
The Nightkeeper's Apprentice
'Full of wonder and heart.'
ALEX MULLARKY
JUDE REID

The Nightkeeper's Apprentice

For Julia and Sofia, with love, always.
Look for the light.

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Prologue

1941
Clydebank, near Glasgow

Eilidh rubbed the sleep from her eyes, took Dad's big silver pocket watch from under her pillow, and checked the time. Nine thirty. That meant she'd hardly slept at all. She twitched the blind to one side so she could look out of the window at the people scurrying like ants on the street below, blinking her eyes into focus, trying to make sense of the strange orange light coming from outside. There shouldn't be a light out there, not in the blackout. There shouldn't even be people down there clattering over the cobbles, not at this time of night.

The sky was on fire.

"Up. We need to get up, my lamb."

She hadn't heard Mum open the bedroom door, but there she was, standing at the foot of the bed. Eilidh let the blind fall back with a guilty start, like she'd been caught doing something she shouldn't, and shoved Dad's watch into the pocket of her nightie. The hall light was on, and that wasn't right either. She shook her head to try and clear it, as if sleep was something you could throw on and off like a jumper. Already the shreds of her dream were slipping through her fingers. Dad had been in it. That was all she remembered.

"Put your coat on. Come on." Mum placed the coat in Eilidh's hands. In the half-light Mum's face was set firm, her lips pressed tight shut, two vertical lines cutting in between her eyebrows. A cold prickle crept down Eilidh's back, and somewhere out in the Clydebank streets, an air-raid siren began to wail.

She'd spent months preparing for this, but now it was finally happening it didn't seem real.

"I'm coming." Eilidh swung her legs over the side of the bed. The floorboards were warm under her feet. She could hear people on the floor below – the low rumble of their neighbour Mr McKinnon, and his son's voice getting louder and louder as he tried to argue with the old man.

"Eilidh." Mum put on her own coat and lifted her

handbag from the peg by the door. "Coat and shoes on. Quick!"

Eilidh stared at her shoes, her thoughts still slow and stupid, her mind struggling through the fog of sleep that stubbornly refused to clear. Gym shoes or school shoes? You weren't supposed to wear your gym shoes outside, but her school shoes were new, and if she scuffed the toes they'd be stuck like that until she outgrew them, so maybe gym shoes would be better after all…

A thunderclap shook the building, showering stoor down from the ceiling like confetti at a wedding.

Eilidh froze – and so did Mum, standing there at the open door with her face covered in dust, grey as a ghost's. Someone below them was shouting and a heavy drone was building in the sky, as though a thousand giant bees were swarming towards them.

Mum grabbed Eilidh's school shoes in one hand and Eilidh's wrist in the other, pulling her along like she was a very small child again. "You can put them on once we're outside. Come on."

Eilidh followed her barefoot to the door, feeling the prickly hessian of the doormat, then the concrete of the close floor freezing against the soles of her feet as they went down the stairs. "Aren't you going to lock up?"

"No." Mum flashed Eilidh a quick, nervous smile. "We'll be back in the morning. When it's safe. All right?"

Eilidh nodded. "All right."

It wasn't all right, though. Mum was scared, and that said it all. Mum was never scared. Not when the war broke out, not when they'd heard the news about the bombings in London and the ARP team had brought the sirens, not even when they'd heard the news about Dad's ship. For a moment, all Eilidh wanted to do was run back upstairs and pull the covers over her head. As if that would be enough to protect her if the roof fell in.

"My school books! I need to go back for—"

Another thunderclap. The sky outside flared a brilliant yellow-white and the narrow close window shattered like it had been hit with a cricket ball, a gust of hot wind sending the shards glittering into the air around them.

"You're all right. We're all right. Eilidh, *listen to me*."

Eilidh opened her eyes. Her ears were full of a dull ringing sound, like church bells chiming beneath the ocean. Mum had her by the shoulders, clutching onto her like the two of them were drowning, her blue eyes locked on Eilidh's own. When she spoke, her voice had a shake in it, like she was holding her nerve by the thinnest of threads. That was the most frightening part of any of it.

