

A streak of colors, brown and white and yellow, flashed by Aodh's head. The man spun around in time to see the strike. All it took was a fraction of a second, but Aodh could see that it was off just enough to miss the target, especially the eyes. The raptor pushed its wings hard, after losing so much momentum with the hit, and rose into the sky once more.

"Missed again."

"Aye, Heather. Thank you for stating the obvious." Aodh turned back around, smiled, and shook his head. "Have you nothing better to do than criticize poor Hornie?" At that moment, a cry from high in the sky sounded, as if the goshawk wanted to add her two pence.

"All I'm saying is that you spend so much of your time out here trying to teach that bird to hunt and what have you got to show for it after three years? Hasn't even brought you a squirrel. Still can't hit the target. Sometimes it misses the whole thing, which is huge. And what are you hunting, stag? That thing you built is as big as a horse. There's no way on God's green Earth that your old, beat up hawk is going to take down a deer. And you need to make the target easier for her to see."

"You doubt her, but this hawk will hunt. I know it," replied Aodh with a certainty that could not be explained.

"I've seen enough," replied Heather. She turned and began to walk away.

"I might not know my letters very well, but I know H is for the hunt."

"So, you say," she answered without turning back, talking as she walked away.

"But, you've been training that bird for years. Isn't it enough that you saved its life?"

Can it even be on its own? When will that hawk get to be free? How will you know when it's time?"

"Love ya, Heather," answered Aodh as he turned his attention back to the bird. He looked up at her and smiled. She was riding the thermals of the late afternoon. Aodh watched for another full minute and then let loose with a whistle that could send a jolt up and down your spine. Hornie began a slow descent, circling in a tighter and tighter arc as she got closer to the ground. Alas, the raptor landed on the thick, leather glove that covered Aodh's right hand and half his forearm. He fed her a dried piece of meat and attached a jess, or strap, to her foot. The whole time he kept an anxious eye on the black talons that wrapped around his own wrist. They were far sharper than the dagger that hung at his side. Without warning, Hornie flapped her wings and tried to take off. The leather strap around the thick, bumpy flesh of her yellow foot, pulled tight and she came back down. As soon as she touched his forearm, the bird flapped its wings again and rose up, only to be held once more. This time she settled on his arm and let out a vicious screech, looking over Aodh's shoulder.

Hornie held on as Aodh turned his body around and saw the reason she was upset. Three men approached, walking the trail between the two meadows where Aodh's few livestock grazed. They were moving with a deliberate pace. Sunday Mass must have been let out early was all Aodh thought. When they were about half a furlong away, two of them stopped. Aodh never moved, but Hornie hopped up and down a few more times. The third man halted about ten feet out and came no further.

"Aodh," said the man.

"Eli," came the reply.

“Bill and Pharell thought it best if they stayed out in the field. You know, after last time. They’re a little afraid of your bird there.” Aodh tilted his head to the side, raised his eyebrows, and shrugged his shoulders.

He turned back to Hornie, trying to calm her. She hopped up and down on the gauntlet a few more times. The back of his bare left hand ran down the alternating dark and white feathers of her leg. She began to stare at Eli, bobbing her head from side to side.

“Just wanted to check on you, Aodh. Make sure you’re all right,” said Eli.

Aodh began to hood Hornie, securing the little leather helmet over her eyes. He ran his hand along the feathers of her leg a few more strokes.

“You know, Aodh...Well, I’ve said this to you before. It wasn’t your fault. What happened...none of us had the power to...to...I mean, you weren’t even...” Eli always struggled with Aodh these past few years. Instead, he went to a tried and true way for men to communicate. “You know you haven’t been over to the farm in a few years. I know you prefer ale, but I’ve made a batch of mead from the honey I’ve collected this summer.”

“H is for goshawk,” was all Aodh said to his old friend. He turned away from Eli and began to walk toward the decaying hovel that he and Heather had lived their whole married life in.

Eli watched him go, but said no more. He looked at the target Aodh had built and shook his head a couple of times. Then he stared at the ground for a few more seconds. A final kick at the dirt signaled his surrender. He turned and started back to his friends. When he got there, Bill asked, “What did he say?”

Eli frowned and admitted failure. “Same thing he always does. H is for goshawk.”

With a genuine look of confusion, Bill said, “That’s not how it’s spelled is it?”

Shaking his head, Eli replied, “No. No, I don’t think so.”

“What does that even mean?” asked Pharell

“I have no idea,” confessed Eli. “He’s confused. I don’t think he...I’m not sure he even knows me anymore. Says my name, but that’s it.”

“And H is for goshawk,” added Bill.

“Right, right,” agreed Eli, who tried to force a sad smile. “Well, at least he seems to be eating all right. Doesn’t look sick. His sheep...” Eli scanned the meadows. “The goat and the cow; they all look like they’re cared for. Still the same number of animals. Maybe that hawk he nursed back to health is hunting for him. Maybe he’s come to rely on the hawk and that’s why he says it.” Eli shrugged his shoulders and raised his hands, admitting he had no idea. Bill and Pharell both shook their heads, feigning compassion, and started heading back through the fields. Eli followed, looking back once for Aodh, but he was already gone.



Alaxandair led his small retinue through a wet and boggy field. Their horses trudged along at a slow pace through the cold and blustery March twilight. They tracked along the River Forth, making steady progress. There were only six of them, a small

entourage to be sure. One was a priest who hated to ride, but could not keep up with them walking. Father Callum was no company on these excursions, for he struggled with his mount, even at a slow pace. He rode behind everyone. In front of him strode the horses of three more men. Two, Arran and Keith, were fighting men, sworn to protect Alaxandair, who had knighted them many years before. The other, Hamish, was sworn to attend to his every need. Leading the pack was Alaxandair and his right hand man, Malcolm, who was actually riding at his right hand side as they came out of the field and began to descend toward the river and the town of Culross.

A man, working the bellows of a forge outside a stone enclosure, saw them coming into town and turned to another. "Cael, eh? That rider there, got silver and such on his bridle, would that be the king coming?"

"Oh no," was all Caelan could say.

"He doesn't seem to have many men with him. Maybe he's just passing through," said Caelan's friend with an air of hope. That was not shared by Caelan, who looked at his own state of dress and realized it was too late to do anything about it. He stood there helpless and waited for the party to approach.

When the horses paused in front of him was the first time he noticed that his friend had slinked away. He frowned for a moment and then changed it to a forced smile. "Welcome, Alaxandair mac Alaxandair! Scotia Rex! I am Caelan..."

"Yes, Caelan, son of Douglas, of the Clan McDuff, Burgess here in Culross. I hear good things about you."

"Yes, your Grace. Thank you. Thank you for visiting our humble village." Caelan looked to the sun going down, creating the shadows of twilight. "As we have reached

the gloaming, I assume you will be staying. I apologize, sire. Had I known that you...”  
The king looked to his right. It was Malcolm’s turn to interject.

“The king is just passing through. We ride for Saint Andrews. We will not be in need of anything more than your hospitality for the evening meal. Might we sup at your table?”

“Saints be damned! Of course! Of course! Here, here, this way. Let me lead you to my home. My wife and daughter will be most thankful for the opportunity to cook for you, m’lord.” The burgess turned around and began to lead them to the other side of town. Caelan’s eyes were wide as his anxiety grew. He was not sure what the larder at his home held, but he was certain it was not fit for a king.



“Oh my. Saints be praised. You’ve gone and built two more stags. Old Hornie had trouble hitting the first one. Here we are a year on, and you’ve made it harder?”

“Thank you, Heather. You know, my love, it is amazing how you can see the finest detail, no matter how small,” said Aodh with a hint of sarcasm.

