

1306



Snakes & Wolves



Trilogy

A.V. Arms



Chapter 10

March 24, 1306, Hermitage Castle, Scotland

Evander Kirkham's long stride carried him through the corridors of Hermitage Castle. He had come to make demands of Ranald Elliot. Evander was tired to his very bones. Exhausted by the fighting between the Elliots and the Kirkhams. It had raged for far too long. It ebbed and flowed through generations depending on the volatility of the clan leaders. Evander's grandfather, Gabe, existed peacefully with the Elliots, with only a sheep stolen here and there on both sides. But war came again when the Elliots accused Evander's uncle, Keith, of sending raiders to set fire to the chapel at Larriston.

In retaliation, Keith was killed. Evander's father, Allister, refused to be humiliated by the Elliots. By the time Evander was born as the fourth son, his two eldest brothers were dead. Evander was raised with a sword in his hand and hate in his heart for the Elliots. It was fueled by his father, who took on the war that became his obsession. He died an old man, still wanting revenge on the Elliots. But now Hermitage was Evander's. His three brothers and uncle lost their lives, along with countless men, in the years of the raging war. Evander was not so young himself. At thirty-five, he wanted to stop the fight. He was the last Kirkham, and he could not waste his life on something so futile. This war was about revenge. Sometimes battles were fought over land, a tangible thing, where there would be a winner with their flag fluttering proudly over the property. But vengeance was a different kind of war. An entire family could be wiped from the earth through vengeance. The Kirkhams now teetered precariously on the brink of extinction with the Elliots. Five sons had been lost by the Elliots in Evander's lifetime, and like the Kirkhams, only one remained.

Kenneth Elliot was an imposing figure when he met Evander in the inner courtyard. He was dark where Evander was fair. Dark hair and dark eyes like onyx orbs.

"My thanks for coming," Kenneth greeted him.

"I would feel more welcome if your men had not taken my sword." Evander did not care that he came off surly. He was uneasy to walk into the castle walls with no weapon. And the four men with him were not allowed to enter the walls.

"No one wears a sword inside Hermitage, only me and my guards. I have brought you here on an important matter."

Evander waited, silently feeling anxious. "I have decided to give my daughter to you to wed. Then, we can join our two houses and perhaps lay this feud to rest forever."

"Your daughter," Evander said.

"I have only one child. I have no sons to continue."

"But my son will inherit Hermitage."

"And my grandson will inherit Ravenshill. Seems a fair trade."

Evander considered. He had come here to make peace, knowing both families were backed against the wall and suspecting that was the purpose of Kenneth's invitation. "Might I lay eyes upon this woman I am to wed?"

"Of course," Kenneth said, though the corners of his lips pinched with irritation.

He led the way to the women's solar, where Kenneth's wife stood and greeted him from the tapestry work she and several other women were doing.

Evander's eyes were snagged by one of the women. She was young, her face cherubic, hinting at a child or angel. Her hair was dark brown with hints of red shining in her long locks braided tightly at her nape.

"Lilly, I would like you to meet someone."

The girl swept up from her chair, and her dark eyes went nervously to Evander before darting away and approaching her father.

"This is my daughter."

The girl looked younger up close, her body not yet fully developed, though she appeared as if she would be a lythe woman. Evander took his time running his eyes over her, knowing he made Lilly uncomfortable. Finally, she lowered her eyes, refusing to meet his.

"Is she breedable?"

"Yes, for a year now."

Evander nodded, "Very well. We shall go immediately to reach Ravenshill before nightfall."

The speed Evander was prepared to leave surprised Kenneth. "Make yourself welcome. We are to be in-laws, after all. Stay for a time. Give her a chance to say her farewells."

"No," Evander said, clarifying that he would not be moved. "I do not wish to remain longer than I must without my sword."

"As you wish." Kenneth turned to the ladies. "Help my daughter gather her things. After that, she shall travel to Ravenshill to join our family with the Kirhams."

Evander felt anxious. He could not be happier with the peace offering of Kenneth's daughter, but he still stood with no weapons on enemy ground. "We leave in thirty minutes. She will ride with me and take only four bags my men can strap to their saddles. After that, the rest can be sent."

Lilly's eyes were on him now, and they were terrified.



