



Arrived By The Highlander (Highlander Forever #16)

Author: *Rebecca Preston*

Category: Historical

Description: When psychological thriller author Crystal Corwin wakes up in 16th-century Scotland, she never expects to find herself at the center of a real-life murder mystery...

Crystal's arrival in the quiet Highland village is overshadowed by the gruesome murder of a beloved local woman—a crime so brutal that villagers blame the Fae. But as Crystal's investigative instincts kick in, she begins to suspect that the culprit isn't a mythical creature but a very human monster.

Jamie Grant, a Watchman with a knack for uncovering lies, is tasked with protecting the village from further attacks. At first, he finds Crystal's involvement a distraction, but her sharp mind and relentless determination quickly prove invaluable. As they unravel the mystery, their connection deepens, and Crystal finds herself falling for the stalwart Highlander.

Total Pages (Source): 35

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

Crystal Corwin pushed her wavy light brown hair over her shoulder so that she could lean forward on the bar, with one elbow propped next to her drink.

Despite the fact her brow was furrowed in concentration, she was in a celebratory mood and waiting for her friend Noelle to arrive so they could celebrate together.

Noelle was late, but that wasn't unusual for her busy friend.

Crystal was excited because today marked the release of her third published book, and though she wasn't a best seller yet, she enjoyed a good following and being published at all was a feat in itself.

She and Noelle had made plans to go out for drinks and celebrate the accomplishment earlier in the week.

Crystal had arrived early though, and had taken a seat at bar, ordering a red wine.

"Would you like another?" the bartender asked, indicating her glass of red wine.

"No, I'm fine for now, thank you," she said. She picked up her glass and took a slow sip. She didn't want to overdo it before Noelle even arrived.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. She pulled it out and looked at the text. It was Noelle with an apology.

I'm so sorry, I can't make it. Babysitter didn't show up. Can we celebrate tomorrow?
xo.

Crystal released a sigh of disappointment. She had been looking forward to this night out, but she couldn't be too upset with Noelle. She knew how hard it was on her as a divorced single mother of a five-year-old. Things like this happened and it was simply part of being friends.

No worries, tomorrow sounds good.

Then she placed her phone down on the bar with another sigh.

"That bad, huh?" a deep voice said.

She turned to see a man cozying up to the bar to order a drink.

"Excuse me?" she asked.

"Your phone. You put it down with a sigh, so it seemed like someone disappointed you." He smiled.

Crystal looked him over. He was tall with dark brown hair and blue eyes and seemed pleasant enough, but there was something in his eyes that unsettled her.

"Oh, right. My friend was supposed to meet me, but she can't make it," she said as she picked her phone back up and slid it into her back pocket.

"That's a shame and also a bit of a coincidence," he said.

"What? How so?" she asked.

"I was supposed to meet a blind date here and she stood me up," he said.

"Really? That is coincidence but probably something that happens at a bar around this

time of evening anyway," she said.

He chuckled. "Very astute observation." Then he held out his hand in greeting. "I'm Mason."

She hesitated for a moment. She normally didn't strike up conversations with strange men in a bar, but she was in a good mood. This was supposed to be her celebratory night after all. She shook his hand. "I'm Crystal."

"Nice name, Crystal. Can I get you another?" he said, pointing at her glass of wine.

She looked around the bar. More patrons were spilling in and it was getting busier by the minute.

She didn't want to sit at the bar alone feeling like all eyes were on the sad girl at the bar.

Though Mason seemed a bit off to her, he mostly seemed harmless, and at least so far offered a conversation instead of pure sleaze.

"Alright, just one more couldn't hurt," she said.

"Excellent, and you'll be doing me a favor. Sitting next to a gorgeous woman will help mend my ego after being stood up, so thank you for that," he said. Then he gestured at the bartender. "Two more here."

"Coming right up," the bartender said.

Crystal finished her current drink and pushed it aside, making a mental note to only have the one drink incase Mason was attempting to get her drunk.

"So tell me, Crystal, what do you do for a living?" Mason asked as she settled onto the bar stool next to her.

"I'm a writer," she said.

"Very cool. What do you write?"

"Fiction. Psychological thrillers, that kind of thing."

"Here you are." The bartender pushed two glasses of red wine in front of them and then scurried off to take more orders as people began to crowd the bar.

"Then you must be a very smart woman. You need to weave a whole web of deceit and intrigue to build one of those, don't you?" Mason said, then took a drink of his wine.

She was flattered. Most men immediately began to pitch their own stories to her the moment she named her occupation, but Mason was different. "Yeah, pretty much. I enjoy it."

"Do you find yourself studying people in order to create your characters?" he asked. His voice held a bit of charm and his smile was disarming.

"Yes, I do, but I don't let them know I'm doing it. That wouldn't be nice."

"And what about me? What kind of character would I be in your story? A stranger in a wool coat, casually sitting next to a woman and engaging with her. Would I be arrogant? Confident? Or merely a man of mystery?" he asked.

Crystal laughed. "You're funny. I haven't figured you out though, I don't know what character you would be."

Then he leaned in close and whispered, "A dangerous one?" Then as he leaned back, he grinned and took another sip.

"No, not dangerous at all," Crystal said.

Suddenly a rush of giggling young woman pushed against them and Crystal moved her elbow, which knocked her purse off the bar.

"Oh, I'll get it," Mason offered.

"No, no, I'll get it. Thanks," she said.

Crystal looked down, attempting to simply lean her long form over in the stool and fetch it from the sticky bar floor, but one of the women kicked it without knowing it. Crystal slid off her stool and took a few steps to fetch it from the floor.

When she straightened, a woman had pushed into her place, not sitting on the stool but standing with her arm in the air attempting to get the bartender's attention.

"Excuse me, Miss. My friend is attempting to get back in her chair," Mason said to the woman.

The woman rolled her eyes and stepped away. Crystal took her seat on the stool.

"Well that was an adventure," she said with a slight annoyance.

"You look like you could use a drink." Mason chuckled.

"Indeed," Crystal said. She picked up her glass of wine and took a long sip. Then she looked at Mason. "Thank you for moving her out of the way."

"No problem. It's getting crowded here. I didn't realize this place got so rowdy. I thought I was going to a nice quiet conversation bar."

"It's usually tame, but it's Saturday night," Crystal said.

Mason nodded and took a sip of his wine, Crystal mirrored him.

"So what do you do?" she asked.

"I work in pharmaceuticals. Not as exciting as a thriller writer, but it pays the bills," he said.

"Right, so you're a drug dealer?" She laughed, growing comfortable with him when she cracked a joke.

Mason chuckled. "I guess I am when you think of it. You've got me all figured out."

"If only that were so. There's one thing I know from writing thrillers is that you never, ever, actually know anyone. Everyone has their secrets," she said.

"Even you?" he asked.

She was quiet as she contemplated her secret, the fact that she thought being successful meant that she would never find love.

"Yes, even me," she said. Then she picked up her glass and drank all the wine to the last drop.

"Easy now," Mason said.

"I can handle it. That was my second drink, but it will be my last."

"Really? You won't have another with me? I thought our conversation has been interesting so far, is it not?" he said.

"Better than most I'll confess, but this whole scene, it's getting loud for me," she said.

"That's true. Looking around I can see it's getting a bit out of hand. Before you go let me ask you one more question, Crystal," he said.

"Alright," she said.

Then he took another sip of his wine and set it down. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and checked the time, then shoved it back in. He turned to her and looked up at the ceiling, prolonging his thoughts.

"Well?" She laughed.

"Sorry. So here's my question. Looking at me, do you think that my blind date walked in, saw me, and then walked out? I'm asking for a woman's perspective."

"Hmm, interesting. So you had never met her before?"

"No."

"Any idea what she looked like?"

"No, not at all. We had described what we would be wearing to find each other," he said.

"Well, I suppose—" Crystal uncrossed her legs and leaned back in her chair a moment, but then quickly leaned forward and put her hands on the bar. "Whoa, that was weird."

"What?" he asked.

"Just a bit, I don't know. Felt dizzy, like I was about to fall off the bar stool," she said.

"Afraid of heights?" he joked.

She laughed it off and slid off the bar stool, but as she planted her feet she stumbled back a step.

"Whoa, there. Okay, let me help you. I think you need some air, is all. It's a bit close in here," Mason said, standing up and putting his hand on her arm to steady her.

"Yeah, maybe you're right. It's suddenly really crowded in here," she said as a group of guys pushed into her as they tried to get by. She picked up her purse and then stared after them with a glare.

Because she needed the help, she allowed Mason to walk her toward the door, where a big bouncer stood.

Crystal locked eyes with him and then suddenly everything went out of focus.

Her body felt limp, but also alive and buzzing at the same time.

She felt Mason put his arm around her waist and she leaned all her weight on him.

It felt like she was walking on air toward the door in slow motion.

Something was very wrong with her, but she couldn't figure out what.

"Wait, hold on buddy," the bouncer said but the words echoed in Crystal's mind.

"She's had too many. I'm her brother. Taking her out of here," Mason said.

"Sweetie, you alright?" the bouncer asked her.

It suddenly dawned on her that she'd been drugged and she opened her mouth to say so, but no sound came out.

Panic filled her as the world around her blurred and her heart raced uncontrollably in her chest. How the hell had she missed this guy drugging her?

She couldn't leave with him. She raised her eyes to the bouncer again, hoping he'd see the fear in her eyes since she couldn't make her mouth work.

"No, I'm sorry, I can't let you walk out of here with her. I've been here since early evening and saw you walk up to her. You didn't come in with her," the bouncer said to Mason.

"What are you saying, man? Accusing me of something?" Mason said, anger filled his voice.

Crystal couldn't add anything to the conversation instead she slipped from Mason's grip to the floor as everything went black.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

Crystal felt the haze around her as she came to.

Her body had felt ice cold and then a warmth suddenly ran through her and calmed her.

A lilting sound of voices invaded her ears but she couldn't make out specific words.

She felt weightless, like she was floating, then a moment flashed in her mind and she thought about the dizzy feeling she'd felt inside the bar.

Then the flash went away. She struggled to get it back, to piece it together.

She had started to feel sick in the bar, then the bouncer said something and Mason...
Mason .

She remembered vividly now that he had somehow managed to put something in her wine.

There was no other explanation for her sudden state of fuzzy hallucination.

For the way her mouth wouldn't work and her limbs had failed her.

The nightmare continued and she fought hard to wake up from it, but she couldn't.

Still, Crystal struggled to open her eyes, but all she could see was group of people hovering over her, they seemed to glow as they looked down on her.

She felt a hand on her forehead, stroking her hair in a calming manner.

They didn't say anything, but she got the overwhelming impression that they were there to help.

She wondered if she was in a hospital, if the bouncer had realized Mason had drugged her and gotten her help.

Her eyes drifted closed again and she felt a little less scared. Whatever Mason had done to her, she was being cared for now. He hadn't gotten her out of that bar, thankfully.

Suddenly, she felt her body jerk, as though she'd been pushed, and her eyes flew open as icy water engulfed her.

She spun in the black water, wondering how the hell she'd ended up in it.

Panic filled her once more as she tipped her head down and then up.

Her lungs were screaming at her for oxygen, but she knew if she opened her mouth, she'd drowned.

As she tilted her face up, she saw a glimmer of light and she kicked hard, driving herself upward through the water. She used her hands to help push herself through the freezing water toward the light.

Finally she broke the surface of the water and took a sharp breath. She gasped, coughing out the water that filtered into her mouth as she struggled to stay above the water. Within moments she could breathe in a somewhat normal way, but the water felt so cold and painful.

She scissor-kicked her legs to spin in a circle in the water and scan the area. Nothing but water all around.

"I'm dreaming. This has to be the drugs," she said. However, it felt too real, especially the cold water.

"Help!" she screamed. Her voice carried far across the water. "Help me, please."

"Lass?" a voice she didn't recognize hollered back.

For a moment it frightened her to hear a man's voice. What if it were Mason?

As a psychological crime thriller writer, she knew that a man might attempt to dispose of a body in a dark lake.

What if he tried to do that, thinking I was dead, but the shock of the water brought me out of it , she thought.

Of course, that was ridiculous. There was no way that Mason got her out of that bar.

The only problem was, if he didn't, then how the hell had she ended up in this lake?

"Lass, can you hear me? Where you be?" the man shouted again.

This time Crystal could tell the accent was different than Mason's or even the bouncer's. Not only that, but also that the voice belonged to someone older.

She shouted back, "I'm here. Help me. I'm in the water."

"I'm coming to you, lass. Make a splash so I can find you," the man said.

She heard the sound of something hitting the water. She turned in that direction and made out a small lantern swinging from a pole on a small rowboat.

Crystal slapped her hands on the surface of the water, slow but consistent so that the man could hear her. "This way. I'm here," she said over and over.

The lantern light grew closer and closer until there the boat was next to her.

"Give me your hands, lass," the man said.

Crystal reached for his hands. He easily hoisted her up and into the boat. She collapsed on the floor next to a pile of fresh caught fish. She breathed heavily, attempting catching her breath.

The man moved the lantern over her body and near her face. "Oh, you're one of them, then?"

"What?" she said, confused.

"It's alright, lass. Here, get yourself warm." He tossed a coarse wool blanket to her. Then he grabbed hold of the oars and began to row toward the shore.

Crystal wrapped the blanket around her as she moved to sit on the wooden seat across from the man, which was just a small wooden board the size of a plank that spanned from one side of the small boat to the other.

"Where am I? Who are you?" she said through chattering teeth as she gazed at her rescuer. His clothing looked coarse, tattered, and not at all modern.

"You're in Loch Ness, lass. My name's Gavin, son of McHeron."

"Loch Ness... as in a lake in Scotland?" she asked.

"Aye, tis the same."

"No, that's impossible," she said, her mind going back over all the events she remembered.

There was no possible way she could have gotten on a plane and flown over to Scotland.

She would have remembered something like that.

This man had to be messing with her. Looking back up at him, she said, "I don't know what's going on, but there is no way I'm in Scotland.

Let me borrow your phone, please. I need to call the police. "

"Listen to me, lass, I cannot explain how it is you ended up in the loch, but there are those that can. Right now, you need to get warm so you don't catch your death of cold. I'll take you to the village where there are people who can tell you what you need to know."

"I... what? I don't..." But the words wouldn't come out properly through her chattering teeth.

The more that the hard, cold wind hit her the more she felt like she was turning into an icicle.

The man seemed kind to her and mentioned taking her to a village.

That would have to do for now until she could get warm and get more than three

words out without her teeth chattering.

A few minutes later they drew up to the shore and he helped her out of the boat and to a horse drawn wagon, which was beyond strange. Where was his car? Why were they getting into a wagon? Was he Amish? Were there Amish in Scotland? she wondered.

The fisherman was a man of few words and she didn't want to ask, seeing as he was a little hard to understand with his thick accent.

She looked around, but it was so dark out, even the moon didn't put off much light.

All she could make out was the lake she'd just come out of, the small bit of clear land from the lake to where the horse and wagon stood and the shadow of woods on the other side of the wagon.

There seemed to be no lights of civilization at all.

Her gaze turned to the sky. The stars above her shone brighter than she had ever seen before.

The fisherman picked up the reins and urged the horses into action, pulling the wagon along the bend in the road.

They rode in silence for a while and the sky began to lighten some, as though it was nearing morning.

She had no idea what time it really was, and wondered if the man even had a way to check the time.

As they turned the corner, a soft glow of light came into view, but it still wasn't the city lights she expected. This was like the lantern he'd had on the boat. She wondered

if that was the only thing available to the small buildings in the distance too.

"That's the village. We're almost there," he said.

"Village? Are you Amish or is this like a renaissance faire or a theme park?" she asked, feeling completely bewildered and out of her element.

"I don't know what you're askin', lass," he said.

She dropped it and simply rubbed her arms under the blanket she still held around her to create some heat. Just a few more minutes and there would be more people and she could get out of her wet clothes and figure this out.

The wagon entered the village just as dawn began to arrive, she'd been right about it being near morning.

Crystal looked at the thatch roofed buildings.

A few pedestrians crossed their path, all dressed like the fisherman in rough non-modern clothing.

She could hear whisperings in the same dialect as Gavin, and nothing in the village seemed to be modern at all.

It had to be a theme park of some type. She'd gone to Williamsburg as a child and that was also a reenactment village where all the townspeople participated by wearing clothing of the Civil War era.

As it got lighter and lighter with the morning, Crystal could see more of the village. She was impressed at how well it was made and looked very real. It even smelled real with pungent horse dung and hay filling the air.

"Here," Gavin said. The wagon stopped beside a building that seemed a bit more lively as people stood outside in conversation. Some moved in and out of the door.

Crystal read the sign that hung over the door. "The Gatehouse Inn."

"Aye, this tavern used to mark the entry to the village, but the village grew beyond it. The name stayed. Come we'll get you in front of the fire and a whisky to warm you."

She followed Gavin inside and thought it ironic that the last establishment she was in was a bar and now the next, a tavern.

The tavern had many wooden tables and chairs.

It was dimly lit by two separate large fireplaces and candles everywhere.

A counter in the back stood as the bar and a few patrons in period clothing mingling in hushed tones to each other.

Crystal noticed some looked her way and gave her clothing a once over, then turned to mind their business.

"Move for the lass. She's soaked to the bone," Gavin said to a patron who had a prime spot in front of the fire.

The patron grunted in disapproval but picked up his tankard and moved along.

Crystal sat down in front of the fire as close as she could without getting burned.

"I'll get you a hot drink and a whisky," Gavin said and walked away.

Crystal stared into the fire, mesmerized by the flames expecting them to take her out

of this hallucination and back to reality.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

Crystal ran the coarse wool blanket into her wavy long hair, squeezing the damp into it. Outside the narrow windows she could see that the sunlight grew brighter, but it was still cold air that whooshed in every time the door opened.

As she shifted in the chair she felt her phone in her pocket, and suddenly stood up. She pulled it out and attempted to turn it on. It was soaked and dead.

"Great." She set it in front of her feet hoping the fire would dry it out and it would miraculously work again.

She turned to the table next to her where a few men sat.

They were dressed like the fisherman, but looked rougher and more gruff.

Crystal opened her mouth to ask if she could use one of their phones, but decided against it.

Being the crime writer she was, she felt suspicious of everyone.

She would simply have the hot beverage and dry off a few more minutes then ask the owner of the tavern to use their business phone line.

"Here you are, lass." Gavin returned with a hot mug of tea and a glass of whisky.

"Thank you," she said, taking both. She poured the whisky into her hot tea and took a sip. The liquid instantly warmed her. It was much stronger whisky than she anticipated though and she felt it burn all the way down her sternum to her belly.

"They'll bring you a hot bowl of soup. I traded them a fresh catch of fish for it, so I'll return in a bit. Gotta get that fish from my wagon," he said.

Crystal watched as Gavin walked out of the tavern and she was completely confused as to why he wouldn't just pay money instead of trade a fish. Were they really into their character role playing this much?

A grunt could be heard over her shoulder. She turned to see the Innkeeper sliding a bowl of soup onto the table, then walked away.

"Okay, not very chatty here," she said. Then she turned her body and inhaled the scent of the soup. "Oh, smells delicious."

She lifted the tin spoon and gave it a strange look, then dove into the dish. "Oh my." The soup was unlike any soup she'd ever had before. It was so fresh and every vegetable tasted like it was somehow grown in the Garden of Eden itself.

Gavin returned and sat at the table. "You warmed up, lass?"

"Yes. Thank you. This soup is incredible.

Gavin, you really saved me. I promise when I can get to my purse I'll make sure to give you some money.

Whatever they're paying you in this reenactment thing can't be much.

Do you think that someone will let me use their phone?

" she asked. She dipped the spoon into the soup again and she shoved a large amount into her mouth, not worried about looking elegant.

Gavin gave her a strange look and Crystal assumed it was because she had just stuffed her cheeks.

"Lass, your questions are out of my ability to answer.

I'll alert the Watch to your presence. The Laird likes to know when the likes of you cross over.

One of the Watchmen usually show up here around this time, but if they don't I'll send a message to the Castle for you. "

"Come again?" Crystal asked, unsure of anything that he said.

He didn't answer, but continued on as if she hadn't asked for clarification. "Best be staying here at the inn for today. It's not safe around here right now."

"Why isn't it safe?" she asked as she looked around the tavern with caution.

Gavin furrowed his brow, then stood up, but again didn't answer her question. "I'll speak with Wallace, the Innkeeper, see if there's a room for you. I think I can talk him into makin' the Laird pay for it." He walked away to the bar counter before she could ask a follow up.

She buried her head in the soup, and took a bite of the piece of bread at its side. "Wow. So good."

As she ate and became more satiated, she grew angry.

Getting to a phone was important so that she could call the authorities on Mason.

The more time that passed, the harder it would be to track him down, she knew that

from writing crime fiction.

It worried her even more because she really did think she was in Scotland based on the past hour.

Somehow Mason must have gotten her out of that bar and onto a private jet bringing her here to Scotland.

She didn't know what his purpose of bring her here was, unless he'd thought he was dumping her dead body.

He had to have given her some kind of drug and thought he'd overdosed her.

He did say he worked in pharmaceuticals, the jerk.

From the table she sat at, opposite of the front door, she could see that every person was in hushed conversation that seemed rather intense with worry. The men who sat at a long table near the front door and directly in front of another fireplace, seemed to be the most engaged in conversation.

The front door swung open and Crystal felt the cold air hit her bones, but what truly sent a chill up her spine was the man who strolled in.

He was very tall with a broad chest and a way of entering the room that let everyone know not to mess with him.

His gray eyes seemed to lack empathy. His dark brown beard was unkempt and wooly and matched the messy crop of hair on his head.

However, what truly stirred her were the scars on his face.

The man drunkenly swaggered in with another man on his heels, who was much younger and looked to be related to the man, only with a leaner stature and brown eyes.

Crystal froze in her seat because she knew these drunk types were looking for a fight and to pick on anyone who got in their way.

It was obvious to her they had been drunk all night into the morning.

Luckily, before the man laid eyes on her, the Innkeeper crossed from a table toward the bar counter and caught his attention.

"Wallace, you mule, where's my ale," the broad chested man shouted.

Wallace looked terrified and scrambled to get the man a drink.

Gavin quickly walked over, blocking her view of the man and sat down across from her at the table and whispered, "Pull the blanket up over your head and wrap it around you, lass."

"But—"

"Just do what I say."

The terror in Gavin's eyes led Crystal to obey, and she quietly and slowly pulled the blanket up, until only her face was peeking out.

"You there, that's my seat," the huge burly man said to the men seated at the long table in front of the fire by the door.

The men groaned, but didn't disobey and moved to a different table in the corner. The

two men sat when the others departed. Wallace placed two large mugs of ale in front of them, then followed it up with a loaf of bread and a wedge of cheese.

"Who is that?" she whispered to Gavin.

"Cameron Gilroy is the big one, and the other is his younger brother Billy. They're dangerous, lass. Don't want to be gettin' near them lot," he whispered back. "Keep your head low. Don't look their way."

Crystal nodded and shifted on the bench so that the side of her face, which was covered by the blanket, was aimed at the brothers.

She didn't want any reason to have more drama than she already had, even if this was part of some sort of role playing scenario.

Though the more time she spent in the tavern, she began to think it wasn't role playing at all, which only made her feel sick.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

Crystal sat on the bench, still slightly damp.

The blanket had soaked in much of the water.

The fire helped but her boots and socks were still wet and cold.

She nervously sat drinking her tea since she'd finished her soup, and waiting for Gavin to tell her what the next move would be.

As time passed it seemed like her hopes of this being a hallucination or some sort of village reenactment started to fade.

The door opened and another man walked in.

This one held such confidence that the whole tavern went quiet and turned his way.

Crystal immediately set eyes on him and noticed how handsome and rugged he was.

His long blond hair was almost platinum white and his close-trimmed beard looked like it was only a couple days past a five o'clock shadow.

His form was tall, lean, and youthful. Crystal felt an immediate attraction and couldn't look away, especially because he was dressed differently than the others in the tavern.

This young man wore a tunic shirt tucked into a knee-length kilt with a matching, bulky, plaid, scarf-like thing that crossed over his shoulder.

At his side was a sword in a sheath and various other weapons that hung from his belt.

She thought he looked like something out of a very well-done fantasy movie.

Behind him entered two more men dressed in the same manner, and two women, one was curvy and petite with dark brown hair and green eyes.

The other was tall and slim with flaming red hair and gray eyes.

Although they were dressed in period clothing, there was something familiar about the women to Crystal.

"Thank heavens," Gavin said as his eyes landed on the newcomers.

"Who are they?" she asked.

"The Watch. They will help you, lass. Wait here a moment." Gavin stood up and walked to the man with the long blond hair and whispered in his ear.

The man turned and looked her square in the eyes.

His blue eyes penetrated right through her.

He didn't smile, he only gave her a serious look.

It made her uncomfortable. Finally he nodded at Gavin and went to speak quietly to the two women.

The women turned to Crystal and smiled a genuine smile at her.

Before long they moved to her table and sat down.

"Hey, are you alright?" the red-head asked as she approached. "I'm Elena."

"Oh my God. Finally someone who doesn't speak like everyone here," Crystal said.

"I completely understand. We've been through exactly what you're going through, now. I'm Melanie," the petite curvy one said.

"Can I use your phone? Mine is wet and dead. I don't know what the hell is going on here but I'm cold and wet and need to get home."

They looked at each other and then at Crystal. "Here, I have a dry blanket in my bag," Elena said, opening her leather satchel and handing a blanket to her.

Crystal eagerly put the wet blanket down and wrapped the dry one around her. "Much better. Now can we get me out of here, please?" Crystal said.

Elena took a deep breath. "What's your name?"

"Crystal Corwin. I'm a writer."

"What's the last thing you remember before waking up in the water?" Melanie asked.

Crystal paused, her mind drifting back over what she could recall. "Let's see. I was at this stupid bar to celebrate my latest book, then I'm pretty sure this jerk drugged me, and then it's all fuzzy from there until I was suddenly in the water, and honestly I think I was hallucinating."

"Tell us," Elena said.

"Well I was in this weird place. I don't know.

I heard what I thought were voices that sounded melodic but I couldn't make out the words.

There was a warm glow and I felt better, but then I was plunged into ice and opened my eyes in water.

I was pretty deep under water, but I don't understand how, I don't remember how I got in it, but maybe I fell?

Anyway, I swam up to the surface and Gavin pulled me from the water.

It's honestly so bizarre." Crystal shook her head and looked at the two women.

"I don't know what's happening here, but Gavin says we're in Scotland.

That can't be possible. I live in the U.S. "

"Okay, so, you are in Scotland," Melanie started, her voice steady and calm. I know you're confused, but don't panic. We promise to explain everything to you once we're back at the Keep."

Shaking her head, Crystal said, "No. Explain now. What is happening here? I'm scared."

Elena sat down next to her and gently said, "You have every right to be scared. This is an unusual circumstance. Right now you're not in any danger. Both Melanie and I have had similar experiences."

"You have?" Crystal said, her eyebrows raising.

"Yes, and I promise we will tell you everything about what's going on here, but right now there's something more pressing we have to deal with," Elena said.

"How's the lass?" the young man with the long blond hair stood asked from over Elena's shoulder.

"A bit confused, which is understandable," Elena said. "This is Crystal Corwin." Elena looked from him back to Crystal. "Crystal, this is Jamie Grant. Think of him like a police man."

"Welcome, lass. I know things here might look a wee bit odd to you, but you'll come to understand it in time. As Elena said, I'm with the Watch, as are the men with me."

Crystal looked up into his blue eyes and felt relieved to see a soft smile on his face. His words were inviting and warm. "Nice to meet you, Jamie."

"And you, lass. Don't worry, we'll soon have you sorted, but I'm afraid it might be a short while as I have business that needs attending to," he said with a nod and walked to the Innkeeper.

Crystal was sorry to see the man walk away so quickly because his attractiveness was a distraction from her confusion.

"I promise, everything is going to be okay," Elena said.

"Have you eaten anything?" Melanie asked.

"Yes. Gavin has been very good to me. He brought me here, fed me, and gave me hot tea and whisky."

"I'll get you another," Elena said. She stood up and walked to the bar to fetch the

drink.

Melanie looked around with her brow furrowed as she looked at everyone's faces.

"Is there something going on? Everyone is so tense or is that just the script?" Crystal asked.

Melanie's eyes flashed as she looked back at her.

She frowned a little and said, "It's not role playing.

This town, these people, they're all real, Crystal.

I know it all looks strange, sounds strange, but trust me.

And yes, your senses are correct. Everyone is tense.

It's partly the reason we're here, to question all the villagers we come across," Melanie said.

"For what?"

"Well, there's been a murder, unfortunately."

"What? That's awful," Crystal said. Though she wasn't too shocked. She always spent hours researching for her crime thriller novels and had learned that murder happened somewhere in the world every second of every hour of the day.

"Yes, it is awful. So you can see we have a duty to fulfill, but we will see you through this as well."

"Here you are," Elena said, returning with a hot cup of tea.

"Thank you." Crystal took the cup with a grateful smile.

"We really need to get you out of those damp clothes. Too bad it's not summer, the sun would dry your clothes in no time," Elena said.

"Yes, if that would be possible. I don't have a change of clothes though." Crystal pursed her lips and glanced at Elena's bag. "You don't happen to have a pair of jeans and some different socks and shoes in there do you?"

Again the women looked at each other and then back to her as if they were keeping something from her.

"What? What is it?" Crystal asked, getting tired of these strange looks.

"We can't get you modern clothes. All we have will be more like what we're wearing," Elena replied.

"Oh Lord. I don't know why this is so difficult. I think it's really great that you guys aren't breaking character with this murder-mystery game thing, but I'm over it. Please let me use your phone and point me to the bathroom so I can get out of these clothes."

The two women sighed and looked at each other again, as though having a private conversation between them, one she wasn't privy too.

Crystal began to get very annoyed by this.

She'd had enough of this game and although she didn't want to be ungrateful for their kindness, she really needed to get to the bottom of all this, find a phone and get home.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

Before either woman could answer Crystal, Jamie returned. It was hard not to appreciate the look of the man as he stood hovering over them. It was then Crystal noticed he was back to his serious and somber expression.

"Elena, Melanie, come with me. The first of the villagers to be interviewed has arrived."

Elena turned to Crystal and said, "Stay right here. Don't draw attention to yourself. I promise we'll try to get through this as quickly as possible, then we will explain things more. We'll be right over there."

Before Crystal could respond they walked away.

Sitting in silence, Crystal observed the scene.

If this was some sort of role playing game, they were all extremely focused on staying in character.

Melanie's words replayed in her head. This town, these people are all real...

What was she trying to say? Of course they were real.

Did she mean that they weren't acting? That this town, these people lived like this on purpose? Why?

She glanced over at Elena and Melanie as they questioned one of the villagers.

She watched, feeling slightly intrigued, seeing as she wrote crime dramas for a living.

It was pretty interesting to see an interrogation in action.

Of course, if this town was real, and there had been a murder, that was nothing to be happy about.

Still the process was fascinating. Maybe she could write a new series and base it on a town like this, when she got back home.

If she got back home, crossed her thoughts, but she quickly dismissed that. Of course she would get back home.

Crystal watched as Jamie sat down at the table next to her with a villager and the two women. She did her best to eavesdrop as they spoke in hushed tones and the tavern began to grow louder with more villagers arriving for a breakfast meal.

"We're looking into the murder of the farrier's wife," Jamie said.

"Aye, I figured as much," the elderly man said, his tone filled with sadness. "It's the goblins, ain't it? It'd need be, the way she was done in, so brutal. No man would do that."

Goblins? It must be the name of a motorcycle gang. Crystal thought as she slid over to the edge of the bench to hear a little better.

"Could be," Jamie acknowledged, but his tone gave nothing of his true feelings on the murder away.

"We're here questioning everyone in hopes that we can find whoever did it before they can attack someone again.

But right now, we don't know what we're looking for.

That's why we're asking everyone in the village what they saw that night.

Even if you think it's nothing, it could be something to us. "

Crystal was impressed by Jamie's interrogation skills.

He was kind and explained why they were questioning people, he didn't point fingers or make accusations.

That was the mark of a good investigator.

She had written and researched investigators enough to know that the bad ones got in their own way and hindered an investigation.

"You have no witnesses, then?" the man asked.

"Unfortunately, the farrier didn't see the crime take place, but he discovered the body right after it happened."