Heather took no note of it. “And are they on wooden wheels? What in the name of St. Columba have you done that for? Are they for riding or targeting? You know our children have moved beyond such things.”

“Yes, woman. Do you think I don’t know my own kin?”

“Not sure what you know anymore, the way you’ve been acting,” grumbled Heather.

“Do you have some need of me, Heather, or did you just come to interrupt Hornie’s training?” asked Aodh, but in a calm and quiet voice.

Heather looked up into the sky. She scanned the horizon and then took a careful look towards the sun. An instant later the silhouette of her husband’s goshawk emerged from the glare. Aodh watched his wife with patience, waiting for her to return her focus to him. She did, but then something new grabbed her attention. “Ooh. You painted the old one white. I was so distracted by the wheels that I didn’t notice.” Aodh looked at his wife with an odd expression, thinking her observations should have been the other way around. Heather paused, considering her next words. “Are you hunting the ghost stag they always talked about up in the hills of Lomond?” She started to laugh. “That bird won’t even be able to find that hart! Ha! Let alone take him down.” Aodh just shook his head and sighed. He went over to the targets and began to move them around. Heather still had the giggles when he was done.

Stepping back to be at his wife’s side, he let loose with a shrill whistle. He watched Hornie turn, rise on a thermal, and then dive. The maneuver was beautiful to watch. Silent death coming from above. She leveled out about a furlong from the target. That was when Aodh gave three short bursts of whistle. A fraction of a second passed by before she got the signal. Aodh knew that someone like Heather would believe the bird had never changed its approach. For Aodh, who had been working with her for years, the deviation was clear for all to see. The goshawk had shifted to the right, but was still coming in like lightning. The strike was violent, but almost too fast to

comprehend. The black talons ripped away the piece of tanned and bleached hide that Aodh had placed on the target's "head" with charcoal drawings for the animal's eyes. Hornie soared into the air again. Aodh wasted no time. Wanting to communicate before she was too high to hear, he whistled the same three short bursts, but then followed it with a long trill. The goshawk banked hard to the right and dove again. Within seconds she was back for another attack. This time she tore the white hide off the back of the target Aodh had directed her to. The covering for the target's "hind quarters" was ripped away.

"That was right violent, I must say."

"Do you still think she can't take down a stag, Heather?" asked Aodh with some pride."

"Don't see those targets moving any. Now that you put wheels on 'em why don't you have Galen pull them across the fields next time he comes to visit. Then tell me if your hawk can hit the target. I know it's been a long time since you went hunting, but you know how a stag behaves. Red deer don't just stand there and wait for you."

"Are you never satisfied, woman?" demanded Aodh.

"Not when I see you spending all your time with this bird. It's not healthy, Aodh." Heather began to walk towards the meadows. "You worry me, husband."

"Don't you fret about me. I know a few letters. You think H is for a hart running through the hills, but H is for hurt," replied Aodh. "Hornie can put the hurt on 'em!"

"And that's what I don't want happening to you," shouted his wife over her shoulder.



“Love ya, Heather!” he called after her. Aodh regretted calling out to his love, for he soon saw a familiar man coming up the burn, making his way along the dying reeds of late October. For a moment he thought of calling for Hornie, but decided to let the bird get some flight time. She deserved a little freedom, for today was the first time she had hit both targets in an attack.

The man stopped at those targets and looked them over, but said nothing about the three wooden structures. He took a few moments to ponder them, but then moved on. Despite being feared by many in the area, he was, in normal circumstances, a genial man. “How are you, Aodh?” he asked with a placid tone.

“Sheriff Curwen.” The lawman smiled at Aodh’s acknowledgement.

“I’m glad you recognized me. I wouldn’t want you calling that bird down on my head.” Aodh tilted his own head to the side, raised his eyebrows, and shrugged his shoulders. The sheriff did not know how to respond to the gesture. “Folk in the area are...let’s say, concerned about you, about some of your behaviors.” Aodh’s head tilted back and forth as if he was stretching his neck muscles. The gesture seemed quite odd to the sheriff and threw him off what he was saying. “Aodh, I’m just telling you this for your own good.” The sheriff paused and took a deep breath. He had walked here from his home in Kinross and did not want it to be for nothing. “I know you look a little lean, but you seem healthy. The problem is the way you’ve been acting. People are worried about you. They’re starting to be afraid of...well, they’re not sure of what you might do. All this hawking you’re doing, but you never seem to hunt. No one wants to take anything you and Heather built here. I want you to know that. No one wants to...”

“H is for goshawk,” was Aodh’s reply. He had heard enough.

“Right, right, right. That’s what you told me the last time I came out.” The sheriff hesitated, not sure where to go with his concerns. “Have you spoken to Heather today? I’m sure she doesn’t like seeing you this way.”

Barely a second passed before Aodh whistled for Hornie. The sound made the sheriff jump. Then he looked to the sky and saw the bird begin to descend. “All right then, I’ll check in on you before winter comes, make sure you have enough food and enough firewood or peat to burn, or maybe dung. Are you getting ready for winter, Aodh?” Aodh just gazed into the sky. After less than a minute, the sheriff left, heading back upstream from whence he came, even more frustrated than he had expected.



“It is but a humble home, your Grace. You really should visit the leader of Clan MacDuff. The Earl of Fife would be glad for you to stay with him I am sure. You would be more comfortable in the castle there in Wemyss.” King Alaxandair’s entourage had enjoyed a meager, yet tasty meal with the previous town’s burgess. Now they had come to another village and had been met by a different member of Clan MacDuff.

“That is what the Burgess of Culross told me. Now I stand in the next village along the firth, and Colm, son of Duncan, tells me the same.”

“Aye, my cousin. A good man, Sire.” Colm grew anxious, for he sensed the tone of Alaxandair’s words. “Neither Cael nor I mean to imply you are not welcome. It is just

that our abodes are not worthy of one such as you. The Castle of Wemyss is more fit for a king.”

Malcolm was about to interject, but the king raised a gloved hand and said, “Yes. I know it well. Perhaps we will stick to the coast instead of going across the peninsula. In lieu of cutting across Fife, we will visit the great hall of the MacDuffs.” Colm was not sure of his king’s intent. Was it sarcasm or sincerity? He remained silent in his confusion.

“First, we must water the horses,” said Malcolm, hoping the king would think he had meant to suggest that all along.

“Let me lead yours down to the burn, Sir Malcolm,” offered Colm MacDuff, trying to assuage any offense he might have made. “And could I also offer your Grace, his lords and knights, a tankard of ale, to refresh your own thirst? I make the best ale in Fife. Everyone knows it.”

Alexandair relaxed some. He smiled and said, “One for the road then, Colm, son of Duncan.”



“By the sword of Saint Eustace, why are you out here in the fog? Your hawk has a hard enough time on a clear day. Five years you’ve been training that bird and now you want to make it harder.”

“Now my dear Heather is concerned about the weather. Whether we stay in or go out, always a complaint from Heather.” Aodh laughed a wee bit, trying to hide it from his wife.

“Aren’t you the clever one. How long did you need to come up with that?” she asked in a huff.

“Just now. How’s that for being crazy in the head?”

“Hmmm. What’s that bird doing now?” The raptor was diving and then arching up into the sky, disappearing into the fog. Then she repeated it, reappearing as she flew past and then was swallowed up again.

“Her name is Hornie,” reminded Aodh. “You know that.”

“The devil you say. How silly a name is that? Where’d you get the idea?”

“From you,” was all Aodh said.

“Oh, I swear!” Heather acted both aggrieved and flummoxed.

