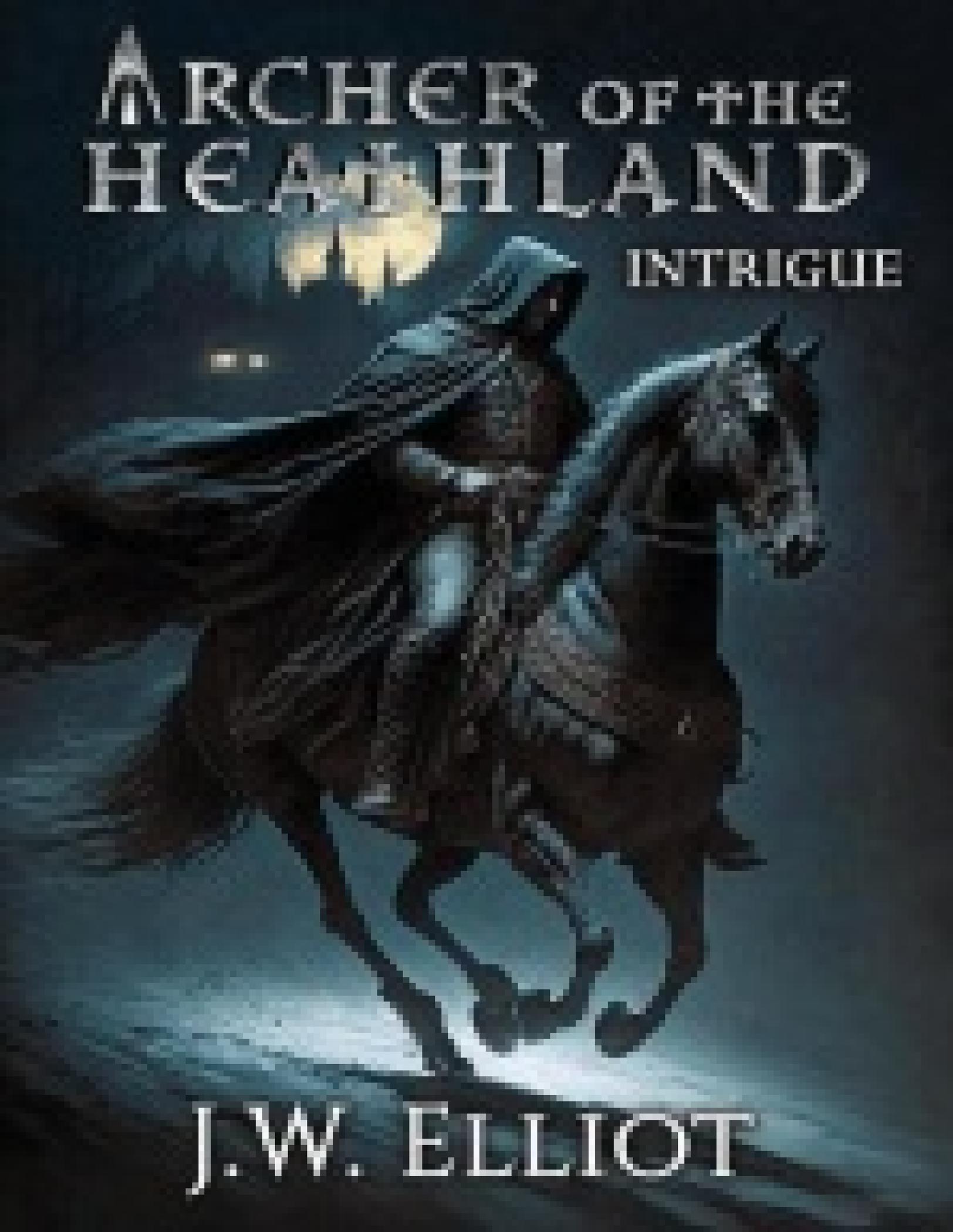


# ARCHER OF THE HEATHHILL

INTRIGUE



J. W. ELLIOT

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**Archer of the  
Heathland**

**Intrigue**

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Bent Bow  
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**For My Dad,  
Sam. I Miss You.**

# MAP OF FREI-OCK ISLES



## Intrigue

**THE NIGHT SEETHED** with an energy and anticipation that brought the goose bumps to Weyland's arms. He reined his horse to a halt. Someone was out there. Something was going to happen. The foreboding heightened his senses. The smell of human sweat, urine, and wood smoke floated on the breeze that blew over from the camp. The fall of a boot ground pebbles and sand underfoot. A glint of moonlight flashed on steel. Weyland slipped from the saddle and slapped his horse into a walk. He shadowed the animal as it picked its way along the narrow wash leading to the army's encampment. He didn't want to be silhouetted on the back of a horse when someone was sneaking about the underbrush.

The path wound its way amid the high heather and the scattered bunches of oak and beech trees. Laro Forest loomed dark and impenetrable to the east. Weyland had finished his circuit of the archers from his company who were posted to guard the camp. The Duke of Saylen had chosen this ground for the coming battle and now waited for the Salassani to make the next move. The scattered canopy of oak, beech, and the occasional patch of serviceberry splintered the light of the full moon, casting fragmented and shifting shadows as the breeze played through the branches. Weyland was still inside the pickets where no enemy was supposed to be. Yet he had seen that flash of steel.

Harsh whispers followed by a grunt and a gasp disturbed the night. Something heavy crashed through the heather and rolled down the gentle slope into the wash. Weyland crouched low, hugging the shadows, listening to the sound of retreating footsteps. The scattered moonlight flashed across a striped surcoat for an instant before the undergrowth swallowed the shadowy figure.

Weyland crept toward the sound of ragged, labored breathing. It might be one of their own men who needed help. The man lay in a heap against the trunk of the oak tree that arrested his fall. Weyland recognized the crest of the Duke of Saylen stitched to the man's cloak—

a stag set against a teardrop shield. Kneeling beside the dying man to see if there was anything he could do, he lifted the fold of the cloak.

A pale face with wide, dark eyes stared up at him. The man made a feeble attempt to defend himself until he realized that Weyland wasn't going to attack him. His eyes widened, and he snatched at Weyland's wrist with a vice-like grip.

"To the Duke," he said.

The words gurgled in his throat. Weyland recognized him as one of the lesser nobles attached to the Duke's household. But Weyland was a simple archer. He led a company of twenty bowmen, while his friend Neahl led a company of scouts. He was no one the Duke would recognize or even notice, let alone give him an audience. The man slipped a tiny, metal tube into Weyland's hand.

"Take it to the Duke," the man whispered. "Tell him to beware of Geric."



The Duke of Saylen appraised Weyland with a shrewdness beyond his years. He was a stout, young man with short-cropped, sandy-brown hair, and dark eyes. The Duke's father had died two years back, and the young Duke rapidly made a name for himself as a competent general and a dangerous opponent both on and off the battlefield. He couldn't be more than twenty-two years old—only three years older than Weyland.

