

# THE FIRE WIELDER

Sadhbh Lowry

I took in a deep breath and closed my eyes willing the kindling I had gripped in my hand to light. I let the power I always kept so subdued, so repressed in my chest, escape a little. My mother pushed the grey metal bucket of water closer to me, ready to douse me if I lost control. I pushed out a breath, watching as the kindling began to glitter with sparks of heat and then, suddenly, a large flame. I thrust my hands into the water. I shut my eyes sighing in defeat.

"It's alright," my mother said, "you'll learn to control it."

"How can I learn to control it if I never use it, why can't we leave, go somewhere safe?"

My mother stood sighing. She brushed down her skirt and looked at me, "We've had this conversation before, Fiadh." She turned over to the table where her healing herbs were laid out. "Go outside and take a walk, cool down."

I huffed but grabbed my cloak and walked out of the hut.

It was nearing the winter celebrations and our village was already deep under a blanket of snow. I walked at the edge of the woods, muttering angrily to myself. That was when I heard it - the loud, uniform stomps of hundreds of boots hitting the ground. The warning of the emperor's soldiers. My Grandfather had warned me about them before he died. I wouldn't risk them getting me, I couldn't let them feel the heat coursing off my skin. Blood rushed to my chest, fear blossomed into an unbearable heat. I had always told myself that we were too far north, too inconsequential for their raids. I turned on my heels and ran towards our hut, my boots thumping on the ground and my cloak flying behind me.

When I burst through the entrance my mother was sitting at the table, her long, greying plait tossed over her shoulder. "Soldiers," I gasped, reaching for her cloak and tossing it at her.

She jumped up, grabbing a bag, throwing cheese and bread into it. I took my small string tie bag, carefully placing our herbs inside.

Suddenly the door was knocked in, wood splinters flying everywhere. I looked up and saw a large soldier standing there, dressed head to toe in thick steel armour. Their green tunics were stamped with a white falcon, the emperor's insignia.

"Where's the fire wielder!" he yelled in a gruff voice, his beady eyes looking from my mother to me.

"I don't know of any." I could hear the tremble of fear under my mother's bravado.

The soldier strode over to me and wrenched me forward. My heart threatened to beat out of my chest. He roughly placed his meaty fingers on my neck. My stomach convulsed at the reek of stale sweat and foul breath as he slid his cold hand downwards and over my heart. I wanted to rake my nails across his face, hit him, kill him even.

"She's hot," he said. "Her skin is burning," he snarled.

I took in a deep shuddering breath. "I have a fever," I said weakly, desperate to keep the tremble out of my voice.

The soldier reached out and trapped my hands behind my back.

“No!” my mother screamed as she fell to her knees while another soldier marched in and grabbed her.

Soon we were in the village square, kneeling on the hard, cold, cobbled stone, held down by two soldiers, one either side of me. The whole village was out watching on.

There were desperate tears sliding down my mother’s face, while I remained stoic. I would not give them the pleasure of seeing them break me.

“Fire Wielding,” the general of the legion said, addressing the crowd. “A crime punishable by death.”

The crowd cheered raising their fists in hatred at us.

“All hail Emperor Alpin,” he screamed.

The crowd began to chant it, the words merging together into one noise, pounding into my head. Suddenly, my mother was pulled up onto her feet and pushed into the centre of the square.

I watched, desperation blooming in my chest as the general shouted over the crowd, “There is only one way to know for sure, fire wielders don’t burn.” I let out a scream cursing the gift for skipping a generation. The general took a lit torch from the soldier next to him and put it to my mother’s skirt. I watched as it spread on her clothes like wildfire, I watched as her skin melted and her blood boiled. I heard her screams of agony.

I watched as she died.

I was pulled up onto my feet. The fear, the agony in my chest blooming into something, something more powerful than I had ever felt before. The general held the torch to my cloak and the fire spread, but I didn’t burn. I let out a shriek so anguished, so full of grief, and I let the fire consume me. I pushed it from my body and suddenly I exploded. Fire spread out from me like a pinwheel. I looked on at the village and the people began to burn. I looked on as the metal helmets the soldiers wore melted into their skin. I listened on as they screamed and shouted. I looked on as they died. A sick sense of satisfaction began to explode inside.

I began to rein in the fire. I breathed deeply and shut my eyes imagining dousing myself in cold water.

When I opened my eyes, I stood in the centre of what was now a mass grave. I looked at the houses burning, at the charred flesh of those who hated me. I turned on my heel and began to walk.

I stood at the top of the north mountain and looked at what I used to call home, burning. Suddenly my knees buckled under me as I felt the grief and guilt overwhelmed me.