



Taken By the Beastly Highlander

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Category: Romance, Historical

Description: "There is nowhere to go. Tell me who did this to ye."

Keira is forced to marry a Laird she despises. Until his castle is under attack and his biggest enemy sees her trying to flee...And kidnaps her. Now Keira is trapped with a villain far worse than she imagined, only she can't resist his touch...

When Christian takes Keira with him, he knows there will be consequences. But the beautiful lass is his. And whoever stands in the way will face his wrath...For he can protect her from anyone - except himself.

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CHAPTER1

“I hate ye,I hate ye so much,” Keira sobbed, her fury evident in her tone. “I do nae want to marry ye anymore. Do ye listen to me? I will nae marry ye. I wish to return home this instant!”

“What did ye say? Ye wish to return home?” Eric scoffed as if what she had said amused him. Keira could sense he was getting angrier with every passing minute, but she was not going to back down. She was not going to stay quiet any longer. She had never learned to do that, and she would not start now.

“Aye! Break off this betrothal and take me home. I will nae stay with ye in yer miserable castle for another minute,” she shouted again, making sure he could hear the anger in her voice.

“Ye wish to break off our betrothal, Keira?” Eric asked, his tone dangerously low. Keira felt chills run down her spine; at that moment, he looked dangerous. A man who could hurt her. She knew something was not right. In fact, something about this man, the one her father had arranged for her to marry, was extremely wrong, and Keira needed to escape. She knew she needed to return to her castle, to the O’Donelly clan, as soon as possible.

“I do, aye,” she replied, “take me home.”

In the flash of a second, Eric moved towards her, closing the distance between them even though she continued to back away. Before she could understand what was happening or shield herself from the hit, his palm landed right across her cheek, pain

shooting through her face and scalp at the touch as she fell back from the force of it, her head hitting the wall. She slumped on the floor, spots dancing in her vision; she was struggling to remain awake.

He had slapped her. The man she had once been ecstatic about marrying had slapped her. This was the last thing Keira could have imagined. In the past two months, she had known him and even though he had slowly broken her, she could have never expected him to hit her.

“Ye will leave me? Ye will go home?” he asked, his tone turning sarcastic as he walked towards her pushing her onto the ground. He sat down in front of her on his knees, and all Keira wanted to do was run away. Every fiber of her body was telling her this man was going to hurt her more, and she did not wish to take the pain. No one in her life had ever raised a hand to her. Tears ran down her cheeks, and she quickly wiped them away, not wanting to show weakness.

“Eric, why are ye doing this to me?” Keira tried to hold her sob, knowing perfectly well that she was at this man’s mercy. She knew nothing could be done.

“Because ye are supposed to be wife very soon, and yet ye wish to break off this betrothal. I do nae like that, Keira. I do nae like a lass raising her voice at me,” he shouted, making her recoil further away. His hand shot out and grasped her long, blonde hair. His touch was harsh and extremely painful, warning Keira there was no escape. She could not physically fight off Eric since he was much stronger than her, and if she tried to run away, he would only catch her and make her suffer even more.

“I will raise my voice at ye whenever I wish to. Do whatever ye can and just leave me be,” she shouted at him furiously, but this time, a sob managed to escape her. Her words did not affect him and his stone-cold heart since he slapped her again, pushing her head toward the wall. She knew it would only make him angrier, but she no longer cared. There was no way she was going to succumb in front of a man who was

nothing but a coward.

As her head hit the wall again, she saw black. For a few seconds, the world was spinning, and she felt a sharp pain throbbing through her head. She felt as if she could no longer breathe.

“Ye are my betrothed, and ye will stay here in this castle with me forever. Forget all about going home,” Eric said, his voice returning to normal even though his words were just as cruel. “Do ye understand?”

“I understand,” she sobbed, just wishing to get rid of him.

“If ye even so much as talk about leaving again, I will kill ye, and perhaps then ye can leave the walls of this castle.”

Terror ran through her veins at his words, and she stared at him with widened eyes. “Kill me?” Keira stuttered.

“Aye, first I will kill ye, and then I will kill yer father for raising a daughter so disobedient. Then both of ye can leave my life,” he replied calmly as if he had not just threatened to murder her. Keira did not know how her life had reached this point. She did not know how a man who was once charming to her had turned into a barbaric monster.

He laughed slowly and turned around to leave the bedchamber. Keira heard the latch settling into place, indicating that he had locked her inside, but she waited for his footsteps to disappear entirely before breaking down into tears. Gut-wrenching cries tore out of her as she realized what had just happened.

It had only been two months since she had come here to live with him in the Gilmor Castle. He was the laird’s son and the only heir to the lairdship but had assumed all

responsibilities since his father had been sick for a while now. Keira couldn't help but think about the man she had met at her betrothal; the man had been nothing like the Eric she knew now. The Eric who had just hit her.

“Faither, how could ye do it?” Keira questioned her father.

“Ye have to get married sooner or later, Keira, and if an arranged match can work for Astrid, it can work for ye too.”

“Where is he?” Keira whispered to Aiden and Astrid, her brother and sister, who stood just by her. Although, before anyone could reply, she heard approaching footsteps and turned around.

“Me lady?” a pair of warm brown eyes met her gaze as Keira looked at the man staring at her with a smile on his handsome face. He was young, no more than a couple years older than her, and still youthful, but he was rather tall and quite lean, which made him look older.

“Aye?” she finally replied when she finished appraising him, realizing he must have been doing the same thing.

“I was merely wondering if the legends of yer beauty were true. I think I will nae have to wonder any longer,” he said, and Keira smiled at his flirtatious comment, immensely pleased.

“I think ye are nae allowed to flirt with a woman on her betrothal feast,” she replied, still not certain if this was Eric.

“I think ye are when ye are her betrothed.”

Keira scoffed as she came back to the present, still lying on the floor with blood

oozing out of her head. She had been confident that Eric would never keep her at Gilmor castle without her will. He would never be unkind to her because he had simply seemed like a man who did not know anything beyond kindness. He had appeared charming to her and her family, and no one could have suspected the kind of person he had turned out to be.

After he had brought her to his castle, the first few days had been bliss when he had dazzled her with attention. Although suddenly, he started to pull away from her until she needed to beg him to spend time with her. She was extremely lonely. She had never liked his mother, and his father was sick. He was an only child, and hence Keira had felt abandoned. She had realized that she could not live a life like this. He had turned cold towards her.

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He never touched her until today. She was terrified of asking anything from him, and Keira had never been afraid of anyone in her life. He had broken her feisty spirit, and that was something she could not forgive him for.

The only thing she knew was that she needed to escape. She did not know how she would do it or even if she would make it out alive. Living in this castle with Eric was killing her a little every day, and she would rather die trying to escape than die at the hands of a cruel, brutal man. A man who did not deserve her at all. Keira knew she needed to do something and do it fast, or else her life here would just fade away day after day.

She touched the dried blood on her forehead and wondered how many bruises and pain she would have to endure until she could finally be free. If she would ever be free.

CHAPTER2

ONE MONTH LATER

A loud sound suddenly reached her ears as Keira woke up from an already uncomfortable sleep. Eric had left her bedchamber only a few hours ago. She knew her face was sporting two huge bruises, and there must be cuts and gashes all over her body.

He never touched her sexually, never even came close to her in an intimate way but hitting was another thing entirely. He believed as his betrothed, she was already his property. Although he fancied himself as an old-fashioned man and would only come

close to her once she was his wife. Keira just had to make sure she'd never be that.

Everything hurt, but she was still trying to get whatever little sleep she possibly could just to escape Eric, even for a few hours. Hitting her had become a custom, a routine. She felt as if she had become the source of his venting, a human being he could be unnecessarily brutal with to take out his frustrations.

Although something else had woken her up. She sat up in bed, trying to understand what was happening, when her gaze landed on the faint orange light coming into her bedchamber through the partially shut window.

Fire.

She immediately stood up, her feet bare in the cold, and wrapped a plaid around herself. The fact that it was the colors of the Gilmor house made her recoil, but she did not have much choice.

“What is happening?” she whispered to herself and quickly walked towards the window. Her window faced the backside of the castle, and as she opened it, she was met with towering flames that had overtaken the building. A loud, violent cough quickly overcame her as she inhaled the rapidly rising smoke. Her eyes watered, and her vision turned blurred. Keira backed away in horror and immediately ran towards the door, praying for it to be unlocked.

Eric had stopped locking her up lately since he was now certain that she would not be going anywhere. He had broken her so much that she believe there was no point in attempting to escape his cruel grasp. She tried to open the door and breathed a sigh of relief. It was indeed unlocked, and when she stepped out, she found the castle in chaos. She could see servants running from one end to the other, some carrying buckets with water and others just simply trying to escape from whatever calamity had struck.

“Wait,” Keira shouted as she noticed a servant running, and the young man immediately stopped. There was terror in his eyes, and Keira knew something was wrong.

“What is happening?” she asked, praying for it to be just a fire and nothing else. For some reason, she could sense it was an attack. It was not just her instincts telling her so. She was sure a man like Eric would have enemies.

“The MacPherson clan has attacked, and their soldiers have breached the gates. We are all going to die,” the servant cried out.

“Is it just the soldiers or has their laird also come with them?” she asked, hoping it was just the soldiers.

“Laird MacPherson is here too. I saw him with my own eyes in the forest. The man looks as murderous as everyone says he is,” the servant told her, his voice almost drowning with fear.

Keira’s blood froze at the news since she knew perfectly well what it meant. The MacPherson clan was the strongest, most violent clan in all of Scotland. They were both rich and powerful, and their soldiers were the most well-trained soldiers one could come across. They were ruthless fighters and Eric’s biggest enemies. Their laird, Christian Larsen, was supposedly a fighter and a ruthless one at that. There was no one in the entire kingdom who could match him. The man was dangerous, and Keira knew he should never find her. Eric had only threatened to kill her, but Christian would kill her in truth.

They had been trying to attack the Gilmor clan for the last month now, and every time they did, Eric would take his frustrations out on her. The beating that night would be severe. Keira still did not know how she was alive yet.

Although, this time, the MacPherson clan had invaded the castle walls and had set the place on fire. She knew what this meant. If Eric made it out alive, she would die at his hands.

Now is my chance to run. They're too distracted to notice.

Before she knew what she was doing, she was running downstairs and out of the back gate of the castle, trying to make sure no one saw her. She knew since everyone was running out, a crowd would have formed outside in the forest, which meant she would need to run in the other direction to remain unnoticed.

Every inch of her body hurt due to Eric's beating, but she had no choice. As she stepped into the forest, filled with soldiers and fires erupting left and right, she knew she could escape. She could feel it in her bones.

Keira smiled weakly to herself as she continued running, knowing that all she needed to do was somehow get lost in the forest so no one would be able to find her. She was ready to die in the forest or become a meal to the wolves rather than suffer a life with Eric or be found by someone from the enemy clan. She just needed to run.

"God, help me," she whispered, navigating through the thick smoke all around her. She tried her best to keep her plaid wrapped tightly around her. Running was becoming difficult for her with every passing second as her legs were starting to hurt, and she struggled to breathe.

Tired and coughing, without being able to see well through the smoke, she ran directly into something. As she tried to clear the smoke with her hand, she saw it was someone. The tallest, most muscular man she had ever laid eyes on. A sudden burst of orange flames erupted somewhere close to her, but Keira could not look away from the piercing blue eyes trained on her face.

The man was not dressed in battle armor but simply in a tunic and his kilt, which was enough to tell Keira that he was from the MacPherson clan. Her kilt slipped through her fingers and fell to the ground as he stared at her curiously, trying to understand who she was. His face remained impassive and emotionless. He was beautiful. Keira knew men were not supposed to be described as such, but she had never seen someone who looked the way this man did. Despite the chaos and the running and the flames around her, all Keira could see was this man.

His gaze moved away from her eyes and slowly moved all over her face. Keira couldn't help but feel self-conscious, suddenly feeling the loss of the kilt over her as she noticed him looking all over her hands and exposed flesh. She immediately understood what he was staring at. Her bruises. She could sense that it was exactly what he was looking at as his eyes suddenly turned wild. Keira feared him, yet she did not once think of backing away or running. He already had a strange pull on her.

He extended his hand towards her, his index finger falling short just short of her face as if he had wanted to trace her scar, the scar given to her by Eric. His hand dropped back to his side, balled tightly into a fist as their eyes once again met. Hers curious, his still raging.

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“Who did this to ye?” he asked, his voice heavy with anger. Keira would have flinched if anyone else had used such a tone, but she didn’t flinch now. Not with him.

“I need to go,” she whispered, afraid to tell him who had been behind the bruises. She knew she was beyond help anyway. Whomever this man was would not be able to do anything for her. He was an enemy of Eric’s, and in the honorary sense of the word, she was Eric’s prized possession. He would never help her. She only needed to escape, get as far from Eric and this castle as she possibly could.

“There is nae where to go. Tell me who did this to ye,” he asked again, his words restrained as if he was fighting to conceal the anger in his tone.

“It does nae matter,” she replied, running her hands over her arms as a sudden chill overtook her. She turned silent as he picked up her kilt from the ground and wrapped it around her shoulders once again. “I need to go.”

“I asked ye a question. Do nae make me ask again,” he said, his words sounding both urgent and furious, but Keira was not going to give him a name. She was not going to tell someone from the enemy clan that Eric had done this, because then she’d have to tell him she was his betrothed too. She was sure they wouldn’t take this kindly.

“Why do ye care?” she asked back angrily, looking around to make sure her absence was still unnoticed. The man was becoming a hurdle to her escape. “Move. I need to leave. Now.”

“Nay, ye do nae,” he said as if he was deciding for her.

“I said move. I must leave before the battle is over. Ye do nae understand!” she said, clearly frustrated. She pushed against him, but he was built like steel, entirely unmovable.

Before she knew what was happening, he removed his kilt and wrapped it around her, over the plaid she already had on to protect her from the biting winds. She noticed he was wearing breeches underneath. His colors wrapped around her arms. She suddenly felt warm, but not yet safe. She would not be safe until she was as far away from Eric as possible.

“There is no where to go,” he replied. “Ye are coming with me.”

He suddenly picked her up in his arms as if she was weightless, and Keira knew that to him, she most certainly must have seemed weightless. He threw her over his shoulder as if she was a bag of wheat, and she realized what was happening. This man, whoever he was, was taking her away with him. A man she did not know was trying to kidnap her, and Keira could not let this happen. This was her only chance to escape. She could not flee from Eric, only to be captured by a stranger.

“Let me go,” she shouted, kicking with all her might at his thighs and hitting her fists on his back, but he acted as if none of it had an effect. He was built like steel, and his skin felt as if it was pure muscle. He might truly not feel a thing.

“Stop it,” he said when she continued hitting him as he walked with her on his back. Keira could see the battle unfolding in front of her, and she did not know what was going to become of her. The smoke only kept increasing as it filled her lungs, and she was beginning to feel dizzy. She knew if she were still running, she would not have been able to make it much further.

“I need to go,” she shouted, a cry escaping her throat. “Ye do nae understand. I really need to go. This is my only chance. Please let me go.”

“Ye are safe with me, fox,” he whispered as if coaxing a child. Keira only felt insulted and began to hit him harder. The smoke kept making her dizzier, and she was beginning to lose sense of what was happening around her.

She noticed when the handsome stranger suddenly stopped walking and instead placed her on a horse before mounting himself. Keira had no strength left in her body to run away or fight anymore. She was both exhausted and dizzy, and the smoke surrounding them made it even worse.

“I am nae safe. Let me go,” she whispered to the man, who simply looked at her with patience in his gaze. He still did not loosen his hold on her.

Before she could say much else or hear what he was saying, her vision began to darken as things around her started spinning faster and faster. As the man began to move away from the forest and the burning castle, Keira saw Eric. His brown eyes were on her as he watched her ride away with the stranger. Keira knew she was away from him.

She was away from the danger that her betrothed brought to her, but she did not know if the man she was with was safe or just another Eric. She knew she could not trust him, but as her senses began to get even more muddled, she had no choice but to close her eyes against the darkness and hope for things to work out in her favor.

She would not die today.

CHAPTER3

“Where am I?” Keira whispered as she slowly sat up in bed, her body still hurting. The battle. A large man who had picked her up as if she was weightless. Eric’s cold eyes as he stared at her before she fainted. Had she fainted? Keira couldn’t make sense of what was happening, or where she was.

Her memory returned as she realized that she was not home, and she could not be at Eric's castle. Her bedchamber there never had a burning fire, and Eric had refused to provide her with anything warm to cover herself, leaving her entirely miserable in the cold.

The blanket on top of her had indeed kept her extremely warm, and she felt protected. The feeling reminded her of home, but as she stared at the bedchamber, she knew this was a place she had never been before. The bedchamber was large and lavishly furnished, and from what she could tell, she was inside a castle. But whose castle? Fear gripped her chest as she remembered the man that had taken her. Who could he be?

Keira slowly moved her body to turn around, wanting to look at the other side of the bedchamber as well. Even turning around from one side to the other while sitting up required a considerable amount of strength. Just as she turned around, her gaze landed on the lit fireplace giving the entire bedchamber an orange glow even though it was dark outside. Had an entire day gone by? She could not tell.

As she looked to the side of the fireplace, a small shriek escaped her lips as her eyes once again met the piercing blue eyes she had encountered in the forest. The handsome warrior who had brought her here. Keira's mouth went dry at the very sight of him. The fact that he was still staring at her in the same way as he had done earlier was not helping at all.

He was dressed in a plain white shirt which was thin enough to reveal the hardened muscles on his chest and stomach, making him appear almost god-like perfection. It felt as if he was not real but molded right out of marble. His strong thighs lay open leisurely as he leaned forward on the sofa he was seated on. His breeches strained against the muscles on his thighs, and his arms were flexed enough for her to see how strong he truly was.

Although, his most striking feature was still his eyes. They were as blue as the sky on

a stormy night, and, set against his olive skin, they looked extraordinary. As if God had given them to him to make him appear more heavenly than human. His long, black hair that framed his square jaw was messy as if he had been running his hands through it for a while. Keira had never imagined someone this brutal could be this handsome. He was a warrior through and through. The strength his body emanated made him appear almost terrifying, yet Keira could only find herself drawn to him.

“Who are ye?” she asked, trying her best to not appear meek. She knew it was not easy to look strong in front of a man who was twice her size, but she would not succumb to yet another man. Eric had broken her already, and she was tired. She was not going to sit quietly as whoever this man was did whatever he wished to do with her. She needed to go.

“Why did ye bring me here? I told ye to let me go,” she asked again but knew her question would go unanswered yet again. He was silent still.

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“Will ye please say something?” she finally said, softening her voice, but he remained impassive, simply staring at her with an intensity she had never experienced before. She could not see anger or hatred in his gaze, just something she could not put a name to.

“Please let me go from here. I never wanted to be here. I need to go back to Eric,” she said. She knew she had no intention of returning to Eric, but it was a possibility that this man could be far worse than her betrothed. He looked deadly dangerous and could crush her with one hand. Keira knew she needed to look out for herself.

“Did Eric do this to ye?” he finally spoke, and his question stunned Keira. She did not know what it was about her bruises that had him so interested. She did not understand why he even cared. It was all he seemed willing to talk about ever since their first encounter.

“Does it matter?” she asked, not wishing to reply.

“Did Eric do this to ye? Aye or nae?” The apparent dominance in his voice told her that he demanded an answer and would not go without. Fear inched through her body and emerged into her eyes at his tone as she nodded.

The immediate anger on his face appeared like a flash, but he quickly concealed it behind an excellent mask that showed no emotion. Keira did not understand why he would be angry. He certainly did not know her enough to care about what had happened to her or if Eric had hurt her or not, but his expression and obvious concern told her otherwise. Who was this man, and what did he want from her?

Keira immediately backed away towards the head of the bed as she watched him stand up, fear taking hold of her entirely. She knew this man was stronger than Eric and far bigger, and if he would hit her, she would not be able to survive. She could not go through this again. He must have noticed her reaction since he immediately stopped in his tracks, concern rising to his face. He held up his hands as if to tell her that he was not going to come towards her.

Her heart continued to beat wildly in her chest, but she calmed slightly as she watched him move towards a table at the back of the bedchamber from where he picked up a tray filled with different kinds of food. He took slow, measured steps towards her with the tray in his hands and placed it on the bed through his extended hand while he himself remained five paces away.

Keira knew he was doing it all to make sure she felt safe and comfortable, and her breathing calmed down entirely. As she looked at the tray in front of her, she realized that she hadn't eaten properly in quite some days. Eric had not cared much about her meals or what she ate, and she was often neglected by everyone in Gilmor castle, which had led to her losing a lot of weight.

"Eat," the man said to her as he backed away entirely and sat back down on the sofa by the fireplace. Keira continued looking at him, not sure if she should eat. It was impossible for her to begin trusting him this quickly, but she could not help feeling slightly safe in his presence. As if he would protect her no matter what.

"I asked ye to eat," he ordered, his tone just as commanding as earlier. Keira did not know what it was, but everything about him demanded obedience, and she did not like that. She could not deny him either.

"Will ye let me go, please?" she asked again, her mind thinking of ways to escape. She needed to escape.

He looked at her as if she had lost her mind, and she could not blame him. After she had told him that it was Eric who had given her these bruises, the fact that she wished to return to him would sound insane to anyone, but Keira knew she had no choice in the matter. She needed to find a reason to escape, and all she could tell him was she needed to go Eric. Keira could not tell this man her identity or who her father was. She did not know if she could trust him with this information.

Without replying, he simply stared at the food and then back at Keira as if silently asking her to eat. Not wishing to deny him, she slowly pulled the tray towards her and took a bite from a random plate. As food touched her lips, she realized how delicious it was and how long it had been since she had eaten properly.

Without thinking that he was still staring at her, she began to eat leisurely, feeling stronger with every bite. She knew she had gotten weak in the time she had spent at Gilmor Castle. She needed to regain her strength and think about leaving this place. Although for that, she first needed to know who he was and where she was.

“Will ye tell me now?” she asked, finally gaining courage.

“Tell ye what?” he asked back.

“Who are ye?”

“Laird MacPherson, but ye can call me Christian.”

CHAPTER4

Christian stared at the woman in front of him, unable to turn his gaze away from her face. It had been a whole day since she had been with him. Since he had found her amidst the burning ruins of Gilmor Castle, he noticed the bruises on her face and the terror in her eyes and had made a split-second decision to take her with him. By now,

he knew everything about her. Even in the battleground when he had first seen her, he had known she was not an ordinary milkmaid or a servant. He had known she was so much more than that.

By now, he knew he was right. He already had his people find out more about her, and within time, he had found out she was Keira Wright, the youngest daughter of Laird O'Donelly and Eric's betrothed.

Eric had often bragged about being betrothed to a woman like Keira. Someone who was extremely beautiful and well-read. Someone who was lively and feisty and had every quality in her that any man could desire. Although, what Christian could not understand was the fact that a man who was as big a coward as Eric was would hit a woman. The mere thought made his blood boil. Even with the bruises on her face, he could see she was beautiful.

The MacPherson clan, which was decidedly isolated from every other clan, had also heard about the immense beauty of the sisters, Astrid and Keira. Astrid had already been married to Laird MacKie, who Christian knew to be an honest, powerful, and excellent man but, he knew Eric was none of those things. Eric was a coward and apparently had been cruel to Keira, and yet she had constantly been asking him to send her back to him. He truly could not understand.

"Why do ye wish to return to him?" he finally questioned, his curiosity getting the better of him. No woman deserved to be treated the way Eric had been treating Keira. The fear he had seen in her eyes yesterday and even today made him angrier than he had ever been before. He knew he could kill Eric for this, but first, he needed to make sure Keira trusted him, something that seemed like an impossible task.

"He is my betrothed," she finally replied, gulping down a piece of bread.

"He is a cruel man and the coward who did that to ye," Christian replied, knowing he

sounded angry, but he could no longer conceal it. She was still beautiful underneath the bruises on her face. She did not deserve this treatment. No woman did.

“Are ye...” she stuttered, as if unable to say what she wished to say, “are ye going to hurt me too?”

His heart broke at her question, and he felt the urge to stab Eric right across the face or give him similar bruises to what he had given Keira.

"Keira, I will never touch ye. Ye do nae have to fear me," he replied softly, still maintaining his position on the sofa. He knew if he even so much as tried to go closer, she would back away, and he could not see that happen. He could not see her suffer and be afraid of him when he had no ill intentions.

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Although he could not deny that he was more attracted towards her than he had ever been to any woman in his twenty-nine years. Here she was, a woman he knew nothing about except her name and he wished for nothing more but to gather her in his lap. He knew it could simply be his need to protect her, his need to shelter her from Eric and somehow remove the fear he had seen in her eyes when he had found her yesterday. He had been feeling weirdly protective of her since.

She seemed to accept his reply as she nodded thoughtfully and got back to her food. The dress Harriet, a maid he had assigned to her, had gotten for her was far bigger than her body and extremely loose on her. She was weak, probably due to the treatment she had received at the Gilmor Castle, and he could not think about anything else but making sure she ate well and got healthier.

Her dress shifted slightly, moving to bare a shoulder, and Christian could not help but stare. She was beautiful, but he would never force her to sleep with him. That was not the reason he had brought her with him or, as others were putting it kidnapped her. In a way, it was kidnapping, but he couldn't have left a young girl alone in a dense forest at night. If Eric hadn't found her, some wild creature would have, and she would have died anyway. He could not see her suffer.

"I am going to stand up and walk out of this bedchamber, and I will send in Harriet," he said, telling her before doing anything so her alarmed expression would not appear again. He didn't wish to startle her. She was already terrified and in a strange place and it was a surprise to him how he already cared for her well-being. He wanted her to feel happier and healthier.

"Who is Harriet?"

“She is a maid in the castle, but I have assigned her to ye now. She is going to be here with ye to take care of anythin ye might need. Is that all right?” he asked her calmly.

“Is she kind?” Her question felt odd to him, but he could not even guess what was going through her mind. She was genuinely scared of anyone.

“She is about yer age and very sweet. Ye will enjoy her company,” he assured her, still unsure why he cared for her so much.

“All right,” she replied, pushing the tray of food away from her. His eyes darted toward the tray, and he noticed that she hadn’t eaten much, but he could not force her. She was exhausted and in pain and clearly scared and distrustful. He would put her through even more misery at this hour by forcing her to eat against her will.

“Can I ask ye something?” she suddenly asked, surprising him.

“Of course.”

“How do ye ken my name? Did ye have me investigated?”

“I knew who ye were the minute I saw ye, but yes, I had ye investigated anyway to confirm,” he replied honestly, not wanting to lie to her. She had the right to know that he already knew quite a lot about her, even if she wished to hide it all from him.

“So ye ken my faither?”

“I do.” He wondered if she was going to try and threaten him to return her to her father. It would not work on Christian, but the effort would certainly be admirable.

“Will ye return me to him?”

“I thought ye wanted to go back to Eric,” he retorted immediately, reminding her of what she had been saying.

“I would rather go back to my faither,” she whispered.

“We will see about that. Ye need to heal first.”

Once she nodded at him, he slowly stood up and stepped out of the bedchamber. Just as he had asked, Harriet was waiting right outside the door and looked at him as he walked outside.

“She is awake, Harriet. She did eat in front of me, but it would be excellent if she could eat more,” he explained, “stay with her and make sure she feels better.”

“I will do just that, me laird,” Harriet replied brightly, and Christian felt confident that she was the best person to take care of Keira. He sincerely hoped Keira could feel comfortable with her and perhaps a little at home. He needed to make sure she felt better after the treatment she had received at Gilmor Castle. That was the least he could do.

“Make sure ye keep treating her wounds and bruises. I want her to heal as quickly as possible,” he instructed Harriet, who nodded obediently.

“I will do the best I can,” she replied, and Christian was satisfied. He watched her walk inside the bedchamber and heard Keira’s soft, sweet voice as she greeted Harriet before the door closed once again.

He wished to go back in again and spend more time with her even if all he did was sit and stare. There was something about her that made him wish to do nothing more but continue looking at her just as he had been doing since yesterday while she had been asleep. It had seemed as if she had slept this peacefully after months, and a small part

of Christian had been ecstatic that he was able to give her this peace.

Although he had been ignoring his responsibilities as the laird, and now Josh and his entire council were waiting for him in the hall to discuss the news of the battle. It was for the betterment of the clan, and he needed to work for his people. Keira was going nowhere, and he needed to get back to his responsibilities.

He walked downstairs until he reached the hall, and everyone looked up as he entered. His gaze immediately landed on Josh, his adopted younger brother from his gangster days. Josh had been beside him through it all, and when Christian had finally claimed his lairdship, he had asked Josh to live with him as his brother and member of the MacPherson clan. Josh was just two years younger than Christian, and the two shared an unspeakable bond.

“Ye all are here,” Christian said, addressing the men of the council. He knew they were all worried, and he could not blame them. They had all expressed his concerns to him earlier, and he had ignored each one of them since he had been worried about Keira.

“We were waiting for ye,” Josh replied and Christian nodded. He walked further and sat down in his chair.

“Have we gained enough war spoils?” he asked, trying to sort the matter of business first.

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“Yes, me laird,” a member of the council replied, “since we were able to get through the castle, we have gained ample resources.”

“That is good. Ye all ken we only raided the Gilmor clan in a way of defense; they attacked us first. I hope our motives are known to our people,” Christian reiterated, not wanting anyone to think that he was a cruel laird who was looting other clans and killing innocent people just for the sake of some money.

Eric had tried attacking the MacPherson clan once, and even though they had stopped the attack, he and his army had managed to escape, but forgiveness was something not in Christian’s nature. He knew he would never be able to let go of this until he extracted revenge from Eric for even thinking about attacking his clan, and now Christian had finally done it.

“The people ken, me laird. They all ken ye are both just and kind and would never do such a thing for any other reason but defense,” the council member replied.

“The people of our clan think so, but my reputation in the rest of Scotland is still...abysmal,” he replied, not sure if he wished to change it. Up until today, he hadn’t given a second thought to what people thought or believed about him, but today, he had been forced to think. When he had seen fear flash in Keira’s eyes at the mention of his name, he could not help but wonder if he was truly an awful person who deserved to be feared. The people of his clan respected him, for they knew him, but everyone else simply looked at him as fierce and lethal.

“Does it even matter to ye what other clans and people think?” Josh asked, knowing perfectly well that Christian did not care about other people’s opinions.

“It does nae,” he finally replied. “Now, what is the matter that concerns ye all?”

“Ye ken very well what the matter is, Christian,” Josh said, stepping forward. If there was someone in the whole world who could talk to him this freely and without fear, it was Josh alone. No one else had this privilege.

“I do nae,” he feigned ignorance, even though he knew perfectly well what they meant.

“Ye have kidnapped Eric’s betrothed, and ye and I both ken very well what that means,” Josh answered, saying it out loud. Right now, he was simply trying to ignore it until he absolutely did not have to.

“What does it mean, Josh?” he asked nonchalantly.

“It means war, Christian. Ye have kidnapped his woman, the lass he was going to marry. That is a direct attack on his honor and the honor of his clan.”

“I do nae care,” Christian replied, standing up and pacing the length of the hallway. Josh was right, and what he had done was terribly wrong. That had not been their motive, but he couldn’t have left her there to die, and he certainly did not regret his decision even for a second. Eric did not deserve her. A man like him did not deserve anyone.

“Ye will have to care, me laird,” a council member said. “This means we are all in danger.”

Christian turned to look at the man with an amused smile on his face. “Do ye truly think that our clan cannot fight the Gilmor army?”

“That is nae what I meant, me laird. I only meant that our clan and soldiers will be

forced to go through another battle for nae reason at all,” the council member replied hesitantly as his gaze landed on Christian’s thunderous expression.

