



Temporary Cover

COVER REVEAL JUNE 7, 2024

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PART ONE

The Fatal Mistake

*“There was something in the woods with us that day.
Perhaps a frygt or a banshee, but the way my blood ran
cold and my soul writhed within me – it had to be
something far more terrifying.”*

-The Tome of Thisiby, Year 1327

Chapter 1

Eoin's bicep flexes in my hand as I tug on his arm.

"You're going to get us caught!" My whisper is barely audible over the creaking stable door, blowing slightly open with the breeze.

A beam of light streams in from the partially cracked door, illuminating the side of Eoin's face. He turns and slowly retreats into the shadows with me. Moments later, two servants pass by, oblivious to the two of us hiding in the stable.

"I thought you did your research." I rifle through my rucksack.

"I did. They're supposed to be gone another half fortnight or so. What the hell are you looking for?" Eoin's tone drips with the impatience of a mother to her seventh child.

“My well is low, and I can’t regenerate here.” The small glass vial of thick, velvety black liquid clinks against the buckle of my satchel, and I grimace. “I get nervous when my magic is low.”

“Well, you know you and I could always . . .” Eoin brushes back his sandy blonde hair in mock flirtation. I glare at him. He’s playing a dangerous game.

I pop the vial and tip my head back, taking it in one quick gulp. It’s bitter with lingering notes of nutmeg and cinnamon. The manufactured imitation magic isn’t nearly as good as what I can pull from the ether but it will do in a pinch.

“This won’t last long. We need to move fast. As soon as they realize they’ve been robbed, this is the first place they’ll look.” I peek out the stable door at the manor, and my eyes catch on the wrap-around porch. It’s a beautiful day for a picnic or stroll through the park — not so much a high-stakes robbery. “They’re still unloading the carriages. It looks like they’ve called the servants in to start dinner. We’ll have a very small window soon.” I wince and turn slowly to Eoin.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

I put my palms up defensively. “We are going to have to leave some.”

“Absolutely not, Bronwyn!” Eoin crosses his arms in defiance. “We’ve spent weeks planning this. This will

last us half the year.” His posture relaxes, and he gently grabs both of my shoulders. “Trust me. I can get us out of this; I always do.”

“It’s mostly gold, and it’s too heavy for me to run with. We need to be fast.” I glance at the four large flour sacks stuffed with various high-value trinkets and treasures, and my heart sinks. We’ve worked so hard for this one. It has been a while since we’ve had a plan go awry.

The sun begins to set, and the chirp of crickets lends a false atmosphere of peace and tranquility. A high shriek from within the manor cuts across the gardens. That scream definitely came from upstairs. I’m certain the lady of the house has just found her empty safe.

“Shit.” Eoin drops down and dumps the four bags onto the ground. “Help me sort these into two bags.”

We quickly sift through the gems, jewelry, and ornate gold figurines; our decade’s worth of experience making quick work of the task. I open the back window in the stable and carefully drop out two of the sacks while Eoin throws straw over our discarded loot.

“Quickly,” Eoin says. “This will only buy us time. We still may have to fight our way out of this one.” He gives me a boost and helps me pass through the back window before climbing through himself. Ahead through the forest lies our destination. Unfortunately, we will need to pass through about a quarter mile of wide open field to

even breach the tree line, let alone navigate in the waning light.

Eoin hands me one of the two sacks. “Hoods up.” He tugs on my hood and gives me a gentle smile. The rush of adrenaline has reddened his cheeks. Gods, he’s handsome. I pull my hood up over my head, hiding my face, and take off behind him in a full sprint.

For a moment, the only sounds are my deep rhythmic breathing and the crunch and swish of tall, unharvested golden wheat as we barrel through the open field. The sky is now an ominous orange, and a swarm of blackbirds break away from the trees ahead. Everything around me fades out of existence. I don’t need to look back; I know they’re coming.

Eoin stops abruptly, and I slam into his back, knocking a golden goblet out of my flour sack.

“Here.” He shoves his sack to me, and I take it. “You remember how to get there?” Eoin palms the sides of my face, keeping my focus on him.

“Yes, of course.”

“Run. Meet me there.” He slides two daggers from his belt. I chance a glance over my shoulder. Three riders race towards us: two with short swords, one stringing a bow and arrow, all wearing Crusader robes and signets. What are the Prophet’s Crusaders doing this far south?

Eoin shoves me aside, and I nearly fall as an arrow splits the gap between us.

Eoin throws the first dagger at the closest approaching swordsman and strikes him in the throat. Thick, dark blood spreads quickly down the rider's white tunic before he falls from his horse.

Time seems to slow down, and I hear nothing but my heartbeat — or is it his? I can't think. I can't breathe. Black mist creeps into my peripheral vision as I feel myself slipping somewhere else entirely.

