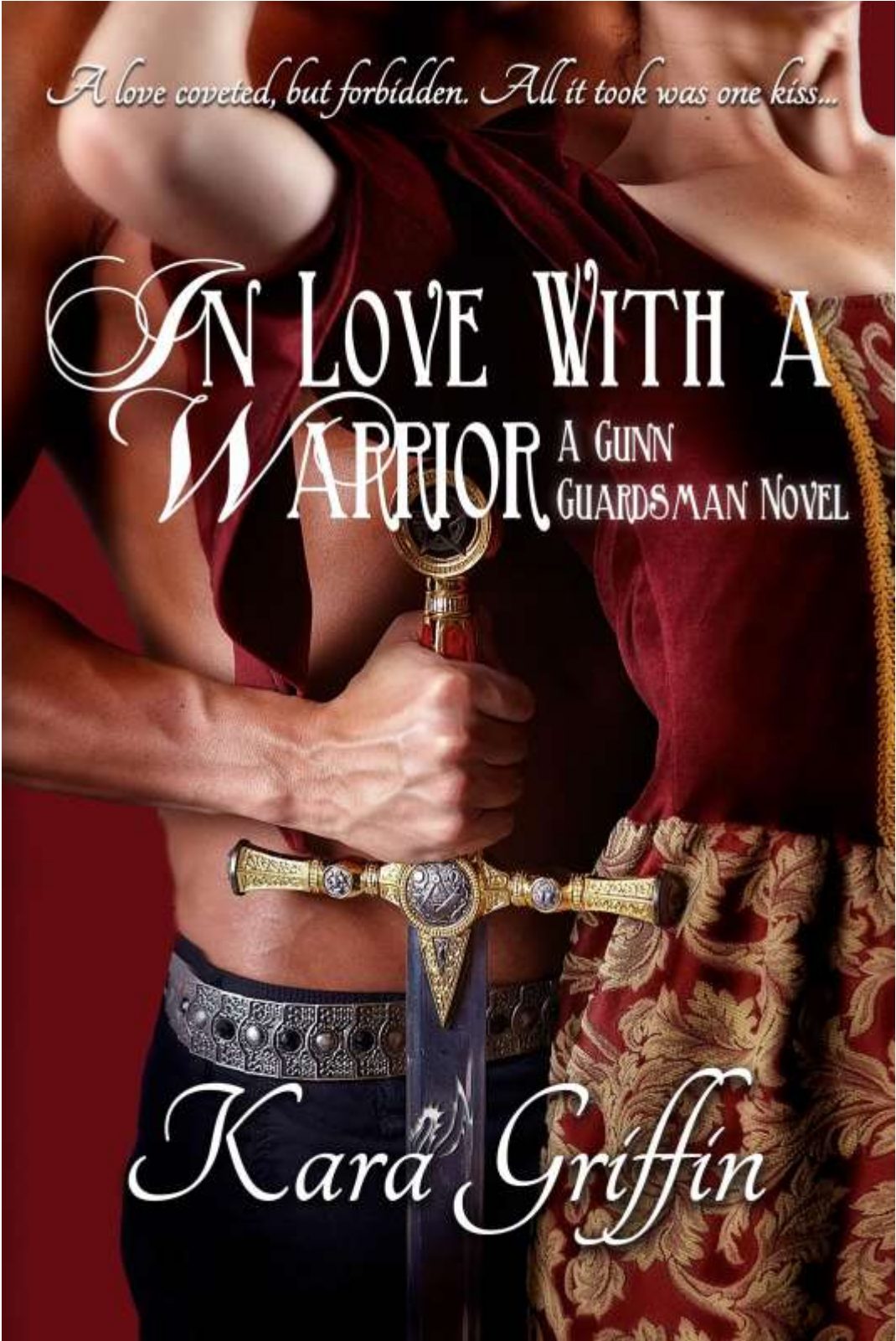




A love coveted, but forbidden. All it took was one kiss...

IN LOVE WITH A WARRIOR

A GUNN
GUARDSMAN NOVEL

Kara Griffin

IN LOVE WITH A WARRIOR

Gunn Guardsman - Book Four

KARA GRIFFIN

IN LOVE WITH A WARRIOR

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This book contains adult material, reader discretion advised.

DEDICATION

To my youngest daughter, ERW, the inspiration for Emlyn,
who never ceases to amaze me with her humor, talent, and craziness.

There is always some madness in love.

But there is also always some reason in madness. -Friedrich Nietzsche

IN LOVE WITH A WARRIOR

Besotted by the Princess

James Gunn knew his heart would forever be hers when she bested him in combat. Never had he met a formidable foe such as Emlyn. Maybe it was the way her body felt above his when she pinned him and he had no choice to submit to her.

A love coveted but forbidden

Princess Emlyn would allow no man to conquer her on the field, especially the arrogant, handsome Highlander. She wouldn't fall at his feet and worship him. He was Godlike in his appearance, strong, gallant, and a protector—all the things in a man she thought she despised. It was the sensual nights spent in his arms that swayed her desire.

All it took was one kiss

Neither could deny their attraction. When Emlyn is betrothed to her clan's enemy to save her people from being besieged, she demands James' aid. The only way to escape her ill-fated destiny and have the man of her dreams is to wage war and triumph. Not so easy a feat for a warrior such as Emlyn.

Chapter One

Gunn Keep, Northeast Scotland
Late July 1224

It didn't take long for James to get back to his routine on his return home from the border region. He awoke earlier than usual and set off to find embers before he'd take to the fields. When he finished dressing, he tucked the bound parchment pages into a protective pouch and put it inside his tunic for safekeeping. He headed to the keep's kitchen to collect items he needed for his task. Outside, James heard the boisterous voice of the keep's cook shout orders. Gell was an onerous man and only spoke softly to their laird's lady, Bree. That didn't stop James from entering the kitchens because the man's bellows were mostly bluster.

"Young James, I don't believe I've ever seen you this early in the morn." Gell stood beside a massive pot and held a large spoon in his burly hand. His whitened hair stuck out in various places and gave him a comical look.

James stood by the main worktable. "Gell, good day. Do you have the—?"

"It's been a long time since you came in here, but aye, I've saved the sticks for you. Over there, in the cup on the shelf." Gell returned his attention to his pot and dismissed him.

