



Captured By the Highland Devil (Lairds of the Loch Alliance #3)

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Category: Historical

Description: "I am a beast, remember. And that side of me has appetites that a virgin like ye cannae even imagine."

The king has spoken: Paige must marry the Highland Devil. And though she vows to never give in to him, she finds it impossible to resist his touch...

Laird Ruben never wanted to marry much less his enemy's daughter. But when he sees her curvy body, he knows he must make her his.

But Paige refuses to submit to the devil. Now matter how tempting he makes sin look...

Total Pages (Source): 35

CHAPTER ONE

“F ather...”

Paige Bradley stared blankly at the piece of paper in her hand without quite understanding what it said—or rather, she could understand it but could not believe it.

“Father...” Her voice was hoarse. “This cannae be right.”

“It came from the King’s pen, girl,” her father Angus said tightly. “It’s a royal decree, I cannae undo it, undermine it or revoke it. It must be done.”

“But—but—” she swallowed, her hand clenching on the page so tightly it almost ripped in two. “He wants me to wed that McKinnon brute. The same scourge who had been wagin’ war against us and killed our people.”

“I ken that,” Angus Bradley, the MacPherson laird, snapped. “If I had the power, I wouldnae want that dastardly man anywhere near us.”

“But-but...” she swallowed. “The King kens about the bad blood between us. Is there nay other solution than marriage?”

Angus shook his head, “He doesnae want ye to marry, he is orderin’ ye to marry—” his face twisted into a scowl. “—I daena believe the Brute is happy about this either but there is nothin’ we can do.”

A suffocating weight compressed her lungs. “But Faither, he killed me cousin Elijah.

Nae to mention the many others he slaughtered in the past year alone! H-how can I marry a man with such blood on his hands. I cannae, I will nae marry this man.”

“Ye will,” Angus shot out of his chair and slammed his hands down on the table, sloshing the goblet of wine and sending papers skittering to the floor.

Paige jumped, startled that her father took such a tone with her. “But Faither, I?—”

“Ye will marry him, or all our blood will be on yer hands. Ye and I will be just like yer cousin. The weddin’ is going to happen whether ye like it or nae,” her father said, while reaching for his wine.

Looking at her hands on her lap, Paige asked, “Why did they start the war at all?”

“At first, they invaded for nay reason, then I realized they wanted the mountain,” Angus said tiredly.

“That land has mines that are full of gold nae to mention it’s where the coast is and where the fishermen make their catch.

How do ye think that clan is rich, daughter-of-mine? All that coin goes to them.”

Paige should have been shocked at hearing that, but she was not. The McKinnon clan were an evil set of people, and their laird, Ruben Miller was the worst of them.

She had never laid eyes on the man before, but whispers told her the man was as ugly as sin, with only one eye and a scar down the other.

“When—” she swallowed. “When is this marriage going to happen?”

“In a few days,” Angus said, unhappily. “The laird and his people will be here by

nightfall and tomorrow we'll have the wedding ceremony."

"Does Maither ken about this?" she asked.

"Aye, from this mornin' and she hasnae stopped cryin' about it," Angus was agitated, his eyes flicking here and there.

"I need to go see her." Paige stood and hurried from the room, leaving the crumpled paper behind.

She walked quickly to her mother's room and found the door half open, from there she heard her mother's soft sobs. Her mother Daisy Bradley—small, dark-haired, and painfully thin—was prone to nervous fits.

It pained Paige to see her already fretful mother crying. With too many emotions, she would fall into a conniption.

"Mama," she said while rushing to her side. "Mama, please, daenae fret."

Peeling the sodden cloth away from her eyes, her mother shook her head, "I dinnae want this for ye, Paige. Ye're supposed to marry a good man, n-nae this warmonger."

Perching on the side of the bed, Paige hugged her mother. "I ken Maither, but I daenae want ye to get ill over this. Ye ken that at times of real pressure, ye happen to take too much of it to heart and ye get ill."

Shaking her head, Daisy said, "At times, aye, I have but it's warranted for this. Yer life is going to change irreparably, and I daenae ken how to fix it."

Hugging her mother tightly, she said, "Maybe we can talk to Laird McKinnon. If he does nae want this marriage either, maybe we can forge a peace without the

weddin’.”

“We cannae disobey the King,” her mother sobbed. “Marriages are for alliances, Paige.”

Hugging her mother, Paige tried not to sob. Her heart was heavy and her soul felt hollow. Her future felt bleak at best and would be a terror at worst. She could not imagine what being a wife to such a man would be like and even worse, combining their clans would mean having a child with him.

She shuddered.

“Maither, I daenae want ye to worry about this,” Paige said. “If the man is any sort of gentleman, he’ll listen to what I have to say.”

Her mother’s fingers fluttered in the air, “And what if he does nae?”

“I’ll make him listen,” Paige promised herself.

Atop his powerful warhorse, Ruben gazed at the MacPherson manor house. The old bastion had seen better days, that was for sure.

The stone was drab and dirty and to the south-west, a portion of the curtain wall had crumbled to nothing. The space was filled with a mound of dirt and stone. Two goats were perched on it, their ears twitching.

“T’is a sorry lookin’ place, isn’t it?” Galan Howe, Ruben’s man-at-arms, nodded to the castle ahead of them.

Ruben’s answer was a disconsolate grunt.

“Have ye ever seen yer wife-to-be?” Galan asked.

“Nay.” Ruben’s deep voice rumbled out. He snapped the reins, making the horse walk down the incline. “It matters nae if I have seen her before. Her looks mean nothin’ to me. What does matter is for her to stay out of me affairs and out of me way after this sham wedding is done.”

“Her looks would matter to me if I were forced to marry and make a bairn with her,” Galan said as they headed to the road leading to the house. “Have ye met the laird before, at least?”

“I’ve seen him once,” Ruben replied. “When I was younger, he and Faither had a meetin’ but I had nae stayed for introductions. I was due to report for a battle that day. The northern raiders were on our borders again.”

“Ah, I remember,” Galan replied. “The raiders had nay chance that day, nay with ye as executioner in that battle.”

The guards at the gate stopped them but upon getting their identities were let through. Already dressed in his clan’s colors and kilt, Ruben was ready to go to the kirk and get this handfasting done with. He had more important things to do with his day.

At the steps, a male servant greeted them and Ruben could feel Galan’s eyes on the side of his neck. He knew what his friend was thinking.

The laird is nae meetin’ us, that is a bad sign already.

“His lairdship would like ye to meet him in his meetin’ room,” the servant bowed. “This way please.”

“Before we go,” Ruben stopped the man. “Where is lady Paige?”

“She is preparin’ for the weddin’, me laird,” the footman replied.

Turning to a young woman behind them, he said, “Take Maisie to them, then take us to the meetin’ room. She is to be me wife-to-be’s new maid.”

The footman bowed. “Aye, Laird McKinnon.”

As the two went off, Ruben looked around the drab hall; two battered shields were hung on the walls, a brass chandelier hung over their heads and a thin carpet was underfoot.

“Did ye say this lairdship had some wealth?” Galan sniffed.

“They were rich some years ago,” Ruben said.

“But when we had to take the land back, they lost the gold mines. And then there is the fact that he is a cruel, greedy man. Too greedy for good men to follow. The taxes they pay go to maintain him instead of the lairdship and they are leavin’ him, it seems.”

“Ah, I see, like rats leavin’ a sinkin’ ship,” Galan snorted.

The young man returned to them and bowed, “This way, Laird McKinnon.”

They were led to a room that was as plain as the foyer but had a long, rectangular table that took up half the room and behind it was a throne-like chair.

Two men and two guards were inside. The oldest man had on rough fair robes held together with a simple rope belt while the other man wore clothes stitched with gold thread and premium velvet. Jewels were sewn into the collar and fur topped his boots.

This man is wearin' jewels while his people scabble for bread.

Ruben had no positive feelings for this man and from the tempered glare the laird returned, the emotion was mutual.

"Greetings MacPherson," Ruben said firmly. "I hope the arrangements are finished and we can get this weddin' underway."

"Laird McKinnon," MacPherson said stiffly. "Aye, almost everythin' is prepared but we have to do things by standard. We need to publish the banns and get the license before we proceed."

. "Here are the papers," Ruben said, pulling out a rolled sheaf from his tunic, splaying them out upon the table. "The King waived the time for publishin' the banns and here is the license, signed by the archbishop himself. All is in order so we can proceed."

The priest took the papers, his little rheumy eyes darting back and forth between Ruben and MacPherson.

MacPherson's face bloated with fury—just as Ruben expected. He knew the man would try to delay the proceeding somehow. Who knew if the man wanted to secret the girl away and double-cross Ruben by framing him for her murder?

MacPherson thought he was cunning at least, but he was not the sharpest arrow in the quiver. The man had been outmaneuvered many a time by the other lairds around him. In truth, MacPherson had been a bit of a laughingstock among the other lairds for his dim wit.

"All seems to be in order, me laird," the friar said. "We may proceed."

Angus' mouth twisted with displeasure and fury before he forced a pleasant smile on

his face to replace it. He reached for a bottle of wine and goblets. “How about we toast to this occasion?”

Ruben shared a look with his second. Did MacPherson think he was a fool? Why would he drink with a man who he knew actively hated him?

“Nay,” he said to Angus then turned to the priest. “We need to have the ceremony now. Find the girl and let us start. I have other affairs to attend to.”

As he spoke, he reminded himself that this marriage was a means to an end, and that he must never forget that. It was an alliance, not a love match, and when this was all done, he’d put her away into a house somewhere and move on with his life.

Nothin’ good will come from this and nothing will. She is still a scion of the enemy and that is all she will be treated as...the enemy.

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CHAPTER TWO

T ears were burning behind Paige’s eyes as her maid pinned the pearl-tipped comb into her hair. She was not angry, she was not furious, stunned or even feeling betrayed— Paige was numb.

It was the day of her marriage to the hellraiser of the McKinnon Clan and if she made herself think too much about it, she knew she would dissolve into sobs.

“Paige,” her mother said behind her, “Please daenae fret. I ken it isnae what ye wanted but if ye fret about it, it might make it that much worse.”

“I am nae frettin’, Mama,” she said.

In truth, she was not worrying. The deep-seated dread that had settled into the pit of her stomach from the moment she’d heard about the marriage surpassed worry.

Her maid Innes pulled her hair back into a long braid, then wrapped the braid around her head and pinned in place. Deftly, she wove in a few ribbons to give her flaxen hair a flair.

She stood and turned, looking down at her wedding dress. The tails of her finely woven wool dress were a faint bluish-grey with long bell sleeves. It was simple and well-fitting, but fashionable. Her mother pinned the sash of her clan around her left shoulder to her hip.

Her mother held Paige’s face, “I urge ye to find the good in the midst of this. Mayhap

in due time, ye and this man can have a civil, even happy union.”

I doubt that will happen.

A knock on the door had them turning and as Innes answered, another young woman in dark clothing entered. She curtsied; the sun’s rays turned her dark red hair into a burnished brass. “Good mornin’, me ladies. I am Maisie Grant, and I was sent by Laird McKinnon to be yer maid, Lady Paige.”

Paige shared a look with her mother before she addressed the young woman, “Thank ye for comin’ but I question why. I already have a maid.”

“I will be yer lady’s maid when we return to Clan McKinnon.”

“But—”

“As much as we might like to talk this over, we daenae have time to do it now,” Daisy stopped them. “It’s time to head to the chapel.”

The chapel, affixed to the east end of the castle was large enough to hold thirty people. Her father had used it to hold masses for other lairds before they went to meetings.

Sunlight filtered through the stained-glass window above the altar and shone upon the hanging crucifix. If she weren’t filled with such misery and resentment, she would have admitted that the light, with dust motes floating around the cross, was beautiful.

Her father was in his finest clothes, his kilt trimmed with a fur collar and hemmed in gold. Paige inhaled deeply and tried not to cry. She couldn’t be weak even while grief sat like a boulder in her chest, but she would not succumb to it.

“Hold yer chin up.” Her father told her. “Ye cannae be soft in front of him .”

As if summoned, her gaze lifted to the man at the other end of the hall. His tall, lean body, broad shoulders, and muscular chest were clothed in a great kilt of reds and gold tartan.

The tunic underneath was crisp white and richly embroidered with gold threads. It stretched tautly across his, the tunic fell to his knees, meeting the tops of fine leather boots. The sun gave his thick, tawny brown hair a burnished gleam and he was clean-shaven, which was odd for a highland Scot.

His granite chin and hard-edged features gave him a distinctively wolfish mien. He was too far away to see his eyes, but when he met her gaze, her heart beat a rapid staccato.

The priest was waited for them at the altar. Laird McKinnon turned to nod to the man beside him, moments before he strode over to her. Paige felt like a mouse trapped in the eyes of a goshawk as he came closer.

“MacPherson,” he addressed her father while his eyes rested on her. “A moment with yer daughter alone.”

“I’d prefer if I stayed?—”

“I dinnae ask ,” the beast said, “We will talk alone.”

His stern tone had the people around them bowing away, even her father, who looked mulish doing so.

This close, his heavy-lidded eyes half-covered his intense blue-black irises. The color was like that of the deepest loch, bottomless and infinite.

Half his hair hung down to his shoulders, and half was tied back with a leather thong. A thin crimson scar pulled taut along the right side of his face near his mouth.

“I daenae want this,” Paige said, bitterness turning her voice brittle.

“Neither do I, but here we are lass,” he said, the hard lines of his mouth softening for an instant. “There is nothin’ ye can do about it. Or do ye want to face the King’s wrath?”

“I ken who ye are. Ye’re a murderer,” she said hollowly.

His lips tightened, “Have ye ever been in war lass? Nay, of course ye havenae. Nae with those butter soft hands of yers, I reckon. To survive, it is kill or be killed. If we daenae marry, the king will make sure we are dead.”

She turned away and muttered, “That might be better.”

A snort came from him and then she heard the subtle shrrk of metal against leather. “Have at it then.”

What ?

Paige turned to find him holding the handle of a dagger to her by its cross guards.

The blade glinted in the bright sunlight and her belly shivered at the insinuation. His face was unreadable as he held the weapon to her; her eyes flickered from the weapon to the man holding it.

It felt like a cruel taunt.

“Put it away,” she said.

“Are ye sure?” he asked, “Ye said ye’d prefer to be dead than marry a murderer.”

“Ye’re a brute,” she whispered.

The brute had a glint in his eye as he sheathed the dagger. “Stop ragin’. We will marry.”

Paige’s throat was constricted, and she felt tears sting her eyelids. “Why do ye want me to have a new maid? I already have one.”

“I daenae trust yer faither and I will nae have a spy in me house,” he said.

“Me maid is loyal to me.”

“Yer maid is bound to yer faither and if he wants something he will have it,” he said.

“Ahem,” the priest cleared his throat, his dark eyes flitting from Ruben to Paige. “May both parties please come to the altar, we are ready to proceed.”

Ruben grasped her arm and bowed, “We’ve a weddin’ to attend.”

Her very soul rankled at his words and tone, he was treating her like a recalcitrant child and not as the grown woman with her own mind that she was.

The cleric looked between them, then to her father—who was silently stewing in fury—and lastly to the cadre of the Brute’s soldiers who were around them. Paige was sure that so many weapons in the house of God was a sin.

She held her frustration in; no sobs, no cries of outrage, no pleading with her father to stop this.

Mutely, she stood at the Beast's side. The cleric wound a length of plaid around their hands, joining the two of them together.

Then he hefted the ancient bible and began to drone on with the psalms to bless this union.

I already feel cursed.

“...and do ye, Ruben Miller, Laird of McKinnon clan take this woman, Paige Bradley, daughter of Laird MacPherson, to be yer wedded wife —”

“Aye. Move on,” the Brute clipped.

“Do ye, Paige Bradley, daughter of Laird MacPherson take Ruben Miller, Laird McKinnon to be yer wedded husband, love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health? Do ye pledge to forsake all others, keep only to her as long as ye both shall live?”

Any horror she might have previously felt was now dwarfed as she realized she was about to wed McKinnon. A man she hated to the depths of her soul.

The priest frowned at her silence, “Me lady?”

“She does.” Ruben said brusquely.

Nervously the cleric looked to Ruben, “I beg yer pardon, yer lairdship, I need to have her response.”

Paige could not bring herself to say the words.

“Ye will respond, woman,” Ruben said, his voice was low and threatening.

Air scraped through her throat as she took a desperate breath. "...I will nae."

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CHAPTER THREE

Her father's face went mottled red, "Girl, ye are going to damn yer own self and this house!"

"Angus, please," her mother pleaded with him, pressing a hand to the Laird's chest. "Let her be."

Ruben's cold stare made her all but wither in her slippers.

"Ahem," the cleric coughed. "Do ye Paige Bradley take this man to be yer wedded husband?"

Paige knew she could not say no a second time; she was already sure the Beast—Ruben, she corrected herself—understood that she wanted no part of this marriage.

"I do," she said, resistance still brimming in every drop her blood.

"Ye are now wed." the cleric's voice intoned. "Ye can kiss yer bride now."

The Beast—Ruben— fixed her with a cool stare. He fixed her chin with firm fingertips, lifted her face to his. She was a foot and a half shorter than him and his domineering presence looming over her irritated her—but that feeling was lost at the sensation of his skin on hers.

His touch seared her skin.

She did not know how to interpret the burn. A part of her wanted to lean into the touch and another part pushed her to leap away.

His eyes were dark and emotionless as he wordlessly leaned down and brushed his lips on her cheeks. Her breath stumbled in her chest. He smelled of fresh woodsmoke, leather and clean water— a scent that made her pulse suddenly quicken.

When he pulled away, she saw no emotion coming from him and that made her stomach tie itself in knots. She felt as if the floor under her feet had been ripped away from her.

This was not how she had expected her first kiss—as chaste as it was—to be. She did not move; she did not respond.

As she turned, she realized there was another woman in the room, one she had not seen before. From her dark hair color and ruddy skin, she saw a resemblance to Ruben.

What she did not like—and what confused her— was the blistering animosity coming from the girl. It almost made her want to leap away. If that glare were daggers, she'd be pierced through by now.

Her father came to them, his arms crossed and a tight scowl on his face, looking anything but pleased. “The weddin’ feast is waitin’ for ye.”

With her arm linked with Ruben, Paige mentally distanced herself from the man. If she had her way, she would rather be across the manor house than heading to the dining hall.

As they stepped in, the gathered crowd inside the room roared with their approval, the noise shaking the timbered halls to its foundations.

Paige's eyes misted with tears, but she blinked them away. None of them knew what this was like; none of them knew the bleak future she was about to suffer through.

There were about fifty people in the hall, she guessed, a few lords and ladies from allied clans, men of her father's councilmen, and a few servants, including her father's head guard and housekeeper.

The head table was laden with roast fowl, duck, and fish stuffed with braised onions and carrots, breads, cheeses and pies. Paige had no appetite in sight.

As she sat and the feasting began, Paige simply wanted to leave to her room and cry.

Sipping his wine, Ruben noticed that his new wife had not once glanced his way.

She is a headstrong one, that is for sure. What do I do with her now? I need someone meek and submissive, nae a termagant.

Objectively, the lass was beautiful. Her lips were rosy and plump, her face had a delicate bone structure, and if her neck and shoulders were any indication, her skin was as smooth and flawless as porcelain.

Her generous bosom was gently rising and falling and despite her plump curves, she was quite petite, with her eye level reaching in the low vicinity of his chest.

"She's nae the wife ye thought her to be, eh?" Galan murmured under Ruben's left ear.

As the lass, Paige, was on his right, he doubted she heard his man-at-arms, and even if she did, he doubted she would care.

"Nay," he said while his eyes searched for Norah in the crowd.

His sister had been silent about the union, and he still did not know what she thought about it—and it worried him. She had two guards near her and even though she was eating he could feel her reluctance.

“Keep an eye on Norah for me, please,” he nodded to Galan. “I daenae want her to get overcome with these proceedings.”

“Aye,” Galan nodded. Knowing about the troubles Norah had fallen into and the moments she did get fretful, he sat back and drank his water. “I will.”

Returning his gaze to Paige, Ruben assessed the mass of flaxen hair coiled on her head. Being partial to those with fair hair, he wondered what that mass would look down over her back.

“Ye should eat,” he told her, filling her empty trench with meat and fish.

“I am nae hungry,” she said, chin up and gaze stubbornly averted.

“At dawn, we’ll be journeyin’ to me home and I will nae have ye faintin’ on me.” The lass’s stubbornness was absurd ... and perversely intriguing.

Beneath his tunic, his belly warmed with arousal. His lips ticked down with self-mockery as he sipped his wine. Wasn’t it just like him to get aroused by defiance?

He already knew he was going to have his hands full with this one. When she’d refused the vows at the altar, his fingers had flexed. He wanted to shake her for being so stubborn.

“Ye cannae force me to eat,” she said. “Ye have to pardon me, me stomach is uneasy at the moment.”

One of Ruben's men stood, lifted his goblet and shouted, "To his lairdship and his wife. I drink to ye and all the health in the world!"

Ruben picked up the bronze goblet filled with spiced wine, took a mouthful then handed it to Paige, his gaze a dare. She hesitated but he knew she would not— could not refuse to sip from her husband's cup and call shame upon them.

Her fingers brushed his as she took it from him, and he could see the pulse in her neck started to race. It was clear that the merest touch from this stranger excited her beyond reason. It showed him how much of an innocent she was and while it tempted him to smile—he did not.

God almighty—what was he to do with a pious virgin?

CHAPTER FOUR

The feasting and drinking continued late into the night; the wine coursing through the guests' veins lowered almost any inhibition the guests had. The men got rowdy, the women, lightheaded.

"Can ye hand me the platter of fish, please," Paige said quietly.

"Finally, ye're makin' sense," Ruben muttered while reaching for the platter.

Outside, a violent storm battered the hall, the rain splattering on the walls, the wind made the shutters vibrate and snap. Yet with the music and chatter, no one inside, no one seemed to notice.

When Galan left the dais to dance, Ruben kept his eyes on his sister: Norah had settled herself into a corner with a platter of sweet tarts and wine. Most of the men, warriors, were getting rowdy but he could see Galan was keeping to his word and between dances, was watching over her.

It was his wedding night, Ruben knew he was expected to be as drunk as any of the men here, yet he refrained; he wanted to be lucid.

He was a warrior first, a laird, so he knew he had to keep his head about him.

Moreover, he was in enemy territory, and the tentative peace they had brokered was still as fragile as flax rope.

Near midnight, the men and women rose to their feet, pushing the tables to one side as the music got louder.

“Do ye dance?” she asked.

“Nae much,” he said as the men and women began a lively reel. He cocked his head, assessing her body stance. “If ye want to dance, ye can go.”

She drew in her bottom lip and gazed at the people around them. When she released her lip, it glistened wet under the light from the chandeliers. His blood heated again.

“I think I will,” she said while pushing away from the table.

Now, he had two lasses to keep his eyes on. His gaze flittered to Norah, she was still in her place and he reminded himself to go and talk with her before she went to bed.

Relieved to get away from the intensity that was Ruben Miller, Paige had barely descended the dais’ stairs when someone claimed her hand.

Alick Fell was an older man, a retired warrior and a part of her father’s council. His hair touched with silver at the temples and his brown eyes gleamed in the light.

“May I have the honor of yer first dance, me lady?” he asked.

Paige smiled, “Aye, Alick. Ye can.”

Alick limped slightly as he danced, though that did not slow him down. She put her hand in his and let him lead her into the middle of the group as the tune turned lilting.

In place to dance, the villagers began to clap in time, Alick caught her hands in his and they spun around together. The beat was catching, and she matched his steps.

She'd loved dancing from childhood, always felt the music as alive as the air she breathed and the river that rushed pell-mell in the woods behind the manor house. As the dance got wilder, she found herself laughing aloud with the pleasure of it.

As she spun, she caught sight of her new husband's assessing gaze—turned away. He was not even looking at her.

"Is McKinnon as bad as they say he is?" Alick asked as they spun.

"I—" she had to pause. "I daenae ken him that well yet."

As much as she had called him a murderer and despised what he had done to her home, Paige did not want to badmouth him to anyone else. Her umbrage with McKinnon stayed between her and McKinnon.

The touch to her backside startled her but she dismissed it as a mistake. The first time. After another spin it happened again and she wondered if it was intentional.

By the third time, Alick was brazen enough to cup her backside. She was ready to push Alick away and leave the floor—when Alick was ripped away from her.

Ruben's order to Alick was bone-chilling. "Enough."

Alick looked to argue but the expression on the warlord's face chilled Paige to her bones, even though she was not in the wrong. Wisely, Alick bowed and scurried away like a wounded mutt with its tail between its legs.

With how angered Ruben was, she expected steam would shoot from his ears any moment. As ridiculous as it sounded, such a display would ruin the glee of the celebrants, who were already circling the hall in their joyous, foot-stamping dance.

“Me laird?—”

He held her left wrist tightly and pulled her in like a fish on a line. He growled, “Were ye flirtin’ with him on purpose?”

“N-nay,” she stammered. “I would never do such a thing.”

She was keenly aware of the strength of her husband’s hands and the warmth of his gaze. Though his hold barely touched her, the fire that raced up her wrist made her shiver, hot and cold at the same time.

His breath brushed her ear in a low growl. “Remember who ye belong to now.”

Paige lifted her chin. “I will never belong to ye.”

She was breathless as the tune wound to a close, and he spun her into his arms when the music began again. He reached over and took her hand in his. “We’ll see about that.”

A man with a bone whistle joined the harpist as they leaped and spun, stamped their feet and clapped their hands.

Despite him saying he did not dance much, Ruben was a magnificent dancer.

He did not show any weariness, his breath still steady as he finished the leaping, whirling dance.

His broad, well-muscled chest was rising and falling as easily as if he’d taken a walk instead.

The blaze of the fires around the room made his skin gleam like burnished bronze. In

the golden haze in the room, he looked gloriously divine, Lugh reincarnated. A blush swept up her neck, staining her cheeks and her heart thundered.

He danced with an intensity she always felt from him since she's met him. She had thought he wanted nothing to do with her—but then he'd become so possessive and protective of her, it made her head spin.

What does this man want?

While catching her breath, she saw other men hesitant in approaching her. She wondered why, until she caught sight of her husband's stern eye trained on them. When the men did approach her, it was to give them their best wishes and kiss the back of her hand. Certainly, no more dances.

Was it too early for her to suppose he did not want her but did not want anyone else to come near her either?

Think of it as a man's perspective, a proud Scot's perspective. He could nae let anyone disrespect his new wife and do nothin' about it.

They danced another three times before Paige had to cry exhaustion and that she needed to rest.

Steering her away from the dancers, he said, "Yer faither has arranged for a marital bedroom for us—" Paige felt every drop of blood drain from her face. Ruben slid an eye to her. "—but I will nae be using it as intended. Nae here, nae now."

"Meanin'—" she swallowed, "—ye will be usin' another bed?"

"Aye," he said as they left the main hall. The sudden quiet jarred her. "But at me home."

The thought of being intimate with the man she despised made her tremble deep down inside. Her face must have shown her fear as the brute chuckled. “Drop yer shoulders lass, I never touch unwillin’ women.”

“Ye will never touch me,” she promised him.

His hand caged her chin again while a wicked emotion danced in his eyes. “I am sure I can change yer mind in a sennight.”

She pulled away, half-repulsed, half-fearful. “I will never let ye.”

With those words, she fled to her rooms and even though he did not chase after her, she slammed the door close and shot the bolt in place. Trembling, she backed away from the doorway until her back met the other wall.

Overwhelmed, she sunk to the floor, trembling. Frantic, her eyes darted to the window, and she lurched up to fling the window open. The rain had petered off and though it was pitch dark, she could see the wet ground.

Did she dare escape? It would be so easy to knot her bedsheets into a rope, clamber down and run. But to where and with what?

She stepped away, her head shaking. “A coward’s way out. And the king would probably send men to hunt me down, to boot.”

Her eyes dropped to the packed trunks at her door waiting to be transferred to a wagon or a carriage. Over a chair to her left, was a thick woolen travelling dress, ready for the journey on the morrow.

“Chin up,” she reminded herself. “Of all the times to be strong, ye’ve never needed strength like this before.”

CHAPTER FIVE

The pre-dawn mist was still heavy on the ground as the sun began to rise over the hills to the east. Ruben was ready and impatient to get on with the journey ahead.

He pressed a hand to his warhorse's neck. "Calm, Goliath." Turning to the broad set of doors behind him, Ruben scowled, "God almighty, how long does it take one lass to rise and dress?"

Coming to his side, Galan shook his head. "I'd advise ye nae to ask her that question when she arrives."

It was shortly after dawn. While the sun began to peak through the clouds, parts of the mountain beyond still lay in shadow. The storm had spent itself overnight and moved on, leaving the air fresh and crisp.

With how unpredictable the weather was in early spring, he was eager to get on the road. Ruben was not fond of getting doused in a deluge. He'd had enough of that during his training and hunting days.

"God's blood," he swore. "Why won't she hurry?"

As he made to head to the steps, the doors opened and Paige stepped onto the top step with her father beside her. Her petite, voluptuous figure was covered in a plain travelling gown and a thick wrap around her shoulders.

Her hair was pinned away from her face and braided in two thick ropes that dangled

to her rounded backside. She lifted the finely woven shawl and wrapped it around her head. Footmen were coming out with her trunks and parcels and hefting them to the wagon waiting for them.

“T’is about time,” he muttered.

She looked around the courtyard, while he strode to MacPherson. “We should be getting’ on, MacPherson; I’ll be sendin’ the marriage license to the church as soon as I get to me home. The bishop will send ye yer copy at their discretion.”

When the laird did not reply, Paige quietly asked, “Faither?”

“Ye do so, McKinnon,” he said stiffly. The words sounded as if he’d scarped them from the bottom of his throat. “If ye daenae protect me daughter, I will call for yer head.”

Ruben’s expression was flat. “I daenae respond to threats, MacPherson.”

“T’is nae a threat,” her father said. “It’s a warnin’.”

Dismissing her father with a cutting glance, Ruben looked to Paige. “We must leave, now,” he said. “Our horse is waitin’.”

She stared at him. “Our horse?”

“Yes, lass,” he said, striding to where Goliath was impatiently pawing the ground.

Paige gazed at the horse with widened eyes. “This is yer horse?”

“Aye,” he said while crouching to check the girth. “What do ye expect a murderer to ride to war upon? A pony? A mule perhaps?” Getting to his feet, he fixed the saddle.

“Could it be that I rode into war on a chariot? A horse with wings, perhaps?”

Her cheeks burned. “Ye can stop mockin’ me now.”

“We’re losin’ time,” he said. “I can lift ye onto the horse if ye’d like” he said.

“Surely ye have a carriage,” she said. “I can get one of me faither’s?—”

“Nay,” Ruben stopped her. “T’is either ye ride with me or ye walk fourteen miles through forestland and marshes. Now, should I lift ye or will ye walk the way?”

“I—” she paused.

His left brow ticked up. “Can ye ride? Ye seem like one of those dainty English lasses who rely on a carriage to take them everywhere.”

Her lips were tightened. “I’ve known how to ride a horse since I was seven.”

“Good enough, then ye’ll ride,” he patted the horse’s neck. “I will ask for a third and a last time. Do ye need me help to get into the saddle?”

“Ye daenae need to do so.” Paige said, turning to the impatient horse. “I am nae crippled.”

Ruben stiffened; a flare of heat ran up his chest. The offhanded words she had just said were like a double-edged sword to his gut.

Did she know about his father? Did she know about the cruel sickness that had taken him out of his prime long before he was due to leave? Was that a barbed taunt to get under his skin?

She did not look back at him before she put her foot in the stirrup and hauled herself onto the horse. Ruben waited until she was settled down then and climbed up behind her.

Turning the warhorse, he urged it into a brisk walk down the hill and on the flat urged into a trot. She sat side-saddle and he had his arms around her as they rode.

Her defiance maddened him just as much as her clean, feminine scent. But he could not lose his head. This arrangement was one forced upon him, not one he wanted. Moreover, the lass was an innocent; virginity held no special appeal for him, he preferred bed partners who knew what they were doing.

“How did ye get that scar?”

Silence greeted her question.

“Did it come from the war ye waged against the people in me home?” she asked. “Innocent people who ye slaughtered like sacrificial lambs?”

Ruben clenched his jaw tight. “Ye ken nothin’ about that war.”

“Don’t I?” she challenged. “I can give ye the names of the women ye left as widows, and the children ye left fatherless. Ye caused a lot of misery in these lands, and to date, ye have never given anyone an answer for yer crimes.”

“Ye ken nothin’ of which ye speak,” Ruben growled.

“Then tell me,” Paige demanded. “Tell me what happened.”

“I owe ye and yer faither nothin’,” Ruben snarled. “Listen and listen closely, me only duty here is to marry ye on behest of the King. That is as far as I am obligated to do

when it comes to ye. I owe ye nay answers or explanation aside from what is necessary. Do ye understand?"

"I want ye to tell me why ye killed forty-two men and fifteen boys nae even ready to be men." Paige's tone told him she was not letting up on the issue.

Ruben wanted to curse, what sort of stubborn temperament was he saddled with?

"If ye daenae cease with these questions I am tempted to let ye down so ye can walk the way," he said. "These woods have wild boars, wild dogs, ravenous wolves and adders. T'is rare to come across those serpents but ye just might. Let us see if ye can survive the night alone."

"A decent man would tell me what I want to ken," she said.

"A charitable man would leave ye with a dagger in the woodland," Ruben rerouted the conversation. "Ye have two choices, ye can either go to yer new home in peace or ye can stay in the woods. T'is yer choice. This is the last time I will offer. God's blood ye are a stubborn one."

She did not speak for at least two more miles and when she did, her words were cold, laced with dislike. "I wish to be away from ye," she said.

"I saw the paupers' graves we had to bury our men and boys in." Paige continued. "I sat with women who were heartbroken and lost, killed with grief and laid low because of what ye did. Ye are cruel and inhuman, without a shred of decency."

"Ye are half-right," he said. "I am cruel but I am human. If and when I choose to be beastly, there are many reasons why, but ye may nae understand any of them. Now, be quiet."

Paige exhaled and faced forward; she felt the tears springing to her eyes but forced them back. She could not dare cry, she could not dare let one tear slip. She had to be strong and not let this shark smell the blood in the water.

Any ounce of frailty would cost her more than it would gain her with this man— not man, this brute. She did know self-preservation though and clamped her lips shut.

She did not know this side of the country and with the large swathe of woodland, she could not dare the chance of getting left.

He would nae dare. Faither already warned him and I trust he will be true to his words.

One thing she knew for sure, though: he might not see her as his wife or the true lady of the clan, but Paige vowed to herself that she would not be treated poorly. She promised herself not to be controlled or disrespected by him or any of the other clanspeople.

Even if she was only there by demand of the King, she would never let them rule over her. Even if Ruben and his men only saw her as a pawn, she would demand her basic human decency.

She had not chosen this, and she would keep fighting for her freedom. Paige had to trust that her spirit would never break, not with this. Surely one day the king would be persuaded by her plea and order an annulment as soon as possible.

I willnae be kept as a prisoner in a marriage that will give me more misery than happiness. I will speak to the King.

While she mulled over these thoughts, she lost track of time. As the sun reached its midday height through patchy clouds, they began climbing a slope.

Sitting side-saddle for such a long distance—she assumed they'd been traveling for at least two hours now—was straining. Paige would rather suffer the pain than let him know she was as he assumed her to be—frail, weak and a burden.

Keeping her back straight was getting to be tiring too and little but little, her rigid posture began to slacken. After a while, she felt her eyelids grow heavy, and she succumbed to the weariness clinging to her.

The last thing she remembered before slipping off to sleep was the feel of him letting go of the reins with his left hand and wrapping his arm around her middle, pulling her back into his chest. She sank into the warm hardness of his chest, her head lolling to his shoulder.

When she came to, she felt the fast canter of the horse's motion slowing. Half-awake she was very conscious of the warmth and hardness of a body behind her.

She could feel the strength of the arms that passed around her to hold the reins, touching her upper arms. That dastardly scent of his skin unnerved her—but there was something else too.

Is that...salt I smell?

She blinked a few times in the calm, evening sun. There were still a few white and gray clouds lingering, but much of the sky was blue.

They were on a flat above a gentle hill carpeted with bright green grass. The expanse flowed down the hill and around a glen, then up to a point where an imposing castle sat.

From their vantage, she could see at least four towers within an enormous stone curtain wall. The castle was perched on what seemed to be on a cliff, as it could be

approached by land on its front side a forest to the east, but the other sides were hemmed in by cliffs and ocean.

A breeze was whipping up the whitecaps on the sea, and occasionally, she saw a blast of mist shot up where the waves crashed against the rocky outcroppings and clumps of heather.

“The sea...”

