
A Land Without Wolves

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MMXXI**


Temple Dark Books

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Part I

Chapter I. The Felon

Gallowf' Hill, October 12th, 1798

“If what they say is true,” the hangman murmured behind him, “then may God damn ye soon as he sees ye.”

Breath steaming out in silvery plumes, Mogue Trench glanced up at the noose. Outlined by the glare, it looked withered and egg-shaped, a maw of agape nylon gently swaying from the traverse beam in the dawn breeze like a hypnotist's pendulum. He couldn't help but wonder how many necks it had snapped over the years.

Below the scaffold, a sea of faces was amassed. Some were emaciated, flat-eyed, staring up at Mogue, waiting to see him dance a Kilmainham minuet. It was an unseasonably drab day for mid-October. Flint-grey clouds skulked overhead, threatening to soak the city. To his eye, all things took on the general hue of pewter, as if the season had leached all colour away. Only the rich scarlet coats of the soldiers standing guard at the base, and the Kingdom of Ireland's gold-and-azure banner high above the yard, interrupted the dullness. As per the ritual of public execution, it had been hoisted to half-stand as he was dragged from his cell; it now hung toward the ground, as if in prayer, ruffled only by an occasional flurry of breeze.

A crow swooped down, perching on the granite; no doubt his corpse would make a fine banquet.

Mogue clenched his teeth and, though bleary from lack of sleep, scanned their faces as a sailor might scan the heavens for hints of an approaching squall. He had recognised the faces of both ally and adversary in the crowd all morning. Surely she'd be here, flapping a nicked brisé fan before her and trying her best to look incurious. And if she was, why wasn't she closer to the scaffold, where he might see her? Every face of every lady, he squinted to see; her presence would be comfort enough, proof that his departure from this world need not be fully devoid of hope.

But nowhere was she to be seen. Mogue stared ahead at the stone insignia carved above the prison entrance across the yard. *Let them gawk*, he thought. *You may as well be on parade for them. How many hope you'll break down and beg forgiveness through your sobs?*

He wondered if they felt disappointment upon seeing him in the flesh at last; no monster, no wild-eyed, bloodied assassin; just a young, feral-looking man with a limp, his cheek and jowl a patchwork of scars. His wrists were leathery beneath the heavy iron shackles clamped over them. He wore a torn, discoloured greatcoat; and to his gaolers' surprise, he'd asked for a shave before he was delivered from his cell, as a final request. Now, clean-shaven, he looked much older than his twenty-seven years; his face was drab enough to be forgotten as soon as it was seen. Sometimes even close friends had trouble recalling his features. Greying teeth. Hair soft and gossamer-thin, whiter than the soiled linen shirt he wore. Lean shoulders. But on the walk to the scaffold, he'd moved intently, despite his bruised legs, his hessian booted footfalls hard and cadenced as a drumbeat. And before that – as they had dragged him through the cobbled streets, through the mud and manure, through the loud jeering of the crowd, his clothes shredded, his legs cut; and pelted with anything they could hold – he had somehow kept silent.

From behind, he heard the hangman lumber forward, boots clumping on the rough oak boards. The noose was clenched roughly around his neck, pressed hard against his gullet; Mogue forced himself not to respond. Even here, in this place of extinguished hope, face encrusted in the filth of the streets and his own dried blood, some semblance of fortitude had to be maintained. They did not deserve the satisfaction of hearing him beg.

Far beyond the cracked parapets, over the rooftops, the Angelus bell from St. Michan's tolled grimly.

It was strange. He'd been surrounded by death and death's abettors since the cradle, yet his own mortality rarely intruded on his thoughts. But upon his arrest, a vivid expectancy had

loomed in his mind. It grew steadily as a well-tended plant, watered by his interrogation, the hue and cry of his trial, the gavel's reverberation as the magistrate passed the verdict. It wasn't fear; at least, not wholly. More a sense of relentless, eclipsing finality.

He thought of shadows veiling the sun, church bells tolling their last, corpses of the long dead crawling up from their graves in reversion. Every precious second lost only enlarged the noose that now hung above him. Countless had stood before him, and millions more would after, for crimes both more heinous and more petty than his. Plenty more would stand there who bore no guilt at all, but the sentence had to land on somebody. All Mogue could think about now was that this would be his final glimpse of daylight.

Across the square, the chaplain intoned his homily: "Mogue Trench. You stand here charged, tried, and convicted of many heinous crimes within these realms. Verily, said crimes shall be stated herewith: murder, thievery, membership of a treasonable organisation, incitement to riot, the murders of Captain Joseph Shaw and Constable Ivan MacBride in cold blood, resistance to the police at Clonmel, together with a long catalogue of minor charges. For these crimes, you are to be sentenced on this day, hung by the neck, until dead. And may God have mercy upon your soul."

Months earlier, before the rebellion was even in full flare, he'd heard of the public execution by firing squad of a group of convicts suspected of seditious activity on the green of Dunlavin, in the County of Wexford. There had been no trial, no inquiry as to whether those men even warranted a death sentence. Suspicion was verdict enough. Yet he partly envied them the manner of their fate. With a firing squad, he'd at least have been able to look his killer in the eye.

Oratory completed, the magistrate called out, "Have you any final words to say?"

Had you been in the crowd that morning and were standing close enough to hear his response, something most peculiar would have been clear. Whether it was a trick of the light, some couldn't rightly say, but it seemed the man awaiting the noose smiled ruefully to himself – a crooked, upward tilt of the lips. Many felons before him had stood on that same platform, their hands bound, their bearings shrivelled. Perhaps you know how to read a face. Perhaps you've seen hulking murderers break out in tears, brigands cackle wildly at their subjugators, ill-famed madmen staring skyward with an uncommon solemnity as the final decree is passed, no doubt priming themselves for the union with death. To see an inmate smile, even dejectedly, is not unusual. It may be the only time in his life that a criminal would smile. But now the convict turned his forlorn smirk to the officials, before looking out again over the crowd. He held his fettered hands up, rattled them a little and demanded, "Does any man here know me?"

No takers. Strange question to ask at one's hanging. The convict's voice was cracked and hoarse on the air as his eyes darted expectantly around the clustered faces.

"Does any here know my face?"

Only silence answered him. He cleared his throat. Though known to pepper his speech with only the coarsest of invective, his voice now rang out with limpid appeal.

"Will everyone here remember my face?"