James reached for the cup and found five burnt sticks. They would do well for his purpose. He'd discovered burnt cinders and sticks could be used to draw on parchment. He liked to make images of wounds he tended. Only a handful of people knew his skill at medicinals and his secret ability. The more people who sought him, the busier he'd be.

"My thanks, Gell. These will do well." He added the sticks to the pouch and grabbed a large apple and a hunk of cheese before he headed to the training fields.

He hastened his steps and reached the sloping hillside. Below, on the vast field, Gunn soldiers assembled for the day's exercise. For the next two hours, he used his sword and tested his arm against the younger soldiers. His comrade, Duff, shouted at the unseasoned soldiers. Duff was the most formidable of their clan and oversaw the training. His impatience grew to ire, and he all but stomped from the field and called a rest.

James chuckled under his breath, for his laird should find someone else to train the younger lads. They would do better under the tutelage of someone who had patience. During their rest period, James sat beneath the large oak at the top of the training field. He pulled out his parchment and a stick and attempted to finish the sketch he'd begun the day before.

Gordy, who was recently promoted to commander-in-arms, and in charge of the gate watch sat nearby. James was proud of the young soldier for he'd matured and reached an age where he'd be of use to their clan. The lad demonstrated himself repeatedly and rewarded with a prosperous position.

“What are you drawing, James?” He leaned close and got a glimpse before James hid it. “Let me see it. Och, that’s gruesome.”

James looked at his sketch and nodded. “Aye, but it’s accurate.” The image was of a battle wound a soldier incurred the day before during training. His leg was split by the sharp edge of a claymore. The inside of his skin and muscle was visible. Such things interested him and he’d made sketches of them since he was a lad. Sometimes the images aided him when he was called upon to mend one of his comrades. He used the burnt stick to shade the sketch and finished it.

Duff returned and called their rest to an end. James was about to take to the field when his friend stopped him. “Grey wants to see you at the keep.”

“What does he want?” He sheathed his sword and swiped back his hair, for the day grew warm.

Duff scowled and muttered a blasphemy. “Cosh, what do I look like, your personal messenger? He didn’t say.”

James shoved him and hastened off before he retaliated. Along the path to the keep, James wondered what his laird wanted. They had yet to discuss when they would leave on the mission for the king. They’d received Alexander’s missive on Saint Swithin’s day, a few weeks before. He’d directed them to go to Wales of all places. James reached the keep within minutes and entered. He noticed the mien on his laird’s face when he got closer. Grey only wore the expression when something bothered him. It was an aspect none of the guardsmen wanted to see.

“Laird, Duff said you wanted to see me?”

“Aye, I did. We have a visitor.”

James stopped at the buttery and dunked a cup in the ale barrel before he approached and stood next to his longtime friend and laird. He waited for him to elaborate, but Grey didn’t seem to want to impart who the visitor was.

“Is it the king?” He appreciated his friend’s dislike for the king because their relationship was tedious. In the last years, Alexander caused discord.

“Nay, it’s your father. He wants you to come home.”

James could’ve been knocked on his arse. Joseph Gunn was a treasonous banshee. He wouldn’t forgive such a transgression. James suppressed his rage, but couldn’t refrain from sounding outraged. “He wants me to what?”

“He wants you to return home.” Grey leaned against the chair in the great hall and appeared as cross at the news as James was.

James couldn’t believe his father had the gall to show himself. The man tried to kill his own brother to overtake the clan. The clansmen carried the severity and remembrance of it in their hearts. Fortunately, James wasn’t held accountable for his father’s action. He’d been too young to remember the sordid details. Still, having one’s father be vindictive caused bitterness inside him.

The man’s nerve surpassed his transgression, for James would never agree to return to his land. Even if he hadn’t betrayed his clan, James wouldn’t consider abiding by his request.

“I expected this,” Grey said, “My father told me his brother vowed to come for you one day. We foresaw word from him. He waits outside.”

James smirked, for he never expected it. Throughout the years, he'd read the hastily worded missives demanding his return. But James never thought Joseph would come. Most of the elder Gunn clansmen hated his father. Joseph risked his life to step foot on Gunn land.

"He dares to come here after what he did? Laird, I refuse to see him. Send him away."

"I cannot. If you don't see him, he'll never leave. Your father is an obstinate man. He'll damn well camp on my doorstep until we face him. He's here," Grey said and set his hand on his shoulder. "Speak with him now and get the reunion over with. Do you want me to stay?"

He nodded but wasn't appeased. James waited at the end of the table and hastily glanced at him when he entered the room. Joseph walked with unreserved steps toward him as if his welcome would be joyous. It was far from that, and James kept his expression staid.

"Well, look at you, son. You've done a fine job at getting him ready, Laird Gunn. He looks to be strong enough to handle the tasks to farm my land." His father's words seemed prideful, and yet, James didn't appreciate his boast.

He remained silent. Farming. Hell, not as he lived and breathed. James hadn't trained for nearly twenty years at warfare and protection to tend livestock and fields. He envisioned standing amid a hill full of fat sheep and stepping in horse cosh... What a boring, dreadful existence.

James took in the view of the man he hadn't seen since he was the age of six. Not once had his father inquired of his health or welfare. Joseph gave him to his uncle to train and raise, but he'd been given no choice. Their laird, Mikal, Grey's father, demanded his word he'd never try to overtake the clan again. Along with his vow, he had to forfeit his son for his treachery.

As far as James was concerned, that was the end of his relations with his parents. His father stood tall as Laird Mikal had. He bore the same traits, light hair, lanky body-build, and blue eyes—from their Viking ancestors. His age showed in his drawn face and gray-streaked hair. James looked nothing like him with his dark hair and eyes. He stood taller than his father, which gave James a wee bit of mettle.

"James is not pleased with your request, Joseph." Grey motioned for him to be seated, but the man remained standing.

"You're not, James? You knew I would come, and your destiny was to take over the farmstead and toil the land. My brother became laird and I became a farmer. So goes the fate of a second son. I bid your return as my first-born son so you may take over. It is our custom."

