



His Runaway Bride

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Category: Historical

Description: When Lileas MacDonald flees her wedding to hide in a remote Scottish abbey, she thinks she's escaped her unwanted marriage forever.

She was wrong.

After months of humiliation and wounded pride, Laird Ewan MacNeil vows to bring his runaway bride to heel once and for all. But the woman he finds isn't the meek maiden he expected. She's a brilliant inventor with a penchant for whiskey brewing.

Their forced marriage was supposed to be a simple political alliance. Instead, it's becoming a battle of wits between a woman who can turn dirt into an explosive and a man who's beginning to think he's her next experiment.

When enemy clans discover Lileas possesses knowledge worth killing for, suddenly her biggest problem isn't avoiding marriage, it's avoiding kidnapping.

Between dodging Highland raiders and clan warfare, can a reluctant bride and her long-suffering groom find something worth fighting for?

TROPES: Arranged Marriage, Runaway Bride, Enemies to Lovers, Marriage of Convenience, Forced Proximity, Alpha Hero, Genius Heroine, Opposites Attract.

Stand-Alone Novella. Mature Content. NO cheating. NO cliffhangers. HEA.

Total Pages (Source): 18

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L ileas MacDonald sat in her tower chamber, surrounded by the beautiful chaos of her mind's work.

Parchments lay open beside bubbling bottles filled with herbs and spices, while half-drawn sketches and calculations covered every available surface.

Notes in her careful script were strewn across her bed like fallen leaves.

A clever blind of her own design shielded the window from harsh sunlight yet could be lowered to welcome fresh air inside.

It had taken her a fortnight to perfect, but like everything else in her domain, it eventually worked.

Her entire room told the story of an inventive spirit: bits and pieces of projects, works in progress, innovations half-completed as she tinkered and tested.

Ink and charcoal stained her fingers from endless hours of drawing and sketching new designs.

In one corner stood her small workshop where she had been perfecting the art of spirit-making for the local abbey.

Her father knew nothing of this endeavor.

He had sent her away often enough to be tutored by the nuns, and they had done their job well while also giving her sharp mind room to flourish.

It was there she discovered the good sisters brewing their own uisge beatha and creating recipes for all manner of tinctures.

Lileas had absorbed it all like a sponge, eager to learn every secret they would share.

If she could just perfect the proportions, she believed she could distill spirits for the clan, saving them coin and providing valuable goods for trade and barter.

But alas, time had come when suddenly her life's work seemed of no consequence. Somewhere in the midst of her dreams and discoveries, she had been betrothed against her will.

"Father, please dinnae do this." Lileas rose from her chair. "Dinnae marry me off so soon. I would perish if I cannot be allowed the freedom to learn."

Her father began pacing before the window, his heavy boots echoing against the stone floor. "It is already done." He gestured sharply with his hand, cutting through the air. "'Tis time ye put away yer strange ways and produce bairns for a laird worthy of yer upbringing."

Lileas stepped forward, her arms outstretched in appeal. "So I am to be just a brood mare? But I can do so much more than birthing babes." Her voice rose with desperation. "I've heard the MacNeils are brutish, boorish men. Why, even Connor the laird's brother is rumored to be vicious and cruel."

"Tsk, 'tis just rumors." Her father waved dismissively, his face reddening. "Dinnae pay them any mind. Connor married that Finnigan lass, and by all accounts she seems hale enough. Besides, Ewan MacNeil is spoken of favorably, and he appears to be a reasonable sort of man."

Lileas clasped her hands before her chest, her eyes wide with hope. "But will he

allow me to create things, to continue studying with the nuns?"

Her father whirled around to face her, his expression thunderous. "As if any husband would allow that! This is all my fault. After yer mother's death, I indulged yer peculiar ways too long. But now 'tis time to do yer duty for the clan."

"Perhaps there is another woman he could marry?" Lileas reached out toward him, her voice trembling.

"No!" Her father's voice boomed through the chamber as he resumed his agitated pacing. "'Tis ye and ye alone. We need this alliance, Lileas." He stopped abruptly and pointed at her. "Dinnae be so selfish as to deny the entire clan good fortune for once."

Lileas moved closer, gesturing toward the window and the lands beyond.

"But I can help the clan in other ways. Who told the farmers to rotate their crops for better yield?

I did, and now we have grain aplenty." She swept her arm toward her inventions scattered about the room.

"Who created a better system for bringing water to the fields? That was me, Father."

Her father's shoulders sagged slightly before he straightened again, his jaw set. "Aye, ye did well, lass, but only because there were men who could do the work." He shook his head, his voice growing stern. "Without them, yer ideas would be nothing."

Lileas's hands clenched into fists at her sides, her face flushing with indignation. "Without me, they would have no ideas, and we would have starved last winter!"

"Och, enough!" Her father slammed his hand down on her work table, making the

clay jars rattle.

"I will not be contradicted on this. Ye've been allowed too much freedom.

" His eyes blazed as he leaned forward. "Now 'tis time ye submit.

The marriage will proceed, and that's final!

" He turned on his heel and strode from the room, his cloak billowing behind him.

Lileas was seething as she paced the length of her chamber after her father left.

All she could see before her were years of despair, living under a tyrant's rule, for it was true that any man she married would never understand her.

Even her own clan thought her daft. She had watched her dearest friends succumb to arranged marriages, babies, and the never-ending monotony of creating comfortable lives for their husbands.

She had long ago concluded that men were the beneficiaries of marriage, rarely women.

Lileas knew in her very bones that if she were stifled from her creativity, her soul would wither and die. The lord had made her this way. Surely he would not have given her such a curious mind if he had not intended her to use it?

With that conviction burning in her heart, she made a plan. It was really the only option left to her.

Exactly one week before her wedding day, Lady Lileas MacDonald ran away.

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The rain hammered down upon Ewan MacNeil's woolen cloak with relentless fury.

Each droplet struck like a tiny dagger, soaking through layers of wool and leather until the cold seeped into his very marrow.

His destrier's hooves churned the sodden earth into a treacherous mire, yet he pressed onward, his jaw set against the tempest raging within his chest.

The wind howled, driving the rain sideways in sheets that made it nearly impossible to see more than a few yards ahead. Only the steady rhythm of hoofbeats broke the monotony of wind and rain.

Sanctuary. The word tasted bitter upon his tongue, carrying with it the sting of humiliation.

"Bloody stubborn lass," he muttered through gritted teeth, water streaming from his dark blonde hair into his green eyes. The words were lost in the howling wind, but they carried the weight of three months of suppressed anger and wounded pride.

Behind him, his two most trusted men—Grant MacLeod and Patrick Wallace—followed in equally miserable silence. The three of them had ridden together through countless campaigns, yet none had ever faced a challenge quite like this one.

Three months. Three long, humiliating months since Lileas MacDonald had vanished from her father's keep just seven days before their wedding, leaving behind a hastily scrawled note with a feeble apology.

Three months of scouts confirming that his wayward bride had taken sanctuary at St. Agnes Abbey, the one place in all of Scotland where even a Highland laird's authority meant nothing.

Three months of Ewan's carefully composed letters going unanswered. He had started with formal requests for an audience, progressed to attempts at negotiation, and finally descended to what could only be described as pleading. All had been met with the same stony silence.

The humiliation had been almost unbearable. His own clan looked at him with barely concealed pity. Village folk whispered behind his back. The alliance between MacNeil and MacDonald lands hung in the balance, and everyone knew it.

But perhaps worst of all was the growing certainty that he had somehow failed before he had even begun. What manner of man inspired such revulsion in a woman that she would abandon everything she knew rather than marry him?

Her open rejection had shaken his confidence and strengthened his resolve to hunt her down and bring her to heel. No woman was going to jeopardize the welfare of his clan or thwart his carefully laid plans.

The abbey loomed ahead through the driving rain, its ancient stone walls rising from the mist. The structure was old, built by monks who had sought isolation on this windswept coastline.

Its towers disappeared into the low-hanging clouds, giving it an otherworldly appearance that seemed fitting for a place where earthly authority held no sway.

Even through the storm, smoke rose from several chimneys. The sight should have been welcoming, but instead it filled Ewan with dread. Somewhere within those walls was the woman who held his future in her delicate hands, whether she knew it or not.

As they drew closer, he caught the faint scent of something being distilled. The sisters of St. Agnes were renowned throughout the Highlands for their brewing skills and healing arts.

Ewan and his men moved their horses under an awning and out of the rain.

He dismounted with movements stiff from hours in the saddle, his boots squelching in the mud.

He approached the gate and pounded against the wood with enough force to rattle the hinges.

"Open in the name of Clan MacNeil! I would speak with yer abbess! "

Long moments passed before a small wooden panel slid open at eye level. A pair of shrewd brown eyes appeared, studying him with calm assessment.

"What business have ye with the sisters of St. Agnes, warrior?" The voice was steady and unimpressed by his show of authority.

The casual dismissal made his jaw clench. He was Laird of Clan MacNeil, a man whose word was law across thousands of acres of Highland territory, yet this woman spoke to him as if he were some common soldier seeking alms.

"I am Laird Ewan MacNeil," he replied, forcing his voice to remain level. "And I've come for my betrothed, Lady Lileas MacDonald. I ken she has taken sanctuary here, and I would speak with her."

The eyes regarded him with that same infuriating calm, neither showing surprise at his identity nor any particular deference to his rank.

"Ye are not welcome here armed, MacNeil. This is a place of peace." He noticed she did not acknowledge his title.

Ewan's hand moved instinctively to the sword at his hip before his mind caught up with his reflexes. He'd expected this, of course. No abbey would allow armed men within its walls, particularly not men who came seeking to retrieve unwilling women.

"I'll surrender my weapons if ye grant me audience," he said, his voice carefully controlled. "My men can make camp beyond yer walls."

The eyes studied him for what felt like an eternity, weighing and measuring. Finally, heavy bars could be heard lifting on the other side of the gate.

The portal swung open with a groan, revealing a tall, austere woman in the black robes of a Benedictine abbess. Her face bore the lines of someone who had seen perhaps fifty winters, yet her bearing was that of a queen.

"I am Abbess Bethóc," she said simply. "Yer weapons, if ye please."

Ewan unbuckled his sword belt with movements that were deliberately slow and non-threatening, though every instinct screamed against disarming himself completely. He handed the belt over, along with the small blade from his boot.

The abbess accepted them without flinching, then paused. "All yer weapons, warrior."

"Bloody hell!" Ewan cursed, then apologized. He reached behind his back and pulled out the dagger strapped there, reluctantly handing it over. The abbess nodded.

"Yer men may shelter in the stables beyond the outer wall," she continued, gesturing toward a smaller building barely visible through the rain. "They'll find hay for yer

mounts and a warm, dry place to wait."

Grant caught Ewan's eye and nodded slightly, understanding the unspoken order. Patrick looked less comfortable with the arrangement, his hand resting on his sword hilt.

"Go," Ewan said quietly. "See to the horses and wait for word."

The two men nodded and led the horses away into the storm.

"Now," Abbess Bethóc said, turning those keen eyes back to him, "ye wish to speak with Lileas MacDonald."

The use of his betrothed's name sent a jolt through him that was part anticipation, part dread. After months of uncertainty, he was finally going to meet her.

"Aye," he replied, his voice rougher than he intended. "I would have words with my betrothed about this... misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding." The abbess's tone was carefully neutral. "An interesting choice of words. Tell me, MacNeil, what precisely do ye believe has been misunderstood?"

"She fled our wedding," he said, the words coming out harsher than he intended. "I assume she thought she had a choice."

"And ye believe ye can simply... address... whatever drove a young woman to abandon everything she knew and seek sanctuary among strangers?" The abbess's voice carried no judgment, but her words hit their mark with precision.

"I believe," Ewan said through gritted teeth, "that running away solves nothing. Whatever her objections to our marriage, she could have discussed them with me."

Abbess Bethóc studied him for a long moment, her gray eyes missing nothing. Finally, she gestured for him to follow her, leading him through the gates and into the abbey proper.

"Lileas is indeed under our protection," the abbess said as they walked.

"But I must be clear: sanctuary means exactly that.

We cannot and will not force her to leave with ye, regardless of any betrothal contracts, and we may not look it, but we are not without the means to protect ourselves. .. even from ye."

The words hit him like a physical blow. His authority, his rights as her betrothed, none of it mattered here.

Ewan's temper flared. "She is my betrothed! We have an agreement between our clans!"

His voice echoed off the walls, loud and harsh in the sacred quiet. Several sisters looked up from their work, and he immediately felt ashamed of his loss of control.

"An agreement between men," Abbess Bethóc replied smoothly. "Lileas was not consulted, was she?"

The words hit their mark with devastating accuracy. It was true: the negotiations had been conducted entirely between himself and her father. The bride's wishes had never been considered relevant.

"Then what do ye propose?" Ewan asked. "That she simply hide here forever while our clans forgo a beneficial alliance?"

The alliance between MacNeil and MacDonald lands was crucial to the security of both clans. Without the marriage to cement the bond between them, old rivalries might resurface, and the carefully maintained peace might shatter.

"I propose," the abbess said, stopping before a narrow window that overlooked the abbey grounds, "that ye speak with her yerself. She's quite capable of explaining her own position."

Through the rain-streaked glass, Ewan could make out a smaller stone building set apart from the main complex, smoke rising steadily from its chimney.

"She's there?" he asked, his voice softer now, touched with uncertainty.

"She spends most of her time there, yes," the abbess replied. "It's our brewster cottage where we prepare our... various concoctions. Lady MacDonald has been quite helpful with our work." There was something like pride in her voice.

Ewan's frown deepened. Helpful with their work? What sort of work could a sheltered nobleman's daughter possibly do that would be of value to a community of experienced sisters?

"What sort of work?" he asked, his curiosity beginning to overcome his frustration.

"The sort that requires... a sharp mind." Abbess Bethóc's smile was enigmatic. "Ye're welcome to visit her there, Laird MacNeil, though I warn ye: she will not be dragged away against her will. I have various means to ensure that does not happen."

Something in her eyes suggested that those means might be more formidable than they appeared.

"If ye want Lileas to return with ye, ye'll need to convince her to leave of her own

free will."

The challenge was clear, though politely phrased.

"And if I cannot?" The question escaped before Ewan could stop it, revealing the fear that had haunted him for three months.

"Then ye'll return to yer clan without a bride, and she'll likely choose to remain here permanently. But I suspect ye may find the conversation... illuminating."

Ewan studied the cottage through the storm. "What exactly has she been doing in there?"

Abbess Bethóc's eyes glinted with something that might have been amusement.

"That, Laird MacNeil, is precisely what ye should ask her yerself."

The cryptic words did nothing to ease Ewan's growing confusion, but one thing was becoming clear: whatever he had expected to find at St. Agnes Abbey, it wasn't this.

"Very well," he replied finally, squaring his shoulders as if preparing for battle. "I'll speak with her."

"See that ye do more listening than speaking," Abbess Bethóc advised. "Lileas has quite a lot to say, if ye're wise enough to hear it."

As he prepared to make his way to the cottage, Ewan couldn't shake the feeling that he was about to discover something that would change everything. Whether that change would be for better or worse remained to be seen.

It was time to meet Lileas MacDonald and find out, once and for all, why she had run away.

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The rain had lessened to a steady drizzle by the time Ewan made his way across the abbey grounds toward the brewster cottage. Each step across the sodden ground was a careful negotiation with mud that seemed determined to claim his boots.

As he drew closer, Ewan realized the cottage was larger than expected, with two chimneys sending aromatic smoke into the damp air. The smoke was unusual, thicker and more fragrant than simple peat fires, with undertones of herbs and something else he couldn't identify.

Light flickered in the windows of the solid stone structure. As he approached the heavy wooden door, Ewan raised his hand to knock, then froze as a voice drifted through the thick walls.

"No, no, that will not work at all," the voice was saying. "The fire's too strong. It'll ruin the delicate balance. But if I could just... hmm."

The woman's voice was musical and lilting, carrying an energy and enthusiasm that spoke of genuine passion for her work. Curious despite himself, Ewan moved quietly to where one of the windows showed a gap between its shutters.

What he saw made him catch his breath and forget entirely about the rain dripping from his hair.

A woman paced before the cottage's large stone fireplace with restless energy.

Her dark hair had escaped from its braid in wild tendrils that caught the firelight.

She wore a simple brown dress chosen for practicality, sleeves rolled up to reveal forearms marked with small burns and stains that spoke of serious work.

She moved with the energy of a caged wildcat, her hands gesturing expressively as she spoke to herself, tracing complex patterns in the air.

"The real question," she continued, apparently addressing the fire, "is whether the cooling vessel can maintain steady heat at lower flame levels. If the copper coils were longer, with a more gradual curve... but where could I get more? The expense would be considerable."

Ewan watched, mesmerized, as she paced and muttered. This woman approached thinking like a physical activity, engaging her whole being in wrestling with complex problems.

Suddenly she stopped mid-pace, her entire body going perfectly still. Her eyes widened, and a slow smile spread across her face, transforming her features from intense concentration to pure delight.

