



Cree & Dawn and the Wolf

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Category: Romance, Adult, Paranormal, Historical

Description: A thick, creeping fog envelops Cree, Dawn, and his troop of warriors as they make their way home from a weeklong event hosted by a powerful noble under the king's patronage. The fog itself poses a challenge, but even more unsettling are the howling wolves echoing through the mist.

Before they can find shelter, the dense fog separates Cree and Dawn from his men. Dawn suffers a fall, leaving Cree to desperately search for safety. His search leads them to Clan MacMadadh, the long-thought-extinct Clan of the Wolf.

With the fog refusing to lift and Dawn needing rest, they are forced to stay. As Cree explores the eerie castle, he is warned not to venture into the fog, where wolves prowl dangerously close to the village. The deeper he digs, the more uneasy he becomes, and when he and Dawn discover claw marks embedded in the wooden floors, a terrifying thought takes root—one born of ancient myths... werewolves.

Trapped by the relentless fog and the ever-present howls, Cree faces a dire question... how will they escape and make it home?

Cree will not tolerate being trapped, and he will stop at nothing to protect Dawn—even if it means facing the leader of a wolf pack head-on.

Author Note: Read more about the Clan MacMadadh werewolves in the present day in *Sexual Appetites of Werewolves*.

Total Pages (Source): 39

CHAPTER 1

Cree saw it creeping toward them, ready to devour every last one of them... a heavy cloud of mist. The forest was slowly growing thick with it, and mist was not to be ignored or dismissed when encountered in the Highlands. Even a light mist could prove dangerous, but a heavy mist could prove deadly. They would be forced to stop and shelter until visibility improved or he would chance losing his troop to it. Then it would take time to find them, delaying their return home.

He should have paid heed when the invitation had arrived and sent his regrets, but it had not been an option. It had been a summons disguised as an invite. An influential noble was hosting a week-long event for a consultant to the King, a Lord Coulston, to meet the most powerful Highlanders in the Highlands, and Cree was considered one of them. He was left no choice but to attend and he was given no choice but to bring Dawn along since wives were expected to attend as well, and no excuse would be accepted.

He worried how his wife might fare since she could not speak, having been born without a voice. There was no rhythm or reason to her affliction, she simply could not speak. She made herself heard easily enough, to those familiar with her, mostly through gestures. Strangers, however, were a different matter and many people could be brutal to those different from themselves. She had done surprisingly well, having gained favor with many of the wives and some of the husbands as well. Though he had made it known upon arrival that he kept a firm eye on his wife in case a husband thought to have a dalliance while there, and who better than with a woman who could not voice her objection. He had wanted to bring Beast, their sizeable hound with them, but Dawn worried his attendance might not be appreciated and that he might

not be safe.

After giving it thought, Cree had agreed, and Beast had been left home. He had been leery of the event from the start, and after only one day, he had wondered if the event was nothing more than a ruse for the King's consultant, Lord Clouston, to gather information on the Highland clans. The other Highland chieftains thought the same themselves but only voiced it among themselves.

Cree kept a steady eye on the mist that continued a slow crawl towards them, almost as if it stalked them, waiting for the right moment to pounce on them. He had seen a rise not far off before the mist swallowed it from his view and he knew that at any time the mist could do the same to them... swallow them whole.

"We stop before the mist completely engulfs us and shelter in place until it dissipates," Cree called out to his troop of two dozen warriors. "Tether yourselves together in case the mist rushes over us, so we do not get separated. Hand the end of the rope to me when done and listen for my command."

The warriors hurried to obey, their eyes remaining watchful and concerned about the thickening mist.

Cree kissed his wife's brow when she tightened her arms around his waist and rested her head on his shoulder. "You are safe, wife, worry not."

Dawn nodded, letting him know she did not doubt that. She never doubted his ability to keep her safe. He would do anything to see that no harm came to her. But the heavy mist could prove the worst kind of foe since it was unpredictable.

"I will let nothing happen to you," Cree said, offering her more reassurance.

He had immediately gone to her when he spotted the mist and lifted her off her horse

to settle her in front of him on his stallion. He would take no chance of her disappearing into the mist with no voice to call out to him. While she could make some sort of sound to alert him to her location, sound in the mist could be deceiving and she could be lost to him, alone and vulnerable.

“Once you are off this horse, you will not take a step away from me. You will keep your hand locked in mine. I will not lose you to this blasted mist,” he ordered, the thought of such a possibility irritating him.

Dawn tapped his arm once. Once meant aye and two taps meant nay, a gesture they had decided upon shortly after they met. She pressed herself against him and gripped his waist tight, keeping a firm hold on him.

Her gesture alerted Cree to her concern. She realized just as he had the danger of her being separated from him in the mist. If necessary, she had enough sense to clap hard and continuously if they were separated, but would it be enough for him to locate her, and what if she couldn’t clap? What dangers would she face until he reached her?

“You hold on to me, Dawn, no matter what, you hold on to me. But if by chance this mist somehow separates us, then you are to clap and keep clapping as loud as you can until I reach you,” he ordered, even though he knew his wife was wise enough to know what to do in such a dangerous situation.

She nodded vigorously, having no intention of letting go of her husband.

The mist crawled ever closer like a foe stalking its prey, ready to devour it.

“Lord Cree,” Dylan said as he came up alongside him and held out the end of the rope.

“Is everyone secured firmly to one another and holding tightly to the rope?” Cree

asked, taking the rope from him.

“Aye, my lord.”

“Those boulders just up ahead,” Cree said, with a nod to a rock formation not far away. “We should reach it before the mist does. We will stop there and shelter.”

Dylan looked relieved and the others cheered when Cree called out the orders. Silence followed soon after as a heavier mist began to advance from behind them.

“Not long now!” Cree called out as they plodded along, keeping his eyes on the boulders ahead and the mist that seemed to race toward the formation. “Though the rope is fastened to you, make sure you keep hold of it,” he reminded with a strong shout. “We stay together. Do not allow yourselves to be separated.”

He kept his voice strong and commanding, his men needing his strength and confidence.

“Almost there,” Cree said to comfort his wife as she continued to cling tightly to him, but he could not blame her. If the mist grew any thicker, he would not be able to see her face.

He sighed with relief as they were about to reach the boulders when the mist rushed at them and devoured them so fast that he heard his men gasp.

“Halt!” he cried out, not able to see anything. He waited until he heard no more sounds of horses being brought to a stop. “We proceed slowly. We are but a short distance away from the boulders. Once there, we will remain tethered together and wait until this blasted fog leaves us. Then we make our way home posthaste.”

“Aye,” the men cheered.

Cree proceeded forward slowly. The chilled air was heavily scented with late autumn's decay and the crunch of fallen leaves beneath the horses' hooves was the only sound that let the riders know they were not alone... until a piercing howl broke the silence.

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“Wolves!” a warrior cried out.

“Keep close, do not let distance linger between you. We are not far!” Cree called out and felt his wife shiver as she did as he ordered, keeping herself pressed tightly against him.

Another lone howl sounded and was soon joined by a chorus of howls.

“A pack of wolves,” a warrior cried out and even the horses protested with snorts and pounding hooves.

Cree’s concern grew. Wolves could prove a serious problem, their keen sense of smell giving them an advantage. The wolves could be on them before they even realized they were there, giving themselves little chance to defend themselves. The boulders would offer at least some protection from where they could fight if necessary.

Cree felt his stallion hesitate, the howls spooking him, but he urged him gently forward and he soon felt the brush of a boulder at his foot.

“I have reached the boulders,” he called out. “Proceed carefully, and once we are all gathered here, we will keep a close formation until the heavy mist passes. Dylan, have the men call out as each one arrives here.”

“Aye, my lord,” Dyland cried out, sounding close.

Cree had never seen anything like this mist, heavy to the point of no visibility and

cumbersome as if wadding through thick muck, and it had raced with a strange force toward the boulders, reaching them before Cree did. It was as if the mist had made it clear it was in command. But Cree surrendered to no man, least of all a mist.

He carefully maneuvered his horse forward, leaving room for his men to enter and circle within the boulder formation.

“All is well, Dawn,” Cree said when he felt her tremble. “We will wait out the mist here and when done make our way home, arriving in two days’ time. And we will not be leaving there any time soon no matter who commands it.”

Dawn nodded vigorously against his chest so he could feel that she overwhelmingly agreed with him.

Cree listened for the crunch of the leaves beneath the horses’ hooves as they moved within the rock formation. It was good he had made them tether together and they would remain that way until the blasted mist faded away.

A strong wolf howl tore through the mist and was joined by vicious growls that sounded so close it frightened the horses, and fearful they protested ready to run.

Cree fought to keep command of his stallion as he yelled, “Hold your horses steady!”

His stallion pounded the ground and snorted agitated, and though Cree kept him from breaking into a run, he could not stop him from turning. Once he got him under control, he listened for his men.

Cree scrunched his brow when he heard Dylan order, “Call out!” He sounded at a distance instead of close. He listened as the men called out their names one by one and each shout sounded fainter than the next.

“Dylan!” Cree shouted.

“Lord Cree,” Dylan yelled out, “I can barely hear you.”

Cree realized then that the rope he had fastened around his wrist was gone and that he probably had lost it while fighting to keep control of his horse and in the process had inadvertently drifted away from his men.

Cree dug deep to make his voice as powerful as he could. “Dylan, keep calling out so I can find my way to you.”

He waited for a response and could only catch a few faint words. “Rope. Not attached. Lost.”

With wolves in the area, he could not take a chance and keep moving. Besides, it would not be wise when he was not familiar with the terrain. He would have to hunker down where he was with his wife and wait it out.

He felt her quiver against him and went to reassure her and warn her not to let go of him when a sudden wolf’s growl sounded so close that it spooked the horse, and he reared up on his hind legs with such power that Dawn went flying out of Cree’s arms and into the thick mist.

CHAPTER 2

Cree cursed the blasted horse. His heart pounded viciously, fearful Dawn could be lying helpless beneath its hooves, and he would trample her. His strength and commanding tone brought the animal quickly under control. He listened for his wife to clap as he had told her to do if they were separated in the fog.

He heard nothing and he called out, angry he had failed to keep hold of her, “Dawn!

Dawn!” He was met with nothing but silence, and his anger and fright grew. “Damn it, Dawn, answer me!” He swerved his head to the right thinking he heard something. “DAWN!”

A wolf cried out in a soulful howl as if commiserating with Cree, though more likely alerting his pack to a hunt.

What that meant had him rushing to dismount. He had to find his wife before the wolves did.

“DAWN! ANSWER ME RIGHT NOW!”

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A clap. Was that a clap?

“DAWN!” he called out again and listened.

She would answer him if she could. That meant she may have been injured in the fall and lay unconscious somewhere, making her easy prey for the wolves. If he kept calling out to her the wolves would hear and follow the sound. But what choice did he have? And why hadn't Dylan or any of his men heard him? Were they that far of a distance from them that none of them heard him call out?

He eased off his horse, keeping the animal calm with a soft voice, and holding tight to his reins. “We go slow to find her, my friend.”

Cree shuffled along the ground, keeping the horse behind him to follow in his tracks to avoid trampling his wife and praying he would bump into her.

“Dawn!” he called out, though not as loud as before and stopped when he thought he heard a sound, a movement. He listened, praying he would hear something, but again he was met with silence. He tried again. “Dawn!”

A sound! He was sure he heard a sound this time—a rustle of leaves.

If she had been hurt, she could be just regaining consciousness and was probably disoriented. His heart pounded against his chest with hope, yet fearful she could be hurt and unable to alert him to her whereabouts.

“Dawn!” he cried out more strongly, hoping his voice would break through her hazy

mind if she had been left disoriented. Another rustle? It was faint, so he called out again. “Dawn! Clap if you hear me.”

His worry grew when a soft clap sounded. She had to be seriously hurt, if she could not produce a strong clap.

“Keep clapping so I can find you, Dawn,” he called out, angry at himself for not stopping sooner and waiting out the heavy mist. But there would be time later to chastise himself for a foolish decision. Right now, he needed to find his wife.

He heard another clap and concentrated on where the sound came from, the mist making it difficult to determine the location. He shuffled along the ground slowly and when another clap did not follow, he called out to her again.

“Keep clapping, Dawn, I can find you if you keep clapping,” he encouraged.

The clap sounded again, no stronger than before, though not weaker either and he listened. He thought to turn, but something warned him against it and when the clap came again, he pressed ahead, sounding like it was somewhere in front of him.

Another clap sounded but this one was followed by a growl that sounded far too close to the clap and fear tightened his muscles. He would tear a wolf apart with his bare hands if one should dare touch his wife.

A weak clap sounded, and he feared Dawn might be losing consciousness again, and when a growl followed again, Cree hurried his steps forward.

“DAWN!” he shouted.

He barely heard the clap, and he felt a stab to his heart knowing his wife was fighting to reach out to him. Never again. Never again would he go anywhere without Beast.

The large dog would have found her by now, but then if he had secured the rope around her and him, he would never have lost her to the fog. It was his fault, and he cursed himself for his foolishness.

A strong growl echoed through the mist and Cree followed it, knowing the wolf was probably prowling near his wife. He pulled his dagger from the sheath at his belt, ready to take the beast down.

Suddenly, snarls and barks filled the air as if the wolves were fighting amongst themselves. Had one of the wolves laid claim to Dawn and the others objected? He had to reach her. He had to chase the wolves and keep them from not only Dawn but himself and his horse or neither of them would survive.

A nasty growl tore through the mist followed by several whimpering whines. Whoever the pack leader was, he was powerful and had made the others aware of it. But Cree was an alpha as well and like the wolf, he protected what belonged to him and Dawn belonged to him.

A soft clap sounded, and it was not far off. A few more steps at most and that was when he spotted the green eyes glowing through the mist. There had to be at least four pairs. That meant four wolves. It would be difficult to defend against four wolves but not impossible if he got to the pack leader first.

His stallion snorted and tugged at the reins, anxiously.

Cree calmed the horse with soothing yet firm commands while keeping hold of the reins and the animal reluctantly obeyed.

A steady growl drew Cree's eyes, and he knew he gazed upon the pack leader. The wolf stepped forward, emerging enough from the mist for Cree to see him. His mouth was drawn back, his fangs bared, and saliva dripped from them. He was all black and

large, like no wolf Cree had ever seen before, a majestic creature displaying his power and his fearlessness. He would not be an easy foe to fight, and with his pack with him, victory did not look promising, but defeat had never stopped Cree from entering a fray and victory was always his to claim.

The wolf kept a low growl and cast a quick glance down and that's when Cree saw that the animal stood right over Dawn's head.

"She's mine. She belongs to me. I love her and will fight to the death for her," Cree said, the wolf's intense green eyes so human, he thought the creature might understand him.

The wolf tossed his head up and howled and the other wolves began to back away. Then he looked once again at Cree, his fangs bared, and growled, then he slowly stepped back, disappearing into the thick mist.

Cree hurried to his wife's side while keeping a tight hold of his horse's reins and dropped down beside her, trying to determine what injuries she suffered, the fog making it difficult.

"I am here, Dawn. Wake up. You must wake up," he urged, anxious to get her on the horse and away from here, away from the wolves, in case the pack leader changed his mind.

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She stirred and lifted her hand slightly, though it fell to the side all too soon, the simple movement too much for her.

With a fall off the horse, it was plausible to assume that she struck her head. So, Cree felt around her head and when his hand connected with something wet, he knew without seeing that it was blood. Fear twisted his gut when he saw the blood that covered his hand.

“Dawn,” he said, when her stirring stilled and when she didn’t respond, his worry soared.

He wrapped the horse’s reins around his wrist to keep him tethered to him before he carefully lifted his wife and draped her gently over the saddle, then mounted behind her and carefully maneuvered her to rest in the crook of his arm. He had to find help, a place where she could rest safely. There had to be a croft or village nearby.

He cursed the mist and plunged into it. “You’ll not stop me!”

Cree continued slowly, avoiding any shadows in the mist and calling out to Dylan every now and again, hoping to find his warriors. He stopped once he realized he had probably drifted too far away from his men to be heard.

He tapped his wife’s cheek. “Stay with me, Dawn. Stay with me.”

He was relieved each time she stirred. It meant she heard him, and he was even more relieved when she tapped his arm once. But her wound needed tending and she needed a bed to rest in and he intended to find both.

The mist began to fade some to the point where he could make out the shadowy shapes of the trees, making travel a little less difficult, though he still had to remain cautious. He felt the slight rise in the terrain and slowed his horse, not knowing if that was all it was, a slight rise or if it was a hill that pitched deep once he reached the top. He proceeded extra cautiously and determined it was more than a slight rise when the ground evened out and, in the not far distance, he caught sight of the top of a turret that had broken through the mist.

“I found help, Dawn,” he said and slowly maneuvered his horse down the hill as cautiously as possible to prevent his wife from suffering any more discomfort or pain.

He kept the turret in sight to guide him as he navigated his horse through the threatening mist, the autumn leaves crunching beneath the animal’s hooves. Dusk was falling over the land. He didn’t have much time. He had to reach the castle before nightfall, or its safety could well be lost to him.

The village suddenly emerged like ghostly apparitions, its numerous structures rising from the mist as eerie silhouettes. He gazed about searching for signs of life, but it appeared deserted, and Cree wondered if the village had been abandoned and if so, why?

The air was heavy with a chilling stillness, broken only by the occasional hoot of an owl or the rustling of leaves as he continued apprehensively through the village.

Cree kept himself alert to all around him and the more he gazed about the more he thought that the mist appeared to cling to the structures, veiling the village in a strange aura.

His eyes caught sight of a flickering light, possibly a torch, at the far end of the village. The dim light filtered through the dense fog, creating a hazy, distorted view, and for a moment Cree wondered if the light waved him away in warning rather than

extended a welcome.

Cree led his horse slowly toward the light, his breath mingling with the mist, forming wisps of vapor that curled and dissipated into the air. His eyes strained, trying to pierce through the mirky veil, all his senses heightened by the strangeness that cloaked the village.

Dawn stirred in his arms.

“Almost there. Help is in reach,” he said, hoping his words would prove true and their situation would not worsen.

Night began to fall and if not for the flickering light, Cree would not know where he was headed. It drew closer and closer and just before he reached it, the distant howl of a lone wolf echoed through the mist.

He was glad to hear it in the distance. It meant they were safe here where they were, wherever that might be.

The light allowed him to partially see the few stairs that led to the door of the keep. He spoke calmly to his horse before he dismounted, letting him know he would tend to him as soon as he could. He would not tie his reins in case the wolves should come this way, he could run. Otherwise, the horse would remain where he was until Cree came for him.

He coiled his arm tightly around his wife and dismounted with her in his arms, adjusting her to rest comfortably against him once he was off the horse. Then he mounted the stairs and kicked at the front door with his booted foot.

