



Kilty Until Proven Innocent

(Kilty Pleasures #4)

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Category: Historical

Description: To save his honor, he's going to have to learn to trust again.

Drummond Kennedy is the leader of the King's Hunters, the mysterious group of masked lawmen tasked with keeping the royal peace throughout Scotland. He is strict, noble, and has firm rules for his men when it comes to working with women. Mainly: Do not do it, and if you have to work with one, then for the love of God don't get involved with her. He's speaking from experience here.

Too bad he didn't take his own advice.

Because with the recent assassination attempt on the king, evidence points to the Hunters in general and Drummond in particular, and he's perilously close to losing not just his place in court, but also his head. His honor as well, which is galling, but likely secondary in concern after the whole head-logging-off part.

There's only one person who believes he's innocent and might possibly be in a position to help him regain said honor: sweet-tempered chambermaid Brigit who is turning out to be far more than he'd always suspected. Is it possible his long-time lover might actually have the ear of the Queen? As disconcerting as it is to consider working with a woman, Drummond is going to have to learn to trust again...before it's too late!

Warning: Your old book boyfriends will be jealous of the talented Hunter in this laugh-out-loud, super-spicy conclusion to the Kilty Pleasures series!

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Drummond Kennedy wondered if he was getting drunk.

‘Twas possible. It had been a long time since he’d been truly drunk—he hated the thought of allowing his guard down like that. But now...what did it matter?

Sitting alone in the small room he’d used for years to manage the King’s Hunter business, he scowled down at the cup of whisky on his desk. A pool of fiery amber contained in a battered mug. A liquid-filled island in a sea of – nothing.

Not a tablet, parchment, or missive to be seen.

All of his missions, complete.

All of his duties, done.

And the King had given him no new ones.

His three best Hunters had married off this year —one, two, three, right after each other. Did His Majesty blame him? There were other Hunters spread throughout Scotland on assignment. Drum could bring them back in, give them new missions.

Except there are no new missions.

Was it because the King thought the Hunters were no longer useful? Or was it about Drum himself?

Bah. Likely for the best there’s nae new missions. Naught for yer snoop to find.

He lifted the cup to his lips, glad to see his hands were still steady. He wasn't drunk.

Yet.

Thrice in the last month, since Craig had left for the Sinclairs, Drum had noticed things off in this room, or in the small chamber he occupied here in the palace. Someone had searched through his things, searched through the scrolls and records of the Hunters' missions.

The snoop.

And a dozen times or more, he'd felt someone's eyes on him. At court, while stalking the streets, eating supper— someone was watching him, and 'twas utterly galling that he couldn't determine who .

Were they enemies of the crown? If so, he'd lay down his life to protect the King and Queen.

But...

But as the weeks went by and fewer missions came from His Majesty, Drum began to suspect something else.

Christ, this whisky is tasting better. That's how ye ken ye've had enough, aye?

Scowling, Drum took another sip, just to say fook ye to his subconscious. He wished he hadn't finished off the last of the bottle.

Was it possible... He hated to consider it, but 'twas time to admit the possibility that the King no longer trusted him. Was it possible the unknown watcher, whoever had searched through his space, was sent...

Sent by the crown?

Did His Majesty have other agents, agents unknown to the leader of his Hunters? A few months ago, Drum would've laughed at the thought, but now... He'd thought the King told him everything, trusted him implicitly.

But mayhap he'd been wrong.

Mayhap he'd been wrong about everything .

He'd devoted his life to the King and to the idea of justice in Scotland. If he was no longer trusted by the crown, then what was he left with?

Worse than that, ye ken too much to no' be trusted .

Aye. The emptiness in his gut had naught to do with the whisky and lack of food. 'Twas dread.

He and the King had worked closely for years. If His Majesty no longer trusted him, then Drum couldn't be left alive.

Ye should run .

He scoffed, this time gulping the whisky and ignoring the burn. Run? Run where? Besides, why would he run? He'd lost everything once before, built it back into a reputation he was proud of.

If he ran, he'd be no better than Rebecca.

Well, shite. If we've reached the stage of drinking where ye're thinking of her , then ye must be drunk .

She was the reason he'd almost lost his good name once before, and he'd be damned afore he allowed it to happen again. If the King had lost trust with him, then Drum would face the consequences with his chin held high.

And if that meant an execution, aye, he'd face that. If that meant an assassin in the night with a knife for his heart, then... Well, he wasn't going to face that quietly, not without knowing 'twas His Majesty's command.

Oh God, his stomach was roiling. Mayhap 'twas because of the whole heavy drinking on an empty stomach . He should find food.

But where was safe?

Och, ye're becoming paranoid .

He needed to speak to the King, but the King had refused to meet with him for the last sennight. Proof Drum was no longer trusted—as if he needed further confirmation.

“Fook it,” he muttered. Sitting here alone, drinking, wasn't going to solve anything.

He planted his hands on the desk and pushed himself to his feet. The room spun only slightly , which was good news. He could likely manage to drag himself to the kitchens in one piece.

Just as he'd made the decision, the door swung open. He cursed, fumbling for his sword, but before he could manage to draw it— Damn his hide for being drunk! —he recognized the backside coming through the door.

His own arse plopped back into the chair. “Brigit?”

She gave the door a push with one hip as she navigated a half-turn.

“Hello lover.”

As always, the sight of her impish grin made his chest warm.

“I brought ye supper.”

Sure enough, she was holding a tray on which she balanced a bowl of something steaming and fragrant, as well as a jug of something. Drum’s attention, however, seemed stuck on the way her bodice was laced just a little too tight, pushing her breasts halfway to her chin.

“Are ye hungry?” she asked, edging around the desk to plop the tray in front of him.

“No’ anymore,” he mumbled, reaching for her and burying his face in her tits .

The little maid giggled and batted at the back of his head. “None of that, Drummond. Ye’ve been in here moping, aye?”

His response was muffled. “Nay.”

She only chuckled harder. “Ye have been. I ken ye, and the whole place smells of whisky. Come now, my lad, ye need to eat.”

Sighing in defeat, Drum acknowledged she was right. He straightened. “I am hungry. Is that whisky?”

For a moment, something like sorrow flashed across her freckled visage and he hated the thought his misfortune was so well-known even the palace maids were pitying him. But her smile was back quickly enough, and she reached for a cup and the jug.

“This is cool, clean water, love, exactly what ye need.” She plonked it in front of him. “And this is a chicken stew. I snuck an extra loaf of bread for ye.” Nudging the tray with her hip, Brigit drew his attention to the food again.

And Drum had to admit, the stew and thick bread was what he needed.

She was still holding out the water so he sighed again and took it. “Thank ye.”

Her fingers came to rest on his head, softly smoothing the hair near his ears. Her, “Of course, love,” was so quiet he almost didn’t hear it.

There was pity in her tone, and he hated it. Hated himself.

Brigit was...well, she was a bit of fun. More than a bit, he had to admit. She’d come to his bed—here, and in his chambers—more than a few times in the last year, and her cheer almost made his heart lighter .

Just the fact she was here today, caring for him... Och , a man didn’t need a pity fook. Or a pity stew-and-bread.

She kept her hand on him as he ate. “Ye have nae more missions?” she asked, her manner nonchalant.

When he glanced up at her in question, she smiled. “Usually this desk is strewn with yer planning.”

He supposed that was true. She’d been here more than a few times. There was naught suspicious about her question; she was just curious.

So he nodded, albeit cautiously.

“I’m...in between missions right now.” Christ, the whisky made thinking hard, did it no’? “Why?”

Brigit’s smile was brilliant, although it struck him as just a little false. “Just wondering.”

And before he could ask further questions, she nudged the tray out of the way and shimmied her arse up onto the desk. “So ye have nae current responsibilities? Nae where to be?”

Och, now her questions made sense. She was grinning as her hands played across his shoulders and traveled under his shirt. The lass wanted a tumble?

Well...naught else was going right in his life. He could oblige her this.

Drum took one last bite of the bread as his other hand slid up her leg, pushing her skirts aside.

“Nae where to be, lass,” he repeated, his voice surprisingly harsh. “Nae responsibilities.”

Brigit pulled him closer, brushing wee kisses across his forehead and cheeks. “Tell me about it, love. ”

Nay, he couldn’t do that. He still owed the King his allegiance, until His Majesty cut him free. ‘Twas the not knowing which was eating him up inside. The same as it had been with Rebecca.

