

1156



Trilogy

A.V. Arms



Chapter 10

Ravenshill December 15, 1156

The space was tight. William might suffocate, and he wanted to tell his father. But suffocating in the small space beneath the hearth in the lord's hall of the Ravenshill tower was an easier death than the one his uncle predicted for them all. Far easier than the death that had been clinging to them for the last month.

“May the lord finally show us mercy and let you live.”

His uncle Anthony's voice rasped weakly. Long thin fingers of a skeleton patted him on the leg he had tucked against his chest so the small space would hold him. Then the hand left him, and the stone was moved into place. William was plunged into darkness, only penetrated by the tiny pinholes in the stone's mortar. He began to tremble, his teeth rattling together. But his tears would not come. They stopped coming when his stomach began to eat away at itself. His throat grew dry once their enemies had contaminated their water source. By then, food was gone, down to every dog, horse, and rat that could be found. Bodies were piled in the bailey, their stench rising, not even forced from between the curtain walls by the strongest winds.

The storm gave the men the cover they needed to finally breach the walls of the old Norman keep. William's father, Marcus, had long since died from the putrid wounds he received defending his keep. A keep that only became William's when he inherited it from his older brother Jacob. One of the first to die as the gates slammed closed on the marauding force of the Elliot clan.

That had been five months ago. William could still hear his father's deep and terrifying voice order his men to prepare for a siege. He swore there was enough food inside the walls to sustain them. But he had not anticipated the determination of the Kirkham's rivals. Days ticked into weeks, then months. Food was rationed, but then it was gone. After all livestock and the food stores in the cellar were gone, the emaciated dogs were slain. The horses were last until a rat or even a mouse became a feast.

Men, women, and children died. His aunt Sylvie was one of the first to die of starvation. Her determination that the lords and ladies of Ravenshill should sacrifice for their people sent her to an earlier grave and did nothing to improve their situation. Once William's father died, his uncle Anthony took a different stance. He ordered everyone but himself, William, and his sister Sylvie be withheld food. But in the end, it did not make a difference. Not really.

William heard the first reverberating strike of an ax on the wooden door of the tower. When the keep gates were penetrated, the household ran to the tower, drew the bridge up that spanned the moat, and barred the door. They had remained in the tower for a week, starving. Three more died, and the remaining five barely held on. The week gave the Elliots time to fill the moat until it was merely a ditch. Arrows could have prevented them, shot from above, but those arrows had been exhausted, keeping the enemy off the walls. Now his uncle had his sword, his aunt a dagger that matched the one tucked in William's shoe. The two remaining knights were also armed with swords and daggers, but where they were once big men with the strength to wield their weapons, they were now emaciated and weak.

Another blow landed on the door, and a frightened squeak left William when he heard the wood splinter.

"Stand your ground," Anthony ordered the four standing and facing the door. William pressed his face against the cold stone to see through one of the pin holes. They looked impotent when the first surge of men rushed through the broken door.

The knight Bram was the first to fall. He was the knight who had never been defeated. Not by any man in his garrison or in battle until now. His weak defense contradicted his life before the siege. Anthony and Sir Lachlan put up a long fight, but when Lachlan fell, a sword point was pressed against the skin on the front of Anthony's throat. The man holding the sword said something, and within a second, his uncle's head fell from his neck when the man stepped up behind him and sliced him through. William almost screamed to see his uncle standing for only a moment without a head. Then the life was gone, and his body dropped to the floor with a twitch.

Sylvie suffered a similar fate much later than her brother. William could only lay folded tightly in silence as he watched his aunt beaten, humiliated, and raped. Closing his eyes did not block out the horror. He still heard every sound, every slap, every tear, every thrust. But he kept his eyes closed until a sound came from his aunt. His eyes flew open to see the man on top of her pull a knife away from her throat. Blood gushed from the gaping wound in her neck. The man spilled his seed inside her as she gurgled her last breath through the open wound. The man's eyes looked to the hearth for a moment, and William held his breath. The man could not possibly see him hidden beneath the stones. But at just seven, William did not want to trust in what he thought but did not know.

The title 'Chapter 2' is written in a black, elegant, serif font. It is flanked by two decorative rose illustrations. The rose on the left is red with green leaves and a small bud. The rose on the right is light purple with green leaves and a small bud.

Chapter 2

William remained in his hiding place long into the night. Long after, the tower grew quiet after the Elliots claimed Ravenshill as if they had a right to it. When William determined it was as safe as ever to leave his hiding place, he nearly panicked when the stone that concealed him didn't budge. He used all his diminished strength to finally get it to move so he could slip through.