“I did nae come here to ask ye all what do ye think about me bringing home a woman who was clearly abused by Eric in his castle. I think ye all are forgetting that she is the daughter of a laird and was clearly being held against her will in that castle. I have merely rescued her. If ye do nae understand that, that is yer problem nae mine. Keira is nae going anywhere,” he replied angrily, making sure everyone knew he meant every word of it. She was truly not going anywhere.

“She is still his betrothed, Christian,” Josh reasoned, and Christian took a deep breath to calm himself. He knew they were all thinking about the benefit of the clan, but he could not care less. But he could not return Keira to Eric. He would die before doing that.

“She is under my protection now, and I do nae care if she is his betrothed or nae. All I care about is that the young lass was clearly in a lot of pain with nay one to help her, and she has finally found an escape from that hell. I will not return her to him,” Christian replied with finality ringing in his voice.

“Eric will think we are holding her for ransom when that is clearly nae the case. We do nae need his money,” Josh added, still trying to reason with Christian.

“I do nae give a shite about what Eric thinks,” Christian shouted, no longer trying to control his anger. “Keira needed me help.”

“Perhaps we should return her to the Laird O’Donelly,” a council member added. Of course, they were going to suggest that. Although, he could not even let her return to her father without knowing if he was good to her or not. He would need Keira to open up and tell him the truth before he made any decisions about her fate, and until then, she would remain with him.

“I will need to ask her about that. Before that, she stays here,” he replied, finally calming down. “I do nae want anyone suggesting to me that we should return her to Eric or even so much as thinking about such a thing. I will not see it happen before my eyes.”

“But Christian, that would be the best course of action,” Josh added, and Christian finally lost all his temper.

“She is mine! Do ye understand, Josh? And everyone else? She is mine, and she is nae going anywhere, anywhere at all. If someone even touches her or invites Eric to take her back, or behaves rudely toward her, I will deal with the matter myself. She. Is. Mine.”

Christian turned to look at the astonished faces all around him and realized what he had just shouted in his fury without realizing what he was even saying. He had confessed in front of everyone that Keira was his. He himself was confused for several seconds, simply trying to grasp what he had just said. He simply wished to protect her from everyone. Even the clan, and perhaps this was the best way to do it. To make sure everyone knew she was staying here as per his wishes.

They all backed away and nodded, shock evident in their expressions. It was the first time they had seen him so worked up over a woman, but he was not going to remedy it. He turned around and walked out of the hallway, a sense of belonging filling his heart.

Keira was his—even if he didn’t know what that meant or how it had come to this.

CHAPTER5

It had been a week since Keira had arrived at the MacPherson castle with Christian, and she still hadn’t stepped foot outside of her bedchamber. The only person she had

met was Christian, who had been here when she had first woken up. She had often seen him just outside her door whenever Harriet came in or went out, but he had only come to sit by her or meet her a couple times.

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Keira wondered if he was simply trying not to scare or overwhelm her with his presence, for he certainly had a commandeering energy about him. Besides that, she had Harriet to take care of her, and she truly was the best company Keira could have asked for.

Keira already had knowledge of herbs and medicines since she had been interested in studying them and had taught herself through books. Hence, she had only needed Harriet's help in preparing them for herself, which had certainly aided her in feeling significantly better. The bruises on her face were almost entirely gone, and she did not feel so self-conscious any longer.

“Should I bring up yer breakfast?” Harriet asked her, and Keira nodded, pushing the covers away to get out. Harriet immediately began to straighten her bed out as Keira went ahead to help her. She had always done these things for herself when she was back home despite always having servants and had been doing them herself at Gilmor castle too. Eric had never provided her with a maid. She shuddered as thoughts of Eric came back to her, but she immediately pushed them away, not wishing to think about that cruel man.

At least here, at the MacPherson Castle, she had Harriet to take care of her, and Christian seemed protective. He had not tried to converse with her again, but Keira still did not trust him. A part of her was certain that he was just like Eric and was only waiting for her to heal so he could break her all over again, even though Harriet had done nothing but sing praises of Laird MacPherson to Keira in the past few days.

“How is everyone in the castle today, Harriet?” Keira asked, trying to act nonchalant since she wished to ask about Christian only. She was still unsure about her feelings

towards him.

“There are only two people besides the servants in the castle, me lady. Ye are the third,” Harriet replied as Keira went ahead and sat down on the sofa.

“Who is the second?” she asked confusedly, wondering if Christian had a family.

“Josh, me lady. Me laird’s adopted brother from his gang,” Harriet explained before moving out of the door and bringing in a tray full of food that had just been waiting outside.

“His gang?!” Keira asked, surprise ringing in her tone. Christian had a dark history, and she had heard bits and pieces of his past from Eric, but she still did not know much about his past.

“The laird was abandoned by his faither after his mother died, and he was just a young boy. The cruel man left him on the streets,” Harriet explained as Keira listened in closely, “that was when the laird knew he needed to do something for survival, and he decided to join a notoriously evil gang.”

“Did he have no siblings?” Keira questioned, entirely invested.

“None, me lady,” Harriet replied, “he was left all alone.”

“Surviving in a gang must have been just as difficult for him,” Keira commented, her heart feeling sympathetic for Christian. She did not even know him that well, but her heart broke for the young boy who must have felt helpless and miserable when left all alone by his very own father.

“Not at all,” Harriet replied immediately, “he was both strong and hot-headed despite being young, and even the older and experienced members of the gang began to

respect him. His noble lineage was also known to all and gave him a significantly higher position than the rest, and very quickly, he rose through the ranks until he became the leader of the gang.”

“He must have been very young when he became the leader,” Keira said. She could imagine Christian excelling at everything and rising easily amongst those like him. He was better than them all.

“He was, me lady. Perhaps only in his early twenties, but he was an excellent fighter and nay one compared to him in any regard. Hence, he was the most obvious choice for leader. Josh, who is now his man at arms, was his brother from the gang.”

“How did he become the laird then?” Keira asked, curiosity coursing through her at its best. She felt a sudden need to know as much as she could find about him.

“One day, he came back to the clan and decided to challenge his father, the former Laird MacPherson to a duel saying that the lairdship was rightfully his and his faither can nae take that away from him,” Harriet said, almost in a whisper as if narrating an adventurous tale. Christian’s life was nothing short of an adventurous tale, though. He was the prince who was wronged but fought his way to become king.

“He challenged his own faither to a duel?” It was hard for Keira to believe that such things truly happened.

“He did,” Harriet nodded.

“And he won,” Keira said more as a fact than a question.

“He had to win. He was stronger, more powerful, and far more trained in the art of war,” she replied, “although, he did nae kill him. He only defeated his father and assumed the lairdship. His faither was already sick and eventually died a few months

later.”

“He hated his faither so much and yet did nae kill him. He has a kind heart,” Keira smiled, not knowing why that made her happy.

“He does have a kind heart but nae a lot of people ken or believe that. He is only ever seen as cruel.” Keira nodded, knowing that Harriet was right about that. “He is the best laird the clan has ever seen. The clan has flourished and grown with him being here and has prospered every day since. He is kind to all of his people and cares for us all.”

“Is Josh young?” Keira asked, suddenly curious.

“Nay, me lady. He is younger by two years than the laird, which only makes him seven and twenty, but he is much older than ye.”

“Laird MacPherson is nine and twenty? I thought he was older,” Keira replied, her focus entirely on the handsome man who had brought her here. He was rather young, but years of fending for himself had turned him exceedingly brutal and his expression quite stoic, which made him appear older.

“Our laird is very young and very handsome, me lady,” Harriet replied with a smile.

“He is,” Keira nodded, realizing belatedly what she had just said. She had called Christian handsome, which was the truth indeed, but Keira did not want Harriet to know that. She preferred to keep all her thoughts and feelings hidden until she was certain she could trust these people.

Harriet placed the tray of breakfast in front of Keira, and she began to eat slowly, her mind still on Christian. Keira had felt nothing but safe this past week. It was true she had been lonely, but when Christian had asked her if she wished for him to inform

her father about all that had happened in the past few days, she could not help but deny it.

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The bruises on her body were almost, gone but she had not recovered fully yet and certainly could not go home this way. She needed to heal first and gain strength which was only possible if she stayed here, despite the looming risk in the near future. Since Christian was mostly staying away from her, she wasn't entirely scared of him, but her feelings of distrust were still rampant, and she did not think she could help them.

"But the members of the clan and the council must come and go all time," Keira observed, knowing that the laird's castle was never empty. Her own castle had always been filled with people from the clan and members of the council who came to consult matters with her father.

"They do keep coming, yes, me lady," Harriet replied.

"Laird MacPherson must be close to Josh," Keira added, wanting to find out more about Christian. She did not know what it was about him, but he was intriguing, and Keira was definitely interested in finding out more.

"I do nae think there is anyone in the whole world closer to the laird than his brother. The rumors are that the two of them have protected one another countless times from harm and have grown closer over the years," she replied.

"They must be closer than blood brothers."

"They are, me lady," Harriet agreed, "Do ye nae have brothers nor sisters? Everyone here has heard about ye and yer sister and everything that happened with yer brother and how he was found. Yer family is quite well known even in these parts."

“Truly?” Keira was surprised. “What do ye ken about Astrid and me?”

“Yer tales of beauty have been heard everywhere, me lady. And now that I have seen ye myself I must admit that none of them were wrong. Ye truly are a sight to behold,” Harriet complimented, and Keira could not help but turn crimson. She did not remember the last time she had been complimented in such a way. Harriet was the first person who had treated her this well in such a long time, and Keira was grateful to her for that.

“Ye flatter me, Harriet,” Keira blushed, “if ye think I am the beautiful one, ye truly must meet Astrid instead. Laird MacKie fell in love with her the moment he saw her.”

“Anyone would fall in love with ye with just one look too, me lady,” Harriet complimented again, and Keira laughed. She knew she hadn’t laughed this openly in days. Her days at Gilmor castle had been nothing but bleak, dark, and filled with terror, and now, here, she finally felt like herself again. It would take her a considerable amount of time to truly feel entirely like herself and for her heart to heal, but she was getting there. That was only if Christian did not have some terrible intentions toward her.

The two of them remained there talking for a long time, and Keira asked question after question about Christian. A part of her knew she would have to face him sooner or later, or perhaps once she was better, she could simply ask him to send her home, and he would do so. Once she was back with her family, she could figure out what was to be done about her betrothal to Eric.

They needed to know what had happened, and she needed to be the one to tell them. She did not realize when morning had turned to evening and it was almost time for dinner. Just then, there was a knock at the door of her bedchamber and Harriet immediately got up to check.

“Who is it?” Harriet asked, opening the door and Keira tried to see who it was. Her eyes widened as she saw Christian walk inside the bedchamber, his tall frame filling the doorway. The bedchamber was huge, yet once he was inside, she suddenly felt as if the large space had grown smaller. There was something about him that made him appear larger than life.

“Keira, can I come inside?” he asked, although there was no such thing as pleading in his tone. Even his questions were commandeering; the man was not used to asking. He always got everything he wished for.

“Ye already are inside, me laird,” she replied, raising an eyebrow at him. He raised his eyebrow in reply, a smug half-smile on his face, and Keira realized she needed to be careful. She could not give him reason to be angry with her.

“Come have dinner with me,” he said, and Keira wondered if he had truly lost his mind. She was not going to sit and have dinner with a man who had kidnapped her in one way or the other even, if he had been rescuing her in the process.

“I do nae wish to,” she replied hesitantly, not knowing how he would take the denial. Fear must be evident in her eyes since she truly was afraid of his reaction, but he only shook his head as if her reply had merely amused him. Keira did not fail to notice that he still hadn’t taken a single step further inside the bedchamber and still stood by the door as if he knew that his walking inside would scare her.

“Keira, please come have dinner with me. Ye can nae remain locked up inside yer bedchamber forever,” he asked again, this time adding a certain hint of pleading in his voice as if he knew she would not be compliant with his orders.

“I can have my dinner right here, Laird MacPherson. I do nae need to step out for it,” she replied again, trying to make sure she sounded slightly stern with her words this time.

“If that is what ye wish,” he said at last. Keira stared at him with confusion, wondering if this was the extent of his pleading and if he was truly going to leave her once again. Although, she knew it was not going to be this easy. She was still deathly afraid of him, but it did not seem as if he were going to harm her, at least not right now.

“Are ye leaving?” she asked when he did not move an inch.

“No,” he said nonchalantly before turning towards Harriet. “Harriet, come here.”

Keira watched as Harriet walked closer to him, and he softly whispered something in her ear in a way that Keira could not listen. She strained her ear to try to catch the slightest hints of their conversation, but all was lost to her. Once he was done speaking, Harriet looked at him with a smile before nodding.

“At once, me laird.” She immediately walked out, confusing Keira even further, but questioning Christian would be fruitless. He was not going to answer her. Instead, he began walking ahead in the room, and fear once again rose in Keira’s chest. She quickly backed away towards the wall by the bed, trying to put as much distance between her and Christian as she possibly could. He must have noticed her reaction as sadness flared up on his face for a moment before it was gone again, and he held his hands in front of Keira as if telling her to remain calm.

“Keira, I am just going to sit there,” he said, pointing towards the sofa by the fireplace. It was the exact place he had been seated on when she had woken up here after the battle and had found him staring at her.

Keira did not say anything, and he took quick steps before finally sitting down and assuming a relaxed position. She finally breathed in deeply, realizing he had done exactly what he had said, her heartbeat calming down slightly. Christian continued staring at her as she crawled back on the bed, still maintaining the distance between

them.

What do ye want from me?She wanted to ask, but it wouldn't be sensible of her to do so.

It was his castle, and he could go anywhere he wanted. Hence, she knew she had no right to ask him to leave. Determined to ignore him, she picked up the book she had been reading earlier, which Harriet had fetched for her from the library, and began to read again. Harriet had told Keira that the castle had a huge library since Laird MacPherson had always been fond of reading.

"I hear ye have a library here," Keira commented, unable to sit still under his gaze.

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“I do,” he nodded.

“I could have never taken ye for a reader,” she shrugged, and he burst out laughing. The sound warmed her heart.

“Since I am a warrior, I am supposed to be dumb?” he asked her, raising an eyebrow at the prejudice in her mind.

“Perhaps,” Keira replied, smiling a little. She must have sounded awful saying something like that.

“I will let ye ken that I was a rather bright child before my faither decided to turn me out of the castle, and I continued teaching myself even after I left,” he replied, surprising her, “when I returned to the castle, the first thing I worked on was the library because I have always enjoyed reading.”

For a man who looked nothing short of a great warrior, Keira could have never expected him to be a reader. Although she still wished to see the library but was too afraid to step out of her bedchamber even though Harriet had assured her all was going to be fine. Keira nodded at him and continued reading but was acutely aware of Christian’s gaze still on her, which was slightly unnerving. She could simply not focus and annoyingly closed her book to look at him.

“What do ye want from me?” she snapped, knowing how this anger could be lethal for her only.

“I see yer bruises have almost healed,” he remarked, instead of replying to her.

“They have,” she replied, surprised that he had noticed such a thing. “Ye did nae answer my question.”

“Which question?”

“What do ye want from me?”

“I asked ye to have dinner with me, but ye refused, so I am sitting here now. I wished to be in yer company,” he said with a shrug as if such a confession did not mean much to him. Laird MacPherson wanted to spend time with her, but Keira simply could not believe such a thing. It sounded untrue to her ears.

“Why?”

He once again ignored her question. “How are ye feeling now?”

“I am feeling well. Just a little annoyed right now since ye are sitting here and not letting me read,” she replied smugly, a glimpse of past Keira resurfacing without her even realizing it. She recoiled a little, waiting for the burst of anger from Christian, but to her surprise, he laughed softly, a small smile playing on his face. Keira’s heart rate accelerated as she looked at him, laughing and smiling, realizing how it was the most beautiful laughter she had ever seen. Everything about him was etched into perfection.

“Ye have quite some fire in ye, Keira,” he remarked, and she could not help but wonder if that was a compliment.

“I do, me laird, yes,” she answered.

“Christian. My name is Christian, and that is what I want ye to call me.”

“Christian,” she replied softly, testing his name on her lips. It seemed strange to her as if something she was not supposed to say, but it felt good anyway. The man was making her feel emotions she had never felt before, and she could not understand what this hold he had over her.

“Keira?”

“Yes?”

“Do ye want me to kill Eric?” she looked at him confusedly as he voiced out the question and wondered if he was being sarcastic or serious. Sitting there dressed simply in his tunic and kilt, he was asking her if she wanted him to kill a man. A man who had abused her and beaten her. A man he clearly hated. Keira could not understand him. Why would he even propose to kill a man for her sake alone?

“Goodness, no,” she replied immediately, the humane part of her not wishing for anyone’s death. As soon as the reply escaped her lips, she could not help but break down into chuckles at his casual demeanor while asking her such a question. This man was nothing short of a mystery to her, and she did not want for anything other than the chance to unravel him.

CHAPTER6

“I wouldif ye simply say so,” Christian said in all seriousness, his heart-warming as he watched her laugh. He never could have imagined her laughing around him, and he was pleasantly surprised when he had felt her getting comfortable around him. He felt as if she just might trust him.

“I would nae want ye to have his death on yer hands,” she shrugged. He realized that she did not care much about Eric dying but simply about his death not being blamed on Christian.

“If ye insist,” he finally agreed, raising an eyebrow as if he was doing her a favor, and she chuckled softly.

“I wanted to thank ye,” she said.

“What for?” he asked, appearing rather confused.

“For taking such good care of me,” she smiled at him, and he knew she genuinely meant it. “Harriet has been there for me through it all, and it is her kind company, which has allowed me to heal even quicker.”

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“It was the least I could do,” Christian said, wishing he could tell Keira that he would gladly do almost anything for her. She was already too precious to him, and he simply wanted her to get better.

“Yer servants truly respect ye,” she remarked, and laughed softly, “as per Harriet, everyone in the clan does since ye are the best laird they ever had.”

“It is my job to take care of them for everything they do for me. I simply fulfill my role as laird, which was definitely nae done by those before me. I ken my faither was cruel to the people, and I always knew I would never be like him. It is just an effort to make my clan better,” Christian replied honestly.

As he stared at her, he could not understand the attraction he felt towards her. He had never been so attracted to anyone else, nor did someone ever have such an intense hold over him. Everything was different with Keira. The woman sitting in front of him was still not entirely healed but getting better every day, and Christian knew he could help her by simply being there for her. All she needed was care.

Their gaze turned towards the bedchamber door, which he had left open after Harriet left to make sure that she felt comfortable around him. Servant after servant entered with trays in their hands, followed by Harriet. When Keira refused to step out of her bedchamber to have dinner with him, he asked Harriet to bring their dinner to her bedchamber since he was determined to make sure they ate together. He wanted to spend every waking minute with her; dinner was simply just a small part of it.

“Should I get it served, me laird?” Harriet asked him as all servants stood behind her.

“Yes, just keep it here on the table,” Christian replied, motioning towards the table by the fireplace where he was seated.

Harriet nodded and motioned to the servants to place their dinner on the table, and just as he had asked her, she had brought them an assortment of all kinds of foods. He wanted Keira to eat to gain back her strength, and he was not certain if she was eating enough. Harriet had told him that she made sure Keira ate as much as she could, but it had been one week since she was here, and Christian could no longer stay away.

He watched the smile on her face as the servants set the food on the table, as she realized what he had done. He was glad that she did not look angry or, even worse, terrified. Instead, she looked content just sitting there. He had to resist checking up on her constantly in the past week, but he knew he was punishing himself unreasonably. He would need to break the ice with her himself, or else the two of them would never get closer, and he certainly needed to get closer to her. He wished for nothing more.

“Do ye need anything else, me laird?” Harriet asked once the food was set up.

“Nay,” he replied with a wave of his hand, “ye all can leave.”

“At once,” Harriet nodded. The servants exited, and Harriet began to close the door just as she was leaving, but Christian called out her name, not wanting the door to be closed in case it scared Keira. Right now, he wanted nothing more but her comfort and security, and far above it all, he needed her to trust him. He knew it was not going to be easy, but it was not impossible either.

“Leave the door open, Harriet.”

Harriet nodded and left and he turned to look at Keira, who was looking at him with a grateful expression, certainly noticing what he had done and why he had done so. He wondered if she realized that he was doing it all for her trust, protection, and safety.

None of it was easy for her, but he was ready to be patient and wait.

“Keira?” he called out her name.

“Yes?”

“Will ye please have dinner with me?” he asked once again, making sure to smile at her. Christian did not remember the last time he had smiled as much as he smiled in her presence. She was doing things to him that no one had ever done before.

She laughed and rolled her eyes at him before getting up from the bed, and Christian, too, chuckled softly. In the past, if someone had ever rolled their eyes at him, he would never have left them alive to consider doing such an insult to his person again. Although, when Keira did it, he did not mind at all. Her antics simply amused him, and he could not believe that a woman was having such an effect on him.

Under the terror Eric had instilled in her and her shy demeanor around him, Christian could sense that she was a completely different person with fire and spark. He could see it through her eyes and the way she replied to him. She had a rebellious streak in her which excited him, and he would give anything for her to become her old self again; to become the Keira she once was.

“I will have dinner with ye, Christian,” she replied, sitting down opposite him on the other sofa. Even dressed simply in a blue gown, she looked beautiful. Harriet had bought some clothes for her, and these fit her better. Her blonde hair lay freely behind her, making her olive skin shine. Christian could see the gold of her eyes in the firelight, which was only illuminated further by her smile. She was truly stunning, just as the legends had presented her to be. Nothing compared to her.

“I am honored,” he nodded at her as the two of them dug into the food. He was ecstatic to see her eating well and rather heartily, as if she really had been hungry.

“I must say, I haven’t even had food this scrumptious back at home,” she complimented, and he laughed softly. The MacPherson’s were certainly extremely serious about their food, and hence one could always find the best food everywhere in his clan.

“We love food. It is a warrior thing,” he replied proudly.

“Aren’t warriors supposed to eat anythin’ they get and nae care about its taste?”

“Nae when those warriors have women around them who care about what they eat,” he explained. Most of his soldiers were married, and the cooks in his castle were women as per the norm, and every woman in the clan was certainly a remarkable cook.

“So ye have women here who cook for ye?” she asked, and he wondered what it was that she meant. The sudden tinge in her tone made him wonder if she was truly asking if he had another woman in his life. He was certain Harriet must have told her all about him already, hence the question surprised him but amused him too. Could Keira have similar feelings towards him as he did towards her? He had a feeling it was too soon for such a thing to exist.

“The cooks here are women. Old ladies who make me, Josh, and whoever else is having dinner with us the most delicious of meals.”

“Oh,” she replied, relief flooding her eyes and her reaction confused him once again.

“Tell me more about yerself, Keira,” he said, wishing to know her better. It could only happen if they spent time together, and he needed to make sure they did. He wished for nothing but her company.

“Do ye nae ken everything already since ye had me investigated?” she questioned

sarcastically, and he once again realized how no one had ever talked to him in such a tone before. Yet here he was, letting a woman he did not even know get away with it. His feelings towards her were certainly too strong.

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“Nae everythin, Keira,” he stressed on her name. “I only found out who ye were and naething else.”

“What else do ye want to know?”

“Everythin’ that ye can tell,” he replied plainly, raising his glass of wine at her. He was not shy about expressing his feelings towards her at all. He had already confessed in front of the council members and Josh that she was his, and he would not shy away from letting her know that he was attracted to her. The only thing he did not wish to do was scare her with his feelings.

“I do nae ken what to tell,” she deflected.

“Tell me about yer family? Are ye close to them? Ye have been here a week, and ye still have nae written to them or expressed a desire to return to them. The council members think we ought to send ye back home,” he told her, not knowing why he had added the last thing. He truly did not need to tell her what had happened between him and the council members.

“Are ye plannin’ to send me home?”

“I asked ye, ye denied. So nay,” he told her flatly.

“My family is great. My faither loves me very much, and so do Astrid and Aiden. I ken they must all be worried about me, especially if Eric has told them that ye have, ye ken...” she hesitated and trailed off.

“That I have kidnapped ye?” Christian completed her sentence.

“Yes, that.”

“I will send ye back this instant if ye wish for that, but I will never let ye go back to Eric,” he said, anger rising to his face once again as he thought about that sorry excuse of a man. A man who hit women. Christian could never call any such person a man, and to him, Eric was nothing more than a coward.

“I do nae wish to go back to Eric either,” she whispered, taking a small bite. He felt relief as he heard her say that.

“I am glad. The man does nae deserve ye or anyone else for that matter.”

“It was an arranged betrothal, and he was the very picture of charm when I met him at the betrothal feast. None of us could have known what was waiting ahead,” she said, and he realized that she was unconsciously justifying her family.

“Did ye find out how he was the moment ye came to his castle?” Christian asked, evidently curious. He wished to know everything he could find out about the matter.

“Nay,” Keira shook her head, “he was extremely kind to me in the beginning for a few days, but then he became distant, which was emotionally torturous for me since I was alone in the castle besides his company. He then became abusive and made me feel small, and then one day eventually, he began to hit me.”

Christian could not help but notice how she whispered the last part, as if the mere thought of that happening both embarrassed and scared her. He could not even imagine the pain and abuse she must have endured at the hands of Eric, and the very thought made him furious.

“Ye did nae contact yer family?”

“He did nae let me,” she replied with a sigh, “he must have also intercepted any letter they sent me because I did nae receive anything from their end.”

“Ye do nae ken a man until ye have lived with him, Keira. Nay one could be blamed here,” Christian said, wishing to change the subject. He could see that even thoughts of him made her feel afraid, and he did not want her to ever feel that way again.

“Ye are right.”

“How did yer bruises heal so quickly? I thought they would take some time,” he asked.

“Oh,” she replied, finally looking up at him and then down at her body, “I prepared infusions and ointments for myself with Harriet’s help and the help of yer herb garden. That did help me heal.”

“How do ye have that knowledge?” he asked, truly impressed. It was evident that she was both learned and well-read, and the knowledge made Christian like her even more. She was more than just a beautiful face, and her mind was certainly as sharp as her wit.

“I taught myself through reading,” she answered.

“Ye must visit the library at the castle. Ye will find several books ye will quite enjoy reading; I assure ye,” he told her, wanting for her to step out of her bedchamber. He wanted her to feel at home in the castle, to get to know those around her so she could be comfortable with them.

“Harriet did say so,” she answered shyly.

“And yet ye still haven’t seen it?”

“I did nae ken if I should have gone out of my bedchamber or not,” she told him honestly, and Christian shook his head.

“Keira, ye can go anywhere ye wish to go. I ken that the situation seems as if I have indeed kidnapped ye, but ye ken those were never my intentions. I am not the kind of man who would ever kidnap a woman,” he assured her.

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“So why did ye bring me here?” she suddenly asked, looking up at him. If he stared at those brown eyes any longer, he would be lost in them, but he did not wish to look away. Her hold on him was too strong.

“To rescue ye,” he answered truthfully.

“And how did ye ken I needed rescuing? Has Eric done this to another woman before me? Does he have such a reputation?”

“Eric’s only reputation is that of a coward, and I do nae ken if he has ever done this to another woman, but if he has, I hope the man dies a slow, painful death,” Christian said angrily, “I knew that ye needed rescuing the moment I saw ye. It was in yer eyes.”

“I simply wished to run away into the forest,” she told him. “Away from Eric and the castle, but instead, I bumped into ye.”

“Ye would have died in the castle,” he reasoned. “It was dark, cold, and ye were barely dressed in anything to keep ye warm. Ye had nay food and water, and there were wild animals in the forest against which ye had no means to protect yerself. Ye ken as well as I that ye would have never survived in a castle. The moment ye would have gotten lost, ye would have died of thirst and starvation if ye were nae brutally eaten by that point already.”

“It would have been better than being with Eric,” she said, a lone tear escaping her eye. Christian immediately put down the glass he had in his hand and got up to move toward her. He saw the fear in her eyes at his approach, but she did not move away.

He sat down on his knees in front of her, his head almost reaching hers even then since he was much taller, and tenderly brushed away the tear. She continued to stare at him but did not shirk away.

“I do nae want ye to cry, Keira. Never again.”

“I do nae want to cry either. He has done enough damage to me for it to last a lifetime,” she said.

“It will heal,” Christian replied.

“That will take time.”

“Ye will nae be broken forever, princess. I promise ye,” he assured her. He would be there for her throughout the journey, for he was a patient man and truly wanted to be there for her. He wanted to stand beside her as she once again learned to stand on her own feet.

“Why, Christian?” she whispered, a million questions swimming in her teary gaze. “Why are ye doing all of this for me? Why are ye letting everyone think ye are a kidnapper by bringing me here? I am not yer problem. Ye did nae send me home even after yer council members suggested it. Why are ye doing this all?”

“Do ye think I am a kidnapper?”

“I do nae. I am thankful to ye for bringing me here,” she told him, and his heart burst with joy. He realized that the only opinion that mattered to him was her opinion.

“Then I do nae care what anyone else thinks or how Eric is going to react. I ken I am capable enough to deal with him. All I care about is ye and yer safety,” he assured her, holding both her hands in his. Her hands were limp, but he noticed she did not

pull away from his touch. It felt as if some part of her was finally beginning to trust him, and this morsel of hope was enough.

“Me and my safety? The safety of a woman ye do nae even ken?”

“Keira, when I saw ye in that battlefield looking broken and vulnerable and searchin’ for escape, I knew I needed to somehow help ye, and the only way I could have done that was by bringing ye here,” he whispered.

“What did ye want to help me? Nay one else in the entire battlefield cared.”

“I wish I had an answer for that, but I do nae. All I knew was that ye needed help, and I was there. I could see the fear in yer eyes and I knew I needed to do somethin. I cannot see injustice being done to someone right before my eyes, Keira. And as I stared at ye, I knew ye had been wronged one way or the other,” he explained, hoping for her to understand.

“And ye decided to bring me here without once thinking about the consequences of such a decision,” she whispered back.

“I am a man of reason, Keira. I always consider consequences. The life I have lived has taught me to do so, but I saw ye, all reason fled my mind, and I simply wanted to save ye from the hell breaking loose all around us.”

“Ye did save me that night, Christian. Or else I am sure I would have been dead by now,” she whispered, more tears running down her cheeks, “but I cannae trust ye so soon.”

“Ye do nae have to trust me so soon, Keira. I am not asking ye to give yerself to me or even believe me. I am only asking ye to try and get better for yerself. Ye have been through so much in the past few months, and I simply want yer heart to heal, and

once ye feel better, maybe then ye can trust me.”

He was a patient man, and he was ready to prove it through his actions.

“Are ye sure?” she asked.

“I am.”

“Thank ye, Christian. I ken this is something I should have said to ye a long time ago, but I was too afraid and too distrustful of everyone and everythin here,” she told him.

“Ye never have to thank me.”

“I still did,” she smiled.

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He slowly extended his hand, entangling a lock of her hair around his index finger as he continued to stare intently into her eyes. She was beautiful. His gaze dropped toward her lips, and he knew he needed to know what she felt like. Christian leaned in and waited for her to back off if she wanted to. He smiled when she didn't, her gaze dropping to his lips.

Christian moved even closer to her and placed a gentle kiss on her petal-soft lips as she gasped at the sudden touch, her breath quickening. He could almost hear the acceleration of her heartbeat, the soft rising and falling just as he moved away. He noticed how she did not back away, a touch of crimson staining her cheeks. As he pulled back, he could see the surprise on her face, her eyes moving from his eyes to his lips as if she didn't want him to stop. There was no hatred or fear. Curiosity, maybe and something else. Something Christian didn't dare to put a name on. Not yet.

“One day, when ye finally want it, I promise I will make ye mine, Keira. Truly mine.”

CHAPTER7

Keira was sitting in the drawing room, extremely absorbed in reading her book, when she suddenly began to feel sleepy. It could probably be because she had not much to do in the castle even though she had finally started stepping out of her bedchamber. It had just been a few days since Christian had shown up in her bedchamber unannounced, and the two of them had dinner together. When he had kissed her.