She had never been so close to the sea in her life. The roll and crash of the waves, the splash of white at the cliff and the brisk, salty air made her feel suddenly invigorated.

Lifting her head, Paige felt Ruben dismounting behind her, then he reached up to pull her down. His hair was disheveled, it looked like he had been dragging his hand through his black hair because it was disheveled.

The hard clench of his jaw threw his face in sharp lines as he clasped her around the waist and brought her off his horse, and she noticed that the other men were dismounting also.

“We’re here,” he said, turning. “McKinnon Castle, me home.”

She froze as a pair of intense dark eyes gazed down at her. Every part of his body radiated sheer power and shrewd intelligence. But how could that be? He was a brute, a savage, a warmonger who only heralded death and suffering.

Something shifted between them and her heart softened a little. Was it fair to keep thinking of the man as a brute when he was so kind and generous to children cast off from society?

They began walking through the small vale, the mist-laden grass wet the tails of her

dress as they headed up to the gate. Before they got closer, the great gates began to slowly crank open.

The courtyard was large enough to hold a troupe of soldiers, wagons and even ten large carriages. She looked around, amazed at how well-kept this bastion was; as ancient as it felt, it was cared for. This was nothing like her old home which had been constructed fifty odd years before.

She turned to Ruben to remark on it, only to flinch away when two large bloodhounds leaped to Ruben. One of them was black and tan, the other dark brown and tan. She almost crashed into one of the men she'd seen with Ruben but she did not get his name.

“Steady there, lass,” the man said, his green eyes dancing.

Paige turned to see Ruben crouching to rub both dogs' ears with the hints of a smile on his face. It was the first time she had seen any emotion on his face.

Something cold nudged her hand and Paige leaped away, only to trip and end on her backside. A large, russet red bloodhound loomed over her, its dark eyes and twitching nose commanded her vision.

Fear settled in her chest as the dog sniffed her face. His cold nose brushed her cheek and ear while she shivered in fear. The dog dropped to its haunches and laid its head in her lap, staring at up her with large, soulful eyes.

“W-w-what—” she spluttered. “What do I do?”

The man from before shooed the dog off her and helped her up. Brushing her skirts off, Paige tried to calm her hammering heart.

The man laughed, “Ye’re going to get used to the hounds, lass. Ruben has had those dog since they were whelps.”

She looked over to Ruben as he was still occupied with the dogs. Turning back, she asked. “Thank ye. May I have yer name?”

“Galan,” he said. “Galan Howe. His lairdship’s man-at-arms.”

A whistle behind her had the last dog over to Ruben who then sent them off with a squire. Galan stepped aside as Ruben came to her side, all hints of the previous happiness seeing his hounds were gone. He had gone back to the stoic, stern face she was familiar with.

“Are ye all right?” he asked brusquely, his gaze running over in a swift check that held no emotion than to make sure she was not injured.

“Aye,” she nodded. “Nothin’ was hurt.”

“Come then,” he inclined his head to the grand doors behind them. “It’s time ye see yer new home.”

CHAPTER SIX

The front room was long with staircases at either end, in the middle were a set of corridors that led to a place she could not see. Ruben took her to the left staircase, and she followed him up to a second and then a third level.

The hallway was massive, its walls were worn stone with wooden inlays here and there; beautiful rich wood with intricate paneling that held large, ornate portraits. Some wooden panels had shields, broken swords and even pieces of armor.

Is it a constant memory of the wars they've been through... or a testament to this victory?

The wing he led her to had five rooms spaced on either hall. He stopped at the left side where only two doorways stood. He pulled a door in and stepped aside for her to enter and when she did, another wave of awe washed over her.

Her room had a large four-poster bed against the back wall, far away from the row of windows on the north side. Heavy, light blue velvet swaths hung above it, draping down on each side ready to close the occupant of the bed in its velvety warmth.

Across from the bed was a fireplace, that while empty, she could see how a blazing fire from it would light and warm the room.

Most of the room had fresh rushes but near the fireplace were two plush chairs with a blue rug beneath them.

The furniture there was ancient but exquisite, in good condition, and well cared for.

Her throat felt tight.

It was lovely and such a stark contrast to their room back at her manor house. Her father's home was a crumbling pile of stone, filled with dusty, moth-eaten, musty things.

"Is it to yer likin'?" Ruben asked.

She nodded jerkily. "It's...it's magnificent." Paige admitted. "I'd once thought me home was luxurious, but yer home puts mine to shame. I ken it's nae a competition, but I realize the difference."

Ruben leaned on the wall, crossed his arms and cocked a boot to the wall. "And how do ye figure that?"

Resting a hand on the wall, Paige replied. "Ye take care of yer home because ye prize it and ye ken it's a home ye want future generations to have. Me faither cares nothin' for our home. I daenae believe he plans for days ahead."

With a derisive snort, Ruben pushed away from the wall with a scornful grunt. "Of course nae."

Frowning, Paige asked, "What do ye mean by that?"

He pivoted to her, his face softening with something that faintly resembled pity. "I daenae think ye ken this but there is a recurrin' jest around the rest of the lairds that yer faither does nae ken his head from a headless chicken."

His meaning made her heart plummet, "The other lairds think me faither is weak?"

“And foolish, presumptuous, easy to manipulate and very reactionary instead of wisely seekin’ opportunities to increase his wealth or his lairdship,” Ruben said. “He is also a spendthrift and irresponsible.”

His frank words hit Paige like blistering catapults. It did not feel good to know her father was the laughingstock of the rest of the Scottish nobility. “I’d ask ye what ye meant by all of that...” She slowly sat in one of the chairs. “But I doubt I’d get an answer.”

Pushing away from the wall, Ruben said, “Maisie will come and find ye when it’s time for supper.”

She did not say a word when he left the room and when he was gone, she looked around the room, to examine it.

Everything in the room was so rich, combining to make a room fit for a princess. She ran her fingers over the beautiful old wardrobe and looked down on the thread for the rug.

Was it English—or from the East? Either way, it looked exquisite. The whole room was gilded—a gilded prison.

There were two doors in her rooms, one that led to the hallway and another one that she assumed led to a washroom.

It was thick and massive, as well as heavy to push open, but she did so. Her assumptions were right; it was a washroom with two basins and on stands and a wide bathtub that stood over a bed of unlit coals.

A second door was to the end of the room, and she pushed it in, stepped one foot in and stopped. The bedroom inside was a vivid counterpoint to hers. While her room

had a faint feminine air, this one was starkly masculine.

His bed was wide with dark sheets, the shutters in his windows open while his curtains fluttered. There was a chest of drawers to the side, baskets were placed here and there but what drew her attention was the left wall.

“He really is a warmonger...”

Weapons of every size and shape were on the walls. She counted halberds, maces, swords and daggers of all sizes and shapes. Some of the blades were straight, some were wickedly curved with leather handles and jeweled pommels.

His fireplace was banked, a set of chairs and a short, squat table were before it. There were no carpets, and the floorboards were swept off the rushes.

There was nothing sentimental in the room, there was nothing to show any attachment to anyone or anything.

“Isnae this just sad...” she murmured.

Then, her eyes landed on the metal bowls in a corner of the room and she realized they were for his dogs. Closing the door, she retreated to her rooms and found that footmen had delivered her trunks and bags, so she set out to unpack them.

Striding to his meeting room, an intimate assembly room where his father and his advisors would gather, Ruben summoned a messenger. He had to make the church and the Crown aware of the marriage and could not delay.

As he arranged the papers, the door slipped open. He did not look up. “I daenae need ye, Howe.”

“It’s me, brother,” Norah said quietly.

Instantly, his head snapped up. “Norah—” He dropped the papers and strode to her, “Are ye well? Did the journey exhaust ye?”

“Nay,” Norah said as she took a seat.

“Was the marriage and the celebration too much for ye? Because we will have another one tonight and I?—”

Exasperated, Norah waved her hands, “Stop, please, stop. Nay, nothin’ of the marriage or the feast after flustered me. Why does everyone think I am that fragile? Doesnae anyone see that me health has improved? I’m nae as weak nor useless.”

“Nay one is sayin’ that, Norah,” Ruben assured her. “But we do ken ye get flustered at times.”

“I am nae flustered,” she said, “But I am unhappy. Why did ye have to be forced to marry the enemy?”

Taking a seat across her, Ruben leaned in and braced his forearms on his upper thighs. “It was an order from the King, Norah. I could nae ignore or disobey his order.

“I suppose the war years ago and the continuin’ skirmishes between our men and theirs had reached the King's ears,” he said. “The King already has his hands tied up in issues with the English. I suppose he dinnae want any more troubles on his hands.”

She rolled her eyes. “There are always issues with the English.”

His lips flickered up. “That’s very true.”

“This girl,” Norah said. “Do ye like her?”

Ruben shook his head and stood as the messenger entered the room. After handing off the letter to the man with strict order to go straight to the archbishop, he returned to Norah.

“Likin’ her or nae likin’ her has nothin’ to do with this marriage,” he said. “All that matters is that we hold the union long enough for the two lairdships to be civil. The King will be satisfied then.”

Taking her brother’s hand, Norah asked. “But what of yer happiness? What about yer satisfaction? Should that nae count?”

He swallowed and took a moment while deciding what to say. His shoulders fell an inch. “I am a soldier, Norah. Me satisfaction comes from kennin’ that the people I serve are happy, healthy and safe.”

Her face fell in disappointment. “But what about love, Ruben? I ken ye remember how Maither and Faither were, even when Faither was as dedicated and decisive as a warrior as ye are. Ye deserve to be happy as well, nay just—ye cannae sacrifice yer life all the time for others and nay have anything for yerself.”

Ruben did not have the heart to tell her he had given up on love she spoke of a long time ago. His sister was a dreamer—or at least she used to be. He remembered when she’d come to the breakfast table recanting the last fairy tale she’d read with a hopeful glimmer in her eyes.

Tales about forsaken princes and poor women or hopeless princesses and the men, farriers, blacksmiths, or fishermen who loved them. The tales of forbidden—and unexpected—love were ones she saw as the best and the worthiest, but Ruben had no such ideals.

He tried to smile, but it fell flat. “Norah, ye have to understand, leaders daenae have the freedom to find love like ye want.”

When her face fell, he was quick to add, “Nae to say it doesnae happen. There are a few lairds I have heard of who have found the love of their lives in the most unexpected way, but the best I can do with this marriage is hope for civility.”

She shook her head. “Do ye want to have bairns with a woman ye daenae love?”

“T’is me duty,” he said. “I ken ye are worried, Norah but worryin’ will nae make any of this better. Why daenae ye take yer mind off it by helpin’ the servants prepare for the welcomin’ feast tonight, eh? I am sure cook will turn a blind eye one of those sweet buns go missing.”

She narrowed her eyes, “Ye’re tryin’ to distract me.”

“I simply daenae want ye to worry,” he replied. “I ken it’s nae what ye wanted but let’s make the most of it.”

Norah let out a long sigh but still stood and hugged him warmly before she left the room. Rubbing his palms on his thighs, Ruben stood and left the room as well, only this time, he headed out to meet with the guards.

Tonight of all nights, they needed to be vigilant. He was not sure if MacPherson would try some trickery, but if he did, he would be prepared for it.

Halfway there, he doubled back; he suddenly felt the need to speak with his father about the king’s edict.

Without a backward glance, he started toward the spiral staircase that led up to Niall Miller, his father, the former laird. Sixteen years ago a cruel malady had started to

take his father's knees from under him.

It would have crippled him if their wise healer Cassandra Gilmour had not devised a set of teas and salves to stay off the disease. One leg was lame but he could hobble on the other. Though Cassandra was a lady of the McDougal clan, she had never given up on her duty to heal the infirm.

He knocked, hoping his father was not asleep.

"Enter," Niall said.

His father's voice sounded stronger than most days, especially the wintery months when the cold air wreaked havoc on his frail body. Pushing the door in, he strode in to find his father sitting up in his bed.

The windows, opened wide, let in cool air. Lennox saw that the old man was sitting up in a chair, a warm plaid wrapped around his bony shoulders. Leaned on a wall to the left side of him were two of his crutches.

The simplest one was a handheld pole with a leather strap to hold the leg in place, while the other held a platform where his father could rest his knee and lower leg on it. He used the latter one in the winter months when his knee was seized up.

"Ah, son," Niall closed the book on his lap, his spidery fingers tapped on the back cover. "How did it go?"

Pulling a chair to his father's side, Ruben replied. "Without conflict, as I'd hoped."

"Och lad," Niall shook his head. "I'd hoped for a different solution to our troubles. Nay one wants to be married to one's enemy."

“I ken,” Ruben said. “But if it brings peace to the people, I will gladly accept it.”

Hunching over to cough into his hand, Ruben tried not to react to the unsettling rattle in Niall’s breastbone. Leaning back on his pillows, Niall said, “This lass, how is she?”

“Quiet but spirited,” Ruben admitted. “She is a na?ve too, but I supposed a few months or years away from the sheltered seclusion she has been living in with her faither should cure her of that.”

A nostalgic smile curved his father’s lips as his eyes wistful. “Yer maither was like that. God above, she adored love stories, old myths and even present tales of unexpected love. T’was somethin’ she wanted for ye to experience as well, nae only this defend and protect mandate.”

Ruben cocked his head. “Did ye speak with Norah perchance?”

“Nay, why do ye ask?”

“Because she gave me the same spiel,” Ruben said, while getting to his feet. “And I will tell ye the same thing I told her, me duty is me duty. I will perform it to the end. As long as me people are safe and provided for, I am complete.”

His father’s head met the wall behind him. “I used to think so too until Miriam walked into me life,” Niall’s rheumy blue eyes held Ruben’s.

“When I would put pressure on meself about the poor harvest or the lochs breakin’ away and floodin’ the fields, she took me to see the middle of the wheatfield and forced me to look at the sky.”

Ruben’s brows lifted. “What? I never heard that before.”

“We never told ye,” he said. “She told me that nothin’ is stationary, that the seasons change and when they do change, we have to allow them to take their toll. Nay man can control the wind or the water or the sun. I had to learn to let the things I could nae control go.”

Leaning unto a wall, Ruben rubbed his face. “Things could have been prevented. If— if I had been with her that evening?—”

Sympathy marked his father’s face. “I ken, son.”

“And then there was the land issue with the MacPherson’s,” Ruben groaned.

“That too,” Niall nodded. “I ken it does nae make sense now, but I hope this will turn into something good one day.”

Shaking his head, Ruben said. “We’re have a feast tomorrow morning to welcome her. Are ye feeling well enough to join us, Faither?”

“I should be,” he said. “Let me get some rest and I will be down with ye.”

Leaning in to rest his hand on his father’s shoulder, Ruben nodded. “Get all the rest ye need.”

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CHAPTER SEVEN

“ G ood morning, me lady,” Maisie said while carrying an armful of cloth. “How did ye sleep?”

Turning to her, Paige replied. “As best as I could, I suppose.”

“It’ll get better,” Maisie said as she laid the cloth on the bed. “T’is time for ye to have yer bath and dress for the mornin’ feast. The men are comin’ with the water now.”

Paige tightened the thick robe around her body and turned to the window. “Is this really necessary?” she asked dully.

Pulling the door in for the men to lug buckets of water through the room and to the bathing room between hers and Ruben’s room, Maisie nodded. “It is, me lady. Why do ye feel otherwise?”

“It’s...” Paige swallowed thickly. She wrapped arms around her middle and hugged herself tightly.

It was the sole comfort she could have. “It feels like when a farmer would parade his fattened calf in front of a row of butchers and sold it off to the man with the most coin. I’ll feel like a spectacle. ”

While gathering some items around the room, Maisie said. “I’d rather think of it as presentin’ ye to the people as a symbol of hope. The people here have been through a lot?—”

“So have mine!” Paige snapped. Then dropped her tone. The poor maid did not deserve her anger. No, that fury should be saved for the brute, Ruben. Sighing, she said, “I am sorry. That was nae right of me.”

Maisie gave her a flickering smile. “War will do that to a set of people.”

Paige soon found herself sinking into a warm bath of olive oil as Maisie massaged soap into her hair. She rested her head against the towel draped over the edge of the tub.

“Do ye ken what happened to cause the war?” Paige asked. “I have asked and nay one is willin’ to give me anythin’ solid.”

“I wouldnae ken, me lady,” Maisie said as she reached for a pitcher to wash Paige’s hair out. “Such matters are above me station.”

Stumped again, Paige decided to demand answers from Ruben as soon as there was a private moment. She knew she would not get such a chance with the brute while the celebration went on. But as soon as there was a quiet moment, she would get her answers.

She stepped out of the bath and wrapped a towel around her after drying. She chose a simple stark white petticoat and kirtle made of beautiful shade of sapphire blue. Maisie added a belt of finely twisted strips of gold and silver around her waist before pinning the McKinnon sash on.

“One day, ye’ll have a full arisaid made from the clan’s colors,” Maisie said. “I am sure ye will look as beautiful in that dress as ye are in this one.”

I will burn that gown to ash.

“How do ye want yer hair, me lady?” Maisie asked.

“Down,” she said. “It’ll dry better that way.”

Her new maid brushed her hair down but pulled it away from her face with a circlet. A sudden flurry of drums had both their heads daring to the window and Maisie said. “It’s time.”

They entered the Great Hall, three or four times the size of the one back at her home. It had been beautifully, if not quickly, decorated for the feast. Eight long tables spanned from below the dais to nearly the large set of iron doors at the end.

As she entered the room, half the room was filled with lairds and ladies, village people and elders, all of them in their best clothes. The dignitaries wore silks and velvet, while the townspeople wore modest dark clothing.

“Ye’re headed there,” Maisie nodded to the high table. “His lairdship will accompany ye there as a show of the alliance and marriage.”

“Where is he?” Paige asked, looking though the room while avoiding the curious looks trained back to her. “Ravagin’ another village, I gather.”

“Ye presume much, lass,” Ruben said. “And most of it altogether wrong.”

When he stepped into her view, she swallowed tightly. He wore a pleated and belted red and golden tartan. The end of the tartan was brought up and draped across one shoulder and fastened with a large silver brooch studded with four small sapphires and a large sapphire at the center.

His face had been shaved clean, and his ebony hair was down, its natural curl refused to be tamed and curled at his temples and nape. He looked magnificent.

She jerked her head away.

Her hands balled inside at her side, and her cheeks grew uncomfortably warm.

Why did the brute affect her so intensely?

She felt nothing for the degenerate. Even if she found him the attractive—in a rough, uncouth sort of way and she hated herself for it—it was no excuse to feel so... displaced by him.

Despite her inexplicable attraction to the man, she couldn't deny that he represented the double standards Paige despised.

He was a warmonger; bold and insufferable. While he admitted his part in making her people suffer, through what he had said—and what he had not said—it was as if he were blaming her father and her people for the bloody invasion. The hypocrisy of his actions made bitter gall flood her mouth.

“It was a reasonable assumption,” she said, boldly looking him in the eye. “Ye are a warmonger, after all.”

His mouth pulled across his face in more of a grimace than a smile. As a matter of fact, she had never seen him truly smile. Perhaps he was so evil he was incapable of such simple joy.

Servants were bustling to and fro from the great hall on their varied tasks, some carrying great rounds of cheese, while large barrels of ale and mead were being wheeled into. The sounds of excited chatter and happy laughter could be heard all around.

He held out his arm. “It's time.”

Begrudgingly, she took his arm, and they mounted the steps to the dais and stood in front of the head table. A servant lad handed him a full goblet of wine that he lifted high. "Hear ye! Hear ye!"

The people, at least fifty, quieted and Ruben announced, "I, Ruben Alexander Miller, present to ye Paige Bradley, the daughter of Laird MacPherson as me newly wedded wife. We have pledged to forge peace for both our clan and theirs."

This announcement brought great shouts of approval from the stunned guests, and a roar went up at the far end table. Men clad in soldier leathers clapped fiercely and stomped their feet, cheering raucously.

"We are to welcome her," he added. "All of us in Clan McKinnon are to open our arms and hearts to her as she is now one of us."

Ruben sobered, "I ken some of ye are victims of the war, or ye ken someone who is. A lot of ye have lost faithers, sons, uncles and brothers. It is very easy to sink into bitterness and anger, but she is one of us now. Raise a hand to her, and be warned that the consequences will be swift."

A rush of whispers coasted over the room and Ruben made sure to let his announcement sink into the people gathered before speaking again.

"That said, this is a celebration of unity and peace. This morning, we eat and drink to our health and future while putting the grim past behind us. And to that, I take the first drink!"

He tilted the cup to his lips and took a bracing mouthful before he turned and handed the cup to Paige. She wanted to slap it out of his hands or throw the contents into his face, but when his brow ticked up, she took the goblet.

Taking two mouthfuls of the warm, heady, sloe wine, she stifled a shudder and handed the goblet back to him. He led her to the high table when the girl she had seen at the wedding was seated to the right of her. It was just beside where Ruben would sit.

He pulled out a seat right beside her and she sat, her gaze flittering over the poached eggs, Lorne sausage, slivers of roasted fowl and well-seasoned potatoes. She saw cornmeal cakes and buttered toast, a feast for a king.

“I’ll be right back,” Ruben said, resting a hand on her shoulder.

Even though she knew she should eat, the mere fact of where she was—and who she was around—robbed her of her appetite. She did not even want to touch her wine.

“Are ye nae hungry?” the girl—Norah, she assumed—said quietly beside her.

“Nay,” she said.

“Do ye think we will do somethin’ to ye?” Norah asked.

She gave the girl a curious glance and while she felt some sympathy for the girl, the pain of where she was and who she was tethered to dampened her heart. “I ken nothin’ of ye people.”

“Ruben is an honorable man,” Norah said. “He wouldnae bring ye here to renege on his agreement for peace to kill ye.”

“It doesnae matter if I am poisoned or physically killed,” Paige said. “Bein’ in this marriage will kill me regardless.”

The young woman gaped, “Daenae say that.”

The clunk of a cane had her turning while Norah got out of her seat. Ruben was leading an older man to the table; he was hunched into Ruben's side while hobbling with a crutch on the other.

Norah held unto the man while Ruben pulled out a chair; the old man sat and waved Ruben off. "Stop it. I am nae the invalid as ye think I am."

The older man had dark eyes, like his son, only made darker by the shock of hair, grey-black, long and thick upon his head, and the gray-white beard that covered his chin and jaw and the top of his chest. His kindly, wrinkled face made her think of a priest she once knew; Father Matthew.

How is it that this man sired such a brute?

"Ye must be Paige," the man said. "MacPherson's daughter."

"I am," she said stiffly. "And ye are?"

Ruben's lips tightened at her tone. "He is me faither, Niall Miller. Mind yer tone, lass."

"Is there any water, or milk?" she asked. "I cannae drink wine this early in the mornin'."

Annoyed, Ruben called a servant girl to him and asked her to fetch both from the kitchen. Trying to at least attempt to show civility he was not, she reached for a buttered roll and nibbled on it while gazing at the doors at the end of the hall.

She turned her attention back to her end of the table to find Ruben watching her. Bristling, she resolutely kept her gaze fastened upon back to the door. Let him stare at her all he wanted—it would do no good. She wanted no part of this.

The doors opened and a man sprinted through the room and up to the dais' steps. He then bowed his head to Ruben and whispered something, all the while, his eyes kept flickering to Paige.

Ruben, on the other hand, narrowed his eyes and shot them to the door. The messenger finished his report and stepped away, leaving a muscle to jump in Ruben's jaw.

Finally, he turned to the man and said, "Let her in."

Her? Who is her?

The footman nodded and headed down the dais then went to the doors. She kept her eyes on the doors, intensely curious about who this lady was.

When the doors opened and a diminutive figure dressed in a brown travelling ensemble entered the room. Beneath the brim of her hat, her mother Daisy's bright blue eyes flew to the dais.

Paige almost lurched out of her seat to go to her mother but a quelling look from Ruben stopped her. A footman helped her mother up the dais and Ruben pulled out a chair for her.

"Lady MacPherson," Ruben bowed his head. "Welcome to me home."

"Thank ye," her mother pulled her hat away. "I just couldnae sit still at home kennin' that me daughter was away from me," Daisy said. She turned to Paige and reached for her hand, "How could I stay away? This is the first time ye've been away from me side since ye were born."

From the corner of her eyes Paige saw Ruben roll his eyes as if to say, of course, why

would I expect anythin' else?

She bristled, but she trained her attention to her mother and the spark of relief that her mother was there with her. At least she had someone to talk with.

“Maither,” she leaned in, “How was the journey?”

“Moderately long,” Daisy said, “But I am happy to be here. Yer lairdship, would ye be so kind to introduce me to yer family, I assume?”

“Lady MacPherson, this is me sister Norah and me father, Niall Miller,” Ruben said, nodding to both separately.

A friendly smile warmed her mother's face as she greeted the elderly man and the young woman, but Paige could not follow suit. She did not want to be anywhere near Ruben, the man who had rained terror on her people.

“Please,” Ruben said to Daisy and then gestured to the feast. “Help yerself to anythin' ye want.”

Encouraged by her mother's presence, Paige added more food to her platter as her mother began to fill her trencher “Was Faither all right with ye comin' by yerself?”

Her mother bit into her sliver of cold fowl and braised potato. “He was nae very happy about, but since the King made the decree, he hasnae been happy about anythin' much. I told him I was comin' to visit ye, despite his objections.”

“Very brave of ye, Lady MacPherson,” Niall said.

“It had to be done,” Daisy said. She then angled her head to Norah. “I assume ye are his younger sister. What do ye like to do, me dear?”

The air suddenly went flat. Unsure of why the air seemed to scape over her skin, Paige frowned. Norah's head was down, and her body was rigid.

Daisy's eyes flickered between Paige and Niall, "Did I say somethin' out of order?"

Ruben leaned in. "It's only?—"

"I like to paint," Norah said quietly. "I used to like to go on trips, ridin' me own horse but I—I cannae do it anymore." She shoved her plate away, half of the food untouched, "May I be excused, brother?"

Ruben nodded, "Aye, ye can. Get some rest, Norah. I'll be with ye shortly."

When the young woman left, her mother looked conflicted, as if she was not sure if she had crossed a boundary she did not know was there. "I... apologize?"

"Nay need," Ruben said, while his eyes followed Norah out of the room. "It's a complicated issue but nae one ye need to be sorry about."

Daisy nodded and turned to the laird., "And what do ye like to do, Laird McKinnon?"

"Swordplay and plannin' how to damage more people," Paige muttered darkly as she stabbed an egg with a knife. "What do ye expect of a brute?"

Aghast, her mother admonished her, "Paige!"

"Nay," Ruben's eyes were cold and piercing. He swirled his drink while staring at Paige. "It's better to be a brute than to be as soft and na?ve as ye are."

She scowled, and he ignored it. "It is in yer best interest to return to yer room and ready yerself for the day. Yer duties as Lady McKinnon start now."

“Duties?” Paige echoed, stunned. “What duties?”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Good lord, the lass hasnae even been taught how to run an estate. What were her parents preparin' her for? A life of luxury with nay responsibility?

His eyes landed on her mother and a brow ticked up in question. The lady turned to her daughter. "Much like I have been doing our clan, Paige. Ye've seen me attend to the women and children, the widows and the orphans."

"Yer duties are to manage the homestead," he said. "If the harvest is poor, ye need to ration the food, findin' ways to make sure everyone is fed. In times of rich harvest, ye would do the opposite and make sure we have stores replenished."

"There are certain women and children who need help every month," he went on. "The matrons of the village church will help ye with that. Those are yer duties."

"I see," Paige said.

"As the laird and the chief, I am responsible for makin' important decisions on behalf of the clan, such as leadin' the clan in battle or negotiatin' alliances with other clans."

"There are many villages in me lairdship, with many offshoots. However, years ago me faither and I decided to consider the offshoots as a part of the village closest to it. We have a round number of thirteen villages, each with its own lesser chief and landowners. These thirteen men make up me council," Ruben explained.

Paige did not look pleased. "Are there any other duties ye need me to perform?"

She was goading him, he knew it, but he would not give into her. He knew—and she had to know—about the need to conceive a child as quickly as possible. It was uncouth to mention such matters in front of his father and her mother.

“Aye, ye are directly in charge of the orphanage in the village,” he said, “As a matter of fact, I am takin’ ye there this mornin’. That is why I told ye to get ready. Have ye finished eatin’?”

“I have,” she said.

“Good,” Ruben pushed away from the table. “We’re to leave. Now .”

They left the gates of Castle McKinnon behind them and Paige sat atop a loaned mare, secretly relishing the feel of the breeze upon her face. It had been a long time since she had ridden like this.

At home, her mother had not approved of a woman riding, thinking it vulgar for a woman to be on horseback, but her father had insisted upon it. Thankfully, her father’s word had overruled her mother and she’d taken the lessons.

“Choille Village houses over four hundred souls.” Ruben said, adjusting the thick plaid sash he wore, tied from shoulder to hip. “It used to be almost five, but the war claimed forty men.”

“A war ye started for nay reason,” she said.

He was silent as they rode over a stretch of green. “Yer faither sheltered ye.”

She shot a look to him, “What do ye mean by that?”

“I’ll explain later,” he said.

Paige had the strange feeling that he would not be explaining anything at all. Ruben sat atop his great steed, his back a slab of iron, his shoulders rigid.

He led them down a road to the east that skirted the wide bay with bracing winds. They skirted round a backend of a seaside bluff that made a natural narrow gate to the village. The thick wall that curved away on the other side; it made a narrow gate to the village.

It's good to stop invaders, but bad to stop the people from fleein' if attacked.

They soon came to the outskirts of the village, not unlike any other village of a great castle, it had thatched cottages sat on large swaths of land, many had large pens that contained small livestock.

Others had massive pastures of cows, sheep and goats.

All this wealth...

They got closer to the town center where the houses got closer. There she saw women outside, laundry fluttering on a line, children romping outside with dogs while a few men were out chopping wood and loading carts.

"Are we near this orphanage?" she asked.

"Aye," he said nodding. "We're here."

The first impression Paige had gotten at seeing the two-structure house was that it was... sad. The house had no doubt weathered some storms, but it still looked ragged and drab.

Ruben alighted from his horse, helped Paige down then hitched the horse to a post

under a sprawling oak.

“Come on, then,” he said. “The children are waitin’.”

Stepping through the doorway, Paige took note of the scrubbed walls, the bare staircase leading to the level above, the wide hallway under it led to a room beyond.

A young woman in a blue frock, a gray apron and cap came out of the room beyond. She jerked at a stop at seeing Ruben but then broke out into a smile.

“Me Laird, we dinnae ken ye would be visiting us today,” she paused to open the doorway to a cupboard and pulled out a mop, a bucket. “And ye brought company. Welcome.”

“T’is a surprise, Sarah.” Ruben said.

She then tucked rolls of dried towels under her left arm. “Please, come this way. The children are in the readin’ room.”

“Readin’ room?” Paige murmured to herself.

“Would ye gather all the housemothers and the children in the readin’ room?” Ruben said. “I have an announcement I think ye should all ken.”

“Aye, me laird.” Sarah said, smiling, “This way, please.”

She led them beyond the great hall dining room to two classrooms at the back of the building where the children were having their daily lessons. The children, ten of them, were on the floor listening as the older woman read to them.

The room was drab, one part of the wall had some paper drawings of a garden and

pretty flowers, and another of a woman with grey hair, kind eyes and wrinkles.

Paige's eyes dropped on the woman in the middle of the room, who under her cap, had grey hair—the same as in the drawing.

“Maither Etna,” Sarah called to the woman. “Children, his lairdship is here to see us. Is that nae wonderful?”

A wave of delightful cries surged into the air as the children surged to their feet and went to hug him. He lifted a young lad to his arms, warmth sparking in his eyes.

It was the closest thing Paige had seen to him smiling.

She turned to the door as more children started filing in, these were the older children. Paige estimated their ages to be between thirteen and seventeen.

“Me Laird?” Mother Etna said invitingly. “Yer announcement.”

While holding the boy, Ruben said. “I daenae ken if word had gotten around the village yet, but I want ye all to meet me wife, Lady Paige McKinnon.”

Cries of joy ran through the room and the elder caretaker pressed her hand to her chest, pure joy on her face. The lady bowed her head and whispered what looked like a prayer of thanksgiving.

Paige did not have the heart to correct her. It would probably break her gentle heart.

“How wonderful,” another caretaker said. “We have all been hoping and praying ye would find a wonderful lady to marry.”

Again, Paige bit her lip. Would Ruben tell them who she truly was, or would he leave

the part that she was from the enemy clan out of it?

Some of these orphans came from the war too.

“Thank ye,” Ruben said. “She will be the caretaker for ye all here. Now, ye will nae have to wait for me to return from a long journey or be forced to relay yer needs to those who have nay authority to give ye what ye need—” he looked to Paige.

“Now, she’ll be the one ye come to,” he said. “Send her a message any time ye need and I assure ye, she will help.”

Forcing herself to put the rift with Ruben to the back of her mind, Paige focused on the children. They were not a part of this though and her heart bled for these innocent children. The war had caused this.

A young girl, clad in a rough-woven dress, came to her and tugged at her dress. Crouching, Paige asked, “Can I help ye, sweetheart?”

“Ah like yer dress,” the girl whispered. “The color’s pretty.”

“Yellow is pretty,” Paige agreed. “It reminds me of sunshine and flowers. Do ye like flowers, pretty girl?”

She nodded, “Aye.”

“All right, all right,” One of the housemothers came and lifted the girl. “I am sorry about Nera’s interruption, me lady.”

“T’is all right,” Paige got to her feet. “I daenae mind.”

“Why daenae I give ye a tour of the orphanage so ye can ken the house?” Ruben said.

“Go back yer lessons, children. We’ll return soon.”

“May I come with ye, me laird and lady?” Sarah asked. “I can give ye a tour of the orphanage so you can see the sorts of needs we have? I am nae needed here.”

Paige did not feel as if she had the power to tell the young woman to come or to refrain. Ruben nodded curtly, “Aye, ye can show us around.”

The young housemother showed her everywhere - from the place the children washed their clothed to their vegetable garden the little ones took turns to plant and weed. She saw a chicken coop and the lone milk cow.

Paige leaned forward and rested her hand on the sill. “Ye grow yer own food too?”

“Aye,” Sarah replied. “Carrots, potatoes, onions and beets. We use some and sell the surplus for coin in the market. We have to teach the children to be self-sufficient from an early age so they will have skills to use when they do leave us.”

Paige nodded. “That’s smart. They do need to have somethin’ to take with them into the world. Ye’re teachin’ them to protect themselves and to have a skill to survive.”

“One of our girls is interested in becomin’ a healer. She once met Lady Cassandra and was assured a place in the healing hall when she leaves here. She’ll gain all the skills she needs to help others.”

Thinking about healers and the wonderful work they did with the sick and the infirm, Paige felt bereft and inadequate. These girls would go on to be helpful members of the clan with skills that were in demand. Ladies were only good for looking regal and pretty.

What can I do here that is meaningful? What legacy can I possibly put in place?

They retreated to the schoolrooms where a series of letters were marked on the large slate on the wall. The children had their heads down, carefully tracing the letters on their slates.

“Maither Etna,” Paige called her over. When she came to their side, Paige looked around. Her eyes landed on the small girl from before. “Is there anythin’ ye need? Foodstuff? Clothin’?”

“We have food stored for months,” Etna said. “But we did take in two more orphans last week. We would appreciate some bolts of cloth to make their everyday clothes and those for celebrations.”

“Ye’ll have it,” Paige promised her. “Within the next week. May I ask, though—who started this practice? It is uncommon to teach orphans to read.”

“T’is one of the rules his lairdship made for us to follow,” Etna said. “It’s another skill they must have to function in the world beyond these halls. Being able to read and write, with basic arithmetic, they have the basic tools to nae be tricked by scrupulous men out there.”

Pivoting to look at Ruben, Paige felt her emotions sway. Why would a man as he was, a warmonger, do such a kind thing?

“The orphanage is home to ten bairns between the ages of three and eleven and eight more children between twelve and seventeen,” Etna said while fixing her cap. “It’s quite a task to keep them all fed, clothed, and educated. We do our best, though.”

The sound of singing came from the other classroom and Paige tilted her head to the harmony. She left for down the hall and stood at the door of the room. Five girls were at the front of the room, with songbooks in hands.

“The girls are participatin’ in next week’s May Day celebration in the township. They rehearse as much as they can as there are prizes to be won there, baskets of food, books and silver coins.” Etna said proudly. “I am sure they will win.”

Paige looked to the young girl who was focused on her slate with her tongue poking out her lips, “What is the name of that little lass again?”

“Nera,” Etna said. “She’s the daughter of a young lass who had an unfortunate dalliance with another young man. The birthin’ took her away from us.”

Pressing her hand to her chest, Paige rubbed the sudden painful spot aching in her breastbone. “That’s very unfortunate. I cannae—I cannae think of what it would be like to have nay family to help me. These poor children.”

