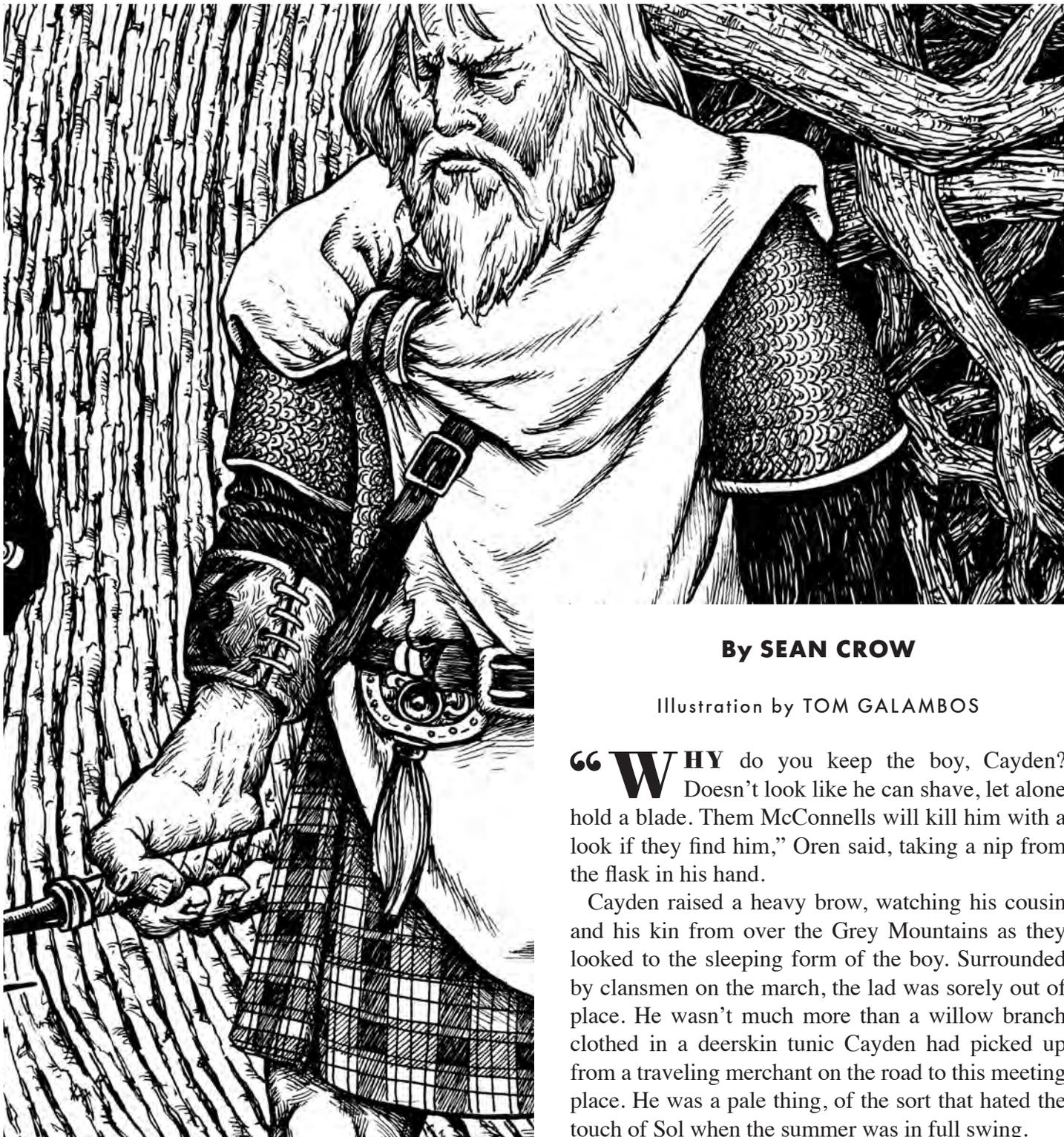


PIPES OF GL





AN MAGLAIRD



By **SEAN CROW**

Illustration by **TOM GALAMBOS**

“WHY do you keep the boy, Cayden? Doesn’t look like he can shave, let alone hold a blade. Them McConnells will kill him with a look if they find him,” Oren said, taking a nip from the flask in his hand.

Cayden raised a heavy brow, watching his cousin and his kin from over the Grey Mountains as they looked to the sleeping form of the boy. Surrounded by clansmen on the march, the lad was sorely out of place. He wasn’t much more than a willow branch clothed in a deerskin tunic Cayden had picked up from a traveling merchant on the road to this meeting place. He was a pale thing, of the sort that hated the touch of Sol when the summer was in full swing.

"Best piper my ears have heard. Likely the best in the highlands — no lie," Cayden said, meaning it.

"Bah," scoffed Brok, Oren's much larger cousin. "No chance that stick could blow a note, let alone a tune. Not enough air in that frame of his."