As William slid from his hiding position, he felt the hardwood beneath his hands. The bones of his thin knees ached on the unyielding floor. He weaved when he got to his feet. His ears rang, and the dark lord's hall blurred and undulated around him. He steadied himself, feeling his stomach protest, angry at its empty dryness. He tried to lick his lips, but no moisture was left to him. Then, steadying himself, he crouched and pulled the dagger from his boot.

His hand shook, and he wanted to swear at himself if only his brain could hold a thought long enough to do so. He could have chosen not to come home for Christmas. Fostering at York, many of the squires planned to go to London instead of returning to their families. The boys would be on their own in a land plentiful with brothels. William had been very curious about brothels and whores. Instead, he had come here to the home he loved. He came to see his father out of obligation, but more importantly, to see Uncle Jacob and Aunt Sylvie. Jacob was the type of man that garnered loyalty with capabilities instead of fear. He was honest and brave and always took the time to speak to William as a man to another man. Aunt Sylvie was fun. She was young, and despite being his aunt, he imagined himself as her husband or at least her beau. The thought of Sylvie and the brothel came to mind and almost made him sick. He knew what happened in brothels, but he had never experienced it. He was considering it so his mind could take him beyond his limited knowledge of wooing a lady as a gallant knight, which he always was in such imaginings. He hated himself for even imagining touching her. Her end had been cruel for a lady such as she.

William moved cautiously to the stairs that spiraled upward to the second and third floors of the tower. On the third floor was a door that led down into a garden only accessible from that floor. Slowly William climbed the stairs, pausing

every few steps to listen, barely daring to breathe. Finally, reaching the door, he touched the cold iron latch and closed his eyes. The bolt had to be forced back, never moving easily. It was always a struggle to throw it open, and it was never without a loud ring as it always shot free with a suddenness that slammed against its stop.

Drawing a deep breath that sounded loud enough for the sentries to hear on the walls outside, he opened his eyes and tried to pull it back quietly, but it would not budge. His head gave a slight involuntary shake as if to tell himself this was a bad idea. But it was the only way he knew out of the keep. So, with another breath, he held it and threw the bolt. It released almost as soon as it slammed loose. William gripped it, his heart hammering in his ears as he tried to listen for any sound coming from the room behind him or those below.

Satisfied he had not woken the household, he eased the door open. Stepping onto the small landing, he closed the door again and drew in his first breath of fresh air he had smelled in more than a month, locked away with rotting corpses. He crouched on the landing, watching for the sentries that might come within sight. It would be unlikely anyone would see him there from the wall. One would have to stand on tiptoes to have a chance at seeing the stairs. It was made for privacy and secrets. Few knew the secret it held, and he had only learned of it the day before.

Finally, he eased his way down the steps, one slow, shaky one after another. He found himself standing on the soft soil, well cultivated by the loving hands of his Aunt Faina. He eased around the small evergreen shrub, turned right, and followed the path until it turned at the wall to double back. He stopped and placed his hands against the wall. The moon from above showed dimly. He felt along the mortar grooves, feeling for a gap he could fit his fingers in. Finally, he found the spot, wedging his shaking fingers into the hole. With great effort, he moved a large stone for a small man to slip through. Now, William was the only one alive who knew of the garden's secret.

Slipping through the gap in the wall, he dropped to the ground on the other side. He waited, looking above for any sign of detection. When none came, he carefully pulled the stone back in place. Uncle Anthony told him not to leave a trace that he had survived. He was the last Kirkham and might become hunted by the Elliots to finish what they had wanted to do for more than a generation, annihilate the Kirkhams.



Chapter 3

May 7, 1158, Inverness, Scottish Highlands

Run! Run! Run! William's mind screamed at his legs. He could feel the horses breathing down his neck, their hooves shaking the ground as they chased after the thief.

William had long ago stopped worrying about right or wrong. Perhaps from that day, the gates were slammed shut and committed all those inside Ravenshill to their tombs. He spent the last two years figuring out how to survive. It had been a struggle and still was. If he was not a thief, he would have long ago starved to death. But he knew what that looked like, how it felt, and he was sure God would forgive him.

