

Stone of Alisanos

Mickey Stone



Stone Literary LLC

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This is a work of fiction woven through real places.

The River Earn flows through Crieff, Scotland. James River winds through Virginia. The Graham and Drummond clans have deep roots in Highland history. These places and names are real, and they are honored here.

But the characters who walk these lands, the events that unfold along these rivers, and the gifts passed through these bloodlines are born of imagination.

McKenna Chapel and McKenna's Glen exist in the heart of this story, if not on any map.

Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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Tom Elliot — For nailing the cover art. I may write the words, but he gives them the cover!

Dani Dejesus — My Beta Reader and cheerleader

In this work, you will find a smattering of elongated vowels, written as *yuuu* or *yu* (as an example), to give flavor to the dialect of the Scottish characters within.

The mists of The Highlands are like the mists of time. Much forgotten, but the people and spirit occupy both, always.

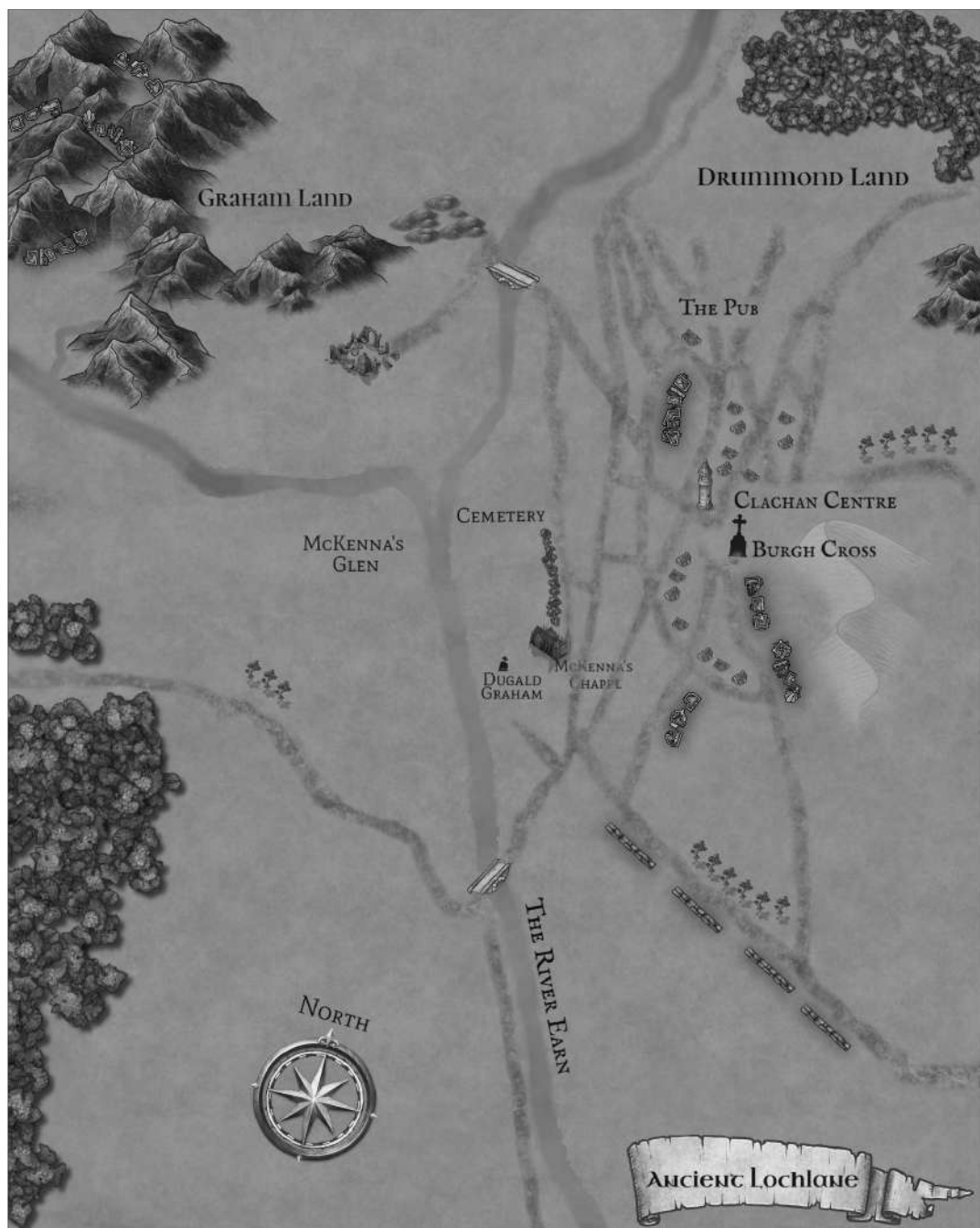
To all those who have the light within.

