



Flanders' Folly (The Curse of Clan Ross #7)

Author: *L.L. Muir*

Category: Historical

Description: Oh, how the mighty can fall for love.

Flanders Leesborn is a seasoned warrior, infamous for his unshakable loyalty and sharp wit. Charged with protecting the Todlaw stronghold on behalf of his best friend, (an MI6 agent who has returned to the future) he never expected his duties to include witches, spies, and accusations that could bring the wrath of The Crown. But when he meets a mysterious woman with copper hair, a magic touch, and a voice inside his mind, his world tilts. Protecting her becomes his purpose—even if their connection sparks a war that threatens the very Scotland he swore to defend.

Brigid has always known her magic would one day put her in danger. As a Muir witch, she's trained to be cautious, careful—and never fall in love. But when she crosses paths with the formidable Flanders Leesborn, she's faced with more than prophecy. He's kind, he's charming, and he's willing to burn for her. When a vengeful laird accuses her of witchcraft and

secures her death sentence, Brigid must decide she can fight for her life, or she can trust in Flanders and the mysterious Wickhams plan, which could bring true happiness or a horrific death.

As ancient alliances teeter and torches are lit, Flanders and Brigid will learn that trust is more powerful than fire and steel. But which will they reach for?

Total Pages (Source): 45

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:41 am

1

A FORTUITOUS FOLLY

* * *

N ear Laird Stephan's fort, Gallabrae, Mabon of 1325...

Flanders chided himself for not pushing his mount faster while the sun was still up. As a result of his lack of haste, he now found himself picking his way home through the trees, far too near the home of his enemy to stay to the road, with less than a quarter moon to light the way. That was, when the moonlight could be seen at all.

He'd been a fool to think the fort might be distracted with Mabon revelry so he could slip by unnoticed. But it occurred to him, too late, that Laird Stephan would never allow his people to celebrate the pagan holiday.

The bitter man had probably held no ill will toward the pagans at all until he learned that Robert the Bruce had asserted his protection over them. And there were few men who walked the earth that Hector Stephan hated worse than the king of Scotland.

Unless it was James Duncan.

James had been gone a full four years now. So, in his stead, Stephan hated Flanders for being the one man standing between him and James Duncan's expertly constructed stone fortress, Todlaw. Four years since the king demanded James give Stephan a stone keep of his own...one rock at a time.

Naturally, Stephan was livid he'd been tricked out of a great reward—a reward promised to the man who introduced James to the woman he would take to wife. It was a deed Stephan had fulfilled. He had, no doubt, expected a great treasure of silver or jewels, but the jest was on him. The Bruce had been on hand when James declared his intentions to marry the woman Stephan had provided and, meddling monarch that he was, the king had chosen the reward himself.

And a bitter grudge was born.

After teasing Stephan with the promise of a stone keep, which that laird dearly desired, the king had ordered James to gift his neighbor with only the stones to build one. Stones Stephan was required to transport himself. And out of spite, Stephan had refused to build it.

Notwithstanding, the stones were moved from Todlaw to Gallabrae, where the petulant man left them in a great pile, just outside his palisade, where it could stoke the fire of his anger each time he looked to the west.

The sight of it upset Flanders as well, for each time he was forced to pass the fort, when he had business in the east, he saw a perfectly good store of stone that he knew just how to use. Stone he could neither purchase nor barter for.

Fearing he'd lost sight of the path, Flanders halted his horse and studied the inky black forest floor. Voices up ahead made him curse his luck. But since he couldn't go on until he had the forest to himself again, he dismounted and relieved himself.

The murmurs continued, moving neither closer nor further away. A few minutes later, the tinkling of light laughter and the pitch of those voices told him those blocking his path were women.

He smiled. What had he to fear from women who could be charmed?

Trailing the reins behind him, he set off again. When there were but twenty yards between himself and a break in the trees, he saw them. Five of them. Three huddled together, and two standing watch. A pity they were watching in the wrong direction.

He carefully cleared his throat, though he did not slow. Immediately the three jumped apart and the two watchers hurried to stand in Flanders' way—two men whose small swords spoke for them. He stopped in his tracks, and for their sakes, he took a step to the side so a ray of moonlight could warn them just whom they dared to threaten.

One sword lowered immediately. The man's quick smile proved he couldn't be one of Gallabrae's dour men.

"Flanders, isn't it?"

"The very same."

The other man came forward with an open hand. Though, in the shadows, he might have been Flanders' tall mother for all he could tell. "Thomas and Torquil. Muir," he said, and shook Flanders' hand.

"Muir?" His mind whisked him back to the day James Duncan had disappeared—right before his eyes. And that, after two sets of Muir witches had come to Todlaw to collect Pheobe, the woman Flanders had once thought to make his wife. Unfortunately, she and James were already in love with each other, though they'd denied it.

That was the day he'd learned that his best friend was not as mad as Flanders had once thought. For in all the years they'd battled beside each other, James sometimes spoke about the future, the distant future, as if he'd once lived there.

A place to which James and his would-be wife had returned. And all with the help of

Muir witches.

After Flanders shook the hands of both men, two women stepped forward. Though they, too, were twins, they were not the sisters who had visited Todlaw that fateful day. Thomas introduced them as Bella and Brigid. They were lovely, even in the darkness. Tiny shafts of moonlight lit the red fire and gold of their hair, the only color amidst the shadows.

Flanders took the hand of the nearest sister and lifted it to his lips. And the oddest thing...

Both sisters gasped as if they'd been burned. The hand was gone, and the two clutched each other, their pretty faces hidden. The brothers took a protective step closer to the pair, but they didn't draw their blades. In fact, they paid Flanders no heed at all. Clearly, they didn't believe him to be a threat.

"What is it, sister?" Thomas said, gently trying to pry the pair apart. "What did ye see?"

The one called Brigid whispered to Bella, then stepped back. Abject fear shone from her eyes in the dappled moonlight, but she faced Flanders anyway. "I saw our death. And chaos," she said, as if she'd seen those things in his eyes...and could see them still.

Flanders retreated enough to draw his sword and find the direction of this eminent threat, but Thomas stopped him with the wave of his hand. "It is the future she sees," he said. "Thanks to Gerts, none of the men at Gallabrae can...erm...raise a sword or anything else. At least not this night."

The third woman stepped from the shadows and it was, indeed, Hector Stephan's lady wife.

“Laird Leesborn.”

With his hackles up, Flanders was loathe to put his blade away, but he did so out of respect for his old ally. Many a time Gerts and he had saved a young woman from her husband’s clutches, and the bond between them was unbreakable because of those days.

“Gerts.” He stepped close and placed a kiss on a cheek soft with age. “How do ye fare?”

“I’m well enough. I still wish for those days when ye came regularly.”

“I’ve missed ye as well, though I cannot say the same about yer laird.” He pointed his chin at the others standing behind her. “Dare I ask what business ye have with true witches?”

She grinned all the way to her eyes. “They come through every year near about Mabon, to fortify my supply of hensbane. Come, watch them work.” Gerts led him deeper into the trees where a sea of plants grew close to the ground. These had obviously been harvested recently, and Flanders recognized the strange plant as one he’d been warned to avoid since he was a small boy.

The brothers moved off to the right. The sisters to the left encircling the cloistered field. But it was only the sisters who raised their arms and whispered. Even in the tenuous light, Flanders could see their words transforming into an ethereal mist that spread above the plants and swirled slowly. He couldn’t look away.

When both sisters fell silent, the swirling ceased and the mist fell straight to the ground like a fine rain. He opened his mouth to comment, but Gerts clutched his arm in warning. The demonstration was not over, then.

A noise he couldn't possibly describe came from the ground. Barely audible, it was something akin to the squeaking of mice. It was a voice, and yet not. No mouth created such...magic.

Flanders blinked over and over again, wanting to understand what moved at his feet, but simultaneously dreading that knowledge. Only when the plants began to sway did he realize they'd doubled in size, and as he watched, they doubled again, nearly tall enough to reach his high knee.

"What ye hear," Brigid whispered, "is the Song of Growin'."

A song. Much less malicious than what he'd been imagining—not the devil or his ilk rising up from Hell to greet them.

Flanders released his breath and gave her a smile of thanks for relieving his fears. And suddenly he realized...she hadn't whispered after all. She stood too far away for such a soft whisper to be heard. The words had come...only in his mind.

He sought her eyes. She gave a sheepish smile that made her beauty all the more compelling. But was that a trick as well?

"Careful not to insult a witch," she whispered aloud, then laughed quietly.

He'd barely had the chance to laugh along before the witches all moved back toward the road, leaving behind a healthy crop of the dangerous plants. Used regularly but carefully by healers, it could ease pain, aid sleep, and treat gout. But it was also deadly. In large doses, it caused confusion, fatigue, and could render a man impotent. It was rumored that witches and druids used the stuff themselves to bring on visions and prophetic dreams.

Flanders followed close on Gerts' heels and asked why she needed so much of the

stuff.

“What do ye think? He brings a pretty lass into the household and I can no longer send them away to Todlaw, can I? I do what I can to spare them his attentions, and when I cannot...” She shrugged.

He was horrified. “Gerts! What are ye thinkin’? The man’s hate for witches is implacable. If he finds ye’ve been fettling him with?—”

“He drinks it willingly. Our healer told him it makes him more virile and potent. For him to complain that it does not would be to admit his own failures. And the great Hector Stephan fails at nothing.” She smirked. “Except his attempt to take Todlaw.”

Flanders worried that the Muirs didn’t understand the risks of coming so close to the fort, and to even step foot on Stephan’s land was to risk their lives—and a hellish end. But it was the fort that was quiet as death at the moment. Nothing moved.

He insisted they ride with him as far as Todlaw, just to be safe. But they had other business to see to before the end of Mabon. They did not say where. So, Flanders could do nothing more than wish them well.

He stepped close to Brigid’s horse but was careful not to touch her, fearing that alarming vision might repeat itself. “I am sorry for what ye saw, lass. Sorry for the pair of ye. I only hope ye are mistaken.”

Her head swayed slowly from side to side. “Worry not for us, Laird Leesborn.” She stared at his hand resting on her saddle, then tentatively reached out to lay her fingers upon his. After only a heartbeat or two, he heard her in his head once more.

Laird Stephan is more devious than ye believe. He need not leave home to bedevil ye.

He took the warning to heart, then attempted to answer her in the same manner. Very clearly, he thought the words, Many thanks.

Though her face showed nothing, he heard the tinkling of laughter that was answer enough.

“Remember,” he said aloud. “Any witch, Muir or otherwise, will find sanctuary at Todlaw.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:41 am

2

BLACK EYES FOR brEAKFAST

* * *

T odlaw, Spring, four years later...

Burned again.

The bitter tang of scorched eggs assaulted Flanders' senses before he ever set eyes on the trencher. It was a familiar disappointment, one that had plagued his mornings for longer than he cared to admit. His stomach grumbled a low complaint, then reconsidered and roared with the primal need to consume anything that would fill the void.

Forcing a smile, Flanders looked up to find his new cook Marjory biting her lips together and staring straight ahead. Her hands were clasped behind her back in a pose that was meant to convey defiance but reeked of fear. The wayward strands of hair that dangled from her cap trembled. But what stirred his blood more than the prospect of another ruined breakfast was the idea that she would fear him at all.

He didn't chide her, just as he hadn't the day before, or a score of days before that. There was no point in adding cruelty to incompetence.

"My thanks," he said instead, his voice steady and calm. "Ye may go."

In her surprise, she dared meet his gaze. "Yer thanks? For this?" She pointed to the trencher, where a dozen pigeon eggs lay in various shades of black and grey, their centers staring up at him like so many accusing eyes. Not a hint of yellow to be seen among the broken yolks, and instead of the crispy brown lace around the edges that he'd dreamt of far too often, today's lace was black as the devil's heart.

For eight long years, since James Duncan had left Todlaw in his care, Flanders had craved those magical eggs cooked perfectly in butter, which his friend had introduced him to. But neither man, woman, nor child had been able to recreate the dish. And in the last week, this latest addition to the kitchen had very nearly purged that delicious memory entirely.

"Aye. Ye may go," he repeated, his tone leaving no room for argument. The sooner she was out of sight, the sooner he could dispose of the charred offerings without her witnessing the waste.

He tilted the trencher to one side, watched the black circles tumble together like stones in a riverbed, then ripped the bread in half before standing and heading to the hearth. Half a trencher would sate his gullet for a while, at least until he could see to the real problem at hand—the slow decline in kitchen skills that had plagued Todlaw while he'd been distracted by Scottish politics and alliances.

A young woman swept the hearthstones with a fragrant broom and paused to watch him approach. Her eyes grew wider as she realized his intent. When she licked her lips, a nervous gesture that betrayed her hunger, he stopped dead, caught off guard as if he'd taken an unprepared punch to the stomach.

He held out the half with eggs along with the rest of the trencher. "Ye would want this...this..." He shrugged, words failing him in the face of her obvious need.

She dropped her attention to her shoes and whispered, "Aye, laird."

He pushed them at her. "Take them. Feed them to the dogs. Then come to the kitchens and I'll see ye're fed real food."

She gaped at him in disbelief.

"Do as I say." He looked around the great hall, finding another half dozen hungry-eyed women looking on. "Same with the rest of ye. Meet me in the kitchens."

If James were to return to Todlaw and find that any one of his people were hungry enough to eat burnt offerings, he'd pound Flanders into a bloody heap before boiling him in butter. And rightly so. Flanders had no excuse. His distraction with Scottish politics had been his downfall. He'd left the running of Todlaw to others and had obviously chosen to trust the wrong people for the duty.

As he made his way out of the keep, he averted his gaze, not ready to face what else might have suffered while he'd been galivanting around the young country, tending to alliances instead of seeing after the people who had been placed in his care. His mantle lay heavy now, with the weight of his remembered responsibility, a mantle he'd worn lightly for too long.

Tomorrow, there would be a reckoning. Todlaw was a rich place with stores a' plenty. And if its bounty wasn't reaching the stomachs of its people, someone was diverting it elsewhere.

But for now, he had one task only. There were bellies to fill...and his, perforce, would be the last.

* * *

The heavy oak doors of Todlaw's keep creaked open, and a hush fell over the gathered crowd as the last of the household members filed around the corner and into

the great hall. Their faces were etched with confusion, and their movements were hesitant, as if they feared they were walking into a trap.

Flanders sat in the laird's chair—a great bulking throne of carved wood that had been a gift to the original laird by Robert Bruce, King of Scotland. It was a common belief that the monarch sent the chair along so he'd have something worthy of his arse when he came to visit. But today, it would only know Flanders' unworthy arse.

He gave nothing away as he watched the stragglers find their places, the men filling the open benches before the dais and the women hanging back to find what space they could among the general population. They were nervous, clutching at each other while they tried to understand why they'd been summoned.

At the head of a long table to Flanders' left sat Heslington, the pinch-nosed steward. The man had proven to be the most literate of all the residents when James Duncan had invited the people of the glen to gather at Todlaw to enjoy his protection—to become a community that shared labor and respect equally. But in the years since its conception, that community had slowly separated into classes, despite James' best intentions. And in the time since the peace-loving warlord had walked away, those gaps had widened.

Flanders had seen little harm in it, early on. After all, the desire to better oneself was a sound motivator. But lately, he'd realized that climbing the ladder of any society meant climbing over one's neighbors. Someone was always left at the bottom, sometimes through no fault of their own.

It was the duty of those at the very top to see to those unfortunates who might not possess the wherewithal to defend themselves...or to fight for their share of the bounty that was created, in large part, because of their contributions. And that duty lay with him—a duty seen much more clearly through the lingering acrid haze left from yet another morning of burnt eggs.

"Pray tell," Heslington began, lifting his arse only halfway off his seat and raising his voice to be heard above the murmuring crowd. "To what end have we been summoned, Laird Leesborn?" As he lowered again, he held his brows aloft, demonstrating his self-importance, as if Flanders had better have a good reason for disrupting his day.

Flanders ignored him and gave a nod of thanks to his audience for settling quickly. "Thank ye for answering the call. I have brought ye all together so that I might apologize." He waited a moment for the surprise to settle. "I have failed ye. Ye see, it has become clear that, with all my travels, I have neglected our community, and I mean to rectify that. If any of ye have a complaint that has gone unanswered, I invite ye to step forward and lay it at my feet."

Heslington rose immediately and moved to the edge of the dais as if he believed the invitation was for him alone. "I'm grateful, yer lairdship. I believe everyone has a right to hear the true state of our community, so I have no qualms airing my concerns before all and sundry."

The man had changed a great deal since the day he'd first stood before James and proved he could read, write, and add sums. He'd been a humble man then, content to record the details of an expanding community and please Robert the Bruce's favorite warlord.

It was difficult to reconcile that man with this strutting, well-dressed peacock. Clearly, he wore finer garments than anyone else in the keep, including Flanders. Any other man would be embarrassed to stand so near those women who cooked and cleaned for the household, whose gowns were little better than oft-mended ribbons of cloth that weren't up to Highland weather.

"As ye must know, Laird, the provisions consumed during yesterday's impulsive celebration have left supplies in a precarious state. Why, the number of animals alone

has disrupted a delicate balance." He looked at the grizzled and well-fed Dunstan, Master of Beasts, who gave a nod. Then he smiled slyly back at Flanders. "I tried to warn ye, of course."

At Heslington's back, an unhappy murmur shuffled through the crowd, though the man was either oblivious or unconcerned by it. A hundred flashing eyes bored holes in his fine cote, while half the people looked like they would flee out the door if given permission to do so. After a moment, however, the steward proved he wasn't oblivious after all, for he stiffened, turned, and sent a haughty glare the breadth of the room, putting an immediate end to all those dissenters.

Clearly, no one else would be stepping forward to complain.

In the back of the room, three figures entered late and found places against the wall. Flanders recognized the faces beneath the hoods, but he didn't have time to deal with them at the moment. Nothing was more important than making sure this gathering evolved the way he'd planned.

Heslington returned to the conversation. "We must make adjustments. Allotments must be reduced accordingly. And if all will accept those adjustments, we should be back in fair shape in time for winter." He cast a pointed look at Ailis, the chatelaine, whose thin lips held tight to whatever she might be tempted to say. But eventually, she nodded.

This time, the murmurs were only whispers, more worry than anger. Clearly, the people of Todlaw believed these three villains held their futures in their hands. And the sooner they were disabused of that notion, the faster the damage could be undone.

Satisfied that his pronouncement was accepted by all, and not bothering to wait for Flanders' agreement, the steward returned to his seat and waited, with a smile, for Flanders to send everyone back to work.

Flanders let the silence stretch, affording ample time for someone to speak up.

No one dared.

His gaze settled on the new cook, Marjory, who stood with her back against the wall, waiting for him to call upon her, as he'd promised to do.

"Marjory," he said. "Come forward, if ye please."

Without hesitation, she moved around the perimeter and came to stand before him.

"Ye've been responsible for preparing my meals of late. Tell me, why have ye continued to burn my eggs in the mornin', while ye have no trouble cookin' other food?"

The young woman nodded and spoke boldly. "Aye, well, that would be because Mistress Ailis instructed me to do so."

A collective gasp nearly sucked the air from the hall. Flanders feigned surprise and turned his attention to the now pale chatelaine. "Is this true?"

Ailis cleared her throat, then lifted her chin in defiance. "Aye, laird, it is true. I... I told Marjory to ruin the eggs, lest ye continue to crave them and consume more than yer fair share. James Duncan was determined that all are equal?—"

"How dare ye invoke his name in yer lies!"

She clutched at her throat and took a step back. "Lies?"

Flanders regretted he'd allowed his calm mask to slip, but it was back in place now.

"A funny thing happens when people find their bellies full, and the wine and ale flow freely. They are much more likely to speak the truth when they don't know someone is listening. So no, Heslington, yesterday's celebration was not the waste ye believe it was." He got to his feet, stepped around Marjory, and moved closer to Dunstan.

"Tell me, sir. When did ye first change yer loyalty from Todlaw to Heslington? Or should I say Gallabrae?"

The man's mouth dropped open and his shoulders shrugged over and over as he sought the words that would excuse him. A denial mustn't have occurred to him, or else he knew one would be useless. Finally, he bowed his head. "Forgive me, Laird."

Flanders shook his head. "It is not my forgiveness ye need today, man."

Heslington was back on his feet, leaning forward over the table, his face flushed with indignation. "Ye dare to accuse us of transgression? We've been acting in the best interests of these people!"

Flanders raised a hand, silencing the steward once more. "The people, ye say? And what of the women I sent to the kitchens, hungry and disheartened by their meager rations? I am surprised they stay on. Which leads me to wonder how many have abandoned Todlaw while I was away, believing they would be better off on their own?"

He looked Heslington over, from head to toe, and winced.

"Odin help me, I cannot look another moment at those raiments." He lowered his voice. "Take them off."

The man blinked rapidly. "Off?"

"Yer cote. Take it off. Tell me, where did ye find such a fine garment?"

The man gaped and wrapped his arms around himself as if he could somehow hide his clothes with his fleshy limbs. "It...it was a gift."

"A gift? From someone at Todlaw?"

"No, laird."

"No, I didn't think so. Yer friend must be someone... significant . Did The Bruce happen by in my absence and believe ye were in need of a reward?"

"No, laird."

"No? Hmm. I would wager that selling such a fine piece would bring in enough food to restore that balance ye quibble over. Would it not?"

Heslington bit his lips together.

"Nay, nay." Flanders shook his head. "Too fine a garment to part with." He waited for the man to hope, then he dashed that hope into the rushes. "Ye'll note that Marjory's gown is quite thin. With nothing better by winter, she'll no doubt fall ill. I believe yer cote would cover two women of such size, will it not?"

The steward backed a step. "Ye would have me freeze, then? Yer steward?"

There was that self-importance again.

"Auch, no. I have something else in mind for ye." Flanders barely hid his smile. "Strip, Heslington." After a nod to one of his guards, the man was forced to relieve himself of his most outer garment before returning to the bench and told to sit. The

garment was then delivered to Marjory, who folded it neatly over one arm and returned to her spot by the wall.

Flanders returned to the chair . One down, two to go, as James used to say. It was just one of those phrases from far in the future, where James would be living out his life...in time. It was a pity his friend wasn't with him now, to help him rectify the situation. But alas, all Flanders could manage was to imagine what his wise friend would do in his stead.

And hopefully, this would take care of Hector Stephan's meddling. If only he'd heeded Brigid Muir's warning more closely, it might not have come to this.

NAKED TREACHERY

* * *

"Mistress of the Loom, come forward," Flanders called, his voice easily reaching to the back of the hall. Though a fresh energy charged the air, the crowd was silent except for a few whispers that skittered across the stone floor like nervous mice.

From the corner of his eye, Flanders watched Heslington and Ailis stiffen as the rarely-seen, white-haired woman made her way to the dais. Despite a back bent from years of labor, she moved with brisk steps and cut through the crowd like a seasoned warrior navigating a battlefield. At the foot of the rise, she offered a brief curtsy, her eyes flicking nervously toward the chatelaine and the steward before settling on Flanders. "Yer lairdship," she greeted, her voice steady.

Flanders softened his demeanor and offered a kind smile. "How do ye fare, madam?"

The woman squared her shoulders, a flicker of pride in the lift of her chin. "Fare? Why, I fare better than most my age, though there are not many left."

While everyone chuckled, Flanders noted the strength in her arms, visible through her thin sleeves. Her neck and shoulders, too, bore the marks of a life spent in diligent service, not wasted in idleness. His gaze fell on her airisaidh, a garment patched meticulously with stitches so straight and sure they spoke of a craftsman's skill. "Is this yer work, then?" Flanders asked, gesturing to her attire.

Her cheeks flushed pink. A sad smile tugged down the corners of her mouth. “Auch, aye. From long ago.”

“How many work with ye?”

She puffed out her chest. “More than a dozen, laird. It takes a wee army to clothe so many.”

“And how many yards of cloth do ye complete each day?” Flanders pressed, seeking to understand the depth of the problem.

“Each day?” She shook her head. “Takes weeks and weeks, laird.”

Disappointment brought a sigh from him. He'd hoped the issue was one of productivity, but perhaps it was simply a lack of resources. Yet, he needed to be sure.

The woman began counting on her fingers, her lips moving silently as she counseled with the ceiling, ending with a nod. “Akin to a hundred yards a month, then.” She put her hands on her hips and swung them back and forth as if very proud of that number. A hundred yards of cloth was nothing to scoff at, after all. And with just twelve or so women doing the work. Maybe a yard couldn't be completed in a week, but it was the end result that counted.

Flanders nodded in appreciation. “Ye work hard, all of ye.”

Her flush deepened, but this time with pride. “We do, laird.”

“Now, I'd like ye to look around the hall here and point out to me some samples of yer work. Some recent samples.”

She shook her head, her gaze sweeping the room. “Recent? Nay. Ye'll not find our

work here, other than hers.” She jerked a thumb toward Ailis.

“And why not?”

The old woman tilted her head in the chatelaine’s direction, her eyes suddenly hard. “That one trades it away.”

“Trades it, when we so clearly need it here?” He tried to hide his frustration and motioned for Ailis to approach. “Ye have a plausible reason for this?”

The woman fidgeted with the keys dangling from her hip. “I can get twice as much fabric if I trade it.”

“Twice as cheap, ye mean?”

“Aye. As ye say, everyone works , laird. No need for finery.”

“So ye trade for the coarser stuff.”

“Aye, but?—”

“Half as warm.”

“Aye, but?—”

“I notice ye don’t go lackin’.” Flanders’ gaze fell to the fine wool cote and over gown the woman wore, garments that would keep her warm through any Highland winter.

Ailis looked down at her attire, then back up at Flanders, horrified. “Aye, sir. But I do not wish to disgrace ye. Ye wouldn’t wish me greetin’ the King of Scotland in rags...”

“Not a soul that lives within Todlaw should wear rags!” He found himself on his feet again, wishing he could grab her by the shoulders and shake her until she repented. But that would invite the memory of James to whisper "barbarian" in his ear, and Flanders hated that. “We shall take everything we have on hand and trade it at Stirling, and purchase more besides.” To the older woman he said, "As soon as we have the new cloth in hand, I will require ye and yer talented army to pause yer labors for a while to help cover the backs of every one of us before winter. And from this day forward, Todlaw wool will remain in Todlaw.”

Cheers erupted. Tears spilled down the woman's cheeks, and she straightened her back, standing taller than before.

“Mistress of the Loom, will a thousand yards do to start?”

A careful gasp escaped her. “A years' worth of work? Aye.”

“My thanks. Ye may be seated.” He pointed to a man on a front bench to give up his seat for her. Then he turned his attention to Dunstan, the Master of Beasts, who shifted uncomfortably under his gaze. “I presume there is an equally lucrative arrangement for the animals?”

Dunstan's brow furrowed. “Lucrative? I dinna ken what that means,” he said, glancing at the red-faced steward before nodding. “Laird Stephan pays handsomely for what we can part with.”

“Only the finest, no doubt.”

“Aye, he's a picky man, to be sure.”

“Cattle?”

“Aye.”

“Sheep?”

“Aye.”

“Geese?”

“Aye. He’ll take the lot of those, if we’d let ‘im.”

“So, our food goes to Gallabrae .”

Dunstan’s eyes widened, his confidence faltering. “Uh...nay, yer lairdship, not...not all!”

“And what do we get in return?”

Dunstan’s face brightened. “Easterling silver, yer lairdship. For yer coffer, o’ course.”

“My...coffer?” Flanders’ voice was icy.

The man’s gaze dropped to his boots, his cap twisted in his hands. “Erm...”

Flanders leaned closer, his voice low and dangerous. “Do ye remember why Todlaw was built, Dunstan?”

The big man swallowed hard. “For protection.”

“Aye, that too. But from the start... everyone works, everyone eats, everyone fights, and no man—or woman—is better than the next.”

Dunstan nodded, still nervous, finally suspecting the trouble he was in.

“Turn around and face the people of Todlaw,” Flanders said quietly. When the man had done so, Flanders waved for Ailis and Heslington to come to the fore and do the same. Then he returned to his chair against which his sword was propped and pulled it from its sheath. No one breathed as he returned to stand behind the three villains.

From his vantage point on the edge of the dais, he could easily see every hungry face. And though he didn't know whether or not they could judge fairly in their current state, he would still let them decide the futures of those who had betrayed the Oath of Todlaw.

“Good people,” he began, “I will remind ye that I am the most at fault here. I failed in my duty to ye, and I mean to right the wrongs done in my absence. Even when I was in residence, I was blind. But no more.” He sucked air deep into his chest and let it out in a whoosh. “Now, ye must choose the punishment for these three who also betrayed yer trust. Mercy.” He drew out the options. “Banishment...or death. It is up to ye.”

He lifted his sword tip over the head of Ailis first, then lifted a brow and waited for the verdict.

It took a moment for the crowd to realize what was expected. It was one of the scullery maids who shouted first. “Banishment!”

Ailis flinched.

Others took up the call. “Death” was suggested by only a few, each time making the woman jump with surprise, but none cried out for mercy. A hard pit of dread ate into Flanders' gullet when he realized Ailis' depravity might have been harsher than he knew. Eventually, banishment was adopted by all, and he moved the tip of his sword

over Dunstan's head.

Banishment brought the most enthusiasm, but eventually, calls for mercy made those enthusiasts reconsider. In the end, the Master of Beasts was offered forgiveness.

Flanders had to hide his smile, for their undeserved kindness renewed his faith in the people of Todlaw. But Heslington would be another matter, if the crowd had truly understood the greed and callousness involved. Although, he wouldn't tell them the extent of what he'd uncovered thanks to yesterday's celebration.

Most had been on hand to see the reshaping of the steward's character. Clearly, they now feared him. And though this was their chance for revenge, there were, again, only a few cries for blood.

"Banishment," Flanders said behind Heslington's head. "For ye, that is mercy indeed."

The man turned and sputtered. "M...m...mercy? Banishment is no mercy! Ye have yet to see yer coffers, Laird Leesborn! Ye don't know what I've done for this clan! Ye cannot send me away without giving me the chance to?—"

"Justify yerself?"

"Indeed!"

"Justify this. How many bairns might have died from yer greed?"

"Bairns?"

"Aye. They cannae eat silver."

“No one said anything about?—”

“Wee-uns starvin? Auch, but I’m certain they have, and just as certain ye’d have turned a deaf ear to them. Just as I couldn’t hear them from a distance.”

“Then ye’re just as much to blame?—”

“Aye! I am! But mine was the sin of neglect. Yers was of intention. I will be here to pay for mine. But ye...ye cannot be trusted inside our walls again.” Flanders waved to the guards. “Take him to his quarters. Find these coffers he brags of. Allow him to pack a small sack—clothes, water, bread only. Then present him at the gate.” He gestured to another guard and one of the scullery maids. “Do the same for yer former mistress. A small sack. Let her keep the finery on her back to remind her of what she deemed more important than yer lives.”

Another guard came forward for Dunstan. Flanders let the big man face him again.

“Ye have a choice. Ye may stay at Todlaw, but ye’ll no longer be Master of Beasts. Ye’ll be given the most menial of work. Or ye can meet us at the gate and go with yer friends. Perhaps Laird Stephan will have a reward for the loyalty ye paid him. But if ye stay, remember that these starving people showed ye mercy today. Whether they continue to do so is up to them.”

Dunstan nodded his bowed head, then gave a timid whisper, “I would stay, yer lairdship.”

Finally, Flanders stepped back to his chair, though he didn’t sit. For the chair was no longer his.

“First things first,” he announced. “Any of ye who can read, write, and add sums may step forward. Todlaw has an immediate need for a new steward. Any woman who can

do the same may put her foot in for chatelaine.”

Then he waved to his three guests whom he hadn't forgotten. As they came forward, they threw off their hoods. He was surprised at the height on Robert Duncan since the last time he'd seen him. The lad had to be nineteen now...

“Laird Leesborn! Thanks to James Duncan, I have just the skills ye're lookin' for!” The lad grinned and slapped Flanders on both shoulders with enough strength to cause him pain.

Flanders slapped the top of the laird's chair. “Say ye've come to take yer rightful place here,” he said, grinning back into those dark eyes.

“First, I must learn.” Robert turned to gesture at the people who would soon call him their leader. “But I believe I've just had my first lesson.”

“A wise tack. And I vow, before ye've learned all the workings of Todlaw, we will make it a place of honor and plenty once more.”

PUT TO RIGHTS

* * *

The inner bailey was a sight to warm Flanders' heart, filled with weary but happy people, food a' plenty, and the peace that comes from high walls and well-trained men to man them.

Instead of eating apart and aloof on the dais, as he used to do, ignoring what might have been happening on the tables below, Flanders sat at the end of one of those tables with a hundred of his people sitting before him and another two hundred to each side of him.

Everyone seemed to appreciate and revel in the stark changes the place had undergone since he'd cleaned house.

Before, if there had been a wary silence over meager meals, and folks stretching provisions, he'd been oblivious. It wasn't until he'd seen that woman eyeing his burnt eggs that he'd finally bothered to look around...

Now, thankfully, the summer air chimed with easy laughter and the clatter of wooden platters spread equally along the trestles. The fragrance of roasted meats mingled with the crisp tang of healthy crops growing on the hillside and the welcome smell of bread from the kitchens. The last time he'd ordered such a meal for the general population to share, it had been an apology, a restitution, an act of survival. This time,

it was pure celebration.

Even the dogs, once lean things skulking about the refuse piles, now lounged beneath benches, bellies round as spun barrels, occasionally lifting hopeful heads for another scrap.

Flanders didn't bother hiding his satisfied smile. James Duncan had built Todlaw to be a respectable sanctuary, and by Odin, it was once again.

To his left, Robert tore at a slab of salt pork, his eyes alight with the smug triumph of a man who'd turned a tangle of corruption into order. "I still cannae believe we've made it through all of Heslington's ledgers." He stuffed the meat in his mouth and followed with a wash of ale, then he leaned close and lowered his voice. "Do ye reckon ye might offer a reward to the man, or woman, who finds the sum of silver still missin?"

Flanders shook his head. "James was all for rewards, but not I. I'll not have one stone upturned to find what's left of that evil dragon's hoard. We found the bulk of it, and we've used it to make us whole again. Perhaps, in the future, James will?—"

He bit his lips together and reached for his drink, to wash the words down again. He'd almost let it slip that James had gone forward in time when he'd left Todlaw behind him. And with the current outrage over witchcraft raging across Scotland like a grassfire, a slip like that would be the worst sort of fodder for his enemies.

Like Hector Stephan.

Robert frowned. "Perhaps James will what?"

"Perhaps, if James ever returns, we could tease him with it, to keep him occupied."

The frown remained. "Aren't ye the one who insists he'll never return? That his woman was from so distant a place they will never come back?"

"Aye. I've said as much. It's just that, I forget sometimes, not to hope."

Robert nodded and took a long drink. "I think yer problem is ye're lonely. An auld mon like yerself should have found a wife by now."

"No doubt." Flanders wasn't willing to go down that road at the moment, with so many people within hearing, or he'd have a line of women waiting outside his bedchamber by nightfall. So, he brought the conversation back to the missing treasure. "We must let word slip...perhaps through Dunstan, that all the silver listed in Heslington's ledgers has been accounted for and spent. Then, neither he nor Stephan will have reason to come lookin'."

"Aye, sure. But between ye and I, unless he buried it in the ground, where in seven hells did it all go? I've no doubt the records are accurate. He was too bloody proud of his cleverness to lie to himself. And he had enough tucked away to buy his way into King Robert's household."

Flanders gave a nod and checked to see that no one leaned an ear their way. "Either he was robbin' Todlaw blind from the start, or he made such a push lately that it's a wonder they weren't all bones and ribbons when I last returned from Stirling." He flicked a glance toward the kitchens, where the cooks bustled about, pink-cheeked and far from starving now. "Ye'll keep on yer toes, Robert? To make certain a Heslington can't happen again?"

Robert muttered something unflattering under his breath and tore off a hunk of bread with his teeth. "I dare him to come back to this side of the pass." Again, he pushed the food into his maw and wiped his mouth on his sleeve with all the grace of a wild boar. Then he grinned. "Perhaps we should change the rumor, use the missing

treasure to lure the bastard back."

Broad-shouldered and steady-eyed, Robert had outgrown the eager lad who once shadowed James Duncan's every step, dreaming that one day, he'd be as fearless as his foster brother. And now, that day had come.

Flanders' duties were truly coming to an end.

"Nay, ye're right," Robert said, shaking his head. "No use givin' trouble a faster horse, as James used to say."

"Nay. He said don't borrow trouble."

"Then I wonder who it was that said it?" Then his brows flew high. "I know! It was me." They both laughed until they were out of breath. Robert eventually wiped tears from his eyes before turning serious. "What about ye?" He pointed at Flanders with his empty tankard. "We've chosen a good man for steward, a clever but kind lass for chatelaine. And ye said when we had both, ye'd put Todlaw into my hands. So, what'll ye do now? Be the captain of my guard and nap above the gate?"

Flanders exhaled, glanced around the bailey once again, then lowered his voice to a whisper. "Might be time to think about my own household," he admitted.

"A wife, then?"

Flanders shushed the man but gave a nod.

Robert laughed quietly. "Ye mean to tell me the Bright Bear of Todlaw is ready to be tamed? And here I thought findin' Heslington's hoard was the only adventure ahead."

"I said I might consider it, not that I'd go huntin' one straight away."

“Aye, well, when ye do, I pray the lass is willin’. I dinnae imagine ye’d handle rejection so well a second time around.”

Flanders shot him a flat look but grinned despite himself. “Aye, well, this time, I’ll look for a woman who hasn’t already given her heart to my best friend. That sort of thing drives a man to strong drink.”

Robert grinned. “Then I’d best order a ship of kegs from France. Preparation is all.”

The teasing tapered off into comfortable silence. A woman gasped when a dog grabbed a bone from her hand, then the beast was hounded by laughing children. A scullery maid near the kitchen door attempted to sneak a honeyed oatcake for herself. Old Gavin, the baker, caught her wrist, then laughed at the worry on her face. She blushed and then scampered off with the cake stuffed into her apron.

Nearby, a young lad tripped over his own feet and was hoisted upright by a passing guard, who barely broke stride before setting the boy back on his way, ruffling his hair as he went. Laughter erupted from a group of women leaning their heads together over the end of a table, exchanging gossip, no doubt.

Flanders stood and excused himself to walk the perimeter of the wall when his ear caught on a ridiculous claim from a table as he passed.

“I’m tellin’ ye, it was as tall as a man, and its teeth—like bloody daggers,” a younger man insisted, keeping his voice low so children wouldn’t hear. “If I’d paused to gape, I’d have lost my arm, easy.”

Another man interrupted with a scoff. “Daggers? Bah, don’t believe a word! Ye ken well it was a flea-bitten cur barely up to yer knee that chased ye clean across the river! I was there!”

The men's laughter easily drowned out the women's and rumbled across the yard like a loud wave breaking on the shore.

Flanders chuckled under his breath. Aye, it was an old tale repeated in a hundred different ways. And for a moment, it was as if James Duncan were sitting where the naysayer was now, leaning back to find Flanders and say, Ye hearin' this nonsense?

James would have been proud of the bounty of Todlaw—of the people, the laughter, and the security they'd rebuilt. And Flanders, after a long, hard season, finally felt as if he'd done right by its founder.

Robert hurried to catch up to him. His easy grin suddenly faded to something more serious. "I was just thinkin', even when ye find yer bride, ye won't leave Todlaw behind, surely?"

Flanders tilted his head, surveying the bustling yard, the meager but growing pile of stones in the distance, waiting to form the third tower. There was always something more to be done. "Nay. This will always be home, as long as I'm useful, if ye'll allow?—"

Slicing through the genial hum of the bailey came the sound of a horn. Everyone jumped to their feet and quieted. Three blows followed...then nothing. Someone was coming from the west. If the watchers sensed danger, there would have been another three blasts, repeating for as long as was prudent, or as long as they were able.

Though there was no apparent danger, folk picked up after themselves and scattered. Men headed for the walls, small children hurried to their mother's skirts, and Flanders and Robert headed for the gate.