He heard nothing, though he did not know the size of the keep. It could take a while for someone to answer. He kicked at the door again and again until finally it creaked

open.

“I need help,” Cree said, shoving the door open and entering without being invited in.

A petite, elderly woman, her gray hair coiled in a braid at the back of her head and her eyes wide, stared at him stunned.

Cree, forgetting how his size and commanding manner could easily frighten, hurried to ease the woman’s concerns. “I mean you no harm. My wife needs help. She fell off the horse and suffered a wound to the back of her head. She is in desperate need of a healer. Do you have one?”

“Aye,” the elderly woman said, “but she is at a croft seeing to a dying man. She will not be back until morning. I will show you to a room and bring you whatever you need to tend to your wife until the healer returns. Follow me.”

Cree let loose with several silent oaths, worried what such a delay would mean to his wife. Having no choice but to do as the woman said, he followed her.

She led him along a barely lit, narrow corridor to a closed door halfway down it and ordered him to wait, then she opened the door and entered the room.

His gut roiled with uncertainty. Was this place safe? Were they a friendly or fiendish lot? Again, he was reminded that he had no choice in the matter. He either remained here or returned to the uncertainty of the mist, and at least here Dawn was safe from the wolves.

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A lone wolf's howl sounded closer than before, and Cree was grateful for the stone walls that protected them. Humans he was used to battling, not wolves.

"Enter," the woman called out.

Cree hurried and entered and was surprised at the large size of the room. The woman had lit enough candles to cast a good light over the generous area, and she was setting a fire to burn in the hearth, which added more light as the logs burst into flames.

He hurried Dawn to the bed and saw that the woman had drawn back the blankets and placed a thick cloth on the pillow. He didn't think he mentioned his wife had suffered a head wound or perhaps she coated the pillow with a thick cloth for a different reason. He placed Dawn gently on the bed and removed her shoes. She wore no stockings. Even in the thick of winter she sometimes would forego her stockings, and yet her feet were often warm. He gave one foot a squeeze then the other surprised to find them cold and hurried the blanket over her to her waist.

"There is a bucket of water here you may use," she pointed to one by the hearth, "and some cloths on the chest." She pointed to a chest near the bucket. "I will bring you another bucket of water and more clean cloths. Is it a large wound or would honey help heal it?" the woman asked.

"Bring whatever you have and whatever you think may help a wound," he said.

The woman went to the door, Cree's firm voice stopping her.

"I am Lord Cree, and I am grateful for your generous help."

“I am Olwen. I oversee the keep,” she said with a bob of her head and hurried out the door.

She left so fast he had no time to ask her the clan that allowed him to shelter and care for his wife. It mattered not at the moment, only his wife mattered. He leaned over the bed ready to turn her to her side so he could examine her wound when her eyes fluttered, fighting to open.

Her hand barely made it to her head, and before it dropped from lack of strength, he caught it in his hand.

“Your head pains you?” he asked.

She tapped his hand once.

“I am going to look at it, clean the wound and bandage it if necessary. The clan’s healer will be here tomorrow, and she can let me know if more needs to be done. We took shelter at a keep. You are safe. I will let no harm come to you.”

Her smile was weak but that she smiled at all eased his worry a bit.

“Easy,” he said as he rolled her gently onto her side and he winced along with her, feeling her pain.

Blood smeared the cloth that covered the pillow, but, to his relief, no blood ran from the wound. He knew from far too many battles how a head wound could bleed a lot but not threaten life. Then there were those head wounds that would claim the wounded in their sleep. He would need to keep an eye on his wife throughout the night and keep death at bay. He would let no one take Dawn from him, no one... not even death.

“It is not a bad wound as far as wounds go,” Cree said to help ease her worry as well as his own. “I am going to ease you to rest comfortably on your side while I clean it.”

Dawn reached back with a bit more strength, searching for his hand.

He took hold of it. “All will be well. We are safe here.”

Cree got busy cleaning the wound as gently as he could, as well as trying to get the blood out of her hair. He kept talking as he tended to her to keep her at ease.

“I do not know how we got separated from my warriors so quickly. We were so close and then suddenly we were at a distance. The mist. Heavy mist can confuse. We should have no trouble finding them once the mist passes. The wound is small, though it did bleed a lot, and you have a good-sized lump which probably is the reason for your pain. Hopefully, the clan healer will have something to help you with that.”

He watched her body sigh in relief. Though she had no voice, his wife spoke to him in so many other ways; the movement of her body, the expression in her eyes, her gestures that had become like a second language to him. They all forged a voice more powerful than any she could speak, and he often told her that she talked too much, which always brought a smile to her face.

“You would do well to sleep on your side tonight. You do most times anyway since you sleep against me.”

He loved sleeping wrapped around her, loved exploring her beautiful body with his hands or his lips. Loved how eagerly she responded and how much joy and pleasure they shared making love.

He felt his shaft begin to stir and hurried to chase the suggestive thoughts away. Now

was not the time to dwell on such things, but it was difficult not to since thoughts of making love to his wife often entered his mind. He pushed the stirring thoughts away and just finished placing a clean cloth beneath her head when Olwen returned, a rap at the door sounding before she entered.

She carried a bucket and a sizeable sack and placed the bucket by the bed for Cree. She then got busy emptying the sack. Clean cloths came first, a crock of honey followed, and she pulled a smaller sack out. She removed the few items that she set on the table against the wall to the right of the bed.

“Meat, cheese, bread,” she said, unwrapping a cloth that held the food after placing it on the table. “I will fetch you some wine. It will help your wife sleep.”

Olwen left before Cree could stop her.

“She is fast for an elderly woman,” Cree said and slipped his hand under his wife to adjust her more comfortably in the bed. “Are you hungry, Dawn?”

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She tapped his hand twice.

“Maybe later,” he said, worried that she did not want to eat, not even a small bite of something since it had been sunrise when they had last eaten.

With a tender touch, he turned Dawn onto her side and placed a pillow behind her back to keep her rested there. Then he got the crock of honey and spread a generous amount on the wound to help heal and seal it.

“Once we return home, Elsa can see to you,” he said, wishing his healer was here now. He gathered the dirty cloths in a pile and left the wet ones in the bucket with the dirty water. He soaked a clean cloth in the fresh bucket of water, rinsed it and placed it over his wife’s brow. “Hopefully this will ease your pain some.”

He watched her body sigh for a second time, and it was only a short time later that his wife’s gentle breathing told him she was asleep.

Olwen returned as promised with wine and tankards.

“Did you leave your horse out in front of the keep?” Olwen asked.

“I did. Is he not safe there? Is there a place I can shelter him for the night?” Cree asked, his concern turning to his stallion.

“The wolves are active when the mist is heavy.”

“They come into the village?” he asked, surprised and alarmed at the prospect of such

danger to the clan.

“They have on occasion. There is a stable to the right of the keep when you are facing it. He will be safe there. I can take you to the front door now if you’d like and wait to escort you back here, so you do not get lost.”

Cree was good with direction and could easily find his way, but Olwen seemed anxious, and he was eager to get his horse to safety after learning that wolves might prowl the village.

He went to his wife and pulled the blanket up over her shoulders. He did not like leaving her here alone in a strange keep even for a short while, and he intended to hurry and finish the chore.

“Lead the way,” Cree said, keeping focused on his surroundings so he could better understand the layout of the keep and learn to maneuver it himself.

Once at the front door, Olwen opened it a sliver and mist rushed in as if waiting to gain entrance.

“Hurry and be done, my lord,” Olwen said anxiously and reached for a torch in a metal sconce attached to the stone wall. “It grows late, and the mist will thicken with the night.” She opened the door wide enough for him to step out and handed him the torch.

He had never heard that before, but she was more familiar with this part of the Highlands than he was.

He stepped out the door and stopped to ask, “What clan has been so generous to me and my wife?”

“Clan MacMadadh,” she said softly as she closed the door.

Cree stood there, a chill racing through him as he whispered, “MacMadadh, son of the wolf.”

CHAPTER 3

Night had fallen and the thick mist remained. Cree’s horse’s snorts led him to where he had left him and he ran a gentle hand down his side to calm him, then took hold of his reins. He kept tight to the side of the keep following the directions Olwen had given him, taking no chance of getting lost in the mist and leaving Dawn alone in the keep. He made his way slowly along the stone wall keeping alert for sounds, particularly the howl of a wolf.

When he reached the end of the wall, he peered as best as he could into the mist and caught sight of something looming large a few steps away. He kept his eyes on it as he made his way towards it, his horse following behind, his gait agitated.

Cree made it to the building and pushed open the wide door and once his horse was inside, he hurried and closed the door. He spotted a sconce attached to a wood post and made his way to it to set the torch’s handle in it.

“You will be safe here and you are not alone,” Cree said to his horse as he eyed the four stalls curiously. Two were occupied and two sat empty.

He walked his horse to the empty one nearest the door in case he had to leave hastily. He would be easier to reach and to be on his way with Dawn if a quick departure proved necessary. The thought that his wife was alone in an unfamiliar keep had him hurrying to see his horse settled comfortably and safely.

Cree heard it as he tended to his horse—a low growl. The other horses’ sudden

uneasiness told him they had heard it as well. It was a growling rumble, and it sounded like it was close to the stable.

He stilled and listened, but the horses remained agitated, snorting and stomping the ground with their hooves. He made no move to console them. It would be a worthless effort with wolves roaming nearby.

The door creaked as if someone or something pressed against it and this time the growl was distinct. A wolf prowled outside.

How had wolves entered the area? Where were the clan warriors and the torches that kept unwanted animals at bay?

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“MacMadadh meant son of the wolf,” Cree whispered. “Werewolves.”

Where the foolish thought came from, he couldn't say. It was utter nonsense to think such a thing could be true that humans could turn into wolves. But it was a tale that was repeatedly told in the Highlands as well as in foreign lands he had traveled to. He had even seen a man hung for believing to have turned into a wolf when the moon was full, even though no one had ever seen him transform into such a creature. He had learned that in the ensuing years after the hanging there had been no more wolf attacks. So, could it be true or merely a coincidence? Either way, he did not want to leave Dawn alone for long, though it also wouldn't be wise of him to leave the safety of the stable when growling was heard. He feared Dawn's fate if anything should happen to him, not so if he were home. There she would have friends to console her and would make sure she stayed safe.

“I need to get back to Dawn,” he said to the horse, though more to himself.

Once he finished tending to his horse, he stilled and listened again. The growling had ceased, and the horses had calmed down. That meant that the wolves weren't around the stable, but what about the keep?

He had no choice. He had to take a chance.

He slipped as quietly as possible from the stable, but his steps seemed to echo in the fog and the door to the stable sounded as if it creaked loudly in the night. Even crackles and spit could be heard from the flicking flames of the torch he carried.

Cree stopped briefly, thinking he heard a low growl and swung the torch around him,

in warning to any wolf that might be near, then he continued walking. He had taken several steps and stopped again. He should have reached the keep by now. Had he disoriented himself when swinging the torch and inadvertently gone in the wrong direction?

Stranger still, Olwen was right about the fog. It had thickened. He could not even see where he was walking. A few more steps and he found himself at a cottage, at least that was what he believed, having to feel his way around it.

When his hand felt the door, it creaked open, and Cree called out, “I am looking for the keep, can you set me in its direction?”

When no one answered, he pushed the door further open and saw a fire burning in the hearth. He called out again and when no one responded, he entered and jumped back, his heart slamming against his chest and his hand going to the hilt of his sword at his waist.

He shook his head when he realized the wolf’s eyes glaring at him and the sharp teeth appearing ready to attack was the head of a wolf resting on a bench. He stepped further into the small room and when he reached the center, he stood staring at the walls. Wolf pelts covered the walls.

“MacMadadh, son of the wolf,” he whispered, reminding himself once again.

Was the clan out hunting wolves tonight the reason the village appeared empty? Were women and children tucked away tightly in their homes while their husbands hunted? Or had he stumbled into a den of werewolves?

Cree shook his head at the insane thought, blaming it on the heavy fog and the prowling wolves. Whoever inhabited this place was a skilled wolf hunter. He turned to leave, anxious to get back to Dawn, when he heard a weak growl. He gazed around

and when he didn't spot anything he went to leave only to have his attention caught again by the sound of several, soft growls.

He thought he knew where it came from and stepped closer to the narrow bed in the corner and that's when he spotted the small paws peeking out from beneath the bed.

He set the torch he carried in a bracer on the wall and crouched down in front of the small paws, tossing the blanket back that hung down over the side of the bed, hiding the animal beneath.

A little wolf cub stared back at him growling, his teeth small but sharp, nonetheless.

"Are you all right, little wolf?" he asked, and the cub jumped at him as if ready to attack then cried out in pain and collapsed.

Cree wondered if the wolf he heard outside the stable was searching for the small cub and if the injured cub was drawn into the heat and safety of the shelter. He knew he should leave the cub alone and let his mum or da find him, but what if they didn't? What if the hunter returned and found him? But his decision to help the cub was made on only one thought... Dawn would never forgive him for not helping the helpless, little cub, wolf or not.

He grabbed a soft pelt from the bed and dropped it over the cub's head and snatched him up quickly, muffling his small but menacing snarls. It took some maneuvering, but he was finally able to see the cub had suffered a wound to his left front leg. The only thing he could think of using on the cub's minor wound was honey. Whether honey worked on wolves as it did on humans, he didn't know, but it was all he knew to do for the little fellow. With the cub tucked under his arm, and the pelt still covering his head to keep him from biting him, Cree looked around and found a small crock of honey. He sat on a bench and with more hasty maneuvering got the honey smeared heavily on the wound, though not without snarls from the cub.

When he finished, he placed the cub on the ground and snatched the pelt off him. The little cub rushed back beneath the safety of the bed, sticking his head out and snapping at Cree.

“That’s the appreciation I get for helping you?” Cree said with a snarl of his own and the cub turned silent.

Cree realized it wasn’t him who caused the cub’s sudden silence. It was the howl of a wolf in the distance that silenced the cub and had him returning the howl, louder than Cree expected. He took his leave without hesitation, thinking the cub’s response would surely bring a wolf and by sheer luck, he found his way back to the keep.

Cree pounded on the door. “Open up!”

“I feared you got lost,” Olwen said, her eyes round with worry after opening the door.

“I almost did,” Cree confessed and thought to tell her about the cub but stopped. It was better he kept the incident to himself, at least for now, though he would tell his wife.

“I will take you back to your wife. You can eat and rest and hopefully the heavy mist will be gone by morning,” she said and took the torch from him to return to the bracer.

Cree did not like hearing that the mist might continue to linger. He wanted to leave this strange place as soon as possible and get his wife home where his skilled healer, Elsa, could care for her.

“Does heavy mist usually last a day or more around here?” he asked.

“It has been known to last a week,” Olwen said.

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Cree liked hearing that even less. He would not be happy spending a week here. And what would the clan leader say about his unexpected guests? Would he welcome them, or would he find disfavor with them? He decided to find out what he could about the clan laird.

“Your clan laird may not welcome a lengthy stay from my wife and I.”

“Lord Tiernan is a good man but a man whose commands are obeyed without question and that includes any guests who stay here,” Olwen warned.

“Then he is much like myself, for I rule the same way,” Cree said, not one to bow to another’s command though honorable enough to respect another man’s command in his own home... within reason.

A lone howl penetrated the keep’s stone walls, silencing them both.

“That sounded close,” Cree said.

“That howl calls out to find a lost wolf,” Olwen said.

“You can distinguish the various howls?” Cree asked, surprised and curious.

Olwen nodded. “I have heard them since I was young. I know the different howls. They are beautiful in their own way and deadly in other ways.”

“Wolves are dangerous animals,” Cree said, pointing out the obvious.

Olwen voiced her own opinion. “They are no different than people. They protect their pack as humans protect their clan. They hunt together, making sure all in the pack are fed just as clans hunt and store food to keep their people fed, and when one of their own is in danger, they do whatever is necessary to save him or her just as clans do.”

“You speak as if wolves are more human than animal.”

“Their instincts are the same—protect what is theirs,” Olwen said, coming to a stop in front of the bedchamber where Dawn rested.

“OLWEN!”

The forceful shout echoed through the keep, causing Olwen to jump in fright, though not Cree. He braced himself, ready to defend himself and Dawn if necessary.

“Lord Tiernan has returned,” Olwen said anxiously.

“I should go meet him,” Cree said and hurried to peek into the bedchamber to make sure his wife was as he left her. She looked to be resting comfortably, a soothing rise and fall of breath to her body, and he shut the door, eager to meet the clan leader and judge for himself what type of man he was.

“Morning might be better for you to meet with Lord Tiernan,” Olwen suggested as if reluctant.

Cree had no intention of waiting until morning. “That would not be right of me to do, showing up here and spending the night without making myself known to him. Now lead the way.”

“OLWEN!”

“Lord Tiernan grows impatient, and I do not blame him. Now take me to him,” Cree ordered with a scowl that had Olwen hurrying to do as he commanded.

Cree thought she would take him to the Great Hall, but she led him down another narrow passageway and stopped in front of one of two doors.

“You will wait here while I speak with him,” she instructed and did not wait for a response. She entered the room.

Cree remained rooted to the spot where she left him, staying silent so he could hear anything that might be said. Unfortunately, he heard nothing. He feared meeting no man, though most men feared meeting him, his reputation often preceding him, and he did not mind that they did. It often gave him the advantage.

Olwen opened the door and stepped to the side. “Lord Tiernan will see you now.”

Cree entered the room and Olwen hurried out, shutting the door behind her. The room was not well lit. A large fire in the stone hearth provided most of the light but only to half of the room. The other half was immersed in darkness.

Cree went to the hearth, turning to stare into the darkness, the only place Lord Tiernan could be. If the man had evil intentions, Cree would be ready for him. If he remained silent, in an attempt to intimidate Cree, he was doomed to fail.

“The fog can be dangerous in these parts.”

Lord Tiernan continued to conceal himself but that did not bother Cree. “Which is why I am grateful for your generous hospitality in allowing my wife and I to shelter here, Lord Tiernan.”

“How could I deny the infamous Lord Cree?”

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“You have me at a disadvantage, Lord Tiernan. You have heard of me while I have not heard of you.”

“We are a small clan, known to a few trusted friends, and we tend to keep to ourselves.”

“I regret having to intrude on your privacy, but it could not be helped. My wife was injured and needs rest before she can travel again,” Cree said, making it clear that he had no intentions of going anywhere just yet, whether the man liked it or not.

“I would be remiss and unkind to turn someone away in a time of need. You are welcome in my home until your wife is well enough to travel. You have no warriors with you?”

“I do, two dozen skilled warriors, but the fog separated us, though not for lack of trying to remain together. I am sure once the fog recedes enough, they will search and find us and no doubt their efforts will lead them here,” Cree said, purposely letting the man know he had warriors who would search for them in case the man had any ill intent toward him.

