



Highlander's Undying Flame

(Immortal Highlanders #4)

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Category: Historical

Description: Falling in love with her comes with great consequences.

Esme Mackenzie is left an orphan when a northern tribe attacks the island she calls home. Her survival depends on the kindness of her fellow islanders and her mere determination to avenge her parents' deaths. When she is taken as a slave under Laird McFlecher's command, she is ready to sacrifice everything to make the conquerors suffer. The only thing standing in her way is the charming immortal Highlander known as the Bear.

Bruce Sterling answers to no master, but he has decided to settle down until he finds the beautiful creature that saved his life. He is sure that the lass who found him unconscious on his floating boat was humming the sweet lullaby of the sirens. However, when he sees the slave girl he has been searching for being brought into the Keep, Bruce has no reason to serve the laird anymore. His body and soul will answer only to the lass with the mesmerizing green eyes.

Unfortunately, her beauty draws all kinds of unwanted attention from the court but the real danger lies in the hatred in her heart. Bruce has to gain Esme's trust and control his wild emotions, hoping he will not scare her away. Esme has an unyielding spirit, though, that will not back down from a challenge. Can his love soothe her rage and protect her from the enemy and herself?

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“ T hey say that legends walk clothed in the flesh of men this far in the North, Highlander.”

The soldier whispered to the huge man lying on the ground next to him. The battalion of soldiers lay hidden below the crest of the hill with only their helmets visible as they looked for the enemies’ approach.

It would have taken someone with eagle eyes to see the men, so well camouflaged as they were in their dark green plaid. They were as silent as the soft breeze blowing gently through the tall grass.

The man the soldier spoke to was formidable in every way. He wore no symbol of loyalty on his clothing and no special plaid displayed his clan. The crest of the silver pin holding the plaid across his shoulder showed the great muzzle of a bear with its fangs exposed in a snarl.

The soldier had no doubt it would be the last thing many of their enemies saw once they joined in battle.

“I am nae legend,” the man with the bear crest growled in a deep voice. “I am more in the way of thinking aboot meself as a nightmare, lad.”

The soldier made the sign of the cross and turned away from the man. They had all noticed him when he joined their march. After presenting the captain with a letter from their laird, commanding the battalion to obey the huge man’s orders once battle commenced, the warrior had said nothing by way of greeting or explanation. All he did was adjust his weapons and stare at the skyline, frowning with concentration.

No one bothered the dark Highlander. Some of the more devout soldiers whispered that the man reeked of magic, and they wanted no part of a victory if it was to be won with dark spells. They had tramped many leagues, to where the sands of Scotland joined the black North Sea, on a mission to find and destroy a brigade of pirates. This land was unfamiliar territory to them with its barren fields and stark gray rocks.

A village had been burnt to the ground with the poor villagers still inside their cottages. No laird would stand back and allow such evil to go unpunished. As far as Laird MacPherson was concerned, if the tall Highlander wanted to go along for the march then he was welcome to swing his sword when the time came.

But after hearing the man's expertise with war, the laird sent him to join the battalion in the north with instructions to lead them to victory. But the soldiers themselves were not so sure.

"He wears no armor," the MacPherson clan soldiers whispered amongst themselves. "It is nae natural."

But for some reason, when they had bivouacked the night before, the camp followers did not feel the same way about the stranger as the soldiers did.

Every army battalion had camp followers, and Laird MacPherson's was no different. With the wives at home looking after the bairns, it was convenient for some of the soldiers to use the services of camp followers. These accommodating women cooked the meals on the journey and provided other services for a fee.

If a soldier did not have the penny coin to pay one of the camp followers, he could bargain away the loot his clothes and armor would fetch if he were killed in battle. It was not an uncommon sight to see weeping camp followers picking through the bodies of fallen soldiers after their favorite man fell under the sword.

The captain turned a blind eye to this, saying that so long as the women did not show signs of the pox, they were welcome to ply their trade. Several of the bonniest camp followers had gathered around the stranger's fire that night to coo over his large muscles and compliment his long sword.

"Where are ye from, handsome?" The loveliest woman fluttered her eyelashes at him as she ran a hand over his thick arm. "And are there more braw warriors like ye there?"

The man was friendly enough to the women, but his battle fury was already running too high for him to want to blunt it with lovemaking. "Och, hen. Awa' wit' ye. I'll nae turn me back to the sky until yon pirates are lying dead." He panted as he growled the words, his eyes fixed on the horizon where he knew the pirates lay.

Some of the ladies noticed the fierce glitter of bloodlust in his black eyes, but they were helpless to move away from him. The stranger had an animal attraction about him, and as feral as the warrior seemed to be there was not one woman seated next to him who did not crave to house-train this exciting creature.

"Ye growl like a great bear, sweetheart," another woman stroked the man's leg under his plaid and above his boot, "it will do ye good to satisfy one o' yer fits of hunger before we catch up to those seafaring rogues on the morrow."

But the stranger refused every offer of food and drink made to him. The soldiers were amazed to see the camp followers begging the man instead of it being the other way around.

"Are ye nae tempted by the thought? A pair of soft, white thighs spread wide open to receive ye, Warrior?" One of the soldiers called over to the man, but all he got by way of a reply was a growl. The sound reverberated across the camp, making the war hounds howl at the moon.

That display of rigid discipline and dedication to the art of war was enough to make the men whisper of legends. They began to call him the Braw Bear. His hulking shoulders, dark brow bone, and scowling expression reminded them of those great beasts that roamed the forests across the seas.

The battalion was patient, waiting for the pirates to show themselves.

“There,” the man they called Bear pointed along the coast. “Smoke. They are burning another village. We must stop them.”

The captain advised against it. He was feeling aggrieved by the warrior’s blunt manners. He was a clan elder and chief, after all, and should not have to obey this brutish stranger. “We have the advantage based here on the hill. Let them come to us.”

The warrior shot the captain a glowering look of scorn before standing upright. “It is time for us to bring the fear to them.” He began running down the hill toward the smoke. Sighing, because Laird MacPherson had given him orders to heed the stranger at all costs, the captain told his men to follow.

There was no science to the way the warrior charged into the village with his weapons brandished. He simply sprinted to where the spirals of smoke could be seen curling into the air and did not stop until he saw pirates.

Most of the brigands had their backs facing outwards as they concentrated on setting the thatch alight. No lookouts had been posted; they did not worry about a counterattack. The first sound that alerted them to the warrior’s presence was the sound of wood splintering. The man called Bear smashed his axe to break the barricaded doors. Coughing villagers staggered out into the road, but the pirates could do nothing to stop them—Laird MacPherson’s soldiers were already rushing into the village with their spears brandished.

While the warrior smashed the doors, the soldiers and pirates clashed. This was not to the Bear's liking. Grabbing a young squire, he pushed his axe into the lad's hands. "Smash doon the doors and dinnae stop until every cottage is open."

After checking once to make sure the lad was doing what he said, the warrior joined the fray with relish. It was like he was possessed by some great force of nature. Most of the soldiers stood down and watched as the stranger used his two swords as if they weighed no more than ivory toothpicks.

The pirates were fighting back to back, moving towards the shore where their four longboats lay on the beach and the carrack ship was anchored in the bay. One by one, the man was thinning them out, the same way a kitchen maid might weed the herb garden. Some of the soldiers even sat down and watched. It was clear that the warrior had no need of assistance.

No matter how much the pirates tried to hide behind the shields and lunge at the man with their spears, it had no effect on him. His broadsword split their shields like apple seeds and he ducked any spear thrust directed at him.

By this time, some of the bolder camp followers had caught up with the battalion and were watching the killing spree. Some of the soldiers looked over at the women. "Begone, wenches! None of us are dead this time. Ye will have to wait for unluckier days. The loot from the brigands belongs to us by law!"

But from the way the women licked their lips as they watched the warrior fighting, it was clear that they had other things on their minds besides looting the corpses.

"Och, he's a braw beast," one of the women marveled, "and I'll wager me best gewgaw that he will lie on me bolster this night."

A few of the women began to bicker amongst themselves over who would have this

honor. They hoped that whoever might sleep with the man would have a bairn with him. The laird would pay well for the chance to foster the braw beast's wean. The child would likely grow up as large as a cottage if it were a boy.

They were so busy discussing this prospect that no one noticed the warrior chase the pirates to the beach. There were only five men left now, and they knew there was no escape. They planned on selling their lives dearly. It was time to stop backing away and face the man—and their doom.

“Let us go,” the leader tried to reason with the tall warrior with the black eyes, “Let us go, Berserker, and we will give you half the loot we have on board the carrack.”

“Nay, ye scoundrels,” the man was not even out of breath, “ye murdered innocents. I cannae let ye live. Throw doon yer weapons and I will give ye a clean death.”

“Belike the monster will gnaw our heads off at the neck,” one of the brigands said. “Let's rush him all at once. He cannot possibly withstand all five of us.”

They attacked him like a howling pack of dogs, their cutlasses raised to strike. All except for one brigand. He waited for a beat until the warrior began slicing up his shipmates, and then he grabbed a spear and thrust it deep into the middle of the mayhem.

The spear skewered one of the brigands right through the torso, but the head managed to bury itself deep in the warrior's belly.

The berserker did not flinch when he saw the spearhead protruding from his gut. Calmly withdrawing the shaft, he dropped the body with the spear and then flexed his sword in a large circle.

“I don't believe it!” The pirate backed away, his hands held out in front of him as if

he were warding off a ghost. “You should be dead. That spear went down as deep as your spine. It would have skewered a wild stallion.”

Flexing his sword around once more, the warrior grinned. “Believe it, lad. For the few moments ye have left to live, ye better believe it. And I am nae stallion. I am the Bear.”

Only when the pirate’s head hit the sand with a soft thump did the berserker warrior stagger and clutch his belly. Looking down at the wound, he frowned. Ignoring the village behind him, he walked to one of the longboats and clambered in after pushing it out onto the water until the waves began to lift the prow. Holding the oars, he began to row after casting off his heavy weaponry. The length and breadth of his arms were so big that he had no trouble setting the oars in the locks next to a seat made for four men to row on.

Casting one eye up at the sky, he noticed a thunderstorm gathering on the northwestern horizon. All this made him do was row faster. His enormous shoulders and back muscles flexed and strained as he worked the oars. The blood oozed out of his wound in a lazy, sluggish way and did not seem to affect his strength at all.

A bolt of lightning streaked across the sky as the rain began to fall. A large wave lifted the boat away from the shore, sending the vessel plummeting north.

Only when the shore was a distant golden line far away did the warrior stop rowing and drop the oars in the hull. His body swayed as he sat rigidly on the bench. And then he fell face forward with a mighty crash.

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Chapter

One

Esme saw the longboat bobbing a good many yards offshore. She would walk along the beach early in the mornings whenever she could, hoping to catch limpets and crabs to eat before the gulls did. Her hunger was constant, but so were her memories.

Stripping down to her shift, she waded out into the water and then started to swim to the boat. It did not take her long, she was as good at swimming as any other island lassie raised within walking distance of the craggy beaches. Nor did the freezing temperatures bother her, because she was used to hardship and sudden shocks. None of it mattered anymore.

Gripping the side of the boat, she pulled herself up into it. Esme bit her lower lip when she saw the body. The man was pale, but he looked so rugged and healthy that it was hard to believe he was dead. As lowborn and uncultured as she was, even Esme had heard of the great statues carved out of white marble in the faraway lands in the south. He reminded her of them; huge, hard, and awesome.

Then, the sun rose in the east, painting his high cheekbones with a blush of color. Leaning forward and kneeling in the hull, Esme placed one slender finger under the man's nostrils. He was breathing. Startled, she jumped back, waiting for him to open his eyes and pounce on her. But the man continued to sleep. Grateful that she had the chance to paddle one of the oars and bring the boat to the shore, Esme set her eyes on the small bundle of clothes waiting for her on the pebble beach where she had dropped them into a ragged pile.

She had to leave the boat half in the water because it was too heavy for her to drag onto the beach. Climbing out of the boat, she waded to her clothes and pulled the bedraggled kirtle over her thin body. With this scanty garment to protect her modesty, Esme waded back out to the boat, the hem of her undershift clutched in one hand and her small leather flask of weak ale in the other.

The sun was well above the end of the sea now. Fascinated, she began to tend to the man as best she could. He must have weighed twice as much as the frail girl; no one would have known it to look at her, but the peasant girl was nearly eight and ten years of age.

Carefully inspecting the swords, the girl looked for runes to tell her the man's story. There were none. The pommel of the sword in the back scabbard was a snarling bear, the same totem as the animal on his silver crest. As starving and penniless as she was, the girl did not steal from the man. That was not her way.

Esme enjoyed caring for him. He was the first man she had touched in such an intimate way, using her woolen kirtle to wipe him dry, lifting his heavy limbs off the bottom of the boat and making them more comfortable. He was huge, but he was not threatening. His pale forehead was noble and his handsome features were almost peaceful, except for the crease of a frown between his dark brows.

"Let's get ye warm and dry, Dark Highlander, and then ye might wake." His plaid was woven from black wool, so she called him by that name. For some weird reason, he did not feel like a stranger to her so she did not want to treat him like one.

The man stirred and groaned. Fighting her impulse to run away, Esme uncorked her flask and held it to his mouth. She slipped her thin arm under his thick neck to lift his head. "Here, ye braw duin, take a wee sup." Like the rest of her appearance, Esme's voice was as sweet and soft as honey. In the old days, in the happy days, she would sing and dance to delight her clan—but that was a long time ago.

“Come, master. Wake up. The world waits for ye.”

He drank down all of her precious ale, swallowing it with big, thirsty gulps. Esme did not begrudge the stranger one drop. His eyelids flickered open and his eyes glazed over as he tried to focus on her.

“I thank ye, bonny lass. Ye are me dream come true.”

She smiled, wiping a damp strand of black hair off his face with a light finger. “Me life is a nightmare, master, but I dinnae mind being yer sweet dream.”

He seemed to frown. His voice was gruff and harsh. “Are ye a Selkie, lassie? Have ye come to drag me doon under the water?”

That made Esme laugh out loud. When he heard the very real human sound of her laughter, the man settled down and closed his eyes. Soon, he was back fast asleep. He held her hand fast in his great paw, but she had no trouble wiggling it out as he slept.

Covering him with the scrap of arisaid to protect him from the October winds, Esme climbed out of the boat, promising herself that she would come back and fetch the woolen rag the next day.

When Bruce woke up, he was alone and very uncomfortable after lying on the hard hull floor for so long. Looking down at the tight pack of muscles on his taut stomach, he smiled to see he was as good as new. But when he ran the palm of his hand over the area, he could feel some hair was missing from the wound site, where the thin line of dark hair descended from his midriff down to his groin.

He saw a small woolen rag lying on the floor of the longboat and wondered if it had been there when he left Scotland.

The longboat had banked close to a pebble beach. Vaulting out of the vessel and pulling the prow onto the sand, Bruce scouted the land looking for signs of inhabitants. It was then he noticed the tracks leading down to the waterline. Someone must have come upon him when he was sleeping.

He did not like the idea of that at all and began to don his cast-off weapons hastily; back scabbard, sword sheath, and dirk. Before the healing sleep knocked him senseless, he always tried to lock himself away or hide in a cave. But when he saw the light tread of his timid visitor, he saw that she must be a girl. A very dainty, petite girl by the size of her footprint. One thing made him frown. It was nearly winter and the footprint showed no sign of a shoe.

Maybe the girl who found him was a fisherman's little daughter. He had a vague memory of a sweet dream, about a beautiful mermaid who touched his wound when he was asleep, stroking his hair off his face as she sat in her damp rag of a shift gown beside him.

It was the first time in his long life that Bruce became aroused while the web of sleep was still wrapped tightly around him. Then a movement caught his eye. Someone had been walking down to the beach over the gritty dunes but ducked behind one of the rocks when they saw him standing alert on the sand.

He knew it was the young lass from his dreams. Every one of his senses told him that. He could smell her musky scent and hear her frightened breathing. "Come oot, lassie!" he shouted over to where she crouched. "I will nae hurt ye, wee yin. Come and prove to me that ye are human!"

Striding to the boat, Bruce grabbed a scrap of woven wool. Waving it in what he hoped was a tempting manner, he beckoned her forward. "Come closer, lassie. I dinnae bite."

Waiting impatiently, he did not know what else to do to make the girl trust him. That was always how it was before he was able to cast his glamor on a woman; she would back away from his brutish height and huge muscles with fear.

Risking the possibility of her fleeing from him, Bruce began to climb the dune holding the scrap of woolen arisaid in one large hand. "See, sweetheart," when he saw she was hiding and not running, he smiled. "I wish to return yer cloth to ye." Pointing to the scabbard hanging behind him, he gave a deep laugh. "Dinnae fash aboot me swords either. They stay sheathed until battle."

The cheekbones of her face were sharply etched from hunger. Her green eyes were huge in her face, but not big enough to detract from the blooming fullness of her pink lips. A girl on the cusp of womanhood, but none could compare to her unique beauty.

Stopping ten yards away from her hiding place, Bruce decided to coax her to come to him. "Are ye sure ye are nae a Selkie, lass? I swear there are sirens less tempting than ye."

His remark made her blink with shyness and then a ghost of a smile flickered over her lips. The hair was scraped back off her face and hidden behind a tight, dirty rag, but when she raised her hand and threw something at him, the fingers were clean.

It was the heel from a loaf of black bread. When Bruce saw the color of the bread and stopped to look around at the miles of barren grassland on the slopes surrounding him, he knew where he was; the north islands. Those lonely isles in the North Sea; those chunks of rock and sand dotting the waves, halfway between the lands of the Norse and the Scots.

The cries of gulls and the loud flapping of wings as the birds wheeled overhead almost drowned out his words.

Politely picking up the heel of bread he ripped the hard crust with strong, white teeth. "I thank ye, lassie," he growled, licking the corners of his mouth with his tongue, "D'ye ken where can I get more of this?"

She was still too shy to reveal all of herself to him. Bruce was under no illusion that the bonny maiden was a fisherman's daughter who had found him while out searching for shellfish to use as bait. The lass must be a lowly servant girl or even a beggar maid. His cold, hard, battle-driven heart melted for her.

Throwing caution to the winds, Bruce advanced on the rock where the girl was hiding. She turned tail and ran like the wind, her dirty bare feet kicking up sand as she sprinted away from him. But it was not Bruce who had scared the wee beauty away. The thumping sound of trotting horse hooves could be heard coming over the slope, where the hills turned into dunes.

Six riders thundered along the brow of the hill. A scouting party would have been his first guess, but then he changed his mind when he saw they were dressed in finery. The riders wore shining breastplates and leatherbound trews. Some of the men's hair was braided and tied back. Others had adorned their full beards by forking the thick growth and fastening the tufts with gold beads. Their round shields had large bosses in the middle, and the men carried spears in addition to the axes hanging from their belts.

At the head of the riders rode a young woman. Her blonde hair was tightly braided and held in place with a thick golden circlet. Her willowy body sat proudly sideways in the saddle, her torso moving with the rhythm of the animal underneath her with a sinewy motion.

She looked down at the beach and saw him. Shouting over her shoulder to the men, the woman turned her horse to trot down the dune, leaning back in the saddle so far that her head touched the saddle. It was a superb display of horsemanship considering

the woman was riding sidesaddle.

Bruce, however, remained unimpressed. He kept his wits about him and loosened the sword in the sheath hanging from his belt.

Seeing that he carried no crossbow or spear, the woman reined in her horse and dismounted a few yards away from him, stroking her thighs to smooth the velvet fabric straight and looking at him with curiosity in her languorous blue eyes. “Stranger, what dangerous waves lapped you this far? Did you not know this is the lion’s den?”

The other riders had caught up to the young woman by now. They circled Bruce, still astride their horses with their spearheads pointing down at him. He was not bothered and kept his attention on the young woman. “Och, Mistress, dinnae ye fash noo,” Bruce flashed her his most charming smile. “The lion is me brither.”

This made the girl laugh. “You make a bold claim, stranger. And how do you know my father?”

Bruce bowed. A simple nod of the head, but it was enough to let her know he acknowledged her father’s title. “I dinnae ken yer faither, Mistress. I spoke of me own brethren. They are all famous warriors. As am I.”

The woman signaled to one of the riders, making the man dismount from his horse and hand the reins to Bruce. The Highlander could see that the rider was fuming mad to have to give his horse over to Bruce for him to ride, but he dared not disobey the blonde girl’s command.

“My father is as strong and fierce as one of those great beasts the English claim as their animal totem, stranger. He reigns as the laird here, having conquered the local Scots people with sword and fear.”

This told Bruce everything he needed to know. They were Norse folk, those savage fighters from across the water.

“Why does he nae call himself the Thain, yer faither?” Bruce vaulted onto the horse, his heavyweight making the animal sidle and snort as he settled himself into the saddle.

“We embrace the local ways,” the young woman told him in a light tone. “I suppose it is to try and make the local folk like us better.”

Muttering under his breath, Bruce could not help saying, “Good luck with that, hen. Ye will nae make many friends if yer servants are walking on the freezing sands in bare feet.”

He still clutched the scrap of wool in his hand as he followed the woman’s horseback up the hill. For the first time in his long life, Bruce looked back as he rode. It was not because he worried about the men with spears riding close behind him—he wanted to see the girl with the green eyes.

But she was long gone.

Following the track of trampled grass soon brought them to the coastal village. The cottages overlooked the steep cliffs and crashing waves underneath. It was a dismal place this close to winter. The smell of smoking fish was everywhere. Some of the villagers looked at him with suspicion when they saw his black plaid. There was no display of plaid anywhere to be seen which was a sure sign of a conquered people.

Bruce dismounted and threw the reins to one of the riders, following the blonde girl into the great hall with a casual, heavy gait. The only concession the hall had made to its Scottish heritage was the slate roof tiles. Everything else was decorated with Norse wood carvings. This was considered to be the height of luxury on an island where the

tallest tree could only be described as a scrubby windswept bush.

The villagers' cottages had been built from stone and thatched with grass. Every home was buried half underground to hide as much of the walls from the harsh seasonal elements as possible. The main source of fuel was dried cattle pats and the thick black flammable substance that washed up on the beach sands.

A man sat on a richly carved wooden chair on the stone dais at the top of the hall as thin wisps of smoke curled around the ceiling above him.

The blonde girl curtsied. "Father, we found this man on the beach. He claims kinship with all warriors."

The Norse laird leaned forward in the chair, looking at Bruce from head to toe. "I am not blind, Mackenzie," the laird said, "I can see the man is a warrior without you telling me. How did you get here?" He addressed the question to Bruce.

After bowing, the warrior introduced himself. "I am Bruce of Sterling, Laird. Got me heid knocked about a wee bit during a battle and must have collapsed in the boat."

The Norse laird did look a bit like a lion. Bruce had heard of the practices of the Northern tribes but thought them to have been long forgotten. Apparently, some tribes still liked to spread their influence and conquer other lands despite it being an ancient and heavily criticized practice dating some centuries back. He had a thick head of blond hair and a round, wide face with the same slanting blue eyes as his daughter. "Battle, hey?"

Bruce bowed again. "Aye, I can smell blood in the air before it is spilled and I make sure to go there. Forgive me asking ye a question, Laird, but did I hear ye correctly when ye called yer daughter 'Mackenzie'?"

The Laird was dismissive. “Yes. The clan who lived on this isle before I conquered it was mainly descended from the McKenzie clan, so I named my daughter after it. We have even turned our own names to reflect the native tongue. We were of the Fluga tribe, ‘arrow’ in our land. But now we call ourselves the conquering clan of ‘Fletcher’.”

Bruce looked around the hall and noticed some of the servants had downcast faces. He made his own assessment of how the Fluga tribe had forced the villagers to accept their rule. He did not say anything out loud. He was a battle-hardened warrior after all, and he was used to seeing people live in bondage. He had no problem with that so long as they were treated fairly.

“So, do I have yer leave to bide here for a wee while?” the warrior shrugged his massive shoulders around while gesturing at the men in the hall. “Ye live on an island, Laird. Yer borders are at risk from both the north and the south.”

“Why should I trust a man who gets washed up on my shores?” The new Laird McFletcher sat back in his chair, waiting for the warrior to beg him for refuge.

Bruce had never been the kind of man to rely on brags. Stepping over to one of the guards so quickly that the man was taken unawares, Bruce wrested the spear out of the guard’s hand and broke the shaft in two. It was such a shockingly awesome show of strength and speed and, for a long moment, no one in the hall reacted. Then Laird McFletcher stood up.

“Do you eat the soft spores that grow in the dark woods of our mountains?”

The laird was referring to the bright toadstools and mushroom fungi that the Norsemen consumed before battle to give them superhuman capabilities, turning them from cautious soldiers into battle-enraged berserkers.

Bruce grinned. “I dinnae need to. I am the Bear. One o’ the Immortal Brethren from the myths of auld! I am the original berserker, dedicated to blooding me sword until the last foe falls.”

The laird whispered. “Of that I have no doubt. Mackenzie! Show this great warrior to our best bedchamber, and make sure he is comfortable. This man is going to make our island famous.”

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Chapter

Two

Three years later...

Three years had passed since the great warrior came to live on the faraway Scottish isle, and the new McFletcher clan had grown in both wealth and power. Every year, for the past three years, Esme McKenzie had walked down to the shore where the longboat lay keeled over on the wet sands. And every month before snowfall she would find a gift waiting for her there.

The gunny sack hidden beneath the rotting boards would always contain the same items; a woolen tunic, a pretty lawn chemise, a finely woven woolen shawl, a pair of leather short boots, and a small pouch of gold. There was always the same sign to let her know who left her the gifts—a tiny scrap of ragged wool. It was the last remnants of McKenzie clan plaid from the old arisaid she had accidentally left next to the warrior when he lay in the boat.

What had drawn her to visit the boat in the first place? Esme had no fond feelings for the man she had once helped. It was like Bruce was dead to her now, and there was a reason for this. He had begun fighting for the people she would always call the Fluga; they were no clan or kin of hers! The invaders could claim to have changed their tribe name to McFletcher as much as they liked, but they had not even used the dyes of the land to craft themselves a special plaid weave yet.

The first time Esme had returned to the boat, it was to see if there was a chance to

leave the island in it. Esme wanted to row far away from this wretched place until her old homeland was no more than a dot on the horizon. But the longboat was far too wide for her to operate on her own, and Esme could never find anyone else who was brave enough to leave with her.

They were all mired in their subservience, too afraid to rebel. And she would have needed at least seven others besides herself if she wanted to navigate the northern waters and row over the sea to Scotland. After one harsh winter storm, the boat had drifted onto the rocks and smashed there, smashing all of Esme's hopes for escape along with it. But the skeleton of the boat still remained, as if it wanted to tease her how easy it had once been to sail away.

But she could not say no to the gifts the warrior left for her. Even though she had no family left alive, Esme was happy to share the clothes with others who needed them. Her gold went towards buying hearty root vegetables from the markets at Thurso whenever the merchant boats passed the island with a hull full of produce.

When the weather was fine, the warrior would sometimes ride to her side of the island, stopping to ask neighbors and friends if they knew where he could find a wee slip of a lass with green eyes that beckoned like a Selkie song. But they would turn him away with a frown. For no amount of gold would they betray Esme.

The fisherman tried to warn her. "I ken when a man is obsessed with ye, Esme, and he is it! It is time for ye to get married before yon Dark Berserker Bear locates ye."

"I have seen only one score of summers, William," Esme scoffed as she helped the man lift the heavy twine nets. "I dinnae want to risk me life in childbirth just yet."

Personally, Esme had a suspicious feeling that if the dark man found out she was married, he might set about turning her into a widow in the fastest time. There was a predatory expression on his face when he made his inquiries about her as if he

already considered her to be his property. Esme knew this because she would watch him from behind one of the smoking sheds or stables as he stalked from cottage to cottage looking for her.

His eyes would rake across the road, searching for her face. Esme would swear to her friends that the man could smell her and hear her breath too! He was relentless and kept coming back. And yet, Esme never felt hunted by the tall warrior. She was too busy trying to survive to think too hard about why he looked for her.

His gifts were thanks enough, and she learned his name was Bruce of Sterling. Rumors circled that he was one of the Immortal Warriors, but Esme was too young to have heard those old wives' tales about the Eternal Brethren cursed to walk the earth in search of salvation.

Sometimes, Esme would smile to herself after she retrieved the rough parcel he left for her. The tunics would have fitted her when she was a young maiden of seven and ten years old, but she was a woman now. Her body had filled out in all the right places, with wide, curved hips, voluptuous breasts, and a waist any large man could span with two hands. But her neighbors would always receive the tunics with open arms, thanking Esme for her generosity and begging her to take from their small supply of food in exchange.

Until one day, disaster struck. The Laird's comptroller was aboard one of the merchants' ships, commanded to guard the latest cord of timber ferried from the mainland. The conquered people ran to the beach, clustering on the shore so they could barter fish and mead for barley wheat when the boats came. Bored of the ship, the comptroller climbed down the rope ladder and sat in the prow as it headed ashore.

One villager caught his eye. She was a maiden, of that there was no doubt. Her soft, brown hair hung down to the back of her waist and her heart-shaped face was as pretty as a picture. But it was the girl's eyes that made the comptroller sit up.

“Hoy! Merchant. Who is that wench with the hair like clouds?”

The merchant shrugged. “A beggar girl, like most of the others ’round these parts. Too comely to work over the hill at the great hall. Too stubborn to wed. I dinnae blame the poor wretch. Wives have it tough here on the island.”

The comptroller nodded understandingly. He could not have summed it up better himself. “Tell two of your sailors to bring her to me.”