Again, he was answered by silence, with some people looking away. Most had no doubt heard his name long before today, shouted from pulpits and whispered in grog shops; now they had a face to go with it. He had no friends in the crowd; no one to cut his body down and drag him to the nearest grog shop, where they'd open his jugular and pour some mulled whiskey into it in pursuit of his own blessed reversion.

And afterward? Would they come to think him a martyr? Would ballads be composed in his name? Would he be listed in the almanacks among those who championed the cause of freedom? Would his name be spoken in hushed reverence, as if he were an unrecognised saint? Or most likely, would he be forgotten as the men in Dunlavin, his corpse dumped into some anonymous pit for the miscreant and the destitute?

The future be damned, his legacy also. In the precious seconds before the sentence was carried out, he decided to ruminate on the events that had led him to this place.

Chapter II. The Wait

Wexford, 1786

A mile out of the Tintern estate, the mail carriage slowed down. The horses snorted as the coachman drew on the reins. The two redcoats flanking the vehicle primed their bayonets. A half-moon hung awry amidst the stars; the sky looked polished as glass. Their timepieces stated it was an hour before midnight.

It was a clear night, and bitterly cold. The darkness of the road hunkered all about them like an audience, while the frost-choked ditches appeared like glacial pools of silver. Yet they had no need for lanterns; the moon was their guide. Its milky lustre flooded the road ahead, allowing them to see as far as the Abbey, standing silent on its grassy mound, fanged battlements surmounting the trees that surrounded it.

December was cloudless; the bare minimum of frost, drizzle and mist glossing the limestone, the trees defrocked of leaves.

Not a word was uttered by the coachman, the postboy, or the redcoats since Dublin. Departure time was 5 pm, and the sky had grown dark before they had even saddled up. As the city lanterns faded from sight, the postboy had tried softly crooning a ballad to himself but was glared out of it by the coachman. He'd held his peace since. The job ahead was too preoccupying, the silence too palatial to break.

This was the only road in Wexford safe enough for a carriage to drive upon. Ireland's hinterlands swarmed with highwaymen after dark, bands of armed brigands and rebels who hid in the roadway gullies, hands clamped over their pike handles. But they were not overly worried; the murk of secluded roads was familiar to them, and their destination was near. The driver flicked the reins, and they trundled on.

*

A mile away, the highwayman Joseph MacTíre crouched in the gravelly shallows of Bannow Bay, sea-green eyes scanning the darkness that surrounded him. He'd been there for over an hour, shielded by the lichen-speckled stone of the abbey bridge above him. The bridge lay just on the rim of the Tintern estate, its cutstone ribs straddling the Bannow's rapids in a crenellated series of arches and parapets, like the battlements of a fortress. At high tide, the river would hurdle under it relentlessly, spilling out toward the bay in a churning flow. For now, though, the shallows prevailed. The cold ensured some thin slabs of ice had frozen over it in parts, further curtailing the roaring rush.

MacTíre's breath was drawn in, and his ears were pricked for hoof beat thuds, the hollow commotion of a carriage. He lay on his stomach, the stony margent damp against his skin, even with the gloves he wore. Even under the moon's full scrutiny, he stayed hidden, his cheek and jaw swiped by the damp air. The tide's salty aroma stung his nostrils. He didn't mind the cold; in fact, he barely noticed it anymore. There had been a time when the damp chill would slowly infest his bones, leaching his body of all warmth, but years of sleeping under the stars had now numbed him to such sensations. His fingertips were grazed from crawling over the flint. The pink cuts and welts speckling his hands were a familiar irritation under his gloves, reminding him to keep vigilant. A few yards away, his horse stood tethered to a tree stump.

Ten minutes until the mail carriage reached him.

Every so often, his horse grew impatient, whinnying and pounding its hoofs, snorting hot grey tusks of breath into the air. Whenever this happened, MacTíre would creep over to the animal, stroke the grey velvet of its neck and make soft shushing noises, before sliding agilely back into position, tense from the interruption, breathing heavily. But he did not worry about getting caught; he knew the stream waters too well to give himself away.

Attentive to his attire, he was garbed in black, which allowed him to vanish among the shadows with great ease. This despite the weight of the guns with which he'd armed himself: a bayoneted carbine slung at his crossbelt, the blunderbuss he gripped upward away from the water, and a brace of smoothbore cavalry flintlocks, both pilfered from a redcoat officer. Although he wore a mask, mud also coated his face, along with the hilts of his guns and the buckles of his belt and baldric. Whenever he rode out in the glens, there was always the danger of the moon's glint catching one of the brass surfaces, so the highwayman never forgot to carefully darken his artillery.

Even so, whenever the moon crawled out from behind a cloud, pouring its light over him, he cursed it. It mocked his efforts to keep out of sight. *I see you*, it seemed to say. *Tonight will be the last crime you commit. I shall divulge your whereabouts without prejudice.* The highwayman saw nothing splendid or lyrical about the moon. It seemed to loiter in the firmament, keeping eternal watch on the proceedings of earth. A chalky orb, conspicuous among the stars. Even during an eclipse, it wasn't truly gone, merely hidden from sight. It swam behind clouds and sharpened to a creamy barb in warm weather. He never understood why poets and painters devoted themselves to scribbling about its loveliness, or daubing its acrylic likeness onto scraps of cloth. To him, indeed to all men who lived the life he did, it was one more thing to cut short his time as a lawbreaker, an informer Nature had set upon him as punishment.

Though still a young man, the highwayman had led his transgressive life for over a decade. Now at the age of thirty, he had on occasion marvelled that he had managed to survive for so long. Though he'd also remind himself why. He slept during the day, attending to his excursions after dark. He rarely risked showing his face in the daytime. The world smelled different at night, the stale dampness of the fields, the tang of flowers enhanced if the wind was calm, the salty whiff of seawater. Such smells he'd come to associate with his own genius for survival, and so he revelled in them.

A consummate practitioner of remaining hidden, Joseph now had only a vague notion of what the diurnal hours looked like. In early dawn, cold spindles of light rinsed the shadows from his hideaway, sole reminders of a world being blanketed in a timespan unthatched by darkness. Yet this was no cause for concern. Few men were better acquainted with the landscape and the secret places of Wexford than Joseph MacTíre.

Eight minutes until the mail carriage reached him.