“They would be wise to remain sheltered until the fog clears completely. The wolves love to hunt in the fog.”

“My men are superior warriors?—”

“No warrior is superior to a wolf when he hunts. He stalks like no other and attacks when least expected.”

Cree did not budge when Lord Tiernan suddenly emerged from the darkness, though for a moment, he thought the man's eyes glowed a bright green then realized it had been the fire's flames playing tricks. However, he was surprised by the man's stunning features. He had a bold handsomeness to him that could not easily be ignored. It caught the eye and kept you focused on him, almost mesmerized by his exceptional good looks. His black hair fell just past his broad shoulders, and he was tall, though not as tall as Cree, and his body was lean with muscle.

"Since you know of my reputation, than you are aware that my warriors are exceptional and can hold their own against any foe," Cree said.

A knock sounded at the door and Lord Tiernan called out, "Enter."

A young woman with pretty features and soft red hair entered and Cree could see she was clearly upset.

"We cannot find him," she said, looking close to tears.

"Worry not, Brigid, we will find Tade," Lord Tiernan assured her.

"A bairn is lost? I can help search for him," Cree offered.

"My clan will see to it," Lord Tiernan said, "but I thank you for the offer."

"How old is the bairn?" Cree asked.

"Four years," Brigid said, a tear slipping down her cheek.

"That is young to be alone out in the foggy night," Cree said and almost thought against telling them about his encounter with the wolf cub, but if the wolves hunted for one of their own that was lost it could very well bring the pack to the village.

“Olwen mentioned that the wolves hunt for a lost wolf. You should know that I came across a young wolf cub in your village when I got lost returning to the keep after sheltering my horse. He was injured and I managed to get some honey on the wound then he buried himself beneath the bed where he was hiding. His pack may come for him.”

“Where was this?” Brigid asked anxiously, her eyes wide with worry.

“A dwelling I found myself in when I seemed to get turned around after leaving the stable,” Cree said. “The place had wolf hides covering most of the walls. He must be a fine hunter to have gathered so many pelts.”

“Dolan’s dwelling,” Brigid said, “I will go alert him, my lord.” She turned to Cree, her eyes stirring with more worry. “Did the wolf cub bite you?”

“Nay. I threw a wolf pelt over his head while I tended to his wound, though that did not stop him from trying to bite me. He is a brave one.” Cree thought he caught the woman smile, but it was too brief to be sure.

The door swung open.

“We still cannot find him,” a man who looked similar to Lord Tiernan, though lacked his bold handsomeness, rushed in and stopped when he spotted Cree.

Brigid hurried to his side. “There is a wounded cub in the village. This man,” —she nodded at Cree— “came across him in Dolan’s dwelling and tended his wound. We should go make sure the cub is removed and placed where his pack can find him.”

“Go now,” Lord Tiernan ordered.

Cree caught the questioning look the man sent Lord Tiernan and the brief and almost

undetectable response. Something was going on here and unless it could harm him and Dawn, he wanted no part of it.

The man and woman left, and Cree was anxious to return to Dawn, so he was glad for what Lord Tiernan said next.

“It is late, and I must join the hunt for the little lad. I will speak with you tomorrow.”

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It was something Cree would have said himself, though more forcefully, leaving no doubt at all that the person should take his leave.

“Again, I am grateful to you for allowing us to remain here, and I wish you luck in finding the bairn,” Cree said and walked to the door.

“I have no doubt we will find him,” Lord Tiernan said confidently.

Cree thought the same but said nothing, he simply nodded and left the room. It didn’t surprise him to see Olwen standing outside the door.

“I will take you to your bedchamber,” she said and hurried off, leaving him to follow.

Silence lingered between them until they reached the door, and Olwen said, “I will see that the healer looks in on your wife as soon as she returns.”

“I appreciate that, Olwen, and thank you for all you have done for me and my wife tonight.”

Olwen nodded and turned, hurrying off.

Cree entered the room and went to sit down on the bed beside his wife. She continued to lay on her side, to avoid disturbing the wound on the back of her head. He ran his hand gently beneath her sleeve and along her arm resting over the blanket. He loved touching his wife’s soft skin, the intimate gesture always stirring his passion, a passion that had not dimmed since they had first met years ago. He had known he would wed, but never had he expected to love his wife with such fiery passion.

Nothing would stop him from keeping her safe. Nothing. Not even wolves. He was pleased to see her eyes flutter open to look at him.

“How does your head feel?” he asked, and she cringed. He understood and voiced what she felt. “It hurts.”

She tapped his arm once.

“Rest and heal,” he said gently and stroked her arm once again. “From what I can surmise so far, we are safe here.” He wanted to tell her about what had happened since their arrival and get her thoughts on it. But it would have to wait until she was more rested and feeling better.

Her eyes drifted closed, and Cree leaned down and brushed his lips over her warm cheek in a soft kiss. His brow creased after kissing her and he sniffed along his wife’s face and her hair. A scent lingered on her, and he sniffed closer, glad she had fallen asleep.

The scent was a bit familiar to him, but where he had smelled it before he couldn’t recall. He sniffed a bit more then left the bed to fill a tankard with ale. He stopped and turned to glance at his wife. It came to him then, why the scent was familiar. Only this similar one was more potent... it was the scent on Beast when his fur got damp.

An animal had been in the room during his absence.

CHAPTER 4

Dawn loved waking in the morning cuddled against her husband. Only this morning an irritating pain disturbed that blissfulness. She intended to focus on her husband rather than the pain. She found comfort in his strong arms and the way he would

squeeze her gently, in his sleep, as if reassuring himself that she was there. She enjoyed hearing his soft snores and hearing his heart thump against his chest when she laid her head upon it. It reaffirmed life ran strong through him. She could not imagine life without him, could not imagine waking without him beside her in the morning or not slipping into bed together at night. They had a bond that could never be broken, not in this life or beyond.

She breathed in deep, his scent as potent and seductive as ever, which was why they often began the day making love. She took another strong breath and scrunched her brow. There was a scent to him, familiar, but not to him. How had it gotten on him? Or was the scent coming from her?

Damp dog hair.

Wolves!

Her eyes shot open recalling where she was and what had happened yesterday, but it was her memory of last night that had disturbed her the most. She glanced up at her husband and was relieved to see he was awake.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

She cringed then held two fingers close together.

“It hurts but only a little,” he said, pleased her pain had subsided.

She nodded gently.

“The healer should return to the village today. If she says you are well enough to travel and the fog has cleared, we will take our leave and go find my men,” he said, anxious to do just that. Clan MacMadadh left him with an uneasy feeling, and he did

not want to linger here.

She appeared as anxious as he was to leave here, nodding and frowning in response.

With Dawn not having a voice and unable to communicate as easily as most did, Cree had learned to pay heed to her movements, gestures, and her eyes. He had realized she spoke through all three and had come to understand that language as if she spoke it aloud.

“Something troubles you. I can see it in your eyes, and you twitched much in your sleep last night. Did you have troubling dreams?”

She nodded slowly, then switched to a shrug.

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“You’re not sure?” Cree asked, concerned.

She shut her eyes tightly as if in deep sleep and cringed, then she opened them wide and looked around.

Cree understood her without a problem. “You are not sure if you were dreaming or if what you saw was real?”

She nodded and purposely sniffed.

“A scent?”

She nodded again.

“I caught a scent in here last night after returning from meeting the clan laird. It reminded me of Beast after getting caught in the rain... wet dog hair.”

Dawn’s eyes widened and she nodded.

He lowered his voice as if concerned about being overheard. “This is a strange place, Dawn.”

A sudden ripple of fear ran through her, and she snuggled closer to him and tapped his lips for him to tell her.

“We are at Clan MacMadadh.”

Her eyes rounded.

“You know it means clan of the wolf?”

She nodded and gestured, waving her hand repeatedly backward.

“Aye, you are right. Clan MacMadadh is an extremely old clan dating back to the early days of this land. I was surprised to hear the name since the clan was thought to have died out long ago, yet here it sits.” He went on to tell her about the wounded wolf cub he had come across and helped and then he told her about meeting Lord Tiernan.

“He says we are welcome and has been generous with his hospitality, yet I cannot help but feel this place harbors a secret. One I care not to know.”

Dawn tapped his chest then hers, then looked to the closed door as she quickly walked her fingers toward it.

“Are you saying we should leave?”

Dawn nodded hastily and it brought a cringe to her face.

“You need more rest, more healing time, and the persistent heavy fog prevents us from leaving,” he said, though felt the same unease as his wife.

Dawn held up one finger.

“One day may not be enough rest for you and there is still the problem of the fog,” he argued gently, clearly seeing she was upset.

Dawn pressed her finger against his nose with such strength that it almost flattened it.

“Are you being adamant about remaining here only one more day?”

She tapped his nose once instead of nodding.

“If the fog lifts in a day, we will take our leave and travel slowly and find my warriors,” he said to appease her and himself.

Dawn smiled and snuggled comfortably in his arms.

Cree kept his arm tight around her. The situation was a conundrum for him. It would not do his wife well if he left here before it was wise for her to travel, yet with his uneasy feeling about this place, he felt a need to take his leave as soon as possible. At least with daylight he could get a better feeling for the clan and perhaps alleviate some of his concerns.

“Olwen, the woman we met upon arrival, says she will send the healer to see you as soon as she returns to the village.”

The unease Dawn felt made her wonder if she would trust the local healer, but she supposed it would be wise to meet the woman and judge for herself. Besides, her husband would insist upon it since it was easy to see he was worried about her, and she did not want to give him more reason to worry.

A knock at the door had Cree getting out of bed.

Dawn understood her husband well. He left her side quickly to be ready to protect her if necessary. She smiled softly, her unease beginning to fade, knowing how capable her husband was of protecting her.

“Enter,” Cree called out.

Olwen entered. “I brought a bucket of water and clean cloths if you would like to freshen yourselves before the morning meal. Lord Tiernan is looking forward to talking with you again and meeting your wife, if she feels up to it. Otherwise, I can have food brought here for Lady Dawn.”

Cree understood it was a summons for him to join Tiernan and he had every intention of doing so, wanting to learn more about his host, as for Dawn.

He turned to her. “Do you feel up to getting out of bed and joining me?”

Dawn nodded her head slowly. There was no way she would remain sequestered in this room all day. She intended to see for certain that the fog persisted and to meet Lord Tiernan to judge the man for herself.

“I will return for you shortly to escort you to the Great Hall,” Olwen said and turned to leave.

“Did they find the young bairn? Tade, I believe they called him,” Cree called out.

Olwen swerved around a bit startled at his question and responded quickly, “Aye, my lord, they did.”

“Was he unharmed?”

“A minor wound, my lord,” Olwen said and hastily left the room.

Cree helped ease his wife out of bed and helped her to freshen her face with a splash of water before he saw to himself. He also examined the wound on her head.

“I believe the swelling has gone down,” he said and was pleased to see her smile.

He watched as she ran a comb that was left for her use through her hair, having offered to help her with it. She refused, naturally, since she could be stubborn at times, doing things for herself since those who did not know her believed that her lack of a voice also left her mind lacking. She continued to prove quite the opposite, having a sharper mind than those who had voices.

He detailed the events of last night to her as he admired the way her long, straight auburn hair began to shine with each stroke of the comb as did her beauty. While some thought her plain featured, he thought them blind since to him she was beautiful.

Dawn heard the concern in his voice as he spoke, telling her of the wolf that passed nearby where he sheltered his horse, the tenacious wolf cub he helped, and of his meeting with Lord Tiernan and a woman named Bridgid. She had missed much and was annoyed that she did. She had much to discover for herself.

After she finished combing her hair, she went to him, rested her hand to his cheek and kissed him gently. Then she pointed to his eyes and turned a seductive smile on him.

He chuckled as his arm coiled around her waist. “It isn’t that my eyes betray how

much I want you, it is that you know I always want you.”

She laughed as well, though no sound was heard.

“But you need to heal and since this place makes me uneasy, intimacy will have to wait.”

Dawn pouted playfully.

“Do not tempt me, wife,” he scolded teasingly.

She smiled and they kissed, needing a touch of intimacy.

A knock at the door eased them apart.

“If I must leave your side at any time, you will either accompany me or stay put where I leave you,” he ordered.

Dawn gave a brief nod, and they walked to the door together.

Olwen led them to the Great Hall where Lord Tiernan stood in front of the dais.

Cree was impressed with the sizeable room and how well it was kept. Some Great Halls had onerous odors and lacked cleanliness, not so this room. The floor was clean of debris, tables were wiped clean, and a hint of pine could be detected amongst the delicious scents of the morning meal from the fresh pine branches that had been placed around the room. After hearing his wife’s stomach rumble upon making their way here, he was glad that such pleasant and inviting scents greeted them.

“Lady Dawn, it is a pleasure to meet you,” Lord Tiernan said with a respectful bob of his head. “Tales of Lord Cree’s lovely wife does reach this far north.”

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Dawn smiled and bobbed her head as well.

Cree was pleased with the way Lord Tiernan greeted Dawn, acknowledging without saying that he knew she had no voice, leaving for no awkward moments.

“I hope you are feeling much better, Lady Dawn, and that you both slept well,” Lord Tiernan said.

“We sleep well thanks to your generous hospitality,” Cree said, “and I am eager for your healer to see Dawn and advise us on what would be best for her.”

“Our healer, Lynall, should return soon and will be only too glad to help in any way she can,” Lord Tiernan assured Cree and turned, extending his arm toward the dais. “The meal awaits us.”

Cree seated his wife before taking a seat next to Lord Tiernan and asked what was most on his mind. “Has the fog dissipated?”

“I fear not. It continues to linger this time of the year. It could be two or three days before you are able to travel safely, especially with the wolves on the hunt.”

“It must be difficult to live in an area so infested with wolves,” Cree said.

“The clan has come to understand them enough for us to reside in some form of compatibility. We do not bother them, and they do not bother us.”

“Yet they prowl your village. Doesn’t that disturb your people?” Cree asked, trying to

make sense of the relationship Clan MacMadadh had with the wolves while trying not to visit the thought of werewolves.

“Knowledge of the wolves is essential to survival and Clan MacMadadh has gained such knowledge through the years and is able to live without fear of them.”

“A wise approach to the problem,” Cree said with a nod. “I am relieved to hear that the missing bairn was found.”

Lord Tiernan smiled. “Tade can be handful, having a mind of his own for one so young.”

Dawn appeared to pay attention to the conversation while she was actually watching Lord Tiernan. Having lacked a voice since birth, she learned at an early age that a person revealed much about themselves through how they spoke with others, their gestures, and their facial expressions. Most people, particularly women, would not see past Lord Tiernan’s handsome features, not so Dawn. She saw that he was a cautious man, careful of what he said, what he revealed, which meant he was careful what he said around strangers, or he harbored secrets that he made sure to keep hidden. It was easy to see he was a confident man, not easily intimidated, even by her husband, not easy to do with the size of her husband and a reputation that many feared. One thing that appeased her worry some was that she did not think him an evil man. Evil was difficult to hide. It showed itself in little things and she saw none of those things in Lord Tiernan. Still, there was something about him that was strange, and she could not make sense of it.

“I have one of those willful ones myself, my daughter Lizbeth,” Cree said with a smile, thinking of his daughter who was forever determined to have her way.

Talk continued of family, Lord Tiernan making certain to include Dawn in the conversation as they ate.

“I would advise you to remain in the keep until this fog lifts at least enough for you to see where you walk,” Lord Tiernan cautioned as the meal was coming to an end.

“I will not leave my horse untended, nor leave his care to another, especially in a place unfamiliar to him,” Cree said.

That her husband left no room to be denied spoke of his commanding nature and strength and she saw that Lord Tiernan had no intention of arguing with him.

“I will have someone take you to the stable after we finish here, so you do not get lost in the fog again.”

“I appreciate that,” Cree said.

Talk continued for a short while until Lord Tiernan offered, “I can have you escorted to the stable now, if you’d like.”

“Now would be good,” Cree said. “My wife can wait here for me.”

Dawn knew that was an order and she acknowledged her husband with a smile.

“You might be more comfortable by the fire, Lady Dawn,” Lord Tiernan offered. “There is a chill in the air today that warns winter might not wait for autumn to finish.”

Dawn smiled and nodded in agreement with him and took her husband’s arm after he assisted her to stand and escorted her to a table close to the hearth.

“I won’t be long,” Cree said, depositing a kiss on his wife’s cheek, then followed alongside Lord Tiernan out of the room.

“Is there anything else I can get you, my lady?” Olwen asked.

Dawn smiled pleasantly as she shook her head.

“Our healer should return soon.”

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Dawn brightened her smile and nodded, wishing to gesture yet knowing her gestures might not be understood.

“If there is anything you need, please let me know,” Olwen said and with that she left the room.

“Olwen will provide you with anything you need during your stay here.”

Dawn was startled by Lord Tiernan’s sudden presence. She had not heard him return. She nodded her thanks and expected him to take his leave.

“Do you mind if I join you?”

She maintained her smile as she pointed to the bench opposite her.

Lord Tiernan sat. “I believe you would find the wolves in the area interesting.”

Dawn raised her brow and shrugged, hoping he understood that she asked why.

Lord Tiernan smiled. “For that very reason... your gestures and expressions. Wolves mostly communicate through their howls, but they also communicate through gestures and expressions. Baring their teeth, ears straight up, and a wrinkled forehead warns, nuzzling shows affection, a head held high shows dominance, and the position of their tails tells much. A tail not held high or tucked between the legs but somewhere in between is a threatening expression.”

Dawn creased her brow, then tapped it, and pointed to Lord Tiernan.

“You wonder how I know this,” he said.

Dawn nodded, realizing he was more observant than most.

“As I said before, knowledge of wolves is essential to surviving with them. When you live as closely with wolves as my clan does, we had no choice but to learn all we could about them. I have also come to respect the wolves. They protect their packs as we protect our clans. They mourn the loss of pack members as we mourn the loss of clan members. They rear their young to survive just as we do. We are similar in many ways even when it comes to mates. The female is well-loved and protected and she in turn gives the same to the male. They work in unison much like you and Lord Cree... from what I have heard about you and your husband. He is a lucky man to have such a wise and courageous wife.”

Dawn smiled and patted her chest just above her left breast.

Lord Tiernan smiled graciously. “Your gesture tells me that you love your husband very much.”

She nodded firmly, and the strong movement sent a shot of pain through her head, though she did not cringe. She would not show weakness in front of this man. Instead, she patted her chest again and pointed to him.

“You ask me if I love someone?”

Dawn nodded, this time slowly.

“I have not been as fortunate as Lord Cree to find such a powerful love, though I am sure I will one day.”

Dawn smiled softly and nodded just as softly. Lord Tiernan seemed nice enough, a

mannerly man, though his intense eyes unsettled her. She felt as though he was trying to see inside her, gain a closeness that was for her husband alone and it caused her to shiver.