Chapter 2

Lilly could not stop shaking. It felt as if her teeth would rattle from her head, and her knees would buckle beneath her. She had not shed the first tear. Her shock was yet to wear off. He was not the man she thought she would have to marry. She thought perhaps she would be lucky like her parents and fall in love without being forced upon another. However, her mother did not seem surprised by the marriage, which incensed Lilly. She should have had some warning that this was how they would make the peace she heard them speak of.

She knew it was her duty, but the man she was to marry was terrifying. He had a stern look, from his frigid expression to his icy blue eyes. He did not seem like the man who would ever hold her tenderly as she witnessed her father often do with her mother. On the contrary, his callous inquiry into her monthly flux had chilled her. She had felt danger when she stood in front of him. He did not smile. His face remained impassively cold, nor did he try to make himself look less tall and intimidating. Instead, he was unbending with his shoulders back, his head high, and his eyes searching every corner of the room when they were not locked on Lilly.

Lilly found herself in her chamber, with the women fussing over what she would take while she stood with her back to them, contributing nothing. She stared at the table with the cup and bowl where she drank milk this morning and ate pottage, never thinking today was the day she would leave her home with a man twice her age and marry him for duty's sake.

"It will be okay, Lilly," her mother's voice came from behind her. "I have always heard the Kirkhams treat their people well."

She wanted to go to her mother and slap her so hard her teeth would rattle. She did not care about the Kirkhams' kindness to their people. Instead, she was concerned about this man she did not want to leave with. She wanted to run but would not get far, whether it was her father, her honor, or Evander that would stop her. It was not as if she had anywhere to go, no aunts or uncles. Everyone she knew and the only people who cared for her resided here at Hermitage.

"It is time," her father said from the doorway.

Lilly nodded, arms folded across her chest as if she could protect herself from what would come. Then, finally, she turned and followed her parents obediently from the room. She followed them all the way outside Hermitage's gates. The wind whipped, blowing strongly from the mountains to the north. A drizzle had begun, cold and steady. Three men and Evander were already mounted while another stood waiting for

her. He took the bags and distributed them among the men. Evander watched as she said her goodbyes, only long enough for the load to be secured.

“Come, Lilly,” Evander barked at her.

She started at his loud voice, turned with a sad smile from her parents, and moved toward him. The man who took the bags now plucked her easily from the ground and sat her gently on the horse’s rump behind Evander. Then, without a word, Evander dug his heels into his horse’s sides, and Hermitage disappeared at her back as she clung to him.

The horses ate the miles, and before Lilly had time to recover, the hooves echoed across a bridge before ascending a hill. Above her, she saw a small keep looming with one tower surrounded by old curtain walls. The yellow banner with the black raven whipped in the wind above the gate. They crossed beneath the wall and into the mud of the bailey. Evander reached behind him and pulled her from the horse’s rump. His strong arm slid her from horse to ground in one smooth sweep that left her standing on shaking legs as he dismounted.

“Take the horses,” he barked at a young man who came from the stable. Then, to another, he ordered to find the priest.

Everything moved so quickly under Evander’s orders. First, she was swept across the tower’s walk bridge she nearly slipped on, the boards sodden from the rain. Then, she was heralded into the hall of the tower and beyond. She barely had enough time to see the rich mahogany table, high-backed chairs in the hall and the stairs that spiraled out of sight before she was in the chapel.

Rain dripped from her and Evander as they came to stand before the altar and the minister on it. She did not hear the words as Evander accepted her as his bride. Her voice cracked when she agreed to honor and obey him, and then it was over, and she was no longer an Elliot but a Kirkham.



Chapter 3

He was pleased with his wife. She was quiet and obedient, staring up at him and quieting her sobs when he ordered her to as he tore through her maidenhead. He found his pleasure almost immediately, which pleased him all the more. He climbed from her and left the room. He had matters to settle if war was no longer coming over the horizon daily. Resources could be reallocated, and Ravenshill could be made more prosperous.

He spent the next several weeks managing the clearing of fields overtaken without the manpower to harvest them through the years. He set the blacksmith to work making farm tools instead of weapons. At night he returned to the keep, ate his dinner, then took his wife to her bed. Each time she was compliant, she never shirked her duty, and he found he was proud of her for that.

