

When darkness falls, heroes rise...



THE
GOOD
HAWK

EXCLUSIVE
SNEAK
PEEK!

JOSEPH ELLIOTT



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GOOD
HAWK

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WALKER
BOOKS

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AGATHA

THE WIND IS ON MY NOSE AND MY EYES STING. I brought two cloaks today because I am clever. I pull them together with my hands. The tops of my fingers are numb but I don't mind because it is my job and it is an important one.

I look at the sea. The waves are chopping up and down. Sometimes I follow a wave from as far away as I can see, all the way to where I am. I look at it and keep my eyes on it and try not to let it out of my eyes when it comes close and more close until it crashes. It is a hard thing to do and I am good at it.

When I was only young I wanted to go on the sea so much. I asked the Anglers and the Seals lots of times to take me on their boats but they wouldn't. They shoved me away and called me a "good-for-nothing nuisance", which is rude. I made the plan to do it myself and climbed up the wall when no one was looking and

down the other side. It was a hard thing to do but easy for me because I'm good at climbing. The waves went on my legs and my face and I laughed because I liked it and it tasted like soup. Then a bigger wave came and I couldn't hold on any more and I fell. I could have drowned but one of the Hawks saw me and my arms splashing. "You stupid girl," he said when he pulled me out. "You stupid, stupid girl." I'm more clever now and I wouldn't do it again.

After it happened I didn't want to go on the boats any more. I stayed inside the enclave and didn't look at the sea until they gave me my *dreuchd*. I was very happy that day because they made me a Hawk, which is my duty and an important one. One day I will save someone from drowning too like when the Hawk saved me.

"You look cold."

It is Lenox who says that, who is another Hawk. "Go into the turret and warm up. I lit a fire," he says as well. His eyebrows go scrunchy when he talks. They are big ones and black.

"I don't— want to," I say and I shake my head. I don't like going in the turret because when I'm inside I'm not looking at the sea which is what I should be doing.

"Go on, little girl, it's for your own good," he says, and he pushes me on my back. I hate it when he calls me "little girl" because I am not a little girl. I am fifteen so he shouldn't call me that. I do a big frown so he sees it.

When I am in the turret, I kick the fire because I don't want to be there and bits of it fly up to the walls. It's a

small room in a circle. I should not have kicked the fire. Now it might go out, which would be bad. I scrape the bits with my shoe and add some more sticks to make it big again. Even though I didn't want to come, it is nice to be hot and I move my fingers which is nice as well. I undo my first cloak and the other one underneath so I can reach the pocket on my top where Milkwort is. He is warm which is good because I was worried he would be cold. I put him next to the fire because he likes it there. In my trousers is some bread that I saved. I give some to him and keep some for later. He thanks me and eats it while looking at the fire.

"Don't get too close," I warn him.

Milkwort is my friend and a vole and a secret. No one knows about him. Except Maistreas Eilionoir. I don't know how she found out. She is old and knows everything. When she found out she pulled me into her bothan and told me to get rid of him.

"You could be severely punished for this," she said. She was holding on to my arm tight and it hurt a lot even though she is old and her hands are small.

"I know," I said, and I tried to pull my arm away. People think that I'm stupid but I'm not stupid.

"Get rid of it. Before someone finds out who isn't as forgiving as I am." She let go of my arm and I rubbed it and then I left.

"All right, Aggie, my turn."

The voice is a surprise to me. I must have been staring at the fire for longer than I thought. It is Flora who is

there and it is her turn to come in. I am in panic because she may have seen Milkwort. My eyes look to where he was. He's not there.

“I need to do up my cl- cloaks. Give me one— one moment, will you?”

“Of course.”

It is lucky that Flora turns away so I can search for Milkwort without her seeing. I want to call for him, but Flora will hear me if I do that, so I only do it in my head. Talking to animals is not *dùth* which means you shouldn't do it. He is nowhere by the fire and there is nothing for him to hide behind. He wouldn't have run away. He would never leave me. Then I spot him in a gap between the stones in the wall. It was clever for him to go there. I hold out my hand. He jumps onto my arm and behind my neck and into the pocket again. That was close. I do up my cloaks the quickest possible.