I cannot believe he kissed me without warning.

She knew when he had leaned in, the intoxicating scent of his skin corrupting her thoughts; she had wanted nothing more but to be kissed by him. He smelled remarkable, and no one would ever be able to resist him. She wanted to know what he felt like against her, and it had been far better than anything she could have ever imagined. He had been gentle, painstakingly so, as if he was afraid he would break her. As much as she had wanted for him to kiss her again, he had made no such advances.

All she had been left with was his carefully uttered statement about being his someday. Did he truly mean that? Those few words had made her speechless, and as much as she didn't want to admit it, a part of her wished for them to be true. Since that day, he would come to her bedchamber every night for dinner, and they ate together and talked about things.

She knew she had told him almost everything about herself. He knew all about her life, her childhood, her family, and whatnot. She felt comfortable talking to him and realized that even Eric did not know these things about her, which could possibly only be because he had never bothered to find out. Christian, on the other hand, was immensely interested in knowing everything he could about her.

"Ye are more interesting to me than me entire clan," he had told her when she had mentioned that she bored him with endless details about herself while he simply listened. Upon probing, he never answered her questions, and she still did not know much about him except for the things she had been told by others.

"Keira?" Christian's voice forced her to look up as all sleep escaped her.

"Christian? What are ye doin' here?" she asked, appearing confused. She knew for a fact that Christian was mostly busy during the day with work or visiting the clan to solve whatever problems required his attention. He did spend all evenings and nights with her, but his days were solely for the clan.

“I decided to come back earlier than usual today,” he replied with a shrug, and Keira raised an eyebrow at him. It could not be unreasonable because Christian did everything in an extremely calculated manner.

“Why don’t ye tell me the truth behind ye comin’ home early?” she laughed. Keira was certain he would give in eventually.

“There is a council meeting,” he replied, and Keira nodded. She had heard a lot about these council meetings, which happened almost every other week, in which the senior members of the clan sat and discussed persisting issues with the laird. Her father, too, held these council meetings, and she had always admired the power he exercised. Although she had never seen Eric conduct one. Perhaps he was the sort of laird who made every decision for the clan himself.

“Well then, I will leave ye to it,” she smiled at Christian, not wishing to take much of his time, “I am sure ye have a lot to do.”

“There is still some time in the council meeting to start,” he shook his head but then suddenly stopped and looked at Keira thoughtfully, “will ye come with me for a second?”

“Where?” Keira asked, definitely curious.

“I will introduce ye to some people,” he replied honestly, and she immediately began to shake her head. She did not think she was ready to suddenly meet members of the council already. Josh lived in the same castle, but she had not even met him yet. The council members kept to themselves, and Keira knew nothing about them.

“I think that is too soon,” she whispered, refusing to stand up even though Christian continued to extend his hand toward her.

“That is the most absurd thing I have ever heard,” he scoffed, “Keira, I think ye are perfectly ready to meet the council member. Even Josh will be there, and ye have nae met him as well.”

“Christian, I am a mess,” she stressed, standing up and pointing toward her dress.

“I do nae understand,” he replied confusedly. Keira was wearing a simple blue gown which left her shoulders entirely bare. Her hair was left open behind her, which gave her a youthful appearance, but she still did not think she looked good enough to meet such important people in Christian’s clan. These were the people whom Christian had defied to keep her with him when they had advised him to send her back to her clan. She did not know what they thought of her.

“I am scared,” she whispered, “what if they dislike me.”

“Keira,” Christian whispered back, an understanding smile appearing on his face, “everyone in this clan respects ye as much as I respect ye. If someone so much as raises an eye towards ye or says a bad word, I will kill that person with my own bare hands. Ye come first to me, and ye will do well to remember that.”

“But, Christian,” she no longer had any argument left. Saying no to Christian was already quite difficult, and his reassuring promises were making it even more difficult for her to deny him. She knew she would eventually end up meeting these people.

“Nay buts,” he shook his head and clasped her hand in his, “ye are coming with me.”

Keira no longer objected, finally giving in and walking beside him, her book still clutched in her hand. She had finally gone through the library and had explored the section of books based on herbs and was beginning to read those. Several of those were ones she had never even seen.

They reached a large hall, and Christian walked inside effortlessly as Keira simply marveled at his power and obvious charisma. He moved like someone who recognized his importance and knew he yielded immense power. No one could ever resist him. She finally snatched her eyes away from him, her gaze falling on the several men moving around the room.

Why are all of them so muscular?

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It was not as if Keira had never seen warriors before, but there was certainly something different about the MacPherson warriors. She knew most people in the council were soldiers, too, or had been soldiers once.

“Why does everyone appear so fierce?” she whispered to Christian, who simply chuckled at her question.

“We are warriors, Keira,” he whispered back, “our clan is different from the rest of the clans because of our ability to be the best fighters in all of Scotland. Nothing and no one compares.”

“That I can see,” she whispered back.

She knew several people had turned to glance at her, but she remained adamantly confident and kept her face neutral. She was certainly not going to show her fear in front of these men who feared nothing. She did not miss the irony of the situation when she remembered how she was in a clan where both the men and women were trained fighters and knew everything about the art of war while she had perhaps never even lifted a sword. It was rather comic to her.

“I ken nae everyone is here, but that is nae necessary since this is something I needed to do so Keira here would know more people in the clan,” Christian suddenly began speaking without warning, and everyone simply turned to look at him. “This is Keira, the daughter of the Laird O’Donnelly and I want ye all to introduce yerself to her.”

“Christian,” she whispered his name as she stared at him with widened eyes, unable to believe he was being so adamant about these introductions.

“Keira,” an immensely masculine yet charmingly kind voice called out to her, and she removed her gaze from Christian to stare at the man in front of her. He was tall, perhaps only a few inches shorter than Christian, and just as well built. He had an expression that screamed he would kill anyone who wronged him or his clan, and a part of Keira knew that he was someone important.

“This is Josh, my friend, my brother, my man at arms,” Christian chimed in, a smile on his face. Keira had already heard about Josh from Harriet and simply smiled at the man who made her feel warm without even saying much to her.

“I am Keira,” she nodded at him, and he nodded back.

“I had been looking forward to seeing ye for days now, but the servants tell me that ye do nae leave the bedchamber much except to go to the library or the kitchen,” Josh commented, and Keira immediately burst out laughing. She could have never imagined Josh, Christian’s brother from the gang, to be this perfectly warm and kind towards her.

“The servants are unfortunately right, but I am trying to step out of my bedchamber as much as I can,” she smiled, “or at least Christian is forcing me to.

“He is doing the right thing. The castle is yer home too now, and we both want ye to feel comfortable here,” he replied, and Keira felt warmth burst through her chest.

As Josh moved away, every council member presented introduced themselves to her, and she was pleasantly surprised to see how each of them was both kind and charming and more welcoming than she could have ever imagined. She received invitations to meet their wives and to go out in town or into the market. Keira did not know what she had been expecting, but she had certainly not expected to feel at ease between men she knew nothing about. Men who had no reason to be kind to her, but they were.

Christian guided her back out of the hall once she had said goodbyes to everyone and had promised at least half of them to visit their homes and their wives.

“Are ye feeling all right?” he asked, brushing a lock of her behind her ear as she smiled at the gesture.

“Thank ye,” she said simply, not knowing how else to express herself. She felt as if, in just a few days, Christian was beginning to understand her and what she needed far better than she herself was.

“For what, princess?” he asked, scrunching his eyebrows as they stood at one corner of the long hallway, Keira’s back resting on the wall as Christian stood in front of her.

“For making me feel cared for and respected by nae just ye but the people of yer clan as well,” she replied, a tear escaping her. “I do nae think I deserve this respect because I truly have done nothing, and these people do nae even ken me. But Eric never made me feel respected, and I had almost forgotten what it felt like to be cherished by those around ye.”

“Keira,” he whispered her name, running his fingers along her jawline.

“I do nae ken how to thank ye,” she replied, “honestly.”

“Ye have nay need to thank me. Ye deserve to feel both cared for and respected because ye give love and respect in return. Ye do nae need to do something for someone to attain basic human decency in reply, princess. Ye being ye is more than enough for that,” he replied, and Keira knew he was right. She needed to teach herself that being loved was something she truly deserved.

“I promise I will try,” she nodded, and he placed a soft kiss on her forehead.

“I am so proud of ye, princess,” Christian said, “I will attend the meeting, and then we will have dinner together.”

“I will wait for ye,” she replied and watched as he walked back inside, turning to look at her with a smile before he disappeared. Keira truly did not know how she had escaped from the hell that Eric had turned her life into and had been transported to the MacPherson Castle, which was proving to be everything she could have never imagined it to be.

Everyone from the servants to the cooks and now even the council members were kind towards her. Keira knew if she would step out of the castle and visit the townsfolk, everyone would be kind and welcoming. They would truly appreciate her presence between them, and Keira truly needed that. She deserved that and she would tell herself every day that things were going to be all right very, very soon.

CHAPTER8

“Keira?” a familiar voice called out to her, and Keira looked up immediately from the book she had been absorbed in. She was beginning to spend all of her days reading around the castle, and it was quickly beginning to get tiresome, but she did not have much else to do. She looked up and noticed Josh leaning in the doorway as if hesitant to come in.

“Josh, why are ye standin’ there?” she asked, turning to look at the man who was quite handsome himself. He was nowhere close to Christian, but Keira could sense that he had his charm about him, and he had been excessively kind to her since the beginning, which she was grateful for. Even though he had never tried being close with her, and neither had the two of them conversed for extended hours but there was still kindness in his person, which Keira could simply not ignore.

“Will it be all right if I come and read too?” he asked, and Keira nodded immediately.

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“Of course,” she replied. He walked inside and picked a book from a nearby shelf before coming to sit in front of her. She noticed how he maintained his distance but that his attention was certainly not on the book. It could simply have been because she was still staring at him.

“What are ye readin’?” she asked, not wishing to sit quietly. Keira had always been surrounded by the company back home, and she was used to being around people.

He raised the book towards her, “Commentary on Plato.”

“Ye are interested in Greek philosophy?” she asked.

“I am interested in whatever seems interesting to me at that particular moment. Ye see, I never had access to reading as a kid, and only now can I finally learn a few things here and there,” he replied to her with a smile, and it made sense to Keira. Josh had been with Christian in the gang the two of them had joined as children to survive. Christian came from a wealthy family, but she did not know if Josh was as privileged as he was.

“Who taught ye how to read?”

“Oh,” he said, his gaze suddenly turning hazy as if he was remembering the past. “Ye will be surprised to hear this. Christian did.”

“Truly?” Keira was not surprised. She had expected such an answer.

“Yes. When we first met and became friends at the gang, he was ten, and I was eight.

I had been part of the gang for the last four years already, but he had been recently turned out of his house by his faither after he had found a mistress. Surviving on the streets of Edinburgh for a young kid was not easy, and he had been smart enough to ken that joining a gang was the best thing he could do. Hence, he had done that. We became close to each other rather quickly, and when one day he realized I could nae read, he taught me.”

“Ye both were very young,” Keira remarked, realizing that even Christian had never talked so much about himself in all the two weeks they had spent together.

“Very young,” he agreed, “but perhaps that was what cemented our brotherhood, and now I am his man at arms.”

“Ye two do seem like brothers truly,” she smiled at him. She had noticed the fraternal interactions between the two men.

“We are. Only in name, but perhaps that is better than blood brothers. I would lay down my life for him.”

“And he would do the same for ye,” Keira observed.

“In a heartbeat,” Josh nodded. “Christian might seem cold and distant, but the man kens how to love. He doesn’t love often, but when he does, it’s for life.”

That surprised Keira. She had sensed that Christian had feelings of affection for her, but she was certain that a man like him could not love. He was both feared and respected by his people, and his aura around them was entirely different from the way he was with her.

She had seen him turn into a true laird when she had once seen him in a council meeting. The clan masters feared him, but it was evident that no one was better at

being a laird than he was. He had brought the MacPherson clan to a point where it was now one of the strongest clans in all of Scotland. They were almost as rich as her clan and the MacKie's. It had all been possible because of Christian alone.

“Ye really think he kens how to love?” Keira asked Josh, unable to believe so.

“I ken he appears cold and brutal, a little rough around the edges, but I have known him since we were both lads. I have seen him live a hard life since he was very young, and I know how it has changed him. Although, despite every hardship that came his way, he never lost his ability to love. I ken he still loves truly and purely and cares for those he loves immensely,” Josh explained.

“Has he ever been in love?” Keira asked hesitantly.

Josh looked up at her, a curious smile playing on his lips. Keira wondered what he was thinking but stayed quiet, waiting for him to say something himself.

“Did he not tell that ye himself? Do ye two not have dinner together every day? Have ye nae asked him?” Josh asked, and Keira wished she could laugh at the question. Josh, out of all people, must know about Christian's secretive nature and complete refusal to talk about himself.

“Do ye truly think he talks about himself with me?” she asked, not wishing to lie to Josh.

“He does nae?” Josh laughed. “What do ye two talk about then?”

“He only ever wishes to ken things about me, and whenever I ask him something about himself, he navigates the questions,” Keira told him honestly, “it is beginning to make me angrier with every passing day.”

“Well, that is not a surprise to me. Christian had never been one to talk about himself. He believes he is not interesting enough,” Josh replied, and Keira raised an eyebrow at him.

“That is the most absurd thing that I have ever heard,” she replied.

“Well, if there is someone in the entire castle who can make him open up, I believe that will be ye,” Josh said and Keira raised an eyebrow in surprise. She had not been expecting this.

“I doubt that. I told ye, he does nae talk about himself with me,” she said with a shrug.

“He will eventually. Right now, he is just allowing ye to adjust to the castle and feel at home. Ye have been through a lot already,” Josh assured her, and Keira did not know how she was supposed to feel about it.

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A part of her was certainly ecstatic that Josh believed Christian could open up to her, but another part of her still doubted what was happening between them. She was still betrothed to Eric, and Christian was the man who had kidnapped her. She did not know the basis of this relationship except for the fact that he was her rescuer.

“I do feel better here,” she confessed, suddenly feeling comfortable around Josh too. He had never given her reason to feel otherwise, and she immensely enjoyed having this conversation with him.

“What do ye do all day except read? Does it nae get awfully dull?” Josh asked, sounding genuinely interested.

“I do nae have much to do here, that is true. I can take up my reading and practices of healing again, but I will need to familiarize myself with the herb garden and the lands and forests of the clan for that,” she told Josh.

“Ye ken healing?”

“I have always enjoyed it, but I am self-taught only. Although I did treat myself at home whenever necessary and even helped those at the castle, so I do ken some things,” she replied.

“If that is somethin ye enjoy ye must definitely do it. Although, if ye do wish to do somethin else, can I suggest something?” he asked, suddenly appearing hesitant, which piqued Keira’s curiosity. She knew she needed something to do since she was terribly bored here as everyone was busy during the day with their own chores while she had nothing to do. She had even tried to learn cooking but had realized she was

extremely terrible at it and had no sense of what to do.

“Anythin’, please.”

“In the MacPherson clan, we make sure that our women are just as adept at battle as the men. Hence, most women are excellent horse riders, swordswomen, and whatnot. They ken the art of war and are quite proud of these accomplishments,” Josh explained as Keira listened closely, her interest increasing, “these women ken how to protect themselves against dangers of all kinds and can even fight male soldiers.”

“That sounds unreal,” she commented, never having heard such a thing before.

“But it is real. Always has been. Christian only stressed the importance of this even further and promotes every woman of the clan to learn. The little girls are trained just the way little boys are so they can learn from a young age,” he elaborated further.

“That is a truly Spartan spirit,” Keira commented.

“Even better than the Spartan spirit, I would say,” Josh smiled. “I was wondering if ye would like to learn?”

“Ye think I can?” Keira asked, sitting up straighter. The idea had intrigued her immensely, and she could not deny being interested in it. She knew she needed to learn how to defend herself and be strong in the process. Had she known it earlier, she might not have suffered this way at the hands of Eric.

“Anyone can, Keira. Ye suffered at the hands of Eric for too long yet stayed alive, which tells me ye have a truly strong spirit and can tackle anythin that comes yer way. If ye wish to learn, I would teach ye. I am sure Christian would teach ye too if ye ask him,” he added.

“I would love to learn,” Keira finally replied, a huge smile on her face. For the first time in a long time, she felt a sudden flash of hope in her heart, as if she was doing something good with her life. Something she truly needed to do.

“Really?”

“Yes. I want to learn riding and sword fighting, and I wish I could be strong enough to stand up to a man if he ever dares to hit me,” Keira replied passionately; every time Eric had beaten her coming back to her. She would give everything to have a chance of beating Eric the way he had beaten her.

“If that is what ye want, I am sure everyone here can help ye. Ye will also get stronger with time,” Josh replied, looking pleased with himself.

“Should I ask Christian before starting?” she suddenly asked, wondering how he would react to the news.

“He will nae have a problem with it, but if ye do wish to run it by him, ye should. He must be in his study.”

Keira nodded, wanting Christian to know. It was not as if she felt as if he would disapprove of such a thing, for she knew he would not. Although, in her heart, she did want him to know what she planned on doing, so it did not come as a surprise to him. Perhaps it was simply an excuse to see him during the day, but she did not care.

All she knew was the fact that he was a man who had been nothing but kind to her since the day he had met her and had exceeded all expectations. He was a man who had heard her unsaid pleas and had pulled her right out of danger while endangering himself and his clan. He was a man who had come closer to her than any other man ever had in the past, and she could finally feel herself softening for him. She only hoped she would not be hurt this time.

CHAPTER9

A sudden knock on the door of his study startled him, and Christian looked up, wondering who it could be. No one disturbed him during work in the middle of the day except for Josh.

“The door is open,” he shouted, expecting Josh to enter, but when Keira walked inside, Christian could not help but be surprised.

He smiled at the woman he had come to care for even more with every passing day and noticed how beautiful she looked, dressed in a long purple gown. Her blonde hair was tied up, leaving her long, slender neck bare, which made her look all the more attractive. Christian had been noticing every day how eating again was beginning to make her look healthier, and she almost did not look as weak as he did when he had first brought her to the castle.

“Keira, come in,” he said, standing up from behind his desk and moving forward as she walked inside.

“I hope I am not disturbing ye,” she said silently, looking around his study. The room was dressed in dark tones, which was much different than the rest of the castle. Although, Christian’s study suited his tastes best since he could never remember staying in bright places. He had always been an agent of the night, always involved in something dark, and had now become used to it.

“Ye are nae,” he said, extending a hand towards her. His heart soared when she unhesitatingly clasped his hand and walked towards him but stopped just a few inches short, not wanting to come inappropriately close. He could understand her hesitation. She was still another man’s betrothed, and the relationship between the two of them was yet undefined even though they were growing closer with time. It was true that her betrothal to Eric was only a betrothal in name and etched in writing and could

only be broken off by her father or by Eric himself. If it were up to her, she would have resolutely ended it by now.

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“I just wished to tell ye somethin’, and then I will be out of here,” she smiled at him.

“Is everythin’ alright? Did someone say somethin to ye?”

“Oh nay! Everythin is perfectly fine,” she assured him before continuing. “I was just conversing with Josh when he asked me what I did all day at the castle. Now the truth of the matter is I do nae do much any anyway; hence, he suggested some activities to me.”

“What activities?” Christian became intrigued at the hesitation in her tone. He slid his hand around her waist, simply wishing to touch her one way or the other.

“He told me how women in the MacPherson clan were trained in the art of fighting as well, and he offered to teach me sword fighting and horse riding and perhaps some other fighting too so I can protect myself. He said if I asked ye, he was certain ye would be willing to teach me somethin too,” she finally said, and Christian smiled at her. He could imagine Josh thinking about wanting to teach these things to Keira just so she could protect herself. The man was a proponent of women being independent in all respects.

“Do ye truly wish to learn?” Christian asked Keira, knowing that he would teach her anything she wished to learn. Although, despite all of it, he would always be there, right beside her, to protect her.

“I do. I think I should ken how to fight someone if they are tryin to hurt me. I have learned my lesson after Eric,” she replied, looking up at him as he continued to stare into her brown eyes.

“I think it is an excellent idea, and every woman must ken how to fend off danger,” he agreed, “Josh, I can assure ye is an excellent teacher, and ye are in good hands with him. Besides, I can teach ye sword fighting as well, along with any other sort of fighting ye wish to learn.”

“Truly?” she asked as if she had not expected Christian to agree to it so easily. He knew the hesitation in her tone had been because of her doubts about him agreeing.

“Why will I nae support ye about this?” he asked her, trying to understand.

“I do nae ken how ye see me. I am nae a part of yer clan, and I simply did nae think ye would have the time, ye ken, to teach me. Ye are a laird; ye have a lot of things to do,” she shrugged, and Christian could not help but chuckle. Her eyes widened as he laughed, “Unless, of course, ye are afraid that I could be stronger than you...”

Christian eyed her for a few seconds as he chuckled louder and moved even closer to her, “I already believe ye are stronger than me.”

“Do ye now?”

He nodded, “Absolutely.” He looked as if he wanted to say more, but he changed the subject. “Keira, do I nae have dinner with ye every night?”

“Ye do.”

“What did ye think I did at dinner before ye?”

“How would I ken?” she asked, appearing confused. “Eat with Josh?”

“Nay, Keira,” he laughed again, “I usually ate in my study while working or with the council members while discussing other things. Although, now that I eat with ye, I

have realized how somethin as simple as a dinner could be made enjoyable.”

“That is true,” she whispered.

“I enjoy spending time with ye, and I think ye already ken that. Hence, I would spend time with ye during the day as well, even if during that time I am simply giving ye a lesson about sword fighting or teaching ye how to ride a horse through the hills of Scotland.”

“Thank ye,” she nodded with a smile on her face.

“Ye do nae have to thank me, Keira,” he said, putting his index finger under her chin to make sure she met his gaze when she suddenly looked away. “I have only ever wished for ye to trust me and my clan. None of us here would ever hurt ye or harm ye, but we all simply want ye to be happy and healthy and everything ye were before the torture inflicted on ye by that bastard.”

“I do feel at ease here, Christian. Much, much better,” she told him honestly. “Can I ask ye something?”

“Anything.”

“It has been tens day since I came here. Has Eric still nae contacted ye about sending me back?” she asked, confused. She knew Eric had seen her leave with Christian and had expected him to come get her immediately, but he was still silent, which scared Keira even more.

“I do nae think he has figured out that ye have been kidnapped. Or perhaps he does nae want the people to judge him since ye are his betrothed and ye got kidnapped from his castle.”

“He kens that ye have me,” Keira told Christian.

“How do ye ken?”

“He saw me leaving with ye. The last thing I remember before fainting on the day of the battle is his gaze on me. On us. I thought he would have contacted ye by now, but he is remaining adamantly silent,” Keira replied.

“Are ye certain it was him?”

“I am.”

“Well, in that case, this once again shows how big of a coward he is,” Christian said angrily, “the man knows where ye are, but he still does nae care about ye enough to come get ye. Or perhaps he is just too scared to come get ye from me because he kens I will kill him if I see him.”

“Why will ye kill him? He has done nothing to ye.”

“I do nae need any more reason to kill him after what he did to ye, Keira. Moreover, he attacked our clan.”

“When?” Keira asked, appearing confused.

“Two weeks before we attacked him. That was why we looted his castle, or else I never would have done so,” Christian explained.

“He attacked the MacPhersons? How bad was the damage?”

“Ye think? Even the women of our clan are stronger than his soldiers,” Christian scoffed.

“So yer attack was only for the purpose of revenge?”

“And to remind him that he needs to stay in his lane and think twice before attacking the MacPherson’s ever again,” Christian confirmed.

“He told me that ye were a hot-headed laird who was attacking him for nay reason apparently. That his clan was far richer than yers, and all ye wanted was money. The first two times ye attacked, ye could nae breach the gates, and he was extremely angry and frustrated after the attack,” she told him, a sudden surge of fear in her eyes.

“I would never attack a clan to loot them. Our clan is far wealthier than he is and is only prospering. He is a cruel laird who tortures his farmers and blackmails them into giving him a greater share, and even his people hate him,” Christian told her, and Keira knew he was not lying. He had no reason to.

“So ye did attack him twice before?” she asked, curious about what had gone on outside the walls of Gilmor castle while she had been locked inside a bedchamber.

“Nay,” Christian shook his head. “It could hardly be called an attack since both times, it was Eric who tried to attack us first, and we simply chased him away till we reached his clan. We did nae even try to breach the gates, or else he would have never been able to stop us.”

“He was such a liar,” Keira scoffed.

“When he tried to loot our clan again, that was when I decided to finally attack and teach him a lesson. That was when I found ye,” Christian explained further.

“Thank ye, Christian,” she suddenly said.

“What for?”

“Saving me.” Christian smiled at her as he knew he would spend an entire lifetime saving her all over again just to see the smile on her face. She was more precious to him than anything else in the world.

CHAPTER 10

“What are ye doing?” Christian questioned the moment he entered Keira’s bedchamber at their usual time for dinner. Keira smiled as she looked at him since she had been waiting for him restlessly. She knew this evening was going to be monumental for them.

“I was waiting for ye, of course,” she replied innocently, completely ignoring the fact that Christian was clearly eyeing and referring to the table in front of her.

Since the two of them had been having dinner together every day, Harriet would set up a table for them in Keira’s bedchamber before Christian arrived. Although today, Keira had told Harriet to not set up dinner and leave the table empty because Keira had other plans. She was tired of Christian avoiding her questions and refusing to talk about himself. She would not tolerate it any longer.

“Why is a board of chess spread in front of ye, Keira?” Christian asked, coming to sit down in front of her. She could sense an amused curiosity on his face but nothing akin to anger or annoyance. She smiled as she looked at him, remembering how good he had been to her throughout her time here. He was kind and respectful, and she felt as if he truly wanted her to be around him.

“We are going to play chess today,” she told him with a smile as he cocked an eyebrow.

“Why? If I may ask?”

“Well, me laird,” Keira said with mock flattery, “I am tired of ye dodging my questions about yerself and refusing to open up while I am ready to tell ye everything about me. So today, ye will need to reveal yerself.”

“Really?” He laughed. “How do ye think it is going to happen?”

“The rules are very simple,” Keira explained, “every time I take away yer pawn, ye will answer a question of mine.”

“Ye have chosen the wrong game, sweetheart,” Christian winked, “I am an excellent chess player. I have been playing since I was a kid.”

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“So have I,” she replied confidently. “I ken what I am up against.”

“So ye think ye can win?” he asked, folding his muscled forearms across his chest. Keira’s attention diverted towards them as they flexed from under the thin cloth of his shirt, but she quickly removed her gaze and looked at him once again.

“I am certain I will win,” she replied smugly, and Christian shook his head as if laughing. “Do ye nae believe me?”

“Of course I believe ye, me lady,” he replied, turning serious, but Keira knew he was still just messing with her. “Ye are a fierce warrior, a prized knight, a mighty soldier, a skilled rider. What is chess for ye?”

Keira rolled her eyes, knowing perfectly well that he was referring to her training. For the past few days, Josh, him, and a few other soldiers had been training her in the art of combat and riding. Christian had mostly always been there overlooking it all and had been quite understanding about the difficulties she had been facing.

The truth of the matter was that Keira was not a natural in it, and it was taking her ample time to learn. She knew Christian was not making fun of her since he had been nothing but supportive throughout the process up until now. He was just being a little competitive, and she found that amusing. He could treat her like a friend above all, which never dulled their conversations.

“I might nae be all of those things, but I have been playing chess with the most skilled of players since I had gained consciousness, and ye will nae believe the things I can do,” she said, tilting her chin up defiantly.

“With all due respect, begin,” he motioned towards the board, and she nodded. Before she could make the first move, he suddenly held her hand and looked at her. “But wait.”

“What’s wrong?”

“If I take away a pawn, what do I get?” he asked, appearing serious. She had already thought about him asking for something as well since it was only fair.

“Ye can ask me a question as well,” she suggested, but he immediately shook his head.

“I do nae want to ask ye questions,” he replied, “I want somethin else.”

“What?” she questioned suspiciously; the mischievous grin on his face could only mean trouble.

“If I take yer pawn, ye will remove an item of clothing,” he replied with a glint in his eye, and she could not help but be surprised. Surely, he didn’t mean it.

He continued to stare at her, his strong forearms folded casually over the table as he leaned in closer to her. She immediately counted the amount of clothes she was wearing in her head and knew it would only take five pawns to get her naked, but she was confident the game would never reach there. She was certain of her win.

Although, the idea of being naked in front of him was more appealing to her than she wished to admit. She wondered if Christian would be affected by her the way she would be affected by him if he began to strip, and perhaps this time, he would finally kiss her again. She certainly missed his mouth on hers.

“Accepted,” she replied confidently.

“Truly?” he asked as if he had expected her to rebel against it.

“Ye are the one who is going to be losing his pawns, Christian. Not me.”

“We will see about that,” he winked, “who will be losing pawns, and who will be losing clothes.”

They finally started the game, and with every move they made, she could sense he had not been lying. He truly was a marvelous player and knew what he was doing. He understood the rules of the game and knew tactics that would draw toward his win. Although, she could still sense most of his moves even though some went by unpredictably. He was a risk-taker; she could see that now. But she was a risk taker too, and that made this game interesting for both of them.

“Ah,” she smiled at him as they both looked down at the board. He knew his pawn would go down with her move, and she leisurely hit it, placing her own on the board triumphantly. The mere fact that she had been the first to draw blood made her ecstatic, and he smiled as he saw the grin on my face.

“Do nae gloat, Keira,” he said, appearing calm, “ask yer question.”

“How were yer days at the gang? Ye know, when ye were a little boy? And how did ye even manage to become the leader? I can only imagine how it must have been for you...” she asked, immediately getting to the point. Keira had sensed he was an excellent player, and she had no time to waste with her questions. She already knew what she needed to know about him.

“Ye have thought this through, haven’t ye?” he asked, amusement lingering in his voice.

“I have,” Keira agreed, “now answer.”

“It was nae easy at first since I was new, and everyone knew that I had been turned out of the house by my faither, who was the laird. Although I was a strong and intelligent leader at the time sensed it quite early on and kept me close. Everyone quite liked me and eventually began to love me as their brother. I was accepted soon enough and became a part of them all. As brutal and vicious as them all. Perhaps even more so. People all over the area feared and respected me, for they knew what I was and who I was. Hence, when we needed a new gang leader, I was chosen via consensus of all. Those were some of the best days of my life,” he replied.

Keira had been staring at his face as he spoke, as he was staring at the wall behind her. She knew he was imagining those days, that time. He was imagining the pain and the suffering which had turned into the glory he had achieved eventually. Although, she could sense something soft about him when he talked about that life. And she knew it had not been terrible. Christian was strong enough to endure anything life threw his way, and he had endured this too.

“Do ye miss it?”

“That life?” he asked, still lost in the trance of the memories. “I remember it fondly, but I have a better life now,” he replied and immediately shrugged his shoulders, his attention returning to Keira.

“Why do ye remember it fondly? Wasn’t it harsh for ye?”

“It was harsh, but it made me who I am, Keira. It turned me into the man I am today and I love this version of myself. I am a better man today than I would have been if I had grown up in this castle beside my faither, and that is something that makes that life fond for me. It taught me things nothing and nay one else could ever have,” he replied, his eyes swimming with faraway memories, but he immediately shook his head and returned to the present. “I let ye slip in two questions with one pawn.”

“What can I say? I am clever,” Keira laughed, and they began the game again.

The two of them continued to make measured, calculated moves for a while, each of them fighting hard to protect their own, but as Keira made her move, she knew her pawn was about to fall. She saw the victory emerging in Christian’s gaze as he noticed it as well, but Keira had no choice left. She rolled her eyes as Christian, just like her, made a show of killing her pawn and then sat back leisurely.

“Let’s have it,” he said with a smirk, and Keira rolled her eyes at him again.