To all those looking for that light.

I promise, if you look, you will find it.

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On one side, a problem.
On the other, a solution.

Few know which side they are on.



Chapter 1

THE RIVER EARN MOLDED LIVES like clay on a potter's wheel. The promise of the water mixed with an uneasy balance of hidden danger. Cattle grazed in the valley, finding shoots of field grass still sticking up through a blanket of fresh snow.

The ground had yet to freeze, and hooves sloshed, as constant as the nearby river. The herd paid no attention to the earth underfoot.

Settling into their saddles, the Graham clansmen observed the herd. Eyes darted back and forth, on the lookout for predators that approached with stealth and attacked with no mercy.

Or worse.

In the mountains to the west, one danger was ferocious mountain felines. Early spring was the most dangerous time, when animals woke from the depths of hibernation.

Grazing conditions were scarce in the mountains, and there were plenty of places to hide.

Finding grasslands for the cattle meant one thing: moving the Clan east, out of the mountains. Their numbers were dwindling, and Rancet Graham had seen enough of his people perish from sickness, lack of fresh water, and attacks from *The Blacks* in the hills.



Bears never bothered the cattle, but a man on horseback... or at even more peril... on foot, and that was another matter. Dens were hidden all over the mountains. No one from the Clan dared venture forth in the mountains alone. If you could see a *Black*, pity on that unfortunate soul.

Forward scouts had located a grassland area that was on the edge of Drummond land, but screened behind hills and stands of trees from the main Drummond village. Months of observation proved the land was ignored and unused. They didn't ride the perimeter or bring their herds to graze there. They did not harvest the grass or dam the water for irrigation.

Such were the edges of clan lands.

Rancet proposed the idea of leaving the mountains with his family before raising it in a Council meeting. His wife, Rache, had lost two brothers to *The Blacks*. She tried to hide the creases of pain at the corner of her eyes, but she understood both the need and the dangers. Stay in the hills and mountains, or face the danger of Man in the grasslands.

For Rancet's son, it was a different matter.

Ethan preferred the solitude of the peaks. Trees, caves, and outcroppings gave him nooks to hide and ponder things that the Elders refused to debate. He saw no difference between man and woman, crippled or whole. Blood ran red in all.

The din of the Clan meeting carried two alleys away. Pounding fists within the chamber echoed outside. Many in the clan clung to the privacy of the mountains. Others argued for the health of the cattle.

Ethan sat close to his father's seat in the chamber. Unnoticed in the corner, the debate raged around him.

"Why? We have all we —"

"What danger awaits?"

"The herd needs new blood, not new fe—" A voice cracked.

A cup sailed across the room.

"The herd needs more than just blood!"

"If your sword breaks, do you not fix it? The herd ails and you ignore it!" Rancet's raised voice silenced the others.

Several cast their eyes to the floor. Quiet settled over the room.

The Elder lowered his head in resignation. Glancing sideways at Ethan, he nodded.

"To the grasslands."



Seasons ago, Rancet sat at the stream's edge, watching. A full day of observing as three unknown men brought vessels to the edge of the flowing water, filled them, and departed.

Six times they approached, filled, and left.

They must have stock nearby.

The seventh time, Rancet ensured everyone saw him.

“Tis a dangerous place, in the rocks, to draw water,” Rancet spoke as he stepped from behind a tree.

“Aye, but it is not as obvious as leading a herd to the stream below,” Innes Mackenzie responded. “I’ll not drive my herd across an obvious spot such as that. It invites pitfalls where I need no such thing.”

“I am Rancet, of the Village Graham. Where is your herd? I do not see or hear them.”

“On the west side of the hill, in a flat between peaks. We draw water for them. We know we are on the edge of yer lands. The flats are not.”

“You know this how?” Rancet was curious, not combative.

“Yer mark on the boulder entering the flat faces east, in claim, not west. I would not leave my herd on such a marked land.”

“And what is your intention in this place?” Rancet wondered why a herd was migrating in the area.

“We drove south to the markets. Stay no more than a week’s time and move on. Our group carries its own supplies and feed. Grasses in the flat add to our provisions for the herd.”

Rancet did not think this was a chance encounter.

The Graham clan had suffered from a lack of mixed stock and suitable grain. Crop failures in patchy growing areas were too common. As herdmaster, he knew the concerns.

A group driving their cattle to market? In this area?

“Show me. I have thoughts that may benefit us both.”

They finished filling their vessels, strapped them to the horses, and rode west to the flat. They pushed up the trail and entered the plateau, where 500 head stood grazing and wandering. Two men rode horses, tending to the cattle, while the others filled a makeshift basin that they made from the provision cart and lined with coated bark and waterproofed skins.

