



Foretelling His Future (Tangled In Tartan #3)

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Category: Historical

Description: An outcasts fight, a thieves redemption, and a love that defies all odds

Raised in a life of thievery, Rory finally has something to call his own. After Ian bequeathed him his forge, Rory swore it would be a new start with honest work and no more trouble. But trouble has a way of coming his way, and Elvira's arrival will mess up not just his life but his heart as well.

Elvira, a beautiful Romani fortune-teller, has faced mockery and rejection, but her will to survive is stronger than any bias. Seeking refuge from the ruthless Laird McKovac, she and her family turn to his old enemy's clan, hoping for safety. Yet, McKovac's greed and malice know no bounds, threatening to burn anyone and anything willing to stand against him.

Rory will fight fiercely to protect the charming woman who has dominated his every waking thought. Elvira will inspire him to fight for what's right, and he will give her his unconditional love. She will find an ally and a home in Rory's arms, but can they win against the evil Laird and the poison he has spewed about her people?

Total Pages (Source): 24

PROLOGUE

“Y e should nae gae,” Patrin Lovell said, a desperate look in his eyes.

Maria clenched her jaw and looked away. “I must. If I dinnae answer his summons, I fear what he would dae tae our people.”

“We cannae live in fear.”

“If I gae tae him, then I dinnae need tae. I will be fine. I hae done this before. I will return soon, my love,” Maria spoke in soothing words, placing her hand upon Patrin’s cheek. Her hands settled against his bearded skin, finding the beginning of a scar that Patrin covered up with his facial hair. It had been a gift from a cruel Highlander. Many Romani people had been given similar gifts. Maria pressed her lips against his. He ran his fingers through her dark, curled hair, and she felt herself buckle under the force of his affection.

“If anything should happen tae ye...”

“I will be fine,” Maria promised. She hated lying to the man she loved.

Her red cloak flowed behind her as she strode through the village. People gazed at her, some with intrigue, some with fear, and some with gratitude. Maria held her head high. She was used to being treated in such a way. All Romani were, but today she was the guest of Laird McKovac.

Guards smiled and nudged each other as she made her way to the laird’s chambers.

She knew what they were thinking, but their opinion of her did not matter. It was not the truth. She closed the door behind her. The Laird was waiting for her, his lips stained with wine. He was already old, flinty and hard, like the mountains that rose in the distance. He leered at her, and tension ran through Maria's body. She did this not only for Patrin and their family, but for her entire people. If they were to stay in the village, then she needed to heed the laird's request. It was hard enough for her people to live in peace as it was. If the laird looked upon her favorably, then she might be able to buy some kindness.

"Come sit, my dear. I am in need of yer insights again," he said, patting the floor beside him. He sank down to a bear skin rug and held out his palm. Maria suppressed a sigh. There was no doubting the truth of his intentions, for he did not take his eyes off her as she descended to the floor, curling her legs beneath her. He had a dazed, infatuated look on his face as she took his hand in hers, and then gazed at his palm. His hand was wide, and hair dusted the back of it. The palm was smooth, with strong, deep furrows etched into the skin. She had read his palm many times before, but the Laird always called her back.

"I see that there shall be a fruitful harvest in yer future," Maria said, locking her gaze on his palm. She did not wish to look up and meet his eyes.

"What about love?" he rasped.

"I am sure a man such as yerself dinnae need me tae give ye insight about that. A man of yer stature must attract many Scottish maidens," she said, her heart sinking.

"And what if I dinnae want a Scottish maiden? What if I want someone a wee bit... different? Let us stop this dance, Maria. Ye must know why I call ye here. Ye must see it in my palms. I love ye. I want ye tae be by my side," he said.

Maria's breath caught in her throat. She had been dreading the confession, for there

was only one answer she could give.

“My Laird, I am sorry, but my heart already belongs tae another.”

“Another? Ye mean one of ye?” he sneered. “Ye could be a Laird’s wife, Maria. Dae ye know what I am offering ye?”

“Aye, my Laird, and still, I must refuse. I must stay true tae my heart. I can live nae other way. It would be a betrayal to my people, and my culture.”

The Laird gave a scoffing laugh, his expression changing immediately. “Yer culture? A rich tale...ye are little more than vermin. Only ye are the exception.” Maria tried to pull her hand away, but long fingers curled around her wrist, pulling her towards him. She saw the evil glint in his eye and could smell the wine on his breath. Suddenly, the room became very small, and she feared there would be no escape. “I could make life very difficult for yer people, Maria. Think about them. Would it be sae bad tae live here with me, and keep me... occupied? Nae other Laird would hae a wife like ye.”

“I hae pledged myself already. Please—let me gae,” Maria said, the words squeaking out as he placed more pressure on her wrist. She feared it might snap.

Maria, acting on instinct, lashed out at him when he wouldn’t release her. She swiped her hand across his face, scratching his nose and eyes. The shock of it loosened his grasp, and she backed away.

He looked at her with hatred.

“I will make ye pay for this! I will come after all of ye!” he roared, bristling with anger and vigor.

Maria turned to her ancestral knowledge, defending herself and her people with the

only weapon she had; words. All this time she had placated him and flattered him in the hopes that he would remain calm and peaceful. She had obeyed his summons to protect her people, but now she wondered if she would have been better off ignoring him in the first place. Seeing him so regularly had inflamed his desire to the point where it boiled over to anger, burning with a fervor that never would have taken hold had he not fallen to lust.

She mumbled something in a strange tongue and then cast a spiteful curse on this spiteful man. She pointed her finger, and her brown eyes flickered with arcane fury. “Yer rule will be tainted with turmoil and despair. Whatever hatred you give to the world will be returned to you tenfold. Only if you seek redemption for your sins will you avoid catastrophe; otherwise, you will be ensnared by your own misdeeds. Seek my forgiveness, and you will be free of this curse,” Maria said.

The laird backed away, shocked and stunned. Maria took the opportunity to escape, hoping that the fear of the curse would be enough for the laird to let her. Ancient knowledge was powerful, but the power came from the belief, not in any magic itself. Maria ran away from the keep, her figure disappearing into the shadows of the night, fearing that her people were condemned to suffer because she had been true to her heart.

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A few years later...

Elvira Lovell was hiding in plain sight. The tavern was dimly lit, the low candles flickering. Hushed whispers flitted back and forth around the room. Elvira was sitting at a table in the corner. Her dark, curled hair was pulled back, accentuating her strong cheekbones and full lips. A cloak was draped around her shoulders and she leaned forward. Her olive skin was a stark contrast to the pale-faced Highlanders that sat around her. Ordinarily, a tavern like this would not have been a safe place for a 19-year-old girl, especially not one who was so different from the other patrons. However, Elvira was special. Elvira had been invited for a particular reason.

Before her sat a quivering woman, her eyes filled with fear.

“I’m just sae worried for my boy. I dinnae want him tae be a cruel bully, but it seems that’s the way all men grow up here.”

Elvira gently took the woman’s hand in her own. She traced the lines of the palm, remembering all the lessons she had learned from her mother. People often thought that there was some magic involved in this, as though it was impossible for someone to master this skill who did not have Romani blood flowing through their veins. Perhaps, deep in the past, in the world before this one, there had been magic. Such a thing had dwindled from the world, Elvira thought. She was not a witch, even though the insult had been thrown her way on more than one occasion. No, what she excelled at was listening and observing. The lines of the palms helped guide her, but it was not the only thing that helped.

“I’m sure that with a mother’s keen guidance, his compass shall always point north. He is yer son, nae matter what. He always hae been, and he always shall be. Remind him of virtues like kindness and love, and his heart will nae harden like sae many others,” Elvira said. The woman sighed with relief and bowed her head, thanking Elvira profusely. She passed a few coins Elvira’s way, and Elvira pocketed them quickly. The chair was vacated and then filled quickly, this time by an older man. His clothes were ragged, and the color had faded from his hair. His palm was wrinkled, showing a life well lived.

“Are things ever gaeing tae get better?” he asked.

Elvira frowned a little. “In what sense?” she asked.

“The world. Am I gaeing tae see peace in my time? When I was a boy, I remember things being far happier. The world was brighter. Things hae only gotten worse as I hae gotten older, and just once I would like for things tae be the way they were when I was young.”

Elvira traced the line of life on his palm, thinking to herself that he probably didn’t have many years left. “Try and look at the world as ye did when ye were a child. Ye were filled with wonder then, but that hae left ye as ye hae gotten older. Perhaps it is nae the world that hae dimmed, but the light inside of ye. Hae ye suffered a loss recently?”

His head bowed and a whimpered breath passed through his lips. “Aye, my sweet Loelle. I always promised her a good life.”

“I’m sorry for yer loss. I’m sure she had one,” Elvira placed her other hand over his palm, reassuring him. He looked up.

“Ye are?” he asked. Sometimes she forgot the power of her words. When she said

something, people often derived a deeper meaning from them than what she meant. In this instance, he was inferring that Elvira had received a message from the next world. Elvira did not dismiss the notion, however. If it brought him peace, then where was the harm? She nodded. He smiled and seemed relieved. He gave her some coins but, before he left, he had one thing more to say.

“Ye know, many years ago, I came tae yer Ma. I wanted her tae tell me if I should ask Loelle tae marry me. Without her words, I dinnae know if I would hae worked up the courage. I never saw her again, but I wanted tae thank her. Will ye pass on that message from me?”

“I shall,” Elvira said, swallowing the sudden, painful sob that rose to her throat.

“It is remarkable; ye look just like her. It’s as though I’m back there, sitting with her again,” he said, a wistful tone entering his voice as he traveled to the past, thinking of a time when hope was in front of him and the world was filled with possibilities rather than regrets. Elvira bowed her head, excusing herself from the next customer as she needed to fetch a drink. In actuality, she needed a moment to collect herself. The man’s request only served to remind her that Maria was no longer with them, having died in childbirth to Elvira’s younger sister, with her father having followed Maria shortly after. Sometimes, Elvira wondered if it was better that her Ma had departed the world then, for she had not had to witness the descent into madness.

There was a long line of people waiting for her to return. Anxiety twitched on their faces. Elvira already knew what questions they were going to ask even before she took her seat. They would all want to know when the world was going to get better, and if fighting could be avoided. Laird McKovac had given into all his worst impulses. It was as though a storm had arrived over the village a long time ago and never left.

Elvira slaked her thirst and then returned to her seat, wearing her placid smile. When

people looked at her, they wanted to see someone in control, confident and reassuring. She had become adept at donning a mask of confidence in the hope of soothing people's anxieties. Before she could even speak to her next guest, however, a tall, familiar guard burst through the tavern's door with a worried look on his face.

"There's a raid coming," he said, and his gaze passed around the tavern until it settled on Elvira. "They are looking for ye." He marched towards her and started to push all the people away.

"I cannae leave, Samuel. All these people need me," Elvira protested.

Samuel tilted his head and gave her a stern look. "Ye really want tae be here when they come? Yer grandmother would never forgive me." Samuel turned his attention to the tavern. "And none of ye better say that she was here. Ye hae all been seeking her advice, and the Laird will nae take kindly tae that." He turned his attention back to Elvira, speaking in a low voice. "Come on," he urged.

Elvira knew there was no point in arguing with him. It was the pragmatic choice anyway. The last thing she wanted was to suffer at the hands of Laird McKovac's other guards. Samuel was the only kind guard she knew of. The Laird had shown a cruel streak towards Romani people and often made them suffer just to entertain himself. At least the villagers all agreed to keep her secret. Samuel took her out of the tavern and looked into the distance, before beckoning her forward.

"What are ye daeing here? I told ye that it was tae dangerous," he marched forward, turning his head in every direction and straining his ears.

"The people need my help. They're scared, Samuel. If I can help tae allay their fears, then I must. It's what Ma would hae done."

"Ye need tae think of yeself and yer family. It's nae safe for ye around here. I dinnae

know why ye dinnae all just leave.”

“Aye, the Laird would like that,” Elvira muttered darkly.

Samuel paused for a moment and put his hands on his hips. “I’m sorry. I dinnae mean it like that. I just... after what yer grandma did for my sister... I hate tae think of ye suffering when ye dinnae hae tae.”

“Then think about yer sister. What state would she hae been in if my family was nae here? She would nae hae been healed from her sickness. Think about all the other people that we could help by staying here.”

Samuel had a grave look on his face. “It’s true, Mirella was the only one who could help my sister. But she is fine now, and ye staying is nae gaeing tae solve the problem.”

“But we are nae the problem Samuel. Laird McKovac is.”

Samuel had an aggrieved look on his face. It wasn’t his fault really, but Elvira was annoyed by the fact that her people were seen as the problem rather than Laird McKovac’s aggression. Everyone said that they should just move on, as if uprooting their lives was an easier fate than placating an angry Laird’s temper. It didn’t seem fair that they should all suffer while he terrorized them. Samuel ushered her away to a path through the forest that would obscure her. In the distance, they could hear the thunder of hooves against the ground, signaling that a patrol of guards was oncoming.

“Hamish McKovac is kinder than his father. He sent me, to warn anyone I could find. Things will get better, I promise. I’ll lead them away as quickly as I can. Get back tae yer family and hide,” he said.

Elvira’s heart flashed with fear. Life shouldn’t be like this , she thought. They had

done nothing wrong, yet they were persecuted anyway. She wished that she did possess magic, real magic like some people believed she did—then she could protect everyone she cared about.

Elvira made a hasty retreat back to the small farm she called home, skulking along a trail used by hunters and denizens of the forest. It was barely visible in the darkness, but she had traveled it many times before, so she was sure-footed and nimble. The path wound between trees, wending like a river, and she was obscured by leafy bushes. She crested a ridge and expected to be greeted by the sight of the homestead, but instead, she was faced with a ruin. The soft moonlight was gentle, but it could not soothe the ache in her heart. The building had been charred by fire. There was a gaping hole in the thatched roof. The fence had been broken as well. The animals who hadn't been slaughtered, must have freed themselves. Everything they had, had been just taken away.

Elvira silently sank to her knees and wept, unable to move. She couldn't bring herself to go to the farm because she was afraid of what she might find there. Were her siblings and grandmother laid among the ash, or had they been taken? She wasn't sure which fate was worse. As she sobbed, she curled her hands into tight fists and beat them upon the ground. Anger and pain flooded her mind, and she gave into the rampant emotions that roared inside her. She wished that Laird McKovac was below her, and she was pummeling his face, making him feel all of the pain that he inflicted upon her people.

And then, a hand came upon her shoulder. It startled Elvira so much that she flinched, pushing herself away as she feared it was a guard. Instead, it was the kind, wizened face of her grandmother, Mirella, who looked almost bemused.

“Now, child, this is nae time for tears. We needed them before, they might hae put out the fire,” she chuckled.

Elvira immediately threw her arms around her and hugged her fiercely. “How can ye laugh at a time like this?” she asked between quiet sobs.

“I haven't more tears to give for these men.” Mirella rolled her shoulders. “Come, lassie; yer siblings are waiting.” She turned, and Elvira followed.

They walked a short distance to a small glade, where Tereza and Ollie waited for her. She clung to them as she saw them again, crying with relief. With them stood Storm, the old family horse.

“We fled the farm before they arrived,” Mirella said, sighing heavily. “I think it’s time we left this place.”

Elvira’s eyes widened. “We cannae give the laird what he wants. We cannae let him win!”

“Look at us, Elvira. He hae won already. I am nae gaeing tae live in a land where we are nae wanted, just out of spite. Best tae move on, for the wee ones,” Mirella added this last part when she saw that Elvira was getting ready to argue.

Elvira looked down at her siblings. They were tired and confused. Mirella was right. They shouldn’t have to grow up in a world ruled by fear.

“Where can we gae?”

“Laird Boyd’s land. He is an enemy of McKovac’s. Perhaps we can find refuge there. Ye may remember that we hae an old family friend,” Mirella’s eyes twinkled and Elvira’s did the same. She remembered the broad-shouldered older boy who showed an uncanny skill with the hammer. She had been just a slip of a girl, and he was becoming a man. Elvira had been quite taken with him, and she remembered her mother coming to her, smiling as she could tell Elvira’s secret.

“Ye like Ian,” Maria had said. Elvira had blushed and tried to hide her face. Maria had sat Elvira on her lap and had taken her palm in her hand. “Elvira, one day ye will marry a good man like him. Strong, tall, handsome, and with a good heart. That’s what ye must look for above all else, a good heart. And maybe, if ye are patient enough, ye will find the man ye want.”

When she had been younger, Elvira had always dreamed of being reunited with that boy, Ian McKendrick. As the years passed, that dream had dwindled, and she rarely thought about him. Her parents used to move from clan to clan, until they had returned to these lands, unable to find prosperity elsewhere. Despite all the people she had seen, there had never been anyone like Ian who had anchored in the root of her childhood mind. But was this the river of fate carrying her back to her childhood fantasies? Was all this pain going to take her into the arms of a man who was to be her husband? It seemed so absurd, but then again her mother had shown tremendous insight, and perhaps her influence on the world lasted longer than her body.

While Elvira did not like the idea of leaving these lands and the people who needed her, she could not deny that she needed to do what was best for her family. So, she lifted Tereza and Ollie onto Storm’s back and then walked alongside the horse to new pastures. Perhaps there was something noble in retreat, as long as it guaranteed safety.

Rory's bicep glistened with sweat, illuminated by the light of the forge. He often worked shirtless, for he sweated so much that his clothes clung to his skin. The heat licked his flesh, and the power of the hammer flowed through him as he brought it crashing down onto the forge. The clang echoed around his ears, a sound that had long become routine to him.

The past two years had been an industrious time for young Rory, who had grown into a man and a blacksmith of some repute. After inheriting the forge from Ian, Rory had focused on his craft. After having been involved in so many schemes in his youth with his sister Anne, and in his adolescence with Ian himself, Rory was glad to put that life behind him. He had flirted with trouble often enough, but he had vowed never to do that again. He was going to be a dutiful man, blinding himself to any kind of illicit scheme or trouble. He wanted to earn honest coin and do what he was good at, and so far, he had succeeded.

He was interrupted from his work by Torrin, who knocked on the door and called Rory's name. Torrin was a kind, comfortable man, settled into his life and manner. He was almost ten years older than Rory. His hair was blond and curly, his face full and soft. He always claimed that he enjoyed not having to work with his hands, and it showed.

Rory turned and grabbed a cloth, patting himself down before he pulled on a shirt.

"With you working like that, it's no wonder that the maidens giggle when they walk past," Torrin said teasingly.

Rory arched an eyebrow, but didn't say anything in reply. Ginger meowed as the feline came to greet Torrin. Torrin made a sound with his teeth and scratched Ginger around the neck. Ginger lifted her head and closed her eyes, purring softly.

"Ye should pay more attention tae this one, else she's liable tae wander off," Torrin warned.

"This is as much her home as it is mine, and I pay her plenty of attention. She just likes enough of it," Rory said.

Torrin chuckled. "I've known a few women like that in my time. Perhaps ye should get acquainted with some," he cast a sharp look towards Rory.

"I'm just fine with the way things are, thank ye. Life is uncomplicated, and that is the way I like it," Rory said.

Torrin nodded, but he had an uncertain look on his face, as though he was just waiting for the day when Rory was going to change his mind. Today was not going to be that day, though. "Well, I hae something here for ye," he produced a letter and handed it to Rory. Rory's eyes flashed when he saw it, taking it and unfolding it open immediately. "Thank ye, Torrin."

"Nae problem, lad. It was delivered by a passing seller. Brought terrible news, he did," Torrin continued. Rory had already turned his back and bent his head, eager to read news from Ian and Lucy, who were now residing in France. Torrin hadn't yet taken the hint to leave, however.

"Mmhmm," Rory murmured.

"Oh aye, it seems that things are getting worse over in the McKovac clan. Apparently, raids are a common occurrence, and patrols are venturing farther out,

even threatening tae encroach on our territory. It's enough tae make a man worry about the future, given the history between the clans, and the rumors that their Laird hae lost his mind."

Rory was only half-listening and was actually getting quite annoyed that Torrin hadn't stopped speaking yet.

Torrin, himself, was annoyed that Rory wasn't listening, and grabbed his arm.

"Lad, the letter can wait. This is real life I am talking about. Are ye nae worried? A war could be upon us!"

Rory sighed. He had heard all this before. "Why would there be a war, Torrin? This is all just hearsay and rumor. Besides, it is nae our place tae consider these matters. The only people who should be talking about this are the ones in the keep. All I care about is my hammer and my forge, and the only thing ye should care about is yer tavern and yer wife."

"Aye, well, some of us care about a wee bit more than that," Torrin said, narrowing his eyes at Rory. "For the clan."

Rory took a deep breath. He had always tried to look at things logically, and it irked him when other people let their emotions rule them. "I'm sure Laird Boyd will dae everything he can tae protect the clan. He hae enough men-at-arms tae defend us, and if there ever is a fight, it will probably take place on a field a long way from here. I dinnae see that there's any point in worrying when all we hae tae gae on is the word of some passing merchants."

"Oh, it's nae just some merchants, lad. And wars can start like that," Torrin snapped his fingers. "Besides, hae ye nae been paying attention? The Laird dinnae want tae fight. He'd be more likely tae ransom off his land than gae tae war. We hae tae

protect our own. Now, a few of us are gathering and?—”

Rory held up his hand. “I dinnae want tae hear anything about this.”

“But how can ye stand here when we might be under threat? Ye know that the Laird and his advisor dinnae care about us wee people. If we can deal with this threat early enough, then we never hae tae worry about Laird McKovac coming for us. The way he treats his own people... it makes ye wonder what he’ll dae tae the enemy. Ye may think ye are safe here in yer forge, but when the world is burning around ye, ye will feel differently.”

“And when the world is burning, I will come and help. I just think that it’s best for us to follow the Laird’s orders.”

“It will be too late then!” Torrin put his hands on his hips and shook his head. “Ach, I expected better of ye, Rory. I know that Ian would never hae backed away from a fight.”

“And he almost got himself thrown in jail because of it,” Rory said.

“I expected better of ye, lad,” Torrin said, again, his head hanging in disappointment.

Even Ginger was casting a judgmental look in his direction, or so Rory felt.

Rory had to make a conscious effort to quell the guilt in his heart. Torrin was right in that Ian would have joined this fight without so much as a second thought. Anne and Finlay might have too, but that’s because they liked injecting themselves into situations that didn’t concern them. Rory thought the point of life was to learn from those around him, and the best thing for him was to stay in his forge and stick to his skills. Still... he couldn’t fully dismiss Torrin’s words. After all, he knew of Glenrock, the Laird’s advisor, as he was Lucy’s father... The man had been willing to

disown his own daughter because he had been ashamed of her. If he didn't care about his daughter, then why would he care about the people of the village?

"I thought ye would at least dae us the courtesy of hearing us out," Torrin said. "We could use a strong man like ye."

"I am nae a fighter," Rory said bluntly.

"Aye, aye," Torrin said, stretching out his palms and moving them up and down through the air. "Look, how about ye hold a meeting here, and ye can try and reason with us, tae convince us why it's nae a good idea. If ye think ye are the voice of reason, then let others hear yer voice. We can hold it in the basement," Torrin said.

Rory glanced towards the entrance to the basement. He sighed. It had been used for an illicit scheme before. "Ye want tae bring me trouble..."

"There's nae danger, lad! We're just a group of friends gathering for a wee bit of time away from the families, that's all. Naebody will think anything of it," Torrin said.

Rory pressed his lips together and sighed. Perhaps Torrin had a point. If they didn't have anyone to dissuade them from this notion, then they were liable to get themselves into trouble. Perhaps Rory could be the voice of reason.

"Very well," Rory relented.

Torrin's face brightened. He clasped Rory's shoulders and smiled broadly. "There's a good lad! I knew ye would come around. I shall spread the word," he said, and then added, "it's funny how times change. Used tae be that the biggest fear was the distillery down there being discovered, and now it's war. Why does it feel like things never get simpler in life?"

“I cannae imagine,” Rory said thinly, although in his opinion it was because people didn’t know when to leave trouble well enough alone. Torrin departed, and then Ginger mewed again.

“Ye can keep quiet as well,” Rory muttered, before running his hand along the cat’s soft fur, all the way to the base of its spine. Her tail rose and swayed happily through the air. Rory fetched a drink and then took a seat. Ginger curled on his lap and Rory finally opened the letter. He received regular missives over the course of the year, and it was always a joy when he learned about what was happening in Ian’s life. He and Lucy had gone from strength to strength, settling abroad in a strange country, but far away from their troubles. They sounded very happy. The only thing that gave him pause for thought was when Ian asked him why all his letters sounded the same.

The truth was that Rory didn’t have much to report back. He kept his life at a steady pace, never rocking the boat. It may have made for some boring letters, but at least he wasn’t putting himself in danger. He supposed he might well have more to report in his next letter if Torrin was right. However, he didn’t want to mention it, just in case Ian got it into his head to rush back to Scotland to defend the keep. He was so reckless he might take it upon himself to do such a foolish thing, so Rory would keep quiet. He did hope that Ian and Lucy would find an opportunity to return again soon, however. The forge was quieter without them, and lonely. If it wasn’t for Ginger, Rory didn’t know what he would do.

He snorted with laughter as he reached the end of the letter. “Can ye believe the cheek of them, Ginger? Look at this, ‘keep out of trouble’. Oh aye, like I’m the one who needs tae learn that lesson,” Rory shook his head and folded the letter, placing it on the table.

His fingers idly stroked Ginger, and he closed his eyes, hoping in the depths of his soul that there was not going to be a war. Laird McKovac might be mad, but surely, he would not send his armies into battle? The Highlands were at peace, and it was a

thing that should always be protected. Rory didn't know why anyone would want to destroy that. As for these raids, well, that was an internal matter. It shouldn't have concerned him or anyone else.

All he wanted was to be left alone, but life kept trying to tempt him. Well, he would soon talk some sense into Torrin and the others. And if his letters to Ian and Lucy were boring, well, so be it. He would rather do that than have to write of clashing swords and a land stained with blood.

Rory's muscles burned after a long day of work. He had found himself hammering harder and longer after Torrin had left, as his suppressed frustration became a lot for him to bear. He had chewed down his food and wrestled with his conscience. He kept telling himself that this was the right thing to do, that just because Anne and Ian would have done differently didn't mean he was wrong. All he wanted was to get the meeting over with and resume his ordinary, peaceful life.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door. Ginger prowled close, intrigued. Rory thought it was too early for it to be anyone for the meeting. He suddenly had grim thoughts of Glenrock and his guards coming by, having heard whispers about a secret meeting. There would be threats against his livelihood. Already things were being twisted and Rory was being placed in a difficult situation. He steeled himself against the anxious knot that twisted in his gut, growing tighter and tighter, just as it had when he had been young, acting as a lookout for his sister while she deceived men to steal their precious silver. He looked back on his life with shame, even though it had been a matter of survival. He and Anne had been forced to do drastic things to survive, and all he wanted was to never have to do something like that again.

Even so, he opened the door.

Standing there wasn't a stern agent of the laird, but rather a soft and beautiful young woman. She was like nobody Rory had ever seen before, and he was so stunned by her appearance that his mouth dropped open. She was a little shorter than him, but stood with her head held high, a proud expression on her face. Dark, curled locks

cascaded down past her shoulder, framing her elegant cheekbones. Her skin was the color of olives, and her eyes a dark brown, as mysterious as the night itself. Her nose was dainty, her lips rosy and full. The cloak she wore was draped over her body, rounded against her curves. It took him a moment to realize that he wasn't breathing.

"I'm sorry, can I help ye? The forge is closed for the day. If ye need something, ye can come back taemorrow," he said, swallowing a lump in his throat after he spoke. By the look of her, she seemed Romani, mysterious people with whom Rory had never had dealings with. He had heard stories, though, rumors that they could curse people, sometimes even turning them into animals if they were displeased. Of course, Rory didn't believe all the things he heard.

Elvire took a moment to study the lad in front of her. He was tall, obviously strong with dark blonde hair that curled by his ear and forest-green eyes that seemed keen and bright.

"My name is Elvira Lovell. This is my grandmother, Mirella, and my siblings, Tereza and Ollie. I was hoping tae find Ian McKendrick," she said, her voice had an exotic lilt. She spoke the same language as Rory, but it had never sounded more beautiful to him than when the words were formed by those soft lips. He cleared his throat and gathered his composure.

"I'm afraid Ian is nae here. I am Rory."

"Ah, Rory. When will he return?" Elvira asked.

"I'm afraid he is nae gaeing tae. Nae soon, at least. He left for France with his wife. I was his apprentice, and I took over for him when he departed. I am sorry."

Elvira's eyes flickered as she heard the news. Rory almost saw her flinch when he mentioned that Ian had a wife, although he couldn't be certain.

“I see,” she tilted her head and furrowed her brow a little. “Well, we are family friends of his. We used tae live in this clan for a while, many moons ago. I knew him as a child.”

Rory narrowed his eyes, filled with suspicion. He knew that Ian had no family, at least not for a long time. “He never mentioned ye.” He placed his arm against the door, worried that this was some sort of scheme designed to rob him of his riches. Well, perhaps riches was a little too generous a description. Still...

Elvira smiled. “It was a long time ago...” she trailed away, looking towards her siblings and then back at Rory. She dipped her head and clasped her hands together, making a gesture of supplication. “We came here hoping tae find shelter with him. We hae endured an exhausting travel, and there was nae much coin left after stabling our horse. We hoped that our family's long-standing friendship would be remembered by Ian, but if he chose ye as an apprentice, then ye must possess a kind heart as well.”

Rory liked to think he possessed such a thing, but he was not about to be swindled. He could just imagine him offering shelter to these people only to find everything he owned stolen come morning. After all, it wouldn't have been hard for them to learn of Ian's departure and concoct some story. Without Ian there to offer testament, it was impossible to prove or disprove her words. This was the kind of scheme that Anne would have deployed in their youth. Did he see some trace of his sister reflected in Elvira? It was certainly a cunning thing, to come to a house, just a young girl, a harmless old woman, and two children. What could have been more sympathetic than that? Most people would have opened their homes and then suffered because of it.

“I'm sure ye hae been through a lot, but I'm afraid I cannae help ye. This is a forge, nae an inn,” Rory said. He went to close the door, but Elvira slipped in as quick as a single breath. She turned him away from the door.

“Please, may I speak with ye alone?” Elvira asked, placing a hand on his arm. Her fingers were delicate and slender, her touch pliant and tangible. Her eyes seemed to grow wider, and he could feel himself falling into them, as though they were two pools of dark, cool liquid.

“I dinnae think ye know what we hae been through. We dinnae hae anything in the world. All we hae are the friendships we made,” Elvira said.

“We are nae friends,” Rory pointed out.

Elvira took her hand away and narrowed her eyes. “That is apparent,” she looked around at the forge. “Ye hae plenty of room here. We will nae be any trouble, I promise. We just want tae rest for the night until we can find more permanent accommodation. Please, I am only asking for a wee bit of kindness,” she clasped her hands together as if she was praying. “My grandmother is old, my siblings are young... I dinnae know what we are gaeing tae dae if ye dinnae help us.”

Rory took a deep breath, steeling himself against these plaintive words. “Ye should hae checked that Ian was still here before ye arrived.”

“I dinnae hae a chance,” Elvira snapped. “And if Ian were here, I’m sure that he would hae allowed us tae stay.”

“I dinnae know that ye can speak for his wishes. By yer account, ye hae nae known him since he was young. I knew him more recently than that.”

“Did he turn intae a hard-hearted man, then? Or did he just take an apprentice whose heart is as hard as the anvil he strikes?” Elvira stuck out her chin, giving Rory a challenging look. Rory huffed. Getting into an argument with a stranger was not what he had planned for the evening. It wasn’t long until the meeting, and he didn’t want people to arrive with Elvira in his forge. Goodness knows what Torrin would think

about it.

“Look, I think that ye should just leave. There are plenty of other places in the village that might take pity on ye. All ye hae is yer word that ye knew Ian. I cannae place my trust in that when I dinnae know ye.”

“I hae more than that,” Elvira said. She slipped her hands inside her cloak and rummaged around for a few moments. Then, she brandished a dagger.

Rory backed away a step.