She left the managing of the keep to Dariah, who had taken over the castle's ladyship when his mother died. This left his wife time to pursue her interests, whatever they were. It was of little concern to him as long as she was available to him when he wanted her, and she was compliant.

Her items arrived in a wagon from Hermitage a week after he married her. The tarp had not been removed in the following weeks, and the wagon remained loaded next to the animal pens. He might set it ablaze if it sat there much longer, taking up room in his bailey.

Six months after Lilly arrived, Dariah announced his wife was with child. He was proud of Lilly. She would prove to be fertile. He sent a message to Kenneth and then waited.



Chapter 4

October 6, 1308, Ravenshill

The pain was excruciating. It had come in waves, but now it remained steady, tearing out her insides, her screams filling the rafters overhead despite herself. When finally the child slid from her body, she collapsed, her eyes heavy after long hours of pushing her baby forth. A boy, the heir to not only Ravenshill but Hermitage. She smiled down at the child as she placed him at her breast, and he latched on, drinking heartily, already strong.

For Lilly, Reid Kirkham was the epitome of his father, though only a newborn. He took more from her than she wanted to give. Her breasts ached from trying to provide the boy enough milk. Finally, a wet nurse was found, and Lilly eagerly handed over the baby. She saw him little after that and again filled her time walking the walls and bailey. Sometimes she would walk to the bridge, but never beyond it. The desire to run was always too strong.

Evander had returned to her bed the night before, and she ached from the encounter. She wanted to ask someone how she could wash herself of his seed but did not know if it was easier to give birth or suffer beneath him every night. Evander would not come to her in the last two months of her pregnancy. He announced this to her when he told her he would find a whore to satiate his needs. She did not know why he told her this. She hoped he would keep his whore. She decided she would rather go through childbirth and get her two months of peace from her husband. Perhaps the Lord would be merciful and take her on her birthing bed this time.

After two years at Ravenshill, she liked it no more than she did the first time she rode into the bailey and was swept into the chapel. The servants were respectful, and her mother had been correct that they were treated well. Many women tried to befriend her, but she did not want to be there and did not want to feel as if she belonged because she didn't.

Reid was two when the messenger came from Hermitage. Her mother had given birth to a son. The message had come to her, not Evander, and that realization chilled Lilly. Hermitage had an heir now that was not her son. She knew there was no way her father would let the son of a Kirkham have Hermitage if he had a son. The fact he had the letter delivered to her hands made everything crash around her.

She hurried to her solar and, shaking hands, wrote a short letter to her father. It simply said, "Can I come home?"

The messenger galloped away, and Lilly prayed he would return with a yes soon. Then days passed, but the road remained empty.



Chapter 5

Evander stared down at the letter in his hand. He had read the words so many times they blurred, but they still blazed in his mind.

Son is strong. Open the gate to us at midnight a week hence.

Evander knew Kenneth had a son, and it had been worrisome. Intercepting the messenger from Kenneth to his daughter had been fortunate. In the end, he sent the message on to Lilly, with instructions for the messenger to bring her response to Evander or lose his head.

The message returned to him was a betrayal that made his blood boil.

A week hence in exchange for the execution of my husband and son.

He read the note three times to fully understand what he thought a quiet child like her was incapable of.

With a nod, Evander's man stepped forward and extinguished the messenger's life with a blade in his throat.

"Now bring me, my wife," he ordered before the messenger had bled his last.

Evander waited in the hall where the body of her messenger lay in a pool of his own blood, so it was the first thing she saw when she entered. Her feet stopped, and her eyes trailed from the messenger to Evander at the other end of the hall. The blood drained from her face.

Ned shoved her forward, and she turned in surprise, tripping on her feet and falling to the floor. Evander moved forward. "Leave her," he ordered as Ned reached to drag her back to her feet.

Lilly turned and looked at Evander. She should have taken that opportunity to rise, but she remained where she had fallen. One of his boots landed on her hand. He balanced his weight on it, brought the other up, and kicked her in the face. Her head snapped backward, and blood flew from her lips. A surprised sound escaped her, and then sobs of terror began when her hand remained pinned under his boot.

"You have been such a good wife. This is a betrayal that cannot be forgiven." He thrust her message into her face. "You want your own son killed?"