"That's it!" she exclaimed. "Of course! The answer was there all along! How could I have been so blind?"

As she turned, Ewan truly saw the space she inhabited, and his jaw dropped open in amazement.

The cottage interior was unlike anything he had ever encountered.

Glass vessels and clay jars of every shape and size lined wooden shelves, connected by intricate metal tubing that wound through the room like vines.

A massive still dominated one corner, its design far more elaborate than anything

Ewan had seen, featuring multiple chambers and an extensive cooling section.

Detailed drawings covered the walls, sketches that reminded him of technical drawings their guild craftsmen created back at MacNeil Keep.

Sums and figures were scrawled across parchments scattered throughout the room, while Lileas MacDonald moved through this chaos with complete confidence.

Charcoal smudges on her cheek and ink stains on her fingers suggested she was the creator behind all these sketches.

In that moment, Ewan thought Lileas MacDonald was quite possibly the most peculiar creature he had ever laid eyes on.

He watched, transfixed, as she hurried to a workbench positioned to catch the best light. She began sketching furiously, her hand moving with swift, sure strokes as an improved version of the still took shape. Occasionally she paused to check something bubbling gently over the fire.

"If I adjust the angle," she said to herself, "and increase the length of the cooling coils by an inch... aye, that should work!"

Ewan found himself leaning closer to the window, trying to absorb everything he was seeing. As he watched, Lileas suddenly looked up from her sketching, her eyes bright with excitement. "Perfect," she breathed.

Then she looked directly at the window where Ewan stood, and their eyes met through the rain-streaked glass.

For a moment that seemed to stretch into eternity, neither of them moved. He expected surprise, perhaps alarm at being discovered. Instead, her expression showed

what could only be described as excitement, as if his arrival was an opportunity she had been waiting for.

Her face lit up with genuine delight, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm that transformed her features from merely pretty to genuinely beautiful. This was what she looked like when she was happy.

Lileas set down her quill and walked toward the door with movements that spoke of eagerness rather than reluctance.

Ewan stepped back from the window and moved to the doorway. The cottage door was already opening, and he was about to come face to face with the most peculiar, most fascinating creature he had ever encountered. Whatever happened next, he braced himself, ready to meet his betrothed.

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Through the window, Lileas caught sight of the tall figure outside and her face lit up with genuine delight. She hurried to the door and flung it open with such enthusiasm that it banged against the inner wall.

"Oh, wonderful!" she exclaimed, gesturing him inside with obvious pleasure. "It could have waited until after the rain, but I am so pleased to see ye. I think I've just struck on an idea ye could help with."

For a moment, Ewan simply stared at the woman before him, his mind struggling to process this enthusiastic welcome. This was not the reception he had expected, not the cool dismissal or angry rejection he had braced himself for.

Who greeted their unwanted suitor with such obvious joy?

Perhaps she was touched by some madness.

Good grief, he thought, his mind reeling, I'm betrothed to a lunatic!

Yet even as the thought formed, he found himself questioning it.

She seemed more alert, more vibrantly alive than anyone he had ever encountered.

"Come, come," Lileas said, taking his arm with familiarity that should have been presumptuous but somehow felt natural. "Dinnae stand there dripping. Ye'll catch yer death, and then where would I be?"

"I..." Ewan began, then stopped abruptly when she led him inside and he witnessed

the other side of the cottage that had been hidden from view.

"Sweet heaven," Ewan breathed, turning slowly to take it all in. "What is all this?"

"My work," Lileas said proudly. She paused, suddenly remembering her manners. "Oh, but where are my manners. Please dry yer cloak by the fire, and here, take this cloth to dry yer hair."

Ewan removed his sodden cloak, grateful for her consideration, and draped it near the hearth. The warmth began to work on his chilled bones immediately. "Thank ye, lass."

"Tell me, what do ye ken of St. Agnes Abbey?" Lileas asked, making polite conversation.

The question caught him off guard. "It's... a house of God. The sisters are known for their healing arts, their..." He paused, his mind working to connect the dots. "Their uisge beatha."

"Ah." Lileas smiled brilliantly. "Now ye're beginning to understand. The good sisters produce some of the finest spirits in the Highlands. Their whiskey is sought after by lairds from here to Edinburgh."

As she spoke about angles and heat flow and distillation principles, Ewan found himself truly looking at her for the first time.

Without the barrier of expectations, she was.

.. bonnie. More than bonnie. Her dark brown hair caught the firelight, framing a face animated with intelligence and enthusiasm.

"But," Lileas continued, moving with fluid grace to adjust something on her still, "the traditional methods are terribly wasteful.

It takes enormous amounts of grain to produce relatively small quantities of spirits.

" She gestured toward her contraptions with obvious pride. "I've been working on improvements."

Meanwhile, Lileas was having her own moment of revelation. When had the abbey acquired such a handsome blacksmith? This man was tall and broad-shouldered, with striking green eyes and a strong jaw. There was something in his bearing that was unusual for a craftsman.

Surely it's a sin, she thought, heat rising in her cheeks, to have such lusty thoughts about a blacksmith. But Lord help her, the man was magnificent.

"Ye've been perfecting their spirits," Ewan said, and it wasn't a question but a statement of understanding.

"Among other things." She picked up a small glass vial filled with clear liquid. "This batch is nearly twice as pure as anything they've produced before, using half the grain and a third of the time."

Ewan moved closer, studying the contraptions with growing amazement. The design was ingenious. "Ye built all this yerself?"

"Crafted it, certainly. The sisters helped with some of the parts, but the ideas and improvements... those are all mine." She set the vial down carefully. "But I still need a blacksmith to craft some of the pipes."

"And it works?"

"Better than I'd hoped. The real trick is in the cooling vessels.

If we could fashion the coils with a more gradual curve, the heat would flow more evenly.

" She moved to another part of her apparatus.

"And if I can perfect this process, well, then perhaps I can build something similar for my clan.

Then I could prove I'm worth more to them than I would be married off to some arrogant, boorish boar of a man. "

Ewan's jaw tightened at her casual dismissal of her betrothed, but she was too absorbed in her work to notice.

"Not that I dare speak badly of anyone," she continued, "but surely my betrothed must be exactly that, based on all the rumors I've heard.

I mean, what sort of man simply expects a woman to submit to marriage without even meeting her properly first?

" Her eyes flashed with indignation. "I intend to remain hidden here until he finally sees sense and grows tired of waiting, then he can marry some other poor lass who does not mind being bartered like cattle. "

Every word was like a knife thrust, particularly painful because he was beginning to see her point of view with uncomfortable clarity.

"He sent me letters, ye ken," Lileas said, her tone softening slightly as she adjusted the flame beneath her distilling vessel.

"My betrothed, I mean. They were... well, actually they were very nice letters.

Most men would not take the time to write such thoughtful words, and his handwriting was quite elegant. "

The unexpected praise sent a jolt through him. She had read his letters, had found them thoughtful.

"Did ye write back?" Ewan asked through gritted teeth, his voice strangely hoarse.

"No." Lileas shook her head. "There's no point if I dinnae intend to marry him, is there? It seems improper to form a bond with a man I'll never meet."

The words hit him like physical blows, confirming his worst fears about her complete rejection.

"So hiding away in an abbey is better?" The question came out sharper than intended.

Lileas paused, considering this challenge with thoughtful attention. "Perhaps ye have a point there." She glanced at him with a rueful smile. "Ye know, ye're very easy to talk to. Most men just grunt and nod when I speak, but ye actually listen to me."

The smile that followed seemed to light up the entire cottage, and Ewan stood deadly still, afraid that any movement might break the spell of the moment.

"So... what do ye think? Can ye create coils precise enough?" She turned to face him fully, her eyes bright with excitement. "Is such a thing possible?"

"I..." Ewan hesitated, realizing with growing alarm that he had no idea how to answer her question. He knew little of metalworking beyond the basics, certainly nothing that would qualify him to work on her sophisticated apparatus.

Lileas tilted her head, studying his face with growing confusion as she noticed the uncertainty he was struggling to hide. Something in his expression wasn't quite right. And there was something else about his bearing, his speech patterns, that seemed wrong somehow.

"Wait," she said slowly, her enthusiasm beginning to fade as doubt crept into her voice. "Are ye not the new blacksmith?"

Ewan felt the walls of his carefully maintained pretense crumbling around him.

"No, lass," Ewan replied quietly. "I'm not."

The warmth drained from her expression, replaced by wariness and something that might have been dread.

"Then who are ye?" The question came out as barely more than a whisper.

Ewan met her eyes directly, his voice dropping to a dark whisper. "I am yer betrothed."

For a heartbeat that stretched into eternity, Lileas simply stared at him, her mind struggling to process the words. The man she had been talking to so freely, sharing her work with, feeling attracted to, was the very person she had been hiding from for three months.

Then the full horror of the situation crashed over her like a Highland storm.

"NO!" she shouted, the word torn from her throat with enough force to make the glassware rattle. Without thinking, operating purely on instinct, she grabbed the nearest object: a small copper tube.

She swung it at him with all the force that fear could provide.

Ewan dodged the blow just in time, but the sudden movement caught him off guard and he stumbled backward.

His foot caught on one of the many pieces of equipment scattered throughout the cottage, and in his retreat, the back of his head struck one of the larger pipes protruding from the wall with a sickening thud.

He slid down the stone wall like a felled tree, his eyes rolling back as consciousness fled and his body went completely limp.

Lileas stood there, the small copper tube still clutched in her trembling hands, staring in horror at the unconscious form of Laird Ewan MacNeil sprawled on her cottage floor.

Then the full realization of what she had done hit her with devastating force. She dropped the tube and grabbed a damp cloth from her work area. She fell to her knees beside him, gently cradling his head in her lap as carefully as if he were made of the finest glass.

She dabbed at his forehead with the cloth, checking for signs of life while willing him to wake up, her hands shaking so badly she could barely control her movements.

"Please dinnae die," she whispered, her voice breaking.

"I'm so sorry. I did nae mean to hurt ye.

I was just... ye startled me, and ye're supposed to be a terrible man, but ye listened to me, and ye seemed interested in my work, and now I've probably killed ye, and they'll hang me for murdering a laird, and I'll never get to finish my brew. "

Even in her panic, her mind was working with methodical precision, trying to find solutions to what seemed like an impossible situation. But for once in her life, all her intelligence seemed inadequate to the situation before her.

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The first sensation that crept into Ewan's consciousness was warmth and the most exquisite scent he'd ever encountered: honeysuckle and herbs, with undertones of something uniquely feminine.

Heaven, he thought drowsily. I must have died and gone to heaven.

A soft voice drifted through the golden haze of his awareness, melodic and desperate in prayer.

"Please, dinnae let this man die. I ken I've been willful and disobedient, but surely that's no cause to make me a murderess at my tender age.

And it would be such a waste, truly: he seems a good sort of man, even if he is my unwanted betrothed.

The clans would go to war, and all because I cannot control myself when startled. "

Despite the throbbing in his skull, Ewan found his lips twitching with amusement.

"And his poor clan," the voice continued with growing desperation.

"What will become of them? How am I to explain to the cruel Connor MacNeil that I've accidentally murdered his brother with a pipe?

He'll think me a witch, then Clan MacNeil will seek vengeance upon my father.

Who has a bad heart, as ye very well ken. He will no doubt die because of me."

As awareness gradually returned, Ewan became conscious of other sensations: the soft press of a woman's thigh beneath his head, providing the most comfortable pillow he'd ever known.

Silken strands of hair fell across his cheek, and the gentle dabbing of a cool, damp cloth against his forehead brought blessed relief.

The realization struck him like a bolt of lightning.

Good grief , he realized with a start. The daft lass has her bosom pressed against my face.

The thought sent an entirely inappropriate surge of heat through his body. This was hardly the time or place for such reactions, yet he found himself acutely aware of every point of contact between them.

Memory returned like cold water thrown in his face.

This was no angel ministering to him: this was Lileas MacDonald, the woman who had tried to brain him with a copper pipe moments ago.

Yet here she was, cradling his head in her lap with infinite gentleness, her voice thick with genuine concern as she prayed for his recovery.

His eyes snapped open to find himself staring up into a face of genuine concern and startling beauty. Her dark hair had come completely loose and now fell in waves around them both like a silken canopy.

"And he has such bonnie green eyes," she was saying, apparently unaware that those very eyes were now fixed upon her face.

"It would be a shame to close them forever when they've barely had a chance to see the world properly.

Why, I'd wager he's no more than thirty winters, although he does look somewhat haggard and aged. "

"My eyes," Ewan growled, his voice rough with pain, "are working perfectly well, thank ye. And I am only nine and twenty!"

Lileas's reaction was immediate and unfortunate. With a cry of pure joy she leaped to her feet, exclaiming, "Oh, blessed saints, ye're alive! I thought for certain I'd killed ye!"

The sudden removal of his cushion sent Ewan's head crashing back against the stone floor with another sickening thud.

"Bloody hell!" he roared, his vision exploding in stars for the second time in as many minutes.

"Oh no, I've done it again! I'm so very sorry. Here, let me help ye sit up."

She slipped her arms beneath his shoulders and helped him rise to a sitting position against the wall.

Her movements were gentle but efficient, and as she supported his weight, Ewan caught another intoxicating scent and found himself wondering how someone who worked with copper pipes could smell like a summer garden.

"There now," she murmured, her voice soft with contrition. "Just lean back against the wall and try not to move too quickly."

"How many fingers am I holding up?" she asked anxiously, thrusting her hand before his face.

Ewan blinked, focusing on her upraised fingers. They were long and elegant, he noticed, with ink stains. "Two. And if ye make me hit my head again, lass, I swear I'll—"

His threat was cut short by the sound of running footsteps approaching, followed by the cottage door flying open with such force it rattled on its hinges.

A figure burst through the entrance like an avenging angel, her brown habit billowing behind her as she wielded a wicked-looking quarterstaff with the skill and confidence of a seasoned warrior.

"Lileas! I heard a scream," Sister Margaret cried, her eyes quickly assessing the scene before her.

Without hesitation, Sister Margaret spun the staff in a deadly arc above her head, the polished wood whistling through the air. She brought it down in a strike that would have felled an ox, aimed directly at Ewan's already battered skull.

Ewan pushed Lileas out of harm's way then threw himself sideways, rolling across the floor as the quarterstaff whistled through the air where his head had been moments before. The wooden weapon struck the stone wall with enough force to send chips of mortar flying.

Sister Margaret followed through with a spinning movement that brought the staff around in another vicious sweep, this one aimed at his midsection. The nun moved with fluid precision, her brown robes swirling around her as she executed what was clearly a well-practiced series of attacks.

Ewan ducked and scrambled backward, his hands scrabbling for purchase on the stone floor. "By the saints!" he roared, dodging yet another expertly executed strike that would have broken his ribs. "What is the matter with the violent women in this abbey?!"

"Sister, wait!" Lileas scrambled to her feet, placing herself between the advancing warrior nun and the increasingly battered Ewan. "Please, he's not hurt me. Quite the opposite, I fear. I've nearly killed him twice."

Sister Margaret paused and lowered her quarterstaff slightly, though she kept it at the ready. Her eyes never left Ewan's face. "Ye've... what?"

"I hit him with a copper pipe when he startled me," Lileas explained. "I think I may have addled his wits completely."

Ewan touched the tender spot on the back of his head and winced. "My wits are perfectly sound, thank ye. It's my skull that's taken a beating."

Sister Margaret eyed Ewan suspiciously, noting his disheveled state. His dark blonde hair was mussed, his clothing rumpled, and there was definitely a glazed look in his eyes. "And who exactly is this man?"

"Laird Ewan MacNeil," Lileas replied quietly, her cheeks flushing. "My... my betrothed."

The effect of this revelation on Sister Margaret was immediate and dramatic. Her eyebrows shot up skyward and her mouth fell open in surprise.

"This is the MacNeil?" She looked him up and down with obvious astonishment. "The laird ye called a brute and a dunce? This is he?"

Ewan's eyes narrowed dangerously as he turned to glare at Lileas, his jaw clenching with barely suppressed anger. "A brute and a dunce, am I?"

Lileas's face went from pink to scarlet. "I... well... ye see... I may have been... harsh in my judgement..."

"Harsh?" Sister Margaret snorted, apparently forgetting all about propriety. "Lileas, ye've done nothing but complain about yer 'boorish, arrogant betrothed' for months! Just yesterday ye said he was probably too stupid to find his way here even with directions."

The nun's words hung in the air like an accusation, and Lileas felt her mortification reach new heights.

"Sister Margaret!" Lileas hissed, mortified beyond measure. "I said no such thing!"

"Aye, ye did!" Sister Margaret replied with the righteousness of someone defending the truth. "Remember? We were gathering water from the well when ye said ye'd rather wed a muddy pig than—"

"Haud yer wheesht !" Lileas interrupted in a panic. "Sister, I was not talking about Laird MacNeil."

