CHAPTER ONE

The Pull of the Blade

April, 2013 · Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Eleven years before the crossing

THE MUSEUM DOORS bit into Aidan's palm—cold brass that stung despite the spring morning. He pushed through anyway, sneakers protesting against marble as sound bounced off stone walls and oil portraits, through vaulted ceilings worth more than his house would see in a decade.

Portraits tracked him, eyes in gilt frames following his movement down the corridor, each painted gaze manufacturing threats from shadows.

Lemon oil and walnut hung in the air, mixing with ancient dust. His father stopped and breathed deep through his nose, eyes half-closed. Aidan's shoulders slumped as he heard the crowd gathered in the main hall. *Another three-hour tour. Another crowd is asking the same questions about dead kings. He was annoyed his father was about to be busied, yet again. Yet another day that Dad is too busy to spend time with Mom and me.*

Spring light cut through windows at strange angles, throwing shadows that didn't match the furniture. Car headlights swept amber and red across walls. Aidan's stomach turned over.

Thomas stood motionless at one of the displays, rubbing the ache from his neck. Aidan moved beside him. His reflection in the angled

glass of the nearby case fractured into three mismatched versions of himself, each lagging a heartbeat behind the last. This was like watching an echo. Aidan let his gaze trace the pitted, dark surface of the bronze cauldron sitting in the case.

Aidan closed his eyes, letting the sounds rush in—metal striking metal, meat sizzling over fire, voices raised in celebration. He pressed his palms against his eyes and shook his head hard enough to hurt, but it didn't clear.

Again. Third time this week.

They walked on, footsteps muffled on carpet that had known decades of visitors. Gold lunulas gleamed against black velvet—bronze swords with hilts worn smooth by dead hands. Something pulled at Aidan's chest, a hook behind his ribs, dragging him forward through cases of artifacts that should have stayed buried.

Voices up ahead. He froze. *Another hallucination? No—it's a tour group. Real people, real sounds echoing off marble.*

In the center of the room they traversed was a display in its own column of dusty sunlight—a golden brooch that caught light and shattered it into patterns on the walls. Aidan stared, mesmerized. The metalwork moved, knotwork forming faces in the intricate patterns. A craftsman bent over his anvil—a king fastening the brooch at his throat. A farmer's dirt-crusted hands pulling it from the earth, soil still clinging to ancient gold. Aidan flickered his eyes at the sight. His breath puffed visibly in the cold museum air, but he stood somewhere else. Someplace else. The brooch's song threaded through his chest, back through the centuries.

Thomas's hands landed on his shoulders, heavy and warm. The brooch's hold released, and the museum returned to ordinary focus. "Today's a big day, son." His father turned and coughed into his elbow—three sharp barks that rattled in his chest. "We have a bigger crowd than usual—a news crew. You want to be on camera, big guy? Or would you rather hide in my office? I brought you a couple of books and left them on the desk. Got the Tolkien you like."

Aidan hunched forward, wiping the gritty taste from his mouth. "What's going on, Dad? We never get news people."

Thomas glanced at the main hall, where crowd noise built like approaching thunder. “Don’t look at the cameras if you want to watch. Look at the people. Smile as I showed you.” His fingers tightened on Aidan’s shoulders, and Aidan’s breathing slowed. “I’m going to show you something special. I’ve been waiting a long time for this.”

They walked toward the noise. Aidan rose onto his toes, trying to quiet his squeaky shoes, without success. His chest constricted, turning every breath into hard work. The crowd shifted and murmured, but he couldn’t see what held their attention—too many expensive suits and expensive dresses blocking his view.

Sunlight cast golden squares on the floor around everyone. When Aidan stepped into one, a flash in the corner of his eye drew his attention. Thomas took Aidan’s hand with his own sweaty palm.

Aidan looked up at his father’s face, which now flexed as he ground his teeth and watched his eyes jump from face to face in the crowd. He hastened their pace, pulling Aidan toward a small platform. Each click of his dress shoes evoked a flinch through Aidan’s cranium that now ached even worse.

Their eyes met. Thomas squeezed Aidan’s hand three times. Aidan squeezed back. Three times. The tight feeling in his chest loosened a fraction. *I’m here, bud. You’re not alone.*

Cameras swiveled toward them along with a popping of flashes—white bursts placed afterimages burning in Aidan’s vision. He pressed against his father’s leg as they climbed the steps. Journalists raised their notepads and recording devices. Photographers fought for the best position behind the rope barrier, their equipment rattling, most aimed at a display Aidan had never seen before today.

Behind the glass lay a sword on scarlet cloth.