"Lord have mercy," the man gasped. "What a thing to discover of one's own wife."

"Aye, tis. He's very distraught and refuses to speak. I cannot imagine the horror of finding a loved one in such a state," Jamie said.

Crystal's eyes widened. How horrible a storyline for this to be a murder mystery reenactment.

But with the husband being first to show up at the crime scene, it made him look very guilty.

Her mind immediately turned to thinking about this set up.

Maybe partaking in this murder mystery game would be fun and a good distraction for her while she waited for her new helpers to get her a phone and a change of clothes.

She had to admit, though just to herself, that a little part of her was allowing her ego to think that she could solve this little mystery game they had going before they did. It would put her wits on the subject to the test. Maybe she actually would write about her experience.

A loud grunting caught her attention across the room. Cameron and Billy were served heaping plates of eggs, meat, loaves of bread, and cheese. No doubt the Innkeeper meant to sober them up with such a helping. She was glad that the food would occupy them for a while and she could move around a bit.

She stood up just as Gavin came back to the table. "Where you going, lass?"

"Nowhere, just stretching my legs," she said.

"Aye, that's fine. But you don't want to be going nowhere far from Jamie Grant. You met him? He's with the Watch," Gavin said.

"I did meet him. What's his story?" she asked. Even though she didn't know if Gavin would give her Jamie's real life information or his character as a man of the Watch. She also hid the fact she was asking because she was interested in him.

"What do I know of Jamie Grant?" Gavin asked, and when Crystal nodded, he continued, "He's an upstanding member of the Grant family, cousin to the Laird.

He's a ranked member of the Watch, which are the guards from Urquhart Castle.

They keep the peace on Grant lands, which includes this village.

"Gavin paused and looked about the room a bit, then leaned in closer to whisper, "Some say Jamie possesses a talent for telling when people are lying. "

Crystal's lips quirked into a wry smile. "Really?" She turned to Jamie and saw that his eyes were roaming over the villager who sat before him in an analytical way. It reminded her of someone playing poker and sizing up their rivals' bluff.

"Aye. He's a smart one, though stubborn sometimes. That's not an unusual trait for the men of the Watch. They don't back down. It's necessary in their trade," Gavin said.

The more she learned about Jamie Grant the more intriguing she found him.

"So is Jamie Grant his real name or is that part of his character? Is he wearing a wig?" she asked.

Gavin gave her a strange look. "It is his real name, lass. And I'd expect, like all Scots men, he'd not be caught dead wearing a wig. I don't know his character only to know he's a true and honest fighter."

Crystal raised her brows realizing that Gavin wasn't going to break character at all. So she went along with it. "Does Jamie have a wife?"

"No, not that I've heard. Though it is probably time he find one. He's of nine and twenty years of age."

"Twenty-nine? Hm, he looks much younger," Crystal said.

The door to the tavern opened, as it had done multiple times over the last hour or so,

only this time the one who'd opened it was not what she was expecting. A hush came over the entire tavern as they all stared at the woman in the doorway. Even Gavin turned to look at the woman who entered.

Crystal's gaze was drawn to the table next to hers as Jamie shifted in his seat and locked eyes with the woman in the doorway, then gave her a nod.

The woman was about thirty or so, with russet hair and a thin face.

She pulled the hood of her cloak closer to her cheek so that her startling, sad blue eyes were the only thing peeking out as she shuffled through the tavern toward the back corner.

Once she settled into a standing position the chatter of the tavern started up again.

Crystal leaned back across the table to speak to Gavin in a hushed tone because her curiosity was too great. "Who is that and why did everyone nearly freeze when she entered?"

"Aye, that's Courteney. She's the elder sister of the young woman who was murdered, Maeve Highsmith, God rest her soul.

Courteney is broken after all this. Twas only her and her sister living together in the village with no kinfolk.

That was until Maeve got married to Brian Highsmith and moved out, leaving poor Courteney alone and all.

She keeps to herself, though. A good quiet woman who does no one no harm and all.
"

"I see," Crystal said. She turned toward Courteney but not for long, not wanting to make the woman uncomfortable.

Crystal placed her attention back on Jamie.

She noticed that Elena and Melanie were speaking with another villager who had entered and placed them at a table, as though creating a holding room.

Elena looked up and locked eyes with Crystal.

She murmured to Melanie and then made her way over to Crystal and Gavin.

"Elena, how much longer is—" Crystal started to ask.

"I know. I'm sorry. This is going to take a few hours, then we will get you settled. Jamie and his men want to question as many villagers as they can, or at least those that will speak. Have you eaten? I can get you?—"

"No, I did eat, thank you. Gavin fetched me a bowl of the most delicious soup I've ever had," she said.

"Oh right." She scrunched her nose up and twisted her lips into a grimace. "I forgot how awful and artificial the food is where we come from. This food here tastes like heaven," Elena said.

Crystal cocked her head to the side, confused by her statement but didn't push. "I don't understand, do you mean here in Scotland, or—" She wasn't sure where she was going with her question, but Elena just shook her head.

"I promise, you'll understand everything soon. For now, it really is best you just sit here by the fire. It's the safest place for you right now. Being a stranger in these lands,

sitting next to Jamie and the Watch is safer than any place else at the moment."

"I'll sit with you, lass. So as you're not too bored out of your wits," Gavin said. "I had a long mornin' on the loch. Fishing before the sun comes up, that's the best time. I can do with a hearty meal myself."

"Aye, Gavin. Help yourself and I will cover your tab. You're doing the Laird and the Watch a service by watching over Crystal. And when she gets hungry again please order for her. We will be here for some time," Elena said.

"Well you don't have to tell me twice, lass. And please be thankin' the Laird for me. I only do my duty.." Gavin stood up and walked over to Wallace to place an order.

Elena gave Crystal a genuine look of sympathy. "I do know what you're feeling, Crystal. It's a lot to ask for you to sit tight when you want to burst out of your skin and go home, but trust me on this. Please?"

Crystal sighed. "Alright. I'll wait here."

"Good. Melanie and I will be over to explain everything, but it might be lunch time before we get through all these interviews. So just stay with Gavin. Don't worry, the Laird will see that he is compensated for looking after you and he will cover the costs of whatever food you eat."

"Okay, sure," Crystal said, shrugging.

Elena returned to Melanie leaving Crystal alone.

She took the opportunity to look at Jamie again.

He was very handsome and Crystal felt sure that all these female actors must all want

him.

Maybe he was a playboy and had slept with all of them.

She supposed it was possible. He was an actor after all and looked the way he did.

She found it strange that her body responded to him with attraction because after what she went through with Mason, she should be swearing off all strange men.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

The villagers moved in and out of the tavern, some of them came for a morning meal and mug of ale or cup of tea, while others were simply curious about the investigations and did their best to listen in on Jamie as he spoke with one villager after another.

The sunlight pouring in through the narrow windows grew harsher and filled the tavern with more warmth as the fires burned down to embers.

Although Crystal didn't have a way of telling time, and there wasn't a clock mounted on the wall, she could sense that it was about an hour before noon.

Her stomach also let her know that it was time for lunch as she started to grow a bit hungrier, especially after watching Gavin eat a nice helping of roast vegetables and fresh fish, his own catch, no doubt.

"Gavin, I was wondering if I might get something to eat. Elena mentioned that she would spot me," Crystal said.

"Spot you? I don't know what that means, lass, but I will get you some food right away." Gavin stood up from the table and walked to the counter where Wallace stood.

Crystal looked around the tavern and thought that someone might want to take the seat where Gavin sat.

She nervously hoped it wouldn't happen considering she understood it to be communal seating.

she took the damp blanket that Gavin had given her in the boat and spread it on his seat so that it could dry as well as save his seat.

When Gavin returned, he carried two mugs of ale, one that he placed in front of her.

He moved the blanket aside and sat down.

A moment later Wallace slid a tin plate of food in front of her.

He gave her a peculiar look, but she was glad that he didn't linger in his curiosity.

Instead he walked away and she looked at the food in front of her.

"Mmm, this chicken smells delicious," she said looking at the nice thigh and breast in front of her along with a wedge of cheese, roasted carrots, and a roll of bread.

"Tis, a game hen, lass."

Crystal gazed from Gavin to the plate and nodded. She tentatively picked up the thigh and took a bite. Once again her taste buds exploded with splendor as she ate. The food was fresh and spectacular in flavor. "So good," she murmured.

She dug in, not worried about manners as she used her hands to tear the game hen apart and stuff it into her mouth. The ale was strong but she welcomed it to wash down the hearty meal.

Crystal watched as Melanie walked away from the long table which now had three villagers waiting to be interviewed, and approached the corner where Courteney leaned against the wall with her eyes glued to the floor.

Melanie spoke to Courteney in a hushed tone.

Crystal couldn't hear what they said, however after a few moments Courteney looked up and directly at her with wide-eyed amusement.

Crystal understood that they were speaking about her because Melanie turned to look at her as well.

Crystal turned up the corners of her mouth and nodded in a smile of acknowledgment that wasn't too over eager.

Melanie walked away and back to the table where the villagers sat with Elena each awaiting their turn, however there was only one left to be interviewed.

The one who sat with Jamie at the moment stood up and walked out of the tavern having ended the questioning.

The next villager was summoned to Jamie and Crystal could tell that he was growing a bit aggravated which possibly meant he was getting nowhere with the interviews.

She was deep in this thought when suddenly a body slid next to her on the bench.

She turned and looked up into Courteney's stark blue eyes.

The woman sat nervously fidgeting her fingers together as she looked at Crystal up and down taking in her attire but said nothing.

"Oh, hello," Crystal said, breaking the awkwardness.

"Hello, Miss. Melanie tells me that you were put through something by the fae. Is that true?" Courteney asked.

"The fae? I do not know what that is."

"You don't? I do not think there's anyone in these parts who doesn't know what the fae are, though they like to deny it. But tis clear that you have been through something, Miss. Just by looking at you I can tell, what creature attacked you?"

"Attacked? Well I guess you can put it that way." Crystal thought about Mason and what he had done to her.

"It's just my sister is the one who was murdered, you see. If there have been other attacks, then it could help," Courteney said.

Crystal didn't know how to respond to this. She knew that what happened to her wasn't related to this poor woman and what happened to her sister. Though she didn't want to seem like she was hiding anything either. So she told the truth even though it might be strange to the girl.

"I was drugged by a man that I didn't know.

The drug was so strong that I passed out.

When I awoke I was in some sort of haze surrounded by things that I couldn't make out.

It was very shiny and iridescent. Then the next time I opened my eyes I was swimming for my life in what I've been told was Loch Ness.

That's all I remember. Gavin, here, was kind enough to fetch me from the water and bring me here, wherever here is, I don't really know. "

"Oh, I see. Only a few of us from the village are aware of the women the fae bring through the Loch.

You must be one of them. I don't know much about your kind, Miss.

But thank you for that. The Sidhe are no murderers, but you look like you've been through war and back," Courteney said as her gaze raked over Crystal.

Crystal looked down at her clothing and the coarse blanket she had wrapped around her hiding her modern clothes from everyone.

She felt suddenly very self-aware of how she looked thinking that her mascara must be running down her face and her makeup making her look crazy.

She ran her hand over her hair pushing it down as much as possible realizing that this was how Jamie had seen her.

"Yes, I guess almost drowning would make me look like that," Crystal answered.

Courteney looked at the plate of food in front of Crystal. She immediately slid the plate toward her.

"Please, help yourself. I am quite full already and after what you've been through you probably have not eaten a morsel," Crystal said.

"That is very kind of you. I will not forget it.

You are right, however. I have plenty of food, but my nerves have been such a mess that I have had no appetite.

Only now I realize that I have been depriving myself and I am hungry.

My brother-in-law is quite broken and I have been tending to him at his and my sister's cottage. "

"I understand," Crystal replied.

Crystal looked to Gavin who had a slight smile on his face as though acknowledging and being impressed with her sharing food with Courteney. It was a small gesture and she didn't think anything of it.

The sound of boots creaking the floor of the tavern made her look up into Jamie's eyes. Standing this close she once again noticed that he was very tall and handsome.

Crystal beamed a soft smile at him and he smiled back a little. Suddenly she felt better about her entire ordeal, which surprised her. Such a small gesture from a stranger should not make her feel anything, even from someone so handsome and protective.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

The tavern had grown busy with the noon meal. Crystal was unsure if this was part of the murder mystery theater or something else. However something more pleasant was distracting her eye, as Jamie Grant stood before her.

"Aye, lass, are you ready?" he asked.

"Hm? What?" Crystal responded, her cheeks heating.

"Actually, I meant Miss Courteney," Jamie said.

Crystal felt her face heat more as embarrassment flooded her. "Oh, of course."

"Ready for me to ask a few questions again?" he said to her.

"Aye, I suppose. If it helps find my sister's murderer," she answered.

"Oh, I'll just move out of the way." Crystal stood up and stepped away, but stayed close to the fire. She leaned against the wall trying to not be too obvious. Gavin stood up and entertained himself at the bar with another mug of ale.

Jamie sat down across from Courteney and started the interview.

"Thank you for coming to the tavern. I'm sorry you've had to wait so long to speak with me, but I appreciate it. How is Brian?" Jamie asked.

"Not good at all. He hardly says a word. He is but a shell of himself."

"I can only imagine," Jamie said. "It is very good of you to take care of him since you yourself have lost your own sister. Can you tell me again what occurred the night before last?"

Courteney took a deep breath and Crystal could tell it was very trying for her to have to relive this moment.

It was obvious that she had been previously asked about this, probably right after this so-called murder, but Crystal was watching closely because she didn't know if this was still part of some sort of play or if there really was an actual murder at this reenactment renaissance faire.

Her brain was stimulated trying to figure it out, which made it more appealing than the basic crime thriller mystery.

"I will never forget. My brother-in-law, Brian, showed up at my door and was in such a state of shock.

He had blood on his hands. He could barely say more than a few words, but I managed to understand that there was something very wrong with my sister at the house.

So I mounted his horse behind him and he rode full speed to the house he shares with my sister, as you know it is outside the village quite far from any neighbors.

He had been at work here in the village, at the Blacksmith's where he's the farrier.

He's very good at his work, as you know. "

"Aye, I do know. He's most gentle with the horses and many come to him for shoe work."

Courteney nodded. "Because he is very good, sometimes he will stay later if a person comes in with an animal in need of a trim, or even to be shod. Brian won't turn them away. It is not his way of doing things."

"Go on," Jamie said.

"That's what happened that evening. He had stayed to do work for a traveler who was passing through the village and then returned home a little after sundown.

It was later than he usually returned home.

That's what he told me in a shaking manner as I slid off his horse in front of the house.

Then he began to cry and dropped to his knees, saying my sister's name over and over. "

"He didn't say what happened to her?"

"Not at that moment. It took him a time just to tell me that much. He could barely get words out. So instead of waiting for him to find his tongue, I walked inside their house calling my sister's name. What I saw was such a fright. It is burned in my memory forever."

Courteney stopped speaking as though she couldn't go on any longer. Jamie handed her a glass of water and she drank from it greedily until she was able to speak again.

"Take your time, lass."

"In the bedroom, my sister's body was on the floor. I could see that she had passed on. There was no saving her. There was blood everywhere, including on the ceiling,

such a horrible way to go. So much violence. I could barely look for too long before I ran outside and vomited."

"As is to be expected."

Courteney took a moment to gather her thoughts before she spoke again. "It was a few moments before I could speak, as I was in the same state of shock as Brian. Finally I found my tongue and walked to him where he sat outside on a stump shaking like a leaf. I asked him what happened."

"How did he answer?"

"He told me again that he stayed late at work longer than usual but not more than an hour.

He returned after Sundown and found the same as what I saw with me own eyes.

He started to curse whoever did this to his love of his life.

I along with him for the sake of my sister.

It must have been another half hour before we were able to move and not completely collapse in sorrow. "

"Then what happened?" Jamie asked.

"We went to the nearest neighbor, Mr. Langston and his family. You know them."

"Aye, I do. We told them how we found our poor Maeve and he was in shock as well, and fearful for his family.

We asked if he saw anyone coming in and out of the road that leads to their home and he said he hadn't seen anyone, but he had not been home.

His wife and children said they didn't see anyone in that direction.

Then we came into town here to the tavern to send word to the Watch.

We waited until your arrival, the rest you know. "

"Aye, I do," Jamie said.

Crystal watched as he wrote something down on a piece of parchment and she could make out the word Langston probably a note to interview him later.

Crystal was surprised that she found herself intrigued by all that she had heard.

It definitely was an interesting mystery that had been set up.

If it were one of her crime thrillers, it was nearly always the husband when a wife was murdered especially so brutally.

Most murders of chance were fast and swift, but one that was brutal meant there was passion or vengeance behind it.

Someone took out their frustrations on the woman in a horrible way.

This was usually domestic violence, but she would have no way of knowing if that was the case here.

Perhaps if she could meet the husband Brian she could sense it on him.

"It's the goblins, ain't it, Jamie?" Courteney asked, a look of fright on her face.

"It looks like it, but I aim to find out for sure.

We must find them and track them down before they do more damage.

They rarely come this close to the village, but it has been known to happen before.

We cannot let them get away with something so easily or they will continue to do it again and again. "

Crystal listened to this mention of goblins once more.

More and more she thought it was some sort of motorcycle gang and she could definitely see that because a Renaissance Faire reenactment was full of nerdy geeks and would attract bullies like a motorcycle gang if the murder was real and not part of whatever theme park situation they had going.

"We will need to go back to your sister's house and look for more evidence.

I want to look over everything once more, not just the inside of the house, but the outside area as well," Jamie said.

"I know the Watch already went over the area, but it was dark and they might have missed something.

I want to be sure we've checked every inch of the property. "

Crystal thought that was very smart of him. He was just like a real detective, looking at the crime scene, interviewing possible witnesses... she could almost imagine that he was an actual detective in his real life, not just posing as one for this Renaissance

faire.

Crystal realized just how much she was getting into this whole murder mystery shenanigan and suddenly got angry.

This was nothing but a distraction that had gone on all morning and now well past noon.

She had allowed it to distract her to the point that she wasn't worried about her own welfare and getting the authorities to catch Mason so she could get some answers as to how she ended up in a lake in the middle of this weird village where time stood still.

Why wouldn't anyone lend her their phone?

All of these thoughts boiled inside of her to where she snapped.

She abruptly pushed off the wall by the fireplace and marched right over to the table where Melanie and Elena sat.

"Okay, listen up ladies. I've had enough of this crap.

I'm not going to wait for you all to finish your murder mystery play theater whatever it is.

I'm out of here. You're obviously not going to let me use your phone or call the authorities for me.

It seems I'm going to have to do it on my own.

Thank you for your hospitality and goodbye. "

"Wait, don't go!" Melanie stood up and blocked Crystal's path.

"Get out of my way, I'm leaving." Crystal glared at her.

"Please, Crystal, let us explain. Things aren't what you think." Melanie looked around the tavern and then lowered her voice. "Please, you've got to let us talk to you. It's not safe out there for you, especially once the sun goes down. You need to understand what's going on. Please, will you sit?"

Crystal hesitated.

"We really didn't want to do this here, but you aren't giving us a choice," Elena added. "But you really need to know, so come sit down, please."

Crystal really just wanted to walk out and continue on her way, but her curiosity got the best of her.

There would be no harm in listening to whatever these women had to say and surely it wouldn't take more than fifteen minutes or so.

She was curious as to what kind of ridiculous explanation they were going to give her.

If she listened, at least she could have more to put in her next book.

"Fine. You've got fifteen minutes," she said sitting down at their table.

Elena stood up and said, "I'll get you a whisky. You're going to need it for what we have to tell you."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

The tavern remained noisy and busy. Jamie still spoke with Courteney and she seemed to be crying when Crystal looked over for a moment.

Elena returned with a glass of whisky and slid it in front of Crystal. She didn't touch it however, because she was growing very impatient and wanted her wits about her when she walked out of the tavern after listening to whatever ridiculous thing they were going to tell her.

"All right. So let's have it. Why am I in danger if I walk out of here? Is it this motorcycle gang? The goblins? I think I'll be able to hear them coming."

The two women looked at each other strangely and then took a deep breath almost in unison. Melanie spoke first.

"The goblins aren't a motorcycle gang, but we will get to that in a moment. Where to start? I wish I could remember how it was told to me but the reaction of being told what we are about to tell you sort of makes your mind go blank in a panic. Wouldn't you say so, Elena?"

"Yes it does. I hardly remember how it was told to me, other than I didn't react well to it as I suspect our new friend here won't as well, but we have to try."

"Yes, do try. I'm very much over this." Crystal crossed her arms across her chest and leaned back in the chair.

"Melanie and I are from the same place as you, but we live here now. I'm originally from Baltimore where I was a police detective."

"You're a police officer? Then help me out of here. I told you before that a man drugged me in a bar and then I ended up in a lake. Why didn't you say something before?" Crystal said annoyed.

"It's more complicated than that." Elena continued, "I'm no longer a police detective here in this place. I'm married to a man named Brendan and I have a son named Brendan jr. My life in Baltimore is no more, the same as your life where you're from."

"What? Is that a threat?" Crystal said, getting aggravated.

"It's not a threat, Crystal. It is simply the truth," Melanie added.

"I was a private investigator. So was my father and I took over his agency before coming here, but now all of that is gone.

Elena and I still try to make use of our skills by helping the Watch when something like this comes along. "

"Okay I don't know what you're playing at. You're really starting to annoy me, both of you."

"Sorry, we're not doing this right." Melanie frowned and looked around the tavern before speaking in a very hushed tone.

"Okay, look, the truth is you died. You're no longer in the twenty-first century, the United States hasn't been created yet, it's the mid-fifteen hundreds and you're in Scotland.

The best we can tell you is that the fae intervened in your death and brought you through to this time.

Magic is real and that's how you're here. "

Crystal rolled her eyes and then picked up the glass of whisky and shot back a large gulp.

She winced at how harsh it tasted and thought about how the whisky was strong and the food was fresh and good, but that didn't mean she was in a different time like these women were attempting to say. That was simply ridiculous.

"Told you that you were going to need that," Elena said.

"Of course I need it. You're making sure that I need it by telling me this ridiculous story, but go ahead and continue because I'm very curious, however, I don't believe one word you are saying."

"The magic and creatures here are real. The goblins aren't a motorcycle gang, but actual goblins, as in creatures we would see in fantasy movies from our own time.

The fae, or Sidhe are of two groups, one are of the light court and one is of the dark court.

The ones who are associated with the light are friendly with humans, for the most part.

Goblins are from the dark court and are very dangerous.

The fae live a different realm than our world, but there is a doorway between the two at the bottom of Loch Ness.

That is how you came through. That's how each of us came through," Melanie explained.

"This is a really weird joke. Did someone put you up to this? Someone I know? To abduct me and put me through all of this? Maybe it's an angry fan of one of my books? Whatever it is, you should come clean now," Crystal said.

"You're acting in the same way all of us did, but you will see when you go outside that there is nothing modern in this world. There are no planes flying overhead, no cell phones, no cars, nothing modern anywhere."

"So what. That doesn't mean anything other than we're in some no fly zone. No modern anything is the same thing that the Amish do in their towns. I assume this is the same way, only much more extravagant and weird."

"That's very good reasoning. I'm impressed," Elena said. "It's wrong, but still impressive."

"Well I do write crime thrillers and psychological thrillers for a living so I have to think through all the steps. Whatever you throw at me I can reason out of it, so don't waste your time," Crystal said.

"Well there won't be a way to reason out this, I promise you that.

We've all tried. I know it's going to take a while for you to accept it and get used to it.

It was that way for all of us. We understand that.

We should take you to the castle. It's where all of us have gone while we were figuring things out.

I suggest you do the same thing," Melanie said.

"A castle? like a real life castle?" Crystal asked, recalling that Gavin had mentioned a

Urquhart Castle before.

"Yes, you are in Scotland after all. There are castle ruins still there in our modern time."

"And therefore could be used now and just get rid of all the modern stuff, right? but I don't know why you would go through such great lengths to trick me. What is really going on here?" Crystal said.

"Exactly, why would we go through such trouble to create all of this for one person?

There is no reason for it because it's not what's happening here.

However, we get you being in disbelief. All of us who came through we're exactly like that.

I still sometimes have a hard time believing it, and think I'll wake up and be in my apartment in Baltimore. "

"You keep saying all of you. How many are there?"

"A little over a dozen women like us who have come from modern times to this time. You will meet them eventually," Melanie said.

Once again Crystal rolled her eyes annoyed that these women were taking her for a ride. "Is this being filmed? Is this some sort of elaborate prank show? It's very weird to have that and center it around a murder, but I guess murder mystery is always popular."

"The murder is real. Maeve is a real person. She was very good and kind, and what happened to her is horrible. There is no faking here, Crystal. You will see. Give it a

day or two more. It just takes time." Melanie said.

"That is one thing I will not give you," Crystal said as she stood up from the bench.

"I've had enough of this. I am glad I stayed for your crazy explanation though.

I was very curious, though I didn't expect fae and goblins.

That's bizarre, but not as bizarre as time travel.

It couldn't be a better story if I wrote it to myself. "

"Where are you going?" Elena stood up in a panic.

"I'm leaving. I said I would give you fifteen minutes and I've done that.

Although I'm curious to see what castle you want to take me to, I'm not going to play along anymore.

I'm walking out of this tavern and finding the nearest phone or person who will actually break character and help me.

Thank you for your hospitality and feeding me and entertaining me, but I have to get back to my life and get back to finding that jerk Mason, and making sure he goes down for what he did. "

Crystal turned away from the table heading toward the door with Melanie and Elena calling after her.

She was seething with anger and frustration that they had tried to trick her.

She should have gone the moment she was dry and fed and she would be at the nearest police station by now figuring things out.

Instead it was well past noon and probably going to have an early sunset so she only had a few hours to figure everything out.

However the moment she was near the door she felt a large hand wrap around her arm. It caught her off guard. Her feet gave way under her as she was yanked off them and onto a man's lap.

She could smell how awful he smelled and his coarse, vile, gruff voice in her ear. "Aye, lass. You don't need to be goin' away. You be right here with me."

Crystal knew who it was before she looked because Cameron Gilroy had been sending chills up her spine with his very presence across the tavern. Now she found herself in his arms and on his lap.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

Crystal looked into Cameron's cold gray eyes. There was no life or empathy there. It frightened her to the core as he held her at the waist. His breath smelled foul of whisky and decay.

"Let me go, asshole," she said.

"You know you like it, lass. All of you do. You pretend not to want it, to play games, but you secretly enjoy a big man like me. I desire you and what I desire I take," Cameron said.

His brother Billy laughed and drank from his mug of ale.

"Stop. Let me go, you jerk!" she shouted at the top of her lungs.

This got the attention of almost everyone in the tavern. Some men looked on laughing while other villagers, especially the women grew uncomfortable. Crystal was about to dig her nails into Cameron's arm when suddenly there was a dirk at Cameron's throat.

"Let her go, Cameron, or I will slice your throat from one end to the other," Jamie said.

Crystal couldn't see him, but knew that he stood behind Cameron. Jamie's voice was like heaven to her as he came to her rescue. Though she hated the thought that she needed a man to intervene, she had subconsciously grown more frightened and on edge after the situation with Mason.

"Mind your own business, Jamie. This lass is mine. Go get your own," Cameron said.

Even with a dagger at his throat he wasn't going to back down. Crystal could tell he was an entitled narcissist.

"This lass is my business. Touch her and you will be answering to the Laird, and to the rest of us," Jamie said.

At that moment, the two other Watchmen who accompanied Jamie drew their short swords and walked to the table. Crystal noticed that Melanie and Elena also drew knives from their belts. The entire tavern seemed to be turned against Cameron, which was only good for her.

Cameron pushed Crystal off his lap and she almost lost her footing. The palms of her hands landed against the next table to steady herself. Cameron and his brother Billy stood up from their table. Cameron had an angry sneer on his face as he cursed the entire tavern.

"There, keep your stupid lass. I'll get me another. I don't think you can tell me what to do. That's not how I live my life. I do what I want when I want. You all don't know what I'm capable of. Come, brother, let's get out of this hell hole."

Cameron slammed back the rest of his whisky and his brother did the same with his mug of ale. Then they walked out the door of the tavern.

Crystal looked at Jamie who stood there watching Cameron until he was out the door. His kind demeanor had changed to that of a protector and capable man that you didn't want to mess with. Suddenly Crystal looked at him with fresh eyes.

She took in his attire again, the way he carried himself.

The brutal strength tempered with measured kindness and intelligence.

He was the epitome of a true Scottish Highland warrior.

Everything that Melanie and Elena had been telling her flitted through her mind again.

Jamie wasn't an actor playing a role. He actually was a guardsman, a member of this Watch, the police force of this time period.

Magic was real and she had been transported back in time.

She should have noticed it before. The way Jamie and the other men of the Watch were fiercely protective, not just of her, but of all these people here.

There was something almost barbarian about them, but in a good way, a manly way.

Not that they were sexist, they had been nothing but kind and respectful of her and of all the women in the tavern, that she noticed.

So different from the way guys were back home who were too self-involved and just looking for a hook-up.

Of course there were men like Cameron back home, Mason being one of them, but here it seemed there was someone to put a stop to that kind of behavior almost immediately.

Had someone like Jamie been there at the bar, Mason wouldn't have had a chance to drug her, she thought as the sound of horses galloping away from the tavern sounded from outside.

Jamie sheathed his dirk and looked at her. "Are you all right, lass?"

"Yes, I am. Thank you for your help."

"Tis my job," he said, a small smile on his lips.

"Oh, of course," she said, feeling slightly embarrassed for thinking he'd done it because he liked her. For a moment she'd forgotten that his act of chivalry wasn't one directed at her because of an interest in her, but because it was simply his responsibility.

"Are you sure you are not hurt?" His gaze traveled over her in a respectful way, as though looking to be sure she wasn't hiding some slight injury.

"I'm not hurt," she replied. She wanted to say more, but couldn't find the words as she was still trying to process that this man truly was a warrior and protector.

"I'm glad you're okay," Elena said as she moved closer to her and Jamie and keeping her voice soft, so not to draw any more attention their way.

"Yes, I'm okay, just a little shaken up." Crystal glanced toward the door. "What an awful jerk that guy is."

"Cameron has been known to bully many in the village," Elena said.

"He and his brother are both awful," Melanie added.

"This entire day has been so strange and overwhelming—" Crystal started.

At that moment, she felt a sudden dizziness coming over her.

She had been unsteady when Cameron pushed her off his lap, but this was something different.

The events of the past twenty-four hours were catching up to her and leaving her light-headed and woosy.

She tried to take a step, but her knees buckled from underneath her, and she nearly fell over going limp, but strong arms caught her just in time and held her.

"It's all right, lass. I've got you," Jamie said. "You've been through a lot in the last day, it's bound to take its toll on you."

She looked into his gray eyes as his towering lean figure hovered above her. Electricity pulsed through her, radiating from where his hands held her firmly.

"Thank you," she murmured, feeling breathless.

"Come, lass, let's get you sat by the fire again. I can't have you wandering out there unsteady on your feet," Jamie said.

This time Crystal allowed herself to be taken care of. Storming out of the tavern no longer seemed like a logical plan after what had just happened with Cameron. Perhaps it would be better to stay with this group, at least while she processed everything that Melanie and Elena had told her.

Jamie kept his large, warm hand on the small of her back, guiding her back toward the table where she previously sat. Courteney still sat on the bench, watching everything. She stood up as Crystal and Jamie joined her.

"Are you all right, Miss?" Courteney asked.

"I think so. I need to sit for a moment."

"Of course, sit. It has been a trying day for all of us," Courteney replied.

Crystal sat down on the bench closest to the fire and leaned her elbows on the table. She was embarrassed by the fact that she had almost fainted like a true damsel in distress, something that a writer like her thought was very cliché.

"Here have some water." Elena appeared at the side of the table pouring a cup of water from a pitcher.

"I promise it's safe to drink, a couple of us have taught them to boil it before setting it aside to let it get to room temperature," she murmured, again keeping her tone hushed. She handed the mug to Crystal.

She drank it down fast. She had been drinking quite a bit of alcohol almost the entire day in order to warm her damp body, so the water was much needed. "Thank you."

"If you start feeling sick you must tell me," Jamie said gently.

"I think just a little light-headed. It's too much to process. I don't think that I'm ill though."

Jamie nodded and then took a few steps away to speak with the other Watchmen and with Melanie and Elena who had moved aside with him. Crystal did all she could to stretch her ear so that she could overhear what they were saying.