The way the man spoke, commanded his acceptance, but James wasn't in a mood to placate him. He was his only son, then again, perhaps his parents had other children. But he wouldn't know such as he hadn't stepped foot on his land.

"Customs be damned. You gave up your rights as my father the day you left me. I'm a Gunn guardsman and will remain so until the day I die. I took an oath to my laird and I won't break it. Not for you, not for anyone." James kept his voice insistent so he wouldn't mistake his repute.

"What say you? You were brought here to toughen you up and to make you strong. You had no right to make an oath. The time since passed and your return is needed." His father ran his hands through his thick mane of graying hair. "You'll disobey your father?"

“The only persons I need to obey are my laird and my king. You speak false. You’re aware of why I was sent here and what purpose you were bid to bring me. I was given as barter to save your arse from the noose.”

His father stood a foot from him, his face reddened. He wasn’t sure if it was because due to embarrassment or ire. James readied for his strike, as angry as Joseph appeared. His nose flared and his eyebrows furrowed. James kept his hands at his side, knowing he wouldn’t retaliate should the man attack. If there was one thing James held above all else, it was honor. To raise a hand against one’s parent was a grievous sin. Regardless of the man’s actions, he was still his father. No matter how much he wanted to take retribution against his misdeeds, he resisted.

“I’m needed more by my laird. Our clan is called to war by our king, and I’ll not let my clansmen face the fracas without me. You’ve survived all these years without me. I won’t return to your farmstead.” James was about to dismiss him, but Grey blocked his withdrawal.

“Joseph, give James time to consider this. In time, he may be willing to give it a try. When we return from our mission, he can come for a stay, and you both can see how it goes.” Grey played devil’s advocate, and James raised a brow. For hell would meet heaven before he’d return to his father’s land and rule.

Joseph kicked the chair closest to him. “Your father, Grey, my own brother and laird, promised my son would be returned when I was ready. I’ve long since sent missives directing his return. Now you say nay?”

“My father never told me he gave permission for James to return. If you speak the truth—” Grey frowned fiercely when Joseph cut him off.

“I do. Why would I risk my own life if it was a falsehood? All the Gunns hate me. I probably had arrows pointed at my back on the way in here. I’ve accepted my kin abandoned me. But I will have the return of my son.” Joseph’s voice rose as his fury intensified.

Grey was about to retort when James held up his hand.

“I can speak for myself, Grey,” James said and took a step toward Joseph. “You dare speak of abandonment? You come here after years of negating me, sent me off when I was a lad to people I didn’t know... I didn’t trust you cared. And now, you demand I return? I made a life here, Joseph, one I’m pleased with. I won’t do as you bid. I’m certain you can find others to work your land.”

“You’re a stubborn man, James, and have obstinate Gunn blood running through you, as I have. I give you six months to return. If you don’t by then, you’ll never step foot on my land. You will forfeit your inheritance, for my lands are vast and my income great. There are others who would happily reap the benefit.”

“Your land is cursed with your foul deeds. They are welcome to it. Farewell, Joseph.” James trod from the hall and directly to the barracks. He grabbed his bow and would work-out to rid himself of the hostility of his father’s visit. He’d take to the quintains and use his arrows to calm. Focusing on targets would allow him to put the man’s audacious request from his mind.

He was about to exit the barracks when Grey and Duff entered. His laird blocked the doorway, as well as Duff’s large body. Their scowls lent to their rigid stance. Duff was the most intimidating of Grey’s guardsmen and one of James’ closest friends since they were lads. Though he respected

them both, he wouldn't have a qualm about taking his fist to them should they intervene in his quest to get to the fields. They gave no account for their demeanor, which bore as hostile as his.

"There's nothing to discuss," he said and hoped they'd move aside. But neither did.

"Aye, there is. I understand you don't wish to be a farmer, James, but you should at least go and see your father, on his own land. Allow him to make amends."

"I disagree," Duff said. "He left James to his own and committed a heinous act against his clan. Why should James allow him to make amends and aid him now? After all these years."

James nodded at Duff. "Exactly my thought, Duff. And can you honestly see me as a farmer? I wouldn't last a day."

Grey and Duff chuckled at his jest.

"Don't let your duty to me ruin this opportunity, James. I vow you're the most devoted of my guardsmen, but I wouldn't want that to stop you from going after your own pursuits."

"My pursuit is to get to the quintains and take target practice."

Grey scowled. "That's not what I mean."

James sighed. "I can't forgive my father for what he did. There's no honor in him." He leaned against the wall and hoped the conversation would end. His hand tightened on his sword, and considered hacking at a few opponents on the training field might alleviate his aggression.

His laird grew solemn. "What your father did... My father and I spoke at length about it. They were both angry and encouraged by their father to best each other. Neither were at fault for what happened. My grandfather was a harsh man and pitted them against each other. He did it on purpose. Those were troubled times. My father died before he made amends with his brother."

Duff folded his arms over his chest. "Every man has a say in his own actions, Laird. Your father was more than generous by gifting him those lands, lands the Gunns never reaped the benefit of. Joseph chose his path. Why should James be punished for it?"

James took a deep breath, for rehashing the past affected him. "Your father, Grey, spoke of it with me before he passed, too. I know what happened. Laird Mikal saved me from the stigma of being born from a traitor, and I'm grateful. It doesn't matter now. My father did what he did, and my involvement ended with him the day he dropped me off on your father's doorstep. Now let's forget this nonsense. It bothers me not."

"Nay? Seems to me it does bother you. But if you wish, I won't bring it up again."

"There's a war to ready for. How long before we leave?" James wasn't thrilled with news they received from their king, directing them to aid the Iorwerth clan. He didn't trust the Welshmen, for they were as passionate about battle as the Scots. They were as battle-weary as well. Warring with the English was a beguiling task, for they were often wily in their war practices, and the Scots liked nothing better than going against their enemy. At least they had that in common with Wales.

"We will leave in a few days for Sean's land. I'll meet with the king and find out exactly what his message entails." Grey moved aside, and Duff led the way from the barracks.

James recently returned from his comrade's keep near the border of England and Scotland. He'd gone with Sean to the Hume clan, where his comrade was given a substantial inheritance of lairdship. James stayed on after troubles arose and Sean needed him to protect his family.