She said nothing. Despite her message, she was not ready to be openly defiant. Perhaps he would prefer that. Defiance could be quelled with strength, but her quiet was defiance, one he could not battle. She lay, sobbing with her cheek pressed into the floor, her head turned away from him.

Still crouching over her, he ran his finger across her cheek, then stroked her head. "You will have to answer for your betrayal."

“Wha—what?” she stammered through jaws he knew ached.

“What do you think the punishment should be? You are my wife, and you conspire against me. You conspire against your own son. You brought war to my walls when our son was supposed to join our households. You will open my home to your father, who also betrayed me. Tell me, Lilly,” he spat out her name. “what is the punishment for treason?”

The title 'Chapter 6' 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 in a large, black, serif font, and the number '6' is in a smaller, black, serif font.

Chapter 6

The pain shot through her arm as Evander dragged her from the floor. She did not answer Evander, but the punishment for treason was death.

“Do not think I will take into consideration you are the mother of my son. You gave up that title when you decided you wanted him dead.”

He thrust her toward Ned. “Take her to my chamber and keep her there until her father comes for my keep.”

Ned grabbed her, dragging her out of the hall, across the bridge, and up the stairs to the tower’s top floor. He thrust her into the chamber and took a stand on the steps. Lilly knew there was no escape from this room. She could visit the small garden behind the tower, but only unscalable walls surrounded it. So she spent her day in fear.

It was here Evander found her and bid her come to his chamber and perform her wifely duty. Her face still hurt, and her head rang, but she complied. She had no choice. But soon, her father would come, and she hoped Evander would turn her over. He had his son, and he would not get Hermitage now. She suffered the week, counting each day with relief when Evander left the chamber, and she was one day closer to being rid of her husband.

The days were slow, filled with less than what they were before entering her imprisonment. The night of the seventh day, Evander ordered her to his bed again, and as she lay beneath him, he placed his forearm across her neck, bearing down on it and cutting off her airway. “Tonight, your father is coming.”

Lilly felt her eyes bulge before he released her.

“Tonight, the war you started begins again.” He climbed from the bed and began to redress. “Dress well. We want the attire to fit the occasion.”

Evander left, and soon Dariah came and helped her dress in her most delicate silk tunic with white rabbit fur lining the cuffs and neckline. She placed her hair in a braid, wound it around her head, and pinned it there. Then, clothed as Evander wanted, she was left to wait. The time crawled forward with the speed of a wounded beetle, foundering and moving backward. When Ned came to take her from the room, she did not feel relief as she thought she might.

Silently he took her to the wall. When she stepped on the walk, she looked across the small plateau. She saw the glimmer of metal as her father’s army revealed itself. It had passed beyond midnight and had raced into the early morning hours.

Evander grabbed her arm and thrust her toward the wooden boxes stacked against the wall. He lifted her onto them and climbed up behind her. She felt the wind hitting her face as she stood above the gate. Then she heard it. The whisper of Evander's sword leaving its sheath. She felt the tip press into her back.

"Have you come for your daughter or me?" Evander called down.

"You," Kenneth did not care to lie.

"I will give you your daughter instead."

She heard the words and was processing them when she saw Evander's arms lifting. She felt a sharp pain in the side of her neck.



Chapter 7

Lilly's head rolled to the side, down her shoulder, fell onto the box she stood on, then tumbled down to land on the walkway. Evander placed his palm on Lilly's back as her corpse sagged and thrust her off the wall. Yelling ensued from below, great bellows of rage and threats. Evander joined his voice to theirs, lifting Lilly's head for all to see before he swung it with all his might toward the horde of men.

"You die today!" Evander declared.

The gates of Ravenshill were swung open, and his men charged from the walls. But Evander had underestimated Kenneth's numbers. Where he expected a small number to sneak into the walls, a massive army was gathered from the Elliot clan and many of their Scottish neighbors.

He watched his men slaughtered, falling beneath the numbers of the Elliot force. He ran down the steps and into the bailey. The gatekeepers were trying to close the gates back. But some of Evander's men were trying to get back in, hindering the efforts.

"Hide my son," Evander called to Daliah as he sprinted toward the gates. Suddenly they burst inward, and a stampede of armored men filled the bailey. Evander raised the sword coated in his wife's blood, swinging it twice before his sword arm was severed by a falling ax. Blades pierced his body, and he was driven to the ground, his life seeping from him.