Ogham script spanned the fuller of the blade; its lines moved when he wasn’t looking directly at them. They glowed a purple haze around the blade, projecting runes in swirls. The marks whispered something he could not make out, just below the threshold of hearing. They were syllables in a language older than kingdoms. Nicks along the blade’s edge caught the light—battle damage.

Microphones clustered the edge of the platform like a bouquet of metal flowers, all pointed at his father.

“Ladies and gentlemen.” Thomas’s voice found its tour-guide steadiness, though his fingers trembled where they rested on Aidan’s shoulder. “Thank you for joining us this morning at the Irish Heritage Museum. We’re here to unveil our newest display—a unique item, one no other institution has shown.”

A red-haired woman in the front shoved her microphone forward, cutting Thomas off mid-script. “Mr. Corbin, Channel 4 News. When it comes to authentication, can you walk us through the process? Is this genuine or a reproduction?”

Thomas huffed gently, stiffening his back and lifting his chin. “It’s genuine—one of the oldest items we’ve displayed. The sword underwent metallurgical testing at Trinity College Dublin. Carbon dating puts it between—“ He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead, the cloth damp. “Between 800 and 850 AD. Though carbon dating has its limitations with objects of this... particular composition.”

“The *Ogham* inscriptions?” A tall man with wire-rimmed glasses kept his camera raised, lens focused tight on the blade. “Have they been translated?”

A barrage of questions came faster than expected, sharper—probing at things he couldn’t answer. “We have preliminary translations. But the inscriptions are unusual. Unlike any form of *Ogham* we’ve encountered in eighth-century artifacts. We’re consulting experts before making any formal announcements.” Thomas stuttered over the words.

Whispers spread through the crowd, voice to voice: “...unusual for *Ogham*...” “...never seen markings quite like...” “...royal provenance...”

“Mr. Corbin!” The voice cut through the murmuring. “Daily Tribune. Rumors say someone found this sword near a burial site.”

“Information about the discovery location remains confidential at the owner’s request.” Thomas’s words fell flat, clipped short. “What I can tell you: this sword represents early medieval Irish craftsmanship. I know that is vague, but there is going to be some mystery with this for a while.”

The questions came in overlapping bursts, voices bleeding together: “Who’s the owner?” “Why the secrecy?” “Any connection to Irish warriors?”

Thomas raised both hands. “Please. One at a time.”

Another question came. As he answered, the sword pulled Aidan’s focus. His father’s voice faded into the background.

More sounds rose from the sword. Aidan felt them now, not just heard them, with a pressure against his eardrums as if he’d dove underwater. He shook his head, but it didn’t clear.

The sword steadily pulsed purple.

Aidan squeezed his eyes shut briefly, then looked around. No one else reacted. No one else saw what he did.

“Ok, folks. If I could direct your attention to the blade design itself,” Thomas said, pointing with a hand that trembled slightly. His voice found its tour-guide cadence again, sliding into familiar patterns. “You’ll notice interlaced patterns characteristic of eighth-century metalwork. But with variations. Significant variations.”

A camera flash—white burst that seared Aidan’s vision.

The *Ogham* inscriptions flared a deep purple, burning Aidan’s eyes and searing images into his retinas.

Aidan yanked his father’s sleeve. Thomas kept talking, without a glance.

“The pommel bears marks consistent with royal ownership. We’re working to identify the lineage. The blade shows minimal corrosion for its age, but—“ He pointed along its length. “Notice the nicks. Combat damage. This wasn’t a ceremonial blade. This sword has been used in combat.”

“Mr. Corbin!” The voice cut through everything else. Aidan’s scalp prickled, and head snapped in the direction of the voice.

A man stood at the back in a black fedora, shadows pooling over his face.

Cold spread down Aidan’s neck. From coccyx to atlas, rigidity marched up each vertebra.

Thomas stiffened.

"Are you aware of the sword's true significance?" His sharp voice echoed in the room.

"I… We… I mean, we are still in the midst of research." The words snapped sharper than Thomas intended, cutting through the professional veneer. "Most information's sealed, but what we do know, I am giving you some of that today."

A smile clung to the man's face at an unnatural angle. He stood there in his black suit and fedora—the only person not holding a phone or camera. "I do my homework, Mr. Corbin. In a very thorough manner." He adjusted his glasses with fingers that moved too precisely. "And I assure you—no one told me anything."

Ice settled in Thomas's stomach, spreading outward. Paper trails? Archives? Someone at Trinity talked? The owner would have his head if word got out before the official announcement.

"I'm sorry, who are you?"

Thomas blinked. The man slipped back into the crowd—lost among the press of suits and dresses, absorbed into the shifting mass of journalists and visitors. One moment, standing there with his fedora casting shadows that shouldn't exist, the next swallowed by bodies.