All settled, he returned to his daily routine and life. Only the normalcy was intruded upon by his father's visit. Family matters were inconsequential to what they were about to face. James wanted to put it as far from his mind as he could, if only it was possible.

Chapter Two

Garth Celyn, House of Gwynedd
North Wales

With all the strength she could rally, Emlyn hacked and advanced on her adversary. He was the best of Gwynedd's soldiers, and he'd boasted he wouldn't hold back during their fray. Though they only tested their skills, they both gave all their effort and appeared to want to kill each other. Emlyn wouldn't be defeated. Rhun advanced and caused her to step back. Cheers rose around her when she deflected his strike and advanced upon him in return. Her breath rasped and her arm waned from the force of his sword, but she wouldn't concede to the tall, angry soldier. Her eyes took in the form of her father who watched the fight nearby. Emlyn had something to prove and she wouldn't give up until she accomplished her goal. This day was long in coming and she wouldn't disappoint.

She tired and needed to put an end to this round. It had gone on long enough for they'd been at it for nearly a half an hour. He continued to strike her sword and lent to her exertion and exhaustion for he was stronger than she. But Emlyn was quicker on her feet. She pulled a mace from her belt and threw it at Rhun's feet and caused him to sidestep and become unbalanced. Then she ran at him and forced him backward with the heels of her hands until he fell. The point of her sword pricked his neck.

"Do you give?"

"Aye," he mumbled. "Aye."

With his acceptance of defeat, she removed her sword and turned to face her father. The crowd cheered and then quieted when he stepped forward.

Her father, the mighty chieftain of their land, stood taller than most. He wore a simple bronzed crown on his head, which made him appear regal even though it wasn't ornate. Emlyn was pleased with the look of pride in his eyes. She needed his approval, but unfortunately for her, she'd been born female. The only reason she'd taken to arms at an early age was to win her father's favor. His prideful words were given to her brothers for their ability with the sword and bows, but he'd had no such words for her. Why would a great warrior chieftain be proud of a lass' ability to sew a tunic?

"Don't berate yourself, Rhun, for the lass has been under my guidance since she could walk. You've been beaten by my heart, and aye, should be as proud of her as I. All of you shall be proud of the lass' accomplishment this day." He set a hand down to help Rhun from the ground.

Rhun glared. "How can I be angry at being beaten by a lovely opponent? Next time, be sure to tie up that red fire, lass, for I could've gripped your hair and had you succumb."

Emlyn chortled, for he was a bear of a man, and almost as hairy. She scrunched her blue eyes at him and twitched her nose as she did when she teased. "You would've paid dearly if you tried to grip

my hair. But well done, Rhun, for you've given me a challenge this day. Shall we meet again on the morrow? Say around noon?"

Those around them laughed and Rhun sheathed his sword. "If that's your wish, fair Emlyn, I shall concede to it."

She was ready to call her training day an end and worked up an appetite. Hopefully, the kitchens still served supper for she'd missed the bell.

As she walked away, her father called. "Emlyn, I must speak with you, lass. Walk with me."

She found it peculiar he wanted to talk. He was usually too busy to spend time with her these days. War with the English had him tending to maps and strategizing against his latest enemy, the knave, William Marshall. She ambled beside him until they reached the wall. He continued to lead her along, and she tucked her sword away while she waited for him to speak.

"I received word Bevan died. I'm sorry, lass, for your betrothed is dead."

Emlyn's heart tensed and she looked into his eyes. "I'm...sorry. I assume he died at the battle?"

"Aye, my soldiers were tricked and led into a fray unarmed. Only a few men returned with the news. The rest perished. I must go, lass, and prepare for we must be ready to face Marshall's army if he comes. You understand?"

"Of course, Father." Emlyn pulled off her helmet and tucked it beneath her arm. Her wavy hair hung in damp ringlets. She'd gotten overheated from the workout and the news he imparted.

He stopped and set a gentle hand on her shoulder. "I know you weren't pleased with the betrothal. Are you upset at all by this news?"

Emlyn frowned and hadn't realized she wore an unaffected mien. "A warrior doesn't show emotion." That was the expected answer, and she wouldn't disappoint. She'd given him one of the primary rules of being a warrior. There were five in all and she'd remembered them by heart at the age of four summers.

Her father shook his head. "Aye, she does when the man she's betrothed to is killed. Warriors do hold emotion, lass, deep within. Sometimes emotional display is warranted."

"I'm sorry, Father. I am saddened by your news, even if I wasn't as pleased with the betrothal as Bevan. He was a good man, and if I had to marry, he would've suited. I'm sorry he died."

"He was honorable and worthy of your hand, which is the only reason I gave consent. I thought him capable of handling your...ways. Alas, it wasn't meant to be." He touched her hair and made off the keep.

Emlyn stood by the wall for a few minutes and watched the late-day activity. Several soldiers passed by on their way to the garrison. Maidens held baskets, filled to overflow with laundry. None of them looked her way. She wished she despaired at the news, but she wasn't. Relief overwhelmed her, for she was a warrior and warriors didn't love. Nor did they care about such matters as a betrothals, having bairns, and tending to a man's needs. There was far more excitement to life, especially when one had a talent with a sword.

There was no love in her heart for Bevan, even though he'd professed such to her. She considered she might come to love him in time. He was handsome and kind. A sorrow built in her stomach.

"There you are."

She turned at her friend's call. Branwyn appeared upset, and must've learned of her brother's death. "Good day, Bran. I was speaking with my father and—"

"I looked for you all day. You were supposed to help me with my wedding entails. You promised and because you didn't come, I had to put up with my mother and her ardent remarks. I have a headache to rival all headaches. You know how excited she gets."

Emlyn approached and wrapped her arms around her friend's body. "Forgive me, I'm sorry."

"And well you should be. I realize you enjoy training, but you shouldn't promise you'll come if you won't. This is the last time I'll believe you." Branwyn pulled away.

Emlyn watched her face for a sign of grief, but her friend gave none. She looked beautiful with her sable brown hair tied up in braids, and her deep brown eyes lent with a sparkle. *She doesn't know.*

"You're angry."

Branwyn set the back of her hand on her forehead and glared. "Aye, I am. You always make promises, but never keep them. I don't know why I bother being your friend. You would do well to befriend any of the soldiers, for you spend more time with them."