“Aye,” Etna said, smiling softly, sympathetically. “But we will give the best life we can give them. If ye will excuse me, I need to get back to the lesson now.”

“I willnae keep ye.” Paige said as the housekeeper went on with her lesson. As she kept looking on the children learning how to spell, she was close enough to hear Sarah and Ruben speak. Well, Sarah was talking; Ruben was sternly silent.

Sarah inched closer to him, batting her eyelashes as she glanced up at him. Her cheeks were pink, and her brown eyes glowed with admiration. “I like to see ye smile, me laird. It does me heart good.”

Prickles of awkward warning broke out down Paige’s back. But she kept her head straight and listened.

“I remember when yer sister was here,” Sarah turned to the doorway. “How she was so certain ye would never find love and we tried to tell her she was wrong. That one day, ye would have the admiration of a lovely woman and we were right.

“Nay one is happier than we are to ken ye have found some joy,” Sarah said respectfully. “I hope yer marriage bring yer the peace ye keep lookin’ for.”

That drew Ruben’s attention. His left brow ticked up, “The peace I’ve been lookin’ for? Why do ye say that?”

“Ye havenae been happy for years,” Sarah said. “Since yer da got sick and the burden of the lairdship fell on yer shoulders.”

She pretended not to hear them then turned. “I think we should return to the castle and start the preparations of what they want,” she smiled at Sarah. “Thank ye for showin’ us around.”

The caretaker bowed her head. “Ye are most welcome.”

As she left the orphanage and stepped into the sunlight, they headed to the tied horses. She shot an eye to him. “I dinnae think a brute like ye would have a sensitive side.”

In seconds, Paige found her eyes pinned by Ruben’s dark gaze. Her breath hitched as a shiver ran up her spine. “Stop callin’ me a brute, lass. Ye daenae ken what a true brute is.”

She swallowed. “And if I daenae?”

“Believe me, if ye want a brute, I will show ye one,” he growled.

The fire in his eyes made her tremble; it felt as if he wanted to either shake her senseless or cower her into submission. His eyes—cold, piercing, and intent—held her own in a moment that seemed both too short and endless.

“I—I apologize,” Paige said.

A flood of emotions washed over her as she clenched her fists at her sides, drawing in a deep, steady breath. She felt a strange pulsing, fluttering sensation at her core.

“Come,” he demanded as he jerked his chin towards his horse. “T’is time we return.”

CHAPTER NINE

With ease, he lifted her into the saddle and quickly swung up behind her. The lass was shivering, perhaps from the wind, perhaps from that intense encounter they had had. Either way, it unsettled him.

He unpinned the length of plaid, unwound it from his hip and then draped it over her shoulder. She reached up to tighten the wrap before craning her head over her shoulder. “Thank ye.”

Nodding curtly, he reached around her body to grasp the reins and to his surprise, she leaned back against him.

Ruben tried to ignore their closeness and forced himself to disregard the soft scent wafting from her golden curls. He sat rigid.

She smells like a meadow of wildflowers.

The ride to his castle had felt endless, and it had been mostly spent in silence. He felt that, more than anything, she hated riding with him because she still saw him as a beast.

He wanted to give her a distraction so he purposely rode along the shoreline, down a beaten path to the sea.

He rode dangerously close to the rush of the water; Goliath had been this way hundreds of times and was sure-footed enough that he could navigate the terrain.

“What—” she grabbed at him, eyes wide with fright, “What are ye doing?”

“Scared, lass?” he teased. “With how ye were at the weddin’, I thought ye were a statue of Brigid herself”.

Paige shoved herself into his chest, her eyes wide, pulse jumping widely. She scrabbled to get ahold of anything, of the horse, the saddle, and finally, she grabbed at him. Her nails sunk into his forearm.

“I am nae—” she swallowed. “I am nae fond of how dangerously close we are to the edge of the cliffs.”

“Ah, I see,” the wind tugged at her hair, sending it in tangles around her face.

With the barest twitch of his leg, the horse took another step forward and the jolt made the lass go as white as death. He scolded himself on teasing the lass and steered Goliath back to the road.

“Can ye swim, lass?” he asked.

“Nay,” she said quietly but at least her pulse was not pounding out of her skin.

“Ye’re goin’ to learn here,” he said.

She craned her head to look over her shoulder. “That doesnae sound like a suggestion.”

He snapped the reins. “That’s because it’s nae a suggestion. T’is an order. Ye will need to learn how to swim in these lands for yer own survival and I need to ken ye can handle yerself with any sudden surprise.”

Paige faced forward, her mouth pressed into a line.

The sky was iron grey, and low rumbles of thunder held a constant threat of rain as they rode west back to the castle. She turned a wary eye to the sky then back to the road, “Does the weather change so quickly in these lands?”

“Aye,” he said. “At times, it’s as fickle as a feather in the wind.”

She went quiet again, “Will ye tell me what happened with yer sister, Norah? Why was she taken? Did ye find out who took her?”

Ruben stiffened. “Why are ye askin’?”

“I want to ken,” she said. “Is that a bad thing?”

“T’is none of yer business what happened with Norah,” Ruben’s tone was harsh and brooked no further questions. “Yer place is to be quiet and play the subservient mouse so the claws of the Crown willnae hook into us.”

The defiance in her eyes made him want to shake some sense into her.

“When ye get to the keep, it will best if ye go to yer chambers,” he told her as the horse took the incline to the castle.

Paige turned her head towards the castle, her expression hardening with resolve. Ruben was not affected whatsoever; as far as he was concerned, she was simply a means to an end.

Hopping off the horse, he got her down and said, “Go inside. The rain is comin’. Ye daenae want to get sick.”

She hesitated for a moment, her lips parted for a moment but then she clamped them shut. Spinning around, she marched up the steps, and vanished beyond the door with not one look behind her.

Goliath turned to him and snorted.

“Aye, I ken. Be glad ye daenae have stubborn mares to put up with.” Ruben said.

But what happens when ye need to consummate the marriage?

“I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it...” he muttered while gesturing for a waiting stable boy. “Make a quick run, lad. Ye daenae want to be trapped in this rain.”

“Aye, me laird,” the boy said, hurrying off.

Casting a look to the sky, Ruben stepped into the hall and headed up to his rooms. He went to his war room, hoping that the archbishop had replied with his signature and seal. Hopefully, if it was there, he could send the copy off to MacPherson so he could focus on more important things.

What am I goin’ to tell the lass when she asks about Norah again without breakin’ me sister’s privacy? And she will ask, that’s a given.

There was nothing on his table and he sunk to the chair with a grumble. Leaning forward, he covered his face with both hands, the rough calluses scraping his skin.

He could already see the revulsion and pain in her eyes when he did approach her consummate the marriage. The lass would not want him to touch her, she would be rigid as a board, still as death itself. She despised him.

How much were these gentleladies so very different from the sort of females he’d

known in his past? In the past, his sexual exchanges had one purpose, to sate his needs.

A laird has many duties. Fighting and defending his land was one that Ruben excelled in. But there was another duty he had been able to ignore while his brother lived. Securing the line of succession.

Begetting heirs was to some minds the most important duty of a laird. Afterall, what could be more crucial than securing the future of the clan for another generation?

The best he could do was to treat it as a quick and necessary duty and not make her feel too awful about what he had to do to her.

“It has to be done...” he sighed, rubbing his face. “Sooner than later.”

Maybe it was a good thing the archbishop hasn’t sent his seal yet. They had a little more time yet.

Paige loathed Laird Ruben McKinnon with every fiber of her being but even knowing the vile things he did to her clan years ago... she couldn’t help but question herself.

“He ordered the caretakers to teach the orphans to read,” she muttered to herself. “How much of an animal can he be if he can do such a kind thing?”

She could not make heads or tails about the man. All she knew was that the man gave orders but did not deign to answer question.

“Me lady,” Maisie knocked on the door. “The lads are comin’ with yer bath water.”

As she waited, she wrapped her arms around her middle. “Maisie, ye’ve lived in these lands for a while, correct?”

“Aye, I did,” Maisie said. “From I was ten summers after me maither moved here.”

Slumping to a seat, Paige grasped the skirts of her dress in numb fingers.

“How...how was Laird McKinnon?”

Frowning, Maisie asked, “What do ye mean?”

“Was he always this...” Paige was not sure how to frame her words. “... stiff-necked?”

Maisie sighed, “I wouldnae say he was such, but his maither died when he was a boy and then, when he was seven-and-ten, his father fell ill.

He had to take on the lairdship because his father’s cripplin’ sickness of the knees took him away from the front lines,” Maisie said. “He was a young man thrown into a sea of older lairds, more experienced and more cunnin’ than he.”

Paige was starting to understand, “He had to make sure they dinnae take advantage of him.”

“Aye,” Maisie said. “He pushed himself to excel at everythin’. He grew excel at strategy and he became a true warrior, trainin’ day and night, and nary a soul could best him. But then, his sister was abducted.”

Paige’s mouth twisted. “I asked him about that. He wouldnae tell me what happened. I daenae think he ever will.”

“She was abducted one night returnin’ from the orphanage where she used to volunteer to help.” Maisie said. “She’d been taken for six months, and his lairdship was frantic to find her alive. He’d turned ruthless in those days, vowin’ to raze the world to the ground to find her.

Little by little, Paige began to understand the situation and the underlying reasons for why the laird was how he was. She shook her head. “What happened with his sister?”

“Nay one really kens,” Maisie shrugged. “The poor girl was taken and held for half a year, then she was found alone and bound in a field. I am afraid I daenae ken any more about that.”

Paige could not help but feel some sympathy for the young woman, surely that had to be heartbreaking and horrible. She could not imagine what such a thing could feel.

Maybe that encounter with the laird who had taken advantage of him had turned him into another vile monster who took advantage of others.

Shaking her head, Paige vowed to show sympathy to the girl when she met her, but she would keep her distance from the laird. She knew she would never like the man, much less love him. The best she could hope was for some variation of civility.

Even that is dubious.

Paige waited for Maisie to leave before she went to the doorway leading to Ruben’s chambers. She did not hear anything coming from them so perhaps he was not inside.

She still did not understand the flutter in her belly when Ruben touched her, but as she disrobed and sunk into the waiting tub with a sigh, she couldn’t help but want to experience it again. The warm water was heavenly, but the knowledge of what was coming made it hard to fully relax.

“I’m nae entirely sure that is a good thing...” she muttered.

Surely there is a way to get out of this horrible nightmare.

“Paige, dear, ye cannae keep hidin’ away from yer husband,” Daisy said fretfully. “T’is nae the best way to start yer marriage.”

“This is nae a marriage, Mama,” Paige shook her head as she reached for her nettle tea. “It’s a mockery of one. Besides, I am sure me husband doesnae want me around him at all.”

Her mother’s face fell with disappointment. “Paige, ye cannae perpetuate the rift between ye two. Ye need to make an effort to be more amenable to him, to be open and come to a?—”

“Nae when he murdered me cousin.” Paige bristled. “Elijah should be alive now but he isnae because of him. How do I make peace with such...such a beast?”

“Paige,” her mother said aghast. “Ye cannae say such a thing.”

“I will never forgive him for what he did to Elijah,” she said strongly. “Me cousin should be alive and with his family now. He should be alive now, married, have his children and be enjoyin’ his life.”

Daisy reached out for her and held her hand, “Me daughter, peace doesnae come easily. It will nae come unless someone decides to sacrifice for it.

“I am sorry ye had to be the one it comes through but please, try to make the best of it. Please, give yerself the chance to understand yer husband and give him the chance to understand ye.

“Nay one is as bad ye think they are,” Daisy said, “Can ye nae see that? I ken ye must have seen somethin’ in the man that resonates with ye.”

He wants the orphans to read. That should count for somethin’.

“Nae enough to count,” she said stubbornly.

Looking around, Daisy shook her head. “Ye’ve been locked into this room for the past two days, Paige. I think being so cloistered in here is affectin’ ye. We should take a walk and get some fresh air.”

“Maither—”

“Nay, Paige,” Daisy’s voice sharpened. “Come along.”

It took them a while to navigate the corridors in the massive keep, but eventually they managed to leave through one of the many backdoors.

They bypassed outbuilding, smokehouses, many vegetable gardens were there, and she saw servants plucking weeds from the rows. She nodded to a few that met her eye and mustered a smile. They rounded the back lands and storehouse then came up extensive and training field.

She could already see the formations. Over to the left, young squires, mere boys, were running with buckets of water to increase arm strength, while older squires were sparring with wooden swords.

To the far right, Ruben was with fifteen warriors. Thirteen of them were on the sideline, watching him battle two, probably waiting their time to enter the field.

Ruben’s dark hair seemed to absorb the bright mid-morning sunlight, and she swallowed tightly at the sight of him. It was one thing sensing how hard his body was during their rides, but to see it directly was another.

His tall, broad-shouldered form was bare-chested. Clad in only breeks that covered from knee to waist, his muscled, battle-scarred chest unexpectedly sent her heart into

a fluster. She had thought his chest would be covered with hair—but no, it was bare.

His hand flexed over the hilt of the massive claymore and dragging her eyes from his hand, she spotted his face, and her breath stalled in her chest.

She did not see his eyes but did see the thick line of his lowered brows leading to his regal nose. His lips were flattened in a line, and she wondered what he was displeased about.

He squared his shoulders and lifted the sword to the two men facing him. He then dropped into a stance and lunged; the two men did not leap out of the way, and she realized he was teaching them.

The morning wore on as they engaged in a battery of military exercises. He and the men sparred fiercely, but Ruben showed the men no mercy, sending more than half of them to the ground.

“I think I’ll head back inside,” her mother said, while touching her arm. “Remember what I said about makin’ peace in yer marriage.”

Paige bit her tongue. She did not want to tell her mother that she knew, deep down in her bones, that such a thing was not possible. The only words she could find were, “Get some rest.”

Standing within the courtyard gates, she watched another warrior spar with Ruben. He blocked Ruben’s lunges, and possessed a speed that made her eyes widen. He fought with an uncanny instinct that had Ruben on the defensive as well.

Eventually a small crowd gathered near the gate but none of them—most servants—stayed for long. They hurried off to their duties, men holding boxes, women with clean washing in hand.

A woman dressed in healer garb with a basket of herbs perched on her hip lingered there as well before moving on.

“Me lady,” a passing servant lad bowed and hurried by.

As if pulled by a lodestone, Paige stepped closer and closer to the training ground. Ruben was about twenty feet from her, but she was far away from any sword flying out of bounds.

She watched Ruben so intensely that she was having a hard time concentrating on anything other than his body. All his muscles clenched and bunched while he fought against each of his men.

The two clashed and Ruben flung his sword up to block the blow his opponent delivered. The man’s sword sliced down in a high arc and came down over Ruben’s head in a killing strike. Ruben shifted to the right—and her hand flew to her breast as panic tightened her throat.

CHAPTER TEN

In the space of a hairbreadth, their swords met in a loud, deafening clash, barely dodging the blow to his ear. Ruben twisted his sword around and lifted his foot to kick the man in his belly.

In the blink of an eye, he'd swiped the man's sword from him and spun around with both blades in hand. Every muscle sinew was on show for her from his calves up through his thighs, and then from his waist up through his shoulders. She watched them ripple and glisten with sweat under the bright sun.

The men shouted. "He's done!"

Ruben pivoted and lobbed the sword back to the man and the two shook hands. For once, his lips flickered into something resembling a smile and the two spoke—and then it vanished.

He does have the capacity to nae be frownin' all the time...but he doesnae. Nae for me anyway.

Pivoting on his heel, Ruben looked over her and his brows lowered. There was no hostility in his gaze but for some reason, Paige felt unwelcome.

Disheartened and saddened, she turned away to leave and had barely moved three paces when a hand grabbed her arm—effectively spinning her around.

A heavy mass rammed into her back, and she crashed into the hard, packed ground.

All the breath left her lungs and she winced at the mass holding her down.

Heavens. He is heavy!

When she peeled her eyes opened, she found Ruben hovering over her. Inches away from his face, she realized his eyes were the deepest blue they looked as black as the midnight sky. His gaze was smoldering, something she never imagined seeing coming from him.

His eyes dropped to her lips and nervously she pulled her bottom lip in. Unexpected heat sizzled up her skin, making gooseflesh wash over whole body.

“What—” she sucked in a breath. “What are ye doin’?”

Ruben’s eyes sharpened as he pushed himself off and stepped away. She watched as he strode five paces away and plucked the shaft of an arrow out of the wood overhang.

“Savin’ yer life,” he said.

His eyes narrowed at it, then he pivoted and from the look in his eyes, he was trying to discern where the arrow had come from. Before he could call out, a man, clad head to toe in chain mail and armed with a broadsword, ran over, his face white with fear.

“Dornach,” Ruben said, “Explain yerself.”

He dropped to one knee, “I apologize me laird and lady. One of the squires-in-trainin’ lost control of his bow. I will reprimand him severely for the act.”

“Ye will dismiss him and send him home,” Ruben said as helped Paige to her feet. “I cannae have such careless acts among me men.”

She clutched her elbow that felt scraped and smarted under her ripped sleeve. As much as her skin felt bruised, she was frightened for the boy. “Must ye dismiss the boy, Ruben?”

His eyes were hard, “Mistakes like that get men killed.”

“Aye, I realize,” Paige dropped her tone go pleasing. “But he is still a lad. Isnae that what trainin’ is for? To nae make those mistakes? Surely ye made some at times when ye were younger. Please reconsider dismissin’ the lad.”

Ruben’s jaw worked and for a moment, Paige thought she had done more harm than good until Ruben turned to the captain.

“Put the boy on stable duty for a month. In the day he is muckin’ out the stalls, at night he is practicin’ with the targets under yer supervision until he can shoot the center blindfolded. I daenae care if his arms get weary, he will return to the troop a better archer.”

“Aye, me laird,” Dornach bowed. “I will tell him right away.”

“And Dornach, daenae make me regret this.” Ruben said.

“Ye will nae, me laird,” the captain replied. “I will make sure he does as ye say. Please excuse me.”

When he left, Ruben tightened his hold on her and ushered her—almost towed her—down to the clearing away from the training fields. She looked up to offer her thanks when he reprimanded her again.

“What are ye doin’ here? Ye could've been hurt, even maimed. What were ye thinkin’, just standin’ there in the middle of the strikin’ range?”

Paige flung her head up, outraged that he would give her such a set-down in a public place. As she drew a breath to reply, she cast a look behind her—he was right. The trajectory for the arrows from the young lads in training were right where she had stood.

She had walked, unwittingly, into danger like the foolish girl her father had raised, the girl she was trying to leave behind.

Swallowing her pride, she turned back. “I’m sorry. I hadnae realized.”

He pinned her with a hard look. “Ye’ll need to sharpen up quickly if ye dream of survivin’ here. Ye should return to yer room as it will only get more dangerous out here. I still daenae ken why ye were here at all.”

Her lip tightened, “Me maither and I decided to take a walk as she said I was too cloistered in me room. We had nae planned to see ye,” she said, keeping from wincing at the burn on her arm. “I need to see the healer.”

Ruben’s hand slid up her arm and he bowed her elbow to see the rip and the tiny drops of blood. She could see the disdain in his eyes. “It’s nothing but a scrape.”

“It still hurts,” she defended herself. “And me knee is scraped too.”

“I keep havin’ to remind meself that ye gentle-bred women are so soft,” he scoffed. “I’ll show ye the way,” Ruben said, then called one of the men to them. Curiously enough, it was the same man he had been sparring with before.

“Keep the men doing the drills we did earlier and if I am nae back by the last run, send the men in.” Ruben told the man.

“Aye, me laird,” the man bowed. “Me lady. Good to see ye again.”

When had he seen her before? Faintly, she remembered seeing him at the other end of the chapel where she and Ruben had wed. “I do remember ye,” she said. “Pardon me though, what is yer name again?”

“Galan Howe,” he replied. “I am his lairdship’s man-at-arms.”

“A man I trust with me back in any battle,” Ruben said. “If ye cannae find me at any time, find him. He will assist ye.”

“Thank ye,” Paige replied.

A smirk flittered over Galan’s face, “I’ll see ye at supper.”

“I’ll return before that,” Ruben said.

Once again, Galan’s eyes flittered between them, and drawled “Of course ye will.”

“I ken what ye’re hintin’ at,” Ruben said darkly. “Haud yer wheesht!”

As Galan chuckled, Ruben walked them away and to the castle.

He took her up two levels to a long hall at the very back of the keep.

Even from up there, she could already hear the crash of the waves below and the briny but brisk air.

The sea air almost hid the fresh, natural scent of herbs and lavender dangling from the roof’s timbers.

The hall was lined with neatly made cots fitted with grey sheets on one side, and on the other stood long tables with tools for the healers.

She noticed there were washing basins, jugs with liquid or scalded milk, cauldrons, mortars and pestles and many bone-carved spoons.

Oddly enough, not one healer was inside.

“Do ye ken where the herbs are?” she asked.

“There,” he nodded to a door at the end. “Some are dried, some are green. What do ye need?”

She gave him a list of plants and went to arrange a mortar and pestle. When he returned with the plants in hand, she plucked the leaves off and dumped them into the mortar.

After searching the jugs, she found a jug of water and used the pestle to crush the herbs. She then mixed them with water and drained the juice through a fine cloth into a cup.

She nodded to a small table that held fresh linens. “Hand me two strips please.”

As he cut a length off, she slathered both with the thick poultice and sat. Pulling her skirts up above the knee, she made sure to tuck the rest of her dress under her thighs.

“When did ye learn herbs?”

Paige looked up, “I dinnae learn in the way that healers do, as me faither forbade me to see such horrid things. But I would watch them from time to time, and eventually I picked up on some things along the way. What did yer man-at-arms mean by, of course ye will?” she asked.

He heard her question, but it took an awkward moment before he could answer.

Without her eyes narrowed in a glare, it was easier to see the fullness of her mouth and the soft curve of her cheeks.

The delicately shaped foot that she propped up on a stool, under the heavy fortress of her kirtle made his blood warm.

“Ye really are an innocent,” he said. Unwilling to shield her from the reality of married life—much like her mother and father had - he spoke in no uncertain terms. “He was hintin’ that we werenae off to the healers but to me bedroom.”

“Why would he think we’d be off to—” her tone showed her absent state of mind. But soon enough, she caught on and her cheeks flamed bright. “—Oh.”

“Aye,” he said, “ Oh .”

He watched her slim fingers trace gently over the broken skin before she cleansed it with water. Gingerly, she wrapped the poultice around her knee, and the flawless ivory of her skin shone bright against the blue wall of her dress.

She tightened the knot to the side of her leg then tended to her elbow in the same manner. “That is the one thing ye’ve nae deigned to tell me...” Paige kept her head down. “What have ye decided about that? As a matter of fact, ye were nae all that clear on what other duties I have.”

Cocking a boot onto the wall behind him, he said. “As ye well ken, this marriage was nae of me choosin’. Me hand was forced, and so was yers.”

“That goes without sayin’,” she muttered.

His tone sharpened. “Maybe when ye tame yer tongue and curb yer temper, we can get on well with mutual respect,” he snapped.

“I expect ye to manage the runnin’ of the keep and the household.

I will protect and provide for ye as me wife, ye will respect me in public and in front of me men, and I will do the same. ”

“That’s a bit hypocritical of ye, isnae it?” she dared him. “Back on the field ye told me off and insulted me to me face even though I am yer wife. Was that respect?”

He scowled. “It was an appropriate response! I will nae tolerate ye puttin’ yerself in danger.”

“I understand,” she said, biting her tongue, “But as for the terms the King made, a marriage must be consummated for him to accept it,” she stated at him with wide eyes. “We cannae bide his rules by just signin’ a piece of paper.”

“Are ye sayin’ ye want to be done with it?” Ruben asked, his left brow tucked into his hairline.

“Nay—I- I daenae ken,” she puffed out a breath. “I assume ye daenae have the same issue. Women probably trip over their own feet to fawn over ye.”

He shook his head. “Having women fawn all over me isnae somethin’ I encourage.”

She bit her lip and kept her head down, “And these women, the ones ye do favor? What—what are they like?”

“Ye daenae want to ken that, lass.” He shook his head.

Paige lifted hers, her expression still and somber. “I wouldnae ask if I dinnae want to ken.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tried as he might, Ruben could not figure out why the lass was egging him on, why she was testing him. He did not want to scar the girl but if she was daring him, he would oblige her.

“I prefer wanton women in bed and non-existent outside of it,” he said. “Those times were only to slake a physical need, nothin’ more. They were nay vows of undyin’ love to any of the lasses and before ye ask, nay, there is nay bairn who is goin’ to land on our doorstep and claim me as their own.”

Their gazes held, and Ruben saw how she actively turned away from him; Tension crackled in the space between them. This strange, magnetic attraction had been there from the moment they met but it had presented itself as animosity. He knew she felt it too—but was hellbent on denying it.

Perhaps animosity and attraction are two sides of the same coin.

“I... see.” She lifted her chin, dropped her leg and fanned her skirts out. “Thank ye for makin’ sure I wasnae harmed today.”

“Tryin’ to change the subject?” he asked.

“Nay,” she said. “I just want to give ye me appreciation.”

“Ye daenae have to thank me more than once, lass,” Ruben shrugged. “I always protect what’s mine.”

Paige swallowed. "I'm nae yers."

"The marriage vows say so," he said.

"We're enemies." Paige stated plainly.

"I am yer husband," he said. "I cannae be yer enemy."

"The vows—" She shook her head and spoke crossly. "Do ye nae think they were all lies? Nay future exists, nae for any of us."

He crouched before her and forced her to meet his eyes. "I ken I am nae the man ye wanted to marry. I am nae that fabled prince with the heart of gold and unsullied hands.

"Yer hands are surely nae pure," she said.

"We still have a duty to perform," he said. "And as much as ye hate me, I daenae think that is a deterrent."

Her look was flat, "Ye're nae much of a seducer."

"Ye think I'd take a woman to bed if I dinnae find her genuinely attractive?" He shook his head. "Lass, I'm nae that much of a gentleman. The first thing ye need to ken about desire is that it's a base instinct, an appetite, if ye will. If ye feed it, it'll grow."

"If that is yer version of seduction, I shudder at what ye'd use for flattery." Paige shook her head.

He cocked his head. "What?"

Her next words emerged as mere whispers. “Some of the men would said I am overly... plump for their tastes.”

Ruben’s face morphed into one of disbelief. “Ye? Overly plump? What in God’s blood does that mean?”

Paige turned her face away, “They say I am too... rich in the blood for them.”

“Lass, whoever thought ye are overly plump is a dobberin’ eejit,” he said.

“Ye daenae have to lie,” Paige shot him a look. “I ken I am nae what most people desire.”

Shaking his head, Ruben said. “Ye’re perfectly fine lass. And if ye daenae believe me, I can prove it to ye.”

Her head snapped in shock and when his meaning sunk in, her cheeks went red in mortification. She turned her head to the window and swallowed tightly. “It’s nae amusin’,” she muttered.

“It is to me,” he said.

Paige shook her head and stood, “I daenae think I can—can do that— with someone I daenae take kindly to,” she said.

“Ye daenae despise me to the depths of yer soul anymore?” he asked.

She blushed. “I’m nae sayin’ that. But I cannae forgive ye for the war.”

“I cannae change what happened in the past.” Ruben sobered, eyes narrowing. “But lass, ye daenae ken much about the war, so ye should shut yer mouth on that.”

She looked over her shoulder, “Or what?”

“Or I will shut it for ye,” he said.

Ruben pulled Paige’s face into both palms and as his mouth came crashing down on hers, all rational thought scattered to the four winds.

Ruben felt the beast in him come out. Just like a predator hunting its prey, the more Paige challenged him the more he wanted to devour her. All he knew was he had to kiss Paige's sweet lips. The more she challenged, the more the hunter within came to the fore.

His spine snapped straight at the thought she would reject him but the moment his lips touched hers, Ruben felt something... shift. He had been with women before, but none of them compared to this sweet, innocent woman he was holding.

From Paige's tentative response, he felt how innocent she was, and yet he sensed a dormant passion within her. If only he could pull it forward. He coaxed her lips apart so he could taste her with his tongue, gently encouraging her, guiding her until he felt her response.

Ruben's hands explored her luscious body, surprised by the abundant breasts and curvaceous bottom concealed by her attire. Her body was sumptuous, and he was tempted to carry her right to his bed.

As he deepened the kiss, he heard Paige moan. He knew she was just as affected by their embrace. He felt her arms around his neck, pulling him closer as Paige moved to deepen the kiss.

If he felt this much desire from only a kiss, how much more would it feel to be inside her and have her writhing beneath him as he pumped his essence into her body?

Ruben felt his control slipping from him the more his lips coasted over hers. He had to stop.

. On that thought, Ruben pulled his lips away, taking the fleeting moment to appreciating her lashes resting on her cheek, her plump lips glistening. When she peeled her eyes open, she looked dazed.

She blinked, “W-what was that?”

“Desire,” he said. “Or lust, if ye want to be crude. There are a lot more bawdy terms for the intimate act, ones I ken would scald yer ears and leave ye questionin’ mankind.”

Paige pulled away and headed to the doorway. “I daenae need to question mankind,” she paused. “I have questions about the war ye wrecked on me people and nay one is givin’ me any answers.”

When he did not give her any reply, she sighed and headed to the door. “I suppose nay clarification will be forthcomin’ today either.”

The rhythmic thud of the squires’ wooden sword-blades colliding rang out across the arena.

Ignoring them, Ruben dashed the sweat on his forehead away then hefted his sword and gestured Galan forward. As expected, his friend attacked and parried with calm determination, warding off his strikes with his small round shield.

“How’s yer wife?” Galan asked, as their swords locked.

Grinding his boot into the ground, Ruben scowled, “We’re here trainin’. I daenae want to talk about me wife.”

“Ye may nae,” Galan said. “But I want to. I daenae ken much about her but from the way she looks at you, is she a vixen in bed?”

“Ye may be me second, but if ye dare utter those words again,” Ruben furiously spun on his heel to deliver a backhanded strike to Galan that sent his second stumbling, he added, “I’ll have yer tongue.”

The chaotic thud and clack of the trainee’s sword and shield were in the background as Ruben side-stepped, he skipped back and struck at him in a wide arc—their blades joining for a moment before Galan twisted away and dodged out of reach.

“Concentrate on the fight,” Ruben growled.

“Me apologies. I will never cast aspersions on yer dear wife again.” Galan said. “How about a simpler question?”

“Mind yer tongue,” Ruben warned as they circled each other,

Have ye thought of how many bairns ye want?” Galan asked. “Me Nara and I want three.”

“Ye’re aggravatin’,” Ruben scowled, doing his best to keep his man-at-arms alert. Galan met his strike with a snapping deflect and swiftly tried to undercut Ruben.

They circled each other once more, Galan leading the attacks, although Ruben’s parries and feints grew gradually more aggressive. Then he suddenly attacked, swift and silent as a striking wolf.

Galan leaped backward to avoid him, but he was too slow. Ruben managed to backhand Galan’s sword of his hand and sent it spinning across the enclosure.

Grunting, Galan said. “That wasnae nice.”

Cocking his blade over the back of his shoulder, Ruben said, “If ye would keep yer mind on the fight ye’d still have yer sword in hand.”

After retrieving his blade, Ruben asked, “Ye havenae touched her yet, have ye.”

Remembering the arousal from earlier, Ruben shifted. “That doesnae sound like a question.”

“Because it wasnae one.” Galan replied, extending his hands for a shake. “Do ye want to go to one of the village’s taverns tonight and speak over it? Being away from this castle could give ye a fresh perception on this matter.”

The almost instant answer that nearly flew off Ruben’s tongue was no— he did not drink spirits as a rule. No leader that was worth calling a leader allowed himself to drink to excess.

A light mead couldnae hurt.

Rubbing his face, Ruben replied, “Against all of me rules...I think I’ll go with ye this night.” He rubbed the back of his neck and winced at the tense muscles that went right down to his shoulders. “What time are ye going?”

Looking down at the needlepoint on her embroidery hoop, Paige dropped her hands and looked down at her work. As pretty as it was—it felt meaningless.

What was a pretty image going to help anyone? It had hardly kept her mind off the problems facing her at every turn. Why would no one tell her the full truth about the war? What did Ruben decide to do about them consummating the marriage?

The most worrying question?—

Why do I feel he doesnae hate me, that he only hates the situation? Worst of all, why do I want to feel this... heat for him?

“I shouldnae like him much less want to...” she winced. “...kiss him again.”

While his indifference grated, she reminded herself that he was a murderer and did not deserve anything from him. He’d told her he like wonton women and to a man like McKinnon, he probably enjoyed such intimacies all the time.

His defense of her to the other men who had dismissed her did warm her heart—but it was probably for nothing. It did not mean he like her, or wanted her, or was a bit interested in her as the woman she was.

Even with that, she doubted he found her interests appealing. She played the harp and flute, could sew and spoke three languages.

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“Latin is the language of business,” she muttered to herself. “It might help him if he decided to include me any trade deals he wants, especially with the crown.” Putting the sewing to the side, she drifted to a window. The young men were training but she did not see Ruben there.

“Maybe if I learned to fight, I’d have somethin’ to talk about over meals...” she muttered.

“Paige, dear, are ye in he—” her mother’s words broke off as she saw her lingering by the window. “Oh, good. I was wonderin’ if ye wanted to have a talk.”

“About what, Maither?”

“I saw ye earlier before I went to visit the healers,” Daisy said as she put a bottle on the table. “Ye looked dazed and worried, so I bought a dram of calmin’ draught. What happened, dear?”

Paige wished she did not have to admit this to her mother, but she had left her few friends behind.

“What is the matter with ye this eve, Paige?”

She hesitated; as close as she was with her mother, something about this felt too intimate to speak about with her mother.

“Nothin’ is the matter,” Paige said, trying to marshal a smile.

Her mother tutted. “I ken ye’re a married lady now but t’will do ye nay good to keep yer thoughts wonderin’ all the while.

Ye have a husband and a house to cater to.

Ye must pay keen attention to what will make ye a happy marriage.

However will ye learn to please yer husband, if ye continue to disregard him? ”

“Mama, please?—”

Her mother’s hand rose to adjust the simple caul she wore, as it was slipping over her graying flaxen hair. The skullcap was adorned by glimmering silk thread and lined with silk.

“One must work very hard to please one’s husband, Paige. Do ye nae recall the many lessons ye were given on runnin’ a house and home? I?—”

“I’d rather someone tell me why the war happened,” Paige stopped her, her tone sharp, “I’d rather the truth about it than dither about what I am doing or nae doing for me new husband. It is aggravatin’ and I—” she puffed out a breath. “—it is gratin’ on me.

“Do ye ken somethin’, Maither? Do ye ken the truth about what is going on?” Paige pressed.

Her mother’s face fell and her thin shoulders sank. “I am sorry, Paige, but I ken only what yer father told me. Ye ken I was nae a part of any of his business dealings.”

As much as she wanted to believe her mother, something deep inside her told it was not so. “If it is true what Faither said, that the McKinnons invaded us for nay reason,

why would they welcome us so warmly?”

“Paige—”

“If on the other hand and we were the aggressor, provokin’ them to invade us, they would still nae welcome us,” Paige said. “There has to be somethin’ in the middle that I cannae figure. What is it?”

Daisy shook her head, “Dear, why is this botherin’ ye so much? The war ended five years ago.”

Her hands were fisted by her side as old grief soured her stomach. “Because it took Elijah from us. That’s why. Ye ken how much I considered him family; how much he deserved to be alive now and t-they robbed him of that right.”

Her mother looked pained, and Paige knew there was something she was keeping from her. “Maither, will ye tell me what ye ken? Please?”

“I am nae sure what ye mean, Paige,” her mother said.

She shook her head, and sighed, reluctantly letting go of the issue. “Well, I suppose ye should ken I... I think I have made some progress with me husband earlier.”

A remarkable change showed on her mother’s face. Happily, Daisy asked. “How so?”

“He kissed me.”

Her mother’s face went alight with happiness. Claspin’ Paige’s hands, Daisy gasped in delight, “But that’s wonderful, me daughter. It means?—”

“Nothin’,” Paige shook her head, then slumped into a seat. “It means nothin’,

Maither. Well, nothin' important. He doesnae care for me beyond the fact that he was ordered by the King to marry me and nae harm me."

Her mother's face fell. "Do ye nae feel anythin' good for Ruben?"

Let out a breath, Paige said, "I—I cannae tell ye, Maither because I daenae ken what I should be feelin' for him."

That evening, Ruben headed to the castle's smithy, he quickly crossed the grassy distance between the outhouses. The smithy was separate from the other buildings as any rogue spark could tinder a wildfire in the peat houses.