But those eyes. That fedora.

Aidan shook uncontrollably, his shoulders trembling.

Thomas cleared his throat. "As I was saying. Combat weapon, not ceremonial. The preservation suggests specific storage conditions..." His voice steadied, but his eyes kept scanning the crowd, hunting for the fedora.

The press conference ground on. Details. Non-answers. Political double-talk. Through it all, Aidan watched. The blade trembled on its mount once, then twice.

Just your imagination. Has to be.

Thomas answered questions, smiled, and pointed out details with the authority of a man who'd spent thirty years studying artifacts. But sweat beaded on his forehead despite the museum's climate control, and his eyes kept drifting to where the fedora man had stood.

Finally, someone called time. The journalists packed their equipment with practiced efficiency. Voices faded. Footsteps echoed

away down corridors.

"You okay, munchkin?" His hand found Aidan's shoulder and squeezed gently.

Aidan nodded.

"Good. I need to get back to the office. You want to come, or stay here?"

Aidan looked at the sword. The hook behind his ribs intensified, dragging him forward. "I'll stay."

Thomas studied him for a moment, forehead creasing. Then nodded. "Don't get too close to the displays. And come find me if you need anything." He squeezed Aidan's shoulder once more and walked away, dress shoes clicking on marble.

Aidan waited until his father disappeared through the office door. Then he moved to the glass case, drawn forward.

He pressed close. Each breath fogged the surface, ghost-mist vanishing as fast as it formed. Sunlight caught the silver blade, throwing reflections that danced across the walls.

He glanced at the placard—something about kings and battles and lost dynasties—then turned back to the blade.

A purple glow pulsed along its edge.

Aidan forgot to blink. His eyes burned. A tear rolled down his cheek, hot against skin that felt too cold.

The metal gleamed sharp as fresh steel, despite eight centuries underground. The *Ogham* inscriptions shimmered with inner light. The surface rippled like water disturbed by stones thrown from another world.

He pressed his fingertips to the glass. The surface tingled, vibrating with a frequency he felt in his bones.

The security camera in the corner tracked him with its blinking red eye. But security systems measured the physical world—distance, heat, motion. They missed what happened in the space between heartbeats, in the invisible current pulling the boy toward the blade across dimensions engineers never thought to measure.

To the cameras, Aidan looked like just another kid keeping his distance, standing where he should stand. The alarms stayed quiet. Nothing physical breached.

The purple light pulsed where no camera could see it—the connection formed in the space between visible and real.

The security system did its job perfectly.

It just didn't know what it was looking for.

His breathing accelerated, faster and faster until the air thickened in his lungs. Sounds muffled. Sweat beaded on his forehead despite the museum's chill. The sword's surface shifted, flickered like a candle flame in wind that shouldn't exist.

Then: purple shimmer moving across the blade, beginning at the handle and traveling the full length, no brighter than a night-light at first.

He leaned closer. It grew stronger.

He jerked back, heart hammering.

His reflection stared at him from the glass—wide-eyed, pupils dilated, jaw slack.

The sword trembled on its mount, a vibration no one else noticed, loud in his chest. Purple light pulsed with each shake, like a heartbeat, like the sword was alive.

The trembling increased.

The color shifted toward his reflection, reaching through the glass that suddenly felt thin as paper. The pull in his chest grew stronger, became gravity itself, bending toward the blade. His feet moved.

The world narrowed to just Aidan and the sword and the glow pulsing between them.

The light pulled him deeper. Sound faded, replaced by his heartbeat—loud, getting louder, filling his skull with a rhythm that matched the sword's pulse. Violet light poured through him, thick and weightless, like gravity forgot he existed.

His feet felt weightless. The ceiling seemed closer, or he seemed lighter.

Warmth flowed from the sword into his body, spreading through every muscle. Calm. Easy. Worry gone. His shoulders relaxed. His breathing slowed. The purple fire spread through him.

Thomas's face swam into focus—brow creased, lips moving, no sound. His father's voice was lost in the space between worlds.

Thomas stared into Aidan's eyes and squeezed his shoulder hard enough to bruise.

The connection snapped.

Aidan's body jerked like he'd been shocked, muscles seizing. The museum crashed back—too bright, too loud, too real.

"Aidan? Come on, we need to get to the office." Thomas studied his face with the intensity of a man reading symptoms. "You okay, munchkin? Something scares you?"

Aidan exhaled—relief or something like it, something that tasted like copper. "Dad, did you see that purple light?"

Thomas frowned, glancing back at the display case. "Purple light? From the sword?" He looked at the other visitors milling around, then back at Aidan with concern deepening the lines around his eyes. "No one else saw anything, buddy. The display lights run white. Are you feeling okay? Not getting a headache or anything?"

