

**THE THREEFOLD DEATH**

**Asun Álvarez**

## **CAST OF CHARACTERS**

### ***THE HUMANS***

Martín de Salas, a Spanish survivor of the 1588 Armada, stranded on the West Coast of Ireland.

### **MacClancy**

Chieftain MacClancy, a local minor lord.

Domhnall, an Irish judge or brehon.

Gráinne, his widowed sister.

### **O'Rourke**

Brian na Múrtha O'Rourke, chieftain MacClancy's overlord.

Eoghan and Brian Óg, his sons.

Cathal Dubh, a member of O'Rourke's war party.

### **O'Connor Sligo**

O'Connor, tanist to his older brother, who is being held in London.

Tadhg, their youngest brother.

### **O'Brien**

The Earl of Thomond

Boetius Clanchy, formerly Baothalach, his brehon.

### **O'Donnell**

O'Donnell, tanist to his aged father.

Iníon Dubh, his Scottish stepmother.

### **Other Irish lords**

MacGuire, lord of Fer Managh.

Aodh O'Neill, the would-be tanist to the O'Neill.

### **The ollamhs**

Dall O'Higgin

O'Byrne

### **The English**

Sir Richard Bingham, Governor of Connacht.

Edward Kelley, a sorcerer.

Augustine and Watkin, his assistants.

Matthew Williams, a merchant, married to Sinéad, an Irishwoman.

### **Other humans**

Father Michéal, a priest.

Aodh Mac Aoidh, a Scottish mercenary or gallowglass.

Caitríona, a wise woman.

Myfanwy, a Welshwoman, and Pádraig, her Irish husband.

### ***THE SIDHE***

Delbáeth, High King of the Sidhe.

His Queen.

Conmáel, his son.

The Kingmaker.

The Hunter.

MacPhellimey, a púca.

## NOTES

For the sake of better readability for non-Irish readers, Irish family names have been given in their English spelling: *Mac Clancy* rather than *Mac Fhlannchaidh*, *O'Connor* rather than *Ó Conchobhair*, *O'Rourke* rather than *Ó Ruairc*.

The *head of the name* is the head of an Irish noble family, who is referred to as, e.g., *the O'Neill*, *the O'Donnell*, *the O'Connor Sligo*.

A *tanist* is the second-in-command to an Irish lord or chieftain, and his chosen successor.

An *ollamh* (pronounced *oh-lav*) is a professional master poet.

*Domhnall* is pronounced *Donal*. *Gráinne* is pronounced *Grawn-ya*. *Tadhg* is pronounced *Tayg*.

*Baothalach* is pronounced *Be-u-luch*, *Cailleach* is pronounced *Ca-le-uch* (with *ch* pronounced as in the Scottish *loch*).

*Oh but the farrow know*

*her hungry eye, her ancient soul*

*A. Hozier-Byrne*

*A veces madre y siempre madrastra*

*V. M. San José*

## CHAPTER ONE

*A curse on the mother that bore you. A curse on the milk you suckled on. A curse on the cradle that rocked you.*

Martín willed himself to keep his eyes on the buttermilk as he cursed inwardly, plunging into the barrel the paddle that he would much rather plunge down the throat of the bowlegged fellow who walked past, laughing at his own wit. Seán, he thought he was called, and the tenor of his jeers was obvious by now: something about Martín's manliness, or lack thereof, and doing a woman's work. As if he hadn't churned butter a thousand times, back in Asturias, and very good butter it had been.

He wondered whether an actual curse, or one of his mother's spells, would work here. But he knew better than to try, and just viciously muttered to himself, in pointless defiance, the little rhyme she had taught him as a child:

*Firi tixeiru*

*tarabicón*

*saca manteiga*

*e lleite non*

*Wound, swivelling blade; draw out butter, not milk.* A nursery rhyme, really, nothing remotely witchy about it – but suspicious enough coming from his mother, even more so to Castilian ears. Never say it in front of outsiders, she had warned him, and he hadn't: he had always been so careful about those things. Not that it had done either of them much good.