Weyland knew little of the strife at court save the nasty, salacious stories the poor liked to spread about the ruling class. It was rumored that the Duke had taken a fancy to a Carpentini servant at his manor in the Taber Wood in the south, despite the fact that he was married. Still, Weyland was surprised the Duke agreed to see him. Nobles seldom gave any consequence to common soldiers like Weyland. He had been with the army for almost a year, and he had never spoken directly to the Duke.

**But, like most of the soldiers in the Duke's army, Weyland respected him. The Duke didn't waste the lives of his men by sending them into hopeless, frontal assaults against prepared enemy positions.**

**He preferred to lure the Salassani onto ground he had chosen. The Duke also fought with and worked alongside his men. He dug trenches, felled trees, and often ate with them. There weren't many people Weyland respected and fewer for whom he felt real loyalty. If the Duke hadn't been a nobleman, Weyland might have been his friend.**

**The Duke waited until his guards had disarmed Weyland and then dismissed them. When they were alone in the tent, Weyland tried not to fidget. Nobles were trouble—even ones like the Duke. It was always best to avoid their notice. What bothered Weyland the most, however, was knowing that he was unarmed in the presence of a man who had the authority to kill him if he wished. He felt naked and vulnerable without his short sword at his hip.**

**Weyland liked to think of himself as a good-looking, young man, with his thick brown hair and pale silver eyes. But standing in the presence of the Duke in his beautifully furnished tent and bright mail armor, left him feeling diminished, almost trivial. Nobles had a way of doing that. It was one of the things Weyland disliked about them.**

**“You have a message for me?” The Duke rested his hand on the pommel of his sword. He wore a polished mail shirt even in his own tent, and the dagger and sword were always on his hip. He looked like a man who didn't trust anyone.**

**Weyland extended his hand with the small metal tube. “He said to deliver this to you and to beware of Geric.”**

**At the mention of the name Geric, the Duke's eyes narrowed, and he snatched the tube from Weyland's hand. Poking a quill into the tube, he drew out a tiny roll of paper, which he unrolled and read quickly.**

**The Duke snapped his head up to glare at Weyland. “Have you read this?”**

**Weyland shook his head. “I came straight to you, My Lord.”**

**The Duke studied him for a moment as if trying to decide whether he believed him, before nodding. “Thank you,” he said. “But you are to tell no one what you have seen or done tonight. Do you understand?”**

**“Yes, My Lord.” Weyland itched to be gone. He avoided nobility whenever possible. It was too easy to rub them the wrong way and end up in trouble.**

**“There was something else, My Lord,” he said.**

**“Yes?”**

**“I saw someone running away wearing a striped surcoat.”**

**“Did you recognize him?” The Duke’s gaze was intense. He clenched his jaw.**

**“No, My Lord.” Weyland understood why this annoyed the Duke. The red and blue striped surcoat belonged to a noble family from Brechin that had risen to power only recently. And now someone in their employ had murdered one of his men.**

**“Anything else?”**

**“No, My Lord.”**

**“You may go.”**

**The young Duke dismissed him with the ease of a much older and more experienced noble. Weyland bowed and turned to leave, anxious to be out of his presence.**

**“One more thing,” the Duke said. Weyland glanced back over his shoulder. “Watch your back. Now that you’ve been seen at my tent, you’ll be a target.”**

**Weyland nodded and stepped outside to retrieve his weapons from the guards. He buckled his sword belt around his waist and slipped his boot knife into its sheath before striding away from the Duke's tent. This is why he avoided nobles.**



**The chaos of battle roared over the heather-covered hills. The Salassani sprang up the wash on their sure-footed ponies bending their short, recurve bows to send a shower of arrows into the ranks of Alamani nobles and peasants rushing to meet them. Men shrieked in pain and roared in anger. Horses screamed. Metal clashed, and the sickening smell of battle filled the air.**

**Weyland crouched just inside the cover of the trees behind the line of sharpened stakes he and his company had pounded into the ground and sharpened with their own knives the day before. Two dozen arrows were rammed into the ground beside him, within easy reach. The Salassani charged, never knowing the archers were there.**

**The captain gave the signal, and Weyland drew the string of his ninety-pound longbow to his ear, found a target, and loosed. The shaft whipped from the bow and drove straight into the side of a passing Salassani. The left flank of the Salassani rush faltered as horses and men fell under the shower of arrows to be trampled by those behind. But the center of the Salassani line drove through the mass of Alamani warriors, penetrating all the way to where the Duke's blue standard fluttered in the breeze.**

**Weyland worked methodically, selecting his targets with care so that no arrow was wasted, when a cry from the center of the battlefield caught his attention.**

**“To the Duke,” they cried. “To the Duke.”**

**Somehow the young Duke had become separated from his guard and was fighting like a wildcat to break free of the encircling crowd of Salassani horsemen who sought to cut him down.**

**Swords flashed.**

**Steel crashed.**

**A burly Salassani horseman barreled through the kicking and biting horses behind the Duke, raising his sword for the kill.**

**Weyland swung to the left, drew his bow to his ear, let out his breath to steady his shot, and loosed the string. The arrow arced over the battlefield, a flash of white goose fletchings against the pale blue sky. It was seventy paces at least to the target, and Weyland stood still as the arrow reached its peak and began its descent.**

**The big Salassani horseman closed with the Duke. His sword caught the light of the newly risen sun as it flashed downward. Weyland's arrow plunged into his throat, passing all the way through. The man's stroke faltered and glanced off the Duke's mail shirt.**

**The Duke spun in desperation to see the Salassani slip from his saddle and fall to the bloody, trampled earth. The Duke's guard rallied and drove the Salassani back.**

**In the pause, as his men surrounded him, the Duke gazed over the battlefield to where Weyland stood. Weyland raised his bow and nodded before returning to the battle. It had been a good shot. If only Neahl, his best friend, had been there to see it.**



**“Thank you,” the Duke said as he washed the blood and grime from his hands and face in the basin a man-at-arms brought him. The groans of the injured and dying still filled the air. The stink of death had become overpowering.**

**“No need to thank me, My Lord.”**

**“Maybe not,” the Duke said. “But I thank you all the same. My life may not have value to very many people, but it still has value to me.”**

**That seemed an odd declaration for him to make. Weyland bowed his head to avoid looking at the Duke.**

**As soon as the battle ended, the Duke had summoned him. Weyland now faced the second interview in as many days with a man he had never expected to speak to personally. And he hadn't planned either one. He needed to figure out how to stop attracting so much attention from the nobility.**

**The Duke finished washing and stepped close so only Weyland could hear him. Weyland stiffened, unsure what the Duke intended.**

**"I need good men," the Duke said. "Men I can trust."**

**Shifting his feet, Weyland didn't respond. He wasn't sure he wanted to hear anymore. He had no quarrel with any noble—only with the Salassani who raided his village and killed his entire family. His motives and needs were simple enough. The last thing he wanted was to get mixed up in noblemen's quarrels.**

**"You have a horse?" the Duke asked.**

**Weyland nodded.**

**"I need you to ride to Brechin to the tavern by the front gate."**

**"My Lord," Weyland began, "my men—"**

**"Will survive without you." The Duke finished his sentence for him. "You will find a young woman with auburn hair." The Duke placed a copper coin in Weyland's hand. "Give her this."**

**"My Lord, I'm just a common archer."**

**The Duke smiled. "No common archer could have made that shot," he said. Then the Duke bent close to whisper in his ear. "This kingdom is poised on the edge of a knife, if you throw in your lot with me, no matter which way it falls, I can protect you."**

Weyland swallowed. He had heard rumors of infighting and intrigue, but that was normal politics as far as he knew. Yet here was the Duke, the only noble he had ever met personally and the one who led his army with so much skill and respect for his men, asking for his help. He could say no and escape into the heathland where the Duke would never find him. But that would only make him an outlaw and show disrespect and disloyalty—two things Weyland despised the most in foolish men.