He crouched down to Aidan's eye level, checking his pupils with the practiced attention of a parent who'd spent too many nights in emergency rooms.

"Maybe you've been staring at screens too much. Or the camera flashes got to you." He squeezed Aidan's shoulder. "Come on. Let's get you some water and sit down for a bit."

Some visitors still clustered around the exhibit, voices hushed with reverence, as museums demanded. Reporters packed cameras and microphones into cases with metallic clicks. They walked maybe ten feet when heels clicked on marble behind them—sharp, purposeful, wrong.

Darkness edged Aidan's vision. He looked back.

The man in the black suit moved toward them, purpose in every step, his face still hidden under the fedora's shadow. His beard looked wrong—too dark, maybe, or too thick.

Aidan's skin prickled, hair standing up on his arms. He yanked his father's arm, pulling him faster.

Thomas looked down, forehead wrinkling with confusion. Aidan's breath caught—the man from his nightmares. "Thomas? Thomas Corbin."

The voice cut through everything—conversations, footsteps, the hum of climate control.

Thomas's hand tightened around Aidan's shoulder, knuckles gone white. His eyes squinted. His shoulders squared.

"My name is John Hornsby. Can we talk for a moment?"

The man said something about flying in from Atherton, California. Thomas's neck muscles stood out like cables under strain, his breathing gone shallow.

Thomas cut him off. "Yes. Thank you for coming. I've said all I can say today—more in tomorrow's report. Check us out online. I-H-M-P dot com. Now excuse me—I need to get to my office." He turned, wrapped his arm around Aidan's shoulders in a grip that bordered on possessive.

John didn't move. Stepped closer instead, eating up the space between them. He pulled a manila envelope from his pocket, movements too smooth, too practiced.

"Thomas. I'm not here for the report. I'm well informed. Far more than you might know."

Thomas winced.

"I have a business proposition."

Aidan looked up at his father. The knuckles were white on Thomas's fists.

Thomas went rigid under Aidan's hand and stopped walking. Aidan's hair rose. Thomas turned to face John again, movements careful, controlled.

Hornsby shook the envelope—paper rustling, loud in the sudden quiet. "There's money in here. For the sword. Investment. Fifty percent down." He gestured at the museum around them with one sweeping motion. "Nice place. But I noticed some things walking through earlier. Things this money would help with. Sound interesting?"

Silence pressed between them, heavy as wet wool.

His father's lips pressed flat, the museum-director smile gone. The lines around his eyes deepened, cut deeper into weathered skin that had seen too many years, too much disappointment.

John spoke again, words measured. "I collect rare items. Ancient items. Celtic mythology. Irish history. This would benefit my work." He

paused, letting the weight settle on his next words. “Are you aware of what you have?”

“I’m not sure how you know—or think you know—anything about this relic. This knowledge is sealed. No one outside the owner and I know anything. I haven’t been given much detail. How would I know what I was doing in any transaction?” He paused, breath catching. “I couldn’t even begin. I have nothing to work with.”

“Mr. Corbin. This is cash. A down payment.” He shook the envelope again, held it where Thomas couldn’t miss it, where the thickness of bills inside pressed against the paper.

Aidan pulled at his father’s arm. Cold spread through his chest.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Hornsby. As I stated, the item is on loan. Not for sale. The owner would have my head.” Thomas gripped Aidan’s hand hard enough to hurt. “Good day.” He marched toward the office, their footsteps echoing too loudly against the marble that had witnessed a century of conversations.

Behind them, the face under the fedora, those eyes catching the light in a twisted way.

“Just... be careful with it,” John called out, voice carrying across the museum’s vast space. “There’s more to it than you know.”

Thomas rolled his eyes and kept walking. “I’ll do that. Thank you.” Snapped it out like a weapon, each word sharp enough to cut.

Aidan followed. The purple light still burned behind his eyes.



CHAPTER TWO

The Obsession Unfolds

JOHN HORNSBY'S LEATHER SHOES struck the museum steps, each footfall echoing off the granite like an accusation. Cool Pittsburgh air hit his face—momentary relief—but sweat still beaded along his collar, running down skin that hadn't known calm since he'd laid eyes on that sword.

"He wants to study it." The words scraped out like gravel over concrete. Only after it hit the pavement did he realize he'd thrown the fedora, black felt tumbling down stone steps. His hand found his beard—old habit, older anger— and he strode across the pavement, shoes striking hard, toward the idling SUV. He'd been told no before, had heard rejection in deals from Dublin to Dubai. This wasn't Dubai. This mattered in ways those other acquisitions never could. *Corbin doesn't have the first damn clue what he's sitting on.*

The migraine built behind his eyes, pressure spreading like fingers digging into his skull. The driver fumbled with the door handle, fingers gone clumsy with nerves. John didn't wait. Metal groaned as he yanked the door open and dropped into the seat, slamming it hard enough to rattle the frame.