"We need to get outside. If the building gets hit, we'll be trapped inside. All we need to do is get to the

shelter, we'll be safe there." A trickle of blood the colour of strawberry jam was making its way down Mum's face, running from a shard of glass the size of a sixpence that was sticking out of her eyebrow. She knelt down at Eilidh's feet and shoved the shoes on the way she'd done when Eilidh was a toddler. "Come on." Mum glanced up at the shattered window and the flaming skies outside. "Keep walking."

It was four flights down to ground level. Every window in the close had blown out, even the stained-glass one on the first half-landing, covering the floor with a carpet of shards that crunched underfoot. Mr McKinnon was standing by the front door in his slippers wearing a dazed expression. His son was holding a dishcloth to a bleeding cut on his cheek with one hand, while he fumbled at the door handle with the other. The door opened, and he pushed his father roughly through.

"Where are we going?" Eilidh's stomach was churning, like she was up the front of the class at school and Miss Anderson was about to belt her hand for coming in late. She felt giddy, weightless, blood crashing through her ears in waves. She wanted Dad to take her cold hand in his big warm one and make everything safe again, just like he always had – but Dad was gone, lost at sea, and all she and Mum had was each other.

"French Street. There's a shelter there." Mum opened the close door and pointed down towards the canal and the shipyards beyond. Eilidh knew French Street well enough that she could have found her way there blindfolded. Peggy McGowan in her class lived there, and it had a big grassy back court, much better than their own concrete one when it came to kicking a ball around. Eilidh took a deep breath, one step forward out into the street, then stopped. Her feet felt like they had been turned into a pair of cast-iron anchors.

"What is it?" Mum asked.

"I don't want to," Eilidh said, in a high voice that didn't sound like her own. Fear was pinning her feet to the floor. The thought of stepping out under a burning sky that might crash down on her head at any minute was enough to freeze her in place. Surely they were safer where they were?

Mum tugged at her arm, but she stayed rooted to the spot. "I don't want any of this, my lamb," she said more gently. "But we don't have a choice. You need to walk. I can't carry you."

Eilidh's mind was racing. "We need to leave a note for Dad. To tell him where we're going." She found his watch in her pocket and closed her hand around it, focusing on the weight of it, the smooth metal against her palm.

"Eilidh, that's not—"

"What if he comes back and he can't find us?"

Another explosion, closer this time. Someone was screaming. Mum bent down just enough to bring her eyes level with Eilidh's.

"Eilidh. The last thing your dad would want is for you to—" Mum grabbed her chin and turned it towards the fires, her grip hard enough that Eilidh yelped. "Look. Look at this."

Fires were burning along Dumbarton Road. The tenement at the corner of Castle Street was half gone, the corner ripped away like someone had taken a bite out of it, and the canal was lit up in reds and golds, lava instead of water, like Glasgow was a volcano spitting magma down past the docks to the sea. "You can't wait for your dad here forever. We don't have time."

Eilidh didn't hear the next bomb hit. One moment she was standing on the street, Mum's hand holding her chin so hard that her nails bit little half-moons into the skin, then next she was lying staring up at a foggy sky, the moon a vague silver circle miles away. Bells were clanging in her ears, so loud she could hardly think.

"Get up!" someone said. Tremors shook the earth one after another like the footsteps of an angry giant, while the drone of engines sliced the skies overhead, sending fire raining down like blood.

Mum's hand closed around Eilidh's wrist and dragged her to her feet, pulling her over rubble and broken glass, past what had been the baker's and the newsagent's, down to the canal and the open Anderson shelter there, where a woman with a baby on her hip was waving them frantically inside.

"Another minute and we'd have shut the door!"

"Is there anyone else out there?" Mum shoved Eilidh in and stopped in the doorway, bracing it open as she searched the streets for movement.

The woman with the baby was shaking her head without even looking. "You're the last – close it!"

For a moment, Mum stood very still, her shoulders rigid, then she gave a sharp nod and closed the door, muffling the drone of the bombers and the wailing siren and the crackle of the flames.

It was dark inside.

Someone was playing a radio with the volume turned down low, and the baby on the woman's hip was grizzling. Something soft was fluttering in the far darkness of the shelter. A trapped bird, Eilidh thought, its wings beating on its cast-iron prison, and the thought made her own throat tighten with panic. Another loud bang shook the walls of the shelter, and the bird went quiet. Maybe it knew they were safer inside, or maybe it was too scared to move.

"What do we do now?" Eilidh asked. Her voice came out as a tiny whisper.