“You are chilled,” Lord Tiernan said and went and grabbed a cloak hanging on one of the many pegs by the door and stepped behind her to drape it over her shoulders.

He tucked it around her and gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze when he was done and, strange as it seemed, she could have sworn he sniffed her hair when he leaned a bit closer to tuck the cloak around her. She was relieved when he stepped from behind her and around the table to face her. “Please consider this your home while here. I enjoyed our chat, and I hope to talk more with you. Until later.” He bobbed his head and left.

Dawn shivered again. There was something about the man that unnerved her. She could not quite figure out what, but she intended to keep a keen eye on him and her surroundings.

Dawn sniffed, a familiar scent teasing her nostrils. She sniffed again, the scent a bit stronger. She turned her head and sniffed her shoulder. The scent was stronger there. It reminded her of Beast’s scent when she would hug him tightly and bury her face in his fur to let him know how much she loved him. Why would an animal scent be on the cloak instead of a humanscent? And why had Lord Tiernan spoken about the wolves in such detail? It was as if he was preparing her for an encounter with them.

She shivered again and quickly slipped the cloak off her, placing it at the end of the bench. She did not know what was going on here and she did not know if she wanted to find out. She wanted the fog to lift and Cree and her to take their leave. She rubbed her head, a low pain lingering there, reminding her of her wound. She was not her usual self because of it, and that left her feeling vulnerable, not as strong as she usually felt, and at that moment she wished Cree was there with her.

CHAPTER 5

Cree wasn't surprised when the man who resembled Lord Tiernan was introduced as his brother, Sim or that Lord Tiernan had his brother escort him to the stable. It told Cree that more than an eye was being kept on him. But why? He posed no threat to the clan. Or did he?

The fog had dissipated a little or it could have been that it was daylight that made it appear so. He could at least make out shapes and the sound of people talking which meant the clan members managed to see to daily chores even in the fog.

"I am glad Tade was found," Cree said, taking the opportunity to learn what he could.

"Aye, it is not the first time he has gone missing and probably won't be the last." Sim smiled. "Only four years, and he has a distinct mind of his own and an adventurous soul."

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“I have one like that, but she’s a lass,” Cree said, thinking of his daughter Lizbeth.

Sim chuckled. “Much luck with her.”

Cree laughed. “I need more prayer than luck. Did you find the wounded wolf cub?”

The smile that had lingered on Sim’s face after his laughter faded, vanished.

“Nay, we found no signs of him.”

“I thought I heard a wolf prowling outside the stable last night while settling my horse. Perhaps he came across the cub and returned him to the pack,” Cree suggested, to see if the man might agree with him.

“That is a possibility. The wolves have been known to prowl the village when the fog is dense.”

“It must be difficult to live with the constant threat of the wolves,” Cree said and waited to learn if his thought resembled Lord Tiernan’s, and it did.

“We don’t bother them, and they don’t bother us. Besides, wolves have no interest in humans. They mostly keep to themselves.”

“A good thing to know,” Cree said, wondering over the brothers’ shared belief. There didn’t seem to be a reasonable explanation as to why a wolf cub was hiding under the bed of one of the dwellings or why a wolf prowled outside the stable last night. He had a feeling that Clan MacMadadh harbored many secrets.

Cree's horse was doing well and was being well cared for and he thanked Sim for that. He would normally want to explore more of a village unfamiliar to him, not that the fog would let him see much, but at least he could get a sense of his surroundings. Presently, he did not even know the way out of the village, the fog consuming all paths. The thought made him want to return to Dawn, feeling uneasy about leaving her alone in unfamiliar surroundings, especially with her wound robbing her of her full strength.

"I am sure you are eager to return to your wife," Sim said.

Had his eagerness shown on his face or was Sim eager to return him to the keep?

"Sim," a woman called out as she began to emerge from the fog. "Tade is doing well, a minor wound and it was wise of you to coat it with honey. Oh—" The woman stopped abruptly when she stepped out of the fog and spotted Cree. She appeared surprised and a bit confused.

"Lynall, this is Lord Cree. Brigid must have told you about him and his wife, Lady Dawn, who requires your healing touch," Sim said and turned to Cree. "This is Lynall, our healer and a skilled one at that."

Lynall bobbed her head. "I am pleased to meet you, my lord."

"And I you, Lynall, though more anxious for you to tend to my wife," Cree said, thinking the woman was too young to be an experienced healer. She had pretty features, green eyes, and long dark hair that did not want to remain piled on her head, strands falling where they pleased.

"Aye, I was headed to the keep to see Lady Dawn, having been advised of her arrival and need of a healer, when I saw Sim."

“You must have exceptional eyesight to be sure it was him through such a heavy fog,” Cree said, finding Clan MacMadadh stranger the more he learned about it.

“When you live with as much fog as we do, you learn to make out familiar shapes and shadows,” Sim said.

Sim may have thought the explanation viable but not Cree, it made him more suspicious of this odd place and even more eager to leave it.

“Come, Lord Cree,” Lynall said, “and let me see how I can help your wife.”

Cree saw the relief on his wife’s face as soon as he entered the Great Hall, and he silently admonished himself for leaving her alone too long in an unfamiliar place. He never thought of her as different, having no voice, since to him she spoke loudly with her gestures, her expressions, and her touches. But here no one knew her, no one would hear her, and he worried it would leave her feeling vulnerable. Then there was her head wound that didn’t help any, robbing her of her usual confident self.

His suspicions were confirmed when he hurried to her, and she stood anxious to greet him only to wobble on her feet.

He rushed his arm around her, and she fell against him. “You’re dizzy, aren’t you?”

She nodded.

“You stood much too fast after suffering a head wound, feeling dizzy would be expected,” Lynall said with a pleasant smile. “May I have a look at the wound?”

Dawn nodded and Cree helped her to sit. It disturbed him when his wife grabbed his hand and wouldn’t let go. She was letting him know he was to stay there beside her. Dawn was a strong, fearless woman having survived many ordeals and made even

stronger by each one. It bothered him to see her appear frightened. He squeezed her hand, assuring her that he wasn't going anywhere.

“The bump isn't too bad, and the wound is not deep and looks to be healing nicely. I have a salve that will help with the healing. It is good the fog prevents you from leaving since you need rest and traveling by horse or walking would not serve you well.”

“You are welcome to stay here as long as necessary for Lady Dawn to heal.”

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Cree turned, annoyed that he had not heard Lord Tiernan enter the room. He was usually alert to all sounds around him, but then his only thought was for his wife and her well-being.

“I truly appreciate your generous hospitality,” Cree said.

“I would do nothing less for a man as well respected as you are, Lord Cree. Olwen, move Lord Cree and Lady Dawn to a more comfortable bedchamber and see that Lady Dawn is provided with a hot brew.”

“Aye, my lord,” Olwen said.

“Go with Olwen, and Lynall will bring you the salve you need,” Lord Tiernan said, his eyes steady on Cree.

“Again, my appreciation for your generous hospitality, Lord Tiernan. I am in your debt,” Cree said, and with a firm arm around Dawn, he followed Olwen out of the room.

Cree made sure to recall the way to the room from the Great Hall. He kept his arm around his wife when they entered their new bedchamber, a fire heating the large room, and the blankets pulled back on the sizeable bed, ready for Dawn to have a rest. But she leaned her body against him, preventing him from going anywhere and he took it as a sign that she didn’t want to rest just yet. So, he kept hold of her as Olwen pointed out jugs of wine and ale, logs to keep the fire burning and extra blankets stored in the chest at the foot of the bed since the nights got cold this far up in the Highlands this time of the year.

“What’s wrong?” Cree asked as soon as the door closed behind Olwen. He was suspicious as to why the housekeeper had talked continually until the hot brew arrived, leaving no room for conversation, and then she made a hasty exit.

Dawn shrugged and gestured.

“You don’t know, yet you are sure something is not right here,” Cree said to make sure he understood her correctly, and she nodded. “I feel the same, though I cannot say why.”

She laid her head on her husband’s chest, though she was unable to stop worrying. That she didn’t upset her since she always found solace in Cree’s strong arms. His embrace never failed to comfort, protect, reassure, and she needed all of that right now. Her wound had waned more of her strength than she cared to admit not only to herself but especially to her husband.

“It may sound strange, but I get the feeling that wolves rule here more than humans,” Cree said, skeptical of his own thought.

Dawn bobbed her head rapidly then cringed.

“You cannot bob your head like that, it does your wound no good,” Cree scolded, hating to see her in pain.

Dawn sighed, frustrated, and gestured as she stepped away from him.

“I want to go home as well, but your wound and the fog prohibit our departure.” He could not help but say, “I have rarely seen you this agitated.”

Dawn gestured again.

“You are uneasy here.”

She nodded and continued to gesture.

“Secrets? You think secrets lurk here?”

She gestured again.

“Dangerous secrets,” Cree said to confirm what his wife meant.

Dawn nodded slowly and drifted back into her husband’s arms.

Cree hugged her close. “I will let nothing happen to you.”

Dawn turned worried eyes on him and tapped his chest.

“Worry not about me,” he said, and she raised her brow. “All right, so we both worry about each other, but there is not much we can do about it right now. We are stuck here for two, possibly three days.”

Dawn held up two fingers.

Cree saw the stubbornness in her eyes. She would stay no more than two days, but if the fog didn’t cooperate, they would have no choice but to remain there. He didn’t argue with her. The only thing he could do was take one day at a time and get them out of there as soon as it proved possible.

Dawn fell asleep shortly after finishing the hot brew and he worried that the healer had put something in the drink to have her sleep. He wasn’t sure if he was pleased with that or not. Though he knew Dawn wouldn’t be. But perhaps the healer thought it best that she rested.

Cree pulled the blanket up to cover her shoulders and left the room to explore the keep and see what he could find. He did not know how long she would sleep, but he was sure about one thing, he did not want her to wake and find herself alone. So, he would hurry and make himself familiar with the keep then return to Dawn.

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The keep was quiet, barely a sound stirring, a far different atmosphere from his keep. Talk and laughter were usually heard as well as his children running, laughing, and shouting throughout the keep or Beast's huge bark was heard when he chased after them in delightful play. His keep was full of joy. There was no joy in this keep.

He explored the two floors above the bedchamber where he and Dawn had been moved to. Torches with dwindling flames sat in wall sconces and cast barely sufficient light along the winding staircase. He measured his steps carefully, not sure what each turn would bring. He yanked one of the torches out of the bracer to light the way as he explored. There were two bedchambers and a lady's solar that obviously had not been used in some time since numerous cobwebs and a plethora of dust now occupied both.

He stopped when he heard something overhead. Were those footfalls he heard? Was Lord Tiernan's quarters overhead? But why would quarters that hadn't shown use in years be beneath his? Usually, a lord of a clan had quarters on the first floor above the main floor. It granted him easier access to whatever was going on below and provided a faster route to make an escape if necessary.

Cree heard the noise again and listened. It wasn't footfalls he heard, and he listened more closely. What was the sound he heard? It came to him. It sounded like Beast's nails when he failed to keep them trimmed and they could be heard scratching along the wood floors. But he had seen no signs of a dog's presence in the keep, so where did the sound come from, or was he wrong about the sound?

He considered going and investigating, but he was a guest here and it would be improper to be caught exploring the keep without Lord Tiernan's permission. And the

sound was made by either man or beast, and it would not be wise to get caught by either.

Cree made his way below to the Great Hall, which was empty. He found a closed door behind a drapery that led along a corridor and at the end of it, he found himself facing a locked door. He was looking for exits besides the usual main entrance and exit. There was probably an exit through the kitchen, though he hadn't found a corridor that connected the keep to it. A corridor kept the kitchen a safe distance from the keep, preventing any potential fires from reaching the keep. Although some keeps kept the kitchen completely separate with no attachment at all. He found that unlikely with the problem of wolves in the area.

"Can I help you, sir?" Olwen asked. "You appear lost."

Cree hadn't heard the woman approach him and not only that, but he also wondered where she had suddenly come from since he stood in a narrow corridor with no other doorway than the one at the end.

"I was looking for the kitchen to get myself a brew."

"I can have that brought to you," Olwen said. "Would you like it brought to the Great Hall or your bedchamber?"

"Point me to the kitchen and I will fetch it myself," Cree said, so he could discover the entrance to the kitchen and another exit in case it was necessary.

"It is my task to serve, sir," Olwen insisted. "Now where shall I bring it."

Cree could have demanded, confident he would get his way, but not sure it was the wise thing to do, so he said, "The bedchamber."

“Very well, sir. It will be there shortly,” Olwen said. “Can you find your way back, sir?”

Cree knew a dismissal when he heard one. He was to return to his room. He wondered if she didn’t like him roaming the keep. Or perhaps Lord Tiernan had left orders that he was not permitted to do so. If so, why? What could they be hiding? Though considering it, he would not want a guest roaming his home without permission.

He hurried back to Dawn to find her pacing the floor, annoyed with himself for lingering too long and not being there when she woke. She frantically gestured to him.

“Slow down,” he said, taking hold of her hands and pressing them against his chest and holding them there. “It is obvious you are upset that I left you. I planned to return before you woke, but you woke sooner than I expected. I wanted to find areas that would allow us to make a hasty departure, if necessary, not that I worry we will need to do so, but you know how I prefer to be prepared.” She nodded, accepting his explanation without question or worry and that bothered him. “Something disturbs you.”

Dawn nodded, closing her eyes briefly and eased her hands out of his to tap her brow.

“You had a dream?”

She shook her head.

“A nightmare?” he asked, his annoyance with himself growing for failing to be there for her.

She nodded and snarled soundlessly, baring her teeth.

“About wolves?”

She nodded again, looked down, and with her finger created an imaginary circle around them.

“Wolves surrounded us?”

She nodded and clenched her fingers.

“We were trapped?” he asked.

She nodded again and her gesture that followed was clear to him.

“We couldn’t escape,” he said and spotted a hint of terror in her eyes.

Again, she nodded and shivered, rubbing her arms.

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Cree stepped behind her and eased her back against him to share his heat and rub her arms to chase away her chill along with her fear.

A knock sounded at the door, causing Dawn to jump.

“I requested a hot brew,” Cree said, hugging her against him. “I will tell you about my fairly quick search of the keep once we are alone again,” and he called out in a commanding tone, “Enter!”

“Enough for you both,” Olwen said after entering and sat a jug and tankards on a small table. “I fear with the fog there is little for you to do while you are here. Feel free to sit in the Great Hall if you grow tired of this bedchamber. Though Lynall did advise rest for you, Lady Dawn, so you will be ready to take your leave when the fog lifts.”

Dawn smiled pleasantly and nodded.

“Ask and I will do my best to get you whatever you need,” Olwen said and with a bob of her head, left the room.

Dawn stepped out of her husband’s arms and pointed to the brew and shook her head. She then pressed her hands together as if in prayer and held them against her cheek and closed her eyes.

“You think the previous brew put you to sleep?”

Dawn nodded.

“The healer did say you needed rest,” Cree said, and her glare had him quickly revising his comment. “Though she should have told you the brew would put you to sleep.”

Her glare vanished when she nodded in agreement. She gestured, letting him know she was eager to hear about what he found while exploring the keep.

Cree detailed his brief venture. “I found little of interest or anything strange and I cannot be sure if what I heard overhead was animal footfalls. I could have missed the entrance to the kitchen in my hasty quest to find what exits I could.”

Dawn dismissed his claim with a wave of her hand, then gestured.

Cree smiled at his wife’s praise. “So, you think I am too wise of a warrior to question my own skills and confidence.”

She nodded and gestured again.

“I, not we, will continue to explore and learn about what goes on here,” he ordered firmly and when she did not acquiesce, he spoke even more firmly. “I mean it, Dawn. You will rest so you are well enough to leave when the fog lifts.”

She went to him, knowing his arms would greet her, and they did, circling her in a soft embrace. With slow, meaningful gestures, she made her worries known.

Cree listened closely almost as if he could hear her, and she made him realize the truth of her words and his own worry grew. “I had not thought of that. If while exploring, something should happen to me and I didn’t make it back to you, you would be left here with strangers and odd strangers at that and none that could understand your gestures.”

She gestured, pressing her two fingers tight together, tapped his chest then tapped hers.

“I wish I could promise you that we will remain together while here, but it may not always be possible. We cannot stay ignorant of our surroundings. I need to make sure I know of exits if we must make a hasty escape or see where weapons may be if needed.”

Dawn understood the wisdom of his words, but they only managed to worry her more. If she felt her usual confident self, she probably wouldn't be as concerned, but her head hurt, and she did not feel she had her full strength. How could she help her husband if he should need her when she lacked strength?

“We will stay together as much as we can and when that's not possible, you will remain in this bedchamber.”

She shook her head and gestured that she would help. She would sit in the Great Hall and listen, watch, and discover.

“That may be helpful and with servants around I see no reason why you wouldn't be safe. But there is one thing I intend to see done. Tomorrow morning I will take you to the stable where the horse is sheltered so you know where it is. If for any reason I don't return to you while we're here, you are to take the horse and leave.”

She shook her head.

Cree pushed away the few strands of auburn hair that had fallen loose around her face, then kissed her gently. “I will find you, Dawn. I will always find you whether now or through time, we will always be together.”

Her eyes grew misty with tears, and she was about to kiss him when the soulful howl

of a wolf stopped her.

Cree pushed his wife behind him, the piercing howl sounding like it came from within the keep.

CHAPTER 6

“Lord Tiernan sends his apologies. He will not be able to join you for supper. The wolves are restless tonight and he and his warriors are making sure they present no problem to the village,” Olwen said when Cree and Dawn entered the Great Hall.

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“I can help if needed,” Cree offered, his wife squeezing his hand and letting him know she was not pleased with his offer.

“That is generous of you, Lord Cree, but you are not familiar with wolves and that could prove dangerous for you,” Olwen said. “I thought you and Lady Dawn would be more comfortable at a table in front of the hearth since the Great Hall holds a chill this evening. But if you prefer, I can have your meal moved to the table at the dais.”

“It is good where it is, Olwen,” Cree said and escorted his wife over to the table to sit.

“If you should require anything else, please let me know,” Olwen said and left the room.

“How does she expect us to do that when no other servant lingers about to take a message to her?” Cree asked, looking around at an empty room.

Dawn shrugged, wrinkled her brow, and gestured slowly.

“Aye, I agree. It is odd that no one is about. It almost feels as though the keep is empty of all but you, me, and Olwen.”

Dawn shivered and moved closer to her husband so that their bodies touched. She preferred sitting close enough to feel their legs touch, their arms brush each other's, and have the warmth of their bodies joined together. They were connected that way, always together as one.

She ate sparingly. Cree didn't. He had often warned her that in certain situations one

needed to eat when they could since they might not know when their next meal could be. That he ate robustly told her that he was concerned with their present situation.

