



Dunnottar Castle

Dunnottar Castle appeared through the early morning twilight like a dark spectre rising out of the mist. Staring at the wondrous sight, Skye watched on in utter amazement as the morning fog clung to the gently rolling hills abutting a series of cliffs overlooking the German Sea. Relief eased her weary features as her rapt stare took in the upper ramparts—a stark relief against the pale blue sky of a new day.

Perched high on a jut of rock nestled between two coves, Dunnottar's walls dared anyone to storm its daunting approach. Short of possessing the ability to fly, she didn't envy an enemy attempting to breach its walls. Not a lass of the world, especially when it came to warfare, she imagined the loss of life an army would suffer when it broke against

the cliffsides warding the glorious stronghold would be significant.

Leaving the false safety of the tall grass, she and Amberleen took a moment to scan their surroundings before meandering in a dreamlike daze along the dirt road that dropped to the sea below—a treacherous approach to the bastion they had been seeking for the better part of three weeks.

The early days after crossing to the mainland had been fraught with danger. How Ber had managed to half carry her up the slopes they had traversed while keeping them clear of the witch hunt was a mystery, but for some reason, after an initial foray of redcoats scouring the hills around them, the pursuit had fallen away, appearing to have turned their attention northward. Thankful for whatever diverted the hunters, they had made a slow and torturous trek across the rugged interior virtually unmolested.

Their path thwarted by towering highlands, she thought she would die long before they reached their destination. But Ber had refused to allow that to happen. Hungry and exhausted, the heart of the Irish woman must surely have been forged from iron. Through it all, Ber never complained—not once giving in to the deepening despair that had plagued their lives over the last few months.

For Skye, their long journey consisted of agonizing slogging, drifting in and out of a fevered stupor and muttering that they would never make it. But Ber had persisted, insisting that just one more day and things would get better.

One day had turned into two. Two turned into three, and three into a week, and then a fortnight and more.

Somehow, through it all, Ber's stubborn refusal to accept defeat had carried them through the many dark hours of self reproach.

Not sure when it had happened, likely after passing what Ber claimed was the source of Loch Ness, Skye's fever had broken, taking with it the worst of the lethargy that had afflicted her. Still in considerable pain, her spirits had soared, and because of her improved attitude, their pace improved as well.

Yesterday, as the sun went down over the dirt roadway, they came across a farmer who had agreed to let them sleep in his barn to escape the cold. While showing them where to settle in for the night, he off-handedly mentioned the unrest that had taken hold of the region over the last few days, asking pointedly if they travelled with anyone else.

The farmer claimed the sight of king's men wasn't odd by any stretch of the imagination in these parts, but these particular redcoats were searching for three wayward witches, a cannibal, and a warlock.

After eyeing them suspiciously, he had concluded Amberleen and Skye couldn't be the subjects of the witch hunt as there were only two of them.

Even so, Amberleen had roused them before the dawn. Deciding greater stealth was in order because of what the farmer had related, they avoided the road but kept it in sight as they made their way to the coast.

It was a profound relief when the castle came into view. Despite everything they had endured, the weather, the unforgiving terrain, and Skye's injuries, they had made it across Scotland. Standing on the edge of a steep cliff, they took a moment to savour their accomplishment.

Emotions running wild, their bodies physically spent, to actually see the castle with their own eyes instilled a surge

of energy into their step, but as they rounded the cove to rejoin the road, their jubilation slipped away.



The castle road dropped precariously toward the shoreline far below, winding behind the bulk of the promontory that faced them from across the gap as it jutted into the sea.

“Bugger me,” Amberleen said as she draped an arm over Skye’s shoulder and hung there. “We dragged our sorry arses all this way only t’ be flagged by the prospect o’ traversin’ that. Ye sure it’s the castle we’re lookin’ for?”

Skye smiled. Ber was joking, but the realization that the castle was so close, and yet, seemingly so far away, was a cruel fate. She lifted her shoulder to support her friend. It was time she returned the favour and helped pull her weight. “Aye. Can you not see the stag on the pennant flapping above the keep?”

Amberleen squinted as she stared at the fortress across the way. Without a word, she shook her head.

Ignoring the pain of ribs that refused to heal, Skye urged Amberleen down the embankment; their trek serenaded by the incessant squawk of sea birds drifting in lazy circles over the water ahead.

The German Sea lapped at the shores of the coves on either side as the roadway levelled out near the base of the wall of exposed rock looming overhead to their right.

Rather than being relieved, Skye gasped as the clip-clop of hooves rose above the wind. Before Skye came to terms with the rising din, a small party of horsemen rounded the base of the promontory ahead.

A cold shiver wracked her body. It wasn't the horsemen's sudden appearance that startled her, but redcoats riding among the group that set her heart racing.

Acting on instinct, she grabbed Amberleen's arm and started to pull her back the way they had come, but as she looked up the intimidating slope to the mainland, her heart sank.

Breasting the top of the roadway, a contingent of redcoats came into view—pausing at the brink of the defile as if waiting for the riders from the castle.

Skye searched their surroundings for an escape route. The drop on the southern bank appeared more dangerous than the steep slope that fell away to the northern cove. Her foot suspended in the air, she was about to take the first step when it felt like the life had been sucked out of her. Ascending toward them from the rocky beach below was a dark-haired man dressed in red, a thick, ruffled collar bobbing on his shoulders as he caught sight of them.

Kind, brown eyes regarded them as he climbed. "Good day, ladies. A bonnie morn to be making your acquaintance, I'm sure."

Skye's mouth went dry. Lowering her eyes as the man came up to them, she considered the knife Mum had given her back in Kyleakin, but the fact that the man's red attire differed from the uniforms worn by the king's men dissuaded her. Having no idea who he might be, she said softly, hoping she had the right of it, "M'lord."

“George Keith,” the man said confidently; black beard manicured like a royal garden. “Fourth Earl Marischal at your service.”

Skye had no idea what an Earl Marischal was, but it sounded important. Before she could ask, the riders from the castle commanded his attention.

The most arrogant appearing red coat jockeyed his horse close, tilting his head as he scrutinized the Earl and his new companions—his shrewd gaze lingering on Amberleen. “And who have we here?”

Unphased by the king’s man’s air of righteousness, George Keith said, “I haven’t gotten to that yet. We’ve only just met.”

“That one,” the king’s man nodded at Amberleen, “matches the description of the one we’re looking for.”

“Curious,” George said with a finger on his chin. “Good King James knows I’m working on a marriage arrangement abroad. Has he changed his mind?”

The king’s man frowned and shook his head. “The king ain’t looking to bed this one. As you well know, the Kincaid has us scouring the countryside for three witches who escaped on the Isle of Skye.”

George’s demeanour hardened. “Is that so?”

“Aye, Earl Marischal. The Kincaid will be grateful to get his hands on them.”

“Indeed,” George said, giving Amberleen and Skye a once over before scanning the area. “I only see two.”

“Two witches matching their description were seen crossing at Kyleakin. Of the third witch, I never heard tell of her whereabouts before setting out to chase the likes of the ones who stand before you.”

Short-bearded chin in hand, George considered Skye and Amberleen, but his question was directed at the king's man. "From Kyleakin, you say?"

Sensing Amberleen was about to do something irrational and put an end to the doubt regarding their identity, something Mum had said on the morning of their escape came back to her. On impulse, her free hand seized Earl Marischal's forearm. "In Kyleakin, truth conquers."

George's eyes widened. Pulling free of her grasp, he commanded, "Seize them!"