"Drive." John rubbed the bridge of his nose, the throb spreading.

"Uh... where to, sir?" The young man hopped into the front, settling himself at the wheel with nervous efficiency.

"I don't give a damn where. Just drive. I have to make a call."

Tires shrieked against asphalt as the car lurched from the curb. His reflection stared back from the window—jaw locked, eyes fixed with the look of a man who'd already decided someone was getting hurt. John ripped the tie off in one violent motion, silk crumpling where it landed on the floor mat. The briefcase sat next to him, leather worn smooth from years of terminals and lobbies, the brass clasps loose from a thousand openings. He could work them blind. Click. Click. Open.

Folders spilled across his lap, research papers mixing with the usual clutter of a life spent chasing answers no one else believed existed. And there, wedged between the bureaucratic debris, lay his journal. The one thing that mattered more than breath.

The binding showed years of handling, leather worn soft as skin where his fingers had rubbed it raw. Coffee stains marked the cover like campaign medals. This book had seen Dublin's rain, Galway's wind, and London's fog. Each mark told a story. Each page brought him closer to the truth scholars refused to acknowledge.

He flipped to the center spread. There it sat: the sword, rendered in precise detail. Every curve of the blade, every twist of the Celtic knotwork, every symbol carved into steel—all captured in ink and obsession. His hand trembled as he traced the drawing with his finger, following lines he'd memorized years ago.

"*An Soilsitheoir*," he whispered.

The driver's eyes flicked to the rearview mirror. "Sir?"

"Nothing."

But it wasn't anything. The Irish words carried weight in his mouth, heavy as promises made to the dead—the *Illuminator*.

He turned the page. Margins crowded with notes in different ink colors—red for breakthroughs, blue for connections, black for foundations. Years of work compressed into cramped handwriting that tracked his descent into obsession.

Portal to the otherworld. Sealed by blood.

The king was uncrowned.

The words blurred together, his pulse pounding loud enough to drown them.

"The boy." The words escaped before he could stop them.

The driver glanced back. “Sir?”

“There was a boy with Corbin.” John’s voice went quiet, measured. “The way that kid looked at it. At the sword.”

“At what, sir?”

“The sword.” John’s fingers gripped the journal so tightly that it creased the pages. “He knew something, or he saw something. Somehow, he knew.”

The car hit a pothole, shaking John from his thoughts. He flipped to the journal’s last page, where the prophecy waited in thin script he had spent three years translating:

The otherworld key, reborn in young hands. A gateway, sealed through centuries, yearns for the pure of spirit to unleash its ancient power.

Below it, star charts and moon calculations covered the remaining space, all pointing to one date. One moment. One convergence that wouldn’t come again in his lifetime.

Now.

The journal snapped shut. John pulled his phone from his pocket, screen glowing in the dim interior. His thumb hovered over a contact buried three screens deep—the kind of contact you don’t delete because you might need it, and you don’t call because you know what it costs. The name stared back at him from the display, O’Malley. After Belfast, he promised himself: *Never again.* That promise felt like a long time ago now, like something a different man had made.

The last job: Belfast, three years back. An illuminated manuscript from a private collection—pre-Christian, worth more than John’s house and car combined. O’Malley got them in and out in under twenty minutes—clean, efficient, no wasted movement. Clean. Professional. No alarms, no witnesses, no trail. The kind of work that made powerful people remember your face and shortened your lifespan if you screwed up.

After that, John walked away. Told himself the thieving life sat behind him, that research and legitimate acquisition kept his hands clean enough to sleep at night. But O’Malley didn’t let go easily. Christmas cards with no return address. Occasional courier messages from boys

who didn't know who'd paid them and wouldn't remember his face. The kind of contact that whispered, *I'm still in the game,* without leaving footprints.

John burned the cards. Paid the couriers to forget. Kept the name.

He pressed the contact—the call connected on the third ring.

"I was wondering how long it would take you, Johnny-boy." O'Malley's accent came through rough as a whetstone on steel, carrying three years of silence with it. "Saw the news from Pittsburgh. Figured I'd hear from you inside a fortnight. How're you keeping?"

His teeth ground together, molars aching with the pressure. *Of course, O'Malley watched*—the man made it his trade to know when Celtic relics surfaced, had informants scattered from Dublin to Edinburgh who sent word when something appeared. He probably had informants in auction houses from here to the Irish coast, coins dropped in the right hands, contacts who whispered when something worth stealing changed owners.

