

Witch

The Alison Balfour Story

by Adrien Leduc, 1987–

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Scene 1

Meet the Balfours.

Village of Ireland, Parish of Stenness, Orkney Islands. Friday, December 2, 1594. Supper hour. We find ourselves at the Balfour family home. Their house is a simple abode, cozy and warm, the furnishings being a mix of old and new. Their home consists of one room with two partition walls which separate both the toilet and the bed of Alison and Abraham from the rest of the house. The children sleep on two small beds along the wall nearest the fire. The table (which, when not in use stands against the wall) occupies the centre of the Balfour household at this hour as Alison, husband Abraham Taillifeir, and her two children, ten year old William and seven year old Anna are just finishing supper.

"But I don't like turnip, mother..." moaned seven year old Anna, eyeing the offensive vegetable on her plate.

"Anna. You need to eat your supper. All of it. You know there are families in Stenness who have nought to eat tonight." Alison Balfour's tone was patient and understanding.

"But—"

"No buts!" Abraham growled (for he was somewhat less patient than his wife). "Ye heard your mother...now eat your turnip!"

Anna let out a whimper, but said no more.

The old man meanwhile turned to ten year old William. "Pass the bread, will ye." He indicated the basket of thick-slice black bread at the boy's elbow.

William Balfour, keen and bright-eyed, with a mess of straw-coloured hair, did as requested.

"Tomorrow, when we go to market," Abraham continued, selecting a slice of bread and tearing it in half before setting the basket aside, "I'm going to introduce you to Isaac Rendall and inquire about him taking you on as an apprentice carver. Would you like that?"

"I would," answered William, somewhat uncertain.

Alison smiled as she watched her son. William had always been polite to Abraham. And Abraham, even though he wasn't the boy's father by blood (he being her second husband after the untimely demise of her first husband), was always tender with the boy.

"Very good," were his words now as he glanced at his wife who, at thirty-nine, was more than forty years his junior (he having turned eighty-one in August). "We shall go and speak with Isaac Rendall and with any luck he will have you working for him within a fortnight."

William nodded as Anna wrinkled her nose. "So Will's going to cut up dead animals all day? That's going to be his job?"

Abraham stared at the young girl and opened his mouth to reply, but Alison stayed him with a patient smile. "William is going to work and learn a trade and this is going to allow him to have a source of income when he's older."

Anna looked at her mother. "What's income?"

"Money," Abraham answered gruffly, growing increasingly impatient with the girl's seemingly endless questions.

"Oh."

Alison exchanged a glance with her husband and resumed her eating.

"What have we got for dessert tonight?" asked Abraham after a time, as he finished the last remnants on his plate.

"I've made biscuits," said Alison. "Biscuits with honey."

William's face seemed to brighten. "Biscuits? Really?"

Alison nodded, smiling broadly.

"You outdo yourself, Alison," said Abraham.

"I do the best I can, dear husban-"

A loud and harried knocking at the door stopped her short.

"Who can that be now..." Abraham gumbled, pushing back his chair and rising slowly from the table, his arthritic fingers giving him cause to wince in pain as he did so.

Alison remained seated and watched in silence as the time-trodden man ambled purposefully to the door.

"Edward Bellenden," Abraham announced, eyeing the well-dressed, but humble looking man with gentle eyes and trim, tidy hair who stood in the doorway.

"Good evening," said the man, removing his hat and bowing to the three seated at the table, "I'm sorry to disturb you during your supper, but it's Rachel." He looked past Abraham to Alison who watched the man from her seat at the table. "She's not been well," he continued, "for two days now. Terrible pain in her stomach."

Abraham, though long accustomed to folk arriving on his doorstep at odd hours to call on his wife for her remedies, opened the door fully and admitted the man (albeit with some reluctance).

"Evening, Mrs. Balfour," said Edward, bowing ever so slightly as he took a step toward to the table. He gave a friendly nod to William and Anna who sat motionless at the table.

"Evening, Mr. Bellenden," said Alison, getting up from the table. "I only caught a bit of that... your wife, she's having stomach pain?"

Edward replied with a grim nod. "Yes. Terrible pain."

Alison's expression showed concern. Lady Rachel Bellenden had suffered from several ailments in the past year. First her feet had gone numb. Some dandelion tea had aided that. Next her vision had gone blurry. A strict diet of lamb and raw carrot had absolved her of that. Stomach pains... yarrow? St. John's Wort? There were a number of remedies for a number of afflictions...

"Which side of her stomach is giving her pain?" she asked as Abraham muttered something under his breath and shuttered the door to the cold wind outside.

"Her left side," Edward replied.

This is good news, thought Alison. If he had answered "her right side", it may already be too late. The humor of the right stomach had a tendency to leak when affected and she had seen several men, woman, and children succumb to the affliction in her time.

"The left side... how long has she been having this pain?"

Alison was diligent in asking as many questions as possible so as to ascertain the most plausible malady. To prescribe a remedy without fully knowing the malady was a grave oversight and one that might carry terrible consequences.

"For two days now," answered Edward.

Alison's questions continued for several more minutes until finally, as Abraham felt himself about to doze off in his chair by the fire, he heard her say: "I suspect she may have a blockage. This should be relatively easy to remedy with some ground flax and herb of Ulster. I'll prepare a draught now and she can take it immediately. Expect her pain to continue for a further twenty four hours, but to abate with each hour. If she is still not improved by tomorrow evening, come and see me again."

Edward Bellenden nodded with an air of obedience, his cap clasped between his hands. "Thank you, Mrs. Balfour. Thank you. The people of Stenness owe you much."

Alison, not one to accept compliments, allowed herself to smile. "Anyone in my position would do the same. I do only what I do because God has bestowed this

gift unto me and it is therefore my duty to share its rewards. Have a seat,” she said, gesturing to the chair she had vacated at the table, “while I mix the draught. William,” she added, turning to her son, “see that your father and Mr. Bellenden each get a few biscuits.”

Scene 2

The Wrath of Earl Patrick Stewart.

Saturday December 3, 1594. Morning. Kirkwall Castle. The Great Hall. Earl Patrick Stewart is fuming mad, stomping back and forth while his wife, Margaret, and all of the castle staff and courtiers, seated and standing throughout the hall, are forced to remain and hear what the earl has to say.

“And the fact that someone tried to poison me in this very castle... my castle!” the Earl seethed, face crimson, eyes aglow, “tried to poison me... it’s treachery!”

“Dear brother,” John interjected, raising a hand, “if I may—”

“You may not! No one is to speak.” He paused to let his words sink in. “You will hear me now,” he said, his tone threatening. “I swear on my mother’s grave that I shall find the man, woman or child responsible... and after a visit to my dungeons, I shall have them beheaded for all to see. Furthermore, I shall have the head of this cretin posted on a pike at the gates of Kirkwall so that it will never again be assumed that Earl Patrick Stewart was a soft and easy man. I’ve been too good to all of you.”

The Earl’s wife, Margaret, long accustomed to her husband’s angry and violent outbursts, watched the others (somewhat less accustomed) grow more anxious by the minute.

The silence was deafening now as Patrick scanned the room, waiting and daring any to defy him. The silence remained and not one spoke. Finally, after what seemed an eternity to those assembled in the Great Hall, Patrick ordered them all out and they left in a hurry.

Scene 3

Alison, Anna, and the Standing Stones of Stennes.

Meanwhile... Stennes. It’s bright and sunny though the sky is garnished with a number of puffy, white clouds. Alison and Anna are foraging in the meadows for herbs and wildflowers and other things Alison uses to create her remedies.

“Now this one here,” Alison began, crouching down beside a white rain drop petal flower, “is used for stomach ailments.”

Anna, all ears during such walks through the meadows with her mother, crouched down beside her: “Is that what you used to make the draught for Lady Bellenden?”

Alison smiled at her daughter’s keen observation. “The very same.”

The young girl, clearly enthralled, eyed the flower with intense curiosity. “Does it do anything else?”

Alison nodded. “If you boil it and add it to honey, you can apply it to any cut, wound, or bruise and it will hasten the healing.”

“Really?”

Alison laughed at the awe-struck look on her daughter’s face. “Yes, you seem so surprised!”

“Well...” said the girl, glancing hesitantly at the flower, “it’s just... it’s a plant anyone can pick...and it’s right there... does everyone know about these kinds of things? The things you know, mother?”

Alison pursed her lips (though her eyes smiled). “Not everyone takes the time to appreciate the wonders God has given us. There is surely a reason for every tree, flower, bush, and berry on this island, just as there is a reason for you and I. We do ourselves no justice to remain ignorant about the uses for the many things we find in our natural environment. I was fortunate enough to have Roshanna teach me these things before it was her time to venture to heaven.”

“How old were you when she taught you?”

Alison paused to reflect a moment. “Twelve or thirteen. I remember as it was she who taught me how to prevent my clothes from soiling during menses. I had no mother to teach me these things after all.”

“What’s menses?”

Alison smiled at her daughter’s bewilderment. “I’ll explain to you when you’re older...now then have a look at this purple flower here. The stem of this—and only the stem—can be used to make a tea that will put the person to sleep within a quarter of an hour.”

Anna gaped at her mother.

“Come, let’s pick a few of these as my supplies are low.”

The girl nodded and together mother and daughter picked enough to fill the rest of the basket Alison carried with her for the purpose. As they made their way home a short while later, treading carefully but with purpose along the dirt road that led to the village, Anna spied something she always liked to ask about.

“Mother can we—”

Alison, accustomed to her daughter’s requests to visit the Standing Stones of Stenness, obliged before the question had left Anna’s lips. “Yes we can go, but only for a short while. We have to get home and start dinner for William and your father.”

Alison always referred to Abraham as the children’s “father” even though everyone in town knew he was more suited to being the children’s grandfather (given his age). Alison believed it would be disrespectful for her or the children to refer to him as anything but as he’d been the only (decent) man in the Orkney Islands willing to marry her, a widow, with two bairns had by another man. This,

in itself, commanded respect and though theirs was not a relationship founded on romance, there was friendship between them.

The stones loomed large before them as they drew nearer, Anna pointing and oohing and aahing as she always did, despite having seen the stones a dozen times.

“That’s my favourite,” she said, pointing to one stone in particular. “No, actually *that* one is my favourite.”

Arriving at the stones, Alison closed her eyes and exhaled. This was a place of greatness. Their ancient ancestors had decided this would be the best spot in all the Orkney Islands for the standing stones. It was not hard to see why—no matter the time of day, the sun or the moon would cast light and shadow upon them in mesmerizing ways. There was strength and beauty in these stones, grace and power, that connected a person to the heavens. Not that she would ever say such a thing publicly as the church would most certainly not approve. In fact it was a wonder that the stones had been left standing given that they stood, quite literally and tangibly as a representation of their pagan past. The church was adamant that no one should worship or depict idols—and yet here were these stones. While none contained carvings or images, they were nonetheless objects of worship and not to be praised by Christian souls.

“Why is this one crooked, mother? It looks like it’s going to fall down.”

“It’s very old and the ground beneath it has possibly shifted.”

“And that’s why it’s crooked?”

Alison shrugged. “Perhaps...or perhaps there’s a monster below (she set down her basket and moved closer to her daughter), and he’s pulling it down into the netherworld (Anna retreated slowly from her mother) and he’s going to get you next!”

Alison lunged at her daughter and the girl ran away giggling, fighting off her mother’s tickles.

“Mother!”

Laughing, Alison ceased her teasing and the pair collapsed onto the grass in a fit of giggles. Alison got in one last tickle which caused Anna to screech.

“Stop it!” the girl cried, still giggling uncontrollably.

Mother wrapped an arm around daughter and the two gazed up at the sky.

“Look at that cloud, mother. Is that a whale? Is that what a whale looks like?”

Alison smiled and followed her daughter’s gaze. “Yes, that’s what a whale looks like, only it has a tail fin as well to help it swim.”

“How come whales don’t sink to the bottom of the sea? They’re so big and heavy.”

“Well, they can swim, can’t they now. They’ve got strong fins that keep them afloat.”

This seemed an acceptable answer for the seven year old, as she nodded and with a little sigh, returned her attention to the stones. “Tell me why they made this place again, mum? What did they use the stones for?”