"Yer males are fine stock. Breeds not seen in this area," Rancet commented to Innes.

"Driving this herd across different grasslands and Glens, they eat different grain. We've gathered seed along our routes. Planted back on our lands," Innes continued.

"I've seen yer herd." The Mackenzie drover took pity on Rancet. "Give him 10 stone each, of our gathered seed, for his kindness."

A Mackenzie clansman scurried off to fetch the gift.

"Plant and harvest for feed and hay. Keep back one-fifth for seed harvest. Rotate the crop the next season to keep yer lands rich," Innes instructed.

Rancet looked Innes over. The first step was taken.

"In exchange, take your cattle and water at the stream. 'Twill be easier for you."

"I have females in season, do you have bulls? Perhaps we can crossbreed and gain some new bloodlines. A benefit to both?" Rancet asked of the Mackenzie Drovemaster. Innes nodded at the wisdom of the idea. Within hours, the herd was making its way down the mountainside.

For a week, deep in summer, the herds intermingled. Mixing Highland Coos, Luing, and Galloways made for hearty stock.

The Mackenzie clan left and traveled south. Rancet had much to think about. His herd carried bloodlines of cattle from another clan, and he was determined to make it better.

For three seasons, he took the seed and grew it in small patches in the mountains. There were scattered areas to grow, but the herd could not access them. Graham threshers cut the grain and carried it down to the cattle pens. It was still not enough.

Rancet looked at the sparse growing areas. He needed better fields. He pleaded his case to the Clan leaders. The Council of Elders held to the old ways of clan distrust, even with Rancet being second to only the Clan Chief.

One winter season, however, the Clan Chief and several Council members fell ill within a Chamber meeting. Members fell to the floor, clutching their stomachs. Twisting and writhing, foaming at the mouth or being violently ill, choking as their throats constricted. Two people died, including the Clan Chief. The rest suffered from a stomach sickness that the healers could not cure. Many suspected the Drummond Clan poisoned their water, but no other villagers fell ill.

A plant mistaken for Twinberry Honeysuckle, mixed in a regular Council meeting drink, created an illness unlike anything they had seen before.

Deadly Nightshade was a danger in the Highlands. A predator could eviscerate you with a sudden attack, but nature extracted her toll as well. Sharp eyes kept them safe. Careless eyes paid a harsher cost.

Fate kept watch over both.

It fell upon Rancet, as Drovemaster, to rise to Clan Chief. It was not a responsibility he wished for. Settling minor squabbles, claims of ownership, and other petty issues were like the bitter aftertaste

of a poor drink. He loathed individual pursuits in favor of things to better the community.

He thought back on his idea of trying to increase grain and multiply winter stores of meat. Everyone in the clan would benefit from plentiful food stocks. He presented his idea again to the new Council members. Reality withstood arguments, raised voices, and stomping.

Rancet's voice was finally heard.

The clan was shrinking in health and in numbers. The choice for survival spurred many to ideas that had seemed impossible before.

He broached the idea again, with Rache. Turning away in shame, she admitted to hearing whispers in the village.

"Do you know what it might bring? Here, we know what we have. There, we know nothing." The fear furrowed her brow.

Rancet caressed his wife's face, smoothing the creases of concern from her cheek. His eyes held the look of a person weighted with thought for the clan and hope for his family.

"I mean for all to thrive. To challenge each allows one to grow and prosper. We move forward together, or not t'all."

Rancet looked upon the boy sitting next to him and said, "Every man can be better. G'ven the chance, surprise you it will, that."

The words seared into Ethan's memory.



Chapter 2

RANCET AND ETHAN SAT on horseback, looking at a wide grassland area. To their left, a large outcropping blocked most of the view of the valley beyond. Neither wore the colors of the Graham Clan.

To the outward eye, they were wanderers, traveling toward the river to water their horses.

“We can raise pens here, as well as plant enough grain to feed both man and beast,” Rancet said as they rode along the tree line.

“Erect quarters to shelter from the weather, small paddocks and enclosures to protect the herd.”

We will build along the treeline, to protect our backs.

“Will we stay here or wander as we have done in the mountains?” asked Ethan.

“We build facing the Drummond Village. Keep a watchful eye, but our door faces them in Welcome. We’ll not turn away any person before hearing that which he bids us to listen.”

Rancet and Ethan had set out at daybreak, determined to reach Drummond pastures before the sun rose to noon. They passed several single riders, and Rancet recognized them as forward Drummond watchers. A man riding with a boy gave them no concern.



The grasslands were level and covered with field growth. Rancet knew it could barely sustain a small herd, but if there were a poor growing season, it would suffer, as would its inhabitants.

