showing terror and fear while he attempted innocence. How did Saerlaith do it? She'd been walking around this morning with a face full of nonchalance and contentment.

“Well, lad, this isn’t the way to learn. The letters will mean nothing to you unless you’re taught.”

“Oh?” he replied.

“Yes, you must learn the sounds the letters make before you try to put them together. And, if I’m not mistaken...” the scribe rounded the table, separating the pages and studying Hew’s notes, “this is all in Latin. Unless you speak it fluently, copying this wouldn’t have done you much good.”

“I know a little!” Hew added, hoping more detail would add credibility to the story. He felt like an eel, floundering in a fisherman’s net, trying to squeeze between the net’s holes, back into the safety of the water. “The priest back home taught me some.”

“Well now, that’s not nothing.” The scribe smiled. “But your penmanship is abysmal,” he said, pointing at Hew’s scribbled notes. “You’ll have to practice with great care, otherwise you will get used to crafting the words incorrectly. Are you serious about wanting to learn, my boy?”

“Yes!” Hew blurted. People who weren’t serious didn’t copy down random words they found. He could feel himself finally slipping through that hole in his net of lies, the stream below calling to him.

“If you really want to learn—and make no mistake, it’s much to learn—I would teach you. You have the look of promise about you, son, and I’d not deny you a chance to grow.”

“Thank you, sir!”

“I have Tuesday evenings free. Meet me here then, after supper. And, here, take your notes.” The scribe took the ink and quill from Hew and carried the proper edict to its home on the shelf.

Oh good, more lessons to keep secret. Hew was happy to be free, but, as he strode towards the door, he dreaded the idea of faking his way through reading lessons he didn’t need. But something occurred to him.

“Sir?”

“Yes, lad?”

“Could I bring another pupil with me on Tuesday?”

“That would be fine. But keep this quiet, son. Not everyone is keen on kitchen boys writing the king’s English.”

“Thank you!” Hew rushed from the room, notes in hand.

Back in the kitchens, he procured a serving of lunch (though he still felt too jittery to be hungry) and found Saerlaith sitting with her friends at a table. He’d never really met the two girls, though he knew the round-faced girl with copper hair was Órlaith, from Loch Country. The tan willowy girl he didn’t know the name of, but she seemed to be from Noldan. She had black hair peeking from under her cap; a feature usually indicative of low-country folk. He had seen her around the kitchens, working with the soups and chatting with Saerlaith when she could.

“Hello,” he said, approaching the girls. “May I sit here?” he addressed to Saerlaith.

“Sure!” she said, and her friends followed him with their eyes as he sat. The dark-haired girl smiled softly.

“I’ve been wanting to meet Saerlaith’s mysterious friend,” Órlaith said, leaning conspiratorially forward. “She says you’ve got quite the backstory.”

“I guess,” Hew replied. “I’m mysterious?” A questioning glance at Saerlaith.

“I’d say so!” she defended. “You’re from Loch Country, you can read and write— in Latin! But you’re not noble at all.”

“Is Hew a common name in Loch Country? I’ve only ever met Hews from around here,” the other girl asked.

“Mum said my father picked it.” One of the few things his mother had ever said about him.

“You didn’t tell me that!” Saerlaith chimed. *But you’ve told them quite a lot!* Desperate to change the subject, he asked,

“Saerlaith, why don’t you introduce us all? I’m at a disadvantage.”

“Of course,” she said, and began to do the introductions. He learned that her shier, tan friend was named Hilda, and Órlaith was from Lochhill. He did notice that, despite her friendly tone, Saerlaith’s face grew red, and her words accelerated. He felt a bit better that she realized her rudeness. Perhaps there was hope for her, after all.

“Yes, so I’ve known these two for about six months, and they’re the greatest.” She nodded to Hew then to her friends: “Hew’s acquaintance is more recent, but he seems alright. Once you’ve rescued someone from a gong pit, you feel bonded for life.”

“Oh, don’t tell me you’ve recounted that adventure to them!” he groaned. “That was not my best day!” The girls chuckled, and he felt a sudden affection for the trio. He

had limited friends back home, and many Lochmarans did little more than tolerate his presence. His only deep relationships were with his family. Perhaps this was a chance for a fresh start. A chance to build friendships based on who *he* was, not his mother's marital status or the peculiarity of his complexion.

“So, did Saerlaith exaggerate the story, or did you really almost die?” Órlaith questioned. Hew felt his face grow red. He had tried not to dwell on that night in the following days. A strange mix of shame and fear tinged his memories. He'd come so close to leaving his family without his support. He did his best to ignore his accelerating heartbeat.

“Well, as I was unconscious,” he quibbled, “I don't remember being in mortal danger, but I have no reason to disbelieve Saerlaith's descriptions of her heroics. Also, the dried shit on my face was corroborating.” Hilda cringed while Saerlaith grinned in response. Órlaith's face scrunched in disgust.

“Oh! I can't believe I washed all those clothes for you!” she said. “They were disgusting. And all on your underthings, too, you unlucky girl.”

“She's unlucky?” Hew argued, “I'm the one who almost drowned!” Órlaith laughed and nodded her agreement, and Hilda noted, “You're much more important than the clothes, Hew.

“So, Órlaith,” he asked, “you work in the laundry, right? Is that any better than our work in the kitchen?”

“I'm not sure how it compares to the kitchens,” she began. “But it's definitely very hot. With a lot of stirring.”

“I’m familiar with that sort of work,” Hilda teased, referencing her work in the Privy Kitchen.

“Yes, but do you have to stir cauldrons full of wet cloth for hours of your day?” Órlaith retorted.

“No,” Hilda replied. Saerlaith interjected,

“But you’ll be much better off when you go back to Lochhill!” Órlaith slumped in assent, while Hilda turned to Hew. “What do you think, Hew? Is working in the kitchens any better than working in the fields?”

“I wouldn’t know,” he said. “Back at home, I work in Lochmara’s alehouse. My family doesn’t work the lord’s fields.”

“Oh, I see,” Hilda responded. “Then how does this compare to that?” Being from an urban environment herself, Hilda wasn’t shocked by his answer. Órlaith, on the other hand, looked at him in confusion. Even Hew knew from this short conversation that such silence did not come naturally to the redhead.

“Well, it’s more varied,” he replied, tearing his gaze from Órlaith’s green-eyed stare. “There were only so many tasks to be done at Meadhbh’s, but here, there’s always—”

“So, you work in an alehouse,” Órlaith interrupted, “and you don’t farm because you’re free.” Hew nodded slowly. “I mean, we still grow food for ourselves—”

“But you can read and write in more than one language, and you have a low country name.”

“If you say so.” *Hew’s a universal name...*

“You make no sense,” Órlaith finished.

“That’s what I said!” Saerlaith replied. “You’ve never really noticed how strange you are, Hew?”

“I’ve noticed it every day of my life,” he retorted—“I just have no way to gauge what’s normal for Lochmara and what’s normal for the great city of Noldan. Forgive me if I assumed Noldan was more diverse in experiences.” The women were silent for a full two heartbeats.

“Perhaps it’s really your mother with the interesting story,” Saerlaith offered. “I mean, you’ve only ever lived in Lochmara.”

“Hew, Saerlaith’s told us that your ancestry remains a mystery,” Hilda began gently, “and we’d like to help you solve it, if you’ll let us.”

“Why?” he asked, a bit chilled by the offer. He’d never needed to know before; why did these girls feel compelled to label his fatherlessness such a problem? It was none of their business, really. He didn’t like where the conversation had gone. And he certainly didn’t like how much of his life they had pondered, courtesy of Saerlaith’s gossip.

“We’ve heard you’re a worthy patron,” Órlaith commented. *More like I’m a worthy project. To have their services bestowed upon me.*

“Thank you, ladies,” he answered. “But I think that’s a mystery I’d like to solve on my own terms. Saerlaith, I’d like to speak to you privately when you’ve finished.” He took a bite of his meal and chewed in the resulting silence, the stringy venison elongated the quiet. “Hilda, I’d love to know,” he added when finished, “what was it like growing up in Noldan?”

For the rest of the meal, his anger simmered just below the surface. Hilda had worked in the kitchens long enough to know when a pot was going to over-boil, and she and Órlaith excused themselves immediately upon finishing their food.

“Saerlaith, how could you talk about me like that behind my back?” Hew reproached.

“I wasn’t talking behind your back,” Saerlaith defended. “I was just telling my friends about you. I had hoped we could all be acquaintances.”

“Is that how you usually begin friendships? By telling one party all the interesting details about the other, whether they’re private or not?”

“I just told them about *you*,” Saerlaith said, red-faced and gesturing at him with her arms and open palms. “I didn’t think anything I said about you was a secret or ‘private,’ she said, emphasizing her appraisal of his confidentiality as ridiculous.

Hew dropped his voice to a whisper and hissed, “We’re having meetings in the dead of night, sneaking around the castle, and I’m taking magic lessons. My whole life is one big secret! I don’t think it’s too much for me to expect you to let me choose what details about my life I share.”

“I’m sorry I can’t read your mind!” Saerlaith retorted, gathering her things and her unfinished dinner.

“Well, I’m sorry I thought to help you read anything!” Hew snapped. “I got you lessons with a scribe on Tuesday after supper. I’ll see you there if you don’t get me arrested for treason or something between now and then.” Saerlaith stood and began to walk away. She turned around, just for a moment, and tried to kill Hew with her gaze. “Thank you,” she said.

Hew knew he would need to smooth things over eventually and tell her about his discoveries. He needed Saerlaith's friendship. He even sort of wanted it. But reconciliation was a task for another day. One when he was better rested.

Chapter 9

A few days later, on a Monday morn, after some rest and consideration, Hew was feeling ready to forgive. The mass the previous day had included a homily in Latin that was difficult to follow, and it was more about the priest's grand ideas than the Bible readings. Hew missed the simple sermons of the priests in Lochmara, which were frequent— and always in English. He wondered what Father John would have said regarding his anger at Saerlaith.

“Hew,” he would say, “Did the lass mean to hurt you?”

“No,” Hew would reply.

“Is she likely to be a good friend to ye in the future?”

“I believe so.”

“And does God forgive you, sinner that ye are?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Then, there you go. ‘Do unto others,’ my boy.”

Father John didn't have a particular like for Hew, and his patience was not his greatest virtue, but he could always be trusted to provide sound advice. Appeased by the thought of his Savior's grace, Hew set out to reconcile with his one friend.

He didn't have much of a chance during the morning; his tasks kept him occupied. From fetching, chopping, and toting wood, to plucking fowl, he had no opportunities to break from work. He tried to provide Saerlaith with a reconciliatory smile when he passed her during their chores, but he wasn't sure if she had seen.