For a while, the highwayman lay on his stony eiderdown and forgot about the approaching prize. His adrenaline dulled for a moment, before a sudden sting of energy caused him to tighten his grip on his guns. Now wasn't the time for rest. "Rest is for the grave," he hissed to himself.

Further down the saltmarsh lurked the dense and sequestered foliage of Tintern Forest, a knotted thicket of towering oaks and ashes that overstepped the riverbank. Their leafy ceiling was so impenetrable that no light, whether from sun or sky, seemed able to pierce them. Even the look of it, spiked and opaque, trees murmuring in a hushed frenzy as headwinds blasted through, was enough to daunt even the monks who lived nearby to walk in its undergrowth.

Again, his horse snorted, this time annoyed by a sudden gust of wind. For a minute, the silence seemed to evaporate. But it wasn't a big cause for concern. Both man and beast were accustomed to the wind, the jangling rainfall, knew to use them as camouflage and to read the deception in the noises it carried. MacTíre knew the horse was well concealed, for he'd trained it to keep from sudden whinnying or beating its hooves. There was no other strategy for attack. He'd wait for the carriage to enter his eye-line, then he'd leap up, pistols blazing, and shoot down as many as he could. He was an excellent shot, and believed that speed and not strength, the ability to move quicker and sharper than one's opponent, always won a fight. Yet the timing was also crucial. Attack too early, and a state of panic would ensue, and he might have to give

chase. Attack too late, and the same state of panic would compel his prey to return fire, albeit haphazardly and without strategy.

With any luck, only two men would be manning the carriage, with two soldiers accompanying them. That was how it usually went. Four against one was a safe enough wager. And it was too much of a risk to follow them. Anything could give him away – a branch snapping underfoot, slosh of his boots through river rapids, his personal scent, or even a whiff of gunpowder drifting on the breeze as he drew back on the firing mechanism, upsetting the horses and lending awareness of his presence. He had to lay in wait, allowing some time alone with his thoughts. It was wiser to attack with the element of surprise, a lesson best learned under pain of wound.

Once, he'd waited for a carriage at the Campile crossroads, veiled in the rustling shade of a yew tree. He'd been barely able to hold his carbine up, he remembered, the weight of it lumbering his hands. There had been heavy snowfall that year, and so moving about was difficult. Not that it mattered: the footman saw him first. The orange afterglow of his campsite betrayed his position before he'd a chance to put it fully out, never mind the odour of smoke carrying on the breeze. A warning shot rang out in the dark, and the pellet grazed his jaw and cranium, leaving an ugly welt on his cheekbone. Though he'd returned fire, the carriage had managed to wheel around him and leave him where he was.

Lying in the grass, trying to dress the bloody issue on his cheek, he'd felt strangely thankful. They'd allowed him to live, rather than clap him in irons and drag him off to the nearest magistrate. He was young at the time. Hadn't even reached twenty. And he still had the scar, now a cord of white flesh running along the length of his jaw. People only had to see it to feel daunted by him.

Mercifully, no snow had fallen this winter. There had been a week of fog, but none tonight, for which the highwayman was sorry. Fog was a better accomplice than snow.

Six minutes until the mail carriage passed him.

Chapter III. The Courtesan

Dublin, 1791

“Will you be back the night, sir?” Still naked, the girl bunched her hair up in her hands before dipping it into the bowl of steaming water on the dresser in front of her. When she threw her head back, spattering a trail of moisture off the wall opposite, it hung, lank and darkly sopping, down her emaciated back. To his amazement, she didn’t wince from the cold; just stared at him, questioningly, in the mirror.

Mogue Trench lay back on the divan, exhaled pipe smoke at the ceiling. It mingled with the steam rising from her bowl, smudging the mirror and windowpane like fog, curling upwards and needling his eyes. His shoulder was still numb from where her head had rested for most of the night; the ghost of her perfume still tickled his nose. He didn’t answer right away.

“Did ye not hear me?”

“I did. I don’t know yet.”

He hadn’t said a word since waking. The daybreak hours were his favourite time; that interval of grey tranquillity before the noise of the city fully reasserted itself, when he preferred not to profane the air with talk. In the laneway below, nothing could be heard, not even the odd dray wheel or a horse’s brisk clop off cobblestone. The Charleys’ night shift was over, he guessed; soon the first of the street-traders would be loudly declaiming their wares.

Without taking his gaze off the girl, Mogue softly patted himself down; his timepiece was right where he’d left it, as were both his folding knives. His belt lay sprawled where he’d left it across the chair, wherein most of his blades remained in their sheaths, oiled and polished of all gore and gristle. By the end of today, they’d be freshly reddened once more. His knives – the tools of his trade.

“Will the thief-catcher be there?”

“He better be.”

“You plan to kill him?”

“I’ll do to him exactly what he done to you. And worse.”

“Worse?”

“Yes – my promise to you.”

The girl nodded, and wordlessly laced up her bodice. She couldn’t have been much older than fifteen, but she still knew better than to steal from him; everyone in this place did. They didn’t like him, he knew, the girls and the madams and the bouncers alike; but he never gave any of them reason to turn him away. There’d be trouble if he did, and another visit that would involve cracked skulls and the parlour going up in smoke. But she’d no intention of robbing him; just wanted what he owed her, which was always a handsome sum. For that reason, she was the only one to whom Mogue enjoyed handing over his shillings, with the odd tip if she really outdid herself. He wasn’t nearly as rough as most of the clients who darkened the place’s door. And he preferred waking up in this room above all the others. She kept it clean, and her personal touch was evident throughout. The soft bedspread and the white cloth on the dressing table where she now sat. All things she chose to mark this room as hers.

She was pale, almost lily-white, as were all the girls in that place. The madam insisted on keeping them indoors; it gave them the look of courtesans. Of course, they painted themselves in rouge. Gentlemen and bowsies alike preferred pale and were happy to pay top coin for it. The gentlemen – the ones brave and depraved enough to venture this far east of College Green – because it gave them the conscience-killing illusion they were still fucking according to their class, and the bowsies because they got a taste of having risen in the world, if only for one night.

Mogue quite liked pale himself, though right now his own legs trailed out from under the blanket and an odd self-consciousness took him. They were tan and leathery like the rest of

him, from years of sleeping in ditches and gulleys with nothing but rainwater to hold off the thirst.