Cree kept his voice low when he spoke with her. “With the keep so empty, it might be a good time to explore.”

Dawn nodded and patted her chest then his, letting her know that she would go with him.

“Aye, you will come with me. I will not leave you alone tonight. It is odd that the keep is so quiet. Lord Tiernan may be out with his men, but where are his servants? I have seen one or two besides Olwen since arriving here, not a sufficient number for the keep being so well-maintained.”

A howl sounded outside followed by another one, and Cree slipped his arm around his wife, catching the sound of faint footfalls.

“The wolves hunt tonight.”

Dawn was startled by Olwen’s sudden appearance, not having heard her enter the room. Her husband hadn’t budged, but even if he didn’t hear her, he was too well-trained to show that anyone could startle him, except her of course. Dawn was still capable of surprising him at times.

“But worry not,” Olwen said. “The men will spend the night protecting the village and the livestock.”

“My horse?—”

“Is safe,” Olwen assured him. “As are both of you, so rest well and do not worry.”

“Yawn the next time she returns, so she thinks we are ready for sleep,” Cree whispered to his wife after Olwen left the room. “And eat more while you can.”

His order confirmed his concern, but she could not abide the thought of taking another bite. She shook her head and patted her stomach.

“You’re not feeling well?” he asked.

She nodded and drew a never-ending circle on her stomach.

“Your stomach is upset.”

She nodded, sighed, and rested her head on his shoulder.

“Have no worry, Dawn. I will get us out of here safely and we will not be going anywhere for some time after this. I have traveled enough. I prefer my home and the company of family and friends.”

She tapped her chest and nodded, letting him know she felt the same.

When Olwen returned, Dawn had to force herself to yawn, the prospect of exploring with Cree boosting her strength and resolve.

“I left a nice brew in your chambers to enjoy just before bed,” Olwen said. “Have a good rest and I will see you in the morning.”

“Your generosity is appreciated,” Cree said, and stood, then helped his wife to stand and with a nod to Olwen they left the room.

As soon as they reached their bedchamber, Dawn warned him to stay away from the brew, pointing to the jug and shaking her head and finger.

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“I agree. We don’t drink the brew, though I have a feeling that Olwen may make sure we did. So, in a short while we will lie in bed and wait for her visit before we explore.”

Dawn took the jug and first poured some into the two tankards, then emptied them and more from the jug into the bucket of water, planning to accidentally spill it in the morning so that no one was the wiser. Not long after she got into bed and was lying on her side, then her husband curled himself around her, tucking her close against him, and she smiled. She rested her hand on his arm that hugged her waist and feeling his strength and his heart beat with confidence, she felt less anxious since arriving here.

“Footfalls. Close your eyes,” Cree whispered in her ear after they had laid there for a while.

Cree had made sure they faced the door, so Olwen didn’t need to enter the room, but he thought she might anyway, and he was right. He heard a slight tap to the door, then it creaked open slowly. He listened as her footfalls neared the bed. He felt a slight poke at his arm, then he heard her walk away but not toward the door, to the table. Dawn had been wise in making it seem like they had drunk quite a bit of the brew.

Her footfalls headed to the door and the door creaked open then closed, but he waited as he advised Dawn they would, to make sure Olwen made it appear that she left when she didn’t. Once again, he was right. After a few moments, the door creaked open again and shut. Still, Cree waited since he heard no footfalls along the passageway and once more the door opened and shut. Olwen was thorough in making sure that he and Dawn had drunk enough of the brew to keep them asleep for the rest

of the night.

Finally, he heard her footfalls fade down the passageway and he alerted Dawn. “She’s gone.” He helped her out of bed. “You will stay close to me.”

She nodded, intending to do just that. She did not want to chance getting separated from him in an unfamiliar and odd place, especially since she had no voice, no way of calling out to him. She had learned through the years to clap her hands or make noise with whatever was at hand to attract his attention when needed. But that was not always possible, so she did not like to take risks. Besides, this place left her feeling uneasy and only feeling the strength of her husband’s muscled body against hers could ease her anxiousness.

Cree had opened the door enough times to know that if he lifted it some the creak could barely be heard. So, he and Dawn managed to leave the bedchamber making as little noise as possible. He grabbed a torch from one of the few sconces before they climbed the stairs to the next floor. The torch flickered in his hand, cutting a light through the suffocating darkness. The flames cast shadows that danced and twisted on the cold, uneven walls, forming shapes that looked like clawed hands reaching out to seize them. His other hand gripped Dawn’s hand to make sure she kept close.

Dawn welcomed her husband’s tight grip and moved closer to him, her arm brushing his. It made her feel safe, though she wished she had worn her cloak, the air so chilly she could have sworn she saw puffs of her own breath. She kept her eyes sharp and steady, watching for danger or whatever else the darkness might hold.

They continued to climb the twisting stairs, their footfalls echoing softly in the silence. The more they climbed the chillier and darker it seemed to get. It wasn’t as cold or dark when he was here earlier but then it hadn’t been night. But how would that make a difference with the heavy fog outside allowing little daylight? He made no remark about it to Dawn, not wanting to frighten her, but he took extra care with

his steps and kept his focus alert. He'd allow nothing to harm his wife.

Dawn was relieved when they reached the first landing, a narrow corridor stretching out before them. Dust motes drifted in the torchlight, and the walls seemed to close in, the shadows so deep they appeared almost solid. She thought she heard a sound and tugged on Cree's hand.

"I hear it too," he said. "It sounds like the steady drip of water somewhere."

Dawn nodded, agreeing and thought the steady drip reminded her of time passing, a warning for them to hurry.

The first door they came upon sat ajar, a sliver of darkness leaking out. Cree pushed it open with the tip of his finger and stretched the torch out in front of him revealing a small chamber.

"This room has not been in use for some time from the thick dust on the furniture," Cree said as they entered.

Dawn nodded, casting a glance around at the items there, a basket of unfinished embroidery, a foot stool, and a wool blanket hanging off the lone chair were sure signs that the room once served as a woman's solar. The tapestry above the fireplace caught her eye and she gestured to Cree to raise the torch.

It was a typical battle scene. Warriors lay sprawled on the ground while the victorious warriors stood over them, Lord Tiernan in the middle of them, though his hair was longer with twin braids on each side of his head. But what caught her eye the most was the forest scene at the top part of the tapestry. She spotted wolves among the trees, not hiding but rather watching as if they too were gleeful for the victory. She pointed it out to Cree and freed her hand to gesture her thought.

“Aye, the wolves do look pleased, almost as if it was a victory for them as well and they were now safe.” He tore his glance away from the disturbing tapestry. “We can’t linger. I want to get back to our quarters long before anyone returns.”

Cree led the way to the next room. Whatever the room had been used for was hard to tell, a collection of discarded furnishings and old chests now occupied it.

Something caught Cree’s eye. He believed it to be the handle of a weapon and once he extracted it from among the mountain of items, he saw that he was correct. It was a sword, an old one crudely made. Such a weapon had been abandoned by warriors long before he had even held a sword in his hand and long before this castle was built.

He wanted to dig more to see if he could find other old weapons, but moving things around would make too much noise that could possibly attract attention.

Several distant howls broke the silence and Cree hurried to grab his wife’s hand. “Time to leave.”

Dawn nodded, fully agreeing, the menacing howls running gooseflesh over her, and she wondered if they howled in victory of their hunt. And if they did, who in the clan had suffered a loss this night?

Once in the corridor, Dawn glanced down it, but it was dark, and she couldn’t see to the very end. She gave Cree’s elbow a nudge to raise the torch, and he did.

Cree stared along with Dawn at the large wood door at the end, pagan symbols intricately carved into it. It was a door that warned people away. Or was it a door that protected and if so, what did it protect?

Cree released his wife’s hand, gripped her arm, and turned her around, anxious to

return to their bedchamber. “Let’s go.”

Dawn nodded, her eagerness to explore gone and her eagerness to leave here mounting. She hurried her steps and would have fallen if her husband hadn’t had a good grip on her arm and stopped her near tumble.

“Are you all right?” Cree asked anxiously.

Dawn nodded and scrunched her brow, pointing to the floor.

Cree lowered the torch and they both stared with their mouths agape at four parallel lines scored deep into the wood floor, like the marks of a clawed hand.

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He didn't care how bad the fog was, tomorrow they would take their leave from this strange place. He remained silent as he hurried her down the stairs, but he could tell the claw marks had frightened her. They had even disturbed him and that wasn't easy to do. What were the scratches of a clawed beast doing so high up in the keep?

Cree hurried Dawn into their bedchamber and wished there was a lock on the door after he closed it. When he turned, Dawn began gesturing to him and her hands trembled as she did, and her facial expressions made her gestures easy to understand.

He went to her and grabbed her hands to stop her from talking. "Werewolves were born from tall and often drunken tales. They are not real."

She slipped her hands out of his and gestured again.

"I agree that tall tales can be born from a grain of truth, but a man turning into an actual wolf is far too tall of a tale to believe."

Dawn continued to disagree with him.

"Aye, I saw those claw marks and it is puzzling how they got there and worrisome since it tells me that a wolf gained entrance to the keep, which means it is not safe here. We leave in the morning. I don't care how foggy it is."

Dawn nodded rapidly, then cringed as a pain struck her head.

"Bloody hell," Cree said, his arm going around her and he helped her to sit on the bed. "You still need rest."

She shook her head and cringed again.

“The healer advised you to take two or three days’ rest, that any travel before than could prove difficult and possibly harmful. We cannot leave, at least not for another day.”

Dawn mouthed, not safe.

“Whether we leave or stay, either way could prove dangerous for us. We will not sleep at the same time. I need less sleep than you so I can sleep for a few hours during the day and stay awake throughout the night.”

Dawn shook her head, not agreeing.

“Your protest is useless. I command it and so it shall be.” He reminded her of his earlier decision. “I will no longer put off showing you where the stable is located, so you can escape on my stallion if it should prove necessary. The horse will find his way to our warriors or home.”

Dawn kept shaking her head.

“I will hear no more protests. You will do as I command, Dawn. I will have it no other way.”

Her chin went up and she crossed her arms over her chest, demonstrating her tenaciousness, letting him know that she had no intention of leaving him.

“Do not be foolish,” he scolded. “One of us must survive and return home to the children.”

She sighed and gestured slowly, her exhaustion obvious.

“Bloody hell,” Cree mumbled, annoyed that she was right. It was not safe for her to travel alone, not with the wolves around. Worse, no one would hear her screams if she were attacked. No one would know to go to her aid. The image of what she would suffer was too excruciating to bear. He had to make sure they remained together.

Dawn tapped his chest, then hers, and crossed two fingers, reminding him they would do better together, always together.

As usual their thoughts mirrored each other’s, and Cree reached out to cup the back of her neck and draw her slowly to him. Then his lips descended on hers in a possessive kiss, and his manhood instantly responded. It had been days since they last made love under the covers of the bed in the noble’s house where they had stayed. He knew the noble’s predilection for installing peek holes in the guest bedrooms so he could spy on them, not for information but for the pleasure he got in watching them perform intimately.

So, in the week they had been there, they had coupled only once and not at length. He was growing needier for his wife by the day, but his need would have to wait. She needed rest if they were to get out of there as soon as possible. Kisses would suffice for now. That Dawn rested her head on Cree’s chest when the kiss ended proved him right. If she was feeling herself, she would have made sure to get him into bed and not to sleep.

“You need to rest if we are ever to get out of here,” he said and stood, taking her along with him, then reached down to draw the blankets back for her to get into bed.

She gestured before climbing into bed.

“Worry not. I have no intentions of leaving you here alone,” Cree assured her.

She gestured after pointing to the bump on her head and around the room.

“You don’t know if it is the bump or this place that leaves you feeling uneasy?”

She nodded.

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Cree gave her a gentle shove to move over and make room for him and once she did, he slipped in beside her and eased her against him to snuggle close. “You must get all the rest you can so you will be well enough to leave as soon as possible.”

When she didn’t answer him, he glanced down and saw she was asleep. The wound to her head had taken more of a toll on her than she would admit. He should have never taken her exploring tonight but he hadn’t wanted to leave her alone and it had proven helpful. They now knew that some type of beast roamed the keep, proving they weren’t safe here.

Cree let himself drift in a light sleep, alert to slightest noise and knowing the distinctness of each one. It had proven helpful often as it did now when he caught a distant sound that was unfamiliar... until it got closer.

It was the sound of claws on the stone floor and it came to a stop just outside the bedchamber door. Then he heard the sniff and the rustle of the latch, and Cree imagined the animal poking at it with his nose. A low rumbling growl sounded, then once again he heard the sound of claws being dragged along the stone floor. The animal was finished with them for the night.

The question was... what did he want with them?

CHAPTER 7

Cree woke with a start realizing his wife wasn’t in his arms or in bed with him and that he had fallen asleep. He jumped out of bed ready to tear the keep apart to find her only to see her sitting in one of the two chairs in the room, combing her hair, and to

his relief looking better than yesterday.

She smiled and gestured.

“So, you think I am getting old that I did not remain awake all night, do you?” he asked with a playful scowl as he walked toward her. She laughed, though it couldn’t be heard, but to Cree her laughter rang in his ears, having imagined how it would sound time and again. With one arm, he caught her around her waist and brought her up on her feet. He was about to teasingly take her to task for her comment when she kissed him.

The strength of her kiss told him that she was feeling better and for that he was grateful, but he also felt the tenseness in her slim body. Her concern remained and rightfully so. A beast stalked the keep and after last night, Cree wondered if it stalked them.

A rap sounded at the door and Cree released Dawn to step in front of her, instinctively shielding her before calling out for the person to enter.

Olwen stepped in. “The morning meal awaits.”

“Thank you. We will be there shortly,” Cree said and when she turned to leave, he asked, “Has the fog lifted?”

“I’m afraid not,” Olwen said, shaking her head, “if anything it has worsened.”

“Is that usual for this area?” Cree asked.

“It happens from time to time, but it passes,” Olwen assured him.

“And the wolves? They are more brazen in where they wander when the fog is

heavy?”

“This was their land long before it became ours, so we are the trespassers. Do not take too long. The food is hot,” Olwen said and walked out, closing the door behind her.

Cree turned a scrunched brow at his wife. “She defends the wolves.”

Dawn shivered as she gestured.

“Aye, this is a strange place. I should have brought Beast then?—”

Dawn interrupted him with a frantic wave of her hand, then gestured.

“You’re right. With so many wolves about, he would have been in danger and would have fought to the death to protect you.”

Dawn rested her hand on her chest and shook her head, letting him know how much that would hurt her. Then she hurried to gesture again.

“You want me to go check on my horse?”

Dawn nodded as he spoke, then talked with her hands once again.

“True. I am told my horse is safe, but I have not seen that for myself.”

Her hands continued to gesture.

“I will not leave you alone to explore the village and see what I can learn. Besides, you heard Olwen, the fog has grown denser. I won’t be able to see anything.” This time he was the one who shook his head. “But I don’t know that for sure if I don’t see

it for myself.”

Dawn nodded, her hands once again speaking for her.

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“We agreed we wouldn’t separate, and you should know where the stable is located just in case?—”

She shook her head slowly but waved her hand vigorously in front of her face to remind him of what they discussed last night and that she would not leave without him.

He grabbed her hands to stop her from arguing with him. “I remember well what was said last night. It is my concern of leaving you alone that disturbs me.”

She slipped her hands out of his to gesture more calmly.

“I agree that you would probably be safe in the Great Hall with some servants about while I am gone. And we do not know enough about this place to know the danger we might face.”

She nodded.

“I admit your suggestion makes sense, but I don’t like leaving you alone and last night you made it clear you didn’t want to be left alone,” he said, realizing last night’s sleep had allowed her to regain a good part of her strength since she now appeared less reluctant to remain alone.

He saw a hint of fear but more determination in her eyes when she once again gestured.

He repeated her silent words. “You don’t want to remain captive of the fog, of this

place, of what might await us here.”

She nodded and stepped closer to him, his arm instinctively reaching out to capture her around her waist and draw her against him.

He wasn't planning on telling her about the animal outside their bedchamber door last night but thought better of it. If an animal was able to enter the keep, then she had to be made aware of it.

“I need to tell you something,” he said, and he told her about the incident. Her eyes went wide, and her body pressed against him, seeking his strength, and knowing he would shield her from any danger. “You must promise me that you will not leave the Great Hall while I am gone, not even to return here to our room. And I forbid you to go exploring on your own.”

She nodded and rested her head on his shoulder, wishing they were home.

Cree didn't wait long after they had their meal to take his leave but not before reminding his wife to stay put. When she didn't confirm with a quick nod, he eyed her suspiciously and reminded, “You made a promise.”

She shrugged and scrunched her brow.

“I know perfectly well what you're thinking. What if an opportunity presents itself for you to discover something? That you even would give such a foolish notion a thought means you are willing to place yourself in harm's way, which tells me you are feeling much better and could possibly get yourself into trouble.” He brought his face close to hers. “You will go nowhere. You will remain here, and do not disobey me on this.”

“Is there a problem, Lord Cree?”

Cree cast a scowl at his wife to remind her to obey his order before he turned to greet Lord Tiernan. “Not at all, but if there were, it would be between me and my wife.”

“Of course,” Lord Tiernan said with a nod. “It is just that people who are not used to such a lingering fog, curtailing tasks and activities, often find it difficult to adapt to the confinement it causes even for a short time.”

“Being wed to me, my wife has learned to adapt more easily than most people,” Cree said and sent his wife a glance.

Dawn’s smile bordered on laughter as she nodded in agreement.

He looked back at Lord Tiernan. “Besides, we never tire of seeing each other and we never lack for conversation.”

It always touched her heart when Cree spoke as if she had a voice that he could actually hear. He never thought of her as different and never let anyone else think that as well.

“Then you are a lucky man,” Lord Tiernan said and didn’t hide the envy in his eyes.

“You have not wed yet?” Cree asked.

“Not for lack of trying,” Lord Tiernan said with a chuckle. “But Clan MacMadadh is a small clan with little to offer a prospective wife. Besides, the area is far too remote for most young women. One day, perhaps, I will find a woman who wishes to share a life here with me.”

“She will need to be mindful of wolves,” Cree said.

“Aye, that she would, which means she would need to be an exceptional woman

much like your wife,” Lord Tiernan said with a nod to Dawn.

Dawn smiled pleasantly at the compliment.

“Aye, my wife is exceptional, and she belongs to me,” Cree said, making it clear he would let no one take her from him.

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“I admire and respect how you protect your wife, for I would do the same for my wife. So, please let me know, or Olwen, if there is anything you need while you are here. I do want your stay with us to be as pleasant as possible.”

“I want to see my horse,” Cree said with his usual authoritative tone.

“The fog is quite heavy,” Lord Tiernan cautioned.

“And my stallion is no doubt anxious since I have not been to see him since shortly after we arrived here. He will think I deserted him.”