Bypassing the blacksmith's cottage, a simple house with a chicken coop and pasture for a milk cow, he came to the smithy. Made with dark brick, the smithy had a wide furnace and chimney. Around the smithy, there was no yard, only dirt - another failsafe to keep fire from sparking.

He heard the hard, rhythmic pound of a hammer on iron. As Ruben rounded the corner, he saw the smith, Eli, as he stood at his anvil, shaping a horseshoe.

"Eli," Ruben called out, holding up a hand. "I need yer help."

The smith straightened and ran a forearm across his forehead. "Of course, me laird," Eli nodded, his gray eyes sharp. "What do ye need?"

"A pair of daggers fit for a woman," Ruben said. "It's for me wife."

Eli smoothed a hand over his shortly cropped brown hair. "With iron, copper or brass, me laird?"

"Use yer best judgment," Ruben said. Even though Eli was a young smith, only with

the castle for four years, he was a dedicated, hard worker and Ruben trusted him implicitly.

“I’ll get it done, me laird,” Eli replied, reaching for his apron. “Ye’ll have it a sennight.”

“Thank ye,” Ruben said.

“And me felicitations, me laird,” Eli said. “I’ve heard Lady Paige is a sweet soul.”

“She is,” Ruben said, sighing to himself. “Besides being stubborn, I ken she is too trustin’ and I fear that might be her undoing.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“That is why I need those daggers.”

Eli frowned, “What do ye mean, me laird?”

Pivoting, Ruben said, “I need her armed in case she is on her own and trusts the wrong person.”

“Aye, me laird.”

After taking the horseshoe into smithy, Eli returned with two blocks of metal in hand. “I’ve a bit of steel, me Laird. Nae enough for a man’s blade, but for a pair of lady’s daggers, ye cannae get finer than good steel.”

“I think so too,” Ruben said. “Her father sheltered her so much she is a bit blind to the many deceptions people can play on others. She has compassion, aye but I think she is gullible too. Hence, the daggers.”

Eli nodded then sat the metals on the stone. “Pardon me if this is too bold, me laird, but has her faither shielded her so much she does nae know about the truth of the war?”

Ruben’s brows dropped. “Aye. How did ye suspect that?”

“Simply from how he stated it,” Eli said, “Ye ken, I was a part of that war, me laird. If ye want me to speak with her to give her another perspective, I will be happy to do

so.”

“Thank ye, but nae. That is a discussion for me and the lady to have alone.” Ruben said, rubbing his face. “Get on those daggers for me, will ye?”

“It’s louder than the screams of the damned in here,” said Ruben as he stepped into the tavern that evening, raising his voice above the clamor of conversation and the wild song of the patrons.

The place was packed from wall to wall. Even though the main room was larger than most of the pubs Ruben had stepped foot in, it was absolutely cramped.

“That’s the best part of it,” Galan grinned.

There were a few empty places at the tables crowded into the room, but Galan lead them to the very back where empty tables were in the shadows.

Ruben did a quick assessment of the table; it was nowhere near a window or door, near a corner and then up against a wall. It was the most defensible position in the room. “I approve,” he said.

“I kenned ye’d approve,” Galan grinned over his shoulder. “I’d already kenned ye would prefer this spot away from the others. Ye’re nae a mysterious man, me laird. T’is very easy to predict what ye want and what ye daenae.”

At least a dozen drunk men and a handful of women sang along with the half-drunk minstrel in the corner. The mood of the place was jolly, carefree and warm, a feeling that was strange to Ruben. He was not used to such merrymaking or knew how to behave in the midst of it.

“Mead,” he told Galan. “I will nae become drunk beyond reason on spirits.”

“Nor would I expect ye to,” Galan replied. “Ye’re too disciplined for such a thing.”

Even with the flickering light in the room, the tavern was clean, freshly whitewashed. The floor was swept spotless, and even the panes in the windows were clear of soot and dirt.

As he looked around the room, he noted men and women who made the town as profitable as it was, the slight baker lass, the hulking arms of the smithy. He saw the two sisters that spun cloth for the nuns, the young lass that sold candles and oranges, and the gaggle of fisher lads.

The splash of mead from the tankard dropped in front of him jolted Ruben from his musing and he reached for the drink. “Thank ye.”

“Now, tell me why ye havenae touched yer bonnie lass yet.” Galan said, asked with a knowing jerk of his chin.

“The lass hates me,” he said plainly. “She cannae get over the war and the deaths it brought on them. She keeps mentions her cousin but I havenae an inklin’ who was.” He paused to take a mouthful.

“The deaths of those who passed in those three months, five years ago blurred into a long line of blurred faces and names,” he said with a grunt.

Sipping his ale, Galan asked, “Why nae tell her the truth about how the war began? I daenae think ‘tis wise to keep the lass in the dark about it for too long.”

Staring at the men and women cavorting and dancing to the music from the fiddle and bone flute. “She’s naive and so... so bloody innocent,” Ruben said. “Her parents have shielded her from everythin’ and the thought of merely touchin’ her makes me think she’ll break apart.”

He knew Paige was no commoner to be bedded as carelessly as any tavern wench. Her dignity, pride, and bearing alone told of her high birth and genteel upbringing. She was like a fine, high-spirited filly that had not yet been broken—and that terrified him.

Very few knew it because he did not let it show but he was a man of sensual appetites, and Lord knew he did not think the gentle lady would take kindly to that.

“What sweet little virgin could put up with me irritability and me devilish temper?” he grunted.

“Oh, I daenae ken,” Galana said, leaning back in his chair and flinging an arm over the edge of it.

“Seems likes the best time to teach a young lass the pleasure of couplin’.

If I were ye, I’d enjoy every moment of seein’ her discover her own passion, step by slow step.

Take in her passion as if it were yer own.

Rediscover the pleasure of first times.”

Rubbing a finger along the rim of the wooden cup, Ruben sighed. “I willnae get any gain with her until she kens the truth of the war. Problem is, I daenae think she will accept it.”

Galan’s thick brows dipped. “Why do ye believe that?”

“She seems to think her faither’s words are sanctified law,” he said dully. “She doesnae ken the deceiver and slippery madman he is. MacPherson is like an

overgrown child. He is an arrogant dunghill with a loud mouth and nay substance to back it up.”

“Like an empty barrel.” Galan agreed.

“Aye,” Ruben scowled. “Just like one. Bang on it with a stick and it makes the biggest noise, but there is nothin’ inside.”

“So, tell the lass the truth about the war,” Galan said. “If ye want, I’ll gladly be with ye.”

Ruben took a moment to think it over, then eventually shook his head and reached for his drink, “Nay. I’ll do it alone. If she doesnae believe me on me own, she’ll never believe anythin’ else.”

While sipping his drink, Ruben gave himself a moment to observe. The mood inside the tavern was merry, and the song was cheery and lighthearted, it almost tempted Ruben to forget the trouble back at the castle.

Galan looked in the same corner as Ruben did; he spotted a couple kissing each other with licentious abandon. Their hands were roaming in places they should not have in the open. The man was moments away from hauling the woman into his lap or carrying her out back.

“I remember the days I’d do that with Nara,” Galan groaned.

“Ye daenae do that anymore?” Ruben asked.

“Nae for the past month. She’s at her sister’s house,” Galan muttered. “She never returns quickly enough when she’s at that house. To this day, her sister thinks she can do better for a husband than a lowly warrior like me.”

Shaking his head, Ruben said. “Ye’ll be fine. I’ve seen yer wife a time or two. She loves ye to death.”

A near full moon lit the night, the clear sky peppered with tiny dots of starlight. By the way Galan’s eyes kept flickering to the window, he suspected the man was keeping watch on the time. He had a reason to—guards woke before sunlight.

“We have a few hours yet.” Ruben said, surprising himself with his own leniency.

“As for the other itch under yer skin, have ye told her what happened to yer sister?” Galan asked.

Ruben’s hand firmed around the cup, “Nay. And I will nae rest until I find that blackguard who took her and scarred her so deeply that she is nae the sweet girl I used to ken. Believe me, when I find that son of a dunghill, he will pay.

“Ye ken this means more to me than a trunk full of coin and jewels,” he said. “This is me family’s honor at stake, and I’ll see that bastard hung up by his heels and flayed alive for what he did.”

A buxom woman who served pints of warm mead was meandering through the room; she took her time to attend to some patrons first. Smiling, laughing, rubbing men’s arms and heads.

As she neared, he saw she was swaying on her feet—the woman was as drunk as the rest of the patrons.

He shifted to stand just as she swayed and felt right unto his lap, giggling. The tall tankard in her hand sloshed as she sat it down. “Me laird, as I live and breathe. Ye’re here in me brother’s pub. How may I service ye tonight?”

“By getting’ off me lap,” Ruben said firmly.

She did not seem to hear him. “A storm is rollin’ in, me laird. T’would best if ye stayed in the inn upstairs and saved yerself a perilous journey.”

“Are ye offerin’ me a bed, ma'am?” Ruben asked dryly.

“A bed,” she said while Ruben gently eased her to her feet. She took great pains to bend over, her tight bodice revealing more of her ample cleavage as she removed his emptied cup. Dark eyes glittering with seduction, “Aye, and a body to go with it.”

“Nay,” Ruben told her. “I only want the mead.”

“Are ye sure, me laird?” the serving woman coasted a hand over his chest—a hand Ruben instantly removed.

“Aye, I am,” Ruben said as he stood and dropped a coin on the table. “We’re leavin’, Howe. Now.”

“Word around town is yer new wife is a frigid as a witch’s tit,” the drunk woman slurred. “Ye would have better company here, with me, me laird.”

Stopping, Ruben said, “Ye will keep me wife’s name out of yer mouth, me good woman.” He pitched his tone loud enough for everyone to hear. “If ye or anyone else badmouths me wife, I promise ye the repercussions will nae be tame.”

Stepping into the nights air, the shock of the cold air made gooseflesh rippled up his skin. He strode to the tethered horse and swung into the saddle, turning the steed to the road.

“Word moves fast around here,” Galan said as he spurred his mount into a trot.

“Those whispers are nae somethin’ good though.”

“It’s only spurrin’ me to tell the lass the truth about the war,” Ruben said. “It’s true she is detached from me but I understand that. She has nay one to trust here, well, aside from her maither.”

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They continued along the road as it left the village behind. The road emerged at the other side and took the long path through farm roads.

There was a patch of wooded area that spotted a part of the road, a quarter mile that the locals named “the plunderers path”. The thick forestry was perfect cover for the robbers to pounce on unsuspecting travelers.

Ruben made sure his sword was in early reach but as they rode through, not a flicker or a shadow was out of place.

He did not his guard down as he rode around the corner, only to see a horse sprint down the road, the saddle on its back unmanned. The animal’s panicky gait told him that someone had been attacked, and its fear of death was palpable.

Galan swiftly turned his horse away as the frightened animal plunged into the forestry behind them. The two shared a look before they began to look around for the unlucky person who had been attacked.

Slowing their horses, they peered into the shrubs and tall grasses for the person.

“Me laird, ye ken this is a?—”

“Ruse to get us to drop our guard,” Ruben said. “But we’re nae distracted. If it is an ambush, we’re ready and if the poor soul is hurt, we are also ready.”

A soft groan came from a clump of bushes, and Galan swung his leg around before dropping to the ground. He waded to the bush while Ruben kept watch. Galan lifted

the man from the bush and helped him limp up the graded ground.

“What happened to ye, good man?” Ruben asked.

“They came out of nowhere, me laird and I?—”

Four men dropped down from the boughs above, their war cry piercing through the night air. Galan hastily dropped the man to the ground again while he met one’s blade.

Leaping off his horse, Ruben yanked his sword from its scabbard at the same time he punched one of the men in the side of his head. He met the thirds man swords meeting with a grating scrape as they came chest to chest.

Ruben pushed, his strength greater, though the man remained on his feet. Breaking away, they parried, but only for a moment before he sensed another attacker behind him.

It had been a while since he’d faced two assaults at the same time but this one had a dirk, not a sword, easier to slip in and under his ribs without him being able to defend from it.

Wasting little time dancing with the first man, Ruben put his sword through his enemy’s gut, while simultaneously pulling his dirk from his waistband. Armed with both weapons in hand, he could attack and defend at the same time.

“Who sent ye?” he demanded, sparing one eye to Galan who was defending himself from an axe and a halberd at the same time.

“We only want yer coin,” the man snarled. “Nay one sent us.”

It was possible he was telling the truth, but an ember of doubt still rested in Ruben's gut. "Ye'll die here," he said, leaping away to meet the other attacker.

He feigned to the left to avoid a wild swing, but failed to block, in time, the dagger flinging up and scoring a deep slice down his arm. The pain was ungodly .

Roaring, Ruben flew into a controlled rage. He was determined to end this ambush as quickly as possible. He flung the sword to his left hand and went on a rampage of blows.

The power, control and force he used had the man clearly weakening. With a swing so forceful it not only knocked the sword from the robber's hand but dropped him to the ground as well.

Unwilling to keep this dance go on, he rushed in, with one slash, he chopped the hand off and then quickly gutted the man. Kneeling, Ruben twisted his sword, "I told ye ye would die here."

Swiftly, he spun to meet the third assailant— only to see another, unknown man, was fighting him.

All Ruben could see of his was short hair and that he was wielding a club.

Having no time to wait and investigate further, he leaped in to take the second man off Galan's hands and managed to dispatch him.

He found the third man dead and the stranger who had jumped into help— was gone. There was something though, and Ruben knelt to pick it up as Galan slew the last raider.

There was a small, sheathed dagger on the man's chest and wrapped around it was a

golden pendant. The golden square had a Celtic knot edged into it, while in the middle of the knot was a rose. The banner below it read, Fortis et fidelis .

“Me laird, ye’re bleedin’,” Galan said, worriedly.

Still looking at the chain, Ruben muttered, “Strong and faithful.”

Dropping to his knee, Galan said, “Ye’re bleedin’ hard. We need to bind this wound, now .”

Ruben finally looked to his arm, then said, “Do what ye can.”

As he examined the pendant, he heard ripping cloth, most likely the clothing from the slain men. He felt Galan binding his arm above the wound and winced at the tight knot. It stopped the blood flow, but he needed to get to the healers soon before his arm went numb.

“What is that?” Galan asked as he worked.

“A pendant of the MacPherson Clan,” Ruben replied as he got to his feet with both objects in hand. Holding the pendant up to the moon, he frowned. “Doesnae this look like somethin’ ye give to a child?”

“Aye,” Galan agreed. “T’is somethin’ ye would give a lad or lassie.” He turned away to wipe his sword on the clothing or one of the dead men, then trotted over to where the old man sat huddled into himself.

“Let me help ye up, old boy,” Galan said. “We’re takin’ ye with us. T’is a cryin’ shame that the robbers had to use ye as bait to trick us.”

“T-thank ye,” the man whispered. “I had prayed someone would find me before the

wolves did.”

The dried blood on the man’s temple worried Ruben but he had some of the best healers in the land. He knew he’d get the man all the help he needed.

Tucking both items into his saddle bags, Ruben swung into his saddle, and they galloped to the castle, forcing his vision to not slip into black.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Even from her chambers in the second floor of the castle, Paige heard the furor from below. The shouts had her dropping her sewing and rushing out of the room, down the corridors and to the staircase— only to lurch away.

Two footmen were carrying an unconscious man up to steps and for a moment, she felt her heart sink to her feet, thinking it was Ruben.

But she glimpsed the man; he was older and grey-haired with blood matted across his temple. Following him though, was Ruben, clutching his arm—his bloody arm.

“Ruben—” she called out.

He slid an eye to her. “Nae now, lass.”

Nevertheless, she followed the men and watched in worry while the men placed the older man on the bed. She pressed her hand to her heart as one healer rushed Ruben to a nearby bed.

She stood at the back while watching the healer cut the makeshift tourniquet from his arm. Her head snapped away as the wound began to bleed again.

Her throat worked thickly as they cleaned his arm and bandaged it. A gentle hand touched her arm, and she turned back to see Galan there, staring at Ruben with worried intensity.

“What happened?” Her words were strangled.

“We were ambushed by thieves,” the warrior said then nodded to the old man, “T’is a cryin’ shame they have to use innocent men to do it.”

“Is there nothin’ I can do?” Paige asked worriedly. “I am nae a healer, but can I help prepare what ye need.”

“Me lady—” from the healer’s tone, Paige knew she was going to reject her offer but she insisted.

“Let me do somethin’.”

“If ye insist, hold his arm as we stitch,” the healer said. “It will be painful and we cannae risk him jerkin’ too hard and then do more harm than good.”

Taking a seat near him, Paige tentatively reached out to touch him. “Are ye in horrible pain?”

“Nay,” he said. “I have endured worse.”

While one healer gave Ruben a warm, pain-reducing herbal tea, Paige held his shoulder and forearm still as the healer slid the needle in and out of his skin. Not once did Ruben wince or give any indication of what was happening to him, but Paige could not take her eyes off him.

His eyelids were lowered and his jaw locked; even in pain he was handsome and his skin was tight and firm. Her fingertips coasted over thin scars here and there and the brush of his hair at the back of his head was thick but soft.

When they were finished, they gave him another infusion and then left to join the

other healers tending to the older man.

Before the last healer left his side, she asked, “Is it—” she moistened her throat. “Is the wound life-threatening?”

“Nay, me lady,” the healer who then introduced herself as Ceana said. She was short and round with a motherly look to her. “His lairdship has suffered worse wounds than this.”

“T’is only a flesh wound, lass,” Ruben said gruffly. “It will heal.”

Heavy with worry, her eyes fell to meet his. “Will there be any festering?”

“Nae with the herbal poultice we have wrapped the laceration with, me lady,” Ceana said comfortingly. “He will be on the mend in nay time.”

Looking over her shoulder at Ruben, Paige wondered if that was true. He was rested on a pillow now, his chest moving with controlled breath, while his eyes were closed.

“Will he need to stay here for the night?” she asked.

“Nay, me lady.”

“Thank ye,” she told Ceana.

Relieved washed through her and she and she looked straight into Ruben’s eyes. They were steady but Paige thought she glimpsed a rare moment of vulnerability on his face.

Galan said. “I’ll clear the room for ye to have some privacy.”

She gave him a slight smile, “I’d appreciate that.”

As his second in charge ushered the unneeded people out of the room and when the room was quieter, she went to the side of his bed.

“Ruben...” she hesitated. “Are ye?—”

She did not know how to frame that question, clearly he was not well, clearly, he had had worse injuries than the laceration on his arm. She paused. “Is there anythin’ I can get for ye?”

His eyes opened to slits. “Water, please.” He swallowed. “With ice.”

Ice? He truly is a wealthy man!

Without hesitation, she ran her hand over his other shoulder in soft comfort, then left the room, seeking the kitchen. A few kind servants pointed her the way and two even offered to get the water for her, but she refused.

I want to do this for him.

Entering the kitchens, she paused at the feel of the heat washing over her, Paige swiveled around, aware of the enormous amount of activity in this kitchen.

Her father had employed about five kitchen workers for their home; there were at least three times that number here. All of them, from the young girl to the lanky kitchen lad, were hard at work in a room that was as large as half her old home.

Along the inner wall, a long hearth stretched the length of the room. The fireplace was tall enough for the beast—no, not the beast, Ruben—to stand upright inside.

The kitchen boasted many different sections for the various cooking implements, including racks, roasting spits, and hooks to hang tin and copper kettles.

There was a long table with bowls and pans galore, rolling pins were stacked in a pile, and an array of pots and trays stood ready for the daily baking.

Where do I even look first?

Paige felt the curious glances aimed her way and she raised her chin, intent on looking assured while meeting their searching looks.

“Me lady?” Maisie asked, coming in from a wide backdoor. She was holding a basket of ripe fruits. “Is somethin’ wrong?”

“Nay,” she said. “I daenae ken if ye have heard, but me husband was injured this evenin’. Where can I get iced water, please?”

“I shall fetch it for ye.” Maisie said, hastily putting her basket aside and grabbing a bucket and chisel. “We have ice in the cellars.”

She followed Maisie out into the outbuildings and to one far away from the last out-jutting terrace. The icehouse was circular and made of brick with a domed roof.

Entering the icehouse, she saw large blocks of ice insulated by straw and watched as Maisie chipped away at the blocks. “Have ye ever seen Rub—his lairdship get grievously injured?”

“I couldnae say,” Maisie said, while flickering her hair from her eyes. “He is usually three steps ahead of any enemy he has. But he has been in skirmishes and incidents before.

“There was a time when the Northern Raiders came and he joined with other lairds to quell them from the land,” She stood. “It was brutal. The northerns are kenneled for their horrible torture and they captured one of his men.

“His lairdship volunteered to take his place and be the prisoner.”

Paige took the bucket from her. “Was he?”

“Aye, but nae for long,” Maisie said. “He fought his way out, killed twenty Norsemen and injured four. There were lashes on his back that took a while to heal but he wears his scars with pride.”

Trudging back to the castle, Paige felt another sliver of understanding fall into place. Ruben was not the mindless beast she thought him to be.

He is barbaric in killin’, but...is that because he had to do so and nae because of who he is?

Inside the kitchen, Maisie handed Paige a jug of water, then said. “If ye need anythin’ else, please send for me, me lady.”

“Thank ye,” Paige replied.

She headed back to the healing hall to find Ruben sitting up, his elbows on his knees. With the way he was facing her, she could see the edge.

Raised scars intersected with the others not just on his back, but also the backs of his arms. Her horrified gaze followed each trail, unable to move as she took in the sight.

God—how he must have suffered.

There wasn't an inch of his back that was left unmutilated. Tears began to build under her eyes and she wanted to cry at the thought of all the pain he'd gone through. Somehow, she managed to swallow down the urge to make any sound.

"I have yer water," she said quietly.

He sat up and wordlessly took the chalice with ice and the jug of water from her. He sipped slowly and Paige took the opportunity to look at his back.

Maisie was right; his back was littered with scars, small and large and she guessed, recent and some much older. If she thought of him as the warmonger, she thought him to be, the scars coupled well with his reputation.

But now, knowing he had sacrificed himself to save others had her thoughts swaying to pity. How had he withstood it? It had to have been many whippings to have made the huge, raised scars. From the back of his neck to his waist, there was barely any spot left untouched.

He tensed. "Take yer pity and throw it to the dogs, lass. I daenae need yer pity."

Ashamed, Paige ducked her head. "Maisie told me how ye switched one of the prisoners for ye when the Northerners invaded. I—I dinnae believe ye would do such a thing."

He scoffed. "Aye, because I am such a beast."

Paige sighed, "I daenae think of ye that way anymore."

His brow ticked up, while profound skepticism rested in his eyes. "And what lead to this sudden change, pray tell?"

“Me maither is pressin’ on me to more acceptin’ of the situation we’re in, that I should nae keep pushin’ aversion and hate between us if I want to live a peaceful life.” Paige said.

“And with the inconsistent recounts of with the war and all the secrets, I feel that I should give ye some doubt.”

Ruben straightened, his gaze still. “I will tell ye what ye need to ken—” Her heart leaped. “— but I daenae think ye’re ready for the truth now.”

Shattered, Paige took small comfort in him promised to tell her the truth, then said. “I’d appreciate that.”

Pushing off from the bed, Ruben made for the door, but Paige stopped him, “Ye should be restin’.”

“I will be,” he said, striding though the door. “In me chambers.”

Ruben rolled over and yawned. Despite the drapes keeping his bed chamber mostly dark, he instinctively knew it was the middle of the night.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:03 am

The howling gale outside was so strong that he heard the branches of the trees being viciously whipped back and forth. Slipping from the bed, he went to a window to tighten the shutter, when the wind yanked the pane out.

“Damn it,” he swore and yanked the pane back in.

The teeming rain was being swept sideways with such force that it was almost horizontal. The storm seemed to have been sent from hell, but Ruben was not disturbed; he’d weathered more of those storms that he cared to admit.

Padding to the joint washing room, he went to rinse his mouth so he could take the last of the painkilling brew. As he filled a cup, through the adjoining door, he heard whimpering. It took all he could not to roll his eyes.

“The lass is scared of storms,” he sighed, “Why am I nae surprised?”

After finishing rinsing his mouth, he moved from the room and into her, pausing only as the doorway to see if she was asleep. She was curled up on her side, a mound of blankets atop her, while she shivered.

“I’ve got ye.” Ruben said as he slid both arms under her back and knees. “Hold on.”

The lass looked up but was too weak with relief to protest at being hefted up his muscular body like a sack of grain.

Without hesitation, he tucked her into his side, holding her to his chest as he carried her to his chambers. She made not a sound; no protests came forth as they walked.

In five swift, long strides until he reached his room and rested her on his bed. Her nightshift, stark white and thin, rucked up her thigh as he rested her on the pillows.

Pulling up the blanket from the foot of the bed, he shook out the thick wool sheet and draped it around her shoulders. She stared at him, “T-thank ye.”

“Nae fond of storms, I take it?”

“Nay,” Paige said hoarsely. “Rain I can understand and stomach, aye, but these storms make me feel like I am about to jump out of me skin.”

He shrugged on a loose, armless léine then stroked the smoldering fire into life by dropping more wood into the bed and rummaging the coals. After that, he upended the vial of painkilling draft.

“Did ye never grow out of it?”

“Nay,” she said. “The ones at home, they were one thing, but out here near the sea they’re so loud...”

Paige eyed his bandaged arm as she slid under the sheets, only to tuck his hands under his head and stare at the ceiling. She asked. “Did ye strain yerself liftin’ me? I ken t’is very easy to rupture those stitches.”

He snorted. “Hardly.”

A grating thunderclap had her wincing, and Ruben tilted his head to her, “Shhh, lass,” he tried to comfort her. “Ye’ll be fine.”

Pressing her head into the pillow, Paige did her best to block out the constant boom. “Me cousin Elijah would tell me to close me eyes and to think of thunder as God

draggin' his chair across heaven to get a better look through the clouds."

A laugh puffed past his lips, "In all me years, I never heard of such a thing."

"Elijah was a unique soul," she said.

He craned his head, brows lowered, "Was? He was a unique soul?"

Her eyelids fluttered down, "He is the cousin who died in the war," she said calmly.

"The one I keep badgerin' ye about."

"I see," he said, his eyes fixed on the timbered ceiling. His throat worked as he finally twisted his head to her, "I'll be honest, lass, I have nay memory of any Elijah who died in the war."

Her words came out more spiteful than she wanted them to. "And ye ken all the names of the men and woman who died, I suppose?"

To his credit, Ruben did not react to her bitter words, calmly said, "There were fifty-seven of yer clansmen who died and thirty of mine," he said. "All of them were identified and nay Elijah comes to memory."

"I ken he died," she said tightly. "If ye dinnae kill him, one of yer men did."

Once again, he turned to her, "And who told ye that? Ye father, perhaps?"

Her eyes narrowed, "Aye, he did."

For a second time, he craned his head to her, "Lass, one of these days ye are going to have to realize that yer father is nae the man ye think he is."

“Me father has his flaws,” she said. “He is nay saint?—”

“Ye’re right about that,” Ruben snorted. “The man is as weak and foolish as a hungry, blind fox in a henhouse. Even with his nose, he cannae decide which bird to eat and is goin’ to die from hunger tryin’ to decide. Do ye want to take a moment to think why?”

Her eyes were closed, “He wants them all, I suppose.”

“Without any give and take,” Ruben said. “Yer father wants everythin’ to be his without tryin’ to gain it fairly.”

She opened her eyes this time. “What do ye mean?”

He pulled a hand from under the pillow and rubbed over his face, pressing the heel of his hand into his eyes. “I shouldnae have started this tonight when t’would be better to do it in the day.”

“Why?” Paige asked.

“So I can get the witnesses here to show ye why yer father had told ye five lies and one truth,” Ruben said tiredly. “I suppose what I just said to ye will have yer head going in circles. But try to get some sleep, lass. Ye’ll need it for the morrow.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

As she swam to consciousness, Paige felt more than she saw, or smelled. She was lying on something hard—harder than the mattress Ruben had for a bed. A bed she was sure was stuffed with rocks instead of straw.

But that hard surface—it began to shift. Something smelled like clean river water, lingering hints of smoke and something...male. Come to think of it, whatever she was lying on felt like him too, all warm muscle and slowly beating heart...

She peeled her eyes open and shifted her head away from the pale morning light, streaming in under the shuttered windows. The fire had burned low in the grate, but her vision was obscured by a hairy chest.

When she realized she was sprawled atop his muscular body, she went immobile. Sometime during the night, he must have moved and shifted to the other side, wrapped his free arm around her middle.

How she had found herself wrapped around him like a blanket, she did not know—but she wanted to move away instantly. The only thing stopping her was the iron-band of his arm around her middle.

It almost feels... possessive. So...proprietary. As if I mean somethin' to him, somethin' good, precious even. Nay the precious jewel me father calls me, but somethin' different. Somethin'... alive.

From her limited vantage point his hair was tousled with sleep like a boy's. The lines

on his face were smoothed out and without the constant knot in his brows he'd never looked more handsome.

Paige dropped her head.

She could no longer hide from the truth. She was drawn to Ruben—a man who had done unspeakable wickedness. However, even in that evil, he still had the heart to sacrifice himself for one of his men.

What kind of man was he truly?

“The way ye’re starin’ at me lass, makes me think there is somethin’ else than questions on yer mind,” Ruben grumbled sleepily.

Her heart leaped into her throat. “I—I’m nae?—”

“Stop lyin’ to me, Paige,” his eyes opened and a lazy look, one she had never seen, or one she knew he did not show anyone, lingered in his gaze. “Matter of fact, stop lyin’ overall. Ye’re nae good at it.”

Indignant, she asked, “How do ye ken I am lyin’?”

Instead of replying to her, he swiftly flipped their positions and the moment her back hit the pillows, he loomed over her.

“Many ways, lass.” His dark blue eyes grew darker by the moment. “Yer voice hitches when ye lie. It raises in pitch too but most tellin’ of all, yer heart begins poundin’ like a drum. I felt that while ye were layin’ atop me.”

Her cheeks burned. “Nevertheless. That is nay me intent.”

He eyed her, “Nay logically, anyhow. Ye need to ken that most of the time, yer emotions and yer logic daenae see eye to eye.”

Paige frowned, “What do you mean?”

Ruben kissed her. He had no desire for a polite kiss nor was he seeking permission or approval.

He dove right in, stroking his tongue inside her mouth at the first touch of their lips, and deepened it when she responded.

His arms tightened around her, clamping, pulling her close to mold her body against his.

Paige met his kiss tentatively then eagerly and she felt that Ruben was pleased to see his desire was not one-sided. His lips were firm and hot upon her, and he nibbled on her bottom lip before sliding his tongue into her mouth again.

As early as it was, she tasted the lingering herbal draught on his breath, the almost tart taste of a berry. Paige groaned against his mouth as her hands shifted slowly upward, from his side to his back. The kiss became feverish.

His length stirred against her midsection. Paige clung to his tunic, tilting her face up to him.

Ruben took her face in his hands; he was breathless yet from their kiss. “I need to make ye mine in truth.”

She bit her lip. “Now?”

His gaze was steady, “Nae now. As much as ye respond to me, I believe I have about

a dozen question to answer before I gain yer trust.” he pushed away from her and swung his legs over the bed’s edge.

“Wash up and meet back here,” he said. “There is a small room me faither and I use to speak in private at times. We’ll need to get yer maither there as well so we can talk.”

Paige sat and ruffled her tousled hair. “Why do I feel scared about what ye are about to tell me?”

He twisted and dropped a hand on her arm. “Ye shouldnae, but it’s about time ye learned the truth.”

Stepping into the small room with airy windows, Paige found Ruben standing at a window and staring out. He looked ... so grave, so alone. As if he carried the weight of the world upon his broad shoulders.

His father was sitting in a large chair, with pillows behind him and his cane by his side. Ruben’s man-at-arms, Galan, was standing guard in the corner silently.

“Lady Paige,” Niall said, “T’is good to see ye and ye too, Lady Daisy. I hope ye are settlin’ into to our home.”

Daisy brightened. “Yer home is wonderful, so warm and welcomin’.”

“That’s good to hear,” Niall said. “I hear a fair is comin’ to the village. It might be good for ye to enjoy yerself when the chances come about.”

Paige smiled, but it was tenuous. “I’ll consider that, thank ye.”

Ruben turned from the window and pulled out two chairs. “Ye should sit.”

As Daisy sat, Paige rested her hand on his shoulder. His shoulder was tense under his plain brown tunic. “Are ye all right?”

“Aye,” he said, nodded to a chair. “I called ye in here because I need to tell ye the truth of the war. I cannae have ye, the lady of the clan, thinkin’ we are brutes to start a war for nay reason. The war was started, lass, because yer father lost a wager and dinnae pay up graciously.”

“A wager—” Paige asked, her gaze moving from the older man to Ruben then to her mother. Staring at her mother, she asked. “Did ye ken about a wager, Maither?”

Daisy shook her head.

“Lies,” Paige said stubbornly. “I daenae believe ye.”

“It’s true, Paige,” Ruben said.

She notched her head up. “I daenae believe ye. What wager?”

“Half a year before the war, yer father, me and few more lairds were celebratin’ the summer festival and he was drinkin’,” Ruben said. “Yer father is nay strategist when he is sober, but when he is drunk, he is an easy mark, especially at cards.”

“Yer father made a wager, one he recanted, but one that was already written and agreed to,” Niall said, slipping a piece of parchment to them. “Forgive the handwritin’, men daenae write their best when they are drunk with whisky. Yer father’s signature is at the bottom.”

Tentatively, Paige reached for it and read, “Upon the honor of both men, Laird McKinnon and Laird MacPherson, a wager is set. The terms are for the northeast lands of the MacPherson clan, including the mineral mines, against a chest of gold

from Laird McKinnon. Both parties agree to settle their debts to the winner upon the end of the last hand.”

Paige’s stomach twisted, “What...” her eyes dropped to the bottom of the page to see two signatures. “...Angus Bradley, Laird MacPherson, Ruben Miller, Laird McKinnon.”

“I won the hand,” Ruben said. “He dinnae want to give the lands he’d agreed to.

When he would nae heed to me orders, we’d tried to mediators first, and then we got the sheriffs involved in the matter and they warned him.

MacPherson sent the head of one of the sheriffs back to us and that is when we declared war.”

Sickened, but still doubtful, Paige said. “Me father wouldnae do that.”

“I kenned ye would need the witnesses,” he said, then nodded to Galan.

Bowing, Galan left the room, but Paige was more concerned with the hastily scribbled noted before her. Could it be true? She knew her father’s handwriting, and that was it, plain before her face.

Still, she did not— could not stomach the thought that her father had lied to her.

Her eyes flickered up when two men came into the room behind Galan, but did not pay attention to anyone of them—until Ruben barked.

“Eli? What are ye doin’ here? I sent for the witnesses to the signin’ and ye were nae a part of that night.”

“With all due respect me laird,” this Eli said. “But I ken a lot more than that.”

Curious, Paige lifted her eyes—and her vision peppered with black. Her breath grew short and she grabbed at the arm of the chair where she sat on. When she finally managed to master her breath, she cried out, “Elijah!”

From the corner of her eye, she saw Ruben’s head snap to the man in the room. She lurched out of her chair, pain filling her voice, “I thought ye were dead!”

Coming to her side, Elijah took hold of both her arms and gently sat her back on the chair. Cold all over, Paige stared at him as if he were a specter from the grave.

Her voice cracked as she reached over to touch his face. “Ye’re---ye’re alive? H-how?”

“T’is a long story,” Elijah said calmly. “But that will come later. Ye need to listen to what Laird McKinnon has to tell ye.”

Ruben’s eyes were narrowed to Elijah. “And when we are done here, ye and I need to talk.”

“I will agree to that, me laird,” Elijah said, his eyes coasting over the witnesses. “But please me laird, let me talk with Lady Paige. She’ll take it from me best.”

Brows lowered, Ruben fixed his eyes on Elijah for a long, almost grating moment, then nodded curtly. “Go on but the rest of the men will stay.

Pulling up a chair, Elijah reached for Paige’s trembling hands and held them tight. “Listen to me, Paige. I will explain why I am alive later, but Laird McKinnon is right. Yer father did bet the land in a game of cards, I ken because I was there and saw it.”

Leaning on a wall, Ruben listened with one ear as he thought back to that night MacPherson had made the deal. The man had drunk enough to fill a wheelbarrow and to end up in one.

“That night, yer father was drunk, and the worst thing was, he wasnae heeding to common sense to stop,” Elijah said. “Yer father then went on to bet his lands against a thousand coins from Laird McKinnon.”

Ruben swallowed over his shock; the man had been there that night after all.

“Yer father insisted on betting the northeast lands and while he was cautioned, twice, he went along with it,” Elijah said. “But he chose to make the wager anyway. Yer father is an easy mark when he gets flustered. His eyes get big and have a feral look, like a beast that has been cornered.

