

THE FIRE TREE

CHAPTER 11

The Inn Keeper, Hamish Pottle, stood behind the bar, casting a leisurely eye around the interior. Try as he might, he could not stop himself from looking up at the door to the Inn at least twice every minute. He had been doing this for the past ten minutes and felt slightly worried that the urge to do so was so strong. As an ocean-going sailor of forty years' experience, however, he knew to never ignore his instincts.

There was a sudden yelp and Hamish quickly looked up. Maisie, the serving girl, was pulling herself from the grip of an over eager drinker, in the corner. After a moment came the sharp thwack of hand meeting flesh as she slapped him for his trouble. The offender made a feeble attempt to climb to his feet, but, being a little too worse for drink to accomplish this feat, he dropped back into his seat and cursed her in coarse Gaelic. Maisie gave him a withering look.

The recipient of Maisie's slap appeared to be reaching to his side, under the table, and Hamish, fearing him to be reaching for a dirk, shouted to him in an authoritative tone: "If you're in a mood for a wench, there are places you can go for that, but don't go delaying my girl. She has other customers, do you ken?"

There was a merry chortle from the dozen other customers, sat at the nearby tables, and the man in the corner growled some offensive remarks, deliberately not loud enough for Hamish to discern, and went back to quaffing his ale.

There was a creaking sound in the doorway of the inn as the floorboards responded to weight being put on them. Hamish looked up. Though not visible to him, he knew that somebody was stood at the other side of the door. The door began to move, swinging very slowly ajar. Hamish felt his heartbeat speed up. There was the noise of what seemed like a second person shuffling behind the first. Hamish looked to the shelf by the fireplace where a strategically placed mirror allowed him a view of the doorway from an angle.

Hamish could see two men, neither of whom he recognised, peering into the bar room. The one in front wore a brimmed hat with some heather in its band and had a bag slung over his shoulder. The second, standing immediately behind him, wore a cap tilted off one side of his head and was craning his neck to look over the other man's shoulder.

Finally, the door swung open and the two men entered. Hamish pretended not to notice them and bent his head to conduct some absorbing task under the bar. The first man spoke to Maisie, ordering some ale, then – as she turned – he caught her elbow and leaned close to ask her something. Whatever the question, Maisie shrugged and shook her head. The man said something else to her and she shook her head again, this time more insistently.

The two men walked to the table by the fireplace, exuding menace, and the two occupants, already sat there, looked up uneasily. The newcomers, having come in from the relative chill of the outside, were drawn by the welcoming heat of the peat fire burning in the hearth. The man in the hat spoke gruffly to the two occupants of the table, then placed his bag on the floor and pushed it under the table with his toe. Whilst Hamish caught only the tone, rather than the content of what was said, it was distinctly intimidating. The men at the table got up and reluctantly moved elsewhere.

Maisie arrived with the men's ale and placed it on the table between them. The man in the hat leaned close to her and said something into her ear. She shook her head. He reached and grabbed her arm and Maisie flinched, looking down at her arm, her face contorting in pain. She tried to pull herself away, but the man's grip was too strong.

Hamish reached swiftly to a hidey hole in the wall behind the bar. Gripping the handle of a little sgian-dubh knife, he flicked it through the air, embedding it with a dull thud in the wooden post, a palm's width from the aggressor's head.

The man stopped and turned, with unrestrained animosity blazing in his eyes. Maisie, taking prompt advantage of the distraction, wrenched her arm free and shot away from him.

"I may have to teach you a lesson!", the man snarled.

Hamish Pottle knew the make of these men, instinctively, from the first second he laid eyes on them. Having survived the bloody brutality and barbaric violence of a life at sea, he knew the folly of squaring up to foes such as these using any kind of civilised code. No amount of aggressive or threatening posturing would work with these two. There would be no testing and pushing each other, like decent people would, by ramping up the menace until violence became an option. These men were savage animals who thrived on violence.

"Am I frightened of you?" Asked the Inn Keeper in a measured, even tone, drilling him with his eyes, "Because if you think I am, then the next mistake you make could be your last!"

The man was taken off guard by such a breathtakingly bold challenge and his gaze became furtive, his eyes darting left and right like a snake, working out his next move.