Without standing up from her chair, she only took off her shoes as Christian stared at her with a betrayed expression. She knew he had expected her to take off something else, but she was not going to do that so soon.

“Are ye kiddin’ me right now?” he asked, staring at her and the shoes.

“More pawns, more clothes,” she shrugged, settling back into her position and making her move before motioning towards Christian to make his.

Christian nodded with a certain sort of determination, and Keira looked at him admirably as, within the next few moves, he once again trapped her in a similar situation where she knew she had no choice but to once again take the fall. She regretfully made her move and waited patiently till Christian took her pawn with a huge smile on his face.

“More pawns, more clothes,” he repeated what she had said earlier and sat down comfortably, clearly waiting for her to give him a show.

Keira decided to do just that as she stood up from her chair, running her hands through her blonde hair and drawing away the clip she had been using to secure them over her head. In one swift motion, she removed the clip, making sure her hair was falling behind her luxuriously. She continued to stare at Christian as she did so, feeling powerful as he could not take his eyes away from her.

“I will nae count that as clothes,” he said, sounding deeper than usual as he motioned towards her open hair.

“Do nae worry, me laird,” Keira said softly, leaning in closer to him, “I will take off my clothes too. Just as ye asked.”

Christian stayed quiet as Keira moved back, turning around so her back faced Christian. She put all of her hair at the front from one side, turning around to look at the handsome man in front of her as she bent down seductively, her hands reaching for the end of her pastel blue gown. She slowly lifted it above her head and took it off at once, revealing the silk camisole she was wearing inside. The camisole only reached her thighs, leaving her legs bare and hardly covering her breasts.

Keira turned around, making sure Christian saw her before bringing her hair to the front to hide her exposed neck and chest as she was sitting down at the table again. She knew the table would hide her thighs, and she would not feel as self-conscious.

As soon as she sat down, she was met with Christian's glazed expression, but he swallowed quickly and straightened himself.

"That was some show," he commented with a grin.

"I am glad ye enjoyed it," Keira said confidently, although she had turned crimson, sensing Christian's unconcealed passion through his gaze. It was clear that he wanted her, and as Keira sat down in front of him, almost naked, she knew she wanted him too.

"Let's play," he said, and Keira made her move, determined to bring Christian to his defeat.

She played even more determinedly and, soon enough, took another one of his pawns as he shook his head. She knew he certainly must have been hoping to take her pawn, but she outsmarted him yet again.

"What else would you like to ken?" he asked, leaning in as he listened attentively.

"Have ye ever been in love? I mean, a man like you...Surely women must have been in love with you, right? But whom did you fall for?"

"Those are three questions, clever thing," he smirked and Keira nodded.

"But I asked them all in one flow, so ye must answer them all," she replied with a shrug as if this nonsensical rule made complete sense.

"I will answer them all," Christian agreed, "Nay, I have never been in love. And yes, some people have been in love with me over the years, but since I never reciprocated those feelings, it never led to anything. Hence, I have never felt that emotion for a woman before, even though I have felt lust for women and have even acted upon it.

But love, never. Yet.”

He said the last word almost stressfully as if trying to tell Keira something, but she did not know what. She had almost expected this answer from him but had never expected him to be brutally honest. Christian truly was playing the game seriously, and Keira was quite happy about it.

“Truly? Never?”

“Nay,” he shook his head. “Have ye?”

“Nae yet,” Keira replied honestly. She, too, had never experienced the pure and carnal feeling one could translate into being in love. She knew she wished to feel it, to know what it was and how it felt, but it had simply not happened to her as yet.

“Let’s play,” he said after nodding.

Within minutes, Keira had once again brought Christian to his death just by her skills and took away his pawn as he looked at her confusedly. She knew he had underestimated her, and now that he had found out that she truly was talented at the game, he was surprised. She laughed at his expression, thinking of the next question.

“Ask,” he said.

“Do ye ever miss yer mother?”

Christian sighed at the question as if he had been expecting such a thing. Each question she had asked earlier had been just as emotional too, and Keira knew Christian was a smart man; hence it was not too difficult for him to predict her.

“Honestly, I do nae remember her enough to miss her,” he replied, once again not meeting Keira’s gaze. She knew it was not easy for him to talk about himself, yet he was sitting in front of her doing it patiently and calmly just because she had wished for it. The knowledge warmed her heart.

“Then?” she asked, extending her hand across the table to hold his.

“I do miss her when I think of warmth and motherly affection or when I see some child or a grown man walking around the market with their mothers. I wonder how different my life would have been if she were still here, but she is nae. So, I will nae lie and say I never miss her, but I think of her now and then,” he smiled sadly, his eyes meeting mine again.

“I miss mine too,” Keira told him honestly. She knew she understood his loss, for she, too, had lost her mother. Her grief had not been as deep as his, but it was grief all the same, and she could comfort him as much as he wanted.

“One must miss their mothers,” he smiled again, taking a deep breath. “Let’s continue.”

They continued the game, and the next pawn to go was hers. Keira stared at the board as Christian smiled, his gaze sliding across her body. She knew he must be thinking this was the last thing she had on, but Keira knew he was going to be disappointed further as she stood up once again, her hand reaching for the undergarment she wore beneath her camisole.

Her fingers drew onto the band around her waist as she slowly slid away the sheer silk guarding her womanhood and slowly pulled it down, Christian's gaze following her every moment. Keira only grew warm as she saw him watching her as if she wanted nothing but him, but she continued to keep a straight face no matter how difficult it was.

"Let's resume our game," she said, sitting back down, knowing her voice was husky. Christian nodded, not saying another word, and Keira immediately took away another one of his pawns with her next move as they stared at one another again. She could feel the raw passion in his eyes, and she knew she depicted similar energy.

"What do ye wish to ken?" he asked, sounding huskier still.

"When will ye kiss me again?" Keira asked as Christian's eyes darkened. She could not deny the fact that she had been thinking about their kiss endlessly and had wanted just that again.

Before she knew what was happening, Christian threw away the chess board in one quick motion, the pieces clattering to the ground. He stood up from his chair as Keira stood up from hers, and he easily picked her up in his arms and placed her on the table, coming close enough that she was forced to wrap her legs around his waist as he bent down and leaned in just for a second as if waiting for permission.

Keira looked up into his eyes, and her gaze quickly dropped to his lips. That was all the encouragement Christian needed as his lips seized hers in a passionate embrace.

He only dug in closer to her. She could feel his unrestrained passion through his trousers as he dug against her bare femininity, which too, was throbbing with a similar feeling.

“Christian,” Keira moaned his name as he backed away for a second before taking her lips wildly again, and the two continued to explore each other’s mouths hungrily.

Keira felt his hands in her hair as they went downwards and cupped her waist, making her feel small compared to his large palms, but her desire only rose at the feeling, and she continued to kiss him. He tasted heavenly, and she wanted all of him. Even closer.

She moved her hand all over his chest, her hands tugging at the hem of his shirt to remove it, and he dutifully picked up his arms, and she took it off his chest, her gaze falling onto his muscled torso. She had never seen a more perfect sight than Christian, and she quickly began to explore the muscles on his back as they continued kissing. Just as her hands reached the belt of his breeches, he immediately brought his hands forward and stopped her in the act, pulling away slightly.

“We need to stop,” he whispered, moving away immediately as Keira stared at him in confusion, wondering what had just happened. He carefully picked her up in his arms and placed her back on her feet as she tried to make sense of the situation. They had been kissing not two seconds ago.

“Why?” she asked him, even though a part of her already knew. She could sense he thought this was too soon. She knew it in her heart, too but she wanted him immensely, which slightly frustrated her.

“Nae so soon, darling,” he smiled at her, holding both her hands in his, “wait a while, and then ye can have all of me.”

Keira knew he respected her enough to try and make sure that he was not hurting her in any way at all. This seemed like the only reason he had stopped, and it did make her smile. Although, she took his words as a promise and could certainly not want to truly have all of him soon enough.

CHAPTER 11

“Keira, be careful!” Christian shouted before her as she laughed and continued to sprint ahead of him, her horse galloping even faster now that she had finally learned to take control of it.

“Ye are fast enough to reach me, Christian,” she shouted back behind her, but before she knew it, Christian had already caught up with her, a stern expression on his face.

“Ye will fall and break yer neck, and I won’t, Keira,” he said angrily, and she knew he was right. It was true she had learned the art of horse riding and was getting better at it every day, but she still needed to be careful, or else there was a chance she would hurt herself. Now that she could ride bravely, she realized that she had been missing out on a lot and was simply trying to make up for it.

“Ye are right,” she said loudly, immediately slowing down as he slowed down beside her, shifting to a much slower pace.

“I want ye to learn to ride, and be excellent at it but try nae to go this fast in the middle of the woods where the ground is uneven,” he scolded again, and Keira looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

“Any other advice I must adhere to?” she asked sarcastically, rolling her eyes at Christian.

“Just this for now, my fox,” he smiled at her, and Keira could not help smiling back.

His smile was infectious and made her feel things she should not have been feeling at all.

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After their chess game just yesterday, she had been worried that things would be different between them, but Keira was certainly glad to see that nothing had changed. Christian had accompanied her for her early morning ride, after which he helped her train and learn a bit of sword fighting before he had to start his own day. He was making all the time he could for her, and she truly admired that about him.

It was true she wanted him even more after yesterday, but she knew she would have to wait, just as he had said. If it were in her hands, things between them would have escalated much farther from a simple kiss because Keira had never felt this certain about another man before. No one but Christian had ever touched her, and she did not even want anyone else to touch her.

“Ye are awfully quiet today,” he said suddenly, pulling her back to the present.

“I was thinkin’ about our game last night,” she replied with a mischievous smile on her face as Christian shook his head.

“I will nae be answering any more questions,” Christian said simply, shaking his head.

“Don’t worry, I will nae pester ye with more questions,” Keira laughed, simply enjoying the relatively comic banter between them. She did not know what it was about Christian’s company, but she enjoyed every minute of it. He could simply be beside her, sitting or walking silently, and Keira would be content with his presence alone. That was the way of things with him. He made her feel at peace.

“Good,” he nodded, suddenly stopping his horse as they reached a clearing in the

woods. "We should train here."

"Whatever ye wish," Keira smiled at him, quickly hopping down off her horse, and tying him to a tree as Stephen did the same. A few weeks ago, she could have never imagined herself to be this comfortable while jumping down from a horse, and yet now, she was rather skilled at it.

"I will attack; ye will defend," Christian said before fishing out his sword.

Keira had been training with several soldiers from the clan, including Josh, yet the only person that ever truly intimidated her was Christian. Whenever he helped her practice, she was acutely aware of his sheer strength and perfect skill. It was truly evident how good he really was at all forms of combat and defeating him was almost impossible. He held back while training with Keira since he knew her level of skill, not wanting to hurt her, yet simply his presence alone while in a fighting stance was enough to intimidate the fiercest of fighters.

"I am ready," she replied, taking out her sword as they stood face to face.

Keira assumed a defensive posture, her left leg behind her as her right leg protruded ahead. Josh had been teaching her how she could use her smaller stature and quickness of feet to trick the enemy and escape unharmed, and she was planning to use such a trick on Christian. She knew she could never outsmart him, but she was going to try.

"Let's begin," Christian said with a smile, almost immediately raising his sword to attack her. Keira, who had already been anticipating the hit, easily spun around to move out of the way, leaving Christian's attack to land in mid-air.

Without being perturbed, Christian waited for a few seconds before attacking again, and Keira stopped it with her own sword, but Christian's sword still came in contact

with her abdomen as he almost immediately shifted it to attack from his other hand. Keira backed away, remaining in her position to defend, successfully shielding a few more attacks from Christian until his sword landed directly on her neck.

“Ye are doing better, Keira,” he complimented, and she simply raised an eyebrow.

“If I was yer enemy, I would be dead by now,” she replied.

“Well, then, good thing ye are nae my enemy but someone very, very dear to me,” he said, coming in closer to whisper the last part in her ear. Keira felt goose bumps on her skin at his closeness, but before she could react, he had already moved away.

Why did he always do this to her?

“Well, what is the verdict, then?” she asked, hoping to hear his critique. Christian had never once tried to protect her feelings but praising her unreasonably, which was something she respected about him. When she did well, he said so. When she did not do well, he said it just the same.

“I see ye have been learning to use yer smaller stature to yer advantage, and I think that is excellent,” he remarked, “ye still need a lot of practice and training, and I am sure ye will only get better with every passing day.”

“Why, thank ye, me laird,” she said with a smile, bowing down to him.

“Are ye mocking me?”

“Nay, I respect ye too much to mock ye,” she replied. She had been trying to be funny, but she would never purposefully mock Christian since she really did respect him. He had earned a place in her heart that no one else ever could after all that he had done for her and was continually doing day after day.

“Should we head back?” he asked, looking at the horses. Keira knew it was time to return since morning was quickly approaching, and the sun was already almost entirely out in the sky.

“We should,” she remarked but continued to stand where she stood, not willing to move.

Instead, she walked back towards a large tree and sat down on the ground covered with fallen leaves, her back resting against the trunk. Christian looked at her confusedly for a few seconds, but when she motioned towards the ground beside her, he silently followed her and sat down, resting against the tree. Keira lowered herself slightly, placing her head on his shoulder as they stayed there in silence.

“What are ye thinking?” he asked at last.

“About how comfortable I am just sitting here with ye,” she said with a smile, her eyes closed against the cool breeze of the morning.

“We will have to head back eventually,” he said, and Keira groaned loudly, voicing her disapproval at his matter-of-fact tone. She knew he did enjoy spending time with her but could certainly not ignore his responsibilities to the clan. Yet she knew she could still have a few minutes with him. A few minutes away from everyone else where he could solely be hers.

“I ken,” she whispered, still not making any move to leave.

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“Are ye happy, Keira?” he asked suddenly, and she opened her eyes at the question, getting up to look at him.

“Why are ye asking that?”

“Because I need to ken,” he replied calmly.

“What do ye think, Christian? Do I nae look happy to ye?” she asked, a small smile decorating her face. She truly could not understand him at times.

“I would like to hear it from ye.”

“I am very happy,” she finally replied, “I do nae think I could have been happier anywhere else. If I were home, I would have been safe, but it is ye who makes me feel both happy and safe at the same time. Ye truly have been nothing but kind to me since the beginning and have helped me step out of the trauma inflicted on me by Eric. Ye are helping me get stronger every day, and I cannot thank ye enough for that.”

“Well, I think I just needed to hear ye praise me,” he joked. Keira rolled her eyes as she lightly smacked him on the arm.

“I knew it,” she laughed, “but I was serious about everything I said.”

“Were ye now?” he raised an eyebrow.

“Absolutely, me laird,” she nodded. “I think it is about time we head back. I certainly

do nae have the energy to tackle any more of yer questions this early in the morning.”

“That is entirely unfair,” Christian laughed, standing up beside me as we walked towards our horses and untied them.

“I never said I play fair,” Keira shrugged.

“I always knew ye were cheating in the chess game last night.”

“What?” Keira asked incredulously, mounting her horse, “I never cheated. I am just a better player than ye are.”

“We will play again, and this time, get ready to be defeated because I am certainly nae letting ye win a second time,” Christian replied.

“Oh, we will see,” Keira laughed as they rode back towards the castle at a leisurely pace, each of them simply enjoying the company of the other.

CHAPTER 12

Christian walked outside into the terrace, his gaze searching for Keira. She always trained with some of the soldiers precisely at this time of the day, and she had gotten quite proficient at sword fighting. She was no natural, and it took her immense practice to get somewhere, but he admired how truly determined she was and how much work and time she was ready to put into her training.

He often helped with her training since he could not help but feel slightly jealous when anyone else but him touched her, and he wanted to be there for her whenever possible. The two had been going out riding together almost every day. It had been two days since their little chess game, and her lips and soft body seared his memory for an eternity and beyond.

“Where are ye Keira?” he whispered to himself as his gaze finally found her just by the edge of the castle grounds. She had walked in from outside, walking beside some soldiers, a sword clasped lightly in her arms.

Christian could only think about how truly perfect she looked in that moment. She looked beautiful to him at every instant, no matter what, and he was getting used to feeling this way very quickly. A week ago, when the two of them had shared a passionate kiss, letting her go had been the most difficult thing he had ever done. He wanted her entirely, but he had known she was innocent. Much too innocent for him and still the betrothed of another man. He could never risk hurting her in any measure.

He immediately turned around as he heard footsteps approaching from behind him and saw Josh walking towards him hurriedly, a piece of paper that appeared quite like a letter clenched tightly in his hands. Christian looked at his brother questioningly as Josh extended the letter toward him.

“This came for ye just now,” Josh said, giving the letter to Christian, who immediately took it, his gaze falling to the Gilmor seal.

“Eric finally decided to write,” Christian said, sarcasm dripping from his tone. He abhorred the man entirely but had still been waiting for this tiny of piece of correspondence. He knew Eric won’t sit quietly for too long.

“Seems like it,” Josh nodded, continuing to stand by Christian, who immediately tore open the letter and began to read aloud;

Christian,

Ye attacked my clan and castle and looted us in the middle of the night, but that was something I expected from a man of yer lower status and weakness of character.

Although, ye have attacked my honor by kidnapping my betrothed. I was not sure of the fact up until now, but my sources have informed me that Keira is in yer castle, and ye have made a prisoner out of her. Ye have taken her from me only for the purpose of revenge.

I will show up at yer castle tomorrow with my army. Release Keira or prepare for battle. The choice is yers.

Eric

“That bastard,” Christian cursed, crumpling the letter in his hands, but Josh quickly took it away or else Christian would have torn it into pieces.

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“What now?” Josh asked and Christian looked at him as if he had asked a nonsensical question.

“What do you mean?”

“I think ye should ask Keira what she wants,” Josh said. Christian immediately shook his head as if he could not understand what Josh was even suggesting.

“Ye truly think she would want to go back to Eric? After all that he has done?”

“I do nae think she will take such an irrational decision,” Josh clarified. “Although I believe she has the right to make her own choices, and for that, ye must ask her what she wants.”

“Ye are right,” Christian agreed. He had never planned to hide the letter from Keira anyway. She would know when Eric showed up tomorrow even though Christian was not planning to have a battle. “I will ask her right now.”

Before Josh could protest or add anything else, Christian immediately walked straight out of the terrace and headed downstairs towards the gardens. The sooner he had this conversation with Keira, the better it would be. Since Christian would need to prepare his army otherwise. He was not looking for a battle and had no desire to subject his clan and his soldiers to the prospect of more bloodshed. He knew just the way to handle the situation. Although firstly, he needed to ask Keira what she wanted.

“Christian?” she looked at him as he approached her, appearing pleasantly surprised. He knew she had not been expecting him since he had told her he would be busy for

most of today.

“I need to talk to ye, my fierce fox,” he said, addressing her with a term of endearment even in front of everyone else. He had nothing to hide. He had been openly affectionate towards her since the beginning, and Keira had only trusted him more due to this.

“Right now?”

“Aye, it is rather an urgent matter,” he told her plainly, ensuring he still appeared calm.

“Is everything all right? Has something happened?” she asked, immediately handing her sword to one of the soldiers, concern emerging all over her features. Christian knew he had worried her.

“Aye, just take a walk with me?” he asked, extending his hand toward her.

“Of course,” she immediately took his hand and joined him. Once they had walked a little further away from the others, she quickly turned to him and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Eric sent me a letter,” Christian told her flatly and watched her concern turn to confusion and anger at the man’s name. Her emotions were reassuring for Christian even though he already knew her answer. He believed he had come to know her enough in this short time, but he was just not entirely sure about it still.

“What did he say?”

“He said he kens ye are with me and has told me he will come here with his army tomorrow. He wants me to release ye and give ye back to him, or else I should expect

a war,” Christian replied, assessing Keira’s face closely. She was beginning to appear terrified.

“Why do ye think he took two weeks to write?” Keira asked. “Do ye think he could have been preparing a bigger army just for this?”

“He said he did nae ken ye were here, and now his sources have confirmed the news,” Christian shrugged, “Although, I am certain he is lying and was rather just too scared to show up and fight with me. He does not have the resources to build a bigger army, especially after our last attack on his castle.”

“Yes, ye are right. It is the only explanation since he already knew I was here,” Keira said. “So? What are ye planning to do?”

“I wanted to ask ye, Keira,” Christian whispered tenderly, stepping even closer to her, holding both her hands in his. “Do ye wish to return to him?”

“Never,” Keira responded immediately, not even waiting to think about it. Christian smiled at her patiently, all of his fears dissolving almost that very instant. He did not know what he would have done if Keira had said that she did wish to go with Eric. He could have never allowed it knowing the kind of man he was, but he could not keep Keira with him against her wishes either. He was not a kidnapper.

“Well then, there is nothing to think about,” Christian said firmly, “a battle it is.”

“Christian, I do nae want ye and the clan to suffer because of me,” Keira said, her face contorted in pain, “ye all have been nothing but kind to me, and I truly can nae return the favor ever. Although, I have no desire to bring a battle to yer hands. I would return with Eric, but I can nae go through the pain again. I can nae handle being beaten and living a life of constant agony and heartbreak when I know what it feels like to live in peace.”

“Keira, none of this is happening because of ye. Ye must never blame yerself, and ye are nae the one who is bringing his army to us. It is Eric and this is all his fault alone,” Christian reasoned, although he knew none of it mattered. Keira would continue to blame herself until all of this was over.

“But it is my fault. Eric is coming to get me, and since I am refusing to go with him, he will wage war against yer clan,” she replied, a lone tear escaping her eye. Christian immediately wiped the tear away, sensing how vulnerable she truly was in this condition.

“I was the one who brought ye here even when ye asked me to let ye go,” Christian whispered, staring intently into her eyes, “if there is anyone to blame for this, it is I. Nay one is at fault, Keira and I promise ye we will emerge out victorious.”

“I ken that, Christian,” Keira whispered, pain bursting through her voice, “I have immense faith in ye and yer army. But ye will emerge out victorious at what cost? At the cost of how many lives?”

“Ye have nay need to worry about the battle and the bloodshed that might ensue. I will nay drag my entire clan and army into this battle. I will simply challenge Eric to a duel. He can never win against me,” Christian replied, the plan solidified in his head. He knew he could quite easily tackle Eric, and the battle would be canceled entirely after that since the Gilmor army would be forced to retreat.

“It will work?” Keira asked. “Will Eric agree to a duel knowing he is weaker than ye?”

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“He will have nay choice,” Christian replied, “I will ask him in front of everyone and if he denies, it will simply mean he is weak and quite terrified of me. He would never tolerate such a blow to his pride.”

“Ye ken he is both those things,” Keira said.

“Nae in front of his people. He tries his best to maintain his image of a powerful, undefeatable laird,” Christian told Keira, gently brushing away a lock of her hair that had escaped.

“Well, then, his image is about to go to dust,” Keira said, breathing in deeply as if relieved.

“Can I ask ye something?” Christian asked suddenly, unable to stop himself from the awful time Keira must have endured with that man.

“Anything.”

“Was it awful since the beginning? Had he always been this way?” Christian asked, unable to understand. He did not know why anyone would act in such a horrendous way toward someone as innocent as Keira.

“Nay. He was charming and amiable in the beginning but soon changed his behavior with me... You could say he broke me, in a way” Keira smiled bitterly. “He started yelling and insulting me at first. Then came the hitting,” she said, her eyes gazing into the distance as if remembering it all. Christian did not wish to cause her pain, but he needed to know how much that coward had hurt her.

“Were there anything else besides hitting ye?” he asked, unable to stop himself. He knew he needed to know if Eric had violated Keira in any other sense of the word. If such was the case, Christian knew he would never be able to stop himself from killing the man.

“Nay,” Keira smiled sadly, “he never came close to me intimately. He believed it was only to be done after marriage since he was certain I was going to marry him nay matter what.”

“That’s called being delusional or extremely overconfident,” Christian commented, relief flooding his body. He felt calmer knowing that Keira had remained safe from the urges of that animal. She had not been hurt irreversibly. Christian knew he could never take away the pain she had endured anyway, except only by killing Eric.

“Christian, I do nae want ye to have his blood on yer hands,” Keira said suddenly, “do nae kill him.”

“Why?”

“Ye are bigger than that. Better than that,” she replied, touching his arm softly. The two of them debated over moral topics almost every day, and he knew Keira was against violence and bloodshed. He knew she only ever wished for peace and simply wanted the best for Christian. Even though he wanted to kill Eric, he nodded as if agreeing with her, although he knew he would need to think about it at length.

“Now return to yer training. I have taken enough of yer time,” Christian said, nudging her back towards the soldiers, who were practicing amongst themselves.

“Christian?” she suddenly whispered his name.

“Yes, fox.”

“Thank ye for doing what ye are doing for me and showing me once again what it feels like to live day after day happily. I do nae ken how would I have escaped Eric if it were not for ye.” Keira had tears in her eyes as she uttered those words, and Christian could sense she was overtly emotional right now, although he had no qualms about it. He knew she truly meant every word.

“Ye have nothing to thank me for,” he smiled at her as she laughed and shook her head before turning around to leave. He watched her until she was engrossed in practice again, but Christian knew he would do anything to protect her.

He had a battle to prepare for.

CHAPTER13

Christian watched amusedly as Keira paced the length of the hallway, clearly anxious about the impending fight. His army was gathered outside, and he had sent Josh to talk to Eric as soon as he would enter their lands. Christian had no desire for bloodshed and had asked Josh to bring Eric’s army to the castle as peacefully as possible so he could challenge Eric to a duel and solve the matter once and for all.

“Are ye sure they are still not here?” Keira asked worriedly, looking at him. He knew she was concerned.

“My soldiers will inform me as soon as they arrive,” Christian told her for the hundredth time as he saw her wringing her hands.

“Yes, yes, of course,” she replied absently, continuing to pace.

“Keira, come here,” Christian voiced his command so she would know he wanted her to listen. She immediately walked towards him as he remained seated on the sofa and sat down beside him.

“What happened?” she asked, and Christian simply held her hands tightly in his grasp without saying a word. He smiled and continued to look into her eyes, trying his best for her to calm down.

He knew none of this was easy for her, and she had never wanted such a fight to happen for her sake. Even though she trusted his abilities to win the duel with Eric, she was worried for his safety and generally about the safety of the entire clan. Christian knew no words would ever be enough to comfort her, but he could try.

“Ye must keep calm, Keira,” he whispered.

“It is difficult to stay calm in such a tense situation, Christian,” she cried, “ye are about to go fight a duel for my sake!”

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“And I will win, I promise ye,” he said just as soothingly. Reassuring her was certainly not an easy task.

“I ken ye will,” she smiled, although the stress did not disappear from her face or posture. “But what if something happens to ye? Or some other soldier? I will never be able to forgive myself.”

“My army is far better than Eric’s; hence no soldier will be hurt, and I will come back to ye in one piece, I promise,” Christian replied. “I promised ye that I will never let Eric or anyone else hurt ye again, and I will stick to that promise. Do ye believe me?”

“I believe ye,” Keira nodded, staring straight into his eyes.

“Ye remember what I called ye when I saw ye in the forest and picked ye up to carry ye to safety?” he asked suddenly.

“I was too busy fighting ye off and trying to run away, but I would remember ye called me a fox, even if you dinnae call me that every other day too,” Keira laughed.

Christian smiled. “Even that day when I only saw ye and did nae ken who ye were, I could sense a fire in ye. I could sense strength in ye. I knew ye were a fox then, and I ken ye are my fox now. If there is someone who can endure this, Keira, it is ye. And I have immense faith in ye to do so.”

“Ye trust me that much?” Keira asked, smiling fondly at him.

“Even more than that, lioness,” he said honestly, squeezing her hand tightly.

As if on cue, a soldier entered the hall and immediately walked towards Christian. Christian stood up, knowing that the army must have arrived and it was finally time to end what Eric had started. Dressed simply in his shirt, trousers, and kilt, Christian appeared confident as if he already knew the victory was his. More than skill, he had the motivation to make Eric suffer and take revenge for all that he had done to Keira. Christian was angrier than he had ever been.

“Me Laird,” the soldier bowed.

“Are they here?” Christian asked, without wasting any time.

“Yes. They are with Josh, waiting for ye,” the soldier informed Christian, who nodded.

He turned to look at Keira, who simply nodded at him. Christian nodded back, proud to see the warrior in her shining through, and walked out with the soldier. As soon as they reached the gates of the castle, Christian saw Eric’s army laid out in front of him as Eric stood at the front. He looked angry and proud, but Christian knew he was just a meek man who must be deathly scared since he knew he was facing his death.

“Eric,” Christian greeted him.

“Where is my betrothed?” Eric asked without wasting another second. Christian smiled at him as he walked closer and stood just in front of him.

“In the castle,” he replied honestly.

“Ye already ken my wishes. Return her to me yerself, or we will fight ye until I can rescue her from yer cruel hold,” Eric said calmly, even though his words shook just slightly, almost unnoticeable to anyone but Christian.

“She does nae wish to return to ye. She wants to stay here. With me,” Christian stressed at the last word, making sure Eric could see the anger in his eyes. He would never talk about what Eric had done to Keira in front of everyone, but he wanted to make sure that when Eric stared at him, he knew that Christian was aware of everything Eric had done to Keira.

“Ye are lying to me. Keira would never say that,” Eric smirked as if even the thought was absurd. “Ye must have her locked up in yer dungeons. Bring her out. She is my betrothed, and she is going home with me, and that is final.”

“Christian already told ye that I have refused to go with ye. I will nae step foot out of this castle, Eric. Ye need to leave.” Christian immediately turned around as he heard Keira’s voice from behind him, and his heart warmed as he watched her walk out of the castle and straight toward where he stood.

Pride emerged into his chest at her obvious courage, and he knew that her feisty personality had returned. The woman that was standing beside him was not afraid of anything and was finally prepared to face Eric unflinchingly. She looked beautiful, almost regal, and there was no such thing as meekness in her tone. She was a strong woman, and she was all his.

It was natural for him to worry about her as he saw her standing out in the open, directly in harm’s way, but he knew he was there right beside her and would protect her from anything and everything.

“Keira,” Eric snarled, lunging towards her, but Christian immediately blocked his path, stopping him from approaching her. He had promised Keira that Eric would never even come close to her, and Christian was going to stick to this.

“Move out of my way,” Eric roared, getting angrier with every minute, but Christian could not care less.

“Ye will nae go near her, Gilmor,” he said calmly, and Eric must have sensed the firmness in his manner, for he stood back in his position but turned towards Keira.

“Keira, ye are my betrothed, and this man kidnapped ye. I am here to take ye with me. Come,” Eric said, a subtle firmness in his tone as he dug holes into her with his menacing gaze.

“I will never come with ye, Eric. Do ye nae remember? I told you so a while ago, and you did nae believe me,” she replied, anger flashing in her eyes as she backed away, letting Christian handle the matter.

“Gilmor, this matter is between ye and me. I am the one who kidnapped yer betrothed. I will nae drag my soldiers into this. If ye want Keira and wish to defend yer honor, I challenge ye to a duel,” Christian said loud enough for both his and Eric’s army to hear.

The armies broke into hushed whispers, and Christian could see a sudden tension appear on Eric’s face, but he did not give away what he felt. Eric swallowed quickly and turned around to look at his army, who were whispering amongst themselves, perhaps wondering what Eric’s decision would be. Christian knew he had put Eric in a tough position by presenting him with the offer of a duel since his soldiers knew it was the right thing to do. The honorable way that would protect massive bloodshed. Eric would never be able to deny it.

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“I accept the challenge,” Eric finally said, making sure he was loud enough to be heard. His arm erupted in cheers at the announcement and backed away slightly.

“Let it happen,” Christian replied confidently, stretching his body leisurely.

Josh handed him a sword just as Eric was handed a sword by his man of arms, and the two stood facing one another. Christian could not remember the number of times he had been in a duel. At this point, he felt as if he was a champion of them. He had learned from his mistakes, and he has grown as a fighter. He already possessed natural talent, which had only thrived and nourished as he had trained himself.