He went north after fleeing Ravenshill. He stopped along the way, in this village or that, but in Inverness, he found hope for a better future. But that hope died with Sir Keithen. An older knight serving the garrison at Inverness Castle, he had found William in Edinburgh, trying to sneak Keithen's purse from his belt. He made William promise to end his thievery and that he could travel with him to Inverness. William had no need to steal when he was provided for, so he had not been a thief for nearly a year. Then one night, Keithen died, the rent could not be paid on his small piece of property, and William found himself homeless within a few days of the old knight's death.

William dodged to the left, jumped a small bank, and landed in the arms of a man he recognized from Inverness Castle, where the bag of potatoes had come from that he now clung to as he ran. The impact knocked William off his feet, and the big man was hauling him up before William could flee.

"Hold him," one of the men behind him called. He heard the horse slide down the bank then the man dismounted. He walked to William and snatched the bag from him with a sneer. Then he hefted the bag and swung it at William's head. "He'll be going to see MacDuff. This one's been seen filching before."

"That one will be lucky to have only a hand taken," one of the other horsemen said.

The first horseman grabbed William by his arm and yanked them behind him. He was tied to a rope to the saddle, and they sat off in a slow trot for the castle sitting atop its hill.

By the time they entered the bailey, William was panting and close to collapsing.

Another man stepped forward with no word to be spoken, cut the rope binding him to the saddle, and then yanked him toward the hall. The rope around his wrists remained tied and chafed where it had bitten into his skin.

“He was found fleeing.”

William was shoved forward and stumbled, falling at a man’s feet. William looked up at him and saw he had some age. The man’s fierce expression made William shudder.

“Was the item recovered?”

“No, sir,” the man said.

“That’s a lie,” William called out.

Like lightning, MacDuff’s hand cracked across William’s cheek. “Quiet.” Then, as if all had been decided, the castle governor looked down at him and said, “It is common for me to hang thieves. But you are a young man. You are capable of working off this debt to me. Take him to Malcolm. Let him break his back in my forest.”

“But I didn’t—.”

One of the guards had stepped forward and grabbed him so tightly about the arm that he sucked in a breath of pain and was dragged away. The day was cold. Fall would soon give way to winter, and William shivered as he was carried to the back of the tower and shoved into a wagon cage. And there he stayed for two days. When it rained, he drank, but no one brought food or even laid eyes upon him tucked away in an isolated part of the castle. When finally, someone appeared, it was a squat, ugly man, and he dragged a girl behind him. She staggard but was wrenched up before she had a chance to fall.

The door opened, and the man hauled her up quickly, slinging her into the bottom of the cage at William’s feet. The door clanged closed. She lay with a hand splayed on his dirty bare foot, but he could see her green eyes looking fearfully over her shoulder.

“Go ahead and give her a try. She is most pleasant if you are careful of the claws,” the man said, walking away.

William sat in silence, staring down at the girl. She had bruises on her arms, and he saw a gash on her cheek facing him, and a crack appeared on her lower lip. When the man’s steps receded, the girl finally lifted herself from the floor with shaking arms. The left side of her face looked far worse than the right. Her eye was swollen shut displaying a myriad of colors. Both lips were swollen, and a gash appeared over her eye.

She pushed herself backward, glaring at William as she pressed herself into a corner, remaining there, watching William silently. He wanted to speak to her after so long without uttering a word, but he felt his words would not sink in. So, he remained on the other end of their cage, silent, pretending to sleep when he had been trying to do that very thing for days.

Sometime later, a boy brought out a team of horses and hooked them to the wagon, and shortly after, a man approached. He was a giant of a man resembling a bear, not in bulk alone but aided by his long hair and beard. He stopped at the wagon and looked in on him. His tiny dark eyes smirked at William before he spat out the side of his mouth, revealing decayed teeth. "You're not likely to last long." Then his eyes turned to the girl, and he was silent for a long time as she glared at him. "Well," he finally said. "You'll be learning your place soon enough, Girly, when we get there." He went to the seat on the wagon and climbed on, and set the horses and wagon into motion.

They left Inverness behind. The girl sat silently, glaring out across the landscape. "Are you Malcolm," William finally had the nerve to ask after two hours of silence. The man laughed and spat again. "No, I'm not Malcolm, and you should be grateful for that. You'll meet him soon enough and wish you hadn't."

"Why am I being sent to him? Who is he?"

"As far as why I do not know, nor does it matter. As for who Malcolm is, he brings the wood to Inverness for fires and construction. He also oversees the transportation of stones and the labor for all these things."

"And I'm to be this labor?" William said, but he already knew the answer to that.

"Unless you want to be the whore for the guards like the girl."

William quieted again, contemplating his fate as he was sure the girl sitting in her corner was.