"I got distracted and forgot. Father gave me permission to fight Rhun, and you know how much I've wanted to test my skill against him."

Branwyn grinned. "And did you at least win?"

She nodded. Emlyn tensed for she didn't want to tell her of Bevan's death. It would wound her friend, and she didn't want to bring her despair. Especially given she'd already broken a promise to her this day.

"I shall go home with you and spend the night. You can tell me all about your wedding feast plans and we shall have a wonderful time." But it wasn't to be, because as soon as her friend reached home, the news would be given, and their night wouldn't be spent in merry leisure.

"That sounds like a fair idea. I hardly see you since you've been on the field more than in the keep. I suppose your father is pleased."

"I believe he is. He praised me and I thought never to hear him do so." She tried to hide the smile at her father's pride, knowing the dismay her friend was about to encounter.

"And I suspect your mother full of wrath?"

"She's always full of ire no matter what I do to please her." But she didn't want to speak of her parents. Emlyn's mouth turned down at the thought of Bevan being gone.

When she'd been betrothed to him, Branwyn was delighted. It wasn't every day your dearest friend would wed your brother. And they'd made plans to be near each other which was the reason her friend agreed to be betrothed to Cranog. He lived near Bevan's cottage and they were comrades. Much to Emlyn's dismay, Branwyn had their entire lives planned, down to what they'd name their children.

"You're brave to use the sword and go against men. I wouldn't have the courage to do so."

Emlyn clasped her hand and changed the subject. She didn't like to discuss warrior pursuits with Branwyn. Her friend never understood her desire. "I hope your mother made something delicious for supper, for I'm hungry enough to eat an entire roe."

"You probably could. Where do you put it? Your body couldn't hold that amount of food." Branwyn laughed and walked beside her.

“Training helps keep me slender, Bran, and hungry, too.”

They reached the cottage and before they entered, sounds of cries came from within. Voices rose in despair from Bran’s brother and father.

Emlyn stopped and tucked her arm with her friend’s. “You shouldn’t go in. Come away.”

“Why? I want to find out why my mother is crying. Something is wrong. I’ve never heard such pitiful weeping from her.” Branwyn dislodged her arm and opened the door.

She followed and hoped her friend’s heart wasn’t broken. Emlyn stood behind Branwyn and listened to the news being given. Branwyn’s mother wept and was comforted by her youngest son. Her father spoke the news bluntly, and Emlyn regretted not telling her the sorrowful news. She would’ve spoken more gently.

“Nay, I won’t believe it.” Branwyn, without a glance to anyone, ran from the cottage.

Emlyn faced her friend’s parents. “I’m sorry for your loss.” She followed Branwyn and left.

When she exited the cottage, her friend was nowhere in sight. Emlyn knew all her hiding places and went in search of her. She looked everywhere until one place remained. As she approached the waterfall, she spotted Branwyn on the grass by the bank of the lake. Without saying a word, she sat beside her and took her hand. Her clasp bespoke her sorrow.

“You knew, didn’t you?”

She nodded but remained silent.

Her friend’s brows furrowed and her eyes darkened. “Why did you not speak of it? How could you let me go in there, knowing what they would tell me?” Branwyn twisted her hand until she released her.

“I’m sorry, Bran. I didn’t want to cause your misery.” Emlyn kept her eyes on the water’s gentle waves. The noise of the water hitting the surface usually soothed her, but not this day.

“My misery? But you aren’t heartbroken, are you? You never wanted to marry my brother, and now, your fondest wish came true. I vow I shan’t speak to you ever again.”

Emlyn felt wretched because even though she’d wished not to wed Bevan, she didn’t wish any ill upon him.

“You’ve nothing to say? No apologies?”

She fisted her hands in rejection of her friend’s hurtful words. “I have nothing to apologize for. I didn’t kill him. Nor did I wish for his death. You make it sound as if I’m at fault. He died in battle, Bran, like many men.”

Branwyn stood. “Aye, you’re right. Now you’re free to do your will. Practice swords with the men. Act as if you have a right to be on the field with them. I care not. If your father allows you to go to war with his soldiers, you’ll end up dead like Bevan.” She marched off and didn’t give Emlyn a chance to retort.

Emlyn sat by the waterfall, miserable and full of woe. She hated being the cause of her friend’s dismay, even if indirectly. Although her friend was distraught and didn’t mean a word of which she spoke. She would visit Branwyn later after she had time to calm.

When Emlyn reached the keep, she tried to avoid seeing her mother, but as with everything this day, she was thwarted. Her mother stood near the entrance in wait for her.

“I heard what you did this day and I’m not pleased.”

Emlyn recognized the disgruntlement on her mother's lovely face. She wouldn't speak for she'd be punished if she did.

"I forbade you to fight with your father's men, and you disobey me yet again. And now the only thing that consoled me has been ripped away. Your betrothed is dead and you're probably well pleased with yourself."

"Mother, I'm not pleased, but saddened at the news."

Her mother put her hands on her hips and flattened the material of her gown against her body. She was in a mood and all Emlyn thought of was escaping.

"We shall add that falsehood to the list of grievances you'll speak with the priest. Aye, for disobeying me, you will spend the morrow on your knees and pray for your soul's redemption. Why can you not do as I ask?"

"I don't need redemption, Mother. Why does everyone accuse me of Bevan's death? I had nothing to do with it. I wasn't there. He died in battle. I wish everyone would leave me be." Emlyn marched away with angry steps. She made certain her mother heard the thumping of her feet on the wooden stairs and didn't give a care whether it childish or not.

When she entered her chamber, she found herself alone. She was grateful her sisters weren't in their bedchamber. Emlyn reached for a pillow and wept. She wept for the sorrow of Bevan's death, for her friend's anger toward her, and her mother's disapproval. Nothing had gone right this day except for the earlier training session, which was the only thing that brought her joy. If only she could focus on battle tactics and not worry over the insignificant matters of womanhood, she'd be the merriest of all the Iorwerths.

Chapter Three

The Gunn clan wanted peace and to exist without being embroiled in King Alexander's political endeavors. Since the king's missive instructed his laird take soldiers to aid the Wales warlord, Llywelyn Iorwerth, the followers trained day and night. All suspected the implication of being given a directive from the king.