“Yes, My Lord,” he said. What choice did he have?

“Go at night and don’t be seen,” the Duke said.

“What am I to tell her?” Weyland asked.

The Duke smiled. “Nothing. She’ll tell you what to do.”

Weyland ducked under the flap of the tent. Neahl would call him a fool for getting mixed up with a noble. But he couldn’t see how he could avoid it.



“What are you doing?” The voice sounded harsh in the darkness of the close wood where Weyland had picketed his horse.

Weyland jerked his dagger from its sheath and spun in a crouch. But it was only Redmond, Neahl’s younger brother. Weyland shook his head and clicked his tongue in annoyance.

Redmond was a tall, lanky youth about seventeen years old, two years younger than Weyland. He survived the raid on their village and joined Neahl and Weyland as they pursued the Salassani into the heathland. He was young, but he was as skilled at woodcraft, tracking, and fighting as any man and better than most.

“Be quiet,” Weyland snapped as he sheathed the dagger and straightened. “I could have knifed you.”

**Redmond smiled. “Maybe,” he said. “You could try.”**

**Weyland yanked the girth strap tight, but the mare had filled her stomach with air in anticipation of being saddled. He punched her and then yanked again as she let the air out of her belly. He couldn’t afford to have his saddle loose tonight.**

**“Where are you going?” Redmond whispered.**

**“You don’t need to know,” Weyland said. The Duke warned him not to tell anyone, and he figured the Duke would find out if he did.**

**“Neahl will want to know.”**

**“Look,” Weyland said. “I have a job to do. I’ll be back in a couple of days.”**

**Weyland strung his bow and slipped it over his head to nestle beside his quiver. He picked up the reins and turned back to Redmond, who stood quiet with his jaw set the way he did when he was angry or offended.**

**“I’m sorry, Redmond,” Weyland said. “I have to go, and I can’t tell you where.”**

**Redmond frowned. “You’re in trouble, aren’t you?”**

**Weyland mounted. “Not if I can help it. I’ll be back. Don’t follow me. You’re needed here.”**

**He kicked his horse into a walk and ducked into the trees. Now was not the time to worry about Redmond and Neahl. He had to get past the sentries and the Salassani without being seen or caught.**

**For a moment, Weyland wondered if the Duke had sent him on this mission to test him—or maybe just to get rid of him because he knew too much. He hadn’t forgotten that the assassin who killed the Duke’s man had been wearing a surcoat from Brechin. Now the Duke was sending him to the same city on an apparently secret errand. What could be more important than stopping the Salassani invasion? Why**

would he send a common archer? He had no head for intrigue. He was a fighting man.

Weyland approached the sentry line, grateful the moon hadn't yet risen. The cover of darkness would allow him to slip away. He grabbed the horn of his saddle, kicked his feet free of the stirrups, and slid sideways until he was clinging to the side of the horse opposite the sentry. He let the horse move slowly, browsing as she went. With any luck, the sentry would think it was just a stray horse who lost its rider in the battle.

The rich smell of the heather filled his nostrils as it brushed his face. The heather in the southern heathland grew tall and in large bunches. Weyland had always loved the smell, especially after it rained. Up in the village of Comrie, before the Salassani burned it to the ground, Weyland spent long hours hunting in the heather and tilling the earth with his father.

He had always lived close to the land, but now he lived by his bow and by his sword. The Salassani had driven him from Comrie, leaving him with neither family nor land. He spent the last couple of years roaming with Neahl and Redmond, seeking revenge upon any Salassani they met. Neahl took special delight in cutting off Salassani ears and keeping them as souvenirs because he knew it terrified the Salassani and because the Salassani had cut off most of the fingers from Neahl's right hand so he couldn't draw a bow.

Weyland was growing tired of running, always wondering if the Salassani were tracking him at the same time he tracked them. He thought he might enjoy a quiet life with a wife and family. But now he had complicated his life even more by allowing the Duke to entangle him in intrigues that didn't concern him. He wouldn't have done it for any other noble.

The sentry gave a cry as the horse grazed into view. Someone rushed toward them, and Weyland remained silent, letting the horse pick its own way. The muscles in his arms and legs began to burn. As the footsteps approached, his horse trotted out of range and began grazing

again. A few more feeble attempts at capturing her failed, and soon she left the line of sentries behind.

Weyland dragged himself back up into the saddle and massaged his aching arms and legs. He hadn't pulled that trick in a long while and forgot how much strength it took. He kicked his horse into a slow canter to start putting the miles behind him. He hadn't gone far when someone cried out, and the sound of galloping hooves pounded into the night. Weyland leaned low over his horse's neck and kicked her into a gallop. If the Salassani caught him, he was a dead man.



The walls of Brechin loomed out of the twilight of dawn as Weyland reined in his horse and adjusted his seat in the saddle. His horse's head drooped. Weyland had pushed her as hard as he dared. It had been a close run to escape the Salassani. He patted her neck. She'd earned a nice, long rest. Weyland dismounted and stretched as he waited outside the gates until the guards unbolted them and shoved them open. Then he waited while they turned the winch to lift the portcullis.

Weyland was surprised to find so few travelers waiting to enter the city. On the few occasions when he had visited Brechin, it had always been a bustling market town with merchants and farmers surrounding the gates, anxious to begin selling their wares. But today, only a few, trail-worn travelers scuffled underneath the teeth of the portcullis. A few steps inside the gate and Weyland understood why.

A pile of bodies stacked like cordwood had been left by the gates, and a crowd of men wearing masks were now loading them into a cart. The odor of death and disease filled the air. Weyland considered turning around and letting the Duke run his own errands. But he knew he had to see this through. He had given his word, and he respected the Duke. Besides, the Duke was a powerful man. Even if Weyland had not believed in honor and loyalty, he wouldn't dare cross the Duke.

So he made his way to the livery by the tavern where he rented a stall for his horse. He gave her a good rubdown before seeking his own

lodging and a warm meal at the tavern. With any luck, he could get this over with and out of this city stalked by disease.

He spotted the young woman immediately. She was a handsome, sturdy girl about his own age with thick auburn hair. She wore a light blue dress and a dirty apron. She saw him enter and nodded towards a table in the corner. He sat.