Gaunt as she was, and despite the collage of scars marring her back, there was no sign of the pox on her, yet. The crisp dawn chill hardened her nipples, making them poke forward like soft jewels. The urge to reach out and take her back into his arms, shower her with kisses again, was overwhelming. He knew her bare flesh would be warm and delicate under his fingertips. Women like her weren't conjured in the poems he read in the book he'd lifted from a bookseller off Dame Street; yet he forgot how regularly he debauched her, how suited panniers would be hanging from her hips, her neck massaged with perfume. If she held her head high, she'd be nothing short of queenly. The tincture of a bruise marked her collarbone; he remembered running his knife-tip along it as she undressed for him last night, his breath quickening hotly as her shift fell to the floor. She'd winced as he traced over the bruise, her dark eyes springing open, but no more than a grimace, barely noticeable beneath the rouge dusting her bony face. Mogue was skilled enough that no blood was drawn, even accidentally. He knew all this about her, yet he'd never learned her name. Privately, he'd decided to call her 'Grace'.

"I don't know if anyone will be back tonight."

She turned to face him, her head slightly tilting. "What's that mean?"

"Just that and nothing more. What happens today, in the next few hours, could very well mean a different world for us all."

"So, this is goodbye, then?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. You'll know when you see my face in that doorway again."

"Assuming no one sets it on fire."

"It won't come to that. You have my word."

"How do you know?"

Mogue looked down; young as she was, she already had an instinct for when lies were being uttered. He knew because he had it himself. Life on the streets tended to sharpen such instincts. If he'd said yes, she'd be waiting for him.

"Why d'yis even have to do this?"

"I've commitments. I like to see them honoured. And what'll you care, anyway?"

She turned away, eyes unreadable in the glass. Mogue always noticed a girl's eyes first; hers had drawn him the first night he'd shared a bed with her. Now, they gazed right through him, piercing his mind.

Without a word, she stood up, wrapped a slip around her shoulders and left. Mogue made no attempt to stop her. Little point in compounding a lie with hollow reassurances. He didn't blame her; he was a reliable source of income that she'd now lost forever. After a moment he dressed and left the brothel, making for Meath Street.

An early sun crimsoned the sky, and Dublin was still dragging itself out of sleep. The caws of seagulls, shrill and high, resounded on the breeze. Everywhere else had a lone nightingale or rooster to herald the dawn, it seemed to Mogue; Dublin had a full choir of seagulls.

Mogue kept his head down, the tobacco in his lungs scalding anew. The pavements' cracks and dirt were all the more conspicuous in the dawn glare, but Mogue barely noticed it. It had rained heavily in the night, and puddles still blotched the cobblestones, thick as turf or porter. By midday they'd be burnt away.

At this hour, in the growing heat, the city was a riot of scents both pleasing and putrid, from sea-winds wafting coolly inland and barley roasting pungently from St. James' Gate; to the stench of vomit pooling in doorways and streets steaming with horse dung. All were eclipsed, however, by the Liffey's sulphurous reek, an odour every Dubliner knew intimately, mingled from brine and raw sewage that the wind whipped into a frenzy, causing people to hold their noses and quicken their pace. As he moved briskly across Essex Street Bridge, Mogue found his eyes stinging.

Glancing downstream, toward the harbour and where the river spilled into the bay, he saw a squad of navvies swarm over the humped, skeletal arch of the new Carlisle Bridge. Their pickaxes' heavy clink off granite and the orders they snarled and bellowed to one another as huge slabs of Portland stone were hauled into place glided on the wind like clarion calls. Mogue didn't let go of his breath until he reached the southside quays.

McClear, a lamplighter on Parliament Street, nodded wordlessly as he hoisted his pole into the mantle to douse the tiny flame within. Mogue knew his face, having bribed him for tasty information several times already, and had never found him to be a liar. He nodded back without breaking his stride, his blood starting to pump with each footstep; right now, he knew all he needed to know. The knives slung in his belt, hidden beneath his greatcoat, knocked gently off his thighs and ribs, goading him further, faster. If all went well today, McClear would get double what Mogue gave him originally.

Today was definitely a day for smiling, and to kick up a good dust.

Chapter IV. The Crucible

Wexford, 1786

Joseph hated nights like this. Clear, moonlit, biting cool. But he hated being so close to the Bannow River even more, for it dredged up memories of his older brother, memories he had forced himself to bury in his mind's inmost vault that now clawed their way back to plague him.

Despite this, there were nights when he found himself trundling out to its banks, hoping to drink in its ever-flowing calm. It was a ritual of sorts for him, a means of expunging any remorse he occasionally felt for his crimes. He would dismount and lead the horse over the bridge by its tether, moving slowly, instinctively, boot-heels scraping the gravelled floor, reverent as a pilgrim in the temple.

Whenever he did this, he'd often remember helping his brother and their parents drag a haywain laden with the day's produce to the community fair across that very bridge. The MacTíre family were cottiers, eking an existence living in a ramshackle, one-roomed cabin tucked away in the Kilmore foothills, proximate to the roadside on the estate of Fethard. They rented from one of the tenant farmers there, with less than an acre to their name. Redmond, Joseph, and their sister Fiadh were only three of six siblings to survive beyond childhood. As a result, they had grown up in a world of hunting for game in the dense forests in the neighbouring Tintern estate, poaching for salmon in the nearby stream, gathering bundles of tree branches for kindling.

The MacTíre siblings learned to read and write at a hedge-school near the limestone quarry at Herrylock – an illegal academy for children of the subtenants in the region. The school, a converted limekiln with red sandstone walls, was kept by a man called Hugh Ó Doirnín, a spindly, red-faced *spailpín* and amateur pedagogue from the County Louth, who harboured an undisguised fondness for poitín and who advertised his schoolmasterly services on the myriad, garishly painted signs adorning the hovel's door:

To Parents and Guardians. Wex. Such Parents and Guardians as may wish to Entrust their Children for Education in its Fullest Extent to Maestro Hugh Ó Doirnín, shall have said advantage at Herrylock of Church Street Chape. Also Licens'd to Buy and sell Liquor, Dry Goods, Etc.

The MacTíre children had been among dozens of local boys and girls to attend this covert academy, for as much as having a place to keep warm as for curiosity for the texts. Despite being in the direct path of icy sea winds that howled and lashed in from the peninsula, Ó Doirnín kept it heated by means of a small nook he'd converted into a hearth, periodically tossing slabs of peat – a perk from the seasonal labour he performed footing turf on the bog – from a steel pail onto its smouldering embers as he extolled the doctrines of Diogenes.

