

“Thrilling,
strange
and brutally
involving.”
Guardian

THE BURNING SWIFT

JOSEPH ELLIOTT



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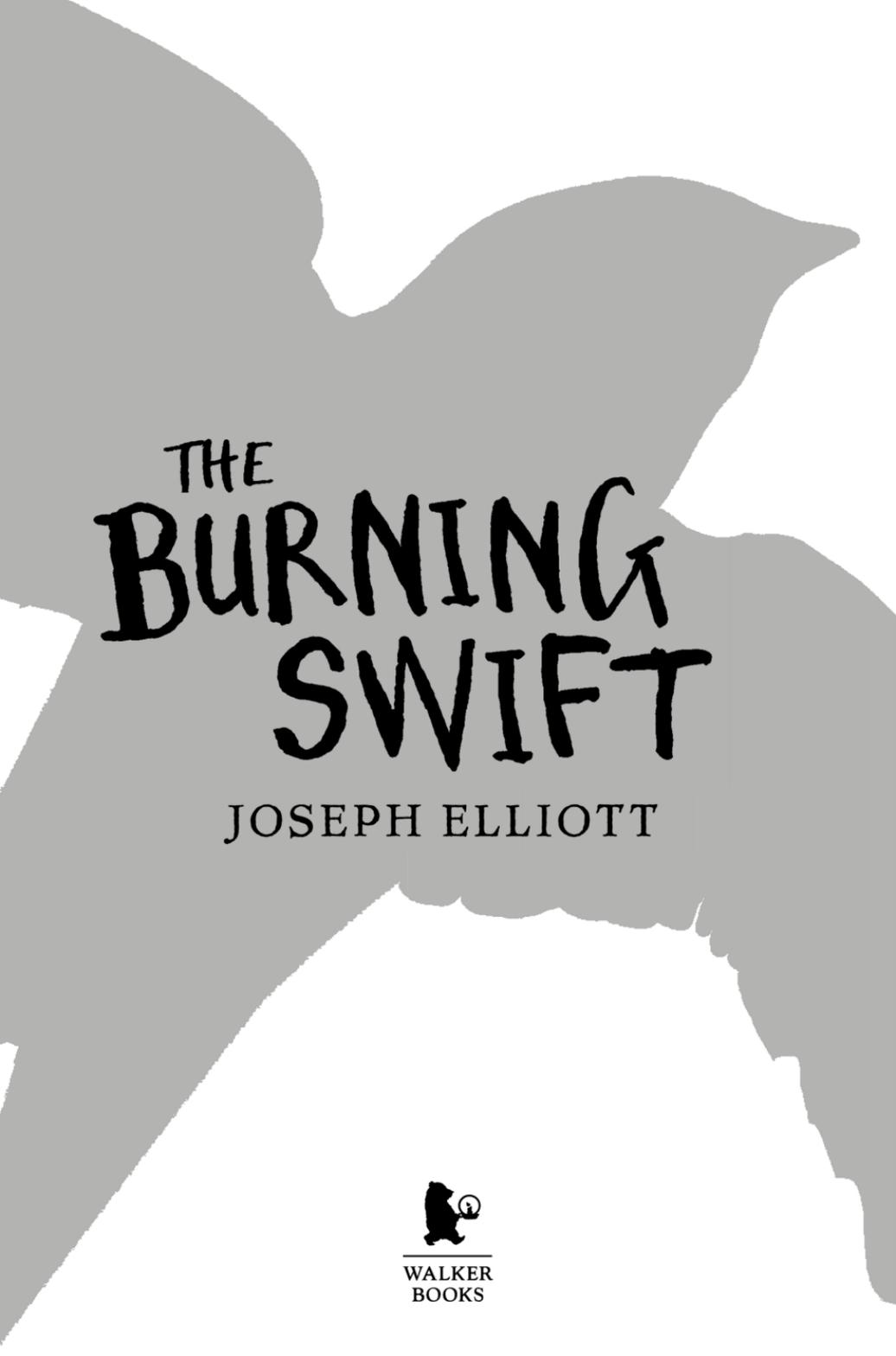
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BURNING
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JOSEPH ELLIOTT