“I'm done,” I say to Flora.

“Thanks,” she says, and she smiles and comes in and I go back onto the wall.

I like Flora because she is nice. She's my friend. She is a girl like me but her hair is light brown and she is taller. When she was made a Hawk I helped by telling her all the things you have to do to be a good Hawk, like how to tell the difference between a dolphin and a deathfin and the best way to spear a spider crab and what the five chimes mean and how to ring them properly. I am good at helping.

The sea is a grey colour today with only a bit of white.

It looks like broken rocks. When I am looking I have to do walking as well. Otherwise the blood will freeze inside you. That is what Lenox says.

It is one hundred and seventeen steps to walk along this part of the wall which I know because I counted them. I can walk it without looking at my feet which is good because it means I can look at the sea the whole time and don't miss a single thing. When I reach the other side I turn and walk back and then back again the other way the whole day.

Behind me is the enclave. That is where we all live, which is Clann-a-Tuath, which is my clan. It is the best one. There are other clans but they are far away on the other parts of the island. I can't even see them from the wall. That is because Skye is a big island. We are on the north part. Inside our enclave are lots of bothans made of stone which is where we sleep, and a big wall all the way around which means we can see everything that's all around us. Some people might want to come into our enclave but they are not allowed which is why I have to do the looking on the wall to stop them if they try.

It is getting darker now. You have to look more hard when it is darker because it is not so easy. There is something there, on the sea. I saw it because I looked so well. It is far away and it is small but I think it will be a boat. I keep it in my eyes until it is a little bit closer and then I know that yes, it is a boat. I do not know who is in it. Maybe it is a Seal boat coming back. That would be good.

I walk to the turret and keep looking at the boat still. All of the turrets have a set of chimes outside them so we can do warnings and send messages with the sounds. I pick up the hammer and am going to hit the First once at the top which means I can see a boat and it is people but I can't see who it is yet, but the sound comes out before my hammer hits the metal. It makes me jump because I am not expecting it and I am confused how it made a sound without me hitting it first. Then I know that the sound didn't come from my chime. It came from a different chime, from one of the other turrets, and was hit by someone else. It is confusing in my head because I was expecting one sound and then I heard a different one so it is hard to remember what it was I heard. It could have been the Second but no, I think it was the Fourth. That is very not good. The Fourth is for danger and two hits at the top means it is a ship and it is going to attack. My heart is going fast. When you hear the Fourth the most important thing is that you have to act quickly. If you don't then people could die because it is serious. I look in the turret but there is no one there and I can't see anyone further on the wall either. Who was it that hit the chime? I look back at the sea. The boat is coming in fast now and I am the only one who can stop it. I have to stop it. It is my duty and important and I have to protect my clan.

I run to the launcher and wind back the claw until it clicks. The arrow is already inside. It is a big one and a metal one. I've got the flint in my belt because we always

have to have it. I take it out and try to light the moss on the arrow, but it won't do it because it's all wet from when it was raining. I shake my head and tear the moss off and throw it in the sea. I need something else. I look up and it makes me yell because I see how close the boat has got. Think, think, I need to think. Then I know what to do.

I kick off my boot and take off my sock quickly so quickly. I tie the sock to the end of the arrow with one knot and then two knots so it won't come loose. It is a clever plan. The sock is hard to light because you have to hit the flint so fast. My hands are all shaking. I try to do it lots of times and then I do it. The fire goes all big because of the animal fat on the arrow. In my eye there is someone and it is Lenox on the wall far away. He is waving at me to go faster. He knows how fast I need to be because the boat is so close now. I slide the launcher over, making the middle of the boat line up with the tip of the arrow like I was taught.

“Agatha, no!” Lenox's shout is an echo, but my finger has already pressed the trigger. Why did he tell me no?

The arrow goes up into the sky. The boat is more close now so I can see the people inside. That's strange. I squint my eyes because what I see isn't right. I can see their faces and it's not right because I know them.