OLD FRIENDS AND BAD NEWS

* * *

They reached the top of the outer gates just as the distant figures of seven horsemen became clearer. The standard they carried was unmistakable—the Royal Banner of Scotland, with its red lion rampant on a gold field. The imposing figure of the King was clearly missing from their party.

With no danger in sight, Flanders returned to the ground and signaled for the gates to be opened, then he stepped out to greet the approaching riders. The sound of hooves on the hard earth grew steadily closer, steadily louder, as did the pounding of his heart until the horsemen reined in their mounts before him.

"Welcome to Todlaw!" Flanders' voice carried all the weight of his soon-to-be-ended authority along with a hint of concern. He recognized each man from countless encounters at the king's side along with James Duncan.

The lead rider, a grizzled veteran named Hewitt, dismounted first. His expression was somber, and he approached Flanders with a heavy step. "Laird Leesborn." They grasped right forearms. "We bring grave news. King Robert the Bruce is dead."

It was rumored The Bruce suffered from leprosy, though it was not often spoken aloud. And though Flanders was relieved for the end of his old friend's suffering, he was overcome with grief, both for his own sake and for Scotland's. The country was

still so young.

But there would be time to mourn a' plenty, later. For now, he had to see to the visitors.

"Long live the king," he murmured, thinking of The Bruce's son.

"Aye, long live King David," Hewitt replied, his gaze steady. "He is but a young lad, four years old."

Flanders nodded, his mind racing. "And who will be Regent?"

"David's cousin, Thomas Randolph, Earl of Moray, has been appointed. It was Robert's wish."

"A wise choice, I think." Flanders' thoughts turned to the home at his back. The protection that Todlaw had enjoyed under Robert the Bruce's favor would now be precarious. With a new, young king and a regent in place, the political landscape would shift, and Hector Stephan might see an opportunity to test Flanders' walls and his resolve.

He turned to the wall and gestured up to Robert. "Robert Duncan, son of James Duncan, and as of this minute, laird of Todlaw."

Robert nodded gravely. There wasn't much youth left to his young face. "Welcome to Todlaw," he said, with all the command and confidence they might have expected from Stout Duncan, Robert's father, who firmly held lands at the western range of the Tay Forest.

"Well met, Laird Duncan." Hewitt and the other riders nodded in respect, seemingly unconcerned with the lad's age. After all their new king was all of four years.

Flanders couldn't help but be proud and allowed Robert to extend their hospitality, which he did without prompting. "Come, rest yer horses and stay the night if ye will. Ye've found us celebrating, and food abounds. Though now, we will be raising our cups to the Bruces."

Hewitt shook his head regretfully. "Grateful, Laird Duncan, but we cannot. We must spread the word of the king's passing and assure Scotland that the throne is far from empty, aye?"

Flanders understood their duty but pressed him. "At least take a moment to rest and eat before ye continue on to Laird Stephan's, for he is not the welcoming sort he once was."

The banner men exchanged glances, a hint of amusement in their eyes. Hewitt chuckled softly. "Aye, we've no doubt of that. So aye, we'll rest a mite...and relieve ye of some of that boar we've been smellin' for the past two leagues."

As they led their horses toward the stables, Flanders walked beside Hewitt, his mind still grappling with the news. "Tell me, what was it like at the end?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Hewitt's face softened. "He was surrounded by those who loved him best. He spoke of his victories, his regrets, and his hopes for Scotland's future. He mentioned ye, Flanders. Said ye were always a man to be trusted, a true friend to The Crown."

Flanders was humbled by the bittersweet honor. "Anything of Laird Stephan?"

Hewitt's expression darkened. "He warned that without his direct influence, Stephan will grow bold. And Moray will have much more important matters to tend to. Ye will be on yer own. Or rather, Robert Duncan will be."

"Don't worry about the young laird. His father and James taught him well. He'll not sit back and allow the Rat Laird close enough to sniff these walls."

"I'm relieved to hear it. Speakin' of James, I reckon if he were still in Scotland, The Bruce would have summoned him to guard over King David, hoping he could have the same influence on his son as he's had on Young Duncan. Perhaps we will soon return with such an invitation for ye, from Moray."

Flanders laughed. "I'd like nothing better than to see Stephan's face if he learned his favorite neighbor joined the king's household!" Then another thought occurred to him. "No doubt, when ye reach Gallabrae, he'll have questions about what ye saw here."

Hewitt grinned. "Then tell us, exactly, what ye most wish for him to hear..."

As they entered the bustling inner bailey, the men were greeted with great interest. Flanders decided to let the news of the king's death spread as it would instead of making an announcement. Let the standard bearers have some peace while they ate. And as soon as they were gone, he and Robert would create a war council.

Though Scotland was currently at peace, trouble was coming to Todlaw—unless they took it to Stephan first.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:41 am

6

BLOOD AND MOONING

* * *

M uirsglen, The Black Isle...

Brigid shoved the needle against the stubborn leather. It was like trying to mend sinew. The old satchel that lay in her lap was already patched and worn from a lifetime of carrying the potent herbs of Muir witches through the Red Hills. But maybe this year, they could delay their journey until after Mabon. Perhaps they could wait until spring...

The needle broke through, quick and sudden. A hiss escaped her, and she jerked back her wounded thumb. A heavy drop of crimson welled from the small hole, a betrayal that rolled to the fleshy pad and threatened to spill onto the leather.

A fierce tremble seized her heart. Blood brought memories. Blood called to visions.

She pressed the wound to a rough square of cloth tied at her waist, and she clenched her jaw tight against unwelcome images, but they invaded anyway.

Death. Darkness. Chaos.

She let them pass through her mind and breathed them away again.

In the distance, the soft rhythm of the sea was a familiar and comforting melody that mingled with scents she might never smell again, if this was the year those visions would come to pass. The tang of sea brine from Moray Firth mixed with sweet broom, tangy heather, and the bright clusters of whin blooms sprawled defiantly nearby. An ancient oak spread protective branches at the edge of the family's yard, casting shadows over valerian plants grown waist-high around its great trunk.

A perfect summer's day. She ought not fret so, shouldn't mourn already over events yet to come. But a woman plagued by visions could hardly live as carefree as any other.

Pain throbbed in the bone of her thumb as her mind went back to the Mabon of four years ago. On that chill night, beneath a thin sliver of moon, she'd crossed paths with Flanders Leesborn. His face had remained sharp in her thoughts ever since: blond hair catching stray beams of moonlight, blue eyes fierce enough to pierce the night, and a leather jerkin molding perfectly to broad shoulders. And somehow, impossibly, she'd slipped into his mind...and he into hers. She could almost feel the tickle of his deep, soft voice. A shared secret. A connection her sister, hopefully, had no inkling of.

She dreamt of him altogether too often for it not to mean something. But since her sister never mentioned him, she had reason to hope those dreams were private. Sadly, they often mingled with those darker visions—the ones she'd seen only after Flanders brought her hand to his warm lips, all courtesy and charm. All that sweetness chased away by that maw of darkness...

If only she knew what happened afterward, in that swirling chaos. Would tragedy strike others? Would Flanders?—

No. Swallowing hard, Brigid forced away such thoughts. She would not allow despair to take root, not when the warmth of the sun fell across the wildflowers and danced on the sturdy herbs tied into bundles all around them—stalks of mugwort and leaves

of rosemary twisted into tight crowns, and young angelica whose sweet, earthy scent now mingled with the leather and blood...

Forceful footsteps brought her out of her thoughts. Bella marched around the corner of the cottage into the yard wearing a smile until she caught a thread of Brigid's thoughts. Her feet halted and her eyes narrowed. Her attention dropped to Brigid's bloody hand. Then she dug deeper, blinked, and tilted her head to one side. "Ye're trying to find a way to convince me not to go this year. Again."

Brigid pulled the cloth from her waist, wet the corner with spit, then cleaned the traces of blood from her skin. "And why not? Why not let everyone fend for themselves just this once? Mayhap next summer they'll appreciate us even more."

Bella dropped to sit beside her on the low bench and gave her a gentle smile. "They appreciate us now, sister. They depend upon us. Would ye rather they suffer without what we bring?"

"All our stores can be found elsewhere."

"Ha. Ye know as well as I do, those other stores are rubbish compared to ours and nowhere as potent as what we grow here in the black soil of Muirsglen." Bella made a tsking noise. "This is selfishness. But if I recall, ye get this way every year around this time..."

Brigid's chest tightened, and for a breath, she stared at the elderberry bush beyond Bella's shoulder, its dark berries fattening in the sun. "Am I selfish to want to live?"

A long silence stretched while arguments of the last few summers bubbled back to the surface and drained the joy out of the world. Before that fateful vision, they'd rarely disagreed, let alone argued. Now it looked like they might as well plan on it happening each time they began sorting their harvest.

Bella exhaled loudly to signal she was ready to talk about it. Finally.

"Every one of us dies when our allotted time is spent," she said. "Just because our deaths will be...terrible...does not mean we should hide from the life we were given until then." Her sister lifted a shoulder dismissively. "Like most, we do not ken the when. And I will not sit by the hearth, waiting for Death to come to me. When the bell tolls, what does it matter whose lands we stand upon?"

Brigid stared blankly for several moments, mouth slack with disbelief. "But Bella, we do ken the when!"

Bella stilled instantly, her face pale beneath the bronze of her summer skin. All bravado gone. "What do ye mean?"

Brigid leaned closer and clutched her sister's hand. "The vision," she said softly. "Our death. It comes upon Mabon. Surely, ye recall that much—aye?"

Overhead, a lone bird wheeled across the sky, calling sadly to its mate, the pitch so mournful perhaps it did not expect an answer.

At last Bella shook herself and forced a smile. "My vision revealed nothing of the sort. Though truly, can it matter so much, when we cannot know which Mabon? This year, or ten years hence. Perhaps we've a hundred summers yet to live."

"Ye know that's not true," Brigid cut in. "The vision showed us as we are now. Young. And it will happen when we travel south."

Bella cut short any further argument with a slicing gesture. "I will not speak of it again," she said flatly. "And I will be goin' south. Stay home if ye wish. Thomas and Torquil will keep me safe."

The discussion was over. There was no use trying again. There might be no stopping Bella from heading south, but Brigid had never once abandoned her sister, nor hidden from Fate when it leaned close and whispered promises. They belonged together, all the days of their lives. No matter how many days that meant.

“If ye won’t postpone the journey until spring, then that is that. Ye can stop pretending ye’d truly leave without me.”

Bella’s stubborn chin lowered and her scowl melted into a grin. “Of course I wouldn’t, fool. Who will carry the needle and thread?”

Brigid rolled her eyes, then stood and brushed dirt from her knees. “I’ll come,” she said quietly. “I’ll come and I’ll pray that we age slowly, aye?”

“By all means,” Bella said, laughing as she went inside.

Brigid shrugged off her worries in favor of the golden summer’s day. She set aside the mending and went into the garden to let the burgeoning life refill her heart and her soul. Densely tied rows of silver-leafed mugwort moved softly in the breeze, fanning out among valerian and the wound-healing blossoms of celandine. She stroked gentle fingers across feathery fennel fronds and inhaled the pungent aroma of rosemary, strong enough to clear away any dread lingering in her mind.

Aromas of angelica, vigorous and stubborn, drew her closer and rewarded her when she ran her fingers through their leaves. And farther back, delicately stemmed horehound, and the strangely beautiful clusters of deadly nightshade—all thriving in the dark, magic-rich earth that gave the Black Isle its name.

Soon, the seasons would change along with this garden, and she and Bella would journey a path that would take her very close to the walls of Todlaw and the man she should force herself to forget.

She brushed back a wavy lock of hair in a move that mirrored pushing Flanders Leesborn out of her mind, lest her sister catch one of those tender thoughts. But the query lingered—when they reached the southwestern edge of the Red Hills, would her path cross his again?

Bella's low chuckle and taunting voice came from the cottage doorway. "If it is a man who inspires such mooning, Brigid, perhaps our travels south won't be such a hardship to ye after all!"

* * *

Flanders stood on the ramparts, his gaze fixed on the distant hills, though in truth, he saw nothing of the night-cloaked landscape. The cool air tasted of heather and pine and reminded him of that Mabon night four years past when he'd encountered the Muirs with Gerts, outside Gallabrae.

Or rather, he remembered Brigid.

Her name whispered through his mind like a puff of air. He could still see her face in the dappled moonlight, those eyes that caught and held his attention. That half-smile meant just for him. The delicious thrill when she'd laid her fingers on his. And that impossible moment when her voice had slipped into his head as easily as his own thoughts.

Laird Stephan is not as powerless as ye believe. He need not leave home to bedevil ye.

He'd heard her clear as day, and she'd heard him. The chiming of her private laughter was a memory he cherished like a laddie with a treasure.

Flanders closed his eyes now and leaned on the cold stone of the parapet. He focused

on the words and gathered his intentions behind them like so many arrows before letting them fly.

Brigid Muir, hear me!

He quieted his breathing and waited, listening without his ears.

Nothing.

Again, nothing. Just like the hundred times he'd tried before. How far away was she? Did distance matter in such things? Or was it simply that she chose not to hear him?

"Bloody fool," he muttered to himself, opening his eyes to stare at the stars. "Perhaps I dreamed the whole cursed thing."

But he knew he hadn't. The connection had been real—brief but undeniable. He could never have imagined what it was like to be touched inside his own head. The very idea couldn't have come from him.

He rubbed his forehead now, a habit that repeated whenever his thoughts turned to her, as if he could pull out those memories and examine them with his eyes.

The moon hung low in the sky, a waning crescent marking time. How many days until Mabon? Twenty? More?

Would she return to meet Gerts this year? For three summers past, he'd hoped she might stop at Todlaw—for a respite and refreshment if for nothing else. But perhaps she'd forgotten his offer of sanctuary and welcome.

Perhaps this year...

He flatly refused to believe that the foresight of her own death might have come to pass. She was out there, he was certain, wandering across Scotland like the stars wandered across the sky, following a path he didn't understand.

"Ye're brooding again," he chided himself and pushed away from the wall. "And over a witch, no less."

But even as he turned to make his way back to the stairs, he cast one last thought into the darkness, more from habit than hope.

Brigid, lass, remember me!

THE RAT LAIRD'S FIRST MISTAKE

* * *

Three weeks later...

The walls of Todlaw were so substantial in size that, to anyone who had not witnessed their construction, they might have existed from the beginning of time, just as the great Red Hills to the north. Tonight, they bristled with soldiers as sharp-eyed as the crows that nested in the parapets.

Every gate was reinforced with iron bands, every tower stocked with arrows by the sheaf and barrels of grain stacked like fortifications of their own. The armory was full, the horses restless and battle-ready, and each night, the guards patrolled the perimeter with twice their usual vigilance. And the lists reeked and rang with the constant sweat and practice of Todlaw's famous fighters.

Two brave souls at a time manned the tower above the northeast pass with a clear view of the far side. If Stephan were to attack, he would have to silence those two first...or come by another road, passing by more watchtowers.

All the people had been moved inside the curtain wall, along with their animals and crops, save those still ripening on the vine. But if those fields were burned, there was still plenty to get them through until next spring.

Aye. Todlaw was ready for war.

Flanders should have been content. Indeed, he should have been jubilant, knowing that nothing was left undone. If Stephan dared make a hint of aggression, the fight would be taken to him and never reach Todlaw's gates. Though Robert Duncan was prepared for the worst, the battle would be fought on the far side of the pass, where Flanders would make damn sure it ended before any of his people suffered from more of the Rat Laird's greed.

Gallabrae's men didn't stand a chance. All of Todlaw had been trained either by James or by those James had trained. One Todlaw man was worth eight of Stephan's. And even if the bastard was clever enough to hire mercenaries, Flanders would always bet on his men, every time.

Aye, there would be some who would brand Flanders the aggressor, but let Moray come and ask for explanations. Flanders would give him a full accounting—a scroll of justifications as long as an arm.

Despite his confidence, sleep refused to follow where it was so clearly invited. And Flanders lay restless, staring up at the black beams overhead, his mind a battlefield of its own, though the war in his head had little to do with his enemy.

Mabon was almost upon them.

A true warrior didn't hold with superstition, typically. And Flanders had once been a man of reason, not given to nightmares or troubling omens and certainly not to fretting about some witches whispering in the wind. But he could no longer claim to be a typical warrior. He'd seen James and Sophie disappear in an instant with that Wickham fellow who had apparently come to collect them.

And the fact that he'd seen it with his own eyes made it fact. He'd watched plants

grow in a matter of seconds, heard them straining in what Brigid had called the Song of Growing. And he'd absolutely heard her voice in his head.

He could never go back to typical.

Lying there in the early hours, the memories were sharp and clear. In weaker moments, he'd sometimes convinced himself he had imagined it all. But no one could lie to themselves in the morning...

I saw our death. And chaos.

How far into the future had Brigid seen? Did that doom still wait for them, creeping closer with every turn of the moon? And just who would suffer that chaos?

Damned if he knew.

Grinding the heel of his palms against his eyes, he forced himself to relax. It was just another year. Another Mabon. Another restless night with nothing but ghosts rattling in his head.

Eventually, weariness overtook his worries, dragging him down at last into the heavy dark of sleep. And in his dreams, she was there again, standing in the woods with the mist curling around her ankles, her hair loose—the same coppered gold as the mare she stood beside. She turned, her lips parting as if to speak, but no sound came.

He took a step forward, but suddenly the trees behind her cracked apart like bones snapping in a fist. Blackness rushed in—an unnatural dark that consumed everything in its path. She reached for him, as she had in other dreams. This time, however, it was not fear on her face, but urgency. And then the darkness took her. Swallowed her whole.

He woke with a start, his fast breath almost painful in his chest. Sweat cooled on his skin and made him shiver. For a long time, he lay there while the fragments of the dream escaped him like water through his fingers.

Was someone slipping hensbane into his drinks? Was some bastard having a jest at his expense?

But nay—that couldn't be. Hensbane would have helped his sleep, not kept it from him.

Still, as he swung his legs out of bed and reached for his leathers, the gnawing in his gut persisted. He had prepared for every threat outside these walls. Every threat he could see.

What the devil was he supposed to do about that hungry darkness?

* * *

Still an hour from dawn, Flanders climbed the narrow steps to the gatehouse. He shivered from a chill that hadn't been present the evening before—a chill that had nothing to do with the temperature. The sun was coming, and with it, Mabon.

Still weary, he leaned his weight against the rough stone and scanned the darkness within Todlaw's walls.

Below, the bailey lay quiet where most of their new inhabitants still slept, blissfully unaware of the men watching over them. Oblivious to the shuffle of an occasional boot or the haunting call of owls on the hunt. Toward the Red Hills hiding in the darkness to the north, he cast his mind and imagined two Muir sisters picking their way through the trees.

"Don't come," he urged aloud, just in case their magic allowed them to hear him, whether or not he could hear them. "Not this year. Not this time."

His worries turned to Gerts, who might soon be about her usual business, preparing the hensbane for her dastardly husband. He hoped she had the sense to keep her wits, to be careful not to stir Stephan's ire. The man had always been dangerous to his people, but with The Bruce gone and uncertainty spreading across Scotland like gossip, he would be even more unpredictable.

If the Rat Laird suffered from the same nervousness and lack of sleep currently plaguing Flanders, he would be more alert than usual. More easily provoked. More paranoid.

More deadly.

Surely, Gerts knew this and would act accordingly.

The distant sound of hoofbeats pulled Flanders from his brooding. He moved to the other side of the walkway and strained to see the road east. The changing of the guards on the watchtowers meant scouts were due back. But they were usually more cautious on a dark road, so their haste worried him. Or perhaps his ears were simply too sensitive.

Hastily, he descended the tower steps. The wary gatekeeper saw nothing amiss and opened the gate. No alarm. Two horses entered, but instead of two riders, there were three.

The lead rider, Alpin, dismounted and hurried forward. When he recognized Flanders, he seemed relieved.

"Laird—"

“Who is he?” Flanders nodded to the third man.

"Mael, our spy from inside Gallabrae. Came to the tower," he said, his voice rough with both exhaustion and foreboding. "Stephan has caught a woman. Accused her of witchcraft."

The air in Flanders' lungs refused to move in or out. "And?"

"He burned her at the stake last night."

The world tilted beneath Flanders' feet. He gripped the hilt of his sword to steady himself, forced himself to breathe. "Did he give a name? A description?" The words scraped from his throat.

Alpin nodded grimly. "Red hair, he said. Young, comely. Came with her sister to trade herbs with the women of the fort."

Brigid. It had to be. The dream—that cursed dream—had been a warning after all. The horror pushed into his mind, but he resisted. Instead, he imagined it just like his dream and hoped the darkness had swallowed her quickly.

"And what of the sister?" Flanders managed.

"Escaped. There was chaos when the first one was tied to the stake. Some of the women tried to intervene." Alpin hesitated. "The bastard had them all tossed into the pit. Lady Stephan among them."

Flanders closed his eyes briefly, the insanity of it all urging him to his knees. They had prepared Todlaw for war, had fortified the place against every possible attack, had anticipated Stephan's every move.

But he had never imagined this, that he might be tempted to go after Stephan on his own, to rip out his throat with his bare hands. No. Better yet, rip out the man's guts and burn him at the stake while he yet lived!

Flanders hadn't been willing to risk Todlaw for anyone—but apparently, he might have done for her...

"Gather the war council," he ordered, to anyone listening. His voice was surprisingly steady despite the destructive rage consuming him. "Wake Robert. And someone ready my horse."

Alpin's eyes widened. "Ye mean to ride to Gallabrae? Now?"

"Aye." Flanders turned and headed for the keep. "I have an idea."

The man trailed on his heels. "But Laird, the woman is already dead. Wouldn't it be folly to go now?—"

"I know." Flanders cut him off, his eyes hard as flint. "But Gerts still lives. And the witch's sister may yet be in those woods, hunted like an animal. Besides, if Stephan gets the better of me, Robert will have all the more justification to destroy him."

To the east, the first hints of dawn began to lighten the sky. Mabon had arrived. He'd simply never imagined that he would be the one to bring the chaos in Brigid Muir's vision.

NEVER PISS OFF A VIKING

* * *

Robert didn't like the look in Flanders' eyes.

The great Viking was mad with vengeance, that silver-blue stare burning through anyone in his line of sight. Robert had never seen him like this, not even when Heslington's full treachery had been dragged into the light. That had been mere anger, but this? This was something else. Something deeper. Something dangerous. Something James had warned against.

Robert squared his shoulders and stepped into Flanders' path just as the man would have quit the room. Flanders halted, his nostrils flaring, but Robert met his gaze and kept his voice level. "Ye call the counsel to tell us to sit on our heels and wait for bad news?"

Flanders didn't blink. "I mean to see him suffer...as she suffered."

Robert exhaled sharply. De-escalating the situation would be no easy thing, but he had to get Flanders to explain better. "We ken well that The Bruce forbade the burning of witches. Aye, but The Bruce is dead, Flanders." He let that truth settle between them. "And we've yet to see how Moray will rule on this matter. In this delicate time, I cannot see anyone with wisdom believing that one witch was worth taking up arms."

"Then be satisfied that it is worth it to me." Flanders moved to step past him, but Robert shifted, blocking the way again.

This was no passing fury. No convenient excuse for a long-overdue battle, and he needed the man to admit it before he flew off to kill the neighbor and perhaps cause another war in truth.

"Flanders, stop." Robert narrowed his eyes. "This isn't just about Stephan killing a woman, is it?"

For the first time, Flanders blinked, perhaps finally seeing past the bloodlust. A fraction of a breath. A flicker of pain in his gaze. But Robert saw it. And that was all the confirmation he needed.

"Aye," Robert muttered, rubbing the back of his neck. "I thought as much. This woman was yers, then? Not some witch?"

Flanders cursed under his breath and tried to step around him again, but Robert caught his arm and lowered his voice. "I will hear the truth from ye, in case this is the last time we ever speak."

Flanders stiffened, but Robert refused to release him. For a long moment, Robert thought he'd lost his friend completely to madness. Then, with a rough exhale, Flanders gave a nod and led Robert into the spiral stairwell.

In the still shadows, the Viking told him an impossible tale about meeting witches in Gallabrae's forest on Mabon, about growing plants in a matter of minutes and speaking without words. If the tale would have come from any other man, Robert would have him removed from Todlaw. But then his friend revealed the first time he'd met Muir witches, and how James Duncan, his foster brother, had really left Scotland, by disappearing in the blink of an eye.

A laugh escaped Robert, unintended. “James, James. Auch, but what ye say makes sense of so many things from my childhood, if he’d truly come from another time. And perhaps he’d confided in the king as well. Trust my brother to leave Scotland in the only sure way he could never return. And all for a woman.” He shrugged. “Love makes many a man give up all he holds dear. I assume it is the same for ye, brother .”

Flanders nodded. “Aye. Only I am too late.”

Robert dragged a hand through his hair before shaking his head. “Why in hell didn’t ye tell me she was yers from the start? If Stephan suspected, he’s committed another sin altogether. And Moray’s hands are tied.”

Flanders shook his head. “He had no reason to suspect. Even Gerts couldn’t have understood what happened between us. And four years have passed since I laid eyes on her.”

“It matters not. She was yer woman and Stephan killed her. An act of war in anyone’s eyes.”

“So, I may go?”

Robert nodded. “Aye. We go.” He gestured toward Mael still wringing his hands just inside the war room. “We two and the spy, so he can show us his path to the fort. We’ll find the sister, bring her to safety—along with Gerts, if she still lives. And then we deal with the Rat.”

Flanders frowned. “Now that I’m thinkin’ clearly, ye should stay behind.”

“And let ye have all the fun?” Robert shook his head.

“If we’re both taken?—”

“Then I’ll trust Todlaw to bring us home. And pity Stephan if my father hears of it.” He clapped Flanders on the back. “Now quit thinkin’ so hard and get in the saddle. We’ve already wasted enough time.”

Flanders smirked. "I hope James Duncan never finds out what a terrible influence he’s been on us."

"Aye, well, we shall lay that at his feet if we ever see him again.”

WITCH HUNTING WITH FRIENDS

* * *

The rain came down like icy needles, soaking into Flanders' woolen cover despite the tight weave. It was fitting, this weather, because it mirrored his mood to a fine point. Relentless rain, relentless rage, relentless sorrow.

The trail was little more than a ribbon of mud and pine needles winding through the trees not far from their own watchtower. But each step forward brought him and his sword closer to the Rat Laird. And closer to rescuing Brigid's sister. It was the least he could do for her now.

A long two hours after they left Todlaw, they left their horses hidden in a copse of trees on the southern slope that faced the enemy's fort. From their vantage point, it was clear to see that the witch-hunting party was searching west and north. More than a hundred torches flickered inside the tree line and moved in slow, steady waves. And on the distant mountain, men on horseback moved south, hemming in woman and animal alike.

How had they not found her by now?

Flanders soothed his nervous horse with a pat and a quiet word, then turned to Robert and Mael.

“Keep yer chins down,” he warned. “If anyone recognizes me, this will be over before it begins.”

Robert adjusted his wet covering to keep his face further away from the dripping edge. “No one here kens my face. And Mael’s known to them. We’ll get through. Ye just follow behind us like an obedient laddie, aye?”

Mael nodded, his face pale with worry. He hadn’t planned to return at all, so it was a brave service he did now. Hopefully, they wouldn’t come across any man who suspected him, and if they did, perhaps the excitement of the day would make them forget.

They moved carefully down toward the main road, picking their way through the mud and underbrush. The rain had lessened to the odd drip and a fine mist that muffled their footsteps, but Flanders’ heart pounded loudly enough to betray them. He forced himself to breathe slowly, evenly, as they reached the edge of the trees and stepped calmly across the wide road.

A voice called out sharply, and three soldiers appeared from the west, torches sputtering. “Who goes there?” demanded the lead man, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

Mael stepped forward and pulled back his hood enough to be recognized. “Only me. Mael. Come to join the hunt.”

The soldier’s expression softened with recognition. “Aye, a familiar face, then, but who are these two?”

“Friends from the south. Eager to see a witch burn. They were too late for the first.”

The soldier eyed them briefly, then nodded. “Then they’ll have to help find her first.

Can't be long now. She's surely cornered." He gestured to the west and north, then he and his fellows moved back to watch the road from the shelter of the trees.

Flanders clenched his jaw against the fury that threatened to escape from his mouth and forced himself to walk steadily in the direction they'd been given. He kept his eyes fixed on the muddy ground until they were well out of sight, resisting the urge to slit all three throats.

A woman's scream stunned them to a stop. From due north, it had come, followed by the sound of a hundred men rushing through the forest in that direction. There would be a mob, soon, full of men who would recognize him.

He nodded to Mael. "Go. See what ye can learn. We'll wait here, or very near. Return to us if ye can."

Without hesitation, their devoted spy hurried off toward the scream, along with half the mountain. Staying put and not rushing to Bella's aid was torture, but he could help her better if he weren't taken in chains himself.

He and Robert moved deeper into the trees to avoid notice. When they heard others moving close, they inserted their swords into shadows and bushes, pretending to be searching. Each moment dragged slowly as they strained to hear.

God's ears, what is happening?

A second, piercing scream shattered the air. This time, from well to the east.

Men shouted and the cacophony of breaking branches shifted that direction, along with the sporadic flicker of distant torches.

Robert frowned his way. "Are they huntin' more than one woman, then?"

Flanders immediate thought of Thomas and Torquil, but neither of those screams had come from a man. The question was, had they come from a woman?

He replayed the sound in his head. There was something odd about it. Like unto a woman's scream, aye, but there was something familiar about it.

A trait akin to a sound he'd heard before...in those very woods. The cry of wee plants as they grew at an unnatural pace.

"The scream," he breathed. "It's magic. Muir magic. Bella must still live."

Robert's eyes narrowed in confusion. "How can ye be sure?"

Flanders smiled grimly. "I've heard that sound before, when the sisters made the plants grow. She's using her magic and the forest, to confuse them. If I had to guess, I would say that was the sound a tree makes when forced to grow very fast."

Robert nodded slowly, clearly trying to believe him. "Clever lass."

Flanders moved to a spot where he could watch the hunters moving. The men further up the mountain were closing in. The trap was closing in. There couldn't be much ground left uncovered.

How had they not found her?

"She's sent them north," he said quietly. "Now west. And none believes she's gone south. So..."

"The lass is east?"

"And what is east?"

Robert's expression cleared. "Gallabrae."

"Aye. She's still inside the palisades. They're looking in the wrong place."

* * *

Without another word, they moved swiftly toward the fortress, keeping to the shadows of the trees. The closer they came, the greater the activity. Twice they changed direction to avoid meeting another hunting party head on. At one point, they dared not take another step until they took stock of the danger.

Not twenty feet away, three men spoke clearly, one of them recounting the missing witch's mad dash across the stream the night before. Another man claimed he'd seen her leap straight from the ground to the top of a tree. The third said he wouldn't sleep until he'd watched her burn and the danger was gone.

If Bella was inside the fort, the first two were lying. She'd never left. And if the third wished for a peaceful sleep, Flanders would be happy to oblige him and every other coward in Stephan's ranks.

One of the three caught sight of them. "Oy! Ye there, show yer faces!"

Flanders lowered his chin slightly, as did Robert. Their hoods shadowed their features, but they watched the enemy carefully and stepped forward as if complying, their every muscle coiled and ready to strike. For a heartbeat, Flanders thought the soldier was looking straight at him and a fight was inevitable—but no, the man's focus jumped to someone moving up from behind.

A smaller man shouldered past him. It was Mael.

After a moment's hesitation, the soldier relaxed. Their spy kept walking as if he'd

hardly noticed the trio. Flanders and Robert fell into step behind.

Without pause, Mael led them to the palisade wall, then south to the corner, and around to the front gate. Flanders thought it best to keep his head down and trust the man—then he was suddenly incapable of coherent thought when his attention caught on the massive black muddle just east of the gate.

No sign of a wooden stake, but clearly, this was where they'd murdered Brigid. Acrid smoke still lingered in the air along with the trace of sulfur and something more bitter that he couldn't identify. And though he braced himself for the smell of burnt flesh, there was none of that left. He didn't want to look, but how could he not?

His eyes jumped to the center of the charred debris, but there was nothing left but a smoldering stump. The rest had been burned flat, leaving a shallow circle of blackened rubble. He could only imagine how hot it must have burned and prayed Brigid had been aware of none of it. Perhaps that blackness from her vision had been some sort of witch's blessing—to lose consciousness before the worst befell her...

He was fooling himself, of course. He'd witnessed such death sentences before. Even those who fainted were revived again...by pain...until the smoke took them.

He turned his head away lest tears fill his eyes and cause trouble.

The gates stood open, but as the three of them neared, they closed again.

Mael stepped forward with impatience and pounded the hilt of his dagger on a metal brace. "Oi! Open the gate!"

A guard at each corner leaned down for a look. "Get back out there," one called. "She's not found yet!"

“We were ordered to return,” Mael shouted.

“Oh? And why is that?”

“We complained. Been searching all night, haven’t we? So, they called us women and ordered us back to the fort to tend the bairns. We have no choice,” Mael grumbled as if he’d been condemned to muck out the privy houses.

The pair above them burst out laughing and opened the gate without another thought.

“Clever man,” Robert muttered, and hung his head as if he too had been assigned to an odious duty.

As soon as they were clear, the gates swung closed behind them and a giant port bar fell across them and landed in the cradles with a thud, reinforcing the fact that they were, for good or ill, in the belly of the beast.

WOLFY THE GUILLESS

* * *

Flanders, Robert, and Mael strode with purpose for a long while and still hadn't lost the interest of the gatekeepers, so Flanders grabbed his fellows by the sleeves and guided them around the corner of the Smithy's enclosure. Over the clanging of hammer and anvil, Robert shouted, "What do ye suggest?"

"We were told to watch over the bairns," Flanders said. "I suggest we do just that."

"Bairns? Why?"

He grinned. "What do bairns do better than their parents?"

Both men shrugged.

"They tell the truth. They tell the truth."

* * *

Flanders had been a regular guest at Gallabrae for many years, and a favored one at that, until James and the king got the best of Stephan, then left Todlaw in Flanders' hands. He'd been around enough to know the lay of the place, and little had changed in the past eight years. Thus, the longhouse that was reserved for the wrangling of

children was just where he expected it to be.

At Todlaw, it was referred to as the child garden, but the corresponding space Stephan provided for his smallest and newest citizens was hardly cheery enough to be called the same. In the low structure, with light coming only from the ends, there was no learning or singing or playing games—the children were all working. Small tasks for small fingers, but nothing playful or enlightening.

A dozen or so children sat in lines along the dirt floor, their small fingers working nimbly at stripping bark from willow branches—wattle that was used for any number of things. Others sat at rough tables, sorting through piles of dried herbs, separating stems from leaves. The smallest ones, whose heads would barely reach above Flanders' knees, toddled back and forth with tiny scoops to water a line of clay pots where seedlings were planted.

The woman overseeing them—a thin, sharp-faced creature with wild hair and ragged clothes—eyed the three men with suspicion when they entered. "What business have ye here?"

Flanders kept his shoulders hunched to disguise his height and his hood on in case the woman might recognize him.

Mael took the lead. "Laird Stephan sent us to check on the bairns while the search continues."

The woman's eyes narrowed. "Did he, now? And why would he do that?"

Robert spoke kindly. "The witch is still at liberty. The laird fears she might try to steal a child."

The woman's hand flew to her throat. "Odin preserve us!"

"Indeed," Robert added. "So, we're to keep watch until the witch is found. Ye can go about yer business, mistress. We'll not disturb ye."

She hesitated, then nodded. "I'll fetch more water for the seedlings, then." She hurried out, leaving them alone with the children, leaving the door ajar.

Flanders moved among the older workers. Most kept their heads down, but a few brave ones glanced up, curiosity overcoming caution. He knelt beside a girl of seven or eight summers who was stripping bark with particular care. She was far too young to have seen his face before.

"What's yer name, lass?" he asked softly.

The girl glanced at the door before answering. "Moirra."

"A fine name. Tell me, Moirra, do ye ken where they keep the women who tried to help the witch?"

The girl's eyes widened. "In the pit," she whispered. "My mam's there too."

"The pit?"

She nodded solemnly, her eyes filling with tears. Her small fingers continued to work as if she were afraid to stop. "She only said there was no proof the first one was a witch."

Flanders' blood boiled and his guts hardened with anger, but he kept his voice gentle. "How many women are in the pit?"

"Ten," said a boy from across the circle. "My mam and sister too."

Robert joined them, crouching low. "And Gerts?"

Moira nodded.

"Don't tell the woman, or anyone else, but we've come to help get them out."

The children exchanged hopeful glances.

"And we'd like to help the dead woman's sister as well. But we can't find her."

A silent communication passed between their little faces. After a nod from the others, Moira spoke again, so quietly they had to lean in to hear. "She's not in the forest."

"Oh?" Flanders raised an eyebrow. "And how would ye know that?"

She bit her lips shut.

A smaller boy with a mop of dark curls whispered, "Because she's in the muds."

The girl jumped to her feet. "Wolfy! Ye're not supposed to tell!"

"The muds?" Flanders didn't understand.

Mael headed for the door. "Mud and sod dugouts, shelters built along the inside of the palisades. It would help if we knew which one."

Moira sighed, resigned now. "Wolfy's."

"How do we find it?"

"Last on the left. Please don't tell her we said."

Flanders gave the lassie his most charming wink. “Ye’ve done nothing but help her, I swear it.”

Robert lingered, waiting for all the children's attention. “Now, if ye want to help yer mams, do a better job of keepin’ our secret, aye?”

Little heads nodded all around the room. The ones too young to understand thought it was a game and nodded as well. When the woman returned, Robert helped her move her heavy bucket inside and they took their leave, promising to watch from outside to make sure the witch wouldn’t get to her precious charges.

* * *

They stepped outside and Robert closed the door. “What are the chances they’ll all forget our visit, our conversation, and our faces?”

“Not likely.” Flanders shrugged. “We’ll have to move fast is all.”

Mael nodded to the west, where a row of muds sat up against the wood poles of the palisades. Half below ground, the walls of the small shelters needed only half the material of a cottage and didn’t take up much room, though it would take some engineering to keep the rain out. Perhaps the walkway above was enough.

Last on the left, Moira said.

Flanders took a step, but Robert pulled him back. “Now that we ken where the women are, what will we do? Damn me, if the sun isn’t about to come out. In full daylight, we will need a plan.”

Flanders smirked. “I already have a plan to get Gerts and the others out of the pit.”

“Oh?”

He nodded. “Kill Stephan. In the chaos that follows, ye free the rest.”

Robert rolled his eyes. “Aye, nice plan. Just not terribly diplomatic. And difficult to accomplish if we’re thrown in the pit as well.”

“Ye can dress the witch’s sister in my clothes,” Mael suggested. “They’ve let us in the gates. No reason not to let the three of us out again.”

Flanders looked at the spy with new respect. “Ye would do that? Stay behind? Ye’d likely be killed if any suspect ye.”

He shrugged. “Mayhap I can slip out the gates when the hunters return—dressed as a woman.”

Robert shook his head firmly. “They’re hunting a woman, remember? No female will pass those gates without showing her face.”

Mael nodded, but he didn’t give up. “As a man then. After dark. I’ll slip out somehow. I’ll see ye at Todlaw on the morrow.”

Flanders shook his head. “Won’t work. If the three of us get out, that leaves those in the pit. The two of ye take Bella out, in breeches, and once ye’re away, I’ll remove the Rat.”

“And fight yer way out? Through hundreds? On yer own?” Robert’s look said clearly what he thought of that idea. “There is another way. We must find it.”

“Fine. But let’s find Bella first.”

Flanders struck out for the muds and left the other two to come along or not. But if someone else found the woman while they sat havoring about it, he'd never forgive himself. At least he would accomplish something.

As he drew near the dwelling on the end, he saw that the walkway above did cover the front of the dugout, but depending on the bent of the rain, it wouldn't keep the place dry in all instances. Case in point, the steps leading down into it were covered in straw and wet mud, and he had to pick his way carefully else land on his arse.

