



FIRE, FAIR AND FIERCE

“NICK, I NEED YOU TO listen to me. Izzie is on the warpath, and I have no interest in trying to control her – it’s been six years. That’s quite long enough. I don’t know what happened in London, but since I haven’t heard from you, I simply don’t have the truth to defend you with. I assume you’re getting these dratted voice messages, so I’ll tell you now – she thinks you’re behind the killing of a young man in Edinburgh, and there was another death here, too. We’re in Yorkshire, attempting to investigate. I know you wish to stay away, but I fear your presence has become unavoidable. These murders... they match your own crimes. And there’s a hunter here – a woman. I think you might like her.”

I raked a hand through my hair, deleting the message and returning my phone to my pocket. Adam meant well, but he was a wee bit behind the times – I kent about her all right, and hardly a moment had passed since I’d first seen her that I’d thought of aught else. The murders should have concerned me more, but I didnae have the capacity for it. I was consumed with other matters – namely, the kind with wild locks and a mouth that I already believed could start wars or end them, depending on her mood.

I'd avoided thinking about events in London after they'd happened – when I'd almost slipped. Yet here I was, pulled in again, wondering... and something dark and wild in my heart knew that this time, I'd found *her*. The steady rhythm of her heartbeat called to me, a sound I'd memorised these last days.

A silhouette shifted in the window above, and I stepped back into the shadows beyond the light's reach, concealing my position on the street below. The shadows welcomed me as they should – as they had for centuries. From here, I could pick out every detail of her profile against the warm glow within. She hadnae seen me or sensed me despite what she was – but I'd followed her since my arrival, absorbing her grief and heartache, catching her wry smiles and the way she pursed her lips in thought or frustration. I kent I was stalking her like a lovesick lad of sixteen – which was ironic, considering who and what I was. I should be far too old for such games and rise above my predatory needs – or so Izzie would have said, I'm sure. But I couldnae help myself.

The night air carried her scent to me even from this distance – spearmint and thyme from her earlier shower, mixed with the summer storm bouquet of her heated blood. Twas a sweet aroma I'd known only a few times in my life, each time accompanied by words as familiar as my own soul. Though here and now, she made my throat ache with each breath, and it took every ounce of control I had to stay back – though my control was mercurial at the best of times. I wasnae sure how long it would last. Ne'er had been.

The single pane of glass between us did naught to muffle the soft pad of her feet across the floor or the whisper of fabric as she moved. She tugged the curtains across the window, and for a moment I caught the moonlight on her face, gilding her shapely mouth into a

sweet cupid's bow. I'd dreamed of that mouth – those verra lips – a thousand times, though more than once I'd thought them an imagining of old Luckie's words, no a real, live woman. A light switched on, and the outline of her small, human form became a silhouette against the fabric – fragile, though she carried herself like the warrior she was.

T'would be a tough evening for her – and from the set of her shoulders when she'd arrived home, she knew it, too. Tonight was to be her meeting with my great-great-something-or-other-nephew. I had no interest in the man personally, despite our blood connection. He'd proved a dour bloke, and I'd let the responsibility of keeping an eye on him fall to Adam decades ago. Though I'd had my work cut out in persuading him, if I recalled.

Jonathan had been a curious one, though – enough I'd checked in several times over his short thirty years. If I'd known he was acquainted with a woman such as *her*, I'd have been far more attentive. The severing of that last tie to my mortal life had drawn me here, but had I sensed her presence, I'd have come running like the lovelorn fool I was.

“Erin!”

The shout came from the young lad cooking downstairs. Though a man by human standards, he seemed but a youth to someone approaching four centuries. From what I'd gathered, he and Erin owned the coffee shop together with Jonathan. I desperately hoped their relationship was merely friendly. I kent I could turn a head when I wanted to – hell, I'd had enough practice over the years – but I wasnae sure that would be enough with Erin.

“I'll be five minutes! He's not here yet, is he?” Her voice, even raised, was like rich velvet – arousing feelings in me I'd half-

forgotten. As if summoned, a dark grey Volkswagen pulled up outside the house, its engine struggling with the steep hill. The man who climbed from the driver's seat was tall, well-built despite his age, and looked a wee bit like, well, me. His scent carried on the wind – Edinburgh bred and born, as I had been. The blood connection was faint, but unmistakable. He climbed the steps to the front door and knocked, and I heard Erin's breathy "*Shit!*" through the open window.