“No, you don’t. You never swore a day in your life.” Aodh openly chuckled now, content in the knowledge that he had been successful in needling his wife.

She turned back to their home and started to walk away. This time Heather just said, “I’m going to see if there’s anything for you to eat. You look too thin lately.”

“Love ya, Heather,” he called to her as she left.

Several minutes passed as Hornie flew past Aodh a few more times. Then Aodh gave her a call and she came to roost on his gloved hand. The jess was placed and her feathers brushed a little before Aodh put the hood on her head. “H is for hoodwinked,” he said, laughing and brushing her breast feathers. “At least that’s what my grandson

told me once when I was teaching him how to handle a bird like you.” A few more gentle strokes of her plumage and Aodh was ready to go inside with her.

He turned around and heard from the mist, “As I was walking down here, I could’ve sworn I heard you tell màthair you loved her. You two getting along better these days?”

Aodh turned to look at his son. “Galen,” was all he said, but he did smile after saying it.

“Athair. How are you?”

“H is for goshawk.”

“Yes, it is. And also for the heart of a hunter. That’s how you first described her.”

Galen had accepted his father’s obsession with the goshawk. “I hope old Hornie has got you some rabbits, for food and fur. You need to stay warm. The start has been a mild winter, but I wanted to see you before the New Year, make sure you’re getting on. Not arguing too much with mum, I hope.” Aodh said nothing. Galen sighed, but tried to make it quiet. “We were hunting, up near the falls of Glen Vale, and I thought I’d make my way over, bring you some game.” Galen slid a sack off his shoulder. He took out three partridges and a grouse. “The earl uses falcons, but the hawk you trained James Ellis on, well he’s still a great hunter. Dawson might not be as fast as those falcons, but he sees better, I think. Smarter too. Took just as much game, which didn’t sit well with the Earl’s falconers.”

Aodh just nodded. There was an uneasy silence between the two. A son hates to see his father in decline, but like most, Galen had no idea what to do about it. He did not want to take away his father’s independence, for he knew he was a proud man, but

he also did not want to let him get hurt. The son decided to just come out and say what needed to be done. "I know you don't want to hear this, athair, but we want you, both of you, to come live with us. You don't have to be separated." He saw no change in his father's eyes and decided on a different strategy. "You know Deirdre and James Ellis would love for you to come live with us. We have enough room."

Aodh did not react for several seconds. Then he squinted one eye and shook his head a bit to the left.

"There's nothing here for ya," declared Galen, but his plea was in vain. Aodh did not respond. His son scrunched up his nose and his lips as if in pain. He pinched the bridge of his nose and then looked at the ground, unsure of what to do next. "All right, if it's okay, I'm going to go pay my respects to mum, talk to her for a bit. Maybe the next time you talk with her, she can convince you to sell the farm and come down to Wemyss." Aodh tilted his head toward the shack and raised his eyebrows, as if to say, "You know where to find her." Galen knew that was the best he was going to get.

In Aodh's mind, the words, "You know your mother, she's always watching out for me," sounded. What he said, however, was, "H is for goshawk."

"I know, Dad. I know. The world doesn't make much sense to me either." He patted his father on the shoulder and then walked toward what had once been a loving home for Galen and his siblings.



“Another for you, Sire.”

“No, no. We must be off. I will be falling from the saddle if I continue. It is a good, strong ale you make, Colm.”

“You are the best of us, my king. I am sure you can drink all night and fight all day. There is no one better to drink my ale. Of that I am sure.”

“Don’t make a hero out of me,” came the royal declaration.

“But, you are Alaxandair, Scourge of Haakon, Conqueror of the Isles.”

“That was more than twenty years ago, probably what, twenty-three if I recall.”

“Well, you will always be our most revered leader, m’lord.”

“The older I get, Colm, the less I think I should be revered,” admitted the king.

“That is probably the ale talking, Sire,” decided MacDuff. “I have never heard a man question your honor or dignity, and I would cut them down if I did.”

“Let’s not be having any of that. The blood of my people is already on my hands,” said Alaxandair, looking to the door with a sad expression. “It was not many, and I thought it was for the good, but they are bloodstains nonetheless. They don’t fade, you know. No, Colm, son of Duncan, over time they grow bolder.”

The room grew silent, unsure of what their leader meant. However, his host could not hold back, for even in candlelight, he saw the pain in the king’s eyes.

“Scratching out a living from this thin soil we have, just rock and a little dirt, you have to make decisions that can affect you and your kin.” Colm banged his fist off the table.

“But you, your Grace, you make choices that affect a whole people. Sometimes that requires hard judgments.” MacDuff thought for a brief moment, but then went with his gut instinct. He raised his mug and shouted, “To the king!” Everyone echoed his toast.

“Thank you, MacDuff. Thank you. I could stay here and get my ego built up all night, but alas, we must be off.”



“Why are you feeding that good-for-nothing bird? Is that offal from the rabbit you caught this morning?”

“No, much worse than that, Heather. It’s from one of your stew recipes.”

A look of consternation came over Heather’s face. “Aodh, I tell you, one of these days I’m going to walk out through that meadow and I’m not coming back.” Heather sounded serious this time. She took a breath and relaxed. After another deep breath, she said, “And you always liked my rabbit stew.”

“So does young Connie here. H, I’ve been told, is for helping.”

“I thought you were crazy when Tully, your old plowhorse, died and you fed pieces of it to that crazy hawk.

“No, no, now who’s got the bad memory? I fed the horse meat to Hornie. This is Connie,” announced Aodh.

“By the ghost of Saint Regulus is that a new bird?”



“They say H is for hatchling. And Connie here is right as rain, just about ready to hunt.”

Heather seemed confused. “How? How did Hornie...? She’s got to be at least six years old now and as haggard as they come.”

“Hornie can still hunt.” He fed the young raptor another piece of rabbit liver. “Soon Connie will...” Heather wasn’t hearing it.

She interrupted Aodh with a rant he knew had been coming for a while. “Are you mad, Aodh? Stark raving mad! You’re feeding that bird exactly what it should be killing and feeding itself. How’s it wanting to fly and hunt if you give it everything it needs? H should be for hungry!”

Aodh just laughed. “Now you’ve got the spirit! You’re ready to hunt, just like her. I’m going to get you a gauntlet and teach you. We will go hawking together.”

Heather’s face turned red. “Oooh, Aodh. You know I don’t like that. I don’t can’t care for her...them...those birds!” She headed towards the burn.

“Where are you going?” called Aodh. “I was hoping to start your first lesson.”

“I’m going down to the water. You’ll need some if you want stew from what’s left of that rabbit.”

“Love ya, Heather.” He smiled as he watched his wife walk away. She was as beautiful to him now as the day they were married, and just as feisty, maybe more so.

A question from behind him broke Aodh from the spell of remembrance. “How are you, Aodh?”

“Father Tamhas.” Aodh bowed his head as he turned and addressed the priest.

“Good to see you so hale after the winter months.” A simple shrug was Aodh’s only answer. “I was talking with your friend, Eli, and Heather’s friend, Sheena. Remember her, widow of old Dougal?” Aodh just nodded. “Well, they said that you haven’t been seen for over a year. They’re all saying that, well folks are...they’re afraid to come out here anymore. Some thought you had passed..” Aodh raised one eyebrow, trying to convey surprise and doubt at the same time.

“I wish you would come back to the Church, Aodh,” said the priest. A tilt of his head, a lift of his eyebrows, and another shrug of his shoulders was all Aodh could muster.

“We all lost a lot when the...the incident happened. Your boy and girl...that should have never...but,well, you still have people...”

“H is for goshawk.” Eli and others had told them they did not know what it meant, but they did know it was a signal to leave. The priest knew he had not been successful, nor even done his best, but he was ready to go nonetheless.