Was he trusted? Was he being watched? Was he in danger?

And...if he’d lost his good name, did it matter?

Drum forced a smile, his fingers curling around Brigit's thigh.

"I can think of better things to do with my tongue than talk, lass."

This time her smile was real and a hint of a flush climbed her cheeks. Embarrassment or excitement? Either way, he could put it to good use.

His lips touched her skin and Brigit gasped then sighed.

Aye, he might not know what the future would bring, but here and now...he could do some good.

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Smiling happily down at her lap, Brigit decided she really was quite proud of her tiny penis.

It had taken some skill and imagination to figure out how to tweak the petals of the heather just slightly to appear to be purple-colored genitalia, and she suspected that only someone truly looking closely would be able to identify them for what they were.

If she was going to be forced to live the life of a lady-in-waiting, then by God, she was going to have fun with it! Months from now, when she used this cape as the days turned colder, she'd smirk quietly to herself, knowing what these flowers actually were.

In fact, she smirked quietly to herself now, imagining it. No one guessed that her chemises were decorated with delicate penises, as well as her stockings. 'Twas a delightful secret.

"What are you smirking about?"

Brigit's head jerked up. "I'm no' smirking!"

"Yes, you are."

This small antechamber was one the Queen herself used when meeting with her ladies...but today 'twas just two of her Angels; Brigit and the Lady Avaline. Since Avaline hadn't looked up from her own embroidery, Brigit decided Her Majesty was speaking to her.

With a huff, she stabbed her needle into the linen to keep it secured, then tossed it into her lap. “Fine, perhaps I am smirking. ”

The Queen, of course, smirked in response. Likely because she’d been right. “Is there a new gentleman in your life?”

“A new ruffian, more likely,” snorted Avaline quietly, scarred face still bent over her embroidery. “Brigit’s tastes dinnae run toward gentlemen .”

Since ‘twas true, Brigit grinned and stretched her legs out in front of her, crossing them at the ankles. “Nae new gentlemen—or ruffians.”

The Queen, who seemed a bit desperate for distraction—and she certainly would be, what with the recent news—nodded wisely. “The same old ones, hmm?”

Chuckling as she was expected to chuckle, Brigit reflected on the Queen’s speech, and how, even after all these years in Scone, the woman’s English tones still shone through. Still, the King had made a fine choice in his spouse, and the marriage had helped to unite Scotland.

Knowing what was expected of her, Brigit said nothing, but dropped one eyelid in an exaggerated wink which caused Her Majesty to chuckle, thank goodness.

“Did you hear that, Avaline?” the Queen mused, pulling another scroll toward her across the small writing desk before her. “You might take a lesson from Brigit.”

“A lesson in what, Yer Majesty?” the stately and somber former-novice asked, attention still on her sewing. “Revelry? Debauchery? Sin?”

“Fun, Ava!” burst out Brigit, well used to her partner’s morality sermons. “ Fun! ”

The other woman just hummed. Finally, she lifted her gaze, straightened her shoulders, and turned her embroidery toward the other two women in the room. “We were no’ put on this earth for fun .”

Eying her partner’s embroidery—it seemed to be a depiction of St. Stephen’s martyring, complete with gushes of blood from the arrow wounds and an expression of near-ecstasy on the poor bastard’s face—Brigit murmured, “Well, ye werenae.”

She glanced down at the tiny penises she’d been working on. Far more interesting, far more fun.

As a general rule, penises were more fun than martyrdom.

Although, in her years working with Avaline, Brigit had learned some very interesting martyrdom stories. Some of which involved penises.

Lady Avaline Klyne had been born to wealth and privilege, a younger daughter of a prominent family. Although her father had secured a marriage contract for her, young Avaline had opted to join the church. With her schooling and devout religious opinions, she would’ve been perfect as a nun.

But somewhere along the way, she’d been horrible scarred by fire, then wound up as a Queen’s Angel. She’d been Brigit’s partner all these years. When Isabel had been part of their group, things had been easier, because, as a mother of an Earl, that lady could always make peace between Brigit’s coarse ways and Avaline’s judgmental nature. But now that Isabel was happily married and settled into her son’s estate, Brigit rarely saw her .

Which meant Her Majesty herself was the only one to soothe Avaline’s ruffled feathers, or Brigit’s constant boredom.

Speaking of boredom, Brigit drew on a recent subject. “Any word on the assassin, Yer Majesty? What direction are the investigations looking?”

A flash of regret crossed the Queen’s face, before she sighed and knocked the scroll in her hand against the small desk. “Naught, I am afraid.”

“Nae news?” Avaline asked, proving she was paying attention.

“My husband...does not trust easily,” the Queen finally said. “With the possibility of his Hunters compromised, he is not certain to whom he should turn.”

“No’ all of the King’s Hunters are under suspicion, Yer Majesty,” Avaline reminded her. “Only their leader, Drummond Kennedy.”

Brigit winced at the reminder, lifting her embroidery to cover the expression.

The Queen murmured, “Yes, that is the problem.”

When Avaline hummed, the Queen continued. “My husband believed he could trust Drummond with his life—with more than his life. As the leader of the King’s Hunters, Drummond is trusted as much as I trust you, my Angels. But to think he might be responsible for this attempt on His Majesty’s life...”

The Queen shook her head with something that looked like despair, and tossed down the scroll.

Avaline sat on the hard bench with her shoulders as straight as a board, a sympathetic expression on her face. “I’m sorry, Yer Majesty. That must be a terrible blow. ”

“If only we could find evidence exonerating Drummond—”

“Who else could it be, Yer Majesty?” Avaline asked bluntly. “Only those closest to the King kened how often he traveled that corridor at night. Only one of his personal men could have kened his route.”

The Queen wasn’t the only one who sighed in despair.

Brigit lifted her embroidery higher and tried to duck behind it, pretending to focus on the tiny purple penises she was stabbing inefficiently with her needle, hoping it would hide her expression.

She wasn’t even certain what her expression was.

Sorrow, certainly, for the King’s grief, knowing his trusted friend and advisor had tried to kill him.

Fear, for what Drummond might do next.

And her own heartbreak, knowing her long-time lover was guilty of such a sin.

She would’ve never guessed Drum capable of such a thing, not the way he always spoke so highly of the King. But as Avaline said...who else was capable?

A fortnight ago, the King had almost been killed by an assassin’s trap. Few people knew His Majesty visited the royal nursery every evening he was in the palace; ‘twas better that way, and no one would expect a male monarch to be involved in the lives of his children like that.

But on this night, a tripwire had been set up, with a crossbow tucked into one of the darkened niches along the corridor leading back to his chambers. It had to have been recent, which meant ‘twas someone who had access to the palace, because otherwise a servant would risk triggering it.

As 'twas, Avaline had almost been skewered herself when she pushed His Majesty out of the way of the bolt. Thank God and all his saints she'd happened to have been passing along the corridor then!

Aye, it had been a sloppy assassination attempt, one which anyone could have triggered, and which had little hope of actually hitting the King. But it had been set up in his home, along a corridor everyone believed to be safe.

The culprit was most definitely someone Their Majesties had trusted, and Drummond Kennedy had access to weaponry, to the palace, and knew the King's schedule.

"But one thing I keep coming back to," murmured the Queen, "is why? My husband has known Drummond for years, and trusted him almost as long. They have been together for so long, why would Drummond betray him now?"

"Money," answered Avaline immediately. When they turned her way—the Queen interested, Brigit incredulous—the slender woman nodded certainly. "The Hunters have been retiring at alarming rates, aye? Three—nay, four—married in the last year or two? He is losing his men. Perhaps he is thinking of retirement as well, and when one of the King's enemies approached him—"

"Ye think Drummond would kill the King—his friend—for money?"

It wasn't until the words had blurted from Brigit's lips that she realized she was defending him. When Avaline frowned at her, Brigit flushed, but turned to meet the Queen's conflicted gaze.

"Yer Majesty, ye said yerself Drummond was a trusted advisor and friend of yer husband."

The Englishwoman nodded. "Yes. Was. Something has happened to change that, and

I cannot guess what it might be.”

“Gold is a reasonable explanation,” Avaline pointed out, far too calmly. “He has nae home of his own, aye? He left his clan to follow the King, so nae holding, nae way to retire. If he was offered money to kill His Majesty...”