And so, when Esme stepped forward to buy apples from one of the baskets inside the boat, she found herself grabbed by two men from the ship and taken to stand in front of the comptroller. “I am the laird’s majordomo, girl,” the man informed her, “I run the laird’s household affairs. Be not afraid. I am here to offer you work.”

Esme hung her head. She knew the Norse folk had peculiar customs when it came to food production. Some of the pagan practices they had not given up required maidens to harvest honey for mead and make the yeast for bread. Virgins were also needed to light the candles on feast days and serve warriors strong brews before battle.

But still, more rumors rippled around the island about how a beautiful maiden would be sent offshore in the chief’s longboat after he died—after the vessel had been set alight!

The comptroller could see her hesitation and it made him angry. “Come, girl! Get in the boat. Don’t waste my time. When are you people going to learn you are subject to the laird’s will?”

Esme’s fisherman friend stepped forward. “If the laird’s will wants to pluck a bonny lass’s maidenhead awa’ from her, yer great cockerel, then I have nay doubt Esme will be better off here with us!”

One motion of the comptroller's finger and the fisherman got punched in the stomach by one of the sailors. Splashing into the shallow water, Esme got into the boat and sat next to the man. As the oars dipped and splashed, she watched as her people got further away and the carrack ship got closer. She should have agreed to marry, and then this would never have happened to her. But Esme could not shake the feeling that she was heading in the right direction.

Towards those villains who had murdered her folk and pillaged their land...

Bruce felt restless and bored. The leaf fall was ending—not that anyone would notice on this barren rocky outcrop full of grass in the middle of the ocean—and then he would have an entire winter to wait before the spring campaigns began again. Only then did he feel halfway to being alive.

The moment the snowfall and iced-in harbors started to melt, the Norse chief who now called himself Laird McFletcher would send Bruce and a cohort of his best warriors over the water to the north. There, they would demand the annual weregild from the Norse chieftains or harry coastal villages for booty. Most of the servants on the island were nothing more than bonded slaves. They were a motley scattering of the conquered islanders and some wealthy Norse farmers' kidnapped families, held for an annual ransom.

The McFletcher raiding army never sailed south. Scotland was seen as an ally against the men of the north, a place where timber and fresh food could be bought and transported back to the island. But as hard as the laird tried to distance himself from the customs and tribes of Norse men, he could not change the blood flowing in his veins. At the end of the day, the McFletcher clan was nothing more than a tribe of sea-raiding Norse folk called Flugá.

Only one thing kept Bruce bound here. Or rather, one burning question did. How could a wee slip of a lass evade his notice for three years on a small isle? Sometimes,

the warrior thought his bonny rescuer might have been created in his imagination after all, but his gifts left at the boat were always taken, along with the tatter of wool from the ragged arisaid he always kept rolled up in his sporran.

Anyone else would have tossed the wool away or left it hanging from the splintered boat wood, but not the Sylph-like girl. She took the wool with her, as if she wanted to weave it into a spell to entrap his heart.

Mackenzie stirred beside him. “Are you awake already? It’s not like you, Bruce, to sit and watch the sunrise.”

The laird was happy for his daughter to satisfy the warrior’s physical appetites and allowed the couple to share a bedchamber. When it came to worth, Bruce was a greater prize than Mackenzie McFletcher. Now that the kirk had outlawed women from fighting in battles, females were no longer valued alongside men. All the priests who followed the teachings of Saint Paulus insisted that women fulfill their roles as mothers and wives only.

Mackenzie rolled out of bed and went to the dressing room to prettify herself. Bruce found that endearing in her. She tried so hard to please him, and yet his heart remained untouched. Not that he would have noticed if love came close enough to bite him on the nose! He believed himself to be immune to the slim arrows from Cupid’s bow.

As one of the Immortal Brethren, Bruce took his work seriously. If a laird was willing to entrust him with winning his battles for him and kind enough to give him a woman to warm his bed in addition to the spoils of war, then Bruce was happy to fight for him. He did not overthink it.

And yet his food did not taste as good as it could, nor did his couplings with Mackenzie fulfill him in any way. He would release his seed with her assistance in a

way that would never result in a child, making the act a simple spasming of his muscles. Truth to tell, Bruce no longer knew what he wanted, but he was quite sure this was not it.

He would have never told any of this to Mackenzie, of course. He was not a brute when it came to women, at least he believed himself not to be. He would smile and thank her for everything she did and treat her kindly.

So, when Mackenzie came out of the dressing room in her diaphanous linen night shift dress and showed herself willing and eager to please him, Bruce let her think that he was looking forward to it.

“Come, Bruce, let me help you ease yourself into the day with a smile,” Mackenzie had a healthy appetite for his body and loved to pleasure him in such a way that would get her juices flowing warm and wet inside her cranny. Bruce smiled slightly and kicked off the covers so he could watch her.

Like every other time when she would caress his chest and lick his midriff all the way down to his groin, he would tell her how good it felt and run his fingers through her long blonde hair to guide her mouth.

She would go through the same motions; complimenting his size before fitting as much of him into her mouth as she could. But to Bruce, it could only ever seem like a hollow act. Still, he enjoyed his release the same as any other man would do so, and in that moment believed himself to be content.

Mackenzie had no idea about the restless thoughts in her lover’s mind. She would tease him into returning the favor and make the most of whichever way he chose to give it. Bruce was as talented with his mouth and fingers as he was with his sword, and on those days when they knew it was safe for them to join their bodies together, he would plow her field until she saw stars bursting in front of her eyes.

But this morning, Bruce jumped up from the bed with unsettling speed after spilling his essence into her willing mouth. “Forgive me, sweetheart, but I must go and train. Feel free to pleasure yerself in me absence, as I ken well ye like to do.”

He gave her a wink and ducked out of the door before she could kick up a fuss, holding his plaid in front of his manhood in case one of the servants was passing by. But it was too early in the morning for the maids to start their cleaning.

Bruce insisted on paying his servants a seasonal salary, despite Mackenzie promising him that it was a waste of gold. Unlike the other warriors attached to the laird’s household, the man they all called Bear felt pity for the skinny wretches who slaved day and night to keep him warm and fed.

Free of his bedchamber obligations, Bruce went to the private parlor. He called for his squire, who was a free man, to fetch his breeks from the dressing room and then kneel to help him tie his boots under his knees. Shirtless, with only his black plaid draped over his shoulders, Bruce sauntered down to the training yard. His sword was itching in his hand as he unsheathed it. His breath formed mist in anticipation of the combat, blowing out of his flaring nostrils like warm steam. The warrior’s eyes were like black shadows, promising pain and death to those who got in his way.

But when the soldiers saw Bruce flexing his neck muscles and rolling his shoulders to loosen the sinews, they all volunteered to take a break. “Come, men!” the commander roared across the courtyard, “Time for us to break our fast.”

“What d’ye mean, lads?” Bruce scowled as the men scattered back to the barracks. “Here I am, ready and willing to spar until the sun rides over oor heids! Dinnae leave me hanging.”

The commander scoffed. “Use the training dummies, Highlander. They do not care if you shake them to the bone.”

There was a row of four stuffed mannequins at the end of the archery range. The laird would award any soldier a copper penny if he managed to hit the spot in the center with an arrow. Every soldier except Bruce that is, because the warrior was as good with a bow as he was with a sword.

A clear voice spoke behind Bruce as he opened his mouth to call the soldiers peely-wally poltroons.

“I will spar with you, Highlander. But I should warn you—my father would not take kindly to you missing the mark.”

When Bruce turned to see who it was, he saw a small entourage of men with a tall, blond man standing at the head. The blond man stepped forward. “I am Clyde, Laird McFletcher’s son. I have heard tales of you, Highlander, while I was acting as my father’s envoy on the mainland these past three years.”

Bruce bowed his head, a smile lifting one corner of his mouth. “Clyde? I dinnae think any Norse man owned such a name.”

A flicker of annoyance crossed the blond man’s face. “I was Ulf at birth, but like everything else in the tribe, we have changed our natures to reflect our new lives closer to Scotland. Ulf means river in our tongue. And the Clyde River is the greatest waterway in all of Scotland.”

“Meaning ye think ye’re the greatest warrior?” Bruce wanted to know. He had no desire to make the laird’s son’s bones rattle if they agreed to spar with each other.

“Meaning you do not fight fair, Highlander. You are one of the Immortal Brethren. It costs you little if you make a mistake.”

Striding over to the weapon wall, Bruce lifted a wooden sword off the brass hooks

stuck into the mortar. “I fight fair, Clyde. Ye can keep that sword o’ yers and use it to fight me. And we shall see who has the unfair advantage then.”

All the soldiers had given up the thought of breakfast and were moving back to the training grounds to witness the sparring session. A few of the men were making bets. The combatants were well-matched. Bruce was tall, dark, and magnificently well-muscled. He looked to be about thirty years of age, but it was hard to guess because of the glamor spell on him.

The laird’s son, Clyde McFletcher, was a great hulking brute of a man, with his blond hair and beard braided tightly and greased with animal fat. The Norseman looked to be fond of his food, but active enough to fight off the adverse effects of it because of his youth and sport. Still, his belly protruded above the belt of his tunic and the slabs of hard fat would make him slower.

The two men circled one another, getting a feeling for the other’s footing and gestures. It was a tense moment, and the soldiers whispered quietly about who would strike first. Clyde struck first, but Bruce batted the metal sword away like it was a stick. The laird’s son growled and stepped back, waiting for Bruce to make his move.

It was unfortunate for the Highlander that the comptroller came over the hill with his sailors as the two men were sparring. They had to pass by the training yard to reach the great hall, and the laird’s majordomo could not resist hailing Clyde in a loud voice. “Come see the prize I found for yer faither’s household, young master! She’s sweeter than honey.”

Both men glanced briefly at the convoy of men as it passed by. They were in a training session, after all, not a proper battle. It was not a matter of life or death.

But it turned out to be a huge disadvantage for Bruce when he saw the new slave bound for the laird’s household. One glimpse of those intoxicating green eyes, and he

lost his edge. Seeing Bruce's sword arm drop down with shock, Clyde saw his chance and took it.

"Defend yourself, Highlander!" the laird's son swung his sword high in the air and brought it down in a curving arc towards Bruce's sword arm. But the warrior with the strength and reflexes of a large bear did nothing. Taken off guard by his opponent's lack of interest, Clyde tried to pull his sword stroke, but it was a fraction too late.

The sword sliced deep into Bruce's thick forearm. And by the time the warrior had plucked the blade out of his bone and lifted his arm to stop the sluggish flow of blood, the girl with the green eyes was gone.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:10 am

Chapter

Three

Esme was shown to the kitchens and told to take her orders from the cook. “What can I do with an untrained girl?” the cook shouted after the comptroller as he departed through the scullery door.

“I can gut fish and brew ale,” Esme volunteered this information. The further away she was from the training grounds at the barracks, the happier she would be. The berserker warrior from the boat had recognized her. She had to keep away from him at all costs. If the man singled her out from all the other slaves, it would draw the attention of the laird and his children onto her. Esme looked too much like her mother for those barbarians not to make the connection between them in their beastly minds—and then the chance of vengeance would be gone.

“Well, at least you are not completely useless,” the cook grunted when Esme listed her skills, “the laird does not allow slaves to touch his food or prepare it, but if you can clean fish and remove bones from the smoked haddock, you cannot get up to too much mischief down here.”

“Why dinnae he let us touch his food?” Esme was curious to know. “Viking food cannae be so different from the Scots.”

Cook stared at Esme as if she thought the girl was stupid. “He does not want to be poisoned, of course! Slaves can hold all kinds of bitter resentment to their captors. Put them unsupervised and close enough to a pitcher of wine or a bowl of soup, and

they can cause all kinds of trouble. Now, go and tidy yourself up and find a pinafore to cover those raggedy clothes of yours. Wash your face and neck too, girl. You are a dirty wretch!”

Esme did not have a spirited reply to give after that bit of information. If anything, it had planted an idea in her mind. After making herself presentable and hauling several wooden pails of water from the well to the scullery, she was allowed to sit on a low stool by the fire pit and turn the handle for the spit. The smell of roasting fowl made her mouth water, but she was too scared to sample a morsel.

As the crispy meats turned over the flames, Esme allowed herself to dream of revenge. She loathed the bloodthirsty Norse men who had slaughtered her family with all her heart. And now that she was a grown woman, brave enough to plot and plan, nothing could stop her from imagining the sweet sounds of the Fluga tribe’s dying screams.

Dinner was set to be served when the sun was straight overhead in the sky—or at least when it felt as if the sun was overhead—the clouds were gray and hung low over the island all day. The smell of thick sea mist blew rankly over the tall grass and gulls cried and wheeled over the cliffs. Already, Esme missed her side of the island. The beachside might have been more prone to attacks from the Scottish seafaring clans, but it was a lot more picturesque.

“Girltraighten the scarf covering your hair! You must help us serve the food!” Esme would do better than setting her hair scarf straight. She wanted to make a veil to hide her face too. Wrapping the dun cloth once over her hair, she used the rest of the length to fashion a veil over the lower part of her face. Many poor souls from the mainland used this style if they had traces of disease on their faces. Esme hoped all the diners in the great hall would be too focused on their dinners to worry too much about the facial deformities of the woman serving them.

The hall was packed with men when Esme shuffled in carrying a basket woven from grass in her hands. One of the men beckoned her over. “Bring the bread basket here, wench! Make it quick.”

Keeping her head down, Esme ran from the kitchen to the great hall with platter after platter of food. All the servants were female. Not even Mackenzie McFletcher was allowed to drink or eat until the laird allowed her to. It was a woman’s duty to serve.

When the trenchers were full, Esme was allowed to lean against one of the dark corners of the halls and watch the men stuffing their faces. Her eyes darted along the high table on the dais. Those were the men who interested her. When she got the chance, that was the place she should strike first.

Laird McFletcher and his enormous oaf of a son, Clyde, were quaffing and scoffing as if their lives depended on it. Big gulps of ale and huge chunks of meat disappeared from their plates and Esme stood and watched them silently. But then one of the men seated closest to Esme stood up and walked out of the hall, giving the slave girl an unobstructed view of the high table on this dais.

The Dark Bear was watching her. Indeed, he was watching her through all the other male diners with a quizzical expression on his handsome face. It seemed like he could read the thoughts going on in her mind. It was uncanny. How could he know it was she?

Since he had taken the side of those who had ripped everything away from her, Esme was sure she hated him the same as she hated all the others. He could leave hundreds of gifts for her at the boat, but now that she was on the northern cliffside of the island, Esme wanted nothing whatsoever to do with Bruce of Sterling. In the boat, he had been her ally and her friend, free as he was from the corrupting influence of the Fluga. But now that he fought alongside them and recognized the laird as his master, he was dead to her like all the others.

“Hoy, you old gremlin! Bring us more ale!” One of the men called out to Esme, convinced that her face must have been destroyed by leprosy or a plague for her to cover her lower face the way she had done. But another soldier had keener eyes. “That’s no elder, you fool. No pox-scarred slave has a fine figure like that. Woman! Take off that scarf. Let us see if you are worth touching our food.”

Esme began to back out of the doorway to the hall, staring at the floor and pretending she could not understand what the men were saying. She did not stop backing away until she felt something hard and solid behind her.

“Ye cannae leave me again, bonny mermaid. I remember those green eyes as if they were imprinted on me soul.”

It was the dark warrior. He must have leapt up from the high table the moment she left and run around the side door to stop her escape. But Esme refused to give up her disguise. Holding the scarf over her nose and mouth, she continued to back towards the kitchen. “Ye have the wrong person, master,” she whispered as she bobbed curtsy after curtsy, “I am a humble slave.”

He halted her by grabbing her wrist. “Those eyes, lassie, they give ye away.”

Wrenching her hand out of his hold, she spat the muffled words at him. “Leave me be, ye traitor! Ye lickspittle, life o’ ease lovin’ piece o’ shite!”

It was an astonishing lack of respect. Esme quailed at her cheekiness but was not afraid of taking the consequences. She hated the Fluga and everyone allied with them, and that included this man. He frowned but did not try touching her again.

The man’s eyes turned black with disapproval. “Why d’ye take names to me, Siren?”

Shaking her head to show him fake contrition, Esme curtsied and began to back

away. She had nothing more to say to him, nor to anyone else inside that great hall.

“If ye go back in there, sweetheart, the men will remove yer veil and see yer beauty. Is that what ye want?”

Everything Esme wanted to say bubbled up inside her, bursting to get out. She had to make him understand. The Highlander deserved that much if nothing else. “They should worry more about the content of me heart instead of judging me face, dinnae ye agree, master?”

All he said was, “Come,” before beckoning her down the entrance stairs. It was said as an order, not a request. The yard outside was deserted of men, with each one busy dining. A lazy page boy sat in the lookout tower, but he paid them no mind, his focus being on the ocean. The man patted the place on the stone stairs next to him as he sat down. They had a good while before they were interrupted. The clan took their feasting seriously.

Esme seated herself daintily beside him, more aware than ever before of his enormous physical presence. He shifted his body so that he could look down at her. His dark eyes locked on her green ones.

“I have been searching for ye for a long time, lassie,” he growled the words, allowing Esme to see the air of possession he held towards her. “Why did ye nae seek me oot to thank me for the presents I left ye every All Hallow’s Eve?”

Shrugging, she replied. “’Tis a strange day for ye to celebrate the first time we met, Highlander.”

He was not put off by the dismissive tone she used. “It is close enough to the day ye rescued me as I can remember. By what name may I call ye?”

“Wretch. Wench. Girl. Take yer pick.” Esme was startled when the man took her hand in his own.

“No one would dare call you that in me presence again, lassie. Yer life will get better noo that I have found ye.”

Esme withdrew her hand from his as if it were too hot. “Are ye raving mad, Highlander? Please dinnae single me oot for yer special attention. It will only get me into trouble.”

The deep line between his brows intensified at her reaction. But he was not put off. In fact, it seemed to make the Highlander want her smiles even more.

Moving closer to her, the dark warrior stared deep into her eyes with a mesmerizing smoldering gaze. “Dinnae be scared o’ me, maiden. I will be gentle with ye. I believe it was Fate that brought us together.”

Before she could hide her hand behind her back, he gripped it again and laid it on his leg. For one delightful moment, Esme imagined sliding her fingers along his muscular thigh and not stopping until it lay on the bulge of his crotch. To Esme, it felt as if the Highlander was trying to throw a glamor over her, but it had no effect. That he fought on the side of her enemies was enough for her to be able to push him away.

“Then I spit on Fate the same as I spit on ye!” Bouncing up off the step, Esme let her wrath run free. “I would sooner let the north winter winds blow on me bare skin than allow ye to touch me under me shift!”

She ran back inside, desperately trying to shake off the effects of the sensual glamor spell his touch had cast on her. For one wild moment, Esme had fantasized about lifting her kirtle and straddling him as he sat there! Her mind leapt at the thought of unlacing the front of his breeks and releasing the hard monster he kept restrained in

there. Would she bend before him and allow him to mount her, waiting for him to pleasure himself inside her body the way she had been craving for so long? Something writhed and jumped deep inside Esme's belly when the image of the man flashed in front of her.

Although it had cost her every last ounce of discipline, she had managed to get away from the man before his will dominated hers. Let him prowl at the soft entrance between me legs like a hungry bear if he likes! I will never succumb to him. He works for me enemies, therefore, he is me enemy.

The dark warrior did not follow her. His pride must be smarting from her rejection, but he was too canny to chase after a woman after such a defiant refusal. Esme shuddered as her mind and heart reverted to belonging to her. His allure was so strong, that she knew she would have jumped into bed with him if her revulsion at their opposing loyalties had not made her run away.

Magic aside, the Highlander had only gotten more attractive since the time she nursed him in the boat. The high bridged brow and firmly etched jawline were unchanged over the years. Try as she might, Esme could not shake the feeling that some strange connection had happened to them on the boat and the beach.

"What are you doing lazing out here?" The kitchen cook shouted at Esme, using the plaited grass basket she was carrying to hit the young woman around the head. "If I ever catch you shirking your duties again, Wench, I will send you to the barracks to become a pleasure girl. Do you understand?"

Crying out because of the belting, Esme said she understood. Still fuming, the cook gave her the basket. "Go gather up the trenchers in the hall, you lazy good-for-nothing."

Running back to the hall, only stopping at the doorway to wrap the scarf around her

lower face, Esme sneaked inside and began collecting the discarded trenchers. The hard black rye bread had been her staple diet when she had been living at the beach village, where most folks were happy to live on leftover scraps and fish.

The chief of the Fluga tribe stood up on the dais. Esme was glad the veil hid the sneer on her face as the man began his speech. “Here’s to the mighty clan of the Fletchers, whom the local people would call ‘McFletcher’ in their own tongue! My son returns from Scotland with good news. The Highland Council acknowledges our name! For this day forth, we will be known as the McFletchers and I will be called Laird Alfred McFletcher. We can use the local plants to dye our wool and weave our own cloth with it.”

The laird’s comptroller leaned across and whispered something in the laird’s ear. The laird nodded. “Our woolen plaids must reflect the colors of the seasons. Bright colors for feast days and dun colors for hunting and war. Tell your womenfolk to begin work right away.”

One of the pages pushed Esme towards the high table. “Remove the trenchers, Wench! The fruits and nuts must go out next.”

Fruit and nuts; what luxuries. Esme had been enslaved for ten years, but not even when she was a happy child playing in her family’s barn had she ever tasted a nut. Her mind on food, she stepped up onto the dais and leaned forward to remove the laird’s son’s trencher.

Clyde gripped her wrist like a vice. The two chieftains seated next to him shot her disapproving looks. “Are you a saucy minx or do you have a death wish?” Clyde hissed at her through bared teeth. “I swear to you now, woman, that if you are hideous under that mask, I will lop off your head for this rude infraction.”

Esme was close to fainting from fear. “I... I am nae cheeky, master. Cook told me to

take all the trenchers from the t-tables.”

“You can only step up to the dais if you are invited, you silly woman,” the comptroller jeered. “You have to move along the floor in front of the table and reach up to take the trenchers from below. Were you born in a gutter?” Then he recognized Esme’s green eyes. “Hang about, Master Clyde. I can vouch for the girl’s ignorance. And I am happy to say that I can also vouch for her beauty under that mask she is wearing.”

At these words, Clyde reached over, pulling off Esme’s veil with one jerk. A few of the men rose off their benches to get a better look. For one awkward moment, complete silence settled over the hall.

The lust was easy to read in the laird’s son’s eyes. “Remind me to award you with a gold coin, Comptroller,” Clyde said, not taking his greedy gaze off Esme’s face, “you have exquisite taste in young maidens.”

The comptroller looked very pleased with himself. “That’s what I thought so too, master. Life is sweet when slaves are so comely.”

Laird McFletcher raised his cup carved from horn. “Sk?l ! I mean, Slàinte ! I drink to your good health, Son. But we cannot pluck the girl from her village without finding out if she is married first. You never know when the woman is so young, there might be a young husband out there also. And the last thing I need on such a small island is the Kirk getting involved with an illegal ravishing.”

Clyde sulked. He was a big man with an even larger appetite, and he wanted this serving wench with the green eyes.

There was something very beguiling about Esme’s face and figure. The more he looked at her, the more Clyde could imagine bedding the maid, sleeping soundly with

her next to him in bed, and toasting their firstborn when it turned out to be a boy.

“I can see our future in those green eyes of yours, Wench,” Clyde muttered in Esme’s ear, getting great enjoyment out of the way she cringed away from him as she sat on his lap so unwillingly. “Tell me that you are not married.”

Overwhelmed with ardor, the laird’s son caressed Esme’s bosom as she shook with misery on his lap. “Don’t bruise those luscious breasts of hers, Clyde,” one of the chieftains said jokingly, “her husband will want her back in one piece before the day is much older. There is no way the woman is unmarried with the full ripeness of her comeliness so evident.”

Clyde pretended to like the joke, but when the man looked away he was frowning.

Jumping off his lap like a disgusted cat, Esme ran along the dais removing the broken trenchers before running out of the hall as if a rabid dog was chasing her—too distraught to notice the thunderous look on the Bear warrior’s face in the darkened corner of the room.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:10 am

Chapter

Four

Bruce's mind had never been such a blank slate of rage before. It felt as if the berserker bloodlust had come over him without the scent of battle in the air.

Why did the laird's son get to sit with the maiden on his knee, her eyes meekly downcast as she accepted the way he was fondling her voluptuous breasts? It made him so mad when he thought of it, that Bruce flung himself on a wild horse in the stables and rode out onto the grasslands as if the three Furies were chasing him.

The girl was immune to his glamor. No woman had ever turned him down before!

As impossible as Bruce found this to believe, he had to accept it. The slim little sylph who had rescued him from the sea and nursed him back to health was a little girl no longer. In the three years since their first meeting, she had grown into a beautiful woman. A beautiful, highly desirable woman who did not find him attractive. Who seemed to hate him with every fiber of her being.

Bellowing loudly at the top of his voice, Bruce flung himself out of the saddle. Tethering the reins to a thicket of bushes, he went to the cliffs and stood on the edge. Crazy thoughts crowded into his head. If she did not agree to lie with him, he might go mad with frustration. What had begun in his mind as a vague interest seemed to have taken on a life of its own. Like a ravening beast in a cage, Bruce's heart growled to be set free.

Wrenching back discipline over his emotions, Bruce straightened his shoulders and headed down to the fishing village near the beach. He would have known his way there blindfolded. So many times he had tried to locate the little peasant girl who had made his eyes wake to the world with hope for the first time.

The locals hung their heads and refused to make eye contact when they saw him leading the horse downhill. No one acknowledged him. No one smiled. Some of them rolled their eyes to the gray clouds above because they were so tired of him asking them the same old question. The hulking Highlander might want to know the answer to his mystery woman's identity, but he was doomed to be disappointed.

Bruce stopped the fisherman. He admired the elderly man for making a living out of these freezing waters. "Good morrow, Elder. Och nay, dinnae turn awa' from me. I'm asking ye nicely."

The old man faltered and then stopped. Making an effort not to sound exasperated, the fisherman bid Bruce a good morrow. The Highlander got straight to the point. "Aye, it would be a good morrow but for one wee thing. Yon comptroller at the chief's hall got hold o' the wee lassie who helped me oot three years past."

He could tell from the guarded look that came over the man's face that the fisherman knew he was talking about the girl with the green eyes. "I can confirm the chief's man took away one of oor maidens, master, but that's the only information ye are going to get oot o' me!"

Holding back his frustration, Bruce slipped the man a silver coin. "For the love of all that's precious to ye, auld man, I beg ye to tell the laird's men that she has a husband. Spread the word to everyone who lives on the beach. When the time comes, they must swear the girl is married." Bruce tried to think of a believable story. "Tell them that her husband is a local man who traveled to Scotland on a mission. Tell no one of her virginal status other than to swear she was married on the mainland a few weeks

prior.”

The fisherman gave up all pretense that he did not know who Bruce was talking about after this. “Why is this lie so important, master?”

Bruce managed to keep his temper. “Use yer heid, auld man! She’s living in the lion’s den noo. Withoot the protection a married status can give her, she will be ravished against her will.”

The old man stepped back, crossing his arms. “And is nae that ravishing likely to come from ye, lad? Ye’re more than fond o’ her—ye’re obsessed—coming here as often as ye can, sniffing around like a hungry bear after hibernation, looking for sweet honey.”

Holding up his hands, palms facing outward, Bruce acknowledged the old man’s observation. “Aye, aye. It might look that way, but I have the girl’s best interests at heart. This I swear to ye.”

The fisherman’s wife had come out to stand next to her husband and heard this last confession. “Girl? Esme McKenzie is a young maiden who has seen twenty summers; she is nae ‘girl’.”

Bruce nodded. “She was a girl when I first laid eyes on her, so I suppose that is how she will always be remembered in me heart. And if ye think of her with affection, dinnae call her a maiden again.”

The fisherman’s wife scowled. “Ye should be ashamed o’ yerself, Berserker, bending yer knee to a ruddy Norseman! Scuttle back to yer own side of the island as fast as ye can go. We’ll nae say a word against yer story. Noo, be gone.”

After this, all Bruce could do was mount his horse and go back up the hill. It was hard

going riding to the cliffside because he sat heavily in the saddle. The horse struggled and bridled underneath him, shying to the side as it tried to buck off his weight. But Bruce's mood was lighter. Esme McKenzie. Esme of the Kenzie clan. A pretty name. A rumble of thunder came from the north as black clouds collected over the tossing waves.

As if to mock him, Bruce saw Esme walking behind Clyde as he rode into the stables. Quickly vaulting off the horse and throwing the reins to the groom, he strode over to the couple.

"Where were you?" Clyde got his question in first. "Father wants to have a chat about the spring raids you have planned."

Very aware that Esme was listening in, Bruce did not know what to say. "Went for a ride to clear me heid. Ate too much at the feast. Er, well done for getting the Highland council to recognize yer clan's claim. How much gold did ye have to bribe them with?"

Clyde's brows lowered. "Are you saying the McFletchers do not have a rightful claim to this island?"

Bruce forgot about the awkward situation for a moment. "Awa' with ye, lad! Why d'ye brangle?"

Pushing Esme behind him with a possessive gesture, Clyde measured up to Bruce, balling his fists aggressively. "I'm not after a brangle, Highlander. I heard you mock my tribe's claim. We did not have to bribe anyone to recognize us."

Hiding his smile as best he could, Bruce muttered under his breath. "Och, lad, ye will need to bribe them all over again if they hear ye call the McFletchers a 'tribe'."

Covering her mouth with her hands, Esme tried to stifle her laughter. Spinning around, Clyde raised his fist, aiming for her face.