“That is nae gaeing tae work. I am nae gaeing tae be threatened,” he said, banking on himself to be able to disarm her before she struck a fatal blow. He wasn’t about to be bullied into giving her what she wanted either way.

Elvira rolled her eyes. “I am nae gaeing tae stab ye. Just look at it,” she said. It was a small dagger. She held out the dagger in her hands. Rory tentatively reached forward. Her hands were steady. She did not make a motion to flick her wrist and attack him, and allowed him to take the dagger from her. He held it up, inspecting the craftsmanship. His gaze traveled up and down the blade as he turned it around. It was indeed Ian’s work, plain as day, although it didn’t confirm anything.

“Ye could hae bought this from someone,” he said.

Elvira gave an anguished sigh. “Ye are impossible. Dae ye really think I would gae tae these lengths?” she gasped and paused for breath, putting her hands on her hips and shaking her head. As she parted her cloak, Rory’s gaze flashed away from the dagger, noticing her trim waist. “Why dinnae ye direct me tae his father, or his sister? They will remember.”

“They are no longer with us,” Rory said almost nonchalantly, as to him, it was

something that happened before he had even known Ian.

To Elvira, it was evidently a huge shock. She placed her hand on her chest and staggered back. Her mouth formed an 'o'.

“Dead, oh... oh nae...”

“Sae ye see, there is really nae way for me tae trust what ye say,” Rory said, handing her dagger back. Elvira collected herself. Her nostrils flared as she snatched the dagger away from him and sheathed it against her side. Her expression made something twitch inside him, but then it faded. Elvira pulled her cloak around her and glared at him.

“I see. Well, I’m sure Ian would be sorry tae know he gave his forge tae someone who hae nae instinct for kindness,” she turned and marched out of the door.

“There is a nearby tavern. Ye can stay there,” Rory said, pointing in the direction of Torrin’s place. His words faltered and faded as they rolled out of the doorway.

Elvira didn’t bother looking back. Instead, she placed her hands against her siblings and led them away. Rory stared at them for a while, guilt swimming through his heart. It was difficult for him to watch those two young children being led away, for they reminded him of himself and Anne.

How many times had he and Anne cursed the cruelty of strangers who turned them away? How many times had they wished to find kinder people? It seemed as though he had turned into the kind of person he had always hated, but he had his reasons. It might have been a scheme... although when he thought about it longer, it did seem more plausible that they were telling the truth.

Ginger paced around the door after Rory closed it, moving back and forth. Then,

Ginger paused, licking her lips, her tail flicking behind her. She stared intently at Rory.

“Oh, what was I supposed tae dae?” he asked, spreading his arms out wide. “I cannae just give shelter tae anyone with a hard story. I dinnae know her, and I hae already invited enough trouble intae my life taenight. It’s better tae nae involve them in the meeting anyway. If anything, I am daeing them a kindness by turning them away. At least in the tavern they can get a good meal,” Rory said, but every excuse he gave just seemed to add to the weak foundation.

He had turned away a family in need, putting his own safety above others. It wasn’t the kind of thing Anne would have done, neither Lucy, nor Ian. He thought back to how Ian had reacted when Lucy had been discovered in the forge. He hadn’t turned her away, even though every instinct had warned Ian against sheltering her. In fact, it had been Rory, back then, who had argued on Lucy’s behalf.

Had he truly changed so much? Had he really become so callous that he could turn people in need away? He ran his hand through his hair and shook his head, knowing that this was not his proudest moment. He hoped that Elvira and her family would find some comfort at least, although it would not be in the forge.

Elvira was dejected and aggrieved by Rory's rejection. She had come here expecting to find kindness from an old friend, and instead had been met with the callous attitude of a stranger. She thought that Rory was too young to be so bitter. Although he had the body of a man, his facial features still possessed some of that dusting of innocence that was so rare in such a dark world. She had given him so many reasons to help her, but none of them had been enough. He wanted to sit in that big forge by himself, enjoying the warmth and the comfort, while condemning her and her family to hardship. Her feet were aching, and her throat was dry and scratchy. Tereza and Ollie were whining about hunger. Elvira bit her tongue, lest she snap at them. It was not their fault that their home had burned, or that Rory had turned them away.

"We can find shelter in the tavern. At least he gave us that piece of advice," Mirella said, trying to look at things in a positive light.

"I even showed him the dagger and it was nae enough," Elvira said bitterly.

"Some men cannae see the truth even when it is plain in front of their face. All we could dae was ask, and ask we did," Mirella said.

Elvira was still despondent, not only at that, but also at the news of Ian. She had thought it a slim chance that he would still be unmarried after all this time. It seemed that her mother's words had not been as prescient as some of the villagers would have liked to believe. It was harder to cope with the news that his entire family had died. If she hadn't been so angry with Rory, then she would have asked him for more information. The shock had startled her. It was difficult to comprehend how a man

could lose everything. She hoped that this was not a fate she was going to have to endure.

They staggered their way to the tavern and opened the door. She guided Mirella and her siblings to a table, before moving to the bar. She pulled out a handful of coins, which was all she had managed to gather from her palm readings at the tavern the previous night. Behind the bar stood a stout woman with tawny hair, pulled back in a tight bun.

“How can I help ye, lass?” she looked up and did a double take when she saw Elvira’s uncommon features. It wasn’t the first time Elvira had been looked at in this way, and it would not be the last.

“I would like a room for myself and my family, a meal tae,” Elvira said. She opened her palm and showed the coins. The woman did a quick count and looked back at the table.

“I’m afraid ye are a wee bit short,” she said reluctantly.

Elvira’s heart sank. Her knees felt as though they were at the point of buckling, and there was a gnawing sensation in her stomach. The hunger throbbed, but she would have to endure it for a while longer. “Then perhaps just a meal for the others,” she whispered.

The woman slipped the coin into her apron. “Let me see what I can dae. Ye gae sit down. I’ll bring over yer food soon,” she said. Elvira’s legs were leaden. Now that she was at the end of her journey, it was as though all of her strength had been sapped. She collapsed into the chair, leaning her head back. Ollie and Tereza were busying themselves with a game they played with their hands. Mirella leaned towards Elvira, speaking in a low voice.

“At least we hae arrived,” Mirella patted her thigh. “But we must be cautious here.”

“Why?” Elvira asked. Over the years, she had learned to trust Mirella’s wisdom. There was much she knew that Elvira did not. Mirella had lived a nomadic life under the shadow of clan feuds, and she had developed an instinct for the political turmoil of a region.

“Although this clan is an enemy, we may be seen as members of the McKovac clan,” Mirella whispered.

“If they saw how we were treated, they would nae hae such a foolish notion,” Elvira said bitterly.

“Aye, but even sae, people are nae inclined tae trust outsiders. We must be careful regarding how much we reveal about ourselves.”

“I just want tae be safe,” Elvira said, glancing at Tereza and Ollie. “I dinnae know why we hae tae be sae persecuted. We are people tae.”

“Aye, but we are different. It is part of our blessing, and our curse,” Mirella said.

“That’s nae gaeing tae help us get coin. We need it tae live, and we dinnae hae enough left for a meal taemorrow.”

Mirella chuckled. She was as resilient as ever, although Elvira wondered how she could act as though there was nothing to worry about when their resources were dwindling and there was no safe place for them to remain. They were alone, stranded from the rest of their people, forced to leave their home. It was hard to remain positive when faced with such dire circumstances.

“I would nae worry about that, Elvira. As a people, we are used tae enduring even

when the circumstances are against us. We hae always managed tae fend for ourselves, even after all we hae been through. We are survivors, and we are determined. Ye get that from yer parents,” Mirella said.

Elvira frowned, unsure that this was a rousing endorsement. Still, she was too tired to argue with Mirella. Thankfully, they were interrupted by their meal. Four plates were brought to their table. It was hardly a feast, but the meager meal was welcomed by ravenous appetites. Elvira was grateful that a plate had been scrounged up for her, but even so she gave some of her food to Tereza and Ollie, keeping only a morsel back for herself. She noticed that the woman who served their food lingered around their table, eventually working up the courage to speak to them.

“Excuse me, I dinnae mean tae interrupt but, are ye... well... it’s just that I heard that yer people hae certain skills... skills tae help people see the future.”

Elvira pursed her lips. She was about to disabuse the woman of this notion, before Mirella began speaking. “Oh, aye, we dae. It is a gift passed down from generation tae generation. Elvira’s ma was one of the best. What’s is ye name, dear?”

“Isla,” she said, offering them a broad smile.

“Elvira hae inherited her mother’s talents. She would be delighted tae give ye a reading, although it does take a wee bit out of her, and we hae endured a long journey. I suppose the prospect would be made a wee bit easier if we were assured of a hearty breakfast,” Mirella said. Elvira glared at her, but the words had already been spoken.

“Oh, of course! I would be happy tae oblige, it’s just that there is sae much fear and uncertainty in these parts. I hoped that ye might bring my mind tae rest.”

“That she will dae, just find a quiet place and Elvira will see tae ye,” Mirella said,

giving Elvira an encouraging glance. Elvira composed herself, swallowing the last mouthful of food. She followed Isla to an adjoining room at the rear of the bar. Isla wiped her hands on her apron.

“Dae I need tae dae anything?” Isla asked.

“Nae at all, just relax and give me yer hand,” Elvira said. She took Isla’s hand and studied it intently, then she told Isla to close her eyes and breathe deeply. This afforded her the opportunity to look at Isla. Isla’s hands were calloused, indicating that she worked hard at the inn. On her left hand was a wedding ring, suggesting that she was married. Given her age, it was likely that she had at least one child as well. Elvira gently manipulated the fingers, more to give Isla the impression that she was doing something impressive.

“I can see that ye are a hard-working woman. This line here shows that ye hae always been the same,” Elvira began.

“Oh aye, even when I was young, I was helping Ma out. She said that I should marry a rich man sae that I would nae hae tae work a day in my life, but that dinnae sit right with me.”

“Yes, I can see here that ye married for love.”

Isla smiled warmly. “Aye, as soon as I saw him my heart was gone, and the same was true for him as well. People always said that love was complicated, but loving him hae been the easiest thing in the world. I just wish other things were as simple.”

“Things like the outside world,” Elvira said.

“Aye... I keep hearing things, whispers and rumors ye know, passing word about other clans.”

“Clans like the McKovac clan.”

Isla flinched in surprise, not knowing that Elvira had come from the area. “Yes, and I’m worried that eventually they are gaeing tae darken our doorstep. We’re good honest folk, ye know, we dinnae want any trouble.”

“Of course, but why in particular are ye sae afraid? Oh... yes, I see this line of conflict... is there some history between this clan and the McKovac clan?” Elvira said. Isla peered at her hand, trying to see the same thing that Elvira saw, but of course, she did not.

“Lots of history, gaes as far back as time itself,” Isla sighed. “I thought peace could last forever, but I suppose we are nae sae fortunate. Dae ye see anything tae put my mind at rest?”

“Well, there is some tension here, but as long as good men stand up for what’s right, then there should be nae trouble.”

“That’s just the problem. I’m worried, well, I should say that Torrin, that’s my-”

“Husband,” Elvira guessed, which served to impress Isla. It was easy to impress people who were looking to feel that way. She arched her eyebrows and leaned back in her chair.

“Aye, well, he says the laird is nae prone tae fighting. It’s his advisor, ye see. Wars cost money, and money is nae something they want tae spend. If McKovac decides tae attack us, then the Laird might come tae a truce and sacrifice his land, land that gives home tae good people. It’s just that there’s sae much uncertainty and I want tae know that everything is gaeing tae be well,” Isla leaned forward, placing her hand across her forehead. She rubbed her temples, while Elvira studied her. Most people wanted to be given this type of news. Elvira wished it for herself as well. Sometimes

she wondered if she should be pragmatic and tell people to prepare for the worst, but she liked to give people hope.

“As long as there are men like Torrin in the village, then people will be safe. Ye should be proud of the man ye married,” Elvira said.

Isla sighed with relief and nodded, smiling warmly.

“Aye, that is good advice. Even talking about this hae helped,” Isla said. “Now, I hae better get back tae the bar. And ye should get some rest. Thank ye again. I’ll make sure that ye get a filling breakfast taemorrow,” Isla said, smiling warmly.

Elvira returned to her family. Mirella smiled. “Ye are just like yer mother,” Mirella said. Elvira took it as the compliment that it was intended as, but inside she was haunted by the memory of her mother and all she had endured. Elvira did not want to suffer the same fate and was determined to forge a different path for herself and her family. All she wanted was to keep them from danger, but it seemed as though it followed them, no matter how far they went.

The hour grew late. The family had been squashed into a large room. Mirella was sleeping with Tereza, while Elvira shared a bed with Ollie. He seemed to grow as he slept, becoming gangly, taking up far more room than was warranted by his size. He fidgeted terribly, and Elvira felt a hand pressing against her mouth and a foot into the small of her back. Eventually, it became too much to cope with. This, coupled with her incessant fears of the future, gave her a restless night. It didn’t help that Mirella snored as well, so there was utterly no hope for Elvira.

In between these snores, she did get a hint of an argument between Torrin and Isla from below. Elvira crept out of her room and listened at the top of the stairs.

“I am gaeing and that’s that. There is nae more urgent business than this. The clan

could depend on it!” Torrin cried out, and then slammed the door beside him. Isla cursed under her breath and disappeared to the back room.

Elvira glanced back at the room, tempted to leave. Even as she was justifying this course of action to herself, she was already slinking down the stairs and darting out of the tavern, following in Torrin’s footsteps. If she were to take care of her family, then she needed to know what kind of place this was. She needed to understand the undercurrent that flowed through the clan, and the only way to do that was to listen in on forbidden conversations. The more she learned, the more she might be able to steer her family to safety. She moved through the shadows, nimble feet drawing no attention. She only paused when she realized Torrin’s destination.

It was the forge that had once belonged to Ian McKendrick, the forge that now belonged to Rory. What could a hard-hearted man like him have to do with Torrin? Elvira was convinced that it could not be anything good.

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Rory opened the door to find Torrin standing there.

“Ye are late,” Rory scowled. “The rest of them are below.” He wasn’t about to start referring to the group as ‘us’.

“Aye, sorry, Isla was wagging my ear. She just will nae let it well enough alone.”

“I’m sure she dinnae want ye tae get intae trouble, that’s all.”

Torrin waved a dismissive hand through the air. “Ye sound just like her now.”

“Perhaps that’s because we are reasonable,” Rory said, but his words fell on deaf ears and he knew it.

Torrin was already marching towards the basement hatch, descending to the area below the forge. Once, this place had housed a very large and very illegal distillery, but those days were long behind Rory. Occasionally, he caught a whiff of whiskey, but put it down to his mind.

Torrin was greeted by nods and clasped fists by the other men in attendance. Rory hadn’t realized there were going to be so many. The group was made up of prominent citizens of the clan. There was a merchant, a keep guard, seasoned warriors, and other guild members who all expressed concern for the future of the clan. Rory had been introduced to them all, but he had failed to remember their names.

“Now that Torrin is here, we can finally begin,” one of the warriors said.

“Aye, I dinnae want tae be away for tae long,” the keep guard said.

“First we hae a simple matter tae attend tae,” Torrin said, turning to Rory. “Dae ye swear secrecy, Rory?”

“I’m hosting this meeting in my forge, is that nae enough?” he asked in surprise. The eyes of the men around him were flinty and cold. They stared at him expectantly.

“It’s nae. We need yer oath. Promise that ye will nae share word of this meeting tae anyone, nae even the laird himself, should he demand it. We are putting ourselves at risk meeting like this, sae swear tae secrecy,” Torrin said.

Rory noticed that one of the warriors was carrying a dagger. His hand went to it, his fingers stroking the hilt. Rory rolled his eyes. He didn’t even want to do this. Torrin had practically forced him. He thought that providing the location for the meeting would have been enough to show that he could be trusted, given that it was him who would face the wrath of the laird if this meeting was ever discovered. Even so, he shook his head and sighed.

“Aye, I swear that I will nae breathe a word of this tae anyone, even if the laird himself hae a blade at my throat.”

Torrin exhaled deeply after hearing Rory’s words. The other men seemed to relax as well. Rory studied them closer, and after some effort managed to recall their names properly. The keep guard was Declan, a stoic man he had encountered a number of times when he made his deliveries to the keep. They had rarely exchanged words, but Declan had always struck him as dutiful, which suggested to Rory that this group had legitimate concerns. He couldn’t imagine Declan conspiring against the laird unless matters were extremely serious. The seasoned warriors were Tarbuck and Rab. Rory

had witnessed these men regaling people with stories of risk and valor. They might just be angling for a fight. The other man was Michael, a timid baker who seemed out of place. However, the fact that these men were from such different walks of life was cause for concern for Rory. If they could all be persuaded that something was amiss then perhaps something really was wrong, and if so, could he stop it? Should he?

“Why dinnae ye tell us what ye hae tae share from inside the keep?” Torrin said, looking towards Declan.

Declan took a step forward and gave a heavy sigh. He had long, lank hair that framed his face in straggling lines. He had one thumb shoved behind his belt, and placed his weight upon his right foot. “Things are getting worse. They were already bad when Cade, the laird’s son, was wounded. Healers came day and night. Prayers were sung. Remedies were tried, but none of them worked. Cade passed away.”

“That damned boar,” Rab muttered, shaking his head.

“Aye, a wee hunting accident can change the fate of a clan,” Declan’s head dropped. He shook it softly. “Laird Boyd hae lost himself in grief. He lived for his son and now, well, it’s like he hae become a ghost himself. I know that some people need a wee bit of time tae work through grief, but he is the laird. He should be leading this clan, especially when there are wolves at our door.”

Rory opened his mouth, about to question this, for he did not believe it was the right phrasing to use. However, he refrained from speaking. If he was going to persuade them to abandon this course of action, then he needed them to like him.

“And the worst thing is that the coward Glennrock is in charge,” Declan spat, clearly showing no affection for the man. “I cannae understand how the laird can be sae blind tae trust him. Sometimes I stand at the gates tae the keep and I think that the walls separate different worlds. They dinnae know the problems common folk face, and

believe me, I side with all of ye. I grew up in this village. I used tae look up at the keep when I was a boy, thinking that one day I would make it behind those walls tae the world beyond. I used tae think it was some kind of paradise, but now that I hae seen it for myself..." he paused to run his hand through his hair, as though he could still not believe that the childhood dreams of a boy had been crushed by reality.

"Hae there been any talk of protecting the clan? Increasing our presence in the territory?" Tarbuck asked, his voice trembling with a hint of worry.

Declan's face turned pale. He looked sick as he gave a negative response. "He's a passive man. He stands there and lets the rocks fall all over him. All he cares about is the keep. As long as they are safe behind their stone walls, well, the rest of the village can burn. He's called back many of the guards and hae put a hold on delivering supplies. He's storing up in case there is a siege. He dinnae seem tae care about the folk down here," Declan let out an exasperated sigh as he spoke, ashamed of this craven act.

There were gasps and shocked expressions on the faces of those in attendance. Rory frowned, uneasily listening to the words. Unfortunately, this reaction did not surprise him. Glennrock was not a noble man, not like his daughter. Rory found himself wishing that Lucy had stayed here, for she might have been able to talk some sense into him, although it was unlikely considering that Glennrock had disowned her. If he found it that easy to force his daughter into becoming an outcast, was it really hard to believe that he would be willing to cast aside the entire village?

"And what about all the riders we hae seen coming intae our territory? Are people nae allowed tae defend themselves?" Rab asked.

Declan shook his head. "Glennrock is already in the process of spreading word forbidding violent action. There can be nae retaliation, and nae signs that we are preparing tae defend ourselves against an attack. We are supposed tae continue with

life as normal.”

“What is he playing at?” Torrin put his hands on his hips and shook his head. “I cannae believe he would be sae passive. The entire clan could be at stake, and all he wants tae dae is hide in the keep?” his voice rose with indignant anger.

Michael responded with a quiet voice. “He is looking out for himself. If an attack dinnae come, he is safe. If an attack daes come, then this village can burn, and the flames will nae penetrate the walls of the keep. We are mere sheep tae him, and he can afford for us tae be slaughtered.”

“Nae that he would ever come out and say that, of course,” Tarbuck rolled his eyes.

“What if we spoke tae him? Shared our concerns? If he knew the way the village felt, then he might be more willing tae help us,” Rory piped up, although he immediately knew that he was in error by the derisive looks shot his way.

“Dae ye think there is any reasoning with a man like him? By the gods, his own daughter fled the keep because she dinnae want tae suffer his tyranny! He hae never cared for the people, he only wants power, and now he hae it all,” Torrin said.

“And what about the laird? This is only happening because he hae shut himself away. Could we nae get someone tae stir him and make him remember who he is?” Rory asked.

Declan shook his head. “He is guarded day and night. Everything gaes through Glennrock. Trust me, if we sit by and dae naething, then we are the ones who are gaeing tae suffer. The people in that keep dinnae care about us. If we are gaeing tae defend ourselves, we hae tae dae it ourselves. We cannae rely on help from the keep. We may as well consider ourselves our own people from now on,” Declan said gravely. A grim atmosphere settled over the men gathered in the basement of the

forge. Rory was thinking about matters, trying to find a way out of this situation.

“Let’s just be clear about what we’re discussing here,” Michael said, a furtive gaze dancing around the basement. “This is a rebellion.”

Rab cursed and slashed his hand through the air. “It’s nae a rebellion. We are fighting for our lives, nae against the laird. If he pulled his finger out of his arse then maybe we would nae hae tae gae tae these lengths.”

“That may well be the case, but we must think about how our actions are gaeing tae be perceived. We are arming ourselves when the orders are tae remain peaceful. If we are attacked, Glennrock might blame us for provoking things. He may even punish us. We all know the man dinnae like us making our own decisions. He managed tae put a ban on drinking.”

“He wants tae strip men of everything that makes them men. The next thing he’s gaeing tae dae is stop us all from taking women tae bed,” Tarbuck muttered.

Rory felt a rush of blood flow to his cheeks at this point. He had never lain with a woman before, even though a few village girls had fluttered their eyelashes at him. There had been a girl he had danced with when he was younger, just before Ian and Lucy left. It started with promise, but had quickly fallen into failure when he realized he didn’t quite know what to do after they danced. Without Lucy there to give him guidance, he found himself lost.

“Aye, well, if he daes try such a thing then there will surely be a riot,” Torrin replied, and there was a hearty laugh from the other men.

Rory wasn’t sure why this happened, but an image of Elvira appeared in his mind. He clamped his eyes shut, trying to dispel the thought of her extraordinary beauty. There was no sense in thinking about her at all.

“Let’s nae talk about riots,” Rory said, stretching out his hands. “The fact is that we hae nae been attacked yet. If we start acting rashly we might make things worse.”

“I would rather feel safe,” Rab said.

“We need tae protect ourselves. If there was any other way...” Declan replied, wearing a despairing look. Torrin stroked his chin.

“It seems tae me that we should arm ourselves and prepare for the worst,” he looked at Rory as he spoke, noticing Rory’s wide eyes. “I think our young friend here hae a point. We dinnae need tae gae brandishing the swords and charging towards McKovac lands just yet, but we should be careful. That’s why I think we are in the perfect place. Rory, would ye be able tae forge swords for us tae distribute throughout the village? Fine weapons could make the difference here.”

Rory felt as though the rug had been pulled out from under his feet. The other men looked at him expectantly. He knew what they wanted him to say, but he wasn’t sure he could.

“Torrin, everyone... it’s worrying that Glennrock seems tae hae sae much power at the moment, but that will nae last. Laird Boyd will recover. Sharing weapons with each other may only make things worse. I dinnae want tae get people in trouble. What happens if Glennrock starts searching our homes, and he sees that we are all stashing weapons? There will nae be any village left because we’ll all be sent away, or worse,” he shuddered as he thought about being thrown into a dungeon. “McKovac hae nae attacked yet, and there is naething tae say that he will. I dinnae think we should gae looking for a fight. I’m sorry, but I cannae help ye.”

He bowed his head, not wishing to bear the looks of disappointment that were cast his way.

“Ye are just as craven as Glennrock himself,” Declan spat.

Rab shook his head. “Ye might hae learned a lot from Ian at the forge, but nae about being a man. He never would hae done this. He knew tae stand up for what’s right.”

“When people start dying, their blood is gaeing tae be on yer hands,” Tarbuck said. Michael and Torrin remained silent, although this spoke volumes. The guests slowly filtered out of the basement, disappointed in how the meeting had ended. Rory felt a taut knot in the pit of his stomach, torn between his moral compass and his desire to avoid trouble. Holding a meeting was one thing, but supplying the clan with weapons was something else entirely. It just wasn’t possible, and he hoped that these men were worrying over nothing. After all, it wasn’t as though people were rushing towards the village, screaming for salvation.

Elvira skulked around the side of the building and found a small window, which she managed to pry open. She bent down and peered through the narrow opening, where she could see a group of men gathered in the basement of the forge. They weren’t making any attempts to be quiet, as they likely did not expect that anyone was spying on them. She listened intently to the meeting, her heart flaring as she heard them speak about defending themselves against McKovac, while at the same time despair pooled in her stomach upon hearing that those in power did not take the threat seriously. Perhaps coming to this clan had not been safe at all. Sometimes she wondered if there ever was a safe place for the Romani people.

Her gaze persistently drifted towards Rory. He was younger than the others, but his body bristled with strength. She wondered if she had been mistaken about him. Perhaps he had turned her away not because he was a cruel man, but because he was protecting himself from prying eyes. If he hosted meetings like this, then he must have been suspicious about being found. However, Elvira was soon disabused by this notion as she heard Rory speaking out against taking action. He even refused to make weapons! Elvira wore a disgusted look on her face and had to swallow her own

indignation lest she bring attention to herself. Rory had a skill that could help the village, but he obstinately refused, and the only reason she could see was because he was a coward.

He didn't seem to understand the threat that McKovac presented. She wanted to scream at him, to shake sense into him, to let him know of the terror that spread throughout the land from McKovac's fist. He was just another ignorant man, though, unable to understand the plight of people who were not as fortunate as him. He had this large forge, a steady business, and a skilled hand. Life had been kind to him, and he did not wish to risk this for anything. Well, at least there were people in the village who understood what had to be done. If McKovac was sniffing around these lands, it was only a matter of time before he set his demons loose. Elvira knew that she could not simply sit around reading people's palms. She had to make a difference. Unlike Rory, she was not going to sit back and do nothing.

Eventually, the men left. Elvira pressed herself close to the wall, hiding in the shadows. The men were all too annoyed to peer into the shadows. She waited for them to pass before she moved. She cast one more glance down into the basement and saw Rory standing there, a man alone. She shook her head, almost feeling pity for him because he would never know the joy of doing something righteous. Well, he could keep his forge to himself. It wasn't as though McKovac was going to spare it from destruction when he came to this village. Everything was going to burn, unless Elvira found a way to help.

Rory scowled as he brought the hammer down. The impact reverberated up his arm and across his shoulder, again and again. He did it so fiercely that he ended up roaring, and the brittle metal broke under the force of his blows. He cursed under his breath and shoved it away, turning from the forge. He grabbed a cloth, wiping the sweat from his brow and his arms, before flinging it haphazardly across the room. It happened to land near Ginger, who mewed sharply as she jumped up, startled, and moved to another part of the room.

“Ah, ye daft cat, there’s naething tae be scared of,” Rory muttered, but then chastised himself for speaking to Ginger in that manner. He slumped in a chair and drummed his fingers against the table. He had been in a black mood all day, and he wasn’t sure anything could pull him out of it. Sleep had been restless. He had refused to help people two times the previous day. First, Elvira and her family had come to him seeking shelter. While he had given them directions to a tavern, it was hardly hospitable behavior. He had plenty of room and food here, as well as warmth. How many times had he cursed people for turning himself and Anne away as children? He had always wondered how people could be so cruel as to shut their doors on exhausted bairns. Well, now he was one of them.

And then he had refused a call to arms. He could almost hear Ian in the back of his mind, berating him for being such a coward.

Yer clan needs ye! The ghostly words thundered. Anne would have said the same. Rory ended up leaning forward, putting his head in his hands. He dug his nails into his scalp so hard they almost drew blood, but even so, the pain was not as bad as the

one that drilled inside his soul. What had he done? Who had he become? This wasn't the same man who had urged Ian to take pity on the girl cowering in their basement. It was as though at some point he had lost himself, and he wasn't sure how to find his way again.

He pushed the chair away and forced himself up. While he still wasn't going to commit himself to working with Torrin and the others, he felt he should have done more to help Elvira. Given their condition and their desperation, he assumed they had little to their name. Perhaps if he bought them a meal, it might allay his troubled conscience somewhat. He couldn't abide the thought of leaving those children with empty bellies. Sometimes, at night, he could still remember what it was like to feel that cold stone in the pit of his stomach, gnawing away at him, growling and griping as though some beast was inside him.

Ginger looked at him. "Dinnae make a sound," he said, before he slammed the door to the forge and headed towards the tavern. His steps were slow, but the turmoil in his mind was fast and loud.

He assumed that Elvira's family would be huddled in a single room, keeping to themselves. What he actually found when he reached the tavern was quite different indeed. The children were full of face and had boundless energy. They were gamboling around an old dog, giggling happily as though they did not have a care in the world. The old woman was knitting by a fire, her legs stretched out on another chair. There was a mug beside her. Tendrils of steam rose. The only one missing was Elvira... oh, there she was. He didn't see her at first because a crowd of people had swarmed around her. There were hushed murmurs, but he couldn't quite see what she was doing. He ambled up to the bar and caught Torrin's attention. Torrin immediately served him an ale.

"I was a little afraid ye would nae serve me after last night," Rory said, curling his hands around the ale. Even this didn't taste as refreshing as usual.

“Keep yer voice down, lad,” Torrin glared at him. “And I’m nae that type of man. I respect yer decision, even though I disagree with it. Every man hae a right tae choose for himself. I just hope that ye think about things.”

“Aye,” Rory said, not wishing to speak about such matters any longer. Instead, he angled his gaze towards the corner. “What’s gaeing on there?”

“Oh,” Torrin smiled. “We hae a new guest come tae the tavern last night. Isla got tae talking with her and, well, she’s a Romani lass ye see. People like them hae, well, people believe they hae special insights. I never put my stock in it myself, but Isla spoke tae her and said she felt better for it. Isla suggested that people might like tae hear some glimpses of the future, and I figure if they like what they hear, then they’re gaeing tae want tae celebrate with a drink. If they dinnae, then they’re gaeing tae want tae nurse themselves. Either way the ale will be flowing, and I’ll hae a full bar,” Torrin’s eyes twinkled. The luster quickly faded from them, however. Rory sensed more bitterness in Torrin’s voice. “Besides, there’s nae telling how long things are gaeing tae stay the same around here. Might be that we dinnae get tae keep this bar for long. Perhaps ye should gae and speak with her. Maybe she might help ye see the error of yer ways,” Torrin cocked his head to the side and then went to serve another customer. Rory noticed that Torrin’s smile was broader for the other man, although he quickly mentioned Elvira’s services all the same.

Rory turned and peered towards Elvira. The whole thing reminded him of some of the schemes that he and Anne used to perform, a long time ago, taking advantage of well-meaning people. Perhaps his instincts had been right about her all along. He wasn’t about to stand there and allow Elvira to take advantage of people in this village. Their nerves were already frayed with this fear about being attacked, and some false prophetess was not going to help matters.

Rory took a few good gulps of ale and then made his way to the shadowed corner of the bar. A candle burned on Elvira’s table, illuminating her features in an amber

glow. She wore a cloak around her shoulders and spoke with a deep, rolling cadence. It was hypnotic, and Rory found himself struggling to take his eyes off her. He stilled possessed enough sense to quell these feelings, though. So he pushed his way through the crowd.

“I need tae speak with ye,” he said, thinking that he would give her a friendly warning, make it known that he understood what she was trying to accomplish and she should stop.

Disarmingly, Elvira gave him a sweet smile.

“I’m afraid ye are gaeing tae hae tae wait yer turn. All these people hae been patient,” she replied, seeming to take great delight in turning him away. Rory looked at the line of people glaring at him for daring to try and butt in.

“But I dinnae want a reading. I just want a word.”

