



EDINBURGH, AUGUST 1644

I DUCKED THROUGH THE WORN doorway of the house we were lodged in and stepped out into Craig's Close – the wynd where my kin and I had lived for as long as I could remember. Twas a dreary morning, and I'd had to be careful no to wake my pa on my way out – though I had my story prepared should I need it, and planned to tell him I'd gone to fetch some old wool scraps for work in the shop. To my surprise, I'd had no need to explain myself. Yet.

Across the wynd, a fresh red cross marred the door of the MacNabs' home, visible even in the dim blue-grey light of the pre-dawn. Without thinking, I touched the pouch of rosemary and rue I wore about my neck, crushing the herbs between my fingers till the rich, clean scent reached me, masking the other – considerably less pleasant – smells of the alley. If the plague had made it this close to the house, it didnae bode well, even for those of us up on the third floor. Pa would want to move us all – myself, my ma and my grandmother, who I still called Luckie though I was a man grown – maybe to the shop, or mayhap he'd try his luck with one of his more friendly customers. Either way, it winnae bode well for my plans to leave. No that he knew what I was planning, and I had nae intention

of him finding out.

Pulling my green, woollen doublet tight against the chill mist on the air, I headed up the cobbles toward the entrance of the close, my calves long accustomed to the ache that came along with the many hills of Edinburgh. I couldnae help but glance back at the red cross. The MacNabs were good people, though I didnae ken them all that well these days. I hoped the plague hadnae taken all of them – or if it had, that it had at least been quick.

Though the sun hadnae quite breached the horizon, I was already late. Twas my plan to meet with Robert at the market, but I had a feeling he'd likely still be causing mischief in a tavern somewhere, and no likely to remember our arrangement, so I didnae hurry myself. Still, I thought, ducking once more to avoid hitting my head on the stone lintel at the wynd's entryway, I could manage without him. And he was already aiding me in so many other ways these coming days that I'd do well to forgive his lapse of memory.

The high street was almost empty so early on, though the usual drunken stragglers were about – the sort that made me want to avert my eyes, where in truth I stood a wee bit taller at their approach. And I was already tall for my age, at nigh on six foot, so this had the desired effect of deterring anyone who might be considering approaching. In all honesty, Edinburgh wasnae made for a lad so tall as I was, but I kent t'would be to my advantage, tomorrow, when Robert and I put our admittedly underhanded plan into motion.

On my left, the great shape of St. Giles Cathedral loomed, casting its claw-like shadow on the dim street below. I strolled right past and up the hill, winding my way between a couple of overturned stalls that hadnae yet been set right.

It might have been the dreich morning or my nerves a-jangling

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that sent a shiver through me as I walked, my leather shoes making all but no sound underfoot on the damp cobbles. The purse tied beneath my shirt didnae make much noise either, since there were few enough coins inside it, but that didnae stop my thoughts from wandering to thieves at this hour. I had only enough for the one purchase – a horse, pre-arranged with a questionable trader – and twas likely more than I'd ever carried on my person at one time, even if the horse in question was likely to be a gaunt, mistreated thing worth less than I intended to pay for it. But Robert had assured me that the trader was eager to get rid of the thing, and with it likely being stolen, he'd take less for it than he might have any other time. With the plague, he winnae be the only man simply trying to make his way with what he could. And a trader such as this one wasnae likely to ask too many questions about why a tailor's son might need a stolen horse.

Turning west along the High Street, my long stride soon had me at the mouth of West Bow – a steep, winding street that curled down from the ridge. The air grew cooler as I descended, tall houses pressing in on me protectively from either side. At the bottom, the world opened out once more and the Grassmarket spread before me, broad and muddy, the air thick with the lowing of cattle and the sharp tang of dung and smoke – though the plague restrictions meant the market was but a ghost of what it had been in previous years. Above, the grandeur of the castle loomed as the day's first traders began their work at the pens.

A few people were already about, hoping to grab an early bargain before the rest of the world awoke, but Robert was nowhere to be seen – though glancing past the gallows and over at the old White Hart, I had an inkling I might know where he could be.

I sighed and pushed a hand through my dark hair – the hair that pa had demanded I cut as recently as last night. I didnae need Robert by my side for so simple a task as bartering for a mare, but still... I was already uneasy with the idea of spending coin I hadnae fairly earned – and I'd sold my pa's silver thimble to get enough. Though I didnae think he'd miss it, the guilt weighed upon my heart. The sight of a friend and soon-to-be comrade would have bolstered me a wee bit, and helped me to forget, I reckoned.