"No time for pleasantries. I need your expertise."

"Straight to business, eh? No, how've you been, Connor?' No, sorry, I disappeared for three years?" O'Malley's laugh carried edges. "Hell. What's going on?"

The accent made John tense, brought back memories of close calls and closer shaves. He closed his eyes. "Connor. Listen to me. This is important."

"It always is with you, Johnny-boy." The condescension oozed through the speaker. "What's the job?"

"A museum heist. Pittsburgh. The target's a sword."

Silence stretched between them, thick with implications. Then O'Malley laughed—short, bitter, carrying notes of disbelief.

"A sword?" O'Malley's laugh came through sharp, but something careful, calculating, lurked beneath it now. "Johnny, we hit the Ironfast vaults three winters back. You told me you were done."

The silence stretched again. Then O'Malley's tone shifted, the mockery draining out of it like water from a cracked cup. "Is this really that important?"

"More important than anything we've pulled before." John kept his tone flat, steady, giving nothing away.

"You said that about the Trinity codex. Said it about the Galway collar." O'Malley didn't laugh now. "Said it about Ironfast—which nearly got us both hanged, in case you forgot."

"Ironfast got us exactly what we needed. Clean exit. No witnesses."

"We got lucky." The words came hard and fast, clipped short. "There's a difference."

The connection hissed with dead air. When O'Malley spoke again, his tone had gone low and tight—the register he used when the job's already gone sideways, and they're counting exits. "But you don't call me unless it's serious. Haven't called me for coin work in years. So what's this really about, Johnny?"

John closed his eyes, then opened them. His journal lay on his lap, the sketch of the sword staring back at him with accusations rendered in ink. Even on paper, the blade weighed a lot.

"This one's different."

John pressed his thumb and forefinger against his temples, massaging pressure points that never gave relief. "Will you do it or not?"

Another pause, longer this time, weighted with consideration.

"What's the security like?" Skepticism edged O'Malley's tone, but underneath it ran the current of professional interest.

"Minimal. Night guards, standard alarm system. The sword's in a display case on the second floor."

"Cameras?"

"Motion sensors. Easy to avoid if you know the patterns." John continued working his temples, trying to push the migraine back where it came from.

"And you know the patterns?"

John almost smiled. "I've been watching them for months."

"Bloody hell." O'Malley's words carried grudging admiration. "You are obsessed, aren't you?"

"Are you in or out?"

"When?"

"Friday. Three AM."

"Two days?" O'Malley's breath hissed through the line. "That's not much time to plan."

"It's enough."

O'Malley went quiet for a long moment. When he spoke again, skepticism had given way to something more serious. "This isn't just about money, is it?"

The city slid past in blocks of concrete and glass, gleaming in the afternoon light. Pedestrians moved along sidewalks, heads down, lost in their phones, their problems, or whatever small crisis defined their Thursday afternoon. None of them knew. They vanished behind the SUV, already forgotten. *In two days, their world would look different.* The museum heist would make headlines. Some of them might even remember walking past on this Thursday afternoon, might remember the anonymous SUV, and wonder.

"No," he said at last. "It's about power."

"Power," O'Malley repeated the word slowly, letting it sit between them. Doubt crept back into his words. "Your kind of power, or the kind that pays bills?"

"Both."

"Alright. I'm in. But I want double my rate."

"Done."

"And Johnny? This better be worth it. I'm getting too old for prison."

The line went dead.

John pocketed his phone and flipped the journal open, pages falling to the sketch like they knew where they belonged—the sword. Even rendered in ink and pencil, the thing carried a presence that made his breath catch. The blade caught the faint light filtering through the tinted windows, shimmering despite being mere graphite and obsession. John had drawn it a hundred times, maybe more. Every angle, every detail burned into his memory from that one glimpse years ago—the glimpse that had set him on this path, that had cost him his marriage and his reputation and his peace.

Soon.

His finger followed the *Ogham* script etched along the fuller, the lines and notches worn smooth in his memory. Ancient Irish. Pagan, if the translations held up under scrutiny. He'd spent three years cross-referencing marks, hunting down scholars who didn't ask questions and manuscripts that weren't supposed to exist outside vault rumors. The prophecy stopped being words on a page somewhere around month six. Now it lived as a blueprint—step one, step two, step three, all laid out by people who'd been dust for a thousand years. They'd known something—left instructions for whoever proved smart enough or desperate enough to decode them.

The car hooked left onto Thirty-Fourth, rolling past a shuttered deli and a dry cleaner that looked like it hadn't updated since the eighties. The hotel squatted at the end of the block, red brick gone dark with age and pollution, ivy climbing the walls like it was trying to reclaim the place one vine at a time. Professional. Anonymous. The kind of establishment that catered to business travelers who needed a bed and didn't ask questions about the minibar charges or who came and went at odd hours.