It means the boat is one of ours. I have done a terrible mistake.

JAIME



THE BOAT LURCHES, MAKING MY STOMACH TWIST. I open my mouth to retch, but all that comes out is a hollow whimper. I tighten my grip on the boat's side. Sharp scabs of paint flake away beneath my fingers. I'm sure the other Anglers are giving me pitying looks behind my back. I'm trying. I'm really trying. I hope they know that.

I reach up with one hand and pull my hood over my face. The wind whips it straight back off again. Sleet lashes my cheeks and trickles down my neck.

"You look like you've been grabbed by a gannet," Aileen says as she steps beside me.

"I feel like it too," I reply in between heaves. If a gannet did try to take me right now, I would probably let it.

"Can I get you some water?" Even with rain spewing down and the boat being tossed from side to side, Aileen still manages to look graceful.

“I’m fine,” I say, shifting away from her. I’d rather she didn’t see me like this.

“On the plus side, you appear to be attracting more fish. We’ve caught loads since you started emptying your guts.” She’s trying to make me smile. I really don’t want to. “I’ve no idea why,” she continues, “it smells *awful*.”

The sides of my mouth betray me and start twitching upward.

“That is definitely a smile!” she says. “I knew I could break you.”

“It’s not,” I say, forcing my mouth into a knot.

“It gets better with time,” she says. “I promise.”

Although Aileen is roughly the same age as me, she was given her *dreuchd* about six months ago, so she’s already had six months’ practice. I’m sure she was great at it, even in her first week. She gives my hair a gentle ruffle, then leaves me to my misery. I watch as she slips back to her place and casts her line into the sea. She says something to the Angler next to her that makes him laugh. How does she do that? Make people laugh so easily? It’s one of the reasons everyone likes her so much, including me. The only good thing about being named an Angler is that I get to spend more time with her. She’s my best friend; she always has been.

Waves strike the side of the boat in a repetitive thud-slap, thud-slap, thud-slap. I look down and immediately regret it. All that deep, dark water. My mind starts rattling through the possibilities of what could be lurking just beneath the surface: giant squid, killer rays,

deathfins... I scrunch my eyes closed. *I'm safe in the boat. I'm safe in the boat.* I have to keep telling myself that. As long as I don't think about what's in the water, I'm fine.

It takes a long time for the weather to improve, the clouds eventually turning from fierce grey to dirty white. As the waves mellow, so too does my seasickness, and I race to try and catch up on all my tasks. As the newest member of the crew, I've been given all the jobs that no one else wants, like untangling the ropes and threading the bait. I work in silence, sat on my own with my head low.

To make matters worse, we're out east today, which means the Isle of Raasay is directly in front of us: a mountainous strip in between Skye and mainland Scotia. I refuse to look at it. It's where the girl lives, the one who is going to ruin everything. I don't want to think about her right now.

Just before dusk, we start heading back. It's been a long day, but all of my despair melts away at the sight of the enclave. Its walls rise up before us like a welcome beacon. Flecks from the crashing waves make the ancient stones shine.

Home.

My whole body aches to be inside, to be surrounded by the familiar faces of my clan, to feel the spongy earth beneath my feet. To feel safe. From somewhere on the wall, the Second chimes twice to announce our arrival.

“Why have they put *her* on centre post?” says the

caiptean. I follow his gaze and spot Agatha, one of the Hawks, staring down at us from beside the turret. “And what the hell is she doing now?”

I can just about make out Agatha’s arms, pumping at the launcher. She hops about a bit, then ties something to the arrow and sets it on fire.

“She’s going to shoot at us. That bloody idiot is going to shoot at us,” says the caiptean.

A thunderous twang rings out as the arrow arches high above us. The aim is poor, so the caiptean doesn’t bother altering the boat’s direction. Instead, he looks up and shouts a string of curses at Agatha. I keep my eyes on the arrow. It tears through the sky like a falling star, its path unstable. A rogue wind catches it, altering its course at the last moment, curving it directly in line with us.