“I’m afraid a reading is all I hae tae offer,” Elvira said, and then turned her attention back to the man sitting at her table, ignoring Rory as though he did not exist at all. Rory gritted his teeth. He had come here with the intention of doing her a good turn, only to find out that he had been right all along. Everything was going from bad to worse. He knew the power that these people could have, and if she should stoke the fear in the village... goodness... he had to stop her before things became drastic.

There was nothing he could do but wait. He stood in line, counting down the minutes, telling himself that he should just march out of the tavern and back to his forge, yet he never did and eventually, came his turn to sit.

“Ah, welcome. Please take a seat,” Elvira said, soft words dripping from her soft lips. Rory grabbed the chair and pulled it hard, slamming the legs down. Elvira went to take his hand. Her skin was unusually smooth and slightly darker than his own. They

were warm to the touch as well. Her nails were sharp, and there was no hesitancy in the way she touched him. He immediately felt tension rising through his body and snapped his hand away. Elvira drew back, shocked.

“I dinnae believe in any of that,” Rory said, clasping his hands together. He wondered when the warmth was going to fade. The candle burned between them, flickering in her eyes.

“Many people dinnae, but that dinnae mean it is nae true.”

Rory wore a skeptical look. “I’m nae gaeing tae fall for this. I know what ye are up tae... how can ye lie tae all these people? And tae think that I actually felt bad for turning ye away last night. Ye should be ashamed for peddling lies.”

“Lies?” Elvira’s eyes narrowed. Her features became sharper, her words harsher. “Ye speak about things ye dinnae understand.”

“Oh aye, but ye spend all yer time daeing that. I dinnae know how ye can sit there and pretend that ye know everything about strangers. People only listen tae ye because they want tae believe what ye say. I’m nae such a fool as that.”

“Then give me yer hand and I shall prove I am nae lying, or are ye afraid that ye are wrong?” Elvira challenged him. Rory could not hide the unease that flickered across his face. He pressed his lips together, and Elvira was satisfied that she had backed him into a corner. If Rory refused, then he was hard-headed and afraid that she was right. If he accepted, then Elvira could say all the things she wanted to say about him and, of course, she did not need to read his palm to know these things. But it would help add to her mystique, and it might make him think about things differently.

“I’m nae afraid,” Rory said, although he did not immediately give Elvira his hand. She uncurled her hands and held them open, waiting expectantly for Rory to offer her

his palm. He stared at her hands and gulped.

“If ye are gaeing tae insult me, then at least give me the chance tae defend myself, or dae ye always make up yer mind about people without giving them a fair chance?” she said acidly. Rory frowned and sighed, knowing that he had been corralled into this difficult situation. He reluctantly gave her his hand. Elvira wrapped her own fingers around the back of his palm, holding it steady. Her slender fingers reached to his wrist. His hand was broad, the skin leathery and taut. The tips of his fingers were calloused after years of hard work, hammering away at the forge. The lines were etched like deep furrows in smooth stone. She drew her index finger along the longest line, dragging it all the way to the heel of his palm. She could feel Rory attempt to hide a shudder, and his instinct was to pull his hand away again. But Elvira had a tight grip on him, and she did not let him go. The strength that coiled in his body ran all the way through to his hands as well. She could tell that he was a hard-working man, a man whose experience belied his years, although she did not tell him those things.

Elvira pursed her lips. When she spoke, her voice was still even and slow, but he could feel the resonant anger behind it. “Nae a fool, but a coward. Aye. I dinnae need tae see yer palm tae know what kind of man ye are, Rory. Ye are a coward, hiding from the world in yer wee forge, refusing tae take action when people need ye. The thing that ye need tae be cautious of is that the world hae a habit of finding ye. How can ye hide from something that is all around ye? Yet still ye turn away. Cruel, cowardly, craven. Yer heart is a stone. Now, ye tell me if ye believe that or nae.”

Rory’s eyes twitched. He had always considered himself a good person, noble in intention if not always in deed, yet here his flaws were laid bare, and he did not like the picture they painted. He still didn’t believe that Elvira had any special insight. She was likely just speaking about the way he had treated her when she had come seeking help. However, her words cut much deeper because he was reminded of the way Torrin and the others had come to him for help. Sadly, he could not say anything to

dispute Elvira's claim. He was a coward, and the realization of this left a bitter taste in the back of his mouth. It had all been done in the name of trying to protect himself and move on from his past, but had he protected himself so much that he had ended up turning away the entire world?

He pushed the chair back and stormed out of the tavern without sparing her another glance, shaking his head in dismay at how Elvira had so easily gotten under his skin. She had played him like a fiddle, and he had danced to her tune. He had made so many strides towards making his life simple, and yet complications still arose. A dark shadow shrouded his face as he made his way back to the forge, wishing that he could just slam the door for eternity and keep everyone out. At the same time, he found himself cradling the hand that Elvira had touched. It was maddening the way his mind went hazy around her, and how her scent lingered. It was smokey and sweet all at the same time. The soft touch had been intense, perhaps because it had been so long since he had that kind of contact with another person. Yet, for her, it was just a way of business and his personal humiliation. She was so different from him that he couldn't make sense of her, and he thought it better if she moved on quickly.

Elvira was stunned when Rory left so abruptly. She had expected him to fire back, banter with her, but he seemed to have been genuinely insulted by her words, which had not been her intention. Of course, she was angry, but she had hoped to jolt him into action. Instead, he had cast her as the rogue, and he seemed to be just as ignorant as most other people. He had dragged his hand away as though she was poison, and insulted her skills. Part of her wished she had lashed her tongue more directly at him, while another wished she had been softer so that she could have gotten to the root of what caused this tension. Her gift of palm reading was fed by an innate curiosity to understand how people's minds worked. She could pick up on the currents of emotion that flowed within them, and she understood that there was always a reason for people to feel the way they did. Sometimes it just took a little work to uncover the truth, like massaging out a knot from a muscle. What could make a man so cowardly? Despite finding him hostile and callous, she did want to understand why he acted in this manner. After all, if there were more people in the village like him, then it was going to be difficult for them to rally against Laird McKovac.

She apologized to the person who had been waiting, explaining that her voice was hoarse and she needed a drink. They nodded, although the look on their face suggested they believed that Elvira had been flustered by Rory's reaction. Elvira found Isla, who was wiping down a table.

"Do you know much about that man?" Elvira asked, gesturing to the door through which Rory had just stormed out.

"Oh aye, that's Rory. He's a harmless lad, even though he dinnae sound it taeday."

Must be something about the forge that makes men angry. Ian would hae days like this as well,” Isla replied.

“Harmless? Sae he dinnae hae a reputation for being cruel?” Elvira enquired.

Concern came over Isla’s face. Her brow knotted. “Lass, did he say anything tae ye? I can get Torrin tae hae a word with him if ye like.”

“Oh nae, it’s naething like that. It’s just... well... I went tae the forge last night, hoping that Ian was there. I used to know his family well when I was a child. But Rory dinnae believe that I knew Ian and turned us away,” Elvira had told Isla how an old friendship with Ian had brought them to this village.

“Ah, I’m sorry about that. Unfortunately, some men never learn good manners. What he needs is a woman in that forge with him. All he hae is a cat, and I think he’s learned some bad habits if ye ask me. He’s nice enough, ye know, but I think he’s been alone for sae long now that he dinnae remember how tae be with other people. He spends all day hammering on that forge. It must be enough tae drive a man crazy,” Isla shook her head gently.

“Sae ye would nae describe him as a cruel man?” Elvira asked.

“Nae, like I said, sometimes a man just needs a soft touch. Torrin was the same before I met him, always prone tae dark moods. It’s amazing what a wee bit of tenderness can dae,” she said.

Elvira thought on her words. If Rory had been in any other forge in any other village, then she wouldn’t have been so burdened with thoughts of him. But he was in this village, and he lived in Ian’s forge. Whatever faint bond lingered from childhood, it was enough for Elvira to want to understand how Ian could have allowed a man like Rory to take over for him. Besides, if she was to gauge the attitude of the village, then

she needed to understand men like Rory. So she did what she had to. She left the tavern trailing after Rory, her cloak billowing behind her.

She increased her pace, as his long strides carried him quickly. She saw him from afar rushing into the night. “Rory,” she called out, before he made it to his forge. He slowed his pace and turned, wearing a dark look.

“What dae ye want? Dinnae ye run out of insults back there?” he asked, a hurtful tone to his voice.

In Elvira’s experience, it was rare to find someone who possessed a callous heart to be so sensitive to insults. Usually people like that cared not for what people thought of them, yet Rory seemed to be wounded just as surely as if he had been pierced by an arrow.

“I dinnae mean tae insult ye. I can only offer the truth as I perceive it. But if I am wrong, then I would like tae give ye the chance tae prove it. Show me that I am mistaken about yer character. Give me a sign that ye are a better man than what I hae been shown already.”

Rory’s green eyes had a darkness about them that was as deep as the night. He looked down his nose at her, but there was not a sense of smugness or superiority at all, just a storm of emotion behind his eyes. “I dinnae hae tae prove myself tae ye. Besides, ye can hurl insults at me all ye want, but at least I am nae a liar, preying on people’s fears. Ye should be taken up tae the keep and put in the stocks for yer crimes. Is that how ye make a living, moving from village tae village and convincing people tae give away their coin by telling them that they’re gaeing tae fall in love, and that they’re gaeing tae be happy? Whatever words ye tell them, they’re all empty.”

Rory moved to turn away from Elvira. The disrespect he showed her ran deep, for not only did he insult her, but he also mocked the way her people lived, stretching back

for generations. Still, Elvira quelled the sharp words that were waiting to be unsheathed. It would do no good to get into an argument with him again. Nor did she want to tell him the true reason why she had come to Boyd lands. He'd likely just think it was another lie.

"I dinnae lie tae people, and I dinnae tell them what they want tae hear. I dinnae know why ye are sae quick tae think the worst of me, Rory. I hae done naething tae offend ye. Is listening tae people a crime? Is giving them advice something tae be feared? I am nae a criminal. It seems tae me that if people took the time tae understand what I and many of my people dae, we would nae be treated like pariahs. Frankly, I'm surprised ye hae nae come out and accused me of being a witch, cursing my dark magic."

"I'm nae fool enough tae believe in magic," Rory muttered.

"There's that word again, fool . Are ye afraid of being taken for a fool, Rory? Is that why you are determined to view everything with suspicion?" she asked, using all the gifts Maria had passed down to her to try and get through the tall walls that Rory had erected around himself.

"If I view ye with suspicion, it is only because ye deserve it. Aye, ye may think that ye are giving people simple advice, but ye are charging them a pretty penny for daeing sae."

"I am daeing what I must tae keep my family afloat. I'm sure ye are observant enough tae notice that I am accompanied by my grandmother and my two siblings. There is nae a man among us who can give himself tae labor. I must make use of the skills I possess."

"I hae heard thieves justify their actions by self-preservation before. It dinnae mean they are innocent," Rory sneered, although a flash of emotion came across his face,

and he looked as though he flinched.

“I am nae thief. People give me their coin willingly. If ye found yeself in a strange place and all ye hae was yer hammer, would ye give away yer skills for free?”

“That’s different,” Rory said.

Elvira merely arched an eyebrow, silently challenging him to define how it was different.

Rory could not offer an explanation. Instead, he scoffed with derision and waved a hand in her direction, shaking his head. “I dinnae need tae speak with ye. Just gae back tae the tavern if ye like. If people want tae throw away their hard-earned coins while talking tae a stranger, then sae be it. I’m nae gaeing tae get involved,” he spat, and turned his broad back to her. Something about his attitude pierced Elvira’s heart. Here she was, having seen her home burned, being driven from a land as some madman had decided that she and people like her were no longer welcome. And there Rory stood, a man who seemed to have never known hardship in his entire life. He could dismiss everything she stood for in one breath, just as though he was wiping raindrops off his tunic and sending them splashing to the ground.

“That’s the phrase that sums ye up, I wager. Ye dinnae get involved. Whenever a problem comes tae ye, ye just turn away and pretend it dinnae exist,” she said darkly. Lustrous, curled strands of hair fell across her face as she dipped her head. At that moment, Elvira wished she did possess magic, as she would have liked to see the surprise on Rory’s face. As it was, he received only a baleful glare.

Rory threw his hands in the air and huffed. “I’m sorry for nae helping ye last night. I dinnae realize that I hae tae open my forge tae anyone who comes along. I guided ye tae the tavern, did I nae? And that seemed tae work out well for ye. Ye would nae hae all these customers if ye were staying with me. I’m sure ye will be moving on soon

enough anyway, sae I suggest that ye stay away from me while ye are here.”

“I wish I could move on, but that is nae easy for someone like me. Nae matter where we gae, my people are nae welcomed. We’re viewed with suspicion and fear. Sae far I hae received hospitality, but I know that can change in an instant. Whenever I move somewhere new, I hae tae worry about whether we’re gaeing tae hae swords at our throats. I came here because I thought I hae a friend, and I’m just thankful that Isla and Torrin took pity on us. It could sae easily hae been different. Ye would nae know about that, never knowing if ye hae a safe place tae rest yer head, being viewed as worthless, nae belonging tae this land. But that’s fine, ye are nae the first person tae feel this way, and I pity ye for haring such a black heart. But this is nae just about my family. This is about yer entire village,” Elvira stepped closer to Rory as she spoke, closing the distance between them until there was barely any air. Now that she was so close to him, she could see the dark stubble that threatened to bloom into a full beard, the stiff neck muscles, the slight hint of freckles across the bridge of his nose. “Ye stand there refusing tae help everyone, including the people around ye. Perhaps things may be different if they paid ye for yer skills, aye? It’s nae as if ye would forge weapons for free.”

The words cut through the air. The color paled from Rory’s cheeks and he looked haunted. He staggered back, as though he had been struck by an open hand. He blinked quickly, as though he was trying to understand how she could know such a thing.

“Did Torrin tell ye?” he asked, the words rushing out of him in a hushed whisper. He looked around anxiously. “What are ye trying tae dae? Dae ye know how much trouble ye could cause?”

“Ye hae nae idea how much danger ye are truly in,” Elvira replied. In his panic, Rory grabbed her arm and dragged her to a nearby alley, and he continued speaking in a low voice.

“What are ye talking about? Is this another trick?”

Elvira rolled her eyes. “There hae been nae tricks, Rory. I hae nae lied tae ye. Ye just think that I hae, but ye are wrong. I dinnae want tae hurt anyone. I just want tae help them, and I can help ye tae.”

“How can ye help me?” Rory scoffed, wearing a disbelieving look.

“The same way I help everyone else, by telling ye the truth. Nae once hae ye thought tae ask where I come from, or what brought me here. Dae ye think I like living this way? I hae lost my home, been driven from my land... and I think ye can sense where people like me would be treated sae harshly. There is a storm coming, Rory, and the best thing ye can dae is prepare for it. Pretending like it is nae gaeing tae happen is foolish. Ye would be daeing yeself and the people of this village a disservice.”

“McKovac lands,” Rory said in a grim, gravelly voice.

Elvira nodded. “Aye. He is losing himself tae madness, and naebody can reign him in. I watched my home burn because of him. I fled raiding parties. It is only a matter of time before he turns his ire outwards and starts attacking other enemies, enemies like this old clan. Ye might think that ye can stay in that forge and all the troubles of the world will pass ye by, but ye are wrong. McKovac will come, and if ye are nae ready tae defend yeselves then this place will burn. That is the truth, and I will nae even ask ye for any coin in return,” she gave a haughty sway of her head and then turned from him, walking back to the tavern. Her cloak swayed along with her hips, but she did not look back towards Rory, no matter how much she wanted to. There was something about him that got under her skin and caused a fervor, although she wasn’t quite sure how he accomplished that.

Rory was left reeling in the wake of Elvira’s warning. He wanted to think that she was lying so badly, but everything she said made sense. He shook his head after

running his hand along his scalp, and then returned to the refuge of the forge, trying to hammer away all the tension and unease that plagued him. However, no matter how fierce the cacophony of sound was around him, Rory could not get Elvira's words out of his mind. Everything she said made sense, and if McKovac turned on people within his own lands, then what would stop him from striking at ancient enemies? Perhaps his need to avoid trouble was leading him to endanger others.

He wondered what he would have done had Ian, Lucy, and Anne been there in the village. Would he have been so quick to turn away from Torrin's call if people he loved were in danger? He had become a solitary figure, distancing himself from others. He was beginning to see how this had led him to a dark place, to a point where he barely recognized himself. He felt like a hypocrite. Elvira accused him of not knowing what it was like to have doors slammed in his face, to be treated like a nuisance, to be told he didn't belong. On the contrary, he knew exactly what that was like. Had things changed so drastically? Had he really left that boy behind? And the way he had erupted in anger at Elvira... Was that just pent-up frustration for the life he had been forced to live with Anne? They hadn't wanted to cause so much trouble or deceive people, but it was either that or die of starvation.

And now Elvira was trying to goad him into action by calling him a coward, but a coward he was. This village was not his home in the sense that it didn't house people he cared about. Perhaps there was a part of him that had always thought if he got into trouble he could just move to a new village and a new clan, or even return to live with Anne and Finlay. After all, there were plenty of places that could use a skilled blacksmith.

But that wasn't who he was, or at least who he wanted to be. He never imagined he would turn into the man who slipped away into the shadows, disappearing while danger soared around them. A bitter feeling entered his heart and he wore a cloak of shame. Sweat mingled with tears as he thought about all the people who depended on him. He could help so many. What if they died? The blood and the screams would be

on his clean hands. None of these people deserved to die, and certainly not because some blacksmith thought himself above getting involved in trouble like this.

The more Rory thought about Elvira's words, the more he realized that he had changed too much for his own liking. He had to put a stop to it now, before he was beyond salvation. It was time to make a difference. It was time to find Torrin and help protect this village from the oncoming storm, because if Elvira was right, then McKovac could not be negotiated with, and Glennrock did not seem disposed to protect the people of the village.

Rory had been working on instinct, and when he looked down, his creation took him by surprise. He had abandoned the commission he had been working on, and instead had made something far more important. He had forged a sword, a symbol of the new attitude that he wanted to live by from now on.

A few days had passed since Elvira had accosted Rory and tried to get him to see sense. Unfortunately, it didn't seem to have worked. Rory had been noticeably absent from the tavern. Elvira hadn't been brave enough to visit him in the forge. She thought it was better to put him out of her mind entirely, although such a thing was easier said than done.

As well as spending her evenings sitting in the corner, reading people's palms, Elvira helped Isla with cleaning and other duties. Elvira used this labor to help pay for her lodging expenses and meals. As a result, the food they ate was not made of meager portions any longer, but rather thick knobs of cheese and juicy slices of meat. They were eating well and, although they did not have a home of their own, they were safe for the time being. However, Elvira was attuned to the mood in the village, and it was clear that people were becoming more frightened. She asked Mirella if they should move on.

"And where would we gae? At some point, ye hae tae take a stand. Besides, if we gae tae far, then we may never end up back in the land where we belong," Mirella said, meaning the McKovac land.

"Dae ye think there is a chance for that tae happen?"

"Oh aye, all it takes is that mad fool tae keel over. We only hae tae wait him out," Mirella said. When she spoke like this, it seemed to be the simplest thing in the world. Unfortunately, that sentiment did not prevail in Elvira's mind. When she spoke to her guests and to Isla, she was given a grim and bleak picture of the village.

People were worried about the absence of Laird Boyd. There were no rousing words or promises coming down from the keep, which left the villagers feeling unprotected. There were murmurs of farms on the outskirts being raided, with cattle being stolen, and the ground being disturbed by a sizeable patrol. She was continually asked about whether the laird would listen to the villagers again, and she was unable to allay their fears.

Eventually, she had to go to Isla to address her concerns. “Isla, hae ye noticed how people hae been acting recently?”

“It’s hard tae miss,” she said, shaking her head.

“Can naething be done? I cannae believe that the Laird is ignoring everyone. Dinnae he know that people need him? He is a leader, he should lead.”

“Oh aye, that he should. But the laird is nae the main problem. He may nae even know what’s gaeing on. It’s Glennrock that is causing all of this. If ye ask me, he hae never been interested in this village. I would nae be surprised if he secretly wants it tae burn. All of these appeals that people are giving, well, they’re falling on deaf ears. That man dinnae hae a kind bone in his body.”

While Elvira was succeeding in gathering information about the clan, she felt that she could do more. Listening and observing was all well and good, but it wouldn’t save people’s lives. She wanted to be more involved, but the only way she knew how was to ingratiate herself with Torrin and get invited to the defense meetings. She had tried dropping hints now and then, but Torrin had ignored them, so she was forced to take more of a direct route. She found Torrin in the storeroom and closed the door behind her.

“Torrin, I wanted tae speak tae ye about something... something delicate.”

“Lass, ye are already getting free board and meals. I cannae give ye anything else. I’m grateful for the business ye are bringing intae the tavern, but even I hae my limits,” he said, raising his hands above his head.

“It’s nae about that. It’s about... the situation in the village, with all this talk of being attacked by Laird McKovac.”

Panic flashed across Torrin’s eyes, but it only lasted a moment. He forced a smile and spoke in a nonchalant manner. “Ah well, ye know how people always like tae worry. I’m sure it’s naething.” He motioned towards the door, but Elvira would not let him pass.

“Ye and I both know it’s nae naething. I want tae be involved, Torrin. I want tae be invited tae the meetings.”

Torrin winced and clasped his hands together. “I dinnae know what ye are talking about, lass,” he said nervously.

Elvira tilted her head, giving him a look that suggested nothing could get past her. “I can help,” she said in an imploring voice. “I lived in McKovac lands. I know what it’s like living under his rule. I have seen what he’s capable of. Ye can use my knowledge tae help prepare a defense plan. I dinnae want tae just stand by and dae naething, nae when ye hae been sae kind tae me and my family. Please, I know all about the meetings. I just want tae help.”

Torrin’s head fell. “I knew I should never hae told Isla about this,” he huffed. Elvira did not bother correcting his mistaken assumption. He pursed his lips and then put a fatherly hand on her shoulder. “Lass, I appreciate yer concern, but ye should stay out of harm’s way. It is nae place for a bonny lass like ye. Besides, as ye rightly say, ye hae suffered enough at his hands. Let other people dae the fighting. Ye can help people in yer own way. We hae warriors and guards tae help us build a defense. I’m

honestly nae sure what else ye could offer,” he said. Elvira was so forlorn at his reluctance to accept her help that she did not resist when he tried to push her away. Not only was she dismissed because of her heritage, but also because she was a woman. It seemed there was nothing she could do about it, so she returned to the tavern and went about her duties, trying not to feel too bitter about things.

Nights at the tavern had been rather busy, with people coming to her table, some of them multiple nights in a row. When she was finished with her palm reading and the night became slow, she helped clean up the tavern. Mirella had put her siblings to bed hours ago, and it would soon be time for Elvira to turn in as well. One of the regulars stumbled out of the bar, leaving two travelers in the bar alone. They had mostly brooded between themselves, drinking stoically, and she assumed they would be going to bed presently.

Usually, either Torrin or Isla was with Elvira to help clean up. Recently, however, Elvira had noticed some tension arising between the married couple. They were currently in the back, with voices trembling with emotion.

“Ye cannae leave again. How many nights are ye gaeing tae spend with these people?” Isla asked.

“As many as it takes, Isla. I thought ye understood. This is for the good of the clan.”

“What about the good of our family? Ye are nae a fighter, Torrin.”

“I can give as good as I get,” the indignation in his voice was plain. “I wish I hae never told ye about this in the first place. I took an oath and everything...”

“The only oath that matters is the one ye made tae me when we got married.”

“Aye, but if anyone should find out... I mean, it’s bad enough that ye told Elvira.”

“I dinnae tell Elvira.”

Torrin sighed. Elvira cringed with guilt, for she had not wanted to be a source of tension between the couple. “Whatever ye say. Ye know, she actually wanted tae be involved,” he chuckled, as though the notion of Elvira taking part in the meetings was ridiculous.

“And would that be such a bad thing?” Isla asked in a flat tone.

“Of course!” Torrin’s voice rose. Elvira suspected they might be reaching the point of the argument where they lost all sense of their surroundings, and secrets might unknowingly slip out. Elvira pulled the door closed and left them to it. They would come out when they were ready.

“Can we hae another drink?” one of the men left in the bar said, holding up his mug. Elvira wore a placid smile.

“I think it’s getting a wee bit late. Shouldn’t ye be off tae bed?” she suggested, partly because she was tired herself.

“Oh well, if ye are offering, lass, then lead the way,” the other man replied, and both of them guffawed. Elvira had noticed them looking at her with keen interest throughout the evening, and her heart sank. She thought about calling on Torrin and Isla, but she had been dealing with men like these for most of her life. They wore dark cloaks and dark smiles. Their grimy faces were covered with thick beards, while their eyebrows looked like furry caterpillars. She had been expecting them to ask her for a palm reading given their interest in her, but they seemed to be content with admiring her from afar. Elvira wished that it would have remained that way.

“Ye know that’s nae what I meant, and if ye think it is, then ye hae most certainly hae tae much tae drink,” Elvira walked over to them and went to pick up their mugs,

indicating it was time for them to leave. However, as soon as she did, one of them grabbed her arm.

“Ye are even more beautiful up close,” the first man said, and then sniffed her arm, before making a disgusted look on his face. “But nae matter how beautiful ye are, I would nae want vermin like ye in my bed,” he spat. His face turned malevolent. Elvira realized she had misjudged the situation completely. While her other hand was free, she reached for her dagger. Before she could slash it wildly in the air, the second man turned around and put his hand over her mouth to stop her from screaming.

“Better make sure she dinnae curse us,” he mocked.

“Well, lass, just because I would never taint my bed with someone like ye, dinnae mean there is nae someone who would. Laird McKovac has a generous bounty on Romani women who look just like ye. Some say he’s mad, but that’s yer problem, not ours.”

“Aye, as long as his coin is good, what dae we care?”

The men dragged her out of the tavern. Their grips were like iron, and no matter how much Elvira writhed and wriggled, she could not escape their grasp. Her eyes widened, and she tried to scream, but the clammy hand was clamped around her mouth, meaning that she could only inhale through her nose. When she did, she smelled the scent of wickedness.

Elvira clung to the dagger with all the strength she had, but as soon as they were outside, the second man twisted her wrist sharply. The pain was so great that Elvira’s knees buckled, and her fingers uncurled due to reflex. The dagger dropped to the ground, and with it went her last hopes of protecting herself. They took her to a nearby horse, binding her to the animal with tight ropes and stuffing a gag in her mouth, before they rode away in the darkness. Elvira looked back at the tavern

forlornly, tears pouring from her eyes, screams choked into silence before they could leave her mouth. If only she hadn't closed the door. If only...

They took her directly through the village, passing Rory's forge on the way. Elvira closed her eyes and hoped that her family would be safe. She tried not to think about the fate that awaited her, for it was not one that brought her any consolation.

Sweat dripped from Rory's brow and rolled down his shoulders. His tight biceps glowed and glistened as he drew his arm up and brought the hammer down with a mighty blow yet again. His lips were parted, and he hammered with such intensity that he roared like a wild animal. It wasn't just the heat of the forge that made him sweat this time; it was the intensity of the work and the fury of the emotions that were crackling inside him. All of the frustration and shame and guilt he felt swirled together and exploded in these harsh bellows, which left his throat raw. He gripped the hammer tightly, all the sinews in his forearm stretched to their limit, and he did not care that they had begun to ache a long time ago. He looked at his hands, the palm resting against the handle of the hammer. The same hand that Elvira had so delicately used to destroy him. How had she done it, he wondered, was there really magic in those eyes. He could hardly call it a trick either, as she had gotten to the root of his shame, uncovering it as though it lay basking in the sun. He was a coward, he was craven, and he turned his back on people in need.

No longer would he do such a thing.

Every time he brought his hammer down, it was a blow against his reluctance to help. It shattered the dulling of his instinct to help. It obliterated this fraud of a man he had become, and instead allowed the boy beneath to shine through again. Obeying rules was one thing, but the laws of the land did not always equate to what was right. He had learned that a long time ago, both from Anne and from Ian. He had always raised objections, and they had always calmly explained to him that sometimes people needed to break the rules because they were made by unjust men. He had always gone along with them in the end, but it was only now that he truly understood why

they had been so passionate. Some men were content to stand by and let the world pass before them, never involving themselves in anything. These men died a thousand times over. Rory himself had died many times, every time shame pricked his heart he bled out until there was nothing left but a husk. He had this forge, but was that all he wanted? Did he want to be the kind of man about whom people muttered? Who gave him dark looks as they passed, because they knew that he could never be counted upon to do the right thing? Slowly and surely, he would be isolated from the rest of the village, for they would not bother to tell him their secrets.

There's Rory, they would cry, Rory the useless, Rory the craven, Rory the lapdog of the lords. Oh yes, he would have a fine career, but nobody would appreciate him. Nobody would admire him. Nobody would ever want to be like him. If he stood for nothing, then he would fall for anything, and people like Glennrock and Laird McKovac could trample him like a wounded lamb whose bleating was drowned out by a stampeding herd. Elvira was right in everything she said. He had his home, his shelter, but was he the only thing that mattered? She had lost so much, and he was ready to condemn her for it.

He was disgusted by the man he had become, and all of this pain and self-loathing and revulsion was channeled into his blows as they came crashing down.

And then he stopped.

His shoulders and chest rose and fell with heavy inhalations. He drew his forearm across his head, wiping away a sheen of sweat. He gazed upon his work, and nodded. Six swords had been produced that day, fine, sturdy swords that would have been the envy of any warrior. They were long and sharp, weapons to be used honorably, by honorable people for honorable ends. It was just the beginning. Rory would make more swords, daggers, arrow tips, spear tips, anything the villagers could use to defend themselves from an imminent attack. And if trouble should find him, well, Rory would just have to cope with that. There were all different kinds of trouble in

the world, and some of them weren't as bad as all that.

After the swords had cooled down, Rory wrapped them up in a rough cloth and bound them together by rope. He hoisted them under his arm and decided to deliver them to Torrin in the hope of mending the tension that had risen between them. Along with the swords, he would also deliver an apology. He hoped that Torrin wouldn't mind the late interruption. Rory was surprised at how late he had worked. He slipped out into the night and headed towards the tavern when his thoughts drifted towards Elvira. His feelings for her were as yet unresolved. She was a most uncommon woman and had the ability to make the ground shift under his feet. He was often left speechless around her and said the first thing that was on his mind instead of considering his words. He could not forget the way her fingers grazed his palm. Even now, the echo of her touch made him twitch inside. She was so at ease with her tactile nature, whereas for Rory, it was something of an unexplored land. He tried not to think of it, though, and he hoped that Elvira was absent when he spoke to Torrin. He needed time to think about what he was going to say to Elvira.

Except, he soon realized that he did not hope for such a thing at all. When he reached the tavern, his keen eyes were drawn to a dagger that lay on the ground. He bent down and recognized it as the one Elvira had shown him as proof that she knew Ian. When he held it in his hands, he was immediately filled with shame. It should have been enough to earn his trust, yet he had turned her away, assuming the worst of her when she had not deserved that treatment at all. Then, a second thought quickly entered his head. Why was it out here? He couldn't imagine Elvira would have been so careless with such a cherished possession. He narrowed his eyes and looked closer towards the ground. There was a mixture of footprints, perhaps signs of a scuffle. His heart skipped a frantic beat as he barged into the inn, finding it empty.

"Torrin? Isla?" he cried out, the words shattering the silence. They emerged from the back storeroom, their hair tousled and their faces flushed. They had either been in the midst of an argument or something equally as passionate. Perhaps it was both.

Torrin's eyes narrowed when he saw Rory.

"What are ye daeing here? I hae a good mind tae ban ye from the bar, especially the way ye just stormed towards Elvira that afternoon. What could ye possibly want at this hour?"

"Where's Elvira?" Rory clenched his jaw. All thoughts of the swords left his mind.

"Elvira? Well, she's..." Torrin looked around, and then turned towards Isla.

"She was cleaning the tables."

"Ah, well, she must hae gone upstairs then. Whatever it is ye want can wait until the morning. She works hard and deserves her rest," Torrin said, but then Isla made a small cry.

"Look at that," Isla said, pointing to a cloth that had fallen to the floor. "She would nae leave it there. And most of these tables hae nae been cleaned. Torrin... there were two men sitting at the table. I dinnae recognize them."