The lie was obvious to everyone present, and the silence that followed was deafening. Ewan's eyes narrowed to dangerous slits as he stared at her. The air in the cottage seemed to crackle with tension, and Lileas found herself taking an involuntary step backward.

Then, very quietly, Ewan growled: a low, rumbling sound that seemed to emanate from deep in his chest and filled the cottage with menace. It was the sound of a predator who had just identified his prey, and it made the hair on the back of Lileas's

neck stand on end.

Sister Margaret looked between them with growing alarm, finally seeming to realize she might have said too much.

The warrior nun who had been prepared to brain a stranger with her weapon suddenly looked like nothing more than a frightened woman who had inadvertently walked into the middle of a lovers' quarrel.

"Perhaps... perhaps I should fetch the abbess?

" she suggested weakly, backing toward the door with her quarterstaff held defensively before her.

"Aye," Ewan said, his voice still carrying that dangerous undertone. "I think that would be wise."

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An hour later, Ewan found himself seated before the great fireplace in the abbey's main hall, a wooden cup of some vile-tasting but effective healing tincture warming his hands.

The brew was bitter as sin and smelled like something that belonged in a stable, but he had to admit it was working.

The throbbing in his head had subsided to a manageable ache, though his pride remained somewhat bruised.

Abbess Bethóc sat across from him in a high-backed chair, her expression carefully neutral as she regarded both him and Lileas. Her gray eyes missed nothing, and Ewan had the uncomfortable feeling that she could see straight through him to his very soul.

Lileas perched on a nearby stool like a bird ready to take flight at the first sign of danger.

She had attempted to repair her appearance, but her hair was still escaping from its braid and there were still traces of charcoal on her fingers.

She kept shooting nervous glances in his direction, as if expecting him to suddenly explode into violence.

Ewan reflected on what had transpired since first meeting his betrothed, and he had to admit he was even more determined to wed the stubborn lass.

If that made him a daft fool, then he would willingly bear the title.

Most men would have cried off by now, claiming insanity on the part of his bride, but for some reason Ewan could not walk away.

Once a MacNeil chose a path, they never looked back.

"Now then," the abbess said, "let us discuss this situation like adults."

"There's nothing to discuss," Ewan replied. He set down his cup with deliberate care, but there was steel in his green eyes. "Lileas and I are betrothed. We will be married, and that's final."

Lileas shot to her feet, her hands clenched at her sides and her eyes flashing with defiance. "Ye cannot simply make demands..."

"I can and I will." Ewan's interruption was sharp and final. He reached into his leather pouch and withdrew a folded parchment sealed with red wax. "Yer father has given me full authority in this matter."

He handed the document to Abbess Bethóc, who broke the seal and read the contents slowly, her eyebrows rising with each line.

"What does it say?" Lileas demanded, though dread was already pooling in her stomach like ice water.

The abbess looked up gravely. "It states that yer father, Laird Duncan MacDonald, gives his complete permission and authority to Ewan MacNeil to wed ye immediately, by whatever means necessary.

He grants full consent for the marriage to proceed without delay, and yer dowry has already been sent to the MacNeils.

" She paused, then added quietly, "He also mentions that the alliance between yer clans is of vital importance to the security of both. "

"No," Lileas whispered, the blood draining from her face. "He wouldn't. Not immediate marriage."

"Aye, he would and he has." Ewan's voice was hard as granite, but he did show some sympathy for her distress.

"I've seen yer work, lass, and I ken why ye ran away.

What ye have done with the still is impressive, no doubt yer contribution has been valuable to the sisters.

But now 'tis time to do yer duty for the sake of both our clans.

Neither one of us has the freedom to escape this marriage when it will bring great benefit to us all.

I've wasted enough time on this folly. Abbess, I require someone to officiate the ceremony.

Tomorrow morn if possible, then we can be on our way. "

"Now wait just a moment..." Lileas began, but Ewan cut her off with a sharp gesture.

"Ye've had three months to come to yer senses, lass.

Three months of hiding when ye should have just come to me with yer concerns.

" He rose from his chair, his imposing height allowing him to tower over her.

"Ye are mine, Lileas, by right of betrothal and yer da's blessing. This marriage will happen."

Lileas found herself taking an involuntary step backward, suddenly aware of just how large and physically imposing the man was.

"While the document does appear to give such authority," Abbess Bethóc interjected carefully, "Lileas is still under the protection of sanctuary. She must consent to leave with ye of her own free will."

Ewan's laugh was short and harsh. "Must she?"

"His eyes never left Lileas's face, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper.

"Tell me, lass, what exactly is yer alternative?"

Hide here forever? Take up the order and spend yer days brewing for the sisters?"

Yer father has made his wishes clear. I've made mine clear.

The only question remaining is whether ye'll be fair minded about this and put the needs of others above yer own. "

Lileas opened her mouth to object, but something in his expression stopped her cold. This was not the man who had shown interest in her work or spoken gently about her fears. This was a Highland laird claiming what was his by right, and the steel in his green eyes brooked no opposition.

"I promise ye this," Ewan continued, his voice softening only slightly. "I will take yer concerns into consideration. But make no mistake: ye will be my wife."

The air in the room seemed to thicken with tension. Lileas looked desperately to the abbess for support, but found only a measured, thoughtful expression that offered no immediate salvation.

"Perhaps," Abbess Bethóc said quietly, "Lileas and I might have a private word?"

Ewan stepped back, though his gaze remained fixed on Lileas with the intensity of a hawk watching a mouse. "Aye. But I'll expect an answer within the hour."

The threat was implicit but clear. His patience, already stretched to its limits, was at an end.

Lileas paled slightly but after a long moment, she gave a small nod. "I... I understand."

As Lileas turned to leave, Ewan called after her. "And lass?" His voice was determined. "Whatever ye've heard about me or my clan, I want ye to ken this: I'll have a mind to yer care. I'll not be a tyrant to ye."

I N THE ABBESS'S PRIVATE chambers, Lileas paced before the narrow window. The room was smaller and more intimate than the main hall, with a simple wooden cross hanging above the narrow bed.

"He cannot simply demand this!" Lileas burst out, whirling to face the abbess with her hands clenched into fists. "Marriage is not a transaction to be completed at a man's whim! I am not cattle to be traded between clans!"

"Is it not?" Abbess Bethóc asked quietly, settling into her chair with practiced calm. "In the eyes of the Church and the law, yer father's consent makes this entirely legal."

Ewan MacNeil has every right to claim ye as his bride."

"But ye said I was under sanctuary. That I must consent," Lileas's voice rose with desperation.

"And so ye must. But child," the abbess's voice grew gentle but firm, "ye cannot remain here indefinitely. This abbey is not a permanent refuge for frightened brides. It is a house of God, meant for those called to serve."

Lileas stopped pacing, her shoulders sagging as the reality of her situation finally sank in. "So I have no choice at all."

Abbess Bethóc rose and moved to stand beside her at the window. "Ye can choose to approach this marriage with wisdom and courage, or ye can let fear rule yer decisions."

Outside the window, the abbey grounds were bathed in the golden light of early evening.

Sisters moved like dark shadows, going about their daily tasks with quiet efficiency.

It was a peaceful scene, one that had brought Lileas comfort for several months.

Now it felt like she was about to be released from a sanctuary into a cage.

"He's so... demanding. So certain he can simply order me about like a servant." Lileas's voice was small now, stripped of its earlier defiance.

"He is a Highland laird, accustomed to having his word obeyed. But I observed him carefully during yer conversation. Did ye notice how he spoke of yer work? He called it impressive. How many men would even acknowledge such things, much less show

real interest?"

Lileas frowned, remembering. It was true that his reaction to her work had been different from what she'd expected. "He did seem... interested, even though I blathered on."

The abbess turned to face her fully, her gray eyes serious and intent. "Child, yer work among us has been of great benefit to the abbey, but perhaps 'tis time ye shared some of yer knowledge with others."

The truth of those words hit Lileas like a physical blow.

She had been so focused on escaping an unwanted marriage that she hadn't considered the larger implications of hiding away from the world.

Her work could benefit others. Perhaps she could even assist the MacNeils.

But only if she was free to share her ideas.

"Ye think I should marry him," she said.

"I think," the abbess said carefully, "that Ewan MacNeil may be the only man of sufficient strength to protect a woman of yer talents.

A weaker man would be threatened by yer abilities.

This one seems intrigued by them. And he still wants to marry ye despite ye almost murdering him with a piece of pipe. "

They both grinned before Lileas sighed and stared out at the cottage where she'd been so happy these past months. "And if he proves false? If he becomes a tyrant?"

"Then ye will find a way to change his mind. Ye are far more persuasive than ye ken." Abbess Bethóc's smile was small but warm, carrying genuine affection.

A soft knock interrupted their conversation, and Sister Margaret peered around the door with obvious reluctance. "Forgive me, Mother Abbess, but the MacNeil is asking if Father Benedict might be summoned from the village. He wishes to ensure everything is ready for the morn."

Lileas's face went white as parchment. "Tomorrow? He really means to marry me so soon?"

"It would seem so," the abbess replied with that same infuriating calm. "And it is a good thing ye have already made yer choice."

The choice, Lileas realized, had never really been hers to make. From the moment her father had signed that betrothal contract, her fate had been sealed. The only real choice was how she would face that fate: with courage or cowardice, with wisdom or fear.

"Aye, I'll do it," she said quietly, her voice steady despite the fear that still gripped her heart. "I'll marry him."

The abbess nodded solemnly, as if she had expected no other answer. "Then let us prepare ye for yer wedding, child. And may God grant ye both the wisdom to find happiness in this union."

As they left the chamber to begin the preparations, Lileas couldn't help but wonder if Ewan MacNeil was a man of his word. Either way, there was no turning back now.

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The morning dawned clear and bright over St. Agnes Abbey, and Ewan stood at the window of the guest chamber gazing at the blue sky.

She had said yes. After months of rejection, humiliation, and wondering if he would ever see this day, Lileas MacDonald had agreed to become his wife. The relief that flooded Ewan was so profound it left him weak-kneed.

He had barely slept, his mind replaying the moment when she had finally nodded her acceptance. That gave him hope for their future.

A soft knock at his door interrupted his thoughts, and Grant entered carrying a basin of steaming water and clean drying cloths.

"Time to make yerself presentable for yer bride, laird," Grant said, setting down the basin. "The good sisters have been bustling about since before dawn, preparing everything for the ceremony, and Patrick is readying the horses so we can leave soon afterwards."

Ewan nodded his thanks and moved away from the window. "Have ye seen her?"

"Aye, I caught a glimpse of yer betrothed in the garden with Sister Margaret." Grant's expression grew more serious. "Are ye certain about this, laird? Taking a wife who ran from ye once?"

"I'm certain," Ewan said without hesitation, beginning to wash with the thoroughness of a man preparing for the most important day of his life. "Whatever drove her to flee before, we'll work through it."

I N HER OWN CHAMBER across the abbey, Lileas stood perfectly still while Sister Margaret and two other nuns fussed over her appearance.

"Hold still," Sister Margaret said, working carefully to braid flowers into Lileas's freshly washed hair. "Ye'll be the most beautiful bride St. Agnes has ever seen."

"That's not saying much, considering how few weddings take place here," Lileas replied, trying to inject some humor into her voice despite the nervousness that made her hands shake slightly.

Abbess Bethóc, who had been quietly supervising the preparations, moved closer and took Lileas's hands in her own. "Are ye certain, my dear? Once the vows are spoken, there will be no turning back."

Lileas met the older woman's eyes steadily, drawing strength from the wisdom and compassion she found there. "I'm certain."

"Then ye have a solid foundation to build upon," the abbess said with a smile. "Many marriages have flourished from far less promising beginnings."

Sister Margaret stepped back to admire her handiwork. "There. Ye look presentable."

Lileas turned to examine herself in the small mirror the sisters had provided, and caught her breath at the transformation.

The sisters had drawn her a bath earlier that morning, and she had been allowed the luxury of steaming hot water and fine soap scented with lavender and rosemary.

Breathing in the lingering scent helped calm the butterflies in her stomach.

Her dark hair had been woven with white flowers and ribbons, and the dress the sisters had found for her was simple but beautiful, made of soft blue wool that brought out the color of her eyes.

"I look and feel... different," she said softly, barely recognizing the woman in the mirror.

"Ye look like a bride," Abbess Bethóc corrected gently. "Now come. Yer groom is waiting."

THE ABBEY'S SMALL CHAPEL had been transformed for the occasion. Candles flickered, casting dancing shadows on the ancient stone walls, and the sisters had gathered wildflowers from the gardens, creating simple but beautiful arrangements.

Ewan stood at the altar beside Father Benedict, the elderly priest who had been summoned from the village.

He wore his finest doublet, made of deep green wool that matched his eyes, with his clan plaid displayed proudly across his chest. Grant flanked him, both men wearing expressions of solemn dignity.

When the chapel door opened and Lileas appeared, escorted by Abbess Bethóc, Ewan felt his breath catch in his throat.

She was more beautiful than he had ever imagined she could be, but it was more than just her appearance that struck him.

There was a quiet dignity in the way she carried herself, a calm acceptance that she would stand by her decision.

When Lileas reached him, her eyes met Ewan's and held. He saw nervousness there, yes, but also trust. The knowledge that she was placing her future in his hands, despite everything that had passed between them, humbled him.

Father Benedict began the ceremony that would bind them both for eternity.

When the time came for them to exchange vows, he spoke the ancient promises with a sincerity that surprised him.

"I, Ewan MacNeil, forsaking all others, take thee, Lileas MacDonald, to wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, to protect and cherish, till death us do part."

When Lileas spoke her own vows, her voice was clear and steady. "I, Lileas MacDonald, take thee, Ewan MacNeil, to husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, to cherish, and to obey, till death us do part."

The word 'obey' stuck slightly in her throat, but she forced it out, even as she silently vowed to herself that any obedience would have to be earned through respect and understanding.

Father Benedict blessed their union and pronounced them married.

Ewan turned to face his new wife, seeing the slight flush that colored her cheeks. Very gently, he reached up to cup her face in his hands.

"My lady wife," he said quietly, for her ears alone.

"My lord husband," she replied, the words feeling strange on her tongue but not unpleasant.

He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers in a kiss that was chaste and gentle,

lasting only a few heartbeats but carrying the weight of promises and possibilities. When they parted, Lileas's eyes were bright with wonder.

The small gathering erupted in congratulations and blessings.

THE WEDDING REPAST was held in the abbey's refectory, a simple meal that the sisters had prepared with obvious care. There was fresh bread still warm from the ovens, roasted fowl with herbs from the garden, and bottles of the abbey's finest wine.

Lileas found herself seated beside her new husband, acutely aware of his presence in ways that were both thrilling and terrifying. Every time his hand brushed hers as they reached for food, every time he leaned close to speak quietly in her ear, she felt a jolt of awareness.

"The sisters have outdone themselves," Ewan said, raising his cup in a toast to their hosts.

"They are dear women," Lileas agreed, watching with affection as Sister Margaret bustled about ensuring everyone had enough to eat. "They've been so kind to me these past months."

"Ye'll miss them," Ewan observed, and there was understanding in his voice rather than criticism.

"Aye, I will. But..." She paused, then looked at him directly. "I'm ready to see what lies beyond these walls."

"Then I look forward to showing ye."

As the meal progressed, Lileas found herself relaxing in his company. He was intelligent and well-spoken, with a dry sense of humor that matched her own.

T HE TIME CAME TO DEPART far too soon for Lileas's comfort. Sister Margaret had helped her pack what few possessions she had at the abbey, but it was a pitifully small collection compared to the workshop she had left behind at her father's keep.

"I hate leaving with so little," she confessed to Ewan as they prepared to mount their horses. "All my notes, my drawings, my equipment... it's all at MacDonald Keep."

"We'll manage," he assured her, helping her mount the gentle mare the abbey had provided for her use.

As they prepared to ride away from the abbey that had been her sanctuary for three months, Lileas felt a pang of loss that was sharper than she had expected.

"Thank ye," she said to Abbess Bethóc, who had come to see them off. "For everything."

"May God bless ye, lass," the abbess replied.

Ewan also thanked the abbess for her hospitality and slipped her a heavy pouch of coins. The abbess accepted it with grace and wished them well.

As their small party rode away from the abbey, Ewan noticed the thoughtful silence that had settled over his new wife. "Regretting yer decision?" he asked gently.

"No," she said after a moment. "Just... thinking about what comes next."

They had been riding for several hours when Ewan called a halt to rest the horses. As they sat beside a small stream, sharing bread and cheese that the sisters had packed for their journey, Ewan noticed the nervous tension that had been building in Lileas's posture.

"Lileas," he said quietly, moving to sit beside her on a fallen log. "I want ye to ken something."

She looked at him expectantly, her hands fidgeting with her skirts.

"I will not... that is, I have no intention of claiming my husbandly rights until we are properly settled in my keep. In our bed." His voice was gentle but firm. "Ye need have no fear about the coming nights on the road."