I open my mouth to shout a warning—

Too late.

It rips through the sails before anyone can react, instantly setting them ablaze. The flames lick across the deck and curl up the mast. I yelp, tripping over my long legs in my haste to stand up. The heat is intense, tightening my skin and drying out my eyes. One of the Anglers upturns a bucket of water in an attempt to douse the flames, either not realizing or not caring that it also contains the shrimp-bait. The creatures spill towards me and flit about pathetically, until the fire engulfs them with a series of harsh pops. The smell of scorched fish burns my nostrils.

“Abandon the boat!” yells the caiptean.

What? No. The water is too deep.

People leap overboard in all directions.

I hover at the boat’s edge, staring at the water, my legs frozen. I can’t do it. I can’t.

Someone pushes me from behind. I try to resist, but my knees give way and I tumble into the water.

The coldness hits me like an avalanche of stone. I’ve fallen in deep. I spin around in circles, but I can’t find the surface. My limbs flail in all directions. To my right, a hazy orange smudge pierces the darkness. The blaze from the boat. I kick towards it. Something brushes against my leg. Panic grips my lungs and digs in its nails. I turn. There’s nothing there. I turn back, but I can no longer see the boat, no longer know which way is up. I twist my whole body from one side to the other, expecting something to burst out of the darkness at any moment. I’m trapped in the water and I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe.

Rough hands find me and yank me upwards. Then a new coolness washes over me as my head breaks the surface. I suck in quick mouthfuls of salty air. Above me, flakes of ash rain down from the boat’s corpse.

“Where’s Jaime? Protect the boy!” people are shouting.

“I’ve got him,” says a voice in my ear. Whoever it is starts towing me towards the wall.

“I’m fine,” I say, coughing up seawater. Now that I can see the enclave, I’d rather get there myself. I’m

not the best swimmer in the world, but I'm more than capable of swimming a few hundred yards. I also don't want the other Anglers to see me being helped; they already think I'm hopeless. I try to shrug off my rescuer, but he won't let go.

I scan the water for Aileen. I can't see her anywhere. Burning remains fall from the wreckage, sizzling black as they hit the water. When we reach the wall, the caiptean insists that I be pulled over first and that I'm taken straight to the sickboth.

"Where's Aileen?" I say, but no one replies.

"It's vital he doesn't fall ill," someone says as I'm hustled across the enclave. "The Ceremony is in less than two weeks." As if I need reminding. Half a dozen people usher me into the sickboth and swamp me in blankets. Once inside, the Herbists fuss around me, drying my hair, feeding me soup.

"Did Aileen make it back okay?" I ask again, raising my voice a little this time.

"She's fine, everyone's fine," says one of the Herbists, placing a sweaty hand on my forehead. "Our main priority right now is you, young man."

I surrender to their care. I've never liked being the centre of attention, but I know they mean well. One of them even sneaks me a wedge of hearthcake, covered in thick butter, which helps raise my spirits a little.

"Well, that was dramatic," Aileen says as she saunters through the sickboth door. She's changed into dry clothes, but her rust-coloured hair is still sodden from the sea.

“Aileen!”

The Herbists step aside to give us some space. Aileen clasps my fists.

“Thought I’d better check you were still alive,” she says.

“Just about.”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Bit embarrassed, maybe. What are people saying? Are they laughing at me?”

“No. Why would they be laughing?”

“Because I’m supposed to be an Angler and I nearly drowned...”

“No one even knows. Or cares. I promise.”

“Really?”

“Really really. So stop worrying. And that’s an order.” She points her finger at me and gives me her best stern look.

“Okay. Thanks.” And I mean it. She always knows the right thing to say.

There’s a tickle in my throat. I start coughing. There must still be seawater in my lungs. Once I start, I can’t seem to stop.

“Are you harassing our patient?” says one of the Herbists, coming back over to check on me.

“Nothing to do with me,” says Aileen, holding up her hands.

“Well, I think you’d better let this little mouse get some rest,” says the Herbist, patting my back and rubbing my chest at the same time. The cough begins to ease.