He quashed his frustration, staring and not quite seeing the landscape that in many ways was so similar to Asturias: red cows grazing in fields of green parted by low stone walls, and beyond them a dark tangle of woods, and, beyond those, grey hills rising out of the fog – only here they were craggier, and flat at the top like giants' tables. The late January morning was

cold and grey and sunless, as all mornings had been since he had come back to consciousness on the cot behind Colm's hearth.

He'd been put to churning to unman him, that was clear. A humiliation. But he didn't mind it – it was a familiar task that took his mind off things, and most of the women here treated him kindly. Most, but not all. As with the men, there were those who resented him, who would much rather have left him and the other Spaniards shivering naked on that nightmare beach, or even handed them over to the English in exchange for some coin or some temporary goodwill. He had been told that was what happened elsewhere along the coast, where the local lord wasn't as good-hearted as O'Rourke and MacClancy. That he was lucky, and should be grateful.

Yet gratefulness was the last thing he felt right now. He had loathed captain Cuéllar – the only good thing about the man had been that he was a taskmaster, brutish and pig-headed enough to force-march the half-dead group of survivors through the unknown wilds. But by now Martín had mostly come to agree with his constantly referring to the Irish as 'the savages'.

He looked up, just in time to see Seán cross over to one of the nearby thatched huts that these people called houses. Seán noticed him looking, and ostentatiously hawked up, spitting a gob of greenish phlegm with such thrust and accuracy that it landed, as intended, in the mud just in front of Martín's feet.

He forced his eyes back to the swirling cream.

Shipwrecked because that asshole King Philip and his asshole priests had refused to allow his precious Armada to be sullied by any kind of magic that might, just might, head off the storms that Elizabeth's head sorcerer was bound to send their way. Tossed, battered and bleeding, onto that hellish strand, in the midst of an elemental vortex the raging likes of which Martín had never seen before, in Spain or in the Americas. Stripped naked by whooping hordes of gold-crazed Irish villagers, as he saw his friends' dead bodies – he hoped they had been dead by then – ravaged by wild dogs. Hunted like an animal across bogland and swamps by English

and Irish and *fucking marsh goblins*. Finally finding refuge with delusional, brother-murdering cattle raiders in God's idea of a joke.

And then, after fighting and defeating the English on behalf of MacClancy, captain Cuéllar and the other survivors had fled the ecstatic chieftain's tower in the middle of the night, because who in his right mind would willingly stay in this shithole unless they had to? And wounded Martín had been dumped, left, burning with fever and not expected to last the night, to die among strangers.

And now here he was. Still alive, but mangled and alone in this godforsaken sty of a village on this godforsaken island, with no way out in sight.

*A curse on God.*

*'A dhuine! Spáinneach!'*

Martín looked up – that much Irish he understood. Colm, his unhappy host, was calling at him from the farther end of the row of huts. He nodded towards the tower: *MacClancy wants to see you.*

Colm's wife pushed him aside to take over the churn, more concerned with the butter than with her manners. He wrapped himself in the coarse dun blanket he had been given and followed Colm down the muddy path, past squawking chickens and busy women and screeching children playing in front of the village church, dedicated to saints he had never heard of, to the bank of the lake.

Colm didn't like him, and was as eager to get Martín out of his house for good as Martín was eager to leave it. He had thrown a fit when he found his wife dressing Martín's wounds, with his linens off, and threatened to kick him out. And he would have done so, or worse, had MacClancy not intervened. Colm must feel Martín was stealing from him: his food, his space,



and most of all his peace of mind. And he was right. If the English found Martín here, they would hang all these people along with him. No wonder they resented him.

*And they don't know the half of it.*

It must have been nearing noon, yet a heavy, clammy mist still clung to the surface of the water, and to their clothes and faces, as they paddled across to the island. When the leather raft bumped against the rocky bank, Colm picked up the two bundles he was carrying to the tower kitchen, and gestured for Martín to go ahead without him.