When she trailed off suggestively, the Queen shook her head and slumped back against her tall chair. “Is it bad that I almost hope that is the case? ’Twould mean it had been someone else’s idea to betray my husband, and Drummond was acting on purely selfish motives.”

“Ye would prefer the assassin’s motives be selfish?” Brigit asked in surprise.

The Queen nodded. “’Twould be better than having to explain to my husband that his oldest friend hates him enough to murder him.”

Brigit winced at the word murder .

Had Drummond truly turned on the King? Or had he done it, as Avaline suggested, purely for profit? And would it matter either way?

Ye’ve been sleeping with a traitor .

Still, of all the people in Scone, Brigit was likely the person who knew Drummond the best, outside of his own men. A year ago, after months of flirting, she allowed him to finally convince her to come to his bed. She hadn’t expected anything earth-shattering, but she’d been surprised.

Very surprised.

The man could use his tongue.

And his fingers.

And his cock.

He was, not to be too blunt about it, a fucking amazing lover, one who cared about her pleasure. Often he made certain she found release two or three times before thinking of his own pleasure, and Brigit had never been with a man like him before.

A man who gained pleasure from her pleasure.

But the results were impossible to deny, and she was certain his responses to her own seductions were honest and true.

So, aye, 'twas heartbreaking to think all these months there'd been something lurking beneath Drummond's surface that she hadn't been able to see. Something dark, something twisted. Anger, bitterness, greed? Why would he turn traitor?

But...

Had he turned traitor ?

The Queen seemed certain he had, but until they could find evidence against him, the King was reluctant to punish the man he'd trusted.

So Brigit had taken it upon herself to find said evidence...and been unlucky so far. Her interlude with Drummond the other evening had felt...wrong. Sullied.

She'd gone to his office—the office of the head of the King's Hunters—looking for evidence, but found a drunk Drummond instead. Thinking she could use his state to pump him for information, she'd been surprised when he seemed to notice the direction of her questions.

He could not know who she really was, who she really worked for.

So she'd distracted him, and it had worked. It always worked.

And the dear man had brought her to climax twice with only his tongue, before falling asleep holding her. She'd stroked his hair as he snored, pillowed on her breasts, and wondered how many other men in the world were caring enough to forego their own pleasure like that.

Or had he suspected her, thanks to her questions, and was trying to waylay suspicion?

But Avaline was right: there were a limited number of people who not only had access to weaponry like that, but knew how to use it. And knew the King's schedule.

It had to be one of the King's Hunters, and Drummond was the only one left in Scone right now.

"My Angels," the Queen began quietly, and Brigit startled, realizing she'd been staring unseeing at her embroidery. "I need you."

Brigit straightened at the same time Avaline lowered her own stitching. Her partner always managed to look calm and composed, and now was no different; Avaline's scars only twitched slightly as she settled her expression into one of slight interest.

The Queen held their gazes, one after the other as she straightened. "My husband has no one to trust at this moment. He has requested help from the guards, but the investigations are turning up naught. He wants me—and by extension you—to find who is responsible for this. He knows I trust my Angels."

As Avaline nodded, Brigit took a deep breath, readying herself for what she had to do. "I'll do it," she announced quietly. "I...ken Drummond. I'll find the evidence we

need to execute him.”

Just saying the words sent a spike of sorrow and helplessness through her chest, and something must’ve shown in her eyes or in her voice, because the Queen’s voice turned pitying.

“Oh, Brigit. I am sorry.”

Avaline, on the other hand, seemed excited. “He’s one of yer ruffians? Of course he is—ye always did have a soft spot for a tall, braw warrior with fine forearms.”

And one who smiled softly when he was alone, and who cared about his lover’s pleasure.

It wasn’t enough to base a relationship on, but Brigit would always remember Drummond Kennedy as the man she’d first fallen for.

“Dinnae ye see?” Avaline was still speaking. “Ye can go to his bed, find the evidence we need. Bring it here, and we can tell the King we’ve found the traitor. Mayhap set a trap. Ye must seduce him, Brigit. ‘Tis the best way to get close to him.”

It was the Queen who spoke in her defense. “Let us not whore out our fellow Angels too often, Avaline.”

The tall and slender woman rolled her eyes and picked up her embroidery. “Brigit needs none of my help.”

It stung more than usual .

Brigit had been on many missions for the Queen with Avaline and Isabel at her side. But since Isabel’s retirement, their little trio-turned-duo had been relegated to Her

Majesty's side. Brigit missed the excitement of a mission, of trusting her fellow Angels.

In the time since Isabel had left them, Brigit had become bored .

Avaline, as well, had changed. The other woman had always been pious and proper, but now she was at court more often, paying attention to the political intrigues and nuances and who was angling for more power...and she'd become more judgmental.

So Brigit forced herself to tell the truth. "Seducing Drummond willnae be enough. He's let none of his secrets slip—he claims loyalty to the King, and wouldnae tell such things to a mere bedmate."

Avaline snorted as the Queen studied her quietly. Finally she said, "I take it you speak from experience. Fine then. Perhaps...you could offer to help? Do you think you could insinuate yourself into his life outside of the bedroom?"

Slowly, Brigit nodded as she considered. "Aye...I think that could work. But what—?"

"He would want to clear his name, aye?" Avaline offered without looking up. "Offer to help with his investigations. While he thinks he's being clever, ye'll be gathering evidence against him."

If there is evidence against him .

Brigit wasn't certain if she actually believed he might be innocent, or if she just didn't want to think of herself as so easily duped .

The Queen was nodding eagerly. "Bring him the crossbow and bolt!"

Avaline gasped. “‘Tis evidence! I thought ‘twas destroyed?”

“No, my husband would not allow it. Surely Drummond will react to holding the evidence of his crime in his hands, and you can bring us the news of that reaction. It might be all we need to convict him.”

Heart aching, Brigit nodded in agreement. It would work. It would be devastating, but it would work. For certes, if she handed Drummond the bolt he’d used to try to kill the King, he would react.

But what if he doesnae? What if he isnae the traitor? He’ll be confused .

Well, if he was confused, then she’d be thrilled.

Or he’s verra, verra good at playacting .

Brigit hid her sigh, hating arguing with her own subconscious. ‘Twas bad enough arguing with Avaline.

It willnae be the first time ye’ve had to go deeper undercover to find evidence ye need .

Aye, that was true.

Unlike Avaline or Isabel, Brigit hadn’t been born a lady. Her mother had been a palace maid, her father a man-at-arms to the old King. She’d been raised working in the kitchens, then as her skill with coiffures had become known, she’d come to the attention of the Queen.

Her association with royalty had begun slowly; at first, ‘twas her ability to bring Her Majesty the palace gossip which had made her a favorite. Brigit had set out to find

out all the best and most interesting gossip, and if that meant sticking her nose where it didn't belong, well then. 'Twas worth it to gain the praise of the English Queen.

It was only after several years of this that she learned the Queen had her own cadre of agents: spies who worked for her in many capacities.

The Queen's Angels.

Some Angels were proficient in fighting, in battle skills and weaponry.

Some were highly intelligent, who used their wits and wisdom for the sake of a united Scotland.

And some, like Brigit, were known for their skills with people : gossip, flirtation, infiltration. Spying .

She'd been given assignments which took her all over Scotland and twice down into England itself. She'd seen much, but Scone and Edinburgh would always be her home. And most importantly, the Queen trusted her. Trusted her to do what was right, trusted her honor and loyalty...and trusted her to save Scotland.

It was a heavy responsibility, but one Brigit adored.

She would do this. She would find the evidence against Drummond, even if it meant breaking her own heart.

So she took a deep breath and met the Queen's gaze. "I'll no' let ye down, Yer Majesty."

As her Queen nodded, eyes softening slightly, there was a knock at the door.

Brigit reached for a dagger hidden at her waist at the same time she saw Avaline reach for her bodice.

An Angel's reflexes are never dulled.

The Queen only hesitated a moment before calling, "Yes? "

The door swung open to reveal Lawrence, the royal household's seneschal. "Yer Majesty, I have yer afternoon wine."

After waiting for the Queen to nod in welcome, the older man shuffled in, holding the silver tray. Brigit, tucking her blade away once more, jumped to her feet.