Lord Tiernan nodded and waved Olwen over. “Send for Sim.”

Olwen bobbed her head and left the Great Hall.

“Sim is probably in the kitchen with Tade, trying to sweet talk the cook into sharing some of the food she’s cooking even though Brigid probably already fed them both.”

A laughing screech had them turning to see a young lad racing into the room trying to avoid Sim’s arms that reached out to grab him but missed him. The light-haired little lad hurried to climb on the bench at the table where Dawn sat, and he snatched up a piece of meat from one of the platters.

“Tade, that is not polite,” Lord Tiernan scolded.

“Sorry,” Tade said and popped the meat into his mouth. He went to grab another piece when he spotted Cree and smiled. Then he saw Dawn and he hurried off the

bench and around the table to climb up on the bench beside her. “I, Tade.”

Lord Tiernan went to explain to the lad that Dawn could not speak, but Cree shook his head at him, so Tiernan held his tongue.

Dawn smiled, tapped her closed lips, then shook her head.

Tade scrunched his face. “No tongue?”

Dawn kept her smile as she shook her head and stuck her tongue out.

Tade stuck his tongue out as well and scrunched his brow again. “Voice got lost?”

Dawn nodded, knowing it was the easiest explanation for him to understand.

Tade rested his hand on hers. “You be all right.”

Dawn’s smile widened as she nodded and tapped her chest.

Tade tapped his chest in return.

Cree noticed the cloth around the lad’s forearm and as soon as he did Sim snatched him up into his arms.

“You summoned me, Lord Tiernan,” Sim said, grabbing a piece of meat from the platter to give to the lad to keep him occupied.

“Lord Cree wishes to see his horse, please take him there.”

“Aye, my lord,” Sim said and turned to Cree. “Follow me.”

Cree cast a quick glance at his wife, a look in his eyes warning her to be there when he returned before he followed Sim out of the room.

To Dawn's surprise, Lord Tiernan joined her at the table.

"I shall share a hot brew for a short while before duty calls."

She smiled and nodded, and a servant hurried to fill a tankard for him and refill hers.

Dawn jumped, startled by a howl that sounded as if it could very well come from within the keep.

"Worry not," Lord Tiernan assured her. "The wolves call their pack together. It is time for them to rest so they will be ready to hunt when night falls. Do you fear the wolves, Lady Dawn?"

Dawn nodded and tapped her temple and hoped he would understand her response.

Lord Tiernan smiled. “You wisely fear them.”

She smiled, pleased he understood.

“They protect their kind just as we do ours, just as your husband protects you. They have no interest in humans.”

She drew her brow together in question and walked two fingers in a circle while glancing around the room, hoping once again he would understand her.

“If they have no interest in humans, you wonder why they prowl so close to the village,” he said, and she nodded. “Curiosity perhaps and, they are intelligent enough to know the fog provides cover. Wolves have been wrongly blamed for attacks and deaths they had nothing to do with, but unable to find blame elsewhere, people blame the wolves. False tales are often told about them, causing them to be hunted and slaughtered.”

Dawn patted her chest and pointed to him.

“You ask if I care about them?” he asked, and she nodded. “I respect them, my family having dealt with them for generations. There is a story told about a chieftain of the clan, who like many, blamed a wolf for the death of a woman in the village. He gathered men and hunted the wolves, returning with a female wolf he had killed, and the village rejoiced. He kept her fur pelt, wearing it over his shoulder for all to envy. One morning when the chieftain failed to arrive for breakfast, a favorite meal of his, a servant went to his room. He was found with his throat ripped nearly apart, leaving his head barely attached to his neck. The white wolf pelt was gone and not far from

the door leading to the bedchamber were claw marks dug deeply into the wood floor. My ancestor, who became the new chieftain, treated the wolves differently and ever since then we have learned to live in peace with one another. And I will say that the old chieftain got what he deserved since he was the one who killed the woman and blamed it on the wolves.”

“Excuse me, my lord,” Olwen said, approaching the table. “Someone needs to speak with you. He waits in your solar.”

“Duty calls,” Lord Tiernan said and stood. He paused before following Olwen who was nearly out of the room. “You should know that wolves have exceptional scent, making it easy for them to track from where they first pick up a scent to where it takes them, leaving it difficult for their prey to avoid them. Do rest, Lady Dawn. You never know when you may need your strength.”

Dawn watched him go and shivered. He was warning her that he knew that she and Cree had explored the upper floors, and they had been tracked back to their bedchamber. But by who? A wolf or Lord Tiernan or were they one in the same?

A heavy fog rushed at Cree as soon as the door opened. Olwen had spoken the truth. The fog was far thicker than he expected. It was eerie to step into since it was like stepping into the unknown, not knowing where your feet would land or even if your feet would touch land.

“You need to stay close to me, Lord Cree, or you will get lost in the fog,” Sim cautioned.

“I have gotten caught in fog before now but never as thick as this fog,” Cree said.

“It’s rare even for us, how thick this fog is,” Sim said, then suddenly called out, “Brigid, come take Tade.”

“Aye,” Brigid called back and suddenly appeared, Sim handing Tade over to her.

“I won’t be long. I am taking Lord Cree to the stables,” Sim said.

“Be careful,” she warned. “The fog is not friendly today.”

Cree thought it strange that Sim called out to Brigid, and she responded so quickly. It was almost as if he could see that she was nearby, but that wasn’t possible with the fog. It was also strange that Sim got them to the stable without difficulty. His steps nor direction never faltered even though the fog engulfed them. Cree could not help but wonder how he had managed it.

Sim lit a small torch kept there for use after they entered the stable.

His stallion whinnied as soon as he caught sight of Cree, and he could tell with one touch that the animal was as uneasy as he and Dawn were about being stuck here. He stroked the horse’s neck and with soft whispers assured him the best he could that he had not abandoned him, and they would be leaving together when the time was right, and the stallion calmed and nodded.

A frantic shout from Brigid had Sim rushing to the stable door.

“Tade ran off and I cannot find him,” Brigid said, suddenly appearing at the open door.

Sim turned to Cree. “Stay here. I will return for you.”

“I can help,” Cree offered.

“Nay. You will only get lost in the fog and we will have to search for you when we need to concentrate on finding Tade,” Sim said and rushed out, grabbing the torch

before he closed the door behind him and before Cree could say another word.

Plunged into darkness, Cree continued to stroke the horse's neck. "This is a very strange place, indeed, and I will get us out of here as soon as I can."

The stallion agreed, nodding his head.

Cree did not like being stuck in the stable, engulfed in darkness where he could see nothing and not know what was going on, and worst of all he was away from his wife in the keep. He hadn't planned on being gone long and there was no telling how long it would take to find Tade. He was a little devil of a lad, getting himself into things he shouldn't, much like his daughter Lizbeth. The thought of his capricious daughter made him even more determined to get home with Dawn safely.

His stallion's head went up alerting Cree before he caught the creaking sound of the stable door opening.

Cree ran his hand gently down his horse's face to his mouth, a signal the horse had learned meant to keep silent, and he did. Cree kept silent as well, and it allowed him to hear a whisper.

“Kee?”

Cree recognized the voice. “Is that you, Tade?”

“Aye,” Tade said.

Hearing the lad enter the stable, Cree made his way toward the door, relying on his recall of the layout of the place to get him there without incident. He was able to see the shadow of the lad in the mist.

“Your parents are looking for you, Tade,” Cree said, crouching down in front of the lad when he reached him.

Tade made a face and pressed his small finger against Cree’s lips and shook his head, cautioning him not to speak. Then he pushed his sleeve back, tapped his bandage, smiled, and threw his small arms around Cree’s neck and hugged him.

Cree could have sworn he heard the lad growl softly in his ear. Then he was gone, disappearing into the fog.

“Tade! There you are. How many times have I warned you not to go off in the fog on your own,” Sim admonished.

Cree stood listening to Sim chastise the lad, his thoughts more on Tade and what his actions were meant to tell Cree. It was obvious. He couldn’t deny it. Tade had thanked him for tending to his wound, not the wound of a child, but the wound of a wolf pup.

CHAPTER 8

“Werewolves. We are in a den of werewolves,” Cree said, running his fingers through his hair as he paced in front of the hearth in the bedchamber.

Dawn sat quietly, not disagreeing and shocked that it very well could be a possibility.

“I have battled vicious men, some I believed to be the devil themselves they were so cruel, but werewolves?” Cree shook his head, then went and sat next to his wife on the bed. “Between Tade thanking me for tending to his wound and what Lord Tiernan said to you, I don’t see how we can doubt the obvious. We are dealing with werewolves.”

Dawn gestured, pointing out the obvious.

“Aye, they haven’t harmed us... yet,” Cree said.” But Lord Tiernan’s tale of how the wolf scratches got into the floor and how a scent can be followed, which led the wolf to our bedchamber door last night, strikes me as a warning not to pry, which means he must know we have concerns.”

Dawn gestured slowly and Cree followed along nodding.

“I suppose you are right. If news got out that Clan MacMadadh was a pack of werewolves, they would be slaughtered. You do not believe the wolf clan attacks people?”

Dawn shook her head and continued explaining.

“That is true. They could have killed us, and no one would have ever known.”

Dawn scrunched her brow as she gestured.

“Aye, Lord Tiernan cautions us, but you wonder why. Brigid told Sim that the fog was not friendly. I thought that odd, but I now know how Sim could sense Brigid being so near and how he got us through the fog to the stable... scent.”

Dawn once again gestured slowly.

“You say Tiernan talked about the wolves calling their pack home so they would be well rested for the evening hunt?”

She nodded and continued.

“You question what they hunt since meat is plentiful and I did notice that they are partial to meat. So, what is it they hunt? Perhaps it is simply their nature.”

Dawn shook her head, her hands moving.

“You believe there is more to it?”

She nodded and gestured.

Cree stared at his wife surprised at what she suspected. “I never thought of that. Lord Tiernan leads Clan MacMadadh, which would mean he leads the pack of wolves. If that is so, then who was it that called their pack home.” He looked puzzled. “You think it might be a foe who hunts them?”

She nodded, having given the whole matter thought since speaking with Lord Tiernan and trying to make sense of it.

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“You think another pack of wolves is seeking to claim Tiernan’s pack?”

She made a face he recognized that meant she wasn’t sure. “It could be humans who hunt them. But you heard a howl.”

She explained.

“I suppose it could be humans disguising themselves as wolves,” Cree said at his wife’s explanation. “But the wolves would certainly be able to tell the difference.”

Dawn nodded in agreement.

Cree stood, pacing in front of her. “This worsens our situation.”

Dawn scrunched her brow in question.

“If humans are hunting Clan MacMadadh and are successful, they will not rescue us... they will slaughter us, thinking we are part of the wolves.”

Dawn’s eyes turned wide, realizing her husband was right.

Cree continued to pace in silence and Dawn knew her husband’s thoughts, either way it was bad for them. They could be killed by wolves or humans and how could he possibly prevent either from happening?

Cree stopped pacing. “I need to talk with Lord Tiernan. You said Olwen told him there was someone there to speak with him. Maybe he received news.” He raised his

hand to stop her from gesturing. “I know what you think, he won’t tell me anything. But if he knew that I would help defend the clan, he might think differently as well as securing our safety here. Presently, he has been generous to us and with Tade thanking me for helping him, it means his parents have taught him kindness. We know who we deal with here. We don’t know what might await us with others, wolves or humans.”

Dawn nodded, understanding the wisdom in her husband’s conclusion.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asked when she stood, and her response had him agreeing. “I suppose you are right. You are safe in the Great Hall where others can see you instead of closed away here in the bedchamber.”

She gestured.

“That is a good idea to speak with the healer again and see if she believes if you have healed enough to take your leave.”

Dawn nodded, her hands continuing to speak for her.

“A healer does know much about what goes on in a clan. You may well learn something from her.” He went to her and took her in his arms. “It is good we have the start of a plan. We will leave here and make our way home. I will let nothing happen to you.”

Dawn smiled and patted her chest then his.

“You will take no foolish chances in defending me,” he ordered, but loved that his wife would do so as she had done in the past, which meant she would do it again. “No unnecessary chances, Dawn.”

She nodded to put him at ease, but, like him, there wasn't anything she wouldn't do to protect him and keep him safe.

A kiss sealed their commitment to each other, and they went to the Great Hall.

As soon as Cree spotted Olwen, he called out to her. "Could you summon the healer for my wife, Olwen, she would like to speak with her."

"Aye, my lord," Olwen said with a bob of her head and hurried off.

"Perfect, now I can get to Tiernan's solar without Olwen alerting him to my arrival."

Dawn shooed him off to hurry before Olwen returned and as he rushed out, she sat at a table by the hearth to wait for Lynall.

Cree gave a quick rap on the closed door before opening it, startling Lord Tiernan and the man inside. "I wanted a word with you but being you are already occupied, I will wait outside your door until you are done." He was letting Tiernan know he would not be ignored.

"That is not necessary, Lord Cree. We are finished," Tiernan said and turned to the man. "Do as I've ordered, and we will speak later."

The older man gave a respectful nod as he passed by Cree. If the clan truly were a pack of werewolves, they were polite ones. Though he had seen politeness used as a ruse to trap people. Somehow, he did not get that sense from Clan MacMadadh.

"How can I help you, Lord Cree?"

"It is I who wanted to offer my help, Lord Tiernan. You have been more than generous and kind to me and my wife, and seeing how thick the fog is I can only

imagine how difficult it must be to keep your clan safe from predators. So, I am at your service if you require any help in defending your clan.” A slight smile touched his lips. “Or to help find that little devil of a lad, Tade, since he went missing again?—”

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“He’s missing?” Lord Tiernan asked, stepping forward, ready to go search for him.

Cree raised his hand. “Only briefly, he is safe.”

“That lad tries my patience. He is brave but foolish as only the young can be.”

“True enough but do keep in mind that I will raise my sword for you, if necessary,” Cree said, wanting Tiernan to understand he could rely on him to help.

“I appreciate that, Lord Cree, and I am honored that you would offer and know that Clan MacMadadh is a loyal clan to those who are loyal to us.”

“That is good to know. Now tell me, is this heavy fog a challenge that some might think of as an advantage?”

“Only for those familiar with it,” Lord Tiernan said and pointed to the table for Cree to sit.

Cree did, and Tiernan joined him, filling two tankards with ale and handing one to Cree.

“I saw how familiar with the fog Sim was, walking me to the stable without any difficulty,” Cree said, so Tiernan would know that he noticed and had an inkling of what might be going on at Clan MacMadadh.

“A necessity we have all come to learn,” Lord Tiernan said with a slight nod.

“And do you have foe who are familiar with the fog?”

“One or possibly two and although they are a distance from here, the fog would provide a useful cover for them if they thought to attack us.”

“Do you know if either have recent thoughts to do so?” Cree asked.

“As you know, land is power and wealth in the Highlands. I recently acquired more land from a neighboring clan in exchange for supplying them with food during the winter. Clan MacMadadh possesses exceptional hunting skills, we never lack food, whereas the other clan is sparse of hunters. I hope to acquire more land through such negotiations and there are those opposed to my expanding my holdings.”

“You dislike battle.”

“I abhor battle and the senseless killing that goes with it. I prefer to live in peace when possible. Unfortunately, it is not always possible.”

“I understand and feel the same after years of fighting other peoples’ battles. I prefer to live out my days peacefully with my family, my clan, and while that might not always be possible, I will strive to make it so.”

Cree wanted to make sure that Tiernan understood that he had no desire for bloodshed but would shed it if it meant leaving here safely with his wife.

“I understand, Lord Cree. We do whatever we can to protect family and clan, and once again I appreciate your offer of help and will do all I can to make sure you and Lady Dawn leave here safely.”

Without admitting it, Cree felt that he and Tiernan had come to an understanding that he intended Tiernan and his clan no harm.

“Tell me of your home, Lord Cree,” Tiernan said.

Cree saw the tension leave Tiernan’s shoulders, worry having been lifted off them, and Cree began to detail his clan, adding incidents concerning his children, especially Lizbeth, that had Tiernan laughing. It was an enjoyable discussion and Cree ended by saying, “You must come visit one day. You are always welcome in my home.”

Tiernan couldn’t hide his surprise. “I rarely leave my clan, but I do appreciate the invitation.”

Someone frantically shouting his name prevented Cree from responding and he and Tiernan hurried to the door. The shouts brought them to the Great Hall, where Cree stared in shock at his wife lying on the floor appearing lifeless, the healer cushioning her head in her lap.

“DAWN!” He rushed to her. “What happened?” he demanded of Lynall when he reached them and crouched down to see his wife’s pale face.

“I believe she fainted after standing too quickly. I managed to cushion her head before she hit the floor,” Lynall said. “We need to get her to her bedchamber.”

Cree nodded, and gently lifted his wife into his arms, his worry growing as he carried her to their bedchamber. He had seen men receive head wounds who appeared fine and then a few days later they slipped into a deep sleep and never woke again. His heart pounded in his chest and his every step grew heavier with fear.

Relief rushed over him only moments later when he felt Dawn stir in his arms and he silently thanked the heavens. “You are all right. I’ve got you, Dawn. You are safe.”

Dawn’s eyes fluttered open just as they entered the room and when he placed her gently on the bed, she turned a confused look at him.

Cree understood she was asking what happened. “You fainted.”

Dawn's arm went to press at her side.

Lynall, seeing her reaction, stepped around Cree. "You felt a pain before fainting?"

Dawn nodded.

"You may have suffered another wound we are now just learning about. Would you permit me to take a look at your side where you felt the pain?"

Dawn nodded.

"If you would step outside the door, my lord, I will let you know when I am done examining your wife," Lynall said.

Dawn cringed not from pain, but from what she knew her husband would say, and she feared he would frighten the healer.

"Listen well, woman." Cree scowled and jabbed his finger toward Lynall. "I'm staying right here by my wife, and I will see for myself what ails her and do whatever it takes to see her well."

"Aye, my lord," Lynall said, paling.

Dawn thought to chastise her husband for frightening the healer, but he would only elaborate on what he said to the healer and frighten the woman even more, so she kept her hands quiet.

“I will help you slip your garments up,” Cree said before Lynall could offer and she stepped aside.

Slipping one arm under his wife, he lifted her up enough to shift her garments and expose the area she had felt the pain and cringed when he did. The side beneath her right breast was bruised and he feared what that might mean. He covered her with a blanket up to her waist once he laid her back down.

“A bruise,” he said, turning to Lynall.

The healer hurried over to have a look, her fingers gently probing the area. “I can feel the slight lump there. You must have hit something when you fell since this bruise is not fresh. When you stood so fast, you must have disturbed it, and it made itself known. I will prepare a compress for it that will help with the bruising and pain and a brew for you to take. I advise you to rest for the remainder of the day.”

“She will,” Cree commanded. “Will this delay our departure even more?”