Alison studied the ring of slate slabs, rising vertically ten, twelve, fourteen feet in the air and assembled in a perfect circle. “No one knows for sure, my dear, but most have said that this was a place of worship.”

“For who? Who lived here?”

Alison smiled. "You have more questions than I have answers. You need to speak to Father Clouston. He might know the answer."

Anna wrinkled her nose (as was her habit when she disagreed with something). "Father Clouston is a mean man."

"Oh hush, Father Clouston is just himself."

"He's mean!" the girl insisted, "and I don't like him."

Alison sighed. Her daughter was just as stubborn as she had been at her age. "Well, maybe you'll change your mind once you're older. He's not a gentle man, that's sure. He's got his opinions about things and they are quite black and white... but he's certainly not mean."

"He is too and I don't want to talk about."

Alison sighed once more as she brushed the grass from her dress and readied to return home.

"Alright, well let's get on then and we can talk about something different."

Scene 4

John Stewart Pays a Visit to his Servant Thomas Paplay.

A short time later... Kirkwall Castle. Servants' wing. The Paplay family's chambers. Thomas Paplay and his wife, June Paplay, are spending the lunch hour together as it's mid-day break for the servants, Thomas having started his day at the rooster's crow. June has just finished nursing Isabelle, their six month old and now she is tidying up and organizing the apartment. Thomas holds Isabelle, making soft "coo coo's" at her while June babbles about her day.

"And would you believe it," June said with a laugh, "she looked at me with this big smile on her face and smiled. She just smiled. And it was as though she had understood what I had said to her."

Thomas smiled and poked gently at the infant's button nose, making baby sounds and baby faces all the while.

"She's going to be a sharp one," June continued. "Take after her father."

Thomas smiled and resumed playing with their six month old.

Banging at the door.

Thomas and June exchanged a glance.

"Are you expecting anyone?" asks Jane, glancing at the homemade sundial etched into the wall flanking the kitchen stove. "You've still got time yet, don't you? Before you're due back at work?"

Thomas nodded, studying the door as though it held some secret. "I have time. And I have chores today, but I've been getting all my work done... perhaps I missed something and Sharon has come to inform me."

"I doubt as though she would disturb you on your lunch hour. She knows full well you spend that time with me." June's tone was uncharacteristically irritable.

Banging at the door (again).

"Thomas! Are you in there?"

The voice was unmistakable.

"John..." said Thomas, looking once more at his wife.

She made a face, but said nothing. She had never liked the Earl's brother.

Thomas moved to the door, unlatched it, and pulled it open.

"Get inside!" said John, barging past. "Is anyone here?"

Thomas closed the door slowly before turning to face his employer. "No. It's just us."

John seemed to relax at this information. He glanced around the room, his eyes stopping on Thomas' wife and the baby in her arms. "Please, June, leave us. We have business to discuss, your husband and I."

June nodded, her expression concerned. She looked at her husband. Thomas nodded and urged her on with a glance.

"Sir," said June politely, curtsying to John as she gathered up her skirts. She took Isabelle from her husband and removed herself from the room.

John waited for her to leave entirely and shut the door behind her.

"We have a problem."

"Oh?"

Thomas watched as his master began to pace the floor, hands clasped behind his back.

"Yes. You see, my brother is quite angry—understandably—that someone tried to poison him."

Thomas gave a sympathetic nod.

"Now, there are rumours—" he stopped and turned to look Thomas square in the eye, "that I had something to do with it, that I was somehow involved. Me!? Me!? The Earl's own brother. How... pray, tell me, why ever would one make such an allegation?"

He watched Thomas closely while he waited for his answer.

Thomas shifted uncomfortably on his feet. "Well... Sir... I must confess I am as bewildered as you."

John smiled, a thin line that danced across his lips, his eyes alight like a viper's before it strikes. "Well... they are but rumours after all," he said, turning on one heel and resuming his pacing. "I would ask you to keep an ear out for me... and to speak well of me to the Earl if you are questioned... after all, have I not been a good master to you all these years? I give you this," he indicated the apartment, "I give you a weekly pay packet... what more could you ask for?"

Thomas nodded and cleared his throat. "Yes, sir, you are very kind. My wife and I are very grateful."

John smiled, the serpentine smile appearing once more. "I am happy to hear my staff are pleased with me..." He paced to the other side of the room and when Thomas was not looking, slipped something into a dresser drawer that had been left slightly ajar. "Now then," he said abruptly, clearing his throat and turning around to face his servant, "so long as I can have the utmost assurances from you

that you will say nothing to anyone—and I include your wife in this—that might further fan the flames surrounding these ill conceived and offensive rumors...”

Ever the faithful servant, Thomas nodded. “But of course, sir.”

“Very well. That is all. I shall see you at supper. Be sure to arrive at my chambers at a quarter past six to help me dress. I want to be sure I look the part of loyal and faithful brother this evening.”

“As you wish, sir.”

Scene 5

Abraham and William at Market.

We find ourselves at Kirkwall’s weekly Saturday market. The market takes place in the town square and is teeming with chickens, oxen, wagons, children running to and fro, vendors hawking their goods to passersby, and all the other sights and sounds of a 16th century European market.

“Take that, would you William.”

With an obedient nod, the boy reached for the sack of potatoes Abraham had just purchased from one of the produce vendors.

“Thank you,” said William as the vendor transferred the heavy sack to his arms.

The vendor, a deaf mute, said nothing, though he waved at them before turning to help the next customer.

“Right...” said Abraham, thinking to himself as he stared across the expanse of the market. “Your mother needs flour...for that we shall go to Mrs. Flett, yes. But first,” he said with a glance at William who seemed to be struggling beneath the weight of the potatoes, “let us return to the wagon and deposit that sack so that you are not carrying it all around.”

William, red faced and with the veins in the side of his head bulging, nodded as he wrestled with the heavy sack.

“And then we’ll go and see Isaac about a possible job for you.”

William, still struggling, offered up a smile and Abraham couldn’t help but chuckle. He liked the boy. He was obedient and respectful. True, the boy did not have the swarthy disposition of some of the farmer’s and fisher’s sons of Orkney—and he was yet soft, unhardened to the realities of life—but he demonstrated an intelligence and an eagerness he hoped Isaac could appreciate.

“Come on then,” said Abraham, leading the way to their wagon.

Once the sack of potatoes had been stowed in the wagon, the pair made for Kilda Flett’s stall, one of the busier stalls in the market. In addition to flour, the woman, with her two giant sons, Angus and Robert, sold an assortment of breads, pastries, and pasta noodles.

“Abraham Taillifeir.”

Kilda had always greeted the elderly man with a friendly smile.

“Mrs. Flett. How are things this fine day?”

“Good. Better than they’ve been for awhile.” The woman folded her arms across her chest, eyeing William every so often as she spoke. “Haven’t had weather like this in half a century, said me dad last night at supper. Been as warm as summer this week.”

Abraham nodded. “Aye. ‘Tis warm alright. Almost wondering whether we’re going to get snow this winter,” he added with a chuckle.

“Oh, we’ll get snow. You know that. We haven’t seen January yet.”

“This is true.”

Kilda glanced once more at William before returning her attention to Abraham. “Alison and the two bairns keeping well then?”

By this, William, even at his young age, could tell she meant: “Are they treating you well, Abraham? They’re not taking advantage of you now, are they?”

If Abraham detected this too, he didn’t let on. “Oh aye, they’re all well. Alison’s out with Anna doing some foraging for herbs and what not.”

William watched as Kilda’s eyes narrowed (though it was only momentarily). “That’s nice.”

Despite what William might have thought, Abraham was keenly aware that Kilda (like some others in their part of Orkney) disapproved of his marriage to Alison and thought Alison’s “medicine woman ways” were suspicious. But he didn’t hold it against her. Others, maybe. But not Kilda. Kilda was a no nonsense, “prayer fixes all” kind of woman. His own mother had been cut from such cloth. And, if he were to admit it, he himself. That was, until he’d met Alison. His various old age afflictions—gout, memory loss, pain in his fingers and hands—Alison had a draught or ointment or salve or tonic for all of it. And, while she wasn’t able to rid him of these things, the remedies she dutifully and diligently prepared for him had improved his moods and memory, and greatly reduced his physical aches and pains. That Alison was also able to perform this service for a number of people in Stenness—people of all ages and all walks of life—was a tribute to her ability.

“Flour then today again, is it?”

Abraham nodded. “Yes, please, Kilda.”

“Not to worry Abraham. Always happy to help.” She took one last glance at William before turning her head and shouting: “Angus!”

Angus, the eldest of her two sons, was “touched” and it showed as he ran to his mother, mouth open and arms dangling at his sides.

“Get a bag of flour for Mr. Taillifeir,” she said loudly, pointing at Abraham. “Two stone,” she added, holding up a hand to show two fingers.

Angus nodded and set upon the task, William watching all the while.

“Right then,” said Kilda. She stopped when she noticed William watching her son. “It’s not polite to stare. Hasn’t your mother ever told you that, boy?”

William wrenched his gaze from Angus. “Sorry, ma’am. I was only watching him work.”

“Yeah well don’t,” said Kilda, throwing an irritated glance at Abraham, her expression softening as she did. “Abraham. It’s been a pleasure as always. I’ve got other customers to tend to. Angus will have that bag ready for you in a minute.”

Abraham nodded and offered a small smile. “Thank you, Kilda.”

The pair exchanged a parting nod and then Kilda moved to the other side of the stall to step in between her youngest son Robert and a customer who had begun

to row over the price of a pudding. Angus meanwhile appeared with a bag of flour and held it out to William, his expression like that of a faithful canine who has brought his master a bone.

William smiled. His mother had always taught him to be kind to those who were different. "Thank you."

Angus smiled, nodded, and hurried back to his mother's side.

"It's not far to Isaac's stall," said Abraham, not skipping a beat. "Carry that there and make it look like you're capable of hard labour."

William nodded, struggling once more with the heavy sack in his arms.

"Put it over your shoulder, son," Abraham growled, "Christ you're carrying that in the worst way possible."

With some difficulty, William transferred the sack to his right shoulder.

"Good. Now let's get a move on."

It didn't take long for the pair to reach Isaac Rendall's stall. The master carver had the highly coveted spot at the corner of Broad Street and Tankerness Lane though, while easy to find, was difficult to access at the best of times as there was usually a shoulder-to-shoulder crowd of customers waiting to purchase their cured meats, victuals, venison patties, and roasting chickens.

"Is it always like this?" asked William with some anxiety as he eyed the massive crowd.

"Oh, aye. I've seen even more at times."

William wasn't sure how he could manage. He was only ten after all. Working as an apprentice carver and preparing meat for this many people?

"It's nought to worry about," said Abraham gruffly as they stepped forward into a small opening which brought them only somewhat closer to Isaac Rendall's stall, "they're all gone by noon."

William nodded, swallowing the knot in his throat and doing his best to hide his uncertainty.

It took nearly half an hour—and William had to listen to a great deal of grumbling from Abraham—but they finally made it to the front and Abraham was able to get Isaac's attention.

"Looks like you could use an extra set of hands."

Isaac looked up from the rack of ribs he was tying and smiled when he discovered who the voice belonged to.

"Abraham Taillifeir."

"Isaac." Abraham smiled and tipped his hat.

"Haven't seen you in awhile," said Isaac, his smile remaining as he set down his knife, wiped his hands on his blood-stained apron, and came to shake Abraham's hand.

Abraham sighed. "It has been awhile, that's for sure."

William watched as the pair shook hands.

"How's the family?" asked Isaac. "How's Alison? And the bairns? You've got the two, right?"

Abraham, looking rather proud, seemed to grow two or three inches taller. "She's well, thank you. And the bairns are just fine. I've got one of them with me here in fact."

William felt Abraham's hand on his upper back and felt himself being pushed forward.

"And who's this then, eh?" asked Isaac, leaning over the counter to get a better look at the ten year old.

"This here is my son, William. He's ten years old as of this month and ready to work."

A look of comprehension seemed to don on Isaac. "Ah..."

"You can probably guess why we've come to see you then," said Abraham softly.