Eoin grabs my shoulders firmly, shaking me. "Dammit, Bronwyn. Run!" He shoves me back as he turns and runs towards the fallen rider. With a jolt, I'm brought back to reality and the loud chaos of our little skirmish. Eoin throws another dagger before bending to pick up the fallen soldier's short sword.

I turn, and I run like I've never run before, breaking through the tree line in mere moments. My legs are on fire, and it's a struggle to hold onto these bags. The sound of clanging swords is now distant, like a dream.

I pass the line of wild blackberry bushes and nearly trip over a fallen branch. I need to slow down. It's significantly darker in the woods.

Hunched over, catching my breath, I notice the silence. I hope Eoin is okay. Why did they return early? Did I miss a detection ward? I squeeze my eyes tightly. Bile rises in

my throat as I remember the blood — so much blood running down his white cloak.

“Focus. I need to get to Eoin’s gate.” Following the deer trail behind the blackberry bushes, the towering boulder comes into sight. Standing about a meter taller than myself, it’s hard to miss.

I place the bags next to the stone and massage my arms, making sure none of the runes have been smudged since we left. The smell of black rune powder lingers from earlier today when Eoin etched the perfectly arched rune gate into the flat side of the rock.

A chill catches me by surprise, and I’m unsure whether it is due to the setting sun or something more sinister. A raven calls somewhere in the canopy, followed by the beating of wings. The hair on the nape of my neck stands on end.

Scanning my immediate vicinity, I slowly reach down to unsheathe my dagger. The forest is thick, and it’s hard to see beyond a couple of trees now. I slow my breathing, trying to calm my nerves, and hear an all-too-familiar whistle pierce the air.

Eoin emerges from the deer path, and a small smile momentarily crosses his face as we make eye contact.

“There’s more coming. We need to leave now.” His urgent tone makes my stomach plummet. I race to collect

my rucksack and the flour sacks as Eoin begins chanting. The runes emit a faint hum, but they aren't glowing yet.

“This way!” A distant shout raises the alarm.

They must have spotted our trail. My heart races, and the humming intensifies. It takes mere moments, but gods, this feels like hours.

A warm glow casts moving shadows down the trail as the soldiers approach with torches. I hand Eoin one of the sacks, and I brace for the inevitable.

I widen my stance and try not to panic, remembering what little combat training I've received. Two large men emerge from the bend ahead, and I don't hesitate. I throw my dagger like Eoin has taught me, aiming for his throat. I miss, but it does strike the other soldier in the upper thigh. He lets out an angry yell and raises his bow, taking aim.

“Now!” Eoin yells and grabs my arm, pulling me with him. The twang of a bowstring reverberates through the air as we leap through our rune gate. We begin tumbling faster and faster through nothing and everything all at once. I always hate this part.

My back slams into the ground, and all the air leaves my lungs. Panic seizes me as I try desperately to breathe in precious air.

Eoin leans over me, blue eyes wide, “You’re going to be okay.” He shifts and pulls my rucksack over to us, digging through it. He pulls out some cheesecloth and a healing poultice we made just in case.

That isn't going to help me breathe! I swat at him and let out a pitiful moan as more air somehow leaks from my lungs.

“Your shoulder, Bron.”

White hot pain shoots down my arm as soon as I see it: an arrow protruding from my left clavicle. The shock of it momentarily releases some of the tension I was holding, and I inhale a sharp staccato breath. The smell of black rune powder fills my nose as Eoin helps me sit up.

Burnt rune marks smolder on the ground around us, left over from our collapsed rune gate. My stomach twists as I glance at the jagged arrow shaft and the trail of blood soaking the front of my cloak.

“He shot you in the back. You pushed the arrow through when you landed. You’ve really got to work on your landings.” He examines the wound, gently moving some of the fabric around it. “I need to remove it. Do you have enough left in your well to heal yourself when I pull it out?”

I wince, still trying to catch my breath and shake my head. “Just patch me up and get us through this meeting;

then I can find somewhere to regenerate and heal myself. Jake better have brandy, this hurts like hell.”

“Jake always has brandy to seal the deal.” Eoin smiles. “Do you think we still have enough here to cut some for St. Agatha’s?” He nods towards the two flour sacks. “The young ones are looking pretty scrawny.” He glances at me, and I know he’s thinking of his brother, Tomas. It wasn’t that long ago when we were the ‘young ones.’

“We always have enough for St. Agatha’s,” I say and return his smile. “Now stop stalling and patch me up before Jake sees how pathetic I look. I don’t want him to think I can’t take any more jobs this month.”

He sighs and looks at me with apprehension. “I need to cut these off.” He motions to my blouse and my favorite cloak. “I don’t want to make the wound worse by trying to take them off, especially since it might be a day or so before you can properly heal.”

I know he is asking permission. Although we’ve grown up together, he’s never seen me undressed. I squint at him and nod. He’s my best friend, and I trust him.

