



# Crazy About Jill (Highland Berserkers #1)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Six Highland warriors out of time. One modern family with a centuries-old secret. And a monster that refuses to be left behind.

Jill Greenwood has always known her family's deep Scottish roots set them apart—the language, the traditions, the stories passed down for generations. But she never expected those stories to come to life.

When six fierce Highland warriors appear out of nowhere on her family's lavender farm—battle-worn and utterly bewildered—Jill and her relatives are the only ones who can understand their ancient Gaelic. Teaching medieval Scotsmen how to survive in the modern world is challenging enough—convincing them that sword fights are frowned upon and that deodorant is not optional—but when unsettling occurrences around the farm turn deadly, Jill realizes these men didn't come alone. Something dark followed them through time. And it has no intention of letting them go.

Alasdair MacGregor fought for his clan, his future, and the bride he was promised. Instead, he and his men were betrayed, flung through time, and left to fend for themselves in a world that makes no sense. But Jill Greenwood? She's the one thing in this unfamiliar land that does. Sharp-tongued, compassionate, and as stubborn as any warrior he's ever known, she speaks his language, understands his past, and makes him want something more than just survival.

But the monster that haunted them in the ninth century is now hunting them here. And keeping Jill safe may be his most important battle yet.

**Total Pages (Source):** 43

## CHAPTER 1

The clash of steel still rang in Alasdair MacTyre's ears as he led his men toward the great hall of Domnall of McKinney. Blood—some his, most belonging to others—had dried in dark crescents beneath his fingernails. The scent of victory clung to him like smoke, mingling with the earthy smell of Scotland's loamy soil.

This is it. Finally, we'll have a home.

His hand unconsciously traced the wolf-paw brand seared into his forearm—the mark that had stripped him of his birth name and branded him a MacTyre. Son of the Wolf. A name thrust upon all berserkers, a constant reminder of their outcast status.

"Today, brothers," he murmured, his voice barely carrying above the creak of leather and the jingle of mail, "today we become men with names that matter."

Behind him trudged his five brothers-in-arms: Fergus with his eyes always studying; young Cillian whose laughter had grown rare since his branding; stoic Lachlan who spoke more to horses than to men; massive Macrath whose rage simmered constantly beneath the surface; and Tavish, the storyteller, whose words could conjure worlds even in their darkest moments.

Each bore the same brand, the same rejection. Cast out from their clans, but not broken. They'd formed their own family, bound by something stronger than blood—shared fate.

"We did it, brothers," Alasdair said. "The price was steep, but our reward..." A rare

smile tugged at his mouth, his heart lightening at the thought of fires and homes and laughter.

"Aye," Fergus replied, his sandy-blond hair catching the late afternoon sun. "A home. Wives." His blue eyes gleamed with hope.

"A fire that doesn't need to be snuffed at first light," added Cillian. "And ale that we dinnae have to water down for fear of being seen as a threat."

"Perhaps even children who willnae be taught to fear us," Tavish said quietly, his storyteller's voice gentle with longing.

For too long they'd been denied what other men took for granted—hearth, home, the soft touch of a woman, the laughter of children. No more. Domhnall of Kinney had promised them wives from among his clan if they turned the tide of battle.

And they had. By the blood on his blade and the ache in his bones, they had.

"D'ye think they'll have bonnie lasses waitin' for us?" Cillian asked softly, his young face momentarily unguarded.

"Aye, brother," Alasdair assured him, clapping him on the shoulder. "McKinney kens our worth now. He'll honor his word."

Macrath snorted, his dark beard flecked with dried blood. "Honor? From clan folk? I'll believe it when I feel a wife's thighs around me."

"Mind your tongue," Alasdair warned, though the hint of a smile betrayed him. "We're to be kin with these people soon enough."

As they approached the great hall, Alasdair's keen eyes caught sight of the McKinney

guards. He didn't miss the sneers that flickered across their faces, the way they shifted their stance as if preparing to block the berserkers' path. A knot of unease tightened in his stomach.

The tallest guard spat on the ground as they approached. "Here come the dogs, tails wagging for scraps from the table."

Macrath's hand went to his sword, but Alasdair stopped him with a look.

Where were you when the fighting was fiercest? he wanted to snarl. Why should you have families while we, the strongest, are left out in the cold? But he said nothing. Soon enough these men would be kin and they'd not start their kinship with a fight.

"Today we are guests," Alasdair muttered to Macrath. "Tomorrow we will be brothers. Remember that."

The guards parted, allowing them entry. The hall fell silent as they entered, then filled with whispers that prickled against Alasdair's skin like nettle stings.

"Beast-men," he heard one woman whisper. "They say their eyes glow red in battle."

"I heard they drink the blood of their enemies," another replied.

The words stung more than they should. Today was supposed to end such rumors, not sharpen them.

A flash of golden hair caught his attention. A young woman, her eyes wide with fear as she looked at him and his men. Their eyes met across the crowded hall, and something flickered in her gaze—a momentary softening, perhaps recognition of the humanity behind his warrior's mask.

"Mayhap she'll be yers, Alasdair," Tavish whispered. "A bonnie lass with hair like summer wheat."

The woman caught his eye and flushed, looking away quickly. But not before Alasdair saw something beyond fear in her gaze—curiosity, perhaps. A small flame of hope kindled in his chest.

"Or maybe yours, Tavish," Alasdair replied softly. "You've a way with words that might charm such a lass."

"Alasdair!" The booming voice of Domhnall of Kinney cut through the noise of the hall. "My scouts, welcome! Come, sit by me. You've earned your place at my table."

The Laird's smile didn't reach his eyes, Alasdair noted, a flicker of unease passing through him. But he pushed it away. This was their moment of triumph.

But as they neared, a chill ran down Alasdair's spine. Seated beside McKinney was his druid advisor, a man whose very presence made Alasdair's skin crawl. The druid's ice-blue eyes seemed to pierce right through him, and Alasdair had to fight the urge to look away. Something about those eyes reminded him of winter—cold, empty, devoid of mercy.

The druid's thin lips curled into what might have been a smile, but reminded Alasdair more of a serpent preparing to strike. Long, stained fingers caressed a pendant of strange bone that hung around his neck. The bone seemed to pulse with its own heartbeat, though Alasdair told himself it must be a trick of the light.

"Dinnae trust that one," Macrath growled under his breath. "He looks at us like we're vermin."

"Hush," Alasdair warned. "Tonight we celebrate. Tomorrow we'll worry about

making allies."

The pendant at the druid's throat seemed to pulse with an unnatural glow, so faint Alasdair almost thought he'd imagined it. The air around the man felt wrong somehow—colder, thinner, as if reality itself bent away from him.

Alasdair settled into his seat, his men arranged around him. The druid stepped forward, a flagon in his hands, his movements as graceful and deadly as a viper's. "A special brew," he said, his voice like silk over steel. "For special guests."

"When will ye announce our brides, Laird McKinney?" Lachlan asked, his voice steady despite the hope that must have been surging through him.

The hall quieted, interested ears turning toward their table. McKinney's smile flickered, something dark passing behind his eyes.

"All in good time, lad. First, we celebrate your victory."

McKinney raised his cup. "A toast! To our brave berserkers, who've proven their worth a hundred times over!"

The declaration echoed hollowly in the great hall, few voices joining in. The silence hung heavy, charged with something Alasdair couldn't quite name. Warning bells rang in his mind, but the promise of acceptance—of home and hearth and family—drowned them out.

Alasdair lifted his own cup, a surge of pride warming his chest. This is it. Everything we've fought for, everything we've dreamed of. It's finally ours.

He watched intently as McKinney took a deep draught from his own cup before giving his men a slight nod, giving them permission to drink.

The ale was sweet on his tongue, sweeter than any he'd tasted before. Too sweet. The thought came a heartbeat too late.

Something bitter lurked beneath the sweetness, metallic and wrong. He tried to put the cup down, but his fingers wouldn't respond. They felt leaden, distant, as if they belonged to someone else.

A few deep swallows later and the pleasant warmth in his chest turned to fire, searing through his veins. His throat closed, lungs burning for air that wouldn't come. Across the table, he saw Lachlan's face go pale, saw Macrath slump forward. Tavish clutched at his throat, eyes wide with panic. Fergus toppled from his bench, his cup clattering across the stones. Cillian—gods, who'd spoken so hopefully of a bonnie lass to call his own—fell face-first onto the table.

Poison. The word burned in his mind even as his body burned from within.

The blonde woman's hand flew to her mouth in horror. Around them, the hall erupted in jeers and cruel laughter.

Not the good-natured ribbing of new kin, but the vicious mockery of those watching enemies suffer.

"You..." Alasdair choked out, his vision blurring as agony gripped his insides. Treacherous rat-hearted cur. I'll feed you to the crows piece by wretched piece.

His gaze snapped to the druid, seeing the satisfaction in those icy eyes. Then to McKinney, whose jovial mask had slipped to reveal triumphant malice.

The Laird leaned close, his breath hot against Alasdair's ear. "Did ye truly think we'd welcome wolf-kin to our hearths? That we'd let our women warm the beds of animals? Did ye think we'd let berserker seed take root in our clan?" McKinney spat.

"Ye were useful for the battle, aye. But ye'll ne'er be one of us."

Betrayal. Poison. Death.

The promises of wives, of children, of a place to belong—all lies. They'd been fools to believe. Fools to hope. Alasdair thought of the blonde lass, of the family he'd never have, of the children he'd never hold, and rage eclipsed even the pain of the poison. It burned hotter than the toxin in his blood, scorching away everything but the need for vengeance.

Through dimming vision, he watched the druid smile, raising his own untouched cup in a mocking salute. The bone pendant gave off a sickly gleam, pulsing like a corrupted heart.

"Not death," the druid whispered, his voice somehow piercing through the growing darkness in Alasdair's mind. "Something far worse awaits you, wolf-son."

With the last of his strength, he forced words past his tightening throat.

"You'll die for this treachery," he rasped, fixing McKinney with a glare that promised vengeance. "If it takes me ten lifetimes, you will pay. My brothers and I will find our way back, and we will have what was promised. Mo ghealladh air m' anam." I vow on my soul.

The vow echoed strangely in the hall, the words seeming to hang in the air longer than they should, vibrating with power that even Alasdair could feel. It was as if something ancient and powerful had heard him—had witnessed the injustice and marked his words.

For a moment, the druid's smug expression faltered, a flicker of uncertainty crossing his features.



Then darkness closed in. Alasdair's last thought was of his men. His family. Betrayed and dying, all for daring to dream of a place to belong.

Then, there was nothing but the void, and the echo of a vow strong enough to span centuries.

### CHAPTER 2

The sting of salt-laden air roused Alasdair from the depths of unconsciousness. His eyelids felt heavier than a blacksmith's anvil, but he forced them open, squinting against the inky darkness of night. Cold seawater sloshed over the side of the birlinn, drenching him, shocking his senses further awake. Whatever had once steadied him was gone—only the sea remained.

Where...where are we?

The poison, or mayhap drug, still clouded his mind, memories fragmented like shattered glass. The feast, the toast, the betrayal—it all swirled together, as turbulent as the waves crashing against the wooden hull beneath him. His mouth tasted of copper and bile, the lingering bitterness of McKinney's treachery.

As his eyes adjusted, the silhouettes of Innse Gall loomed in the distance, dark teeth against the star-strewn sky. Alasdair's gaze darted between the two birlinns, tethered together and rocking in the choppy waves. He and his brothers lay helpless in one, while Domnall, the druid, and their men crowded the deck of the other. The realization hit him like a war hammer—they were to be cast adrift, abandoned to whatever fate the sea and sorcery had in store.

He tested his limbs, finding them heavy but responsive. The paralysis was wearing off, though too slowly to be useful. A breath to his left confirmed what his heart most needed to know.

His brothers. They still live.

Alasdair strained to see them in the darkness. Relief surged through him at the sound of their ragged breathing—proof they were still alive, even if just as motionless as he was.

Laird Domnall McKinnie's smug voice cut through the rhythmic slap of waves against the wooden hull, dripping with contempt.

"Well, well...seems the filthy berserker dogs are finally rousing from their slumber."

Alasdair's insides churned with rage, the familiar heat of his berserker nature struggling against whatever foul concoction still paralyzed him. He strained against invisible bonds, willing his limbs to move, but his body refused to obey.

"You mongrels actually thought I'd make you part of my clan? Allow your tainted bloodlines to sully my daughters?" Domnall's laughter rang out, sharp and cruel, echoed by the jeering chorus of his men.

"Wolf-seed has no place among true Scots," one of McKinnie's men called out, his voice slurring with drink.

"Aye, feed them to the deep!" shouted another, raising what appeared to be a flask in salute.

The druid's deep voice rumbled an incantation from the other birlinn, and Alasdair felt ethereal tendrils tighten around him, reinforcing their magical restraints. The sorcerer's words slithered across the water, cold as a grave.

"èist, a' bheathach. Tha cumhachd na tìre is na mara nam chridhe. Cha chuir thusa no do shluagh dragh air an fhearann seo a-rithist."

Listen, beast. The power of land and sea flows through my heart. Neither you nor

your kind will trouble this land again.

The bone talisman gleamed coldly at his throat, that eerie blue glow building with each word. Each syllable seemed to distort the very air around them, bending reality with ancient power. The pulsing of the pendant matched the rhythm of Alasdair's own heartbeat, as if the magic sought to bind his very life force to whatever spell was being cast.

"That's right, you mongrels," Domnall continued. "After you so fortuitously won me that battle, I knew I could be rid of your scourge once and for all. You served your purpose well enough as mercenaries."

The waves grew more violent, as if the sea itself responded to the druid's incantation. Spray crashed over the gunwale, its icy sting against Alasdair's face both torment and blessing—each shock bringing clarity through the fog of drugged confusion.

Alasdair felt his brother Fergus beginning to stir beside him, fingers twitching against the wooden planks. Beside him, Cillian's chest rose and fell with more force than before, fighting against the drugs.

Hold on, brothers. Fight. We are not finished yet.

Domnall's men began to untie the thick rope binding the vessels. The Laird's eyes glittered with malice in the moonlight.

"To the depths with your ilk!" Domnall shouted. "You're the filthiest of God's creatures, berserkers—unholy abominations that shouldn't be allowed to walk His earth."

With a violent lurch, their birlinn careened sideways as the ropes were freed. Alasdair heard shouts of triumph from Domnall's men as they pushed the berserkers' boat

away. In the distance, something dark moved across the water's surface—too fluid for a boat, too large for a fish. It vanished as quickly as it had appeared, leaving only ripples in its wake.

"Alasdair..." Tavish's voice, barely audible, reached his ears. "I cannae move..."

"Nor I," Alasdair managed to reply, his own voice little more than a rasp. "The drug...the druid's magic..."

"My feet...I can feel nothing below my knees," Fergus whispered, a tremor of fear in his voice.

The current caught their birlinn, dragging it inexorably towards a yawning black maw in the cliff face. A cave, Alasdair realized with growing dread, its entrance gaping like the maw of some great beast ready to swallow them whole.

"Brothers," he forced out, desperate to reach them, to give some comfort in what might be their final moments. His throat thickened, not from poison this time, but grief. These men were his kin, forged in blood and battle. "If this be our end...it was an honor to fight at yer sides."

"Och, dinnae start with the farewells yet," Macrath growled, though his voice trembled with the effort. "I'm no' ready to meet my maker."

"Not like this," Cillian breathed, his voice breaking.

As they approached, the roar of water echoed off the stone, growing louder with each passing moment. The birlinn lurched forward, caught in the cave's hungry pull. Waves slammed them against the rocky walls, each impact jarring Alasdair's paralyzed body and sending showers of icy spray over the deck.

"I can feel my fingers," Lachlan whispered urgently. "The magic weakens."

"Mine as well," Fergus added. "Keep fighting, brothers."

Darkness enveloped them as they passed the threshold, the starlit sky shrinking to a mere pinprick behind them. The air grew thick and damp, heavy with the scent of brine and something older, something primal. The stone around them was ancient—worn smooth in places by millennia of tides, but elsewhere jagged with crystalline formations that caught what little light remained, winking like malevolent eyes in the darkness.

"It smells like death," Tavish murmured, his storyteller's senses sharp even now. "Like the world before men walked upon it."

Then, as if answering an unspoken summons, an eerie glow began to build within the cavern's depths. Sickly blue light pulsed, its source yet unseen but growing stronger with each passing heartbeat. The otherworldly illumination danced across the slick cave walls, casting grotesque shadows that seemed to writhe and reach for them.

"What devilry is this?" Cillian's voice quavered, unable to mask his fear.

"Stay strong," Alasdair commanded, though his own heart thundered against his ribs. "Whatever comes, we face it together."

"As we always have," Fergus added softly, determination threading through his voice.

The birlinn's progress slowed as they ventured deeper. The water grew still, the air crackling with energy—metallic, electric, and full of dread—magic, but unlike any Alasdair had ever encountered. It tasted of metal and lightning, raised the hairs on his arms, made his teeth ache in his skull.

Ahead, the cave opened into a vast chamber. At its center, Alasdair saw the source of their doom—a whirling maelstrom of that same sickly blue light, pulsing like a demonic heartbeat, waiting to claim them. It twisted and writhed, folding in upon itself in ways that hurt his eyes to follow. The vortex's glow matched exactly the light from the druid's pendant, as if they were two parts of the same ancient magic, now working in terrible harmony.

"Mo Dhia," Fergus breathed. "What is that?"

"Nothing of this world," Alasdair answered grimly. "Brothers, if we dinnae survive this night, know that ye were the finest men I've ever known. We may have been outcast, but we found honor among ourselves."

"Aye," Macrath agreed, his voice stronger now. "Family by choice, no' blood. The truest bond of all."

Tavish's voice, though strained, held a hint of his storyteller's cadence. "They thought to break us, but they only forged us stronger. That's the tale I'll tell, in this world or the next."

The voracious vortex dragged them inexorably inward. Alasdair heard muffled cries as his brothers began to stir, fighting against bonds both magical and physical. But it was no use.

"I swear," Alasdair bit out through clenched teeth, "if there's any justice in this world or the next, we'll return to claim what was promised. We'll find our place, our women, our future."

"Aye," his brothers chorused, their voices blending into one defiant roar.

The vortex pulsed, seeming almost to respond to their declaration. The blue light

intensified, waves of it washing over them, through them.

One by one, his berserker kin were picked off and swallowed into the maelstrom's depths. Powerless, Alasdair could only watch in horror as Cillian, Fergus, Macrath, Tavish, and Lachlan were dragged to their doom. Each man met his fate with eyes wide open, backs straight despite their paralysis, refusing to cower even in the face of the unknown.

"I'll find you," Alasdair promised, though he knew not if his brothers could hear. "Whatever waits beyond, I'll find you all."

When only Alasdair remained, he felt himself sliding backwards towards the precipice. The heat of the vortex scorched his skin even as his body trembled with cold fear.

But even as the vortex's pull became inescapable, one unified wail of defiance tore from Alasdair's throat:

“Chan eil sinn deiseil! Beòidh sinn! Gabhaidh sinn na chaidh a ghoid!”

We are not done! We will live! We will have what was stolen!

The words echoed through the cavern, a binding oath that seemed to pierce the very fabric of time itself. If they were denied their rightful place in this life, they would claim it in another. Their honor demanded no less.

The vortex responded with a screeching wail of its own, the blue light flaring blindingly bright. Alasdair felt himself torn apart, not physically but in some deeper, more fundamental way—as if the very essence of who he was was being unraveled, strand by strand, and rewoven into something new.



His bones hummed with impossible vibrations, his blood seemed to flow backward in his veins, his very thoughts scattered and reformed like stars being born. Past and future collided within him as centuries compressed into a single, eternal moment. Time itself became something tangible, something that could be touched and traversed.

Then the raging currents claimed him, dragging him over the edge and down into the endless depths of the hungry vortex. Consumed by its crushing force, Alasdair slipped into black oblivion with his anguished vow to avenge his brothers echoing through his mind.

And beneath the waves, something ancient stirred—drawn by oath and magic alike, hungering for the ruin yet to come.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:49 pm*

### CHAPTER 3

The soft beeping of the security monitor pulled Jill Greenwood from her textbook-induced stupor. She blinked, realizing dusk had fallen while she'd been lost in the intricacies of 18th-century European politics. The clock on her laptop blinked 9:30 PM.

Another night lost to dead men's squabbles, she thought wryly.

Stretching, she winced—hours hunched over her desk had left her sore and stiff. The lavender-scented breeze wafting through the open window did little to clear the fog of historical dates from her mind. She'd been hoping for a quiet night of study, especially with Dad and the twins out catching a movie in Aberdeen.

The persistent beeping drew her attention back to the security screens. Jill sighed, expecting to see the usual beach partiers wandering onto their property. But as she peered at the grainy black-and-white footage, her eyebrows shot up. These weren't lanky college kids stumbling through their woods. No, these men were massive. Linebacker massive.

"What in the name of Boudica's battle axe?" she muttered, leaning closer.

Her jaw dropped as one figure moved into clearer view. The man wore honest-to-goodness medieval garb—a sodden tunic clinging to his muscled frame, a heavy cloak, and was that a wolf pelt draped over his shoulders? His leather boots were caked in mud as if he'd tramped through a bog to reach their Washington farm.

That's ninth-century Highland clothing , her historian brain noted. Not English knights—Scottish warriors.

After years of college followed by a museum internship, she'd seen her fair share of medieval reenactors. But what were they doing out here, miles from any historical site or festival?

The largest of them paused, as if sensing her scrutiny through the camera. He turned, and even through the grain and static, his gaze cut straight through her. Impossible—but she felt it.

"Now that's not your average lost tourist," she whispered to herself, a strange fluttering sensation rising in her chest. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, oddly self-conscious despite being alone.

She glanced at her phone, considering calling her dad. But then she pictured his face, relaxed for the first time in weeks, probably munching popcorn at the multiplex right now. And hadn't he always said a Greenwood doesn't back down from a challenge?

A soft cough drifted down from upstairs, reminding Jill of her mom's fragile state. Whatever was happening outside, she had to keep her mother safe. But surely a group of overzealous history buffs posed no real threat?

"Mom?" she called softly up the stairs. "Everything okay up there?"

"Just fine, dear," came Sarah's gentle reply. "Is something wrong?"

Jill hesitated. "No, nothing to worry about. Just going to check something outside. I'll be back soon."

Decision made, Jill grabbed her trusty backpack. She did a mental

inventory—flashlight, check. Pocket knife, check. After a moment's consideration, she retrieved her father's rifle from the gun safe. Not that she expected trouble, but the weight of it was reassuring.

After double-checking all the locks Jill slipped out to the barn. The cool, misty air of the Olympic Peninsula enveloped her, carrying the mingled scents of hay, horse, and the distant Pacific.

Chestnut greeted her with a soft nicker, as if sensing the strange tension in the air. "Just us tonight, girl," Jill murmured, stroking the horse's velvety nose. "Ready for an adventure?"

The mare nudged Jill's shoulder with surprising gentleness for such a large animal, her warm breath fogging in the cool night air.

"I know, I know. Dad would say I'm being impulsive again." She reached for the saddle hanging on the wall, the leather cool and smooth under her fingers. "But something about these guys...I don't know. They seemed lost. Confused."

She mounted Chestnut with practiced ease, the leather saddle creaking beneath her. The rifle rested across her lap, out of caution rather than fear. She'd faced down angry bulls and territorial coyotes; a few costume enthusiasts didn't worry her.

They set out into the June twilight, the scent of lavender mixing with pine and distant sea air. Jill breathed deeply, letting the familiar smells steady her nerves. The fading light cast long shadows across the fields, turning the peaceful farm into something almost magical.

"Alright, girl," Jill said, patting the horse's neck. "What's our working theory here? Escaped Renaissance Faire performers? Method actors taking it way too far?"

Chestnut's ear twitched, which Jill chose to interpret as agreement.

"I've got about a thousand questions," she continued, curiosity stirring about their costumes, their group, and just how far they'd go to maintain historical authenticity.

The shrill ring of her phone broke the quiet night. The caller ID showed her father.

"Dad?" she answered, slowing Chestnut to a walk.

"Jill, where are you?" Her father's voice crackled through the speaker, his tone urgent in a way she'd rarely heard before.

"Checking the security alert. There are men in the woods—they're dressed in medieval clothing, of all things."

A beat of silence. Then: "Did you find them yet?"

Jill's brow furrowed. "Wait, you know about this? What's going on?"

"Listen carefully, Jilly. Find them and bring them to the ranch right away," he said, ignoring her question. "We're on our way home now."

She could hear the twins arguing in the background, William's serious tone contrasting with Joe's excited questions.

"What am I dealing with here?"

"Later, Jill. It's not safe in the open."

Not safe? From what? The questions multiplied, but the urgency in her father's voice brooked no argument. In twenty-five years, she'd never heard that particular edge in

his tone.

"Dad, if you know something?—"

"Please, Jill. Trust me. Find them and bring them in."

"Fine," she sighed. "But you owe me the biggest explanation of your life when you get home."

As she hung up, a chill ran down her spine that had nothing to do with the evening air. She urged Chestnut deeper into the forest, scanning the shadows for any sign of movement. Her mind raced with possibilities, each more fantastic than the last.

"Come on, Chestnut," she murmured, guiding the horse around a fallen log. "Let's find our mysterious visitors before whatever's 'not safe' finds them first."

The forest pressed in tighter around her, the trees crowding out what little comfort the twilight had offered. Jill switched on her flashlight, the beam cutting through the gloom like a sword.

Something moved in the trees ahead.

Jill's heart pounded as she raised the rifle, not aiming but ready. Her flashlight beam caught a flash of something—a glint of metal, perhaps, or the reflection of eyes.

"Hello?" she called, her voice steadier than she felt. "Can I help you?"

There was no answer, just the rustle of underbrush as whatever—or whoever—was there retreated deeper into the woods.

"Wait!" Jill urged Chestnut forward, following the shadowy figure. "Do you need

help?"

The horse snorted nervously beneath her, picking her way carefully through the dense undergrowth. For a moment, Jill thought she glimpsed something—a shape—watching her from between the trees, and then it was gone, melted into the darkness like a ghost.

The wind shifted, carrying with it a scent she couldn't identify—something foul and ancient, like rotting meat mingled with sulfur and decay. Her pulse quickened and the hair on the back of her neck rose.

She was suddenly glad she'd thought to bring the rifle.

Chestnut stiffened beneath her, ears flattening against her head. The darkness between the trees seemed to thicken, to breathe with malevolent intent.

The woods fell unnaturally silent. Then a branch cracked in the distance, and Jill urged Chestnut forward, away from the shadows and toward the promise of human contact.

### CHAPTER 4

A lasdair's legs trembled as he pushed through the dense undergrowth, his sodden clothes clinging to his skin like a second hide. The taste of salt lingered on his lips, a reminder of their desperate swim to shore. Behind him, his brothers' ragged breathing matched his own, a chorus of exhaustion and disbelief.

The wolf-paw brand on his forearm throbbed painfully, as if awakened by the strange energy of this place. He flexed his fingers, willing strength back into limbs that had been submerged in cold seawater for too long.

They'd emerged from the sea less than an hour ago, only to find themselves in a world gone mad. Huge growling birds in the sky. Strange vessels without sail or oar on the water. And now, something darker—a sense of malevolence that felt disturbingly familiar in this bewildering place.

"It went this way," Macrath growled, gesturing toward a thicket of ferns. "The Brollachan leaves a trail of dead things."

Indeed, the vegetation had blackened where the creature passed, leaves curling inward as if in agony. A miasma of putrefaction hung in the air, the unmistakable taint of the ancient entity.

"We should keep moving," Fergus urged, his eyes wide with fear. "Find shelter, figure out where we are."

"Aye," Lachlan agreed. "We're in no condition to fight that...thing."



Alasdair shook his head. "It followed us through the vortex. We cannot outrun it forever."

"But we've nothing to fight with but our blades," Cillian whispered, his young voice strained. "And I dinnae think steel will harm it."

"It never has before," Tavish added grimly.

A sound cut through the night—a high-pitched wail, rhythmic and piercing. The berserkers dropped into fighting stances, weapons raised.

"What manner of beast makes such a cry?" Tavish whispered.

"I know not," Alasdair replied, his knuckles white around the hilt of his dagger. "Nothing I've ever heard before."

Then came a different sound—the distant but unmistakable thud of hoofbeats approaching through the forest.

"Someone comes," Fergus murmured, pointing in a different direction than the strange wailing had come from.

"Look there," Cillian said, indicating a faint light moving among the trees.

A beam of light swept through the darkness, bouncing off tree trunks and illuminating patches of ground.

"Be ready, but hold your blades," Alasdair ordered quietly. "We know not friend from foe in this strange place."

The light drew closer, and Alasdair caught a glimpse of its wielder—a slender figure

mounted on horseback. A woman, by the looks of it, though her garments were unlike any he'd seen. Tight blue trews hugged her legs, and she wore some kind of close-fitting jacket over a thin tunic.

Strange attire for a woman, he thought. The clothing revealed the shape of her form in a way that would be considered improper in his time. No Highland woman would venture forth in such fitted garments—they'd be deemed indecent by his people's standards.

But it was her face that caught and held his attention. In the harsh beam of her light, he could make out high cheekbones and a determined jawline framed by long, dark hair tied back in a single braid.

Something stirred in his chest—recognition perhaps, though he knew they'd never met. The feeling was unsettling, as if his soul remembered what his mind could not.

She called out something in a language he couldn't understand, her voice clear and commanding despite the obvious question in her tone.

"What tongue is that?" Tavish wondered aloud. "Not the speech of any clan I know."

"It has a rhythm to it...almost like our own, but twisted," Fergus observed, his scholar's ear catching nuances the others missed. "Like our words turned inside out."

"Scatter," Alasdair ordered in a low voice. "Circle behind. If she means harm, or has others with her, we'll have the advantage."

His brothers slipped into the darkness with practiced stealth, leaving Alasdair to face the stranger alone. He stepped forward cautiously, his hand resting on the hilt of his dagger.

The forest floor was soft beneath his boots, pine needles cushioning his steps. The night air carried unfamiliar scents—an overwhelming sweetness, chemical and false, that burned his nostrils alongside the clean tang of saltwater.

The woman's eyes widened, and she raised a strange, short staff to her shoulder. The stance was practiced—like an archer with a bow, yet utterly foreign.

Something in her stance—the confidence, the readiness—told Alasdair this was no helpless maiden. This was a warrior in her own right.

"Stop!" she shouted, the word strange but its meaning clear from her tone and posture.

When Alasdair didn't immediately halt, a deafening crack split the air. Splinters flew as a nearby tree exploded, a large branch falling to the ground in a spray of bark and needles. An acrid scent filled his nostrils, making him flinch and stumble backward, heart slamming into his ribs.

"Devil's teeth!" Macrath swore from the shadows. "What manner of weapon is that?"

It was a warning. She could have struck him, but chose not to. This woman had power that could have ended his life in an instant—yet she had shown mercy.

Goddess? Demon? Alasdair's mind reeled. "We mean ye no harm, lass," he said, slowly raising his empty hands, palm outward. A universal gesture of peace. "We're lost, far from home."

His voice sounded raw even to his own ears, hoarse from swallowing seawater and from the shock of their impossible journey.

Her brow furrowed, and she tilted her head slightly. "Who are you? Where did you

come from?"

The words were in his own tongue—though her accent was strange, the cadence not quite right. Alasdair's eyes widened in relief. "You speak the old tongue," he noted. "Are we still in Alba—Scotland?"

His brothers emerged partially from the shadows, listening intently.

The woman's eyes darted between them, wary but curious. "No, you're far from Scotland. My father taught me the language. He's...interested in Scottish history. Now answer my question. Who are you?"

Alasdair straightened, drawing on years of formal introductions at clan gatherings. "I am Alasdair of Clan MacTyre. These are my brothers—Fergus, Cillian, Lachlan, Macrath, and Tavish. We are warriors from the Highlands of Scotland. And we...we do not know where we are."

"Well, you're far from Scotland. You're in Washington state," she replied. "The United States of America."

The names meant nothing to Alasdair. He exchanged confused glances with his brothers.

"I've never heard of such a place," he admitted.

"I'm not surprised," the woman said, her voice softening slightly. She seemed to hesitate before asking, "What year do you think it is?"

The question was so strange that Alasdair almost laughed. "The year of our Lord 839, of course."

She inhaled sharply, her grip tightening on her weapon. "It's...that's not plausible. That was over a thousand years ago."

Silence fell like a physical weight. A thousand years? The enormity of it threatened to crush Alasdair's very soul.

The blood drained from his face, his limbs suddenly leaden. The forest seemed to spin around him, trees blurring into a green haze as his breath came in short, painful gasps. His heart hammered against his ribs like a war drum, each beat sending shock waves through his body. A thousand years from home. Everyone we knew—gone to dust centuries ago.

"A thousand years?" Macrath growled. "The druid cursed us, aye—but this?"

"It's not a curse," Fergus said, voice trembling. "It's...time."

"Who are you?" Alasdair asked, needing to focus on something, anything, to keep from drowning in the implications of their situation.

"I'm Jill Greenwood," she replied, lowering her weapon slightly.

He bowed his head. "Lady Greenwood."

She wrinkled her nose. "Okay, no. Just Jill, please."

"Very well...Jill."

"My father seems to be expecting you, though I have no idea how he could be."

"Your father knows of us?" Hope kindled in Alasdair's chest.

"Apparently. He told me to bring you to our ranch. Said it wasn't safe in the open."

"He's right about that," Alasdair replied grimly. "A creature from our homeland—a Brollachan—has followed us. A shapeless evil that consumes all it touches."

Now it was Jill's turn to look shocked. "A Brollachan? Like in the old stories?" Her eyes widened. "My father used to tell me tales about them when I was a child. I always thought they were just legends."

She shook her head in disbelief. "First men in medieval clothing appear on our property, then you speak ancient Gaelic, now you're talking about mythical creatures...This doesn't make sense."

"Many legends have teeth, lass," Tavish said softly.

A rustle in the underbrush made them all tense. The Brollachan was still out there, hunting.

"We should go," Jill said, urgency in her voice. "My father will have answers. And we'll be safer at the ranch."

Alasdair hesitated, his pride warring with practicality. They were strangers in a strange land, with a monster at their heels. This woman—this Jill—offered shelter and possibly answers.

His brothers looked to him, waiting for his decision. Even Macrath, always the most defiant, seemed to recognize the gravity of their situation.

"We accept your hospitality," he said finally, the formal words feeling right despite the bizarre circumstances. "And offer our protection in return."

Jill's lips curved in what might have been a smile. "I'm pretty sure the woman with the rifle is the one offering protection at the moment, but I appreciate the sentiment."

There was a warmth in her eyes that belied the teasing tone, a kindness that eased some of the tension in Alasdair's shoulders.

Her horse nickered nervously, sensing something in the darkness beyond. Alasdair stepped forward instinctively, placing a calming hand on the beast's neck. He murmured soothing words, and to Jill's visible surprise, the animal immediately settled.

"You have a way with horses," she observed.

"Lachlan is the true horseman among us," Alasdair replied, nodding toward his quietest brother. "But all Highland warriors know the value of a steady mount."

Lachlan approached slowly, his eyes fixed on the chestnut mare. "She's beautiful," he said softly, running his hand along her flank. "Strong-spirited but gentle-hearted."

"Her name is Chestnut," Jill offered, watching the interaction with evident fascination.

As they prepared to leave, Alasdair caught Jill studying him with an intensity that made his skin warm despite his sodden clothing. Not just curiosity in her gaze, but a flicker of something deeper—as if she'd discovered something long sought but unexpected.

"What is it?" he asked, suddenly self-conscious.

Jill shook her head slightly. "Nothing. It's just—you're exactly like the warriors in my father's stories. Right down to the wolf pelts."

"Your father knows of Clan MacTyre?" Alasdair couldn't keep the surprise from his voice.

"I'm beginning to think he knows a lot more than he's ever told me," Jill replied, her tone suggesting a reckoning to come.

A crack of branches behind them ended further conversation. The Brollachan was drawing closer.

"We must go," Alasdair urged. "The beast grows bolder."

Jill nodded, her expression hardening with resolve. "Stay close."

The soft glow of moonlight filtered through the treetops, casting dappled shadows across her face. For just a moment, with her head held high and determination in her eyes, she reminded Alasdair of the warrior queens of old.

As they moved through the darkened forest, Alasdair couldn't shake the feeling that their meeting was more than mere chance. This woman who spoke their tongue, whose father somehow expected them—it seemed fated, somehow.

But to what purpose? He watched Jill's confident movements as she led them through the trees. And at what cost?

Only time—something they'd already shattered—would reveal what fate had in store.



### CHAPTER 5

Jill's mind raced faster than her heartbeat as she guided her horse through the dense forest, acutely aware of the six warriors spread out around her. The soft crunch of pine needles beneath their boots was eerily quiet for men of their size. She glanced back, unable to stop herself from studying them with hungry observation.

This can't be happening. Six ninth-century Scottish warriors? Here? Now? My history professors would be laughing their heads off if I tried to claim such a thing.

They moved nothing like modern men. Where hikers would stumble over roots or catch their clothes on branches, these warriors navigated the forest with predatory precision. They maintained a loose formation—Alasdair at point, the others fanned out in what she recognized as a classic medieval defensive pattern straight out of the military histories she'd studied. Almost exactly like the Pictish war bands described in the Annals of Ulster, her academic brain noted, cataloging yet another impossible verification of authenticity.

The scent of their damp woolen clothes and leather mingled with the forest's earthy fragrance. So different from the synthetic fabrics and cologne of modern men. There was something raw and elemental about them that made the hair on her arms stand up.

"Keep heading northwest," she called, gesturing toward a gap in the trees. "The ranch is about two miles that way."

The ancient words felt both familiar and strange on her tongue. Dad had taught her

when she was little, drilling verbs and conjugations during long summer evenings. He knew this would happen someday, didn't he? A lump formed in her throat. All those stories, all those lessons...they weren't just stories.

Alasdair nodded, his attention constantly scanning their surroundings. He moved with the hypervigilance of someone accustomed to ambush, someone for whom danger was a constant companion rather than an occasional visitor.

"Yer land is vast," he remarked, falling into step beside her horse. "Ye must have many men to defend such holdings."

Chestnut snorted gently as the large man approached, but didn't shy away. Even my horse trusts him, Jill realized. Animals always know.

Jill nearly laughed. "We don't really need to...defend it. Not like you're thinking." She hesitated, uncertain how to explain modern property laws to a man from a time when land was taken and held by force.

How do I even begin to explain deeds and property taxes and the sheriff's department?

His eyebrows rose slightly, disbelief evident in the slight tension around his mouth. "All land must be defended, lass. If no' by sword, then by coin or law."

Lass. The familiar address sent an unexpected shiver down her spine.

"Well, I guess that part hasn't changed much," she conceded. The mechanisms differ, but the principles of territorial rights remain surprisingly constant across the centuries.

They approached a swollen stream that cut across their path. The recent rains had

turned what was normally a gentle trickle into a churning obstacle. Jill frowned, calculating. Her horse could manage, but on foot...

She opened her mouth to suggest a route upstream—but the warriors were already moving, communicating with subtle hand gestures and glances that spoke of years fighting together. Macrath—the broad-shouldered one with the perpetual scowl—waded in first, testing the current with a sturdy branch. Lachlan quickly joined him, the two men positioning themselves as human anchors in the rushing water.

"We'll form a chain," Alasdair explained, seeing her bewildered expression. "Yer horse can manage, but we'll ensure none of my men are lost."

Something in his voice—the calm authority, the absolute certainty that his solution would work—made her stomach flutter unexpectedly. No committee meetings, no debating options, no second-guessing—just immediate, decisive action.

Get it together, Jill. He's from literal centuries ago. This is NOT the time for...whatever this feeling is.

She maneuvered her horse across first, then watched in fascination as the men linked arms, creating a human chain through the deepest part of the stream. They moved with practiced efficiency, supporting each other against the current. Not one complaint, not one moment of hesitation—just seamless teamwork that spoke of absolute trust.

Cold droplets sprayed her face as Chestnut climbed the opposite bank, the water reflecting the last golden rays of sunlight filtering through the trees. For a moment, the scene looked like something out of one of her father's stories—warriors forging through water, determination etched on their faces.

"You've done this before," she observed as they regrouped on the far bank, water streaming from their clothes.

"Aye, many a time," Alasdair confirmed. "The rivers in the Highlands care no' for a warrior's need to cross them."

His accent gave the words weight and rhythm, turning even simple truth into something that lingered.

Jill found herself wondering what those Highland rivers looked like, what this man's homeland had been like twelve hundred years ago.

"The Highlands must be beautiful," she said softly, surprising herself with the wistfulness in her voice.

"Aye," Alasdair replied, something distant in his eyes. "Wild and free, like a beast that cannae be tamed."

As they continued, Jill noticed the youngest one—Cillian—studying her phone with undisguised curiosity.

"What manner of talisman is that?" he finally asked, pointing to where it was clipped to her belt. "It glowed and made sounds, like naught I've e'er seen."

His expression reminded her of her students back at the university—eager, curious, untainted by cynicism.

"It's called a phone," she explained, unclipping it to show him. "It's...a way to speak with people who are far away." How did one explain telecommunications to someone from the ninth century?

I sound like I'm giving the world's most bizarre history lecture. Except I'm explaining the future to the past.

Fergus moved closer, eyes alight with intellectual hunger. "Like a speaking trumpet? Or a message carried by birds?"

"Something like that." She smiled, despite herself. Their genuine curiosity was endearing. "Except it can reach anywhere in the world, instantly."

"Anywhere?" Tavish echoed, wonder and skepticism battling in his expression. "Even across the great sea?"

"Even there," she confirmed, unable to suppress the teacher in her that delighted in their fascination. "I could speak to someone in Scotland right now if I wanted to."

Alasdair's gaze sharpened with assessment. "Such power...in so wee a thing." His scrutiny swept over her, reevaluating. "Yer people must possess great magic."

The intensity of his regard made her feel suddenly self-conscious, as if he was seeing past her modern clothing to something deeper.

"Not magic," Jill corrected automatically. "Science. Technology."

"Is there a difference?" he asked, his question surprisingly philosophical.

Macrath grunted. "If it does what she claims, what matter if it's magic or no'? A blade kills whether forged by a master smith or conjured by a witch."

"But one follows the natural order, built on understanding the world," Fergus countered. "The other defies nature's very laws."

Before she could answer, a cold gust of wind cut through the trees, carrying with it a sickly-sweet odor of decay. The change in the warriors was immediate and alarming. They shifted into a tight formation, weapons appearing in their hands as if conjured.

"It's near," Alasdair growled, all traces of curiosity gone from his face. "The Brollachan hunts us still."

The hair on the back of Jill's neck stood up. The temperature seemed to drop several degrees in an instant.

Jill's hand moved instinctively to the rifle secured in its carrier on the saddle. "How can you tell?"

"The stench," Macrath muttered, his massive frame tense as a drawn bow. "Death follows where it treads."

Jill inhaled, detecting only the faintest hint of something rotten beneath the familiar pine and loam of the forest. The fact that they could sense something she barely perceived was unnerving.

Dad's stories about the Brollachan...the shadow that consumes life...it can't be real. But the warriors' reaction was too genuine to dismiss.

"We should hurry," she urged, suddenly eager to reach the safety of the ranch. Whatever this Brollachan was, she had no desire to meet it in the gathering shadows of the forest.

As they quickened their pace, Jill noticed a patch of vegetation beside the trail—withered and blackened as if burned, yet without any sign of fire. The sight sent a chill down her spine.

Just like in the stories. Life drained away, leaving only husks.

"Dinnae go near it," Alasdair warned, noticing her attention. "The creature's passage taints all it encounters."

His hand hovered near her arm, not quite making contact but ready to pull her back if necessary. The protective gesture wasn't lost on her—a warrior's instinct to shield despite having known her less than an hour. Despite the circumstances, the almost-contact sent warmth blooming beneath her skin.

The path widened as they neared the edge of the forest. Through the trees, the first glimpse of the lavender fields came into view, purple and gold in the late afternoon sunlight. Beyond them, the ranch buildings stood solid and reassuring.

The sight of home had never been so welcome. The familiar weathered cedar of the barn, the wraparound porch of the main house, the golden glow of windows against the darkening sky—all of it represented safety, normalcy, in a day that had veered sharply into the surreal.

"There it is," Jill said, pointing. "Home."

The word caught in her throat, suddenly heavy with meaning. Home, where her father apparently had answers to questions she hadn't even known to ask.

### CHAPTER 6

A lasdair's heart pounded as they stepped from the trees into open meadowland, the forest's protection falling away behind them. His gaze swept across the vast clearing, landing on strange structures that loomed ahead—too massive, too precise, too unnatural. The air thrummed with unfamiliar energy.

What manner of place is this?

The scent of flowers rode the breeze, sweet and strange—like home, but not. Fields upon fields of purple plants stretched out, their hue barely visible in the deepening twilight, reminding him painfully of Highland heather in bloom. But these unknown flowers were arranged in unnaturally perfect rows, stretching farther than any farm he'd ever seen. "Stay close," he murmured, voice low. "And be ready for anything."

"Ready with what?" Fergus replied under his breath, his hand twitching toward a sword long lost to the vortex. "Most of our weapons are gone."

"No' entirely," Macrath said, flexing his hands and adjusting the dagger at his belt. "We've still got these. And Tavish and Lachlan still carry their swords."

His leather bracer felt suddenly light against his forearm where his own sword would normally rest. The loss of his broadsword—the weapon that had seen him through a hundred battles—left him feeling naked, vulnerable.

Ahead, Jill guided her mount toward a towering structure she'd called a barn, riding with the ease of someone who'd spent her life in the saddle. The horse itself was



familiar, but its strange tack gleamed with polished metal—unlike any harness Alasdair had ever seen.

The scent of hay reached his nose, grounding and real. But it was layered with sharp, biting odors he couldn't name—like metal struck by lightning, or herbs distilled beyond recognition. And beneath it all hummed a low vibration that set his teeth on edge.

"What is that sound?" Cillian asked, eyes narrowing.

"I dinnae ken," Alasdair replied, voice quiet but steady. "But keep alert."

His eyes scanned the horizon, marking potential threats, possible escape routes, defensible positions—the instincts of a lifetime at war refusing to quiet even in this bewildering place. He found himself checking for signs of the Brollachan too, the creature's corrupt stench still fresh in his memory. One enemy he understood in this land of incomprehensible wonders.

The buildings unnerved him. Smooth walls loomed in the gathering darkness, too straight, too clean—like they'd been conjured by magic rather than built by hand. Metal beasts sat idle nearby, their purpose unknown.

Is this the land of the fae? Or some stranger place still?

A shadow flitted past in the dim light—a bird seeking its roost as night approached. At least some creatures remained the same across the centuries. The thought offered small comfort.

Jill dismounted with effortless grace, eyes flicking toward the house before returning to the warriors. Her grip on her weapon had loosened—an unspoken signal of trust that didn't go unnoticed.

"Wait here," she said, and disappeared into the barn.

Alasdair's gaze followed her, drawn despite himself. There was something about the way she moved—quietly assured, her spine straight, her purpose clear. She was protecting someone. That much was obvious from how her eyes kept darting toward the main house with concern. A parent? A child?

Or a husband?

The thought hit harder than it should. A sour twist bloomed in his gut, sharp and unwelcome.

A woman like her would be claimed already—someone inside that house waiting for her return. But the thought didn't sit well.

"She's a fine lass," Tavish murmured beside him, too low for the others to hear. "Carries herself like a chieftain's daughter."

Alasdair shot him a warning glance. "We're centuries from home, with a monster at our heels, and you're admiring the womenfolk?"

Tavish's lips quirked. "I'm a storyteller, brother. I notice things. And I notice how ye look at her."

Heat crept up Alasdair's neck, but he was saved from responding when Jill returned.

