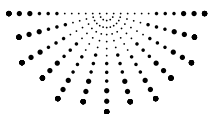


MAIDEN FROM THE MIST
EXCERPT

GUARDIANS OF THE STONE



TANYA ANNE CROSBY

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ISBN: 978-1-942820-79-6

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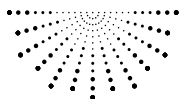
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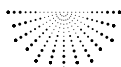
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Angel Of Fire

MAIDEN OF THE MIST



PROLOGUE



DUNRÒNAIGH KEEP, THE ISLE OF RÒNAIGH,
NOVEMBER 1135

Caden Mac Swein seized his grandfather's halberd from its brace upon the wall and stepped back to swing the heavy weapon, recalibrating its weight. "How many?"

"Fifty, near as we can tell," Alec replied.

Caden swung the halberd yet again, cursing beneath this breath. Made of sturdy ash wood, the haft of the great axe was more than four feet long. The blade was a solid thirty-three inches of iron edged with fine steel. As a whole, the weapon measured six feet long and weighed more than two stone. Only a man of Caden's size and strength could ever hope to wield it, and anyone within arm's length of his swing could attest to his prowess with the weapon.

If they still had a head to speak.

He ran his fingers across the sharp blade. Far more than the great sword, the Viking relic was his weapon of choice,

for it had once belonged to his great, great-grandsire, Swein of the North. Beast, it was called, and once he set The Beast in motion, it unerringly met its mark.

Just at that moment, Wee Davie rushed in, bearing their father's great sword. At thirteen, Davie was small for his age, and the length of the claymore was nearly as tall as him. "They're gatherin' near the Church Cave," he announced. "Let's smite them from our land!"

Caden's brow furrowed. The Church Cave was a natural sea cave, with a ceiling so high it formed an echo. It was, in fact, deep enough to conceal more than fifty men. If any were hiding inside, their numbers could easily be misjudged, and it was critical they know precisely how many men they would face today. They were not so well numbered that they could afford to take a chance.

"Have they gone inside?" he asked his brother, realizing that Davie had probably spied them from the tower. Built by the ancients, Dunrònnaigh Keep was "laird of the Minch." Its enduring presence defied even the storm kelpies—those Blue Men of the Minch—who ruled the waters of Skotlandsfjörð.

"Nay," his brother said.

"Good." Caden nodded. "Good." To their great fortune, the cave by the shore was haunted and cursed. Most living souls would never venture inside, where the bones of hapless men and women still clung to stalagmites near the ceiling. Trapped by the rising sea, their bodies had been borne too high to retrieve them. Now, clinging to their berths, even in death, they awaited with shivering bones for the sea to return and claim them. And claim them it would, for the Minch was a vengeful sea. No man who'd ever traversed the fjord could claim the kelpies weren't the fiercest of foes. The Scots of the Western Isles all feared them, but clearly not enough to keep their filthy feet off Caden's island.

"Let's go! I'm ready!" Davie announced, but he struggled

to lift up their father's claymore. And eyeing his youngest brother with displeasure, Caden said, "Nay ye're no', Davie."

The boy's helm fell over his wide blue eyes. "Aye, Caden, I am," he argued. "Ye canna keep me from it this time! I'm a mon grown." He cast a glance at Alec, hoping to win the captain's aid, knowing full well he was the only man Caden would listen to, but Alec very wisely turned away. "Today, I will fight like a mon aside my brethren!" Davie maintained.

Caden softened his tone. "Nay, Davie boy. Ye're of better use to me here."

Inside the keep. Away from so many bloodthirsty blades.

Once upon a time, Caden had been the third of five strapping sons, but only he and Wee Davie now remained. Their forefather, Conn Cétchathach of the Hundred Wars, had been a high king of Erin, but Wee Davie was little more than a boy. Already, during his scant years, they'd seen a quarter of the battles Conn had, and one of them—either Caden or Davie—must survive to see the end of days with all their limbs and head intact. Caden aimed to see it would be Davie.

The youth pouted, his jaw set firmly in a freckled face.

"Davie," Caden reasoned. "One of us must stay and guard the keep."

"*Gonadh*, Caden! 'Tis a woman's job ye would leave me to," Davie said, his voice cracking in complaint.

Caden laid a hand upon his brother's shoulder. "To guard the chieftain's seat? Nay, brother. 'Tis a task befitting only a chief."

Unconvinced, Wee Davie screwed his face. "Aye? Then do it yourself!"

Caden's fingers tightened about his brother's shoulder. "One of us must lead this fight, and until the day ye can wield this halberd in my hand, ye'll no' be the one to do so. D' y' hear me?"

Wee Davie lifted his chin. "Please," he begged. "Please, Caden. I'm a mon now! I'm a mon!"

Caden furrowed his brow. "A mon need never say he's a mon, Davie. My resolve remains." By the eyes of Conn, there were not even women remaining of their blood to strengthen alliances. This decision was not open to discussion. His brother would *not* fight today. He would remain safely within the keep.

He and Davie met eye to eye. To make his point, Caden handed the Viking halberd to his brother and it dropped with a thud to the floor, the iron spikes chipping the stone. It barely missed Davie's foot, and the clatter it made rivaled the echo in the Church Cave.

No more need be said. Davie scowled, though he allowed Caden to lift the halberd from the floor, and he was still glaring as Caden turned and made for the door.