The island was tiny, created, they had been told, to build the thick-set, grey-stoned, moss-encrusted tower that loomed above him through the fog, as if in reproach – *you still here?* He brushed his hand past the low defensive wall that stood in front of it, a makeshift parapet. He and his eight fellow Spaniards had built that wall while they held MacClancy's home against the English, during those endless seventeen days and nights in December. He took an odd pride in it: they had made this, and survived.

*Has it really been only a month?*

Martín's leg still hurt and he limped when he walked, but he was able to climb up the steep stairs to the top floor without too much trouble, although he did have to stop to catch his breath several times. He wondered what to expect, as he hadn't seen MacClancy since before the siege. The chieftain had been furious when Martín's comrades left for Scotland without warning – MacClancy had hoped he would get to keep his nine highly trained Spanish guards, and marry his ugly sister off to captain Cuéllar. His hopes dashed and finding himself saddled with an invalid, MacClancy had dispatched Martín out of his tower and into Colm's house as soon as his fever went down.

The chieftain was sitting at the heavy, dark table in the middle of the room, morosely picking at the remains of a meal with the tip of his knife. He was not alone. The other man, whom Martín had never seen before, was standing – tall, lean, long-legged – in front of the

fireplace. Red hair. (Yet another one. It was not that unusual in Spain, of course; but the number of redheads here was ridiculous.)

MacClancy glanced up as Martín came in. ‘Are you looking at the women?’ he barked in his ungrammatical Latin. ‘I am told you have been looking at the women.’

Martín blinked. The other man turned slightly, eyeing him sideways.

‘I have been put to work helping the women. I can hardly do that without looking at them. Unless you want me to cover my eyes and go around bumping into things, that is.’ The red-headed man looked away again, hiding a smile. Martín added, as MacClancy was frowning in dangerous irritation (his Latin, however basic, was good enough to understand Martín’s back talk): ‘I have not disrespected the women. Or anyone else, for that matter.’

MacClancy kept frowning. He was a large, heavy-set man, his broad shoulders made even more so by the huge pelt he was wearing. He must have been in his fifties, and his pale hair, which he wore long, falling veil-like down the sides of his craggy face, was turning white in places. ‘There have been complaints. The men in the village say that you *Spáinneacha* pestered the women when you came along. And that *you* are now chasing after them and groping them.’ He scowled, and muttered, almost inaudibly: ‘And that some of them *like* it.’

Captain Cuéllar had moaned that the women here were all after him. *In his dreams, perhaps.* God, but men could be idiotic about what women did and didn’t want. Dangerously so, now, though. ‘Even if I did that sort of thing – which I don’t – do I look like I could do much chasing right now?’

The red-headed man chuckled. MacClancy glared at him, then looked Martín over, grudgingly allowing that he was indeed in no shape to pose a threat to anyone. ‘Hm. Are you happy here? Has Colm been treating you well?’

‘I have no complaints. And I am grateful for Colm’s and your hospitality, lord MacClancy. But I would like to cease to impose on your kindness and be on my way back to Spain as soon as possible.’

This was a mistake, as it obviously reminded MacClancy of captain Cuéllar, the bolting bridegroom. He stabbed at the table with his knife, trying to spear a stray crumb. ‘I have troubles enough already to worry about. With the *Sasanacha*, and O’Rourke, and the fairy shite, and the cattle thieves, and my blacksmith gone, and next week is...’ He turned to the other man, saying something in Irish that sounded like *imbold?*

‘Saint Brigid,’ said the other man in Latin.

*La Candelaria*, Martín translated to himself. Candlemas. ‘I only need some food and clothes and to be pointed in the right direction.’

‘Not now,’ snarled MacClancy, whacking the blade hard into the table, where it stood quivering. ‘Brian na Múrtha has said you are not to leave Ireland until he sends word. You will wait.’

‘But...’