But the punch never landed. Looking at his frozen fist in confusion, Clyde saw Bruce had him by the wrist, his mighty muscles hardly flexing; he was able to hold the laird's son's meaty hand so easily.

“Before ye let yer temper get the better o’ ye, Clyde, I have some news for ye. The lass is married. Her husband is in Scotland the noo, and he’s a sturdy fellow with friends in the Kirk. Yer faither would nae want ye to be foutering? 1 around with the local wives, would he?”

Dropping his fist, Clyde snarled. “Don’t touch me again if you value your life! If you think you’re immortal, I swear I will test that brag, Highlander.”

Bruce stepped back, his expression was neutral. “Ye cannae take the woman to bed, Clyde.”

The laird's son sneered. “She has agreed to work in my household. It is a distinguished position. To hell with her husband, isn’t that right, Wench?” Clyde turned to Esme and asked her the question directly. She had been staring like a good, docile servant at the ground throughout the conversation.

Lifting her head, she nodded. “Aye, master. I have agreed to work in yer quarters.”

Bruce's mouth dropped open with shock at her reply. His blood boiled when he noticed how Clyde was secretly squeezing and kneading Esme's bottom as she stood in front of him. The girl had no shame! Was this blond braided bampot with a greasy beard more to her taste than he was?

Pushing Bruce aside, Clyde continued to his house, dragging Esme with him.

Helplessly, the Highlander watched them leave.

And then Esme turned back to see if he was watching her. She gave him an enigmatic smile. Bruce knew then that Esme was playing a deep game with the men in her life, and it was up to him to protect her from the consequences of her actions!

All the important members of the Laird's household lived in a compound around the great hall and all of them shared the kitchen's fire pit. This made sense on an isolated island with no forests as only one fire needed to be stoked and tended.

This gave Esme the access she needed to both households; the laird's and his son's. She had no idea yet how she would go about getting her revenge on the cruel barbarians who had swept over the island ten years ago, murdering everyone she loved without a hint of pity or compassion. She was shrewd enough to wait and see for the best opportunity.

Shuffling across the stony walkway at the crack of dawn the next day, Esme headed for the kitchen to heat water for Laird Alfred's son's ablutions. A loud thumping sound distracted her from the task. Placing the wooden pail gently down on the ground, she went to see what was making the noise.

In the gray light of dawn, she saw the Highlander standing in front of one of the target dummies in the training yard. With his legs straddled in a slight crouch to lower his height, the man swung hard punches at the tightly stuffed straw, over and over again. His strength was relentless. Stroke after hard stroke, he pummeled the target dummy until the sacking fabric started to tear.

As a fair-minded person, Esme had to admit to herself that there could be no finer sight for a woman to observe than the shirtless Highlander slugging away at the hapless focus of his fury. Despite the nip in the late October air, all he wore was a roughly pleated black plaid belted around his lean hips and a pair of soft leather boots

laced under his knees.

As something awakened inside her, Esme pushed it firmly back down. She was too busy plotting her revenge to get sidetracked by her enemy's ally. And yet she had to admit she could stand here all day watching how the muscles in his back flexed and rippled as he pounded away.

Summoning the willpower to move, Esme inhaled the brisk morning air as she turned to pick up the pail again. Somehow, he heard her and turned. Their eyes locked and for a fraction of time, Esme wanted to run forward instead of stepping back, so enthralled was she by his fierce stare.

"It's a braw morning for it, Esme." There was an undercurrent of dissatisfaction in his tone, but the cocky grin on his face enchanted her. Stepping out from the shadows, Esme bobbed a curtsy and tried to explain. "Aye. That it is, Highlander."

He leaned to one side and picked a large square of linen off one of the ring posts. Using the cloth, he rubbed it over his torso to mop up the slick sheen of sweat glimmering on his skin. Like a deer caught in the light of a lantern, Esme was transfixed. Her fingers tingled from the memory of touching him. Never before had she wanted a man more.

She grew heavy in that hidden cleft between her legs. The uncontrollable urge to run her fingers over her thighs and satisfy the swollen sensation growing there was all Esme could think about. Her breath caught in her throat, turning her sigh into a gasp. When he heard that sound his smile grew wider.

"Braw morning for what, sweetheart?" his brow raised with the question, the light of laughter in his eyes as he hung up the cloth and came closer. He narrowed the gap between them so fast that Esme wondered how such a tall man could move so swiftly. The next thing she knew, he was standing in front of her with a proprietary

expression on his face.

“Answer me.” Lifting her chin with one finger, he forced Esme to look straight into his dark eyes. The heaviness under her ragged shift gown intensified. Her lids felt weighted down as the urge to roll her head back and receive his kiss overwhelmed her. But a small voice would not give in. All of her womanly instincts screamed at Esme to press herself against this man, begging for him to use her any way he wanted. The small voice rebelled at this notion.

He’s part of yer problem, girl, not the solution! Be strong. Yer time to lie down with a man waits in yer future. When ye do, it will be a loving act done with dignity, not a roll in the hay with the laird’s lickspittle!

She could smell the husky scent of his sweat—the Highlander stood so close to her. Tentatively, Esme reached out a hand and laid it against the rock-hard muscle on his proud chest. Her future flashed in front of her. Yes, she would let him lead her to his chamber where he would loosen that belt holding the plaid around his belly and let it drop to the floor. His rampant desire would belong to her for one magical moment. And she wanted him so badly.

The wild tendrils of black hair that fell over his pale brow made him resemble some romantic hero of old. His hawkish stare and firm mouth could be stern one moment and break into smiles the next. And the taut muscles running in rigid ridges over his stomach seemed to point her gaze downwards, to where she knew her satisfaction hid under the black wool of his plaid.

“I...” she was so close to surrendering herself to him, that Esme could feel her knees shaking. Summoning up her strength, she pushed him away. “A braw morning for ye to stay away from me, Highlander!” The words were hissed in an undervoice so that only he could hear them.

The way he looked at her once he caught his balance made Esme think he was close to beating her, his dark expression was so angry. But he managed to hold himself back.

“That great lummoX ye call yer master noo will never make ye his official mistress, Esme. Ye ken that, dinnae ye?” His voice was also low, like a deep growl of disapproval at her cruel rejection of him.

“I call nay man ‘master’, Highlander, so therefore, I cannae be a man’s mistress.”

His bitterness was evident on his handsome face. “Och, ye’re lying to yerself, lass. Ye’re like one o’ those snake handlers at the mainland fairs who swear they can charm the serpents.”

Edging away from him, Esme felt it was safe for her to be as sassy as she pleased to the warrior. “So? Ye think ye can charm me too! If I had to choose between the two masters, I would choose the laird’s son. He is married already and cannae want for more.”

The man gave a short bark of laughter. “Ha! Ye are so innocent, I’ll forgive yer ignorance. Ye ken nothing o’ men if ye think a wife under the covers will stop his eyes from roving above them.”

Esme’s lip curled. “I am starting to see why ye remain unwed, Highlander, if that is how ye see yer own marriage playing oot in the future.”

That shut him up. He did not respond, shocked once again at her insightful cheekiness. Seeing him struck dumb, Esme made the move to leave. He stopped her by pulling the sleeve of her kirtle. “Esme, promise me ye will stick to the story of having a husband on the mainland—it is all that protects ye. And that is all I can offer ye until ye choose to accept me patronage.”

She wanted to scream at him and rake her nails down his face, hissing out oaths and curses. Her family's bones lay scattered and lost in the cold mud near the burnt ruins of their home and this man wanted to support her?

He had no idea how hot the need for vengeance boiled inside her. These gray skies and damp weather were ideal conditions for fungi to start growing on the rotting wood and wet grass. When she saw the Death Cap, Fool's Funnel, and Amanitas sticking their deadly heads up, Esme swore that she would harvest them and serve them forth in the great hall.

Tugging at the scratchy woolen fabric, she tried to free herself. "Let me go! I dinnae need ye to guard me virtue."

Hearing her angry words of rejection, the Highlander released his hold on her. He shouted after Esme as she ran to the kitchen. "It's me who keeps this island safe from another invasion, Esme. That's the only service I supply to the laird. I'm nae yer enemy, lass!"

Slamming the door behind her, Esme pressed her ear against the wood panels, listening for sounds of pursuit. But there were none. She did not know whether to be peeved or relieved about that. The cleft between her thighs pulsed with impatience. If she were to be honest with herself, Esme had to admit that at that moment she had wanted the dark warrior to lie down with her more than anything else in the wide world.

1 ? Mess around

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Chapter

Five

It was the last boat crossing for the year. After this, the North Sea would be too unpredictable to risk sailing on. Laird McFletcher had a deal with a merchant on the mainland. The merchant would navigate his carrack a few miles offshore the Scandinavian coastline and then lower the clan's longboats onto the water before sailing on to trade peacefully with the inhabitants further east.

The two McFletcher longboats would slide along the rugged coastline under the cover of darkness, looking for the familiar natural harbors where they would pull ashore. Clyde was in charge of one boat and Bruce had the other.

Since gaining adult status and a wife, the laird's eldest son was eager to prove his worth—and take his rightful place as the warriors' leader. Unlike the other lairds on the mainland, Laird Alfred McFletcher was content to keep a circle of chiefs and war-like friends around him instead of paying for a standing army. And now it was time for Clyde to prove his merit by leading those men on a foray.

This was very necessary. One whiff of weakness from the conquerors of MacKenzie land, and hordes of Norsemen would head south and west, eager to supplant the Flugas with sword and fire. Those tribes that did not have children on the island as hostages would not hesitate to set sail when it was least expected, to rape, pillage, and plunder the winter stores, maybe even returning to the Scandinavian lands with hostages of their own.

Bruce blended into the dark night like a shadow. He had blackened his face with lamp soot and covered his coat with the plaid. He was pleased to be on the move and busy. It took his mind off Esme's stubborn refusal to give him the time of day. One sword was in his back scabbard and another was in the sheath on his side. A long knife hung from his belt and two more had been slid down the side of his boots.

On this occasion, he used no bow. He needed to get up close to his foes and look them in the eye. It was the only way he could forget how Esme rebuffed him. Turning his bitterness into anger, Bruce moved away from the group of men so he could feel the battlelust rising inside him without interruption. He knew where he was going; the day before, they had seen smoke rising out of a vast forest that swept along the coast. It was a sign of an encampment.

This raid was done as a request. The merchant had reported to Laird McFletcher about a poor clan of peninsula islanders who had been set upon by an aggressive tribe of wandering warriors. The men would move south for the winter, taking what they wanted from the local people and leaving the survivors without food or warmth. Those who had not died from the sword or fire perished from the cold.

"My father's orders are clear." Clyde McFletcher was relishing being in control. His shield hung behind his back and his sword was already in his hand. Like most men dedicated to war, he would not sheath his weapon again until it had been fed blood. "Slay all the invaders if they are men. Capture any women. Ransom those too young to wear a beard or bleed on their lunar cycle."

Bruce's eyes glowed in the light coming from the moon. After checking Clyde had no more orders, the Highlander began to trek inland. One of the men offered him a large pinch of dried mushrooms to consume as he passed by, but Bruce shook his head in rejection.

He needed no stimulation to enjoy his work. Also, it concerned him that after a man

ate the potent dried mushrooms, the toxic properties within them made a man lose control over his ability to feel pity or remorse. Those emotions linked Bruce to the world, and he would feel even more like an animal without them.

He could hear Clyde trying to overtake him on the trail, but this only made Bruce pace faster. It must be he who bore the brunt of their first attack. He was one of the Immortal Brethren, doomed to roam, doomed to fight, fated to seek some sort of closure to the endless cycle of blood and gore.

Spotting the invaders' lookout scout easily, Bruce ducked out of sight and threw a stone to one side. He had to be quick before Clyde caught up to him. True enough, the scout moved to see what the noise was. He understood the language of the Norsemen well enough to understand what the lookout shouted to the camp.

"Beware of the bear, lads!"

Hoots and jeers came from the camp. "More like a reindeer coming to graze on the last of the berries." The lookout grumbled, telling the men to guard the meat. Bruce smiled to himself. The scout was more accurate than the men would ever know! Moving behind the lookout, he clamped his hand over the man's mouth and dispatched him with a dirk stab to the neck.

The rusty smell of blood flooded his nostrils and the thrill of combat rose inside him. This was what he had been born to do. Hefting the sword in his hand, Bruce rushed towards the campfire as deadly as an arrow loosed from the bow.

The McFletcher warriors stampeded behind him, yelling their battle cries as they breached the camp. It was a particular fighting technique used by the Norsemen called 'storm and stress', and it aimed to shock those who had to defend themselves, effectively making them useless from fright.

This was a good thing because there were many invaders. Still, the skirmish was over quickly. No man could withstand such a powerful onslaught. Bruce's black plaid absorbed all traces of blood. As for the splatters on his skin, he went to wash it off in the sea before going back to see to the prisoners.

The captives were kept in wooden cages on carts. They cried pitifully when they saw the bloodied barbarians stalking towards them. Bruce was the first to comfort them. "Dinnae nap yer shirt fronts, lads. Wheesht, ye wee lassies. I'm here to set ye free and take ye back to yer families."

Clyde was nearby to hear this. "No. My father's orders were for us to bring them back to the island with us. As slaves."

Bruce stood his ground. "Nay right back at ye, lad. Yer faither's orders were for ye to ransom or capture the invaders' kin if the men were traveling with them. These poor weans are nae kin to those slain men—they are prisoners and they are going back home to the island where they came from."

A few weak cheers came from the young children and maidens in the cages, but this only made Clyde more stubborn. "No! Why must you always seek to undermine me, Highlander? I want my pick of the maidens at least."

This battle frenzy was still high in Clyde's blood and his eyes were wide and crazed from the mushrooms. But Bruce was not intimidated. He was confident he would always have the last word.

Shrugging off the plaid around his shoulders, he flexed his bare shoulders and loosened the sinews in his neck, never taking his glaring eyes off Clyde. Withdrawing both swords and swinging them in a lethal circle around him, Bruce seemed to grow taller in firelight.

“Ye have the most precious slave already working for ye! Must I teach ye a lesson on how to be satisfied?” Bruce’s voice echoed through the forest, waking the woodland creatures from their sleep. Birds flew out of the branches and wolves howled on the hills.

A small boy in one of the cages was amazed by this display of shock and awe. “Woo! He’s bigger than a bear!”

One of the McFletcher chiefs began to laugh, and then another one. Soon, the whole contingent of men were holding their sides and howling with laughter. It diffused the situation immediately. “You don’t want to fight your father’s favorite berserker, Clyde,” one of the older chiefs patted the laird’s son’s shoulder. “Sheath your swords and return the children to their families. We have plenty of hostages and slaves already.”

Bruce did not back down until Clyde dropped his sword arm and mooched off to break the cages open. The Highlander was panting from having to restrain his black mood. There, he had said it out loud. And everyone had heard him. Bruce Sterling believed the latest addition to Clyde’s household to be precious.

Esme was precious, but she was especially precious to Bruce. He was fuming at the thought that she was willingly living under Clyde’s roof. His exposure could not have happened at a worse time. The last thing he wanted was for the laird’s son’s attention to whip back to the bonny young lass with the green eyes who now lived within an arm’s reach away.

Fretting and cursing under his breath, Bruce went back to the boats for a lantern. He must signal to the merchant ship to come back around the harbor. He could not wait to get back to the island—and to Esme McKenzie.

Her heart sank when she saw the merchant ship on the horizon. The mission to help

the Scandinavian isle hostages must have been successful. And Clyde Fluga McFletcher would be coming back with good news.

His wife, Anna, was pregnant. She had not bled for three months and her belly was swelling. A few of the slaves from the household went down to the shore with their mistress to be there when the master received the announcement. There would be lots of work, enough to keep Esme busy for hours. A great feast was to be held in honor of the possibility of a son and Clyde's heir, and to celebrate the completion of the rescue mission.

The island dwellers knew the raid had been successful because of the flag flying from the ship's mast. Esme was in two minds about it; happy that the hostages were safely home, and deeply concerned that she had chosen to work in this household. With his wife pregnant and off limits for the next six months, Clyde would be free to choose a mistress.

Clinging to the faint hope Master Clyde would respect her fake wifely status, Esme hid her mass of thick brown hair behind her scarf and kept her head down.

But her plain disguise was not enough. When she looked up as the welcoming party breezed through the entrance, she caught Clyde staring at her with hungry eyes. Fleeing to the great hall, Esme offered to fill the pitchers of wine and ale from the caskets in the cellar during the feast. She could hide in the dark and pray he did not come looking for her.

That was where Bruce found her. She heard his heavy tread and looked up, the fear and disgust clear to see. But when she saw it was the Highlander, her face broke into smiles of relief.

"Gods be praised! I thought ye were the laird's son." They both knew why she was afraid it would be Clyde. Esme saw the Highlander's eye glitter with humor from the

light of the lantern.

“And what do I owe to this change of opinion, Esme?” moving towards her, he took one of her cold hands in his own, brought it to his mouth, and kissed it. His touch was warm. Without even being aware of it, Esme’s body bloomed under his caress.

“Och,” her nervous hands pleated the hem of her apron, “me tongue was rough on ye when last we met, Highlander. Ye saved those poor islanders, and for that I am grateful.”

“News travels fast,” he remarked in a casual tone, “but I have a name, ye ken. Why dinnae ye call me Bruce? We are nae longer strangers, bonny lassie, and in truth, we never were.”

No. He was definitely no longer a stranger to her. Esme had dreamed about him every night since the broodingly handsome warrior had sailed north. Dreams? Not exactly. They were as close to fantasies as a woman could get without climbing into an actual bed with a man. Her breath caught in her throat as she remembered them.

They were on the boat, rocking on the waves of a dark sea and, willingly, she had parted her legs for him. Looking down at her splayed knees, Esme saw she was wearing her ragged shift. The material was wet and clung to her body like a second skin. Her nipples pressed against the linen, peaked to tight points by the cool air and the man kneeling in the boat in front of her. The Highlander was wearing his black plaid, but when she beckoned him to come closer, he cast the plaid aside with one careless throw.

Her mind had imagined him to be the most braw man, and she was not afraid at how much she yearned for him inside her. Nor was she afraid of his impressive size. Her body ached for him, becoming soaked with anticipation the longer she watched him. Too impatient for his touch, she sat up and pulled him down onto her, feeding him

into that part of her that craved him the most.

Something was building inside her. It felt huge, monumental. Why did it not hurt when he thrust into her? Was it because she had wanted this so badly that his powerful manhood had not torn her maidenhood away from her, but eased it away from her gently? Had the barrier yielded before him like everything else did?

Opening her eyes in the dream, Esme had looked down. A dark shadow had covered her and was eating her soft mound with hungry growls.

“I like the way ye are looking at me, lassie,” Bruce broke in on her turbulent thoughts. “Might I ken what ye are thinking?”

Whispering softly, hoping the darkness of the cellar hid her blushes, Esme shook her head. “Nay, Bruce. Ye may not.”

“Then I will share my thoughts with ye,” the warrior countered. “Come awa’ with me to a more private place so that we are nae interrupted. Surely I have earned the right to whisper secrets to ye withoot a troupe o’ servants bothering us?”

Esme allowed him to lead her to the brewery. It was her fate and her dearest wish to give her maidenhead to the Highlander.

It was a warm space that smelt of barley. The sound of bubbling wort was all around them. There was a bench against the wall with a table for the brewer to sample the ales. Gesturing with his hand, Bruce signaled for Esme to sit down first. “A hard bench is all I can offer ye, lass, because ye cruelly sent me awa’ with me kind offer o’ refuge rejected.”

This time, Esme could tell that he was teasing her. He had a very sardonic sense of humor, and she had to search for the glint of merriment in his eye before she could

tell if he was being serious or not.

“A bench is fine, I thank ye. But I will catch the cook’s fury if she finds out that I have abandoned me post.”

Bruce waved a lazy hand in the kitchen’s direction. “Let them swelter. It’s their choice to celebrate every swelling belly with a feast. As if it were nae the most natural thing in the world.”

Esme was feeling very comfortable sitting next to Bruce on the bench. He had stuck out his long legs under the table and had broached a flask of wine, pulling out the cork with his teeth. He took a hearty pull from the mouth of the bottle and then handed it to her. She did not hesitate, taking the flagon and tilting a large dollop of wine down her throat.

It was her first taste of strong wine. Spluttering and coughing, Esme laughed. “Are ye trying to kill me, Bruce? That stuff tastes like the black ooze that washes up on oor northern shores! We use it to help us light the fires.”

Taking her by the hand, he grew serious. “Does it feel as if a fire has been lit inside yer belly?”

“Aye,” Esme wiped her streaming eyes, removing her head scarf to use as a kerchief. Her hair tumbled down like a cascading waterfall. “I feel hot.”

When he did not reply, she turned her head to look at him. It was then she knew why she had agreed to follow the Highlander to the brewery—she wanted those exquisite dreams of hers to come true. Reaching out her hand, she caressed the side of his face. “I feel hot. The words bear repeating.” A smile flickered across her lips. Bruce had sailed north to save a clan of islanders. Too bad he had come here too late to save her island and family, but her heart had thawed because of that good deed.

“I will stoke that fire inside ye, sweet lassie.” His voice rumbled, so close they were to each other. “And ye will love the stiff poker I use to do it.”

He used his fingers to trace the passage of the wine down her throat. Esme had never been touched so gently by a man before. His stroke moved over her neck until he reached the deep cleavage of her bosom. Hardly daring to linger, his fingers traced down her belly, stopping at the girdle of her kirtle. “I will make ye hotter than a midsummer day at noon if ye let me,” the way he growled his gruff promise thrilled Esme to the core. “I will sink deeper inside ye than any wine could ever do, me bonny Selkie.”

His voice, the masculine scent rising from his body, his darkly handsome face; all of these things made Esme’s heart skip and beat and then continue to beat a little faster.

“Aye, Bruce. I give ye permission to take from me the only thing I have to give.”

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Chapter

Six

“Ye honor me, sweet maiden,” he kissed her hard. “I have treasured the memory of our first meeting in me heart for so long.”

Lifting her hand, he placed it on his knee. And this time, Esme did not hold back. Never had a man made her feel more like a woman before. Bruce aroused intense feelings of desire inside her, and she was desperate for the fulfillment he promised her. Sliding her hand over his plaid, she caressed the hardness under the black wool. “If ye lift yer kilt, Bruce,” she whispered the suggestion into his ear and felt his body respond as it reared up in her hand, “and if I were to lift me kirtle and lie back on this table, ye might take yer pleasure of me.”

Jerking to stand up, Bruce tipped the bench back. He was so eager to possess her that it made the agile warrior clumsy. Hiking up her skirts and lifting her into his arms, Bruce and Esme were face to face as she wrapped her legs and arms around him tightly. “Is this what you want?”

He had to be sure. She had eluded him for so long that what was happening now felt like a dream. “Aye, Bruce. I want ye to take me and make me yer own. No one else. Ever.”

That was all he needed to hear. Putting her down on the edge of the wooden table, Bruce knelt on the floor in front of her. Pushing her shift and kirtle over her wide-open thighs, he lapped at her cranny with wild abandon. Esme gasped, her hands

instinctively grabbing his hair to pull him back. It was such a tender sensation, it was hard for her to imagine something better. However, this was just the beginning of her dream coming true.

He let her pull at his dark hair, which she did when his probing tongue became too close to its end objective. “Bruce, if ye continue acting like the cat with the cream, it will cause me to reach me peak too quickly.”

This made him stand up, a wide smile on his face. “That cat ye keep hidden between yer shapely thighs needs a lot o’ petting, lass. If I dinnae treat it kindly, ye will feel pain when I enter ye.”

She could not rip her eyes away from what lurked under his plaid. Esme had never wanted anything more than this right now. “I’m ready. I want ye so badly, Bruce Sterling, that if ye dinnae please me right now, I think I might die from longing.” Panting, touching her soft mound with frantic fingers, Esme was almost mad with desire.

With her knees hanging over the edge of the table and her lover standing between her legs, Bruce entered her damp passage as gently as he could. When the extreme discomfort was over, he paid such loving attention to her breasts and mound with his fingers that Esme was able to relax her rigid posture and regain her enthusiasm. His body was a visual feast for her eyes, and Bruce loosened the ribbons of her shifts so that he could devour the sight of her luscious breasts as their bodies joined together.

Only when he felt her pleasure pulsing around his manhood did the Highlander allow himself to spend his satisfaction on her belly. Collapsing on top of her, his head lying on her breasts, Bruce heaved a sigh of relief. “Three years I have waited for this moment, Esme, and it was worth every heartbeat of patience.”

She felt shy at what they had just done, but she was not ashamed of it. “If ye like, ye

can come to the servants' quarters tonight and we can join oor bodies together again, Bruce." Esme watched him move to the row of tasting ladles hanging from the wall where there was a pail of water and a rag. Dipping the rag in the water, he brought it back and handed it to her with a kiss.

"I'll nae step one foot over Clyde's threshold, sweetheart. I wish with all me heart that ye had nae gone to him. What was the thinking?"

Checking her body for signs of love making, Esme ignored his questions. She knew with almost perfect certainty that Bruce would stop her ambition to rid the island of the Fluga tribe. Not because he wanted to hurt her, but because it was so dangerous.

He allowed her to keep her silence. Like all men after sowing their seed and plowing a maiden's virtue, he was half ready for sleep and half worried she might be in pain. Jumping off the table before he could offer her a hand down, Esme screwed the rag into a ball and hid it in a mouse hole in the corner of the skirting board.

"If I cannae come to ye, Esme," Bruce would not rest until he was assured of their next meeting, "will ye then come to me?"

Esme slept in a long room with seven other female slaves, two to a bolster. The salaried servants—northerners or relations of Anna and Clyde—refused to sleep in the same room as conquered people. She was used to far worse, growing up orphaned and alone, but Esme had a suspicion that Bruce would be unhappy if he knew how poorly she was treated in the house.

Made to work from dusk to dawn on a scanty diet of plain food, the slaves were just glad to be relatively well looked after compared to those poor souls living at the beach village.

"I will come to ye, Bruce. Dinnae doubt me."

Pressing an ardent kiss on her lips, he stared deeply into her eyes, as if he was trying to read her mind. “Ye belong to me noo, Esme. Dinnae doubt me either.”

And then he was gone. Slumping back down on the table, Esme stared at the low wooden beams on the ceiling and marveled at what she had just done. It felt as if her fantasies had been like a trail of breadcrumbs, leading her to spread her legs for the dark warrior and give herself to him with a smile and a kiss.

She had no regrets. Bruce was right. Since their first meeting in the boat, since the first time she touched his body and watched over his slumbering face, her feminine interest in him was piqued.

A loud voice bellowed her name, making Esme sit up and look around in panic. “Esme! Get your lazy arse back in here and start filling these ale pitchers!”

Sighing and checking her thighs one last time for stains, Esme went back to work.

It was midnight and the feast was only finishing now. Bruce was racked with rage at the thought of Clyde McFletcher stumbling back to his house where his pregnant wife was waiting for him in bed—while his slave girl was still working in the kitchen. Esme would have been ordered to rub sand on the jugs and then rinse them in water. Just another task from the long list of chores a bonded serf-girl was bound to do on any given day.

MacKenzie found him lying on their bed, staring up at the wooden beams in the ceiling with his hands propping up his head. He did not even acknowledge her when she came in, his mind was so obsessed with what had happened in the brewery.

“How now?” MacKenzie sat at the dresser and began to unbraid her long blonde hair. “Why are you in a black mood?”

“What did ye think when yer faither changed yer name to Mackenzie?” Ignoring her question, Bruce had one of his own that he prioritized. “What was it before?”

The laird’s daughter continued to loosen her hair. “I was Alleyt before, Bruce, but I would not turn my head if I heard the name called now. I have been Mackenzie for too long.”

Turning on the stool, she faced him. “What brought about your mood? Are you displeased that Father asked Clyde to tell the saga of the rescue?”

Bruce made a rasping sound with his tongue. “If ye kent how many years the bards have been telling me own story, Mackenzie, ye would nae be asking me such a daft question.”

Letting her tunic drop to the floor, MacKenzie crawled onto the bed and lay down beside him. “Let me turn that biting dog of a bad mood you have into something nicer.” Running her hand over his chest, she gave the muscles a soft pinch with her delicate fingers. “I have missed you. You were gone too long.”

He could not stand to replace the memory of Esme in his mind. “Ye’re a sweetheart, Mackenzie, and I am a lucky man to have ye warm the bed, but tonight I must walk ootside for a wee while. The moon is calling to me.”

She clung to him. “I have a sweet tooth of my own, Bruce. Come back soon so that I can satisfy its hunger.”

He nodded but was no longer paying much attention. Mackenzie understood him, but she could never comprehend how he felt tonight. They had been together for three years after all, but his restless, roaming spirit was leading him in another direction.

Thrusting his legs into a pair of leather breeks and tying his boots under the knee,

Bruce threw his plaid over his shoulders and tramped outside. The moon cast a long shadow beside him. He would try the kitchen first to see if Esme was still working. Knowing that Clyde would sleep late but his wife was likely to rise early, the house serfs would take turns in serving them.

Bruce's senses told him she was in the kitchen. He could hear her tired feet shuffling from one side of the flagstone floor to the other as she tidied the pitchers away. For some strange reason, Bruce did not make his presence known to her, preferring to observe her from the dark doorway instead. He took pleasure from watching her unaware, entranced by every little movement and sound she made.

When the last jug was put away, Esme groaned and stretched her back. Darting her eyes over to the great hall passageway to check that no one was coming, she tiptoed to a loose flagstone in the corner. Using all of her strength, she pushed the slab to one side and stuck her hand into the dark cavity underneath.