"Ye left her out here with two strangers?" Rory thundered.

Once again Elvira was causing him to act on instinct, but this time it was a fierce need to protect her that consumed him, and anger that she had been taken. He couldn't help but think this was all his fault. If he had just taken her into his forge, then this would never have happened. He should have listened to her when she spoke of the danger that pursued her. He was as angry at himself as he was at the men who had taken her.

"I dinnae realise we were gone for that long!" Torrin ran his hand across the back of his neck and looked ruefully towards Isla.

Rory knew that time was of the essence. With the signs of struggle, it was clear what had happened, and there was surely only one thing men would want with a woman as beautiful as Elvira. Rory sheathed the dagger in his belt and then dumped the swords on the table. He tore the knots free, and the cloth fell away, revealing the swords. Torrin's eyes widened as he gazed upon them.

"What are these? They are things of beauty... I dare say they are even better than what Ian would hae done." He picked up one of the swords and examined it. Rory grabbed one as well.

"They are gifts, and an apology. More are gaeing tae come, but for now, I need tae test one," he said grimly, and stormed out of the tavern without saying another word to Torrin. He made his way to the stables, where he could see the hoof prints trailing off into the distance. He took one of Torrin's horses and geed it for a late-night right, weapon brandished, eyes like fire. He would track down these men, and he just hoped that it wasn't too late to finally start protecting Elvira.

Elvira's teeth chattered as the horses sped along at a good pace. She tried to take notice of the world around her in case she did break free, but it was all a blur. She assumed she was being taken back to McKovac lands, and despaired. Her only hope was that Samuel might hear word of a Romani woman being captured and come to her aid, but he had already risked a lot for the sake of her and her family. She wasn't sure that help was going to present itself. If she was going to get out of this, then she was going to have to do it herself. She chastised herself for losing the dagger. She had already realized it was useless to struggle against the tight knots, so she allowed herself to be carried by the rhythm of the horses and gathered her strength. The night was dark and bleak, the moon barely a crescent. It was as though a shroud had been draped over the world, chilling her to the bone. It was easy to hide sins in the darkness.

Eventually, they reached a small clearing and the horses slowed their pace. Elvira

was roughly pulled off the horse. For a moment, her arms were free.

“Help!” was the strained cry that escaped her lips. She was struck across the face for her trouble, the sting of the blow lingering long after the impact.

“More of that and I’ll cut yer tongue out. There’s nae point mewling for help. Naebody is coming tae save ye,” one of the men said. He dragged her to a tree and wound ropes around her body, so tight that she could barely breathe. Her arms were rigid by her side. The other man was making a fire. Both men sat around it, taking out and laying a few pieces of meet over the fire. The scent of the roasting food made her stomach rumble. At least they had remained true to their disgust of her and had not laid a hand on her, although she wondered for how long this was going to last. Some mens’ taste could change on a whim, and she feared their curiosity might get the better of them.

There was only one chance she had, and that was to draw upon the mystique that surrounded the Romani in the hope of chilling them with fear.

“Ye are making a mistake,” she gasped, fighting against the tightness around her chest. “Ye should let me gae. Hae ye nae heard of the curses that befall men who refuse tae help the Romani?”

The men scoffed. “Oh aye, a likely tale. It dinnae seem tae be gaeing sae badly for Laird McKovac, daes it? There’s one good cure for a curse, and that’s hard, solid gold,” one of the men said. The other nodded.

“Ye may think that now. But in years tae come yer blood will turn as dry as dust, and all the strength will ebb away from yer bones. There will come a day when ye will nae be able tae lift a finger, and what good will ye be tae anyone then?”

The men laughed. “As long as I get my fun in when I can, I’ll be fine.”

“Then perhaps it will be yer children that suffer, the curse passing from one generation tae the next. Every drop of life that drips from ye will be tainted, and end in a shadowy creature screaming in pain, doomed to live for only a short time.”

“I never hae a desire for bairns anyway,” the men shrugged.

“Ye act sae mighty when ye hae a woman tied tae a tree. I come from a long line of Romani witches, who hae whispered secrets tae each other, secrets that are as old as the wind. If ye deliver me tae Laird McKovac, then I shall make sure that ye suffer. I will make yer skin slough off and yer blood boil. I will rob the sight from yer eyes and twist yer mind. It will be as though insects are crawling under yer skin every moment of every day. I will take away the taste of food, and ale will be as bitter as poison. And as for lust... I will make it sae that nae strength flows tae that part of yer body. Ye will certainly never hae tae worry about children again. Ye will never hae tae worry about anything, and oh how women will laugh at yer shriveled thing.”

This was the only thing that brought fear to their eyes.

“She cannae really dae that, can she?” one of them asked in a fearful whisper. Elvira smirked, wishing that she did indeed possess the power to do all of these things. If the Romani did possess these abilities, then life would have been easier for all of them. In fact, she couldn’t understand why a lot of people still believed these old stories. Surely, they realized that if they did possess these powers, they would have used them to make life better for themselves?

“She’s just trying tae scare us. And if she keeps wagging that tongue I’ll find a way tae shut her up,” the other man raised his voice as he spoke, ensuring that Elvira could hear. He wore a nasty, menacing look on his face, and Elvira grew quiet. But, at least she had sown a seed of doubt between them. It might be enough to keep her safe, and if they were hasty in taking her to Laird McKovac they might make a mistake. She closed her eyes, and prayed to all the gods she knew of as well as her

own ancestors that she might be protected, and that she would find a way back to her family.

Wind whipped through Rory's hair. He could taste it in his mouth. The sound of hooves against the ground was like a cacophony of thunder, and the impact sent reverberations throughout his body. His face was set in grim determination. He kept himself low, wanting the horse to move as swiftly as possible. His gaze flickered towards the ground, making sure that he was following the tracks. The men who had taken Elvira seemed to have followed a trail, and they hadn't made any attempt to hide their tracks, perhaps assuming that they were not going to be followed. Maybe they thought that nobody was going to care about Elvira.

They were wrong.

Every time Rory thought about them mistreating her, he was filled with righteous anger. She must have been so scared. She had fought back valiantly, but it had not been enough. Two men had been enough to overpower her and send her dagger helplessly to the ground. Was she even still alive? No, Rory could not allow himself to think that way. The last thing he wanted was to cradle a limp body and take Elvira back to her grandmother and siblings, knowing that this only happened because he was too stubborn to help. He should have listened to her better, he should have... oh a pox on it. It didn't do him any good to think about things on these terms. The various possibilities all spiraled away from him like wispy clouds, and there were countless of them. But he did know one thing for certain; if Elvira had died, then he was going to kill the men responsible, and he wasn't going to stop killing until he had gotten to Laird McKovac himself. He was the one hunting the Romani people, he had driven Elvira from her home.

Rory's blood flowed as hot as fire. It crackled through his body. Although he had spent all day in the forge, he did not feel tired at all. He was emboldened by his anger. Eventually, he stopped when he saw a plume of smoke rise, and the light of a fire flickering in the distance. The horse whinnied a little as he pulled back, bringing it to a halt. Rory placed his hand upon the horse's neck and breathed deeply, calming it. He left it near a tree to rest and graze.

"Wait here," Rory whispered, turning with his sword still drawn. He kept himself low, skulking as close to the ground as possible. He strained his ears. The forest was quiet at night, and as he drew closer, he could hear Elvira's voice rising above the fire. There was something strained about it. It lacked the usual strength that he had become accustomed to. He remained hidden as he approached the small camp. The two men, a surly pair to be sure, were sitting beside the fire, illuminated by the warm glow. Elvira was some way away, at the periphery of the light. Rory stifled a gasp when he saw how she had been tied to a tree. Her clothes were ragged, her hair tousled, and there was a dark look in her eyes.

"Ye will never rest, ye will never-" she said darkly.

"Nae, of course I am never gaeing tae rest if ye keep gaeing on like this! I told ye before that I dinnae believe in yer curses. Wasting yer breath, ye are," one of the men said.

"But what if she's telling the truth? I don't want tae be cursed. Gold is fine and all... but what if I never get tae enjoy it? I dinnae want people tae laugh when I cannae... ye know," the other man said, looking down towards his groin.

The first man shook his head and sighed. "Dinnae pay any attention tae her. This is what she wants."

At this point, a malevolent look came upon Elvira's face, and she started speaking in

a language that Rory did not understand. It sounded ancient and jagged, the words as sharp as any dagger he could have forged. The words rolled from Elvira's tongue as though imbued with a force that came from outside herself. The scared man was horrified, his eyes widening in fear. He fell back and pointed at her.

"What is she saying! What is she daeing?" he pointed towards Elvira. The other man, who was far more pragmatic, cursed under his breath and scowled.

"Enough of this," he muttered, and grabbed some old rag. He walked up to Elvira and stuffed the rag in her mouth, gagging her and interrupting the stream of words. Elvira's moans were muffled. She turned her head from side to side, and then the man struck her with a sharp blow, pointing a finger towards her. "I told ye tae be quiet, and this is yer last warning."

Rory had intended to assess the situation. He thought he might wait until both men were asleep or, if one of them decided to keep watch, then for one of them to sleep. He was not a trained fighter, so he wanted to make things as even as possible. However, all thoughts of patience left him when he saw Elvira being struck like that. Some instinct deep inside him had been triggered, something that had been there since the day of his birth. He heard the roar of a lion inside, and he lunged forward, brandishing his sword. Strength rippled over his body. The men turned to face him, shock on their faces as they saw this possessed man striding towards them. Rory ran towards the man by the campfire first. He reached for his sword, but was too late. Rory came in and swung his thick leg towards him, connecting with his jaw. There was a sharp crack and a plume of blood sprayed out as the man was knocked back.

By the time Rory turned his attention to the other man, the rogue had drawn his sword. He turned away from Elvira.

"Ah, ye dae hae friends," he muttered.

Rory snarled. His nostrils flared and he charged the man. He whirled the sword through the air, using it more like a hammer than as the elegant weapon it should have been in the hands of a skilled warrior. However, his brute strength was enough to overwhelm the rogue, at least for a time. Rory's blade crashed against the other man's sword so loudly that the song of steel stretched through the night. The anger was so intense inside that at one point it felt as though flames crackled along the blade of his sword.

But then, the rogue was able to deflect his blow and rolled away. Rory was slow to turn. He twisted his blade, remembering lessons from long ago, ones that were buried deep in his mind. He thought about all the duels he had witnessed over the years, and mimicked the stance of warriors. He stood between the rogue and Elvira, determined to block that evil man from his prize.

The man charged in again. This time there was a flurry of slashes, and Rory felt a cut on his arm. He gasped in pain and looked down, seeing a crimson line trickling over his flesh.

"Ye are a big bugger, but ye are nae the first giant I hae faced. That sword looks unwieldy in yer hands. Ye made a mistake in coming here, boy," the man hissed.

Rory grit his teeth and charged again. At one point, their swords were locked together for so long that he could see the yellowed teeth of the man, and smell his stale breath. They were not going to get Elvira. Not a chance.

The rogue showed surprising agility as he ducked around and spun, leaving Rory standing there with his back turned. The rogue did not have the opportunity to bring his sword to bear, but he could jab the hilt into Rory's kidneys. He felt the dull pain, and staggered towards Elvira.

"Watch out! Defend yeself!" she said, having spat out the gag. Rory turned and raised

his sword just in time to deflect a blow that would have run through the middle of his body. He blinked away sweat that threatened to blur his vision, and behind him came a cry. “Listen tae me!” Elvira said. Rory calmed his thoughts, and heard only her voice.

Rory came from nowhere, like a bolt of lightning. After all that had transpired between them, he was the last person she expected to come to her rescue. He was certainly no coward now, although his initial advantage of surprise had been lost. Elvira knew that the longer the battle continued, the likelier it was that Rory would be defeated. In the background, she could see the other, more fearful man staggering to his feet again. She needed to help. As she watched the fight unfold, she used her keen gift of observation to study Rory’s opponent. She noticed some patterns of attacks, and some tells. Every time he shifted his weight, she knew that a certain blow was going to follow.

“Rory, duck tae yer left,” she cried. Rory did as she said, and avoided a cutting blow that sliced through the air. The man cursed, and when he was unbalanced, Rory lunged forward and put his full weight into a shoulder barge. The rogue went staggering back. He was able to regroup, however, and came back with another few lunging blows. Rory lifted his sword, managing to catch them all like lightning.

“Leap back!” Elvira cried. Rory did so, sucking in his gut as the rogue’s sword came thrusting forward in a straight line. With Elvira’s help, Rory was able to fare better against the rogue, who was becoming frustrated and leveled his own curses towards Elvira, wanting to silence her once and for all. Fury blazed in his eyes, and she sensed that he wanted to deal with Rory swiftly so that he could skewer her against the tree. Elvira watched his feet, and then yelled towards Rory. He shifted to the side and brought his sword up in an arc, slicing the man’s leg open. The rogue cried out in pain and staggered to the ground, as though he had been held up by strings that had been cut. He fell to one knee. Rory swung around and drove a knee into the back of the man’s head, and the rogue fell face forward into the mud, utterly still.

By this point, the other man had gotten his senses back. He had picked up his sword, but now Rory turned on him.

“The curse hae already begun. I summoned this man, an ancient warrior from long ago, whose heart beats with fire. He will chase ye tae the ends of the world,” she cried out.

The rogue’s knees weakened as Rory strode towards him. He ended up on his knees, begging for mercy. Rory had his sword in hand and could have run the man through, but instead he brought his fist back and swung it across the man’s face. His neck turned sharply, and the light fell from his eyes. He too fell into the mud, his chest rising slowly.

Rory stood over him, bristling with strength, before he turned towards Elvira. Elvira took a moment to appreciate the sight of him, clad in an armor of power, her avenger. Then, he strode towards her and cut through the ropes that bound her. She fell forward, tension easing across her body as she was now free. She could breathe easier. She ran her hand through her hair, pushing it away from her face. She also adjusted her clothes as well. While she was grateful that Rory had rescued her, she now felt a little ashamed at the scathing words she had said the last time they had met. He had certainly proven that he was no coward, yet still, she was angry at him for turning her away in the first place. This, coupled with the trauma of the night, gave her a steely resolve. She did not fall into his arms like a swooning damsel. Instead, she acted as though she had the matter entirely under control. She smoothed down her dress and cleared her throat, dipping her head towards him respectfully, but maintaining her composure. She clasped her hands together and took small steps forward, fearing that she might lose all strength from her steps if she walked normally.

“Thank ye for coming tae my aid, although I had everything under control,” she said.

“Aye, it certainly looked that way,” he replied with a skeptical look.

“I was gaeing tae wait for them tae sleep before I made my move.”

“I’m afraid I could nae be as patient. Sae, ye think my heart beats with fire?” Rory lifted his chin and displayed pride at the way she had described him. She narrowed her eyes, not wishing to inflate his ego. Why did all men think that excelling in combat was the only way to succeed in the world?

“I only said that tae strike fear intae his heart. I dinnae always mean what I say,” she said.

Rory looked a little crestfallen, before realization crept upon his face. “Wait, daes that mean ye were lying when ye spoke tae me earlier?”

Elvira sighed and put her hand to her head, massaging her temples. “Rory, after the night I’ve endured, I dinnae want tae speak about these matters with ye.”

Rory composed himself after this and turned towards her, looking at her with concern. “Did they hurt ye?” his tone of voice softened, and she appreciated the kind words.

“Nae enough tae last. And nae enough that I cannae give it back myself,” she walked up to the man Rory had been dueling with and kicked him in the side. It was a sharp jab of a kick, hard enough to cause a bruise. The limp body twitched, but the man did not awaken. While it was not enough to cause any lasting damage, it did do wonders for Elvira’s mood. She had been tied up for so long that she believed she would never have been able to strike out against them. This small act was enough to give her some satisfaction, at least.

After this, she walked to the fire and began rummaging through their belongings,

stealing their coin purses and looking for any other items that might be useful.

“What are ye daeing?” Rory asked.

“What daes it look like I’m daeing?”

“Ye should nae steal from them.”

Elvira cast a glance towards him, wondering if she really just heard him say that.

“What dae ye think I should dae? Tuck them up in their bedrolls and kiss them on the forehead?”

Rory frowned, shifting his weight between his feet. “I never said that. I just...” he sighed, clearing his throat. Sometimes it seemed as though it was impossible to have a simple conversation with him. “What did they want with ye?”

“What daes any man want with a woman? Especially a Romani woman. I tried tae tell ye before, Rory, people dinnae see us the same as ye. We are just things, nae different tae cattle or sheep. This is the way we live, fearing that someone may just come and take us away. The world is nae kind tae us, and all because we are different. Sae now I am gaeing tae take a wee reward and return home, hoping that these men dinnae darken my door again,” she said, deciding that she wouldn’t tell him about Laird McKovac just yet. She had already been shaken enough by the ordeal, and it was difficult to keep her emotions under control. There was a part of her that just wanted to fall to the ground, to break down weeping and crying, beating her fists against the hard soil. There were times when everything seemed hopeless. How many other men would be sent to find her? How many other times would she be captured? She couldn’t always rely on Rory to rescue her, and the fact that she had to rely on him at all was galling.

Once she had gathered the loot, she returned to Rory and looked at the dagger resting

against his waist. Her hand nipped forward, and she plucked it from him. Her hands grazed his tight stomach, and he leaped back as she did so, once again reluctant to be touched.

“I’m nae gaeing tae hurt ye. I just want my dagger back,” she muttered. “That’s a fine sword, by the way. Where did ye get it?”

Rory angled the blade and held it straight in front of him. “I made it,” he said in a small voice.

Elvira pursed her lips and nodded. Perhaps her words had an effect on him after all. She always knew how to get a reaction from people, and often her talents lay in deciding what people needed to hear, not necessarily what they wanted to hear.

“Come, the horse is nearby. We can return home before these men wake up. Hopefully, they will nae come after ye again.”

“I doubt they will. Ye tanned their hides well,” Elvira said.

“Aye, although ye did help,” he said. It was a tacit acknowledgement of her impact on the fight. She could see the gratitude in his eyes and hear it in his words. She dipped her head gently, and it felt as though a newfound respect rose between them. Elvira could not escape the fact that they would have been doomed without each other. She would have been carted off to Laird McKovac if he hadn’t saved her, and he would have been run through with a sword if she had not told him where to strike. Depending on someone like Rory did not sit well with her, but she was thankful he had been there when she needed him. She thought about the silent prayers she had made, and wondered if Rory was truly the answer to them.

Elvira could be obstinate sometimes. She didn't seem to be all that grateful for being rescued by him, although perhaps that was just because she was shaken. Yet again she had darted her hands towards him and taken him by surprise when she had reclaimed her dagger. Her fingers pressed against his stomach for a moment, and a strange sensation had rippled through his body. He had also been sobered by her words when he had chastised her for robbing the men who had taken her. He hadn't meant to make her feel guilty for getting some measure of revenge, he merely wanted to ensure that these men had no reason to come after her again. After what she said, though, he realized it didn't matter because she was always in danger, whether it be from these men or others. Even when he and Anne had been at their most desperate, they had always been able to blend in. He now realized it wasn't as simple as that for Elvira. She was different, and people treated her as such. Rory didn't know what to say or do about it, though. Perhaps there was nothing that could be done, although that didn't seem right at all.

Rory was relieved when they found the horse waiting for them. Rory clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. The horse responded by unfurling its limbs and rising to a standing position. Its dark mane was soft, and its eyes kind.

"I can walk beside ye while ye ride," Rory said, positioning himself to help Elvira mount the horse.

"Dinnae be silly. It would take us an age tae return if we dae that. I'd like tae get back before dawn," Elvira said. She placed her hand on Rory's shoulder and placed her foot into his latticed hands. He pushed her up, she swung her leg around, and then

settled on the horse. Rory pulled himself up behind her, her back against his chest. They were so close that he could feel her spicy scent surrounding him, playing havoc with his senses. Her dark curls were lank with sweat. He glimpsed the slender curve of her neck and found himself losing all sense of time as he followed the trail along her shoulders. The horse stamped its hoof impatiently, shaking him from his trance. There was a tightness in his throat as he reached around her, his arms nestling around her waist as he took the reins. She did not seem perturbed by this closeness, yet to him, it was as though everything was spinning out of control in a dizzying haze. Elvira's back was straight. Her hands were placed on the horse's mane, balancing herself quietly. As the horse moved, they rocked back and forth. Elvira pressed against him in one moment, and then rolled forward in another. The tension in the air was palpable as they were thrown together like this, the storm of sensations gripping his heart.

The battle must have taken more out of him than he thought. And he had been hard at work in the forge all day. No wonder his head was hazy... at least that's what he told himself.

"Does my family know what happened to me?" she asked.

"I'm nae sure," he said after a moment. When she spoke, it was as though her voice called to him from a dream. "Torrin and Isla might hae told them. As soon as I realized what happened, I came tae find ye. I knew that the longer ye were out here, the worse it was gaeing tae be for ye," he said softly.

Elvira dipped her head. He couldn't quite see the expression on her face. All he could make out was her dainty nose and her soft cheek. There were moments when her skin seemed so inviting, although he quickly chastised himself for thoughts like these.

"I'm glad. I dinnae want them tae worry over naething."

“It’s nae naething. This is serious. They deserve tae know sae they can protect themselves, and be more careful.”

Elvira laughed, although there was no humor behind the gesture at all. “It’s nae a question of being careful, Rory. Hae ye nae understood that yet? There is always gaeing tae be danger for people. It’s just the way of the world.”

“Then ye should tell someone...” he trailed away, already knowing the folly of his words.

“Aye, because it’s serious ,” she mocked him with her tone. “It’s serious tae me, Rory, and tae my people. But it’s nae serious enough tae others. Lairds care about their own people, but we dinnae fall intae that category. We are the others, belonging naewhere. It’s just the way of the world, but I dinnae want Tereza and Ollie tae live like that while they are young. There’s enough sorrow waiting for them in the future. I’d rather they get tae enjoy their youth.”

“It still dinnae make it right. More should be done.”

“Aye, but who is gaeing tae dae it? It’s easy for people like ye Rory, people who hae a roof and sturdy walls around them. It must be easy tae forget that people suffer in the world.”

Her words made him feel small. He bowed his head in shame and felt his cheeks reddening. He hated to think about what Anne would have said at that moment. She had tried to do the same thing with him, protecting him from the reality of the world. Unfortunately, she wasn’t able to do so for very long, as she needed his help. There was a time when she broke down in tears, apologizing to him profusely for being unable to give him the childhood he deserved. He hadn’t been angry with her, nor had he resented her. He knew how hard she tried to keep them safe. Without her efforts, they never would have made anything of themselves. The same sentiment was

present in Elvira as well, and he could not begrudge her for wanting to shield her siblings from the true nature of the world. However, it did make him want to change the subject, as there was something that had been playing on his mind.

“Why did those men take ye, Elvira?”

“I told ye before. Men are always taking my kind.”

“Aye, but tae take ye from a village like that, with Torrin and Isla close by. It was a risk they dinnae need tae take. And, if ye forgive me for saying sae, ye are nae as badly harmed as I thought ye would be. Did they say what they were planning tae dae with ye?”

Elvira took a deep breath before she answered. “They were gaeing tae take me tae Laird McKovac. He hae been targeting Romani women for years, and I suppose his temper hae reached a point where it is nae gaeing tae abate. It is why our home was destroyed, why we hae tae flee, but we are never gaeing tae be able tae escape completely. And I’m worried about what’s gaeing tae happen when Tereza grows up. If Laird McKovac is allowed tae continue tormenting us, then she will hae tae suffer as well.”

Her voice grew small, and Rory was deep in thought. It was no wonder she had been so angry with him when she learned that he refused to defend the village from Laird McKovac. It was also clear that she had more intimate knowledge of the laird’s capabilities as well. He had been wrong to dismiss her fears. He had been wrong in so many things, and he knew that saving her this once was not enough to make it up to her.

Rory had fallen into silence after she told him the truth. Elvira was tired as well, and let the motion of the horse sooth her. There were moments when she slumped against Rory. He was strong, sturdy, like the wall of a keep. The only difference was that he

was warm as well. His arms never moved, constantly around her waist, holding her in position. She felt safe with him. This time there was no rebuking her truth, no calling her a liar or a thief, no harshness at all. He simply listened, and she hoped that he finally understood what she had been trying to tell him all this time.

The world passed by. Elvira found herself peering into the darkness, worried that more bandits were waiting for her. If people knew her location, they might come again and again. Was there any escape? Sometimes she wished she could fly away like a bird and find a nest somewhere high in the mountains that was far away from all of these terrible people who wanted to hurt them. At least then they could be safe, and Tereza and Ollie could grow up without having to fear the world around them. It was ironic, really, she thought. People were often afraid that the Romani had the ability to curse them, but the truth was that being a Romani often felt like a curse. They were the ones who were persecuted. They were the ones who were hounded for being different. They were spit on, beaten, and generally treated as though they did not deserve a place in this world. Was it ever going to end?

Perhaps it would, if people like Rory stood up for what was right. She regretted calling him a coward now. It did not seem to fit his character. No true coward would ever have been able to summon enough courage to embark on this journey. Even if he had managed to leave the tavern, his nature would have gotten the better of him and second thoughts would have driven him back. He could easily have said that he lost the trail in the darkness, or that there were too many men to fight, and thus it was prudent to make a retreat. Rory hadn't done any of these things. He had barreled towards her, as though there had been no other choice at all. He had placed himself in danger for her sake. There was no denying the valor of his actions.

But if this was his true character, why had he been so adamant in refusing to help defend the village in the first place? What had happened in his past to make him want to turn away from a conflict like this? If his heart was not as hard as she first suspected, then it meant that he was masking his true nature, but for what purpose?

He was far more complicated than he seemed at first glance. Elvira wished she knew the right question that would unlock the secrets of his heart because she wanted to know what drove this man, this man who had turned her and her family away who had accused her of being a liar, and then who had come towards her like a tempest and defended her from her captors. For someone who always prided herself on knowing what to say, however, she found herself at a loss for words. She feared that saying the wrong thing would seal his lips. She needed to be patient, to gather her strength so that she could think clearly again.

“We’re almost there,” he murmured. His voice had that pleasing Highland burr, low and growling, as though something primal was hiding within his flesh. She almost didn’t want the ride to end as being in such close proximity to him was like being next to a fire, such was the heat that radiated from his body. The horse trotted back and the village came into view as the pale light of dawn pushed back the darkness of the night.

The shock and emotion of the evening had worn off, leaving Elvira drained. She stifled a yawn. Relief entered her heart as she returned to the village, although she half-expected enemy warriors to leap out and attack them again. Thankfully, this did not happen. Instead, she was greeted with the sight of Torrin, Isla, and her family rushing out of the tavern when they heard a horse approach. Rory brought the horse to a stop and dismounted. He held his hand out, assisting Elvira as she came to the ground. Her fatigue was dulled by the sight of seeing her family. Tereza and Ollie came rushing towards her, wrapping their arms around her waist. She kissed them both on the head. Mirella had a concerned look on her face, as she knew more about what had transpired.

“Oh, Elvira, we’re sae glad ye are safe. We hae nae idea what hae happened. We’re sorry. We never should hae left ye by yeself,” Isla said. Torrin looked guilty.

“It’s nae yer fault. I pulled the door closed, thinking that ye could use some privacy. I never should hae trusted those men,” Elvira said, admonishing herself for enjoying even a moment of complacency.

“Was it him?” Mirella asked as she drew Elvira in for a hug. Elvira bowed her head and nodded, wearing a sick expression on her face. Mirella exhaled slowly, a haunted expression on her face. . Elvira could see the lifetime of trauma that Mirella had endured, and how much had been taken from her. She had lost a daughter, a son in law, and now almost a granddaughter as well. How much was the world going to take before its hunger had been sated? They did not mention Laird McKovac’s name, still wanting to protect Tereza and Ollie.

“They said bad men took ye,” Tereza said.

“Aye, well, they were greedy and and they were rogues. They dinnae get very far before Rory caught up tae us,” Elvira said. Her siblings eyed Rory with suspicion. They may have been children, but they were not stupid. They knew that he had turned them away, and must have wondered why he had gone to these lengths to save Elvira. They did not give rise to these questions, though, nor did they have a chance because Torrin was already clasping Rory’s shoulders, congratulating him for his heroic efforts.

“I knew that ye hae this in ye. Ye cannae hide yer true nature forever. Ye are a good man Rory. With this and the swords ye made, I’m sure that everyone is gaeing tae trust ye now. I’m glad ye hae seen what’s required tae keep people safe,” Torrin beamed.

Rory shot him a look of concern as he looked around, worried that one of Glennrock’s agents might have overheard. However, the early hour meant that the area around them was barren. Elvira was shocked to hear this news, however. She turned towards Rory.

“Is this true?” she asked.

Rory pursed his lips. He said nothing.

“Aye it’s true. And they are the finest swords I hae ever seen! I cannae wait tae see what he is gaeing tae forge next,” Torrin said.

This time Isla chastised him, muttering that he should keep quiet. Torrin gestured around, shaking his head, but Elvira’s attention was solely on Rory. He had changed in every aspect. No, that wasn’t quite true. He hadn’t changed at all, he had just allowed his true spirit to be seen.

Elvira turned away from her family and closed the distance between her and Rory. “Ye are daeing the right thing,” she said softly.

“I hope sae,” he replied. Then, he smirked. “I suppose all it took was hearing the right words. Maybe part of the reason why I was sae angry was because ye were right.”

Elvira didn’t smile at all. She searched his eyes, seeing the soul that lay beyond them. “I was nae, Rory. Ye are nae a coward at all. Aye, ye may hae done cowardly things, but that dinnae make ye a coward. Yer heart is true. Ye proved that when ye came after me, and putting yeself at risk in the name of helping the villagers. I am glad that ye are seeing the truth of the world,” as she spoke the last remnants of resentment turned to endearment. She had been cold to him even after he had rescued her, not even thanking him for his efforts. She wanted to change that now. She gently placed her hands against his waist and rolled forward, wrapping her arms around his back and kissing his cheek softly. She felt the strong trunk of his body and the powerful strength that lay coiled within him. Her lips bristled with heat as she brushed his cheek. At first he seemed tentative, but then his arms opened and they welcomed her inside, his fingers pressing against the small of her back. There was a part of her that didn’t want to leave, that wanted to stay with him all night and uncover his secrets one by one. He was shifting before her eyes, as though only now she was seeing his true nature, and she did not wish to turn away.

In fact, seeing his actions tonight made her recall the words her mother had once told her. She blushed, and was silent as she was led away to bathe and recover from the night.

The children had been sent to bed. Mirella was tending to Elvira, who soaked in warm water. The aches of the night eased away from her muscles. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes, enjoying the relaxed atmosphere.

“I feared the worst,” Mirella said.

“I was nae gaeing tae let them take me tae him,” Elvira replied.

“I thought we would be safe here.”

“We are. Rory brought me back, and these people are making efforts tae defend themselves. If McKovac daes attack this place they will be ready, and we can help defend them.”

Mirella made an uncertain murmur. “I’m nae sure about that. I’m just glad ye are back with us. I wish I was able tae chase after ye,” she reached into the bath and squeezed Elvira’s hand. “Although it seems that ye hae yer own personal guard,” a playful tone entered her voice.

Elvira blushed. “I would nae gae that far.”

“From what Torrin said he dinnae waste a breathe in chasing after ye. As soon as he realized ye were gone he raced out of the tavern, leaving all but one of his swords behind. He reminds me of yer Da.”

Elvira frowned. “In what way? He’s nae Romani.”

“Nae, but yer Da would hae done the same thing for Maria. That’s all ye can hope for in this world, tae find someone who will fight for ye. He seems like a good man, at heart.”

“Aye,” Elvira’s heart was warmed by Mirella’s words. There was definitely some form of attraction between herself and Rory, although she thought that some of it might be caused by her fatigue. She still wasn’t ready to accept these feelings when there were matters that were unresolved. “But it still dinnae change the fact that he turned us away. I want tae know why he was sae reluctant tae help us.”

“There’s only one way tae find that out” Mirella said with a twinkle in her eye. Elvira’s lips curled into a smile, and she sank deeper into the water, the temperature seeming to increase as she thought about Rory.