I wasnae trying to listen in. I wasnae even trying to follow her every move – but I almost *had* to. From the second I'd seen her, I'd been drawn to her – the woman fate had deemed I was meant for, had forced me to search for across the centuries.

Even at a distance, I could feel her. I remembered, clear as day, the overwhelming sensation the first time I'd heard of her: the whisper of her hands on my skin, the sound of her laughter, the fire in her heart, the scent of her hair... And aye, she was a fierce beauty, too... but I wanted more. I needed – after all this time – to truly *know* her, and in more than just the carnal sense.

My phone buzzed again in my pocket, pulling me back from such thoughts. T'would be Adam calling once more, knowing full well I winnae answer. It didnae matter. For now, I was where I was supposed to be.

THE EVENING WENT AS WELL AS it could have, or so it seemed. From my limited perspective, Erin appeared to eat and drink heartily, grew sad, and then grew tipsy – and I couldnae blame the lass. Her friend, Tomal, seemed keen to sober her once the old Scot had left, and I had to agree twas wise as it seemed she intended to go

out hunting.

T'would be the biggest test of my control so far – since I'd arrived almost two days ago, she'd kept herself out of harm's way. Here, now, she was subdued and still grieving – but her fire drove her to hunt heedless of her own concerns. I'd almost call it noble, but my unbeating heart was afear for her still – and it was only right that I keep a close eye on her. At least until the sun rose.

She stepped from the house and stood, breathing slowly on the doorstep, taking in the frosty night. The pale moonlight drew out the deepest auburn shades in that tantalising hair of hers, the wind carrying the heat and scent of her across to me, hidden still. I could smell the alcohol in her, though it didnae mask the melody of her blood as it sang beneath her skin – a song I'd long yearned for, but could ne'er consume.

Dressed all in black, her clothes fit her neatly, highlighting the gentle slopes of her hips and breasts, the small corners of her shoulders and the neat muscles of her calves. I smiled despite myself when I caught sight of the heavy, almost military-style boots she wore – she'd have made a sexy wee punk back in the 70s, though what she'd have made of me back then, in my torn clothes and eyeliner, I wasnae sure I wanted to think on. Ever again, actually.

She made her way down the hill, and I kept my distance, taking in the night's frost-covered scenery. Adam had been right about my avoidance of Yorkshire. But Sheffield wasnae the place where my darkest memories lay, and though unfamiliar, the bursts of greenery and life amongst the humdrum of the city were comforting – almost like home. It seemed Erin was heading toward a nearby park, which – given the ever-predictable habits of young vampires – was appropriate. What she likely hadnae yet learned was that resilience

to the cold was an earned ability, and no one the youngest of my kind were granted upon rebirth. As such, they were as likely to be tucked away in a warm den as any human might be on a dreich November night.

I didnae need to follow her closely to trace her scent along the icy paths, but I couldnae allow her out of my line of sight either – no on a night like tonight. She walked the perimeter, passing the main gate and pulling her fingers up into the sleeves of her soft jumper. I reckoned the cold might have been deeper than she'd been expecting, and I wondered if she – a hunter – felt it like another human might. I'd known other hunters, over the years, but ne'er to have much in the way of conversation. In my earlier years, I'd run from them – and in more recent encounters, they'd run from me.

At the park entrance, she pursed her lips as she stared up at the locked and bolted iron gate. A small smile spread across her face as she reached up to grasp the rail, and pulled herself up and over the barrier in one swift move. She landed lithely, like a wee kitten, crouching before she stood and brushed off her hands.

Bold as brass, this one.

As she set off down the main path, I hesitated. Following too closely might alert her to my presence – I wasnae like the young vampires she usually hunted, but I wasnae ready to reveal myself yet, either.

By sheer luck, the dim lamps provided enough shadow for concealment while the heat of her blood on the air allowed me to track her movements. She headed toward the largest of the crumbling buildings – an Adamesque mansion whose grandeur had long faded, leaving only the beauty of dark things that lingered in the night... like the night-blooming jasmine escaping from its

hidden walled garden. When she pushed through the curtain of flowers, releasing their fragrance into the crisp air, I waited a moment before following.