James returned from the Highlands to his friend's holding by the English border only a sennight prior. There, they awaited Grey's return from meeting with the king. Before they would engage with the rest of the armies in mid-August, they were given time to get their affairs in order. He didn't have affairs, but there was a woman he wanted to say farewell to. He waited until most sought their beds before he trekked to the village where the healer lived. None knew of their liaison, and that's exactly how James wanted it.

The woman was feared by the clan, and short of their diversions in bed, they didn't get along. When he'd met Muriel, she abhorred his medicinal practices and scoffed whenever he recommended a different way of healing. The woman was of an ancient culture whose practices bordered on barbaric which had been handed down from generations. He was more astute in his thinking and discerned there were better ways to heal people.

In battle, he tended a wound or two. How many times had they quarreled about a certain remedy, he wasn't certain and lost count. He didn't mind their differences when it came to medicinals, because it was in bed where they were compatible. And Muriel damn sure amused him. James entered the cottage quietly so he wouldn't disturb her. She stood by the hearth and her red hair glowed from the candles lit within the small confines of the cottage.

"The rumor wasn't false, you returned," she called over her shoulder and continued to focus on her task. "I heard you came back. What took you long to come?"

"I had duties, but I'm here at last." He approached the table where a good number of volumes were left open. James spied the words before she banged the tomb closed. She never allowed him to read the ancient text.

"Not for your eyes."

He would've laughed, but she remained serious. James was comfortable in her abode and made himself at home. Hastily, he removed his boot and garments. He kept his braises on, not because he was modest, but Muriel worked and she didn't like distractions. He'd keep the disturbance to a minimum. The woman could be a harridan when annoyed. James closed his eyes to rest until she joined him in bed.

Before he took rest, he noticed she mixed something. "What are you concocting?" It was rare she used herbs, for she wasn't one to use them, and then only in dire situations. He'd caught her a few times and when he'd asked about the remedy, she rebuked his interest. James reasoned she practiced the dark magic of her ancestors, and wouldn't judge her.

She didn't look up when she answered, "A salve for the warriors. Soldiers came throughout the day with bruises and abrasions. Training must be serious for them to inflict wounds on each other."

"Aye, we need to strengthen our skills. I have a wound you can try it on."

When she inspected his cut, she gasped. "You should've come to see me. It'll get infected."

James shrugged. "It's a paltry cut, Muriel, no need for ministrations."

Duff, his opponent on the field, was intent to test his skill to the limit. If Sean hadn't called him, he would've paid attention, and thwarted his attack. He wanted to sketch the wound in his parchments, but it was at an inaccessible spot behind his bicep.

"Don't move." She used her fingers to scoop salve from the bowl. With a gentleness he didn't know she possessed, she applied it to the four-inch gash on his arm.

"Might need the needle."

He shook his head. "It's not deep. And besides, your hands shake too much." James grinned for he hoped she wouldn't be irked by his jest.

"They only shake around you. Lie on your stomach and let it dry," she ordered. She went back to her chore and measured herbs and tapped them into the bowls to make more salve.

James crawled upon the small bed and settled on his stomach, careful not to disturb the salve on his arm. With his eyes closed, he listened to her move about the cottage. After a long day of training, he wanted to sleep and needed to get as much rest as he could. His laird returned from his meeting, and soon they would depart. Before he left for war, James needed to say farewell.

When the excursion ended, he wouldn't return to the border. He belonged on Gunn land and needed his position as guardsman. If his father had his way, he'd be knee-deep in manure. James was in an anomalous mood all day about his father's request. His honor wouldn't allow him to reject his father's legacy outright. Since his father's visit, he'd been unable to put it from his mind, and regretted not hearing his father's side of the confrontation.

Once he returned to the north, he wouldn't see Muriel again unless he visited Sean. It was unlikely since he had a position of esteem within his clan and was needed there. And if he returned to his father's lands, he'd rarely see the Gunns. Until he reached a decision, there was no sense to ruminate about it. He wanted to focus on his last night with Muriel and then war. After waiting for hours for her to finish her tasks, she joined him. The midnight hour passed and the window casement appeared dark.

The bed groaned with her weight. Her hands stroked his aching muscles. When her spry fingers pressed his shoulders, he moaned. "You're quiet this eve. Is there a reason?"

James rolled onto his back and noticed her serious expression. "Mayhap there's a reason." As much as he wanted to speak of his intention, her bonny face and exposed breasts distracted him.

"What might this reason be?"

James groaned as her hands kneaded his sore muscles on his chest. "My departure."

"You leave again? You've only come."

"We are headed to war." James drew a sigh. "When it's finished, I won't return here."

She settled back against the wall. "I wish you safe travels and a joyful life."

“You’re angry.” James grunted at the thought he’d angered her. He disliked causing a woman ire, for there was too much pleasure to be had. And a cross woman was unpredictable. He learned that from experience.

She realized she’d not see him again, and regrettably, he didn’t want to hurt her. He would have ended their liaison regardless of the fact he was off to war.

“I mean it, I want you to be content, and you’re not here, even if you pretend.” She trailed a finger over his chest and smoothed her palm over his abdomen.

“I’m pleased with you, but aye, you’re right. This is not my home, not where I belong, and there’s no sense of purpose here.” James closed his eyes, he was tired, but he wouldn’t seek sleep yet. It was the last night she’d lie in his arms.

“My bed is not purpose enough,” Muriel said in astound. “I never should have allowed you in my bed. Go then, for you will rue the day you crossed my path.”

“You know I live far from here and I’d leave eventually. I thought we had an understanding. I never promised...” James frowned at her disheartened words. Would he rue the day? He already regretted it.

She pressed the tips of her fingers against her forehead. “You’re pleased to leave. That’s what bothers me.”

“I’m not pleased, but what we shared was just a...” He couldn’t continue when her eyes scrunched in abhorrence of what he was about to say.

“Leave now.” She flicked her hand as if he was nothing but a nuisance.

“I wanted to stay with you on our last night together. Will you deny me the pleasure?” James should’ve discerned she’d be spiteful.