Making my way between the stalls and pens of the market, I feigned interest in the traders' goods here and there until I spotted the man I was after. Robert had described him to me in considerable detail, and it was true he didnae exactly blend in with the usual folk.

Weather-beaten and ancient, I couldnae help but take in his appearance with a tailor's eye: patches in his hose, a well-worn linen shirt much like my own, but likely more costly when it was new. Leather boots in much the same condition. All in all, the picture of a man who'd once had plenty of coin to his name, though he'd worked a hard life, likely outdoors – now brought low and selling off what he could until his situation changed.

The chill set deeper into my bones as I scanned the surrounding area. The mare I'd come to purchase was nowhere in sight. Instead, I noted a shaggy Highland garron – likely stolen – tied beside him. Twas the only animal he had with him, and there wasnae a chance in heaven or hell of this fierce old bloke accepting the four shillings I had on me for a garron like that – stolen or no. And no likely I'd be able to scrape together any more before the morn, either.

It was too late to change course now. I had nae choice but to try and talk the man down to an affordable price, though I kent going in twas a fool's errand. But my only other option was to take one of

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my father's prized horses without permission, and I had – perhaps foolishly – thought to avoid stealing away the verra thing that aided him in his livelihood, offering him the means to reach wealthier clients outside of the city who had fled the plague-ridden streets. 'Twas bad enough that I was to abandon him – and my ma, and Luckie – without my help at the shop, but the life of a tailor wasnae for me. I knew it, and so did my pa, deep down. I was fated for war. I yearned for it.

I drew up beside the trader, taking in his one, slightly milky eye and rough, unshaven face. He gave me an equally appraising look, and I wondered what he made of me. I was a good fit or so taller than he was – than most were – and I towered above him, already broad for my age.

“You the Murray lad?”

“Aye,” I nodded, folding my arms and leaning against the stall beside the garron. “But this isnae the mare ye promised to bring.”

The trader cleared his throat, rubbing at his stubbled jaw. “You’re a keen one, eh? The mare’s gone. Sold. But tis a fine horse here, he’ll do you well.”

“I dinnae doubt that’s the truth of it, but it wasnae the deal you made.”

“He’s a bargain. Seven shillings and he’s yours.”

That’s the end o’ that then, Murray.

I tried not to let my disappointment show – in the trader, and in Robert. If he’d turned up, we might have been able to come to some sort of arrangement. I didnae want Robert’s charity, but in a tight spot I’d take it, should he offer it.

“You must think me daft,” was all I said. “He’s no worth more than four.” I could tell before I’d even finished speaking that the

trader saw right through me. Mayhap my disbelief came across in my tone, but I couldnae leave it be. There was nae harm in trying, to save myself from a bad deed later.

The trader chuckled, his laugh low and rough. “You’re no too familiar with bartering at the market, eh? He’s worth twice what I’m offering, lad, and I’m only keen to trade as to get rid of the thing. Seven’s my lowest, and that’s a kindness.”

I stood up straighter and did the only thing I could – I swallowed my pride. He wasnae wrong, of course – my pa hadnae often let me come along to purchase fabrics and the like, and most of his better-paying customers preferred to provide their own anyway. I’d ne’er come close to trading for livestock before.

“I dinnae have seven. Ye ken I dinnae have seven, since Robert likely said as much.” I shoved my hands deep into the pockets of my breeches. “If you’re so damned desperate to get rid o’ him, you’ll take four shillings.”

“Look, lad—” he started.

“Nick! You’re here!” Robert appeared out of nowhere and slapped me on the back in greeting, throwing an arm around me though he hardly reached three inches above my shoulder. Despite that, he cut a striking figure in a well-cut blue doublet I remembered stitching myself, matching full breeches and a lace collar. His sword belt was mercifully empty, which seemed for the best considering the scent of ale he’d brought with him. No doubt he’d been in the tavern, as suspected.

“Aye, I’m here.” I couldnae help but smile at Robert’s easygoing enthusiasm – though he was almost five years older than me, I didnae recall a time when we hadnae been friends.

Pa had worked for his father, also Robert Balfour, the 2nd Lord

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Balfour of Burleigh, for as long as I could remember, travelling out to Burleigh Castle for various reasons. I'd accompanied Pa since I was a child and become close friends with Robert in particular – though I had a grudging respect for his older brother John, too – training with the sword and generally getting up to the sorts of mischief young lads will when left together. Twas, I suspected, part of the reason Robert had remained in the city despite his family fleeing to the countryside when the plague hit again. If I was honest, I appreciated the company.