‘I said *you will wait*.’ He pulled the knife out, scowling as the blade resisted him, and grumbled in Irish about Brian na Múrtha, Brian of the Ramparts. This, Martín now knew, was O’Rourke, MacClancy’s overlord, who had extended his protection to the bedraggled fleeing Spaniards. They had never actually seen him, as O’Rourke seemed very busy with cattle raids up and down the country. But they had stayed with his people, and then O’Rourke had sent orders to the unenthusiastic MacClancy to take them in. After the gaggle of Spanish soldiers had, to everyone’s surprise, held his stronghold against the English by themselves, MacClancy had been happier for a while. But now they were gone it was clear that he once again resented his overlord’s commands. Or, possibly, his overlord altogether.

The other man turned around to face Martín. He'd be some ten years older than him, late thirties or early forties. Sharp features, with a sparse red beard. Shrewd green eyes. He looked like a fox, Martín thought, discomfited.

'It's dangerous,' the man said. 'The English have no doubt learnt of your comrades' crossing over into Scotland, and they're stepping up the search for Spanish survivors in this area. And also, other – events are under way.' He glanced at MacClancy. 'This really isn't a good time. It will be easier for you when things calm down. In the summer.'

Martín was by now used to the way Latin was spoken here, MacClancy's slow, fumbling half-grasp of it having helped him to become inured to the odd local pronunciation, and to also pick up some of the Irish words that peppered his sentences. But this man's Latin wasn't halting like MacClancy's – rather, it was fluent, comfortable, as if he spoke it on a regular basis.

He looked down, pursing his lips. When he looked up again, he saw that the red-haired man was watching him. Fully aware – or so it seemed to Martín – of his mutinous thoughts.

'You can read and write, yes?' MacClancy asked.

'Spanish and Latin. Yes.'

'And you fought before coming here, yes? You have killed?'

Martín's jaw clenched, and this time he was certain that the red-haired man noticed. 'I am not a soldier by trade,' he replied. 'But I know how to handle a sword and a gun. As you saw for yourself.' Not that they had needed to use them much during the siege: they had just had to wait the English out while avoiding their missiles. Which Martín had signally failed to do.

'Yes, you *Spáinneacha* were good fighters,' muttered MacClancy, irked again by the memory of his lost personal guard. 'Good protection. And he's an ally. Kept my castle safe while I was away in the mountains, taking care of the people and the cattle. Kept it safe from the *Sasanacha*. We need to be good hosts. When King Philip sends his people to help us fight them, *he'll know who to thank.*' He looked meaningfully at the other man, who snorted.

MacClancy started saying something in Latin, but quickly switched to Irish, and the red-haired man replied in kind. As MacClancy grew angrier and their conversation flared up into an argument, Martín stared at the floor. The row, to judge from MacClancy's frequent gesturing at Martín, was about him. And, in his experience, when people talked about him, it was never good.

*The minute they take their eyes off me, I'm out of this shithole.*

Martín spent the afternoon mending the fence and the rabbit hutches behind Colm's hut. It wasn't until it started to grow dark that the commotion started.

There was an outcry on the other side of the hut. He stopped to look around the corner. Seán's short, plump wife was going from house to house, hands twisting her apron, repeating the same word over and over to everyone she came across: *Niamh. Niamh. Niamh. Niamh*, judging from the growing fear in the woman's eyes, must be the little flaxen-haired girl Martín had seen run in and out of Seán's house.

Other women gathered around Niamh's mother, then the men, drawn by the sudden agitation. Martín saw Seán as he walked home and met the unexpected tumult, the colour draining from his face when he was told what was going on. Then one of the women raised her voice above the hubbub, and said something in an authoritative tone, to the others' nods. As one, the small, clucking crowd hurried down to the churchyard, where some straggling children were still pelting each other with ice, putting off going home despite the cold.

Martín looked around. Colm and his wife had gone with the others, and now, for the first time since he had been here, all the huts around him, and the track between them, were empty. There was nobody to watch him.

He looked to his left, to where the track sloped slightly upwards and out of sight – it kept running along the edge of the lake for a while, he knew, before turning sharply towards the North. Towards Scotland, and the ships to the Spanish Netherlands there.

He slid into the empty hut, going straight for the box where Colm kept his knives. He pulled one out at random. His eyes strayed to the pallet where he knew Colm hid his purse, then thought better about it.