The promise of warmth and the thrill of reading kept Joseph and Fiadh returning, even as Redmond finally lost interest. From the bench seat where Joseph knelt, hunched over a tattered, coverless copybook he'd shared with his sister, he scratched out the rules of grammar with a grey goose quill, imitating the dusty white hieroglyphs Ó Doirnín – whose powers of erudition hastened to make him the literary guiding light of the parish – chalked on the black slate board pinned to the far wall, his haughty oration running through the full gamut of Ireland's melancholy history with endlessly aggrieved eloquence.

By the calming growl of waves and sea-wind buffeting the walls in hurtling, banshee-like screeches, the shaped splotches of ink on the flyblown page offered themselves to him, becoming more and more recognisable, fascinating him, luring him back. The solid weight of a book in his hand, the promise of what was stored within. Ó Doirnín showed them everything:

the shapes and sizes of the alphabet, the gradual alchemy of sentences and paragraphs, the myriad dexterities they could be used for, and the sheer joy of a blackened page. Joseph murmured them to himself, forcing his tongue to take on their shape, his accent to reproduce them, surround by the low hum of Fiadh and his fellow scholars taking in the day's lesson or Ó Doirín's lordly voice urging them to heed their Greek. The master did not hesitate to wield his rod on the more unruly pupils, but there was little sadism in him. Joseph scraped his own name onto a bit of slate with chalk, admiring the skeletal cut of the lettering as a smith might admire a newly forged skein, realising he could use it against others.

"You, lad. On what isle did Aeneas make landfall after departing Buthrotum?"

"Eh, the Isle of the Cyclopes."

"Isle of the Cyclopes what, boy?"

"Isle of the Cyclopes, sir!"

"And whom do they encounter whilst there?"

"Sir, they meet the man Acha...Achamenides."

"And he is...?"

"Eh...the sole survivor of Ulixes' crew. Sir."

"Aye. Indeed he was, lad. Indeed he was."

A wealth of knowledge was before him. Fiadh's preferences ran to those of geography and natural history, but his own passions ran to English and Greek as fields of study. There were the laws of grammar, the declension that formed the ending of a Latin noun, the sussuration of Greek idioms. A verb held the glimmering of some grand adventure. As the rich aroma of peat smoke permeated the air like fog, Joseph's breath quickened as he traced over sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph, feeling himself steadily gaining mastery over it. It was like discovering terrain and knowing its dangers well enough to anticipate them.

And, of course, there were the stories relayed to him. The simple precision of a poem in octosyllables.

He could do it all day long if he were allowed. But he knew he wasn't. There was always work to be done, always another task to be aware of and executed. And besides, books were better for little more than firewood, his father and Redmond agreed.

Joseph recalled an afternoon their father had brought he and Fiadh to a market, the cart shuffling behind them. Their father had set up in the village square and asked them to stay put while he saw to some matters in the nearby tavern. Joseph sat back happily on the cart, unconcerned by his father's growing absence or Fiadh's boredom, ignoring the shadows' slow shift as afternoon morphed into evening, the tattered Euclid's *Elements* he stole from the school room holding all his attention.

It was then that he saw wolves for the first time: a local huntsman had dragged a wain into the square, and Joseph saw creatures trussed up in the back of it, bristly, blood-flecked legs hanging out over the edge, as if they were resting. The man had roughly drawn the burlap back to reveal three stiff, grey-furred wolfhounds trussed together by strands of linen, their maws still agape and faces burst apart from where the bullets had bit through them. Joseph still recalled his heart heaving to a standstill upon seeing them, while Fiadh's eyes were wide under the coppery thatch of her hair.

The walks to and from the places where such resources were in plentiful supply became expeditions unto themselves. The land surrounding their home was hilly and treeless, at the ongoing mercy of wind and rain. Morning dew varnished the grass on clear days. Lousewort infested the sagging thatched roof. Rainwater wept through the gauzy rafters. Decay smeared the walls. Driving winds cuffed the lone windowpane. Only the candles Joseph and his brother had filched from the cloister in Ramsgrange church kept the place well lit, and the turf fire in the hearth staved off the relentless cold.

Their schooling was cut abruptly short when it came to light that Ó Doirnín had been instructing them in Latin – a most grave offence that brought the local magistrate to his door. Arrested on suspicion of teaching seditious material, the school was shut down and its pupils dispersed - though not before Joseph managed to lift the few remaining books that hadn't been confiscated from Ó Doirnín's quarters to be used as evidence against him at trial.

Redmond MacTíre, his brother, had been a jack-of-all-trades, a hunter of work. As Papists, the MacTíre men hadn't a hope of toiling in any profession higher than that of water-drawing or woodcutting. Soldiering was off limits, as was service aboard one of His Majesty's warships. Nonetheless, the highwayman tagged along with his brother and their father on whatever donkey work they happened to be tasked with, helping however he could, his instinct and respect for labour growing, while Fiadh and their mother had worked as scullery maids in the Ely mansion. They spoke to each other in Gaelic, though both understood English well enough.

'Tis strange, he thought. Since their deaths, the nights have become clearer.

After the sudden deaths of their parents in the winter of '67, shortly after the school's closure, and with no other surviving relatives to turn to, Redmond assumed responsibility over the household. Fortunately, the years of working in odd jobs had served them well, and Fiadh for a time managed to keep her scullery position. Along with the farming, there was never a shortage of physical work for them to do.

The MacTíre brothers. That had been how people referred to he and Redmond. It was the name he responded to still, with habitual instinct born of familiarity. A name more befitting of a colliery, or a pair of local craftsmen. Yet it signalled them as Papist, suggesting immediately what church they attended and what prayers passed their lips. Not quite landowners or tithes protectors, yet still quietly respected by the Fethard tenantry. Their name was better than any title or style, for they'd no need to wield it over their peers with high-handed conceit. People trusted them, knew they were dependable. Yet whatever job paid, Redmond did it, much as his ability would allow him and with no complaint. He repaired carriage wheels, hewed timber in the bunched groves of Tintern Forest for the fair or the market, wove wool on a mill floor in Enniscorthy, burnt charcoal in the local kiln, helped the wagon-men haul slabs of crushed ore from the lead mines to Arklow port. Together, the brothers footed turf on the bogs in Ferrycarrig, plied the waterways along the peninsula for coalfish and whiting in a currach Redmond had built from the felled wood of a fir tree. Redmond led their horse, a seal-brown gelding christened St. Eligius in honour of the day on which he had been bought, on all these jobs, tethering him to the trees that bristled the shore. He undertook every job with the same druidic calm, the same quiet fervour of a man who prided himself on the severity of labour.