The relief that flooded her features was immediate and obvious, followed quickly by a blush that spread from her cheeks down to the neckline of her dress. "I... thank ye. That is... considerate of ye."

"Moreover," he continued, wanting to be completely clear, "We will not consummate the marriage until ye ask me to."

The blush deepened, but she met his eyes directly. "Ye would wait for me to ask?"

"I would wait as long as necessary," he said simply. "Marriage vows spoken in haste and fear are one thing. The intimacy between husband and wife should be something else entirely."

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Then Lileas said softly, "Ye're not what I expected."

"Nor are ye, lass. Nor are ye."

A S THEY RESUMED THEIR journey, the atmosphere between them had shifted subtly.

The formal politeness of new acquaintances was gradually giving way to something warmer, more natural.

Ewan rode beside her when the path allowed, pointing out landmarks and telling her stories about the history of the region.

Patrick, riding slightly ahead of them, proved to be a cheerful companion. "Ye'll like it there, mistress," he assured her. "The keep is old but well-maintained, and the views from the towers are the finest in all of Alba. On a clear day, ye can see for miles."

"And what of the people?" Lileas asked. "Will they welcome a MacDonald bride?"

Patrick's enthusiasm dimmed slightly, and he glanced back at Grant, who had been riding in pointed silence since they left the abbey.

Grant, seeing the look, urged his horse closer to theirs.

"Our laird is a good man," he said without preamble, his face serious.

"He has sacrificed much for us all, and ye paid him a slight by refusing to marry.

So ye'll not be in all their graces yet, mistress.

For that reason alone, some may snub ye. "

"Grant," Ewan's voice carried a warning, but the man continued.

"I dinnae mean to cause offense," Lileas said carefully, her cheeks coloring with embarrassment. "But I also had a life in my clan. I did not want to give it up without understanding what I would be gaining in return."

"Be that as it may, ye left him high and dry when he needed ye most. There's much work ye need to do to mend those fences with our people."

Lileas straightened in her saddle, meeting his challenging gaze directly. "Then I'll do it. Whatever it takes to earn their respect, I'll do it."

"See that ye do," Grant said with a grudging nod of approval. "Our laird deserves a wife who'll stand by him, not one who runs at the first sign of trouble."

"Enough, Grant," Ewan said sharply, his eyes flashing with anger. "My wife has made her choice and spoken her vows. She deserves yer respect."

Grant nodded, but his expression remained doubtful. Lileas appreciated Ewan's defense of her, but she also understood that Grant's concerns were not entirely unfounded. She would indeed have much to prove to her new clan.

As the day wore on, Lileas found herself studying her new husband when she thought he wasn't looking. He sat his horse with the easy grace of a born rider, and there was something about his profile that made her pulse quicken in ways she didn't want to examine too closely.

When he caught her looking, he would smile, and she would feel that strange flutter in her stomach that had everything to do with a growing awareness of him as a man rather than simply an unwanted obligation.

HIDDEN AMONG THE ROCKS and bracken, a small group of men tracked their progress.

"There she is," murmured Dugald Ferguson to his companions, his eyes fixed on the small figure riding beside the MacNeil laird. "The clever lass who can brew liquid gold. Our laird will be well pleased when we bring her to him."

"She's married now," pointed out one of his men uneasily. "Taking her will mean war with the MacNeils."

"Let MacNeil weep for his bride," Dugald replied callously. "Our laird has greater need of her skills. Besides, what's one more feud in the Highlands?"

They withdrew deeper into the hills, following the small party at a distance, waiting for the right moment to make their move. The Ferguson clan had been watching and waiting for weeks, ever since word had reached them of the brewster responsible for the abbey's increased production.

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As evening approached and they made camp for the night, Lileas noticed Patrick hunched over the cooking pot with the determined expression of a man doing battle with forces beyond his understanding.

"Sweet Mary," she muttered under her breath as she caught sight of whatever unholy concoction was bubbling in the iron vessel. The mixture resembled nothing so much as what might result if someone had attempted to make porridge from tree bark and regret.

"Patrick," she called out, approaching cautiously. "What exactly are ye preparing there?"

The burly Scotsman looked up with obvious relief. "Och, mistress, 'tis meant to be a stew, but I fear it's gone a bit..." He gestured helplessly at the pot, where something gray and lumpy was doing its best impression of mortar.

Grant, who had been gathering firewood nearby, peered over Lileas's shoulder into the pot. "God's blood, Patrick, what did ye do to it?"

Lileas peered into the pot and immediately regretted it. "This looks like it could be used to patch the castle walls."

"Aye," Grant added cheerfully, "or perhaps as weapon against our enemies. One whiff of that and they'd flee for the hills."

"Aye, well," Patrick scratched his beard sheepishly. "At least I try to cook, which is more than can be said for some who just scratch their arse and do nothing."

Lileas couldn't help but grin at that quip.

Grant replied, "At least I can ken me arse from me face."

Patrick turned as if he was ready to clobber Grant, so Lileas intervened.

"Perhaps," Lileas said, pulling a small leather pouch from her traveling pack, "ye just need to work on the natural humors of food."

Patrick blinked. "The what now?"

"Move aside, warrior," she said with surprising authority. "The sisters at the abbey taught me that all foods contain the four humors: hot, cold, wet, and dry. Yer mistake lies in creating a balance so poor that even the devil himself would turn away from this pot."

She began pulling small cloth packets from her pouch, each tied with string and labeled in her careful script. "Thyme, sage, and fennel... These will help bring the dish back into balance."

"I dinnae ken all this talk of humors," Patrick grumbled, but he stepped aside, watching with fascination as she began to work.

"Of course ye dinnae ken it. Ye cook like a berserker." Lileas tested the mixture with a wooden spoon and smiled. "That's better. Now for a pinch of salt."

She set to work with practiced efficiency, adding pinches of herbs while muttering to herself. The transformation was remarkable, both in the pot and in Patrick's expression as he watched his culinary disaster slowly become something that smelled... edible.

"There," Lileas announced with satisfaction. "The humors are balanced and the devil is banished."

Patrick leaned over the pot and inhaled deeply. "By Saint Andrew's bones, that actually smells like food!"

"Try not to sound so surprised," Lileas said tartly, but she was fighting a smile.

It was at that moment Ewan returned from seeing to the horses, following his nose toward what he expected to be Patrick's usual attempt at sustenance. Instead, he found his wife standing over the cooking pot while Patrick looked on with something approaching worship.

"What sorcery is this?" Ewan asked, breathing in the savory aroma. "Patrick, have ye finally learned to cook?"

"Yer lady wife has informed me that I've been lacking... what was it again?"

"The natural humors of food," Lileas supplied helpfully.

Ewan raised an eyebrow. "Ah. Of course. How foolish of ye to ignore the natural humors, Patrick."

"Exactly what I told him," Lileas said primly, ladling the stew into wooden bowls.

When Ewan tasted his portion, he groaned with such evident pleasure that Lileas felt a warm flush of pride. "Patrick," he said solemnly, "Ye are never to cook ever again."

"Och, I'll not argue with that," Patrick laughed.

Grant agreed as the men devoured their food in silence. Lileas smiled as they praised

her cooking.

"Wife," Ewan said quietly, setting down his empty bowl and turning to face her. "I thank ye for this meal." Without warning, he leaned over and pressed a gentle kiss to her lips.

The sudden tenderness of it caught Lileas completely off guard. Her cheeks blazed crimson, and she felt something flutter in her chest like a bird taking wing.

"Ye are welcome, husband," she stammered, which only made her blush deepen.

Ewan smiled at her obvious flustering, and his expression softened.

For the first time since this marriage had been arranged, Lileas felt like perhaps—just perhaps—she was exactly where she belonged.

AS THE LAST EMBERS of the cooking fire settled into glowing coals, Ewan rose and extended his hand to Lileas. "Come," he said quietly. "There's a stream nearby where ye can refresh yerself before we rest."

Lileas accepted his hand, grateful for his thoughtfulness. They walked in comfortable silence, their hands entwined, until they emerged into a small clearing where a narrow burn tumbled over smooth stones, creating a natural pool edged with moss and ferns.

"The water will be cold," Ewan warned, "but clean. I'll stand watch while ye..." He gestured vaguely toward the stream, then turned his back to give her privacy and walked a few yards away.

"Thank ye," Lileas said softly. She stripped down to her shift and set about washing as best she could with a cloth. The burn was indeed cold, but refreshing after the day's ride. When she was finished, she dried herself and changed into a long woollen tunic.

"Yer turn, husband," she called out quietly.

Ewan approached the water's edge while Lileas turned away to study the star-scattered sky emerging overhead.

She could hear clothing being removed and then the splash of water as he washed.

For a fleeting moment she wondered what he looked like naked, then mentally slapped herself for such errant thoughts.

"Ready?" his voice came from behind her, warm with something that might have been affection.

Startled, she blushed and stammered, "Aye." But not before he caught her gazing at his naked chest, wrapped only in his plaid.

Ewan returned a wicked grin before clasping her hand and leading her back to camp.

When they returned, Lileas noticed that Grant and Patrick had made themselves busy with checking the horses. Near the dying fire, a sleeping area had been prepared: Ewan's travel pallet spread with additional blankets and furs, positioned by the fire with the shelter of a large boulder.

"Grant, Patrick," Ewan said quietly, "I'll take the dawn watch."

"Aye, laird," Grant replied, not quite meeting anyone's eyes. "We'll keep vigil

through the night."

The two men melted away into the darkness beyond the firelight, leaving Ewan and Lileas alone beside their makeshift shelter. For a moment, they stood in awkward silence, the reality of their wedding night—such as it was—settling between them.

"The pallet is large enough for two," Ewan said finally, his voice carefully neutral. "But if ye'd prefer, I can make another bed by the fire."

Lileas looked at the inviting pile of blankets and furs, then at her husband's face in the firelight. She saw no demand there, no expectation, only an offer of warmth against the cold.

"I... I think I would like to share," she said quietly, surprised by her own boldness. "If ye dinnae mind."

Ewan's smile was soft and genuine. "I dinnae mind at all, wife."

He helped her settle onto the pallet, then arranged the heavy woolen blankets and his own clan plaid around them both. When he lay down beside her, Lileas felt a moment of shy uncertainty, but the dropping temperature and Ewan's solid warmth beside her was undeniably welcome.

"Come here," he murmured, opening his arms in invitation. "Ye're shivering."

Indeed she was, though she wasn't entirely certain the cold was to blame.

Still, when Ewan gathered her close against his chest, wrapping his strong arms around her and pulling the plaid snugly around them both, she felt her tension melt away.

His warmth enveloped her, and despite her nervousness about their strange new intimacy, exhaustion was quickly winning the battle for her attention.

"Better?" he asked softly, his breath stirring the hair at her temple.

"Much," she admitted, allowing herself to relax fully against him.

She could feel the steady rhythm of his heartbeat beneath her cheek, could smell the clean scent of him mixed with woodsmoke and Highland air.

It was unexpectedly comforting, this closeness with a man who was still largely a stranger yet was now her husband.

They lay quietly for a while, listening to the soft sounds of the night and the distant murmur of Grant and Patrick's voices. Gradually, Lileas felt herself growing drowsy, lulled by Ewan's steady breathing and the secure circle of his arms.

"Lileas," he said quietly, and she made a soft questioning sound. "Thank ye for marrying me."

She tilted her head to look at him in the dim firelight. "Thank ye for being patient with me."

Ewan's hand came up to stroke her hair with surprising gentleness. "We'll make this work, love. I give ye my word."

"I believe ye," she whispered, and meant it.

He pressed a tender kiss to her forehead, his lips warm against her skin. "Sleep now, Lil," he murmured, the nickname falling naturally from his lips for the first time.

The unexpected endearment sent a flutter of warmth through her chest. "Lil?" she asked softly, smiling.

"Aye," he said, and she could hear the smile in his voice. "Lileas is a lovely name, but perhaps too formal for a husband to use with his wife under the stars."

"I like it," she admitted, snuggling closer to his warmth.

"Good night, then, Lil."

"Good night, Ewan."

As she drifted toward sleep in the circle of his arms, Lileas marveled at how right this felt. They were still learning each other, still finding their way, but tonight they were not just two strangers bound by political necessity, but a man and woman choosing to trust each other.

It was, she thought drowsily, a very good beginning indeed.

That night Ewan and Lileas slept more peacefully than they had in months.

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The third and final night of their journey found them camped along the rugged coastline that marked the outer boundaries of MacNeil territory.

The keep was now less than a day's ride inland, but Ewan had chosen to make their final camp here beside the sea, wanting to give Lileas one last peaceful night before the responsibilities of being lady of the keep began in earnest.

"It's beautiful," Lileas breathed, watching the waves crash against the rocky shore in endless rhythm.

"Aye," Ewan agreed, standing close behind her as they watched the sun sink toward the western waters. "This has always been one of my favorite places. I wanted ye to see it before we reach the keep."

Patrick and Grant had built their fire in the shelter of a small cave that faced away from the wind, and their sleeping area was arranged just outside the cave mouth where they could enjoy the sound of the waves while remaining sheltered.

As they settled down for the night, wrapped once again in Ewan's plaid and sharing the warmth of their bodies, Lileas reflected on how much had changed in just three days.

The shy uncertainty of their first night seemed like a distant memory now.

She nestled against Ewan's chest with easy familiarity, her head tucked beneath his chin as his arms encircled her.

"Tomorrow we'll be home," he murmured against her hair, his voice carrying both anticipation and something that might have been nervousness.

"Are ye worried about how yer clan will receive me?" she asked softly.

"Nay," he said firmly. "They'll accept ye because I said so."

She smirked. "Aye, and yer word is law?"

"Always," he replied with a grin.

They drifted off to sleep lulled by the eternal song of the sea.

D A W N WAS brEAKING GRAY and cold over the water when the attack came.

Lileas was jolted awake by an almighty roar of rage.

Ewan's voice raised in a battle cry that seemed to shake the very stones around them.

Her eyes snapped open to find him already on his feet, sword in hand, facing half a dozen mounted figures who had approached their camp in the pre-dawn darkness.

"Fergusons!" he bellowed, his voice carrying a fury that made her blood run cold.

"Ye dare much, coming onto my lands!"

The lead rider, a giant of a man with cold, calculating eyes, laughed harshly. "Yer lands for now, MacNeil. But we've come for what should belong with our clan."

"She's wasted here!" another Ferguson fighter called out. "Her skills would be better

served among those who truly understand their value!"

Patrick and Grant were moving even as the words were spoken, their weapons appearing in their hands with the fluid grace of seasoned warriors. But they were outnumbered two to one, and the Fergusons had positioned themselves to cut off retreat.

"Lileas!" Ewan shouted without taking his eyes off the enemy. "The cave. Run to the cave and hide!"

But even as he spoke, the Ferguson raiders spurred their horses forward with wild Highland war cries, their weapons gleaming wickedly in the growing light. Steel rang against steel as Ewan met the first attacker's charge.

"Go!" he commanded, parrying another thrust while Grant and Patrick engaged their own opponents with deadly efficiency.

Lileas scrambled toward the cave mouth, but instead of fleeing to its depths, her mind was already working with methodical precision.

Near the dying embers of their fire, she spotted what she needed: a thick layer of wood ash mixed with sand and salt from the beach, along with the remains of the charcoal they'd used for cooking.

Working with desperate efficiency, Lileas tore strips from her garment then packed the cloth with the ash mixture and several sharp stones. Using leather cords from their gear, she fashioned makeshift slings, crude but effective weapons.

The sound of battle was growing more desperate. Ewan was fighting like a man possessed, his fury at the threat to his wife driving him onwards. But the Fergusons were skilled fighters who had clearly planned this attack carefully.

The leader pressed forward with obvious intent to reach Lileas while his men kept her protectors busy. "Take the lass!" he bellowed to his nearest companion. "She's worth more than gold!"

"Aye, Dugald!" another Ferguson fighter called back, parrying a thrust from Patrick's sword. "The laird will reward us well!"

The words chilled Ewan to the bone even as he fought desperately against two attackers. These men didn't want ransom or simple plunder: they wanted Lileas herself.

Amidst the chaos of battle, Lileas lit the first of her improvised weapons with a glowing ember and began to whirl it overhead, aiming for the men.

The burning bundle struck the nearest man square in the chest, exploding in a shower of sparks and hot ash that sent man and mount into screaming panic.

The effect was immediate. Confusion reigned as their attackers struggled to control their horses. Lileas rapidly filled another sling, lit it, and sent its burden hurtling towards the startled men.

"Witchcraft!" one of them shouted, struggling to control his panicked horse. "The lass commands fire itself! Take her quickly!"

But the tide of battle was already turning. The explosion of ash and flame had scattered the Ferguson formation, giving Grant and Patrick the opening they needed to press their advantage.

It was then that the thunder of hoofbeats echoed from inland. A party of MacNeil warriors led by a guardsman named Cameron came riding hard across the packed earth, having spotted the Ferguson riders crossing their borders at dawn.

"MacNeil!" they shouted, their battle cry carrying the fury of men defending their own land.