Luckily, there were no guards nearby, so none stopped him.

The structure was much more impressive on close inspection. The wattle and daub walls were two layers thick and well hardened. He knew because he knocked his knuckles on one of them to warn the witch she was about to receive company. His friends joined him and the three of them stepped inside the dark maw.

He considered, too late, that someone might attack from within. But it mattered not at all, since the place was empty.

A single room. Two raised pallets. No one hiding beneath. There was a wee table and an alcove for a fire with a small mud chimney that ran up the wall. Belongings were kept to a pair of boxes. And a wool blanket was pulled to the side of the entrance in place of a door. A bucket and scoop sat beside it, perhaps for bailing out the rain. Nothing more. Nowhere to hide.

"She's gone," Mael whispered.

"Maybe not." Robert turned for the doorway. "Tell me, what are the chances wee Moira kens her right from her left?"

WHERE HOPE HIDES

* * *

The row of muds stretched along the palisade like a line of orderly beasts with their mouths open, waiting to be fed. Flanders counted as they moved, wishing they could run. Fifteen or more to go before the last on the left...when facing north.

"Bloody hell," Robert muttered. "There must be twenty of these."

"Twenty-four," Mael corrected, his eyes darting nervously toward the center of the fort where men were gathering. It seemed the men of Gallabrae were giving up on the hunt. Soon the place would be brimming with the enemy.

A woman with a heavy basket approached from the opposite direction. Her eyes narrowed. Flanders turned his face away.

"Good day to ye, mistress," Robert said, his tone warm and friendly. "Seen a witch about?"

The woman shook her head and hurried on.

"Move," Flanders grumbled.

They passed each entrance with care, alert for any sign of danger. A child cried from

within one, and from another came the sound of a man's snores. A fast-moving cloud dowsed them in shadow, but the reprieve would be brief.

At last, they reached the final dugout. Flanders paused, his heart a war drum in his chest. What if the children lied? What if she'd gone? What if the men came back because they'd caught her? Had they killed her as well? There was no hue and cry, so...

He shook the worries away and knocked softly on the wooden frame of the entrance. "We come to help," he whispered through the opening. "Friends from Todlaw."

Silence answered him.

He exchanged a glance with Robert, then ducked his head and stepped inside. The interior was much like the other—two raised beds, a table, a small chimney. But this one caught a shaft of sunlight through a small window that was possible only because it was the last in the row. Warm light illuminated dust motes that danced in the air.

"Bella?" he whispered.

Nothing.

He moved further in, eyes adjusting to the dim light. An empty cup on the table, a small pile of kindling by the hearth, a child's wooden toy on one of the beds.

Then, like a breath of wind, he heard his name, and he caught his breath.

Flanders?

Not aloud. In his mind. Just as Brigid had once spoken to him.

He scanned the small space again. "Where are ye?" he whispered.

Robert gave him a strange look. Mael pulled the blanket over the doorway and peeked out the thin gap beside it.

The voice came again, stronger this time. Under the bed. I...dare not move.

He dropped to his knees and lifted the rough blanket that hung to the floor. In the darkness beneath, he saw her—curled tight against the wall, her copper-gold hair a tangled mess, her face smudged with dirt and tears.

She looked so much like Brigid, the sight of her drove a fist into his gullet. Then again, could Bella speak into his mind as well? Certainly, the sister could share the same powers, but...dared he hope?

"Brigid?" The name escaped him in a choked whisper.

She blinked up at him, her eyes wide with fear and disbelief. "Flanders," she said aloud.

Robert lifted the end of the bedframe. Flanders reached for her and firmly but gently helped her out. When she stood before him, alive and whole, he pulled her into his arms and held her as if she might dissolve into smoke. Tears spilled down his cheeks.

"I thought ye dead," he said against her hair. "When they said they burned a witch, I remembered yer vision. I've seen it myself in my dreams. I assumed it was ye. I reckon my dreams were wrong."

She trembled against him but didn't push him away. "It was Bella. She couldn't get free—" Her voice broke. "Oh, my poor Bella!"

He pulled back enough to see her face, to read the heartbreak in her eyes. "I am sorry," he said, knowing the words were hollow compared to such loss. He wished he could take her pain, absorb it into himself, but all he could do was hold her.

Robert cleared his throat from the entrance. "Time to talk later. Mael will give ye his clothes, then he'll take yer hiding place until after dark."

Mael held out a hand to silence them but kept his eyes on the other side of the wool drape. "Six or seven," he hissed, "headed this way."

Flanders turned back to Brigid. "Don't worry. I will not leave ye."

"Maybe they'll pass," Robert whispered.

"I don't think so." Mael released the curtain and turned away. "They have Wolfy with them."

Robert rolled his eyes. "We should have known—children tell the truth."

* * *

As footsteps outside grew closer, Flanders moved Brigid behind him before quietly drawing his sword. Robert did the same. There was no room to maneuver, but they prepared just the same.

"We ken ye're in there," taunted a voice from just outside. "Come out, willingly or dead, it matters not. Bring the witch as well."

Flanders froze. That voice. He knew that voice.

"Heslington," he spit.

Brigid clutched his arm. "Who?"

"The steward I banished from Todlaw," he said. "An old snake in a new nest." Now he wished he wouldn't have left the man alive. No doubt he played a part in putting Gerts in the pit.

"Come out now, Flanders Leesborn. Aye, I ken it's ye. I'd recognize those shoulders anywhere, even beneath a peasant's cloak."

Robert cursed under his breath. "Bad luck the bastard ended up here."

"Where else would a rat go but to the Rat Laird?"

Mael dropped to the floor and gave Flanders a nod before crawling beneath the bed. The spy would hide and perhaps live to carry the tale to Todlaw.

"I'm counting to three," Heslington shouted. "Then we shall pile wood over the door and finish the job proper. One..."

Flanders squeezed Brigid's hand. "Stay behind me."

"Two..."

Robert adjusted his grip on his sword, though they all knew using it now would be suicide.

"Thr—"

"We're coming out," Flanders said calmly. He pulled the drape aside and stepped into the light.

Heslington backed away from the steps that led out of the hole, leaving them room. He was flanked by four men. His clothes were no finer than those he'd worn out of Todlaw. Hector Stephan would have never allowed anyone to dress more fine than he.

The triumphant serpent smiled. "Well, well," he said, rubbing his hands together with undisguised glee. "What a pleasant surprise. The mighty Flanders Leesborn, caught like a common thief." His eyes widened when he recognized Robert. "And Young Duncan besides! Laird Stephan will be most pleased. Drop yer weapons and come out of there."

Flanders laid his blade carefully on the ground as if to say I'll be back for it, then he started up the steps with Brigid at his back, Robert behind her. When he finally towered over his former steward, he looked down his nose at the man and smirked. "Ye've fallen far, Heslington. From steward to lackey. Pray tell, does Stephan ken ye've slithered under his gate?"

The bastard's smile faltered briefly. "And ye've fallen further, from laird to prisoner." His gaze shifted to Brigid, who stood half-hidden. "And I've caught the witch. A good day for the house of Heslington."

Flanders laughed. "Ye're no house. Ye're half a man. And yer name will die with ye. Right soon, I reckon."

The bastard swallowed with care, knowing full well how lethal his enemy was whether or not he held a weapon. And thusly sobered, he retreated further and gestured to the others. "Take him and the witch to the pit. Put Young Duncan in chains. We'll get a fine ransom from his father. Leesborn can burn with the rest of them."

As the men moved forward, Flanders tensed, calculating their odds. Four against two,

but a mob of curious witch hunters were already moving in their direction. Between the two of them, they could dispose of twenty, but there would soon be twice that, and Brigid could get hurt while he was otherwise occupied.

"You there," Heslington called to a man in the mob with a bow on his back. "Nock an arrow and aim it at the woman. If either man resists, kill her."

The bowman did as he was told and circled to the side, so his arrow would have a straight path.

In response to shouting, the mob parted and the laird of Gallabrae marched through the middle. His dark curls now had streaks of gray through them, but his nose hadn't changed, still looking as if it had been recently injured, smashed to one side, and the swelling had yet to wane.

Two guards hurried to maintain their positions at his shoulders. The man seemed more feeble since Flanders had seen him last. Confused as well? Something was definitely amiss.

"What's this? What's this?" Stephan squinted as he pushed closer. "Flanders, Flanders?" For the merest second, he seemed almost pleased to see him. Had he forgotten they were now bitter enemies? But then he caught sight of Brigid and stopped short. "Ye've found her then? I trust ye'll hand her over."

Heslington slithered toward Stephan, but one of those bodyguards stepped in his path.

"Laird Stephan, I've caught Leesborn and Young Duncan sneaking into the fort to rescue the witch. I've caught them all, ye see."

Stephan blinked rapidly, then his curious expression changed to understanding. "Ah, yes. Witch lovers, like the king. But the king's not here to defend ye, Flanders, is he?"

He scowled again and looked at Robert, then behind him, then around the gathering.
"Where's James, then?"

One of his guards bent close to whisper in his ear, then the blinking commenced again.

"Dead? Oh, yes, yes. Of course."

"Yer lairdship," Heslington interrupted, "I've ordered chains for Young Duncan. He's worth a fine ransom. And I reckoned we'd all be safest if we put Leesborn in the pit with the witch."

"The pit? Yes, of course." Stephan smiled again. "Ye'll join us for supper, Flanders. Gerts will be pleased to see ye."

"Hakon," Heslington barked at the guard who'd whispered in Stephan's ear. "Take our laird back to the longhouse. It's been a trying night with no sleep. He'll need food and a bed."

Hakon whispered again and Stephan nodded. Judging from the concerned look exchanged between the guard and the former steward, their laird wasn't the man in charge.

Heslington dared step closer, then spoke quietly. "It seems I haven't slipped as low as ye imagined, aye?"

With his chin lifted like the Stephan Flanders remembered, the laird strode toward the longhouse on the hillside, oblivious to the shifting glances exchanged by his own men. He was a puppet now, his strings held firmly in Heslington's grasp. And yet, they obeyed him still.

Flanders' gaze swept across the gathered crowd and landed on Wolfy, the wee lad clinging to the leg of a broad-shouldered man with a thick beard and wary eyes. The father's hand rested protectively on the boy's small shoulder, his fingers gripping tight in silent warning. His chest rose and fell in slow, measured breaths, but his jaw was locked, his eyes burning with something dangerous.

Not fear.

Defiance.

The man's gaze flicked toward the pit in the distance, then back to Flanders. Clearly, he and Robert weren't the only ones resisting the urge to act.

And no one had checked the dugout. Thank the gods, they hadn't thought to ask the boy how many men had been searching for the witch. Too young to count, perhaps his ignorance had bought Mael's life.

If Heslington meant to burn all the women in that pit, then this wasn't just cruelty—it was a mistake. Because there were men here who wouldn't stand idle while their wives and daughters turned to ash. All it would take was a spark, the first man bold enough to step forward.

Thank the gods, this fort was days away from an uprising. Hopefully, only hours.

FRIENDS IN LOW PLACES

* * *

Gallabrae's pit was an impressive affair. Hector Stephans was a poor builder, but he knew how to dig.

The hole was twenty feet in diameter and well over twenty feet deep in the ground with its walls and edges reinforced by stones—some of the very ones James Duncan had been ordered to deliver to Gallabrae, one by one. At least some of them had been put to use, though not in the way The Bruce had intended.

The guards forced Flanders and Brigid down a rough-hewn ladder. He went first so he could help Brigid down after him. Robert had been dragged away, and he could only hope the lad would be treated well enough for ransom purposes.

His feet hit the floor with a squelch. The bottom of the pit was mostly mud with a smattering of rocks here and there. There was nothing to keep the rain out, and the storm from that morning had yet to be absorbed. The place stank of wet earth, offal, and fear—a pit used often, then.

As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he realized there were more women in there than he expected. At quick count, fifteen women, one girl. That meant more crying bairns in Gallabrae. That meant more motivated fathers who wouldn't look kindly on Heslington burning their wives and a young daughter.

"Flanders!" Gerts emerged from the shadows and embraced him fiercely. "Ye came for us!"

"Aye, though not quite as I planned." He returned her embrace, then held her at arm's length to examine her. She looked tired, wet, but unharmed. "Are ye well?"

"Well enough." Her eyes shifted to Brigid with recognition and concern. "And ye found Brigid."

Brigid stepped forward, her face drawn with grief. "Gerts."

The older woman pulled her into a gentle embrace. "I am sorry about Bella, child. We tried to stop it."

"Which gave Stephan and Heslington an excuse to put ye here," Flanders said glumly.

Gerts nodded. "Stephan has always been cruel, but Heslington encourages his cruelty. Though lately..." She shook her head. "For days, he's not been himself. A week ago, he was fine."

Brigid wiped a tear from Gerts' cheek. "Age wouldn't cause such a drastic change. And it wouldn't be hensbane, unless ye've doubled the fettle."

"I haven't. But perhaps Heslington has found the garden."

"Or perhaps Heslington has his own poisons."

Flanders frowned. "We saw Hector. He was confused. And Heslington seems to be the one giving orders now."

Gerts cheered. "Well, the men won't stand for that."

Flanders smiled. "Good. That's very good." He looked around at the other women, some huddled together for warmth, others watching them with wary eyes. Some stood apart from the others, balancing on the larger rocks to keep their feet from the mud. "Cheer up, Gerts. Heslington is a fool."

As the afternoon wore on, Flanders paced the perimeter, testing the walls, looking for weaknesses. The stones were solid, but the mortar between them crumbled in places. None of it was sturdy enough to climb. Their only hope lay in intervention from the outside.

Eventually, he settled beside Brigid, who sat with her back against the wall, her knees drawn up to her chest. She seemed lost in thought, her eyes fixed on nothing.

"I've thought of ye often," he said quietly, surprising himself with the admission. "Since that night in the forest."

She turned to look at him, her eyes glistening in the dim light. "Have ye?"

"Aye. I tried to reach ye, in my mind. As ye reached me that night."

A ghost of a smile touched her lips. "I heard ye. Sometimes. When the distance wasn't too great."

"Ye never answered."

"I was afraid," she admitted. "Of what I saw when I touched yer hand. Of what it might mean for us both."

"And now?"

She looked away. "Now Bella is gone, and I'm still here. I don't understand why."

He reached for her hand, hesitated, then took it gently in his. "I'm sorry about Bella. Truly. But I'm not sorry ye're still here."

She didn't pull away. "I saw our death, Flanders. Both of us. And chaos. How can that be, unless I am soon to join her?"

"Perhaps what ye saw hasn't come to pass yet," he suggested. "Or perhaps it changed. The future isn't set, surely."

She gave a weak shrug that signified nothing.

As the light began to fade, Gerts moved among the women, offering comfort and quiet words of encouragement. She had no magic like Brigid, but she had a lifetime of wisdom.

Footsteps approached the edge of the pit. They all looked up to see Heslington's smug face peering down at them.

"Comfortable?" he called down, feigning concern. "I hope so, because it's yer last night on this earth. The laird has agreed that ye should all burn in the morning." His gaze fixed on Flanders. "Maybe we won't bother with a stake. We can just fill this pit with wood and light it from above. Save us the trouble of hauling ye all out."

Flanders stood, his face a mask of calm despite the rage coiling inside him. "Ye're a coward Heslington. It's a wonder Stephan allowed ye in."

Heslington's face flushed red. "We'll see who's the coward when ye're begging for mercy tomorrow."

"I've never begged for anything in my life," Flanders replied with a cold smile. "But I'll wager ye will before this is over. Perhaps ye should practice. Ask me now to forgive ye. Let us see how high yer voice can reach. Give me somethin' to look forward to."

"Empty hopes of a doomed man in a hole," Heslington spat, but his voice wavered slightly.

"Not hopes, but a promise."

The man's eyes narrowed, his face pinched, but he had no clever retort. With a final glare, he turned and stomped away, then yelled, "Bring the ladder to the longhouse! No one escapes!"

Gerts moved to stand beside Flanders. "Ye've rattled him."

"Good. He won't sleep any better than we do tonight."

They settled back into their places as darkness fell. There was but the smallest sliver of a moon whose light didn't make much difference in the pit.

There was movement above. Flanders tensed, ready for whatever might come, but instead of guards or Heslington, a basket was lowered on a rope. Inside it were skins of water. When it lowered the second time, there were loaves of bread and strips of dried meat.

"Take it all, quickly," called a gruff voice from above.

Flanders exchanged a hopeful glance with Gerts. "What did I tell ye?"

Gerts nodded. "The men are with us."

“Aye, but they need a push.” Flanders grabbed hold of the basket before it could rise out of reach. A head peeked over the edge to see what impeded it.

Wolfy’s father. “Let go, man. I cannot lift ye.”

“Listen well,” Flanders hissed. “If ye mean to save yer women, ye’ll need to free them well before dawn, or ye’ll be raisin’ those bairns on yer own! And mark me. Todlaw and Duncan move against Stephan even now. This place will be razed to the ground and yer families with it...unless ye get us all out now.”

The man yanked on the rope again, but Flanders held.

The big beard returned. “What now?”

“Find Young Duncan. Free him. And he’ll help.” He released the basket and it flew up into the darkness.

As they distributed the food among the women, Flanders felt his faith in the men of the Gallabrae grow stronger. Heslington might have Stephan's ear, but he didn't have the hearts of the people. And that would be his downfall.

Brigid touched his arm, her fingers light as a feather. "Ye knew this would happen?"

"I hoped," he admitted. "Men may follow orders, but they love their women more."

She studied his face in the dim light. "And what of ye, Flanders Leesborn? What do ye love more than duty?"

He held her gaze steadily. "I'm beginning to wonder that myself."

Gerts approached them with bread and meat. "Eat now, both of ye. Tomorrow will

test us all."

As they ate, Gerts settled on Flanders' other side. "I've been meaning to ask ye something," she said quietly.

"Ask away."

"Why did ye come? Ye knew it was dangerous. Ye knew Stephan would kill ye if he caught ye."

Flanders glanced at Brigid, who was sharing her bread with the young girl. "I came because I couldn't bear the thought of not trying."

Gerts followed his gaze and smiled knowingly. "Ah, I see." She patted his hand. "Ye know, when I first met ye, I thought ye were just another warrior with more muscle than heart. I'm glad to see I was wrong."

"Don't tell anyone," he said with a wink. "I've a reputation to uphold."

He leaned back against the cold stone wall, watching Brigid across the pit as she comforted the young girl. Even in the midst of her own grief, she found the strength to ease another's fear. Her lively-colored hair caught the faint moonlight, and for a moment, he was transported back to that night in the forest when he'd first felt the strange connection between them.

It surely sounded like folly to feel so drawn to a woman he barely knew. And yet, in this moment, trapped in a pit and facing death, he finally understood why James had been willing to leave everything behind for Phoebe.

Here, in this unlikely place, with death looming over them, he felt more alive than he had in years. He'd spent his life fighting, surviving, and building walls, only to find

something worth living for when those walls were no longer his to protect.

Brigid looked over then, her eyes finding his across the darkness. Something passed between them. A recognition. A certainty. She felt it too—he could see it in her eyes, in the slight parting of her lips, in the way she held his gaze without wavering.

As the women settled for the night, bunched together in a mob, Brigid huddled against him on his right. They didn't speak for a long time, just drawing comfort and warmth from each other.

"If we survive this," she finally whispered, "what then?"

"Then I take ye home," he said simply. "To Todlaw."

She turned to look at him, her face half in shadow. "And if we don't?"

He took her right hand in his left and pulled her closer beneath his arm. "Then I'm glad to have found ye...if only for a day."

She leaned her head against his chest and eventually relaxed. Perhaps she even slept while, above them, that sliver of moon passed from one side of the pit to the other. He listened to the soft breathing of the women around him, to the occasional whisper or quiet sob. He thought of Robert and prayed the lad was safe. He thought of Todlaw, of the people waiting for their return. He thought of their unseen allies.

All their hopes hinged on the love those men had for their women. And if he could only judge by how he felt for Brigid, by how determined he was to see her to safety, to take her home and make her his for the rest of his days, he liked their chances.

DANGLING BY A STURDY THREAD

* * *

Flanders fought sleep like the enemy it was. He'd never been one to nod off during his turn at watch, and that was precisely what this was. Watching for a miracle with death looming at dawn. But the warmth of Brigid against his side, the steady rhythm of her breathing, and the exhaustion of the past two days without sleep conspired against him.

His eyelids fell like heavy stones and he struggled to lift them again. He blinked rapidly, then pinched his thigh and rolled his shoulders. Anything to stay alert.

The stars above the pit shifted slowly, marking the passage of time and causing his eyes to lose focus. He counted them, named them, tried to remember the stories James had told him about the clusters and patterns. Anything to keep his mind working.

But in the end, sleep ambushed him from behind.

He woke with a start, disoriented. How long had he been unconscious?

The pit was alive with silent movement—shadowy figures shifted in the darkness. For a moment, he thought they might be under attack, but then he saw the women were moving with purpose, not panic.

Brigid's heat still lingered beneath his arm, but he couldn't see her. He reached out and caught the feel of her hair, wrapped his hand around her arm.

She started. "What's happening?"

He finally made out her precious face. "Our friends have returned."

A wooden pole, sawn lengthwise, had been lowered into the pit, its surface wrapped with rope at intervals to provide handholds. Above, silhouetted against the night sky, he could make out several heads peering down.

"They're getting us out."

One by one, the women approached the pole. The youngest lass shimmied up with surprising speed. Another woman followed. Then another. A steady stream, like ants marching up a stick.

These weren't pampered ladies but working women, their bodies strong and capable.

He positioned himself beneath the pole, ready to catch anyone who might fall, but none did. They climbed with the agility of squirrels, disappearing over the edge of the pit where helping hands pulled them to safety.

Soon, only Gerts and Brigid remained.

Brigid stepped aside. "Yer turn."

The older woman shook her head, her face pale even in the darkness. "I cannot."

Flanders smiled kindly. "But ye must."

"I shall fall. I ken I will!"

"Then I shall catch ye."

She shook her head again, more firmly this time. "I cannot balance on something so narrow. High places turn my legs to water."

Above, the face of Wolfy's father appeared and he hissed, "What's the delay?"

"She's afraid," Flanders called up.

A long moment later, a rope snaked down into the hole with a large loop tied at the end. Flanders caught it and turned to Gerts. "Up with yer arms, then."

With quaking hands, she did as she was told. He looped the rope around her middle and tied it securely. "Now, hold tight. They'll pull ye up."

She gripped just above her head, her eyes still pleading. "I'll fall."

"Ye won't. The rope will hold. And they will not let go."

With a nod to the men above, Flanders watched as they began to haul Gerts upward. She let out a squeak of terror as her feet left the ground, her body swinging wildly as she tried to find purchase against the pole.

"Stop kicking," Flanders hissed. "Just hang still."

But Gerts couldn't help herself. Her feet danced a frantic jig in midair, sometimes connecting with the pole, sometimes missing entirely as her body rolled back and forth against the wall. Each impact sent her in a new direction, at times, her body twirled like a leaf on a string.

"Sweet Odin's beard," she gasped, her voice a strangled whisper. "I shall surely die!"

"Ye're ten feet off the ground," Flanders countered. "Hardly in danger."

Her legs continued their mad dance, and she let out another squeak as she spun again.

"Up is all that matters, woman. Ye're doin'...fine." He tried very hard not to laugh, but it wasn't easy, despite their dire situation. He wondered if she'd ever get her wide eyes shut again.

Brigid pressed a hand to her mouth, stifling her own mirth.

Finally, Gerts reached the top, where strong hands grabbed her arms and hauled her out of sight.

"Yer turn," Flanders said.

Brigid approached the pole, but he caught her arm and pulled her back to him. "Be careful," he said, suddenly terrified to let her go. Then he kissed her, hard and sure. If it was his only chance, he wanted her to remember it.

Her response was just as fierce. Then she pulled back and sought his eyes. "Let's get out of this hole, aye? Then I'll thank ye to do that again."

His heart hammered against his ribs as she began to climb. Each movement she made drove him mad. She moved too slowly. She moved too fast.

She would fall!

She would get caught!

Something would happen and he'd be the only one left behind. This was all just too good to be believed. Surely, Heslington was waiting at the top, toying with his hopes, poised to dash them to bits.

Odin save him, he would lose his mind before the night was over.

Brigid reached the top and hands reached for her. Then she was gone and all was silent. Too silent. Deathly silent.

Wolfy's father looked for him, then waved impatiently.

Flanders retreated, got a running start, and hurried up the pole barely touching it with his hands. He vaulted over the top and landed with his feet apart, prepared for an attack. But it wasn't Heslington waiting for him....

THE LOVE OF GOOD MEN

* * *

"E asy," Robert whispered, then extended a hand. "Ye're the last?"

Flanders nodded, all but speechless with relief. "Where is she?"

His friend pointed north and they crouched and ran. The women had gathered beneath the wall walk and moved west along it with a handful of rescuers. In a quiet, but steady line, they followed Wolfy's father. And above them, guards moved back and forth, their attention on the hills beyond.

Brigid was waiting for him. At the same time he reached for her hand, she reached for his and together, they joined the end of the column. With the mere connection of their hands, his body filled with a sort of wholeness that warmed him all the way to his frozen ears.

He knew where they were headed. The postern gate—a small, obscured door—was built into a jog in the palisade wall. He'd used it himself many times when he'd wanted inside the fort while avoiding whatever unsavory visitor stood at the front gates.

A lifetime ago, when the crown was secure in The Bruce's hands, James ruled Todlaw, Robert was yet a child, and Flanders was free to roam Scotland in search of

exceptional lasses. Back then, he'd been welcome to stop at Gallabrae for a meal and a warm bed...

It hadn't always been the dreary shambles it was now.

They moved smoothly through the darkness like a large family of mice sneaking along beneath an owl's nose. When the opening of the postern produced a tiny squeak, they all froze.

"Who goes there?" A man looked over the walk just ten feet away. With no rail on the inside, it would be an easy thing to tip him off the edge...

Just ahead of him and Brigid, the man helping Gerts carried a coil of rope on his shoulder. Flanders took it from him and moved toward the guard, making a loop as he went.

"Show yerselves or I'll raise the alarm!"

Flanders stepped out of the shadows and threw the loop high. It caught on the guard's pith helmet and his shoulder, and Flanders pulled him over. He landed on the ground and lost his breath. Before he could catch it again, Robert knocked him unconscious with a hilt to his head, which, unfortunately, made more noise than expected.

No one moved. And though they waited, no one came to investigate. So, the parade continued. Wolfy's father held the gate open while each of them slipped through. There was a fifty-foot stretch of open ground between the wall and the nearest shrubbery that then extended to the forest. But, thanks to the sliver of new moon, off to the west now, the shadow of the trees made for a mottle of dark on dark. Even from above, it would be difficult to pick out movement.

The escapees crossed the expanse in twos and threes. When everyone was safely in

the woods, and only he, Brigid, and Robert remained, they held back and waited for the passing of yet another sentry. Soon, he would wonder where his fellow had gone.

“Now,” Robert whispered, and led the way.

He and Brigid followed, their hands clasped so tight they might never get them apart again.

The taste of the cool night air helped chase away the dank smells of the pit, and Flanders filled his lungs with it. His chilled bones and body had warmed nicely, and the prospect of morning was now a joyful one. At least now, they had a chance.

The women moved with purpose, following a path they seemed to know. Robert brought up the rear, watching for pursuers. Flanders glanced back, now and then, just to be sure the fort was getting smaller, that they weren't caught in a nightmare.

After what seemed like an eternity of walking, the others paused in a clearing. And there, waiting in the shadows, were children and husbands. James had worried what leaving their families would mean to the women, but Wolfy's father and the others must have had their rescue planned long before James had goaded him.

Reunions were silent but for the happy wails of the smallest children. Flanders watched, a lump in his throat, as families found their matriarchs again. Men held their wives with the same passion Flanders had felt when he'd located Brigid in the dugout.

Aye, the love of a good man for his woman had been a safe bet.

Robert moved to the center of the gathering and lifted his arms. "Todlaw welcomes ye all," he said, keeping his voice low but ensuring all could hear. "There's food and shelter a' plenty, and neither man nor woman will suffer for speaking their minds."

Wide smiles widened further.

Mael waved from the far end of the path, holding the leads of their three horses. He warned, "We should move. Dawn isn't far off."

"We'll need to go quickly," Robert said. "Put the children on the horses."

As they prepared to leave, Flanders noticed Gerts standing apart from the others, her face troubled.

He went to her. "What troubles ye?"

She sighed heavily. "Hector is a monster, aye. But I hate to leave him at the mercy of that snake."

Flanders raised an eyebrow. "I thought ye wished Hector dead."

"Auch, I did. I do. But...this seems cruel. The past sennight, he's been a pitiable bairn betimes..."

"A bairn wouldn't have sent ye to the pit. A bairn wouldn't let ye burn."

"True. True." She seemed no more relieved.

"Come to Todlaw, my friend. Come and rest. And we shall decide what to do about yer husband after ye've regained yer strength. Despite what happens to him, we cannot leave the rest of yer people to Heslington in any case. He has a history of allowing people to starve."

Gert nodded, satisfied for the moment at least.

HOME AND HEARTH

* * *

The journey to Todlaw took most of the day. What should have been a direct route became a winding path as they avoided main roads and open spaces, sticking to the cover of forests. The group moved as one, a strange, silent caravan of the displaced.

The fifteen women and one lassie from the pit was now a party of over forty, what with husbands and eleven wee-uns. Some of them rode on their fathers' shoulders or on horseback. The women, despite their ordeal in the pit, showed remarkable resilience. And through it all, Flanders and Robert were prepared for a pursuit that never came.

By the time Todlaw's walls appeared on the horizon, it was late, and the orange of the sunset glowed behind the silhouette of Flanders' beloved home and elicited a collective sigh from its new guests.

Flanders signaled to the watchtower with a whistle, and the gates swung open to receive them. As they filed in, the people of Todlaw filled the outer bailey to see for themselves that their young laird had returned hale and healthy. Word spread quickly, and soon Gerts' people were provided with blankets, hot food, and a warm welcome. Robert took it upon himself to find shelters for them all.

Flanders escorted Lady Stephan to the main tower where she and Brigid were fed.

Despite his protests, women from the kitchens soon came to lead Brigid away, along with Gerts so they could bathe. He realized the stench of the pit had attached itself to him as well, so he hurried to do the same.

* * *

Brigid lowered herself into the giant barrel and silently wept for the joy of being surrounded completely by steaming water. It had been so long since she'd been able to indulge in such luxury, and she'd needed it more than she realized. And not just to remove the stench and soil from the past two days.

Likely due to her gift of premonition, she'd been unable to get warm since they'd set out on their Mabon journey. No matter where she found herself—inside some keep, sitting by a fire, or simply wrapped tight in layers of wool, she'd shivered like a fevered bairn. Perhaps her bones had known how much time she'd be spending in that foul, cursed pit or beneath that pallet, in the dugout, huddled against the cold earth.

Or maybe it was the sure knowledge that death had been waiting for her and her sister.

Heaven only knew why she had been spared. But now, the danger had passed. She was devastated and lost without her other half, but she was safe. There was no doubt Flanders would never allow such monsters near her again, so she should, at the very least, be able to breathe slow and relax a mite. And yet...

She tried to sit perfectly still while the women of Todlaw aided Gerts, and though the water around her had settled, waves bubbled up around her and moved away in tiny circles that quickly flattened and died.

Her body trembled. Violent and steady. And no matter how she concentrated, she

couldn't make it stop. Warm and safe and her worries taken from her, and yet her body was trying to tell her something.

A young woman came to the side of the barrel and smiled, then worried when she met Brigid's eyes. "Auch, lass, what is it?"

"I...I can't make it stop."

"What? The shakin?" She smiled again. "Give it time. I remember when my ma brought me to Todlaw. It took a long while before I truly believed I was safe. Ye're mind might ken it, and yer ears might have heard, but I reckon yer body doesn't yet understand. It doesn't mean ye're broken."

"W...what are ye called?"

"I'm Willa."

"Ye're a comfort, Willa, and I am grateful."

While Willa helped her wash her hair and her body, the shaking continued, and her helper chatted soothingly through it all. Only when she was dry and dressed and seated before a freshly stoked kitchen fire did her body finally stop denying the blessings she'd been given.

* * *

Despite how thorough he was, Flanders still had to wait another hour before Brigid was returned to him. Then she appeared beside the fireplace in the great hall like an angel with a mane of fire-red hair, her face pink from scrubbing, her eyes wet with tears, and a timid smile on her face.

He'd seen her just like this in his dreams, every detail the same, down to the pale green of her robe.

"Ye've built something remarkable here," she said. With her arms wrapped tightly around herself, he assumed she was either cold or unsure, and he had the cure for either. While he distracted her with words, he took hold of her hand and led her to the laird's chair, where he sat and pulled her onto his lap. She noticed every movement but, to his delight, she didn't resist.

"James built it," he said. "I merely maintained it until Young Duncan was grown and able. Though I don't think my old friend ever intended to leave it behind."

"James is legend in our clan. Or rather, the man who...took him away is legend."

"I remember." He settled his arms around her. "Wickham, wasn't it?"

"That is what they say."

"I have always wondered how this...Wickham...knew when and where to come."

She shrugged, her lovely shoulder rubbing against his chest in the doing. "We are told, when anything important or particularly distressing happens to any of us, we are to get word to The Grandfather—the chieftain of the Muir witch clan. Thomas did so after James and his woman were taken away. When Laird Stephan took Bella..." She exhaled carefully and tried again. "Thomas and Torquil wanted to stay, to try to save her, but I insisted they go home, to report it to The Grandfather."

"And delivering this report was more important than yer life?"

Brigid shook her head. "I knew—I could see it—that they both would be taken and they would share our fate if they tried to free us. So, I sent them away to protect

them. I knew my vision would come to be. They couldn't stop it. But then, the women...they saved me."

He pulled her head closer so he could kiss her forehead—a personal gesture of gratitude. "So, is there anything ye believe this grandfather can do for ye?"

She shrugged again. "I cannot imagine what. Thomas said only that he wrote about Wickham and James and the woman in the margins of his book."

"He recorded that James Duncan and Phoebe were taken away...by Wickham."

"Yes."

He chuckled. "Well, perhaps James will think it amusing when he reads this book in the future."

She smiled. "You believe they went to the future?"

"I do. Someday, I'll explain. Someday, when we've run out of things to talk about."

She smiled and laid her head on his shoulder, and he marveled at how harmoniously their bodies melded together. For a long while, they simply listened to the crackling of the burning wood. And when she spoke again, she didn't raise her head.

"Flanders?"

"Aye?"

"Do ye suppose the chaos is behind us? Or yet to come?"

"Auch, we're together now. Will it matter?"

* * *

When she began to fall asleep in his arms, he took pity on her and carried her to the stairwell and to his chamber on the upper level. He'd had his things tucked away and a fire lit. Fresh linens on the bed, a heavy blanket, and someone had placed a cup of wildflowers on the table.

"This is too grand," she protested.

"Nonsense. Ye're a guest."

She raised an eyebrow. "Is that what I am? A guest?"

He pulled her against him and held her there. She was the dream he'd longed for and the answer to that dream, but he worried he might frighten her if he admitted as much. But neither did he wish her to misunderstand him, which she might if he quibbled.

"Ye're whatever ye wish to be," he said carefully. "Todlaw is yers for as long as ye desire it."

She studied him. "And what of its laird? Is he mine as well?"

He could not hide his delight. "Auch, lass, I've been yers since that night in the forest, though I didn't truly know it until I thought ye dead."

"And now that ye know I live?"

He chuckled. "Now...now I think I should catch my tongue in my teeth lest I frighten ye away. Besides, I should promise nothing until Stephan and Heslington are dealt with."

Her smile disappeared. "Ye mean to go back."

"Aye."

"When?"

"At first light."

She nodded slowly, as if she'd expected this. "I'm coming with ye."

"Not for all the world!"

"Yer permission is irrelevant."

Flanders realized that with this woman, he would have to pick his words carefully. "See reason. I cannot do what I must do if I must also see to yer protection. Need I remind ye that ye nearly died there once already?"

"And yet, here I stand." She lifted her chin defiantly. "I mean to avenge my sister."

"And I mean to do that avenging for ye. If ye'll but stay where I ken ye are safe?—"

"Safe?" She scoffed. "If my death is at hand, if my vision was truly for both Bella and me, it matters not where I go. My death will come. Besides," she smiled to one side, "my magic might prove useful."

"Magic won't stop a sword."

"No, but it might prevent the need for one."

He studied her face, saw the determination there, and knew he was fighting a losing

battle. "Ye're a stubborn woman, are ye?"

Pain flared in her eyes. "Aye. A family trait, I'm afraid."

Flanders understood what he must do, but he feigned surrender. "Very well. But ye stay behind me at all times. And if I say run, ye run. No arguments."

She nodded. "Agreed."

"Sleep," he said, and stepped back, though he dearly wanted to linger. "Tomorrow will come soon enough."

"Flanders." Her voice stopped him. When he turned, she was standing in the center of the room, suddenly looking small and vulnerable. "Will ye stay? Just for a wee while?"

"Nay, lass. When the two of us make our memories, I'll have no others standin' in the way. But I'll sit outside yer door for a mite, until ye sleep."

She nodded. "But tell me, what will ye do when ye face Stephan and Heslington?"

Flanders had been asking himself the same. "What needs to be done," he answered. "No more, no less."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one I have."

She studied his eyes as if searching his soul, his heart. "Ye're not a cruel man, Flanders Leesborn. Don't become one to answer their cruelty."

He managed a simple nod and took his leave.

While he sat outside her door he wondered if she'd had a glimpse of tomorrow and knew what he might be compelled to do. And if so, he hoped it was only a glimpse, lest she see all he was capable of.

SHOULDN'T 'A DONE THAT

* * *

At dawn, Flanders realized he needn't have locked Brigid in his chambers after all. Obviously, she wouldn't have willingly stayed behind, but that no longer mattered—she wouldn't be leaving Todlaw anytime soon...and neither would anyone else.

Long before the sun reached the eastern horizon, Laird Stephan and every man at arms that was compelled to answer his call surrounded the substantial curtain wall built by James Duncan. Thankfully, all the bonnet farmers from the area were safely inside, and the young Laird Duncan appeared quite prescient for having his castle siege-ready.

Except for Bella Muir's, not another life had been lost—as yet.

Alas, that wouldn't be the case when it all came to an end. Flanders would see to that.

Robert took his time, making his way toward the gate, waving and wishing his people good morrow as he pulled on his gloves to greet his new visitors. And since the young buck seemed to have a plan, Flanders remained on the ground, dressed and ready for whatever was required of him.

A loud screech escaped from the keep at Robert's back, but he kept coming. His eyes

widened briefly before he gave Flanders a wink. “Prepare yerself,” he said. “They’ve let her out.”

No need to explain who she was.

The laird took the steps two at a time as if he would much rather speak with Stephan than deal with the woman who had, only temporarily, been locked in his home.

“Laird Stephan,” he shouted cheerfully. “Look how well ye sit a horse this morn. I had wondered if ye might ever do so again, after the state we found ye in yesterday!”

The men on the wall laughed, insinuating that the tale had well and truly spread. Unable to control his curiosity, Flanders climbed to the wall walk just west of the gatehouse, to see how their neighbor was handling the barb. The red of Stephan’s face was all the answer he needed.

“I’ve come for two things, Young Duncan,” Stephan announced. “First, I’ve come to retrieve my people—the ones ye kidnapped in the night. I’ve already sent a list of yer sins to Stirling, but if ye release them to me immediately, perhaps our regent will be lenient in yer punishment.”

“No.” That was all. Robert didn’t bother to elaborate or explain himself. There was no need.

“Then we shall await the verdict together.”

Stephan seemed surprisingly alert considering his condition of the day before. The question was, would it last? Would he suddenly wonder how he’d arrived at Todlaw’s gates?

The Rat Laird signaled to a pair of men who quickly dismounted and moved close to

the gate, one of them leading a horse with a wrapped body lying across its back. The men reached for the ties that secured the burden, then paused.