"Let me help ye, Larry," she said as she took the heavy tray from him. "For certes, someone of yer stature doesnae need to be lifting and toting." She accompanied the admonishment with a saucy wink, to show she meant no insult.

But the seneschal straightened regally. "I am honored to do it, my lady, and my name is Lawrence ."

"Och, is it?" Brigit said brightly, pouring the wine for the Queen with a cheeky smile. "I'll try to remember that, Larry."

The Queen stifled her own snort of laughter and managed a serene nod to the seneschal. "Thank you, Lawrence. What would we do without you?"

"I'm certain I dinnae ken," he replied stiffly.

"Perhaps I should speak with my husband about a reward for your duties?" the Queen began gently. "A man of your years is surely looking to retire. Perhaps a young wife to keep you occupied?"

While the seneschal's expression had turned acerbic at the mention of retirement, the idea of a young wife caused said expression to melt into contemplation. But all he said was, "I live to serve, Yer Majesty," before bowing his way out.

As the door closed, Brigit's giggles escaped. "He was no' happy at the suggestion of ye giving his power to someone younger, Yer Majesty." She poured herself a glass of the wine as well.

"Yes," she chuckled in response. "But you saw he did not mind the offer of a wife?"

Avaline thrust herself to her feet with a disapproving hum. "Who would marry someone like that?" she snapped as she took the glass from Brigit's hand.

Brigit shrugged good-naturedly and poured herself another. "Someone who saw the benefits of marriage—and the marriage bed—and was looking for a royal reward." She winked at the Queen. "Want me to start asking—discretely—among the chambermaids?"

Her Majesty's eyes twinkled teasingly as she shot a glance at Avaline. "Nay, but thank you. I will put the suggestion to my husband and see if he has another in mind for the seneschal position—it is a heavy responsibility, to be in charge of the royal household. Lawrence deserves a reward."

"A reward better than marriage," muttered Avaline, plopping herself down.

"Oh, Avaline," the Queen sighed, finally addressing the woman's snark. "Marriage is not the horror you have in your mind. Yes, it is the lot in life of most women, and few are lucky enough to find love within its bounds. But it is a partnership, in the same way you are partnered with your fellow Angels. Having a spouse you can trust and lean on is one of the gifts of life."

Avaline just dropped her gaze to her wine and didn't respond, a sure sign she didn't agree but didn't want to argue with Her Majesty. Brigit, meanwhile, was considering the Queen's words.

A partnership.

Aye, that was what the King and Queen had. 'Twas what Brigit's own parents had had; a partnership where each trusted the other to do what was right and necessary to care for the family.

But Brigit had never considered that life for herself.

For the one thing, she already had responsibilities and danger as a Queen's Angel...how could she find time for a husband who wasn't already part of that life? And she couldn't imagine limiting herself to only one man for the rest of her life!

But a treasonous little voice in the back of her mind whispered: Ye could if he were like Drummond, and cared about ye .

Well, aye. But Drummond was a traitor, which just proved she was shite at choosing men, right?

The Queen sipped her wine, then hummed in satisfaction. "Sit, Brigit. Let us make plans to trap a traitor."

The reminder fell like a bucket of cold water splashed over her, and Brigit plopped back down onto the bench, cradling the goblet between her palms. The surface of the wine reflected the despair in her eyes.

"Aye, Yer Majesty," she managed. "We'll take down Drummond Kennedy. We'll keep the King safe."

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Drummond's sword slammed against the other man's, and when his opponent fell back, he pressed his advantage. Sweat streamed from his temple, but he was used to being unable to swipe at it, thanks to the heavy helm he wore.

His sparring partner—one of the palace guards—stumbled, and in a wild thrust, swept his sword at Drummond's knees. Expecting the blow, Drum leapt, kicking at the man's wrist. The panting guard dropped his sword, holding up both palms in a symbol of defeat.

“Well done, Hunter,” he huffed, then dropped his hands to his knees as he bent over, sucking in air like a bellows. “I dinnae ken how ye can manage to fight in that helmet. I can barely manage to stay upright!”

Rather than pulling off the constricting steel, Drummond slid his sword back into his scabbard and stooped to pick up his opponent's weapon. “Lots of practice, lad,” he said, offering the blade. “Ye show potential. If ye're ever interested in joining the Hunters, come see—I mean, ye ought to visit the head man. He always has use for strong fighters like yerself.”

Chuckling faintly, the other man slid his own sword away as he straightened. “The head of the Hunters isnae the King's favorite man right now. If it's all the same to ye, I'll wait to see if there are any King's Hunters next month, afore I commit.”

As the watchers chuckled and began to speculate on guilt, Drummond forced himself to nod and slap the other man on the back as if he wasn't bothered by such talk.

As if he wasn't the man in question.

This is why ye left on the helm, remember?

He'd needed this sparring practice to work out some of the anger and fear which had settled in his chest, and he'd known he'd not find a worthy opponent if his identity was known. So he'd kept on the helm, and it had worked.

The scowling visage on the piece of armor worked to keep away all but the bravest as he stalked back toward his small office. Beneath its shadow, he could be any of the King's Hunters; the helms were identical except for the bearer's crest or initials carved inside.

When Drum reached the familiar corridor, he glanced right and left, assuring himself he was alone. Then he reached up and pulled off the damnable thing and stared down at it.

The helms had been his idea all those years ago when he'd helped found the King's Hunters. Over a decade, now. He'd reasoned, and His Majesty had agreed, that the Hunters would become a sort of faceless force of peace throughout Scotland. They were acting in the King's stead, essentially, working for truth, justice, and Mam's haggis pie.

If each Hunter wore his own colors and fought under his own name, then all the people would remember would be "that Kennedy warrior" or "that McIlvain warrior". By dressing them in the King's colors and cloaking them in the anonymity of the helmet, they became extensions of His Majesty, capable of carrying out his orders without opposition .

These days, that anonymity was keeping Drummond safe. Apparently everyone in the palace knew he was under suspicion, and by wearing the helm when he was sparring with the guards, he'd let them believe he was just a nameless, low-level Hunter.

He'd hated it, but 'twas for the best.

If only ye could clear yer name !

Aye, the recent assassination attempt was no secret, but because Drummond had lost the trust of the King—and thus his advisors—he had no information to investigate. He'd heard all the rumors about the tripwire and the crossbow bolt in the corridor, and knew why 'twas damning.

There were few others in the palace who knew the King's routines and had access to those places.

But how could he defend himself if he had no place to begin investigating?

And would His Majesty believe him if he did?

Deep in his thoughts, Drummond wasn't thinking when he pushed open the door to his office.

He only had a moment to register the second person in the small room, but he swung the helmet out from under his arm and sprang, ready to defend himself.

It was Brigit.

He was already checking his attack when she flipped her forearm into position to block, catching his helmet and swiping it out of the way as she spun about. If he hadn't pulled back, she might not have had the strength for such a move, but she'd surprised him .

Where had a palace maid learned such a trick? Or had she been lucky?

“What are ye doing here?” he barked to cover his confusion.

Brigit’s easy smile slid back into place and she cocked her hip saucily, one hand caressing her curves. “I’m happy to see ye too, love. I thought ye might use some cheering up.”

Despite his sour mood, his cock stirred beneath his kilt and Drummond shook his head. Aye, he needed her particular brand of distraction, but...

“I’m foul, lass. Ye dinnae want me in yer bed right now.” He tossed the helm atop his cleared desk, the sight making him angry all over again.

The noise she made was somewhere between a laugh and a snort. “Who said aught about my bed? I’ve never kenned ye to be picky.”

She’d really come to him for sex? He twisted to send her a quirked brow. He must’ve been right to question her, because her cheeky grin eased into something more natural looking as she chuckled and lifted one hand, palm out. “Aright, aright. Ye’re no’ in the mood to make me scream yer name, I understand.”

Christ, she was tempting him on purpose, was she not? “Lass...” he growled in warning. He was in no mood to play.

“So instead I brought ye a gift,” she declared. With that, Brigit moved her other hand from behind her back.

Drum’s gaze latched on the crossbow bolt she clutched—she’d been hiding it since he’d stepped into the room?—and instinctively he reached for his dagger.

“Ye dinnae trust easily, do ye, love?” she chuckled, sashaying forward to offer him the bolt.

“Nay,” he rasped, gaze locked on the weapon. “No’ since...”