"I think that we've interviewed everyone who is willing to talk about the murder. Tis time we returned to the site and speak with the neighbors again," Jamie said. "What opinion have you, Rory?"

"Aye, tis a good plan," the Watchman on his left replied.

Crystal assumed his name must be Rory since he was the one who answered. Like Jamie, he was tall and lean, but muscular. He wore the same plaid design on his kilt

and she wondered if it was their uniform. Rory.

"Tis getting late and the sun will be setting in a few hours. It might be best to put our attention toward the new arrival and get her situated, so that we can continue on with this investigation," Rory continued.

"Should we ride back to the Keep before nightfall? " Melanie asked.

The group was nudged away from where they stood by some other patrons and they moved toward the other fireplace across the room and out of the way.

Crystal could no longer hear what they were saying above the chatter in the tavern, which was disappointing since they were discussing her, but she was too tired to get up and join them.

She sat staring into her glass of water remembering everything that Melanie and Elena had said to her.

She was no longer in the twenty-first century, but in the sixteenth.

Not only that, she was no longer in the US, but in Scotland, where everyone except for her, Elena, and Melanie spoke with thick Scottish accents.

She was damn lucky that she even understood them at all.

None of these people were actors, they were all just real people, living their real lives. The whole thing was blowing her mind.

She closed her eyes to try to make it go away, thinking about her apartment at home and her computer where she wrote her books, and being at the bar waiting for her friend to text her.

Willing all of this to be a dream. Willing herself back to the bar.

Or hell, to a hospital bed after having suffered a drug overdose from that asshole Mason. Anything.

But when she opened her eyes she was still in the medieval tavern and nothing had changed.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

Crystal must have looked distraught because Courteney sat back down across from her with a look of pity.

"Miss, you look a fright," Courteney said.

"Thanks," Crystal replied wryly. "I'm very tired. I don't know how to handle all of this, and whatever is to come next. Jamie said that I need to go to a castle to see the Laird—I can't even believe I'm saying that out loud." Crystal shook her head in disbelief.

"Aye, the Laird will want to know of your arrival."

"What exactly is the Laird?" Crystal said with her brows raised. She'd heard of them, of course, but what kind of power did they wield, she wondered.

"I don't understand what you're askin', Miss. He's a man?"

Crystal shook her head and tried to reframe her question. "No, I mean is he like the King?"

"Oh, aye, of a sort, I suppose. He is the Chieftain of the area.

The English King rules over Scotland, however, everything in our area is owned and managed by the Laird.

There are some English who like to think they're in control of us, but we pay them no mind.

" Courteney twisted her lips into a moue of distaste and rolled her eyes.

"Okay, why would it matter that I've arrived? I mean what does it have to do with the Laird?" Crystal asked.

"Oh, he has taken in all of the women like you."

Crystal frowned, thinking he'd turned all the women Elena and Melanie had mentioned into a harem. "Like some kind of Sheik? He's sleeping with them?"

Courteney looked appalled. "No, of course not.

Only his wife, Anna, as far as I'm aware.

She's one of you, a woman from Loch. She'd have his head on a platter if he were to stray.

" She giggled. "What I meant was, he allows all the women to stay at the Keep.

" She paused for a moment. "He'll probably want to know what happened to bring you here, and how you ended up in the village. That sort of thing."

Though it relieved her to know that he wasn't keeping a harem, she didn't like the idea of being questioned like she'd done something wrong.

"Great. Just what I need is some macho dude interrogating me.

Maybe I can do that later, right now I just want a bath and to get out of these clothes, and a bit of privacy to process all of this. "

Courteney scanned the room, pausing when she came to Jamie still talking to his

group.

Then she leaned in and quietly said, "You have been kind to me.

If you like, my cottage is here in the village.

It's empty at the moment because I've been caring for my brother-in-law at his home.

We spent yesterday cleaning the inside and seeing my sister brought to the church for burial.

You could stay there. If Jamie allows it, that is. "

"Really?" Crystal perked up. The idea of having some space to herself was appealing.

"That's very kind of you to offer. I would love that. Do you think Jamie will allow it?"

Courteney sighed and looked down at the table. "Probably not. It's dangerous being on one's own at the moment. I don't want you to meet the same fate as my sister."

Crystal knew that she was right, but who would know that she was in the cottage anyway?

Only the few people who had come into the tavern even knew she existed and most didn't seem interested in her at all.

She had to bring it up at least because she was tired and wanted some peace of mind for a while.

Going to the castle, however far it was, and being questioned by the Laird would not give her that.

She watched as Jamie and the Watchmen as well as Melanie and Elena stepped out of the tavern to continue their quiet talk. She could see them through the narrow window. It was now or never she thought.

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt to speak to them, will you join me?" she said. Though her words leaned toward asking, she wasn't actually planning to ask.

Courteney stood up and walked with Crystal out the door. Crystal approached Melanie and Elena first.

"Good news. Courteney has offered to let me stay at her cottage for the night since she isn't using it anyway," Crystal said quietly so that no one would overhear.

"That's very nice of her, but not a good idea. We can't let you stay there alone," Melanie said. "It's not safe. Not even here in the village."

"It's just for one night. No one will even know I'm there," Crystal replied.

"It's not the people who are the problem—" Elena started.

"What's this I hear?" Jamie stepped toward them.

"Courteney has offered to let me stay in her cottage for the night and I'm going to do that," Crystal said. She squared her shoulders and faced Jamie head on. She wasn't going to let him intimidate her or talk her into going to the castle which was who knew how far away.

"No, lass, that will not be happening," he said.

"I'm not asking for your permission. I'm simply informing all of you what I'm going to do." Crystal smiled. "Consider it a courtesy."

Jamie looked her up and down, a small smirk on his lips. "You're a fiery one, aren't you?" He shook his head. "Stubborn, just like the others who've shown up from your time. You women are different."

Crystal couldn't tell if was a compliment or not, but she stood her ground. "Fiery? If that's what you call a woman speaking her own mind and making her own decisions, then yes I am."

She felt the tension rise between them and she wondered if anyone else noticed. Her cheeks flushed and she realized that she must still look a mess with mascara down her face and stringy hair that had dried in clumps, however she wasn't going to back down to the attractive Scottish Watchman.

"Aye, speak your own mind if you wish, lass, but I cannot let you out of our sight, it is too dangerous. I will have my men take you to the Laird at the castle where you will be safe. It is my duty."

"And how far is that?"

"On horseback, no more than an hour or so," he said.

"So you want to send a newly arrived woman with two guards on an hour's long trip when the sun is close to setting and a murder to deal with?"

That doesn't seem like a logical idea, nor does it seem like a safe thing for me to do.

I think I would be far safer if I'm indoors before nightfall, in a local cottage.

Courteney says it's here in the village and not out in the countryside. "

"I know where her cottage is," Jamie snapped, a frown marring his face.

Crystal stared at him, willing him to listen to reason. And her idea was much more thought out and reasoned than his, despite the fact that she was bone tired and still a bit woosy.

He was quiet for a moment and put his hands on his hips as he scanned the village.

Finally he gave in. "Very well. Your reasoning is sound, so you can stay in the cottage, but I will have one of my men posted as a guard outside.

You will stay inside and not open the door for the remainder of the night. Is that understood?"

"It is. I won't want to leave anyway, I'm very tired and all I want is to wash up and sleep. This day has been exhausting." She lowered her shoulders in relief.

Jamie turned to his group. "Rory, you, Miss Crystal and Miss Courteney come with me," Jamie ordered. "The rest of you, please wait for me in the tavern. I'll return shortly."

Crystal enjoyed seeing him in acting with authority.

It only made him more attractive. Melanie and Elena gave her a hug with promises to check on her in the morning.

Then they went inside with the other Watchmen while Rory followed Jamie and Courteney escorting her through the village to the cottage.

A row of cottages stood on the far side of the village, away from the tavern and the shops.

It wasn't too far of a walk, and there was a church just across the way.

"This one is mine," Courteney, murmured, pointing to one in the middle of the row.

Crystal was shocked by how rough looking it was.

She had expected something a little more sturdy, like an English cottage with fresh paint and quaint shutters, but this was more of a dingy stone shack with a thatched roof and not what she had thought it would be at all.

"Here we are. Come inside," Courteney said.

Courteney opened the door and stepped in, followed by Crystal, where it was quite dark until Courteney lit a couple of candles. Rory

Upon the room being lit up, Crystal was relieved to see that it was much better on the inside, almost like glam camping. It was a large one room cottage on the inside with a fireplace and kitchen area, a single bed, and a sitting area.

"It's not much I know. Not as fancy as the castle will be, but it is comfortable," Courteney said as she opened two wooden shutters to let in some fresh air and more light.

"No, it's perfect. Thank you."

"The hearth is used for cooking. Swing the kettle over the fire to boil water. There are some dried herbs hanging from the rack, here. I have not been to the market for a few days, but it is near the tavern."

"I'm sure it's all fine. I think I can manage," Crystal said looking around.

"I will lay out a night dress for you and I have an extra dress you can borrow for tomorrow. Right now I should fetch you some fresh water to wash up with,"

Courteney picked up a bucket and headed for the door. "The water well is just behind the cottage if you need some in the morning."

"Thank you, Courteney. I truly appreciate it."

Courteney walked out and then Jamie stepped through the doorway making the small cottage seem even tinier. It was the first time that Crystal had been alone with him and she suddenly found herself nervous, not because he presented a danger to her, but because she was attracted to him.

He held a bundle of logs in his arms. "I'll build up the fire and get the cottage warmed up for you." He moved to the fireplace and squatted down, setting the logs next to it.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

Crystal watched as he used the small iron fireplace shovel to scoop the used ash into a bucket that stood nearby.

He added a couple of the logs and some kindling to the grate and used a piece of flint to spark the kindling into a flame.

He used the fire poker to encourage the logs to light and soon the flames were dancing merrily and putting off enough heat that she could feel it.

He stood back up and turned to her. "Add two more logs before you go to sleep, then it should stay warm through the night," he said.

Crystal gulped as he stepped toward her. "Alright, I can do that." She looked away from him to the fire.

Jamie used a finger under her chin to turn her face back to him.

"Lass, I still do not like this, but since you've insisted upon staying here tonight, Rory will be outside.

I will send another guard to relieve him around midnight so that he can get some rest as well," Jamie said, dropping his finger from under her chin.

Though his touch had been light, Crystal missed the feel of it upon her skin. Still she didn't want to be a burden to him and his men. "Really that's not necessary," Crystal started.

Jamie didn't respond with words, instead he looked at her for a long moment, before sighing softly. He pulled a dagger from his belt, reached for her hand and placed it and its sheath in her palm, closing her fingers around it.

Crystal stared at the lightweighted weapon now resting in her hand. "What is this for?"

"Tis for protection against the goblins or anyone else who dares to accost you. Do you know how to use it, lass?" he asked.

"I think it's pretty self-explanatory," she quipped with small smile and met his gaze.

Jamie chuckled. "Aye, I suppose it tis. It's made of iron, so it should ward off any of the fae if they come calling."

"The fae are afraid of iron?"

"Aye, it can be deadly to them. Burns them badly and they tend to avoid it when they see it. We try to keep the villagers supplied with iron, but most seem to think the fae are demons and they rely on their faith to keep them safe."

Crystal didn't know what to say to that. She'd yet to see a goblin, but she imagined that if she had never seen one, it would probably look like a demon to her too. She set the dagger down on the small table next to the bed.

Jamie moved toward the door and turned back to her. "You have everything you need?"

"Yes. Courteney is getting me water, but then I should be fine. I really just want to wash up, change out of these clothes and sleep," she said.

"Of course, lass. I will send word to the Laird of your arrival. He will wish to meet with you. You do understand now that you are not in your time anymore, aye?" he asked.

"Yes, I think so, but I'll understand it better once I've had some sleep," she said.

He gave her a crooked grin that melted her heart and had her insides turning to jelly.

"Aye, I'll leave you to it, then," he said with a slight nod to her before turning and heading out the door.

Courteney returned a moment later, carrying a full bucket of water.

She set it on the floor by a wooden frame that held a porcelain bowl.

"Here you are. Fresh water for you to wash up in.

The cloth here is clean, you can use that to wash up with.

" She indicated a piece of fabric hanging from the side of the wooden frame.

"Let me fetch you some clothes from the wardrobe. "

"Thank you." Crystal smiled at her.

She moved to a wooden cabinet that stood against the wall near the door and opened it.

She removed a white gown and set it on the bed.

"Here's a nightshift for you." She turned back to the cabinet and pulled out a heavy

looking, plaid, wool dress and a dark blouse.

She held it up for Crystal to see. "I think this tunic and dress will work for you, let me get you some stockings as well.

" She laid the dress and shirt over the chair and opened a drawer at the bottom of the wardrobe, pulling out a pair of stockings.

"I'm sorry I do not have another pair of shoes for you.

You will have to keep wearing those," she said looking at Crystal's boots.

"That's alright, I appreciate you lending me these. My boots should be fine once I dry them by the fire," Crystal replied.

"Then I shall go. Sleep well, Miss."

"Thank you, Courteney. I really do appreciate everything you're doing for me, I don't know how I'm going to be able to pay you back for your kindness," Crystal said.

"It tis no trouble, Miss. I am happy to do it." Courteney gave her a soft smile and walked out, closing the door behind her.

It took Crystal a moment to figure out the hatch lock on the door, but once she understood how it worked, she locked the door securely.

She moved to the window and closed the shutters, latching them closed as well so that she could wash up and change in privacy and relative safety.

She wasn't sure exactly how secure the little cottage was, but she didn't feel unsafe.

Especially since Jamie had given her the dagger.

"Home sweet home," she murmured as she looked at the dim little room.

The room felt nice and warm with the fire blazing. She pulled a chair over and sat down in front of the fire, then peeled off her still damp boots and socks and set them close to the flames to dry.

"Much better," she said.

Picking up the bucket of water, she poured a small amount into the wash basin. Then she took off all her clothes and washed her face, then used the cloth to bathe her body as best as she could.

"How is this real? I must be losing my mind," she said as she realized that she was doing this very medieval activity in a Scottish cottage.

The moment she started to question her reality she pushed it out of her mind for the sake of keeping her sanity at least to get some sleep.

She put on the nightgown and found it fit very well and loose.

She moved to the bed, which was neatly made with a heavy quilt and wool blanket.

She folded down the blankets, and fluffed the pillow.

Before getting into the bed, she moved the window, opened the shutters and peeked out.

Rory leaned against the wall of the cottage, his thick arms crossed over his chest as he stared out into the night.

The sun had gone down and now the night was only lit by the half-moon in the sky.

If she weren't so tired, she might have felt more nervous about nightfall and killers on the loose, but her body begged for sleep.

She blew out the candles, then laid down under the cozy blankets and fell into a deep slumber.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

Crystal felt Jamie's strong hand run up her thigh. She arched her back up off of the bed inviting him to touch her more. Her hands grabbed the blankets, twisting them in her fists as her skin was set ablaze underneath his touch.

She whispered softly, "Jamie," begging for him to touch her more.

She felt her body responding to him in a way that she'd never felt for anyone else.

She opened her thighs wanting more of him.

Without words, she begged him to move his body over hers.

Feeling the weight of him pressing her into the straw mattress was all she could think about.

His lips pressed against hers, kissing her with a tenderness, but also with a certainty that let her know he was in charge.

Crystal wanted nothing more than her warrior to show her the man he was, preferably with his tongue.

A chill went up her spine as he traced his fingers up her belly and over her hard erect nipples.

However the chill felt real and she suddenly felt cold. That's when her eyes opened.

"Oh my... what a dream," she whispered as she pushed her hair from her face and

looked around the dark room.

For a moment she thought she was in her own bedroom.

That everything had been a dream, a figment of her overactive imagination.

Then, as her eyes adjusted to the darkness and she saw where she was, it all flooded back to her.

The incident with Mason, the fae hovering over her, soothing her, waking up in the lake, and being told that she was in Scotland in a different time period.

She sat up in bed quickly, taking in more of the cottage. .

The fire had faded to just glowing embers and was the only light in the cottage and warmth.

She'd forgotten to add the logs like Jamie had said.

The chill she felt and her nipples being hard was because it was very cold in the small room.

Climbing from the bed, she wrapped the top blanket around her shoulders and walk over to the fireplace.

She poked it with an iron poker, stirring up the embers.

She added some dry hay kindling to get the fire going a bit more, then added two more logs to the fireplace.

She sat down on the wooden chair she'd pulled up next to the fire and warmed her

cold bones.

She thought about the dream she just had about Jamie and how uncomfortable it made her feel now that she was awake.

She didn't know the man at all and had barely spent an hour in his presence and yet he was getting this reaction out of her?

How was that possible? She rarely had hot dreams. Yet this stranger, this medieval Scottish warrior in a strange land had penetrated her mind like no other.

She relit a candle and looked around the cottage for something else to warm her bones.

She noticed several jars on the counter in the section of the cottage that looked closest to what could be called a kitchen.

She pulled the cork on a couple of the jars, smelling them.

The third jar had what she was looking for, alcohol.

She found a tin cup and poured some in, then took a drink and realized it was wine or— with the heavy scent of honey, mead and not whisky like she expected.

She moved back to the bench and sat down drinking hefty swigs of the mead until she was drowsy enough and warm enough to crawl back into bed.

As she laid in bed, she realized that she couldn't stop thinking about the erotic dream of being with Jamie. He had really taken a hold of her mind in such a short time. She continued thinking of him as she drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, Crystal found herself fumbling with the clothing that Courteney had left for her.

The dress was more difficult than she had expected it would be to put on, and she could only guess that she did it correctly.

She was very glad for the long, thigh-high stockings to keep her legs warm but tying them around her thigh felt very strange.

Thankfully, her boots had dried and she was able to slip them on then grabbed the dagger and put it in one of the large pockets in the side of the dress.

Opening the wooden shutters, she let the light in and some fresh air. "Hello? Rory, are you there?" she said, and then recalled that Jamie had said he'd send someone to relieve Rory at midnight. "Er... or well, whoever you are from the Watch?"

"Aye, I am here, lass. You may call me, Shaw. Did you need something?"

Crystal stuck her head out of the window and looked at the red-headed Scottish guard. "Hello, Shaw. Thank you for watching over me and the cottage last night. It is nice of you." She smiled at him.

"Aye, lass, tis my duty." His gaze moved from Crystal to someone approaching.

Crystal turned to see who it was and smiled when she saw it was Elena.

"I see you're an early riser. I came to see if you needed help with the dress," Elena said, walking toward the open window.

"Elena, good to see you. I generally do get up early. Would you like to come in?" Crystal asked.

Elena nodded and moved toward the door. Crystal unlatched the lock and opened the door to let her in. Rory had turned back to gaze about the village, letting the two women have a bit of privacy, though Crystal was sure that the walls were thin enough he'd hear everything they discussed. .

"So how was your first night here?" Elena asked.

"As strange as anyone's first night would be after being told that they traveled through time and relocated in sixteenth century Scotland. What do you think?" Crystal grumbled, but then gave her a smile to let her know she wasn't really complaining too much.

Elena chuckled. "Trust me I've been there, but you seem to be taking it in stride and aren't hysterical about it. You spent your first night alone which is more than most of us have done. We all spent our first night at the castle."

"Yes, well I didn't want to be interrogated by your Laird and I just wanted some alone time to process everything."

"I can understand that." Elena smiled. "He's not a bad guy though, just so you know. He's not going to treat you like a criminal or anything. He's always very welcoming to those of us who show up. Of course he wasn't in the beginning, but that's Anna's story to tell."

"Yes, Courteney mentioned her," Crystal said just as her stomach gurgled loudly. "Sorry, I'm really hungry." She laughed.

"We could go to the tavern to eat, or the market is all set up if you'd rather cook something here?"

"Maybe to the market?" Crystal wasn't sure what to expect, but fixing her own food

sounded good.

"We'll get you a few things then, just in case you stay here longer than today," Elena said.

"Thank you I would really appreciate that." Crystal looked down at her dress then back to Elena. "Is this dress on right? I don't want to go out there if I've done it up wrong."

"Turn around." Elena twirled her finger to indicate that she should spin around.

Crystal did as she asked. "Well?"

"Not bad for your first try. Let me just fix this—" She tugged on one of the dress ties and redid it. "There you go. All fixed."

"Thanks." Crystal smiled. "Shall we go?"

"You'll want this too, it's helpful to keep you warm." Elena moved to the wall next to the wardrobe and pulled a hooded cloak from a peg and tied it around Crystal's shoulders.

"I can't believe I'm actually wearing all this medieval stuff. It's very surreal," Crystal said.

"It is but you'll see it's actually pretty comfortable and it keeps you very warm."

A few moments later they walked out of the cottage with Shaw following them. It felt strange to Crystal to have her own guard, but since it was the only way Jamie would let her stay and not send her away to the castle she had to endure it.

They returned to the town center and Elena directed her to the market area.

There were many tables set up with vendors selling their goods.

The fish stall they passed was very pungent.

Fresh herbs and vegetables hung from another stall and in the back was plenty of livestock.

Crystal thought it was very similar to the farmers markets that she'd been to back home.

As they walked through the crowd of townspeople, Crystal could hear everyone talking about the murder and how awful it was that the demons had gotten to Maeve.

She assumed that they meant the goblins that Elena, Melanie and Jamie had told her about.

She did her best to overhear anything that might be useful to the investigation.

It was the least she could do to keep her mind occupied instead of dwelling on the fact that she may never return home again.

That was something that had truly started to sink in and made her stomach hurt.

Elena bought Crystal some vegetables, fresh eggs, dried fish, a loaf of bread, and a bottle of mead. Then she handed her a freshly made meat pie that was the perfect size for eating while walking.

"I can't believe how good the food is here. I've never tasted anything like it," she said.

"True. I'm still amazed myself. Now let's get you a wedge of cheese."

The cheese stand had many varieties and Crystal picked a hard goat's cheese herself.

"Let's get this stuff back to the cottage. This should have you set for a while. But if the Laird wishes to meet you, we'll have to take you to the castle."

Crystal nodded. "I get that. I mean he's like the governor or something right? Courteney said he's like the guy in charge, but not the King."

"Right, I guess governor is similar to what he is.

He's the political power, the head of the Watch, the judge, the owner of the land.

People come to him to solve their differences, help when they are in trouble, that kind of thing," Elena explained.

"He's also the one in charge of keeping everyone safe from the dark fae. "

"Still don't know why he'd want to see me, but I get it. If he wants to meet me, I have to go."

"Exactly." Elena nodded and reached into a pouch tied to her dress. "Here's some money." She dropped some coins into Crystal's hand. "When these goods run out you can come to the market and buy more now that you see where it is and how to haggle."

"Thanks, Elena. I don't know how I'd have done all this without you."

"It's my pleasure. Us time-traveling women need to stick together. And as I said, the Laird is very generous. He makes sure that we have everything we need when we

arrive, including money to purchase things."

"I admit I am very curious about seeing this castle you keep talking about, and meeting your Laird."

"Urquhart Castle is a sight to see, definitely. It sits on a isle that juts out into Loch Ness at the end of a long land bridge. It's honestly beautiful."

They walked with the bundles back toward the cottage. Crystal couldn't stop thinking about how everyone spoke of these demons and how strange it was to think that they were really goblins.

They entered the cottage and put the goods on the table. Elena turned to her and said, "Well I must be off. I have work to do with the Watch."

"Where are you going?" Crystal asked curiously.

"We're heading back to the scene of the crime," Elena responded.

Crystal's gears began to turn and she knew exactly what her next question would be even if that question was a demand.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

"Take me with you please," Crystal said.

"To the crime scene? I can't do that. Jamie'd be angry and I'll never hear the end of it," Elena said.

Crystal huffed. "You know that I write about crime. That means that I have read and dissected every single crime that I've come across. This is no different, even if it is in a different time period."

"That might be true but I can't. You don't understand this place yet. It's safer for you here under guard."

"He can come with us. You shouldn't be out there alone either. Courteney said their house was outside of the village," Crystal said.

Elena was quiet for a moment. "Very well, you're probably intricate to solving this murder anyway, seeing as that's usually how it works. Jamie won't be happy, but we'll do our best to make sure you're protected, right, Rory?"

"Aye, my lady." Rory nodded.

"I will just tell Jamie that I made you bring me, then he can't be mad at you."

Elena chuckled. "I think he knows me well enough to know that no one can make me do anything. I'm pretty stubborn."

Crystal laughed. "I am as well." "All right then, let's grab another of the meat pies and

then we should get going," Elena said.

Crystal found the bag with the pies and handed Rory and Elena one, then grabbed one for herself. They ate them quickly and headed out the door. "How far of a walk is it?" she asked.

"We won't be walking. Do you know how to ride a horse?" Elena asked, pausing her steps.

"I've never been on a horse in my life," Crystal admitted.

"She can ride with me," Rory suggested.

"That will work," Elena strode to the stables near the tavern.

A few minutes later, two horses were saddled and Rory was directing Crystal into the saddle. Once she was seated, he swung up behind her, grabbed the reins and turned the horse in the direction they were going to travel.

Crystal turned her gaze toward Elena to see her astride a chocolate brown mare, looking as though she'd been riding her whole life.

She seemed very confident upon the horse.

As they rode, Crystal had no idea what to do with her hands, so she wound her fingers into the horse's mane to hold on.

She didn't think she'd actually fall off, though, not with Rory's arms blocking her in.

They galloped along a dirt road for about twenty minutes and Crystal watched as they passed by homes that were closer to the village until they grew further and further

apart.

Finally they arrived at a cottage that was a little bigger than Courteney's.

Crystal noticed that the home wasn't the only building on the property.

Behind it was a small outbuilding that was half open, and a barn, which was also open where the horses were kept.

It was a good hiding place for anyone who might be waiting for Maeve to come home.

Crystal took note of it as Rory reined the horse in and they came to a stop.

Jamie stepped out of the outbuilding and strode over to them wearing a frown. "Why did you bring the lass?"

"These two demanded I bring the lass, says she might be able to help solve the murder," Shaw commented as he dismounted and helped Crystal down.

"Is that so? And what makes you think that you are capable of solving something like this murder? Were you a detective like Elena?" he asked, giving her a hard stare.

"Well, no, but I did have to investigate many crimes where I am from."

"She's a crime novelist," Elena replied, dismounting as well.

"What might that be?" Jamie narrowed his eyes, obviously not liking what he was hearing.

"I'm an author. I write books."

Jamie scoffed. "So you think coming out here when we haven't any idea of what or who has murdered Maeve is a good idea? Have you lost your mind, lass? This is dangerous work, and I can't be having a novelist out here causing me to be distracted!"

Crystal put her hands on her hips. "I can and I will investigate this crime. You are not the boss of me, Jamie Grant. I am in control of my body not you." She gave him a defiant look, daring him to make her leave.

The Watchmen who had come out of the barn grinned and turned away.

Clearly they found the argument between her and Jamie amusing, but decided it might be better to give them some privacy as they returned to the barn.

Or maybe they were just going back to work, Crystal couldn't be sure.

Either way, she was grateful not to have a large audience.

"I am not trying to control your body," Jamie said, his voice gruff as he ran a hand through his thick blond hair.

"Only trying to save my own head. If anything happened to you while you were out here, the Laird would have my head.

You're not qualified to be out here. You're only here to satisfy your own selfish curiosity! "

Crystal took a step toward him getting in his face.

He was being pig-headed and she knew that she could help.

She glared at him, digging in her heels.

"I am not being selfish! Yes, I may be curious, I've never encountered anything supernatural, so I understand that it may be dangerous, but you aren't the boss of me.

I can go where I want and do what I want with my own body. You don't own me."

Jamie's chest heaved, an angry look on his face as he stared at her, but there was something else brewing between them and Crystal could sense it.

She was pretty sure he could too because the fire in his eyes turned to something softer.

She felt her cheeks flush and her eyes narrowed at him, but she felt anything but angry.

Jamie groaned, clearly annoyed. "All of you lasses from the future are impossible! Stubborn, and mule headed—" "How dare you—" Crystal began, but Melanie cut her off.

"Enough, both of you. We have work to do. Now you both can make yourself useful or go argue in that field over there like animals."

Crystal took a step back from him, counting to ten and calming herself.

Jamie turned away, muttering to himself about trouble finding women.

"I'm sorry for getting drawn into an argument like that.

I'm here to help, Melanie. I am really good at investigating.

I might have only been a writer, but I did my work and I did help with a couple of cold cases back home.

" Crystal smiled as she explained. "I know you were interviewing witnesses yesterday, I heard some of it, but what have you found here at the crime scene?

" she asked, completely ignoring the fact that Jamie was in charge.

She wanted to rile him up because he'd pissed her off.

"We've been looking for any signs of animal tracks, but so far all we've found are horse hooves and boot prints.

We've matched Brian's Maeve's and Courteney's to many of the boot prints, and Brian's horse as well as ours to the hoof prints, but there are others we haven't been able to verify.

It could be from the Watchmen who were here the night of the murder, but we can't be sure," Melanie answered.

"It's very troubling." "Why specifically look for animal tracks? " Crystal asked.

"Well it's not exactly animal tracks that we're looking for but something that would look like an animal track.

It's what the Goblins would leave behind," Jamie said, sounding calmer.

"It rained earlier in the day on the night of the murder, so the ground was soft and the tracks would remain and stay fresh because it has not rained since. "

Crystal was still having trouble understanding what these goblins were.

The only reference she had for them were the muppet kind of goblins she'd seen in movies.

In the movies they were capable of speaking English, but if they were looking for animal tracks, she wondered if that meant the goblins were more like animals here.

"What kind of animals are these goblins? " she asked.

Jamie frowned and tilted his head at her. "They aren't animals, not like you're thinking. They are—" he stopped and looked at Elena and Melanie for help.

"Okay, so you know how they were portrayed in the movies?" Melanie asked.

Crystal nodded. "Yes, I mean I've seen Labyrinth, who hasn't?" She shrugged.

"So they are similar. They can speak both in their own language, and in ours.

Depending on what type of goblin they are, they have various features.

Some are more vicious than other, like the redcaps.

Their foot prints will look similar to our feet, but with fewer toes, and smaller than an adult human's.

Unless we're dealing with a goblin sorceress who has stolen someone's identity again.

" Melanie frowned and looked over at Jamie. "Think that's possible?"

Jamie shook his head. "The ones who are capable of doing that are very few. It'd be unlikely and Nellie is locked away in the Seelie Court prison, so it cannot be her."

Crystal had no idea who this Nellie person was, but she was more concerned that there were goblins who could steal someone's identity. "So, how do they steal someone's identity here? I mean it seems like everyone here knows everyone else, wouldn't they recognize a goblin?"

"When we say that, we mean that they can shapeshift and trade bodies with the human.

The human becomes the goblin and the goblin takes on the human's form.

You'll have to ask Mary about it sometime, she's a little sensitive about it, but she's back to her own body now that the spell was broken, and more willing to talk about it," Elena explained.

The entire idea was terrifying and Crystal really hoped they weren't dealing with that kind of goblin. "Let's hope Jamie is right and that's not what we're dealing with here."

"Exactly." Melanie nodded. "Anyway, if you would help with looking for their tracks, that could be useful."

Crystal nodded. "Yes, I can do that, but I would like to be shown inside the cottage, if you don't mind? I'd like to see where the body was found and for you to explain how she died," Crystal said.

"I can do that, but... what do you mean by how she died?" Melanie asked. "She was murdered."

"I know but... Courteney said there was blood everywhere, the ceiling even. How did that happen?" Crystal's gaze was drawn to Jamie who arched a brow at her request. He didn't deny her access though, and for that she was grateful.

"Ah, okay, follow me," Melanie replied.

She and Elena led Crystal to the small bedroom.

The room had been cleaned and smelled of some sort of cleaning fluid, but there were still stains upon the wall and floor.

Crystal's gaze moved to the low ceiling and she could make out a few stains there as well.

They'd been scrubbed, but it seemed that didn't get rid of all the blood evidence.

"Her body was found here, though I didn't see it." Elena pointed to the spot on the floor. "From what I am told, it looked as though she'd been mauled and her body slashed. Whether by a goblin or man, I can't say."

Crystal frowned. "You think a man might have done it?"

"I'd hate to think that there is someone in the village capable of this kind of violence, but we all know that men are capable of this kind of attack.

Goblins are dangerous, and they too have been known to do this kind of damage.