“Second order of business is to return yer spy.” Stephan waved a hand and the ties were pulled. The body was yanked roughly from the back of the beast and it landed on the ground with a lifeless thud.

Flanders immediately turned to scan the courtyard for Mael, the brave man who had proven crucial in the triumphs of the previous day. He couldn’t imagine when their talented spy might have been captured between Gallabrae and Todlaw, without any of them noticing.

A gasp drew his attention back to the wall. The covering had been removed from the corpse, but it wasn’t Mael. It was Heslington who stared, sightless, at the morning sky.

This explained the Rat Laird’s morning clarity. The two people who might have kept him fettled and out of sorts were his wife, who was now safely inside the curtain wall, and the man who lay dead at his feet.

One down, one more to go.

Flanders could see Robert resisting the urge to turn and look at him. Likewise, he would like nothing better than to consult with his friend on how they should handle the accusation. But in the end Robert hadn’t needed his advice.

“I’m afraid ye’re wrong about Heslington. We simply sent the spy back to his true master.”

Stephan smirked. “Well, then, I suppose the Regent must decide who has been spying upon whom. That is, if ye still refuse to return my people to me.”

“Aye. I do. Feel free to enjoy our dirt whilst ye wait.” Robert gestured to the expanse of land that surrounded Todlaw on all sides. To prevent an enemy from catching them unawares, all trees and tall growth had been cleared away so the horizon was visible in all directions. And anyone laying siege to the place would remain in plain view. So there was little to shelter Stephan and his troops unless they brought them along.

Robert turned away from his visitor as if suddenly bored and moved to the stair. Once he was out of Stephan’s view, however, he hurried down the steps, sober as a priest. Flanders caught up with him halfway to the keep, where the war counsel would be gathering.

He stated the obvious.

“The Regent is too busy to come.”

Robert nodded. “Aye. The quandary is whom he will send in his stead?”

“And why does Stephan seem so confident?”

“You suppose he only pretends to know something we do not?”

“I wish I could say otherwise, but I don’t believe he is.”

“I thought...I worried it was Mael.”

“So did I. I’ve sent Mason to find the man and tell him to shave his beard, cut his hair, and find new clothes. And above all, to stay well away from the walls.”

Robert finished the sentence with him, and they laughed. Then the lad’s eyes flew wide and he came to a halt.

“What is it?”

“I forgot about yer woman.”

Together, they lifted their eyes to the top of the steps where Brigid Muir stood in a warm shaft of sunshine. She wore a rich green kirtle with long sleeves attached, and though her hair had been tamed, glints of gold and red still danced around her head like tiny knives of light. The way she linked her fingers demurely in front of her was just as deceptive for, even at a distance, her smile unnerved him. And for a moment, Flanders considered turning away.

But there was a fight overdue—and it wasn’t the one waiting at the gates.

“Favor me,” Robert said, as they started up the steps.

“I can try.”

“Make it well and clear that I had nothing to do with yer decision to lock her in.”

* * *

“Good morn, gentlemen.” Brigid held a practiced smile in place as her rescuers reached the narrow landing. She pushed the door wide and stepped back to allow them inside the keep. By the glances they exchanged, she had already made them nervous. And she tried not to enjoy that fact. After all they’d done for her, she should be nothing but grateful.

But that didn’t mean they should be trusted. Or rather, it didn’t mean Flanders could be trusted again. Looking back, she was certain he’d lied intentionally when he’d promised she could go with him back to the fort. He’d known his plan before he took his leave. Then as soon as she’d fallen asleep, he’d locked her inside the bedchamber.

Granted, he hadn't gone off without her, but would have if he could have.

And now, he had more important things to deal with than her. But at least he knew that a reckoning was coming.

She breathed in the warmth of the morning sun and followed them inside. Like a silly puppy, she waited to see if Flanders might have something kind to say before he was swept into the tide of men headed for the war room. The women in the kitchens warned her not to get her hopes up, that now, with the enemy at their gates, the men would think of nothing but the fight, and that to distract them would be selfish.

She had learned, before her morning rant was through, that Flanders Leesborn was beloved by his people, and she would find no one to take her side against him—justified or not.

She'd awakened with tears on her cheeks, an ache for her sister, and vengeance in her heart—only to discover she'd been betrayed by the man she'd mooned over for years. And then, to be told that man was too sainted to be questioned—it was not to be born!

And yet, here she was, bearing it.

Robert started up the stairs to the upper floor but stopped to look back at Flanders, who had not followed.

"Go on," Flanders told him. "I shall join ye presently."

Robert glanced at Brigid, gave an understanding nod, then went on. Flanders turned to her and held out a hand. She hesitated long enough to make him worry, but finally laid her hand in his. He wasn't smiling when he pulled her close and wrapped a hand around her back to keep her from escaping.

“Brigid.”

“Flanders.”

“I owe ye an apology.”

She breathed in those words and found them much more satisfying than the warmth of the morning sun, but still, she withheld her smile and held her tongue. No need to interrupt a good apology.

“I lied to ye. I let ye believe that I would allow ye back in harm’s way, because ye wanted it so badly. I wanted to make ye happy. Oh, how dearly I wanted to make ye happy, but I care about ye too much to allow it. And I should have said so. No matter how I might have angered ye, I should have told ye the truth.”

The resentment simmering inside her ceased boiling. That feeling of betrayal changed into something else entirely. And damn him, she hadn’t had a chance to say all the things she’d rehearsed. But there was still something...

“I understand, Laird Leesborn. I do. And I shall forgive ye this time. With all that happened, we were forced together by a storm of sorts. What we might have felt...perhaps we were desperate to belong to...someone. But the storm is over?—”

“It is not.” He made a broad gesture toward the enemy outside.

“Ye ken what I mean. I can see it in yer eyes. Ye’re relieved to know I won’t expect anything from ye.”

He pulled her closer and pressed his lips to hers, demanding she react as she had the night before. And naturally, she couldn’t refuse. But when she was finally allowed to take a breath, he laid his fingers across her mouth before she could speak.

“I am relieved, lass, that ye accepted my apology. But I can see ye’re disappointed. Ye were hoping for a fight, and I’ve robbed ye, plain and simple. So, if ye’re still wishin’ for a stramash, after this business with Stephan is done...” He pecked her lips yet again. “Just keep insistin’ that we don’t belong together, and I’ll oblige ye.”

He released her gently, like he was setting a wild animal free and worried it might come back at him. Then he grinned and left her standing there with nothing to do but watch his backside while he climbed the stairs.

Hot-faced and speechless, she was grateful they hadn’t had an audience. Or so she thought.

When she turned around, she found half the household standing in the entrance to the great hall, grinning like well-fed cats.

THE WAR CHAMBER

* * *

The war chamber sat at the top of Todlaw's main tower, a circular room with narrow windows that allowed those inside to see in all directions. A massive oak table dominated the center, its surface scarred from years of daggers stabbed into maps and fists pounded in frustration or triumph.

Flanders entered to find Robert already seated, along with Hemming, the captain of the guard, a stocky man with a face that looked as if it had been carved from granite by a blind man in a foul mood. Snorre, the master of scouts, lounged against the wall, his lanky frame deceptively relaxed. Rolf, the bald-headed, long bearded quartermaster with wild eyebrows, stood at the window, watching Stephan's men with narrowed eyes.

"Ah, the man of the hour," Hemming said with a smirk as Flanders took his seat. "Some of us didn't need the screech of a banshee to wake us this morning. We were already up and about our duties."

The others chuckled, but Flanders merely raised an eyebrow. "And yet, here ye sit, no more prepared than I."

"Touché," Hemming conceded with a nod. "Though I must say, I've never heard such colorful language from a lady's lips. Particularly the bit about yer ancestry and what

ye might do with yer own sword."

"Enough," Robert cut in, though his lips twitched with amusement. "We have more pressing matters than Flanders' lady love."

"Love?" Snorre pushed off from the wall. "Is that what we're calling it now? I thought it was more akin to a bear poking a beehive."

Flanders ignored them all and spread his hands on the rough table. "What do we know of Stephan's movements? How many men?" There was no need for leadership in the room. Not with these men.

The teasing ceased immediately.

"Brought two hundred eighty-four that we can count," Rolf reported. "Impressive for just a day's notice. Though there may be more beyond the pass. Supplies are trickling in."

"And the message to Stirling?" Robert asked. "Any idea what it contained?"

Hemming shook his head. "Their rider left before dawn. Fast horse, light load. He'll reach Stirling in two days."

"And what of our own messenger?" Flanders asked.

"Sent last night, just after we arrived," Robert confirmed. "Our fastest horse and best rider. He should arrive first, if luck holds."

Flanders nodded, satisfied. "Now, to the heart of it. What game does Stephan play? He cannot truly believe Thomas Randolph will order us to release his people so he can burn them as witches."

"Especially not his own wife," Snorre added. "Lady Stephan is nobility in her own right. Her family has connections."

"Connections that haven't helped her much all these years," Hemming pointed out.

Robert drummed his fingers on the table. "The worry is his confidence. Did ye see his face? He believes he'll win this."

"Aye," Flanders agreed. "And with Heslington dead, who's feeding him that belief? The man's lucid again. Back to his bastard self."

Rolf had a thought. "Perhaps he learned something from Heslington."

The men fell silent, each lost in thought. Flanders stared at the map spread before them, tracing the boundaries between Todlaw and Stephan's lands.

"What if it's not about the witches at all?" he said suddenly. "What if that's merely the excuse?"

Robert frowned. "What do ye mean?"

"Think on it. Stephan has wanted Todlaw since James first built it. The Bruce denied him, but The Bruce is dead. What if he's convinced Randolph to redraw the lines, to revisit his claim that James still owed him a great reward?"

"Impossible," Hemming scoffed. "The Bruce's decree was clear. Todlaw belongs to James Duncan's heir, his brother."

"Aye, but what if Stephan claims Robert isn't James' true heir?" Flanders pressed. "They are foster brothers, after all."

Robert's face darkened. "Let him try. Every man, woman, and child in the glen knows I'm James Duncan's brother."

"By blood, no," Flanders reminded him gently. "By choice, aye. But in the eyes of the law?"

"The king himself recognized me as his heir," Robert insisted. "That should be enough."

"The Regent must honor that," Snorre said firmly. "He needs The Bruce's allies, which include Stout Duncan. He won't risk alienating them or losing any of them to Balliol's side."

"Unless," Rolf said, "Stephan has offered him something he wants more. Only, what could Randolph want more than to continue as Regent, and to see David safely on the throne?"

The room fell silent again as they considered this possibility. They'd fought beside the man in question and knew him well enough to be certain he wouldn't hand Scotland back to an ally of England, which Edward Balliol was.

Hemming gently hammered at the wall with his fist while he thought aloud. "What could Stephan possibly offer anyone? Just how much wealth can the man have?" Hemming asked.

No one had an answer.

"There's another possibility," Snorre said after a moment. "What if Stephan doesn't expect Randolph to rule in his favor at all? What if the message to Stirling is merely a distraction?"

Flanders straightened. "Go on."

"What if his real plan is to attack before any messenger returns? To take Todlaw by force and present Randolph with a fait accompli?"

Robert shook his head. "With two hundred eighty men against our walls? He'd need ten times that number."

"Unless he has allies we don't know about," Hemming suggested. "Or a way inside we haven't considered."

They spent the next hour examining every possibility, every potential weakness in Todlaw's defenses. They discussed secret tunnels (there were none), traitors within their ranks (unlikely), and even the possibility of Stephan having some new weapon or strategy they hadn't encountered before.

By the time the sun climbed high enough to shine directly through the southern window, they were no closer to an answer.

"Perhaps we're overthinking this," Flanders said at last, putting his feet on the table and tipping his chair back. "Perhaps Stephan is simply mad. The years of hensbane may have addled his wits beyond repair."

Robert managed a smile. "Illusory confidence? We can always hope."

A knock at the door interrupted them. Servants entered with trays of food – bread still warm from the ovens, cold meats, cheese, and ale. The men fell on the meal with enthusiasm, their discussion happily postponed.

As they ate, Flanders' thoughts went to Brigid. He wondered how she was digesting his last declaration. But he'd been perfectly serious, not just trying to distract her. If

the lass fancied a good fight, it only made her more appealing. As long as she didn't try to set his beard on fire when he came in for a kiss...

The thought made him smile.

Hemming noticed. "Thought of something clever, have ye?"

Flanders choked on a fresh cherry and washed it down with a swig while he thought of a reply other than the truth. "Just thinking that for all our worrying, we might be missing something obvious."

"Such as?" Robert asked around a mouthful of bread.

"I don't know. But I can't shake the feeling we're looking in the wrong direction."

Snorre nodded thoughtfully. "Perhaps we should ask the witch."

"Her name is Brigid," Flanders said sharply.

"Aye, Brigid then," Snorre amended with a knowing glance at the others. "But my point stands. She might have...insights we lack."

"She's a healer and herb-woman," Flanders protested, though even as he said it, he remembered her vision of death and chaos. The vision that had come true for her sister.

"Still," Robert mused, "she may know something."

Flanders shook his head. "No. But there is a woman we should have added to our council. I shall speak with her."

"Assuming she'll speak to ye," Hemming muttered with a grin.

"I refer to Lady Stephan. Surely, she'll know her husband's mind better than anyone. If Stephan has a secret move to make, she'll ken it."

18

NOT SO COMPLICATED

* * *

B rigid found Gerts in a small chamber above stairs sorting through a basket of clothing. The older woman's face brightened when she saw her, though the smile held back a world of grief. She retreated to a long bench and patted the empty space beside her.

"Come sit with me, child."

Brigid joined her and together, they held hands and listened to the distant bustling of a castle preparing for a siege.

"I am sorry," Gerts said quietly. "Bella was a joy."

An unexpected sob caught Brigid off guard. "I keep turning to tell her something, and she's not there."

Gerts set aside her wad of clothing, took Brigid into her arms, and let her weep until she was exhausted. A great storm had been brewing inside her and now that it had been unleashed, there was no reining it back. And through it all, Gerts held on.

Finally, the wave of grief began to ebb, and she straightened and mopped her face. "We could speak through our thoughts, did ye know that? We didn't need words."

Brigid swallowed back another sob for fear of starting all over again. "Now there's just...silence."

Gerts nodded, her eyes glistening. "I remember how the two of ye would laugh, suddenly, as if ye'd heard the same jest, when not a word was spoken. So aye, I suspected as much."

"It was four years ago we saw our deaths in yer forest. I was always so certain it would be the both of us."

"And yet, here ye are." Gerts squeezed her fingers. "Perhaps ye were spared for a reason."

"A reason for her and not for me?"

"No one can know, lass. But remember that Bella would rejoice that ye were spared, so ye should do the same. To do otherwise is to mock her memory."

For the first time since it happened, Brigid felt the weight of a sister's responsibility lighten, if only a little. But it was enough to give her a dose of hope. Maybe her duty wasn't to grieve for the rest of her life after all. Bella certainly wouldn't want that.

She considered her friend. "How can ye be so calm? Yer husband sits outside these walls, demanding the return of us all."

Gerts snorted, some of her usual spirit back in her smile. "Hector doesn't want me back because he misses me. He hates to lose, especially to Flanders Leesborn."

"Why especially?"

"Because Flanders was James Duncan's right hand, and James was the bane of

Hector's existence." Gerts chuckled. "That man drove my husband to distraction. James with his clever words, almost magical fighting skills, and his strange ways..."

"Magical fighting?"

"Auch, ye'd have to see it to believe it. Taught Flanders and all his fighting men as well. The Bruce favored no man without good reason."

"In any case, I am relieved ye're quit of that man."

"What I'm relieved of is cultivating all that hensbane, of sneaking out to harvest it. Relieved of the ruses to get him to drink it. Relieved of my duty to protect the others. Let someone else step up now."

"A sad marriage to be sure."

"No marriage at all. Now, tell me how ye feel about our handsome rescuer. I heard ye this morn. Tell me ye don't truly wish him roastin' on a spit with his own longsword."

Heat rushed to Brigid's cheeks. "I didn't say?—"

"Aye, ye did. Only ye suggested he skewer himself." Gerts winked. "A fine trick, though if anyone could manage it..." Then she laughed.

Brigid groaned and covered her face. "I was angry."

"We heard." Gerts pried Brigid's hands away from her face. "What did the poor man do?"

"He lied to me." Brigid sighed. "He promised I could go with him back to Gallabrae,

then he locked me in the bedchamber while I slept."

Gerts stared at her for a long moment, then laughed again. "Oh, child. My husband planned to burn me alive, and ye're upset because Flanders wanted to keep ye safe?"

"It's not that simple," Brigid protested. "He looked me in the eye and lied."

"And saved yer life in the process." Gerts shook her head. "Some men try to prove their love with pretty words and gifts. Others show it by making sure ye live to see another sunrise."

"Love? No, it's not that. He feels responsible for me now, that's all."

"Is it?" Gerts raised an eyebrow. "I saw the way he looked at ye in the pit. That wasn't duty in his eyes."

Brigid looked away. Though she lived through the same hellish night, the woman didn't understand, and Brigid wouldn't try to explain. "I just need him to realize that he owes me nothing. He's done enough for me already."

"Owes ye nothing?" Gerts hummed. "Ye think a man like Flanders Leesborn does anything he doesn't want to do?"

Before Brigid could respond, they heard footsteps and looked up. Flanders himself filled the doorframe. His eyes found hers immediately, and something in her chest tightened at the delight in his gaze.

"Ladies," he greeted them with a slight bow. "I'm not interrupting?"

"Not at all," Gerts said, patting the bench on her other side. "Join us."

He settled beside them, his broad shoulders making the space suddenly small. "I came to speak with ye, Gerts. About yer husband."

"Ah." Gerts nodded. "I heard he's back to his nasty self now that Heslington's dead."

"Aye. And that's what concerns me." Flanders leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "He seems certain he'll win this standoff. Do ye ken any reason he might believe The Regent would side with him?"

Gerts frowned, considering. "I can think of nothing. Hector has some friends at court, but he never speaks of them to me, and I pay little attention to his braggin' to others."

"Could he have discovered something? Have some leverage over Thomas Randolph?"

"Nothing I've heard." Gerts shook her head. "But if he's true to his old form, he won't wait for The Regent's decision. He'll strike now, before anyone can order him not to. Blame someone else for not stopping him soon enough. That's his way."

"Then nothing has changed."

"And The Regent can't punish him for what is The Regent's own fault." Gerts' eyes narrowed. "And be prepared. He'll have two thousand men ready to scale the walls by morning."

Flanders cursed under his breath. "That's what I feared."

"No doubt it is why he is so confident. And remember, he has ever planned to scale yer curtain wall since the moment he saw it."

Brigid was shocked the woman could speak so casually about something that might

mean death for them both.

Flanders' gaze shifted to her and his voice softened. "How do ye fare?"

She wanted to reach for him, to feel his arms around her as she had the night before. To let him make her feel safe again, to give her hope. But she held back. He'd done enough. More than enough.

"I'm well," she said stiffly.

A flicker of hurt crossed his face before he masked it. "Good. That's...good."

Gerts looked between them and rolled her eyes. "Saints preserve us from stubborn fools."

Flanders stood. "I should return to the war council. Gerts, if ye think of anything else that might help us guess his plan, find me."

"I will."

He hesitated, his eyes finding Brigid's once more. "Will ye join us for the evening meal?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice.

With a final bow, he left, his broad shoulders filling the doorway before he disappeared from view, and she was left, once again, to watch his backside moving away from her.

Gerts rolled her eyes. "Ye're a fool, girl."

"Am I?"

"That man would move mountains for ye, and ye push him away because he tried to keep ye safe?"

"It's not so simple," Brigid protested again.

"It never is," Gerts agreed. "But sometimes, it is not so complicated."

THE BUILDING STORM

* * *

Days passed with maddening slowness. Flanders spent his waking hours on the walls, overseeing the preparations for an attack that never came. Stephan's men remained camped outside Todlaw's walls, neither advancing, multiplying, nor retreating, simply...waiting.

Brigid watched the Viking-like laird from afar, noting the deepening lines of worry on his face whenever their paths crossed. Which was less and less often.

* * *

At the evening meal on the third day, Brigid found herself seated at the high table beside Gerts with an empty chair between them where Flanders should have been. The hall buzzed with conversation, but a tension hung in the air like a cloud of smoke.

"He's been on the wall since midday," Gerts said, following Brigid's gaze to the empty seat. "Counting arrows, I believe."

"Again?" Brigid tore her bread into small pieces, not really hungry. "He counted them yesterday."

"Aye, and he'll count them tomorrow too, I reckon. " Gerts smiled knowingly. "Men need to feel useful when they're worried."

Robert Duncan appeared at the table, his face flushed from exertion, his clothes smeared with something dark. His stench was nearly enough to put them off their meal.

He nodded to both women before taking his seat. "My apologies for the delay. We've been moving the last of the oil barrels to the east wall." He reached for a cup of ale. "We're more than ready. From all sides."

"And yet Laird Stephan makes no move," Brigid said.

Robert shrugged. "That's what troubles us. Near three hundred men don't sit idle without purpose."

"Perhaps his purpose is to starve us out," Gerts suggested.

"With our stores? We could last through winter." Robert tore into a leg of fowl. "No, he waits for something. Or someone. But it doesn't matter who comes. No one will get through the curtain wall James Duncan built. Though they're welcome to die tryin'."

The meal continued without Flanders. Brigid found herself glancing at the door more often than she cared to admit.

* * *

Flanders stood on the north wall, watching the enemy camp through narrowed eyes. Torches flickered among the tents, and men moved about with casual ease. Too casual.

"They're not preparing for battle," Hemming observed beside him.

"No. They're not."

He thought of Brigid, likely at supper now. He'd meant to join her, to steal a few moments of peace amid the preparations. But each time he resolved to seek her out, some new task demanded his attention.

Perhaps it was for the best. She'd made it clear she wished for distance between them. Let her have it, then. When this business with Stephan was finished, he'd have time to get her sorted.

And the distance between them would be gone for good.

* * *

The fourth day dawned bright and clear. Brigid spent the morning in the herb garden, grateful for the work. Her hands moved with practiced skill, harvesting what was needed, preparing tinctures for the inevitable wounded, and encouraging growth with an innocent but powerful song—whenever she was alone.

A shadow fell across her work. She looked up to find Flanders standing there, his broad shoulders blocking the sun.

"Ye look well," he said, his voice gruff with fatigue, she was sure.

"As do ye." She stood and brushed dirt from her skirts. "Are ye weary yet?"

"Aye." He shifted his weight, suddenly awkward. "I came to ask if ye need anythin'."

"I have all I require, thank ye."

A silence stretched between them and she was compelled to reach out to him, but before she could lift her hands?—

"Good, then." He nodded and turned to go, and she couldn't bear it.

"Flanders." Her voice stopped him. "Be careful on the walls. The sun is strong today."

He smiled, the first genuine smile she'd seen in days. "I shall try to remember. But a storm is comin'. I feel it." The mention of a storm, while looking into her eyes, sent a fissure of cold up her back.

Then he was gone, striding toward the keep, and Brigid returned to her herbs, wondering if he'd felt the same.

She resisted reaching out with her mind. Distracting him now would indeed be selfish.

* * *

That evening, Flanders made a point to attend the meal in the great hall. He found Brigid already seated, deep in conversation with one of the women from Gallabrae. She glanced up as he approached, her expression unreadable.

"May I join ye?" he asked, gesturing to the empty seat beside her.

"Of course." She moved slightly to make more room—or possibly to gain more distance, he couldn't know.

He sat, acutely aware of her nearness and the scent of rosemary that clung to her always.

"Any change?" she asked, nodding toward the south.

"None. They sit and wait, and we watch them sit and wait."

"A thrilling battle."

He chuckled despite himself. "Indeed. But we've done all we can. I only hope whatever the bastard has in mind can't get through our defenses. After all, even elephants can be killed."

For a brief moment, the tension eased. Then Robert approached with news of a scout's return, and Flanders was pulled away once more.

* * *

By the sixth day, Brigid had established a routine. Mornings in the garden unless it was raining, afternoons tending to the children and elderly, evenings in the great hall where she might catch a glimpse of Flanders if he remembered to eat.

She told herself she was content. She couldn't go home, but she was safe for the time being. And she had many friends to help her while away the hours. Not much to complain about when so many had been displaced because the mad laird to the east couldn't be trusted with the wellbeing of his own people.

One day soon, this would all end. Flanders would be eager to see her gone, and she would be eager to go. She was nearly certain that time and distance would heal them both. After all, what they'd shared was merely happenstance and circumstance. Yet each time he entered a room, her heart betrayed her by tripping over itself.

Thankfully, no one else would ever know.

* * *

"Ye're a fool," Gerts told her bluntly as they sorted through jars of remedies, preparing for a battle that might not come, while the rain poured hard and fast outside.

"I beg yer pardon?"

"Ye heard me." The older woman's eyes twinkled. "Ye push 'im away then pine for 'im when he goes."

"I do not pine."

"O'course not. And I'm the Queen of France. I've seen how ye watch him."

Brigid's cheeks warmed. "It's...difficult to look away."

"At least ye've ceased calling it complicated. That's progress."

Was it?

How could such a simple word make her feel so...light?

* * *

On the seventh day, just as the morning storm blew out like a candle in the wind, a horn sounded to the east and all men flooded to the walls. Flanders strode with Robert to the gate, where Todlaw men had been enjoying the view of the enemy getting pummeled into the mud by a brief but furious rain.

Two riders. As they neared, they recognized the established Royal Banner of

Scotland with the lion rampant.

When they stopped outside the gates, Stephan didn't bother joining them, but stood outside his tent and sent one of his men in his stead. When the messenger realized he wouldn't get more of an audience, he produced a scroll, which he unrolled with much flourish.

"At last," Robert muttered.

"His Majesty, The Regent to King David the Second, regrets that he cannot intervene in what he considers a local dispute. He suggests ye settle the matter between yerselves."

Just as Flanders expected.

Robert wasn't satisfied. "And what of Stephan's claims?" he demanded. "What charges?"

The messenger shook his head. "I know of none, Laird Duncan."

Robert exchanged a puzzled look with Flanders, then pressed again. "Hector Stephan sent no message?"

"Not unless it arrived after I was dispatched, three days ago."

Robert waved for the gates to open to allow the messengers inside. "Refresh yerselves. And give The Regent our thanks." He turned back to Flanders and the rest of the war council. "Our man saw his rider leave."

"Perhaps he never reached Stirling," Hemming suggested.

"Or perhaps," Flanders said slowly, "Stirling was not his destination."

* * *

That night at supper, Flanders sought out Brigid deliberately. He found her sitting alone by the hearth, staring into the flames.

"Good even."

She looked up, surprised. "Good even."

He sat beside her, closer than necessary. "I've missed ye," he said simply.

Her eyes widened. "Ye've been busy."

"Aye. Too busy." He took her hand, half expecting her to pull away. She didn't. "But I find myself thinking of ye even when I should be counting arrows or inspecting the walls."

A small smile curved her lips. "Is that so?"

"It is." He squeezed her hand gently. "When this is over?—"

A horn blast from the walls cut him off. Three short blasts – the signal for approaching riders.

Flanders was on his feet in an instant. "Stay here," he told Brigid, then rushed out the door, leaving her to guess at what he might have said.

* * *

“Horn from the east,” the sentry announced as Flanders ran to the top of the wall. Robert joined him just as the riders came into view. Five men. Four of them guards. A banner of red and gold. But whose?

Three gold stars on a red field—the banner of Thomas Randolph, The Regent himself.

How many times had he fought beneath that very flag?

But no. The Earl of Moray, Regent to the child king, would have dressed better. And he’d have come by coach, not as the soldier he once was. This was someone lesser. A puppet. But whose?

Flanders was afraid he already knew.

THE ELEPHANT UP THE RAT'S SLEEVE

* * *

The riders approached the gate with haste, trying to reach their destination before full darkness fell. Their horses were lathered and their heads hung low from a hard journey. The youngest among them, a man with a confident bearing and rich garments, rode slightly ahead of the others. Despite the evident weariness of his mount, his own face showed little fatigue as he reined to a stop before Todlaw's gates.

Robert and Flanders stood atop the wall, watching as the party halted at a respectful distance.

"Hail, Todlaw!" the young nobleman called, his voice carrying easily on the moist evening air. "I seek audience with Laird Robert Duncan."

Robert nodded. "I am he. State yer business."

The man bowed slightly from his saddle. "I am David Strathbogie, Earl of Atholl, sent by Thomas Randolph, Earl of Moray and regent to King David." He reached into his tunic and withdrew a sealed parchment. "I come with full authority to settle the dispute between yerself and Laird Stephan."

Flanders stiffened at the Strathbogie name. Here was the son of a traitor who'd fought against The Bruce in the Wars of Scottish Independence. Only after the tide turned at

Bannockburn did the family pledge their loyalty to Scotland's true king. And now this pup, barely older than Robert, was sent to judge them?

Robert's face remained impassive, but his knuckles were white. He'd been a new babe when Bannockburn was fought. This Strathbogie had been all of five.

"We welcome the Regent's interest," Robert replied carefully. "Though we received word just hours ago that he considered this a local matter."

"Aye, that messenger was sent before my appointment." Atholl held up the parchment. "This grants me authority to resolve this as I see fit."

Flanders noted that Stephan made no move to approach the gates this time, nor did he send a representative. The Rat Laird remained by his tent, watching from afar.

Robert exchanged a glance with Flanders, then nodded to the guards. "Open the gates. We'll receive ye properly inside."

Atholl raised a hand. "I thank ye for the courtesy, but I must decline. To maintain impartiality, I will hear both sides without interruption." His smile never wavered. "Protocol demands I speak first with the aggrieved party. I shall return on the morrow to hear yer defense."

"I would hear the charges now." Robert said, the very spit of his fearless father.

"All in good time, Laird Duncan." Atholl tucked the parchment away. "I assure ye, justice will be served."

Flanders stepped forward, unable to contain himself. "The Earl of Moray knows us well. We fought beside him at Bannockburn." He let the implication hang in the air—unlike your father, who fought against us.

Atholl's smile tightened. "Indeed. He spoke highly of ye both. My father often remarked on the... loyalty ...of The Bruce's men." The pause was slight but deliberate. "Which is why I'm certain this matter can be resolved without... undue... bloodshed."

"Yer father learned the price of disloyalty," Flanders said evenly. "I trust his son remembers the lesson."

"Some lessons are worth remembering," Atholl replied, his voice cool. "Others, perhaps, are best forgotten. Until tomorrow, gentlemen."

With that, he turned his horse and led his men toward Stephan's encampment. They rode directly to the Rat Laird's tent, as if they'd known precisely where to find him. As if they'd been expected all along.

Robert and Flanders watched them go, their expressions grim.

"We're about to lose it all," Robert said quietly. "Randolph is a fool to trust a Strathbogie."

Flanders nodded. "Aye. It's no wonder now why Stephan's been smilin' in the rain."

* * *

The war chamber felt smaller than usual, crowded with worry and the restless movements of Hemming, who paced from window to window, checking each direction with growing concern.

"They're movin'," he reported, his voice tight. "Fanning out to surround us completely."

Robert leaned over the map of Todlaw, his expression dark as if he were bidding the place adieu. "How many?"

"More than before. Many more." Hem shook his head. "More than triple. Must have been waitin' for Atholl. Could have only come from the south or we would have had warnin'."

Snorre cursed under his breath. "We're trapped like rats."

"We're well-provisioned rats," Rolf reminded him. "And these walls have never fallen."

"Aye, but they've never faced a judge with The Regent's seal," Robert said grimly.

The door opened and Gerts entered with Brigid close behind. Their attention darted from one man to the next as they tried to guess why they'd been summoned.

"What's happened?" Brigid asked.

Flanders moved to her side, his voice low and steady. "Stephan's reinforcements have arrived...along with a judge from The Regent."

"A judge?" Gerts' eyes narrowed. "Who?"

"David Strathbogie, Earl of Atholl," Robert answered.

Gerts inhaled sharply. "Strathbogie? Are ye certain?"

"Aye. Do ye know him?"

"Well enough." Gerts' face had gone ashen in the torchlight. "His mother was Joan

Comyn, Hector's cousin. She died a few years back, but the connection remains."

"Comyn?" Robert's head snapped up. "As in Red Comyn?"

"The very same. Yer Earl of Atholl is the grandson...of the rival Robert the Bruce killed in Greyfriars Church."

A heavy silence fell over the room as the implications sank in. It was no wonder the Strathbogies had fought with Edward of England.

Flanders said what every one of them was thinking. "Thomas Randolph has invited a poisonous snake into the royal nursery."

Brigid swayed slightly on her feet. Flanders guided her to a chair, sat beside her, and secured her hand in his. She gripped it tightly, and the connection became an anchor he desperately needed.

"Take a moment. And when ye're ready, I would ask if ye can see anything of the future. Anything that might help us."

She took a deep breath, nodded, and closed her eyes, her face a mask of concentration. After a bit, she shook her head. "Nothing but darkness. The same blackness I've seen before." Her eyes opened. They were full of regret and dread, but she forced a smile. "Not promising. Perhaps death is still close by, waiting for me."

"No." Flanders squeezed her hand. "I'll not allow it."

"Can we send another rider to Stirling?" Rolf asked. "To request a more impartial judge?"

Hemming snorted. "Look outside. This move was, no doubt, to prevent us from doing

just that."

"We must prepare...for his worst." Snorre glanced at the women, then grumbled to his feet and moved to a window. "The advantage is, we already know what that is. What we had thought to prevent, we might have only delayed."

"He can demand all of Stephan's people be returned," Flanders said. "Demand compensation for Robert being caught in his fortress, and for the cost of bringing his army to take them back."

"And if I refuse?" The petulance in Robert's tone betrayed his age.

"Then he will take Todlaw from you," Flanders said, not without great pain. "And likely give it to Stephan."

Gerts nodded sadly. "Which is what my husband has wanted all along."

Robert slammed his fist on the table. "I'll die before I surrender my brother's keep to that rat."

"Maybe we can negotiate," Rolf suggested. "Maybe everything has a price that can be paid. Perhaps he'd rather have treasure in place of his people."

Robert rallied, but only just. "If only we could find the hoard Heslington hid..."

While Flanders explained to the women, who hadn't been told of the missing silver, Gerts began to laugh. It started as a chuckle, then grew until she could barely control herself. Tears streamed down her face.

"Gerts?" Flanders frowned. "What is it?"

She wiped her eyes, still fighting for composure. "Wouldn't it be poetic if that particular snake was our salvation?"

"Yes, but we'd have to find his silver first," Robert said. "And we've looked everywhere."

Flanders studied her closely. "He told you where it is." It wasn't a question. "How did you get that man to share his deepest secret?" He paused. "Wait! Perhaps I don't want to know."

She rolled her eyes. "Ye reckon my husband was the only man in the fort drinkin' hensbane?"

THE IMMOVABLE CHAIR

* * *

It was midnight, and though all of Todlaw was awake and wary, the main tower sat in hushed silence. All the children had been moved indoors, filling the floors of each level with blankets and wee bodies, with mothers taking turns keeping watch. The wee-uns thought it some sort of holiday, oblivious to the fact that they'd been brought inside for their safety, in case war was inevitable.

The great hall was no exception, and when Flanders and the war council stepped inside, he begged privacy from the mother on watch, and she was happy to leave them alone so long as they vowed to be quiet.

Gerts kept her secret to the end, barely containing her amusement as she moved to the dais and climbed into the laird's chair.

"The Immovable Chair," she whispered, then gave a quiet giggle.

Flanders watched her carefully. "Aye. It hasn't moved a jot since the Bruce gifted it to James Duncan. He had it secured in place, somehow." He stood back and studied the chair as if for the first time.

The massive oak throne dominated the dais, its dark wood worn smooth in places from years of use. Intricate Celtic knotwork adorned the arms and legs, while the

back featured the lion rampant of Scotland, carved with such precision it seemed ready to leap from the wood—The Bruce's signature mark, a reminder of his favor.

The seat itself was bright from the shine of a thousand arses, or rather, a thousand sittings of a few arses, but Flanders had never paid much attention to the boxed space beneath—a perfect hiding place. No one would think twice about it.

Looking back, he remembered the way his former steward would eye the chair as if he dreamed of polishing that seat himself one day. He'd always thought the man's ambition troubling, that Heslington would dare to aim so high. But it wasn't the title Heslington had wanted. He'd simply been keeping an eye on his hoard.

"Are ye certain?" Robert asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Gerts nodded. "In his cups, the fool boasted he'd hidden his treasure where no one would ever look, in plain sight, in the one place that would never be moved . " She tapped the arm of the chair. "He said the Bruce himself couldn't shift it if he tried."

Robert glanced at Flanders, then gave a nod of permission. "Let's see what the bastard left us."

Rolf drew his knife and moved behind the chair to examine it closely. "Here," he whispered, pointing to a seam around the back panel.

With careful force, he slid his blade into the crack and applied pressure. The panel resisted at first, then gave way with a soft creak. Rolf eased it open to reveal a dark cavity within.

A whisper of movement came from inside and a single silver coin slipped free, hitting the dais with a clink that echoed like a scream in the quiet hall. They all froze and held their breath when a child stirred nearby.

"Sweet Odin," Hemming breathed when the child settled again.

Snorre peered into the opening. "It's packed full."

"How much?" Robert asked.

Rolf grinned. "Enough to buy Atholl twice over."

Brigid stepped closer to Flanders, her eyes wide. "He hid all this from ye?"

"Aye," Flanders said. "The bastard ate at my table and smiled while he starved our people." His hand found hers in the darkness. "But now his greed may save us."

Robert pointed at the rafters. "We need to move it to the war room, where we can present it to Red Comyn's grandson."

They formed a line, silently passing handfuls of coins from one to the next. Each person made a pouch from the front of their tunics and filled them as much as they dared. If it had been gold, at twice the weight, it might have torn the fabric from their hands.

A pair of coins slipped from Snorre's hand and fell to the floor with a loud thunk. Gerts hissed through her teeth and pointed to the children. He grimaced and nodded—a promise to take care.

When the cavity was finally empty, Rolf replaced the panel, fitting it back into place so perfectly that no one would ever know it had been disturbed.

Just as they prepared to leave, a small voice called out from the darkness. "Laird Robert? Are ye playin' a game?"

They all froze as a tousled head popped up from a nest of blankets. A boy of no more than four summers rubbed his sleepy, half-open eyes.

Robert knelt beside him, his silver-laden tunic held closed. "Aye, lad. Too late for games, though. Can ye keep our secret?"

The boy nodded solemnly.

"Good lad. Now back to sleep. There'll be porridge with honey in the morn."

The child smiled and nestled back down, eyes already closed.

They filed out silently, each burdened according to size and strength. In the corridor, they encountered the mother returning to her watch. Her eyes widened at the shiny boon that couldn't be concealed. The high pitch of whispering coins was unmistakable, despite their care.

Robert gave her a sheepish look. "We found Heslington's silver."

She looked from one guilty face to the next, then broke into a broad smile. "High time." Flanders followed closely behind Brigid, eager for another squeeze of her hand and praying this miracle would be enough to avoid bloodshed and wooden stakes.

He considered the Earl of Atholl and wondered what a man like him would think of their pile of Esterling silver. Would it matter? And would it be enough to entice a young ambitious lad from a turncoat family to choose treasure over family?

YE CALL THAT DIPLOMACY?

* * *

M orning arrived with a sullen sky and the promise of more rain. Flanders stood atop the wall, his eyes gritty from lack of proper sleep, though he couldn't bring himself to regret the night spent with Brigid curled against him. She'd fallen asleep on his lap in the war room while they counted Heslington's silver, and he hadn't found the heart to wake her.

It had been a taste of what might be—her warmth against him, the scent of her hair, the way she fit in his arms. And when she woke, she'd allowed him a kiss that left him dizzy with hope. A hope he dared not yet name.

Now, as he scanned the enemy camp for any sign of the regent's representative, he found himself eager to have this business done. The longer they remained in peril, the more Brigid seemed to doubt the bond between them. As if she believed their connection was born only of shared danger, a fleeting thing that would dissolve once safety returned.