When the wagon finally stopped late in the evening, William's heart sank to think this was his new home. It was a pit of mud. Shacks were built together and appeared like the first strong wind would topple them. They barely looked large enough for a man to stretch out in. The sounds of logs being split and sawed fill the air, along with the calls between the men.

The man hopped down from the wagon as a few gathered. The mud reached their ankles and splashed high on their tall boots. The driver moved to the back of the wagon, opened the door, and yanked the girl out in a flash. She stumbled, and he dragged her away as she fought and screamed.

"Get out here," a man called from the door.

William licked his lips, hesitating, fearing he would be dragged out like the girl. The mud swallowed his feet and ankles when he jumped to the ground.

"They sent us a scrawny one," the man who demanded he get out of the wagon said in disgust as he turned and walked away.

“I told that bastard, MacDuff, I needed strong men, not children,” another said.

William swallowed, looking at him. It appeared as if his right eye had been ripped from its socket. The skin of his eyelid was haphazardly sewn closed. A scar was etched deep on that side, rising from his lip, tugging it up, making him appear as if he was always smiling. He was a tall and lean man with a look of rage tightening him.

“I am Malcolm,” the man announced. “I am king here, and you will grow strong or die.” With that, the man turned away.

“You will go to Shaw,” another man said, pointing him out. “And tell him you are the newest piece of scum to be sent for his timber. If you try to run, you will be found and punished, but you will never be freed or killed. But that is not a good thing if you are caught running.”

The man pointed to another, near the edge of the camp, yelling. “And tell him there’s a new girl for us.”

William looked at the man and hesitated as the man, in turn, looked at Shaw. “I will not tell you again. We do not repeat ourselves here.”

The title 'Chapter 4' is centered on the page. It is flanked by two decorative rose illustrations. The rose on the left is red with green leaves and a small bud. The rose on the right is light purple with green leaves and a small bud. The word 'Chapter' is written in a black, elegant serif font, and the number '4' is written in a similar font to its right.

Chapter 4

“This boy is just a welp,” one of the men said as the light waned from the sky. As he watched the shadows creep in, William began to see the darkness in this remote place was far worse. He heard the howls of wolves. So many wolves, and he knew they circled the giant camp. He could feel their eyes, watching and waiting for their chance to attack.

William sat by a small fire that was abandoned when he approached. He looked up from the nuts he had found scattered on the ground earlier in the day. The big man towered over William, and at his height, he looked fierce. The hair on the back of William’s neck stood up. His chest was broad, with massive shoulders used to work at the timber. His torso was long, and he had legs that might be mistaken for the enormous tree trunks they cut down.

After three days, William barely had the strength to sit and eat after the hard day’s work. His hands were raw from the axes and saws he used minute after minute of each day. Before dawn, they were fed slop left from the meals of the guards and supervisors, thrown together, and presented to the prisoners in whatever condition it did not matter to anyone but the prisoners. Then as dawn broke through the thick forest, they would be staring up at their first tree.

This morning there had not been enough left for William, and the day to the noon meal had been excruciatingly long and tiring. At noon the salted fish did little to fill his belly. His arms were leaden, and he could not use his hands again until he would be forced to the following day. His father always taught him he had to fight to survive and taught him how. He had always been good at it. He was so good, whether it was practicing swords or boxing, he never ran from a fight. But he could not fight a big man like him if he came to cause trouble. As of yet, William had met no one that didn’t swear at him or cuff him upside his head. One day, if he survived this place until he was bigger, he would beat the hell out of those men.

As the man stepped further into the light, so it reached his face, William saw he was young, and if it was any place but here, he would still be considered a boy. But, behind William, nothing moved in the shadows. William wondered if this man expected him to answer the statement meant for his ears.

“What have you there?” the deep voice cracked for a moment, and William recognized he could not be much older than himself.

“I found them,” William mumbled, closing his hands over the acorns. The nuts were not as pleasant without being processed, but it was food.

The boy plopped down beside him and leaned over his shoulder. He tugged William’s elbow, moving his hand from over the top of the nuts. William did not resist.

The other boy let his arm go and straightened. “Maybe we can share.” Then the boy brought out three Damson Plums, looking as if they had ripened a little too long, but the sight of them made William’s mouth water. Warily he extended the hand holding the acorns out to him. The boy lay one of the plums beside the acorns and then selected half of them. He lay them in his lap before he took the last of the plums and, in one bite, ate half of it. He lay the other half in William’s hand.