“T’is nay wonder the man ruined himself at cards and then lied to ye to save face,” Elijah said. “He is a very foolish man that thinks he is three steps ahead of everyone but had nay tactic to connect each of them. For all he’s been doing, for all he’s lyin’, it’s only a way to trick ye.”

Paige pulled away and covered her face, trembling. She looked raw and vulnerable, as if her sensibilities were stripped away from her like rotten leaves falling from a dead plant.

“A—all this time,” she whispered. “All this time, he’s been lyin’ to me.”

Elijah made to hug her, but a curt shake of Ruben’s head stopped him. Sitting up, Paige’s voice was weak, “How are ye alive? Father told me ye were a casualty of the war.”

“Yer father kenned I was with him that night, so he had some men try to kill me to

stop me from talkin’,” Elijah said. “I made sure to slip the noose, Paige, and made sure to make it look like I was dead. From there, I ran here, right in the very same territory yer father would never dare to look.”

She swallowed and looked to the two men. “That is what happened that night?”

“Aye, me lady,” one of the men nodded. “It’s just as yer cousin said.”

Standing, Paige looked between Ruben and Elijah. “I—I think I need to lie down. I cannae— I cannae—” she swayed and her knees buckled.

Elijah caught her as she collapsed but in the next moment Ruben made sure to hold onto her. Instantly, Elijah let go.

“I’ll take ye to yer room,” Ruben said. To Elijah, he said, “Ye, stay with me men. I need to speak with ye.”

Cradling her close, he carried her up the stairs, wondering if he needed to call a physician to attend to her. He did not like how frantic her eyes were fluttering. Instead of taking her to her room, he took her to his and gently sat her in the middle,

He perched on the edge of the bed and smoothed her hair from her eyes. “Lass, are ye all right?”

Paige pulled away from him and tried to turn away, but he stopped her. “Nay, Paige, look at me. Tell me if ye are all right?”

“Nay,” she said. “Nay, I am nae. I just had me life ripped away from me, Ruben. How in heaven’s name can I be all right?”

“Ye dinnae have yer life ripped away from ye,” Ruben said. “Ye had the lies ripped

away from ye. I am sorry, lass, but ye needed to ken the man yer father was— is .”

“And Elijah...” her voice sounded far away. “All this time I thought he was dead, but he was here. Alive. I—I would have never guessed.”

He smoothed her hair from her eyes. “Get some rest, lass. I will talk with yer cousin for ye and I promise ye, he will be here when ye wake.”

She gazed up at him with wide, vulnerable eyes. “Ye promise?”

“Ye have me word.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

That evening, Norah was the one who found Ruben in his meeting room and softly moved the bottle of sloe wine from his hand. “From what I hear, ye daenae need to be drunk on the morrow.”

Letting her slide the bottle away, Ruben asked, “And why do ye think so?”

Sitting, Norah said, “She finally kens the truth about the war, aye?”

“Aye,” Ruben sighed, taking another sip of his wine. “And to compound her shock, the very cousin was she was assured was dead is the castle’s new smithy. He’s been livin’ here all the while, holding his secrets with him.”

Norah looked out the window. “I ken what that’s like, feelin’ yer whole life suddenly shift from under ye.”

Leaning over to rest his elbows on the table, Ruben asked, “Do ye think ye’d like to talk to her, Norah? I think the lass needs a friend around her and so do ye.”

Her eyes widened. “Do ye think that is best?”

“I do,” Ruben said, while sitting back. “Maybe on the morrow when most of the shock has worn off.”

“Speakin’ of yer wife,” Norah looked around. “T’is almost a quarter to midnight. Why are ye here broodin’ instead of being with her?”

Drumming his fingers on the table, Ruben admitted, “Ye might nae believe this, but I am nae sure how to address the situation. I daenae ken what state of mind she will be in when I return, and I daenae want to aggravate her more.”

“Well, I daenae think ye will find out if ye stay here.” Norah said. “If I were in her position, I’d feel vulnerable and I’d want the company of me husband with me.”

Cocking his head to the right, Ruben’s lips flickered into a semblance of a smile. “And when did ye get so wise, sister of mine?”

Norah stood. “Rumor has it that me brother is one of the sensible men around these parts,” she smiled. “Ye could say I got it from him.”

Chuckling, Ruben took the last sip from the cup and then stood as well. Leaving for his rooms, he gently eased the door in and stepped inside. Besides the think rays of moonlight and the dying fire, the room was dark, not so dark he would not make out the form on his bed.

Gruffly, he pulled open the trunk at the foot of his bed and withdrew an extra pile of furs before gentling his actions to place them snugly about her while her eyes remained closed.

Paige was curled up like a child, hugging a pillow to her cheek as he eased into the bed beside her, so close that they were only a breath away.

Her eyes were closed but he knew she was awake; the lass was a light sleeper. “I ken ye’re awake, Paige,” he said. “Ye can open yer eyes now. Yer mock sleep is very sound, lass but ye cannae fool me.”

At that, she did open her eyes, “Why did ye put me in yer bed instead of mine?”

Turning onto his back, Ruben said. "I felt it was the right thing to do." He then gruffly added, "Yer hair is quite bothersome as it goes everywhere but aside from that, sharin' a bed with ye is nae at all unpleasant."

After a beat of silence, Ruben reached for her and pulled her onto him, she came easily and rested her temple on his chest.

"Thank ye," she whispered.

"It's all right," he said. "Ye can let it out, Paige. Ye've been betrayed by a fool who dinnae realize the truth would come out eventually."

She was crying now, and couldn't make the tears stop. When she did, she could not stop her voice from quavering. The tears tightened her throat and made her body shudder.

A crying woman was not something Ruben encountered frequently, and when he did, he took pains to avoid them. Now, he forced himself to stay.

"Och lass," he grunted, "When this is done, ye'll realize yer father did ye a service. He showed ye how deceptive an untrustworthy he is."

When Paige did speak, her words were hitched. "I—I wished I had known all this. I—" she swallowed. "I would have nae been so nasty to ye."

He kept massaging her neck. "Ye couldnae have known. Yer father made sure to keep ye and yer maither blind to it all."

"Still," she whispered. "Ye've been so welcomin' to me... and I daenae want to be ungrateful anymore. Thank ye for...everythin'."

She gazed up at him with wide eyes, hesitant, timid almost.

If he kissed her now, while she appeared as if she might welcome it, everything would change.

Everything. His chest tightened, a new fear sitting heavily there.

He could not, in good faith, push the boundaries of the tentative trust he'd earned so quickly.

Not when she was so vulnerable and needed safety over everything else.

Sitting up, he said, "I need to change me shirt, but I will be right with ye."

He shucked his shirt and pulled another one on, then returned to bed. He lay on his back and pulled her close. Resting her head on his shoulder, she said, "Elijah is stayin' with us?"

"Aye," Ruben said, spearing his fingers through her hair. "I need to speak to yer cousin. I daenae take kindly to deception either. Ye and I need to speak with him about his actions."

"It sounds like ye're going to punish him," she said.

He lifted a brow. "I am. He is here under false pretenses that I daenae appreciate. I understand he came here to save his life, and that any communication to ye would have put him in peril. If he had come to me, I would have understood and kept his confidence as well."

"Please daenae punish him too severely," she said.

“We’ll see in the mornin’,” he said.

Waking in the soft rays of dawn, Paige felt Ruben’s arm around her middle again.

With her back molded against Ruben’s front, she could feel every inch of his virile form: it was like being trapped against a stone wall. When his warm breath skittered over her ear, she shivered at his touch and the heat of his surrounding strength.

His scent entered her nose, clean, masculine and woodsy. Simultaneously, she registered a steely length wedged against her bottom. Despite the layers between them, she shivered, a strange hot pulsing at her core.

“Stop squirmin’,” Ruben muttered in her ear, his arm tightening.

“Ruben...” her face felt hot. “Ye’re...encumbered.”

“Aye,” he murmured. “It happens most mornings, lass and with ye in me bed, it is bound to happen a lot more. Now, stop yer squirmin’ or I’ll give ye something to really squirm about.”

She bit her lip, “Ruben, should...should we consummate the marriage?”

He was quiet for a long moment, and for a moment Paige wondered if she had lost him, but he suddenly her to face him. “Are ye ready for that, lass?”

“I wouldnae have asked if I wasnae sure,” Paige spoke with a bravado she truly did not feel.

Braced on both elbows on either side of her head, Ruben realized she was stretching the truth, “I willnae consummate the marriage now, there are dozens of things we can do before we do that. Are ye willin’ to try?”

Her throat was dry, so she nodded.

When Ruben slanted his mouth over her, their kiss began gently but soon turned into a heated parry of tongues. The kiss took on a life of its own and became heated and demanding. Heated lust spiked so fiercely that he was quickly hard against her.

Daring, Paige flicked her tongue against his lips and then traced them with the tip of hers. Ruben thrust his tongue into her mouth as he thrust his hips into her parted legs, pressing her inner thigh.

Heated with desire, Paige began to suck on his tongue which earned her a groan and two strong hands sliding under her and gripping her bottom.

His hands slid up her body and cupped her breast. She startled a little but moaned as his thumb flickered over her nipple, the sensation overwhelming even through her clothes.

Her back arched into his touch, her lips pulling away from his mouth as he began to kiss down the column of her neck. His lips coasted from just behind her ear to where it met her shoulder.

She tipped her head to give him better access, and a shiver ran through her. He nibbled then licked his way back up to her earlobe and sucked on the lobe.

Paige tilted her head further and caught his lips again, as he pressed his hand to the middle of her back and brought her body flush with his.

He coaxed her to mate her tongue with his, and the sinuous, slick dance caused the tips of her breasts to tingle, a strange, molten feeling awakening at her core. A sudden gush of wetness between her thighs made her squirm— and she felt him, very hard and very large poking into her inner thigh.

“R-Ruben,” she gasped while he breathed softly against her ear, he traced her collarbone.

He let his palm course over the swell of one breast, circling her tender nipple with his thumb and forefinger. It stiffened at once in response, fueling her lust. The hot, wet suction on a taut peak made her spine arch off the bed; she bit her lip to stifle a moan.

He leaned in, sucked at one peak through the cloth of her nightdress, forcing her eyes open. He licked his tongue along the nipple as his hand slid up her dress.

“I’m going to touch ye, lass,” he warned her. He placed his flat hand on her soft thighs, a growl of approval rising in his throat when she did not shy away.

A flicker of his fingers over her seam had him groaning; she was drenched, dripping with desire. When his fingers stroked through those velvety folds, a growl rumbled from his chest. “Ye’re so wet for me, lass.”

He caressed her, alternating feather-light caresses with sinuous circles upon her sensitive nub. Tentatively, he slid a finger inside her.

“God above, ye’re tight. The way ye’re grippin’ me fingers...” Although his jaw was ruddy with pleasure, his brows drew together. “Are ye all right, lass? Am I hurtin’ ye?”

“Nay,” her breath was shuddery and tight.

She was so close he knew she wouldn’t last long. Sure enough, her thighs began to quiver. He drove two fingers into her tight passage and she took him in.

Scintillating pleasure blazed from her nipple to the apex of her thighs, molten pressure mounting at her core. Her thighs fell open as her breath quickened.

With one hand, he swept aside her hair, his lips skimming the graceful curve of her neck with licks, and nips, eliciting throaty moans.

His light caresses and tight circles upon her sensitive nub were her undoing. Paige knew she was so close ,she wouldn't last long.

Desire built and built inside her belly like a dam building on the verge of breaking. Her legs moved restlessly, the place between them throbbing with desperate need to erupt.

Ruben gripped her hips, holding her down and she gasped when his fingers hit her exactly where she needed it. Her hips moved of their own accord, seeking more.

The friction opened her floodgates, and she moaned as bliss inundated her. Her cry of delight echoed though the room and when the spike faded, she fell back to the pillows, worn out like a wrung rag.

When she had the strength to lift her eyelids, she met his intent gaze. "That was—" her head rolled languidly. "—heavenly."

Ruben leaned over her, "Yer face was the picture of pleasure too. I love how ye respond lass. It's so...instinctive."

Her brows met in two. "There are other ways?"

"Many," Ruben kissed her cheek. "Some women are so jaded they fabricate their response to men, feignin' pleasure when they feel none."

She winced, "That's deceitful."

He chuckled, "Aye, it is."

“Is it normal to feel so... sleepy after?” Paige asked.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Ruben nodded, “Aye, it is. It’ll be even more pronounced when we do consummate the marriage.”

She turned to him. “What about ye? What about yer pleasure?”

He slid from the bed and covered her with the blanket again. “Seein’ ye was all the pleasure I need. Get some rest, lass. I will be in me meeting room if ye need me.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When Paige woke again, it was beyond midday and her stomach was tight with hunger. As she washed and headed down to the kitchens, Paige was hoping for a quiet, private meal.

Halfway there, she changed her mind.

It probably the best time to talk with Elijah. In the kitchens, she requested a basket, her eyes widening as they filled it with slivers of cold meat, cheeses, sweet baked morsels and spring ripe fruit.

“Thank ye,” she told the cook then headed out to the smithy.

A kind stableboy pointed her in the way, and she headed to the quaint, ashwood cottage with a slate roof at the other end of the property. The cow looked up from grazing with a low moo, then went back to its meal.

“Paige,” Elijah said, stepping out of the cottage while wiping his hands. “Or should I say, me lady .”

She rolled her eyes. “Ye were never one for formalities, cousin. There is nay need to start now.”

Chuckling, he gestured to her basket, “May I?”

Handing the basket over, she said. “Ye had such long hair. Why did ye cut it all off?”

Rubbing a hand over his head, Elijah said, "It was a good way to disguise meself."

Stepping into the cottage, she looked around; it was neat, with a curtain separating the main room, sitting place and kitchen firepit, from the sleeping quarters. He pulled out a chair for her and she sat next to the small round table.

Elijah pulled a wineskin out and eye her, "Since when do ye drink spirits?"

"Since I came here," Paige admitted, her gaze roaming over him, as if to convince herself he truly was alive. Her eyes trailed out the window to the wide, pastoral lands beyond the hut.

Her voice was quiet and hollow. "A part of me wants to believe father is innocent of what ye all told me, but I kenned it was senseless for a laird to invade his neighbors with nay reason."

Elijah leaned on the table and folded his arms, his expression turning grave. "I had to run, Paige and I am sorry for the hurt I allowed ye to feel, but I couldnae send any word to ye or give ye a hint that I was alive. If I had, yer father would stop to nothin' to silence me for good."

She placed her palm over his work-worn hand. "I ken. I am simply overjoyed to ken ye are alive. I mourned ye, Elijah, I mourned how ye were cheated of a fulfillin' life, one with a wife, and children and love."

"I'll find that, eventually," he said while moving to unpack the basket. Slipping an eye to her, he asked. "Speakin' of love, what do ye feel for our laird?"

She went red and he laughed. "Heavens, has he seduced ye already?"

"I wouldnae say that," Paige muttered.

He handed her a platter and took his head. "I cannae imagine what ye felt when ye received the missive by the king to marry a man ye thought was yer worse enemy."

She reached for a sliver of beef. "I felt as if me life was dyin' before me eyes." Paige admitted. "Everythin' inside me wanted to hate him..."

"But?" Elijah prodded her.

Embarrassed, Paige admitted, "But when I got to ken him, I realize something was wrong. Nay one would answer me questions until Ruben took me to that room yestermornin'."

"And now?" Elijah asked, "And now, what do ye feel?"

"I question what else father has lied to me about," she dully. "I am afraid to find out what other evil things he has done."

Brushing the breadcrumbs from his fingers, Elijah asked, "If ye do find out, do ye think ye can find it in yer heart to forgive him?"

"I suppose we'll have to see," she swallowed.

As she headed back to the castle, Paige deterred from the beaten path and wandered around to find patches of vegetables and her gardens.

A few of the healers, clad in their namesake grey, were working in the fields, but there was another there too. Norah was nestled in a patch of burdock, carefully pulling out the weeds.

Moving to her, she walked slowly so she would not startle, and when she looked up to see her, Paige came closer. "Did ye plant all these?"

“Aye,” Norah said, while pulling another weed. “T’is an easy distraction from the dullness that goes on day by day around here.”

Looking at the plants, Paige asked, “Would ye mind if I join ye?”

Struggling with a stubborn weed, Norah replied. “Even with the mats—” she looked to her left where a pile of cloth mats were stacked, “— ye’ll ruin yer pretty dress, me lady.”

“I can wash it out,” Paige said, as she took a mat, folded her skirts and kneeled. “Speakin’ of pretty dresses, a little girl at the orphanage admired a yellow gown I had worn there. I promised her I’d make her one just like mine.”

Norah’s head lifted and something—almost a bereft look—crossed her face, before she ducked her head and handed Paige a small spade. “Ye’ve been to the orphanage?”

“Aye,” Paige said. “Unfortunate little dears, are they nae? We had some orphanages back home and I used to visit with me maither, but after the war, Faither told me it was nae safe to go back there.”

Norah didn’t say anything which made Paige carefully considered her next words, “Aside from drawin’ and gardenin’, what else do ye like to do?”

“Nae much,” Norah said quietly.

Biting her tongue, Paige gently pushed, “Ruben told me about what happened to ye. Do ye think that even with all that... that perhaps ye will find any urge to regain some semblance of yer old life?”

Stilling her moves, Norah kept her head down, “What do ye mean?”

Tentatively, Paige pressed, “Maybe step out of the castle again, or attend a festival? Maybe find a man to love and who will love ye? How about?—”

“Nay,” Norah said sharply, while yanking up another root.

Quickly pulling from her approach, Paige said, “I apologize. I dinnae mean to push ye so hard. I cannae dare imagine what ye’ve been through?—”

“Nay one can,” Norah said sharply.

The girl's tone crackled with old hurt and Paige felt her soul clench with sorrow. She breathed in deeply, then asked, “I ken I cannae rewrite the past, but I want to help ye move from it. Will ye come with me to the orphanage? I think the children would like ye.”

Norah did not speak and focused only on jabbing the spade into the dark ground, yanking out rocks and pulling out roots with a vengeance.

Dropping her eyes to the plants before her, Paige allowed Norah all the time she needed to decide if she would reply. She did not speak for another about half an hour or so , but when she did, her voice was quiet.

“I used to go to the orphanage frequently,” Norah said. “I’d go at least three times a sennight. I was returnin’ to castle from there when I was abducted.”

The spade fell from Paige’s hand. “I am so sorry.”

“Nay need to be sorry,” Norah stood and took her basket of herbs with her.

Following her, Paige hoisted her basket as well and they both turned to the path leading to the kitchen. The clang of metal on metal was almost deafening as they

moved towards the tiltyard. Paige's steps faltered as she caught sight of Ruben.

He was shirtless this time as well.

To Norah she asked, "Do ye watch yer brother practice often?"

A shadow passed over Norah's face before she answered. "Nay. I have seen him practice, and I have seen him fight more than once, but I abhor violence, and I hate death."

Paige tilted her head towards the training men and admired Ruben as he wielded the weapon in his hand, an ax this time.

"I see ye are duly impressed," Norah said.

"I've seen him fight before," Paige said. "But not this close."

She began to move to the men when Norah shook her head. "Nay. We cannae go over there," she hissed. "We cannae disturb or interrupt their training. I daenae want to cause a fuss."

Taking a long-lasting look to the large field where at least fifty men were in various stages of the mock battle. Ruben was moving through them, correcting some of the younger men.

They headed back to the castle, Paige waited until they were inside and heading up to the healing hall. They handed the baskets over the healers who hung the plants up to dry.

As she was about to leave the room, Paige beseeched Norah one last time. "I ken ye feel it is too painful for ye to go to orphanage, but I do think it might help ye to heal."

“I cannae tell ye, me lady,” Norah said.

“Please daenae call me that,” Paige said. “Me lady, I mean. I daenae want to hear it from ye.”

“T’is only proper,” Norah frowned.

“Still,” Paige shook her head, “I’d prefer if ye dinnae.”

“Excuse me,” Norah muttered as she turned away.

Watching her go, Paige feared she might have done more harm than good. She feared that if Ruben found out about it—that he might never forgive her for it.

Stepping into his rooms, Ruben smelled vanilla oil and lavender soap. The soft steam coming from the bathing chamber, paired with the almost inaudible humming, drew him closer to the door.

Paige was in the tub, her head down on a table, a stark white chemise was on a chair next to it. He tried his best to avert his eyes but... well, he was a red-blooded man and did not deny himself for too long.

Stepping in, he came closer and saw her head lift as he was just inside the doorway. The water did not hide her lush, naked curves, how her generous bosom beckoned with each luscious rise and fall, their pomegranate tips calling to his tongue.

“Ruben—” she made to hide herself from him, clapping both hands over her breasts.

“Nay,” he shook his head. “Daenae hide yerself from me, lass.”

Pulling a chair to the side of the tub, he dipped his hand into the water and swirled it

around before resting it on her knee. She still looked afraid but bore it bravely.

Reaching for a cloth, he soaped it and drew the cloth over her shoulders then dipped to her nipples, rousing them to taut peaks. He dragged the between her breasts and down her belly.

“How was yer day?” he asked. “Aside from spyin’ on me at the tiltyard, I mean.”

“I w-wasnae spyin’ on ye,” she said. “And it’s hard to think with ye doing that.”

He snorted, “If it’s hard to think now, ye will be lost when we bath together. Now, think back, little bird. What did ye do after I left ye this mornin’ in me bed?”

She took in a long breath. “I went to speak with Elijah. I had to make sure what happened last night was nae some feverish fit where I’d dreamed he was alive.”

“And ye saw he was,” Ruben said.

“Aye, alive and well,” she said. “We talked about why he had run and why he hadnae sent word to me. I understand now why he had to bide his time.”

His eyes flickered to hers. “And ye probably wondered what else yer father lied about.”

“Aye,” she said.

Leaning in, Ruben kissed her. “At least he willnae trick ye again.”

Paige fingered his damp hair, “Did ye take a bath?”

“I went swimmin’,” he said, getting to his feet. “Believe me or nae, it is a soothin’

exercise after a long day on the tiltyard.”

She shook her head. “Seems like more work to me.”

He snorted. “The fair Faither was talkin’ about is arrivin’ in the village two days from bow. Will ye want to go?”

“Aye,” Paige nodded. “I’d love to.”

“Good,” Ruben lifted her from the water, out of the tub and wrapped a waiting towel around her.

She frowned, “Is it custom for the laird to welcome a band of tumblers and jesters to yer village?”

“Nay,” he said. “I want ye to come with me because we’ll be overseein’ the orphans.”

“All the better,” Paige said. “Now, turn around so I can dress.”

His brows flew up. “Lass, I just saw ye naked and now ye want to be proper?”

Her chin went up again. “Aye.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“R uben,” Paige said hesitantly. “I fear I may have done somethin’ to upset Norah and by exchange, ye.”

Peering at her, he asked, “And what on earth could that be?”

She told him the recount of the afternoon and how Norah had reacted to her suggestions. To her slight relief, he did not grow angry and kept his propriety arm around her back as possessive as moments before.

“Daenae worry about it, lass,” he said. “I’ve been tryin’ to get her out as well but she doesnae want to go. It’s been years but the after-effects of her abduction still haunt her to this day.”

“Do ye think she will try, at least?” Paige asked.

“I cannae tell,” he pressed her closer. “But I do hope so. I want her to have a fulfillin’ life and nae let the fears of those six months where she was taken linger in her heart forever.”

“I wish she would have come with us today.” Paige said. “It might have given her somethin’ to distract her.”

“That’s another thing,” a heavy breath left Ruben. He snapped the reins, spurring the horse into a faster gait. “Norah gets nervous and frantic when she is surrounded by many people.”

Her heart pained her. “The poor girl. It must be horrible to nae be able to trust anyone, or be around anyone with the faith that they can help ye.”

The orphanage was in sight as Ruben replied. “T’is a curse. I daenae ken how to get her away from the past. I ken ye’ve never been in irons, lass but believe me, those chains hold ye. She’s still lettin’ those chains bind her and I am at me wits end on how to make them go away.”

“I wish I kenned how to help as well,” Paige said. “Maybe take her to a priest or mayhap a druid?”

“I’d do anythin’ to ger her out of the castle,” Ruben said. “I can ask the village priest to come to her, but I doubt she would want to see him.”

They arrived at the orphanage while the housemothers had the children filing out of the front doors. The little ones were starched dressed and the boys were dressed in tunics over dark trews.

“Me laird and lady,” Tessa curtsied. “We are so glad ye’re comin’ with us.”

“We’re happy to be here,” Paige said as she brushed her arisaid down.

A cart came around the corner, driven by one of the oldest boys and seated in the back was Etna. The older woman smiled as the youngest children were sat beside her as it was a walk to the village.

Spying the young lass Nera, Paige remembered her promise about the yellow dress. As she mounted the horse again, she quietly asked Ruben, “How do I go about getting’ the cloth for the housemothers to make their clothes?”

“Ye’ll need to speak with the treasurer,” Ruben said, “I shall introduce ye to him

when we return.” He slowed his horse down a walk as to keep up with the children.

“I have sent some of me men ahead of us to secure the fairgrounds. I cannae allow any marauders to turn this joyful day into something to regret.”

“Thank ye,” she said. “And... I must ask, what punishment did ye put upon Elijah?”

“He is going to be a second pair of hands for the farmers when they reap the wheat this season,” he said. “It’s nothin’ painful, but it is long, tirin’, work and I wager he will think twice before he tries to evade being honest again.”

Before they arrived at the fairgrounds, she heard flute and pipe music and the happy laughter of the townspeople.

“Have ye ever been to one?” Ruben asked. “When Norah was a child, we’d go to them every harvest.”

“Well, ye are luckier than I because I have never been,” Paige smiled. “I was never allowed as a child. And the church frowns on such things.”

She paused as a strange sensation ran over the back of her neck. She shook it off— it was probably the wind. “The church frowns on everythin’ that is a bit of enjoyable.”

They broke around the corner and saw colorful tents and carts littering the expansive green. Children ran around adults, holding sweet treats, fruit and clutching simple wooden toys, probably ones they had won, as if they were treasures.

Over to the left, older boys sparred with rough wooden swords while juggler moved through the crowd tossing balls high in the air. Musicians bearing bone whistles, timbrels and fiddles walked in groups to take the cheerful sounds to other parts of the crowd.

Stopping the horse, Ruben alighted first then helped her down. The two younger housemothers began to make rules, ordering the older ones to form groups of four with the younger children.

“That is to make sure ye always have someone bigger to help ye,” Tessa instructed. “Ye must nae stray! As delightful as it is, a fair is full of tinkers and tricksters waitin’ to take advantage if ye are alone! Be mindful.”

“And if ye find yerself in trouble, look for one of me men. They wear me clan colors with a red band on their arm, so ye can find them easily,” Ruben told them as he gestured to a guard a step behind him. “Like Williams here.”

As the housemothers took the children one way, Ruben turned her another way. The fair was teeming with people, most of who stopped to speak with Ruben and were happy to meet her too.

An old woman invited her to the church to celebrate her grandchild’s christening, another woman asked if she could get her daughter a position in the castle.

As she considered her answer, a third lady asked her to come and sew with her and her friends on Sunday afternoons.

“I will attend yer granddaughter's christenin'. And as for yer daughter, I must ask the housekeeper first, but I shall let ye ken her decision,” Paige said calmly. “And I would love to sew with ye. Please tell me the directions to yer home.”

Ruben listened in on the conversation and when the women left, he inclined his head, “Ye handled that well. T’was prudent of ye to think to ask the housekeeper as I ken ye’re nae all that familiar with the runnin’ of the castle yet.”

“I thought it was best to be cautious,” she said as they stepped around a juggler

tossing daggers.

“Ruben!” She grabbed at him. “Look at that.”

She was entranced at the sight of an acrobat upon a pole, his body upside down while balancing with one hand. Her breath held tight as he leaped from it and landed on both feet with bended knees.

“They are from the East, lass,” he said. “Their people have some truly unusual skills.”

“I can see that,” she said as they wandered through some stalls.

The woman from the east were selling exotic wares, porcelain dolls, cup and silks from China, and precious stones from the Far East. Paige had never seen such beautiful wares.

She reached to touch a length of purple cloth, it slipped through her fingers like water. She had never touched something so delightful.

“Ye like, lady?” the seller asked.

“Very much.” Paige replied.

She felt Ruben’s looking over her shoulder, “What do ye want it for?”

“It would be a lovely shawl,” she said. “T’is so soft.”

When the lady told her the price, she belatedly realized she had no coin with her. “I daenae think?—”

The unsettling feeling from before rippled over her skin again. God above—what was

that?

“Nay,” Ruben said, taking her pause as reluctance, she assumed. He then slid the gold coins over the stall’s small ledge. “She’ll take it.”

As the lady cut a length, she turned to spy a man carefully put a torch aflame in his mouth, seeming to eat it. She watched another swallow a sword and a tightrope walker carefully walking on a thin piece of rope and a pole for balance.

“Such abilities...” she marveled.

“Me laird,” William leaned in. “It looks like Morigha is comin’ to ye.”

Hearing him, Paige asked, “Who is that?”

“The local seer,” Ruben said, nodding to a wizened figure walking with a cane.

Her face was marred with wrinkles, her hair grey, and her eyes were so pale Paige feared she was blind. Her cloak was grey like the morning mist. “Some of the men in the village call her an oracle. The ones in the church say she is a witch. However ye take it, all agree she has the sight.”

“Has she ever given ye a prediction?” she asked.

“Nay, but she told me faither that she’d once foreseen how he’d meet me maither,” Ruben nodded. “And she was right.”

“What did she say t?—”

“What can I do for ye, Morigha?” he asked as the woman came to stand by them.

“Nae ye, me laird,” her voice was crackling as she turned her gaze on Paige. “I have a word for yer wife. I’ve been watchin’ ye from the moment ye arrived and I cannae hold back any longer.”

Ruben’s eyes flitted between her and the seer, “Well, speak yer mind.”

“Nae here,” Morigha said. “Come with me, me lady.”

Instinctively, she looked to Ruben, he would know if it was best to as she asked. Indulgently, he nodded but then turned to Williams. “Stand outside the tents. I daenae want to leave anythin’ to chance.”

As Paige followed the lady and William a step behind her, she was led to a tent. She parted the low curtain and startled a little when she jolted a windchime.

Inside was dark; and she blinked to adjust her eyes, then jerked to a stop when two cats wound through her legs.

“Sit,” Morigha gestured to a stool near a table then sat opposite her. “I see storms wrapped around ye, lass. Ye are torn between two worlds and ye daenae ken which way to turn.”

Paige blinked. “W-what?”

“I see change, all around ye,” she intoned. “Ye daenae ken which way to go, ye have major decisions to make in yer life but ye must decide, very soon. Events will unfold that will force ye to choose a side. Duty, or love will be the question.”

“Duty or love...” she parroted. “I—I have nay idea what ye mean.”

“Ye shall see,” Morigha said. “Ye love deeply, but there is conflict there as well. Ye

arenae allowin' yerself to feel how ye ken ye should."

Her shoulders slumped. "I think ye mean about me husband."

"Do ye really think that is what it is?" the seer asked, her hauntingly white eyes looked otherworldly.

Paige frowned, "What else could it be?"

Instead of replying, the seer seemed to gaze right through Paige. "First comes the warrior, second comes the laird, third is the maiden with the healin' touch."

Now, Paige was beyond confused. What on earth did she mean by that?

"I think it's time for me to join me husband," Paige stood. "Thank ye."

Stumbling out of the dark tent and into the bright day felt like moving from one world to another and she felt oddly unsettled. Ruben saw her state immediately and went over to her.

His gaze was sharp as he asked, "Are ye all right?"

"Aye," she shook her head, trying to throw the strange feeling off. "She is just... peculiar."

"She is." Ruben steered her to the carts selling hot treats and purchased buns for them.

After a nibble, Paige thought over the baffling prediction then asked, "What did she tell yer faither?"

“That he would find his wife on the battlefield of ice,” he said. “See, me faither went to the aid of a northern clan to stop the invaders.

“Me maither was a healer in trainin’ at that time, and she’d come to the help of the wounded after the battle had ended. Snow had fallen all through the battle so ye can imagine what the field looked like at the end.”

“I see,” Paige finished her food. “She told me I would have to soon choose between love and duty.”

His head jerked back, “And what on earth did she mean by that?”

“I daenae ken.” Paige chose to refrain from telling him the other part of her prophecy.

First comes the warrior, second comes the laird, third is the maiden with the healin’ touch.

Ruben did not know what to make of the first part of the riddle, she was sure he would not unravel that one either. Shrugging, Paige decided to enjoy the fair and while they walked, spoke with more village people who were eager to meet her.

The day slipped away in a sublime mix of children’s laughter, fun games, a few that she won and swiftly passed off the silly toys to the children. When she won a doll, she knew exactly who it was for.

“Where is Nera?” she asked Ruben while looking around.

“Probably with her caretakers,” he said. “Walk with me; let’s find her.”

While they searched the fairgrounds, Ruben paused to inspect some horses for purchase. Paige then noticed a little girl with beautiful black hair, looking around and

sniffing.

Paige offered a smile and was surprised to find the child walking toward her.

When the girl stopped in front of her, Paige went down on her haunches and asked, “Are ye all right, little lass?”

The little girl sobbed. “I cannae find me maither.”

Crouching, she reached for the lass. “Tell me, what is yer maither’s name?”

“Mama’s name is Elspet,” the girl said, sniffing. “Me name is Hanna.”

Looking around, Paige tried to find a woman, any woman, who looked like the girl. “When did ye last see yer maither?”

That late in the day, most of the people from the fair were gone to their homes, and some of the shopkeepers were closing their stalls. She looked over to Ruben while he was bartering with the horse breeder.

Turning to the little girl, she took a chance. “Where was the last place ye saw yer maither?”

“Over there,” the girl pointed to a far end of the field that had some outhouses and tall grass; beyond that was a forest. It looked like there was a path leading into the woodland too.

Could it be that the woman had wandered off, or had someone taken her away?

“Let’s go and see if we can find her.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ruben's head turned to Paige—when she was half the field away, a child at her side.

“Lass!” he shouted at her back. “Stop!”

When she did not hear him, or if she did and did not care to answer, he turned to the salesman. “I’ll be back. That geldin’ is mine.”

“God’s blood,” he swore under his breath. “What is that foolish lass doing? And where are the damn guards who are supposed to be with her?”

With a mental note to castigate her missing guard, he broke off into a trot, following his wife.

Heavy footsteps sounded behind him—Williams and his guardsmen, following their laird—but he did not heed the sound.

He could already hear the harsh reprimands he would give her the moment he got her back to safety.

“Paige, where are ye—” he rounded the line of outhouses to see three men grabbing at Paige, trying to haul her atop a horse.

Two men were trying to shove her into the hold of another man atop horseback. To her credit, Paige was fighting with all her might, jabbing her boots into the men’s face. She threw her head back as hard as she could and smashed it into the

horseman's face.

An unholy rage swept through him. Ruben leaped forward on nothing but instinct and fury. Not so much as a second thought crossed his mind as he plunged a sgian dubh into the neck of one of the men who held her.

He bellowed and slew the other man before the horseman tried to haul her into his lap. Paige seized the opportunity and managed to twist as much as possible to push his from the horse.

He lurched and fell to the side, dropping Paige as he went. The third man slumped sideways in the saddle, with his foot stuck in a stirrup, but did not fall clear of the horse. His head was dragged along the ground as the horse continued to gallop away.

As he leaped to get to Paige, Williams and two more of his men ran after the horse.

“What in God's name were ye thinkin', lass?” he snarled. “Did ye understand nothin' that was said to the children? They also pertain to ye!”

“I—I—” she gasped in some air, her eyes with fright as she grabbed at him. “What just happened? W—who were those men?”

“I daenae have the faintiest inklin',” he said, looking over her shoulder. “But the men chasin' after the last man might tell me. If he is alive that is. God, I have a mind to tan yer hide.”

Her face was still bloodless white. “I- it's nae me fault. Who forces children to lure people into an ambush?”

“More than ye think,” he stood and pulled her with him. “It's one of the oldest ruses for brigands, lass.”

She brushed her skirts down, “Ye think they were robbers?”

“They could be,” Ruben said as his men were returning, a wild horse and thief in tow. Only, the man was slumped over the back of the saddle, his limbs too loose for a captured man.

“Is he dead?” Ruben demanded. He was so full of rage he wanted to run the man through, but he needed to know who had sent the would-be kidnappers.

“Nay, me laird,” one of the men shook his head. “The horse threw him, and he landed on his temple. He is unconscious.”

In a tight tone, Ruben ordered, “Take him to the healer hall and I need two guards with him day and night. If he wakes, send for me immediately.”

He turned to Paige. “When we rejoin the children, nae a word to them. When we get home, ye and I are going to talk. Men, take the prisoner the long way around so ye daenae scare the children.”