Christian could feel Eric’s fear as the two of them stood facing one another. He could see the faint trembling of his sword and the terror radiating in Eric’s gaze, which made him feel even more confident than he already was. Christian waited patiently as Eric immediately shot out his sword to hit him. Christian dodged by moving to the other side as if he had been expecting the move.

“Nae so easy, Gilmor,” he replied and used Eric’s loss of balance at the fallen hit to lunge ahead and attack him with the handle of his sword, which caused Eric to fall on his knees.

The crowd remained deathly silent, their eyes on the duel. Christian knew Keira would be watching, too, and the knowledge gave him more confidence. He wanted to make sure she knew he would keep his promise to her, and she would always remain his, and Christian would go to any length for that.

Eric stood up, raging like a madman, and immediately attacked Christian yet again,

who he stopped with his sword. After three more failed attacks, Christian knew Eric was not only angry but even embarrassed since his entire army was standing right there behind him. He could not afford to lose face in front of them, yet there was no way he could win against Christian.

“I will kill ye, MacPherson,” Eric shouted, running towards him head-on with his sword pointing out.

Christian sighed deeply and stopped the attack by pushing Eric away and throwing his sword on the other side. Eric fell down on his back, and within seconds, Christian was standing over him, his sword pointed towards Eric’s throat. Christian knew all it would take him was one swift motion to plunge the blade into Eric’s neck and make sure he was dead, but Keira’s words came back to him.

She had wanted him to not kill Eric in the duel, and he knew he would comply with her request. She had never asked him for anything, and even this was for Christian’s own benefit since she had no desire for him to have blood on his hands.

“Ye ken I can kill ye right now? Do ye?” Christian asked Eric, who nodded as carefully as possible, making sure the blade did not pierce the sensitive skin of his throat.

“But I will nae kill ye. I will let ye go,” Christian said, his voice lowering to make sure no one heard it but Eric. “Do ye ken why?”

“Why?” Eric croaked out, sounding hoarse.

“Because Keira asked me to leave ye alive,” Christian scoffed, “after everything ye put her through, she still does nae want ye dead. Ye never deserved her.”

Christian jerked back his sword and raised it in the air, making sure his victory was

seen by all those present. His army roared while Eric's people remained silent since their laird was on the ground.

"I have won this duel and spared the life of Laird Gilmor. Ye can retreat now and never return here again. Nay bloodshed happened this time, but I will nae be so generous if I ever see ye again," Christian emphasized, moving back towards his castle.

Keira was waiting for him just by the door, a huge smile on her face as she watched him approach. He immediately scooped her into a hug, not caring that Eric was still present right there and could witness the entire scene. Not at all. Keira was his, and he wanted Eric to know that.

"Thank ye," Keira whispered.

"What for?"

"For sparing his life," she smiled at him.

"I only did it for ye," he replied, looking straight into her eyes to make sure she knew he meant it.

Keira nodded and hugged him once again, but before they knew what was happening, Eric had already stood up from the ground and was fuming with rage. Christian knew how humiliating it would be for the young laird to first lose a duel in a battle that he had waged and then watch his betrothed in the arms of the man he had lost to in front of his entire army. Christian had wanted just that. He had wanted Eric to feel insulted in front of his own people.

"Ye wench," Eric shouted, his gaze directed at Keira as he angrily stalked toward her and Christian. Christian once again stepped in between them, blocking Eric's path.

“Ye were my betrothed! Yer faither gave ye to me, but he kidnaps ye and brings ye here, and ye decide to side with him? Side with the man who attacked me?!” Eric kept shouting as Keira stayed put by Christian’s side, anger flaring up in her chest.

“I was only yer betrothed in name, and ye ken that,” she shouted back, refusing to endure his insults calmly, “ye never loved me or respected me but only tortured me day after day, and I am glad to be rid of a monster like ye.”

“Ye are a bloody whore is what ye are!” Eric continued shouting.

“Shut up, Gilmor,” Christian said calmly, not wishing to shout. He had no desire to cause another scene.

“I will nae shut up. I want everyone to ken that this woman is a wench and would sleep with anyone that benefitted her cause!” Eric continued, and Christian grew angrier with every word that came out of his mouth. “I end this betrothal right now. I nay longer want ye in my life. Good riddance from this wench.”

“That is enough!” Christian shouted, his loud voice stunning Eric into silence. “I did nae kill ye earlier, but if ye say one word against Keira again, I will make sure yer death will be slow and painful. Do ye understand?”

“I do,” Eric whispered, fear emerging in his eyes. Christian knew he looked angry, and no one would dare to disobey him right now. There was no point in going against Christian, for Eric knew he would only lose again.

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“Take yer army and leave. I never want to see yer face again,” he said, his tone calm but dangerous. He noticed that his words had the desired effect when Eric immediately turned around and began to march away with his army.

Christian watched them leave for a few minutes and then nodded at Josh, signaling him to make sure they left their lands entirely. He then turned towards Keira, who stood just beside him, relief evident on her face.

“Are ye all right? Are ye happy?” he asked her, holding her hands in his.

“I am. I am happy,” she smiled. “I am nay longer betrothed to him.”

“Yes. Ye are free now,” he smiled back, sensing the calmness in her voice. It was as if a huge weight had been lifted off her chest.

She immediately hugged him again, her small body fitting into his perfectly as they melted together. At that moment, Christian knew that he had made the right decision when he brought her home. He had written his fate with his hands and he could not be happier with the outcome. He would fight a hundred duels just to make sure Keira remained his because, after today, he knew he would never let her go.

CHAPTER14

“How do I look, Harriet?” Keira asked the maid, fretting about her appearance as she stared at herself in the looking glass. Keira could not remember the last time she had gotten dressed for someone else or had worried about how she looked. Although today it was different. It was Christian waiting for her, and she needed to look as

beautiful as she possibly could.

“Ye look bonnie, me lady. Like ye always do that is,” Harriet replied, helping Keira with her hair.

“Are ye certain or should I wear something else, perhaps?” Keira asked, turning to look at Harriet.

“I think the laird will find ye to be looking bonnie nay matter what ye wear. None of this matters to him as long as ye are the person in front of him,” Harriet said with a smile, and Keira turned crimson at the comment. She knew everyone in the castle was aware of Christian’s undivided devotion and affection towards Keira and the fact that she reciprocated his feelings. Although, no one ever discussed it in front of her. Now, everyone had seen Christian fight a duel for her sake, and it was no longer a secret as to what he felt.

She immediately turned back towards the looking glass, staring at her hands as she straightened the red silk dress she was wearing. Christian had invited her for dinner tonight and had told her that he wished for her to dress up.

Keira knew he had planned something special because they were not having dinner in her bedchamber tonight but somewhere else in the castle. She had never looked forward to anything else more than this and was quite excited to spend the evening with him. She knew it was not simply gratitude for what he had done for her, but she had truly developed real, lasting feelings for him.

Is it love?

Keira was not certain. Although whatever it was, it was too strong to remain unnoticed and could certainly not be ignored. Hence, she knew she was doing the right thing by staying here with Christian. He was everything Eric could never have

been to her, and Keira could not believe she had found him, and he wished to stay.

“Do ye need anything else, me lady?” Harriet asked her, and Keira shook her head no. Just then, a knock sounded on the door, and Harriet looked at her as if asking for permission.

“Could ye open the door, please” Keira motioned ahead, and Harriet immediately unlocked the door.

Keira surveyed her reflection one last time and was satisfied with what she saw. As she turned towards the door, Christian entered the bedchamber but stayed by the door, his eyes immediately landing on Keira. She noticed how handsome he looked, dressed in a simple white shirt and trousers. His gaze took her in from head to toe, and a huge smile appeared on his face as if he was satisfied with what he saw.

“Ye look beautiful,” he said, his voice hoarse with emotion. Keira had never seen him look this way, and it felt as if he was seeing her for the first time. It was evident he was overcome with his feelings yet was trying his best to keep them concealed.

“So do ye, me laird,” she smiled at him.

“I look beautiful?” he shook his head. “Are ye ready to go?” he asked her, and she nodded, immediately making her way towards him.

“I am,” she gave her hand into his extended palm, and he held it firmly before leading her outside.

Both of them remained silent as he walked her through the almost deserted hallways of the castle. Keira wondered where he had arranged dinner but remained silent as they slowly walked outside the castle gates and into the gardens. Rather than going out of the castle, Christian led her towards a small opening through the woods which

she had never seen before since it was entirely concealed by tall trees.

Keira enjoyed the cold air hitting her exposed neck, shoulders, and arms since she was wearing an off the shoulder gown which she knew made her look quite extraordinary. He kept walking ahead of her until they reached an opening amongst the trees, and Keira gasped as she realized how she had never seen quite a view before. The castle was located at a hill; hence they were quite above the surrounding ground. They stood just by the edge, and Keira could see taller mountains in the distance illuminated by the light of the full moon upon them. The valley below was swimming in darkness yet appeared so calm that Keira, too, felt at peace.

“This is beautiful, Christian,” she sighed, her eyes finally falling on the table that had been placed at one end for them. The entire surrounding area was lit up by candles, and food was already waiting for them.

“Do ye like it?” Christian asked, and she turned to look at him as if he had asked an amusing question. No one had ever gone to such lengths for her before, and she could not believe Christian had arranged this all for her and her alone.

“I can nae believe ye did this for me,” she whispered honestly, not wanting to hide anything she felt from him.

“Of course I did this for ye, Keira,” he replied, turning her around so she would face him as they stood together in the woods. “Ye deserve this and so much more.”

“Thank ye,” she said and walked ahead to place a soft peck on his lips. The passion in his gaze at the touch told her he wanted to deepen the kiss, but instead, he smiled and led her towards the table as they sat down.

“I have something important to talk about with ye,” he told her, both of them helping themselves to the food spread out for them on the table.

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“I needed to tell ye something too,” Keira said, suddenly remembering.

“What? Is everything alright?” Christian asked, stopping mid-bite and staring at her earnestly as if trying to see if she was alright.

“Yes, everything is just fine. I wrote letters to my sister and faither yesterday and have told them about all that happened and how ye rescued me. I do nae ken what is happening out there and what do they ken about it, but it has been a while since I left home, and I am certain they must be worried about me,” Keira said quickly, hoping for Christian to not have a problem with it. She knew he was the laird and had offered her to talk to her father himself, yet she had gone ahead and managed the entire matter on her own without even informing Christian.

“I truly wonder why it took ye so long to do it,” Christian replied, taking a bite, “I myself had been worried about what they could be thinking about ye and yer whereabouts and how they needed to know it all through ye. I am glad ye told them.”

“I already knew I was safe here with ye, and Eric was nay longer a part of my life, although I was nae ready to tell them all that had happened to me,” she replied, “I’d have to say what ye had seen in that castle, the state ye found me in...My faither would never forgive himself for nae protectin’ me, but I couldnae delay it any longer. I am safe and they should know.”

“I am happy to ken ye felt safe here with me from the beginning,” he replied.

Keira smiled, staring at the handsome warrior in front of him. She had never expected him to be this kind and thoughtful about what she had told him, yet here he was, once

again being an extremely ideal man. Keira did not know how she had gotten lucky enough to have found him in her life, but she was grateful.

“Ye are nae angry about the fact that I did nae ask yer permission before telling them about what ye did and how I came here?” she asked, clearly tensed to hear his answer, although a part of her already knew it would be in her favor. Christian truly was both kind and understanding, and he would support Keira no matter what.

“Why would I ever be angry with ye?” he asked as if amused by the prospect. “Ye are nae my subject, Keira. Ye are a whole person, and ye have the right to choose what is best for ye and what is nae. They are yer family.”

“Aye, ye are right. Thank ye,” she whispered, a blush creeping onto her cheeks. She had never expected this conversation to go ahead this way; hence was slightly surprised. “Now, what did ye have to tell me?”

“Let’s eat first,” he smiled and continued eating.

She did not push him further and laughed as he continued conversing about her other things, but all Keira could think about was how her life had led here. Just a few months ago, she had been at her castle and could not have even thought that her life was about to change this significantly. She had been forced to endure everything Eric put her through, and then God had sent her Christian in the form of her savior.

And now, this handsome man in front of her, who was feared by most of Scotland since he was famous for his brutality, was a man she couldn’t imagine her life without. Christian had earned her trust simply by being himself. He was nothing like everyone had painted him to be. He was a vicious warrior but at the same time, he was just a man who would do anything to protect those he cared for, and Keira knew she was now one of those people.

“Keira?” he called out her name, and Keira suddenly realized she had been so lost in thought that she had failed to listen to what he was even saying.

“Aye?”

“Ye were nae listening to me, were ye?” he asked, sounding amused.

“I was thinking about something else,” she laughed, pushing aside her plate since she was done eating.

“Come with me; let us take a walk.” He stood up and extended his hand towards Keira, and she took it without a second thought. If there was someone in the world she had come to trust blindly, it was this man. He had never given her reason to doubt him.

He leaned closer to her, and the two of them walked side by side, silently. Keira felt at peace in his company. It was as if everything had turned right now, and nothing or no one could destroy her happiness. He stopped walking and suddenly turned her around so she would face him, and Keira looked at him confusedly.

“What happened?” she asked, looking around.

“Keira, I ken what I am about to say right now might come as a shock to ye considering we have nae known each other for too long, but I think it would be the best way to keep ye safe still,” he said, his words coming out slightly hesitant as if he was putting too much thought into this.

“What do ye mean? What is it?” she asked worriedly, hoping for everything to be all right. She knew she had just been marveling over how precious Christian was and how what they shared was something she could never have any doubts about. She did not want anything to ruin her happiness, and Christian’s words sounded too serious.

“Keira, I think we should get betrothed,” he said simply as if stating a universal fact.

“Ye do?” she asked, shocked. She did not know what she had expected, but surely a proposal like this wasn’t it. “I thought ye went to a duel for me for nay reason at all.”

Christian chuckled as she teased him, and Keira laughed as well, trying to make sense of the situation. Sure, they had grown fond of each other, but a betrothal? So soon after her last one ended? It wasn’t that she didn’t care for Christian or that she didn’t trust him, but was she truly ready?

“I do, fox” he rolled his eyes at her reply, “and I ken it might be too soon for ye...I will never force ye to do anything yer nae ready for. I just think that that would be the safest way to keep Eric away from you, and to justify why yer stayin’ with me instead of going back to yer own clan. Noone would dare touch ye and Eric would never claim ye if ye were mine.” He was serious when he was talking, but the emphasis he put on the last word made Keira’s heart flutter.His. She would be his.

Christian cleared his throat and took her hand. “So...ye want to be betrothed to me, fox?”

Keira looked at him and closed her eyes, still unable to say anything. If she said yes, she knew it would mean something more.

“Christian,” she whispered his name and opened her eyes to look at him, about to say something, but he put his index finger on her lips, motioning her to remain silent.

“Listen to me first,” he said, “If ye wish to say nay, ye can. I will understand and I respect whatever ye decide. I ken ye just came out of a betrothal with a man as awful as Eric and ye might nae be able to trust me so soon after that. But my question will remain till ye are finally ready to agree. I will always keep ye safe and until ye decide, I implore ye to spend time with me and get to ken me better if that is what ye

wish to do.”

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“Christian,” she tried to speak again, but he once again asked her to remain silent.

“Keira, wait,” he said, “I care for ye, from the moment I saw ye trying to flee that castle I knew I had to keep ye safe and happy. I have never felt that for anyone else. I have wanted to keep ye on my side ever since, even if ye say nay. I’ll still find a way to protect ye. If ye want time, ye can have it. If ye wish to deny me entirely, ye have the right to do it, and I will make sure to send ye home to yer faither. But I couldn’t let ye go without asking, without ye knowing all of yer options.”

“Can I speak now?” she asked, amused as she wiped away a few tears from her face. His words had moved her. After Eric, she never thought any man would consider her own feelings, or safety. She was convinced everyone was only capable for the opposite. But here she was, with a man who would do anything to protect her. Even get betrothed to her.

“Yes,” he smiled, wiping her tears with his hands.

“Christian, ye were kind to me when I had nay one in the world, and ye saved me. I never thought I’d want to be betrothed to anyone again if I made it alive out of that castle” at that, Christian squeezed her hand, and his eyes had an angry glint that made her smile “but I trust ye. I trust that ye’ll protect me, and I’ll do my best to help ye and yer clan. I don’t want people to think that ye just kidnapped me for revenge. I think getting betrothed to ye is going to be the best decision I’ve ever made”.I want to be yours,she wanted to add. Christian had already done too much for her, she couldn’t ask for more.

“Are ye sure?” he asked, his eyes wide from surprise. Keira could sense he had not

expected such an answer.

“I am,” she nodded her head amidst the tears and laughter flowing out of her, and just as the words had escaped her mouth, Christian pulled her towards him, devouring her lips with his entirely.

She melted against him, her body molding into his perfectly as they continued to kiss. Keira knew her decision was the right one, while Christian picked her up in his arms, hardly even grunting at her weight and she tightly wrapped her legs around his waist, her dress pushed up till her thighs, exposing her legs entirely.

“Thank ye for doin’ this, my betrothed,” she whispered against his lips as one of his hands rubbed against her thighs roughly, and desire pooled inside Keira. Something inside her burned, and she knew she needed to feel Christian.

“I can assure ye, the pleasure is all mine,” he replied, his manhood lengthening against the wetness between her legs. She could feel his desire through his trousers as he settled her back against a tree and continued to run his hands on her thighs, making her even more desperate for his touch.

“Christian,” she moaned his name.

“What do ye want, fox?” he asked her, his voice hoarse with desire.

“Ye, all of ye,” she whispered, her mind clouded with desire.

Christian put her back on the ground roughly before slowly leading her backward until her back was resting against the tree and he was on his knees in front of her. Keira could not understand what he was doing, but as his hands swept over her legs until they reached her soaking womanhood, her thinking had ceased entirely. All she could do now was feel what he was doing to her as one of his fingers journeyed

inside her wetness, making her feel fuller than she had ever felt.

“Oh good god,” she moaned loudly, and Christian took that as encouragement as his movement only increased.

Keira could feel warmth surge inside of her as she watched the man in front of her bent down between her legs, his fingers replaced by his mouth almost immediately. Keira moaned even louder as his tongue worked with skillful, strokes bringing her closer to her climax, and before she knew what was happening, a loud scream tore out of her chest as her body reached the end, her legs shaking and throbbing against Christian’s tongue.

He stood back up and grinned at her as she stared at him silently, exhaustion taking hold of her. They remained quiet as Christian pulled her into his lap, and the two of them kissed until all Keira could remember was falling asleep against his chest. She had never felt safer.

CHAPTER 15

“How many people have ye invited?!” Keira asked Christian as soon as she stepped downstairs from her bedchamber and came into the hallway.

“Almost every neighboring clan in the area and the richest and biggest clans in all of Scotland. Some of them from very far away, including yer faither’s and yer sister’s husband’s. Some could nae show up at such short notice, but sent their heartiest congratulations,” he replied with a smile, and Keira looked at him dumbfounded.

Christian knew when he had told her he was planning to arrange a betrothal feast for them she must not have expected him to arrange such a grand celebration where everyone would be present.

“Yes, Astrid and Flynn will arrive in a few days’ time to see me, and so will my brother,” she replied offhandedly, her gaze still focused on the people. Christian had not been aware of that but was certainly looking forward to meeting Keira’s family, wishing to know everyone who was linked to her in any way at all.

The two of them were standing concealed behind a wall and had not been seen by those present as yet. He could not wait to introduce her to everyone in attendance, for he knew each person there would be as stunned by her beauty as he was right now.

“Ye look beautiful, Keira,” he whispered, running his hand affectionately across her arm, his gaze once again falling to the gold gown she was wearing and the way it hugged her every curve. Her blonde hair beautifully fell across her back, making her appear ethereal, and all Christian wished to do was take her in his arms and keep her there for an entire lifetime.

“Thank ye,” she smiled, “ye look just as handsome.”

“Should we go out now?” he asked her, motioning towards the hall where most of the lairds he had invited were busy chattering and drinking.

“Yes,” she nodded, “I still do nae understand why did ye turn it into such a grand feast.”

“For political reasons alone,” he explained, “I need to build up my reputation and make sure our clan is nae as isolated as it was before. I need allies.”

Christian had always known he would eventually need to build allies and restore his reputation from being nothing but a hothead looking for war with everyone to a sensible laird. His clan was finally prosperous enough, and Christian knew with Keira on his side, he would be able to focus on building up his political ties. In truth, though, he also just wanted everyone to know Keira was his and his alone.

“Ah, so now I am a pawn to ye,” she replied jokingly, and Christian shook his head at her wit.

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“Of course, darling,” he said, mimicking her tone, “ye have always been a pawn for me. Ye are beautiful, ye are the daughter of a laird, ye are brilliant. I am simply using ye for my own gain.”

“Are ye now? I believe I must return to my faither immediately,” she joked.

“Should I take ye myself, or can ye go alone?”

“I am a fierce—” she began speaking but immediately stopped as Josh appeared in front of them.

“I think ye two should greet the guests now, it is quite late,” Josh commented, and Christian nodded immediately.

“Shall we?” Christian asked Keira, who put her hand in his as they made their way in front of the crowd.

Christian stared at the crowd, his massive presence filling the room. Minute by minute, everyone who saw him standing quietened down, their attention turning towards him as Christian maintained a patient smile on his face. People had always told him that his aura was commanding, that whenever he stood in a room, people assumed him to be the leader. That was what gave him the confidence to first become the leader of the gang he was in and then fight his own father for the lairdship. He knew each man in the room both feared and respected him already, and building stronger ties with them would not be a difficulty.

“Greetings,” he said loudly, raising the glass of scotch in his hands, which a servant

had brought him.

Everyone raised their glasses in reply, and some even greeted him back. He knew each of them waiting for him to say something, and he turned to look at Keira, who smiled at him encouragingly.

“I ken ye all have never come to me castle, and I knew it was time to change that. Hence, what better occasion could there have been for such a thing but my betrothal to the charming lady beside me, Keira,” he said, turning to look at her affectionately.

“Thank ye all for coming on our invitation. Have a good time,” Keira said, raising her glass as several people once again toasted with her.

Christian smiled at her as they began to mingle with the crowd and personally met several lairds. He noticed how several lairds already knew Keira since they either knew her father or her sister’s husband, Lord MacKie. It was evident both had very strong political ties throughout Scotland and had great connections.

He marveled over how charming Keira was to each person and always knew just the right thing to say. She was kind yet appeared intelligent and meshed with those present as if she had been doing this since she was a little girl. Although Christian knew it was not the case. Both Keira and Astrid had never been allowed to attend such feasts very often, and her father was not a very social man, especially after her brother, Aiden, had been kidnapped. Although now, Keira fit the role of the lady of his clan perfectly, and Christian once again knew he could not have done better than her. She was a natural.

“Me laird,” Christian turned around as Harriet came towards them and whispered softly while he and Keira were busy in conversation with a laird and his wife of a nearby clan.

“Yes,” Keira asked, turning around before him.

“The table has been set up,” Harriet whispered, “ye must ask everyone to come for dinner.”

Keira nodded and looked at Christian, and he knew she expected him to make the announcement for dinner. Christian had never seen such things before, and it was the first time he was hosting a feast at his own castle. All of this was new to him. He took Keira’s hint and immediately walked to the front of the room, inviting everyone to dinner.

He walked back towards Keira as everyone began to leave for the dining hall, but just as he was about to reach her, he noticed a middle-aged, short, and stout man suddenly bumped into Keira and cupped her waist, his hand reaching towards her hips.

“Ye beauty, come with me,” he slurred, clearly intoxicated.

“Get yer hands off of her,” Christian thundered, his voice echoing through the entire hall as everyone stopped to stare at the scene unfolding in front of him.

“Stay away from me,” Keira removed the man’s hands from her body and moved away just as Christian reached her, and she turned to him. “Christian, calm down; he is clearly intoxicated.”

Christian completely ignored what Keira said and held the man by the collar and quite easily picked him up so that he hovered a little off the floor with one hand only. He wanted the man to look at the rage in his eyes and understand that he had no right to touch his woman. No one had the right to touch Keira.

“I...I,” the laird stuttered.

“Ye what?” Christian asked, his voice lower but still furious.

“I did nae notice who it was. I thought it was a maid,” he replied, still stuttering. Christian knew every one of the guests had stopped in the hallway and were staring at the scene playing out in front of them, but he could not care less. The man should have known better.

“Ye are nae even allowed to touch a maid in my castle, do ye understand? Much less my betrothed,” he shouted, making sure his words registered into the man’s mind perfectly well.

“I am sorry,” the man stuttered again, his breathing clearly cut off by Christian’s strong hold on his collar.

“Ye should be sorry,” he replied angrily and dropped the man immediately as he fell to the ground.

Christian turned to look at Keira, who was staring at him angrily. He watched as she breathed in deeply and immediately turned to look at everyone in attendance, their focus on them only.

“This was nothing. Nay more fighting here,” she said, her voice firm, “everyone must sit down for dinner.”

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He smiled as he saw her feisty side emerge and realized how much he admired her spirit and character. She was beautiful. Christian was glad to see that she had healed past the trauma which Eric had inflicted on her and was quickly becoming herself again. That was all that he wished for.

“Why are ye always in a rage?” she asked him, looking disappointed.

“I am sorry, Keira,” he said immediately, knowing he might have overreacted a trivial thing.

“I told ye it was nothing, and he simply had a little too much ale,” she replied. “Ye do nae always have to make a huge deal out of the most trivial things.”

Christian knew Keira was right, but he would never be able to control himself if it was someone hurting her. He would have even killed Eric if it were not for her request, and he would have killed the drunk laird if he had crossed another line with Keira. He did not care if his perception of being a war-loving madman persisted; he simply cared about the people he loved.

“I ken,” he agreed, “I just lost my wits for a moment.”

“Christian, ye are trying to build strong political alliances with these clans, and ye will need to work harder for it. Such relationships do nae come into existence overnight.”

“Keira, I promise ye,” he sighed, holding her shoulders in his arms as he looked straight into her eyes, “I will try harder, but if anyone tries to touch ye, I will tear

them apart limb by limb. Nay one hurts me lady.”

“And nay one will,” she smiled at him as if trying to understand his viewpoint while continuing to console him.

He nodded at her as they too made their way to the dining room and Christian assumed his position at the head of the dining table while Keira sat down beside him. He turned to look at Keira, who was once again involved in conversation with several people around her and smiled.

The general atmosphere of the evening had not dampened because of what he had done, and Christian knew that too was because of Keira. She had handled the situation quite well and had made sure no one took it seriously.

Just then, everyone suddenly quietened as a sharp whistling sound was heard through the air as if something sharp was slicing through it. Before Christian knew what had happened, an arrow cut through the air and landed right by his feet beside the chair. He looked up towards the darkness of the garden through which the arrow had entered the dining hall. Christian knew someone out there probably wanted him dead.

CHAPTER16

“Who shot that arrow?” Keira asked loudly, pushing back her chair to stand up. Everyone else at the table had become alert, too, as all conversation ceased. Christian walked forward to peer in the dark gardens through the open window, but Keira knew no one would be there. Whoever had shot the arrow had aimed for Christian.

“I have nay idea,” Christian said, turning around to face those on the table. Several soldiers, including Josh, walked into the dining room as the news traveled to them, and Christian motioned them to go search the garden and the castle grounds.

“Where is that laird? Could it have been him?” Keira asked, noticing that the laird Christian had almost killed a few moments ago was not present at the table.

“Nay, he does nae have the balls to shoot at Christian,” another laird replied, and Keira nodded.

Just then, she noticed Christian picking up the arrow and examining it. A piece of paper was attached to its end. As if someone had wanted to send Christian a message. She watched as Christian carefully pulled out the note and read it, his expression still impassive. He extended the note towards Keira, and her eyes quickly scanned over it, ‘You will pay for making a fool out of me’.

Who could it be? It was impossible to know with the plethora of enemies Christian had already.

“It was just a threat,” Christian said just as Josh came in and shook his head, informing Christian that no one had been found. Whoever it was must have known that being caught was out of the question and hence had disappeared almost immediately. Christian nodded back and turned towards his guests.

“Our betrothal feast has been quite eventful for ye all, just as it has been for us,” he laughed to lighten the mood since almost everyone appeared worried, “it seems as if someone is angry with me, but that is a problem for another time. Ye all must enjoy yer dinner.”

“Laird MacPherson, we will help ye in any way we can,” a laird told him, and Keira smiled at his words.

Several other lairds gave similar reassurances to Christian, and Keira that his purpose for inviting them all had been successful at last. He had been looking to form political alliances and strengthen his relationship with the neighboring clans, and exactly that

had come about just because of this one arrow that had been shot at him in front of everyone. Whoever had done it, had certainly underestimated Christian's power and the timing of their attack because it showed the lairds how Christian was the one being threatened.

The dinner went ahead rather smoothly after that, even though she could sense a certain tension in Christian's demeanor. She knew he must be thinking about who it could be, for she was doing the same. The only person she could think about in such respects was Eric. He loathed Christian to a degree, but Keira had not expected Eric to seek revenge after Christian had left him alive. Despite that, Keira wondered if she had done something wrong by asking Christian to not kill Eric? Could she have put both Christian and herself at even greater risk? She hoped not.

* * *

"Keira?" Christian entered her bedchamber when everyone had returned back to their homes, and Keira had finally retired for the night.

"Ye are here," she smiled and immediately embraced him. His earthy scent helped her feel calm once again after everything that had happened throughout the night.

"Are ye okay?" Christian asked her, looking at her tense expression.

"Just worried."

"About who shot the arrow?" he asked her with a smile. She knew he understood her too well.

“Yes.”

“Ye must nae worry about such things, darling,” he replied, “we will find out who it is and deal with the matter.”

“It was Eric, wasnae it?” she asked, unable to hide the concern on her face. She knew if it were Eric, she would continue to blame herself for asking Christian to spare his life. It had all happened because of her.

“I have other enemies too, me darling,” Christian laughed, “yer future husband is a very hated man.”

“Nae anymore,” she said, running her hand over his face affectionately, “several lairds have presented their support to ye.”

“They have,” he said, “and most of it is yer doing.”

Keira was taken aback by the sudden compliment since she had truly done nothing. It was Christian who had invited them all and had been hoping to work for an alliance between his clan and theirs. It had all been his idea, and she admired his thinking and the ability to put those thoughts into action. He had successfully achieved exactly what he had wished to.

“I did nothing,” she said with a shrug, just as Christian picked her up in arms. Keira squealed but held onto him. “What are ye doing?”

He softly kissed her forehead before taking her towards the bed, softly placing her on

it as he slid in beside her as well. Keira turned to look at him, admiring again his strong features, still waiting for his answer. Would she ever get used to how handsome and strong and kind he was?

“Ye stood beside me just as me lady should have, Keira. Ye were charming and brilliant, and everyone was in awe of ye. When I got angry with that laird, ye handled the matter with ease and made sure nay one felt uncomfortable. If there was someone who truly was perfect in every measure tonight, it was ye,” he smiled at her.

“Ye flatter me, me laird.”

“I only tell the truth, me lady,” Christian replied. Keira hugged him even closer, her head resting on his chest. She was still wearing the gown she had worn at the feast, but she did not even care about destroying it. If she was close to Christian, everything seemed well.

“But I am still worried, Christian,” she said, looking up into his eyes. She knew he could sense how tense he was.

“About the arrow?”

“Yes. I do nae understand who would dare to threaten ye knowing yer reputation, and my heart keeps on telling me it could be nay one but Eric,” she confessed, truly concerned.

“Even if it is Eric, I will deal with him,” Christian said, stroking her hair, “Ye ken me and my army. We are warriors, Keira, and if someone dares to harm us, we ken how to crush them. Hence, whoever was dumb enough to attack me, will suffer.”