But John Hornsby was still working and still hunting. The real work was about to begin.

The car pulled into the valet circle, crunching gravel under the tires. John gathered his briefcase and stepped out into the air that carried the smell of exhaust and distant rain. He felt the journal against his chest where he'd tucked it inside his jacket, a solid weight that anchored him to purpose.



CHAPTER THREE

The Heist of Heritage

EMERGENCY LIGHTING BATHED the corridors in a sickly yellow, making everything look diseased. Stone walls rose to high ceilings, the sort of place that had lasted centuries, now running on backup power. Thomas Corbin's footsteps echoed through the Ancient Manuscripts wing. A reproduction of the Book of Kells sat under glass, pages open to an illuminated Gospel page, gold leaf still bright after twelve centuries. Thomas gave a thin grin. The Celtic cross in the next display caught the emergency lights, scattering red, green, and blue across the wall. He didn't look.

The black van sat at the curb, engine ticking as heat bled off. No lights. No markings. Federal or private military— the kind of vehicle that screamed big budget. The driver's door swung open, hinges oiled to silence. Four shapes hit the sidewalk in tactical boots, moving like a machine, each cog knowing its place. The leader's fist came up. Everyone stopped. Two fingers toward the entrance. A slash across the throat. *Someone inside would have a bad night.*

Earlier that evening, Thomas Corbin hunched over the *Ogham* manuscript, pages spread across his desk. His reading glasses slid down his nose, and he shoved them back up. The power went out. Probably a transformer—the same thing had happened twice last winter. Facilities

had texted: checking breakers. He'd told them to call if they needed him. Until then, emergency lighting would hold.

He should've gone downstairs. Emergency protocols, board questions—none of it mattered now. *Six months wasted on this manuscript. Six months for nothing.* His hand found the coffee mug—empty. The ceramic clinked when he set it down, cracked through the silence. Even the building had gone quiet, listening.

A flicker of movement in the window—dark against dark.

Thomas's head snapped up. The Ancient Weaponry wing should've been empty, emergency lights barely cutting through the gloom. Metal glinted near the sword display—wrong angle, wrong placement. He blinked hard, clearing eyestrain.

Three figures crouched low, working to open the display case.

His chair toppled backward. His hand shot to the panic button under his desk—a red square that should've sent silent alerts to police, activated every camera, and locked every exit.

Dead. The LED sat dark. The power outage knocked out the entire security grid.

"Security!" The word echoed off stone walls, came back empty. Only silence answered. McKinley clocked out at ten. *No overnight coverage. No event tonight.* And the backup system—motion sensors, cameras—is offline. *Blind.* Three people who shouldn't be there, and nothing between them and the sword except Thomas.

"Dammit!" Thomas snatched the phone off his desk and bolted.

He ran, thumbing 9-1-1 as his loafers slapped marble. The screen lit up. One ring. Two. His shoulder caught the doorframe, and pain shot down his arm. The call cut out—no signal, or the outage killed the phone reception too. He kept the phone anyway.

O'Malley worked the picks. Cutting the power was Hornsby's idea: blind the cameras for 30 minutes. Ancient mechanisms. Leverage and prayer. Metal scraped against metal. Behind him, the woman with the crossbow stood three meters back, weapon up, eyes on the corridor. To her left, the big man with the M4 covered the approach, safety off, finger along the trigger guard. At the perimeter, number four swept arcs with both Glocks drawn, hunting for movement that wasn't there yet.

“Thirty seconds.” O’Malley kept his voice flat, calm.

The emerald in the pommel pulsed, a faint green glow seeping through the case like a visible heartbeat. He’d left nerves in Kandahar, but this felt different, wrong, like touching a live wire. His skin prickled. His pulse beat too fast, too loud. His hands shook.

The lock gave with a final click.

“Stop!” Thomas burst into the weaponry wing, loafers skidding on the polished floor. He held up his phone like a weapon. “The police, I… I called them! They’re coming!”

O’Malley straightened, the sword gleaming in his grip. A smile tugged at his lips. “No. You didn’t.”

The big one with the M4 moved between Thomas and O’Malley, muzzle tracking center mass. “Turn around. Walk away. Nobody needs to bleed over a museum piece.”

“That sword is over a thousand years old! It’s history. It belongs here, not locked in some billionaire’s panic room.” His voice cracked on the last word.

“Hornsby offered you money.” O’Malley lifted the sword, testing the balance. The blade moved like it wanted his hand. “Good money. You said no.”

Thomas lunged forward, bare hands against four armed professionals.