Because she lived in the slave quarters, a small hole under the flagstones would be the only private space available to her. Holding a small wooden box in her hand, she moved to the stool by the firepit and opened it.

Bruce recognised the pale, dried objects inside the box. They were poisonous fungi. He frowned, unsure as to why Esme would feel the need to elevate her senses by eating the spongy caps and stalks. It was a dangerous pastime. Many years of experience were needed before a person learned the correct amount to eat. An incorrect dose could result in death or chaotic rages.

Wiping her hands on her ragged apron, Esme shuffled over to the table and began to pound the fungi into a powder in the mortar bowl. Soon, the ingredients were no longer identifiable. The breath caught in Bruce's throat when he saw her upend the contents of the mortar into the palm of her hand. Calmly walking to a pot hanging over the firepit from a hook, Esme threw the dried mushroom powder into it and gave

the contents a stir.

Only then did Bruce step back into the shadows and wait for Esme to go to bed. When the kitchen fell silent, he went to the firepit and looked into the pot. There was no trace of the crushed mushrooms anymore. All he could make out was the large serving of porridge oats ready for the laird's family to break their fast in the morning. The oats had to be soaked overnight, ready to be boiled when the cook lit the fires at dawn.

Frowning, Bruce lifted the pot off the stove and threw the contents into the sluice drain. Scratching his head because he had no idea how food was prepared, he guessed that refilling the pot with dried oats and water would be enough to cover up the swap.

Then he went slowly back to his quarters in a very thoughtful mood.

"Where have you been?" Mackenzie was still awake, sitting up in bed with her embroidery on her lap and using a rushlight for illumination. "You can't just tell me you are going out and then disappear for such a length of time. Were you with one of the serf-girls?"

It unsettled Bruce how accurate Mackenzie's guesses were. Also, he hated the domesticity of having someone in a house he was bound to call home, demanding that he stick to their schedule.

"Dinnae bleat on at me, lass!" he was too disturbed by what he had just seen Esme doing to worry about upsetting the woman who warmed his bed. "I'm back, aren't I?"

He could see that Mackenzie was torn between squabbling with him or playing him sweet so that he would lie with her. She could be just as calculating as her father when she wanted to be, so Mackenzie forgot her questions and pretended to forgive him. "Is your black mood gone, Bruce?" she patted the mattress beside her. "Come,

spend the rest of the night with me and I will put a smile on your face.”

Cursing her insistence that he prove his physical devotion to her to keep the peace, Bruce growled that he was still feeling queasy from the sailboat. “If ye want me to scratch that itch ye have, Mackenzie lass, ye’re going to have to bide a wee while.”

Instead of getting up to brew him a posset for his illness, Mackenzie huffed with anger and threw her embroidery frame across the floor. “I am young, Bruce! I have needs too, you know. And if you don’t satisfy them, I will ask my father to find me a strong man who will.”

Bruce was unmoved by her temper tantrum. “If ye ken how many long years I have been able to witness every emotion used to blackmail a man into acting against his better nature, Mackenzie, ye would nae waste yer breath acting like a spoiled bairn towards me.”

Before she could snuff out the rushlight, Mackenzie McFletcher was granted the sight of her Highlander bed partner wrapping the long back of his black woolen plaid around his shoulders and going to sleep in the dressing room next door.

The next morning, Bruce rose early and went to the great hall to break his fast. Esme was there, busy serving porridge from the pot to the men from Clyde’s household.

She looked shocked when she saw him there. “Good morrow, Master Bruce.” The way she said it showed him how stressed she was by his appearance. “Are ye missing an ingredient from yer own hoose? Can I bring ye a bowl to yer bedchamber? There is really no need for ye to come all the way to eat at the great hall.”

He held up his hand to stop the flow of her nervous words. Sitting down at a bench by an empty trestle board, he pulled a bowl towards him. “I’m that hungry, sweetheart, give me a real big serving.”

Esme did not move. “Nay,” she whispered in a desperately soft voice, “Nay, I cannae, Bruce.”

He would never find out if Esme could be forced to serve him from the pot she believed she had poisoned. A man from Clyde’s household seated at one of the head tables began to bellow aloud.

“You poxy wench! There’s no salt in this porridge. It tastes like pig swill!”

Bruce had to duck as a pewter bowl full of sludgy porridge was hurled down the hall towards Esme’s head. The bowl hit the flagstones and spun around like a quoit from a game of chance. Seizing her chance, Esme backed away from Bruce. “I better go make another batch, Master Bruce! I beg yer pardon.”

But the man who had hurled the bowl down the hall was not so easily put off. Stalking to the door, he blocked Esme’s exit. “It’s bad enough that we have to eat the foul muck you blasted islanders call food around here! And then you serve it to us without salt or cream!”

Esme cringed back as the man raised his fist to belt her across the face. But the blow never landed. Bruce easily caught the man’s wrist, holding it immobile and even crushing it slightly. Moving with his usual speed and silence across the hall, Bruce had no problem protecting the young woman. “Are ye nae going to ask the poor girl if she made the porridge first, lad? Before ye buffet the bonny lass in the face?” He knew the man well, well enough to know he was close friends with Clyde.

The man snarled, trying to bite back the pain as Bruce’s grip got tighter. So Bruce asked the question for him. “Esme, did ye make the porridge?”

Hanging her head, Esme nodded. “Aye, sir. I made the porridge.” Bruce knew that Esme did not want anyone else taking the fall for what she had done. Glancing over

his shoulder, he saw four men from Clyde's household sitting there, staring down at their bowls with a decided lack of enthusiasm for the contents. More men from the laird's house were coming in and sitting down, pouring ale to quench their thirst and looking around for food.

"And did ye remember to add salt and cream to give the oats some flavor, lass?" Bruce asked Esme in a kind tone. She nodded. "Aye, aye. I most definitely did, master."

Bruce locked his eyes on the man before letting go of his arm. "There ye go, lad. She added salt." Shooting black looks at Bruce the man went back to sit with his friends. He was left alone with Esme.

"Ye are lucky I was here, sweetheart," Bruce muttered in a low voice, "If I wasnae, ye could have been very badly injured, maybe even killed. Perhaps ye should go and make another batch o' that porridge?"

She did not look at him, just bobbed a curtsy and turned to leave.

"And Esme?" She stopped when she heard him call her, but still did not look at him. "This time, remember to add salt and cream— only salt and cream."

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Chapter

Seven

Esme was sweating and shaking when she returned to the kitchen with the pot. Dumping the contents into the sluice drain, she ladled more oats and salt into the pot and hung it over the fire after adding water. It would take a good while to cook up, because the oats had not been soaked in the water overnight, but she needed that time to regain her nerve.

There were several servants and serfs already at work in the kitchens, but their job was to start peeling turnips and making the trenchers and bread for dinner later on that day.

One of the servants noticed the pot hanging over the flames. “More porridge? Cook will want to know why the sack of oats is lighter.”

In no mood to worry about such a trivial thing, Esme retorted. “I guess I’ll fret myself about such a silly concern when it happens!”

Four of the men in the great hall had eaten at least some of the porridge. It was as good a time as any to go back and see how quickly they were dying. Growing up in the beach village, Esme had seen the housewives harvesting those mushrooms whenever they wanted to rid the house of rats or other vermin. Some women sprinkled dried mushroom powder under the thresh to stop insects from breeding there.

They would dip the fungi in hog fat and leave it in all the ratholes in summer. It was a sure way of keeping the cottage pest free—and that was how Esme saw the men who had murdered her family. They were rats, pests that must be eradicated before life could continue as normal.

That was the reason she had chosen to work at Clyde's household; she had free access to their food. How she longed to see them suffer the way her poor family and clan had done. Death was too good for them.

Standing quietly at the door, she looked at the head table. The four men were still there, complaining angrily about the lack of palatable food. But when Esme looked at the bottom of the hall, she saw that the Highlander's dark eyes were watching her carefully.

Panicked, she turned to walk back to the kitchen. Did he suspect something? Esme was sure she had seen a sparkle of amusement in his eyes just now!

But there was no way she could ever serve the Highlander toxic food. Bruce Sterling had shown Esme how lovely joining her body to another's could be. He might be a traitor to her people. He might be the laird's spoilt favorite warrior who got every single one of his whims and desires fulfilled the moment he wished for it. However, Bruce would always be the man who showed her a little piece of heaven when he slid himself so slowly, so tenderly inside her.

Risking another quick look at the tables higher up the hall showed Esme the men were still in rude good health. Puzzled that such a strong dose was having no effect on them, eaten as it was on an empty stomach, she returned to the kitchen.

The oats were cooked well enough to be edible. Adding lots of cream, she told one of the baker serfs to serve it in the hall for her while Esme took over kneading the bread. She waited for the news that three or four of Clyde's men were sick all day, but it

never came.

He came for her that night. Pushing open the slaves' bedchamber door so hard that it slammed against the wall, Clyde ordered her out of bed.

"Come! You with the long, brown hair. Come, wench. You must sleep with yer master tonight."

While the other girls hid their heads under the covers, Esme tried to make sense of what was happening. "I am married. Ye cannae take me to bed. Me husband will object in the Kirk. Ye will be excommunicated!"

Clyde gave a harsh guffaw of laughter. "Ha! You think I care about such things? A fleet of mainland ships came past this evening, and not one of them had ever heard of a man claiming you to be his wife. No Kirk has your marriage union registered in its book. And if your husband ever does put in an appearance, pretty little Esme, I will pay him off with gold."

She was frozen in place, unable to force her legs to walk towards him. Dithering, Esme held her arisaid around her shoulders as she searched for her kirtle. "You won't need that," Clyde told her, "Come as you are. I'll give you finer clothing in the morning. After you have become my official mistress."

Esme could not stand the thought of this man touching her in the same way Bruce had touched her. Clyde McFletcher was altogether loathsome, with his protruding belly and fingers like sausages. His red face was blotchy from drinking too much wine, distorting any nobility in his features.

How she regretted choosing Clyde's household instead of Bruce's! And now it was too late. This bully would put a bairn in her belly and then she would be just like all the other poor wretched slave girls on the island, too scared to leave their children

behind to escape.

Weeping quietly, she followed Clyde out of the bedchamber. His heavy steps guided her to the small cottage next to his own. He showed her inside. It was a cozy structure, with its own hearth and a small bedchamber to the side. Clyde lit a rushlight in the ashes of the hearth and used it to spark an oil lamp.

The bed was neatly made and the bolster was thickly stuffed with goose down. It was luxury compared to what she had left behind, but the price of the luxury was one Esme was unwilling to pay.

Sitting down on the stool, Clyde began to undress, pulling the jerkin over his head and loosening his breeks. He glanced over to her. "Come, ready yourself for me in an enticing way."

Esme had no idea what that meant, so she went to sit on the edge of the bed. Her body sank onto the soft bolster mattress as if it were soft butter.

"Oh ho!" Clyde looked at her with a lustful, greedy expression. "So you want to play it shy, do you? Very well. I won't complain, not the first time."

Crawling up onto the bed, he pushed her down to lie beside him, hoisting up her skirt as he held up his shirt too. Licking his lips so that they glistened in the lamplight, he got ready to plunge himself into her. Esme wept uncontrollably. Nevermore had she longed to be dead. And then, "Ach! Why did you not tell me it was the time of your moon cycle, Wench?"

Rolling off her, Clyde vaulted onto the bedchamber floor as if she had turned into an old crone. "Do you not know that it saps a man's strength to lie with a woman during such a time? No wonder your folk are so weak and cowardly if you indulge in such disgusting practices! I will be back in seven days, and see that you are clean for me

then!”

Barging out of the door, he left Esme alone. Murmuring heartfelt prayers of thanks, she looked down at her shift. The back of the thin linen garment was stained with the last blood of her maidenhead. She must have missed it when she cleaned herself with the rag at the brewery.

She was not the most superstitious woman, but Esme was finding it hard not to imagine that the rough Highlander with the dark hair and hypnotically black eyes had saved her from Clyde once more. Hugging the warm blankets around her and collapsing back on the feather-soft bolster, Esme fell asleep with hope in her heart.

Waking to a world full of fresh hope, Esme left the soft bed reluctantly and went to dress next to the hearth. The sun was rising closer to midnight every morning as the summer solstice approached. Moving to the bowl on the table, she rinsed out the pink stain from her shift gown before putting it back on. The damp spot stuck to the back of her thighs, but it felt cool and fresh in the warm morning air.

Supposing that she should go back to the laird’s kitchen to help prepare the bread for dinner, Esme opened the cottage door, stepping down the stone stairs with her arisaid wrapped tightly around her shoulders.

Bruce was standing outside. He was silent, only watching her as she walked out the door. This time, there was no use Esme denying where she was or why she was there. It was the Lairdsson’s mistress’s cottage, built next to his house for easy access so that he could visit without disturbing Anna, his wife, as she slept in her chamber.

Esme stepped forward with her hand held out. “Bruce, wait! I can explain—” but he had already retreated into the early morning mists that drifted silently around the stone walls of the houses.

In the kitchen later, the man who tended the fires brought dry kindling from the scanty bushes on the island. He also brought them news. “I hear yon Highlander has finally had his fill o’ the Norsemen. He’s petitioning the laird to end his contract.”

“Contract?” The cook was in the mood to be entertained with gossip, even if it meant chatting with the lowly woodcutter. “Did he sign his life away to be a mercenary to the laird?”

The woodcutter shook his head. “I should rather call it a deal, the Berserker signed no contract. I have nae idea why such a fierce man would choose to waste his mighty life away in such a god-forsaken spot anyway, but there’s nay accounting for taste.”

One of the elderly ladies kneading bread spoke up. “Me brither is a fisherman over at beach village. He tells the story aboot how the Highland warrior fell desperately in love with a bonny Selkie lassie. They say she pushed his boat to safety and beached it on this isle. He woke to see her comely face gazing doon at him, but she swam away oot o’ reach when he tried to touch her. He fell in love on the spot and was preparing to swim after her, but the laird’s daughter rode past and turned his mind to other things. But he stays on the island, hoping to see his love for one last time.”

“That’s hogwash,” the cook cackled with laughter. “No great Highland warrior is going to throw his hat over the rainbow for a mermaid!”

“Dinnae laugh!” the baker frowned at the cook, “It is a great tale of love and loyalty. The man has shown nay sign of wanting to wed Mackenzie McFletcher, has he? It’s been nigh on three years the woman has been warming his bed noo.”

Esme was listening intently to the story. Since she had been dragged over the island to work here, she had totally forgotten about how she first met Bruce. Her thoughts of vengeance had turned her heart away from him, sucking the innocence and love from her mind like a monstrous ghoul.

And now it was too late. Bruce believed she had given her body to Clyde McFletcher willingly. She had to find him before he left. He must not leave without knowing the truth. When he had taken her maidenhead so sensually down in the musty brewery, it had not only given Esme her first taste of ecstasy, but it had also saved her from being ravished by that porcine Lairdsson too.

Where could she find him? Was it too late to apologize? Had she burned her bridges? Much to Esme's frustration, the cook noticed her skulking in the kitchen and put her to work kneading and baking bread.

There must have been bad air in the kitchen that day because the bread came out flat and hard. Finding the easiest person to blame, the cook grabbed Esme by the scruff of her neck and gave her a hard buffet in her ear. "You pestilent wench! I should have your heavy hands whipped at the post. Begone from here at once and go scrub the paving stones in the stables."

Accepting her punishment meekly, Esme went out to the stables, hauling a pail of water and some lye soap with her. Dropping the pail on the floor, she set the scarf hiding her hair straight, and got down on her hands and knees. The tack room was exceedingly basic, being just a wooden table and some hooks on the walls to hang the bridles and reins.

The harsh lye soap burned the skin on her hands, but it was better than lying on the bed in Clyde's cottage.

For one moment, she puzzled over how the mushrooms had not killed those men, and then a shadow blocked out the light. "Bruce!" holding up one raw, red hand to guard her eyes from the sun so that she could see who it was, Esme was so happy when the dark silhouette resolved to show the Highlander standing in front of her. He was looking down at her with a frowning face. Clambering to her feet, Esme had never wanted to hug someone more in her life. "I...I am glad ye're here."

Scowling down at her, his upper lip curled. “Yer new lover will be upset to hear ye trying to charm me like that, Esme. How can ye look at me with a smile on yer face after playing me such a backhanded trick! Ye hardhearted doxy!”

Unthinking, Esme raised her hand and slapped him across the cheek. Aghast at her behavior, she cowered back and waited for him to hit her back. He spat the words out at her. “I will nae hurt ye, Esme. A woman is free to change her mind at will. Ye are nae a slave in me eyes—ye are equal to me in spirit and bravery—but ye twisted the knife when ye spread yer legs for yon Clyde.”

His expression was far more stern than his words were. Ignoring his accusation, Esme cried out, clutching the edge of Bruce’s jerkin. “Did ye ken about the porridge? Tell me noo!”

Dragging his hands down his face with frustration, Bruce raised his eyes and his fists to the ceiling. “Aye, aye. I came looking for ye that night—just like I come looking for ye every night—and I saw ye taint the oats. It was me who swapped oot the contents.”

Lost to her despair, Esme backed against the table so that he could not see how hard she was crying. He thought she had slept with Clyde and now, without Bruce to protect her, she really would have to do so in seven days.

“Why did ye nae let the men eat me porridge, Bruce? That was me plan and ye ruined it.”

His rage was like a black storm as he flung himself back from her. “Yer foolish fouting plans! Are ye insane? Do ye ken what they would have done to ye if they had found oot? It’s best that ye go back to yer blond lover and ride his rump as best ye can, lassie, because Clyde’s fondness for ye is the only thing that will save yer arse from the fire when ye are found out to be a poisoner!”

Esme raised her hand to try and hit him again, but he caught her wrist. Now, it was Esme's turn to spit out the words of denial into his face. "Lairdsson is nae me lover...yet! He saw the blood spot of me maidenhead on me shift and believed it to be my moon cycle. I am untouched!"

Relief flooded Bruce's face. They glared at one another, their faces only an inch or two apart. And then they fell upon each other with a desperate hunger, their passion fuelled by the rampant emotion burning inside their hearts.

Crushing her against his hard chest, Bruce murmured loving words as he kissed the top of her head. "Me darling lass, I thought... I dreaded to think; I couldnae stand the thought o' ye lying with another man. It would kill me if ye did."

Esme was too relieved to be back in the protection of his arms to worry about the unfairness of her lover's demands. "Dinnae say such mad words to me, Bruce. We come from different worlds. I am a serf, born to slave for another's whim. Ye are a free man. Is it true that ye want to leave the island?"

Kissing her fiercely, the words he murmured were half-crazed with ardor. "I'll nae leave this island withoot ye, Esme. I have nae been able to leave this cursed place for three long years because it is only here that I can find ye."

Those loving words brought Esme back to earth with a bang. Pushing him away from her, Esme's eyes were wide with frustration. "But what about yer bedfellow, Mackenzie? Don't ye stay here for her too?"

Once again, Bruce must have felt the frustration rise inside him. "I am fond of her, Esme. I cannae deny it. But she is nae ye, darling lass."

Pushed by an unfathomable feeling of outrage, Esme found the strength to put him on the spot. "Och, ye great beast! How can ye play with two poor women's feelings like

this? Have ye nay compassion?”

Her indignation made him laugh out loud. “Ha! Ye ken nothing o’ the matter, darlin’. It is Mackenzie who plays with me. All I am to her is a hard body in bed at night to romp with. She is the very definition of a bedfellow. We are friends who fouter around together when the mood takes us. Oor feelings are nae involved.”

Esme blew air out of her mouth in a scornful puff. “Pfft! Ye ken nothing aboot women if ye think that, Bruce. No woman can bed a man for so long and only feel friendship for him.”

“I dinnae care,” he growled, gently wiping the strands of hair off her face with one hand so that he might kiss her again. “I only care aboot us, Esme. Ye and me.” His kiss told her that no matter what, Bruce’s blood ran hot whenever he touched her.

It was pure bad luck for Esme and her Highlander that Mackenzie chose that time to come down to the stables.

Chapter

Eight

“Y ou pert minx! I’ll kill you for laying your poxy hands on my man!” Mackenzie flew at Esme with her fingers curled like a scratching cat. Fortunately for Esme, Bruce stepped in between the two women before Mackenzie could get to her.

But Mackenzie’s outstretched hands managed to grab hold of the scarf wrapped tightly around Esme’s head. When she jerked it off, Esme’s long brown hair came cascading down. “I swear I’ll have your head shorn of all its hair before the day is much older, you bow-legged jade!” Mackenzie hissed the angry words, trying to remove Bruce’s restraining hand.

When he was unmoved by her wild efforts, Mackenzie grabbed hold of Bruce’s hand and bit it. For one long moment, the strange scene played out; the cowering slave girl, the massive Highlander standing between the two women, holding them apart with his hands, and the laird’s fiery daughter with her teeth sunk deep into the man’s flesh, as rabid with anger as any dog.

It was as if he flourished under the pain because all Bruce did was grunt and flex his shoulders before pushing her away from him. His brows were lowered now, dark with ill humor.

“Leave her, Mackenzie. I’ll nae have a soul lay their hands on Esme, not even ye.”

Wild with jealousy and fury, the laird’s daughter withdrew a small dagger from her

belt and lunged at Esme with it. “I’ll kill the she-dog if it’s the last thing I do!”

But the blow never landed. Sighing with frustration, Bruce had blocked the stab with his body. He was shielding Esme from more than the knife. He was protecting her from the harsh reality of what happens when a highborn warrior with a privileged lover falls in love with a slave.

Esme screamed when she saw the blade sink deep into his side, scything through the taut sinew and muscle. But the harmful effect on Bruce was minimal. Mackenzie had already released the dagger handle and stepped back, a look of frustration on her face. All the Highlander did was exhale heavily out of flaring nostrils before pulling the dagger out. His veins were standing out from the skin like cords and his breath was coming in hard huffs of rage.

“Ai!” Mackenzie cried out. “Are you dying, Bruce? I thought you said you were immortal?”

Throwing the dagger into a far corner of the stables with one hand, Bruce scoffed. “Ye ill-mannered scold! I prefer getting wounded in battle, I’ll thank ye very much! The injury has brought oot me berserker rage! I am fighting back the urge to kill.” It was fortunate for the laird’s daughter that Bruce had been raised to be a gallant, courteous man towards women and he would not have harmed a hair on her head because of this. Even so, he seemed to have gotten taller. His muscles flexed under the skin as he fought to control his battle rage. The sweat ran down his forehead and his hands were bunched into massive fists. After a while, he was able to calm down. His black mood did not improve, however.

Bruce was not shocked by Mackenzie’s actions, but he was extremely uncomfortable knowing that anything might happen to Esme while he was sleeping off the effect of the wound.

It was amazing for the two women to watch as the flesh began to knit itself together. As if the air had grown an invisible needle and thread, the dagger wound disappeared. To hear of such a thing happening when someone told it around the warm glow of a fire at night was one thing, but to actually witness the man's magical healing ability was entirely another thing.

"Howt!" Mackenzie swore, "I swear I have never seen such a miracle before!"

Bruce was unmoved. He was a brutal warrior and wanted nothing to do with the domestic side of catfights and brangling. "Awa' wit' ye, Mackenzie. It was only a wee buss on the mouth. And dinnae yer faither tell ye that I was planning on sailing forth? All things have an end—except me, ye ken."

Esme kept her mouth shut. The less attention she brought to herself the better chance she had of escaping punishment. But Mackenzie was far too enraged to let sleeping dogs lie. "Only a wee buss?" Her voice was mocking as she punched Bruce's chest hard, wiping the angry flecks of spit away from her mouth with the back of her hand. "You share my bed, Highlander! That means the only busse s you get to dole out belong to me! And until you are actually on the boat, lover, you belong to me, and me alone!"

Darting a look over at Esme and jerking his head slightly towards the door to indicate that she should leave, Bruce grumbled out an explanation. "Ye dinnae own me, Mackenzie. Not ye, not yer faither, and certainly not some slave girl. Get a grip!"

He was relieved to see Esme make it out of the door intact, but he needed to calm the laird's daughter down considerably so that Esme would be safe when the healing sleep overtook him. "Listen, I was ready to leave the island because I thought oor arrangement had gotten stale and lifeless, lass. But to see ye so ready to fight for me put the fire back into me belly!"

These passionate words were more to Mackenzie's liking. She simmered down and managed to give him a rueful smile. "Really, Bruce? You mean it? You promise?"

Keeping a rational head on his shoulders, Bruce replied. "I promise nothing, lass. I can only say that I will stay here with ye for a wee while yet. Noo, get back inside and forget about yon slave girl. She cannae compare to ye in status or beauty."

The moment Mackenzie left, Bruce walked slowly after Esme, easily following her tracks in the damp grass. She was cowering behind the handcart full of hay for the horses. He did not have time to explain much to her. He had to keep her safe from Mackenzie's wrath.

"Esme, I will fall into a deep sleep soon. It will nae last for so long, but I will be dead to the world. Listen to me, ye must return to yer master. Clyde is the only man who can protect ye from Mackenzie's vengeance while I sleep. Ye must promise me this."

She said nothing but gave him a small nod of agreement. He wanted her so badly, it drove him almost insane to think that she would be alone and vulnerable while his body hibernated. To be cursed with eternal life was bad enough, but to be sleeping while Esme remained susceptible to the McFletchers was intolerable.

Staggering up the hill, Bruce reached the small stone cottage the laird had given him to live in. There, under the floorboards, he had carved out a crawl space to lie in. Only when he had slid the last wooden board back in place did Bruce lie down on the cold earth under the floorboards and allow the healing sleep to overtake him.

This time, when Bruce awoke there was no pretty little heart-shaped face watching over him. Groaning as the memories of what had brought him there flooded back, he pushed the floorboards up and clambered slowly out of the crawl space. The stone cottage given to him was a basic home, sparsely furnished and dusty from lack of cleaning.

Bruce had kept the cottage like that, knowing that sooner or later, he would need a bolthole to hide in. He was happy to make his home with Mackenzie while he hunted for the girl from his dreams.

The healing sleep was every Immortal Brethren's most vulnerable time. If an enemy wanted to find out if one of the Eternal Highlanders could be killed by burning or dismemberment, that was the opportune moment to try it out. And that was the reason why every Immortal had been blessed with such dazzling good looks; it was his handsome face that drew maidens and mortals into watching him sleep instead of taking advantage of his unconscious state. No one wanted to harm a man who was so attractive that he looked more like a hero from the old tales, rather than a flesh and blood human.

Heaving himself into a crouch and then standing up, Bruce flexed his muscles and stretched like a lazy cat. Leaning over and looking down, he checked for damage or scarring. There was a small white scar, very faint now. Only if he stared closely could he see the slight indentation from Mackenzie's dagger.

The vixen! But Bruce had to admit he had been careless. He did not want to be the cause of a lady's heart to hurt, and now there was no escaping it. He could not let Esme go. And that might mean the two of them must escape the island together.

Bruce was not delusional when it came to Laird McFletcher's reasons for keeping him here and keeping him happy by placing Mackenzie in his bed. He was a prized warrior, and the Fletchers had only ruled this island for ten years. Their claim to rule was small at best. But the longer he delayed the inevitable, the more risk there was of Esme being hurt.

With this in mind, he dusted the flakes of soil off his plaid and went looking for her. His senses told him that she was not in the kitchen, but he stopped there first anyway, hungry after his long sleep.

One of the kitchen scullions saw him. “Go around to the great hall, good master. There, ye will find a basket o’ bannocks and some honey.”

Bruce nodded his thanks but stepped into the kitchen and began to slice meat off a haunch of boar roasting on the spit over the fire. “What day is it?” He did not need to ask the time, seeing that the remnants of the morning meal were still on the boards and the dinner was being prepared.

“Day, master? It’s three more days before oor day of rest. ’Tis Thursday morn.”

He did a quick calculation and then thanked the scullion, taking a big plate of food to the kitchen table and wolfing it down. Then he went to the sluice drain and used the water pump to douse his head under the water and clean his teeth with the softened end of a hazelnut tree twig. Running his fingertips lightly over his jaw, Bruce winced when he felt the rough beard scruff that had grown there, but there was no more time to waste making himself presentable. He must find Esme.

It had been a little over one day since he had crawled away to sleep long and hard, dead to the world and all of its problems. Anything could have happened to Esme during that time, and that was not even taking into account the laird’s two children.

Standing at the post outside Clyde’s cottage, Bruce announced his wish to enter. No one was allowed to simply walk up to a warrior’s front door and knock. “Hie! Are ye open for a visitor?”

At first, he thought there was no one at home, but then a servant opened the door a crack. “Good morrow, Highlander. Do you seek the master?”

He had not really thought it through. He did not want to ask for Esme directly, and he knew that all the Norse folk were loyal to the Fletchers. “Master or yer mistress, lass. Both are acceptable to me.”

Pushing the door open all the way, the servant stepped aside to let Bruce in. The front room was such a mess of shields, weapons, and armor hanging from the walls and ceiling beams that Bruce had to crouch so that his head did not hit them. When Anna came in and asked him to sit down, he accepted gratefully, perching on a stool by the fireside that creaked ominously when it felt his weight. Bruce reasoned that if the stool could bear the weight from that sack of wind, Clyde, it could take his weight without breaking too.

Anna sat on the bench by the hearth. She was a comely lassie, so young that the dewy skin of her cheeks bore no sign of wrinkles and the lids of her eyes were pink and plump. She wore a loose-fitting tunic woven from red-dyed wool, which must have cost Clyde McFletcher a pretty penny to buy on the mainland. The dyes available on the island turned everything russet brown or dull yellow.