The highwayman remembered his brother's boundless strength. Redmond's arms had been solid as the kindling he chopped, his shoulders rounded and sinewy from years of labour in the quarries, his face leathery from raw lashings of wind that swept through that region. At times, he seemed to be born old, elderly before he'd even reached twenty; an air of yielding stoicism hung off him. Still, he'd been kind, had a pleasant voice and laugh, and was a frequent smiler. He was often seen at local dances and in the *sibíns* dotted around the country, played the fiddle at wakes and dances, and never seemed to want for company. He wasn't a heavy drinker, but he knew how to keep the laughter alive. In different clothes, he could have easily been mistaken for a lord's son, or a junior army officer, dancing with rouged ladies in the manor of a local viscount or leading a regiment of Redcoats into battle.

When he eventually found them permanent work in a local tanner's forge, heaving coal and chopped wood into the furnace to keep the flames going, he often returned home reeking of dead cinders. But that was the job that made both brothers strong. Their muscles swelled; their gaits became slower, more upright, but more assured, more ready for the world. People knew them, held them in quiet regard.

Redmond and Fiadh helped washerwomen carry their bundles from the river free of charge, Redmond's eyes appearing to dance. Joseph, by contrast, suspected they thought him surly, snivelling, too dependent on his brother to make a solid decision, yet dependable with any task set to him. Meanwhile Fiadh, with her sea-green eyes and uncombed auburn locks, was the subject of much malignant gossip from the women, and wolfish looks and remarks from the men.

Fear of what her eldest brother might do in retaliation should they ever lay a hand on her was all that kept them at bay. Not that she was ill-equipped to fend for herself. Once, she had been passing through the square in Fethard when a group of village lads outside the alehouse, already plunged in drink, had hollered all manner of lewd remarks at her. "I'd make a woman of you, Fee", and so forth. It would have been left at that, too, were it not for one of them attempting to make a drunken grab for her, and miss, much to his companions' lusty mirth. Joseph made to charge them but Fiadh's hand on his shoulder had stopped him in his tracks.

Without a word, she approached the leader, a butcher's apprentice named Tully, with a sweet smile ghosting her lips. Without warning, she grabbed him by the coat lapels and slammed her forehead against his nose, breaking it instantly. As Tully fell back in a haze of blood and screams and his comrades' drunken scrambling to aid him, Fiadh and Joseph had fled for their cabin, their laughter harmonious upon the air.

Because of things like this, he knew, they tended to invoke suspicion and wariness in the locality.

Popular and admired as Redmond was, people blessed themselves whenever he passed. Nor was he immune to the occasional rumour circling about him: he was a member of the Ribbonmen; he brewed poitín in a secluded distillery in the foothills; he and his brother were the illegitimate sons of a highly respected local magistrate. Redmond had always laughed such intimations off. But the highwayman had to admit, there were times when even he had felt slightly afraid of him, as much as he'd been enthralled. At dances and *céilís*, when called on to tell one of his stories, a savage brightness glazed his brother's eye whenever he told one of his deathly yarns. Under a murky pall of pipe smoke, his normally gracious deportment seemed to wash away, replaced by the raw wildness of the story being told. His voice sank an octave lower, shifted a pitch wilder, his accent sharpened. His stories were blustery accounts of crime and cruelty, of cave-dwelling hags who drank the blood of new-borns, cloven-hoofed men who seduced gullible young women over a game of cards before vanishing through the roof in a fiery blast, or convicts sentenced to hang who burst into flames the moment the hatchet door slid open beneath their feet; and, of course, of the *Sluagh na marbh* – that horde of ghostly souls who ranged the air on the lookout for prey.

The stories he relayed seemed conjured from some diabolical source – yarns of robberies, or duels held in open fields; hangings and savage inclination, and roving bands of *ropairí*, those gentlemen of the road born into wealth now driven to lives of thievery; godless rogues and cutpurses who lurked on horseback on the high-roads and bye-passages in the dead of night, springing from knots of furze where they kept hidden, to attack travellers; all men with little or no hope of salvation or even the king's pardon, and all destined in the end to be fodder for the gallows. Given the current colour of his lens, Joseph often wondered how much of what he remembered of his brother were true, and how much was his own invention.

Whether Redmond had heard such yarns as a boy himself, or if he was simply making them up, the highwayman had never guessed. He and Fiadh revelled in hearing such grisly legends spill from their brother's lips, like starved travellers tucking into their first hot meal in weeks, feeling their brother's personal warmth flood the cabin like peat smoke as wind rattled the cabin's frail fixtures and roared down the chimney.

During the day, the country looked endlessly green, grassland mauled by the surging wind, fallen leaves everywhere. But at night, danger ruled the bogs and glens. Gangs of white-shirted

men rode to or from a raid, setting fire to fields, barns and manor houses, maiming the livestock. Their hoof-thuds rumbling in the dark, grunted calls and clanking harnesses, echoed like wayward thunder. They'd storm in and attempt to strong-arm the men of the house into joining their ranks, or demand money, or else burn them in their homes.

On more than one occasion, they decided to honour the MacTíres with a visit, always unannounced and late in the evening. Redmond did not suffer them gladly. They would ride up, cowls drawn tight over their faces, a phalanx of white-shirted spectres with danger in their pace.

Redmond had been chopping extra wood for the fire when they approached that first time. As soon as he saw them, he told Joseph, who at the time had been only a lad of twelve, to go inside and bolt the door. Fiadh was darning something as he ran in, and the colour drained from her face as he urged her to hide. From a chink in the cabin's thatching, the boy and his sister watched the men line up at the wall in crude formation. One or two held burning branches. Horses snorted. Flames flickered in the dark.

He remembered wondering why they felt the need to hide their faces. Did they fear recognition? Were some of them neighbours, known to them? Evidently, they all knew him and his siblings, had no qualms about menacing them.

Their captain dismounted and sauntered up to Redmond, whose grip on the axe shaft had tightened. "Nice night for it, MacTíre."

"Aye, it's that," Redmond had replied, his voice calm.

The captain lifted his cowl with one hand so his mouth was exposed, and he spat on the ground. "I was wonderin', would ye mind if we gave your home a wee inventory?"