She'd already entered the lodge that adjoined the garden by the time I caught up, its doors and windows empty in a way that allowed the sound of her breathing to carry back to me. I could hear the sweet melodic rhythm of her heart, too, a little faster as she cautiously explored the ruin.

Ach, lass, what are ye thinking? Wandering into ruins with nae backup and nae clue what might be lurking inside. Twas brave – and a tad reckless – but I then I'd always admired a woman who'd walk into danger and dare it to blink first. Then again, I already cared too much for her safety to no be worried at the verra thought.

Still, even from this position, twas clear to me that the lodge was empty. A bird nestled on the topmost floor, resting. Several mice had made a den in one of the walls. But there were no vampires here – no creatures for Erin to hunt. So what was she looking for? Had she sensed something I hadnae? Could she?

I folded my arms across my chest and leaned against the far wall of the garden, my long coat brushing against a veil of ivy that perfectly concealed me from any searching eyes peering from the lodge – I could see the building well enough, but no watcher would see me.

I wasnae certain what she hoped to achieve here. Though I'd observed her closely, I'd yet to learn what manner of hunter she was – one who had learned her skills, or one who was born to the art. I suspected the latter since her measured movements around the lodge's interior implied she sensed *something* – which wasnae a skill most hunters I'd come across were blessed with. Mayhap it was the

faint sense of me, at a distance, she was feeling.

It was several moments before I felt it. Faint vibrations ran through the building long before the echoing crack of wood reached my hearing, the earth around me reverberating with the change in the environment.

Erin cried out, and I moved without thinking, flitting to the doorway of the lodge as my instincts dictated, heedless of my desire to remain unseen. The ground floor room was empty still, and despite myself, I hesitated at the base of the stairs – if she needed me, I must proceed. But this wasnae the way I'd wanted us to meet. I hadnae planned this, and I–

A charged tension filled the lodge, an edge in the air that spoke of damage and destruction. Before I could decide to follow her, another resounding groan filled the space above my head and I felt the break as the supporting beams in the ceiling above me splintered. I flitted out of the way, avoiding the worst of the dust and debris, and hastily brushed the rest from my clothing.

As the haze cleared, I saw her. Up close. Finally.

Erin. Her left arm was bent awkwardly around her head, protecting her from the worst of the impact – though the lass would undoubtedly be injured from a fall such as that. Though her eyes were closed and her breathing laboured, her heart beat strong and steady still – if harder than usual. This close, her scent was almost overpowering – sweet and heady and more inviting than anything I'd ever kent. Twas the closest to inebriated I'd been in... well, decades.

I steadied myself against the cold, hard stone of the lodge wall as the faint but unmistakable scent of her blood heated the air.

“The pith o’ sense, an’ pride o’ worth, are higher rank than a’ that.”

The words came to my tongue unbidden, as they always did, and I released them almost silently. Despite that, Erin stirred and let out a low moan. Her eyes squeezed tightly closed, she pulled herself upright, swearing all the while.

In my long years I'd seen falls that would shatter a mortal's bones to pieces – in castle keeps, from battlements, and from heights less than this one. Yet here she was, brushing herself off like a bairn who'd tumbled from a tree. There was steel in her.

I should speak, but Gods, what to say? *'Hello, I've been lurkin' in the shadows, and by the by, you're the most captivating thing I've ever seen?'* Aye, that'd go down well. Navigating bloody clan rows was simpler than this, and right when I needed it, my blood... well, it wasnae exactly rushing in the direction of my brain.

Keep it simple, Murray. Try not to stare at her lips like a starvin' man.

"Easy there, lass. Best stay still a moment while we make sure you're in one piece."

She startled and turned toward me. Even in the gloom, I could see every feature close to for the first time. As I watched her and she watched me, her eyes – a warm grey, like the North Sea on the bright mornings of my youth – widened, pupils flaring as a small frown mark appeared between her brows. I took a step toward her, fighting to keep my hands in check, though all I wanted to do was smooth the crease away and hold her. Even in the dark, her pulse danced at her throat, a rhythm I couldnae just see, but hear: a forbidden network of veins beneath her alabaster skin.

Erin continued to stare, and I understood – she didnae see me at all. She was seeing her friend. Jonathan.