Cayden eased back against his travel pack and nudged the boy with his foot, "Wake a moment, lad; these heathens from over the Greys have put a stain on your honor. You must defend it."

The boy darted up, eyes wide with surprise but tiny hands clenched into fists at being woken so abruptly.

That earned a few chuckles from the surrounding clansmen, piquing the interest in the surrounding camp. They were only thirty strong but would meet up with Clans Dulane and McDun before joining the southern lords for the battle to come. The civil war had finally arrived, and the clans would settle their grudges at the Battle of Edmund's Valley. It was only a few days' march, but the day would come soon enough.

"Whist, boy, there are no enemies here," Cayden said, seeing the fear fade from the youth's face. "They wish to hear you play your pipes."

The boy blinked the sleep from his eyes; his hands relaxing from the clenched fists they had been. Dutifully, he placed the new chanter reed Cayden had bought for him in his mouth as he gathered his bagpipe.

Cayden had found the lad by the River Bri when he was called upon by his Clan Chief to champion a duel against the McConnells. Dressed in little more than rags, the boy was sitting beside the river, serenading the flowing water with a tune so pure that it touched something in Cayden, for he knew he was in the presence of something few would ever hear. The lad was a true master of the pipes, able to raise or cool a man's blood with the mere change of a tune. Waiting for the song to finish, he had approached the boy, offering him some food and coins for an evening of hearing him play. Half-starved and wary eyed, the boy reluctantly accepted, though he spoke not a word.

That evening, Cayden listened to the boy play long past the setting sun. When the last note filled the night air and the moon was at full glow amongst the stars, they turned in for the night. It was only then, when the lad moved to lay at Cayden's side, hand resting on his thigh, that the swordsman realized just how the boy had survived so long, and a great anger entered the clansman.

"We'll be needing none of that, lad," Cayden had told him firmly. "I'm no beast to make a child serve those sorts of desires, and you need not lower yourself to this in order to survive. Not anymore. Stick with me, play your pipes, and I'll make sure you never have to live that way again. Do you understand me?"

The boy had seemed confused by the offer, but he nodded and went back to his own makeshift bedroll. Since then, the young boy had followed him wherever he went.

Cayden was not entirely sure why he took the boy under his protection. He was a clan champion after all, a killer with a blade and no family of his own to speak of. He had taken far more lives than he had bettered. Perhaps, with this boy, Cayden could make one life better before he passed into the Dark Veil.

"Looks like we'll have some entertainment tonight," one of the clansmen called, bringing the rest of the warriors from their camp to the main fire.

The boy paid them no mind, but once he had taken up his pipes and stood, the warriors grew quiet, save for a few hecklers in the back.

The first note was a low, mournful thing that immediately drew them in before he launched into a dirge that filled their hearts with memories of the past. "Shade's Tears" the song was called, and never had they heard it so masterfully played. It told the tale of enduring love and the tragedy of a god who sought the affections of a maiden fair, who turned to a shade the moment the god touched her. Their love was forever separated by the planes of life and death, yet each would hold true to their love throughout the span of time until time itself no longer existed. When the boy finished, the entire camp had become silent in their reverence.

"A fine tune," Brok said, all hints of doubt removed from his voice.

The rest of the clansmen nodded in agreement, and Cayden saw the newfound respect in their eyes. The boy looked to Cayden, and he gave a nod of approval.

"A fine tune, indeed," Cayden said, as the boy carefully put his instrument away before returning to his bedroll.

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THE next day brought heavy clouds and a stiff wind that promised rain as they followed a game trail along the craggy peaks that made up the Greys — not uncommon for the highlands, but it would make their journey through the pass far less enjoyable. The men, however, didn't seem to mind as Cayden had asked the boy to play. Against the billowing winds on their march to the gathering grounds, the lad played "Ascension of the Daoine Sith," a spirited tune that added an extra bounce to the clansmen's steps and kept them from muttering curses that normally accompanied such weather.

Cayden watched the boy, seeing how his eyes sparkled with life as he played. He dipped and swayed with the tunes, feeling the music as if it coursed through him. Any other time, his gray eyes bore the world-weariness that was all too familiar in this broken world. Without the pipes, the boy simply existed. Yet when he played, there returned a certain youthful passion that Cayden himself had long forgotten.

"The boy should have a name," Brok said, coming alongside Cayden. "Not right that he should march with us, yet we treat him as naught without even a name to go by."

Cayden shrugged, "I thought the same, but he doesn't speak. Not my place to give a name when one isn't asked."

Brok grunted, looking from Cayden to the boy. "Lad, quiet your pipes a moment and come over here."

The boy stopped, and Cayden saw the life fade from his eyes along with the music, but he didn't get any closer to the large clansman. Instead, he looked to Cayden first, and it was only then that the swordsman realized it was the boy's way of asking for permission.

"Aye, come over," Cayden said.

Brok chuckled, "I wish my boys were so well behaved."