It was easy to see why the Duke might take an interest in such a young lady, and Weyland swore he would play no part in orchestrating some tryst for the Duke. If the Duke had forced Weyland to risk his life so the Duke could court the favor of this maiden, he would have words for him.

The girl stepped up to him, wiping her hands on her apron. She flashed a pretty smile. The heat rose in Weyland's cheeks, and he suddenly felt awkward. This always happened to him around attractive women. Neahl said this was his special curse, and, if he didn't get over it, he would never get married.

"What can I get ya?" she said. She had a pleasing voice and wide, dark eyes.

"Ale," Weyland said, "and something to eat."

She smiled again. "Just anything?" she said.

Weyland nodded.

"I think we've got a few rats in the back," she said.

Weyland scowled until he realized she was teasing him. "A warm stew would do," he said.

She seemed disappointed that he didn't tease her back, but she turned and disappeared into the back room.

Pulling out the copper coin, Weyland flipped it between his fingers, thoughtfully. What was so special about this copper coin? The only

thing he could note was the little triangle that had been cut out just above the king's head. He considered keeping the coin and riding back to the camp. Helping the Duke seduce a girl was more than he had bargained for. Maybe he could just explain it to him, and the Duke would let it rest.

When she came back with the ale, stew, and loaf of bread, he handed her the coin without a word. Her head shot up, and she stared at him, openmouthed. She looked down at the coin and back at Weyland before she spun and strode from the room.

Weyland brooded over his stew as the weariness crept into his bones. He hadn't slept all night. That and the hard ride were staring to tell.

The girl hadn't seemed pleased to get the coin. If the Duke thought she wanted him, he was mistaken. Weyland decided, if the girl didn't come back before he finished, he would catch a few hours of sleep and head back to the war. Compared to this disease-ridden city and the discomfort of dealing with attractive women, the war seemed rather appealing.

But he never had the chance to put his plan to work. A short stocky man wearing tight blue breeches and a long red tunic slid onto the bench opposite him. Weyland's hand dropped to the hilt of his dagger. He didn't know this man or what he wanted. The man nodded and sipped a mug of ale. He had bushy eyebrows and thin, wispy hair.

"How fares the war?" he asked.

Weyland didn't answer. Why would the man think he was come from the war? He hadn't told anyone that he had been with the Duke's army.

"It appears we have a mutual friend," the man said.

"Maybe," Weyland replied. He didn't want to commit himself to a relationship when he wasn't sure who the man meant or what he intended. Could he mean the Duke? Or was he speaking of the girl?

**“You might want to check your horse tonight before you retire,” the man said. He slid off the bench and stood. “Things can happen when the city is asleep.”**

**Weyland narrowed his eyes as the man sauntered away. Was that a threat? Or was it an invitation to a private meeting? And where was the young lady? She hadn’t returned to wait the tables.**



**Weyland took advantage of the long summer day and slept most of it away. He spent the rest cleaning and caring for his gear, checking his horse, and sitting in the tavern, studying the people that filtered through the door. Maybe he was supposed to pick up some clue for why the Duke had sent him.**

**The young woman did not reappear. When Weyland asked the bent old man, who was waiting tables in her stead where she was, the old man frowned.**

**“Always running off, that one,” he said. “Don’t know why I keep her on.”**

**So Weyland reclined in a corner and worried a mug of ale while the shadows lengthened. After the last of the patrons left, the tavern keeper shooed him out the door. Weyland still had no idea why the Duke sent him or why the coin had so upset the young woman.**

**He paused in the narrow, cobblestone street and took a deep breath of the city air. It tasted of horses, waste, wood smoke, and death. Today the air in Brechin seemed laced with death. The hulking shadows of buildings with their blinking candlelights pressed down upon him. Like the night a few days before, this night seethed with danger—either that, or Weyland was losing his nerve. Maybe he had allowed the little man’s cryptic message to get under his skin.**

**Weyland strolled toward the livery, thinking the sooner he got this over with, the sooner he could escape back to the fresh air and freedom of the**

heathland. He hated cities—too many people, too much pent up frustration, too many nobles.

A light burned just inside the front door of the livery. Shadows moved about. It could just be a stableman. Or it could be someone waiting for him. Weyland touched the pommel of his short sword to assure himself it was ready should he need it. As always, he had taken care to conceal a few knives on his body, though he left his bow and arrows locked in his room in the tavern.

Melting into the shadows, Weyland crept toward the door. Maybe he was being overly cautious, but, if life in the heathland had taught him anything, it was that a little caution could save a man's life. He edged up to the doorway and peered in.

The young woman with auburn hair and a blue dress bent over a figure stretched on the floor of the stable. She held a long knife in her hand. Weyland stared in disbelief. The short stocky man who had sat at his table that morning lay on his face while the blood darkened his tunic. It looked like a professional strike to the liver from behind.

Weyland tried to still the rising beat of his heart. What should he do? Should he accost the girl and disarm her? Should he call for the guard?

The girl straightened suddenly and cast a furtive glance at the door just in time to see Weyland before he could pull his head back out of view. He knew she had seen him, and he stepped away from the wall of the stables to give himself room to move if she attacked him.

“Finally,” she said as she burst from the door of the stables and grabbed his arm. “We have to get out of here. They’ll think we did this.”

Weyland let her drag him a couple steps inside the door before he shook her hand off and grabbed the wrist of the hand that held the knife.

“We didn’t do anything,” he said. “But you’ve been busy.”

“What?” The young woman tried to dislodge his grip. “Let go.”

**“I’m not going anywhere until you explain to me why you killed this man and why the Duke sent me all the way to Brechin in the middle of the night.”**

**“Let me go,” she demanded.**

**“Not so long as you’re swinging that knife around,” Weyland said.**

**She glanced at the knife and dropped it, casting him a vengeful smirk.  
“Now let go.”**

**Weyland released her, but he put his boot on the handle of the knife.**

**“Look,” she said. “The package isn’t here. If you want it, you’ll have to come with me.”**

**“Package? I’m not after any package,” Weyland said. “And I’m not going anywhere until you explain why you killed that man.”**

**He wasn’t used to dealing with pretty women, and he certainly wasn’t going to go off with her into the dark streets of Brechin until he understood her.**

**The young woman hissed in disgust. “I didn’t kill him, you crooked-nosed knave,” she said. “I didn’t kill anyone. I came to meet you as we agreed.”**

**“Did we agree on that?” Weyland asked.**

**“You’re here, aren’t you?” she demanded. “Now let’s go.”**

**“Where?”**

**“To get the package.”**

**“What’s in the package?” Weyland asked. He had seen the pile of dead bodies by the wall, and he was not about to be tricked into carrying some sick or dying noble back to the Duke’s tents.**

The young woman clicked her tongue in disgust and put her hands on her hips. "You're new, aren't you?" she said. "Why does he always send me the new ones?" She gestured toward the stables. "Come on. If you don't follow, you'll have to go back to the Duke empty-handed."

Weyland frowned. This is what nobles did. They lied and cheated and tricked men and women into playing their little games. All the while, they sat in their fine palaces, sipping wine and dining on rare delicacies watching their pawns move across the gameboard. The pawns always seemed to meet a bad end. Maybe the Duke of Saylen wasn't any different.