The scarred Ferguson leader—Dugald—saw the approaching reinforcements and knew his chance was slipping away. With his men scattered and wounded, retreat was the only option.

"This isn't finished, MacNeil!" he snarled, backing toward where his surviving men were trying to rally. "We will have her!"

"Set foot on my lands again and I'll kill every last one of ye!" Ewan roared, his voice carrying the promise of death. "Any man who threatens my wife answers to my steel!"

The Fergusons were already in retreat, their wounded leader helping to lift injured men onto their mounts as the MacNeil reinforcements closed in, driving the Fergusons off their land and into the forest beyond.

Even so, Dugald's voice could be heard shouting, "This won't be forgotten, MacNeil! She's worth more than ye ken!"

The words sent a chill through Ewan. He turned and stormed towards Lileas, his gaze unwavering. She dropped the sling just as he enveloped her in his arms and kissed her like a man possessed. "Are ye hurt, love?" he rasped, quickly looking her over.

Lileas shook her head. "I am well."

Then he stepped away and roared, "When I say run and hide, ye run and hide! Ye dinnae dive head first into battle throwing flaming dirt about the place. Ye could've been hurt or taken!"

Lileas's spine immediately stiffened and she bellowed in return, "I was not about to let them hurt ye, ye stubborn ox!"

I kenned what to do and I did it." She was glaring at him now with her hands on her hips in such righteous anger that she yelped in surprise when Ewan reached across, pulled her into his arms, and slammed his lips over hers again.

What followed was a passionately fierce embrace as they battled for supremacy, completely forgetting they had an audience.

They were interrupted by Cameron who cleared his throat several times to get his laird's attention. Eventually they separated, panting deeply as if they'd run several miles. But Ewan clasped Lileas's hand tightly in his and drew her close to his side.

"Laird, we've secured the area. I've sent men to make sure they dinnae return."

"Aye, thank ye!" Ewan replied as he tried to shake the passionate haze. "I want a full patrol of our borders. Every approach, every glen, every path the bastards might use. If they're still on MacNeil land, I want them found and driven off."

"Aye, consider it done," Cameron replied.

"And send riders ahead to the keep," Ewan continued. "I want the gates secured and the watch doubled. No one enters or leaves without my personal permission."

Grant and Patrick exchanged glances at their laird's intensity, but they moved quickly to follow his orders. They had never seen Ewan like this, the controlled, charismatic leader replaced by a man whose protective instincts had been unleashed.

"Husband," Lileas said quietly, placing her hand over his. "We're safe now. The Fergusons are gone."

"For now," he replied grimly, his eyes still scanning the horizon. "But they'll be back, Lil. And next time they'll come with more men, better planning. They made it clear they want ye specifically."

"Then we'll be ready for them," she said firmly.

Ewan's expression softened slightly as he looked at her, but the underlying tension remained. "Aye. But not like this, caught in the open. Once we're behind the walls of the keep, I can better protect ye."

As they prepared to resume their journey, now with a full escort of Cameron's men, Ewan continued issuing orders with military precision. The relaxed, tender husband of the past three nights had been replaced by a Highland chief who saw enemies in every shadow.

"Laird," Cameron said carefully as they mounted their horses, "a warning. Yer brother Connor will need to be briefed. He has not been in the best mood of late."

"Connor will do as I command," Ewan cut him off. "The keep will be locked down completely. No one travels alone, especially the women. Especially my wife."

Lileas made to fetch her mare, but Ewan pulled her once again to his side.

"Ye ride with me from now on, wife." No sooner were those words spoken than Lileas was hoisted onto his destrier.

Ewan sat behind her and pulled her back against his front, holding the reins and keeping her firmly in place before he commanded them all to ride.

The journey to MacNeil Keep passed in tense silence, with Ewan constantly scanning their surroundings as his men fanned out, forming a protective barrier on all sides to

protect Lileas. Every shadow was a potential threat, every movement in the distance a possible enemy.

As the massive walls of MacNeil Keep finally came into view, Lileas felt Ewan relax slightly behind her. Soon they would be behind walls that could withstand a siege, surrounded by his own men, in the heart of MacNeil power.

But she also realized that this ordeal had changed something fundamental between them.

The gentle courtship of their journey was over, replaced by a bond forged in danger and tested by fire.

They were no longer just husband and wife by arrangement—they were partners who had fought for each other, who had proven their willingness to risk everything to protect what they were building together.

As the keep's gates came into view, Lileas suspected that the real test of their marriage was just beginning.

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MacNeil Castle rose before them like a mountain of hewn stone, its massive walls and towers speaking of warfare and the need for constant vigilance. As they approached the gates, Lileas could see armed men on the walls, their weapons gleaming in the afternoon sun.

The gates stood wide open, and there was an unusual amount of activity in the courtyard. Word of their arrival seemed to have preceded them, and people were streaming out of various buildings to catch sight of their returning laird.

"Looks like word of the attack has reached them," Grant observed, noting the excited buzz of conversation that rose from the assembled crowd.

"Aye," Ewan replied grimly, his arm tightening protectively around Lileas as they rode through the gates. "And knowing my brother, he'll have heard every detail twice over by now."

As they passed through the massive gates and entered the main courtyard, servants and clan members alike pressed forward to get a better look at their laird.

"My laird!" called out several voices at once. "Thank the saints ye're safe!"

"Is it true the Fergusons tried to take yer lady wife?"

"How many of the bastards did ye kill?"

Ewan dismounted first, then immediately reached up to help Lileas down, his hands lingering at her waist in a gesture that spoke of both protection and possession.

Before Ewan could respond to any of the questions from the crowd, the keep's main doors burst open with enough force to rattle the iron hinges. Connor MacNeil stormed out with his characteristic thunderous expression, his dark hair disheveled and his clothes bearing evidence of recent outdoor work.

"About bloody time!" Connor shouted, his voice carrying across the entire courtyard and effectively silencing the excited chatter. "Do ye have any idea what I've been dealing with while ye were off getting yerself attacked by Ferguson scum?"

Connor was two years younger than Ewan but shared the same strong features, though where Ewan commanded through charisma, Connor ruled through sheer intimidation and barely contained fury at the world in general.

"Brother," Ewan began, but Connor cut him off with a sharp gesture.

"Dinnae 'brother' me," Connor snarled. "I've just spent the morning trying to stop Kenneth and Douglas from killing each other over a prize bull, the kitchen staff are at each other's throats over who used the last of the good flour, and half the clan has been pestering me about decisions I dinnae care about! "

He paused to take a breath, his chest heaving with the effort of controlling his legendary temper.

"I hate making decisions for other people.

I hate having them come to me with their problems, and I especially hate that ye left me in charge of this madhouse while ye went gallivanting off to an abbey! "

"The attack—" Ewan tried to interject.

"Aye, I heard about the attack!" Connor snapped. "I've already started doubling the

watch, but ye need to make it official before someone gets themselves killed."

Ewan nodded, impressed despite himself by his brother's quick thinking. "Good. What else?"

"What else?" Connor's laugh was harsh and bitter. "The blacksmith's apprentice set fire to the forge yesterday, the bridge over MacBride's Stream needs repair before someone gets killed crossing it, and—"

He stopped mid-sentence, his dark eyes finally focusing on the woman standing close beside his brother. Very close, in fact. Ewan's arm was around her waist in a possessive gesture that was both protective and intimate, and she was leaning into his side as if she belonged there.

Connor's scowl deepened as he took in her travel-stained dress, her windblown hair, and the way she looked at Ewan with obvious trust and affection.

"And who might ye be, lass?" Connor asked, his voice dropping to the dangerously quiet tone that had made grown men reconsider their life choices. "Dinnae tell me ye're the troublesome MacDonald wench that took my brother away from his clan and forced me into the worst weeks of my life?"

Lileas straightened under his baleful glare, her chin lifting with stubborn pride.

After facing Ferguson raiders, one surly brother-in-law hardly seemed worth backing down from.

She opened her mouth to respond, probably with something that would have made the situation considerably worse, when the keep's main doors opened again.

"Connor MacNeil!" The voice was feminine, melodious, and carried the particular

tone of a woman who was thoroughly exasperated. "Where are yer manners?"

A small whirlwind of energy burst from the doorway. She barely reached Connor's shoulder, with auburn hair that caught the afternoon light and bright green eyes that sparked with intelligence and humor.

Without ceremony, she planted both hands against Connor's broad chest and pushed him aside as if he were no more substantial than a wayward child. "Out of my way, ye grumpy dragon. Can ye not see the poor woman is exhausted from travel and probably half-frightened by yer scowling face?"

Connor grunted but allowed himself to be moved, though his scowl never wavered.

Instead of protesting the woman's high-handed treatment, he wrapped one large arm around her waist and pulled her back against his front, where she fit as perfectly as if she had been made for that exact purpose.

As he did, Lileas noticed the slight curve of Fiona's belly that spoke of a baby on the way, and Connor's large hand moved protectively to cover it in an unconsciously tender gesture.

He continued to glower at the world in general, but Lileas noted his hold on the woman was gentle, almost reverent.

The woman, for her part, seemed completely unimpressed by Connor's fearsome reputation. She ignored his possessive hold entirely, focusing her attention on Lileas with a warm smile.

"Ye must be Lileas," she said, her voice carrying genuine pleasure and relief. "Thank goodness ye've finally come home safely. I'm Fiona, Connor's wife, and I cannot tell ye how happy I am to meet ye at last. When we heard about the Ferguson attack, I

feared the worst."

Lileas found herself staring at the woman who had just treated the legendary Connor MacNeil like an unruly pup, then at the man himself, who was glowering at everyone present while simultaneously holding his wife as if she were made of spun glass.

"Ye're Connor MacNeil?" Lileas asked, unable to keep the surprise out of her voice. "I had heard... that is, yer reputation..."

"Aye," Connor replied curtly, his arm tightening protectively around Fiona. "The same Connor who's been running yer husband's keep while he was off collecting ye. And let me tell ye, lass, it's been no pleasure."

"Connor," Fiona snapped warningly, though she made no move to escape his possessive hold. "Be nice."

Connor grunted again, but subsided into sullen silence, apparently willing to endure his wife's scolding as long as she remained within arm's reach.

"I apologize for my husband's manners," Fiona continued, rolling her eyes at Connor's behavior. "He's been impossible to live with since Ewan left, and dealing with clan matters always makes him even more disagreeable than usual."

"I heard that," Connor muttered darkly.

"Ye were meant to," Fiona replied sweetly, patting his arm with absent affection. "Now then, Lileas, ye must be tired and hungry after such an ordeal. Let's get ye settled in yer chambers."

"Aye, but from now on ye will both have guards keeping watch over ye at all times," Ewan interrupted, his voice carrying the authority of a laird taking charge of his

domain.

Both women looked as if they were about to object, but Connor gestured to two of Cameron's men who nodded and followed the women.

Once they were gone, the men retreated indoors to the council room to discuss matters privately.

Connor's expression grew even more grim. "What exactly do the Fergusons want with yer wife?"

"She's highly skilled in making uisge beatha ," Ewan replied grimly.

Connor raised a brow. "And from what I hear, she can also rain fire from the sky?"

"Aye, her mind is very sharp. Any clan would be lucky to have her."

"And what of ye, brother. Do ye feel lucky to have her?"

"I'll kill any man who tries to take her from me."

"Then we best guard her well."

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The sun was beginning to set behind the Highland peaks as Lileas found herself standing in what would be her chambers.

The room was larger than she had expected, with tall windows that offered a sweeping view of the loch beyond the keep's walls.

A fire crackled cheerfully in the stone hearth, casting dancing shadows across tapestries that depicted scenes of Highland history.

Fiona bustled about the chamber, directing the servants who were bringing in heated water, linens, and a tray of food and drink. Connor's wife commanded immediate obedience from the household staff, who seemed genuinely fond of her.

"I hope this will suit ye," Fiona said, smoothing the coverlet on the large bed. "These have been the lady's chambers for generations of MacNeil wives."

"It's beautiful," Lileas said honestly, running her fingers along the carved wooden headboard. "Far grander than anything I had at my father's keep."

"Ewan wanted ye to have the finest chambers in the keep," Fiona continued, a knowing smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

Before Lileas could respond, a soft knock at the door interrupted them.

A woman entered, perhaps sixty years old, with silver-streaked hair neatly braided and kind eyes.

She wore a simple but well-made dress, and her hands bore the telltale stains of someone who worked regularly with herbs and healing compounds.

"Morna!" Fiona exclaimed with obvious delight. "I was hoping ye'd come to meet Lileas properly."

The older woman stepped forward with a warm smile. "Aye, I had to see for myself the lass who finally captured my lad's heart."

"Yer lad?" Lileas asked, confused.

"Morna raised Ewan and Connor after their parents died," Fiona explained gently. "She's been more of a mother to them than anyone else. She's also our healer and has a cottage just beyond the main keep."

Morna studied Lileas with eyes that seemed to look straight through to her soul, and her smile grew even brighter.

"I kenned ye'd be good for my lad. Ye made him work for it, which is a good thing.

Ewan has always needed a challenge, and no lass has ever made him chase her down.

" She paused, noting the slight tightening around Lileas's eyes.

"Now now, dinnae get jealous. I see it in yer eyes.

"Twas the past, lass, his future is you. "

Lileas felt heat rise in her cheeks, embarrassed that her momentary flash of jealousy had been so easily read. But Morna's words were spoken with such kindness that she found herself smiling instead. "I thank ye for raising such a fine son."

Morna's expression shifted with surprise, and for a moment her composure faltered.

A tear shimmered in her eyes as she reached out to take Lileas's hands in her own weathered ones.

"Thank ye, lass. Ye'll do well. I kenned it the moment he told me ye ran away.

" She chuckled then, the sound warm and knowing.

"Takes a strong woman to run from what she fears, and an even stronger one to face it when she's ready. "

"Word has spread throughout the keep about yer actions during the Ferguson attack," Morna continued. "The clan is asking to meet ye properly, to thank ye for saving our laird and his men."

Lileas felt heat rise in her cheeks. "I only did what anyone would have done in such circumstances."

"No, lass," Morna said firmly. "What ye did was remarkable. Cameron's men have been telling the story to anyone who'll listen, and Grant and Patrick can barely contain their excitement when they speak of yer fiery sling that turned the tide of battle."

Fiona clapped her hands together with delight. "Oh, this is wonderful! I was so worried about how the clan would receive ye, given... well, given the circumstances. But if they've heard about yer courage and quick thinking, all those concerns will be forgotten."

"The circumstances as in my running away from my wedding?" Lileas repeated, feeling a stab of shame at the reminder.

"Pay no mind to that now," Fiona said firmly. "What matters is that ye're here, ye've proven yerself, and the clan will accept ye as Ewan's wife and their mistress. The past is behind us."

As if summoned by their conversation, the sound of voices could be heard in the corridor outside.

"That'll be the clansfolk," Morna said with obvious satisfaction. "Half the keep wants to meet Lady MacNeil and hear the story firsthand. Let's get ye ready to meet them."

THE GREAT HALL OF MACNEIL Keep had been transformed for the evening's feast. Tables groaned under the weight of roasted meats, fresh bread, and vegetables from the keep's gardens. Ale and whiskey flowed freely, and the air was filled with the sound of laughter and animated conversation.

Lileas sat at the high table beside Ewan, wearing one of the gowns that Fiona had somehow procured for her. The dress was a deep blue wool, and she had managed to tame her hair into an elegant arrangement that befitted the wife of a laird.

Throughout the evening, a steady stream of clan members approached the high table to pay their respects.

"My lady," said Graham Sinclair, an elderly man who served as the keep's blacksmith, "Patrick has told me of yer sling. I would be honored to help ye create whatever ye might need for yer... weapons."

"Thank ye, Master Sinclair," Lileas replied warmly. "I would very much like to discuss some ideas with ye, if ye're willing."

"It would be my pleasure. Any woman clever enough to send the Fergusons running with their tails between their legs is someone I want to stay on the good side of."

Similar conversations continued throughout the evening. The clan members who might have held reservations about their laird's choice of bride now looked at her with obvious respect and admiration.

"They've accepted ye," Ewan said quietly, his voice carrying satisfaction and something that might have been relief. "Yer actions today have earned their respect."

"I'm glad," Lileas replied. "I want to be worthy of their trust."

"Ye already are," Ewan assured her, his hand finding hers beneath the table. "Ye saved my life today, and the lives of good men who serve this clan. They will not forget that."

As the evening progressed and the ale continued to flow, the atmosphere grew more relaxed and celebratory.

Someone produced a fiddle, and soon music filled the hall as couples began to dance.

Lileas found herself drawn into the festivities, dancing with various clan members who wanted to welcome their new lady properly.

When she finally returned to the high table, slightly breathless from the energetic reels, she found Ewan watching her with an expression she couldn't quite decipher.

"Ye're happy," he observed, and it wasn't quite a question.

"I am," she realized with some surprise.

"They see yer worth," Ewan replied. "As do I."