The weapon was gone. She approached with caution, but not fear.

"My father's on his way," she said, her amber gaze flicking again toward the house. "You'll need to wait out here."

"We mean no harm," he said gently. "You have my word as a MacTyre."

Jill studied him for a long moment. Then she nodded toward two wooden tables.

"You can rest over there. I won't be far."

He shared a glance with his brothers. They were being watched, but not cast out. Offered courtesy—but not trust. It was more than fair.

"The lass is wary," Tavish muttered, hand on his hilt.

"Aye," Alasdair agreed. "Wouldnae ye be?"

They followed her lead with slow, measured steps. Fergus scanned every window, eyes sharp as he assessed the new text. Macrath's fists clenched and unclenched, ready for a fight he couldn't yet identify. Lachlan walked close, his sword sheathed but his body tense, attuned to every sound. Cillian's wide eyes darted from one marvel to another, youth's curiosity battling with a warrior's vigilance.

Cillian leaned in close as they walked. "That strange contraption," he whispered, pointing to a metal beast with huge wheels. "Do ye think it's alive?"

Alasdair followed his gaze to the gleaming vehicle. "I dinnae think so," he answered, though he wasn't certain. "But stay away from it nonetheless."

"I have water in the barn," Jill called over her shoulder. "Please stay here."

She disappeared once more. Alasdair sat heavily on a bench, listening to the hum beneath the air and the whispers of his men.

"What now?" Lachlan asked quietly. "We're stranded. And nothing makes sense."

Alasdair ran a hand through his damp hair, still crusted with salt from their emergence from the sea. "We wait. We listen. We learn. If the druid's magic brought us here, perhaps there's magic that can send us home."

Before Alasdair could answer, the barn lit up—suddenly, brilliantly—like the noonday sun had been trapped inside. The warriors jerked upright, the harsh light painful after their eyes had adjusted to the twilight.

"By the saints!" Macrath exclaimed. "What kind of witchcraft?—"

"Peace," Alasdair said, rising to his feet with deliberate calm. His heart thundered, but his expression stayed neutral. His brothers needed steadiness. He would be it.

"We've seen stranger things today," he reminded them, though his own pulse raced. Light without fire. Weapons that thundered like lightning. A world transformed beyond recognition.

Jill returned moments later, carrying clear vessels filled with water. The light behind her still glowed.

"Water," she said, placing them on the table. "They're sealed to keep it clean."

Alasdair eyed the bottles. "Thank you." He accepted one, noting the strange ridges around the cap. When she opened it with a simple twist, he watched carefully.

The vessel was unlike anything he'd ever seen—clear as finest crystal, yet light as a feather. He turned it in his hand, marveling at how the water remained contained with no visible seal.

"That light in the barn," he said slowly, "how does it burn without fire?"

Jill paused, then gave him a long, unreadable look. As if she wasn't sure whether to be amused, startled, or concerned.

"It's called electricity," she said after a beat. "It's like...captured lightning. But safe."

Alasdair blinked. Captured lightning. Was this a jest? Or some new sorcery?

"Safe lightning?" Lachlan muttered. "What's next—water flowing uphill?"

"You'd be surprised what's possible," Jill murmured, her gaze lingering on him. Steady. Searching.

though her gaze lingered on Alasdair longer than necessary, as if trying to puzzle him out.

That look stirred something in his chest—a warmth that had no place in their current predicament. He forced himself to look away, focusing instead on the horizon where the sun had sunk below the distant mountains.

Then came the growl.

A terrible sound rolled toward them, growing louder. All six warriors rose instantly, hands at their weapons.

Alasdair's fingers closed around his dagger hilt, every muscle coiled to spring. The Brollachan? No—different. Nothing he'd ever heard before.

"Stay calm," Jill said, stepping forward with both hands raised. "It's just my family. A car. You're safe."

He didn't know what a car was, but he didn't like the way it moved—smooth and

silent save for that low, rumbling snarl.

He didn't relax, but he kept his blade sheathed, signaling with a glance for his brothers to do the same. Trust earned, not given. It had kept them alive this long.

Moments later two young men appeared—identical in appearance, wide-eyed at the sight of the armed strangers.

"Jill," one of them said, "what in the world?"

They looked nothing like her—brown-haired and broader-featured—but something in their posture marked them as kin. The protective stance of the one on the left spoke of a warrior's instinct.

Then another figure approached.

An older man, weathered and lean, with eyes that seemed to see through flesh and into spirit. Something about him felt...familiar.

Alasdair's skin prickled with an instinctive warning. There was power in this man, though of what kind, he couldn't say. His bearing reminded Alasdair of the druids back home—the quiet confidence of someone who wielded forces beyond the understanding of ordinary men.

"Welcome, warriors," the man said in smooth, fluent Gaelic. "I've been expecting you."

Alasdair's brow lifted, not in surprise but wary curiosity. Of course Jill's father spoke their tongue—she'd learned it somewhere. But hearing it again settled something in his chest he hadn't realized was strained.

The familiar cadence of home eased a tightness in his throat that had been there since their arrival. Yet something in the man's too-knowing gaze put him on edge.

"Ye speak our tongue. Ye know of us. How?"

The older man smiled, but it was the kind that held more secrets than warmth. "All in good time, berserker. All in good time."

The title made Alasdair stiffen. He knows what we are.

Memories flashed through his mind—the heat of battle rage, the power that flowed through his veins when the berserker spirit took hold, the fear in others' eyes when they witnessed it.

He clenched his jaw. Then he knows what was done to us. The betrayal. The vow.

"We seek answers," he said. "And a way home."

The man's eyes narrowed. "Are ye sure home is what ye seek...or justice?"

The words struck a chord, too close to the truth. They resonated in Alasdair's chest like a struck bell—justice for the betrayal, for the lives they'd been denied.

"Both," Alasdair said flatly. "We were promised wives. A future. A place to belong. We were betrayed, drugged, thrown into a maelstrom. If ye know who we are, then ye know what drives us."

"I know your kind," the man replied. "Warriors of great strength, and greater pain." He gestured to the tables. "Rest. Then we'll talk of how ye traveled more than a thousand years to reach this place."

A thousand years.

The words landed like a hammer, despite Jill having told them the same thing in the forest. Hearing it again, from this knowing man with ancient eyes, made it inescapably real. Around him, his brothers shifted in shock.

"A thousand?" Cillian echoed. "The lass spoke truth then. It cannae be..."

But Alasdair already knew. The signs were everywhere—metal beasts, fireless light, Jill's strange weapon. It was true.

The weight of it pressed on him, heavy as armor. A thousand years from their people. From their time. From the lives they were meant to live. What Jill had said in the forest had been shocking, but somehow hearing it confirmed by her father—a man who clearly knew more than he was saying—made the truth sink bone-deep.

He felt hollowed out, scraped raw. Everything they'd known—gone. Everyone they'd ever met or loved—dust for centuries. The crushing enormity of it threatened to drive him to his knees.

But when his gaze drifted to Jill—standing strong, her shoulders squared, her eyes unreadable—he felt something else rise up through the fog of confusion and grief.

Resolve.

She was solid, real. This strange place with its captured lightning and metal beasts might be incomprehensible, but she wasn't. Whatever age they'd landed in, people remained people.

The flowering fields swayed in the evening breeze. The sun still set. Warriors still stood by their brothers. Some things, at least, remained constant across the centuries.



"We have much to learn," Alasdair said, lifting his chin to meet the older man's gaze.  
"And ye have much to explain."

### CHAPTER 7

Alasdair's muscles coiled tight as he watched Conall settle onto the bench across from them. The stranger's eyes, sharp and knowing, seemed to pierce right through Alasdair's carefully maintained facade of calm. Suspicion gnawed at his gut.

Nothing about this place felt familiar—not the strange smooth surfaces, not the unnatural light glowing from the barn, and certainly not this man who seemed to know far too much about them. Each time Conall opened his mouth, Alasdair felt as if he were hearing a ghost—the accent and cadence belonged to their own time, not this strange future world.

The twins—William and Joe, Jill had called them—hovered nearby, their expressions a mix of wariness and curiosity. Jill herself stood behind her father, arms crossed, her amber eyes flicking between Conall and the warriors as if assembling pieces of a puzzle.

Alasdair found his gaze drawn to her more often than was wise. The way she carried herself, strong yet graceful, reminded him of the shield-maidens in the old tales. A woman of substance, not merely beauty. Her presence was oddly comforting in this bewildering world.

"You claim to have been expecting us," Alasdair said, forcing his voice to remain low and controlled. "Explain."

Conall's weathered face creased into a smile that did nothing to ease Alasdair's wariness. "It's a long story, lad. But the short of it is, you and your brothers have

traveled through time. You've come over a thousand years into the future."

Alasdair nodded grimly. He'd already heard this twice now—first from Jill in the forest and then from Conall when they'd arrived. The enormity of it had already crashed over him like a wave. Now, he needed answers, not repetition.

"Aye, we've gathered that much," he replied, his voice steady. "But how did ye know we would come? And why here, to your land specifically?"

Conall studied him with newfound respect. "Clever lad. The portal that brought you here has existed for centuries. It's one of several throughout the world. I settled near this one deliberately after I was cast through twenty-seven years ago—to help others who might follow."

"How did you know to expect us?" Fergus asked, leaning forward with interest.

"I didn't know exactly who would come through," Conall admitted, "but I've been monitoring the site for years."

As Conall spoke, Alasdair noticed how his fingers moved in subtle patterns, almost like the weaving of invisible threads. The hair on the back of his neck stood up as realization dawned.

"You're a druid," Alasdair said, his voice dropping to a dangerous growl. In an instant, he was on his feet, dagger drawn. His brothers followed suit, weapons appearing in their hands. "Like the one who cast us here."

The twins stepped forward protectively, but Conall raised a hand to halt them.

"Aye," Conall admitted calmly, making no move toward a weapon. "I was once a druid of the old ways. That's why they exiled me—I refused to use my powers as they

demanded."

"Druids sent us here to die," Macrath snarled, his massive frame tensed for violence. "Why should we trust another of their kind?"

Jill stepped between them, her eyes wide with shock. "What is happening? Dad, what are they talking about?"

"Stand aside, lass," Alasdair warned, not taking his eyes off Conall. "Druids are masters of deception. Whatever he's told you?—"

"If I meant you harm," Conall interrupted, still eerily calm, "I wouldn't have sent my daughter alone to find you. I wouldn't have opened my home to you."

Alasdair's grip on his dagger tightened. "And why wait for strangers from the past? What do ye gain from this?"

"You were cast out too?" Fergus asked, leaning forward. "From our time? But how?—"

"Da?" Jill interjected, her voice sharp with confusion. "What are you talking about? You told me you learned ancient Gaelic from your grandfather. You said our family had preserved it through generations."

A flash of guilt crossed Conall's weathered features. "I'm sorry, lass. There are things I haven't told ye. Couldn't tell ye, until now."

Alasdair's blood ran cold. "Ye mean to say," Alasdair continued, not lowering his weapon, "that ye too were flung forward through time by druid magic? Ye're from our time?"

Conall's gaze was steady. "When were you cast out?"

"The year of our Lord 839," Alasdair answered, watching Conall's reaction carefully.

A look of surprise crossed the older man's face. "I was born in 789, fifty years before your time. I was a druid in Alba for many years before my own brethren cast me out. I came through the same portal twenty-seven years ago."

Macrath spat on the ground. "More druid treachery!"

"Aye," Conall agreed, surprising them. "But sometimes treachery can be a gift, though we don't see it at first. I found my home here, my family. And now you have the same chance."

Jill's eyes flicked between her father and the armed warriors, fear and confusion warring in her expression. Alasdair found his resolve weakening at the sight. Whatever Conall had done, she was innocent in it.

He felt a sudden, unexpected pang of sympathy for the woman who had taken them in.

Slowly, deliberately, he lowered his dagger—though he did not sheathe it. A nod to his brothers had them easing their stances as well, though wariness remained etched in their features.

"And the Brollachan?" Alasdair asked, the memory of the shapeless creature sending a chill down his spine. "It came with us."

Conall's eyebrows shot up, genuine alarm flickering across his face. "The Brollachan? By all the saints...sometimes the rifts draw in more than their intended targets. Dark things, hungry things from the old world. This is grave news indeed."

"We fought it in the woods," Lachlan added, his voice steady though his fingers twitched as if reaching for his absent sword. "It retreated, but 'twas no mortal wound we dealt it."

"Ye ken of these creatures?" Alasdair pressed, studying Conall's face. If this man truly came from their world, perhaps he might hold knowledge that could help them fight the beast.

"Aye, though I've never faced one. They're shapeshifters—ancient evil that feeds on fear and chaos." Conall's weathered hand traced a protective symbol in the air. "If it's here, we'll need to deal with it before it grows stronger."

As Alasdair recounted their encounter, he noted his brothers' reactions. Fergus leaned forward, eyes bright with a curiosity that Alasdair couldn't help but envy. Macrath's hand kept straying to where his sword should have been, while Tavish paced restlessly behind them. Cillian stared at his hands as if they might hold answers to questions he dared not ask.

"Well," Conall said finally, "we'll deal with the beast. But first, you need a place to stay, to adjust. I can offer you shelter in the bunkhouse, and work here on the ranch in exchange for food and lodging."

"Work?" Macrath snorted. "We're warriors, not farmers. And we'll no' be taking orders from a druid."

"We're survivors," Alasdair corrected him firmly, though his eyes remained wary as he watched Conall. "And if working this land means shelter and food while we find our footing, then so be it." He turned to Conall. "What kind of work?"

He couldn't help but notice how Jill straightened slightly at his words, approval flickering briefly in her eyes. Something warm unfurled in his chest at that small

gesture of respect.

"Horses still need tending, fences still need mending - some things haven't changed in a thousand years." Conall's eyes twinkled. "Though I'll warn you, the horses are a bit more pampered these days."

A ghost of a smile touched Alasdair's lips despite himself. Horses, at least, were familiar. A touchstone in this bewildering new world. But then Conall's expression grew serious.

"You need to understand - there's no going back. The rifts only work one way. This is your world now. You'll need to learn our ways, our language." He paused. "Which brings me to my next point. I can help with that, though you may not like the method."

"More druid magic?" Alasdair's voice hardened, his fingers curling into fists. His hand dropped instinctively to his dagger again. Magic had cost them everything—their homes, their promised brides, their very lives as they knew them. "We'll learn your tongue the natural way."

"You don't have time," Conall said bluntly. "The world moves faster now. You need to communicate to survive. Without the language, you'll be vulnerable—and in this age, vulnerability can be deadly in ways you cannot yet imagine."

Alasdair felt the weight of leadership settling onto his shoulders as his brothers looked to him for guidance. If this was what it took to protect them...

Jill stepped forward and placed a hand on Alasdair's arm—the first time she had touched him. "I can vouch for my father," she said, her voice tight with conflicting emotions. "Whatever else he's kept from me, I know he wouldn't harm you."

The warmth of her touch sent an unexpected jolt through him. Her eyes met his briefly. There was both uncertainty and determination in them. The connection was fleeting but powerful, a moment of understanding that caught him off-guard.

"Do it," he said through gritted teeth. "But know this—if ye mean us harm, if this is some trick..."

"I would never harm those who share my fate," Conall said quietly.

Before Alasdair could question him further, Conall leaned forward, his eyes taking on an otherworldly gleam. One hand rose instinctively to the strange pendant at his chest—a piece of bone or stone, worn smooth with age. The air hummed with power as he began to chant in a language that made Alasdair's skin crawl.

The words seemed to writhe in the air, twisting and coiling around them like living things.

"Dad, what are you doing?" Jill's alarmed voice seemed to come from very far away.

A warmth began to build in Alasdair's chest, spreading outward. His vision blurred and panic clawed at his throat as the strange warmth reached his head, seeping into his very thoughts. He fought against it instinctively, his warrior's spirit rebelling against this invasion.

Memory flashed behind his eyes—McKinnie's betrayal, the druid's spell, the horrible paralysis that had preceded their journey through time. Was this another trap? Had they escaped one prison only to stumble blindly into another?

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it was over. Alasdair gasped, blinking rapidly as the room came back into focus. He opened his mouth to demand answers - and froze as unfamiliar words filled his thoughts.



"What...what have you done to us?" he asked, the strange new language feeling both alien and natural on his tongue. The words were there in his mind, as if they had always been there, yet he knew they had not been moments before.

"Given you English," Conall answered in the same tongue, looking rather pleased with himself despite the beads of sweat on his brow. "Though I couldn't do anything about that accent of yours. The lasses will no doubt fancy it anyway."

"Dad!" Jill exclaimed, stepping between them. "You just...how did you...what exactly is going on here?"

Her closeness sent a wave of unexpected awareness through Alasdair. The scent of her—lavender and something soft and strange, unlike anything he knew. It wrapped around him like a physical touch.

"Later, Jilly-bean," Conall said, his tone gentle but firm. "There's much to explain, but first our guests need food and rest."

Alasdair exchanged stunned glances with his brothers, seeing his own mix of awe and unease reflected in their eyes. This place held more wonders - and more dangers - than they could have ever imagined.

"I can understand the twins," Cillian marveled, his young face alight with wonder.

"Welcome to the 21st century, lads," Conall said, rising from the bench. "Now, who's hungry? Fair warning - the food's changed a bit too."

"Changed how?" Lachlan asked warily.

"Well, we don't typically start the day with ale, for one thing," Conall replied with a chuckle. "And you'll find the fare both more varied and less...gamey."

"If it fills my belly, I'll eat it," Macrath grumbled, though his eyes betrayed eager interest.

They followed Conall toward the bunkhouse in the distance, and Alasdair felt a curious mix of fear and excitement stirring in his chest. They were lost in time, yes - but they were also at the dawn of a new adventure.

Yet as they walked, Alasdair couldn't help but cast one last glance at Jill, her face a portrait of bewilderment and hurt. She had guided them here, welcomed them, given them water, treated them like people instead of monsters...and now discovered her own father had been keeping secrets from her all her life.

In that moment, he vowed silently that whatever new world they were building here, it would not be founded on lies. They had seen enough of deception's bitter fruit to last a thousand lifetimes.

"Are ye coming, lass?" he asked softly, pausing as they approached the bunkhouse.

Her amber eyes met his, a storm of emotions swirling in their depths. "I don't really have a choice, do I?" she replied. "Apparently, there's a whole world of things I don't know about my own family."

"Family secrets can be painful," Alasdair said, thinking of his own past, the brand that had marked him outcast, the name they'd been forced to bear. "But they dinnae define who ye are."

A small, grudging smile touched her lips. "That's...surprisingly insightful for someone who just arrived from the ninth century."

Despite everything, Alasdair found himself returning her smile. Perhaps they both had much to learn in this strange new arrangement.

### CHAPTER 8

Jill pushed open the bunkhouse door, her mind still reeling from the day's revelations as she led the warriors inside. Her fingers had been digging crescents into her palms since the moment her father cast that spell, and even now, the air around them still seemed to hum with ancient power. She flipped the light switch, and the warriors tensed as electric illumination flooded the space.

Years of questions suddenly crystallized in her mind as she watched the men cautiously enter. The odd books in her father's study she'd never been allowed to touch. His inexplicable knowledge of historical events, related with such vivid detail it was as if he'd been there himself. The strange, ancient lullabies he'd sung to her as a child—songs no linguistics professor had ever heard before.

A druid. My dad is an actual druid from medieval Scotland. The kind who can do magic spells and speak ancient languages and apparently give people instant English lessons.

She'd always known Dad was different - Mom's playful magician nickname suddenly felt a lot less whimsical. All those times she'd caught him murmuring to plants that mysteriously thrived, or the way animals seemed to understand him...it hadn't been her imagination after all.

The bunkhouse interior held the mingled scents of cedar, and lemon polish. Eight neatly made beds with tartan quilts lined the walls, their iron frames gleaming in the soft lamp light. A worn leather couch and armchair occupied one corner near a woodstove, while the other end held a simple kitchenette with modern appliances.

Fresh paint and new linens couldn't quite mask the building's age, but Jill had always found its weathered cedar beams and stone hearth comforting.

"This is where you'll be staying," she said in careful Gaelic, figuring they might appreciate their native tongue after whatever her father had done to give them English. "We keep it ready for seasonal workers during our two harvest times, and sometimes for visiting friends or family. It's well-stocked."

She stepped aside, allowing them to explore. She watched Alasdair's face as he surveyed the space, noting the furrow in his brow as he took in the unfamiliar surroundings. His brothers spread out like cautious cats, touching surfaces with varying degrees of curiosity and wariness.

"Beds," she explained, leading them into the sleeping area. "Though I imagine they're a bit different from what you're used to."

Cillian poked at a pillow with such intense concentration that Jill had to bite her lip to keep from laughing. He jumped when it gave under his finger, shooting her a sheepish look.

"It's so soft," he marveled, his face lighting up with wonder. "Like sleepin' on clouds, I'd wager!"

He can't be much older than my students, Jill realized with a jolt. A boy who should be studying and making friends, not fighting battles across centuries.

"Come this way," she said, gesturing toward the bathroom. "This is something you'll need to understand."

They crowded in the doorway as she entered the bathroom. "This is for washing and...other necessities." She pointed to the toilet. "Watch."

She wadded up some toilet paper and dropped it in the bowl, then demonstrated the flush. Their collective gasps and exclamations of wonder made her smile. Even Macrath, the gruffest of the bunch, looked impressed.

"By the saints," he muttered, peering suspiciously into the bowl, his thick brows furrowed. "Where does it go? Some manner of underground river?"

"Best not to ask," Tavish replied sagely, though his own eyes were wide with amazement. "Tis clearly some form of water magic."

That wonder turned to chaos when Lachlan discovered the shower. "Wait!" Jill lunged forward, but too late. Water sprayed everywhere, and she found herself pressed against Alasdair as she reached past him to turn off the tap. Her historian's mind cataloged the sensory details: the surprising heat radiating through his damp tunic, the scent of pine and leather and something indefinably male, the solid strength of him.

Oh no. Don't even think about it, Jill. Do not go there.

Clearing her throat, Jill stepped back, her clothes uncomfortably damp. "Actually, let me explain this properly. This is a shower - it's like having your own personal waterfall, but you can control how warm or cold it is." She demonstrated the knob, letting them feel the temperature change. "See? No need to heat water over a fire or haul it from a well."

Their expressions reflected varying degrees of wonder. Fergus reached out tentatively, letting the warm water run over his hand, his gaze analytical. "Like a hot spring," he murmured, "but at our command?"

"Exactly," Jill said, reaching for the bottles on the shelf. "And these? This is shampoo for your hair, conditioner to make it soft, and soap for everything else." She popped

open the shampoo cap. "Here, smell."

The brothers passed the bottle around, their reactions as distinct as their personalities. Macrath gave it a suspicious sniff, his nose wrinkling. "Smells like a meadow. Men shouldnae smell like flowers," he grumbled, though he took another curious whiff.

Tavish inhaled deeply, his expression appreciative. "Reminds me of summer in the Highlands," he said wistfully. "When the heather blooms purple across the moors."

Lachlan, entranced by the shower, barely glanced at the bottle. "Will it harm the horses if I smell of this?" he asked practically.

Fergus examined the bottle with interest. "What manner of ingredients create such a scent?"

Alasdair's eyes widened slightly as he detected the familiar aroma. "Like the fields outside," he said, recognition in his voice.

"My mother makes these herself," Jill confirmed. "Much better than whatever you were using before." She immediately wanted to kick herself - what if that was rude? But Alasdair just chuckled.

"Aye, a sight better than lye soap and river water," he agreed, examining the shower setup with new interest. His fingers traced the metal fixtures with something approaching reverence. "And this warm water - it never runs out?"

"Well, the hot water heater has its limits," Jill explained. "When it runs out you have to wait for it to reheat. So maybe don't all try hour-long showers on the same day. But yes, basically. Clean, hot water whenever you want it."

"Whenever we want," Cillian repeated softly, as if the concept was almost too

wonderful to believe.

A knock at the door announced William and Joe's arrival, arms loaded with bags of groceries. "We raided the pantry," Joe announced cheerfully, setting his bags on the counter, his movements energetic and playful.

"Hope you guys like sandwiches," William added, his expression more reserved but eyes alert as he assessed the warriors.

The kitchen tour nearly ended in disaster when Tavish discovered the refrigerator, yanking the door open with such enthusiasm that it rattled.

"Here's food to get you through tonight," she explained as her brothers unpacked bread, peanut butter, jelly, apples, and other simple foods. "We'll show you how to prepare it."

William demonstrated making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, his methodical approach earning nods of approval from the warriors. Joe's more enthusiastic explanations about the refrigerator drew them in, his hands gesturing animatedly as he explained how it kept food cold without ice.

As the impromptu meal came together, Jill noticed how Alasdair watched over his men—the quiet pride in his eyes as they discovered each new wonder, the gentle way he guided Cillian when he seemed overwhelmed, the patient explanations he offered when Macrath grew suspicious. Despite their imposing appearances, there was a tenderness in how they looked to him, and how he cared for them in return.

"You'll need new clothes," she said, eyeing their medieval garb. "We'll get some ordered. There are sleep clothes in the drawers for now." She gestured to the dresser, then added in English, "Nightshirts," testing their new linguistic abilities.

Alasdair translated automatically, then blinked in surprise when the words came out in English. The look of bewilderment on his face was so comical that Jill couldn't help but laugh. After a moment, he joined in, the rich sound of his chuckle doing funny things to her insides.

As they prepared to leave, Jill noticed Fergus hanging back, his gaze on the small bookshelf near one of the beds. She approached him quietly. "They're just some old paperbacks we keep out here for rainy days," she explained.

"Books are a treasure," he replied, running his finger reverently along the spines. "In our time, only the wealthiest or the clergy had access to such things."

Fergus pulled one out, his eyes widening as he opened it. "I can...I can read this," he said in astonishment, staring at the pages. "The words make sense to me, though I've never seen this script before." He looked up at Jill, wonder spreading across his face. "Your father's spell...it gave us the reading of this tongue as well as the speaking."

Jill blinked, momentarily stunned. "That's...I didn't even think about that." Her historian's mind raced with the implications. "Do you realize what this means? My father didn't just teach you modern English—he somehow transferred complete language comprehension, including a writing system that didn't even exist in your time." She shook her head, both impressed and unsettled by the depth of her father's abilities. "Just how powerful is druid magic?"

"Powerful enough to fling us across centuries," Tavish remarked from nearby, his tone wry but his eyes reflecting the same wonder as Fergus.

"I'll bring you some better books tomorrow," she promised, trying to regain her composure. "Some history books, perhaps. To help you understand this time."

William cleared his throat from the doorway. "We should get back. Dad will be



wondering where we are."

Turning to address them all, Jill squared her shoulders. "Get some rest. Tomorrow we'll start figuring out...everything else."

As she closed the door behind them, Jill exhaled deeply. The evening air had cooled, carrying the mingled scents of pine and earth. Crickets chirped their nightly chorus, the familiar sound anchoring her in the present even as her world spun off its axis.

"So...time-traveling warriors," Joe said, breaking the silence as they walked back to the house. "Didn't see that coming."

"And Dad's a druid," William added, his voice tight. "Been keeping that secret our whole lives."

"What has he gotten us into?" Jill murmured. The memory of Alasdair's steadfast gaze and the solidity of his presence lingered like a physical imprint. Her world had enough complications without developing feelings for someone from the ninth century.

Focus, Jill. They're lost and confused. They need a guide, not someone drooling over their leader's forearms.

As they reached the porch, they found their father waiting, his weathered face unreadable. The porch light cast strange shadows, making him look simultaneously familiar and foreign.

"I suppose you all have questions," he said softly, his accent thicker than usual.

Jill barked out a laugh that bordered on hysterical. "Questions? Oh, just a few. Like maybe why my perfectly normal rancher dad just cast a spell that would make

Hogwarts jealous? Or why you never mentioned being from medieval Scotland?"

Her father's lips twitched. "Would you believe me if I said I've been waiting your whole life to have this conversation?"

"At this point?" Jill shook her head, a reluctant smile tugging at her mouth. "Dad, I just taught a bunch of time-traveling berserkers how to use indoor plumbing. I'm pretty much ready to believe anything."

He chuckled, the familiar sound somehow making everything feel a bit more manageable. "Come on inside. Your mother's waiting. It's a long story, and she'll want to hear about our new guests."

As Jill followed him into the house, she cast one last glance at the bunkhouse. A light still burned in the window, silhouetting tall figures moving about inside. Whatever came next, she had a feeling life on their quiet ranch was about to get a lot more interesting.

### CHAPTER 9

The heavy oak door closed behind them as Jill, William, and Joe followed their father into the kitchen. She inhaled the familiar blend of pine cleaner and leather polish. Four steaming mugs of hot chocolate sat waiting on the worn kitchen table, marshmallows melting into little islands of sweetness. Her father must have prepared them before coming out to the porch.

"Figured we could all use something warm," Dad said, his Scottish brogue thicker than usual as he gestured for them to sit. "With the wee marshmallows floating like boats, just as ye liked when ye were small."

Jill's throat tightened at the gesture. So familiar, yet now cast in an entirely different light. This man who'd taught her to ride, who'd bandaged scraped knees and checked for monsters under the bed—this man was from another time entirely. The thought was too enormous to fully grasp.

"Thanks, Dad." She settled into her usual chair, the wood creaking a familiar welcome. "Though I'm not sure cocoa is strong enough for this conversation."

A ghost of a smile crossed her father's face. "Aye, perhaps we should've broken out the whisky."

"The good stuff you keep hidden behind the oatmeal?" Joe asked with a tentative grin.

"Ye know about that, do ye?" Dad chuckled, then sobered. "Sharp lad. Ye take after

your mother."

William leaned forward, his expression serious. "Dad, what exactly happened out there? How did you...do what you did with those men?"

The soft sound of her mother's cough through the baby monitor and Jill's eyes darted upward, her hands tightening around her mug. Despite everything—warriors from the past, druid magic, her father's true origins—Mom's illness remained the most terrifying thing in her world.

"She's resting easy," Dad assured her, his eyes following her gaze with a tenderness that transcended time.

Jill nodded, breathing in the rich chocolate aroma. "Dad, we need to talk about...well, everything. You being from the 8th century, the druid magic, those men from the past..."

"Ah." Her father's hand went to the pendant he always wore, its surface catching the lamplight with an otherworldly gleam. "I suppose we do need to have a proper family discussion about all this."

"It still doesn't feel real," Joe said, staring into his mug. "Even after what we saw you do with that stone."

"The language spell," William added, his expression analytical as he processed the implications. "And what you told us about being born in 789. I mean, we heard you say it out there, but..."

"But it didn't quite sink in," Jill finished for him. "It's one thing to hear something impossible, and another to actually process it."

Dad nodded. "The mind protects itself from truths too large to grasp all at once. I've had centuries—" he caught himself with a slight smile, "—well, decades in your perception, to become comfortable with who and what I am."

Jill still struggled to connect the father she'd known her whole life with the medieval druid he claimed to be. "When you first told us out there, it sounded...I don't know, almost like you were humoring those men. But you're serious, aren't you? You're really from the 8th century."

"Aye," Dad confirmed quietly. "From a time when Scotland was still forming itself, when druids still walked openly among the people. The stones spoke to us then, and the old trees remembered the first men to walk the glens. It's why I recognized those warriors for what they were the moment I sensed them arrive."

"So you're...what? Over twelve hundred years old?" William asked, his brow furrowed in concentration.

Her dad's lips quirked. "Well, when ye put it that way, it does sound a bit dramatic."

A snort of laughter escaped Jill. "A bit dramatic? Dad, you're practically prehistoric!"

"Oi! I'm not that old." He affected a wounded expression. "And I'll have ye know I still beat your brothers at arm wrestling."

"Not every time," William muttered, though his lips quirked upward.

Joe grinned, tension visibly leaving his shoulders. "Does this mean you used druid magic to win at Monopoly all those times?"

Their shared laughter broke the tension, and Dad's expression softened. "I'm still me. Still the same father who taught ye to ride and helped ye with your science projects. I

just...have a bit more history than most."

The absurdity of his understatement struck Jill. A bit more history. Like the Pacific Ocean has a bit more water than a bathtub.

"The stone?" Jill nodded toward his pendant.

"Druid magic." Her father's hand cupped the smooth surface. "I'm what they called an elemental. A keeper of the old ways."

"Like in those fantasy books I used to read?" Joe asked, eyes wide.

"Similar, though with less dramatic hand-waving." Dad demonstrated with an exaggerated flourish, making them smile. "The real magic is subtler. It's in the wind and earth, in the turning of seasons."

"And those nightmares I had as a child?" Jill asked. "The monsters you fought off?"

"Weren't nightmares." Her father's face grew serious. "The old world was dangerous, lass. And now and then, its shadows cross into ours."

A shiver ran down her spine as she remembered both her childhood terrors—the shapeless shadows that had oozed beneath her bedroom door—and Alasdair's description of the Brollachan. The warrior's steady voice had lowered to a warning rumble when he'd mentioned it, his stance shifting instinctively to place himself between her and potential danger. She'd noticed the way his shoulders had squared, how his hand had reached for a weapon that wasn't there, the protective intensity that had transformed his features.

"Like whatever the Highlanders were fighting in the woods?" William asked, leaning forward.

"The Brollachan." Dad nodded grimly. "Nasty piece of work, that one. Feeds on fear and innocence. Shapeless in its natural form, but it can take on aspects of whatever it consumes. Tis a shapeshifter. The ancient texts called it 'the hunger that walks.' We'll need to deal with it before it grows stronger."

Jill absorbed this, her mind whirling. "So many things make sense now. The weird herbs in the garden, the stones around the property line, the way you always seem to know when a storm's coming..."

"That time our treehouse collapsed," Joe added, "but none of us were in it because you suddenly decided we needed ice cream in town."

"Or when that mountain lion showed up near the south pasture," William said quietly, "and somehow changed direction before reaching us."

The puzzle pieces of their childhood rearranged themselves. That time in third grade when Tommy Jenkins had pushed her down and somehow slipped in mud that hadn't been there before. The way animals always seemed to respond to Dad's whispered words. The stories he told that felt more like memories.

"Your mother calls it my party trick." Her father's expression softened at the mention of his wife. "She knew what I was, ye ken. Accepted me, past and all."

"Does she know about the Highlanders?" William asked.

"Aye. Said it was about time I had someone around who understood my 'archaic turns of phrase.'" He grinned. "Your mother's a remarkable woman."

"She is." Jill studied her father's face—the familiar lines and creases that she now realized mapped experience from a time she could barely imagine. "So what do we do about our visitors?"

She thought about Alasdair—not just his striking appearance, but the quiet strength in how he'd guided his brothers through their bewilderment, the careful respect in his interactions with her family, the flash of wonder in his expression as he'd encountered each new marvel of the modern world. There was something compelling about a man who could maintain such dignity and purpose even when his entire world had been upended.

Dad sighed, suddenly looking weary to his bones. "Help them adapt, I suppose. I tried for years to find a way back, but time's a one-way road, lass. The kindest thing we can do is help them build a new life here. Time-travel isn't a round trip. It's exile. The portal only flows one way."

"You got stuck?" Joe asked quietly.

"Aye." He reached across the table, squeezing Jill's hand. "Though I'd say things worked out rather well for me in the end."

She squeezed back, feeling the calluses earned over decades of farm work. For a moment, the kitchen fell silent, each of them lost in thought.

Jill's gaze wandered to the framed diplomas on the wall—her bachelor's in Environmental Science, her master's in History, her PhD certificate. All that specialized knowledge, all those years of study, now brought into focus in a way she'd never imagined.

"I've been feeling like I've put everything on hold lately," she admitted softly, the words tumbling out before she could stop them. "All that schooling, that teaching position I stepped away from..."

Dad's eyes softened with understanding. "Ye believe coming home means ye've set aside your dreams?"



"Maybe temporarily," Jill replied thoughtfully. "Mom needs us now. That's what matters. But lately I've been wondering about my path forward. And now this."

"Oh, mo chridhe." Her father's voice was gentle. "Nothing ye learn is ever wasted. Who better to help six medieval warriors adapt to modern life than a historian with your expertise? Who better to understand the journey they've made?"

She nodded.

"Life rarely follows the path we map out," he said, his eyes wise and knowing. "Take it from someone who's lived through more than most. Sometimes the most meaningful work finds us when we least expect it."

"I suppose having six living witnesses from medieval Scotland will make for interesting research," Jill admitted with a small smile.

And one of them is already occupying far too much of my mental space, she realized with a start. What was it about him that kept drawing her thoughts back? The steadiness in his presence? The way responsibility seemed to sit so naturally on his shoulders? How he managed to retain his dignity even while facing an entirely alien world?

"Aye, and consider this—your life experience prepared ye to communicate with them in their native tongue, to understand their customs and fears. That's no small thing." Dad raised an eyebrow. "And that tall one, Alasdair? He looks at ye like you're the moon and stars."

"Dad!" She felt her cheeks warm. "That's not—I mean, he's just?—"

Is it that obvious? she wondered, mortified. I've barely met the man and I'm already so transparent that my father can see right through me?

"Just a handsome lad who happens to be exactly the sort of honorable warrior ye used to read about in those history books." Her father's eyes twinkled. "I've seen that look before, lass. Wore it myself once, looking at your mother. Still do."

"Well, I'm out," William said, standing up. "I need to check on those security lights we installed last week anyway."

Jill felt her blush deepen. "Right. Well. I should..." She gestured vaguely upstairs.

"Go on then." Dad's eyes twinkled. "Though mind ye, if he breaks your heart, I know several 8th-century curses that never go out of style."

"Dad!"

His laughter followed her up the stairs, wrapping around her like a familiar blanket. Her world had shifted on its axis, expanded beyond imagination, but some things remained constant. Her father was still her father, even if he came from a time more distant than she could truly comprehend.

As she climbed the stairs, Jill felt a curious lightness in her chest. Maybe Dad was right. Maybe everything—her education, her return home, even the appearance of six medieval warriors on their doorstep—was part of some larger design she couldn't yet see. For the first time in months, the thought of her paused academic career didn't seem so overwhelming.

And if her mind drifted to a certain green-eyed Highlander as she reached the landing, well—that was just one more complication in a day already overflowing with them. Though when she caught herself wondering what Alasdair might look like in modern clothes—jeans and a flannel that would highlight the quiet confidence in his bearing—she had to admit this was becoming something of a pattern. Her third Alasdair-related daydream in the past hour alone.

"Not wasted at all," she murmured to herself, glancing back at her father and brothers as they settled into conversation below. "Just being put to use in ways I never expected."

Well, no one could accuse life on the Greenwood ranch of being boring. Not anymore.

### CHAPTER 10

Jill's footsteps echoed softly on the polished wooden stairs as she made her way to her mother's room. The familiar scent of lavender and antiseptic mingled in the air, a constant reminder of her mother's ongoing battle with cancer. Her hand hesitated on the doorknob, steeling herself for what lay beyond.

Deep breath, Jill. Be strong for her.

This room had become the center of their world these past months—the reason she'd abandoned her teaching position, the reason Dad spent less time in the fields during the May planting, the reason the twins had taken on extra responsibilities.

Sarah Greenwood sat propped up against a mountain of pillows, a dog-eared copy of Jane Austen's "Persuasion" open in her lap. Though the chemotherapy had thinned her once-thick chestnut hair, her amber eyes—the same shade Jill had inherited—sparkled with undimmed curiosity as her daughter entered. Those eyes remained defiant windows to the fierce intelligence that cancer couldn't touch.

"Tell me everything," Sarah said, patting the bed beside her with hands adorned with the turquoise rings she'd collected since college. "Your father mentioned we have some...unusual guests."

Jill sank onto the mattress, the springs creaking softly beneath her weight. "Oh, Mom," she sighed, "you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

A knowing smile played on Sarah's lips as she reached for the mug of ginger tea that

helped with the nausea. "Try me, sweetheart. I've known about your father's...uniqueness since before we married."

Jill's eyebrows shot up. "You knew? All this time?"

"About him being a twelve-hundred-year-old druid who can work magic with stones and talks to plants when he thinks no one's watching?" Sarah's eyes danced with mischief, her hand finding Jill's with surprising strength. "Yes, dear. Hard to hide that sort of thing from the woman who shares your bed."

Jill couldn't help but laugh, the same laugh they'd shared over countless late-night ice cream sessions and early-morning garden walks. "And you never thought to mention it? 'By the way, Jill, your father was around when Charlemagne was crowned Emperor'?"

Sarah squeezed her daughter's hand. "Some secrets are meant to be kept, even from those we love most. But now, it seems the time for secrets is over." She shifted, adjusting the heating pad at her lower back. "So these warriors from the past—what are they like?"

Taking a deep breath, Jill launched into her tale. She described the encounter in the woods, the imposing figures of the Highlanders, and their strange, ancient garb. As she spoke, she noticed her mother's eyes brighten, color returning to her cheeks. It had been weeks since she'd seen Mom this animated, this engaged.

"Remember those illustrated history books you used to read me at bedtime?" Jill asked. "The ones about Scottish clans and battles? These men could have walked straight out of those pages."

"Complete with broadswords and fighting spirits?" Sarah replied, her voice strengthening with interest.

"And wolf pelts. The real thing, not synthetic replicas."

"Tell me about their leader," Sarah urged, leaning forward with the same intensity she'd once shown when discussing Jill's dissertation research.

Heat crept up Jill's neck at the question. She felt suddenly transparent, as if her mother could see right through to the confusing emotions she'd been battling since meeting Alasdair—the same way Sarah had instantly recognized her childhood crush on Bobby Peterson in fourth grade.

"His name is Alasdair MacTyre. He's tall, with broad shoulders and the most intense green eyes I've ever seen." She described his medieval attire - the rough-spun tunic, leather breeches, and the wolf skin draped over one shoulder. "They all wear wolf skins, actually. They were branded as MacTyres—Sons of the Wolf—when they were cast out as berserkers. It's...striking."

Sarah's knowing smile widened. "You certainly seem to have taken note of every detail."

"Mom!" Jill protested, her cheeks burning hotter. "I'm a historian. Observation is part of my training."

"Mmm-hmm." Sarah's eyes twinkled, the same expression she'd worn when Jill had insisted she was "just friends" with her senior prom date. "And does your historian's training typically include noticing how a man's eyes catch the light, or how his accent sends shivers down your spine?"

Jill buried her face in her hands. "Am I that obvious?"

"Only to someone who's watched you grow from a girl who collected arrowheads into a woman who collects degrees." Sarah patted her daughter's arm. "He sounds

remarkable."

"He is," Jill admitted softly. "He's so protective of his men—his brothers, he calls them. And the way he carries himself...he has this quiet authority that doesn't need to be shouted or proven. It just...is."

"Like your father," Sarah observed.

Jill nodded, surprised by the comparison but recognizing its truth. "I suppose so. Though Dad's never carried a broadsword, as far as I know."

"Don't be too sure about that," Sarah chuckled, her eyes distant with memory. "The night we met, he scared off two troublemakers who were harassing me at the county fair. He had something in his hand that gleamed like metal—never did tell me exactly what it was."

"Seriously? You never told me that story!"

"Some tales are saved for the right moment," Sarah replied with a wink. Then, her expression softened. "You've never talked about a man this way before."

"I haven't?" Jill fiddled with the edge of the quilt.

"No. Not even when you were seeing that archaeology professor—what was his name?"

"Marcus," Jill supplied. "And we only went out a few times."

"A few dull times, from how you described them. All talk of pottery shards and academic politics." Sarah studied her daughter's face. "This warrior has you thinking differently, doesn't he?"

Jill was silent for a moment, trying to pin down the unfamiliar feelings stirring within her. "It's strange," she finally said. "I've always been so focused on my career, on making my mark through my research. I never really thought much about...about family. About having children of my own someday." She glanced up, meeting her mother's understanding gaze. "But seeing Alasdair with his brothers, the way he cares for them...I keep having these thoughts."

"What kind of thoughts?" Sarah prompted gently.

"About what it might be like to have someone to build a life with. Someone who'd be a wonderful father." Jill's voice dropped to a whisper. "I've never really wanted that before—not seriously. But suddenly, I can picture it."

A deep chuckle from the doorway made them both turn. Conall Greenwood stood there, his weathered face creased with amusement. "I see our girl's been properly introduced to our guests," he said, moving to sit beside his wife.

"Don't tease her, Conall," Sarah chided, though her eyes sparkled. "Not every day a girl meets a man who can make her reconsider her entire life plan."

"Dad!" Jill protested. "I didn't say I was?—"

"Ye dinnae have to say it, mo nighean," Conall replied, his Scottish brogue thickening as it always did when he was emotional. The ancient Gaelic endearment—my daughter—wrapped around Jill like a familiar blanket. "It's written all o'er your face."

Jill watched her parents exchange a look filled with years of love and shared secrets. Her heart swelled with a mixture of admiration and hope - that her mother would beat this illness, hope that she might one day find a love as enduring as theirs.



"Get some rest, lass. Tomorrow will bring challenges enough," her father said gently.

Jill paused by the large window overlooking the bunkhouse before returning to her room. The lights were still on, silhouettes moving behind the curtains. Her mind whirled with the day's events as she prepared for bed. The thrill of discovery warred with uncertainty.

We're from entirely different worlds. Could it ever work?

"Get a grip, Jill," she muttered into her pillow. "He's from the ninth century. He probably thinks women belong in the kitchen."

But as sleep finally claimed her, her last conscious thought was that Alasdair MacTyre had looked at her with respect when she'd explained modern plumbing—had valued her knowledge without condescension, had sought her guidance without resentment, had seen her intelligence and strength and hadn't seemed threatened in the least. In a world where even her academic colleagues sometimes talked over her in department meetings, his attentiveness felt revolutionary.

And that, perhaps, was the most attractive thing of all.

### CHAPTER 11

A lasdair leaned against the doorframe of the bunkhouse, the unfamiliar wood pressing cool against his shoulder. The night's quiet was shattered by strange, far-off sounds—rumbles and roars he couldn't place. His gaze moved to his brothers, their faces mirroring his own unease, eyes darting into the shadows.

The scent of summer flowers carried on the breeze, reminding him of home even as everything else felt alien. A thousand years gone —the thought still left him breathless.

So different from the highlands , he thought, homesickness settling deep. There, the night brought true darkness, true silence. Here, even darkness seemed tamed, pushed back by glowing orbs dotting the landscape like earthbound stars.

They moved back inside and closed the door.

Cillian sat cross-legged on his bunk, fingers tracing the seams of his nightshirt. "It's so soft," he murmured. Alasdair's chest tightened with protectiveness. Cillian had been barely sixteen when he'd been cast out, branded as a berserker. Too young to be denied a normal life.

"Aye, 'tis a strange fabric. But we'll make sense of it, as we always do."

"Do ye think they have magic sheep here, to make such cloth?"

A chuckle escaped Alasdair. "I would not put it past this world of wonders."

A rhythmic thudding drew his attention to Macrath's restless pacing. "This place reeks of weakness," he spat. "Where are the calluses on their hands? I've seen no weapon-marks on any of them."

"Peace, brother. We know nothing of their strengths yet."

"How can men fight, swaddled in such luxury?" Macrath eyed the plush mattress with suspicion.

"Perhaps they have no need to fight," Fergus mused, his gaze locked on the electric lamp. "With power like this at their command..."

Alasdair examined the lamp, marveling at the steady light. No smoke, no flame, just pure illumination captured like sunlight in glass.

"Dinnae be fooled," Tavish cautioned. "Every age has its battles. Men will always find reasons to shed blood."

"Did ye see their machines?" Fergus asked. "The metal beasts that move without horses?"

"Aye," Lachlan agreed. "But what of honor? Of tradition? I heard no prayers before the meal, saw no weapons hanging proudly."

The weight of leadership pressed down on Alasdair's shoulders. How could he guide them when he himself was just as lost?