“If it is Eric, I will nae be able to forgive myself for asking ye to nae kill him when there was still time,” she said, her voice breaking.

“My darling, ye must remember that ye asked me to spare Eric because of the goodness of yer heart, and if it is him, ye are nae to blame at all. Do ye understand me?” he stressed, looking straight into her eyes intently.

“I do,” she nodded, even though her heart was quite heavy still.

“Although, ye must promise me something?”

“Anything,” she said.

“Ye will continue with yer fighting practice and yer sword fighting as well as riding. I ken I have promised ye to always protect ye against anyone who hurts ye, especially Eric, but I need ye to be able to protect yerself as well. Ye are strong, Keira, and I ken that ye can make yerself stronger. Do ye promise?”

“Of course, Christian,” she smiled, “I started the practice to feel stronger in the face of anyone that might wish to hurt me, and I will continue it.”

“And it will all end well for ye, I am certain,” he assured her, and Keira nodded. She knew Christian cared for her immensely and only wanted her to get stronger.

If it was truly Eric who had threatened Christian tonight, the night of their betrothal feast, she was certain he would try to attack them again. He would try to enter their lives again. Keira knew she needed to make sure she was prepared if he somehow tried to hurt her again.

Eric had been wounded, his pride had been hurt, and it was only natural that he would continue to harbor a desire for revenge. She knew he was a petty man and always thought about his best interests without caring for those around him. Hence, Keira was almost positive that the threat was his doing, and she was slightly scared of what he might do next.

CHAPTER17

“Ye are absolutely certain nay one saw ye?” Eric asked Brian, his man at arms. Brian had just returned from the MacPherson castle after doing Eric’s bidding since he had wished to threaten Christian.

“Yes, me laird,” Brian confirmed, “nay one saw me. The arrow reached the Laird MacPherson, and I escaped from his garden almost immediately. It was dark, and hence my job was easier.”

“Excellent,” Eric replied and nodded at him, signaling him to leave. His job was done now.

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Eric knew what he was doing might have been wrong. Although, what Christian had done to him was even worse. He still could not believe that Keira had betrayed his trust in such a manner and had refused to come with him when he had gone to bring her back to her rightful place. He had gone to save her, and she had chosen to stay with the barbaric Christian. The warlord.

Although Eric knew that if it were not for his mother, he might not have even gone to Christian's clan to get back Keira. He had already shunned the entire idea, not caring enough about his betrothed. She had just been an object to him. This was the reason that Eric had delayed the entire thing for two weeks despite knowing Keira was with Christian. He had seen him take her amidst the battle.

But his mother had reminded him that Keira might not matter to him, but she was still his betrothed. She was his honor and his responsibility, and if he did not bring her back, he would appear weak. Although, his entire plan had failed.

"God damn, Christian," Eric cursed loudly in the empty hall, remembering how brutally he had been defeated by Christian in the duel.

He knew he should have never agreed to a duel in the first place since he had already known it would not end well for him. Christian was a trained fighter and much stronger than him in all respects. If Christian had not posed the question in front of his entire army, Eric would have backed down. But the clever laird had made sure that Eric was unable to say no. For Christian knew he would win quite easily.

What had made it all even worse was the fact that Keira had first refused to return with him and then had hugged Christian as if he was not standing right there. Her

betrothed. He had been stunned at her audacity. Her boldness. He could have never expected her to turn her back on him.

“Eric?” his mother’s loud voice forced him to turn around, and he looked at her as she entered the hall. She looked exactly how she always did. Dressed in a plain black gown, she had always been rather thin and bony, and Eric was certain he had inherited his leanness of form from her since his father had been a large man.

“Yes, Maither?”

“Is Brian back?” she asked. He had told her about his plan to threaten Christian, and she had not said much about it. He had noticed from her expression that she had not been rather pleased with the idea, which had disappointed Eric.

He knew he wished to make sure she was satisfied.

“Yes, Maither. He came back a little while ago,” he informed her, hoping for a word of praise.

“Is the task done?”

“It is.”

“Did he stay to see its impact?” she asked again.

“Nay. He had to rush out of there, or else he would have been caught,” Eric replied.

“And then Christian would have killed him with his bare hands because he is a strong man and does not attack from someone’s back,” his mother said, her tone dripping with anger as she looked at her son. Eric knew she had been upset with him since he had lost the duel. She had told him how he should have never agreed to fight a duel in

the first place when he had known he would never be able to win. Eric had tried to tell her that he would have never gone there at all if it were not for her, but he could not talk back to his mother. He had not been raised this way.

She let him live his life. She had never said a word when she found out how he treated Keira. She did not care. She did not care about how he treated his people and his methods of gaining extensive funds from the farmers. He knew she remained resolutely silent against it all, but she did talk to him about anything that angered her one way or the other. His losing the duel and ruining the reputation of the clan in front of everyone had angered her.

“Maither, I will take my revenge,” Eric told her firmly.

“Will ye? How exactly?” she asked, sarcasm dripping from her tone.

“I have threatened him today, and I will follow through,” Eric replied, trying to maintain his composure.

“Ye will follow through?” she asked, “When?”

Eric flinched at her tone, his head beginning to hurt. She was extremely unhappy, and this always made him feel small. He felt as if he was a little boy again who was simply trying to make his mother happy, but it was impossible. Since his father had passed away, she had gotten even worse, but Eric knew she simply wanted him to do better. To be better.

“Soon,” he replied, backing away from her.

She breathed in deeply.

“First, ye let that girl slip through yer fingers. She must have tried to run away from

ye in the thick of the battle when she was found by Laird MacPherson, and he took her with him. Then ye were too scared to go fight him to bring her back, knowing perfectly well that she is yer betrothed! Yer honor! Anyone who found out ye had gotten yer betrothed kidnapped would have seen you as a mere joke!” she exclaimed, and Eric knew she was right. He had messed up, but now he was truly trying to make it all right.

“I did go to get her back,” Eric chimed in, sounding small.

“After I forced ye to!” she cried, “and even then ye allowed yerself to be sucked in his trap of fighting a duel knowing that ye will lose! Ye have made nothing but wrong decisions up until now, Eric.”

“If Keira had come back with me, none of this would have happened,” Eric shouted back, his frustration growing, “it was all her fault.”

“If ye truly think that a woman ye beat every day would gladly return to ye, ye are mad,” his mother laughed, and Eric felt even smaller.

“She is now betrothed to Christian,” Eric told his mother, knowing that the news would only make her angrier.

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“Truly?” she asked, turning to look at him. He felt as if her gaze was piercing through him.

“Yes. Tonight was their betrothal feast.”

“Do ye realize,” she said each word slowly, as she continued to pace the length of the almost dark hall, “that a woman who was once betrothed to ye denied returning with ye when ye went to get her and is now betrothed to the man who kidnapped her. Do ye know how disgraceful it is for ye and our clan?”

“I ken,” he whispered, sweat dripping down his forehead.

“Then what are ye planning to do about it?” she shouted again, certainly sounding angrier.

“I need to bring back Keira,” Eric replied resolutely, “I need to show Christian that he can nae kidnap her from me, and I will show him that. She is mine.”

“Yes, she is yers, and ye must use her to win over Christian,” she said, looking somewhere behind him, lost in thought as a sinister smile appeared on her lips. “Ye need to play smart, son. Ye will need to play very smartly.”

“What do ye mean?” he asked, looking at her dazed expression. He truly could not understand his mother at times.

“Ye are well aware that ye can never defeat Christian in a war or a duel. Both he and his army are stronger than us and he will always have the upper hand in such a

situation. Hence, ye will need to show yer superiority over him in a differently,” she said, looking at him again.

“I already ken what to do,” his mother smiled at him, and Eric was certain whatever she had in mind would certainly be worth it. Nothing, and no one would be able to stop Eric from winning now.

CHAPTER18

“Who are ye, and what have ye done to my sister?” Keira dropped the sword in her hand as soon as she heard Astrid’s voice and turned around to see her sister standing just behind her. Her brother Aiden and Astrid’s husband, Flynn, stood there, too, smiling at Keira.

“Astrid,” Keira shouted and immediately ran towards her, the two embracing for several minutes. She then hugged both Aiden and Flynn as tears came to her eyes. She had missed her family immensely, and she could not believe they were finally with her.

“How are ye, darling?” Aiden asked Keira, affectionately running his hand through her hair.

“Better than ever,” Keira replied honestly, for she had truly never been happier.

“I can most certainly see that,” Flynn replied, walking ahead to pick up the sword Keira had dropped to the ground in her excitement, “ye have gotten quite skilled with a sword.”

“Trust me, it has nae been easy,” Keira joked, shaking her head. “Come inside. I will nae keep ye all standing out here.”

They all walked inside, and both Astrid and Aiden apologized to her for not being able to make it to her betrothal feast even though they had gotten the invitations along the way. The distance between their clans and the MacPherson clan was great, and Keira knew it was not easy to travel so much. This distance was the reason that she had remained so far away from them for this long and had to endure everything Eric had inflicted on her.

“Where is Faither?” Keira asked as soon as they were seated inside the drawing room, and she had asked a maid to inform Christian of her family’s arrival.

“He had some important work he needed to get done,” Astrid told her, “but he will come to see ye in a few days. He misses ye and sent his love and wishes.”

“We have all been so worried for ye, Keira,” Aiden said, who was sitting just beside her. Aiden had been absent for ten years of her life yet, Keira had gotten comfortable with him the moment he had returned home. He was her older brother, and it was evident how much he cared for her and Astrid.

“I have missed ye all so much. Throughout everything,” Keira told them, a hint of sadness in her tone.

“Just remember that everything that happened with Eric will not go unforgiven,” Flynn said, “if ye want, I can make sure to wage war against him right now.”

“Nay, nay, do nae do that,” Keira immediately interjected, “I did nae even let Christian do it.”

“Christian wanted to fight Eric?” Flynn asked, sitting up straighter.

“Eric came here with his army to take me back, and I refused to go. Christian challenged Eric to a duel which naturally, Eric lost. Christian could have easily killed

him, but I asked him to spare his life and nae have any more blood on his hands than he already did.”

“Christian is a warlord, Keira,” Aiden chimed in, “he has a history with murder and fighting and what nae. Ye should have let him kill Eric. The bastard deserves to die.”

“It just did nae seem right to me in that moment,” Keira shrugged. “But forget about it. What’s done is done. I am betrothed to Christian now.”

“We have all been worried about that, too,” Astrid replied.

“Why, may I ask?” Christian’s voice made them all look up just as the tall, muscular man entered the drawing room, an easy smile on his face.

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Keira immediately stood up, as did the others, and she quickly introduced Christian to everyone. She noticed Christian was nothing but charming and talked to each of them politely and as if he had known them for ages. It seemed as if he was truly trying to please them, and Keira felt as if her heart would burst with joy.

He had told her that he was looking forward to meeting her family, but she had never expected him to be this amiable. She knew he was only doing it for her sake, and she could not be more grateful to him. He was trying to know and understand her better, and that made Keira extremely happy. They sat down, and Christian immediately brought up the question again.

“Why have ye all been worried about Keira’s betrothal to me?” he asked, looking at Astrid. Astrid smiled at him, and Keira knew her ever-charming sister would easily handle the matter.

“Should we nae be worried, Christian?” she asked him, pushing all formalities aside.

“Nae at all. Nay one can ever take care of Keira and protect her like I will,” he replied easily, turning to look at her with a smile, and Keira smiled back at him.

“None of us personally ken ye, Christian,” Aiden added, “and we have all only heard tales about yer reputation. As her family and people who love her and the people who consider themselves guilty for pushing her into the arms of a man like Eric, we can be nothing but suspicious and careful about any other man who comes close to her.”

“Ye are right,” Christian nodded, “yer suspicion is rather necessary.”

“All we ken about ye is that ye were part of a gang, and then ye fought yer faither to take the lairdship in yer hands,” Flynn said, posing it like a question.

“Both those things are correct,” Christian accepted easily. “I will be honest with ye all. I have nae had an easy childhood, and I have always had to fight for what I wanted. I am brutal when it comes to war, and I will do anything to protect those I care for. And the way I feel about Keira... I will be beside her and protect her till my last breath. Nay questions asked.”

“Will ye truly cherish her, Christian? She will be very far away from all of us here, but she will never be alone. I need ye to promise me that ye will make sure that she never feels lonely or hurt because of ye,” Astrid said, leaning forward, looking straight at Christian.

“I promise,” Christian replied, mimicking Astrid’s stance as he leaned forward too.

Keira watched as Astrid smiled at him, and she knew Christian had won over his sister. She knew Astrid had finally started to trust him, and nothing gave her greater happiness. She had only wanted her family to like Christian and accept him like a son. She knew he was just as worthy as Flynn and would prove to be an excellent husband to her. He was already proving to be an excellent betrothed, and Keira knew she had made the right decision. When he asked her to get betrothed to protect her, she hadn’t really thought about what would happen after. Getting married, staying together...She hadn’t even been sure he had thought about all of this too, or if they’d even get to that part. He always gave her the choice to say no, to leave. But she realized that she didn’t want to. And she knew this betrothal could turn, would turn, into something more. Something true and pure.

“I must say ye are doing an excellent thing by forcing her to train,” Flynn added, looking at Keira affectionately. She had grown closer to Flynn with time, and both loved and trusted him. She knew he only wanted the best for her.

“It was her own decision. My man at arms, Josh, is behind the influencing and if ye do have to thank someone, thank Josh,” Christian laughed, taking her hand in his. Keira held onto his hand as they sat there conversing with her family as if it was an everyday thing. As if everything was going to be alright. As if nothing in the world was more perfect than what she shared with this handsome man beside her.

She knew he had feelings for her and he admired the person she was, and she had quite similar feelings towards him too. She knew everything between them was real and was there to stay. This betrothal would end in marriage, and a happy life awaited them. She knew nothing could dampen it for them, and Keira would never let anything dampen it.

* * *

Keira quietly entered Christian’s bedchamber, her gaze falling on his tall frame as he stood facing the window, his back to her. She had entered silently, and she was certain he did not know she was there, but he immediately turned around the moment she took the first step in.

“Darling,” he smiled at her, beckoning her towards him, and she immediately hugged him, her head cocooned under his chin. He smelled divine, just as he always did and Keira reveled in the feel of him. There was nothing more comfortable for her than Christian’s embrace.

“I just wanted to see ye before I went to sleep,” she said, hugging him tighter.

“Have ye shown everyone else to their bedchamber?” he asked her, and Keira nodded.

She felt his arms grow tighter around her as if he was keeping her safe from every shadow in the dark and she smiled against his chest before looking up to meet his

gaze. He was already looking down at her.

“Yes, they will stay a day or two and then leave,” she informed him, continuing to stare into his eyes as he placed a kiss on her forehead.

“Are ye happy?”

“I am. I met with my family after such a long time today,” she replied, a huge grin decorating her face.

“Ye look happy. I am glad.”

“Christian,” she softly called out his name.

“Yes?”

“Thank you,” she said.

“What for?”

“For being so kind to my family and being patient in the face of their concern and their questions. Ye knew they were worried for me, and ye made sure they trusted ye. And I ken they do. They trust ye, and they can see I am happy with ye, and that is all that matters,” she replied, tears stinging her eyes.

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“Keira,” Christian whispered her name, I will do anything for ye. I will make sure ye are always happy, and I ken how important yer family is to ye and how much ye value their opinion. Since they are important to ye, they are important to me, and it is me duty to make sure they get to ken me and like me for who I am.”

“They really, truly do,” Keira smiled.

“I like them too,” he confessed, “I can see how much they care for ye and how guilty they are about what happened with Eric even though it was nae their fault. I can see ye have grown up in a loving home, and I am happy.”

“I wish ye had grown up in a loving home too. That would have made me happy,” she replied. Her heart always ached whenever she remembered Christian’s childhood and the pain he had been forced to endure.

“If I had a loving home, I would nae have become the person I am today.” he said, and Keira knew he was right. He was an excellent man, and his life had shaped him to be this way.

“I would have liked every version of ye,” she whispered, and he laughed. Christian bent down and took her lips in a kiss as Keira’s hands slipped through his hair, and she kissed him too. He was both kind and calm and gentle. She knew she could not have done better, for she truly had the best man by her side already.

CHAPTER19

“Me lady!” Keira looked up just as Harriet made her way towards her, a note clasped

tightly in her hands. Keira could sense excitement bursting through Harriet, which made her suddenly curious about the content of the note.

“What is the matter?” Keira asked as soon as Harriet reached her.

“A note has just arrived for ye from the local inn,” Harriet replied, out of breath.

“Harriet, calm down first.”

“I am sorry, me lady, I just thought ye would wish to see this immediately, and I came running to ye,” Harriet explained.

“What does it say?” Keira asked, extending her hand, “Give it to me.”

Harriet immediately handed the letter to Keira, who noticed that the paper was entirely plain, except for a few lines carelessly scribbled over it. She wondered who had sent it as she read it out:

Keira, I am in town. I am staying at the inn. Come see me. Faither.

It took her a few seconds to read what had been written over it, but as soon as she realized it had been sent by her father, she was ecstatic. The simple fact that he was in town and had come to see her was enough to make her happy since she had truly been missing him. It had been quite some time since she had left home, and that was the last she saw him. Keira truly could not wait to meet her father. The writing felt unfamiliar for she knew her father’s writing perfectly well which seemed slightly suspicious to her.

What if he had asked his valet to scribble it out and send on his behalf? It was a possibility after all. Keira waited for a few seconds and decided to ignore it, her happiness surging at the news of her father’s arrival.

“Someone from the inn came to give it?” she asked Harriet, who stood in front of Keira patiently.

“Yes, me lady,” Harriet nodded, “it got delivered just now and he said it was for ye, Lady Keira.”

“This is remarkable, Harriet! My faither is in town,” she was beyond herself with happiness, and she knew she needed to tell Christian immediately so he could go with her.

It was slightly odd to her that her father had not directly shown up at the castle but was instead staying at the inn and had written her a letter to ask her to visit him. She knew he had been travelling too long and must have been tired, or else he would have definitely come to see her himself rather than calling her. Although, what mattered to her was the simple fact that he was here.

“I ken, me lady,” Harriet nodded with a smile, “ye must go visit him at once. I will ask the cooks to prepare a large feast for tonight when ye bring him to castle for dinner.”

“That will be excellent, Harriet,” Keira nodded. She had definitely not given much thought to dinner, “I will go tell Christian.”

He was in his study, and under any other circumstances, Keira would have never disturbed him, but this was a rather important thing for her. The first person she wished to introduce her father to was Christian, and she needed to have him there beside her for that. She marched upstairs and softly knocked at the door of his study until he himself stood up and opened it.

“Keira?” he asked, a surprised smile on his face.

“Am I troubling ye?” she questioned guiltily, but she would have never done it if it were not the matter of her father.

“Ye can never trouble me, princess,” he replied, moving aside to allow her to enter, “come inside.”

“Ye just like me a little too much that is all,” she said cheekily, making him smile. She knew it was true. Christian cared for her enough to always keep her first, no matter what.

“That just be true,” he laughed, pulling her close as he placed a kiss on her forehead. “Whenever I see ye, I realize how much I have missed ye.”

“Really?”

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“Really,” he placed a peck on her nose, making Keira giggle. She did not know what it was about him that made her feel like a little girl again. “Is somethin’ the matter?”

“I need a favor from ye,” she told him, getting to the topic at hand instantly.

“Anything.”

“My faither is in town and is staying at the local inn,” she replied, handing him the crumpled note in her hand, “someone from the inn just delivered this note, and Harriet brought it to me. I wish to go see him right now, and I want ye to come with me.”

Christian took the note from her hands, a curious expression on his face. Keira waited for him to say something, but he simply continued to inspect the note for several minutes, his eyebrows scrunched. She did not know what he might have been thinking, but she could sense he was majorly scrutinizing the note.

“Why did he nae come to the castle directly?” Christian asked, “he should be staying with us like Astrid, Aiden, and Flynn did.”

“I ken,” Keira nodded, “I believe he might nae like staying at yer castle since he does nae even ken ye personally, and he must be tired already. He must have gone to the inn to rest, or I ken he would have come for me directly.”

“I am sure,” Christian replied, “if the note is from yer faither that is.”

“What do ye mean?” Keira asked, confused at his comment. He had already seemed

rather absorbed in studying the note just now, and she could sense he had formed an opinion about the entire situation. Although, her heart told her that her father truly was in town and the note had been sent by him.

“I mean there is nay stamp of yer faither on the note nor any stamp of the hotel. This is just a plain piece of parchment someone has scribbled upon. It does nae even mention ye or the laird at all.”

“I do nae ken what it means, Christian,” Keira shook her head, a sigh escaping her lips, “he is just sendin’ a note to his daughter from a few miles away. I believe his valet could have written it for him and he sent it in a haste. I have seen him send several such notes to members of the council throughout the years when he wished to call them. I do nae think we should really worry about it.”

“I ken ye wish to go.” Christian nodded.

“I do,” she nodded, “will ye go with me?”

“Of course, fox,” he nodded, “If it is indeed yer faither who is in town then we must visit him at once to inform him of our betrothal ourselves and how it was necessary to make sure ye are nay longer bound to Eric in any way at all. I need to make sure ye are safe.”

“I am sure he would love that,” she laughed.

Before Christian could say anything else, they heard urgent footsteps outside the door of the study, and the door quickly opened as Josh stepped inside, his gaze falling on both Keira and Christian as Christian held her close. Even with Josh present, Christian did not let go of Keira.

“Christian, there has been a matter which needs yer attention,” Josh said, his tone

slightly worried.

“What happened?” Christian asked, finally letting go of Keira as he turned entirely toward Josh.

“Someone in the north market has started a huge fight which only began from a small skirmish. Although the matter is so heated, half the town is gathered there, and the fight is only growing bigger and more violent. Ye need to see it and try to somehow solve it,” Josh explained, and both Christian and Keira looked at him confusedly. The entire matter sounded nonsensical.

“Can’t ye go or send someone from the council along with soldiers?” Christian asked, “I am sure the matter can be solved without my interference.”

“The men who started it are insistent on meeting the laird and only taking yer help to solve all of it. They are persistent and refuse to move until ye show up. They have blocked an entire pathway, and several people are stuck because of it,” Josh replied, shaking his head, “I think ye will have to go.”

“This is absurd,” Keira chimed in, unable to understand how such a small fight could escalate to this level. Men could truly do anything.

“I need to go to the local inn with Keira since her father is in town, and we are going to meet him,” Christian replied, running a hand through his hair, “Someone else will need to put an end to this irrational feud.”

“Only ye can do this, Christian,” Josh insisted again, clearly perplexed, “trust me, I tried my best to bring the parties to an understanding, but it is entirely impossible.”

Keira watched silently as Christian considered the entire matter silently. She knew he had a duty to his clan and people, and these angry men really needed him to solve

their problems. She would not have any trouble if Christian decided to go help the man rather than going with her, and she knew she would totally be understanding about it.

“Keira, darling,” Christian turned towards her, extending his hand. She stepped forward in his arms, “will it be alright if I go sort this matter first and we can go visit the laird once I return?”

“Christian, ye ken I hardly have any patience within me,” Keira shook her head, “Perhaps I can go myself and meet him and ye can join me later?”

“I am nae letting ye go alone,” he said adamantly, “the matter needs to be dealt with carefully considering I have my doubts about who sent the note.”

“My faither sent the note, Christian! Ye just worry too much. The note arrived specifically for me,” she went on, holding his hand, “what if I take Josh with me for safety? I am sure he can take excellent care of me!”

“Are ye certain about this?” he asked with a frown. “Can ye nae wait a wee bit for me?”

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“I am certain. Please do nae make me wait,” Keira nodded, reassuring him. “I will expect to see ye soon enough at the inn, so it will be good if ye can solve the problem immediately.”

“I will try my best,” Christian promised. She knew he would be solving the matter and running back towards her.

“Thank ye,” she beamed.

“Ye can go with Josh,” Christian nodded, “ye need him more than I do, and I ken he will take care of ye.”

“I am certain he can,” Keira gave in finally, aware that her safety would give some semblance of peace to Christian. He worried about her needlessly, and she could not blame him for caring for her.

“Josh, ye are going with Keira,” Christian motioned towards him, and Josh immediately nodded back in agreement.

“I will be there with her,” he replied, and Keira turned around to smile at him. She had gotten rather comfortable with his presence and knew that if Christian could not be there with her, Josh would be excellent company, and she would truly love for him to meet her father too. She wanted to introduce her father to everyone in the clan and sit down and tell him that the MacPherson’s had shown her nothing but love and hospitality in its purest form.

“I will see ye soon, darlin’,” Christian said to Keira, softly grazing his lips on her

knuckles when he kissed her, and Keira turned crimson at the affection she sensed in his voice.

“I can nae wait to see ye again very soon,” she replied, waving goodbye as she turned around and walked out of his study with Josh beside her. She was truly excited to see her father and knew that it was going to be truly overwhelming to see him after this long.

Keira could finally feel how things were once again settling perfectly in place, and she had certainly never been more grateful.

* * *

Harriet just stepped back inside the castle after making sure that Laird MacPherson and the soldiers he had taken along with him to solve the fight in the marketplace had left and did not need anything. She knew Lady Keira had also left to see her father along with Josh, and the castle had no one. She had already informed the cooks about preparing the feast tonight since the Laird O'Donnely will be dining with them and all she needed to do now was wait for everyone to return.

Just as she was heading towards her bedchamber in the servant quarters, she noticed a maid walking towards her.

“The butler just handed me this note which has arrived for Lady Keira,” the maid explained, “since she is nae in the castle, I am handing it to ye.”

“Thank ye,” Harriet nodded at the maid, who turned around and walked away while Harriet continued to look confusedly at the stamp on the envelope in front of her.

It had been sent from the local inn, where Lady Keira's father was staying, and was addressed to Lady Keira only. Who could have sent it? Harriet wondered since she had

just handed a note to her lady from her father, which, too, had apparently arrived from the very same inn. She did not know why she felt this way, but it certainly felt as if something was definitely not right as Harriet tore open the envelope to read the note inside:

Dearest daughter,

I am writing as I sit in a suite in the local inn of the MacPherson clan, which I hear is very close to the castle. I would have come to ye immediately, but I wished to rest and clean up a little before I came to see ye in yer new home. I will be at the castle soon and I can nae wait to see my precious. Make sure to have a feast prepared because yer faither is certainly expecting one.

Love,

Faither

Harriet's breath hitched as she noticed how this note had the O'Donnely seal on it, which meant that Laird O'Donnely had truly written it. She could see how the other letter had been nothing more than a carelessly scribbled note while this one was neater and addressed directly to Lady Keira. Harriet could not understand what this meant, but she knew something was terribly wrong but she could do nothing about it as of now. She was simply glad Lady Keira had gone to the inn with Josh. Now all Harriet could do was pray for things to be alright in everyone's favor. She certainly needed them to be alright.

CHAPTER20

"Give way! The laird is coming!" Christian heard people shouting as his horse reached the marketplace, stuck between the throngs and throngs of people crowding the area. He could not understand what it was about such feuds which people enjoyed

that they decided to leave their own work commitments and stand around aimlessly doing nothing, simply to observe the ones fighting. His soldiers were right behind him as they slowly walked forward through the crowd, finally reaching the source of the feud.

“Might I ken what is happening here?” he asked loudly, startling the few men who stood facing one another, anger evident in their expressions.

“Me laird!” one man exclaimed, and Christian stepped down from his horse. He did not understand why he felt so annoyed and worried, but he decided to shove aside all of those emotions and simply focus on the problem at hand.

“I asked what is happening here,” he shouted again, sounding angry. He did not care if he came off as aggressive, but such everyday fights certainly angered him.

“He is refusing to give me my money, me laird,” the man who had walked towards him replied, his voice both angry and helpless at the same time. “I am a very poor man, and I sell clothes to make a living. This man here bought several clothes from me and did nae pay at the time saying he would pay later when he received his own money and is now denying that he ever even bought clothes from me.”

Christian turned to look at the other man, who was standing patiently at the other side as if waiting for the first man to finish. That struck as odd to Christian since usually, in such disputes, both parties were largely emotional and began to narrate their troubles almost instantly and altogether.

“Is that so?” Christian asked the other man just as he realized that he had seen the man somewhere before. He could not recognize him, but the man seemed familiar anyway. I must have seen him somewhere in the clan or the marketplace sometime, he thought to himself, once again shoving those thoughts away.

“Nay, me laird,” the other man said, making his way towards Christian, “I truly never bought as many clothes from him as he claims. I, too, am a poor man, and I only bought a few clothes from him and paid him for those immediately. He is simply looking to extract money from me and is making an entire debacle out of it so he can publicly embarrass me.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:50 am

It was not as if Christian had never solved such disputes between his people before, but today, he could not understand why the entire thing seemed rather fallacious to him. He felt as if the argument was both unreasonable, and nonsensical and it was evident that either one of them was lying, but neither of them would ever accept themselves to be the liar. It was extremely messy.

As a laird, it was his responsibility to make sure none of his people were wronged, and all of them were content with their lives in the clan. He had always made sure to attend to all of his responsibilities as best as he could, and he still tried to do so. Which was the only reason he had left Keira alone to go to the inn with Josh while he had come here. Keira, he thought, I need to be there with her as soon as possible.

“Do ye have any proof that ye sold him those clothes?” Christian asked the first man, his entire focus now directed toward a solution so he could get out of there as soon as possible. Night would approach quickly, and he needed to be with Keira and take her back to the castle before that.

“Nay, me laird,” the man replied, further aggravating Christian.

“So ye just sold clothes to another man with nay money and nay agreements to testify that he had nae given ye money and will have to eventually?” he asked the man, making sure he sounded angry. The entire situation was perplexing.

“It was a mistake on my part,” the man agreed.

“It was a rather childish error on yer part, and right now ye are suffering because of it. If ye had some proof, this man would have never been able to deny that he had

never taken clothes from ye.”

“I will make sure to always take proof if someone promises to pay me later in the future,” the man nodded, “although right now, I truly need that money, me laird.”

“Ye need to stop selling clothes to people who can nae afford to pay ye right away. Do nae make yer life more difficult by harboring additional stress of extracting payments from people who are refusing to pay ye at all,” Christian reprimanded, unsure about which one of them was lying.

“Ye are right, me laird,” the man said, “I will nay longer give away clothes without taking money right there and then.”

“Good,” Christian replied, turning towards the other man, “Now do ye have any proof that this man is putting up false allegations on ye?”

“Nay, me laird,” the other man shook his head, “he has just decided to blame me out of nowhere.”

“Is this man yer friend?” Christian asked him again.

“Nay, we just ken each other in passing,” the man explained.

“Ye must work on yer self-image and make yerself strong enough to make sure nay one blames on ye for such things. Why can someone put an allegation on ye so easily? It means ye have some flaws in yer character, which is why this acquaintance of yers decided to choose ye for a false allegation. He must have had the idea that people would believe him if ye were the one blamed,” Christian said. He knew there was no solution to the entire matter, and now he simply needed to make sure that things were somehow brought to a solution and a conclusion.

“Ye are right, me laird,” the man nodded, “I will try to become a better person.”

“Good,” Christian sighed, turning around to look at the soldier beside him, “give this cloth seller the money he claims has been lost and then escort both to their houses. Everyone should disperse and return to their work or houses since the matter has been resolved here.”

“Thank ye, me laird. Thank ye so much,” the cloth seller replied, ecstatic at the prospect of receiving the money that had apparently been lost. At this point, Christian certainly did not know who was right and who was wrong. Good thing was, the matter had finally arrived at a solution, even if it had taken him the entire evening to do so.

“Ye are welcome,” Christian replied, looking up at the sky, which had already darkened. He knew he needed to be with Keira sooner rather than later because she must have been waiting for him. He had already been gone long enough.

“We will always remember this kindness, me laird,” the other man thanked him, and Christian nodded, his mind entirely focused on immediately getting to Keira.