Muriel retreated from the bed. Her naked body on display. “You’ll gain no pleasure from me. Be gone. But before you go,” she said and waved her hands about, “I will speak these words—*diligo mos victum quod evinco vos*.”

“What are you saying?”

“Love will conquer and defeat you. One day you’ll meet a woman who will be what your heart desires, but you shan’t have her. For there will be no love for you, James Gunn.” Muriel laughed derisively. She tugged on a robe and covered up her lovely body.

James lay back, dumbfounded by her words. “Are you hexing me? Aye, I always thought you were a witch.” He closed his mouth because he didn’t want to cause her affront. Too late. Some women took offense being called a witch. Who knew what such a woman was capable of? He didn’t want to upset her and planned a night far different. All he wanted was to spend his last night in pleasure and she ruined it.

“I promise you, James. You won’t be content. If I cannot have you none shall.” She raised her voice and practically shouted.

James detested anger in a woman, and it was the last thing he expected. “Muriel, be calm. I don’t mean to upset you or hurt you.”

She scoffed. “I see her, aye, and if you think for one moment you’ll be content, you will be duped. She’ll cause you nothing but anguish. Then you shall know what it’s like to be rejected.”

He got off the bed and tugged on his garments and boots. "Who do you see? What are you speaking about?" James made little sense of her words.

"Her, the love of your life. She will vex you and I shall care not."

James reached for her, but she pulled away. "Who do you speak of? There's no one I care for except you. But we are ill-fated to be together."

"Ever since you returned from the north, I sensed it. You would rather be anywhere but here, hence your delay in coming to me. I bid you farewell." She reached the door and opened it.

Before James reached the exit, he caressed her cheek. "I'm sorry, lovely. It wasn't intention to upset you. I had a duty which was kept me away. But I hope you forgive me." He lifted a tress of her red hair and set it upon her lovely bosom. He didn't wish for an emotional farewell, but that's exactly what he got. "Farewell, my bonny lady."

When James exited the cottage, the door slammed behind him. He bumped into Sean, who shouted his name. Near dawn, his friend spoke with vigor, loud enough to wake the dead. James muttered a curse under his breath, for his friend's lack of manners. "Cosh, Sean, people are sleeping. You'll awaken your entire clan with your shout. How'd you find me?" James grumbled.

"I figured it out. Aye, you tried to be elusive, my friend, but I saw the way you'd looked at Muriel." Sean raised a brow. "How long has this been going on? Ah, never mind. We must hasten." He chuckled loud enough to wake those in the adjacent cottages. "Best get your arse moving. Grey wants to meet when the cocks crow."

"God Almighty, has he no sense? Just because he leaves his bed when it is still dark, doesn't mean we should. Why does he want to meet this early?"

James led the way and shoved Sean's shoulder irritably when he passed. His friend had an annoying smirk on his face and it bothered him for he wasn't cheerful in the morning regardless of what time he rose. And this night he hadn't slept a wink.

"What'd you do that for?"

"For getting me at this God-forsaking hour. I got no sleep, damnation."

Sean bellowed in laughter. "Nay, none? Damn me, I didn't deem Muriel had it in her. I'd think she'd allow you an hour's reprieve."

James found his jest not to his liking and gave him a glare to attest to it. "Do we leave this day? What did Grey say about his meeting with the king?"

Sean took a quick pace and avoided answering him. James unsheathed his sword and pointed it outward to stop his friend.

"Tell me... What did he say?"

"He said nothing. Grey roused me and my entire household with his yells. He even woke Trudy. Now the wee mite is running around the hall. God help me, I hope she's pestering Grey, he deserves it. Frances gave him a what-for and I got the hell out of there. I should murder him, for Frances hasn't been well, and I let her sleep in. The bairn sits heavily in her belly."

James laughed. Trudy, Sean's daughter, was an adorable lass, but she liked to talk and wouldn't relent unless you found food to quiet her. She'd be a stuffed goose by the time she reached the age of ten. He could've laughed at his thought. He was concerned for Frances since she'd lost a bairn before and her recent pregnancy worried Sean.

“Grey didn’t say why he wanted us there at this hour?”

Sean shook his head. “Nay, all he said was get everyone, and something about a meeting when the cocks crow.” He bellowed a laugh. “I don’t allow the nasty, noisy birds within the castle’s walls.”

James didn’t find his friend’s comment the least bit humorous. They reached the keep and were the last to arrive. Besides him and Sean, the rest sat around the long table and looked as put-out as he was. Grey, Duff, and Benson, the keep’s commander-in-arms, and other seasoned soldiers stared at each other. He gave a quick glance to his close comrade, Colm, who was a guardsman like himself. His friend gave nothing away and returned his gaze with a raised brow.

James took a seat opposite of Grey. “Laird, you got us all out of bed, you mind telling us why?”

A trencher sat before him, but James couldn’t think of eating at a time like this. He waited impatiently for the news which he dreaded. They’d be sent to war.

“James, eat. Then we’ll have our discussion. I’ll need everyone’s full attention when I speak.”

But James wouldn’t consider touching the trencher laden with delicious smelling food for he’d lost his appetite. He put his encounter with Muriel from his mind and concentrated on the matter at hand. Discontent to wait, he glared at his laird.

Grey stared back as he ate his fill. “Tell Mistress Maddie, Sean, the meal was delicious.”

Mistress Maddie, the keep’s cook, was fair and rivaled Grey’s wife at making foodstuff. James was ensnared by the scents wafted to him, and his appetite returned. He picked a few bites from his trencher.

Sean nodded and pushed his trencher forward. Likewise, when everyone else finished, they did the same. Grey didn’t appear to want to begin the discussion so James took it upon himself to get him started.

“What did the king say?”

“I met with Alexander and he explained Llywelyn’s need. His men were killed when a truce had been called. We must travel to Snowdonia.”

Sean leaned forward. “How many men will we take? I want to leave enough behind to see to my family’s safety. After this past year, I won’t have Frances living in fear.”

James grunted in agreement. After they’d dispatched the knave who tormented Frances and killed several lassies in these parts, Sean and most of the Hume clan distrusted others. Sean kept his fortification secure regardless the madman was caught and killed.

“We’ll need every available man.”

“We’re to war?” Colm asked.