Weyland nodded toward the dead man. "Who is he?"

The young woman threw up her hands and spun on her heels. Weyland kicked the knife out of the way in case she got any ideas and followed her deeper into the stables. She grabbed the body under the armpits and dragged him into a horse's stall before she kicked straw over the bloodstain on the floor.

The sound of running feet slapping cobblestones echoed through the streets. The young woman's head snapped up, and a look of horror swept across her face. "They've found us," she whispered.

She grabbed Weyland's hand and dragged him out a back door into a darkened alley. The last thing he needed was to be caught in Brechin standing over a dead body he could not explain.

He let her keep a hold of his hand, telling himself he needed her guidance. The truth was, he'd never held a girl's hand, and he liked the mixture of strength and softness in her grip. This young lady was a firebrand. She was interesting.

"Do you have a name?" Weyland asked as they scampered through the streets littered with the refuse of five thousand lives.

"Rosland," she said.

"Where are we going?"

**“You’ll see.”**

**“Of course I will,” Weyland said. “And you’re not going to answer any of my questions, are you?”**

**“I told you my name,” she said. “Stop complaining.”**

**Rosland dragged him to a stop before a little shop with a sign from the weaver’s guild dangling overhead. She jerked a key from her pocket and fumbled with the lock. It clicked. She kicked the door open, yanked Weyland inside, shoving the door closed behind them. Weyland found himself temporarily blinded by the sudden darkness. The rich scent of dyes and wool filled his nostrils.**

**“Isaac,” Rosland whispered. “Isaac, come here.”**

**A groan and scuffling sounded from an adjoining room. The darkened shape of a small boy shuffled into the entry way.**

**“It’s time,” Rosland said. “Go get the man I showed you today. You remember where he lives?”**

**“Yes.” The boy’s voice was thick with sleep.**

**“Hurry now, Isaac. We must hurry.”**

**The boy disappeared into the street as Rosland ran up a flight of stairs, leaving Weyland standing in the darkness, trying to figure out how he had ended up racing through the streets of Brechin hand in hand with a beautiful woman.**

**The ruckus upstairs soon devolved into the thud of feet descending the stairs. Rosland reemerged with a lantern and a bleary-eyed girl of about eleven or twelve. Her eyes were wide and frightened. Two gray heads that must have belonged to the weaver and his wife peered over Rosland’s shoulder.**

**Rosland rummaged in a trunk by the door and withdrew a package wrapped in twine. She handed it to the girl and faced Weyland. He**

frowned at her.

“Are we going for a stroll?” he asked.

She smirked at him.

“My name is Weyland.”

“I know your name,” she said. “I, at least, like to know who I’m working with.”

She opened her mouth to say something else when Isaac returned with a man in a long flowing cape. He was a round man who clearly spent considerable time at the board, but he was also a wealthy man who sported a coat of arms on his cloak different from the one the Duke’s men used. This coat of arms belonged to some family over by Chullish. Weyland had seen it before, but he couldn’t remember the family’s name.

Rosland took a step toward the man, but when he looked up and the light of the lantern fell upon his face, she stopped in confusion. Then she stepped to shield the young girl from his view and cast a nervous glance at Isaac. Apparently, the boy had made a mistake. This wasn’t the man Rosland expected.

The man had seen the girl Rosland tried to hide, and Weyland noted the recognition on his face and the smile that touched his lips. The girl clung to Rosland’s dress.

“You have a message for me?” the man said. His voice was deep and rang with a practiced air of authority.

“Um,” Rosland hesitated. She glanced at his hand as if she expected him to give her something.

Then she looked at Weyland as if he was supposed to know what to do.

“Don’t waste my time, girl,” the man demanded. “You know who I am.”

**“Yes, My Lord,” Rosland said.**

**“I want the name,” the man said.**

**Rosland swallowed nervously, but she straightened her back. “I am accustomed to being paid,” she said.**

**The man sneered. “You people only care about money,” he said. “I’ll pay you.” He slipped a bag full of coins from the pocket of his robe and threw it on the floorboards at Rosland’s feet.**

**Rosland’s eyes opened wide in surprise, but she didn’t pick it up. Weyland glanced at her. He imagined she was expecting a copper coin.**

**“Now, tell me!” the man demanded.**

**“No, My Lord,” Rosland said. “I can’t.**

**The man lunged, striking Rosland across the face with a gloved fist. Her head snapped back, and she slammed into the wall of the shop. The man stepped in, but Weyland jumped in front of Rosland and placed a restraining hand on the man’s chest.**

**“That’s enough,” he said.**

**“You gutter snipe,” the man cursed. “Unhand me.”**

**He slapped Weyland’s hand away, jerked a knife from its sheath and lunged. Weyland deflected the strike, caught his arm, and brought his fist down on the man’s elbow. He felt it bend under the blow as the man cried out in pain and dropped the knife. It clattered to the floorboards.**

**Weyland punched the man’s belly and caught him with an upper cut to the chin that sent him flying into a pile of boxes. He stood over him, breathing hard.**

**Rosland charged past Weyland, knocking him aside. She pounced on the man, and the light flashed off a blade as she plunged the knife into his neck and chest over and over again. Weyland stood in shock horror for**

a moment before he caught her hand and dragged her off the man who gurgled on his own blood, writhing and twitching amid the broken boxes. The girl sobbed behind them.

“What are you thinking?” Weyland demanded. “That man was a noble.”

Rosland shook him off. “I had no choice,” she said with a tremulous voice. “He saw us. Something has gone wrong.” She dropped the knife as if suddenly disgusted by it. Her hand shook. “We have to get out of the city,” she blurted. “They know who we are.”

“On foot?” Weyland asked. “You won’t get far.”

Rosland clicked her tongue. “He always sends me the new ones,” she said. “Get your horse and bow and meet me here in ten minutes.”

“Now?” Weyland said.

“Yes now,” Rosland spat. “What do you think he sent you for?”

“I really have no idea,” Weyland said. He glanced at the noble’s body. “You want me to take him to the stall as well?”

Rosland placed a hand on Weyland’s chest and shoved him toward the door. “We’ll take care of him. Go!”

Weyland sped through the night. The full moon was just starting to rise, flooding the streets with a pale, white light. He retrieved his gear from the tavern, left a coin on the bed to pay for his keep, and raced to the livery to find it ablaze in the light of a dozen torches.

Men milled about in some agitation. Some carried bows, others swords and lances. A noble with his glittering mail and gold necklace shouted orders. Weyland had already strung his bow, but shooting a man now would only draw unwanted attention to himself.

The livery had three main doors, and the men clustered around the one where the dead man lay. Weyland slipped through the door farthest

from the men and crawled into a horse's stall. He worked his way from stall to stall until he found his horse with its nose in a bag of grain and already saddled. Who had saddled his horse? He glanced around expecting to see the stableman standing just outside the gate. Then he understood.

Rosland must have been in the livery to saddle his horse before their meeting. But that didn't explain the dead man in the stable nor why she had so viciously killed a noble. A noble! He was in way over his head.