He quickly sat atop his horse, slowly walking out of the marketplace until he was back on the main street, which was largely deserted. Christian increased his speed as he quickly made his way to the other side of town, where the inn was located. It was funny and both strange how the feud had taken place rather far from the inn, or else he might have been able to keep a check on Keira. Although right now, he knew nothing.

Christian rode as fast as he possibly could until he finally reached the marketplace where the inn was located. He knew some of his soldiers had followed him, and Christian handed the horse to them before running inside the inn, still hoping to find Keira inside. He knew there was quite a big chance of her having left back for the

castle considering it was dinner soon. Despite that, Christian walked towards a wooden desk where a young man was seated, and she looked up with a smile as she saw Christian approach.

“Laird MacPherson,” he greeted Christian immediately, “what are ye doing here?”

“I have come to look for Keira, my betrothed, and her faither, the Laird O’Donnelly. I know the laird is staying here, and Keira came to see him today,” Christian explained, continuing to look around, hoping to find a glimpse of Keira somewhere.

“The Laird O’Donnelly was staying with us. He only checked in this morning but is not here currently,” the man told him.

“Where did he go?”

“As far as I have gotten to ken, he was here until Lady Keira did indeed come to see him, and he was gone shortly after. It does nae make much sense to me.”

“So ye saw Lady Keira?”

“Yes, She was here but left in a haste. The Laird O’Donnelly was also seen the last time during the day. I reckon wherever they are right now, they might be together,” the man said. Or might be dead, a part of his mind responded, and he truly did not know where that thought had emerged from, but he pushed it aside, knowing it could not be the case.

“Thank ye,” he replied to the young man.

They must have returned to the castle. I only need to go there, and I am certain I will find them at home. Christian knew, but his heart rate accelerated still. He had already been feeling worried all day, and the worry was only constantly growing even though he knew it was entirely pointless. All he could understand was something out there was not right, but he simply could not pinpoint what it really was. He needed to know.

CHAPTER 21

“How will I ever find papa in here?” Keira asked Josh worriedly as she looked at the moderately crowded inn in front of her. Keira could have never guessed that the place would be bustling with activity even during the day, even though she knew night was approaching quickly.

“We will find the person who runs the place and ask him about the laird,” Josh replied easily, as if the prospect was not worrying in the least, and Keira calmed down due to his confidence, “we will quite easily find the laird, me lady. Do nae worry.”

Keira nodded as they quickly made their way inside the inn, several people looking at them. She was certain it must have been Josh who attracted their attention since it was evident he was a soldier, and most people must know who was the laird’s man at arms. He was no Christian, but Keira was certainly glad she had brought her with him because he made her feel immensely safe.

“Do ye see someone?” she asked Josh, who looked around, clearly searching for someone they could ask about her father.

“Nae yet,” Josh shook his head just as a young man approached them, his gaze locked on both.

“Are ye looking for someone?” he asked, and Keira immediately turned her attention towards him. At this point, she was quite ready to ask for help from anyone since she could not see anyone else in the inn who might be able to point her in the right direction.

“We were lookin’ for someone who might run the place?” she asked the stranger, who was smiling at her kindly, “is he here?”

“The inn manager is right outside,” the man nodded, “although, are ye lookin’ for a guest in particular. If yes, I might ken where they are or who they are.”

“The Laird O’Donnelly,” Keira nodded immediately. “I do nae ken if he has revealed his identity when booking a room, but he must have arrived today and is a healthy, slightly older man with white hair.”

“Nay,” the man shook his head, still smiling. Keira wondered if his face had been stuck in the expression or perhaps that was his attempt at appearing kind, “I have nae seen any such man arrive here today. Although I am sure, the inn manager will help ye better. Ye just need to go outside and move to yer right till ye reach a small alley which will take ye to the backside of the inn. The manager is right there, and he can answer yer questions better.”

“What is the manager doing in an alley?” Josh asked, and Keira could sense he appeared confused, “could ye perhaps ask him to come inside since a few people are here to see him.”

“He has been inside all day and went about the area for a walk and to attain some semblance of peace while he can have a much-needed break,” the stranger informed

them, “he will nae come inside for at least an hour or so. If ye wish to wait, do so, but if ye do nae have much time, he is right outside.”

“Alright, thank ye for all yer help,” Keira smiled at the man, turning around to head back outside when Josh suddenly took hold of her arm and stopped her. Keira looked at him, “what’s the matter?”

“I do nae understand honestly, but something seems amiss,” he shook his head, his expression worried, “this man did nae seem right to me.”

“Why will he lie to us about where the inn manager is?” Keira asked, burying the uneasy feeling rising in her chest. She simply needed to find her father.

“He had nay reason to, but I still do nae trust the man entirely,” Josh shook his head, “we need to be more careful than just stepping inside an alley.”

“It’s right behind us, Josh, and I have ye with me if something wrong happens. I am nae worried at all, and I am certain nothing bad is happening,” she replied, stepping ahead.

“I truly hope ye are right,” Josh said, quietly following Keira outside.

The two of them stepped onto the busy street, turning right just as the man had asked them to until the inn ended at the end of an alley, and Keira stepped inside it. She noticed how the roaring street grew calmer in this part, and the two of them immediately walked ahead. Keira could sense Josh being on edge, and she, too, had some semblance of worry coursing through her, but she knew, for the most part, they were simply overanalyzing the entire situation. Nothing was amiss.

Before Keira knew what was happening, she just heard a faint sound from behind her and immediately turned around to find Josh, his eyes wide and face turning pale as

his hands reached towards the back of his head, clutching at a spot. Josh turned around, Keira's gaze falling on the man standing behind Josh, the very man who had just been inside the inn and had advised them to find the inn manager outside, holding a wooden rod in his hand.

Keira saw blood dripping down Josh's head as he tried to move towards the man in front of him, who dodged him stealthily, and within seconds, Josh had fallen to the ground. Keira grew panicked as she realized what had just happened and the fact that she had indeed been caught up in a trap, just what her mind had been warning her about altogether. What is happening? she wondered.

"What do ye want?" she asked the man, who was now staring at her. Keira did not want to get hurt or hurt him; hence she needed to run away and somehow find help until Christian arrived.

"Ye," the man responded, and Keira immediately turned around to run, but the sight she saw before her was enough to stun her as she stood silently. Only Eric stood in front of her in the entirely abandoned alley, a cruel smile on his face. Keira could have never imagined Eric returning.

The note she had received earlier immediately returned to her and she realized how quickly and carelessly had it been scribbled on a piece of paper which was very unlike her father. This meant it had been Eric's plan altogether to lure her here. He was behind it all.

"What are ye doin here?" she asked him, trying her best to hide the trembling from her voice. She had never been more terrified. The time spent with Eric came back to her as she remembered every way he had tortured her, and she knew she could never return to feeling that way again. She had no desire to ever feel that way again.

"I am here to take ye back to yer rightful place, Gilmor Castle," Eric replied, and

Keira breathed in deeply. She could not believe she had been betrothed to this awful human being.

“We broke off our betrothal Eric, the Gilmor Castle is nay longer my rightful place,” she replied to him calmly, even though she knew the man in front of her would never see reason. He was angry and mentally disturbed and had various persisting issues with him. Keira knew she would need to play smartly, or else she might never be able to escape from him. The chances of her escape seemed narrow already.

“Yes, it is, and ye will come with me,” he smiled manically, and Keira felt goose bumps on her skin. She needed to run.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:50 am

“Eric, why are ye doin’ this?” she asked him, simply trying to buy herself time so she could think of a plan to escape. She knew the man they had seen at the inn was one of Eric’s men, and he stood right behind her while Eric stood at the front. She was caught up from both sides.

“What am I doin’ besides taking ye where ye belong, Keira?”

“Ye ken I do nae want to go with ye,” she replied, “ye did nothing but hurt me, and I am in a better place now. Ye need to let me go.”

Eric immediately made his way towards her, his hand painfully clasp ing her arm as Keira tried to struggle to break his hold, but she knew he was impossible. He was nothing compared to Christian, but he was still much stronger than her, and it was almost impossible for her to break free from him.

If only Christian was here with me, she thought. Just then, it suddenly dawned on her how Christian had been pulled away for work right when he was supposed to be here with her, which only meant one thing. The feud in the marketplace, too, had been planned by Eric to make sure Christian was not with Keira. That would make Eric’s job of kidnapping her much, much easier.

“The only place ye will be going to today will be the Gilmor castle,” Eric said, dragging her away as he pulled her toward the back of the inn. The alley there was deserted as well, and all Keira could wish for was for someone to pass by. For Christian to find her but a part of her knew none of it was going to happen. This time, she was truly trapped.

“Christian? Ye were the one who had planned to take him away from me due to the false feud in the marketplace, no?” she asked Eric, wanting to confirm even though she did not need to.

“Yes,” Eric laughed as if truly happy with his planning, “he is there while I take ye with me.”

“He will come,” Keira said confidently, still unsure about how to step out of this trench she was stuck in.

“He won’t,” Eric shook his head, his hold on her arm only growing painfully stronger with every passing minute “Not anytime soon.”

“Ye do nae have to do this, Eric,” Keira tried to reason with him although part of her still knew it was going to be impossible, “please let me go.”

“Let ye go?” he laughed as if he had never heard a funnier joke in his life, and Keira felt her entire body go stiff at the sound of it. “Ye are nae going anywhere but coming directly with me.”

“Keira!” she immediately turned around at the familiar voice behind her, her eyes widening as she saw her father walk towards them, anger brimming on his expression.

She could not deny being glad to see her father even though his presence largely confused her, for she knew the note had been sent by Eric. Although, she knew he shouldn’t be here. She knew Eric would not think twice before hurting Keira if her father tried to protect her from him, and she would not let him suffer on her account.

“Faither, what are ye doing here?” she replied.

“I came to see ye, of course, when I suddenly saw ye at the inn, which was confusing since I had just sent a note to the MacPherson Castle telling ye I would come visit ye at dinner. I followed ye here and saw this lowlife,” he replied, looking angrily at Eric.

“Papa, ye need to go,” she said, stealing glances at Eric, “ye need to leave from here.”

“I will only go when ye go with me,” he replied, and Keira knew he was never going to listen. He was just as hot-headed as she was. “Eric, let her go right now.”

“Let her go ye said, Laird O’Donnelly?” he asked in all seriousness before bursting into laughter again, the sound hurting Keira unexplainably. A few more of Eric’s men arrived at the scene, and Keira could see hope for escape diminishing. She knew she would fight back till the end, but it would not be difficult for Eric to take her with him.

“Let her go at once, Gilmor,” her father shouted, standing right beside her. Oh, papa don’t do this.

“Or what?” Eric asked, looking him straight in the eye. “I do nae want to hurt ye, Laird O’Donnelly, but Keira is going with me, and that is final. Ye better stay out of my way.”

“If ye think I will stay out of yer way while ye kidnap my daughter in front of my eyes, ye do nae ken who I am,” her father replied, pride bursting through Keira’s chest as tears began to flow out of her face. She knew her father would stand up for her no matter what but standing up against Eric was nothing but dangerous right now.

“I do nae care if ye live or die, Laird,” Eric said, just as angrily, “ye can nae stop me.”

Eric tugged at her arm, dragging her along with him as Keira continued to fight back against his hold, but she knew it was impossible to escape. She could sense her doom.

“Eric, let me go!” she shouted at him, using all her might to pull away, but he kept dragging her along. Just then, her father stepped forward behind her, trying to push Eric away from Keira but it did not work either.

“Laird, I am telling ye to stay away from this,” Eric said again, “it will nae end well for ye.”

“Eric, I do nae want to go with ye,” Keira continued to fight back, “ye absolutely need to let me go. I will not go back to the Gilmor castle with ye.”

Her father immediately drew out his sword, pointing it towards Eric, “Let her go, or I will kill ye.”

“Hold her,” Eric said to one of his men who quickly took hold of my arm as Eric left me, drawing out his own sword. “If that is what ye want, old man. That be it.”

“No!” Keira shouted as she realized what was happening, “Papa ye must nae fight him. Let him take me!”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:50 am

“Over my dead body, Keira,” her father replied, attacking Eric as he easily dodged the blow. She fought violently against the hold of the man who had her arm clasped, but he refused to budge even though she kept shouting and trying to claw at his chest. She somehow needed to stop her father. She already knew Eric won’t think twice before hurting him, and she could not allow that to happen.

She watched as her father attacked, but Eric easily shielded all his attacks. Just as he struck himself, his sword hitting on her father’s arm, and blood began to flow. Keira was no longer wiping her tears as she watched the scene unfold before her, her heart beating fast. She needed to do something, but she had never felt more helpless.

“Faither, please stop,” she sobbed but her father was beyond listening to her.

He attacked again, and Eric once again dodged, turning around quickly, and attacking himself, his sword easily plunging through her father’s abdomen as he immediately pulled the sword out back. Keira stopped moving entirely as she saw her father’s sword drop from his hand as blood began to gush out with uncontrollable speed from his body, his eyes widening as he registered the attack. Eric, too, looked stunned at his own accomplishment and moved back almost immediately as if he had not realized what he had done.

“Faither,” Keira shouted, tears rushing out of her eyes as her father turned to look at her before falling to his knees, his body no longer able to support his weight.

“Keira,” he whispered, falling to the ground, his eyes closing.

“Faither,” she shouted again, tugging violently at the hold of the man on her who

miraculously let go of her, and she ran towards her father. “Faither, wake up. Nothing will happen to ye. Nothing at all.”

“I am... sorry... I,” he stuttered.

“Shh,” she quieted him, “Please do nae speak. I will save ye. I will nae let anything happen to ye.”

“I wish... I could... have... saved ye,” he whispered through gritted teeth as if trying to control the pain which he must be feeling.

“I will save ye, I promise,” she sobbed, empty promises on her tongue, for she knew the situation was already out of hand. She would never be able to save him.

“I... love... ye,” he whispered one last time before his entire body went suddenly limp, and Keira knew he was no more. She burst out crying even more violently while continuing to shake him to bring him back to consciousness, but she knew it was to no avail.

Her father had died because of her. He had given his life to protect her while she had stood there helpless. She knew she could have done nothing in the situation, but she would never be able to forgive herself. It was all because of her. She limply allowed Eric to hold her arm once again as he led her toward the waiting carriage. Keira no longer cared about the whole thing. All she knew was that her father was lying dead in front of her, and she had no way to even take his body with her.

CHAPTER22

The moment Christianreached back to his castle, he immediately made his way towards the drawing room, hoping to find Keira there. If she had brought her father here with her, she could be nowhere else but there, yet he was surprised when he

found the drawing room to be entirely empty.

Where was Keira?

He looked around the castle and checked every parlor and hall, but Keira was still nowhere. She had not been present at the inn, and he could not find her home either. What was even more worrying was the fact that Christian could not find Josh anywhere either. If it had been any other day, Josh would have been waiting for Christian himself, wanting to hear the updates on the fight and knowing how it had been solved. Yet, Josh was nowhere to be found either.

“Harriet!” Christian called out to Keira’s maid, quickly making his way upstairs toward her bedchamber.

“Me laird,” Harriet walked out of the bedchamber almost immediately as if she had been waiting for Christian.

“Where is Keira? Is she okay?” he asked Harriet, feeling relieved as he realized that Keira must be inside.

“She is nae inside, me laird,” Harriet shook her head. “She did nae come with ye?”

“I went to the inn to check on her, but they told me she was nae there, which only made me assume that she must have returned home with her faither,” he informed Harriet, beginning to worry even more. If Keira was neither home nor at the inn, where was she?

“She never returned, me laird,” Harriet informed her, “I did ken that something was amiss. Something just did nae feel right.”

“What do ye mean?” Christian asked the maid, noticing the worry in her voice.

“After ye both left, another note arrived from the inn addressed to me lady,” Harriet told him.

“What note?” Christian asked, clearly confused. His worry for Keira was making it impossible for him to understand anything, and the fact that Josh had not arrived yet as well was just as worrying.

Harriet walked inside Keira’s bedchamber wordlessly, and Christian followed her. She picked up an envelope from the table and handed it to Christian, who noticed how it had arrived in an envelope from the inn and how the letter was neatly written and sealed by the Laird O’Donnelly himself. This stood in stark contrast to the note Keira had shown him, which forced Christian to imagine the worst. The note had never been from her father in the first place. It was a trick to lure her to the inn. Just as it had been a trick to send Christian away to solve a feud exactly at the same time. It made complete sense but did nothing to lessen Christian’s worry; instead, only increased it.

“Did Josh return since?” Christian asked.

“Nay, me laird,” Harriet replied, “what do ye think the matter is? Where could they be?”

“I do nae ken for sure, Harriet. But I do ken both just might be in deep trouble,” he replied, immediately turning around as he marched downstairs, Harriet walking right behind him. “If either Keira or Josh arrive back at the castle, send me information immediately. If any letter or note arrives here, keep it safe. I will hopefully be back soon.”

“Of course, me laird,” Harriet replied behind him.

Christian almost ran inside, motioning towards several guards to follow him as he mounted back his horse and rode back towards the inn he had just gotten back from. He knew Keira had gone there only, and it was the only place that would help him find all the answers to the whereabouts of Keira and Josh. He also did not understand if the Laird O'Donnelly was really in town or not, but the fact that a note had arrived with his seal on it did mean that it was written by him and him alone. Christian knew he needed to find out if he had somehow returned to his bedchamber, too, because he might also know about whatever had happened.

As soon as he reached the inn, Christian noticed how loud the place was, along with the main street being extremely busy. If anyone had tricked Keira into coming here, they would have never met her inside the inn. Christian jumped down from his horse.

“Check the side alleys,” he said to one of his soldiers, who nodded. They divided themselves and walked towards the almost darkened lanes beside the inn, Christian going towards the right. It was impossible to see much in the astonishing darkness as he blinked to adjust his gaze.

“God damn it,” he swore loudly as his foot touched something and he almost fell over it but immediately realized that it was not just something.

Christian bent down and saw it was none other than Josh. He was tied up and unconscious, lying there in the alley. Christian's worry only grew as soon as he saw Josh, knowing that it was not a good sign at all. If Josh had been left here unconscious, it only meant there had been no one to protect Keira unless she, too, was

lying somewhere in the alley.

“Untie Josh and make sure he wakes up and look around the alley to check if ye can find Keira,” he instructed the soldiers, beginning to look around himself.

“Me laird!” a soldier who had gone to the other side suddenly came to him running. “There is a dead body out there.”

Christian froze in place at the words, knowing that if it was Keira, he would not be able to stand it. He would never be able to stand anything happening to Keira, yet he knew he needed to see for himself.

“Who is it?”

“An elderly man,” the soldier informed him, and Christian’s breath restored. He could not believe he had already assumed the worst, but this only meant that Keira was nowhere around. Whoever had brought her out here had taken her with them.

Christian quickly made his way towards the back, his gaze falling on the man on the ground. He did not fail to notice that the man was handsomely dressed, which was enough indication that he happened to be rich. Could it have been a robbery? Christian thought just as his eyes caught sight of a sword, fallen right beside the man.

“Does anyone of ye recognize him?” he asked his soldiers, who denied knowing the man. Christian bent down to pick up the sword, his gaze immediately falling to the crest on the handle. It was a familiar crest that hinted of noble lineage. Where had he seen it before?

He suddenly remembered the letter he had just seen from Harriet, which had arrived for Keira from her father. The letter had been sealed with the O’Donnelly crest. The very crest which was embossed on the sword, which only meant one thing. The man

in front of him was no one but the Laird O'Donnelly. Keira's father. Christian noticed the wound on his abdomen along with the sword fallen beside him, showing how he had been murdered by someone he had been fighting. Who could the laird have been fighting? None of it made any sense to Christian, yet his worry kept growing because Keira was still nowhere to be found.

"He will go with us," Christian motioned towards the laird's body, his heart breaking at the prospect of telling Keira about her father's death. He would need to write letters to Astrid and Aiden as well, but that could only be done once Keira was found. Where are ye, my fox?

"Who is he, me laird?" a soldier asked him.

"Laird O'Donnelly."

"Lady Keira's father?" the soldier asked again, clearly stunned at my reply.

"Yes."

They searched the entire area for the next few hours, but Keira was nowhere to be found. Christian did not understand where she could have gone unless she had been taken by someone. He knew she would never disappear on her own account, as clearly, there was an entire planning behind it. If he could kill someone right now, he would. He had never been angrier. He needed to find Keira as soon as possible.

He knew searching the area would be pointless anymore, and he needed to return home. A few of his soldiers had already taken Josh and Laird O'Donnelly's body back to the castle, and Christian knew he would need to arrange for funeral rites. He never wanted to do without, Keira but she was nowhere to be found, and this was worrying enough as it is.

“Me laird!” Harriet was waiting for him the moment he arrived back at the castle.

“Did somethin’ arrive for me?” he asked her, but she shook her head.

“Nothing. The soldiers arrived with Josh, and what they told me was Laird O’Donnelly’s body,” she said, her face pale. “Lady Keira’s faither.”

“Yes, I do nae ken who killed him, but he has been murdered, and we found Josh unconscious,” Christian sighed, trying his best to mask his worry.

“And Lady Keira? She was nowhere?”

“Nay,” Christian replied, pain gripping his chest. The mere fact that Keira could be in danger right now or perhaps extremely hurt was enough to cause him worry, but he was entirely helpless until he knew where she was. He needed to know as soon as possible since he could not stay a single day without her.

“Where could she be?” Harriet asked, appearing just as worried.

“I will find her, Harriet,” he replied. “Is Josh awake?”

“He is drifting in and out of consciousness,” she replied, “the physician said the wound on his head is extremely deep, and he is glad to be alive.”

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“Nothing will happen to Josh,” Christian said firmly, knowing that this was another loss that he would never be able to bear. Josh was his brother.

“I hope so.”

“Prepare for the funeral rites of the laird, Harriet,” he informed her, and Harriet nodded, walking away while Christian quickly made his way towards Josh’s bedroom and entered inside.

He looked like his same old self, just slightly paler and worryingly sick. It was evident that the wound was truly very deep and was influencing Josh. His eyes opened the moment Christian walked inside, and he tried to sit up in bed, despite clearly being in pain.

“Are ye well?” Christian asked, worried for him too.

“I am... fine,” Josh croaked out, his words coming out in nothing more than a whisper, “Keira.”

“Where is Keira, Josh?” Christian asked, sitting down beside him. Josh was the one person after Keira who could see Christian’s vulnerable side. “We searched for her in the entire alley, but she was nowhere to be found. We instead found the Laird O’Donnelly. Dead.”

“Her faither?” Josh asked, his words muffled as if speaking was an effort.

“Yes,” Christian nodded, “what happened there? Do ye remember anything? Do ye

ken where Keira could be?”

“We... we reached there and found out that it was all a fluke,” he said slowly, “we had been... been lured there by someone. Before I ken what was happening, someone... hit me over the head with a cudgel, and I fainted, and Keira was still... with me throughout that time.”

“So, she has been kidnapped?” Christian asked, trying his best to keep his anger under control. He had never been more scared in his life.

“Yes,” Josh nodded, gulping.

“Do ye ken who it was?”

“I do nae ken,” Josh said, “but right before I fainted, I think I saw... Eric.”

Christian only saw red.

CHAPTER23

Keira opened her eyes slowly, adjusting to the darkness around her as she realized where she was. The bedchamber she had stayed in while she had been at the Gilmor castle. The chamber looked the same, and Keira did not understand why all of this was happening to her again.

It is like nothing ever changed, and I was always caught up here.

The time she had spent with Christian suddenly felt like a long-lost memory, or something conjured out of fiction as she began to remember everything that had gone down here, in this very chamber. She curled up into herself, remembering the pain she had been subjected to in this room, the bruises, and the beatings. She remembered

everything she had endured.

“Christian, where are ye,” she whispered, tears beginning to stream down her face. Eric had killed her father right in front of her eyes.

I just want to run away. Will I ever be able to get out of here alive?

She looked up as she heard the door unlocking, and a single ray of light filtered in just as Eric walked inside the room. He looked the same as he had always looked. Classically handsome with a face that could never be seen as that of an unkind man. Only if people knew the monster that was hiding underneath his charm.

“Ye are awake,” he said softly, walking towards her. Keira pushed herself against the wall, raising her knees to her chest to protect her body from his torture.

“Why have ye brought me here, Eric?” she asked, fighting against the tears that were begging to escape yet again. She knew she could not appear weak in front of him. She could not afford to.

“Ye ken why,” he replied, sitting down on a chair in front of her while Keira remained on the floor. The countless times they had been in this exact similar position came back to her, and she felt as if she would crumble. She knew she needed to stand up against him, but her mind and body were refusing to obey. She was terrified and upset.

“Eric, ye need to let me go,” she said, her voice gaining strength, “ye can nae keep me here against my will.”

“Keira, forget all of this,” he said, coming down on his knees to sit in front of her, “I first wanted to apologize to ye.”

She backed away further, not wishing for him to touch her. by had never been more repulsed by any man the way she was repulsed of Eric. He had her father's blood on his hands, and that was something Keira would never be able to forgive him for.

“For what?” she asked.

“I never meant to kill yer faither,” he whispered, running his hand through his hair as if the prospect frustrated him, “I truly wish he had nae come in our way, and he had nae tried to fight me off to protect ye. If he had nae interfered, I would have left him alive, I promise.”

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“Ye could have knocked him out too, but ye killed him, Eric,” Keira said emotionlessly, since all she could think about was picking up a sword and driving it straight through Eric’s heart, “Ye killed my faither on purpose, and I will never forgive ye.”

“Ye will never forgive me?” he asked, his tone dangerously low.

“Never.”

Eric continued to stare at her for a few seconds before he burst out laughing manically as if Keira’s response had been amusing to him. She could not understand this man and what went through his head, but she knew he was certainly not sane. There was something deeply problematic about him.

“Do ye think I give a damn about yer forgiveness, ye wench?” he shouted, bending down to take her hair in his grasp rather painfully to lift her head up. “Ye went behind my back to run away from here and slept with that bastard MacPherson. Ye think I care about what ye think and nae think!?”

“If ye do nae care about me, so why did ye bring me here?” Keira shouted back, refusing to back away any longer. She was still terrified of Eric, but she could not remain quiet. She would never submit to him or act scared.

“To kill ye,” he smiled at her dangerously, just as he slapped Keira’s face with all his might. Keira’s head turned sideways, and she was certain her lip must be bleeding right now. She knew all these bruises too well, but she would no longer succumb to their pressure. Eric could not win over her anymore.

“Ye are planning to kill me?” she asked him, her words soft.

“Why else do ye think I brought ye here?!” he shouted, his palm wrapping around her throat as he tried to choke Keira against the wall, but she remained adamantly silent. “Ye humiliated me in front of my entire army by refusing to return with me when I came to get ye back. The news of yer betrothal feast made me look like a jilted lover! Ye think I will forgive ye?”

“Ye were the one who sent Christian a threat via the arrow the night of our betrothal feast, nay?” Keira asked, knowing she was right. She had been delusional to believe that Eric would leave her alone. She should have known that he was wounded and would certainly strike back.

“Yes, I did that,” he laughed again, “did that scare ye, Keira?”

“Nay,” she laughed in his face, “it seemed like a foolish joke pulled by a weak man. Now I ken it truly was a weak man.”

His expression darkened at her words, and he threw her head back against the wall with violent speed, and Keira felt as if her head had been cut open. She touched her hand to her hair, and her fingers turned red with blood.

“Ye think ye are angering me with yer disrespect, Keira?” he asked, “I will kill ye nay matter what.”

“Eric,” Keira whispered his name, trying to keep her eyes open against the pain that was radiating through her entire body, “the moment Christian finds out ye have me, ye will be dead.”

“Christian will nae even notice ye are gone,” Eric said confidently, and Keira burst out laughing at his reply. Only if he knew Christian would be worried sick by now

and would come for her as soon as he knew Eric had her.

“Will he nae?” she asked sarcastically.

“To a man like Christian, ye are nothing more than a plaything. I ken in yer head ye might think he truly cares for ye, but that is certainly nae the case. He does nae give a damn about ye either, and yer poor faither is dead; hence there is nay one in the world who cares for ye enough to fight me,” Eric replied as if he knew Keira’s life far better than she herself knew it. She wondered if the man was simply crazy or truly delusional.

“Ye are very, very mistaken, Eric,” she said softly, smiling in the midst of the pain which she endured, “ye want to kill me? Kill me. Ye are going to die either way.”

“I will nae die, Keira,” Eric shook his head, “the only person who will be dead soon enough is ye.”

“How I wish I could show ye a mirror of reality right now,” she laughed again, which angered Eric, and he kicked her in the stomach, making Keira double over in pain. She knew he enjoyed hitting her and torturing her in this way, but she was strong enough to take it. She had taken it before, and she could remain alive against it again. She would not die at the hands of this monster.

“The reality only shows me yer death. Which will be very, very soon,” Eric replied. “I will make sure to keep ye alive just long enough that the pain ye feel will make ye beg me to kill ye. Once ye are begging for death on yer knees, I will give it to ye. I want a wench like ye to understand that ye can nae betray a man like me. I wanted to marry ye, and ye really truly hurt me by running away.”

“Ye wanted to marry me? Is that how ye plan to treat a wife? By beating her up every day?” she shouted at him.

“I was treating ye well, ye bitch,” he slapped her again, “being beaten up is part of being a wife. Ye are supposed to be scared of yer husband, and ye were scared of me! Now ye have returned with nothing but disrespect in yer tone, but I nay longer care because this time, I have only brought ye here to kill ye.”

“I have no qualms with ye killin’ me, Eric,” Keira shrugged, the simplest of movements causing her pain since her body was already filled with bruises and gashes, “I ken ye will die at Christian’s hands nay matter what.”

“He will nae be able to touch me, Keira,” Eric nodded, “this time if he comes, my army is prepared. I will make sure to kill him myself, and if ye are alive by then, I will bring ye his head.”

“If ye really think that is even possible, Eric, ye are nothing but delusional,” Keira laughed again, unable to understand why Eric was ignoring the reality of the situation.

He would never be able to fight Christian, much less kill him.

“Ye will see, Keira,” he said, “ye really will see.”

He pushed her back against the floor and walked out of the bedchamber, locking the door behind him. Keira knew he would never leave her unlocked again. Now, he would be very, very careful about making sure she was not going anywhere. She was simply glad that he had not touched her inappropriately. She knew she could handle the beating and the torture, but she would never allow him to exploit her body. She belonged to Christian heart and soul, and she knew he would come for her.

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Keira was certain by this point Christian would have found Josh. Although, she did not know if Josh would remember seeing Eric in the alley. If Josh had seen Eric, Christian would immediately know that Keira had been kidnapped, and he would come for her. He would not leave her in this hell longer than she needed to be here.

Please come rescue me from here, Christian. Please.

He could not hear her, but she still felt as if she could say anything to him, and he would listen. It was their hearts that were connected to one another, and if there was someone in the world who could really rescue Keira, it was him. She knew it.

“Please, God, do nae let me die at the hands of this man,” she sobbed, “please give me the strength to stay alive until Christian comes for me.”

It was not going to be easy. It would perhaps be extremely difficult truly, but Keira had to be strong for herself and for Christian. She needed to be strong for her father because she certainly could not let his death go unavenged. He had died to protect her, and Keira would do anything in her power to make sure Eric suffered a similar fate. She would make sure he suffered just as he was making her suffer. Now all she needed to do was pray for a miracle to help her escape or for Christian to rescue her as soon as he could. She knew she would not be caught up here for too long.

CHAPTER24

“I will kill him,” Christian thundered, hurling a glass kept on the table towards the wall, the glass shattering immediately at the contact.

“Christian, calm down,” Josh said, standing up from the bed.