Redcaps especially. If that's what we're dealing with, there will be more attacks. "

Crystal was glad to have this investigation to focus on for a few hours.

It distracted her from the fact that she had traveled through time to an era where women were treated like property and she found that worrying.

It also distracted her from thinking about Jamie.

Though he was just a few feet away, outside the cottage.

Just that thought of him seemed to conjure him up, as he stepped into the cottage a moment later.

"If you are finished in here, we could use your help searching the property."

Crystal's gaze met his and for a moment she thought he might say something more, but he simply gave her an enigmatic look, turned on his heel and left again. She sighed as she watched him leave. She admired the way his broad shoulders filled the doorway as he left.

"We should go help," Elena murmured, breaking Crystal's thoughts about Jamie.

"Yes, there's not much we can do in here right now I suppose." She followed the other women back out of the cottage.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

After the group spent a few hours looking around the entire property as much as they could, they reconvened on the grassy area in front of the cottage.

Crystal grew nervous as their investigation at the home drew to a close.

She knew Jamie was going to tell her that she couldn't stay another night in the village alone and that he needed to escort her to the castle.

But that's not what she wanted. This mystery intrigued her and being alone in the castle around strangers that she didn't know wasn't something she was looking forward to.

She had grown used to Melanie and Elena and felt comfortable with them, but most of all she wanted to spend more time with Jamie, even if she wouldn't admit that to anyone.

"I want to continue to help with the investigation," Crystal said as she joined the group.

"Lass, I know you think you are like Elena, but you haven't her training, nor Melanie's," Jamie started.

"I might not have held a license to investigate like they do, but I could have. I helped the police solve a few cases that they hadn't been able to solve while I was researching for one of my novels."

"And how exactly did you do that, lass?" Jamie scoffed. "If the Watchmen of your

time weren't capable, how were you able to?"

Crystal glared at him. "I have a brain. I was able to work out a few details that they missed and put them together like a puzzle. I am very detail oriented, I'm telling you I can help."

Jamie turned to Shaw and said something in a language that Crystal had never heard.

"What is that?" she asked, looking at Melanie.

"They're speaking Gaelic because they know you can't." Melanie frowned and added, "They're saying something about the goblins though."

Jamie and Rory continued speaking, ignoring them.

Finally, Elena touched Jamie's arm and said, "I think she could be of some help. All of us have tried to come up with an answer. Perhaps fresh eyes on the whole situation will notice something that we haven't."

"Exactly. I demand that you let me help with this investigation," Crystal said turned to Jamie, meeting his gaze.

Jamie grinned. "Oh you demand?"

The Watchmen nearby chuckled in response as he looked toward them.

This only made Crystal more frustrated. She wasn't going to back down because this investigation gave her something practical and useful to focus on while she came to terms with exactly what was happening to her. She wasn't giving up without a fight.

"I know what you're thinking, Jamie Grant. You think that because I've just arrived

that I can't help you. You see me and must think me a weak woman, but I'm not as fragile as I might look."

"Aye, I can see that is true. My answer is still no," he said.

"That's it? No without any explanation?" she said, feeling exasperated. She crossed her arms and stared at him with defiance.

"I have already given you an explanation once, lass, but you are too stubborn and thick-headed to have let it sunk in. I am in charge here. And I cannot let anything happen to you. This is dangerous out here right now and you aren't trained for it."

"If that's the case, won't it make more sense that you keep me close?" she said.

Jamie put his hands on his hips and hung his head in thought. Crystal thought that maybe she had convinced him. He scanned the area and then looked to his men, followed by Melanie and Elena. Finally he walked toward Crystal and put his hand around her arm, a movement that set her skin afire.

He pulled her away from the group and spoke to her softly. "It is not that I think you can't handle yourself, lass."

"No? Then what?" She looked up at him, jutting her stubborn chin in the air.

For a moment he didn't answer and Crystal thought that he was going to kiss her.

It was quiet and intense between them. Her eyes moved away from his gray ones and down his strong cheek to his plump lips.

She waited, even though she knew that everyone was watching but in the moment she lost sense of that.

Jamie swallowed hard and finally spoke. "It is that I am worried about what will happen to you if you see the horrors that we could uncover, lass.

The goblins are brutal. What will that do to you to see such a thing?

You have already been through a traumatic event.

You had to die in your time for the fae to bring you here, you're lost in time, don't know where you truly are, and you're among strangers.

Add that to what we might see in this investigation, well that won't be good for you, lass. "

Crystal was surprised by his kindness and tenderness in this moment.

He wasn't trying to stop her from helping because he thought a woman couldn't help, but because he worried about her mental state.

Something that was before his time if she thought about it.

Still what he didn't understand was that she'd endured seeing absolute horror when working on her novels and investigating those cold cases.

She knew that her mental state relied on her occupying her thoughts with this investigation.

The horror didn't bother her as much as it once had when she'd first started delving into crime.

Right now though, her mind needed to be distracted from when and where she was as she was still trying to come to terms with it, with the fact that somehow she had died

in her own time.

"Thank you, it is kind of you to be concerned about my mind.

And you are right there could be some horrible things that I might see, but I guarantee you I've seen horrible things before and survived.

I appreciate you worrying about me, but I know myself.

The best thing for me is actually to stay busy, to work through this puzzle instead of sitting idle and worry about myself and how I got here.

If you sentence me to go back to Courteney's cottage or worse, to the castle, I'll simply sit there in my own thoughts all day going mad.

That's not what I want. Please, Jamie, I'm begging you. Let me help."

"Aye, idleness is the devil's hands, that is for certain," he said.

"So will you let me come with you?"

He sighed deeply. His gaze moved to Melanie and Elena and then back at Crystal.

"Fine, lass, but if it be too much for you then you must say something."

"Yes, I will. Thank you." Crystal propped up on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. It was meant to be a simple and quick thank you kiss, but it lingered a little too long. She pulled back and locked eyes with him.

"You're welcome," he said. His voice was thick with lust, and she noticed.

The sound of a wagon jostling down the road caught their attention.

"Brian," Jamie said.

The group moved to the front of the cottage and waited until the wagon came to a stop. Brian sat on the bench with the reins in his hands and Courteney sat by his side holding a bundle of goods.

Brian seemed to be despondent, just as Courteney had described him. He jumped down from the wagon and went to work unhooking the horse, and he did it all without acknowledging their presence. Courteney stepped off of the wagon and Jamie helped her by grabbing her bundle as she did so.

Brian led the horse to the back stable while Courteney stayed with the group.

"Any news?" Courteney asked.

"Nothing new. There are no unusual tracks here, only human. We have not found much, but thank you for letting us take another look," Jamie replied.

"Aye, whatever will help."

Jamie looked toward Brian in the stables. "Is he still the same?"

"Aye, no change. Hardly says a word."

"As to be expected," Jamie said.

They all watched as Brian entered the cottage and shut the door. Within moments they could hear him weeping inside. It broke Crystal's heart to hear him and made her only more determined to help find his wife's killer.

"I'm very sorry. He has been like that every time he enters. I have begged him to

come stay in the village at my place so that he is not reminded of the gruesome scene. He refuses. He wants to stay here in case the culprit returns. if I were not here with him he would never eat or drink."

"Aye, tis good of you to be here, Courteney," Shaw said.

"Let's let the man grieve in peace," Jamie said. "Come."

"Thank you, Jamie," Courteney said.

"If anything changes, we will be at the tavern for a few hours for the noon meal. Send word to us there. I have told Wallace that you can leave word and we will return for it," Jamie said.

"Aye, I will," Courteney said.

"Get your horses, lads," Jamie ordered to the group.

Courteney walked over to Crystal with a soft smile on her face. "Miss, have you found my cottage suitable?"

"I have, Courteney. Thank you very much again for letting me stay there. It is very warm, cozy, and comfortable."

"Good. I am glad to hear that. I should be gettin' inside then and startin' on the noon meal. Such sorrow and sadness in this place, tis hard."

Crystal put her hand on her shoulder. "You are a very strong woman."

That seemed to lift her spirits a little as she turned and walked into the cottage. Jamie led his horse over to her.

"Can you climb up on your own?" he asked.

She realized that he wanted her to ride with him.

She wasn't used to climbing onto the saddle of a horse on her own.

Rory had helped her last time. However, she didn't want to appear weak in front of Jamie, so she gathered her skirts, reached for the saddle and stuck her foot in the stirrup.

She swung her leg over and scooted forward as Jamie leapt up into the saddle behind her.

This felt very different than riding with Rory.

Jamie was pressed up close to her backside and it sent a tiny thrill through her as he wrapped his arms around her, holding the reins.

"Ready?" he asked, his voice soft in her ear.

"As ready as I'll ever be I suppose."

He let out a chuckle and then kicked his horse into motion. The others followed his lead.

As they galloped across the countryside Crystal felt more alive than she had in a very long time.

Feeling the hard abs of the Scottish warrior against her back was thrilling.

It almost felt better than being notified that her first book would be published.

His scent engulfed her senses, making her giddy.

He smelled earthy and manly, and it turned her on in the most animal sense possible.

This ride made her think about the erotic dream that she'd had about him, and that only turned her on even more.

By the time they arrived at the tavern her face was flushed pink, but she was able to blame it on the cold wind whipping against her face on the ride, and no one was the wiser.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

The Gatehouse Inn was not as busy as it had been the day before.

It was an hour past noon and most had eaten and left.

The group took a seat at a long table near the fireplace in the back of the room, away from the front door.

There was much to discuss but their bellies needed to be filled as well.

Crystal found herself very hungry as the small meat pies she had for breakfast weren't enough, especially after working up such an appetite on the ride back to the tavern.

"Wallace, a round of hearty stew for all of us, some loaves of bread, and mead as well," Jamie shouted to the Innkeeper as they sat down at the table.

"Aye, have it right out to you," Wallace said.

"I could eat a whole batch of stew," Elena said.

"Me too," Crystal said. She noticed that Jamie gave her a bit of a wink at her comment. Perhaps he liked a girl with an appetite.

"Let's review what we know so far," Melanie suggested.

"Aye," Jamie agreed. "We know that Brian was the one to find the victim.

We know that no one heard any screams or saw anyone headed to that cottage.

At least not anyone we have questions so far.

That could change. We know that it happened sometime after four in the afternoon, as Maeve had been seen in the village at that time, and before Brian returned home from the Blacksmith's.

We've checked the tracks and there is nothing that gives us any advantage. What else do we know?"

"If I may?" Crystal interjected.

"Go on then, lass," Jamie said eyeing her.

Crystal hoped that she could impress him.

"The murder was very violent, from what I've been told.

I don't think this was a burglary, because those are usually swiftly done, get in and get out and there was nothing of value taken.

I noticed there was jewelry on one of the tables in the bedroom that looked to have a nice gems in them.

A thief would have taken them. Now, I haven't seen the body, and I don't know what a goblin kill looks like, but from what Melanie said, this killing was brutal and from my experience that means that it's most likely that whoever did it knew Maeve.

In our time—" Crystal indicated Elena, Melanie and herself, "when someone is stabbed that many times, it is usually because the person is in a rage and sometimes what we refer to as a crime of passion.

That would take some acquaintanceship between the victim and the suspect. Meaning they're not strangers."

Jamie looked thoughtful. "That is an interesting point, lass. It would make sense except for the fact that we have creatures here that commit crimes like this for fun. Such as the goblins."

"I still don't understand this goblin situation. Since we're sitting here about to dine, perhaps one of you can enlighten me more?" Crystal asked.

"I've brought you all some mead," Wallace said at that moment bringing cups of Mead and setting them on the table.

"Well we already told you they're creatures, like from the movies or fairytales. Like in those, humanoid in shape, but usually shorter than adult humans. Their skin is gray, black, or green, sometimes with patches of all of that. They're kind of grotesque looking," Elena explained.

"They're manipulative and scheming. They love violence and will kill humans just for sport, or for food," Melanie added.

"That's horrible," Crystal said. She looked at Jamie.

He nodded his head acknowledging that they were speaking the truth.

"There's different groups of them, each with various skills and abilities. But what's most important to know is that they have access to magic, and I don't mean that Las Vegas crap, I mean real magic," Elena said.

"Like what kind?" Crystal asked.

"Well if they are strong enough, they can shapeshift or steal an identity, like I mentioned before or some of them can turn invisible," Elena said.

"Invisible? Like one might be in here right now?" Crystal said looking around.

"They mostly only come out at night, they don't do well in the sunlight, even if they're invisible. Horses will react to them being nearby, other animals too, so that is helpful in knowing when one is close enough to attack," Jamie said.

"That is good to know. So how do you defend yourself against such creatures?" Crystal asked. "I know you mentioned iron when you gave me the dagger."

"Aye, iron is deadly to them," Jamie said. "When they are struck with anything else they heal quickly, but iron wounds them. Still have the dagger I gave you?"

"I do," she said patting her side where the dagger in its sheath banged against her thigh.

"They mostly attack in groups, so if you come across them, hide or run," Melanie said.

"In groups?" Crystal replied.

"Aye," Jamie said. "We can often track them for miles and raid their camps after they have attacked on our lands."

"So why do you think a goblin took Maeve's life if they remain in groups? Someone would have seen a group of goblins, and we would have tracks to follow, wouldn't we?" Crystal asked.

"True, but there has been an occasion in the past when a goblin has become obsessed

with a human woman and gone off on its own to claim her," Jamie said.

"That must be terrifying to become the target of something like that," Crystal said.

"How can you all live in the same area as these creatures?"

"Clan Grant is the protector of these lands from the dark fae. We watch over this side of the Burgh from Urquhart Castle. It is our duty to protect humans from the dark fae," Shaw said.

"Hence the Watchmen..." Crystal said.

"Aye. Though protecting against the fae are not all we do. We also protect against bandits and the like as well," Jamie said.

"The Watch are the police force of this time and place," Elena added, keeping her voice low as Wallace came toward them with a large pot on a trolley.

"Here we are. Steaming stew. Made fresh this morning," Wallace said as he filled set bowls of stew on the table. A small woman dressed in a brown dress with a white apron helped pass out the bowls and loaves of bread to those at the table."

"Thank you, Wallace," Jamie said.

Crystal felt her stomach grumble as the steam reached her nose. She wanted to dig in immediately as the Watchmen did, with some stew dribbling down their beards, but she held back and ate with some grace.

"Okay so I think I know enough about these goblins for now, definitely not a motorcycle gang.

What about Maeve? I know very little of her," Crystal said.

She pushed a spoonful of stew into her mouth and restrained from allowing the loud moan of pure joy from escaping between her lips at the bite of deliciousness. "What kind of woman was she?"

"She's the most bonnie lass in town, or was, God rest her soul," Shaw said without looking up from his stew. "Every unattached man in the village wanted her hand."

The other Watchmen nodded in agreement as they continued to eat.

"She married an Englishman instead," Jamie said with a roll of his eyes and a sour look upon his face.

"English? Brian is English?" Crystal asked.

"He is. He moved here some time ago. He's a farrier, and works with the Blacksmith. He came here for work, and is quite skilled. When they met, they fell in love," Melanie said.

"Which some of the men in town did not like. I know many felt slighted that the bonnie lass picked an Englishman over her own Scotsmen," Shaw added.

"I see," Crystal said, processing this information of a possible jealous suitor, which she thought of as a motive, but kept to herself.

"But that was so long ago, it's all but forgotten," Shaw continued.

Crystal, however, knew that long ago meant that someone might have had their hatred simmering for a long time and it eventually boiled over, but since these men were more into the goblins she continued to question in that direction.

"And of these goblins, how do we know if they have been in this area? It seems that

someone would have seen them," Crystal asked.

"There is one person we could ask. She would know," Jamie said, looking thoughtful.

"Maggie," Elena said with a nod.

"We will go and see her after we eat," Jamie said. "Maggie is wise in the ways of the fae and nearly always helpful. At least she has always been helpful to me." He smiled as he took another bite of his stew.

Crystal didn't know who Maggie was, but she somehow felt a little jealous of how Jamie admired her. Was this his lover? Surely someone who looked like him couldn't be sleeping in an empty bed. She was both intrigued to meet Maggie, and also apprehensive.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

Crystal was glad to be out of the village.

She did like it, but it was starting to become too much for her.

It would help her mental state if she could see something else, anything else.

The mystery of the crime had piqued her interest and it was a good distraction but she also needed to believe that she truly was in a different time.

Seeing the open land would help that a lot.

There she could get reassurance that there were no airplanes flying over.

That she didn't hear the ringing of a phone or beeping of a car.

She needed to make sure of this on her own and not simply be told.

As they rode, she saw none of these things and instead saw the endless beauty of the land.

There were forests on one side of the long dirt road and rolling green hills on the other as well as just a peek of the lake, which Jamie said was Loch Ness.

Once leaving the village proper, there weren't any cottages out this direction, which surprised her and had her wondering where exactly this Maggie woman lived.

There was no sign of modern devices anywhere.

Even the people they passed along the road seemed from this time and not her own.

Crystal realized that the more she saw the more she had to come to terms with the fact that Melanie and Elena were telling her the truth. It was a hard truth to stomach but believing it was easier than not believing it.

"We are nearly to Maggie's, she lives just past this bend in the road. If you keep traveling this direction for another fifteen to twenty more minutes, you'll reach the land bridge to the Keep," Jamie said, his breath warm on her ear.

The ride to Maggie's seemed familiar to Crystal. It looked like the same area she had seen when she rode in Gavin's wagon after he'd pulled her from the lake. She hadn't seen a cottage though, so maybe she was wrong.

"So Maggie's cottage is on the shores of Loch Ness?" she asked as she took in the area.

"Aye, Maggie knows more about the fae than anyone, she's very protective of the land and the Loch especially.

I'd imagine if Gavin had not been out upon the water, Maggie would have made sure you were rescued.

She'd have also seen you made it up to the Keep as well, instead of taking you to the village. "

Crystal thought about being in the lake again.

It seemed like a dizzy dream. How she had kicked for the surface thinking she would die and the way she felt in shock when Gavin pulled her into his small fishing boat.

It all happening during darkness which made it seem so surreal as though none of it ever happened at all.

She still wondered how it was that she came to be there even though it had been explained to her she wanted to know every detail about it.

Did the drugs that Mason gave her cause her to die or did she die on the way to the hospital?

If she went to the hospital at all.

Perhaps she died there at the bar while Mason argued with the bouncer.

Did Mason mistakenly give her a drug that killed her instead of one that knocked her out?

She had so many questions and it annoyed her to know that she would never know the answers.

She wondered if the other women felt the same.

Maybe one day she'd be able to ask them how they dealt with the not knowing.

Crystal could see the old cottage they were headed to, but beyond it she could see a bigger portion of the lake. "Is that it, the lake... I mean loch," she asked.

"Aye, Loch Ness," he said.

"Loch Ness is pretty well known in my time, but I'd never visited it. It doesn't look the way I thought it would. It is so dark and much larger than I imagined it would be," she said.

"Aye, tis very deep and cold as ice," he said.

Crystal felt anxious about recalling that icy cold water and spending hours damp in wet clothes.

It also made her anxious that this meant they were almost to Maggie.

It made her nervous to be in this position especially if he had a special bond with this woman named Maggie.

It was possible that Maggie would see Jamie holding her on the horse and not be happy about it.

She was still getting used to this talk of goblins and magic and maybe this Maggie also was magical and could do something strange like curse her.

"Are you all right, lass?" Jamie asked.

"Yes, why do you ask?"

"You seemed to tense up and pull away from me," he replied.

"Oh, sorry, just recalling my time in the water," Crystal said, relaxing again, not wanting him to know what she was really thinking about. She hadn't realized that her thoughts about Maggie were coming through physically.

"I must confess that I am impressed with the way that you are handling everything. I think some of my own men would crumble if they had gone through the same thing that you are going through," he said with a tone of light-heartedness.

"I appreciate it," she said.

"I'm glad you're here to help unravel this mystery. I think you have a good mind for investigations," he said.

"Well when you write crime thrillers you have to be good at it, unraveling mysteries is the same as putting one together, just in reverse," she said.

"Aye, I suppose it is," he said.

Crystal felt that this conversation had a casual nature to it than any previous conversation they had had so far. It was a good sign to her because it meant that he was starting to get to know her a little better and that was something she welcomed.

"Are you cold, lass?" he asked.

"No, I'm fine," she said. "This cloak and dress are plenty warm."

"Good. You seem able to handle the brisk Scottish air. I suppose after being found in the Loch, and being cold and wet in the night that once you've gone through something like that, you can handle anything," he said.

"You could be right," she said, smiling up at him over her shoulder. "And as I said, this cloak and dress are surprisingly warm." "Aye, they're from good Scottish wool," he said. "We're here."

He reined in the horse and dismounted and then helped her down. Crystal looked around as he tied the horse to a tree. A moment later, he removed his belt with his sword and attached it to the horse.

"Do you have the dagger?" he asked.

Crystal pulled it from her pocket. "Yes?"

"Let me have it for now. Maggie doesn't like weapons in her cottage."

Crystal handed it over and he put it in the saddle bag.

She turned back to look at the cottage. It was made of stone and had a thatched roof.

Off to the side she could see a large garden area that seemed to extend behind the cottage.

Something about the place reminded her of a witch's house in fairytales.

If this Maggie had magic, maybe she was a witch?

The idea that she was going to piss off a witch because she was with her sweetheart, had her anxiety spiking.

"How do you know this woman?" she asked quietly.

"Woman?" Jamie chuckled. "I'm not sure I would call her that exactly," Jamie said.

"What?" Crystal scrunched up her nose as her confusion built.

"Maggie isn't what you're thinking, lass," he said with a snicker as though enjoying keeping this little secret from her.

As they drew closer the door opened. A mound of rags stood in the doorway. It moved down onto the front porch and raised a hand in greeting.

"Is that her?" Crystal whispered. "Is that Maggie?"

"Aye, tis me." Maggie cackled.

Crystal was taken aback by the fact that she'd heard her question and Jamie laughed. A moment later the others arrived too and dismounted, some letting their horses roam the area eating grass instead of tying them up as Jamie did.

Maggie shuffled off of the porch and over to Crystal and Jamie. As she grew closer, Crystal noticed she wasn't just a mound of rags, and they weren't rags at all, but layers and layers of sweaters. Beneath all of that was a wizened old face.

Up close, Crystal could see the fine lines and wrinkled skin.

There was a seriousness to the look in the old woman's eyes.

She looked human, but there was something otherworldly about her as well, Crystal thought as she studied her.

Maggie on the other hand intrusively looked at her turning Crystal around and examining her like a piece of meat. Finally Maggie spoke.

"So you're the new lass the Sidhe have sent to us then? I felt you come through the Burgh, you know. Nessie would have seen to you if Gavin hadn't been there to help you out." Maggie nodded and the mound of sweaters shifted with her movement.

Crystal wondered who Nessie was, but didn't ask, she was beyond confused by how Maggie had felt her come through the Burgh, which again, she still didn't understand.

Maggie cackled again. "Come, come. Darter will be excited to meet you too." She waved to Elena, Maggie and the others."

Crystal looked at Jamie completely confused. He raised his brow, arching it very high and grinned sideways, then followed after Maggie with one hand on Crystal's elbow to guide her and a bundle of something in his other hand.

Crystal looked over to Melanie and Elena who simply shrugged their shoulders and gestured for her to go with Jamie, though they followed behind. Shaw and the other Watchmen stayed outside and sat down on the wall, pulling their flasks from their waist belt.

"So what did you bring me, Jamie boy?" Maggie asked, eyeing the bundle.

Jamie chuckled. "Well, it's not Blair's, but I think you'll find it nearly as tasty." He handed over the bundle.

Maggie opened it. "Aye, shortbread from the tavern is almost as good." She broke a piece off and gobbled it down, then sat down on a sofa in the cluttered room and began pouring tea. "Sit, sit." She waved her arm toward the chairs and sofa by the fireplace.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

Crystal did her best not to knock anything over as she moved to sit.

She wondered how Maggie was able to get through the narrow walkways between the furniture without disturbing anything, but it was almost like the room moved around her, which was strange to contemplate.

She felt stupid for thinking that Maggie might be Jamie's secret lover, because obviously this woman was much much older than she'd thought when they'd discussed her earlier.

Then remembering that Maggie had heard her while yards away from the cottage, she wondered if Maggie could also read her thoughts and quickly tried to make her mind blank.

"What brings you by for a visit, then?" Maggie asked as she handed a cup of tea to Crystal.

"Thank you," Crystal murmured.

Maggie's gaze shot up and she looked from her to Jamie then over to Elena and Melanie. "You haven't told her?"

Crystal frowned, confused. "What?"

Maggie gave Jamie a fierce look then turned back to Crystal. "Never, ever thank a fae. They'll take advantage of you and expect a favor."

"Wait... what? I don't understand."

"I'm fae, well part fae, so you don't have to worry about me askin' you for your first born, but others, oh yes, don't be thankin' the fae, you understand?"

Crystal really didn't know what to say, but nodded her understanding.

"Jamie boy, I expected better of you! And of you two as well!" Maggie's gruff voice was full of disappointment.

"Sorry, Maggie. We should have explained better," Elena said, her voice filled with contrition.

"Now, let's begin again, what brings you here?" she asked.

"We need to know if anything's escaped from the Burgh lately," Jamie replied.

"I'd hardly call Crystal's arrival an escape." Maggie cackled as she passed around the shortbread.

"Aye, though I meant anything other than Crystal."

"I am aware of what you meant, Jamie Grant. Nothing else has come through."

"You're sure?" Jamie questioned.

Maggie gave him a look of disdain. "You know better than to question my knowings."

"Aye, I do." Jamie sighed and drank his tea.

"Why come all this way for such a question?" Maggie asked.

"You've likely heard about Maeve's murder. It was a brutal attack," Elena said nibbling on a piece of shortbread. "We're afraid it might have been goblins," Melanie added.

Maggie looked thoughtful for a moment. "Hmm, have not seen goblins in these parts for almost six months now, not since that battle with Nellie," she said.

"Aye, I expected as much seeing as we haven't had any livestock go missing, nor any reports of their usual mischief.

Could it be there are still bands of them further out who've made their way back toward the Burgh?

" Jamie asked. "Anything is possible as always," Maggie said as she poured a sixth cup of tea.

Suddenly the door opened and a creature entered that made Crystal's mouth fall open.

She blinked her eyes to make sure that she wasn't seeing things.

Although this creature was strange to look at, she could tell that there was a sweetness to him and she didn't want to offend him by reacting with shock.

His skin was gray with scales and his ears were pointed and furry.

The left arm was withered and blackened and the hand was missing.

"Oh aye, you've not met Darter yet have you? Don't worry. He's a goblin but he won't harm ye," Maggie said, looking at Crystal.

"Goblin? But?—"

"Not this one," Jamie said. "This is Darter Hob of the Seelie Court. Darter meet Crystal Corwin. She's our newest arrival from the future," Jamie said.

Darter bowed a quick bow and then scampered over to Maggie's side where she offered him a piece of the shortbread and a cup of tea.

"I'm a Glashtyn, a water goblin. I live on this side of the Burgh with Maggie," he said proudly.

"I see," Crystal said, still feeling a bit shocked.

Crystal drank her tea and listened to Jamie talk to Maggie mostly giving her updates about the castle keep and village.

There was no more talk of the murder and she could sense that Jamie was turning their visit from one of gathering information to a social one where they spoke of people that Crystal had yet to meet.

While they spoke, Crystal couldn't stop looking over at Darter with curiosity.

She had now seen a goblin and had no choice but to believe that they were real and she truly was in a different world.

It was a shock to her system but seeing was believing.

Darter ignored her for the most part as he continued to eat the shortbread as quickly as Maggie.

After they finished their tea and had enjoyed their visit, Maggie escorted them to the

door. "You are welcome here anytime, Crystal Corbin. I like having visits from those at the Keep."

"Oh, but I'm not at the Keep," Crystal started to explain.

"You will be, mark my words." Maggie cackled again and waved them off.

Jamie handed her the dagger again, and then put his weapons belt back around his waist. He lifted her up onto the horse and then swung up behind her. "Send word to me at the Gatehouse, if you learn of anything that might be of help to our investigation, would you, Maggie?"

"Aye, you know I will, Jamie Grant. Safe travels," she said.

"And Crystal, I think you will soon find your forever with our Jamie here. Enjoy yourself."

Her words startled Crystal. "What? What do you mean?" Crystal asked, confusion strong in her voice.

Maggie responded with a cackle and then returned inside her cottage.

Jamie cleared his throat and his face was slightly red as he said, "Ready to go?"

"Yes, I'm ready," she said, still feeling confused. Maggie's words echoed in her mind the entire ride back to the village. Something told her to take her words seriously. If only she knew what she meant..

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

As they rode away from Maggie's Crystal noticed that it had gotten much colder. The sun was making its descent into the horizon and could barely be seen through the trees of the forest on their left. She turned to look at the lake and wondered again about it. "Jamie?"

"Aye?"

"Maggie said that if Gavin hadn't found me, Nessie would have. What did she mean? Who is Nessie?"

"Nessie is more of a what, not a who," he answered.

"She meant the Loch Ness Monster," Elena said from next to her.

Crystal's eyes widened in fear. "I was in there with a monster?" Panic filled her as she began to shiver.

Jamie tightened his arms around her. "You're fine, lass. The monster is somewhat friendly."

"At least she's friendly to us. Not so much to the ones who wish to harm her or us. She's a very good ally to have patrolling the Loch," Elena added.

Crystal continued to shiver out of both fear and cold. She was very wary of the huge lake now. Her eyes kept straying over to it, thinking she'd see the monster's long neck sticking up out of the water at any moment. "Does she look like how she's portrayed back home?" she asked.

"Yes, she resembles an aquatic dinosaur, long neck, looks kind of like a Brachiosaurus but she has fins," Melanie answered.

"She helped Mary get to shore when she got here. She's the one who arrived just before you," Elena said.

"The one who had her identity stolen?"

"Aye, that's the one. She's married to Hamish now," Jamie answered.

Crystal shivered again and Jamie moved the reins to his left hand as he reached down and opened the saddle bag on the right. He pulled out a plaid wool bundle and as he shook it out, Crystal realized it was a blanket.

"Can you hold the reins for a moment?" he asked.

Crystal hesitantly took them, keeping the same slack that he'd had. "Why? What are you doing?"

"It is getting cold and I do not wish for you to take a chill." He swung the blanket around his shoulders and brought the edges forward. "Scoot back against my chest more," he directed.

Crystal did as he asked, moving her body until she was flush against him and felt the warmth of him seep into her back.

He pulled the blanket around the two of them and tied the corners in front of her.

She handed him back the reins and gripped the edges of the blanket, pulling it tighter against her to keep the warmth in.

"There now, that will keep us both warm, keep our heat in together," he said. "It gets cold once the sun starts to head toward the horizon. We will need to be out of these woods soon."

"Why is that?"

"Goblins come out at nightfall," Jamie answered.

"They can even be in the shadows of the trees as long as they don't have the direct sunlight on their skin," Rory added.

"Someone mentioned that before about the goblins. About the sun hurting them. What about Darter though? He had been outside in the sun while we were there, how come it didn't hurt him?"

"Aye, Darter is a Glashtyn, they are able to withstand the sunlight better than most, but Glashtyn are generally not the kind that cause us trouble," he said.

"So you still think there might be a band of goblins out there, looking to harm people?" Crystal's gaze was drawn to the trees as she tried to peer into the forest depths to find the creatures that might harm them.

"Aye, tis possible."

"I think I want to get back to the village as quickly as possible now." She pressed even closer to Jamie's front in her fear. She could feel his hard abs against her back and it calmed her some to have him so close.

"Aye, we are making good time and we should see the entrance to the village in just a few minutes," he said.

Jamie was right. Within two minutes she could make out the outskirts of the town.

They returned to the village safe and sound and without incident.

Supper and whisky was eaten at the tavern and Crystal actually enjoyed being there because it was comforting to her.

It was a place that she knew and she liked that there were many people around so that the goblins didn't suddenly show up to attack them.

As she ate, Crystal couldn't stop thinking about what Maggie had told her just before leaving.

What could she have meant by her words? She considered asking Melanie and Elena what she meant, but she was almost afraid to find out.

She suspected that Maggie could tell that she was attracted to Jamie and that was why she'd said what she said, but forever?

Who could predict that? And Crystal wasn't even sure that Jamie liked her in that sense.

Crystal slept restlessly and with good reason.