This was the kind of thing that got men strung up by their necks. And he had blindly allowed the Duke and Rosland, with her pretty eyes and wavy hair, to lure him right into the middle of it. How was he ever going to explain this to Neahl?

Weyland retightened the girth strap on his horse, mounted, and kicked his horse out of the stable. He bent low as the men scattered. The horse slipped on the cobblestones, so he slowed her down after rounding the first corner, working his way back to the weaver's shop. The moon had fully risen now, and Rosland stood silhouetted in the doorway. She was breathing hard. He dismounted.

"What did you do with him?" he asked.

"They won't find him," she said.

"Well, they found the last body you left behind," Weyland said.

Rosland grabbed the girl and hoisted her into the saddle of Weyland's horse. Then she mounted behind her. "We had better run then," she said.

Weyland stared at her in disbelief. "You're taking my horse? Just like that?"

"No," she said with exaggerated patience. "We are taking your horse, and you are following along to protect us."

"On foot?" Weyland said.

**Isaac came to the door and handed Rosland the package.**

**“Thank you, Isaac,” she said. “Be a good boy and obey your ma and pa.”**

**The zip of an arrow was followed by a thud. Isaac grunted and slumped into Weyland.**

**“No,” Rosland cried.**

**Weyland caught the boy, lifted him into his arms and sprinted down the street.**

**“Ride,” he shouted.**

**The clatter of hooves followed him. An arrow slammed into the wall in front of him and shattered. Someone shouted. Weyland ducked behind a water barrel and laid Isaac on the ground. The boy whimpered, and Weyland placed a hand over his mouth.**

**“Shh,” he said. “It’ll be all right.”**

**He shrugged the bow over his shoulder, nocked an arrow, and waited. Rosland clattered past him and turned down a side street.**

**“I’m on foot,” Weyland said. “What is she thinking?”**

**Shapes began to emerge and skulk amid the shadows. The full moon behind them cast them in clear relief.**

**Calm settled over Weyland. This was his element. He knew how to handle men who wanted him dead. He didn’t need much light to aim by. The bow was a part of him, an extension of his arm. The arrow was an extension of his mind. It would go where he wanted it to go. With the moon behind them, his attackers were easy targets.**

**Weyland waited until a shadow stepped around an obstruction in the road. His arrow disappeared into the darkness. A thump and a groan followed. One by one, Weyland found a shape or a shadow or a glint of**

light and sent an arrow into it. He didn't miss. He seldom missed. Soon the groans of dying men filled the street.

When he was sure he had given them cause to fear the silent death of his arrows and the man who wielded the bow, Weyland slipped the bow over his head again, lifted Isaac, and sprinted after Rosland.

He assumed she would head for the city gates, so he worked his way through the unfamiliar streets always trying to tend in that direction. As he approached the open courtyard that surrounded the gate, he slowed to a walk and then melted into the shadows. A nobleman on a horse sat conversing with a guard amid the light of several burning torches. But Rosland was nowhere to be seen.

“Nobles,” Weyland cursed. “They’re everywhere tonight.”

He glanced down at Isaac’s limp body. The boy’s eyes were still open and staring up into Weyland’s face. Weyland knelt and laid Isaac gently on the cobblestones. He bent to listen for any breathing. He laid a hand on the boy’s chest.

What a waste. He had seen so much death in his life. Sometimes he thought he was becoming too accustomed to it—numb to the painful finality that robbed the world of a living soul.

And then something like this would happen. Bitterness and regret filled him. Such a small, innocent boy, like all those that had died at Comrie. Helpless. Harmless. It was during moments like these that the sadness tried to smother him in despair. Tears stung his eyes. Did we all live just to die like this?

A horse hoof clicked on stone and Weyland spun to find Rosland inching her way up behind him.

“Where have you been?” he demanded.

“How is he?” Rosland whispered. She bent low over the horse’s neck to peer down at Isaac.

**“He’s dead,” Weyland said. There was no easy way to say it.**

**Rosland gasped. “Poor Isaac,” she said. “Those villains murdered an innocent boy.”**

**“Those villains are still looking for us,” Weyland said. “Unless you have a way past those guards or over those walls, we are in serious trouble.”**

**Rosland slipped from the horse, leaving the girl holding the reins. She bent over Isaac and kissed him on the forehead. “I’m sorry, little one,” Rosland said. “I’m sorry I can’t do more for you.”**

**When she straightened, tears glistened on her cheeks. She glanced at the girl.**

**“The hood,” she said. The girl yanked a hood over her head to conceal her face. “Follow me,” Rosland said as she wiped the tears away.**

**“Wait,” Weyland tried to grab her arm, but she had stepped out into the courtyard where the torches blazed. The noble on horseback turned in the saddle, waiting for her to approach. Weyland slipped the bow over his shoulder and nocked an arrow. He nodded to the girl and stepped after Rosland.**

**“You’re late,” the noble on horseback said.**

**Rosland said nothing. She handed him a copper coin and waited. The man nodded to the guard who lifted the portcullis just enough for them to pass through and then unbarred the gate.**

**Weyland let Rosland and the girl pass first before backing his way out of the gate. The guards simply watched him, unconcerned. The noble nodded to him and disappeared down a side street just as men rushed into the torch light. The portcullis dropped into place with a thud, and the gate swung closed.**

**“I think we should assume they have another way out of the city,” Weyland said.**

**“They do.”**

**“Shouldn’t we hurry along then?” Weyland asked.**

**Rosland mounted behind the girl. “Yes,” she said and kicked Weyland’s horse into a gallop. Weyland cursed and jogged after her.**



**Rosland paused at the river while Weyland cut a barge loose to ferry them across. Once on the other side, he kicked it out into the current and let it drift downstream. With any luck, the men following might think they were floating downstream on the barge. Then he turned to confront Rosland.**

**“I’m not running on foot all night,” Weyland said.**

**Rosland smiled. “You don’t have to. Just a few more miles.”**

**“Care to introduce me to our package?” Weyland asked. “I’d like to know why you tried to get us killed.”**

**The girl’s hood had fallen back as they galloped to the river. She was a slight child with dark eyes and blonde hair. He thought the child looked unwell. It could have been the terror of the night or simple exhaustion, but her face had a pallor to it.**

**“Let me introduce you to Princess Eryann,” Rosland said.**

**Weyland smirked, and he shook his head in disbelief. “Of course,” he said. “You waylaid me into helping you kidnap the Princess? I don’t suppose we can just take her back and all will be forgiven?”**

**“I am the Princess,” the girl said. She had that tone nobles liked to use on subordinates.**

**Weyland bowed. “I’m sorry, My Lady,” he said. “I had no idea you were being kidnapped, or I wouldn’t have helped.”**

**“Then you would be no servant of the Crown.”**

**Weyland stared up at her in confusion. Rosland laughed.**

**“My father spirited me away to protect me from the coup,” the girl said.**

**“Coup?” Weyland said. “You’ve got to be kidding me. The Duke has got me messed up in a coup?”**

**This was exactly the kind of thing he had feared. A kidnapped Princess and a coup? It didn’t matter what happened after tonight, some powerful group in Coll was going to see him as an enemy.**