“I hope we can see you for Mass this Sunday,” said Father Tamhas as he picked up his robe and shuffled his feet down to the path by the stream, which was running full with the spring rains. He shouted back to a man who had once been a very dedicated congregant of his church. “There’s a lot of people who still care about you, Aodh. If there’s anything we can do...Well, you know the way.” The priest left it at that, knowing that Aodh had not been to Mass in many years. He did not expect that to change.



A tall, stout fellow stood to the side of the muddy trail. Horsemen were approaching and he did not know if they were friend or foe. He had a candle in one hand, but his other held an ax. “Greetings, my good man. Can we trouble you...” Malcolm was about to ask the man for directions, but the rough looking character’s face brightened as he spoke and it was not from a surge in the candle’s luminosity. For he saw the candlelight reflected from the precious metals that adorned the royal steed’s tack. Even the stirrups were shiny. He interrupted Sir Malcolm’s entreaty.

“By the Saints of Iona, is that the king?” he called out.

Alaxandair answered for himself. “It is. And who might you be, the ward of this hamlet?”

“No. We don’t have no thane or burgess here. I’m Cam, son of Daividh.”

“Of the Clan MacDuff?”

“Aye. And there are no Beatties or Leitches here. Rest assured.”

From behind Alaxandair and Malcolm came the impatient voice of Father Callum. “Can you tell us if this be the trail to Wemyss?”

“It is,” answered Cam. “But a fog is coming in off the Firth and it brings a chill. “I would be honored if you would raise a dram of my whisky before you go any farther. It will help with the cold. We make our own uisge beatha here. It is the finest in all of Alba.”

Both Arran and Keith started to speak at the same time. "Sire, we really should..."

Malcolm finished, "If we are to make Saint Andrews by the morn, we must ride on. We thank you, Cam, son of Daividh, but..."

"The man has invited us into his home," insisted Alaxandair. "One pour of whisky will not delay us long." And the matter was settled.



"What now, Aodh? It's night time. The gloaming has come and gone. That bag of bones and feathers can't see anything in this."

"Always thought that hawks could see a little better in the dark than we can. They like to hunt near dusk. I think you might be wrong there, Heather."

"Well, it wouldn't be the first time you said that," Aodh's wife scolded him. "I don't know about all hawks, or eagles or falcons, but she's so old she can barely see in the daytime. How long have you had her, five or six years? Probably half blind by now."

"H is for haggard," admitted Aodh. "At least it sounds that way."

"You'd be better off training an owl if you want to hunt at night," suggested Heather. She was about to make a comment about owls being smarter than a hawk as well, but she recognized some decorations on the rain soaked and mildewed targets.

"Oh my! Saints preserved! What have you gone and done?"

"What are you prattling on about now, woman?"

“Is that our only utensils? You’ve gone and hung our knives and spoons on your white stag! Those were my mathair’s!” exclaimed Heather.

“H is for hallowed. Honor thy mother and father the priest always said.”

“Oh you are impossible. I’m starting to think all those people that come here with their concerns and compassion and all their talk about caring for you, they just might be right. You are losing your mind.” As Heather reached the crescendo of her diatribe, a whoosh came out of the darkness. Both Heather and Aodh jumped. Hornie struck the white target with a tremendous force, tearing off the piece of hide with eyes on it. The cheap metal utensils clanged against each other, rattling like a wind chime in a light breeze.

“H is for hate,” corrected Aodh. “That’s one I learned on my own.”

“Well, I guess that was...I admit that was impressive. But, need I remind you that we’ve only got two spoons and two knives. Don’t even have enough for guests.”

Aodh shot back, “Seems like guests never stay too long.”

“Of course they don’t, not with the way you act.”

He smiled sheepishly and said, “With my friendly smile, I’m not sure why that would be.”

Heather ignored Aodh’s joking. “I want those put back by the stove. Don’t be leaving them out here in the wind and rain and dirt...just don’t be leaving them out here!” She began to go back inside.

“Love ya, Heather.”

“And where’s Connie at?” was her answer. “Have you lost your other hawk? I don’t want to be surprised by one of them again.” Aodh laughed at the memory.

“She’s got her feet locked on the perch inside, back behind the sheep. Probably sleeping soundly. Don’t disturb her.”

“Me? Disturb her? Why I’d like to keep that hood on her all night *and* day.”

“That’s no way to live. You gotta keep your eyes on the horizon and your ears to the ground.”

“You always say that. And by the way, you treat these hawks better than you ever treated me.”

Aodh wanted to argue, but he heard a noise behind the part of their house where he kept the livestock. Worried that one of the animals had broken out of their home, he hurried around the corner, but there was no animal there, nor any person. He looked to the square plot of land that he had built a stone wall around. The barrier stood only tall enough that the sheep and goat he kept would not want to jump over it. No one was there either. He looked to the hills that lay beyond, but saw nothing. He sighed. For a fleeting moment, his life felt as empty as his lungs.



“You should stay, Sire. I will take my family to sleep with our sheep. You will take our bed.” MacDuff was insistent.

Yet, so was the king. “No. No. I am on my way to see the queen.”

“Yolande de Dreux!” shouted MacDuff before realizing how obnoxious it seemed. In a much quieter voice he then said, “I must say, your Grace, what a wonderful choice you have made in taking a second wife.”

“Well, we will see. I have lost everything, but perhaps she can restore to me an heir. I worry that my granddaughter, Margaret, will not be up to the task\*. If I should pass too soon, her regency would be weak. Her reign will create an opening for too many rivals that would seek to take the crown at Scone.”

“That is no concern. You are as hale and hearty as any man I’ve ever seen. We are at peace. Your reign will last for many, many years, my king.”

“As I said, MacDuff, I must visit you more often.”

“You are welcome anytime, Sire.”

“Good night to you then, Cam, son of Douglas. Clan MacDuff has a fine son in you, and in your kin, Colin, son of Duncan, and Colm, son of Daividh.”

A slight giggle came from MacDuff. For a brief moment Cam, son of Daividh, thought about correcting his king. Then he thought better of it. The king might have had one too many dram, but all these names of the MacDuffs, Cam realized, could confuse someone who was stone-cold sober. He wished his monarch and his entourage a safe journey and then watched them disappear into the night.



“You’re back,” said Aodh with a surprised tone even he didn’t expect.

“I am,” was all his wife could say.

“Been gone for some time. Might I ask where you've been?”

“Went to see Galen's family, particularly Deirdre. She's married now, you know.”

“Married? Don't be silly, woman. Little DeeDee's not old enough for that.”

“She's sixteen, Aodh. Older than both of us when we married.”

“That's crazy. She's a wee lass, just this high.” He held out his right arm a little below shoulder height.

“Aodh. Aodh, look at me. I can't do this anymore. I just can't do it.” She took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. Her nostrils flared as she again inhaled deeply, trying to suppress her frustration. “I'm afraid the time has come. It's time, husband. It's time.”

“Time for what?”

“Time for me to go. I can't stay here anymore. I can't watch this one more day.”

“You always come back,” said Aodh with a note of certainty.

“Not this time,” countered Heather with just as much sureness in her voice.

Aodh's lip quivered, but with defiance, he said, “Then I guess H is for heaven.”

“Is that what it will be once I'm gone?”

“No.” A few tears were building in the corners of his eyes, but he would not plead with her. If she wanted to go, who was he to ask her to stay?

“You know Galen wants you to come live with him. He talks about it a lot.”

“If I go there, where will you go? You won't stay here I hope.”

“I think I'm going to go visit, DeeDee. Spend some time with her. Maybe I can teach her how to keep a husband in line.”