The words carried weight beyond their simple meaning, and Lileas felt warmth spread through her chest. This man, who had every right to resent her, was looking at her as if she were something precious.

E VENTUALLY, THE EVENING began to wind down. The older clan members started making their excuses and departing for their homes, while the younger ones settled in for more drinking and storytelling.

"Come," Fiona said, appearing at Lileas's elbow with perfect timing. "Let me help ye prepare for bed. Ye've had a long day, and ye need yer rest."

Lileas allowed herself to be led from the great hall, though she was acutely aware of Ewan's eyes following her progress. She turned back once to see him deep in conversation with Connor and several of his men, their expressions serious despite the festive atmosphere around them.

"They're discussing security," Fiona explained, noticing her backward glance. "The Ferguson attack has them all worried. But dinnae worry, MacNeil men are cut from the finest cloth. They will not let any harm come to our clan, and ye are very much family now."

After Fiona departed, Lileas found herself alone in the large chamber, wearing a simple shift. She moved to the window, looking out over the moonlit loch and thinking about the events of the day.

MEANWHILE, IN THE COUNCIL room, the brothers sat before their own fire with cups of mead, discussing the very real dangers that faced their clan.

"The Ferguson attack was too coordinated to be a simple raid," Connor said, his expression grimmer than usual. "They knew exactly where to find ye, and they came prepared to take Lileas."

"Aye," Ewan agreed. "'Tis not like their laird to try and kidnap another man's wife. The leader Dugald kept saying they were doing it for him, but I've met Bhaltair Ferguson before. He doesn't seem the type to do such a thing."

Connor leaned forward, his dark eyes intense. "If they're targeting the Lady of MacNeil Keep, an attack on her is an attack on our entire clan. At least the marriage is official and consummated, so there's no question of her status or our obligation to protect her."

Ewan's hand tightened on his cup, and he looked away from his brother's penetrating gaze. The silence stretched between them, growing more uncomfortable with each passing moment.

"Ewan," Connor asked slowly, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. "Ye are officially married, and it has been consummated?"

"The first part, yes. The second... not yet."

"Brother," Connor said, his voice carrying a warning, "I think ye need to get on with that as soon as possible."

"I ken it," Ewan replied roughly, running a hand through his hair. "But I promised I would not couple with her until she asked me to."

"Are ye daft?" Connor scoffed. "If the Fergusons take her before the marriage is properly consummated, they could claim an annulment. They could force her to marry their laird, and there would be nothing we could do about it legally."

The words hit Ewan like a physical blow. He had been so focused on being considerate of Lileas's feelings that he hadn't considered the political and legal implications of their unconsummated marriage.

"I wanted to give her time," Ewan replied.

"She needs to understand the danger," Connor continued relentlessly. "And ye need to stop treating her like she's fragile. She's stronger than ye think."

Ewan stared into the fire, knowing his brother was right but still reluctant to pressure Lileas into something she might not be ready for. "I will not force her."

"Then find a way to make her want it," Connor said with bluntness. "Because if the Fergusons take her, force will be exactly what she faces. And it will not be from a man who cares about her wellbeing."

S OMETIME LATER IN HER chamber, Lileas paced before the dying fire, her mind working through the same implications that the brothers were discussing. The Ferguson attack had been a sobering reminder of the dangerous world she now inhabited.

Her marriage to Ewan, while legally binding, remained unconsummated. In the eyes of the Church and the law, that made it vulnerable to challenge. If she were kidnapped and forced into another marriage, there might be grounds to claim her union with Ewan was invalid.

She had spent the evening watching him, seeing the way he looked at her with growing warmth and affection.

Whatever had begun as a political alliance was developing into something deeper, something that she found herself wanting to explore.

The thought of losing that possibility to clan warfare was unbearable.

The decision, when it came, was sudden and absolute. Lileas would not be a passive victim of circumstances beyond her control. She would not allow fear or uncertainty to rob her of the chance for happiness with a man she was beginning to care for deeply.

Moving with quiet determination, Lileas made her way down the dimly lit corridor. She knew where Ewan's chamber was; Fiona had pointed it out during her tour of the keep.

Standing before his door in nothing but her thin shift, Lileas took a deep breath and knocked softly.

When the door opened and Ewan appeared, his shirt unlaced and his hair tousled from running his hands through it, they stared at each other for a long moment. His eyes widened as he took in her state of undress, the determined set of her shoulders, and the resolution in her eyes.

"Lileas," he said softly, his voice rough with surprise and something deeper. "What are ye doing here?"

"I've come, willingly, to be with my husband," she replied simply, her chin lifted with characteristic stubbornness.

Ewan hadn't moved, instead he just stared at her in silence though his eyes became somewhat darker, and that made Lileas suddenly second-guess her decision. She blushed from the embarrassment that maybe he didn't want her after all.

Lileas partly stammered, "That is... ah... if ye'll... have me—"

Before she could finish the sentence, Lileas gave a startled cry when Ewan suddenly lunged for her and pulled her inside his chamber.

She heard the door close behind her but did not have time to register much else before she was in his arms with his lips on hers.

Ewan growled deep in his throat, and Lileas could have sworn she felt the sound right down to her womb.

She shuddered at the onslaught before giving in completely and throwing her arms about his shoulders so she could enjoy the most delectable kiss of her life.

The time for hesitation was over.

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The fire in Ewan's chamber had burned low, casting the room in a warm, golden glow that seemed to wrap around them. When they finally broke apart from that searing kiss, both were breathing hard, and Lileas felt as if the world had shifted beneath her feet.

"Lileas," Ewan said roughly, his hands framing her face with infinite tenderness despite the urgency that thrummed between them. "Are ye certain? There's no shame in changing yer mind."

"I'm sure," she whispered, her hands fisting in the open fabric of his leine. "I dinnae want to wait anymore. I want this. I want ye."

Something wild and possessive flashed in his green eyes at her words. "Ye're sure? Because once I have ye, lass, ye'll be mine in every way possible."

The raw honesty in his voice sent heat pooling low in her belly. "And ye'll be mine," she replied, surprised by her own boldness.

That seemed to break whatever restraint he'd been maintaining. Ewan's mouth crashed down on hers again, this kiss hungrier, more demanding than the first. She could taste the whiskey on his lips, could feel the barely leashed power in his hands as they roamed over her shoulders and down her arms.

"I've wanted ye since that first day in yer workshop at the abbey," he confessed against her lips. "Watching ye move, seeing yer mind work. Ye were magnificent."

"I wanted to hate ye," she admitted breathlessly as his mouth found the sensitive spot

where her neck met her shoulder. "But ye listened. Ye heard me, and ye saw me."

He lifted his head to look at her, his eyes dark with desire but also something deeper.

"I see the most remarkable woman in Scotland. Brilliant, brave, bonnie—"

"I'm not beautiful," she protested, suddenly aware of her plain shift and unbound hair.

"Ye are to me," he said fiercely. "Especially now, standing in my chamber."

His words made her feel powerful, desired in a way she'd never imagined possible.

When he began to unlace his shirt, she found herself watching with fascination as more of his chest was revealed.

He was magnificent, lean muscle and battle scars that told the story of his life as a fierce warrior.

But it was when he removed his plaid that she felt the air leave her lungs.

Lileas traced the contours of his body with her gaze, down to the hardened length jutting out between his thighs.

She blushed as her gaze immediately whipped back to his face, noticing him grinning at her.

"Do ye like what ye see, wife?"

Lileas simply nodded, wide-eyed.

"Yer turn," Ewan said softly, his hands moving to the ties of her shift.

For a moment, nervousness fluttered in her stomach. "I dinnae ken what to do," she admitted.

"Just feel," he said, his voice gentling. "Let me love ye the way ye deserve to be loved."

Lileas nodded, then began to unfasten the laces of her shift. Ewan helped her, and soon the thin fabric pooled at her feet as she fought the urge to cover herself. But the way Ewan was looking at her as if she were something sacred and precious, banished any shame.

"Perfect," he breathed, his hands skimming reverently over her shoulders and down to her ample breasts. Ewan cupped them in the palms of his hands and began caressing her taut nipples with his thumbs as he gently kissed her.

Lileas gasped at the sensation. She felt herself trembling, struggling to remain standing, weak-kneed as her breathing became labored and his calloused fingers brushed against her heated skin relentlessly.

Ewan seemed lost in thought as he watched his wife nearly climax from nipple play alone.

He wondered what she would look like coming around his hardened length.

"Dragon's blood, ye're bonnie," he exclaimed.

He had grown incredibly aroused just gazing at every inch of her and knew it would end soon if he did not move this along.

Ewan needed to be inside his wife as soon as possible, or he would spill too soon on the linens. This woman was fire and beauty, and it heated his blood.

When he lifted Lileas in his arms as if she weighed nothing, carrying her to the large bed that dominated one side of the chamber, Lileas clung to him and felt cherished in a way she'd never experienced.

When he laid her down on the soft furs with infinite care, then covered her body with his, they were both skin to skin.

And then the real lovemaking began.

Lileas closed her eyes as Ewan kissed his way from her mouth to a stiffened nipple. She moaned when he began suckling there, swirling and lapping the peak with his tongue. Then he gently lavished the same treatment on its twin. All the while, Lileas felt his arousal resting against her thigh.

Soon he moved further down still, until he was kissing her stomach and then lower.

He spread her thighs, and then, much to her great surprise, she felt him lap at her heated pearl.

Lileas felt her body spasm, but his firm hands held her pinned to the spot.

It was then she felt a strange pressure building from her inner core to her fevered skin.

She closed her eyes, gasping for breath with the competing sensations, when suddenly Ewan was back again, hovering above her. "Open your eyes and look at me, Lil!" he growled.

She did as he kissed her with abandon, lapping her tongue with his. Then he settled his pelvis between her thighs. Ewan never took his gaze away from her. It was heated, intense, desperate.

"I'm going to make ye mine now. No one will ever come between us again. Do ye ken?"

"Aye," she gasped with a nod. And then Lileas felt it, something hard nudging against her slickened heat. She peered down to see Ewan placing his tip at her entrance.

Ewan growled, "Dinnae take yer eyes off me, wife. Just feel."

Then she groaned as Ewan slowly forged ahead. He clasped her hips to adjust the angle and used his thumb to strum against her hidden pearl. Her arousal made the entry easier. Then, as they gazed into each other's eyes, Ewan thrust his hardened length all the way inside her to the hilt.

Lileas felt a sharp sting, then it was over. Their breathing was shallow as their eyes remained locked on one another.

"You're mine, now and always!" Ewan rasped.

Then he began to move deep inside her, and with each thrust he brushed against her hooded pearl.

Soon Lileas responded in kind, lifting her hips to meet his eager thrusts as they participated in a dance as old as time, their bodies joined in perfect union.

His mouth found hers again, and this time she met his passion with her own.

"Ewan," she breathed when she felt her womb tightening. "Please..."

"I ken it, lass," Ewan replied against her heated skin. "Let go, love. Trust me."

Ewan's thrusts increased in depth and speed, sending Lileas into a shuddering climax

she had never experienced before. She clung to him and shouted his name, her peak triggering his own.

Ewan was lost in the euphoria of being deep inside his new wife.

He felt her contract around him, milking him dry of his essence.

With a roaring shout, he called her name as he found completion.

Their eyes remained fixed on one another as they moaned in pleasure, thrusting and parrying until finally collapsing into each other's arms, completely spent.

Sated, complete, satisfied—united as one.

They shared an intimate kiss as they came down from their sensational high, both knowing nothing would ever be the same again.

As they lay entwined in the aftermath, Lileas felt a peace she had never known before, and Ewan felt a surging feeling in his heart. It was as if they truly belonged together.

"I love ye, wife," he whispered against her lips.

"I love ye, husband," she replied with a shy smile.

They were no longer strangers bound by convenience; they were husband and wife in every sense of the word, and nothing would tear them apart.

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The morning light filtered through the windows of Ewan's chamber, casting golden patterns across the rumpled furs that covered the bed. Lileas stirred slowly, consciousness returning with the delicious awareness of warm skin against her own and strong arms holding her close.

She was naked, completely wrapped in her husband's embrace as if she belonged there. Which, she realized with a flutter of wonder, she did. The events of the night before came flooding back in a rush of sensation and emotion.

"Good morning, Lil," Ewan's voice rumbled against her ear, rough with sleep and satisfaction. His hand traced lazy patterns on her bare shoulder, and she could feel his smile against her hair.

"Good morning, Ewan," she replied, marveling at how natural the words felt. She turned in his arms to face him, taking in his tousled hair and the contentment in his green eyes. "Did ye sleep well?"

"Better than I have in months," he admitted, his thumb brushing along her cheekbone. "Having ye here, in my arms, knowing ye're truly mine... it changes everything."

They lay in comfortable silence for a while, watching the light grow stronger outside the windows.

"How did ye get this scar?" Lileas asked, her fingers tracing the jagged skin that ran along his ribs.

Ewan's expression grew thoughtful. "My father gave it to me when I was fourteen."

"What? But why?" she asked in shock.

"Because he was a bully and a bastard," Ewan replied.

"Connor and I, we did nae have a good upbringing.

Our father was a volatile man. One moment he praised ye, then the next he'd try and beat ye to death.

Anything could set him off, and ye just hoped like hell ye were not within arm's reach of his outbursts. "

"What happened?" Lileas asked.

"He was training with the men and challenged Connor to a fight with a real sword. Not the training sticks one uses for young lads. Connor was only twelve and nowhere near ready to take on my da, who was a seasoned warrior."

Lileas could not speak for the anger rising in her chest. Instead she clutched his hand and held it against her breast.

Ewan continued, "Connor fought best he could by trying to tire my father out. He was quick on his feet and ran circles around him. That made my da angrier, and he began swinging his sword like a mad man. No one could stop him, he'd gone half beserker."

"Ye dinnae have to tell me," Lileas whispered.

"No, I need to talk about it..." he replied, then continued, "At one point Connor tripped and fell.

I saw my da raising that sword high in the air to slice off his arm.

So I ran at my da so hard and hit him in the side to knock him off his feet.

He swung the blade around at me instead.

I was too slow moving out of the way and it sliced down my side. "

Lileas had tears in her eyes, crying in horror.

"Connor gained his feet so fast and managed to pull me off the field. It took five men to subdue my father and relieve him of his sword. Afterward he acted like nothing happened at all."

"Is that when Morna took care of ye?"

"Aye, Connor took me to Morna, and she saved my life that day. We began spending more time in her cottage than at the keep after that. She is more like a mother to us."

"She's remarkable," Lileas said softly. "I can see why ye and Connor are so devoted to her."

"Aye. She kept us from becoming bitter, angry lads. Taught us that strength wasn't just about the sword, but about protecting those who couldn't protect themselves."

"You saved Connor's life as well that day," Lileas said.

"Aye, it's why we're very close. For all his bluster, ye'll never find anyone more loyal."

His hand found hers, their fingers intertwining. "What about ye? What was yer childhood like?"

"Lonely, mostly," Lileas admitted. "After my ma died, my father didn't quite ken what to do with a daughter who preferred reading to embroidery. He loves me, I ken that, but he's never understood me."

"Is that why ye ran?" Ewan asked gently. "Because ye thought I wouldn't understand either?"

Lileas felt heat rise in her cheeks, shame mixing with regret. "I need to apologize to ye," she said quietly. "For humiliating ye by running away. I never meant any slight to come from it, truly. I only thought of my freedom. I didn't consider what it would do to yer reputation, to yer clan."

Ewan was silent for a long moment, his thumb stroking over her knuckles.

When he finally spoke, his voice was thoughtful rather than angry.

"It matters not. Ye did what ye thought was best, and I can imagine it cannot have been an easy decision.

But I still dinnae regret dragging yer stubborn bahookie here, because it means I got to enjoy making love with my wife. "

The teasing note in his voice made her look up, and she saw warmth in his eyes rather than recrimination. "My stubborn bahookie?" she repeated, her lips twitching with suppressed laughter.

"Aye, the stubbornest bahookie in all of Scotland," he confirmed solemnly. "But it's a very bonnie bahookie, so I suppose I can forgive its stubbornness."

Lileas burst into laughter, the sound bright and free in the morning air. "Ye're wicked," she said, swatting playfully at his chest.

"Wicked but yers," he replied, catching her hand and bringing it to his lips. "Just as ye're mine, stubborn and all."

The playful moment settled into something deeper, more serious. Lileas took a breath, gathering her courage for what she needed to say next.

"I'm ready," she said quietly. "To be a proper wife to ye and mistress of this clan. I'm happy to do whatever ye need me to do, to help in any way I can. I ken I have much to learn, but I'm willing to try."

The resignation in her voice, the way she seemed to be steeling herself for sacrifice, made Ewan frown. He could see her preparing to set aside her passions for duty.

"Come," he said suddenly, sitting up and reaching for his clothes. "I have something to show ye. Now that ye are mistress here, 'tis best ye get used to the chores my lady wife must take over."

Lileas nodded and sighed. The sound tugged at Ewan's heart.