Spotting the doll she meant to give to Nera on the ground, she swiftly swept it up and brushed it off. “I daenae ken if I can act as if nothin’ happened,” she was still breathless. “I—I am still in shock.”

He grasped her arm. “Take deep breaths and force a smile on yer face. Ye cannae scare the children. Put on a brave face and act as ye have had the best time today. When we get home, ye and I are going to talk.”

“From yer tone, I daenae think ye want to talk ,” she said pointedly.

Ruben gave her an eye. “Ye’re right. I am going talk, ye are going to be quiet and listen. Ye are too impulsive and easily swayed, which in these lands, is a death

sentence waitin' to happen.”

Swallowing, Paige pressed a hand to her still rioting heartbeat. They began to walk back to the main part of the fairgrounds, as she said, “The child was lookin’ for her maither. Isnae that a reasonable reason to help?”

The urge to punch something made his palm itch. “The reasonable thing would be to take the guards with ye before walkin’ off with the child. A child, mind ye, that has conveniently disappeared in the fracas.”

Paige held the doll to her chest as they rounded a booth and spotted the caretakers organizing the children. Ruben’s astute eyes ran over the group, hoping none of the children, especially the older ones, saw the attack.

He did not want to explain the situation to any of them, mostly because he was not sure why it happened or who was behind it. It rankled him, made him feel weak and powerless when certain situations were beyond his control.

He was a leader— he had to be in control. Something unsettling and gut-wrenching settled under his skin every time he was left picking up the pieces from an attack.

What could have happened if I’d nae been as quick to follow her as I did? She could have been taken like Norah.

His gut roiled with the feeling that he might have been too late to stop their attack and that made him want to find something and break it.

“I daenae think she will have a problem, me lady.” Mother Etna told Paige and Ruben realized he had missed something.

He sharpened when Paige gave the doll to a drowsy Nera. The poor girl looked

tucked out from walk but brightened when she saw the doll.

“For me, me lady?” Nera reached out for the toy.

“Aye,” Paige said, “It’s for ye.”

To the lass’ credit, she was pretending very well. The tight lines around her eyes and the brittle edge to her smile did show she was tense. Only to him though; the children were not clever enough yet to see those signs.

The sun was setting; painting a vivid image that could only be found in the highlands. Vivid hues of orange bled into red and shimmering gold while the encroaching indigo of the night sky slowly ate away at the mélange of colors.

“T’is time to return to the castle,” he said, nodding to his horse. “Let me help ye up.”

Paige let out a long sigh of relief as she sank into the warm bath that had been delivered to her room.

As Maisie massaged soap into her hair, Paige rested her head against the towel draped over the edge of the tub.

“A good day, me lady?” Maisie asked.

She tensed a little but forced herself to relax. “Very, aye. The orphaned children enjoyed the day and so did I. I believe I even saw Ruben smile once or twice.”

“Sounds like a good day to me,” Maisie said.

She sent Maisie to her other duties while she gazed at the timbered ceiling. After the frightening day she had endured, the stillness and warm water added up to pure bliss.

Closing her eyes, the image of the man grabbing at her, the wicked snarl on his face, the tight grip of his scarred hands, the foulness of his breath as he shouted in her face—she startled.

“Nay, nay, nay...” the words tumbled from her lips, much as they did when he had grabbed her. “Let me go! Let me GO! I?—”

“Lass—” Ruben’s voice was faint in her ears, as a hand shook her shoulder. “Wake up, lass! Ye’re dreamin’! Wake up !”

With a gasp, her eyes flew open, and she stared at Ruben. The surrounding slowly came together and eroded the frightening gaze of the man who’d tried to abduct her. “W-what happened?”

“Ye fell asleep,” Ruben said calmly, his face grim. His eyes flickered between hers. “I can only assume ye were seein’ the man who tried to take ye.”

Pulling her knees to her chin, Paige wrapped an arm around them and rested her head on her forearms. “I did.”

“Did he say anythin’ to ye?” Ruben asked.

Her eyes flickered up to him. “The only thing he said was, ye’re comin’ with me.”

“Nay word of who wanted to take ye?”

Silently, she shook her head.

Grunting, Ruben pulled up the small stool and sat. His gaze was firm, while his slightly wet hair told her he had just bathed as well. He smelled like river water.

“Lass, what ye did earlier today was beyond reckless,” he said firmly, and she could hear him holding his tempter under a tight tether.

“If ye dare do somethin’ like that again and I am nae with ye, ye will be taken. Ye’ll vanish like Norah did and if they are the same men who took her, they’d probably kill ye.”

Cold, crushing realization was a tight belt around her middle. Her lips parted then clamped tight again. “I—I’m sorry.”

Ruben pushed away from the stool and gave her an eye. “Ye will be when they take ye and God forbid, do all manner of evil things to ye.”

“Ruben—”

“When are ye going to learn that this is nae the idyllic house yer faither ran?” he demanded. “This is nae a dream or a fairytale. In these lands, ye have to be smarter than that. One single mistake will be the death of ye and I will nae have yer blood on me hands.”

“But Ruben, if I’d died, me blood would be on me hands, nae yers,” she tried. “T’would be me fault, nae yers.”

“Matters nae!” he argued. “If ye were taken I—I could nae live with meself knowin’ I could have stopped it.”

Spinning on his heel, Ruben marched out of the room leaving Paige to scramble. She hurried out of the tub and grabbed her towel. Hastily drying off, she dragged on her waiting smock and hurried off to find Ruben.

I cannae allow this argument to end this way,

Ruben did not have the words to tell her that, at that moment, seeing her being hauled onto the horse, he'd feared the worst. He'd seen what might have happened with Norah—and his heart had dropped to the very earth.

In his chambers, he flung the windows wide open to liberally inhale the night air. Another storm was coming, he could smell it, feel the charge of lightning on the air lifting the hair on his arm.

If it was not so late and for the storm coming in, he would have returned to the loch and swam another ten rounds. The frustration—and fear—in his system had to go somewhere.

“Ruben, please, talk to me,” Paige said from behind him.

Spinning, his eyes landed on her and ground his teeth at the image she presented. The moonlight and the light from the fire threw her smock into a see-through scarp of nothing wrapped tightly around her ample breasts.

It did not help that she had not dried properly, and some part of the smock pressed wet to her skin. It was hard to ignore the imprint of hard nipples against her tunic, by he did.

“I understand that ye are upset, reasonably so, because of what happened to Norah,” she said softly. “And I am sorry I forced ye into thar position.”

Ruben turned back to the window and braced his palms on the sill. “The night Norah went missin’, I combed through every street, nook and shadow of the village. I dinnae sleep or eat for days.”

He stared into the roiling darkness. “I scoured every village, every inch of the forest, I’d have swum the sea and looked at the bottom if I could have.

“In all me years of being on the battlefield, I have never felt that sort of fear—” he looked out at the trees, now whipping around in the wind. “—and I faced that again, today.”

As he spoke, it occurred to him that his words could be interpreted as more than he wanted them to be. He did not want her to think he was over his head in love with her—but he did care for her more than he wanted to admit.

“We dinnae find Norah for months,” he said, his tone tortured. “Months, Paige. To this day, Norah has nae told me, told anyone, what she suffered. Who is to say whether the man who took her was the one about to take ye too? I daenae think he would be so kind to let ye go as well.”

A hand attentively rested on his back and Ruben stifled the urge to throw the hand off. He kept still. “I never want ye to feel that way.”

Turning, Ruben asked. “Are ye sure the man dinnae say anythin’ to ye?”

She shook her head. “Nothin’.”

He closed the window as the gale began battering the shutters. Turning, he told her. “By the end of this week, I’ll be givin’ ye a few daggers for ye to carry. Daenae ye dare do such a foolish thing again and if ye are faced with any such situation, daenae hesitate to strike.

“I’ll be teachin’ ye the best place to strike and beyond that, some tactics to defend yerself as well,” Nodding to the door behind them, he said. “Ye should go back to yer bed and get some rest.”

Paige looked over her shoulder then turned back to him, her cheeks holding a soft blush. “Actually, if ye daenae mind, I’d prefer if I stayed here with ye. After what

happened today, I—I daenae think it's wise to stay alone."

Ruben cleared his throat then crossed over to the bed and pulled the sheets down. "After yer ordeal, I dinnae think seduction would be on yer mind."

A strange sound left her mouth, "Seduction? What are ye—?" She paused. "Is that what ye think I am doing?"

"Yer smock is nay clothin' at all," he said, shooting a look over at her. It almost unmanned him, watching her rise from the water, her chemise clinging to her curves. "It's damned near see-through. Ye'll need to put on more clothes before ye catch a cold."

Waiting for her to reply, he went to add more wood to the fire.

"...Or..." she said behind him. "What if we spend the night together?"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ruben turned to her, “Ye daenae want that, lass.”

“Why nae?” Paige asked.

“Because I believe ye are nae thinkin’ straight.” Ruben said, “Ye are still reelin’ from the attack and yer emotions are in a tangle.”

“Or,” Paige held her head high. “It could be because I see how ye look at me. I may be somewhat of a novice desire, but whatever it is, I can feel it when ye look at me. Can I nae?”

“Nay,” Ruben said honestly. “Ye’re nae wrong. But I daenae think ye want to lay with me, lass—” he grasped her arm. “—I am a beast, remember. T’is inside, rearin’, clawin’ at me to be free and I’ll let ye guess where it wants to be the most.”

She swallowed, her eyes flickering to the bed. “In...there?”

“Aye,” his tone dipped to dark and ominous. “That side of me has voracious appetites that an innocent like ye?—”

Rising on her toes, Paige kissed him. It was barely a brush of her lips across his, softly at first then with more firmness as he gripped her hips in his huge hands. When she flicked the tip of her tongue against his lips, demanding entry, he groaned and took control.

He steered her backward into a wall, securing her wrists above her head, then leaned into her, pinning her with his hips. His lips closed over hers, the kiss rougher, more forceful than before, and she writhed under his touch.

His kisses branded her bare throat. In his arms, she was truly alive. The recognition blazed right through him and at that moment he knew he wanted her and only her.

“If we do this, we do it me way,” he growled. “Do ye agree?”

“Aye” she whispered.

“I’m nae going to take ye fully, but I will see to yer pleasure. If there’s anythin’ ye daenae like, ye will tell me to stop. Otherwise, ye will do as I say. Are we agreed?”

He claimed her mouth again, and heat flared like the Beltane fire, wrapping, pulling pure sensation. Her lips parted and she welcomed him deeper inside. Their tongues met in another flickering tangle of delight, and he groaned at the way the tips of her breasts stiffened against his chest.

They kissed with open mouths and wet tongues, with passion that bordered on desperation. Pulling away, he ordered, “When I take that damned tunic off, get on me bed.”

With ruthless purpose, he bunched her tunic in his hands and ripped the linen shift over her head, tossing the damp garments away.

Then, he allowed himself the reward of drinking in Paige’s exquisite form. God above, she was beautiful. Her hair, her face. The fullness of her breasts and belly and hips.

Everything about her was exquisite. She gently lay back on the bed and braced

herself on her elbows. Her pale pink nipples were taut, and further down, the darker pink flesh peeking through her blond bush was dewy with moisture.

His mouth watered to taste her, but he would work his way down. Leaning forward, he kissed her, the force of his desire bruising.

Her breath left her mouth in forceful pants as he trailed his mouth downward. Dropping searing kisses on her neck and collarbone, his stubble lightly scratched the creamy skin of her breasts before he fastened his lips around her right nipple and sucking hard.

“Ruben—” she cried out and tangled her fingers in his hair, an attempt to pull him closer.

“So sweet,” he rasped, flicking the taut peak with his tongue. Trapping the tight bud in-between his teeth and tugged, the tight spike of pain made her back arch.

The fingers of his other hand found her taut nipple. He circled the broad disk, once, twice, three times, then lightly pinched them with his forefingers.

Grasping her thighs he parted her, and his finger grazed over her inner left thigh; one blunt finger traced a pattern on her inner thighs. Her eyes fluttered as he parted her bush but swept up her throbbing, drenched core.

“Ruben,” her breath was faint. “What are ye going to do?”

He did not reply with words, instead, his mouth sealed over her and his tongue lashed her like a panther savoring its prey.

She made a raw, needy sound as he coaxed the opening to her fluttering channel.

He aggressively licked against her tight hole until it surrendered and allowed entry to just the tip of his tongue.

“More,” Paige groaned. “More tongue. More, more, more.”

He plunged his tongue inside her as far as it could go, until he moved on to suckle on her swollen pearl. His tongue was lapping and suckling while his finger delved inside her channel.

Every time she came on the brink of release, he pulled away, waited a few moments then started again, heightening the sensation when she did shatter.

Now she rocked, moaning, begging, grinding against his chin, a woman on a mission for release. “Please,” she groaned.

“Daenae fret, lass,” he soothed. “I’ll give ye what ye need.”

His fingers sped up inside her, thrusting slowly but with enough force that her body jerked and shuddered. Her completion, wild and untamed, took control of her body, and she bucked, her nails clawing his shoulders, her mouth wide with pleasure.

An untamed cry tore from her throat as her release wracked through her like storm waves, the spasms of bliss lasting.

Eventually she slumped on the pillows, her breath coming out in short, panting gasps.

“That was...that was...”

“Just the beginnin’,” Ruben said, while his eyes roamed over her face. “Ye’ve had me fingers, ye’ve had me tongue inside ye,” he said. “And from how ye reacted, I can see how ye will do when I am inside ye meself.”

Was that a threat...or a promise?

Just a moment of pain. That's what her mother had said. She would get through it.

The embers remained in the fireplaces, the only remaining source of light as the oil lamp on her bedside table was unlit. Paige sat up and drew the covers around her, watching him wearily.

"Does that mean ye intend to couple one day?" she asked.

Flopping on his back, Ruben replied. "Aye. One day."

His chest felt like rock beneath her hands; tight and hard. She looked up at him. His eyes were the color of flint – grey, with a speckle of green through them.

There was a long silver scar zigzagging down the left side of his face. How did he get that? She wondered idly. His long black hair fell against her forehead, tickling it slightly. She felt a flush spread over her, a strong warmth springing up from her chest.

Her eyes traced over his chest to his middle and heat seared her cheeks seeing him so burgeoned. "Ruben are ye—" she did not know the words to phrase the question. "—do ye need help?"

"With what?" His eyes were still closed.

"Erm... yer arousal?" Her voice was faint.

At that moment, the rain which had been threatening suddenly poured down. Ruben's chuckle was thick over the battering rain. "And what do ye propose ye can do to help me?"

“I—” she paused, feeling woefully inexperienced when it comes to men. “Can ye show me how ye pleasure yerself?”

This time, his eyes slit open. “Are ye ready for that, lass?”

Nay....aye.

“Aye,” she replied, “Show me. T’is only fair if I attend to ye. Please, let me.”

As he undid the fall of his trousers, she leaned up on her elbows to watch. Her eyes widened as his erect member sprung free from its confines. Goodness...he’s huge. How will he fit in me?

The rosy-brown pole was long and thick, ridged with prominent veins. When he gripped it in his big hand, his fingers barely reached around the girth. The complexions were stark, her pale, slender fingers against his ruddy skin. She gripped his length and stroked, tentatively at first.

He reached for her hand and fixed it around him and with his hand atop hers, he guided the motion. “Like this,” he instructed.

The pressure he exerted was far more than she would have dared.

“Am I doing this right?” she said.

“Too right,” he said thickly. “Keep going, lass.”

He was a contrast in texture, soft velvet over a core of iron. Its eager pulse filled her with heady feminine power. As she stroked over him, Ruben reached over and fixed his hand around her neck, pulling her in for a kiss.

His kiss ravished through her and Paige wrapped an arm around his neck, luxuriating in the fit of his ridges against her curves. As he plundered her mouth, she kept stroking him.

His tongue stabbed into her mouth, he guided her to masturbate him harder, faster. She sucked on his tongue, and his flesh reared, straining against her hold. She stroked him harder, while his growls of pleasure spurred her on.

He grew so engorged that she had to pull her arm from around his neck and had to use both hands. Pushing to both knees, she jerked on his meaty staff, and when she lightly brushed his broad tip, he suddenly shuddered.

“I’m about to come in yer palms like a green boy,” he groaned.

The idea shivered through her. “I want ye to... to come...to feel the way ye made me feel.”

His hot seed pulsed over her hand, spilling like lava in fast bursts as he panted her name. When she trailed her wet fingertips over his granite-hard chest and his corrugated abdomen, his muscles leaped beneath her touch.

The sound of thunder boomed loudly through the walls as rain hammered the windows. Ruben caught his breath and turned to her, took her hand and wiped it on the sheets.

“Put yer smock back on and get into bed with me,” he said. “It’s cold and it’s going to get colder as the night goes on. I would nae want ye to get ill.”

She did as he asked and slid back between the sheets, and he pulled her into his arms.

With the remnants of his release still thrumming through his body, Ruben lay in thrall

of peaceful, contented feeling. When he turned to Paige, he realized that she was passed out with pleasure beside him.

Her face, in pleased slumber, was so divine, and beautiful that something rattled in his chest. He had an instant awareness of the woman in his arms and the fragrance of her hair.

His wife. His hot, passionate, responsive wife.

He took a deep breath of satisfaction, feeling Paige in his arms, and tightened his hold around her.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:03 am

Rubbing the sore spot, Ruben felt a fission of concern.

I'm becomin' enamored with this lass.

It was a path he had never trodden before, and the best way to ensure he kept some clarity was to keep some emotional distance between them. The first step was to not laze about in bed, enjoying her kisses and company. He would leave before she woke up.

Tomorrow he would begin. Tonight, he would savor the comfort a little longer.

The following morning, Paige woke from blissful slumber, cocooned in warmth. She tried to get up before realizing a firm body lay was curled behind her. One arm lay across her waist, and one firm shin was wrapped around her lower leg— Ruben.

They were on their side, her head tucked up under his chin, and he slept soundly. She tried to move away, but his arm tightened.

“Nay,” he growled. Then he fell back to sleep.

Paige tried to shift out from under him, to move her leg out from under him or even tried to wiggled away, but again, he tightened his embrace and growled.

Even while asleep, the man is annoyin'.

With a resigned sigh, she decided to just wait until he awoke.

Her mind drifted to the day before the wedding and compared the man laying behind her to the cold, detached man she had been forced to marry.

It's like night and day. He is nae as wicked as he seems.

She thought about the night before and felt heat sear her skin. God above. What a night! Who knew such wicked pleasure existed in life? It was positively exhausting. Delightfully so.

She yawned at that thought and drifted into oblivion. When she woke up again Ruben was gone. Disappointed that she was denied a chance to , Paige wondered if her idealistic thought about Ruben were only the thoughts of a na?f.

She slid from the bed and went to the washroom to clean up. After a warm bath, she dressed and went to the great hall for the morning meal.

After her meal, Paige summoned her maid. "Maisie? Would ye be able to tell me where Norah would be at this time of the day?"

Taking a moment to think with a load of laundry in her arms, Maisie said. "I believe she is where is normally is, at the part of the healer's herb plot. After a rain as we had last night, it is very beneficial to attend to the plans."

"Thank ye. Ye can go back to yer duties now." Paige nodded. then changed her dress to a serviceable brown dress and gray kirtle then left for her farms.

Before she went there, she went to the healer's room to get a basket of tool they used on the herbs and left to find Ruben's sister.

The sky was mostly grey with a hint of pale blue here and there and the ground was sodden. Her boots sunk inches in the ground but she headed to the plot of land she

remembered Norah working on days ago.

As she had hoped, Norah was there, working on the plot of land, her tools steadily dropping dried sawdust on the roots of the plants.

“Norah,” she called out softly, trying not to scare the woman. “May I join ye?”

With her head lifting, Norah gave Paige a quick look before nodding and went back to her work. Getting a mat, Paige knelt and began to work on the plants as well.

She knew it would be best to ease her way into getting Norah’s attention. “I ken nothin’ about herbs,” she said. “Can ye tell me why we need sawdust to put on the roots?”

“It absorbs the excess water because if there is too much water, the roots rot,” Norah said emotionlessly. “And in time, it adds nutrients to the soil.”

“That makes sense,” Paige replied. “And we cannot let the herbs rot when we need them. What herbs are these?”

“Bog Myrtle,” Norah said. “When combined with lavender and hops, the tea will surely send ye straight to sleep.”

“I may need some tonight,” Paige said offhandedly as she pressed more sawdust into the ground.

“...Why is that?” Norah asked.

“Hm?” Paige asked.

“Ye just said that ye would need to have some tonight,” Norah asked, her tone almost

accusatory. “Why would ye say that?”

“Because...” Her mind flew to the moment one of the three men had grabbed her and began to shove her to the horse and the cutting fear that had sliced her chest in two.

Her eyes landed on Norah. “Because I was almost abducted yestereve and every moment I think about it, I feel like clawin’ his invisible hand off my skin.”

Norah’s hand clenched tight on the handle of her spade, so tight her knuckles went bloodless white. “What?”

Paige looked down. “I guess yer brother wouldnae want me to tell ye this and—and it might be hard for ye to hear considerin’ what ye’ve been through—” she sat back on her heels. “—but I figured if anyone could understand what I feel, ye would.”

Norah went back to digging, her motions stiff and her face rigid with tension. She was stabbing the ground with a force that Paige had not seen—or expected, from Norah.

Keeping her head down, Paige said, “When they tried to haul me onto the horse, one of the men tried to stuff a cloth in me mouth to stop me from screamin’. He had black eyes and so many scars on his face...”

Thinking of those fraught moments, Paige barely kept herself from shuddering. Her motion with the spade stopped, “When I look back into the man’s wicked, mean, cruel black eyes I cannae help but see me life flash before me eyes.”

She swallowed thickly, and her gaze landed on her trembling hand. “I could see a life of fear and fright and loneliness and— and darkness?—”

Norah threw her tool down, lurched from the ground, grabbed her basket and ran

from the plot, startling Paige. Instantly, her heart fell to her feet; this was not good. If word got back to Ruben—and she had no doubt it would—she could already see the anger in his face.

Nay, nay, nay! This isnae good. What have I done?

CHAPTER TWENTY

Guilt, shame and unease burned a hole in Paige's chest. She gathered her things up, then hurried after Norah. She did not know if she would find Norah in time to apologize before Ruben caught on to her massive blunder.

She rushed into Ruben's room and his meeting room, hoping he was there so she could talk to him first. He was nowhere to be seen, and she began to fret.

"Oh nay, nay, nay," she spun around, frantic. "This is nae good. He'll be furious when he finds out."

Paige knew she had to find Norah and apologize, maybe find a way to explain why she had brought up the abduction attempt.

"I suppose me attempt to befriend her has failed," Paige spun and around while thinking. The most logical place for Norah to go would be to her rooms, but Paige feared going there. "I'd have to ask directions first."

Swallowing her pride, Paige set out to find Norah and a helpful maid told her where to go. Norah's room was a story higher than the rest of the house, almost in the attic.

She came to the door and knocked—and pushed the door in a little. Not daring to step in, Paige heard soft sobs inside and felt her heart grip tight in grief.

"Norah," she called through the door. "I am so sorry. Please, let me explain what I meant earlier."

A sob came from inside the room, so soft, she would never have heard if her ear had not been cocked to listen. Her heart ached even more, “Norah,” she tried again, “Please, let me talk with ye. I can explain, I really can.”

Still, all she heard was sniffing and the stifled sobs of someone trying not to scream their pain away. Unable to stay where she was, Paige stepped into the room and found Norah in a corner on the floor, a pillow held to her chest as she cried.

“Norah,” Paige fell to her knees, frightened, and unsure of what to do. Should she reach out and touch her? Would that frighten Norah more? “May I touch ye? I?—”

The poor girl was in distress. Tears rolled down her cheeks, glistening in the dim candlelight. She had her lower lip pinned between her teeth to hold back the sobs that made her shoulders tremble in silent quakes.

Paige wanted nothing more than to flee this dimly lit room and the pain she couldn’t truly grasp. But...

If I’m to be the Lady here, I must see to the needs of the clan. Even the needs I daenae completely understand.

Even frightened out of her wits, Paige wrapped her arms around Norah and pulled her in for a warm hug. Norah did not seem to notice that she was being held.

The girl was crying buckets, her face flushed more than Paige believed was healthy. “Norah, I am sorry. I am so sorry that I—” she swallowed. “—I never wanted to hurt ye or bring back bad memories but?—”

The girl was losing her breath and Paige was frantic. This was not right. “Norah—” she stood and pulled the girl up. “I think ye need to go to the healers. Please, come with me.”

As she tried to pull Norah, the door opened, “Norah, are ye willin’ to come—” Ruben ran into the room, his eyes flickering to Paige. “What in God’s name happened to her?”

“I—”

Instantly, Ruben hauled her into her into his arms and took off to the healing hall, taking the steps two at a time. Paige could not do much but follow him, fearing his reaction when she told him what had led to this.

“Me laird, what is the—” a healer looked at Norah and called out to another woman there. “—get the calmin’ draught and a wet cloth.”

When they delivered the draught to Norah, Paige stood aside, hoping the elixir would help but Norah did not seem to improve. Her face was still flushed and her breathing erratic.

“Get the pure valerian root,” the healer said calmly.

With steady hands, she carefully undid the vial and carefully dribbled a few drops in Norah’s mouth. “This is strong. It should be enough to get her to sleep the night through.”

Finally, Norah began to calm and Paige felt Ruben’s eyes on the side of her neck. When the healers pulled a soft blanket over her, he wrapped a hand around her arm and pulled her from the room.

He did not speak a word to her until they arrived at their set of rooms and slammed the door behind him.

“What happened?” Ruben demanded.

Paige winced. “Ye’re hurtin’ me.”

He pulled his hand away but his gaze pierced right through her. Massaging her arm, Paige took in a trembling breath. “I found Norah in the herb garden and joined her because I—” she took in a long breath. “I wanted to tell her about the man who almost abducted me.”

“Ye did what !” Ruben roared.

Fury transformed his face into that of a snarling wolf, his eyes narrowed and spitting fire. The beast she once thought him to be was truly coming out. “Did ye lose yer senses woman? Why would ye do such a thing!”

Paige marshaled her wits. “I thought it would make her ken that she wasnae alone. I understand that nay, I cannae fully ken what she’d felt in those moment when she was taken, but I hoped?—”

“Hoped for what ?” His blistering gaze roved fiercely over her. “That ye could build some connection with her? Are ye foxed or mad, lass?” he demanded with outrage.

“It’s absurd to even suggest?—”

“On that we agree.” Ruben’s cold words.

Paige wondered whether there would be any possibility of arguing her way out of this. She could not think of any.

“I just wanted her to ken that she was nae alone. That of anyone else, I have seen the eyes of the devil and feared death.” Paige said miserably as she sunk to a chair. She gazed at the floor. “I dinnae think she would react this way.”

“Because ye dinnae think at all,” Ruben snarled the stalked out of the room.

“Wait!” Paige called out loudly, stopping him as his hand rested on the door latch. He did not turn, but he did not move either. “Is there nay any way we can talk this over? Please.”

“...Nay,” he said, pushing the door in and stalked through them.

Night was falling but Ruben was hardly finished. His powerful arms sliced through the water as he swam the breadth of the loch, shore to shore.

Despite the beating thrum of range heating his blood, he forced himself to keep to good form. The tide had come in so the lake was higher than normal but he was not afraid of deep water.

He couldn’t believe that Paige had something so foolish and risky as forcing Norah to face her demons. Holding on to the dark rock on the further side of the loch, Ruben hauled himself up and took a perch on the edge of it.

“I need to take Paige out here one day to teach her to swim.” Or so he’d planned, but at the moment he couldn’t look at Paige without seeing Norah’s haunted face. And he couldn’t look at Norah without seeing Paige’s protective care for her.

The moon was out, casting its light over the and turning the lake into a sheen of faceted silver over the glistening waters of loch. It was a breathtaking sight, but Ruben was blind to it.

He was in turmoil.

Seeing Norah like that had cut him deeply—but it was the first spec of true emotion he had seen from her in years. From the moment he had had found her in the field,

tied up and unconscious, Norah had walked around with one expression on her face—haunted emptiness.

“I willnae ken how she is until she wakes.” He sighed to himself. “But what if this makes her retreat more than the abduction had—” his gaze flittered to the horizon. “—is it fair to be angry with Paige at all knowin’ she might have broken through to me sister?”

A cutting wind made the water ripple and Ruben shook his head; he’d been out there for half a day. It was time he returned. Diving back into the water, he swam over to the shore that led to the castle. There, he quickly dried off, dressed and went to the horse waiting on the shore.

Heading to the castle in the dark, he felt the steel of his sword in saddle bag under his thigh. Dark shapes scurried across the road at time, most likely brown rats or shrews, but he made it to his home with no attack.

“Me laird,” Galan said. “Correspondence from the archbishop has arrived. I’ve placed it in yer meetin’ room.”

The bishop had acknowledged the marriage—it was now real.

“So now we tear the beddin’ off the mattress and fly the bloodied sheet out the open window to show yer completion of the marriage vows.” Galan grinned.

A twist of apprehension turned Ruben’s stomach on itself.

“I ken that look,” Galan sighed. “What is the matter now? Do ye nae want to prove to the whole town yer love for yer wife?”

“Love?” Ruben’s head snapped to his second in command. Eyes narrowing, he

grated, “Who said anythin’ about love?”

Dropping in step with Ruben as they strode deeper in the castle, with servants bowing and sidestepping them.

“Nay one had to say it,” Galan said as they came to the room. “It’s plain as day. Almost every guard who were with ye when she was almost abducted saw the fear in yer face. It was clear how ye wanted to tear the men limb from limb.”

Stifling the surge of emotion flaring in his chest, he went to the table and plucked up the letter from the table. The red seal at the bottom had him holding in a groan. Sitting, he leaned forward and steepled his hands before his face.

“All right,” Galan said. “Somethin’ else must be botherin’ ye. I daenae have the strength to drag it out of ye, so are ye going to tell me on yer own volition?”

Rubbing his tired eyes, Ruben sat back and tonelessly uttered. “Paige told Norah about the men who almost abducted her. As ye can imagine, she dinnae take it well and cried herself into a paroxysm. We had to give her valerian root to make her sleep.”

Grimacing, Galan asked. “How bad is it?”

“I willnae ken until she wakes,” Ruben said. “But I am afraid for her. Such a thing could set her back into the almost insensate state she had been in since she was found alive.”

“Or,” Galan said, “It could wake up what was asleep inside her and get her to finally tell us what had happened in those months she’d been taken. She could finally end the mystery of who took her so ye can catch the bastard.”

“I can only hope,” Ruben said, his eyes flickering to the window and tracking the slow arc of the moon.

The delayed effect of his strenuous swim began to draw down on him and Ruben stood. “I’m going to me chambers,” he told Galan. “Only come callin’ me if there’re invaders barrelin’ down on the village or well, if somethin’ is on fire.”

“Aye, sir,” Galan nodded.

Before he headed to his rooms, Ruben went to see Norah and found her still sleeping. In the moonlight, she looked so young and fragile. The dark smudges under her eyes showed her exhaustion and her sunken cheeks showed her illness.

“Me laird,” a healer came closer. She looked in Norah’s direction and smiled faintly. “She’ll wake by the mornin’. Right now, her body is overwhelmed with the sudden nervous crisis she’d had earlier. I daenae think ye sister has been sleepin’ well for the last few months either.”

Ruben ground his teeth in futile aggravation. He had not seen that either. Something so simple as sleep deprivation was easy to spot. If he had not recognized that, what more had he overlooked?

“Ye cannae blame yerself for nae seein’ it, me laird,” the healer told him. “Ye have had yer attention occupied for months on end. Years, in fact.”

“I am still her brother,” he said while his hand clenched at his sides. “I should have seen it.”

“Either way,” the healer’s tone carried the emotion that she would rather not debate with him. “Mayhap this is the openin’ yer sister needs to start the healin’ process, in her mind as well as her body.

“Ye should go and get some rest as well, me laird. There is nothin’ ye can for her now. I give ye me word, as soon as she wakes, ye will be the first person I’ll call.”

Regretfully, Ruben had to agree and with a goodnight to the healer, headed to his rooms. Heading to the washroom, he splashed his face with icy cold water and then turned an eye to the door leading to Paige’s room.

Should I go and speak with her...or nae?

“She’s probably asleep,” he muttered to himself while reaching for a cloth to dry his face. “I’ll speak to her tomorrow.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

P aige tossed all night long.

Even with the bed being one of the most comfortable she had ever touched and the window open to allow a breeze in to cool the room—she was uneasy.

Her mind would not settle despite how weary she was both physically and emotionally. She wished she could go back in time and stop herself from approaching Norah and telling her about her almost abduction.

Her mind kept replaying the events of the previous day. Her helpful impulse, her protective moment—and the way Norah had splintered apart. More than twice she had woken up in the dead of night, frantic to reach out and help, but Norah was not there.

“I cannae help her now,” she rubbed at sleepy eyes. “I hope the healers will let me come by on the morrow. I have a lot to apologize for, to her and Ruben.”

By the third time she woke from a fright, she sat up in bed and hugged her knees to her chest. Watching for daylight was a slow and steady trickle of time that made her drowsy. Eventually, she sunk back to sleep and did not wake again until almost noon.

After a bath and a meal, she asked Maisie. “Do ye ken where is his lairdship is at the moment?”

“If he stays true to pattern, I think he will be in the trainin’ grounds, while most of the

men are out in the wilderness trainin' .”

“Thank ye.” Paige left for the training field and found Ruben there, training by himself.

This time, she approached with caution and called out for Ruben, announcing her arrival. After a moment, he sheathed the sword then came forward.

“What are ye doin’ here?” he asked, his tone flat and his eyes guarded.

The apology was on the tip of her tongue, but she swallowed it back. “Ye said ye would teach me how to defend meself usin’ daggers—” her lashes swept up. “I wanted to ken if ye would like to start now?”

Instead of replying right away, Ruben gazed at her. Paige remembered the moment when she had first seen him as he entered the room where they were to be married.

He had seemed like such a hulking figure, his face a slab of stone, his eyes harder than obsidian and soulless. Now, she realized it was not a beast but a red-blooded, passionate man who took her breath away. That was a side of him that she believed he only showed to her.

He looked over his shoulder. The sweat from his exercise made his hair cling to his neck and her fingertips itched to lift it away. “Yer cousin hasnae made the daggers for ye yet so ye’ll have to use some of mine. Come with me.”

Ruben led her to what she could only assume was a weapons shed and there, he pulled out what looked like a scarecrow. The shirt and breeches were stuffed with straw, and he drove the scarecrow’s pointed pole into the ground.

“We use these to train the archers when they move from circular targets,” he said.

After another dip into the shed, he took out two daggers and handed her one.

“Imagine this is a man who is tryin’ to grab ye,” Ruben said while working a circle around her. “How many places on this body do ye think ye can stab to disable him?”

Observing the dummy, Paige said. “His heart... and his neck?”

“The obvious answers,” he said, while slapping the torso with his dagger. “In the upper body, male or woman, there are eleven places ye can stab to make sure the person is incapacitated enough for ye ta have a good chance to flee.”

“The side of the neck and throat are just about even with the Adam’s apple. It has a main artery and the jugular. If either is cut the attacker will bleed to death very rapidly—” he placed the point of his dagger to a point where the shoulder met the arm.

“Here, a powerful cut to the outer side of this muscle can potentially sever another vein which will bleed him dry.”

He told her more places, the inside of the elbow joint, the horizontal cut across the neck and even a powerful vertical slash, leading to the penetration of the abdominal wall will result in loss of motion, and possible disembowelment.

“Here too,” he said, pointing to right in the underarm. “The artery runs along the inside of your arms. It’s deep but severin’ it will have him groggy in a few moments and dead a few after that.”

Paige swallowed. “These...these sound like huntin’ techniques.”

“Some of them are,” he said. “If ye slit the throat of any livin’ thing, they will die but if ye cannae, these techniques are yer best bet. Now—” he took her hand and firmed

her grip over the dagger. “Strike.”

When she did, Ruben grunted. “Lass, are ye tryin’ to escape death or are ye tryin’ to irritate the captor for him to kill ye? Strike it like ye mean it because with some men, ye only get one chance to survive. Again!”

Gripping the blade, she struck the points he ordered to, memorizing half of them as she went.

Here and there, Ruben would grab her hand to fix her grip or turn her hips for a better stance.

Even though his touch was cursory, his warm grip and rough fingers, coasting over her neck and hands, made her shiver.

By the end of her training session with the makeshift man, the scarecrow looked like a pincushion.

“In yer spare time, ye will practice with this scarecrow,” Ruben ordered her. “Ye did fine for now, but I think at one point I’ll have ye train with one of me men.”