“I am Ballock.”

“William,” he replied.

“Why are you here, William?”

“I stole potatoes from the kitchens of Inverness Castle.”

Ballock gave a low whistle, “You are either brave or stupid.”

“I’m here. I would have to stay stupid.” William worked the bitter nut in his mouth. “What about you?”

“I was big when I was a child. I was told I came into the world bigger than anyone else. That is all I did. One of MacDuff’s men said they saw me take a ring from a traveling merchant I never saw and I do not believe existed. Then I was sent here.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Two years, give or take. Eventually, you will get used to the work if you are strong. If you are not, then my condolences to your family.”

Anger flooded William. He had not thought of his family in some time. It was challenging to recall the past when the future was so clouded. He would one day be strong and somehow get out of this camp and return to wipe every last Elliot from the earth. “My family is gone.”

“It is probably for the best. I have a father who I left outraged because he believes, as I do, it was a lie to get another man for the timber. I left my mother sobbing with my little sisters hugging each of her legs. They will never know my fate and will wonder the rest of their days.”

William fell silent, wondering if it was better to have someone thinking of him or if it was easier to be adrift in the world. The boys finished their small fare and then fell into an exhausted sleep on the muddy floor of a shack.



Chapter 5

It was three months before William saw the girl he was brought with. She appeared well enough. He saw the bruises had faded, but she disappeared around a corner and was gone again.

“Best stay away from that one.” Stuart’s sudden presence behind him made him jump. Stuart was one of the men who stood beneath the trees, sawing or hacking away at them. He had laughed when one of his fellow fellers was crushed when the tree shifted and crushed him. Another died when a falling branch struck one of the men in the head, killing him instantly.

“Irvin has staked his claim on her.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means Irvin will cut your dick off if it gets anywhere near her,” there was a gleam in Stuart’s eyes as if he hoped such a fate would be William’s. “The girls brought here trickle down through the supervisors, then guards. Once one of them made it all the way to us. I think they forgot about that one because they had two new girls. So after the guards finish with them, they’re sent somewhere else.” Stuart laughed, “It’s probably a worse place than this. The poor bitches.”

William watched him go with unease because the man did not care for life, not even his own. He had heard Stuart more than once cackling when he was nearly crushed or one of the other men. But as time passed, he grew accustomed to that and everything else.

A year rolled by, then another. William was one of the strong ones brought to the timber. He had seen enough of the weak ones. They did not last long. Either they died of hunger and exhaustion, or starvation and exhaustion caused them to make deadly mistakes. One such incident killed three men working down the hill from the log. It took two oxen to pull free. The man hooking the chains had made a mistake, and the log rolled free and crushed the men below. The man who caused it went mad and was taken away by a guard to never be seen before.

Stuart had laughed hysterically, mimicking the men’s screams before the log rolled over them. He even danced on the hill above them, making everyone

pause in horror to stare at him. Although despite the man's sick sense of humor, he had become William's companion, the how of it still confused William.

No falling tree or limb claimed William. The longer he stayed, the stronger he became and the more demanding jobs he was tasked with. It was always a struggle to do what was commanded of him. He forgot what a bed felt like, how anything but salted fish and left-over slop tasted.



Chapter 6

The Timber, Scotland July 22, 1164

Six years passed in the slop of the timber. William grew tall with a trim waist, broad shoulders, and muscular branched arms. He kept his word to himself, and those men who greeted him with malice only got it back now that he was old enough and big enough. So he found himself a feller alongside Stuart while Ballock cut and dragged using his back that had only grown stronger through the years.

During that time, they had devised a plan to escape the timber, but none of them had chosen when this would happen. It was a dream spoken of when alone. A vision for freedom and hope for vengeance from William against the Elliots.

“Will,” the guard Irvin called to him as he came from the forest as dusk was racing in with the rain.

William bristled. If one of the guards noticed him, it was not good. Even if it was Irvin who did not torture the prisoners like many of the other guards.

“I hear you, and some of the other men have been talking about running.”

William scoffed, “You hear wrong. We have no plans, only ridiculous musings.”

“I need you to take Ceanu with you.”

“I don’t know what you have heard. But we will not run.”

“Listen,” Irvin said, grabbing William’s arm and stopping him. he immediately dropped his hand away. William didn’t cause trouble, but he would get a hit in if one of the guards insisted on singling him out. “She is with child and cannot stay here.”

The girl who came to the camp with him remained under Irvin’s protection, sewing and cooking for some of the men. She was no great beauty, but she was petite with cuteness that made even William want to protect her.