Today, she was working mostly alongside the Soupers, not moving from one spot to another (the Cook thought it best for her to remain stationary after the spillage incident),

but staying in the Privy Kitchen to tend the fire. She only passed him while transporting messages from Mùirne, the head over soups, fetching firewood and kindling, and when relieving herself. Hew knew that, when the afternoon came along, he would see her much more often as she came to fetch large logs to replace the ones that had burned down during the morning. And he would sit with her and her friends during the midday meal. He was looking forward to it, actually.

Once his anger had abated, he began to feel an excitement over gaining new friends. It was past time for him to forge relationships with people other than the three women to which he was related. He tried not to be bothered by fact that his only mates in the world were going to be six women. He supposed it didn't really matter—a friend was a friend. Besides, he was not good at avoiding comparison, and the men around him had always been stronger, more athletic, and more confident. He didn't need any extra insecurity right now.

Finally, like waiting for Christmastide, the midday meal arrived, and Hew was able to fetch his stew and ale and sit alongside the three women.

“Hello, ladies,” he said. He knew it sounded stilted, but he wasn't sure how else to begin. With his sisters, he could begin “ho, ronyon” and they would understand his affection, whilst responding “good morrow, Sir Fopdoodle.”

Hilda merely responded, “Hail, fellow!” No hard feelings, then, Hew supposed. Although, if these girls were anything like Saerlaith, their smiles could hide any emotion under the sun. He'd need to gain that skill, too, eventually.

“I hope we didn't get started on the wrong foot the other day,” Hilda said. “We were pretty forward, and I thought we upset you.”

“I’m alright. I guess I’m just sensitive about my ‘mysteries’ is all. I know you didn’t mean anything by it.”

“We really didn’t!” Órlaith added.

“So, how are you, Hew?” Saerlaith asked. Hew looked at her face and saw nothing but honesty there. She was trying to make amends.

“I’m well. Thank you. And you?” She let a smile break through,

“Good. A bit tired, but fine. I’m looking forward to tomorrow night.”

“What’s tomorrow?” Órlaith questioned.

“Oh,” Saerlaith said, “Hew managed to get us reading lessons with a scribe. The lad’s a wonder!” Hilda and Órlaith responded with appropriate shock and appreciation, “oohing” and “ahhing” with mouths wide.

“Saerlaith’s always wanted to read,” Hilda said. “She’s been jealous that I could from the moment we met.”

“She tried to make a plan to steal texts—”

“Borrow!” Saerlaith interjected.

“*Borrow* texts,” Órlaith amended with a glance at Hew, “from the queen’s chambers to read before bed.”

“She forgets that I read naught but a little English, and the queen has beautiful verse in French and Latin.”

“You have a penchant for ‘borrowing’ things, don’t you?” Hew said, looking to Saerlaith.

“Maybe a little...” She answered. “I was hoping to get stories like those that the minstrels sing during feasts. Imagine having those stories with you, whenever!” Her hands moved as she spoke, as if imaging grabbing the words out of the thin air.

“’Twould be nice,” he acknowledged. “We never had much to read, at home, besides what Mum would write in the dirt. That’s how she taught us, my sisters and me.” Hilda nodded, “That’s one of the ways my brother instructed me.”

“Well, she’d almost convinced me to do it,” continued Órlaith, “but Hilda spoiled our fun.”

“I saved your arse, is more like!” she retorted.

“Well, we’ll see how the lessons go, and maybe we’ll be able to squeeze you in after awhile,” Hew offered.

“No, thank ye,” said Órlaith. “My head’s full enough as it is.”

“I’d go,” replied Hilda, “but don’t trouble yourself if it doesn’t work. But what I don’t understand is, if you can already read, why do you have lessons, too?” Hew felt his face flush. “Well, I had to tell a small fib to cover why I was really there.”

“Saerlaith, you cheeky lass! You finally convinced someone to skulk around with ye!” Órlaith interjected.

“It was for a good cause!” she answered. And she was right, Hew realized. There wasn’t any magic or true illegality involved in bringing his family to Noldan, and the more people on his side, the better. So he decided to induct these three women into his determination to move his family to the capitol city.

That night, as the rest of the castle was preparing for the night, Hew set out for another lesson with Dubhgall. It was time for honesty with the wizard. Hew needed his help, and he was prepared to convince Dubhgall to help him rather than hinder. To his surprise, as he rounded the final turn in the staircase from the men's quarters, he ran into Saerlaith.

"There you are. Finally."

"What are you doing? You can't come with me to Dubhgall's. There's an enchantment that allows me to find him. I doubt it will work if I bring someone with me."

"Oh, you won't be bringing me," she responded with a sly smile. "I'll be following you. I need to discuss that rascal's secrecy with him. I've known that wily fellow for six months and never thought him capable of more than a dirty pun and gossip."

"I don't think it'll work if you follow me, either."

"You won't know that I'm following you."

"But you just told me that were." Saerlaith smiled with a patronizing eye roll. "My dear boy, you won't know *when* I'm following you because you're going to walk there three times. On the second or third time, I will trail you, without you ever knowing I'm there. That's the only way I can possibly think to work around the enchantment. If that doesn't work, nothing will." Hew pondered.

"I suppose it has a strange logic to it. I mean, we can try it, at least."

"Good!" she said. "Let's begin."

They made their way to the kitchens a floor below, Hew collected a torch, and they entered the winding tunnels from the thick door nestled in the corner. Once down the first flight of drafting stairs, Hew turned to Saerlaith.

“This is where you need to stay. I’ll come back quickly.”

“Yes, sire!” she said, with a mock military salute. Hew shook his head and shot her an exasperated glance, but couldn’t help smiling once his back was turned. Beginning down the first long corridor, he tried to feel the pull of magic, but once he reached the first turn, he felt the enchantment was manifesting more as instinct than the normal fugue-state tug. Still, he felt certain of his direction, and saw many familiar landmarks as he wound his way through the halls. There was the missing chunk of plaster that resembled a spider, and there was the floor-stone with fingerprint’s size puddle, a steady drip from above having worn it down.

As he continued, he could feel his breathes begin to increase, and he realized he didn’t have a particular desire to make this journey thrice. He had spent over a month walking among every condition known to mankind; he preferred to tread the least possible. He had just made one more dizzying turn when considered that Saerlaith had said she would follow him the second or third time he traversed to Dubhgall’s room. She wasn’t following him now. What was the use of going all the way there? None.

He turned upon his heel to return, and he stumbled straight into Saerlaith.

“Saerlaith!” She yelped as their frames collided and she tried to shield her chest with her arms, and he tried not to drop his torch or set their clothes afire. “What are you doing?” he continued.

“What does it look like?” she asked, checking herself for flames.

“It looks like you’re abandoning your own plan.”

“No, I’m saving us time by not following the plan I told *you*.” She was breathless, and her face was red beneath her cap, but she raised her eyes and crossed her arms. “I told you I wasn’t going to follow you this trip, so that’s exactly what I did because you weren’t expecting it. It was working, wasn’t it?” He had to admit, they were nearly to Dubhgall’s chambers.

“Yes... but what now?”

“I say you just keep going. How much farther is it? You walk fast, and I don’t want to have to trail you much longer.” At least he had that on her; his pace made her struggle. He felt a smug satisfaction.

“That won’t work. I know you’re following me now.”

“Just keep moving, Shit-face.” She grabbed his shoulders and turned him ‘round.

“You cannot give me a nickname based on my worst moment, my near-death experience. That’s just cruel!” She continued pushing his back. “It’s a term of endearment! I could call you Shit-Brain, if you like. That seems to be what’s in it.” He shook off her grip and faced her. “This. Won’t. Work!”

“Just keep walking!”

“No!”

“Fine, I’ll keep walking by myself until I find it.” Saerlaith strode past him and reached the penultimate turn. Looking left and right, she called back.

“Which way, Magic Man?” Hew sighed. “Right and then left.” Saerlaith turn to face him, belabouredly, “You can tell me directions, and you still refused to move?” Embarrassed, Hew recognized his respect for the enchantment had clouded his reason.

But looking into Saerlaith's furious face, his brotherly instincts took over. "I apologize. My directional abilities had yet to be tested." Trying to convey an icy certainty, he retook the lead, hastily hiding his mortification. This was a power game, and he couldn't let Ciara—Saerlaith!— win.

In just two more turns, they had reached Dubhgall's worsted, oaken door. Saerlaith stopped him for a moment. "Hew, you're a fine fellow, really. But you're infuriating." He responded with a grin, "I know." He pulled the heavy door open and gestured inside: "Milady?"

She entered the room, meeting his friendly gaze with those hazel eyes of hers. "Thank you, sire." As he followed her inside, he glanced about the room for Dubhgall, wanting to introduce Saerlaith before the wizard could turn her into a newt or something awful, but instead his eyes fell on overturned furniture, papers littered around the floor, and Dubhgall's fine bed slashed and stabbed through. The only light falling inside the room came from Hew's torch; no candles were lit inside. Dubhgall's fine desk chair was littered across the floor, having been smashed into multiple pieces.

"What happened?" Saerlaith whispered. Hew felt ill as the fragments came together in his mind, and he knew what had occurred here. "That's why I could find this place. There was no enchantment; I just remembered my way here. And if his enchantment is broken, something terrible has happened to Dubhgall. He's gone."

Chapter 10

That night, as he lay on his pallet in the dark, trying to sleep, Hew applied his mind to fixing his problems. He had avoided overly worrying or panicking because he knew Dubhgall could help him. Surely a wizard would be able to overcome an easy obstacle like helping a family move and escape the grasp of a Loch Country lord. It would be a trivial difficulty for a wizard, but it was not something Hew was confident in his own ability to rectify.

Granted, he now had four heads involved in solving the situation— his family’s relocation, at least. Saerlaith was the only person he had told about the magic lessons. If Dubhgall’s quip about “the less someone could torture out of you, the better” wasn’t just his idea of a joke, Hew didn’t want to put his newest friends in any peril (or himself in any extra vulnerability, but he tried to believe it was mostly for their safety).

He also had the added worry of what had happened to Dubhgall. It was doubtful that he had destroyed his own room, so Hew believed that someone else had been there, and that person had been searching for something. If there was a person or force who could banish, kidnap, or—God forbid— kill a wizard, Hew didn’t want to have anything to do with it. But his conscience was telling him he would ultimately have to if he wanted to find or help his mentor.

Without a man of magic and his tools, how could Hew get his mother and sisters down to Noldan, and how could he support them? But wait: he may not have Dubhgall, but there was still his chambers, and his books. They had been scattered across the room, but they were still there. Perhaps Dubhgall’s room still held some magic tool that Hew could use. Or maybe there was information in a book to solve the problem. That was an

idea! He could explore Dubhgall's books in search of a magical solution to the issue. It was the best he could think of. He would pick the brains of everyone else in the morning. Or after first sleep. Perhaps he would be able to meet with the girls then. He didn't think he'd be able to sleep at all, so their wakeful periods would be sure to overlap.