She had managed to convince Jamie to let her stay another night in Courteney's cottage, with Rory and Shaw taking turns on watch.

However, she had a rude awakening as Shaw pounded on her door in the early morning hours, before the sun had even fully risen.

Wrapping a blanket around her, she hurried to the door and opened it.

"Shaw, what is it? Is there a fire?"

"No, lass, there's been another murder."

"What? Where?"

"Get yourself dressed, we must go. Rory came to inform us that we must meet them as soon as possible at the tavern."

"All right give me just a couple minutes," she said.

She closed the door, tossed the blanket onto the bed, and stripped out of the nightdress.

It took her only a few minutes to put the blouse and dress on.

She pulled the stockings up her legs and shoved her feet into her boots, then grabbed her cloak and headed out the door.

They walked with quick speed toward the tavern. The place was quite busy with people and very loud, as a man was shouting from inside the depths of the building.

"I suggest you stay behind me, lass," Shaw said, putting his arm out as he stepped into the doorway.

Crystal did as he asked, staying behind him, but tried her best to catch a glimpse of what was going on inside. Before she even saw him, she recognized that the shouting was from the man who had grabbed her before. Cameron Gilroy.

"Tell me where those demons are, Jamie. I will hunt them down myself and kill every last one of them for what they've done," Cameron belligerently shouted.

This was followed by the sound of glass breaking as he threw items across the tavern.

"Now calm down, Cameron," Jamie said.

Crystal moved under Shaw's arm to get a better look. Cameron was roaring drunk, teetering in his boots. His face was flushed red and his eyes were bloodshot. It looked to her like he had been crying.

"Calm down? They killed Billy. I'll wring their necks. Those bastards," Cameron shouted.

"I understand your anger, Cameron and I am sorry for your loss. We will catch them, but I need your cooperation and to ask you a few questions," Jamie said. His hand was out with his palm up, trying to calm the man.

Cameron slapped his hand away and in the process, fell back onto a bench. Then the man began to sob. "I found him— I went to fetch him an hour ago from the house. I had passed out in the stables and never made it inside. When I came to..."

"Yes, go on," Jamie said softly.

"When I woke, I headed into the cottage and found him dead, slashed and shredded something awful. His throat slit with a blade," Cameron said. "He...he..." he tried to continue, but he couldn't finish his sentence. Instead he put his head down on the table and sobbed into his elbow.

Crystal listened to this information and processed it.

Now the murderer had gone after a man. This was important because she had assumed that whoever killed Maeve was a past suitor and that her murder was done out of jealousy.

That didn't match up with this new murder of Billy Gilroy.

There was something very strange going on here.

This time, from Cameron's words, it sounded like a blade was used when he said that Billy's throat was slit.

That was different from Maeve's murder in which she had been found with multiple stab wounds and bruising from a beating of some kind.

"Wallace, get Cameron a whisky," Jamie said. Then he moved closer to Wallace and whispered, "Best he pass out in his cups than keep on raging like this."

Wallace nodded his head in agreement and went to fetch a full bottle of whisky and set it in front of Cameron not bothering with a cup.

Cameron took a swig straight from the bottle.

He leaned his back against the corner wall and continued to drink.

Jamie saw her and Shaw in the doorway and approached.

"Outside," Jamie said.

Shaw turned and saw Crystal eavesdropping, grabbed her arm, and pulled her away from the tavern and into the courtyard of the inn. Jamie and the others joined them.

"Lass." Jamie nodded and gave her a small smile. "You are well?"

"Good morning, Jamie, I am." She smiled back. It was nice that he asked after her, even with everything going on. "So Billy Gilroy has been murdered as well?" she

asked.

"Aye. This is bad, very bad. We must send word to the Laird," Jamie said. "We're going to need more guards to scout for the goblin pack, if it tis them that's done this."

"Aye," Rory agreed.

"Also, we must go to the Gilroy cottage straight away before anything is changed and others come to take a look. Once word spreads of this, there will be many who will come to have a look. They live just on the outskirts of the village to the north," Jamie said.

"I want to come," Crystal said.

"No, it is not safe," Jamie said automatically.

Crystal frowned and put her hands on her hips. "The man is already dead and the killer is long gone, or else they would have gone after Cameron as well. Besides, you said I could help and this is a major break in the case. I must come with you," she replied.

Jamie sighed and looked at Rory and Shaw. They both shrugged.

"If we are needed to investigate, we'll have to leave the lass on her own. Probably best she stay with us," Rory said, looking at her and giving her a small wink.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

Jamie's jaw twitched and he seemed stressed. "Fine. She comes. Go fetch your horses. I will have Wallace send word to the Laird of this murder."

"Aye. We'll meet back here," Rory said as he and the others headed for the stables next to the inn.

Jamie started for the door of the Gatehouse with Crystal on his heels since she didn't have a horse to fetch. He stopped and turned so abruptly she ran right into his chest. "Careful now, lass," he murmured as he gripped her arms to keep her from tumbling backward.

"Sorry, I wasn't expecting you to stop and turn around," she said, as heat filled her cheeks.

"Stay right here. I do not like leaving you alone, but I do not want you coming inside right now. Cameron is not stable and might do something violent if he sees you."

A shiver raced up her spine and she nodded. "Right. I'll stay here by the door," she said. Crystal planted herself outside the door against the door while Jamie popped into the tavern.

He returned within two minutes and moved straight toward her side. "I've already had my horse readied. Let's get you mounted," Jamie said as he led her over to the horse and untied it.

He put his hands on her hips and lifted her up so she could swing her leg over the saddle. A moment later he hopped up behind her and the joined the others in the

courtyard.

"Let us be off," Jamie directed.

A few minutes later they arrived at a home just beyond the village proper.

She thought it was a bit run down from the other ones she'd seen but the property was fairly large with there were two small buildings and a stable behind it.

One looked like storage and the other a small barn.

They dismounted the horses and stopped before approaching.

"Follow in one line to keep our tracks together, and be aware of any other footprints so we do not mar them. If you see anything on the ground let me know," Jamie said. "Shaw, you, Elena and Melanie take the outer buildings, we'll head for the cottage."

Rory and Crystal followed Jamie to the door of the cottage and entered.

Crystal was excited that she was going to see a live crime scene this time instead of just photos of one, that was until she actually saw it.

Billy lay on the floor of the main room in a pool of blood. His throat had been slit from one ear to the other.

"Just as Cameron said, whoever did this slit his throat," Jamie said.

"It looks like there was a struggle in here." Crystal pointed out a table knocked over and a chair, as well as a shelf knocked from the wall with various item fallen to the floor.

"Aye, a violent one," Rory added.

Crystal moved closer to the body even though her stomach was starting spasm, especially at the smell.

She directed Jamie's attention to the body.

"Look. It's not just his throat. He was stabbed in his upper arm, and here in his chest. It looks as though the knife struck him again and again here in the chest."

"Aye, I see it," Jamie said.

Crystal had seen many real crime scenes in her research but only via photos. Seeing the real thing in person made her stomach churn. She held it together because she didn't want Jamie to regret his decision to let her come along. This was more horrible than anything she could have imagined.

"These stab wounds are smaller than a dagger like you gave me would have made, what about the ones that were inflicted on Maeve?"

What kind of shape were they? Did they resemble the same?

" Crystal asked. "Good question, lass," Jamie said as he studied the wounds.

"What I gave you is a dirk, most Scotsmen carry them.

The wounds upon Maeve were more of a slashing kind, so if they were made by a blade, it would be hard to say, which is why we've considered it might have been goblins who killed her.

These wounds appear more like those of a Bollock dagger, which is thinner than a

dirk," Jamie explained.

"Okay, so possibly two different weapons?" Crystal hypothesized.

"Aye," Jamie agreed. "Or two different goblins."

"Right, or two different goblins," Crystal conceded, though she had no idea what that meant. "Is that likely though? For two different goblins to attack like this, but one attacked a woman and one a man?"

"Goblins generally attack in packs," Jamie said.

"I remember you saying that, but is it likely that if there was more than one goblin here, that only one did this kind of damage to him?"

"I could not say, lass. The goblins are tricky. They may be trying to manipulate us into thinking there is only one attacking."

Crystal frowned at that. "But why stab Billy like this, but slash Maeve. If they were trying to manipulate us into thinking it was a lone goblin, wouldn't they keep the attack the same?"

"Maybe because Billy was stronger as a man, and Maeve wasn't as a woman," Rory said.

"That is possible," Jamie said.

Crystal turned her head from the body and looked at the cottage floor. "If there were goblins here, there should be tracks in the blood. Don't you think? I don't see any," she said.

"That is a curious observation, lass. Maybe we should check outside," Jamie said.

"I'll do it," she said and went straight for the door. As soon as she stepped out she took a deep breath of air. Then she followed their footprints back toward the horses. She walked far from the door to catch her breath to keep herself from vomiting.

A moment later, Jamie approached her and put his hand on her back. She found his touch comforting.

"You alright, lass?" he asked.

"I am. Just needed some fresh air for a moment. The smell is horrible in there. I didn't expect it to have such a sickly sweet metallic smell."

"Aye, tis awful," he said.

"Whoever did that, it's inhuman. I know I've questioned whether it was goblins, but I have to tell you, humans are capable of such gruesome acts as well," she said.

Jamie nodded, and then looked up over her shoulder. "Oh no," he groaned.

"What?" she asked, turning to look behind her.

A group of neighbors were approaching.

"I need to keep them away from here. Go and fetch Rory."

"Alright," she said as she hurried back down the path they'd created. Crystal stood outside the cottage door and shouted, "Rory, Jamie wants you."

Rory stepped out and headed for Jamie. As the others emerged from the out buildings

to join Jamie and Rory at heading off the neighbors, Crystal took it upon herself to scour the exterior walls of the cottage.

She looked for tracks of any kind before the deluge of neighbors trampled the crime scene and because she didn't want to go back inside where the body was.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

The investigation around the house led to the same findings as at Maeve's house.

There were no footprints to be found except for those of a man's boots, which they could not say for sure if they belonged to Billy, Cameron, or the murderer.

There were no claw marks found anywhere, nor signs of magic that would point to a magical creature.

"No sign of goblin blood, either," Jamie said. "Which I would expect with the struggle that must have happened."

"How would you know if it is goblin blood?" Crystal asked.

"It's green, lass. Not red like ours," he said.

"That's good to know," she said. "I didn't see anything like that around the building."

"We found no signs of goblins in the outer buildings either," Elena added.

"I found where Cameron spent the night, there was a pool of vomit and an indentation in the hay where he slept," Shaw added.

Jamie nodded. "We should head back to the Gatehouse," he said to Crystal. "Rory, you and Shaw keep the neighbors from entering the cottage. I'll send someone to fetch the body and take it to the church for burial."

They remounted their horses and headed back to the village. Elena and Melanie rode

side by side behind her and Jamie. It didn't take long to reach the inn's courtyard. Instead of taking the horses to the stable, they latched the reins to a hitching post.

"I wonder if Cameron is still here," Crystal murmured, eyeing the door to the tavern warily.

The question was answered a moment later when a crash came from inside with some shouting, "I'll kill em' I will."

"Sounds like he's still here," Melanie said.

"Unbelievable. We left him with enough whisky to drop any man," Jamie said.

The tavern was empty except for one table in the far corner. It was obvious that anyone who came in, quickly left after being insulted by the drunken brute at the corner table.

"You said givin' him whisky would knock him out. It's only made him worse," Wallace said as he scurried to Jamie.

"Apologies, Wallace. I appears I did not know his limits," Jamie said.

"Cameron, Cameron look at me," Jamie said walking up to him slowly.

"You and your stupid Watchmen. This is your fault. Demons running rampant as they please. Now they've killed my brother. If you had caught them, Billy would still be alive and all," Cameron said standing up and pushing at Jamie's chest. He stumbled backward a bit with the push, but stayed upright.

"Go on then. Let's have it. Tell me that you are good for nothing, Watcher. Watchers of nothing. Out there prancing about with these whores. You're not working at all to

find these demons just rolling around in the hay with these harlots," Cameron said.

"No need to speak of the ladies in such a way. Step back out of my face," Jamie said.

Crystal could tell by the tone of Jamie's voice that he was giving Cameron a serious warning.

"Shut it, Jamie. You are useless. I'll go find these demons myself because you can't. And while I'm at it, I'll have a go with the ladies you're keeping company with. That one there is mine anyway." Cameron turned his bleary gaze toward Crystal and lumbered toward her.

Crystal felt a chill go up her spine as he got closer. She froze in place out of sheer fright. His size was huge and she felt very small. She was so frightened she forgot about the dagger she was carrying in her pocket for protection.

A few inches before Cameron reached her, he fell forward with a loud thud. Jamie stood behind him, his sword raised. He had hit Cameron on the head with the hilt of his sword. The brute lay on the floor of the tavern out cold.

"Thank the Lord," Wallace said.

"Well, now what do we do with him?" Elena asked.

"We'll drag him out back to the stable, let him sleep it off there," Jamie said.

"Aye. Good idea," Wallace said. "I'll gather some men to help move him."

Jamie then approached Crystal. "Are you alright, lass?"

"Yes, I think so. Thank you," she said, tripping over her words.

"You're shakin' something awful," he said.

"Am I? I didn't notice."

Jamie pulled her aside while Melanie and Elena helped Wallace prop Cameron up to ready him for moving.

"Here, it's alright," Jamie said, rubbing his hands up and down her arms. "I'd never have let him near you, lass."

She nodded. "That helps," she said, meaning his comforting touch. Crystal looked up into his gray eyes and found herself growing calmer.

"Indeed, it does. Let's find you a seat. We will be staying here for the noon meal," he said.

"Alright," she said.

"Wallace, can we get this lass a whisky?" Jamie said.

"Aye," Wallace said. "I've got some men coming to help with Gilroy." He poured a mug of whisky and delivered it to Crystal.

Elena and Melanie moved to sit beside her at the table to join in the libation as well. Jamie helped the men drag Cameron out of the tavern.

"Are you alright, Crystal?" Melanie asked.

"I'm okay. Just a bit shaken by that but it will pass."

"How was the crime scene?" Elena asked and Crystal realized that she and Melanie

had never entered the cottage.

"As awful as can be expected," Crystal said. "Lots and lots of blood. Made my stomach turn." Crystal shot back the entire glass of whisky and then tapped on it, catching Wallace's eye.

Wallace looked at her and simply brought a bottle of whisky over to them. Elena handed him some coin.

"I know what you mean. It took me a long time to get used to that when I was a detective in Baltimore. I'm not really sure I did get used to it."

"About the crime scene. This one was done with a different weapon or by a different goblin. Why change your m.o.? Serial killers usually stick to one method." That was what was bothering her most about the scene.

"True, not always, but majority of the time," Elena said.

"It's very empty here," Crystal said, looking around the room.

"It's not usually like this. Cameron probably scared them off. Once news spreads of Billy, more people will come to get the latest gossip," Melanie said.

"So what all did you notice?" Elena asked.

Crystal described what she saw at Billy's in detail to Melanie and Elena and when she was done, Jamie re-entered the tavern and sat with them.

Wallace served them meat pies, dried fish, a wedge of cheese and a few bread rolls. It was topped off with mugs of mead. As they discussed their next moves, they were caught off guard by the door opening and a flood of villagers entering.

"There he is," one villager with a long red beard said. He pointed at Jamie.

Jamie stood up immediately.

"What's all this?" Jamie asked.

"We demand answers. This is the second murder. We are not safe here. When will the laird send more Watchmen?" the villager said.

Another butted in, "No, we need the whole guard out searching for these demons."

The growing crowd cheered in agreement. Crystal watched as Jamie put his hands up and said, "Calm down, now. I understand your concerns."

"Where is the Captain of the Guard? Why has he not come here himself?" a woman shouted.

Again the crowd cheered in agreement.

"Enough," a burly voice shouted in the doorway.

Crystal noticed that Elena stood up and softly said, "Brendan."

Crystal knew that name to be Elena's husband. Brendan was a large bear of man and also the Captain of the Guard. He stepped into the tavern.

"We are posting guards around the village and have set up patrols to guard those who live outside of the village proper.

Remember that the demons are adverse to iron, so make sure you have it close by and remain in your homes after nightfall," Brendan bellowed so loudly that it drew

silence from the villagers.

The villagers grumbled but seemed to accept what Brendan was telling them.

Brendan moved toward them and greeted his wife, Elena, giving her a big hug and kiss. "I've missed you," he murmured.

"I've missed you as well." Elena's cheeks pinkened.

For a moment, Crystal envied their connection. Though the man was burly with wavy dark hair and dark beard, there was something soft in his hard black eyes when he looked at Elena.

"Come, let us hear of this latest murder and what your thoughts are concerning the village," Brendon directed Jamie to join him and a couple of others at the next table over. He kissed Elena's cheek and she sat back down by Crystal's side.

"We aren't joining them?" Crystal asked, eyeing the men.

Elena shook her head. "No, they're just getting updated and then they'll be talking logistics and passing along messages from the Laird." "Your husband is not what I expected," Crystal said.

"Nor what I expected to marry, but he grew on me," Elena said with a laugh.

"It happens to us all," Melanie said.

Crystal wondered if it would happen to her, but she couldn't see such a future with anyone.

Her interest in Jamie was getting stronger and she lusted after him, but how could she

possibly make a life here?

She wanted to find a way to get back to her own life, if at all possible.

It would be her first priority after they caught the murder suspect.

Jamie finally came over after about an hour and spoke to Crystal.

"I have a lot of work to do with the Watch.

There is not much for you ladies to do at the moment.

You should enjoy supper while you can. We will be heading out on patrol.

You should be getting back to the cottage before sundown though, if that is where you wish to stay again," he said.

"Alright. I do want to stay the night there again. Will Rory or Shaw be coming to guard?" she asked.

"No, it will be Mark." Jamie directed her attention to a boy dressed in the same attire as Jamie and the other Watchmen. He looked to be young, probably not even twenty yet. "See him over there? He's young but well-trained."

"Oh, I see," she said trying to hide her disappointment.

Jamie moved closer and drew her up from her seat and toward the fireplace where he could speak to only her. "Lass, if I could, I would guard you myself. T'would be my pleasure," he whispered in a thick voice as he stared deeply into her eyes.

Her skin came alive with his confession. The thought of him guarding her and

protecting her, turned her on. "You would?" she asked.

Before he could answer, Mark strode over to them and interrupted. "Is this the lass, I am to guard?"

"Aye, this is Miss Crystal Corwin. Crystal, this is Mark Grant."

"Pleased to meet you, my lady."

"Escort her home after the supper meal and post yourself outside her cottage until I send someone to relieve you."

"Aye, I'll be ready when you are, my lady," Mark said.

Crystal returned to the table with Elena and Melanie, but her gaze stayed on Jamie until he walked out the door with Brendan and a few of the other guards. Mark, true to his word, took a spot at another table and kept watch over her and the other women.

"Where are you two staying?" Crystal asked, as it hadn't occurred to her that they didn't need guards until now. "Don't you need a guard to watch over you both as well?"

"We've got a room here at the inn that we're sharing. If it weren't too much trouble, we'd head back to the castle in the evenings, but Brendon and Aelfred felt it would be best if we took a room here while we were investigating."

"Your husbands don't mind you being gone?" Crystal asked.

"Oh, they mind," Melanie said with a laugh, "but they know that can't stop us."

"Brendan gets annoyed, but he knows I have the training they need for investigations, so he grudgingly accepts it. Besides, it's not often that we need to be away from the castle at night. It's not that far away, but since we could be dealing with goblins, this is just safer."

"I see," Crystal replied.

They spent another hour talking then ordered their supper and soon after Crystal said her goodbyes to everyone and left with Mark, all the while wondering how Jamie was doing out on patrol and wishing he were the one escorting her home to guard her.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

The evening passed to night and Crystal spent the time pacing back and forth in Courteney's cottage.

The mystery of the two murders occupied her mind.

She was trying to piece together who could be doing this.

Her gut was telling her that it wasn't goblins, but she wasn't sure if that just because they were a new idea to her, or if she was actually correct and it was a human monster they were after.

With the first murder she had been pretty positive that the killer was a suitor who was jealous that Maeve had chosen another, especially after hearing Rory say that she was the prettiest woman in the village who then married an Englishman who the Scots were not fond of in general.

However, the murder of Billy didn't fit that motive.

That was why she started to think that her gut instinct was wrong and maybe the rest of the group was right from the beginning. That it was some goblins just causing chaos and murdering without any motive except to cause violence and confusion.

It grew late, and she began to get ready for bed.

She placed two logs on the fire and then poured some of the water from the bucket that Mark had fetched for her into the wash basin.

She scrubbed herself vigorously with the wedge of soap and rinsed off, then used the rough fabric cloth to dry herself.

She put on her borrowed night dress and blew out all the candles. She placed the dagger under her pillow and pulled the heavy wool blanket over her. Slowly she drifted off into a deep slumber after such a trying day.

Her sleep was troubled though by nightmares about being stuck underwater, trying to make her way to the surface.

However, no matter how hard she swam, she never reached it.

Her heart pounded and her lungs screamed for air, but she didn't dare open her mouth to take a breath.

Panic filled her until she woke with a start.

She snapped up in bed, wide awake. Something had woken her, but she couldn't say what it was.

She recalled hearing a loud sound, but as she looked around the darkened room, she couldn't say what it was.

She sat quietly looking into the darkness of the cottage.

The fire had gone out completely and it was cold in the room.

Bang. Bang. There was pounding at the door that was loud and aggressive.

Had that been what woke her? Crystal pulled the dagger from under her pillow and got out of bed.

At first she thought it might be Mark telling her that there had been another murder.

But why would he be pounding so aggressively? Was he simply trying to wake her up?

Then she heard a growl and then a loud grunt that gave her chills and she suddenly came to realize that it wasn't Mark at the door. Nor was it any one friendly to her. Anyone who knew her would have already called out her name telling her to wake up. That hadn't happened.

She looked around the room but there were no real hiding places.

Quickly, she moved into a dark corner of the cottage away from the bed and waited.

Perhaps if she was quiet, whoever was at the door would move on thinking the cottage was empty.

Anyone else probably would have lit a candle by now and shouted at the door to find out whoever it was, but Crystal knew something was wrong.

She held her breath hoping they would go away.

The pounding not only continued, it got louder and she realized that the perpetrator was kicking the door.

She could hear it straining against its hinges.

Whoever it was really wanted to get in and that frightened her even more.

She wondered where Mark was and why he was allowing this person to beat on the door.

Had he been pulled away for some strange reason?

Had he gone away to relieve himself? If that was the case, she hoped he'd return shortly.

There was no way of knowing what had happened to him and she was conflicted about whether she should scream at the top of her lungs in order to alert the Watchmen that she knew were posted throughout the village or stay calm and hope that this violent aggressor would go away.

There was one last kick and the door burst open.

Crystal took the dagger out of the sheath and held it tightly in her hand.

She held it down by her thigh behind the night dress so that the blade didn't catch any moonlight streaming in from the shutters.

The perpetrator entered, though she couldn't see clearly she could see an outline of the man.

He was broad shouldered, filling the doorway as he growled and grunted.

As they moved into the cottage they stumbled and pushed things over.

It made a ruckus when they pushed the chair over and it hit the ground.

Then she heard the man release some words that she couldn't make out, but seemed to be curses from his tone.

She hadn't heard a goblin other than Darter Hob talk, so she didn't know what they all sounded like or if they all sounded the same or different from each other.

It didn't matter because all she could think about was that she was about to meet the same fate as the others.

She was scared to death. More scared than she'd been just before leaving the bar and realizing that Mason was trying to get her alone.

Why had this man, this creature come for her?

She didn't know. Was it simply because she was new?

Whoever this was somehow got past her guard and the guards posted around the village.

At that moment she wished that Jamie was at her side.

Feelings of regret flooded her. She assumed this man or creature or whatever they were, was the killer and that her death was close and she hadn't had time to experience anything.

Suddenly she wanted to see the Urquhart Castle.

She wanted to feel Jamie's lips on hers.

She wanted to see the countryside and all it had to offer.

There was so much that she hadn't done in her short time here and it hit her hard as she hid from the killer.

It was too late. The killer had moved along every wall and now moved toward the corner where she stood frozen.

She could see the silhouette of the hulking body as it came for her, charging.

It had seen her nightdress which was white and she realized the moonlight coming in from the door made it so she could be seen upon closer inspection.

The killer lunged for her and she swung her hand up and lashed out at it with the dagger. It released a loud painful wail and another curse.

It came at her again this time she felt heavy hands wrap around her waist. "No! Don't touch me! Let me go!"

She squirmed and then got her hand above the killer's and swiped the dagger across his face.

"Argh," they shouted. One of the hands moved off of her and went for the gash on their face. The killer stumbled toward the door.

Crystal trembled and was in a state of frozen fear.

She had no idea how long she cowered there in the corner, clutching the dagger.

When she realized the killer was gone, she began to call out for help.

"HELP! Anyone! Help me please! HELP!" she screamed and then she heard the hooves of a horse approaching.

"Crystal?" a voice called as the horse came to a stop right outside the door.

She knew it was Jamie before she saw his silhouette in the doorway. Relief washed over her, but she was still shaking from nerves. Jamie held his sword in his hand ready to fight whoever attacked her. "Crystal, are you in there?"

"I'm over here," she said, unable to move.

Jamie went directly to her. "Lass, are you injured? What happened?" he asked with worry.

"I'm not hurt. I had the dagger and I injured who or whatever it was that busted in the door." She couldn't stop her body from shaking, even with his arms wrapped around her.

"Come over here, let me light a candle." Jamie drew her toward the table and lit a candle, then he took the dagger from her hand. He tilted it toward the candle light for a better look. "Tis human blood. Not Goblin blood."

Crystal had suspected it wasn't actually a goblin, based on the size of the person who had attacked her.

"Who was it, lass? Did you get a look at them?" he asked.

"No. The fire had gone out and it was so dark.

I heard a loud noise that woke me, and then there was banging on the door.

They didn't say anything, just growled and grunted, like they were trying to sound inhuman or something.

I don't understand why they came after me, though?

I haven't done anything to anyone here. Why come after me? " she said.

Feeling safe enough to have a small breakdown, Crystal allowed her emotions to take over. She began to sob and when she started to crumple to the ground, Jamie caught

her and held her in his arms. He soothed her and ran his hands up and down her back.

"It tis all right, lass. you are safe now. I am here. I have you and I will not let you out of my sight," Jamie whispered.

Crystal leaned against his hard chest feeling the protection of him as he wrapped his arms around her. She felt much safer in his arms than she'd felt in a very long time. She was grateful that he was the one who showed up.

"I'm so glad you came. I was so scared," she said.

"Aye, I was on my way here to relieve Mark from his watch. I was just up the lane and heard you scream, lass. I swear I have never felt the panic in my heart more than when I heard the fear in your voice."

"You did?" she asked.

"Aye. I am glad you are not hurt. I should have been here sooner. Where is Mark? Why is he not at his post?"

"I don't know," she said. "I was asleep and then there was banging. It's all a blur really," she said.

"Get your cloak and boots. We will check for Mark together," he said.

"Everything alright in there?" someone shouted from outside.

"Everything is fine, now," Jamie called out of the door.

Someone appeared in the doorway. "Ah Jamie. What happened?"

"Angus, thank you for your concern. Someone attacked Crystal, we were about to go look for Mark."

"Is the lass well?"

"Aye, shaken up, but she was able to chase the man away with her dagger."

"So a man was it? Not a demon?" Angus asked.

"Aye. No, seems this attack was done by a human, and I aim to find out who it was."
Jamie reached for Crystal's hand and together they stepped out of the cottage.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

The dark night began to glow with lanterns as more villagers were roused and Watchmen galloped toward the cottage from their posts around the village.

Crystal put her cloak closer over her nightdress that was splattered with blood. There was a chill in the air and her nightdress didn't do much to keep her warm. Jamie led her over to the group of gathered people who stood in the lane away from the cottage.

"Someone has attacked this lass in the night. What has happened to the guard I posted here?" he asked the group. "Has anyone seen Mark?"

A murmur of voices rumbled through the group, but none seemed to have seen the young guard.

"Spread out and see if we can find him," Jamie suggested.

"Over here," a villager shouted a few minutes later.

They all moved to the back of the cottage. Mark lay on the ground out cold.

"He's alive. Looks like he's been hit with something, see the blood trickling down his temple?" Jamie said. "Someone fetch some water to pour on his face."

"I'll go," Angus said.

Rory and Shaw rode up to the group. "What's happened?" Rory asked as he slid off his mount.

"Crystal was attacked inside Courteney's cottage. It seems that whoever it was knocked Mark out before breaking inside," Jamie said.

"Is the lass alright?" Shaw asked, looking at Crystal.

She nodded. "Yes, I'm alright. I had the dagger Jamie gave me and I defended myself."

"What attacked you?" Rory asked.

"T'was no demon, of that I can assure you," Jamie said.

"What? How can that be," the crowd of villagers murmured in shock.

"The lass was able to injure her attacker. The blood on the dagger was human, not demon," Jamie explained to the gathered crowd.

Rory leaned in and asked, "Where did you strike him, lass?"

"I... if I remember, I slashed across his cheek and maybe his arm or chest I'm not sure," she said.

Just then Angus splashed a bucket of water on Mark's face. He sputtered and coughed as he woke. Jamie knelt down beside him. "Mark, are you alright? What happened?" Jamie asked.

"I... everything went black. I came back here to relieve myself, then something struck me." Mark held his head and winced in pain.

"Aye, did you get a look at who did it?" Jamie asked.

"No, afraid not, they were behind me," Mark said.

"Alright listen, this is our chance to put an end to this. The attacker cannot be far. It's only been a short while. We are looking for a man with a fresh gash to the face. Go spread out. Shout if you find him," Jamie shouted to the villagers.

"Light some torches. Go in groups," Rory called out as they began to disperse.

"Rory, report this all to Brendan, once you have done that, head out to the patrols and let them know what we are searching for."

"Aye, on my way," Rory remounted his horse and galloped away.

"Shaw, take Mark inside and see to his wound, then stay inside the cottage, in case the attacker comes back," Jamie said.

"Aye, consider it done," Shaw helped Mark to his feet.

"And what about me?" Crystal asked.

Jamie looked at her and then back to Shaw and Mark. "Shaw wait one moment. Lass, go inside and put some clothes on. You will come with me," he said.

"Alright, please don't leave me," she said, her fear rising at being alone in the cottage.

"I wouldn't dream of it, lass," Jamie said. He gave her a look and for a moment Crystal thought he might kiss her, but the moment passed.

"I'll try to be quick," she murmured as Jamie followed her in.

He tried to fix the busted door back into place. He kept his back to her as she stripped

out of the cloak and nightdress, then put on her blouse and gown, then pulled on her stockings. "Nearly finished, lass?" he asked.

"You can turn around, just need to put my boots back on, and my cloak."

Jamie reopened the door and Crystal lit a couple more candles so that they could see to clean Mark's wound. "Bring him in," he said to Shaw.

Crystal quickly built the fire back up, then poured some water into a kettle that had been on the counter.

Once the fire was going, she hung the kettle up over the flames to warm it.

She found an extra wash rag in the drawer of the wardrobe and handed it to Shaw.

When the kettle was warmed she filled the wash basin with it.

"Once you see to his wounds, blow out the candles and wait here," Jamie said, reiterating his previous order.

Shaw nodded. "I'll put the fire out again too."

Crystal had her gaze on the ground as she went outside. Something glinting in the moonlight caught her eye. "Stop," she murmured.

Jamie stopped. "What is it, lass?"

"I see something. Let me get a candle." She went back inside the cottage and came out with a lit candle.

She returned outside and strode toward the right.

"Look." She pointed at a splatter of blood in the dirt next to some boot tracks.

She and Jamie followed them. They headed in the opposite direction from the town, around the group of cottages. "What's back there?"

"That's where Angus keeps his livestock," Jamie said.

"I think my attacker went that way."

"Tis a good hiding place and only one way to find out. Good work, lass," he said.
"Let me fetch my horse, then we'll go after him."

She grinned, feeling good that she had managed to do something useful. "I'll return the candle to the cottage."

A few minutes later, Jamie helped her to mount.

He climbed on behind her, and set the horse in motion.

"Let's search around the livestock and see if we can find your attacker, lass," he said softly in her ear.

It gave her chills to think that she would be looking for the man who attacked her, but she felt some comfort in the fact that she was with Jamie and that many of the villagers were also looking for the man, along with a large group of Watchmen.

