



A Highland Wallflower

(Revenge of the Wallflowers)

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Category: Historical

Description: Revenge is a beautiful creature, and it will lure her in depths to which she never thought shed sink.

Adair Murray is no stranger to grief and anger, especially after her older brother is maimed in battle. Bent on a plan to ensure Laird Stuart pays for it, she agrees to attend a peaceful gathering at his keep.

Acting demure and shy is difficult as she wishes to stab the man each time he approaches. Unfortunately, her heart doesnt seem to realize hes her enemy, as it slowly becomes clear he isnt the cruel monster shes always believed.

Can the damage she caused be repaired, or is it too late for both of them?

Ruari Stuart is desperate to save his small clan from the ravishes of his uncles power. The man has hurt too many people and must be stopped! In the midst of so much turmoil, Ruari finds calmness and desire when a beautiful lass visits.

And then the true battle between desire and survival begins

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Adair Murray dropped to the ground behind bushes in hopes the men on horseback had not spotted her. The men patrolled the area looking for poachers and other miscreants on the laird's lands. They'd not take too kindly to her having snared the rabbit that hung from her belt.

Pushing the branches apart, she studied the two men. One was very familiar. Her breath left her when she realized why. It was the laird. Her heart hammered and she let out shallow breaths trying her best to keep calm and not give in to instinct and run away.

Ruari Stuart was young and quite handsome. Every time he visited the village, women fawned over the man as if no other compared to him.

Sure they wouldn't see her, she relaxed and narrowed her eyes to study the laird for a bit longer, noting how the sunlight displayed the lighter brown of his hair.

The laird's companion was a bulky warrior with massive arms and a thick chest and neck. His protector no doubt. She waited quietly hoping they'd continue on soon, so she could get up and leave.

Seeming to sense her regard, the laird turned in her direction, and Adair flattened to the ground holding her breath.

It was silly to have snared the rabbit. It wasn't as if she'd needed to do it. Her father was the village miller and provided for the family well. It had been more for sport than anything else. The dumb thing had died of fright, so she couldn't just leave it.

If she was caught, her brother would be furious as he was part of the laird's small guard, and her actions would embarrass him. No matter. She wouldn't be caught, and her mother would be grateful that she'd brought something different to be cooked for that evening's meal.

The men stopped, still looking to where she hid.

Blast it.

She'd have to hide the rabbit in case they discovered her. As slowly as she possibly could, Adair untied the rabbit from her belt and let it drop to the ground.

Unfortunately, just as she lowered the hare, it chose this as the perfect time to resurrect and begin kicking its hind legs. She let out a yelp when the rabbit bit into her finger. Forgetting all about the men who would discover her, she scooted away on her bottom and kicked at the rabbit. It had to be mad because, unlike any other wild animal, the rabbit clung to her skirts and burrowed into them.

Adair shot to her feet shaking her skirts while running in a circle.

"What are ye doing?" a booming voice called out. Both she and the rabbit froze. Then the rabbit fell over. Adair eyed it, wondering if once again the thing would come back to life.

All three, including her, the laird, and the bulky warrior stared at the creature. After a moment, it kicked a couple of times and then jumped to its feet and scurried away.

It was not a bad idea, perhaps she could follow the creature's tactic and scurry away. She took a step forward but stopped when the laird cleared his throat.

"Answer the question lass."

Slowly, she slid her gaze up from the black horse's legs to its thick chest and up to the laird. "I am foraging for herbs. As ye saw, the hare attacked me. It must be rabid."

"There was a string tied to its back leg," the warrior remarked.

"He stole it from me," Adair replied. "Somehow it wrapped around its leg." She looked in the direction of the village, realizing she had indeed wandered much too far into the laird's property.

The laird's head tilted to the side as he studied her. If she were to guess, he saw a bedraggled woman, with unruly red curly hair, a mouth much too large for her face, and an unfortunate pointy nose.

Adair would never be called a beauty by any means. Still, she had been pursued by a couple of lads from the village, though she'd never truly had a suitor.

In truth, it rarely bothered her, as she preferred her own company and that of her family and two close friends.

"If ye dinnae wish to be shot with an arrow by my archers, stay closer to the village," the laird finally said.

Adair nodded and let out a breath. "I will." She turned away and started to take a step, stopping when the damn bulky warrior spoke again.

"Laird." The reminder was soft, but stern.

At his statement, Adair bit her bottom lip. Her father had always accused her of not caring for authority, and perhaps it was true since it took all her strength not to glare at the warrior.

“I will be sure nae to trespass again, my laird.” Her sentence was flat, so she kept her gaze fixed on his horse’s chest.

“I dinnae forbid anyone from the lands. As long as permission is requested.” The laird hesitated, which forced her to look up to meet his gaze. “Understood?”

“Aye... thank ye, Laird,” Adair replied doing her best to ensure she displayed a pleasant expression. “Enjoy yer ride.” She didn’t wait for a reply, but instead gathered up her skirts and hurried away.

Along the path, she picked up her basket of the herbs harvested earlier before spotting the plump rabbit.

As she walked toward the village, she peered over her shoulder noting the two horsemen were gone. In truth, the laird had been rather kind to her. Despite her having obviously lied to him, he’d ignored it. Instead, he’d explained that with permission, anyone was welcome on his lands.

She frowned up at the cloudy sky and wondered why the laird wasn’t married yet. Although his keep and lands were modest, he was a man of means and had much to offer. In addition, he was nephew to Archibald Stuart, a powerful laird who governed vast lands and over a hundred guards.

Adair let out a sigh. One day the village and all the people would celebrate Ruari Stuart’s nuptials. He would find a suitable wife among his peers. Twas likely he would wed the daughter of a neighboring laird and they would have children who would grow up to govern. Such were the destinies of lairds and such.

On the edge of the village, in a cottage surrounded by fields of wheat and a large vegetable garden, lived her friend, Edine.

“Oi, Adair!” Edine called out from inside a fenced portion of the garden. “Where are ye going?”

Glad to see her friend, Adair hurried closer. “I was foraging for herbs. I need to make some tinctures for Father’s hands. Ye know how they hurt him.”

Edine frowned while looking her up and down. “Why is yer hair askew and yer skirt torn?” Edine was the opposite of Adair, with long blond hair and blue eyes, she was also slender and taller. With full breasts and playful upturned lips, her friend often caught the eye of a man whenever she passed. Still Edine was so sweet and humble, she did not seem to realize how lovely she was, which made her easy to like.

Opening the gate, Adair slipped into the garden and placed her small basket on the ground. “I snared a rabbit. I thought it was dead, but it came back to life and scared me half to death.”

“Oh,” Edine’s eyes rounded. “Why would ye snare a rabbit on the laird’s lands? It is bad enough ye go foraging there. If ye got caught, it would be bad.”

Adair considered not telling Edine what occurred, but she’d never been good at keeping secrets. Besides, she couldn’t share what had occurred with her mother or father. They would insist she remain in the house for a long period as punishment for embarrassing the family.

“I did get caught. In a way. The laird and his bulky annoying companion were about.”

If possible, Edine’s eyes grew wider. “What happened? Did ye get punished?”

By the time Adair finished recounting what had happened, Edine was laughing so hard that tears poured down her face. Unable to keep from it, Adair began laughing as well.

“Ye are fortunate, he is a fair laird. I am sure after ye left, they too found humor in what happened.” Edine let out a sigh. “He is a bonnie one.”

Adair remained silent as she could not argue the point, but she preferred not to fawn over men who were out of reach.

In all honestly, their laird was very attractive. He was taller than most men, with burnished wavy hair that fell to his shoulders, deep brown thickly lashed eyes, and a strong jaw. Despite his social stature, he dressed simply in a tunic, breeches, and leather knee-high boots.

“What he said is true, often men are allowed to hunt in the woods. Ye could have been mistaken for a boar,” her friend said, her lips curved into a wide grin.

“A boar?” Adair’s mouth fell open, and she pretended to be insulted. “I am nae that homely.”

“But ye are short and often snort when laughing,” Edine replied with a chuckle.

“Aye, true.” Adair let out a sigh. “I best go. It will soon be time to help mother with supper.”

“Is Robbie home?” Edine asked, her cheeks pinkening. Since a wee lass, her friend had been enamored of Adair’s brother, who unfortunately seemed oblivious.

Adair nodded. “He will be for a few days. Will ye and yer parents come tomorrow to the fish fry?”

“Aye, we are planning on it.”

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“Should we stop and purchase anything else?” Robbie asked Adair as they made their way home from the shoreline the following day.

Following behind her brother, Adair placed the overflowing buckets of fish down to flex her hands, then picked them up and trudged up the slight incline. “Nae unless ye will carry it.”

He ignored her and peered up at the sky. “Should be a clear day. Perfect for the gathering.”

Having invited several families from the village, Robbie had bought two fishermen’s entire catch of pollock, mackerel, and cod.

“Tell me again why ye bought so many fish?” Adair asked glaring at her brother’s back. He carried two buckets in each hand, unlike her carrying only one. “There are nae that many people coming tonight.”

Robbie shot her a wide smile over his shoulder. “We may have a special visitor. Ye will have to wait and see. Come along. Dinnae drop them.”

The fishermen had been filled with excitement at selling the entire lot. Although her brother paid less than what the men had asked for to begin with, it was certainly more than they’d expected to make that day.

As a guardsman for the laird, Robbie was paid fairly. Theirs was a small township, so his pay didn’t compare to larger ones. But it was enough for his frugal lifestyle and going to the tavern on occasion. Her brother had an even-tempered disposition and

though a man of few words, he was well-liked by the villagers and men who worked alongside him defending the keep.

Robbie shared Adair's unruly reddish locks, which was why he kept his hair cropped short. With dark brown eyes and a strong jaw, Adair supposed he was attractive. She'd often wondered why Robbie was so broad and tall, while she was short and curvy. But she was glad that he was a strong man, who was helpful when home.

It seemed to take forever to walk the short distance to where they lived. The buckets seemed to grow heavier, and her arms weaker. To make matters worse, their house was atop a small hill.

Adair stopped and once again put the buckets down on the ground to take a breath. How Robbie managed to keep walking, not seeming at all bothered by the weight of all the fish he carried was baffling. Then again, he did spend many an hour training with swords and such as part of his duties for the laird.

"Dinnae linger. There is much to do," he called out.

Picking up the buckets, Adair continued forward, doing her best to ignore her throbbing shoulders. "Mother will nae be pleased to have to clean all these fish."

"She will nae do it alone. Ye and I will help," Robbie replied good-naturedly.

The way her hands were growing numb, Adair doubted she be able to hold a knife, much less clean the mountain of fish Robbie had purchased.

As the sun fell past the horizon, lit torches and the fire under a pot of boiling oil provided enough light to see.

A pair of men from the village had appeared with fiddles and had promptly begun

playing lively music as nearby families arrived to partake in the fish fry.

Meanwhile, their father, Edgar, had gladly taken over frying the fish, whilst sharing entertaining stories of the misadventures of his youth.

Surrounded by people who waited for the fish, holding out plates or sticks on which the fish would be impaled, he enjoyed being the center of attention while divvying out the bounty.

Large loaves of bread, that had been brought by the baker and his wife, were placed on the pair of tables or in baskets atop several blankets that had been spread about for people to sit.

Adair's mother, Ealasaid, poured ale for their guests, while firmly refusing to serve the ones who'd not been invited, but had come at seeing the gathering.

"Ye should bring yer own," she informed them sternly.

Her parents had been together since young and had grown up there in the village their entire lives. Adair knew she was lucky to have such loving parents, who rarely argued. Her father was gruff only when angered, it was from her mother that she'd inherited a fiery temper.

With a fish laden plate and a loaf of bread, Adair and Edine sat at a small table she'd brought out from her bedroom. Edine hurried over with two cups of cider, her face bright. Anytime Edine was anywhere near Robbie, she seemed to glow. If only her brother was not so oblivious to having an admirer.

The salty fish was delicious when paired with the crusty bread. Adair bit off a piece of fish, closing her eyes at the taste.

“Who is that?” Edine asked, making Adair open her eyes to peer into the distance. A pair of horsemen appeared and immediately she knew who they were.

“Oh, no.”

“What?” Edine asked. “Who is it?”

She leaned forward to whisper although she doubted anyone paid them any attention. “It is the laird, Ruari Stuart, and the bulky warrior I told ye about.”

At first Edine giggled, but at noting Adair’s alarm she blinked and gave her a questioning look. “Ye did say he was nae cross with ye about it.”

“What if he says something to Robbie, or worse, my parents? They will be embarrassed by my actions. I will nae be allowed to attend the festival at the keep.”

“But ye must,” Edine pleaded. “I dinnae wish to go without ye.”

They followed the men’s progress in silence.

Upon approaching the gathering, they dismounted and were immediately greeted by her brother. The laird and Robbie seemed to have an easy rapport, not one usually seen by warriors and their laird.

Although the laird often visited the village, he usually kept a formal distance from the people. It was most interesting that he would attend such a simple gathering.

Their father practically threw his tongs to a man who stood nearby and hurried to where Robbie and the laird stood.

With exaggerated gestures, their father guided the man to a nearby table that seemed

to have miraculously emptied. Ruari sat and was joined by Robbie, the bulky man, and another warrior friend of the family who'd been eating at the table already.

Edine and Adair exchanged worried looks.

"Ye should hide," Edine said. "I can tell yer mother ye fell ill."

The last thing she wanted to do was miss the gathering all because the laird decided to attend a lowly guard's gathering.

She frowned. "I washed my face and combed my hair since he last saw me. Perhaps he will nae recognize me. Besides, why would my brother bother to present me to the laird?"

No sooner had the words left her mouth than her mother appeared. "Come Adair, we must greet our special guest."

"I have a headache and my stomach hurts," Adair blurted. "I think I may become violently ill."

In the next instant she found herself standing. Her mother had snatched her by the arm and yanked her up. "Ye can get sick after. Smile."

Even before reaching the table, the laird's gaze met hers. He then looked to his companion who's right brow arched. Something in her stomach fluttered and she wondered if perhaps, she would become ill. When she took a breath, it was shaky.

They recognized her.

"I must have eaten a rotted fish." Adair tried one last time to convince her mother to stop.

Instead her mother wove her arm through Adair's. "Be silent."

Her father beamed at them. "Laird, this is my bonnie wife, Ealasaid and our daughter, Adair."

Keeping her eyes firmly forward, Adair attempted a smile, but she was sure it came across as more of a grimace.

The corners of the laird's mouth twitched, and her stomach sank. He was about to reveal what had occurred, she was sure of it.

"My laird," her mother said, elbowing Adair in the side.

Without any other choice, Adair met the laird's gaze. "My laird I hope ye find yerself well this day."

His eyes hooded. "Aye, very well. I enjoyed a ride in the forest today. I saw a wild hare that seemed to come back from the brink of death."

At the comment, the people nearby looked confused, except for the bulky warrior, who coughed unsuccessfully to cover a chuckle.

"Quite interesting," Adair stated, unsure what else to say.

"Aye, a bewildering experience."

"A hare came back from death?" a man asked. "How astonishing."

Adair wanted to hug the man, who began peppering the laird with questions as she walked backwards until she had slipped behind people who began to join in asking questions about the hare's resurrection.

When Edine took her arm, she realized her friend had walked up to listen. Together they scurried away and into the house where they dissolved into fits of laughter.

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Ruari and his most trusted friend Keir Campbell rode back from the Murray's feeling comfortably full and a bit lightheaded from the ale.

"The lass from the forest was terrified ye would tell her parents," Keir said with a chuckle.

"Aye, I did nae realize she was Robbie's sister. It makes me wonder why she was in the forest snaring a rabbit. The family is nae without food."

The muscled warrior shrugged. "Sport or just to pass the time. She seems to be a feisty lass."

Picturing the young woman, Ruari couldn't help but smile. "She is certainly spirited." It was interesting that she'd not seemed as affected by him as most of the women he came across. Instead of throwing herself at him, her gaze barely lingered on him.

After arriving at the celebration that night, only once did he catch her watching him, but it was with a wary look. Then again the circumstances could have affected any reaction to him.

Ruari shook his head. What did it matter if the lass found him desirable or not? It shouldn't bother him in the least.

"There is something we should discuss tomorrow." Ruari met Keir's gaze. "We must decide what to do if my uncle requests that we go to battle against the Macdonalds".

Kier guided his mount around a rocky area. "Aye, ye must decide what is best for us.

There are only a few of us. Our presence barely makes a difference.”

His uncle Archibald Stuart insisted he and his men be part of every conflict between the clans. It was ridiculous how many times his uncle had issues with the surrounding lairds. Not only was it dangerous for Ruari and his men, but also it earned him enemies that could easily overtake his small keep.

People—like the ones he’d just spent the evening with—counted on him to keep them safe and it was going to prove impossible if he kept bowing to his power-hungry uncle.

If only his father were still alive. Unfortunately, he’d been mortally wounded during a battle that had been instigated by his uncle Archibald. Another of many reasons to detest the man.

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The next morning Ruari had barely sat down for first meal when a messenger arrived. At noting his uncle’s crest on the parchment, his food lost its appeal.

“What does Uncle Archibald want now?” he asked the messenger without opening the missive.

“For ye to visit.”

“Why so formal as to send it in writing?” Ruari slid a look to the rolled parchment.

The messenger frowned. “I dinnae know.”

Ruari tore off the seal and scanned the words. Apparently, his uncle was not pleased that his last request to meet had been ignored. Ruari had sent a message letting his

uncle know he was unwell, which had been partially true. The fact it was a result of too much whiskey imbibed at the tavern had been left off the message.

“I will depart after meeting with my leaders this morning,” he told the messenger who nodded and walked out.

“I suppose he does nae wish to eat?” Keir said looking in the direction the young warrior had gone.