"We have a simple misunderstanding," the thug cooed, "And have managed to set off on the wrong foot!"

His companion, in the cap, was distinctly unimpressed by the change of direction and was unable to keep this from his face, but shrugged his shoulders, begrudgingly.

"We are searching for a friend, a former compatriot from our army days," the unpleasant intruder continued, "And the memories of war, recalling events, have taken their toll on our.... disposition."

"Is that so?", Hamish said, in a flat tone, ludicrously aware that he couldn't trust a single word that came out of this man's mouth.

Hamish recalled their hesitant entry into the bar and a question flashed into his mind: Who was it they thought they might find within that would inspire such wariness in two brutes like these? The answer came to him in a second: The Constable! A hefty, powerful, athletic man who carried a twin artillery piece that masqueraded as a hand weapon! Hamish locked out the smile in head from his face.

The Constable had left that morning, at first light, proposing to "go about the King's business" but promising, faithfully, to be back late afternoon for Caitlan's rightly famous pot roast.

Hamish felt the tension in the room drain rapidly away and the customers - sensing it, too - resumed their talk, card games and laughter. The bad man in the hat looked at the Inn Keeper expectantly and Hamish looked him in the eye, unblinking.

"Would you have seen a stranger to these parts, with a costly looking riding coat and high boots?", asked the man in the hat, from his seat, "He's a big man, broad and tall.", So saying, he set his hands in the air, this way and that, to show the size of the person he sought.

Hamish pretended to think for a few moments, looking upwards with his brows knotted in contemplation, before shaking his head and throwing up his palms in apology, "I'm afraid I can't help you."

"Are you sure?", the man asked, giving his question a palpable tinge of threat.

The Inn Keeper looked first at one, then at the other, and back again.

"As sure as I need to be for the likes of you.", Hamish replied.

The man in the cap stood up from the table, his fists clenched, and turned to his companion. Hamish couldn't see what look passed between them, but he seemed to feel encouraged.

"I don't think I like your tone," the man in the cap said, and then added, scornfully, "Good man."

In his peripheral vision, Hamish noticed the other man, still seated, reach for something out of his bag under the table.

"You're welcome to ignore my tone, if you choose," replied Hamish, "But I would encourage you not to press your luck."

The expression on both men's faces told Hamish that they weren't used to people defying them. The stance of the man in the cap stiffened and he took a step backwards before kicking the chair in annoyance. Hamish heard the

splintering of wood but decided to ignore it. Then, loosening his neckerchief, as if in preparation for a fight, the man in the snarled: "I'd like it best if I didn't hear your voice again, old man!"

Hamish discerned his seated partner move something heavy into his lap. Moments later Hamish heard the feint but distinctive metallic click of a gun being cocked. Ignoring the man who had spoken, Hamish locked gaze with the one sat down. The man's lip curled in a nasty sneer and he made a guttural noise of scorn.

"You'd best settle for hearing from me," Hamish cautioned them, reaching under the bar and picking up a loaded pistol, "Than hearing from Ruby..." Hamish placed the pistol on the counter, then - reaching and retrieving its twin - he added: "Or from Rose." and deftly arranged the second firearm side by side with the first, before adding: "They make a fearful sound when they're angry."

Both men looked from Hamish down to the pistols. Their eyes flicked expertly from one to the other, noting that both had their sparking hammers cocked back and deciding, correctly, that the covers over the powder pans would be drawn back.

The bar fell dramatically silent as the customers quickly either moved seat or shuffled down the benches to the opposite side of the bar from the troublemakers.

The seated man smiled broadly and laughed. "You'd need to be quick with those things, old man."

The man who was standing lifted both arms, his palms turned up to the ceiling, then let them drop limply back down to slap against his legs. This display of exasperation was accompanied by a long, weary sigh. All the while his eyes remained locked on the worn and weathered sailor's hands that Hamish had folded, one over the other, on the counter in front of him.

The man who was seated loudly banged his hand on the table, replicating the other's frustration, and then carefully and noisily gouged the surface of the table by dragging his ring across it. Hamish's eyes were drawn to the deep groove in the wood and his lips curled in annoyance.