She hoped that this was the end of it after tonight.

The terror could be over if it turned out that her attacker was the same one who murdered Maeve and Billy.

Jamie kept the horse's gait to a slow walk. She was sure it was so they wouldn't spook the attacker as they got closer to him. Ahead of them, Crystal pointed out a group of villagers. Jamie approached them, three men and two young teenage boys who held torches.

Jamie quietly said, "Follow behind me, we might need your help. I think the lass's attacker made his way to the livestock enclosure, but I don't want to spook him with noise. Stay quiet, understand?"

"Aye, we will follow you, Jamie," the eldest of the men said.

Slowly Jamie urged his horse toward the enclosure, but before he got too close he dismounted and handed the reins to Crystal.

He whispered, "If anything should happen to me, you ride hard back to the cottage to Shaw."

"No I won't leave you," she whispered in protest.

"Do as I say, lass" he commanded and his expression brooked no argument.

She nodded and remained on the horse, clutching the reins tightly. She didn't know how to guide the horse exactly, but figured she'd ridden with him enough to know the basics of what to do, though she might not end up going in the proper direction.

Jamie slowly stalked toward the shelter in the enclosure. Over her shoulder Crystal could see the group of men gaining on them. She turned back to Jamie. He drew his sword and got close.

Just then she heard a guttural scream as a large man charged at Jamie tackling him to the ground. "Argh."

"Jamie!" Crystal shouted. She saw Jamie roll out from under the large man and being wrestling with him. She shouted at the group of men with torches. "Come quick! He's here! He's here!"

The group of men started running toward them. Disobeying Jamie's orders, she slid off the horse and ran toward Jamie.

"I'll get you, you bastard!" the man shouted.

Crystal knew that voice well and a chill traveled through her body. The man who had attacked her had been Cameron Gilroy. The same man who had accosted her in the bar, twice.

"Cameron, give yourself up. You can't run," Jamie said as he slugged Cameron across the face.

Crystal drew closer and could see that Cameron was bleeding on his cheek, where she'd cut him. It confirmed to her that he was her attacker.

"It's Cameron Gilroy," she said to the group of men as they approached.

One of the men turned his back to her and put his fingers in his mouth and released a very loud whistle that echoed over the fields. The others waved the torches from side to side as a signal to anyone who might be watching.

Jamie punched Cameron in the gut. Cameron grabbed Jamie's arm and pinned it to the grass. Jamie used his knee to whack Cameron in the chest and get his arm loose. They went on like this until Jamie pushed his fingers into the gash on Cameron's cheek.

"Argh. Damn. Ah!" Cameron screamed as he held his cheek and rolled off of Jamie.

Jamie got to his feet and the other men grabbed Cameron's arms and legs, pinning him to the ground.

Jamie caught his breath and Crystal rushed into his arms. "I'm glad you're alright," she said.

Jamie held her by the waist. "I thought I gave you an order?"

"You did, but I'm not someone you can order around," she replied.

Jamie smiled at her, but just when she thought he would kiss her, he looked over her shoulder. She turned to see the rest of the villagers and the Watchmen approaching to arrest Cameron for the attack on her.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

The night had been long and eventful. Crystal couldn't believe that her life now resembled one of the novels she liked to write, only this was set in a different time period than what she was used to.

It was all very strange to think she'd become embroiled in a murder plot.

Though she wasn't sure that was what this was.

Sure Cameron had been the one to attack her, but did that mean he was the one who attacked Maeve and Billy? She couldn't be sure yet.

She watched as Cameron was put in a prisoner wagon with a cage of steel on the back. He cursed everyone and raged with anger. She could very much imagine that he was Maeve and Billy's killer by the way he was acting.

Crystal listened into the villagers Whispering among themselves.

Most of them were shocked that Cameron had attacked her and were speculating that he was the murderer.

It surprised them to think that one of their own could do things such awful things, even someone like Cameron who didn't have the respect of the town as it was.

Crystal knew that men killed their own brothers all the time including in history when a throne or other power struggle was the culprit.

She didn't think Cameron was capable of killing Billy because he had really seemed

to love him.

It didn't make sense to her, but she had also seen Cameron get angry and maybe it had been accidental or a drunken brawl between the brothers that had gotten out of hand.

No matter the reason it seemed that Cameron was going to take the fall for Maeve and Billy's deaths, whether he was guilty or not.

At least judging by how everyone was acting.

"Good work, Jamie," Brendan said after arriving with the rest of the group.

"Thank you, Brendan. It is actually the young lass here who led to Cameron's capture. She gave him that scratch on his cheek when he attacked her and she is the one who found his tracks leading from the cottage to the animal enclosure back here," Jamie said with admiration toward Crystal.

"Then many thanks to you, lass. My wife speaks highly of you and I can see why." Brendan gave her a bow of his head.

"Thank you and I think highly of her as well," Crystal replied. "I have a question though."

"What is it, lass?"

"What will happen to him? I mean I know he is the one who attacked me, but are we sure he's actually the killer we've been looking for?"

"He will be taken to the dungeon at the Keep. It is unlikely that there is another out there, however, we will question him and look for evidence to be sure of his guilt.

You do not have to worry that we have the wrong man," Brendan said.

"Aye," Jamie said, "In fact, there are a few questions I'd like to ask now, if you do not mind, Captain?"

"If you would like, I do not think the Laird would mind," Brendan said. He stepped back and allowed Jamie access to the prison wagon.

Crystal followed Jamie at a distance she did not want to get too close to Cameron after what had happened, even though he was locked up.

"Get away from me, you filthy bastard," Cameron said as Jamie approached. Cameron was in chains as he sat on a wooden plank seat in the wagon.

"You have no one to blame for your present state except for you. Now tell me why did you murder poor Maeve?" Jamie asked.

Cameron responded with a sneer and a growl, but he didn't answer the question. He simply turned his head away from them.

"Not going to answer that question? Fine, there are other ways to find out if you are behind her death if you want to be that way. Why kill your brother Billy though? Was he going to give you up?" Jamie asked.

Cameron attempted to stand but the chains pulled him back down to the bench. "How dare you. I did not touch my brother. I loved him."

"Yet, you killed him. Slit his throat straight through with such murderous rage, why?"

"I did not. I tell you I did not do it. Stupid animal," Cameron said.

"There is no use hiding it, Cameron. Tis over and you might as well speak the truth," Jamie said.

Crystal could tell that Jamie was attempting to get a confession from him but Cameron was staying quiet except for his angry curses and grunting.

Jamie asked again, rephrasing his questions, obviously hoping that Cameron would spill his guts and Crystal listened in, though she stayed out of Cameron's line of sight. She didn't want him to see her and make her his target again. She'd had enough of that.

Jamie finally gave up and moved away from Cameron. "Fine then, have it your way. The Laird will make sure to find the truth out of you." He put his hand on Crystal's lower back and escorted her back to the group. Rory stood there waiting for them.

"Is that it then?" Rory asked.

"No, we still need to connect him to Maeve and Billy's deaths," Jamie said.

"Why did he murder Maeve and his own brother?" Crystal asked, trying to figure out Cameron's motive.

"Sometimes one never knows the answer to that, if the killer will not give their reason," Rory said.

"That is true. Would be better if he confessed, but for tonight I think we have done all that we can," Jamie said. "We can look for evidence of his crimes once we've all rested."

"Aye, you have earned your rest, the both of you," Brendan said with a wink.

It made Crystal blush. Then she turned away, not wanting to be embarrassed. Most of the villagers began to disperse back to the village to go back to sleep. It was around midnight and Crystal began to feel exhaustion catching up to her, though the adrenaline was still moving through her.

"Come on let's get you somewhere warm," Jamie said.

He fetched his horse and together they rode back to the village to Courteney's cottage.

Shaw and Mark were still there waiting for more news.

A villager had stopped by to let them know that Crystal's attacker had been caught.

Jamie went on to explain everything happened in more detail.

"So it's done then? Cameron Gilroy all along?" Shaw asked.

"Aye, we believe so. He's locked in the prison wagon for now. Head over to the inn and get a room for the rest of the night. You can head to the Keep in the morning with the rest of the Watch. I'll stay here and keep an eye upon the lass," Jamie said.

Shaw gave him a raised brow, then a smirk. "Aye, I am sure you will."

"Get going you," Jamie said, slapping him on the back playfully.

Crystal entered the cottage and lit two more candles.

She began to poke the fire that Shaw had obviously relit after finding out that Cameron had been caught.

She placed two more logs on top of it. She watched as Jamie begin to fix the door.

He had found tools and hammered away at it, placing the door back on its hinges with ease.

Crystal was impressed with his handiwork, and that it was done with such quickness.

He closed the door and engaged the lock.

"Tea?" she asked.

"Aye, but also maybe something a bit stronger if you have it," he said.

"I do," she said. She placed two cups on the table and fetched the bottle of mead that Elena had bought her at the market. She handed it to Jamie and he pulled the cork out and poured some for them..

"You did very good tonight, lass. I was wrong to have doubted you early on. You are possibly the reason that we have captured Cameron. You do know how to investigate," he said.

"Thank you, I appreciate you acknowledging it. It means a lot because I am so out of place here. Sometimes when I wake up from sleep, I think I'm going to wake in my own time again and this would have all been some very long crazy dream."

"That I can understand," he said, raising his mug and tilting it toward her.

She picked hers up and clinked her's against his and they took a sip.

The mead was nice and warmed her cold insides as she drank. They drank in silence for a moment before Crystal finally stood up and moved to the counter. She pulled a loaf of bread and wedge of cheese from the bundle of goods Elena had bought her and began to slice them.

"Thank you, lass. I do have something of an appetite," he said.

She stopped slicing and looked at him. He looked at her with a different type of appetite in his eyes. She swallowed, then picked up her mead and drank a long heavy drink that made her cough.

"You all right, lass?" he asked.

"Yes, just a bit strong," she said.

She slid some bread and cheese in front of him and he ate. Crystal sat and joined him eating and drinking. She felt safe for the first time the whole night and at ease, but not completely ready for sleep. The adrenaline still rushed through her veins.

Jamie poured more mead into their cups and looked at her.

Crystal smiled and said, "Thank you for staying with me tonight. I'm terrified of someone busting in the door again, even though I know Cameron is locked up. What if he were to get loose?"

"He could, that is a possibility, but he would have to get through a group of Watchmen before he arrived here and I think he would possibly run toward the woods and try to get away, at least a smart person would. Not that he is," Jamie said with a bit of a joke.

"I am not entirely convinced there isn't a second killer," she said.

"Oh, why is that?" he asked.

"It's simply about the use of weapons. Billy was killed with a thinner dagger and Maeve with a dagger like the one you gave me. Also I really don't believe Cameron

would harm his brother," she said. Crystal took another long drink.

"Aye, I tend to agree with you, lass, but that is something for us to worry about on the morrow. For now I am here to protect you. Why don't you try to get some rest," he said.

He picked up a chair and turned it toward the door, but close to the fire.

"You're going to sleep in the chair?" she asked.

"I will try to get a wee nap, but we Watchmen are always sleeping with one eye open. I will make sure no one gets in here,," he said. "Go get in your bed, that is an order, lass."

Crystal stood up, took off her cloak, and hung it on the peg. "Maybe that is an order I will obey this time." She winked at him.

"Good." He chuckled.

She pulled off her boots but left everything else on. She didn't have a clean nightdress to sleep in, since the one she borrowed from Courteney had Cameron's blood on it and she didn't want to borrow another from Courteney.

"Good night, Jamie," she said as she stood by the bed in the corner of the room.

"Good night, lass. Sleep well," he said. Then he blew out the rest of the candles except for one and took his seat by the fire again.

Crystal crawled under the blanket and before she knew it she drifted off into a deep blissful sleep.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

Crystal's eyes fluttered open. She felt the chill of the night on her skin. The blanket had fallen off her and onto the floor. Then she remembered that Jamie was in the cottage with her.

She sat up in bed and noticed that the fire had burned down to embers. She fixed her hair with her fingers and pinched her cheeks. She put her hand in front of her mouth and breathed on it to check her breath. Then she tiptoed out of bed and pulled the blanket back on it.

Crystal moved as quietly as she could to the table and poured herself some mead and took a drink gargling and swishing it around in her mouth just a little before swallowing.

Then she walked over to the chair that Jamie sat in. He was asleep and she took a moment to look at his gorgeous face with a strong jawline and pale blond hair. He really was an attractive man.

She took the blanket off her bed and placed it on him, before stoking the fire. She grabbed a log ready to put it on when it was taken out of her hand. "I'll do that, lass," Jamie said. He leaned over in the chair.

"Oh no. I'm sorry I didn't mean to wake you," she said.

"Tis all right. I was bound to wake if it got any colder," he said. Then he took the blanket and handed it to her. "Thank you for that."

She took the blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders, then she moved to the

table and poured some water into the kettle. Once Jamie had the fire roaring again she placed the kettle on the iron hook and swiveled it over the fire to boil.

Crystal grabbed a chair and placed it next to Jamie's and sat down.

"Are you not going back to sleep?" he asked.

"I don't think I can, at least not for a while. Do you mind if I sit with you?"

"Of course not, I am glad for the company," he said.

"Good. I'll make us some hot tea as soon as the water boils to warm us. Tell me about the castle, do you live there?"

"Aye, I do. I am fortunate enough to have a comfortable chambers inside the castle and not in the barracks. Most single men have a shared room, but as a higher rank in the Watch, I have been afforded one above stairs. "

"Your last name is Grant, right?" she asked.

"Aye."

"Are all of you related?"

Jamie shook his head. "No, not all of us. There are some who are clan by choice. The Laird is a distant cousin to me, as is Brendan."

"Really? So you're royalty?" she teased.

He chuckled. "No, lass, none of us are royals."

"I'm worried about meeting your Laird. Is he harsh?" she asked.

"Aye, he can be when it tis deserved. But he is a good and honest man. Of course, every Laird needs to be fearsome or be seen as weak by his enemies." Jamie winked.

"Of course, how silly of me." She laughed.

Crystal grabbed a cloth to take the tea kettle to the kitchen table. She put a spoonful of fresh tea in two cups and poured hot water on top of it. She gave one to Jamie and took her place sitting down at the fire.

"I like this. It is simple." Jamie gazed into the fire holding his teacup.

"What is simple?" She took a sip of the tea.

"Sitting by the fire with good company and a hot cup of tea. It is simple and enjoyable."

"I think I have to agree with you on that, Mr. Grant," she said playfully.

"Oh you do? That is good to know. It will be light in about an hour, so I am enjoying this moment before we return to chaos."

"Ugh, I don't want to think about it anymore.

My brain is exhausted from thinking about all of it.

I will process it more once the sun comes up and we can figure out the mysterious motivation of if or why Cameron did these things.

But for now I only want to talk about this hot cup of tea and the weather. "

Jamie chuckled. "The weather? Is that so?"

"Yes." A small amused smile played upon her lips.

"And I suppose you will be wanting to talk about something as mundane as the seasonal planting and harvest. Perhaps even the milking of goats," he teased her back.

"Yes absolutely that is the only thing I want to talk about. I love goats they are very cute."

"Cute? they smell not so cute."

"Tell me everything of the goats and the planting." She her body toward him.

Jamie looked at her with a sparkle in his eyes. "You really are excited about it, are you not? Look at you," he said. Then the smile faded from his lips as he locked onto her gaze and said softly, "Look at you..."

Crystal felt the chemistry between them rock through her body. The smile fell from her face and all she could do was look directly at him. Locked in a hypnotic spell, for a moment she thought that he might have magical powers as well because he had overcome every sense in her body.

"Jamie..." she said in a whisper.

He didn't respond to her except to lean in and press his lips against hers.

She put one hand on his chest feeling the hard muscles beneath her fingertips.

She kissed him back with a slow and sensual pace that grew until she was kissing him hard and passionately.

He wrapped his hand behind her head and pushed his fingers into her hair.

She moaned into his mouth and felt her nipples grow hard as he touched and kissed her.

She lost all sense of everything. There were no thoughts about the murder or the fact that she had been displaced from her own time into a completely new one.

All she could think about was Jamie kissing her and how much she ached for him.

At that moment she wanted nothing else than for him to pick her up, place her on the bed, and make love to her.

At that moment, a knock sounded at the door. Crystal immediately jumped back feeling scared of who might be at the door. The sound was loud, just as it had been when Cameron knocked the door in. Jamie stood up fast and put his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Jamie, tis Shaw."

Jamie groaned in annoyance. "I will have his head if this is not important." Then he looked at Crystal, his gaze traveling over her with lust in his eyes. "I'm sorry to have to leave you. I'll return as soon as I can."

He unlocked the door and opened it. "What is it? It is not yet dawn," Jamie said.

"I thought you should know that we have detained Brian and his sister-in-law. They are being held at the tavern."

"Why have they been detained?" Jamie asked, his voice filled with confusion.

"They were headed toward Cameron in the prison wagon. Brian had his sword out and was in a rage. His sister-in-law was trying to dissuade him from running Cameron through, so Brendan thought it best to arrest them both and hold them at the tavern until Cameron was brought to the Keep."

"Courteney has been arrested?" Crystal said coming to the door over hearing everything.

"Aye, and Brian. Rory is guarding them with two others. Brendan is preparing the prison wagon to leave at dawn. I thought you would like to know," Shaw explained.

"Thank you. I will come straight away. Crystal get your cloak and boots," Jamie said.

Within moments, Crystal had her boots and cloak on.

The three of them walked down the lane toward the center of town.

Her mind was back on the case as she went over the facts.

It was funny to her that she had just talked about not wanting to speak of the investigation for at least a few hours and suddenly there were new developments.

The crime continued to unfold around them.

She wondered why Brian would take it upon himself to try to go at Cameron when he must know that he would be under guard.

She couldn't blame Brian for wanting revenge after what he did to Maeve, but she wondered why he would put himself in jeopardy with the guards.

That didn't sit right with her, and she aimed to get some answers as soon as she could.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

The entire village was still abed after having such a late night.

The sounds of morning we're starting to be heard all around as dawn approached.

The birds were chirping as they woke up and the livestock were starting to stir and make their calls to each other.

One would think that there was nothing serious going on if you only paid attention to the natural environment.

Things were tense inside the tavern. Courteney paced back and forth in the room, which was empty except for her and Brian who sat in the corner by a window being guarded by Rory and two other watchmen.

As soon as Crystal entered, Courteney approached her with distress, and began to ramble.

"Miss, I tried to stop him, I did. He went blind with rage.

Went straight for Cameron. I cannot blame him, I had a mind to want to do the same, but I know it is best to let the Laird handle it.

Brian is not of his right mind, though, I fear. "

Crystal put her arm around Courteney and led her to a table and sat down with her. "I would feel the same if it were my sister, but you are right. The authorities need to handle it now that he's been caught."

Jamie and Shaw joined Crystal and Courteney at their table.

"Tell us what happened, Miss Courteney?" Jamie asked.

"I was asleep when the news came of Cameron being caught and him being suspected of being Maeve's killer.

Brian had stayed up drinking and was already deep in his cups.

He has spent most nights in such a state since my sister's death.

When Liam brought the news, Brian was beside himself with anger.

He grabbed his sword, stormed outside and mounted his horse, taking off.

I followed him as quickly as I could, but I had to saddle my horse. "

"Go on," Jamie encouraged.

"I yelled after him, and tried to talk him out of taking his revenge, but he would not listen to reason."

"No, indeed it is hard for anyone to stop a man acting in a blind rage," Jamie said.

"When I got there, Brian was already being held back by the Watch as he shouted at Cameron, trying to have a go at him. Of course Cameron shouted back, antagonizing him," she said.

"What was it he said to antagonize him?" Crystal asked.

"Merely taunts about Maeve and her choice of a husband."

Crystal looked at Brian who stared out the window quietly simmering.

"What connection did Cameron have to your sister?" Jamie asked.

"I thought none, but I do see it now. He was always pestering my sister before she was married and then bullying her after she was married for not choosing him.

Though Maeve never would have considered Cameron, nor did she ever give Cameron reason to think she would wed him.

But he pestered her for years, why murder her now? "

"It might be that we may never know unless Cameron confesses and even then we will not know if his motive is truthful.

It could have been that he was simply drunk and wandered over to your sister's home while her husband was away and things got out of hand when your sister pushed him away.

Tis possible her rejection has been festering in him and he allowed his anger to take him over," Jamie said.

"Aye, I suppose that tis possible. He is aggressive with all the women in the village. We all move in the other direction when he comes into town," she said.

Crystal knew from her own experience that was the truth.

She didn't even want to look Cameron in the eyes when he was chained in the prison wagon.

He was a brutal man and it seemed obvious that he was their killer.

She had a feeling that every woman he came across could sense how evil he was.

It was like prey sensing a predator and running away.

"Yes, a bad man if ever there was one," Jamie said. "I shall need to question Brian."

"I understand, though I do not know if he will talk to you. He hardly speaks a word to me. His mind is shattered like a broken glass," Courteney said.

Wallace approached the table and put two hot cups of tea in front of the women. Crystal thanked him. He nodded and walked away. She wondered if he ever got rest considering that the tavern was something of a public square for everyone.

She watched as Jamie and Shaw approached Brian.

"Miss, I nearly forgot. I heard what happened to you. That Cameron came for you. I am so sorry. That must have been a fright."

"It was." Crystal smiled grateful for her concern. "Though you shouldn't apologize for him. His actions had nothing to do with you."

"Aye, but I worry... Do you... that is do you think he meant to come for me? He came for my sister and t'was my cottage... Or do you think he knew you were there?" Courteney asked.

"That's a good question. I don't know for certain. He did hit the guard that was posted to watch over me, so he may have known it was me staying in your cottage," Crystal replied.

"Aye, I am relieved. Oh! I did not mean—" Courteney stopped, looking flustered. "I am sorry. I am not glad that it t'was you he came after, but that I do not have to fear

that he also wanted to kill me," Courteney explained.

Crystal smiled and patted her hand. "I understand."

"You are a pretty woman and new to the village. I can see Cameron thinking he could force himself on you and get away with it."

"I suppose he did," Crystal said. The thought sent chills down her spine and she remembered how Cameron had grabbed her in the tavern her first day here.

Then she remembered Mason and how he had drugged her to do who knew what with her.

Would she always be looking over her shoulder for men who wanted to do her bodily harm?

"Brian hasn't uttered a word," Rory said loud enough for Crystal to overhear.

She turned to look at Brian again and saw Jamie acknowledge that and then take the seat next to Brian.

"Brian, I do not blame you for wanting revenge for Maeve's death.

I think a lot of us would as well if we were in your place.

He is in custody now and you must allow his punishment to come from the Laird.

You must have known you would be stopped.

Do you want to tell me why you went after Cameron even knowing the guard would stop you? "

Brian shifted in his chair but did not say a word. He continued to stare out the window.

"What did you hope to accomplish? Wouldn't it be better to see Cameron rot in prison for the rest of his days rather than a quick death offered by your sword?"

Finally Brian turned to look at Jamie as though he'd just heard him, but he remained quiet. Crystal could tell that Jamie was relieved to have this bit of movement from him at least.

"Aye, seems a much better fate for the likes of him, do you not agree?" Jamie said.

Brian was now obviously paying full attention.

"Brian? Do you agree?" Jamie asked.

Brian was quiet for a moment and then finally said, "Aye, I agree."

"Then will you leave it to the Laird to judge the man for his crimes and not try to take the law into your own hands again?"

"Aye, the Laird will punish him justly. Let him rot in the dungeons with no light and not another woman to touch ever again for the rest of his life," Brian said, but his voice sounded dead without any emotion to it.

"Good, then with your promise, I can have Rory escort you back home, but there will be a guard posted outside of your place. Do you understand?" Jamie said.

"Aye, tis fair," Brian said.

"Good, then go home and get some sleep," Jamie said.

Brian stood up. Courteney gave Crystal a hug and said, "Thank you, Miss. I will visit you soon at my cottage when all this is done."

"I look forward to it, though I may be at the castle by then," Crystal said, fully aware that she would go when Jamie said it was time.

"Of course, I understand," Courteney said. She moved from the table to follow Rory and the others as they led Brian out of the tavern.

"Could we get some food and more tea here, Wallace?" Jamie called as he joined Crystal at her table.

"Aye, comin' right up. Just made a fresh batch of meat pies."

"Are you alright, lass?" Jamie asked.

"I am. I'm glad this is all over, if I'm honest," she said.

"Aye, as am I. Cameron has the strength to have done what was done to poor Maeve. He is a man of violence, always has been. Though this is the first I have seen him so brutal toward a woman. Usually tis against another man."

"Yes, as I now know firsthand. I think he could be capable of killing a woman for refusing him. Unfortunately it is not that unusual for a man to murder a woman for her refusal of him, even in my time," she said.

"Here ye are." Wallace put a platter of small meat pies in front of them and a pot of tea. Jamie handed Wallace some coin, and Wallace walked away jingling it in his hand.

Crystal bit into the meat pie, savoring every bite.

She ate several of the delicious delicacies and had two cups of tea.

By the time they were done eating she wanted to crawl back into bed, not having had much rest that night.

However she didn't want to be in bed alone and wondered if it would be a mistake to have this attractive Scotsman warm her bed.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

J amie stood up from the table and held his hand out to Crystal. She smiled and took his hand. They walked out the door together and into the morning. Some villagers were walking down the lane, going about their morning routines.

As they walked, Crystal saw a few children come out of homes to play.

She smiled and waved at them. It made her happy when they waved back.

Suddenly there was a knot in her stomach.

She realized that it was possible she would never have children.

How could she? She was stuck in a different time period.

She wasn't married and didn't really know anyone here.

It could be years before she got back home.

By that time, she might be too old to marry and have kids.

Sure all the other women who'd come here had stayed.

And Elena had mentioned her own child, but just because things worked out for her didn't mean it would work out for herself.

The thought of sending her child to school and then to college were impossible now.

Things weren't the same in this time. That entire future she'd imagined for herself had been taken from her, and it was just now setting in.

"Are you all right, lass? You look a bit pale," he said.

"Do I? I'm fine, just thinking about home. I mean my home, where I'm from," she said.

"You miss it?" he said.

"Yes, and just coming to terms with the fact that my life will never be the same again." She paused then asked, "So you have never heard of the women going back to their own time, it has never happened?"

"No, it tis not possible. You died in that life, lass.. This is a place of magic and miracles, that is how you were able to come here and have a second chance at life," he said.

Crystal looked down at her feet as they walked, deep in her own thoughts. She could feel Jamie staring at her the whole time with worry on his face.

A few moments later, they were back in Courteney's cottage. Jamie bolted the door again and Crystal lit a fire. She opened the shutters to let in some fresh air. Now that it was daylight she felt safe doing it, especially since Jamie was with her.

"Do you think that will be the end of it for a few hours at least?" she asked. "I know you will have to investigate his place and see if there is evidence of his crime still."

"I do not, some of the other guards will take care of that. Why do you ask?"

"Because I'm exhausted and want to lay down for a while. I didn't get much sleep last

night." She pulled off her boots.

Jamie grinned. "No you did not, nor did I. I think a wee nap will do us both good.."

"You have that look again, lass. Are you thinking about your home?"

"Yes, it's hard not to. I guess now that Cameron has been caught, and the mystery of who killed Maeve is nearly solved, I have time to think about what's happened to me. It doesn't sit well," she said.

"I understand. You must be feeling out of place here. I cannot say I would be comfortable finding myself hundreds of years in the past."

"Exactly," Crystal replied with a small sigh. She turned toward the bed.

"You should get some rest."."

Nodding, Crystal laid the blanket on the bed and fluffed the pillows. She watched as Jamie double checked the door and then closed and latched the shutters. Jamie settled down in the chair before the fire.

"I know it's small, but why don't you share the bed with me?" Crystal felt confident asking because they had already kissed and would have done much more if they had not been interrupted.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, it's an order." Laughing, she grinned at him.

He chuckled. "All right, if it tis an order."

He pulled off his boots and took off his belt.

He removed his plaid, and his kilt, setting them over the back of the chair, leaving him in his long tunic shirt.

Crystal removed the dress she wore, but left on the blouse.

She climbed into bed pushing herself to one side.

He placed his weapons near the bed and then climbed in next to her.

Crystal put her hand on his chest and curled up against his body. She desperately wanted to kiss him, but she couldn't keep her eyes open. She didn't remember falling asleep, but she knew she felt safe.

Hours later, she opened her eyes and sensed that it must be very late in the afternoon judging by the crack of light coming in through the shutters. Her gaze then fell on Jamie sleeping beside her. It gave her comfort to see him there.

Though now that her need for rest had been satisfied, her thoughts moved to another need.

Jamie opened his eyes and looked at her. He smiled. "What are you doing?"

"Sorry, I just woke up and you looked so nice sleeping, I didn't want to wake you," she said.

"So you just stared at me, then?" His smile widened to a grin.

She laughed. "Yes, I guess I did."

"You are an unusual woman, Crystal Corbin."

Crystal smiled, feeling a bit unsure of herself. "Is that a good thing or?—"

Jamie didn't let Crystal finish her statement. Instead he kissed her, rolling her onto her back. Crystal was caught off guard but she welcomed it. She placed her hands on Jamie's back and drew him closer to her. She kissed him back with a need for him that was unquestionable in that kiss.

Jamie groaned. "Fuck, I want you badly, lass. I feel like I have lost my mind. Like I have gone mad with lust for you."

"I want you too." She ran her hands up his chest to wrap around his neck.

They stopped kissing and looked at each other, then in a frenzy began to rid themselves of the rest of their clothes.

Jamie's gaze roamed over her. "You are beautiful, lass." Crystal felt her nipples harden under his gaze and he dipped his head, taking one into his mouth and sucking on it. She dug her fingers deeper into his hair, holding onto him as desire rippled through her.

"Oh, Crystal," he moaned when she pressed herself closer to him and she slid her hand down to his cock, gripping it.

She moved her hand up and down his shaft, slowly at first then faster. Jamie groaned then nuzzled her neck, kissing her behind her ear, sending little thrills of pleasure through her.

"You'll make me finish if you keep doing that, lass," he murmured in her ear.

"You want me to stop?"

"Only so that I can be inside you," he said.

She stroked him a couple more times and then let his cock go.

Jamie rolled her to her back and settled between her open thighs.

He pressed the tip of his cock at her entrance.

He leaned down and kissed her as she wrapped her arms around his neck once more.

She was enjoying this more than she'd ever enjoyed sex with anyone.

"You want me? I need to hear you say it." He studied her face, as though looking for acceptance or distaste.

"Yes, I want you, Jamie." Crystal drew his lips down to hers and kissed him.

"Tell me again," he said as he slipped a little further inside of her, but only a little.

Crystal moaned at the feeling of him slowly entering her. "God, Jamie, yes, I want you... please."

He slid inside her slowly until he was completely seated inside of her. "Fuck, you feel so good. Tight, my..." His words trailed off as he began to move inside of her.

Crystal opened her thighs wider, allowing him in as deep as he could go.

His chest skimmed against her hard nipples as he hovered over her.

Every movement of his sent her rushing toward the edge of bliss.

The familiar throbbing and pulsing between her thighs kept building and building until she was ready to burst.

"I'm going to come, Jamie," she cried out, her voice filled with pleasure.

"I want you to, Crystal. I want you to come on my hard cock."

He turned her on more than any man ever had. He flipped every switch in her, now that she thought about it briefly. However there was no time to compare her experiences because her body took control of her mind and she released in a tremor. "Oh, Jamie. Jamie, ohhh," she moaned.

"Aye, just like that, lass."

With that he pulled out of her and moved down into the bed. He placed his head between her thighs and began to slowly lick her core.

"Oh, oh God," Crystal shouted. She was too sensitive for him to be licking her, but she didn't want him to stop, as she melted into the bed with another orgasm.

A few moments later, Jamie moved back up her body and pushed himself inside of her again. "I love the taste of you, lass."

Crystal reached for him, pulling his lips to hers as she kissed him. Jamie moved inside of her, pounding her faster and faster, slapping his body against hers.

"It tis too good. How can you feel this good," he murmured in a thick lustful breath.

His body tensed. The veins on his forearms bulged and he released inside of her with

a loud groan.

Crystal felt Jamie's body tremble on top of her as he sent her over the edge of bliss once again.

He pressed his chest to hers, relaxing his weight on his elbows.

She enjoyed the heat of him on top of her, pressing her into the mattress.

A moment later, he rolled off of her and lay beside her staring at the ceiling. Then he turned and looked at her with a smile. "You are not what I expected."