Ruari shrugged. “I am sure my uncle instructed him to return straight away.”

The trek to his uncle’s lands would take several hours, and Ruari hoped by the time they arrived he would be prepared to have a difficult conversation with his uncle.

Pushing his plate back, he blew out a breath and motioned to a table where several men sat. “Finnian, we must talk.”

Finnian Stuart was his cousin and part of his guard. Not only was he an able archer, but he was also Archibald’s second-born. Despite being estranged from his father, Finnian was loyal to clan Stuart and would be helpful in negotiations with the irritable man.

“There is little to be done about my father, except to be blunt and expect the worst,” Finnian said moments later once they had settled in the sitting room where they often discussed matters of importance.

Keir leaned forward in his chair and pinned Ruari with a focused look. “What do ye plan to say to him? He must know we will nae fight again. We are only gaining enemies. These people yer uncle fights against are our neighbors.”

“I know all of this,” Ruari replied. “What I dinnae know is what his reaction will be

to my refusal to battle alongside his men again.”

Without Archibald’s constant riling, the region would be peaceful. It was surprising that the surrounding lairds had not planned a way to dispose of him yet. Despite the constant fighting, injuries and deaths had been few, which was something to be grateful for, Ruari supposed.

Mostly the battling was more like a game between the lairds to keep the Stuarts at bay.

Ruari leaned back and stared up at the ceiling. “The men are nae fighting to the death, it is more like a contest to see who can disarm his opponent. Once the sword falls to the ground the loser kneels in defeat. It is a joke.”

“Men are not willing to die for a daft man,” Keir said, then glanced at Finnian. “I dinnae mean offense, but yer father is...”

Finnian held up a hand. “No need to explain. I agree with ye.”

“Shall we go?” Ruari got to his feet and stretched, not looking forward to speaking with his uncle. The man had a foul temper and would enjoy finding a creative way to release his anger.

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The Stuart keep was an impressive stone structure surrounded by a massive wall atop which men patrolled constantly. The laird had few friends which necessitated constant vigil. The massive wooden gates fortified by iron were opened, so they rode through.

Immediately guards approached, but upon recognizing them motioned them to

continue forward. From the many men who congregated around Finnian to ask about his well-being, it was obvious he was missed by his comrades.

Once Finnian extricated himself from the group who greeted him, the three of them approached the entrance.

A guard stepped forward waiting for instructions.

“Inform my father that I am here along with his nephew Ruari and guard Keir,” Finnian told the guard who nodded and walked away.

They waited for what seemed much longer than necessary, as they should have been invited to enter right away even if the laird was not present.

A crystal clear message to Finnian that he remained out of favor with his father.

After a long while, Ruari leaned on the wall, arms crossed over his chest, while Finnian and Keir sat on the steps to wait.

The same guard reappeared. “Please come in.”

His cousin opened his mouth to say something. By his furious expression, it wouldn’t be good. Ruari shot him a warning look and Finnian blew out a breath and pressed his lips into a tight line.

They were shown into the great room, in which only servants were about, sweeping and clearing the tables from the midday meal.

Ruari and his companions remained standing and again they waited.

By the time the laird appeared Ruari had to fight not to show his annoyance.

Archibald Stuart was of medium height, with fine bone structure and brown hair he kept cut just past his jawline that was beginning to show more gray than not.

For someone who loved battle, the laird's soft—almost feminine—features would catch some off guard upon meeting him. He favored deep colors for his clothing and soft-soled shoes that made no noise. On this day, he wore a deep garnet tunic over black breeches and an oval-shaped pendant encrusted with jewels hung from his neck.

“Father,” Finnian's one word greeting dripped with barely restrained dislike.

The laird's eyes hooded as he regarded his son. “I hear ye lost the stone toss competition against someone from Clan Macdonald.”

Before Finnian could reply, Ruari interjected. “Aye. However, he was the only one from our clan that placed.”

At the reply, the laird gave a half-hearted shrug. “If Arran was here, I am sure he would have won,” he said referring to his eldest son, who'd gone away several years earlier with the pretext of sailing for a fortune.

Ruari and Finnian suspected he'd left to get away from their father. There had been rumors he'd been killed at sea, but it had never been proven. Much to the laird's dismay, if Arran did not reappear it meant Finnian would be his successor.

“Bring whiskey to my study,” Archibald ordered one of the maids who hurried away to do as he bid.

They trailed behind him as he strolled to the study. A place both Ruari and Finnian had seen the inside of more than enough times. Keir was fortunate that he was normally left out of conversations with Archibald. This day, however, Ruari had

insisted he be present.

The study was furnished with several chairs around a large table, a pair of sideboards, and a bookcase. On the wall, there were various tapestries, including one depicting a hunting scene stretched over the fireplace.

The servant who'd been sent to fetch whiskey entered, poured the drinks, and silently waited for each man to sit so she could serve.

Archibald settled at the end of the table, with Ruari on his right and Finnian on his left. Keir sat on Ruari's right.

They waited for the servant to place the drams before them and for the laird to drink. Archibald looked to the servant. "Place the carafe on the table. That will be all."

"What should we drink to?" he asked holding up his glass and looking to Ruari.

"To yer health," Ruari said lifting his glass and the others joined.

Once they drank, it was customary to speak of pleasantries, which meant that his uncle would take this time to find out all he could about how things went with Ruari's neighbors.

"It has been a good planting season," Ruari began. "There are plenty of wildlife in the woods and the villagers have few conflicts."

Ruari's father had rarely met with Archibald, as the two were often at odds. It seemed his uncle had a hard time getting along well with anyone. Even his own late brother.

"What of yer neighbors to the west? Are there any troubles there?" his uncle asked in an impatient tone. "I hear the last storm caused much damage."

Despite the fact he and his men had gone to help those who needed it, Ruari preferred not to share any information with his uncle about any perceived weaknesses on his part.

“From the storm. Aye, they did. As did we. There is still much to rebuild. There are several of my people’s homes that will nae survive the next one.”

His uncle waved the last comment away as if it was of little importance. “What of the Campbells? Have they trespassed as of late?”

At the question Keir tensed, and Ruari hoped the warrior would not inform his uncle that he was a Campbell.

“We have an agreement in place with the Campbell. Travelers may cross borders without repercussion.” Ruari braced for his uncle’s reaction.

“What!” His uncle got to his feet. “Yer father and I spent many a sleepless night attempting to find a resolution to the constant strife between the people who live near the Campbell border.”

Ruari knew for a fact, it had been only his father who’d made the agreement with the Campbell when battle was imminent. The agreement to stay out of each other’s territory had lasted for over twenty years. That was until recently. Farmers had complained to him about it and apparently so had those on Campbell lands.

“The Campbell himself came to visit and we discussed how best to handle the issue. We came to what I feel is a sensible and fair agreement for travelers. It makes it much easier for them to take the road that goes through both lands instead of them traveling around and through the forest or shoreline.”

His uncle huffed, his displeasure evident. “One day walking over the border, the next

they will ride across with warriors. That is what he is setting ye up for.”

“We do our best to patrol the area. With only ten men to keep control, the local farmers have been told to send word if they see anything unusual.”

“Farmer sentries, how quaint.” His uncle held out his glass and Finnian refilled it.

Ruari waited for a beat and fortified himself. “What did ye wish to speak to me about Uncle?”

For a long moment, there was complete silence. It was very much like his uncle to lean toward the dramatic. “I wish to speak about the Macdonald of the north. His people have been causing trouble. They can nae control their herds. They have been warned. One more breech and I will declare war.”

“Over one sheep trespassing?” Finnian asked, his expression incredulous. “Or does it have to be two?”

His uncle’s gaze narrowed. “Ye jest, which means ye dinnae understand how difficult it is to remain in control of what has been passed down to us from the generations before. That Stuart lands are vast is a result of firm stewardship.”

“Finnian’s point is that it is not right for men to be injured or possibly die because one shepherd lost sight of part of his herd,” Ruari interjected.

Archibald slid a glance to his son, then turned to Ruari, purposely ignoring Finnian. “I require eight of yer men. I meet with the Macdonald two days hence. They must be here tomorrow.”

“I can nae afford to send ye that many. Ye are well aware I only have ten men. There is much to do—”

His uncle slammed his hand on the tabletop. "I dinnae care to hear yer excuses. Send the men or I will take yer lands. It is becoming obvious ye are nae ready to be laird."

It was Ruari's turn to lose his patience. "The lands are my father's legacy to me. Ye have no right to take it. I will retain my territory as will my sons after me."

Sensing he'd struck a nerve, his uncle's lips curved into the facsimile of a smile. "Aye, yer father expected that ye would be protector over his lands. Although second born, he had some good leadership qualities. Kept the people satisfied and fed. I suppose that is something commendable."

Ruari fought the urge to state that Archibald's people would have unflattering things to say about their laird. "The storm means I require every man in order to continue repairs. If things change with the Macdonald, then we can help."

"Dinnae forget that ye are part of Clan Stuart. My clan." Archibald pinned him with an angry stare.

He gave a shrug, seeming to calm. "The annoyance of living near the shore, I suppose." He finally conceded. "Very well. Be warned however that all of ye will be required if conflict commences. I will nae take any refusal. Send two of yer guard to escort me." His uncle didn't need extra men, he had plenty. There were two reasons for the request. The first being that he wanted to flex his power over Ruari. Secondly, Ruari suspected his uncle had little trust in his own men.

Rage surged, but Ruari knew it was useless to argue. "Very well."

The laird finally addressed Finnian. "Yer brother. Have ye heard from him? It is time for him to return and begin to train for his birthright."

Even if Finnian knew where his brother Arran was, he would never tell Archibald. "I

have nae heard anything.”

It was the truth. Ruari knew Finnian worried about his brother.

Although his uncle was without scruples and was estranged from Finnian, Ruari was sure, as a father, his uncle did care for both sons.

The older man was silent for a beat then spoke. “I am going to hire men to find him.”

Finnian nodded. “I am glad.”

They didn’t bother remaining for the meal offered. Not only did Ruari not wish to spend any more time around his uncle, but he needed to ensure repairs were being done. Most of his guard were helping to rebuild their own homes, so he took on the added responsibility of guarding and patrolling. Despite his lands being smaller than his uncle’s, it took half a day to patrol just one border.

Their steeds were brought out by stable lads. The three men mounted and rode from the keep at a quick pace, lest his uncle decide to call them back.

“Do ye think he will find yer brother?” Keir asked Finnian.

Finnian pondered for a moment. “If Arran is gone to sea, perhaps not. I dinnae think my brother wishes to be found.”

“I agree,” Ruari said. “What of the lairdship? Yer father will have to pass it to ye if Arran does nae return.”

His cousin frowned. “It will be many years before it is an issue.”

“Are those men fighting?” Keir leaned over his horse’s back to get a closer look at

two men on a nearby hill who swung wooden staffs. “Or sparing?”

“Let us get a closer look,” Ruari said urging his horse toward the hill.

By the cursing and swinging of their staffs, the shepherds were not on friendly terms. So engrossed in their fight, they didn’t notice them until Ruari was almost upon them. “What happens?”

One of the men turned to him and taking advantage of his opponent’s distraction, the other struck him on the back of the head sending the man down on all fours. Both were panting heavily but continued to shout insults at one another.

“This son of a whore stole from my herd,” the man who stood called out. He then neared the one who struggled to get up and kicked him back to the ground.

“Stop at once,” Ruari called out, dismounting along with his companions.

By the rounding of their eyes, the men just recognized him.

However, it did not stop them from accusing each other of stealing sheep and of making false accusations.

“He stole from me,” the one man repeated still wielding his staff like a sword.

The other man finally got to his feet and reached behind his head to check for blood. “He insults me by calling me a thief. He is a liar.”

“Damn Campbell.” The one with the staff attempted to swing again, but Keir caught the staff and yanked it from his grasp.

Ruari looked to the man who continued to hold his head. “Ye are on Stuart lands.”

The man balked and turned to scan the surroundings. “Those are my sheep.” He pointed to a small group of sheep who grazed, not at all fazed by the fact their protector was fighting.

“So yer sheep are responsible for ye being here?” Keir asked.

The man glared at the other shepherd. “He invited me here.”

The man who’d been swinging the staff glared back. “Only because the other side of the border is flooded from the storm. I did nae expect him to be a thief.”

Before they could get into another fight, Ruari interceded. “Where are yer sheep?” he asked the man who belonged to his clan.

“There,” the man pointed to another group of oblivious sheep who roamed on the other side of the hill.

“Is it possible that yer sheep will intermingle until such as time as he returns to his lands?”

The shepherd with the staff looked up to the sky as if no one understood him. “He is leaving today, and I saw him go to where my sheep are and tug one over to his side of the hill.”

They walked around until the supposed stolen sheep was identified. The only marking was a shaved “X” on the hind quarters, which was the same mark as the other sheep surrounding it.

They then went to the accuser’s herd and noted the same exact marking.

After much discussion and several more insults, they counted the sheep and came to

an agreement that indeed the Campbell shepherd had not stolen one. The men went to their respective herds and the accused shepherd began his trek back to Campbell lands.

“I wonder what would have happened if we had not come upon them,” Keir said as they rode away.

Ruari shook his head. “I dinnae know. But they are no longer friends to be sure. That is what conflict does, it divides us. Up until the argument, they shared lands putting their herds first.”

“Who do ye plan to send to my father?” Finnian asked. “I can go.”

“Very well. Take Robbie with ye.”

As they continued riding, a slight stirring in his stomach made Ruari frown. Something didn’t feel right. He wondered if perhaps he should not send anyone to his uncle.

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Two days later

Despite the early hour, Adair was well into her chores. The freshly washed clothes were draped over drying lines, and she'd already swept the front room.

Her mother was at the kitchen table kneading dough and looked up when Adair pulled a shawl around her shoulders. "What are ye doing now?"

"Fetching water to scrub the floors," Adair replied. "I feel restless. Worried about Robbie."

By the change in her mother's expression—her eyes falling, her lips pressing together—she too was worried.

Her brother had come by to let them know he was to be gone for several days. He was to escort their laird's uncle to Macdonald lands.

The last time he'd gone, it had been to battle against them.

"I dinnae understand why our laird chose Robbie," Adair said. "It is nae fair."

"Go fetch the water Adair. There is nae can be done but pray and hope for his safe return." Her mother's tone was soft, but strained with worry she couldn't hide.

Immediately Adair felt bad for adding to her mother's worry by complaining. It was true there was little they could do. It was Robbie's duty as a guard after all. The fact he worked for Ruari Stuart and not his uncle was what made it bothersome that he

would have to escort the other laird.

If anything happened to her brother it would be on Ruari's head for not standing up to his uncle, whom she'd heard had over one hundred men under his command.

At midday, she couldn't stay in the house any longer, so she went to the village square. It was a pleasant day; the weather mild and the sky clear.

Several vendors had set up displays of all kinds. But only one vendor interested Adair. A man who sold the most delicate wood carvings. Adair collected them; allowing herself one every season.

As she neared the vendor, the elderly man called Thomas, smiled broadly. "The fair lass approaches. Which one will she choose today?"

"I dinnae see a fair lass about," Adair quipped back feeling lighter at having someone to banter with.

Thomas bowed his head as if in deference. "The lass Adair, is fair in spirit and bonnie to the eye."

Despite herself, her cheeks warmed at the compliment. She lingered over each delicate carving, picking up one and then another. Finally, one of a tiny mouse caught her eye. She lifted it up and giggled at its cheerful expression. "How delightful. I must have him."

"I would think ye would choose a hare." The deep voice made her jump and she whirled to find Ruari standing next to her peering down at the items.

"My laird," Thomas said beaming that his stand would be so popular that day.

“Good day to ye Thomas,” Ruari replied. “How fares yer wife?”

If possible, Thomas’ smile widened. “She is much better. Thank ye.”

Still holding the mouse, fearful that he’d purchase it for himself, Adair took a step away from the laird.

“I may add a hare to my collection one day. Today, I prefer this mouse,” she said not meeting his gaze.

How long would the man carry on over the incident with the rabbit? Of course, he could have had her arrested for poaching and her father fined dearly, so it was best to remain pleasant.

When he didn’t make to leave, Adair paid the vendor and walked away. Not wishing to allow the laird to intimidate her, she stopped at the next stand. The woman there sold beautifully embroidered linens. Adair had never bought one as they were expensive, and she couldn’t afford them. She was satisfied with admiring them and praising the woman for her skills.

To her chagrin, the laird joined her at that stall. “Good day to ye Mairi,” he greeted the woman, who beamed in return.

“Good day Laird,” the woman replied.

He continued past. Did he know every villager’s name?

She couldn’t help but catch up to him. “I am impressed that ye know everyone by name.”

They continued on past another stall where he greeted the vendors by name there as

well. They finally arrived at a stall where a man and his son sold lamb skewers. After greeting them by name, Ruari asked her if she wished for one. Adair was much too nervous to eat so she shook her head.

He purchased two and ignoring her head shakes, handed one to her. He then motioned for her to continue to walk with him.

“I try my best,” he replied between bites. “When people come to the keep for whatever reason, it makes it easier to get to know them.”

Once finishing off the meal of lamb, he tossed a few bits to a dog that lingered around hoping for something to drop.

Adair swallowed a bit of the delicious meat and took a fortifying breath. “When does my brother return?”

The laird looked at her for a moment before replying. “I expect today.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask why he’d chosen Robbie, but she knew her brother would be furious. So she nodded. “I best return home and inform Mother and Father. Good day, my laird.”

“Be with care, Adair.”

At hearing her name, a shiver ran up her arms. It shouldn’t have surprised her that he had remembered her name but hearing him say it felt oddly intimate. She turned to see him watching her and then hurried away. Heat rushed from her stomach to her face and her breath quickened.

The same dog followed her, its tail swishing side to side as he studied her food. “Yer in luck, I can nae possibly eat this.” Adair bent to feed the greedy dog that was

promptly joined by another.