Redmond stood quite still. "What cause would ye have to be doin' that?"

"Only to see if things are in right order. Can't be having any...undesirable sorteen in these parts."

"There's nothin' here. You'll find nothin' and no one. Just me and my brother. Nothin' else. I'll ask you only once. Leave us be, please. We're not causin' you any harm. I'd sooner you did the same."

Joseph drew in a breath as the captain advanced a step. Fiadh's hand, ice-cold, clenched his.

"Mind your tongue, MacTíre. It may land ye in trouble one day."

"As will yours. Now leave us be, please. I will not ask you again."

The captain paused. Because of his cowl, his response was hard to gauge. For half a minute he stood there, facing Redmond, letting the silence build around them like a challenge, before grunting to himself and returning to his horse. They rode away, torch-flames rippling into the gloom.

Redmond watched them leave, finally lowering his axe and letting go of his breath. He knew they'd return. They always returned.

The worst of their visits had been on a chill March night two years later, wind and rain rampaging across the fields. Even over that din and huddled by the blazing hearth, the MacTíres heard the approaching hooves, heavy and deafening as the highwayman supposed the Four Horsemen on the Last Day would be. St. Eligius snorted frantically as they neared. They heard the heavy clatter of men dismounting and skulking toward them. A fist battered on the door and a rasping voice bellowed their surname, demanding that they show themselves. The door was kicked in before a reply could be made, and a gang of about fifteen men, all wielding either a blade, billhook, or club, piled into the cabin. Several more lingered outside. Fiadh had grabbed Joseph and drew them both back into the shadows of the thatch.

Joseph remembered watching them, their threat and their heaviness, with a boy's unafraid curiosity. Again, their faces were concealed by dirtied cowls, threaded crudely from burlap. The volume of the storm seemed to rise a hundredfold behind them. St. Eligius' howl rose as

well, too strident to be ignored. Beside him, Fiadh's breath quavered, heavy and sharp, on the ear.

"Young MacTíre," said the leader, the same man as before, his voice once again muffled beneath his cowl. "It's a soft one we're havin' the night." He was a head taller than Redmond. In his hand he clutched a shillelagh, long and heavy as a bishop's crozier.

"What are you doing to my horse?" Redmond had demanded, attempting to make for the door, before being held back by his collar.

"Nothin', MacTíre. Nothin' you'd want to worry about, anyway."

"Leave us be," Redmond had murmured.

"Say again, lad?"

"I asked you to leave us be."

"Well, lads," their leader smirked, sitting on the stool by the hearth. "Did ye ever hear the like? Young MacTíre seems to have forgotten how to welcome guests into his home. Still and all, no harm done. Never too late to learn a new lesson."

It turned out the animal was being hamstrung, a forge dagger severing its leg tendons while this exchange took place. Over its wild grunts and tortured braying, the intruders demanded to know if Redmond was a tithe protector, a devotee of the Church of Ireland or, worst of all, of the Crown.

Although the MacTíre siblings had lived in the same hut all their lives, the intruders demanded to know what had become of its former dwellers, implying that a landlord had evicted them and put his more loyal tenants in place. They overturned the bed and hacked apart the kitchen chairs ("for firewood, ye understand"), tossed Redmond's Missal into the grate, made off with the last of the buttermilk, and left the door hanging on its hinges. All this was for their own protection, they'd been assured. It's better to know who you can trust.

Joseph, being only fourteen, hadn't enough sense to be afraid. As they shuffled out of the cabin, he spat at one of them. The man seized him by the throat, and with a strength that seemed to surprise even his comrades, lifted Joseph to eye level and slammed him roughly against the cold stone of the wall, hissing at him to stay quiet. That was all they'd been waiting for, it seemed.

As soon as Redmond tried intervening, two of them had pounced, elbowing him in the stomach. He grunted as he fell to his knees, where they treated him to a whirligig of fists. Alerted by Fiadh's screams, two more dragged her to the earthen floor, roughly pinning her by the wrists. One took her throat in his scarred hand whilst sliding his fist beneath her skirts. "Ah, you're a pretty one," he croaked under his cowl, anchoring her back. "Do ye sing as sweet as ye look?"

For years after, Joseph remembered the flinty bulk of his attacker's fingers jabbing into his flesh, cutting off his air supply, as well as the meaty thump of fist on bone and Fiadh's muffled screams as she flopped and squirmed fruitlessly beneath her attacker, who suddenly drew his cowl back slightly, exposing his lower jaw to clamp his mouth roughly over hers. He yanked her bodice and dress fully off, to his companions' bellowed encouragement. The sight of her bare breasts and shoulders, suddenly and cruelly exposed, drew a howl of choked fury from Joseph.

When her attacker was finally done, they all took turns on her, just as they had taken turns on Redmond, some flipping her over, until any fight Fiadh had was gone, and she lay back in a pose of broken flaccidity. One of them was spent on her, and almost as an afterthought, drew his blade and gored the soft pulse of her throat. The blood bubbled and seeped, and neither MacTíre had the strength to cry out, nor could even expect the stealth of their movements.

Redmond, winded from the blows he'd received, was dragged to the centre of the cabin and held down before the fireplace. On his knees, like a man about to receive communion. The leader stood over him, holding the flat of the shillelagh to Redmond's cranium.

“I’ve always had doubts about ye, MacTíre,” he said, the flames crackling behind him in the grate. “I don’t know whether to kill you and that whingein’ pup of a brother of yours the night, ‘long with yer sister there, or else let yis live with the shame.”

Joseph barely heard any of this. He was staring fixedly at his sister’s bruised and bloody corpse, horrified. Nor did he quite see his brother’s face, but, even over the din, he thought he saw him lower his head to the floor. “Not goin’ to reply, no? Well, that says it all to me. The fact that you can’t reply, that says it all to me, lad. Hold him out there, lads.”

The two men had splayed Redmond out on the floor. Their leader turned to the boy, his voice cruel. “Mark this, lad. You’d do well to see it.” He raised his club high before bringing it down with an efficient crunch on Redmond’s left kneecap. Redmond’s voice, howling from the agony, didn’t sound like him; it didn’t sound human.