Isaac, lips pursed, nodded as he studied William's face for a moment.

"He might not look like it," said Abraham, "but he's a hard worker. Always willing ter help... have you need of anyone?"

Isaac nodded and studied the boy once more. "I could use a helper, aye. But I don't want to be training a complete novice..."

Those in the crowd gathered behind and to both sides of Abraham and William were starting to grow restless.

"Come on now..." muttered one large man.

"Market'll be closed before I get what I came for..." complained another.

"All in good time, folks, all in good time!" said Isaac, trouncing on the discontent. He returned his gaze to Abraham. "Tell you what. Let's do a trial next market day. Bring the boy. Have him here for half six. No later. Fair?"

Abraham smiled. "Fair."

"Very well." Isaac nodded and switched his gaze to William. "What say you then boy? Would you like to come and work for me? Would you like to learn to do this (he gestured behind him) for a living?"

William swallowed the knot in his throat and nodded. "Yes, sir. Yes I would."

Isaac smiled. "Very well. We shall see next week. Was that everything then? Or did you want to order anything?"

"We'll get three links of pork sausage please, Isaac, if you would. Thank you."

"Anything for a friend," said Isaac, deftly cutting three links from a chain and handing them to Abraham who paid with a few coins. He turned then to the most restless customers then and shouted: "Right then! Who's next?" as Abraham and William squeezed their way out of the throng of people and returned to the wagon to begin their journey home.

Scene 6

Earl Patrick Stewart and his Wife.

A short distance away at Kirkwall Castle... Earl Patrick Stewart and Lady Margaret Stewart's chambers. Fresh off his rant to all of the staff and courtiers, Patrick continues airing his frustrations with his wife, Margaret. It is obvious that theirs was an arranged marriage, and that Margaret is clearly oppressed by her husband who spews verbal abuse at her most days and hits her on occasion.

“Try to poison me, will they,” Patrick seethed, pacing back and forth. He stopped at the fireplace. “Insolence... treachery... heads will roll.”

He turned and set his eyes upon his wife who sat in her chair, eyes on her embroidery panel.

“What say you? You’ve been sullen all morning.”

Margaret Stewart, formerly Margaret Livingston, sat stoically in her chair. She had decided six months ago, after one of Patrick’s violent outbursts (always exacerbated by his drinking) that she would no longer engage, but would instead accept his vitriol with Christian patience.

“Hey? Answer me when I’m talking to you. You’re my wife, after all.”

Eyes still fixed on her embroidery panel, Margaret simply nodded. “I know not what to say, dear husband. For everything I say, especially when you are in this sort of disposition, only seems to make things worse.”

“Make things worse? Make things worse?” Patrick threw back his head and laughed maniacally. “How on earth, pray tell me woman, can anything possibly be worsel?” He paused for a moment, long enough to stare at his wife with displeasure. “Someone in my own house tried to *poison* me, Margaret! Do you understand!?”

In two great bounds he was at his wife’s side, clenching her hair in a tight fist, his eyes locked on hers, flecks of spittle dotting his lips. “Someone tried to *kill* me!” He wrenched her head back with a mighty pull of the hand and released her. “If someone tried to kill you, Margaret,” he paused to release a laugh which became a hiccup, “would you sit by and accept such treason with your tender grace and humility? Hey?”

To her credit, the woman did not answer.

“No!” Patrick roared, taking up a porcelain dish and hurling it at the wall. The dish shattered into a hundred pieces and shook Margaret to her core. “You wouldn’t! You would grab the nearest blade and plunge it into your victim’s breast!”

(He mimicked plunging a dagger into an imaginary victim). He paused to catch his breath, wiping the sweat from his brow with his sleeve.

An unexpected knocking at the door punctured the silence.

“Who’s there?” Patrick demanded, unsheathing his sword from his side.

“It is I, dear brother. John, the man you made master of Kirkwall.”

Patrick’s eyes narrowed. He looked to his wife for support, but none came.

“Enter,” he said at last, his sword still unsheathed.

The door opened slowly and John appeared in the doorway. Upon seeing the sword, his expression changed.

“You have nothing to fear,” said Patrick thickly, “we are brothers after all,” he added, his tone wavering.

John nodded, swallowing the knot in his throat. “Of course.”

“What is it? Can you not see we are busy?”

John glanced around the room, spotted Margaret hunched over her embroidery panel in her chair in the corner and the porcelain fragments scattered about the floor.

“Er...of course, my lord. Of course. I am most sorry to interrupt you. It’s just... he cast his eyes at the floor as though hesitating.

Patrick stared at him. “Well? Spit it out!”

“Well I...” John made a show of tiptoeing the rest of the way into the room and closing the door behind him. “I have some information... some terribly troubling and vexing information.”

Patrick’s eyebrows seemed to rise. “Oh?”

Margaret meanwhile, ever alert to John’s weasel-like nature, looked up long enough to study his expression.

“It’s my servant, Thomas Paplay.”

Patrick sneered. “And? What of him? Is he leaving? He’s finally realized what a scoundrel you are to work for?”

“I’ve heard murmurings... whispers...” John continued, ignoring his brother’s stinging remarks.

Patrick laughed. “Oh please, brother, is there no depth to which you won’t sink?”

John’s eyes burned into his brother’s. “I only meant to tell you that he is rumored to have been implicated in the plot to poison you... my lord.”

Watching him closely, Margaret for once was unable to determine whether he was lying or telling the truth.

“And what would Thomas Paplay have to gain from my murder?”

“Well,” John cleared his throat, “he would evidently climb the social ladder now, wouldn’t he. For of course if something were to befall you—and curse my eyes out if my words come true, dear brother—but if some misfortune were to befall you and you were to... die... then I, as next in line would assume the title and rank of Earl of Orkney. And thus, surely Thomas would gain by my ascendancy.”

Patrick nodded, but said nothing.

John, unsure how to proceed, inspected his fingernails.

“Well, dear brother,” said Patrick after what seemed an eternity, “thank you for this information and I shall be sure to have Thomas investigated immediately. Now leave us, and I don’t wish to see you again before supper.”

Scene 7

Baking and Brushing with the Balfours.

A few hours later. Abraham and William have returned from the market by now and are outside brushing and caring for the family’s two horses. Inside, Alison and daughter Anna are baking bread, with Alison instructing her daughter on how to properly knead and prep the dough for baking.

“Now when you roll it out, you need to make sure you put some flour down so it doesn’t stick to the table.”

Anna watched her mother for a moment and realized she'd been shown this before.

"I can do it!" she insisted, grabbing at her mother's hand as Alison went to demonstrate sprinkling flour on the table top.

"Alright, alright, you do it," said Alison patiently.

Mother then looked on (proudly) as daughter tended to the task with that eagerness children display when trying to prove to an adult they can do something. When she was finished, and the table top was covered in a generous layer of brown flour, the girl held up her hands.

"I'm not doing anything with those," said Alison with a laugh, taking a step backwards as her daughter advanced towards her.

The girl gave a small whimper and glanced at her hands.

"Let them as they are until we've finished. It will keep the dough from sticking to your hands."

"But... why does it do that... why does it stick to my hands?"

Alison smiled. "It's chemistry, my child. Now let's roll out this dough, shall we?"

Meanwhile in the stables out back...

Abraham paused long enough to lean against the fence and catch his breath.

"Father?" William, a concerned expression on his face, set down the shovel he'd been using to clean the horses' stalls. "Are you alright?"

Abraham smiled as he watched the boy make his way to his side. Sighing, he rested a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Age, lad, age." He smiled again. "It gets the best of us."

William looked as though he didn't understand.

"You'll know what I mean when you're my age," said Abraham with a chuckle. He tousled the boy's hair and then, with a mighty heave, pushed himself off the fence so that he stood upright once more. "Come, let's get our chores done so we can go inside and warm our hands by the fire."

Scene 8

Supper in the Great Hall.

Later that evening. Kirkwall Castle. The Great Hall. Earl Patrick Stewart sits at the head of the table. Along the sides of the table sit his wife Margaret, brother John Stewart, chamberlain Henry Colville, and several other anonymous courtiers. Also seated at the table is a visiting priest from the Shetland Islands. On the table lie the half-eaten remnants of black bread, roast pheasant, blood sausage, roast vegetables, and other items. Glasses of wine and mugs of ale complement the food on the table.

"Do you mean to tell me the crofters there have no means of producing flour?"

The priest shook his head. "They do me Lord, we have a mill, but it is just one and she's not in good shape."

“Such a place doesn’t need a mill,” said Henry dourly, draining his mug of ale so that dribbles ran down his chin. “Shetland men are fishers and foremost.”

“With all due respect,” said the priest, his manner becoming defensive, “we have many crofters on Shetland. Some men do both—fishing and farming.”

With an air of boredom, Patrick swirled the remaining wine in his glass before taking a sip. “So long as they continue to pay their taxes, I have little mind as to how the men of Shetland earn a living.”

The table grew silent for a moment, the only sounds being the scraping of utensils and Henry Colville’s grotesque gnawing and gnashing and slurping sounds as he ate. Patrick snapped his fingers at a servant, breaking the silence.

“Yes, my Lord?”

“More wine, Adam. And see that Susan opens a new bottle. Until our guilty party has been found, I shall drink from a new bottle only.”

“Yes, of course, my Lord,” was the servant’s reply before he rushed away to do the earl’s bidding.

“Forgive my curiosity, Earl Stewart,” the priest began, “but what guilty party do you speak of? What injustice has been committed?”

“Dearest Oswald, where do I begin. I live amongst a nest of vipers, a horde of Mongols. There is always one or two within the castle walls vying for this (he tapped the crown on his head).”

The priest appeared somewhat bewildered by the earl’s frank speech, but nonetheless maintained a stoic and empathetic expression. “I dare not utter the words, Earl Stewart, and forgive me for pursuing my curiosity... but has someone tried to do you harm?”

Patrick smiled as he looked at the faces around the table. “Yes Oswald, someone tried to harm me in the most despicable and cowardly way... someone (he continued to scan the faces, the eyes of each lowering to avoid his gaze as his eyes settled on theirs) tried to poison me.”

“Poison?”

Patrick sighed and nodded theatrically as Adam returned with his glass of wine. “I was sat in this very spot the night before last. We were eating supper as we are now, with the same individuals you see here before you.”

“But...” the priest’s face had drained of colour, “...how... and how did you escape such a plot?”

“Well, let me tell you Oswald that adder’s venom, no matter what may be used to mask the taste, is a foul and entirely noxious substance. I don’t imagine the culprit sampled the poison beforehand so he or she (he glanced at his wife), would surely not have known how ludicrously disgusting it tastes. I sipped my wine (he took his glass from Adam) just like this and I spat it out before swallowing a drop, the taste was off putting.”

“God is with you, Earl Stewart,” said the priest quietly.

Patrick nodded and waved Adam away as he closed his eyes, bowing his head with an air of ceremony. “This I know, dear Oswald. This I know. God supports me and has put me in this position for a reason,” he continued, his eyes opening slowly. “Who else is fit and worthy enough to govern these islands? Orkney and Shetland had hard lands with few resources. The Earl of Caithness wishes me dead. Is it he who has acted through someone in this castle? I am like Christ

among the Romans, an eternal martyr and it is only by the grace of God that I sit here to speak these words now.”

“My Lord,” Henry had had enough. After all, he was the earl’s chamberlain and if a crime had been committed, it was his duty to find the culprit. To ignore this duty, to fail at this duty, would be a curse greater than the curse God sent upon Lot. “If I may, as chancellor, I swear I will leave no stone unturned in my search for the man or woman responsible.”

Patrick nodded as would a parent listening to a child.

“And I swear the same, dear brother,” said John. “Was it not I who brought you information this very morning about Thomas Paplay?”

Two things happened in this moment. First, Patrick scoffed at his brother’s remark (as he had earlier that morning). Second, Henry, as alert an owl on the hunt narrowed his eyes and demanded of John to explain.

“I have heard rumours that the servant, Thomas Paplay—my servant I am sorry to say—was involved in the plot to murder my dear brother.”

“Where did you obtain this information?”