“Oh, you’d be good at that.” He laughed a little and Heather thought she saw a look of contemplation in his eyes. Yet, in the end it was not to be. “Love ya, Heather,” whispered Aodh. That was that. If this was to be the end, then so be it. Aodh had put too much time and effort into his plan to walk away now.

She shook her head, frustrated by all she witnessed, including the slow decay of her husband. “Take care of yourself, you old fool.” He smiled at her name-calling, sure in his decision, but then turned away and started walking towards his dilapidated targets. The hides were worn out, crusty, and disintegrating. Most of the wheels had crumbled. The frames were loose and rattled. Heather watched him go. In a loud voice, she said, “I love you, Aodh,” but to him it sounded like notes of music on the wind. Heather turned away and walked up to the stone enclosure behind what little was left of their house. In the end, Aodh did spin around to see her one last time, but she had already turned the corner.



Alaxandair and Malcolm rode their mounts at a fast walking pace, but not at the speed of a trot. The coastline had rocky drop offs. Though not cliffs, they could certainly kill a man’s horse if he wandered over the edge. The darkness was complete and the fog made it worse. Behind them came the glow of a torch soaked in tar and a lantern with a candle. Hamish held the torch. Father Callum kept switching the lantern from right to left. None of it made much difference. The fog seemed to smother

everything, including sound. The coast was eerie in its unnatural silence. At times a strange call would echo from the waters below. Once Alaxandair heard a bell. Malcolm tried to convince himself that he had heard it too, but Hamish assured the king it was far too late for bells to be ringing.

A short time later, Malcolm broke the silence. "May I ask something of you, Sire?"

"What do you wish to know, my good man?" The whisky had warmed Alaxandair's belly, and for a moment, his spirits.

"You spoke to that last MacDuff in a voice of regret. I do not understand." Malcolm's voice conveyed worry. "I have been with you for decades. Once you came of age, you restored order to the kingdom. You threw Haakon back into the sea when he invaded. The Battle of Largs was our victory. The Treaty of Perth expanded our lands. Your unhappiness lately, Sire, it vexes me."

The king was not expecting such an argumentative declaration. He believed a simple question to be forthcoming. That may have been the trigger for the wrath that began to build. The elation of the whisky was lost in a single moment. "Do not question my mental state, Sir Malcolm. Within ten years I lost my wife and all three of my children. If that is what counts for peace in your family or clan then I suspect they need to choose a new chief."

"I have wept at your side, m'lord. That is a pain I am well aware of and wish that I could relieve you of such agony. Yet, that is not what I inquire about. You seem to question your own reign. As your counselor and your friend, I feel I must remind you

that the realm has known great peace under your rule. Truly, it has been peace and prosperity.”

“Not for all, good sir. Not for all.”

“You spoke of blood to MacDuff. Do you mean the uprising?”

“Do not call it that!” Alaxandair’s roar was so unexpected that all three men behind him brought their horses to a halt. Father Callum’s steed cantered off to the left or he would have spilled over the edge within a few strides. “You and the rest of the council convinced me that a rebellion was brewing. Your council told me the plotters wished to restore what they called the rightful line of kings. I was all too willing to believe you. Hell, their ancestor had usurped Duncan and was then destroyed by your namesake. So, I believed you. I wanted to believe. And it was all lies. All of it.”

“Yes, our informants were liars and schemers, who we later found out were conspiring to take the lands of Clan MacBheatha.”

The king had no patience for such rationalizing. “I rode with fully armored knights and slaughtered farmers. Our so-called brave and chivalrous noblemen, we killed women and children. And you want to tell me once again how the failure of my council is supposed to alleviate my guilt. We burned their parish church for God’s sake.”

“The men on the council who failed you were punished. They lost their lands and titles. We rebuilt the church, m’lord. You did your best to restore the land.”

Frustration turned to outrage. “They lost their titles? Titles and lands? How do you speak so foolishly with such a serious mien? Not one of them lost a child! Not one of them held their wife as she bled out! Not one of them watched their livestock be

slaughtered and their crops burned. No, Sir Malcolm, do not talk to me of peace and prosperity on this night or any other for that matter.”

“Sire, I cannot let you...”

“Do not tell me of my business, Malcolm. You are no Canmore!” Everyone behind them came to a full stop. Alaxandair and Malcolm only slowed. “You do not know what I should or should not have done! You didn’t then and you’re lucky to still be with me now!” The king pulled on the reins and brought his stallion to a stop. “Ride with Sirs Arran and Keith. Tell Hamish to follow between us. I want no more conversation until we reach Wemyss.”

“Your Grace, I meant no offense. I only sought to...”

“I said drop back! Know your place, man!” Alaxandair spurred his horse. His large, white warhorse was a much finer equine than any in his party rode that night. He sprinted away, angry at them, but tormented by himself.



“Pappy? Do you recognize me?”

“Aye, DeeDee. I do. What are you doing here, lass? You shouldn’t have come all this way just to see your old Pap. Some folk round here aren’t too fond...well, they’re, let’s say I’m not...Saints be damned, Deirdre, are you alone?”

“No. My husband, Cinead, he’s there beyond the fence.”

Aodh looked in the direction his granddaughter was pointing. He saw a young man holding the reins of two horses. He turned back to his granddaughter and said, "Married are you? When in God's name did this happen?"

"Last year. Mum and Dad asked you to come."

"They did?" There was an intensity in Aodh's eyes as he asked the question.

The look made the young woman anxious, but she continued to do what she had come for. "Yes. You told them H is for goshawk."

"Right, right, yes, I do remember now. Heather told...no, no...someone told me. I'm sorry, Deidre. A damn fool I've been."

"Nothing to apologize for, Pap. I knew exactly what you meant."

"You did?" The irony was that Aodh wanted to know what his granddaughter meant, but his attention shifted again. He could not help but snap back to Cinead, standing patiently a short distance away. "Married? How is this...How is this..." He squeezed his eyes shut for a second. "You're too young...aren't you?"

"No," was all she answered. The young woman looked to the sky, hoping to spot her Pap's magnificent goshawk. "Hornie was practically a hatchling when I last saw her. Something had attacked her and bit her wing and leg. You nursed her back to health. That was seven years ago, Pap."

"It was? Lord have mercy, it has been that long."

"Hornie's not going to have much more time, Pap. That's why I'm here. I've been told the king is riding this day for Saint Andrews. All the times before, once his first wife passed, he would often go out whoring, but I never had time to come get you. Now, he goes to see his new queen. It will take some time and there are only two routes to

travel. There will be few with him. I think he might keep to the coast, not trusting the folks up this way, cause of what happened to people like you and Gran, Seumas and Moira. You have to be there, Pap. Kinghorn. Remember what you said to me? If you ever had the chance you would drive him into the sea at Kinghorn.”

Aodh was more confused than ever. “Kinghorn? Down by the sea? Why have you come to tell me this? You should be making a home with your man there, maybe a bairn or two to care for. This isn’t for you. Why are you...” Deirdre had held a rage deep down inside since her childhood, when she first learned what loss truly was. She did not have time for her grandfather’s sudden hesitation and interrupted him to put a stop to it.

“Gran told me to. Years ago, not long after the attack, when I was just a child, she said to look for the murdering bastard, watch him when I could. Keep my eyes to the horizon and my ears to the ground, she told me. If I heard or saw anything that might give you a chance, I should ride north. That’s what she said.”

“She did?” Tears broke free from his eyes. “I used to say that to her. I said those very words. But, I shouldn’t have put that on you. I mean, your Gran shouldn’t have...she shouldn’t have put that on you. I..or she..no, we had no right to do that.” Deirdre ignored him.