“Ye are looking bonny, Mistress,” Bruce smiled and pointed at the lady’s swelling belly. “I wish ye a healthy bairn and many more to follow.”

Anna smiled and thanked him. But then she sighed. “Truth to tell, Highlander, I am pleased to see you here. I was hoping that we might be able to help one another.”

Placing a finger to his lips, Bruce rose to close the door so that no one could overhear them. “Continue, Mistress.”

Anna nodded. “You are an acute man, so I am sure I do not need to tell you about recent developments.”

No emotion or expression crossed his face as he responded. “I have been gone for the last two days, Mistress, so please fill me in.” He would not show his hand so quickly, because he was not sure if Anna was heartfelt or if she was acting on behalf of her husband.

“Clyde has taken a mistress. Do not misread my feelings, please. I know it is a husband’s right to use a slave girl when his wife is bearing his child. But no slave girl has Esme McKenzie’s charms.”

Biting back the urge to growl and smash things, Bruce remained serene on the outside. “Has he taken her already? Wheesht, I was only gone two days! I didnae realize Clyde was champing at the bit to have his way with the girl.”

Anna tried to smile at his attempt at humor, but she was too brokenhearted. “Clyde has not bedded the wench yet, but he has set her apart from all the others and gives her pretty gifts.” Staring out of the window, Anna watched the door of the cottage where Esme was kept. “She has such a tempting way about her, Highlander, that I do not think that my husband will come back to me after the baby is born.”

He tried to soothe her fears, but he was a clumsy man, unused to complex female emotions. “Och, Clyde would never leave ye for a slave, Mistress. He prefers his own folk at the end o’ the day.”

Anna looked sad. “There are no wet nurses on this godforsaken island. So I must nurse the babe myself until it is old enough to sup from a cup. During all that time, my husband will be free to use another woman in the bedchamber.” Her eyes refocused on Bruce and a steely light came into them. “I am not blind, Master Sterling. I have seen your gaze follow the slave girl around the great hall. So, I want you to know this. I will do whatever is in my power to help the two of you leave this place and never come back.”

Again, Bruce did not react. He watched Anna keenly for any sign of deception. Clyde was a bully and a scoundrel when it came to women, and Bruce would not put it past him to force Anna into plotting with him to see if he would take the bait.

Standing up, he jerked his chin towards the cottage. “Is he in there?”

Pressing her lips close together, Anna nodded. “Yes. He-he likes to watch her sew and weave. He counts the days until her lunar cycle is over...and sometimes, his sister, Mackenzie, goes to sit with him. It worries her why you were gone for so long.”

“Och, aye, well then, I better go and pay them a visit.” Bruce patted the lady’s shoulder with a comforting gesture as he went out the door. Life was becoming very busy on the island for him since he located his mermaid rescuer, but he would be damned if he left here without her.

This time, there was no knocking on the gate post. Bruce waited for the dinner bell to be rung by the kitchen, calling all the laird’s men to gather in the great hall. He wanted to be sure that no one would come sticking their noses in if Clyde called for help.

It was an ominous sign when the laird’s son did not walk out of the cottage at the sound of the bell. Clyde was as fond of his food as the next man. Bruce braced himself for the fact that he might be too late—and that he might find them in the bedchamber together.

When the coast was clear, he quietly lifted the door latch and went in. Angling his head around the corner so that he could look into the bedchamber without being seen, Bruce’s blood boiled when he saw Esme sitting with Clyde. The laird’s son had his arm around her and he was caressing her breast carelessly with his fingers.

“Ye’re hurting me,” Esme tried to lay a stitch of embroidery with a shaking hand. “I cannae concentrate with yer breathing so close.”

Clyde gave her nipple a sharp pinch. The laird’s son was easily able to see how to land his pinch because Esme was sitting in a transparent lawn shift that was tied so loosely around her neck that it was slipping off one soft, white shoulder.

Esme cried in shock and pain, but it was evident that these emotions aroused Clyde even more. “I am counting the days until I can make you mine, wench. Need I remind you that it is your job to obey me and satisfy my every wish.”

There was no reply because Esme was biting back her rebellious words so hard that her lips were nearly bleeding. The skin on her face was raw from being roughly handled and kissed from Clyde’s bearded chin. There were bruises on her neck and throat, although Bruce could not tell if it was from bites or throttling.

“Come now, wench,” Clyde used what he believed to be a winning voice, but all it ended up making him sound like was a hog snuffling at a bowl of truffles. “Surely you know how to satisfy a man with your sweet mouth? If not that, then what about your hand? I’ll treat you gently, I swear it. One spurt of my essence, and my mood will lighten considerably. Please.”

Esme could not bear it any longer. “I have nae idea what ye’re talking about, master! Leave me be! Hand or mouth, I have nay skill with such nonsense. And I’ll be damned if I let ye be me teacher!”

Clyde stood up, smacking Esme across the cheek as if he were swatting a fly. “Damned, is it? I will see you in hell if you do not bend the knee to me. All I am asking for is one lick, one dainty touch. Come on!”

With his back to the door, Clyde began to unbuckle his breeks. So, it was Esme who saw Bruce step into the room first.

“Thank goodness!” she breathed a sigh of relief. This change of mood confused Clyde, but not enough for him to turn around. But his head whipped around really fast when he heard Bruce’s voice speaking no more than a foot away from his ear.

“Laird McFletcher, yer faither, calls ye to dine at the great hall, Clyde.”

The laird's son felt incredibly foolish to be caught with a reluctant woman and his breeks down in front of the Highlander. By all reports, Bruce was physically large and impressive in every part of his body, while Clyde was holding all the evidence of a weak and wilting instrument in his hand.

The laird's son was humiliated, too humiliated to fight or protest. Hastily pulling his trews up and buckling them under his belly, Clyde mumbled something that might have sounded like thanks before quickly exiting the room.

Chapter

Nine

Both Esme and Bruce waited for the sound of the front door closing before they allowed themselves to react. Esme was first. “Where did ye hide this time, master? I looked all over for ye?”

“Dinnae ye fash aboot that, lass.” Bruce was touched by her devotion, but he was also in no mood to chat. “Come,” he held out his hand for her to take, “I will nae let ye stay one more night under this roof.”

She took his hand, but then dropped it saying, “I must dress first.”

Trying hard not to let his impatience show, Bruce whistled through his teeth as Esme pulled a kirtle and tight sleeveless jerkin over her head. “I didnae think it was possible,” he admitted, “but ye are even lovelier today than ye were when I left ye.”

“Yer Norse beau will bide his time and wait for the embarrassment to settle doon before he comes back looking for ye. What’s the thinking, lass? Why did ye choose him instead o’ me? That still rankles me like a burr under me saddle.”

Sinking onto a small stool, Esme covered her face with her hands. “Ye ken why, Bruce. I wanted to kill him, kill them all!”

“Killing someone is easier to say than do, sweetheart.” Coming closer, he hunkered down next to her, placing one heavy hand on her shoulder. “If it were easy, there’s a

strong chance none o' us would live to see the sunrise. Has Mackenzie been asking ye questions?"

Not daring to look at him, Esme swallowed hard and shook her head, but her hands gave her away as she rubbed them over the bruises on her neck and breasts. "Aye," she mumbled, "but I denied everything—dinnae fash."

Bruce went out of the door first, and he knew when Esme followed him, he would make sure she never came back there. No home within walking distance for Clyde to access would ever be safe for Esme to live again. She had a target on her back now, a bigger target than any of the straw dummies at the archery training yard.

Clyde wanted Esme to be his official mistress, not just some lover hidden in the cottage. He wanted her to be close enough for him to take a moonlight stroll into her bedchamber whenever he wanted to. That meant he would recognize any children she bore him as his own. She would wear silks and sit at a table close to his on feast days.

If Bruce stopped it, that meant Mackenzie would be out for Esme's blood and Clyde would vow vengeance on Bruce for stealing his prize. But if he allowed Esme to stay with Clyde, sooner or later Anna would find a way to get rid of her. And if Anna produced a son and heir for her husband, the chances were very high that she would have a bargaining chip. Many a man had put aside his mistress at the request of his wife, and some had even dispatched them if the wife demanded it. As foreign and barbaric as these practices might seem to the polite people of the South, the North had always lived by its own rules.

"Och, ye're a troublesome lass, ye ken that, do ye nae?" Hiding her under his plaid, Bruce hustled Esme out of the hut adjoining Clyde's. Esme grinned up at him, no longer afraid now that his strong arm was around her. "I am nae trouble, Bruce. At least, I hope I dinnae mean to be. But I have ye to protect me, so I will be alright."

He growled and shook his head, but there was humor in his eyes. “The bond between us is nae so strong that I couldnae find the strength to scold ye, lass.”

Esme opened her mouth to reply, but this time he did not wait. He led her out of Clyde’s domain and took her to the small cottage on the cliffs where he had his hiding space under the floorboards. This had been his first home here on the island, a humble abode provided by the laird until he proved his loyalty to the tribe. Esme looked around her with interest at the dusty furniture; old chests, tables, and stools lined the walls. There were a few rushlight pincers on the mantle shelf and a bundle of kindling sticks next to a flintstone. The empty hearth showed that no fire had been lit lately.

Bruce saw the irony of what he was doing when he pushed the bedchamber door open. “Oot o’ the frying pan an’ into the fire, Esme. This is the only shelter I can offer ye until we manage to sort oot this mess.”

She did not reply but stood at the threshold looking at the bed. Bruce thought she was hesitant because of him. Giving her a little push, he stayed at the door. “I will no’ bother ye, lass. Clyde is enough to put any woman off lying on bed with a man for the rest of her life?—”

Jumping off the mattress, Esme shut him up with a kiss. She had to stand on tiptoes to reach his mouth and pull his neck down with her hand so he would bend to meet her eager lips, but it was worth it just to feel his body respond to her.

“Ye great fool, Bruce Sterling. I want ye to stay with me. I want ye to lie with me. But answer me this question first.”

Willingly, he followed Esme to the bed and sat down next to her. “And what is the question, ye wee minx?”

Kicking off her slippers and tucking her feet under her, Esme made herself comfortable first. Leaning on one hand, she shuffled her body closer to him. “Ye may as well sit on me lap, sweetheart, and be done with it.” Bruce could not resist giving her cheek a quick kiss. She bloomed under this loving attention but shook her head. “First, I need to ken if ye love Mackenzie McFletcher. I cannae—I will nae come second to yer bedfellow, Bruce. I have too much pride, and at the end of the day pride is all I have at night to keep me warm.”

“Ye are second to no one, lass,” Bruce promised her. “Since I opened up me eyes on that lonely beach so long ago, me heart belonged to ye. Before that, nothing. No one was able to touch me heart. These three years have gone hard with me, Esme. I searched for ye so long, but ye remained oot o’ reach. I could nae leave withoot ye. I could nae make plans for the future. The only way I can describe it is like floating in water, waiting for yer feet to touch the ground below.”

She nodded her head solemnly. “I dinnae ken, Bruce. I thought ye were content to ride off over the dunes with Mackenzie and live in the compound village on the cliffs with her. I believed ye to be like the Flugra tribe, happy to sail to the mainland to collect tribute gold and fight the fierce Norse.”

He shrugged his massive shoulders. “Och, aye, I’ll no’ lie, lass. It was a way to live while I searched for ye, but the only reason why I fought on their side was because they were the folk that ye called master.”

Esme’s eyes grew dark. “What choice do we have? We are a conquered people. But let’s not talk aboot that noo.” Stroking the musty covers on the bed, Esme shot him an alluring look. “I have never lain with a man in bed, Bruce. And I would like to see if a bolster mattress is more comfortable than a brewery table.”

Reaching for his hand, she slid his fingers along her thigh, under her kirtle, and shift, all the way up to her cranny. “Feel how much I have missed yer touch. See how I

desire ye?”

Now they had the time and privacy to explore their bodies, Esme and Bruce made full use of it. With the bright noontime sun blazing above them, heating the thatch and the cold stone walls as warm as an oven, it was like making love under a great torchlight. And when he inspected her naked body and found her to be perfect and untouched, Bruce could hardly restrain himself.

And yet he had to. He was built like a man in the prime of his life, full and strong. Esme had only one quick fumble on the brewery table as her sole experience. He wanted to give her so much more. They both instinctively knew that this was their time. Never again would everyone in the village be seated in the great hall with no other agenda than to stuff their faces full of food. Their isolation was palpable and they planned on making full use of it.

This time, there would be no fumble under the kilt and a furtive lifting of the kirtle. Face to face, body to body, they would touch and intertwine with one another until there was no point where Esme began and Bruce ended. Dropping his shirt to the floor and sitting on the edge of the bed to remove his boots, Bruce could not stop checking over his shoulder to see that Esme was still there.

“Ye are a nymph,” loosening his plaid, he let it drop on the floor with his shirt before lying on the bed beside her, “I fear that when I try to hug ye close, ye might fade away like a will-o’-the-wisp.”

Esme held her breath as he propped himself up on one elbow and began to loosen her hair, his dark eyes gazing down at her fondly. “When I take ye and make ye me own, bonny lassie, I want this beautiful hair o’ yers to wrap around me heart like seaweed, strangling me willpower and dragging me down to the murky depths of yer wet domain.”

Esme giggled. She had never been wooed before, never been treated as anything more than some poor creature to be pitied by her own folk or as a vessel by the McFletchers. To have this man, so braw and handsome he could make a spinster's toes curl with unbridled lust, staring down at her with adoration made her beyond excited to think that he loved her.

Burying her face against his chest, Esme whispered. "I dinnae deserve ye, Bruce. Ye are too good for me."

He kissed her shyness away, moving his mouth down her poor bruised neck lightly, across the soft hollow created by her collar bones. "The first time I saw ye, lassie, I kent me wandering days were over. I have never stayed more than three days in one place, and here ye had me loiter for three years. And all that time, I have desired to do this to ye."

His whisper-light kisses moved down her belly, sending her into uncontrollable shivers of delight. The way he touched her had a hint of wildness about it as if he might turn the kiss into a nibble at any stage. Esme did what she had always wanted to do; run her fingers through his thick dark hair and grip it by the roots. She tugged hard when his mouth moved down to between her thighs, his tongue probed into the warmest, wettest part of her, making her bite her lower lip to keep a sigh of rapture from escaping.

The sensation was so gratifying that Esme was prompted to return the favor. Only she could not. She was still too shy. He was her master, she was his slave. He seemed to sense her hesitation and lifted his head. "I ken what ye're thinking, sweetheart, but I can promise ye that I gain much pleasure from doing this—as much as what ye feel, so do I."

Esme found this hard to believe but was happy to let him overrule her. Never before had such sweet caresses touched her body in all her tender places. Her body seemed

to melt with heat as he moved to kiss her lips, using his hand to stimulate her soft mound. His mouth was demanding, giving her a small taste of what his end goal might be. This would be no urgent thrusting on the edge of a table. As exciting and daring as that encounter had been, it was an act of possession and dominion at the end of the day. What he was doing to her now was definitely more akin to making love.

She dared to reach down with her hand and grip the most rampant part of him. It thrilled her to feel him respond, but he moved her hand away. “Let’s nae push oor luck or test me endurance, lassie,” Bruce murmured the words with a hint of humor, “I am on the very edge of me forbearance as it is.”

It was so gratifying to know that she—little Esme MacKenzie from the fishing village on the island beach—had the power to make this man lose his mind with desire. Lying on this bed, face to face, their bodies undulating together, here they were equals.

Bruce watched her face closely to read her expression and found that she was close. It was not the only sign she was giving him. Her hips were circling as if they were searching for better fulfillment. Her fingers gripped the hand that caressed her, trying to guide them into a firmer, faster stroke.

Lifting her hair so that he did not accidentally pull it, Bruce moved to lie on top of her. There was no fear of pain this time; she was ready and willing, almost desperate for him to penetrate her. Esme tilted her hips, presenting her entrance to him with sweet allure.

When they joined their bodies together this time, there was nothing more important to the couple except to fulfill each other to their hearts’ content, which they reached very quickly, Esme muffling her moans of ecstasy in the dusty bolster pillow so that no passersby could hear.

She was amazed to find that one of the best things about the intimate act was lying in her lover's arms afterward. Only here could they be face to face and heart to heart without the Highlander's great height and size overwhelming her.

Pressing her lips against his mouth gently so that Bruce could feel her speak the words, Esme whispered. "What will we do if me belly fills with a bairn? I'll nae have a bairn of mine raised in Clyde's household."

Kissing her lightly, Bruce murmured as he stroked her long hair. "Och, me darlin' lassie, if ye have a bairn, ye will be the first to do so."

She gave him a playful smack on the arm. "Hie! I dinnae want to ken aboot all the other maidens ye have lain with, Bruce!"

That animated him to prop himself up on one elbow so that he could explain. "Nay, love, that is nae what I meant. What I mean is this; I ken of no immortal who has successfully sown his seed inside a woman."

Esme was intrigued. She had witnessed Bruce's uncanny healing abilities up close and was in no doubt they existed. The magic was no longer a myth. It made up a small part of the legendary man lying on the bed next to her. "D'ye mean to tell me that yer brethren have no offspring?"

Shrugging his massive shoulders as he traced a tantalizing finger over her belly, Bruce seemed sanguine about it. "Aye, as much as I ken about the matter."

This was not good enough for Esme. Grabbing his finger so that he could not distract her, she demanded that he tell her more. After a short pause and a long sigh, Bruce began.

"Can ye remember what ye did last year, Esme? Or recollect all the events of yer life

as a child? Nay? Well, then ye will have a good idea of how difficult it is for me to remember over two hundred years ago. That was when all this bewitchment began. Listen closely as I tell ye the sad tale o' the once mighty Sterling clan."

Chapter

Ten

Esme lay unmoving and silent, totally caught up in her lover's story. After giving her pert nose a small flick with his finger, Bruce continued.

"Me faither was an adventurous man. It was the age of the Crusades after all, and everyone was making the pilgrimage south to visit the land of the saints. Bending the knee in front of some shrine was nae to me faither's liking, so he went nosing around those ancient structures they have buried in the sand there."

Shifting his position to be more comfortable, Bruce continued. "If ye think the standing stones and brochs o' the Highlands are big, lass, ye should see the great monuments in the south. Even half covered in sand and rocks, the smallest tip sticking oot the surface is almost as big as a mountain. It is there they bury their dead, treating their highborn with reverence as if they were still alive. And it was under one o' these ghostly pyramids me faither decided to burrow!"

Esme was so rapt by the story, she shuddered with terror. "Burrow under a pile of gravestones? Ugh!"

He hugged her close and kissed the top of her head, ruffling the hair with his cheeks. "Me poor wee sprite. I forget ye ken nothing aboot the world beyond this island. Suffice it to say, me faither found something there and it was enough to change the fortunes of oor hoose forever."

“How? What happened?” Esme had never been so entertained in her life before. She was the orphaned daughter of a fisherman who had never seen anything except the sea and the rocky land beneath her feet. For her, it was as if Bruce was describing someone bringing back a piece of the moon.

“Laird Sterling brought the stone tablet of Thoth back to oor bonny Highlands. Who is Thoth? The ancients worshiped the image of Thoth for many reasons. He is the god of the moon and the messenger of the gods. He is called the master of Knowledge and Animals, using one to rule the other. His magic shrine boasts effigies of five great beasts; the wolf, the hellhound, the lion, the eagle, and...and the bear. I am the bear.”

Leaning over the bed to pick up his black plaid off the floor, Bruce revealed to Esme a small secret pocket sewn into the wool. When he prised it open with his fingers, it revealed an ancient talisman. The tiny figure of a bear was etched onto the rough stone. Sighing, Bruce rubbed the symbol with his thumb before placing it back into the pocket.

This time it was Esme who sat up. She could not believe in magic, not after all the horrors she had seen in her sad life. “Ye’re bamming me, Bruce. I am not so innocent that I haven’t heard of those fierce berserker warriors in the north who call themselves scary names like Bearwolf and Screaming Eagle, and other such nonsense. Are ye sure ye are nae tryin’ to shine a light in me eyes?”

Laughing, Bruce rolled his eyes to the ceiling. “I am nae! I swear it. And I’ll tell ye something else for free as well. Thoth is the god who weighs the heart against the weight of a feather to see if it is light enough to enter the afterlife. If ye have a heavy heart, Thoth kicks ye oot to that place down below!”

“Where I have nay doubt a hellhound is waiting to meet them!” Esme laughed, swatting her hand against his chest in jest.

But Bruce did not laugh with her. His eyes were somber. “That’s the trick, sweetheart. An immortal cannae die. Thoth is the god o’ time and space too. When me faither stole that stone tablet from the tomb, he brought a curse back with him. Me heart is heavy, weary from the pain of life—and yet I must always move on, seeking oot battle and strife.”

“Nay, Bruce! Dinnae speak of such things. Are ye nae lighthearted when ye are with me?”

That gave him pause for thought. Esme watched as the expression on Bruce’s face changed. “Lass, ye are right. I feel... Everything feels right when you are with me.”

“We just have to tell Clyde that.” Esme felt so sure when she was lying in the braw Highlander’s arms, but whenever she remembered that Clyde wanted her body, she got scared again. And if that was not bad enough, Anna, Clyde’s wife, wanted her dead and so did Mackenzie.

If she were to rate her chances of survival, it was not high. Being with Bruce gave her the strength and courage to carry on. And if something bad happened to her, Esme knew she would die with her lover’s name on her lips and the image of his immaculately handsome face in her mind.

“What is it?” he wanted to know when he saw the small crease of a frown appear between her eyebrows. Esme adored how observant he was about her moods. “N-nothing, Bruce, it’s just that I have to be honest with ye. And ye might not like it.”

Gesturing down to his naked body, Bruce replied in a confident voice. “I have nothing to fear for yer honesty, lassie. This is what I offer ye and I ken how to use it!”

Stifling a giggle with the back of her hand, Esme got serious. “Och aye, Highlander, ye’re a braw duin , no doubt, but this is nae aboot that.” Taking a deep breath, Esme

gathered her courage. “If the chance to kill every single one of the Fluga clan ever presents itself to me, I will do it.”

This time, there was no laughter or joking, because he knew she was telling the truth. Bruce had learned to read her face very well by now and he could see that Esme was serious.

“But why, sweetheart? Why this insatiable desire for revenge? Please help me understand.” Holding her close to his chest, Bruce tried to imagine what would make such a good-natured young woman risk her life for such a murderous deed.

“Ye have told yer story, so now it is time for me to tell ye mine, Bruce Sterling.” Snuggling against his hard body, Esme did the bravest thing she had ever done and remembered back to the night of her family’s murders.

“I had seen barely ten summers in my life before the sea raiders arrived in oor waters. The lookout on the cliffs came running down to the fishing village, warning us to prepare for invasion. We were sure the longboats would go sailing past, the same as they always did, heading for the more profitable islands or the mainland. But we were wrong.

I blame what happened on the poor communication we had between the two wee villages on the island. The cliffs and the beach were separated by over two miles of rough terrain, making it hard to relay messages to one another except on foot. There were no horses, only ponies, and mules grown fat from the lush grass that grew in the meadows.

Oor chief was a good commander and we had defenses set in place, but the main problem was that there was nowhere for us to run! No woods to hide in. No caves for shelter. And no gentle waters to duck under to wait for the fear to pass by.

They played a game of cat and mouse with us first, hugging the coastline on the cliffside so that we could not see the boats. They are expert navigators, I'll grant ye that, but the sea raiders from the north did not stay undercover for long. There was a particularly cruel reason they did this—it was so neither village knew which would be attacked first.

In the beginning, the cliffside dwellers came down to the beach village to take refuge with us there. They were convinced the longboats would stay by the rocks. They believed the raiders would climb the rocky narrow footpaths up to the top of the cliff in the middle of the night. The chief gathered the warriors close to where you and I are lying right noo. The men crouched doon behind the lookoot tower, waiting for a sign that the attack was starting.

Can ye imagine it? Waiting on the edge of the overhanging cliffs all night with the wind howling and the waves crashing onto the rocks below. The men who defended the island did that for three nights, every moment expecting the hammer to fall. All the while, the women, elders, and children cowered doon in the beach village, praying and hoping—that is all they could do.

We were a large family and a big clan. Every one o' us were proud to call oorselves a MacKenzie. The lads would sail away to the Highlands when they wanted to woo a lass, and the maidens were bound not to marry anyone close to their family, so we were a healthy lot. There was a Kirk on the island then. The priest used to write everyone's names into the back of the Bible to keep track of oor heritage, but that's all gone now.

For three nights they loitered under the cliffs like evil monsters hiding under the bed. We believed they were working oot a way to climb up the steep incline from the rocks below. The beach villagers provided shelter and food for the poor cliffside dwellers as we waited for the chief and his men to come and tell us it was all right.

My family was even brave enough to continue fishing, casting the nets across the water and wading in to gather the catch. Oor fires stayed lit and oor hopes were high. We imagined what a shock the sea raiders would get when they crested the clifftop to find the brave lads waiting there to cut them doon!

I was oot with me faither in his wee coracle boat when the longboats came snaking around the coastline. It is a terrifying sight! I dinnae wish it on the worst person. They were so swift and so silent, for one moment I thought it was a mirage, some trick created by the waves and the early morning dawn light.

I opened me mouth to cry oot a warning, but me faither gripped his hand around me face muffling me voice. ‘Wheesht, wean,’ he ordered me, ‘I’ll nae have ye suffer for sounding the alarm.’

Suffer . We were to suffer the most awful anguish as the Fluga tribe came ashore and began to take captives and slay the men. Not one male over the age of six and under the age of four score years survived the dawn raid. And all me faither and I could do was hunker doon in the coracle and watch. They burned the cottage thatch, laughing harshly as those sheltering inside came running out.

But for some reason, they barred the door to the fisherman’s cottage, so that those trapped inside could nae get oot. I can hear me family’s screams as the boiling pitch and burning thatch began to fall in on them in me head every night. It was then me faither gave me a hug and made me swear that I would be a good girl and stay in the water.

‘I have to go ashore, Esme,’ he was shaking from shock and horror, but determined to die with the others, ‘so always remember yer promise to yer auld faither and keep oot o’ harm’s way. Stay safe as a way to honor yer family’s memory. And avenge us if ye get the chance.’

I clung to him, weeping with a deep sadness that seemed to cut into me soul, Bruce. But me faither slipped into the water and swam back to the beach. Finding the auld sword he kept hidden under the hen hutch, he was able to kill two marauders until they brought him doon.

When oor warriors and chief arrived from the other side of the island cliffs, every captive had a knife to the throat. Oor men threw doon their weapons and begged for mercy, but there was none. Their throats were cut one by one, brave men to the end, willing to sacrifice their lives so that the women and children could live on as slaves.

They were pirates, common brigands. Nothing more, nothing less. Sure, they had managed to convince the clerics and nobles on the mainland that they were invited to the island to bring order and peace, but things can look different from over the leagues of sea.

The man ye call ‘laird McFletcher’ is really a brigand chief who has stolen Mackenzie land and customs. It is his way to invade vulnerable communities and hold the young to ransom in exchange for good behavior. And ye have been part o’ that, Bruce. All this nonsense about ‘protecting the island from the Norse’ is a load of shite. And I think ye ken what I say is true.”

Bruce did not react. The expression on his face was dark and stern. “What did ye do after yer faither fell in battle, sweetheart?”

This time, it was Esme’s turn to shrug as she made light of the horrors in her past. “I waited for the raiders to settle doon for the night and then went ashore. I lived along the coast for a long while, surviving by eating cockles and mussels and cooking them over a baking stone in the evening. Do ye ken how we get fresh water on the island? There is an underground spring well that feeds the burn. That was one of the reasons why we believed oorselves to be so invincible—I mean, it’s nae as if they could poison oor water supply, or so we thought. After a while, I rejoined the villagers at

the beach, but never for too long. I never wanted to be a slave.”

Bruce’s voice was harsh. “But ye were only a child. Ten years auld!”

Esme sighed. Now it was her turn to hug him. “Hush, Bruce. I had a fire burning in me belly to keep me warm. The fire of vengeance.”

He was amazed, dumbstruck by how brave she was. “Surely there are other men besides graybeards living as captives on the island noo? I have seen them.”

“Aye,” she agreed with him, “We were allowed to send for distant clan members to come and help us here. But only if we never spoke badly about the methods that were used to take over the island. Over a dozen men came, lured by the laird ’s seedy promise that he had named his daughter in honor of the Mackenzie clan and changed his tribal name to McFletcher. Like I said, things can look rosy from over the seas.”

“I see it all noo,” Bruce groaned, covering his eyes with his hands before he let them drop back down on the mattress. “The womenfolk were controlled by the vulnerability of their children. Or else they had bairns with the Norsemen to keep them enslaved by love. Every male was either too young to remember or so auld they have passed away.”

“Aye.” Esme said grimly, “that is how they control us so that we are forced to go along with whatever moonshine story they want to spin for the folks on the mainland. And whenever anyone steps oot o’ line, they get taken aside and threatened; ‘D’ye want for yer family to end up like those poor wretches burned alive in their wee cottage?’ So, we all behave oorselves like good wee lambs.”

“I should bludy well hope so,” Bruce was in no mood to be mollified. Turning onto his side, he faced her. “Lass, I must beg yer pardon. I never knew it was so bad.”

Not meeting his ardent gaze, Esme looked away. “All ye had to do was ask before ye went riding off into the sunset with that blonde shieldmaiden o’ yers, Bruce. But that never happens, does it? The high and mighty folk never bother asking the low and humble about how they got there.”