As long as they came out of their sleeping quarters for a moment; he wasn't comfortable entering the women's sleeping chamber at night. Although, with the amount of lovers amongst the staff, he wasn't likely to be the only man in the room. Some woman made her way into the men's sleeping quarters at least a few times a week, so he figured the converse must occur. This didn't seem odd to anyone else, but to Hew, whose mother had never—to her son's knowledge—had a lover, this access to carnal pleasure was strange. Slightly obscene. He wanted no assumptions from Saerlaith's roommates.

The moonless night slowly dwindled away, and the logs in the fireplace burnt down, crumbling into warm embers. Hew waited until he counted four men awake for The Watch, then rose, slipped on his trousers and tunic, and began tending to the fire. He added a few logs to the hearth and shuffled them around. He often found himself being the one to tend to the fire. (Being accustomed to sleep between sisters meant that even the one or two feet between him and his neighbor felt drafty; he was particularly sensitive to chill in the night). After arranging the logs satisfactorily, he slipped two rushlight into his left hand and then lit a third by the fire. The lights together wouldn't last longer than an hour, and, on this dark night, he'd need all three. His quarter-mates would not appreciate his usage of three rushlights, but needs must.

With as little noise as possible, he exited the room. The hall was dark as death, and he had to navigate solely with his wits, memory, and flickering flame. He was

grateful for the lime-coated walls which amplified the glow, but even they could not assist very much. Once downstairs, he encountered more movement. Like usual, there were more women awake than men this early in The Watch. They had lit the torches along the hall, and he passed a few ladies walking about, tending to tasks here and there. Two women had been conversing at the bottom of the stairs.

In the light, he was able to locate the women's quarters easily. Unsure, he positioned himself across from the door, but slightly to its left. No need for his face to greet *every* woman who left the room. He extinguished his rushlight, and set about to wait for one of his mates.

No sooner had the smoke wafted away did the door open and his Loch-born friend step-out.

“Órlaith!” he softly called. “Hello!”

“Hew,” she greeted, looking up with a warm smile. “What brings you down here?”

“I need to speak to Saerlaith for a minute. It's about our friend Dubhgall.”

“Oh, alright. I'll fetch her.” Órlaith slid her body back through the cracked door's opening, and Saerlaith appeared alongside her after a moment.

“Hello,” Saerlaith muttered, apparently still drowsy from first sleep.

“We need to talk about Dubhgall. I had an idea.” Saerlaith's eyes snapped to his, and he could tell she was rousing by the second.

“Is it about how we can find him?” Órlaith asked. They had told Hilda and Órlaith about Dubhgall's disappearance, but not about his true nature as a wizard. It was tied too closely with Hew's secret lessons, and his safety.

“Sort of,” Hew replied. It was evident that Órlaith had no perception of his desire for a private meeting with Saerlaith. *She* wasn’t aware of any secrets being kept among the four new friends. It made Hew feel a bit guilty, but, again, needs must. “Sorry if we’re keeping you from a task,” he offered.

“Not at all! I was just going to check the color of some fabric we’re dying. Satisfy my curiosity. It won’t get much darker in the next few minutes.” Her open smile turned Hew’s blood to slush. The lies were hard ice in his throat.

“Oh, that’s what you were doing?” Saerlaith said. “You better go now. Alice was just getting up when I was. If you wait, she’ll catch you, and you know she won’t approve of you exposing the cloth to the air early. Go!” With a cheeky smile, Saerlaith ‘shooed’ her friend down the hall, as one would a wayward chicken. Órlaith fled down the way, giggling as she went.

“You’re frightening.”

“It’s a gift,” Saerlaith responded with a shrug.

“But how do you do it?”

“What?”

“Say anything like it’s true. Have your face say…” he gestured dumbly at his own countenance, “whatever you want it to say.”

“I’m not sure,” she said, thinking. “None of my siblings are very well behaved. Perhaps I learnt it because my mum would punish whoever looked the guiltiest when no one would ‘fess up. So I learned to not look guilty.”

“How often were you?”

“Guilty? Wouldn’t you like to know?” She smirked. “Now, come on, tell me why you’re here.”

“I had an idea for figuring out how to get my family to Noldan. I was banking on Dubhgall’s knowledge, but he’s missing. But his stuff isn’t. We might be able to find some magical— or at least helpful— suggestions in his books. We just have to search them.”

“Maybe,” Saerlaith responded. “But why are you telling me? I won’t be much help.”

“You can look at the glosses, the illustrations.”

“And those are always so on topic.” Hew sighed. She wasn’t incorrect. Glosses tended to be...fanciful, to say the least. But every so often they reflected the actual text. And he needed a partner.

“Saerlaith, please. I just... I just need someone else to know. You said helping me was something ‘to do.’ This is something I’m asking you do to. Please.” Saerlaith’s face was a mixture of dread and resignation, but Hew could tell he was seeing the truth in that trustworthy face of hers that was so good at deception. Maybe that’s how she did it; she showed you what you wanted to see. When she gave you the truth, you may not always like it.

“Fine,” she said. “Do you want to go tonight?”

“That was the idea.”

“Alright, let me just get another layer. It’s cold down in those halls.” She slipped back into the women’s quarters, and when she returned she was wearing an extra tunic over her kirtle.

“Ready?”

“Godspeed.”

Hew relit his rushlight from the torch on the wall, and the two friends slid along the hallway into the kitchens as usual. He had to slow down Saerlaith’s purposeful walk to keep the feeble flame alight. He would be glad when they reached the tunnels and he could light an unused torch from its wall. Saerlaith’s impatience had reached its maximum by the time they reached the entry to the subterranean halls.

“Come on!” she said, flinging the door open. To Hew’s surprise, the hall was not empty. At the base of the stair was a barely distinguishable tangle of limbs, skirts, and fabric. A feminine utterance met his ears, alongside a masculine cry of “ho!” Hew wrenched the door from Saerlaith’s hand and slammed it shut. She hooted with laughter.

“Your poor face!” she said to Hew, then, calling to the couple within she said: “Traversing!” Then she counted, “one eel-in-a-basket, two eel-in-a-basket...” After five baskets of eels, she flung the door open once more, grabbed Hew by the hand, and, staring straight forward, drug Hew down the few stairs, past the now mostly-covered couple, and into the dark halls. Not until they rounded the first corner on their journey did she stop and allow Hew to retrieve and light a torch.

“You, know, living with only single women and girls really did not help your social skills.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, confronted with the slightest hint of *amour*, you turn bright red and flee. It’s very funny. But it’s natural, Hew.”

“I know it’s *natural!*” he protested. “I’m just not used to being around it.”

“You best get accustomed to it. It’s not ceasing anytime soon.”

“Don’t you worry about me.” The torch had caught, and the flame was strong. He resumed walking along their path. “Come on.” He tried not to picture the couple’s embrace and identify the location of each’s hands. And he tried not to think about how often he noticed how lovely Saerlaith’s lips looked when she pressed them together in thought.

Chapter 11

The next day, Tuesday, Hew was exhausted. He and Saerlaith had stayed in Dubhgall's room far longer than a normal Watch lasted. The first order of business had been to reorganize the disordered books, papers, and furniture that had been scattered about the room by unknown ill-doers. That had been an ordeal within itself. Next, Hew had decided to group the written material by the likelihood of its usefulness. Hew would read the works' titles, and Saerlaith would scour the chosen for glosses relating to travel.

It wasn't a very efficient system. Every sketched cart, donkey, horse, or pilgrim meant reading for Hew, and Saerlaith clearly felt the burden of adding likely useless pieces to Hew's pile of responsibility. Hew finally called it a night when Saerlaith's guilt became his own as her eyes grew droopy, and her energy dipped. He knew that she felt practically useless, and his conscience began to tug at him. He longed to flee the castle and return to Lochmara, triumphantly bringing his mother news. But losing his position and getting killed by bandits or the threats of the wilderness would help no one.

Now, he felt guilty for keeping her awake so late. The kitchens were bustling, as preparations for Lammas Day and the Feast of St. Peter in Chains were beginning. The king was hosting nobles from Litia for the feast on Thursday, and the kitchen servants had been tasked with creating practically innumerable and intricate loaves for the festivities. The slaughtering and dressing of boars, deer, and other meats was being undertaken, as well. Hew was very glad to have been scullion and tasked with turning the spit, rather than cutting bloody meats.

Across the kitchen, Saerlaith was one of several Soupers who had been reassigned to knead bread. She had been covered in flour since early that morning, and, now that it

was nearly noon, he could see how exhausted she was. He was drowsy; she was weary. Hilda worked the dough alongside her, and strands of her black hair clung to her forehead where they had escaped their tie and her cap. Hew was sweating under his own coif from the heat of the roaring fire that was roasting luxurious meats for the king's table.

Cook and the steward had been in a state all day, working the logistics of creating decadent— and expensive— sugar desserts. Cook argued that amount of sugar necessary, and the Steward argued the exorbitant price required some frugality, if not its appearance. This whole ordeal required the rest of the kitchen to tiptoe around the center table where the delicate sculptures were forming as well as Cook's fraught temper. In a bit of strange irony, Hew thought, the sugar figurines were of simple, plain bread loaves and country barns, dainty corn stalks and wheat heads.

But it was not his place to criticize the king's tastes. He only had to do as he was told. That was the only drawback of Noldan. In Lochmara, he had, in the back of his mind, planned on running his own alehouse and inn one day, but here his future seemed full of being someone else's staff. This was one of the things he would mourn when his family was safe. Home was his family, but Lochmara was the place he knew.

Today, he only had to get through the hot and busy hours until evening, when his first reading lesson with Saerlaith would take place. Then, during the Watch, he would search Dubhgall's texts, alone this time. No need to over exhaust his closest friend.

The day drug on, slowly and full of drudgery. Even lunch with the girls had been a quiet affair, as no one had the energy for small talk. Even Órlaith was tired; there were numerous linens to be retrieved from chests, mended, and washed, sometimes for the first

occasion in months or years. These Litiaan nobles were used to finery. The specialized orchards that thrived in their region meant the whole area enjoyed great wealth. King Flannagan was intent upon impressing his guests, and the whole castle felt the expectation and pressure. Finally, the evening meal had been eaten and tidied, and it was time to face the scribe and Saerlaith's reading lessons. And Hew's instruction in playacting.

They walked from the kitchens, down the corridors, and though the courtyards on their way to the Vestibule of Communiqué.

"You know, Hew," Saerlaith began, "I've been thinking."

"Mm-hmm."