This deliberate distraction was the fleeting moment the man in the cap needed to make his move. As Hamish's eyes returned to the first man, he saw his arm coming up from behind his back and the flash of metal as a throwing axe leapt from his hand, spinning towards Hamish's chest.

Hamish squeezed the trigger of the pistol he had named Rose. The sparking hammer arced down, striking across the abrasion plate and sending a sputter of tiny white-hot metal splinters into the powder pan. The powder ignited in a brief flash and the pistol kicked as the charge in the muzzle propelled the lead ball towards its target.

The face of the man in the cap changed from triumph to disbelief and then to horror, as he realised - far too late - that the hands on the counter top

were not real but imitation! Hamish had once accepted them as part payment of a drinking debt from a member of a travelling theatre show.

The flight of the axe took less than three seconds, but Hamish saw it coming lazily, tumbling unhurriedly through the air as if it were moving through treacle. He had experience this sensation before, during pitched battles on the decks of ships, where time suddenly and inexplicably slowed down to a fraction of its normal pace. Hamish recognised it and welcomed it like a long-lost friend, immersing himself into it as he stepped casually aside to dodge the axe. The whirling projectile crashed into the wooden shelves behind the bar sending up a multi-coloured shower of glass and liquor before embedding itself in the wall.

The heavy ball hit the man just to the left of his nose, underneath his eye. His head recoiled under the impact as the deadly metal narrowly skimmed underneath his eye socket as it passed through his brain and exited out the back of his skull. Its energy still potent, it came to rest deep in a wooden post behind him.

His body flailed its arm in a reflex spasm of death and whirled to the ground in a heap, blood seeping from the acorn sized hole in the front of his skull and brains slopping out through the apple sized aperture at the back.

By this juncture, the man at the table had brought his hidden pistol from under the table and was in the process of raising it to fire. Hamish was already squeezing Ruby's trigger, having had the advantage of pre-aiming both guns, reasonably accurately, while his hands had been covered by a towel. There was a bright flash as the striking arm threw burning sparks into the powder pan, then a soft "whoomph" as the ignition was passed into the pistol's body. The main charge promptly erupted forcing the lead ball out in a billow of smoke towards its target.

The man began to lurch to the side, vainly seeking the shelter of the wooden post beside him. He had nowhere near the three seconds available that this action demanded. Hamish could see the blurred trail of the ball through the air and knew, by every instinct he could muster, that this should be impossible. Nonetheless, he was able to calmly plot the path of the deadly sphere and predict the point of impact. He could be certain that the shot would hit the man in the heart.

The pistol ball struck a billowing fold in the villain's coat, created as the material lagged behind the momentum of his frantic sideways motion, desperately trying to evade it. The Inn Keeper stared, both fascinated and appalled, as the fabric first compressed against the man's chest, then began to rip and tatter under the impact. At a dawdling pace, a hole began to appear at the centre of several concentric rings of shock that made the air pulse outwards like the ripples on water as a stone drops into it. The fabric shredded to pieces as it caved into the wound that was opening in the man's chest.

It seemed, for all the world, as if he had been struck by an invisible hammer. Blood, muscle and flesh exploded outwards, spraying in a perfect circle, before the centre hung – suspended in the air for a moment – then retreated into the cavity, like a tide turning, to follow the wake of the ball as it exited through the man's back.

His lifeless body tumbled to the ground like a rag doll thrown by a petulant child. It crashed backwards, thudding onto the wooden floorboards with a wet splash as the gaping wound in back, the size of a man's fist, spilled out tattered muscle and heart tissue along with strewn white fragments of shattered shoulder blade and ribs. His chest spurted a fountain of crimson blood. His weapon, which he had not had time to fire, spun on the ground beside him like a demented water beetle, mocking his demise. His head came to rest in a seeping pool of blood, the staring, lifeless eyes wide open in startled surprise, still registering the shock of his final moments.

The air was thick with blueish, acrid smoke from Hamish's still smoking spark-lock pistols. The diligent and scrupulous care that Hamish took in cleaning his guns was matched only by the blatant disregard he paid to the two corpses on the floor.

"Now that was a fearful sound!", he declared, appreciatively.

The fifteen remaining customers in the bar looked at the dead bodies with little concern. They exchanged remarks and opinions, in hushed voices, ranging from the dismissive and the scornful to the outright contemptuous. There was little doubt that the passing of these two ruffians would not be mourned.