His captain hurried to keep step beside him, and only once they'd quit the hall, Caden turned and said, "See that he remains safe, inside."

"I shall try."

"Nay!" Caden said, his voice exploding like thunder. "You *will* do it, Alec. If my brother comes to harm today, I will take *your* head."

It was a bold threat, one Caden Mac Swein would never carry out on his most trusted friend, but Alec understood his laird's resolve better than most. At all costs, Caden would protect the youngest remaining Mac Swein from the evils of war. He, himself, might bear a dozen scars from chin to toes, but rather Caden should bear them than Wee Davie. In the end, it would be Davie Mac Swein who'd lead their clan, and Caden wouldn't bear the loss of yet another brother.

Outside, from Dunrònigh's single tower, the Mac Swein standard whipped with the breeze—a lion rampant ermine holding a bow. The cat's powerful jowls snapped, and the

wind was a roar from its toothy grin. Down by the sea cave, a throng of usurpers waited to be ousted, their steely weapons glinting maliciously against a waning sun. Three more boats navigated the foaming surf, their numbers growing by the hour. Fortunately, there was only one place they could land their boats. Anywhere else, and they suffered the possibility of smashing their skiffs against the cliffs. On such a tiny island their military was scant, but every man and woman on Rònnaigh knew how to defend themselves, and their greatest advantage of all was that from the old tower, one could see every inch of their isle and the sea beyond. Their advantage today would be a swift course of action, and whilst the new boats were positioning for a landing, he would slay the first comers—and then, one by one, he would cut down every new man who arrived.

“Di’ ye spy their banner?”

“None.”

“Greedy buggers,” Caden said. “Tis Macleod yet again. He craves this isle more than he does his firstborn son.”

Seventy of Caden’s men awaited outside the keep. He raised his grandfather’s halberd to the heavens. “For Dunrònnaigh!” he cried.

“For Dunrònnaigh!” they returned, and together they marched down the hill, toward the beach. The sky was brilliant and blue, but the sea churned with a ferocity born of the North wind. Caden shed his cloak, and with it, the last vestiges of his civility.

His men all followed suit, wanting nothing to impede them in battle. Like their Viking predecessors, they welcomed the berserker lurking in their souls, each man prepared to defend this land and their people until their dying breath.

As they marched, they shouted war cries, and sliced their weapons through the air, calling down the fury of the Blue

Men. Their every step was made easier by the pitch of the land, spilling them down and down, like a deadly flow of molten silver.

From the highest vantage, atop Dunrònigh Keep, it appeared as though a human wave plunged toward the sea.

By contrast, the usurpers came trudging up the hillside, weighted in their every step, though greed and blood lust fueled their march.

“For Dunrònigh!” Caden shouted one more time.

“For Dunrònigh!” his men returned.

The sun glinted off helms and swords as the two forces collided.

The battle engaged. The roar was deafening, the clang of metal relentless. Blood sprayed the land, a macabre rain that covered every blade of grass and turned the hillside red.

Battling tirelessly, Caden deflected incoming blades, swinging his halberd like a man possessed, felling all who came within reach. The battle raged until all who remained were the fiercest of the lot.

Caden fought until his arms grew heavy. He fought until he felt cold metal slice through his shoulder. Pain shot like lightning through his brain. Black rage overtook him. If he failed today, Wee Davie would be the one to pay. But he would *not* fail his little brother.

When he might have taken yet another blow, Alec came to save the day. The tip of Alec’s sword entered the base of the man’s skull, protruding through his nostrils. The man fell lifeless to the ground, his blood mingling with those who’d fallen before him.

Caden roared his vengeance, raising his halberd yet again, finding strength in his brother’s fate. By God, they would cut him down limb for limb before he stopped. And yet, even as he raged, two more long boats arrived upon his shore. More warriors trampled up the hillside to join the battle.

Realizing how swiftly the tide could turn, Caden renewed himself, strengthening his resolve. With another war cry to the heavens, he moved through the melee, striking wherever he could, aiding his men one by one, and each life he took fed his madness.

Blood ran in rivulets down his arms, oiling his grip, but Caden embraced the axe as an extension of his being, swinging with all his fury and all his might. He felt another stab at his calf, and stumbled forward, howling in pain. The halberd turned before him, alive with a vengeance of its own.

The sun shone down, glinting off the metal of a helm, blinding him, but his halberd swept a deadly path before him, cutting through flesh and bone. He heard a sound that gave him pause, his brother's voice, but he was not quick enough to ken from whence it came.

Davie's blue eyes met his for the briefest instant—prideful in his accomplishment. He'd cut down the man who'd pierced Caden's leg, had stabbed him through the breast with their father's great sword, so the man fell short of his intended aim—Caden's heart. But Caden's halberd had no understanding of this accomplishment. His brother stood before him, grinning proudly, waiting for Caden's blessing... waiting for him to see that he was, indeed, now a man grown. *Waiting.*

Precious seconds passed in slow motion. An innocent to battle, Davie did not ken to step aside, and Caden could not stop the fateful swing of his axe. Once more, his halberd crushed through flesh and bone, severing Wee Davie's head in one fell swoop. His head flew. But Caden never saw it land. A curtain of black swept before his eyes, and he stood imprisoned in darkness, listening helplessly to the screams of men dying all about him.