WALKER
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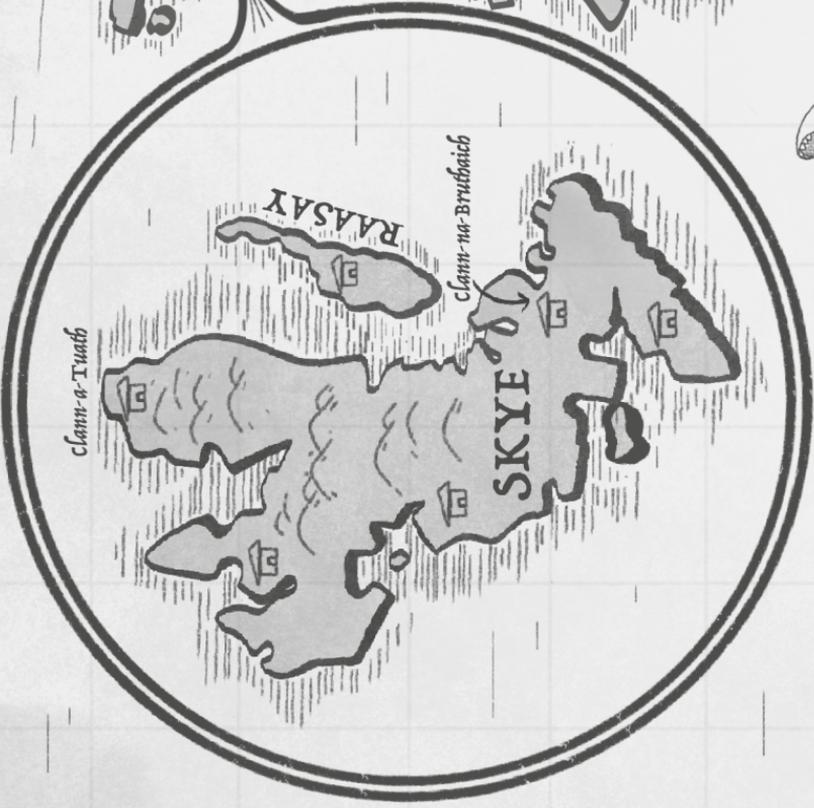
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For Tom, Lils and Kate