“She used to come see me, you know. Tell me what you were doing. How you were training Hornie. Here now. We’ve brought you a pony. You and Hornie can make it, but you must go. You must go now. H is for horse, Pap. Do you understand? You have to go now if you’re going to make it to Kinghorn.” There was still a look of slight disorientation, but the fog seemed to be lifting from his eyes. The clouds of confusion,

to Deirdre, looked to be clearing. She pressed on. “Do you still know how to ride, Pap?”

Aodh tried to straighten his back and lift his head as best he could. Hearing his granddaughter pleading with him to act brought some fire back to his belly. The last ride was put before him, something he had waited on for so many years. Clarity, at last, came to his eyes and mind. “Does anyone know you’re here, child?”

“No.”

“Then be sure to keep it that way. Leave the horse, give your Pap one last hug, and then be gone. Let no one see you until you’re back on the southern side of Loch Leven.” Pride swelled within Deirdre’s heart to see her Pap’s eyes come to life and a confidence in his voice once more. She put her arms around his gaunt frame, ignored the smell and filth of his clothes, and squeezed him tight.

“Goodbye, Pap. I love you. I’ve always loved you. I’ve missed you.”

“I love you too, lass.” Aodh hugged her back. “Probably should’ve come live with you years ago.” He released her and she started to back away.

“I understand why you didn’t.” Her lips quivered. “H is for goshawk.”

“No. That was just for all the people around here, but you live that way for so long and it’s what you become. But today, today H is for hecklebirnie. That is a word I know well.”

“Yes, it is. And there will be hell to pay.” Both Aodh and Deirdre had tears in their eyes. Neither one was sure why. Was it for the possibilities already lost or the ones that now could never be? Deirdre walked over to her husband, said a few words

that Aodh could not hear, and then returned with a pony. For several seconds they just stared at each other, saying no more. The horse snorted and broke the spell.

Aodh wiped his eyes and said, "H is for heart." He took the reins.

Deirdre laughed, but just barely. There was sadness in it. "I think H should be for Saint Helena. May she lead you into battle, and may you have the success of her son, Constantine." The young woman let go of the reins, made the sign of the cross, and walked away. Aodh did not believe in such things, but to see his granddaughter have faith in this world and beyond warmed his heart nonetheless.

"You remind me a lot of your Gran," said Aodh as he watched her go. "You're a saint to me, DeeDee. And I'm sorry, but you'll always be that wee lass with the joyous laugh. I haven't forgotten that. Don't you...don't you lose that!" For a brief moment, Deirdre stopped, wanting to go back and hug him again and thank him for those last words, especially the ones about her Gran. Yet, she knew he might not go if his granddaughter put the jess and hood of familial love on him. And Aodh had to go. He had to. Her Gran had told her that so long ago, but the knowledge really came from her own mind, her own heart. She knew that was all her grandfather truly had left.

Aodh watched as Deirdre's husband lifted her up onto their remaining pony, and for a moment he thought of what could have been. Yet, as they rode away, his mind returned to its singular focus for the past seven years. He had to get Hornie ready. Connie would be loosed along with the other animals in case he did not return. The two hunters had to ride and fly for the Firth of Forth and the coastline near Kinghorn. They had to go as hard and fast as an old man and a haggard hawk could manage.





“Alaxandair!” cried Hamish. There was no answer.

“My king, where are you?” called out Father Callum about fifty yards further inland, holding his lantern high.

“Do you see anything? Anything at all?” demanded Malcolm.

“I see nothing, Sir Malcolm,” shouted Arran.

“There is no sign of him, cried Keith.



“Well, Hornie, it seems either DeeDee was wrong, or the bastard went overland to Saint Andrews.” The goshawk lifted one foot, then the other. She repeated these steps several times, a bird of prey anxious to be released. “Easy now. We’ll wait just a while longer. I know. I know. You would’ve taken him easily in the light of day.”

Horse and rider, hawk and friend waited throughout the gloaming and into the darkness of night. There was no sign of their prey. “It’s going to be just fine, Hornie. I know. This was our best chance. We tried, old friend. We tried, but the time has come. That’s what she said to me. And, I see it now. Heather was right. It’s time to let go of it. The time has come for you and Connie to live your life. You need to be free. You need

to truly fly, once and for all.” There was irony then in Aodh’s next deed. He placed the jess on her foot. Next came the hood. Once she was secure on his wrist, he began to turn his pony back towards the Northwest. It would be a slow ride till the morning sun rose over the horizon of the firth.



All of that changed when Aodh heard a faint rhythm on his left. His heart beat several times before Aodh could believe what his ears were telling him. With those sounds, Aodh knew that the sun would never rise for those few who had heard the midnight bell toll. The sound of hooves, the three beat gait of a canter, found their way through the fog. He stopped his own horse to be sure. The sound was growing closer. Aodh nudged the sides of the pony and pulled the reins. They turned, and he walked them back towards the rugged coast, while scanning the darkness in the direction of the hoofbeats. While keeping his eyes focused, he reached for Hornie’s jess and hood, removing them with haste. Hornie saw the horse first and began to flex her leg muscles. They rippled as if she wanted to launch into the air immediately. Worried about her letting loose with a screech, he tried to calm the bird of prey.

“Steady, Hornie. Patience,” whispered Aodh. The pale horse made its way past them, silver adornments catching a glimmer of some eerie light every few strides. Aodh

and Hornie now heard people calling out from much farther down the coast. They saw two dim lights and knew they were too far away to save the king, who was now past the ambush point. In a few more seconds the prey would disappear. “Fly Hornie. This is our time.” He lifted his right arm into the air as if giving the old raptor a push, but it was not needed. Her wings spread and drove downward, lifting the bird into the cold, blackened sky. Within seconds she was airborne and gaining altitude. Aodh wanted to be patient, but he could no longer wait. Years had passed by. Not another second could be lost. The opportunity would not come again. They had to strike.

He first gave the command for the eyes. Hornie dove and attacked, using the silver of the bridle as a reference point, but the king’s horse dropped his head at the last second and Hornie went by so fast the king only heard the rush of air.

“What demon is this?” asked the king aloud. He pulled on the reins and brought the horse to a halt. Alaxandair looked to both his left and right, but he did not look up. He began to reach for his scabbard, which delayed him a few more seconds. Aodh and Heather had been wrong. Sometimes a target does stand still. Another whistle was heard. Three bursts rang out. Hornie’s second run at the stallion was true. She struck the left eye and gouged it with several talons and then flew off. The horse screamed in pain and reared up on its hind legs. It was all Alaxandair could do to keep his mount under control. He was struggling so much the king did not hear Aodh give the next command. Three whistles and then a long trill. Hornie circled twice, not being able to see well enough to descend, but then the adornments of the king’s saddle and stirrups gave her the reference she needed. Like Aodh had taught her and rewarded her for it hundreds of times, Hornie struck at the horse’s hind quarters. Alaxandair could do

nothing. The stallion felt the bird's talons sink into its flesh, and the horse bolted. The demon seemed to be attacking from its left, so the horse went to the right. Aodh heard them go over the edge and then there was only the breeze and a few more frightened, fog-dampened calls from the king's retinue.

Aodh gave a whistle and raised his gauntlet. He scanned the sky above, but could see nothing. If only for a moment, he betrayed his lack of belief and began to pray. He hoped that the God that Heather believed in would not punish Hornie for this act of regicide, a hawk murdering a king. His prayer was interrupted before he had even a few words out. The old raptor landed softer than she ever had before. Aodh prepped her for their travels north and began to ride, perhaps faster than was safe, but it was necessary. As they left, Hornie could not hold back anymore. The raptor, a silent death from above, now fastened to Aodh's gauntlet, released the loud, piercing screech of a hawk claiming its territory.