They bathed and dressed in companionable silence, though Ewan found himself stealing kisses at every opportunity. He couldn't seem to help himself; the knowledge that she was truly his now made it impossible to keep his hands to himself.

"Where are we going?" Lileas asked as they prepared to leave the chamber.

"Ye'll see," Ewan replied mysteriously, taking her hand and leading her toward the door.

The corridors of the keep were busier than usual, and Lileas noticed immediately that there were more guards than she remembered from the previous day. Armed men stood at regular intervals, their eyes constantly scanning for threats.

"The extra guards?" she asked quietly.

"Aye," Ewan's expression grew serious. "The keep is in full lockdown, and we now patrol MacNeil lands to ensure the Fergusons dinnae venture closer.

I've also posted men throughout the keep to ensure ye and Fiona and any MacNeil lass cannot be kidnapped.

It's like a fortress now, with men on the lookout for anything suspicious. "

They stepped outside into the crisp morning air, and Ewan led her across the courtyard toward a small cottage set within the keep's walls, not far from the blacksmith's forge. The building looked old but well-maintained, with smoke rising from its chimney.

"What is this place?" Lileas asked as they approached the cottage door.

"Part of yer new role among the clan," Ewan replied, producing a key from his pocket. "Go on, open it."

With growing curiosity, Lileas pushed open the heavy wooden door. The scent that greeted her was familiar and exciting: peat smoke, grain, herbs, and the unmistakable aroma of brewing. But this was clearly a makeshift operation, with old equipment and the lingering smell of failed brews.

"What is this place?" she asked again, stepping into the dusty interior and looking around with growing understanding.

"This, my lady wife, will be part of yer role among the clan," Ewan said, following her inside.

She gasped, turning to stare at him in disbelief. "I dinnae understand."

"We've been trying to make our own whiskey for years but never quite worked it out," Ewan explained, watching her face carefully.

"If ye can help with that, we may be able to trade it with other clans for goods we need.

I've also sent a small group of men to bring yer things from yer home.

All those notes and equipment ye mentioned.

And I ken 'tis not much now, but whatever ye need, I can source the supplies.

I thought perhaps ye could use this cottage as yer workshop, to build things. .. if ye like."

Lileas was speechless, her mind reeling with the implications.

She kept looking around the cottage, already working out calculations: where the still should go, how to improve the ventilation, what modifications would be needed.

This wasn't just permission to continue her work; this was encouragement, support, complete validation of everything she was passionate about.

She was silent for such a long time that Ewan began to look embarrassed, uncertainty creeping into his expression.

"If the space is not to yer liking, I can find another—"

His words were cut off when Lileas suddenly launched herself at him, slamming her

lips against his mouth and kissing him as if her life depended on it. Her arms wound around his neck, her body pressed against his, and for a moment they were lost in each other.

When they finally broke apart, both breathing hard, Lileas's eyes were bright with unshed tears.

"This is the loveliest thing anyone has ever done for me," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "I love it!"

But even as she spoke, her mind was already racing ahead to other possibilities.

"And while I'm at it, I noticed yer chamber needs blinds to keep out the sunlight.

With a little wood and canvas, I'm sure I can create something for the windows.

Also, I noticed the crops in the field at the far side of yer lands.

They're not bringing much yield, are they? What do ye grow there?"

Ewan blinked at the rapid shift in topic, then smiled. This was the woman he'd fallen in love with: brilliant, passionate, and all his.

"We've been trying wheat, but it hasn't taken," he admitted. "Shamus has tried everything, but nothing can grow well there."

"I thought so. It's in the wrong place. Ye need a different kind of plant because the soil is too rocky. We had this happen on our lands as well. I convinced our farmers to plant different seeds and rotate them so the soil had time to rest."

"This is why yer lands are always plentiful," Ewan said with dawning understanding.

"Aye."

Ewan thought for a moment, then nodded. What she said made perfect sense. "Ye think ye could help us improve our yields?"

"I know I can," Lileas said with confidence that was utterly compelling.

And just like that, Lileas's mind exploded with thoughts and possibilities. She could see it all: a way to improve every aspect of clan life. This time, though, she had a husband who wouldn't mind it. In fact, he was encouraging it.

For the first time since arriving at MacNeil Keep, Lileas felt truly at home. This wasn't about sacrificing her passions for duty; this was about using her gifts to serve her new family.

"Thank ye," she whispered, reaching up to cup Ewan's face in her hands. "Thank ye for understanding."

""Tis my pleasure, wife."

As they stood in the dusty cottage that would become her workshop, surrounded by the potential for everything they could build together, the future stretched ahead of them, bright with possibility.

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It took some convincing, but eventually Ewan agreed to let Lileas test a small patch of the troublesome field with her proposed crop rotation. What happened next astonished everyone, including Lileas herself.

The yield was not just improved, it was a hundred-fold better than anything they had achieved before.

The rocky soil that had frustrated their farmers for years responded beautifully to the barley and root vegetables she suggested, plants that could thrive in the conditions rather than fighting against them.

Soon Lileas was out in the fields with old Shamus, the clan's weathered farmer who had initially been skeptical of taking advice from "some young lass.

" But when he saw the results with his own eyes, his attitude changed completely.

Now he hung on her every word as she explained soil enrichment and drainage methods learned from the nuns.

Ewan watched these exchanges from a distance, his chest swelling with pride every time he saw his wife patiently explaining some new method or solving a problem that had plagued the clan for years. She had found her purpose here, and more importantly, she was happy.

But Lileas's enthusiasm wasn't confined to the fields.

Within weeks, their bedchamber had become a chaotic workspace of its own, with

parchments scattered across every surface.

She would wake in the middle of the night with an idea and immediately reach for a quill, sometimes sketching by candlelight while Ewan slept beside her.

The final straw came when he rolled over one morning and found himself face-to-face with detailed drawings of some strange new design spread across his pillow.

"Lileas," Ewan said firmly, gathering up the papers with the patience of a saint. "We need to discuss boundaries."

"What do ye mean?" she asked innocently, though the ink stains on her fingers betrayed her midnight drawing sessions.

"I mean," he said, pulling her close and speaking against her ear in a way that made her shiver, "that this bed is for lovemaking and sleeping, nothing else."

Yer sharp mind can work anywhere else in the keep, but here.

.." His hands began to roam in ways that made her thoughts scatter like leaves in the wind.

"Here, ye're my wife and I'm yer husband, and I want no distractions. "

"And if I refuse?" she asked breathlessly, already melting under his touch.

"Then I'll have to convince ye," he growled, demonstrating his persuasive abilities in ways that left them both thoroughly convinced and utterly sated.

From that day forward, Lileas kept her work strictly to the workshop and her solar. And Ewan made sure their bed was used for its intended purposes, frequently. Their

passion for each other seemed to grow stronger with each passing day.

But it wasn't just their personal relationship that flourished. Lileas's inventions began to transform life at MacNeil Keep in ways both large and small.

"Yer wife has a good head on her shoulders," Connor grudgingly admitted one evening, which from him was practically a declaration of undying devotion.

Fiona benefited even more directly from Lileas's inventiveness. The new lady of the keep designed a pulley system that made drawing water from the well and hauling laundry from the lower to upper floors effortless.

"I dinnae ken how we managed without ye," Fiona said one morning as she hauled up a bucket of water using Lileas's pulley system. "Ye've made everything so much easier."

Soon, it seemed like everyone in the keep was seeking out Lady MacNeil when they had a problem that needed solving.

Lileas listened to each request with genuine interest, often disappearing into her workshop for hours before emerging with exactly what they needed.

"How do ye do it?" Patrick asked one day, watching in fascination as she demonstrated a new crossbow device that would increase both accuracy and speed.

"I just look at how things work and think about how they could work better," Lileas replied with a shrug. "Everything can be improved if ye're willing to think about it differently."

Word of Lady MacNeil's remarkable abilities began to spread beyond the keep. Other clans sent emissaries to see these inventions for themselves, and soon MacNeil Keep

was receiving offers for trade and alliance that would have been unthinkable just months before.

It was true that not all the attention was welcome.

They had heard rumors that various clans were taking interest in MacNeil's sudden prosperity and the remarkable woman behind it.

But the Ferguson threat seemed to have faded into the background.

Their increased security appeared to have deterred any immediate attempts at kidnapping or raids.

When the wagon arrived from MacDonald Keep carrying Lileas's belongings, it felt like Christmas morning. Her precious equipment, her detailed notes, her carefully preserved samples, everything she had left behind was carefully transported to her new workshop.

"I can't believe ye thought to bring everything," Lileas said, tears in her eyes as she unpacked her most treasured possessions. "Even the little bottles of trial mixtures."

"I wanted ye to have everything ye needed to be happy," Ewan replied simply. "This is yer home now, and I want ye to feel that completely."

And she did feel it. For the first time in her life, Lileas felt like she belonged somewhere completely. She was valued, appreciated, and loved for exactly who she was.

The whiskey production in her workshop was coming along beautifully. Using her improved brewing methods, she had already produced several batches that were far superior to anything the clan had achieved before.

"At this rate, we'll be one of the wealthiest clans in the Highlands within a few years," Ewan marveled, sampling her latest batch. "This is exceptional work."

"It's just the beginning," Lileas replied with satisfaction.

Life settled into a rhythm that felt both productive and deeply satisfying. Days were filled with clan work, and nights with passionate lovemaking that left them both thoroughly content.

As autumn deepened into winter, life at MacNeil Keep continued to thrive. The improved crops had been harvested and stored, providing more food security than the clan had enjoyed in years. The whiskey trade was bringing in valuable goods and strengthening alliances.

And through it all, her relationship with Ewan continued to deepen. They had moved beyond the initial passion of new love into something richer and more enduring.

"I never thought I could be this happy," Lileas confided to him one snowy evening as they lay entwined before the fire in their chamber. "I never imagined that marriage could be like this."

"Nor did I," Ewan admitted, stroking her hair. "I thought I would be fortunate to find respect and companionship with my wife. I never dreamed I would find my perfect match."

They were planning for the future now. Everything seemed possible, everything seemed bright.

They should have known that such happiness couldn't last unchallenged.

It was on a bitter winter morning, when the loch was edged with ice and the Highland

peaks were shrouded in snow, that the horns sounded from the watchtowers. Not the measured calls that announced friendly visitors, but the urgent, discordant blasts that meant only one thing:

Attack.

The peaceful interlude was over. The enemies who had been watching and waiting in the shadows had finally made their move, and this time they had come prepared for war.

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"What do ye mean she's been taken?" Ewan's roar echoed through the great hall of MacNeil Keep, his voice carrying a fury that made the very stones seem to tremble. "What happened to her guards?"

Cameron stood before his laird, his face grim and streaked with mud, his clothes bearing evidence of a hard ride.

"The guard assigned to her, Malcolm, was found unconscious near the edge of Briar Wood.

He's got a nasty gash on his head but he's alive.

Says Lady MacNeil insisted on going to gather some plant for her work, something she needed urgently. "

"And he let her?" Ewan's voice dropped to a dangerous whisper, more terrifying than his earlier shout.

"He tried to stop her, my laird, but ye ken how determined yer lady wife can be.

She convinced him it was just a short way, broad daylight, no danger.

She told him to wait at the tree line while she gathered what she needed.

"Cameron's voice grew heavy. "That's when they struck.

Malcolm never saw them coming. He was hit from behind. When he came to, she was

gone."

Grant stepped forward, his expression as dark as his laird's. "We found tracks, hoofprints heading north toward Ferguson lands. And this." He held up a strip of torn plaid, distinctive and unmistakable.

"Fergusons," Ewan breathed, the word carrying the promise of death.

Connor burst through the doors of the great hall, his face thunderous. "Is it true? Have those bastards taken Lileas?"

Ewan's jaw clenched so hard the muscle jumped. "Aye. And I'm going after her."

"Then I'm coming with ye," Connor declared without hesitation.

"No." Ewan's response was immediate and final. "Ye're staying here."

"Like hell I am!" Connor stepped closer, his own temper flaring. "She's family now, Ewan. I'll not sit here while—"

"Ye'll stay because Fiona needs ye," Ewan cut him off sharply. "She's expecting, Connor. Yer wife needs her husband safe at home, not riding off to battle."

Connor's face flushed with anger. "Dinnae use my wife to keep me from this fight!"

"I'm not using anyone," Ewan replied, his voice deadly calm. "I'm thinking like a laird should. If something happens to me, this clan needs its heir. They need ye to lead them."

"Ye think I care about being heir when—"

"Ye should!" Ewan's shout rang through the hall again. "This clan, these people, Fiona and yer unborn child, they all depend on us making the right choices. I won't risk leaving them defenseless because we both rode off to war."

The brothers stared at each other, the tension between them crackling like lightning. Finally, Connor's shoulders sagged slightly, though his jaw remained set.

"She's like a sister to me now," he said quietly. "I can't just do nothing."

"Ye're not doing nothing," Ewan replied, his voice softening marginally. "Ye're protecting our clan, our future. That's what Lileas would want."

MILES AWAY, IN A SMALL stone cottage that reeked of old smoke and neglect, Lileas sat bound to a rough wooden chair near a poorly tended fire.

Her wrists ached from the tight ropes, and her shoulder throbbed where she had been roughly handled during the kidnapping.

But it was the crushing weight of her own stupidity that hurt most of all.

Fool, she cursed herself silently. Reckless, stubborn fool.

She had needed nettle root for a tincture, a simple remedy for the seasonal ailments that plagued several clan members, but she had been so focused on her work, so confident in her own abilities, that she had dismissed the very real dangers that surrounded them.

Malcolm had tried to warn her, tried to insist they wait for a larger escort, but she had been so certain that a quick trip in broad daylight posed no threat.

Now Malcolm was injured because of her foolishness, and the entire clan was at risk because their laird would surely come for her, walking straight into whatever trap the Fergusons had planned.

The thought of Ewan riding into danger because of her recklessness made her stomach clench with guilt and fear.

Dugald Ferguson paced before the hearth, his scarred face twisted with satisfaction and something that might have been nervousness. The same man who had led the attack on their camp months ago now held her captive, and she could see the cruel anticipation in his eyes.

"Comfortable, are we?" he asked with false pleasantry, his voice carrying the rough accent of the borderlands.

"Quite," Lileas replied with icy calm, pushing down her self-recrimination to focus on the present danger. "Though I fear ye've made a grave mistake."

Dugald laughed, a harsh sound that held no humor. "Have I now? And what mistake would that be, my clever lass?"

"Ye've taken the wife of Ewan MacNeil," she said, meeting his gaze steadily. "He will come for me, and when he does, ye'll wish ye'd never been born."

"Let him come," Dugald scoffed, settling into the chair across from her. "My laird has been waiting for this opportunity for months. Yer husband can rage all he likes, but ye're coming with us to Ferguson Keep, where yer skills will be put to proper use."

"My husband will find me and when he does—"

"When he does, he'll find himself outnumbered and outmatched," Dugald interrupted.

Despite her bonds, despite the danger, Lileas felt her lips curve into a smile that held no warmth. "Ye clearly dinnae ken my husband very well if ye think he can be so easily beaten."

Dugald's expression darkened. "We'll see about that. For now, ye'd best reconcile yerself to yer new circumstances. Ye belong to Clan Ferguson now, and ye'll serve our interests whether ye like it or not."

"I belong to Ewan MacNeil," Lileas replied fiercely. "And I'll never willingly help ye or yer clan."

"Willingly?" Dugald's laugh was genuinely amused now. "Who said anything about willingly? Ye'll do as ye're told, or ye'll suffer the consequences. There are ways to make even the most stubborn lass see reason."

The threat hung in the air between them, but Lileas refused to show fear. Instead, she lifted her chin and met his gaze with defiance that burned like fire.

"Try it," she said quietly. "And discover exactly what kind of woman Ewan MacNeil chose to marry."

B ACK AT MACNEIL KEEP , Ewan stood in the courtyard as his men prepared for what might be their final ride.

The warband he had assembled was small but elite with twenty of his best fighters, men who had proven themselves in countless battles and would follow him into the depths of hell if necessary.

Grant checked the straps on his horse's tack one final time. "The lads are ready, my

laird. We can be at Ferguson Keep by dawn if we ride hard."

"Then we ride hard," Ewan replied grimly, swinging up into his saddle. His destrier snorted and pawed the ground, sensing his master's urgency and rage.

Patrick appeared at his stirrup, his face set with determination. "What are yer orders if we meet resistance on the road?"

"Cut through it," Ewan said without hesitation. "Anyone wearing Ferguson colors is an enemy. Anyone who stands between me and my wife dies."

A murmur of approval ran through the assembled riders. These men had grown to love their lady, had seen how she improved their lives and brought happiness to their laird. They would ride through fire to bring her home.

Connor appeared in the courtyard, his face still dark with frustrated anger. "Ewan—"

"I've said my piece, brother," Ewan cut him off. "Stay safe. Protect what matters."