Rory was led into the tavern. Torrin poured him an ale, while Isla got him some food.

“Look at ye, lad, a real hero,” Torrin said.

“I’m nae hero. I just could nae let her be taken like that. It was nae right.”

“Which is why ye are a hero! And these swords...ye hae outdone yeself, lad. I was nae expecting anything as fine as these!”

“Dae ye think she will be well?” Rory said, his gaze turning towards the door. Torrin’s attention drifted away from the swords. He came to stand beside Rory and patted Rory’s shoulder.

“Oh, I think she’ll be just fine, and she might be grateful as well. Perhaps ye should come by later, and she might tell ye what lies in yer future. Something tells me it could be something sweet,” there was a conspiratorial tone to his words, and it rankled Rory.

“Leave the poor lad alone, Torrin. He did a good thing taenight. Ye dinnae need tae gae putting ideas intae his head,” Isla said, and then turned to Rory. “Ye just take pride in daeing a good thing. That poor lass dinnae deserve tae be hounded like she was taenight. We are gaeing tae hae tae be careful about who we let intae the tavern. And we cannae let her be by herself.”

“Nae, well, something tells me she’s gaeing tae hae a lot of company soon enough,” Torrin chuckled as he stared at Rory again, while Isla playfully slapped her husband on the shoulder. She told him to take the swords and get them somewhere safe before

people started coming in for breakfast. Meanwhile, Rory left, needing to return to the forge after a long night.

As he left the tavern, he spared a moment to look up at the upper level of the tavern, trying to sense which window housed Elvira. He felt like there was more to say, and after being so close with her, it seemed strange to be returning to his forge alone. He opened the door, walked in, and was greeted by the soft mewing of Ginger, who seemed to sense that Rory had had a tough night. Ginger slipped around his feet and stretched her neck against Rory's ankles.

"Oh, dae I hae a story tae tell ye, Ginger. I think I lost my mind taenight," he said. But that wasn't the truth at all. The truth was that he had found his mind, and his heart. He couldn't have lived with himself had anything happened to Elvira. Even now, the thought of her being in danger made him light-headed. He was tempted to charge back to the tavern and stand guard by her door. But he held himself back.

He knew that he wanted to see her again, though. The gratitude she showed had been easy and effortless. When she hugged him, she embraced him with her entire body and soul. The tenderness of her lips lingered against his cheek as well. When he closed his eyes, he was back with her on the horse, their bodies close together, moving to the cantering rhythm. He swallowed a lump in his throat and groaned a little, for he knew that he had invited trouble into his life after having spent years keeping it well away. However, while he had made an upstanding name for himself, he had only managed to push everyone away. He thought that he was safer when everyone he cared about was far away, but it had just made his life empty. Knowing that Elvira was in direct trouble had awakened something inside him, and it was not something that could be quelled again.

He would not allow that to happen.

Something had shifted inside him, and it was all because of Elvira. She had exposed

him for the fraud that he was, but he had risen to meet his destiny. He had been too complacent with his own life, forgetting that other people suffered. And now, if McKovac was coming for Elvira and these lands, then he was going to have to get through Rory first. Rory staggered to bed and fell onto the mattress, utterly exhausted from the night's exertions and high emotion. He slept better than he had done in a long time, for his soul was at peace, and the inner conflict was no longer troubling him.

Elvira took a deep breath as she knocked on the door. It had been a day since her rescue, and much had been on her mind. Mostly, these thoughts consisted of Rory. Her opinion of him had changed dramatically, and she wished to thank him for saving her. Thus, she had brought to the forge a basket of meat, cheese, bread, and fruit from the tavern. At first, there was no answer. Elvira knocked again, and then pressed her head to the door. She heard hammering sounds, and assumed that Rory had been unable to hear her. The door opened when she tested it, and she entered.

She closed the door behind her and then turned to see Rory at the forge, his back to her. Elvira's throat tightened as she had not expected to see him like this. He wore no shirt, his blonde hair tousled. The sinews and knotted muscles of his back were exposed, his body thick and powerful, packed with strength. This was not the strength of a warrior forged in combat, but the hard strength of a man who had poured himself into his craft for years and years. Broad shoulders led to long arms with thick biceps. When Rory brought his hammer up, Elvira's gaze was caught by the rounded muscle, swelling with strength, and she became light-headed. It seemed as though it was getting hotter in the forge with every passing moment. Her throat felt dry and her lips parted. Rory's body was slick with sweat, glistening in the light of the forge. All the hard angles were well-defined, as though someone had taken care to craft this man, leaving nothing of excess on his body at all.

Elvira was not sure how long she remained standing there. She seemed lost in a trance, until a cat ran towards her and started to slide between her legs, meowing loudly. Elvira expressed her surprise in a gasp, as she had not noticed any movement, for her focus had been on Rory. She bent down to stroke the cat, but her gasp had

been heard by Rory, who turned, displaying his wide chest. Curled hair dripped with sweat and his flat stomach rippled with strength. Elvira felt her knees growing weak at the sight, so she averted her gaze to protect herself.

“Oh, Elvira, I dinnae notice ye there,” Rory said.

“I knocked, but there was nae response.”

“Ah, sorry about that. Sometimes when I get tae hammering I cannae hear anything else. It’s easy tae shut the world out. Can I help ye? Is everything well at the tavern? There hae nae been any suspicious men hanging about, hae there?” concern flashed upon Rory’s face, the boyish features giving way to a harder glare.

Elvira shook her head and rose, moving towards a table. The cat followed her and leaped up on the table, nuzzling Elvira’s hand.

“Nae, naething like that. I just wanted tae bring ye a gift of gratitude for what ye did.”

“Oh, ye dinnae hae tae dae that,” Rory came towards her, the light illuminating more of his body. She felt like a voyeur as she snuck a glance, her gaze drifting over his shoulders and along his chest, wrapping around his waist and moving up to his back again. Every part of him dripped with strength. He radiated this masculine charisma that intoxicated her. She might as well have drunk a barrel of wine.

“Yes, I did. Ye put yeself in danger for me. Ye were wounded because of it,” her gaze fell to the wound upon his bicep. It was no longer bleeding, but it was clear where the skin had been torn. Elvira’s hand twitched, but she stopped herself before she foolishly touched his flesh, becoming uncertain about where the boundaries lay between them. “I owe ye my life,” she dipped her head out of respect.

“Ye dinnae owe me anything, Elvira. I could nae stand by while ye were in danger. I

hae done enough standing by recently,” he spoke in a self-deprecating tone. Elvira looked up. Rory inspected his wound and only then seemed to notice that he was shirtless. He grabbed a garment that had been draped over a chair and pulled it around his shoulders, fastening it with a clasp to cover most of his body.

“Aye, well, I’m glad ye hae helped and please, dinnae turn this gift away. It’s nae much, but I thought ye would appreciate it,” Elvira nudged the basket towards him and opened it. The scent of salted meat and cheese filled the room. Rory’s face lit up with delight as he rummaged through the basket.

“This is a feast!” he exclaimed.

Elvira suppressed a giggle. “I’m glad ye like it,” she said, stroking the cat under the chin. It was purring away.

“Ginger seems tae like ye,” Rory nodded.

“Most animals dae. It is a gift, I suppose,” she said.

Rory pursed his lips and the happiness fell from his face. He exhaled deeply and turned to her. “Ginger was disappointed when I turned ye and yer family away. I am sorry for daeing that. It was wrong of me. I knew it was wrong at the time, but I just thought—” he sighed again. “Well, I suppose I was nae thinking properly. I hope ye can accept my apology, although I dinnae hae a gift like this tae offer ye. The only thing I hae is, well... is this,” he spread his arms around the forge. “Would ye perhaps like a tour?”

Elvira inclined her head. “That would be lovely,” she replied. Rory beamed and first took her to the forge, where he showed her his hammer. He offered it to her, and when she took it into her hands, her arms almost fell to the floor because of the weight. She strained to hold it aloft. “How dae ye use this hour after hour, day after

day?” she asked.

“Ye get used tae it,” Rory shrugged as though it was no grand feat at all, but she was suitably impressed. He then showed her the furnace and the anvil, as well as some of the things he had been working on. While Elvira was not necessarily attuned to the ways of the blacksmith, she had an instinctive appreciation for beauty, and the things Rory made certainly were beautiful. They showed skilled craftsmanship, and it was easy to see why he was in such high demand.

Rory took her through the back, showing her the kitchen and the storerooms. It seemed far bigger on the inside than it did on the outside. When she commented on this, Rory looked sheepish.

“I know. Which makes it even more hard-hearted of me tae turn ye away. There is plenty of room here and, well, I am sorry again.”

“I dinnae mean tae stab at ye, Rory. I just meant it’s a lot of space for one man. Dinnae ye get lonely here?”

“I hae Ginger,” he replied. “And I suppose I hae gotten used tae it over the years. I always assumed that Ian and Lucy would return someday. It is nae the same without them being here,” he replied.

“Why did Ian leave?” Elvira asked, emotion rising in her voice as she spoke about her old friend.

“That brings us tae the last part of the tour,” Rory said as he led her down to the basement. “Ian had an illegal distillery here. In secret. The Laird and his advisor decided that there should be a ban on alcohol, which people felt tae be unfair. Ian took it upon himself tae distill his own whiskey. We used tae smuggle it through the village.”

Elvira's eyes widened. "Ye smuggled whiskey? But I thought ye dinnae like tae get in trouble."

"I dinnae," Rory folded his arms across his chest and scowled. "But I was younger then, and Ian can be very persuasive when he wants tae."

Elvira chuckled. "I remember that," she thought back to when Ian had dared her to jump into streams and climb high trees, forcing her to confront and defeat her fears. "What happened after that? Did he get caught?"

"In a way," Rory led her back up to the table, where Ginger was nosing at the basket. Rory and Elvira sat at the table. He opened the basket and started sharing out the food, which Elvira had not expected. She had brought all of this for him, after all, yet he did not think twice about sharing it with her, and Ginger. Rory continued with the story.

"Glennrock, the Laird's advisor, had arranged for his daughter tae be married tae someone she dinnae want tae be married tae. Sae she escaped and ended up hiding in our basement. Ian feared that eventually the distillery would be discovered, and he certainly dinnae want the attention of Glennrock, but Lucy begged him tae stay, and I suppose I hae my part tae play in that as well. We hid her here, until things became tae dangerous. Eventually, they thought it was better tae leave. They wanted tae find happiness elsewhere. I never thought he would leave this forge. It was all he hae, well, until Lucy came along," a feeling of wistfulness crept into Rory's voice.

"And how is he now?" Elvira said before placing a creamy bit of cheese into her mouth, letting the flavor linger upon her tongue before she chewed.

"Oh, he's fine. I get letters from him and Lucy regularly. They settled in a small village and they both made themselves useful, I think it's what they needed. I would love tae see them again, but I can understand why they might think it's a wee bit

dangerous. If Glennrock should see Lucy again, I dinnae like tae think what might happen. I'm sure Ian will be happy tae hear that ye came looking for him."

Elvira was glad that Rory no longer cast suspicion on her story. There was a sense of mystery about him, though. He was clearly capable of great kindness, yet something had happened to make him guarded. Elvira wanted to know what this was.

"Rory, if ye dinnae mind me saying, there is something about ye that dinnae quite make sense."

"Oh?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow. Ginger was mewing for more meat, and Rory indulged her.

"It's just that ye helped Ian smuggle whiskey and harbor Glennrock's daughter, yet when it came tae helping me, ye acted as though I was poison. Ye were sae scared. Did something happen tae ye when ye were young? Were ye punished for something?"

"Almost," he smirked. "The truth is that my sister and I never hae anyone tae rely on. We were shunned by the world, and had tae rely on our own wits. We came up with tricks tae steal food and money just sae that we could survive, at least until my sister got married. It was nae an easy life. I hated living in fear and looking over my shoulder, always wondering if some guard was gaeing tae drag me away. Frankly, I dinnae understand how we managed tae stay free from capture. Anyway, I wanted tae leave all that behind and find an honest craft. I came tae this village because I knew of Ian's reputation, and I wanted tae learn from him. When he told me about the distillery, I thought about leaving, but I knew I could learn sae much more from him. He's the best blacksmith around, sae I did it even though I hated it. It seemed as though I could nae escape trouble, sae after he left I vowed that I would never put myself in that position again. I wanted tae live a simple life, but I may hae taken it tae an extreme. Sometimes ye cannae avoid a wee bit of trouble, especially when people

are in danger.”

His tone grew somber, as did his expression. As he revealed this bit of his past, everything fell into place. Elvira’s heart went out to him, and she felt ashamed of accusing him of being ignorant. The truth was that he did know what it was like to be treated as an outsider. He could hardly be blamed for wanting to avoid that again, yet still, he had plunged himself back into this way of life for her sake. Once again, she was overwhelmed with gratitude.

After they had eaten, Elvira invited him for a walk through the forest for some fresh air. Rory accepted this invitation gladly. They exited the forge and headed towards the forest, leaving the village behind and enveloped by a verdant world that was lush and fertile. The air was sweet, the ground soft below their feet, and the shadows of the trees stretched long around them. It was a place filled with magic. Sometimes, the most powerful magic was that which occurred between two people.

Rory pulled back a thorny branch so that Elvira could pass. It swung back as he let it go, but moved more sharply than he anticipated. He moved quickly to avoid it, but in his haste he got his ankle caught in a divot and lunged forward. Elvira reacted quickly, catching his arm and managing to steady him. She placed her hand around his back to support him, her fingers pressing against the tight muscles. He laughed and shook his ankle to make sure that it was undamaged, while still holding her hand. It was only then that he realized what was happening, and he relinquished his grip.

“I suppose now I am gaeing tae hae tae bring ye a basket of food tae thank ye for saving my life,” he said with an easy smile.

Elvira laughed, secretly lamenting the emptiness of her palm. “I will be happy with some flowers,” she said, although only meant it in jest.

However, when Rory spied a vivid spot of color, he rushed over and plucked a small

bouquet of flowers for Elvira, bringing them back and making an exaggerated bow. “For ye, my lady,” he said.

Elvira continued to laugh and brought them to her nose, breathing in the sweet scent. “These are lovely,” she said. She took one flower and wrapped the stem around locks of her hair. The bright petals nestled against her dark strands. She did the same with a few more. “Is this suitable?”

“It looks lovely,” Rory said. There was an undercurrent of tension to his voice that was unmistakable. Elvira rolled her lower lip between her teeth and stepped towards him, closing the distance between them.

“Perhaps ye should try one,” she said, taking the last flower and reaching up to the top of his head. Rory dipped his head, and she slid the flower behind his ear. As she did so, her fingers grazed his soft hair, running through the tousled locks. They dropped and rested against his cheeks, and then he looked up. His green gaze so intense, it left her breathless. Her heart thumped and tension crackled and tingled all over her body. She found that she did not wish to take her hands away from him at all. Instead, she felt compelled to share something intimate with him, but just as her eyelids were beginning to flutter shut, and they were being drawn together by the cosmic strands of fate, they heard groans and mutters.

Rory immediately took a defensive stance and placed himself in front of Elvira, moving her behind him as he turned towards the source of the noise.

“Be quiet,” he warned, for he had not brought a weapon with him. The flower fell from behind his ear, nestling forlornly on the ground. In his haste to move, he trampled upon the leaves with his foot. Emerging from a thicket was a shambling group of farmers, each of them injured. They looked beleaguered and, when Rory and Elvira realized there was nothing to fear from these people, they rushed towards the farmers.

“What happened?” Elvira asked, noticing the limps, the welts, the bruises, and the blood.

“Our farms were attacked. We were promised our lands would be safe. Where are the guards? Where are the warriors? Why are we nae being defended?” one of the farmers moaned.

Neither Rory nor Elvira had an answer for them. They could only offer them solace and hope. As the farmers passed, Elvira noticed some of them weeping for all they had lost. She could tell that it was not only the land that had suffered, but the people they loved as well. She glanced towards Rory. The serenity of their stroll had been broken, and this served as a grim reminder that Laird McKovac was not going to sit by idly and wait for the world to come to him.

Rory and Elvira led the wounded farmers back to the village, settling them in Torrin’s tavern. Torrin had a grim look on his face. Elvira, Isla, and Mirella helped tend to the farmers.

“This is nae good,” Torrin said, shaking his head.

“We should send word tae the keep,” Rory suggested.

“Aye, even though it will nae dae any good,” Torrin replied. Elvira came to stand beside them.

“They still need tae know what happened. But we should call a meeting with the defenders as well, taenight. Laird McKovac is getting closer, and we cannot allow this attack tae happen without response.”

There was a terse edge to his voice. Elvira stood beside him, ready to remain there, eager to help. Torrin had dismissed her insight before, but she sensed that Rory would

not make the same mistake.

Declan, Tarbuck, Rab, and Michael had all arrived at the tavern for a clandestine meeting, held late at night. Torrin had closed the tavern early, citing that there was no room, given that they were taking care of the wounded farmers. The regular patrons did not mind this, as they appreciated Torrin's hospitality, and nobody would begrudge him for making the decision to close early. The farmers had all been given rooms and a hearty meal. They were currently recovering upstairs, wallowing in the grim reality that their land had been ravaged, and their lives would never be the same again. Torrin checked that the doors and windows were all bolted shut, ensuring that nobody could sneak in. Rory helped, casting a glance at Elvira, as she had eavesdropped before.

This time, however, she stayed with Rory and forced herself into the meeting, while Isla remained in the background, taking care of the drinks and chastising the guests for making a mess. Mirella was upstairs. She had spent the day helping and listening to the farmers, soothing their raw emotions. Now, she was recuperating as well, watching over Tereza and Ollie. Elvira's heart was filled with fear. She had known it would be difficult to escape Laird McKovac's reach, but she had hoped it might take longer for this dark shadow to reach her. The atmosphere was tense, and the men of the village all had grim faces.

"Hae there been any word from the keep? Anything at all?" Torrin asked.

Declan shook his head slowly. "The messenger came. Glennrock heard the news himself. He said that he will consider it."

“Consider it?” Tarbuck’s face flushed with anger. “What is there tae consider! There’s nae denying that McKovac is bringing anger and fury tae our lands, and now farmers are suffering. Daes that fool nae realize that without the farms he will hae nae food?”

“I imagine he hopes he can broker peace with McKovac before they run out of food,” Declan replied.

Tarbuck swiped a dismissive hand in the air. “There can be nae peace with that man,” he said. Elvira found herself nodding in reply. She did not offer her own insight yet, however, for she wished to observe the meeting.

“What we need is tae get word tae the Laird. I cannae believe he would be sae uncaring tae let farmers be attacked like this. Glennrock cannae be telling him the truth,” Torrin said.

“And what are we supposed tae dae? Send someone sneaking intae the keep tae whisper in his ear? I think we hae tae face facts; we cannae count on the Laird. He hae abandoned us for grief. Glennrock hae all the power, and he dinnae want tae use it tae protect us,” Rab added.

“We hae tae rely on ourselves,” Rory said in a quiet voice.

“We’ve known it was gaeing tae come down tae this from the beginning,” Torrin nodded emphatically. “This just proves how vulnerable we are without support from the keep.”

“I cannae believe that he’s keeping all those guards up there, squatting behind the sturdy walls. Is he really gaeing tae forsake us like this?” Tarbuck said, his voice bellowing out to all corners of the room.

“He hae forsaken us already,” Michael said, his voice close to a whisper. “I was hoping that we could avoid fighting, but it seems that Laird McKovac hae made his intentions clear. We must defend ourselves. We must dae what Glennrock is unwilling tae dae, even if it makes him our enemy as well.”

“Aye, he is nae gaeing tae like the fact that we are arming ourselves,” Torrin said.

“I hae seen the swords ye hae crafted for us,” Rab turned towards Rory and gave an approving nod. “They are fine weapons. Keep them coming. We are gaeing tae need them.”

“It’s nae a matter of fine swords, it’s about the hands that wield them,” Declan said. “McKovac is sending soldiers tae attack us. We are defending ourselves with farmers, bakers, men who hae nae trained themselves. We cannae expect them tae defeat McKovac’s army.”

“There’s naething else we can dae. We can hardly welcome McKovac with open arms. Ye will hae tae train people in the basics of combat. Give them enough tae get by. It will hae tae suffice,” Torrin said.

Tarbuck puffed out his chest. “I hae already been giving lessons in preparation. The enemy might hae training, but we are fighting for our land, our homes, our lives . That will hae tae be enough tae give us the edge.”

“We need more,” Michael furrowed his brow. “What we need is information.”

“What dae ye mean?” Rab said.

“It’s nae good sitting around here waiting tae be attacked. If we knew where McKovac’s men were we could prepare traps and defenses, we could organize ourselves more efficiently. We should send out scouting parties and patrols,” Michael

explained.

“And if these patrols should get captured or killed? We could lose more people, hae them picked off in small groups. It would make life easy for McKovac,” Declan dismissed, shaking his head.

“Perhaps we could mark certain buildings as defensive points and train people tae look for anything suspicious. We should focus on their skills with a bow and arrow. If we can kill most of McKovac’s men from range, then we will nae hae tae worry about them attacking the village. I can make plenty of arrow-heads,” Rory suggested.

“In truth we need all of these things, and we should tae hae put these plans intae action months agae,” Torrin said gravely, shaking his head while he stroked his chin. “If only there was a way tae build walls around this village.”

“There’s nae sense in thinking about wishes and dreams. We need tae focus on the reality of the situation,” Declan scowled.

“The reality is that we need tae know what McKovac is planning,” Michael said.

Tarbuck rolled his eyes. “What he’s planning is tae come here and raze this village tae the ground! Soon enough, flames are gaeing tae be licking at yer heels as ye run away. I think all this talk is pointless. We should be taking what weapons we hae and gaeing after McKovac. The best thing ye can dae is tae take the enemy by surprise, and he certainly will nae expect the entire village tae charge at him.”

“And we will hear the death cries of all of them? That’s madness,” Michael replied with a horrified look on his face. Even Rab was not convinced, and looked towards Tarbuck with a dismayed expression.

“It might shame that coward Glennrock intae sending the men out from the keep,”

Tarbuck muttered. “Surely, he will nae stand by while the villagers throw themselves intae battle.”

“There are nae limits tae his cruelty. As long as he’s safe, he dinnae care about anything else. He’s blinded himself tae our plight,” Torrin said.

Elvira watched as the men began talking over one another, becoming more and more agitated as they all searched for a desperate solution that would ease their fears, yet one did not appear to them. Elvira noticed the anxious look on Rory’s face. If the men continued like this then they were never going to be able to defend the village because they would be too busy bickering amongst themselves. Elvira thought this was the perfect time to insert herself into the situation. She clasped her hands together and walked into the middle of the room. The harsh words around her created a cacophony, but she did not allow it to faze her.

“I have some insight that may be useful,” she said. Although her words were soft, they were different enough that she managed to capture the attention of the men. Her mere presence was commanding as well, something she had inherited from her mother. The men fell into silence, intrigued by what she had to say. “Before McKovac attacked yer land, he attacked his own land first. Many people hae been made rich by his endeavors, but others hae suffered, and they dinnae look upon him with any fondness. There is dissent amongst his men that could be leveraged. The Laird may find it difficult tae defend himself from conflict within his ranks,” Elvira held her head high, proud that she had made a contribution.

That pride was short-lived.

“Lass, with all due respect,” Tarbuck said, without showing any respect at all, “I dinnae think ye are qualified tae speak about such matters. Ye hae only been in this village for a short while. I appreciate yer enthusiasm and what ye hae done for the farmers, but this is business for warriors.”

“And I fail tae see how ye know of such things,” Declan said.

Elvira’s cheeks flared with anger. Once again she was being dismissed, and she did not appreciate this at all. “I’ve lived in McKovac lands. I’ve seen the way he treats his own people, and I would nae want that tae happen here. He wields power, aye, but there are those who conspire against him. If we can contact them, we can ally ourselves with them and become stronger in the process,” she said vehemently.

Declan shook his head. “And what if they refuse our help? Or worse, what if they pass the information we give them on tae McKovac?”

“That will nae happen,” Elvira said.

“Oh aye? And who is his main foe within his camp?” Torrin asked.

“His own son, Hamish.”

“His son?” Rab spat, shaking his head. “I would nae like tae put my trust in his son. Blood runs thick. How are we tae trust that this enmity will last between them? What if they mend their differences? We will be stranded.”

“And Glennrock will nae like that we conspired with the enemy. It will give him more reason tae leave us tae the wolves,” Michael added.

“Even if we did seek an alliance with Hamish, it dinnae mean we are safe. We all know that McKovac commands a powerful force, he might defeat his son. Even if he doesn’t, we dinnae know that the son will be any better than the father,” Declan said.

“He is. He hae been planning tae stop this madness,” a desperate tone crept into Elvira’s voice. This wasn’t how the meeting was supposed to have unfolded. They were supposed to listen to her.

“He hae nae made a good fist of it yet,” Tarbuck snorted with laughter. “If he is sae mighty, then he should hae made more progress. I am nae willing tae place our trust in tavern gossip and rumor. We hae tae rely on ourselves. That is all.”

It was a definitive statement, and as Elvira’s gaze drifted across the room, she saw that most of the men nodded in agreement. She had only been trying to help, yet was being treated like a fool. She dipped her head and stepped back, almost wishing she had never said anything at all. They were sealing their own fates by refusing to listen to her advice. Sadly, they were sealing the fates of the people they were trying to defend as well.

But then, Rory spoke up. He was the one dissenting voice between all the men, the only one to realize that Elvira’s insights were valuable.

“Elvira is right,” he said. His words were greeted with irritated murmurings and eyerolls. Rory lifted his hand and raised his voice, drowning out the others. His voice was rich and strong, bellowing out from powerful lungs. Elvira found herself captivated by the way he carried himself. “She is right!” he cried. “The solution tae our woes dinnae lie in isolating ourselves. We all know we cannae protect the village without help from trained men. Aye, we might fight valiantly, but blood will be spilled. We need tae make alliances, and if we cannae rely on our own leader, then we should seek help from those who are opposed tae our enemy. Perhaps the reason why they hae made nae progress is because they feel alone as well. Taegether we could be stronger. I dinnae think we can afford tae lose this opportunity. And Elvira’s words are nae just whispers or hopes. She lived in McKovac lands for a long time. She knows more than we dae, and we should listen tae her,” he offered her a reassuring smile. Elvira returned one of gratitude. Although she regretted that Rory’s approval was needed to give her words the proper weight, she was glad that someone in the room heeded them.

“Rory is right,” Torrin added, no doubt swayed by Rory’s support of Elvira. “Declan,

ye know we cannae rely on the keep. Tarbuck, ye must see that we cannae train everyone in time. We would be sending them tae slaughter.” The other men began to protest again, but Torrin stretched out his palms, maintaining control of the meeting. “I’m nae saying it’s a perfect plan, but at the moment we dinnae hae much choice. It’s certainly worth exploring, and we should nae ignore the insight of someone who hae more experience with McKovac than the rest of us put taegether,” Torrin turned towards Elvira as he said this, making up in some small way for how he had acted towards her before.

With Rory and now Torrin supporting Elvira, the rest of the men slowly began to agree with them. It took some more persuasive words before they were fully satisfied, but in the end they came to support the plan. It was a risk, but it seemed to have the most benefit while also protecting those who needed protecting. As they discussed the particular details of the plan, it was Michael who came up with a solution about how they were going to travel through McKovac lands without drawing attention to themselves.

“We could send a small group of people posing as merchants. We hae enough stock between us tae fill a merchant wagon, and it would allow us tae move about freely,” he suggested, and his words were met with firm nods.

“And I shall come with ye. I know the lay of the land, and I will be able tae offer advice,” Elvira said. This time nobody opposed her.

That would come later.

The meeting was coming to an end. What had begun as a tense, febrile dispute had turned into a half-decent plan, but Rory’s heart was still filled with doubt. He had stood up for Elvira’s insights, knowing that she should not be dismissed. However, he could not understand why she was seeking to put herself in further danger. While the other men were in the process of leaving, Rory cornered Elvira.

“What are ye daeing?” he asked.

Elvira looked at the empty mugs in her hand and blinked slowly. “I’m helping Isla clean up. I sometimes wonder if ye men realize how much mess ye are making, or if ye are oblivious tae it,” she said.

“Nae about that,” he scowled, “why did ye volunteer tae gae with them?”

Elvira furrowed her brow. They spoke in whispers. Only hours before, they had been standing in a glade, about as close as they were now. She had placed a flower in his hair and he had been lost in her bright eyes. All day he wondered what might have happened had they not been interrupted by the farmers, but every time he did, tension ran through his body and uncomfortable heat prickled over his skin.

“How could I nae gae with them? Ye need my help. I know the lands, I know the people.”

“But ye hae already been captured once. Ye are gaeing back intae the heart of the land ye escaped. Ye are only putting yeself in danger. If anyone should see ye...”

“I hae proud warriors tae protect me,” she said, a smile curling on her face, gesturing towards Tarbuck and Rab.

“This is nae joke,” Rory hissed.

Elvira’s face darkened. “Ye dinnae think I know that? It’s why I hae tae help. I cannae stand by and watch all of ye risk ye lives when I can help. Ye stand a better chance with me than ye dae without me. I’m nae gaeing tae sit behind these walls like Glennrock sits behind his, or dae ye think me a coward?”

“Ye know I dinnae think that. I’m only trying tae-” Rory said in a beleaguered tone.

Elvira sighed and softened. She massaged the bridge of her nose. It had been a long day for them. “I know what ye are trying tae dae, Rory, and I appreciate it, but this is a fight I cannae avoid. I was unable tae stop them from destroying my home, but at least now I can help stop them from destroying this village. Besides, I want tae keep Tereza and Ollie safe. I’d love for them tae grow up without being afraid of the world. We might be treated as outsiders, but this land is ours and we deserve the chance tae defend it. Dinnae try to take that away from me,” she said, and stormed away before Rory could argue against her.

Rory lowered his head and nodded. He understood that there wasn’t any way to dissuade her from her intent to partake in this plan, but he would do all he could to protect her. There was something deep in his heart that compelled him to shield her from the world’s ills, as though it was some noble duty he had been sworn to. He wasn’t about to neglect that duty for anything. He wanted all of this to be over so that they could walk through the forest again without the shadow of war looming in the distance. He wanted to hear her laugh and find more flowers for her. He wanted her to be safe.

In the meeting it had been decided that Tarbuck, Rab, and Michael would pose as merchants. Michael was an unassuming man, and it was hoped his presence would not draw any attention. Tarbuck and Rab would be able to defend the wagon in case they were attacked. Rory was told to stay behind because he was needed to make weapons. Declan needed to resume his duties at the keep, as his absence would have been noticed, and the same went for Torrin at the tavern. While Elvira waited for them to gather, she bid farewell to her family.

She hugged Tereza and Ollie. “Will ye be gone long?” Tereza asked.

Elvira shook her head. “I’ll be back before ye know it. Now, ye and Ollie need tae help Torrin and Isla around her. Remember what I told ye about behaving. When I come back they’re all gaeing tae tell me how ye behaved, and I dinnae want tae be disappointed,” Elvira said. Tereza and Ollie stood at attention with rigid backs, their heads held high. Elvira hugged them again and they went scurrying off.

“I hate lying tae them,” she sighed to Mirella.

“Ye are nae lying tae them. Ye are just offering them hope. And I believe ye will return soon. Yer story is nae one tae end with those wretched people.”

“Dae any of us get tae choose when our story ends?” Elvira cast a hopeless look towards Mirella. “If I dinnae come back-” Elvira began, but Mirella held up a hand.

“Dinnae speak like that. We will see each other again, if nae in this life, then the

next.” She took Elvira into her arms and hugged her tightly. “Ye are a brave girl for daeing this. As ye grow older, ye remind me more and more of yer parents,” Mirella said. Elvira knew she meant it as a compliment, but it was difficult to take it as such when she was reminded about how both her parents had died before their time. She wiped tears from her eyes and nodded towards Mirella, silently acknowledging the love she had for her family, yet not expressing it verbally in the hope that she would have many more opportunities when she returned.

Michael arrived with an old cart that was filled to the brim with goods. It was pulled by a single horse. Tarbuck and Rab had been waiting for him and looked upon this with scorn.