The two stopped at a primitive fence line and looked at a meager herd. It looked much the same as the Graham stock once looked.

"Their stock needs fresh bloodlines, as ours did once." He pointed out several weak bulls among the herd.

"No Coos to be seen." Ethan looked carefully. "Belted, that," he said as he pointed off in the distance.

"Not enough to breed strong lines," Ethan declared.

"Aye, laddie. But they make best with what they have." Rancet had a plan. He prayed it would land on favorable ears.

A single rider approached. He wore a Drummond sash, adorned with a Drummond Penannular. He did not brandish his sword, as he perceived no threat from a man and boy atop horseback.

"Stand steady," the clansman requested. "Do you have business on this land, or are you passing through to the South?"

Rancet answered, "I am known as Rancet and this be my lad, Ethan. We are unarmed and of no threat to you."

The clansman scoffed, "I can see you two are no threat." He spoke larger than he needed to.

"Do you wish me to be a threat? Or do you wish to speak to me as a man?" He locked eyes with the clansman and would not look away. Ethan turned to his Father. Rancet sat tall in his saddle, unafraid.

My Father fears no man. He is steel in his saddle. One day, I'll be tha...

"Speak, and I will listen." The conscript shifted in his saddle, uneasy.

Rancet started slowly. "I come from the mountains to the Noort'. Graham lands. I travel with m'boy to show I wish no ill or confrontation."

What do you want? The clansman found it intriguing.

"Take me to your Council, as the words I have benefit both Drummond and Graham alike. I have a gift to present, and I will give them knowledge to use this gift. Whether they heed my words, that lies upon them." He knew the idea of a gift needing instruction piqued the interest of man, regardless of clan.

Rancet dismounted and brought two satchels of seed to the Drummond clansman. He offered to affix them to the Drummond saddle, and the rider allowed him to do so.

Once tied off and secure, he moved back to his steed and mounted. The clansman stared at the two for a moment and commanded, "Stand where you are."

He turned, took out his Carnyx and brought it to his lips. Blowing the horn, he sounded two short and one long wail. He listened, and an answer came back in the distance: two long bellows.

"Mind your place, young Ethan, and do as I ask," Rancet bade.

“Yes, Father,” Ethan nodded.

“Ride ahead of me. Ride quiet and make no sudden moves.” The scout let them take the lead, and they headed to the village in the distance, to the east.



They passed more mounted men and workers tilling fields. Womenfolk sat milking cows, plucking chickens, or spinning threads for clothing. Children were sparse. At noon, most were inside, tending to food preparation. The stench of manure wafted over the fields, as it was high fertilization season.

Several open fires burned, as large pots held soups or gruel to feed the clan. The odor of beef or chicken would arise here and there, but that was a luxury. Rancet knew the hardships all too well.

CLOPCLOPCLOP

Hooves echoed off the stone and bounced around the alleys of the small hamlet.

They arrived at a meager, single-story structure. Fieldstone provided protection from the elements, the roof thatched with more of the local grasslands, hewn tree branches and mud.

The Drummonds may be powerful, but 'tis not outwardly visible. Rancet examined his surroundings with a keen eye.

“Dunna dismount till told to, lad. Unnerstand?”

“Yes, Father.” Ethan kept his hands visible, forward on the reins.

“You, come with me.” The clansman beckoned Rancet.

"I'll not leave the boy. Bid us both to follow, or bid us to leave." Rancet sat tall in his saddle, unmoved.

"Fetch them both. Bring them inside," someone else commanded.

Two clansmen appeared from nowhere and startled Rancet and Ethan. They took hold of their reins. They dismounted and followed the others inside.

The room was lit by dozens of candles, and several men sat about the room, involved in conversations. Handwritten documents littered the table tops and several chairs sat unoccupied.

The clansman led the two to the middle of the room and bid them stand fast. They obliged, while the scout went to one and whispered in his ear. The Clan Chief glanced sideways, whispered to the others, then spun around and faced the middle of the room.

Liam Drummond moved to his seat. The Drummond Clan Chief was a barrel-chested man. His facial features showed scars from many battles. He moved with purpose and let out a mighty grunt as he sat in his chair.

A younger male sat at his right hand, but wore the same overshirt, decorated with a Drummond Tartan Sash. Liam pointed, wagging his finger towards Rancet.

"Lachlan, ...bid him to speak." Liam squinted at them.

Lachlan obeyed his father, stood up, and moved towards the middle of the room.

"Stranger, what is this gift you bring before us? Why would we need any direction as to its use? You think we are not capable?" Lachlan was posturing and performing for the other Council members.

“When you speak words of wisdom, perhaps I’ll be compelled to answer you,” Rancet snapped back.