“I can help you.”

“Why can’t you get her out of here?”

“I am in service to MacDuff. My family would be disgraced if I fled my duty here. But I will help you and your men get out if you take Ceana.”

William stared at him. He would say nothing because it could lead to severe punishment if Irvin was intent on betraying them. “Talk to the other men. I will not be able to assist in a fortnight. That’s when we move camp again.” Irvin turned and walked away.

Later, when William mentioned it to the other men, Stuart was anxious for the prospect of danger. Ballock was reluctant to trust Irvin and took more than a week to decide. If they continued to do nothing, they could expect nothing different.

As the camp was loaded up and underway, Irvin rode in the left rear guard. As the wagon, the three men trod beside rounded a bend, they slipped into the woods, only seen by Irvin and Ceana, who followed.



Chapter 7

March 16, 1171, London, England

William watched the boy struggling beneath the bucket of slop he carried to the pigs. He knew Kendric wasn't his son. He knew he wasn't Irvin's either. Ceana had lost his child when they were fleeing from the timber. Life had been hard since then, but not as hard as being a prisoner.

They found there was no place in Scotland they could hide. They were the only ones who ever escaped the timber. Macduff was livid. They stayed on the move for two years and William assumed they had been forgotten long before until he stumbled upon a man still looking for them all. William wanted to flee to England, but Ballock and Stuart did not want to leave Scotland. So he and Ceana had trekked to London, making a wide birth around Ravenshill. After all this time, he doubted the Elliots would still be looking for him, but he had thought MacDuff would have long since stopped his search.

Life in England was no easier. He married Ceana before leaving Scotland. When they finally arrived in London, it took weeks to secure a job unloading the cargo from the river boats. By then, Ceana supplied the money for food by whoring herself out. That was where the child came from, a byproduct of all those men William had shared Ceana with.

Being in England reminded William of Ravenshill and the life he was meant to have. His family was annihilated fighting for the Norman keep. When his uncle hid him, he expected William to return one day and place the Kirkhams back at Ravenshill. He thought of the warm beds the Elliots slept in. One of those beds had been his. He knew that as Baron of Ravenshill, he would have had a lady for a wife, not a whore.

One of Ceana's clients killed her when Kendric was two. He missed her more than he thought he ever would. That was five years ago. He had been stuck with the boy ever since. At least he wasn't totally useless now. He was strong enough to tote buckets of water, wash clothes, cook, and help unload the barges.

“Let’s go to the tavern,” William growled at the boy. Fergus would often give him a free drink if he brought Kendric, and the boy cleaned the floors and glasses.

Without a word, Kendric followed. He was a quiet boy. William made sure of that. He did what he was told, and that was good for William.

“Got you some cups in the tub,” Fergus called to Kendric as soon as he and William walked through the lopsided door of the tavern.

Kendric went to the back without a word to begin his chore. He didn’t care one way or the other, but Fergus often fed the boy before William was ready to go home. William was left alone to drink and play cards with the other men. It never took him long to lose his money, whether on betting or on ale, he washed down his gullet.

“I will raise me an army, I tell you,” William ranted to one of the players. The man was a knight of some standing by the cut of his doublet. So personified by the fine steel at his waist and the gold signet ring on his hand. “An army that will take back my home.”

“What home is that?” the man asked, not caring what he had to say.

“Ravenshill. I’ll wipe every Elliot from this earth. You wait and see.”

“What’s he talking about?” the knight asked Ferguson as he stood from the table, sweeping up the coin he had just won from William.

“don’t pay William no mind. He has been coming here for years, talking about raising an army to take back Ravenshill. Wherever the hell that is. But he is yet to hire one man. So instead, he comes here, drinks it all, and drags that boy to the docks so they can make more to come back here and drink it away. William Kirkham is a fool, that is all.”

William was used to people talking about him when he could hear them. He felt the prick of anger and turned his cup up, draining it to the bottom. The knight gave him a pitying look before he left the tavern. William lifted his cup for another drink but saw that it was empty. He felt for his coin pouch and touched its emptiness with disappointment.

He staggered up from his seat, wobbling unsteadily, gripping the table’s edge. The boy came to him, offering a steadying hand as they made their way home. He would go to work tomorrow and avoid the tavern until he earned enough to buy an army. It was an oath he had sworn to himself many times. The Elliots still held Ravenshill since there were no Kirkhams but him to take it back. He had a responsibility to his family; one day, he would vindicate them.