*

“Call yer father,” Adair’s mother stated while ladling stew into large bowls. They stood in the small kitchen, Adair with a basket of bread in her hands.

Just as Adair took a step forward, the door opened and both women turned to find her father entering, with a stricken expression.

Her mother gasped, dropping the ladle, and Adair’s entire body seized, making it hard to breathe.

“What happened?” both said at the same time.

“The wagon is outside. Fetch yer cloaks, we must go to the keep. Robbie has been badly injured.”

The next moments were a blur as they hurried to find their cloaks, and a wooden box that held medicinal herbs, and the prepared tonics she and her mother often made.

With her father pushing the horse to gallop, it was only a short time later they hurried through the gates and into the keep.

Guards didn’t stop them from rushing to the entrance, but instead a pair walked alongside, including the muscled warrior named Keir.

“Where is he?” her father demanded as soon as they entered the house.

Keir motioned to a corridor. “This way. The healer is with him.”

“The healer?” her mother asked in a strained voice. “Which one?”

“The village healer,” the warrior clarified. “He is the best.”

“We will see about that.” Her mother pushed past them practically running to the open doorway. Then she hesitated for a moment as if preparing herself mentally, before entering.

Following her mother into the room, there was no mistaking the smell of blood in the air. It coiled around her like a rope, constricting her lungs.

On a narrow cot, her brother lay still as the dead. He was pale, but thankfully breathing.

Adair had to fortify herself to keep from crying out at seeing his mangled right leg.

“The horse fell atop him,” the healer explained. “I am nae sure if I can save his leg.”

Fury filled her, burning its way up until it felt as if a furnace were alight in her chest. A sound like that of an injured beast surged from her father, and her mother stroked Robbie’s hair whilst tears streamed down her face.

Adair leaned forward and kissed her brother’s oddly cool face and whispered into his ear, “Fight Robbie. Fight for yer life. Ye promised me to be a doting uncle to my bairns. Ye have to live.”

Blind with fear, she whirled around and stormed from the room. If someone called after her, she didn’t hear it. In all probability her parents were too distraught to worry about what she did.

There was no one in the great room and she continued through it until hearing voices.

She found two maids in a room folding laundry.

“Whom do ye seek miss?” a cheerful younger maid asked. The bright smile only angered Adair more.

“Where is Ruari Stuart?” She disposed of titles and a more formal way of addressing the laird. Being respectful didn’t matter considering she was about to demand an explanation from him.

The maids they exchanged worried looks.

One walked to the doorway and motioned to the right. “He is in the sitting room there.”

Without bothering to thank her, Adair stalked toward the room and stopped at the doorway so she could scan the room.

In the dim interior, she made out an intricately carved wooden table and chairs. Two more comfortable stuffed chairs flanked a hearth where Ruari sat. From his leaning to the side and chin dropped to his chest, he was fast asleep.

How dare he rest when her brother’s life was on the line?

She rushed over and tapped him in the center of his chest. “Ye sleep.” Her statement was without regard for his station. “How dare ye sleep when my brother barely clings to life.”

He blinked several times then upon seeing her, he frowned and glanced to the door. “Robbie, is he...”

“He is on the brink of death,” Adair said, annoyed that her voice cracked. “The healer

said he will nae be able to save his leg.”

Ruari jumped to his feet, and she took several steps back. He was so tall and imposing that to stand too close felt almost intimate.

“I best go see about him,” Ruari stated softly, almost as if talking to himself.

“Aye, ye should,” Adair stated, glaring up at him. “He is nae doing well.”

The laird studied her as if he’d not realized who it was that had been speaking to him. “Yer brother is strong. He will recover. I am sure of it.”

“Ye can nae possibly know how he will fare. Have ye seen him?” Adair was much too angry to keep her tone civil, nor did she care if the entire keep could hear her.

He remained silent; his attention going to the doorway, then back to her.

“Why did ye send him? Yer uncle has many men,” Adair demanded. “Is it a sport for ye both?”

Ruari’s jaw clenched, and he pinned her with an angry look. “Because yer brother is injured I will allow yer outburst. In the future, dinnae forget yer place.”

The urge to kick or slap him made Adair take another step back. “Ye and yer uncle treat us like pawns in a game. My brother is nae a toy.”

“Enough.” He didn’t raise his voice, but the firmness with which he spoke made it obvious she was on the brink of pushing him too far.

Adair almost cringed when he moved toward her. At the last moment, he rounded her and stormed from the room. She rushed to follow behind, wondering if he was about

to order her punishment.

Instead, he continued through the great room, ignoring guards who looked up as he walked by and then down the narrow corridor to the room where Robbie was. At this point, Adair was running to keep up.

Both her parents looked up when they walked in, neither seeming to hold any kind of ill regard for the laird. It only served to infuriate Adair more. Why didn't they demand an explanation? The laird should be explaining. He should be apologizing. Instead, they allowed him to near the bed.

Her brother remained unconscious, which was thankful as his injuries looked to be horribly painful.

According to the healer, the bones of his leg were crushed. It would be a miracle if Robbie could ever use it again.

"How did it happen?" her father asked.

"They were on their way back from meeting with the Macdonald. His mount's front foot fell into a hole and the horse tumbled forward. Somehow Robbie was thrown, and the horse fell atop his leg.

"My brother is an excellent horseman. I dinnae believe this could have happened," Adair said, unable to keep a civil tone.

Her mother gave her a nervous look. "I am sure it was as the laird explains. There is nothing one can do if something like that happens."

Not wanting to continue the pointless conversation, Adair went to the other side of the bed and placed a hand on Robbie's shoulder. Her brother was just as still as

before, his coloring not any better.

“The healer gave him strong herbs to ensure he rested,” her father said. “His leg is splinted and wrapped to keep him from moving it. I wish to take him home to recover.”

Ruari nodded. “Aye, of course. But ye should probably wait a pair of days.”

The healer entered and Adair moved aside so he could approach the bed since the man came around to her side. The man touched Robbie’s forehead and then placing his ear to her brother’s chest, he listened to his breathing.

Finally the man straightened. “His heart is strong, and he breathes normally. I will keep an eye on his leg to ensure it does nae rot.”

“Can we take him home?” her mother asked. She was almost as pale as Robbie, her eyes red-rimmed from crying. “I would like to care for my son.”

“Impossible,” the healer announced. “Moving him could cause more harm. He must remain here and be kept as still as possible.”

Both her parents seemed to deflate at the statement and looked to the laird. Adair peered down at her brother wondering how he would react at learning he could possibly lose his leg. Robbie was an active man who preferred the outdoors. A restless sort, he spent most of his days fishing, hunting, or on horseback. That all of it could possibly be taken from him broke her heart.

“There is a room next to this, ye are welcome to remain here,” Ruari informed them. “Please accept my invitation to move into the room for as long as required.”

Adair didn’t share her parents’ enthusiasm in thanking the laird. In her opinion, that

Robbie was on the verge of losing his leg was as much Ruari's fault as it was his uncle's.

When she looked up and noted her father's tormented expression, her resentment intermingled with his grief.

Her father turned his attention to Ruari. "Thank ye, Laird. My wife and daughter will take turns staying here. I must see to things at the mill."

"Of course. Whatever is best for ye." Ruari's gaze lingered on Robbie then he walked from the room.

"He is a kind man," her mother stated. "I am grateful he will allow us to be here. I could nae be away from him whilst he suffers so." She sniffed and her father put his arm around her.

"Adair, return home and gather things for both yer mother and yerself. Tomorrow, I will return for one of ye."

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Guiding the horse from the bench of the wagon, all Adair could do was pray for her brother. The ride back to the village gave her time to consider what occurred.

She was glad that the keep was not very far as she didn't want to be gone too long. When Robbie awakened, she wished to be there. He would need every bit of comfort. In her opinion, family strength was a better aid to healing than any herb or tonic.

The house felt strangely silent and empty; even when her pet cat greeted her by rubbing against her legs, there was a sensation of sadness in the air. She bent and ran her fingers through the cat's hair. "Ye will be alone for a day, Lili, keep out of

trouble.”

Adair hurried into the house and after gathering a large basket, she quickly filled it with necessities such as: fresh clothes, nightgowns, and a brush and comb.

Then she went outside and fed the chickens and hogs. Since the weather was nice, she decided to leave the cat outside. It preferred it anyway.

Once satisfied everything would be well for the rest of the day and evening, she rushed from the house and placed the items she'd packed in the back of the wagon. Finally, she climbed onto the bench and headed back to the keep.

Her stomach tightened at the thought of how she'd yelled at the laird. Unless he was extremely patient, which she was sure he was not, Ruari would not forget the incident.

The more she thought about it, the less her outburst made sense. Of course it was possible that the horse's stumble had caught Robbie unaware, and he'd been thrown. However, the fact that Robbie had been chosen to escort the laird's uncle, still resonated wrongly.

It was curious to her that their laird had sent men to escort another laird who had more resources and men. Unless his uncle did not trust his own guard. There were many rumors the man was not well-liked by his own people.

First thing she had to do was to apologize to the laird. Even after her outburst, he'd treated her parents with kindness and extended the invitation to the family, including her.

The upcoming days would be painful for her brother and just as horrible for her and her parents to witness what he would have to go through. A sob stuck in Adair's

throat, and she did her best to hold back the tears. It would not be helpful to fall apart in front of her already hurting parents.

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While her mother got settled in the room next to Robbie's, Adair sat in a chair next to the bed, her attention on her sleeping brother.

"The healer said he had regained some color," Ruari stated walking in. Adair started because the deepness of his voice was like a touch on her skin.

"He does look better," she agreed and swallowed past the constriction in her throat where an apology seemed to have lodged.

The laird walked closer. "The healer reports to me three times a day, so I can be kept apprised of his status."

"It is kind of ye to see about my brother."

When she looked up, he met her gaze and Adair quickly looked away.

Ruari inhaled. "See that ye dinnae interfere with the healer's duties."

Any apology that was about to come forth disappeared. Adair narrowed her eyes. "Why would I interfere in my brother's care?"

"The healer mentioned noticing the herbs and tonics." He turned to look at the box she and her mother had packed. "He prefers to be the one who administers such things."

"Of course," Adair replied curtly. "I will ensure Mother is also informed."

“Very good.” Once again he placed a hand on Robbie’s shoulder before leaving the room.

“Ass,” Adair hissed once she was sure he was out of earshot.

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Once again his uncle made Ruari wait before finally appearing. “Nephew, I did nae expect to see ye so soon.” He didn’t acknowledge Kier, who stood just behind Ruari.

“My guard will in all probability lose the use of his leg. All because ye insisted I provide an escort when ye have more than enough men at yer disposal.”

His uncle went to sit and both Ruari and Kier joined him.

Archibald motioned for servants to bring forth the midday meal. Trays replete with meats, root vegetables, and cheeses were placed before them.

“Eat.” The command was accompanied by his uncle motioning to the tray with both hands. He acted as if Ruari should be impressed with the bounty before him.

“Uncle, ye were there, what exactly occurred?”

A servant poured wine into their cups and his uncle piled food on his plate seeming to ignore his question.

Ruari decided to eat and perhaps that would help him get more information.

Although Finnian had accompanied his uncle on that day as well, the warrior had been sent ahead and had not seen what happened.

“The boy must not be experienced with a horse,” his uncle spoke while chewing. “Otherwise, he would have rolled away before the beast landed on him.”

“He is a very good horseman. Either he was stunned from the fall, or something else happened.”

Archibald rolled his eyes and motioned to Ruari’s plate. “Yer food will be cold.” Then after a long draw from the cup, he let out a frustrated sigh.

“The guard’s leg broke when it became tangled in the horse’s saddle. That is why he could nae avoid the animal falling on him.”

Visualizing the event made Ruari cringe. All he could picture was how much pain both Robbie and the beast had endured. Not only that, but the man would have to be informed that his horse had been put to death.

“The horse was an experienced warhorse,” Ruari stated having a hard time imagining the animal not noting a hole.

“Is there a reason for yer visit, other than to babble about a guard?” His uncle was becoming annoyed.

“I came to request additional guards. After this incident. I only have nine guardsmen.”

“Oh, that.” His uncle waved his concern away with a flick of a wrist. “Ye claim not to have any troubles with neighboring lairds. Why have guards at all? Have ye considered taking a wife?”

The abrupt change of subject caught Ruari off guard. Instead of replying to the question, he continued with the aforementioned subject. “If the reply is nae about the guardsmen, I will have to find men and train them myself.”

His uncle gave him a droll look. “Every man under me is here because they are

required to be. Ye do understand that because ye live down the river from me my men protect ye as well. We have enemies on three sides of our borders.”

With a frustrated breath his uncle continued speaking in a patronizing tone. “There are spies everywhere. Our enemies are informed of everything. If they learn I am giving guards away, it will only fuel their desires to take us over.”

That he said “we” and “us” made Ruari furious. Whatever enemies they had were because of Archibald’s inability to keep his word. Each time a truce had been agreed upon, his uncle had violated the terms.

“I need more men,” Ruari repeated. “Ye can afford to give me ten.”

If Ruari were to be honest, he did not really need the men. However, experienced men would be able to train more, which is what his ulterior motive was for the request.

His uncle stared forward and continued eating. “Ye did nae reply to my question. A wife?”

“I have been laird barely a year. Father instilled in me the responsibility of ensuring the safety and well-being of our people first and foremost. Taking a wife is not a priority.”

“Ye are thirty,” his uncle said. “Ye should consider marrying. It keeps a man from worrying over inconsequential things.” It struck Ruari as comical that his uncle’s current wife chose to live with her family to avoid being near him.

Each of his uncle’s statements was like a burr in his side. Upon Ruari’s father’s death, Ruari had done his best to continue the cordial relationship with the neighboring lairds. That his own uncle did not seem to understand that was

astounding. At the same time, Archibald Stuart was only enthralled with himself and his need for power.

His uncle rubbed his chin. “Perhaps if I see ye have plans to marry and become more settled, I will agree to give ye some men.”

“Fine, I will marry this year. Can I have ten men?”

After a long beat, Archibald lifted both hands as if giving up. “Very well, ye may have eight, but they will volunteer, and I must agree to each of them before they depart.”

Before his uncle could change his mind, Ruari pushed away from the table and stood. “May I speak to the men now?”

Eyes to the ceiling, his uncle reluctantly called two guards forward. “Balstair and Edgar, come.”

Two warriors approached. One bulky, almost the size of Kier, the other slenderer, but still had the look of a seasoned fighter.

“Balstair is head of the warriors, Edgar of the archers. Ye may have four of each,” his uncle explained and then looked to his men, who had astonished expressions. “Have the men gather. Ask for volunteers. Then return to me with who they are. I will choose who can or cannot go.”

It took rounds of his uncle denying every man who volunteered and then arguing with Balstair and Edgar, and with Ruari before he finally got the eight men.

What was comical, was that his uncle didn’t seem to note that most of the men had volunteered to leave. Instead, he seemed to take delight in denying most of them.

Some twice.

“I wonder,” his uncle said studying him through narrowed eyes. “Do ye request additional men in order to have an upper hand at the upcoming festival ye will be hosting?”

Only his uncle would think everyone was as calculating as him.

Finally, both Ruari and Kier went to their bedchamber.

“That was painful,” Ruari said pouring whiskey into a cup. “No wonder both of his sons left. What is astounding is that he finds fault with everyone, not noting it is he who is the problem.”

Kier chuckled. “I must admire the men who were bold enough to come before him more than once.”

“I think we ended up with some good men as it is evident my uncle is nae aware of their capabilities.” Ruari drained his cup. “We leave in the morning with our men.

After breaking his fast the following morning, Ruari went to the stables. The stablemaster greeted him. “I can fetch yer horse Laird.”

“I have a favor to ask of ye. I require a horse, one of good breeding and nae too spirited.”

The stablemaster’s brow lowered in thought. “I do have a black steed that is much too docile for battle. He has a proud look but too gentle of a nature.”

“I will take him with me,” Ruari stated, not giving any indication that he’d not asked his uncle. He doubted Archibald ever came to the stables to speak to the man, but just

in case he added, “Did my uncle have any plans for it?”

“Nay, yer uncle doesn’t bother with such things.”

“Good. I will take him then.”

Upon departing with the eight additional men and nine horses, Ruari was satisfied with the outcome of his visit. In the coming months, he planned to grow his guard, not to the size of his uncles, but to at least thirty men. Once that was done, he would be assured that his villagers and keep were well protected.

They followed a long creek toward his lands, but made sure to stay clear of Macdonald lands.

“I did nae know we were here to ask for additional men,” Keir stated looking over at him. “I thought the purpose of our visit was to ask what happened to Robbie.”

“It was nae planned to be honest,” Ruari stated. “I wanted him to understand what he’d caused and to tell me the truth about what occurred to Robbie. When he lied, I decided to have him pay a price.”

“What do ye think really happened.”

“I think he or one of his men argued with Robbie and then ran his horse in the path of a hole in the road.”

“To what ends?” Keir asked.

Ruari blew out a harsh breath. “My uncle probably became annoyed when Robbie wouldn’t grovel and agree to be his lapdog.”

“That sounds possible,” Kier replied. “So ye then decided he would pay with men and horses.” His friend gave him an approving look.

They rode in silence for a while. It was strange to be leading men back to his small keep. They’d have to build a guardhouse and some temporary housing. Then once the accommodations were complete, the new guards would be given time to return home to pack up and return with their families, if they had any.

Despite the new guards and horse for Robbie, Ruari didn’t feel as if he’d accomplished enough with the visit.

He looked to Kier. “Ye should move into the keep. That will give an extra room in the guard quarters, until new ones are built.

Chopping trees and building will be the primary concern for now. If ye wish to return to live in the guard quarters after, it is up to ye.”