He stepped out again. And saw, in front of Seán's hut, the small pile of clothes left lying on the ground, next to a wooden basin, ready to be washed. The tiny linen garment on top. A child's shift.

He stared for a moment. Making sure there was no one around to see, he strode across the muddy track and reached for the dirty undergarment. Sniffed it. Then shoved it, scrunched into a ball, under his waistband.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

The scent was strong and clear. Martín picked it up easily, scurrying past the backs of the houses, past the back of the church, where the little girl must have been playing before she wandered off.

The villagers were all searching along the banks of the lake, no doubt thinking that Niamh had gone down there looking for rushes – the children had been weaving odd three- and four-legged grass crosses this week, something to do with Candlemas, he assumed. But the trail led inland, towards the woods that surrounded the village, in the direction of the distant bog that he could smell from here, the loamy, rotting sweetness of peat and moss wafting in the air.

He moved at an ungainly pace across twilight fields, through the encroaching darkness that was no obstacle to his sight, following his nose. It was exhilarating to be able to run – or at least hobble – freely after such a long time on the mend, even though his thigh still hurt and the wound where the English bolt had pierced his shoulder was not yet fully healed. It was the first time he was completely alone, with no eyes watching him, he realised, since – since before he had boarded the *Lavia* in Lisbon, in May last year, actually. He was overwhelmed, for a second, by how much he had missed it.

The little girl had walked into the forest, which was surprising – one would expect folk in such a dangerous country to bring up their children under strict admonishments never to venture into the woods alone. But perhaps Niamh was slow-witted, or something unexpected had happened. Or someone, or something, had lured her away.

He heard, in the wind, the drift of several villagers' voices moving towards where he was, far behind him. They must have split up the better to search for Niamh, or someone may have seen Martín running away from the village, or both. Suddenly, he was struck cold by the realisation of the many ways in which this could go very wrong for him, and how rash he had been darting off alone on Niamh's trail like this. He had better return with the little girl alive and well, or not at all.

‘Niamh!’ he shouted as he followed her scent through the darkening thicket, brushing harsh leafless branches aside, the crunch of ice and frost under his feet. The air here was filled with myriad distracting sounds and smells – hunting owl, scuttling centipede, decaying stoat, the seething vegetable and animal life and death of the night forest, from treetop to undergrowth, pressing against his senses. He pulled the linen shift out of his waistband and held it to his nose. ‘Niamh!’

He wandered around the woods for some time, heart sinking whenever he dropped the trail in the dark, then beating fast when he picked it up again. He was still clutching her shift when his hackles rose as the sudden, familiar *other* scent hit him. The growling that followed sounded almost like a welcome home, although he was well aware that it was far from that. He moved faster.

A small clearing. At its edge, a tiny, shivering child. And across from her, three wolves – a large, dark-collared male, flanked by two smaller females. Siblings. A small pack, hungry in the lean winter.

‘*Tar anseo,*’ he called out to Niamh, the Irish imperative he had heard often enough. Come here.

Niamh looked up from her paralysed fear, then started to edge towards what to her must have been just a deeper shadow in the blackness. As she approached him, her scent spiked with terror, Martín – slowly, slowly – stepped forward, placing himself between the child and the three tense, growling animals.

The male bared its teeth in a snarl, ears erect and forward, tail stiffly vertical, as Martín came closer. Ready to attack.

Without thinking, Martín bared his own fangs and growled back, ramrod straight, making himself as large as he could. It had been years since he had last done this, but the rictus came



back to him as naturally as walking: the deep frown and puckered nose as he held his head high, every muscle on his face and in his body signalling dominance and threat.

The most important thing, though, was holding the wolf's gaze. And not backing down.

Martín stared into those eyes, which would likely be golden in daytime, but were two glowing points in the crepuscular light. His own eyes, he knew, would look just the same. He felt the old, wild rush take over, the fierce focus of his second nature. For a moment, he forgot about the terrified child behind him, he forgot about the whispering, menacing forest that surrounded him, he forgot about the shipwreck and his wounds and the dangers and escaping and Ireland. There was only the wolf across the clearing, and the wolf that arose from within him to meet the challenge.