The trader looked first to me then to Robert. He wasn't the only one either – someone who looked and dressed like Robert Balfour drew attention wherever he went. It was clear to even a dullard that he didnae belong here, amongst the working lower classes. But twas his decision to remain, and he'd been having a merry time of it, as far as I could tell.

A broad grin split his face. "So, are we to buy a horse?"

I shook my head. "It doesnae look like it."

His face fell as he turned to the trader. "What of the mare we discussed yesterday?"

The old man shrugged. "Sold. And your friend isnae willing to part with seven shillings for this fine garron," he gestured toward the shaggy creature, which looked decidedly less than fine by any man's reckoning.

I could tell from the frown on Robert's face that he was thinking fast, but we both kent that this was our last chance. While his family provided him with a generous allowance, he was hardly in good standing with his father given the low company he kept here in the city, and generous as Robert may be, even he couldnae afford an expense of seven shillings at short notice. So turning my back to the

trader, I grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him away.

“How’re we to leave if you dinnae have a horse, Nick?” Robert muttered. “Twas a done deal. The man had all but agreed to the sale...”

“Dinnae fash, Rob. We’ll think o’ somethin’ afore the morn,” I tried to reassure him as we left the edges of the still quiet market behind, our feet taking us in the direction of the White Hart without much thought. “And if I’ve no choice, then I’ll take my pa’s horse.”

“He’d ne’er forgive ye.” His stricken expression likely matched my own.

“Aye, but then I’m no likely to be returnin’ any time soon, either. No if we’re to go to battle with Tullibardine’s men. We’ll likely be called along to another no long after, anyway.” I was trying to convince myself as much as him, but I wasnae doing much of a job of it.

I stooped my head down as we stepped into the tavern navigating the all-too-familiar low doorway. Inside, the space was dimly lit and filled with murky smoke from the open hearth – the smell of burning peat ever present beneath the mingled scent of ale and human sweat. Taking a deep breath, I felt a wee bit of the tension drain from my shoulders, and I followed Robert to a rough-hewn wooden table at the back of the room, fresh sawdust rustling beneath my feet with every step.

A pretty young blonde lass caught my eye as she wove her way between the tables, her hair escaping from beneath her linen cap.

Robert raised a hand to call her over, and she changed direction, heading straight for us.

“A jug of your best ale, if you please, Jenny,” he grinned up at her, and she blushed furiously, backing away without a word. More

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than one of the serving girls in the White Hart had taken a fancy to Robert, what with his striking clothing and generous nature.

The murmur of early morning patrons created a quiet hum in the air, broken by the bark of a wee terrier at a table by the front door, who was eyeing up his master's pie with a look of pure canine calculation. 'Twas much warmer here than out in the market, and despite the dire situation with the horse, I already felt better than I had all morning.

Jenny returned a moment later, balancing a battered jug and two tin tankards with practiced ease. She set them down between us with a deftness that made me wonder if she'd ever spilled a drop in her life. And of course, Robert, ne'er one to waste an opportunity, flashed her that grin of his – the one that worked on serving girls and nobleman's daughters alike.

"Thank you, Jenny," he said, leaning in close, all honey and mischief. "You've a finer hand for ale than any in Edinburgh."

She tried to hide her smile, blushing once more, but it tugged at the corners of her mouth all the same. "Aye, and a quicker hand for a clout if you try your luck, Robert Balfour."

I poured myself a tankard full, and raised it to her with a solemn nod. "Ye mock, but he's right, Jen. If the ale's as strong as your tongue, I'll be lucky to see noon upright."

She laughed, a bright sound in the smoky gloom, and shook her head at me. "You'll be lucky if you're standin' at all, Nick Murray, if you drink it as quick as you talk."

Robert elbowed me, serving his own drink. "He's only quick with his tongue when there's a lass to impress. Otherwise, you'd think him struck dumb."

I snorted into my ale. "That's rich, comin' from a man who's

empties his purse afore he's even filled it. I'd wager ye've spent more keepin' me in drink than you e'er have on yourself."

Robert raised his tankard in mock salute. "Aye, but it's worth every penny to see you try and keep up."

Taking a deep swig of my ale, I leant back against the wall, making myself comfortable on the rough bench. Jenny lingered a moment, her eyes twinkling with amusement as she watched the pair of us, before she was called away by another patron. I watched her go, feeling the warmth of the fire and the ale settle into my bones.