A brisk wind rustled the trees around them when Ruben said, “I need to teach ye more than how to use daggers.” He circled her again; a dark emotion flickered in his eyes. “Suppose ye have nay weapons with ye and someone is attackin’ ye, what will ye do?”

“I’d scream for help,” she answered promptly.

“What if there is nay one to hear ye?” Ruben demanded.

“I’d...” she paused. “...look for any weapon around, a rock maybe, even a branch.”

“And what if—” in a flash Ruben wrapped his arms around her, and Paige found herself caged, her back against his hard chest, his arm hooked around her waist and neck. “—he held ye this way, blockin’ ye from runnin’ and screamin’?”

Instinctively, she tried to get away, twisting in his arms and hooking her hands around his arm, trying to pull him away. He would not budge, and a streak of panic began to set in. It was trying to pry a strip of iron free from a stone wall—impossible.

Trapped by his greater strength, she could do nothing but try to wiggle away, which gained her nowhere. “First lesson of defense, ye cannae fight an attacker by tryin’ to match strength for strength.

“The chances are the man is going to be stronger than ye and ye tryin’ to match him in brute strength will only waste yers. Ye have to be smarter about it.”

Ruben’s hot breath coasted over the sensitive curve of her ear, and despite the situation, sensual awareness shivered over her. Or perhaps—because of it.

“Keep strugglin’ against me and see how fast yer strength wanes,” he told her. “Go on, struggle.”

Doing as he said, she did struggle but soon she found Ruben’s words to be true. The more she struggled, the more her strength drained from her. Tired, she sagged against Ruben, her bosom raising and falling with her frantic pants.

“And ye can still nae move me arm, can ye?”

Paige shook her head. “Nay.”

“Which leads to what ye need to do when ye cannae outmatch his strength, ye need to use his weak points to yer advantage,” he said.

Moving his arm from around her neck, he slid his hand down to her arm. His rough touch made her skin pebble with gooseflesh.

He bowed her arm and cocked her elbow, “Bring yer left elbow up as back as hard as ye can straight into his face or into his belly,” Ruben said, “If ye reach his face, it will take him by surprise and if ye get to his belly, it will make him double over. Now, try it.”

Paige was briefly distracted by his touch and the closeness of his body to her before she responded. “Are ye sure? W—won’t I hurt ye?”

Ruben snorted, “I am a battle honed warrior, lass. As ye are now, nothin’ ye can do will hurt me.”

She swallowed and flung her elbow up again and jabbed it into his jaw, and to her surprise, Ruben hissed. “Do ye have blades in yer elbows, lass? That one is sharp,” he teased her.

“I take it that is a good thing,” Paige replied before slamming her elbow into his gut.

She did not get a reaction from him, but he did grunt in approval.

“That’s good. Now, the next thing ye need to do is quick succession with striking his face and his gut is to stomp yer heel into his foot and grind it in.

That way, ye’ll maximize his pain and throw him off beat enough that ye can run away. ”

Paige attempted to do it twice before he egged her on to put more force into her stomp. “Think about the man who grabbed ye and almost shoved ye over that horse. Would ye be so delicate with him?”

A fire flared in her belly and recalling the fright and fear of that moment, she lifted her arm, snapped into Ruben's middle. She lifted her leg and stomped hard, forcing him to stagger away.

"That what I am taking about," Ruben's approval made her heart warm. "Now that ye are away from him, ye have two choices, ye can run and flee or ye can stay and fight."

"With the daggers?"

"Aye," he said. "And ye have an opportunity to disable yer attacked even more. Ye should knee him in the groin."

Her mouth dropped open. "What? Ye cannae be serious."

"I am as serious as death," he said.

Paige's mind spun at his words. It went against every ladylike behavior that she'd ever been taught. But then, what was more important? Being ladylike or surviving an enemy attack?

"Ye can run or spin around and knee him in the groin."

Paige reviewed the steps in her head. "It seems simple enough."

"Try it."

"But I daenae want to hurt ye," she protested.

Ruben rolled his eye and before she could respond, both his arms slid under hers and he dragged her back, almost lifting her in the air as well.

In a swift movement, she brought her elbow down instead of up against his face and jabbed it into his middle just as she stomped on his foot with all her might.

His grip loosened enough for her to whirl around, snap her knee into his groin. Quickly, he deflected her attack with both his hand and stood facing each other, both panting with the sudden rush.

“I am glad that ye are a quick study,” he said while rubbing his belly.

His praise made her feel amazingly strong and powerful. “Show me more,” she said.

“Just when I thought ye would beg off to go and rest. I am so glad ye asked,” he said. “Now ye’re being a responsible woman.”

Through the next few hours, he took her down a list of defensive exercises that showed her how to not only defend against an attacker’s strength but how to use it against him.

Even though I am smaller and softer, with the right leverage and maneuvers, I can defend myself against a larger, stronger opponent.

As the sun began to dip Ruben came at her, she ducked and instead of using her elbow as he’d taught her. Confidently, she tried to kick his knee out from under him as she had managed to best him three times before—but he jumped over her strike and caught her.

“Here’s a final lesson, lass.” His lips pressed against her left ear. “Being overconfident can backfire on ye. Ye may give yer attacker a way in and land ye in trouble.”

“Trouble?” she squawked, “Like wh?—?”

Ruben threw her over his shoulder and while the world spun for her, she was barely able to orient herself when he dropped her on her feet again.

Paige found herself against a wall, her hands pinned above her head, Ruben's muscled length crushing her into the hard wall.

She stared dazedly up into his face. "What are ye?—"

As the blood rushed from her head, she became aware of the heavy weight of his manhood against her thigh... and the sudden spike of heat rushing beneath the surface of her own skin.

As his eyes raked her body in a prosperity sweep, his voice was little more than a growl. "Ye're a temptation."

The heat of his gaze made her skin prickle and flush. His nostrils flared. "And I have ye right where I want ye."

"Is that so?" Paige whispered, as she twisted her wrists.

With her hands trapped above her head, she could not use them to touch him. So instead of trying, she allowed her body to go lax beneath his hold, welcoming his weight, cradling his body with hers.

His response to her surrender was instant: the dark pupils were enlarged, his length a thick iron bar pressing through the layers of her skirts. "Daenae ye move," he said. "Keep yer hands where they are."

She stilled, the erotic command in his tone causing her temperature to soar.

"What are ye going to do with me?" she whispered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

His mouth slanted across hers, kissing her fiercely and groaning as she responded. It was pure bliss.

If he felt this much from only a kiss, how much more would it feel to be inside her and have her writhing beneath him? Ruben's hands explored her luscious body, coasting over her abundant breasts and curvaceous bottom concealed by her attire.

Exhilaration coursed through Paige as Ruben slid his hands under her dress and up along her outer thigh.

"Ruben—" her head snapped to the left and then the right. "—we're out in the open. Anyone can come along and see us."

"Men are out in the wilderness; the other guards are manning the important places around the castle." his lips coasted over her cheek and down her neck. "Nay one will be comin' along this way for a while."

With anyone else, such a vulnerable position would be unthinkable. But she trusted Ruben. Now, at long last, she trusted him.

Instinctively, she arched her back and parted her thighs. He shoved a thigh between her legs to open her more and then slid his hand to touch her core.

He rubbed her, and if he had not held her fast against the wall because she went faint. His fingers began a lust-arousing exploration of her soft, wet flesh. Paige gasped, and

she trembled at that diabolical caress.

The sensations were hot and overwhelming as his hand seared a path over her quivering flesh. Then he was there, right where she ached the most.

“Free me hands,” she groaned. “Please.”

When he did, she laced her arms around his shoulder, spearing the fingers of her left hand onto the back of his hair. With the other hand, she gripped his shoulders, her nails pressing deep into the muscles there as she held on for dear life.

A long finger slipped deep inside her and her soft moan turned into a sob of raw need. It never occurred to restrain her responses or pretend modesty, not with this level of pleasure surging through her veins.

His thick fingers delved into the slick folds of her and wet itself thoroughly before another joined the first. Over and over his fingers thrust and unable to remain still, Paige rocked to meet it in an attempt to hurry penetration.

“Open for me, me sweet,” he murmured with a mellow baritone.

She held tight on him and parted her legs more. His grunt of satisfaction said that was exactly what he needed. And somehow, his fingers burrowed even deeper, for she now felt a pinch of pain mingling with the pleasure.

“Ah...that is it,” he praised. “How wet ye are getting’ for me, me sweet.”

“Ruben,” she gasped as his thumb glided over her nub of pleasure.

The friction had her arching her hips more into his caress. The quick, heated swipe across her folds ripped a wild cry from Paige as he repeated his wicked, wicked

caress.

Her upper body came off the wall, only to have his hand flatten against her stomach, pressing her back as his lips landed on hers.

Her body tensed, drawn tight as the pleasure built inside her until it broke. Tremors of ecstasy coursed through her body, and she bit into her lip to stop the cries wanting to erupt from her.

She cried out and gripped his hair as everything seemed as if it was spiraling around her.

“Ye’re so beautiful and responsive,” he murmured, his dark eyes glittering with emotions she could not decipher.

“As if I can help it,” she whispered in a half groan. “Ruben, do ye ever think we’ll consummate our marriage? I have nay animosity to ye anymore. Is there somethin’ stoppin’ ye from following though? Is it... is it me?”

Ruben pulled his hands from her and gazed down at his fingers. “Was I too rough, lass?”

“Nay,” she said, frowning, “Why do ye ask that?”

His fingers were spotted with blood. “Because I think I just took yer maidenhead. I ken this should have been done in a bed the very night of our marriage but?—”

“Nay,” Paige stopped him, shaking her head vigorously. Reaching out, she grasped his arm. “Nay, ‘tis fine. Honestly, Ruben, I daenae mind. I’d prefer nay to feel any pain when we do...” her face warmed, “... couple.”

He wiped the blood on his pants and then looked at the sun dipped to the horizon, painting the sky a splash of vivid reds and oranges. “If ye were nae so tired and if the rains had nae swollen the lake so it broke its banks, I’d have taken us down to the loch for yer first swimmin’ lesson.”

She blinked. “I wasnae sure ye were going to follow through on that.”

Craning his head over his shoulder, Ruben said. “I never jest about things that can possibly save yer life. Ye will learn to swim here, lass.” His brows lowered in concern. “Are ye scared of water?”

“Nay,” she said, “I have just never considered that it was important. The only things I am scared of are caves and tight, dark places.”

“Good to ken.” Ruben said as they moved away from the little nook.

He placed the scarecrow and daggers back into the shed, locked it and then they made their way up across the back lands towards the castle.

“It’s been a while since we shared supper with yer maither and me faither,” Ruben said. “Would ye like to do so tonight?”

“I would,” she said, while slipping a worried eye to Ruben. “I want to go and see Norah as well. I feel horrible about what I did, and I need to apologize. I never wanted—I never anticipated that she would react that way and if I could go back and tell meself nae to do such a thing, I would.”

The words came out in a hurried jumble and Paige would have kept going but she had run out of breath. Ruben stopped walking and turned to her, his face now grim.

She sucked in a deep breath. “As much as a stranger I am to yer sister, I do care for

her and I cannae imagine what horrors she'd been through. I never wanted to force her relive the pain she went?—”

“Lass—”

“—through, nor did I ever want her to be so?—”

“Lass—”

“—frantic that she would break down into a frenzy that could have broken her beyond all?—”

“Paige!” Ruben snapped firmly, cutting off her ramble. When she quieted, he reached out and dropped both hands on either shoulder. “I ken ye dinnae want to make her fret when ye spoke to her, and neither did ye want her to relive her pain. Ye are nae a malicious or a wicked person.”

“But—” she swallowed. “—I cannae help but feel like one.”

“There are chances ye might have broken her beyond reason, or ye might have forced her to break through the barrier she had bolted between herself and her memories.” Ruben said.

“I daenae, we daenae ken how it will end until she wakes and tells us herself,” he said. “I daenae ken about ye, but I am hopin’ for the latter. Maybe for once, she can give me the direction to get her the justice she deserves.”

Paige plucked at her bodice and winced at how wet it was. “I am goin’ to need a bath.”

“Ye did well today,” Ruben told her. “Much better than I thought ye would. In the

next couple of days, despite what I have to do with me men or in the village, we're going to make time to practice. I need to be confident that ye can handle yerself if I am nae there."

"I'd love that."

Ruben was not one to languish in hot baths, but his sore muscle needed it that night. He'd overdone it with training that morning and his muscles needed a rest.

His head fell back in the bath, letting the steam from the hot water overwhelm him. As the water lapped around him, he contemplated the last few days.

Who had tried to abduct Paige, and even more troubling, would they try again? No word had come from the guards holding the unconscious would-be abductor and until then, he had no idea who had sent them.

The door opened and Paige entered, dressed only in her thin chemise. He assumed she had already taken her bath as her hair was damp around her shoulder.

"Do ye want me to wash yer hair?" she asked.

Ruben nodded. "Thank ye."

She filled a jug and pulled the stool over to his side, poured water over his hair, and lathered it with a bar of handmade olive oil soap. A groan left his mouth as her fingers dug into his scalp. He had always had a weakness for having his scalp rubbed.

Sometimes it took him to sleep but this time, arousal spread through his veins like the long, slow but of a smoldering peat fir. Paige rinsed his hair but did not pull her hands from his scalp. Her fingers made small circular rotations at the back of his scalp.

“Now I ken ye are tryin’ to seduce me,” he groaned.

“That was nae me intention,” Paige said. “But I have nay regrets. Ye are always so attentive when ye pleasure me. Do ye—” she marshalled her courage. “—want me to do the same to ye?”

“Later tonight,” he said while leaning into her caress. “Get back to me hair.”

“Out of gratitude for earlier today I’ve arranged for us to have supper here, in yer chambers,” she said. “I think ye and I need to talk as well.”

He stilled. “Talk? About what?”

“About what we have nae discussed at all,” she said. “I ken we talked about me duties and yers, but we have nae stated what we want from each other.”

He shifted and from the corner of his eyes saw how her eyes widened at seeing him, fully aroused, thick and long and rising proudly. A flicker of heated amusement went through his chest but he tempered his smile.

Bracing his hands on the edge of the tub, he pushed up and stood, letting the water drip from his body. Paige pinked and averted her eyes but he saw when she took a second look. “Hand me that towel.”

She did and as he stepped out and dried off, she hurried from the bathroom and went to his room. Holding in the smirk, he wrapped the towel around his waist then headed to the room to dress. After donning a loose léine and worn breeches, he padded barefoot to the front of the room.

Paige was now wearing a thick knit wrap over her smock while she arranged their supper on their smaller table. She arranged everything from the slivers of roasted

meats and vegetables to the bowls of strawberries and blackberries, and the few sweet tarts.

He paused to stroke the fire before joining her at the table as she poured out the wine. “When I went to ask the kitchens to send up this meal, I saw me maither and yer faither talkin’ in a room by themselves. I think they’ve found companionship with each other.”

Ruben bit into a berry and cocked a brow. “Ye daenae think they are?—”

“Nay,” Paige shuddered. “God nay.”

Snorting, he took a seat and finished his fruit. Reaching over, he plucked a rich, purple berry off the stem and held it to her lips, wordlessly daring her to eat it from his fingers.

Blushing at the atypical romantic gesture from him, she did as he wanted, smiling as the tart sweetness filled her mouth. Spearing a sliver of roast chicken, he asked, “What do ye mean when ye say ye want us to talk about what we want? I assume ye mean how I expect ye to be in this marriage?”

“Aye,” she nibbled on fragrant rosemary basted chicken. “Especially since we started on a bad footin’. I thought ye were the worst of the worst. But now, I realize what I believed about ye was only a mishmash of rumors and unsupported fear.

“I now ken ye are a noble warrior, willin’ to defend yer people at any cost, even if that means being...” she swallowed “...ruthless.”

Sitting back with the goblet of wine in hand, he gave her an inscrutable look. “Why thank ye for tryin’ to understand but ye’re are wrong. I choose violence because I like it.”

Paige reached for her sliver of cheese and stared at him long enough that the silence began to scrape over his skin.

Finally, she tutted. “If ye think I will believe that, ye are as na?ve as ye think I am. Ye are a warrior, that is true, but ye are also generous, with a fiercely loyal heart.”

“And how do ye figure that?” Ruben asked.

“Call it me intuitive sense,” Paige said. “The reason I asked ye to share with me what yer needs are is because I want to tell ye what I want.”

The shadows danced over his face. “What do ye want?”

“I want ye to be honest with me,” she said. “At all times. Tell me the truth of what ye think, of ye want from me and what ye feel. I ken ye feel deeply, Ruben, even if ye daenae how show it.”

Leaning forward, he braced his elbows on the table. “Ye truly think high of me.”

“I am star?—”

A brisk knock came on the door, startling them both and prodding Ruben to stand and answer it. A healer was standing on the other side of the door, her grey robes dim in the faint light.

“Me laird and lady,” she dipped her head. “I do apologize for interruptin’ ye, but Norah is awake and steady. She wants to speak to ye—” she looked to Paige “—the both of ye.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Paige startled when Ruben leaped to his feet, “She is fully awake?” he asked the healer.

“Aye, me laird.”

Ruben’s face was firm. “And is she lucid?”

The healer nodded. “And while it is late, she wants to speak with ye, without delay. Please, come with me.”

They took the stone stairwell that curved gently upwards and came to the top floor. Norah was sitting on her cot, hands calmly folded in her lap. Paige’s heart leaped into her throat at seeing her peaceful expression, miles away from the frantic, panicked girl she’d seen two days ago.

The torches at the end of the room gave enough light that he could see that the healer was right. The girl looked so placid, Paige was not sure if she remembered what had happened that night? Could it be that she had forgotten why she had shattered?

Does she hate me or will she forgive me for hurtin’ her?

“Norah,” Ruben approached her slowly but directly. “How are ye feelin’?”

“Better,” Norah replied, and for once, Paige heard steady, real emotion in the girl’s voice.

He took a seat on the edge of her bed and reached for her. “Tell me truly, are ye all right?”

“I am,” Norah said, her eyes moving over his shoulder to land on Paige, “And I can only thank ye for this.”

“Thank me?” Paige blurted. “But I—I?—”

“Ye made me finally stop ignorin’ the past I’d suffered and start to contend with the truth of what happened. See, before ye told me of what nearly happened to ye, I had put me ordeal behind a curtain, behind a wall. I thought of it as only a dream, nothing more.

“But now, I am dealin’ with the truth of it all.” To Ruben she said, “I think ye want to ken why I called ye here.”

“I do,” he said.

Norah narrowed her eyes. “I ken that look Ruben. Ye are thinkin’ about this part to me, if it is real and how long it will be before I slip back into that girl who only existed but dinnae live.”

“I want to hope,” Ruben said. “But daenae ken if I should.”

“I—” Norah plucked at the sheets before her. “I cannae answer that in truth, because I cannae see the future. I suspect there will be bad days and good ones but that is for another day. What I can do now is to tell ye what I remember. To get this burden off me chest and start to try anew.”

“Go ahead,” he said.

“When I’d left the orphanage, I’d gotten on me horse and began to ride home,” she said. “I’d gotten beyond the township and was on that stretch of road ye say many thieves use to rob people. Only this time, the men who grabbed me dinnae want any coin from me.

“Two of the men hauled me from the horse, bound me arms and feet. They placed a cloth between me lips and then pressed another cloth to me nose, before throwin me in the back of a covered wagon.” she said firmly. “I kenned nothin’ from there on.

“I faintly remember the road grew rocky and I drifted in and out of consciousness,” Norah said. “I was—I was in a cave. Half of the room I was in looked dug out by human tools and the rest was pure natural cave.”

Paige covered her mouth with a hand as her heart began to sink lower and lower in her chest. This already felt horrible, how much worse could it get?

“Nay one told me why I was there, nay one told me who wanted to take me and nay one threatened me with a grisly death. More often than nae, they woke me up by flingin’ a bucket of water in me face.”

“Do ye remember anyone who held ye?” Ruben asked.

“There was a man,” she said, looking to Paige. “He had black eyes and small silvery scars that went down the left side of his face. Just like ye told me. He had thin dark hair that could nae cover his head.”

“I killed that man,” Ruben said.

Norah gave him a flickering smile. “But he was nae alone, he had at last two men with him, guardin’ me all the time. They were careful, nay one spoke anythin’ about who wanted me there, nae once in the months they held me captive.”

“I was constantly bound and sat in corner of the room. There were times they would starve me and then only give me few slices of bread and water to live.

“The men would tell me I was nothin’, that me brother dinnae care enough about me to look for me and that when they were done, nay one would remember who I was.” Norah said, her eyes trailing to the roof. “They would say it so much, I’d believe them.”

As her heart sank with sorrow for Norah, Ruben’s spine stiffened and she could see carefully controlled fury darken his face and stiffen his jaw. Ruben was about to punch his fist through the walls around him and take every brick down with him.

“They would rarely take me outside to get some sunshine and fresh air, and when I did, I could nae find any familiar sightings to mark where I was,” Norah said.

“Kidnapped and held hostage for five months with nay hope of ever being found made me think I’d die in that cave.” Norah said. “The fact that I survived still amazes me.”

“Did any of these men touch ye?” Ruben asked.

Norah canted her head to the right, confused. “Touch me... what do ye—” when his meaning descended on her, she shook her head vehemently. “Nay, nay, nothin’ like that.”

“Are ye sure?” Ruben pressed.

“I can attest to that, me laird,” the healer said. “Years ago, when she was returned, we had examined her. She was then and still is a maiden.”

Those words mollified Ruben a little but not too much as his shoulder was still tight,

how brows lowered and his jaw clenched.

“A cave, ye say,” his eyes lifted to Paige. “And ye cannae remember much about where it was?”

“All I remember was this strange mountain form,” Norah said tiredly. “Like two devil horns jutting into the air.”

From the way Ruben’s eyes shifted from left to right, Paige knew he was trying to remember where such a mountain could be.

“Ye’re sure about that?” he asked Norah.

“Aye,” Norah said, her voice fading. “I am.”

“Now that you have heard what she had to say, I think t’is best for Norah to rest now,” the healer said.

Ruben reached for Norah and held her hand tight, “Get some rest and thank ye for being brave enough to tell me. And Norah, I am glad to see, the real ye, back.”

Norah squeezed his hand, “Thank ye for listenin’.”

Returning to their rooms, Paige walked with wooden legs; the shock of hearing Norah tell them about her abduction shook her to her core. She drooped the wrap from her cold fingers and didn’t even realize where it fell.

“Lass?” Ruben asked. He reached for her and dropping his hand to her shoulder, stopped her. Gently turning her, he asked, “Are ye feelin’ well?”

“I—” she sank to the edge of the bed and gripped her skirts. “I cannae help but feel

ripped apart at what Norah endured. I—I can only think of what I would have endured if those men had taken me.”

“They willnae,” he said. “This is why we train and tomorrow ye are going to learn to swim too.”

She looked at him. “Ye’re nae going to bed, are ye?”

“Nay,” he said. “I am going to gather me men and send out search parties to find where this twin devil peak mountain is.” He cupped the back of her neck and gave her firm, heated kiss.

Pulling away, his thumb stroked over her chin. “Get some sleep, lass. After all of what just happened, I think ye need it.”

When Paige woke again, in Ruben’s bed, she reached over only to find the pillows and sheets cold. She faintly remembered him joining her in the bed, mere hours before dawn, but he was gone again.

After washing, she quickly got dressed and pinned up her hair so that loose curls fell around her face. Wearing a light blue gown that beautifully framed her full breasts and trim waistline, she glanced in the mirror and decided that she was satisfied enough to exit her chambers.

She arrived at the Great Hall to find her mother and Ruben’s father Niall at the head table. Her mother was chatting with him and the emotion on her mother’s face was that of one finding a firm friend.

“Good mornin’, Maither,” she kissed her mother’s cheek. “How are ye?”

“I have missed ye these past few days,” Daisy said. “Were ye ill?”

“Nay, Maither,” she said. “Just preoccupied. Ruben’s been teachin’ me how to defend meself and he will be showin’ me how to swim later today. Speakin’ of me husband, have ye seen him today?”

“Nay,” her mother replied.

“Speakin’ of me son,” Niall said. “He told me how ye were able to get Norah to confront her past.

“As harsh and perilous as it was, ye managed to do somethin’ I feared would never happen. Ye managed to pull her back into herself. I have me daughter back—” he reached over to hold Paige’s hand, his face heavy with appreciation and tender care. “—so thank ye.”

Daisy looked lost. “What do ye mean? What happened?”

Reluctantly, Paige told her about the almost abduction and as her mother paled in fear, she comforted her. “It’s fine, Maither. Ruben was right behind me to save me.”

She then told her how she’d told Norah about the endeavor and how it doing so had taken Norah down a bad turn.

“Or so I’d thought,” she said. “Eventually, she came around and I can tell ye, the light in her eyes was so bright, it was like night and day.”

“I see,” Daisy’s had her hand pressed to her heart. Shaking her head, she said. “But ye should have told me that, Paige. Surely, yer faither would want to ken about the attack?—”

“Nay Maither,” she rushed to stop her, “Ye cannae tell Faither any of this. Please, promise me, ye will nae tell him any of this, nae in a letter, nae even in person when

ye go back home.”

“But Paige, do ye nae think this is somethin’ yer faither should ken?” her mother pressed her.

“Nay, Maither.” Paige shook her head, “That will cause more problems that it could ever solve. Please daenae do it.”

Her mother was not happy about it, but she nodded in reluctant agreement, and they finished their breakfast. Parting ways, she headed to her rooms but found herself wondering the halls and exploring the castle.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:03 am

As she wandered the many halls and corridors that wound through the castle, she couldn't help but be struck by the castle's great beauty. It was clearly built with great attention to detail and maintained by people who took pride in their property.

Rounding a corner while absentmindedly gazing at the paintings on the wall, she bumped into a friendly-faced, plump, elderly woman carrying fresh sun-dried linens, on her way to freshen up her bed.

She'd hit the woman with such impact that the servant dropped the pile she was carrying and immediately flew into a string of apologies.

"Beggin' yer pardon, me lady. The sheets were blockin' me view, or I would have seen ye comin' around the corner. I shouldnae have been so careless. Are ye all right?"

Struck by the woman's apology, Paige immediately bent and began to help her gather the load.

"Ye need nae to apologize. I was the one who was too busy lookin' around and I should have been payin' closer attention. What is yer name?"

"My name is Mari, miss. I am pleased to make yer acquaintance. I am usually a cook and a gardener, but the washerwomen needed help takin' the linens off the line. Matter of fact, I am going back to the garden after I hand these over."

"Oh!" Paige said. "How kind of ye."

The woman's belly jiggled as she chuckled, and as the corners of her eyes crinkled with her smile, Paige could see the woman's kindness clear in her eyes. "Let me carry these with ye."

"I'd appreciate that, me lady, but I am sure ye have more important things to do."

"Nonsense," Paige shook her head. "I want to, now, please show me where ye take this to."

After depositing the linen to the closet, Mari took Paige down to another part of the herb garden. This time, they were transplanting young, tender shoots into long wooden trays filled with dirt.

She found herself enjoying the time doing something so simple but meaningful and passed the time meeting more of the healers. She realized there was a hierarchy to the healer.

Some of them were young and only treated the easier wounds while they learned the herbs and healing practices, the older healers dealt with children and women carrying children. The most experienced did it all, women, children, men and the elderly.

Ruben found her there.

"I see ye're havin' yerself a lovely time," he said, while walking into the open shed. He nodded to the women. "But I must take ye away for a while."

Wiping her hands from the dirt, Paige smiled and excused herself. She headed up to their rooms as she chattered about the new things she knew about herbs.

"Considerin' a new occupation as a healer, are we?" he asked.

“Nay,” she laughed, “I am just fascinated.”

“Well, it’s time for yer swimmin’ lesson,” Ruben said.

Nodding, Paige went to her room, but called over her shoulder, “I assume ye and ye men were searching for those mountains?”

“Aye.” She heard rustling behind her and imagined that he was gathering his clothes and towel as she was.

When she had her things in hand, she headed back to his rooms to find him twisting a dagger in his hand.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Yer daggers,” he said while handing it off to her. “Yer cousin certainly has a hand with blades.”

The dagger’s handle was wrapped in treated leather, the individual crisscrossing lines made it easier to grasp. The blade was steel with copper edges when she ran a finger over the raised fuller, jerked away.

“Ow,” she yelped as a line of blood trickled down her finger. “That’s sharp.”

“That’s why ye have it,” Ruben gave her the second one, then levelled a strict look to her. “If ye take a step away from this castle, ye will take them with ye. And daenae try to negotiate yer way out of this. Ye will carry them everywhere.”

Thinking of the rough grip of the man who had almost kidnapped her and his hard, wicked eyes, Paige did not make a fuss. “I will put them with me things right now.”

After slipping the daggers in her trunk, Paige followed him out of the castle to the waiting horse. This time, when he sat behind her, she allowed herself to lean into him, allowing herself the comfort of his possessive hold.

“Did ye ken that when the Romans came here, they found tribes ran by women? Fierce women who could wield a sword and shield as any man?”

“Nay,” Paige said. “But I am nae surprised.”

Ruben urged the horse onward to an open moorland. Coming to the crest of the hill she looked down on the scene below.

A beautiful loch spread before her, its dark waters surrounded by trees; in the sunshine it looked blue and inviting, and she imagined swimming there with Ruben in the summer—when she learned to swim, that was.

“It is beautiful isnae it?” Ruben said.

“Aye, it is,” she replied, mesmerized by the scene below.

“Good,” he said as the horse began to take the decline. “Because ye are going to learn to swim. Daenae worry, ye willnae drown on me watch.”

“And what if I daenae get it on one try?” she asked.

“Ye willnae,” he said. “That is why we will be comin’ here every spare moment we get so ye can learn. Ye will survive in these lands if it takes me years to ready ye.”

She laughed. “Seems like ye also want to take me on a hunt.”

Swinging from his saddle, Ruben gave her an eye. “Daenae tempt me, lass, or ye

might find yerself with a dagger in the middle of the forest. Ye may want to watch out for the wolves.”

“I prefer me wolfish Laird, thank ye.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Emerging from the bushes, clad only in her chemise, Paige watched as Ruben rose up, water running down his bare chest and arms down to the rippling muscles of his belly.

Ruben was nearly naked...or naked. Whatever he had for her, it was hidden beneath the blue waters.

Just the thought of being that near to Ruben naked sent her heart beating rapidly and her breasts tingling.

She swallowed and tried to look away but couldn't.

She recalled the dark gaze that hovered over her when he pleased her, and she hungered for more of those gazes. More of him.

One corner of his mouth tilted up knowingly.

“Come join me.”

With her arms folded over her chest, furtively hiding her budding nipples, she walked to the edge of the water and dipped one toe in.

It was cool but not nearly as cold as she had expected. Ruben was waiting for her, the water brushing his lower belly. Before she lost what little courage she had, she quickly marched into the water to join him—but her foot slipped on a rock.

Her breath came out in a whoosh when Ruben grabbed her. “I’ve got ye.”

The skin on her neck pebbled where his warm breath grazed her sensitive skin. Her body responded instantly to his touch and she drew in a sharp breath. Out in the open? ‘Tis not ladylike, but oh, I want him!

“How do ye plan on proceedin’?” she asked as she did not know what he planned to do, and it worried her.

“Ye need to ken how to float,” he said. “Even if ye cannae swim, floatin’ may save yer life.”

“I daenae ken how!”

“‘Tis easy. Go limp. Ye simply trust that the water will hold ye up when ye ask it.” In the next heartbeat, he turned her and with his hands braced on her neck and below her knees, urged her on her back. The sudden change of orientation made her grab at his shoulder.

“Relax, lass,” he said. “If ye are as stiff as a board like this, ye will sink to the bottom of the water, never to be seen again.”

“I daenae ken how I can—” she dipped under the water and spluttered in fright.

“And that too is a death sentence. Ye cannae panic, ye’ll drown.” He sighed. “I think this will be a long while for us.”

By the time evening drew on, Paige had much more ease in the water.

Ruben had taught her how to float and how swim using the torrent to her advantage.

She certainly did not mind the underwater caresses and while he fixed her posture and the playful splashes he sent her way only made her enjoy the day more.

Ruben eyed the sky as dusk began creeping in. "It's time to go back to the castle."

Paige nodded and waded out to the banks, the chemise now fully soaked through.

As she emerged from the water, she caught sight of Ruben; his hair was dripping, and she couldn't help but follow a drop of water as it trickled down his chest. She felt a clenching in her stomach as she remembered the way his chest had felt against her.

Flicking her eyes back to his, her face warmed when she saw that he was watching her with an amused smirk.

But the way his eyes darkened as he noticed the way her chemise clung to her body made one thing clear: Ruben wanted her as much as she wanted him.

The children's concert was happening at a church two villages over. The large kirk was easily thrice the size of the one in Choille Village, its stained glass window sending colored light over the floor.

Two other sets of children had gone already and on the last one, the girls faltered and fumbled their way through the song. Mother Etna's children were next to take the stage. The children, clad in their best, were fidgeting but Sarah calmed them.

"Ye'll be fine," she told them as they stood as headed to the pulpit. Paige did her best to smile comfortingly knowing that despite the outcome of this day, Ruben had a beautiful lunch ready for them as they returned to the orphanage.

Hanna, the lead girl, of about fifteen summers, stood in the middle and started in her high soprano. The other girls joined in the harmony with their voices, while the two

boys' tenors gave contrast to the tune.

Paige was on the edge of her seat as they went through the chorus, finished the last stanza and made it to the end of the song. She shot to her feet, applauding as the children filed from the altar. She hugged a few of the girls who passed by, assuring them they did well before taking her seat.

"They appreciate that," Ruben murmured from her side. "I ken a lot of the girls look up to ye."

"That's good," she said. "I would like to give them someone to emulate."

As the fourth set of children took their place, a guard came to Ruben's side. "I hate to interrupt ye, me laird, but the prisoner ye have kept under watch is awake. Ye said ye wanted to see him as soon he wakes."

Gritting his jaw, Ruben turned to Paige, who instantly waved him off, "Go on. I will be fine with the children and the nuns."

He pressed his lips to her hair, behind her left ear. "Be safe. Me men will be with ye all the while and hold unto the daggers."

As he hurried out of the church, she briefly watched him swing into the saddle before he disappeared. Mother Etna came to sit by her and smiled. "I do believe we have a good chance at winnin'."

"I think so too," Paige replied. The last set did an admirable job, but she did not think they outdid her set. The children her heart had claimed as its people. "The children did outstandingly well."

At the end of the last recital, Paige went to sit with the children and assured them they

did well and even if they did not win, they should be proud of themselves. Pulling Nera on her lap, she rocked the child.

One of the priests stood and cleared his throat, “Before we close, I must remind all of ye, children and caretakers alike, that ye have all done very well. With careful consideration and reflection, we are awarding the prize to the children of Choille Village?—”

Paige felt moved to tears and she smiled to Hannah as she went to collect the bag of coins from the priest.

“See,” she nodded to another of the girls. “Ye did very well and nay one should ever tell ye differently. His lairdship and I had every faith in ye. Now, when we return to the village, I have another surprise for ye.”

The day was dying down but Paige still lingered in the backyards of the orphanage. The children loved the lunch, especially the lemon tarts she’d asked the kitchen staff to make for them.

It was time to go home and even without Ruben’s presence; she had enough guards to take her home safely. She finished saying goodbyes to the children, promised the caretakers she would return another day and then hoisted into her saddle as the sun began to set.

“We must hurry, me lady,” one of her guards said, “His lairdship will nae like it if ye are out in nightfall.”

“I ken,” she said she and the three of the men rode off to the north on a quick pace. “I ken he is very taskin’ about safety and nae runnin’ risks one does nae need to run.”

The sky was darkening as they rode hard to the castle, trying to place the encroaching

night behind them.

They were nearly halfway there, past the glen, approaching the bend in the road where they would head towards the keep. A rope snapped tight across the road, sending two horses tumbling forward, throwing their riders.

Paige gathered the reins and urged her horse to leap the rope when four men broke out of the bushes, swords out and quickly bloodied. One of the last guards gave a swift slap to her mare's haunch.

"Ride, me lady!" he screamed as her horse took off in a sharp gallop.

Paige grasped the reins and hunched over the horse's neck, kept her head down racing back to the keep. Midnight attacks on caravans or isolated assaults were one thing, but to attack a small group in the middle of the day did not bode well.

She turned her head over her shoulder to see the guard fared when a figure emerged from the trees in front of her. The two men had crossbows and in the fleeting seconds, she already saw her fate.

The arrows slammed into the stallion at making the animal crumble and causing Paige to fly off the saddle. The reins slipped through her fingers as she tried to grasp to catch herself. Her eyes clenched hard as she hit the ground hard, slamming her head on the firm ground, temporarily blinding her.

She did not know when someone grabbed the back of her dress and hauled her onto his horse. She didn't even have time to reach for the daggers in her boot or bag.