“Ye were supposed tae bring a wagon!” Tarbuck cried out.

“This was the best I could dae,” Michael said defensively.

“It’ll dae, it’ll dae,” Rab said, calming Tarbuck’s sour mood. Elvira looked in the wagon, noticing a range of goods, from pots and pans to clothes. It was a scattered variety of things, and it was clear that Michael had aimed for quantity over quality. She wasn’t sure it would stand up to scrutiny, but hopefully, they would not be examined.

“Ye might as well fetch the horses,” Tarbuck sighed. Elvira stood close to them and wrapped the cloak around her shoulders. When she reached McKovac land, or if they spied a patrol in the distance, she would pull the hood over her head to obscure her features. Her heart thudded with nerves because she feared that her presence, while helpful, might actually be putting these men in danger. However, she had explained her situation to them, and they had all stated that they wouldn’t let anyone take her. Just as Tarbuck and Rab were returning from the stables with horses, there was a surprising visit from Rory, who Elvira assumed had come to see her off. However, as he approached, she noticed that a sword hung from his waist.

“Hae ye come tae give us a parting gift?” Michael asked.

“Actually, I hae decided tae come with ye,” Rory declared. Elvira could not stop a smile from appearing on her face. It would be good to have another strong man as part of the group, but on a person level, she was glad that she would get to spend more time with him. She hadn’t been able to bring herself to say goodbye to him, as she hadn’t known what to say. She wasn’t even sure how to describe their relationship. Their friendship had emerged from enmity, but somehow it seemed deep. She felt a profound connection with him, and yet she was uncertain how much of this was shared by Rory. The last thing she wanted was to go to him and babble about vague feelings, driven by the fear that she might never get to see him again.

“But ye hae tae stay here and make weapons,” Rab said.

“I worked through the night tae get a start on things, but if this plan works, then we might nae need as many weapons as we thought. Besides, I think we are gaeing tae need another convincing merchant. I am used tae selling wares, and I can bluster my way through if we get caught. I also brought some things tae add tae the collection,” he rolled a sack off his back and emptied it into the cart. Now the stock looked far more impressive. “It’s nae as much of a stretch for me tae pretend tae be a blacksmith than it is for ye. I’m nae gaeing tae sit by while ye ride intae danger.”

The tone of his voice up until the last few words had been light and playful. Then, solemnity descended upon him, and it was clear to the others that he was not going to be dissuaded from this notion.

Tarbuck sighed. “Well, there’s nae use arguing with ye when we could be getting on with things,” he said. They fetched another horse from the stable for Rory, and then set off away from the village. They rode at a slow pace, with the cart trundling behind them. Instead of taking the main route out of the village, which was a wide, smooth path leading to a network of roads stretching to various points of interest in the area,

they headed towards a secret path in the forest. This was a path that had been used by Ian to receive supplies, and other illicit purposes. It was not always easy going, and occasionally the cart seemed as though it was going to be upturned after the wheels hit a divot, but it was still safer than the alternative. Here, they were obscured by the forest as well. If they sensed anyone approaching, they could veer off into the forest and hide among the foliage with ample warning. This trail would take them away from the farms, which they hoped was where McKovac's soldiers were located. They couldn't see any reason for there to be any patrols out here, as there was nothing but a forest. There was nothing for McKovac to conquer here.

Rab and Tarbuck rode on ahead of Michael, while Elvira and Rory picked up the rear. The rolling wheels of the cart made a clattering sound, but Elvira and Rory could hear themselves speak. It actually afforded them some privacy as the noise masked the sound of their voices from the others. They rode close together as well, their horses practically nuzzling, and there were moments when Elvira's leg brushed against Rory's.

"Are ye sure ye are making the right choice about coming with us rather than making weapons?" Elvira asked.

Rory gave a somber nod. "I thought about it long and hard. The thing is that weapons are nae gaeing tae make the difference. I could make enough swords for all the villagers tae hae two each, but in an unskilled hand they will nae help. We need more trained soldiers, more people who know how tae fight. I think I am best needed here. Besides," he said, cocking his head towards her, "I cannae let ye take all the risks."

Elvira smiled. "It seems as though ye are nae reluctant tae accept trouble intae ye life anymore."

Rory rolled his shoulders. "I would much rather stay in the forge, but the world is a troubled place. If people dae naething then men like McKovac get tae dae whatever

they want. It was something I never realized until the end of my time with Ian. At first, I just thought he was daeing it tae make extra coin. I dinnae see that he was fighting for a principle, fighting against unjust authority. We all like tae think that the world is made of fair rules, but it takes good people tae fight for justice. If we turn away from them, then we're as bad as the people who allow it tae happen. I convinced myself that Glennrock and the Laird would eventually see sense and help people, but they still stay behind their impenetrable walls. They cannae see that the closer McKovac gets, the more difficult it will be tae oppose him. Ach... I dinnae know why I am telling ye all this. Ye know it will enough already."

Elvira offered him a sweet smile. "Still, it is good tae hear it from yer own lips," she replied, her heart warmed by his presence. In the back of her mind, whispers from long ago swirled around, a foretelling from her mother about the kind of man she would fall in love with. It had been a vague shadow, but now the illusory form was taking shape in her mind, growing in detail and substance. There were strong legs, a thick, glistening chest, bulging biceps.

Elvira quelled the feelings before she became too overwhelmed, and focused on the rhythm of the cantering horse beneath her, while the world rolled by in a scene of earthy colors.

The journey was fairly long, taking up the majority of the day. They followed the winding path, stopping occasionally for a rest, or when they heard a suspicious noise in the distance. Thankfully, they did not come across a McKovac patrol until they grew nearer his lands. Elvira grew tense as she returned to the land she knew so well. The memories and sensations that flooded her mind were more painful than she realized they would be. As they passed fields they saw scorched ground. The ash that settled there caused a bitter taste to itch at the back of her throat. Tears filled her eyes when they came across dead bodies. The olive skin and tattered clothes showed them to be Romani. Rory offered her a sympathetic glance, and a mumbled word of sorrow. It didn't really make any difference, however. It was a sign of the brutality of

Laird McKovac, a man with power and influence. Instead of using these things to improve life for his people, he instead pressed down on them with his heel, choking the life out of them. Her skin crawled with fear and revulsion. She lowered her head, both to hide her face, and her tears.

They rode on, getting closer and closer to the tavern in which she had spent so many nights, and helped so many people. She wondered how many of them were still her allies. They were quick with their words of support, but offering their action was another thing entirely. Instead, they would keep their heads low and protect themselves. Elvira swallowed a lump in her throat. She hoped that Hamish would agree to an alliance. Otherwise, she had dragged Rory and the others here for nothing.

“Trouble ahead,” Rab called, tossing his head over his shoulder. Elvira peered forward and saw a group of broody men riding dark horses, heading straight for them.

“Get out of sight,” Rory hissed in a whisper. While Elvira was not ashamed of her heritage, she was pragmatic. She veered away and guided her horse through a thicket, hiding among the leaves and remaining still, keeping her breathing slow. She overheard McKovac’s men approaching, telling the others to slow down.

“Ho, who gaes there,” a voice cried out.

“Just a merchant, hoping tae sell our wares,” Michael said in a trembling voice. Elvira began to realize why it had been a good idea for Rory to come with them, as he was more confident in his speech.

“Are ye hiding something?” the soldier said.

“Oh no, we hae naething tae hide. My friend is just a wee bit troubled,” Rory said.
“We heard an old legend that this place is cursed.”

“Ah, well, ye heard right. Cursed with Romani vermin,” the guard spat after he spoke. Elvira winced, but bit her tongue. “Ye seem well-armed for merchants.”

“Ye can never be tae careful, especially with all these outsiders roaming around. We hae trouble with them elsewhere. They came out of nowhere and tried tae steal everything we hae. Thought that investing in a couple of warriors was better than losing everything we’re hoping tae sell,” Rory replied, belying nothing.

“Aye, they’re tricky ones alright. Things will get better soon. Laird McKovac is working tae cleanse this land of them. It’ll be better soon, and everything can gae back tae the way things are supposed tae be. But until then, ye just be careful.”

“Oh aye, we will. And if we see any Romani we’ll dae yer Laird a favor and string them up on a tree,” Rory said.

McKovac’s man laughed. “Oh, he’ll appreciate that, I’m sure. If ye want his favor, then take a trinket from them and bring it tae the keep. He might reward ye.”

“I appreciate the advice,” Rory replied.

“Well, we hae tae stick taegether. We need tae take the Highlands back for ourselves,” the guard said, before riding away. Elvira waited in silence as she heard the horses flee, and then there was a beckoning whisper from Rory, telling her that it was safe to come out.

“I’m sorry ye hae tae hear that,” he said. Elvira gulped and shook her head. “It’s naething more than I’m used tae. It’s just... I suppose I hae gotten used tae moving freely about the village. Dae ye understand now why I hae tae leave?”

“I dae, although I’m struggling tae see why ye stayed here for such a long time in the first place.”

“It’s my home. At least it was. This is where Ma and Da fell in love, where I made friends, where I helped people. Nae everyone is like them. McKovac poisons minds and picks them tae spread his hatred around the Highlands. The sooner we break the stranglehold he hae on this place, the better,” Elvira said. They all geed their horses and continued moving forward.

Thankfully, they did not encounter another patrol before they reached the tavern, where they stabled their horses. Michael and Rab stayed with the cart, while Rory and Tarbuck entered the tavern with Elvira, who hunched her shoulders and tried to be as unassuming as possible. Night was a cloak that had been draped over the land, and thankfully there were no guards in the tavern. Rory nodded to Tarbuck, telling him to go stand in a corner. This way, if there was trouble, at least Tarbuck could attack from a different angle and perhaps surprise any assailant.

Elvira walked through the tavern, growing in confidence as she did so. She noticed a few people looking towards her, although they did not dare say a thing. She moved to her regular table in the corner, the one she had occupied many times before, offering her wisdom and insight. Rory joined her. It didn’t take long for someone to come over.

“I’m sorry, I could nae help but notice ye...are ye Romani? Dae ye offer palm readings? It’s just we hae someone who used tae-”

Elvira lifted her gaze and drew back her hood. The person who had approached her was a man called Liam. When he saw Elvira, the color drained from his face, as though he had just seen a ghost.

“It’s me, Liam. I hae returned.”

“Oh, lass... when we heard about yer farm we all thought... oh, is ye gran well? And the wee ones?”

Elvira smiled and nodded. It felt good to be in a familiar place again, with familiar people. “Aye, they’re fine, at least for now. Can ye fetch the others? Ones ye know we can trust? I hae some news,” Elvira said. Liam moved around the tavern, speaking to certain people. While he did this, Elvira and Rory returned outside to stand with Rab and Michael. In a short time, Liam led a group of people out of the tavern and found her. Elvira and Rory quickly described everything that was happening in the village, and how McKovac needed to be stopped.

“Aye, things are only getting worse. As every day passes he loses more and more of himself. I dread tae think where it’s gaeing tae lead before the end,” Liam said.

“We need help,” Rory replied. “Unfortunately, our leader is reluctant tae take up arms against yer Laird. We hae villagers willing tae fight, but they are untrained. If we band taegether, however, we might be able to attack McKovac from two directions. He cannae defend in every direction at once.”

“And ye should get a message tae Hamish as well. We need tae speak tae him. If he truly disapproves of his Da’s actions, then he needs tae start showing it. We want tae meet with him and create a plan that will end all of this hostility once and for all. It is time for us tae be free from McKovac’s cruelty, tae be free from living in fear.”

Liam and the others nodded. They agreed to harbor the small group and protect their secret, while sending a message to Samuel. Elvira was relieved to hear this. Samuel had saved her once before, and he was sympathetic to the Romani people. It finally seemed as though the tide was turning for the better. Perhaps it was only a matter of time before the Highlands were safer for her people.

Tarbuck and Rab decided to stay with the cart, fearing that the goods and the horses might be stolen. They also wanted to be on hand at the tavern in case any guards came by. While there were no rooms free, Tarbuck and Rab were offered the stable. They had slept rough before, so had no qualms about taking up such an offer. The other villagers were hospitable, offering their rooms. There was one buxom lady called Elaine who had taken a shine to Michael. Her eyes gleamed and she practically dragged him away. He was open-mouthed like a fish, but was so stunned he couldn't utter a single word of protest.

"I think he's in for a memorable night," Tarbuck chuckled as the large, voluptuous woman hauled Michael away. The poor man looked intimidated, but that feeling may not have lasted for the entire night. Liam offered her and Rory a room in his house, which they gladly accepted. He only had a small house, and he apologized that he could only offer a single room. Elvira told him that any help was appreciated, and they would make do. Rory immediately undid his cloak and arranged it on the hard floor, using it as a makeshift blanket. While Elvira appreciated the chivalry of the moment, it felt wrong that he should suffer such hardship.

"Rory, at least come on the bed until we are ready tae sleep. Ye deserve more than the floor."

"Believe me, I hae slept in worse places than this," he chuckled.

"But those days are over," she patted the bed and shifted over. The bed creaked as his weight settled upon it. It felt as though she was in the water and the tide rolled

underneath her. It was almost powerful enough to roll her body towards him.

“Aye, I suppose they are. Ye know, sometimes I still cannae believe that I hae a forge all to my own. When I think back tae the abandoned cabin that Anne and I used tae live in, oh, the wind blew through at night and the rain always found a way in. I never thought there would be any escape.”

“I’m glad that things are better now.”

“Oh aye, all thanks tae Anne. She never stopped trying tae get us a better life.”

“She sounds wonderful. I’d like tae meet her. Where is she now?”

“She lives on a farm with her husband, Finlay. It was actually a funny story. They were both trying tae trick each other. She thought he was the son of a wealthy Laird, and he believed she was the niece of an important merchant. In the end, they dinnae hae much more than each other, but that was enough.”

“It often is. My parents dinnae hae much more than that. They always taught us tae rejoice in family because these are the things that last forever, longer than gold or jewels or anything else.”

“What happened tae them?”

Elvira sighed and dipped her head. She tapped her fingers on the blanket. “Ma died nae long after childbirth. The strain was tae much for her. And Da... well, he fell foul of McKovac’s hatred. Ye know, we only ever tried tae help people. Da was a farmer, tilling the land. Ma helped people by reading their palms. They never asked for trouble. It found them, though. Da found people attacking some Romani woman, sae he went tae defend her, and he got a sword through his stomach. It feels like we are only one moment away from death,” she shook her head.

“I’m sorry. It’s nae right. But yer parents sound like good people. I take it ye inherited these gifts from ye Ma? Palm reading, I mean.”

Elvira nodded and smiled. “I inherited more than that. People say that I am the spitting image of her. But aye, when I was old enough, I could sense that people needed solace and comfort. I try to help people where I can. Everyone needs a wee bit of advice now and then, and sometimes just speaking tae someone can help.”

“Or have something hammered intae yer head,” Rory said with an amused smile. Elvira chuckled and relaxed in his warm presence.

“Aye, or that. Sometimes it’s important tae tell people what they need tae hear, nae what they want.”

Rory pressed his lips together and adjusted his position, holding his hand out in front of him, his palm facing upwards. “I wonder if my future has changed since ye read it last. Am I still destined for cowardice?” he asked with a teasing smile.

“I’m nae sure there’s a good destiny awaiting any of us, at least nae while we’re in this place. I hate being back here. It feels like something bad could happen at any moment,” she shuddered as she spoke.

Rory inched towards her and lowered his voice. “Naething bad is gaeing tae happen while I’m here” he said, and she believed him with all her heart. “Ye should try tae stop thinking about such things. Maybe reading my palm will distract ye.”

“Ye really want me tae read ye palm?”

Rory shrugged. “Why nae?” he said.

Elvira stared at his palm and shifted her position. She rested one hand underneath his,

holding it steady, her fingertips reaching his wrist. Once again, warmth thrummed through her body, seeping from his body to hers, and it only seemed to be getting more intense with every moment that passed. She curled her index finger from her other hand and traced the lines of his palm, feeling the callouses, following the long furrows that were etched into his flesh. This time he did not snatch his hand away, and she felt a tingling sensation running up her arm. These were the hands of a man, not a mere boy. These were the hands of a man who had rushed into the darkness to save her, who now rushed into battle. These were the hands that had curled in anger when he thought she was in danger. This was the man who had gotten himself wounded when trying to protect her.

This...this was the kind of man her mother had always spoken about.

There was a slight gasp, a hitch in her breath when she realized this. That moment all those years ago when Maria had given her advice...advice that Elvira had dismissed over the years, thinking it nothing more than a lesson given from a mother to a daughter. Perhaps there was more to it, though. Perhaps Maria really could glimpse the future, and it wasn't Ian she spoke of, as Elvira had once believed, but this sweet, vulnerable, stubborn man called Rory.

"Is something wrong? What dae ye see?" Rory asked, his brow furrowed with concern as she drew back. He interpreted her hesitation as shock upon seeing something that should not have been seen. Elvira dipped her head, not wishing for him to see the color that ran to her cheeks. Usually, she was so poised and always knew what to say to the people who came to her for solace, yet now she was lost for words. Rory was not like the others. When she read his palm, she was not reading it solely for him, but also for herself. There was a feeling that their futures were entwined, at least she certainly hoped they would be. But... did he feel the same? While he had changed his mind about helping people in need, he still valued his isolation. He had lived in his forge alone for a long time and had gotten used to spending life by himself. He was devoted to his craft, and if he took up with a

Romani would his business suffer? Would people refuse to buy from him because they thought he had been ensorcelled by a witch?

He might not have seen her as a woman at all, but rather as a broken, wretched thing that needed protecting. He might have just pitied her, the way one would pity a bird with a wounded wing that flopped around outside a door, one that you nursed back to health until it could soar again. Would Rory have charged into danger for anyone, or had he only done it because she was special?

When she had his palm in her hand it was easy to believe the former, but the risk was so great. Elvira had always been guarded with her heart. If she confessed to her feelings and Rory did not share them then it would place them in great danger. They would be confused and awkward, but now was the time to be focused. They could not allow themselves to have any distractions.

For all of her insight, Elvira was at a loss. All she knew was that when she looked into his eyes she felt something swell within her heart. She wished it was easy for her to say what was on her mind, but for once, she was a coward, and she was ashamed.

“Naething is wrong,” she said quickly. “I see great riches in ye future, great success. I daresay ye will become the most renowned blacksmith in all the Highlands. People will travel from miles around tae purchase yer wares, and Lairds will make great requests of ye,” Elvira said. Rory smiled, seemingly satisfied with what she said, although she chastised herself. She had always lived by a principle of honesty, yet now, when her own heart was on the line, she found herself retreating. Her grip lingered on his warm hand, reluctant to let it go. If only he would make his feelings plain, if only he would make some kind of gesture so that she could be certain of how he felt, then things would be easier.

“Perhaps I should try reading yer palm,” Rory said, his voice a rolling burr, the soft light of the candle swallowing them. Elvira watched as Rory gently turned her hand

upside down, this time placing his fingers upon her palm. Unlike her, his movements were not delicate. They were clumsy, awkward, yet they still made her tingle. She watched as he dragged his finger around her palm, not following the lines at all. There was no thought in her mind that he was mocking her, however. In fact, it was rather sweet.

“I think that after this, all yer troubles will be behind ye. Ye and yer family will find peace, and can settle wherever ye like. I don’t think people will shun ye any longer. Ye can dae anything ye want in this world, Elvira, and yer siblings will never hae tae worry about being in danger like ye are now,” Rory said. She knew that he wasn’t using any special insight as he had no idea how to read the lines of a palm, but she still appreciated the words. There was an earnest gleam in his eyes. She knew that he wasn’t lying to her or trying to placate her. He wasn’t being patronizing. He wasn’t saying things he thought she wanted to hear. No, he was telling her what he believed, and what he wanted for her. He saw a bright future where the Romani could be treated as any other Highlanders rather than intruders, and she knew that when he looked at her, he did not see someone who needed to be exiled from the land. He just saw a woman.

He just saw her.

But, did the future he pictured show the two of them together? If it did, he made no mention of it, and these feelings became words that clotted under her tongue, refusing to break through the barrier of her lips. It was getting late, and her eyelids were getting heavy. He yawned, which made her yawn as well. If they stayed up all night talking, then they would be no use the following day, and they needed all their wits about them if they were to survive this incursion into McKovac territory. Elvira suggested they sleep. Rory agreed, turning away to blow out the candle. They were plunged into darkness and Rory slipped off the bed, too much of a gentleman to remain so close to a woman when they were unmarried.

Elvira felt his hand pulling away from hers. Out of instinct she grabbed it, squeezing it tight. He squeezed back. Their palms pressed together. Their fingers entwined. For a moment a thought flashed through her mind, an image of their bodies twirling around each other like their fingers were doing now, the expanse of their flesh melting into each other just as their palms were locked. It was only a fleeting moment, but it brought an intense heat rushing through her body, leaving her utterly breathless.

As their fingers parted, she rolled onto her back and wondered if this had been a glimpse of the future, or if it was just something that she desperately wanted to happen.

Perhaps it was both.

Morning arrived. Rory awoke to find the pale light pouring in through the window. He tilted his neck from side to side, stretching out the cricks and knots that had formed after sleeping on the floor. It took him back to years before, where any surface was a bed for him and Anne. He pushed himself to his feet and looked at Elvira, who lay in the bed. Dark strands of curled hair spilled across her face. Her chest rose and fell. Her top had fallen askew in the night from her tossing and turning, leaving the hollow of her throat exposed. Rory's throat went tight at the sight of her flawless skin. He raised his palm, remembering how it felt to have a part of her so close to him. This time he had not drawn back out of fear. The shock of having someone touch him so readily had worn away, and he had begun to enjoy it.

He tried to not interpret anything more from it. After all, this was Elvira's way. She was at ease with other people and made her livelihood from holding people's hands. It didn't make him more special than anyone else, no matter how he might wish for things to be different. She likely felt indebted to him for chasing after her and saving her life. It was a fraught time for her, and romance was probably the last thing on her mind. Still, he found himself wishing that he had said something the previous night.

The moment had almost seemed too perfect, her soft voice rolling past his ears, the light of the candle flickering beside them, her round eyes so open and profound, liquid in their loveliness.

Elvira stirred, and Rory was aware that if she awoke to find him looming over her, staring at her, it might come across as creepy. He cleared his throat and moved to the window, pretending that he had just roused this moment rather than having stood there for a while.

“Morning,” Elvira said, the word stretching out as she twisted her body. Rory glanced at her, heat bristling all over his body as he saw the slender outline of her figure under the blanket. It was alluring, captivating, but he pushed these feelings deep down inside, not wishing to make things more complicated than they already were.

Rory waited for her to rouse herself, and then they headed downstairs, reuniting with the others at the tavern.

There was a different atmosphere in the tavern in the morning. The smell of bacon and bread filled the air. Rory nodded towards his companions. Once they were all gathered, the tavern owner came by, speaking in a low voice.

“Samuel replied tae the message,” he said, handing them a plate of food, beneath which was a letter. Tarbuck pulled the letter out and scanned it quickly, huffing and shaking his head after reading it. He handed it to Rory.

“What does it say?” Elvira asked.

A shadow fell over Rory’s face. “It says that he’s willing tae meet, but only with ye. He says he’ll meet ye in the woods close tae yer farm sae that ye can discuss the best way tae approach Hamish inside the keep.”

Elvira nodded. “He must think it’s tae dangerous for us all tae gae traipsing around the territory. It’s easier for one person tae sneak through, and I know these lands better than any of ye. The woods he speaks of are notorious for keeping things hidden.”

Rory was surprised that Elvira accepted this so readily without any hesitation.

“Dae ye nae think it could be a trap? I mean, asking ye tae gae and meet him alone when he knows there are people hunting ye...” Rory shook his head. The others nodded in agreement. Elvira stared at him with the same fire in her eyes she possessed at the meeting in Torrin’s tavern. Everyone had disputed her words then apart from Rory.

“I know Samuel. He hae always been sympathetic tae our cause. My gran healed his sister, and he hae always felt indebted tae us. There is nae chance this could be a trap. He is against the Laird as much as we are. I trust him with my life, and we cannae afford tae risk this opportunity. If he thinks it is tae dangerous for us tae travel taegether then I must make this journey alone. He is a guard, perhaps he hae heard reports of a strange merchant trundling through the territory. They might capture us as soon as they see us.”

“Which is exactly what will happen tae ye if they find ye, and we will hae nae idea what hae happened! Ye may trust this man, but I dinnae like the situation. Even if we can trust Samuel, there is a great distance for ye tae travel before ye get tae him. Anything could happen tae ye.”

“I know these woods,” Elvira said through gritted teeth, but Rory was not going to be dissuaded.

“And ye know that there are guards sneaking about in every shadow. Let me come with ye. I will follow from a safe distance. Surely, Samuel will nae begrudge ye from

haeing someone tae guard yer back? We will leave the wagon here.”

Rory spoke sense. Elvira could not dispute the logic of his words, so she eventually nodded. The others all agreed with Rory, so it was settled. Rory and Elvira would leave by themselves and meet with Samuel. He would tell them how to contact Hamish, and then they could move forward with their plan. Rory pressed his lips together in a thin line. Perhaps it was just because they were in enemy territory, but he had a feeling that something was going to go wrong.

After a hearty meal, Elvira set off towards the rendezvous point. Rory waited for a while, and then followed her. She glanced over her shoulder, watching him amble along, trying to look inconspicuous, but only drawing more attention to him as he did so. He loped along, not marching like a warrior, but rather like someone on a morning stroll without a care in the world. Only he did have a care, lots of them. Elvira turned ahead, watching where she was going. A scowl adorned her face. Once again, the men overruled her, thinking that they knew better. This time, Rory had joined in with her. When were they going to accept that she knew this land better than they did? Her judgment was never enough for them, apparently, and she feared that this was never going to change.

Still, she supposed that there was reason for them to be cautious. They were in enemy territory after all, and Rory did have a point when he said that just because Samuel was trustworthy, it didn't mean that anyone else was. If Elvira did run into a wayward guard patrol, it would be difficult for her to escape, so perhaps it was for the best that Rory had joined her. It was really the principle of the matter that troubled her. She hated people casting doubt on her words. It made her feel unwanted and ignored. It was really a microcosm of the way the Romani people had been treated, and she was tired of it.

Elvira pulled her hood over her head and slipped into the thicket, using the trees to obscure her appearance from the road that led around the forest. If anyone came upon her, it was likely they would know her as Romani from a first glance, so she had to stop that first glance from ever taking place. Walking through the woods brought memories of running freely with Tereza and Ollie, telling them stories about how the

trees came alive and how, if they listened at the right time, they would hear the song of the wind. Elvira reached out and brushed gnarled trunks with her fingers, wishing that the trees did indeed come alive. She imagined they would have infinite wisdom to pass on. She smiled as she thought about the look on Laird McKovac's face if an army of trees descended on his keep, their roots running underneath the stone walls and uprooting the building, turning it into a ruin before the Laird could do anything to defend himself.

The smile faded as Elvira sighed. Sadly, so many rumors and myths had been spread about the Romani that some people thought they were capable of causing such arcane effects. Then again, reason and logic were always blinded by hatred. The ones who found themselves dominated by fear were superstitious and cowardly. They allowed themselves to be ruled by these dark emotions and struck out without thinking at all. A bitter expression descended on Elvira's face. She could only hope that when Hamish took control, he would change things for the better and people would begin to see that the Romani were just people of a different culture, and there was nothing to fear from them.

Her trek through the woods was largely uneventful. There was one moment where she heard voices in the distance. A patrol of guards were not making a stealthy approach, so she ducked down and hid behind a gorse bush. In the distance, she could see them walking along the road, laughing to themselves. They passed without suspecting a thing. Elvira looked behind her and saw Rory crouched down as well, his hand resting on his sword, ready to draw it in case danger came her way. It was as though he were her sworn guardian, ready to march into the depths of the underworld to defend her honor. It was flattering really, and now she wished that she had been braver the previous night. They had shared a few moments now where it felt they had been close to something wonderful, yet something had always held them back. Elvira yearned to know what it was like to feel love's kiss, to caress something more than a palm.

She pushed these feelings away from her mind before she fell into a stupor. The path she took was a winding one, unmarked on the ground, only in her mind. To an outsider, the trees would have looked identical, but she could see the different grooves, the different tilts, the different colors of the leaves. It was all intimately familiar, but then reality came crashing back to her as she came across her home again. For a moment, she believed she would see the house intact, for that was the most prominent memory. Instead, she saw the charred ruins, the scorched ground, the ash that lingered in the air. If this place were a body, then she would be looking at a dark hole where the heart would have been, ripped out of the chest and leaving a void behind. She stumbled and blinked tears away from her eyes, having to remind herself that this was just a building. Mirella, Tereza, and Ollie were safe elsewhere. This did not have to be their fate.

When she focused her gaze, an unsettling feeling washed through her. Samuel was there, but he was not alone. Accompanied by three guards, all clad in McKovac colors, he looked in every direction. Elvira's heart sank. She remained hidden as Rory joined her.

"Did he say he would be bringing other guards with him? I thought he wanted tae meet ye alone," Rory asked, frustration and fear sharpening his words.

"I suppose he must hae meant that I should be alone. I'm sure that it's fine. As I said, Samuel hae always been loyal tae us."

"At the moment he looks pretty loyal tae the Laird. I dinnae like this, Elvira," Rory grit his teeth.

"If ye emerge with me, then they will hae every reason tae think this is an ambush. At least give me a chance tae discover what is happening. Perhaps these men are loyal tae Hamish's cause as well. It must be difficult for them. We cannae afford tae take unnecessary risks."

“Which is why I should gae down there with ye.”

“Nae,” Elvira said. “We must dae as Samuel asked. I cannae jeopardize the opportunity tae speak with Hamish. Remember, it is nae just my people we are here tae help. It’s yer village as well. If we dinnae stop McKovac, then the Highlands are gaeing tae be plunged intae war and tae many people are gaeing tae suffer. Let me dae this. Ye are here if anything gaes wrong,” Elvira said, placing her hand on his heart. Rory hung his head, looking at it. Then, he lifted his gaze. His eyes were ringed red and there was an anxious look on his face.

“Just be careful. If anything should happen tae ye...”

“This is all part of the plan,” Elvira said, wearing her most convincing smile. She turned away from Rory and emerged from hiding, striding towards the farm. She held her head high, attempting to show no sign of fear at all. As she approached, she noticed the guards tense. Their hands went to their weapons. Samuel strode forward, although he did not have a welcome look on his face.

“I thought ye wanted tae meet alone,” Elvira said, glancing towards the guards. “I assume that they share yer feelings taewards the Laird?”

A shadow of regret fell over Samuel’s face. “Aye, they dae. They share my loyalty tae the Laird,” he said, the words dripping with betrayal. Elvira’s eyes went wide as she realized what was happening. She stepped back, shaking her head, eager to run back to Rory. The guards approached menacingly, drawing their weapons. Samuel was closest, though, and it was his hands that reached out to her, that captured her. It was a friend who had betrayed her, and that was far worse than if she had fallen to the cruelty of an enemy.

“Samuel... I trusted ye! We all did!” Elvira cried, struggling to break free from his grip.

“Just surrender, Elvira. It’ll be easier on ye if ye dae. I’m sorry... but I hae tae dae this.”

“Oh, ye hae tae? Why? Why would ye betray me now, of all times?”

“Because I need the reward. I need healers for my sister. I cannae afford them, and all of the Romani healers are hiding.”

“Then why nae side with Hamish? Drive the Laird out.”

“I cannae wait that long. I need the medicine now,” Samuel’s eyes burned like two coals, and it was clear he had convinced himself that this was the only way to help his sister. Elvira looked at him, stunned. The shock of having such a staunch ally turn on her had sapped all of her strength. Her knees went weak. She fell into his arms without any resistance at all.

“I hae tae dae this, Elvira. I hae tae dae it,” Samuel repeated over and over again, as if by reputation his decision would have been justified. Elvira wasn’t sure if he was trying to convince her, or himself. Either way, she felt sickened that Rory and the others had been right to suspect a trap. She had placed too much faith in Samuel, and now it was costing Elvira her freedom. She looked back, hoping that Rory would have more sense than to come chasing after her. There were four of them and only one of him. The odds were insurmountable. The most sensible thing to do was return to the tavern, tell the others what had happened, and find some other way to get in contact with Hamish.