"You started those lessons with Dubhgall, and now you've got this bring problem to solve. You may need all the magic you can summon." Dread settled in his stomach. He wasn't so good with the magic. "How do you plan on practicing?"

"I hadn't thought about it," he said.

"Well, I have. And I think you should practice during the day."

"How? I'm in public during the day." Saerlaith smiled, as if she had been eagerly anticipating the question.

"Yes," she said, "but no one can see your feet."

"What?"

"Think about it! Your feet and legs are always in your shoes and hose, respectively. You could change the way they look, your one skill, as much as you liked, and no one would know." He had to admit, she had a point.

"Alright. I'll do that. But how is my 'one skill' going to help us?"

“I don’t know yet, but it’s always good to have as many tools as you can at your disposal. Look at me, I’m learning to read.”

“You already wanted to read.”

“Irrelevant.”

“It feels fairly relevant.”

“You’re ‘fairly relevant!’”

“You’re *irrelevant!*”

They reached the Vestibule.

“My liege?” Saerlaith asked holding the door open and barely suppressing laughter. Hew chuckled. “Thanks.”

Their instructor—whose name was Ralph, they discovered— was in good spirits; it seemed to be his default condition. He was surprised that Hew’s “other pupil” turned out to be a young lady, but he displayed no reticence at teaching a scholar of the fairer sex. He started with the vowels, and then drove his acolytes to memorize certain consonants. Hew studied Saerlaith’s concentrated face and strove to copy its countenance. She pressed her lips together in thought, and her brows downturned. He furrowed his own and pressed a finger to his chin, mimicking confusion.

“So, I’ve just got to remember what sounds go with which shapes?” Saerlaith was asking, “and then I can de-code the words?”

“Yes, that’s the idea,” Ralph replied. “Can you try this?” Saerlaith studied the word Ralph had scripted, and Hew pretended to follow each letter in turn, though he knew instantly that the word was “bed.” It was difficult to concentrate when he needed little attention to remember what Ralph was teaching. Instead, Hew’s mind wandered to

the pile of papers and books to be read in Dubhgall's room. He thought of Saerlaith's magical practice suggestion. Maybe he could give it a try... He focused on his right toes, on if they were about an inch longer. He closed his eyes and whispered to himself the magic words before snapping under the table. The flow of magic started again from his right leg, but this time it slipped down instead of up, and through his ankle till it reached the ball of his foot. He released his breath and wiggled his toes. His shoe definitely felt tighter.

"Hew? Can you try this word?" Ralph was pointing on the page. Startled, Hew glanced at the parchment.

"Oh, yes. That's f—" he barely caught himself in time to fake some sort of thought before finishing "—ace. Face."

"Very good!" Ralph replied. "Quick study, you are." Saerlaith glared at Hew while Ralph turned to write another word, and Hew mouthed "Sorry!"

The rest of the lesson went much in the same way, with Hew seeming quicker than he really was, and Saerlaith actually being quicker than he was. By the time the lesson ended and Hew and Saerlaith were beginning their walk back to the servant's quarters, Hew had made a decision.

"I'm going to go to Dubhgall's room and search. If I need to sleep before The Watch, I can sleep there. Even stabbed through, his bed would be the nicest I'd ever slept on."

"Are you sure? You'd be so far from everyone else, and what if you sleep through the morning rousing?"

"I won't."

“I can’t cover for you, Hew.” She grasped his arm, and made him cease walking.

“I know.” Her face showed her discomfort at the premise, and he knew that she would be no help in distracting Cook from his potential absence not because she didn’t want to help him, but because she had no leeway with her supervisors herself.

“I’ll be fine. I’m not a late sleeper.” His first lie—he’d never had the opportunity to sleep uninterrupted in his life. But he wasn’t sure if he was lying to Saerlaith or himself. She studied his face in doubt, and he hoped the last two hours of acting practice had paid off.

“Every time I have a moment for any spare thought, all I can think about is my mother under Lord Cathair’s thumb. Brigid subject to mistreatment. Ciara struggling to do the work I left behind alongside the lord’s work.” This was all true, and Saerlaith could tell.

“Then I’m coming with you.”

“No, I won’t ask you to forsake sleep two nights in a row.”

“I can’t risk you being late to work. The stakes are too high right now.” She emphasized her point with her hands, and her eyes, usually full of mirth, were deadly serious.

“Why do you care so much, seriously? I know I’m some kind of amusement for you, but this is not amusing. It’s boring, and it’s tedious, and I know it makes you feel like a nitwit.”

Saerlaith sighed, closing her eyes in exasperation before placing a hand on his shoulder and looking him square in the face.

“Hew, I like you! And you may find this hard to believe, but when you like a person, you don’t want bad things to happen to them. And when bad things do happen to that person, you want to help them. Because you like them.” She had placed her other hand on his shoulder during her speech, so she now held him firm. She was searching his face for understanding, and Hew forced himself to keep her gaze. Her breath smelt like the sage from supper.

“Thank you,” he replied. “But according to your logic, shouldn’t I want good things for you, as well,” his eyes flicked to the right without his consent. “Like a complete night’s sleep?” Saerlaith’s arms sagged, and she dropped her gaze to the ground, seemingly in disappointment, and she released his shoulders; however, Hew could see a teensy smile in her lips. After a pause, she hooked her arm around his elbow. “Come on, noble-boy,” she said. “Dubhgall’s bed is big enough for four people, if we’re being honest. And we can take shifts.”

“Noble-boy is better than shit-face.”

“I’m keeping that one in my back satchel. Don’t cross me.”

Chapter 12

Thus, they spent the night in Dubhgall's chamber. Saerlaith climbed into the bed at a normal hour, leaving Hew awake to comb over the remaining texts. When she awoke naturally after the first sleep, Hew rested while she perused the glosses.

In the morning, he was roused by a metallic clatter. The bed was warm, and he could tell he'd slumped toward its center, the ropes looser in the middle. He was scrunched against Brighid, having tucked his head so his forehead pressed against her back.

"That's our cue to wake up," Saerlaith said. "I put a nail in the candle, and it's burnt down."

Not Brighid, not Brighid! Hew was awake with a start, rolling himself away from Saerlaith and fumbling to extricate himself from the slumped feather mattress. "We're not going to be late or anything," she added. "No need for anxiety!"

"I know," he gasped. "I just, uh..." he ran a hand over his mouth, checking that he hadn't been drooling in his sleep. "I'm just a light sleeper. It startled me."

"Light sleeper, my arse!" Saerlaith replied, grinning. "You're a first-rate cuddler." She sat up in the bed. "I got sleepy after the Watch and didn't have the heart to wake you. I guess we just slumped together during the night."

"Mm-hmm." Hew was trying to remember if he'd had his arm around Saerlaith when they woke; it wasn't unusual for him to sleep holding one of his sisters.

"Well, we'd better freshen up. It's going to be another long day. The Litiaan nobles should arrive for tomorrow's feast." She slipped out from under the blankets and released her from her disheveled cap as she wiggled her feet into shoes. They'd both slept

in their clothes, but he noticed Saerlaith had eased the lacing on her kirtle. She re-tied her hair and tightened her laces while he slipped his own shoes on and tried to arrange his curls, crushed in his sleep. Sighing, he realized it didn't matter, and he smushed his hair under his coif.

The two friends finished getting ready as best they could in their unfamiliar accommodations and exited the room. They began walking back to the kitchens and the busy day ahead.

"I didn't ask last night," Saerlaith said. "Did you find anything helpful? I made a stack of interesting things for tonight."

"No," Hew answered. "It's all fascinating, but I either don't know how to use the magic it says, or it's in another language. I only read English and Latin. I think some is in French, and the other language I think is La'Marian. Dubhgall's got books from everywhere. And some of his books have pieces from everywhere. I also think lots of pages are enchanted."

"Yeah, I noticed that. I found this page that had only one illustration, straight in the middle of the page. Its eyes followed me. I turned that page *really* gently." Saerlaith shivered. After a few more silent paces, Hew's emotions boiled over. "We're almost through looking through all the books he has, and I've found nothing I can use. What do we do then?"

"We'll figure something out."

"How? I need a solution! The edicts are already being sent out. Might have already reached Lochmara."

"There *is* a solution, and we can find it."

“What if we can’t?” Hew studied the flat stones as they strode side by side. Saerlaith glared at him. “We can,” she stated.

“It’s easier for you to have faith. It’s not your family.” Saerlaith glanced away. “I know it’s not. But, as I said last night, you’re my friend.” Hew’s self-righteous anger melted. She was the truest friend he’d ever had. The door to the kitchen was just a few steps away. He could see Cook and the Steward already at each other’s throats, but not every servant had arrived.

As they stopped in the kitchen doorway before parting ways, Saerlaith looked him in the eyes. “Hew, if it’s faith you’re lacking,” she began. “Perhaps you should ask someone who isn’t missing.” He met her gaze and saw the tenderness she usually concealed behind snark and stubbornness. It was a look with which he was all too familiar. He missed the faces he usually saw it on. And he wished he hadn’t of woken just so quickly. For a moment he considered the closeness of their friendship. Then, he put his arms around Saerlaith for just a moment, hugging her loosely. “Thank you.”

The rest of the morning flew by in a flurry of activity. The kitchen resembled a damaged ant mound more than a room for efficient sustenance preparation. On Lammas Day, the servants would attend mass for St. Peter in Chains, serve an astonishing luncheon for the king and his honored guests, and then all would partake in the evening feasting and festivities. But tomorrow’s revels required today’s preparations, and they were not to be underestimated.

By lunch time, the four friends greeted one another wearily. Unlike the day before, where their exhaustion begot silence, today, they vented their frustrations amongst themselves.

“The problem with feasts,” Hilda began, “is that by the time they arrive, you’re almost too tired to enjoy them!”

“It was much more fun back in Lochhill,” Órlaith added. “We didn’t have to prepare feasts for anyone but ourselves. You weren’t so tired.”

“Yes!” Saerlaith said. “How was the holiday in Lochmara?” she asked of Hew.

“Fine,” he replied. “Mother always stressed the religious holiday first, and we would join the festivities as much as we could.” Holidays were always charged events. It reminded Hew of his separation from his community, but it allowed him a small taste of something larger than himself, as Lochmarans’ good spirits led to increased inclusion on these days. The girls nodded, sensing holidays were a loaded subject for Hew.

“Well, just you get ready,” Órlaith interjected. “Alice is already bemoaning how many nobles we’ll have for Christmas. Apparently, the king’s invited all the Loch Country lords.”

“*All* the Loch Country lords?” Hew glanced at Saerlaith. She said aloud what he was thinking:

“Lord Cathair and his retinue will be coming to Noldan for the Christmas holidays.”

“Not just for Christmas,” Órlaith continued. “Apparently, the journey is so long, they might stay until Candlemas or even Easter.”