"Are you okay?" I asked, assessing her for injuries I hadnae yet

seen. All seemed well enough, but it was hard to tell with humans – and her blood in the air was almost overpowering, though the cuts to her face were superficial.

Moonlight poured through the empty window, illuminating her as if the glow came from within. Her rich, auburn waves, though damp, fell about her face, creating shadows that drew my attention to the soft, angled planes of her cheekbones; her small, pointed chin; soft, sooty lashes and the constellation of freckles across her pale skin. Her lips, sweet and sinful at once, parted a wee bit as I watched her, and if I'd had it to catch, I'd have caught my breath.

Erin was a woman beyond beautiful. Beyond words.

The lass didnae answer, though, and I worried. Could she sense what I was? *Who* I was, and could be to her? Or had she hurt her head more seriously than I'd thought? I crouched to her level, medical knowledge from decades past resurfacing from nowhere.

She shook her head, and closed her eyes. After a fall like that, her world was likely spinning.

Her voice was hoarse when she finally spoke up. "My elbow's hurt. And my ankle and hip. And, you know, my pride."

"Ah." I couldnae help but chuckle with her. "Well, tis to be expected, I should think." I reached a hand toward her before I realised what I was doing. "The bleeding seems to have stopped already, though–"

Erin's hand shot to her forehead, coming away dark and stained. She ghosted her hand across the rest of her face, and winced when she brushed at several shards of wood still caught in her skin. Gods, I wanted to touch her – to help her. But I was a stranger. There was only so much I could do without discovery – and it wasnae the time for that yet. She deserved more.

Mayhap my thoughts showed on my face, but the lass met my gaze with a fierce curiosity that filled my chest with a fearsome ache. I steeled myself and reached toward her again. “May I—?”

Her nod was quick, and I ran the gentlest of touches along her spine, checking for anything out of the ordinary. Though nothing was amiss with her physically, she seemed almost to tense beneath my hands. At each point I applied a small pressure, my fingertips coursed with electricity – taking in the damp fabric of her clothing, and the warmth and life of her skin beneath. Each touch was a battle to remain clinical when all I desired was to pull her closer.

Doctor’s orders, lass – strictly professional, unless ye’d prefer otherwise. I bit my tongue to keep quiet. *Gods, Murray, get a grip.*

Satisfied she was safe for now, I stood and held out a hand to help her up. She took it, her small palm fitting perfectly into mine for a wee moment.

“Where did you come from?” she asked as I stepped back.

I couldnae be honest with her, but I didnae ken the hour either – it may have already been too late for a stroll to fare well as a story. It wasnae like I had a choice, though.

“I saw you disappear into the gardens, before. I didnae know they were here and found myself intrigued,” I shrugged, selling my tale as best I could. “I’m sorry I wisnae following more closely. I could’ve helped.”

Erin looked away, and I followed her gaze as she took in the state of the lodge. It wasnae pretty, and she’d be in a sorry state if she wasnae a hunter, and a born one, too. I supposed that her survival would have to be answer enough for now, but I couldnae let her ken my thoughts on the matter. And I supposed, too, that an ordinary human man in this verra situation would likely be... surprised, to

say the least.

"It's all right." Her voice was soft, her eyes far away. "Unless you were planning on catching me, it wouldn't have helped." She took a few steps forward as she spoke, and her ankle collapsed beneath her weight. Without thinking, I put out an arm, catching her. She took it without hesitation, and I hid another smile.

Dinnae go readin' too much into the smile of a pretty lass, Murray, you fool.

"Still..." I tried not to stare at her hand, or to focus on the way my skin reacted to her nearness, even through the wool of my coat. "I'm Cole, by the way. And despite the circumstances, pleased to make your acquaintance." 'Twas better to go by an alias for now, though I was out of practice at playing Cole, to say the least. The top of her head didnae even reach my shoulder, and I couldnae help but smile, taking her in beneath the moonlight like this. That stunning mouth of hers curved up in response, and I knew I lingered there longer than was... proper. "I must admit, I'm fair amazed you're *conscious*. Is that an impolite thing to say?"

She winced. "Oh, I blacked out for a moment there. Don't doubt it."