Rebecca isnae here. Ye dinnae even ken if she’s still alive. Stop allowing her to haunt all yer interactions with women .

His friend and fellow Hunter Barclay had told him that, years ago. But then again, Barclay had never had any trouble with women trusting him , or getting what he wanted from them. Drummond Kennedy on the other hand...everyone knew he didn’t trust women.

“Here,” Brigit offered quietly, her green gaze sincere. “Ye’ll want this.”

He frowned down at it, torn between pulling her to him and claiming her lips...and urging her out the door so he could drink alone. His chest was a roil of emotions, none of them good, and the sparring hadn’t helped to calm him nearly enough.

“What is it?” he finally growled. “Why should I want it?”

She offered it again. “’Tis the crossbow bolt which nearly killed the King.”

And just like that, the world shifted for Drummond.

With a fierce burst of joy , he snatched the thing from her palm, and didn’t bother to hide his excitement when he lifted his gaze to hers. “Truthfully? Ye are no’ lying to get my hopes up?”

But Brigit seemed startled by his response. “Lie? Why would I lie? Aye, this is the bolt from the trap. ”

A grin spilt Drum’s face, and she sucked in a breath—surprised?—at the sight of it. “This is brilliant, lass! I could kiss ye!”

Instead of offering herself to claim the prize, Brigit actually took a step back, her expression settling into wariness. “Ye’re...pleased, then?”

“Pleased?” He lifted the bolt, studying it. “This is exactly what I’ve been praying for.”

“For yer—” She bit down on whatever she’d been about to say. “For the evidence to make its way to ye?”

“For a chance ,” he breathed. “I’ve been shut out of this investigation, and it’s been eating me up inside. Someone tried to kill the King and I cannae protect him if I dinnae ken who ‘twas.”

She was silent for a long moment as he turned the bolt this way and that, examining it. When, grinning, he finally lifted his face, he was surprised to find her chewing her lower lips as she studied him. As if she wasn’t certain what to think of him?

Or his reaction to the bolt?

“Lass?” he suddenly thought to ask. “Where did ye get this? How did ye get this?”

“Och,” she declared a little too breezily, suddenly spinning away with a wave of her hand to stare out the window. “Nae one notices me! I have all sorts of connections, ken all sorts of people.”

Well, that wasn’t surprising. Brigit was a likable lass, and he’d seen the way the guards watched her walk away. He knew he had no claim to her, and that she hadn’t been a virgin when they’d come together, but the knowledge other men found her desirable had always irritated him .

Had she used that desirability to get the bolt?

If so, she was no better than Rebecca, using her body to get what she wanted.

Och, shut yer gobhole, ye dobber. Brigit brought ye the bolt so ye could solve this mystery. She's helping ye, ye arsehole !

Actually...his subconscious was right.

Dinnae sound so surprised .

“Thank ye,” he said quietly, lifting the bolt once more to study. “If I can trace this to its origin, I might be able to save my neck.”

“Yer neck?”

He glanced up to see her watching him in the reflection of the expensive glass window. “I ken I'm the main suspect in the attempted assassination, and I understand why.” He kept his voice low, his tone even. “But I didnae do it, and it's been killing me that there's an assassin loose and I am nae longer trusted to protect His Majesty.”

Green eyes held his in reflection for a long moment before she finally dropped her chin in acknowledgement and looked away.

She hadn't said she believed him.

But she hadn't condemned him either, not like the guards had during sparring.

Drummond's fingers curled around the bolt, and he had a swift realization: He needed to prove his innocence to the King, aye, to save his name and his honor. But he wanted to prove himself to Brigit just as much.

She cleared her throat and he glanced over to see her pretending interest in the

tapestry of the crest above the hearth .

She tilted her head. “So, how...how will ye use it to investigate?”

“I dinnae ken,” he murmured, twirling it in his fingers. “It bears nae obvious markings noting its maker. But there are a limited number of smiths in the capitol who could make such a weapon. Perhaps, if I were to take it to each of them—”

“ We .” She spun about and his eyebrows rose in surprise. She gentled her tone. “I’m coming with ye.”

Och, of course. She’d likely borrowed the bolt and needed to be reassured it would be returned. She did not trust him.

But he was startled to discover he didn’t feel disappointment at the realization. Or rather, he did, but ‘twas tempered with a quiet sort of happiness. Drum took a moment to examine the reason and decided ‘twas because she hadn’t given up on him. She insisted on investigating with him, and he could not deny he liked the idea.

So he nodded.

“I...would like that verra much, lass.”

She took a step closer, her green eyes hesitant, somehow. “Ye dinnae mind?”

“Nay, no’ at all. Ye might have some insights I dinnae have.”

“Like...” Another step and her tongue swiped across her lower lip. “Where to look?”

Drummond’s breath caught in his chest. “Could ye show me where this was found, Brigit?” God’s Wounds, he hated to sound as if he was begging. “I could no’ find any

information about it, but if I could see the place in the corridor where the ambush took place, see where the crossbow had been set up, it might reveal a clue.”

She halted, only an arm’s reach from him, and cocked her head, studying him. “Ye...really dinnae ken? Where it happened?”

Blowing out a breath, he dragged his hand through his hair. “I dinnae ken aught , and ‘tis frustrating as hell!”

Her hand closed around his, which held the bolt, and her serious green gaze met his.

“Come with me.”

And then she was tugging him out into the corridor. Drummond’s heart sped up in a ridiculous way and he twisted her hold so their fingers twined together, the crossbow bolt pressed against their palms.

She glanced down once, then up at him, the faintest touch of a grin on her lips.

It wasn’t her usual smile, but it felt more...real.

“Thank ye, Brigit,” he rasped, and her smile grew slightly before she tucked her chin down as if embarrassed.

He didn’t have time to consider her strange reaction. All he knew was, for the first time in a sennight, he had hope .

“This is it,” she finally said, tugging him to a stop. “The tripwire was there.” She pointed to an empty spot in the corridor. “It ran up that wall, and the crossbow was tucked in there.”

He dropped her hand, leaving her holding the bolt, and stepped closer to examine the location in silence. The distant sounds of the palace—servants bustling, calls by the guards out in the courtyard—faded, as Drummond’s focus narrowed.

“It would’ve been dark,” he murmured, twisting his head to peer up into the niche above one of the sconces. “Difficult to see, assuming this torch wasnae lit. The shadows from there ...” He twisted to peer along the corridor, checking the sightlines. “No’ impossible, no’ for someone trained to look for danger; but the average person just walking along?”

Cursing quietly, he shook his head and stepped back, peering down at the floor. “This is where the line was attached?” Dropping into a crouch, he studied the wall. “There would’ve needed to be a hook or eye or something to turn the direction of the force upward, along the wall.” He tipped his head back, staring up at the niche. “I dinnae see how such a thing would work, otherwise.”

Suddenly, Brigit was beside him, falling to her knees on the stones. “I believe the evidence was all collected shortly after the attack.”

He was in no hurry to stand, to leave her. Crouched here with her in the dim afternoon light, he felt a sort of companionship. As if they were working together on a mission.

Nay! Ye ken ye’ve always refused to work with another woman !

But Brigit made his heart lighter...

“I’m glad,” he finally said. “But it’d be helpful to ken how far off the ground the tripwire had been. I dinnae see any evidence of anchors, but even that information...
”

She bit her lip, studying the mortar between the stones. One hand reached out in hesitation and tapped the wall about six inches off the ground.

“Christ’s ballocks,” he groaned, rocking back on his heels. “That high? ‘Twas a guaranteed trigger, then, and the bastard got lucky ‘twas the King who tripped it. Anyone coming along could have stepped on it.”

“Which means ‘twas set up shortly before he passed by.”

“Which means ‘twas someone who kened his schedule,” Drummond growled, scrubbing his hand over his face. “Thank fook he was pushed out of the way and nae one else tripped the bloody thing. Who was it who saved him?”

She hesitated, watching him with that uncertain expression again. “A—one of the Queen’s ladies. She was passing along the corridor on her way to the chapel, is what I heard.”

“Aye, I heard similar gossip.” He sighed, then scooped up her hand in his. “Well, I suppose we all have a reason to pray tonight, to thank God for sending her along. If she hadnae noticed the trap, or if she had triggered the trap, we’d be in mourning right now.”

Slowly, her fingers twined through his again. “Aye,” she finally said. “Is there aught else ye’d find helpful to see?”