Hamish called to the serving girl, who was peeping round the edge of the door to the kitchen, and she came back into the room.

"I have a special cleaning job for you!", he told her, "Your admirer and his friend have caused a bit of a mess." With a graceful flick of his hand, Hamish threw her a coin in a high arc and she caught it, snatching it out of the air. Her look of approval, when she appraised the coin in her hand, confirmed him as a generous employer.

Alex Brennan hurried in, carrying his boots, one in each hand and said: "I heard shots. Is everything okay?". Seeing the calm and unruffled customers, who had – by this time – returned their attention solely to their ale, he added: "In the hurry, I didn't manage to get my boots on!"

"Tell me, young Alex," enquired the Inn Keeper, in oddly jovial tones, "How are you with a spade?"

Alex looked baffled and looked around for anything that might require the assistance of a digging tool, his eyes eventually arriving at the two bodies on the floor.

Hamish shrugged and offered: "They wouldn't settle their ale account when I asked them." and then winked.

Alex and Hamish rigged up a makeshift stretcher out of some heavy canvass and leather reins and carried the two corpses, one at a time out to the woods, a little distance from the back of the inn and set to work digging their final resting places.

After an hour of excavation, Alex and Hamish stopped shovelling soil and both gasped loudly. Sweat was streaming down their faces and necks, darkening their shirts and making them stick to their backs. Folding his hands on the handle of the spade, Alex rested his chin on them and watched Hamish Pottle dig another scoop of soil from the pile and deliver it into the grave.

"They were big guys," Alex complained, "But it's taking ages to fill in over the top of them!" He paused and then quipped: "You haven't pulled them out while my back was turned, have you?"

Hamish laughed and mopped his brow, "I still say we should have buried them one on top of the other instead of side by side."

"They very likely had no respect for anybody while they were alive," Alex surmised, "But – putting that to one aside - let's spoil them with kindness of showing them respect now that they'll be no more trouble to anyone."

Hamish panted and caught his breath before replying: "They are going to be feeding the worms. That's probably the best work they have done in a long time!".

"Aye," Alex agreed, "When I was fighting with the Dutch against the Spanish, there were a good few mercenaries on hand. They were never much welcomed by the regular troops. With them having no belief, loyalty or patriotism to motivate them to join the fight - just a love of money - they tended to draw a good deal of contempt. I must confess that they were good fighters, though, so when battle was raging, and each man had to depend on the other, people quickly lost interest in what drove them!"

"Mercenaries are mercenaries, the whole world over.", Hamish announced.

The two paused, again, and both looked around, checking in all directions to make sure they were alone in the woods and not being observed.

"If it's not the McRaes behind these two turning up,", Alex declared, "Then I would be very much surprised!"

"Aye," Hamish agreed, "It was clear from their description that they were looking to find Constable McGrath. They claimed he was a former army comrade, but I didn't believe that for a moment."

"The question is," Alex suggested, "How long will it take the McRaes to miss these two?"

"The question is," Hamish countered, "Will they miss these two ogres because they have already met up with them or will they miss them because they are yet to arrive?"

"More important still," Alex offered, "Is why didn't McGrath return, last night, and did he know about these two?"

"There is certainly no love lost between the Constable and the McRaes," Hamish mused, "Killing their leader certainly assured that! Their need for vengeance, however, didn't overwhelm their judgement. They knew that killing a Constable of His Royal Highness King James, if it were attributed to them, would bring down the wrath of Hell on them!"

The two men continued their chore for almost ten minutes before either one spoke again. It was Hamish, who broke the silence, looking troubled: "Did McGrath say anything to you, last night? Anything about what he was thinking or intending to do"

"No," replied Alex, "We just talked about general things. There was nothing in particular that came up in conversation."

Hamish & Alex continued shifting soil from the mound, which was now appreciably smaller, down into the hole from which it came. The hole seemed to fill slowly and both men were visibly anxious to complete the job. Neither of them wanted to be observed, in the act, by the wrong people.

When, at last, they had finished and were stamping down the soil and strewing it with leaves, twigs and decaying mulch, Hamish pressed his previous question, again: "McGrath didn't say anything to you at all that might have meant anything?"