Clann-a-Tuath

Clann-na-Bruthaich

RAASAY

SKYE

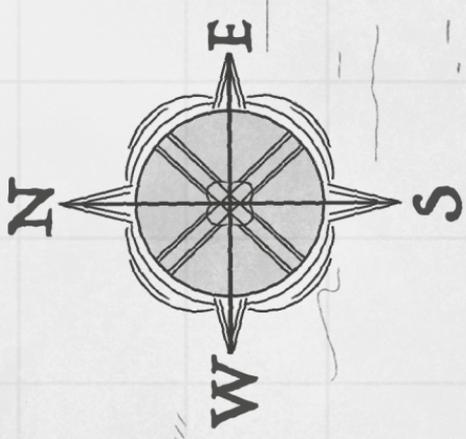
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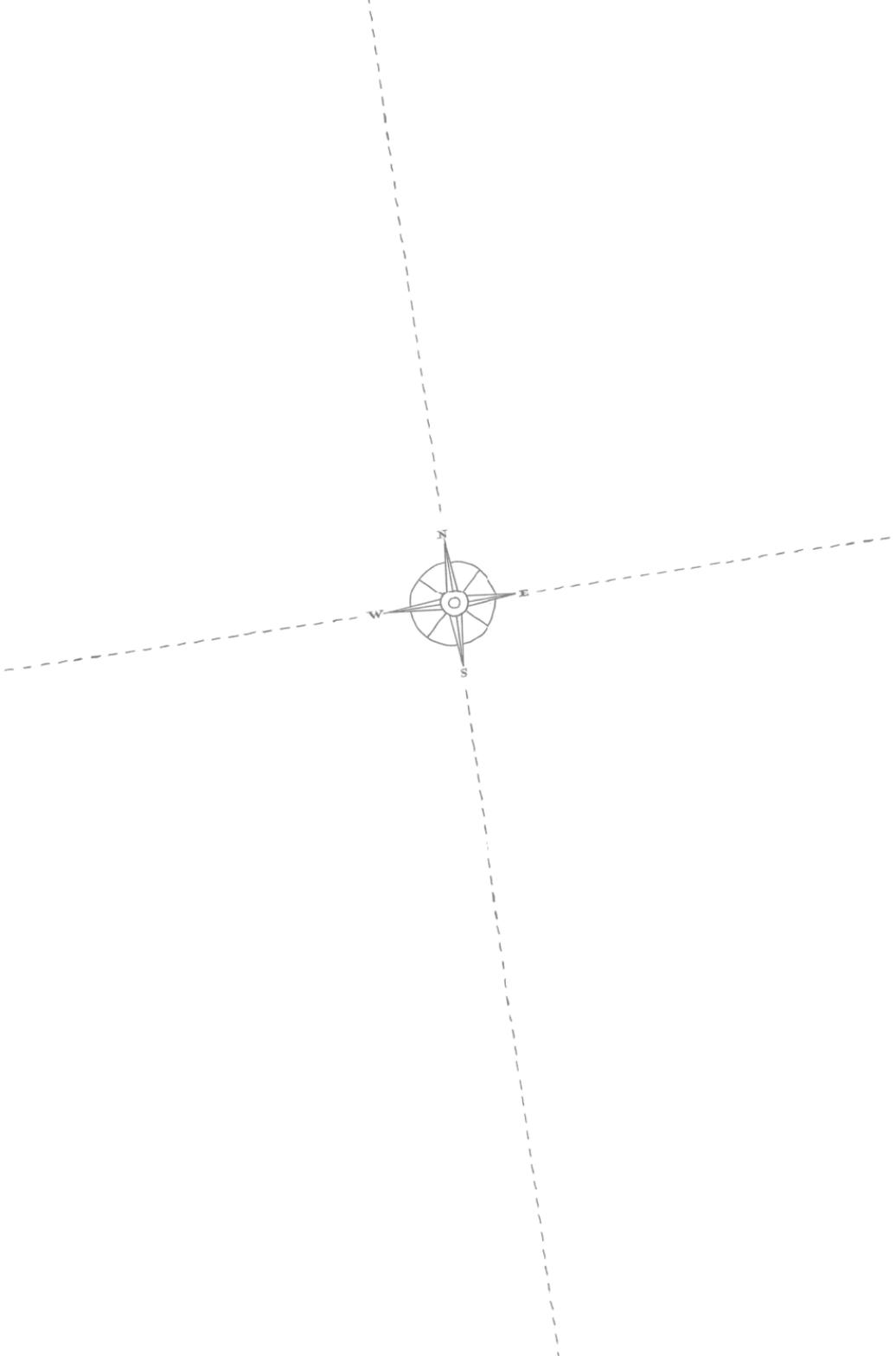
MULL



NORVEG

INGHLAND





JAIME



THERE'S SO MUCH BLOOD – TOO MUCH BLOOD. I CAN'T stop it. My hands are sodden, drenched in its warmth, as I press down on where the arrow protrudes from her body. The girl stares up at me, disorientated and confused.

“Agatha, go! Quickly! Find help or she’s going to die.” Desperation rips my voice.

Agatha takes one more look at her, then stumbles away, shouting for help to anyone who might hear. The girl in my arms starts choking, so I shift her body towards me. From this angle, I have a clear view of the tattoo that stretches from her neck, over her jawline and onto her cheek. It’s some sort of raven or crow, but its neck is at an awkward angle, as if it’s been snapped. The tattoo makes it clear she’s a deamhan, but she seems different from the others.

I am friend. I help you.

That's what she said, right before the arrow punctured her chest. Why is she here? What does she want from us?

Then there's the other deamhan – the one who shot her. The one who thundered towards us on his giant elk as Agatha and I hurried the girl into the enclave, then roared in frustration when we shut the gate on him. Whatever this girl came here to tell us, he was determined for us not to find out.

“It's okay,” I say to the girl. “You're going to be all right.” But even as I say it, I know it's not true. She's lost too much blood. With every moment that passes, she slips further away. She tries to say something but can't form the words. Speckles of blood pop from her lips, and she scrunches her eyes in pain.

Beside me, the horse she rode here on keeps stamping its feet as it watches the girl slowly die in my arms. It slipped into the enclave straight after we did, not wanting to leave the girl's side. It towers over me, wild and beautiful. The wind whips its white hair around its glossy black head.

