



Jude

The oncoming storm chased Jude inside.

His footsteps clattered on the tiles in the main hallway, tracking mud with every step. Much had changed in the eight years he had called Ánhaga home, though sometimes he still felt a jolt of childlike fear walking the halls alone. Especially nights like tonight, when the storm sought entrance through the cracks in the stone and rain battered the windows. He'd need to wrangle the ancient mop from the cupboard, scrounge up a bucket and—

Jude stopped.

A letter sat on a low table by the door. Even from a distance, his name stood out starkly black on the envelope.

Elden, his grumpy housekeeper of the past three years and keeper of the kitchen, hadn't mentioned any post arriving this morning. Jude hadn't received a letter in eight years, at least not one addressed directly to him.

He approached it slowly, trepidation settling in his stomach.

There was only one place it could be from. Only one hand tight on his throat.

Jude picked it up, ignoring how his fingers trembled. The envelope was pristine, unmarked by rain and travel. His name was scored precisely across the front, the familiar contour of the sigil just as damning.

The cupped hands and sun of the Abbey.

The Abbey which, until his fifteenth year, had been the only home he had ever known. His grip crumpled the sharp edges of the expensive vellum, and his heart felt like a slow-to-start fire, reluctant to pump blood down the lengths of his limbs. Steeling himself – he refused to flinch, even if they weren't watching – he ripped open the envelope.

His lungs caught between breaths.

In a handful of sentences, his forgotten existence turned on its head.

The Abbey was sending an iconographer. One they were considering for the lead position, apparently – a woman called Maeve. Something about the name sounded familiar . . . perhaps they had been at the Abbey together, but he no longer remembered. It didn't matter either way. She was coming to paint an icon.

Something Jude could *not*, in any circumstance, allow to happen.

Hatred surged up in a vicious lash. Both for her, and the Abbey that haunted his every step, looking for some new way to control him. They wanted to ensure he kept to himself, holding himself in check. Alone and abandoned.

And to send an iconographer, of all people . . . there had to be a reason they wanted an updated icon of him – an exiled saint. Why send her now?

He reread the letter. Underneath the prickling rage and the raw vulnerability that he refused, *refused*, to acknowledge was the smallest spark of something he was too pessimistic to call hope. An inkling, maybe – grey instead of black.

Over the past year, Jude had been picking at what allowed the Abbey and its insidious band of elders to hold the reins to his magic, to all the saints' abilities.

It had started with a book he'd found shoved behind a shelf in the dusty confines of the library: *Iconography and the Saints*. Despite the title and the fact it had so clearly been hidden, the

gold-dusted fingerprints on its spine had piqued his interest. Whoever Ánhaga belonged to before Jude had taken up its tenancy had read the book and left their mark behind.

The cramped text within had confirmed something he'd long suspected – the icons were how the Abbey controlled the saints they so dutifully brought up and sent into exile. His last icon had been painted just before he left. If its power was growing weak with age . . . a new icon of him would allow the Abbey to renew their hold on him.

And if, *if* the iconographer succeeded, if a renewed icon of Jude was made—

The Abbey's connection to him would be restored. All the measures he'd taken to protect himself and his memories . . . gone. He wasn't sure he had the strength to fight his way free yet again.

Jude pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes until lights popped and flashed behind his lids. Memories swam at the furthest recesses of his mind, begging for entry in honeyed voices. A familiar pang of worry wormed its way into the tender space between his ribs, growing stronger with each ragged inhale. He rubbed the spot with the palm of his hand, feeling the rise and fall of his chest.

But. *But.*

That damning thread of hope.

The book hadn't told him how the elders accessed the magic held in the icons, nor how to restore the memories and magic to the saints they were stolen from.

Maybe the iconographer would know.

She, who formed the icons, who knew of the power between artist and subject . . . was it too much for him to wonder if she'd share her knowledge? If the Abbey hadn't sunk its claws in deep enough to keep her from seeing the truth amidst the lies?

He crumpled the letter as the feeble flame of hope began to wane.

She was an iconographer. Fully trained. Deeper in the Abbey's clutches than he'd ever been, comfortable in its hold. The danger far outweighed the potential of breaking himself free. Of curing himself of the Abbey's grip on his magic, a poisonous taint that turned it into something that wasn't his own. Of running as far as he could from the Abbey and ensuring they could never touch him or his magic again.

Maybe then his life would finally be his own.

Jude had done what was needed when he agreed to leave the Abbey. He'd donned the title of saint just as they asked. A perfect fucking icon for anyone looking for something to pray to.

And still, it wasn't enough.