"I can't believe we just did that," Crystal murmured, a small smile on her lips. She hoped he didn't think poorly of her now that he'd had sex with her. Wasn't it frowned upon to have sex before marriage in this time? Suddenly she was a bit worried.

"Why? I am glad we made love. I have wanted to be with you since I first saw you. I hope to make a habit of it in the future," he said, tucking a piece of her hair behind her ear and kissing the tip of her nose.

"You do?" She raised a brow at him and grinned. "You want to make a habit of making love to me?"

"Yes, exactly so. If you'll have me," he said. The look in his eyes told her he was sincere.

Her smile softened and then kissed him, a long and tender kiss full of feeling and emotion. Crystal knew that she felt lust and infatuation for this man, but now she was very much in danger of falling in love with him.

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

Crystal felt refreshed in a way that she didn't know was possible.

Being with Jamie had distracted her from thinking about what had happened to her and allowed her to release some of the stress she'd been holding on to.

She was still troubled about how she'd managed to travel through time, but being with him had soothed something deep in her soul.

She'd never felt so fulfilled after having sex as she did after being with Jamie.

She got out of bed and lit a few candles.

It was almost dusk, about an hour or so before sunset.

It seemed to Crystal like this had been the longest day ever.

She looked at Jamie and he smiled, his arms folded behind his head as he watched her.

She thought he looked more handsome than ever, and she wanted to push him back into bed and stay there forever making love and not having a care in the world.

He began to rise, putting his feet on the floor. "We should get dressed," he said.

"Do we have to? I prefer to stay in bed with you."

He chuckled. "Lass, now that we are rested," he winked, "we should go to the tavern.

There might be news for me there of what they found at Cameron's place," he said.

"Oh, yes, I want to hear about that as well. And I would like to see if Melanie and Elena are there as well," she said with a smile. She began to redress and her eyes strayed over to see Jamie was pulling his tunic over his broad chest.

"You are right, I hate to see you get dressed. I think I prefer you stay naked." He gathered her in his arms and nuzzled her neck.

She laughed and gave him a light kiss. When they were both done dressing, they blew out the candles and headed into the village.

She smiled as she took in the villagers going about their routines.

Several waved to her and Jamie and they waved back.

She realized that she felt content here.

There was no sorrow over what she was missing back home.

This place actually had started to feel more like home than her apartment back in the twenty-first century ever had.

She realized she had Jamie to thank for that.

Something about being with him made her feel as though she'd finally found home.

She wondered how that was possible after one day of amazing sex, but then she realized it was more than that.

It was the way he was protective of her, the way he cared for her, even though they'd

only known one another for a few days.

She laughed to herself at that thought. It had only been a handful of days.

Jamie looked at her with curiosity, but she shrugged it off.

"Let's get inside," Jamie said when they reached the tavern.

He opened the door and allowed her to enter before him, but he kept a gentle guiding hand on the small of her back, again making her feel cared for.

When Crystal walked deeper into the room, everyone turned and looked at her.

A hushed murmur passed over the crowd, and it made her feel very nervous.

Of course, everyone knew that Cameron had attacked her and that she had slashed his cheek, leading to identifying him as the most likely murder suspect.

Finally after a few moments the crowd began to talk among themselves again and turn their gazes away from her, which she was glad for.

"Crystal, I'm so glad you're okay." Melanie leaned in and hugged her.

"You are, aren't you?" Elena asked as she studied her.

"Yes, I am now. It was terrifying when it happened, but now I'm good," she said, her gaze straying to Jamie at her side.

"Come join us at our table," Elena said. She pointed at a table in the corner where her husband Brendan sat with Rory and a few other guards.

"I'll get us some drinks," Jamie murmured in Crystal's ear.

Crystal followed Melanie and Elena to their table and sat down with them. Brendan and Rory nodded a greeting.

"Aye, lass. Good work," Brendan said.

Crystal smiled. She was glad that these men acknowledged that she had played a part in solving the murders. "Thank you."

Jamie set a bottle of whisky on the table and handed Crystal a cup already filled. His own cup remained in his hand as he sat down and nodded a greeting at the others.

"Any news?" he asked.

"Yes, in fact there is. After a visit to his place and finding the dagger he used, Cameron has confessed," Brendan said.

Crystal looked at him with shock. "Confessed, just like that?"

"He only confessed to murdering poor Maeve, in a blind rage," Elena added.

"Did he give a reason?" Crystal asked, shocked that even with evidence to prove it, he'd finally confessed.

"He said he was in a rage because she'd refused him again. He said he didn't consider her marriage binding since she'd married an English bastard. He felt it was his right to show her what she was missing." Melanie's voice was filled with outrage.

"The bastard." Crystal's jaw dropped.

"Indeed," Jamie said with a shake of his head. "And what of killing his brother?"

"No, he refuses to confess to that. He is adamant that he did not kill Billy. Says he would never lay a hand on him except in a brotherly brawl here and there," Brendan replied.

"I thought you could do with a wee bit of stew," Wallace said as he approached and set steaming bowls of stew in front of Jamie and Crystal with two rolls of bread.

"Thank you, Wallace, this smells delicious." Crystal gave him a grateful smile.

After having worked up an appetite with Jamie, the aroma of the stew was making her stomach growl, but she couldn't dig in just yet when such information was being talked about.

"He's already a condemned man, it's weird that he won't confess to killing Billy when he's confessed to killing Maeve," Melanie said.

"Why do you suppose that is? He will be prosecuted for one murder so what's the point of keeping the other one secret?" Crystal asked, trying to work out Cameron's reasoning.

"Maybe it tis about honor? He does not want to admit he would do that to his own brother," Brendan suggested as he grabbed the bottle of whisky and poured himself a fresh cup.

Crystal dipped a piece of bread in the stew and ate it. As she chewed, she chewed over this new information about Cameron. It didn't make sense to her. She dug into the stew, taking a hearty bite. Then she had a thought.

"I suppose that could be it, about honor, or maybe he's telling the truth," Crystal said.

Brendan leaned in and put his elbows on the table. "Why do you think that, lass?"

"I'm saying maybe Cameron didn't kill his brother as he says. There are two killers," she said. "You found the dagger that matched the marks on Maeve, but what of the ones on Billy?"

The whole table seemed to freeze. Everyone looked at each other with shock. Jamie leaned back in his chair and nodded. "You have a point, lass."

"That could be a possibility," Melanie said.

"A very reasonable answer to why he won't confess," Elena added.

"So there is another killer on the loose? I sent half of the Watch back to the castle this morning, with Cameron," Brendan said. He slammed his cup down on the table.

"It's just a guess," Crystal said.

"Aye, tis a guess, and a good one. One we should have all considered, considering the two different weapons used. T'was sloppy of us to think we'd solved everything by arresting Cameron," Brendan said.

"So who might have killed Billy, then?" Jamie asked.

Crystal sat there thinking about both murders.

She considered everything as if she were writing this as a story.

She went over every detail in her mind as quickly as she could.

Picturing the details as they flashed through her mind.

She remembered that Cameron had found his brother's body pretty much the same way that Brian had found his wife.

The way they had both been killed was too similar and was interesting to her.

It wasn't a detail to be passed up. She recalled seeing Cameron and Billy when they first walked into the tavern.

How similar they looked to each other. It was obvious that Billy was younger, but he had the same build and look as Cameron.

Her eyes grew wide as she realized that someone could easily mistake Billy for Cameron. If that was the case then?—

"I think I've figured out part of it," she said.

"Aye, lass, what are you thinking?" Brendan asked.

"Cameron and Billy were very much alike," she said.

"Aye, as brothers often are," Jamie replied.

"Yes, but I mean they are so much alike that someone might mistake one for the other in the dark," she said.

"Aye, that tis true enough," Shaw said.

"Billy was killed with a smaller blade than Maeve was. And Brian went after Cameron with that short sword. What if he was drunk and mistook Billy for Cameron, attacked him in the dark. Courteney has said he's hardly been sober and his mind is shattered," Crystal continued to share her thoughts.

The group looked at each other again processing what Crystal said.

It began to make sense to her but she didn't know if it would make sense to everyone else, mistakes happened often and Brian had already shown that he wanted Cameron dead.

No one could blame him for that but if he killed Billy by mistake he definitely would not tell anyone.

It would weigh on his mind heavily however as distraught as he was showing to be.

"The wounds on Billy were about the size of a Bollock dagger," Jamie said.

"Aye, that tis true," Brendan said.

"So now what?" Crystal asked.

"When we are done here, we should pay a visit to Brian and look for the murder weapon," Jamie said.

"Tis best. I will go with you. We might have another arrest tonight," Brendan said.

Crystal and Jamie quickly finished their meals. A few moments later, they were on their way to Brian's place outside the village. Crystal was nervous. She didn't know if her guess was right, and if it was, would Brian go quietly? Or would he try to kill again?

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

Brian was surprised to see them as they approached.

Jamie, Rory, Shaw, and Brendan went toward the door and didn't wait to be welcomed inside.

Instead they entered and looked around. Brian followed them inside, but Crystal, Elena and Melanie stayed in the doorway.

Courteney gave her a confused look and Crystal wanted to comfort her but knew that she couldn't say anything yet.

"What is going on here?" Courteney asked as she joined them.

Crystal shook her head and gave her a sad smile.

A moment later, Brian strode out of the cottage, heading toward the stables. Rory and Shaw followed him and detained him. "I think it best if you just wait right here," Rory said, holding Brian's arm.

Brian hung his head low. It seemed to Crystal as though he knew he'd been caught.

"You might as well tell us where it is," Shaw said.

Brian said nothing, but his gaze went to the stables.

"Over here, Jamie," Brendan said as he entered the stables. A moment later, he came out with a blade that was long, thin, and pointed at the tip. He handed the blade to

Jamie.

"There's traces of blood, and some dark hair around the base, almost the same that would match Billy's," Jamie said.

"What? know that cannot be," Courteney gasped, tears forming in her eyes.

"Aye, lass, I am afraid tis true," Jamie said.

Brian dropped to the ground, put his head in his hands, and started to sob. Crystal was shocked that he'd broken down but then he had always been on the verge of a breaking point it seemed.

"T'was a terrible mistake. I thought it t'was Cameron.

I knew it had to be he that came after my wife.

He was always after her. I would sometimes find him on the road to our home when I would come home early from work.

She had often complained that he followed her about the village and on some occasions had followed her home from the market.

I had planned to move my workshop from the Blacksmith's to here so that I could look after her.

I should have done it sooner. I waited too long and now she's gone.

I wanted him to pay for it. I did not mean to kill Billy. I thought he was Cameron."

"No it cannot be true. You did not do it," Courteney pleaded with him to take it back.

"Aye, tis true, lass," Brian said, his tearful gaze directed at Courteney.

Jamie put his hand on Brian's shoulder to comfort him. "I understand wanting vengeance, Brian. However, tis not for us to decide what is to be done with you. We will have to take you in so that you may stand before the Laird."

"No, please do not arrest him. He is the last family I have. He has been through hell already." Courteney was growing hysterical as she sobbed.

"They are right, Courteney. I agree to face judgment. I will go quietly," Brian said standing up.

"This cannot be happening. what will I do now?" Courteney said.

"Don't worry yourself sick, Courteney. You have been through so much already.

Maybe the Laird will have mercy on Brian," Crystal said.

"Gather your things. We'll take you back to the village.

I appreciate you lending me your cottage, but it is time for you to move back home.

I will either stay at the inn, or finally make my way to the castle. "

"Aye, I suppose you are right. I do not want to stay here alone. I hate being here anyway after what happened to Maeve," Courteney whispered. She went inside and began to tie a bundle together of her things and put on her cloak.

By that time Jamie had arrived at the front of the cottage with the wagon they would use to take Brian to the castle, along with his horse. "Do you think you can ride my horse alone?" he asked, looking at Crystal.

"Yes, as long as it follows Brendan's, and I don't have to worry about it taking off with me."

"You'll do fine, lass." Jamie winked.

Once she was mounted on the horse, she hesitantly held the reins and used her heels to set the horse in motion following the wagon. She rode next to the other ladies, all the way back to the village.

Page 29

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

"A ll is set, lass. You shall have a room upstairs,," Jamie said as he settled into a chair next to her.

"Thank you," she said. "So that's it then. We've solved the case and both the murderers have confessed. So now the Laird will pass judgement?"

"Aye, tis how the law is handled here," he said.

"I know that Brian took Billy's life, but I feel really bad for him."

"Aye, I feel the same."

"It's tragic and I know that he will be punished the same as Cameron but it seems so unfair when Brian was simply driven mad by grief and Cameron is a vile violent murderer," Crystal added.

"Aye, had he killed Cameron, he'd have been justified. Killing Billy though, that is something else. The Laird may decide to grant him mercy, we'll have to see."

"So this Laird of yours is the judge and jury? He's got that much power?"

"Aye, tis the way things are handled here to keep the peace of the land. You will get used to it, lass," Jamie said.

"He's right, you'll get used to it. Donal is a good man, and very fair," Elena said.

"I can't believe you haven't even been to the castle," Melanie added.

"Or met any of the other women. It seems like you've been with us forever and you've really only just arrived. I'm sorry you got embroiled in this case," Elena said, grabbing Crystal's hand and squeezing it.

Crystal smiled at them. Honestly, she felt like she'd been there forever too.

Her life in the future almost seemed like a dream now, which was strange.

She had so much to learn here. So many people to meet.

Like the other time traveling women, and this Laird she kept hearing about.

Her gaze moved to Jamie. She wanted to have a week of just lying in bed with him and learning everything she could about him.

"Brendan." Elena got to her feet and walked to the door. She hugged her husband and he joined them. Elena poured him a cup of whisky and he sat down.

"Rory and Shaw are escorting Brian to the castle. He'll be locked in the dungeon until we return in the morning and have an audience with the Laird," Brendan explained.

"Aye, we will go at first light," Jamie said.

Crystal felt a sudden rush of sadness at his words because she didn't want him to leave her. She felt safer when he was around and she didn't want to spend a day alone here.

Jamie looked at her and said, "You can be ready at first light, can you not, lass?"

She restrained her excitement at his words and simply said, "Yes, I will be ready at first light but can we check on Courteney before we go?"

"Good thinking, that lass has had it rough these past few days," Brendan said.

Before long, Jamie was helping her up the stairs to her room.

He unlocked the door, gave her the key, and stepped inside.

The room was large and it had been made ready for her.

A fire crackled in the corner fireplace which was made of gray stone.

On top of a table sat a pitcher of water and a wash basin.

The bed was made and folded down, ready for her to get beneath the fresh linens, wool blanket and quilt.

The window was closed and the drapes drawn to keep the heat in.

"It's a lovely room," she said looking around.

Jamie drew her into his arms. "Should I leave you to your slumber, or would you rather I stay with you?"

"I would be upset if you didn't stay with me," she said, giving him a smile.

"Is that so?" He arched a brow at her, but a grin lingered on his lips.

She pushed up on her toes and kissed him. Their kisses became fevered and she began to push at his clothes in eagerness.

"Slow down, lass." He chuckled.

"No, I'm not following that order," she said cheekily. "I will have you naked in front of me now." She grinned at him as she removed his plaid and tossed it over the back of the chair by the table.

He laughed. "You are drunk."

"I am, but that doesn't mean that I don't want you." Crystal wasn't so drunk that she didn't know what she was doing. Just tipsy enough to give her confidence in acting boldly.

He sighed a lustful sigh. "If you insist, lass."

By that time she had successfully taken off all his clothes and set them over the chair. He stood naked in front of her. She wrapped her hand around his cock and stroked it.

He groaned in response. "I have never met a woman like you before," he said.

"Yes, I suppose we're a bit more aggressive where I come from. We aren't shy about taking what we want."

"I like it." He grinned and kissed her.

Crystal dropped to her knees in front of him.

"What are you doing?" He looked at her in confusion.

She didn't answer, instead she slipped the tip of his rigid cock in her mouth.

"Oh...my..." Jamie groaned and his head fell back. "That's?—"

She rolled her tongue around the tip of him, stealing his words. She sucked lightly

while moving her hand up and down his shaft. Jamie held onto the back of the chair, keeping himself steady. Crystal wondered if she was making his legs weak and it made her giggle.

"Lass," he said, sucking in a sharp breath of air.

She still didn't say anything. Instead she moved her mouth back and forth on his shaft, faster and faster, all the while working her magic on him.

"I'm going to come, lass. I cannot hold on anymore," he warned.

Crystal didn't care about his warning. He released in her mouth and she swallowed his seed with ecstasy. She liked it and wanted him, all of him.

Jamie groaned loudly in enjoyment, his whole body trembling as he did so.

He pulled Crystal up from the floor and said, "My turn."

With a quickness that she couldn't match on a good day, he pulled her dress and underthings off until she was only in her thigh high stocking and boots. He picked her up and sat her on the bed. Then he got on his knees between her thighs.

Crystal laid back on the bed and opened herself up to him.

Jamie licked up and down her wet slit. She wanted him badly and he knew it. Her fingers twisted around the quilt. He flicked his tongue at her clit and she couldn't restrain herself. "Oh God. Yes, Yes," she moaned.

"You like that, lass?"

"I do. Yes, please don't stop. Keep doing that, please," she groaned.

He obeyed her orders and moved his tongue slowly, pressing lightly, then faster and faster. Her back arched up and she released in his mouth. Jamie groaned and licked her juices as she screamed in pleasure.

He moved to the wash basin, poured in some water and dipped one of the wash cloths in then returned to her and cleaned her up. Once he was done, he gathered her in his arms, and settled them both in the bed. Crystal couldn't recall a more enjoyable night in her life.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

The next day, Crystal brought breakfast to Courteney. Some meat pies from the market, a wedge of cheese, a loaf of bread and a bottle of mead.

"I'll just be a minute," she said as Jamie helped her to dismount.

"I will wait here," he said.

Crystal tapped lightly on the door. "Courteney, it's Crystal, are you awake?"

Courteney didn't open the door, but she opened the shutters on the window right by the door. She was groggy and sleepy and Crystal felt bad for waking her.

"Crystal, good morning to you. I am sorry I am not dressed. I did not sleep well," she said.

"No, I am sorry for disturbing you. I brought you a few things," she handed her the bundle of goods through the window, "here you are. Please, go back to bed. You deserve a very long rest after what you've been through."

"Thank you, Crystal." She gave her a weak smile and then closed the shutters again.

She seemed somewhat ill to Crystal, but she knew it was probably just exhaustion.

Crystal rode with Jamie to the castle. The day was frigid, but sunny and she was able to take in all the sites.

She saw Maggie's cottage and Loch Ness and as they rode on, she could see the

massive castle they were riding toward, sitting proudly upon a piece of land that jutted out into the lake.

"Nearly there, lass. What do you think of your first view of Urquhart Castle?" Jamie whispered in her ear.

"It's beautiful." She was in awe of the place. It was magnificent, and looked well kept, almost new with its grey brick and iron fencing.

The group rode up the land bridge toward the courtyard and the gate opened for them. The inside courtyard was bustling with activity. It was very wide, and almost resembled its own little village. There was a blacksmith, a stables, guard quarters and so much more.

"Why are then not already in the dungeon?" Jamie muttered as he directed his horse toward Brendan. "What's going on? Why are Cameron and Brian being held out here?"

"I do not know." Brendan seemed pissed off to Crystal as he rode toward the prison carts that held the two.

Jamie reined in his horse and dismounted.

He held his hand up for her and she leaned down into them so he could help her down as well.

He handed the reins to a stable boy, and then the two of them moved toward the prison carts.

They stopped next to Elena and Melanie, then Jamie moved to join the other guards.

"— them inside?" Brendan was apparently demanding to know why they weren't locked in the dungeon.

"They are full at the moment with those Irish bandits we caught a few weeks ago. Thought it might be best to keep them separated until they went before the Laird."

"Aye, suppose you have got a point." Brendan nodded. "Get them out, we will take 'em before the Laird now."

Crystal felt someone's eyes on her and it was making her uncomfortable. She turned her head and realized it was Cameron staring at her. She shivered in distaste as the guards opened his cart and got him down.

Cameron used his shoulder to push the guard escorting him out of the way. Since his ankles were untied and only his arms bound together he was able to run directly at her screaming and growling.

Crystal was petrified and couldn't move. It was as if every single sound echoed around her and she felt like she was in the cottage again when he attacked her. All she could see was his large body coming toward her.

He was suddenly yanked backwards. She saw that Brian had been released as well, and was right behind him. He used the chains on his arms to wrap around Cameron's neck and pulled him backward from behind. Cameron let out a choking sound.

Full chaos ensued as the Watchmen began to shout.

They attempted to get Brian off of Cameron.

Crystal still stood frozen in fear. It was like she was a character in her own crime thriller novel.

She watched as Cameron acted as though Brian's choking didn't deter him, and continue to move toward her, dragging Brian with him.

"Crystal!" Jamie shouted. He ran straight for them at such a speed that he was at Cameron's side before she knew it. He lifted the hilt of his sword and hit Cameron on the back of the head.

Cameron didn't go down. Instead he crouched and twisted in a way that set him free from Brian's chain. He jumped up with a great stride toward Crystal, his arms outstretched. She shifted, trying to move away. He missed her upper body, but managed to grab her skirts, pulling her backward.

"Agh!" she screamed and fell backward onto back.

"No!" Jamie shouted as he came at Cameron and stabbed him in the lower back with his dagger.

Cameron went limp almost immediately and fell to the ground next to Crystal.

Crystal screamed and shoved herself away from him as he lay dying. He was still trying to reach for her as she scrambled away. The next thing she knew, she was being picked up and wrapped in Jamie's arms.

"Shh, lass, it tis all right now. He cannot hurt you. Not ever again," Jamie murmured in her ear as he held her.

Crystal stood trembling in his arms. She'd seen her life pass before her eyes and she'd been scared to death that she would never get to spend the rest of her life living here in Scotland and loving Jamie. She slid her arms around him and held on tight, unable to let him go.

"It is all right." Jamie rubbed her back as he murmured softly to her.

Around them the rest of the guards got Brian under control, who was laughing gleefully at the sight of Cameron on the ground, bleeding to death. Someone bent over him and checked for his pulse.

"He's dead."

"Get him in a wagon so we can take his body back to town for burial," Brendan said with a sigh.

"Should we wait for the Laird?" Jamie asked over Crystal's shoulder?"

The guards paused in their attempt to lift Cameron's body as they waited for Brendan to answer.

"Aye, I suppose. Rory, go see if the Laird has a moment to come out here."

"Aye." Rory jogged across the courtyard and ran up the large stone steps to the huge wooden door of the castle.

Crystal now trembled for another whole reason. She was about to meet the Laird that everyone spoke about and the thought of do so had her scared to death.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

“What chaos has happened here? Is this not the man responsible for Maeve's death? Was he not to be brought to me for judgment?”

Jamie let Crystal go and stepped forward. "He was. I took this man's life in defense of this young woman."

"What happened? I thought he was secured?" Donal asked.

"He was. We were getting him out of the prison cart and he charged at Crystal. The other prisoner attempted to stop him, but the man was filled with rage. He was determined to get to Crystal. He would have harmed her if Jamie hadn't stepped in and stopped him as he did," Brendan said.

"Aye, all right then. See that his body is taken to the burial grounds, he will not receive a proper church burial, seeing as he confessed to the murder of an innocent woman.

Bring the other prisoner in. I will listen to his plea and pass judgement now.

"The Laird strode back toward the castle. "Aye, Laird, right away," Brendan said.

"What happens now?" Crystal asked. She was worried that despite Brendan's words, Jamie would be in trouble with the Laird for killing Cameron.

"Now we go and present our evidence to the Laird, and Brian's confession," Jamie answered.

"But are you in trouble?" Crystal frowned as he escorted her inside.

"No, lass. The Laird will not punish me for Cameron's death, if that is what you are worried about. It was a justified killing."

"But, doesn't he have to hear evidence and witness testimony? Shouldn't there be a court proceeding?" She was very confused by how everything worked here. Her gaze strayed to Elena and Melanie, who were next to them as they entered the great hall.

"Things don't work like that here," Elena explained. "The Laird trusts his Watch. If they tell him that a prisoner attempted to attack a lady, one of their own, and he died as a result of that, then the Laird will accept that as a justified killing."

"There's no Internal Affairs here, no checks and balances, it's just kind of like the laws of the Wild West. Swift justice and all that," Melanie added. "Oh, there's Aelfred, I will meet you all in the dining hall." She ran toward her husband and embraced him.

"What Melanie meant was that all the red tape is gone.

These men," she gestured to the guards around them, "make sure that everyone is safe and secure.

Be that from the supernatural or from man.

They make sure they find the culprits and bring them before the Laird with evidence and allow the culprits to plead their case.

The Laird decides their fate. If any of the perps fight back when the guard come for them and they die, well, that's a justified killing. "

Crystal nodded. She understood but despite their words of assurance she feared that Jamie would be taken from her.

Jamie directed her down the long hall, she barely even registered that she was inside an actual castle.

They entered a room with many tables, and strode toward the far side of the room where the Laird now sat upon a large chair on a raised platform.

There were other tables behind him, pushed up against the wall.

The room was filled with so many people. There were some she recognized from the village and they smiled at her as she and Jamie moved past them closer to the raised platform.

The Laird looked out over them and then his gaze landed on Crystal. He raised a brow and smiled. "I understand we have a new arrival to Urquhart Castle, what is your name, lass?" the Laird asked.

"Crystal Corwin, sir. I arrived just a few days ago," she said nervously.

"Welcome, Crystal. I am Donal Grant, Laird of this part of Scotland. This is my wife, Anna." He gestured to the woman at his side. "I imagine you have much in common." He smiled.

"Welcome, Crystal, I'm looking forward to getting to know you," Anna commented with a grin.

"Thanks, I am too." Crystal nodded, still feeling apprehensive about standing before someone so important.

"I understand that we have you to thank for the capture of Cameron Gilroy?"

"Um... I helped?" Crystal said hesitantly.

"Perhaps you would tell me what occurred and how you came to be instrumental in his capture?"

Crystal nodded, took a deep breath and shared everything she knew from the moment she arrived to the capture of Cameron, the realization that he hadn't murdered his brother, Brian's confession, and then Cameron's attack upon her in the courtyard less than an hour ago.

"Jamie really did kill him in my defense, sir.

Cameron would have attacked me if Jamie hadn't stopped him.

" A tear slipped down Crystal's cheek and she wiped it away.

"Lass, Jamie is not in trouble, if that is what you fear.

He was justified in killing Cameron Gilroy.

Now, I am sure this has been extremely stressful for you, given the circumstances of your arrival.

I shall have the staff prepare a room for you, unless you have somewhere else to stay?

" He looked at Jamie.

Jamie nodded. "Aye, my Laird." He looked over at Crystal. "Unless you would rather have your own?" He arched a brow at her.

Crystal felt her cheeks heat. "I'll stay with Jamie," she squeaked, completely embarrassed that she was say so in front of all these people.

"Very well. Now, bring forth the prisoner, Brian Highsmith."

Rory and Shaw led Brian forward, his hands were still shackled.

"I understand you have confessed to the killing of Billy Gilroy?" the Laird asked. "Can you explain how and why you took it upon yourself to exact vengeance against the wrong man?"

Brian wept as he explained that he knew Cameron was behind his wife's death. He'd been drinking for days and had worked up the nerve to avenge her, but had mistaken Billy for Cameron in the dark. "I confess I was not in my right mind, my Laird."

"I do not believe that you were in your right mind.

The Gilroy brothers were both guilty of brutal behavior and have been before me on many occasions for various grievances.

They did resemble one another in many ways and I can see that it would be easy to mistake one for another.

Though I must wonder why you chose to take the law into your own hands, rather than tell my Watchmen who you suspected of Maeve's death. "

Brian hung his head.

"Is it that being English, you thought yourself better than us Scotsmen?" Donal asked.

Brian looked up at that and quickly shook his head. "Never, my Laird. I have counted

myself grateful to have been accepted by the people here. I would never think myself better than them."

Donal nodded. "Then what drove you to take his life?"

"My grief, my Laird. I am lost. Broken. Without my Maeve."

Donal sighed and paused for a moment. "I understand you tried to stop Cameron from attacking Miss Crystal in the courtyard?"

"I did, my Laird. I could not allow him to harm another woman the way he hurt my Maeve."

"You could have escaped in the chaos."

"No. I will take my punishment, my Laird. I am an honorable, if broken man."

"Very well. Brian Highsmith, I absolve you of the killing of Billy Gilroy, however, for the time and compensation of my Watch for the amount of time wasted for solving these murders, I order you to spend three days a week working here at the castle in your farrier duties for the next three months.

And if I hear of any more violence coming from you, I will see you in my dungeon. Do you understand?"

Brian dropped to his knees. "Indeed, I swear, my Laird. I am grateful for such a sentence and take an oath upon the memory of my wife to not engage in any violence."

"Good, then you are free to go." Donal gave a slight smile and nodded at Rory and Shaw to release his chains.

Donal leaned back in his chair and tilted his head toward his wife who whispered in his ear. His gaze moved out over the crowd who stood before him and landed on Jamie. Crystal looked from him to the Laird and once again panic filled her.

"Jamie, step forward."

Jamie left her side and moved forward. "Yes, my Laird?"

"You worked tirelessly upon this case. I am grateful for your efforts. You will receive extra coin, and I am granting you five days of rest and respite."

"Thank you, my Laird." He gave him a nod.

The Laird's gaze moved to Crystal. "There will be a welcome banquet tomorrow evening for Miss Crystal Corbin, to welcome her to Castle Urquhart. I hope you all will attend."

With that the Laird dismissed everyone. Jamie wrapped a hand around her waist and led her toward one of the servants. "Would you escort Miss Crystal to my chambers and see that a bath is prepared for her and food brought up?"

"Aye, of course, sir." The young maid nodded.

"Wait, I will take her up, Bridget," Donal's wife, Anna said as she approached them.

Crystal was nervous and wondered where Jamie was going. "But—" Her panicked gaze met his gentle one.

"I shall be up as soon as I can, lass. I have some things to see to first." He kissed her cheek and left her with Anna.

Crystal stared after him and sighed. She looked at Anna and gave her a nervous smile. "Hi."

"Hey. So I'm gonna guess you're feeling really out of place right now?"

Crystal blinked. "You sound like you're from the states, are you like me? Are you one of the women Elena and Melanie talked about?"

"Yep. I was the first, so if you feel out of place, just think how out of place I felt." Anna laughed. "Come on, I'll show you to Jamie's rooms."

Crystal had a million questions, but she followed Anna without voicing any of them.

"Do you have any other dresses?" Anna asked.

"Um, no. I borrowed this from Courteney. All I have is my clothes from back home." She shrugged then hesitantly asked, "Is it weird that I've only been here a few days and I'm going to be sharing a chamber with Jamie?" She felt the heat rise up her neck to her cheeks.

"It's a little faster than some of us, but not surprising at all, and not weird. Well, no weirder than traveling through time via the fae, right?"

"I guess not." Crystal laughed.

"Here we are. I'll make sure you have additional dresses, underclothes, nightclothes and all the necessities.

None of us arrive prepared for this and Donal has gotten used to providing everything for us.

" She grinned as she opened the door to a sitting area.

"His bedroom is back there, there's an extra bedroom here," she pointed to the left, "and another over there that he uses for an office.

This is of course, the sitting room. You can have the staff bring meals up, if you like, or you can join everyone down in the dining hall for meals.

Blair is our kitchen manager, if you need anything food wise, go through her.

Regular staff can help with every day things, like getting bath water or clean linens.

Anything else you need, you can come see me. "

"Thanks." Crystal smiled as there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," Anna called.

A troop of maids came in carrying a tub and buckets of steaming water. "Where should we set this up, my lady?"

Crystal's eyes widened at the deep tub. She couldn't wait to sink herself into it and have a proper bath.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

"You will feel refreshed after a hot bath," Anna said. "I'll see that some fresh clothes are brought to you."

"That is so nice of you, thank you. I was nervous about meeting the other women like me. Melanie and Elena have been great, but I was worried that..."

"That I wouldn't like you?" Anna said.

"Well, yes," Crystal said.

"Don't worry. I'm easy to get along with." She laughed. "Despite the fact that I'm the Laird's wife, I'm still me and still American in many ways," Anna said. "We all are."

"That's good to know. I'm relieved," Crystal said.

"I know it's all a bit overwhelming being here, but you'll get used to the castle."