He didn't know how long they stood there, the other male and he, facing off. After what felt like hours, the wolf dipped his head slightly, his snarl deeper, and Martín answered by growling again and holding himself even taller. Unyielding.

A heartbeat. Then the wolf's head dropped, tail curled between his legs. Submission.

A crash among the trees behind him jolted Martín back to the clearing. Cries and torches. The three wolves immediately looked up in twitching alert, and – with one last glance of acknowledgement at Martín from the male – vanished into the bushes.

The sudden firelight and the hue and cry made Martín blink. Someone called *Niamh!* in utter relief, as if life itself had come rushing back into them, and ran to the little girl, enfolding her in an embrace.

He turned, following the father? mother? as they rushed Niamh away back to safety.

All the men were staring at him.

They stood in silence, faces still with shock in the flickering light of the torches. Then one of them, a large, burly fellow, shouted something, pointing at the little girl's shift that

Martín was still holding. The man strode forward, yanked the garment from his hand, and kept shouting in Martín's face, spraying him with spittle.

Martín lowered his head and raised his hands, placating: this had happened to him before. But the large man, and the other men muttering behind him, were not appeased. They circled closer to Martín, and then the ringleader pushed him, so that Martín almost tripped back, and the others, emboldened, started shoving at him too.

He raised his arms to protect his head, hoping this would just be a ritual beating, the usual taking out of people's fears on the freak, and that they would be satisfied once they had landed a few blows.

They weren't.

The large man hit him on his wounded shoulder, hard, and Martín fell into a crouch as his knees gave way. The men closed in on him, kicking his ribs, spitting, hurling accusations and insults and curses. One of them elbowed his way through, wielding the branch that he had just wrenched off a tree. Raised it above his head to bring it down on Martín's face.

The wolf he had called up was still under Martín's skin, throbbing in his blood. He surfaced.

With the same snarl he had just used on the vanished wolf, Martín leapt to his feet, faster than his own thoughts, and snatched the branch from the man, raking the nails of his other hand across his face. Before the man could do anything but yelp, Martín had kned him in the pit of the stomach, and bared his teeth again.

The other men came at him, furious that he had dared to turn the tables on their friend. But their fury quickly turned to alarm, then disbelief, then panic as they realised that it had been no fluke.

There were five men lying on the ground around him when the shouted order came from the trees. Martín stopped, panting, as the world slowly became human again. He looked down: his hands were red, and he tasted blood in his mouth. Not his own.

More sharp commands, which would have been unintelligible to him right now even if they hadn't been in Irish. Martín could only stand, watching and trembling, not yet fully a man again, while the aftershock of the fury ebbed from his veins.

The red-headed man from the tower briskly stepped over to the fallen men, looking down at them: from their groans, they all seemed to be breathing and at least semiconscious. The men still standing were huddled together, about to run away any second. He gave more orders, and they hurried forward, dragging their fallen comrades away as fast as they could.

He turned to Martín. 'Are you all right?' he asked. Hand on the hilt of his sword.

Martín nodded. Swallowed. Words were coming back to him, but he didn't know what to say. 'I found Niamh,' he managed to say, eventually. 'I went looking for her.'

The red-headed man bent down, picked something up from the grass. The linen shift. 'They thought you used this to attract the wolves. That you had meant to offer them the child.' He looked him in the eye. 'You followed the trail of her scent, didn't you?'

Martín swallowed again, mouth suddenly even drier.

The man tucked the shift under his belt. 'Come on,' he said. 'We need to get to the castle. I told them I'd deal with you, but I don't want to risk anyone in the village becoming hot-headed and getting bad ideas.'

They walked in silence through the forest and fields, avoiding the village, back to the bank of the lake, where they crossed over to the tower. 'Go up to the top floor and wait there. I need to talk to the chieftain,' the red-headed man told Martín. 'And wash yourself,' he added, gesturing at his own face. 'We don't want anyone dying of fright if they see you like that.'