The air in the room suddenly changed. The mild laughter ceased. Lachlan cowered back to his chair. Liam cast a glance at his son and shook his head ever so slightly.

“My son sometimes does not know how to speak with a stranger, especially one that comes forth with gifts... and alongside a child.” Liam rose from his chair.

“What say you, Graham? What brings you to a place of danger, and with a child to witness?” Liam was curious.

“If you know me to be Graham, then you know the land whence I came.”

“I know what you told my scout!” Liam bellowed.

“Then you know we are unarmed and of no threat to you or any Drummond.” Rancet would not shrink from Liam’s bravado.

“I know your lands. They are of no use. If they suited us, we could take them as we please.” Liam tested Rancet.

“Yet we have better grain and heartier livestock, and have no worries about feeding our people.” Rancet took a step forward.

Liam closed his fist, shook it at Rancet and muttered, “You think our grain and livestock are wanting?” He glared at Rancet.

“You have common field grass, no grains to be seen anywhere. You have sickly and underfed Luing, and perhaps 4 Belted in your herd. I witnessed it myself.”

“Your entire herd is set to pasture outside the village. At least your Drovemaster has the sense to keep them together.”

Liam tucked his chin and smirked. He liked the spirit of the man before him.

His mind is like the blade. Sharp and only used when tested. He does not shrink like the others.

Rancet continued, “I come before you with nothing other than my gift. Take those seeds, harrow a field where your pastures are thin, and plant. Let nature run its course. In one season, you will plant once and harvest twice. In the next growing season, plant the opposite seed to rotate and keep yer land fresh. You will plant once and harvest twice again.”

Liam turned slowly and moved closer. “And what of after two seasons? What is to become of this ‘gift’ then?”

“I have more to offer, if you would consider a generosity towards me.” Rancet was ready to plead his case. He looked over at Ethan.

Rancet knelt. Ethan did as his father did.

Liam cocked his head. *Why would he kneel?*

“My clan is of the mountains. We have hardships I can no longer shield them from.”

He continued, “Some time ago, a kindness was bestowed upon us by Clan Mackenzie. They set their herd to pasture with stock. Coos, Luig and Galloways. Their herd strengthened ours.”

“They gave us seed, instructed us how to plant, how to harvest, and how to hold back some of that harvest to gain more seed. That grain strengthened our beasts.”

Liam's eyelids narrowed as he thought. He knew his own cattle had suffered over the past seasons because of a lack of feed and an infusion of fresh blood.

"Go on, you have my ear, Graham." Liam leaned in.

"We must move from the mountains. I offer a trade. We will intermingle our herd with yours, offer grain, or teach you how to grow yourselves. Either way, both clans gain from such an arrangement."

Liam chuckled, "And why would a Mackenzie grant you such a kindness? What nonsense is that?"

Rancet looked up at Liam. "We allowed them to water their herd on our lands. Water is plentiful. Necessity for it is a greater need, and I'll not punish beast because of a clan name."

Liam staggered backwards. Rancet's truth was unexpected.

"And you would extend such a kindness to a Drummond?" Liam asked.

"I would extend this kindness to Man, no matter Clan name."

Liam beheld the two before him. His mind tried to comprehend how anyone could think this way. Drummonds had taught their children to distrust for generations, save one myth.

Dugald Albios

Could such a thing happen again? This was no myth of a sick child or a fire that could not burn flesh, yet the need was dire. Fresh blood for cattle, depleted feed... and the answer to those problems was kneeling before him?

One of the council members spoke up. "And what do you ask in return? Surely, this comes with a cost to our name?"

"One day's ride, to the west, lies land, level and unused by Drummond hands. 'Tis out past the stone outcropping, at the foot of the mountains. I ask you to allow my people to use that land as refuge from the dangers of the peaks. Our herds will be closer, and the land between the Clans can act as a mutual grazing ground when the females are in season. We need have no other contact other than our grainers."

Several on the council leaned forward. All were looking at Liam as he paced the floor in front of the fire. He turned and walked straight to Rancet.

"Why would your people need refuge? Who do you run from?" His voice seeped with suspicion.

"We do not run from men."

"We run from *'The Blacks'*."

The room erupted in chuckles and guffaws. Liam himself grinned, as if he had trapped Rancet.

"*'The Blacks'* haven't been here in a generation. Do you think us foolish?" Liam chortled.

Rancet stood. He put out his palms, face up. His jaw clenched at the memory he had struggled to keep buried.

“Ethan, rise and bare my torso so that all will know.”

Ethan complied with his father’s request. He didn’t understand what his father’s purpose was, but he obeyed. He moved in front of his father and unfastened his riding cover.

Rancet shrugged it off his shoulders. He kept his eyes fixed on Liam.