He knew better. What burned between them was no mere spark from flint and steel, to die when the tinder was consumed. It was a steady flame, one that would warm them both through many a winter.

If only he could convince her of that.

Robert paced nearby, his face drawn with fatigue. The lad hadn't slept at all, by the look of him.

"Any sign?" Flanders asked.

"None." Robert rubbed his eyes. "Perhaps the great judge has decided we're not worth his time after all."

"Would that it were so simple." Flanders shook his head. "Nay, he'll come. And with demands we'll find hard to swallow."

"Then we'll choke him with our silver."

Flanders chuckled. "Aye, that's the plan."

Another hour passed with no movement from Stephan's tent. Flanders felt his temper fraying at the edges. The longer they waited, the more his mind conjured dire outcomes. And anger would serve no one when diplomacy was needed.

"I'm going to find Brigid," he told Robert. "Send for me when our esteemed judge deigns to appear."

Robert nodded, his attention still fixed on the enemy camp.

Flanders descended the steps and crossed the bailey, nodding to the guards and villagers who greeted him. Despite the tension in the air, Todlaw's people went about their business with determined normalcy. Children played, women tended gardens, men repaired tools—all under the watchful eyes of archers on the walls.

He was halfway to the keep when a shout went up from the eastern wall. A guard pointed toward Stephan's tent, where movement had finally begun.

"Bloody hell," Flanders muttered, turning back. So much for finding a moment's peace.

Robert pointed to the Rat Laird's tent where Atholl and his four guards were exiting. Stephan himself walked beside the young judge, both of them smiling as they mounted their saddled horses and began riding toward the gate.

"The bastard presumes to enter Todlaw," Robert snarled. "After all he's done."

Flanders felt his own rage rise but forced it back to his gullet. "Remember the plan," he said quietly. "We need Atholl to rule in our favor. If that means playing the diplomat?—"

"I know, I know." Robert took a deep breath. "For Brigid. For all of them."

"Aye."

The first drops of rain began to fall as the six riders approached the gate. Fat droplets splashed against stone and steel, promising a proper downpour before long.

Atholl reined in his mount and looked up at them, drops already darkening his fine russet cloak. "Laird Duncan," he called. "I've come to hear yer defense, as promised."

Robert made no move to signal the guards to open the gate. He simply stared down at the party, his expression unreadable.

"Do ye mean to keep us waiting in the rain all morning?" Atholl asked, impatient but civil.

"Ye're welcome inside, my lord," Robert replied evenly. "But if I'm to be heard without interruption, as ye said yesterday, then Laird Stephan will have to wait

outside." He smiled thinly. "He so enjoys the rain."

Stephan's face darkened with fury. "Ye dare?—"

"Besides," Robert continued, "I'll burn this place to the ground myself before I let that man inside these walls."

Flanders slapped him on the back with a laugh. "So much for diplomacy." He leaned closer to Robert. "Come on. Let's make Comyn's grandson sing for his supper, eh?"

* * *

Flanders waved Rolf closer and gave a quiet order. "Change of plan. Hurry on ahead. I want that silver covered up. I don't want Atholl to see it, do ye understand? He can wonder all he wants, but he won't lay eyes upon it or he'll find a way to add it all to his demands before we can suggest any exchange. And stoke the fire. Good and hot. Let us warm him to his bones and when they start to melt, he'll want to strike a bargain just to get out. And spread the word. This man is not to be trusted, nor his guards, royal decree or not."

As they watched Rolf go, Robert nodded his agreement. "We were far too weary last eve to think clearly. We could have lost everything."

"Aye, well, we still may."

THE BEST DEFENSE IS A GOOD LIE

* * *

Inside the main tower, at the base of the stairs, Flanders turned to face Atholl's guards. Four men, hand-picked for their size and scowls, no doubt. They stood with hands resting on sword hilts, eyes darting around the keep as if memorizing its defenses.

"I'm afraid this is where we part ways, gentlemen," Flanders said pleasantly. "The war chamber is rather small, only enough room for negotiators."

The largest of the guards stepped forward, clearly disgruntled by the fact that he had to tip his head back to look Flanders in the eye. "We go where the earl goes."

"Not in Todlaw, ye don't." Flanders' smile never wavered. "Ye'll be well cared for here. Food, drink, perhaps a bit of entertainment."

"Entertainment?" The guard's eyes narrowed.

A group of children appeared in the entrance to the great hall, faces lit with excitement. Brigid had done her part well.

A small boy of about six summers stepped forward and bowed with exaggerated formality. "We've prepared a special performance," he announced proudly. "With

singing and dancing and a play about a brave knight who slays a rat."

The other children nodded eagerly, some already humming.

Atholl looked from the children to Flanders, then to Robert. "My men stay with me."

"Then ye stay with them," Robert replied. "Down here. With the children. Though I doubt we can make much headway over their noise."

One of the smaller girls stepped forward and tugged on the guard's sleeve. "Do ye know how to play Catch the Pig? I'm very good at it."

The guard looked down at her in horror.

Atholl sighed. "Very well. My men will wait here," he announced, as if it had been his decision. He turned to the largest guard. "Keep yer wits about ye."

"Aye, my lord."

As they climbed the stairs, Flanders studied their unwelcome guest. David Strathbogie, Earl of Atholl, was a striking figure despite his youth. Tall and lean, with golden brown hair and sharp features, he carried himself with the confidence of a man born to privilege.

His clothing was rich but practical—beneath his russet cloak he wore a fine wool tunic of deep burgundy with silver embroidery at the collar and cuffs, his hose looked to be of exceptional quality and deliciously warm. Flanders couldn't have hoped for more. He very nearly broke into a sweat just thinking about the heat awaiting them.

Atholl's short boots had clearly never seen a day's labor. A silver chain hung around his neck, bearing a pendant with his family crest. But it was the man's eyes that held

Flanders' attention—shrewd, calculating, and constantly moving as they greedily took in every detail of Todlaw's interior.

When they reached the landing, the earl paused, his gaze sweeping over the stone walls, the high ceiling, the quality of the workmanship evident in every corner. "Impressive," he murmured. "I've heard tales of Todlaw, but I confess, I never expected such...magnificence."

"My brother was ahead of his time," Robert said with pride.

"Indeed." Atholl ran a hand along the orderly stone of the wall. "It's curious that in all his land dealings, The Bruce never claimed this place for himself."

Flanders caught Robert's eye. The young man's interest was too keen, his admiration too pointed. They could practically see the thoughts forming behind those calculating eyes?—

How do I get my hands on Todlaw?

"The king valued loyalty above stone," Flanders said. "The mortar you see was mixed with James Duncan's sweat, and he earned every inch of this with his blood."

"As did some others," Atholl replied, his tone light but the nod to his grandfather's spilt blood was clear.

They should never have let this man inside the gates. But it was too late now.

"The war room is this way," Robert said, leading them down the left corridor.

Flanders glanced over the banister to see the children below already circling the guards, chattering excitedly. The smallest girl had taken the big man's hand and was

trying to pull him toward the great hall.

"Ye're a cruel man, Flanders Leesborn," Hemming muttered, though his eyes danced with merriment.

"Aye. It will be a day they'll remember."

* * *

The war room was stifling. A fire roared in the hearth with three fat, fresh logs squatting in the center. The western windows had been shut tight against the rain. In the corner, a large basket covered with a blanket sat atop a table, its mysterious bulk drawing the eye.

Atholl noticed it immediately. "What have we here?"

Flanders waved a dismissive hand. "One of the women has an odd notion of tidying up by hiding the rubbish. Ignore it."

The Earl's eyes lingered on the covered mound before he turned his attention to the room at large. Hemming and Snorre stood by the wall, arms crossed, expressions neutral. Rolf remained near the door, a silent sentinel.

"Please, sit," Robert gestured to a chair near the fire. "Ye must be chilled after a night in the open."

Atholl eagerly removed his outer cloak. Beads of sweat were already forming on his brow. He glanced around expectantly, as if waiting for refreshments to appear, then sat.

"I'm sure Laird Stephan—yer cousin, is he?—saw ye well fed," Flanders said, taking

a seat on the opposite side of the table, where a cool draft might reach him.

The Earl's eyes narrowed at the implication. "He is a distant relation through my mother's side."

"How fortunate for him to have family in such high places," Robert remarked dryly, then took his seat at the head, where he was also more likely to feel a breeze. "Now, to business. What charges does my neighbor bring against me?"

Atholl straightened in his chair, assuming a more formal posture. "Laird Stephan accuses ye of harboring a witch, kidnapping his people, including his wife, and sending a spy to poison him. He demands the return of all his subjects, the usual compensation for the cost of bringing his men to retrieve them, and punishment for those who aided in these crimes."

"Is that all?" Robert asked mildly. "No demand for my firstborn child?"

Atholl ignored the jibe. "There is also the matter of Todlaw itself. Laird Stephan questions yer right to hold these lands, as ye are not James Duncan's true heir by blood."

Robert's jaw tightened, but Flanders spoke before he could. "And what remedy does yer cousin suggest?"

The jibe hit its mark, the young traitor stiffened, but he continued. "He believes Todlaw should revert to The Crown, as it should have when James Duncan abandoned Scotland." Atholl's eyes gleamed. "Though he would be willing to administer it on The Crown's behalf."

"How generous of him," Flanders said. "And have ye already decided our fate, my lord? Or do ye actually intend to hear the truth before rendering judgment?"

Atholl's cheeks flushed. "I am here to hear yer defense, am I not?"

"Ye are indeed," Robert said. "Ye seem young to carry such responsibility, but surely not so young that ye're ignorant of what justice requires? Ye cannot consider any remedy without hearing what truly happened."

The flush on Atholl's face deepened. "I assumed the facts were not in dispute, since Gallabrae's people are indeed now inside Todlaw's walls."

Hemming let out a bark of laughter. "He assumed Stephan told the truth! That's rich."

Even Snorre cracked a smile. "Next he'll tell us the sky is green and boars can fly."

Atholl's eyes flashed. "Ye mock me at yer peril."

"We mock anyone who takes Stephan's word as truth," Flanders replied. "Perhaps ye should hear from those he claims were kidnapped." He nodded to Rolf, who opened the door and beckoned.

Gerts entered, her head high, her bearing every inch the noblewoman. She curtsied to Atholl with perfect grace.

"Lady Stephan," the surprised earl stood and bowed.

"My lord." Gerts took the seat offered to her. "I understand my husband claims I was taken against my will."

"He does."

"Then he lies, as he has lied about many things." Gerts' voice was steady. "My husband attempted to force himself on a young woman. When that failed, he accused

her of witchcraft and burned her at the stake. When I and others protested, he banished us. Threatened us with our own burning if we ever returned. Perhaps he intended to lay the blame at Laird Duncan's feet all along."

Atholl's brow furrowed. "Laird Stephan claims the woman was a proven witch."

"Proven by whom? By what evidence?" Gerts shook her head. "I know from long experience that my husband often has...difficulties...with women. His pride cannot bear it, so he blames others."

"Ye expect me to believe he burned a woman alive because she refused his attention?"

"Ye misunderstand me. Out of fear, she refused him nothing. It was he who could not rise to the occasion. And I expect ye to doubt any man who would burn his own wife, and others, for questioning him. Surely, there are more just punishments for such mild sins. Besides, The King forbade such practices for witches. I reckon he wouldn't have looked kindly upon wife-burning?—"

"The Bruce is dead," Atholl said flatly.

"So he is. But would The Regent think it wise to rescind such policy?" Gerts took a breath and resumed a mild manner. "My husband banished everyone who dared speak against him, including me. Had Robert Duncan not taken us in, where would we be? Dead in a pit or reduced to dust in a fire. No, he does not want us back."

"As for harboring a witch," Flanders injected, "the woman in question is a healer, nothing more. She's treated Stephan himself many times. But because she showed some preference for me, he wants us both punished."

For the moment, Atholl seemed as if he actually believed their slightly altered story.

"And the matter of sending a spy to poison him?"

"That was Heslington, the steward I banished from Todlaw for stealing from our people. He went to Stephan seeking refuge, since together, they'd been siphoning Todlaw's resources to Gallabrae. But Heslington's ambitions knew no bounds. Whatever poison was used, it came from his hand, not ours. And lo, Stephan arrives at my gates hale and hearty. So how deadly could this poison have been?"

Atholl leaned back against his chair, sweat now streaming freely down his face. "And the cost of bringing his men to Todlaw?"

"That is part of the farce," Robert said. "He kicked out his people and chased them here, then blames me for filling their bellies. If ye knew the man well, ye would recognize his cunning. He's held a grudge against Todlaw since my brother built it. Long ago, while visiting here, The Bruce denied him a boon, and Stephan seeks revenge for that slight now. That is the long and short of it."

"Ye have witnesses to support these claims?"

"Forty-two," Robert replied, not mentioning that half of those were bairns.

Atholl wiped his brow with a silk handkerchief. "Laird Stephan has hundreds who corroborate his version of events."

"Of course he does," Flanders said. "Men will say anything when their laird holds a sword to their throats."

The earl stood abruptly and moved to an eastern window. He leaned out for a breath of cooler air and stared down at the bailey, then to the distant walls where Todlaw's men stood ready to shed their blood if Robert asked.

Hemming moved slightly closer, his eyes flicking to the sheer drop beyond the window. He caught Flanders' eye with a raised brow, as if asking permission for a simple solution to their problems.

Atholl must have sensed the danger, for he stepped quickly away from the window, his face pale despite the heat.

"Some families just choose the wrong side," Flanders remarked casually. "In war, in politics...in justice. But ye, here, have a chance to prove ye're a wiser man than yer father."

The Earl's eyes narrowed. Flanders had overplayed his hand. "Now that I've heard yer defense, I will need time to render my judgment. Tomorrow?—"

"Today," Robert cut in, his voice hard as steel.

"Pardon?"

"We will not pace our floors for another day whilst ye play patty fingers with Stephan," Robert said. "We will provide a room where ye can worry through the details and ask God for wisdom. Ye'll not be interrupted. After the evening meal, we will expect yer conclusions." His smile was cold. "And worry nothing for yer men. We'll see they're treated as fairly as ye've treated Todlaw."

Atholl looked from Robert to Flanders, then to the others in the room. Whatever he saw in their faces made him swallow hard. "I shall render my verdict this evening."

"Excellent." Flanders stood. "Rolf will show ye the way. Pen and paper await. And David?"

The man paused in his eager rush for the door and the chance of cooler air, his back

bristling at Flanders' gall in using his given name.

“Ye’re young. Just startin’. Ye’re about to decide the trajectory of yer life. Choose honor, and history will remember ye for it. Choose dishonor, and yer family will be remembered only with derision.”

THE JURY IS OUT

* * *

B rigid watched the men of Todlaw's war council pace the great hall like caged wolves. Tables had been assembled, benches arranged, but no one sat. They were waiting for food, eager to have the meal done with so they could drag Atholl out and put an end to the anticipation.

In light of the tension in the room, the younger children had been taken below stairs to be fed.

Brigid was grateful not to be facing this alone, grateful to have Flanders nearby to assure her she was safe, even if that was only temporary. If only he'd been near when Bella was caught... But no. She couldn't hold that against him. How could he have known what was happening on the other side of the pass? He'd come as soon as he learned of it, risked everything for a woman he barely knew.

And if she couldn't have her sister beside her now, when she was about to learn her fate, she was blessed to be surrounded by friends.

Flanders paced a large swath of floor that the others left to him, taking exactly eight steps before turning back. Each time he turned in her direction, his eyes found hers, and a thrill shot through her chest. Eight steps closer, then he'd turn away and she could breathe again. Eight steps, turn, and another thrill.

He'd repeated this dozens of times, then he changed tack. He didn't turn away. With his jaw set, he strode directly toward her, that thrill mounting with every closing step. Without explanation, he lifted the child she'd been playing with and set him gently aside, then took her hand and marched out the back of the hall.

She scurried to keep up.

At the rear corner of the hall stood a spiral stair that led both up and down. He pulled her into the darkness, descended a few steps, then turned toward her. In the dim light, his face was all sharp lines and shadows, but his eyes burned bright. With the difference of a few steps, his face was level with her own.

"I've been a fool," he said, his voice low and impassioned. "Waitin' for the right moment, the perfect words. There's no such thing."

Her heart hammered in her chest. "Flanders?—"

"Nay, let me say it." He took her face in his hands, his touch gentle despite the intensity in his eyes. "Ye came into my dreams four years ago, and I've been chasin' the ghost of ye ever since. Now that I've found ye in the flesh, I'll not let ye go. Not for Stephan, not for Atholl, not for The Regent himself."

Tears pricked at her eyes. "Ye barely know me."

"I know enough. I know these eyes. I know this smile. I know a glow in my belly when ye reach for me." His thumbs brushed her cheeks. "I know that when ye're near, life makes sense in a way it never did before."

A tear slipped down her cheek. "And if they try to take me?"

"They must go through me first." He pressed his forehead to hers. "I'll volunteer to

take yer place, if needed, if it will satisfy those bastards?—"

"No!" She clutched at his tunic. "Ye must promise ye'll do no such thing. I couldn't bear it."

He smiled sadly. "Ye don't like me to lie, remember? So, I won't. I'll do whatever I must to keep ye safe."

She wept then, for all she'd lost and all she might yet lose. Sorrow washed over them both in wave after wave that might have knocked them to their knees had they let go of each other. And when they'd finally spent their grief, he kissed her—once, twice, again and again, until the world beyond the stairwell ceased to exist.

A stolen bit of joy. Possibly the last.

Finally, they let go and awkwardly wiped each other's tears. She reached out and made order out of his Viking-blond hair and smiled into his eyes. Her bright bear smiled back. And without another word, in a sort of drunken haze, they left the staircase behind and returned to the hall, their fingers knotted together.

The food had arrived during their absence. Platters of meat, bread, roasted root vegetables and sauces covered the tables, but few of their friends showed much appetite. Gerts caught Brigid's eye and gave her a sad smile, an unspoken understanding.

Together, they took a bench and sat with their shoulders touching. Brigid tried to eat, but the food had no flavor for her. Flanders managed no better.

"Ye know," Hemming said, breaking the heavy silence, "instead of hearin' Atholl out, perhaps we should just wall him inside." He gestured vaguely toward the ceiling. "Let his men try to find him."

"Oh, but he'll call out," Snorre countered, a glint of humor in his eyes.

Rolf was eager to join in the jest. "We'd need to shut him up before we shut him in."

Gerts leaned forward, her expression perfectly serious. "I could prepare some hensbane. Enough to keep him quiet for a day or two."

A deadly silence emanated from the far side of the room. Brigid turned to see Atholl's guards seated together at the farthest table, their faces grim. They had to have heard every word.

The tallest stood and encouraged the others to do the same. "We will see the earl. Now. "

Robert stood and nodded, barely keeping his expression in check. "Of course. It is time."

* * *

Brigid and Gerts, the five men of the war council, and four nervous guards made their way out of the hall, up the staircase, and to the solar where the Earl of Atholl had been isolated to deliberate the charges, the defense of those charges, and the strength of his own character.

As they approached the door, Flanders' hand tightened around hers. He was as anxious as she.

Two Todlaw men stood to either side of the portal. Both were relieved by their approach. "He's been demanding to see ye, Laird Robert," one said. "We told him ye were at table, just as ye said to."

They opened the door to reveal Atholl, red-faced and pacing the chamber. He stopped abruptly, the look in his flashing eyes promised retribution.

Brigid's stomach sank. Of course, they might have been kinder to the young man, but the more time she spent in the earl's presence, the less she believed it might have mattered. The man obviously hated everything and everyone associated with The Bruce, so it was a wonder he wanted to have aught to do with the royal household.

"At last," the earl snapped. "Ye're a fool to keep me waiting."

"My apologies, my lord," Robert said, with little regret in his smooth tone. "We have a meal prepared if ye've finished yer deliberations."

The guard who'd overheard their jests pushed into the room. "My lord, I believe we should depart immediately."

Atholl's eyes narrowed. "Oh?"

"For yer safety, my lord."

Atholl studied the carefully blank faces before him, then nodded sharply, as if he finally understood his vulnerability and how little love there was for him in that room. "Very well. We leave at once." He tapped his finger on a folded parchment on the table. "My judgement. Remember that my voice is the voice of The Regent in this matter. I'm sending a duplicate to Stirling post haste, and I shall deliver another to Laird Stephan myself."

He pressed a hand to his breast, where he carried the other copies. Then he jerked his hand away, as if he'd revealed too much.

Hemming stepped forward, staring at the spot. "Perhaps we should read it before ye

go, my lord. In case we have questions."

"The document is quite clear," Atholl replied coldly. "You will escort us to the gates. Now ."

For a long moment, Hemming stood his ground, sizing up Comyn's grandson, weighing his fate. Neither Flanders nor Robert said a word. No one moved as the possible scenarios swirled like dried leaves overhead. All anyone needed to do was pick one. Just one move would decide all.

Gerts' low chuckle broke the silence and, still red-faced, Atholl pushed around Hemming and fled.

Hemming protested to Robert. "We can't just let him go, surely."

"We cannot murder five men who ride under The Regent's banner," Robert said quietly. "And we cannot send the men of Todlaw to war without just cause."

"Then read it," Flanders said, his voice hard as stone. "Give us cause."

25

SHOULD HAVE THROWN HIM OUT THE WINDOW

* * *

J udgment of The Crown

I, David Strathbogie, Earl of Atholl, as the representative of Thomas Randolph, Earl of Moray and regent to King David II, do herein render my judgement in the disputes between Laird Hector Stephan of Gallabrae and Laird Robert Duncan of Todlaw, Tay, Scotland.

In the matter of kidnapping, I find Laird Robert, along with Flanders Leesborn, guilty as charged.

In the matter of conspiracy to murder by poisoning, I find Laird Robert Duncan, along with the spy known as Heslington, guilty as charged.

As to the charge of witchcraft, I find the Lady Gerts and the sister of the already executed witch, along with fifteen women of Gallabrae, currently harbored at Todlaw, guilty as charged.

The female child is found not guilty.

The sentences and awards are as follows.

For kidnapping and harboring witches, Flanders Leesborn is sentenced to ten years imprisonment.

For witchcraft, Lady Stephan, the known witch, and the coven of fifteen are sentenced to death by fire at the earliest convenience.

For the charge of conspiracy to murder and kidnapping, Laird Robert is sentenced to ten years imprisonment. Todlaw is forfeit to The Crown, since James Duncan left no blood heir.

I award restitution to Laird Stephan for a week's expense for his army, in addition to compensation for all injuries done by Duncan, in whatever form most convenient, from the property of Todlaw. Until The Crown decides the fate of said property, Laird Stephan will take possession of the same, beginning at noon September 29th, in the Year of Our Lord 1329. Until that time, there is to be no destruction of the property, no damage to the structures, and no animal slaughter. It will be up to Laird Stephan which citizens he chooses to allow to stay.

Signed and sealed this day, September 28th, 1329

David Strathbogie, Earl of Atholl

After reading the document aloud, Robert stared at the parchment in disbelief. "This is madness."

"Nay," Flanders said grimly. "This is revenge. For his grandfather."

"But that was The King's doing. I hadn't been born!"

Hemming snatched up the document and read the last again. "Noon, September 29 th . That's tomorrow."

"Aye," Robert said, his voice hollow. "And we're surrounded."

Gerts chuckled and lowered herself onto a stool in the corner. "At least there were no surprises, aye? The pup did exactly as his cousin bid him. Ye should have invited Stephan inside. I could have fettled the pair of them true poison and been done."

Flanders slid to the floor. With his back against the wall, he tugged Brigid down to sit on his lap. "Don't worry, love. We only have to hold them off until the Regent himself comes to hear us out. He'll see reason. We know him well. Fought by his side. Bled with him. He'll see Atholl for what he is—in league with his greedy bastard of a cousin. Ye'll see."

Robert, with his elbows on the table, tossed the parchment aside and snaked his fingers into his hair. "We'll have to wait until dark before we attempt to get a messenger out. But we're bottled up. I can't imagine it will be easy. A diversion might work."

A slow smile bloomed across Flanders' face. Everyone waited to see why.

"I should have confessed sooner," he told Robert. "When ye sent the first messenger to Stirling, I sent one as well. I knew ye wouldn't approve, so..."

Robert's eyes widened with understanding. "Ye sent a message to my father." He slapped the table. "Ye sent a message to my father!"

"I did."

The tension in the room shifted like a sudden change in season. Hemming let out a bark of laughter. Snorre closed his eyes and prayed silently. Rolf looked as though he might weep.

"Stout Duncan," Hemming said, shaking his head with a mixture of awe and amusement. "God pity the bastards now."

Brigid looked from face to face, encouraged but wanting to know why. "Who is Stout Duncan?"

"James Duncan's father," Flanders explained, his eyes twinkling. "Robert's father. A man who makes us all look like lambs."

"Put me in the pit for a week because he didn't care for the way I chewed my food." Hemming was serious.

Snorre gave a sober nod. "Put anyone in the pit he didn't trust. Including his own guards."

Rolf laughed. "When they ran from James!"

"To be fair, they thought he was an English giant."

"I'd have run from James as well." Snorre admitted.

Brigid laughed with relief. "He sounds terrifyin'."

Flanders chuckled. "Aye, he is. He was. But Stout Duncan never balked. He's the only man who ever got the best of James."

"Don't tell me. He put him in his pit?"

"As a point of fact, he did. And not long after, he adopted him. A grown man?—"

"A grown giant, ye mean." Robert grinned. "And that's how my brother was born."

“Ah. I see. This is why ye can’t be his heir.”

The room sobered again, until Rolf mumbled, “it was never a problem in The King’s eyes.”

Flanders exhaled sharply. “We cannot give up on Thomas Randolph. He’ll see reason. If he knew that Atholl was related to Stephan, he wouldn’t have trusted him with this.”

Brigid wanted to go back to hoping. “So you think Stout Duncan will come?”

“He’ll come.” Robert laughed when he noted her worry. “They exaggerate. My father is a reasonable man.” He paused. “As long as ye don’t move, or speak, or threaten what is his.”

“And Todlaw is his,” Flanders said firmly. “Built by one son, held by his other. Now Stephan and Atholl have threatened both. Hemming is right. God help the bastards.”

Real hope was a heady thing and she wanted more. “How soon might he arrive?”

Flanders shrugged his broad shoulders. “I had expected all this to resolve before he arrived. But that was before Stephan arrived at our door. Now, I reckon Stout Duncan may arrive in a day, mayhap two. After noon tomorrow in any case. So, I expect we will still have time to make our enemies squawk.”

“And when he arrives?” Gerts asked.

Flanders’ grin turned wolfish. “Even Atholl can’t be fool enough to attack Stout Duncan without the Regent’s backing.” Then he sobered and his gaze flew to Robert. “Unless his and Stephan’s intentions, from the start, were to weaken the alliances that support the Bruce dynasty.”

Robert blanched. “Something only a traitor would want.”

The seasons turned again. The mood in the room changed from hopeful to outright horror.

HE'S COMING TO TAKE ME AWAY

* * *

That night, Brigid couldn't sleep knowing the war council was still trying to formulate a plan to warn Stout Duncan he was walking into a trap, and to avoid bloodshed. Eventually, she gave up trying, donned her robe, and padded down the hall to see if the men had made any progress. She found Gerts sitting on a bench just outside the door, sleeping soundly, snoring like a well-mannered bear.

Brigid shook her shoulder. "Gerts, go to bed. Nothing more ye can do but rest up, aye?"

The old woman nodded, and Brigid asked a servant to help the lady back to her chambers. Once they were gone, she inched close to the door to listen. A cold night breeze flowed out in a steady stream to ruffle her hair and cool her toes, but the open windows in the room weren't doing much to cool tempers.

"We've been over this a dozen times," Hemming growled. "We can't attack first. Not with Atholl's signature on that judgment. We'd be rebels against The Crown."

"What about the silver?" Robert asked, his voice strained with fatigue. "We could still try to buy Atholl off."

"The bastard wouldn't take it," Snorre replied. "Not now. He's committed himself,

sent a copy off to Stirling. If he changes his mind, Stephan will tell Randolph he was bribed. I should have tossed the bastard out this window when I had the chance."

"What if we smuggled the women out?" Rolf suggested. "Through the drainage tunnel?"

"That tunnel's barely wide enough for a child," Flanders said. "And it leads straight to the river. We'd be sending them to drown."

"We could dig a new tunnel," Hemming offered.

"In a night?" Flanders scoffed. "Even if we had a month, we couldn't dig far enough to reach past Stephan's men."

"What about a distraction?" Robert tried again. "Set fire to something on the far side of the camp?"

"And what then?" Hemming asked. "We still have to get a messenger past their lines. And they'll be watching for exactly that sort of trick."

"We could dress the women as men," Rolf said. "Hide them among our soldiers."

"Possibly. But what would they do to the children, to get them to confess where their mums have gone?" Flanders huffed. "Besides, Stephan likely knows their faces well enough to spot them."

"What about the coins?" Snorre asked. "We could bribe those who watch the postern."

"Possibly. A last resort," Robert said. He sounded as sleepy as Gerts. "Someone write that down."

"A bird then," Hemming said. "A messenger pigeon. Where can we?—"

"Balmerino Abbey." Flanders shook his head. "There are better places to send a rider."

Brigid stepped into the doorway, selfish or not, she wanted Flanders to see her, to choose her, and to find his rest.

Her bright bear looked up. His features softened immediately. "Brigid," he said, with relief. "Ye should be restin'."

"As should all of ye," she replied. "Ye'll think better with clear heads."

Flanders stood and stretched his massive frame. "The lass is right. We've exhausted every option ten times over. Let us adjourn until mornin'. Perhaps something will come to us in our sleep."

The others nodded, too weary to argue further. They filed out past Brigid, each nodding respectfully as they passed. Robert was the last to leave, pausing to clasp Flanders' shoulder.

"We'll find a way," he said, though his voice lacked conviction.

When Flanders would have pulled her into his arms, she took his hand and led him back to his chamber—her chamber now—and guided him to a chair. The fire had burned low, but still cast enough light to see the deep lines of worry etched into his face.

"Sit."

He obeyed.

She moved behind him and placed her hands on his shoulders where she felt hard knots in the already firm muscles. Slowly, she began to rub at them.

He sighed. "I've never before appreciated yer hands as I do now."

She moved her attention to his neck. "I am a healer."

His head dropped forward as she worked, and his breathing deepened. When she moved to his temples, he lifted his head closer to her and sighed again with pleasure.

"Brigid," he said after a while. "Could ye...could ye try to see what's comin'?"

Her hands stilled. "I've tried before. I saw only darkness."

"Will ye try again? Please?"

She moved around to face him and knelt on the thick rug at his feet. Since his touch was what triggered that other vision, she took his hands in hers, closed her eyes, and considered the future. At first, there was nothing, just the familiar void that had greeted her previous attempts.

"I see nothing," she whispered, opening her eyes.

"Once more," he urged. "For me."

She nodded and closed her eyes again, concentrating harder this time. That blackness returned to swallow her, but this time, it seemed as if something lurked just inside. Waiting for her.

"Still nothing," she said, though her voice wavered slightly. "Little more than the darkness."

"Ye see? An improvement already. Keep on."

Breathing deep, she reached out, imagined pushing past the darkness, straining to see what lay beyond. When she couldn't penetrate it, she allowed her thoughts to turn and go where they would. In mere seconds, impressions came flooding—men on horseback, hundreds of them, thundering across the landscape. Some wore Stephan's colors, others bore unfamiliar standards. And among them...

She gasped and pulled her hands from Flanders'. Her body began to quake.

"What is it?" Flanders asked, alarmed. "What did ye see?"

"Men," she whispered. "So many men. Riding on Todlaw. Men ye're not expecting." She bit her lip, unwilling to continue. A tear escaped and traced a path down her cheek.

"There's more. Don't be afraid. Tell me."

She shook her head, but he took her chin in hand and gently forced her to meet his gaze.

"Tell me, Brigid. Whatever it is, it's better to know so we can prepare."

"A man is coming," she finally said, her voice breaking. "To take me away."

Flanders' face darkened with fury. "Who?"

"I don't know."

Anger brought all the lines back to his face. His jaw jumped while he smoothed a wayward strand of hair away from her cheek. "Worry not, love. I will simply kill any

man who tries." When he noted the alarm on her face, his features softened again. He pressed his lips to her forehead. "Listen to me. The vision ye had before—about yer death—it was wrong, wasn't it? It was Bella who died, not ye."

"Aye, but?—"

"Then there's no reason why this vision can't be wrong too," he insisted. "And even if it's not, I won't let anyone take ye from me. Not Stephan, not Atholl, not the devil himself." He laughed. "It wasn't the devil ye saw, surely."

She wished she could say it wasn't. The truth was, she didn't know. But she smiled anyway. "Ye can't fight the whole world, Flanders."

"Of a certainty, I can." He lifted her up and onto his lap and tightened his powerful arms around her. "I am like the curtain wall of Todlaw. No one gets past me."

Despite everything, she laughed. "Ye're a stubborn mule, Flanders Leesborn."

"Aye." He kissed her lips then, but all that he promised in that kiss were things beyond their control. There might well be no future for them, and she dared not hope otherwise.

They moved to the bed where he curled up behind her on top of the blankets, both of them unwilling to spend the night apart when it might be their last. He held her so tightly it was almost painful, as if he could keep her safe through sheer force.

"Sleep," she whispered, stroking his arm. "We are together. And tonight, it is enough."

Sleep claimed him within minutes and his arms gradually loosened their desperate grip, enough so that she could turn to see his face. She memorized every line that had

been carved by worry, by laughter, and by petulance. He was determined, even in his dreams.

She traced a finger lightly along his jaw, careful not to wake him. "If ye mean to sacrifice yerself for me," she whispered, "I will lock ye in this chamber come mornin'."

ITS ALL ABOUT THE BANNER

* * *

The sound of distant horns finally penetrated Brigid's dreams and she woke. The panel covering a narrow window had been removed. The sky outside was only beginning to lighten.

Flanders was already up, buckling on his sword belt, his face grim in the light of a single candle.

"What is it?"

"Riders. I cannot tell from which direction."

The horns blew a second time. "That means trouble, doesn't it?"

He cocked his head to one side. "Different pitch. The first must have been from the pass. The second from the west."

Chills raced through her when yet a third set sounded.

Flanders looked ill. "From the south now." He hurried to a trunk, flipped it open, and dug inside.

"The south? But Stephan's camp is to the south."

He closed the lid and came to her with two sheathed daggers in his hands and handed her one. "I'm afraid Gerts may have underestimated her husband's ability to raise two-thousand. Take this."

She held up her hands. "I have a knife in my belt."

"Take it," he insisted. "Hide it beneath yer skirts, and if ye care for my sanity, hide. Don't so much as look out a window."

She shook her head. "We're past lyin' to each other, aye?"

His jaw flexed. He closed his eyes for an instant as if praying for patience, then he nodded. She took the offered dagger and as soon as his hand was free, he grabbed her behind the neck to pull her up to press a wild kiss to her lips before rushing to the door. He paused once to look back, winked without smiling, and was gone.

Another trio of blasts. The pitch of the horn lower still. What was left? The north? Who would be coming from the Red Hills?

She couldn't bear to sit and wait for word. She had to see for herself. But she did care for Flanders' sanity, so she went in search of an arisaid with which to cover her head. He'd never know...

* * *

Snorre was waiting for Flanders at the top of the stair and joined him in the descent. "Ye reckon he had more than two thousand, then?"

Flanders nodded. "It looks that way."

“Not a chance it might be Stout Duncan?”

“There is a chance, but that wouldn’t explain the alarms from the east, south, and north.”

Every able-bodied man rushed to man the walls, along with some very capable women. The still-dark bailey and outer courtyard rumbled from a thousand feet rushing to their stations, while at the same time, the last of the mothers and children headed inside the two towers like so many ants rushing home.

Torchlight and fires made for a hopeful glow in each tower window, and for the tenth time in as many minutes, Flanders thanked God for the shrewd building skills of James Duncan.

When he and Snorre topped the gate, Rolf was there with a long vest of chain, which he held out to Flanders. He insisted Flanders bend so he could help him don the thing. And though he usually eschewed chainmail and armor in favor of fighting as James had taught him, he now had to consider someone other than himself. He had to stay safe so he and Brigid could go on together. A valiant death on the battlefield no longer held the glamor it once had.

Robert stood at the fore of the walkway like a bloody masthead. His chest was puffed with pride, but his hands shook.

Flanders slapped him on the back. “Ye’ve done well, Laird Duncan. We are as prepared as we can be.”

Robert’s wide eyes found his. “Aye, but did we prepare for an assault from all sides?”

“Aye, we did.”

“How did such a bastard win so many loyal friends?”

“Not friends, and not loyal. More likely they have been coerced. Stephan’s favorite pastime has ever been blackmail.”

Flanders turned to search in all directions. Nothing visible yet, even with the growing light. But they would soon know just how many they were up against. They could hold off thousands until Stout Duncan arrived. But tens of thousands?

Memories of Bannockburn flashed in his mind. They were victorious, aye, but Todlaw was small. Well trained, true, but well-trained armies could be overrun by sheer numbers.

Flanders faced south again. “Where is Stephan?”

“Just there, across the road.” Robert pointed, then smirked. “Looks as if he and Atholl cannot decide who is in charge.”

Further back from the bickering hens, a hundred soldiers were readying their war horses. If they expected to be handed Todlaw on a silver platter, why dress for battle? Was it all just for show?

Flanders looked west again, hoping in vain to see a banner of a black boar on a red field. But Robert’s father couldn’t possibly know what they were facing. He might only bring a handful of men, and they might well regret coming to Young Duncan’s aid.

The road remained empty.

“I don’t understand,” Robert said at his shoulder. “If the coming danger is evident, why do the horns not repeat? Riders from all directions, but where are they?”

Flanders had a thought. “Perhaps the watchtowers were taken first.”

“Perhaps.”

Both men jumped at three deep throated blasts from the north. They waited to see if they would repeat, and while they counted their breaths, the horn sounded again from the east. Someone had orchestrated carefully.

From all directions, all at once.

It sounded like something he and James would have planned with Stout Duncan.

Then another idea. Maybe no one was coming!

Flanders found Stephan again to see if the man were preening. If the bastard had planned to take the watch towers only to terrify them, he would be enjoying the chaos on the walls. But instead, Stephan and Atholl looked just as rattled by the alarms as they were.

He recalled Brigid’s vision from late in the night. Riders they weren’t expecting. Maybe the devil himself. Was the enemy not expecting them either?

The screams of horses brought all attention back to the south. All those warhorses were rearing and stamping, rejecting their riders and fleeing like the devil had come for their souls. But another sound caught his attention—a sound that was tuned, perhaps, only to his ear.

Brigid’s quiet whispering...

The sound didn’t last long, only enough to allow him to locate her. There, on the wall, thirty feet to the east. She watched the thrown riders with delight, keeping her

attention on them as the last few men lost their steeds.

Though Flanders was compelled to go after her, to pull her from the wall before Stephan noticed her, he turned back to the chaos instead, looking for something... The last horse reared, eyes wide. It screamed and stamped...at the green leafy fronds reaching for its hooves, fronds that were encouraged by the barest wisps of swirling mist. The beast finally broke free and fled after its fellows toward the growing morning light.

The soldiers' attention was on anything but the ground. The shouting and cursing would have embarrassed any leader.

When Flanders hurried onto the wall walk, the spot where Brigid had stood was empty.

"Flanders," Robert called.

Though he glanced around, he could find no sign of her, nor that length of brown plaid that had covered her head. Not that he could have done anything about her when Robert clearly needed him.

Robert nodded across the road. The bickering wives had put their arguments aside and were headed to the gate with a dozen torch-bearing guards at their backs, including Atholl's four. They'd chosen not to come on horseback. Or rather, Brigid had made that choice for them.

"It's barely dawn," Robert said.

"Aye, well, it seems our judge has as much honor as his cousin." Flanders checked his dagger and hoped Brigid had done what he asked and had hidden hers. For he feared, if the enemy got inside the walls, she would need it.

Atholl and Stephan came to a halt far enough away that they didn't have to tip their heads back too far to see Robert.