"I understand yer concerns," Alasdair said. "But we must have faith in ourselves, and in each other."

"Aye, and faith in ye, brother," Tavish added warmly. "Ye've never led us astray."

Gratitude warmed Alasdair's chest, but doubt gnawed at his gut. Conall's hospitality clashed with years of distrust towards druids. And Jill...

Warmth flooded him at the thought of her fierce amber eyes, her confidence as she showed them this new world. So unlike the women of his time, taught to lower their gaze before warriors. Jill had looked him directly in the eye, unafraid to correct him or guide him.

The women in his clan had been strong—birthing children without complaint, tending fields from dawn to dusk—but their strength was quiet, contained. Jill's was open, unapologetic. She carried her knowledge like he carried his sword—with practiced ease.

"We'll stumble together, aye?" he said, pushing the image aside.

Chuckles filled the room, easing the tension. "We are alive, and that is no small thing. Tomorrow, we learn. We observe. We find our place in this time."

He stepped outside again for one last look around. A light glowed in an upstairs window of the main house. Jill's room? The thought sent an unexpected thrill through him.

There was something about her that drew him—her intelligence, her courage, her patience with their bewilderment. In his time, a woman of such learning would have been viewed with suspicion. But here, it seemed natural.

Returning inside, only Cillian remained awake, eyes wide in the dim light. "Alasdair," he whispered, "is this...home now?"

The question hit like a blow. Memories assaulted him—peat smoke, crashing waves, the bite of northern wind. But those images were tinged with darker things: betrayal,

loss, endless battles.

"I know not, little brother. But perhaps...perhaps this is a chance for a different kind of home. One where our swords can rest."

"We were promised wives," Cillian said softly. "A place in the clan. Children of our own."

"That betrayal burns. But perhaps fate has brought us here for a reason."

"D'ye think we might find wives here? Build the families we were denied?"

Unbidden, his mind conjured an image of Jill tending a garden, small children with her eyes and his dark hair playing nearby. The vision startled him.

"Aye, I believe we might," he said. "This world is strange to us, but its people seek the same things—love, family, purpose."

"I like Jill," Cillian said slyly. "She was kind. And bonnie."

Alasdair felt his cheeks warm. "Aye, she is that."

More than bonnie, though. Jill was valued for her mind, her knowledge—a different kind of strength.

"And she looked at ye like ye hung the moon and stars," Cillian added impishly.

"Enough of your blether," Alasdair grumbled without heat. "To bed with ye."

As sleep claimed him, Alasdair's last thoughts were of amber eyes and the possibility of a future without endless war. Of a woman with fierce intelligence who had already

begun to claim a corner of his warrior's heart without even trying.

### CHAPTER 12

Jill curled up on their well-worn leather couch, her laptop balanced on her knees as she completed an Amazon order. The leather creaked beneath her, familiar and grounding when everything else in her world had shifted. She'd loaded up her cart with jeans, T-shirts, flannel shirts, and jackets from the big and tall section, aiming for sizes that would at least be close to fitting the displaced Highlanders. She'd figure out their shoe sizes later, but for now, the basics would do.

Her fingers hesitated over the keyboard as she tried to imagine Alasdair's exact measurements. Six-foot-two at least, broad shoulders that would strain most modern shirts, strong arms accustomed to wielding broadswords rather than smartphones. The task of translating ninth-century warrior builds into modern sizing charts was absurdly mundane given the circumstances.

Even as she hit "Place Order," she couldn't shake the image of Alasdair's piercing green eyes or the weight of the secret her parents had kept all these years. It felt surreal, buying modern clothes for warriors from another time, yet somehow, it felt like the least she could do to help them fit in—even if just a little.

What would Alasdair make of modern fashion? The thought brought a smile to her lips. The man wore a wolf pelt with such natural authority that somehow a simple t-shirt seemed inadequate in comparison. Though admittedly, seeing those broad shoulders in fitted flannel might not be altogether unpleasant...

The sound of footsteps on the stairs broke her reverie. Her father appeared in the doorway, followed by Will and Joe. All three men looked tired but determined. The

scent of her father's pipe tobacco—a smell she'd found comforting her entire life—now carried new significance. How many centuries had he carried that habit with him?

"I've ordered them some clothes," Jill said, turning her laptop so they could see. "Two-day shipping. Figured they'll need to fit in eventually."

"Good thinking," Will said, settling into the armchair across from her. Always practical, he'd moved past his initial shock and was clearly in problem-solving mode. "We should make a list of everything they'll need."

"I've already started one," Jill replied, pulling up a document on her screen. "Clothes, toiletries, basic electronics..."

"IDs," Joe added, perching on the arm of the couch. "They can't exactly go around town without some kind of identification."

Dad nodded thoughtfully. "I've a contact who might help with that. Someone who helped me when I first arrived."

"Another time traveler?" Jill asked, raising her eyebrows, her historian's curiosity flaring.

"No, lass. Just someone who doesn't ask too many questions when the price is right." Her father's lips quirked in a half-smile.

The implication hung in the air—her father had once been as lost as these warriors. The thought sent a pang through her chest. Had he been as bewildered, as vulnerable as Alasdair had looked when confronted with indoor plumbing?

"What about the neighbors?" Will asked. "What do we tell them?"



"For now, friends visiting from Scotland," Dad suggested. "Here to help with the farm for the summer. It might help to explain their...unusual ways."

Jill drummed her fingers on her laptop. "And the Brollachan? Dad, how dangerous is this thing really?" A chill crawled up her spine as she remembered the dread on Alasdair's face in the woods, the way his hand had instinctively reached for a weapon when he'd mentioned the creature.

A shadow crossed her father's face. "Dangerous enough. It feeds on fear and darkness. Can take different forms to lure its prey." He sighed heavily. "I'll need to teach ye all some basic protections. Just in case."

The thought of something out there—something ancient and malevolent enough to frighten hardened warriors—made the warm living room suddenly feel exposed. Jill glanced toward the windows, half-expecting to see something watching from the darkness.

"Druid lessons from Dad," Joe grinned, though his eyes held a hint of unease. "Never thought I'd see the day."

"The warriors will help hunt it," Dad added. "That's what they do best, after all. And they've faced this creature before."

Jill thought of Alasdair, his protective stance when they'd first met in the forest. She had no doubt he would face any threat head-on. That was who he was—a protector, a leader. The thought sent an unexpected warmth through her chest, pushing back against the fear the Brollachan had stirred.

"We should get some rest," Dad said, glancing at the clock. "Tomorrow will be a busy day. The lads will need their first real introduction to the modern world."

As her brothers headed upstairs, Jill closed her laptop and looked at her father. "Dad? Do you think they'll be able to adapt? To find happiness here?" The question wasn't just about the warriors—it was about Alasdair specifically, though she couldn't bring herself to say his name.

Dad's eyes softened. "Aye, lass. I did, didn't I?" His gaze drifted to the family photos on the wall—a quarter of a century of birthdays, graduations, holidays. A life built from the ashes of another. "They're strong men. And they have something I didn't when I first arrived."

"What's that?"

"They have each other. And they have us." He smiled gently. "Sometimes family is the only anchor you need."

Jill nodded, comforted by his words. As she headed upstairs, her mind drifted once more to the bunkhouse and its inhabitants. Tomorrow would bring new challenges, new adjustments. But for tonight, at least, everyone was safe.

And that, she decided, was progress enough for one extraordinary day.

### CHAPTER 13

Alasdair woke with a start, his hand instinctively reaching for a sword that wasn't there. The unfamiliar softness beneath him sent a jolt of panic through his body before memory flooded back. They weren't dead. They weren't even in their own time anymore.

The events of the previous night came rushing back - the betrayal, the vortex, and then...this unfamiliar world. Alasdair sat up, his eyes adjusting to the dim light filtering through unfamiliar coverings on the windows. His brothers lay sprawled on similar beds around him, their chests rising and falling in the steady rhythm of sleep.

In their own time, they would have been awake at dawn, alert and ready. Years of battle had made light sleepers of them all. Yet here, cradled in these impossibly soft "mattresses," they slept like babes, untroubled by the constant vigilance that had marked their lives as warriors. All except Alasdair, whose burden of leadership never truly lifted, even in sleep.

His stomach growled, reminding him of the meal they'd shared the night before. That magical cold box—what had Jill called it? A "refrigerator"?—had held fruit and cheese, and those odd, sticky sandwiches she'd called "peanut butter and jelly." The taste had been strange, sweet and salty in a way he couldn't quite place, but surprisingly satisfying.

Alasdair's gaze fell on the door Jill had shown them last night. The "bathroom," she'd called it. Curiosity and the promise of hot water drew him to his feet. Inside the small chamber, he turned the knob as she'd demonstrated. Water gushed forth, steam rising

in lazy spirals. He stepped under the spray, gasping as warm water cascaded over his skin.

"By all the saints," he murmured. The sensation was unlike anything he'd ever experienced - a waterfall at his command, as hot as he desired. In his time, a bath meant hours of hauling water, heating it over fires, then enduring the inevitable chill as it cooled too quickly. Only the wealthiest nobles enjoyed anything close to this luxury.

A pounding on the door startled him from his reverie. "Oi, Alasdair!" Macrath's gruff voice called. "Ye better not have used all the hot water, ye great numpty!"

Alasdair chuckled, shutting off the flow. "Patience, brother," he called back. "There's plenty for all."

"And what of the rest of us?" came Tavish's voice, tinged with mock outrage. "Are we to smell like yesterday's battle while ye preen like a laird's lady?"

"Dinnae fash yersel'," Alasdair replied, grinning despite himself. "The miracle of hot water awaits ye all."

Wrapping a soft cloth around his waist - a "towel," Jill had called it - Alasdair emerged to find most of his brothers already dressed and eager to explore their surroundings. Daylight now streamed through the windows, revealing a world transformed by morning light.

As the others took turns with the miraculous shower, Alasdair dressed in his worn clothing, grimacing at the state of it. After the clean scent of the soap, the stale odor of travel and battle that clung to his tunic seemed all the more noticeable.

"Shall we see what lies beyond these walls?" Fergus suggested, his scholarly

curiosity evident in his bright eyes. "I've a mind to understand this place better."

"Aye," Alasdair agreed. "But remember—we're strangers here. We observe before we act." His mind flashed briefly to the Brollachan that had followed them through time. Somewhere out there, that shadow lurked, a danger to these kind people who had taken them in. They would need to be vigilant, despite the peaceful appearance of this place.

Outside, the morning air was crisp with early summer freshness, scented with pine and something sweet he couldn't quite place. The farm spread before them, bathed in golden light. Fields of purple stretched to the horizon, their sweet scent carried on the breeze. The lavender, he realized.

His brothers naturally gravitated toward the horse paddock, drawn by the familiar in a world of strangeness. Lachlan was already climbing the fence, a rare smile breaking across his usually stoic face at the sight of the fine animals within.

"They're magnificent beasts," he breathed, extending a hand toward a mare who approached.

"Aye, that they are," Alasdair agreed, watching as the horse nuzzled Lachlan's palm.

In the distance, strange metal beasts crawled along what Jill had called "roads," their rumbling engines carrying faintly on the wind. Above, one of those flying machines—"airplanes," he remembered—traced a white line across the impossibly blue sky. Such wonders, yet here among the horses and fields, there was still something timeless, something that spoke to the warrior in him that yearned for peace.

"It's a fine holding," Alasdair murmured, more to himself than his brothers. His chest tightened with an unfamiliar longing. This was what they'd fought for, what they'd

been promised - land, a place to call home. And now, by some twist of fate, they found themselves here, in a world beyond imagining.

The sound of a door opening drew his attention to the main house. Jill's father emerged onto the large porch, lifting a hand in greeting.

"Breakfast in half an hour, lads!" Conall called, his voice carrying clearly across the yard.

Alasdair raised a hand in acknowledgment, noticing the slender figure that appeared beside Conall. Jill. Even at this distance, her straight posture and confident stance were unmistakable.

A strange warmth bloomed in his chest at the sight of her. There was something about the lass that drew him—her courage in facing down six armed strangers, the way she'd gently guided them through the bewildering maze of modern conveniences.

Would a woman like that ever look twice at a man like me? The thought surprised him with its intensity. A relic from another time, with naught but my sword arm and battle scars to recommend me?

His brothers had now scattered across the yard, drawn to different aspects of the farm. Lachlan remained with the horses, while Fergus examined an unusual metal contraption near the barn. Cillian and Tavish peered into what appeared to be place for forging or tinkering, while Macrath had found himself a perch atop a wooden fence, surveying everything with wary interest.

"Think the food will be as strange as those sandwiches last night?" Cillian called over, interrupting Alasdair's thoughts.

"Mayhap," Alasdair replied. "But did ye no' enjoy them?"

"Aye," Cillian admitted with a grin. "I've never tasted anything like it."

As his brothers continued exploring, Alasdair found himself taking stock of their situation. They were alive, when by all rights they should be dead. They had shelter, food, and the promise of work. It wasn't the life they'd imagined, but it was a second chance.

For the first time in years, Alasdair felt a flicker of hope. They were strong, they were together, and they would find their way.

"She's a bonnie lass," Macrath observed, suddenly appearing at his side and following his gaze toward the house where Jill had disappeared inside.

"Aye," Alasdair agreed, seeing no point in denial. "And clever too. Not many would have handled six armed strangers with such courage."

"Nor offered them shelter and food," Fergus added, joining them.

"We'll make this work," Alasdair murmured, his resolve hardening. "Whatever it takes. We owe them that much, at least."

The promised wives and families of their time had been nothing but lies, bait for a cruel trap. But perhaps, just perhaps, this world offered different possibilities.

She would want a modern man, surely. Someone who understood her world, who could share her interests. Not a warrior from another time who marveled at indoor plumbing. Yet there had been something in the way she'd looked at him last night—a curiosity, perhaps, or even a spark of interest that mirrored his own.

Don't be a fool, he chided himself. She's been kind, nothing more. Don't mistake hospitality for anything deeper.

"We have some time before the meal," Alasdair said, turning back to his brothers. "Let's explore this farm, learn what we can."

The men nodded eagerly, already drifting back toward different parts of the property. Alasdair watched them go, pleased to see curiosity replacing wariness in their eyes. As he turned to examine a row of peculiar wooden boxes at the field's edge—perhaps some kind of storage?—he glanced once more at the main house.

Aye, he thought as he continued his exploration. They would make this work. And perhaps, just perhaps, they'd find more than just survival. They might find a home.



### CHAPTER 14

Jill hurried down the hallway, knocking on her brothers' bedroom doors. The sun was barely peeking over the horizon, and anxiety fluttered in her chest. How exactly did one prepare breakfast for six medieval warriors?

"William! Joe! Breakfast duty!" she called. She pushed open William's door first, the hinges creaking in protest.

William emerged from his blankets, hair disheveled. "Already?" he mumbled, squinting.

"Dad invited the Highlanders for breakfast. These guys are used to hard physical labor. A couple of toaster pastries aren't going to cut it."

In Joe's room, enthusiasm greeted her instead of drowsiness. "They're coming for breakfast? Awesome!" Joe was already pulling on a shirt. "Do you think they'll show me how to sword fight?"

"Let's just focus on feeding them first," Jill cautioned.

The smell of bacon wafted up the stairs, and her stomach growled. In the kitchen, their father stood at the stove, a content smile on his face. Jill reached past him to turn down the burner.

"Morning, kids," he greeted, his eyes bright. "Hope you're ready for an interesting day."

There was something different about him today—an unmistakable lightness, his Scottish accent flowing more naturally as if being himself fully for the first time in years.

"Feeding an army?" Jill quipped, eyeing the ingredients piled on the counter.

Joe elbowed her. "If you'd traveled through time a thousand years, you'd be hungry too."

"They're berserkers, Joe," William muttered, shuffling into the kitchen. "Not exactly the kind of guys you want to mess with."

"They're men," their father corrected gently. "Lost and far from home. Not so different from what I once was."

A movement outside caught Jill's eye. In the yard stood six men, examining various aspects of the farm with obvious curiosity. Her pulse quickened at the sight of Alasdair, whose presence seemed to anchor the others even as they explored.

When breakfast was ready, Jill stepped outside into the crisp morning air. The berserkers turned, their faces a mix of wariness and interest. Alasdair called out to his men in Gaelic, his deep voice carrying across the yard.

"A-mhàin bidh cùirteis, mo bhràithrean," he instructed. Be courteous, my brothers.

As Alasdair approached, Jill's breath caught. The morning sunlight illuminated him in a way the dim evening light hadn't allowed yesterday. His dark hair was still slightly damp from the shower, his green eyes meeting hers with an intensity that made her breath catch.

Without thinking, she reached up to straighten his awkwardly folded collar. The

moment her fingertips touched his skin, she felt a jolt of electricity. Alasdair went completely still, his eyes widening.

"Sorry," she murmured, quickly withdrawing her hand. "Your collar was—it doesn't matter."

She gestured toward the house. "Biadh," she said carefully in Gaelic. Food. "Food. Come eat."

Alasdair nodded, a small smile playing at his mouth. "Tapadh leat," he replied. Thank you.

Inside, William and Joe had composed themselves, William setting out plates while Joe poured coffee. The kitchen suddenly felt very small with the presence of these men from another time.

"Boys," Conall greeted. "I believe you met my sons last night, but in proper light—this is William and Joe. And you've met my daughter, Jill."

As they settled at the long table, Jill's mind raced through everything she'd learned about medieval Scottish hospitality. "Fàilte gu ar dachaigh," she said. Welcome to our home.

Surprise flickered across Alasdair's face before he responded, "Tapadh leat airson d' fhàilteachas." Thank you for your hospitality.

The berserkers handled modern utensils with determined focus, occasionally glancing at the Greenwoods for guidance. Macrath eyed the syrup with suspicion, while Fergus enthusiastically drizzled it over his pancakes.

"Sweet as honey, but thinner," Alasdair observed, clearly enjoying the taste.

"The syrup comes from maple trees," Jill explained. "We tap the trees in early spring. It takes about forty gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup."

Fergus looked up with interest. "Ye harvest from the trees without harming them?"

"Exactly. The tree naturally heals afterward."

The conversation began to flow, awkwardness giving way to interest. Joe ventured his first question. "What's the coolest thing you've seen so far in our time?"

"The shower," Cillian answered without hesitation. "Water hot as ye please, whenever ye want it."

"Aye," Macrath agreed, surprising everyone. "Though these 'pancakes' might be a close second." He had somehow stacked five on his plate.

"The lights," Tavish added thoughtfully. "Fire tamed and contained, without smoke or danger."

William, initially reserved, began asking practical questions about swordcraft and armor, while Joe demonstrated how to pour syrup. Even Macrath relaxed, his gruff exterior softening as he reached for seconds.

"So let me get this straight," William said. "You guys were betrayed, poisoned, thrown into a magical vortex, and ended up here?"

"Aye, that's the truth of it," Alasdair replied, his eyes revealing a depth of pain his light tone couldn't disguise.

Jill's chest tightened. What must it be like to lose everything—your home, your time, your entire world? A pang of worry flickered through her, remembering the

Brollachan was still out there somewhere.

When Jill rose to refill the coffee pot, she stumbled slightly, her hand brushing against Alasdair's shoulder. Their eyes met, and for a breathless moment, everything else faded away.

As forks scraped against empty plates, Jill realized this was just the beginning. Whatever challenges lay ahead, this moment felt like the start of something extraordinary.

"Well," Conall said, rising, "there's work to be done. The lavender won't harvest itself."

"We're ready to earn our keep," Alasdair replied. "Just tell us what needs doing."

Jill stepped forward. "I can show them the fields, Dad. Explain the harvesting process."

Her father nodded approvingly. "Good idea. No one knows more about proper harvesting techniques than you do."

As they filed out, Jill caught her father's knowing smile. She watched Alasdair waiting for her by the door, his eyes never leaving hers.

"This is going to be interesting," she murmured to herself. Interesting indeed.

### CHAPTER 15

Breakfast had concluded with plans to tour the lavender fields, but as they'd filed out of the house, Conall had placed a hand on Alasdair's shoulder, requesting a private word. The others had continued with Jill toward the purple fields while Alasdair followed Conall in a different direction.

Alasdair's boots crunched on the gravel path as he followed Conall towards the ancient oak tree. The morning air was crisp and clean, so different from the smoke-filled halls of his time. His nostrils flared, taking in the unfamiliar scents - the sharp tang of freshly cut grass, the sweet aroma of blooming wildflowers, and something acrid and strange that he couldn't quite place.

Exhaust, he remembered Jill calling it. The breath of those metal beasts that roared along the distant roads.

His heart hammered in his chest, a war drum of anxiety and anticipation. He'd been in this position before, waiting for the inevitable dismissal. The familiar weight of responsibility pressed down on him—five brothers who looked to him for leadership, for protection, for a future he wasn't sure he could provide.

He steeled himself for the words he was sure would come. Thrice before they'd found temporary refuge with clans seeking their berserker strength, only to be cast out once the battles were won. McKinnie's betrayal had merely been the worst of many.

As they reached the oak, Conall turned to face him. Alasdair studied the older man's weathered face, searching for signs of the duplicity he'd come to expect from druids.

But Conall's eyes held only a steady warmth that left Alasdair feeling oddly unsettled.

"I imagine you're expecting me to ask you to leave," Conall said, his voice gruff but not unkind.

Alasdair's muscles tensed, ready for the blow. "Aye, it wouldnae be the first time."

To his surprise, Conall chuckled. "Well, ye can relax. That's not why I brought ye out here."

Confusion washed over Alasdair. "Then why...?"

Conall gestured towards the sprawling fields beyond. "I want to talk about how we can help each other."

Alasdair's brow furrowed. "Help each other?"

"Aye," Conall nodded. "I ken what it's like to be a man out of time. When I first arrived here, I had no one. Had to figure out how to feed, clothe, and shelter myself. It was...difficult."

The admission caught Alasdair off guard. He'd never considered that this druid might have faced similar challenges. "How did ye manage?"

"Got a job at a ranch, like this one," Conall said, his eyes distant with memory. "Slowly made my mark on the world. But it was hard. I dinnae want it to be that way for you and your men."

Alasdair's suspicion warred with a growing sense of hope. "What are ye proposing?"

"Ye can stay here," Conall said, meeting Alasdair's gaze. "Learn what ye need to

know about this time. Help with the ranch work - we're about to start harvesting, and we could use the extra hands as we haven't stated hiring yet. In return, we'll teach ye what ye need to survive in this world."

It seemed too good to be true. "And if we want to leave?"

Conall shrugged. "Then ye leave. I'm not your jailer. But I'd like to help if ye'll let me."

Alasdair's mind raced. The offer was generous, more than they could have hoped for. "I've never trusted druids," he admitted, the words harsh but honest.

Conall nodded. "I understand. And I dinnae expect ye to trust me right away. But give us a chance, and I think ye'll find we're not all bad."

Alasdair considered the man's words. The thought of having a safe place for his brothers, of learning to navigate this bewildering world, was tempting. They deserved a chance at peace, at building a life beyond constant battle and rejection.

But caution still held him back. "How do I know ye're not lying?"

Conall's lips quirked in a half-smile. "Ye don't. But time will tell. If I'm a liar, ye'll not find yourselves easy marks. And if I'm telling the truth..."

"Ye'll find us to be hard workers," Alasdair finished, a grudging respect growing for the older man. Whatever else Conall might be, he had the sense to speak plainly, without flowery promises.

Conall nodded, then his expression grew serious. "There's one more thing. My wife and daughter are here on this ranch. Can I trust you and your men around them?"



The question hit Alasdair like a physical blow. The implication that they might harm women...But he understood the need to ask. "We are all honorable men," he said firmly. "Ye have my word as a MacTyre. No harm will come to your family by our hand."

The image of Jill flashed in his mind—her warm amber eyes, the way she'd reached to fix his collar that morning, her fingers briefly brushing against his skin. The memory of that touch lingered, a whisper of warmth in a world that still felt cold and strange.

The oath sat heavy on his tongue, binding in a way that transcended time itself. The name MacTyre—once thrust upon them as an insult—had become their bond of brotherhood, their code of honor.

Conall studied him for a long moment, then nodded. "Alright then. Ye can stay, as long as ye follow my rules. We'll take it day by day, see how it goes."

Relief washed through Alasdair like a spring tide. To have shelter, work, and time to adapt was more than he'd dared hope for.

"Thank ye," he said simply, the words inadequate but sincere.

"Don't thank me yet," Conall replied with a wry smile. "Wait until ye've spent a day harvesting. It's harder work than ye might think."

Alasdair's lips twitched. "We're no strangers to hard work. We'll earn our keep."

As they walked back towards the house, a tension he hadn't realized he was carrying began to ease. For the first time since arriving in this future, he felt a glimmer of hope. His gaze drifted to the porch, where Jill stood watching, her amber eyes curious, her long braid catching the morning light.

Their eyes met, and warmth bloomed in his chest. He thought of their breakfast together, the way she'd patiently explained each unfamiliar food, the spark of intelligence in her eyes, the grace with which she moved.

In his time, women of such learning were rare—cloistered in convents or serving as healers. But Jill stood tall, educated and confident, with no trace of fear or subservience.

"Your daughter," Alasdair said suddenly, "she's a scholar?"

Conall glanced at him, his gaze knowing. "Aye. Has a doctorate in history, specialized in medieval Scotland, in fact. Taught at a university before coming home to help when her mother fell ill."

A doctor of history. The concept was foreign, yet oddly fitting. Who better to help them understand this new world than a woman who had studied their old one?

"She's agreed to help ye all adjust," Conall continued. "Teach ye what ye need to know about modern life."

Alasdair nodded, his gaze drawn back to Jill. She raised a hand, a smile playing at her lips. He returned the gesture, feeling oddly self-conscious.

"Good," he said simply. "We have much to learn."

Conall was silent for a moment, then added casually, "She's never taken to strangers so quickly before. Especially not six armed men showing up in the middle of the night." A knowing look crossed his weathered features. "Seems particularly interested in helping you settle in."

Something in the older man's tone made Alasdair's pulse quicken. Could it be that Jill

felt the same inexplicable draw that he did? The thought was both exhilarating and terrifying. What could a man like him possibly offer a woman of such learning and grace?

And perhaps, he thought privately, the lessons would extend beyond the modern world's unusual devices and customs. Perhaps they would include the unfamiliar warmth that spread through his chest each time Jill's amber eyes met his—a feeling he hadn't experienced in far too long.

### CHAPTER 16

The early morning sun warmed Jill's back as she led the berserkers through the fields, the scent of the early June blooms rising with each step. After showing the warriors to the bunkhouse the previous evening, she'd insisted on giving them a proper tour of the farm. Her gaze drifted to Fergus, who walked slightly ahead, his shoulders tense as he took in the unfamiliar landscape.

"The purple plants—they're important to your family?" he asked, hesitantly touching a stem.

"Yes, it's lavender," Jill explained, breaking off a small sprig and crushing it between her fingers. "Smell," she offered, extending her hand.

Fergus leaned in cautiously, then his eyes widened with recognition. "Like the oils your mother uses for healing."

She nodded, pleased. "Exactly. We harvest it, dry it, distill it for oil. It's how we make our living."

"Think we can put them to work?" William asked with a raised eyebrow. "Joe and I could use help mucking out the stalls."

Jill shot her brother a warning glance, but unexpectedly, Fergus stepped forward, his chin lifted proudly.

"We are here tae earn our keep," he said, his accent thick but his words clear. "Show

us what needs doing."

The dignity in his voice despite their displaced circumstances touched something within her. These weren't men looking for charity or pity. They were warriors seeking to prove their worth, even in this strange new world.

"Fair enough," William replied, clearly taken aback by the directness. "The north paddock needs clearing, and the horses need feeding."

"We can handle that," Tavish replied, glancing at the others. "Lachlan knows horses well."

Over the next few hours, Jill found herself constantly amazed by the berserkers' adaptability. They threw themselves into each task with enthusiasm, whether it was feeding chickens or harvesting early blooms. She smiled as Macrath, brow furrowed, carefully clipped stems with the shears she'd given him.

"Ye must be precise," she'd explained, demonstrating the proper technique. "Cut just above the woody part."

"Like preparing herbs for battle wounds," he'd muttered, his large hands surprisingly deft with the delicate task.

"They're not half bad," Joe murmured, coming to stand beside her near the edge of the field. "Might be out of a job soon."

Jill elbowed him playfully. "Don't let it go to your head. You're still on irrigation duty this afternoon."

"Come on, Jill! Fergus just carried two baskets of cuttings like they weighed nothing. How am I supposed to compete with that?"

She laughed, watching as Fergus indeed balanced another heavy basket on his shoulder with ease. "Different strengths, Joe. I doubt he could program the irrigation system like you did last month."

Near midday, Jill glanced toward the oak tree where she'd last seen her father and Alasdair in deep conversation. She'd been curious about what they were discussing, but had respected their privacy. Now, she spotted Alasdair making his way toward the fields alone, his expression thoughtful but lighter somehow. Whatever her father had said to him seemed to have eased some burden.

As he approached, her pulse quickened in a way that had nothing to do with the heat or exertion. For a man who'd lost everything only to be thrust into an incomprehensible future, he carried himself with remarkable dignity.

"The others are quick learners," she said as he reached her, gesturing toward where Cillian and Tavish were carefully bundling lavender stems.

"Aye," Alasdair agreed, his gaze following her hand. "We adapt. We must." After a moment, he added, "Your father is a good man. Not what I expected from a druid."

The hesitant admission surprised her. "He's been keeping secrets all my life, apparently, but yes. He is a good man."

Alasdair nodded, then pointed toward the irrigation pipes running between the rows. "These water channels—cleverly done."

Jill smiled, appreciating his attempt to understand modern technology. "Would you like me to show you how they work?"

Without thinking, Jill placed her hand on his arm to guide him toward the control valves. The heat of his skin sent a jolt through her that caught her off guard. Hard

muscle tensed beneath her touch, then relaxed. A flash of her father's warning about the Brollachan crossed her mind—they should all stay close together with that creature still lurking somewhere nearby. Quickly withdrawing her hand, she knelt and demonstrated how the irrigation system worked, hyperaware of Alasdair as he crouched beside her.

His proximity was distractingly pleasant. When understanding dawned in his eyes, the pride that swelled in her chest took her by surprise.

"You're a quick study," she said, unable to keep the admiration from her voice.

Alasdair's gaze met hers, a warmth in them that made her catch her breath. "I have a good teacher," he replied, the corner of his mouth lifting in a small smile. "Ye explain things clearly, without making us feel like fools."

"Is that how others treated you?" she asked, her voice softer than intended.

His eyes darkened briefly. "Berserkers were weapons first, men second. Useful in battle, but feared otherwise."

The simple truth of it struck her heart. How many academic papers had she read that discussed berserkers as phenomena rather than people? Had she ever truly considered the humanity behind the historical accounts?

"Well, you're not fools," she replied, suddenly shy. "Just...displaced."

The moment was broken by Lachlan calling from the paddock. They turned to see him gently stroking the nose of their notoriously skittish mare. The horse nickered, completely at ease under his touch.

"Well, I'll be," William muttered, impressed. "Looks like we've got ourselves a horse

whisperer."

"He's always had a way with them," Alasdair said, pride evident in his voice. "Back home, even the wildest stallions would calm under his hand."

As the day progressed, Jill found herself constantly torn between amusement at the berserkers' mishaps - like when Tavish accidentally turned on the pressure washer and soaked himself - and genuine awe at their progress. They approached each new task with a determination that was both admirable and slightly intimidating.

"By the gods!" Tavish had yelped, jumping back as the water sprayed everywhere. "What manner of water demon is this?"

"It's for cleaning, not battling," Jill explained through her laughter, showing him how to properly direct the spray.

"Ye could have warned me, lass," he grumbled, though a smile tugged at his lips.

"Where's the fun in that?" she teased, earning a soft laugh from the bard.

Macrath nearby snorted. "First day here and ye've already lost a fight to water."

By late afternoon, the heat had become oppressive. Jill wiped sweat from her brow, catching herself observing how Alasdair moved with such natural grace despite the unfamiliar work. Her academic mind had completely abandoned her, replaced by thoughts that were decidedly unprofessional.

"You're all doing well," she said softly to Alasdair as they gathered the last of the harvested lavender, focusing on the bundle in her hands to avoid meeting his eyes.

"We are trying," Alasdair replied, his voice low. "Ye help much, Jill."



The way he said her name, with such genuine warmth, made her heart skip a beat. In his mouth, the simple syllable somehow sounded like an endearment, rich with his Highland burr. Her father had taught her ancient Gaelic as a child, but no linguistics professor had ever mentioned how attractive the accent could be in person.

She was saved from responding by the distant rumble of an approaching vehicle.

"That's Dad, back from town," Jill said, checking her watch. He'd mentioned picking up supplies. "We should probably start thinking about how to introduce you all to the outside world eventually."

Six medieval warriors couldn't exactly blend in, not in their ancient garb. What would they tell people? That they'd hired some history enthusiasts with remarkably authentic accents?

Alasdair's hand briefly touched her shoulder, a gesture of reassurance that sent tingles down her spine. "We will work hard," he said, his voice firm with resolve. "Earn our place. Yer father mentioned visiting friends from Scotland? That might explain our...differences."

The practical suggestion surprised her. "That's...actually a good cover story. Friends from Scotland, helping with the harvest."

"Aye," he nodded. "We'll try tae keep the 'time travel' and 'berserker' parts quiet."

There was a twinkle in his eye that made her smile. For all his serious responsibility as leader, there was humor there too, a quick wit that had survived a millennium of displacement.

Jill nodded, a mix of emotions swelling within her. As challenging as this situation was, watching these men tackle each new obstacle with grace and determination, she

couldn't shake the feeling that something extraordinary was unfolding on their little ranch.

With a deep breath, she squared her shoulders. "We should head back to the house. Dad probably bought those clothes we talked about. Ready?" she asked, turning to Alasdair.

His green eyes met hers, steady and reassuring. "Aye, lass. We've faced worse than new garments."

The simple confidence in his voice steadied her. And if her heart fluttered a bit at being called "lass" in that deep Scottish burr—well, that was something to examine later, when she wasn't about to escort a group of time-traveling warriors to try on their first pairs of jeans.

### CHAPTER 17

Alasdair's muscles ached as he hefted another bale of hay, the scratchy material nothing like the rough straw he was accustomed to. The barn around him was a marvel of engineering, all gleaming metal and precise angles. It both awed and unsettled him, a constant reminder of how far from home they truly were.

In his time, barns had been simple structures—wooden frames with thatched roofs, earthen floors packed hard by generations of use. This modern equivalent, with its soaring height and complex pulley systems, would have been the envy of the greatest castle builders in Scotland. Even McKinnie, with all his wealth and power, had never possessed anything so grand simply to house animals and feed.

"Well done, Alasdair," Jill's voice called out, sending an unexpected warmth through his chest. He turned to see her approaching, her confident stride and practical attire a stark contrast to the demure women of his time.

The lavender scent that clung to her caught him off guard. In his time, only the wealthiest had such pleasing fragrances.

"Thank ye, Jill," he replied, the unfamiliar English words becoming easier with each passing hour. The druid's spell—a thought that still sent unease crawling down his spine—had gifted them with this new tongue. A mixed blessing, to be sure, but one he was grudgingly grateful for. "Your patience with us...it means more than I can express."

A lifetime of wariness made accepting help difficult, especially from a druid's family.

Yet there was something about Jill that disarmed his usual caution—an openness in her amber eyes, a genuine warmth in her smile that reminded him of simpler times, before betrayal had hardened his heart.

"Ye treat us as men," he added quietly, "not as monsters or curiosities. That is...rare."

Jill's smile sent his heart racing in a way he wasn't prepared for. "You're all doing great," she assured him. "I've never seen anyone pick things up so quickly."

Pride swelled in Alasdair's chest, both at her praise and at the sight of his brothers working diligently around the barn. They were adapting, despite the strangeness of it all. Cillian was carefully grooming a horse, his usual quiet demeanor seeming to soothe the beast. Fergus, ever curious, was examining a large metal contraption—a "tractor," Jill had called it—with wide-eyed wonder.

"By the saints," Fergus muttered, his fingers tracing the machine's contours, "to think such marvels exist. In our time, this would be..."

"Sorcery," Alasdair finished for him, understanding all too well. The line between magic and this "technology" seemed blurred beyond recognition. He turned back to Jill. "Your world is full of wonders, Jill. It's...overwhelming at times."

"And yet we take it all for granted," she replied thoughtfully. "Electric lights, running water, machines that do the work of twenty men..."

"I canna imagine growing so accustomed to magic that ye no longer see it," he said, shaking his head. In truth, she was the greatest wonder of all—a woman of learning and strength, who seemed to straddle both their worlds with grace.

Jill's expression softened with understanding. "I can only imagine how different everything must seem. But you're all handling it amazingly well."

Her praise warmed him more than it should have. "We've had to adapt to far worse situations," he said, then instantly regretted the grimness of his words. "Though none quite so...bewildering."

"Aye," Macrath grumbled from nearby, where he struggled with a modern pitchfork. "Give me a good battle axe over these tools any day."

"Careful what ye wish for, brother," Alasdair cautioned quietly. "The Brollachan is still out there, and I doubt these tools would be much use against it." The shapeshifting beast that had followed them through time weighed heavily on his mind, a threat he couldn't afford to forget amidst the wonder of this new place.

As the day wore on, Alasdair noticed his brothers' growing fatigue. Their bodies, honed for battle and a different kind of labor, were struggling with these new tasks. The work wasn't harder than what they were accustomed to—indeed, these modern tools made many tasks easier—but it used different muscles, required different movements. He caught Macrath's frustrated growl as he wrestled with a gate latch and knew it was time for a break.

"Perhaps," he ventured, turning to Jill, "we might rest for a moment?"

Jill's face lit up. "Of course! How about a swim? There's a pond nearby that's perfect for cooling off."

The thought of cool water against his skin was blissful after hours of labor in the summer heat. But then another image intruded—Jill, wet and glistening...Would women in this time swim alongside men? The very thought sent heat flooding through him that had nothing to do with the summer sun.

Alasdair felt heat rush to his face. "That would be most welcome," he managed, his voice rougher than intended.

Before he could wrestle with the propriety of such a situation, Jill's father's voice cut through the air. "No, Jill. You won't be showing it to them. Your brothers can take care of that."

The older man's expression was knowing, almost amused, as he glanced between Jill and Alasdair. For a moment, Alasdair wondered if the druid could somehow read his thoughts—a mortifying possibility.

Relief and disappointment warred within Alasdair. He cleared his throat, nodding to Jill's father. "Your father speaks wisely," he said. "We wouldnae want to impose on your...what is the word? Privacy."

"It's fine," Jill replied, though Alasdair caught a hint of disappointment in her tone. "Joe and Will know the way. I'll help Mom with dinner in the meantime."

As Jill's brothers led them to the pond, Alasdair found his thoughts drifting back to her—her kindness, her strength, the way she seamlessly bridged the gap between their worlds. In his time, educated women had been rare, typically cloistered in convents or serving as healers. To meet one who spoke with such confidence, who carried herself with such assurance, who understood his world even as she introduced him to hers—it was intoxicating.

But he pushed the thoughts aside. They were here to adapt, to survive. He couldn't afford distractions, no matter how appealing. His brothers needed him focused, clear-headed. The promise of wives and families had been a cruel lie in their own time; he wouldn't let himself be lured by similar dreams now, no matter how his heart quickened when Jill was near.

"Come on, Alasdair!" Cillian called, already stripping down to the undergarments Joe had called "boxers." "The water's wonderful!"

The cool pond was a balm to his aching muscles and troubled mind. As he watched his brothers splash and laugh, tension he hadn't realized he'd been carrying began to ease. Macrath and Tavish were engaging in a water battle, while Fergus floated peacefully on his back, gazing up at the vast blue sky. They looked younger, unburdened, in a way Alasdair hadn't seen since before they were cast out from their clans.

"They needed this," he murmured, watching the simple joy on faces that had known too much hardship.

"Your sister," he found himself asking Will, who sat beside him on the grassy bank, "she's unmarried?"

The question slipped out before he could stop it. Will gave him an appraising look.

"Yes," he replied finally. "She was engaged once, a few years back. Professor type, like her. But when mom got sick a few years back, she started coming back home more and more. They ended up breaking it off."

Anger flared in Alasdair's chest at the thought of someone abandoning Jill. In his time, such dishonorable behavior would have earned a man a beating at the very least. "He sounds like a coward," he said before he could stop himself.

Will's eyebrows rose, but he nodded. "Pretty much what Dad said, though with more colorful language." He studied Alasdair carefully. "She gave up a lot to come home—teaching position at a prestigious university, research opportunities. But family comes first for Jill. Always has."

Family. The word resonated deeply within Alasdair. Wasn't that what he'd always fought for? A chance for him and his brothers to have a place, to belong somewhere, to build families of their own? The dream that had been cruelly snatched away by

McKinnie's betrayal.

"She has honor," Alasdair said quietly, more to himself than to Will. Not the battlefield honor of his world, but something deeper, truer. Something that made her uniquely Jill.

They were alive, they were together, and they were learning. It was enough. It had to be.

But as the sun began to set, casting a golden glow, Alasdair couldn't help but wonder what tomorrow would bring—and how long he could ignore the growing spark he felt whenever Jill was near.

"Come on, lads," he called to his brothers as the light began to fade. "Let's not keep our hosts waiting."

As they made their way back to the farmhouse, clean and refreshed, Alasdair caught sight of Jill on the porch. The setting sun turned her brown hair to burnished gold, her smile warming something in his chest that had been cold for far too long.

He'd known desire before—raw and straightforward. But this feeling was different, more complex. It wasn't just her beauty that drew him, but her mind, her spirit, her kindness. She made him want to be worthy, to be more than the berserker the world had made him.

Perhaps this new world held more promise than he'd dared to hope.



### CHAPTER 18

The kitchen was a flurry of activity as Jill prepared dinner, the sweet aroma of brownie mix filling the room. She'd opted for store-bought potato salad, pushing aside a twinge of guilt. Part of her had wanted to impress Alasdair with her culinary skills, but the thought of slaving over a hot stove while everyone else enjoyed the pond had been too much.

She glanced out the window toward the distant tree line where the pond lay hidden, a pang of envy tightening her chest. While the men had been splashing and cooling off in the June heat, she'd been stuck inside prepping dinner. Her father's protective instincts were sweet but sometimes suffocating.

"Left holding the fort and serving up frozen patties and supermarket sides," she muttered to herself with a self-deprecating smile.

As she arranged condiments on a tray, Jill caught herself wondering about Alasdair at the pond. The academic part of her mind that had studied medieval warriors suddenly felt hopelessly unprepared for the reality of the man himself. A momentary worry about the Brollachan flitted through her mind—they were all vulnerable while spread out across the property—but she pushed it aside. They deserved one peaceful evening.

The back door swung open, bringing a burst of laughter and the scent of sun-warmed skin. "Dinner almost ready?" Joe asked as the twins herded the time travelers towards the grill on the back patio, their voices overlapping in excited chatter about the "sacred art of grilling."

"Move over, sis," Will said, nudging her aside to reach for the platter of raw patties. "Time to show these guys how real men cook meat in the twenty-first century."

"Because fire and meat is such a revolutionary concept they couldn't possibly comprehend," Jill replied dryly, but handed over the platter.

Jill caught Alasdair's gaze as she stepped outside, noting the way his damp hair curled at the nape of his neck. He offered a small nod, the ghost of a grin playing at his lips, and her heart did a ridiculous little flip that caught her completely off guard.

"Was the pond nice?" she couldn't help asking, trying to keep her tone casual.

"Aye, 'twas refreshing," he said, then added, "Though it would have been more pleasant had our guide joined us."

His words sent a flutter through her stomach that had no business being there. Was he actually disappointed she hadn't come along? She suddenly wished she'd insisted on going, regardless of what her father wanted.

She set paper plates on the picnic table, intensely aware of Alasdair's presence just a few feet away. What was it about this man that had her so flustered? She'd dated plenty of men before—intelligent, accomplished academics with impressive credentials. None had affected her this way.

"Need a hand?" Alasdair's deep voice startled her, and she nearly dropped the stack of cups she was holding.

"Could you bring out the drinks? They're in the fridge—er, the big cold box in the kitchen."

Alasdair nodded. "Fridge," he repeated carefully. "Aye, I remember."

His accent wrapped around the simple words like warm honey. Somehow, the combination of that accent and the modern vocabulary he was quickly adopting was utterly charming.

"You're staring," Joe whispered as he passed, a knowing grin on his face.

"I was not," Jill hissed back. "Just...observing. Professional interest."

"Yeah, I'm sure your dissertation was all about how ninth-century warriors look in wet t-shirts," he teased before ducking away from her swatting hand.

Soon they were all gathered around the patio table. Jill noticed how Alasdair surveyed the seating arrangement, his eyes finding her before he deliberately took the empty chair beside her. The intentional choice wasn't lost on her—with five other spots available, he'd chosen to be near her. The simple gesture sent a rush of happiness through her chest.

"Alright, gentlemen," Will announced from the grill, wielding a spatula like a scepter, "behold the miracle of propane and modern seasonings!"

Tavish leaned toward Macrath. "I still dinnae understand why they're so proud of cooking meat over fire. We've been doing that since before we could speak."

Jill suppressed a smile, catching Alasdair's eye. He seemed equally amused by his brothers' commentary.

The air filled with the scent of grilled meat and excited chatter.

"So you enjoyed the swim?" she asked Alasdair.

Alasdair's face lit up. "It was wonderful. In my time, swimming was rarely for

pleasure. Your pond is like something from a laird's estate."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," she replied, trying not to sound wistful. "It's one of my favorite spots on the property, especially in early summer when the water lilies start to bloom."

When she asked about his childhood, a shadow passed over his face. "Perhaps a conversation for another time," he said softly.

Jill felt the sting of rejection but nodded in understanding. "I didn't mean to pry. Professional hazard."

Alasdair's expression softened. "Ye dinnae pry. It's just...some memories don't make good dinner conversation."

The gentle way he deflected the question told her more about his past than words might have. She found herself wondering what shadows lurked in his history, what hardships had shaped the man sitting beside her.

As they ate from the veggie tray, Jill couldn't help but grin at the way Alasdair approached each new food with cautious curiosity. He sniffed ranch dressing suspiciously before tasting it, his brows rose.

"This white sauce is...interesting."

"Just wait until you try the mustard," she teased.

"Burgers are up!" William announced and brought a platter over.

Jill stood up and moved around the table, suddenly enjoying her role as culinary guide. "Okay, everyone, burger-building 101," she announced, grabbing a paper

plate. "Start with the bottom bun, add a little ketchup or mustard—not too much, Fergus!" She laughed as the warrior enthusiastically squirted a mountain of yellow mustard onto his bun.

"Then patty, cheese if you want it to melt a bit, lettuce, tomato, onion if you're brave, and finally the top bun." She demonstrated with quick, practiced movements, creating a picture-perfect burger.

Cillian studied her creation with the intensity of a scholar. "The architecture is quite ingenious," he observed earnestly.

"Not architecture, brother," Macrath corrected, "it's...what did ye call it, Jill? A sandwich?"

"Exactly," she nodded, enjoying their sincere interest in something so mundane. "Though burgers are a special kind of sandwich."

She helped Alasdair build a creation with cheese, lettuce, and tomato.

As her shoulder brushed against his while arranging the toppings, she felt a warmth that had nothing to do with the summer evening. Alasdair seemed to feel it too, his eyes meeting hers for a brief, charged moment.

His expression of pure delight when he tasted it was so endearing that Jill had to look away, afraid her face might betray just how appealing she found him.

"I've never tasted such flavors," he said, examining the burger with newfound respect. "In my time, meat was simply roasted or boiled with whatever herbs could be gathered."

"Modern food science," Jill explained. "Though honestly, a good herb-roasted meat

can be just as delicious."