“Ah, Henry, as much as I would like to divulge who my whisperers are in this castle, I’m afraid I cannot. Suffice it to say that my information sources are as sound as the walls of this castle.”

While Patrick rolled his eyes and made some disparaging remark, Henry seemed intent on following up the lead.

“My Lord, I think it wise to consider all options in our search. Do you trust me to conduct a proper and thorough investigation to find the culprit?”

It was a gamble and everyone at the table, most of all Henry, knew it. For if Patrick were to answer “no”, then Henry would be publicly humiliated and effectively denounced, confidence in his office and title utterly abandoned.

But Patrick, sensing the gravity of the situation, and with all eyes on him, allowed himself to nod. “Yes, Henry. As my chancellor, I trust you with conducting a complete and thorough investigation. Now,” he removed the napkin from his lap and dropped in unceremoniously on his plate, “I have rather had a long day and I shall retire now to my chambers. See that Oswald is treated with utmost care and respect while he is our guest (he gave a nod to the priest) and I shall see you all at breakfast.”

While the evening may have been over for Patrick, it was only getting started for Henry and poor Thomas Paplay.

Scene 9

Thomas Paplay is Apprehended.

The following morning, Sunday, December 4, 1594. It is a day of rest for most of the castle servants and courtiers. We find ourselves in the Paplay family’s chambers. Through the window, one can see it is cold and gray outside. Baby Isabelle sleeps in her crib by the fire. The fire crackles gently in

the background. June Paplay lies on a chaise (also by the fire), reading a book. Thomas, fresh from hemming his pants, has just risen from his chair at the table.

“Thomas?”

“Yes, dear wife.”

The man smiled as he crouched down beside the woman.

“My shoulders are sore... give me a massage?”

She smiled at him. He knew this smile. He knew where a massage might lead. He cleared his throat. “Of course, my queen. Let me go and wash up.”

“Don’t be long,” she cooed.

Thomas grinned as he crossed the room to where the wash basin stood. On his way he passed their sleeping baby, Isabelle. His eyes fell tenderly upon her gentle, sleeping form.

Such perfection... such innocence, he thought. What a beautiful child we’ve created...

A forceful banging at the door interrupted his thoughts. “Yes? Who is it?” he called, turning towards the door. He glanced at his wife who had by now sat up and was adjusting her blouse so it would not reveal so much of her ample bosom.

“It is Henry, the earl’s chamberlain.”

Thomas’s face grew concerned. Was he here to question him about John? Surely John must have sensed something earlier that day—which had of course given him cause to come and see him and command him to remain watchful of rumours...was it too late though? Had rumour progressed to suspicion and was his master now chained up in the dungeons somewhere being interrogated? The animosity between the two brothers, Patrick and John, was well known and perhaps Patrick now had the upper hand.

These were the thoughts swirling through the servant’s head as he made his way to the door, unlatched it, and pulled it open.

“Thomas Paplay?”

“Good morning, sir.”

Henry shouldered his way past the young man, at the head of two courtiers who Thomas recognized, but whose names he did not know. “I have information,” the chamberlain continued, glancing at June, his eye’s affixing themselves to her bare shoulders for a moment before returning to Thomas, “that you may be involved in the plot to murder our Earl, Patrick Stewart.”

Thomas’ face fell. This was why Henry had come? Henry, a man whose methods of torture and interrogation tactics had become the objects of local legend? Thomas gulped.

Henry eyed him with a curious stare. “Have you nothing to say for yourself? Are you admitting guilt with your silence?”

Thomas shook his head with violent force. “No! Absolutely not!”

June had appeared from seemingly nowhere and she now stood firmly beside her husband. “Guilty of trying to murder the earl!? My husband!? You must be joking!”

Henry pursed his lips and looked past them at the two courtiers to whom he now gave a nod. At his nod, the pair began ransacking the room, throwing open cupboards and emptying drawers.

“What is the meaning of this?” asked Thomas, attempting to remain polite and deferential to this man who had been known to cut out the tongues of those he perceived had been rude to him. “Why am I being accused? I’ve done nothing. I swear it in the name of the Lord.”

The noise generated by the two courtiers ransacking the Paplay’s chambers had by now woken young Isabelle who began to wail and whine.

“Now look what you’ve done!” June hissed, clearly undeterred by Henry’s reputation. She went for Isabelle and took the baby into her arms.

Henry watched her for a moment, his eyes scanning her face, and he in disbelief at her lack of fear.

“Sir, we found this.”

All eyes turned to look at the more gangly of the two courtiers. In his right hand, pressed between thumb and index finger, was a vial.

Henry’s eyes narrowed. “Bring it here.” He was examining it under the light of a lantern in the next moment and ordering the two courtiers to shackle Thomas in the moment immediately after.

“But... but... this is madness!” cried Thomas as the two courtiers seized him by the arms and placed shackles over his wrists.

The more portly of the two courtiers locked the shackles using a key tied to a cord which hung around his neck while the other tied a gag around Henry’s mouth.

“What is happening!?” June demanded (with much more force). “You can’t just take him! He’s done nothing wrong!”

As she stared into the face of Henry, her expression went from angry to pleading to angry again.

“Oh, but I can take him... and I will. Do you see this here?” He held out the vial.

June shrugged, the baby on her shoulder whimpering softly. “That doesn’t even belong to us.”

Clasping his pudgy hand around the vial, Henry nodded, as would a priest hearing a confession from one of his flock. “This vial contains a liquid which resembles adder’s venom. In other words, this is not a vial of perfume.”

“It’s not ours!” June roared.

Henry ignored her as though she were a child throwing a tantrum, continuing in his calm demeanour. “As I said, the liquid remaining in this vial—meaning some of it was presumably used—resembles adder’s venom. I shall test it on one of the cats to confirm. At any rate, your husband is now under arrest and charged with conspiracy to murder Earl Patrick Stewart.

“No! Please!”

“Whether,” he continued, “your husband has acted alone, “or whether there are others involved, we shall soon find out.”

“No! Please!”

“Take him away,” Henry spat.

Thomas’s eyes were pleading as he stared after his wife, the two courtiers dragging him from the apartment. June ran for him, but Henry grabbed her by the

hair and held her fast. "You'll stay here and mind your baby if you know what's good for you." And with that, he threw her sideways and exited the apartment, taking care to slam the door behind him.

Scene 10

The Balfours at Home.

Meanwhile at the Balfour household... Alison is cooking at the stove, William is outside gathering eggs and doing his other chores. Abraham sits in his chair while Anna fiddles with the green onions her mother has cut up to go with breakfast.

"Anna, would you stop that, please. It's not polite to play with the food we're about to eat."

The girl stopped and wiped her hands of the green onions (which caused the pieces to bounce around and roll off the wooden cutting board). "I'm bored."

"Go and help your brother with the chores."

"I'm too little to do chores, mum."

Abraham, seated in his chair by the fire, let out a mighty chuckle. "Too little for chores? By Joseph. If you had been a child in my day, you'd be already toiling in the fields."

"But she wasn't born in your day," said Alison with some irritation. "Things were undoubtedly more difficult back then."

"What's that?"

Alison turned so that she faced the back of Abraham's chair. "I said," she began, more loudly this time, "things were more difficult back then."

Abraham nodded, his expression nostalgic. "Aye, that they were. That they were indeed."

"Here you are," said Alison, setting a mug of warm milk down before her daughter. "Don't let it get cold."

"My father had me working with him in the fields by the time I was our Anna's age. Yep. It toughened me up too."

Alison rolled her eyes as she brought a mug of warm milk to her husband. "Well, be grateful then. There's no need for her to be working in the fields. Not in this day and age. I'd rather have her join the convent."

Abraham smiled as he took a sip of milk. "That's always a possibility."

Alison made a sound as she returned to the stove. "Not if I can help it though. The way the church goes on about all their good works. Have you seen the food wasted by the clergy? Have you seen the dinners they eat?"

Abraham sighed. "Aye... aye, I have."

"What's a clergy, mum?"

"People of the church, dear. The priests and deacons."

Anna looked perplexed. "Why're they called a clergy?"

"I don't know, Anna. Because. That's why. Go outside and help your brother gather eggs. Lilly's been laying twice a day lately."

Anna nodded and slid off her chair, her tongue pressed against the outside of her lip in concentration.

"There's a good girl," said Alison encouragingly, fixing her daughter's hair with two fingers as she passed by.

"I smell tomatoes," said Abraham.

Alison smiled. "I've lots of preserves to use over the next few months."

"Aye. It was a good season. I haven't seen a year like this since I was a young man."

"All those centuries ago," Alison quipped with a cheeky smile.

"Eh?" Abraham's tone was humorous as he could tell she'd made one of her usual remarks.

"I said, all those centuries ago."

Abraham chuckled. "Aye, aye, I'm an old man, I know." He turned in his chair. "But I made out quite well now, didn't I?"

"Aye you did. And don't ye forget it!" Alison snapped with good humour, smiling as she pointed her soup ladle at the man.

"I'm going outside to help William," Anna announced.

"Okay, have fun. Be good."

"I will," said the little girl with a sigh.

Alison smiled as she watched her young daughter fumble with the door latch. She managed to unlatch it after some difficulty and she disappeared outside, pulling the door shut behind her—once, twice, and three times before it finally shut fully.

Abraham let out a sigh and looked out the window to his right, the window that looked out onto the front yard.

"What are they doing?" asked Alison with intense curiosity. Now that Anna was seven and William was ten, they were clashing more often and she wanted to make sure she nipped any conflict in the bud.

"William is showing Anna an egg... now she's trying to take it from him... and he's just pushed her over."

While Abraham seemed to find the moment amusing, Alison most certainly did not.

"Right then!"

"Don't be too hard on the boy, Alison..." Abraham muttered as he watched his wife wrench the door open.

"He's got to know he can't be pushing his sister around like that. He'll grow up to be a man who beats his wife."

Abraham had nothing to say to this and he nodded as he watched her head outside. He could hear her yelling, though he couldn't make out the words. Her tone softened after a time and he watched as she seemed to change the energy of the situation. She was huddled together with the two, bent down so that she was Anna's height. William had to bend slightly so that he too could be in the huddle. Alison appeared to be showing the two the egg and then she pointed to three hens grouped together a short distance away. He was always amazed at her ability to calm a situation. She was never one to become hysterical. At least she'd never had

cause to become hysterical. But he admired the patience and tolerance and kindness she showed to the many people who visited, all wanting and needing something different. She was mindful and tactful in her questioning so that she did not offend her visitors. This meant that, while initially they may have arrived on their doorstep with fear and anger or feeling helpless or sad, she was able to extract all the information she needed to make a proper diagnosis. While on occasion one or two would return to inform her that her remedies hadn't worked—and in fact, there had been those who died despite her best efforts to create a remedy for them—the vast majority of folks in Stenness and in the surrounding parishes were happy with her good work. A bonus was that these same folks were often very generous in their gratitude and Alison had been the recipient of numerous chickens, livestock, garden produce, and silver pieces. While Abraham's land holdings and the earnings they produced was generally enough to take care of the family financially, there were wet and dry seasons where crops had nearly failed or completely failed and Alison's extra income (including the livestock and garden produce she received) had been most beneficial.

"There we are," said Alison with a patient sigh.

He hadn't noticed her until she was over the threshold and closing the door behind her.

"All is well again between them?"

Alison nodded as she made her way to the wash basin. "Aye... for now. William's getting older and starting to take advantage of his age and size—like all men are prone to do. Best to keep him on a short lead. And if he does get on with Isaac Rendall as an apprentice carver, this can only be a good thing."

Abraham watched as his wife rinsed her hands in the wash basin and wiped them on her apron. "Aye. I'm sure I can convince him. Isaac and I go back a fair ways. I used to be good friends with his father, you know."

Alison smiled. "I know. You told me."

Abraham chuckled. "You'll have to get used to me repeating myself. I'm an old man now. It happens to the best of us."

Alison set down the soup ladle she had just taken up in her hand and she made her way over to where her husband sat. He watched her as she took hold of his face in her hands—her hands which were always so soft—and then he closed his eyes as she kissed him on the forehead. "If you are an old man, then you are a wonderful old man. And I don't know where we would be without you."