For a moment, my worries about the horse faded into the background. With Robert at my side and a wee bit of laughter in the air, it was almost possible to believe the world outside hadnae changed at all. But I couldnae while the day away in the tavern. Like as not, Pa would be up and expecting me at the shop already – and since I kent I winnae be about on the morn, it seemed only fair to put in a day's work before I abandoned him.

TWAS A LONG DAY OF WORK, dodging Pa's endless questions about where I'd been that morning – since of course, I hadnae a scrap of wool or anything the like to back up my story, and I'd arrived at the shop on Cowgate already smelling of the tavern.

Pa and I got on well enough most days, but of late he'd seemed less and less pleased with my friendship with Robert. I kent that he sent letters back to Robert's father from time to time, keeping him informed of all that his son was up to in the city – but in recent weeks he'd been more vocal in expressing his disapproval, and my patience for it was wearing thin. Robert Balfour might have been the son of a nobleman with a streak of rebellion in him, aye, but he was

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also a good man. And I kent that more than most.

The day passed in a blur of needle and thread, my fingers working almost without thought as I stitched together a waistcoat for one of Pa's regulars. The familiar motions – the push and pull of the thread, the careful measuring – were comforting in their own way, even as my mind wandered to tomorrow's journey. Each time Pa's shadow fell across my work, I schooled my features into casual concentration, not wanting him to read the unease in my eyes.

"Ye've a steady hand today, Nicholas," Pa remarked, inspecting my stitching with a critical eye that missed nothing. He was a man of few words, my father – stout and greying at the temples, with green eyes much like my own but none of my height. What I lacked in his precision and patience, I made up for in the broader strokes of creativity – a fair trade, I'd always thought. But no as useful.

"Tryin' to make up for my late start," I replied, which seemed to satisfy him.

By the time we made it home after dusk, the close was thick with the evening smells of boiled cabbage and peat smoke, and I'd fielded more questions than a man ripe for hanging. The familiar aromas of home – the woody scent of Pa's tools mixed with the lingering trace of the rosemary, sage and lavender Ma hung from the rafters – greeted us as we climbed the narrow stairs. I ducked through the doorway, far too small for my frame, noting how the worn wood was smoothed from years of hands and shoulders passing through. I'd been noticing that sort of thing today, mayhap since I wasnae sure when I'd see it next.

I was silent and sullen through dinner, though I'd hoped to enjoy my last evening with Ma, Pa and Luckie in peace. Of the three of us, Luckie was the only one at ease – Ma had had a tough time

bartering for the crock of fresh butter she'd laid out on the table for supper, but Pa hadnae even noticed, as far as I could tell. Still, the thin broth and day-old bread tasted better for that bit of butter. He wasnae the sort to comment, though – ne'er had been, though Ma hadnae caught on to the fact.

Ma bustled about, her thin face still pretty though lined with the strain of recent months. Her fingers, once nimble with a needle like Pa's, had grown stiff, but she managed the household with the same quiet efficiency she'd always had. Tonight, though, her movements were sharper than usual, her eyes darting to the window more often – the plague had a way of making everyone nervous, even within the safety of their own walls.

"More broth, Nicholas?" Ma asked, ladling a wee bit more into my wooden bowl before I could answer. Her hand brushed my shoulder with unexpected tenderness.

"Thank ye," I murmured, though I couldnae meet her gaze. Did she ken? Had she sensed the weight of my decision somehow? Ma had always had a way of knowing things – no like Luckie with her second sight, but a mother's instinct that hadnae led her astray yet.

Our rooms on Craig's Close were modest enough, but well-kept: the main chamber was low-ceilinged, the beams darkened by years of smoke. The walls had once been green or ochre – though I didnae remember them that way, faded now as they were. A single, deep-set window let in the last purple of the gloaming as we ate supper, the glass wavy and cool to the touch. Twas the colour that marked the time each night when Pa would tell us to hush and Luckie told her stories while she darned in her thrice-mended chair, the soft click and scrape a comfort I'd kent all my life. There was always a glint of mischief in her gaze, as if she carried secrets from the sea and the old

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country, and tonight she seemed more watchful than usual.

“Give us a tale, then,” Pa said to Luckie once our meal was done, settling into his chair with a sigh. His hands rested on his knees, the calluses and tiny scars of his trade visible even in the firelight. My own calluses were a wee bit different these days after so much sword practice with Robert. “Somethin’ to chase away the chill.”