"We're safe in here." Mum's hand found Eilidh's in the dark and gave it a squeeze. Eilidh wasn't sure, but she thought Mum might have been shaking. "All we do now is wait for the all-clear."

Wait, Eilidh thought, as her breathing slowed, and the ringing cleared from her ears, and the glaring blue after-images faded from her eyes.

Lately she'd been doing nothing but wait. Wait till the all-clear. Wait till the war's over and everything can go back to normal. Wait for Dad to come home. Wait for the bombs to stop falling…

But they didn't stop, not until morning, and by then Clydebank was bombed flat.



Chapter One

TWO WEEKS LATER
Orkney Islands

"Did they say who'd be coming to collect you?" the postmistress asked, as the post van turned down yet another narrow, cobbled street, parcels and packages rattling around in the back.

Eilidh shook her head. She was starting to feel like a parcel herself, handed from Mum to the bus conductor, then from bus to train to ferry to post van, with no more say in her destination than the contents of the postmistress's sack. All she needed was an address label gummed to the front of her coat and no one would need to speak to her at all.

Not that she felt much like talking anyway.

She hadn't wanted to leave Glasgow, but Mum hadn't given her a choice. Eilidh had begged and pleaded to be allowed to stay, promised she'd hardly take up any room at all in Aunt Susie's one-bedroom flat, she wouldn't even need to go to school if it was a problem for her to get there. Mum had sat in silence, listened to everything she had to say, nodded and sighed and brushed Eilidh's hair back where it fell over her eyes, but nothing changed her mind. Mum would stay and work in whatever job could be found for her, and Eilidh would be sent away to live on some rock out in the sea with an aunt and a cousin she'd never even met before.

It wasn't fair.

None of this was.

"Are you all right there?" the postmistress asked her.

Eilidh nodded. She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting from Orkney, but what she was seeing through the post van's windscreen certainly wasn't it. Somewhere wild and beautiful, maybe, like one of the pictures in Dad's books or that one time they'd taken the West Highland Line up to Corrour, the horizon jagged with mountains, the sea clear and blue. The harbour should have been quiet, empty except for a few fishing boats, a solitary gull, and a motherly

looking Aunt Rhona waiting for her on the shore with open arms.

Instead, the flat grey town was furious with activity. Trucks rumbled across heavy concrete causeways, while huge warships sat at anchor out in the bay, some of them built, others still under construction.

"You're our first evacuee, did you know that?"

Eilidh shook her head again. Peggy McGowan from school had been sent to a village in Perthshire, and some of the rest of the class had gone together to a big house in Argyll, but none of them had been sent as far away as this. She wished she'd been sent with them. Mum had insisted that she come here to Mirk Skerry instead. Wasn't the point of being evacuated going to somewhere safe, somewhere no one would want to bomb? This harbour with its stink of diesel and fleet of warships at anchor didn't look much safer than Clydebank.

"No one's supposed to come to Orkney, not while the war's on. I suppose if you've got family here…" The postmistress let that sentence trail off. "You've got your card all stamped?"

Eilidh reached into her coat pocket for her identity card. She'd shown it and its smudged black stamp to at least ten people already that day.

The old postmistress patted her hand. "I believe you,

lass. I don't need to see it." This time she asked directly. "Who is it you're here to stay with?"

"My Aunt Rhona."

"Rhona Flett?" The woman's brow crinkled. "You'll be Erik Flett's daughter, then." Her narrow eyes looked Eilidh up and down, then turned back to the road. She turned the van sharply to the right, lurching down a narrow street towards the harbour. "You'll be safe with them out there. No one to bother you but the seals. Your first time here, is it?"

"Yes." Tears prickled behind Eilidh's eyes, but she blinked them back before they could fall, swallowing down the lump that had risen in her throat. She pulled Dad's old watch out of her pocket, opened the catch and ran her finger over the blue seaglass bead set at the bottom of the chain as the second hand swept round, marking off time, just like she was. She should be at home right now, Mum just out of sight in the other room, mince and tatties on the stove. If she closed her eyes, she could smell the onions frying. It didn't seem real that it was all gone: the flat, the building, the street, the factory where Mum worked. All of it gone. If Mum hadn't woken Eilidh in time, they'd be gone with it.

"She'll be bringing the boat over for you, I expect."