“See you in the morning,” says Aileen. She can’t resist rubbing her knuckles on my head before she goes.

“Goodnight,” I say, knocking her hand away. She leaves me with a big smile on my face.

Not long after, the Herbists leave as well, telling me multiple times on their way out how important it is that I go straight to sleep. Before I have the chance to obey their instructions, there is a knock on the sickboth door and Maighstir Ross enters.

“Jaime-Iasgair. How are you feeling?” he says.

Wow. The Ceremony really must be a big deal if I’m getting visits from the clan chief himself.

“I’m fine,” I say for the thousandth time. “Thank you.”

“Very well.” He pauses for a moment as if he might say something else, then lowers his head to go back through the doorway. That was brief.

“Maighstir Ross?”

“Yes.” He doesn’t take his hand off the door handle.

“I was thinking... I was told I have to go to Kilmaluag Bay tomorrow with the other Anglers from my boat, to fish from the shoreline, but ... I was wondering if I could maybe stay with the Wasps instead?”

His forehead creases. “You want to what?”

“Stay with the Wasps. As part of my training. I thought if I watch how they put a new boat together, I could learn how to fix it, in case anything goes wrong while we’re out at sea.” I don’t know where I’m finding the courage to make such a suggestion. “And

also, the bay is quite far; it would probably be better for my health to stay here in the enclave.” I let out a pitiful cough to emphasize my point.

Maighstir Ross isn't stupid. He must know that I'm not getting on well as an Angler, but it is not *dùth* to work for a duty other than one's own, so what I am requesting is bordering on unlawful. His face softens and he gives me the faintest hint of a smile.

“Very well,” he says, “but you must learn through observation only. You are an Angler now. You would be wise to embrace that fact.”

“Yes, Maighstir.”

“Now get some rest. We need you fit and healthy for the Ceremony.”

The kindness in his eyes disappears the moment he mentions the Ceremony. It was the slightest shift, but I definitely saw it. He blows out the lantern with a fierce breath, plummeting the sickboth into darkness. The door clatters as he leaves.

I try to sleep, but a hundred thoughts itch my brain. Mainly about the Ceremony, of course. The declaration was made a week ago. When they first called me into the meeting circle, my whole body buzzed with excitement. I knew I was about to receive my *dreuchd* – my calling in life. I'd been waiting for it ever since I'd turned fourteen. Being part of a duty and working for the good of the whole clan: that is the greatest honour of all.

My enthusiasm soon faded when they named me an Angler. I had to fight hard to hide my disappointment;

all duties are equally important, after all. I'm proud to be an Angler. I am. And the elders would have had a good reason for making the choice they did. I just need to work harder at being better at it.

As soon as the announcement was made, the other Anglers entered the circle and smeared my body with the guts of a freshly killed fish. Not the most enjoyable experience, if I'm honest, but that's the way it's always been. As a result, I was soaking wet and reeking of fish guts when, a short while later, they called me into the circle for a second time. I stepped forwards, blood dripping from my scrawny arms. With the eyes of the whole clan on me, I willed myself not to shiver. I'd never heard of anyone being called twice in one night, so I was immediately on edge, imagining the worst. It was Maighstir Ross who made the declaration, his eyes locked on mine. He described it as "a pivotal gesture to ensure positive diplomatic relations for many generations to come". A sickening silence followed, and it wasn't until Maighstir Clyde shouted, "May Clann-a-Tuath forever be strong," that everyone raised their fists and started to cheer. Their faces, however, could not hide their confusion.

But it's happening. All the arrangements have been made.

I am going to be married.

To a girl from the Isle of Raasay.

No one wants the marriage to take place, least of all me. Marriage is wrong; everyone knows that. No matter

what the elders tell me, it's obvious the only reason I was "chosen" was because I was the right age and the least likely to object. If I'd drowned today, I'm sure they would have found a replacement easily enough.