“Órlaith!” Hew interjected, “Do you know what this means?” Hilda looked at her oblivious friend in disbelief.

“What?” she asked.

“If Hew can get word to his family,” Hilda answered, “and they can figure out how to join his lord’s entourage, he’s solved the problem of getting his family here! They’d be safe traveling in such a group.”

“But that wouldn’t solve the problem if the lord orders her to go back to Lochmara,” Órlaith countered.

“One step at a time, lass!” Saerlaith exclaimed, and Hew added,

“Five heads are better than one, especially when one of them is my mum!” At last, this seemed an opportunity. It was fraught with complications, but it was an idea.

“But,” began Hilda, “you still need to figure out how to get her a message. Surely, the king will be sending his knights any day to escort the nobles here by Christmas. Any letter sent to Loch Country now would just go with them.”

“This is where Dubhgall would help,” Saerlaith mused. “He’d have something up his sleeve.” Hew glared at her. For someone so good at averting suspicion, she could still be the one to send him to an early grave from anxiety. Saerlaith answered his glance with a look that said *Calm down*.

Órlaith hadn’t noticed the silent exchange. “Where is that rascal? I haven’t seen him lately.” Hew answered, still wishing he could pierce with his gaze. “He’s gone missing.”

“Missing!” said Hilda. “What could that mean? Where could he be?”

“The dungeon, maybe?” said Órlaith.

“Órlaith! Ever the dramatic!” Hilda chided. “It’s Dubhgall. Our Dubhgall. Whatever could he have done to end up in the dungeons?” Hew didn’t dare meet Saerlaith’s eyes. He could think of a few reasons the king might find detaining Dubhgall worthwhile.

“And, anyway, I helped Mùirne take food to the prisoners yesterday, and I didn’t see him,” Hilda continued. “There’s only three prisoners down there right now.”

“But how large are the prisons? Could there have been more you just didn’t see?”

“Only if the king is starving large numbers of his prisoners. We only brought two meals, and I saw three people with my own eyes.”

“Oh. It’s unlikely, then,” Saerlaith said. As relieved as Hew was that Dubhgall wasn’t imprisoned, there was now a larger chance that something worse had befallen his friend. His spirits drooped, but his mind continued to run. *Any letter to Lochmara would be sent with knights...* It just so happened that he was familiar with a group of knights that were used to completing secretive missions. And many of those knights would soon be tasked with traveling to Loch Country. This plan wasn’t without its risk; he would be joining a treasonous organization and begging for their help. If he didn’t bring enough to the table, his request could be denied. Or worse, as Dubhgall had hinted, they could always kill him for their safety. Still, it was his only plan.

“Ladies,” he said. “I think to get a message to my family, I need to join a secret society.”

Chapter 13

The girls stared at him in shock, then began speaking at once. All Órlaith could muster was a confused, “What?” Hilda exclaimed “No! Are you sure?” And Saerlaith retorted, “Why you?” Ignoring the two ill-informed women, Hew answered Saerlaith, “What do you mean, why me? Did you want to volunteer?”

“Perhaps I did,” she replied. “This is a group of knights. Perhaps they would be more willing to provide a favor to a damsel in need. *Fin’amour*, and such. I’m also Loch.” Hew mulled over this proposition.

“What are you two nitwits talking about?” Órlaith burst.

“There’s a secret group,” Saerlaith explained. “And Hew and I know about it. They’re knights, and they’re dangerous, and they have some sort of allegiance with the Loch Country.”

“A one-sided allegiance,” he added.

“Yes,” she agreed. “But the point is, that some of these knights will be going to Lochmara on behalf of the king. We could send a message through them, and they could help Hew’s family get to Noldan. *If* we can convince them.” She was using her hands to speak again, and the stubbornness was back in her countenance. Her brown eyes were wooden walls, instead of deep wool. “Hew would likely need to swear fealty and loyalty to exact a favor. I could manipulate their courtly chivalry.”

“It sounds too dangerous for either of you,” Hilda said, and Órlaith pondered, “If they’re really Loch, they may not care about chivalry and noble *amour*.”

“They’re more Noldan than Loch,” Saerlaith stated. She hadn’t taken her eyes from Hew’s face.

“You’re also not going on behalf of your own family,” he argued. “And what could you offer them?”

“My affection. My devotion,” she said. “The perspective of the fairer sex.” She interlaced her fingers and set them upon the table, leaning across it in emphasis.

“Saerlaith, I don’t think they’d care about that,” Hilda replied gently.

“Besides, lass,” continued Órlaith. “You’re an unwed serf. Not exactly the normal object of a knight’s devotion.” This was an unavoidable blow. Hew watched as Saerlaith sighed and glanced around the room.

“Saerlaith, you’re the bravest person I know,” he said. “And it was a good idea. It’s just not our best option.” She faced him, and he could tell he’d brought her back from sliding into the mire of defeat. He placed a hand over hers. “We have to make this work.”

“It’s so dangerous for you,” she said.

“And it would be safe for you?” he said, dipping his head and looking at her from under raised eyebrows. Órlaith laughed, “Hew, if you haven’t noticed, she’s always one to put herself in danger before she’d deign to allow anyone else in harm’s way.” Hilda smiled in assent, “It is very like her.”

“I trust myself to succeed!” Saerlaith said. “And I make peace with the consequences when I can’t. I hate having to live with the consequences of other people’s failures.” From her tone, Hew realized she wasn’t talking about misplaced punishment or unachieved hopes. She’d had to witness the dire outcome of something important. And she’d had to watch someone she loved suffer. Órlaith wasn’t so perceptive. “Saerlaith!” she said, “How rude!” Hilda popped her on the arm with a sympathetic glance to Saerlaith. “I don’t think she meant it to be rude, Órlaith.”

“This will work,” Hew said. “It has to. And to find this group again, we’re going to need all of us.”

“What do you mean?” Hilda asked. Hew looked to Saerlaith and saw her attentive face. She nodded for him to continue. “Saerlaith and I stumbled upon one of their meetings before, in the basement halls. But I’ve traveled those halls since, and haven’t seen a trace of them. I was thinking we could each post watch by a separate entry to the tunnels, follow any knight we see, and then come collect the others once we’ve found the rendezvous location.”

“But,” Órlaith pointed out, “that will only work if there are having a gathering. We could be keeping watch for no reason.”

“I’m open to suggestions,” he said.

“They’ll likely reconvene before they are sent out to Loch Country,” Saerlaith asserted. “They will want to make goals to use the travel to fulfil their own purposes.” Hew nodded; it was sound reasoning.

“But what are their purposes?” asked Órlaith. “You never told us what made the group so dangerous.”

“I don’t think—” Saerlaith began, but Hew interrupted, whispering: “They’re on the hunt for a possible long-lost heir of King Arthur, a bastard of King Aengus.”

“They seem to have other ideas and goals, as well,” Saerlaith added, “but that’s as much as we know for sure. Hew was invited to join the group by one of its members traveling to Lochmara.”

“Well, if you’ve already got an invite, that settles our little argument, then, doesn’t it?” Órlaith chuckled.

“No! But that’s *treasonous!*” Hilda hissed in fear.

“We know what it is, Hilda,” Saerlaith murmured. “But, again, do we have better options?”

“But why do we have to do this at all? Being a serf is normal, why are you so scared of your family becoming serfs, Hew? Saerlaith’s a serf, Órlaith’s a serf.” Anger and frustration welled in his lungs. “My older sister is afflicted. She *cannot* be a serf under our lord. I don’t know what he’d do to her. And my mother has worked too hard maintaining our freedom to throw it all away because it’s ‘too hard.’”

“Look,” said Saerlaith. “Hew is willingly giving up his home in Lochmara, the land they had, their chickens, their sheep. He’s risking everything to bring his family to a place he doesn’t even really like. If that doesn’t tell you that this is worth it, you cannot be convinced.” Hew studied Saerlaith’s face, surprised at her words. He’d never heard her speak so forcefully to the gentle Hilda. And he sounded so brave in her estimation. Did she see him as brave, as risking everything? Was he brave? He was the same person who’d almost died by drowning in feces. But he was also the person who weaseled an explanation out of Cormac, who snuck into the king’s department of communications, who was performing magic. And he certainly was the one willing to join a treasonous secret society to save his family. No doubt.

He smiled at Saerlaith. His bravery didn’t negate the fear in his soul, in his belly. He took her hand and reached for Órlaith’s across the table. The Loch women smiled at him and each proffered a hand to their timid Noldan friend. Hilda sighed, and completed their circle, though Hew could see her fingers trembling. Saerlaith squeezed her palm. “Hew, your sisters and mother better be every bit as interesting as you say they are.”

“That and more.”

They decided that the knights weren't likely to travel on Lammas Day, the Feast of St. Peter in Chains, but they might meet tonight. It was possible they might meet after the feast tomorrow, but with the added guests and late-night carousing, it wouldn't be ideal. After Lammas Day, the king might send his envoys any day. Even with their swift steeds and frequent transferring, it would take up to a month to reach the outermost Loch towns. Then it would take several months for the lords' retinues to travel southward. The sooner his knights could reach the Loch lords, the more time they would have in cities to invite—coerce—the lords to participate in the king's Christmastide festivities.

Hew and Saerlaith couldn't remember what time they had happened upon the meeting that fateful night; honestly, it was all a blur to Hew after losing consciousness and near dying. It could have been anytime between nightfall and the beginning of second sleep. Órlaith wasn't pleased with the prospect of having to stay awake—probably in silence—through first sleep and the watch, but she acquiesced.

Tonight was the first night of their vigil. Hew, exhausted as he was, hoped it would be their last, and his tribulation would be over in the morning. Amongst themselves, they decided their placements. Hew was to take the door to the tunnels in the kitchen. Saerlaith would take the entrance in the courtyard. Hilda would take one halfway down the hall towards that headed to the chapel, and Órlaith would take the entrance near the stables, on the castle's exterior. The knights' quarters were in the front of the castle, near the stables, but the Great Hall, where nobles' meals were often taken, was near both the kitchens and the chapel. The tunnels also had entrances in several other locations, and

even Saerlaith the explorer couldn't account for each entrance. They would do what they could.

After supper and its responsibilities, they waited in the kitchen until the other servants had left for evening activities or their chambers. There was an excitement in the air for Lamma Day, and many were visiting family and friends in Noldan this evening. As the sun dipped below the walls of the castle grounds, the four friends nodded to one another, and parted. Before Saerlaith could exit, though, Hew stopped her.

"Saerlaith," he called. "Tell me how to not seem afraid."

She turned, meeting his gaze, and studied his face. Hew tried to stand tall under her scrutiny, both calculating and sympathetic.