Ethan undid the undergarment and opened it. Rancet shrugged the left side off his shoulder.

The council reeled at what it saw. Several gasped. Eyes turned away.

Steel left a telltale mark.

This was not that mark.

Rancet grabbed Liam’s right hand and pressed it to his side.

Five ragged scars sliced across his ribs. The flesh had been torn by the swipe of a bear years ago.

“Then the ghost of a *Black* lives in the mountains.” Rancet peered deeply into the Clan Chief’s eyes.

Liam could see the terror and the pleading on his face.

“The ghost of a *Black* is hunting my people. If you do not believe me, feel the scourge of my bones yourself. That very same ghost did that.”

Liam could feel his ribs, crooked and out of place. Rancet’s hand on top of Liam’s burned, but there was no pain. The candles flickered, and several extinguished on their own. Heaviness pulled at Liam’s heart.

He pulled his hand back. Mist drifted over Liam's eyes, and a dark, foreboding figure suddenly growled and leaped forward at him. Terror he had never known jarred him back to the council room.

A painful howl came from his lips and bounced off the walls. The other members looked upon him, unsure of what had made him scream in agony.

The mauling reached his very soul.



Years ago, Rancet and two other clansmen were scouting along the hills for refuge spots when they stumbled upon a den that concealed a mother with her cubs. She lashed out, and he was lucky to escape with his life. Had it not been for other clansmen, he would have died in the mountains.

They rushed back to Village Graham with Rancet, unconscious and losing blood. The wounds opened to his chest and the skin was ripped. Heated blades, pressed into the wounds, stopped the flow of blood. Tightly wound bandages closed swollen and damaged skin.

Two womenfolk tended to him as he lay unconscious for weeks. Once the swelling subsided they stitched his wounds crudely, but they could not set the bones. His ribs knitted at awkward angles. One woman took to caring for Rancet, first out of pity. Later, out of awe.

Two of her own family had stumbled into such a fate. The memory still pained her.

At night, she would stare. Reaching for the wounds, she ran her fingers along the scarred skin. She could not bear to leave his side.

For a man to survive and fight for life as he had, he showed the steel in his heart. Weak smiles became the lifeline to pull him back from death's door. Rache later became his wife.

She tended his fever as infection racked his body.

She fed him as he was weak.

Strength came back slowly, as did the smiles. Rancet set about to do small tasks, building his body back. Conversations were easy.

The nightmares were not. Rache was always there to wake him and pull him from his fear.

One night, she broached the subject of the day in the den. Rancet's face contorted in pain. He gazed at the food on his plate, but with a mind far away. He told what he could remember, but stopped himself.

He swore her to never speak of the attack again.



Ethan looked up at his father. He stood in front of him, not looking at the scars, only at his father.

"This is my boy, and he does not know of that day, and I pray he never sees wounds such as these." Rancet cared only for others, and he would bleed for anyone other than himself.

Ethan fought the desire to look, but failed. His eyes widened and jaw went slack. He stumbled backwards. This moment was the first time he saw these wounds upon his father, and it overwhelmed him at this young age. He staggered back another step, where he felt a hand on his shoulder. Liam's hand. His small frame softly heaved.

One father laid his wounds bare for all to see. Another held the shoulder of a boy witnessing the cruelty of The Highlands.

Lachlan cast his eyes to the floor. He knew that this could easily be his father.

The Clan Chief understood the desire of a father to shield the innocent from the wrath of nature or battle.

Rancet slid his undergarment back over his shoulders, fastened his riding covering and took the hand of his son. Ethan still had tears flowing, as he thought his father indestructible. To see him as mortal pulled at something deep within him he couldn't understand.

Rancet glanced at Liam. The Chief spun to confer with the rest of the council. Voices jumbled in the background as Rancet reached out and guided Ethan aside. He knelt before the boy.

"Forgive me, my son, this is something you should never have to see again. It is who I am, and I cannae change it. These scars are not who you are, and it is not who decent men are. Dire times cause the scar. How you carry it is who YOU are. Trust in that."

"You are strong, you are brave, and one day you will come to do many great things, but today, you see the weakness of all men. Never forget that a scar on a living man is but a mark he carries. How others see it depends on the goodness in their hearts."

He held Ethan close. Rancet felt the warmth build. The father knew Ethan possessed the gift, even if Ethan had not recognized it yet.

It will serve him well, that.

Animated voices echoed from the other side of the room. One voice groused above the others. It ended abruptly when Liam slammed his fist on the table.

Rancet and Ethan returned to where they had knelt moments before.

Liam turned to face them.

“Lord, NO!” Gallagher exclaimed.

“SILENCE!” Liam glared at the Council. “Or else my blade will give you scars to match his.” Liam beckoned to Rancet.