Joseph had tried struggling, but the grip of the man’s fingers on his throat was rigid as iron. For a full minute, the leader slammed his club several times more on the young man’s leg and stomach. Every meaty crack, every harsh rumble of laughter, every strangled wail from Redmond, seemed to singe the very air. Eventually, the leader wore himself out. He stopped and leaned on the shillelagh’s brunt. Even beneath his cowl, his panting was easily heard. “Even *amadáns* deserve mercy, MacTíre. Am I right, lads?”

The others cheered in affirmation. Their leader lifted his shillelagh and slung it back into his belt. “We won’t kill ye, MacTíre. You or yer insolent brother there. But we’ll need some extra payment off yis, just for that little...antic. A tithe, if ye will. But we prefer to think of it as penance for sins against yer people.”

Despite the winding he took, Redmond had struggled mightily, but there were too many of them swarming to hold him down. The glint of a blade winked against the flames; the cabin rang with the men’s hellish laughter as they slashed at Redmond’s clothes, his shirt and boots, tearing it off him as a collector might tear a parcel-covering off an ornament. They dragged him to his feet only to kick his bloodied legs out from under him again, battering him stupid once more with their fists as he once more hit the earthen floor, the air driven from his lungs with each landing punch, tearing into him like dogs over a carcass. He coughed up hoarse gorgefuls of blood which sprayed off the hay-covered floor; his chest seemed to puncture under each boot-stomp. Redmond had tried getting to his feet but a swift, booted kick to his lower jaw sent him sprawling again, groping at the hay, spluttering tears and his own harsh grunts. The leader had stepped forward, a lordly hand raised to urge the others to cease, which they reluctantly did.

“Up, ye Judas melt,” he hissed from behind his cowl. “On yer feet, MacTíre, c’mon!” He turned to one of the men who’d lingered by the door and beckoned him over, who in turn approached Redmond’s stricken form. Kneeling, he lashed the elder MacTíre brother’s hands together with a bit of hawser, the taunts and mockery and spitting of his fellows bubbling about them. A length of cord was tied around his neck and tightened; the tip of his tongue was forced out, and the leader sliced part of it with a *gralloch*.

Now naked, his mouth bloody and mangled, barefoot and with a few teeth missing and both eyes swollen shut, Redmond, his face a crimson, bruised pulp, was brought roughly to his feet and dragged outside to the horses. The men heaved him atop the unsaddled back of their boniest nag, slapped the animal’s rear and laughed as it shambled off into the frigid dark, the pale form of Redmond’s bloodied back still slumped astride it, shouting yet more insults after it until the clip of its trots vanished on the wind.

It was then the captain had turned to his men. “Mon, lads. Let’s make tracks.”

Iron-Fingers dropped Joseph as the others shuffled out of the cabin. He lay there on the gathered hay, winded and overcome, struggling to breathe as wind roiled in through the damaged doorway and the fire still blazed over him like a witness. Outside, he dimly heard St. Eligius whinny again, his shrieks as shrill and as frenzied as Redmond’s had been.

The intruders were gone as abruptly as they'd come, the pulse of their hoof-beats vanishing into the night. It was hours before Redmond, by now chilled to the bone and stupefied from the pain, had managed to urge the horse on which he sat back around. During that time, St. Eligius had continued to whinny across the *bóithrín* as if in desperate mourning, and Joseph had struggled to crawl across to Fiadh's corpse, which lay where they had left her.

By the time Redmond arrived back at the cabin, his wounds had congealed to blackish, crusty strips and his face had swollen hideously from all the bruises they'd inflicted. His mouth resembled a wound, crusted in dry, bloody flecks. Ghost-white, slumped over the nag's coarse mane as if desperate not to fall from it, he was shivering violently, the chill convulsions that jolted his body like a ragdoll in a wind never-ending. Joseph had found their skinning *gralloch* and slashed open his bonds. He could only watch as Redmond, overcome with fatigue, fell from the animal's back, collapsing supine on the dew-slick grass. His mangled tongue was hanging loose from his bottom lip, and his lips were curled underneath the blood that now encrusted them. Joseph had waited a long time before crawling over to his brother, who was still gasping for air. Slinging his one good arm over the young man's shoulder, and ignoring his grunts of pain, he helped him to his feet, tried guiding him back to the cabin, where he helped him to lay him on a bed of straw, keeping the fire going at low intensity. All the while, St Eligius' agonised howling filled the valley.

The next morning, after a whole night of the horse's painful bleating ringing through the glen, and Redmond lying across their sister's cold chest, his wounds still unhealed and he still feverish but endowed with some wild semblance of lucidity, Joseph's older brother had hobbled outside, and caved St. Eligius' head in with a boulder.

It was a memory the highwayman never quite pushed from his mind, the image of his brother in early dawn, among the netting of grass and weeds that tangled around the door of the salted cabin they'd shared, dragging the wagon up to the door to heave the animal away. Redmond's face, still addled with bruises, was the colour of claret, his workshirt and britches drenched in perspiration, his mouth slack as he hoisted the rock over his head and brought it crashing down on the horse's bloodied skull. The animal croaked, crumpled on its side, and lay still. Its blood pooled into the grass, dark as wine, mixing with the dew.

For half a minute, neither of them said a word. Then, without warning or reason, Redmond started to sing a lament, his voice a fluid, reedy tenor in the daybreak chill. He'd always been in the habit of singing while he worked, chanteys and street ballads mainly, to keep focused on the labour at hand. But what he sung now was slow, solemn, dejected, the words jumbled and slurred by his weariness, his voice gentle as the dawn breeze were it not for the odd moaning sound it now took on, owing to the mutilation of his tongue:

*Is fada mise amuigh
Faoi sneachta is faoi shioc
Is gan dánacht agam ar éinne
Mo bhranar gan cur
Mo sheisreach gar sgur
Is gan iad agam ar aon chor
Níl cairde agam (Is danaid liom san)
Do ghlacfadh mé moch na déanach
Is go gcaithear mé dul
Thar farraige soir
O's ann na fúil mo ghaolta.*

The clouds were heavy, shot through with red flecks of sunlight. The glare made them both squint. Redmond blessed himself, before limping back to the cabin to see how best to carry

Fiadh's corpse away before repairing the door. He couldn't be certain, but Joseph thought he saw tears welling in his brother's eyes as he knelt to gather up their sister's cold body and carry it outside.

It was in that moment he realised how truly powerless he and Redmond were in the world.

Thank you for reading this sample. Now that you have freely enjoyed the fruits of this author's labour, we strongly advise that you purchase the full title wherever you may find it. Failure to do so will be...unpleasant.



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