It had been two days already since the kidnapping, and Christian could not believe he still had not gone to Gilmor castle to bring back Keira. The council had been against such an impulsive decision and had advised him to deal with the matter smartly rather than impulsively for they believed Eric to have built an army against Christian and he certainly could not have helped Keira if he himself was dead. Even though Christian despised the wait, he knew he need not be so impulsive. Although the simple fact that Eric still had the audacity to go ahead and kidnap Keira stunned Christian, and this time, he knew he would kill the man.

Josh was already much better and constantly considered himself guilty for not being able to protect Keira. Although Christian knew it was not Josh’s fault. He had been knocked unconscious almost immediately, and both had been blinded by the surprise of the situation. Josh could have done nothing.

“We need to get her back as quickly as possible,” Christian said, pacing from left and right. He knew all his council members could see his anger as they gathered around him, but he did not care. His focus was entirely on getting Keira back.

“Me Laird, we have received replies from all the neighboring lairds, and they had agreed to aid ye in this time of need. They all have their own personal enmities with the Gilmor clan as well since Laird Gilmor had tried to loot them once or twice in the past years,” a senior council member replied.

“So, they have agreed to send their armies for the battle?” Christian asked, calming down slightly. If this plan truly worked, he would be marching down towards the Gilmor castle with the largest army ever seen in Scotland, and Eric would have no means to escape.

This was what the council had wanted him to do. They had received information that

Eric had prepared his army for an impending attack from the MacPherson army and was waiting for Christian to arrive. The council knew that the Gilmor army had nothing against them, but they still had advised Christian to not take any risks.

Hence, Christian had written letters to every laird in the neighboring areas and those, which had come to his betrothal feast, informing them of what had happened to Keira and how Christian needed their armies to form a large army that would take down the Gilmor clan once and for all. Since every laird had agreed, Christian could see the plan finally coming to life.

“Send everyone letters back. We will march towards the Gilmor castle tomorrow morning,” he informed the council members, who nodded.

Now that he knew that he was only separated from Keira by the distance of one single day, he could not sit still. I am coming for ye, Keira. Eric must have been brutal with her, and Christian would not be surprised if she had bruises all over her body again. He certainly did not trust Eric at all in the matter.

Why had he even taken her with him? Christian was certain Eric no longer harbored any feelings for Keira, not that he had any feelings for her earlier as well, but at that time, he at least wished to marry her. This clearly meant that this time, Eric’s only motive was to kill Keira and nothing else. He was trying to avenge the humiliation he had faced by murdering Keira and, in turn, humiliating Eric since he had kidnapped her betrothed.

“Christian?” Josh’s voice made him turn around just as Josh walked out of the council room.

“Yes?”

“Are ye alright?” he asked, clearly worried for Christian.

“Now that I ken we will be getting Keira back tomorrow, I feel better,” Christian replied, although he knew he felt anything but alright. He did not know if he was even capable of feeling alright through everything he was suffering already. The fact that Keira was in pain right now was enough to give him pain as well, and he would not be truly at peace or feel better until she was right there beside him.

“Ye do nae have to lie to me, Christian,” Josh replied, and Christian sighed deeply.

“Ye already ken I feel awful right now, Josh,” Christian shook his head, “I will nae feel better until she returns.”

“I ken,” Josh nodded, “have ye written to her brother and sister?”

“Yes, I wrote to them yesterday informing of Laird O’Donnelly’s death and Keira’s kidnapping. I assured them I would get her back, and I mean to keep that promise nay matter what,” he replied, sounding firm on his words. Christian had to get her back no matter what, or else he would never be able to live with himself.

“I think they will be coming here sooner rather than later,” Josh remarked. Christian nodded, knowing perfectly well the grief was too deep for all of them.

“I just need Keira beside me before they return here,” Christian replied, “and I will get her back tomorrow.”

* * *

The sight before him was more remarkable than Christian could have ever imagined it to be. He had always marveled over the strength of his own army, for he knew they were truly the fiercest warriors in all of Scotland, yet he had never once considered how the combined army of a plethora of clans would look like.

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Soldiers stood ready in platoons for as far as the eye could see, and all the lairds were gathered beside Christian. Each of them seemed just as stunned by the sheer strength of the army laid out before them as none could have expected this. Scotland had never seen such an army before, and Christian could not believe he was finally going to rescue Keira and destroy Eric once and for all with such a huge power beside him.

“My soldiers!” he greeted them all loudly, his voice echoing through the large ground they stood at. They were rather close to the Gilmor clan, and it would not take them long to reach there.

He watched as the soldiers quietened down, their attention solely towards him.

“I must thank ye all for participating in my cause and helping me attack the Gilmor castle!” he said. He could not deny being grateful to them for all they were doing for him, “We will be reaching the clan soon enough, and I just wanted to remind ye all that we are only attacking the castle. The people of the Gilmor clan are innocent and suffering under the rule of Lord Gilmor themselves. Nay one is supposed to hurt them since we will only be storming the castle.”

A loud cheer was followed by his announcement, and Christian was glad to see that no one opposed his decision. He had never been a proponent of undue violence, even though all he could see right now was red. Keira was locked up because of Eric, and Christian would make sure Eric suffered immensely.

“And nay one will touch Lord Gilmor,” Christian said again, loud enough for all to hear, “He is mine to kill!”

This was met with even greater cheering as the army began to march toward the Gilmor clan once again. As they neared the lands, Christian noticed how several farmers who were farming on the outskirts saw them immediately, their mouths falling open at the sight before them.

“Are ye ready, Christian?” Josh asked him, and Christian nodded.

“I have never been more ready to kill a man,” he replied, trying his best to stay calm and keep his anger in check. He needed to find Keira first and make sure she was safe. If Eric had done anything to her, Christian would never be able to control himself. Keira had to be all right.

“This army is a sight to see,” Josh remarked.

“Eric will know he is doomed the moment he sees us,” Christian smirked, “I want the man to vehemently suffer until he is dead. I want him to know what he had done was inexcusable.”

They marched ahead silently, finally reaching the castle gates. Christian noticed how the town had almost been empty, as if whoever was notified of the arrival of this army had retreated to their houses. Just as Christian had instructed the army, no one looted the houses or exercised any violence on the innocent people. He would have never tolerated such a thing.

“Break the gates,” Christian instructed, and within minutes, several soldiers had stepped ahead, breaking the gates with their sheer strength. The Gilmor army was waiting right by the gates, and the soldiers charged forward, already looking forward to the fight.

Christian could hear loud shouts behind him, metal clanging over metal as the armies collided against one another, but he knew the Gilmor army could never win. His army

outranked them in both strength, skill, and number, and they truly had no hope.

“Do ye want me to come with ye?” Josh asked Christian, who shook his head.

“Nay, I will find her myself,” Christian nodded. “Ye stay here and make sure ye have yer eyes on the fight.”

“Ye ken where to find me if ye need anything,” Josh replied, running in the midst of the battle as Christian rode forward.

He knew Keira must be in a bedchamber somewhere in the castle, and Eric, too, must be hiding inside. The man was a coward to the core and would never have the guts to step forward and fight himself. Christian would not be surprised if he decided to run away, which was the reason Christian had divided the army into sections and they had surrounded the castle entirely. If Eric were to escape, he would be both seen and caught immediately and brought directly to Christian. There was no repentance or a chance to run away from him. He deserved death.

He turned around and noticed several Gilmor soldiers advancing toward him from behind and drew out his sword while still seated atop his horse, easily slitting their throats in a rage.

“Idiots,” he shook his head, riding towards the manor gates, which had been broken down by soldiers, and several of them were quickly filtering inside. The last time Christian had attacked the castle, it had been the middle of the night, and he had found Keira right here in the gardens. Although he knew Eric would not let her escape so easily this time.

I will find her nonetheless.

He stepped down from his horse, tying it to a tree nearby, and, with his sword still

bloody and clasped tightly in his hands, quickly made his way inside the castle. The castle was in chaos as everyone was running away from one end to the other. The servants were trying their best to escape, and Christian did not care about them. He knew Eric and Eric's mother were both positively awful to their servants as well, and Christian had nothing against them. If it were still the old Christian, the man he had been before he had met Keira, he knew he would have killed them all in a mad rage, but right now, he was more rational and focused on finding her.

"Ye, stop!" Christian shouted as he saw a maid running towards the back of the castle. Her gaze widened as she saw him, recognition in her expression.

"Laird MacPherson," she whispered, standing frozen on the spot.

"Where is Keira?" he asked her, his tone angry. He could only hope for her to know.

"Upstairs. The bedchamber at the extreme right," she croaked out, and Christian nodded before moving towards the staircase. The nearer he got to her, the more he was certain that she was somewhere here only. He knew he would find her. She was waiting for him.

CHAPTER25

"What do ye mean a large army is marching towards the clan?" Eric asked Brian, who had just informed him of the news. Apparently, the farmers on the outskirts had noticed a huge army, larger than any they had ever seen, coming towards the clan.

"It is the Laird MacPherson, me laird," Brian elaborated, "he has gathered the support of several neighboring lairds, and he is marching towards us with a combined army."

"Ye are lying," Eric said unbelievably. He had expected Christian to attack him eventually, but he had never expected him to gather such a huge army in a matter of

two days alone. He had thought that Christian had never cared enough about Keira to do such a thing, but apparently, he had been proven wrong. Christian had outdone himself, and Eric knew his army was not equipped to fight the men marching towards him. They were all more skillful and well trained and much more in number.

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“I am nay lying, me laird,” Brian replied, sounding worried.

“Is our army ready?” Eric asked, knowing that he would have to fight back.

“Yes, me laird,” Brian nodded, “should I send them to town, so they can fight the army as soon as they enter our lands. They will try to attack the villagers.”

“Nay,” Eric shook his head, “I do nae care about those people. Only mount the army at the castle gates and inside the castle. Make sure all of them are standing ready. We must protect the castle only.”

“But the people, me laird?” Brian asked, sounding confused, which annoyed Eric even more, “they will expect some kind of protection from ye.”

“The people can die for all I care,” he shouted back, his anger rising, “We do nae have enough soldiers to fight such a huge army anyway, and the castle deserves greater protection than anybody else.”

“Of course,” Brian nodded and left at once.

Eric walked out of his study and marched straight towards Keira’s bedchamber, throwing it open. She was laying on the bed but immediately stood up when she saw him enter. Her face had bruises all over it, and she looked extremely worn out, but Eric did not care at all for her. He never really had.

“Do ye ken what is happening?” he asked her, his voice low.

“What do ye mean?” she asked, appearing confused.

“Christian has apparently gathered the largest army in all of Scotland and is marching here right now,” Eric told her, a bitter taste persisting in his mouth.

“Is he now?” Keira asked, a smile appearing on her face. “I already told ye he will come for me.”

“I do nae care about ye and what ye told me,” Eric shouted, “I wish I had killed ye sooner, but right now, I have nay time. I will be out of here before Christian can even find me.”

“He will find ye, Eric,” Keira replied confidently. “Ye can go and hide anywhere in the world, but I can assure ye that Christian will find ye nay matter where ye are, and he will kill ye.”

“We will see,” Eric replied. Just then, a loud thundering voice reached them, and Keira immediately walked towards the window, and Eric followed behind her. Her window was open to the entire view of the gardens, and the arriving army was already beginning to be visible from here. They stood in front of the castle gates.

“He is here,” Keira whispered almost triumphantly, just as a few soldiers broke the latches on the gates, the army running inside as the Gilmor soldiers tried to defend. Within seconds, dust was rising from the ground as the armies collided.

“I think if ye wish to run, ye should do it now,” she turned to look at him. “Christian will be upon ye before ye realize it.”

“I will lock ye here and leave ye to die,” Eric said, “he will nae be able to find ye so easily.”

“We will see about that,” Keira laughed. Eric knew he could not waste time bickering with her because it was evident his doom had arrived.

There was no way he would ever be able to fight off Christian or win against such a large army. His only hope to stay alive right now was to escape. He briskly walked out of Keira’s bedchamber, locking her inside as he made his way toward his mother, who had stepped out in worry.

“Eric?” she asked him, concern evident on her face, “what is happening? Have we been attacked?”

“Christian is here with a large army,” Eric answered shortly. “if ye wish to stay alive, ye will need to run. Christian will nae leave anyone alive.”

“I am nae going anywhere, Eric,” his mother said resolutely, “this is our castle, and MacPherson and his army can nae force us to leave from here. Ye must go out there and fight him. Ye must stand yer ground.”

“Ye do nae understand, mother!” Eric shouted, shaking her by the shoulders, “If I go out there, I will die. Christian is so angry he will kill me with his bare hands. He has arrived with the armies of all of his neighboring clans. We do nae have the numbers or strength to fight him. We will lose!”

“We have nay other choice?” she asked, her voice losing hope.

“Nay.”

“Where is Keira?” his mother suddenly asked, “should we take her with us?”

“She is worthless, mother,” Eric replied, “I only care about my own life right now, and ye should do the same. Take whatever is necessary, and we will leave

immediately.”

He watched her nod as he himself walked towards his own bedchamber, quickly gathering anything he might need and held monetary value. He did not know where he would run off too, but this was the only way to get things done. Only if he hadn't kidnapped Keira none of this would have happened in the first place.

His mother was already waiting for him outside as he walked out, and Eric suddenly felt a strong sense of hatred towards her. It was only because of her that he had been reduced to the status of running away from his own castle. If she had not coaxed him into kidnapping Keira, neither of them would be suffering an impending threat of death right now.

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“We must go,” she said, and Eric nodded. This was not the right time to mull over the past.

“We will leave from the back,” he replied as they walked away quickly. The castle was in utter chaos as the servants were running from one end to the next. Everyone was simply focused on trying to save their lives because it was the most they could do right now. The chance of escaping with an army this huge waiting right outside seemed rather difficult to Eric, but he could not give up without trying.

“Laird MacPherson is in the castle!” a maid shouted, informing everyone around her, and Eric looked at his mother, who was just as stunned by the bit of news as him. Christian was already here, which only meant that he would need to rush.

“Come on, mother. Quicker,” he motioned towards her just as a few servants blocked their path.

“Laird Gilmor, ye can nae leave us to die at the hands of Laird MacPherson at such a time,” one of them insisted, “ye must fight him to protect us all.”

“Get out of my way right now,” he shouted, extremely annoyed. He had no time to waste right now.

“Laird, please,” the servants continued insisting, refusing to move aside. “we can nae let ye go while ye leave us here to die.”

“Gilmor!” a loud voice shouted from behind him, and Eric turned around to notice that several soldiers and a few lairds from the other clans including, Josh,

MacPherson's man at arms, stood beside him. He could see he was truly trapped.

He turned back towards his servants, "Ye must let me go immediately, or these men will kill me."

"We have lived in this castle for all our lives. We have given generations of our families for the Gilmor family. We have endured the behavior of ye and yer mother towards us. Ye can nae let us die in here after all that we have done for ye. We will nae let it happen!" The servant shouted, and everyone else cheered in agreement.

"Let us go you lowlives!" his mother said angrily, "have ye forgotten who we are."

"Ye are the cowards who have never been good to us, yet we endured it with patience. Ye will die with us in the castle. We will nae let ye escape," the servant replied back. Eric could sense this was a lost argument since they were trapped from both ends in the hallway. He knew he could go either way, and the only thing waiting for him was death. The footsteps behind him were an indication of the fact that Josh and the other lairds were coming nearer. He knew it was the end for him.

He turned around at last, staring at them, "I ken what I have done is wrong, but I am ready to beg for forgiveness from Laird MacPherson. Please do nae kill me."

"We will nae kill ye. Eric," Josh replied, "Christian will kill ye himself. He specifically asked us to nae even touch ye."

"I have done nothing. I must be allowed to leave," his mother said from beside him, and Eric turned to look at her incredulously.

"Ye have done nothing!?" he asked her, his words vibrating with anger. "Ye were the mastermind behind the entire kidnapping and the person who lured Christian away from Keira with a fake feud between yer men. Ye were the one who convinced me

that I needed to get Keira back because it was against my honor!”

“I did nae kidnap her; he did,” she said without even looking at Eric. “I am innocent in the matter.”

“Ye were equally involved!” a servant shouted suddenly as all of them gathered around his mother. You’ve always been cruel”

“Eric, Eric, stop them!” his mother said in a panic, but Eric ignored her entirely.

“They are all right, mother. It is as much yer doing as it is mine. I do nae ken why I ever listened to ye. I wish I had never let ye manipulate me in the first place,” he replied as he watched a throng of maids drag her away.

He knew he should have felt something, he should have felt horror or grief, for he knew the servants would definitely kill his mother, but he was emotionless. The woman had never given him a fond memory to cherish, and her death did not matter to him.

Especially when he knew his own death was waiting for him. Christian must have found Keira by now. He must have seen the bruises on her body, and it would only take him a few seconds for his hatred to grow even more towards Eric.

Christian would never let me leave after what I did to Keira.

Eric knew he had made a huge mistake. He watched emotionlessly as his mother was dragged away as she kept fighting for her life. Although he knew he himself did not have the strength to fight back. He would never be able to stand before Christian. Just then, a loud, lethal voice thundered through the entire castle, and Eric knew it was the end.

“Bring Eric to me!” Christian shouted. He had never sounded angrier.

CHAPTER 26

“Keira!” Christian’s voice reached her through the door as she stood just by it. Her heart was filled with relief as she knew he was just on the other side. He had come for her.

“I am here, Christian,” she replied, a sob escaping her. She could not wait to be in his arms.

“Move away from the door, Keira,” he said loudly, “I will need to break it open.”

She immediately backed away, giving him room to break the door open since she knew Eric had locked it up. Within a few minutes, Christian had burst through the door with his sheer strength, the wooden plank separating entirely from its hinges as it fell to the ground.

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Her eyes landed on the man before him, his sword raised as he entered the room. He looked just as handsome as he always did, only if angrier and tired. She knew her disappearance must have taken a toll on him, but they were together once again at last.

“Christian,” she whispered his name, no longer controlling the barricade of tears that overtook her entire being. She quickly ran towards him as he opened his arms for her, dropping his sword to the ground.

“My fox, my pretty, stop cryin’,” he whispered sweetly, but Keira had no control over what she felt. She could not believe he had found her alive.

“I am so glad ye are here,” she whispered, her words muffled against his chest.

“Ye ken I will always come for ye,” he whispered back, placing kisses on the top of her head. “Let me look at ye.”

He separated her from him, his gaze falling on her face, and his expression continually darkened as he looked at the other bruises on her body. Keira knew Christian was already angry, and the sight of her wounds would only make him angrier. When he had found her the first time and had saved her from Eric, he hardly knew her. And even then, he had offered her to kill Eric simply due to the bruises on her body. Now she was his betrothed. He would kill Eric for those. Undoubtedly.

“Did he try to touch ye, Keira?” Christian asked, his voice dangerously low. She knew he was trying to conceal the anger he felt.

“Nay,” she shook her head, “he only wanted to kill me.”

“What?”

“Aye, and I told him that he can kill me or nae kill me. Ye were going to kill him anyway,” she replied, and Christian chuckled softly before bringing her into his arms again.

“That is my fierce fox,” he said softly.

“Christian,” Keira began to sob again, “Eric... he... he... faither was there, and he saw us... he saw Eric with me, and he tried to... fight him off to protect me but Eric... he killed Faither.”

“I ken,” Christian said, stroking her hair as he allowed her to cry. “When I found Josh, I found yer faither as well, and I immediately knew he had been murdered. When Josh regained consciousness, he told us how he had seen Eric right before fainting, and I knew only a bastard like him could kill Laird O’Donnely.”

“Ye found papa?” Keira asked, wiping the tears from her face.

“I did,” he nodded, “I wish I could have waited for ye before burying him, but I did nae want to disrespect his body and soul much longer, so I did it anyway. I wrote to yer brother and sister as well.”

“Oh, Christian,” she sobbed, “thank ye.”

“There is nothing to thank me for, princess,” Christian replied, “I still need to kill Eric.”

He took her hand in his as they marched out of the bedchamber, Christian beginning

to get angrier with every step. The last time they had dueled, she had asked Christian to spare Eric's life because she had believed that might help him grow into a better person, but he had instead gotten even worse. This time Keira would not ask him to spare Eric's life. The man had destroyed her life and killed her father. He had tried to deprive her of happiness, and Keira could no longer forgive him. Her heart was big, but it was not big enough to forgive the person who was her father's murderer.

"Bring Eric to me!" Christian shouted loud enough to be heard in the entirety of the castle. The castle seemed to grow silent after the shout, and they made their way toward the main hall.

Keira turned to look and saw Josh dragging Eric behind him, followed by several other lairds of the neighboring clans. Most of these men had been present there at her and Christian's betrothal feast. Keira looked at Eric, who would not meet her gaze, and she could sense the helplessness in his demeanor. He knew his end had arrived.

"We found him just now, trying to run away," Josh said, throwing Eric forward as he fell to the ground.

"What about Elena?" Christian asked, "Has she escaped?"

"She was dragged by the servants as they wanted to kill her themselves," Josh replied, and Keira scoffed at the statement. Elena had never harmed Keira personally, but she knew she was a major reason why Eric was the way he was. She had also been horrible to the servants around her and had never treated a single person with respect.

"I do nae care about her much either," Christian replied, "I was only waiting for Gilmor."

"Christian, I ken I have made a mistake," Eric said, looking up, "I ken I have

wronged ye in many ways, but I am honestly asking for forgiveness. Please do nae kill me.”

Keira could have never expected Eric to beg. She had imagined him fighting back, but it was apparent how he had given up already. He was tired. She knew she did not really wish to see him in such a state, but she no longer cared. To her, he was dead already.

* * *

Christian continued to stare at Eric while he begged for forgiveness from him. Christian did not have the time for that. He had no desire to forgive the man.

“Forget it,” he shouted, making Eric flinch as he stood up from the ground. “Stand up or fight me like a man or die at my hands without a fight. The choice is yers.”

“Ye forced me to take this step, Christian,” Eric suddenly shouted, his face turning crimson with anger, “ye took Keira away from me first when she was my betrothed, and now ye are angry when I did the same!”

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Before anyone could analyze what was happening, Christian noticed how Eric's hand immediately reached for his sword, which he pulled out in a second. He had already seen Eric's move, and his sword was at the ready too; hence just as Eric attacked him blindly, Christian easily defended the attack, pushing Eric away with the force of his sword.

"I will kill ye," Eric shouted, growing angrier and attacked yet again but Christian defended himself once more, pushing Eric back rather easily.

"Will ye now?" Christian asked, attacking Eric himself, easily cutting across his left arm. He could have easily pierced Eric directly in the heart to kill him, but Christian wanted him to writhe with pain before he died. Christian wanted to make him suffer.

Just as Eric recovered from the attack, Christian easily landed a blow on his stomach, successfully breaking a few ribs since Eric doubled over in pain. As Eric fell to the ground, Christian wanted to do nothing more but hurt the man. He landed fist after fist on his face until blood spat out of his mouth.

"Ye hurt Keira, ye bastard," Christian shouted, "ye will suffer for that."

"Christian," Keira's voice forced him to turn around as he looked at her; she had tears in her eyes as she whispered to him, "Just kill him."

She was right. She had taught him to be a better man than this. She has shown him how violence was not the answer to everything. As Eric lay in front of him, almost motionless and very near to death, Christian was certain that the least he could do to differentiate himself from this monster was giving him a painless death.

Torturing might feel good now, but then? Then I'd only feel worse. I am better than this.

Christian stood up from the ground, picking up his sword in his hand as he eyed Eric. He easily stuck the sword through Eric's heart just as the blood gushed out, and the man was dead within a few seconds alone. Christian continued to stare at him for several seconds, unable to believe that Eric was finally dead. The person who had caused Keira nothing but pain was finally dead.

"Christian," he heard her voice as she walked towards him, her hand reaching out to hold her elbow.

"He is dead," Christian said, almost in a whisper, "I have avenged yer faither."

"Thank ye," Keira nodded, wiping her tears. "We should go back home."

"We will," Christian promised before turning to Josh, "stop the battle. Whoever is alive from the Gilmor army, pardon them. Whoever is dead, make sure they are buried, and their families informed."

"Yes, me laird," Josh nodded and immediately walked out of the castle. The other lairds nodded at both Keira and Christian before walking out as well, most definitely to take a look at their own armies. He still could not believe that the battle had finally come to an end, and Keira was beside him once again. Being away from her, even if it was for just a few days, had been hell for Christian. He could never imagine suffering through this pain again.

"I can nae believe ye brought such a big army to get me back," Keira said, a soft smile on her face. "I ken ye would have done just fine even if ye came alone."

"I would have come alone if it were nae for the council members telling me that it

was both dangerous and irrational and I must focus on ending the Gilmor clan once and for all,” Christian told her honestly, “it was the only reason I waited and collected the army to make sure Eric could see the strength he was up against. I wanted him to see he could never compare.”

“He already knew he was nay match against ye,” Keira replied, “nay one is a match against ye.”

“I can nae argue with that,” Christian joked, and Keira smacked him slightly. He pulled her close, softly kissing her forehead once again thanking God for returning her to him.

“I don’t think I have ever been more scared before, Keira,” he said, his head resting on her hair.

“I was nae scared,” she replied, “I knew ye would come for me.”

“Ye trust me that much?”

“I trust ye more than I have ever trusted anyone in the world, Christian,” she replied, looking into my eyes, “I ken ye will always stand beside me through it all.”

“I will,” he smiled at her.

“And I will do just the same for ye,” she replied. “I love ye, Christian”.

His heart skipped a beat at her confession. “I love ye too, my fox”.

He bent down, placing a kiss on her forehead, followed by her nose and cheek, until he finally reached her lips.

He kissed them softly, but Keira only pulled him closer, until they were kissing as passionately as they always did, and Christian finally felt whole again. No one could make him feel that way but her. She was his home.

“Should we go back home?” he asked her, pulling away slightly.

“We should,” she replied, “even though you happen to be the only home I want.”

Christian laughed at her reply, “Ye are my home too.”

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He took her hand in his as they walked out of the Gilmor Castle. They loved each other, and no one would ever come between them again.

EPILOGUE

“Astrid?” Keira called out to her sister, who was with her inside her bedchamber as Keira got dressed for the wedding. She was getting married. Finally, to none other than the one man she loved truly and completely, the entire thing seemed nothing short of a fairytale.

An entire month had gone by since the kidnapping and her father’s death, and her siblings, along with Flynn, had only arrived at the MacPherson clan yesterday. They had been nothing but kind and supportive towards Keira and had truly been worried for her well-being but were glad to see her happy. She was glad to see them too except for her brother, Aiden. He had been quiet and distant, and it was evident that he had not taken their father’s death well.

“Yes, dear?” Astrid asked.

“How is Aiden doing?”

“Still the same,” Astrid sighed, placing a few flowers in Keira’s hair. “Ye ken how he had been so close to Faither before being kidnapped, and then he had been gone for ten years. He had wanted more time with him, and now he is gone.”

“Could he be worried about the responsibilities of the lairdship?” Keira asked, truly worried for her brother. She knew she might not be able to be there for him since the

MacPherson clan was rather far away, but Astrid would be closer, which was a relief.

“Nay,” Astrid shook her head, “he has already assumed the role excellently, and I ken he will prove to be a great laird. He is just upset over faither’s death, and with both of us married, he must be feeling rather lonely.”

A knock sounded on the door, which prevented Keira from replying, and she smiled as she watched Flynn enter the bedchamber through the looking glass. Her brother-in-law looked as handsome as he always did, and he walked towards them, placing a kiss on Astrid’s lips.

“Ye look beautiful, Keira,” Flynn remarked, “Although I must tell ye that Christian is beginning to get rather impatient down there, and it would be the best for all of us if ye hurry.”

“I am ready. We will go down immediately,” she replied.

She looked at herself one last time in the looking glass, smiling at the simplicity of her white wedding dress, which hugged to her perfectly. They were having the ceremony in the forest, and the flowers in Keira’s hair certainly made her feel like a fairy or a princess. She knew Christian would love her no matter how she looked, and she was finally ready to marry him. She walked downstairs with Keira and Christian, a pang of grief hitting her as she realized that her father was no longer there to walk her down the aisle.

Although, as she stepped down, she saw Aiden standing right in front of her. He looked as handsome as ever, and Keira walked towards him, tears stinging her eyes. He must have realized what she was feeling for her and immediately hugged her.

“I ken faither is nae here, but will it be all right if I walk ye down the aisle?” he asked Keira, and she nodded, quickly wiping the tears from her face.

“Please,” she replied with a smile, clasping his elbow.

Astrid and Flynn greeted them before walking ahead outside, while Keira followed shortly after with her brother by her side. She knew nothing, and no one could ever fulfill the emptiness only her father’s presence could fill, but she was glad to have her brother beside her.

“Are ye ready?” he asked, and Keira nodded, finally stepping outside, her eyes locking on Christian as he stared at her.

He looked perfect. She had never once found him anything less than perfect, but today, he looked even better than all those times. As Keira walked towards him, she felt immensely lucky to be his. She knew he would always love her and cherish and keep her safe.

“Keep her happy,” Aiden whispered to Christian as he handed Keira’s hand in his, and Keira smiled and kissed her brother on the cheek before stepping on the aisle. Christian nodded, reassuring Aiden.

“Ye look beautiful,” Christian whispered to her.

“So do ye,” Keira replied. They repeated their vows in front of the priest standing before them until they were finally declared husband and wife.

“I love ye,” Christian said as he bent down to kiss her, his hands snaking around her waist. Keira knew the kiss was a promise of what was to come after. She could not wait to have all of him.

Keira shivered as Christian’s finger lightly trailed across the silk of her night dress, his hand running smoothly over her bare arm. He had not wasted a single second, and the two of them had been in bed while he kept kissing her passionately until she was

thriving with need. Even now, he continually teased her.

“Christian,” she moaned his name.

“Yes, my fox,” he asked, bending lower to place kisses all over her neck and breasts just as he took an already swollen nipple in his mouth. Keira gasped at the touch, her body reacting to him almost explosively.

“I need ye,” she whispered.

“Patience,” Christian replied, lowering the straps of her dress along with the trail his mouth was following. She writhed underneath his chest, submitting herself to him entirely as he finally reached the wetness between her legs.

She called out his name lightly as his tongue licked away the wetness just as he slowly slid a finger inside her, making her sigh with pleasure. She continued to moan loudly as Christian worked his magic, bringing her to climax almost immediately. She breathed in deeply as he moved over her, kissing her on the mouth.

“Ye want me?” he whispered, and Keira nodded.

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“Please,” she replied, just as she felt his manhood against her opening.

“Say yer mine,” he murmured at her lips, not moving.

Keira arched her back trying to get even closer to him. “I’m yers, I’ve only ever been yers. Please” she begged again; she didn’t know what for. She needs him to move, she needed to feel more of him. Now.

Christian hummed, satisfied, as his hands framed her face. They were chest to chest and the slightest friction made her burn. She heard his breath grow heavy, just like hers.

He slowly inched in inside her as Keira moaned at the feel of him. She breathed in deeply until he was completely inside, the pain finally lessening as she was overwhelmed by the fullness of him.

“Are ye well?” he asked her, his voice strained.

“Yes,” she whispered. Christian began to move inside her slowly as Keira moaned his name. She held onto his shoulders as she climbed higher and higher, her eyes rolling closed.

Christian stopped moving. “Look at me, fox,” he whispered in her ear, and she opened her eyes to look at him.

“Don’t stop” she said desperately as he picked up the pace, his hands going to grasp her hips, guiding her. Keira was feeling like she would explode with each movement.

The next thrust pushed her over the edge, and she burst all over him as she came down from her high. Shortly after, he spilled inside her and dropped on top of her, kissing her neck. Keira loved the weight of him and pulled him even closer, biting his shoulder lightly. Christian smirked and laid down beside her, holding her close to him.

“That was...amazing. Can we do it again?” Keira said looking at him expectantly.

Christian chuckled “My fox has an insatiable appetite, I see”. He kissed her on the mouth lightly. “That’s why I love ye.”

“I love ye too.”

The End?