When Alasdair's arm brushed against hers as he reached for more ketchup, Jill felt a jolt of electricity. Their gaze met, and for a moment, the bustling dinner faded away.

"I'm glad ye're here," he said softly, the words clearly meant only for her. "To help us understand this new world."

The way he looked at her—as though she were the miraculous one, not the time travel or modern conveniences—left her momentarily speechless. No one had ever looked at her quite that way before—with such genuine appreciation and respect.

In that instant, Jill knew that whatever was growing between them—this tentative connection bridging centuries—was something she couldn't ignore. It was ridiculous, of course. He was from a completely different time. And yet, when he looked at her like that...

Jill found herself both exhilarated and terrified by the possibilities. She hadn't expected to find herself playing guide to six medieval warriors—and certainly hadn't expected to be so drawn to their leader.

One thing was certain: life on the ranch would never be the same again.

### CHAPTER 19

The bunkhouse door creaked shut behind Alasdair as he entered, the rumble of his brothers' voices filling the small space. His mind still lingered on the dinner they'd just shared, on laughter beneath an open sky, on amber eyes that sparkled in the setting sun.

"Did ye see Tavish try to eat that 'hot dog' in one bite?" Fergus chuckled, collapsing onto his bunk. "Thought he'd choke for certain."

Tavish threw a pillow at his brother. "At least I didnae spill sauce all o'er myself like some wee bairn," he retorted, but his grin took any sting from the words.

Alasdair settled onto his own bed, the strange soft bedding still a marvel after a lifetime of straw pallets and furs laid over hard ground. His brothers continued their banter, their voices a familiar chorus that had accompanied him through countless nights in highland halls and battlefield camps.

But tonight, his thoughts strayed elsewhere.

Jill. The name itself was foreign on his tongue, nothing like the Moirags and Fionas and Ailidhs of his time. Yet it suited her—simple, strong, unadorned by pretense. The women of his time had been no less intelligent, no less capable, but they'd lived within rigid boundaries. Even noblewomen, with all their privileges, had rarely been educated beyond household management and perhaps some basic reading.

But Jill had knowledge that would have made the most learned monks of his era

seethe with envy. A “doctorate,” her father had mentioned. In history—his history. The thought was both humbling and strange.

"Earth to Alasdair," Macrath's gruff voice cut through his musings. "Ye're staring at the wall like it holds all the secrets of the universe."

Alasdair blinked, returning to the present. "Just thinking."

"About Jill?" Cillian asked, his young face alight with mischief.

Heat crept up Alasdair's neck. "About our situation," he corrected, though the words rang hollow even to his own ears.

Lachlan snorted. "Aye, and I'm Saint Columba himself."

"The way ye look at her," Fergus added, his voice gentler than the others, "reminds me of how my father used to look at my mother. Like she hung the moon and stars."

"I dinnae look at her any particular way," Alasdair protested, but his brothers' knowing glances told him the lie was futile. Was he truly so transparent?

"She's bonnie," Macrath conceded, stretching out on his bunk. "And fierce too. Reminds me of the shield-maidens in the old stories."

"And clever," Tavish added. "Did ye see how quickly she matched our Gaelic, even the old words?"

Alasdair couldn't deny any of it. The way she'd guided them through this bewildering day, patient with their mistakes but never condescending. The gentle touch of her hand as she showed him how to build a “burger.” The flash of curiosity in her eyes when she'd asked about his past.



It was that question that had caught him off guard. His childhood—those painful years after being cast out, marked with the wolf brand that made him MacTyre. He hadn't been ready to speak of it, not yet. But he'd seen the question retreat in her eyes at his reticence, not hurt but understanding.

"What I dinnae understand," Macrath said, sitting up suddenly, "is where all the women are. We've seen Jill, her mother, but no others. In our time, a farm this size would have workers, neighbors visiting."

"Aye," Fergus agreed. "Are women scarce in this time?"

Tavish laughed. "If so, we've arrived at a fortuitous moment. Six warriors in need of wives, in a land where women are rare."

"Watch your tongue," Alasdair warned, though there was no real heat in his words. "We're guests here, not raiders."

Cillian shrugged. "Conall mentioned a town nearby. There must be lasses there, aye?"

"I suspect," Lachlan said thoughtfully, "that we're being kept away from townsfolk until we better understand this time. Remember how confused we were by the simplest things today? Imagine being surrounded by strangers while learning."

"It was promised to us," Macrath said quietly. "Wives, homes of our own, after our service to McKinnie. Another promise broken."

The mood in the bunkhouse shifted, old wounds reopened by the simple observation. Alasdair felt the weight of his brothers' disappointment settle on his shoulders anew. That, combined with the lurking threat of the Brollachan somewhere in the woods, made their situation all the more precarious.

"This isn't Scotland," he reminded them. "The old promises don't bind us here. We're free to do as we wish, strange as our circumstances may be. And we have a new purpose—to hunt the beast that followed us, to protect the family that shelters us."

"Free to start anew," Cillian agreed, quick to find hope. "And perhaps to find partners of our choosing."

"It seems only fitting," Fergus said with a sly glance at Alasdair, "that our chief should be the first to find a match. Good fortune that the druid's daughter has caught his eye."

"D'ye think women in this time choose their own husbands?" Cillian asked suddenly, voicing the very question that had been circling in Alasdair's mind.

"Seems they choose everything else," Macrath observed. "Did ye see how Jill spoke to her father and brothers? Not a hint of deference."

"And the way she dresses," Fergus added. "No woman in our time would show her form so openly, save perhaps..." He trailed off, not needing to complete the thought.

"It's different here," Alasdair said firmly. "We cannae judge by our standards."

And that was the crux of it, wasn't it? Everything was different. The rules, the expectations—all transformed across the centuries that separated his world from this one. In his time, a man of his standing—a berserker, an outcast—would never have presumed to court a woman like Jill. Even had he been of noble birth, negotiations would have been with her father, arrangements made, dowries discussed.

Here, he had no standing at all. No land, no wealth, no understanding of this world's customs. What could he possibly offer her?

"She likes ye," Cillian said quietly, as if reading his thoughts. "The way she smiles when ye speak—it's different from how she smiles at the rest of us."

"Dinnae be daft," Alasdair muttered, though his heart quickened at the words.

"The lad's right," Tavish agreed. "And her father watches ye both like a hawk. He kens there's something there."

Alasdair ran a hand through his hair, frustration coursing through him. "Even if that were true—and I'm not saying it is—what then? I'm a man out of time, with nothing to my name save the clothes on my back."

"Ye're our leader," Fergus reminded him. "A berserker chief. That counts for something, even here."

"And ye've your honor," Lachlan added. "Worth more than gold in any time."

Macrath nodded. "The old druid wouldnae have let us stay if he thought ye unworthy of his daughter's attention."

Their faith in him was humbling. Had he truly given them reason for such loyalty across all their years together? He didn't feel worthy of it—not after failing to secure the clan acceptance they'd been promised, not after leading them into McKinnie's trap.

And yet here they were, alive against all odds, with a chance at a future none of them could have imagined.

The weight of their expectations—that he'd find happiness first, lead them in this as he'd led them in battle—both honored and troubled him. In this strange new world, perhaps they all needed to forge their own paths.

"The rest of ye shouldnae wait for me," he said, meeting each of their gazes in turn. "When the time comes that we meet others, ye should seek your own happiness. I am your leader, not your gatekeeper."

"Aye, but ye deserve joy first," Tavish insisted. "After all ye've done for us."

The simple declaration left Alasdair momentarily speechless. It had never occurred to him to put his own happiness before theirs.

"Tomorrow," Alasdair said, changing the subject, "we should ask about this town. Begin learning how folk here conduct themselves. The sooner we understand, the sooner we can move about freely."

"And meet the local lasses," Macrath grinned, returning to his earlier good humor.

Alasdair's gaze drifted to the window, where the stars were beginning to appear in the darkening sky. The same stars that had shone over Scotland twelve centuries ago, unchanged while everything else transformed beyond recognition. There was comfort in that constancy.

"One day at a time," he said at last, echoing the words Conall had spoken to him earlier. "We focus on learning this world, on earning our keep."

"And if more comes of it?" Cillian pressed, hope bright in his young eyes.

Alasdair thought of Jill's laughter, of the kindness in her eyes. A warmth spread through his chest that had nothing to do with the mild summer night.

"Then," he said softly, "we'll face that too, when the time comes."

As his brothers settled in for the night, their banter gradually fading to the deep

breathing of sleep, Alasdair remained awake. Through the window, he could see a light still burning in the main house—in what he guessed was Jill's room. The thought of her surrounded by knowledge, absorbed in her work, brought an unexpected curve to his lips.

When chaos threatened to overwhelm him—when the strangeness of this place pressed in too closely—he found himself anchored by thoughts of her. Her patient explanations, her gentle guidance, her strength in facing the impossible with grace. In a world turned upside down, she had become his fixed point.

"Sleep well, mo nighean," he whispered to the distant light. "Until tomorrow."

### CHAPTER 20

Alasdair's fingers itched for the familiar weight of his sword as he watched Conall's neighbor, Hank, climb out of his truck. The metallic clang of the vehicle's door echoed across the yard, a jarring reminder of how far from home they truly were. The scent of lavender drifted on the morning breeze, mingling with the earthy aroma of horses and hay—scents both familiar and foreign.

In his time, the approach of a stranger would have warranted immediate caution, if not outright hostility. Yet here, Conall seemed untroubled by this man's arrival. Another sign of how different this place was—peaceful in ways Alasdair could scarcely comprehend.

"Conall!" Hank called out, his weathered face creased with worry. "You won't believe what I found in my south pasture."

Alasdair watched as Conall greeted his friend, noting the easy familiarity between them. It stirred a longing in his chest, a reminder of the acceptance he and his brothers had always sought but rarely found.

He caught Hank's gaze taking in their clothing—the rough-spun tunics and leather bracers that marked them as men from another era. Alasdair straightened, unconsciously adjusting the belt at his waist, aware of how strange they must appear.

"What's the trouble, Hank?" Conall asked, his voice carrying a hint of tension that Alasdair recognized all too well.

Hank's eyes darted to Alasdair and his brothers, curiosity evident in his gaze. "Who're your guests? Don't think I've seen them around before."

Alasdair stiffened, preparing for the usual vague explanation, the careful distance that had always been maintained between them and ordinary folk.

Conall's response made Alasdair's heart skip a beat. "Family," he said simply, with a nod that seemed to encompass all of them.

A warmth spread through Alasdair's chest, unexpected and overwhelming. Family. One simple word, yet it held everything they had ever sought. He glanced at his brothers, seeing his own emotion mirrored in their faces. Fergus's eyes widened, while Cillian's seemed dangerously close to tears. Even Macrath's perpetual scowl softened momentarily.

"Dinnae yer dare make a fuss of it," Macrath muttered in Gaelic, though the gruffness in his voice couldn't hide his own touched reaction.

Hank's face brightened. "Well, ain't that something! You boys coming to the fair next week? Whole town'll be there."

Alasdair's mind reeled at the thought of a town gathering. He opened his mouth to respond, but Jill stepped out from the porch, wiping her hands on a dishtowel.

"They'll be there," she said, her voice warm with amusement. "Can't keep them hidden forever, can we?"

Alasdair's gaze was drawn to her, as it always was. The way she stood her ground, the directness in her eyes as she spoke—it resonated within him. Women in his time were rarely so forthright. Jill seemed to make her own path, respected by the men around her simply for herself.

Hank nodded approvingly, then his expression grew serious once more. "Listen, Conall. About that trouble I mentioned. Found one of my cows dead this morning. Torn apart something fierce.

The air around them seemed to chill. Alasdair straightened, every warrior instinct on alert. His hand reflexively moved to where his sword would have hung, finding only empty air. "What manner of beast did this?" he asked, his accent still thick despite the day's lessons in modern speech.

Hank shook his head, bewilderment clear in his eyes. "That's just it. Never seen anything like it. Wasn't no wolf or mountain lion, I can tell you that."

Alasdair exchanged a glance with Conall, a silent understanding passing between them. The Brollachan. It had emerged from the cave with them—he'd sensed its malevolent presence in the forest since their arrival. Guilt coiled in his stomach—they had brought this evil here.

"I'd like to see it," Alasdair said, his voice firm with resolve. This was something he understood, a task he could accomplish in this bewildering place. Fighting monsters—that, at least, was familiar territory.

Conall nodded. "We'll come take a look, Hank. Give us a minute to get ready."

As Hank returned to his truck, Alasdair turned to his brothers. "I'll go with Conall," he said in their native Gaelic, keeping his voice low. "The rest of you, guard the farm. It's likely the Brollachan. It'll grow stronger if it's hunting cattle."

"We've faced it before," Tavish said grimly. "And barely escaped with our lives."

"Aye," Alasdair replied. "But this time we're prepared. It thrives on fear and darkness. Remember that."



They nodded, hands instinctively reaching for the daggers at their sides.

"Lads, see if ye can fashion some makeshift weapons—even just sharpened sticks would be better than nothing."

"Aye, brother," Lachlan agreed. "We'll see what we can do."

Jill's brow furrowed with concern. "Be careful," she said softly, her eyes meeting Alasdair's.

There was worry in her gaze, genuine concern that warmed him even as it surprised him. When had anyone last worried for his safety? The realization struck him suddenly—he wanted to be worthy of that concern, to prove himself to her not as a warrior, but as a man deserving of her regard.

"We've faced worse, lass," he said, his voice gentler than intended. "We'll return soon. Lock the doors until we do."

The flash of indignation in her eyes told him he'd misspoken.

"I'm quite capable of looking after myself and the house," she replied, though there was no real anger in her tone. "But...thanks for the concern."

Their eyes held for a moment longer than necessary, and Alasdair found himself wishing to explain that his instinct to protect her wasn't born from doubt in her abilities, but from something far more personal—a need to keep her safe that went beyond duty. The intensity of the feeling caught him off guard.

Conall waved him forward and he climbed into the back of Hank's truck, the unfamiliar vehicle humming to life beneath him. This morning, the simple act of taking a shower had been a miracle. Now he was riding in a horseless carriage to hunt

a monster. Even for a man who had traveled through time, it was a bewildering turn of events.

But for the first time since arriving in this unfamiliar land, he felt a glimmer of hope. They were finding acceptance here, a chance at the life they'd always wanted. Family, Conall had called them. The word echoed in his mind, sweet as mead.

The truck lurched forward, and Alasdair's stomach flip-flopped with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. He gripped the edge of his seat, both terrified and thrilled by the sensation of speed.

Conall turned around to look at him and smiled. "Ye can relax your grip. The truck won't throw ye."

"Aye, well, forgive me if I'm not entirely convinced," Alasdair replied, though he did loosen his white-knuckled grasp slightly. "Where I'm from, moving this fast usually involved falling off a cliff."

As they pulled onto the main road, and the lush green landscape unfurled before them. Towering evergreens stretched towards the sky, their branches swaying gently in the breeze. The road itself was a marvel—smooth and black, nothing like the rutted dirt paths of his time.

"By all the saints," Alasdair breathed, unable to contain his awe as the truck picked up speed. The world blurred past at a dizzying rate. "How fast are we moving?"

"About fifty-five miles per hour," Conall replied. "That's not even fast by modern standards."

Alasdair tried to make sense of the measurement. "A day's hard march would cover perhaps fifteen of your miles," he said, working it out. "Ye're telling me we're moving

faster than a man could walk in three days?"

"Aye," Conall replied in Gaelic. "And we'll reach Hank's farm in minutes, not days."

"Ye're taking this in stride," Conall said. "Better than I did, when I first arrived."

Alasdair chuckled, feeling for a moment like a lad experiencing his first hunt. Then he sobered as he remembered their grim errand. "Though I wish the circumstances were different. If the Brollachan has followed us here, the blame lies with me and my brothers."

"Nonsense," Conall said firmly. "Ye didn't ask to be thrown through time. The druids who cast ye out bear the responsibility for whatever came through with ye."

"McKinnie," Alasdair growled, the name like poison on his tongue. "And his pet druid. I swore vengeance on them both."

"Vengeance is a cold comfort when those ye seek it from have been dust for a millennium," Conall replied softly. "Trust me on that."

As they drove, Alasdair's mind turned to the task ahead. The Brollachan had followed them through time, and they bore the responsibility of dealing with it. It was a familiar burden, one that settled heavily on his shoulders even as the marvels of this world unfolded around him.

The truck slowed as they approached Hank's property, and Alasdair steeled himself for what they might find. He had faced the shapeless terror before, had felt its cold touch as it sought to draw out his deepest fears. But he had survived, had driven it back.

"Whatever horrors await us in that field," he said quietly, "I will face them. I'll not let

this creature harm any in your care."

And if he was being honest with himself, it was Jill's face that came to mind—the thought of her in danger from this ancient evil was unbearable. His need to protect her wasn't just duty or honor; it was something deeper, more personal than he was ready to acknowledge.

Conall gave him an appraising look. "I believe ye mean that."

"Aye," Alasdair replied simply. "In this life or the one we came from, I am still a warrior. And warriors protect their own."

And they were his own now—Conall's family had shown them nothing but kindness. They were worth fighting for, worth protecting. Perhaps in doing so, they might finally find the belonging that had eluded them for so long.

### CHAPTER 21

Alasdair's muscles tensed as Hank's truck bounced along the rutted dirt road. The vehicle's rumbling engine still unsettled him, though the initial terror had given way to a wary fascination. His tunic and leather breeches felt strangely out of place against the truck's modern fabric seats. He inhaled deeply, catching the scent of pine and salt air drifting through the open window. It was familiar, yet different—sharper, somehow. Less smoke in the air than the peat fires that had always perfumed Scotland's winds.

"Just over this rise," Hank said, gesturing ahead. "I found her in the south pasture."

Alasdair nodded, his mind racing. The dead cow confirmed what they already knew—the Brollachan was hunting.

The truck pulled up to a fence line, and Hank cut the engine. As they exited the vehicle, Alasdair's hand instinctively went to his side, reaching for a sword that wasn't there. He clenched his fist. The absence of steel at his hip was yet another reminder of his displacement.

"It's through the trees there," Hank said, his voice gruff with worry. His eyes darted to Alasdair's unfamiliar clothing, but he asked no questions. "You folks sure you want to see this? It ain't pretty."

"Aye," Conall replied smoothly. "Alasdair here's got experience with all sorts of wildlife. Thought he might help identify what did this."

A clever half-truth, Alasdair thought. He had indeed dealt with the Brollachan before—just not in a way this modern farmer would understand. He inclined his head, grateful for Conall's quick thinking. He managed a gruff, "Lead on."

The men trudged through a field, the long grass whispering against Alasdair's legs. Every rustle set his nerves on edge. The Brollachan could take any form—perhaps even melting into the grass itself. He'd seen it shift shapes the night they'd arrived, melting from solid to mist and back again.

"Had anything strange happen before the cow?" Alasdair asked, scanning the landscape with wary eyes. "Livestock acting peculiar? Cold spots in the air? Dreams that felt too real?"

Hank gave him an odd look. "You some kind of mystic or something?"

Alasdair bit back the truth. "Just thorough," he replied, not meeting the man's gaze. How could he explain that he was hunting something that had haunted the nightmares of his own people for centuries?

Conall caught his eye and gave a subtle nod, a wordless reminder to be careful.

As they neared the treeline, the briny scent of the ocean grew stronger, mingling with something else—something foul and ancient. Alasdair's stomach churned. He knew that smell. The stench of the void between times, of the maelstrom that had swallowed him and his brothers.

"Just beyond those trees," Hank said, pointing. "Found her this morning. Never seen anything like it."

They pushed through the undergrowth, and Alasdair's breath caught in his throat. The cow lay on its side, its black and white hide marred by wounds that no natural

predator could have inflicted. The flesh wasn't merely torn—it was partially dissolved, bubbling at the edges like wax held too close to flame. A viscous black fluid pooled in the deepest wounds, neither blood nor bile but something far more sinister. The grass around it was withered and blackened in a perfect circle, as if the very life had been sucked from the earth.

"By all that's holy," Conall muttered, his face paling.

Alasdair knelt beside the carcass, ignoring the squelch of blood-soaked earth beneath his knees. He traced the air above one of the wounds, feeling the lingering chill of otherworldly magic. The cold that radiated from it was unnatural—a void rather than mere coolness. "No wolf did this," he said softly.

The signs were unmistakable—the same marks he'd seen on the bodies of those unfortunate enough to encounter the Brollachan in the highlands. Ancient memories surfaced: a shepherd found half-consumed on a misty hillside, the elders speaking in hushed tones of shadow-creatures that fed on both flesh and terror.

Hank shifted uneasily. "That's what I thought. But if not a wolf, then what? Black bears are common around here, but usually not this close to the farms. And this...don't look like no bear. Maybe something rabid? Or...I don't know."

Alasdair stood, wiping his hands on his tunic—the rough-spun fabric familiar against his skin, a small comfort in this alien moment. He chose his words carefully, aware of Hank's scrutiny. "In the highlands," he began, the lie tasting bitter on his tongue, "we have...legends. Of creatures that hunt in the mist."

"Legends?" Hank scoffed, but there was a tremor in his voice. "This ain't no legend, son. This is real."

"Aye," Alasdair agreed, meeting the man's eyes. "It is."

Reaching for a modern hunting rifle, Conall checked the ammunition. "I've adapted to some modern conveniences," he explained to the warriors with a grim smile.

"Keep your livestock in at night," Alasdair added, his voice grave. "And your family. Whatever did this...it hunts in darkness."

"And ye know this how?" Hank asked, suspicion creeping back into his voice.

"Experience," Alasdair replied simply. "Hard-won and bitter."

As they made their way back to the truck, Hank and Conall fell into conversation about fencing and security measures. Alasdair half-listened, his mind still on the mangled cow and what it meant. That creature was growing bolder. In his time, it had kept to the shadows, preying on lone travelers and lost children. But here, it seemed less cautious, as if sensing the lack of belief in such things.

Once they were alone in the vehicle, Conall switched to Gaelic once more. "It's exactly what you feared, isn't it?"

Alasdair nodded grimly. "The Brollachan. And growing stronger, by the look of it." A muscle in his jaw twitched. "We brought this evil to your doorstep. I'm sorry for it."

"It's not your doing," Conall said firmly. "You were cast through time against your will, same as I was."

"What do you know of the creature?" Alasdair asked.

"Enough to be wary," Conall replied, his knuckles white on the steering wheel. "In my training, we learned of the formless ones—creatures that feed on fear as much as flesh. They were ancient even in my day, rare enough that many thought them mere



stories."

"This one is no story," Alasdair said grimly. "I've faced it before. It attacked our hunting party in the northern highlands. Three men lost before we drove it back."

"How did you defeat it then?"

Alasdair stared out the window, watching the landscape blur past. So different from his homeland, and yet now, it was tainted by the same ancient evil.

"We didn't," he admitted. "We wounded it with blessed iron and fire. Drove it away, but never found its body. We didn't have any silver."

"I have weapons," Conall said thoughtfully.

"If only 'twere that simple," Alasdair muttered. "The Brollachan feeds on terror—the more frightened its prey, the stronger it becomes."

Conall's hands tightened on the steering wheel. "Then we'll need more than guns."

"Aye," Alasdair said grimly. "Silver tipped weapons, fire...and courage enough to deny it its feast."

He sat back, thinking aloud. "We'll need to bless the weapons. Find a way to trap the creature—to weaken it before we strike. We cannot face it in open battle. Not yet."

Conall nodded slowly. "I'll see what I can gather."

As the truck bumped along the rutted road, Alasdair's thoughts drifted—to the lass who had, without knowing it, become his anchor in this strange new world...

Her face appeared in his mind—not just her smile or the warmth of her eyes, but her entire being. The way she had welcomed them without question, her willingness to share her knowledge, the gentle strength with which she navigated both his world and hers. In just a few days, she had become his anchor in this swirling sea of strangeness.

A pang of longing mixed with fierce protectiveness gripped his heart. The thought of the Brollachan anywhere near her made his blood run cold. He would rather face a hundred battles than see harm come to her.

"We shouldnae tell the others everything," he said suddenly. "Not the lass or your sons. They need to be cautious, but not terrified."

Conall shot him a sidelong glance. "Jill knows of such creatures already, from her studies. She's no ignorant lass—she's spent years researching our history, our legends."

"Knowing of something from books is not the same as facing it in the flesh," Alasdair's voice dropped. "I wouldnae have her look upon the Brollachan with her own eyes. Such sights...they change a person."

What he couldn't quite articulate was his need to be worthy in her eyes. To be the protector, the guardian against an evil from his time. If he could defeat the Brollachan—this creature that had followed them through centuries—perhaps he could prove himself more than just a displaced warrior. Perhaps he could be a man worthy of her regard.

Conall's expression softened. "You care for her already, don't you?"

Alasdair didn't answer, but he didn't need to. The truth was written plainly on his face.

The vehicle rolled forward, silent but steady, carrying them back to the ranch and the impossible task that lay ahead. As the road wound through the forest, Alasdair caught a glimpse of movement in the deepening shadows between the trees. Just an animal, he told himself. Or the wind moving the trees. But the chill that ran down his spine told him otherwise.

The hunt had begun.

### CHAPTER 22

Jill was still a little miffed that when everyone had come back earlier, they hadn't told her anything. She knew something was going on—she just didn't know what.

The evening had been peaceful, almost deceptively normal. Jill sat at the kitchen table with her laptop, attempting to document the day's observations while the scent of cookies filled the house. The warriors lounged in the living room, fascinated by a nature documentary her brothers had chosen—their wide-eyed wonder at footage of African lions had been both endearing and amusing.

A sharp electronic beep cut through the comfortable atmosphere. Her father glanced up from his book, a frown crossing his features as he moved toward the small monitor mounted near the back door. They'd installed the wildlife cameras years ago, primarily to track the local deer population and occasional predators that might threaten their livestock.

"What is it?" Jill asked, closing her laptop and moving to join him.

Her father's expression had gone grave, his fingers tapping quickly on the screen to enlarge the image. The night-vision footage showed something moving at the edge of the northern woods—something that made Jill's skin crawl even through the grainy green display. It didn't move like any animal she'd ever seen, seeming to flow rather than walk, its shape constantly shifting.

"Brollachan," Dad whispered, his voice tight. He straightened, suddenly looking every bit the druid that Jill was still coming to terms with him being. "William,

Joe—get everyone now."

Alasdair appeared at her side, his body instantly tense as he studied the monitor.

"Where was this taken?"

"North pasture, near the old oak grove," Dad replied, already moving toward the basement door. "It's close—too close to the house."

With purposeful strides, her father led them down to the basement, past the laundry area and storage shelves to a solid metal door with an electronic keypad mounted beside it. Jill had known about this room her entire life—Dad's "collection room" where he kept various weapons, hunting gear, and other items he'd acquired over the years. As a child, she hadn't questioned why her father kept so many medieval weapons; it had seemed a natural extension of his interest in Scottish history.

Her heart quickened at the realization—another piece of his true identity hidden in plain sight all these years. Each new revelation about her father sent ripples through her understanding of her childhood. No wonder her interest had ended up so firmly rooted in Scotland.

Dad punched in the code with practiced ease, and the door unlocked with a metallic click. Inside, the walls were lined with swords, daggers, shields, and spears—some looking genuinely ancient, others more modern reproductions, but all meticulously maintained.

"I think we'll need these," Dad said, moving to a rack of particularly fine-looking weapons.

The relief on Alasdair's face as his hand wrapped around a sword's hilt was palpable. "A warrior feels naked without steel," he murmured, testing the balance with practiced ease.

The brothers each selected weapons with reverent care, their hands caressing the steel as if greeting old friends. The transformation was immediate—they stood taller, moved with greater confidence, their bodies instinctively adjusting to the familiar weight.

Dad took down a modern hunting rifle for himself and checked the ammunition. "I've adapted to some modern conveniences," he explained to the warriors with a grim smile.

"I'm coming with you," Jill said, reaching for one of the smaller blades. The weight of the steel in her palm felt right, solid—a connection to both her father's hidden life and the warriors' world.

"No." Alasdair's voice left no room for argument, his green eyes intense as they locked with hers. "Not against a Brollachan."

"We know how to fight these creatures," Macrath added. "In battle, we cannot be watching for your safety."

"But I have a right to see this thing for myself," she protested. "I've studied these legends for years!"

Joe stepped forward, looking equally determined. "If Jill's going, so am I."

"And me," William added.

Dad shook his head firmly. "None of you are coming. This isn't a debate."

"This isn't fair," Jill began, frustration bubbling up, but her protest lost some steam when she realized her brothers were being excluded too. It wasn't just about her being a woman—it was about experience and skill.

"This isn't about fairness," Alasdair said, his expression softening slightly. "When we fight, we become...different. The berserker rage takes us. We're dangerous to friend and foe alike if you don't know how to move around us."

"You'll be guiding us," Dad said, handing her a headset. "I'll wear the other one. You can direct us if the creature moves. That's not sitting and watching—that's being our strategist."

It was a compromise, barely, but Jill knew she wouldn't win this battle. Not when even Joe and William were accepting their father's decision with reluctant nods.

"Fine," she said looking directly at Alasdair.

Something flickered in his eyes—respect, perhaps. "When this is done, we'll talk," he promised.

Minutes later, she found herself set up in the security room, eyes fixed on the screens with her brothers beside her. The system had been designed for security and wildlife observation, with cameras placed strategically throughout their property to track animal movements. Now those same cameras would track a hunt unlike any their land had seen before.

Her palms felt clammy against the headset, adrenaline prickled beneath her skin. All those years studying folklore and mythology, and now the legends were literally walking through her backyard, hunting a creature she'd once dismissed as mere superstition—until now.

"Be careful what you say," she instructed Joe and William, who hovered nearby. "Dad's on the line. We don't want to distract them."

On the largest monitor, she could see the hunting party moving through the darkness.

Dad led the way, rifle ready, with Alasdair and his brothers fanned out behind him in a formation that spoke of years of experience. Their movements were synchronized, fluid, nothing like the awkward fish-out-of-water time travelers who had marveled at indoor plumbing just the other day.

"Camera four has movement," William reported, pointing to another screen where shadows seemed to writhe unnaturally among the trees.

Jill leaned forward, adrenaline spiking. "Dad, northeast quadrant, camera four. It's moving toward the creek."

"Acknowledged," came her father's terse reply through the headset.

She watched as the hunters changed direction, moving with eerie silence through the underbrush. The cameras only captured snippets of their progress—a flash of Macrath's broad shoulders here, the gleam of Fergus's sword there. The night vision rendered everything in an otherworldly green glow that only heightened the surreal quality of the scene.

"I see it," Dad's voice crackled through the headset. "Stay alert, everyone. This one's larger than the texts described."

A chill ran down Jill's spine. From her academic studies, she knew the Brollachan was described in ancient texts as a shapeless entity that could possess the bodies of the unwary. But those were supposed to be myths, folklore to explain natural phenomena or dissuade children from wandering alone at night. Yet her father and these warriors spoke of it with the grim certainty of those who had encountered it firsthand.

"Can you get a visual?" she asked, frantically searching the feeds.



"Camera five!" Joe exclaimed, pointing.

The image made Jill's blood run cold. A writhing darkness moved between the trees, seeming to absorb the night vision's light rather than reflect it. It had no fixed shape, expanding and contracting like a monstrous amoeba. Two pinpricks of red light within the mass could only be its eyes, though even they shifted position within the formless body.

The sharp crack of her father's rifle echoed through the night, startling them even though they'd been expecting it. On screen, they saw the muzzle flash, followed by the creature's violent contortion.

"They've engaged it," William whispered, as another camera caught the warriors surrounding the creature, weapons raised.

What happened next left them all speechless. As the berserkers confronted the creature, a visible change came over them. Their movements became impossibly fast, almost blurring on the camera feed. Macrath charged with a ferocity that seemed inhuman, while Fergus and Lachlan attacked from the flanks with perfect coordination. But it was Alasdair who truly transformed—his face contorted into a mask of controlled rage, his sword moving so quickly the camera could barely track it.

"What the hell..." Joe breathed.

"Berserkers," Jill whispered, academic knowledge suddenly made flesh before her eyes. "The texts described their battle rage, but I never imagined..."

A strange mixture of awe and fear flooded through her. The gentle, confused men who had sat at her dinner table, who had marveled at modern conveniences, were now revealed in their true element—warriors of terrible power, more force of nature

than human. And Alasdair—his transformation was the most striking. The controlled leader she'd come to know was now unleashed fury embodied, his sword carving arcs of pale fire in the night-vision feed.

"This one's stronger than the usual kind," Dad's voice came through the headset, punctuated by another rifle shot. "It's resisting the iron."

"What do you mean, 'usual kind'?" Jill asked, unable to tear her gaze from the display.

"There were always multiple Brollachans in the old world," her father explained, his words punctuated by sounds of combat. "Rare, but not unique. This isn't the same one they faced before, but it knows them. Recognizes the berserker threat."

The creature surged forward suddenly, engulfing the camera's view with darkness.

The image from camera seven flickered, then vanished.

"Camera five is down," she reported, her voice shakier than she wanted it to be. "I've lost visual on your position."

"We're moving to the clearing," Dad replied, his voice steady despite the circumstances. "The beast is retreating eastward."

Jill switched to camera seven, which overlooked the small meadow near the eastern property line. The feed showed Alasdair and his brothers in pursuit of the shadow creature, their weapons gleaming in the moonlight. Another rifle shot rang out, the sound traveling clearly through the night air to the house.

"Did you see that?" William pointed at the screen, his voice tinged with awe. "Macrath just jumped at least ten feet to intercept that thing. How did he do that?."

"None of this should be possible," Jill murmured, watching as Tavish executed a spinning attack that would make any martial arts master envious. "They fight like they have superpowers."

"Keep your eye on it," Dad's voice came through. "We can't let it go to ground."

A cry of pain came through the headset, making her heart lurch painfully against her ribs.

"Cillian's hit," Dad reported grimly. "Its touch is poison. We need to end this quickly."

"Dad, be careful," Jill whispered, forgetting her promise to maintain radio discipline. The thought of any of them injured—especially her father or Alasdair—sent a wave of dread through her that surprised her with its intensity.

On screen seven, she watched as Alasdair and Macrath flanked the creature while Fergus dragged a wounded Cillian to safety. The Brollachan seemed to sense it was cornered, its formless mass expanding in what could only be aggression. It surged toward Alasdair, who met it with a sweeping arc of his sword.

The image from camera seven stuttered and went dark.

"Dad? DAD!" Jill called into the headset, panic rising in her throat. "I've lost all visual. Do you copy?"

Static answered her.

The minutes that followed were among the longest of Jill's life. She and her brothers frantically checked each camera, finding nothing but empty forest and meadow. The headset remained silent despite her repeated calls. Outside, the night seemed to press

against the windows, darker and more menacing than before.

"We should go look for them," Joe said, already reaching for his coat.

"No," Jill shook her head, though every instinct screamed at her to do exactly that. "We wait. If something happened to them, us wandering in the dark won't help."

She forced herself to breathe slowly, to think rationally. Alasdair knew what he was doing. This wasn't his first encounter with such a creature. Her father had survived for twenty-seven years in this time; he wouldn't be careless now. They would return. They had to.

The sound of the back door opening sent them all rushing from the monitor room. Alasdair entered first, supporting a pale Cillian whose arm was wrapped in what looked like Dad's shirt. The others followed, looking battered but triumphant.

"What happened?" Jill demanded, relief flooding through her at the sight of them all alive. "The cameras went down, and the headset?—"

Jill guided them to the kitchen, where William already had the first aid kit open. "Is it dead?" he asked, helping Cillian into a chair.

"No," Alasdair replied, his voice grim. "Wounded, but it escaped. It'll be back."

As her mother treated Cillian's injured arm, Jill found herself watching Alasdair. There was a new cut along his jawline, a thin line of blood that emphasized the strong contour of his face. Despite the wound and evident exhaustion, he looked more alive than she'd yet seen him—a warrior who had found his purpose again.

"You fight like nothing I've ever seen," she said quietly when he crossed the room to join her. "Those moves...they weren't human."

His eyes met hers, still bright with the lingering effects of battle rage. "The berserker fury. It changes us. Enhances what we can do. It's why we couldn't have you there—we cannot always control who we strike when the rage is upon us."

Joe approached, his expression a mix of awe and newfound respect. "You guys were like...I don't even know how to describe it. Like something out of a movie, but real."

A ghost of a smile touched Alasdair's lips. "We are what we were born to be. Warriors bred for battle."

"That's why we need training," Jill insisted. "If we're going to help next time, we need to know how to move around you when you're...like that."

Something like respect flickered in his eyes, along with another emotion she couldn't quite name. "Aye," he said softly. "Perhaps that can be arranged. You have spirit, Jill Greenwood. All of you do."

Dad approached them, his expression grave. "The Brollachan will recover from its wounds and return. We've bought time, nothing more."

"Then we use that time," Alasdair replied. "To prepare, to plan. The beast may have escaped today, but it's made an enemy of the sons of MacTyre. And we don't forgive easily."

The fierce determination in his voice sent a shiver down Jill's spine—not of fear, but anticipation. Whatever came next, they would face it together.

And next time, she would fight.

### CHAPTER 23

The wooden porch steps creaked beneath Alasdair's weight as he settled onto the top stair, his muscles aching from the night's battle. Above him, stars pierced the velvet darkness, the same stars that had guided him through Scottish highlands centuries ago.

In the bunkhouse nearby, Cillian rested, already showing signs of the remarkable healing that was the berserkers' birthright. The black tendrils that had spread from the wound had begun to recede after just hours, far faster than any normal man would heal. They'd insisted on taking him there rather than keeping him in the main house—some wounds required the comfort of brotherhood to properly mend, and they knew best how to tend to one of their own. Another small way to maintain their dignity in this unfamiliar place.

Alasdair's hands still trembled slightly from the lingering effects of the berserker rage. The fury that had fueled him during battle always left him hollow afterward, drained in a way that went beyond physical exhaustion. He flexed his fingers, studying the flecks of the creature's strange, oily blood still caught beneath his nails. No amount of scrubbing had removed it entirely. The sight of it made his stomach clench with revulsion—a physical reminder of the evil they'd faced, the evil they'd brought with them.

The door opened behind him, and Alasdair knew without turning that it was Jill. Her footsteps had a distinct cadence he'd already memorized, light but purposeful. Something warm bloomed in his chest at her approach, a feeling at once familiar and terrifying in its intensity.

"Mind if I join you?" she asked, her voice soft in the night stillness.

"Please," he replied, shifting slightly to make room beside him on the step—though there was already plenty of room.

She sat, closer than propriety would have allowed in his time, her shoulder nearly brushing his. In the soft golden light spilling from the windows, her features seemed both sharper and softer somehow, her eyes reflecting the distant stars. The faint scent of her shampoo—something floral and clean—mingled with the herbs on the breeze.

"How's Cillian?" she asked, though she'd been there when Conall had completed the healing, had helped hold his brother down when the pain grew too great.

"Resting," Alasdair answered. "Your father's magic...I've never seen a druid with such power." The admission wasn't easy. Druids in his time had been feared and mistrusted, with good reason given his experiences. Yet Conall had proven himself different—a healer, not a destroyer.

"Dad said he'll be completely recovered by morning," Jill said. "The Brollachan's poison is strong, but apparently so is Cillian's constitution."

"Aye, he's always been the toughest of us, despite being the youngest." Pride colored Alasdair's voice. His brothers had fought valiantly tonight, their berserker instincts serving them well against the ancient evil they'd faced.

A comfortable silence fell between them, the night sounds providing a soothing backdrop—crickets chirping, the distant hoot of an owl, the soft rustling of lavender in the fields beyond. But beneath the peacefulness, a weight pressed on Alasdair's heart, growing heavier with each passing moment.

"I've brought danger to your home," he said finally, his voice low and rough with

regret. "To your family."

Jill turned to look at him, her gaze steady and unafraid. "You didn't choose this, Alasdair. None of you did. You were thrown into our time against your will."

"Intention doesn't change consequence," he replied, the words bitter on his tongue. The image of Cillian's wound—the blackened flesh, the veins darkening as the poison spread—would haunt him for years to come. It could have been any of them. It could have been Jill.

Her hand moved to rest atop his, warm and steadying. The simple touch sent a current through him more powerful than any he'd felt from the strange electric devices in this modern world. In his time, such casual contact between an unmarried man and woman would have raised eyebrows. Yet here, now, it felt as natural as breathing.

"I've spent my life studying history," Jill continued, her thumb absently tracing a pattern on his weathered skin. "Learning about warriors and battles and creatures of legend. But watching you fight tonight..." She shook her head, wonder in her expression. "I've never seen anything like it. The way you moved, the way you protected everyone—it was incredible."

Pride warmed his chest at her words, though he tried to temper it. "The berserker rage is both gift and curse. It gives us strength beyond mortal men, but at a cost."

"What cost?" she asked, genuine curiosity in her voice.

Alasdair hesitated, uncertain how to explain the darkness that lived within him, the beast he kept chained except in battle. "Control," he said finally. "When the rage takes us, we're...not entirely ourselves. That's why we couldn't let you come tonight. In the heat of battle, we might not recognize friend from foe."



"Yet you protected Cillian when he was wounded," she pointed out. "You didn't strike blindly."

"Years of practice," he admitted. "And still, the risk remains."

Jill's eyes remained on him, studying his face with an intensity that both unsettled and thrilled him. "My father said berserkers were feared in your time. Not just by enemies, but by your own people."

"Aye," Alasdair nodded, the old pain resurfacing. "We were weapons to be used when needed, then cast aside. Useful in battle, but too dangerous for peace."

Her hand tightened on his. "That's not what you are here, Alasdair. Not to us."

The simple declaration caught him off guard, piercing a vulnerability he hadn't realized was exposed. In this strange world, with its countless wonders and terrors, this was perhaps the most unexpected gift—acceptance. Not just tolerance or wary alliance, but true acceptance. It stole his breath more effectively than any blow he'd ever taken in battle.

"What am I to you, then?" he asked, the question slipping out before he could reconsider, his voice gruffer than intended.

Jill's eyes widened slightly, and for a moment, he feared he'd overstepped. But then something shifted in her expression, a softening around her eyes, a slight parting of her lips that sent his heart racing.

"You're..." she began, then paused, seeming to gather her thoughts. "You're a man out of time who's shown more courage and honor in a few days than most people manage in a lifetime. You're someone who protects those he cares about, who adapts to unthinkable challenges, who faces ancient monsters without flinching." Her voice

grew softer. "You're someone I'm very glad arrived on our property, Brollachan and all."

The words washed over him like a balm, soothing hurts he'd carried for longer than he could remember. In her eyes, he wasn't just a berserker, a weapon, a branded outcast—he was a man. A man worthy of respect, perhaps even affection.

"Even though I've brought danger to your door?" he asked, needing to be certain.

"Some things are worth the risk," she replied simply.

The warmth in her voice, in her eyes, kindled something in Alasdair that had long been dormant—hope. Not just for survival in this new world, but for something more. Something he'd never dared dream possible in his own time.

"The beast will return," he warned, the growing lightness in his chest no match for his need to be honest.

"Then we'll be ready," Jill said with a certainty that both impressed and worried him. "All of us, together. And this time, I'm not staying behind while you all face danger."

Alasdair opened his mouth to protest, but the determination in her eyes gave him pause. The way she'd helped tend to Cillian—steady-handed despite the horror—showed a strength he couldn't dismiss.

"You'll need training," he said finally, the words a concession he hadn't planned to make. "Your brothers too, if they wish to join the fight."

Jill's smile was like sunrise after a long winter's night. "I think we can arrange that."

As they sat together in the quiet June evening, Alasdair felt the burden on his heart

lighten for the first time since arriving in this strange future. The Brollachan was still out there, growing stronger with each passing moment. The dangers were real and pressing.

But for now, with Jill beside him and his brothers safe under this roof that had welcomed them without question, Alasdair allowed himself to believe that perhaps, just perhaps, they could forge a life here after all. Not just surviving, but living.

For the first time since arriving in this strange future, Alasdair felt a glimmer of hope for what tomorrow might bring.

### CHAPTER 24

Jill's boots scuffed against the worn wooden floorboards as she entered the cozy kitchen, the scent of lavender and chamomile wafting from the steaming kettle. Her mother, Sarah, stood at the counter arranging cookies on a plate, her movements slower than they once were but still graceful. Despite the pallor of illness that clung to her skin, Sarah's eyes sparkled with warmth.

"Perfect timing," Sarah said, glancing up with a smile. "I was just making our evening tea."

Jill moved to help, taking the kettle before her mother could lift it. "I've got this, Mom. You should sit."

"I'm not an invalid yet," Sarah reminded her gently, but allowed Jill to pour the steaming water into the waiting teapot. "Chamomile with lavender. I thought we could both use something calming after the excitement tonight."

Jill couldn't help but chuckle at the understatement as they settled at the kitchen table. "Excitement is one way to put it," she admitted, breathing in the soothing aroma. The familiar ritual of their nightly tea grounded her, even as her mind whirled with the day's events. The heat from the ceramic mug warmed her still-trembling hands, a tangible reminder that she was safe at home despite the creature they'd encountered. "It's one thing to study ancient folklore, but seeing a real Brollachan..."

"Your father told me about Cillian's injury. Is he all right?" Sarah asked, concern etching her features.

"He's recovering remarkably quickly," Jill replied. "Dad says berserkers heal faster than ordinary men. They insisted on taking him to the bunkhouse—something about brotherhood and their own healing methods."

Sarah nodded, a wistful smile playing at her lips. "I remember when your father first arrived. He was like a force of nature—so out of place, yet so vital and alive." She paused, her gaze distant. "It's easy to forget, in the day-to-day routine, that the man I married crossed centuries to be here."

Jill leaned forward, curiosity piqued. "What was it like, Mom? Falling in love with someone from another time?"

Sarah's laugh was soft and musical. "Oh, honey. It was terrifying and exhilarating all at once. Your father had to learn everything from scratch—how to use a telephone, drive a car, even how to dress for this era." Her eyes twinkled mischievously. "Though I must admit, I rather enjoyed helping him figure out modern clothing."

"Speaking of clothing," Sarah added, "the packages you ordered arrived this afternoon. I had Joe take them to the bunkhouse."

A blush crept up Jill's cheeks as an unbidden image of Alasdair in modern attire flashed through her mind—how those clothes would look on his powerfully built frame. Her pulse quickened at the thought, unexpected but not unwelcome. She quickly took a sip of tea to hide her reaction, the sweet floral notes grounding her in the present moment. "Good. They've been making do with their original clothing for too long."

"And what about you and Alasdair?" Sarah asked, her tone gentle but probing. "I've seen the way you look at each other."

Jill's heart skipped a beat. Was she really that transparent? "I...I don't know, Mom."

He's incredible—strong, honorable, and there's something about him that just draws me in. But he's from a completely different world. How could we possibly bridge that gap?"

"Your father and I managed," Sarah reminded her. "It wasn't always easy, but it was worth every challenge."

Jill traced the rim of her teacup with her finger, feeling the smooth ceramic under her touch. "Alasdair isn't like the men I've dated before. Professor Daniels was all intellect and theory, more passionate about his research than anything else. And Mark from the museum—everything had to be categorized and labeled." She smiled ruefully. "Alasdair is so...present. When he looks at you, he really sees you. Not as a colleague or a concept, but as a person."

"That's rare in any century," Sarah observed.

"And it's not just that," Jill continued, the words flowing more freely now. A warmth bloomed in her chest that had nothing to do with the tea. "He carries this quiet strength. Even confused by everything in our time, he maintains his dignity. And when he fought that thing tonight—Mom, I've never seen anyone move that way." She shivered, remembering the fluid grace with which he'd wielded the sword, the fierce concentration in his eyes. "Like he was born to be a protector."

Sarah sipped her tea, a knowing smile on her lips. "Sounds like you've given this quite a bit of thought."