"Show them what they want to see. Use their expectations against them. You're not tall or particularly intimidating, so you'd be a fool to try to convince them you're a warrior. But you're clever, and ludicrously educated. Keep them guessing."

"How?" She stepped toward him.

"You always look like there's something going on in that head of yours. When you're sad, you look like you've seen a thousand years, and you grieve for humanity. I haven't had the privilege of seeing you particularly happy, but when you're thoughtful, God's wounds, you look like you're going to take down empires."

"What?"

"You have singular eyes."

He knew his blue eyes were an irregularity, but he'd never considered their effect. "You have an old soul," she continued, "and you seem like an intellectual asset. Offer them that."

“I will.” He bobbed his head in nervous assent. “Thank you.”

“Just don’t ruin it by opening your mouth with a stupid idea, Noble-boy.” With a smile, she struck his arm and turned to exit. “If you mess this up, I’ll go back to calling you Shit-face.”

All Hew could do was laugh.

Chapter 14

Hew didn't think time had ever passed so slowly. Well, perhaps the day and evening he spent in the gong farmer's room. However, that day he'd spent in anxiety and dread, with an inkling of what he was to experience. Now, he sat under a table, waiting in fear and anticipation, knowing full well the risk he was taking.

He knew he may not find his goal tonight. They might be waiting for a meeting that wouldn't happen. They may never find the Order of the Lady ever again. Or perhaps Órlaith or Hilda could spot them first. So many things could happen, and he needn't get his hopes up. Or his trepidation untethered.

The fire in the hearth had burnt down to bright embers. He was getting a bit chilled in the drafty kitchen, but he daren't move from his hiding place to tend the flames. It was nearing the watch, when someone would come down to keep it burning. He was starting to look forward to the beginning of second sleep, when he could rest himself, assured no meeting would happen tonight, though it meant more sleepless nights in his future.

After a few minutes, more, he heard heavy footsteps approaching the kitchen. Frozen in place, Hew watched a man enter the kitchen. The man, fully clad instead of in night attire, collected a log from the storeroom, and deposited it in the fire. Just enough to keep the fire going without wasting heat on an empty room for the next hours. He wiped his hands together and brushed the bark off his tunic. Then, as Hew held his breath, the man glanced around the room, and proceeded to exit the kitchen via the basement door.

Hew counted in his head *one eel-in-a-basket, two eel-in-a-basket...* While on his way to five, he heard more footsteps. Another man, this one clad in a red day tunic, but

without any hose, picked up a log from the storeroom and also deposited it in the hearth. *A habit, Hew surmised, for probable deniability if approached.* This man also left through the tunnel door. Hew counted to five once more, and, not hearing any other movement, skulked to the basement entrance. Praying for quiet passage, he slowly opened the door, and slipped into the tunnels.

In the darkness, he stole down the steps. He would follow in pitch blackness, to avoid detection. He could see a glow of light up ahead, and swiftly dashed along the passage, so as not to lose sight of his quarry. The knight was not setting an easy pace himself, and soon his light disappeared from sight after turning a corner. *He's entered the room. Could I have found it that easily?*

Hew turned the corner himself, first checking its safety by peering around the turn with one eye, seeing nothing a sliver of light coming from under a door, he moved forward. He could hear voices inside, and he wondered if he should enter now, and risk being early to a meeting he wasn't invited to, or if he should wait and arrive fashionably late.

“Maon, did you come here carrying that lit torch? You're the last one to arrive, you're not wearing all your clothes, and you could have led someone right to us. Why should we keep you around?”

“Lukas,” presumably-Maon answered, “I have my uses! Don't you forget when I've saved your backside— in more ways than one.”

“You scoundrel. Sit down.” Lukas commanded respect— Hew could tell that from his tone alone. And the fact that Moan said nothing else, and Hew could hear the ‘thump’ of a man sitting down. Another voice, cut through the chatter from within, saying “Well,

this is all who could be present tonight. Keep our brothers abroad in your prayers, and let us begin. To business!”

Ignoring all of his own instincts, and doing what Saerlaith would do, Hew squared his shoulders and pushed open the door. He did not slip through a cracked opening as he would have liked, but he strode into the room with faux confidence. The room was large, larger than he would have thought. The room was a rectangle, with the door on a smaller side. Presumably, this was a particularly large gathering of the Order, with around fifteen to twenty men arranged oblong, standing around or perching on old casks and butts. Standing next to him, near the door, stood a tall man, clad in a black tunic, glaring down at him. Across the room, he saw Maon, in his undyed grey tunic, and no hose. To his surprise, he also saw Ralph, the friendly scribe, resting on a barrel near the doorway. He smiled at Hew.

“Who are you, boy?” the man in black asked, and Hew recognized his voice as the one who had called the meeting to order. He seemed to be the leader. Hew struggled to keep his face neutral and to move his eyes smoothly, not jerking from one terrifying man to another or looking at the knight with arrogance or haughtiness. “I come seeking your assistance,” he began, “and offering my services in recompense.”

“How did you find us?” a man in a green tunic called from the back.

“It’s obvious,” another man said. “He followed Maon!” A series of curses and insults followed this, and Maon had to be protected from bodily harm by several other Order members.

“Enough!” said their leader. “Boy, what could possibly incite us to give our aid to a stranger?”

“I offer my services as a scribe. I am literate, both in English and Latin.”

“That’s what we’ve got Ralph for!” cried a voice. Ralph answered, more sternly than Hew had yet seen him. “We don’t take kindly to liars, son.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” he answered. “The deception was to you only. You caught me reading the edicts to Loch Country, and I didn’t know your sympathies. Feigning ignorance was my only option.” It was the only option he could think of at the time, and, if he was more clever, perhaps it could have been avoided, but best not to mention that. Or suggest it. They needed to trust his wit.

“It is that edict that brings me to you,” he continued. “My name is Hew of Lochmara. My mother and sisters will be made vassals under the law, unless they travel to Noldan, and are able to live under the city government here. I ask merely that whoever among you is dispatched to escort Lord Cathair of Lochmara to the capitol deliver a letter to my mother, detailing the situation, and provide her safe passage among the lord’s retinue. I will secure her place here once she arrives with my family.” *I have a plan*, he told himself. *Act like you have a plan. Please don’t ask about my nonexistent plan...*

The men of the Order studied him, and their leader crossed his arms, saying nothing. Finally, he asked, “And what brings you to us for this task? Why should we not assume you are a spy and dispatch you?”

“No need for dispatching!” he blurted, inducing chuckles from a few men. Taking a deep breath, he continued. “I was recommended to you. I was told you were sympathetic to the plight of Lochmen and -women.”

“And who, pray tell, did this recommending?” Hew’s mind went blank. He could remember the face of the knight back near Lochmara, could remember how awkward he

made Cormac. He could remember the heat of his breath as they lay beside one another at the inn, the man whispering treasonous opportunities in his ear. *What's his name?!* Hew asked himself, trying to ignore each second that passed before his answer. *It was something to do with death because I thought it so apt. 'That man is going to get himself killed,' I thought...*

“Killian!” he said. “Killian disclosed to me that I should seek out the Order of the Lady. He said they knew how to truly support a Lochman.” This generated quite an effect amongst the Order, and the men whispered and grumbled among themselves. They clearly hadn't expected him to produce the name of an actual Order member.

“Sir Killian,” the leader said with a musing nod and icy eyes. “Yes, he is very...liberal with his invitations.”

“I can only thank him for it,” Hew continued, “as I have found few here of the same mind as Lochmen.” He hoped playing the ‘Loch Country’ angle would help his cause. The black-clad man again appraised Hew. “Conn!” he called suddenly, “Come give this young man a drink.” Hew looked to the back of the room, where an auburn-headed man in a blue tunic was making his way to the front of the room. Once there, he removed a small cup from his pouch, and poured wine into it from a wineskin on his hip. He handed the small vessel to Hew.

“And one for me,” said the man in black.

“Of course, Sir William,” Conn answered, retrieving another cup and filling it with wine. William raised his new drink high in the air. “A toast!” he called “to the Good King!” With one voice, the men in the room answered him: “To the Good King!” Recalling Cormac's warning all those weeks ago, Hew called out, trying not to let his

voice crack, “Wherever he may be!” The Order called out “Wherever he may be!” and dissolved into cheers of congratulations. Hew sipped the finest wine he had ever tasted and watched as Sir William did the same, smiling. The tension had broken like kindling breaks for a fire. He had passed the test.

“Ralph!” William boomed, “induct our newest member!” The scribe came forward, digging in his pocket. As he reached Hew standing before Sir William, he pulled from his pocket a small box, gilded in gold with beautiful illustrations. It fit easily in his palm. “A relic of Saint Naomhan,” he whispered to Hew. “Repeat after me,” he called, allowing the whole room to hear. “Ego, Hew de Lochmara,” he began, “sancte iuro Ordini Dominae.” *Another test.*

Hew wasn’t sure if this was Ralph’s decision or William’s, but they wanted to check if Hew was being truthful regarding his literacy. He resented Ralph’s doubt of his veracity, especially after he was forced to reveal the truth. He resented William’s obvious disdain for him. He resented having to go through these steps. He resented a king who would make rules selfishly. He resented his whole situation. His fear overtaken by his anger, Hew replied in clear, eloquent Latin, projecting so everyone in the room could hear: “I, Hew of Lochamra, do solemnly swear unto the Order of the Lady...”

Hew repeated phrase after phrase, promising to uphold the ideals of the Order, keep his brothers’ secrets in confidence, and to remain loyal only to those in possession of the blood of the great king, Arthur of Camelot. Ralph finalized the proceedings with a question. “And do you vow these things with devotion, and forfeit your life if you shall falter in its upholding?”

“Sic voveo,” Hew answered. “Aduva me Deus.” *So help me God!*

Chapter 15

The next night, during feasting and celebration, the four friends sat on the reed-strewn floor of the Great Hall, sipping fine mead. The spacious room, warm and dry on the crisp first night of August, was host to nobles and commoners alike this night. Earlier, the king alone had feasted with his guests. Now, food, drink, and frivolity were available for all. Some knights played a dice game at one table, while a group of ladies laughed amongst each other by the grand fireplace. A Litiaan lord's daughter, dressed in a deep red lined with fur, chatted with the Lord Mayor's son. Light from torches lining the walls bounced off flushed, smiling faces, and one couldn't help but wish for time to slow down as it insisted on speeding up.

Hew tried to enjoy the atmosphere while explaining what had occurred the night before. "I joined the Order," he told his friends. "I had to vow loyalty to them. But they'll get a message to my family and get them here, so it's worth it."

"I don't like it," said Hilda. "You've made promises before you know what they'll ask of you."

"Does it really matter?" answered Saerlaith. "He's done what he needs to keep his family safe."