If this Aunt Rhona even bothered to turn up.

"I went to Glasgow once." Eilidh could hear the smile in the old woman's voice without looking. "It's a long journey you've had. You'll be glad of your bed when you get to it."

A small weathered-looking fishing boat was weaving its way into the harbour from the west. A figure in grubby yellow oilskins was sitting at the stern, a wide-brimmed hat pulled down low, back hunched against the wind.

The postmistress opened the van door, stepped out and waited for Eilidh to do the same. The little boat was bobbing nearer, close enough now that she could make out letters painted in gold on the prow.

Aegir Falco

The figure on the boat stood, tossed a heavy rope up onto the jetty and secured it around a heavy bollard with a few deft knots. Eilidh took the suitcase holding the hand-me-down clothes that the church back home had given her – lighter now that her sandwiches had been eaten – and joined the postmistress at the harbour wall. The figure in oilskins gave the rope a final check and hopped up onto solid ground.

"Go on." The postmistress gave her a nudge.

Eilidh cleared her throat, her mouth dry as dirt. "I'm

Eilidh Flett. I think my mum sent you a telegram?"

The figure stopped just short of her and tilted back the grubby sou'wester. He was a boy a year or two older than she was, tall and lanky with pale skin made ruddy by the sun. A pair of bright blue eyes glittered like shards of broken glass beneath the yellow hat brim. Whoever this was, it wasn't Aunt Rhona.

"Get in, then, if you're coming." His voice was as sharp as his eyes.

The postmistress gave her another encouraging nudge. "That's your cousin Magnus, Eilidh. He'll take you home." Then, as an afterthought, the old lady reached into the van and produced half a bar of chocolate, still in its foil wrapper. She tucked it into Eilidh's coat pocket and buttoned the flap over the top. "In case you get hungry on the way."

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The boat's motor coughed and burped out a cloud of blue-grey smoke, and then with a sudden lurch they were chugging out across the water. The boy – Magnus – kept an experienced hand on the tiller, looking at the sea ahead as if Eilidh didn't even exist.

She ran her hand across the side of the boat, feeling the rough wood catch at her skin. It was sitting low in the water, laden down with bulging hessian sacks. The

sea below them was a dull battleship grey, and as she watched, the thin sunlight glinted on a long, silvery shape that was somehow managing to keep pace with the little motorboat. Eilidh had the strange sense that a glittering pair of eyes were staring back at her, and then they were gone again into the inky depths.

A fish, maybe, or a dolphin? A pod of them had come up the Clyde the year before, playing and leaping along in a steamship's wake, and the memory was enough to make her smile before the lead weight dropped back into her stomach and she missed home even more. Did they even have dolphins this far north? She leaned over to get another look, then jerked backwards as a hand snagged her shoulder.

"Are you wanting to go over the side?" Magnus was glaring at her.

"No, obviously I'm not." She sat up straight. "It's not the first time I've been on a boat, you know. Where are we going?"

"Just stay in your seat and try not to fall in, will you?"

"I think I should get to know where we're going."

There was a faint dusting of hair on his upper lip. How old was he? She would have guessed fourteen or fifteen, and from the look of him he'd been handling a boat since before he could walk. She felt a flicker of jealousy. Mum would never have let her take a boat out

into open waters like this, no matter how good she was at paddling rafts up and down the canal back home.

She tried again. "What does *Aegir Falco* mean?"

"Sea Witch."

"Is it Gaelic?"

"Gaelic?" Magnus snorted. "No one speaks Gaelic here."

"Oh." She turned her face back to the great expanse of ocean, feeling the spray rasp at her skin like a cat's rough tongue. "I thought because we were so far north—"

"There's north and then there's *north* north. Orkney isn't like the rest of Scotland. These were Viking islands for hundreds of years."

Eilidh could believe it. All Magnus needed was an axe and a helmet and he'd have looked ready for the longships himself.

Aegir Falco.

Eilidh tried out the shape of the words. They felt smooth against the roof of her mouth, rolling over each other like two round stones. "What language is it, then?"

"Norn," Magnus said.

It was her turn to snort. "I've never heard of it."

"Oh, well then. That must mean it doesn't exist."

"Does everyone speak it here?"

Magnus shook his head. "Just the n—" His mouth

slammed shut on whatever he was about to say, and his ruddy cheeks flushed a shade darker.