Abraham looked up at her. "I don't know where I would be without you. You and the bairns... it's made my life whole."

Alison smiled and caressed the smooth top of his balding head. "And you have made our lives whole, husband. You have made our lives whole."

Scene 11

The Torture of Thomas Paplay.

Later that evening. Kirkwall Castle dungeons. It is dark and dreary and damp. All of the walls and the ceilings are made of stone. Skulls sit on a shelf in one corner, rats scurry through the shadows, and a fire blazes in one corner. In the middle of the room, bathed in the glow of several lanterns, Henry Colville and two jailers stand over Thomas who is strapped to a wooden board, stripped of all his clothing save for his undergarments.

“Well, well, well,” said Henry as he peered down at Thomas. “Curious how we find ourselves in this position.” Without warning, Henry dropped his elbow into the poor man’s exposed stomach.

Thomas writhed, but made no sound owing to the rag stuffed in his mouth. His eyes, wild with fright, jumped from Henry to the jailers and back again.

“I’ll presume you know why you’re here,” said Henry gravely, making a show of rolling up his sleeves and exposing his pudgy white arms.

Thomas tried to cry out, but no words could escape his incapacitated mouth. He’d done nothing wrong. Nothing. And here he was in the castle dungeon, awaiting what, he did not know...

“You are here,” Henry continued with an air of impatience, “because you conspired to murder my employer, Earl Patrick Stewart, whom you know quite well having served at this castle for nigh on four years.” He dropped his elbow once more into Thomas’ stomach and Thomas writhed in pain yet again. “Now. I’m wanting a confession from you...” His gaze was piercing. “...and we can do this the hard way or we can do this the easy way. What have you to say?”

Thomas shook his head as he tried to speak through the rag in his mouth.

“I’ll remove the rag, but the words out of your mouth had better be good.”

“I didn’t do anything! I swear! I swear upon my mother’s grave! I—”

Henry rammed the rag back into poor Thomas’ mouth. “I see you’ve opted for the hard way...”

He turned to the jailers and gave a small nod. Thomas follow his gaze, the horrified expression on his face growing more and more horrified with each passing second. The thinner, gangly jailer grinned wickedly, flashing a row of yellow teeth and shuffled to the other side of the room as though to fetch something. The portly jailer, with his simple expression, and presenting very much as what his wife would call a “mouth breather”, ambled after his counterpart.

Thomas looked up at Henry who did not return his gaze, but stared into the darkness after the two jailers.

When the jailers returned a minute later, they dragged between them what appeared to Thomas to be an iron skeleton. Upon further inspection however, and as they neared, he could see that it was an iron casing made into the shape of a man’s body.

Henry gestured with a hand. “The caschillaws. Depending on what you tell me when I remove the rag from your mouth—and I will give you this last chance—I may have no choice but to place you inside. And I can tell you, it gets a little warm when Gerard heats it...” he added, indicating the thinner of the two jailers.

Thomas shook his head, his expression pleading.

Henry smiled. “Are you ready to confess then? Are you ready to tell me everything?”

The servant nodded and Henry removed the rag from his mouth once more.

“I swear, sir, I didn’t do anything! I’m innocent! You have the wrong man! I’m inno—”

The rag was stuffed back into his mouth, Henry shaking his head in disappointment. “You leave me no choice, I’m afraid, Thomas. You shall be placed into the caschillaws and we can speak again in a day or two. I believe you may have something to say by then.” He smiled, a thin, crooked smile as Gerard and the other jailer freed Thomas from the wooden board just long enough to place him inside the iron body casing. When this was done and the iron casing had been bolted shut, the two jailers carried it to the far side of the room (with poor Thomas inside) where stood the fire and the furnace.

“Heat him up slowly tonight, Gerard,” said Henry dryly as he made to leave. “And make sure Otis doesn’t kill him. I need a confession.”

“Yes, sir!” the jailer replied, his yellow teeth illuminated by the light of the lanterns.

With a nod, Henry exited the dungeon and poor Thomas Paplay was left to wonder what horrors awaited him, his heart aching for his beautiful wife and child.

Scene 12

The Many Moods of Patrick Stewart.

Kirkwall Caste. Monday, December 5, 1594. Earl Patrick Stewart’s apartments. Patrick sits in his chair by the fire at one end of the room while Lady Margaret Stewart sits in a chair at the opposite end of the room, her maid Claire making her hair up for the day.

With a lazy air, Patrick twirled a stray thread on his lapel, and while his expression would appear vacant to any casual observer, his eyes, as they often were, were keen and observant. He liked to sit in this chair, his chair, the chair only he sat in. No one else was allowed to sit in his chair, not even his wife...

He glanced across the room at his wife and her maid, Claire, who stood behind her fixing her hair into a white snood that matched her white dress. It was elaborate work and often took up the better part of most mornings. While Claire worked on Margaret’s hair, the pair discussed the social news happening around the castle.

“Must you two gossip so much?” drawled Patrick irritably after listening to yet another story about Barbara, one of the serving staff and Alan the stable boy. “If those two wish to hump like rabbits... while in my employ mind you... I really don’t give a fiddler’s fart... though if the girl is with child, she really can’t stay on here any longer...” His eyes moved to Claire. “And Claire, you encourage my wife to wag her tongue so.” The maid avoided his gaze. A year ago she’d have met his gaze with her own. She had been attracted to him, attracted to the power he wielded.

But such a man and his power come with privileges that extend beyond what is acceptable and the last time she had looked at Patrick, he'd forced himself upon her, her gaze clearly an invitation that she wanted him in such a fashion.

"You're worse than a couple of hens, you lot," the earl continued. "Always pecking and clucking your beaks about anyone but yourselves. Are you so perfect? Are you above judgment?" When no answer came, he added: "you both need a turn in the Scold's Bridle."

"Oh, husband." Margaret had bit. She'd taken the bait.

"Oh, wife!" Patrick bellowed, leaping out of his chair. "Oh, wife! You in all your infinite glory. You're wondrous eyes and your wondrous form—a spectacle to be hold. Hark thee, what angel is this who graces us with her celestial presence!?"

Now Claire turned to look at the man for his manner had changed so abruptly she feared what he was capable of. Margaret's expression, meanwhile, was unreadable.

Patrick looked from one to the other, before setting his gaze once more on Claire. "I've a wife who will no longer share a bed with me. I'm forced to listen to this awful gossip. Someone in this castle has tried to poison me! Is there any end to this madness!?"

Margaret, who had obviously heard enough, rose forcefully from her chair, picked up her skirts, and marched from the room, headed up the small flight of stone stairs which led to her sleeping chambers. Patrick waved a hand with a dismissive air as Margaret slammed the door shut behind her.

Claire, nervous at being left alone with the wild-eyed, clearly unpredictable earl, curtsied and made for the main door.

"Ah!" said Patrick, raising a hand.

Claire stopped, though she dared not look at him.

"Look at me. Let me see your eyes."

The maid turned, slowly, so that she faced his direction, but still did not look at him.

"I said look at me!" he bellowed.

Claire, shaking now, raised her eyes slowly so that they could settle on Patrick's face.

Patrick smiled. "Was that so difficult? You've such a pretty face, it's only fair I get to look at you."

Claire averted her eyes and Patrick let out a long sigh.

"Very well, be gone with you. I've no need for women who detest me so."

The maid didn't need telling twice and she hurried out of the room without so much as a glance back.

Scene 13

John Stewart Pays a Visit to the Dungeon.

A short time later. We find ourselves coming upon a conversation between John Stewart and the two jailers (Gerard and Otis) inside the dungeons.

“And what is it to you if I see the prisoner who is my servant?”

John Stewart eyed Gerard and Otis through narrowed eyes.

“Well... my lord... it’s not...” Gerard began, “Henry has asked that we not admit anyone...”

John smiled. Of course Henry would impose such a condition. “I’ll tell you what,” he said quietly, taking a step towards the gangly, pock-marked man with the yellow-stained teeth, “I’ll give you a piece of silver each to let me pass through. I’ve seen Henry leave just a short time ago and I would like to speak with my servant. Besides, who are you to defy me?” He removed his change purse and plucked from it two pieces of silver which he now held out for the two jailers. “Shall you allow me to pass?”

“Aye, my lord!” cried Otis immediately, his eyes fixed eagerly on the silver pieces John held.

John smiled. “There we are then, a simple transaction.” He dropped the silver into Otis’ hand, knowing full well they would likely both be taken from him by Gerard. “I shan’t be more than a quarter of an hour.”

“I...I don’t know, my lord,” said Gerard suddenly, obviously having second thoughts. “Henry gave us strict orders.”

“And my rank and office,” Patrick growled, “supersede those of Henry. Now I will pass,” he said, making a show of reaching for his dagger, “or I will run you through.”

Gerard’s eyes flashed scarlet as he eyed the dagger at Patrick’s fingertips. “Certainly, sir. Certainly.”

“Good. Now which way to my servant, Thomas Paplay?”

It took more than five minutes for John to descend three sets of stone stairs and walk along two dark and musty corridors, but soon John was seated beside his servant. They are alone, the two jailers having stayed back near the dungeon entrance.

“Please, sir! Save me!” were the first words from Thomas’ mouth upon seeing John. “Tell them they have an innocent man!”

Thomas, still encased in the caschillaws, his eyes wild with terror, looked a poor sight. His skin was burned in many places and the rag that had spent many an hour in poor Thomas’ mouth lay on the floor beside him, he having managed to dislodge it with his tongue.

John conjured up a look of dismay and shook his head. “I’m afraid that even if I were to say such a thing, they would not believe me. It is said that Henry found a vial of adder’s venom in your chambers. Were you involved? Did you try to murder my brother?”

“No, sir! Absolutely not! I had nothing to do with the plot against your brother! I swear on my mother’s grave!”

John pursed his lips. “I want to believe you, Thomas. I do. You have been a faithful servant to me these past few years.”

“Sir! I swear to you! I swear on all that is holy. I had nothing to do with the plot against your brother! I am innocent!”

John nodded, allowing himself to appear convinced. “As you know, there is already suspicion amongst some of the courtiers that I want my brother dead. My servant being found to have in his possession, a vial of adder’s venom, well, now this doesn’t look good for me now, does it?”

“I know, sir! I know! Please, I do not know from whence that vial came! I had never seen it before that moment!”

John’s eyes narrowed. “Perhaps your wife...?”

Thomas shook his head. “No! June? She would never!”

“Well, Henry believes you to be guilty,” said John with a sniff. “Otherwise he wouldn’t have you here.”

“But why?”

“Because of the vial, Thomas! And because Henry needs someone to place the blame on.”

Thomas blinked, watching his employer through tear-filled eyes, a pained expression on his face.

“I know this is a terrible situation, Thomas...I don’t know what else to tell you.” He scanned the young man’s body from head to toe, his body encased in the iron frame, his burned and scarred flesh clearly apparent through the spaces between the bars. “What I can tell you is that if you truly are innocent...and if you love your wife and child—which I am certain you do—then you may want to consider extracting yourself from this situation.”

“How, sir? I’ll do anything.”

“Well...” John had to think carefully for a moment. “There are certain folk on our island who delve in the dark arts.”

“Magic?”

John frowned. “Witches.”

“Witches?”

“That’s what I said. Witches, Thomas, are the kind of folk who deal in poison. It is common knowledge that poison is a woman’s weapon...perhaps there is a witch in our midst. Perhaps there is a witch on Orkney who wishes my dear brother dead. Perhaps...” he paused for effect, “we can steer Henry to a witch and you can go free.”

“You think so?”

John shrugged. “It’s worth trying, is it not?”

“I’ll do anything.” Thomas’ expression was pleading once more. “I can’t possibly leave my wife and daughter to go it alone in this cruel world.”

John sighed. “Well then, we need to think of someone... a woman, to be clear... a woman who delves in potions and things of that sort...” While John was no master at chess or keeping tally of the treasury, he was certainly shrewd and resourceful when it came to saving his skin. He had acquired these talents out of sheer necessity over the years, and these talents did not desert him in this instance. “I know of a woman,” he said quietly, “she resides with her family in Stenness. She is said to be a medicine woman. She prepares ointments and salves and potions and the like. One of Margaret’s relations... a Lady Bellenden... I heard tell of her regularly procuring a salve from this woman of Stenness. Balfour. That’s

the woman's name. She is well-known in these parts. It would not be too far a stretch of the imagination to suggest that she prepared the vial of adder's venom destined for my brother."