Aodh stepped inside the stone enclosure behind his home. Hornie held tight to the gauntlet on his right hand. She was not tethered or hooded, but stayed with him still. The weeds and grasses were getting high as Spring had begun to warm the ground, and Aodh never let the sheep and goats inside this square plot. He walked

over to a chunk of stone at the back left of the walled enclosure. On the marker was the name of a man who had been a mentor and friend. He said it out loud. Aodh had chiseled the fading inscription many years ago, having had the priest, Father Tamhas, write the letters down for him. Aodh had little knowledge of the written word. "Bram Leitch." He looked to the next stone on the right. "Shannon Leitch." He could not read the names, but he knew them well. They had been Heather's parents. He had never spoken to their tombstones before. In fact, he had only been inside these walls once since Heather's mother had been laid to rest. Alone now, except for old Hornie, he felt the need to explain. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I couldn't protect them. I was off hunting with Galen when the kingsguard came. Never hunted after that, Bram. You would have been disappointed in me. I know how much you loved to hunt, but I just couldn't do it anymore. Me, I just used traps round here to get some small game. Had to hunt one more time though... one more time. Had to, cause of what they did to my family...our family. One last time, you understand. Don't know who killed them that day, but I know who gave the order. He was here, in all his finery. They murdered them. Cut them down like animals. Burned us out. Left only the stone foundation. And he never stopped them. No, he was here, and he saw it all. He gave the order." Tears began to build in Aodh's eyes. They were a solution of sadness, loneliness, and a fury that had still not abated. The worst part was that Aodh now knew the rage would never leave him, despite what he had done. He rubbed his right eye and then his nose. It was too late for the left eye. Tears spilled down his cheek and ran through his thin beard. "The bastard's dead now, Bram. Eli, you remember old Eli, he came yesterday and told me the news. They finally announced his death. Big fight brewing over who will be next."

Aodh had not planned what he would say to his in-laws and now found himself out of words. He looked over at the low stone wall. Then he stared at the hills a good distance away. With one last look at their graves, he said, "I hope someday you'll forgive me."

Aodh then circled around to the two stone markers that lay about eight feet in front of Bram and Shannon. He tried to speak several times, but could not find the words. Instead, his knees became weak and he sat down with a hard plump beside the left stone. Hornie jumped off his arm and flapped her wings twice, but then landed on the marker to the right. Old Aodh began to weep and then shake with sobs. He had not been here since the day he carved these stones and placed them in the ground. Once more he had asked the priest to write out the words for him.

Hornie's head bobbed from side to side, watching him, but she never left. After a few minutes, a cry came from above and shortly thereafter, Connie landed on the stone wall to Aodh's left. Her presence snapped Aodh out of his uncontrolled sorrow, but he could not lose his grief completely. He rubbed his eyes and looked over at the young raptor. All he could say, as he turned back to the markers, was, "I'm so sorry, Moire. Forgive me. Forgive me, Seumas. It should have been me, not you. You two would've been such fine folk. Fine folk indeed."

Aodh struggled to get up. Hornie gave a small screech. On his feet at last, Aodh raised his right arm. Hornie came to him. Hawking had been a big part of his life before. For the last seven years it had pretty much been his entire existence. Yet, he knew the end had come. It was time for Hornie and Connie to be free. He lifted his left hand, which had no glove on it. Connie stared at him with a questioning look. Aodh

nodded and said, "It's all right, now. Come." She flew over and landed on his forearm. Her grip tightened, but did not lock on. Still, the talons dug into Aodh's flesh. For a second, it took his breath away, but he recovered.

Several times he looked back and forth at the two majestic raptors. "I'd give you a kiss, but those beaks of yours would tear my lips off." Aodh laughed at his own joke and the two birds of prey bobbed a couple of times. He leaned over instead and ran his head along Connie's right wing. "You're a strong lass. You go and raise some hatchlings and teach 'em how to hunt." He looked deep into her right eye, imagining what words she would say, yet knowing that wasn't possible. "Goodbye Connie." With that, he raised his left arm up in a swift launch. The pain was dreadful and her talons drew blood from Aodh's arm, but she was airborne and away. Hornie's goodbye was longer. Aodh nuzzled his head in her breast feathers, trying to ignore the pain in his left arm. She gave a few light pecks to his head, scratching his scalp without drawing blood. "You go now, Hornie. You enjoy what time you have left. You know how to hunt. It's time for you to pass that on. Take care of Connie while she gets the lay of the land and how to catch game. Teach her hatchlings how to hunt. You'll be a gran, just like Heather." He rubbed his cheek against her wing one last time. "Goodbye, my beautiful friend. Remember me. Maybe, if it's all real, we will go hunting again someday?" And with that, his right arm drove skyward. Hornie gave a terrible screech, but she flew away strong and smooth. The only beauty left in Aodh's life soared into the sky.

He did not bother to wipe the tears from his eyes this time. One task remained within the family cemetery. The plot of land was so small that it only took three steps before he stood in front of the last marker. Laying in the back and to the right, this

gravestone had half the enclosure to itself. Again, Aodh stated what was on the marker, though he had never learned to read. He had insisted on carving this one himself, just like the others, but he had to stop so many times. He would lose his focus after a letter or two. The last two words had made him cry when he asked the priest to write them down. A larger stone than the rest, it held two names along with four other words. "Heather Beattie, my wife, my love." He knelt down this time.

"It's done, Heather. We did it." Aodh's lips began to tremble and for a few moments he could not continue. Then, with a deep breath, he regained some composure. "I'm sorry it took so long. Seumas and Moire are avenged. You are avenged." That was the rage that still held sway over his heart. He took a few short breaths this time and tried to let out the other emotions. They came in a flood. "I miss you. I miss you so much." Aodh brought his hands up to his face and sobbed. He could not get any breath at this point. Then he straightened and stared into the sky. He shook his head and said, "I'm not sure why I got left behind here. I was angry with them royals and then mad at myself, and then I was angry with you. I hated everyone. Why did you leave me? Why did you get to go with Seumas and Moire and I had to stay? That's what I kept asking God and Father Tamhas and everyone else, everyone. They didn't have any answers. No one did. In the end, all I had was silence and hate. Till one day I found this hawk, up there in the hills, torn up wing and broken leg. One of its eyes was bad. That's when I knew what I had to do." He laughed at the memory. "And that's when you started helping me, pointing out all my fears, all my doubts. You made me think things through and answer them, just as a good wife should. God I miss you. You were so good as a mother. You were so amazing as a wife. It's over now, my love.



It's over now. Wherever you are, I hope you rest easy. I hope you have peace, and maybe, who knows, maybe I'll see ya soon. Maybe I won't. I don't know. I just know I love ya, Heather." He put his hand to his head and almost, by reflex, made the sign of the cross, but he decided not to. Instead, he simply said, "I'll always love you."

Aodh heard the goshawks above him. They called out a few times, but he did not even look up. He was afraid if he saw them, the loneliness he now felt would consume him. He would fall to the ground and cry until he had nothing left. He would lie beside his wife one last time, never bothering to get up. Or worse, he might call them back. That would be one sin too many, even for Aodh. He put a hand on Heather's marker and stood up. The tears had finally stopped. Aodh straightened his shoulders and stood tall for the first time in many years. This was the end.

"I guess H was for Heather all along."

Aodh was not surprised. He did not jump. With a calm that comes from resignation, he turned to see Sheriff Curwen. Matter-of-factly he said, "It was." The lawman stood just outside the graveyard. A few yards behind him stood Sir Arran and Sir Keith with ten men-at-arms backing them. Aodh saw Father Callum and Father Tamhas further back. The former looked angry. The latter seemed sad.