"Just the *who*?" she asked.

Magnus turned to look over the front of the boat. "Just me and Mum," he said. "Stop asking me stuff. I need to concentrate."

She watched him handle the little boat as the harbour faded into the grey behind them and they headed for open water.

Eilidh yawned. She hadn't managed much sleep on the ferry from Aberdeen, trapped awake by loneliness and the endless pitch and roll of her bunk. At least she hadn't been seasick, even when the other passengers had been emptying their guts over the side. That was something that never bothered her. Dad used to say she'd inherited that from him.

"How long till we're there?" she asked.

"Depends on the sea."

And the sea stretched on for what felt like hours. Eilidh's head started nodding, seconds of sleep stolen between facefuls of spray and the lurch of the boat, though for its small size it cut the water smoothly as they headed towards the vague silhouette of a massive sea stack, rising out of the water like a shipyard crane.

A prickle went down the back of her neck, the hairs on her arms standing on end. The howl of the wind had

taken on a curious note – less the relentless bluster she had almost become used to, more a strange keening whine, like a high wind through a forest of trees.

Magnus was looking at her, his lips curved in a faint, patronising smile. "It's the seals," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Singing. On the rocks."

It didn't sound much like singing. It sounded as though the seals were crying, a heart-breaking song that made her want to join her tears with theirs.

Surely it couldn't be much further, could it?

The boat slowed as Magnus navigated across shallow water, black rocks like rotting teeth jutting up from the seabed below. Another shadowy stack was resolving out of the sea in front of them, and they headed straight towards it, passing through a gap in the reef towards the sheer side of a sea cliff. There was a building on top of it, a long white column against the grey sky.

"Do you live in a *lighthouse*?" Mum hadn't mentioned a lighthouse on Mirk Skerry – and come to think of it, neither had Dad, not in all his stories. He'd told her all about ships and seafaring and navigating, how lighthouse lamps had been extinguished or dimmed once war broke out so that enemy bombers couldn't use them as targets – but he'd never once mentioned that he had family in one himself.

"It's not a lighthouse. Not a working one. Not any more."

Eilidh stared up at it as the boat drew nearer to the rocks, the sheer height of it making her giddy as it loomed over her, and then the boat was slipping beneath a sea-arch into a tiny harbour carved deep into the rock. Magnus cut the engine and let the boat drift towards a shallow rocky beach.

Out of the wind, the air was silent.

Magnus tethered the rope to a brass ring set into the stone cliff, near where an older, smaller rowing boat with peeling green paint lay beached under a set of steps cut into the cliffside. Eilidh stepped over the side of the boat.

"Is it up those stairs?"

A dog barked above her, followed by the furious scuttle of claws on stone as a streak of grey-and-white fur hurtled down the steps towards them and skidded out onto the shingle. A damp, furry body twined itself around Magnus's ankles in a delirious frenzy, a long pink tongue unspooling from its mouth like a May Day ribbon.

"All right, boy, all right!" Magnus bent over and sunk his hands into the wiry ruff around the dog's neck, his voice softer than any time he'd spoken to Eilidh. The dog calmed down enough to sit at his feet, front paws still

restlessly stamping at the ground. It turned its head to regard her, and she saw that one of its eyes was a bright clear brown, the colour of amber beads. The other was white as milk, blind and staring. The dog cocked its head to one side, as if it wasn't quite sure what to make of her.

"Odin!"

Eilidh looked up. She'd been so focused on the dog that she hadn't noticed the person who had followed it down the stairs – a woman, tall and powerfully built, with a broad, weather-beaten face surrounded by greying fair hair.

"You'll be Eilidh, then," the woman said, her face lighting up with a smile so exactly like Dad's that Eilidh's heart missed a beat. "I'm your Aunt Rhona. Welcome to Mirk Skerry."



What does it take to become a Nightkeeper's Apprentice?

Sent to a remote Scottish island she's never heard of and to family she's never met, twelve-year-old evacuee Eilidh feels lost and lonely. But she's drawn to the strange lighthouse she's forbidden to enter.

With the help of a ghostly new friend, Eilidh begins to unravel the island's mysteries: long-kept family secrets and a dangerous, ancient magic that could change the world as she knows it...

Can Eilidh fulfil her Nightkeeper destiny before the past is unleashed?

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