Thomas' eyes were sad.

"You look troubled."

"Sir... how can I... if she is innocent as I am... how can I place this burden on her?"

John smiled. The weak were all the same. They were all the same with their values and morals and integrity. And where did it ever get them in life? They often ended up with their heads on pikes...

"It is your decision, Thomas. I leave this up to you. But if I were in your position—" he paused as he took in once more the state of the young man's burned and scarred body, "I would certainly not hesitate to divert attention from myself. Again, think of your wife and daughter..."

Scene 14

Henry Provides an Update.

While John Stewart is in the dungeons, Henry has gone to call on his brother, Earl Patrick Stewart. Patrick stands at the table by the fire, pouring himself a mug of ale. Candlelight flickers and dances along the walls. A knock at the door makes him jump and he splashes a few drops of ale on the table.

"Who is it?" demanded Patrick, wiping up the ale he had spilled.

"It is, my lord. Henry."

"Enter."

Patrick replaced the cloth over the pitcher of ale and then, on second thought, removed the cloth.

"My lord—" the chamberlain began, taking a few steps into the room and closing the door behind him.

"—hold your tongue, Henry. Here."

Henry stopped and watched as the earl poured a second mug of ale.

"Drink this. Let me know if it's safe for consumption," said Patrick dryly, turning to the chamberlain and handing him the mug.

"My lord..." Henry eyed the mug with great uncertainty.

Patrick smiled. "Don't fear, my friend. If it is poisoned, your death will be swift."

Henry nodded, though beads of sweat had appeared on his forehead. "Thank you, my lord."

"No, thank you, Henry."

Patrick watched as Henry smelled the ale in his mug, swirled it around, and finally took a cautious sip.

"Your verdict?"

Henry swallowed the ale in his mouth and gave a nod. "Tastes fine to me."

“Splendid,” said Patrick with a smile, replacing the cloth over the pitcher of ale and taking up his mug. “To health and longevity.”

Henry raised his glass. “To health and longevity.”

“So then, have you news for me? What of Thomas Paplay? Has he confessed to being a part of the plot to have me poisoned? Surely you still don’t think he acted alone?”

Henry swallowed the knot in his throat. “No, my lord... I do not. I do believe he acted on behalf of another... dare I suggest, your brother, John.”

Patrick shook his head and then, without warning, swept his mug of ale from the table so that it hurtled through the air and crashed to the floor, but not before spraying ale in all directions.

“My lord—”

“Don’t!” Patrick hissed, moving to Henry and sticking his index finger in his face, “accuse my brother. I know he is a foul creature, but he is not guilty of fratricide.”

Henry nodded, swallowing the newly formed knot in his throat as more sweat appeared on his forehead.

“Now, tell me, has Thomas confessed?”

“No, my lord.”

Patrick shook his head with obvious disappointment. “Without a confession, Henry, we have no case. How do you expect to execute a man without a confession? And furthermore, how are we to extract the nest of vipers within this castle? Someone tried to kill me. I want to know who.” He stepped once more towards the chamberlain and stuck his finger in his face. “You find out who. You find out who and I shall double your salary.”

Henry nodded as the earl stared at him through murderous eyes. “I will, my lord. I will find the persons responsible...and I will not stop until I have.”

Patrick smiled, retracting his finger and taking hold of Henry’s mug of ale. “Very good. Go on then and leave me to my drink, you have much work to do.”

“Yes, my lord,” said the chamberlain, bowing as he retreated to the door and pulled it open.

“And I want an update each day,” Patrick called after him. “None of this waiting three days for news. Is that understood?”

Henry bowed once more. “Aye, my lord.”

“Very well.” Patrick waved a hand as though to shoo the chamberlain away. “Get to it.”

Scene 15

Henry Extracts a Confession.

Castle dungeons. Half of an hour later. Henry has gone straight from his meeting with Earl Patrick Stewart to the dungeons. His pride offended, and

feeling slightly humiliated, he's on a warpath. John Stewart has just finished speaking to Thomas and is making his way back to the dungeon entrance.

“Right then!”

Henry's voice carries through the dungeon, echoing forcefully off the walls as he shouldered the heavy metal door open. The door clangs against the wall, sending an even louder echo along the walls and down the corridor.

“Sir!”

The two jailers, obviously startled by his sudden and brusque appearance, leap from their chairs.

“What is it? What's the matter?” Henry demands upon seeing the expression on their faces.

“Well... sir... you did say you would return tomorrow...” mumbled Gerard, keenly aware that if Henry came upon John he would be made to suffer.

Henry sniffed. “I said I would return tomorrow and then I spoke to the earl and he would like a confession. And so I have returned,” his breathing grew heavy as his temperature began to rise and his pulse quickened, “today to get that confession.” He took a step towards Gerard so that he was close enough to see the droplets of sweat on his face. “Are you going to help me? What the hell do you get paid for if you can't get a confession—from a servant no less!?”

“Henry.” John's voice was quiet yet commanding as he stepped into the pool of light cast onto the stone floor by the pair of lanterns on the wall.

The chamberlain turned and glared at the man. “And just what exactly are you doing here?”

John smiled. “Am I not allowed to pay a visit to my own dungeons?”

Henry's eyes narrowed to mere slits. “You would be wise to remember that these are still your brother's dungeons.”

“I disagree. As Master of Orkney, the dungeons of Kirkwall Castle are as much mine as they are my brother's.”

Henry glared at him, but said nothing. Gerard and Otis meanwhile, wanting no part of this conversation, shrank into the shadows.

“I can't tell you how disappointed I am, Henry that after an entire day, not only has my brother's would-be murderer not been found, my servant has remained in your custody. So now I am without a servant and my brother is without his attempted murderer. Do you find such exemplary work befitting of a chamberlain?”

“I have just been to see your brother,” Henry snarled, “and he assured me that he wants a confession as soon as possible. And he shall get one.” Henry now took a step towards John who, unlike Gerard, did not shrink away. “Furthermore, I shall be most satisfied when he admits to acting on your orders.”

“My orders? Just what are you inferring? If I were you, I would my tongue on such matters. Allegations such as that one are taken very seriously.” John's tone was threatening.

“Allegations are often based in fact,” said Henry in a low growl.

John smiled, but said nothing. “Either charge my servant with something and get a confession or return him to me. That is an order. I shall give you three more days.”

“You shall have him back when we are through with him,” said Henry softly, his eyes flickering.

John knew he had gone too far...they would torture poor Thomas to death. If not because they believed him guilty, then because Thomas was his servant and Henry would take the opportunity to settle a personal score. But then, at least his secret would be buried. With Thomas’ death, there would be nothing connecting him to the vial of poison.

“Do as you will. But rest assured, if you are unsuccessful in finding those who would do harm to my brother, I will see to it that you are stripped of your office and title.”

Henry’s eyes narrowed to slits once more. “We shall see about that.”

John made a show of having smelled something truly revolting and, with an expression of sheer scorn, shouldered the chamberlain aside and exited the dungeon.

“He’s not happy...” said Otis with a chuckle.

“I’m not happy!” Henry roared, rounding on the heavy-set jailer and boxing him on the ear. “You were not to admit anyone to see the prisoner!”

“But... but... he paid us, sir!”

Henry’s eyes bulged and Gerard knew it was his turn next to receive a box on the ear... or worse. “He paid you!” He turned to Gerard now. “He paid you? How much did he pay you? You violated a direct order because John Stewart offered you a few coins!?”

“Not a few coins, sir,” said Otis eagerly, “two silver pieces!”

“You idiot!” Gerard roared, aiming a kick at Otis.

The heavy-set man let out a cry.

“You’re both idiots,” said Henry thickly. “You.” He pointed at Gerard. “When this is through, I’ll have you whipped.” He turned to Otis. “And you. You shall be put into a cell and starved for two weeks.” He looked at both of them. “Now I need a confession from Thomas and you two are going to witness it.”

“But how, sir?” asked Otis. “He keeps saying he’s innocent and that he doesn’t know anything.”

“I have my methods...”

Scene 16

The Arrest of Alison Balfour.

December 10, 1594. The following Saturday morning in the village of Stenness at the Balfour household. Saturday is market day in Kirkwall, and the Balfour family are preparing to make the journey to Kirkwall as William is now working for the butcher Isaac Rendall at the market and must arrive by six thirty to begin his shift.

“William—your porridge is on the table. Wake your father, he’s napping again. And Anna, hurry and get dressed already! We can’t make your brother late for work!”

“I’m getting dressed, mum!”

Well hurry!”

“William—did you wake your father yet?”

The boy shook his head. “You wake him, mum. He’ll get cross with me.”

Alison let out a frustrated sigh. “He won’t be cross with you. He has to take us to the market and he knows it. You start work in an hour. Now go and wake—”

Rapping on the door.

The woman stopped short at the sound of the three hard raps on the door. Whoever could that be at this time on a Saturday?

Abraham, startled by the knocking at the door, nearly jumped out of his chair.

“There, well your father’s up now, at least,” Alison mused, moving to the window and drawing back the curtain so that she could look outside.

“In the name of Earl Patrick Stewart, Laird of Orkney, I order you to open at once. If you do not admit us, we shall break down the door. You have until the count of ten. One...” bellowed a voice from outside the door.

It was still dark out (the sun had only just begun to poke above the horizon) and the air was thick with fog and this made it difficult for Alison to make out the faces of the men standing outside. Her eyes adjusted after a moment and she was able to count four men wearing what appeared to be the Earl’s tartan.

“Who the bloody hell is that at this hour?” Abraham demanded, climbing out of his chair. “It’s not half five in the morning!”

“It’s the earl’s men,” said William fearfully from beside his mother as he too peered outside.

“Not to worry,” said Alison gently, belying her own fear, “let’s open the door before they break it down and we can see what all the fuss is about.”

“...eight, nine...”

“Yes, yes, we’re opening the door,” said Alison, her usual calm composure starting to waver.

She unlatched the door and pulled it open.

“About time,” Henry snapped. He studied the four Balfour’s as they stood amassed on their threshold. “Are you Alison Balfour?”

Alison swallowed the knot in her throat. “I am.”

Henry smiled, but the smile disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. “I am here to announce that you are charged with conspiring to murder Earl Patrick Stewart. Your name has been given by a prisoner and you shall henceforth be transported to Kirkwall Castle where you will be questioned. Is that understood?”

Utterly speechless, Alison could not find the words she wanted. “Who... what... I don’t understand...”

Anna, eyes on her mother, started to whine. “Mum?”

Abraham’s reaction differed. “What the hell is the meaning of this!? Is this some kind of joke!? You come onto my property at five o’clock on a Saturday morning—”

“Quiet, old man, or we shall have to arrest you as well,” said Henry, his tone menacing and the cogs in his head seeming to turn. “On second thought, jailers,

arrest them all. I see this plot may be thicker than we thought. Surely a witch's family must be aware of her sorcery. Tell me," he asked, setting his beady eyes on Abraham, "did you do anything to stop your daughter? Did you report her to the sheriff?"

"She's my *wife*," Abraham snarled, taking a step closer to Henry whom, with his height, he was able to look down upon. "And she is most certainly *not* a witch."

Alison, seeming to find her voice again, stepped in between the two men and appealed to the Earl's chamberlain. "Do you honestly believe me to be a witch?"

Henry shifted his gaze from Abraham to Alison and the look of disdain he gave her instantly made her nauseous. "Aye, I do. And it seems we've come across an entire brood of witches," he added, his eyes moving to the two children. He snapped his fingers. "Jailers."

The three men standing a foot behind Henry stepped forward. "Yes, sir."

"Seize these four and transport them to the castle dungeons immediately!"

Alison, her eyes wide with fear, looked from Henry to her family. "No! Surely not! Surely this isn't actually happening!"

The jailers ignored her protests and took hold of her arms as Abraham stepped forward to defend his wife.