“Come, I will speak with both of you in private.” He cast a sideways glance at the others. “Lachlan, attend me.”

They disappeared into a separate room, while the council stared at each other, befuddled.



Chapter 3

“TAKE THEM, PROVIDE THEM QUARTERS for the night as my guests. No one is to know they are Graham. Do you understand, Lachlan?” Liam was taking a calculated risk by sheltering them for the night, but he understood the benefits to the entire clan.

Lachlan nodded and opened a side door to an alleyway.

“Come, this way is safe for us to travel; have no fear.” Lachlan guided them along the way as the sun set over the village and candles lit the windows along the way.

They entered the side entrance of the House of Liam Drummond. The staff expressed surprise at Lachlan’s use of the door, but he clarified he was feeding and bedding the guests, as Liam had requested. Those present quickly obliged and made the guests comfortable.

“I go to fetch your horses. In the morning, you ride. You’ll be provisioned for your ride back to the mountains.”

Rancet bowed his head. “Your kindness will not go forgotten.”

“I will send riders to the North on the morrow, so you will have no encounters along your way. Your saddles will bear Drummond messenger markings. No one will question you. Ride away from the sunrise and you should reach the outcropping by nightfall.”



Lachlan disappeared out the door. Rancet and Ethan ate well and slipped into an uneasy sleep.

Across the village, Gallagher dismounted from his prized Arabian and strode up to the door of Stewart Drummond. He pounded on the door and waited. No candles were lit, as it was late. He struck the door harder.

The heavy door swung open, and a broadsword's point confronted Gallagher.

"Are ya daft, man? Or just stupid?" Stewart was in no mood for games.

"Wart, we have important business. Something is afoot, and it sits unwell in my thoughts." Gallagher barged past the door and turned to face Stewart. Stewart lit a nearby candle. It revealed a visage creased with worry.

Another candle appeared in a doorway nearby, and a small face peered through the crack. Tousled hair covered a young face.

"McKenna, lass, back to bed with you. All is well here," Stewart assured his daughter. She had been fast asleep until the banging on the door. Disquiet gripped her at the voices coming through the thin wall. Clutching her coverings for security, she tried to stay hidden.

Gallagher leaned in and whispered, "We ride north at the request of Lachlan in the morning; we will talk as we ride." Gallagher looked back at the child peering through the crack in the door, wheeled and stormed out of the house.

He plodded down the path until slipping out of sight. Stewart turned back to his daughter.

“Faather, that man scares me so,” McKenna spoke softly.

A child without her mother. Frightened of everything. How do I teach her not to fear?

“Come, lass, to bed. I will read to you. Let the words be your blanket, keeping you warm and safe.” Stewart was an educated man, but raising a daughter alone was a task he was ill-prepared for.

Margaret, his precious Maggie, had died at childbirth. Every day, he looked at a daughter who knew not her mother nor the soft ways of womanhood. The womenfolk of the village watched over her, but she preferred the tumble of boyish pleasures. She was fierce, challenged every lesson her father gave her, and had a curiosity that knew no bounds.

Large groups and noise would cause her to shrink as far into the background as she could. She learned at an early age to become invisible.

At night, however, the tale was different. Night terrors of a mother she never knew haunted her dreams. Screams would wake Stewart as the mares of the night tortured young McKenna.

One stormy night, Stewart read Burns to her. His words soothed both souls, and she fell fast asleep in her Father’s lap. He could not bring himself to take her to her bed. The next morning, he arranged the room so that he could rest and have her climb onto his lap.

The poems were delicate. Words of flowers. Tales of the sea. Unquestioned love. Something Stewart knew too fondly... that fate shatters without care or purpose. Most men allow the darkness to consume them.

The ripples of his deep voice would embrace his young daughter. Sitting in his lap, she would beg for stories, just to fall deep in its spell. It wasn’t just something to help her sleep.

If she could hear his voice, she felt safe.

Stewart reached for the light so that McKenna could ascend from that dark place. She often drifted to sleep in her Father's arms.

She never saw the tears he wept while she slept.



The next morning, Lachlan came into the tack room. Rancet and Ethan were already up, collected, and preparing to leave. Liam joined them in short order.

"Ride with the sun at your backs. Stay on the carriage path. Cross not into the grasslands. You'll be seen. If asked, you carry Drummond business, show them your messenger markings." Liam watched the two mount up.

The Clan Chief had wrestled all night with the decision. The line between Clan and compassion was blade thin, and Liam weighed defending both.

"Remember, Graham, do not move past the outcropping. I risk much; do not give rise to those who would not agree with this." Liam held one mount, Lachlan held the other.