Jill sighed, the reality of her situation settling in. "Sometimes I worry that I don't belong anywhere anymore. I was just getting established in academia when I came home..." She trailed off, suddenly aware of how that might sound.

"You regret coming back?" Sarah asked softly, no judgment in her tone.

"No! Never," Jill insisted, reaching for her mother's hand. "Being here for you is exactly where I need to be. I just sometimes wonder if I'll ever find my place again."

Sarah's fingers tightened around hers. "You know, I've been thinking about that. With your expertise in medieval Scottish history and language, you're uniquely positioned to document something extraordinary. Six men from the ninth century, here in our modern world? Any of your colleagues would kill to be in your position right now."

The thought landed with unexpected weight. It was true—what historian wouldn't sacrifice everything for the chance to speak directly with people from the era they studied?

"I hadn't thought of it that way," Jill admitted. "I've been so caught up in what I left behind, I haven't fully appreciated what's right in front of me."

"And what's right in front of you includes a rather handsome Highland warrior who can't seem to take his eyes off you," Sarah teased gently.

"Mom!" Jill protested, her face warming again.

"Love finds a way, sweetheart," Sarah added, her voice soft with wisdom. "It's not about where you're from, but where you're going together."

As they finished their tea, the conversation drifted to lighter topics—the harvest coming up, plans for Father's Day, small domestic matters that felt wonderfully normal amidst the strangeness that had engulfed their lives. When Sarah finally retired for the night, declining Jill's offer of help with a wave of her hand, Jill found herself drawn to the living room bookshelf.

Her fingers traced the spines of her collection of medieval history texts—books she knew almost by heart after years of study. She selected a volume on ancient Scottish

folklore and settled into the comfortable sofa. The chapter on the Brollachan read so differently now, the academic descriptions pale shadows of the terrifying entity she now knew existed. The clinical language describing "formless entities that consume life essence" seemed laughably inadequate compared to the writhing darkness she'd witnessed on the monitor.

A yawn escaped her lips, and Jill glanced at the clock, surprised to see how late it had grown. As she was about to return the book to its shelf, a whimsical impulse struck her. She reached for her e-reader and downloaded a medieval time travel romance novel.

"What am I doing?" she muttered, even as she confirmed the purchase. The cover image loaded—a muscular, shirtless man in a kilt—and Jill couldn't help but snort. "They didn't get it right at all," she mused, Alasdair's intense gaze and rugged features vivid in her mind's eye. No romanticized cover model could capture the raw authenticity of a true medieval warrior.

As she curled up with the e-reader, Jill found herself struggling to focus on the story. The fictional hero paled in comparison to the flesh-and-blood warrior who had stormed into her life. The book's dialogue rang false after hearing Alasdair's genuine accent, his careful choice of words as he navigated modern English.

With a rueful smile, she set the device aside and turned out the light. Perhaps Mom was right—this unexpected detour in her life's journey wasn't a setback but an opportunity. Her academic knowledge now had real-world application, and what scholar wouldn't sacrifice everything for the chance she now had?

In the darkness, Jill's thoughts drifted to Alasdair—his strength in battle, his vulnerability in the face of this new world, the way his eyes seemed to see right through her. She thought of how different he was from the modern men she'd dated—his directness in place of their polished performances, his authenticity in



place of their carefully curated personas.

As sleep claimed her, one thought lingered: her life had become far more exciting than any romance novel could hope to capture. And for the first time in months, she felt a sense of purpose and possibility that had nothing to do with academia.

Maybe she really was exactly where she was meant to be.

### CHAPTER 25

A lasdair tugged at the strange fabric clinging to his skin. The "jeans" felt constricting, nothing like the loose-fitting wool and leather he was accustomed to. The heavy fabric bound his thighs, while the "t-shirt" hugged his torso in a way that made him feel oddly exposed despite being fully covered.

"Remember, we must blend in," he reminded his brothers in Gaelic, his voice low. How could they possibly blend into this world of wonders? They might as well try to hide a wolf among sheep.

"I feel like a bairn trussed up for church," Macrath grumbled, pulling at his collar.

"These garments are so soft," Fergus marveled, rubbing the cotton between his fingers. "And clean. No fleas nor lice to worry about."

Though he would not admit it aloud, Alasdair was grateful for the new garments. Their own clothing had been worn thin from their journey through time, still bearing the stains and tears of battle. These new clothes, though strange, were clean and whole—another kindness from the Greenwood family that humbled him.

As they entered the dining room, the aroma of French toast and coffee assaulted his senses. His stomach growled in response, even as a pang of longing for the simple porridge of home twisted in his gut. Strange how one could hunger for new experiences yet crave the familiar comforts of the past.

Jill looked up from the stove, her eyes widening as they swept over him. A blush

crept up her cheeks, and Alasdair felt a flush of heat rise in his chest. The soft intake of her breath when their eyes met made his pulse race faster than any battle charge.

He found himself noticing small details about her that he hadn't before—the way she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear when concentrating, how her eyes crinkled at the corners when she smiled. The way her hands moved—graceful and efficient—fascinated him.

"Well, don't you boys clean up nice," Conall chuckled, gesturing for them to sit.

"These garments are most...restrictive," Fergus replied diplomatically.

"Ye'll get used to them," Conall assured them. "Took me a while too. In our time, clothing was made for movement, for work. Here, it's as much about appearance as function."

"Try the French toast," Jill suggested, sliding a plate before him. "Mom's recipe—best in the county."

Taking a bite, his eyes widened in surprise. "So sweet," he murmured. In our time, such sweetness would be for chieftains and holy days.

As they ate, Alasdair found his gaze continually drawn to Jill. The way she moved with such confidence in this world of wonders both awed and unsettled him. How could he hope to protect her, to be worthy of her, when he could barely navigate this strange new realm?

Yet there was something about her that would have been valued in any time. The steadiness of her hands, the way she anticipated needs before they were spoken, her keen eye that missed nothing. And beneath her gentle demeanor, he sensed a strength that reminded him of the clan matriarchs who could quell arguments with a single

glance.

"So," Conall's voice cut through his musings, "we need to discuss how to integrate you lads into our time."

"Aye, we're grateful for your hospitality, but we cannae be a burden. We must learn your ways quickly and make our own way here."

"And we need to hunt the Brollachan," Macrath interjected, his hand instinctively reaching for a sword that was no longer at his hip. "The beast grows stronger with each passing night."

"We also need to fix the cameras it damaged," Joe added. "Dad and I will work on that today."

Jill frowned. "That creature's still out there. We can't just ignore it."

"No," Conall agreed, "but we can't go charging off half-cocked either. You boys need to learn about our world first. It'll help you track the beast more effectively."

Every instinct screamed to pursue the monster, to eliminate the threat. But Conall's words held wisdom. They were strangers in a strange land. How could they hope to defeat their foe if they couldn't even dress themselves without aid?

"Very well," he conceded. "What would you have us learn first?"

The day that followed was a whirlwind of marvels. Jill guided them through the mysteries of the "refrigerator," a magical box that kept food cold without ice. The "microwave" heated food in moments, while the "blender" turned solid foods to liquid faster than any mortar and pestle.

"In our time," Alasdair mused, watching bread pop up perfectly browned from the toaster, "a woman might spend half the day just preparing a single meal."

"And now we complain when dinner takes more than thirty minutes," Jill replied with a rueful smile.

When the promised "pizza" arrived at midday, Alasdair was skeptical of the strange, flat bread covered in sauce and cheese. But one bite changed everything.

"By all the gods," he breathed, the explosion of flavors unlike anything in his experience. "This...this is magnificent."

Jill's delighted laugh at his reaction sent a pleasant rush through him. "I've never seen someone so happy over pizza," she teased, her amber eyes dancing with amusement.

Back then, flavors were simple," he explained. "Salt, if we were fortunate. Herbs when available. Nothing like this...this harmony of tastes."

"How do ye no' become soft, with all these conveniences?" he asked Conall when the older man joined them.

"Different kinds of strength, lad," Conall replied thoughtfully. "In this time, many battles are fought with words and knowledge rather than swords. Don't mistake comfort for weakness."

As the sun began to set, Jill gathered them in front of a large black rectangle she called a "television" to watch a movie called Highlander—a fictional story about an immortal Scottish warrior.

The images that sprang to life on the screen were like nothing Alasdair had ever seen. But it was the scenes of modern cities that truly stunned them—the vast forests of

buildings, the endless rivers of people flowing through streets.

"Are there truly so many people in one place?" Fergus asked, his voice hushed with awe.

"That's New York," Jill explained. "Millions of people live there."

"The buildings," Cillian marveled, "they reach to the heavens. How do they not topple in the wind?"

"How many people are in the world now?" Tavish asked, his storyteller's curiosity piqued.

"About eight billion," Jill replied casually.

The brothers exchanged stunned glances. The number was beyond comprehension.

Alasdair found himself leaning forward, engrossed in the story despite its strangeness. The tale of a Highlander thrust into future times struck a chord too deep to ignore.

Beside him, Jill shifted, her arm brushing against his. The contact sent a jolt through him, more electrifying than any of the marvels he'd witnessed that day. He glanced at her, catching her watching him instead of the screen. Their eyes met, and for a moment, the centuries between them seemed to melt away. The lamplight caught the gold flecks in her eyes, reminding him of amber—precious and warm.

When the Highlander in the story spoke of his first wife, of love lost to time, Alasdair felt a tightness in his chest. He'd never had a wife—the mark of the berserker had seen to that. No clan would give their daughters to men bearing the wolf brand. But here, in this new world, where the mark meant nothing...

As the movie ended, Alasdair's mind reeled with the implications of what he'd seen.

"Is this...is this how your people see us?" he asked hesitantly.

Jill laughed, soft and reassuring. "No, it's just a movie. Fiction. But I thought you'd appreciate the Scottish connection."

"The accents were all wrong," Macrath grumbled. "And no Highlander would wear such strange garments."

"Says the man in blue jeans," Jill teased, grinning. "And for the record, kilts are real. Very Scottish. Very traditional. Just...not from your time."

"We will wear no such thing," Tavish declared.

"You sure?" Jill said, mischief dancing in her eyes. "They made them look pretty good in the movie. Very heroic."

They all shifted uneasily.

"And think of the colors!" Jill said brightly. "There are so many tartans. Lots of blue, lots of red. But you guys are so unique... maybe we should do something original."

They looked at her warily.

"How about pink?" she added sweetly, lifting the hem of her pink T-shirt to show them. "Pink is usually a color for girls, but I think you guys could really rock it."

Alasdair caught the sparkle in her eye, the laughter she was holding back. She was teasing them—and she meant him to rise to it.

A slow grin tugged at the corner of his mouth, hidden beneath his mock scowl. "Pink," he repeated in a voice so grave it could have pronounced a death sentence, as if the very word physically wounded him.

"Maybe even add some sparkles," Jill said, fighting a grin.

The warriors recoiled in unison, Alasdair the most dramatic of them all.

"If ye bring such a cloth near me," he said grimly, hand over his heart as if making a sacred vow, "I'll burn it where it falls."

"Salt the ashes," Tavish muttered.

"And curse the loom that wove it," Macrath added darkly.

Jill burst out laughing, bright and beautiful.

Alasdair let the sound wash over him, feeling lighter than he had in years.

"Relax," she said between giggles. "No pink tartans... unless you ask nicely."

As they stepped outside, the cool evening air a balm after the day's overwhelming experiences, Alasdair found himself walking beside Jill. The moon hung low in the sky, casting silver light across the fields. In some ways, the night sky was the only thing unchanged from his time—the same stars, the same moon that had watched over his ancestors.

"Your father," he began, choosing his words carefully, "when he came to this time...was he alone?"

Jill's eyes widened. "I...yes, I suppose he was."



Alasdair nodded, a newfound respect for Conall blooming in his chest. To face such a transition alone, without brothers at his side..."And now he has all a man could want. A wife, children, a home."

"Is that what you want?" Jill asked, her voice soft.

The question caught him off guard, though it shouldn't have. It was the dream that had driven him and his brothers to McKinnie's service, the promise that had led to their betrayal.

"Aye," he replied, the answer as natural as breathing. "A place to belong, a family to protect, a legacy to leave behind."

Her laugh held something he couldn't quite name. "Not every man, no. Some just want to play, avoid responsibility. Especially these days."

Alasdair stiffened, his disbelief plain. "Then they are nae men at all," he said harshly. "A man is meant to build, to protect, to pass on his name and knowledge. 'Tis his duty—and his greatest honor."

Jill's breath caught, her eyes wide, as if he'd struck some deep, hidden chord within her. "And now?" she asked softly. "In this time, what do you want?"

The question hung between them, weighted with possibilities. As he looked at Jill, backlit by the porch light, her eyes searching his, he recognized a deeper truth.

"I want what I've always wanted," he said softly. "A home. Purpose." He hesitated, then added, "Someone to share it with."

His eyes lingered on her face, taking in the gentle curve of her cheek, the intelligence in her gaze. She was unlike any woman he'd ever known—educated in ways even

noblewomen of his time were not, yet practical and grounded.

He saw something flicker in Jill's eyes—admiration? Interest? Before he could decipher it, Joe called out, beckoning them to examine some large metal contraption.

"That's Dad's old motorcycle," Jill explained. "He's thinking of getting it running again."

As Alasdair moved to join his brothers, he felt Jill's gaze on him. The weight of it followed him, a reminder of all he'd left behind—and all he might yet gain in this new world. They might be separated by centuries of history, but in her eyes, he saw a future worth fighting for.

### CHAPTER 26

Jill couldn't sleep.

She'd tried for hours, tossing and turning as her mind raced with images from the past few days—the Brollachan's shifting form, the berserkers' fierce fighting, Alasdair's eyes when he spoke of home. Finally giving up, she slipped from bed and padded to her window, drawn by a flicker of movement outside.

Moonlight bathed the lavender fields in silver, the early June buds standing like silent sentinels in neat rows. Beyond them, the dark line of trees marked the boundary between safety and the unknown. And there, at the edge of the porch, a lone figure stood watching the treeline, his posture unmistakable even in silhouette.

Alasdair.

Her pulse quickened at the sight of him standing guard over their home. Without giving herself time to reconsider, Jill pulled on her robe and slippers and made her way downstairs, careful not to wake the rest of the house. The wooden steps creaked beneath her feet, each sound amplified in the midnight stillness.

The night air carried the scent of lavender and pine as she stepped onto the porch, cool against her skin after the warmth of the house. Alasdair didn't turn, though she knew he'd heard her approach. One hand rested on the hilt of a sword—one of her father's collection that he'd given the warriors earlier that day. The metal gleamed in the moonlight, both beautiful and deadly.

"Couldn't sleep either?" she asked softly, moving to stand beside him.

Alasdair's eyes remained fixed on the treeline. "A warrior should remain vigilant when danger threatens," he replied, his voice low. "The Brollachan hunts by night."

Jill studied his profile, taking in the rigid set of his jaw, the tension in his shoulders. He wore the new jeans and t-shirt they'd provided, but somehow they looked foreign on him, as if the modern clothes couldn't contain the ancient warrior within. The moonlight caught in his dark hair, silvering the edges in a way that made her fingers itch to reach out and touch it.

"You don't have to stand watch alone," she said. "We have the security cameras. Joe and William have fixed them all and added more."

A wry smile touched his lips. "Cameras that the beast can disable with its presence." He glanced down at the sword at his hip. "Steel and vigilance have served warriors for centuries. I trust them more than your hidden eyes in the woods."

Something in his tone caught her attention—a heaviness that hadn't been there during their movie night. "Is everything okay?" she asked, then immediately felt foolish. Of course everything wasn't okay. He was a man torn from his time, facing an ancient monster in a world he barely understood.

To her surprise, Alasdair turned to face her fully, his green eyes searching hers in the moonlight. "Your father has shown us great kindness," he said. "The weapons, the clothing, shelter for my brothers...I've known clan chiefs who offered less to blood relatives."

"He understands what you're going through," Jill replied. "He made the same journey, just...alone."

"Aye. A harder road, I cannot imagine." Alasdair's fingers tightened around the sword hilt. "I swear to you, we will repay this debt. Every kindness will be returned tenfold."

"It's not a debt," Jill insisted. "It's just...helping people who need it."

Alasdair shook his head, a small smile playing at his lips. "In my time, debts of honor were sacred, Jill. Allow me the comfort of old ways, at least in this."

Something in his expression made her heart ache—a glimpse of the struggle he must be facing, trying to reconcile who he was with who he needed to become in this new world. The historian in her wanted to document his experience, but the woman in her just wanted to ease his burden.

"Do you miss it?" she asked quietly. "Your time, I mean."

He was silent for a long moment, his gaze returning to the dark trees. "I miss knowing my place," he finally said, his voice barely audible. "A warrior knew his purpose, his worth. Here..." He gestured vaguely at the modern world around them. "Here, I am nothing. A curiosity, perhaps. A relic. But not a man of value."

The raw honesty in his words caught Jill off guard. This wasn't the confident leader who had faced down the Brollachan without flinching. This was a man adrift, questioning his very identity. His vulnerability touched something deep inside her that all her academic knowledge couldn't reach.

"That's not true," she said firmly. "You're not defined by when you were born, Alasdair. It's who you are that matters."

"And who am I here?" he asked, turning to face her again. The moonlight cast shadows across his features, highlighting the planes of the warrior's face. "Not a

laird. Not a protector. I cannot even understand half the wonders in your kitchen, let alone defend against the dangers of your world."

Jill stepped closer, drawn by the vulnerability he was showing her. The space between them felt heavy with something unspoken. "You're still Alasdair MacTyre," she said softly. "Still a leader. Still someone who protects others, who faces danger without flinching. That hasn't changed just because the century has."

Something flickered in his eyes—a warmth that made her breath catch. "Ye have a way about ye, Jill Greenwood," he murmured. "Making a man believe he can be more than his past."

She froze, her pulse thudding in her ears. They stood close enough that she could feel the warmth radiating from him, could see the rise and fall of his chest with each breath. The cricket songs and night breeze faded away until all she could hear was her own heartbeat.

"I've spent my life studying history," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "But none of my books prepared me for you. For any of this."

His hand moved, hesitantly, as if he might reach for her, but then fell back to his side. "I cannot offer ye what a man of your time might," he said, each word weighted with meaning. "Not yet. Not while the beast threatens your family. I must prove myself first."

"Prove yourself?" Jill echoed, confused. "You've already faced the Brollachan once. No one doubts your courage."

Alasdair's expression grew solemn. "It isna about courage. It's about worth." His gaze dropped to the wolf brand on his arm, visible beneath the short sleeve of his t-shirt. "In my time, this mark made me unworthy of a good match. No clan would give their

daughters to branded men, no matter how fierce in battle."

Understanding dawned, stealing Jill's breath. He wasn't just talking about defeating the monster—he was talking about earning the right to court her. The realization sent warmth spreading through her chest, equal parts touching and frustrating. All her modern sensibilities rebelled against the idea that he needed to prove himself worthy of her, even as something primal within her thrilled at his devotion.

"In my time, a man like me wouldna have dared look twice at a woman of your station," he admitted. "Not unless he could offer land or title."

"That's not how things work now," she said, struggling to keep her voice steady. "People choose for themselves, based on feelings, not...worthiness tests or clan politics."

"Perhaps," he acknowledged with a slight nod. "But some traditions run deeper than time itself. A man should prove his worth before seeking a woman's hand."

The formality in his words might have made her smile under other circumstances—it was so at odds with modern dating norms. But the sincerity behind them touched something deep within her. No man had ever spoken to her with such earnest intent, such clear purpose.

"And if the woman has already decided his worth?" she asked boldly, surprising herself with her own courage.

Alasdair's breath caught audibly. For a moment, the warrior's composure slipped, revealing something raw and hopeful beneath. Then, as if catching himself, he straightened, his expression becoming guarded once more.

"The Brollachan first," he said, though his voice had softened. "I'll not have ye tied to

a man who cannot keep ye safe."

A twig snapped in the darkness beyond the porch, and Alasdair tensed, his hand drawing the sword in one fluid motion. She froze, her pulse thudding in her ears as they both stared into the shadows.

After a long, tense moment, a raccoon waddled into view, completely oblivious to the drama it had interrupted. Jill let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding, relief mingling with lingering adrenaline.

Alasdair didn't immediately relax. His eyes scanned the treeline, searching for any sign of the real threat. Only when he was satisfied did he resheath his sword, the metal sliding home with a soft whisper.

"You should rest," he said, his tone gentler now. "Tomorrow brings its own challenges."

Jill knew she should go inside, but something kept her rooted to the spot. "And you? Will you stand watch all night?"

"Until Tavish relieves me at dawn," he confirmed. "We've set a rotation."

Of course they had. These were men of war, trained to protect even in unfamiliar territory. The thought was both comforting and sobering.

"Well, then..." She hesitated, then impulsively reached out and squeezed his hand. The warmth of his skin against hers sent a thrill through her. "Be careful, Alasdair MacTyre. Some of us are already quite invested in your future in this century."

Before he could respond, she turned and walked back into the house, her heart racing with the boldness of her words. Behind her, she felt his gaze follow, warm and steady



as the June night itself.

As she climbed the stairs back to her room, Jill realized something fundamental had shifted between them tonight. Beyond the attraction, beyond the fascination of historian and historical subject, a deeper connection had formed—one built on vulnerability, understanding, and possibilities that spanned centuries.

For the first time since the berserkers had arrived, Jill allowed herself to truly imagine what it might mean to fall for a man from another time. Not just as an academic curiosity or a romantic fantasy, but as a real future with real consequences. A future with Alasdair.

Sleep came more easily than it had in days, her dreams filled with warriors and moonlight, and ancient promises. And if, in those dreams, Alasdair looked at her with the same intensity he had on the porch, his guard finally lowered—well, that was her secret to keep until morning.

### CHAPTER 27

A lasdair squinted against the bright morning sun as he stepped onto the porch of the Greenwood farmhouse. The air was crisp and bright, curling around his senses like a spell. He inhaled deeply, committing the unfamiliar aroma to memory. It was nothing like the peat smoke and damp earth of his homeland. It smelled of peace.

And peace was something he'd known precious little of in his life as a berserker. Always fighting, always watching, always waiting for the next betrayal or battle.

William and Joe, Jill's brothers, stood waiting in the yard, their postures casual but alert. Their expressions were a blend of curiosity and wary amusement. Behind Alasdair, his brothers shifted uneasily, still disoriented by the strange comfort of beds and indoor plumbing.

"Are ye certain this is wise?" Macrath muttered in Gaelic. "Learning to farm like common serfs?"

"We are guests here," Alasdair replied firmly in the same tongue. "And there is no dishonor in honest work."

He straightened. They looked to him—always had. If he flinched, they faltered. 'Twas ever thus, from the first day they'd banded together—he the leader by unspoken consent, carrying their hopes on his shoulders.

The weight felt different today, after his conversation with Jill the night before. Her words had lingered in his mind through the remaining hours of his watch. Some of us

are already quite invested in your future in this century. The memory of her hand squeezing his, warm and reassuring in the moonlight, stirred something deep in his chest. Her touch had been brief but intentional—a gesture that spoke volumes in the stillness of night.

"Right then," William said, clapping his hands together. "Time for a crash course in modern farming."

Alasdair's brow furrowed. "Crash...course?" The strange modern phrases still caught him off guard, no matter how many he learned.

Joe grinned. "Don't worry. No actual crashing involved. Probably."

Despite the joke, Alasdair gave a solemn nod. "We are eager to learn. Whatever tasks you set before us, we shall master them." He squared his shoulders, unconsciously adopting the stance he'd taken when addressing chieftains in his own time. "We willnae disappoint your father's trust."

Joe elbowed William. "Careful, big guy. That kind of talk gets you assigned the heaviest jobs."

"The lad thinks he's jesting," Tavish whispered in Gaelic. "As if we ken what heavy means compared to building stone keeps wi' naught but ropes and our backs."

As they crossed the yard, Alasdair's mind drifted to the strange images from the night before—the movie, Jill had called it. A dizzying world of glowing signs, roaring machines, and skies filled with fire and light. A world at war without swords.

"What of the firearms we saw in your...movie?" he asked, stumbling slightly over the word. Such weapons would be useful against the Brollachan, perhaps more effective than the steel blades they were accustomed to. And if they were to protect this family

and their land, they needed every advantage.

William's smile faded. "That's not happening anytime soon. Dad hasn't signed off, and frankly, it's way too early. We barely let Joe near a nail gun."

Joe shot his brother a look. "That was one time."

Disappointment stirred in Alasdair's chest, but he buried it. He was a guest here. And there was wisdom in learning to walk before reaching for weapons. "As ye wish," he said with a respectful nod. "We shall learn what ye deem important first."

The Brollachan weighed heavily on his mind, but he knew they needed to understand this world better before confronting the beast again. Knowledge was a weapon too, one they sorely lacked. And if they were to defeat the creature—to truly make this place safe for Jill and her family—they needed to arm themselves with everything this time had to offer.

Soon, they passed the edge of the fields, the purple rows stretching like ribbons toward the tree line. The sight was unlike anything Alasdair had ever seen—even the grand halls of the Highland lords had never boasted such color. William gestured to the irrigation lines, explaining valves and schedules, and Joe described planting rotations and harvesting bundles for Jill's mother's soap business.

"In spring and summer, we prep and plant," Joe said. "Fall's all about harvesting and bundling. If you're lucky, we'll let you try the distiller."

"Distiller?" Fergus perked up at this, his natural curiosity engaged. "Ye mean for spirits?"

"For essential oils," William clarified. "Mom's soaps need the concentrated lavender oil. Though we do have a still for...other purposes...hidden away in the back forty."

"I like these lads more by the minute," Macrath muttered, earning a warning glance from Alasdair.

Alasdair nodded, taking mental note of every process, every tool. His brothers needed purpose, and this place—this land—it was rich with it. In their time, they'd been mercenaries, fighting for whoever would pay them, never putting down roots. The thought of working the land, of watching something grow from their efforts rather than watching men die...it held an unexpected appeal that settled in his chest like a warm hearth fire.

He felt a swell of satisfaction seeing his brothers engage with this new world, each finding elements that called to their particular strengths. It reminded him of when they'd first banded together—how each had brought unique skills to their brotherhood. Perhaps here, those skills could be used for creation rather than destruction.

He glanced sideways. Fergus was distracted by a chicken, poking at it with cautious fascination. Tavish muttered something under his breath in Gaelic, shaking his head at the sight of a hose coiled like a serpent. But Lachlan was nowhere in sight.

Alasdair's gaze snapped to the barn. "Lachlan!" he barked, more from instinct than alarm. In their time, separation often meant danger.

A moment later, his brother emerged from the shadows, cradling something in his arms. A saddle—worn and cracked, its leather dulled by time.

"This was forgotten," Lachlan murmured, brushing reverent fingers over the surface. "She was good once." His normally stoic face softened as he examined the leather work. Horses had always been Lachlan's true companions, more reliable to him than most humans.

Alasdair arched a brow. "Ye plan to ride into town and challenge their thunder carts?" A gentle tease, to mask his relief at seeing his brother's spirits lifted.

Lachlan didn't smile. "Fix it," he said simply. "If we stay, the horses will need proper gear. No sense wasting a loyal thing."

He turned and slipped back into the barn without another word.

Alasdair watched him go, something tightening behind his ribs. In their time, Lachlan had been known for taming wild horses no other man could approach. He'd once told Alasdair, "Horses dinnae care for titles. They ask only for truth."

Perhaps in that, at least, the centuries made no difference.

Maybe this strange new era would give him that again. Would give them all something back that had been stolen when they were branded and cast out.

"He's good with horses?" William asked, following Alasdair's gaze.

"The best I've known," Alasdair replied honestly. "In our time, men said he could speak their language."

William nodded thoughtfully. "We could use someone like that. The ranch has been short-handed since Mom got sick."

As they resumed the tour, Alasdair felt the tension in his shoulders ease just slightly. Joe explained how Jill's mother had built a loyal customer base with her soaps, how the online world worked—though that term still meant little to Alasdair. But the intent was clear. This was a family working together, building something that would last beyond their own lives. Something he and his brothers had never been permitted to create.

"And now that we are here," Alasdair said carefully, "perhaps we can help with the expansion you spoke of?" He needed to be useful, needed to give his brothers purpose beyond the endless battle readiness that had defined their existence.

Joe grinned. "Now you're talkin'. We've wanted to use more of the land for years. You guys could make that happen."

The possibilities expanded in Alasdair's mind. A future here, working this land, building something lasting. And perhaps, if they proved themselves, if they defeated the Brollachan and showed their worth...

Jill's image rose unbidden in his thoughts. Could she be part of that future too? Not just as their guide to this strange new world, but as something more? The thought sent a surge of warmth through him that had nothing to do with the morning sun. Her words from last night echoed in his mind: Some of us are already quite invested in your future in this century. Had she meant herself? The possibility was both exhilarating and terrifying.

They walked on in companionable silence for a time, the sounds of birds and breeze replacing the usual clang of swords or bellow of war horns. In the distance, the mountains rose like ancient sentinels. Dense forests bordered the fields, vast and green. And just beyond the horizon, the sea waited.

We are fortunate indeed, Alasdair thought, remembering the nightmarish cityscape from the film. Steel towers, crowds of people, metal beasts screaming down endless roads. This place, by contrast, was open. Breathing. Alive. Not so different from the highlands of his youth, before the battles had claimed him.

"The land here," he ventured, "it feels...similar to home. The mountains, the forests." He gestured toward the distant peaks. "In our time, clan territories were marked by such features."

"Dad says that's why he settled here," William replied. "Reminded him of Scotland, but with more opportunities and fewer clan wars."

"Fewer monsters too, until we brought the Brollachan with us," Alasdair said grimly, the memory of their night hunt still fresh. "I'm sorry for that burden."

"Hey, every place has its challenges," Joe shrugged. "Drought, forest fires, property taxes...what's one shapeshifting monster in the mix?"

His casual humor in the face of such a threat startled Alasdair, but there was wisdom in it too. Fear only fed the beast; courage, even lighthearted courage, was a weapon in itself.

The monster would be dealt with, Alasdair vowed silently. He would learn everything needed about this place, this time—not just to survive, but to truly live here. For himself, for his brothers, and perhaps...for Jill.

As they turned back toward the house, Alasdair's eyes found the silhouette of Jill moving through the flowering rows. The morning light caught in her hair, turning the brown strands to burnished gold. Something stirred low in his chest, a feeling both foreign and familiar. Not just admiration for her beauty, but for the confidence in her movements, the capable way she checked the plants, her obvious knowledge of the land. In his time, a woman of such learning would have been rare indeed, and likely feared. But here, her mind was valued as much as her heart—and he found himself drawn to both.

He watched the gentle way she tended the plants, fingers delicately examining the buds. The small smile that played on her lips as she worked held a quiet contentment that he envied. She belonged here, to this land, to this time. And last night, for one breathtaking moment, she had suggested she might be willing to belong with him as well.



Could she ever truly see him as more than a curiosity from the past? As a man with whom she might build a future? The memory of her hand squeezing his in the moonlight, the warmth in her eyes when she'd told him some of us are already quite invested in your future in this century —these suggested possibilities he'd scarcely dared to hope for.

He squared his shoulders. They would learn. They would work. They would defeat the Brollachan, removing its shadow from this family that had shown them such kindness. And perhaps—just perhaps—they would finally find the one thing they had never been given in their own time.

A place to belong. A place where even a berserker might find not just acceptance, but love.

### CHAPTER 28

A lasdair's fingers hovered over the sleek glass surface of the smartphone, his calloused hands comically oversized against the delicate device. The screen glowed softly in the dim light, illuminating the confusion written across his brow. In his time, such a treasure would have been worth more than gold—a small piece of glass that held knowledge beyond measure, that connected people across vast distances in the blink of an eye.

"I still dinnae understand," he muttered, frustration curling around his voice. "How can this tiny box hold more knowledge than all the scrolls in our keep?"

Jill leaned closer, her breath warm against his cheek. "It's not magic," she said gently. "It's science."

Science. The word held no shape in his mind, no weight he could grasp. In his world, things were either natural or magical, gifts of God or workings of darker forces. This strange middle ground—this "science"—felt like walking a rope bridge in fog.

But her nearness, that made sense. The scent in her hair, the curve of her smile, the warmth of her touch as she guided his hand over the screen—those things, he understood. And craved, with an intensity that startled him. Such yearnings had been buried deep during his years as a warrior, when finding a partner seemed impossible.

Her fingers brushed against his as she guided his touch across the screen, the simple contact sending a current through him more powerful than any electricity this modern world commanded. A slow warmth spread up his arm, settling like embers in his

chest. For a brief moment, he allowed himself to imagine those fingers entwined with his, not just in instruction but in something more lasting.

Then she pulled back, cheeks pink. The air between them cooled, but not entirely. A possibility lingered—a tension neither of them acknowledged aloud.

Before he could speak, Macrath interjected from across the room. "I still dinnae see how this will help us find wives."

Jill's eyebrows shot up. "Wives?"

The blunt question hung in the air, heavy with implications. Alasdair exchanged a glance with his brothers. He cleared his throat. "We thought...this was part of the courting ritual in your time." The words sounded foolish even as he spoke them, but there was truth behind them—they had been promised brides before McKinnie's betrayal. That hunger for companionship, for family, had never died.

Jill blinked—then laughed. "Oh boy. We've got a lot to cover."

The warmth in her laughter soothed what might have been embarrassment. She wasn't mocking them, merely amused by the cultural gap that sometimes yawned between them like a chasm.

Alasdair opened his mouth to reply—but a low rumble in the distance caught his attention. He stilled, warrior's instincts instantly alert. In his time, weather was not merely an inconvenience—it could mean life or death, especially for a warrior exposed on open ground.

Outside, the sky darkened unnaturally fast. The wind shifted. There was weight in the air, a feeling he recognized from countless nights camped in the highlands. Storm coming, and a fierce one at that.

"Tavish?" Alasdair called, frowning. His brother had always been sensitive to such things, his storyteller's soul attuned to the rhythms of the natural world.

He found his brother barefoot on the edge of the lawn, arms raised slightly, face tilted toward the sky. The others argued inside about something Jill called 'apps,' but Tavish stood apart, lost in something older.

"The storm listens," Tavish said quietly. "Can ye not feel it? The wind remembers. The sky warns."

Lightning split the clouds above the trees, white and jagged. A heartbeat later, thunder cracked the heavens wide open. The sound was primal, familiar—one thing unchanged across the centuries.

Alasdair stepped beside him, heart pounding. "We're not in the Highlands anymore," he said. "The rules are different here." This modern world, with its electricity and running water and endless comforts, had made him forget how close nature still lurked.

Tavish turned to him, unblinking. "Aye. But the storm still kens us."

A chill ran down Alasdair's spine at the words. There was truth in them. They might have crossed time, might wear strange clothes and sleep in soft beds, but their souls remained those of men born to the wild places, men who understood the language of wind and rain.

The rising tempest reminded him of the night they'd hunted the Brollachan. That creature too seemed to draw power from darkness and chaos—perhaps tonight it was gathering strength for another attack. The thought set his nerves on edge, amplifying his already heightened senses.

And then the power died.

The house fell dark with a suddenness that stole breath. A cry rose from upstairs—Jill's voice, sharp and full of fear. "Mom!"

Alasdair was already moving, taking the stairs two at a time, instinct guiding him through the darkened house. Behind him came the sound of his brothers following, their footsteps sure despite the darkness.

They found Sarah in bed, pale and gasping, her oxygen machine silent. The steady hum that had been a constant background noise since their arrival was gone, leaving only the ragged sound of her labored breathing.

Jill's hands shook as she knelt beside her mother. "Without power...I don't know what to do." Fear sharpened her voice, washing away the confident scholar who had been teaching them moments before.

"I might," Alasdair said, stepping forward. "There is a ritual—an old one. It is not what ye'd call scientific, but..." He hesitated, uncertain how this educated woman would view the old ways, the breathing techniques and healing chants passed down among warriors.

He didn't finish. He didn't have to.

Jill looked at her mother. Then at him. She gave a trembling nod. "Please. Anything that might help."

"Lachlan," Alasdair called. His brother had always had the steadiest breath control, the clearest chanting voice.

Together, they began. Their voices blended in ancient Gaelic, a low chant that

vibrated in the floorboards. The candlelight flickered with each word. Alasdair could feel it—the hum of something older than time, thrumming beneath the skin of this world. The rhythm of breath, the pull of air into lungs, the ancient words that had been old even in their time.

"Anail a-steach, anail a-mach," they intoned. Breath in, breath out. "Beatha, spionnadh, neart." Life, vigor, strength.

Sarah's breathing eased, falling into rhythm with their chanting. Her color returned, slowly but steadily, as she drew strength from the ancient cadence.

Jill sat beside her, watching with wide eyes. "I can't believe it," she whispered. "You...you did it."

Alasdair didn't feel triumphant. He felt humbled. And deeply aware of the woman kneeling beside him. Her quick mind had been open to their ways, despite her education, despite what her modern world would call superstition. That willingness to try, to believe—it touched a part of him long closed off by years of battle and rejection.

A candle guttered nearby, and Jill moved to fix it. In the dimness, they both reached for it at once, their hands meeting around the small flame. For a heartbeat, neither moved away. The gentle light illuminated her face in a way that transported Alasdair back through time—the soft glow dancing across her features reminded him of firelight in great halls, of women with flowers in their hair during summer festivals. Without electricity's harsh glare, she could have been a woman from his own time, her beauty timeless in the dancing shadows.

"There are many things in this world that defy explanation," he said softly, his hand still touching hers. "Perhaps it's not about understanding everything—but being open to possibility."

Their eyes met. In the soft glow of candlelight, she looked like something out of a dream—real, strong, beautiful. Her lips parted, and he found himself leaning closer, drawn by a force as ancient and powerful as the storm outside. The distance between them narrowed, the world shrinking to just this moment, this breath?—

His heart pounded in his chest, drowning out even the storm's fury. The warrior who had faced countless battles without fear now trembled at the thought of closing those final inches between them. Not from fear, but from the overwhelming certainty that once their lips met, nothing would ever be the same again. This wasn't just about desire—it was about finding something he'd never dared hope for, something that transcended centuries.

"So," Macrath's voice boomed from the hall, "about this courting business. In our time, we'd simply take a woman we fancied. Is that still the custom?"

Jill's head snapped toward him, the spell broken. "Absolutely not!"

The berserkers looked genuinely surprised. "Then...how do men find wives?" Macrath asked, his brow furrowed in genuine confusion.

"Slowly," she replied, pinching the bridge of her nose. "And without taking women against their will."

"Then what of bride prices?" Fergus asked. "Do fathers still negotiate dowries for their daughters?"

"Also no," Jill replied, a hint of amusement creeping into her voice despite the situation. "Women choose their own partners now. No taking, no selling, no arranged marriages."

The confusion on their faces would've been comical if not for how sincere it was.

Fergus looked like a puppy scolded for the first time. Even Cillian frowned, trying to make sense of the new rules.

"So women just...choose? Freely?" Tavish asked, as if the concept were utterly foreign—which, Alasdair realized, it was. In their time, marriages had been arrangements between families, alliances sealed with flesh and blood.

"Yes," Jill confirmed. "And men have to...you know, be likable. Worthy of being chosen."

"Och, that's a tough break for ye, Macrath," Lachlan said with a grin. "Being likable was never your strong suit."

Despite everything, Alasdair chuckled. The familiar banter of his brothers, the warmth of the candlelit room, the slow, steady breathing of Sarah—it all combined to create a moment of peace amid the storm. He caught Jill's eye again, and this time, she smiled back. A real smile, not the patient one she wore when explaining modern concepts, but something warmer.

As a particularly loud crash of thunder shook the house, Jill startled, unconsciously shifting closer to him where they sat on the floor. Without thinking, he placed his arm around her shoulders—a warrior's instinct to protect, but something more as well. She tensed for only a moment before relaxing against him, her head finding a natural place against his shoulder.

The weight of her against him felt perfectly natural, despite everything. Her trust—this modern, educated woman willingly leaning into his strength—filled him with a fierce tenderness he'd never known. In that moment, he would have faced a dozen Brollachans to keep her safe, to preserve this fragile peace they'd found amid the storm.



"In our time," he said softly, for her ears alone, "storms were feared, but also welcomed. They cleanse the air, water the crops, remind us of powers greater than our own."

"And in this time?" she asked, her voice equally quiet.

"In this time," he replied, gazing down at her, "I find they reveal what might otherwise remain hidden."

Her eyes met his, questioning, uncertain, yet somehow hopeful. The candles flickered, casting dancing shadows across her face. In that moment, separated from the modern world by darkness, they were simply a man and a woman, drawn together by something that transcended time itself.

They sat together until the storm passed, surrounded by the glow of candles and quiet laughter. The conversation wandered from courtship customs to tales of their homeland, Tavish spinning stories that made even Sarah smile weakly from her bed. Somewhere between fear and wonder, between ritual and revelation, something had shifted.

He no longer felt like a ghost haunting this strange future. The ancient ways still held power, and perhaps there was still a place for men like them, even in this world of science and smartphones.

And as the rain softened outside, Alasdair realized he wasn't just learning how to live in this world—he was beginning to want to. For his brothers. For himself.

And perhaps, he thought as Jill's hand brushed his in the darkness, for her.

### CHAPTER 29

Jill's fingers traced the worn edge of the wooden table as shadows danced across the walls. The power outage had transformed the farmhouse into something out of a historical drama, complete with the warm flicker of candles and the low rumble of thunder outside. For the first time since their arrival, the warriors looked truly at ease—as if the darkness had peeled away a century of displacement.

She glanced around the room. The six berserkers sat hunched slightly around the table, their broad frames bathed in amber light. The combination of candlelight and leather made them seem more at home now than they had all day, as if the modern world had momentarily stepped back in time to meet them halfway.

Alasdair sat directly across from her, his face softened by the glow. He looked almost...peaceful. The hard lines of constant vigilance had eased, revealing the man beneath the warrior. His green eyes met hers for a moment, and her stomach flipped like a startled fish. She quickly dropped her gaze, hoping the dim light concealed the heat rising to her cheeks.

It was happening more frequently now—these moments when she'd catch herself staring at him, or when his accidental touch would linger in her memory. When had the historical curiosity transformed into something more personal? The academic in her tried to rationalize it as a natural response to an extraordinary situation, but the woman in her knew better.

"So," Fergus said suddenly, his voice a low rumble that startled her from her thoughts. "How does one go about finding a wife in this time?"

Jill blinked. "I'm sorry, what?"

Macrath leaned forward, elbows on the table, his dark eyes serious. "We came to this time to build lives. We wish to know—how is it done?"

She stifled a laugh, though there was something touchingly earnest in the question. "There's not exactly a wife shop, if that's what you're asking. And most people don't use matchmakers anymore."

The men exchanged confused looks.

"Are there no matchmakers, then?" Tavish asked, his storyteller's curiosity evident. "In our time, arrangements were often made between families."

Alasdair spoke next, his voice quiet, contemplative. "In our time, marriages were arranged. Or..." He hesitated, something like shame flashing briefly across his features.

"Or what?" Jill asked warily.

Cillian glanced around before answering. "Sometimes, a man would simply take a woman as his bride."

"Bride stealing," Tavish clarified, as if that made it better. "Usually from rival clans."

Jill's blood chilled. "Absolutely not," she said, firmly. "That's kidnapping. It's illegal. You'd go to jail."

"Jail?" Lachlan frowned. "For taking a wife?"

"Yes," Jill said, her tone unwavering. "You don't get to just...grab someone and claim

them. We have things like consent. Choice. Trust."

The men shifted uncomfortably, processing this. They likely didn't mean to offend—just didn't know any better. Their world had been brutal in ways her academic studies had likely sanitized. Marriage had been about survival and alliances more than love.

"In this time," she said, more gently, "people usually meet at work, through friends, or online."

Tavish narrowed his eyes. "Ye've used that word before. Online."

Jill held up her phone. "This is a smartphone. You can talk to people with it, read books, listen to music, even meet new people—like a magical scroll that fits in your pocket."

The warriors leaned in, fascinated. Fergus's eyes widened, while Cillian reached out tentatively, as if afraid the phone might bite.

"But what do women seek in a husband now?" Alasdair asked, his gaze locking with hers. There was something in his voice—a personal stake that made the question more than just academic curiosity.

Jill hesitated. In her academic career, she'd have given a historical analysis of changing marriage patterns. But looking at these men—especially Alasdair—she found herself answering from the heart instead.

"Someone kind. Loyal. Who will share the work and raise a family. Someone who stays faithful." Her voice wavered slightly on the last part, memories of Marcus's betrayal surfacing unexpectedly. "That last one's really important."

As she spoke, a strange realization dawned on her. The qualities she was describing—kindness, loyalty, strength, partnership—were the very traits she'd witnessed in Alasdair these past days. The way he led his brothers with quiet authority, how he'd stepped forward to help her mother without hesitation, his willingness to learn their ways while maintaining his dignity. She faltered mid-sentence, the parallel suddenly clear, and found herself unable to meet his eyes.

Fergus scowled. "What kind of man betrays the woman he vows to protect? In our time, such dishonor would be punished severely."

She offered a hollow smile. "You'd be surprised."

"Ye speak from experience," Alasdair observed quietly, not a question but a gentle acknowledgment.

Jill nodded, surprised by his perceptiveness. "My ex-fiancé. He, uh, found someone else while I was busy writing my dissertation."

"Then he was a fool," Alasdair said simply, his Scottish brogue thickening with emotion. "And unworthy of yer trust."

The intensity in his voice caught her off guard. There was no platitude in his words, no empty comfort—just a sincere declaration that struck directly at the core of insecurities she'd carried since Marcus's betrayal. For years, some small part of her had wondered if she was somehow lacking, too absorbed in her work to be worthy of love. Yet this man from another time had dismantled that doubt with five simple words.

Her eyes met his across the table, and the conviction she saw there made her breath catch. In those green depths, she saw not just sympathy, but something that looked remarkably like indignation on her behalf—as if her pain was personal to him. The

thought that he would be angered by her hurt made something inside her chest unfurl like a flower finally finding sunlight.

"Thank you," she whispered, the words inadequate for the weight lifting from her shoulders.

A beat of silence passed. Then Alasdair's voice rumbled through it. "Surely a man still offers a home? A safe place?" The question carried echoes of what might have been promised to them in their time—the homes and families they'd been denied.

"Yes," Jill said, nodding. "But it's not just about protection anymore. A partner is someone you laugh with, trust, build a life with. Love, too, if you're lucky."

"Love was rarely considered in our time," Tavish mused. "Though the bards sang of it often enough."

"The heart wants what it wants," Lachlan added, surprising Jill with the modern-sounding phrase.

The room was still. Jill could feel Alasdair's gaze like a warm hand against her cheek. There was something in his eyes—a hunger that went beyond mere curiosity. It was the look of a man who had been promised something vital, then had it snatched away. A man who still wanted what had been denied him.

Even with the Brollachan still lurking somewhere in the darkness beyond their walls, there was a sense of possibility in this candlelit moment—as if the ancient creature was just one more obstacle to overcome on the path to something meaningful. She'd always faced challenges through research and analysis, but this threat would require a different kind of courage.

Macrath cleared his throat.

Jill turned to see him holding out a small piece of twisted metal—shaped into a sprig of lavender, its wire curled into a delicate Celtic knot. She recognized it as part of the machinery they'd been examining earlier—transformed by skilled hands into something beautiful.

"For you," he said gruffly. "To thank ye. For not killing us that first night."

Jill blinked. "Macrath...this is beautiful." The gift was unexpected, especially from the gruffest of the warriors. "I didn't know you were an artist."

"I worked metal in our time," he replied with a shrug. "Mostly weapons, but sometimes..." He trailed off. "My brothers will say it's soft. But sometimes soft is strong, too."

She smiled, genuinely touched. "That's...actually kind of profound."