“The fog will do that. When it gets this heavy, it usually takes a few days before it dissipates enough for safe travel. By then, I believe Lady Dawn will be well enough to take her leave as long as she takes care not to think she is fully healed just because she feels a bit better.”

Once again Cree sounded as if he commanded. “Dawn will follow your advice.”

“I will go prepare what is needed and show you how to administer the compresses to your wife’s wound,” Lynall said and turned to leave.

“Lynall!”

She turned, a bit startled by his powerful command.

“I appreciate how you have tended to my wife so wisely.”

Lynall smiled. “Thank you, my lord. It is kind of you to say so.”

Dawn gestured when Cree turned to her, the door closing softly behind Lynall.

“So, you think it was good of me to be nice to her after I wasn’t nice to her,” Cree said.

Dawn nodded and smiled, stretching her hand out to him.

His hand closed around hers, squeezing it, and he sat next to her on the bed. “You frightened me.”

She kept smiling as she patted her chest.

It was easy to understand her gesture. “You frightened yourself as well. Then you need to stop frightening the both of us and rest, so you will be ready to leave here.”

She nodded and she crossed her chest with her finger to promise him.

“This is my fault. I should have stripped you bare once we were alone to make sure we didn’t miss any other wounds you might have had.”

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She chuckled and gestured that that would not have been a good idea.

“Are you saying that I would have surrendered to passion once I saw you naked?”

Her responding gesture had him turning a playful scowl on her. “Are you telling me I can’t resist you?”

She chuckled again as she nodded.

“Well, you are right about that,” he said, chuckling himself, and tapped the tip of her nose. “But you were in no shape for pleasure. My only thought was to get you help.” She gestured quickly. “Aye, and I did.”

He pulled the blanket up over her to leave the wound exposed so it could be tended to when Lynall returned. “I should get you out of all your garments except for your shift. That way you will keep to this room.”

Dawn just tilted her head and stared at him.

She didn’t have to respond; he understood his mistake immediately. “Blood hell, you’re right. You need to be fully clothed if we need to make a hasty escape.”

She gestured again, curious to know what was said between him and Lord Tiernan.

“He knows of two possible foes who may present a problem, though he didn’t say if they were human or wolves. And nothing was said of the possibility of werewolves, but I never expected that acknowledgment. It would be too risky for him to admit

such a dangerous thing, if it were true. The consequences could be devastating to his clan.” He shook his head slightly. “I question my own sanity in pledging my sword to protect a clan of werewolves, but taking shelter among them leaves me no choice.”

Dawn’s hands gestured slowly, and her eyes showed understanding.

“Aye, we cannot say for certain if they are werewolves, but so many things point that way.”

Dawn continued to voice her opinion through gestures.

“Aye, they have only shown us kindness when they simply could have killed us and disposed of any evidence that we had ever been here, and no one would have been the wiser.”

Cree disliked that thought, thinking of how his warriors would have searched in vain for them until they had no choice but to return home without them. Sloan, his longtime friend, would have continued the search, never giving up, and he and his wife Lucerne would have taken over the care of the children, looking after them as if they were their own.

The thought angered him, and he saw that his wife must be thinking the same for she looked upset.

He took hold of her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “We’ll make it home, Dawn. I promise you that we will make it home.”

She nodded, though the worry did not leave her eyes.

Trying to ease her concern, he said, “I was surprised to learn that Lord Tiernan abhors battle. He simply wants to live in peace. I believe we reached a good

understanding. He told me that Clan MacMadadh is loyal to any clan that is loyal to his. Heknows that I will help not harm him in anyway and that I expect the same from him.”

Dawn squeezed her husband’s hand as if that news pleased her.

Cree brushed a soft strand of hair off the side of her face. “I am no longer in any rush for us to leave here. I believe we are safer here for now since we don’t know what or who awaits us out there.”

She nodded agreeing and he kissed her brow.

“Rest and grow strong, Dawn, for what we face here may not be common to this world.”

CHAPTER 9

Cree slept lightly, keeping aware of every sound he heard as his wife slept cuddled against him. He became fully alert when he heard the sound of an animal’s claws clicking along the stone passageway and then it stopped outside the bedchamber door. A snort sounded before the clicking sound began to fade away. When he heard it again later in the night, he realized the animal was patrolling the keep. If that was so, did it mean Lord Tiernan worried that his foe might find their way into the keep, or was he being cautious?

He still found it difficult to believe that the whole of Clan MacMadadh was a pack of werewolves. But he could not refute the evidence thus far. Besides, he had seen strange and unexplainable things during his travels when he was a mercenary. Things he never imagined possible. However, the werewolf tale always struck him more as a myth rather than truth. There was a Norse tribe in a remote region, the Ulfr tribe—wolf tribe—a fitting name, who believed themselves wolves. They revered

wolves. They wore the heads of dead wolves and the skinned hides when going into battle and many believed them madmen and avoided them when at all possible. But they were human men who pretended to be wolves.

The werewolf tale was one of humans turning into actual wolves then turning back into humans. If bitten by a werewolf, it was believed you became one yourself. A myth or truth? He wasn't sure what to believe. He only knew he would be glad when he and Dawn could leave here safely.

His sleep remained restless and light, keeping alert, making sure no harm came to Dawn. He had given his warriors thought, confident they had found a place to shelter from the fog. They were skilled warriors and could easily protect themselves, though how they would fare against werewolves was another matter.

He found himself slipping out of bed, his thoughts too active and heavy to get any rest. He was not one to follow orders, he was the one who gave orders and expected them to be obeyed without question. It was difficult for him to follow another man's rule, but then what did he know of werewolves?

Cree bolted out of the chair when he heard what sounded like two snarling animals viciously fighting from somewhere in the keep.

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Dawn's eyes sprang wide, the alarming sound waking her, and she glanced anxiously at her husband.

"Something is amiss," he said but had no idea what it might be.

He wanted to go see for himself, but he didn't want to leave his wife alone and vulnerable. Though he could be leaving them both vulnerable if he didn't see for himself what was happening.

The disturbing sound came again.

Dawn got out of bed and went to slip her shoes on.

Cree hurried to help her, knowing she had made the decision for him. They would go together.

She shook her finger at him when he looked ready to argue, concerned at what they might be walking into.

"You stay close, but run, if necessary," he ordered.

Dawn nodded, not bothering to argue with him or to remind him that she had no place to run.

Cree kept his sword in hand as they proceeded cautiously down the stairs and to the Great Hall, hearing no more vicious snarling as they went. When they entered the room, it was to find Lord Tiernan sitting shirtless at one of the tables, blood covering

his shoulder and chest and a man lying dead on the ground, his head nearly torn off him and a headpiece made from the head of a wolf lying not far from him while wolf pelts clothed his body. A short staff with a wolf paw attached to the top of it, its claws extended lay nearby as well.

Lynall, her hands trembling, was just beginning to clean Lord Tiernan's wounds while Olwen sat pale and trembling at a nearby table, Brigid tending to her.

Cree kept his wife tucked behind him as he looked down at the dead man, thinking it wasn't possible. The crazy tribe who thought themselves wolves were too far north. What could they be doing here?

Dawn watched as her husband drew his shoulders back and his body tensed so badly that his muscles bulged to the point that they looked as if they would burst. He had had enough. The fierce and impatient mercenary in him was about to emerge.

"I have no patience left, Lord Tiernan," Cree said with such powerful strength that everyone there leaned back as if his words had struck them. "You will tell me the truth or so help me I will kill you myself." He pointed to the dead man. "I know of this vicious tribe. What is one of their warriors doing here in your castle?"

Lord Tiernan glared at Cree.

"Don't bother to tell me that it doesn't concern me. If I am willing to raise my sword for you, then I will know who I am raising it against and why."

Lord Tiernan acquiesced with a bit of reluctance. "An old enemy of Clan MacMadadh."

"Why? What made the Ulfr tribe your enemy when they believe themselves wolves and MacMadadh means son of the wolf? That would make you family."

Dawn went to go to Olwen to see if she could help in any way, the woman appearing far too pale.

“Stay where you are, Dawn!” Cree ordered sharply. “You will not go near any of them until Lord Tiernan explains.”

Dawn knew when to obey her husband’s commands and when she could safely ignore them. This was a time to obey him, and she remained by him but not behind him.

Lord Tiernan did not look too pleased as he said, “You are no doubt familiar with how tales told to entertain grow outrageously in the Highlands, creating unbelievable legends. Due to past actions of some of my ancestors, a myth grew around Clan MacMadadh, leaving many to suspect us of being werewolves. The Ulfr tribe believes the tales and considers us cursed and unworthy of being associated with wolves. To them, we are an abomination and do not deserve to live.”

Cree’s response shocked everyone. “And are you werewolves?”

“An unnecessary question considering our last conversation.”

“I would think the same until I saw this,” Cree said, pointing to the warrior on the floor. “His head has nearly been severed by what looks like a vicious animal attack. Can you explain that?”

“The dead man was more vicious than a wolf, snarling, snapping, growling,” Olwen cried out. “He cornered me and was about to rip me to shreds with that claw staff and his pointed teeth when Lord Tiernan arrived. He didn’t stop even after several strikes of his lordship’s weapon, he kept coming. He was a madman.”

“You are safe, Olwen. All is well,” Lord Tiernan said to calm her.

“Not if there are more of these warriors lurking about,” Cree said. “And how was this one able to make his way into the keep?”

“The fog and his knowledge of wolves and how they hunt allowed him to slip past our defenses,” Sim said, entering the room and sending a quick glance at Lord Tiernan.

“But why a lone warrior?” Cree asked, searching all their faces to see if any of them questioned as he did and not one of them looked puzzled. “Or is he a lone warrior?”

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“We will talk privately, Lord Cree, as soon as Lynall finishes seeing to my wound,” Lord Tiernan said.

Cree nodded. “A wise decision.”

Olwen stepped forward, color returning to her face. “I will fetch a hot brew and have Cook start the morning meal early.”

Cree looked around. “Are there no servants to help her? She has suffered a fright and should rest.”

“I need no rest, sir. I am good and the other servants will wake soon enough to see to their chores,” Olwen said and left the room, her gait strong.

Lord Tiernan nodded to Brigid. She returned the nod and followed Olwen out of the room.

Cree turned to Dawn and slipped his arm around her to walk her away from the others where they could talk more privately. “You will wait here while I speak with Tiernan. There is more to this than he is telling me.”

Dawn scrunched her brow and shrugged, asking what he meant.

“I cannot see the Ulfr tribe holding any animosity against Clan MacMadadh. The opposite would make more sense. If they believed the clan were werewolves, wouldn’t they want to learn their secret so they could actually turn into wolves themselves rather than pretend to turn into wolves?”

Dawn raised her brow at the thought and nodded, thinking that would make sense.

“And the Ulfr certainly wouldn’t attack a clan they believe to be wolves; they revere them too much.”

Dawn shrugged again, confused.

“Aye, it is confusing and worse, the various scenarios of what the Ulfr warrior was truly doing here leaves me more concerned than the thought of werewolves.”

“Lord Cree,” Lord Tiernan called out. “We will talk now.”

Cree turned to see that part of Lord Tiernan’s shoulder and chest were bandaged, but the man did not cringe, not even a little as he slipped on his shirt. The wounds he had seen on Tiernan should have left him with painful movements, but he moved without the slightest discomfit.

“Make sure to stay here,” Cree said, then thought better of it. “Unless you feel in danger, then do not hesitate to come get me.”

Dawn nodded and fear roiled her stomach after Cree left her sitting at a table before he took his leave with Lord Tiernan. She had the horrible feeling that things were about to get worse.

“Do not waste my time, Tiernan,” Cree said as soon as the door to the solar closed. “I want the truth.”

“Once a secret is spoken it is no longer a secret and just as you would not leave your clan vulnerable, neither will I, which is the agreement we reached in our previous conversation. The Ulfr tribe is not friend nor foe to us. My ancestors struck an agreement with them years ago, finding it in both our interests to avoid each other,

our beliefs different, and since then we have had no contact with each other.”

“Are you saying the dead warrior is not from the Ulfr tribe?”

“At one time he probably was, but I would guess he is either an outcast, his tribe or pack, as they often refer to themselves, having forced him out or he chose to leave to start his own tribe and failed, leaving him a lone wolf, adrift on his own.”

“And they seek to prove their worth by trying to kill the laird of Clan MacMadadh?” Cree asked.

“Nay, they usually seek permission to join the clan, missing the camaraderie of their tribe. The wolves in the area usually do a good job of forcing them away.”

“Usually? Has any made it here like the one tonight?”

“Only one other time before this has one managed to reach us,” Lord Tiernan admitted.

Cree didn’t need to think long about who that might be. “Dolan, the one whose cottage it was where I found the wolf cub.”

“How did you know?”

“All the wolf pelts and the head of a wolf in the cottage. Old habits are not easy to break.”

“He does it in honor of the wolves who die. He has been with us for some time. He wed one of our own, had two children, and buried his wife and one child. He is a loyal member of the clan.”

“But the Ulfr warrior lying dead in the Great Hall was not interested in joining the clan. He was here for a specific reason... to kill—” Cree’s brow scrunched in thought, revisiting, in his head, the scene in the Great Hall. What was amiss about it? The wrinkles in his brow deepened trying to recall what had been out of place. He poured over the scene again and again, until... “Lynall’s hands were shaking. Even when I proved frightening to her, her hands never trembled. She was the one the Ulfr warrior was trying to kill not Olwen. Who is Lynall that an Ulfr warrior would want her dead?”

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Dawn watched how Lynall's hands trembled as she lifted a tankard to her lips. She waited until she placed the tankard back on the table to reach out and lightly tap her trembling hands, then she shrugged.

Lynall released the tankard to grip her hands together. "It's been an upsetting night."

Dawn understood though she wondered if there was more to Lynall's response. Cree could frighten with a look or a word and while Lynall may have paled when her husband displayed his authority, she had never trembled in fear. It was obvious she was fearful, but why?

Dawn smiled and nodded.

"You should continue to rest, Lady Dawn, so you will be well healed when the fog lifts and you can leave here," Lynall said, then anxiously added, "but no harm will come to you here. You are safe. The wolves don't harm humans unless the humans try to harm them."

Keeping her smile gentle, Dawn nodded and saw how Lynall kept glancing at the bloody spot where the dead warrior had been, his body having been removed.

Dawn tapped Lynall's arm to get her attention, then pointed to the bloody spot and tapped near her eye and pointed to Lynall's eyes, hoping her gestures were understood.

"Aye, I saw the fight. It was terrible." Lynall shut her eyes briefly as if trying to shut out the images.

Snarls, snaps, and growls sounded at the door and had Dawn and Lynall jumping to their feet.

Dawn pointed for them to leave, intending to get to Cree.

Lynall nodded. "Aye, we need to leave."

The door burst open before they could take a step and four men rushed in, stopping when they spotted Dawn and Lynall.

"Which one is it?" one of the men asked.

"I don't know, but we have to hurry, or the wolves will be on us," another said.

"Take them both and hurry," one ordered.

CHAPTER 10

"The warrior wasn't here to kill Lynall, he was here to abduct her, to stop her from marrying into the clan, though I worry what her fate would be if she was returned home," Tiernan said.

Cree shook his head, pushing his tankard away from him. "I am growing more impatient. Tell me the whole of it and be done." He calmed his annoyance and let the commanding and decisive warrior in him take rein and immediately focused on the problem. He glared at Tiernan. "You worry how I may respond to the truth, so you keep it from me."

"Wolves and human have one thing in common, they protect their own."

A logical assumption that pinpointed the issue. "You worry that I will side with my

own kind which confirms much of what I suspect but find difficult to believe. That I have a daughter of my own and I would do anything to protect her. So, you assume my instincts would have me believing Lynall should be returned to her family. Tell me why I should think otherwise.”

“What I tell you will make little difference to the outcome. The man who loves her deeply will never let her go and Lynall does not wish to leave here.”

“I have seen no man show her favors. If he loves her so much, where is he that he doesn’t make himself known?”

“I thought it best you did not know of their love since I was not sure if your unexpected appearance wasn’t planned.”

That accusation stung and annoyance jabbed at Cree once again. “Are you accusing me of spying on you?”

“You just came from a week-long event, summoned there to meet the king’s consultant, Lord Clouston.”

“What does that have to do—” Cree shook his head, not liking his sudden thought.

“You grasp the situation quickly, Lord Cree,” Tiernan said and continued to explain. “Lynall is his niece and was living comfortably with a family Lord Clouston left her with when she was barely eight years. She loved the forest and showed no fear of the wolves, and they did not bother her. She learned her healing skills from a local healer unbeknownst to the family who looked after her. She received news that her uncle had arranged a politically advantageous marriage for her in Edinburgh to an older man. She could not bear the thought of leaving the Highlands, so she sought refuge here and fell in love.”

“With you?” Cree asked.

“My brother Sim.”

Cree’s brow wrinkled. “I thought Sim was wed to Brigid.”

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Tiernan shook his head. “Nay, Brigid is wed to Gillean, who is presently on a mission for the clan. Sim and Gillean have been friends since they were young. With Tade being a handful, Gillean asked Sim to look after Brigid and Tade while he was gone. Besides, not knowing if you were here on behalf of Lord Clouston, Sim and Lynall thought it best to avoid each other. Believe me when I say they are anxious for you to leave even more so than you want to leave.”

“Lord Clouston is not a man you want to cross. He has the support of the king,” Cree warned, recalling how highly the man thought of himself. “If he asked, the king would send help, and you would have no choice but to turn Lynall over to them and more than likely you would still be made to suffer. Though before Clouston took such drastic measures, he would probably hire a mercenary troop to abduct his niece.”

“Dolan confirmed that when I spoke with him, the day you interrupted our meeting here in my solar. He spotted signs near the village when hunting. It is the reason I doubled the sentinels after that. But right now, the fog is our worst foe.”

“The fog will be the least of your worries if Lord Clouston’s niece is not returned to him. He is far from a nice man. One thing I can tell you that might help put your mind somewhat at ease is that I am no spy for Clouston and no friend of his. I tolerate him as many do. An accident and the fog brought me here. And I am forever grateful for your help. However, going against Clouston in any way can put my family in danger and it is something you should have made me aware of sooner.”

“But I am sure you can understand why I didn’t.”

“Of course I can,” Cree snapped, irritated by the turn of events, “but that doesn’t help

in any way the dilemma you have created for me.”

The door to the solar flew open and Sim rushed in. “They are missing, Lynall and Lady Dawn.”

Cree flew off the bench, his heart pounding furiously in his chest. “Have you searched the keep?”

Sim nodded. “Every bit of it.”

“No one saw or heard anything?” Tiernan asked.

“None that we heard of as yet,” Sim said.