'What else can I do?' he whispered to the house, voice cracking on the syllables.

He forced a slow breath in between his teeth. In and out, in and out, until the rapid fluttering of his heart settled. The Abbey suddenly remembering his existence couldn't be anything but a threat to the fragile peace he'd managed to forge for himself. Redemption couldn't be something he still hoped for.

It couldn't.

He smoothed the letter back out. His focus landed on the iconographer's date of arrival.

Two days from now.

Jude shoved his letter into his pocket and made for the front door. He couldn't stay here, cooped up like a man in a cell. Not tonight. If he had anywhere else to go to that wasn't the house *they* had sent him to, that's where he would go. But he didn't. There was nowhere he would be safe from the Abbey, nowhere they wouldn't find him. Every cyclical worry and half-suppressed fear chased him outside like a shadow he'd never outrun.

He'd run once, and he could do it again. Forever, if that was what it took.

He strode towards the entry gate, palming the back of his head to protect against the whip of winter cold. Short hairs tickled

the skin between his fingers. He'd kept it shorn close to his skull for eight years, never allowing it to grow long enough to grab.

Flickers of memories coloured the backs of his lids.

Blood and iron and salt. The edges of his vision glinted metallic. He'd need to visit his library and sate the magic inside him before she arrived – but not tonight.

Jude only allowed one thought to find harbour as he ran for the neighbouring village of Oakmoor. He wanted to get completely and utterly *sloshed*. Forgetting had never been a problem for him, but tonight, he wanted his thoughts free of anything but the bottom of a cup.

He kept his head down and his feet moving as he entered the town. Consisting of only two major streets, though even that was being generous, Oakmoor was shabby and startlingly poor, its population dying out with every passing year. It was almost empty this time of night, which suited him perfectly. He didn't want to be recognized. Not when he had one stop to make before the blessed oblivion of the pub.

Too soon, the village shrine stared back at him.

It was small enough that he could wrap his arms around it and pull it free from the wall if he tried. Other villages had churches and cathedrals, grand places of worship with room for hundreds, but Oakmoor only had the shrine. Small and forgettable, though not to Jude.

The base was carved wood, the saint's visage above worn by time and clawing, desperate fingers. Frost turned the metal luminescent in the moonlight. A slot was cut in the base for coin. Something to urge the prayer along, or some other brainwashed claim they liked to spew to the poor souls who still believed.

He blinked back the gold, the murmur of memories knocking against the back of his skull.

Hollow eyes watched him turn and walk away.

He was glad he made the stop. He needed the reminder that the Abbey wasn't returning to his life – they'd never left. The

arrival of the iconographer would simply be a step closer. Jude tucked his hands into his pockets, squeezing his nails into the soft meat of his palms until the rolling mess inside him quieted.

He rarely visited Oakmoor, fearful of the Abbey's long-fingered reach. They would know if he tried to weave himself into the community, of that he was certain. Abbey members visited often enough – to collect the shrine's coins, to sell pilgrim's tokens, to preach in the streets. Tucked away in a wild corner of patchwork towns and surrounded by the bleak moors of the Wold, it was an easy place to be forgotten.

But they hadn't forgotten him, a needling voice whispered. Why else would they be sending the iconographer?

Jude made a vicious promise to himself – he wouldn't think of the Abbey anymore tonight, even if it took a whole bottle of whisky to achieve it.

The bell above the pub's door chimed his entrance. The smell of burning peat and souring pints filled his lungs. He'd been coming here for a little under two years, ever since Elden convinced him leaving his cage was not only possible but could be good for him.

Still, he never quite got the sense he was welcome. The bar was small, with squat windows and walls decorated with clumsy paintings and tacked-up village notices. A handful of patrons were tucked around tables, nursing pints and glasses of indeterminate liquid. Jude quickly scanned the space for the old woman who usually kept him company during his visits, but even she was absent that night.

'Heya.'

Sean, the barman, smiled at him from behind the scored wooden counter. He raised an empty tankard, and Jude nodded. Lowering onto a bench tucked against the wall, he watched him work, trying very hard not to think of anything but the barman's swift, practised movements.

Setting a pint next to Jude's elbow, Sean knocked his fist on

the table in two abrupt beats. Jude moved his arms under the table so Sean wouldn't touch him. 'Alone?' the barman asked.

Jude nodded. It was rare he visited the pub without Elden. His housekeeper was fond of the ale, though perhaps the barman and his upstairs bedroom was the real draw for Elden. 'Sorry to disappoint,' he murmured.