“I expect to prefer being away from them at night,” Kier replied and then frowned. “Why do ye think yer uncle brought up marriage?”

“He does that kind of thing, abruptly changing the subject in an attempt to distract. I dinnae think he cares if I marry.”

Ruari didn’t add that he’d considered that at his age, perhaps his uncle was right, and it was time for him to settle and find a wife.

He had few prospects. The surrounding lairds were professed enemies of his clan. Despite his good rapport with the Campbell, the man was part of a powerful clan and could aspire to much better matches for his two daughters. Even if the Macdonald of the south would ever agree to a match with one of his daughters, his uncle would intervene and not allow it.

The clan to the west, Clan MacLachlan was small like his, he'd never gotten to know the laird, as the man was older and rarely ventured away from his home.

"There are women in the village," Keir said interrupting his thoughts. Obviously his friend had gotten to know him so well that he'd guessed his thoughts.

"Aye, there are. I dinnae aspire to more than a good woman who will take care of my home and raise our bairns."

"And keep yer bed warm," Keir added. "Ensure all yer needs are met."

Ruari slid his friend a glance and chuckled. "Ye have given it some thought."

Keir looked away. "I am giving ye suggestions, that is all."

"Right."

Ruari thought about Robbie and what the man's future held. Without the use of his leg, he would have to find another way to make a living.

Robbie had mentioned that one day he'd take over the mill, hopefully he would be able to do it without help. There was also the possibility of some kind of duty at the keep. Ruari felt responsible. If he'd not sent the man to escort his uncle, then the injury would not have happened.

He'd taken the black horse as a gift for Robbie. A compensation of sorts.

If Robbie lost his leg, it would be a useless gesture.

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:44 am

“Adair.” Robbie’s voice broke through the haze of her sleep, and she jerked upright, lifting her head from her brother’s small cot. Sitting in the chair, she’d leaned over to rest and had fallen asleep sometime during the night.

“Yer awake,” she said wiping sleep from her eyes. “Are ye in pain?”

Robbie nodded. “A bit. Aye.”

“I can fetch the healer,” Adair said. “Would ye like some water?”

“Please water. Dinnae fetch the healer yet.” Robbie lifted his head and peered down at his blanket covered body. “My leg is broken?”

“Aye. It is quite bad. The healer gave ye herbs to make ye sleep so ye would be still and not hurt yerself more.”

He drank deeply from the cup and then she left him for a moment so that he could relieve himself. Outside the door, she could hear him groan loudly while adjusting himself.

When she walked back inside, his face was wet with perspiration. “I think ye should fetch the healer.”

“How did it happen?” Adair said as she covered him up. “Were ye being attacked?”

Robbie shook his head. “My horse. He fell. Do ye know what happened to him?”

“Nay,” Adair replied. “In truth we have been so worried about ye, we’ve nae asked. Mother and Father were here, they went home yesterday, but should be back tomorrow.”

“I can go home to recover.” Robbie’s face crumpled and he let out harsh breaths when he attempted to sit up. “In a day or so.”

“Dinnae move.” Adair held her hands out and raced from the room and down the corridor.

The kitchen was quiet when she hurried inside. “Where can I find the healer?” she asked a young woman who stirred a pot. “Is he here in the keep?”

The woman shook her head. “Nae. Someone has to send for him.”

When the woman wasn’t more forthcoming, Adair let out a breath. It wouldn’t do to demand things, she was only there because of her brother. “Do ye know whom I can ask?”

The woman looked to the window. “If someone is headed to the village, ye can ask them. I dinnae know.”

Surely someone had sent someone to fetch the man. He’d been there daily. Annoyed, Adair stalked out to the courtyard looking from one end to the other. There was a group of men training with swords. She didn’t dare go near there. On the opposite side, near the corrals, two young lads worked. One chopping wood. The other neatly piling it next to a small building.

Other than that, she didn’t see anyone else. She walked to the gates hoping to see someone leaving that she could catch up to, but the road was empty.

Frustrated, she whirled about and went to the main doors of the keep. It was Ruari Stuart's fault that Robbie was injured, so he should ensure the healer was summoned.

She was so involved in her thoughts, Adair didn't pay any attention to her surroundings. The entire time, she kept her eyes downcast in thought until suddenly she slammed against a man's chest so hard she stumbled backwards.

"Ye should look up when walking," Ruari stated, with an arched brow and the same expression of someone who knew they were of a higher status.

When heat infused her face, she wanted to stamp her foot, but it would have been childish. Instead, Adair straightened and looked up at him. "I have been seeking someone to fetch the healer. My brother has finally awakened."

At her statement, both of his brows shot up and he turned on his heel and hurried inside. Adair walked just behind.

"Keir, have someone fetch the healer. Robbie is awake. I will go speak to him now." He barked out the order as he walked through the great room in the direction of her brother's room.

His long strides meant she continued at a hurried pace, only glancing over her shoulder to see that the man he'd spoken to was speaking to another, who then hurried from the room.

When she turned, Ruari was facing her and once again, she almost walked into him.

"Wait outside, I must speak to Robbie alone," he ordered, before entering the room and closing the door firmly behind.

Adair crossed her arms over her chest and huffed. "What could he possibly have to

Speak to Robbie about? Did someone do something purposely that caused the accident?"

She glared at the door wondering if she should press her ear to it. Finally, unable to take it any longer, she closed the distance and leaned against it to listen.

"Yer uncle rode ahead...after."

Whatever Ruari said next was hard to make out, but he seemed to have asked a question.

"Aye. I do think..."

Adair clenched her jaw at being unable to hear clearly.

Just then footsteps sounded, and she returned to stand against the wall.

The same woman whom she'd spoken to earlier in the kitchen carried a tray with a bowl of meat and broth, along with bread and a cup. She gave Adair a questioning look.

"The laird is in there speaking to my brother," Adair informed her.

She barely slowed, used her elbow to knock twice, and used the same elbow to open the door and walk in.

It gave her the opportunity to notice that Robbie remained with a pained expression but seemed glad for the food.

The woman said something to Ruari, and he nodded. Then she walked out and closed the door.

It was obvious she'd been there for many years as she seemed comfortable in walking into the room and then addressing their laird.

Just a few moments later, Ruari walked out. She studied him for a hint of what he'd discussed with her brother, but his expression was unreadable.

Instead of continuing on his way, he looked at her for a moment. "Are ye betrothed?"

Adair's mouth fell open, and she knew her eyes widened at the unexpected question. But she recovered quickly. "Nae Laird, I am not."

As if she'd passed a test of some sort, he gave her an approving nod. Much like a schoolmaster gives a student who'd performed a task well.

"Very good then. The healer should be here shortly." With that, he continued on his way, back in the direction of the great room.

"How odd," Adair said to herself and then went into the room.

It seemed the laird had assisted Robbie in sitting up, because her brother was upright and had the bowl in his hands. He took a sip and then placed it back on the tray, which was on the table next to the bed.

"What did ye and the laird speak about?" Adair asked, both because she wanted to know, but also hoping to distract her brother from the pain.

"We spoke about my fall." Robbie sighed. "My horse had to be killed."

"Oh, no." Adair reached for his hand and grasped it. "I know ye cared very much for him."

“He was my mount for many years. I will miss him.”

Adair reached for the bread, tore a chunk, and dipped it in the broth before handing it to Robbie. “Ye must eat. It has been three days since yer fall.”

She watched over him as he ate a bit more of the stew. “Robbie, why would the laird ask me if I was betrothed?”

Not seeming to think much of it, he gave her a one shoulder shrug. “Probably just making conversation. He likes to know things about people. Does his best to memorize their names and something about their life.”

It made sense. Adair recalled how he’d called the sellers at the village square by name. Perhaps, knowing if she was to marry soon or not would help him remember her name.

“Aye, that could be it.”

It was a while later, just as Adair was about to mix her own herbs to relieve Robbie’s pain, that the healer finally arrived. The proficient man went about examining Robbie and then went to the kitchen and returned with a tonic for Robbie to drink.

“How long before we can bring him home?” Adair asked.

The healer looked from her to Robbie, who was already becoming sleepy. “I would say in a pair of days, at the earliest.”

Just then Edine walked in and made a beeline for Robbie’s bed. “How is he?” Her pretty blue eyes glimmered with unshed tears. “I had been hoping to come sooner.”

Robbie pried his eyes open and gazed up at her. “Edine, ye are here.” Each word was

slurred, his eyes closed, and his head drooped to one side.

Both women helped the healer ease Robbie onto his back. The man studied Robbie for a moment and then he announced he was going to mix more tonic and left.

Edine pressed a hand onto Robbie's shoulder. "Are ye in pain?"

Her reply was a soft snore.

"Adair. Ye have been here for days. Ye must be exhausted. Go rest. I will sit here with him."

She gladly accepted the offer and hurried to the room next door. Too tired to undress, she took her shoes off and collapsed atop the bedcoverings.

It was strange that silence was what awakened her. Through the window she could see that the sun was low, the day almost over. Adair hurried from the room in her stocking feet to where Robbie was. Edine was still there in the chair next to the bed, and he seemed to be sleeping.

"How is he?" Adair asked wiping sleep from her eyes.

Edine's face was taut, and she slid a glance to Robbie. "Let us speak outside. He was in pain and I dinnae wish to wake him."

They walked out the door and into the adjacent room. Edine closed the door making Adair wonder what had occurred that had her friend so tense. Edine grasped her hands together. "Yer brother asked the healer about his recovery. If he'd be able to use his leg and how long before he could return to his duties."

Adair didn't dare speak, instead she waited for Edine to continue.

Edine took a shuddering breath. “The healer informed Robbie that if he managed to keep the leg, he would never be able to walk properly again. That it would be many weeks of recovery.”

Her heart shattered for her proud brother. “How did Robbie react?”

“He was silent for a long time, barely made a sound while going through the healer’s examination. I could tell he was in a great deal of pain, but all he did was squeeze his eyes shut and grit his teeth.”

Edine shook her head, looking as if on the verge of tears. “Robbie told the healer he would not allow for his leg to be taken and he would rather withstand the long recovery or die than be maimed.”

Adair covered her face with both hands, contemplating what lay ahead. “He lives and that is all that matters. If the leg festers, we must talk him into allowing it to be taken.”

Fortifying herself, she let out a shaky breath. “Robbie is too stubborn to allow this to beat him.”

Just then they heard voices next door and Adair rushed out of the room and stood just outside the doorway.

Ruari was speaking to her brother. “The healer spoke to me, and I understand yer decision. It is the same one I would make.”

“I will try my best to recover enough to return to my duties,” Robbie replied. “This is nae how I wished to finish my duty to ye.”

“Dinnae worry yerself over it. The celebration takes place in a pair of days. I am

hopeful ye will be able to attend, or at least see things from the window.”

Robbie cleared his throat. “Finnian can compete in my stead.”

“Ye can inform him when he visits ye,” Ruari stated, turning and seeming surprised to not have sensed her standing there.

His dark eyes met hers for a long moment, it was almost as if he dared her to say anything. The man seemed to care for her brother, at the same time, it was his fault he was so horribly wounded.

He is my laird. He is my laird.

Adair repeated the words in her mind, attempting to keep her tongue in check.

“Miss Murray. Ye look rested.”

Instead of a reply, she rounded him and entered the room. Robbie’s gaze went from her to the laird, who remained standing in the doorway. “Adair, ye should address the laird.”

She glanced to the man who was responsible for what had occurred to her brother. “Laird.” Although soft in tone, it was laced with dislike.

Ruari inclined his head, turned on his heel, and left. Edine appeared at the door, her gaze moving from one sibling to the other.

“Ye can nae be so disrespectful, Adair,” Robbie stated. “He is our laird. I serve him.”

“Why do ye continue to be loyal to him? He and his horrible uncle are the cause of yer injury.” The thudding of her heart echoed in her ears. “Do ye nae see it, Robbie?”

His jaw tensed. “If ye continue to behave this way, ye should go home. I dinnae require ye here.”

Too upset to reply, Adair turned to Edine. “I need fresh air.” She hurried from the room and continued blindly past the kitchens, not stopping until ending up in a walled garden. Once there, she leaned against the low wall and took deep breaths. How could her brother be so forgiving? Did he not yet realize the extent of his injuries? Perhaps that was it. Robbie was still groggy from all the herbal remedies and hadn’t yet accepted what happened to him.

“Ye seem upset.” The deep voice was like a frozen knife into her chest. Adair closed her eyes wishing the man to disappear.

“Did ye follow me here?” It was a statement that could have her sent to the dungeon. And yet in that moment she didn’t care.

The laird walked to stand next to her, his hands clasped behind his back. “I understand ye being upset by yer brother’s state.”

“It is much more than that.” She could not hold her tongue. The thought of asking permission to leave his presence flitted past, but Adair ignored it.

Ruari stood straight, his gaze moving from the view before them to her. There was a grace about the man that seemed effortless. She supposed it came from power and that despite his stature, he was a warrior. She’d heard he was powerful in battle, fighting shoulder to shoulder with his men.

Dressed in a gray tunic made from the finest of fabrics, gold thread embroidery around the hems of his sleeves and neckline, he looked every bit an affluent member of their society. Even without speaking, it was obvious that he held a high position among others.

The dark brown pools that studied her were surrounded by thick lashes and dark straight eyebrows. There was something very disconcerting about the way he observed her. Almost like a wolf hunting his prey.

“Ye are angry with me, then.” He spoke as if it was of little consequence to him how she felt.

Her fingers curled into fists, but she held them at her side. “Aye, I am. I find it incredible that ye would send yer men to face danger for a lost cause.”

At her statement, his eyebrows lifted, but he kept his gaze flat. “So ye think to have a better idea of how to govern this land?”

“Stand up to him. Yer uncle. I would nae send men to him when he has ten times as many. Why would he request it, if not to prove his power over ye?”

Ruari’s jaw tensed and a flicker of something like anger passed through his narrowed eyes.

Then he took a step closer. Then another.

Knowing she’d overstepped, better yet, had taken a flying leap over the boundary, Adair didn’t dare retreat but stood her ground waiting for the slap that would surely come. She braced herself for an apology when to her astonishment, he pulled her close.

His strong arms circled her, it was as if he required consoling. Or maybe he did it to keep from striking her. Adair wasn’t sure. She kept still, her fisted hands unclenching as she allowed the iron embrace. He smelled woodsy, not of nature, but more of whatever he’d bathed with.

His head was bent, and the wind blew his hair across Adair's face. The thudding of his heart against her breast was impossible to ignore and for an instant, she almost reached around him to return the hug. But just as suddenly, he released her and walked away without so much as a glance back.

Adair stood frozen, unsure what to think. Why had he reacted in such a manner? Even though she could still smell him, and her body hummed from his touch, it was hard to believe it had happened. Why would the laird embrace her after she'd hurled insults at him?

The sounds of her surroundings returned, horses approaching and conversations in the courtyard. It was as if during the embrace everything had vanished.

Returning to find her friend and Robbie, Adair avoided the great room and instead entered through the kitchen doorway and on past to the short corridor where her room was.

She walked into Robbie's room and the two people looked to her. Edine met her gaze. "We should eat."

"Robbie, I would like to remain at least a pair of days, then we can go home together."

Her brother gave her a pointed look. "Only if ye promise to keep yer opinions to yerself."

If only he knew. "I promise."

"Come let us eat. The cook came to see about ye a bit earlier," Edine said taking her hand. "I am famished."

As they made their way to the kitchen Adair scanned the surroundings. If things went well, she would be able to avoid crossing paths with the laird. Once she and her brother returned home, she would probably never see him again, except from a distance.

Without realizing it, she lowered her chin and sniffed.

She smelled of him.

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:44 am

People were beginning to arrive for the upcoming celebration. At the high board, to his left, was the MacLachlan and his wife Frieda. On his right were Finnian and Keir.

Other than Finnian, the only other family that lived there was his younger brother Elvin. Both his brother and mother had been away to visit her sister who was ill.

They'd returned earlier that evening. Tired from travel, both were currently in their bedchambers.

It seemed that even when his immediate family was there, Ruari was apart from them.

His mother, Melvina, had always been distant. Never showing either him or Elvin any affection. Since Ruari and Elvin's childhood, she'd rarely spent time with them, preferring the company of her two maids, who were ever present at her side. His mother didn't seem to find it necessary to even attend last meals.

Elvin, on the other hand, was pleasant enough, except for the fact he'd rather spend the entirety of his time in the forest hunting. He'd never shown interest in battle and had refused to go. Instead, he honed his archery skills and hunted.

"I spoke to Robbie," Ruari said to Finnian. "He asks that ye take his place in the games."

Finnian's eyebrows rose. "Archery?"

"Stone toss."

“Why nae Keir?”

“He must be prepared for the caber toss.”

Finnian turned to Keir. “Can ye do the stone toss after the caber?”

His friend shrugged. “The caber is last. I would rather nae try. But I can if ye can nae.”

Ruari decided to let them decide between them. “We can expect Elvin to win the archery competition.” As the host laird he would not compete that year.

Both men nodded as his brother strolled into the room, a crooked grin appearing at seeing the other guards at a table.

Despite his brother’s lack of participation in battle, the men still liked him. It was his personality, he was always in good spirits and genuinely cared for people. Everyone except for their uncle Archibald, whom Elvin detested.

Ruari went to his bedchamber and just as he sat to remove his boots, Elvin entered. “I heard what happened to Robbie.”

Not wishing to discuss it again, Ruari just nodded. “How was the trip to visit our aunt?”

Elvin’s left shoulder lifted and lowered. “She is recovering. Was happy to see Mother. Nae sure why we went, as Mother barely spent any time with her.”

“I suppose that our mother’s visit was enough to let her know she cared.”

“True,” Elvin agreed. “What will happen to Robbie?”