Her unforgiving statement made him wince and hold his hands up in a gesture of surrender. “Be kind, bonny lassie. I will ken better another time but for noo I must ask ye for a favor.”

He was so charming that Esme almost forgave him. She ran her fingers over his jutting jawline. “We have told oor stories, Bruce. What favor do ye ask of me?”

Leaning in closer, he kissed her passionately. The embrace was so unexpected, yet so divine, that it nearly took Esme’s breath away. It seemed so natural for her to yield underneath him. It was at such moments when Esme felt comfortable knowing that he was her master and she belonged to him, body, soul, and heart.

“Say ye forgive me for the tardy way I searched for ye. I must admit that it was nice for a wee while to stay in one place, hoping to find me salvation in ye. I should have looked harder.”

“Och, Bruce,” Esme stroked his rough jaw, “If only I had kent how noble yer nature was, I would nae have hidden from ye for so many years.”

One long sensual kiss was all it took for his touch to ignite the flames burning inside her. It was enough for now that their naked bodies could intertwine together with only a thin film of heated sweat separating them. His fingers grazed lightly down her thigh, flickering over those sensitive parts that never failed to thrill at the thought of their connection.

He could be so gentle, but there was strength behind every movement. And that hard,

unrelenting part of his body that insisted on dominating her concentration probed at the doorway to her own personal heaven. Esme shuddered with pleasure when she felt its rigid command. When he entered her most secret parts to find her willing and oh so ready for him, Bruce growled his satisfaction.

To have this man, the man of her dreams, inside her was more exciting in the flesh. No one could have prepared her for the exquisite mounting thrust. How good it felt to have him bucking on top of her, as desperate for her rapturous fulfillment as he was for his own.

In Esme's mind, she did crazy things. Climbing on top of him and riding him like a runaway stallion or bending like a beast in front of him to let him have his way. All of these fantasies gave her great satisfaction, helping her reach a peak of huge significance. Every time she thought it was high enough, it somehow got higher, until she was breathless from panting and softly moaning.

And when it was over, they both knew something had changed. Esme might have been a lowly slave girl for the last ten years, but she was sure that what had just happened had somehow made this man her slave. Rolling off her with a deep groan of happiness, Bruce was astonished.

“Never in two hundred years did I believe such a thing was possible, lass! Ye emptied the very heart of me that time, I swear ye did.”

All she could do was pat him and smile gently. Fate moves in mysterious ways, and maybe she would have her vengeance and somehow manage to escape this loathsome island prison at the same time.

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Chapter

Eleven

They parted before others missed them, separating after many more feverish kisses and sweet words of longing. “I cannae stand the thought o’ ye going back to Clyde’s hoose, me darlin’ lass,” Bruce growled in her ear, running his fingers through her long, dark locks. “When can I see ye again?”

“I must go and smooth over yon big bairn’s injured feelings before he comes looking for me, ye braw duin ,” moving her lips over his eyelids, Esme kissed her lover’s face. “I dinnae like the idea any more than ye do, but it is the path we have to tread.”

But he could not stand to let her go. “When? Dinnae make me wait and worry, sweetheart.”

Giving him her old mischievous smile, Esme broke away from him and walked to the door. “Ye have yer own worries to work oot, Bruce. Dinnae ye fash about mine.”

He acknowledged the wisdom of this with a bow and watched her walk back to the main village. One last naughty glance over her shoulder and a bewitching sway of her hips, and she was gone. Bruce slumped back onto the bed, eying the covers with suspicion as if they had plans to tell what they had witnessed.

It felt so good to have shared that part of his life with her; the cursed life he had led alone for so many years. But Bruce was anxious for Esme to feel the same way about sharing her story with him. From the way she told it, Bruce suspected that Esme

would have no trouble dispatching him along with all the rest.

He admired her fighting spirit, but he had enough experience with women to know that the precarious triangle with Anna, Esme, and Mackenzie would not last for much longer. Always a man of action, Bruce headed to the great hall.

As a warrior, the Highlander never allowed his emotions to get in the way of killing evildoers. But he was canny enough to realize that ten years of constant domination and overlordship was enough for those on the mainland to recognize the Fletcher clan as the island rulers. This was not a simple case of bringing the Mackenzies back into power—for the sad truth of the matter was that there were no male Mackenzies left to rule.

First things first, he must break up with Mackenzie, the laird's daughter. Their lukewarm domestic arrangement must come to an end. He owed her that much after three years of steady, functional intercourse. It bothered Bruce that he had taken the easy route when it came to getting the Fletchers to accept him. Fighting for them and taking the laird's daughter as a bedfellow might have seemed like a good way to pass the time while he searched for Esme, but it had come back to bite him hard.

Tapping a page on the shoulder, Bruce asked the boy to run up to the dais and ask the laird for an audience. After informing the laird that it was time for him to return to the mainland he was no longer granted access to the inner circle without an invitation first.

The page beckoned Bruce forward. The buzz of conversation died down as the Highlander approached the dais.

“My daughter warned me that you would be back with another petition before the moon had grown fuller, Highlander, and here you are.”

Laird McFletcher sprawled in his chair, staring at Bruce with an unmoving face. Neither man moved for a long while as the battle of wills wrestled to see who would break first.

“Well? Are you not going to say anything? You ask for an audience and yet here I am doing all the talking.”

Finally, Bruce spoke. “I ask that ye release me from fealty to yer Lairdship. It is time for me to return to the mainland. What say ye?”

Laird McFletcher darted a look over at his son, Clyde, before answering. “It saddens me to lose you from my side, Highlander. It keeps the dogs at bay knowing that Bruce Sterling—one of the Immortal Brethren of old—fights for the Fletchers.”

“I have been a loyal warrior for three years, Laird. I owe ye nae blood oath or promise. My time here is done. I must move on.”

Bruce did not move from where he stood in front of the dais, but he was aware of movement at the back of the hall. Clyde was holding his wife’s arm, but Anna was determined to speak. The Highlander stepped aside so that Anna could approach the high chair on the dais.

“Father in the eyes of the law, hear me. Let the Bear Warrior depart and take his woman with him. We don’t need them to keep this island safe. The local folk are in thrall and our enemies over the sea are cowed. Let them leave.”

“Control your woman, Clyde,” Laird Fletcher snapped, “and tell her not to interfere in the affairs of men.” He turned back to Bruce. “I was under the impression that you would stay on the island for the love of my daughter, Highlander. How have things changed?”

Biting the inside of his cheeks to hold back his rage, Bruce remained calm in the face of this inquisition. “Three years is a long time for me to bond meself to anyone, Laird, be they a woman or an overlaird. And yet I would prefer to leave with yer blessing.” All the time, he was focused on taking Esme with him, hopefully with the laird’s permission.

“This is true,” Laird McFletcher said, “It has been well documented on the mainland that the Bear Warrior appears for one battle and then recedes into the mists from whence he came. That is why I am so shocked that you want to leave because I believed it was love that kept you here.”

It was a strange sight, watching the two men have such an open battle of wills; the Highlander, hulking tall with shoulders broad enough to hold a yearling calf, his familiar black wool plaid pleated around his taut torso and his broadsword sheathed on his back, and the Norseman chieftain with his new gold crown encircling his head, made from the islanders’ melted sovereigns and jewelry.

The hall seemed to hold its breath as everyone waited to hear what Bruce had to say. Throwing aside the plaid to expose his casually unlaced shirt, the Highlander hooked his thumbs into his belt and relaxed. He seemed proud to be explaining his new circumstances as he flexed his shoulders around and cleared his throat.

“Love did keep me here on the island. Ye are right. But I had to be certain that is what it was, ye ken. That’s why I hung around for so long because I had to be sure. I’ve never felt any o’ the softer emotions before. That side o’ life has been hidden from me up until noo.”

A murmur of shocked voices was heard in the hall. “You’ve gone soft, Bear Warrior!” One of the soldiers seated at the table raised his mug of ale to toast Bruce in a mocking way. “Ye have tied yerself to the laird’s daughter’s apron strings!”

Gales of laughter and high-pitched titters followed this drunken teasing. Bruce was unmoved, acting like he had not even heard the comment.

“It takes a real man to admit to the world that he loves another better than himself.” He addressed his comment to the laird and that was all Bruce had to say on the matter.

The laird held up his hand for silence. “Are you asking for my permission to take Mackenzie away with you? Must I lose my best warrior and my daughter in one fell swoop?”

When Bruce broke the silence this time, it was more shocking than anyone could ever believe. “Nay, Laird. Ye can keep her.”

If the old woman embroidering in the corner had dropped her needle, it would have been possible to hear it fall to the ground. The great hall seemed to be holding its breath to hear what else Bruce had to say.

“Because it is nae Mackenzie whom I love.”

The hall erupted into raucous speculation and shock. This time, the laird had to stand up and wave his arms about to gain their attention and make everyone settle down. “Silence! I must hear what else the Highlander has to say.” The laird bellowed at the top of his voice. By and by, the hall occupants grew quiet. They wanted to know who Bruce had fallen so madly in love with that he was willing to stand in front of all the cliffside villagers and declare himself a lost cause.

The laird settled back on his chair, glowering at the man in front of him. As much as the former brigand admired warriors who were brave enough to speak their minds in front of him, he hated the fact that there was no way he could convince Bruce to stay or stop him from leaving. It made him feel powerless, and the laird did not like it at

all.

“Speak. What maiden has caught your fancy in our great hall, Bruce? I will have her warming your bed before the day is much older if it will make you stay with us a little longer.”

But Bruce was able to see that this was an empty promise. He had no desire to turn Esme into a bargaining tool. “Her name is nae important, Laird. What is important is that I have yer permission to leave.”

Clyde rose to his feet after disentangling his wife’s hand off his arm. “I know the woman who has caught the Highlander’s eye, Father. And she belongs to me.”

The laird had not risen to his position of leadership without being able to read a room very shrewdly. The last thing he wanted was for a fight to go down in front of the dais in the great hall. If news of that got out to the mainland, all the nobles would be laughing at him for his loss of control over his men.

The laird held up his hand. “This is a conversation you should be having with my daughter first, don’t you agree, Highlander?”

Breathing in deeply to control his temper, Bruce bowed his head and stepped back. “Aye, ye’re right, Laird. I must sever me connection with yer daughter before anything else. Where might I find her?”

“That is a conversation I wish to be a part of, Bruce.” The laird clapped his hands together and one of the pages stepped forward to offer him a goblet of mead. The Norse folk had never lost their taste for different drinks and foods and nowhere was this more evident in how they rejected whisky and barley ales, choosing instead to drink honey mead. “Let us all meet later this evening, in the front room in the house you share with Mackenzie. Perhaps you can offer my daughter some kind of wergild

in exchange for the three years you took from her.”

Offering a wergild was an ancient tradition that was already starting to fall out of practice on the mainland. When the word was translated, it meant ‘human payment’. It was used to settle disputes and end blood feuds by paying the injured party, or in the case of wrongful death, settling money on the family. And even though the laird had offered his daughter as a bedfellow for the Highlander willingly and Mackenzie had other lovers during her time with Bruce, she was seen as the one who had been wronged.

All Bruce could do was bow his head and step away from the dais. He was seething with regret, close to punching the walls as he thought of his shortsighted stupidity. He had accepted his old arrangement with Mackenzie without any forethought for the future.

Slowly, with a lagging step, he made his way back to the house where he had slept with Mackenzie for three years whenever his duties kept him on the island. The closer Bruce got to the grace and favor house he shared with the laird’s daughter, the more he realized how lazy he was in the past to accept the arrangement. How badly behaved he had been to lie with a woman so casually.

The pathetic excuse he wanted to use was the same he had heard coming from other men for the last two hundred years; Falling in love with Esme has opened me eyes to the undeniable fact that what we had was a hollow shell o’ a relationship, and noo I must go.

But something did not sit right with Bruce admitting that to himself. There was something so calculated and manipulative about the way the McFletchers had pushed him into this corner of domesticity. He remembered the entitled way Mackenzie had raked her eyes up and down his shirtless torso as she brought her horse to a whinnying halt on the beach the first time they met. She had licked her lips with

relish as if he was some delicious morsel she wanted to eat.

She wanted him in the same way a man at a banquet considers another plate of meat—not because they are hungry, but because they are greedy.

Suddenly, Bruce did not feel so wretched anymore. Esme and he belonged together. Squaring his shoulders, he went inside.

The fire was ashes in the cold hearth and the shutters were bolted. The wind sighed through the rafters, tugging the tapestries away from the walls and sending the hanging cobwebs blowing.

He saw her sitting in the armchair in front of the fire. Mackenzie had her knees pulled up to her chest and her arms wrapped around them. Her brows were pulled together in a frown. Bruce was surprised to see her there—he supposed she would be with the rest of the women finishing what was left over from dinner and planning the food for the following day.

Moving to stand behind her chair, Bruce placed his hand on her shoulder. “It’s time for me to go, Mackenzie. Remember what I said to ye the first time I took ye to me bed? Ye are nae the one I look for, so let’s go into this with both eyes open.” Still, Mackenzie did not respond. “We took pleasure from one another for a brief while, Mackenzie,” Bruce continued, “but I am a Highlander through and through, so I was bound to choose a wife o’ me own kind.”

That got a response from her. Rising slowly from the chair, Mackenzie moved closer. “So, you choose that mewling she-dog of a slave over me? I should have you chained in the Luna hut for the mad -that you are.”

The Luna hut was a small stone shack on a remote part of the island where men were allowed to lock their wives if they considered them to be acting out of line.

Bruce scoffed. “Good luck with that. There is no warrior on the island strong enough to take me on.”

Mackenzie seemed to collapse in on herself. Weeping, she cast herself into his arms. “Don’t leave me, Bear! I cannot stand the mortification of being the one you left behind.”

He hugged her, trying to soothe away her humiliation. And so it was that Bruce did not notice Mackenzie remove the dagger from her belt and plunge it under his ribcage, aiming for the heart.

Chapter

Twelve

For that one moment, time seemed to freeze in place as the needle-sharp dagger point entered the thick muscle of his heart. This was the first time that he felt the wounding, the first time the strong beat of his heart faltered. The shock of the pain alone was enough to make Bruce wince and groan. Clutching the wicked hole under his ribcage, he bent and staggered.

Mackenzie stepped back, a triumphant smirk on her face. “How do you like that now, Highlander? An injured heart is something to fear, is it not? Let’s see how your miraculous healing abilities handle that.”

His instinct was to run away and hide. This time, no berserker rage boiled inside him, urging him into the fray with sword held high. This time, Bruce felt the bite of mortality.

There was no breath to spare in his lungs and when he hacked out a weak cough, flecks of blood covered his hands.

The look in Mackenzie’s eyes held no pity as she watched the big man stumble. But then Bruce seemed to rally and the light of life came back into his eyes. When she saw his fighting spirit slowly beginning to return to him, Mackenzie thought it was best for her to run away and hide from what she had done. Leaving Bruce to make do on his own, she fled the scene of her crime.

He needed to return to his small cottage and hide too. Bruce felt in his bones that the magic that had made him invincible for so long was slowly starting to unknit inside him. Love had set him free from the curse, but it had also endangered his life. Breathing steadily and stopping the blood from flowing out of the wound by pressing his hand against it, Bruce headed home to Esme.

The evening winds were blowing over the cliffs, sighing through the long grass and whistling in the eaves. The cool air was very refreshing and it seemed to put some life back into him. Hugging the walls and using them for balance, step by step, Bruce made his way back to Esme. The beating of his heart was getting stronger. It galloped like a wild stallion trying to escape the halter. And then, where the small cottage was in sight, suddenly it stopped.

The strong pulse of his heart had been with Bruce for so long, that he was at a loss how to carry on without it. Looking down at his hand clutching the wound, the Highlander was in shock when he realized how meaningless his life had been up to the point where he was saved from the ocean by a wee slip of a girl dressed in rags.

Like a tall tree in the forest that has been hewn with axes, Bruce Sterling fell to the ground with a rumbling thud.

Esme was lying on the bed, staring up at the wooden beams spanning the rafters and thinking about what it might be like to leave the island. She was not keen to go back to Clyde's house and kept delaying her return. She had listened to rumors of life on the mainland growing up and they never failed to fascinate her.

To her, the mainland represented the most amazing pastimes and amusements; fairs, market squares, merchant shops, and castle courts. Beautiful places where one could buy trinkets and gewgaws with which to prettify oneself.

Her sunny outlook on life had helped see her through the darkest hours. Esme tried to

imagine how wonderful it would be to hold a penny in her hand and then use it to buy a sweetmeat or adornment from a stall at the market.

“Mmm,” she sighed and closed her eyes, writhing on the mattress with a sensual twist as she dreamed what it would be like to wear a bonny chemise for her lover in bed. What it would be like for him to pull the soft lace off her shoulders, exposing her breasts for his hungry mouth to nuzzle and lick...

A loud thump broke into her dreams. “Who is it?” Esme knew that no one would dare to approach the Highlander’s house without calling out a warning from the hitching post. Had one of the sheep wandered into the village and banged against the wall?

Gingerly stepping to the window, she looked out into the twilight gloaming. Nothing. No movement or sound. But something did not feel right when Esme looked inside herself. It felt like there was a missing part and she would not be complete until she went outside to look for it.

Pulling an old arisaid around her shoulders and using the flint to spark a rushlight, Esme stepped outside. “Hie, who is it? Is anyone there?”

The sound of the wind was the only reply she got, but Esme was not satisfied. Walking all around the cottage, she peered through the dense brush trying to see a shadow or shape. Kicking a path through the long grass, her eyes scanned from right to left and then back again, searching for the source of the thudding noise.

In the dark dusk, she nearly fell over the large body lying amidst the grass. Esme did not need to bend down to see the face; she knew who it was already. “Bruce!” The rushlight fell to the ground and went out as she clutched at his arm, trying to get him to roll over. “What is wrong?”

Under the light of the rising moon, Esme could see his unnatural pallor. He was pale,

almost bloodless. And when she managed to turn him over by heaving on his arm, she saw the fatal wound. A tiny whimper came out of her mouth, the same sound a frightened animal would make when it saw another caught in the snare.

“Bruce!” This time, her need was more urgent. He must wake up now and be her braw, fearless, indestructible Highlander once more. “Ye must rise, me love. Please!”

Sitting on the damp grass beside him, Esme tried to stop the black blood oozing out of the hole under his heart. The flow was sluggish but persistent. Clamping her mouth to his, she could taste the scent of iron in his breath. “Me love, me darlin’ Highlander. Please wake up and be with me again. I cannae live withoot ye.”

No matter what mistakes he had made by choosing to live in peace with her enemy, he was still her braw lover at the end of it all. And together, they must pull through this.

Bruce groaned, but the effort of communicating with her seemed to reopen the wound even deeper. “Hush, love!” Wrapping his heavy arm around her delicate neck, Esme heaved herself up, trying to support him with all her strength. “Come on, darlin’! I ken ye can do it. A few more steps and we will be home.”

He seemed to comprehend her need for movement. With another deep groan of pain, Bruce managed to get his legs back underneath him as he half-crawled to the door of the cottage with Esme’s support. “Get me back under the b-boards...”

She understood. She knew what he needed because they had no secrets from one another anymore. So what if he had flouted his convenient relationship with Mackenzie in her face at the beginning of their union? Bruce had stayed on this isolated island for three years, waiting for Esme to come around.

Helping him into the house and then moving to the room to remove the boards from

the floor, Esme was with Bruce every step of the way. Only when he was curled up in the hidden compartment under the floor did she ask a question; “How long will it be for ye to heal, Bruce? What else can I do to help ye?”

“I need the healing sleep, Esme. I dinnae ken why, but I think this is the last time I will be able to call on the power of the magic talisman to render me such a service.”

His eyes closed as his body tried to find the last of the magic to heal him for one final time.

Esme was left alone in the cottage. It felt alien to be there without Bruce’s strong, masculine presence and his protecting arms to hold her.

Springing into action, Esme decided to go into the village to see what news she could pick up. While she was not allowed into the great hall, slaves were permitted to stand at the doors and wait for someone inside to send them to the brewery for a drink. It was here she found out all the gossip she needed.

It was supper time, another communal meal shared by the tribe and their families. A cauldron of soup had been brought from the kitchen and placed in the middle of the hall. The old bread trenchers from dinner had been thrown into the soup to soften and thicken the broth. The boards were lying across the trestles and all the laird’s favorite warriors were seated close to the dais.

Mackenzie was sitting at the supper table with her father, on the dais. The conversation was conducted in a low voice, but clear enough for her to overhear.

“Your actions were misguided, Mackenzie. When he heals, the Highland Bear will come looking for you, demanding vengeance. Did I not instruct you to wait for me to arrive at the cottage before the two of you started to hash it out?”

Mackenzie had a sulking expression on her pretty face. She was threading one of her long blonde braids through nervous fingers. “He must be punished for rejecting me, Father. And as for that slave girl Clyde has got all heated over, I want her guts pulled out with a meathook before she is hanged from the rafters.”

The laird put down his soup spoon. “Do you have any idea how much gold the Highlander possesses on the mainland? No, you don’t, you stupid, pig-headed woman! The Scotsman would have paid a huge wergild to be set free from the arrangement I made between him and you. And now you have gone and ruined it with your headstrong tantrum.”

“He is dead, or at least he is dying I tell you.” Mackenzie was insistent about the facts. “I stuck him through the heart and I saw the doom in his eyes. He staggered off into the night, grunting like a dying stag. He was not so immortal after all.”

Esme watched from the shadows as Laird McFletcher shook his head with frustration. “Even I can see that it is not the Highlander’s fate to die at the hands of someone like you, Mackenzie. And if you have not just stabbed us into a problem that not a single man on the island is capable of combating, I will be very surprised.”

“He deserved it,” the laird’s daughter insisted. “How dare he mess around with that little nobody behind my back.”

Laird McFletcher gave his daughter a scornful look. “By all reports, you were the one to stray first. Be gone. I want nothing to do with you. And you better go to the saint’s shrine and pray that the Highlander is in a forgiving mood when he returns—and do not doubt that he will return, Daughter. He will heal and come back, probably stronger than ever before because now he has the flame of love burning inside him.”

Pulling her arisaid to cover her face, Esme stepped back into the shadows. It sickened her how casually the two McFletchers dismissed Bruce’s injuries. How dare they

discuss his poor injured body as if he were just another disposable slave to them. All they had ever wanted from him after all his loyal service was to fleece more gold out of him.

Suddenly, Esme forgot her hatred for the McFletchers' ghoulish behavior. Mackenzie appeared at the doorway with the hood of her cape pulling down low. After turning her head to the left and right, she stepped away from the great hall, heading towards her brother's house. Stepping lightly behind her, Esme followed. When she saw the laird's daughter enter the house without announcing her arrival at the post first, she knew some other plotting and planning would be happening inside. Sneaking around the corner, Esme stood on an upended bucket so that she could continue listening at the window.

Anna was seated in a chair next to the fire, the remnants of a private supper on the table. Clyde looked up when the door opened, but he did not stand when he saw who it was.

"You made a pig's ear of it, Sister," his voice was sneering as Mackenzie came to warm her hands by the fire. "I told you the Bear is virtually indestructible. You will be lucky if the village elders take your part because of your three years as his bedfellow now. It's not like having the Highlander lap at your yellow cat was a hardship to endure."

Mackenzie shot her brother a look of dislike. "And yet you stand to gain just as much as I do by his death or departure, Brother dear."

Clyde looked over at Anna. "Let me speak with my sister in private, Wife. This discussion is not for your ears."

Anna stayed put. "This is my house and I am still the mistress of it. You two can go to the other room."

Her spirited reply made Clyde angry. “You own nothing that does not belong to me first, Anna! Now go before the back of my hand forces you!”

Anna left before he stopped speaking, disappearing into the kitchen while tying a shawl across her swelling belly. When Anna had gone, Mackenzie took her place on the chair. “I need you to go looking for him, Clyde. He staggered out into the evening sea mist and now cannot be found. One sword stroke through the heart should dispatch him, I know it.”

Clyde raised one eyebrow. “I am not a coward. If I kill the Highlander, it will be in combat and face-to-face. I want my slave girl back. My loins burn hot for her, but I cannot spread her legs with ease if I have to think about the Bear breathing down my neck all the time. But is it just revenge that makes you long for his death?”

Mackenzie gave her shoulders a careless shrug. “I will get more wergild from his estate if he is dead.”

“No, you will not,” Clyde was adamant, “that was why Father wanted to handle the matter. The Highlander’s gold is unreachable without a warrant from the man himself. And he owes you nothing. The compensation will go to Father.”

A sly smile appeared on Mackenzie’s face. “That is where you are wrong, Brother. A large portion of gold will come to me because I am carrying the Bear Warrior’s baby.”

Chapter

Thirteen

Esme nearly fell off the bucket with shock. For the first time in her life, she experienced the horrible sensation of loving someone and hating them at the same time. Bruce had lied to her! He could father bairns, and he had been lying with Mackenzie in the same intimate way a man lies with a woman when he wants to implant his seed in her.

The sense of betrayal almost overwhelmed Esme as she crept away from the window, hunched over and biting the knuckles of her hand to stop herself from crying. Without noticing it, the bucket handle had hooked to the back of her kirtle. As Esme did her best to stop hot tears of anger from coursing down her cheeks, the bucket rolled over onto the yard's cobblestones with a loud ringing clang.

It was Anna who came outside first. She came storming over to the cowering slave girl. "So, wench! You have come back here to try and take my place next to my husband in bed, haven't you? Well, I have something to say about that!"

The next thing Esme knew, her anger at Bruce was forgotten as the two women clashed. Anna grabbed hold of one of Esme's long brown braids and tried to swing her around the yard with it. Mackenzie and Clyde came outside to watch and the smirk on Clyde's face told Esme everything she needed to know about the man. He believed that they were fighting over him and it made him feel superior.

"Let the wench go, Anna," Mackenzie called out in a humorous voice. "You can't lie

with Clyde for two years anyway, not until the baby is born and weaned. Let my brother have his fun—just like I have had my fun with her lover, the Highlander.”

Sobbing, Anna let go of Esme’s braids, collapsing onto the cobblestones with despair. “You, none of you know what it feels like to try and bring a baby into the world and then have to be constantly worrying that another will replace you in your husband’s affections. My body is sore and pitiful. I get no sleep. I worry all the time about this beautiful young girl replacing me. It’s torture!”

Putting her own troubles aside for a moment, Esme placed a comforting hand on the poor new mother’s shoulder. “I never meant to cause ye worries, Mistress. I dinnae want yer husband. I belong to another.”

Clyde scoffed. “You belong to me, remember? And if your warrior lover has a problem with that, he can petition my father in the great hall. Come. I don’t want you slipping away to the stables again. This time, I’m locking you in your cottage.”

Straightening her back and giving him a scathing look, Esme said, “Ye can lock me away all ye want, but I will never willingly spread me legs for ye.”

Following Clyde down the path, Esme had a warning for the laird’s son. “Bruce does nae have to be one o’ the Eternal Warriors for him to be able to cut ye doon to size. He has years of experience in warfare, and if ye separate us, he will take that as a declaration of war!”

The man shrugged. “I reckon he’ll be plowing my sister’s fields again once he knows I’ve had you, wench. His manly pride is too brittle to handle knowing I have pricked where he has licked.”

Esme tried her best to stay true to the memory of her darling Bruce holding her in his arms as they whispered words of devotion to one another, but it was hard. If

Mackenzie Fletcher was pregnant with Bruce's bairn, Esme was not sure whether she could find the strength to go on.

The only thing she could think to say that might have the effect of putting Clyde off the idea of sleeping with her was to threaten him. "Ye dinnae ken anything about a woman's feelings, Lairdsson! If Anna was to fret herself into a fever over me, she might lose the bairn. Are ye willing to risk that happening?"

Clicking his tongue, Clyde pushed Esme into the small one-room cottage and shut the door on her. But hung around long enough to whisper a threat through the door crack. "The heart can't bleed for something the eye doesn't see, wench. And let me promise you this; as soon as Anna has forgotten this stress, I will be back here to take my pleasure on you."

Esme wanted to bang her fists on the door panels and shriek for help, but she knew no one would come. These people were brigands and ruffians. They might have brought the more polite and kind members of their households from the Northern lands to come and live here with them, but the bulk of the villagers were pirates and their bonded slaves. No one would lift a hand to help her if they believed her to be in trouble.

Left alone in the cottage with only the moon for illumination, Esme gave herself over to the misery of her situation. Bruce was holed up in his hiding place and in no state to do anything other than heal. Whatever had happened to make him vulnerable to hurt could not have chosen a worse time to reveal itself.

"Och, Bruce. Why did ye lie to me again? Why nae just tell me that ye lay with Mackenzie and made love to her with complete abandon? I would have still loved ye. This endless game o' cat and mouse, I'm tired of it."

But as hard as she tried to keep her mind off what Clyde had planned for her in the

future, Esme knew the vengeance she felt in her heart was as strong as ever.

“I will pretend to accept Clyde as a lover and ask him if I can go and work in the kitchens, and then I will poison them all to death! I will stick to my original plan because—the saints help me—this is the only way to lay me poor family’s ghosts to rest.”

So when Clyde came to check on Esme in the morning, he found her biddable and sweet natured.

“I have had the night to reflect on yer proposal, master,” Esme told him with a pretty twinkle in her eye, “and I think it might be a good idea for me to accept your terms. But I hate the thought of lying in the cottage in idleness all day. Cannae I work in the kitchens instead?”

Clyde gave her a dubious look. “What brought about this change of heart? Do you know something that I don’t? Is your Highland lover dead?”

Esme made her eyes all wide and innocent. “Och, master, I hope nae! But I heard what yer sister said about his injuries, and I would prefer to be protected by ye noo.”