"Sirs Arran and Keith, they need to talk to you, Aodh."

"Is that right? What about?"

The sheriff snorted a short laugh, as if to say, "Do we have to play this game?" Yet, he gave the old man the benefit of the doubt. "I'm sure you've heard of our king's accident along the coast." Aodh just nodded. "These men were there. They were searching for the king when it happened. Seems he'd lost his way in the darkness."

“Tragedy that. The coastline is treacherous in some places.”

Now it was the sheriff’s turn to tilt his head to the side, raise his hands, and shrug his shoulders. “All the men agree that they heard Alaxandair cry out before his horse fell upon the rocks.”

“I would expect that,” said Aodh in agreement.

“Right. The trouble is; they also agree that they all heard whistles before that. Distinct whistles. Almost like commands.”

“I’ve never spent much time at the seashore. Loch Leven was always enough for me. But I’ve heard that a lot of strange sounds can come in off the firth.”

“I wish it was that, Aodh. I wish it was, but...”

Arran interjected. “It came from the other direction. There can be no doubt.”

The sheriff looked back at him and raised his hand in a mild gesture. He wanted this to go as smoothly as possible. Many in the area were not sad to see the king gone. His men, the kingsguard, coming here, like this, might tip them into rage, and the sheriff would be the one that had to deal with that.

He turned back to Aodh and said, “They also heard the cry of a hawk not long after the king’s screams.”

“The king did not scream!” yelled Father Callum from the rear. Again, the sheriff held up his hand, trying to keep the peace.

“Enough of this,” demanded Arran. He placed his hand on the pommel of his sword and took a step forward. “You will come with...” He did not get to finish the sentence. Without warning or sign, a silent killer struck from above. The knight had not worn his helmet, nor armor. None of that was needed to take in an old man. He would

regret it the rest of his life. Hornie's talons tore into his left cheek and eye socket, blinding that eye and scarring his face. The goshawk rose into the air again. The soldiers stood there stunned, not knowing their turn was about to come. A few seconds after Hornie flew away, and all eyes were on her, Connie attacked. She did not cause much damage, simply knocking off one man's crude iron helmet, but she did cause a short panic. Having no need of archers, they had no long range weapons. A few of the men picked up rocks and launched them at Connie. One lithe arm managed to clip a few feathers from her right wing, but the rest fell harmlessly short.

"Call them off, Aodh!" pleaded the sheriff.

Aodh was not merciful, but he had set Hornie and Connie free, and he did not want to see them injured or killed. In the language they had developed together, he let Hornie know that what they had done was enough. She needed to fly away. She needed to take Connie with her. They were free. He let out a long sad whistle and held the note with every bit of air in his lungs. As the last breath left his chest, the sound slowly died. Hornie and Connie swooped down along the burn in front of their home one last time, then pushed hard into the sky and began to fly for the hills beyond. Every man there watched them go, with no more effort at insult or violence.

It was the sheriff who broke the silence. "Aodh, there's nowhere to go, so let's try to keep this peaceful. It took a few weeks to piece this together, but you are the only one it could be. All of the royal falconers had alibis. So did the Earl's men. Your own son's family was questioned and investigated, but it was clear they weren't involved. The Earl at Wemyss stands by them. Your son has been a loyal and faithful huntsman for him, his favorite. You're the only one left that it could be. Seeing as how there is no

successor to the king, except for his granddaughter, Margaret, those that are now positioning themselves to take the throne, well, they don't really care about exacting revenge on your family. Nothing will happen to them, but as for you...I'm sorry, Aodh, but we can't just let this go."

Aodh had stopped listening to the sheriff's long-winded explanation after he said the Earl of Fife would stand by his son. Instead, he asked, "Sheriff Curwen, could you step aside? Please. I wish to speak to Sir Keith."

The sheriff moved off and the knight stepped forward. "Time to end this old man. Come now, and we will be merciful."

"I've seen what remains after your mercy. Tell me, Keith, were you here seven, eight years ago, when the king's men came to put down our so-called uprising, our imagined plot to overthrow him and put a Bethune or a Leitch on the throne?"

With a hint of arrogance, or possibly cruelty, Keith answered, "I was."

Aodh turned his head back to the gravestone and whispered, "Forgive me, Heather. You were right. I am an old fool."

"What was that?" asked Sir Keith, stepping forward a couple of paces beyond the rest of the men, just short of the stone wall.

Aodh ignored his query and asked one of his own. "Tell me, Keith, is that a stag I see on your crest?" Though the man knew his family's crest very well, he still looked down at it, but did not answer, for Aodh was not in need of a response. He looked at the sheriff and said, "H is for home, Sheriff. And it's time for me to go there." Aodh saw the confusion on the sheriff's face. He saw the same in Sir Keith's eyes as he raised his head up. With as much speed as he had left in his weary bones, Aodh pulled his

dagger and charged. He jumped up on the short stone wall that bordered the family plot and leaped into the air. Neither Keith nor Arran, Curwen nor Callum, not even the men-at-arms were ready. Keith did not even have his sword unsheathed, a strap still around the hilt. The soldiers could not save the first knight from the goshawk's attack. Nor could they save the second one from her master and friend. No one else in their party, however, was injured or killed that day. Aodh got his wish and briefly laughed as he fell from a mortal wound from some nameless soldier, for Curwen was too shocked to move and a blind and bloodied Arran was simply trying to pull his comrade away. Keith tried to cry out, but the dagger to his throat prevented it. After less than a minute, all fell silent. Then, as Father Tamhas would tell the tale for the rest of his life, the hills rang true with the screams of goshawks. They called out four times each. Father Tamhas would say they were for the mother, children, and then father of the slain Beattie family. Whether truth or embellishment was never known. Aodh became a story told in both churches and alehouses. Then he was a legend. Finally, he was forgotten in the wars that followed. The goshawks were never heard or seen again.

\*This is a tale of fiction. However, a few things are based on history. Alexander III of Scotland (Alaxandair is a Gaelic spelling.) reigned from 1249 to 1286. He died on a midnight ride to visit his new queen in March of 1286. It was her birthday the next day. Alexander became separated from his retinue and guides near Kinghorn. The next morning, it became apparent that he had ridden off the high edge of the coastline. He died of a broken neck. Due to the premature death of his three children, his granddaughter, Margaret, the Maid of Norway, was to succeed him. However, there was much dispute. Edward I of England became involved in negotiations, endorsing her as the rightful heir. Unfortunately, she died enroute to Scotland in 1290. This unleashed a rivalry between John Balliol, Robert Bruce, and a few others. Edward arbitrated the dispute and sided with Balliol, who became king. Balliol was a weak king and was dominated by Edward. This frustrated many Scottish nobles, and Balliol was eventually deposed. Balliol, being a wealthy nobleman himself, simply retired to his lands in France. Edward did not care for his man being overthrown by a council of regents and used it, and Scotland's new alliance with France, as pretext to dominate Scotland militarily and politically. This is the time period portrayed in Mel Gibson's movie, *Braveheart*. Robert Bruce's grandson, Robert, switched sides a few times, but finally led the fight for Scottish independence. Though a long continuous struggle, most historians point to the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314 as the pivotal event for Scottish freedom. Robert Bruce became King Robert I. So, a king, who some say might have had too much to drink, riding alone in the fog and dark, fell to his death, unleashing almost thirty years of violence and bloodshed. The story always seemed like such a strange quirk of history. I always wondered if there was more to the story. *His for Goshawk* is what I imagined.