It was best to get the conversation over with since Elvin would not let it go. “Once he is well enough, Robbie will be going home to finish recovering.”

“I hear he will nae recover fully.” His brother gave him a questioning look. “What will ye do?”

“It is nae up to me,” Ruari snapped. “Why all the questions? Ask him. He is here in the keep.”

Despite his annoyed tone, Elvin didn’t seem inclined to leave. “I will see about him. We are friends, after all.”

“That is right, ye are everyone’s friend, except when it comes to defending them in battle.”

Elvin rolled his eyes. “I will never fight for him, nor will I bend to his constant demands.”

Frustration coursed through Ruari. If Elvin bothered to go with him to their uncle, he would understand that if he declined to be part of whatever scheme the man was up to, he would not hesitate to take over their keep and lands.

“Think what ye want. Please go.” Ruari was tired of shouldering the blame for everything. It was his duty, which meant it was also his burden.

He stalked from one end of the room to the other, finally opening the door to the balcony and stepping out to look up at the starlit sky above. If he fought against his uncle, his people would lose everything. Not only to be ruled by a tyrant but the men would be forced to fight against more powerful clans.

The plan to have the new warriors train men to fight and have a hope of standing

against Archibald would take time. Time he wasn't sure to have.

There was one alternative. To join with a neighboring clan but that would mean another opportunity for a stronger laird to take over.

His mind whirled. Knowing he wouldn't be able to sleep, he left the room. The rest of the keep was silent. The only ones noticing his departure were two hunting dogs, whose heads lifted from where they lay by the hearth.

Both stood stretching and trotting out behind him with the anticipation of an adventure. Their eagerness lifted Ruari's spirits just a bit and he leaned over to pet one.

A pair of guardsmen straightened at seeing him, though neither moved to speak to him seeming to sense he was not in the mood for company.

Ruari walked to the back of the keep, from where he could look across his lands to the village. The moonlit view made up of blues, purples, and black hues turning the trees and fields into a picture of calmness.

*

The next morning, just after first meal, the guards dispersed to begin setting up the competition areas. Village people arrived and began erecting tents and stands from which wares and food were to be sold.

Soon the land surrounding the keep would be transformed into a small village of sorts. Musicians would play, children would be entertained by traveling puppeteers, and ladies would spend their time admiring the displays of shawls and jewelry.

Ruari had business to attend to. He'd be spending his time with the attending lairds in

an effort to keep the peace between them.

His uncle was to attend but would not arrive until the first day of the competition. As was his way, he'd arrive ensuring to be noticed, flanked by banner carriers and warriors.

"I would like a word." His mother neared when he stood to leave the room.

"Of course, Mother." They walked side by side closer to the hearth, where they could speak without being overheard. "Is something bothering ye?"

"While visiting my sister, it came to my attention that if I were to leave, ye would be without a lady of the keep. During the festivities, seek a wife. Surely one of the visiting lairds has a daughter of marrying age. Or who will become of marrying age soon."

Ruari tensed. The subject of marriage was becoming tiresome. He studied her for a moment. "Why would ye leave? I have other matters to tend to that are much more important at the moment."

"I am aware." His mother's gaze held no warmth. "However, a man with a wife by his side is stronger in the eyes of his enemies. And I realized while visiting yer aunt I miss my homeland."

He followed his mother's progress as she crossed the room to join a visiting laird's wife and considered that perhaps she was right. Wives influenced their husbands. When women bonded with one another in friendship, it became easier for their families to come together.

It was what his mother did at the moment, ensuring to form connections with the visiting women.

Elvin waited by the front entrance so that he could escort a visiting laird on a short hunting trip. The man had gone to his bedchamber to change into something more suitable.

“Does mother plan to go live with her sister?” Ruari asked his brother who shrugged.

“She mentioned missing the larger village where she grew up, and that she wished to live there.”

Ruari considered the area from where their mother had come from. It was two days ride in a relatively peaceful region. She came from Clan Ross, a powerful clan that kept enemies at bay by the size of their army alone.

That could be the answer to his problems. To form an alliance with his mother’s clan. Ruari’s lips curved. Finally, a light in the darkness.

The MacLachlan ascended the stairs and Ruari looked to Elvin. “Ensure he enjoys himself. Guards have been instructed to herd prey toward him.”

His brother’s eyes twinkled with excitement at the prospect of his favorite activity. “We will have a prosperous hunt and will feast on the kill tomorrow.”

The MacLachlan laughed. “Ye expect much from my hunting skills.” He looked to Ruari. “Will ye not be joining us?”

Ruari shook his head. “I must be here to greet the other guests. I assure ye, Elvin will be much better company when it comes to hunting.”

The men left and Ruari prepared for what would be a busy day ahead. A talk with his mother forefront on his mind. It would have to wait until he could get a moment alone with her, but it would have to be soon.

He sensed someone watching him and he scanned the great room, catching sight of Adair. She stood in the opposite entryway studying the people in the room. The lass had never eaten in here, instead preferring to have her meals in the kitchen with the servants.

It occurred to Ruari that he'd not thought to invite her to join him for a meal. There was something about that lass that pulled to him. Her presence alone put his fretful soul at ease, a feeling he'd not felt in a very long time.

That he'd pulled her close and held her so tightly had settled him, brought a sort of calm to his chaotic feelings. It was the first time in a long while that he'd touched a woman. Had needed closeness. The act had been unexpected, but exactly what he needed to ease his mind.

Adair's gaze met his and all his surroundings disappeared. The din of conversation, and the clattering of dishes became a melody. The quickening of his heart and fluttering in his belly were pushed away when she turned and disappeared from sight.

All he had to do was walk across the room and catch up to her, but to what purpose? What would he say?

"Laird?" A guard looked from him to the now empty doorway. "Ye asked to speak to us."

Ruari dragged his gaze from where Adair had stood. "What?"

"Finnian and Keir asked that I come for ye."

"Oh... aye. Let us go."

As they walked to meet with the others who'd be competing, Ruari let out a long

breath. What the hell was wrong with him. His head was everywhere except on the matters at hand. Both Kier and Finnian turned to him upon his nearing. Ruari looked to Finnian. "Have ye spoken to Robbie yet?"

Finnian nodded. "Aye, just now. He was in pain, so I did nae linger." His brows lifted. "The sister was there with a friend, a bonnie lass called Edine."

Keir's turned to look at Finnian. "Golden-haired lass?"

"Aye," Finnian said, and they began discussing having seen the girl called Edine in the village.

Just as Ruari was going to ask what they thought of Adair, Finnian spoke. "Robbie's sister is bonnie too. I dinnae dare go anywhere near the lass. Robbie would find a way to take my manhood." Finnian motioned between his legs.

Keir laughed. "True."

They met with another seven men and divided into groups to discuss their strategy for each game. Since Ruari planned to compete in the hammer throw, it was just him and the blacksmith from the village.

The man was just a bit older than him, of stocky build and with a gruff demeanor. Ruari sized him up, wondering if once again he'd lose to the strong man who worked with iron every day.

"Have ye practiced much Clyde?" Ruari asked.

The blacksmith scratched his thick beard. "A bit, aye." His dark gaze took Ruari in. "Ye have put a bit of weight on yerself, Laird."

Ruari grinned. “Aye a bit.” He went to where the hammer lay and lifted it with his right hand. Becoming familiar with the item didn’t take long as he’d practiced at least once a day for the last several weeks. Without someone to compete against, it was hard to tell if he had an advantage or not.

The blacksmith lifted his own hammer and went to stand by a short wall made of stacked rocks. He straightened and whirled the hammer around his head several times before releasing it. The heavy object rotated through the air landing with a thud quite a distance away.

“I am content with that,” Clyde said with a broad grin. “Yer turn Laird.”

Ruari visually measured the distance unsure he could beat it, but he’d do his best. With his hammer in hand, he went through the same motions as the blacksmith, swinging the hammer with both hands around his body before releasing it to fly through the air.

It landed just a foot length short of the blacksmith’s, which satisfied Ruari. He’d not tried as hard as he could, wishing to save his strength for the day of competition.

Lads from the stables rushed to fetch the hammers, exaggerating their movements when picking them up.

“Do ye think our clan will win against Clan MacLachlan?” Clyde asked looking across the way to where some of the other clan’s men watched.

“It was a close competition last year,” Ruari replied. “The same man competes this year and he is considerably older than us.”

They spoke for a bit longer when he noticed in the distance that Adair and her fair-haired friend, joined by one of the servants stood near where the laundry was hung.

They watched the practice.

Immediately he wanted to throw the hammer again, to be sure she saw. Then he was annoyed with himself at the thought.

The blacksmith followed his line of vision. "I heard about Robbie. Will he survive his injuries?"

"Aye," Ruari replied. "The healer hopes to be able to save his leg. However, it is nae expected that he will be able to walk on it."

The man's face fell. "He is young and strong, perhaps he will."

Ruari nodded. "Aye, it is in the hands of God now."

Upon noting the women watched, the men competing grunted louder when tossing the stone and the archers' conversations rose significantly as they goaded each other on.

"I best go see about any visitors," Ruari said, then hesitated. "Ye are welcome to go and visit Robbie if ye wish."

The blacksmith's face brightened. "Aye Laird. I will."

Ruari followed the man toward the house until they reached where Adair and the other two women were. The servant's eyes rounded until he nodded in acknowledgement. "Osla, how fares yer grandmother?"

"She is much better my laird. Thank ye kindly for asking." The young woman bobbed her head and turned to go back inside.

“Ye can continue yer rest,” he said, stopping her. “I know ye work hard.” Osla’s face brightened, and she went to sit on a small bench.

He turned his attention to Adair. “Clyde wishes to visit with Robbie. Is he awake?”

“Aye, Laird. He is.”

Her friend smiled at the blacksmith. “I will take ye to him.”

Before Adair could go with them, Ruari stopped her. “May I have a word?”

She nodded silently allowing him to take her elbow and guide her away from Osla who pretended not to notice them.

They walked a short distance away to the back of the keep where he’d been pacing the night before.

Instead of meeting his gaze, Adair looked into the distance toward the village. “This is a nice view.”

“It is.” He stood next to her. “I stood here last night. The moon was bright...” He left the sentence hanging as he was heading toward something poetic.

“My brother wishes to go home. I worry that the travel will prolong his healing.” She let out a soft sigh. “He is headstrong.”

If she still blamed him, Adair didn’t seem to be considering it at the moment.

“I can speak to him. Ultimately it is his decision.”

When she whirled to face him, thoughts that she’d forgiven him were instantly

dissolved. Eyes narrowed and nostrils flared, he could barely stand to look at her. There was a beauty about her that was not immediately noticeable.

In a clipped tone, she got his attention. “As his laird and the one who sent him, ye should ensure he is nae further injured.”

Tearing his eyes from her angry ones, he wanted nothing more than to ask her to sit and allow him to tell her everything and perhaps she would agree to shoulder his burden, or at least to listen.

Perhaps the only one who understood him was Finnian who was unable to do more than offer sympathy as he too had suffered from Archibald Stuart’s vile quest for power.

“Is that what ye wish me to do?” Ruari asked. “Order him to remain here.”

“If ye must,” Adair replied, her expression wary. “The healer insists it is too soon.”

On the winding road that led to the front of the keep, a group of men escorted a carriage. He followed their progress for a few moments. He imagined that he and Adair would be greeting the visitors as a united front.

It was stupid to allow such romantic musings and he wondered why the thought had ever occurred. Perhaps all the talk of marriage, by both his uncle and his mother, had affected him.

“I will speak to Robbie.” He turned away, wishing she’d ask him another question, if only to prolong the time with her.

Of course she didn’t, and he continued past where only the archers remained and on to where Osla no longer sat.

The carriage would be arriving just as he rounded the corner which meant he and his mother would begin the art of ensuring others thought them to be without worry and without threat. It would be the only way to convince the visiting lairds to a peaceful union.

His mother emerged, her face devoid of any emotion. He'd often thought she resembled a stone carving come to life. With nothing soft about her, and yet she remained an attractive woman.

"Who comes?" she asked when Ruari neared.

"The McNaughton," Ruari responded. "He brings six men who are to compete."

His mother slanted a look to him. "Ye seem troubled."

The comment took him by surprise. "Nothing of concern, Mother."

Her right brow lifted indicating she didn't believe him. "I believe the McNaughton has a daughter of marrying age. Being his holdings are small, perhaps they would agree to a match."

He could only nod as the visiting laird alighted from the carriage.

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Despite Robbie insisting she return to the village, Adair couldn't bring herself to leave him.

When Edine left to head home, she sent a message to her parents that she would remain with Robbie until he returned home, after the festivities.

Her brother was still in so much pain and barely able to turn from one side to the other without having to stop and breathe through the stabs of it. Each time he cried out, it tore at Adair's heart fanning the anger toward both Ruari and his uncle.

The older laird, Ruari's uncle, would be arriving, and Adair considered that she would remain in the servant's quarters to avoid seeing the man. She didn't trust herself to keep from blurting out something that could harm her family.

Although the younger laird had been forgiving at her outbursts, Adair had pushed her luck with him enough. A slight or disrespectful comment toward his powerful uncle would not be allowed to pass without punishment.

When Robbie groaned from pain, Adair was torn from her musings, and she gripped her brother's hand as the healer cut away bloody bandages.

Adair had to take fortifying breaths not to wince at the mangled leg. Thankfully, it had stopped bleeding. Although she suspected whenever Robbie moved, it caused the wounds to open and start to bleed again.

"Why did ye not stitch the wound closed?" Adair asked the man as he examined Robbie's leg.

The healer's eyes lifted to hers only for a slight moment. "I needed to ensure it did nae fester." When he prodded, Robbie groaned, biting into a cloth he'd lifted and placed between his teeth.

"The wound is clean and is healing well," the healer informed them. "It can be stitched closed now."

Robbie's face was a dark red and wet with perspiration by the time the healer finished the task of pulling the flesh together and stitching it closed. He fell back onto the bedding exhausted as the healer prepared to bind it.

The man had Adair hold two flat pieces of wood on each side of the leg while a servant lifted the limb just enough so that the healer could wind a thick bandage around and around. Her poor brother cried out over and over until his voice became hoarse.

"We are almost done love," Adair cooed at her brother. "Just about done."

By the time they finished, Robbie came in and out of consciousness. Each repetitive moan that came from him, was like a hammer to her heart, pounding over and over.

"Ye will nae have to do this again will ye?" Adair asked the healer, her voice quivering with sadness.

The man shook his head and placed a hand on Robbie's shoulder. "I will make a strong tonic for ye to drink. It will help with the pain."

As they waited, Adair held on to Robbie's hand, pressing kisses to his face and whispering words that made little sense in an effort to calm him.

It was a pair of hours later that he finally succumbed to an exhausted although he

continued moaning softly even in slumber.

Adair hurried from the room and out to the back of the keep where she collapsed onto her knees and sobbed. It was now obvious to her that Robbie would never be able to walk normally. Her strong and proud brother would be a cripple for the rest of his life.

“What happened?”

The deep voice surprised her, and she scrambled to stand only to stumble forward. A strong grip held her in place, and she realized it was Ruari.

The last person she wanted to talk to in that moment was the person who’d caused her brother so much pain. She pushed away from him, brushing away tears with the backs of her hands.

“Nothing I wish to speak to ye about.”

His dark eyes studied her for a moment before he turned his attention toward the winding road. “Yer brother.”

Since it was a statement and not a question, Adair remained silent. If she said anything, it would not be kind. If anything, she wanted to kick him, to pound her fists into his chest and let him feel at least a portion of the pain her brother had felt. Here he stood, proud and without any kind of idea of the suffering he’d brought to her brother and their family. Emotions conflicted with one another. On one hand, she understood it was not totally Ruari’s fault, but at the same time, he’d been the one to choose Robbie.

If not for fearing punishment, she would leave the laird’s presence.

Finally, he spoke, breaking the silence. “The healer informed me his leg is now bound until it heals. That there is nae any festering.”

“Is it the guilt that brings ye to stay informed?” Adair bit out. “As soon as he is able, we will leave.” She left the rest of the sentence unsaid. That she never wished to lay eyes on either him or the keep again.

Ruari slid a glance in her direction. “I am sorry for the pain yer brother has endured. It must be horrible for ye to witness.”

Her teeth bit into her tongue so hard, she tasted blood. Instead of a reply, she gave a slight nod. Realizing it was best to go away before she said something disrespectful, she rounded the laird.

Just as she passed his hand grasped her lower arm. Adair took a step backward and pulled her arm from his grasp.

“There are so many things ye dinnae know. The true reason for which I...”

“I dinnae care to hear it, Laird. Ye and yers remain unscathed, with full stomachs and fine clothes, while yer people mourn the loss of good men who are killed or maimed for no other reason than the whims of yer uncle. Ye are no better than him because instead of standing up to him, ye do his bidding.”

His jaw tightened and his gaze bore into hers. There was a statue-like stillness about him, like that of a predator before he struck.

If only he'd let her go, then she would not find herself about to be punished. Her temper and insolence could lead to her being thrown into the dungeon. Was there a dungeon here? What if her family was ordered to leave the lands?

“Go.” His voice was low, but not angry. And when he looked back toward the road, there was a tinge of something like sorrow in the solitary word.

Adair glanced at him one last time noting the barely perceptible rounding of his shoulders and she raced back to her small bedchamber.

It was later that evening, that she finally dared to venture to the kitchen. Not hungry, but knowing she had to maintain her strength for her brother’s sake, Adair forced herself to eat.

“I will prepare a small meal and ale for Robbie,”

“Wait a moment,” Cook said. “I must boil herbs to be placed in his ale. The healer said he must drink it with each meal.”

Whilst waiting for the cook to do whatever preparations she would with Robbie’s ale, the sound of music drew her to walk down the corridor and peek into the great room. Last meal had been served earlier by the looks of it.