As usual, Clyde could not resist her tempting words and alluring smile. “Fine, you can work wherever you like. But mark my words, if you flee to the beachside village or try to run and hide, I will raise your protectors to the ground with fire. Do you understand this?”

“Aye, I will stay in the cliffside village.”

But when Esme went to offer help in the kitchen the next day, she found herself blocked.

“Just you head on back to where you came from, girl!” The cook waved her hands in a gesture of denial. “I don’t want your help here or anywhere else near the food.”

Her heart in her throat with fear, Esme asked why. The cook scoffed at her, addressing her remarks loudly so that everyone in the kitchen could hear. “Why? Because that great warrior, Bruce Sterling, told me that you spice the food with local ingredients. The last thing I want for the food I send up to the high table is for it to be tainted with bitter herbs and rancid salts.”

One of the kitchen helpers piped up. “They put seaweed into the bread, Mistress, and brew ale using dandelions! It’s disgusting!”

All the Norse folk working in the kitchen cheered when the cook sent Esme away. “And take your vile local foods with you, girl!” the cook shouted after Esme, “we want no part of them.”

She should have known that Bruce would make sure she could not have access to the preparation of food. Cursing softly under her breath, Esme went to the little cottage on the cliff edge to check on Bruce. Even when he was asleep, he had the power to dominate her thoughts and dreams.

Those feverish, love-fueled dreams! They were her secret shame but also her secret pleasure. The moment her mind succumbed to sleep, Esme’s body would surrender her to the most lurid dreams of Bruce.

He was prowling around the cottage, sniffing at the door, making the flimsy boards tremble as he pushed against them. She could hear him growl, a deep, rumbling sound as if he could smell her inside.

What feeling is gripping me? Why am I excited and scared at the same time? Both types of excitement flood me body; the kind that makes me heart beat faster, almost

forcing me to run away, and the sort of exhilaration that causes the blood to rush between me legs.

I want to shout for him to go away, if only to protect me heart from breaking, but me mouth won't open to say the words.

The door panels shake as the great beast outside presses to come in. That traitorous part of me body thrills for him to come inside, but I have too much pride to beg him. Shutting me eyes tight, I shake me head, locking me legs in a twist.

Finally, I manage to find me voice. "Go away! I dinnae trust ye. Ye're more like an animal than a real man!"

The only answer I get is a loud growl. Getting up the courage, I take a wee peek through the crack in the door. Bruce, the Bear Warrior, the great immortal Highlander, slams against the thin wood panels. He wants so badly to come inside!

Me mind seems to split in two as the desire of me body wins the fight. I open the door with trembling fingers.

His dark shape steps inside, towering over me with his huge height and well-developed muscles. "I love ye, Esme. And when I love, I never leave."

"Ye will never leave me? But where are ye noo?"

His reply is to sweep me into his arms and press impassioned kisses over me throat and lips. "I am here, sweetheart," his rough voice reassures me. "I will always be in here." And he touches me chest where me heart lies.

I almost faint with happiness as he lies me doon on the bed. This is what I have longed for so long. Ever since I found him in that boat as it drifted close to the shore.

Seeing him lying there was like the biggest present waiting for me to open on a special day.

And he wants me. Humble and lowly as I am, he doesnae care aboot the fact that I have nae money or dowry. This man has chosen me oot o' all the bonny lassies he has met over the last two hundred years.

So, I allow his hand to slide between me legs and caress me doon there. When I look at him, his dark clothing has disappeared and our naked bodies are entwined together.

“This is what I have wanted for so long, darlin’,” his voice is gruff with longing, “and noo I am going to take it from ye—but dinnae fash, sweetheart because when I take, I also give.”

He is almost too large for me soft feminine body to handle as he mounts me. But I am ready for him. I have never been so ready for this to happen before. I have to grit me teeth and a gentle moan escapes me throat as I feel his deep penetration, but when the rhythmic rocking of his body begins to stimulate me, I forget the discomfort as the tingling, melting sensation begins to mount inside me.

“Dinnae stop, ye braw duin,” I am gasping with rapture as his rampant body pleases me so exquisitely, “if ye stop, I think I will die from frustration.”

“Well, we cannae have that happen noo, can we?” A triumphant smile tilts his mouth as he feels the fulfillment growing inside me.

He grinds his manhood deeper, hitting that perfect spot where me body is pierced with a long glow of satisfaction. For the longest time, it seems as though the sun stops moving in the sky and all is silence.

“Aaah!” And then I am awake and alone. Me lover is only a figment of me

imagination as me body craves his touch.

Esme gave a shake of her head to clear it of the images. Lifting the floorboards, she saw her love was still fast asleep. Lying on the floor to try and be close to him, Esme let her hand fall into the crawl space.

“I will nae fight it anymore, Bruce. I love ye and I cannae change that. But just because I love ye doesnae mean to say that I will put up with ye lying to me. I can understand ye foutering around with Mackenzie—the two o’ ye were together for three years after all. So, why do ye feel the need to lie about it?”

He did not reply. Not even a flutter of his eyelashes gave any sign of Bruce being able to hear her. But Esme felt better for being able to talk to him. She moved the ruffled hair off his forehead and settled his clothing right. Like a fairy story prince, the Highlander was just as desirable asleep as he was when he was awake. Esme could have lain there on the floor and stared at his face all day.

Pushing aside the neck of his shirt, she checked to see that the wicked wound he had received from Mackenzie was gone. Esme sighed. He might be a mighty warrior who had lived many years, but Bruce still had a lot to learn about women. There is no way that any female with power would allow a man to walk away from her if it meant a lowering of her status. It pleased Mackenzie to be known as the Highlander’s housekeeper and lover. She probably felt like she owned him.

Just like Clyde felt like he owned Esme.

Sighing wearily, Esme got up and prepared to walk back to the cottage Clyde had set aside for his mistress. Then an object caught her eye. The hilt of Bruce’s dirk was sticking out of his sporran.

She did not even have to think twice before Esme took the knife. Hiding it under her

tunic, she replaced the boards over her lover's sleeping body and left.

Chapter

Fourteen

Clyde came to Esme that night. It was so sudden and unexpected that she was caught unprepared. The first time she learned about his intentions was when he was sliding into bed with her. Shaking off her dreams, Esme awoke with a small scream.

Sitting bolt upright, she gasped. “What are ye doing here, ye great knave? Begone!”

He smelt so alien to her. The grease on his beard, the scent of his skin, and the sound of his fervent breathing; everything about the man repulsed her. There was no way Esme could even pretend to enjoy his touch to save herself. The bile rose into her mouth when his hot breath blasted into her face.

“I chose you for this, girl, and if I remember correctly, you chose me too.”

There was so much wrong about his statement that Esme was lost for words. “I dinnae choose ye! Ugh. I was upset with Bruce, so I went off with ye to spite him.”

She tried to leave the bed, but Clyde grabbed her wrist and stopped her. There was enough moonlight coming through the unshuttered window for them to see one another clearly. Esme did not like the look of rampant lust on Clyde’s face at all. The way he licked his lips with relish as he stared at the outline of her puckered nipples under the soft wool of her shift was repulsive. Never before had Esme realized just how dedicated she was to staying faithful to the Highlander. But she knew it now. She belonged to Bruce, body and soul. She was the very definition of a slave for love.

“If ye lay one finger on me, Clyde,” Esme used all of her strength to push him away from her, “I swear I’ll bite it off!” She spat the words out at him, her face pinched with revulsion.

“I like a woman with a bit of spirit,” Clyde grinned, “It makes the joining of the bodies together so much more pleasurable.”

“Pleasurable for a creeping rogue like ye maybe, but nae for me!”

She knew that once he managed to climb on top of her, his weight would be enough to pin her down. Esme would have to use her wits if she wanted to get out of this. Or at least she would have to rely on her wits to get her to where the dirk was nestled amongst the folds of her kirtle pockets.

Forcing herself to stay calm, Esme lowered her voice to try and sound reasonable. “Master Clyde, if ye give me permission to leave the bed, I will remove me shift for ye.”

This was a very tempting offer. The kirk had held sway over life on the island for many years and the seafaring brigands that made up the Flugha tribe were not immune to it. If the priests could have seen into every cottage bedchamber they would have. The rules for all kirkgoers were clear: to only have intercourse with a wife for the creation of bairns and to do the act wearing nightshirts.

And while the wives were very happy to obey this priestly dictum—especially the ones who were worn down from childbirth and nursing—the husbands champed at the bit to have more sensuality shown to them at bedtime.

Settling himself back on the bolster, Clyde agreed. “Go on then. Give me a display of what you have been hiding under that tunic of yours. But it better be good or else it is not only my prick that will hurt you when you come back to the bed—my hand will

deal you a hard buffeting too!”

Thanking her lucky stars, Esme clambered out of the bed to go and stand at its foot. “Watch me closely noo, Clyde, or else ye might miss the best part.”

Taking a deep breath, Esme pulled one side of her shift gown off her shoulder to expose a beautifully rounded, pert breast. It was not gratifying when she heard the air catch in Clyde’s chest. He did not notice as she took a small step back to be closer to her kirtle. His gaze was rapt as she pulled the other side of her shift down. Using both hands, Esme began to massage her breasts, pushing the fingers to pinch at her nipples.

Again, Clyde was oblivious to her movements, his eyes staring at her chest with adoration. While her one hand played sensually with her breast, Esme’s other hand was frantically searching the kirtle pockets. When she found the dirk, she almost let out a sigh of relief before she slipped the weapon into the shift’s neckline at the back.

“Ye braw stud stallion,” Esme tried to remember how Bruce liked her to talk to him while they were making sweet love together, “will ye nae move over a wee bit so that I have more room in the bed? I need all the space I can get to spread me legs nice and wide for ye.”

By this time, Clyde’s eyes were nearly bulging out of the sockets—he was so aroused.

“Move over? Yes, of course, spread the legs.” It was like he was mesmerized by the tempting display she was putting on for him. Just as she had planned, Clyde moved over to be closer to the wall. Positioning her body so that her back was not observable to him, Esme unbraided her long, brown hair so that the thick tresses hid the dirk hilt. And then she went to lie on the bed.

He pounced on her the moment she lay down, sticking his knee between her thighs while his fingers searched to pry open that secret hidden slit of hers. He was a selfish lover, uncaring of whether her body was open and ready to receive him. Esme felt sorry for his poor wife, but her mind was made up.

This man and his family had orchestrated the worst atrocities on her poor village. Clyde's father had stood by and laughed as the villagers had been burned alive in their homes. Sliding her hand underneath her back as Clyde tried to push himself into her body, Esme retrieved the dirk. She did not need to think twice. The man huffing and puffing with lust on top of her despite her rejection of his advances must die.

Her hand balled into a tight fist to hold the weapon, Esme plunged the dirk tip down onto Clyde's back.

There were several disadvantages Esme had against her. Firstly, the strength in her arms was not enough for her to stab hard. Secondly, never having stabbed anyone before, she had completely underestimated how resilient the human skin could be. The tip of the dirk sunk less than half an inch beneath the surface of the skin before hitting a thick slab of muscle. The blade refused to go in any deeper.

The stabbing had the desired effect of making Clyde jump off her, scrabbling his hands behind his back to see what strange insect was biting him, but it did not incapacitate him in the slightest. When he felt a thin trickle of blood oozing through the nightshirt fabric, his focus snapped back to Esme, but this time no love-making was on his mind.

“You stabbed me, you poxy jade. I will kill you for that.”

For the first time since her father had swum away from the coracle boat after making her swear to look after herself, Esme realized that she had neglected her father's order. Her life was meaningless now. She would die by the hand of this man, the son

of the man who had slain her family and neighbors, and no one would be left to avenge her or them.

But her courage did not desert her in the face of death. She would sell her life at a price and damn the consequences. “Aye, I stabbed ye, ye great weasel! And I would do it again in a heartbeat!”

Grabbing the dirk off the mattress, Esme held it in front of her as if she were warding off a rabid dog. “Come one, Lairdsson! Come and get me if ye dare!”

The dirk did not perturb Clyde in the smallest way. Swatting the point aside like it was a wasp, he lunged for Esme’s hair. He managed to catch one lock as she tried to whirl away out of his reach. Using her long hair like a halter, Clyde dragged her towards him.

“I will ring your neck like the scrawny chicken that you are, you she-dog,” Clyde grunted with discomfort as the wound in his back pinched him. Esme screamed with pain as a thin lock of her hair was pulled clean from her scalp. Outside, some villagers got up from their beds and began to light torches and rushlights off the embers of the fires.

Uncaring of the pain now that her death was staring her in the face, Esme laughed wildly. “I ken Bruce will avenge me, Clyde. Ye are nothing but a stupid lummo, nay fit to clean his boots after a walk through the mud!”

The words were designed to make him kill her quickly. But as Clyde’s fingers clamped around her neck and began to squeeze, one of those people who had heard Esme’s scream burst through the door.

It was the Highlander. Taking in the scene with one look, he withdrew the sword from his back sheath. “When are ye going to learn to pick on those yer own size,

lad?" Bruce commented drily before he kicked out the back of Clyde's knees. To stop himself from buckling forward, the laird's son let go of Esme and staggered.

Clyde felt like a fool in front of the strapping Scotsman. It was never going to look impressive for him to be wafting around a woman's bedchamber in his nightshirt with a dirk hole in his back. "The strumpet spread her legs for me and then stabbed me in the back," Clyde fumed. "If I don't kill her now, you can bet your life that my father will have her hanged before daylight rises."

"Ye should have let us leave when the time was ripe," Bruce's sword was hanging down; he would not attack an unarmed man. "But nay, ye had to go and push yer luck with me woman. When are ye going to learn, lad?"

Esme was sharply aware of the fact that Bruce had told her his healing powers had faltered and waned. She wanted to shield him for further harm. He was so magnificent, but this new vulnerability made his protection of her even more heroic.

"This ends now." Clyde hissed the challenge at Bruce. "You and me, right now. In the village square. Winner takes all. Loser dies. It is a pity you came back from the dead, Highlander, but where my sister failed, I will succeed."

Bruce pretended to suppress a yawn. "Och, ye'll give yerself a nosebleed if ye insist on taking life so seriously, lad. But if ye think I'm going to dance around the village square with ye while ye're wearing yer night shirt, ye must have run mad."

It was as if the Highlander was deliberately trying to taunt Clyde! Clyde blew air out of his nose in one long stream. "That is why I challenged you! I must change into my clothes first!"

"Och aye," Bruce put his arm around Esme in a protective gesture. "Pull on some boots and breeks first, by all means, but leave off the armor—if we are fighting to the

death, then I want it to come quickly.”

The next thing Esme knew, Bruce was hurrying outside with her. “Forgive me, sweetheart. Me sleep came at a bad time. But noo I am mortal, the stakes are higher.”

She clung to him, unwilling to let him go. “Nay, Bruce! First ye must promise me that ye will nae get injured again!”

Clasping her small hands in his large ones, he smiled down at her in the way he always had done so, the half-humorous, half-teasing twinkle in his eyes. “I have nae doubt that oor luck will hold for one last time, darlin’ lass. Stay true, stay strong, and believe in oor love.”

Esme sobbed. “How can I believe what ye say when Mackenzie McFletcher is going around telling everyone that she is pregnant with yer bairn! Why could ye nae tell me the truth?”

His loving smile did not lessen as he held her close to his chest. “If she is pregnant, Esme, it is with some other man’s bairn, I promise ye. We ask too much from the ancient gods if ye expect the eternal Highlanders to have bairns as well as long life. I would nae lie to ye aboot something as serious as that. But what I must ask ye noo is this. Can ye still love me even if oor union is nae blessed with a wee bairn?”

Her answer was a fervent kiss and a soft whisper. “I will always love ye, Bruce Sterling.”

By the time Clyde had flung himself back into his house, looking for his sword, most of the villagers were awake. Word spread like a wildfire. The Highlander was back and stronger than ever before! He had issued a challenge to the laird’s son! The two men had lit the torches and were getting ready to fight in the square.

When the laird heard this, he came out of his house, buckling his breeks around his waist and calling for more torches. “What is this I hear? Why is no one listening to my orders anymore? If the Highlander wants to leave the island without forfeiture, let him go! Do you think I want a bunch of immortal brethren sailing to the island to challenge my lordship over it?”

Mackenzie came to stand next to her father, shrugging her pretty rounded shoulders. “Let the two men vent the bad blood between them, Father. You can step in before the Highlander goes in for the killer blow.”

“You are remarkably cold-blooded towards your brother’s chances, Mackenzie,” the laird complained.

One of his warriors commented. “As brave as your son is, Laird, he is fighting an Immortal being after all. Not one drop of the Bear’s blood has ever fallen to the ground.”

Then Bruce stepped forward to stake his claim. “Laird, for the third and final time, I ask that ye let me and me woman leave. I dinnae want to fight Clyde to death, but I will. Esme’s family must be avenged by this.”

With all of his warriors urging him to accept the challenge, the laird had no choice but to agree to the terms. Mackenzie shot a look at her brother as the two men moved to square off against each other; brother and sister nodded to one another in a secret agreement. The only one to notice this exchange of looks was Anna.

Chapter

Fifteen

Bruce was more tired than he had ever been. He longed for natural sleep, lying in the arms of his lover without anything to worry about the following day. He was done with war, done with combat, and could not wait for the predictable domesticity of a homely life with Esme as his wife.

But in order to get there, he must first fight Clyde. He had no desire to kill the laird's son, but he would not hesitate to do it if events turned out that way.

By this time, news of the challenge had reached the beach village. The careworn fishermen, haddock smokers, shepherds, and net weavers were tramping up the hill to the cliffs, eager to see their oaths of revenge come home to roost.

A lone woman, a stranger, came with the beach villagers. With her slender height and serenely beautiful face, she stood out from the crowd. The laird noticed the woman. She looked too noble and highborn to be approachable, so he called one of his men to fetch the elder fisherman to come and speak to him.

The elderly fisherman came and stood trembling next to him, his cap in his hand. "Aye, Laird, how might I help ye?"

Leaning his elbow on the armrest of the high-backed chair that had been brought out to the forecourt, Laird McFletcher pointed his finger over to the woman. "Tell me, who is the stranger who came over the island with you? The elegantly dressed woman

with the face like one of those angels painted on the wood screens of the kirks on the mainland.”

The fisherman did not have to look over to the person the laird was referring to—he already knew. “The lady came over on the boat from the mainland yesterday evening, Laird. When we asked her what duties brought her to bide a while on such a barren wee island, she replied that it was her duty to witness certain things and that she would nae leave until she had seen it with her own eyes.”

The laird shook his head with confusion. “That tells me everything—and nothing! What is her occupation?”

“She is a healer, Laird.” The fisherman stepped back when the laird dismissed him.

Mackenzie moved closer to the high-backed chair. “Father, I will not be pleased if the Highlander leaves me. It would not look good when I have to tell the story to other suitors when they step up to take his place.”

“What do you mean?” The Laird stared at his daughter with beady eyes. He was proud of her cold and calculating heart but was realistic enough to see that there was no way Mackenzie’s pale prettiness could compare to the fiery beauty of the beach village orphan; Esme, the slave girl.

“It hurts my pride that he left me for another. I could only bear the shame of Bruce casting me aside if he were to die.”

“How many times do I have to tell you that he is the great Bear Warrior, Mackenzie? It is not Bruce’s fate to die by a man’s hand. I suggest you pray for your brother’s sake that the Highlander takes pity on Clyde and spares his life. As great as you believe yourselves to be, at the end of the day both you and Clyde are ordinary people playing with some of the strongest magic you do not even understand.”

“And what strange magic is that?” Mackenzie snapped back.

Laird McFletcher sighed. “I think we are dealing with the magic of love. It is not to be trifled with. In the last few days, I have seen the Bear go from being a warrior with a liking for battle and turning into a man with a mission. Clyde and you were insolent to try and change that.”

“And would it change your mind if I was to tell you that I was pregnant with his child while the Highlander went off to woo another woman?”

The laird shot his daughter a scornful look. “No, it would not. If you have been so careless with your lovers as to let them plant a seed in your belly, I wash my hands of you. You are too young to know this, but no tales are told about the Eternal Highlanders’ children. The immortal warriors stand alone. And that is how it should be. They cannot live forever and also breed. There are no Sterlings’ sons or daughters out there, believe me.”

The tall woman who had arrived with the beach villagers overheard this. “And what of the first Laird Sterling? The clan had to start from somewhere, did they nae?”

The laird was too interested in the woman to be angry that she had not waited for an introduction. “Maybe the Immortal Brethren sprang from the rocks of the rugged Highland mountains, mistress? You never know.”

The woman smiled charmingly and curtsied. “Perhaps. My name is Agnes, Laird. I am always here at the end.”

He did not have the chance to ask her to what end she was talking about. Clyde had donned a pair of leather breeks and honed his sword into a keen edge. Stepping into the circle, he clanged the blade of his sword against his shield. He was shirtless, and his boots were tied tightly under his knees. Grease had been rubbed over his skin so

that his opponent could not grip him or throw him.

With an almost weary resignation, a deep scowl marring his handsome face, Bruce stepped into the circle too. His black plaid was belted tightly around his midriff and leather boots tied under his knees. As he sized up Clyde's physique by peering at him from under dark brows, Bruce used a leather thong to tie back his long black hair.

"Present your swords to the laird," the comptroller ordered the two combatants. "And then state your case."

Approaching the chair from different angles, Clyde and Bruce stayed well apart from one another as they bowed and withdrew their swords. Holding the blade in front of his face, Bruce bowed his head without taking his eyes off Clyde. "Laird, I would have walked away happily at any time since finding the lassie I have been searching for the last three years. But a fickle fate has kept me here long enough to repay yer hospitality with death. Cannae I offer ye a wergild and be done with this nonsense?"

"And what nonsense are you referring to, Highlander?" Clyde scoffed. "Would you call it nonsense when I skewer you like a wild boar?"

Bruce ignored him. "I would nae call it nonsense, actually. I would call it insanity for any man— any man —to think that he can touch me plighted lady and think he can get awa' wi' it."

"You talk like a sane man, Bruce," the laird replied. "But I know my son too well to think that he will be satisfied with gold. You will have to butt heads over this until there is a victor."

Esme was standing on the edge of the crowd. Only she knew what Bruce had told her. The magic spell that had kept him alive for so long had been broken. He was no longer invincible.

Fortunately for the laird and Clyde though, Bruce had lost none of his skill with the sword. Going up against him was a fool's errand. The Highlander was, and always would be, death incarnate.

The two men stepped into the circle created for them by all the bystanders. They did not bother with bows and salutes. Clyde was still sizing up his opponent when Bruce struck first. Lunging across the gap that divided them with his sword arm pulled back, he stabbed the wood of Clyde's shield so hard that it splintered into fragments.

The crowd surrounding the combatants gasped. They had never seen such a feat of strength or speed before. It was as inhuman as they had been led to believe from all the stories. Unconcerned with their shock, Bruce stepped back.

"Go get another shield if ye want, Clyde. Or I can throw mine away too if that evens things up a wee bit."

Laird McFletcher could see that his son was significantly unsettled by what had just happened. He knew that look on Clyde's face. He had seen it before when he was a seafaring brigand raiding ships and coastal villages. It was the look of someone who could see their own death plotting out in front of them. "Throw away your shield, Bruce." Laird McFletcher made the decision for his son.

Casually, as if it weighed no more than a sovereign, Bruce cast his shield into the crowd before squaring up to Clyde again. The laird's son could not help himself from going cautiously. He did not like the idea of facing off against such brutal strength and speed at all, but his pride would not let him surrender.

It was a waiting game now, and no one in the crowd felt that Clyde was safe. Anna wept quietly next to the laird's chair while Mackenzie stood with her lips pressed firmly together and her eyes narrowed.

The slender healer with the beautiful face went to stand next to Esme. “Ye dinnae fret for yer man’s safety?”

Esme looked at the woman. There was a twinkle in the lady’s eyes that she found herself attracted to. It made her feel as if she could trust her. “Lady, I have seen wondrous things happen to yon Highlander. He doesnae seem to fret about his safety over much, so why should I? But as his woman, I cannae like the idea of him standing up there to make himself a target.”

“And why is that?” The healer wanted to know.

Esme gestured around her. “Look at them, the bloody Fluga tribe. They dinnae belong on oor island. They had to slaughter everyone to be here, setting themselves up as oor laird and masters and making us slaves.”

“So why did ye stay here then?” the healer wanted to know. “What was stopping ye all from hitching a berth on the next merchant ship and leaving?”

“This is me home!” Esme was outraged, taking her eyes off the fight while she made her case. “The island doesnae belong to the Fluga—it belongs to us!”

The healer pointed to the crowd around them. “I see many island women with bairns from the Fluga men. And children standing together without worrying about who came to the island first. And where d’ye think Bruce will want to live once the two o’ ye are married? Will he be happy to stay here and accept Clyde’s angry stares for the rest of his life? Or will he take ye with him to the mainland to make yer home where Sterlings have lived for hundreds of years in the Highland mountains?”

Esme felt anger rising inside her. “Why must I be the one to move? If I leave, that means these wretched people have won!”

Agnes the healer shook her head. “They won ten years ago, Esme MacKenzie. It is you who has been too stubborn to accept it. Let go of yer wrath and move on with yer life. Count yer blessings and walk away from what makes hate rise in yer heart.”

Finally, Esme was able to see everything clearly. It was as if the scales had fallen from her eyes. Clyde and Bruce were fighting over her because she had not walked the line of truth. Her thirst for vengeance had caused all of this hatred to fester.

It was going hard for Clyde in the ring. The sweat was pushing through the grease on his skin and he was panting hard. Every time he ducked or tried to block a particularly vicious sword blow from Bruce, the rising sunlight would catch the flecks of sweat drops as they sprayed off Clyde’s body. Bruce was not even trying to kill the laird’s son. He was toying with the heavy man in the same way a mountain toys with someone trying to reach its peak.

Summoning up all of her courage, Esme stepped into the small circle where the men were fighting surrounded by the crowd of villagers. The healer was right. As Esme looked around at the sea of faces, she saw both cliffside and beachside dwellers standing side by side.

“Stop!” Holding up her hands, Esme went to stand between the two combatants. “I’m tired of fighting and squabbling.” Sighing long and deep, she moved next to Bruce to take his free hand. “It’s been ten years since me parents and family were tortured and murdered. For ten years I have carried the burden of their dying screams with me every moment of the day. But nothing will bring them back to me, and I...I dinnae think me living here with all these poisonous memories is a good idea. I want to move on. So all this,” Esme gestured around the circle, “must end now.”

Bruce waited for Clyde to throw down his weapon. The young man was staggering with fatigue, but still, he held onto his sword until his father commanded him to drop it. Only when Clyde cast aside his sword did Bruce step out of the ring of watchers.

Pulling Esme behind him, he went to stand in front of the laird.

“We leave on the next tide.”

But before the laird could show some sign of agreement, Mackenzie dodged in front of the high-backed chair, trying to stab Esme with a sharp dagger. Bruce brought his fist down on the woman’s wrist after blocking the blow.

“Ye are so predictable, Mackenzie,” Bruce spat as the laird’s daughter fell to the ground, holding her aching wrist in her lap and screaming loudly. “Ye should learn some new tricks.”

“When we settled here, we used our old ways of violence to take possession of the land. In hindsight, that was unwise. It caused those who live here on the island to separate into two. That will end today. From now on, I want half my people to go and live at the beachside village—and I want half of those living by the sea to come and stay here, by the cliffs. But only if they want to. Our divisions must end going forward.”

That evening, when the tide was going out, a small boat left with it. In the boat sat Agnes and Esme, and the man pulling on the oars with ferocious strength was Bruce Sterling. Even in the twilight, the two women could see the few gray hairs threading through Bruce’s hair at the sides.

“How fast d’ye think he will age noo, Lady?” Esme asked Agnes.

“The magic of long life begins when an Immortal Warrior is in the prime of his life. Bruce will be nae more than two or three and thirty years auld at the very most. Ye both have a long and happy life together ahead of ye, just like normal folk.”

“I am happy with that,” Esme smiled as she watched the island fade into the mists

behind her.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:10 am

“How many more miles must we trek to get to yer home, Bruce?” Esme sat astride her little pony as the small train of riders crossed the mountain pass. Her pony was a palfrey, the easiest horse breed to ride because of its steady gait.

She was hardly recognizable as the former slave girl from the island. Esme’s clothes were very fine and gave her a mature, elegant air. Her tunic was made of thin blue silk and hugged her curves in a very attractive way. She had a thick gold girdle around her waist and soft leather slippers on her feet. The hood of her cape hid her hair, as was proper, but underneath it, her long braids hung down, for Esme’s husband had begged her not to change her hair for his sake.

“A league or so by me estimation,” Bruce rode his horse to be closer to Esme’s. “How is yer sweet arse holding up against the saddle?”

Esme blushed, looking around her to see if any of the other riders had heard him. “It is holding up well, thank ye. The new velvet saddle makes all the difference.”

She had never ridden a horse before. Never worn fine clothing or shoes. All of her clothes had been hand-me-downs until Bruce had begun leaving her gifts and money by the wreckage of the boat on the island. Even now, there were stark differences in what they had each experienced during their separate lives.

The skin and nails on Esme’s hand were still hard and brown from years of helping the fishermen gut and smoke their fish. She could only eat her porridge with salt and water and would laugh when Bruce insisted that eating it with cream and honey tastes nicer. She would sometimes wake up screaming in their bed, only stopping when her husband would wrap his strong arms around her to soothe her nightmares.