But Rory was not always a sensible man. If the situation hadn’t been so fraught with tension, then Elvira might have appreciated the irony of Rory throwing caution to the wind for her, when she wanted him to be reticent and avoid trouble, as had been his intention when he turned her away from the forge. Instead, he broke through the bushes with his sword held high in the air, charging like a demon ready to wage war.

Elvira looked at him with passion rising in her heart. What a sweet, sweet fool he was. He had damned himself for her. It was utterly romantic, and utterly foolish, and she couldn't help but love him for it. She only wished that she had been able to tell him how he felt, because now they weren't going to get a chance.

Rory cursed himself for not walking down with her. He chastised himself for not dragging her away as soon as they had seen that Samuel was accompanied by three other men. Every instinct in his body told him that this was a trap, but no, he had to trust her, he had to give Samuel the benefit of the doubt, he had to turn against his own judgment because he trusted Elvira. Anger burned inside him, but it was not anger directed at her. This man, Samuel, had betrayed Elvira, betrayed them all. As soon as Samuel stepped towards Elvira, Rory knew that something dreadful was happening. He unsheathed his sword and wished that Tarbuck and Rab were beside him to even the odds.

But they weren't.

It was just him. He would have to be enough. He had been enough with the bandits, although these were hardened warriors, and there were two extra men. Still, Rory wasn't about to turn back and allow Elvira to be hauled off by them. A red mist descended over his eyes and, like a beast whose pride was threatened, there was nothing in his heart other than a need to protect what he loved.

“Get yer hands off her!” he yelled, charging towards the guards. They immediately went on the defensive, with Samuel hauling Elvira away. The other three came to meet Rory. His fury and passion charged the sword with a crackling energy. He swung it with such force that if he struck truly, he would have cleaved them in half. Unfortunately, his skill did not match his ferocity. It had been enough to disarm the bandits, but three guards were too much, although Rory did put up a better fight than they might have anticipated.

He barreled through the first man, cutting a chunk out of his arm. A plume of blood sprayed in the air, splashing the ground with crimson drops. But the second guard was ready for him. He caught Rory's sword and pushed him back. Rory was forced to go on the defensive, holding his sword tightly to absorb the blows. As it was, he managed to defend himself, and then shifted his weight to fight back. He got some good blows in himself, although his opponent seemed to be able to predict where he was going to strike. He didn't seem to be in any danger of breaking through the guard's defenses. Then, the third guard joined. Rory was faced with two skilled, trained warriors. One sword was difficult enough to manage, but two were impossible. Sweat poured down his forehead, stinging his eyes and tasting bitter on his tongue. He strained as he angled his sword to guard against both weapons crashing down upon him. He felt proud of being able to do so, and was summoning his reserves of strength to push them away. However, one of the guards kicked at his knee, putting so much force into the kick that Rory's leg buckled and he sank down.

The other guard ran forward, the point of the sword stopping short of running Rory through.

"Yield," the guard snarled. Rory's nostrils flared as he looked up to see his strained face reflected in the man's blade. The battle was over. He had failed. He hung his head as his sword was wrenched from his hands. The guard who took it looked at it approvingly. Rory's stomach turned at the thought that a weapon he created might be used by this monster. His hands were bound, and he was hauled over to sit by Elvira.

"How could ye dae this? How could ye betray her like this?" Rory spat as he met Samuel face to face for the first time. Samuel averted his gaze.

"I dinnae need tae explain myself tae ye. I will leave ye for yer men tae find. A warning. If they continue with this treachery, then their blood will be spilled as well," Samuel said, drawing his sword. Rory jutted his chin out, ready to meet his destiny without fear. He looked towards Elvira, wanting her face to be the last thing he ever

saw.

“Wait!” Elvira shrieked, grabbing Samuel’s attention.

He hung his head. “This is already hard enough. Dae ye think I like daeing this?”

“I think ye hae twisted yer mind beyond all reason,” Elvira spat, “but that is beside the point. Ye dinnae want tae kill him. That man there is the finest blacksmith in the land. If ye keep him alive he can be of use tae ye. I’m sure Laird McKovac would want him tae make weapons.”

Rory grit his teeth. He would rather die than arm the enemy, but he knew that Elvira was trying anything she could to save his life.

“If he made this sword, then she’s telling the truth. I hae rarely seen finer craftsmanship,” the guard who had taken Rory’s sword said, offering the weapon to the others. They examined it and seemed to come to the same conclusion.

“Very well, perhaps there will be a better reward for a blacksmith and a witch,” Samuel muttered. Rory felt strong hands being placed upon him as he was dragged away. He fell into step with Elvira, trying not to look at her because he was ashamed of his failure. He had come along on this mission specifically to help her, to protect her, but they had both been captured. He wished he could reach out and hold her hand, but his hands were bound. Well, no matter what happened, he wasn’t about to forge weapons for the enemy. He would rather die. However, as long as he was alive, then there was a chance. At least he and Elvira were together, and he had a sense that while this remained true, they could accomplish anything.

And, once Tarbuck, Rab, and Michael did not hear from them, they would know that something had gone wrong. This wasn’t over by any means, the only thing that was uncertain was whether Rory would be around for long enough to see the outcome of

all of this. He shook his head, thinking that none of this would have happened if he had stayed firm in his reluctance to help Torrin. Then again, he wouldn't have been able to live with himself. This was where he belonged, by Elvira's side, even though they were being led to a dark fate. Since he was with her, though, there was nowhere he would rather be.

The journey back to the keep had been long and arduous. Elvira and Rory had been marched back at an intense pace, leaving them gasping for breath with their muscles aching. The keep ascended in the distance, a huge blot against the beauty of the natural landscape. The stone that had been used to build the keep was a dark shade of gray, as though it had always been designed to be ominous. The sense of dread that pervaded the keep was palpable, as though a perennial storm lingered above. Elvira felt sick to her stomach. This was the place she had sought to avoid for so long, yet now she was in the heart of darkness. Her skin prickled just knowing that the Laird was nearby. Everyone she passed looked at her with disdain. They spat at the ground and flung curses towards her. They tried to make her feel ashamed for her culture and her heritage, but they would not succeed.

Samuel and the other guards led them down to the dungeons, throwing them in the same cell.

“Ye can suffer and wait for yer fate taegether,” Samuel said. It was perhaps the last mercy he would provide. The dungeon was dark and dank. A lantern hung outside the cell, offering dim amber light. The ground was hard and cold. Elvira expressed dismay at her surroundings as she rubbed her wrists. Their hands had been freed when they had been placed in the dungeon.

“Let me look at ye. Did ye get hurt in the battle?” Elvira asked, reaching out towards Rory to examine him in case he had any lingering wounds. He wasn’t dripping blood, but that didn’t mean a bone couldn’t have been cracked, and it was likely that bruises adorned his flesh. However, Rory pulled away and moved towards the bars.

“I’m fine,” he snapped, testing the strength of the bars. He moved from one to the next in a straight line, curling his fingers around each bar and heaving it with all his might, bending back to try and pry the bars loose. However, they were sunk deep into the stone, and there was no hope of moving them. Rory still tried them all, though.

Elvira narrowed her eyes after he stepped away from her, annoyed that he refused her kindness. “Why did ye come for me? Ye should hae gone tae the tavern and told the others what happened. Ye should hae saved yeself.”

“I went with ye tae protect ye. What kind of man would I be if I hae left ye tae fend for yeself? If ye hae listened tae me in the first place, then we would nae be in this situation. I knew that Samuel could nae be trusted. It was tae suspicious that he wanted tae meet ye alone,” Rory scowled.

Elvira tilted her head back and folded her arms across her chest. “Aye, well, I thought I could trust him. He hae lost all sense.”

“Aye, and if he’s nae an ally, who is? Can we even trust that Hamish still wants tae betray his Da? I dinnae like this at all. I feel like we came here on a rumor, and now we’re suffering for it.”

“Sae ye are blaming me for this?” Elvira asked in a haughty tone. She arched her eyebrows towards him. Rory slowly turned away from the bars and looked down his nose at her. He pursed his lips, thinking about his words carefully. When he spoke, his voice was slow and rasping.

“I dinnae blame ye for Laird McKovac. I dinnae blame ye for Samuel. I saw the way people treated ye out there,” Rory shook his head in dismay, as though he could not believe people had behaved that way even though he had seen it with his own eyes. “It’s nae right, and something needs tae be done tae stop it. But I dae blame ye for what is about tae happen. If the Laird forces me tae make weapons for him... I

cannae bear the thought that my creations are gaeing tae be used by an evil man like him. What if they use my weapons when they attack the village? The blood of people I care about will be spilled by my weapons... ye hae just given him an advantage, Elvira."

"I was trying tae save yer life. Samuel was just about tae cut off ye head," Elvira glared at him, confused at how someone could be angry at her for saving their life. Rory skulked around the walls of the dungeon, kicking at the walls. Thud, thud, thud... the noise was maddening. "Will ye stop daeing that?"

"I'm trying tae find a way out of here," Rory snapped.

"I'm surprised ye dinnae just bash ye head against the wall if ye are sae determined tae die."

"I'm nae determined tae die. I dinnae want tae die. I just dinnae want tae be used as a puppet by the enemy."

"Well, I dinnae want tae see ye die right in front of me. It was the only thing I could think of at the time. Next time we are in that situation, I'll just let them chop ye head off," Elvira rolled her eyes and shook her head. She leaned her head against the wall and let out a frustrated sigh, which rolled around the dungeon. Then, there was another sound. It was deep and rich, and at first, she couldn't quite believe she was hearing anything like it. Then, she turned to Rory to confirm that she wasn't hearing things. He had thrown his head back and was laughing uproariously.

"Oh, grand, ye hae lost ye mind," Elvira muttered.

Rory shook his head and kept laughing. He wiped tears from his eyes and approached her, slumping down to the ground, crossing his legs. "It's nae that, it's just... here we are, arguing again. I remember when I saved ye from the bandits, ye chastised me,

and now I'm angry at ye for saving me. Ah, I am nae really mad at ye, I am just frustrated that we were captured."

"I suppose we hae tae argue with each other when there is naebody else around," Elvira confessed, allowing a smirk to drift across her face. "The truth is, I'm angry at Samuel. I cannae believe he is sae short-sighted tae side with the Laird."

"Did he tell ye why?"

"Aye, his sister is still ailing and he needs medicine. The healers are all hiding, at least the ones that hae nae already been killed by McKovac. Instead of turning against the Laird tae drive him away and welcome the Romani back, he seems tae think that the Laird cannae be stopped."

"I'm starting tae get that impression myself," Rory sighed, grimacing. He picked up a small stone and threw it against the wall. Then, he rose, and began looking in every nook and cranny. He disappeared into the far corner, swallowed by the shadows. The light did not reach far enough to penetrate the darkness there.

"What are ye daeing?" she asked.

"I'm looking for an escape. I cannae just sit her and dae naething, waiting for our inevitable fate. There hae tae be a loose stone somewhere, or a wee hole. Maybe if we can create one, ye can burrow out," he said.

"I'm nae sure that's gaeing tae be possible. Laird McKovac is known for keeping people in his dungeons. I hae nae heard any story of anyone escaping."

"Then we can be the first," Rory replied. Elvira sighed and shook her head, refusing to join him because she would rather recover her strength.

“Ye should rest with me. Ye are nae gaeing tae find a way out of here.”

“Ye dinnae know that. I need tae try.”

“But why? Ye are wasting ye time.”

“It’s my time tae waste,” Rory replied firmly. It was clear to Elvira that she wasn’t going to talk sense into him. He was one of those men that needed to do something just to feel like they were accomplishing anything. She left him to his own devices, scraping and prodding about, until the noise became too vexing to stand.

“Will ye give that a break,” Elvira eventually said, looking to the ceiling and holding out her hand. “Are ye gaeing tae poke intae every crevice?”

“If I need tae, aye,” Rory said.

“Why? There is nae escape. We need tae rest, sae that when we are released, we can look for an opportunity.”

“We cannae wait that long. There is nae gaeing tae be an opportunity like that once they come for ye,” Rory said. Elvira noticed the way he said ‘you’ instead of ‘us’. She angled her body towards him. He was a silhouette standing with his back to her.

“Rory, what is this really about?” she asked.

Rory hung his head. He exhaled deeply and trundled back toward her, sinking to the ground again. “I dinnae know as much about this land as ye, but I hae seen enough and heard enough about the Laird tae know that naething good awaits ye here. As soon as he calls for ye, ye are doomed.”

Elvira welcomed the concern in his voice, but she was not prone to fear. She swept

locks of her hair away and spoke in a calm voice. “Rory, I am nae afraid of him.”

Rory’s gaze shot up, and he glared at her, looking shocked. “What dae ye mean? How can ye nae be scared? Ye hae seen the way he treats ye people, how he hae his guards hunting ye. He is cruel and insane. I dread tae think what he hae planned for ye. Whatever fate lies in store for me... the one waiting for ye is gaeing tae be far worse and there is naething I can dae about it. I will nae be able tae protect ye.”

Elvira drew her neck back and regarded him with an icy stare, but this coldness was not meant for him, it was meant for the man who had started all this; Laird McKovac himself.

“Rory, while I appreciate that ye hae put yeself in danger for me, I dinnae need ye tae protect me. I hae been surrounded by danger my entire life. I hae seen friends and family be hunted by Laird McKovac’s men. I hae seen our homes burned. I hae skulked away in the night hiding from his patrols. My Da died at the hands of his men. I hae always known fear and danger. It hae been a part of my life, sae this is nae new tae me. It is the curse of every Romani tae know that a fate like this is likely, yet still, we live. Still, we thrive. Still, we dae everything we can tae survive. I am nae afraid of the Laird because he is a cruel, petty man whose heart is twisted with rage. There is nae joy in his life. No matter how many Romani he kills, he will still be bitter, a hollow husk of a man. He is nae even a ghost. I am nae gaeing tae waste my time being afraid of him. I only fear what may happen tae my people. But, as long as I am being held against my will, it means that others of my kind are free. I will take the punishment if it means they can be saved. And when I stand before Laird McKovac I will look in his eyes and he will nae see me cower in fear. He will nae hear me beg for my life. I am a Romani, and while we are intimately familiar with death, we dinnae fear it from men like McKovac. I will nae give him the satisfaction. He might kill me, but he will nae win. I promise ye that.”

Her words dripped with determination. She was tenacious and unflappable, and she

meant every single word she spoke. The Laird had set many things in motion. People had died by actions carried out by men under his command, and this atmosphere of hatred and prejudice had festered under his rule. However, he was the one at the heart of it all and while Elvira had always been scared about what could happen, she was not scared of the man himself. The worst he could do to her was take her life, and she had been prepared for that a long time ago.

Elvira could feel her heart hardening inside her, becoming like stone. Rory's lips were parted. He didn't know what to say. Perhaps there was nothing he could say. He started to reach out to her with a tender hand, but then they heard the sound of guards stomping towards them. One of them took out a key and unlocked the door. Rory stood up, facing them.

"It's time for ye tae come with us," the guard said.

"We are nae gaeing anywhere," Rory said defiantly.

"Dinnae be stupid," the guard said. Another man came up and struck Rory across the face, his fist moving so swiftly that Rory did not get a chance to defend himself. Rory cried out, more from shock than pain, cradling his face. Elvira pushed herself up and went to his side, inspecting the blow. Thankfully, there would be no lasting damage.

"Come on, the Laird is waiting," the guard said.

"We will nae make any trouble," Elvira replied.

The guard snorted. "Aye, fine words coming from ye. Ye people always make trouble," he said. Elvira scowled at him. The hatred in his words was so casual. There was no shame from any of them. Before Elvira left, she let the cloak fall from her shoulders, leaving it in the dungeon. She was tired of hiding her face. If they were going to mock her and torture her, then they would have to see her for what she was.

They would witness the pride on her face and the resolute expression. She would show them that she could handle death better than any of them could handle life, and perhaps, through her efforts, she could shame them into seeing themselves.

Elvira and Rory did not exchange a word as they were led up from the dungeons, through winding hallways, towards a great hall. Elvira's heart thumped in her chest, but her face belied none of her fear. Her expression was placid, and she tried to make herself as cold as the stones that had been used to build this keep.

The guards opened the sturdy doors of the great hall. There were feasting tables arranged around the room, as well as copious amounts of alcohol. There was a stale smell lingering in the hall, hinting at the revelry that stained the air. At the end of the hall, Laird McKovac sat on his throne, a man who looked as though he had been carved out of granite. His face had a deathly pallor, while he was draped in thick black cloaks that hid his physique. He was flanked by his advisors and his son, Hamish. Elvira looked in Hamish's direction, but could not discern anything from his face. She feared that his rebellion had been a lie all along, a way to give people false hope that things might change.

As soon as they entered the hall, Rory sidled past her, trying to put himself in between her and the laird. Elvira appreciated his efforts, but knew they were futile. The Laird was obsessed with Romani people. As they walked forward, the guards pushed past her as well to draw Rory back. They grabbed him and tore him away, pushing him aside. Elvira maintained her composure, not wanting to show any sign of weakness. She feared that if she showed concern for Rory, then Laird McKovac might prey on that, might hurt Rory to get at her. Next to him was a younger man, the spitting image of his father, but a much kinder aura emanate from him; Hamish.

"Bring this mongrel tae me," Laird McKovac said, beckoning Elvira forward with a bony finger. The nail at the end was long and yellow. Wispy white hair fell about his face. His eyes were beady, like a hawk. Elvira stepped forward and met his gaze,

wanting to show that she was not daunted by his presence. As she came closer, Laird McKovac's expression changed. His eyes widened, as though he had seen a ghost. His mouth parted, revealing yellowed teeth and a black abyss. He pointed to Elvira, trembling. At first, she thought it was anger, but she quickly realized it was fear.

"Ye... this cannae be!" he cried, and then leaned forward, perching on the edge of his throne. One more inch, and he would have toppled off. "Nae," the breath rushed out of him. "Maria... it cannae be ye... Maria. Ye look just like ye did back... ah, ye devil woman! Ye witch! Release me from this curse, release me! "

His tone turned from low to desperate in an instant, as though some force possessed him. He lunged forward, pushing himself from his throne and falling to his knees. He clasped his hands together and looked up at Elvira, haunting desperation in his eyes.

"Please, Maria. I hae suffered... oh how I hae suffered. Ye must release me from this terrible curse. Please, I am begging ye," he croaked, and muttered insane, unintelligible words that barely made any sense. His advisors ran forward and grabbed him, hauling him back to the throne. He was still babbling, talking about how Maria had haunted him for years, how he had been unable to sleep because of the curse. He was shaking terribly, and at that moment Elvira realized that she held all the power. It wasn't her who needed to be afraid of the Laird at all. Rather, he was afraid of her.

19

M aria...

The name echoed in Elvira's mind. She had always been told that she bore a striking resemblance to her mother. Now she understood that when the Laird looked at her, he did not see Elvira, but her mother. She had not expected to have this effect on him, but her mind worked quickly to take advantage of the situation.

"Get off me!" Laird McKovac yelled, pushing his advisors away. Hamish was still unmoved. The Laird turned his attention back to Elvira. "For years ye hae tasked me. The words ye left burrowed in my mind, and I hae never been able tae forget them. All of this... all of this is yer fault!" he rasped. He pointed a finger at his skull, and then clenched his fist, bringing it crashing to the arm of his throne. "Maria, lift this curse. Stop this torment. I need peace... peace! I need it now. Ye dinnae know what ye hae done tae me. For years, I hae searched for ye and now... now that ye are in my presence again... I implore ye, free me from these shackles."

Elvira quickly understood what must have happened, why her parents had fled these lands in the first place. They had always been coy about the true reasons, but now she saw. She could see every aspect of the way Laird McKovac looked at her. The fear, the anger, and the desire. Was all his hatred really borne from being spurned by her mother? Elvira knew she had two choices; either she could deny his words and tell him the truth, or she could play into his delusion. She chose the latter, thinking it might be the only way to navigate a conversation with his cracked mind.

"I will free ye, as long as ye swear tae stop this cruelty tae my people. Let us live

freely. Abandon all ye plans of war, against us and the neighboring clans. Give us all peace,” Elvira said, drawing her head back. For a moment, she felt the spirit of her mother flow through her heart.

Laird McKovac snarled and sneered. “Ye are just the same as ye always were, speaking of peace,” he spat. “There can be nae peace! Ye need tae break the curse. There is nae other way!” McKovac said.

Without knowing exactly what the curse was, Elvira could do nothing more. The curse wouldn’t have any truth to it anyway. Maria must have played upon the Laird’s superstition and tricked him.

“I cannae break the curse, only ye can dae it. Dinnae ye see the curse that hae plagued this land? All of this death and horror, all of this fear... that is the real curse, and it comes from ye,” Elvira pointed at the Laird. “Ye hae the power tae stop it, by declaring peace here and now, by bringing yer guards back tae the keep and ordering them tae sheath their weapons, by proclaiming that Romani people are welcome in yer lands again.”

“Nae...nae!” the Laird frothed at the mouth as he beat his fists against the throne. He rocked side to side, and the throne moved with him. His eyes were manic, the whites of them wide, the pupils two small dots that were focused upon Elvira. “Ye told me I could be free. Ye told me...ye need tae fix this, Maria. Ye need tae save me. I cannae gae on like this. I cannae live!”

“I cannae break the curse, but I can read yer palm. Let me give ye a glimpse intae yer future and to help ye see the right course of action,” Elvira said, hoping that if the Laird bought into these superstitions, she might be able to guide him towards making a sensible decision. While she found the idea of touching him revolting, she knew it was necessary in order to save her people.

The Laird's head dropped upon hearing her words. Everything went silent for a moment. Then, a sound of dread laughter emanated from him. There was a crazed look upon his face as he slowly lifted his gaze. He was not a man who possessed sanity any longer, and it was no wonder that his clan had fallen into such disarray. He had been driven mad a long time ago, mad by a woman's words. He laughed as he lifted his palms and showed them to Elvira, revealing charred flesh. The skin of his palms and fingers was mottled by fire, all the lines that were used as a guide burned away, with nothing left.

"Never again," he hissed. "Never again will ye lie tae me! I thought if I could get rid of these lines then it might free me from the curse, but it dinnae work. I thought driving ye all from my land would free me, but that dinnae work either! Now there is only one thing left. If ye refuse tae help me, then there is only one way I can free myself from the curse, and it's tae take the heart of the woman who placed the curse upon me. The only way I can be free is tae kill ye," his eyes flashed intensely as he left his throne again. He made a dramatic gesture, pushing his cloak away. He reached for his sword, which was as bony and thin as his own body, but it was still deadly. He held it like a needle, ready to jab it at her, and he lunged forward. Elvira's eyes went wide with fear. There was nothing more she could say to the man, no reasoning with him, no bargaining with him. He was convinced that this curse that addled his mind could only be resolved by killing the woman he thought to be Maria. He roared, deaf and blind to anything except Elvira.

Elvira turned, looking towards Rory. He was straining to get to her, but was being held back by guards.

"Nae!" he cried, but his words were forlorn. At least the Laird had shown himself to be insane, Elvira thought. Surely, the men around him could not deny the truth, and would need to wrest control of the clan away from him. She watched the blade thrust through the air, the point directed at her heart. She waited for the sweet release of death. A strange calm came over her, and in the distance she could hear her mother's

voice calling to her.

Then, in another moment, she was deafened by the clash of steel. There was a gasp as Hamish finally moved, stepping forward, unsheathing his own sword and using it to deflect his father's. The Laird looked shocked. He turned to face his son, his expression turning to one of bitter betrayal. Elvira stepped back, stumbling over her feet as she made her way to Rory. They clung to each other as all eyes turned to the Laird and his son.

"That's enough," Hamish said sternly.

Laird McKovac's eyes twitched. "Enough? Ye dare tell me that it's enough?"

"Aye, and enough people hae seen what I hae known for a long time; that ye hae lost yer mind. That is nae the same woman who came tae ye all those years ago. Look at her, she is a young lass herself," Hamish said, gesturing with his sword to Elvira. Laird McKovac fixed his gaze on her, trying to see through the haze of insanity and the reality he had concocted for himself.

"Nae...nae, it's her! It's her!" he cried.

"Ye are a pitiful old man who cannae lead this clan any longer. I am nae gaeing tae see ye lead us intae a war when ye are seeing ghosts," Hamish said.

"Ye are fool if ye think ye can take this clan from me. This is my clan! And everyone else thinks sae," the Laird swiped his sword through the air to punctuate his words. Hamish's lips curled into a smug smile.

"Ye are wrong, Da. We hae all been concerned for a long time," Hamish turned his head to the side and looked at the advisors. One by one, they moved to stand with Hamish. Laird McKovac's mouth fell open, utterly shocked at the sight of this

treason.

“Ye would all stand with him? With this... usurper?” he sputtered.

“Aye,” the advisors said in unison.

“Ye are nae fit tae lead this clan. I am taking over, with the support of the advisors. If anyone dares challenge me, then know that ye are throwing yer lot in with a man who hae lost his mind. This hae gone far enough,” Hamish said, his sonorous words filling the great hall. He looked towards the guards. None of them came to stand with their laird. McKovac turned, hissing like a viper.

“Ye would all act like this? Ye would all betray me? Bah, the lot of ye can burn! This clan is mine. I am the laird. I am in charge. I am the one ye should all bow down tae, and I will hae yer heads, every last one of ye. And I will start with ye,” Laird McKovac turned around the great hall, eventually making a complete circle so that he faced Hamish again.

Hamish shook his head and let his sword drop, indicating that he did not wish to fight. “Dinnae dae this, Da. Just accept yer fate quietly. It’s all over. The clan is mine.”

“I gave ye life. I gave ye everything . And now ye would take it from me?” Laird McKovac lunged forward as he spoke, whirling his sword in the air, striking at Hamish’s heart. Hamish raised his sword in time to deflect the blow, but he moved back.

“I dinnae want tae kill ye, Da,” Hamish said, blocking McKovac’s wild blows and jabs. The Laird wasn’t going quietly, however, and Hamish was forced to fight back. He struck at the Laird, his sword cutting through the billowing folds of the dark cloak. Laird McKovac cackled, emboldened by Hamish’s inability to make the fateful

blow. The swords whirled in the air and McKovac came closer and closer to striking his son. Elvira clung to Rory tightly, watching in horror as father and son dueled for the destiny of the clan, and possibly the Romani people.

Hamish's brow deepened as the fight continued. As he withstood each blow, he realized that he was not going to make his father yield. The swords clashed and Laird McKovac's cackling laughter could be heard all through the keep. Their fight led them back to the throne. They came close together, their swords scraping against each other, and then there was a moment where they each thrust forward, claspng each other. Everything stood still for a moment as people waited to see who struck the killing blow. Laird McKovac moved back, and at first, it seemed as though he had won. Then, he staggered and fell into his throne, dropping his sword to the floor. He clutched his stomach, and looked at his hand, stained with blood.

"Ye made me dae this," Hamish said.

Laird McKovac went to say something, but his words were suffocated by blood. It poured from his lips, and then his head lolled back. A shocked gasp ran around the room, while Elvira and Rory were as close as they had ever been.

They had their arms wrapped around each other and now looked at each other. She lost herself in his green eyes, which expressed his relief that she was safe, and a deep need to protect her. His gaze fell to her lips, lips that promised a lifetime of joy and wonder. They had come so close to being ripped apart, and now, after the reminder of Maria, Elvira knew the kind of man that Maria had wanted her to be with.

She was in his arms. There was no time for further hesitation.

"Rory," she whispered.

"Elvira," he replied. They were seized by passion, and thus seized each other,

allowing their feelings to fly free in a stormy kiss.

News spread throughout the keep and then flowed wider. Like a flood, it drenched the village, seeping into every crevice. People reacted with disbelief and awe. Many barely believed it, thinking that Laird McKovac had been too ornery to die, and would have plagued the world with his immortal bitterness. Given that he had held on to such power for so long, there were people loyal to him, people who knew they were now going to have to answer for the crimes they had committed under Laird McKovac's rule. The fact that they were following orders was not enough of an excuse. Some began to fight back, and were quickly caught by guards loyal to Hamish, who had spent a great deal of time picking guards who possessed integrity. The ones who remained devoted to the former Laird were hauled away in chains, bemoaning their guilt. News of this reached the village as well, and there was a notable group of people who fled the land, running into the forest and disappearing from sight. Their crimes would go unpunished this day, but at least the village would not be darkened by their presence.

Elvira's face was adorned with a smile. Her eyes sparkled with delight, and it was as though the sun shone on her for the first time in a long time. The caress of Rory's lips echoed on her own. The sensations tingled, and she became aware of every bubble of sweat that rose to the surface of her flesh. The kiss had been like a dream. The excitement she felt was exhilarating, and it was as though she were lighter than air.

But all was not well with Rory. He had managed to summon enough strength to stand by her side and kiss her, but the wounds from the fight had taken a greater toll than she had imagined. It hadn't helped that he had refused to rest while being locked in the dungeon, instead hammering and prodding against every bar and every brick to

test for weakness. More than that, he had wrestled with the guards in an effort to protect Elvira. Now, he swayed, almost toppling over. His eyelids twitched, and a haze came over him.

“Rory...” she gasped, concern etched upon her face.

“Nae worry about me, lass. This is a good day, a grand day. We must return and tell the others that the threat hae been dealt with,” as he finished speaking, Rory’s head lolled to the side and he made a frail cry. Elvira’s concern deepened. Fighting against his protests, she got the attention of a guard and told him to take Rory to a healer. Rory did not have the strength to resist, and was subsequently led away.

This allowed Elvira to observe the hall. The Laird’s body had been taken away. A trail of blood led out of the hall, the spots getting smaller and smaller as they led towards the door. The advisors were grouped together, looking relieved. They had been solemn when she entered, and must have been burdened with tension. Now they drank wine and spoke of better times. Even the room itself seemed lighter, as though some darkness had been dispelled.

That was true of every part of the room, except the throne. Hamish McKovac, the new Laird, now stood beside it, staring at the stain of blood left by his father. He looked to be a man alone, isolated from everything else. What a toll it must have taken, Elvira thought, to save the clan by killing his own father. Ultimately, Hamish had done the necessary thing, but it would haunt him for the rest of his life. She had always been inclined to help tortured souls, so she approached him softly, light of foot. Although, even if she had stomped she doubted he would have noticed, for he was lost in thought. His face was drawn, and he looked as though he had aged a decade in a matter of moments.

“Excuse me, I dinnae mean tae interrupt, but could I hae a word with ye?” Elvira asked, tugging at Hamish’s sleeve. He nodded, although there was a blank look in his

eyes. Elvira walked away from the throne towards the wall, where the shadows enveloped them. She thought it was best for Hamish to put some distance between him and the celebrations that were taking place. “It must be hard for ye tae cope with what ye hae done.”

“I did what I hae tae dae. I knew he was nae gaeing tae give up the Lairdship. There was nae other choice,” Hamish spoke. His throat was tight, his voice strained, and his eyes glistened with tears. He tried to blink them away, but the liquid remained.

“I want tae thank ye on behalf of the Romani people, and all the others who suffered under ye Da’s rule. I’m just sorry it hae tae end like this. I’m sorry that it hae tae be ye who struck the final blow.”

“It could hae been naebody else. I was the only one...” he sighed, the exhalation heavy, seeming to take everything out of him. “I know it’s a good thing for the clan, I just dinnae like how everyone is celebrating. A man died. He may nae hae been a good man, but he was my Da nonetheless.”

“I understand, although I fear that his mind was addled, especially taewards the end. He was nae the father who raised ye. He was a husk of a man.”

“Aye, driven crazy by the curse he thought was placed upon him,” Hamish said. For a moment, fear curled in Elvira’s heart, worried that Hamish was going to blame Maria for the state of his father’s mind. Thankfully, he didn’t.

“Ye hae tae know... there was nae power tae the curse. My parents sometimes spoke about the Laird... about why they hae tae leave for a while, and I hae seen how terrible he was with my own eyes. The curse Ma placed on him...it would nae hae any effect. I imagine she did it tae try and make him change his ways.”

