

Wind and rain battering at the windows now, whistling down the chimney. Candles dancing in a sudden draught, Ker shifting in his seat. "He's taking his time, isn't he?"

"You mean Gary?" Lox shrugged. "He's got a bottle of port and two helpings of fish pie to bring up. But try telling them, eh?"

"He works for you?"

Meaning did Gary steal Euan's wallet on Lox's behest? See? The guy doing it again, getting tricky in amongst all the smalltalk. Lox having to waggle the gun at him again, remind him it was there.

"See this? It means *I* ask the questions."

Look at that. Ker nodding his head now, as though Lox's threat was quite reasonable under the circumstances. Sipping at his sparkling water like an anorexic sparrow, imbibing just enough to moisten the wry trace of his smile. Beginning to rattle Lox with his air of fucking nonchalance.

"I hope that's an automated trigger-safety you have there," Ker said, "because you look like you're about to have an accident."

"The guys who designed this also design aircraft cannons," Lox said. "So you can understand their preference for armour-piercing rounds that can penetrate steel plate at 20 meters. Enough stopping power for any eventuality."

"You expected me to arrive in a tank?"

That almost-smile back on his face, Ker looking just like his ancestor in the painting over the fireplace. Maybe it was hereditary, that expression, product of a wayward gene in the family pool. Sir Kenneth there with the same hard eyes untouched by the same hard smile.

"Last time I was here," Lox said, "I remember looking round this hall and thinking that in the last 500 years nothing's changed. We're still living petty feudal lives in petty feudal times."

"Back then," Ker said, "you had a difference of opinions, you drew your sword and settled it in a dignified manner, may the best man win."

Lox had to smile. "You're challenging me to a duel?"

"Not much honour in shooting an unarmed man, is there?"

"It certainly saves on the housework."

"Or maybe it's arthritis setting in, the reason you need a gun."

Lox about to reply when a movement caught his eye. "Ah, Gary," he said. "Perfect timing."

The kid leaning on the doorjamb, pale as a ghost, damp stains down his front.

"This him?" he croaked.

"In the flesh, my chickadee. Say hello to Duncan Ker."

"So why don't you shoot him and then we can all go home?"

"I have a better idea," Lox said. "Why don't you get those swords down off the wall?"