Luckie’s eyes crinkled at the corners as she smiled, her face a map of wrinkles that told of a life well-lived. She settled more comfortably in her chair. She’d come from Orkney as a young woman, bringing with her tales of the sea and ancient powers that had filled my childhood with wonder. Though her accent had softened over the years, it still carried the lilt of the islands when she told her stories. I’d miss it more than I cared to admit when I was gone.

I sat on a stool at the battered table as I listened, writing in my journal as was my habit. It had started as a way to practice my letters and numbers, and I had to admit my handwriting had improved for it... but I’d found that getting my thoughts down had a way of alleviating them from the mind, in a way that talking them through – even the secret ones – didnae.

The familiar scratch of my quill against the paper kept time with Luckie’s voice as she spun tales of selkies slipping from their seal-skins beneath the light of the moon, and of ancient bargains made with powers beyond mortal understanding.

The fire crackled in the hearth, casting dancing shadows across the worn floorboards, and the weight of all that would come on the morrow pressed down on me – these last hours all the more precious since I didnae ken if I’d make it back here after. But for a while, I could almost believe I was a wee lad again, with no thoughts of war or duty.

I glanced up from my journal to find Luckie's eyes fixed on me, knowing and sad all at once. She'd always had the sight, or so Ma claimed – a gift or curse from her island ancestors that let her see more than most. Whether true or mere fancy, I couldnae say, but then, with her gaze piercing through me, I felt as if she could read every thought in my head; every plan I'd made.

The shadows grew long, the fire burned lower, and the city outside fell quiet. Ma soon fell asleep in her spot by the fire, and even Pa's eyes were drifting closed when Luckie's tales came to their natural end, and she began to hum a tune to herself.

Twas a song I knew well from my youth, one she'd whistled and hummed and sang all my life, though I'd ne'er heard the words that went with it. Except tonight, her voice low and ancient, she began to sing:

*"The flame-haired lass shall cross your path,
when darkness shadows day and night.
In her your heart will find its match,
through her, your soul shall come alight."*

Luckie's voice was rough and somehow sweet, as she sung her song over, weaving a spell the likes of which I'd ne'er felt. The fire in the hearth sparked and flamed higher, and a heat like molten iron burned in my veins, filling me with strength and a longing that spread from my heart to the tips of my fingers and toes. Her words danced in the air until it began to feel charged, and a barrage of sensations flooded through me; the whisper of hands on my skin, the ghost of velvety laughter, and the scent of the sky after a summer storm: fragrant and fresh and beyond powerful. The force of the impression pinned me to my chair, and I surrendered to it, allowing

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the strange and miraculous awareness to consume me. I hadnae a name for it, and yet I kent twas mine – it belonged to me, and I to it.

All the while, Luckie's gaze held onto me as she sang the words through a third and final time. Nothing in her charm was myth or legend. Twas no meant to warn or teach or entertain as her stories might be, but a truth, for my ears alone, that she had waited to tell me until now.

As her song faded quietly into the dark corners of the room, I realised... she kent what I was planning. It wasnae a secret from her – and in truth, she'd always been able to read me better than most. She didnae believe I'd be a-coming back to hear her words – her *prophecy* – again. And if anyone were to ken such a thing afore they possibly could, t'would be Luckie.

"Who is the flame-haired lass?" I asked, keeping quiet so as no to wake Ma and Pa. I could feel the power of her words still reverberating through the small chamber, the air itself still heavy. I didnae think I'd ever forget the feeling – the inexplicable ache and sense of belonging – and I already kent I'd fight all my days to feel it again. "What shadows, Luckie?"

She picked up her needles again, still humming the tune to herself. "I cannae say, lad, ye ken that."

"O' course ye can! Ye dinnae come out with a thing like that and no have anythin' to say!" Twas all verra well telling me my heart would find its match, and making me feel such things, but shadows? I didnae like the sound of that. Not the night afore I went to war. "Who is she? Where will our paths cross?"

Luckie smiled to herself, but she wasnae going to answer my questions. She rarely did, on such occasions – though there'd been

few enough, twas true. And naught quite like this.

“Ye only need take care o’ yourself, Nick. Take care wi’ your heart and dinnae go chasing shadows and darkness and the like. They’ll find ye well enough, anyhow.”

LUCKIE’S WORDS STUCK WITH ME AS I tried to sleep that night. I kent I wasnae like to get much real rest, since I’d decided leaving early on would be the best approach if I wanted to sneak out unseen. There winnae be any goodbyes for me – I didnae have much choice in the matter, since if my Pa kent what I was planning, he’d have put a stop to it afore I could get a foot out the door. But regret hung heavy over me, ne’ertheless.