Crystal nodded. "And there's no way to go back?"

Anna sighed and gave her a sad look. "No. The one thing all of us have in common is that we died in that life. That is how the fae are able to bring us here. We think they must grab us at the moment of our deaths, and repair us, then send us here."

Crystal frowned. "What about our bodies? Wouldn't they go missing? If I died, I did it in a bar full of people."

"Right, so you know the fae have magic? Well, we think that they use a changeling,

or something similar to switch us out. Leaving a body behind for them to bury."

"That's kind of creepy." Crystal shivered.

"But necessary. And that is just speculation. We can't know for sure what happens on that side of things. We'll talk more soon, right now, I'll let you have your bath."

"Okay, thanks again, Anna." Crystal smiled as she left. "I've brought some food, Miss," the maid entered the sitting room with a tray of food.

"Thank you," Crystal said.

On the tray was the most decadent food she had seen yet.

It was better than the food at the tavern.

There was a roasted game hen, roasted vegetables covered in a rich sauce and sprinkled with fresh herbs.

Beside that was a whole loaf of bread basted with honey and butter.

There was a decadent fruit pastry that she had never seen before with red berry preserve.

She smiled at the delicious bounty and dug into the meal.

Another maid entered the sitting room from the hall with a bundle of material. "Miss, my lady asked that these be brought to you. There are dresses, and underthings, and nightdresses. Shall I hang them in the wardrobe?"

"Yes, thank you," Crystal said, excited to put on fresh clothes after a bath.

When the tub was ready she thanked the staff as they left her alone and took off her clothes in the bedroom as fast as she could. Within moments, she was deep in a the tub filled with hot water in front of a large roaring fire. Her bones ached and she relished the warmth.

She leaned her head back on the edge of the tub and closed her eyes.

The water felt divine as she soaked. She'd brought her mug of whisky into the bedroom with her and she reached for it next to the tub and took a sip.

The alcohol here was so much stronger than what she was used to, but it was warming and delicious.

Fifteen minutes later, the door opened behind her. "Thank you, I don't think I need anything else," Crystal said, her eyes still closed.

"No? Nothing else?" Jamie responded.

The door closed. Crystal turned to see Jamie standing next to the door with lust in his eyes.

"Jamie. Sorry I thought you were the maid," she said with a giggle.

"Sorry to disappoint you, lass." He grinned. He unbuckled his belt with his weapons on it and set it aside.

Crystal became aroused the minute he did so. "I'm not disappointed. I'm glad to see you. Are you glad to see me?" she asked.

"Seeing you like that? Aye," he said. With every step he took toward her, he removed more of his clothing.

"I thought you were busy," she said, arching a brow at him.

He stopped in his tracks and looked at her. She could see the hesitance on his face. "I was, do you not want me here while you bathe?"

"You are welcome to be here anytime. I like having you near me, though I wondered if you were trying to escape my company," she said shyly, nervous about their budding relationship.

"I mean we kind of announced to everyone that I was staying in your room..."

I wondered if maybe you felt it was too fast."

Jamie moved to her side and knelt down beside the tub. "I suppose I did need a minute to adjust to the idea of it, but I cannot say I am unhappy about it.."

"Then why did you need a minute?" she asked, curious.

"Because I realized that I cannot be without you in my life.

You have only just arrived and from the moment I laid eyes upon you, I knew I wanted you in my life.

Tis a scary thing to see your future in the embodiment of a woman from the future.

" He smiled, but it faded as a troubled look came over him.

"When Cameron went for you, I knew that I could not lose you.

I would find him a thousand times, fight hordes of goblins to not lose you.

If I lost you, I would be just as shattered as Brian is," he said.

Crystal felt her heart beat faster. She'd felt the same, or at least something similar when Cameron had charged her. "I think I would be just as shattered if I lost you," she whispered.

"I love you, lass. You have my heart, my sword, my hands, all of me. Tis a lot to come to terms with after knowing each other just a short amount of time," he said.

Crystal turned in the tub and put a hand to his cheek. "I love you too, Jamie," she said.

He leaned over and kissed her. She kissed him back. His hand slipped into the water and fondled her breasts. She moaned in pleasure. Now she could relax knowing he loved her.

Jamie plunged his hands into the bath and picked her up out of the tub. "Ah, Jamie," Crystal laughed.

"I cannot wait any longer. I need you now," he said.

He tossed her wet body onto the bed.

"I want you, Crystal," Jamie said as he hovered over her.

"I want you too, Jamie," she moaned.

"Beautiful," he said looking at her wet naked body.

Crystal felt desirable as he looked at her with lust in his eyes. She wanted Jamie to want and need her every time he looked at her. Crystal wanted this gorgeous man to

be filled with arousal when she was near.

"I can't wait any longer," she said.

"Neither can I," Jamie said. He laid down on top of her.

Crystal's skin was hot and wet from the bath. Jamie licked the wet droplets from her breasts. She arched her back in response to him and dug her fingers into his back. His tongue circled around her hard nipple. When he was done, he put his entire mouth on it, teasing and sucking.

Crystal pushed her hands into Jamie's hair. Soft moans escaped her mouth.

Jamie kissed her lustfully and hard, as though he had waited ages to touch her. His moved up her body, slowly, pleasing every inch of her. Finally he rested his lips over hers, but in a demanding way.

"Take me. I beg you," she said.

"Are you begging for my cock, love?" Jamie teased. "Yes, I am. Please don't make me wait any longer." She gazed up at him with love and desire.

He kissed her with a voracious appetite and pressed her into his bed.

"Mmm, Jamie," she moaned.

Jamie kissed Crystal's neck and his large hands moved over her breasts. The middle of his palm pressed against her hard nipple as he massaged. Crystal's body tingled as Jamie touched her. He left her body ablaze everywhere he touched her. She was filled with a need to be loved by him.

"Oh God," she said.

Crystal reached down and grabbed Jamie's hard cock. He sucked in a sharp breath of air in response. She guided him to her sex and allowed it to linger there for a moment.

Jamie moaned as he looked down at Crystal and locked eyes with her, then he pushed himself inside of her, slowly. Crystal was more than ready to accept him as he slid inside her. It felt delicious and satisfying, to her.

"Crystal, you feel so good," Jamie moaned. "I never want to be without you." He stared down into her eyes with a fierceness that filled her with joy. "This is mine, do you hear me. No other man can have this. I claim you for my own."

Crystal looked at him and grinned. "Yes." At first her words were soft, but then grew louder. "Yes, yes, yes!" she shouted as he pounded against her.

The sound of his skin slapping against her wet skin filled the room as he took her. Crystal wanted Jamie to dominate her. She wanted to only be his and no one else's. His protective nature as a warrior made him claim her and she gave herself to him, not only in body, but in her soul and heart.

Jamie slid in and out of her, faster and faster as she twisted her fingers into the linens, holding on.

Crystal had been hungry for this for so long that she thought she would explode. "Oh, Jamie. Yes. I'm going to come. I can't stop. You feel so good."

Jamie moaned as he watched her squirm with delight. "Come for me, lass."

Crystal felt the pulsing grow and give way to him. Her body released in ecstasy. The trembling over took her. She buried her head in his neck as he slowed his movements,

building her pleasure again.

"You want me, as bad as I want you. This is how it is for us," he murmured. Then he began to move his hips faster and faster.

She was so wet now as she felt her juices around his rigid cock. She thought she would faint from the sheer pleasure. His hard back and strong arms held him above her as he moved in and out, and again.

She watched as he tilted his head back and his mouth opened. His brow furrowed and she knew that he was on the edge. "Mmm, Crystal," Jamie moaned. "You're so tight, so..."

But he didn't finish his sentence, he released inside of her.

She felt him fill her inside and she went over the edge of bliss with him.

He moved slower and slower until he pressed his body on top of hers.

Crystal wrapped her legs around his body and her arms around his back as they laid in silence enjoying the intense indulgence.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

A month had passed since she had arrived, but Crystal had found that she felt the time passing quickly. She and Jamie had married in the courtyard, surrounded by all his friends and family, as well as her new friends. She had never felt so blessed than she did the day she became Crystal Grant.

Now she rode with Jamie down to the village.

She had become used to riding with him, leaning into his hard chest and feeling his arms wrap around her, holding her in place upon the horse.

It felt natural to her to be with him like this.

He had started to teach her how to ride on her own, but she much preferred riding with him and she was pretty sure he enjoyed it as well.

As they rode toward the village and they passed Maggie's cottage, she recalled the words that Maggie had said to her. "And Crystal, I think you will soon find your forever with our Jamie here. Enjoy yourself."

It suddenly dawned on her what Maggie had foreseen.

"That's what it meant..." Crystal whispered.

"What who meant, love?" Jamie asked.

"Maggie. What she said to me that day we visited her. You are my forever. She knew."

It was what Maggie had prophesied and now she understood it.

She smiled a big smile knowing that it had been her fate all along and that she didn't need to worry about anything when it came to her new husband.

They were destined for each other and if Maggie knew it then there was nothing that could contest it.

This made her heart swell with joy and relief.

She wanted nothing more than to share the rest of her life with this man who made her heart melt and her body tremble with desire.

Starting a family with him, living in the castle, and making this their reality was all that she wanted and never wanted to live without him.

She looked around the fields as they got closer to the village. The villagers moved here and there going about their business. Sounds of the market reached her ears and vendors haggled their prices. Children ran out of the village and into fields chasing butterflies. Spring had arrived.

She loved being in the village. There was a special energy around it and it reminded her in a way of her old life.

The hustle and bustle of everyday living.

She missed out on it being at the castle, but she wouldn't trade living there for her.

Being there she had Jamie, but that didn't mean they couldn't visit from time to time.

"It feels like a lifetime since we were last here together," Jamie said.

"Not to me, the time has gone by so quickly, but maybe I've lost track of how time passes considering that I traveled through it," Crystal said with a quiet giggle.

Jamie chuckled. "I suppose that makes sense." He leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "The last time you were here, you were an unmarried Miss. Any regrets?"

Crystal shook her head. "Not a one, dear husband." She smiled and leaned into him, pressing her back to his front.

They passed through the center of the village and turned down the lane to Courteney's cottage. It had been weeks since Crystal had seen her and she worried about her as if she were her own sister. "Thank you for bringing me to see Courteney." She snuggled into him.

"You're welcome, love. By all accounts she is doing well and Brian has even kept to his promise. He comes to the castle three days a week to tend to the horses, and he's not had a drink either," Jamie said.

"I'm glad for it," she said.

Jamie reined in the horse as they reached Courteney's cottage. Jamie dismounted and helped Crystal down. He opened the saddle bag and handed Crystal the bundle. It was a gift for Courteney.

She knocked on the door and waited impatiently for Courteney to answer.

"Crystal, so good to see you. Please come in, you too, Jamie."

"Thank you very much."

Jamie and Crystal entered the cottage. It looked nearly the same to her only there was

a certain brightness to it.

The shutters were opened and the sunlight streamed in, for some reason it just seemed a happier space than before.

She also noticed that a second bed had been added to the small cottage on the far side of the room.

"Brian is at his workshop if you came to check on him," she said to Jamie.

"No, this is a social call," he said.

"So he has given up his old house?" Crystal asked.

"Aye, I finally convinced him to move in here. I am hoping he will tear down the old house and simply use the fields for growing food. I do not want the memory of what happened to my sister," Courteney said.

"I can understand. But you look very well and I have a gift for you," Crystal said. She handed her a package wrapped in cloth.

"For me? Oh you should not have," Courteney said.

"I insist. It is long overdue." Crystal smiled.

Courteney opened it to find a new night dress and a new wool blanket. "Oh these are very fine items."

"Since I ruined the night dress you lent me and the blanket is for your kindness," Crystal said.

"Thank you, Crystal." Courteney hugged her.

"You're welcome," Crystal replied.

"Can I get you a drink?" Courteney said.

The door opened and Brian stepped in. He paused when he saw Jamie.

"Brian, hello. We're just here for a social call," Jamie said.

"Aye, welcome both of you," Brian said. Then he went quiet as he entered. He put his work items away, then sat down in front of the fire.

Crystal gestured her head at Jamie to go sit with him. Jamie obeyed of course.

"Courteney let me help you with the tea," Crystal said and moved to the kitchen area of the small cottage, though the space was so small she could still hear Jamie chatting with Brian.

"How are you gettin' on?" Jamie said as he pulled a chair over to join Brian.

"Fine. I take it one day at a time now. Keeping busy helps a lot," Brian said.

"Aye, time and hard work is the cure for everything," Jamie said.

It was obvious to Crystal that Brian was still in mourning, which was to be expected as it had not been that long.

"The stable master has been quite happy with your work, by the way," Jamie shared.

"Is he?" Brian said. He perked up and it was the first time Crystal had seen a glimmer

of a sparkle in his eyes. It made her heart swell.

"Aye, says the horses have never been so well shoed."

"Is that so? Aye I can but assume that your stable master was relying on the blacksmith to shoe them," Brian said, fully engaged in the conversation.

"Aye, we did have to rely on him for quick repairs. Having your skills put to use for us on a regular basis has been a blessing."

Brian smile. It was clear that he took pride in his work.

When the social call was done, they said their goodbyes and promised to call upon them again.

"Are you staying in the village? Or heading back the castle?" Courteney asked.

"We are getting a room at the inn tonight," Crystal said. The castle was nice, but she had wanted to visit the village and Jamie had agreed saying he wanted to please her.

"Brian and I are expected there for supper, shall we head over there with you then?"

"Expected there?" Crystal asked. It seemed a strange turn of phrase.

A blush came over Courteney and she pulled Crystal aside. "Aye, Wallace is expecting me. He and I have taken a fancy to each other of late. We have started to take supper there as it helps everyone get used to Brian again, to see him acting good and calm. They whisper less around him now."

"That is a good idea, and you and Wallace? I'm so happy for you. He seems a good and kind man. He takes care of everyone just like you do. I think he is a good match

for you," Crystal said.

"I think so too," she said. "Brian, lets walk with them to the inn and we should all take supper together, unless you have other plans?"

"Aye, I'm famished," Brian said.

"That would be nice," Crystal replied. She and Jamie didn't have any particular plans for dinner, so this worked well.

Together the group walked through the village and toward the inn.

Jamie led his horse and tied it up on the hitching post in the inn's courtyard.

When they entered all eyes turned to them, but only briefly and Crystal didn't know if it was because of Brian or because of herself.

She had also been involved in the crime as well and she was glad that the looks didn't last long.

Wallace greeted them, then turned to Courteney and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

She embraced him with a smile on her face.

Crystal was very glad to finally see Courteney happy.

She had been through way too much; more than anyone should have to go through with losing her sister and then dealing with her brother-in-law.

Now she seemed on the path to her own marriage.

She would probably move into the inn with Wallace and work with him to take care of the villagers and guests the way that Wallace did.

That would leave Brian with Courteney's cottage and a space of his own.

Maybe in time he would find love again, or so she hoped.

The group sat together at the large table by the fire in the back of the tavern.

Wallace brought them a bottle of whisky and cups.

This was followed by platters of food that had fresh fish, roasted vegetables, and loaves of bread.

They ate and drank to their hearts' delight and Crystal grew happier the more that Brian engaged in general conversation with Jamie about normal everyday things.

Everything seemed like it was on the right track, at least for now and she wanted nothing more than to enjoy the calm.

Speaking to the other women from her own time, it seemed that there would be phases of chaos and drama that came upon them from time to time, so she was going to enjoy the time between as best as she could.

Crystal silently watched and listened to the chatter around her as she realized she loved this place and the people.

She was itching to get back into writing and had considered creating a story around what had happened here when she arrived.

She loved writing so much and was happy that it was something she could continue

to do here, even if she wasn't published.

The thoughts about what Mason had done to her in the bar that night still made her angry, but she knew that if it hadn't happened, then she wouldn't have the life she had now.

She wouldn't have Jamie Grant, the love of her life.

The thought that it must have all been her fate was what kept her going, and with Jamie at her side she could endure anything, even living in a different time in a different land.

"Are you happy, love?" Jamie whispered in her ear.

"I am. I truly am. I can't believe it. I'm sitting in the same spot that I was when I was damp and trying to dry off from the loch, when you walked in looking as handsome as ever," she said.

"Aye, I remember. You had black streaks on your cheeks," he said. "You were an adorable, frightful mess." He chuckled.

She playfully slapped his shoulder. "That was mascara. How dare you."

He laughed. "You still looked beautiful to me. I love you, lass."

"I love you, Jamie Grant, my Scottish protector." She kissed him and he embraced her.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

At midnight, Audrina James finally laid her head down, gratefully onto her pillow.

It had been another grueling day in Trauma One, it was always the worst when the nursing staff and doctors of the trauma ward lost a child.

Audrina looked at the ceiling where she had taped pictures of stars, lush green fields, exotic ancient castles and the forests of her ancestral homeland, vowing to herself that she would visit Claran Castle in Scotland someday.

Audrina had put the pictures up so that she could clear her mind of the gruesome scenes that she faced in the E.R.

day after day, night after night. They'd worked hard to save the boy from the ravages of a car crash, but Donald Nightingale, of sunny northern California, flatlined at eleven-thirty, after half a day's worth of surgeries, blood transfusions and plasma bags.

Audrina didn't cry much anymore after working in the trauma center.

But there were a few patients who tugged at her heartstrings. Donald would be one of them.

"Look at the pictures. Look at the pictures," Audrina chanted to herself.

She used them as a platform to spring her mind into more pleasant thoughts before she drifted off to sleep.

Audrina had been fascinated with the stories and lore of her ancestry when her grandfather used to sit her on his knee and recount tales of his youth, roaming the Highlands of Scotland.

That was before a potato famine reached his homeland and forced his family to immigrate to the United States.

Audrina would spend hours, daydreaming as she roamed the redwoods behind the house, pretending the tall trees were the ancient forests of Scotland.

She knew now that Scotland was much greener, and the forests were made of tall oaks, and rowan trees, beech and pine and ash.

But she had promised herself she would visit and discover it for herself someday.

That was all a couple of decades ago, when Audrina had been just seven.

After high school, she had gone on to nursing school, and now was faced with the ever-increasing violence of the San Francisco Community Hospital that came through the doors.

The timing had just never felt right. There was always one more case to oversee, or one more patient to look after and successfully care for until they walked out the door of their own volition, and not in a body bag or stretcher.

Audrina certainly had the money saved for the trip, but she always felt there was something holding her back.

Some small fear she had that there was something Grandfather neglected to tell her about the ancient folklore.

Audrina never quite made the jump to buy the plane ticket or book the hotels.

She'd never really been sure why, but as she laid there, thinking about all of the never did's that young Donald was never going to experience, she thought, "Why am I holding back? I have no solid reason, no proof that there is anything in Scotland I should be afraid of."

"I'm going to request the time off tomorrow and start booking tickets after my trip to the museum," she vowed out loud.

There was no one to hear her proclamation, she realized.

There wasn't anyone in her life that she could tell really.

"I guess that makes it kind of sad, maybe even a little pathetic. Sure, I have my co-workers, but they would all say, "Finally, you are taking a vacation," when I tell them," Audrina thought.

Audrina had become a trauma nurse after Mom had suffered the same fate as little Donald.

She winced as the memories of that day entered her mind.

It had been much like Donald's parents rushing into the hospital.

The only difference between her grandfather being informed, and Mrs. Nightingale's heart-wrenching screams, had been significantly different, but as equally as devastating.

That's when Grandfather had taken her in.

She didn't know who her dad was, and it never occurred to her to go looking for him.

She knew that she was loved when Grandfather took her, a scared little girl, home that night.

He had cared for her and she didn't need anyone else.

Anyone, that was, except her mom, but she wasn't coming back.

When Grandfather had passed away she was twenty-one, she was left with no one.

She hadn't even bothered getting a pet. Audrina was never home because she worked so much.

She'd always felt like it was her duty to save people because, well, she couldn't save her mom back then.

Audrina tried to roll over onto her side.

She was disgusted with herself that she was caught up in her own head and wallowing in self-pity.

Her vow was just that and she was sticking to it.

She realized, as she flipped back onto her back, that she had never been able to fall asleep unless she was looking up at her pictures.

Grandfather had printed them for her the week that Mom had passed.

He wanted her to have something to think about, other than the sadness of losing her mom.

As Audrina's eyes began to flutter closed, and she emptied her mind save for thoughts of faraway lands and lost familial ties, something, perhaps the moonlight, sparkled in the pictures above her.

A small light that glowed in the tower of the castle, appeared to be brighter in the picture.

But she squinted at it, and then chalked it up to fatigue and weary eyes.

Her lashes batted against her cheeks one last time, and she fell into a deep, sound sleep.

Candles surrounded her in a circle, haloing the circular room with an ethereal glow. Long thin tapers of white sheep's fat burned low and lit the gloom of the dark tower. She'd been locked in there for so long, she had lost track of time.

There was a straw mattress, in a splintered bed of Ashwood.

The thin blanket cast across it, was worn and frayed at the edges.

A small wooden chair, equally as uncomfortable, sat at the base of the bed.

It wobbled on three legs, having relinquished one of the legs long ago, for the usage of a handle for a torch.

The torch, had long ago burnt to ash, and was scattered and lost amongst the dust and dirt that caked the cold stone floor.

She rocked back on her heels and murmured a soft prayer to the Gods, the Spirits, anyone who would listen.

The tower was a prison, a tortuous place that seeped into the soul like the smoky blackness of a demon, coming from the bowels of hell to inhabit and ingest the goodness of the person's humanity.

There were bones in the ashes and they cried out to her.

Begging her to release them of their captivity.

She couldn't help them that night. They would remain tethered there until the angels came for them on the day of reckoning.

Thunder clapped outside the castle and lit up the tiny room in an intense light that threw the stark furnishings of the room into harsh contrast. The candles flickered, and she feared they would blow out.

Cotswold Castle had many frivolities, protection from the elements in the prison tower, was not one of them.

Rain lashed against the stone tower and sprayed into the room in droves of unending dampness.

It rained often in Scotland. She hadn't been dry since she was thrown into that room.

The water collected in puddles at the base of the windows.

She sat in the middle of the room in an attempt to keep herself and her activities dry.

She knelt over a carnelian kilt pin. It glowed in the candlelight like fire.

She reached out her hand and touched it as she murmured.

The contact sent a spiral of heat through her fingertips, and she jerked her hand back.

How could the stone set in silver be warm to the touch?

There was no fire there. The brooch had not been warmed against constant contact with her skin, as she had been shivering since she arrived there.

The cold was such that it seeped not only into her bones, but into her very soul.

There was no possible way the stone could be warm.

Her eyes fixated on the glowing center of the gem as she continued to murmur, “Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, through spans of time, I cannot rest. Seek thee my kin, and pardon my sin, that I may reincarnate, and new life begin. And with this pin I shall be returned to my love, cast through the ages, by touch of mine blood, and light from sun up above.”

The kilt pin glowed ever-brighter in a hue of burnt orange that lit up not only the room, but blazed like the dawning of the early morning’s sun, sending spirals of light from the tower window.

She heard shouts from below and quickly loosened the stone nearest the door, about halfway up the wall.

She hid the pin behind the stone, where someone had hollowed out the stone behind that, and replace the stone so that it looked seamless.

She prayed that someone would find it someday, and that she might rise up, released from the ashes of the debris of bodies from that hellish place.

She heard footsteps on the stairs and boots clunked up the stone steps.

She hurriedly pushed the stone back in place and managed to take one step back, as the door was thrown open and she screamed in terror as... ”

Audrina woke, sitting bolt upright in bed.

“What the hell?” she muttered as she glanced up at the pictures.

“What the heck was that?” she wondered to herself as she let her tired body fall back against the pillows.

She stared at her pictures and then pushed herself back up to a sitting position.

She used her hands and pushed to stand up, so that her upturned face was almost nose to nose with the picture of the castle.

Audrina stared at the tiny light in the tower.

It had faded over the years, but she could have sworn last night it glowed brightly. So brightly it almost lit up the room.

And then...and then, that dream. What a strange dream.

Who was that woman in the dream? What happened to her?

She must have died there. Audrina could feel the drive of her trauma nurse training kick in.

She had to save her. But how? That’s silly.

The woman...me...that was centuries ago when she cast the spell.

And what kind of a spell was that anyway?

Audrina's mind began to fog over, the dream becoming misty around the edges, as reality and the present day slowly seeped back into her mind.

She looked around the modern-day bedroom and laughed at the absurdity of her mind's vehemence that the dream was somehow a reality way back when.

She climbed off the bed and hit the shower, enjoying the feel of the warm jets hitting her body as the ache from the previous day's strenuous shift was washed away.

She combed out her dark red hair and swiftly braided it down her back as she stared into her own brown eyes in the reflection of the foggy mirror.

She wiped away the condensation and flashes entered her mind.

The reflection of a woman in the puddles on the floor as the lightening lit up the room.

Did she have brown eyes like my own? Audrina wondered.

She shrugged and finished her braid and then donned her typical casual wear of jeans, an oversized tee-shirt and a ball cap.

The ensemble fit well on her athletic frame, and it was just what she needed to walk down to San Francisco's Museum of Natural History.

Audrina enjoyed the casual wear on a rare day off, and she was equally as pleased that the museum was hosting an exhibit on loan from Scotland.

She figured she could kill two birds with one stone.

She could get her walk in and surround herself in ancient artifacts that made her yearn for a time and place that she had not yet discovered.

She pulled her ballcap low over her eyes as she walked out the front door, not minding in the least that she had been accused on more than one occasion of being a tomboy.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:09 am

When Audrina reached the museum, she purchased her ticket and queued to get in line to be let into the exhibits.

She was about ten minutes early and so she began to read the pamphlet that was handed out at the ticket booth.

She had been to the museum so many times, she was only interested in the exhibit on loan from the Scottish Museum of Ancient History, but she figured she might peruse a few more on her way out.

She read about the various artifacts that were on display, quite impressed with the vast array of items that have been amassed.

As she flipped the cover open, she paused, staring down at the pamphlet stupidly and didn't really register what she was seeing and reading on the pamphlet.

As she stared down at the glossy photo, the memory of the dream from last night was a bit hazy, but there was no mistaking the kilt pin from the dream.

The one that the woman, that she, had cursed.

Or maybe the woman in the dream, she, had placed a spell on it.

But there it was, shining back up at her from the brochure.

Audrina blinked rapidly in the sun, thinking that maybe she was mistaken, and this was another pin that was excavated from some site in Scotland, and it just looked

similar.

But as she continued to read, the weighted feeling in her stomach became heavier and heavier.

“The Cotswold Pin, a rare and expensive carnelian-gem set pin, was discovered last year in the ruins of Cotswold Castle’s eastern most tower.

Archeologists and Historians know very little about the pin, except that it was discovered hidden behind a loose stone near the doorway to the tower, where a mason was reinforcing the towers infrastructure.

Cotswold Castle is host of a long and bloody history in the Scottish culture and it is well known that Lord Cotswold, imprisoned many native Scotsmen, in his long and cruel English reign over the Scottish people.

It is speculated that the pin was hidden by one of the prisoners.

Most likely in the event of their impending death and the desire for such a rare gem to not fall into the hands of the English.

It is known that Lord Cotswold’s reign was filled with such terrors and atrocities against the Scottish people, such as imprisonment, torture, and rape.

He often invoked the First Rights, also known as Prima, against many young Scottish Brides.

It was well known that many of the ones he impregnated he had accused of, tried, and found guilty of witchcraft and subsequently sentenced to death.

It is no wonder that whoever was bequeathed such a rare treasure as this gem-inlaid kilt pin, would have wanted it hidden from such an atrocious and vindictive lord and

ruler. ”

Audrina’s hands trembled, and the pamphlet shook as she read and re-read the description under the brooch.

“ How can this possibly be? How is it that I dreamt of this very kilt pin, only last night? I have no memory of such a pin, even from the countless hours spent with Grandfather pouring over history and ancestry books,” she wondered.

She only realized that the line had started to move, and people were entering the museum, when someone shouted, “Are you going to stand there all day?”

She jumped and shouted, “Sorry!” over her shoulder as she hastened to the door.

She followed the map of the museum to the new acquisitions and the new exhibit that was on display and it took her a full ten minutes to push through the throngs of people who were gathered around the ancient claymores and thread-bare tartans.

She looked for a case, a glass case, figuring, if the museum was going to display rare and beautiful jewelry and gems, they would have it resting on a bed of velvet and enclosed in a high-security, alarm activated case such as the ones she had seen countless other relics, and objet d’art displayed in before.

She found the very case she was looking for and made a beeline for it.

She waited at the back of the line and tapped her foot restlessly, as she waited for the older couple who were fawning over the brooches and tartans and listing off their family tree and origins, dating themselves back to the days of yore and their own ancestors.

Just when her patience couldn’t possibly take any more waiting, the line moved ahead, and she was able to press in, face to face with the kilt pin.

Audrina found it extraordinary that, even after centuries sitting behind a stone, even though it was unexposed to the elements, it was still in pristine condition, as if it had never survived centuries of time passing by.

She was sure that it was probably dusty when the mason found it, possibly even the gem was scratched or worn and thus had to be restored, but the pin was pristine.

The burnt orange gem sat at the apex of a silver hill.

The silver had been bent and molded onto a swirling pattern to resemble the crest of the hill, so the gem was the representation of the sun.

From what Audrina knew of Celtic mythology, the sun symbol was more widely used in the sun cross symbols, which were indicative of Christianity's introduction to the Celtic peoples.

But this sun was a literal representation of the sun, suggesting that whoever designed and forged the pin, was still a practicing pagan, possibly giving the pin druidic or witchcraft origins.

On the outset of the circular pin, the silver swirled into a Celtic knot which was wavy around the edges, like a river.

Audrina knew this because as Grandfather and she had investigated the Claran, or MacClaran name, it was discovered that the Claran's were one of the older tribes of Scotland, but those particular tribes were ancient, nomadic druids who traveled the waters from the Isle of Eire, also known as Ireland.

The modern day Claran's were to be found inhabiting the areas on the River Clare and the name Claran literally meant, "One who lives near the River Clare." So, Audrina knew her ancestors had been an ancient people of magics and mystery, and the warring tribes had caused them to take root in Scotland as one of the founding

tribes, and they had taken their name and origins with them.

The evidence was right there in the pin that resembled the pagan magics and the river beds from whence her people came.

The tribes, like the rivers on the pin, were split between Ireland and Scotland.

Audrina felt her excitement at having found such a connection to her ancestors, begin to grow.

She stared with her face almost pressed to the glass, willing the pin to do something, anything to give her a sign that she belonged there, with it.

She felt like, somewhere deep in her soul, that the pin belonged to her, but she knew this was silly, because it belonged to the museum in Scotland.

It didn't change the connection she imagined she could feel through the glass.

As she stood there, she again realized the grumblings of the crowd around her as she had allowed herself to be lost in her thoughts.

She was about to exit the line and circle back around, when the crowd was jostled and parted by the streak of a black clothed and masked figure, who shoved them aside.

When the intruder got to Audrina, he shoved her so hard, she knocked into the glass and it smashed as the sirens from the museum began to wail.

Audrina cut the back of her hand on the glass as she tried to stop her fall, but with the rest of the crowd, she tumbled to the floor.

Audrina looked up, just in time to see the masked figure reach into the case and grab something.

A flash of orange and silver registered in her mind, and she clawed her way back up and ran after the thief, as he dashed outside the museum with what she could only proclaim as “her” kilt pin.

Audrina chased after him as the wail of sirens from the museum’s security, and the automatically notified police screeched in her ear.

As athletic as she was, it didn’t take her long to catch up to the thief, and she tackled him, expertly maneuvering him into a judo hold from her years of training with Mr. Tanaka at his Japanese dojo.

Audrina had needed an outlet for her rage and frustration for losing everyone she had ever loved.

And she had miraculously stumbled upon it in the classes offered at the dojo and Mr. Tanaka’s ever-patient and serene temperament.

The thief was quickly apprehended at Audrina’s capable hands, just as the police showed up and began to cross the sunny court-yard.

“Hey lady, are you nuts?” one of the officer called. “You don’t chase after a criminal! What were you thinking!” he shouted.

Audrina didn’t answer him, but reached out her shaking hand toward the pin that had fallen to the ground in the take-down of the thief, and as her bloodied fingers from the cut on the glass closed around the pin, the sun shone brightly through a cloud cover, landing directly on the pin, the blood and her hand, and then suddenly, there was a black and gray mist, and Audrina was falling, falling, falling.