"This is an abomination!" the old man roared, waving his cane at Henry who in turn took hold of his cane and pulled Abraham to the ground with a mighty tug.

"Mum!" Anna cried, rushing to her mother as the jailers hauled her toward the wagon Henry's party had brought with them. The rear part of the wagon was constructed with iron bars and a locking gate, a cage on wheels for transporting prisoners.

"Anna!" Alison's eyes were wild and her hair had come undone as she fought with two of the jailers, the other jailer letting go of her arm to move on to Anna.

The girl screamed as this jailer took her up in one arm and threw her kicking and crying into the back of the wagon.

"You bastards!" Alison roared, clawing and kicking at the two jailers.

The third jailer meanwhile assisted Henry with William and Abraham who were beginning to prove a challenge for the portly chamberlain. Before long however, the two men had overpowered the ten year old boy and the eighty-one year old man and the entire Balfour family found itself locked in the wagon, en route to Kirkwall Castle.

Scene 17

The Torture of Alison Balfour and her Family.

Kirkwall Castle. Dungeons. The same dungeon in which Thomas Paplay, now "recovering" in a cell off to one side, was tortured and gave Alison Balfour's name to Henry. Present now are Henry, the two jailers, and Alison. Alison's family—husband Abraham, son William, and daughter Anna—are held

in a cell some twenty feet away so that Alison—close enough that Alison can hear the whimpers of her daughter and the cries of her son.

“I shall never confess to a crime I am not guilty of!” cried Alison from where she stood, completely naked and shackled to the cold, stone wall.

“Witch!” Henry took hold of Alison’s hair and wrenched her head from side to side. “Confess! Admit that you prepared a vial of adder’s poison for Earl Patrick Stewart!”

“Never!”

Henry slammed her head against the stone wall which caused Alison to cry out.

From a short distance away can be heard the cries of William and Anna and the shouts of Abraham to “release my wife at once!”

“Now then,” said Henry, wiping the sweat from his brow and sticking his face into Alison’s so that she could smell his garlic breath, “what shall we use on you?”

“How about the pincers, sir?” Gerard offered with a wicked grin.

Otis guffawed and clapped his hands together at the prospect.

Henry smiled. “Very well. We’ll start off easy. Fetch me the pincers...and make sure they’re hot. There’s nothing like fire to release the devil from a witch.”

“How? How can you do this! I am innocent! I had nothing to do with the things you’ve accused me of!” cried Alison, growing frantic to the point that she feared she might break. She had never been in such a position, so powerless, so helpless...

The continued cries of William and Anna, and hapless shouts from Abraham, echoed throughout the dungeon.

Henry ignored her and waited patiently for Gerard to return with the heated pincers. When he did, Henry seized them greedily and moved on Alison.

“You’ve got a few places we can use these on... how about we start here...” he said with a smile.

Alison’s ensuing screams rattled the ear drums of all three men and echoed throughout the corridors. In his cell nearby, staring numbly at the stone ceiling and wrapped in his rags, his burns beginning to turn gangrenous, Thomas shivered. He had not intended for Alison and her family—these people he didn’t even know—to endure such suffering. What had he done?

For more than a quarter of an hour, Henry worked on Alison with the hot pincers. He pulled here and tugged there and twisted this and wrenched on that, her screams seeming to encourage him.

However, she did not break (as she thought she might) and eventually, with the pincers completely cooled and Henry growing impatient, he called on the two jailers to bring the family into the chamber.

“Bring the old man first!” he ordered.

Abraham did his utmost to fight against Gerard and Otis as they wrestled him from the holding cell and who now strapped him to the wooden table at the centre of the room.

“You cowards! Cowards!” the old man roared. “Preying on innocent women and children!”

Gerard laughed, flashing his yellow teeth as he and Otis finished strapping him to the table

“Are ye feeling strong, old man?” asked Henry, moving towards him. He snapped his fingers at a wooden plank that leaned against the wall opposite. Beside the plank, stacked into a neat pyramid, were numerous heavy-looking rocks.

Taking his queue, Gerard left Otis pinning Abraham to the wooden table while he took up the wooden plank.

Henry looked on as Gerard then laid the plank across Abraham’s chest while Abraham continued to shout and Alison continued to plead with them.

“This needs to stop! Now!” Alison’s voice was growing hoarse now and she coughed as she tried to utter the words.

“Quiet, whore,” Henry hissed as he turned his back on her. “Pile on the rocks,” he ordered.

“Don’t you dare call my wife a whore!” Abraham bellowed as the two jailers began taking up rocks from the pile and stacking them atop the wooden plank.

“How many do ye reckon your husband can hold?” asked Henry, turning to face Alison.

Horrified, Alison shook her head. “Stop! You’re hurting him!”

Henry silenced her with a slap across the face.

“And you call yourselves Christians...” said Alison as she spat blood. “Are you proud of yourselves?”

Henry took two steps backwards as her blood reached his clothing.

“There we go, old man, just a few more I reckon and you’ll crack like an egg...” said Gerard with a laugh.

“Crack, crack, crack,” chimed Otis as he took up two more rocks and placed them across the wooden plank.

Beneath the weight of the half dozen rocks now on the plank, Abraham began to wheeze.

“Do you confess yet?” Henry demanded, this time keeping a safe distance from Alison lest she try to spit at him again.

“Confess!? Confess to what!? We’ve done nothing!”

Henry shook his head. “A man confessed that you supplied him with a vial of adder’s venom. I have a confession in writing. I want the same from you and this can all be over.”

“How can I confess to something I know nothing about!? Please! This is not right! Let me speak to the earl. We’ll see what he has to say.”

“I’m afraid he doesn’t want to hear anything you have to say,” said Henry thickly, returning his attention to Abraham upon whom numerous rocks were now piled nearly a foot high.

“Please! Stop it!” Alison screamed seeing her husband was in trouble now, his aged frame brittle and surely not able to bear so much weight.

Three more rocks were placed atop the plank and there then came the sound of Abraham’s ribcage cracking. Alison screamed and Thomas, still shivering on the floor in his cell, knew from her tone that some terrible thing had been done.

“Still not ready to confess, are ye?” asked Henry, taking hold of Alison’s breast and wrenching it firmly from side to side so that she winced in pain.

“You killed him,” she sobbed. “You killed my husband...”

Henry pursed his lips. “You killed your husband because you didn’t confess. How many more must suffer on account of you?”

"I didn't do anything! I have nothing to do with this thing you've accused me of! Why won't you believe me!?"

Henry ignored her and turned to Gerard. "Bring the boy," he said with a snap of his fingers.

"No!" Alison was frantic now. "Not my children! Take me instead! Do what you will with me, but spare them!"

"All we need is a confession. Nothing more, nothing less."

"But I have nothing to confess to!" she roared, her veins bulging from the sides of her head. "How many times do I have to tell you!?"

Gerard returned a minute later with William who began to cry as he saw the scene before him.

"Bawling like an old woman," Gerard snapped, striking the boy with a fist so hard he fell to the floor.

"Get your hands off my son!" Alison screamed, her entire body shaking as she pulled and strained against the metal chains which held her to the wall.

"She's a wild one, sir," said Gerard, picking the boy up off the ground by one arm.

William, his face red and tear-stained, allowed himself to be dragged to a chair.

"Let him go!" Alison roared.

"Confess!" Henry shouted.

"I'll kill you if you touch my son. I swear to God. I'll kill you."

"A threat is that?" asked Henry, his eyes narrowing. "Are you going to curse me now?"

"That's no threat, that's a promise," said Alison. "You let him go right now."

Henry smiled as he turned from her to the jailers. "Put the boy in the lang irons."

"As you wish, sir," said Gerard, his eyes dancing with delight. He shoved the poor boy into Otis. "Hold him while I fetch the lang irons."

"Please!" Alison screamed, sobbing and hanging her head. "We've done nothing!"

We cannot, dear reader, imagine the scene that unfolds. And I, cannot bring myself to write such a scene. Suffice it to say, and your imagination is surely fertile enough to paint the picture, that poor William's legs were put into metal braces and small wedges of wood were inserted into the gaps in the braces. These wedges were then struck with a mallet—fifty-seven times say the historical accounts. We do not know if William died, though it is likely he did not. Alison still did not give Henry Colville the confession he so badly wanted and it was Anna's turn to face his wrath next. This, dear reader, was also a travesty of justice, the girl being but six or seven years old. Her thumbs were placed in what were known as the "piniwinkies"—thumbscrews—and it was at this moment that Alison, unable to witness the torture of her young daughter, confessed to having a part in the plot to poison Earl Patrick Stewart. The confession extracted, Anna was allegedly let to live while Alison was hauled away, the date of her trial and execution set for December 15, 1594.

Scene 18

The Execution (Murder) of Alison Balfour.

December 15, 1594. Shortly after nine o'clock in the morning. The air is chilly and the ground is set with a morning frost. Hundreds have gathered at Heiding Hill, a grass-covered hill a short distance from St. Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall, to witness the burning of the alleged witch Alison Balfour of Stenness.

The stage was set. Her time had come. This is where she would die. This is the moment her life would end. Alison stopped and vomited. The chains around her hands were cold and heavy and as her jailer yanked them, she felt herself fly forward. They were headed for the pyre, this much she knew, the pyre that had been built atop Heiding Hill, the pyre that had been built for her.

The walk from St. Magnus Cathedral (where her trial had taken place an hour earlier) was a short one. They would walk along Watergate Street and then up Buttquoy Street. All eyes were on her and she hated it. Men, women, and children watched from windows and doorways belonging to the shops and homes that rose up two stories on either side of the street. Occasionally one would spit or empty a chamber pot onto her.

How cruel and twisted, these injustices in life, she thought as her eyes scanned the crowd. It made her stomach recoil and she vomited again. The faces were the faces of her friends (or rather, people she had thought were her friends), her neighbours, her fellow parishioners... There was Mrs. Flett who ran the bakery stall at the market, and Sheilagh Spence whose son had been good friends with William, and Isaac Rendall, the butcher...and there was Father Clouston, minister of Stenness Church. He looked away as her gaze met his, looked away and turned his back on her. How these people could think she was a witch...she couldn't fathom it. People she had known for years. People she'd talked to at the market and sat beside at church. Those among them who didn't feel she was capable of trying to poison the Earl said nothing. Raised no complaint. Why? Because they were afraid? On the one hand, she couldn't blame them. After all, if any of them were to contest the charges brought against her they would quite likely find themselves in her position. As well, these were people who knew her well... these were people she had prepared draughts and tonics and salves for and assisted when they or their loved ones were ill. Was that not worth something? Were cold shoulders and stone silence just reward for the benevolent services she had provided them?

"Come on!" her jailer barked, yanking the chain once more, this time forcefully enough that she nearly lost her balance. Ahead, seated on the platform to the right of the pyre, she could see Patrick Stewart, Earl of Orkney. Beside him, the others were already seated: his wife, Margaret, brother John, chamberlain and her torturer Henry Colville, and two other courtiers unfamiliar to her.

Alison drew herself up as she passed through the crowd, their stares a mixture of the sad, curious, and hateful.

“Witch!”

“Satan’s mistress!”

“Filthy whore!”

The insults from several in the crowd stunned her and left her unprepared for the dozen or so rotten potatoes that came hurtling her way, glancing off her breast and forehead.

“Get a move on!” cursed the jailer, yanking the chain again. This time Alison flew forward and was only able to regain her balance at the last possible second.

“Burn in hell!” cried a boy who couldn’t have been older than her William. Behind him stood the woman she presumed to be his mother, her vacant expression conveying her simple nature.

They reached the pyre a moment later and her jailer yanked the chain so hard that this time she fell forward into the mud and muck at her feet.

Raising her head, she looked up at the viewing platform and locked eyes with Patrick Stewart who hastily averted his eyes and looked away.

“Hark, the witch is here!” cried John Stewart, leaping to his feet and pointing to Alison. “Take care, those gathered here today, that her dark magic does not soil you. Stand too close, and this may happen! It is a brave business our jailer and executioner undertake today and you can rest assured that once they’re through, Alison Balfour the witch shall not harm another soul in Orkney!”