There were many guests in the great room. Each of the four long tables had people on both sides.

Musicians had set up by the hearth, and some people danced while others looked on. At first she didn’t see Ruari, but then his dark hair got her attention.

He sat next to a woman, his head inclined so he could listen to whatever she said over the din of the music.

The woman placed a hand on his lower arm and squeezed it. He didn’t move away. Instead, he turned to her and said something.

The food she'd recently eaten turned to stone in Adair's stomach, her gaze pinned to where the woman's hand rested.

Jealousy? No. It was impossible. She hated Ruari Stuart and his uncle for what they had done. Given the choice, she would do something to maim the younger, so that he would understand the pain Robbie felt and his uncle would know how it felt to watch someone ye care for suffer. At the thought she immediately regretted it. She'd never hurt anyone purposely. She was not like them.

As if sensing her perusal, Ruari turned to the doorway and looked at her.

Adair wanted to hide, but she would not cower. Instead she straightened, turned away, and went back to the kitchen to collect the tray of food for Robbie.

*

That night Adair could not sleep. The house was noisy with so many visitors. People were crowded in any available space, others outside in tents. People talking, others snoring made for a cacophony of sounds.

She was not so naïve to think to have escaped punishment. It was only a reprieve because of the festivities. In three days everyone would be gone, and it was only after that, she and Robbie would leave.

There was no way to get any time alone with the laird to ask for leniency for her family. With so many people about, it was impossible unless she could find a way to seek him out. The next thought made her throat dry.

The only time Ruari was alone was at night. In his bedchamber.

The stone floor was cold against her bare feet, but Adair didn't dare wear her sturdy

shoes which would make sounds with each footfall. She'd spied a back staircase that led to the second floor. It was usually used by the servants so that they didn't have to cut through the common areas to bring up food or other necessities to the family and guests.

Her heart pounding, Adair climbed the staircase, the dim light of her candlestick shaking against the stone walls.

Upon reaching the second floor, she peered out into a large room where several people had made pallets and slept. Thankfully one man snored loudly, which would mask her movements.

If someone saw her, they'd mistake her for a maid doing someone's bidding, so she didn't worry much.

Once past the room, she wasn't sure which corridor to take as there were two. Thinking it made sense for the laird to overlook the courtyard, she went to the right.

It was a short corridor with three doors.

Again using logic, she decided to choose the room that not only overlooked the courtyard but would also have a view of the road.

Her hand trembled as she pushed down the door latch and peeked inside.

The room was masculine, with dark bedding and only one tapestry on the wall. Besides the wardrobe in the corner, there was a writing table and a trunk.

Upon a huge four-poster bed someone slept. When they tossed, Adair held her breath. Whoever it was slept restlessly.

She neared the bed and saw it was Ruari.

The ties to his nightshirt were left undone, allowing a glimpse of his tanned chest. He murmured something in his sleep and turned away from her onto his side.

Knowing it was her only opportunity to speak to him, Adair took a breath and tapped his shoulder.

She had to nudge him before he woke and then he wiped his eyes and stretched, not seeming surprised at the waking.

“What can possibly be happening that I must be awakened?” he asked in a groggy voice.

“Laird,” Adair whispered. “I must speak to ye.”

At the sound of her voice, he bolted upright. His eyes widened as he took her in.

It did not occur to Adair until that moment that she wore a nightgown. And that perhaps he would misconstrue her late-night visit.

For a long moment, he didn’t say anything. His fingers raked through the thick mussed locks that fell back to his shoulders in a wild mane that somehow made him look both untamed and more handsome.

He motioned to the bed. “Sit. I dare not move from the bed as I am only half dressed.”

Not wishing to cause any more trouble, she lowered to sit on the end of the bed. It was impossible to drag her eyes from him, the thin nightshirt doing little to distract from the well-formed chest beneath.

“Did something happen to yer brother?”

Adair shook her head. “Nay. I am here to ask yer forgiveness for the way I behaved earlier. I beg that ye dinnae punish my family. It is I who deserve any punishment alone.”

He let out a long sigh. “I dinnae plan to punish ye, Adair. Ye are one of many who think the same. If I were to punish everyone who feels as ye do, it would be a very long line.”

His words sunk in, and she gaped at him. A barrage of questions formed in her mind.

“Why then do ye not change? Why keep sending men to fight with yer uncle?” Adair kept her voice a whisper.

“I dinnae blame ye for hating me. If I were ye, I would feel the same.” There was a tinge of sadness in his voice. He looked from her to the open window.

Was that what she felt? Hatred toward him? They sat on his bed and for some reason, it was comfortable. Adair didn’t feel threatened or scared of him. It was almost as if he wanted her to be there.

She frowned. “I dinnae hate ye. I am angry with ye. There is a difference.”

When he smiled, it was as if a burden had lifted from his shoulders. Albeit, it was a soft smile, more melancholy. “I understand.”

“Why do ye subject your men to danger?” Adair asked. “Do ye wish to continue allowing yer uncle to put them in danger?”

“No,” He shook his head and reached out holding his hand out, palm up. Adair took

it, unsure why he seemed to need the physical touch.

His hand was calloused from swordplay, but oddly comforting. He lowered their clasped hands to the bed, looking at them. "I will tell ye something, but ye must promise never to repeat it."

His eyes met hers. "Promise me."

So strange to be there with him, holding his hand as if they were more than laird and subject. In that moment, Adair wanted to laugh at the absurdity of it. At the same time, she wanted to remain there, with him, holding his hand.

"I promise." She held his gaze. "I will nae repeat what ye tell me."

"Good. Now look away for just a moment" He released her hand and turned to the side, sliding from the bed. Adair looked away as he walked to where clothes were thrown over the back of the chair by the desk. Unable to keep from it, she peered out of the corner of her eyes to catch a glimpse of his powerful thighs as he bent to pull on breeches.

He kept his sleepshirt untucked and looked like a pirate with the loose tunic, tight breeches, bare feet, and unruly hair. Somehow he exuded power and a very sensual aura.

Adair had to swallow past the sudden dryness in her throat and did her best to slow the beating of her heart. There was nothing to be done about the heat that traveled up and down her body.

He returned to the bed, sat down next to her, and once again took her hand. This time he held it with both of his atop his thigh. Adair felt her eyes widen at how intimate it felt. Strangely at the same time, she didn't want to move away.

Ruari began to speak and in moments, she was no longer a stranger, but a confidant. Something propelled her to move closer to him, perhaps the melancholy tone of his voice.

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Ruari wanted nothing more than to pull the small woman closer. To release all the emotions that had built up in the months since his father died and ask that she be with him as he worked to find a solution. His decision made to tell her everything, he dove into the unknown.

“I can nae take the risk, ye see. If I dinnae keep him appeased, my uncle will overtake this keep and the surrounding lands. I have nae doubt he will take glee in it. I have tried to come up with solutions, but he always makes more demands, just for the sport of it.”

He went on to tell her about his plans to train more warriors and how one day be strong enough to stand against the tyrant threatening to steal his birthright.

“It will take years to train that many. I doubt even then to have enough trained men to fight against him. There are about ninety men in his army, but all are well trained and seasoned in battle,” Ruari continued.

While he talked, Adair listened in silence. Every so often she’d ask a question. It surprised him how intelligent each question was, sending him to explore new ideas he’d not considered.

When she yawned, he realized it was quite late.

“Ye can lay down and rest. We can speak more tomorrow.”

“I should go,” Adair said, but she didn’t move.

“Sleep. I will ensure ye leave before anyone sees ye.”

She looked about to protest, but then her expression softened, and she nodded. “Very well. Just for a bit.” Adair moved up and lay her head on one of the pillows.

He lowered next to her, then grasped her hand again. “I am considering my mother’s family. She is a Ross. Perhaps they can help me.”

Adair looked up at him. It was so easy to be there with her, familiar even. He wondered if she felt the same.

“Ye should speak to yer mother. If she mentions her family connections when yer uncle is here, it may buy ye more time. That is a very good idea.”

The praise made something in his chest lighter. “I will speak with her.”

“Laird,” she said in a quiet tone. That she called him that whilst laying in his bed as he disclosed all his secrets felt wrong.

“Please call me Ruari.” Her cheeks pinkened and he repeated the request. “Call me Ruari, Adair.”

“Ruari,” she said in a hesitant tone. “I am so very sorry for how I and others judge ye without knowing the weight of yer burden.”

“It is my duty as laird to carry it and ensure the clan’s people feel safe. I have shared with ye and although I feel lighter, I fear ye will now also carry the burden.”

Her lips curved and his stomach tumbled. “I dinnae mind. Someone should be there for ye. Do yer brother and mother know?”

“Somewhat. But they either choose to ignore it or have lost all hope to be independent.”

She yawned widely. “I truly must go.”

“Please stay.”

“Here? I can nae.”

“I will ensure no one sees ye leave in the morning.”

Finally she let out a sigh. “Very well.”

Before he could think more about it, he leaned closer and kissed her. The kiss was soft, gentle, but at the same time sweet. She responded at first hesitantly, but then put her hand on the side of his neck and kissed him back.

If it were up to his body, he would have continued kissing her, taking and claiming her. Instead, he pressed another light kiss on her lips and lay back. “Sleep.”

When he blew out the candle the room plunged into darkness, and yet for the first time since becoming laird, it was not oppressing. There was a lightness in his chest, a sense of relief. That not only could he speak with Adair about what lay heavy on his mind, but she shared ideas and gave him hope for a good outcome.

The feel of a hand sliding down his chest woke him sometime later. At first he thought it was his imagination, but then he realized it was Adair. She snuggled against him, her hand moving down from his chest to his stomach.

Was she asleep and perhaps thinking he was her lover? Did she have a lover in the village for whom she pined?

Ruari remained very still, not wishing for her to stop exploring his body. At the same time, he wished for her to want him, not some faceless man she mistook him for.

“Ruari,” she whispered against his ear. “I know I should nae, but... Can we?”

Her lips pressed against the sensitive place just below his ear and he took a sharp breath. “Aye.”

Adair let out a soft sound, like that of a satisfied cat and Ruari could barely refrain from allowing himself to move fast. Rolling to face her, he pulled the woman closer and kissed her. Her response was immediate.

Thankfully, she only wore a nightshift making it easy to slide his hands under it and caress her silken skin.

Ever so slowly, he slid the palms of his hands up from her thighs to cup her round bottom. The woman was built for lovemaking, with curves that could drive a man senseless.

Ruari trailed his lips from her mouth down her throat as she clung to him, digging her nails into his back.

When he nipped the side of her neck, Adair moaned with satisfaction.

“Take me.” Her request was all he needed.

Her fingers slid up and down his back as she writhed under him.

Annoyed at not feeling her skin against his, he disengaged, climbed from the bed and quickly did away with his clothes before joining her again.

At once, she was pressed against him, her soft silky body making it impossible to keep the soft moan that erupted from deep in his throat.

“Are ye sure?” He whispered against her ear. If she was a virgin, it would be hard to justify taking her. She deserved more than a tryst, whether or not it was her first experience.

“I am burning with need,” she responded. “I want to know what it is like to be made love to.”

So it was her first time. He let out a breath. “I will ensure ye do, but I can nae spoil ye lass.”

He guided her to lay back, and once again took her mouth, glad when her lips parted, and he could slide his tongue into her. Adair responded, her fingers raking through his hair.

Her hips lifted signaling desire, want, need. Ruari’s hand trembled as he slid it down from her breast and past her stomach to the mound between her legs. Her breathing hitched when he slid his fingers between the folds of her sex, then she let out a low moan that vibrated through his body.

There was no returning from this point, he wanted to witness her undoing. To see her lost in passion and he was glad for the lightening sky. Still the light that filtered past the window allowed barely more than shadows.

Whilst circling the tiny bud between her legs, Ruari rubbed his throbbing staff against the plush flesh of Adair’s hip, the friction an immediate salve to his growing need.

He slid a finger into her moist heat, and she gasped against his mouth. When he moved it in and out of her, Adair moaned, suckled at his throat, and raked her nails

through his hair. Her responses to his lovemaking were unexpected and exciting.

Knowing he would not last much longer, Ruari continued to push himself harder against her plushness. When Adair trembled against him. Her body shuddered from the force as she found release. The throaty sounds she made brought him to come undone and he spilled.

He pulled Adair against him and kissed her soundly. She gripped his shoulders, as if not wishing the intimacy to end.

He felt the same way.

“The sun is rising,” Ruari said looking at the dim sunlight around the edges of the window shutters.

Adair looked to the window. “I am nae sure how I can possibly return downstairs without being seen.”

With her against his side, Ruari felt as if he could face down any opponent. Finding a way for her to leave unseen was the least of things in that moment.

“I will go look. The people out there are probably still asleep.”

Adair let out a long breath. “I am nae sure why I... I shouldn’t have.”

“Dinnae regret what happened between us. I am glad for it. I feel honored.”

She peered up at him with a slight frown. “Why would it be an honor? Ye are my laird. I am but a village girl.”

He pressed a kiss to her lips. “We are a man and a woman, that is all.”

When her lips curved, a warmth filled him. He wanted nothing more than to see her smile each and every day.

After pulling on his breeches, Ruari went to the door and cracked it open. He took inventory of the surroundings finding that indeed, the people remained asleep. He motioned for Adair to come to the door and then placed one of his heavy cloaks over her shoulders and pulled the hood down to hide her face. “If they do see ye, they will nae have any idea who ye are.”

As she hurried away, holding a candlestick, he watched until she disappeared, rounding the corridor to the back staircase.

He turned and went to his bed and fell back onto the bedding with a wide grin. The woman had no idea what she’d just done.

Her fate was sealed.

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Adair finally allowed herself to breathe freely when closing the door to her bedchamber and leaning against it. She remained for a few moments, assessing what had happened. There was a tingle between her legs, a stark reminder of an unexpected experience.

Whatever had driven her to seduce the laird? Her mind must have been weakened by him sharing so much with her. He'd not taken her fully, she was not so naïve to not be aware of it. And yet. What they shared had been so very intimate.

He'd fallen asleep holding her hand. An admirable and respectful man, who had not taken advantage of the situation nor his position as laird to take liberties. Instead, he'd been sound asleep when she'd given in to her urges.

“What woman can lay next to such a handsome well-built man without desire overcoming them?” Adair mumbled, annoyed with herself. “He must think me a common whore.”

Pulling the cloak around her, she went to her much smaller bed and lowered to it. She would have to find a way to place the cloak somewhere so that he could get it back. Otherwise what excuse could she make for having it?

A while later, the sounds of the household woke Adair, and she sat up and stretched. Ruari's cloak fell from her shoulders, and she couldn't help running her hand over it.

The sounds of conversations and hammering from the activities outside made her go to the window and peer out. Tents had been erected, vendors were setting up their displays, and firepits had been lit to dispel the morning chill. The smoke wafted

through the makeshift village as people milled about, preparing for the beginning of the festivities.

The entire time she brushed the tangles from her hair, her mind returned to waking Ruari up that morning. His face—as enticing as his body—over hers.

What had occurred with him had been so overwhelming, almost as if there'd been more than a physical connection. Adair rolled her eyes at the thought. Surely, he would not describe it the same.

After fetching porridge, bread, and ale, Adair made her way to her brother's room. He was awake and looked over when she entered, and then focused on the tray.

“The festival is today?” he asked turning to the window.

Adair nodded, placing the tray of food on the small table next to his bed. “Aye, it begins. The vendors are setting up and several large tents have been raised.”

Robbie took the porridge bowl and drank from it, not bothering with the spoon next to it. “Three days and then we leave.” His brow furrowed. “How long has it been since I was injured?”

Unsure of where his thoughts were, Adair studied him. “Perhaps if I fetch a pair of men, ye can sit outside and watch the competitions.”

To her surprise, Robbie nodded. “Find Keir. He will find someone to help. I would like to see the competition.”

“It has been about a sennight since ye were injured.” Adair took the empty bowl from his hand and replaced it with the cup of ale. “It seems the pain has lessened.”

“As long as I am as still as the dead, it does nae ache.” Robbie drank the ale and then peered at the cup. “Did she put that dreadful tonic in here?”

“I did nae see her prepare it,” Adair replied honestly. Although she was sure the cook had laced the ale with tonic, she had not witnessed it.

After she settled Robbie with pillows behind his back so that he could see out the window, she left to find her own meal.

The kitchen was a flurry of activity. Trays piled with trenchers and bowls were brought back and forth from the great room. Women stirred pots over the fire, while others kneaded dough for bread and cut up vegetables for stew. In the next few days, the laird’s visitors—many of elevated status—were to be housed and fed.

Feeling useless, Adair approached the red-faced cook who was busy chopping a huge slab of meat into smaller pieces.

“What is it lass?” she asked curtly. Throughout Adair’s stay, all of the servants had been helpful and accepted her as one of their own. It said a lot about how well Robbie was liked.

“I wish to help. What can I do?”

“Eat first, then ye can peel potatoes. Go now. There is porridge and bread, and a bit of leftover pork from this morning’s meal.”

Adair ate quickly, washing down the meal with delicious fruity cider. Then she began peeling a mountain of potatoes, plopping each into a bucket of water once she was done.

It was almost midday when she took a break and went to check on her brother, whom

she found sleeping soundly.

Upon returning, the cook motioned her forward. “Be a dear and take this tray of bread and cheese to the great room. Follow Bettina.” She waved toward a young woman who carried a tray laden with cups.

Carrying the heavy tray, Adair followed the woman, who didn’t seem at all worried that any of the cups would tip over from her swift movements.

They entered the great room, which was strangely uncrowded. Only one long table had people around it. Her heart quickened at seeing Ruari at the head of the table. He didn’t notice her until she stood by the table waiting for Bettina to place cups before each person seated.