Drummond stood and used his hold on her to tug her to her feet as well. She stumbled slightly, and he instinctively wrapped one arm around her waist, pulling her safely against him .

Brigit fit against his chest as if she belonged there. The hand holding the bolt was trapped between them, but she’d angled it last minute so neither of them would be

hurt. Now she tipped her head back to present him with those plump lips and that freckled nose.

His chest tightened.

“Thank ye, lass,” he managed, even as she pressed closer, rising on her toes. “This was helpful.”

“I can be more helpful,” she whispered, inching closer.

“Aye, I ken it.” Unconsciously, his lips lowered toward hers. “But I think allowing ye to help in that manner will only distract me. Mayhap ‘tis yer intention?”

When she smiled, he had a flash of the real Brigit, the one he’d fallen for all those months ago. The lass she was when she came to his bed.

“Ye dinnae sound as if ye’re fighting my offer too hard, Drum,” she breathed.

“Ye ken it,” he growled a moment before his lips claimed hers.

Brigit had always been an enthusiastic lover, and this kiss was no different. But today, after the uncertainties of the last sennight, having her in his arms felt more important, somehow.

She met him head-on, her fingers working free of his so she could clutch at his belt, pulling him closer and rocking her hips forward, cradling him...right where he wanted to be cradled. Drum didn’t bother stopping his little groan of need as his cock jumped.

Her lips curled under his, and he stepped forward, forcing her back against the stones. She didn’t object, but pulled her hand from between them so she could reach up and

wrap her fingers through the too-long hair at his nape as her teeth caught his lower lip.

Aye , he wanted to growl, but she'd stolen his breath.

He wanted this. He needed this.

He was ready to push up her skirts, push aside his kilt, and take her right there in the corridor...and judging from her panting, she was as ready for it as he was.

But a sound in the distance caught his attention and he cursed himself for allowing his guard to fall so easily. Struggling to control his breathing, he pulled away as the footsteps came closer.

Brigit blinked up at him and a part of him wanted to crow smugly that she seemed so disoriented, so needy . His kiss had done that, affected her the way she'd affected him!

But he had a job to do, an investigation which might very well save his life.

"The bolt, lass," he managed to gasp, knowing 'twas still squeezed between them. "I need..."

"Aye?" She rocked her hips forward, pressing her warmth into his cock, and he groaned again, knowing how wet she'd be for him. "What do ye need?"

"I need..." He licked his lips, trying to focus as the interloper approached. "I need to learn where it came from. I need to visit the smiths."

She blinked, then blinked again, and blew out a breath which sounded like disappointment. Then she slid down him, supporting herself on the stones behind, and

swallowed .

“Let us start with the castle armorer then. He might have some answers.”

Slowly, Drummond’s smile grew as he stepped back and offered her his hand. “The armorer. Brilliant.” And ‘twas the truth; he would’ve trotted all over the city, interviewing smiths, but her idea was to eliminate the worst possibility first, and he respected it.

Brigit finished adjusting her clothing, then tucked the bolt into the ties at her waist. He respected that she wanted to keep it close, because she clearly wasn’t certain about this.

Och, she was certain enough about the kissing , he knew, but not about his innocence. And he respected that, too, because he was a man who didn’t trust easily. In fact, he was beginning to suspect that Brigit was the first woman in a very long time whom he could trust.

“Shall we?” she asked haughtily, weaving her fingers through his.

And Drummond cherished the spike of hope in his chest.

Mayhap ye’ll get to keep yer head after all, laddie.

If only he could give his heart to Brigit.

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“Dinnae give up hope, lass. We still have a few more guards to interview.”

Drummond’s soothing assurance jerked Brigit’s attention from the list of names at which she’d been staring. She forced a carefree smile.

“Of course! Just because we’ve gone through ninety percent of them and they can all produce their crossbows means naught! For certes these last men will be the guilty parties!”

He snorted at her overly optimistic tone, as she’d intended, but in truth, she was beginning to lose hope—

Hope? Nay, keep yer story straight. Ye dinnae actually hope he’ll find a guilty man here, do ye ?

Sighing, Brigit pinched the bridge of her nose and straightened, stretching her back.

Her idea to visit the royal armorer had been a good one, of course. The man had immediately identified the bolt as coming from his supply, and, not for the first time, Brigit had wished she’d thought to take the crossbow as well, to have him identify it.

She’d been certain that having Drummond present the bolt to the armorer would elicit some sort of response from one or the other. But instead, both had acted as if they’d never seen the damned thing before. The armorer confirmed these bolts had been issued to the guards and royal men-at-arms instead of thrusting himself to his feet, pointing at Drum, and yelling Aha! Back for more weapons with which to murder the King, eh, fellow conspirator ?

Sometimes the bad guys were so inconsiderate.

But...was Drummond a bad guy?

The plan had been so simple; show him the bolt, allow him to incriminate himself, drag him to the Queen to confess. But Drummond had been happy to see the bolt, not frightened. Excited, even. Once she explained what 'twas, he'd seen it as a chance to clear his name!

Something an innocent man would do.

When he'd asked to see the location of the trap, Brigit had purposefully taken him to an area of the corridor very much like where the ambush had been set, but about a dozen feet away. Drum hadn't shown any indication he knew 'twas the incorrect spot, and instead gone over the stones with a careful eye, looking for the same minutiae Brigit herself would have.

The more time she spent with him trying to hunt down the assassin, the more Brigit came to believe that Drum was telling the truth; that he didn't know anything about the attempt on the King's life.

If he was innocent, she wasn't sure how she felt about it.

Well, of course she was pleased if her lover turned out not to be a traitor. But if it wasn't Drum who set that elaborate ambush, who?

That's what ye're trying to determine, remember ?

"The armorer said the bolt came from a weapon issued to the guards," Drum was saying, pacing behind his desk in the small office he used. "It has to belong to one of them."

“Or he removed it from the armory,” she pointed out .

“He?” Drum asked, coming to a stop and placing his palms on the desk.

Brigit shrugged, then turned the motion into a rolling of her shoulders. She’d been sitting on this bench for over an hour, keeping notes as he interrogated the guards who were sent in, one after the other. “Whoever the guilty man is.”

“God’s Blood, ye’re right,” he groaned, leaning his weight forward for just a moment. “It could be anyone .”

Could it? “We ken it’s someone who has experience with weaponry. Someone agile. Likely someone tall to wedge the crossbow into that niche. Someone who kens the King’s schedule.”

His expression had turned grave. “There’s no’ many people in the palace who check all those boxes, lass.”

“Which boxes? Who said aught about boxes and checks?”

Drum shook his head. “I just mean, there’s no’ many who meet all those requirements.”

Deciding to push him, to see how he’d react, Brigit held his gaze and said very clearly, “Ye do.”

To her surprise, his lips tugged into a rueful grin and he straightened, scrubbing a hand across his face. His, “ Aye ,” was muffled until he dropped his hand. “But I ken I didnae do it.” He sent her a wink. “And ye’re too short, lass. So that’s two people in the palace I ken arenae guilty. Unless there’s something ye’re no’ telling me?”

It was said teasingly, but Brigit stood to hide her discomfort. There was plenty she wasn't telling him, after all, starting with I'm a spy and going all the way to The Queen herself tasked me to find evidence of yer guilt so ye can be executed .

Better to laugh it off.

She waved airily as she crossed the door and pulled it open. Outside was the captain of the guard, a gruff older man who was not pleased to hear his men were under suspicion.

“What?” he barked. “Ready to interrogate another innocent? I cannae believe ye’re going along with this, Brigit!”

In her role as palace gossip, she knew everyone . So, offering him a sweet smile, she said, “Och, Bartleby, ‘tisnae so bad. Yer lads arenae harmed and they get a bit of time away from their harsh taskmaster.” She sent him a wink to tell him she didn’t mean it. “Can ye send in the next one?”

“Matthias isnae even grown yet, but aye, if ye want to intimidate and hurt him, I guess I cannae stand in the way of the King’s Hunter, even if the bastard is just trying to foist his guilt on someone else!”

Another wink, although her words were sour in her throat. “I’ll take care of him, Bartleby, I promise. Matthias? We’re ready for ye.”