But day by day, her smiles became more frequent than her frowns as she struggled to conquer the bitterness that had ruled her life for so long.

Her husband would tell her his story, and she would repay the favor by telling him her own as they shared the long years of searching until true love came along.

Bruce looked at his wife fondly. “Ye remind me of those fables about the gorgeous, exotic flowers that manage to thrive and flourish, even though they are growing in the dark inside a pile o’ dung.”

Esme wrinkled her nose. “Hie! That is nae very romantic, Husband! Can I nae have grown in something else?”

Bruce shrugged his broad shoulders. “I dinnae ken. How would ye describe the island?” After thinking hard, Esme had to agree with him. “That’s the thing about unpleasant circumstances—there is always good to be found amongst the bad.”

They had crested the mountain by this time. A wide rift valley opened up in front of them, crisscrossed with many small creeks and burns flowing into a black loch. “This is what I have always dreamed of,” Esme sighed, “a place where there is nay sound or sight o’ the sea.”

For the first time, when she closed her eyes and listened, Esme could not hear the sound of gulls crying or the lapping of waves slapping on the wet sand of the beach. She could not smell brine in the air or taste salt when she breathed in.

Looking over at her husband, she smiled, leaning her head back to stare at the gray sky so that the hood of her cape fell off. “It is perfect. I want us to make oor home here.”

“Well, that’s a good thing, wife,” Bruce grinned, “because that castle doon there next

to the loch is oor home.”

“Forever and ever?” she had to be sure before she allowed herself to enjoy the feeling.

“For as long as we both shall live,” the Highlander made her the promise.

That night, Bruce had to drag Esme away from helping the servants unpack the trunks and set the furniture in the correct rooms. “Ye are their lady noo, sweetheart. The servants will think it strange if ye try to do their work for them.”

But she was worried all the same. “What if they think I am lazy for nae helping oot, Bruce? What if they are sick or tired and feel scared to tell me they are hurting?”

Her husband took her to sit on his lap. He stroked her long braids, playing with the ends of her hair with a thoughtful expression on his face. “Oor home must be comfortable for all who stay here, sweetheart, and I promise ye that any servant who feels poorly will come to ye and ask ye to fix it. Ye’re the castle chatelaine, the mistress o’ the house—it is yer duty to care for those who live here.”

“Ye mean they are nae afraid o’ me?”

Bruce laughed, moving to kiss her fears away. “No’ for the wages I pay them!”

Snuggling against his chest, Esme said in a small voice. “I keep forgetting that they are servants. I find it hard to forget me past as a slave.”

His voice grew gruff. “Ye are the mistress of everything ye see around ye, Esme. It is me who is the slave!”

She gasped. “Nay, Bruce! How can that be?”

Pulling her close, he growled. "I have been a slave for yer love since the first time I saw yer beautiful face watching over me, Esme. And I have never been happier since I admitted it!"

Picking her up, he carried her to the bedchamber. This was where they spent a large portion of their married lives now, catching up on all the long nights they had been segregated from one another on the island.

Sometimes they made love gently, taking their time to bring one another to fulfillment at a leisurely pace. Other times, their passion for one another would overtake them in the middle of a task or event. Then they would duck into the cellar or corner of the courtyard and join their bodies together with frantic urgency, with Esme leaning over a table as Bruce hitched up her skirts to find that part of her that tempted him the most.

He was not a selfish lover. Esme was completely satisfied by the way Bruce would use his fingers and mouth to pleasure her, and it was this that encouraged her to try different things when they were in the mood for it.

But most nights, they would make love face to face, and heart to heart. She adored watching his face as it contorted whenever the rapture of ecstasy overtook him. She loved to stroke his dark hair afterward as he collapsed against her neck. Esme would sometimes have a silent, secret climax during these times, rocking her hips against him once his hard thrusts had subsided.

Always at ease with one another, because Esme's social standing had never given her stiff manners or rigid etiquette, the two lovers treated each other as equals in and out of the bedchamber. If she had demanded, she would let him know. Maybe this night would be the night she requested something exotic from him. Their conjugal bliss knew no boundaries.

“Stand there for a wee while, Bruce,” Esme murmured from her perch against the bolster. “I want to take me pleasure from seeing yer body.”

“Which part?” he grinned, happy enough to fulfill her every wish. If it was at all possible, Bruce found himself falling more in love with her every day.

He was wearing his usual black plaid feileadh-mor belted around his slim waist. A homespun shirt covered his chest, but he had kicked off his boots and left them in the dressing room with the stocks. Raising his arms above his head, Bruce turned slowly around, allowing Esme to see the back of the feileadh-mor hanging down over the belt behind him. “Ye must start to collect dyes so that we can create oor own plaid, sweetheart,” he reminded her, “something to reflect the colors of the loch and the gray rocks o’ the mountains.”

“Wheesht!” Esme ordered him. “How can I prepare me body for love-making with ye wittering on about plaid?”

That got his attention. “Och, so it’s a good foutering ye’re after, is it? I am happy to oblige, milady.”

She giggled but soon got serious again. “Take off yer clothes for me slowly, Bruce. As if I am the master and ye have to obey me lustful wishes.”

“Ye wicked wench,” Bruce played along with her fantasy, “and me a poor stable hand just trying to make an honest wage.”

“Do as I command ye!” Esme’s eyes sparkled with merriment as she loosened the ribbons holding her transparent lawn chemise around her neck.

Lifting the shirt out of his belt, he pulled the garment over his head and let it drop on the floor. Esme licked her lips with relish as the tight muscles of his stomach were

revealed. She adored the taut V-shape on each side of his flat belly, created by the perfectly etched brawn. His body was rock hard, with not an inch of spare flesh to be seen. How she longed to run her hands over the proud chest muscles, following the line of dark hair downwards...

Making a circular motion with her finger, she told him to turn around. The smooth skin of his back rippled with knotted tendons. Bruce flexed his shoulders, rolling his neck and shoulder blades to make the muscles rise and spread. His manly body had that highly desirable triangle shape, with broad shoulders tapering down to a slim waist and lean hips.

“Mm, I like that,” Esme told him in an approving tone, “It reminds me of the cocks when they preen themselves for the hens in the coop.”

He laughed, spinning around to face her. “Ye have a remarkably descriptive way with words, lass! But I can promise ye that I will be doing more to ye tonight than just mounting ye like they do in the farmyards!”

“Dinnae break the spell, Bruce!” Esme complained, “Ye still have to do what I order.”

“And what is yer next command, milady?” He smiled at her, but she could see the danger in his eyes. Esme knew that when he dropped the plaid from his waist, she would find him hugely aroused. It no longer had the power to frighten her, but his gorgeous body never failed to excite her.

Her body was almost melting with desire under her chemise. If he did not come and cover her soon, she might have to take herself in hand. Suddenly, the thought of pleasuring herself while her husband watched her gave Esme a thrill.

Caressing her breasts and teasing the nipples into hard points with a gentle pinch of

her fingers, Esme licked her lips. “Very well then, stable hand, drop yer kilt! I order ye to obey me!”

Bruce did not need to be told twice. The two newlyweds were as hot for each other now as they had been that first time in the brewery. And when her husband casually unburdened the plaid from his waist, he revealed her favorite part of his braw body.

There was no way she could hold back now. “Very well, ye common servant, come and pleasure yer mistress right noo!”

Crawling onto the bed like the dangerous predator animal he had once been, Bruce growled. “Yer wish is me command, Milady.”

He pounced on her in the same way a hungry man might pounce on a delicious meal. Esme giggled and cried out as he pretended to bite her neck. His touch excited her more than words could say, bringing her to a peak of anticipation very quickly.

Biting her lower lip, Esme moaned softly as she reached for that rampant part of him to guide him inside her. “Give yerself to me, Highlander,” she whispered, “make me believe that I am the only woman ye have ever craved.”

He was her willing slave from the moment they joined their bodies. He loved the way she wrapped her legs around him as if to push him deeper inside her. He was smitten with the lustful words she would mutter in his ear to make him pound into her harder and faster. It was like they were connected in a special way, where she ended where he began, and the other way around too.

Their kisses were ardent, sometimes with mouths open and hungry for penetration and then sometimes happy with short, sweet kisses of love.

He told her he was close, which was information he knew would turn Esme into a

frenzy as she abandoned herself to receive his essence. Grinding himself deep inside her, Bruce felt her body contracting with pleasure as her screams of euphoria echoed around them.

And then they fell back, spent and exhausted.

After a while, he moved to slip his arm underneath her neck so that she could sleep in its crook. “Why d’ye call me ‘Highlander’, Esme?” he wanted to know. “As me wife, ye should ken that is what ye are too.”

She answered him in a sleepy voice. “Aye, I suppose, but I will always be an islander in me heart, because that is where me clan is.”

“The Islander and the Highlander,” Bruce chuckled, “It sounds like the first line of a ballad.”

“And this castle is the bridge between those two places,” Esme whispered softly.

He pulled her closer to his chest to hug her. “I would cross the ocean that flows around the world if it meant that I can call ye me wife, Esme. I love ye.”

These were the most perfect words the little slave girl who had saved the great bear warrior from the sea could ever hope to hear.

Thank you so much for reading my book!

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:10 am

Laura allowed her body to move with the swaying and jolting of the coach. Her nurse sat propped up with cushions in the corner. Fast asleep and oblivious to the tedious journey, the elderly nurse snored as her mouth gaped open.

The landscape outside the coach was gloomy. Sallow yellow tufts of grass trying to grow amidst the gritty soil. Nothing was flat, everything seemed to be jagged and steep. The road wended over humpbacked hills and skirted around rocks as big as giants. When Laura craned her neck to look up at the slate sky, she saw birds of prey circling above her—almost as if they were watching the coach. They were too high up for her to hear their cries.

As the terrain became increasingly rugged, the coach jolted hard enough to wake the old woman.

“Goodness gracious! Scotland is the most unfriendly country to travel in,” Nurse Mildred grumbled. “What happened? Only yesterday, the roads were so smooth and hospitable.”

Her pretty young charge had nothing else to do besides look out of the hatch window for the last twenty miles, so she was able to answer the question. “That’s because we were in the Scottish Lowlands yesterday, Nurse. Now we are in the Highlands. See?” Laura pointed to the gray crags surrounding them. They towered up into the misty clouds that wisped around their peaks.

Nurse Mildred clucked her tongue. “Who would have thought that a few leagues would be enough for the landscape to change so much? From rolling hills and lush green grass to this! Will this horrid journey never end? Why would your father feel

the need to send you forth to meet your betrothed like this? The man should come to you, not the other way around.” It was clear that the old woman was made irritable from the journey.

The girl sighed. She often asked herself the same questions. “Father’s debts are considerable, Nurse. Ethelred Donaldsson’s father has offered to settle them in exchange for my hand in marriage. It is not like we were in the position to lay down rules.”

This brought the old lady no comfort. “That man! I could strangle him. Selling my sweet nursling off to the highest bidder. He should be ashamed of himself.”

Laura gave no reply to this. She could not scorn her father, but nor could she deny the truth. The moment the harsh winter’s snowfall began to melt, Sir Morecambe Raleigh had sent riders forth. Their mission was to deliver an enticing letter to every nobleman living between the manor and the North Sea. And that included the Scottish Highlands.

And this is the message the letters contained:

Greetings,

Might I tempt you, fine nobleman, with an offer you cannot refuse, especially if you be a connoisseur of female beauty and soft speech?

I have a daughter. She is the fairest belle of the north. Chaste, lovely, and gentle. For five years she has run my household, played host to my guests, and cared for the invalids on my estate. A pearl past price, dear sir, I do not exaggerate.

What would you offer me for this delightful young woman to be dropped into your lap like a ripe plum?

She is on the market to the highest bidder this May Day at noon. I invite you to my estates in Northumberland to observe her beauty for yourself. But act swiftly, I warn you! There are many wealthy noblemen prepared to lay down their gold to possess such a prize for a wife.

Your friend and ally,

Sir Morecambe Raleigh,

Humberside Manor

Mill Burn, Northumberland.

Over a dozen suitors had ridden south to inspect Maid Laura Raleigh. Laura had woken up one morning and looked out her bedchamber window to see a line of horses coming through the manor gate.

Sir Morecambe had ordered his daughter to dress in her finest clothes before coming down to greet their guests. This grated against Laura's fiercely independent nature. "I will dress myself as I see fit, Father! I have to work in the kitchen today because you insisted on holding a feast."

"Hush!" Sir Morecambe begged her. "Please keep a civil tongue between your teeth, Daughter. Do not forget that I told these guests that you were docile and sweetly spoken. If you mess this up, the moneylenders will foreclose on us."

And so Laura was forced to put on her most tempting dress and smile enchantingly at the men as they came in. When the visitors found Laura to be exactly as her father had described her, there was a mood of competition in the air. Soon, Sir Morecambe was besieged with offers for his daughter's hand in marriage. The men alternated between kissing Laura's dimpled wrist and complimenting Morecambe on his

daughter's splendid face and figure.

"She is as desirable as a dumplin' might be to a starvin' man," said a nobleman from Aberdeen, "and from those delicious aromas comin' up from the kitchen, I'll wager she knows how to cook too!"

But one man was determined to snag Laura for his son. Laird Redmond Donaldsson took Morecambe aside and whispered in his ear. "I hear ye have run up some large debts because of yer bad harvests, Raleigh."

Sir Morecambe sighed. "Aye. Two bad harvests in a row. The wheat rotted in the fields from the cursed rain. Laura has run my house for me since my wife died. I shall be heartsore to lose her, but gold in exchange for such abundant beauty is a good bargain, as I am sure you will agree."

Laird Redmond stroking the whiskers of his beard. It looked like he was thinking about making an offer, but he had actually already made up his mind. "I'll take her. It's a good bargain. Those wide hips promise many healthy bairns."

One of the lairds from Inverness overheard this. "Awa' with ye, Donaldsson! Ye're a wee bit too auld to satisfy such a beauty."

Laird Redmond stood his ground. "She's for me son, Ethelred. And the bargain has been struck, so awa' with yerself instead!"

The agreement that was made between the two men was as complicated as any contract. Laird Redmond promised to pay half the gold up front for Laura's betrothal to Ethelred, but she must journey north to meet his son. Only when the couple were happy with one another, a wedding day would be set and the balance of gold paid to Sir Raleigh.

Sir Morecambe had used some of the gold to pay for his daughter's journey north. He had wept when she kissed him farewell.

"Do not cry for me, Father," Laura patted the old man's grizzled beard. "I will make you proud. I do not think it will be so bad in the Highlands."

"It's not that," Sir Morecambe sniffed, "I am worried what kind of man you are marrying. I want him to be kind and gentle to you. I worry that your independent spirit might rub him the wrong way."

"If Ethelred is proud and disagreeable, I will know how to cheer him up. Good food, a warm fire, and a soft bed have the power to bring a smile to the blackest mood, Father. Just you get busy settling our debts with that gold. And I'll make sure the rest of the balance is paid to you once I get to Donaldsson Castle."

And so Maid Laura had set forth with her nurse to brave the rough Scottish Highlands with only a coachman and four outriders to guard her. When they left the inn at the Tay Forest crossroads behind, the coachman began to grumble.

"Keep those crossbows ready and bolted, lads. This is bandit country. I've heard bad things about this road."

One of the London-born and bred outriders scoffed. "You call this muddy track a road? I've seen better-looking cow byres."

"Mud will be the least of our worries," the coachman muttered under his breath.

It was a lawless, dangerous part of the world. The mountains provided countless caves where bands of brigands could set up camp. Every rocky outcrop was an ideal hiding place for villains to lurk. In more civilized areas, outriders would flank a coach on all sides. But with every lurching curve in the track revealing another blind spot,

all four men rode in front.

From her front-facing position in the coach, Laura watched the riders' backs and prayed they had a safe passage.

Her prayers were not answered. Laid across the track were several large stones, heavy enough to make a grown man stagger to remove one of them. The coachman reined in his horse. "Get those rocks off the path, lads! Night is approaching. We must get to Iolaire village before the gloaming."

The moment the men dismounted, loud yells were heard coming from around the corner. A gang of ruffians descended on the riders, knives and cudgels raised, with mouths snarling and teeth bared. The outriders were hopelessly outnumbered.

These were the Highland hills, where the outcasts would form a clan of their own to prey on travelers. No one was safe—merchants, bards, mercenaries, and messengers—they would all fall victim to the ruthless hatred of the wicked.

The nurse clutched Laura's hand. "What is it? Can you see who is winning?"

Laura had taken one look at the score of ragged ruffians hacking and stabbing at the outriders and reached for her case. In it were the few baubles her father had not yet sold and a gold sovereign he had given Laura for her bridal. The jewelry had belonged to her mother, and were the only mementos she had of that kind lady.

The coachman wrenched open the door. "Quick! Our men will not hold them off for long. Their cross bolts are all gone."

Nurse Mildred whimpered, but Laura wasted no time in hoisting her kirtle above her knees and jumping down onto the rutted track. "Whither shall I go?" she begged the coachman to point her in the best direction.

“They will expect you to flee backwards. Do not go down the mountain track, Maid! Climb up. Always climb upwards. You will find safety at the top of this mountain.”

Giving Laura a push, the coachman showed her a faint pathway curling around the mountainside. It glittered silver in the twilight. Taking her nurse's hand, Laura trudged at a fast pace along the trail. Behind her, she heard the sound of men dying. A shadow flickered in the evening mist. The coachman had cut the coach horse loose and was riding it bareback down the mountain, so fast as if the devil himself were after him.

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Altair woke and sat bolt upright. Something had disturbed the stillness of the night. This was an unusual occurrence. No one ever climbed this far up his mountain, so there was never anyone around to make a noise.

Vaulting out of his bed, he strode over to the window and peered out. Stars, moon, and scudding clouds banking in the west to form rain. When Altair breathed in, he tasted the rain. It was gentle and hazy on his tongue.

Turning his head sideways so that his ear was cocked towards the fortress walls, he waited for the sound to come again.

If anyone had been in the round watchtower bedchamber with him, they would have been able to admire the outline of Altair's profile against the moonlight. Just as there was no softness on the Laird's rock-hard body, nor was there any pliancy to be found on his face.

His features were rugged, rigid to the point of looking intimidating. His high bridged nose jutted out from his brow with ruthless sharpness, and his chin promised a stubborn, unrelenting nature. The muscles under his scimitar-shaped cheekbones twitched as he waited and watched with hawk-like intensity.

He did not have long to wait. The sound came again. Now that he was wide awake and could listen more carefully, Altair was no longer on guard from the noise. It was more of a whimper than a murmur; the kind of sound a child makes when they are lost or injured.

But it had been a long time since Altair had heard a child's voice. He was about to

write it off as a lost mountain goat's kid until he heard words underneath the weeping.

“Help me, please. Can anyone hear me?”

The feminine voice would have been as pleasing as the coo of a dove on a summer's day if it had not been worn ragged by stress and thirst. As Altair went to the chest to remove the long length of dark woolen plaid he used for a feileadh-mor, he calculated how long it had been since he last heard a stranger's voice.

At least seventy years.

People believed this mountain to be cursed. They loathed every rock his fortress was made of. And they muttered prayers to protect them from the evil sorcerer whom they claimed lurked behind its crumbling walls. To them, the Highland laird was a beast, hardly worthy of the description of being human. They were happy to take his gold when his servants came down the mountain to buy supplies of food and fodder, but it was done with no smile or greeting.

The warm midsummer night's air wafting in the valley did not rise this high. Even though it was the beginning of June, a cold wind buffeted. But this frigid mountain atmosphere did not bring him any discomfort.

Once his plaid was pleated and belted around his midriff, all he had to do was tie a pair of boots under his knees and he was ready to venture out.

All the servants—all four of them—were fast asleep in the east tower. Altair was a lenient master and did not begrudge them a late morning or early night. He used one of the secret side gates to exit the fortress. The stronghold had more tunnels and underground trapdoors than a labyrinth, and he knew each one of them as well as he knew the back of his hand.

He did not need a lantern to see the path. Using the moon as his guide, Altair crept towards the one who called for help. Where the mountain crested to its peak, he saw her. A small figure on the rocks, shivering under her hood and knuckling the tears from her eyes. A sorrowful sniff broke the stillness around them as the figure gave up the last of her hope.

“Hie, lassie. Dinnae ye fash noo. Ye have nae more to worry about.”

Gasping, the young woman whipped her head around to stare at him. “Are you a rogue? If you are, I must warn you that I only carry a few small baubles with me!”

Her voice was shrill with fear, but Altair could not help but admire her courage. She faced him down, crouching on the boulder as if she were ready to launch herself at him.

“That will nae stop a rascal from prying up yer kirtle, lass. Come doon from that rock before ye break yer neck.”

“I do not understand what you are saying, but if you are not a rogue, then why are you shirtless?”

Altair glanced down at his bare chest. He was so used to his lonely life that it never occurred to him that a visitor might not like the sight of him half-naked. This young maiden was clearly a Sassenach. But where was her keeper? He could tell from the thick velvet of her cloak and stiff satin of her kirtle that the girl came from a noble family.

Speaking slowly, he inched towards her. “I was sleeping. Yer cries woke me. I’m the Master of the Fortress. Laird Altair Sterling at yer service.” He bowed and then held up his arms for her to jump into, saying, “Come, lass. Ye cannae redden yer eyes with sad tears all night. I promise I dinnae bite.”

The maiden seemed a bit shy at first, hesitating. But his comforting voice seemed to put heart into her. Reaching down with her hands, she jumped. Altair caught her. For one brief moment, her soft hands gripped his bare shoulders, before letting go.

Placing the girl gently on her feet, he stepped back. But she grabbed his arm to stop him from retracing his steps back to the side entrance. “Laird, I climbed up here for a reason. My poor nurse lies below us. She twisted her ankle and cannot move. I hope it is not a bother, but please, can you help me bring her up here to safety?”

“If yer nanny has waited this long for ye to find help, lass, then I have nae doubt she can wait a wee while longer.” He stepped aside and waited for the girl to step through the unlit doorway.

Again, she paused, looking at the darkness ahead and then back at the tall man standing next to her.

“Are ye a-feared o’ the dark?” His tone was deep and almost teasing because he knew what she was thinking. A lone man. An abandoned-looking castle. And no sign of sentries or servants.

The girl straightened her back and tilted her chin up at him. “No. I am not afraid. I have come this far, I may as well go several steps further.”

And she entered the fortress while biting her lower lip with small, white teeth. Altair had to admire her pluck. There was only one other woman inside, and she was his housekeeper. No other female had crossed Sterling clan portals for many dozens of years.

“Can you please light a candle?” she asked him politely. “I am sure you know every nook and cranny of your ancestral home, but I do not.”

Tracing his fingertips along the wall, Altair found the fireplace and used the embers

to light a rushlight reed. A fire was always kept burning inside the castle to try and warm the frigid stone walls. When the flame grew, immediately everything was bathed in its rosy glow. And the laird got his first good look at his new visitor.

She was a striking looking young woman. Still in the first blush of her youth, but she carried herself with the poise and confidence of a mature lady. It was her bountiful figure that first caught his eye as she removed her heavy cloak in the airless antechamber room. The demure neckline of her bodice barely concealed a richness of flesh. Her lush bosom heaved as she looked around the room with bright, curious eyes, as black as pitch.

The exotic darkness of her hair and eyes contrasted beautifully with the girl's skin, which was a delicate peach hue. It invited the observer to touch it, taste it, and stroke the soft valley of her cleavage. From her sweetly dimpled hands to the delicious curves of her belly, hips, and thighs, Altair's visitor was enticingly lovely.

The young woman would probably prefer to have devils fly out of her mouth than look twice at a jaded hermit like him! His angry thoughts made Altair curt and impolite. Flinging himself over to the bell rope, he rang to wake up the servants. The moon was sinking fast. Dawn was approaching, and in the Highlands during June, sunrise came early.

Using a ladle, he scooped springwater out of a bucket and passed it to the girl for her to drink. She sipped from the spoon delicately, making sure to wipe her lips by pinching the droplets of water off with her fingertips. When she was finished, she placed the ladle on the table, where it laid like a barrier between them.

“Well, what's yer name? I cannae call ye ‘lass’ in front o’ me servants.” Scraping a chair out from the table, Altair slumped down on it. Clicking his fingers, he pointed to show his visitor that she could join him. “Sit, sit. Ye’re making the place look untidy.”

As timid as a mouse, she took a seat opposite him. She seemed perplexed at his sudden change of mood. “My name is Laura Raleigh, kind Master. But please, Laird, will you send servants down for my poor nurse, I beg you.”

Running his hands through the tangled dark brown locks of his hair, Altair replied grumpily. “Och aye, sure. For how long were ye climbing ‘til ye reached me hoose?”

It was as if a dam broke as the flood of words came out. “I have been climbing this wretched mountain for nigh on two days, Laird! Our coach was set upon by villains. They killed the men who rode outside to protect me,” Laura drew in a shuddering sob. “Nurse hurt her ankle almost immediately as we set out running away. Our coachman told us to hightail it if we wanted to live. But I can think of worse fates than death.”

In the middle of this confession, Laird Sterling’s steward came in. He stopped short when he saw Laura. “By Lud’s beard, Master! How did ye magic up a maiden?”

“There’s been another damn attack on the beinn pass road, Berenson.” Altair growled the news to his faithful servant. “This young lady’s nanny fell by the wayside.” Turning to Laura, he asked her directly. “There’s nae chance we can hoist the auld lady skywards up the beinn with her ankle busted, Maid. But me servants can carry her doon to the village. Is that an acceptable ootcome for ye?”

Laura looked confused. “What is this ‘beinn’, please?”

Berenson, the steward, answered. “It’s oor word for ‘mountain’, Maiden. And might I say how pleased I am to hear the gracious Sassenach accent in oor castle again?” he bowed low and smiled kindly.

This made Altair laugh. “Awa’ with ye, Berenson, ye sentimental auld cadger!” Then he turned his attention back to Laura. “But ye have nae given us permission yet. Can we carry yer nanny doon to the village?”

The young girl grew agitated. “Yes. Please do whatever is best for Mildred. Is it selfish of me to not want to go back down there? I have not slept for a long while. I fear I will be no help, such is the state I am in.”

She did not shrink away from him as he walked to stand behind her chair. Altair placed his hands on her shoulders, leaning forward so that their heads were level. “Think hard, lassie. When ye skittered awa’ from yer travelin’ coach, did ye head back the way ye came or go straight up the rocks? Show me.”

Giggling nervously, the young maid used her arms to show him the directions they took; up, down, back and forth, left and right. Laura’s hands swept around as if she were dancing, her tired eyes half-closed as she struggled to remember.

“There was no way Mildred would have been able to clamber over rocks, so we walked briskly for a few yards back the way we came along the trail our coachman showed us. Then I saw a narrow pathway cutting towards a ledge of pine trees. We hid there and watched as the brigands went after the coachman on the horse. Poor fellow. I hope he escaped to safety. When the coast was clear, we continued along the path. The going was so rough, Nurse Mildred twisted her leg after two hundred yards or so.”

Giving her shoulder an encouraging pat, Altair stepped back. “I ken where the auld nanny lies.”

Berenson nodded and prepared to leave. “That copse o’ pine trees is where the brigands collect their firewood. Ye’re lucky none were doing it when ye hid there. Shall I wake me family, Laird?”

“Tell yer goodwife to come forth and show oor guest a bedchamber. The rest of us must descend.”

Laura seemed to be shocked at the sudden change of her fortune. “Are you sure you

know where to find Mildred? You do not need me to guide you there?"

Altair gave her a rueful lopsided grin as Berenson climbed the east tower stairs to fetch the other two servants. "This is me beinn, lass. Ye gave me a good description of yer nanny's lay-bye. Berenson and the others will carry her to the village, where she will be given all the succor she needs."

He was not expecting the maiden to take this information the wrong way. Altair saw Laura's lips pout adorably. Crossing her arms, she glared at him. "If this is your mountain, Laird, perhaps you would do me the courtesy of telling me why you allow brigands to attack travelers on it?"

No one had ever criticized him so boldly before. To say Laird Sterling was taken aback was to put it mildly. Summoning all the courtly manners he had learned at his mother's knee, he gave the maid a tight-lipped answer. "They must've set up a camp real quick-like. There are many caves where they could be hidin'."

He got no further than that. "Hogwash!" Laura interrupted him. "I heard you saying to Berenson that there's been another attack. You should have stopped them after the first ambush—not let them continue doing so!"

Altair gave her a scowling look. "Ye have a mighty strange way o' showing yer thanks for me hospitality, lass."

Laura blushed, twisting her hands into knots on her lap. "Forgive me, Laird, but it had to be said."

Mistress Berenson bustled into the antechamber, her arms full of linen. "A guest! I cannae believe we finally have a guest, Laird. I'm over the moon with joy."

Ignoring the scowl on her master's face, the housekeeper placed the linen on the table so that she might curtsy to Laura. "Och, I'm that happy ye're here, Maiden. Me

husband tells me that ye are a lady. How nice.”

Berenson appeared at the door with two men. “Maid Raleigh. Please may I introduce me two sons to ye? This is Andrew, the groom. And Stephen, the footman.”

The men stepped forward and bowed. Laura smiled sweetly. “You are named after my two favorite saints. I bid you thanks for helping my nurse.”

“We are taking the stretcher to transport her on, Maiden. Dinnae ye fash. Ye’ll have yer nanny safe and sound, ready to continue yer journey in a trice.”

Still with a thunderously grumpy look on his face, Altair left with the three men. Mistress Berenson noticed Laura’s gaze following the laird out the door.

“Let him go, Milady,” the housekeeper whispered. “When the master is in one of his black moods, it’s always best to let it wear off.”