Before Connor could respond, another figure emerged from the shadows near the keep's entrance. Morna moved with the quiet grace of someone who had spent a lifetime tending to others, her silver hair gleaming in the torchlight and her wise eyes fixed on Ewan with an intensity that made him pause.

"Morna," he said, his voice softening with affection and respect. "I must go. There's no time—"

"There's always time for wisdom, lad," she interrupted gently, approaching his destrier. "And ye'll need it where ye're going."

Ewan frowned, recognizing the distant look in her eyes that sometimes came when

she saw things others could not. "What is it?"

"Take care with their laird," Morna replied quietly, her voice carrying the weight of certainty. "All is not as it seems with him. He is in need of a good woman, just like ye were once."

"Morna, I'm not going there to play matchmaker," Ewan replied with exasperation. "I'm going to get my wife back and likely kill every Ferguson who stands in my way."

"Aye, and ye should protect what's yers," Morna agreed. "But remember, lad, sometimes our enemies are not who we think they are, and mercy serves us better than the sword."

Ewan stared down at the woman who had raised him, who had never steered him wrong in all his years. Her sight had saved them more than once, and though he didn't always understand her visions, he had learned to trust them.

"Ye're asking me to spare a man whose clan took my wife," he said slowly.

"I'm asking ye to use that sharp mind of yers before ye use yer blade," Morna replied.

For a moment, Ewan wavered. Every instinct screamed for blood and vengeance, but Morna's words carried the weight of hard-won wisdom.

"I'll question him first," he said finally, his voice rough with reluctance. "But if he's harmed her, if he's threatened what's mine..."

"Then ye'll do what ye must," Morna finished. "But give truth a chance to speak first."

For a moment, the brothers glanced at each other, years of shared battles and brotherhood passing between them. Then Connor stepped forward and gripped Ewan's stirrup.

"Bring her home," he said roughly. "And come back alive, or I'll never forgive ye for leaving me to tend this daft clan alone!"

"I'll bring her home," Ewan promised, his voice carrying the weight of an oath. "Whatever it takes."

With that, he spurred his horse forward, and twenty riders thundered through the gates of MacNeil Keep, riding hard toward Ferguson lands and whatever fate awaited them there.

In her chamber, Fiona placed a protective hand over her growing belly and whispered a prayer for the safe return of both Lileas and the man who had become like a brother to her.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 9:55 am

Ferguson Keep rose from the Highland mist like a monument to decay and neglect.

Once-proud walls now showed gaps where stones had fallen, and the main tower listed slightly to one side as if weary of holding itself upright.

Weeds grew through cracks in the courtyard, and the smell of damp and rot hung in the air like a shroud.

Laird Bhaltair Ferguson sat in what had once been the Great Feasting Hall, surrounded by the evidence of his uncle's failures.

The previous laird had run their fortunes into the ground through drink, poor decisions, and a complete lack of care for his people or his lands.

Bhaltair had inherited not a proud Highland stronghold, but a crumbling ruin and a clan on the verge of collapse.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, with dark hair that fell to his shoulders and eyes the color of winter storms. His face bore the kind of austere ruggedness that spoke of ancient bloodlines, but it was marked by a perpetual scowl that had only deepened since taking control of his failing clan.

Today, that scowl darkened further as Dugald and his men entered the hall, dragging with them a bound and gagged woman whose eyes blazed with fury despite her predicament.

"Laird," Dugald announced proudly, "we have someone who will reverse our

fortunes."

Bhaltair's gaze moved from his captain to the woman, and his expression grew thunderous. "Who is this? And why is she bound and gagged?"

"'Tis the bride of the MacNeil," Dugald replied, oblivious to the building storm in his laird's eyes. "The one with the skill for brewing, among other things."

"The MacNeils of Barra?" Bhaltair's voice dropped to a dangerous whisper.

"Aye."

"This is their laird's lady wife?"

"Aye."

"And ye stole her so she can brew our whiskey?"

"Aye."

Without warning, Bhaltair stormed across the room and punched Dugald square across the jaw with enough force to send the man staggering. "Are ye daft, man?" he roared. "Ye dinnae steal someone else's wife!"

Lileas flinched at the violence, then shuffled backward as this imposing stranger turned toward her with that thunderous expression. But when she cowered, he immediately raised his hand in a calming gesture, his voice gentling as if he were speaking to a frightened horse.

"Steady there," he said quietly. "I'll not harm ye."

Moving slowly and deliberately, he approached and carefully removed her gag, then drew his dagger. Lileas tensed, but he had already turned her around and sliced through the ropes that bound her wrists with quick, efficient strokes.

When she faced him again, rubbing feeling back into her hands, she found herself looking up at a man whose anger was clearly directed at his own men rather than at her.

Dugald was getting to his feet, blood trickling from his split lip. "We got her to help ye," he spluttered.

"I dinnae need this kind of help," Bhaltair snapped. "The last thing I want is a clan war. We can barely spare the men as it is. Is this what ye lot have been off doing while I've been trying to salvage what's left of this place?"

His men looked suddenly uncomfortable, shuffling their feet like children caught in mischief.

"I've been asking ye to help rebuild the keep, get the seeds into the ground, crops out of the fields, fix the water system, mend the roof, repair the cottages and ye've been off kidnapping a married woman?" Bhaltair's voice rose with each word, his fury evident.

The men now looked openly contrite, avoiding their laird's blazing gaze.

"Bloody hell!" Bhaltair shook his head in disgust, then began barking orders. "Ada! Bring refreshments for our... guest. And ask Gregory to ready my horse."

An elderly woman with kind eyes appeared and gently led Lileas to a chair by the fire, pressing a warm cup of mead into her hands. Lileas thanked her and took a sip then immediately winced at the taste.

"What are you doing, Laird?" Dugald asked, still nursing his jaw.

"I am returning this woman to her husband," Bhaltair replied curtly, "that's if he doesn't murder us all beforehand."

Lileas looked up from her cup, studying this unexpected turn of events. "This tastes terrible," she announced bluntly. "Who brewed it?"

Bhaltair blinked at her directness. "What?"

"It has too much barley in it. Try a little more honey and less grain next time. The balance is all wrong."

"Aye... all right," he replied, clearly taken aback by her casual criticism.

"And that corner there that keeps leaking," Lileas continued, gesturing toward a spot where water dripped steadily into a bucket, "ye can patch it with straw bound in mud clay, and it willnae trouble ye anymore."

"Anything else?" Bhaltair asked, his tone caught between irritation and amusement.

"Aye, that rash on yer sword arm," Lileas said, noticing the angry red welts that covered his forearm and how he unconsciously scratched at them. "The one that troubles ye."

"Yes, 'tis from some plant in the woods," he replied, surprised that she had noticed.

"No, it's not."

He raised an eyebrow.

"'Tis a reaction to the oak gall."

"What?"

"Yer sword, aye? Ye clean it with oak gall mixed with vinegar?"

"Aye, it removes the rust and blood better than anything else," he said, confusion evident in his voice.

"'Tis the oak gall causing the rash. Some folk are sensitive to it. Here, may I?" She reached for the small pouch that still hung at her belt, the one Dugald's men had overlooked in their haste.

Bhaltair sighed and in a sarcastic voice replied, "By all means, it's not like I have anything pressing to do today. My keep is crumbling, my men dinnae follow orders, yer husband will likely murder me, and my skin is on fire. So help yerself, Lady MacNeil."

Lileas gave him a sympathetic look before she mixed a small amount of the nettle root she had gathered with some chamomile from her pouch, creating a paste that she carefully applied to the irritated skin on his forearm.

Bhaltair closed his eyes, feeling relief for the first time in weeks as the cooling mixture soothed the burning itch.

"See, 'tis nettle root and chamomile," she explained. "It will draw out the irritation, but dinnae use oak gall anymore. For yer sword, try river sand mixed with a bit of oil, or just plain lye soap. It'll clean just as well without the rash."

The room went quiet as everyone watched this remarkable display of knowledge and skill.

"Bloody hell," Bhaltair breathed, staring at his arm in amazement. "No wonder the MacNeils are thriving."

"I told ye, she is worth keeping—" Dugald began.

"She is still someone else's wife!" Bhaltair roared, his anger returning full force. "And when her husband arrives—which he no doubt will—we're going to return her with our apologies and pray to the good lord he doesn't slaughter us all for yer stupidity."

As if summoned by his words, the sound of horses thundering into the courtyard echoed through the hall, followed by the distinctive war cry of Clan MacNeil.

"Too late for prayers now," Bhaltair muttered. "Show the MacNeil inside. We need to return his wife before this becomes a bloodbath."

Moments later, the doors of the Great Hall burst open, and Ewan MacNeil strode in with several men. His green eyes blazed with fury, and his hand rested on his sword hilt as he took in the scene before him.

"Lileas!" he called out, relief flooding his voice as he saw her sitting unharmed by the fire.

She rose immediately, moving toward him as he crossed the room in quick strides. But before they could embrace, Bhaltair stepped forward, his hands raised in a gesture of peace.

"MacNeil," he said formally. "I need ye to ken that I had no knowledge of this kidnapping. My men acted without my orders, they will be punished accordingly, and I was preparing to return yer wife to ye when ye arrived."

Ewan's gaze moved between Bhaltair and Lileas, his jaw clenched with barely

controlled rage. "Is this true, love?"

"Aye," Lileas said quickly, stepping closer to her husband. "He was furious when they brought me here. He was about to escort me home himself."

For a moment, the tension in the room was thick enough to cut with a blade. Then Ewan's arms came around his wife, pulling her against his chest as if he could shield her from all the world's dangers.

"I'm sorry I could nae protect ye," he said roughly against her hair.

"No, 'twas my fault for being stubborn and leaving the keep," Lileas replied, her voice muffled against his chest. "I'm sorry."

"No, twas my fault and I'm sorry," Ewan insisted.

Bhaltair Ferguson just rolled his eyes at the display. "Perhaps," he said dryly, "we could discuss reparations, rather than standing here watching ye apologize to each other until next Michaelmas."

Ewan glared at Bhaltair while Lileas for the first time since her kidnapping, burst out laughing.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 9:55 am

The evening fire crackled softly in their chamber as Lileas sat curled against Ewan's side, both of them finally able to breathe easily after the events of the past few days.

The terror of her kidnapping and the relief of her safe return had left them both clinging closer than usual, reluctant to let each other out of arm's reach.

"I like him, Ewan," Lileas said quietly, her fingers tracing idle patterns on his chest. "And I dinnae envy him the task he has ahead."

Ewan snorted, though his arm tightened around her. "Is that why ye have insisted on trying to help him?"

"Aye," she replied without hesitation. "So many improvements can be made if he just had a little aid. We could forge a strong alliance, one that would benefit both our clans."

Ewan's expression darkened, and he pulled back to look at her properly. "Lil, they kidnapped ye. Took ye away from me. I spent the worst hours of my life fearing for yer safety, wondering if I'd ever see my beloved wife again."

The pain in his voice made her heart clench with guilt. She reached up to cup his face gently. "I ken that, and I'm sorry for the fear I caused ye. But it wasn't Bhaltair who ordered it. He was as furious as ye were."

Ewan was quiet for a long moment, his jaw working as he wrestled with conflicting emotions. Finally, he sighed. "I have to admit, I found him to be an intelligent, reasonable man. His uncle was a right bastard though who destroyed everything he

touched."

"Ye offered to help him, didn't ye?" Lileas asked, reading the reluctant admission in his eyes.

"Aye," Ewan said grudgingly. "Though he's too proud to accept much assistance."

"He thanked me for my detailed notes I gave him about fixing things around the keep, though. Said it was more practical help than anyone had offered him in months."

"There's only one real solution to his problems," Ewan said eventually, his voice thoughtful. "He needs a wife. Specifically, a wife with a substantial dowry."

Lileas sat up straighter, her eyes brightening with interest. "A wife with a dowry... that's actually quite sensible. But who would be willing to marry him in their current state?"

Ewan was quiet for a moment, then a wicked grin spread across his face. "Well, there's always the Mad MacKay Witch."

Lileas burst into laughter. "Ewan MacNeil! Ye cannot be serious!"

"Think about it," he continued, his eyes dancing with mischief. "Legend has it she has the largest dowry in all of Scotland. Enough gold to rebuild three keeps."

"Aye, and legend also has it she turns men into toads when they displease her," Lileas replied, still giggling. "Besides, no one has ever actually seen her. The MacKay insist she's real but her father says tis but a myth. Isn't she supposed to be older than the hills themselves?"

"Perhaps that's just what makes her so wealthy," Ewan said solemnly. "She's had

centuries to gather her fortune."

"Oh, ye're terrible," Lileas replied, swatting at his chest. "Poor Bhaltair Ferguson. Can ye imagine his face if we suggested such a match?"

"He might actually prefer the toads," Ewan replied, pulling her close again.

They both dissolved into laughter at the absurd image, the tension of the past few days finally melting away completely. Whatever the future held for Clan Ferguson, it certainly wouldn't involve the Mad MacKay Witch.

"Perhaps we should look for someone else," Lileas said finally, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes.

"Aye, perhaps we should," Ewan agreed, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "But not tonight. Tonight, I just want to hold my wife and be grateful she's safe in my arms."

"I love ye, Ewan MacNeil," she whispered against his chest.

"And I love ye, Lileas MacNeil. My stubborn, clever, generous-hearted wife."

As they settled into comfortable silence, both were content to simply exist in this moment of peace and happiness. Whatever challenges lay ahead, it could wait until tomorrow.

For now, they had each other, and that was enough.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 9:55 am

The sound of bairns' laughter rang through the stone corridors of MacNeil Keep as Lileas hurried about their chambers, trying to locate her eldest son's wooden sword whilst braiding holly into her hair for the Christmas feast.

"Mama, where's my sword?" five-year-old Alasdair called from beneath their great bed, where he appeared to be hunting through the rushes like a wee warrior on campaign.

"Try looking where ye last wielded it, lad," Lileas replied, though she was already searching the chamber. After five years of motherhood, she had yet to invent a contraption that could find lost playthings.

Four-year-old Finlay tottered past wearing one of his father's leather belts cinched around his small frame, the end trailing behind him like a tail. "I'm Papa!" he declared with great pride, as if the overlarge belt had somehow transformed him into the laird himself.

"Aye, ye've the look of him right enough," Lileas agreed with a smile, catching the belt before he could tumble over it. "But perhaps we should find yer tunic first."

The chamber door swung open and Ewan entered, baby Flora nestled safely in his arms. The bairn was swaddled in wool dyed MacNeil green, her dark hair crowned with a tiny circlet of winter berries that made her look like a Highland faerie princess.

"The Fergusons have arrived and are in the hall with Connor's brood," Ewan announced, then paused to survey the disorder around him. "Should I ask why our lad is beneath the bed?"

"Lost sword," Lileas replied.

"Found it!" Alasdair emerged in triumph, brandishing the wooden blade above his head before promptly losing his footing and colliding with his father's legs.

Ewan steadied himself whilst keeping hold of baby Flora, who cooed happily at the commotion. "Easy there, young warrior."

"Are our cousins below too?" Alasdair asked eagerly. "Can we go to them now? Please, Da?"

The sound of running feet and joyful shouts from the hall confirmed that Connor and Fiona's bairns were indeed already wreaking their own brand of merry havoc. The keep had grown loud with children over the years, and Christmas gatherings had become wonderfully riotous affairs.

"In a moment," Lileas said, finally wrestling Finlay into his proper tunic whilst he squirmed like an eel. "Once everyone is dressed properly and Finlay, nay, ye cannot carry Papa's dirk to feast."

Ewan rescued his blade from his youngest son's eager grasp. "When ye've grown a hand span taller, perhaps."

"Can we go now?" Alasdair pleaded. "I want to show the lads my sword skills!"

"Aye, away with ye both," Ewan relented, and his sons bolted from the chamber swift as deer.

Suddenly, the room was blessedly peaceful save for Flora's gentle burbling. Lileas and Ewan looked at each other across the now-quiet chamber and both breathed a sigh of relief.

"Merry Christmas, my love," Ewan said softly, shifting Flora to one arm so he could draw Lileas close.

"Merry Christmas, husband," she replied, reaching up to smooth his plaid. "Can ye believe it's been five years?"

"Five years of blessings I never dared dream of," he murmured against her hair. "A bonnie wife, three healthy bairns, peace with our neighbors, and more happiness than one man deserves."

"We've been fortunate indeed," Lileas whispered, gazing down at Flora's smiling face. "I never imagined such contentment when I first ran from marriage."

"And now ye run toward it daily," Ewan teased gently.

From somewhere down a corridor came Connor's booming voice: "Ewan! Get yerself here before the feast grows cold!"

They shared a laugh at Connor's impatience.

"Ready?" Ewan asked, offering Lileas his free hand.

"Ready," she replied, taking his hand in hers.

Together they made their way toward the great hall, baby Flora secure in Ewan's arms, their fingers intertwined, walking into the warmth and light of their Christmas feast surrounded by clan, allies, and the kind of joy that comes only from love freely given and gratefully received.

The End