The captain hadn’t lied; Matthias was little more than a lad, gangly, pimple-faced, with that strange cockiness sometimes found in youth. He swaggered past Bartleby with an air of certainty that had Brigit sending the captain a teasing look as she shut the door.

Clearly, Matthias isnae terrified .

He sat on the stool Drummond indicated, chin held high as if he had naught to worry about .

Frowning, Drum crossed his arms over his chest and stared down at the lad. “Ye ken about the attempt on the King’s life?”

“Aye, and I ken ye did it,” the guard shot right back. “So why are ye asking us all these questions?”

Drum’s scowl deepened. No’ the tactic to take, laddie. “Because I didnae do it, and I’m trying to determine who did. ‘Twas an ambush with a crossbow, and the weapon is in our possession.”

A lie. The crossbow was in the possession of the Queen’s Angels, but the guard wouldn’t know that, and Drum was using it to gain information. Besides, he surely noticed how Matthias paled slightly?

He did.

Drum leaned forward like a hunter closing in on his prey. “Where’s yer crossbow, Matthias?”

“W-what?” the lad stammered, glancing at the sneering visage of the helmet propped on Drum’s desk.

“Yer crossbow. We’re asking all the guards to produce their crossbows and account for all their bolts. Can ye?”

Matthias seemed to rally, thrusting back his shoulders. “Aye! Of course! Of course I can! It’s just...no’ with me right now.”

As if sensing blood, Drum slowly stalked around the desk, holding the lad's gaze.
“Where is it, Matthias?”

“’Tis in the barracks!” the lad blustered. “With the rest of my gear.”

“Where is it, Matthias?” Drum growled, even more threateningly .

The guard's chin rose mulishly, as if Drum's threat made him even less likely to cooperate. “The barracks! Why would it no' be there?”

Suddenly, Drum's hand slammed down against the desk, the loud thwack causing both Matthias and Brigit to jump.

“Where is it?” he roared.

And Brigit decided this was her cue to step in.

“Better tell him, lad,” she murmured sympathetically. “He can be a monster when someone doesnae tell the truth.”

Drum sent her an incredulous look, but she hoped, by holding Matthias's attention, the lad didn't notice. She moved close enough to pat his shoulder. “’Tis aright, Matthias—I can call ye Matthias?” Smiling charmingly, she bent a little closer, hoping the lad would be distracted by her bosom. “Why no' tell me where yer crossbow and bolts are?”

“Uh...” Her plan had worked a little too well; the young guard was distracted by the skin revealed at the top of her bodice. “My, uh...?”

“Crossbow!” bellowed Drum, slamming his hand on the desk once more, causing Matthias to jump and swing his attention back in that direction. “Where is it?”

“Tell him,” Brigit urged in a compassionate tone. “Otherwise he might tear this place—and ye—apart.”

Matthias paled further, the column of his throat bobbing as he swallowed. “Apart?” he whispered.

She nodded sadly. “Completely apart. ‘Tis what happened last year when a witness wouldnae answer his questions. Puir man. Ye’d better tell Drummond what he needs to ken, or ye’ll be next. ”

Suddenly, Drum swung on her. “Look, what are ye doing, Brigit?”

She blinked. “Helping?”

“By making me out to be a monster?” he snapped.

Oh. Oh dear, she thought he’d picked up on her plan. “‘Tis a game, aye? Good cop, bad cop? I’m being the good cop.”

“ Cop ?” he repeated. “What in the shite does that mean?”

“Cop,” she repeated. “A constable? From copper?”

He was shaking his head. “A constable? Because he has a copper badge?”

“What? Nay, he doesnae! Who the fook would make a badge out of copper?” She was half-laughing already. “ Copper means ‘someone who takes’.”

Drum frowned. “Is it French? Sounds like something the French would do.”

“Actually, I think ‘tis from the Latin capere , to capture.”

Humming, he squinted at her. “I dinnae think this word’s been invented yet, Brigit.”

“Well, surely the concept has. We can call it good constable, bad constable ?”

Slowly, he nodded. “Aye, that would work. I’m the bad one?”

“Please, ye’re ever so much better at it than I am,” she noted with a sweet smile.

The twitch of his lips told her he was enjoying this just as much as she was.

They both swung on Matthias as if this interlude hadn’t happened, to see the lad staring up at them, mouth agape, wide-eyed. His head swung back and forth between them like a spectator in a tennis match.

“See?” Brigit whispered conspiratorially to the lad. “A monster. A complete brute. Ye should tell him where yer crossbow and bolts are before he becomes truly angry.”

“He’s no’ angry now?” Matthias squeaked.

With a roar, Drum swept the candelabra off the desk, thrusting it forward until the flames were right beside the lad’s temple. “Tell me!” he growled, as Matthias leaned away from the heat. “Where’s yer weapon?”

“I dinnae ken!” the guard blurted.

Drum thrust the flames closer; not close enough to burn, but the light from them bathed the lad’s pimply face. “ Tell me!”

“I dinnae ken!” Matthias wailed, as the door burst open and Bartleby charged through, clearly intent on saving his man from Drum’s rage. “I dinnae ken! I lost it!”

Immediately, Drum straightened and Brigit stepped in, holding her palm out to stop Bartleby's confused charge. "Ye lost it, laddie?" she murmured, tone full of sympathy. "Och, that's horrible. When did ye lose it?"

"Almost a fortnight ago," Matthias sniffed, as if close to tears. "I was on patrol, and I put the thing down on one of the parapets—all the lads do it! When I came 'round on my next circuit, 'twas gone!" He was speaking only to Brigit now, his words tripping over one another in their haste. "I thought it had fallen to the ground, but when I looked for it after my shift, I couldnae find it. "

Even as Brigit patted his shoulder, making small, murmured noises to console him, she lifted her gaze to Drum's.

There was triumph in his dark eyes, which she was certain matched hers.

Behind her, Bartleby growled, "Ye lost yer weapon, laddie, and didnae think to tell me?"

The guard cringed, and for the first time, Brigit felt truly sorry for him. "Up ye go, Matthias," she commanded, helping the lad stand and turn to face his captain. "Fess up bravely, like an adult."

With that, she gave the lad a little nudge. He stumbled toward the captain of the guard who grabbed his elbow and hustled him out the office, muttering under his breath.

As the door closed behind them, Brigit felt the breath whoosh from her body, her veins filled with the jittery sort of energy which always came on a mission. Smiling hugely, she turned to Drum...only to find him wearing a huge grin of his own.

She clapped her hands. "Well, that worked well."

“Well?” he whooped, surging forward and grasping her waist to lift her and swing her around. “ Well ? ‘Twas brilliant . Brigit, ye were brilliant.”

Laughing lightly, she patted his arm when he set her down. “We work well together.”

He was smiling down at her, none of the earlier worry visible in his expression, and she had another spike of guilt.

“We do work well together,” he murmured. “A team. Partners.”

And all that guilt ?

Suddenly replaced by something better. Something worse.

A longing for a partner like Drum. Someone she could rely on, the way she used to rely on her Angels.

Oh no .

He was a mission, naught more.

And she knew what she needed to do in order to get close to him, to learn any of his remaining secrets.

Luckily, it wasn't a task she minded at all.

When Brigit surged up on her toes, Drummond lowered his lips to meet hers. They crashed together joyfully and he lifted her closer.

God's Wounds, kissing Brigit would never get old, would it? He hoped to hell it wouldn't.

Careful. Ye're no' thinking of a future together, are ye?

Except...mayhap he was. Drum knew he shouldn't, especially with the suspicion hanging over his head, but...he was.

He wanted her. Not just now, not just tonight, but...

Nay, dinnae think it. Brigit was just a bit of fun, someone to slake yer lust.

Until she wasn't.

With a little whimper, her arms wrapped around his neck, pulling him down, pulling him closer. He knew her. He knew her signs. He knew how much she wanted to finish what they'd started that morning in the corridor.

And he wanted it too.

Groaning low in his throat, Drum gave in to temptation and lifted her again, turning to hoist her arse up onto his desk. She went willingly, excitedly, wriggling a little to push herself back.

Their lips clung together. Her hands pawed at his shirt, yanking at the cords at his throat, and Drum felt her lips curl against his. Aye, she wanted this and he was ready for her. Beneath his kilt, his cock straightened, yearning for her softness.

"Brigit," he groaned, moving his lips to her jaw, her cheek, her earlobe, as his hands cupped and fondled. "Ye're certain?"