When he turned to her, his eyes widened just a bit and he gave her a questioning look. Adair didn’t dare meet his gaze. Instead, she scanned the table as Bettina neared to take the baskets of bread, leaving the bowls of cheese for last. Just as the last item was placed on the table, did Adair take notice of who sat on the opposite end from Ruari.

It was Archibald Stuart. The man who’d caused her brother to be injured. The one who threatened to take over Ruari’s lands and people.

She’d not seen the man in many years. He’d not aged well. Jowls hung from his gaunt face. There were bags under his eyes and his graying hair was stringy and sparse. Seeming to sense her perusal, he looked at her. When his gaze traveled up and down Adair, his upper lip curled in distaste.

Adair turned her attention to one of the cups on the table, mentally willing Bettina to hurry.

“I am looking forward to being shown yer home and gardens, Ruari.”—A young woman, about her age, placed a proprietary hand on Ruari’s lower arm.—“Yer mother offered yer assistance as she will nae have the time today.”

Why would the horrible woman think the hosting laird would have time to walk about showing her rooms and flowers? Adair clenched her jaw doing her best not to scowl. If only Bettina would move faster. The maid listened as one of the men asked for something or other. Adair couldn’t hear clearly as she was concentrating on hearing Ruari’s reply.

“Of course.”

Adair couldn’t help it, she slid a look to see what the woman was doing. Ruari sat back in his chair, a cup in hand as he looked across the table toward his uncle. The woman nibbled something, then pursed her lips. “The most delicious cheese. Do ye make it here Ruari?”

“Come,” Bettina said nudging Adair.

They went back to the kitchen and Adair returned to her potato peeling task, the entire time wondering what she’d feel when Ruari married. There was little she could do to impede it. It wasn’t as if making love had formed any kind of agreement for a future.

Men and women often had trysts for the sole purpose of physical satisfaction. That was all it had been between them. A tryst.

And yet, she’d given him more than just her body. All her life, she’d managed to keep her feelings in check when it came to men. With Ruari the experience had felt deeper. It was as if while making love they’d bonded—become one—not just physically, but on an emotional level.

Since she lived there for the time being, it was expected of her to help with whatever was needed. In truth, it was a welcome escape. There was so much to do, that before long, Adair was consumed with the tasks of the household. Preparation of meals, serving drinks, and helping with cleaning and such.

The courtyard was transformed from the open area it had been days earlier when she'd arrived, to what looked to be a small village.

Going to the well for water meant winding through the crowds of people who meandered from one place to another seeking food or to purchase goods. Children screeched with delight as they raced around in play, being chased by a man pretending to be a dragon. Then there was the music, lively tunes filling the air.

Despite her earlier annoyance and the sodden cloak of her brother's recovery, Adair's mood lightened. She chuckled when noticing playful hounds joining in the chase with the children, causing them to dash in separate directions.

A familiar group walked toward her, and she waved, noting it was Edine and her parents. She put the buckets down by the well and waited for them to near.

"How does Robbie fare?" Edine's mother asked. The woman was sweet like her daughter, always caring for those in need.

Adair hugged her. "Recovering. He is much better."

"Yer mother is feeling poorly today and was in no mood to come," the woman informed her.

"She has a horrible toothache," Edine added. "Does nae want it to be pulled."

Her mother would not come if she was not allowed to take Robbie home. It was

understandable, she wanted to care for her son.

Since Robbie's injury, she'd not returned. Instead she requested reports of Robbie's progress through visitors to the keep.

"We shall go home in a few days," Adair told Edine's mother. "Tell Mother to expect us soon."

The woman smiled and nodded. "Can we see him?"

"Aye, of course," Adair replied.

Edine walked away with her parents in the direction of the keep's side entrance. Adair scanned the area without seeing the familiar dark-haired male she sought. Either he was at the competition area, or inside. Deflated, she drew the water and made her way back to the kitchens.

The last of the potatoes were peeled and cut into chunks. The cook threw them into salted boiling water as Adair kept watch.

The aroma of roasted meat and freshly baked bread made her inhale deeply. "I have already learned new ways to cook from watching ye," she informed the cook. "I will try it when I return home."

"Ye have been a great help today," Cook replied. "Perhaps ye can manage to stay a few more days?"

Adair nodded. "The laird has requested my brother not leave until after the festivities end. I will remain with him."

"I am glad for it then." The no-nonsense woman handed her a wooden spoon. "The

potatoes should be soft. If they are, we must drain them.”

By the time servants left with overburdened trays of food, Adair was glad she didn’t work there permanently. Her feet throbbed and her back ached and yet the much older cook continued barking orders and moving about the space as if she’d only just started the day.

Needing to check on Robbie, Adair filled a cup with cider and piled meat and potatoes on a plate, then hurried down the corridor.

She rushed past the doorway into her brother’s room only to stop short at the deep voice. Ruari sat in the chair near the bed, long legs stretched before them as he listened to Robbie.

Neither noticed her as they chuckled at whatever her brother said. Her heart pounded so loudly in her ears she could barely hear over it.

“Yer sister takes good care of ye,” Ruari said sliding a glance in her direction. “Ye will become fat and spoiled.”

It was nice to see Robbie so relaxed. It was the first time since his injury that she’d seen him smile. Her brother looked up at her. “The laird has just assured me that I can return to my post as soon as I recover.”

Adair didn’t dare look at Ruari. How could he promise something like that? Robbie would never be able to walk without the assistance of a cane—and that was if luck was on his side. He surely never be able to ride again.

“Kier and Finnian will come and fetch ye so ye can watch the competition,” Ruari said, not moving from where he sat. It meant Adair had to brush his knees as she neared the bed.

As she leaned forward to place the tray on Robbie's lap, her cheeks reddened at the proximity of her behind to Ruari.

Why didn't the man move?

She straightened and glanced at him. The corners of his lips twitched, and he gave her a devilish wink. Wide-eyed she slid a look to her brother, but he studied the food on his plate.

"I am nae fond of turnips," Robbie said, oblivious to the tension between herself and the laird.

"They are potatoes, nae turnips," Adair replied, glad to keep an even tone to her voice. "Eat." The last word came out terse and Robbie lifted his gaze.

"Did ye nae sleep well last night? Ye look exhausted."

Ruari cleared his throat and Adair took a step back, purposely stepping on his toes before putting distance between them.

She avoided looking at Ruari and spoke to her brother. "I helped in the kitchens all day. There is much to do. I will return for yer plate."

"Ye can remain. I must go and entertain my guests," Ruari said standing.

"And give tours of the house and garden?" Adair wanted to bite her tongue off for the comment.

When Ruari pressed his lips together, she couldn't figure out if it was to keep from smiling or from reprimanding her.

“I have the guards or mother show guests about.” He turned and left the room.

“Must I keep reminding ye to keep yer tongue?” Robbie shook his head. “I am surprised yer nae in the dungeon by now.”

Adair frowned in thought. Had Ruari avoided time alone with the visiting woman? Or had he lied about giving the woman a tour to spare her feelings.

Of course, there was no way to know.

*

If the day before had been hectic, today was a hundredfold more. Despite the frenzy of chores, Adair got caught up in the excitement.

Competitors had arrived from neighboring clans to participate in the games. Local single women made excuses to arrive early wearing their best dresses and colorful ribbons in their hair.

Caring for Robbie had not allowed Adair an opportunity to go home and fetch a nicer dress and she’d not thought to send a message with Edine the last time she’d visited.

At first meal, curiosity got the best of her, and she grabbed a tray, taking the opportunity to go to the great room. Although it was foolish, she wanted to get a sense of Archibald Stuart. Since young, she’d made it a habit of studying people and had grown astute at reading expressions. Today she’d put her gift to work.

The great room was not as crowded as she’d expected as most of the visitors were meandering outside.

At the head table, Ruari and his uncle presided over the room. Unfortunately Adair

was to serve another table. She lowered her tray allowing those who sat there to get a trencher filled with neatly cut meat and cheeses. It was just enough to break their fast.

When a woman hesitated, Adair looked to her. It was the woman who'd been flirting with Ruari the day before.

"Is something wrong dear?" Ruari's mother asked.

The woman wrinkled her nose. "I prefer a different meal in the morning." Her blue gaze lifted to Adair. "Fetch me some broth and freshly baked bread. Be quick about it."

Biting her back teeth together, Adair nodded and continued circling the table to serve the rest of the people. As she turned to go to the kitchen, she caught sight of Ruari.

He leaned forward just a bit and watched. His gaze moving from Adair to the woman.

When Adair noticed Ruari's uncle was studying him, she pushed down all her emotions through sheer force of will and placed a blank expression on her face and walked from the room.

The best thing to do would be to send someone else to serve the woman. Better not to risk Ruari's uncle noting any attention he may pay her, as his uncle may use it against him. And by the narrowing of the older man's eyes, he already suspected something.

It was not unheard of for a laird to have relations with servants or village women. However, any strong feelings could always be used against the laird. Not that she expected Ruari felt anything more than attraction for her.

Better to be safe.

“A visiting woman requested broth and freshly baked bread,” Adair told Cook as she entered the kitchen. “She sits with the laird’s mother.”

The only other serving girl in the kitchen lifted a laden tray and left just as Cook ladled broth into a bowl and then cut bread. “There ye are.”

Adair glanced around, but no one entered. Letting out a long breath she lifted the plate and headed back to the great room.

Upon reentering, she kept her gaze down praying Ruari didn’t notice her. She neared the woman and placed the items in front of her.

“Much better,” the woman said, the high tone of her voice carrying.

Adair glanced to the others seated. “Is there anything else ye require?”

When no one replied, she took a step back, stopping when Ruari’s mother lifted a hand. “Did Cook hire ye? I was nae made aware.”

“Nae my lady,” Adair replied, out of the corner of her eye, she noted that Ruari looked over. “I am here caring for my brother, Robbie, and wish to help.”

The older woman frowned and glanced toward the head table and simply said, “I see.”

Dismissed, Adair hurried toward the kitchen.

She’d almost made it from the room when a hand wrapped around her lower arm. “More ale,” a gruff man said, his gaze roving over her, lingering on her breasts. “Yer Robbie’s sister aye? I did nae know he had such a bonnie sister.”

The others at the table snickered as she made her way to a side table to get the pitcher of ale. Thankfully, they didn't make any other comments, just watched silently as she refilled their tankards.

When she walked past the doorway that went to the kitchens, she stopped midstride at the sight of Ruari's uncle standing dead center, his shrewd eyes narrowed on her.

"So ye are the guard's sister." The man walked closer, taking her in.

Although he'd made a statement and not asked her a question, Adair nodded. Immediate dislike for the man rose within her tightening like a rope around her chest.

"He lives then?" he asked, moving much too close.

Not one to cower, she held her ground and lifted her chin. "He fought to live. Although his leg will be malformed."

The man's eyebrows hitched up and his nose flared. "Ye will address me properly, girl."

"I apologize Laird."

This time his lips curled with annoyance. "My laird."

Either foolish or stubborn, Adair did not cower. She glanced toward the great room. "Ruari Stuart is my laird. Laird."

The slap sent her sideways and she fell against the wall. "Insolent little bitch."

"What happens?" Ruari neared and stood between her and his uncle. "Why did ye strike her?" There was no mistaking the underlying fury in his clipped words.

“She disrespected me. Spoke without addressing me properly.” His uncle spoke lightly as if he’d just punished a dog for taking food or nipping at him. “Ye should have yer servants trained better.”

“Adair is nae a servant. She is—”

“Aye, I know, the clumsy guard’s sister.” The older man stepped sideways and glared at Adair.

“I never strike women. Nor my servants. I expect the same from my visitors,” Ruari snapped.

His uncle rolled his eyes. “Such anger over a simple village lass. One would think ye care for her.”

Ruari looked over his shoulder at her. “Go to the kitchen. Stay there.”

She would have preferred to remain and hear what else was said, but it was best not to press her luck, so she rounded them and hurried away.

Once in the kitchen, she walked to the table where the servants ate and lowered to a chair. Her cheek stung and hot angry tears pricked her eyes. Archibald Stewart was an evil man, filled with hatred. Now she understood why Ruari did what he could to keep him away.

“What happened?” Cook eyed her face. “Who hit ye?”

“Laird Archibald,” Adair said, her voice catching.

The cook looked toward the doorway and back to her. “He is a ripe bastard. Ye would do well to avoid him until he leaves. He always picks one of us to abuse every visit.”

Another servant brought a wet cloth and pressed it against Adair's cheek, and she winced garnering the young woman's sympathetic gaze. Thankfully the coolness of it immediately helped ease the throbbing.

When Ruari entered the kitchen, the women didn't seem surprised. They went back to their duties once they'd acknowledged their laird.

Brows drawn, he lowered to the chair opposite her. He didn't touch her, and she was glad for it because it would have brought more tears of frustration. "I am sorry."

Adair nodded. "Ye dinnae have to apologize, Laird."

"I should have kept him from ye. I did nae think he would seek ye out."

Sliding a look to the kitchen to ensure they were not overheard, Adair lowered her voice. "He saw ye looking toward me. It must have piqued his interest."

Ruari nodded. "I explained that ye were nae here to serve, but to care for yer brother and I did nae expect ye to work. Which is true. Enjoy the festivities with Robbie. Dinnae do more than care for him."

She lowered the cloth. "I am nae sure how I will explain this."

"My laird, someone seeks ye," Cook interrupted and Ruari stood. He squeezed her shoulder and left the kitchen.

Food was sent to Robbie with the younger servant as Adair continued using cold compresses on her face hoping that by the time she saw her brother, any evidence of the strike was gone.

There was another thing she had to worry about. What would Robbie's reaction be if

the older laird antagonized him?

She did not put it past the cruel man.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:44 am

Anger coiled like a viper in Ruari's chest. Heat rushed through his veins as he exhaled pushing back the fury as he walked down the corridor toward the great room. He had to control his expression upon entering the room and not give his uncle the satisfaction of a reaction.

His mother waited by the hearth, along with the blond woman, Hannah McNaughton. Both turned to him when he entered. Escorting them to the stands where they would watch the competition was a perfect way to avoid having to speak to his uncle.

Hannah smiled brightly as he approached, and he had to force an amiable expression in return as he offered her his arm. Elvin escorted their mother.

His uncle walked with the McNaughton, talking to the visiting laird. Probably spouting some dribble in hopes of making himself seem powerful. Ruari pitied the MacLachlan, whose expression was cordial. The man, like most neighboring lairds, did not care for his uncle in the least.

They exited to find it was a sunny day, the breeze just cool enough to make it pleasant. There was so much activity that it took longer than usual to walk across the courtyard to the stands. Finally there, his mother and Hannah sat next to the McNaughton, his wife, and a few other visitors.

"Ruari, since ye are competing, I suppose I will take yer seat," his uncle announced loudly.

It was the perfect opportunity to put him in his place, Ruari glanced at his mother. "Is my cousin, Malcolm Ross, attending?"

His mother gave him a curious look, but she was wise enough not to ask him why he'd brought up her powerful nephew. Instead, she searched the crowd. "A messenger has nae returned. I am nae sure."

Archibald looked between Ruari and his mother, too surprised at the comment to hide his alarm.

"Ye can sit there uncle."

He walked away, allowing himself a soft smile of satisfaction. His uncle would be wondering if he'd aligned with Malcolm Ross, the most powerful laird of the region, who commanded an army of over five hundred men.

A messenger had been sent, not to invite Malcolm, but with a request for his support in case Archibald Stewart threatened to take over the lands belonging to his cousin. It was possible the laird would decline, but the reminder of who Ruari's cousin was, would probably be enough to keep his uncle at bay.

The competition kept everyone on the edge of their seats. Every man pushing past pain and exhaustion for the prizes.

After handing the winner a sack of coins in the competitions, he strode to stand on the sidelines as the archers waited for the targets to be set up.

The sun had begun its descent, making it late afternoon, which made it easy on the archer's keen eyes.

A horn blew announcing the beginning of the competition. Across from the stands beside the house, he noted that Robbie had been brought out and sat in a chair, his broken leg lifted onto a stool.

Next to him were Adair and her fair-haired friend. Even from a distance, he noted that Adair's cheeks were very pink. Obviously, someone had placed rouge on them to hide the reddening of his uncle's strike. Tension rolled through him, and he forced it down. The bastard would pay for all he'd caused. Perhaps not right away, but one day. Hopefully soon.

There was a hush in the crowd when Elvin walked up to take his turn. There was elegance in the way his brother straightened and notched the arrow, each movement measured.

When he lifted the bow, his body straightened, his broad back shifting as he pulled back. Ruari was proud of his younger brother's abilities, but of Elvin's archery skill, he was in awe.

Elvin released the arrow and it sunk into the center of the target.

There were roars of approval and clapping. People calling out his name.

It was as if Elvin didn't hear a single thing. Instead, he watched solemnly as each of the other archers took their turns.

When it was his turn again, Elvin resumed his stance and notched the second arrow, aimed, and released it. The arrow split the first and again, the audience erupted.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Ruari walked to where Robbie, Adair, and Edine were. He went to stand next to Robbie. "My brother wins again," he murmured with mock annoyance and the warrior chuckled.

"Aye, and he will ensure everyone is aware for days to come," Robbie replied good-naturedly.

Ruari stole a glance at Adair and Edine. “Ladies, are ye enjoying the festivities?”

The fair-haired young woman was a delicate beauty. She slid a look to Robbie and Ruari instantly knew she was enamored of the warrior. “Aye, we have, Laird,” she replied, cheeks pinkening.

“Adair?” He gave the woman he wished to be standing next to a pointed look. “How fare ye?”

“Very well, thank ye,” she replied with a soft smile. His gaze lingered on her lips, only broken when the people in the stands began calling out to whoever was about to compete next.

Robbie lifted a brow. “Time for the hammer throw. Best of luck Laird.”