MacClancy must have retired recently for the night: the embers were still glowing in the fireplace in the main room. A pallet, an ewer and basin, and some folded linen towels had been laid out nearby, no doubt for the red-headed man. Martín picked up one of the towels and washed his hands and face, the cloth and the water that dripped back to the basin turning dark with blood.

He waited in the gloom, standing by the door, alert. He didn't think they would harm him now, here, but there was no telling what MacClancy – or indeed, the red-headed man – might do after what had happened. Eventually, the man returned with two servants, one of them carrying another pallet, the other a tray that he set on the table. Once the servants were out of the room again, the man gestured for Martín to sit with him.

‘It’s for you. You must be hungry, after...’

He *was* ravenous. He always was, after, the wolf-rage took so much energy. The other man sat down to drink, and Martín got started with the meat they had brought. It was very good beef, but boiled and fairly insipid, the way they seemed to prefer to cook it here.

He ate in silence for a few minutes. Then the red-headed man asked: ‘Have you always been... like this?’

What he meant was: *Is it a curse?* Martín swallowed another bite and replied: ‘Yes.’ He washed down the coarse oaten bread with what turned out to be surprisingly tolerable wine. ‘I’m a *lloberu*, a wolf man. I got it from my mother, it ran in her family. I – can do some things wolves do. Smell like them, see and hear like them. I don’t turn into an actual wolf, if that’s what you’re thinking.’

‘I know,’ replied the man, nodding at the goblet Martín was still holding. ‘That’s silver.’

Martín snorted a laugh, surprised. *Fox-like indeed.*

‘You fight like a wolf, too. I’ve never seen anything like it.’

Martín said nothing. He took another long swig of wine.

‘Can you control it?’

‘Up to a point.’

‘Ah.’ He looked at Martín, thoughtful. ‘I know some gallowglass – they are Scottish mercenaries, descended from Northmen – some gallowglass claim they are possessed by a bear spirit when they fight. But I have never seen it, myself.’

Martín moved on to the cheese. ‘How did you find me? In the forest?’

‘I saw you running towards the woods, and some of the villagers saw *me* follow you and ran ahead. I had gone down to Colm’s because it was clear you were determined to leave. I wanted to find you before you tried to escape.’

‘To stop me.’

‘To give you my purse and my sword. So that at least you’d have a chance of surviving.’

Martín stared at him. Eventually, he asked, ‘So what happens now?’

The red-headed man sighed. ‘I came to Ros Clochair to discuss some business matters with the chieftain, but then he sprang on me that he wanted me to take you into my own household, in An Tobar, because the villagers were unhappy about you being here. I refused – nothing against you, you understand, but it’s only me, my sister, and a few servants, and I didn’t want to place them at risk. He was trying to bully me into taking you in, before.’ He frowned. ‘Now you can’t stay here, not after what happened. The villagers think you are a *conriocht*, a sort of malevolent shapeshifter, or worse. They will kill you as soon as you turn your back. So it looks like you’re coming with me after all.’

Martín laid the knife down on the table. ‘I just want to make my way to Scotland. Or to a ship going anywhere but England.’

‘As I told you before, the situation is very volatile right now. The English are hunting down and killing all the Spaniards they can find; they’re afraid they will spark a rebellion. By all accounts, Elizabeth’s Deputy in Ireland has had hundreds of them slaughtered already.’ His

face clouded over, as if with some private grief. ‘In Clare, the sheriff hanged more than seventy survivors of two ships like yours. After torturing them.’ He looked up, and saw Martín’s stricken face. ‘I’m sorry. But you don’t want to end up like them.’

Martín shut his eyes for a second. Saw again the wild dogs on the beach, gnawing on the boatswain’s face. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I don’t.’ He took a deep breath. ‘I’ll wait. And thank you. For your hospitality. I promise I will be a good guest. I don’t want to be a burden on you or your household.’

The man smiled, a small, secretive smile that made Martín want to get up and *run*. ‘Oh, if I’m right, you will prove quite useful, Martín.’ He pronounced it correctly, with the stress on the last syllable. ‘By the way. My name is Domhnall.’