People keep telling me what an honour it is, but they're only saying that to try and make me feel better. There are six clans on Skye and none of them has allowed marriage for over a century, so I'm going to be the only married person on the whole island. Not even Maighstir Ross could hide his disdain for what is going to happen. No one is going to want anything to do with me afterwards, I'm sure of it. I'll be nothing more than a walking reminder of our clan's weakness.

Clann-a-Tuath has always been proud, standing strong against our enemies and our allies, both on the Isle of Skye and over the sea. So why compromise our beliefs now?

There is definitely more to this union than the elders are letting on. Something has made them desperate. Something out of their control. Whatever it is, it can only be something bad.

BEHIND THE SCENES Q^{AND}A WITH THE AUTHOR

WHAT IS *THE GOOD HAWK* BOOK ABOUT?

The Good Hawk is the first book in the Shadow Skye fantasy series. Set on an alternative version of Scotland, it's about a clan who are invaded and enslaved by ruthless warriors from across the sea. The only people to evade capture are a girl with Down's syndrome called Agatha and an anxious boy called Jaime. Together, they must cross the mainland – a mysterious country full of forbidden magic and dark secrets – in order to rescue the only family they have ever known.

WHAT IS YOUR INSPIRATION BEHIND THE STORY?

I've been inspired by so many things, from films and TV shows I've seen, to places I've visited and books I've read. The fantasy books I loved as a teenager have undoubtedly made their mark on my own work, particularly Garth Nix's *Old Kingdom* series, Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* and Ian Irvine's *The Three Worlds Cycle*. Scotland was also a massive source of inspiration – its landscape is so incredibly beautiful and wild, drastic and harsh – the perfect setting for a fantasy novel.

WHO ARE YOUR MAIN CHARACTERS AND HOW ARE THEY DIFFERENT?

Agatha is known as a “Hawk” – someone who patrols the sea walls, looking for signs of enemies approaching. She is a brave, outspoken and fiercely loyal girl. She has Down's syndrome, but in her world the condition is unnamed. Many of her fellow clan members bully or belittle her for her differences, but over the course of the novel she often proves that her differences can also be her strengths.

Jaime is an “Angler”, a fourteen-year-old fisherman who is yet to find his place in the world. He feels uncomfortable in his own body and suffers from anxiety-related panic attacks. Whereas Agatha is often viewed by others as “different”, Jaime's differences are more internal. It is these inner demons he needs to overcome in order to save his people.

HOW DID YOU CREATE AND DEVELOP THE CHARACTERS?

I taught in a special needs school for nearly five years, and Agatha is inspired by some of the incredible children I worked with during that time. It was always important to me that the story was not about a character who has Down's syndrome, it is just a part of who Agatha is. After writing the first draft, I sent it to several sensitivity readers to ensure the portrayal was as accurate as I could make it.

I actually found Jaime harder to write than Agatha, probably because he is very loosely based on my own experiences of being fourteen. As a result, I had to address feelings which I'd kept bottled up for several years. I hope that, as a result, teenagers will connect with his character and empathise with his personal struggles.

WHAT ARE YOUR TOP WRITING TIPS FOR BUDDING AUTHORS?

- **Read lots!** The more you read, the better your writing will become.
- **Just start writing.** Stop worrying about whether or not you're any good and get the words down on the page. You'll have plenty of time to improve them later.
- **Write what excites you.** Don't try and predict what will sell, just write the novel that you would want to read.
- **When you write, cover all the clocks and hide your phone.** Not knowing the time is extremely liberating and will help focus your attention.



JOSEPH ELLIOTT is a writer and actor, well-known for his work in children's television including CBeebies series "Swashbuckle". His commitment to serving children with special education needs was instilled at a young age: his mother is a teacher trained in special needs education, and his parents provided respite foster care for children with additional needs. He has worked at a recreational centre for children with learning disabilities and as a teaching assistant at Westminster Special Schools. The heroine of his first book, *The Good Hawk*, was inspired by the many incredible children he has worked with, especially those with Down's syndrome. Joseph lives in London. Say hello to Joseph on Twitter: @joseph_elliott.

Read the full story
from 6th February 2020!



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