The corner of Sean's mouth ticked up. He tapped the side of Jude's tankard. 'Want me to keep them coming?'

Carefully, Jude extracted an arm and downed half the pint in one go. He stifled a grimace at the bitter aftertaste. Beer wasn't usually his drink of choice. Once, it had been cider. Sweet and tart, a glass passed between young mouths. 'Whisky, please.'

It'd do the job quicker, at least.

Sean studied him for a lingering moment. They weren't friends, not even close, but Jude couldn't be sure what Elden had told the bartender about him. Not that Elden should have said a word, but Jude suspected he might have let a few morsels slip.

'Now,' Jude grumbled. Guilt flooded him when Sean jerked away from the table. Before he could dredge up an apology, the barman was gone, a glass of whisky appearing a minute later.

His throat burned in protest as he gulped it down. Warmth suffused his face, whether from the curious gaze of the bar's patrons or the whisky, he wasn't sure. Coming here was a risk, but one he was willing to take. He'd better get used to it. The iconographer would soon be watching him just as closely. Closer.

Jude raised his hand in the air, signalling Sean for another drink. Whisky or beer, he didn't much care as long as it fulfilled its end of the bargain. He'd regret the indulgence in the morning, but he would be a mess either way. Might as well make it miserable by his own hand.

'C'mon. You can't stay here all night.'

Jude peeled back his eyelids, one at a time. Light danced in his vision, multiplying into a shattered dance of fire and spinning

faces. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. He tried to speak, but all that came through was a distorted murmur. Everything was so *bright*.

‘Ungh—’

‘Yep. That sounds about right.’

Someone slid their hands under his armpits and hefted him to his feet. He struggled to focus on their face. Pale eyes leering closer. A glint of a sliver chain—

‘No! No—’ Jude flailed, kicking out. He needed to get free. He couldn’t let the man touch him. Not his hair, not his back, not his wrists or hands. ‘Stop it!’

‘Okay,’ the voice murmured. Softer. ‘You’re okay.’

Jude looked up from where he’d crumpled onto his knees. The face swam into hazy focus. Familiar. *Safe*. ‘Sean?’

The barman nodded, unsmiling. ‘Time to get you home.’

This time, Jude let himself be pulled to his feet and guided towards the door. He couldn’t feel his legs, and his eyes were gritty with sand. Gold flashed disconcertingly bright with every blink. Alcohol influenced his control over his unruly magic, which was why he usually abstained. His loss of control was another point against the iconographer.

The freezing wind felt like a bucket of water had been dumped over his head, diluting the numbing effect of the alcohol. He blinked. ‘What happened?’

Sean propped Jude up against the side of the pub. ‘Had a bit too much, mate. You all right?’

‘I’ve got him.’

Elden materialized from the gloom with a flat cap pulled over his sandy hair. He smiled at Sean before peeling Jude off the wall, careful to keep his hand light on Jude’s elbow, knowing how he shied away from touch. ‘Let’s go.’

They made their way slowly from the village. The first curls of nausea swarmed in Jude’s belly as the house came into view, joining with his embarrassment at Elden having to *fetch* him like

an unruly child. He stopped at the gate, bracing his hands on the iron. A small, rusted plaque was mounted at the centre. Jude ran his fingers over it, feeling the shape of the letters. The name of the house he'd been condemned to.

ÁNHAGA. Solitary being. A dwelling for one.

Tears pricked the corners of his eyes as he turned his messy focus to the moors behind him. Dawn was still hours off, the sky a deep blue indigo. The old oak tree stood proud, not too far in the distance. A spectral figure with hulking branches like shadows given substance.

A wave of drunkenness swept over him, as infallible as the tide. Fear chased it, pummelling against all his sharpened edges until they softened with weary reluctance. His body felt weightless. Not entirely his own, like he could float away at any moment. A restlessness in his veins that felt at once both untenable and wholly unfamiliar.

'Elden,' Jude asked, 'what's wrong with me?'

The question was quiet, hardly more than a suggestion between exhales. But still, Elden paused. Their eyes locked. Something in their light blue depths gave Jude pause. He wondered if he would ever truly know the other man. Even after three years in the same home, he still sometimes felt like a stranger, a fault that didn't lie with Elden. Warm, friendly Elden. Jude only had himself to blame.

'Let's get you into the house,' Elden murmured.

Jude bit the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood. He pulled his gaze away from his housekeeper and back towards the oak, further, *up*. He searched the horizon for guidance, for birds. He would allow himself that much. A desperate moment of pain and fear, a prayer sent towards an uncaring sky, before he turned and trudged back towards Ánhaga.