Her pain was like a knife, and I couldnae do a damned thing about it. Instead, I held her steady and we made our way from the lodge and into the gardens once more. From the outside, a passerby winnae ken what had happened – all looked peaceful once more in the cool, bright night.

As we worked our way amongst the trellises of hanging jasmine and along the cracked paths, Erin paused and turned to look at me.

"Are you a doctor?"

I grinned. "That depends on who's asking, lass."

She wasnae to know how many times I'd trained. How many bones I'd set, burns I'd wrapped, wounds I'd healed... how many wars I'd fought, and how much death I'd seen. And I didnae want her to ken such things, since the good came with far more ill than I wanted her heart to know.

Leaning back so I could see her properly, my hair fell into my eyes – as it ever did – and I pushed it away, careful no to loose my firm hold on Erin. She seemed to be watching my every move, but I wasnae certain if the inquisitiveness in her eyes was something more. Mayhap more akin to... hunger.

She pulled her eyes away before I could decide. "I can probably manage from here."

No, she didnae want to leave me, as much as I couldnae leave her, now.

"Ah, but what kind of gentleman would I be, leaving a lady to brave these treacherous paths alone? Another ruin might fall on you. Or mayhap a tree." I smiled. "I dinnae need the worry of a strange, pretty lass on my conscience. Bold as the moon you may be, climbing in the rafters – but soft as stardust and prone to breaking."

Blood flooded her pale cheeks, drawing pink spots on her cheekbones as we walked. I could feel the heat of it, and I suppressed a shiver. *The pith o' sense...*

A distraction. "Do you mind if I ask what you were doing in the lodge?" I asked. "Seems a bit dreich to be out so late."

"I needed to clear my head before bed." Her heart hammered, giving her away. "Exploring sometimes helps."

I nodded, but the moment had passed – my distraction had done the trick. For now.

"Aye, I know the feeling. When your head's so full..." Had I

checked her head? What had I been thinking? “How *is* your head?”

“Fuzzy, but not too bad.” She touched her forehead gently, but the cuts there remained unopen, healing more with every passing moment if she was truly a *vânător*. “My arm took the brunt of it.”

I frowned and stopped. *Vânător* or no, she was soaked to the bone. “Are you cold? You must be soaked through.”

Twas clear she was trying to hide her shivering, though she replied promptly enough: “I’ll be fine.”

I removed my coat without releasing my support, and draped it across her shoulders, my fingertips tingling as they skimmed her shoulder blades. I didnae need the warmth of the soft, old wool myself, and the coat was older than she was, but by nature of my upbringing, I struggled to let go of good tailoring when I found it. The fabric draped around her, too large and yet ideal for her. Her skin heated immediately, though neither of us said another word.

With each step, her warmth continued to caress my senses, awakening comfort and – though I was ashamed to think it – thirst. Proximity to mortals was a challenge I’d long overcome, and yet her nearness tested my bounds in an entirely new way, helped along by the wee glances she threw me from beneath her long lashes. I could barely keep my eyes from her, and if she kept looking at me like that, I’d be lucky to ken my own name, ne’er mind my manners. Twas a divine torture, and I embraced it.

At the edge of the park once more, it seemed Erin finally realised she couldnae get out the same way she’d gotten in – and despite myself, I had to grin at the apprehension written so clearly across her features.

I held up a hand. “It was open when I arrived, I swear. We’ll find another way out. You cannae climb over a fence like that in this

state.”

She released a long breath, and her scent hit me like a wave. I swallowed down the thirst and longing that reached up to take control of my body, and mentally shook myself.

If ye cannae keep ahold o’ your senses, Murray, ye may as well step into the sunrise come dawn and end it all. And I would, if I had to.

“I think there’s a wall nearby where the fence is lower,” she suggested. “I might be able to make the climb.”

I gripped her arm a wee bit tighter. I couldnae let her fall. “A true midnight wanderer,” was all I said, though. “You must spend a lot of time here.”

She didnae answer, though it was likely safer for her no to.

Twas a short walk to the place she’d mentioned, though twas also clear she was struggling by this point. I had to wonder what sort of world would give me the strength to carry her and yet force me no to – to watch her suffer instead. The injustice of it simmered under the surface of my skin, as near as my desire and tentative hopes.