The traitor's spawn cleared his throat. "Laird Duncan! I've come to execute my judgment on The Regent's behalf! I demand ye open yer gates!"

Robert leaned forward and rested his elbows on the barrier, as casual as you please. "My document reads noon. Perhaps ye made a mistake and wrote dawn on yer duplication. But I assure ye, these gates will not budge for the pair of ye this morn...even if the entrance to hell has opened and its occupants come at ye on all sides. Ye shall be offered no sanctuary here!"

As if Robert's words had been a signal, the alarm from the west sounded once more. Judging by the way both men reacted, they had no idea who might be coming.

"I've reconsidered," Atholl shouted. "Some of yer people will need more time to reach other destinations," he reasoned. "Open yer gates now, and I'll ensure them safe passage."

"But David," Robert teased, "I must refuse, for it seems ye cannot guarantee yer own safety, let alone anyone else's."

Atholl showed his teeth, miffed at the use of his first name and the reminder that he and Robert were contemporaries. "Then I shall not guarantee their safety when we breach yer walls, Robert."

Robert grinned and turned to Flanders. "Do ye hear that? He believes he can breach our walls. These walls."

Every Todlaw man within hearing laughed both loud and long—enough to bring the sun up over the horizon.

"Laird Duncan!" Atholl called again. "This is yer last chance. What say ye?"

Robert didn't hesitate. "I say ye can wait until noon, or ye can explain to the Regent why ye attacked a loyal subject without provocation."

The hens resumed their bickering, but it ended abruptly when Stephan turned and stomped back across the road. But he paused when McInnes, Todlaw's eagle-eyed scout, shouted from atop a wall turret and pointed west.

"Red banner!"

Red! That could be Stout Duncan! But it was also the color of the Comyn family. Had Atholl sent for his own reinforcements and not known the direction from which they'd come?

Hemming put a hand to his face and shouted back, "Is there a boar?"

"Something dark," McInnes called. "Might be."

Flanders exchanged a look with Robert. Both Stout Duncan and the Comyns sported a boar. The question was, was there any gold? He shouted the question to McInnes, then explained to Robert. "Comyn would have gold somewhere. Either sheaves of wheat or a gold stripe, boar or not."

Riders came into view. Two dozen, perhaps more. Three bore banners. The red was visible even to those with poorer eyesight.

"No gold!" McInnes waved his arm over his head. The man obviously knew his banners. "Black boar, no gold!"

Air filled Flanders' lungs without invitation. Stout Duncan had come! And it seemed

Stephan's men weren't prepared to stop him at the moment. The small party need only reach the gates and they'd be safe.

SURPRISE GUESTS

* * *

Robert's grin reached both his ears. "I think my father will understand if we don't ride out to meet him."

Flanders didn't know which he enjoyed more, seeing Robert's joy or the agony on the faces of the two men standing in the middle of the road, watching their nefarious plans slip slowly beyond their reach as one of the most powerful barons in Scotland drew near.

He felt a mere whisper of his name in his head and looked to the nearest set of stairs. There, Brigid hovered, biting her lower lip and watching for some sign of hope. He waved for her to join them. If Stephan saw her now, so be it. Having her beside him in a joyful moment was a balm for a heart weary from worry.

He tucked her under his arm and squeezed her against him. "Look there. The black boar on a red field is Stout Duncan's. If they had planned a trap, I see no signs of it. And Atholl would be a fool to move against us now, without the Regent's express permission."

She squinted at the riders. "He hasn't brought many men with him, has he?"

Robert chuckled. "Look again, my lady. Ye see that shadow on the horizon?"

And indeed, there was a wide swath of movement growing in the distance, undulating as it moved slowly forward. Flanders closed his eyes and thanked God yet again.

The lad gave him a close look. "Mayhap I should have asked just what ye included in that message."

Flanders shrugged. "Just that we had rescued my woman from Gallabrae, along with Lady Stephan, and that the bastard might try to take them back again. That we might need some help in the coming days."

It took another five minutes for the old man to get near enough to recognize. The two riders at either side of him, however, were strangers. Though Flanders hadn't been to that Duncan's keep for years, he surely would have known if the man had elevated new faces for his captains. And these two, riding beside him...

He nudged Brigid's shoulder to get her attention, but she wouldn't look away from the coming horsemen. It was just as she'd described her vision. Men they weren't expecting.

The one on Duncan's right hand was a fine tall man who had to rival Flanders in size. Thanks to his helmet, it was impossible to see his face. But it was the other man who concerned him.

Black, odd clothing. Black baldric, a blanket of dark plaid around his hips. Even from a distance, Flanders felt as if the man were seeing directly into his soul. And smiling.

He whispered against her hair. "Looks like the devil has come to Todlaw after all." He watched helplessly as the bastard neared, his heart pounding louder by the second...until the moment he recognized the stranger and the organ fairly exploded in his chest.

A man who will come to take me away...

* * *

Brigid struggled under the pressure of Flanders' hold on her. Only when she gasped for lack of air did he realize he'd nearly crushed her. But at least it broke the spell and she was able to look away from the dark stranger riding into their lives.

Brigid, I assume?

The words came clearly into her head, as if the devil were standing before her.

She dared not answer. The sight of him, combined with the inevitability of her vision, left her trembling with fear. He would take her away, and there was nothing she could do to thwart him.

Easy, lass. I am here to help.

So, he could read more than her thoughts?

Who are ye? she demanded.

In due time, Brigid. In due time.

Stout Duncan gave Atholl and Stephan only a passing glance as he and his retinue forced them from the road and turned for the opening gates. The war council at large hurried down from the wall with wide smiles to greet him. Brigid's slippers barely touched the ground with Flanders' helpful hand around her waist, keeping her close.

"Father!" Robert looked up adoringly at his still-mounted father, no longer the laird of Todlaw, but the boy who missed his family dearly. As soon as the man

dismounted, however, it was the father who looked up at the son.

"Robert, my lad!" He chuckled, then cleared his throat. "That is, Laird Duncan, we request yer hospitality. And in exchange, our arms are yers."

Huzzahs rang out from his men and all around the courtyard as the people of Todlaw celebrated their relief.

Duncan waved everyone quiet again and scowled. "What's this I hear about Flanders settling on one woman?"

While everyone laughed, the tall stranger dismounted and removed his helmet. His hair was long and curled and the color that rivaled Brigid's own. "All I can say," he boomed, "is it's about damned time!"

The courtyard fell deathly quiet. Flanders' chest turned as immovable as stone beneath her hand. His mouth hung open, his eyes unbelieving.

"James," Robert whispered. "James, is it ye?"

The man wrapped his arms around the young laird and lifted him off the ground. "It's me, baby brother. Ye're not hallucinatin'."

Stout Duncan beamed as if it were the best day of his life. "I've got my lads back again." Then he noticed Brigid or rather, Flanders' tight hold on her, and stepped close. "Ye must call me father." He scooped up her hand and kissed the back of her fingers. "And if ye already have a father, I shall be yer favorite."

* * *

Flanders still couldn't believe it was James who slammed into him and lifted him off

the ground, turned in a circle, and set him back down again before pounding the side of Flanders' shoulder. Somewhere in there, he'd lost his hold on Brigid.

"Come on, mate. It's not like I'm back from the dead. I'm just...back for a visit is all." He stepped aside and gestured to the dark stranger Flanders may or may not have labeled rightly when he'd thought him the devil.

"Ye remember Wickham."

Flanders took a deep breath and eyed Wickham carefully. If he was here to steal Brigid from him, he was mistaken.

The man grinned and held out his hand for Flanders to take. "Flanders Leesborn. I admit, I've heard yer praises often enough to make me doubt them."

"Wickham Muir, is it? I pity a man so homely. Perhaps, if ye linger for a day or two, we can remedy that." Flanders shook the offered hand, then wiggled his nose as if to demonstrate how Wickham's might be adjusted for him. "No trouble a' tall."

Wickham only grinned wider.

He wasn't aware of precisely when the older Duncan had won his woman away from him. He had no choice but to follow the pair up the steps.

Hemming shouted from behind. "What shall I tell the earl when he comes knockin'?"

He, Robert, and James shouted in unison, "Tell him to piss off!"

When they reached the top of the steps, he slapped the old man on the back. "I should have kenned it was you who set off the trumpeters in all directions."

Duncan stiffened. “Flanders, lad, I did no such thing. All my forces were behind me.”

Robert paled and together they searched the southern horizon, the eastern, and what they could see of the north. Shadowy lines shifted in the morning light...in all directions.

Robert swallowed and pointed. “Then who are they?”

THE BOARD IS SET

* * *

Using trestles and planks, a table was erected in the outer bailey, its surface covered with maps and the stones to hold them in place. They also marked the positions of the enemy.

The morning sun struggled to warm anything through a low bank of gray clouds that hovered overhead as if trying to read those maps over the shoulders of Todlaw's war council. Robert had immediately ceded the head of the table to his father, taking a position at Stout Duncan's right hand while Flanders stood at his left. James, Wickham, Snorre, Rolf, and Hemming completed the circle, with Brigid and Gerts seated on a bench to one side.

Flanders couldn't stop glancing at James. His friend had changed since he'd disappeared eight years before. He was much less gaunt, proving he'd eaten well wherever it was he'd gone. And the gray at his temples and striping his beard proved that time, even in the future, did not stand still. He also looked irritatingly happy.

As for Wickham, the man was a puzzle. He moved with a strange grace, his eyes constantly taking in everything around him. He missed nothing. And simply thinking his name drew his attention. It took far too long for Flanders to realize the bastard might share Brigid's ability to speak into the minds of others, and probably hear their thoughts as well.

As if proving that fact, the man glanced Flanders way and grinned, which sent chills racing up and down Flanders' spine.

McInnes, the eagle-eyed watchman, came to stand before them. The wiry man's face was weathered from years of watching horizons, his sharp eyes missing nothing within sight of Todlaw's walls. Behind him waited four watchmen who had abandoned their distant posts and ridden hard to report all they'd seen. Atholl, in a demonstration of his youth and inexperience, had allowed them back through the gates without interference.

"My lords," McInnes began, nodding respectfully to both Duncan and Robert, "the watchmen bring the expected news. We are surrounded."

Robert nodded. "But by whom?"

McInnes took a deep breath. "By half of Scotland, it seems." He gestured to the north. "From the Red Hills, the Morays—red banners with gold crosses." The Regent's own clan.

Stout Duncan's eyebrows shot up, but he held his tongue.

McInnes gestured to the southwest. "The Campbells. Yellow and black triangles. Unmistakable. And with MacDonalds to boot."

"MacDonald and Campbell together?" Hemming scoffed. "Next ye'll tell us the English have come."

"Aye, well, the Earl of Mar, Lennox, and the Stewarts."

Flanders exchanged a look with Robert. "It seems we've become rather popular overnight."

"But why?" Robert asked, bewildered. "Why would they all come?"

All eyes turned to a grinning Stout Duncan, who suddenly found great interest in examining the table.

"Father?"

The old man chuckled. "I might have sent a missive to Thomas Randolph."

"Aye?" Flanders said. "What kind of missive brings Scotland to our door?"

Duncan's eyes danced. "I merely suggested that the fate of the country and the wee king might be decided at Todlaw in two days' time." He shrugged. "I was guessing, of course. Never trust an enemy with family ties at court."

"A lesson I've learned, Father," Robert said. "And just as important, know your enemy's relations in the first place."

James leaned his elbows on the table. "We assumed Atholl would be called into this ruckus. And Atholl isn't to be trusted. He won't...that is, I doubt he will remain loyal to another Bruce king or his regent." He bit his lips together like he was trying to keep from sharing too much. And Flanders reckoned that, from some future vantage point, his friend might know exactly where Scotland's fate lay.

"Precisely," Duncan nodded. "The lad's grandfather was Red Comyn. His mother was Stephan's cousin. Flanders' missive said Stephan was the threat, so I assumed he would call on his connections."

Wickham, who had been silent until now, spoke up. "And what of Stephan and Atholl? Do ye suppose they'll dismiss the charges and slink away?"

McInnes grinned. "I surely would."

"They are stuck," Flanders said. "They've pulled their men tight around the walls to catch us, but they're caught between us and the clans. And they know it."

"They do," one of the watchmen said. "Stephan's men are desertin'. Slipping away in small groups."

Flanders felt a weight lift from his shoulders. He glanced at Brigid, who was watching him with a mixture of relief and something else—uncertainty, perhaps. He wanted to go to her, to reassure her that all would be well, but he couldn't make promises about things he had yet to understand.

"What of their horses?" he asked, remembering the wild scene from earlier. "Have they recovered them?"

"Most ran off," the same man replied. "Strange thing, that. Never seen warhorses spook so badly over nothin'."

"It wasn't nothin'." McInnes glanced at Brigid, then away. "Every horse went mad, rearing and throwing their riders, then bolting as if the devil himself were nippin' at their heels. But it wasn't the devil, it was..." He suddenly clapped his mouth shut and looked at his boots.

"Not the devil, ye say?" James raised an eyebrow.

"No. It was weeds," Flanders said, his eyes finding Brigid again. "Our Brigid has a way with plants. She made them grow right before our eyes and reach for the horses' hooves."

Wickham's eyes gleamed with interest. "A talent indeed. Though I suspect yer

watchman wasn't the only one to notice."

Flanders' smile faded. "What do ye mean?"

"I mean," Wickham said carefully, "that if two of ye saw the truth, there are others who did as well. Word will reach Stephan and Atholl. They won't take it lightly."

Flanders cursed. He'd been so caught up in the moment, in the joy of seeing their enemies discomfited, he hadn't considered the danger. And danger it was, now that The Bruce was gone.

James placed a hand on Flanders' shoulder. "Dinnae fash. With these armies arriving, Stephan and Atholl have more pressing concerns than one woman."

"Besides," Wickham said with a strange smile, "I'm here to help with that. Trust me."

Flanders would do no such thing. He'd seen the fear in Brigid's eyes when she spoke of the man coming to take her away.

"What happens now?" Robert asked, bringing Flanders back to the matter at hand.

"Now," Stout Duncan said, "we wait for Randolph to arrive. He'll have to decide what to do with a judge who's been caught conspiring with his cousin against The Crown's closest allies."

"And Stephan?" Hemming asked.

Duncan's smile was cold. "I suspect he will pay dearly, at least for his recent crimes." He looked at Brigid, then at Flanders.

Flanders noted Brigid's shiver and moved to her side to wrap an arm around her

shoulders. "It's nearly over," he promised.

"Is it?" she whispered back.

30

LET THE GAMES BEGIN

* * *

Thomas Randolph, Earl of Moray and regent to the child king, did indeed come to Todlaw.

His Majesty's carriage approached Todlaw's gates with a slow, dignified pace that belied the urgency of the situation. From the wall, Flanders watched as the conveyance rolled past Stephan and Atholl, who stood expectantly by the roadside. The Regent barely turned his head in their direction, offering nothing more than the briefest glance through the carriage window.

"Open the gates," Robert called, unable to hide his satisfaction at the slight to their enemies.

The massive wood slabs swung wide, and the carriage rolled through. Before Stephan or Atholl could protest or follow, the gates closed with a decisive thump.

The carriage rolled to a stop and caked mud fell from its wheels. The small door opened before a footman reached it, and the man who was so anxious to extricate himself was barely recognizable. Thomas Randolph, the great war captain, the man with whom they'd been caked in the mud and blood of Scotland, now stood before them draped in fine wool and silk.

His well-weathered mantle of old had been replaced with something rich and trimmed in fur, and the decorations on his boots sparkled as if the sun itself shone down from his arse. Gone was the battle-worn warrior, the hardened knight who had drunk the rain and slept in the heather. In his place stood Scotland's Regent, wrapped in the gaudy trappings of court.

Despite the finery, his face was familiar enough. Canny eyes sat atop strong cheekbones and an iron jaw. Once upon a time, he'd been quick to smile. But that morning, he bore the sobriety of his station.

Just as with every soldier, time had carved new lines in his skin and marked him as a man who had seen too much of war and not enough of peace. His hair had lost its dark color and was now cut in the manner of an English courtier.

The same piercing gaze that had sized up enemies on the battlefield now swept over Todlaw's war council, weighing, measuring. He might have traded steel for silk, but the man beneath had not changed. This was still Thomas Randolph, nephew of The Bruce, and dangerous to his enemies.

Hemming let out a low whistle. "Would ye look at that? Our Thomas has gone and turned into a peacock."

"Careful," Snorre muttered, though his eyes danced with mirth. "That peacock can have yer head."

Stout Duncan made no effort to hide his amusement. "Thomas!" he called, striding forward. "I hardly recognized ye without grass in yer teeth! How can ye draw yer sword with those fancy sleeves in the way?"

Moray's stern expression cracked, just slightly. "Duncan, ye old goat. Still alive, I see. And still lacking any sense of propriety."

"Propriety?" Duncan scoffed. "In my day, we called it somethin' with a foul smell."

"In yer day," Moray grinned, "didn't ye fight with clubs?"

The two old warriors clasped arms and laughed.

"Lord Regent," Duncan finally said, and stepped back to offer a respectful bow.

Robert stepped forward next and did the same, adding, "Todlaw welcomes ye."

"Young Duncan." Moray clasped his arm as well. "Last I saw ye, ye were barely as tall as a sword. Never expected ye to grow full sized." His gaze swept over the assembled men. "Flanders Leesborn, still standin' watch and fosterin' trouble?"

Flanders bowed. "Someone has to, my lord, since others have been relegated to protecting their silk."

Moray laughed again. "The silk is for the nobles. For old friends, I'm still the same captain who once drank ye under the table at Scone."

"As I recall," Flanders countered, "it was ye we found under the table in the mornin'. And not alone."

"Details," Moray waved a dismissive hand, but his eyes crinkled at the corners. His gaze continued its journey around the group until it landed on James. His brows flew high in genuine surprise. "James Duncan. Ye're dead! Is this a ghost?"

"Departed, not dead, sir. And soon to be again."

"Hmm." Moray's gaze shifted to Wickham, lingering there with undisguised curiosity while he took in the man's strange manner of dress before moving on to Brigid and

Gerts. "Ladies," he said, inclined his head, then dragged his attention away.

Flanders backed up to stand closer to Brigid, a movement not lost on the regent and not intended to be.

"I see we have much to discuss," Moray said, rubbing his temples. "But first, I require rest. The journey was...taxing." He glanced back toward the gate. "I assume our friends outside can wait a while longer?"

"They can," Stout Duncan said. "A little waiting should improve their manners."

"Indeed." Moray's lips twitched. "When I've rested, we'll sort this mess. All of it." His gaze swept over them once more. "It is good to see truly loyal faces. I mean to see that loyalty rewarded..." He looked at Brigid once more, then Flanders. "Wherever possible."

James stepped forward and inclined his head. "Allow me to escort ye into the keep, my lord. I believe I remember the way."

"I'd welcome that," Moray said. "It's not every day I can converse with a man fresh from the grave."

* * *

Three hours later, Thomas Randolph emerged from Robert's chambers feeling refreshed, though he could have slept for an entire day, truth be told. He was greeted by the tall and lanky soldier he knew as Snorre and escorted to Todlaw's impressive war room, where the narrow windows gave him a clear view in every direction and a welcome breath of fresh air.

The fortress was surrounded on all sides by Gallabrae's men, but on each horizon,

another army bided its time.

"Now," he said, settling into the chair at the head of the table. "Tell me everything. From the beginning."

Young Duncan and his council took turns recounting events that had led to this standoff, starting with a corrupt and banished steward, Hector Stephan's accusation of witchcraft, the burning of the first witch, Lady Stephan and other women being sent to the pit. Leesborn told the harrowing tale of the attempted rescue, being sent to the pit himself, and their ultimate rescue. This was all followed by Stephan's arrival at Todlaw's gates, of their theories of what motivated the bastard, and Atholl's arrival soon after.

"We were not surprised by Atholl's biased judgment," Young Duncan added. "Considering his grandfather was Red Comyn."

Through it all, Moray had listened without interruption, careful not to allow his expression to reveal his thoughts. When it was finished, he sat back and steepled his fingers. "I feel it only right that I remind ye that I, too, have Comyn blood through my mother's family."

He was pleased to see them set back on their heels, if only slightly. Their confidence in their own righteousness needed checking, and he pretended not to notice when, to a man, they shared a silent, nervous exchange.

He enjoyed it so much, in fact, he sought to worry them just a wee bit more. So he asked, "Where is this Easterling silver Heslington stole? The silver that might have bought Atholl's favor?"

Flanders glanced at Young Duncan before answering. "Hidden, Lord Moray. Safe from those who cannot be trusted."

He nodded. "Wise. Now, I believe it's time we heard from our friends outside. Send for Atholl and Stephan."

Flanders' expression darkened and he shook his head. "I am happy to bring in Atholl, my lord, but I can't guarantee Stephan will leave Todlaw alive."

Moray's gaze flicked to the witch standing in the corner. The Viking was protecting his woman. Completely understandable. But he couldn't allow one man to put the future of Scotland at risk for a show of chivalry.

"Give it no further thought, Leesborn. I can guarantee his safety. Is that understood?"

The man inhaled sharply, then inclined his head. "As ye wish, my lord."

THE OPENING GAMBIT

* * *

The great hall was transformed into a makeshift court. The immovable chair, still immovable despite the weight of silver that had been rescued from its base, and the smaller table and chairs that usually sat behind it had been removed. Thus, when Moray sat upon The Bruce's gift, there was nothing to distract attention away from him.

Obviously, there was little of the humble soldier left inside the finery.

Benches had been removed so that everyone in attendance remained standing, except for Lady Stephan, who was given a stool to one side of the dais.

The war council stood along the south wall to Moray's right. Along the back of the large room waited the women who had been rescued from Stephan's pit, along with their families.

Though it was unconsciously done, Flanders kept nudging Brigid back so that his own body blocked The Regent's view of her. And each time he did, she nudged him in return and tried to step forward to see what was going on. She did, finally retreat a step on her own when the enemy entered.

Atholl came first, his steps quick and eager, his face a mask of deference. "Lord

Regent,” he said, bowing low. "An unexpected honor. How fares our young king?"

"Well enough," Moray replied coolly. "Though I wonder at your concern, given your recent actions."

Atholl's smile faltered. "I've done only what was expected, my lord. I've represented yer interests in this petty dispute?—"

"Petty? Indeed." Moray's voice was dangerously soft.

Hector Stephan entered and came to stand at Atholl's side, his gaze darting around the hall like a man who expects it all to be his, and soon. When he spotted Gerts among the women, his face darkened and his eyes narrowed while he waited to be addressed.

“Laird Stephan.”

"Lord Regent,” he said, offering a stiff bow. "I'm pleased ye've come to enforce yer representative's judgment?—"

"Are ye?" Moray leaned forward. "Tell me, Atholl, when ye came to me with Laird Stephan's complaints, why did ye not mention that ye were relations?"

Atholl's face paled. "I...didn't think it relevant, my lord."

"No? A man accuses his neighbors of harboring witches and kidnapping his people, including his lady wife, and ye didn't think it relevant that he is kin?" Moray's voice rose slightly. “Ye didn't suppose that might affect yer judgment?"

"I assure ye, my lord, I was completely impartial?—"

"Enough." Moray cut him off with a sharp gesture. "Yer judgment is annulled. I will judge this situation myself." His gaze swept the hall. "After all, some of Scotland's most loyal subjects find themselves in jeopardy."

Flanders didn't like the way Moray looked at Brigid when he spoke. There was something in his eyes—not desire, but a kind of calculating assessment that warned Flanders to reach for his sword, which he couldn't do, since weapons in The Regent's presence were restricted to his own guards.

Atholl cleared his throat and a dozen of Stephan's men ushered themselves into the hall. He waved a hand in their direction. "If it pleases ye, my lord, these are but a few of the witnesses?—"

"Silence, Atholl, or I'll have yer tongue."

Atholl clapped his mouth shut and he cowered over to the north wall where he and Stephan waited, along with their witnesses. Both men repeatedly glared at the forty-some-odd people ready to call them liars. And still, Atholl sneered as if he believed things would still fall his way.

Moray turned his attention to James. "I would have ye explain to this assembly why we were led to believe ye were dead, sir."

"A misunderstanding. I left Scotland for good. Or so I had intended," James said simply. "I never expected to return, but my friend Wickham found me and told me there was trouble brewing between Gallabrae and Todlaw. I thought Flanders might need my help."

"Hmm." Moray's eyes narrowed. "I don't care for people returning from the dead, James. It makes things...messy."

Wickham chuckled softly, drawing Moray's attention.

"And who exactly are ye, sir? Too young to have fought in the Wars, perhaps?"

"I assure Yer Majesty, ye dinnae wish to ken the likes of me." Wickham's smile insinuated he was jesting, but his eyes promised he was not. "But if ye insist, it would be best if everyone else clears the room first." He seemed deadly serious.

Moray studied him for a long moment, then nodded. "Everyone out. Except ye." He pointed to James. "Ye stay."

As the hall emptied, Flanders cast one last look at Wickham. The man winked—a gesture so unexpected that Flanders nearly stumbled.

Steady man. No matter what happens, keep yer wits.

Outside in the bailey, they waited in tense silence. Brigid pressed close to Flanders' side, her eyes fixed on the closed door at the top of the stairs. He was tempted to tell her the words he'd heard in his head, but he preferred she believed that speaking into his mind was something only she could do.

"What do ye think they're discussing?" she whispered.

"I have no ken," Flanders admitted. "But whatever it is, I trust James. And if he trusts Wickham..."

"Ye don't sound convinced," Brigid said.

"I'm not. But I've seen enough strange things in my life to keep an open mind." He squeezed her hand. "Including a beautiful witch who can make plants grow and sing with just a whisper of encouragement."

She blushed but said nothing, her attention drawn back to the door.

Over an hour passed before the door finally opened. Everyone involved was instructed to return to the great hall. When they filed inside, Moray's face was ashen. He waited impatiently for what was probably his second or third cup of wine, judging from the red drops at the corners of his mouth and a line of stain that ran to his chin.

After draining it, he gulped in deep breaths to compose himself.

James looked unconcerned. Wickham wore a satisfied smile that made Flanders distinctly uneasy, and he had to remind himself that he trusted these men.

"Return to yer places," Moray commanded, his voice steadier than his complexion suggested. "I will hear the witnesses."

Once everyone had settled, Moray turned to Stephan. "Tell me your version of events, Laird Stephan. And be brief—I've heard enough long-winded tales this day." His eyes darted briefly in Wickham's direction.

Stephan recounted his accusations—witchcraft, kidnapping, conspiracy to poison. His voice grew more confident with the retelling, as if he believed Moray couldn't possibly believe anything or anyone else.

When he finished, Moray sat in silence for a long moment, his gaze moving from Stephan to Atholl, then to Wickham, who watched the proceedings with that same unsettling smile.

"I've heard enough," Moray said finally. "Since I have already heard Leesborn and Duncan's recounting, I am prepared to render my verdict." He gestured to his scribe, who hurried forward with quill and parchment.

"I recognize that no one will be satisfied if the result of all this fuss is a mere slap on the hand," Moray began. "The charges are serious. What Atholl proposed would have ruined lives—the wrong lives."

For the first time, Atholl and Stephan appeared to worry.

Moray nodded to Gerts. "During my rest, I had a long conversation with Lady Stephan. Combined with what I already know of the men in this room, I believe I understand the truth of this matter."

Atholl shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, while Stephan's face had gone completely white.

"First," Moray continued, "the charge of witchcraft. A serious accusation, particularly when it results in death." His gaze fell on Brigid, and Flanders' hand tightened around hers. "In this matter," Moray said, his voice ringing through the hall, "I find Laird Stephan guilty...of murdering...the wrong woman."

DOLING OUT FATE AND THE EASTERLING SILVER

* * *

For decades, the people of Todlaw would argue over the particulars of what happened after the Regent began handing out sentences. But they all witnessed, in general, the same events.

First, Moray announced that Laird Stephan had murdered the wrong woman and acknowledged that there was still a witch among them, namely Brigid Muir, the lass that Flanders Leesborn had claimed as his own.

“She cast a spell on our horses,” one of Stephan’s soldiers shouted—a claim that was echoed by one man after another.

By the time Moray had the room back in his control, it was clear to all that no one along the south wall had denied that the woman was a witch. Flanders merely argued that witches were protected by The Crown.

“Be that as it may,” Moray said, “it does not change the fact that Laird Stephan murdered an innocent woman. Though I admit that mistakes do happen, I wonder if there is some compensation that should be made.” He turned to James Duncan. “What do you believe would be fair here?”

James scowled for a moment. “The last time I saw Stephan, I was forced to give up

something that meant a great deal to me, and to Todlaw. I would like to see it returned.”

Stephan sneered. “You gave me nothing but a—” He clapped his lips shut and shook his head. “No! Ye have no ken how long it took me to move all those stones to Gallabrae!”

“Nevertheless,” Moray said, “ye shall move them back. It will give ye ample time to think on yer sins.”

“Stones,” Flanders spat. “As payment for murder?” He looked at James and wondered if his friend had lost all reason. But James wouldn’t meet his eye.

Moray frowned at Flanders in warning and went on. “Next charge.” He consulted a parchment in his hands. “Kidnapping. I find, after speaking with Lady Stephan, that no one was taken from Gallabrae against their own wishes. Unless any of ye say otherwise?” He lifted his chin and looked to the back of the room. No one spoke. “Very well. Charge dismissed.”

He consulted his paper again.

Flanders considered taking Brigid’s hand and fighting his way out if something didn’t start making sense. But suddenly, Wickham trespassed into his mind once more.

Steady I say. Remember what I told ye. Keep yer wits. And trust us. Moray is with us.

Flanders took a breath and looked down into Brigid’s eyes. He could tell she was hearing something as well. And more, she didn’t look any more convinced than he was. A quick squeeze of his hand was all he needed, however, to trust her . The others had yet to earn it.

“As for the charge of witchcraft against Lady Stephan, I found no proof of such in our long dealings together and dismiss that charge,” Moray said. “She may go where she pleases. To Stirling with me, or she may stay here. I believe it unwise to return home with yer husband, but I am the last man to claim he understands women.”

This brought laughter from all quarters.

He continued, “I compel no persons included in Laird Stephan’s charges to return to Gallabrae. I believe all of the women accused were the victims of the laird’s ire and nothing more.”

The hall erupted in cheers from those who had been dreading their fate. Stephan was outraged. Atholl was, slowly but surely, adding physical distance between him and his co-conspirator. Soon he’d be inching onto the dais.

“Next, the charge of conspiracy to murder. The intended poisoning of Laird Stephan was the action of the deceased person called Heslington. The man was no spy. This was a case of a chicken coming home to roost. The shame belongs to Laird Stephan for welcoming him in.”

Wickham’s steady gaze, along with the expression on James’ face, warned Flanders there was more yet to come, and that he wasn’t going to like it.

“Three more issues remain,” Moray shouted, to get the revelers to settle once more. “First, there seems to be an issue with the possession of this fine castle. I agree with Atholl that this place is far too fine and defensible for its control to fall into enemy hands. It must be entrusted to only the most loyal and capable of subjects. Therefore, I set aside whatever kinship that exists between James Duncan and Robert Duncan, blood or no.”

Stephan proved himself a true lackwit by straightening his posture as if preparing for

a great honor to be bestowed upon him like some crown.

“And I bestow ownership of Todlaw, in total, to Laird Robert Duncan, who will be granted his spurs and title of Knight before I depart.”

Shock and cheers made it impossible for any voice to be heard above the din for a good long while. Robert bowed low, then he embraced his father, his towering brother, then found Flanders and did the same.

Todlaw was safe. It was all Flanders had ever wished...until he met Brigid. Now, she was all he wanted. And her fate was all that worried him.

Moray pounded on the arm of the great chair until the hall quieted. “Next,” he said, “is the matter of recompense for the army needed to surround Todlaw.”

Stephan perked up once more and Flanders stomach turned. He knew it had been a mistake to let Moray know about the silver, friend or not. Wealth made men forget themselves, and it looked like the regent was no exception.

“So, Laird Stephan, I put it to ye. What compensation do ye believe would be fair?”

The bastard suggested a sum that was suspiciously close to the value of Heslington’s hoard!

Moray jumped on it. “Done!”

Atholl got some color back in his face and he and Stephan shared a gleeful smile, though the former still kept his distance.

Moray’s brows rose. “How soon can ye have that much delivered here?”

Stephan's eyes flew wide when he realized the Regent was asking the question of him. "I beg yer pardon, my lord?"

The Regent smiled. "I asked how soon ye can have that sum delivered here. I'll need time, ye see, to divide it between the Campbells, MacDonalds, The Earl of Mar, Clan Lennox, the Stewarts, and of course, the Morays. It will only be a token compared to their expense. But the clans loyal to Scotland mustn't be slighted." He smirked at Atholl. "Isn't yer wife a Stewart?"

The man ducked in shame. "Isobel. Aye."

Moray stared the man down a bit longer to make his point.

"But...but I am loyal," Stephan whined. "I deserve compensation?—"

"For starting this ruckus with false charges?" Moray scoffed. "I am not so generous as Atholl. Now answer the question."

"I...cannot say how long it would take...to produce actual coin..."

"Then perhaps...Gallabrae can fetch enough."

"Can fetch..." Stephan shook his head. "All of Gallabrae?"

"All of Gallabrae."

"Ye'll add me to the Disinherited?"

"I'll do no such thing. Whomever has the coin..." He glanced pointedly at Robert. "Shall hold the ransom to Gallabrae until such time as ye can repay that amount...in coin."

Stephan laughed nervously. “But Majesty, no one would?—”

“I would.” Robert beamed. “I can settle the matter today.”

Stephan took a step toward the Regent, his eyes fixed on the box beneath the other man’s arse. And Flanders wondered if Heslington had been executed for drugging his laird or if he’d been fool enough to give up all his secrets and had suddenly lost his usefulness.

“Well said.” Moray seemed pleased that the new laird of Todlaw had taken the hint. Although, it wasn’t lost on Flanders that the Regent was, in fact, getting his hands on Heslington’s stolen treasure after all. But it was a small price considering Robert would have control of Gallabrae and be able to help all those souls build a better home and a better life than the one they’d suffered under Stephan’s thumb.

Flanders, on the other hand, didn’t intend to hang about. He would take Brigid and find somewhere to live that was safer for women who could make plants sing and grow...and scare horses away.

“That only leaves one matter.” Moray waved his fingers, summoning Brigid forward. When Flanders stepped to the side to block the way, Moray huffed out a breath. “Very well, bring her yerself, Leesborn. But bring her ye will.”

Steady. Trust us.

A barely discernible nod from Wickham gave him hope. But the fact that James still avoided eye contact worried Flanders even more. Moray’s patience was at an end, clearly, so he decided to trust, if only a little.

“Until recently, the matter of harboring a witch wouldn’t have been at issue,” Moray said, to the room at large. “But The Bruce is gone. And Scotland is in a state. We

have no choice but to tread carefully here. And we have decided that a price must be paid for the events that have brought us all together. And we believe this will allow the scales to balance.”

He looked into Flanders’ eyes and inhaled deeply.

“Flanders Leesborn, I find ye guilty of harboring a witch and taunting yer neighbor to the point he disrupted our urgent business at court. I hereby sentence ye to two weeks imprisonment in a location yet to be decided. Take him.”

Two of the Regent’s surprised guards hurried forward and cautiously took hold of Flanders’ arms. Another two came from behind with their weapons drawn and tapped him on the back to alert him. Obviously, they were aware of his skills and feared what he might do. Shackles and chains were produced and attached to his wrists.

He blamed a lapse in sanity for his reasoning, hoping that if he went along quietly, Brigid would be spared a similar sentence, though she was guilty of nothing. He realized too late that Moray was purposefully waiting for him to be taken out the rear stairs before finishing his pronouncements. He hadn’t counted on his voice carrying down the spiral steps as clearly as if Flanders stood before him.

“Brigid Muir, ye’re found guilty of witchcraft, and in two days’ time, ye shall be burned at the stake. May God Almighty have mercy on thee.”

The very soul of Flanders Leesborn, the Bright Bear of Todlaw, protested so loudly they say it was heard for a mile in every direction.

Half of Scotland crossed themselves.

33

YE MUSTN'T TELL...

* * *

Deep in the ground, at the base of each turret in the curtain wall, a space was constructed for prisoners. No more than ten men at a time could be kept humanely in such a space, but when creating a fortress like Todlaw, a place many men would covet, James Duncan insisted there would be times when men, enemy or not, would need to be imprisoned for the safety of the community. He called it a jail.

Ten turrets. Ten jails.

The man couldn't have known that the first prisoner to be housed in the jail closest to the tower would be his dearest friend.

Flanders cursed himself for not having the forethought that he might one day need to escape one. But no, there were no weaknesses to be found. He'd torn the meager bench apart trying to pry the metal bars loose, and now he was left with only a cold dirt floor and a torch just inside the stairwell for comfort. But he didn't need comfort. He needed out!

Two days. That bastard Moray had given Brigid two days before her sentence was to be carried out. That gave Flanders less than two days to convince someone to unlock the cell door. That was all he needed. Just one chance. And with everyone in Todlaw loyal to him, it shouldn't be too difficult. No need to despair.

The shackles were already beginning to wear on his wrists, but he couldn't blame his jailors for leaving them on. No man in Scotland, save James Duncan, could rival him in hand-to-hand combat.

Once again, he recalled the look on James' face and couldn't fathom why his friend couldn't look him in the eye...unless he'd known what was coming. But why not warn him?

What possible excuse could James have for not doing so?

James could have helped him escape with Brigid before Moray began. At the very least, he could have feigned ignorance. Why had he not?

James had ever been one to champion women. He'd claimed to have known many witches. And he knew for a fact that Flanders loved Brigid. So why not help them?

It made no sense!

Steady I say. Keep yer wits. And trust us. Moray is with us.

Could the answer lie in Wickham's words?

Did James not warn him of the danger...because there was no danger? Was there truly a plan? A plan that Moray was party to?

Just what had been discussed during that lengthy conversation? Was a plan made then? And did Moray know Wickham could take James away again in the blink of an eye?

Flanders cursed himself all over again for being a fool. Brigid had seen it— a man was coming to take her away . Wickham had come to take her away! And there was

nothing she could do to stop him.

Getting Brigid far away from the danger was all well and good, but she was going nowhere without him!

Flanders took a drink from the water skin he'd been provided, to soothe his throat, then he resumed his only strategy...

"James Duncan! Bring me James Duncan!" He pounded a broken plank against the iron bars until his ears rang. "James Duncan, show yerself! Ye great ruddy coward!"

* * *

Brigid paced the confines of Flanders' bedchamber, her fingers tracing the edge of the dagger he'd given her. After the sentencing, Moray's men had escorted her back to the very space Flanders had once locked her inside, but they hadn't searched her or the room for weapons.

If she didn't want to face the horror of the fire, she could end it here, now. But she'd never done a cowardly thing in her life. She doubted she could. Besides, there were still two days left for miracles. And if anyone could produce one, it was Flanders Leesborn.

If he managed to get her out of Todlaw, it wouldn't be the first time he'd been an answer to her prayers. But first, someone would need to free him...

"Please tell me ye're not plannin' to use that."

Brigid spun to face the corner, dagger raised. Where there had been nothing but shadows a moment before, Wickham now stood, watching her with those unsettling eyes that seemed to hold a hundred secrets, one of which must be how to move

through walls.

"How did ye do that?"

"The same way I'll take ye away," he said simply, as if appearing from nowhere was a natural and frequent habit.

Brigid finally thought to lower the dagger.

"I mean ye no harm, lass." He leaned back against the wall, making no move toward her. "I've come to help ye, after all."

"How...how did ye ken I would need help?"

He smiled to one side. "Let's say I read it...in the margins of a book."

"The Grandfather's book!"

"Aye. Considerin' the year, I grabbed my friend James and rushed to Gallabrae, only to be told ye'd fled to Laird Duncan's stronghold. I...made some adjustments, and after we got yer sister to safety, we went to Stout Duncan's, only to realize?—"

"My sister!" She rushed to him, grabbed the front of his shirt, and forced him to bend so she could look into his eyes, to know if he was toying with her.