"No," Alex replied, shrugging his shoulders, "We just talked about old times and our experiences in the army and about life and fate and such things."

Hamish looked thoughtful, his brows creased, "Nothing of any importance?"

"No," Alex repeated, recalling the strange little poem or riddle McGrath had recited, but sure that it was of no significance, "We roasted pine cones, split them, ate the nuts and drank too much whiskey."

"I was a Merchantman, on the seas, for many a year," Hamish began, "And, when new crew were taken on – which was a constant thing, due to illness, death and people quitting that kind of life – there would be that odd time when you would look at a somebody and know, without a shadow of a doubt, that they were a significant individual who would have an impact on your life."

Alex nodded, sagely, "It was the same in the infantry.", he replied.

"This man, McGrath," Hamish remarked, "And – if I may say so – your good self, as well, are two fine examples of such people."

Alex inclined his head and lifted his hand in a brief salute to his temple.

"McGrath," Hamish continued, "Was professing a hearty desire to be tasting my wife's pot roast, yesterday, and – although I am not claiming that such a thing would drag a man back from the ends of the Earth – its strange that, rather than being late, he simply didn't return at all."

Alex, giving a final, conclusive stamp on the soil, turned back to Hamish and nodded his head in agreement, "It's mighty strange, indeed."

"Yet," persisted Hamish, like a dog gnawing at a bone, "He never said anything to you out of the ordinary?"

"No," Alex confirmed, turning back to the grave and loosening the lacing of his britches, "I'm afraid he didn't."

"What are you doing?", asked Hamish, in puzzlement, hearing the other unbuckle his belt and then seeing him ease down his britches a few inches."

"What am I doing?", Alex asked, as way of reply, "I have an obligation to discharge, here!"

Hamish first heard the flow of liquid and then caught a glimpse of it as the steaming flow of hot urine was delivered from Alex' bladder onto the grave.

"On behalf of all the people they wronged," Alex announced, "And all the people they bullied, assaulted or killed...." Alex swung his hips, left to right, propelling the sparkling yellow flow in a snaking whiplash, "I need to give them the send-off they deserve!"

Hamish let out a laugh that set a dozen birds to flight from the tress and slapped his thigh, "I can only hope that some of that finds its way onto their faces and, better still, into their eyes and mouths!"

The two men, tired and weary, trudged the half mile back to the Inn and went around to the horse trough at the front. Here, they took turns at working the handle of the pump while the other washed. Hamish called to one of the maids to fetch them both clean shirts and they sat down on the 'gentry steps', outside the entrance to the inn. These were a set of wooden beams stacked to form a short rise of stairs for people to board coaches who were either unable or - for those of a more refined upbringing - unwilling, to clamber up into coaches by means of their own narrow, awkward steps.

When the maid returned with the shirts, she approached them uneasily and offered them tentatively, almost apologetically. Hamish's face dropped at the sight of them, close up. The maid looked anguished. Hamish knew that his wife had sent her with these particular shirts. Alex put his on and flexed his arms as if performing chest expanding exercises and remarked: "The owner of these must be a strapping and manly individual! Were they left by guest?"

The expression on Hamish's face was desolate as he replied: "They were left by my son."

"A fine strong man, to be sure!", Alex declared, cheerfully, attempting to lift the other's mood.

"He's dead.", Hamish added, dismally.

"Oh!", Alex said, flatly, feeling clumsy and stupid, "I'm genuinely sad to hear that."

Hamish didn't reply. He was there in body, only. His mind – as confirmed by his far-off, vacant stare – was elsewhere. Alex feared he was reliving some traumatic event from the past and decided not to intrude upon it with any more talk.

After a couple of minutes, Hamish suddenly turned back to him, looking like a man back in the present.

"I'll not speak of it, if it grieves you.", said Alex.

"It's nothing to trouble yourself about.", Hamish responded.

Alex could not prevent a wounded expression from reaching his face and, seeing it, Hamish relented.

"I take your concern kindly," Hamish assured him, "But his passing has left me numb and empty rather than cross or upset."

Alex paused a reverential moment then asked: "Was he lost at sea?"