There are muffled shouts to my right as a small group emerges from behind the nearest bothan. At the front is Lenox – the Hawk who's been a temporary clan elder since we returned from Norveg – and I also recognize one of Clann-na-Bruthaich's Herbists, a broad lady called Una. Agatha is with them, her cheeks puffing as she struggles to keep pace.

“She's been shot,” I say as they draw near, although that much is obvious. “I've been trying to stop the bleeding, but I don't know how.”

“We’ll take it from here,” says Una, replacing my hands with her own and pressing hard on the wound. The girl’s head flops to one side, and Una lets out an audible gasp at the sight of the tattoo. “She’s a deamhan,” she says.

“Yes, but she’s not the enemy,” I say. “At least, I don’t think she is. There’s another one outside, though. He’s the one who shot her.”

“Get to the wall,” Lenox says to a couple of Hawks who’ve joined us. They leave at once. “What makes you think this girl is different?” Lenox asks me.

“She came here to warn us about something. She said she’s a friend and that bad men are coming.”

“How did she get in here? Did you let her in?” asks Una, her face stiff with scorn. I open my mouth but can’t reply. “Did it not cross your mind that it could be a trap?”

“It’s not,” I say. I don’t know how I know it but I do. “She has something important to tell us. You have to save her.”

Una looks at Lenox, who gives an almost imperceptible nod.

“Fine,” she says. “We need to get her to the sickboth. Although I fear it may already be too late... Lenox, take her legs. And the two of you,” she says to two other members of Clann-na-Bruthaich, “one under each arm. On my count, we lift. Three, two, one.”

Without releasing the pressure on the girl’s wound, the four of them lift her limp body and carry it across

the enclave. Her head lolls, first to one side and then to the other, as she slips in and out of consciousness.

“Out of our way,” Una barks at the small crowd that’s gathered.

Agatha and I follow them all the way to the sickboth, sidestepping the trail of blood that spatters the grass. Once there, the Herbists refuse to let me and Agatha in, claiming they need space to work, so we’re left outside, pressing our ears against the door. The wait is agonizing.

“Is she going to d– die?” Agatha asks me.

“I don’t know,” I reply. “She’s lost a lot of blood.”

Blood. Of course. If the Herbists can’t save her, maybe there’s someone else who can.

I turn away from the sickboth and start sprinting towards the loch.

“Where are you— going?” Agatha shouts after me.

“I’ll be back soon,” I say.

The loch in Clann-na-Bruthaich’s enclave is huge, but I spot the Badhbh straight away. He’s in the same position he’s been in since last night, after we won the battle against the *sgàilean*: sitting cross-legged on a large rock that overlooks the water. I still haven’t forgiven him for abandoning us during the fight – for choosing to cower in the nursery instead – but maybe he can redeem himself now.

By the time I reach him, I’m out of breath.

“Excuse me! Hello?” I call, but he continues to stare at the loch as if I haven’t spoken.

I climb onto the rock and stand in front of him, blocking his view. He's wearing the same tatty robe he's worn ever since I found him in his small hut off the Scotian coast. The thick grey locks of his hair twist away from his head like tortured snakes.

"We need your help. I mean, I'd like to *request* your help." I correct myself, remembering how particular he can be. "There's a girl. She's lost a lot of blood and I think she's going to die. Can you help her?" He still doesn't meet my eyes. "Look at me, dammit!" I draw the sword that hangs at my hip. It still has a faint red glow from the magic the Badhbh instilled in it – magic that grew stronger when I fed it my blood during the battle against the *sgàilean*. Seeing it again sends a secret thrill through my body. The Badhbh's eyes flick to the blade, betraying mild curiosity at the fact that it's still glowing.

"Are you threatening me?" he asks, his rich voice seeping into my bones.

"No, I..." I don't know why I drew my sword. I just wanted to get his attention. "She's only a girl," I say. "She's young. Please."

"Your emotional bribery is wasted on me. Leave, unless you wish to be forced."

"She said we're in danger, that someone bad is coming. That means all our lives are at risk, including yours."

That got his attention.

"Who's coming?"

"I don't know. She didn't say. That's why you need to save her."

“What makes you think I could help even if I wanted to?”