"Uh...only to realize ye'd gone to Young Duncan's keep. Forgive me. I should have led with yer sister, aye?" He smiled into her eyes. "Bella is safe. And happily waitin' for ye to join her."

She wasn't ready to let him go. "Why, oh why did ye not tell me the moment ye arrived? Ye could have spoken in my mind. No one would have heard?—"

“Because there are witnesses to yer every move. And Flanders’ as well. People who must believe yer anguish is real. So, in the end, they will not question what they see.”

Her mind raced, trying to make sense of what he was saying. But whatever it was, whatever his odd accent, she did believe he was telling the truth. He’d just proven he could manage miracles, and what was more miraculous than the idea that he’d saved Bella from that fire?

“She’s alive?”

He gave up tryin’ to explain. “She’s alive.”

She wrapped her arms around him and squeezed as hard as she could before turning him loose and stepping back. “Who are ye?”

He chuckled. “Well, in future, I am...The Grandfather.”

"Grandfather!" She dropped into a curtsy, then stood when he laughed again.

“Nae need for that, lass.”

“And what ye did here?” She gestured to the corner in which they stood.

“I can step in and out of Time ...just as easily as ye step in and out of a door. A happy result of a truly horrific curse, and one which allows me to help some of our people out of difficulties, if the circumstances are right.”

“Our people?”

“Muir witches.”

“I knew ye’d come. I saw it?—”

“I know.”

“I thought, perhaps, ye were death himself.”

Something changed in his eyes. “For some, I have been.” Then the look was gone and he smiled again. “Quick, now. Before we are interrupted, I must explain our plan, why ye must pretend ye ken nothing about it...and why Flanders cannot be told.”

* * *

In his cell, Flanders paused in his shouting to listen.

Brigid?

Her voice was faint but unmistakable.

Flanders!

My love! Where are they keeping ye?

I am back in yer room. I’m safe. Comfortable. And ye?

The same.

The desperation eased and their conversation slowed to a normal pace. They spoke of simple things, basic things, like hunger and loneliness, which was just another sort of hunger. He explained what he suspected about Heslington’s death. She told him that the Regent called for musicians to play in the hall to help drown out the noise he was making. And they finally got around to talking about the bastard’s plans for her in

two days.

I've been thinking about Wickham, he said. And yer vision. If he has come to take ye away, I want ye to let him. If there is a chance to flee, if he can truly save ye, then do so. Don't wait for me.

There was a long pause.

I don't wish to go anywhere without ye.

Never mind me! I'm in no danger. Promise ye'll go.

Silly man. Do not ask me to lie, remember?

Stubborn woman.

Aye, and ye love me despite it.

Notwithstanding everything, he smiled. That I do.

And I love ye, my stubborn Viking. But I must sleep now. The day was long and tryin'. Until tomorrow...

The connection faded, leaving him alone once more. But now, a seed of hope had been planted. If Wickham could truly save Brigid?—

The sound of footsteps on the stairs interrupted his thoughts. He tensed, ready for whatever was coming. But it was James who appeared and ducked his head to exit the stairwell.

"Ye took yer time," Flanders growled.

James walked slowly, taking in the details of the broken boards and remnants of a bucket that had been demolished, but he said nothing. His face remained solemn.

"Ye're a right bastard."

"I am. And I'm sorry."

"For givin' no warnin'? For lettin' them take her? For standin' by while Moray sentenced her to burn?"

"For all of it." James sighed. "But it had to be this way."

"Had to be?" Flanders gripped the bars and tried once again to shake them from their stone beds. "Explain that to me, James. Explain why my woman has to burn."

"She won't burn." James glanced over his shoulder, then leaned closer. "Wickham doesn't want ye to know the plan. He insists that yer reactions must be believable for the bastards watching. But I... have had a change of heart."

"Oh? What changed it? Being called a ruddy coward?"

His friend finally smiled. "Ye do know the right buttons to push." He leaned closer and lowered his voice. "Listen to me. There's a sound plan, but for it to work, ye must continue to act as if ye know nothing. And under no circumstances can ye tell Brigid."

"Why not?" Flanders demanded.

"Because Stephan and Atholl, and a castle's worth of witnesses will know something is amiss if either of ye appear disingenuous." James gripped his shoulder through the bars. "Trust me, brother. For the sake of all those we will leave behind, tell her

nothin'."

We. For all those we will leave behind ... They intended to take him with them!

Flanders studied his friend's face, searching for any sign of deception. Finding none, he nodded. "Tell me everythin'."

THAT BLASTED HENSBANE

* * *

All night, Brigid rode wave after wave of emotion that kept her from sleeping more than a few minutes at a time. Her elation over her sister's rescue was difficult to hide. She would have jumped and danced around the room had Wickham not warned her that royal guards stood outside her door, and that guards from court were horrible gossips.

On the other hand, every now and then, she would imagine the plan going terribly wrong, leaving her to burn at the stake for Stephan and Atholl's entertainment.

How could anyone sleep in that sea of fervor that splashed her from one extreme to the other?

Then, for a respite, she would think about Flanders. It no longer mattered what had brought them together, only that they not be torn apart. There was a chance, Wickham had explained, that he might not be able to take Flanders along, that they couldn't possibly know until the moment was upon them. And Wickham's priority was to save her and reunite her with Bella. Anything beyond that was what he called "gravy."

Of course, Brigid wanted to be noble, wanted to insist that if Flanders couldn't go, she would stay behind. But the only thing she would be staying for was a fire. And

for her to suffer that fate for want of Flanders would likely torture him for the rest of his days. How could she do that to him? And what would that do to Bella?

Come morning, she was left with three possibilities. First, the plan would work and Wickham would get both of them out of Todlaw and she would see her sister again. Or, Wickham would get her out and she would never see Flanders again. And in the worst possible case, the plan would fail completely and she would burn. Of course, there was also the possibility that their plan would be exposed and others would be punished with her...

The plan simply couldn't fail. And if that meant she needed to keep Flanders in the dark, she would do it.

* * *

Flanders had slept on hard floors before. But in most cases, he'd been wearied enough to sleep unaware of his discomfort. That was not the case this time, and he ended up pacing his cage half the night. In the morning, his keeper delivered a pallet stuffed with feathers—it was the only luxury that could fit between the bars, and under no circumstances was his gate to be opened without The Regent's direct order.

The only clue that the night had passed was the simple fact that he was given porridge to eat. He'd been hoping for eggs. He'd been dreaming of those lacey-edged eggs since the moment James had removed his helm. But alas...

More feet on the stairs. Soft. No boots . Brigid!

He set his bowl aside and flew to the bars, but it wasn't Brigid who emerged into the torchlight, but Gerts, carrying a plate with a towel over it.

She read the disappointment on his face and laughed. "Ye'll forgive me, I think,

when ye see I've brought ye eggs, cooked by James Duncan himself." She giggled. "I thought ye mad, years ago, when ye'd go on about these. But I've had a few myself this morn."

Since the plate was too wide to fit through the small gap at the bottom of the bars, he fed himself from the far side while Gerts continued to laugh at him. When he was finished, she took the empty plate, pulled a wineskin off her shoulder, and handed it through.

"I reckon yer throat will feel like fire after all the caterwaulin'." The smile fell away. "I am sorry, my lad. But don't give up hope. There is a chance Moray will change his mind. Always a chance my husband and Atholl will do something to anger him further, and he'll call off the fire just to spite them." Tears filled her eyes and she used the towel to dry them as she turned back to the stairs. "Not allowed to stay, ye see. But I shall come again."

He listened while the sounds of her sniffing slowly faded away.

So, Gerts knows nothing of the plan.

Flanders removed the cork from the wineskin and gulped down a full half...before he realized the woman had drugged him. And as he slipped off to sleep, on his meager but cherished pallet, he guessed that the not-unpleasant taste lingering on his tongue...was hensbane.

* * *

Brigid was pleasantly surprised when Gerts was allowed to come visit her. She brought a plate of eggs and a wineskin, along with two eyes filled to overflowing with tears.

Obviously, Wickham hadn't informed her there was a plan...

When Brigid woke in her bed and noted the morning sun creeping around the corners of the window shutter, she realized the old woman had drugged her. The strength of the flavor of hennbane in her mouth made her wonder if she'd eaten the plants whole and not remembered.

Gerts had stolen from her what might well be her last full day of living!

She splashed water on her face to wash away the final haze of a dreamless sleep, brushed her hair and prepared herself for the day. Then she reached out.

Flanders?

There was no answer. In case he was still sleeping she tried harder.

Flanders?

Brigid?

I'm here! Forgive me! It seems I slept an entire day away!

As did I. Gerts came. Brought me wine...

She could have wept. Then ye were fettle as well!

Aye. Aye. Such precious time lost!

Yes. Lost. But...we were spared the torture of it, I suppose.

He agreed. Listen to me, love. I...I am working on a plan to get free. Promise ye

won't lose heart.

A plan? Was it his alone, or was he telling her that Wickham had come to him as well. If so, she didn't dare acknowledge what she knew. So she answered him with... Never!

* * *

Flanders wouldn't have lost heart either, but it worried him when all he was given for his morning meal was another bowl of porridge.

"Wait, Fisbee," he said, when his jailor would have left with his empty bowl. "I would have ye pass along my petition to The Regent."

The man blanched. "Me, laird?"

"Aye, ye, Fisbee. Tell Thomas Moray that I would like to be on hand for...the fire. The last face my woman sees should be a friendly one. It should be mine. Tell him to shackle me however he likes, and I will ask nothing more of him. Then give him two words."

"Two words, laird?"

"Stirling Bridge. Ye'll remember?"

"I shall remember, laird."

Everyone at Todlaw had heard the tale of the Battle of Stirling Bridge where, long before James Duncan came on the scene, Flanders fought with William Wallace. It was during this battle that Flanders saved Thomas Moray's life. The future regent had been tossed off the side of the bridge with a rope around his neck and Flanders

managed to keep a hold on him while fighting off the English, until Moray was back on the bridge with his head still attached to his body.

None at Todlaw would be surprised when Flanders chose that moment to leverage Moray's debt.

35

IF ONLY SOMEONE WOULD LIGHT A TORCH...

* * *

B rigid stood at the window and watched the colors of the evening sky change from orange to pink and purple. Not long now...

Gerts had come that morning to apologize for drugging her and to tell her the execution was planned for sundown. A guard in the hallway had laughed and said the hour was chosen because witch burnings should never be witnessed on a full stomach.

Gerts threw a fit that would make a berserker proud and had the man replaced. Then, in one last attempt to save Brigid pain, she'd offered her a small vial of concentrated hensbane.

Brigid had declined.

Now, with the gloaming nearly upon her, a tray of food sat untouched on the table. They'd provided her with roasted goose, warm bread, plump berries of every sort, and honey cakes. A condemned woman's last meal. But she wanted something else entirely.

Flanders?

His response came immediately. They'd been talking like this all day.

I'm here, love .

They've brought me food. How can they expect me to eat?

Try. For strength alone, aye?

Fine. I will try, she lied.

She closed her eyes, weary of fighting off the dread. Wickham had promised to save her, to reunite her with Bella. But as the day slipped through her fingers, doubt gnawed at her.

What if it was all a lie? What if he'd never saved Bella? After all, she'd been there, in the crowd at Gallabrae, watching the horror on her sister's face until everything was consumed in sudden flames.

Then again, why would Wickham lie? Why had he come at all, if not to help her?

Oh, but she was tired...

The door opened and a priest entered, his face solemn beneath his cowl. He carried a large Bible and a rosary. Its cross wagged back and forth like the tail of a happy puppy, pleased to be of use.

"I've come to hear yer confession, child."

"I have nothing to confess," she replied.

The priest sighed. "Then perhaps I can offer comfort? Laird Leesborn would want

that at least."

A friend of Flanders? She nodded and allowed him to pray over her, though the Latin washed off her like water off stone, meaningful only to him. When he finished, he pressed the rosary into her hand.

"Keep this," he whispered. "It may bring ye peace."

She shook her head and handed it back. "Only more fodder for the fire, Father. It would be a pity to burn something so beautiful."

"Aye, so it would, so it would." His eyes were wet when he turned away.

Once he was gone, she reached out again. A priest came. He was surprisingly kind to a woman accused of witchcraft.

Brigid! I have news! The Regent has granted my request. I am to be released to attend... to witness. Ye see? I told ye I would get out of here. Take heart! I will find my way to ye. Ye will not die this day! I swear it!

His sudden confidence made her cry. Hope was beyond her, though she couldn't tell him that. But she could at least pretend, for his sake.

Are ye certain?

Aye! Moray owed me a debt from Stirling Bridge. He's honoring it now.

A pity it wasn't a debt large enough to gain her freedom.

I'm leaving now. It shan't be long, love. Don't lose heart!

She waited for Wickham to come, to offer final reassurances about the plan, but the minutes passed and the corner of the room remained vacant.

She emptied her stomach twice and broke down after the second time. Hopelessness swamped her the moment the guards came for her. They had to take her by the arms before she could move her feet. Thankfully, they were gentle with her.

She concentrated on each step and wished she'd spent the day differently, but she couldn't imagine how.

As they passed through the great hall, a small child darted forward, then stopped at the sight of her. Oblivious of the moment, he smiled. His blue eyes sparkled with interest before his somber mother scooped him up and took him away.

The bailey was filled with people, their faces full of pity as they marked her progress. Some looked away, unable to meet her eyes. Others offered sad nods, some whispered prayers. These were the people of Todlaw, who had welcomed her, protected her. None blamed her for the trouble that had befallen them, though it was defending her sister that had started it all.

Still no sign of Wickham. No sign of a pyre.

The guards led her around the north side of the main tower, past the second and beyond, all the way to the great curtain wall. People stepped back to reveal an open postern and she was led outside. But not to freedom.

Beyond the wall, halfway up the hill, the dreaded pyre awaited. A healthy pile of wood with a thick pole in the center...

The walk up the hill took time, but she was grateful for the chance to stretch her legs, to feel her heart pounding in her chest—proof she was still alive, at least for now. It

gave her immeasurable pain, however, to know that this was what Bella must have felt as she was led to her own stake.

Fifty yards away from the pyre, to the west, stood a dozen sober warriors, each with a bannerman at his shoulder. Campbell, Lennox, Steward. And one imposing creature she knew must be the Earl of Mar.

A lazy breeze toyed with the banners. Reds and blacks, silvers and blues. Diamonds, stars, and flowers. A galley, a hand, crosses and saltires. The device on the Keith banner was hundreds of years old, dating back to the days of King Macbeth.

Next up the hill, a platform had been erected. Despite signs of digging, chairs sat on a slight angle and upon the first two sat Laird Stephan and Atholl. Their undisguised anticipation gave her a start. Such cruel men.

In the center of the platform sat The Regent of Scotland. If she should feel somehow honored, she did not. His expression was unreadable. Behind him, his guards. To his left sat James, Robert, and Stout Duncan. And beyond them, to the side of the platform, her beloved Flanders was shackled to a chair.

As she passed the platform, Flanders stood and bowed to her, along with all three Laids Duncan. Beyond Flanders, Hemming, Snorre and Rolf bowed their heads, followed by the rest of the crowd that had already arrived.

Out of everyone on that hillside, all but two pitied her. Was she to die just to please two monsters whom not even the regent respected?

Without pause, she was turned and led toward the pyre. No miracle interrupted her steady progress. No man in black appeared before her to spirit her away. Though she slowed when they drew close to the woodpile, she was given no chance to prepare herself before the two guards lifted her off her feet and carried her to the center,

where a small platform sat at the base of the stake. There, they allowed her to gain her balance again before they took her arms and tied them to either side of the pole.

Too fast. It's happening too fast! Wickham! Where are you?

It was Flanders who answered back. He will come. He will come!

She had her confirmation. Flanders knew of the plan after all. And maybe, just maybe, he knew more than she did.

Despite that hope, tremors wracked through her and made it more difficult for the guards to tie her hands. Both men apologized while they fumbled behind her. Even if she wanted to cry out, to fight and run, she was powerless, frozen with fear.

"Now," the man on her left whispered. "We've left it loose. Do not let them see. Act as though ye're tied firm, aye?"

What? These men were helping?

She managed a nod.

She found Flanders again. With the Duncans blocking the others' view and Moray's guards watching something down the hill, he was attempting to free his hands from the shackles. Might he truly get free? If Wickham failed her...

She glanced around, tried to imagine which direction she and Flanders might run. But her attention caught on the people of Todlaw now pouring through the postern and marching up the hill, gathering around the pyre in a wide circle. Guards kept them at a distance, but their presence was a comfort nonetheless. If she and Flanders did manage to flee, they wouldn't be stopped.

Alas, her trembling continued. Even her hair pulsed in unison with the pounding of her heart. The rough wood pressed against her back, the ropes began to sag, so she leaned slightly forward to lift her hands higher on the pole and held them there.

The strong smell of pitch explained the black smears on the wood. Though, as the sun disappeared, it was more difficult to see shadow against shadow. Pitch would catch quickly and spread the fire. Fast. Hot. It was meant to be a mercy. But she wanted anything but fast!

She desperately searched the crowd for any sign of a man in black, but she couldn't see him. Lord help her, he wasn't there! Her panic rose to drown her on the inside.

Flanders, I'm afraid. Wickham is supposed to take me away, but he's not here!

If he fails, I vow I will not. I'm nearly free. Look at me. Only at me.

She focused on Flanders, watching as he subtly twisted his wrists against the shackles and pulled on the chains attached to the chair, but the coming dark made it hard to see. Impossible to find his eyes now. If only someone would light a torch...

The irony caught her off guard and she laughed. Then she couldn't stop laughing.

36

ZERO HOUR

* * *

Flanders' hands were wet with blood. As planned, he'd been left in shadows and no one took notice. But the slick stuff just wasn't enough to get his large wrists out!

He hissed at Robert, who sat nearest him. "James," he said. "I need James."

Metal bit into his skin but he hardly felt it. It was full dark. He was out of time. He was supposed to run to Brigid just after the fire was lit and leap into the flames. Wickham would come for them at that moment and the onlookers would believe they had died together. James and Robert would insist on burying the remains themselves. All vengeance would be satisfied.

Well, not all.

Stephan would be allowed to live, at least until he angered the wrong person. It was the only solace Flanders would have. But at least he'd have Brigid.

His heart faltered when Moray stood, moved to the front of the platform, and lifted his hands. Without him to block the light of a single torch, James was visible to the enemy. He couldn't move until Moray resumed his seat!

The Regent's voice carried easily on the moist night air and the mob fell silent.

“Brigid Muir, ye have been found guilty of witchcraft, a crime against God and The Crown. The sentence is death by fire. Have ye any last words?”

For a moment, Flanders worried she would say nothing. But he needed time. He would peel the bloody flesh from his hands if he had to.

Buy me time, lass!

That beautiful chin lifted. “A true witch,” she shouted, “would curse those who brought her to the stake. She would curse them that the evil of their own hearts would be reflected back at them each time they look upon still water. She would curse them to never find peace in their sleep, and to regret the evil they visited upon her. So ye, Hector Stephan and David Strathbogie, ye must hope that I am not that witch. Ye should hope with all yer hearts that ye are murderin’ an innocent today.”

Half the onlookers laughed. Some crossed themselves. Moray inclined his head to her with a smile, and gestured to Flanders. “Anythin’ ye wish to say to this man, say it now.” Then he resumed his seat.

Now James was able to move, but he froze. Half the crowd strained to see Flanders, to witness his reaction to whatever his woman might have to tell him. Some of the guards, who had been bribed to look away, had forgotten their duty, and watched as well.

Brigid’s voice was loud but tender. “Greet for me, my love. Greet for me, and then have done. If I am to die here, tonight, I would not take ye with me . For one of us must live to tell the tale of how a very good man healed a healer.”

He’d failed her. She could see he wouldn’t get to her in time, and she had given up! Wickham would come, and he would lose her.

“Brigid!” His roar was the only way to tell her how he felt.

All around them, women began to greet. A wail here and there. A sniffle. They’d won the crowd, but the crowd couldn’t help them.

Moray signaled to the torchbearer, and finally, the light moved away from the platform. James was behind him instantly and began working at the chains. He knew they were out of time. With some tool, he freed the links from one side of the chair and moved to the other. Flanders could carry a hundred chains if he had to, if James could just detach them!

The torchbearer now stood beside the pyre, watching Moray. The latter paused only a moment, then nodded.

With the light on her, Flanders could see Brigid’s chest rise and fall with quick, short, panicked breaths as her attention followed the fall of the burning torch.

“Brigid!” he shouted again, to pull her attention from the fire. It was a mistake. It brought the attention of too many. But he no longer cared.

Flanders, I love you.

James strained beside him, but the chains wouldn’t give.

* * *

Brigid braced herself. Something must have prevented Wickham from coming or surely, he would have been there, within sight, to give her hope. But what little hope remained now caught fire along with the dry wattle and grasses that reached up with thin fingers to catch the light.

Death had come for her after all, crawling toward her like a hungry animal.

Flames leapt from log to log searching for pitch, on a straight course toward her feet. A wave of heat washed over her and hinted at the pain to come. Smoke brushed her face like a lover, swirled around her, and blew into her face.

She was determined not to scream, determined not to open her mouth, but a powerful cough took away that choice.

This was it. The end. If she closed her eyes, that darkness from her vision would take her. But she wasn't ready!

Flanders!

He'll come. He must .

The flames crawled closer and licked the edge of the little platform, then began to chew. Heat and smoke became a blanket wrapping themselves around her. She choked again. Her vision blurred, but she saw Flanders' form finally break free from the chair. James blocked a guard from stopping him.

It was too late. The fire surrounded her. The smoke was too much. She had to breathe something.

"No!" Flanders' anguished voice seemed so far away...

A sound came from the edge of the fire and the torchbearer retreated. A hissing, like water on coals.

Something tugged the ropes away from her wrists.

Easy, lass. It's over. I'm here.

But Flanders!

No time.

Wickham cursed aloud.

A low but forceful boom sounded, then ceased, as if it had never started, and she doubted her hearing. Blackness swallowed her, whisked her away from the hot wind that had pushed at her skin, then changed its mind. The rough wood of the pole was gone, the platform gone from beneath her feet. Her only anchor was Wickham's grip on her arms.

She was flying. A mast on the bow of a ship cutting fast through a dark water she couldn't see.

Was this death?

The platform suddenly returned and Wickham's hands abandoned her. He cursed again and she opened her eyes just as he rushed back at her, a pale blanket in his hands with which he knocked her to the ground and started beating painfully on her legs.

A woman screamed her name.

Bella!

A TRUSTIN' BUGGER

* * *

When Flanders was sure they would never come free, the chains finally fell away from the heavy chair. He didn't waste a moment but gathered the trailing links in his bloody hands and surged to his feet. The flames had fully engulfed the base of the pyre now, climbing hungrily toward Brigid. Even from this distance, he could see her choking on the thickening smoke, her body convulsing as she tried not to breathe.

"Move!" he roared, and the crowd parted.

With chains rattling, he ran, his eyes fixed on Brigid's face. The torchbearer recoiled from the fire he'd started. Nothing between Flanders and the pyre now. Nothing but fire between him and his love.

Twenty yards.

Fifteen.

Some fool stepped into his path and they collided. Flanders went down hard and landed on one knee. Pain shot through him from a chain pinned beneath it. Precious seconds were lost while he rocked to one side then scrambled to his feet again. He surged forward, found her again. With all eyes on him, he might have been the only one to see the dark shadow that loomed up behind her.

Wickham! It had to be!

But the fire!

It was too late. They shouldn't wait for him!

He stopped to make certain they didn't.

Take her and go!

Thunder and wind suddenly threw him onto his back. His ears rang from a blast that had come from the pyre itself. As if unleashed by God, the flames surged skyward and whatever, or whomever, remained inside the conflagration was consumed.

The mob cried out in surprise and retreated, mumbling that someone had used too much pitch, leaving him to stare at the inferno alone.

Dear God, let it have been Wickham. Let her be all right.

He'd been left behind. The plan had failed for him. And now she was gone.

Heartbreak stoked rage, and together they boiled inside him much hotter than any fire. All promises meant nothing now. He was free to kill Stephan. Free to exact the vengeance he'd promised. He no longer cared what happened afterward.

He turned back toward the platform. A straight path to the enemy remained clear. The bastard's face was alight with glee as he watched the flames consume what he believed was Flanders' woman.

Flanders moved with deadly purpose. The chains that had foiled him were now a weapon in his hands.

"Leesborn!" Moray's warning cut through the chaos, but it only served to alert Stephan to the danger.

The Rat Laird's eyes widened as he saw Flanders approaching, outraged that he'd gotten free. Atholl, the coward, grabbed a sword from one of the guards and thrust it into Stephan's hands before scrambling away, knowing full well he'd be next.

"Leesborn!" Moray called again, but made no move to stop him.

No man moved to intercept him as he gained the platform in one fluid step. The Regent simply watched—for entertainment? Or did he wait to see if Flanders would master himself?

Stephan glanced at Moray and realized no help was coming from that quarter. He raised the sword, his face contorted with fear and hatred. "Stay back!"

Flanders didn't slow. He had no weapon but the chains and his bare hands. They were enough.

Stephan swung wildly, causing Flanders to pause. The man had some skill—he wouldn't have survived this long without it. He pressed his advantage, forcing Flanders to retreat from the platform, then joined him on the sloped ground. Or at least he believed it was his doing.

Flanders let himself be driven back, drawing the Rat after him, but half his attention kept returning to the fire, wondering if that shadow had only been his imagination. Had Wickham succeeded? The distraction cost him as Stephan's blade sliced across his arm and drew blood.

"It's too bad," Stephan taunted, emboldened by the small victory. "She'll be dead now. A pity she won't see you die by my hand!"

Flanders' attention focused once more. He wrapped the chain around his forearm and used it to deflect Stephan's next thrust. The sword caught in the links, and Flanders twisted violently, wrenching the weapon from his enemy's grasp.

"Kill him, Flanders!" Gerts shouted from somewhere in the crowd. "Send the bastard to Hell!"

Infuriated, Stephan scrambled for the sword, then snarled, "Ye're next, woman! Behold, the fire grows hungry again!"

With his attention divided, Flanders struck. He moved with the fluid grace James had taught him, techniques from a future time that no man in this age could counter. He feinted left, then spun right and whipped the loose end of the chain out to catch Stephan's ankle. The Rat Laird went down hard, flat on his back, and he thrashed to get breath back into his lungs.

Before he could recover, Flanders was on him, one knee pressed into his chest. While the man strained, Flanders slipped the chain beneath his head and wrapped it around his throat.

"This is for Brigid," he whispered, tightening his grip. "And for Bella. Both of whom are still alive and well. The explosions were mere distraction." Then he pulled with all his might.

Stephan's eyes bulged, his face purpling as he clawed desperately at the chain.

Flanders leaned close again. "And this is for me." With a savage twist, he ended it. Hector Stephan was no more.

Rising slowly to his feet, Flanders pulled the chains free from the lifeless body and turned to search for Atholl. The young earl had fled.

Moray stood at the edge of the platform, his face a mask of disappointment. "Ye've left me no choice, Leesborn," he said, then gestured to his guards. "Seize him."

The men moved forward reluctantly, none eager to be the first to lay hands on a bloody, still-armed, and well-known warrior.

Flanders looked to the fire, still burning fiercely. Then he found Robert, who stood with his father, and gave the lad a wink. When he found James, he lifted a single brow.

His tall friend offered a shrug, then a grin and a nod. It was all he needed.

Flanders gave his friends a quick salute with two fingers, then turned and ran straight for the fire. The heat hit him like diving into a hot loch. He held his breath and plunged forward, his boots slipping on crumbling embers. With his heart focused on Brigid, his mind shouted to another.

Wickham!

A mere heartbeat later, he was engulfed not in flame but in that same darkness he'd seen in his dreams of Brigid—a nothingness that he assumed was death. Now, it was merely a dark shade of hope.

A large, firm hand gripped his forearm, steadying him.

Auch, but ye're a trustin' bugger.

38

THE ENDINBURG HOUSE

* * *

Flanders stumbled as the darkness receded, leaving him blinking in a light so bright it hurt his eyes. He stood in a chamber with walls as smooth and flawless as polished marble but without the shine. The floor beneath his feet was as flat as frozen water.

The future, at first glance, was perfection.

"Welcome to the Edinburgh house," Wickham said, steadying him with a hand on his shoulder. "Are ye sound?"

Flanders searched all around the space, but they were alone. "Where is she?" The hand on his shoulder tightened. He didn't care for Wickham's expression.

"The doctor is with her. Her skirt caught fire."

Flanders' heart lurched. "Ye'll take me to her?"

That hand held. "Aye. Let's hear what the doctor has to say today."

"Today?"

Wickham smiled and nodded. "I waited a day before goin' back fer ye. Imagine my

surprise when I saw ye headin' into the fire. A lucky thing I didn't trust ye to keep yer head."

"A day!"

"Auch, well, Time passes only where ye stand in it." He waved a hand. "No matter. Ye'll not need to worry about that again. Come on. Let's remove those chains first." He strode away, deeper into the castle he called the Edinburgh house. Back home, if they'd traveled from Todlaw to that growing city of the same name, in less than a minute, it would have been miracle enough on its own.

He left him standing in a hallway, staring at a painting of flowers, and when he reappeared, he held small tools that made quick work of the locks on his shackles. They were similar to the ones James had used to free the chains from the chair.

Was that only moments ago?

They left the heavy shackles on the floor and continued on until they came across Bella sitting on one of two cushioned yellow chairs beside a closed door. She jumped to her feet, genuinely relieved to see him. The similarities between herself and her sister made his heart ache.

The door opened just then, and all else was forgotten.

A man in strange white garments stepped outside and smiled first at Bella, then at Wickham before he turned and looked up at Flanders. To Flanders' surprise, the man addressed him in French, though the words were oddly formed, with unfamiliar cadences that made them difficult to follow.

"I assume you are the man she has been asking for?" the doctor said.

Flanders blinked, grateful for the years he'd spent in the French court with James, but still struggling to make sense of this strange version of the language. He replied in his own rougher French, "I am. How is she?"

The doctor's brow furrowed slightly as he parsed Flanders' accent and phrasing. When he continued, he spoke slowly. "Most of her burns were superficial," a word Flanders didn't recognize. Then he clarified, "Not deep. But her pain is severe. The burns were contained to the front of her calves and her right thigh. The scarring should be minor. The pain should ease in a few days."

Flanders nodded, still struggling to follow.

The doctor continued, "I've changed her bandages and given her medication that will help her sleep through the night. I want no one except my nurse in the room with her for the next two days. We cannot risk infection." Another unfamiliar word, but Flanders gathered the meaning. "And you," the doctor sniffed pointedly in Flanders' direction, "should bathe before speaking to her from the doorway. In fact, bathe twice and burn your clothes. My nurse will see to your wounds once you are clean."

Flanders understood enough to know his condition offended the man. "Will she live?" he asked in his Norman French, cutting to what mattered most.

The doctor nodded emphatically. "Yes, she will live."

Wickham laughed and slapped him on the shoulder. "Should have said that from the start. Aye, she'll live. A rough few days is all. Come," he tried to lead Flanders away. "Let's get those fourteenth century germs off ye."

The doctor had started to walk away but staggered to a stop. He stood perfectly still for a moment, then started walking again as if a dog were nipping at his heels.

Wickham saw it and laughed. "Come on. I pay him enough to ignore such comments."

He led Flanders through more corridors until they reached a bedchamber larger than most crofts back home. The bed itself could have slept six.

"This is yer room," Wickham said. "And through here is the bathroom."

He opened a door to reveal a chamber of gleaming white surfaces and strange things affixed to the walls and ceiling, some of which lit up from within when Wickham touched a magical square on the wall. A large white basin stood in one corner, with silver handles protruding from it. Another, larger basin, like a massive white barrel sawn in half, took up the far end of the room with a wall of shaped glass enclosing it.

"This," Wickham said, pointing to the smaller basin, "is called a sink. For washing hands and face." He demonstrated the handles. "Hot and cold water. Mix to yer likin'."

Water flowed from a long silver nose when he turned the handles. Flanders touched the steady stream with his fingers, then smiled at the simple miracle.

"The toilet," Wickham continued, gesturing to a white chair-like object, "is yer privy, or garderobe. When ye're finished, press this lever to flush it away." He touched another handle. "There is water here, or paper, for cleanin' yer arse. The paper flushes away as well."

Flanders nodded, though he wasn't entirely sure he understood.

"And this," Wickham said, moving to the glass enclosure, "is a shower. Stand inside the tub, turn these handles, and water falls on ye from above. Like rain, but warm." He pointed to various bottles on a small shelf. "Soap for yer body, shampoo for yer

hair. And this is a towel for dryin' afterward."

He handed Flanders the soft, thick cloth, then laughed at the wonder on his face.

"I assure ye, none of this is magic, but I'll explain it another day. If ye prefer, ye can fill the bathtub instead." Wickham indicated the large basin. "The doctor suggested ye be thorough." He pointed to the bottom of the barrel. "Ye lift this to allow the dirty water to drain out, then ye can do it all again until ye're as clean as can be."

Flanders looked at the array of strange devices, overwhelmed but determined. "I can manage."

"Good man. I'll leave clean clothes on the bed. When ye're done, come find me in the hall outside Brigid's room." Wickham paused at the door. "And Flanders? Dinnae fash. Brigid will be as right as rain. I swear it."

Left alone, Flanders approached the shower cautiously. He removed his filthy clothes, wincing as dried blood pulled at the wound on his arm. The chains had left raw marks around his wrists, and his knee, where he'd fallen on chain, screamed for attention as well. But none of it mattered. Brigid was going to recover.

He was at a quandary as to how right rain could be, but he understood the gist of it.

He stood inside the barrel, inside the glass enclosure and turned the handles as Wickham had shown him. Water burst from above, startling him so badly he nearly slipped. It was cold at first, then warmed when he toyed with the handles. He stood beneath the rain and marveled at the aperture from which it flowed.

It was then he got the full impact of what the doctor had sniffed—the perfume of imprisonment, of battle, of burnt tar and smoke. It was a wonder he hadn't been sent to the barn.

A long while later, after using up more than his share of the water in Edinburgh, he emerged, pink-skinned and clean. A new man.

The towel was softer than the fur of any living creature, and the clothes Wickham had left—though strange in cut and fabric—fit well enough. The colors were as gaudy as anything he'd ever seen in court, but he was given no alternatives.

As he deliberated how to keep his blood from the clean shirt, there was a knock on the door. He found a woman donned in blue from her head to her toes, holding a shiny silver tray covered with a blue towel and blushing as if she'd never seen the bare chest of a man before.

She spoke quickly. He recognized a few words. *Panser tes blessures* . She was there to dress his wounds.

He invited her inside and stood stoically while she tended to the cut the Rat Laird had inflicted on his arm. He only faltered once when she stuck the end of a wee needle into his flesh, and before he could do more than flinch at the burning sting, the pain began to subside. He'd felt nothing at all when she'd stitched the gash closed with a thread so fine that, if it hadn't been such a bright color of blue, he couldn't have seen it.

Over the top of the stitches, she attached a strip of thin white matter that adhered to his skin, then she wrapped it in a luxurious strip of cheesecloth. After she smeared some substance on the shallow wounds around his wrists, she covered them with the same fine stuff before carrying away every trace of blood.

He donned his thin shirt and followed her back to Brigid's door. She waved him away and stepped inside, all sympathy dispensed with.

Bella was asleep in the chair but had stirred at the sound of their approach. Upon

closer inspection he noted her gown was of fine blue cloth, and she'd nearly smoothed all the gold wisps out of her hair.

"Well met, Bella," he said.

She straightened. "Leesborn."

"How is she?"

"Sleeping." She gestured to a small device on a table between the two chairs.

"Wickham says this will tell us when she wakes. I cannot fathom how."

Flanders sat in the empty chair and studied the device, resisting the urge to pick it up. There was a tail attached, but without a face, it couldn't be a living thing. "What is it?"

"He called it a 'baby monitor.' It lets us hear her if she stirs, even with the door closed." She looked him over in turn. "Ye look...different. Clean."

"As do ye." He studied her, noting the differences. Bella's hair was shorter, her face a touch thinner than her sister's. Her eyes held the same intelligence, but with a sharper edge. "How long does it seem ye have been here? Wickham said time passes differently...I didn't understand it, but..." He shrugged.

"Three days. The second day, he brought Brigid, and the third, you." She ran a hand over the chair's arm. "The beds are as soft as these chairs. In fact, I've seen nothing the same as...back home. No more board and trestle. The table we eat at gleams like the floors. Time has changed everything but for some of the plants I found in the garden. We're like babes here."

"But we're alive. And we're...the two of ye are back together."

She nodded. "I ken ye think ye love her?—"

"I only think it?"

She sighed. "Ye've known her days. I've known her since before my first breath."

"And ye worry I'll come between ye."

"Ye already have." Her eyes grew wet. "In her pain, it wasn't my name she called out."

"Auch, Bella. One day, ye'll call out yerself. And ye won't be callin' for yer sister."

She looked doubtful.

He tried again to make peace. "How ye feel about me matters not at all. What matters is that we both love her. And we both want her well. Let us cry pax until then."

Bella looked away, but nodded.

"We must be friends," he said. "How else will we survive these next days? We're the only ones who speak our language!"

She laughed, then they let silence settle around them, both staring from the door to the white box, listening for Brigid's breathing, begging for any noise at all.

SUCH SORCERY

* * *

A n elderly servant woman in loose blue hose and a tunic not long enough for a child, brought a tray of food—strange meats and cheeses, bread softer than anything Flanders had ever put between his lips, and bright fruits he couldn't name but happily devoured. He and Bella shared the meal in silence, both too exhausted for conversation.

When they finished, Bella rose from her chair and stretched. "I should rest," she said. "I have a bedchamber just down the hall and around the corner."

"Go," Flanders told her. "I'll keep watch."

"Ye'll wake me if she needs me?" Bella's eyes were red-rimmed, her face drawn from worry.

"Aye. Ye have my word."

She hesitated, then nodded. "Thank ye, Leesborn."

Flanders settled deeper into his chair. A small red eye on the corner of the white box continued to watch him, unblinking. It unnerved him, but he wouldn't abandon his post. Not for all the gold in Christendom.

* * *

Flanders dozed fitfully in the chair, waking at every noise. When he was roused by Brigid's moans of pain, he'd been forced to stand by, listening helplessly, while the nurse came to her aid and fettle her back to sleep again. It was then he realized he wanted her sleeping too, not awake enough to call for him. If that wee box was silent, it meant she was at peace.

In the morning, when dawn arrived through high windows so clear as to be invisible, the doctor returned with a woman to replace the night nurse.

Moments later, Brigid cried out and Flanders was on his feet and through the door before he could think. At the distant end of a massive bedchamber, Brigid lay on a wide bed, held down by the nurses. Her face contorted in agony as the doctor removed bandages from her legs. She lifted a knee, and the sight of her raw, blistered skin broke his heart.

"Sortez!" the doctor barked, get out, while a nurse moved to block his path.

"She's in pain," Flanders growled.

"Of course she is," the doctor replied. "Burns are painful. Now go, or I'll have you removed from the house."

Strong hands caught him from behind. "Easy, lad," Wickham murmured in his ear. "The doctor knows what he's about."

Flanders struggled against the hold. "She needs me."

"She needs time and she needs a clean space. Soon, she'll have all the Flanders she could ever want. But not the now."

One nurse pressed something small against Brigid's arm, and before Flanders retreated out the door, she settled and her eyes closed.

"What magic was that?"

Wickham closed the door and smiled. "Modern medicine. Magic ye'll learn much about in the days ahead." He tugged Flanders away. "Come. Eat. I'm going to introduce you to breakfast. A weak man will be no help to her."

Flanders followed reluctantly. I won't go far, he thought, in case she could hear him. But he heard nothing in return.

Bella emerged from an adjoining hallway, tying a thin long gown at the waist. "How is she?"

"Sleeping again," Wickham answered. "The doctor is with her. Will ye eat?"

She shook her head and headed back the way she'd come.