Despite his best effort, Clyde won, and Ruari placed second. Both were glad to have beaten the visiting man, from Clan McLachlan, who’d won previous competitions.

The last competition, the caber toss, was to be held in a field outside the gates the following day. It gave time for the stands to be moved, which meant the people now meandered from stand to stand to purchase offerings, whilst the Stuart guards roasted two pigs that would be fed to those who lived there and the visitors at last meal.

Long tables were set up where everyone would sit, and torches were lit that would give off enough light.

Thankful for the short reprieve, Ruari went into the house and hurried to his study, where he hoped to get some quiet time. He avoided his uncle who sat at a table in the great room surrounded by his own men drinking ale and whiskey.

Moments later, his mother entered through the door. She looked around the room,

seeming surprised to find him alone.

“Why are ye here instead of entertaining our guests? We must remain in good standing with the visiting lairds.” She gave him a disapproving look. “Honestly Ruari, ye can nae be tired.”

He stood and went to the door, pulling it closed. “Mother, it is of utmost importance that ye listen to me. I sent a messenger to Malcolm yesterday. He must have arrived by now.”

She lowered to a chair, concern etched on her pretty face. “Are things so bad, son?”

Ruari nodded. “My uncle wishes to take our lands, our home.”

“That will nae happen.” She straightened and set her shoulders. “My nephew will respond and will give us his support. Of that I will make sure.”

Her eyes met his and held and for a moment, his mother’s expression softened. “I see yer father when I look at ye. He would be proud.” She let out a sigh. “Ye are a good laird to our people.”

In that moment, he knew that she’d understood what happened and through it all had trusted in him, had faith that he’d find a course for the future of their small clan. His chest filled with pride.

Unable to speak past the thickness in his throat, he could only nod in response.

His mother’s brows lowered. “I am sure Archibald is mulling over whether to believe ye or nae. He may have forgotten that I come from a powerful clan that could easily overtake him.”

She stood, walked to the door, and turned to him. “Ye should be out there presiding over the festivities. This is yer territory and no one else’s.”

They went out together—a united front—and joined the visitors at tables set up for them near a large bonfire. There must have been something different about them, because his brother sauntered over and lowered onto the bench next to him. “Is all well?”

“Aye. It is.” Ruari slapped his younger brother’s back. “I had no doubt ye would win today.”

Elvin smirked. “I have yet to receive my prize. Ye wandered off and Finnian had to pay the other winners. I think he mistakenly gave my prize away.”

Ruari laughed. “I will ensure ye get it.”

With his mother to his left and Elvin on his right, for the first time in a long time, Ruari felt strength in his small family. His uncle must have noticed it as well because he glanced over from the other table and his eyes narrowed.

He’d gone to sit at the table where the other lairds were, acting as if he were the host. Those at the table were forced to tolerate his continued babbling about lands and such.

The McNaughton stood and walked over to Ruari’s table. “May I join ye?”

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People began settling for the night, most of the vendors sleeping behind their stands, wrapped in blankets. Ruari returned from speaking with the guards and too restless to seek his bed, he walked to the back garden where he suspected no one would be.

The sky was filled with stars that night, and the moon was bright. Its light enough so that he could see clearly until he found a back door. Pushing the heavy door open, he walked into a dark corridor that led to the laundry area.

He'd grown up there and could navigate easily in the dark. When finding the door he sought, he pushed it open and walked in.

On the bed, lay Adair, sound asleep. She'd not doused the lantern, so its glow spilled across the room.

"Adair," he whispered, not daring to touch her lest she scream.

She stirred and then her eyes popped open, and she looked up at him in surprise. "Laird." Pushing up to sit, she wiped her eyes. "Is something wrong?"

"Nae. I wished to speak to ye." He felt like a pubescent lad waiting for her response.

Her lips curved. "Of course. Please, sit." She motioned to the bed, and he lowered to it.

The ease of being with her was something he'd never experienced, and in that instant, he understood why.

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:45 am

Adair's day had ended with ensuring Robbie was comfortable. He'd been in pain after being moved outside. Despite it, he was in good spirits, having enjoyed the competition and the constant filling of his tankard.

When being returned to his bed, he'd groaned in pain, but then had promptly fallen asleep.

Without much to do, Adair had spent the next few hours in the kitchen listening to the servants discuss the day. Several of the younger women gave different accounts of the competition focusing more on which of the men were more attractive, than on how they performed.

By the time she'd gone to bed, it was later than usual, and Adair was exhausted. At the same time, it had been a good day and she looked forward to the next day of festivities.

While braiding her hair, she had barely been able to keep her eyes open and had apparently fallen asleep without dousing the lantern.

Then he'd awakened her. The very man she'd been dreaming of.

There was only one reason a man came into a woman's chamber in the middle of the night. Ruari lowered to the bed and sat next to her knees. As much as she desired him, a part of her ached in the knowledge that once she left, they would not have moments alone like this. It would be foolish to aspire to more, and yet her heart cried out for him. The best thing would be not to give in, but would he allow it?

He studied her face. “Does it hurt?”

“Nay. Not anymore.”

Reaching, he cupped her face. “I am so sorry that I did nae get there in time to stop him.”

Adair leaned into his palm. “There is nae to be done about it now.”

“I sent a messenger to the Ross keep and spoke to Mother about it. She agrees that Malcolm will assist us if need be. I think the mention of his name alone is making my uncle hesitate.”

Relief poured through her. “Good.”

For a long moment, he remained silent, his hand lingering on her face, his gaze moving to the lantern. “I have something to ask ye. It is not a demand, but a request. Ye are free to deny me.”

Would she deny him? Could she refuse to be his one more time? Adair wasn’t sure how to respond as she waited for him to voice his need to claim her body. She held her breath as he hesitated.

“Would ye honor me by becoming my wife?”

Her breath hitched and her hand flew up to her mouth. Was she dreaming? Ruari was not there, and he’d certainly not asked her to marry him. What a cruel dream it was, Adair would wake up disillusioned.

“Wh-what?” She heard herself ask.

When Ruari took her hand with both of his, it felt very real. “I need a strong woman by my side. Ye bring me certainty and comfort that I’ve never felt. I know ye have to consider it, and I understand marriage to me will be a huge change.”

Hysterical laughter bubbled from within her. Somehow she managed to contain it.

“I will never be accepted as yer wife. What will the people think? Their estimation of ye will falter.”

Ruari’s chuckle was deep, his warm gaze meeting hers. “I am nae a rich laird. The lands that surround the village and keep are nae vast. I am not a good match for neighboring laird’s daughters, they could make better matches with second sons of larger clans.”

“Why me?” Despite wanting to scream yes at the top of her lungs, fear of the unknown held her in its clutches. “Ye are who has to think this through.”

To her surprise, he motioned for her to slide over and he climbed onto the bed. Leaning back on the headboard next to her, he took her hand once again.

“I searched ye out today. Each time something happened, I wanted to share the moment with ye. When I competed, I became distracted wondering if ye watched.”

“I did watch. Ye did very well.”

He nudged her shoulder. “I did nae win.”

“The other men are much larger than ye, not in height, but in size.” Adair smiled at him. “I am happy that Clyde won. Father has grown tired of his complaining.”

“Now he will tire of his bragging,” Ruari said.

They were quiet for a few moments. Adair lifted Ruari's hand and kissed the back of it. "Do ye plan to speak to my father?"

Ruari nodded. "I will speak to him and Robbie."

"Then I will marry ye," Adair replied, her heart thundering under her breast.

"Good." Ruari pulled her into his arms and kissed her soundly. When he lifted from the kiss, she grasped his tunic. "Ye are nae leaving my bed, Laird."

He whispered in her ear. "I am glad to hear it."

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The caber toss was astonishing. The crowd cheered loudly as each of the competitors lifted enormous trees to toss, in the hope it would flip end over end.

Ruari had left Adair's room late, they'd talked for hours about plans for the upcoming days. In the end, they decided to wait until after the festivities to share the news of their upcoming marriage.

This morning, he was filled with energy and hope.

Even the sight of his uncle along with two warriors flanking him nearing failed to bother him. The older man lowered to sit next to Ruari.

"My competitor has won several other games. I doubt he will be beaten today," he informed Ruari. "Who is yers?"

"Keir. He is quite strong."

They watched as the last three men stepped up, each holding their arms up so the crowd could cheer. The crowd grew larger as people hurried over from the vendor area to watch, and soon the hillside was covered with onlookers.

A McLachlan went first. Despite a good lift and run, the tree didn't flip. People screamed out in disappointment. Several clapped, glad he wasn't part of their respective clan.

The second competitor was a muscled man representing, Clan Stuart of the north, his uncle's man. The huge man grunted loudly when he lifted the tree and seemed to effortlessly toss the caber. It flipped end over end then landed with a loud thump. The crowd cheered, clapping at the performance. Since most who attended were Clan Stuart, they supported both competitors, although they favored Keir.

It would be difficult for Keir to beat the man as he was a bit smaller, but Ruari had faith in the man's strength and willpower.

There was a hush over the crowd as Keir neared the enormous caber. The caber was raised, and Keir set it against his right shoulder as he reached down to lift it. The ease of how he lifted and rushed forward with it was astonishing. Even more surprising was the height of the toss, and the flawless way the huge tree flipped end over end.

The people erupted with yells of excitement at the distance of the toss. Jumping up and down, the local men rushed to Keir, lifting him up onto their shoulders and parading him about as there was no question he'd just won.

His uncle grimaced as if in pain. "That was interesting." He wouldn't congratulate Ruari, it was beyond the man to be conciliatory in any fashion.

Ruari didn't care, he too jumped to his feet clapping. Taking three sacks of coins for the last three competitors, he left the stands, not wanting to continue to hear whatever

his uncle would say next.

Each man received a sack of coins, the heaviest going to Keir.

Astonishingly, his uncle walked up behind him and made a show of congratulating each man. Ruari bit his back teeth. It wasn't the man's place to be present.

"Uncle. I am the host of the games," Ruari said under his breath, so only the older man could hear.

"They appreciate being congratulated by a greater laird." His uncle smiled broadly at the crowd and lifted his hands to silence them.

Just as Archibald was about to speak, every head turned to the southern hillside where men appeared on horseback.

They carried Clan Ross banners.

It was not Malcolm who'd come, but the laird's brothers: Tristan and Kieran. Each wearing Ross clan tartans. The green and black making it obvious who they were.

Murmuring began, but Ruari got everyone's attention. "Welcome to my cousins, who've come to enjoy the last day of festivities."

The people began clapping, stretching their necks to get a glimpse of the formidable warriors as they rode closer.

Upon nearing, they dismounted and stable lads took their war horses away.

The brothers towered over most men, each of them exuding authority that came from both battle and being part of a powerful clan.

Both Ruari and Elvin hurried over, and the cousins hugged, smiling at seeing each other after not seeing each other for over a year.

The Ross brothers walked to the stands together, greeting his mother warmly.

Servants brought them food and drink as they settled to watch the tug of war, which would be a fun event that included teams of villagers who split into groups of eight for each side.

His uncle neared, waiting to be acknowledged.

Tristan's hazel gaze moved to Ruari, and he gave a barely perceptive nod. They'd come to ensure Archibald would understand they would not allow him to take anything from Ruari.

"This is my father's brother," Ruari said. "Archibald Stuart."

"Laird Stuart," his uncle clarified.

The men exchanged handshakes. His uncle let out a snort and slid a glance to his cousins and murmured. "Well played nephew. Well played."

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When her parents came to fetch Robbie, Edine accompanied them.

"Come to the parlor for a moment," Adair said meeting them in the courtyard. "There is something we must speak about."

Ruari walked out just as they got to the entrance. Her father hesitated. "Laird. Is something amiss?"

“Nae, not at all,” Ruari replied, motioning for them to continue forth.

They became wary upon entering the sunlit room, exchanging glances with each other and Robbie, who was already there.

Ruari’s mother and brother entered right after and greeted her family. It was evident by their lack of questioning looks, that Ruari had already spoken to them. Her heart melted when her mother sat down, and Lady Stuart lowered into the seat next to her. Her humble mother was just as beautiful, just as worthy, as the woman beside her.

Ruari cleared his throat and looked to her befuddled father. “Mister Murray, yer daughter and I have fallen in love. I would like to humbly ask for yer daughter’s hand in marriage.”

Both her mother and Edine gasped. Robbie grinned and her father blanched.

Lady Stuart smiled at her befuddled father. “Yer daughter is the perfect balance to my son. Together they will bring peace and prosperity to our lands. I request that ye grant yer daughter’s hand to my son.”

Her father looked from Lady Stuart to Ruari. “Aye... aye, ye may have it. Of course... Laird.” her father managed, regaining color. “I am just surprised.” He turned to Adair. “Are ye sure, lass?”

Springing to her feet, Adair rushed to her father and threw herself against him. “I have never been so sure of anything in my life.”

Before long everyone was talking. Robbie and Ruari shook hands, both grinning like fools. Elvin poured whiskey for the men and Lady Stuart poured honeyed mead for the women.

Edine came to stand next to Adair, her pretty face bright. "I am so very happy for ye. My friend, the laird's wife." There was awe in her voice. Then they looked at each other for a long moment and giggled.

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:45 am

One Month Later

Sunlight poured through the window across Adair's face, and she turned away, not ready to leave the comfort of her bed.

A week since she'd come to live at Stuart keep and she'd quickly become accustomed to the plushness of what had been Ruari's bed.

There was much to do that day, so she couldn't linger. As soon as she and Ruari had married, in a ceremony that was attended by most of the village and neighboring lairds, his mother announced plans to move away.

Adair had yet to have a private conversation with Ruari's mother. This day she would do it. It was hard to know what the woman thought as she kept her expressions neutral. Ruari had explained that she was not one to outwardly show emotions.

The burden was lighter now that his uncle had stopped his threats and the neighboring lairds had seen with their own eyes the public support of his powerful cousins.

There was the fact she was of humble birth, but Adair refused to allow her circumstances to be looked down upon. Her father was a noble man, who worked hard every day of his life and deserved respect.

As she finished braiding her hair, the door opened and Ruari walked in. "Are ye ready for first meal?"

She stood and walked to him until he was within reach, then she wrapped her arms

around his waist. "I love ye Ruari Stuart and I'm so very happy."

His arms around her, Ruari pulled Adair close, pressing kisses to the top of her head. "And I love ye, Adair Stuart."

Lifting her face, she gladly accepted his kiss, her body tingling with recollections of the night before.

They entered the great room where only the guards, Elvin, and her mother-in-law were being served.

Ruari escorted Adair to the seat next to his mother and the older woman acknowledged her with a soft nod.

"We must continue yer lessons on running the household. I hope to leave in a fortnight," the woman informed Adair. "There is much to learn."

Adair met the woman's gaze. "Must ye go so soon?" In truth the woman had been cordial to her. Although Ruari had explained that his mother was stoic and had never demonstrated any kind of open affection, it was hard to grasp. Her own mother might not be the most openly loving, but neither Adair nor Robbie had any doubts she loved them. Their mother showed love by cooking for them and through constantly affirming how proud she was of them.

Ruari's mother seemed surprised by Adair's question. "I have been waiting for Ruari to marry so I can return home and live with my sister. Would ye deny me the joy?"

"Of course not," Adair exclaimed, not wishing to upset her. "It is just that I dinnae feel ready for such a large task."

Ruari's mother met her gaze. "As soon as I saw ye with my son, I knew ye were who would lead beside him, share his burdens, make him happy."

Adair wanted to weep with relief. “I will do my best.”

“That is all I can ask for.” The woman patted her hand, the gesture light but meaningful as Adair understood how rare it was.

By last meal, Adair’s head spun with all the daily tasks required. She walked out to the side garden to look toward the village. It was a beautiful sunny day and she wondered what her family did.

Robbie was healing well and already managing to move about with crutches. Despite their mother’s protests, he went to the mill every day to help where he could.

There was no doubt in her mind, he would return to work at the keep. He was much too stubborn to stay away.

Nearing the gates, Ruari rode toward the keep, along with Keir and Finnian, his two faithful companions. She’d learn not to expect Elvin to do more than practice archery or spend long days in the forest hunting or fishing.

The man lived life as he desired it, which she could find little fault in, especially since he gave whatever he killed or caught to the elderly and the infirmed ensuring they were fed.

Upon entering the courtyard, Ruari dismounted and strolled to the garden. It was wonderful to see how his countenance had changed, he was much more relaxed and at ease.

“I visited yer brother. He is doing well.”

“So ye went to the village then?” Adair asked, still intrigued at how often he visited her family.

He chuckled. "Aye, yer mother is becoming quite fond of me. I believe they may favor me over ye."

Adair elbowed him playfully. "Is Robbie still insistent on returning?"

"I took him a horse. It's a beautiful black horse I got from my uncle's stables. The animal is docile. I informed him that I would nae accept his return until the end of next season and only if he could ride without pain."

"He will do it," Adair said shaking her head. "He is very stubborn."

"Aye, he is," Ruari agreed.

Adair looked toward the village for a moment. Although she missed her simple life, she'd found her forever home there at the keep.

"Yer mother is planning to leave soon. She says she trusts me to take over the duties of lady of the house. I am nae sure."

For a long moment, they stood side-by-side looking down at the village.

Sensing his regard Adair looked up at him. "What is it?"

A smile played on his lips. "With ye at my side, I know I can face anything. The household duties will sort themselves out and soon ye will have yer own way about things. What is most important is that ye are here. With me."

The amount of pride and love she felt toward Ruari was like nothing she'd felt before. Her heart spilled over with love and her entire being with gratitude for how destiny had brought her from a humble often-ignored woman with ill will to the fulfilled happy wife of a handsome and caring laird.

Love certainly conquered all.

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Were you intrigued to learn more about Clan Ross, Ruari's powerful cousins? Read the series, starting with *A Heartless Laird*, Malcolm Ross' story.