"Which ones?" Oren asked, nudging one of his kin. "The whorehouse back home has a few little bastards running about it with that red hair of yours."

"Piss off," Brok grumbled.

The boy watched the exchange without reaction, but Cayden had traveled with him long enough to notice that he held his bagpipes a bit tighter than before. He was uncomfortable being addressed by these men, and Cayden made sure to stand closer to put him at ease. Whether the boy knew it or not, he took a step nearer Cayden.

"Nothing to be afraid of, lad, just thinking about giving you a name. Is that something you'd like?" Cayden asked.

The boy chewed the side of his cheek, a brief moment of hesitation before he gave a shrug. It was the closest thing to an answer they were likely to receive.

"Looks like a Simon," said Brok.

The boy said nothing; he simply held his bagpipe and watched the clansmen converse.

"I knew a Simon," Oren said with a shake of his head. "A real bastard he was. Boy needs a better name than that. How about Piper?"

"Piper who plays the pipes?" asked another clansman, a distant cousin from Brok's side of the family. "Seems a bit much."

There was a low murmur as word of the discussion traveled to those closest. The boy watched them all with a practiced wariness.

"He'll be called Leathan, for river, as that was where we met," Cayden said.

The boy looked up at him, face serious as ever, but he gave a nod of approval.

Brok grinned, "Leathan MacLaird. Our blood could use a bit more music in it after all."

A flash of life seemed to spark in Leathan as his shoulders relaxed from hunching around his pipes. Cayden, however, raised a hand and the small column of clansmen stopped their march.

"You wish to be part of Clan MacLaird?" he asked Leathan.

The boy hesitated, then nodded again. Cayden hated to see him like that after watching him warm up to his new name but matters of this nature were to be taken seriously.

"Then listen close, lad, because there is a code you must hold to be a part of us."

"Hell, Cayden, he's too young for such things," Oren said. "Besides, who here amongst us hasn't broken it?"

"It's not about never breaking the code," Cayden said, his normal good nature vanished from his voice. "It's about setting yourself apart from the animals that rule this world and knowing that, when you do slip, you make it right."

Kneeling before Leathan so as to meet him eye to eye, he said, "When you speak, may your words be true. May your deeds be open for all to see to ensure no shade enters your soul. Keep your wits when others lose their own, and stand for the clan before all else. Accept this, and you will be a MacLaird, boy, but know that every man here will hold you to it. Do you accept these words as your own?"

Leathan held Cayden's gaze, and for a moment the swordsman saw the foundations of strength begin to form. In response,

the boy held a pale hand out to Cayden, who took it. Upon seeing this, the nearby clansmen gave approving words, repeating his name until everyone had spoken it aloud.

"Then you are now one of us, Leathan MacLaird. Be sure to honor this code as best you can and be willing to make things right when you don't."

Leathan MacLaird released Cayden's hand and returned his hold on the bagpipes he carried. For a moment he seemed deep in thought, then he placed the reed in his mouth and began to play once more. Cayden could not tell what the tune was, but it was a joyful sound; of that there was no doubt. Without another word, the clansmen began their march once more, and the pipes guided their way.

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TWO nights passed and the boy's hesitation around the other clansmen began to fade. He no longer held to Cayden's side but wandered the camp and played for those who asked it. Though he had yet to speak, the men accepted his silence and had taken to understanding Leathan's way of speaking. Their conversations were a mixture of words from the men, nods from the boy, and music to fill the gaps. For the first time in a long time, Cayden felt that he had finally done some good in the world. That, in itself, was a treasure worth more than any silver or gold that would cross his hands.

Turning his gaze away from the boy, he focused on the military camp below. A steady, late summer breeze sent banners waving on either side of the valley where the crows would soon feast. For now, night covered the land; the light from hundreds of campfires muted the stars above. His clan had gathered a few more to their number along the way, bringing them up to forty-five. Yet they were but a drop in the bucket compared to the thousands gathered. His clan's liege, flying the Raven Banner of Dun Glen, had set up his camp alongside the other high lords and was likely discussing strategy with his peers.

Or getting drunk, Cayden mused, likely both.

Heavy steps approached, and Cayden glanced up from his resting place to see Brok coming to his fire. The man was a braggart for the most part, a known thief and stubborn as a mule. They had come close to blows several times over the years, but his blood was highland true, and Cayden would be proud to have the warrior at his side come tomorrow.

"A lot more of them than I thought," Brok said as he eased himself beside the fire.

Cayden scanned the banners across the way. It was too dark to know which belonged to which clan, but it was clear that there were far more against them than not.

"There are," Cayden said.

He was not in the mood for company, especially the night before a battle, so he let the silence between them stretch. He had been in three pitched battles during his thirty-four years, the first when he was little older than Leathan. A few thousand on either side and none of them lasting longer than the sun could move a handspan across the sky. This, however, was of a magnitude far greater than he had ever seen.

The death toll would be high.