“The belief gave it power,” Hamish whispered. “He could nae see any other way. But

that was the way he always saw the world, filled with enemies. I sometimes wonder if he ever suspected that I was plotting against him. There were other times I thought about it, but I could nae bring myself tae make the final blow. If I'm honest with ye, I was a coward. I hoped that death would come for him in the night. He seemed tae get weaker and weaker. I thought it was only a matter of time, and yet he kept clinging on."

"For some men, hatred can make them survive. I'm sorry for yer loss, but at least the clan hae a Laird who will dae anything for them. Ye did what a Laird is supposed tae dae, put the wellbeing of his people above himself. I'm sure ye will serve them well."

"I hope I can, even if I will never be able tae forget what I did taeday."

Hamish's words were weighted with sorrow. Elvira feared that he was going to define himself by this action. She wanted to do something to help him, something to repay him for what he had done. "If ye like, I could read yer palm. It might help ye gain some insight intae the future."

Hamish chuckled and shook his head. "With all respect, I hae nae put much belief in all that."

Elvira rolled her shoulders. "Ye never know, I may get a glimpse of what's tae come, and it will nae take long," she held out her hand expectantly. Hamish stared at her, then presented his hand. Elvira had spoken to many troubled people before and knew exactly what they needed to hear. Holding their hand created a simple bond between them, a caring connection that helped them feel safe and gave extra comforting weight to Elvira's words. She traced the lines, pretending that she was accessing some mystical secret of the world.

"I see here that ye will live a long life. There is a part here where the lines intercross, and I believe that this is taeday. A great sacrifice hae been made. But it will not

define ye. Ye see how it tapers and fades here, that means it dinnae hae tae define yer life. Instead, look at this line, the line of nobility. It's long and unbroken, which means there are still good deeds for ye tae accomplish. Ye are a good man, Hamish, and ye should never forget that."

"If I start to forget that, then I suppose I can just look at my palm for a reminder," he smirked.

"Better yet," Elvira replied softly, looking directly into his eyes, "look around at the clan ye command. Look at all the people who prosper under yer rule, and ye will see that they are a reflection of yer own heart."

"Thank ye, lass," Hamish said, his voice cracking under the weight of emotion. "I know that this clan hae nae been safe for yer people for a long time, but that will change. I will rebuild the farms my father scorched, and I will ensure shelter for the Romani people. If ye would like tae stay, then there is a place for ye here. Will ye and yer family return?"

Elvira wore a coy smile. "I appreciate the invitation, M' Laird, but I think that my future lies elsewhere. I shall spread the word among my people, however. The Romani will be grateful for yer promise," she bowed her head with respect, and then her thoughts turned to the path that lay ahead of her, as well as the man with whom she was going to walk.

Rory was feeling better after having been seen by the healer. She had given him some damnable concoction that had knocked him out for hours. He awoke feeling refreshed, but was shocked when someone told him how much time had passed. He pushed himself off the cot and rushed out, ignoring the advice shouted at him to take things slow. While he was glad that Laird McKovac had been killed, he still wasn't entirely sure about Hamish. He worried that something had happened to Elvira without him being there to protect her.

However, as soon as he left the infirmary, he realized that the entire keep was bouncing with triumph. Everyone had suffered under Laird McKovac, suppressed by the heavy boot of his bitterness. Now freed of his dark moods, they were able to laugh and smile again. They skipped through the halls of the keep instead of skulking about, and music played, a joyful, light-hearted tune that filled the keep. Before, there had just been a mournful dirge that had bestowed a melancholy feeling upon the residents.

Rory breathed a little easier. He overheard talk of a feast in the main hall, and assumed that Elvira would be there. He saw people leaving holding great mugs of ale and huge chicken bones. Other people were carrying barrels of food and wine outside, so the entire clan could partake in the celebrations. Rory passed them all with a stunned look on his face, thinking about how foolish Glennrock would appear after having cloistered himself away, embracing a siege mentality before one had even begun. He wore a smug look as he imagined Glennrock sputtering, trying to explain why he was willing to sacrifice the village when faced with the threat from Laird McKovac. He hoped that the Laird would move past his grief soon and return to leading the clan, for Glennrock could not be trusted.

However, Rory did not spend too long thinking about these matters, as there was something far more important that occupied his mind. He entered the great hall and was greeted by an undulating, animated crowd. They embraced each other and sang songs, they danced and they laughed. Rory had to check his pace once or twice as he almost collided with people who were too busy dancing to pay attention to others around them. Rory avoided the food, searching for Elvira. Occasionally, he caught glimpses of girls who looked like her, but each time he was disappointed. Had she left and gone to spread word to the other Romani that it was safe for them to live in the clan? His heart ached as his search became more desperate, but then he saw her.

Their eyes met across the room, and they were drawn together by an invisible force. Everything else melted away, even the people spinning around them in a dance. They

met in the middle of the dance floor, but the rhythm of the music did not capture them. They could only hear the beating of their hearts.

“Ye are looking well. I came tae check in on ye earlier, but ye were sleeping,” Elvira said.

“Aye, they knocked me out. I thought I would never find ye here.”

“Aye, it’s gotten a lot busier than it was before. Still, it’s nice tae see people happy again.”

“Indeed, they’re gaeing tae enjoy a new beginning.”

“We all are. I hope that Hamish is the complete opposite of his Da.”

“I’m sure he will be.”

Although they exchanged words, they were only half-listening to what each other were saying. They smiled constantly as well. Rory’s jaw was beginning to ache. Then, a rude dancing couple came rushing past and danced in between them. Rory and Elvira were forced to take a step back each. They may as well have been stranded on either side of a chasm.

As soon as the dancers passed, which happened in a flash of a moment, Rory and Elvira stepped towards each other again. Rory asked if they could go somewhere private, and they agreed to head towards the garden. Elvira’s hand slipped into his, and they hastily left the hall, leaving the fun and frivolity behind to an open courtyard garden. The air was filled with a floral scent and stars blanketed the night sky. The moon was a crescent, as though it was winking at them.

They stopped in a small area, surrounded by a leafy bush. It helped give the

impression that they were alone. Even though they stopped walking, they didn't let go of each other's hand.

Rory was overwhelmed by Elvira's beauty. His heart thudded in his chest. A haze appeared in his mind, almost as powerful as the healer's concoction. He reached up with his free hand and stroked her cheek, grazing his thumb along her jaw. It rested near her lips, and then he retracted it, instead leaning forward to kiss her again. He closed his eyes as he did so, losing himself in the dream that was her kiss.

"Talking about the new beginning for this place... it gets me thinking about ye. After all, with the new Laird things are safer now. Ye can come home again," Rory's voice hitched as he spoke these words. "I saw how ye were received in the tavern. People here care about ye."

Elvira tilted her head to the side. She wore an enigmatic smile. She lifted her palm, twisting it away from his hand. She showed it to him, offering it. "Perhaps ye could read my palm and tell me where my future lies," she teased.

Rory licked his lips quickly. She could be maddening sometimes. Was she going to make him come out and declare his feelings for her? He huffed as he placed his hand under hers, then looked at the slender fingers, the smooth palm. The lines across it were elegant and shallow. He had no idea what any of them meant, or how he could derive purpose from them. He only knew what he wanted them to say, and he hoped this would be enough.

"Elvira... I think ye are gaeing tae be very happy, surrounded by people who love ye. Ye hae a lot tae contribute tae the world. Tereza and Ollie are gaeing tae be grateful for all ye hae done for them, and ye should gae down in history for the part ye played in bringing peace tae this place. But I... I think that yer time here is at an end. I think yer future lies elsewhere," he grew uncertain as he revealed his feelings.

“Oh, and where daes my future lie?” Elvira asked. Her words were a whisper that drifted past his ear. Rory took his gaze off her palm, looking into her eyes instead. A smile flickered on his face. He was standing tall, yet he felt as though he was on his knees, begging for her to come back with him. Being with her was what he wanted more than anything, perhaps even more than he had wanted to be a blacksmith. He took a deep breath and then stated his desire.

“With me. As my wife. I-”

He was ready to launch into a long speech extolling her virtues and explaining the depth of his feelings for her. He thought he might need to persuade her to stay with him. Instead, she placed her finger upon his lips, silencing him.

“Ye dinnae need tae say any more than that, Rory. I accept,” her eyebrows tilted and something shifted in her eyes. A smile broadened on Rory’s face. He swept her in his arms, lifting her off her feet and twirling her around. A light laugh soared through the air, and then it was silent as he pressed his lips against hers, stealing a kiss under the moonlight. His hands ran through her hair and she melted into him as they claimed their future.

EPILOGUE

Rory and Elvira were greeted with a hero's welcome by Tarbuck and the others when they returned to the tavern. Word had traveled fast, although they hadn't been aware if Rory and Elvira were alive. There were drinks all around, and then another round when Rory and Elvira announced that they were going to be married. They tarried while they celebrated, but then were on their way back home. An entourage of McKovac guards traveled with them, carrying a written decree from the new Laird that there would be no more threats to the surrounding land, and that any offending parties had been suitably punished.

When they reached home, the McKovac guards continued to the keep, while the others reunited with Torrin at the inn. Elvira and Rory were hugged by her grandmother. Elvira bent down and hugged her siblings as well. Torrin gave Rory a firm handshake, while Isla prepared hearty meals for them all. Tarbuck gave a garrulous laugh and slapped Rory on the back. He began telling the tale of their daring intrusion into McKovac lands. They all piped up as they ate and drank, sharing the danger and the thrill. Elvira and Rory spoke about the scenes within the keep, and how Laird McKovac finally met his end. Mirella closed her eyes at this, as though she was finally able to release some tension that had lingered within for so long.

Elvira and Rory remained sitting close to each other. She always made a point of touching him, her hand lingering on his arm or his thigh. Their legs were in constant contact, and she often rested her head against his shoulder. Isla observed this and pointed out that there might be some other news to share, and indeed the announcement was made. Torrin was the first to shake Rory's hand, complimenting Rory and Elvira. Isla rushed to Elvira's side and offered to help Elvira with anything

she needed.

Elvira flashed a coy smile towards Rory. "I think the first thing we'll need help with is moving intae the forge. He is nae gaeing tae refuse us this time," she nudged Rory playfully. Rory wore an abashed smile, embarrassed about the way he had acted previously. He was able to laugh it off, however, for his rough edges had been smoothed away, and his true character had been revealed. He may have tried to avoid trouble, but sometimes trouble could lead to surprising things. He clutched Elvira's hand firmly and looked at her.

"How could I refuse ye from yer own home? It is as much yer forge now as it is mine," he said. Elvira kissed him on the cheek. There was a great cheer from Tarbuck and Rab, while Michael looked a little perturbed at the displays of public affection. He then cleared his throat and said that he had an announcement as well. All eyes turned to him. He wrung his hands together and his furtive gaze darted about the room.

"Well, I happened tae make the acquaintance of a rather... comely woman," Michael began. Tarbuck and Rab raised their eyebrows at this. "It seems she rather took a liking tae me and, well, she insisted that I return tae her as soon as possible. I dinnae think I am in a position tae refuse," he said awkwardly. The others laughed and said that it was about time Michael put down some roots, and perhaps the best thing for him was to find a woman who took his destiny into her hands.

While everyone else was celebrating, Rory and Elvira sneaked away from the tavern and returned to the forge. Ginger mewed loudly when they entered, turning her back on Rory for abandoning her.

"I'm sorry," Rory apologized. Ginger might have been angry, but the feline was still willing to accept the strokes that Rory offered. Ginger lifted her tail and paced around the room, as though this was Ginger's forge and Rory had to beg to be accepted

again. Elvira laughed, but squeezed Rory's hand.

"Welcome home," he said, looking at her.

Some time passed since Elvira and her family had moved into the forge. It hadn't taken Rory long at all to get used to the company. In fact, he quite liked it. Elvira was still working in the tavern, but Mirella liked spending time at the forge, and she took on the duties of cooking. Tereza and Ollie were both fascinated by the forge. They were too young to be trusted near the heavy tools and hot fire, but Rory was happy enough to pass on his knowledge. He had them perform rudimentary tasks, and he was able to bond with them that way, which also helped bring him closer to Elvira.

As far as the rest of the clan went, things were peaceful. The McKovac guards had ridden up to the keep, at which point Glennrock had believed it was an invasion. He made the mistake of offering the clan's treasure as a peace offering before he had a chance to read the letter, and begged for mercy. He said that he could be very useful to Laird McKovac, and was willing to turn his back on his own clan. This was all related to Elvira and Rory later, by Declan.

When the McKovac entourage revealed that they were here to offer peace, Glennrock was revealed as the coward that he truly was. Everyone had seen his true colors, and Declan led a revolt against him, demanding that the letter be brought to the Laird as was only right. It was revealed that Glennrock had been keeping things from the Laird, who had no idea that anything was amiss at all. According to Declan, he was furious at Glennrock and dismissed him from his service immediately, exiling him so that Glennrock suffered the same fate he had once wished upon his own daughter. The Laird took the letter and all hostilities with the McKovac clan were ordered to remain in the past, which allowed a wonderful future to blossom, and there was no need for anyone to conspire against those in the keep.

Elvira and Rory did not want to wait too long to get married, but there were certain

guests they wished to have at the wedding, and needed to wait for them. It was certainly worth the wait, however, as when Ian, Lucy, Anne, and Finlay appeared, it was a joyous occasion. Ian and Lucy looked hearty. He inspected the forge and nodded approvingly, saying that he knew he had left it in good hands. There was also an emotional reunion with Elvira as well, as they both lamented their lost families.

At least they had found happiness in the end, Elvira thought.

There was a moment of reflection shared between Anne and Rory, after they hugged, and he had given her a tour of the forge. Anne squeezed his hand and put her head on his shoulder, for now, he was far taller than her.

“Look at us, Rory. Can ye believe what we made of ourselves?”

Rory chortled and shook his head. “Sometimes I wake up, thinking that I’m gaeing tae see the stars. I still feel like this is all a dream, and I’m really just a wee lad, thinking about what my life is gaeing tae be like.”

“I feel the same way. We did it, though. We made something of ourselves,” Anne’s eyes filled with tears. Rory was glad he wasn’t as emotional as her, although he ended up blinking away the stinging sensation from his eyes anyway.

The wedding ceremony wasn’t anything grand. Rory was not a pompous man, and in Romani culture the wedding ceremony itself was not important. They were married outside, holding their hands, promising themselves to each other, with their friends and loved ones witnessing the event. It was a ceremony close to nature, out in the open air, with the sky stretching above them, as eternal as their love.

Once they had spoken their vows, Mirella and Isla brought out some salted bread. They placed this on Elvira’s lap, and then Rory took a piece and ate it. Elvira then took a piece herself. This symbolized a prosperous future for them both. After that,

Torrin and Isla hosted a grand feast in the tavern. Minstrels had been hired to provide song and laughter. Rory and Elvira danced the night away, reveling in the moments they were sharing with each other, and the life they were about to embark on. The mood had been lifted completely, and no longer were the people of the clan concerned about their safety. Even Lucy did not have to be afraid, since her father was no longer present.

For Elvira, it was a time of acceptance. She was not made to feel different at all, or unwelcome. She was a member of the family, and this was her place in the world. She had escaped danger and found safety, and now she would form a nest here, creating a safe haven for her and her family. She spared a thought for her parents, wishing that they could have been present to share in the joyous occasion. Elvira consoled herself by thinking that Patrin and Maria were there in spirit.

The night was growing late. Rory and Elvira were both so overwhelmed by the presence of everyone that they tried to speak to them all. However, at one point, Ian sidled up to Rory and nudged him in the ribs.

“I think it’s time for ye tae take yer bride and get out of here,” Ian arched an eyebrow.

“I dinnae want tae be rude tae the guests,” Rory replied. Ian laughed so hard that he doubled over. Lucy took Rory’s hands and smiled sweetly. She led him to Elvira, who accepted Rory’s invitation without hesitation. Rory tried to be surreptitious about it, but as they left there was an uproarious cheer. Rory cringed and paused, hating that it had become such common knowledge, but he and Elvira did not turn back.

They walked into the quiet forge. Even Ginger was wise enough to allow them to stay together. They went to the main bedroom and stood in front of the window. Rory lit a candle, which illuminated the room in an amber glow. Elvira stood before him. He unclasped her dress, peeling it away from her skin. It flowed away, revealing her

curves. As inch by inch of her skin was exposed, his arousal grew. Elvira did the same with him, admiring his male form. She ran her hands along his chest, down his stomach, across his arms, drinking all of him in. She stepped towards him, pressing her body against his, enjoying the tactility of his touch. He twined his fingers in her hair as they kissed deeply. Her body arched like a bow, and they sank to the bed. He kept his strong arms wrapped around her body as he came over her, holding her close. She wrapped her arms and legs around him like vines. Their kisses gave way to breathless moans as the heat surged through them.

Rory buried himself in the crook of her neck. The heat they created together was more intense than that of the forge itself, and what they created was like nothing Rory had made before. It was pure and soft, raging like liquid heat, before sizzling in the air. He lost himself in her, running his hands across her breasts, delving deep into her femininity. Elvira used her artful hands to direct his manhood towards her. She yielded to his force, embracing the yearning within. They came together, opening their minds and their hearts to each other. The world rolled around them as Elvira's eyes rolled into the back of her head and Rory's hips thrust powerfully, endlessly, rampantly. The future waited for them, but for now, all they needed was this single night of passion.

Thank you so much for reading my novel!

PROLOGUE

“K neel before your laird, serf! I demand you kiss my feet!”

Twelve-year-old Aleck Campbell wrinkled his nose as he looked at his brother's dirty feet. “Ye out yer mind Lachlan. I dinnae want nothing to do with yer dirty feet.”

His brother glared at him, the wooden sword pointed at Aleck's chest. “You will one day, Aleck. I'm the oldest. I will be Laird.”

Aleck shrugged a shoulder as he walked around the perimeter of the great hall, his eyes casting glances at the large tapestry that hung over the fireplace. “Aye, perhaps, but yer too skinny to take the place of Da.”

“I won't be forever,” Lachlan called out, climbing down from the chair at the head of the scarred wooden table. “Then I will cast you out, you and Duncan.”

“You can't cast out yer own brothers,” Duncan muttered, swinging his feet wildly as he sat in the chair. “We are family.”

Aleck stopped his pacing and looked at his two brothers. “Aye, we are family.” Their da had told them that nothing was more important than family, and that they were responsible for each other.

He would, however, likely tan their hides for being up past their bedtimes, pretending to be the laird of the castle and such. Their ma and da had gone to a hut outside the gates that surrounded the keep to help heal a villager, as their ma had a knack for

healing herbs. The lady sounded mighty sick and must have been to have them leaving at night.

The great door burst open suddenly, scaring the three boys, and Aleck watched as their uncle Fergus hurried in, his eyes wide. “Come!” he urged, grabbing Duncan off the chair. “Come with me noo!”

Aleck and Lachlan exchanged guilty looks. They had been found out and their ma was going to force them to clean the kitchen floor again for disobeying her.

“It was Aleck’s idea!” Lachlan wailed as the older man took both of them by the arm, Duncan clinging to his corded neck.

“Quiet!” Uncle Fergus stated, silencing them further.

A loud boom rattled the keep and the boys jumped. Aleck whirled around to catch a glimpse of what was going on through the open door.

“Move quickly noo,” his uncle warned, propelling the boys to the tapestry on the other side of the fireplace. A great Scottish warrior stared down at them as Uncle Fergus drew it aside, revealing the hidden door that they all knew was there.

“Whit's wrong ?” Aleck asked, the sounds of shouts and screams filling the air.

Uncle Fergus ignored him as he pushed open the door, stale air emanating from the opening. Duncan whimpered and burrowed his face in the large Scot’s shoulder as Aleck peered in, curiosity propelling him forward. Lachlan joined him at the entrance, the wooden sword still in his hands. “Are we gaun in thare?”

“Aye,” Uncle Fergus answered, pushing the two boys into the darkness. “I have to seal the door.”

Aleck took a step forward, holding out his hands in front of him as he blindly moved further into the darkness. “Where’s Da?” Lachlan whispered as he walked beside his brother. “And Ma?”

“I dinnae know,” Aleck whispered back, hearing the fear in Lachlan’s voice.

“Are you afraid?” Lachlan asked, as the sound of the door being shut echoed throughout the tunnel.

Aleck didn’t answer, though inside he was trembling with fear. He wanted to see his da and ma and get out of this tunnel. Uncle Fergus came up behind them and forced them to walk faster, where the smell shifted, the air growing cleaner.

Wind whistled past Aleck’s ears and Uncle Fergus pushed past them, placing Duncan on the ground. “Stay here,” he warned in a low voice before disappearing into the darkness.

Frightened, Aleck wrapped his arm around Duncan’s quaking shoulders, drawing his younger brother to his side. Lachlan would call him weak for doing so, but they did not understand what was going on.

All they had was each other.

Finally, Uncle Fergus appeared before them. “’Tis safe. Come noo.”

Duncan wrapped his tiny hand around Aleck’s and they moved, the tunnel opening to the dark night sky. Aleck recognized where they were immediately, but his ears were drawn to the sound of fighting beyond the keep. Were they being attacked?

Uncle Fergus forced them to skirt the fishing pond and head toward the woods, urging them to hurry. Duncan broke out into a run after Lachlan, severing Aleck’s

grip on his hand as he did so. Aleck turned back to the keep, horrified to see that the huts leading up to the keep were on fire, illuminating the fighting in the main courtyard. It was easy to spot his da, Callum the Great, swinging his claymore sword over his head as he cleaved a man on the head, letting out a roar as he did so.

Aleck started to run forward, knowing that he could help his da defend their home. “Da!” he called out, catching his da’s attention.

His da’s eyes widened and he started to shake his head, pointing his claymore at Aleck. “Run Aleck!”

Aleck’s feet stumbled in the tall grass as he watched the great shadow rise up behind his da, the outline of a claymore poised for a deadly strike. Aleck screamed but it was too late. The claymore came down on his father’s back. Callum the Great seemed to be frozen in place, his eyes on his son, before he fell to his knees.

A wail went up behind him before Aleck was grabbed about the waist, hauled against his uncle, and carried into the woods, where his brothers waited. The moment he was let go, Aleck collapsed to the dirt ground, tears streaming down his face. His brothers clamored around him, their whispers mingling together, but Aleck could not focus on anything but the sight he had just witnessed.

The etching in his brain that he would never forget.

He had caused his da’s death.

Callum the Great was dead, and it was all his fault.

CHAPTER 1

Twelve Years Later

Fennella Mcpherson crouched in the dirt, the raindrops sliding down her tightly bound hair and onto her face. She wanted to pull her hood up to ward off the sudden downpour, but any slight movement could draw attention, which was the last thing she wanted.

The smell of wet earth surrounded her and she breathed it in, calming her soul. The recent row with her half brother had left her angered, but also with a cut upon her cheek for daring to speak against his demands. He had spoken of how she was not performing her duty to her family, to her laird, by turning down yet another marriage proposal.

The Scot had been covered in mud and stank as if he had bathed in it. Besides, Fennella felt as if she were worth far more than a few pigs as trade.

Yet another reason she longed to leave the keep for good, and would have if it weren't for her sisters. She, Moira, and Sorcha were all true siblings of her da and ma, her ma unable to bear a son to take their da's place.

So he went elsewhere for his sons and as a result, three half brothers were born from the women of the village. While Fennella was the true heir to the clan, she could not fight her da on naming Dearg his next in line.

When their da died on the battlefield, her true horror had begun, as now she was the

only one to protect her clan, her sisters, and their family's legacy. Without her, the clan would starve and her sisters would be sold off to pay for Dearg's vices.

She could not allow that to happen.

"Yer soaking wet, lass."

Fennella looked up at her second-in-command, pressing her finger to her lips. He nodded as he hunkered next to her, his brawny shoulders brushing hers. Even in the rain, a sound could carry for miles around, but no matter how many times she told Will, he never seemed to understand what it meant to be completely quiet.

For Scots, being quiet was like cutting out their hearts. They were a loud lot.

Turning her attention back to the muddy road, she peered through the torrential rain, waiting for the caravan to appear. One of their scouts had made the bird call that there were travelers even in this weather, and Fennella had positioned herself and Will in such a way that they would ambush the caravan before they had a chance to draw their weapons.

It was a tried and true plan they had used time and time again, one that had attempted to right the wrongs of her clan.

On a full moon night, Fennella would hurry away from the keep, dressed in her brother's breeks, and meet the rebel bandits at an unnamed location, making plans to watch the main road to the keep and divest some weary traveler of goods.

Goods that would only be handed over to Dearg on arrival to the keep. Fennella had watched her brother, the laird of the Mcpherson clan, take goods meant for his people and hoard them away, never once sharing with the clan. The cellars overflowed with ale and grain, though the coffers that had once held their family's fortune were empty.

Anyone outside the keep, especially those that did not pledge their allegiance to the laird, were forced to eat the meager crops they could grow or forage the woods for animals.

Their clan was starving and Fennella felt as if she was the only one in her family that cared.

So she resorted to stealing from her own brother, secretly distributing the goods to the families beyond the keep, the families that needed the food the most. For three years she had directed the rebel bandits to watch the road, taking only what was needed and leaving the traveler with nothing more than a tale to tell.

Her brother suspected no one, though it was a mite difficult to keep the smirk off her face when he raged about the very fact from his perch in the main hall. After all, it was he who would inform in his boastful ways that the traveler was coming to the keep, giving Fennella ample time to set her plans in motion and then watch as they were executed.

Fennella did nothing more than steal from her brother, though many in the growing group of rebels wanted to build a resistance against Dearg and his cruel reign. Afraid that he would catch on, Fennella had tamped down the talks of overthrowing Dearg, knowing that he would snuff out any thought of rebellion by destroying even more innocent lives. She could not allow those deaths to be on her conscience.

One day she would be forced to abandon her mission, but for now, she continued on. Tonight, however, was different. One of the rebels had been injured in the fields and she had stepped in this evening, not wanting to put off this raid. She was nervous, but it was a sight better than waiting for them to finish.

Another bird call cut through the blinding rain and Fennella reached for her bow propped up on the fallen log, already extracting the arrow from the pack on her back. To keep her identity hidden, Fennella wore a mask to conceal her features, pulling the

hood over her rich auburn hair. One slip and her brother would immediately know she was the one, and her sisters would suffer. Moira was at the tender age of sixteen, far old enough to wed if her brother chose to do so, though Fennella knew that their ma had wed at that age and become Lady of the keep. By thirteen, she had born Dearg and four other children in rapid succession.

It had been Sorcha that had been her downfall, and she had perished in childbirth, leaving her daughters in the hands of a hardened warrior, who had turned his backs on them in favor of his sons.

Now at twelve, Sorcha was Fennella's responsibility.

Her other half brother, Gavan, was rapidly turning into Dearg with each passing day, preferring to spend his time imbibing in ale than to learn the ways of a proud Scot warrior.

Their clan was failing.

The sound of a wagon clamoring down the muddy road caught Fennella's attention. She raised her hood, tucking it in tight against the pull of the strong wind, before nodding to Will, who was adjusting his own black mask. Will was a farmer's son, one who had lost both his da and his ma in the same season. She had found him in his family's hut, drinking the last of his da's ale, and together they had formed an unlikely friendship. In another time, as another person, Fennella might have had romantic notions about him.

The wagon grew closer and Fennella stepped out onto the road, her arrow pulled back tightly against her wet cheek as she waited.

There was a brawny Scot on horseback in front of the wagon; she aimed the arrow at his chest. "Halt!"

The rider stopped, his eyes flickering over her. Fennella was struck by his size, how he dwarfed even the massive steed he was traveling on, but she kept her arrow steady. “Kind sir, we will be divesting you of your wagon.”

“Mah wagon?” he asked, his thick Scottish burr cutting through the night.

Fennella nodded as Will and the other two rebels approached the wagon, their swords drawn. “We have no reason tae harm ye.”

The rider arched a brow. “Ye an' who else lass?”

Frowning, Fennella took a step forward. “You will be on your way shortly, as long as you do not give me reason to place this arrow in your bleeding Scot heart.”

To her surprise, he chuckled. “I confess, this is the first time I am bein’ robbed by a wee lass.”

“‘Tis won’t likely be yer last,” she said coldly, nodding to Will. Will let out the call and more rebels came from the wood, their arrows drawn on their seemingly difficult traveler. Now that they were outnumbered, he would have no reason to put up a fight.

The Scot looked around at the group of men, all masked and ready for a brawl. “Is this all, lass?”

“It's enough tae tak' ye doon if ye choose tae fight ower yer goods,” she said evenly, inwardly frustrated that he continued to doubt their ability. “Which we wull be divesting ye o' at this moment.”

At her signal, Will motioned for the man driving the wagon to climb off the seat. Once he was secured with a bit of rope to a tree, he peered inside, letting out a low whistle.

That meant it was far more than they had hoped for, and Fennella's mood lightened. Spring was coming and the fields would need to be replanted if the clan was to survive the next winter. Her brother did not know of the fields that lay beyond the wood, out of any path that he would travel.

It was the only way she knew to keep hope alive within the clan. "We will be taking yer wagon."

The rider didn't react to her words, instead resting his hands on his saddlehorn. "Yer making a mistake lass."

"'Tis my mistake to make," Fennella said calmly. "I will be needing you to dismount yer horse."

"Are ye planning oan taking mah horse tae?"

Fennella shook her head, motioning for him to dismount. "A horse is a man's prized possession."

He grinned. "Next tae his boaby."

She glared at him and his grin faded, but he did dismount, leading his horse over to the side of the road. Fennella caught sight of the Claymore nestled in the cleft of his back, wondering if she could take him down with a mere arrow. Somehow she didn't think she would.

He was a warrior, and given the large sword on his back, a fine one at that.

Once he was standing on the side of the road in the tall grass, Fennella motioned for Will to get the wagon moving, where they would hide it in the woods before divesting it of the goods and scattering them before morning. Even if the traveler found the wagon after days of searching, there would be no sign of his goods, not in

the wagon nor in the village.

Keeping her arrow trained on him, she motioned for another rebel to tie him to the tree along with his own man, who was silently watching the robbery. “Ye know ah will find ye,” the traveler finally said as he allowed the rebel to tie him to the tree without a fight. “An' whin ah dae, ah will demand payment fur mah goods lost.”

Satisfied that the ropes would hold him briefly at least, Fennella lowered her bow, relaxing the arrow. “I would expect nothing less, Scot. Someone will be by to let you free sooner or later.”

“Ye play a dangerous game lass,” he called out. “A game ye cannae win.”

Fennella walked away as his threats called out behind her. If only he knew how often she had played this game, risking her life and that of her sisters to keep the clan alive.

No, she knew she could win the game...for now.

Fennella followed the wagon ruts until they moved off the road and into the grassy pasture that would lead to the woods. It wasn't until she had put some miles between her and the traveler that the knot in her shoulders eased some. There had been something about him, about the way that he had followed her every movement with his eyes.

She found Will and the others in the clearing, surrounding the wagon to protect it. “What's in it?” Fennella asked. “What did you see?”

Will grinned. “Mair than ah had expected fur us tae fin' lassie.”

She walked over and peered in, surprised at the amount of food stores and ale packed away under the canvas. There were also silver candlesticks, and dried pelts, one so white that she longed to run her hand over it to feel its softness. The traveler had not

looked like a trader, but a hard warrior, so why did he have such goods in this wagon?

And why was he taking them to Dearg?

Fennella sucked in a breath, a notion clearing in her mind. These weren't just trading goods, these were wedding gifts, which meant Dearg was marrying off one of them to the brawny Scot!

"I must go," Fennella forced out, her tongue thick in her mouth, bile rising in the back of her throat. Dearg could not mean to marry off one of her sisters. They were too young, too inexperienced in the ways of life outside of the keep.

And against that Scot, they wouldn't last a season.

"What dae you want us tae dae wi' this?" Will called out as Fennella started toward the keep.

"The same as we always do," she called back, not bothering to turn around. If they were truly wedding gifts of sorts, then it was best to use them in order to help clan and not her brothers.

Stripping off her mask, Fennella threw it into the woods, not bothering that she would not have it for the next raid. Something was not sitting well with her and she intended to find out what Dearg was up to.

For if he had plans for her sisters, she would be ruining them.

Excited by the preview?