"Aye," said Órlaith. "And maybe the Order has ideals you agree with. They're dangerous, sure—" she dropped her voice— "but are we sure they're in the wrong?"

"Órlaith! You best keep your mouth closed, 'lass," chastised Hilda.

"She's allowed to think what she likes, Hilda," Saerlaith said.

"I hadn't really made up my mind about what they stand for," Hew said. "And it's too late to be worrying about that, now."

“I’m just saying,” Órlaith added, checking their inconspicuousness, “King Flannagan is Low Country through-and-through. Aengus at least pretended to care about his Loch heritage.”

“And what’s wrong with Low Country folk?” asked Hilda.

“Nothing,” said Saerlaith. “As long as they remember they’re not the only part of the country.” Órlaith nodded.

“At any rate,” interrupted Hew, “I’ll do what good I can, while trying to avoid any bad. I’m not allowed to tell you any members’ names, so if I seem dodgy, that’s why.”

“Truly?” asked Saerlaith. “This the secret you want to keep from us? You’ve told us so many already.”

“Yeah, but those were *my* secrets, not ones I was tasked with keeping upon pain of death.”

“A very good point, I think,” Hilda said. Saerlaith looked miffed. Hew knew this would be a sore spot for her after being privy to all his secrets so far. He wished she could be a part of the Order. He realized he’d grown accustomed to having her quick wit beside him.

“I wrote the letter today and gave it to our leader. The king will send out his knights to Loch Country in two days’ time, and the one headed to Lochmara will bring it to my mother and assure her safe passage.” If the edict hadn’t arrived, his mother was free to move as she pleased, and the knight would merely offer protection. If the edict had arrived, and she was bound to the lord, he was sure she might appeal to his sympathy and beg to visit her son. The knight would help smuggle his sisters into the group if they were ordered to stay home.

The phrasing of the letter, though... That had been more challenging. He was essentially convincing his mother to upend their lives and steal herself from her liege lord. There could be dire consequences if the letter were intercepted and fully understood. He'd phrased his request—order?—carefully and written in Latin:

Mother Isobail:

I hope you and my sisters are well. I am well in body, though sick with anxiety for you. I have not slept these many nights, searching for a way for you to be with me here. I face much less danger here than you must at home. If you are also ill from worry, please let me know. I desire for you to be fully free to tell me your sentiments. For this reason, I insist you three travel alongside our lord to serve him in Noldan this Christmastide. There is place for your service here, and it is the only thing which could ease my mind.

I am certain I will see your beautiful faces before Advent is ceased.

Your loving son,

Hew of Noldan

To his mother, it would hardly be subtle. He was never one to be frank with his emotions, much less transcribe them to parchment. He also would never dare to “insist” his mother do anything. This, alongside his strange spacing and describing himself as “of Noldan” would have to be enough to convey to his mother that their family *must* come to Noldan. He hoped it would read as a homesick boy to anyone else. He'd read it to Ralph who approved of it and would pass it along to Sir William and the Order.

Now, all Hew could do was wait, and, though he still worried how it would all turn out, he knew there was nothing he could do to speed things along. He settled himself to appreciating castle life for the next four months, as he watched Saerlaith laugh at Órlaith's and Hilda's debate over which had the more odorous job. He felt a certain peace as he listened to Saerlaith begin the story of their gong pit misadventure. That would trump both the others' complaints of smelly tasks.

As he sipped his mead and laughed, he sent the-now-familiar *zing* of magic down into his foot, and, beneath his shoe, his toes became a deep indigo.

Over the weeks and months to follow, Hew dedicated himself to his magic craft. He ceased attending reading lessons and instead spent hours in Dubhgall's chamber, studying and practicing. Saerlaith continued her training with Ralph, which soon included both Órlaith and Hilda, after some cajoling by Saerlaith— to her friends— and a good word from Hew— to Ralph. He and Hew both continued to act as if Ralph knew nothing of Hew's literacy, so as not to reveal their Order association. Hew still felt some guilt over this deception, but he was rapidly adjusting.

The four friends continued to take their meals together, though their evenings were often spent apart. Two or three times, Saerlaith kept Hew company while he studied, but, the closer he became with Órlaith and Hilda, the stranger it seemed to spend several hours just the two of them, unable to say where they had been. Hew didn't want the two girls to speculate on the activity done during the unmentioned hours he and Saerlaith spent alone, out of sight.

The Advent season was especially hard on Hew. It betokened the Christmas season and his family's arrival—or their doom. There was no second plan. It was also especially taxing to be fasting in their absence. Granted, as the days passed into December, his appetite grew steadily less. He tried to not dread each day as it came, filled as they were with cleaning, cooking, wood splitting, and other arduous preparations.

The first Loch delegation arrived December 9th. Word had been sent the night before to announce their impending arrival, and horns heralded their actual arrival the next day. Not knowing if this would be his town, and his family, Hew pushed his way through the crowds, searching for sight of the company between Noldan heads. When he saw the grand lord, sitting resplendent on a horse, his spirits sank. It was no man he recognized. With each arriving faction, he found himself further back in the Noldan crowd, unable to bring himself to be the first to see.

Finally, a week before Christmas Day, the castle received word that the penultimate Loch troupe would be arriving that day. The previous day's weather had kept them from sending word earlier. While those around him grew excited—or weary—about yet another arriving assembly, Hew became anxious; he ate nothing for lunch, and none of the girls' assurances that his family would arrive soon could make him believe it would be so. In the evening, when they heard the first trumpets of the heralds and everyone began rushing to the castle's gate, Órlaith took his arm, linking it in hers while Saerlaith pushed him from behind. Hilda gestured, "Come on, come on!" Together, they thrust themselves and Hew through the crowded courtyard and towards the gate. They managed to find a good view of the proceedings, just as the first knights and servants were passing by.

The king's knights led the procession, alongside some of the lord's own. Each was dressed in a shirt of mail, with a heraldic tunic overtop, brightly colored and displaying allegiance. Next, the heralds, stewards, marshals, and high-ranking servants passed by. Then, atop a horse, sat the lord of the manor. Hew forced himself to look up and see the man riding by. He wore a long tunic of fine green wool, accented and belted with a strip of intricate, woven textile. Hew recognized the pattern. He had made it. Glancing higher to the man's face, Hew recognized the stern visage of Lord Cathair of Lochmara.

"It's my town," he whispered.

"What?" asked Saerlaith.

"It's my town. It's Lochmara!" His mouth was almost too dry to speak, and he didn't know if he would survive the overwhelming sensation of anxiety, dread, and excitement. He wasn't sure which would be worse, the apprehensive waiting or discovering his family wasn't there. At least the waiting was soon to end.

"Hew, can you see your family?" Hilda yelled over the din of the crowd.

"No! I'm looking!" Servants passed by, men wearing short tunics, and women wearing longer, loose dresses. They each wore woven cloaks pinned in place with a decorative brooch. He looked for the tall head of his mother, and the red hair that would signify it. He looked for the fawn-colored hair of Brighid, and the frenetic energy of Ciara darting between servants. None of this appeared.

Instead, a beleaguered woman walking with her head downcast caught his eye. She wore a widow's veil and wimple, which hugged her face and covered her hair. Alongside her were walked two demure young ladies, and the three together produced no considerable effect on an onlooker. But in the widow's eyes, he saw something familiar,

and, as she looked up to see the crowd, he was able to see her face clearly. His mother found his gaze in the horde and smiled. It was the same face he had seen every morning of his life until six months ago. She raised a finger to her lips. *Don't make a fuss*, she said. It was enough for him; his family was here. He put an arm around Hilda and Saerlaith, standing beside him. He hadn't felt this unsteady since he had gotten a face-full of dung. He didn't want to repeat the event; the stones of the courtyard would not be a soft landing.

“They're here,” he said to his friends.

“Thank God!” the girls chimed, practically in unison. Saerlaith slid an arm around his back and held his shoulder with her other hand, drawing him into a sideways embrace. “I'm so glad!” He looked to her face and saw through his own unusually bright gaze that she had tears in her eyes. He smiled and took deep breaths, holding his friends' shoulders tight. He would be alright, but he could live without the embarrassment of fainting in front of them from overabundance of emotion.

The king gave a rousing speech in the courtyard, thanking Lord Cathair for his presence, and reminding the crowd that with the arrival of Lochmorn in a few days' time, the guests would be complete. The king then retired, and his servants were left to delegate arrangements and responsibilities for the arriving staff. Cathair had brought a small group, just enough to maintain his lifestyle, around twenty in total. His middle son had accompanied him, but he brought no other relations. Hew's family was part of only a small number of women accompanying the party.

He was eager to reunite with his mother and siblings, but they were kept from him by the king's marshal, sorting the servants into tasks. He lost his mother in the crowd, and it appeared she was summoned to attend Lord Cathair. Ciara was shuffled into the laundry, and Brighid was assigned to the kitchen. Hew was forced to return to the kitchen as well to resume his duties before supper. At least he could keep an eye on Brighid.

He resumed his task of plucking geese, while Brighid was oriented by Richard on how to turn the spit. She told him that she could keep a fire going or help with dinner, but he said she should stay where she was for now. It wasn't the answer she wanted, but she obeyed, if rather sulkily. Richard left her alone a bit more reluctantly than usual. *She's afflicted, not daft*, he thought. He watched as she turned the spit, paying careful attention to its speed. She hummed softly to herself. Hew smiled. He had missed her so much.

Soon enough she took to admiring her surroundings, lazily gazing at each wonderful thing in turn. Finally, her eyes rested on her brother. "Hew!" she shouted. Abandoning her post, she rushed over to his workstation and encircled him in a tight embrace. He pulled her tight for just a moment, filled with joy at seeing her face again, at being near enough to hold her. Then, he released her, and, after a kiss to her forehead, he told her, "Brighid, you can't walk away from the spit. I got in trouble there my first day, and I won't let it happen to you." He took her hand in his and walked her back to her meaty task. "You've got to stay here for now, but we'll eat supper together, and I'll be right over there."

After making sure no harm had come to the roast from her brief absence, Hew returned to the half-naked geese. He spent the rest of the evening glancing up periodically to find his dear, sweet sister there, looking at him and smiling, often with a wave.

Chapter 16

That evening, every person he had ever loved sat together at one table, and he was happy. So very happy. Their conversation was light, and Ciara enjoyed swapping stories with Saerlaith about embarrassing moments in his life. Saerlaith recounted—again—with glee the tale of the gong pit, rather over dramatizing his plight, he thought, and Ciara told her about the time he had shouted during Mass after being startled by an insect. In his defense, he had been eleven.