"Taake your dead to the mountains." Liam's voice cracked. "Accept I cannae allow Graham flesh to spoil Drummond land. I can only bend so much before I abandon my Clan completely. Unnerstand me?"

"As we agreed, with only moonlight as our witness." Rancet glanced around, making sure no one was about. "I'll come forth on the nights of the Dark Moon, for discourse on matters of herd and grain. You have the gratitude of my people, and I am in your debt."

“Haaaaa!” as Liam swatted the horses into action. They thundered down the path and quickly disappeared around the bend.

“Speak of this to no one.” Liam faced Lachlan. “The Dugald sent them to balm what ails us, I am sure of it. You keep well my word when it is your time.”

Lachlan swore his oath, “Your word stands as long as I breathe the air of the Glen.”

With that, Lachlan turned and made his way down the street. He turned the corner and entered the stablery where the muster of scouts awaited instructions.

“Ride north to the ridge, across the river. Look for evidence of *The Blacks*. We need not haave a surprise when tending the herd in the Spring.”



The scouts rode forth as instructed. Gallagher and Stewart brought up the rear. Gallagher had much on his mind and much planned to share.

The party crossed the bridge to the north and east, across the river, near the ruins of the ancient Roman Fort. As they separated into the hills, he stopped the Arabian and turned in his saddle towards Stewart.

“A man bid us last night to believe *The Blacks* still roam the mountains. He bore scars of such.” He tried to rid his mind of what he had seen, but could not.

“What lives in the caves of the mountains is a mystery, that.” Stewart knew better than to question the witness of torn flesh. “I do not doubt it is true. Protect ourselves we must, from the things we cannot see or adjudge as a danger.”

“I do not trust any creature that is not aligned Drummond.” Gallagher sneered.

“Would you not trust the sparrow whose song floats in the trees? Or the deer that run across the fields? A bitter heart, your only possession, and you protect it like a beggar with a grain of rice.”

“To better my two bairns. If we do not protect what is ours, what is it they inherit?” Gallagher had no counsel other than to take.

“My child cannae have such hate and darkness upon her. She already lives with a mother unknown to her, and I’ll not have her slip into the well of no return. She must think, feel, and grow to love. How can she know love if it does not surround her?” Stewart’s words fell on deaf ears.

“My two will grow strong. They are destined to lead and make right the wrongs of those who would rather feel the pain of others rather than steel themselves to those who plead for favor.”

They led the horses to the river’s edge to let them drink. Dismounting, Stewart looked down at a rounded stone in the water. He picked it up, held it in his palm, face up.

“This stone, it is smooth, but it did not begin its life this way. It had hard edges, much like you. Over time, water, air, and the seasons themselves wore down the edges until it was perfectly polished and smooth. We, as men, hope to be as such one day.” Stewart dropped it back into the river.

Gallagher moved towards the stone, placed his foot in the water, diverting it around the stone.

“I prefer to dam that which causes my edges to wear away. You would make do with some edges yourself. Mark my words, you will need them if what I suspect comes to pass.”

“I choose when my edge is needed, be it by blade or wit.” Stewart took a step closer, placing a hand on the hilt of his broadsword. “If you think me worn, you’ll find my mettle is not to be tested.”

The thundering of hooves approached and broke the tension between the two. The scout parties found no evidence of *The Blacks*, but areas existed that required a search on foot.

“We will discuss how to proceed baack at the council when we return. Found nothing, did yoou?” Gallagher had hoped for as much.

“Carcass and bones scattered about, but no droppings and no trees damaged by claw or weight of animal,” the scout reported. “Further search requires a camp, more provisions and increased numbers.”

“We are not fitted for such,” Stewart said as he mounted his steed. “Away, to the village, to advise what we have found.” Stewart flipped his reins and flicked at the horse.

The chestnut bucked slightly, shook its head, and lurched forward down the path. Stewart grinned, as he preferred a horse with presence. His preference for men? Not to resemble the hindquarters of the beast he rode.



Across the vast glen, Rancet and Ethan approached the outcropping. They paused along the river's edge to water their horses before heading to the mountain pass back to the Graham dwellings in the hills.

The sunset danced across the water, and the breeze came from the land to the south, warm and inviting. Rancet looked out upon the land he had bargained for. His people would be safe. Plentiful water, rich lands and the promise of a Drummond that made it come to pass.

"Does it still pain you, Father?" Ethan asked. "I did not know of it."

"Scars are currency to be used as a last resort. Indeed, it can pay for much." Rancet had been teaching Ethan all along. "Come empty-handed, humble yourself before others, and speak that you can help. Nothing more. Those acts will return with little effort or need."

"Come, we'll make shelter by dusk." The two rode off to the hills with news to change the destiny of both villages.