"I hope ye are nae too badly off," a voice said. "He'll kill me if ye are too injured."

"Please, stop." Paige's voice was little more than a whisper, as she trembled in fear.

“I—I need to go home.”

“Ye are going home,” the voice taunted. “Just hold on.”

Striding into the infirmary, Ruben nodded to the two guards outside of the private room and stepped inside to find the man sitting in his bed. The side of his head was mottled with red and murky browns, the sign of healing injuries.

“Speak and I may have mercy on ye,” Ruben demanded. “Tell me who hired ye to abduct me wife and I will not have ye drawn and quartered.”

The man swallowed, “I daenae ken who hired us, Laird McKinnon. The only one who kenned that was Ragar, the man with the scares who ye slew. He was the one who approached us and gave us the coin. He never said who hired him.”

“So ye have nothin’ of worth to tell me,” Ruben spun on his feet. “Take him to the gaol.”

“N-nay nay, laird! Please, spare me life! I—I?—”

“Ye have nothin’ to tell me, so why would I spare yer life?” Ruben asked coldly.

“I—I can tell ye w-where we held the g-girl, Norah, yer sister,” the man swallowed. “I can bet ye that is where they are going to take her too.”

His brows lowered. “Where? How many. Tell me everythin’ and leave out not a word.”

“Before ye slew him, Ragar was going to take yer wife to the cave,” the man said, fear rife in his eyes. “He said the man who hired him wanted her and that he would nae stop until he has her. They are always watching. Chances are, they have her right

now.”

Ruben demanded directions. He had to know where to search before he brought all the wrath of the Highlands down on these men. Galan nodded along, keeping careful track of the directions himself.

“MacPherson.” The words rapped out in rhythm with his rapid footsteps as he sprinted for the stables.

“When I am done with him, he’ll be fortunate to find his skin still on his body.

Ye get Elijah and go to the cave, and I will find the men who took Paige.

If anyone harms a hair on her head, they would be better off askin’ the Devil for mercy than me! ”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Paige cried out as she slammed against a wooden wall. The covered cart she'd been dumped in rumbled along the road at a speed that flung her from side to side with every stone in its path.

After being dragged from the horse, still dazed, in less than a minute, someone had tied her up like a bird about to be cooked. The new driver had his hat low over his face so that she could not see who he was. He refused to slow down, even when she screamed at him.

"Stop, I beg ye!" she screamed through the crack in the cover of the cart. She braced her head on her arm as the road was so bumped, she could not take more blows to her head.

With the speed the man was taking, they could have an accident any moment now. She did not want to die, not now, now when things between her and Ruben were going on so well.

"Who are ye? What are ye going to do to me?" Paige yelled.

The driver kept silent as they flew over the road.

"Why are ye doing this to me?" she demanded.

When he did not say another word, she wiggled in the back of the cart and tried to look out. It was dark so it took her a moment to realize that he was headed back to the

MacPherson's lands. She hadn't thought she could become more frightened, but a sinking feeling began to carve her chest in two.

Is this Faither's doing? But why?

She saved her breath as it made no sense to demand answers from this man when he would not answer her. When the cart finally stopped, she kept still, hoping the driver and whoever was waiting for them would think she was asleep.

Someone flung the cover over and she kept her head tucked into the crook of her arm. A man snorted. "Ye're nae foolin' anyone. I ken yer awake."

He hauled her out of the bed and got her on her feet. In the darkness, she saw two men in the clearing. She looked up and behind the trees, she saw two jutting peaks looming in the darkness, curving into the air— devil's horns.

"Where am I?"

The man sneered, "Ye daenae ken yer own father's lands?"

Paige's knees almost went out from under her. The truth of everything came tumbling out and made her feel sickened. Her father had been the one who had taken Norah, held her hostage and had shattered the poor girl to bits.

Did he do all that because he couldnae admit he lost a bet?

"Are ye going to stay there for the rest of eternity?" Paige looked to where the voice was coming from and saw her father approaching. "Ye need to get out of the open and into the hidin' place?"

"Nay," Paige snapped. "Ye are the reason for all this! Ye kidnapped Norah after ye

lost the bet and dinnae give up the lands ye had wagered.”

“I was tryin’ to rescue ye!” her father blustered. “Ye should nae believe all the lies McKinnon told ye.”

“They are nae lies,” Paige said, “And when Ruben finds out about this abduction, he will nae spare yer life.”

“If ye think I am scared of that brute, ye ken nothin’.” Her father grabbed her arm and began to drag her across the clearing—when the thundering hooves of horse had her head snapping to the left.

Sure enough, seven men were riding towards the clearing, their horses ghastly looking in the light from the lit torches three of the men held raised over their heads.

“MacPherson!” Ruben snarled as he launched from his horse, “Ye are going to die tonight!”

Her father laughed while yanking Paige behind him. “Ye walked right into me trap! Men! Fight! Kill him!”

More men launched into the clearing while he pulled her away from the battle. Paige yanked her arm from him, then picked up her skirts and ran. She skirted the active battlefield and hunkered behind the cart while drawing a dagger from her boot.

In her line of sight, she could see Ruben fighting swiftly, methodically cutting men down left and right. When a rider came on him with a raised sword, he met the blow quickly swung his sword low and slashed the man’s gut, ripping him open from one side to the other side.

Plucking the sword out, he went on to cut down every man who came against him.

Looking around, she tried to find her father in the fray, but he was nowhere to be found.

He was a full-grown man who'd seen hundreds die, perhaps thousands, yet there were things he couldn't stand to hear. Someone yanked her from behind the cart man she did not know, so Paige struck.

The man's arm was up so she slashed under his arm to his armpit then swiped the blade across his inner elbow.

"Ye bitch!" he hollered.

Undaunted, she jabbed at the man's belly and sunk the blade to the hilt. She yanked the weapon out, he grabbed at her, but she ducked and ran to hide behind a tree.

"MacPherson!" Ruben roared. "Show yerself, ye coward!"

Peeking around the tree trunk, she realized the battle was over, the ground was littered with bodies. The rest of her father's men, the few that were alive, were knelt on the ground.

Ruben spun on his heel, searching the trees with a snarl of rage on his face.. "Where are ye, ye bastard?"

Tentatively, Paige stood, relieved. She headed to Ruben—only to get grabbed again. Her father yanked her to his front and before Paige could react, he pressed the tip of the sword against his belly.

"Give up, McKinnon," Angus spat. "I demand ye return the lands to me, forget the bet, and give us free passage away from here. That is unless ye daenae want to see yer wife and spawn again."

Her head snapped to him. “Father! W-what are ye talkin’ about? I am nae with child.”

Angus did not seem to hear her. “If ye have any heart inside that carcass of yers. Let us go and I will consider lettin’ ye see them.”

“Father—”

“Let her go, MacPherson,” Ruben said, lifting his sword. “Kennin’ what horrors ye put me sister through, I have the mind to hang ye by yer toes and let yer blood drain like a deer. Let her go and yer death will be swift.”

“Last warnin’, beast,” her father spat.

Paige stifled a sob. She knew what he had done to Norah, but how could her father use her, use his own daughter as a shield? Her father was a selfish, cruel man with no compunction, shame or conscience.

“Paige.” For just a moment, the rage faded from Ruben’s face and his snarl eased. “Do ye trust me?”

“Aye. I do.”

“Then float.”

“‘Tis easy. Go limp. Ye simply trust...”

Paige closed her eyes and dropped to the ground. Surprised by the sudden weight, her father bent downward and jerked back upright.

He dropped the blade as Ruben darted in, dropped two blistering punches to his midsection, and had him on the ground. Elijah ran to her and pulled her from the two.

Ruben had his boot on Angus' neck.

"Ye're a disgustin' swine," he swore. "Ye abducted me sister, almost had yer nephew killed, and now ye tried to kill me wife. Admit it."

Angus's face soured, "I should have never let yer sister go alive. And that spineless cousin of yers deserved the death he should have gotten. But he slithered away like the snake he is."

Paige pressed a hand to her pained heart, the truth of all if made her blood go cold. How could anyone do something this heinous to another person, an innocent one at that?

She watched as he pulled up a leg and if it was not for the moonlight glinting on the head of a steel dirk, she would not have seen it.

"Ruben!" she screamed. "Dagger!"

He leaped away from Angus just as the felled laird slashed at his heel and missed. Angus scrambled to his feet, but couldn't run before Ruben took him down with two vicious slashes and finally ran him through with his blade.

Grabbing at the blade, Angus tipped over and he crashed to the ground, gurgling for breath.

Ruben's head fell back as he gazed at the rising moon. She could only imagine how it felt that such a heavy burden had dropped from his shoulder and how free he was of the years-long mystery.

"Go," Elijah told her. "Go to him."

Slipping away from his hold, she went to Ruben's side and gently touched his arm. He turned to her and silently wrapped an arm around her middle, pulling her into his side and buried his face in her hair.

"Thank ye for being brave," he murmured. "Ye managed to protect me and yerself. Thank ye, Paige."

She wrapped her arms around him, bitter tears slipping from her eyes. "Take me home, Ruben. Please take us home."

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:03 am

The moment she'd stepped through the doors to the McKinnon Castle, her mother rushed to her and wrapped her in a tight hug.

"Is it true?" Daisy looked heartbroken and distraught, "Did me husband really do all those evil things? Did he take the lass Norah and try to kill Elijah?"

Knowing how frail her mother was, Paige guided her up the steps to a room near their breakfast room. Guiding her mother to a seat she gently sat her down.

Reaching over she held her mother's hand tightly while swallowing over her own grief. "I hate to tell ye the truth, Maither, but aye..." she swallowed, "Father did do those things.

She told her about her father admitting to kidnapping Norah, the bet he had lost, and how he had admitted to wanting to kill Elijah.

Tears trickled down Daisys's face and utter grief darkened her face. Hugging her mother close, Paige allowed her tears to fall as well. The pain of feeling utterly betrayed by her father and the unneeded hatred she had built up for Ruben.

Both emotions crashed with the memories on fear and frenzy, only two hours collided into a ball of pain that poured out of her in tears. She held onto her mother's shoulders as they cried together.

Pressing the back of her hand into her eyes, Paige wiped the tears away as Ruben stepped into the room. His astute eyes took one look at the two of them and stepped back out of the room.

He returned with Maisie in tow. “She’ll take yer maither to her rooms, and I need to take ye to ours.”

“Good night, Maither,” Paige said.

As her mother, she saw how Ruben have her a long look at her. Paige felt his eyes take in her haggard appearance, including her ragged, stained dress and tousled hair. He wrapped her up in a tight, warm hug.

“When I saw him hold that weapon to ye, I wanted to take his head off,” Ruben said.

“I was terrified,” Paige admitted as she pressed her face into his chest. “Me heart was beatin’ out of me chest.”

“But ye did well,” Ruben said, “Very well. For that one lesson in defense, ye took it well.”

His left hand slipped up to cup the back of her neck. He tilted her head up to face him, and kissed her on the lip, and in that moment she did not care about anything.

The kiss was amazing, and Paige found herself standing on her tiptoes, deepening the connection between her and this man who had saved her life twice...this man whom she loved...

“What ye do to me,” he muttered, tracing his finger along her jawline. “I never planned to fall in love with ye.”

The words washed over her and nearly made her swoon. Ruben loved her; he was in love with her. The love of her life was in love with her!

That was enough let her truth fall from her lips. “I...I am in love with ye, too. I

dinnae want to believe it, but it is true.”

“I’ve sent for us to have a bath,” Ruben said. “Do ye wish that I’d only captured yer father for the crown to deal with him instead of killin’ him?”

She rested the side of her head on his chest, “The Crown would have imprisoned him or sentenced him to death. I ken they will make an enquiry when his death is kenned, but we can deal with it then.

“I am simply glad we have answers to all the questions about Norah, me cousin and the war.” Paige sighed, pressing her face into his chest. He smelled like smoke and sweat. “Ye must have some comfort too.”

“With ye,” he brushed his lips across her forehead, “Aye, I do.”

Three Weeks Later

The merry sounds and smells of the going away feast wrapped around Paige like a comforting blanket. Her mother and Elijah, the new Laird of MacPherson, were set to ride back to her old home by dawn.

“Are ye going to miss us, cousin?” Elijah asked from her right side.

“Aye,” Paige replied. “But ye are nae hundreds of miles away. I can visit ye two at will. I ken ye will be a smart, kind, reasonable laird. Ye ken what the court said.”

Upon learning about her father’s death, the court had examined all the evidence of the laird’s crimes and found him guilty in death. The evidence had been stacked higher than the Ben Nevis Mountain.

The tribunal had read the condemning wager, signed by her father’s own hand. They

had heard the spoken testimony from Elijah who had faked his death to save himself from persecution, and the kidnapper who knew about Norah's abduction.

They had appointed Elijah his successor upon Ruben relinquishing any rights to the land as Paige's husband.

"I ken what they said," he said. "But ye ken what they say, heavy is the head that wears the crown." He nodded to Ruben as he entered the room, "Speakin' of crowns...."

The head of the clan was dressed in its finery, clad in a green tunic, his father's sword hung at his side and a sprig of heather in the clasp of his cloak. He looked extremely dashing and every bit the Laird of all that he surveyed as he took the steps to the dais.

Her mother smiled widely as she spoke to Niall and Paige knew the two would be in contact from then on.

The serving women came around the tables where platters of roasted meats; salmon had been dressed and prepared on great platters and salads of wild herbs prepared alongside breads and sweet fruits.

Ruben had ordered several barrels to be brought up from the cellars and already the room was merry with the sound of clansmen enjoying the feast.

Sitting at the high table, her thoughts turned to her father. She felt no anger towards him, just pity. She could not imagine how tiring it would be to keep up such appearances, because she now knew that appearances can be deceptive.

Now, they were celebrating the union of the two clans and the peace which now this brought to the glen.

A year previously it would have been unthinkable to imagine the McKinnons feasting with the MacPherson's in the Great Hall of the MacPherson castle, but now her union with Ruben had brought peace.

"Are ye feelin' well?" her mother asked.

Paige tore her eyes from Ruben, "Aye, Maither. I just want to speak with Ruben for a while."

Lifting her skirt, she descended the dais and went to find Ruben. He was talking to Galan, but as soon he caught sight of her, pulled away.

"Paige?" he asked. "Is something the matter?"

"Nay." Paige said. "I just want a moment to speak with ye. In private."

He cocked his head, then took her hand and they left the hall with a few eyes flickering to them, but she did not care. He walked them up to their rooms and closed the door behind them.

"Were ye tirin' of the feast?" he asked while unpinning his cape.

"Nay," she said. "But I would prefer to have some alone time with ye."

"Would ye now," Ruben rumbled. "And what sort of time are ye lookin' for?"

She came closer and ran her hand down his chest, looking coyly up from under her lashes. "I want ye to touch me."

He cupped the back of her head with one hand, then slid down to cup the curve of her bottom with the other, His fingers tangled in her silken hair, drawing a breath from

her.

He thrust his tongue into her mouth to tangle with hers. She surrendered under his invasion, her lips parting and softening. Paige melted like wax against him, so warm and yielding.

“Stop me,” he rasped against her lips.

She deliberately wrapped her arms around his neck. “Nay.”

“Damn it, lass. Ye must, for the hunger I have for ye is going to make me demand much of ye that an innocent like ye cannae give.”

In answer, she lifted her head from the mattress and kissed him..

With a growl, he grabbed a fistful of her skirts and yanked them up and Paige made a startled noise as his hand locked under her bare thigh. He pulled her wide beneath him, settling into the cradle of her open legs. Innocent or nay, she could not mistake the hard length he pressed against her.

“Is this what ye want?” he demanded, desperation tightening his voice. To his surprise and pleasure, she pushed back against him exploratorily. Her hands trembled on his shoulders, but she fixed him with an unwavering gaze.

“Aye.” All she still wanted from him was to give him all of herself.

She stared up at him with wide, dark eyes. Her lips were damp and swollen from his punishing kiss as Ruben set to work on the laces running down her back. He moved behind her and brushed her hair over her shoulder.

When the ties were loosened, he peeled back her blue gown and kissed down her

spine now before he lifted her chemise. His fingers brushed along her collarbone as he cupped her breasts, from behind. The taut pink tips strained under his touch.

She did not try to hide her body from him, but she knew he knew from the trembling of her lips that she was nervous. Dipping his head, he lowered his mouth to her neck and dragged his lips from the base of her throat to the slope of one breast.

When his tongue flicked her beaded nipple, she jerked and gulped a ragged breath. She was so sensitive. He lavished attention on first one breast and then the other, pulling gasps and moans from her with each graze and swirl of his tongue.

“God above, ye’re beautiful,” he groaned while stepping away to shuck his shirt and removed his breeks.

Her dark gaze was like a soft caress as it slid over his chest and down his torso to his jutting manhood. Her eyes rounded and her mouth formed a silent “oh” as she took in the size of him. While she had had him in her mouth, he looked thicker than ever before.

Pushing her on the bed, his tongue lavished attention on first one breast and then the other, sliding lower and lower at each time. He settled between her trembling thighs and lowered his mouth to her very core. She opened her legs wider to accommodate his hips when he kissed up her.

Paige sucked in a breath when his manhood nudged against her wet entrance. With one trembling finger, he circled her opening, teasing and taunting her, his fingers dipping in and sliding out of her tight body.

He doubled his fingers and his thrusting force, delving inside hard enough that she peaked; shattered, crying out. He kissed her ear. “Now, lass. I’m going to take ye now.”

“I’ve waited,” she reached for a kiss. “For a long time.”

. Instead, he circled that nub of pleasure at the top of her sex until she tilted her hips in wordless invitation.

Gritting his teeth, he pushed in an inch at a time. Whenever she tensed at the new invasion, he stilled, waiting for her to adjust and relax. Finally, he was flush inside her and Paige could never imagine she would feel so full.

He kissed her lips, “I love yer body.”

Reaching for her, he locked her ankles behind his back, and the last of his self-control shattered. Smoothing his damp hair from his forehead, she felt a shuddery breath leave him.

Her fingers dug into his shoulders as he rocked into her again and again, pushing harder and faster. Paige tightened around him as burst and burst of pleasure exploded inside her body.

She kissed him as hard as he kissed her and reveled in how their tongues twined with the same eroticism as their joined bodies. With each hard thrust, his need and lust seemed to double.

He drove into her with wicked, scantling abandon, not once losing his rhythm, but kept driving them to completion. Her lungs burned as he slung her sleek legs over his shoulders and gave it to her.

His hips slammed again and again, her muscles tensed as she screamed, her tight channel milking him. They both careened over the edge and into ecstasy together, riding the wave until they drifted back into their bodies, breathless and shaking.

He dropped onto the mattress beside her, drawing her onto his chest as her frantic pants began to even out. She was as supple as melted wax, draping over him in languid repose.

“Ruben...”

“Aye?”

“What do ye wish for, sons or daughters?” Paige asked.

It took him a long time to reply and when he did, his words were not what she’d expected. “It matters nae to me who comes first,” he said. “Any daughter we have will be as strong and brave as their Maither, and any sons we have will be as just and good.”

He turned to her, “Are ye already thinkin’ about out bairns?”

“It’s in the back of me mind,” she replied. “I suppose we’ll have to see one day. But before we do have children, I’d prefer ye to teach me how to handle a sword and swim.”

He laughed. “I agree to those terms. Now, get some sleep, we’ll have a long day on the morrow.”

“Startin’ with?”

“I think with gettin’ ye a proper sword,” he replied. “I will turn ye into the best swordswoman the Highlands have ever seen.”

The End?

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:03 am

Six Years Later

“Are ye sure ye can do this, lass?” Ruben asked, gazing at Paige as she rubbed her belly. “Ye are carryin’ heavy and I daenae want ye to injure yerself.”

CHAPTER ONE

“ I dinnae ken where she went, but we have to find her!”

Rosaline’s feet moved so fast, it felt as if she was pushing the ground beneath her. She ducked through the trees, and when her tunic snagged on branches, she swiftly pulled it free with a twist of her shoulders and carried on.

She fought with every ounce of energy left in her body, little though it may have been after years of beatings and starvation. She propelled herself through the woods at all costs.

Suddenly, the trees stopped racing past her and started to tower above her. Her body had fallen, though her mind was determined to go on. Something had taken her down. She looked down at her hands, her tunic, her legs, only to see her boot wedged between the deep roots of a tree and a large rock.

It must have been painful. Her ankle was twisted at an unnatural angle, and the rock grazed her skin, but her body could not register the pain, only the urgency to carry on.

She yanked at the rock, trying to move it to free her foot, but a shout from behind stopped her movements and almost her heart.

“All of ye, after her! She is a frail young lassie—she cannae get far!”

Mother Denise ordered the hunt.

“I willnae be caught again. I am never goin’ back,” Rosaline muttered to herself and yanked her foot free.

She looked long enough to see blood rise to the surface, but the wound was not deep enough to stop her. She charged onward, the sounds of the novices’ footfalls fueling her determination to flee.

Rosaline watched the path ahead more carefully this time, peering through the sunlight as it filtered through the trees, watching out for any obstacles that may hinder her again. She could not slow down.

“Spread out!” she heard the Abbess cry, quieter this time but still enraged.

The woman was as determined to find her as she was to escape.

Rosaline powered on, but she could feel her body grow weaker. Her ankle throbbed now, and at a quick glance, she could see the blood staining her boot. She would have to slow her pace.

But there were so many of them, and they would find her in no time if she stopped.

Her eyes caught a sliver of light to her right, and her body instinctively turned left. Water. She fled from it at all costs. Everybody knew that about her.

Perfect.

Against her instincts, she turned towards the loch.

She limped now, quick but still stunted, minding her steps and leaning on nearby trees for support when needed, until she reached the clearing where the loch sat.

Her nerves grew as she drew closer to the water and heard it lapping at the shore. It was a sound she considered as a warning and often fled from, but here she was, heading straight for it.

But her heart was racing and her legs were trembling regardless as she ran from the nuns, so there was no use in fighting them. She had to choose one fear over the other.

Rosaline pushed onwards, using the strength left in her aching ankle to drag herself to safety.

But as she drew closer to the gap in the trees, she began to hear unnatural noises—the clash of steel against steel.

The clatter of swords. She paused at first, in case the danger was behind her, closing in on her.

But she soon saw movement in the clearing ahead and realized that a battle entirely different from hers was being fought there.

She slowed her pace and ducked lower, casting her gaze around the trees to get a glimpse of what she was approaching.

She had to get right to the edge of the woods to gain a clear view, and by then, the noises were louder, metal clanging as swords were swung, men grunting as they avoided the blades.

“Get him, Samson!” the tallest of the men shouted. He was arguably the strongest-looking, yet he seemed to be doing the least work.

“Aye, kill him, Samson!” the smallest bellowed.

Three men against one. Unfair, was Rosaline's first thought.

As the men fought, circling each other, she was finally able to get a glimpse of the underdog fighting alone. A gasp slipped past her lips as her eyes landed on his handsome features, but then she quickly clamped her hand over her mouth.

He was tall and strong, but there was a sort of softness to his skin and features that told her he was more than just a brute.

His hair was dark as the night sky, but his eyes shone like the moon.

They beamed a bright silver even from a distance, and they enchanted her immediately. She could hardly take her eyes off him.

Samson swung his sword at him, trying to land a blow from all angles, but the man dodged every single one.

He seemed relatively calm, despite facing three armed Highlanders.

His eyes watched their every move, judging their next hit perfectly and swerving out of the way with ease.

He looked braced, ready, but he showed no sign of tiring.

Samson, however, was panting and heaving, his body folding now as his energy waned.

It was a good thing he had backup, Rosaline thought, as he would have had no chance of coming out alive if he were alone.

The smallest man stepped in, trying to catch the handsome warrior with his blade,

aiming just beyond Samson's last swing. The handsome warrior had to put in extra effort to dodge both, but he still managed to do it in swift, close motions, spinning out of their reach at the last second.

Finally, he began to swing his sword at them, perhaps growing frustrated with their attempts.

Every blow landed, never fatally, but taking them down a peg each time.

He caught Samson in the thigh, slicing where his kilt brushed his knee and drawing blood.

Samson clutched his leg and limped. Then, the smallest man was hit just below his right shoulder, and he immediately loosened his grip on his sword.

The men grew angrier at being hit and tried to come back harder, but their wounds slowed them down, making their moves sloppier. Each swing had even less power and speed than before, and the handsome warrior dodged them with even more ease.

He's got them.

Rosaline barely held back from whispering the words. She had to stay silent.

She had allowed herself a brief pause, hoping that her proximity to the loch and the fighting men would put the nuns off this area altogether. But she hadn't even turned around to check. One of them could be nearby, hunting for her in an unexpected area.

Furthermore, these four armed men were likely a threat to her as well, even though they had no idea who she was. She might be favoring the handsome warrior, but he looked even more threatening than the others.

Just as the fight looked like it was coming to a close, with the three men wounded and the handsome warrior coming out the victor, she spotted movement on the other side of the clearing. A fourth man emerged from the tree line and began to creep up on the others.

She looked back at the group to see if they had spotted him and found that the team of three could see him clearly. Their faces showed no hint, but he was directly in their line of sight. The handsome warrior, however, had his back to him.

She watched him grow a little cocky in his victory, loosening his posture and relaxing his core. He lowered his sword slightly and brushed his hair from his face. He thought it was all over—he was not prepared for the attack from behind.

Rosaline's heart thundered in her chest, and she was unable to stay silent any longer. The fourth man was mere steps away now.

“Behind ye!”

CHAPTER TWO

Caelan did not take a moment to determine where the voice had come from. He merely obeyed the order and turned his head swiftly, keeping his body angled towards the attackers in front of him.

His eyes landed instantly on a fourth man only a few paces away, heading straight for him. He jumped backward, angling his body so that all four attackers were in his view, and braced himself.

The three he had been fighting for ten minutes already were exhausted and injured. Their bodies were weak, and their minds even more so. He would worry about them later. The new attacker was charging at full speed, as energized as ever. His eyes were ablaze with malice.

But Caelan immediately caught his weakness. He held his sword too low and left it swaying in his grip with each long, rushed stride. He was young and angry, but he did not have the skill to back it up. He had no idea what he was doing.

“Prepare to die, Sinclair!” the young assassin screamed, charging with a low swing, trying to sweep Caelan’s legs out from beneath him.

But his blade swung so low that it cut the grass and brushed against Caelan’s boots, getting nowhere near his skin. It did, however, cut the leather.

Those were his favorite boots, the pair he wore on every ride. And thus Caelan's rage flared hotter.

“Come here, ye bastard,” he growled, having had enough of these foolish attempts.

If they were going to try to kill him at every outing, they might as well send worthy opponents. These men were nothing more than annoying midges to be swiped off his face.

He lunged forward, taking large, heavy strikes at the boy. He caught him with every blow, slicing through his left arm and left shin and even shoving his armor to the side, scathing his ribs.

The boy fell to the ground, and Caelan towered above him, awaiting his surrender.

“Ye might survive today,” the boy choked out, “but yer days are numbered, Sinclair. They’ll always send more of us. Ye’ll never survive us all.”

Caelan glared at him as he bled out on the ground.

The boy’s words triggered him deeply. He was tired of these attacks, always hovering around a corner, never harming him much physically but leaving him endlessly paranoid, always on high alert.

Even if none of them were good enough to kill him with their blades, they would eventually drive him mad.

In a moment of rage, Caelan lifted his sword above his head and drove it down into the boy’s stomach, plunging it through his body and into the ground beneath him. The boy’s eyes glazed over instantly as his blood pooled beneath him, the dark red puddle soaking into the mud.

After only the briefest of pauses, he turned back to the three blackguards. They stood on shaky feet, pale and trembling as blood seeped from their wounds. They looked at

each other as if waiting for one of them to announce the plan.

The tallest man took a step forward, finally ready to play his hand.

“Decided to give yer lads a hand now, have ye? Now that they’re bleedin’ out on the ground?” Caelan spat out.

The man was a coward.

“We will get ye in the end, Sinclair. Ye willnae rest.”

The giant lunged forward, swinging his sword straight at Caelen’s neck this time. If the blow landed, his strength would likely have chopped Caelan’s head straight off.

It was a firm strike, well-placed, but with too much preparation.

Caelan could calculate the angle well in advance and simply ducked beneath the blade.

He took advantage of the momentum behind the swing, which would spin the attacker’s body around, and swung his sword upwards against his torso.

He skinned the man, causing him to stagger backward in pain and crumple to the ground.

“I’m nae done with ye yet,” he muttered, pulling a rope from his belt and moving to straddle his opponents.

He was taking at least one of them back to the castle to interrogate them. He wanted answers. He wanted to know who was sending all of these assassins after him.

But before he knew it, the three men did the same thing he had seen the assassins do every time he had them cornered.

He tried to stop them, to pull their arms back down by their sides, but they used the last ounce of energy they had to reach behind their ears and pull a small tincture, stopped with a cork.

In one swift motion, they poured the liquid into their mouths, and in mere seconds, their eyes drooped and closed.

They had poisoned themselves.

“Argh!” Caelan groaned in defeat.

He may have been the victor, sitting surrounded by dead opponents with barely a scratch on him other than his boots, but the victory was pointless if he could not get any more information. He still did not know where these assassins were coming from or why, so they would keep coming.

Caelan rose and wiped his sword on his kilt before sliding it back into its sheath.

He paced backward, shaking off the thrill of the attack and trying to quell his anger.

He had survived another battle—another practice session, more than anything.

But he wished for less practice at this stage of his life.

But who warned me of the fourth man ?

The question came to his mind for the first time, now that he did not have to worry about staying alive. He looked around the clearing, searching for the source of that

voice.

It was a woman's voice, he was sure of it, so he was expecting to see someone small, hidden in the trees.

Caelan considered whether this woman could be a threat to him.

What was she doing in the forest by herself?

She could have been working with these men to spy on his location, moving more quietly than they ever could.

But no, he decided. If she wanted to hurt him, she could have just let the fourth assassin do the job.

He would never have survived that attack unscathed if she hadn't alerted him.

He owed her a thank you, he realised, and now he was intrigued.

He wandered to the forest's edge, peering closely but seeing no one. He listened carefully but heard no twigs snap underfoot. Not even a breath.

"Where are ye, lass?" he called. "I owe ye me thanks."

But there was no answer, no stir, not a movement to be spotted or heard.

"I'm nae goin' to hurt ye. Reveal yerself."

Still nothing.

He grew slightly annoyed.

She obviously meant him no harm if she had saved him. Surely, she would have let him die if she thought he would harm her.

His eyes scanned the trees, the rocks, the grass.

“Dinnae make me hunt ye, lass.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:03 am

Rosaline watched him pace the tree line, peering deeply through the forest, searching for her. He rose high and crouched low, taking his time but scanning methodically—clearly something he had done before. She held her breath and stayed as still as possible.

His voice was enchanting, strong but warm. It was familiar, an accent from not too far away. How had she not encountered this man before?

Probably because she had been locked up in a convent all these years.

He drew closer to her, and her breathing quickened. She could feel her skin prickle and her cheeks grow hot.

He looked like he knew how to scan a horizon, how to spot prey a mile off. He would surely see her if he got any closer. She didn't want him to hunt her down; she wanted this to be on her own terms. As he'd said, he owed her his thanks.

So, she plucked up her courage and emerged from the trees, holding her breath to let her core take her weight, trying to hide her limp.

She did not want him to see that she was injured, so she stood strong and ensured that her tunic covered her wound. She had to hope that he would not see the pain on her face.

“Finally,” he muttered, a cheeky smirk tugging at his lips.

Rosaline didn't know what to do with herself.

With no trees or branches to obscure her vision, she could see the aftermath of the battle on him.

Blood had sprayed up his front, painting his armor and shirt collar underneath crimson, turning brown as the sun shone on it and dried it.

He even had blood on his face, vertical crimson lines traveling from his chin, past his thick lips, to just underneath his eyes.

His hair was disheveled, and his clothes were creased and skewed.

He looked like a beast after a feed.

But his beauty was even more astounding, now that he was looking right at her. His eyes were like gemstones, totally enrapturing, and the contrast with his dark hair made him look almost unearthly, glowing from some kind of magical source.

Rosaline drew in a deep breath and tried to cast her mind back to the silence of prayer the nuns had taught her all these years. She tried to clear her mind of the searing pain in her ankle and the attraction she undeniably felt for such a beautiful yet terrifying man.

“Greetings,” she finally managed, holding her chin high.

“Greetings, lass.” He chuckled, slowly walking closer. His eyes were downcast, and his laughter seemed directed at himself. “What is yer name?”

She hesitated. She was on the run—should she be honest? Perhaps her name was something to keep hidden. But how would he know her?

Her first name would do.

“Rosaline.”

“Caelan.”

She ran the name over in her mind. It captured him well. The sharp introduction of the C , strong and biting, with the softer flow over the la and the n , gentle over time.

“I dinnae bite.” He chuckled again.

Rosaline realized that her fear must not have been as hidden on her face as she had thought. She pressed her lips together and squared her shoulders. She had to be strong.

“It was ye who warned me?”

She nodded before pushing herself to be assertive. Now was not the time to be silent.

“Aye, it was me.”

“Thank ye. If ye didnae save me life, ye at least saved me from a very painful stab in the back.”

She nodded, unable to summon any further words.

She had helped him, and he was thanking her, yet the power clearly lay in his hands.

He was a strong, armed man, covered in the blood of his opponents, and she was a young woman on the run, with only her blood to show for it.

Still, she was better here with this beast than back at the convent with the evil nuns.

She strained her ears for the sound of any nuns nearby, but there was only silence.

“Why did ye do it?”

Her heart stopped. “Do what?”

He tilted his head in slight confusion, and the right corner of his lips quirked up. “Why did ye call out?”

“Oh,” she murmured. He was not questioning her about her escape. She had to calm herself. “Four men against one. It seemed unfair.”

He chuckled under his breath—something she only spotted thanks to his shaking shoulders and downcast eyes. She had to fight to keep her mouth shut.

“Nae fair, eh?”

She hadn’t meant to offend him. Clearly, the unfairness of the match had been in his favor, as he did not succumb.

Rosaline opened her mouth to retort, to explain that she had only meant unfairness in number rather than in strength, when a distant voice yelled, “Well, she cannae be anywhere else, so we must try!”

The words were faint, but Rosaline could just about make them out because of the familiarity of the voice. Mother Denise had guessed her plan and was heading in her direction. They were coming for her.

She quickly collected herself and began to look for another hiding spot. She had forgotten herself, distracted by the handsome warrior and the tension of the fight.

Rosaline had her own battle to fight today, and she had been foolish to dally for long. She had to move away and stay hidden.

The clearing was altogether too... flat. Other than a few sparse shrubs, there was nothing to conceal her out here. She had to run to the other side of the loch, where thick trees and greenery would conceal her while she continued onwards.

She made a move for the far side of the loch, dodging past Caelan's large form, when a hand caught her by the waist.

She froze, half from the force of his soft grip, half from shock. Her skin broke out in goosebumps at his touch, and in so intimate a place as the curve of her waist, just where her ribs ended before her hips flared out. His forearm banded across her stomach, and his face was mere inches from hers.

Her breath caught. Another person to harm and control her.

"Let me go," she hissed, managing to find her voice despite her panic.

She could not let the nuns take her back to the convent. The punishment they would mete out for escaping, and during a mass, would surely kill her. Nothing in the world could be worse than returning there.

She struggled against the warrior, but his grip stayed strong.

"Please, ye have to let me go. Ye dinnae understand," she pleaded, keeping her voice as calm as she could, holding back her tears.

"Where are ye goin', bunny?" Caelan asked, his voice gravelly and deep as it dropped.

She felt his breath fan her skin, trickling down her earlobe and neck. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end, and a sigh escaped her.

"Hurry! She couldnae have gone far!" Mother Denise's voice was quickly drawing

closer.

Rosaline clawed at Caelan's forearm, trying to pry it off her so she could run, but he was too strong.

"Are they huntin' ye?" he asked.

She nodded, this time pleading with her eyes, still trying to wrench free.

"Please, I cannae go back there." She could hear pounding footsteps now as the nuns trampled quickly through the forest in her direction. "Ye have to help me."

"All right, all right," Caelan relented, finally loosening his grip a little.

He did not understand the urgency—he couldn't. He had no idea what she had been through at the convent. He was going to be the reason she had to go back.

"I'll help ye."

Rosaline looked up at him, shocked. Her eyes widened as she searched his face for truth. Was he serious? How could he help her?

"Ye will?" she asked.

"Aye. From one Highlander on the run to another. Ye just have to do somethin' for me in return."

Here we go .

He probably wanted her to lie with him, or for her to become his servant for the rest of her days. Nonetheless, few things could be worse than life with the nuns.

So, she awaited his proposal.

“Be me bride, and I’ll save ye.”