The crowd gave a cheer and then John raised his hand for silence. “My brother,” he paused for effect and directed the crowd’s attention to Patrick Stewart, seated at his left, “nearly lost his life because this witch,” he spat as he glared at Alison (the crowd booed), “tried to poison him... she tried to poison my brother! Your earl!” John stomped his feet in anger as the crowd booed once more. Next he rushed dramatically to the chair in which his brother sat and took up a sentry-like stance beside it. “No one! Not even the Devil himself!” his eyes gleamed wicked as he scanned the crowd, “tries to harm my brother and gets away with it! Am I right!?” The crowd cheered and then all eyes turned to Alison as he pointed to her. “We have before us today the woman who has confessed to being a witch and conspiring to poison my brother, your Earl of Orkney.”

Alison shook her head. “I am no witch.”

“Liar! Liar, liar, tell it to the fire!” John shot back, moving to the edge of the stage and peering down at her.

“I am no witch!” It was all becoming too real now. The pyre. The stake she would be tied to. The executioner with his black hood... “I am not a witch!”

Not one heeded her words as the crowd began to chant. “Burn the witch! Burn the witch! Burn the witch!”

“I am not a witch! I help people!” Alison screamed, frantic now as the crowd pressed towards her.

“Silence!” bellowed John from the platform, arms spread before him. The crowd fell silent. “Henry Colville, our earl’s chamberlain, shall now read the charges against the witch, Alison Balfour. Father Clouston will then read the witch her last rites. May God have mercy on her godless soul,” he spat for dramatic effect.

“I am not a witch!”

A backhand from her jailer sent Alison sprawling into the mud.

“Quiet, whore,” the jailer spat, staring down at her.

The taste of blood she had experienced so frequently in the past four days was once again on her tongue.

“Alison Balfour.” Henry Colville’s voice, a voice that made her skin crawl, returned her to the present. “You are charged with engaging in witchcraft and attempting to poison the Earl of Orkney, Patrick Stewart. Under questioning, you confessed to these crimes and you will now face the appropriate sentence which is death by inferno.”

Alison shook her head and climbed slowly to her feet as the paunchy man retook his chair beside the earl. “How...how can you say these things!? I confessed under torture! My family—” Another backhand from the jailer and Alison felt her lips split open. Blood filled her mouth, her dry and cracked mouth, dehydrated from so little water over the past four days.

“Jailer,” said John, “rising once more to his feet, “bring the witch to the pyre and tie her there to face her punishment.”

“With pleasure, sir,” the man wheezed, his sour breath causing Alison to recoil. He turned to her, his beady eyes dancing with excitement. “Let’s go, witch. It’s time for you to get what’s coming to ya.” He yanked the chain without warning and Alison felt herself being dragged in the direction of the pyre.

“No! No! I have children! Please don’t do this! Please don’t do this!” She dug her heels into the mud. Twenty yards away, at the foot of the pyre, stood the executioner, torch at the ready. The pyre itself consisted of a stake surrounded by a mound of straw set amongst a stack of wooden logs.

“Come on! We haven’t got all day!” The jailer whined, tugging at the chain and pulling her forward, despite her intentions to not move an inch.

She was so frail, so weak... she had no fight left in her save for the fight brought on by fear. The crowd meanwhile, with a buzz of excitement, seemed to become more frenzied with each passing second. They could smell blood. They could smell death. They wanted a spectacle.

Alison stared at them, their faces becoming one big blur. The hate, the desire to kill... it was too real. It was too real...

Two men separated from the crowd and stepped forward, seizing her by the arms, murder in their eyes.

“No! No! Please! I have children!” Alison screamed, kicking and swatting at them as they lifted her off the ground. “You’re all mad! You actually believe me to be a witch!?”

The men ignored her, their hands like iron shackles as they carried her forwards and up the slope towards the pyre.

“I... have... children!” Alison felt herself growing faint now, though her churning stomach and the bile now rising up within her throat kept her from losing consciousness.

“Please...”

“Alison Balfour.” The executioner’s voice as they reached the pyre was loud in her ear. “You have been sentenced to die by fire.”

“No! This is not right! How can you behave like such animals!?”

“Tie the witch to the stake!” cried John from the platform.

Her strength—weakened by her lack of food and water over the past four days—was not enough to resist the jailer and the two men who forced her to the stake, slammed her against it, and lashed her to the wooden pole with ropes that cut her wrists.

“Please!” she cried. “This is un-Christian! I have children!”

“Don’t you tell us what’s un-Christian, you vile creature!” John spat, wagging his finger at her. “We should have cut out your tongue!”

Alison ignored him and turned to the only woman who might have the power to change the course of the events unfolding. Margaret Stewart sat beside her husband, watching Alison, her expression both horrified and sympathetic. Her gaze, while it communicated sadness, was clearly powerless and Alison knew there was nothing she could, or would, do. She vomited again as the hooded executioner approached her, clearly intent on lighting the straw piled high around her.

“Father Clouston will now read the witch her last rites,” said Henry Colville from the platform.

“I didn’t do anything!” Alison screamed. “This is murder! I’m a mother with two small children! How can you do this!” She set her gaze upon those in the crowd. “How can you be allowing this to happen!”

“Silence!” John bellowed from the platform (though Alison wasn’t sure why as the crowd was by now in such a bloodthirsty frenzy, they weren’t listening to anyone – neither him or her.)

Father Clouston approached and Alison tried to look into his eyes. The priest however was having none of it and instead averted his gaze as he opened his worn, leather-bound bible and began to read aloud.

“I haven’t done anything wrong! Stop this madness!” cried Alison. “Please! Father Clouston!”

“Quiet you whore!”

“Satan’s mistress!”

“Enough already! You confessed!”

Alison glared at those in the crowd who defied her. “I confessed under torture! I was tortured by these animals - ”

“Per istam sactam unctionem—” Father Clouston’s voice found its way into the mix.

“—why won’t you listen to me!?”

“Shut your mouth, whore!” John snapped from the platform. “Do you really want to add dishonesty to your sins!?”

“—ignoscat tibi Dominus—”

“Oh shut up you dog! You’re the worst of the lot!” Alison’s eyes blazed fire now—a fire that matched the fire beginning to lick at the straw as the executioner set the pyre ablaze.

Where earlier she’d felt herself growing faint—she felt herself coming alive now—alive now, in these moments where her life was about to leave her. Or was she about to leave this life? What did it feel like to die? The smoke from the fire began to billow and Father Clouston finished reciting from the bible. The crowd, in all its frenzy, seemed to be nothing more than an annoying buzz now, so much was Alison focused on her life in this present moment. She had decided she wouldn’t

utter another word, she didn't want to give them the satisfaction. She wouldn't scream either. It was them who should be screaming and standing in her position.

The smoke grew thicker by the minute and before long she was coughing and wheezing. It wouldn't be long now, she thought. It wouldn't be long until she died...

She thought of Anna. And William. Poor William, his body destroyed as he was murdered by those animals. Abraham, good and faithful Abraham, such a man deserved a better end to his life. These vile creatures—Henry and John and Father Clouston—they would eventually get their own punishment. Surely God would not allow such foul behaviour to go unpunished.

Her coughing now was constant and she could no longer breathe as her lungs began to burn. At least I'll die before the fire gets me, she thought. In a way, she was thankful for the smoke as it screened her from her tormentors. Cloaked in its darkness, she could neither see nor hear their shouts, their insults, their excitement. It was just her and the smoke and her tragic demise now... Such an unnecessary and unjust way to die...

Ode to Alison

(Author's Note)

With this novella, I have created a fictional account of a story recorded in history. The facts are known and widely available online. Most of the characters in this story were real people (though they may not have been as I described them). I have simply woven a story around the known facts—with two exceptions:

Thomas Paplay is said to have been tortured for eleven days before “confessing” and giving Alison's name to his torturers;

Alison is said to have been strangled before she was burned at the stake.

I decided to write this story—Alison's story—after a trip to Scotland with my wife Ashley. It was our honeymoon—not quite the thing to compare to witch burnings so I'll move on quickly – and we found ourselves in Edinburgh. There we signed up for a ghost walk tour of the Old City and while on the tour, in the “catacombs” of Edinburgh, our guide told us of a story about a suspected witch named Alison Balfour from the Orkney Islands. The guide explained to us that Alison and her family had come to Edinburgh from the Orkney Islands in the late sixteenth century. He told us that there was a witch hunt craze gripping Edinburgh (and Scotland) at that time and that Alison was seized by witch hunters on suspicion of being a witch. He told us that Alison was tortured in order to get a confession from her. He told us that, when she did not confess, her eighty-one year old husband, ten year old son, and six year old daughter were also tortured. He told us that it was on account of their Orkney Island accents that the Edinburgh torturers could not understand the Balfour family and vice versa and that the torture was essentially the result of poor translation... I was so haunted (and moved—what

pain this Alison woman must have endured, I thought, not to mention her husband and children) by this story that I began researching it the following day. My wife and I had driven to Kirkcaldy by then to continue on our honeymoon road tour of Scotland. It was in researching the story that I learned the true facts. Yes, Alison Balfour did live in the sixteenth century and yes she was accused of being a witch and yes she was tortured and later executed. And yes her husband and children were also tortured in an attempts to exact a confession from her. However, this story did not take place in Edinburgh. Au contraire. It took place on the Orkney Islands—which makes much more sense considering this is where the family was from. (Why would a mother move herself, her eighty one year old husband, and two young children move from the Orkney Islands to Edinburgh? Especially at a time when such a move would have been extremely difficult and especially considering that Edinburgh—or Auld Reekie as it was then nicknamed—was one of the dirtiest and most unsanitary cities in Europe?)

Our fascination with the Scottish Isles had begun when Ashley (my wife) learned of ancestral connections to the Isle of Skye through the famous MacLeod and MacCrimmon clans. Orkney Islands—the name, the location (so far north, so near to Scandinavia), the history (lots of Viking history), the mystique (Google the Standing Stones of Stenness), the lore (this story and many more)... we had to go! We hastily juggled around a couple of bookings and rejigged our already packed itinerary so that we could get six hours on the Orkney Islands. In that six hours we visited Stromness, the Standing Stones of Stenness, ancient paleolithic settlements, and Kirkwall, the capital. It's a shame we didn't make it to Heiding Hill (Gallow Ha' or Clay Loan) where Alison Balfour is believed to have been burned at the stake. (Google Street has since rectified that.)

Knowing that this tragic story—and many others quite similar—unfolded on the ground upon which we walked, amidst the people whose faces we now looked upon made me wonder. Had Alison been to the Standing Stones? Surely she must have gone there at least once having lived so near. The people of Orkney. The shopkeepers and bar staff and fishers and farmers—were their ancestors amongst the crowd of spectators at Heiding Hill on that dark day in December 1594? Or worse—were they linked to Earl Patrick Stewart, Master John Stewart, Henry Colville, and the rest?

We visited one of the local cemeteries (cemeteries are great places to research family ancestry and research for writing). There we found a number of "Flett's". A friend of mine here in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada is a "Flett" and his paternal ancestors hail from the Orkney Islands. Fascinating how we spread out over time! Among "Flett's", there appeared to be many other common family names including Craigie, Aim, Rendall, and Clouston. I bestowed these names upon minor characters in the book. I bestowed the surname "Clouston" on one of the priests in this story—my apologies to those Clouston's out there if I have offended!

Apart from this however, all the other names (characters) mentioned in this story—Patrick Stewart, John Stewart, Henry Colville, Patrick's wife Margaret, the Bellenden's—these were real names and these were real people. Whether their personalities were as I described – only those who were there at the time can

confirm. However, their actions as laid out in this story were largely their actions and I think this is one story that would look good on the big screen. Stories such as these—indeed, cases such as these—need exposure, need to be brought into the light. This is how we prevent (some of) these kinds of things occurring again in the future. I won't presume to think for a minute that human beings aren't capable of the things in this book because they once were—in our not too distant past—and sadly, things like torture are still very much a reality. But this is about Alison and whoever Alison was—whatever sort of person she was (perhaps a little quirky? Perhaps a little weird? Perhaps a kind woman who treated people with herbs and homemade remedies?)—I hope she found the peace in death she was deprived of throughout her final days. Rest in peace, Alison Balfour.