“I saw how you knew Brigid was in the fog without seeing her. I assume it was by scent. Have any scents been picked up by anyone?” Cree asked, having to stop himself from running out of the keep in search of his wife, a foolish response since he needed to know more before he started searching for Dawn, and angry with himself for leaving her alone.

“Whoever is doing this is masking their scent,” Sim said.

Cree shook his head and glared at Tiernan. “Masking their scent, another thing you failed to tell me. That’s how the Ulfr warrior managed to make it into the keep. His scent wasn’t detected.” He shook a fist at Tiernan. “The only thing I care about is finding my wife and I imagine Sim’s only thought is for Lynall.”

Sim cast an anxious glance at Tiernan.

“He knows. I told him everything,” Tiernan said. “Right now, we need to find Lady Dawn and Lynall before they are taken too far away from us.” He looked at his

brother. “We hunt.”

“The pack is ready,” Sim said.

Cree looked from Sim to Tiernan. “Is this a hunt I can join?”

“Nay, you will remain here in the keep,” Tiernan said.

Cree’s fist came down hard on the table. “I will not sit around while my wife is missing.”

“You will not help her by getting lost in the fog,” Tiernan said. “Besides, it’s Lynall they want not Lady Dawn, and I doubt she will be harmed once they discover that she is the infamous Lord Cree’s wife.”

“You cannot be sure about that,” Cree said with a snarl.

“I am sure enough. You will wait here,” Tiernan said and turned to Sim. “We waste time. Let’s go.”

Cree didn’t rush after them as they hurried out of the room. He waited until he was sure they would be gone from the keep and went in search of Olwen. He found her in the Great Hall.

“I need a wolf, Olwen, to track my wife’s scent.”

“I don’t know what you mean, sir. I?—”

He lunged at her with a menacing glare, their faces nearly touching. “I have no time for games, Olwen. I know the truth about Clan MacMadadh. Now get me to someone who can help me before I tear this village apart.”

Olwen trembled. “Dolan can help you.”

“He’s not?—”

“Maybe so, but he tracks wolves better than wolves track.”

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“Then he is the man I need. Take me to him,” Cree ordered.

“You idiots,” the short, wiry man said, then pointed to Dawn. “Do you have any idea who you abducted?”

“One of them is the one we were supposed to abduct,” one of the four men who had taken Lynall and Dawn said with a smug grin.

“So, what if we got an extra one, Larkin? We can enjoy her, then sell her. Besides, she’s a quiet one. Hasn’t said a word since we took her.”

“Is that so, Penn?” Larkin said, his nostrils flaring as he nodded his head. “Tell me, Penn, what lord in the Highlands has a wife with no voice?”

“Everybody knows it’s—” Penn muttered several oaths beneath his breath.

“Good, Lord! We abducted Lord Cree’s wife,” one of the other men said.

“He’ll kill us, every one of us, but not before he tortures us,” another man said. “I’m out of here. I want nothing to do with Lord Cree.”

“Too late,” Larkin snapped. “He’ll hunt you down no matter where you go.”

“What do we do?” the man asked.

“We leave her,” Penn said. “Lord Cree will be happy to find her and won’t bother with us.”

“You are an absolute idiot,” Larkin said. “I don’t know why I brought you with us.”

Penn stuck out his thin chest. “You brought me along because I’m a fog man, born and bred in it. There isn’t a fog I can’t make my way through. We take Lady Dawn with us and once we’re beyond the fog we leave her someplace safe where Lord Cree can find her.”

The other men there nodded, agreeing with Penn.

“That sounds perfect,” Larkin said with a forced smile and Penn and the other three men smiled along with him. “Except for one thing,” he snapped. “Lord Cree is probably searching for her as we speak.”

“No one can get through this fog except for me,” Penn said.

“You really think a fog will stop Lord Cree from finding his wife?” Larkin asked and watched as the men’s smiles faded and they stared past Penn to Lady Dawn, who stood by the cold hearth shaking her head.

“We’re dead men,” one of the men said, and shivered.

Dawn kept her arm snug around Lynall. She hadn’t stopped shivering since they were abducted. She wished for the warmth of a fire but knew they wouldn’t get one, the smoke too easy to scent. She was relieved that they had at least taken shelter in an abandoned home, away from the fog and chill. She hoped the men would continue to waste time arguing, giving her husband more time to find her.

“We leave her here and get moving,” one man said.

A lone howl sounded, and every man’s hand went to the hilt of their sword.

“We need to get moving,” Larkin said. “Lord Clouston has probably grown impatient with us being late in delivering his niece to him.”

“What about her?” Penn asked with a nod at Dawn.

“We take her with us and drop her at that small abbey we passed on our way here. The nuns will look after her until Cree finds her, and he may look kindly on us that we left her in a safe place,” Larkin said, hoping it would be so. “Now let’s go before the wolves find us.”

“We have a better chance surviving the wolves than Lord Cree,” one of the men said and the others mumbled, agreeing.

“I cannot let my uncle get me,” Lynall whispered to Dawn as the men began to file out of the shelter. “He intends to wed me to a cruel man in exchange for more influence and power. But I am already wed,” —her hand went to rest on her stomach— “and with child barely two moon cycles now, and I have yet to tell Sim.”

Dawn wrinkled her brow.

Lynall understood Dawn’s expression. “You thought Sim was wed to Brigid. Brigid’s husband Gillean is away, though due back soon. He and Sim are longtime friends and he watches over Brigid and Tade for him while he is gone.”

“Move!” Penn ordered the two women and gave Dawn a shove in the side to get them moving.

She cringed and Lynall tightened her hold on Dawn’s arm and whispered, “He disturbed your wound.”

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Dawn nodded, the pain still radiating through her.

“Lean on me, walking will not be easy for you now,” Lynall urged.

Dawn nodded again, praying that Cree would not take long to find them.

Once all were gathered outside, Larkin ordered. “Stay close. The wolves cannot find us with our scents masked.”

“Are you sure the women’s scent is masked enough?” one of the men asked.

“Aye,” Penn said, “that Ulfr warrior left enough for us to use on them.”

After walking for a while, Dawn wondered how Penn could make his way through the fog so easily. He didn’t hesitate or falter in his steps. He walked as if the path was clear to him.

Werewolf.

She was being foolish. She was seeing werewolves everywhere since lodging at Clan MacMadadh. But what other than being a werewolf could explain his ability to navigate the fog so easily?

“How far to the horses, Penn?” Larkin asked.

Lynall’s grip tightened on Dawn’s arm hearing that. Dawn understood. If they reached the horses, more distance could be gained, delaying a rescue or worse,

preventing it.

“We have a way to go yet,” Penn said, not breaking his stride as he remained in the lead.

“Keep moving,” Larkin ordered.

They had taken only a few steps when a scream was heard. It brought everyone to an abrupt stop.

“Call out, men,” Larkin ordered and all, but one man responded.

“The wolves,” one man said.

“I heard no growl,” Larkin said.

A sudden thud was heard but no scream.

“Call out!” Larkin ordered again.

Only Penn and another man responded.

“It’s no wolf,” Larkin said and yelled out, “Take your wife, Lord Cree, and leave us be. We had no intention of keeping her.”

“I will not raise a sword against you,” the one man called out.

“You raised your sword when you took my wife,” Cree shouted with snarling anger.

“And you will pay for it. Lynall, have you or my wife been harmed.”

“Nay, sir, though Lady Dawn is in pain from a shove she received and being forced to

walk.”

A raging roar more frightening than any wolf growl pierced the fog and when it was done, Cree called out, “Dolan is moving toward you, Lynall. He will bring you and my wife to me.”

“You can have your wife, Lord Cree, but not Lynall. She comes with us,” Larkin called out.

“I think not,” Cree shouted.

“Lord Clouston sent us to get her. She is his niece. I caution you on making him your foe,” Larkin said.

“And I caution you,” Cree called out with a warning that no fool would ignore. “Stop Lynall from leaving and I will see you all dead.”

“I’m done. I want no more of this,” the one man said and ran off into the fog and a thud was heard after he took only a few steps.

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“You’re not going to let any of us live, are you?” Larkin called out.

“Your men are not dead... YET,” Cree shouted. “Now let my wife and Lynall go.”

“It’s not worth it. Let’s go,” Larkin said, seeing a shadow emerge from the fog. “We leave now!”

Penn turned, grabbed the dagger at Larkin’s waist and slit his throat, then he turned back and reached out, giving Dawn a powerful shove as he ripped Lynall away from her, and sent Dawn tumbling to the ground.

Dolan hurried to help Dawn up as a furious roar broke through the fog once again.

“I’m going to kill you!” Cree screamed as his shadow rushed through the fog toward Penn.

Dolan threw out his arm to stop Cree from going any further and Cree turned a furious glare on him.

“Leave him to Lord Tiernan,” Dolan said. “They are old friends.”

“I will not leave Lynall with him,” Cree said, his wife’s eyes pleading with him to help the healer.

“Lynall has served her purpose. Penn no longer needs her,” Dolan said, easing Dawn into her husband’s arm. “Leave the wolves to deal with him.” He nodded, looking beyond Penn.

Cree saw endless pairs of yellow eyes and one pair of green eyes glowing through the fog right behind Penn.

Dolan looked directly at Penn. "Let her go. You got what you wanted."

"When I lead this pack, Dolan. You will be the first to go." Penn sneered.

"You always were a fool, Penn," Dolan said. "Release Lynall so you can have your fabled victory."

Penn shoved Lynall toward Dolan as he stepped forward to catch her before she could fall.

"Time for all of us to return to the keep," Dolan said, keeping hold of Lynall. "Follow me."

"Where is Sim?" Lynall asked anxiously.

"Gone to end your problem once and for all," Dolan said.

Cree lifted his wife in his arms and kissed her brow. "I cannot wait to go home."

Dawn nodded and patted her chest, then rested her head on her husband's shoulder.

They hadn't taken that many steps when the snarling and growling wolves in a vicious fight could be heard echoing through the woods.

CHAPTER 11

Dawn snuggled suggestively against her husband, the thin shift she wore barely a barrier to her nakedness.

Cree snagged his wife in a tight embrace, keeping her pressed flat against his side. “We will not couple even though my shaft disagrees and continues to ache me. It has been too long for us both and that will result in my giving you a good pounding?—”

She smiled and nodded, the thought appealing.

“Nay, we will not take the chance. The fog has lifted these last two days, and you have healed nicely thus far. I will not take the chance of disturbing your wounds and delaying our departure. I want to go home and once home I will pound you until you are well satiated.”

She shrugged and traced a cross on her chest.

“Aye, I promise to pound you relentlessly,” he said with a chuckle.

A knock sounded at the door and Cree called out, “Enter.”

Olwen walked in with Dawn’s garments draped over her arm. “They have been washed and dried, and are ready to wear, my lady. No scent lingers on them.” She draped the garments over a nearby chair. “The morning meal is waiting, and Lord Tiernan will be joining you, and your horse will be made ready for you.”

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“Eager to see us leave, Olwen?” Cree asked, keeping a slight smile to his lips and shocked to see the woman return it.

“It is time for you to return home to your family, but your unexpected visit here will remain memorable.” Her stoic expression returned. “Do not take long. You need to fortify yourselves with food for your journey home.”

“Home,” Cree said with longing as Olwen closed the door behind her. “I can’t wait to get there.”

Cree helped his wife dress to avoid her disturbing her bruised side that had healed well with rest and no worry to disturb her sleep the last two days. But he would take no chances with their departure so close at hand.

With hands held tight, Cree gave one last look to the bedchamber before shutting the door. “I shall not miss it.” And Dawn agreed with a nod.

They entered the Great Hall, Lord Tiernan standing when they approached the dais.

“You both look well rested, and I imagine you are quite pleased that you will be taking your leave after you eat,” Lord Tiernan said.

“And I imagine you will not mind seeing us go,” Cree said and assisted his wife to sit.

“Actually, Lord Cree. I am grateful for the opportunity to not only have met you but to now call you a friend.” Tiernan held his arm out.

Cree locked his hand around Tiernan's forearm and Tiernan did the same to Cree. "Aye, Tiernan, Clan Carrick and Clan MacMadadh shall always be friends."

"That pleases me more than you know," Tiernan said and sat after Cree did.

"Have you heard any news about Lord Clouston?" Cree asked, pleased to see his wife eagerly reaching for a quail egg and a piece of meat, hardy choices to keep her full while traveling.

"Aye, and the news is most unfortunate," Tiernan said, nodding as he spoke seriously while a glint of satisfaction shined in his green eyes. "Lord Clouston fell prey to a wolf. They say his body was torn to shreds and while some called for the wolf to be hunted, there weren't any who volunteered to go after such a ferocious beast. More unfortunate news, I'm afraid. It seems that Lord Clouston's niece perished as well, attacked by a wolf in the woods. Clan MacMadadh was kind enough to bury the poor young woman so no one had to review her remains. The nephew, due to inherit Lord Clouston's sizeable holdings, was only too eager and grateful to accept our help."

"I am sure he was with such an abundant inheritance waiting to be gained," Cree said. "I am curious about Penn. Dolan mentioned he was an old friend. Was he part of your clan?"

"He was years ago. He challenged my leadership and lost. He set out to form his own pac... clan but never succeeded. He was alone, on his own. That can be devastating to someone who was used to a strong bond of family. The lonely years turned him bitter, vengeful, and foolish. I wished things could have been different for him, but he sealed his own fate."

"Larkin believed he was in command, but all along Penn was. He never had any intention of taking Lynall to Clouston. His goal was to kill you and take over leadership of the clan."

“Even if he had succeeded, he would have never led this clan. He would have had to challenge Sim for leadership and that would not have gone well for Penn.”

“And the men that were fooled by him?” Cree asked, their fate never mentioned to him.

“They will tell no tales,” Tiernan said.

Sim and Lynall entered, smiling like only young people in love could.

“I’m to be a da,” Sim shouted.

Tiernan hurried out of his chair to go and congratulate his brother in a huge hug and a firm slap on the back. “I am thrilled for you and look forward to being an uncle, the favorite one.”

Dawn stood to go to Lynall, but the young woman waved at her, “Please stay where you are Lady Dawn. I will join you so we may talk.” She looked at Tiernan. “If that is all right with you, my lord.”

“Of course it is, Lynall, and you need not ask permission. You are my brother’s wife, which grants you a place at the dais.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Lynall said with a smile, then she brushed a kiss on Sim’s cheek and hurried to sit in the chair next to Dawn.

Cree liked Lynall for treating Dawn no differently from anyone else and that she talked and understood Dawn more easily than most when first meeting his wife. The healer had a kind heart, though he did wonder how she ever got involved with werewolves. But he was not curious enough to ask.

“I wanted to thank you, Lord Cree,” Sim said. “You refused to leave Lynall behind with Penn. You put yourself in more harm’s way than you know, and I am forever grateful to you.”

“You should thank Dolan as well. If it wasn’t for him, I would still be wandering around in the fog.”

Sim laughed. “I already have thanked him. Dolan is a good man with a kind heart, and I am glad the clan accepted him as one of us years ago.”

Another human who lived among werewolves. Cree simply did not understand it. But then he didn’t understand how he could believe that the fabled creatures he only knew in tales were actually real.

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“I am pleased to let you know, Lord Cree, that your warriors are headed this way,” Sim said. “Your tracks must have been found and they follow them here. They should arrive in an hour or so.”

“Olwen,” Tiernan called out. “See that more food is prepared for Lord Cree’s warriors. They are probably hungry after so many days spent in the fog.”

“Aye, my lord,” Olwen said and hurried off.

“I appreciate that, Lord Tiernan,” Cree said.

“Come and let us sit, eat, and talk before the time comes for your departure,” Lord Tiernan said, and the three men settled at the dais.

Time sped by and Cree was pleased to see his warriors had survived well and from the smiles on their faces, he could tell how pleased they were to have found him and Lady Dawn.

“A few of the men feared we would return home with dreadful news, when we did not locate you right away,” Dylan said. “Of course, the constant howls of the wolves didn’t help. But I told them that we would find you and Lady Dawn safe and that you would have it no other way.”

Cree slapped Dylan on the back. “And I knew I could count on you finding us. You have learned to track well from Henry. He will be pleased to learn of your success.”

Dylan’s chest widened from the praise and pride of Cree’s compliments. “I will never

let you down, my lord.”

“And you have proven that, Dylan. Now drink and eat, for we leave here by noon.”

Talk and laughter filled the Great Hall and tales of wolves were told and listened to with great interest. But when the time came to leave there was no hesitation. Cree, Dawn, and his men wanted to go home. Even Cree’s horse was eager to leave, stomping the ground and snorting when Cree approached him.

Cree lifted his wife up onto the horse without protest. He thought she might argue wanting to ride her mare, but she didn’t. She was feeling just as he was that she didn’t want to be parted from him during their journey home.

He gave her leg a squeeze, then turned to Lord Tiernan. “Again, I will be forever grateful for your generous hospitality.” He lowered his voice. “I don’t quite know the truth of what happened here, and I don’t care to know for sure. As far as anyone will know, Lady Dawn and I were treated graciously and generously at Clan MacMadadh, and Clan Carrick now calls Clan MacMadadh its friend. You are welcome in my home anytime.”

“I am grateful for your friendship, Lord Cree, since your friendship offers our clan a degree of protection.”

“Don’t make me regret giving it to you. Tread wisely with your secrets, for as you told me once a secret is shared it is no longer a secret.”

“Which is why I was careful with my words to you, but rest assure you will never now or in ever regret pledging your friendship to Clan MacMadadh.” Lord Tiernan rested his hand on Cree’s shoulder. “Safe journey, my friend.”

“Kee! Kee!” Tade cried out, running toward Cree and Sim, Lynall and Brigid running behind him trying to keep up but failing.

Tade would have taken a tumble he was running so fast if Cree hadn't caught him and swung him up into his arms, Tade giggling through it all.

Once settled down, Tade pointed to Dawn. "I come say good-bye."

Cree lifted him closer to Dawn.

The little lad pulled out a flower, nearly squashed, that was tucked in his sleeve and handed it to Dawn. "For you."

Dawn smiled as she took it from him, tapped her chest, then leaned close to kiss his cheek.

Tade tapped his chest and kissed her on the cheek, and said, "Friends."

Dawn nodded.

As Cree lowered him to the ground, Tade tapped his chest and said, "Friends too."

"Aye, Tade," Cree said, "friends always."

More goodbyes were exchanged and a few tears from the women, then Cree turned his horse after one last wave, and positioned his stallion in front of his men, lined in pairs, and led them out of the village.

It wasn't until the village faded from view that Dawn looked at her husband, scrunched her brow, and shrugged.

"I think the same, wife. Were we truly in a den of werewolves? We never saw anyone there turn from a human into a wolf and yet all we learned about Clan MacMadadh leads us to believe that we took shelter in a den of werewolves. I think it is better for us to never truly be sure, to only think of them as our friends and pray for them, for I

fear for the future of Clan MacMadadh.”

The End