O’Malley’s fist came up, one finger raised. The woman’s crossbow was already tracked.

The shot was nearly silent—just a whisper of the string and the wet thunk of the bolt slamming into his shoulder. The impact spun him, knocked him sideways. Marble came up fast, slammed into his chest, and emptied his lungs. His vision went white, then spotty. When it came back, the floor under his cheek felt slick and warm. Red spread across white stone in a pool that kept growing.

O’Malley squatted next to him, sword balanced across his thighs like they were having a chat over coffee. “You’ve got a kid. Boy, right? What’s he, ten? Eleven?” The thick Irish accent rolled across Thomas’s ears.

Thomas tried to breathe. Couldn't. His fingers found the bolt shaft, slippery with his own blood. Pain shot through his chest.

"Think about him," O'Malley whispered. "Think about him growing up without a father. Because that's what happens if you try to be a hero again."

O'Malley stood and jerked his chin at the team. They moved fast and silently, there one second and gone the next. Thomas didn't even hear them leave—just him now, the bolt in his shoulder, and enough blood to paint a wall.

He clamped his hand over the wound. *Keep pressure on it, Thomas.* His paramedic training—thirty years gone—kicked in. He made it to his knees. The corridor spun. His legs shook, but he held—one foot, then the other. Red footprints tracked behind him on white marble, each one more unsteady than the last.

His office door sat at the end of the hall, might as well have been on another continent. He kept moving. When he hit the doorframe, he used it to stay vertical, stumbled to the chair, and went down hard. *The phone—where?* He found it after a painful search.

His thumb barely worked. Screen blurred. He jabbed at the numbers.

"Nine-one-one, what's your emergency?"

"Irish Heritage Museum." Each word cost him. "Armed robbery. Four of them. I'm shot."

The phone hit the desk, or maybe the floor. Everything had edges now, soft and wrong. Gray crept in from the sides of his vision, narrowing the world to a tunnel. The world tilted forty-five degrees and kept going.

Sirens. Somewhere. Getting closer or farther away, he couldn't tell anymore.

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Three weeks out, and Thomas lifted his arm above his head. No scream. *Progress.* The physical therapist, Angela—nice woman, grip like a vice—had worked him hard for an hour before declaring him "adequately mobile" and leaving him with exercises he'd never do. His son's drawing hung on the wall opposite the bed: a knight with a sword, all crooked

lines and enthusiastic crayon work. Aidan had used every color in the box. Thomas had taped it up himself, one-handed, and left it crooked.

Detective Morrison rapped knuckles on the doorframe. “Got a minute?”

Thomas gestured at the bed, the IV stand, the whole sad setup. “My schedule’s wide open.”

She didn’t smile. Her expression stayed flat—professional distance, or maybe just exhaustion from getting bumped to a robbery-assault case that should’ve gone to someone else. “The photos I sent. Anything?”

“Masks. Balaclavas, tactical gear, the works.” Thomas flexed his shoulder, felt the scar tissue pull. “But the one in charge called himself O’Malley. He somehow knew things—our security rotation, which cameras had dead zones. He knew I had a kid.” His voice went cold. “He knew Aidan’s age.”

Morrison’s pen scratched across her notebook. No recorder. “This Hornsby you mentioned. We found the hotel—checked in under that name, paid cash, and used a fake California ID. The driver was a local hire, paid through a shell company that dissolved two days after the heist. Press footage shows his face, but facial recognition returned no results. No priors, no property records under that name anywhere. Either it’s an alias or—”

“Or he’s rich enough to erase himself from public records.”

“Or connected enough to scrub records.” She clicked her pen, thinking. “Whoever this guy is, he knows how to disappear. But nobody’s perfect. We’ll find something.”

She nodded and closed the notebook. “We’ll keep looking.”

After she left, Thomas watched the city through the window. Pittsburgh spread out below, buildings gray as slate under low clouds. *The sword sat in some oligarch’s vault, locked away, or already crated and shipped to Singapore, Dubai, or some climate-controlled bunker where stolen history went to die—a thousand years of history reduced to an invoice and a tracking number.*

He swung his legs over the side of the bed. The floor felt cold through the hospital socks. His clothes sat folded on the chair—jeans, button-down, jacket with a hole in the shoulder, they’d cut wider to get at

the bolt. The doctors wanted another week for tests. Thomas had insurance forms to fill out instead. Board meetings to attend. Statements to give. And somewhere in all that paperwork, buried in security logs and financial records, was the thread that would lead him back to the sword.

He started getting dressed. His shoulder sent sharp pain down his arm. He worked through it.

Fifteen years as curator. Now he understood: some things were worth bleeding for.

He buttoned his shirt with his good hand and headed for the door.

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