His mother sat and mostly let the children talk, but Hew asked her about their life since he left, and Isobail politely asked his friends how they enjoyed life in a castle. No mention of danger, laws, or missing wizards occurred, and all seemed well in the world for just one small breath of a moment. But as the meal drew to a close, Hew knew reality must return. When tidying had been completed, Isobail drew her son to one side. “Hew, is there somewhere private we could talk? I think there are important things we must discuss.”

“Yes, mum. I know a place.” Isobail asked the girls to show Ciara and Brigid their quarters, and Hew led his mother towards the basement halls. “It’s a bit unnerving, but I promise I know where I’m going.” Once down the stairs, he grabbed a torch and proceeded to Dubhgall’s chamber, the one place they’d be sure of privacy. He held his mother’s hand as he guided her through the twisting halls. It felt a bit strange to *lead* his mother anywhere.

Once at Dubhgall’s room, he opened the door and gestured for his mother to enter. “This is where a friend of mine lives. But he’s missing right now, so it’s a safe place to meet.” As Hew lit the candles and torches within the room, his mother took in her

surroundings. They were a bit worse for their ransacking, but Hew had neatened them up considerably, and their opulence was obvious. Isobail glanced around the room, a smile tugging on her lips. She removed her veil, and Hew once again saw her vitality in her bright hair.

She ran her fingers down the tall bedframe and rubbed the thick fabric of the bed curtains between her fingers. “Your friend has some wealth,” she said.

“You wouldn’t think it by looking at him. Besides this room, he lives humbly.”

“What’s this man’s name?”

“He goes by Dubhgall.”

“Does he?” Isobail walked toward the desk, lost in her thoughts.

“He’s a wizard, mum.” She stopped and turned to him, alarm in her eyes. “How do you know?” she asked.

“Because he told me. And he taught me.” The fear on his mother’s face was clear. “Just a little!” he added. “I think he was kidnapped. But that’s not what’s most important right now.”

“Your friend has been captured, and it’s not important?” He gestured for his mother to sit with him, and they sat cross legged, facing one another on the floor, resting on Dubhgall’s luxurious rug. Hew took his mother’s hands in his and squeezed, feeling his mother enfold his fingers. He wasn’t sure who was comforting who.

“Dubhgall isn’t *most* important right now. There’s nothing I can do. But I have to tell you why I wrote to you, why you’re here.”

“You’re trying to free us from Lord Cathair. Isn’t it obvious?”

“I wasn’t sure if the edict had reach Lochmara yet. It has?”

“Yes, Lord Cathair took us into his household immediately. Hew, it will not be easy to escape his lordship.” Isobail squeezed her son’s hands. He could tell she was trying to let him down easy, that this may not be possible.

“Aren’t you the one who said ‘Let the only lord over you be the Lord your God?’” Isobail gave him a wry smile.

“Yes. But Jesus said ‘Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s.’” He would not win an argument with Biblical quotes against his mother. She brought his hands together and held them between her palms.

“Mum, you said Lord Cathair has taken you into his household. Does that mean you’re living at the manor? Why?” Isobail studied his face and brushed a thumb against his cheek before tugging one of his curls. “Your hair has grown.” She smiled.

“It doesn’t really matter.” He closed his eyes, concentrating on the pull of magic. He’d gotten better at summoning the energy, no magic words required. The force traveled to his head, where his hair became straight, falling long into his eyes. This shocked his mother, who rose on her knees to clutch his head.

“No! Put it back!” He let the magic return to its origin, and his curls sprang back into place. He heard his mother utter a pleased sigh from his place beneath her grip, and she tousled his hair before kissing the top of his head. She sank back down to sitting position. “You have learned, haven’t you?” She looked in her son’s eyes, and he willed her to understand who he was. What he’d learned. What he knew. What he needed to know. To his surprise, her eyes showed an openness.

“Why did Lord Cathair take you into his household?”

“Hew, I am bad at trusting with my secrets,” she said, bowing her head for a moment before returning his gaze. “And I’ve wanted you to have the least burdens possible. Perhaps I was selfish in my reasoning. But I need to know, can you keep a confidence?” Hew returned her stare with a small smile. “Yes, mother, I know I can.”

“I have been in the employ of Lord Cathair for many years. I am his tutor and scribe. He cannot read and is ashamed of it.” His mother’s near nightly absences, the cause of which he tried not to speculate... She was reading? And in Lord Cathair’s confidence? “As a child he had the best tutors to be found, to no avail,” she continued. “He cannot seem to do it. He says the letters seem to dance on the page. I come at night to assist him in secret, so no one knows this weakness.” Hew recalled the stories he’d heard of Cathair’s childhood, of his father being killed in a revolt. For the first time, Hew fit all the pieces together: Lord Cathair’s harshness, his strict author, and an irrational fear of appearing weak. He was trying to stay alive.

“He can speak and understand several languages,” his mother was continuing, “but it’s the reading and writing of it with which he needs aid.”

“So when he was suddenly given the chance to become your liege lord and take you into his household, he was eager for it.” Isobail nodded. “Precisely.”

“How does he treat Ciara and Brighid?” His mother sighed.

“Brighid, he wants to send to a nunnery,” she said. “And Ciara is serving on his staff. But you know her, Hew. She is taking beatings for her nature.”

“Then you must stay here, in Noldan. Here, if you can slip away, you will be invisible under the city government, tied to no lord.”

“Hew, it’s dangerous for me here. I already don’t know how I’m going to manage through Easter.”

“Why?” There were aspects to this that he wasn’t seeing. He grew aggravated with his mother’s reticence, her constant mystery. “Why can’t you stay here?”

“I might be recognized!”

“By who? Who knows you in this city?”

“By the king!” His mother rolled back onto the floor, rubbing her hands across her face in surrender, in frustration. She parked her palms over her eyes and repeated in a mutter, “I could be recognized by Flanagan.”

Hew asked slowly, “How do you know the king?” Isobail drew herself back to a sitting position, reluctantly, as a sinner to confession. She looked into her son’s face with a gentleness and a vulnerability that he had not seen before.

“I have not told you my story for many reasons. But I think it’s time you know now— all the pieces to this puzzle.”

“Okay.”

“To start off with, I was born noble, here in the Low Country. I was the fifth child of a lord, and Flanagan was my eldest brother.” She paused here, waiting for a reaction. Hew’s mouth remained firmly shut. He wasn’t sure he could open it if he wanted to. She continued, “I was given an astounding education, one I have endeavored to pass on to you and your sisters.”

She nodded to him, trying to connect this unknown past with Hew’s present. “Our father was close with King Aengus, and we spent many months of the year at this castle. When our father passed, Flanagan became lord in his place, and he continued that

friendship with the king. My brother has always been ambitious. Always. He instituted me into the king's court, as a lady-in-waiting and companion to the king's ward. Then, as the king willed, as his mistress." Again, Isobail paused, allowing Hew to react. But he couldn't. His mother had slept with the last known descendant of King Arthur. It was unnerving, to say the least.

"In those days, the court was a lively place, complete with jesters, advisors, and the king's sorcerer, Maxim Merlin. He was a young man, then, much aligned by the court for his youth and inexperience. His father—and his predecessor— had died when he was nineteen, leaving him as the sole magical advisor to the king. It was a difficult situation. But he was wise beyond his years, with a kindness and a humor that soon gained him friends, including myself. He was gracious enough to find me his equal, and worthy of his admiration. As I gained favor with the king, Maxim gained my favor, and I his. To put it plainly, we were in love." Hew watched his mother smile, seeing old friends in her mind's eye. She paused a moment in recollection before continuing.

"But the king was a man... of great appetite—" she dropped her gaze for a moment— "and I soon found myself with child. That wasn't a great scandal, you have to understand," she met his eyes once more, "and my brother was ecstatic to have another tie to the king. The child was born a girl, healthy, but the midwife noticed she was different. Afflicted."

"Brigid..." Hew whispered, for the first time acknowledging aloud the reality of the story. This insane, fantastical true story. The story of his mother.

"Mm-hmm," Isobail nodded. "The king was disappointed. Bastard or no, she was his only living child. And he was getting sicker. Succession was on his mind, on all of our

minds, especially Flannagan. He was situating himself to be named the heir. Brigid complicated all of this. So I fled. Flannagan could win his crown, and no blood would be spilt.” The Order of the Lady didn’t know it, but they were searching for his afflicted older sister. Who not infrequently drooled on him while they slept.

“I fled to Lochmara, with Maxim by my side.”

“The wizard left the king?”

“Yes,” she continued, “I’m ashamed of it now, that I came between a sorcerer and his sacred duty, but we were young, and in love, and scared. I had no knowledge of how to live a peasant life. We coped together.

We lived like that for two years, working hard, but blissful. And then the shame came creeping back in. Flannagan was king. He’d married the king’s ward, and there was no court wizard to supervise his ambition. We felt that we had left Noldan and Tribian vulnerable.”

“Maxim returned to Noldan? Where is he now?”

“I don’t know,” she sighed. “But he hated to leave. You had just been born.” She touched Hew’s face once more, cradling his cheek in her palm. “You have his eyes, you know.” Her touch-seemed to burn against his face as he realized his identity. He was the son of Merlin’s line, of a wizard.

His father had been good, and wise, and kind. Those things he’d hoped his father to be. He’d also been young, and scared, and foolish. The same qualities Hew was battling. He tilted his head into his mother’s embrace, resting his eyes for a moment. They’d need to keep his mother out of view of the king. They’d need to release her from

a lord who had a stronger-than-average interest in keeping her his vassal. And his father was a wizard. A famous wizard.

Hew raised his head, his thoughts beginning to move again. “Mum, do you think Dubhgall—” The sound of the door pounding against the wall as it opened wide cut his question short.

In the doorway stood a tall, dark man. He leaned against the doorframe, barely supporting himself. He was emaciated, worryingly so. His hair, originally arranged in locs of fine black hair, was now matted and dirty, and his tunic was filthy. His brown skin was mottled in flecks of dried blood and caked muck. “Hello,” he croaked.

Hew’s mother was standing in a second. “Maxim!” She rushed to his side, placing her shoulder beneath his arm and helping him hobble to his bed. “What happened to you?”

“The dungeons are not pleasant,” he murmured. Hew took a step forward. He looked to his mother, who thankfully saw his question written there. “Come here, Hew,” she said. “Meet your father.”

“Oh, we’ve met before,” Maxim smiled weakly, meeting Hew’s gaze with those familiar azure eyes. “Have you been practicing?”

Appendix
Pronunciation Guide

Aengus— ENG yu

Aibhne— AVE ny

Brighid— BREEDJ

Cathair— KA heer

Ciara— KIER ruh

Cliaman— KLI mun

Jinau— ZHEE no

Maon— MOON

Meadhbh— MAVE

Mùirne— MOORN a

Naomhan— NOOV an

Oisin— USH een

Órlaith— OR la

Saerlaith— SEER la

Tassach— TASS ukh