At this moment, I could only help her as a human might – for her sake as much as mine. She wasnae ready to know the truth – and while I wasnae one to keep her from it indefinitely, she needed the room to process the other things in her life too. Her grief was ever-present in the circles beneath her eyes, and I’d watched her closely these last few days – the way she had to work to smile, even when she wanted to. The sadness that turned down her shoulders and slowed her every step.

No, I wasnae here to confuse and hurt her further while she needed room to breathe. I reminded myself of this one more time as I finally released my hold on her arm, and lifted her at the waist –

though she was but a doll, really – and helped her through the small gap in the cut down railings.

I glanced at the stumps left in the wall to pull my thoughts from the way her blood pulsed beneath my fingers, warming my cool touch, and briefly recalled days when those small steel sacrifices were made necessary. Twas no a memory for now, though.

“Not exactly my most graceful display,” she murmured.

I had to smile. She was the verra picture of grace and beauty to me, injured or no. “Words couldnae describe it.”

The wind grew ever more biting as we walked the city’s empty streets, climbing the hill toward her home. I let Erin lead the way, feigning ignorance and shielding her from the worst of the elements with my body, but we didnae speak – I was certain she was in more pain than she would admit to, what with that fierce steel of hers. I suspected she might be a stubborn one.

As we passed my earlier hiding place, she paused and pulled away to rest on the wall at the base of the steps to her front door. “This is me,” she said quietly.

I didnae need to look to sense there was no one home – the young lad had long gone and no returned – but a warm light fell from the large bay window, turning Erin’s hair into a shimmering halo of soft waves. My gaze wasnae fair to her – I saw so much more than she could ken, even through the streaks of dirt and blood that marred her face. How could I leave her like this? And yet, I had nae choice.

“How’s your head, now?” I wasnae sure if my concern was too obvious. But then, I was playing a role, was I no? “You mightn’t want to fall asleep yet, in case of concussion and such.”

She pulled herself upright and I resisted helping her once more.

“Honestly, I’ve had worse.”

“Worse falls or worse head injuries?” I raised an eyebrow at her as she struggled with her keys. A wee bit flirtatious, aye, but I was genuinely curious. Gods, there was so much I didnae know about her! And so much I’d hate for her to know about me.

She still hadnae found the right key, and I couldnae resist – I took them, shook them out to release the brass one that matched the lock on the front door, and passed them back to her. Twas possible I moved a wee bit too fast for a mortal, but she didnae seem to notice. I grinned as she stared at me, lips parted. If only all life’s troubles could be solved with such a simple flick of the wrist.

“Thanks,” she mumbled, and shrugged off the coat. I took it from her, and forced down the urge to hold it to my face. To breathe in her warmth and scent.

Instead, I reached for her. It was wrong, and I knew it, but I did. Slow this time, I let the tips of my fingers caress her uninjured cheek, savouring the moment and the heat and electricity that came unbidden with the touch. If I could bottle this feeling, I’d ne’er need another drop of blood...

She closed her eyes, almost leaning into my hand, and I swallowed.

Ye cannae stay, Murray, lad. She’s no for you. No now.

Stepping away swiftly, her eyes remained closed, her dark lashes throwing blue shadows onto her cheeks. Again, perhaps I moved too fast for a mortal, but...

“You know, I’d usually prefer dinner and dancing to moonlit adventures in ruins.” I pushed my hands into my pockets, certain she’d see them trembling if I didnae. “But I have to admit, this has been far more memorable.”

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Her warm gaze didnae leave my face, and I continued: “Still, if you’d promise no to go exploring another derelict building any time soon, I’d sleep easier, lass. For my peace of mind, eh?”

I dipped my head, and it was all I could do not to beg her to keep safe and sound. But I had to leave her. I couldnae be here. Yet my heart tore as I took those first steps away, the distance like a deep ocean between us already.

By the time I reached the end of the street, my pace deliberately slow, my heart was pounding. In nigh on four centuries, I could count on one hand the number of times my heart had stuttered to life in my chest like this – and the tight ache beneath my ribs was the deepest hurt I’d known in decades. Possibly ever.

If this is what mortals call falling, ye’d best pray you land on your feet, Murray.

I knew I’d return to watch over her. I couldnae let her sleep, alone in that empty house, possibly concussed and hurting bad. And my heart swelled at the thought of seeing her once more. But for this moment, it broke to leave her.