**Rosland nudged the horse into a walk. “We shouldn’t waste time,” she said.**

**“I demand an explanation,” Weyland said.**

**“Can you run while I explain?”**

**“If you can talk while you ride,” Weyland said.**

**Rosland kicked the horse into a slow trot heading south away from the city. Weyland jogged alongside her.**

**“The Queen rescued me from a very difficult situation several years ago,” Rosland said. “When she asked me to save her only child, I couldn’t say no.”**

**“I thought there was another child,” Weyland said.**

**“The Queen is pregnant,” Rosland said. “But she’s not due for several more months. By rescuing the Princess now, we can ensure the royal line will continue.”**

**“Would Geric have anything to do with the coup?” Weyland asked. He hadn’t forgotten that the Duke’s agent had warned him to beware of Geric.**

Rosland scowled down at him. "I just killed Geric's uncle," she said. "He was leading the coup."

Things just kept getting worse. This woman was nothing but trouble. So why did he like her?

"The short fellow you killed at the livery wouldn't happen to be a noble, too, would he?"

"I didn't kill him," Rosland insisted. Weyland believed her now because that man had been killed by a professional. Rosland had killed in a clumsy burst of savage desperation.

"I have a feeling you won't be going back to Brechin," Weyland said. Rosland was quiet for a long time.

"I have no home now," she said.

"Was Isaac your brother?"

"No, but I lived with them before I went to work at the tavern."

They fell into silence as the miles passed beneath them. Weyland's legs began to ache and a stitch pinched at his side.

"If you don't give me a rest," he panted. "You'll have to go on by yourself."

Rosland glanced at him as if she intended to keep trotting, but she slowed the horse to a walk. "Why do men always think women need them?" she asked.

"Maybe," Weyland said, "because women always tell men they need their protection."

"I've never said that," Rosland said.

Weyland didn't bother to contradict her. "You are impossible," he said.

**They alternated between walking, trotting, and resting as the full moon climbed into the inky, black sky until it hung directly overhead. A fresh breeze carried the rich, earthy smell of the Great Oban Plain. It tasted good after the stale, sickly air of the city.**

**The rising thunder of hooves beating the hard-packed earth broke the quiet of the prairie, and Weyland spun to see five horsemen pounding over the rise behind them.**

**“Go!” he shouted.**

**“Weyland,” Rosland began, but he slapped the horse’s flank. “Ride!”**

**Weyland jerked the bow over his head, nocked an arrow, and aimed at the first rider’s horse. He loosed. The horse stumbled and went down. The horse behind it tripped over its companion and spilled its rider onto the road. The other horsemen reined their horses around to avoid the flailing hooves. Weyland shot a rider from his saddle in the confusion. The two remaining riders galloped toward him.**

**Weyland stood his ground and shot another horseman in the chest. Then he darted out of the path of the oncoming rider and disappeared into the tall grass beside the path. He crouched low, trying to make it difficult for them to see him, but he knew the light of the full moon would betray his passing.**

**He knelt, keeping his head below the height of the grass, and waited, trying to still the pounding of his heart. From this position, he could see the road and hear the thrashing as the injured horses tried to regain their feet. The rider who charged him pulled his horse around and yelled at his two remaining companions.**

**“You get this one,” he said. Then he kicked his horse down the road.**

**Weyland raised himself on one knee as the man sped past. The rider was thirty paces away and in full gallop when Weyland drew, gave him a lead, and loosed the string. He didn’t have time to see whether his arrow flew true or not because the two unhorsed riders bore down upon him.**

**Weyland dropped his bow and jerked his sword from his sheath just in time to meet the rush.**

**He deflected a stroke for his head and slammed his foot into the man's knee. It snapped under his boot.**

**Then he jumped back to avoid the stroke from the second man, but the tip of the blade sliced a long, shallow gash along his thigh. He dropped to the ground as if mortally wounded.**

**When the man raised his sword for the killing stroke, Weyland rolled suddenly forward inside the strike and lunged upward, driving his sword up under the man's ribs into his heart. He yanked his sword free and rolled away from the falling man. Sheathing his sword, he grabbed up his bow, and sprinted after the horseman that had ridden past him.**

**Rosland was alone with the Princess. Though she had spirit, she was no fighter. If the man caught her before Weyland could stop him, she could not win.**

**Weyland bounded over the rise, ignoring the pain in his thigh, to find the horseman still riding, bent low over the horse's neck. Weyland drew. The man was already more than a hundred paces away and would soon be over the next rise.**

**One shot was all Weyland had. He took a deep breath, noted the direction and intensity of the breeze, let the breath out slowly, and loosed. The arrow leapt from the bow and disappeared into the nighttime sky.**

**Breaking into a run, Weyland chased his arrow down the prairie path. As the man crested the hill, he jerked in the saddle. His horse stumbled, and then they disappeared over the ridge.**

**Weyland sprinted the hundred paces and up the rise before he bounded over the crest. The man lay crumpled in the grass. One broken arrow shaft protruded from his back and a bloody hole in his tunic showed where the second arrow had passed through him. Weyland stopped and looked on in grim satisfaction. Both shots had found their mark.**

The horse stood with its head bowed and quivering not twenty paces away. Weyland tried to approach it, thinking he could mount and catch up with Rosland, but it shied away. When it did, the light of the moon revealed the jagged edge of an arrow protruding from its neck. Blood gushed down its shoulder with every beat of its heart.

Weyland shook his head in pity. He didn't like killing horses, but in battle there was little choice. His arrow had passed through the rider and bit deep into the horse's neck, slicing through the great vein. The horse was bleeding out.

This night just kept getting worse. Still, that was probably the best shot he had ever made, and no one was there to see it. Neahl would call him a liar.

He considered going back for one of the other horses, but he knew they had both been injured. He had shot one, and the others was clearly too injured to ride, or the other riders would have mounted and come after him rather than attacking on foot. The uninjured horses had disappeared into the night after Weyland shot their riders from the saddle, and he would lose valuable time tracking them.

After taking a moment to catch his breath, he loped down the road with long, deliberate strides. It was going to be another very long night and he needed to keep moving so his thigh wouldn't stiffen.

He had gone about a mile when a whistle sounded shrill and piercing over the plains. He slid to a halt, breathing heavily. Sweat dripped from his hair. The whistle sounded again. He scanned the area, expecting another bunch of riders to materialize from the prairie. That would be just his luck.

A horse lunged to its feet fifty paces off the road and stepped toward him. Weyland nocked an arrow. The horse was riderless, but had apparently been lying down in the grass. Weyland scanned the area expecting more horses and riders to rise from the prairie grass and attack him, though he couldn't understand how anyone could have

known to set an ambush here. No one knew he would come this way—unless the Duke had betrayed them.

Weyland put tension on the string and prepared for a fight, when Rosland appeared from behind the horse, holding Eryann's hand.

“What the . . .” he began. “I told you to ride.”