"Aye," Hamish replied, "He was."

The far off look returned to the Inn Keeper's eyes, for a short while, before he added: "My son was a farmer. I persuaded him, after much arguing, not to take to the waves, as I had."

Alex gave him a puzzled look and had opened his mouth to ask a question when Hamish cut him off: "He was lost in a sea of corn. Taken from us by a pistol shot from a Campbell who was disputing a land boundary."

Alex held up his hands in a gesture of helplessness and Hamish, seeing the pained look in his eye, hugged him, briefly resting his chin on his shoulder and slapping him on his back.

"He would have been about your age, now.", Hamish confided, narrowly avoiding a sob in his voice as he choked back his emotions.

Hamish turned to Alex but said nothing further. A tear escaped the brim of the old man's eye and rolled down his cheek. As if in answer, a tear rolled down Alex' own cheek. The old sailor reached out and patted the young man's arm. The young man returned the gesture and the two men sat in silence, side by side on the wooden slabs, for several minutes. The silence was devoid of any hint of embarrassment or discomfort. It was an easy silence, between friends. A silence that shunned anything so basic and primitive as words to share its intimacy.

After a little while, a group of birds began singing in the trees. It was almost as if they had held back, in reverence, but now found their song too joyous to restrain. The men looked up to the trees at the same time and shared a smile that neither had to see to know was there.

"Its not so much what we do that spurs regret," Hamish announced, "But what we hold back from doing. That's what torments us. An action can be condemned, in hindsight, and argued to be right or wrong, wise or foolish. When we fail to act, we expose ourselves to a grief that can consume our very soul. I have a demon to lay to rest, along with these two men."

Hamish stood up, quickly and unexpectedly, catching Alex by surprise. Alex stood, too, feeling it the appropriate thing to do.

"He said nothing. Nothing of any significance.", Hamish said, making it more of an accusation than a question.

Alex looked sheepish. Hamish tilted his head to one side. Alex let out a long sigh of resignation. He knew exactly who "he" was and didn't need any reminding.

"We talked about possessions, at one point. About things we value.", Alex confessed, "I have a flint box that belonged to my Grandfather."

Hamish looked at him eagerly, like a dog by a long soundless rabbit hole that just heard movements from its occupant. Alex looked pained, almost apologetic, as he went on: "He recited a verse or spoke a ditty or something...", Alex screwed up his features in contemplation, "It was strange..."

Hamish stood, patiently, as if waiting for a possessive gun dog to reluctantly drop a recovered pheasant

"He said 'I have the petal of a rose. I keep it in a thimble of glass. I keep the thimble in...', Alex broke off seeing the shocked and astounded expression on Hamish's face.

The Inn Keeper looked horrified! His eyes were wide and his mouth hung open in dumbfounded amazement. Alex thought that he couldn't have looked more astonished if he had just announced that he were the Messiah and that this was the Second Coming.

"Brydda!", Hamish gasped, slapping his hand to his own mouth, "The words of Queen Kiffan.", he said with reverence and awe.

Alex stood, baffled and speechless.

"Horses! Get to the horses!", Hamish cried, "We need to go to Coilltean Dorcha and take a look around. The McRaes of the Watch use it as their base when they are in these parts."

Coilltean Dorcha (or 'Dark Woods' in English) was a forbidding place, no doubt deliberately chosen for its gloomy and inhospitable setting. It was one of Hamish's least favourite places and the inhabitants were, appropriately, his least favourite people.

Alex hurried round to the stables with Hamish, who was bellowing for the stable lad to saddle up their horses. The stable lad, who looked as if he had just woken from a nap, sprang into the air like a startled cat and reached the saddles in half the strides a person should take. His hands a blur of activity, the boy had grabbed a saddle, thrown it up onto the first horse's back and had begun attending to the straps, before Alex could even get his own saddle off the shelf. In awe of the young lad's dexterity, Alex positioned his saddle and moved to place the first strap underneath the beast. In the blink of an eye, the boy was there, catching the strap and passing through the buckle of its partner. With the economy of motion of a professional, he hauled the straps tight. The horse promptly looked down, as if to examine his handiwork, at the point they reached perfect torsion. The horse seemed pleased.