He pulls out his sharpest dagger and slowly cuts through my cloak, sliding it off my shoulder. He takes extra caution with my blouse, especially near the arrow. His face is mere inches from mine, and a bead of sweat gathers where his eyebrows knit together.

His eyes flick to mine with the last rip of fabric. His hands are delicate as he slowly takes off my blouse. I can't look him in the eyes any longer. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows hard, letting out a shaky breath.

I shut my eyes and I feel it: the tingling sensation in the ether, like when your hair stands up just before lightning strikes. Eoin has never had this sort of reaction to me before, but I push that out of my mind and seize the opportunity to refill some of my magic. I open up, and the warm, familiar sensation of pure magic regeneration wells within my core. It's not much, but it may be enough to ease some of my pain.

“Brace yourself,” he says just before snapping the arrowhead off and yanking the shaft back through my body.

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Glaring at the healing herbs swirling within my wooden cup, I mentally curse the archer who is responsible for this pain. These aren't helping, but there's no way I'm telling Eoin he spent over an hour foraging them for nothing.

Eoin's shirt is about two sizes too large for me, and my old blouse has turned out to be a surprisingly decent sling. Pulling from my nearly empty well, I work on healing my clavicle, and some of the pain subsides.

I'm lulled into a near-catatonic state by the crackling fire and the songs of the tree frogs near the lake. I stare into the flames and embers, unmoving, as fireflies dance around our campsite.

Eoin returns with more firewood and tosses it on the fire. He smiles nervously and sits down beside me, brushing his hands on his knees. "I'm sorry about your cloak. Were you able to heal at all?"

"A little. Thanks for the shirt." I glance at his exposed torso, and my cheeks flush.

Eoin clears his throat. "Jake should be here soon. Let's go through the sacks and run some numbers before he arrives."

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By the time we hear the sound of a single rider approaching from the west, we've got a good idea of inventory. Jake, a short middle-aged man with a crooked nose, dismounts his chestnut horse and pulls Eoin into an embrace, patting him on the back. "Boy, am I glad to see you!"

One wouldn't know it from a glance, with his plain horse and his plain attire, but Jake holds quite a bit of power with his banking position. He also just happens to be our fence, taking our stolen goods and selling them. He also has many clients who request our anonymous services through him.

Jake walks over to the two bags, dumps them, and chuckles heartily. “Eoin, when you told me to meet you two out here, I was not expecting this much of a haul.”

Eoin’s eyes briefly meet mine, seemingly in a silent agreement to never mention the loot we left behind.

“Oh, this is extravagant.” Jake squats down next to the pile and holds up a gold-plated pheasant with ruby eyes. “I suppose there is a reason some travel so far seeking your services.” He stands and dusts his palms together. “Alright, let’s get down to the brass tacks.”

I pull on Eoin’s arm, and he follows me towards the fire. “Can you do it this time?”

“We talked about this. You need practice negotiating.”

He’s right; I do need the practice. A tinge of guilt twists my gut. “I know, but the pain is getting to me. I feel foggy.”

His eyes soften, and he nods. “I’ll handle it this time.” He pokes my uninjured shoulder and smirks. “I don’t want your blood loss to make us lose out on any more coin.”

I sit back by the fire and discreetly dump the nasty herbs from my cup while Eoin negotiates with Jake. My hands tremble. We almost died today.

Jake laughs obnoxiously and shakes Eoin's hand. "You've got yourself a deal." He turns to his horse and grabs a jug of brandy and three wooden cups.

"I see you've got yourself a place to stay tonight." Jake gestures towards the nearby tent and fills our cups.

"I pitched the tent last night when I set up this half of the rune gate." Eoin drinks from his cup and grimaces. "You make this yourself?"

"I'm working on my recipe. What do you think?" Jake looks at me expectantly, and I take a large swig from my cup. My eyes burn, and I cough.

"It's strong." The fiery liquid warms my belly, and I already feel some relief in my shoulder. We sit by the fire, and Eoin tosses another log on. I can't help but take him in; the way he moves and the flex of his abs when he stokes the fire.

*Stop it. You don't want to curse your best friend.*

The events of the day that have been haunting me start to fade as we drink, laugh, and tell stories. Eoin finally gets around to telling Jake the story of this peculiar heist, leaving out the abandoned treasures part. Something about this job isn't sitting right with me. We did everything right. What happened?

Their talking fades, and my mind slips back to that soldier and the blood. I feel myself being pulled, and the

edges of my vision fade a bit. I shake my head and stand up abruptly. Their conversation ceases as they look up at me with perhaps confusion or alarm.

“I’m going to bed.”

I hand Eoin my cup and enter the tent. The two sleeping sacks are divided by a small folding table. On it is a candle, some matches, and a canteen of water. I sigh and light the candle, settling into my sleep sack. Outside, Eoin continues his heroic tale, his low, familiar voice a comfort as I close my eyes.