"Dinnae let it go to his head," Fergus teased. "He'll be writing poetry next."

"I'd like to see ye try better," Macrath retorted, though there was no heat in his words.

A moment later, the overhead lights flickered, then buzzed to life, casting harsh modern light over the cozy darkness. Everyone blinked, startled by the sudden return of electricity. The spell was broken.

"Well," Jill said, standing and stretching, "guess the 21st century is back."

The men rose as well, towering over her in the now-bright kitchen. One by one, they nodded or bowed slightly as they exited, murmuring their thanks in a mixture of English and Gaelic.

Alasdair lingered.

"Thank you," he said softly. "For your patience. I know we must seem barbaric to you."

She looked up, her heart tugging at the quiet vulnerability in his voice. This mighty warrior—this man who had crossed time itself—worried about her judgment. "Not barbaric. Just...different. But that's okay. We'll figure it out together."

His expression shifted, something unspoken flickering behind his eyes. A slow, tentative smile curved his lips. "I would like that verra much," he said, the Scottish lilt in his voice making the simple words sound like music. Then he turned and followed his brothers out the door.

Jill stood there, holding Macrath's handmade gift in her hand, her thoughts a tangle of emotion. The sprig caught the light, its twisted metal both delicate and strong—like the men who had crafted it. Men with lethal skills and gentle hearts, trying to find their way in a world that had moved on without them.

What had she gotten herself into?

And why did it feel a little bit like falling?

She traced the Celtic knot with her finger, remembering how naturally Alasdair had performed the healing ritual for her mother. The way his eyes had locked with hers across the candlelit room. The promise in his smile as he'd said "together."

The truth she'd been avoiding rushed forward with sudden clarity. This wasn't academic interest. It wasn't just physical attraction or the novelty of their situation. Somewhere between their first meeting in the woods and tonight's candlelit conversation, she'd fallen for Alasdair MacTyre—truly fallen for him. Not as a historical curiosity or an intriguing subject, but as a man whose strength was matched by his gentleness, whose leadership was balanced by his willingness to learn, whose



eyes held both ancient wisdom and vulnerable hope.

"Pull yourself together, Dr. Greenwood," she muttered to herself. "He's from the ninth century, for heaven's sake."

But the professional title felt hollow now, a shield too thin to protect her from what was happening. Dr. Greenwood studied historical figures objectively. Jill, however, was irrevocably drawn to a man who happened to be from another time.

As she tucked Macrath's gift into her pocket and headed upstairs to check on her mother, she knew she'd crossed a threshold tonight. Under the gentle glow of candlelight, surrounded by men from another time, Jill Greenwood had admitted something to herself that would change everything: her heart had recognized something in Alasdair that transcended centuries, something worth pursuing despite every rational argument against it.

Perhaps some things, like the human heart, didn't change so much across the centuries after all.

### CHAPTER 30

Jill leaned against the weathered porch railing, inhaling the crisp morning air tinged with the scent of lavender from the nearby fields. The sun had barely crested the horizon, casting long shadows across the dew-dampened grass. In the distance, she could see Alasdair and his brothers heading toward the barn, their tall figures silhouetted against the pale sky.

She couldn't help but notice how Alasdair moved—that confident stride, the way the others naturally fell into formation around him. Even in this peaceful setting, they carried themselves like warriors. Old habits, she supposed, ingrained through years of fighting and survival in a world far harsher than her own.

A smile tugged at her lips as she reflected on last night's conversation about courtship traditions. The berserkers' straightforward approach to finding wives had been both shocking and oddly refreshing compared to the complicated dating rituals of modern men.

"You're up early," Dad said from behind her, the screen door creaking as he stepped onto the porch. He joined Jill at the railing, his calloused hands wrapping around a steaming mug of coffee. After witnessing his druidic abilities, Jill found herself studying her father more closely—noting the ancient wisdom in his eyes that belied his apparent age, the subtle power in his weathered hands.

"I wanted to catch the sunrise," she replied, though they both knew it was more than that. Sleep had been elusive with so many thoughts swirling through her mind—not just about Alasdair, but about the Brollachan lurking somewhere in the woods,

waiting to strike again.

"Thinking about our medieval visitors?" Dad asked, his Scottish accent thickening slightly as it often did in these early morning conversations.

Jill nodded, turning to face him. "They're adjusting better than I expected. Last night they were asking about modern dating customs. Their ideas about courtship are...different."

Dad's expression grew serious. "Aye, and that's something we should discuss, lass. I've seen the way you and Alasdair look at each other."

Heat crept into Jill's cheeks. Was it that obvious?

"There's something you need to understand," he continued. "For men like Alasdair, there's no such thing as casual dating. In our time—his time—courtship had one purpose: marriage. If you allow him to court you, in his mind, you're considering him as a husband."

The bluntness of his statement caught her off guard. "Dad, we're not—I mean, we haven't even?—"

"I know," he said gently. "But it's important you understand his perspective. Modern dating—getting to know someone without commitment, seeing multiple people—that concept didn't exist. For Alasdair, showing interest means serious intentions."

As their conversation lulled, a comfortable silence settled between them. Jill watched a hummingbird flit between the hanging baskets of fuchsias, its wings a blur of motion. She sensed a shift in her father's mood, a heaviness that seemed to settle over him like a cloak.

"You know, Jilly-bean," Dad began, his voice soft and contemplative, "I remember being in his position once. Lost in a strange new world, trying to make sense of everything."

Jill turned toward him, curious. She'd heard bits and pieces of his arrival story growing up, but now she knew she'd never heard the full account. "What was it like for you? When you first got here?"

Dad's fingers tapped a restless rhythm against his mug. "Terrifying. Everything was so different, so overwhelming." His gaze grew distant, as if seeing across centuries. "Imagine it—one day ye're in a world where the fastest thing is a galloping horse, the next ye're watching metal beasts roar down roads at unbelievable speeds."

"And then I met your mother." A warm fondness crept into his voice.

Jill smiled, eager to hear more about her parents' love story. The tale of how they met had always been one of her favorites growing up—romantic and mysterious.

"I liked Sarah from the moment I saw her. It was the way she carried herself—bold and certain, with laughter that refused to be tamed. She had the look of a woman who knew her own mind, and it struck me like a hammer to the chest."

He smiled at the memory, a rare softness in his face, but then his expression grew more serious.

"I won't lie to ye—there were practical matters too. Her family had money, stability—things I desperately needed to survive in this new world. But even without all that, I would have chosen her."

Jill flinched, surprised by this admission. "But...I thought..." Her voice trailed off, uncertain how to reconcile this new information with the romantic tale she'd grown

up hearing.

Dad's eyes, so like her own, filled with sincerity. "In my time, marriage was rarely about love alone. It was also about survival, alliances, childbearing. I carried those values with me, even as I struggled to adapt to everything else."

He sighed, running a hand through his graying hair. "The love came—as I expected it to. But I can't deny that knowing she could help me navigate this strange new world made her all the more precious to me."

Jill's mind whirled, trying to process this more nuanced version of her parents' love story. Her academic knowledge of historical marriage practices collided with the personal revelation about her own parents. The historian in her understood, but the daughter in her felt a subtle shift in perspective.

"How...how did you know it was real? That it wasn't just gratitude or need?" The question felt vital, not just for understanding her parents' relationship, but for her own confused feelings toward Alasdair.

A soft smile played on Dad's lips. "It was the little things. The way she'd leave wildflowers on my pillow. How she'd sing off-key while doing the dishes. The sound of her laugh." His voice grew thick with emotion. "And now, seeing her fight this illness with such grace and strength—I fall in love with her all over again every day."

The raw emotion in his voice was unmistakable. There was no doubting the depth of his love. Her mother had been feeling stronger lately—eating more, laughing again. It gave Jill a fragile but growing hope. Emotion tightened her chest at the tenderness in his voice.

Dad's hand came to rest on her shoulder, warm and comforting. "I'm telling you this because I want you to be careful, Jilly. Men like Alasdair—they come from a

different world, with different values. What looks like love might be complicated by other needs."

"You think he's just using me? To adapt to this time?" The thought hurt more than she wanted to admit, a sharp pain blooming beneath her ribs.

"No, lass. I think he's a good man—honorable to his core. But his world shaped him differently than yours shaped you." Dad's eyes held ancient wisdom as he gazed at her. "In his time, finding a strong connection to this world would be vital to survival. The lines between love and practicality might blur, even for him."

The weight of his words settled in Jill's stomach like a stone. She thought of Alasdair's intense gaze, the way her heart raced when he was near. The fleeting touches, the way he seemed to seek her out. Was it real? Or was she just a convenient bridge to this new world for him?

"There's so much more to consider," Jill said softly, voicing the tangle of concerns that had kept her awake half the night. "We come from completely different worlds—different values, different expectations. He was raised in a time where violence was the primary way to resolve conflicts, where women's roles were strictly defined. What happens when modern life challenges those ingrained beliefs?"

She gestured toward the distant figures of the warriors. "And then there are the practical considerations—he has no legal identity in our world, no education our society recognizes. What kind of future could we build together?" A thought that had nagged at her surfaced. "And what about children? How would we agree on how to raise them with such different backgrounds?"

Dad squeezed her shoulder gently. "Ye can't know all the answers now, sweetheart. Love is always a risk. But you're smart, and you have a good heart. Trust your instincts."

Her academic mind wanted evidence, data points, historical precedents. But this wasn't a research project—it was her life, her heart. And neither her PhD nor her extensive knowledge of medieval Scottish history had prepared her for falling for a man from that very era.

As Jill watched Alasdair in the distance, his powerful frame easily hefting a bale of hay, she felt a war of emotions raging within her. Attraction, uncertainty, hope, and fear all battled for dominance. She saw how naturally he took to the farm work, adapting to this new life with surprising grace. But was that enough to bridge a thousand years of differences?

"Thanks, Dad," she said finally, offering him a small smile. "I've got a lot to think about."

Dad nodded, understanding in his eyes. "Your mother's probably awake. I should check on her."

Emotion rose again at the tenderness in his voice. Whatever complications had been part of their beginning, there was no doubting the depth of his love now. Perhaps that was the lesson—that love could be both immediate and enduring, passionate and practical at once.

Left alone on the porch, Jill's gaze drifted back to Alasdair. The morning sun glinted off his hair, and even from this distance, she could see the easy camaraderie between him and his brothers. There was Macrath, gruffly showing Cillian how to properly stack hay bales. Tavish telling what appeared to be a joke, his hands gesturing wildly. Lachlan already at work with the horses, his quiet competence evident even from afar.

Despite all the logical reasons, despite all the potential pitfalls and complications, something about Alasdair called to her on a level deeper than reason. Perhaps that

was what her father had experienced with her mother—that inexplicable connection that transcended practical considerations.

What if, for once in her life, she didn't analyze every angle? What if she allowed herself to feel without the filter of academic detachment? The thought was both terrifying and exhilarating.

"Maybe some risks are worth taking," she whispered to herself, the decision crystallizing in her mind. She wouldn't rush headlong into romance, but neither would she let fear hold her back from exploring whatever this connection might become.

With a deep breath, Jill pushed herself away from the railing. She had chores to do, a ranch to run. Questions of love and time-crossed romance would have to wait. But as she walked down the path, drawn by the thought of seeing Alasdair, she felt lighter somehow. She couldn't predict the future—no one could—but she could choose to face it with an open heart.



### CHAPTER 31

The scent of lavender hit Jill full force the moment she stepped out of the SUV, sunlight bouncing off the colorful tents lining the grassy fields of the Sequim Lavender Festival. Children's laughter bubbled near bounce houses, and the gentle strumming of a folk band drifted through the air like music caught on the breeze.

This annual tradition had always been a highlight of her summer calendar—a chance to showcase her mother's handmade soaps and connect with the local community. But this year was decidedly different. She took a deep breath, excitement bubbling inside her.

This year, they'd decided to skip the family booth—too much work with her mother still regaining her strength—and let the other artisans take center stage. Sales were doing well enough online now anyway.

Jill spotted her parents strolling hand-in-hand near the festival's heart, Dad carrying a tote bag while Sarah, wearing a sun hat, leaned lightly against him, laughing at something he said. They moved slowly, but with an ease that hadn't been there months ago. Friends paused to greet them, faces brightening at the sight of Sarah out and about. Her mother's color was good, her smile easy, and the sight filled Jill with a fierce, aching kind of hope. Maybe healing wasn't just a wish. Maybe it was real.

She tucked the feeling close as she turned back to her own small chaos—six towering men climbing out of the SUV behind her.

Jill had helped them modify their ancient garb into something a little more

modern—cleaned woolen tunics, tartan wraps, dark boots, and crisp button-down shirts to pass as dramatic visitors from Scotland. The effect was striking: part warrior, part model, all impossible to ignore.

Pride fluttered in her chest as she watched Alasdair organize his brothers with quiet authority, ensuring they stayed together while taking in the new surroundings. There was something undeniably impressive about him—the natural leadership, the dignified bearing, the way his eyes constantly scanned for potential threats before allowing his brothers to relax.

The morning's conversation with her father echoed in her mind. For men like Alasdair, there was no such thing as casual dating. Was that what made him different from the men she'd known? The certainty of his intentions, the clarity of his purpose?

"Come on," she said, grinning at Alasdair. "You're going to love this."

Alasdair straightened his shoulders, his expression a mix of curiosity and anticipation. "Lead on, lass," he replied, his Scottish accent rolling the words melodically.

It was adorable how they strode across the lot like they owned it, drawing curious stares with every move. They didn't look like tourists or lost travelers. They looked like they'd just stepped out of a Celtic wedding catalog shoot.

They hadn't made it ten feet before Lachlan let out a booming laugh that startled a trio of younger women selling lavender soaps. The women glanced up, their eyes widening appreciatively at the sight of the towering Scotsmen.

"Sorry about my friend here," Jill said, striding forward with an easy smile. "They're visiting from Scotland. First time at an American festival."

"We don't mind at all," one of the women replied, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear as she smiled shyly at Lachlan. "Not even a little bit."

Lachlan bowed slightly, his cheeks flushing as he attempted a modern greeting. "A pleasure, lasses."

Jill bit back a laugh as she noticed how the brothers straightened their postures, suddenly very aware of the female attention. These men might be fierce warriors, but they turned surprisingly bashful around pretty women—a charming contradiction she hadn't expected.

Turning around, she saw Fergus eyeing an ice cream vendor with curious interest rather than suspicion. His expression was that of a man facing a new adventure.

"Lavender-flavored?" he asked, accepting a cone from the smiling vendor.

"You'll either love it or hate it," Jill said, coming up beside him. The earthy floral notes weren't to everyone's taste, and she could only imagine how strange it would seem to someone from the ninth century.

Fergus took a bite, his eyes widening in surprise. "It's like eating a flower field! Strange, but not unpleasant." He turned to offer a taste to Macrath, who took one lick and handed it right back.

"Even the sweets here are peculiar," Macrath muttered, though his grimace held more curiosity than disgust. "But I'd try it again for that pretty lass serving it."

Jill suppressed a smile. For all their warrior training, they were still men looking for connections—for home, for belonging, perhaps even for brides, as they'd so bluntly put it during their earlier conversations at the ranch.

Lachlan's eyes lit up at the sight of a horse-drawn carriage ride. He wandered over, whispering Gaelic to the mare, calming her instantly. The female driver watched with clear appreciation as his strong hands gently stroked the horse's mane.

Jill edged closer to Alasdair, who was studying a display of handcrafted jewelry with intense concentration. "Having fun yet?"

"Aye," he replied, his green eyes twinkling with genuine pleasure. "Your world has many wonders."

A middle-aged woman selling hand-loomed scarves caught Jill's eye with a knowing smile. "You two make a lovely couple," she said warmly. "How long have you been together?"

Jill felt heat rush to her cheeks, a prickling warmth that spread down her neck. "Oh, we're not—I mean, he's just?—"

"We are not yet formally pledged," Alasdair interjected smoothly, his accent thickening slightly. "But I hold her in the highest regard."

The woman's smile widened. "Well, honey, better snatch him up quick. Men who look at a woman like that are rare these days."

Jill glanced at Alasdair, catching the intensity in his gaze before he quickly looked away. Her heart gave a startled lurch as she recognized the truth in the vendor's words. There was something in the way he watched her, a reverence and attentiveness she'd never experienced with anyone else. It wasn't just the admiration of a man attracted to a woman—it was deeper, more profound, as if he saw something in her that others had missed.

Before she could respond, a commotion caught her attention. Just then, Jill spotted

Fergus kneeling beside a little girl crying near the soap stand. Her blonde curls shook with her sobs, her ice cream cone upended in the dirt beside her.

"Fergus?" Jill approached softly, curious.

Without looking up, Fergus carefully withdrew a sprig of lavender from his belt pouch, holding it out gently. "There now, lassie. A wee bloom for a brave girl. 'Tis no reason to weep over fallen sweets. The day is too bonnie for tears."

The child's tears slowed, and she grasped the flower, eyes wide with wonder at the giant man speaking so kindly to her.

A woman rushed over, visibly relieved. "Annie! Oh, sweetheart." She glanced uncertainly at Fergus, then softened at the sight of her daughter's brightening face. "Thank you."

Fergus stood and offered a respectful nod. "Aye. My pleasure."

Jill's heart warmed as she overheard a couple nearby murmur approvingly. "Did you see that? Big guy's got a kind heart. Maybe they're all gentle giants."

Perhaps these men—branded outcasts in their own time—could find acceptance here, where their differences didn't carry the same stigma. The thought filled her with unexpected hope.

Watching Fergus's gentle interaction with the child, Jill felt a swell of pride. These men, who had been feared and misunderstood in their own time, were showing their true nature—fierce warriors with surprisingly gentle hearts. And she was part of their journey, helping them find their place in this new world. The thought filled her with a strange sense of purpose, more fulfilling than any academic achievement she'd ever pursued.

"Look there!" Alasdair suddenly exclaimed, pointing toward a row of carnival games. A dart-throwing booth caught his eye, the prizes hanging temptingly above it. "What manner of contest is that?"

Jill laughed, genuinely delighted by his enthusiasm. "You throw darts to pop balloons. Win prizes. Want to try?"

His eyes lit up with competitive fire. "Aye, that I would."

The brothers followed eagerly, each reaching for the pocket money Conall had given them earlier. As they approached the booth, Jill couldn't help noticing how several women nearby slowed their pace, watching the group of handsome Scotsmen with undisguised interest.

"Three darts for five dollars," the carnival barker announced, eyeing Alasdair's considerable height. "Pop three balloons, win a prize for your lady friend."

Alasdair glanced at Jill, a slow smile spreading across his face. "Challenge accepted."

He handed over the money, accepting the darts with a confident nod. The brothers gathered around, offering loud encouragement and good-natured taunts. Tavish slapped him on the back. "Show us how it's done, brother!"

With barely a moment's hesitation, Alasdair flicked his wrist, sending the first dart flying with perfect precision. Pop! The balloon burst instantly. The second and third darts followed just as quickly. Pop! Pop!

"We have a winner!" the barker announced, clearly impressed. "Which prize would the lady like?"

Alasdair turned to Jill, his expression boyishly proud. "Choose, lass."

Feeling strangely touched, Jill pointed to a fluffy lavender-colored bear. The barker handed it over with a wink. "Lucky lady."

"Thank you," she said, hugging the bear to her chest, oddly moved by the simple carnival tradition. When was the last time someone had won her a prize at a fair? Had anyone ever?

Cillian and Tavish immediately stepped up to try their hands at the game, clearly hoping to impress a pair of young women who had stopped to watch. Their aim wasn't quite as true as Alasdair's, but their enthusiastic attempts drew laughter and applause from their growing audience.

"Your friends are from Scotland?" asked a friendly-looking man watching the proceedings.

"Yes," Jill replied smoothly. "Visiting for the summer."

"They sure know how to throw!" the man observed with a laugh.

"Lots of practice," Jill said, smiling as she watched Macrath take his turn. "Traditional Scottish games and all that."

The day continued in a blur of new experiences. Cillian tasted cotton candy and declared it "spun fairy magic." Macrath arm-wrestled with a local farm boy, both laughing uproariously at the friendly competition. Tavish tried his hand at ring toss, winning a small stuffed sheep that he immediately presented to a blushing young woman who'd been watching him.

At one point, they stopped to watch a local dance troupe perform traditional Scottish dances. Jill couldn't help but notice Alasdair's intense focus, his expression a mixture of nostalgia and delight.

"It's not quite right," he murmured to her. "Close, but the steps have changed."

"Maybe someday you could show me the original."

Alasdair's gaze shifted to her, something warming in his eyes. "I'd like that very much."

As the afternoon wore on, Jill found herself relaxing completely, enjoying the sight of the warriors experiencing simple pleasures with such unbridled enthusiasm. Their joy was contagious, their wonder at ordinary carnival attractions a reminder of how magical the world could be when seen through fresh eyes.

By the time the sun began to dip toward the horizon, Jill's cheeks hurt from smiling so much. She gathered them back toward the SUV, counting heads and collecting their various carnival prizes and purchases.

As she started the engine, her gaze caught Alasdair's in the rearview mirror. He looked thoughtful, a gentle smile playing at his lips.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" she asked.

He was silent for a moment. "More than I could say. Your world—it's full of wonders. Perhaps we could find our place in it after all."

His words filled her with warm hope. The historian in her understood the profound displacement they must feel—men out of time, trying to find their footing in a world that had moved on without them. But another part of her, the part that had begun to care for these men—especially their leader—wanted desperately to believe they could carve out a place here.

"You belonged today," she said softly. "More than you realize. People responded to



you—to all of you. They saw something special."

He met her eyes in the mirror again, a question in his gaze that made her heart ache with tenderness.

"I was proud to introduce you to my world," she admitted, the words escaping before she could analyze them too carefully.

Something shifted in his expression then—a softening, a warmth that made her breath catch. "Thank ye, Jill. That means more than ye know."

The drive home was filled with the brothers' excited chatter. In the backseat, Cillian showed off his small carnival prizes to Fergus, while Macrath recounted his arm-wrestling victory. Lachlan and Tavish whispered quietly in Gaelic, occasionally glancing at Alasdair, who remained silent, his gaze rarely leaving Jill's reflection in the mirror.

They were beginning to feel like family, Jill realized with a start. An odd, complicated, unlikely family—but family nonetheless. And that thought wasn't terrifying at all—it was wonderful.

### CHAPTER 32

Alasdair gripped the edge of his seat as the metal beast—truck, he reminded himself—lurched down the winding dirt path. The contraption was nothing like the solid reassurance of a horse beneath him, its movements unpredictable and its growling unsettling. He shifted uncomfortably, his knees nearly touching the strange dashboard with its bewildering array of buttons and dials.

"Are ye certain this beast won't turn on us?" he muttered, trying to mask his unease with humor.

Jill's fingers drummed lightly on the steering wheel, a mischievous glint in her eyes as she glanced at him. "No promises. She's got a mind of her own. Just like me."

Alasdair snorted, relaxing a fraction despite himself. "Aye, that I believe."

She laughed, the sound warm and easy in the small cab. "Besides, you're a big tough Highlander. What's a little truck ride compared to battle axes and dragons?"

"Dragons would be preferable," he said dryly, bracing himself as they hit a pothole. "At least dragons make sense."

Jill grinned wider. "Don't worry. If it comes to a fight, I'll protect you."

Alasdair turned his head slowly to stare at her, deadpan. "I am doomed."

Her laughter filled the truck, bright and musical, and for a moment, the lurching and

growling of the machine faded into the background, leaving only the heady mix of her scent, her smile, and the undeniable pull between them.

He kept glancing out the window as trees gave way to a wide clearing, the air growing salty with the scent of the nearby ocean. "Are we hunting something?" he asked at last, his Scottish burr wrapping around the words.

The salty tang reminded him of the western shores of home, where the MacTyre warriors had once sought refuge during a clan war. But this shore smelled different—cleaner, wilder somehow. And unlike those desperate nights in hiding, he felt no immediate danger here. Just a different kind of tension that coiled in his gut whenever Jill's eyes met his.

She smiled, easing the truck to a stop at the edge of a bluff that overlooked the water. "Not tonight. No monsters, no siblings, no berserkers. Just us."

Alasdair blinked, startled. "Just...us?"

His heart hammered against his ribs, a war drum signaling something between danger and exhilaration. Back then, being alone with an unmarried woman meant only one thing—intentions serious enough to risk her family's wrath. He swallowed hard, suddenly aware of how different their worlds truly were. Would she understand what such a moment would have signified in his century?

"Is that okay?" she asked, uncertainty flickering across her face.

"Aye," he said softly. "More than okay."

Relief washed through him that she couldn't read the tumult of his thoughts. How could he explain that in his world, this moment—this simple act of privacy—would have been weighted with promises and expectations? That men had died for less than

sitting alone with a laird's daughter under a darkening sky?

Jill grabbed the picnic basket from the backseat and nudged open her door. "Come on. You said you wanted to understand modern courtship. This is part of it."

"Courtship," he repeated under his breath, the word both thrilling and terrifying. Was that what they were doing? His branded arm seemed to burn beneath his sleeve, a reminder of all the ways he had been deemed unworthy in his previous life.

He followed her out, hesitant at first, then steadier as they reached a weathered wooden bench near the edge of the overlook. Below them, the Pacific stretched out in dusky blues, the last light of day fading into golds and purples. Waves crashed gently on the shore far below.

"It's beautiful," he murmured, his eyes reflecting the deepening sky. "Reminds me of the western shores of Scotland, where the sun sets over the water."

The vastness of the ocean made him feel small, yet strangely grounded. The same stars would rise here as they had over his homeland, a thousand years and a world away. Some things, at least, remained constant.

Jill set out a blanket and unpacked the basket—two sandwiches, a thermos of cocoa, and a small speaker. "This is called a picnic," she said, gesturing to the spread.

Alasdair looked at it like it might bite. "This is what couples do together?"

The word "couples" struck him like a physical blow. In his time, men like him—berserkers, branded as outsiders—were not permitted such gentle rituals. Their matches, when allowed at all, were arranged for breeding strength, not sharing tender moments beneath the stars. Yet here she was, this remarkable woman, offering him something he'd never dared dream possible.

"Sometimes. It's low-stakes. Just food and talking and...maybe music." A slight blush crept up her neck.

He nodded solemnly. "I shall do my best. Though I fear I'm a poor companion for such modern rituals."

He flexed the hand that once gripped a sword, callused and scarred from years of battle. These were not hands meant for gentle things. Yet Jill looked at him not with fear but with something warmer, something that unfurled a dangerous hope within his chest.

"You're doing fine," she assured him, smiling.

She pressed play on her phone. The soft chords of an acoustic love song drifted from the speaker, mingling with the sounds of the sea. Alasdair listened, transfixed. "What manner of bard sings this?"

Such haunting sweetness in the voice, such tender sorrow in the melody. It reminded him of the laments sung after battle, but gentler—a celebration of love rather than an honoring of the dead. He had never heard music that spoke so directly to the heart, that seemed to give voice to feelings he'd buried beneath duty and survival.

"Spotify," Jill replied, chuckling. "He's a modern bard. We have thousands of them now."

"The music of your time is...different," he observed. "Less pipes and drums, more...feelings."

"And does that disappoint the fierce warrior?" she teased, her eyes catching the last light of day.

"Nay," he admitted softly. "It...speaks to parts of me I thought long silenced."

They ate quietly, conversation coming in soft bursts. Alasdair asked about her childhood. Jill told him about summers spent roaming these hills, about building forts among the trees, racing through the lavender fields, and pretending she was a knight defending her kingdom. He told her about the glens of his youth, the cold wind off the hills, the first time he'd held a sword.

"You still seem like a knight," she said softly.

Her words lit something fragile inside him, something raw and vulnerable. No one had ever seen him as noble. Useful, yes. Feared, certainly. But never as someone worthy of the old tales. Even in his own time, berserkers were viewed as tools of war, not heroes of legend. That she could see something honorable in him—it shook the foundations of how he'd viewed himself for as long as he could remember.

"I feel less and less like one every day," he admitted, his voice low. "There's no glory in plumbing, no honor in irrigation. In my time, a man's worth was measured by his skill in battle, not by how well he tended plants."

"There's a kind of honor in staying," she said. "In choosing peace."

He went quiet, then nodded slowly. "Ye sound like your father."

Jill tilted her head. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"Your father is a druid," he replied, the old wariness creeping back into his voice. "My kind has good reason to mistrust his kind."

"And yet you trusted him enough to let him cast that language spell," she countered.

He met her gaze, and something tender passed between them. "It's not him I trusted." The words were quiet but carried a weight he hadn't intended. It was her—her judgment, her kindness—that had made him lower his guard. And now here they sat, beneath stars that had witnessed a thousand years, closer than he'd ever dared to hope.

As the night deepened around them, Jill opened up in ways he hadn't expected. "Sometimes I worry that I've wasted all those years of education to end right back where I started. My professors would be horrified."

Alasdair studied her thoughtfully. "Ye dinnae see it, do ye? How ye use your learning every day?"

He thought of how she'd explained the stars to him, the history of his own people, the workings of this strange modern world. How her knowledge had made the terrifying manageable, the foreign familiar.

"What do you mean?"

"The way ye speak to us of our own time, explaining things we ourselves didnae understand about our world. The books ye've shown me about Scotland's history—things I never kent about my own land." His voice grew warm with admiration. "Ye're a teacher, Jill. Perhaps not in a grand hall of learning, but here, where it matters to us."

Jill smiled, a softness in her expression. "I never thought of it that way."

"You have brought light to darkness for us," he added quietly. "That is no small thing."

The stars blinked to life above them. Jill lay back on the blanket and patted the space beside her. After a moment's hesitation, Alasdair joined her, his shoulder brushing

hers, sending a current of awareness through his entire body.

The softness of the blanket beneath him, the warmth of her so close—it was almost too much. In his time, he had slept on cold ground, on stone floors, beneath open skies. Never had he lain beside a woman this way, watching stars emerge like scattered silver against the darkness. The intimacy of the moment, though innocent by modern standards, felt profound.

"What are we looking for?" he asked.

"Nothing. Everything." She pointed. "That's Orion. And there's Cassiopeia."

He squinted. "I only see stars."

"That's enough." She paused, then added softly, "My father used to tell me stories about the constellations. He said families used to gather under the stars, telling tales and planning futures."

"Aye," Alasdair agreed. "The night sky was our calendar, our clock. When to plant, when to harvest." His voice softened. "When to celebrate births, marriages. The cycles of life."

The old ache returned—dreams of what might have been, promises broken. The wives they were to receive, the children never born. How many nights had he lain awake beneath these same stars, wondering if he would ever know such simple joys?

Jill's voice was hesitant. "Do you ever think about that? Having a family someday?"

The question hung in the air between them, weighted with possibility. The heartbeat of silence that followed seemed to stretch into eternity. Alasdair felt his future balancing on the edge of his answer.



"Every day," he said simply. "Back then, it was all I wanted—what was promised to us before McKinnie's betrayal. A home, children, someone to build a life with."

"And now?" she asked, barely above a whisper.

His fingers found hers in the darkness, the touch sending fire through his veins. "Now more than ever."

Her breath caught audibly. "Then maybe we're not so different," she whispered, her voice soft but clear in the night air.

The touch of her hand—small but strong, soft but certain—anchored him to this moment, this unbelievable reality where he, Alasdair MacTyre, branded berserker of a forgotten time, might dare to dream again. He tightened his grip gently, marveling at how perfectly their hands fit together, how natural it felt to bridge the centuries between them with this simple touch.

A silence stretched between them, comfortable and warm, filled with unspoken things.

Then Jill whispered, "You don't always have to lead, you know."

He turned his head. "What do ye mean?"

The words hit deeper than she could know. Since boyhood, he had carried the weight of leadership—first of village children playing at war, then of actual warriors facing death. Always vigilant, always responsible. The idea of setting down that burden, even for a moment...

"Just that...it's okay to let someone else guide you sometimes. You don't always have to be the warrior. Sometimes you get to just be."

His eyes searched hers, finding no judgment there, only understanding. "And what am I now, Jill?"

In her gaze, he saw not the monster others had named him, not the weapon he'd been forged into, but something else entirely—something that made his heart swell with a feeling he scarcely dared to name.

She smiled, reaching over to take his hand properly. "Someone I like very much."

He exhaled slowly, his fingers tightening around hers. "I feared I was alone in that feeling."

"You're not," she assured him. "Not at all."

Alasdair gazed up at the ancient stars, the same stars that had watched over his childhood in the Highlands, and for the first time since being cast through time, he felt something like peace. Something like belonging. Something dangerously close to hope.

### CHAPTER 33

A Iasdaire's fingers tightened around the worn leather grip of his sword, the familiar weight both comforting and unsettling in this strange new world. The blade—one Conall had unearthed from a storage shed, claiming it was a "family heirloom"—was solid enough, though nothing like the finely balanced weapon he'd carried before. Still, it felt right in his hand, an extension of himself that had been missing since their arrival.

The sword sang softly as he drew it through the air in a practice swing, muscle memory guiding his movements. This patch of level ground behind the barn, far enough from the house to avoid curious eyes but close enough should trouble arise, would serve their purpose well. A makeshift training ground, not unlike the clearings where he'd taught young clansmen to defend themselves in a world long turned to dust.

He inhaled deeply, centering himself as he watched Jill approach. Women did not train with weapons in Scotland—at least not openly—but he'd seen enough of this century to understand that such restrictions no longer applied. And Jill, with her fierce intelligence and determination, deserved to know how to protect herself, especially with the Brollachan still lurking.

Her long brown hair was tied back in a practical braid, swaying gently as she walked. She wore those strange "jeans" that hugged her legs in a way that would have been scandalous in Scotland, paired with a simple shirt that left her arms bare to the summer sun. His heart quickened at the sight of her, a feeling that both exhilarated and terrified him. Back home, he would have already approached her father with

formal intentions. But here, in this baffling future, courtship was a dance he was still learning the steps to.

"Ready for your first lesson, lass?" he called out, forcing a lightness into his tone that he didn't quite feel. The Brollachan was still out there, a constant threat lurking in the shadows of this new life they were building. Teaching Jill to defend herself wasn't merely a pretext to spend time with her—it was a necessity.

She smiled, the expression lighting up her face and sending a rush of warmth through his chest. When had her smiles begun to affect him so?

"As ready as I'll ever be," Jill grinned, her amber eyes sparkling with a mixture of excitement and apprehension. "Just don't expect me to suddenly turn into Xena: Warrior Princess."

Alasdair blinked, the reference sailing over his head like so many things in this century. The casual mentions of unknown people and customs still caught him unawares, reminders of the vast gulf between their experiences. "Is that another of your television characters?"

"Yes—sorry," Jill laughed. "I keep forgetting what you wouldn't know."

"First, we'll start with your stance," he said, moving closer.

The scent of her soap—something floral and distinctly modern—filled his nostrils as he positioned himself behind her. Not the harsh lye soap of Scotland, but something gentle and sweet that sent a jolt of awareness through him. He swallowed hard, trying to focus. "Feet shoulder-width apart," he instructed, his voice rougher than he intended.

"Like this?" she asked, adjusting her position.

His fingers itched to guide her into place, to bracket her hips with his hands and physically show her the proper stance. But such liberties would have been unthinkable with an unmarried woman where he came from, and he wasn't certain of the boundaries here, despite their growing closeness.

"Almost," he said instead, demonstrating the stance himself. "Weight evenly distributed, ready to move in any direction. In battle, standing still means death."

"There's a cheery thought," Jill quipped, but adjusted her stance as directed, bracing her feet more firmly against the packed earth.

"Aye, that's it." He kept his hands carefully at his sides, though every instinct urged him to guide her body into the proper form. Boundaries between men and women seemed more fluid in this time, confusing him at every turn.

"Now," he continued, circling her slowly, "hold the sword like this." He demonstrated the grip, noting how her eyes focused intently on his hands, studying every nuance of his movement with a scholar's precision.

Jill's brow furrowed with concentration as she attempted to mimic his hold, her slender fingers wrapping around the hilt. The sword dipped immediately, its weight clearly more than she'd anticipated.

"It's heavier than it looks," she admitted, struggling to keep the blade level.

"Strength comes with practice," he assured her, finally allowing himself to reach out, guiding her hands to the correct position. Her skin was soft against his calloused palms, the contrast jarring. His hands bore the marks of countless battles, while hers showed gentler work—farm calluses mingled with ink stains from her books.

The brief contact sent a shock of awareness through him, warming his blood in a way

that had nothing to do with the summer heat. He stepped back quickly, concerned his reaction might be visible.

"In your time, how did you train new warriors?" Jill asked, adjusting her grip on the sword.

The question caught him by surprise. "Brutally. Endless drills until they bled and screamed and learned." His voice softened. "Not how I'll teach you."

He cleared his throat. "Try a simple swing—from shoulder to hip, like so." He demonstrated slowly, the blade cutting a clean arc through the air.

Jill bit her lower lip, a gesture he'd come to recognize as deep concentration. She mimicked the movement, her swing tentative but surprisingly fluid.

"Not bad," he nodded approvingly. "Ye've got a natural talent, it seems."

Jill laughed, the sound sending a warm flutter through his chest. "Maybe I was a warrior in a past life," she joked, executing another swing with surprising grace.

"Aye, perhaps," Alasdair murmured, struck by the idea. In his darkest moments, he wondered if this was all some fever dream—if he'd wake up back in Scotland, Jill nothing more than a fading memory. Or worse, if he'd find himself back in that hellish portal, eternally falling between worlds. The thought made his chest ache. "Or perhaps ye've just got warrior blood. Your father has the look of a man who's seen battle, despite all his talk of farming."

"Dad?" Jill snorted. "He's more likely to wage war on aphids than people."

Alasdair wasn't so sure. There was something in Conall's eyes—a watchfulness, a readiness—that spoke of combat experience. But that was a mystery for another day.

"Again," he instructed, moving to stand beside her, matching her movements with his own. "Let your body learn the rhythm. The sword is not just a weapon; it's an extension of yourself."

They continued training, Alasdair guiding Jill through basic forms and defenses. Her quick learning and determination impressed him, stirring a pride he hadn't expected to feel. She approached swordplay as she did everything—with intelligence and focus, analyzing each movement before attempting it.

As the sun climbed higher, casting dappled shadows through the nearby trees, Alasdair found himself relaxing into the rhythm of the lesson. For a few precious moments, he could almost forget they were separated by centuries, by experiences no modern human could comprehend.

Sweat beaded on his brow, and he pulled off his outer shirt, leaving only the thin cotton undershirt the twins had given him. The modern fabric clung to his skin, still strange after a week of wearing it. Jill's eyes flickered to his exposed arms, lingering on the definition of muscle earned through years of warfare. Color rose in her cheeks before she quickly looked away.

The reaction sent a jolt of awareness through him. Was she affected by him as he was by her?

"You're a fine teacher," Jill panted, wiping sweat from her brow. The simple gesture shouldn't have been enticing, but he found his gaze lingering on the curve of her neck. He dropped his gaze, willing himself to focus.

"You're a willing student," he replied. "Most lasses in Scotland wouldnae have shown half your determination."

"Most 'lasses' don't have father's born in the middle ages," she quipped, mimicking

his accent with a playful smile.

"True enough," he conceded, returning her smile. There was something freeing about her confidence, so different from the carefully cultivated meekness of noblewomen in his era. "Now, let's try a defensive maneuver. I'll come at ye slowly, and ye block like I showed ye."

He moved forward with deliberate slowness, telegraphing his movements so she could anticipate and counter them. Her eyes focused intently on his blade, tracking its path with remarkable precision. Promising, he thought. Very promising indeed.

Jill raised her sword to block, the steel catching sunlight as she moved. But her foot slipped on a patch of dew-dampened grass. Without thinking, Alasdair lunged forward, catching her before she could fall.

Her body pressed against his, warmth seeping through their clothes. The world narrowed to just this moment—her widened eyes, the small gasp that escaped her parted lips, the hammering of his heart. Jill's breath hitched, her eyes searching his.

The pull between them was as tangible as gravity. The scent of her—clean sweat and something uniquely Jill—overwhelmed his senses, drowning out centuries of careful restraint. He leaned in, his heart thundering, drawn by a force stronger than will or reason.

Her eyes drifted closed, her lips parting slightly in invitation. The sword hung forgotten in his grip as his free hand moved to cup her cheek, the softness of her skin against his rough palm igniting something primal within him.

"Jill," he breathed, her name a prayer on his lips, his brogue thickening with emotion. Her face tilted up to his, her breath warm against his mouth.



"Alasdair," she whispered in return, and the sound of his name on her tongue nearly undid him.

"Am I interrupting something?" Fergus's amused voice shattered the moment like a stone through glass.

Alasdair jerked back, his cheeks burning as he turned to face his brother. Fergus stood at the edge of the clearing, bow in hand and a knowing smirk on his face. His eyes danced with mischief, a look Alasdair had seen countless times over their years together.

"We've found signs of the Brollachan," Fergus reported, his eyes dancing with barely contained mirth. "But perhaps I should come back later? When ye're less...occupied?"

"Nae," Alasdair growled, frustration and embarrassment warring within him. Trust Fergus to appear at precisely the wrong moment. "We're done here. Show me what ye've found."

"If ye're certain," Fergus replied, his tone making it clear he was enjoying Alasdair's discomfort far too much. "Though ye seemed quite engrossed in your...swordplay."

Alasdair shot him a warning glance that would have silenced most men. Fergus merely grinned wider.

As they followed Fergus back towards the house, Alasdair snuck a glance at Jill. Color rose in her cheeks, and she wouldn't meet his eyes. The unresolved tension between them crackled like static electricity, leaving him both yearning for more and terrified of what it might mean.

The sword in his hand suddenly felt heavier, a reminder of his oath to protect, not just her physical safety, but her heart as well. He was a man out of time, with a duty to his

brothers and a monster to defeat. His life had never been his own to direct—first claimed by the berserker brand, then by the needs of his brothers, now by the threat of the Brollachan.

But watching Jill's braid swing as she walked ahead of him, Alasdair realized that his heart might no longer be his own to command.

It belonged to her—to this remarkable woman who bridged centuries with her understanding, who looked at him and saw not just a warrior, but a man. A man who, against all odds and across a thousand years, had found something he'd never dared hope for.

A second chance.

"We'll continue your training tomorrow," he called to her, needing to say something, anything, to acknowledge what had nearly happened between them.

Jill glanced back at him, her expression a mix of longing and uncertainty that mirrored his own conflicted heart. "I'd like that," she replied softly, and in her simple words, Alasdair heard a promise.

Tomorrow, perhaps, there would be no interruptions.

### CHAPTER 34

Jill drummed her fingers against the worn steering wheel of her father's pickup truck, sneaking glances at Alasdair in the passenger seat. The morning sunlight caught in his dark hair and illuminated the strong line of his jaw as he stared out the window. Even relaxed, his eyes tracked everything with a warrior's vigilance—cataloging terrain, noting escape routes, scanning for threats.

"Are you sure about this?" she asked, turning onto the main road toward Aberdeen. The warm summer breeze carried the scent of pine and salt water through the open windows. "Town can be overwhelming, especially on market day."

Her skin tingled with the memory of yesterday's interrupted almost-kiss. The truck cab felt impossibly intimate, his large frame just inches from hers. She'd barely slept, replaying the moment over and over—the steadying warmth of his hands, the intensity in his green eyes as he'd leaned toward her.

"I cannae hide from this new world forever," Alasdair replied, his brogue thicker than usual—a tell she'd noticed happened when he was nervous or emotional. "Besides, your father says we need supplies for the coming battle. Silver for Macrath to forge into weapons."

Jill's stomach tightened at the reminder. "Right. The blacksmith in town has what we need. Dad called ahead."

"And that shop with the wee cakes you mentioned?" Alasdair asked, a hint of a smile softening his features. "Will we have time for that as well?"

She laughed, tension easing from her shoulders. "Cupcakes? I promised, didn't I? Consider it part of your cultural education."

"Aye, my education." His voice dropped lower, sending a pleasant shiver across her skin. "I find myself eager to learn all manner of new things in this century."

The weight of his gaze made her cheeks burn. Something had shifted between them since yesterday—a new boldness in his manner, as if their near-kiss had pushed some invisible boundary.

"The twins told me what ye call these outings," he continued. "Dates, aye? Though Joe said proper dates usually happen after sunset."

Jill nearly swerved off the road, her heart leaping into her throat. "This isn't—I mean, we're just getting supplies. Not that I wouldn't want—" She took a deep breath, focusing on the road ahead while her pulse hammered in her ears. "Is that what you want this to be? A date?"

His large hand covered hers on the gearshift, warm and solid. Her fingers looked so small beneath his, and the simple contact sent electricity racing up her arm.

"I may be from another time, Jill Greenwood, but I'm not blind to what grows between us." His thumb traced small circles on her wrist, each movement leaving trails of heat on her skin. "In my day, I'd have spoken to your father already, made my intentions clear."

"And what are your intentions?" she asked, her mouth suddenly dry.

His answer was interrupted by the blare of a horn as a logging truck barreled past them. Alasdair tensed, hand automatically reaching for a sword that wasn't there.

"Easy," Jill soothed, swallowing her disappointment. "Just someone in a hurry."

They drove in silence for a few minutes, the landscape changing from farmland to the outskirts of Aberdeen. Small homes gave way to businesses, streets growing busier with morning traffic. She watched Alasdair's shoulders tense as he took in the number of vehicles and people.

"It's alright," she assured him. "Just stay close to me."

She pulled into the small lot behind MacAllister's Hardware & Forge, one of the few traditional blacksmiths still operating in the county. The smell of coal smoke and hot metal greeted them as they stepped from the truck.

"Smells like home," Alasdair murmured, inhaling deeply. His expression softened with something like nostalgia. "Our village smith had a similar scent about him."

"You miss it," Jill said, studying his face.

He considered this, head tilting slightly. "I miss the certainty of it. Knowing my place, my purpose." His gaze met hers, intense and unwavering. "But I'm finding new purposes worth pursuing."

That look—like she was something rare—stole her breath.

The blacksmith's shop door swung open, breaking the spell. Grant MacAllister, a burly man with Scottish ancestry evident in his red beard and booming voice, waved them in.

"You must be Conall's girl!" he called. "And this is one of those Scottish visitors he mentioned?" His eyes narrowed slightly as he took in Alasdair's imposing height and warrior's stance.

"Yes, this is Alasdair," Jill replied, silently thanking her father for preparing the cover story. "He's interested in traditional metalworking techniques. We're hoping to purchase some silver for a project."

As the men discussed metals and forging methods, Jill wandered the shop, trailing her fingers over tools both recognizable and mysterious. The walls displayed MacAllister's creations—ornate gates, decorative pieces, and handcrafted knives that caught Alasdair's attention.

She watched him examine a blade, his practiced eye assessing its balance and craftsmanship. For a moment, the modern clothes and setting fell away, and she could see him as he must have been—young and fierce, learning combat in a world she'd only studied in books.

What would her academic colleagues think of this? Dr. Jill Greenwood, shopping for monster-killing weapons with an actual ninth-century berserker. They'd think she'd lost her mind.

Maybe she had. Or maybe she'd finally found something real—something that mattered more than publications and tenure.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Alasdair's voice startled her. He stood close enough that she could smell the subtle pine scent of the soap he'd used that morning, close enough that she could feel the warmth radiating from him.

"Just thinking about how surreal this all is," she admitted. "A few weeks ago, my biggest concern was whether Mom would take her medication. Now I'm helping shop for silver to kill a mythological Scottish monster."

His eyes crinkled at the corners. "Life's full of surprises, is it not?"

"That's putting it mildly."

Grant approached with a small wrapped package. "That's the finest silver I've got. Tell Conall he owes me a bottle of that peaty whisky of his."

After paying, they stepped back into the summer sunlight. The town had grown busier, the Saturday market in full swing in the square a block away. Colorful tents and stalls lined the streets, the air filled with the scent of fresh bread, flowers, and grilling food.