“Because you’re the Badhbh! Blood magic is what you do, isn’t it? She’s bleeding to death... There must be something you can do.”

He’s wasting so much time.

“You want another lesson in blood magic, do you?” His eyes are intense, boring straight through my own. Before I can utter a response, he stands up and lowers himself off the rock. “Take me to her, then.”

I slip my sword back into its scabbard and jump down from the rock, stumbling in my haste to lead the Badhbh back to the sickboth. “It’s this way,” I say.

The Badhbh doesn’t exactly hurry, but he moves with a bit more speed than his accustomed stroll, which is the best I can hope for.

Agatha sees us approaching. “Is he going to help?” she asks. “Are you going to— h— help?”

“Move,” says the Badhbh.

Agatha steps aside, and he swings open the sickboth door. Inside is a frenzy of shouting and repressed panic. Six Herbists surround one of the beds, their bodies crammed together, hiding the girl from view. Most of the other patients are sitting up, craning their necks to see what’s happening. The arrow that tore through the girl lies in two bloody pieces on the floor. The Badhbh strides straight over to her.

“What’s he doing here?” Una asks, adding, “Jaime, Agatha, out,” when she notices we’ve crept in as well.

“You’re not going to save her,” says the Badhbh.

“Not with you breathing down our necks we’re not.”

I take a few steps closer to the bed, peering between the Herbists’ backs. The girl’s eyes are closed and her face is ashen. The Badhbh picks up a short blade from the side of the bed, then reaches out and grabs my wrist.

“What are you doing?” I ask. I try to pull away but his grip is firm.

“Do you want to save her or not?” he says.

“Yes, but...”

“I’ve told you before: blood magic cannot occur without blood.”

Without another word, he prises apart my fingers and slices the blade across my palm.

“Wh—?” My knees buckle as the blood spills out and a scream catches in my throat.

The Herbist nearest to us turns his head. “What on earth...?” he says.

The Badhbh pushes him aside and makes a similar incision across the girl’s hand, which hangs lifeless at the side of the bed. He then forces me onto my knees and presses our two palms together.

“Don’t stop what you’re doing,” the Badhbh says to the Herbists, who are all staring at him open-mouthed. “This will help, but she needs you as well. You,” he says to one of them, “bind these two together.”

The Herbist wraps a length of cloth around our hands and fastens it with a tight knot. Above me,

the Badhbh mutters a string of indecipherable words. A harsh burning sensation rushes from my shoulder to my fingertips. I clench my teeth and squeeze the girl's cold hand in my own. I'm starting to feel dizzy. I focus on her face, willing it to show some sign of life. The Badhbh's muttering gets louder, and then he tuts and shoves the blade he's still holding into my free hand.

"Cut me," he says.

"What?"

"Do it now." He holds his palm towards me, his eyes ablaze. Something tells me I need to obey.

With trembling fingers, I trace the blade across his leathery skin.

"Deeper!" he says.

I press the blade in harder. A thick sweat breaks out over my forehead.

"Enough."

I drop the blade and it clatters to the floor as another wave of dizziness spills over me. The Badhbh slaps the Herbists away and places his cut hand over the girl's wound, repeating the same words over and over. He bares his teeth and his nostrils flare. Everyone in the room holds a collective breath. The searing pain in my own hand grows more intense as if every part of who I am is being sucked out of me. I scrunch up my face and grab a fistful of blanket. Just when I think I can't take any more, the Badhbh stops talking and the pain trickles away.

"Her eyes," Agatha says. "She's o- opening her— eyes."

It's true: the girl's eyes flutter open and she takes a deep, life-affirming breath.

The Badhbh removes his hand from the girl's body and wipes it on the side of the bed. "You can take that off now," he says, indicating the cloth that binds me to the girl.

Una helps me remove it, unable to hide her disbelief at what she's just witnessed. I expect there to be a messy gash across my palm, but when the cloth drops away, the wound has already healed. All that remains is a crooked line, tender to touch.

I stand up, feeling every drop of blood that pounds through my body. Traces of the Badhbh's magic are still inside me, which is both terrifying and exhilarating.

I turn to the Badhbh. "What happens now?" I ask.

The Badhbh looks at me as if the answer is obvious. "Now we find out what it is she has to say."