Dawn hadnae yet broken when I rose from my pallet, gathering the few belongings I hadnae already smuggled to the Balfour townhouse in the Canongate. My journal, a small knife Luckie had given me years ago, and a spare shirt – the rest of my meagre possessions were already waiting for me. Robert had been generous beyond measure, providing me with a fine basket hilt sword and dirk with his family crest on that had belonged to a cousin who’d died last winter. The leather armour we’d acquired had been trickier, and try as I might I hadnae been able to forget the wee ‘adventure’ we’d had to endure to get it.

I moved quietly through the small chambers in my soft leather boots, pausing only to cast a final glance at Luckie’s sleeping form. I wasnae sure if I saw her eyes flicker open in the gloom – but if she was awake, she didnae make a move to stop me. Mayhap she truly did see what was to come.

The stairs creaked beneath my weight as I descended into the

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pre-dawn darkness. At the bottom, a fine mist hung in the night air, the cobblestones treacherously slick. I made my way through Craig's Close, keeping to the shadows as best I could. Edinburgh was ne'er truly asleep, but at this hour, only the night watchmen and the occasional early-rising tradesman were about.

Pa kept his horse stabled behind Mistress Campbell's wool shop on Cowgate, no far from our own shop. The wee stable yard there housed four horses belonging to various merchants who paid her husband a small monthly fee. The lock on the gate was simple enough to manage – I'd watched Pa open it countless times.

The stable was dark and smelled strongly of hay and horse dung as I slipped inside. Pa's gelding – a sturdy bay he'd named Rabbie after the stablemaster who'd helped him acquire it – whickered softly at my approach. I stroked his muzzle, whispering calming words as I slipped the bridle over his head.

"Easy now, lad," I murmured. "We've a bit o' a journey ahead o' us."

With practiced movements, I saddled Rabbie and led him quietly into the yard. Every shadow made my heart skip, certain I'd be caught at any moment – no that I was exactly doing anything wrong. But the streets were still empty.

Leading Rabbie through the narrow closes would be nigh on impossible, so I took a longer route around by Cowgate and up toward St. Mary's Wynd, heading for Robert's family townhouse. Twas a grand three-story building with ornate stonework around the windows and a small courtyard accessible through an arched entry. Grand as it may be, Robert had spent as many nights sleeping on our floor as I had enjoying the comforts of his father's homes since his father and brother had left the city. No that they exactly kent

that, like.

The sky was lightening to a pale grey as I approached. Robert was already waiting in the courtyard, his horse saddled and packed with provisions. His own mount was a magnificent chestnut stallion that worth more than my pa would see in several years hard work.

“Ye’re here!” Robert’s grin was contagious, and I grinned right back at him as I took in another pack of provisions waiting for me. His eyes fell to Rabbie, and his expression softened. “Had to do it, then?”

“Aye. Had nae choice in the matter,” I replied, tying Rabbie to a post. “And I’ll send coin back to Pa if I can... to make up for it. Enough to buy him a better one than this old nag.”

Robert clapped me on the shoulder. “Aye, and by then ye’ll be a decorated soldier with tales to make the lassies swoon.” He nodded toward a leather bundle waiting atop a barrel. “Armour and weapons are in there. I’ve packed bread and cheese enough for three days, and a wee flask of usquebaugh for when the nights grow cold.”

I glanced at the townhouse windows, half expecting to see a servant peering down. “What if someone notices you’re gone, Rob? Will they write to your father?”

Robert laughed. “The servants think I’m off to *join* my father. By the time anyone kens otherwise, we’ll be well on our way to Tullibardine’s encampment.” His expression sobered. “Are ye certain about this, Nick? There’s no shame in—”

“I’m certain,” I said, fastening the sword belt around my waist. The weight of it felt right, like something I’d been missing all my life.

As I transferred my few belongings to saddle bags, I thought again of Luckie’s prophecy. What shadows awaited me? And who

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was this flame-haired lass who would match my heart? Would she bring the fire and strength I'd felt before, listening to Luckie's song? Where was she, and how could I find her? Questions swirled in my mind like the morning mist, but I pushed them aside. War was calling, and I was finally answering.

Robert mounted his stallion with the quick ease of years spent on horseback. "Ready, then?"

Swinging up onto Rabbie, I settled into the saddle. I cast one last look back toward the spires of Edinburgh rising above us in the growing light. I'd see it again.

"Aye," I said. "Let's be off."