Alex nodded towards Constable McGrath's second horse and said: "If he were going, not meaning to come back, he would have taken his other horse."

"Yes," agreed Hamish, "It's a fine animal just to abandon."

The two riders mounted up and the boy halved an apple and give a piece to each animal. As they moved off, the boy appeared to inspect his own work and the hint of a momentary, pouting frown that flickered on his lips appeared – perversely – to indicate satisfaction.

Hamish rode to the side of the inn and bade Alex to follow him inside. Hamish grimly loaded Ruby and Rose into a bag and handed Alex his own weapon from the cupboard behind the bar. He then took a knife and ran down the inside corner of the cupboard and then levered out a panel. Handing Alex the knife, to put in his sporran, Hamish eased the panel forward and it swung open to reveal two muskets. Hamish took the muskets out and handed one to Alex.

Alex had not held a musket since he had been in Austria, six weeks ago, and felt uneasy at handling one again, but took it, nonetheless. Hamish took out powder horns and two bags of shot balls.

"These are lead," Hamish explained, handing Alex the heavier bag, "And these are iron.", he said tossing the other bag up and down in his palm a couple of times.

The Inn Keeper didn't insult Alex' knowledge and understanding by explaining that the iron balls flew a greater distance with less charge or that they were less prone to drop below their target.

Without a further word, the two men loaded their weapons, made them safe, then went back outside and got onto their horses.

"You didn't ask me who the Brydda were.", Hamish said, conversationally.

"No.", replied Alex, flatly.

The two men moved out onto the road, where Hamish put his heels into his horse and set off up the long hill at a pace. Alex prompted his mare to keep up. When they reached the summit, Hamish slackened off the speed.

"You don't think McGrath has gone back to his troops and been delayed for one reason or another?", Alex asked.

"No, I don't," Hamish confirmed, "Because he would have sent a messenger. I'm sure of it."

"Well, we received no message.", Alex agreed.

"We received a message," Hamish replied, "But it wasn't via a messenger. He left a message with you. A message and a warning."

It took just over half an hour to reach the turning leading into the woods that gave Coilltean Dorcha its name. The two men exchanged looks of unease as they encouraged their mounts down the path. The air in this higher ground was markedly colder and, up ahead of them, they could see snow in the trees. As they reached the snow, they could feel a modest breeze behind them and, in the distance, they could see a thin haze where the snow was still lightly falling.

"The snow is still falling over there, in the distance, but it's not fallen here for some while." Alex noted, pointing first ahead and then down to the ground beside them, "If we're going to be going close to their hide out, in the snow, then we're going to leave tracks all over the place for them to see!"

Hamish grunted his dismay and said: "That's a problem we will have to tackle when we get to it." Then he pulled his horse up to a stop and raised his hand for Alex to do the same. "This place," he said, waving an arm towards the partial clearing a little way in front, "Would be ideal for an ambush!"

The two riders coaxed their steeds to walk dead slow, looking in all directions for any possible trap, then stopping them every few strides to listen. Hamish gestured to Alex to take out his pistol and he did the same. Brandishing their weapons, they dismounted and crept forward cautiously. The snow made everything ominously quiet, soaking up all noise and rendering the perfect stillness threatening and uncomfortable.

Hamish leaned in close to Alex, bringing his mouth a handspan from his ear, and whispered: "Look... signs of a struggle... over there by the bushes."

They edged their way to the spot, treading stealthily, their pistols at the ready. The bushes had a couple of broken branches, stretched back and splintered, accompanied by a cluster of snapped twigs. On closer inspection, the foliage was bent, as if somebody had fallen, or been thrown, into it. On the ground, the thin scatter of snow clearly displayed the boot marks of at least three, maybe even four, different people.

Suddenly, Hamish grabbed Alex firmly by the arm, preventing him from advancing. His grip was harsh and Alex almost rebuked him until he saw him pointing, urgently, to something on the ground.

Hamish dropped to his haunches, staring intently at something, and Alex heard a sharp intake of breath followed by a low Gaelic curse. Alex crouched beside him and had to stifle an involuntary gasp.

There, amidst a swathe of pristine snow, standing out starkly in dazzling contrast - like a charcoal smudge on a pure white canvas - was a lone black thumbnail.