“I did,” she said.

“Then you just decided to stop to take a rest?”

“I'm smart enough to know I wasn't going to out ride them,” she replied. “And if I had kept going you wouldn't know we have to leave the road here.”

“Let's do that,” Weyland said. “But let's not make it obvious.”

“You didn't notice me,” Rosland said with a smile.

As she stepped up to him, she saw his blood-soaked pant leg. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah.”

“Let me look at it.”

“I'm okay.”

“Oh stop it,” Rosland said. “Come here.”

She pulled him to the side of the road and made him sit down.

“How many were there?” she asked as she tore a strip of cloth from her petticoat and cleaned and dressed his wound.

“Five.”

“You killed them all?” She glanced up at him in awe.

**“Four,” he said. “The other has a broken leg.”**

**Rosland smiled mischievously. “Only four? You must be having a bad night.”**

**“You could say that,” he said.**



**Rosland finally reined the horse to a stop near a copse of trees that crowned a pile of boulders. The gray light of morning slowly colored the world until the sun peeked over the rolling hills of the Oban Plain. They dismounted, and Rosland cradled the sleepy Princess in her lap.**

**Weyland gazed at the Princess as she lay asleep. “She doesn’t look well,” he said.**

**Rosland stroked her hair. “She’s just tired.”**

**Weyland knew it wasn’t weariness. Redmond was the one with the healing skills, but Weyland was certain this child suffered from something worse than exhaustion. He hadn’t forgotten the bodies by the gate. Disease was afoot in Brechin.**

**“How long have you been caring for the Princess?” Weyland asked.**

**“Not long,” she said. “They brought her to me a few days ago. after they smuggled her out of Chullish in a milliner’s boat.”**

**“You really think there’s a coup brewing?”**

**“I don’t care,” Rosland said. “But no child should be murdered because of her parents.”**

**“How long have you known the Queen?”**

**Rosland paused in stroking the Princess’s hair to study him. Then she looked down and pushed a strand of hair from Eryann’s forehead.**

**“I used to live in a village outside of Dunfermine,” she said. “The lord there tried to force me to marry one of his tenants. When I refused, he arrested my family and put me in chains. The Queen was visiting, and, when she heard what he had done, she ordered my release.” Rosland paused and glanced up at Weyland. “Then the lord hanged my entire family to spite the Queen.”**

**Weyland bowed his head. “I’m sorry,” he said.**



**Hours later, riders dressed in the brown and orange colors of the Baron of Whit-horn found them huddled under the sheltering shadow of the trees. Rosland stood protectively before the Princess until one of them handed her a copper coin.**

**Then they shoved Rosland and Weyland aside in their haste, leaving them standing awkwardly by the horse. No one spoke directly to them, but Weyland could hear the mumbling of some of the men as they lifted the Princess onto the saddle of a horse.**

**“She’s sickly,” one of them whispered. “Everything depends on the baby now.”**

**Weyland didn’t want to know anymore. Clearly, other intrigues were brewing, and all he wanted was to get as far away from them as possible.**

**The Princess raised a small white hand to Rosland as the riders galloped away with her. Rosland sniffled, and Weyland resisted the urge to put an arm around her shoulders to comfort her. He had only known her for twenty-four hours. Besides, if he tried, she was as likely to knife him as not. So he let her cry until she turned to his horse.**

**“What now?” Weyland said.**

**Rosland shrugged. “The Duke owes me,” she said.**

**“Would you mind if I ride with you?” Weyland asked. “My feet are killing me.”**

**Rosland grinned. “It’s your horse. I don’t know why you’re asking me.” She stepped up to him and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you,” she whispered.**

**Weyland touched the purpling bruise on her face where the noble had struck her. “You’ve got a bruise,” he said.**

**Rosland shrugged. “I’ve had worse.”**

**They mounted and rode in silence over the rolling hills of the Oban Plain. From horizon to horizon, the golden grasses rolled and sighed like the waves on the beach. The breeze tasted sweet and fresh after the foul confines of the city. Weyland tried to ignore the closeness of Rosland’s body behind him and the feel of her arms around his waist. But he wouldn’t mind getting used to it.**

**“How did they know where to meet us?” Weyland asked.**

**“I sent a runner ahead,” Rosland said.**

**“And you arranged to have the gates opened for us?”**

**“Of course.”**

**“How is it that a tavern maiden has so much power in Brechin?”**

**Rosland laughed. “The Duke always sends me the new ones, still wet behind the ears.”**

**Weyland grunted. His leg was growing stiff and he needed to exercise it.**

**“I guess I ought to dismount and give the horse a rest.” He dropped to the ground and grabbed the reins. “You won’t ride off without me, will you?”**

**“Only if you bore me,” she said.**

Weyland was going to reply when two riders appeared on the horizon to their left. Weyland paused and then kept walking.

“Let’s act like we belong and maybe they’ll go away,” he said.

It was surprising that anyone would be out this far on the plain. He had intentionally swung wide of the path so if anyone was following their trail, they wouldn’t meet them by accident. Weyland considered remounting and galloping away, but his horse was tired, and it could never outrun a single horseman while carrying two riders. The riders angled toward them and kicked their horses into a gallop.

Weyland pulled his bow over his head and nocked an arrow.

“You have a knife?” Weyland asked.

“Yes.”

“Don’t be afraid to use it,” he said. “And if I say ride, I want you to ride as hard as you can. I’ll follow if I can.”

Weyland raised the bow. He could take out at least one of them before they got too close. Waiting until he was sure of a hit, he drew the string to his ear.

“You shoot me, and I’ll kill you,” one of the riders shouted. Weyland lowered the bow and laughed.

“Does this mean I won’t need my knife?” Rosland asked.

Neahl and Redmond reined up before them. Neahl was a big, broad-shouldered man. He grasped a lance in one hand and a sword hung at his side. Redmond carried a bow over his shoulder the way Weyland wore his.

Weyland smiled. “I thought I told you not to follow me,” he said to Redmond.

Redmond grinned. “You didn’t really expect me to listen, did you?”

**Neahl was shaking his head. “We rode day and night, tracking you all the way to Brechin and then halfway across the Oban Plain thinking you were in some kind of trouble, and all you were doing was chasing a woman?”**

**“Well,” Weyland said.**

**“And you let her ride your horse, while you walk?”**

**Weyland glanced up at Rosland. “I didn’t exactly let her,” he said. “She kind of took it.”**

**“You never could handle a woman,” Neahl said.**

**“She’s a handful,” Weyland said.**

**“That would explain the trail of dead bodies we’ve been following,” Neahl said.**

**“I’m worth fighting for,” Rosland said. “Besides, it was self-defense. They attacked us.”**

**Weyland smiled at the sound of injured defiance in her voice. She didn’t know Neahl’s sense of humor.**

**Redmond laughed, and Neahl appraised her.**

**“So you’re not going to tell us why Brechin is in an uproar?” asked Neahl.**

**“Nobles,” Weyland said. “They’re nothing but trouble.”**

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## ABOUT J.W. Elliot

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