"Cupcakes now?" Jill asked, nodding toward a small bakery across the street.

Alasdair hesitated, eyes scanning the bustling market. "Perhaps we could see this market first? It reminds me of the summer fairs in the villages."

His expression was so earnest, his eyes lit with such genuine curiosity, that Jill couldn't refuse. "Sure. But stay close—it gets crowded."

They wandered through the stalls, Alasdair marveling at the abundance. Fresh produce gleamed in the sun, artisanal cheeses and bread filled the air with mouthwatering aromas, and local crafters displayed their wares.

"So much food," he murmured, watching a child bite into a ripe peach, juice running down their chin. "And none of it spoiled or scarce."

The observation hit Jill like a physical blow. How much had she taken for granted? The simple miracle of refrigeration, year-round produce, food safety standards?

"Here," she said impulsively, purchasing two honey sticks from a local beekeeper. She handed one to Alasdair. "Try this."

He examined the small straw filled with golden liquid, then followed her example, biting the end and letting the honey flow onto his tongue. His eyes widened with pleasure.

"Like ambrosia," he declared, the simple joy in his expression making her heart squeeze. "We had honey in my time, but nothing so pure and sweet."

They continued through the market, Jill introducing him to small pleasures—artisanal cheese, jewelry, intricate woodcarvings with Celtic-inspired designs.

At the far end of the market, a small group had gathered around a fiddler. The lively Scottish reel filled the air, and several couples had begun to dance. Alasdair stopped, transfixed by the music.

"We had similar tunes," he said softly. "For celebrations after harvest or successful hunts. The rhythm is the same, though the instrument is finer."

An elderly couple joined the dancers, moving with the grace of decades spent together. The woman's white hair caught the sunlight as her husband twirled her, their laughter youthful despite their years.

"That could be us someday," Jill said without thinking, then froze, horrified by her presumption. Heat flooded her face as the words hung in the air between them.

Alasdair didn't seem shocked. Instead, his hand found hers, fingers intertwining with surprising gentleness for such a powerful warrior.

"Aye," he said simply. "I would like that very much."

The moment hung between them, perfect and terrifying in its implications. Jill's heart started to pound as she stared at their joined hands—her modern manicured fingers



wrapped in his calloused, ancient strength. A thousand years separated their births, yet here they stood, connected.

A commotion from a nearby stall broke the moment. A group of teenage boys had knocked over a display of pottery, the crash followed by angry shouts and laughter. Alasdair tensed immediately, shifting slightly in front of Jill.

"Just kids being stupid," she assured him, though touched by his protective instinct.

They continued through the market, eventually making their way to the bakery. The sweet scent of vanilla and chocolate enveloped them as they entered, a welcome respite from the growing crowd outside.

"Pick whatever looks good," Jill told him, watching as Alasdair examined the colorful display with serious concentration.

"They're so...decorated," he marveled. "Like tiny works of art."

The young woman behind the counter smiled. "First time at Sweet Dreams Bakery?"

"First time having a cupcake," Jill explained. "My friend is from...a very remote part of Scotland."

The baker's eyes widened. "Well then, you have to try our bestseller—double chocolate with raspberry filling."

They left with two cupcakes and found a quiet bench in the small park adjacent to the market. Jill watched with delight as Alasdair took his first bite, frosting catching on his upper lip. The expression of pure pleasure that spread across his face made her laugh.

"This," he declared solemnly, "might be worth traveling through time for."

Jill reached out to wipe a smudge of chocolate from the corner of his mouth. "Better than medieval fare?"

"Infinitely." He captured her hand before she could withdraw it, pressing a soft kiss to her palm that sent heat spiraling through her body. "Though not the best thing I've found in this century."

The intensity in his gaze left no doubt about his meaning. Jill's breath caught.

"Alasdair," she began, not entirely sure what she wanted to say.

His phone—a basic model they'd gotten him just days ago—chimed from his pocket, startling them both. Jill's stomach dropped. She'd programmed only family numbers into it, which meant...

"Something's wrong," she said, reaching for her own phone.

A text from William confirmed her fears: Dad says come home NOW. Brollachan signs near the east field. Macrath & Fergus tracking it.

The peaceful moment shattered. Alasdair was already on his feet, combat-ready despite his modern clothing and the half-eaten cupcake still in his hand.

"We need to go," he said, all trace of softness gone from his voice. "Now."

As they hurried back to the truck, Jill cast one last glance at the market—at ordinary people enjoying their ordinary Saturday, blissfully unaware of ancient monsters and time-displaced warriors. For a few precious hours, she and Alasdair had been just another couple enjoying the summer day.

Reality, it seemed, had other plans.

The silver package felt suddenly heavy in her bag. What they'd purchased as a precaution was now an immediate necessity. The battle they'd been preparing for was no longer a distant concern but an imminent threat.

Alasdair's hand found hers as they reached the truck, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "We'll face it together," he promised, his voice steady and sure. "Whatever comes."

In that moment, despite the danger awaiting them, Jill believed him. Together, they might just be strong enough to face anything—even a monster from another time.

She started the engine, leaving behind the simple pleasures of cupcakes and markets for the complex reality of their shared fate. As they sped toward home, toward whatever danger awaited, one thought crystallized in Jill's mind with startling clarity: she was falling in love with Alasdair MacTyre, and not even a thousand years or a mythical monster could change that fact.

### CHAPTER 35

A Iasdaire crouched in the damp soil, studying the blackened patch of earth where nothing grew. Evening mist crept through the trees like ghostly fingers, bringing the sharp scent of pine and the fainter, more wrong scent of the Brollachan's passing. His fingertips registered the unnatural coldness that lingered hours after the creature's touch, a chill that seeped into his bones despite the warm summer air.

"It's growing stronger," he said, voice low as Macrath and Fergus flanked him in the gathering twilight. "Feeding more frequently."

Macrath grunted agreement, the bandage on his forearm stark white against his tanned skin. "Wee beastie killed two more of the neighbor's sheep. Left nothing but bones and black earth."

Alasdair wiped his hand on his jeans, the texture still strange beneath his calloused fingers. The denim felt too smooth, too unyielding compared to the rough wool he'd worn for decades. He missed the familiar weight of his tunic, the way it moved with his body in battle. These modern garments clung differently, though they offered surprising freedom of movement.

Rising to his full height, he surveyed the forest edge as thunder rumbled in the distance. The Greenwood farm stretched before him, fields of lavender now mere silhouettes in the deepening dusk. The farmhouse lights glowed with amber warmth, windows like golden eyes watching over the land. Behind one of those windows, Jill would be waiting, perhaps watching for their return.

His heartbeat quickened at the thought of her, warmth spreading through his chest despite the cool air.

"We should head back," Fergus suggested, his scholarly features tight with concern. "It's too dark to track further, and Conall wanted to discuss the silver we brought."

The silver. Their best hope against the creature, according to both Tavish's visions and Conall's druidic knowledge. Alasdair's jaw tightened involuntarily. Relying on druid magic scraped against everything he'd learned from bitter experience, but he'd witnessed enough impossibilities since arriving here to know that ancient enemies sometimes made necessary allies.

"Aye," he agreed, turning away from the corrupted ground. "The beast hunts at night. Best we not become prey ourselves."

As they made their way back through the darkening forest, the first cool droplets of rain spattered against his face. His thoughts drifted to the day's earlier moments in Aberdeen. The market's riot of colors and scents, the burst of sweetness from honey and cupcakes on his tongue, and most of all, the feel of Jill's hand in his—small yet strong, her fingers intertwining with his as if they belonged there.

Marriage in Scotland had been a formal affair of negotiations and arrangements—discussions with fathers, considerations of dowries, careful evaluation of family connections. But here...Jill stood educated, independent, free to choose her own path. And somehow, inexplicably, she seemed to be choosing him.

"You're thinking of her again," Fergus observed quietly, falling into step beside him as they emerged from the tree line. Lightning flashed in the distance, illuminating the approaching clouds. "I can tell by the look on your face."

Macrath snorted from behind them. "He thinks of nothing else these days. Our mighty

leader, felled by a lass with books."

A decade ago, Alasdair might have bristled at such teasing, might have felt it undermined his authority. Now he merely smiled, the expression feeling like a rare, precious gift after years of grim determination. "Aye, and what of it? She's worth thinking about."

"No argument there," Fergus said easily. "She's a rare woman. Her knowledge of our customs—it's remarkable."

"It's not just her knowledge," Alasdair found himself saying, the words emerging unbidden from some deeper part of himself. "It's her spirit. Her strength." The memory of their sword training surfaced—the determination in her amber eyes, the quick intelligence with which she adapted to his instruction. "She doesn't fear what we are. Not even a little."

"And what are we, brother?" Macrath asked, his tone uncharacteristically somber. "Men? Warriors? Monsters? Relics? Do we belong here?" He gestured at their surroundings—the electric lights from the farmhouse, the distant hum of a vehicle on the road, all the marvels that remained bewildering despite weeks of exposure.

The question lingered in the rain-scented air as they approached the barn. The wolf-paw brand on Alasdair's forearm seemed to pulse with memory—the mark that had made them outcasts, less than men in the eyes of clan chieftains and village elders. Yet here, Jill looked at him and saw not a berserker, not a beast-man, but simply Alasdair.

"We are what we choose to be," he said finally. "Where we came from, that choice was taken from us. Here, perhaps, we might reclaim it."

The barn door stood open, golden light spilling onto the packed earth. Inside,

Alasdair could see Conall hunched over a table covered in maps, Jill at his side. The sight of her—hair pulled back in a messy bun, brow furrowed in concentration—sent a surge of longing through him so powerful he had to clench his fists to keep from striding directly to her side.

She looked up as they entered, relief washing over her features. She moved closer, her scent a welcome contrast to the earthy smell of rain and forest that clung to his clothes.

"You're back," she said, eyes scanning his face as if searching for injuries. "Did you find anything?"

"More signs of feeding," he reported, forcing himself to focus on the threat rather than the way lamplight caught the amber flecks in her eyes. "The creature grows stronger with each passing day."

Conall's expression darkened as he traced a line on one of the maps. "The Summer Solstice approaches. Three days from now, the veil between worlds will be at its thinnest."

"The creature will be at the height of its power," Tavish added from his position near the window, where he'd been keeping watch. "But so will any magic we wield against it."

"What of the silver?" Jill asked, her practical nature asserting itself. "Macrath, can you forge it into weapons in time?"

Macrath nodded grimly. "Aye, with your father's help. The forge here is different from what I knew, but the principles remain the same."

"Good," Conall said, straightening. "We'll begin at first light. For now, you men

should rest. You've been tracking since midday."

As the others filed out toward the bunkhouse, their boots scuffing against the wooden floor, Alasdair lingered. The barn's familiar smells—hay, leather, horses—grounded him even as his heart raced at being alone with Jill. The steady drum of rain on the roof filled the silence between them.

"A word, lass?" he asked softly once they were alone, Conall having tactfully retreated to the house.

Jill's smile sent a jolt through him stronger than any battle fury he'd ever known. "I was hoping you'd stay," she admitted, stepping closer until he could feel the warmth radiating from her. "I've been thinking about our trip to town. Before we got the message about the Brollachan, I mean."

"As have I," he confessed, allowing himself the luxury of reaching for her hand. Her fingers were cool against his calloused palm but warmed quickly as he enclosed them in his own. The simple contact sent lightning through his veins more potent than the storm outside. "In Scotland, I would have spoken to your father by now. Made my intentions clear."

A blush crept up her neck, visible even in the dim light. "And what exactly are your intentions, Alasdair MacTyre?" The playful challenge in her voice belied the genuine question beneath.

He took a steadying breath, feeling as though the words might slip through his fingers if he didn't hold them tight. Where he came from, such declarations were rare, formalized, often arranged by others. But here, with Jill, nothing was as it had been.

"My intention," he said carefully, his brogue thickening with emotion, "is to court ye properly, as a man courts a woman he hopes might one day consent to be his wife."



The words hung in the air between them, heavy with meaning. Outside, rain fell harder, drumming against the barn roof in a rhythm that seemed to match the thundering of his heart.

Jill's eyes widened, but she didn't pull away. Instead, her free hand came up to rest lightly on his chest, just over his heart. The warmth of her palm burned through his shirt like a brand, but one he welcomed.

"That's...very formal," she said, teasing lightly even as her eyes stayed serious. "Usually people take a little more time before proposing eternal devotion."

Alasdair's mouth twitched. "How much time are we speaking of? A fortnight? A season? A decade?"

She laughed. "Usually more than a couple of monster attacks and a road trip."

He tilted his head, considering. "I dinnae ken. Slaying beasts and surviving your metal beast on wheels seems like a strong foundation for a lifetime."

"True," she said, smiling warmly now. "Not everyone gets to test their relationship under fire."

"Aye," he said, voice low and earnest. "And if it pleases ye, I'd gladly keep proving myself... however long it takes."

Her heart gave a little lurch at the rough tenderness in his tone.

"Be careful," she whispered, eyes shining. "You might just win me over completely."

"I intend to," he murmured, his smile slow and sure.

Her answering grin stole his breath. "I'd like that too. Very much."

For a moment, they simply stood there, connected by their joined hands and the promise of something neither had expected to find. The scent of hay and rain enveloped them, the barn's timbers creaking gently in the wind.

"But first, we have to deal with the Brollachan," she said, her voice soft but determined. "Your safety—all of you—comes first."

"Aye," he agreed, reluctantly releasing her hand. "The beast must be dealt with before we can look to the future."

She nodded, then surprised him by rising on her toes to press a soft kiss to his cheek, her lips warm against his skin. "For luck," she whispered, her breath tickling his ear and sending shivers down his spine. "Come back safely from your hunt, warrior. I'll be waiting."

The simple gesture set his blood aflame more surely than any battle cry ever had. It took all his willpower not to turn his head, to capture her lips properly as he'd been longing to do for days.

But she was right. The monster came first. Their future—the tantalizing possibility of a life together—would have to wait until they had secured the safety of the farm, of her family, of his brothers.

"I will return to ye," he promised, the words carrying the weight of an oath. "I swear it."

As he stepped out into the rain, the cool droplets a welcome shock against his heated skin, Alasdair felt a strange sense of peace despite the danger that awaited them. For the first time since being cast through time, he had something to fight for beyond

mere survival. A home. A future. A love born across centuries.

The Brollachan would face not just a warrior seeking victory, but a man defending everything he held dear. And that, Alasdair knew from long experience, made all the difference in battle.

Thunder cracked overhead, lightning briefly illuminating the fields in stark relief. The storm had arrived, much like the one building in his chest—powerful, primal, and unstoppable.

Let the beast come, he thought fiercely. Let it face a man with something to lose.

### CHAPTER 36

Jill tucked a strand of hair behind her ear as she pored over the ancient text spread across the kitchen table. The leather-bound volume—one of her father's most treasured possessions—smelled of time and secrets, its pages yellowed and fragile beneath her careful touch. Beside it, her laptop cast a soft glow, the screen filled with half-translated Gaelic snippets, grainy images of ancient carvings, and conflicting articles about Scottish folklore.

Outside, the storm that had started last night continued unabated, rain lashing against the windows while thunder rumbled in the distance.

A perfect backdrop for researching ancient Scottish monsters, she thought wryly, fighting back a yawn. Her academic mind craved the certainty of footnotes and peer-reviewed studies, not the frustrating ambiguity of folklore that had suddenly proven all too real.

The Brollachan's nature remained elusive despite hours of research. Her historian's training had taught her to question, to validate, to cross-reference—but this creature existed in the murky space between mythology and reality, a place where her training offered little guidance. Worse, every passage she translated made the creature sound more dangerous, more ancient, more hungry.

"Find anything useful?" William asked, setting a steaming mug of coffee down by her elbow.

Jill looked up, noting the dark circles shadowing her brother's eyes. He'd been up

most of the night helping their father and Macrath at the forge, hammering silver into weapons. The acrid scent of metal and fire still clung to his clothes.

"Nothing we don't already know," she sighed, rubbing her tired eyes and gratefully wrapping her fingers around the warm mug. "Shapeshifter, drawn to magical energy, vulnerable to silver and pure intention." She gestured at the rain-streaked window. "At least the weather's keeping it subdued for now. They seem to dislike water."

William nodded, then hesitated, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. His expression changed to something more guarded, the look he'd worn since childhood when working up the courage to say something uncomfortable.

"Can I ask you something?" he finally said.

Something in his tone made Jill straighten, wariness prickling along her spine. "Of course."

"What exactly is going on between you and Alasdair?"

The bluntness of the question caught her off guard. Heat crept up her neck as she recalled Alasdair's words in the barn last night— my intention is to court ye properly, as a man courts a woman he hopes might one day consent to be his wife . The formal declaration had left her breathless, caught between amusement at his old-fashioned approach and a deeper, more profound emotion she wasn't entirely ready to name.

"That's...complicated," she hedged, buying time while her heart raced.

"We're worried about you," Joe chimed in, appearing from the pantry with an armful of snacks. Unlike his methodical twin, Joe always dove straight into matters—arms full of cookies and no filter. "These guys are from the 9th century, Jill. Their ideas about women, about relationships—it's not exactly modern."

Jill stiffened, her protective instincts flaring. A sharp pulse of irritation bloomed beneath her breastbone. "I'm perfectly capable of making my own decisions about who I date."

"Date?" William raised an eyebrow, his tone hitting that irritating big-brother note she'd thought he'd outgrown years ago. "Is that what you're doing? Because from where we're standing, it looks like you're falling hard for a guy who, until a few weeks ago, thought the earth was flat and women were property."

"That's not fair," Jill protested, anger rising fast. How dare they reduce Alasdair to a stereotype after everything he'd done for them? "Alasdair is more than just some medieval caricature. He's learning, adapting. And he respects me."

"We know that," Joe said, his tone softening as he set his snacks on the table. "He's proven himself a dozen times over. But Jill, this is serious. We're not talking about some guy you met at a conference who lives across the country. We're talking about a time-displaced warrior with PTSD and a target on his back."

"Not to mention his brothers," William added, leaning against the counter. "Have you thought about what happens if things work out with you two? We're going to have five more berserkers looking for local women to court? Aberdeen's a small town, sis."

The genuine concern in their voices tempered Jill's indignation. They weren't being overprotective jerks—they were genuinely worried about the implications of this unprecedented situation. Their family's world had been turned upside down in a matter of weeks.

"Look," she said, closing the ancient text with careful hands, the scent of parchment rising as the pages met. "I understand your concerns. But this isn't something I've rushed into blindly. I've spent my entire academic career studying his time, his culture. I know what I'm doing."

"Do you?" William asked quietly. "Because loving someone from your history books is a lot different than loving a flesh and blood man with a thousand years of cultural baggage."

The word "loving" hit her like a physical blow, stealing her breath. Was that what this was? This fierce, protective feeling that had been growing inside her since the moment Alasdair had appeared on their property? The way her heart raced when he was near, how she found herself storing little details about him—the way he tilted his head when confused, how his voice softened when speaking to the horses, the surprising gentleness of his hands despite their strength?

Before she could form a response, the kitchen door swung open. Alasdair stood framed in the doorway, rain dripping from his dark hair onto borrowed flannel and jeans that somehow emphasized rather than disguised his warrior's bearing. Behind him stood Fergus and Lachlan, equally drenched and serious-faced.

The tension in the room hit her like a wave. Alasdair's eyes narrowed, assessing the twins' protective stances, her flushed face, the awkward silence.

"Is there trouble here?" he asked, his voice deceptively calm. But Jill recognized the subtle shift in his posture, the almost imperceptible straightening of his spine, the way his fingers flexed at his sides. A warrior assessing a threat.

William squared his shoulders, looking almost comical as he tried to match Alasdair's imposing presence. "We were just having a talk with our sister about your intentions."

Alasdair's eyebrows shot up, and for a moment, Jill saw a flash of the fierce berserker beneath his calm exterior. "My intentions?" he repeated, his voice low and dangerous.

"Yeah," Joe chimed in, apparently drawing courage from his twin's bravado. "We

want to make sure you're not just, you know, looking for a quick roll in the hay or something."

Jill groaned inwardly, mortification washing over her in a hot wave. But beneath the embarrassment was an unexpected surge of affection for her misguided brothers. "Guys, seriously?—"

But Alasdair was already stepping forward, his eyes blazing with a mix of indignation and...was that amusement? "In my time," he said slowly, his accent thickening with emotion, "a man would prove his worth through combat. If ye doubt my honor or my intentions towards yer sister, I would be happy tae demonstrate them in the auld way."

He drew himself up to his full height, which made both her brothers look smaller. "Ye should ken, I have never dishonored a woman in all my days, and I dinnae intend tae start with one as precious as yer sister."

For a moment, silence reigned. Jill's mind raced, trying to process the absurdity of the situation. Her 21st-century brothers squaring off against a 9th-century berserker over her virtue? It was like something out of a bad romance novel.

And then, unable to contain it any longer, she burst out laughing.

Three pairs of eyes turned to her, expressions ranging from confusion to concern. Jill struggled to catch her breath, wiping tears from her eyes. "I'm sorry," she gasped, her sides aching. "It's just...this is ridiculous. We're not in medieval Scotland, guys. Nobody's fighting over me like I'm some kind of prize to be won."

She straightened, looking each of them in the eye. "William, Joe—I love you both, and I appreciate that you care. But I'm perfectly capable of making my own decisions about who I date. And Alasdair," she turned to him, her voice softening, "I know you



mean well, but offering to fight my brothers isn't exactly the way we handle things now."

Alasdair had the grace to look sheepish. "I apologize," he said, ducking his head. "I'm still learning yer ways. I meant nae disrespect."

"Well, actually..." William hesitated, then plunged ahead. "It's not just about you and Jill. What about your brothers? Are they going to be moving in on local girls too? Because Aberdeen's a small town, and?—"

"My brothers," Alasdair interjected, his voice suddenly solemn, "are my responsibility. Just as yer sister is yers." He glanced at Jill, his eyes softening. "But now that I've found happiness with Jill, I am determined tae help them find the same. Each deserves a chance at the peace I've begun tae find here."

The raw honesty in his voice made Jill's heart flip. She'd never considered that Alasdair might feel responsible for his brothers' happiness as well as their safety.

"They're good men," Alasdair continued, laying a hand on William's shoulder. "Warriors, aye, but honorable tae their cores. They would die before bringing shame tae any woman or her kin."

Fergus cleared his throat from the doorway. "If I might speak for myself," he said, his voice even. "We have no intention of imposing ourselves on your community. We understand we are...unusual circumstances."

Lachlan nodded his agreement, though he remained silent as always, his calm presence a counterpoint to the tension in the room.

"But you've all been, what, living together as bachelors for years?" Joe asked, his tone somewhere between confused and concerned. "That's a lot of change, going

from all men to suddenly living with women."

Something dark flickered across Alasdair's face. "We were promised brides, once. By the very clan that betrayed us." His jaw tightened. "I failed my brothers then. I willnae fail them now. Not when we've been given this second chance."

Something in his words—the weight of responsibility, the depth of his loyalty—struck Jill deeply. This was the true heart of Alasdair: not just a warrior, but a man who shouldered the burdens of those he loved without complaint.

William and Joe exchanged glances, the wind clearly taken out of their sails. "We just want you to be happy, sis," Joe said finally.

"I know," Jill replied, reaching out to squeeze his hand. "And I am. Alasdair may be from a different time, but he's a good man. You guys should know that by now."

As the tension dissipated, Jill couldn't help but marvel at the strange turns her life had taken. Here she was, mediating between her 21st-century brothers and her 9th-century...what? Boyfriend? The word seemed inadequate to describe the connection she felt with Alasdair.

"Och, dinnae fash yerselves," Alasdair said, his tone lightening as he clapped both her brothers on their shoulders. "I understand yer concern. If I had a sister as bonnie and clever as Jill, I'd be just as protective."

Joe chuckled, finally relaxing. "Yeah, well, just remember we're watching you, medieval man."

"I wouldnae have it any other way," Alasdair replied with surprising sincerity.

The moment was broken by the arrival of Conall and Macrath, their clothing singed

and faces streaked with soot from the forge.

"The weapons are ready," Conall announced, his expression grave as he surveyed the gathered group. "Silver-tipped spears, arrowheads, and blades. We'll need to prepare for battle. The storm will break by nightfall, and with it, our advantage."

Jill felt a chill run through her despite the kitchen's warmth. The brief normalcy of sibling overprotectiveness gave way to the reality of their situation—a monster from Scottish legend, hunting the men she'd come to care for, threatening everything she held dear.

Her eyes found Alasdair's across the room. In his steady gaze, she saw not just the warrior ready for battle, but the man who had declared his intention to court her, who had stood his ground against her brothers, who had crossed centuries only to find her.

Whatever came next, they would face it together.

"Then we'd better get ready," she said, rising from the table, her resolve hardening like steel. "We have a monster to hunt."

### CHAPTER 37

The twilight air was thick with the scent of lavender and storm, pressing down on Alasdair's chest like a physical weight. A woodpecker's distant tapping fell suddenly silent, as if the forest itself sensed something coming.

The fields stretched out before him in long purple rivers, glowing under a sky painted in deep gold and crimson. A beauty so fierce and foreign it still stole his breath.

But tonight, that beauty was off. Discordant.

He stood on the porch of the Greenwood farmhouse, silver-tipped spear in hand—Macrath's finest work since arriving in this time—the smooth wood of the railing biting into his palm. The world around him had fallen silent—no birds, no insects, no rustle of wind in the trees.

Just waiting.

"Something's coming," he muttered under his breath. His fingers tightened instinctively on the spear's shaft. The others would be joining him soon for the planned hunt, but what he sensed now might not wait for their preparations.

Beside him, Jill appeared, barefoot on the porch, her presence an anchor and a blade all at once. Her dark brown hair caught the dying light, her eyes fixed on the treeline with the same steady resolve he'd come to depend on.

"What is it?" she asked, her voice steady but low.

Alasdair shook his head, scanning the dark line of trees beyond the fields. "I dinnae ken. But ye must stay inside."

Her jaw tightened—he saw the fight in her—but after a heartbeat's hesitation, she nodded. "Alright. But you come back to me." Her fingers brushed his forearm, a gesture somehow more intimate than a kiss.

"I swear it." His voice roughened. "Ye have my heart, Jill Greenwood. I'll not leave it behind."

She turned to go, then suddenly froze. Her head tilted slightly, eyes narrowing as she scanned the treeline. "I feel it too," she whispered. "Something watching us. Something... wrong." A shiver ran through her as she backed toward the door, never taking her eyes from the darkening fields.

He watched her retreat into the house, heart twisting, before turning back to the fields.

The stillness deepened. The very ground seemed to hold its breath.

And then?—

The howl.

It ripped across the valley like a blade, ancient and terrible.

Every instinct Alasdair had honed in war screamed at him: defend. Prepare. Fight.

The bunkhouse door slammed open. His brothers poured out, steel gleaming, grim and ready. Macrath's face was set like stone, his collection of silver-tipped spears gleaming in the fading light as he distributed them among the warriors. Tavish

whispered, "Like old times, eh? Except this beast doesn't offer ale before trying to kill us."

Joe and William sprinted from the barn, shotguns clutched tight, grim lines carved into their faces. Despite everything, William managed a tight smile. "Guess this counts as your official welcome to the ranch, berserker."

Conall followed close behind, his silvered sword catching the last blaze of sunlight, his blue eyes burning with a power that seemed older than the land itself.

They formed a line across the yard—Highlanders, ranchers, warriors, all standing between the farmhouse and the coming storm.

The treeline shivered.

And the Brollachan burst forth.

It was worse than before.

Fed by the Solstice, its form was more solid, more horrifying—a mass of twisting shadows, gaping maws, limbs that shifted from beast to man to nightmare with every writhing step. Its howl cracked the air, the ground seeming to ripple beneath its weight. The stench of rot and something older—something wrong—washed over them like a physical wave.

"Form up!" Alasdair shouted in Gaelic, raising his silver-tipped spear high. "Remember, brothers—we fight for those within these walls!"

The first clash was immediate, brutal, chaotic.

Alasdair hurled his spear with deadly precision, driving the silver tip into the

creature's flank. The Brollachan shrieked, staggered—and reformed before his eyes, smoke and sinew knitting together faster than before, but not without cost. The silver had burned it, left a wound that struggled to heal.

Macrath swung a heavy blade into its shoulder, but the sword passed through with barely any resistance. "The blades do nothing!" he shouted, diving for one of the remaining silver spears.

Fergus darted in low, his sword slashing at the creature's legs and passing through like mist. The warriors exchanged looks of alarm—never had they faced an enemy their steel couldn't bite.

Joe and William opened fire with their shotguns, the blasts thundering across the yard. The pellets disappeared into the Brollachan's shadowed mass, then fell uselessly to the ground like metallic hail, the creature howling with what sounded like laughter.

"Only silver wounds it!" Alasdair shouted, his berserker blood rising, the ancient power surging in his veins. His vision sharpened, his muscles coiled with preternatural strength. Around him, his brothers underwent the same transformation—their eyes brightening with unholy fire, their movements blurring with impossible speed.

For a moment—just a heartbeat—they pushed it back.

But the Brollachan adapted.

It shifted again, faster this time, sprouting tendrils of smoke and claw that lashed out wildly.

A tendril slammed into Macrath, knocking him sprawling despite his berserker's strength. Another clipped William's shoulder, spinning him to the ground.

Conall darted forward, driving his sword into the beast's side, but even the druid-forged blade barely seemed to slow it. "It's drawing power from the Solstice!" he shouted over the chaos. "We must break its center!"

Alasdair roared, charging, grabbing the second silver-tipped spear from the ground and plunging it into the writhing mass. The metal burned cold in his hand, an echo of ancient magic meeting modern making.

The Brollachan shrieked in genuine pain this time, but its rage only grew.

"By all the ancient powers," Fergus gasped, "how is it still standing? Not even a berserker could withstand such wounds!"

They regrouped, breathless, battered, bleeding.

The battle had only begun.

Alasdair wiped blood—his or the beast's, he didn't know—from his brow and tightened his grip on the silver spear. The weapon felt alive in his palm, humming with energy that matched the thunder of his heartbeat.

Around him, the battle raged—shouts in Gaelic, the thunder of gunfire, the screeching, warping cries of the Brollachan.

The beast surged again, faster than before, driving them back step by step toward the farmhouse.

They couldn't hold much longer.

Out of the corner of his eye, Alasdair saw Joe stumble, his shotgun ripped from his hands by a flailing tendril.



Fergus moved to cover him but was forced back by a slash of shadow that tore the ground at his feet.

The creature pressed its advantage, lunging?—

And then a rifle cracked, sharp and bright, splitting the chaos.

The shot slammed into the Brollachan's shoulder, only to fall away like all the others.

Alasdair's head whipped around.

And his heart stopped.

Jill.

Charging out of the house with her rifle raised, Cillian guarding Sarah just behind them, both carrying more weapons—another silver spear and boxes of ammunition. Jill's amber eyes blazed with determination, her jaw set in that stubborn line he'd come to adore.

Conall shouted something, half a warning, half a curse—but Jill was already moving.

She didn't just stand and fire—she ran toward Joe, covering him with clean, precise shots. The bullets disappeared into the creature's mass, falling like pelting rain at its feet.

When Joe scrambled for his weapon, she dropped to one knee beside him, firing another blast into the Brollachan's snarling maw, buying Joe enough time to rearm.

Alasdair's heart burned with a mix of terror and awe.

She wasn't reckless.

She was brilliant. Brave. Fierce.

But she had drawn the monster's full attention now.

The Brollachan turned toward her, its shifting mass boiling with rage.

"No!" Alasdair shouted, sprinting toward her. Time seemed to slow, each footfall echoing in his bones.

Behind Jill, Cillian pushed Sarah back toward the doorway, positioning himself as a shield. "Get back!" he shouted at Jill, but she either didn't hear or chose to ignore him.

Jill saw the tendril coming—but not fast enough.

It struck her square across the ribs, lifting her off her feet and throwing her brutally across the yard. She landed hard, the rifle spinning from her hands. The sound of her body hitting the ground cut through the chaos like a knife.

A scream tore from Alasdair's throat, primal and broken.

"Mo chridhe!"

He sprinted for her, everything else—battle, enemy, fear—vanishing into a single driving need: reach her.

He dropped to his knees in the dirt beside her, gathering her into his arms. Her blood was warm against his skin, her breathing shallow and ragged.

Blood stained her shirt, vivid against the paleness of her skin.

Her eyes fluttered open, dazed, filled with pain—and stubborn determination. She clutched at his wrist, her grip surprisingly strong.

"Fight," she rasped, voice barely a whisper. "Don't you dare give up, Alasdair MacTyre."

Tears blurred his vision.

"Aye," he swore, pressing a shaking kiss to her forehead. "For you." For us, he thought but couldn't say, the word still too fragile, too precious to speak aloud.

He laid her down gently, heart breaking—and rose.

Alasdair turned to face the Brollachan, the silver spear trembling slightly in his hand—not from fear, but from fury held too tight. A cold calm settled over him, the berserker's rage transforming into something more deadly, more primal than anything mortal men could comprehend.

The creature roared, looking for weakness.

But Alasdair had never been stronger. The berserker fury took him fully, his muscles swelling with supernatural power, his vision sharpening until he could see the patterns in the creature's shifting form, the weak point at its core.

He sprinted toward it, his brothers flanking him with the same frightening transformation, Joe and William firing in rhythm. Cillian had moved Jill to safety and now rejoined them, his healer's hands balled into warrior's fists.

They battered the beast back, blow after blow, refusing to yield an inch.

Conall moved like a storm, his silver blade a blur of deadly light, cutting through shadow and smoke. For once, Alasdair felt no suspicion toward the druid magic—only gratitude for its fierce protection.

Fergus tackled the creature low, his berserker strength shaking the very ground.

Tavish leapt in, impossibly high, swinging a silver-tipped axe with brutal force.

And Alasdair—Alasdair drove the spear into its center, into the pulsing void at its heart, with all the fury and strength of a berserker born.

The Brollachan howled, its body shuddering, black mist spewing from its form.

It fought to reform—but Conall drove his blade in deeper, Macrath cleaved a tendril free, William fired another useless blast into its core—and Alasdair twisted the spear home with a roar that shook the very air.

The creature screamed—and exploded into a sickening mixture of mist and viscous black goo that splattered across the ground, hissing where it touched the earth, leaving scorch marks in the soil.

Silence fell, broken only by harsh breathing, the crackle of distant thunder, and the dying echo of the beast's death cry.

They stood there, bloodied, battered—and victorious.

But Alasdair only had one thought.

He stumbled back to Jill's side, falling to his knees.

She was breathing—shallow, but steady.

Cillian was already there, checking her wound, issuing sharp commands to Sarah and young William. His healer's hands moved with certainty, ancient remedies flowing from memory as he worked.

Conall knelt beside them, placing his hands near the wound, murmuring words in ancient Gaelic. A soft blue light emanated from his palms, seeping into Jill's skin. The druid magic, powerful on this night of all nights, flowed into her.

"She'll live," Cillian said at last, voice rough. "You got to her in time." He clasped Alasdair's shoulder briefly. "Our Jill is stronger than any wound, brother."

Alasdair bowed his head over her, crushed by a tidal wave of relief—and guilt. Her blood stained his hands, a sight he'd never thought to see.

Hours later, the house had fallen quiet.

The storm had passed. The battle was over. What was left of the monster burned.

But the war inside Alasdair raged on.

He stood outside Jill's bedroom door, forehead resting against the cool wood, his fists clenched so tightly his knuckles ached. The hallway smelled of antiseptic and herbs from Cillian's healing poultices.

He could still see it—the way she'd flown through the air.

The way blood had bloomed across her side.

The way her eyes had fluttered shut in his arms.

Because of him.

He had brought this danger here.

He had made her bleed.

He had failed her.

"I'll leave," he whispered to the empty hallway. "Before worse follows. Before I destroy what I love." The words tasted like ash and salt, but he forced them out anyway. Better his heart break than her body.

He would go. It was the only way.

The door creaked behind him.

"Ye planning to run off without saying goodbye?"

Conall's voice was quiet—but carried steel beneath it. He leaned against the wall, arms crossed, looking for all the world like a man discussing the weather rather than a heart breaking.

Alasdair turned, shame burning hot under his skin. "I brought this down on her. On all of ye. I should never have stayed." His voice cracked on the last word.

Conall arched a brow. "Funny. I thought ye were here to take my daughter off my hands." A sly smile played at the edges of his mouth. "She's stubborn as a Highland winter and twice as fierce. This is gonna be fun to watch."

A stunned silence—and then a soft snort of laughter from the doorway.

Jill.

She stood there, pale but upright, one arm braced against the frame, eyes bright despite the shadows under them.

"You're not going anywhere," she said fiercely. "Not without me." She stood in defiance of her injury, her chin lifted in that stubborn tilt he'd come to cherish.

Alasdair stared at her, hardly daring to believe she was real. The hallway light caught in her dark brown hair, the waves falling loose around her shoulders.

"You should hate me," he said hoarsely. "I failed ye. I nearly?—"

"You saved me," she interrupted. "You saved us all." She pushed away from the doorframe, wincing slightly but refusing to show weakness. "And if you think I'm letting you walk away after that, you're sadly mistaken, Highlander."

Her words struck harder than any blow.

"You fought beside us," Conall added, stepping closer. "You fought for this house. For these people. You belong here now." He gave Alasdair a look that spoke volumes—the understanding of one man who had crossed time for love to another.

Behind him, Joe and William, Macrath, Tavish, Fergus, and Lachlan appeared, battered but smiling. Macrath's arm was bandaged, but his scowl had softened into something like contentment.

A wall of brothers, blood and bond, standing behind him without a word needing spoken.

And Jill—Jill was looking at him like he was the safest place in the world.

"You belong here," she whispered. "With us. With me." Her voice gained strength

with each word, as if speaking the truth aloud made it more certain.

Alasdair dropped to one knee, overcome. The weight of centuries seemed to lift from his shoulders, replaced by something lighter, sweeter—hope.

She crossed the distance to him, sliding her good hand into his hair, drawing his forehead to hers. The clean scent of her, still there beneath antiseptic and bandages, filled his senses.

"Mo chridhe," he breathed. "Mo gràdh." The words felt ancient and new all at once.

"My heart," she whispered back. "My home." Her fingers traced the line of his jaw, warm and sure.

Around them, laughter rang out—tired, battered, victorious.

Tavish clapped Macrath on the back. "Told ye he'd end up tied to a lass with more courage than sense."

Lachlan grinned. "She'll keep him in line. Mark my words." He rubbed his bruised shoulder, wincing. "Any woman who can take on that beast can handle our fearless leader."

Conall, still leaning casually against the wall, grinned. "At least he'll make a decent son-in-law. Looks like he fights almost as stubbornly as she does."

That drew a real laugh from Jill—bright, joyous, the sweetest sound Alasdair had ever heard.

He gathered her carefully into his arms, holding her as if he could shield her from the world. "I'll never let ye go," he murmured against her hair.



"Good," she whispered, her breath warm against his neck. "Because I'm not done with you yet, Alasdair MacTyre."

Later, when the stars broke through the thinning clouds and the battered lavender fields lay quiet again, they gathered on the porch.

The men nursed bruises and bloodied knuckles. Sarah passed out bandages and muttered threats about anyone who refused them. "I've spent years patching up one stubborn Scotsman," she declared, fixing Macrath with a glare when he tried to wave her off. "Six more won't break me."

Conall poured whiskey into battered tin cups with the solemnity of a priest. "The good stuff," he said with a wink. "Been saving it for a special occasion."

Jill sat wrapped in a blanket beside Alasdair, her head resting against his shoulder, her hand curled loosely in his. The weight and warmth of her beside him felt like an answered prayer.

The night smelled of woodsmoke and damp earth.

The scent of battle was fading—but the memory would linger.

Alasdair looked around at the faces around him.

Joe and William, arguing softly about who had fired the best shot. "That last one was dead center," Joe insisted, miming the shot with his hands.

Macrath sharpening his blade with slow, careful strokes. The rasp of stone on steel was oddly comforting, a lullaby from another time.

Fergus dozing with his arms crossed, his steady breaths a counterpoint to the

crackling fire.

Tavish strumming broken chords on a battered guitar someone had rescued from the bunkhouse. The ancient melody wove between them, binding past to present.

Not by blood.

Not by time.

By choice.

By heart.

He tightened his arm around Jill and dropped a kiss into her hair. The lavender scent lingered, a reminder of this place they'd made their own.

She stirred, looking up at him with a sleepy smile.

"You still thinking about leaving?" she teased, voice rough from exhaustion but rich with warmth.

Alasdair smiled slowly, the ache in his chest easing for the first time in what felt like forever.

"Never," he said. "I have everything I ever fought for. Right here." His gaze took in the farm, the brothers, the home—and finally, lingered on her face, memorizing every beloved feature.

Her fingers brushed the back of his hand, gentle, certain.

"I'm glad you're stubborn," she said softly. "I needed someone who wouldn't let me

go."

He chuckled low in his chest. "Och, lass. Ye're stuck with me now. Across centuries, across battles, across whatever madness follows next." His thumb traced circles on her palm.

She leaned into him, warm and solid and real.

"I wouldn't have it any other way," she whispered.

Above them, the stars burned bright and steady.

The ancient threat was gone. The battle was won.

Tomorrow would bring new challenges, new mysteries, new dangers.

But tonight?—

Tonight they had peace.

They had love.

They had a home.

And they had forever.

### CHAPTER 38

Jill winced as she eased herself into the porch swing, the bandages around her midsection pulling with each breath. The morning sun bathed the fields in golden light, transforming the farm into something out of a pastoral painting. She breathed in the sweet-scented air, each breath slow and measured. Cillian had crafted a poultice of herbs and modern medicine that had worked wonders on her wound, but the damage from the Brollachan's attack remained a constant, throbbing reminder of last night's battle.

And of the words she'd spoken in its aftermath.

I love you.

Three words, uttered in a moment of pain and fear and certainty. Three words she'd never said to any man before. Her heartbeat quickened just remembering how they'd fallen from her lips, unplanned yet undeniable.

The screen door creaked open, and her mother emerged, a steaming mug in each hand.

"I thought you might want company," Sarah said, handing Jill one of the mugs before settling carefully beside her on the swing. The scent of chamomile rose between them, comforting and familiar.

Jill took a cautious sip, the warm liquid soothing her throat still raw from screaming during the battle. "Where are they?"

Sarah didn't need to ask who she meant. "Your father took Alasdair and the others to look for the monster's nest. Something about making sure it's truly gone."

The memory of the creature's shadowy form dissolving into mist flickered through Jill's mind. She shuddered, her skin prickling despite the morning warmth. "Do you think it's really over?"

Her mother's hand found hers, fingers intertwining in silent support. "Nothing is ever truly over, honey. But some battles can be won."

The simple wisdom in those words struck Jill deeply. Her mother had always possessed this ability—to distill complex truths into something elemental and clear. Perhaps it came from years of living with a time-traveling druid, or perhaps it was simply Sarah's own innate wisdom.

"I told him I love him," Jill confessed, her voice barely above a whisper. "In the middle of everything—blood and bandages and fear—I just...said it."

"And do you?" Sarah asked, her tone neutral but her eyes keenly observant.

Jill stared out at the fields, at the land that had been in her family for generations. The land that now sheltered six warriors from another time. Her chest tightened with an emotion too big to name.

"Yes," she said finally. "God help me, I do. It makes no logical sense. He's from the ninth century. He still flinches at the microwave. His idea of technology is a more efficient way to shoe a horse." A surprised laugh bubbled up, sending a twinge of pain through her injured side. "And yet..."

"And yet," Sarah echoed, a knowing smile playing at her lips.

"How did you know?" Jill asked, turning to face her mother fully. "With Dad, I mean. How did you know it was right, despite all the differences?"

Sarah's expression turned thoughtful. "I didn't, not at first. Love isn't something you know, Jill. It's something you choose, day after day." She took a slow sip of her tea. "When I met your father, he was lost. A man out of time, trying to make sense of a world that must have seemed like magic to him. But beneath all that confusion and fear was a core of integrity that I couldn't ignore."

Jill nodded, picturing Alasdair's unwavering loyalty to his brothers, his fierce protectiveness, and how his hands—capable of such violence—touched her with impossible tenderness.

"Your father needed me," Sarah continued. "Not just for the practical things—learning to navigate modern life—but as an anchor, a reason to build something new rather than mourning what was lost." Her gaze drifted to the distant figures returning from the woods, Conall's tall form easily recognizable among them. "And I needed him too, though I didn't realize it at first. I needed his strength, his different perspective. The way he saw the world as full of wonder rather than mundane familiarity."

Jill followed her mother's gaze, her eyes instantly finding Alasdair among the approaching men. Even at a distance, something in her recognized him—the way he moved, the set of his shoulders, the watchful awareness that never fully left him even in moments of peace. Recognition sparked in her chest.

"What if it doesn't work?" Jill whispered, giving voice to her deepest fear. "What if the differences are too much?"

Sarah squeezed her hand. "Those are questions every couple faces, sweetheart. The specific challenges may be unique to your situation, but the core is the same—can

two people, with all their differences and scars and hopes, build something that lasts?"

"And the answer?" Jill pressed.

Her mother laughed softly. "Oh, honey. There is no answer. There's just the daily choice to try."

As the men drew closer, Jill could see the exhaustion etched into Alasdair's features. He'd barely slept, refusing to leave her side for most of the night as Cillian tended her wounds. He'd whispered Gaelic prayers and promises into her hair as she'd drifted in and out of sleep, his large hands impossibly gentle as they stroked her forehead, her cheek, the curve of her shoulder. The memory sent a warmth through her that had nothing to do with pain or fever.

"I'm terrified," Jill admitted. "Not of him—never of him. But of how much I feel."

"Love is always terrifying," Sarah replied. "That's how you know it's real."

The men reached the edge of the garden, and Alasdair broke away from the others, his strides lengthening as he caught sight of Jill on the porch. The morning light caught in his dark hair, highlighting strands of copper her academic mind distantly noted as evidence of his Celtic heritage.

"I should go," Sarah murmured, rising from the swing. "Give you two some privacy."

"Mom," Jill caught her hand before she could leave. "Thank you. For understanding. For not thinking I'm crazy."

Sarah smiled, bending to press a kiss to her daughter's forehead. "Crazy would be denying what's right in front of you out of fear. That's no way to live." She

straightened, her eyes twinkling. "Besides, now I can say my daughter literally has a man who crossed time itself to be with her. That's quite the romance novel premise."

Jill laughed despite herself, then sobered as Alasdair reached the porch steps. His eyes never left her face as he ascended, his movements controlled but betraying his eagerness to reach her.

"I'll leave you two alone," Sarah said, patting Alasdair's shoulder as she passed him. "Don't let her overdo it. She's stubborn, just like her father."

A small smile tugged at Alasdair's lips. "Aye, I've noticed that trait."

As her mother disappeared into the house, Jill felt a sudden shyness descend. Last night's declarations had come in a moment of crisis, adrenaline and fear breaking down the walls of caution. Now, in the clear light of day, the weight of what lay between them made her fingers twist nervously in her lap.

"How do ye feel?" Alasdair asked, his accent thicker than usual, betraying his own nervousness.

"Like I got slashed by an ancient Scottish monster," Jill replied, attempting humor to calm her racing heart. "But better than last night."

He settled beside her on the swing, careful not to jostle her. His warmth along her side felt like sanctuary, the clean scent of sun and soap mingling with something uniquely him.

"Cillian says ye're healing well. The wound was clean, for all its depth."

"Lucky me," she murmured. Then, because she couldn't bear to talk around what mattered, she plunged ahead. "About what I said last night. What we both said."



Alasdair tensed beside her. "Do ye regret it?"

"No," Jill answered immediately, surprised by the force of her certainty. "Not even a little. Do you?"