* * *

The kitchen was a marvel of gleaming silver surfaces and wee wooden doors. And right there in the center of the castle with no consideration for smoke and smells. Flanders stared in wonder until Wickham nudged him on, then ducked into a room opposite that held the table Bella had mentioned. Polished wood worthy of any king. And scrolled chairs to match. Beneath them all, a rug finer than many he'd slept upon.

Wickham pushed him into one of those chairs and Flanders bent forward, to look at his reflection in the surface.

"It's all right, man. Ye can touch it."

He did so with his hands, then with his elbows. Then he put his head down on his arms and closed his eyes. "It's too much to take all at a go, aye?"

"Aye," Wickham said with a grin. "But I reckon breakfast will inspire ye to push through."

A plate was set beside him and he straightened to identify the strong smells that accompanied it. He nearly wept.

Eggs fried to perfection, their edges crisp and lacy. Thick slices of charred ham, plump sausages, haggis, mushrooms, some red round vegetable, and toasted bread—a feast fit for a king's table.

"I thought ye might appreciate a proper Scottish breakfast."

Flanders took his first bite of egg and closed his eyes in bliss. "I'm going to like the future just fine," he murmured.

As they ate, Wickham explained his plans. "I'm going back for James today. His wife will be here soon—she's been visiting her family. Ye'll remember Phoebe, no?"

Flanders nodded, his mouth too full for speaking.

"Good. I'll not be gone long." Wickham rose from the table. "My sisters will look after ye while I'm away."

"Sisters?"

Wickham gestured to the women who had delivered their plates, standing patiently in the doorway. Flanders had mistaken one the previous evening for a servant.

Identical sisters. Older, with red and silver-streaked hair and identical smiles. "Lorraine and Loretta. They don't speak much Scots, but they understand more than ye might think."

One approached, reached out to pat his hand, and said something in the New French he didn't understand. Then she laughed and both sisters left the room.

"They're...like Brigid?"

"Aye," Wickham said. "Witches. And they can read yer mind, so tend yer thoughts."

As soon as the meal was over, Wickham disappeared, his chair suddenly empty, as if Flanders had supped with a ghost. That was Flanders' first moment of trepidation. What if he couldn't adapt to this new century? What if it were too vexing for Brigid? Or her sister? What would they do then?

* * *

Later in the morning, Flanders and Bella were both back at their posts. The white box was still quiet. She held on her lap a pile of thin, fine parchment that would have cost a handful of Easterling silver coins. She then produced a narrow shaft from her pocket and began drawing on the topmost layer.

She glanced at him and lifted the shaft. "It is a pen."

"A pen? But where is the ink?"

She leaned toward him and grinned. "The ink...is inside the pen!" Then she tipped the parchment so he could watch her draw the daintiest of lines. And she kept on drawing, line after line, creating leaf after leaf, without ever stopping to refill the supply!

“Clever indeed!”

“So many clever things. I cannot wait to share them with Brigid.”

“Aye, aye. So many things.”

Her pen stilled. She studied him for a moment, then laughed. “Flanders, ye needn’t learn it all at once, ye ken? None of this...” She gestured all around them, at the soft chairs, the windows, the lights that lit from inside, then the parchment. “None of it is going to disappear. We’ll learn it, and if we forget it, we shall learn it again. Take heart, man. Ye look like ye would turn tail and run back to Todlaw, back to certain trouble, if given the chance.” She tapped her finger in sudden thought. “Of course, if that is what ye wish, Brigid and I can muddle along fine together. Ye needn’t worry?—”

“If she stays, I stay.”

Bella bit her lips together and nodded, but he noted the smile she tried to hide. Was she merely teasing him, or had she decided to discourage him from staying? Was she clever or kind? It was impossible to know.

The sound of a large door creaking open ended the twisting of his thoughts. A woman’s voice called out Wickham’s name. Then, “Flanders? Are ye here?”

“Phoebe,” he whispered, then jumped to his feet and ran back to the chamber where he and Wickham had entered, albeit by magic. There, he found the woman he had once intended to claim as his own—a long eight years before. But had eight years passed for her? Perhaps not.

Her dark hair was shorter now, just past her shoulders. Her warm hazel eyes lit when she saw him, and in her arms, a lanky wee laddie with his father’s red curls already

past his ears.

"Flanders Leesborn," she said in the heavily accented Gaelic he remembered. "We meet again!"

He strode forward until he could tower over her. "Ye have the advantage of me, mistress."

She smiled, unsure. "I'm Phoebe. James Ferguson's—James Duncan's wife." She set the child down, and he immediately toddled away. "And that, is our son. Don't tell me ye don't remember me."

He turned thoughtful and tapped his chin. "Did we share a kiss, once?"

"Aye, we did."

"Mayhap, if I taste yer lips again, I shall remember ye, sure."

Pheobe rose immediately onto her toes and he leaned down. She placed a quick, chaste kiss on his cheek, then laughed in his face before she threw her arms around his neck.

"Oh, Flanders. I'm so glad ye're here! James has missed ye so."

"Surprising, what with his new distractions." He gestured to both her and the wee laddie who was back again and tugging on Flanders' oddly loose hose, babbling and making bubbles on his lips.

Flanders knelt to study the eyes, the wee jaw. The lips that were miniature versions of his mother's. "What is the wee man's name?"

"Flanders," Phoebe said softly. "We call him Flanders."

Something pinched him at the back of his nose and brought tears to his eyes. "James named his son after me?"

"He speaks of ye every day," Phoebe said. "His brother in all but blood."

The bairn stretched high to pat both sides of Flanders' face with chubby hands, then pointed at his own chin and garbled a question.

Phoebe translated. "He wants to know if you're a Flanders too."

He smiled. "Aye, laddie." He pointed to his own chin. "Flanders."

The boy clapped his hands, probably approving of the sound of his own name, but still...

Before Flanders could say more, Bella joined them. "She's awake," she announced. "And asking for us both."

THE BATTLE WITH BELLA

* * *

Brigid was well awake when Flanders and Bella reached her door. The nurse had propped her up with pillows, and though her face was pale, her eyes were clear. She smiled when she saw them and reached out her hands.

"The doctor says ye must stay at the door," the nurse said firmly in French. "No visitors inside the room."

Flanders bristled, but Bella laid a hand on his arm. "We understand," she replied in Norman French, which seemed close enough for the nurse to comprehend.

"Ye're both here," Brigid said, her eyes bright with relief. "Truly here."

"Where else would we be?" Flanders asked softly.

The nurse demanded their promise not to cross the threshold, then stepped out of the room to give them some privacy. "Five minutes," she said. "She'll be in pain again soon."

Brigid leaned forward, winced, and leaned back again. Then she smiled at her sister. "Ah, Bella. I was so happy to hear ye were alive! For days, I believed..." Tears leaked from her eyes and down her face. "Such a miracle. Such a miracle! And now

that I've..." She gestured to her swathed legs. "I am eternally grateful to Wickham for sparing ye even a moment of this."

Bella could only nod and weep, holding a colorful cloth to her mouth to stifle the sound. Flanders put an arm around her in comfort and gained comfort himself.

Brigid rallied. "Come, now. Tell me everything, Flanders. What happened after Wickham came for me." She shook her head. "I was only told that he went back for ye. And that he'll collect James Duncan as well."

He considered shielding her from the truth until she was well, but he thought better of it. They'd agreed not to lie to spare each other. "After the explosion, and I knew ye'd gotten away...I killed the Rat Laird."

Brigid gasped. "Ye didn't!"

"I did. Strangled him with my chains in the end." And he'd do it again.

He could see she had mixed feelings about it, so he decided not to tell her, just yet, about running into the fire himself. "Moray warned me, but since Wickham came for me straight away, The Regent never got a chance to punish me for it. But take heart, love. It was a fair fight, not murder."

She smiled, clearly relieved.

The sisters stared at each other, some silent communication passing between them that Flanders couldn't interpret. But whatever it was, it caused Bella to stiffen beneath his arm and he removed it. Though the doorway wasn't so wide, they managed to lean away from each other.

"Please," Brigid said. "I need ye both. I need ye to get on, even when I'm not with

ye."

Bella's expression softened. "But of course."

Brigid waited on him.

"I will do anything ye ask, love."

"Then love my sister."

They all laughed at the silliness of the request, and he teased, "Surely, we can get along without that."

"I'll settle for getting along, then, for the now." Pain flashed in Brigid's eyes and she bit her lip only briefly. "But ye know what I expect. And Bella, ye must believe that I love him. Not just out of gratitude."

Bella gave her head a shake. "I know ye believe that. But I'll need more proof. Ye've been through much together, according to Wickham, but ye've known each other for a matter of days."

"Time has naught to do with it."

"Oh? Ye silly woman. Time has everything to do with it." She waved a hand. "But time we have. And time I'll give ye—to convince me yer love is true. And if this mighty love of yers is built on some sense of obligation," she looked up at Flanders, "then I'll take my sister and we'll find our own way. And ye must trod another."

The nurse returned then, her expression brooking no argument. "Time's up. Out, both of you."

Flanders wanted to protest, but Brigid shook her head. "Go. I'm weary. Remember to be gentle with each other."

But she wasn't weary. They could tell. She was in pain.

* * *

Flanders discovered suddenly that it wasn't wise to pace the front foyer of the house when Wickham appeared not five feet away, with one hand locked on James' forearm. The tall redhead glanced around as if he'd never seen the Edinburgh house before. He looked more worse for wear than the last time Flanders had seen him, but there was a smile beneath the smudges.

"James!" Phoebe rushed toward her husband but stopped short and wrinkled her nose. "Auch, have ye bathed since ye left home? And ye look like ye've been rollin' in a fire pit."

James grinned and opened his arms wide. "Come give yer husband a proper welcome, woman."

"Not until ye've showered." She backed away, but her eyes shone with relief. It was only then that Flanders realized the risk he'd taken to leave his family to help a friend.

He waved to gain the man's attention. "Did I ever thank ye, James, for goin' back?"

James grinned. "I'm certain ye'll find a way." Then he looked Flanders over. "Ye look different in those clothes, and clean behind the ears as well."

"And ye look like ye've been dragged through Hell backward."

Wee Flanders toddled into the hall, spotted his father, and emitted a delighted squeal. James scooped him up, heedless of the dirt.

"Now look what ye've done," Phoebe scolded. "He'll need a bath too."

Wickham chuckled. "I'll leave ye all to yer reunions. I have matters to attend to." With that, he disappeared as suddenly as he'd arrived.

"I'll never get used to that," Bella murmured.

James turned to her with a warm smile. "Bella. We met only briefly at Gallabrae. I regret what happened to ye."

She inclined her head.

"How is yer sister? Wickham said she was badly burned?"

"Recovering. The doctor says she'll mend up fine."

"Good, good." James bounced his son on his hip. "And how are ye finding the future, old friend? Not too overwhelmin', I hope?"

Flanders took a breath and forced a smile. "We're managin'."

"Well, we've all agreed to go slowly. After all, ye've come a lot further than any of the others."

Flanders blinked. "Others?"

Phoebe laughed. "We've got friends from the fifteenth century who needed a lot of help too. So cheer up. We've got experience helping time travelers."

James bobbed his brow. "Just wait until ye discover television."

"Television?" Bella asked.

"Moving pictures in a box," Phoebe explained. "Like watching a play, but the players are tiny and trapped inside glass."

Bella's eyes widened. "Truly?"

"No," James said, shooting his wife a scowl. "No one is tiny, and no one is trapped inside glass. She's a tease."

"Guilty as charged," Phoebe said. "But don't worry. Television is far down on the list. No technology for a while, yeah?" She stepped back and waved at her husband to go ahead of her. "Let's leave these fine people before the smell of ye makes them ill."

Bella watched them go, a wistful expression on her face. "They seem happy."

"Aye," Flanders agreed. "I reckon they are."

"Did ye know her well? In the past?"

Flanders hesitated. "We were...acquainted."

Bella's eyes narrowed. "How acquainted?"

"I once thought I might make her my wife," he admitted. "But she chose James. As she should have. They were well on mad for each other."

"You loved her?" Bella's voice was carefully neutral.

"Hardly. I hadn't known her I—" Flanders shook his head. "We were well suited for each other. Not the same as love. What I felt for Phoebe was nothing compared to what I feel for your sister."

Bella studied him for a long moment. "Ye seem to love rather easily, Flanders Leesborn."

"Don't count on it, Bella Muir."

Reminded of Brigid's request, they shared a smile.

As he walked away, she gave a warning. "I'll be watching ye, Viking."

A SHRINE TO TRUE LOVE

* * *

That evening, Brigid insisted on joining everyone for dinner, despite the doctor's reservations. She didn't want any more injections of that drug that took away her wits, and besides, the pain was decreasing all the time. The man admitted that she was through the worst and finally let her have her way.

A chair with large wheels on the sides made it even easier to escape her room, and she wasn't so sure she would let anyone take her back again.

The nurse insisted on delivering her to the dining room, then positioned her in an empty corner to avoid the risk of anyone bumping into her raised legs. Word had spread, apparently, that she had escaped because Bella and Flanders rushed into the room soon after her wheels were locked in place.

"I'll feed her," Bella shouted, before Flanders could. But he wasn't paying her any attention.

His eyes found Brigid and he fell to his knees. "Ye're well, then?"

"I'm improving all the time."

He blinked tears from his eyes and just looked at her for a long minute. When others

started through the door, he climbed back to his feet.

James laughed at him. “Pull it together, man. No one dies from minor burns in this century.”

Bella insisted the nurse leave her sister in her hands and come back in an hour. The woman only left after Brigid insisted, but she paused at the door to scowl at Flanders. “Keep yer germs to yerself, all of ye.”

No one else got a dirty look.

James suggested Bella go with him to the kitchen to find some things that might tempt the patient. And one by one, everyone else found a reason to leave the room, since dinner had yet to be served, leaving Flanders alone with her.

He glanced at the empty doorway, then rushed to her side. She knew they didn’t have much time, so she lifted her chin and closed her eyes, in case he had any doubts about what she wanted.

The press of his lips was the finest of balms, and the ache in her legs was forgotten. He kissed her again and again, choosing action over words, stopping only a time or two to look deep into her eyes and whisper her name.

James, the clever devil, laughed loud and clear on his way back to the room, so Flanders had time to kiss her hand and give her a wink before taking a step back.

Bella nudged him aside with a full tray that she laid across the sturdy arms of the wheeled chair. Brigid looked at the round chargers covered in odd foods and laughed. “Am I this hungry?”

“Yes,” Bella said, at the same time Flanders said the same, and everyone laughed.

Others filed into the room and found seats at the beautifully polished table. James introduced her to his wife, Phoebe and his son, Wee Flanders. Although, no matter what his age, he looked as if he would be anything but wee in a few years' time. They procured a strangely small chair on tall legs and locked the laddie in place by adding a small white tray that attached.

So clever.

Wickham took the place of honor at the far end of the table. James and Phoebe sat on his left with Wee Flanders between. And Flanders sat opposite with Bella closest to Brigid in case she needed help.

The older sisters who had delivered meals to the sickroom pushed two rolling tables through the doorway. Both were covered with plated meals. Wickham introduced them as his sisters, but they chose not to join the party so no one would be required to interpret for them. They were kind and cheerful and the streaks of red in their hair made Brigid wonder if she and Bella would look the same when they grew old.

They were called Lorraine and Loretta, and they bustled in and out, serving dishes that smelled heavenly, even if they looked strange.

The conversation flowed in a mixture of Norman French and Gaelic, with occasional English phrases that she, Flanders, and Bella practiced. Phoebe was fluent in the modern French and Gaelic and didn't have much trouble understanding everyone else.

At one point, James leaned forward with a mischievous grin for Flanders and said, "Ye left all husbands lackin' when ye leapt into that fire, ye great madman."

Brigid gasped. "He what?"

“After Laird Rat was dead, yer man here ran into the flames. Of course, he was hopin’ Wickham would be there to collect him,” his grin widened, “but ye didnae ken for sure, did ye?”

Flanders held up his hands and shook his head. “Now, tell it right. Don’t leave out the small detail that I looked to ye first, and ye gave me a nod. Ye knew what I meant, and ye encouraged me.”

“Encouraged ye?” James scoffed. “I thought ye were askin’ if ye should go after Atholl, ye great bampot! How could I know Wickham would come back?”

Brigid suddenly felt light-headed and blinked rapidly to steady herself.

“Ah, lass,” James said, as Bella rushed to her side. “I but tease. I did give the nod. I did believe Wickham would come.” Then he lowered his voice. “Though, had I not, I fear my friend wouldn’t have changed tack. He wanted nothing more than to be with ye again.”

When Bella was satisfied, after Brigid had remembered to breathe again, she returned to her seat and slyly elbowed Flanders as punishment for causing a scare. But he ignored her.

“So, tell me. What happened after I left?” Flanders asked.

“Chaos, plain and simple.”

Brigid exchanged a look with Bella, then Flanders. They both knew the vision. Now they knew it had been completely fulfilled.

James continued. “Moray was furious—or pretended to be. He let the fire burn, though, didn’t he? Had to give Wickham time. Of course, when we found the remains

the next mornin'—”

"Remains?" Brigid blurted.

"Two skeletons," James said, “embracin’ in the ashes."

Flanders frowned. "But who?"

"Wickham's doin'," James said with a nod to their host. "A bit of theater for the benefit of the witnesses. We buried them together, in a fine coffin. Verra romantic, like Malcolm III and Margaret. I have no doubt yer graves will become a shrine to true love. On the hillside, feet away from the pyre. Each time anyone looks up the north hill, they'll remember the witch and the laird who loved her." He winked at Brigid. "No doubt Robert will laugh over it often."

"And Atholl?" Flanders asked. "What became of him?"

"He came out of hidin’ the next mornin’. Moray had some stern words for him, but he could only punish him so much. After all, the Stewarts are important. Uh, were important.”

"But here, now, ye can tell me if the Bruce Dynasty still reigns.”

Wickham shook his head. "Not for long. But we must slowly work up to those details. History is a disgusting drink. Best ye take it in sips." He cleared his throat. "I should confess something, however." He glanced between Brigid and Flanders. "We told ye both to keep the plan secret from each other. Not because we expected ye to obey, but because we knew ye'd put more effort into the pretense. I believe it worked well enough, but I do apologize for the deception."

"Ye tricked us." Brigid shuddered. She probably shouldn't have taken the man's word

for anything just because he was a fellow witch. But then again, if she'd doubted him, she would have tried harder to escape on her own, and she wouldn't have seen Bella again.

"For yer own good," Wickham said, unrepentant. "No one will be searchin' for either of ye, and every witness believed yer anguish was real."

"It was real," Flanders muttered.

James turned to Wickham. "Speaking of manipulation, where did those skeletons come from? They looked authentic enough to fool the gawkers."

"They were authentic, from a more recent century."

James nodded. "As I thought. One of them wore a ring that couldn't possibly have existed in the fourteenth century. Naturally I worried, albeit briefly, that ye hadn't saved them after all. And if something had happened to ye, I would never get home again to my family. But the ring eased my mind."

"This was why it was important that ye and Robert be the ones to bury them."

After the past was settled, they enjoyed a sweet dessert before James introduced the next subject.

"What about this house?" He gestured at the walls. "Ye said it's not occupied at the moment?"

"It's a long story," Wickham said. "But I have more business to finish as Grandfather of Clan Muir, so I cannot stay long. Don't worry, I won't leave ye three defenseless. Ye couldn't ask for better guides in this new world than these two. And my sisters, when they're available."

Bella took note. "Ye dinnae intend to be Grandfather all yer life?"

"I am working on a plan to pass on that duty."

"What will ye do then?"

"It's not as if I will give up my powers," Wickham said, but he clearly didn't wish to elaborate.

James' wife leaned to the side with a sly smile. "Ye should open a school—Wickham's School for Time Travelers. Each time one of yer sisters causes trouble, ye can fix it."

The man choked on a laugh, then recovered and took a drink. "Fixin' problems caused by other Muirs is our life's work," he said. "And has been for generations, Grandfather duties notwithstanding'."

"But don't ye think there are others out there?" Phoebe pressed. "Not just witches, but other time travelers? If ye can do it, and James has done it, others can use tomb?"

James cut her off by placing a hand on her arm, then addressed the rest. "We already know of another mechanism for traveling from one century to another. It's in the caverns beneath a particular castle near the Black Isle. I used it a number of times with our fifteenth century friends. Who knows who might emerge from there...if they unblock the tunnels..."

"Let's not invite trouble," Wickham said quickly.

"Invite?" Phoebe raised an eyebrow. "What if someone is stuck in there, looking for a way out?"

"We would know it," Wickham said confidently. "My sisters would surely know it."

Brigid was less interested in the conversation than in the Viking seated by her sister. And her mind finally felt clear enough to reach out to him.

I wish we could be alone .

As do I.

But my sister will make it difficult.

She worries for ye. She's kinder than she wants me to know.

She worries I'll choose ye over her.

And will ye?

Surely, I can have both.

Of course. Flanders smiled.

Bella was watching her. It's charming that ye think ye're the only two who can hear ye.

And just like that, their precious link was as good as gone. Brigid had thought convincing Bella her love was true would be a simple thing. But now, she worried. And worse, she didn't know how much time she had left to accomplish it.

Bella was a clever woman. If she wanted to destroy her bond with Flanders, she would find a way to do it.

42

JOAN BLOODY ARC

* * *

L ater that night, Flanders found himself in the rear bailey, sitting on smooth stone steps with James, looking up at the sky. It was different here—fewer stars visible, the darkness fading at the edges. Strange lights moved quickly among them, which James called airplanes. And in the near distance, the glow of what he claimed was Edinburgh City created an artificial dawn on the horizon.

"Ye'll like it here," James assured him. "Ye haven't been introduced to technology yet, and technology can make life much more enjoyable than ye could have possibly imagined."

"Ye used to mention that fellow back home," Flanders said. "Who is he?"

James laughed. "Not he. What. Many whats. We'll take it slow so ye won't drown, aye? But trust me."

"More trusting," Flanders sighed.

"Well, trusting got ye here, got Brigid and her sister to safety. And it got me home again to the woman I love." James clapped him on the shoulder. "Aye, I'd say I've trusted the important details of my life to Muir witches. Although..."

"Although?"

"Lorraine and Loretta are...troublemakers." James grinned. "Ye can trust them just fine. Just don't believe a word they say."

"And what if I cannot understand a word they say?"

"Then I suggest ye learn the language. Quickly."

The language, aye. Vital, yes, but not the most important thing on his mind.

"Flanders, what is it? Besides the wide world ye've stepped into. I can see something is amiss."

Flanders told him about the trouble standing between him and Brigid—that maddening sister.

The big fellow laughed outright, threw his head back and hooted until he couldn't breathe. "Why didn't ye say so? And ye livin' under the same roof as Phoebe! Why, she's the Joan Bloody Arc of Love."

"Who is Joan Bloody Arc?"

"Ah, that is one of those sips of history for later. But for tonight, rest easy. By mornin', my beloved will have a plan all laid out for ye. So take heart. And in a week, she'll be plannin' the weddin'."

* * *

A soft knock on the door roused Brigid from her half-sleep. Her day nurse answered it, then spoke in rapid French that Brigid couldn't follow. She caught only Flanders'

name and the word " non ."

"Please," he begged. "I'll not enter. Just leave the door open."

The nurse hesitated, then relented with a sigh. "Five minutes only," she said, then stepped aside.

Brigid shifted slightly, wincing as the movement disturbed her healing legs. The doctor had ordered her to leave the burns exposed to the air, and though the worst of the pain had subsided, she still felt every small movement. The clean sheets beneath her were a luxury, as was her freshly washed hair, but after days in the same room, she was desperate for something—anything—different.

Flanders appeared in the doorway, his broad shoulders filling the frame. He carried a chair, which he placed just outside the threshold. True to his word, he made no move to enter.

"I've brought ye something," he said, settling into the chair. From inside his strange new clothing, he produced a small book bound in red leather. "James gave it to me. It's in French—the New French they speak here. It will help us learn."

"What is it?" she asked, curious despite her fatigue.

"A story. *Les Misérables*. About a man who steals a loaf of bread and spends nineteen years in prison for it." He opened the book carefully. "I thought I might read to ye. To help pass the time."

The nurse, who had been hovering nearby, nodded her approval and after exchanging a pointed look with Flanders, stepped out of the room.

He began to read, his voice halting at first as he struggled with unfamiliar words. But

as the minutes stretched into an hour, his pace increased. He kept a small piece of paper beside him and marked down words and phrases to ask James about later.

When he finally paused, Brigid realized she'd been so caught up in his voice and the story that she'd forgotten where she was.

"I must go," he said reluctantly. "But I'll return whenever ye call for me." He kissed his hand, then blew at the spot as if he could send the kiss across the room to her. It was the sweetest gesture she'd ever seen.

"I'll call often," she promised.

True to his word, he returned twice more that day, reading until his voice grew tired. By evening, Brigid found herself looking forward to the next installment like a hungry lassie waiting for her next meal.

* * *

The following day, Flanders was pleased to see Bella join them. She sat in one of the yellow chairs and tucked her feet beneath her while she drew on her pile of parchment. She pretended to be watching over him, protecting her sister, but he soon realized she was there for the story. Perhaps she'd been listening from the start.

Her presence also made her sister happy, and he learned the pair had never spent much time apart, which helped explain why the relationship was so difficult for Bella to accept.

On the third day, when he moved the small chair into place, Bella surprised him.

"Let me try," she said, holding out her hand for the book.

He surrendered it without hesitation. "By all means." He took the more comfortable chair to listen.

Bella began confidently enough, but soon stumbled over the unfamiliar words. Flanders winced at her pronunciation, but hid his amusement. After a few pages, she sighed in frustration.

"This is harder than it looks," she admitted, handing the book back to him. "I'll leave the reading to ye." Then traded seats with him.

He took it as some small victory.

43

MEET OL' MISTER TECHNOLOGY

* * *

Two days later, the doctor finally allowed Brigid to join them for breakfast, and she asked if he would mind reading to her in the garden. Later that morning, they found a quiet corner of the garden where they could all sit comfortably on cushioned settles. Bella chose to kneel nearby to work the soil and tend the plants while he read.

A few days later, Brigid sat on the ground as well, and the pair of them enjoyed working with flowers and plants while they listened. And though he felt left out, somehow, he resisted the urge to insert himself in their shared pleasures.

Maybe the enemy would relax her guard...

* * *

Brigid had been lying in bed for hours with her mind wandering between the past and the future, when she finally realized sleep was beyond her.

The house was too warm, the air stifling.

With most of the day spent in the garden, her veins now hummed with the same natural magic she'd imbued into the columbine and honeysuckle. And now it was she who felt like reaching up and climbing the walls around her.

The doctor and nurses—her jailors—were gone. And she'd go mad if she sat willingly in this place that had been her prison!

She leapt from the bed and slipped on the thin robe that matched her pretty shift of pale green. There were downy slippers to match, but she pushed them aside with her foot. She didn't want anything coming between herself and the world. She wanted to feel the cold floor, run her hands along those magically smooth walls, touch the cool window glass.

There was a fountain at the back of the garden and she intended to discover how the water was forced out in patterns. Of course, in the darkness, she might only learn how cold the water was, but it was worth a try.

And somewhere in this magical place was a kitchen...

She was giddy as a child when she reached for the front doors, but the deep murmur of men's voices reminded her that Wickham had guards watching the place. He claimed he'd removed the house out of Time, whatever that meant, but that he wasn't the sort to take chances. And though she felt wickedly unbridled at the moment, she was in no mood to be questioned by strangers.

The fountain would have to wait.

She veered down the first corridor she came to and scurried silently from door to door, peeking into rooms. When her hand touched the first on the left, she knew without looking that Bella was sleeping inside and moved on. Six bedrooms along that wing. Five of them empty.

She found a room with odd contraptions inside, the uses of which she could not determine until she accidentally pressed a hand to a white and black surface that abruptly fell away beneath the weight and the hulking box emitted a dissonant music!

No musician in sight—no one but her—and she was able to create such sound!

But she backed away from it lest she wake the entire household with her curiosity. She cautiously made her way back to the door, careful not to touch anything else, and promised to return when the sun was up.

At the end of the next corridor were a pair of doors that intrigued her. While she rested her hand on one, she heard the murmur of voices within. James and Phoebe were clearly having a conversation they never intended for her to overhear, and she hurried away. As she headed back toward the center of the house, she paused to press her hand against the last few doors, trying to guess who slept inside.

And it was then she stopped lying to herself. She wasn't interested in water fountains or kitchens. Hadn't sought adventure in the hallways. She hadn't left her slippers behind out of a need to feel the free world beneath her feet. She'd wanted stealth. She'd wanted to come here, uninterrupted. She wanted Flanders.

Those honeysuckled tendrils in her veins reached for the door before her and she turned the handle and stepped inside without fearing what she'd find. She'd known he would be awake. They hadn't used the link between their minds since Bella had revealed her ability to hear them. But she'd sensed a door standing open. Perhaps that was why she hadn't been able to sleep...

She whispered into the darkness. "Flanders?"

He was beside her in a heartbeat, long before her eyes could adjust. His answer was to lift her hand and press it against his bare chest.

Yes! This was the connection she'd wanted. Not the touch of the floor, but the touch of his skin. The sound of his breath, the taste of his lips—which he gave her next.

She tried to explain herself over and over again, but each time he interrupted her, distracted her, shook his head and kissed her again. And the only words he uttered—finally—were, “Mine. All mine.”

* * *

At dinner on the tenth day, James cleared his throat and announced, "We have a surprise for ye. Phoebe and I thought ye might enjoy something different tonight."

"Different how?" Flanders knew to be wary of James's "surprises."

"Ye'll see. I know the book will be much better, but I think ye'll appreciate seeing the characters from *Les Misérables* in a different light."

After the meal, he led them through the house to a large room Flanders hadn't seen before. Hulking settles with massive cushions provided seating for all, but they each faced the same wall with a large white rectangle in the center.

Brigid was amused. "What is it?"

"It's called a screen," Phoebe explained. "We're going to watch a story on it."

"Watch?" Bella asked. "Like players?"

"Something like that," James said, fiddling with a small black object in his hand. "Just sit and enjoy. Don't worry about how it works—we can explain all that later."

Flanders settled beside Brigid with Bella on her far side. Phoebe dimmed the lights with a touch to the wall, and suddenly the white square blazed with light and color.

Flanders jumped, his hand instinctively reaching for Brigid's. "More sorcery?"

"No sorcery," Phoebe assured him. "Just technology. I promise there are no little people trapped in the wall. Just watch. These are just moving pictures."

There, in the dim light, he squeezed Brigid's hand firmly. It was just a little reminder that she was and always would be his. He was still hoping that the plans of Joan Bloody Arc of Love would help him satisfy Bella, but there was nothing more standing between him and his lady love now.

Music filled the room—rich, full sounds unlike anything Flanders had ever heard. Even the orchestras at court had never pulled this emotional response from his breast, and he had the odd urge to catch it in his hands. So, he tucked them beneath him so he didn't prove himself a fool. After all, it wasn't as if the music could be seen...

Players appeared as if they were in the very room with them. As if the stage were suddenly before them. Words appeared on the screen in what James called "New English," with smaller words beneath them in "New French." But Flanders found he hardly needed the words at all. The music spoke directly to his heart, and the images told the story more clearly than any language could. And he began to recognize the characters he'd been reading about.

He kept his grip on Brigid's hand, his eyes wide as he tried to comprehend what he was seeing. "How can pictures move?" he whispered. "How can they speak?"

"Wheesht," James hissed. "Just watch."

The story unfolded before them—Jean Valjean, the man who stole the bread and was imprisoned for it. But this was different from the mere tale, more immediate. The colors, the faces, the music that swelled with emotion—it was overwhelming.

When a chorus of voices rose in harmony, singing of dreams that would never die, Flanders felt a tightness in his chest he hadn't experienced since he was a boy. He

glanced at Bella and saw her similarly affected, her hand pressed to her mouth, her eyes glistening in the reflected light of the screen. Perhaps she wasn't as hard as she pretended to be.

Then came a moment when a young man named Marius wandered into a garden and saw Cozette for the first time. Their eyes met across the space between them, and though they exchanged no words, there was a recognition, an instant connection that transcended explanation.

The music swelled, magnificent and heart-wrenching, and Flanders felt his own eyes grow damp. He recognized that moment, that feeling. It was what he had experienced when Brigid reached out and touched him, just before parting, in the forest at Gallabrae.

When he saw her for what she was—the other half of his soul.

He turned away from the screen to look at her, finding her already watching him. A tear slipped down her cheek, and he knew she was thinking the same thing. His hand tightened around hers, and in that moment, he knew that whatever doubts Bella might harbor, whatever challenges this strange new world might present, what existed between them was real and true.

And suddenly, he understood why James and Phoebe had chosen this particular tale to show them.

44

“ENOUGH!”

* * *

By the time the “play” had ended, and the music had faded to silence, Flanders thought it was cruel of James and Phoebe to expose the three of them to such violent emotions. If he hadn’t been clutching Brigid’s hand, he might have watched most of the performance on his feet, he was so moved, so tortured. They’d been on their own emotional odyssey for a week, and by the time the lights were turned on, they’d suffered through the equivalent in a matter of hours.

Flanders’ shirt was soaked with tears. He was spent.

Brigid and Bella were sniffing and mopping tears from their faces while their eyes adjusted to the brightness. But by way of consolation, however, so were Phoebe and James.

Without asking for permission or anyone’s leave, Flanders slipped his hands beneath Brigid’s legs and lifted her into his arms. He didn’t bother looking back as he marched out of the room and toward the center of the house. He just prayed Bella would be wise enough not to follow. He was finished trying to prove himself to her. It was time to prove himself to Brigid.

“Flanders?”

“Quiet, you. I don’t want to talk about it.”

She laid her head against his shoulder and allowed him to continue in peace.

No, he didn’t want to discuss what they’d just gone through. And no, he didn’t care to explain what he intended...

* * *

On the far side of the foyer, there was a solar of sorts, packed full of large settles covered in cushioned cloth of blue and white and gold. Though the room was rarely used, a fire was always laid and waiting in the hearth. And it was to this room Flanders carried Brigid, bypassing her bedchamber, though the nurses had been excused and she now had the space to herself.

If Bella did follow, she would be disappointed to find the room empty, and disappointed again when she couldn’t find them in his chambers either.

Brigid was his, and he wouldn’t suffer any more interference. And when he carried her into their sanctuary, deposited her onto a settle, and turned back to lock the two doors together, he told her as much.

She laughed, though quietly. “Ye’re done then, are ye? Ye’ll take yer Cozette and leave the country, will ye?”

He didn’t see anything amusing about it and gave her a sharp look. “I’ll do what I must. Now, be still, woman.” He knelt and lit the fire with the magical matches James had showed to him just that morning. Then he went back to the doors and pushed on the wee square beside them that turned the lights off. “There,” he whispered. “No light to lead them to us.”

“Them, now? Not just Bella?”

“Wheesht!” Once again, he picked her up and carried her to the farthest settle by the outer wall. There, he sat before resting her on his lap and giving her a chance to speak. But first, there was some kissing to get out of the way.

And mayhap more discussion could wait until morning...

He couldn't guess how much time had passed, but there had been an ample stretch for the rest of the household to find their beds, and he was feeling quite proud of himself for escaping with the prize...until Bella's voice called out.

“Flanders! Brigid! Where are ye?”

“Lie back,” he hissed.

Brigid resisted. “Why?”

“We're hiding.”

She rolled her eyes and stifled a giggle when he pressed her down on the settle. Another two pieces of the same furniture hid them from view.

Someone tried the doors. “Brigid, are ye in there?”

Half-stretched beside her, Flanders kept her quiet with another kiss.

There was mumbling. A fumbling of metal on wood, and the doors unlatched. He stared into Brigid's eyes, warning her not to make a sound.

“Someone's lit a fire,” Bella said. “They must be in here. Brigid, show yerself!”

James chuckled. “Perhaps it was a decoy, and they’re getting away.”

“Nonsense. We’re all petrified of what we’ll find beyond the garden.” Footsteps came closer and Flanders’ heart jumped like a guilty laddie’s. “Enough of that! Sit up!”

Though Bella was obviously standing at the end of the settle, staring at Flanders’ back, they kept still, trying not to laugh.

James’ voice came from close by. “Perhaps they’ve fallen asleep. Let’s leave them be ? —”

“Perhaps I’ve sprouted wings,” Bella scoffed. Then she plopped onto a smaller settle nearby and simply waited.

“I think we should sit up now,” Brigid whispered.

He made a face. “Maybe they’ll go away.”

Bella snorted. “We will not.”

Flanders laughed and sat up straight, then pulled Brigid back onto his lap. Found or not, he had no intention of letting her go.

“Bella.” He gave the woman a nod. “James.”

“Flanders.”

He gave James a wink. “I would say this is not what it seems, but alas, it is.”

Bella looked to the ceiling. “I do not know what you mean except that you are hiding from me.”

“Precisely.”

“Well, you can just hide later. I have something to say.”

The lights switched on. Phoebe stood inside the door, trying not to smile and failing miserably. “Don’t let me interrupt.”

Bella chewed her lips for a moment, then sighed rather loudly. “I want to apologize.”

“Ye do?” They were both surprised and reacted in unison.

“I do. It was cruel to tease ye like I did.”

Brigid frowned. “Ye teased us?”

“I did. When I said I’d take ye away if I didn’t believe ye loved each other. It was cruel of me. I was...jealous.” She waved a hand at Flanders. “I wanted to see him dance. I wanted to see him earn his place in yer life—in our lives.”

“And leaping into a fire wasn’t enough?” Brigid wasn’t happy at all.

“If ye’ll remember, I did learn that later.”

“And what about me? Why did I need to prove that I loved him? If ye can read my thoughts, my dreams, my memories, ye should have known I’ve wanted him for years.”

“I know. And I did know. And it was too bad of me, I admit it. But I can’t deny it was rewarding to watch ye tryin’ to prove it. I do hope I’ll be forgiven. I am sorry.”

Flanders shook his head and looked seriously into Brigid’s eyes. “Don’t ye think

she'll need to prove that?"

Brigid bit her lips together to hide her smile, but nodded soberly. "But how?"

"Yes, how?"

Flanders inhaled deeply, then shouted, "By shuttin' off those lights and lockin' the door behind ye!"

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:41 am

The wedding took place ten days after the enchanted animation of *Les Misérables* was played upon the wall at The Edinburgh house. In those ten days, Flanders and Brigid had experienced quite enough of Technology and the 21st century, and were begging for a respite from it all. Thus, Wickham arranged for what he called a honeymoon for them far away from the city, where he promised the night sky would appear exactly as it used to, back in the year 1329.

After the ceremony, the sorcerer would deliver them to a hunting lodge deep in the Scottish Highlands, which would be stocked with the foods they requested and no technology whatsoever, save an ice box and the plumbing and fresh water to which they'd grown fond.

They would be allotted twenty-one days in their private sanctuary before they would be moved to the home of James and Phoebe, where they would begin their educations anew.

The ceremony was performed by a modern-day priest named Father Donne, in a magnificent church in Inverness. Once, merely a royal burgh and strategic settlement, it was now a fine city with so much technology, both the bride and groom were willingly blindfolded both to and from St. Mary's. Transported in a carriage with no horses, by the way—a feat no one wished to take the time to explain that day.

While they waited to sign the official wedding documents, Flanders pulled Brigid into his arms to make a confession.

“Brigid Leesborn.”

She giggled at his sober expression. The woman was quite enjoying her day and he'd yet to have her alone, to truly make it memorable.

She blinked. "Aye?"

"I shall need at least two sons."

She sobered only slightly. "Two?"

"At least two. I shall call them James and Robert."

She sighed. "Then I shall endeavor not to bear ye three."

He scowled. Three didn't seem too much to hope for. "Prithee, why not?"

She gave him a devilish grin. "Because I do not think any laddie should be named Stout. "

* * *

I so hope you liked the story of Flanders and Brigid! I'm thrilled they finally got to tell it. I'll love you forever if you return to the [lok_epub](#) page here and leave a review.