“Not exactly,” Grey said and leaned back. When they looked at him expectantly, he let out an exasperated breath. “When I met Alexander, he bid me to make a stop before I returned here. I was to parlay with Marshall to discuss his betrayal, and to see if we could get him to cease his attacks. I met with Donal, and he and his soldiers went with me.”

James frowned and didn’t like that Grey called on Donal Ross to accompany him. It meant tempers flared. Donal, the chieftain of their neighboring clan was often called upon by their king to soothe riled warlords.

“Did you meet with Marshall?” James pounded his fist on the table, certain his laird stalled. His impatience grew tenfold during the conversation, and it seemed Grey didn’t want to expound.

“We caught up with Marshall by the border. He gave his terms of withdrawal. He will desist on attacking Llywelyn’s fiefs, and we might thwart a war if we convince Llywelyn to wed his daughter to Marshall.”

Why Grey looked pointedly at him, James couldn’t fathom why or be insolent to question his laird. For several seconds, a nerve-wracked silence came. James scowled at the thought the lass would be a pawn. Such a thing never turned out well. From what he’d heard of Marshall, the lass was in for a harsh life if she lasted long in his care.

“Cosh, Llywelyn won’t agree. I trust he enjoys his quarrel with Marshall to concede. Which daughter?” Sean asked.

“The one named Emlyn. He’ll not accept any other. We’ll present the offer and if Llywelyn accepts, we’ll escort the lass and peace will reign.”

James laughed mockingly. “Peace my arse. I doubt those two will ever come to peace. Do you deem this treaty and marriage pact will end years of fighting? Each has taken many fiefs in the last year alone...”

Duff slammed his cup on the table. “I agree with James. News always reaches us about their squabbles. I doubt it, too. Marshall wants Llywelyn’s lands and won’t cease his marauding until he takes them.”

“And Llywelyn may not want to sacrifice his daughter,” Sean said.

Grey shook his head. “We must hold hope he does. Otherwise, we’ll be drawn into their fray. I won’t lose any of my clan, or yours, Sean, for their petty causes.”

A rock sat in James’ stomach at the news. “What of Kenneth? Will he join us?” James hoped not. They’d been raised with Kenneth and entered training at the same time. Kenneth became laird of his clan, the McInnish, and had a vast amount of land and clan to see to. He had no time to care for such matters as Llywelyn’s or the king’s. Then James reconsidered for Kenneth’s clan wasn’t too far from the land being fought over. If Marshall won Iorwerth’s lands, he’d be close to McInnish land, and might start a campaign against his comrade. Unless they stopped Marshall, England would consume all of Scotland and Wales.

Grey didn’t look at him when he answered, “I sent word to Kenneth to meet us near the border where we’ll camp. It made little sense for him to travel here when he’s a stone’s throw from Llywelyn’s land.”

Sean tossed a hunk of bread on his trencher in disgust. “We’re to be glorified matchmakers then?”

Grey rubbed his eyes and was as bleary and apprehensive as they. “Seems so.”

James hoped Llywelyn agreed to the betrothal. The last thing the Gunns wanted was to insert themselves in a war which had no bearing on their lives.

“If Llywelyn doesn’t agree to send his lass,” Grey said and again looked at him as if he tried to say something without saying it. “We will to war. At least Llywelyn is used to warfare and his men well trained. Marshall hasn’t fought his full army and only besieges his smaller fiefs. I’m not sure what to expect when their armies clash. Aye, we might battle for our lives.”

Everyone around the table became staid then for no one wanted to voice what they were thinking. After a few minutes of silence, Grey said, "You've been given ample time to take care of your matters. We'll depart in an hour." Their laird left the hall and them to their trepidation.

James walked from the keep with Colm, who like Sean, was due to have his first bairn in the spring. He couldn't fathom the unease Colm or Sean must feel. Though they'd put their lives on the line for causes as insignificant, James wouldn't want to trek off to Wales to war if he was in their position. They started their families and had pregnant wives to protect.

He ambled leisurely to the barracks to collect his belongings and grabbed his bow and the arrows he'd carefully carved. Each arrow was identical and smooth as a bairn's cheek. He'd taken pride in his talent and enjoyed crafting them. He carried the armful of weapons, bows, and other belongings, and went to put them in the large satchel secured to his saddle. With his arms full, he dropped them to the ground. James opened his satchel to make room for the items.

Oran, his warhorse, snickered a greeting. The horse tossed his head and lifted his hooves in excitement. "Easy, lad, here you are." James took a parsnip from his satchel and held to his steed.

"I deem the horse is in love with you," Colm said and laughed raucously.

James disregarded his friend's jest. He set about packing the items he wanted to take. Carefully, he picked the items from the ground next to his warhorse and shoved inside: several daggers of varying sizes, a mace whose points needed sharpening, two axes, and the copious amount of arrows. Then he shoved in a few extra tartans and two tunics. Just about all of which he possessed.

Colm stood beside his warhorse and when his horse nipped at him, he hastened back. "I vow your horse hates everyone but you."

"Aye, it's the only reason Kenneth returned him." James grunted for his friend needed a horse when his perished from sickness, and he'd taken his warhorse. It didn't take long for his horse's return for he was an ornery beast and only a few handled him. He continued to place the items inside his satchel and gave his horse another parsnip in reward for his good behavior.

"Damn me, James, you're bringing enough weapons to be a one-man army."

"I like to be prepared."

Colm laughed. "Lend me a few of your arrows. You make the best. I vow mine are cosh. My arrows never fly straight and I have to compensate my aim."

James grinned for that was true. Colm was the worse when it came to carving wood. His arrows always ended up misshaped or uneven and flew off-kilter. He handed Colm a handful. "Be careful with those. They're dipped in monkshood and are deadly if the poison gets on your skin."

Colm bellowed a curse and handed them back. "Cosh, never mind, James, my arrows will do."

"You couldn't hit the backside of a barn or a horse's arse with yours," James jested.

Colm raised his brows. "Nay, I cannot, but I can use this," he said and unsheathed his sword and cut it through the air.

"Don't be boastful. Arrows are more effective when your enemy is afar," James said pointedly, "where your sword can't reach."

"Aye? That's when your feet come in."

James shook his head at Colm's conjecture. He'd have to watch his friend's arse on this journey.