His large hand covered hers, his calloused palm warm against her skin. The contrast between his rough hands and gentle touch made her breath catch.

"I've lived through battles that would make grown men weep, seen atrocities and wonders alike. I've traveled through time itself." His eyes, green as the highlands he'd left behind, met hers with unwavering intensity. "But I have never been as certain of anything as I am of loving you, Jill Greenwood."

The words washed over her like sunlight, warming her from the inside out. "Even though I'm stubborn and reckless enough to get myself hurt fighting monsters?" she asked, only half-joking.

"Especially because of that," he replied, his voice dropping lower. "Ye fight for what ye believe in. For those ye care about. I admire that fierce heart of yours, even as it terrifies me."

"It terrifies me too," she admitted. "How quickly this happened. All the obstacles we still have to face." She gestured at the farm, the modern world around them. "You're still learning how everything works. We don't have any legal identity for you or your brothers. We can't exactly list 'ninth-century warrior' on a resume."

Alasdair nodded, acknowledgment rather than dismissal of her concerns. "Aye, the path ahead is no' easy. But I've walked harder roads with less reason to hope." His fingers tightened around hers. "If ye'll have me—if ye'll have us—we'll find a way through those problems together."

Jill studied him—this warrior out of legend, this man who had crossed centuries only to find himself sitting on her porch swing discussing practical matters like identity papers and cultural integration. It was absurd. And yet, somehow, exactly right.

"The Brollachan," she said, changing topics. "Dad thinks it's really gone?"

"Aye. The silver weapons worked as he said they would. The combination with lavender was the final blow." His expression turned more serious. "But Tavish believes there may be more dangers from our time. Things that could follow the same path we took."

"So this isn't over," Jill concluded, a quiet dread pooling in her stomach.

"The battle with the Brollachan is won," Alasdair said carefully. "But the larger war...that may continue. If ye wish to reconsider?—"

"Don't," Jill interrupted, reaching up to cup his face. The rasp of his beard against her palm sent a pleasant shiver through her. "Don't offer me an escape route. I'm in this, Alasdair. All the way."

His eyes darkened, and for a moment, Jill thought he might kiss her. Instead, he touched his brow to hers in a gesture more intimate than a kiss.

"Then we face whatever comes, together," he murmured, his breath warm against her lips. "You, me, our families. Whatever creatures or challenges emerge from the past."

"Together," Jill agreed. The word felt like a vow, simple yet profound.

She leaned into him, careful of her wound, and felt his arm come around her shoulders. The solid strength of him, the steady beat of his heart against her ear, anchored her in the present moment.

Her brothers' laughter drifted from the barn, mingling with the deeper voices of Fergus and Tavish.

Two worlds, colliding and merging, creating something entirely new. A family forged across time itself.

"I should let ye rest," Alasdair said after a while, though he made no move to release her.

"Stay," Jill murmured, nestling closer. "Just a little longer."

As the swing rocked gently in the morning breeze, Jill surrendered to the improbable reality of their situation. She'd spent her life studying history, digging through dusty archives and ancient texts for glimpses of a world long past. Now, that world had arrived—wrapped in the arms of a warrior who looked at her as if she'd hung the moon and stars.

It made no sense. But then, love rarely did.

"I love you," she whispered, because saying it once wasn't enough.

His arms tightened around her, careful of her injury. "And I you, mo gràdh. Now and forever."

The promise hung in the air between them, as tangible as the scent of lavender and as enduring as the ancient hills of Scotland. Whatever battles still lay ahead, they would face them as they sat now—side by side, hearts aligned, bridging the distance between past and present with nothing more complicated than love.

### CHAPTER 39

A lasdair wiped the sweat from his brow as he hammered the white-hot metal, each strike precise and purposeful. The rhythm pulsed through his arms, grounding him in a way little else had since arriving in this strange century. The forge behind the barn glowed with heat, casting his shadow in dancing patterns against the weathered wood walls. Outside, rain pattered steadily, the soft sound a counterpoint to the ringing of metal on metal. The scent of hot steel and coal brought memories of village smithies back home, a rare thread of familiarity.

"You've skill with the hammer," Macrath observed from where he worked his own piece. His fellow berserker's arm was still bandaged from the Brollachan battle three days past, but he had insisted on returning to the forge as soon as he could stand. Metal spoke to Macrath the way horses spoke to Lachlan—a language older than words.

"Not like ye," Alasdair replied, studying the blade taking shape beneath his hands. Not a weapon this time, but something else entirely. Something for Jill. "In our time, every warrior knew the basics. But ye've true craftsmanship."

Pride flickered across Macrath's usually dour features. "Aye, well. The forge doesna judge. Metal cares naught for brands or birthrights. It yields to patience and skill alone."

The words resonated deeply. In the weeks since their arrival in this time, each of his brothers had found something that spoke to them—Fergus with his books and modern farming techniques, Lachlan with the horses, Tavish with his music now played on

instruments of impossibly fine craftsmanship, Cillian with his expanding knowledge of both ancient and modern healing. And Macrath, who had always kept to himself in their time, had found his voice in the language of metal and fire.

"What are ye making?" Macrath asked, nodding toward Alasdair's work.

A flush rose up Alasdair's neck, unrelated to the forge. His fingers faltered momentarily on the hammer. "A gift. For Jill."

Macrath's gruff laugh held genuine amusement. "Of course. Our leader, lovesick as a green lad." But there was no mockery in his tone, only a rough affection. "She'll like it. The lass appreciates craftsmanship."

They worked in companionable silence for a while, the hiss of hot metal in water and the steady fall of rain filling the space between them. Alasdair's mind drifted to Jill, as it so often did these days. She was healing well, her strength returning with each passing day. The memory of her pale face after the Brollachan's attack still haunted him—the way her blood had felt warm and slick against his hands, the terror that had gripped him when he thought he might lose her before they'd truly begun. But that memory was gradually being replaced by newer ones—her smile as she watched him learn to use the computer, her laughter as they shared meals with both families, the way her eyes grew soft in quiet moments when she thought he wasn't watching.

"Do ye ever think about them?" Macrath's question broke the silence. "The brides we were promised, back in our time?"

The unexpected question caught Alasdair off guard, striking him like a physical blow. None of them spoke often of the marriages that had been promised by McKinnie—promises broken by betrayal and exile. "Not their faces," he said quietly. "Just the promise of them. A home. Belonging."

"Aye." Macrath set down his hammer, his expression distant. "I used to imagine mine would have hair like fire and a temper to match." A sardonic smile twisted his lips. "Probably best for her, whoever she might have been, that the match never came to pass."

Alasdair considered his response carefully, testing the weight of the cooling metal in his hand. "I think of what we lost sometimes," he admitted. "Not with longing, but with a kind of...gratitude."

"Gratitude?" Macrath's eyebrows rose. "For a promise broken?"

"For the path that led me here." Alasdair turned the cooling metal, examining the curves taking shape beneath his hammer. "Had McKinnie kept his word, had we received our promised brides, we'd never have come to this time. I'd never have met Jill."

The realization settled in his chest like a physical weight lifting. The betrayal that had once burned like acid in his veins had become, against all odds, a blessing. Had they remained in their time, married to women chosen for alliance rather than affection, would they ever have known true happiness? Or would they have continued as they were—berserkers feared and used by those in power, never fully accepted, never truly home?

"Ye believe we were meant to come here," Macrath said, not a question but a statement.

"Aye," Alasdair replied, certainty flowing through him like forge-fire. "Not by the druid's design, but by some greater purpose."

Macrath grunted, returning to his work. "Perhaps. Though I've yet to find my place as clearly as you have."

"Ye will," Alasdair assured him, watching how Macrath's hands moved with practiced precision over the metal. "Conall wasn't jesting, ye know. He meant it when he said the forge is ours. The land's ours to work. Real futures, if we have the grit for it."

"Aye," Macrath agreed, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "Strange, is it not? We were cast aside like beasts in our time. Betrayed. Forgotten." He tapped the anvil lightly, a soft, hollow sound. "Now we're offered a second life. A chance to shape the world with our own hands."

"We'll need more than hooks and horseshoes," Macrath continued, thoughtfully. "Conall's talking about setting up an apothecary for Cillian. Tavish is already dreaming up mead recipes. Fergus wants to start raising Highland cattle again if we can manage the grazing."

"MacTyre Mead," Alasdair mused, feeling the name on his tongue. "Tavish was up half the night talking about honey and lavender. Says Conall knows someone who can help with the licenses." He reached for a cooling piece of metal shaped into a small, fierce wolf's head—a test piece for a brand. "He wants to use our mark. Turn what was meant for shame into something of value."

Alasdair huffed a quiet laugh. Ambitious, all of it. Impossible, once. Now... maybe not.

The forge door creaked open, allowing a gust of damp air rich with the scent of wet earth to momentarily cool the sweltering space. William stepped inside, shaking water from his hair like a dog after a swim.

"Dad says dinner's in an hour," he announced, eyeing their work with obvious interest. "What are you making? More weapon replacements?"

"Not this time," Alasdair replied, tilting his project away from curious eyes. "How fares your sister today?"

William's expression softened. The twins' initial wariness toward Alasdair had transformed over recent days, especially after he'd risked himself to save Jill during the battle. "Better. Mom finally convinced her to rest instead of trying to document everything about your battle techniques for her 'historical record.'"

Alasdair smiled, imagining Jill's frustration at being confined to bed. Her scholar's mind never rested—constantly questioning, analyzing, recording. Even wounded, she'd insisted on interviewing each warrior about what they'd observed of the Brollachan's weaknesses and strengths. "That sounds like her."

"She's stubborn," William agreed with brotherly affection. Then, more seriously, "The sheriff stopped by earlier. About the 'animal attack' at the Edwards farm."

Alasdair tensed, exchanging a quick glance with Macrath. His grip tightened on the hammer until his knuckles whitened. They'd crafted a careful story about the Brollachan's attacks, attributing the damage to an unusual predator. "What did he want?"

"Just following up. Dad handled it." William hesitated. "But we can't keep explaining away strange occurrences forever. People are starting to talk."

The reminder of their precarious position settled heavily on Alasdair's shoulders, making the hammer suddenly feel twice its weight. For all that they'd begun to find their place here, they remained men without pasts in a world that demanded documentation, history, proof of existence. Conall had spoken of forged papers, identities that could be created, but the process was complex and not without risk.

"We'll find a way," Alasdair said, striving for confidence. "Your father has navigated



these waters before."

William nodded, then gestured toward the metal piece taking shape on Alasdair's anvil. "That for Jill?"

Alasdair felt heat rise to his face again, no less intense than the forge beside him. "Is it so obvious?"

"Only to anyone with eyes," William replied with a grin. "She'll love it, you know. No matter what it is."

After William left, promising to ring the dinner bell when food was ready, Alasdair returned to his work with renewed purpose. The metal had begun to cool—he'd need to reheat it soon. As he placed it back in the glowing coals, watching the silver begin to glow red once more, he found himself reflecting on how far they'd come in such a short time.

"Do ye ever miss it?" he asked Macrath suddenly. "Our time, our ways?"

Macrath considered the question as he quenched his own project, steam rising around his scarred hands, the sharp hiss filling the air. "I miss the simplicity," he said finally. "Knowing exactly what was expected. Enemy before you, sword in hand—the choices were clear." He gestured toward the barn door, toward the modern world beyond. "Here, everything has layers. Nothing is as it seems."

Alasdair nodded, understanding exactly what his brother meant. The complexity of this world sometimes overwhelmed him—the invisible connections through phones and computers, the intricate social rules, the sheer volume of knowledge needed to navigate daily life.

"But," Macrath continued, surprising Alasdair with the thoughtful tone, "I dinnae

miss being feared. Being seen as less than human because of what we could do in battle." His fingers unconsciously traced the wolf-paw brand on his forearm. "Here, we're strange because we're different, aye. But not because we're monsters."

The admission struck Alasdair deeply. For all their struggles to adapt, this time had offered them something their own never could—the chance to be judged for who they were, not for the berserker brand they carried.

"Aye," Alasdair agreed softly. "There's freedom in that."

"I suppose we'll need homes too," Macrath added, almost shyly. "Proper ones. For when wives find their way to us."

Alasdair's heart clenched in his chest, a fierce and aching joy blooming there. He thought of Jill's smile. Her laugh. Her hand slipping into his.

"Aye," he said simply. "Homes. Futures."

They worked in companionable silence for a while longer, the steady rhythm of hammer on metal speaking its own language. When Alasdair finally withdrew his project from the forge for the last time, it had taken clear shape—a delicate replica of a lavender sprig, twisted from silver wire with painstaking detail. The hot metal glowed briefly before cooling to a soft shine in the dim light.

"For her hair," he explained when he caught Macrath watching. "A small thing, but..."

"But made with intention," Macrath finished for him, understanding in his usually stern eyes. "The best gifts always are."

The dinner bell rang across the yard, its cheerful tone cutting through the steady patter of rain. Alasdair carefully set his creation aside to cool, already anticipating

Jill's reaction. Would she understand the significance? In his time, such a gift would have been a clear declaration of intent, a token that spoke of future promises.

As they stepped out into the rain, pulling their modern jackets tight against the chill, Alasdair felt the weight of the piece in his pocket. The Brollachan was defeated, but Tavish's visions suggested other dangers might follow. The practical challenges of establishing their place in this world remained daunting.

Yet for all these obstacles, Alasdair felt a certainty he'd rarely known in his former life. This place, these people—they had become home in a way his own time never truly had. Whatever battles lay ahead, they would face them together, not just as warriors, but as brothers with purpose.

The farmhouse shone warm and inviting in the rainy twilight, light spilling from windows in golden rectangles across the wet yard. Through one window, Alasdair caught a glimpse of Jill, seated at the kitchen table with her mother, her face animated as she spoke. Even from a distance, the sight of her sent a surge of warmth through his chest, a feeling he was only now learning to name.

"You're staring again," Macrath observed dryly.

"Aye," Alasdair agreed without embarrassment. "And likely will be for many years to come, if the gods are kind."

Macrath clapped him on the shoulder—a gesture that said more than words ever could. As they hurried through the rain toward the waiting warmth, toward the family that had somehow become theirs across time itself, Alasdair felt the weight of the silver token in his pocket—a promise, a beginning, a bridge between worlds.

Tonight, he would give it to her. Tonight, they would take another step forward on this improbable journey together. And tomorrow, whatever it might bring, they would

face with the strength of both their worlds combined.

### CHAPTER 40

Jill traced her fingers along the embossed lettering on her doctoral thesis, the leather binding cool beneath her touch. Outside her bedroom window, late afternoon sunlight filtered through the pine trees, casting dappled shadows across her desk. Her wound had healed enough that she could sit comfortably now, though any sudden movements still brought a sharp twinge—a visceral reminder of the Brollachan's attack.

“The Evolution of Berserker Mythology in 9th Century Scottish Highlands: Historical Evidence versus Folkloric Exaggeration,” she read aloud, an ironic smile tugging at her lips. Two years of exhaustive research, countless hours spent in dusty archives, painstaking analysis of primary sources—all to conclude that berserkers were likely exaggerated figures, more legend than reality.

And now six of them lived in her bunkhouse, ate at her family's table, and helped with the harvest.

A laugh bubbled up in her throat. So much for academic certainty.

A soft knock at her door interrupted her thoughts. “Come in,” she called, quickly closing the thesis and sliding it into her desk drawer, feeling oddly embarrassed by its presence.

Mom entered, bearing a steaming mug and a sly smile. Jill felt a rush of gratitude at the sight of her—cheeks flushed with healthy color, eyes bright and clear. The combination of Dad's druid remedies and Cillian's healing knowledge had worked

wonders these past weeks. The special tea they brewed from lavender and the crushed leaves of rare medicinal plants grown from seeds Cillian had carried through time—seeds Dad had been searching for during all his years in this century—had her mother moving with more energy than Jill had seen in months.

"Hiding the evidence?" Mom asked, nodding toward the drawer.

Jill accepted the tea gratefully. "Just putting away some of my academic arrogance. It's humbling to realize how wrong I was."

"Not wrong," Mom corrected, perching on the edge of the bed with an ease that would have been impossible a month ago. "You worked with the evidence available to you. Science adjusts its views based on new information. That's its strength, not its weakness."

"I don't think my dissertation committee had 'actual time-traveling berserkers' in mind when they talked about new evidence," Jill replied dryly.

They shared a laugh, the simple moment of normalcy precious in a world that had become decidedly abnormal. Outside, hammering drifted from the direction of the forge, where Alasdair and Macrath had spent much of the afternoon. The rhythmic clanging sent a flutter through her chest that had nothing to do with her healing wound.

"How are you feeling?" Mom asked, her eyes assessing her daughter with maternal precision. "And I mean all of you, not just the wound."

Jill sipped her tea, buying time as she sorted through the tangle of emotions within her. "Physically, I'm on the mend. Cillian's poultices work better than anything modern medicine could have offered." She paused. "As for the rest...I'm still processing, I guess. It all happened so fast—the Brollachan, the battle, Alasdair and

I..."

"Love often does," Mom observed. "Especially in extraordinary circumstances."

"That's what worries me," Jill admitted. "What if it's just the circumstances? The drama, the danger—what if once things settle down, we realize we don't actually make sense together?"

Mom's smile was gentle. "That's the risk everyone takes, honey. Love always starts in extraordinary circumstances—maybe not time travel and monster battles, but the beginning of love always feels a bit like magic, doesn't it? The question is, what happens when the magic becomes everyday?"

Jill considered this, thinking of Alasdair's face across the breakfast table each morning, the way he listened intently when she explained modern concepts, his patience with technology that must seem like sorcery to him. The small, quiet moments between the chaos and danger. There was magic in those moments too, quieter but no less powerful.

"I think..." she began slowly, "I think I'd like to find out."

"You look well, Mom," Jill said after a comfortable silence. "Better than I've seen you in months."

Mom touched her cheek, smiling. "It's remarkable what can happen when druid magic meets ancient Highland healing. Those medicinal plants from Cillian's seeds—your father nearly wept when he saw them. Said he'd been searching for that particular variety for decades." She took another sip of her own tea. "The way they prepare it together—crushing the leaves at exactly the right phase of the moon, brewing it with specific lavender buds—it's like watching a dance between two healers from different worlds."

"Dad's been amazing with the brothers," Jill said, gazing out the window. "I overheard him talking with Macrath about turning the forge into a real business. And Cillian mentioned something about Dad helping him create healing products with the lavender."

Mom smiled. "Your father has always been good at seeing people's strengths. He spent half the morning with Tavish discussing honey fermentation and lavender mead. Those wolf brands they wear—your father thinks they could make a perfect logo."

"They've lost so much," Jill said softly. "Their time, their world. But they still have their knowledge, their skills. That doesn't have to be wasted."

Mom joined her at the window. Below, they could see Joe and Tavish walking from the barn, deep in conversation. Further away, near the eastern field, Cillian knelt tending to a small patch of plants with distinctive silver-edged leaves—the second crop already, harvested regularly for Mom's healing regimen.

Before Jill could continue, her father's voice called up the stairs. "Sarah? Jill? Could you come down? We have a visitor."

The abrupt summons sent a jolt of alarm through Jill. Mom's expression turned serious, the playfulness evaporating. They made their way downstairs, Jill moving carefully to avoid jarring her healing wound.

In the living room stood Sheriff Maddox, his weathered face serious beneath his official hat. Alasdair and Fergus had come in as well, both standing with the careful stillness of men prepared for trouble. The sudden tension in the air made Jill's skin prickle with unease.

"Sheriff," she greeted him, fighting to keep her voice casual. "What brings you by?"



"Miss Greenwood," he nodded, his keen eyes taking in her careful movements. "Heard you had an accident out by the east field. Wanted to check in."

"Very kind of you," Jill replied, the rehearsed story falling from her lips even as her mind raced. "Just took a fall on some broken equipment. I'm healing nicely."

The sheriff nodded, though his expression remained unconvinced. "Been a strange few weeks around these parts. Livestock attacks, strange tracks out by Miller's Creek, and now I hear reports of gunfire from your property a few nights back."

Dad stepped forward, his presence calm and authoritative despite the tension in the room. "Target practice, Sheriff. The boys were helping clear some vermin from the south field. Should have given you a courtesy call."

Sheriff Maddox's gaze shifted to Alasdair and Fergus, studying them with professional assessment. "You boys related to the Greenwoods? Don't recall seeing you around town before recently."

"Old friends," Alasdair replied smoothly. "From the old country. Here to help with the farm and learn American ways."

"Immigration paperwork all in order?" the sheriff asked, the question seemingly casual but charged with meaning.

"Of course," Dad interjected. "I can have copies sent to your office if needed."

The lie hung in the air between them. Jill's mouth went dry. She held her breath, acutely aware that one thread pulled could unravel their entire fragile arrangement.

After what felt like an eternity, the sheriff nodded. "That won't be necessary, Conall. Just doing my due diligence." He adjusted his hat. "Strange things happen from time

to time, but this is a small community. Folk notice when something's...off."

"We appreciate your concern, Sheriff," Mom said, stepping forward with the gracious hostility of a mother bear. "Would you like to stay for dinner? I've made more than enough."

Sheriff Maddox hesitated, then shook his head. "Another time, perhaps." His gaze swept the room once more. "You folks take care now. And if you see anything...unusual, you know where to find me."

As the door closed behind him, the collective tension in the room released like air from a balloon. Jill realized she'd been holding her breath and let it out in a shaky laugh.

"That was close," she murmured, her knees suddenly weak.

Alasdair moved to her side, his hand finding hers with easy familiarity that still sent a thrill through her. "Will he be a problem?"

Dad shook his head. "Maddox is a good man. Cautious, observant, but fair. And not particularly interested in matters that might complicate his paperwork." A wry smile touched his lips. "We've had an understanding for years."

"Still," Fergus observed, "he's right that people are noticing. We cannot remain indefinitely as 'friends from Scotland' without raising questions."

"Which is why we need to make it official," Jill said, seizing the moment. "The brothers need legitimate work tied to the farm. Dad's ideas about Macrath's forge crafts, Cillian's healing remedies, Tavish's mead—we could build something real here."

"It has potential," Dad agreed, stroking his beard. "We'd need permits, a legitimate business structure."

"And legal identities for the men," Mom added. "Which, as I was telling Jill, can be arranged through your...connections."

Alasdair's fingers tightened around Jill's. "Ye would do this for us? Create a place for us to belong, to share what we know?"

Jill nodded. "Of course."

A slow smile spread across Alasdair's face. "Then I believe we have much to discuss," he said. "But first..." He reached into his pocket, his hand trembling slightly as he withdrew something small. His eyes, usually steady and sure, now held a vulnerability she'd never seen before. "I have something for ye."

Curious, Jill extended her hand. Her breath caught as Alasdair placed a small silver object on her palm—a delicately crafted lavender sprig, each tiny leaf and bud rendered with painstaking detail. The metal was still warm from his pocket, its weight somehow both substantial and delicate at once. Her vision blurred with unexpected tears.

"I made it," he said, his voice breaking with emotion, deep and rough like stones shifting beneath water. His fingers lingered near hers, not quite touching. "For ye. In my time, such a gift would be...would signify..." His throat worked as he swallowed hard, the stoic warrior suddenly stripped bare.

"Intentions," Jill finished softly, her heart thundering so loudly she was certain he must hear it. The word hung between them, heavy with meaning.

Alasdair nodded, his eyes never leaving hers, their green depths filled with a fierce,

terrified hope. "Aye. Intentions."

The silver sprig caught the late afternoon light, glinting with possibilities. Jill closed her fingers around it, feeling its surprising weight—carrying as it did promises, and futures yet to be written. Something ancient and nameless bloomed in her chest, a certainty beyond words.

"It's beautiful," she whispered, her voice trembling with feeling, the simple words wholly inadequate for the tide of emotion washing through her. Her fingers tightened around the silver as if it might anchor her to this moment, this impossible, miraculous reality. "Thank you."

Dad cleared his throat. "Perhaps we should give these two a moment," he said, ushering Mom and Fergus toward the kitchen.

Alone in the golden light, Jill asked softly, "In your time, what would happen next? After such a gift was accepted?"

Alasdair's smile was gentle. "The families would begin discussions. Arrangements would be made." He shook his head. "But we are not in my time anymore."

"No," Jill agreed, stepping closer. "We're not. We're making our own path now."

His hand cupped her cheek, his touch reverent. "And what does that path look like to ye, Jill Greenwood?"

She leaned into him. "It looks like this farm. Like your brothers finding their places in this world. Like writing new histories together."

"And us?" he asked, his voice dropping to a whisper, the question carrying the weight of a thousand years and countless impossible chances.

She rose on her toes, her heart racing wildly beneath her ribs. When their lips met, it wasn't just a kiss—it was a sealing of fates, a promise written in breath and touch. His arms encircled her waist, drawing her against him as if she might dissolve like mist if he didn't hold her close enough. Her fingers threaded through his hair, anchoring them both to this impossible moment where past and present melded into something entirely new.

When they finally parted, breathless and shaken, she rested her forehead against his, feeling the slight tremor in his powerful frame. "Us most of all," she whispered against his lips, tasting the future on them. "Whatever comes next, we face it together."

His eyes, luminous in the fading light, held a universe of emotion—wonder, devotion, fierce protectiveness, and something deeper still that made her soul recognize its other half.

The wolf-marked warrior and the modern scholar, bound by something neither history nor science could fully explain.

The day was ending, but something new was just beginning—a future forged across centuries, written not in history books, but in the beating hearts of those brave enough to believe in impossible things.

### CHAPTER 41

A lasdair stood on the hillside, watching the final preparations unfold below. Workers arranged chairs beneath ancient oak trees and strung lanterns from sprawling branches. The scent of fresh-cut lavender drifted on the balmy breeze, mingling with pine and sea salt—a fragrant reminder of how deeply this place had become home.

As his gaze swept the meadow, he caught the details—workers weaving lavender sprays among chairs, gauzy ribbons drifting in the breeze, tables dressed with pale cloths shimmering in the afternoon light.

And everywhere, unmistakable against the softer hues, bold swaths of pink tartan ran through the decorations.

Alasdair stared for a moment, then shook his head with a slow smile. Jill hadn't forgotten their playful promise, stitching it into the heart of the day like a secret only they would understand.

"Nervous, brother?" Fergus asked, appearing at his side. His sandy-blond hair had grown longer since their arrival, and his once-wary blue eyes now carried the quiet confidence of a man who had found his place.

"Aye," Alasdair admitted, his stomach tightening with a flutter unlike any battle nerves he'd ever felt. "Though not about the choice. Never about that."

"She is a rare woman," Fergus said, his level-headed practicality evident even now. "Ye've been blessed beyond what any of us could have imagined when we first

arrived."

Alasdair's hand unconsciously moved to his right forearm where the wolf paw brand—the mark of MacTyre that had once made him unworthy—now rested beneath his sleeve. "From sons of the wolf to men with futures," he murmured. "Who would have believed it?"

Below them, Alasdair spotted Jill emerging from the farmhouse, clipboard in hand. Even from this distance, his heart quickened at the sight of her—the determined set of her shoulders, the graceful efficiency of her movements. Her long brown hair was pulled back in a simple braid that caught the light, and he could almost see the fierceness in those amber eyes that had first challenged him in the forest.

"I should go," he said reluctantly. "Conall says it's bad luck to see the bride before the ceremony."

"Some customs are worth honoring," Fergus replied. "Even the strange ones. And if anyone knows about traditions across time, it would be your future father-in-law."

The bunkhouse was a flurry of activity when he entered. Macrath struggled with a modern tie, his blacksmith's hands too large for the delicate work. Cillian carefully pressed Alasdair's dark suit jacket, his healer's hands steady. Tavish sat cross-legged on his bed, softly strumming a borrowed guitar, while Lachlan was already dressed in his wedding finery.

"Our leader returns," Tavish announced. "How fares the battlefield, brother?"

"It's hardly a battle," Alasdair replied, though his stomach lurched at the thought of standing before so many people, speaking words of commitment in a ceremony still unfamiliar to him.

"It's always a battle when it matters," Macrath said, finally conquering the tie with a triumphant tug. "Just a different kind of weapon."

Cillian approached with Alasdair's freshly pressed suit jacket. "We've come a long way, haven't we?" he asked quietly. "Who would have thought betrayal would lead us here, to this day?"

"Perhaps fate has a sense of humor after all," Alasdair mused.

A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts. William poked his head inside, his expression both solemn and amused. "It's time," he announced. "Minister's ready."

"How's your mother?" Alasdair asked, concern momentarily overshadowing his nervousness.

William's face brightened. "You wouldn't believe the difference in her. She was up at dawn arranging flowers, directing the caterers. Dad couldn't get her to sit down for even five minutes." His voice softened. "That healing tea of Cillian's and whatever Dad does with those ancient chants—it's like watching a miracle unfold day by day. She's nearly back to her old self."

A warm relief flooded through Alasdair. Sarah Greenwood—who had once seemed as fragile as spun glass—was blossoming again. The color had returned to her cheeks, and her laughter filled the farmhouse like sunlight.

Alasdair nodded, meeting his brothers' eyes one by one. Without words, they formed a circle, arms clasped in the warrior's grip that had seen them through countless battles across two different centuries.

The walk to the meadow passed in a blur of sensation, golden light filtering through ancient trees, the murmur of gathered guests falling silent as they approached.



Alasdair took his place beneath the oak tree next to the minister, its sprawling branches creating a natural cathedral over the clearing.

The gentle strains of string music filled the air—a quartet playing melodies that somehow bridged ancient and modern, familiar yet haunting. Tavish had worked with local musicians to adapt traditional tunes that would resonate with both worlds.

The assembled guests rose, turning to watch the procession. And then?—

Jill appeared at the end of the aisle, her arm linked with her father's. The sight of her stopped Alasdair's breath. Her dress was simple, elegant, falling in soft folds that caught the early evening light. In her hair, woven among loose curls, were sprigs of fresh lavender and tiny white flowers. Around her neck gleamed the silver lavender sprig he had forged for her weeks ago.

But it was her eyes that truly undid him—those fierce amber eyes, bright with unshed tears and a joy that matched the feeling expanding in his chest. As their gazes locked across the distance, the centuries that should have separated them vanished.

When she reached him at last, Conall placed her hand in Alasdair's with a solemn nod that carried centuries of shared understanding between two men from another time. Her hand slipped into his with the surety of coming home.

"Ye take my breath away," he whispered, his voice rough with emotion.

Her smile, radiant and intimate despite the crowd, was his answer. "Twelve centuries was worth the wait," she whispered back.

The ceremony proceeded—a blend of Christian tradition, ancient Celtic ritual, and personal touches. When the time came for their personal vows, Alasdair spoke first, his voice deep with emotion as he focused solely on Jill's eyes:

"Jill Greenwood, I have crossed oceans of time to find you. When I was cast adrift from everything I knew, it was your shore I washed upon, your light that guided me home. You saw me not as relic, but as a man—flawed, seeking, capable of growth and love."

"I vow to honor both our pasts while building our future. I vow to learn your world as thoroughly as you've learned mine. I vow to stand beside you in battle, in peace, in joy, and in sorrow, as long as breath fills my lungs and beyond. For I believe that what we have found is stronger than time itself—a love that would have found its way across any distance, any century."

As he placed her ring on her finger, a hush fell over the gathering. Then Jill spoke, her voice clear and steady:

"Alasdair, when I was a girl, I dreamed of ancient warriors and heroic deeds. When I grew older, I studied them, dissected them, tried to separate myth from reality. But you—you walked out of legend and into my heart, proving that sometimes, the most extraordinary truths lie beyond what we can document or classify."

Soft laughter rippled through the guests who thought this merely poetic language rather than literal truth.

"I promise to stand beside you as you navigate this world that must still seem strange. I promise to be your guide when you need one, your student when you have wisdom to share, and your partner in all things. I promise to remember that love, like time itself, isn't linear but a circle, constantly returning to what matters most."

She slipped a simple gold band onto his finger, and something shifted within him—the last ghost of his old life settling peacefully into place beside the new. Warrior and husband, exile and home-finder—finally, whole.

"By the power vested in me," the minister said, "I now pronounce you husband and wife."

The kiss was brief, but filled with promise—a future forged together.

Later, under the stars, lanterns glowing, they stood watching the celebration unfold. Sarah danced with Conall, her movements fluid and graceful, nothing like the tentative, fragile steps of months past. Her cheeks were flushed with health, her laughter carrying across the meadow, prompting smiles from everyone who heard it.

"Your mother looks radiant," Alasdair observed. "I've never seen her so strong."

"It's remarkable," Jill agreed, her eyes shining with happiness. "Dad says the combination of druid healing and Cillian's ancient remedies is better than anything modern medicine could offer. The doctors can't explain it, but then, they don't know about ninth-century healing plants grown from seeds carried through time."

"What happens now?" she asked, her eyes reflecting the starlight.

Alasdair considered. "Now, we live, Jill MacTyre-Greenwood. We build our home. Share our knowledge. Help my brothers find their paths." He hesitated. "And maybe, when ye're ready...talk of children."

Her eyes widened, joy blooming. "Little ones with your warrior spirit and my academic curiosity? The world might not be ready."

"The world is rarely ready for greatness."

She leaned against him. "I like that future. Though Tavish thinks the portal may not be done with us yet."

"Then we face that too," he said. "Side by side."

She kissed him. "Side by side."

Alasdair's gaze drifted across the celebration. His brothers, mingling and laughing. Sarah and Conall, dancing in the lantern light. Joe and William arguing good-naturedly over the music. Jill's hand found his, her fingers twining through his with a familiarity that still felt like a miracle.

Not vengeance. Not bitterness. But something far greater—love, belonging, purpose.

Everything he had once believed lost, he had found in her arms, in her heart, in the life they would build together. And this was only the beginning.

### EPILOGUE

The late afternoon sun filtered through the trees, warming Jill's skin in patches as she followed her father deeper into the wooded area north of the lavender fields. Pine needles cushioned her steps, releasing their sharp scent.

Alasdair walked beside her, his fingers intertwined with hers, his calloused thumb absently brushing against her wedding ring.

Even weeks after their wedding, that simple touch still sent a quiet thrill through her.

Conall stopped in a natural clearing, his weathered face thoughtful as he surveyed the space.

Tall firs and cedars created a protective circle around an open area dotted with younger saplings and wild grasses.

Jill breathed deeply, tasting the mingled scents of pine sap and distant lavender carried on the breeze.

"This is where it will begin," her father said, his voice carrying the quiet authority that had always marked him—even before she knew he was a druid from another century.

"The homes. Yours first."

Jill glanced at Alasdair, watching as he studied the space with a warrior's

eye—assessing sight lines, natural protections, proximity to water.

The attentiveness in his expression made her heart swell. Just one more reason she loved him.

"I've set aside funds," Conall continued, hands in his pockets. "For cottages for each of the Highlanders. The men will help build where they can—Macrath especially—but we'll need modern contractors for most of it."

He scuffed his boot against the forest floor, a gesture that reminded Jill of her childhood, when her father would grow shy before revealing a surprise.

"I'll charge them a small rent until the final home is built.

Then eventually, the men will receive the deed to their home."

The generosity of the gesture caught in Jill's throat.

Her father understood what these men needed in a way no one else could—he'd once been cast alone through time just like them.

He knew what it meant to build a life from nothing, to forge identity and purpose in a world never meant to be yours.

"They'll need a place," he said simply, meeting her eyes. "For when they find their wives."

The words carried weight.

Tavish's visions had hinted that the other warriors would indeed find love, just as her father had predicted all along.

Jill imagined each cottage filling with life and laughter, the berserkers finally receiving the families they'd been denied in their own time.

"Highlander Hollow," she said softly, the name rising from somewhere deep within her.

"That's what we should call it."

Alasdair's hand tightened around hers, his palm warm against her skin.

"Aye," he murmured, his green eyes reflecting the dappled forest light.

"Because you named it.

And because it means we have a place in this world."

His voice was rough with emotion, the words brushing against her heart like a vow.

Jill leaned her head lightly against his shoulder, and for a moment, they simply stood there, breathing in the promise of this place.

From beside her, Alasdair spoke again, softer still.

"I can see it," he said, almost to himself. "Bairns playing among the trees. Smoke rising from our chimneys. Laughter in the air."

The quiet certainty in his voice made her chest tighten.

This warrior who had lost everything—his time, his home, his identity—now stood on land that would be his, beside a woman who was his, surrounded by possibilities that were his to shape.

And she would be there, helping to build that future alongside him.

They walked back toward the house hand in hand, the path winding between ancient trees and down the gentle slope.

The farm spread before them, the rows of lavender rippling like waves in the breeze, the white farmhouse standing sentinel beyond the fields, tucked beneath the sheltering peaks of the Olympic Mountains.

In the distance, laughter rose from the bunkhouse, carrying across the open space.

Tavish sat on the porch, head bent over a borrowed guitar, the melody both hauntingly ancient and strikingly new.

Cillian and Macrath split wood nearby, their movements synchronized from centuries of fighting side by side.

Lachlan whispered something to a chestnut mare, his quiet presence calming even the most skittish horse.

Fergus stood watching them all, his practical nature evident in the way he organized the split logs into neat stacks.

They were hers.

Warriors.

Family.

Hers now.



Jill leaned into Alasdair's solid presence, feeling the steady rise and fall of his chest against her shoulder.

"Do you think they'll all find what we have?" she asked quietly.

"Aye," he said with conviction.

"The gods have not brought us this far to abandon the others.

We six were cast through time together.

We will all find our place—together."

As they reached the edge of the field, Jill took one last look back at the clearing, her mind filling with vivid images?—

six cottages arranged in a loose circle, smoke curling from stone chimneys, children's laughter echoing beneath the trees.

A clan reborn, not in the glens of Scotland, but here—in the heart of the farm, beside fields of fragrant lavender.

They didn't see it.

Near the treeline, hidden where the wild grasses thinned, a small patch of earth lay blackened and bare.

A circular wound in the soil where nothing grew, where life recoiled.

Beneath the surface, unseen and patient, something stirred.

The Brollachan was gone.

But deep beneath the earth, something slumbered—hungry, watchful, waiting.

### CRAZY ABOUT LILA

#### PROLOGUE

The clearing lay silent under the waning light, the scent of lavender heavy in the air.

But beneath the sweetness, something rotted.

The soil in the far woods, blackened and withered, pulsed once—then again—like a heartbeat no living creature should possess.

It had waited. Buried deep. Nursing hunger, nursing hatred.

Its progenitor had been vanquished—torn from this world by silver and fire—but its legacy remained. Smaller. Younger. Weaker...for now. But patient.

It remembered.

The taste of fear. The scent of blood. The thrill of the hunt.

It remembered the warrior bloodlines. It remembered the MacTyre clan—the branded ones whose blades had pierced its parent's form. It remembered the song of rage and magic that once bound its kind to the earth—and the human flesh it had been denied too long.

Now new prey stirred above. Soft-footed humans. Warm blood. Laughter and life—things it hated. Things it craved.

And from somewhere nearby, the faint echo of an ancient melody—a storyteller's voice lifted in song. The bard-warrior. The one who sees.

The creature writhed beneath the earth, recognition coursing through its shadowed essence. The one called Tavish. The MacTyre with the sight.

A shift of earth. A ripple of shadow. The thing unfurled itself deeper underground, pressing closer to the roots of the ancient trees.

It would grow. It would hunt. And when the time was right, it would feast.

\* \* \*

The sun glared off the freshly poured concrete, baking the air until it shimmered over Tavish's little kingdom: twenty by thirty feet of solid foundation, smelling like progress and possibility. He squatted down, patted the slab like a loyal hound, and smiled. The rough scrape under his palm grounded him in this strange century better than anything else had so far.

"Still starin' at it?" Lachlan called from across the clearing. "It's not goin' to sprout legs and dance, ye know."

Tavish rose to his full height, six-foot-four of displaced Highlander crammed awkwardly into stiff denim. "Laugh now," he said. "But when I'm sleepin' under my own roof and ye're still starin' at stars, we'll see who's laughin'."

Lachlan snorted. "Perhaps—if the builders dinnae flee first. Ye've scared off three already with your 'suggestions.'"

"They dinnae understand rain," Tavish grumbled, jabbing a finger at his construction plans. "Their roofs are flatter than a drunken bard's song!"

The rumble of a truck cut him off. Tavish's muscles tightened instinctively, the old urge to reach for sword or shield rising—until he recognized Jill's familiar battered pickup bumping down the trail toward Highlander Hollow.

She drove one-handed, waving at them with casual confidence that still amazed him. Women commanding metal beasts—aye, he'd seen stranger things, but not many.

"Are ye two arguing about roofs again?" she called, cutting the engine with a practiced jerk of her wrist.

"He started it," Tavish said, managing to sound far more innocent than he felt.

Jill grinned, hopping down from the cab. "Good. You'll need that fighting spirit at the library. Lila Mitchell needs help moving some display cases for Heritage Days."

"Why would a library—" Tavish began.

"She asked for you specifically," Jill interrupted, smirking. "The music teacher? The one you've been pretending not to ask about?"

"I havnae been askin'!" Tavish protested, too quick.

"Four times," Lachlan said, betrayal pure and gleaming.

"Three times!" Tavish corrected—then cursed under his breath.

Jill tossed him the keys to one of the farm's four-wheelers. "Think you can handle the ATV without another incident?"

"That was one time," he muttered, catching the keys. "And the man said his eyebrows would grow back."

He grabbed his hammer—not because he needed it, but because solid weight in his hand still felt like home—and mounted the four-wheeler. The machine roared to life under him, shuddering like a nervous stallion.

"Remember!" Jill called as he pulled away. "Modern women don't like being called 'wenches' or challenged to duels!"

"That was Macrath!" Tavish yelled back, but their laughter chased him down the trail.

The ride into town was pure battle strategy. He white-knuckled the handlebars, muttering Gaelic curses every time the wheels hit a bump. Modern machines, like modern customs, clearly wanted him dead.

When he reached the library—a sturdy old church refashioned to house books instead of prayers—he parked the ATV with exaggerated caution. Then spent several minutes trying, and failing, to tame his wind-blown hair.

Inside, the chaos of furniture rearrangement reigned. Tables shoved against walls. Chairs stacked like drunken sentries. And at the center of it all, perched precariously atop a wobbly step stool, was Lila Mitchell.

For weeks, he'd seen her flitting around town - sometimes at the coffee shop with her sheet music, other times hurrying to her car with armfuls of books, her honey-colored hair caught in the wind. Something about her quiet grace and the way she hummed to herself had drawn his eye long before today, though he'd never found the courage to approach her.

She stretched high to hang a banner reading "Celebrating Our Heritage," her yellow sundress fluttering around legs that made Tavish's ninth-century brain short-circuit.

The stool wobbled dangerously.

"That doesna look verra safe," he called.

She yelped, spun toward him—and the stool tipped.

Tavish dropped his hammer and lunged.

She landed against his chest with a soft "oof," her arms instinctively clinging to his shoulders. Her scent—books, sunlight, and something sweetly floral—wrapped around him and nearly knocked him flat.

For a moment, he forgot what century he stood in.

"Nice catch," she breathed, glasses crooked on her nose, lips parted in surprise.

"Easier than catchin' a sheep on a steep hill," he said—and immediately wished for death.

But she laughed, bright and easy, and the knot in his gut loosened.

"Tavish, right?" she asked as he gently set her down. "The Scottish guy who knows all the old songs?"

"Aye," he said, pleased she remembered. "Jill said ye needed help."

"She did, did she?" Lila tilted her head, a teasing glint in her eyes. "Interesting. Because I only asked if she knew anyone with a truck."

His stomach dropped. Jill. Matchmaking fiend.

Still—he wasn't about to squander a rescue like this.

She pointed at his hammer. "And that? Planning to build me some new bookshelves?"

He tucked it sheepishly back into his belt. "For persuading stubborn furniture."

"Furniture persuasion," she repeated, grinning. "Is that a traditional Scottish technique?"

"Aye," he said solemnly. "Passed down through generations."

"Good." She hopped off the newly placed table. "Because I've got some very stubborn cabinets that need convincing."

Lila gestured toward an enormous oak display case against the far wall. "That's the main culprit. We need it moved to the center of the room for the History of Aberdeen exhibit."

Tavish approached the cabinet, running his hand along its intricately carved surface. The thing was massive—at least eight feet tall and six feet wide, solid oak from top to bottom. For an ordinary man, an impossible task. For a berserker, merely a challenge.

"Has anyone tried moving it yet?" he asked casually.

"The janitor and I couldn't budge it an inch," she sighed. "Everyone's busy with festival preparations, and they want it done today."

Tavish nodded, a slow smile forming. This, at least, was something he could do—something useful in this bewildering modern world.

"Stand back," he said, rolling up his sleeves.

"Tavish, you can't possibly?—"

But he was already bracing himself, hands positioned at the cabinet's base. He took a deep breath, letting just enough of the old power stir in his blood—not the full



berserker rage, but enough of that ancient strength to flow through his muscles.

With a controlled grunt, he lifted.

The massive oak cabinet rose from the ground as if it were made of balsa wood. Tavish shifted, adjusting his grip, and began walking it toward the center of the room, his steps measured and careful.

Lila's mouth fell open. "That's—that's impossible," she whispered. "It took six men to bring that in last year."

"Just good leverage," he said, setting the cabinet down precisely where she'd indicated, trying to downplay his strength. "And stubborn Scottish determination."

She stared at him with undisguised wonder, her eyes wide behind those delicate glasses. "Are all Scottish men like you?"

"Nay," he said, a strange pride stirring. "I'm one of a kind."

She handed him a stack of books—Scottish history, appropriately—and their fingers brushed.

The world disappeared.

Light burst behind his eyes—not pain, but vision, sharp and clear as mountain water. Lila running through dark woods, terror on her face. A writhing shadow pursuing her, something ancient and malevolent with glowing red eyes. Her dress torn, blood on her arm. Her voice screaming his name. The shadow lunging, its form shifting from mist to beast, reaching for her with elongated, blackened claws. His brothers fighting alongside him, battling the creature that seemed to swallow light itself—a Brollachan's offspring, hungry for fear and flesh.

Tavish gasped, the books tumbling from his hands as reality crashed back into place. Cold sweat broke out across his forehead, his heart hammering against his ribs.

"Tavish?" Lila was staring at him, concern etched across her features. "Are you okay? You went white as a ghost."

"Aye," he managed, throat dry as desert sand. "Just a...moment of dizziness. Not used to the heat."

She studied him carefully, not quite believing. "Let me get you some water."

As she hurried away, Tavish steadied himself against the bookshelf, the vision still burning in his mind. This wasn't just any prophetic glimpse—this was a warning. The Brollachan they'd fought wasn't the only one. Its offspring hunted in these woods, and somehow, Lila would be in its path.

When she returned, adjusting her glasses, he blurted without thinking, "Have ye family here? A husband, mayhap?"

Subtle as a thrown axe.

"No husband," she said, not missing a beat. "No boyfriend, either, if that was your next question."

"It might've been," he admitted gruffly, accepting the water with hands that still trembled slightly.

She laughed again, the sound wrapping around him like sunlight through the stained glass windows.

"Think about the storytelling," she said over her shoulder as she walked away. "And Tavish? Thanks for the catch. And the superhero cabinet-moving. Very impressive."

Tavish stood alone among the ancient books and crooked furniture, Lila's laughter lingering in the dusty air. For the first time since the portal had ripped him from everything he'd known, he felt not just the ache of what was lost—but the thrill of what might yet be found.

Maybe it was time to stop surviving.

Maybe it was time to start living.

But the vision haunted him. If his sight spoke true—and it always had—the woman walking away from him now, with her bright smile and clever eyes, would soon be in terrible danger. And he would be all that stood between her and a monster born of his own world.

He tightened his grip on the hammer at his belt. Some things hadn't changed across the centuries. A warrior protected what was his. And though he'd only just met her, he knew with bone-deep certainty that Lila Mitchell was meant to be his.