She tipped her head back, even as her hands went to the ties of her bodice, loosening them for him. "When have ye— oh Saints be praised, right there !"

Drum smiled as he nibbled at her sensitive skin again and she moaned.

“I’m always ready for ye, love.”

Love .

She’d called him that for ages, but did she call everyone that? Was he...special to her?

When she moved her hands back to his shoulders, he took that as an invitation, and reached for the sides of her bodice. ‘Twas short work to reach inside, to cup one palm around her tit and lift it out.

Aye .

She moaned as he brushed his thumb across her nipple and the sound went right to his cock.

He knew her. He knew her body, and this? This was perfection . “Ye like that, eh lass?” he murmured, lowering his mouth to her tit as he gently freed the other. Arching backward, she offered them both to him, and he wasn’t going to ignore such a gift.

“Christ, Brigit, ye’re perfect.” His tongue teased her. “Look at ye, on display for me. Like a feast.”

It was the truth. With her tits spilling out the top of her gown, her hair falling loose from her braid, she looked like one of those nymphs the court painters loved so much.

Without urging, she eased herself back to her elbows, thrusting her breasts up to his touch, and he groaned again at the sight.

Perfect . Perfectly wanton, just for him.

Even as he leaned forward to feast—to lick, to suckle, to tease those large pink nipples—he reached for the front of his kilt, squeezing his cock through the wool. Soon soon soon . Soon he'd have a release, but he needed to feel her pleasure first.

One last squeeze, then he moved his hands to her skirts, pushing them up her legs. Her thighs parted, booted feet dangling above the floor of his office, skin already prickling with anticipation.

They'd been in this position before. How many times had they fooked here on this desk? A dozen? More? Just last week...

But today, things felt different. Mayhap 'twas the hope he was feeling after a sennight of despair, knowing he might be able to solve this mystery. Or mayhap 'twas the knowledge that he and Brigit worked well together.

Or mayhap 'twas the fact that he genuinely enjoyed spending time with her. She made him laugh, and that was important .

His hands ran up her thighs as he straightened from her tits. “Are ye ready, lass?” he prompted, praying she'd give him permission.

Her beautiful green eyes were hazed with passion. “Please, Drummond,” she whispered. “ Please .”

The wool of her skirts was ungainly, but he managed to shove it out of the way before his fingers slid through her wetness. Because, aye , she was ready for him.

But he could make her readier.

Holding her gaze, he slowly lowered himself until he couldn't see her any longer, and instead settled his sight on the rosy, pink, very wet cleft before him. He watched his finger slowly disappear inside her, heard her sigh, saw her flesh quiver.

“Aye,” he murmured. “That’s a good lass. So wet for me, are ye no’?”

Another slow thrust, and his second finger joined the first. Brigit rocked her hips forward with each thrust, her breathing growing heavy. She wanted this as much as he did.

“So beautiful. So fooking beautiful.”

Above him, her whimper sounded helpless and he smiled as he bent closer to taste her.

That first swipe of his tongue along her dripping cunny made them both sigh in satisfaction, and he reflected again how lucky he was to know her so well. He knew not to focus on her entrance, not while his fingers were still inside her. Instead, he slowly guided his tongue up toward the top of her cleft, where the little hood hid the pearl of her pleasure. He circled it with his tongue then slid back through her cleft .

“Drum,” she panted above him. “ Please .”

It was remarkable how ready she was for him. For this. His other hand reached for his cock, stroking it roughly through his kilt as he leaned forward.

She was ready for release, and he could give it to her.

“Ye want this, lass?” he murmured against her cunny. “Ye want to come like a good girl for me?”

“Please,” she whimpered a third time.

So he obliged.

Hooking his fingers, he brushed upward, the pad of his forefinger caressing the rough patch deep inside her that always drove her mad. As he did, he closed his lips around her bud and suckled , while his tongue flicked against the pearl.

One of her hands closed around the top of his head as her whimper built into a wail, and he smiled against her cunny as she came, as her inner muscles squeezed his fingers.

As always, a burst of liquid gushed from her core, covering his hand and mouth, and Drum lapped it eagerly, trying to prolong her pleasure for as long as possible.

He knew her. His Brigit.

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:16 am

Holy.

Christ.

Holy Christ on the Cross !

Pleasure burst over Brigit, white-hot and bright as the noon sun, and she curled forward around her core, around Drummond's head, trying to capture the sensations.

The man knew what she liked.

How could he always make her come so quickly? It was a combination of his words, his fingers knowing exactly what to do, and his tongue... Dear God in Heaven, his tongue.

Panting, Brigit allowed her muscles to relax, to feel . The frissons of pleasure, the jolts of pure excitement were beginning to fade, and as she exhaled, she felt herself loosen from around him.

As she leaned back once more, Drum's face appeared from the pile of her skirts. He was grinning, self-satisfied and cocky, and his mouth and chin were covered in her spend.

Brigit had never been a self-conscious sort of person, but the first time a lover had made her squirt liquid, she'd thought something horrible had happened. After much experimentation on her own, she'd realized it only happened with the very best of orgasms and was something to be proud of.

Drummond seemed proud of it too, judging from the way he licked his lips.

He rose to his feet, body relaxed, manner at ease, as if he'd also been satiated by that amazing release. But she saw the way he gripped himself through his kilt, stroking his cock almost lazily.

“Come here,” she ordered huskily, pushing herself upright and reaching for him.

But Drum just shook his head slowly, his smile easy as he stroked himself. “Dinnae be daft, lass, that was for ye.”

Hungrily, she eyed the shape in his kilt. “This is for me, too. And I cannae have ye walking around all day with a loaded cannon hanging between yer legs—I’ll worry.” She beckoned him impatiently. “Come here.”

Holding her gaze, Drum flipped up the front of his kilt and she eagerly took in the sight of his thickness. Blessed Virgin, she loved the way he was so casual about his body, his impressive cock.

When he grasped the thing, wrapping his fingers around its width to spread her wetness across it, they both sighed in satisfaction.

She sat there on his desk, legs spread, desire dripping from her core, down her thighs...and her inner muscles spasmed again at the thought of him filling her.

So Brigit beckoned him again. “Drummond, ye’re making me ache again.”

Aye, his grin was a bit cocky as he stepped between her legs, still stroking himself. “Ye’re certain, lass?”

As he asked that, the tip of his cock rested against her entrance, and the movement

from his strokes sent a shudder through her. She loved how nonchalant he was, as if 'twas her pleasure, her desires which mattered .

Drummond Kennedy made her feel powerful.

So she reached up, grasped the sides of his head, and pulled his lips down to hers. She made certain to stroke his cheeks with her thumbs, and the little noise of surrender he made caused her insides to flutter again.

When he straightened, he reached for her breasts, still hanging heavy in the cool air of his office. His cock slid along the wetness of her cleft, the tip of it hitting her clitoris, causing her to gasp, even as his fingers reached her nipples.

He knew how sensitive her nipples were, and treated them like royal jewels, rolling them gently between his thumbs and forefingers, as he lowered his mouth to the little spot where her neck met her shoulder.

The feeling of his stubbled whiskers there, on her sensitive skin, made her shudder again. With a moan, she tipped her head to one side, allowing him to kiss up her throat as his fingers and callused palms sent quivers through her.

And through it all, he rocked his hips against her core, sliding his cock along her wetness, across her already-sensitive cunny lips, until she was shuddering with need. Each thrust caused the head of his cock to brush against her pearl, and soon she was rocking forward to meet him, to prolong the delicious friction.

It wouldn't be the first time he'd spilled like this, against her. But Brigit wanted more . Her core was still humming from her first orgasm, and she needed to be stretched, to be filled. By him .

"Drum!" she gasped. "More, please. "

She felt him smile against her neck even as she reached between their bodies, shifting and rearranging until she could grasp him by the base and angle him where she wanted him.

As his cock slid into her weeping core, they both stiffened, then relaxed with a sigh.

Aye.

He was still for a moment, but then began to move, the same rocking motion. Brigit kept her fingers between them so she could stroke herself, and 'twas a good thing, because having him inside her was building her pleasure to the same point where it had been with his fingers and lips.

“Christ, Brigit, ye feel perfect,” he groaned appreciatively, and she felt herself smirking, even as she gasped at the sensations sweeping through her. “So wet, all for me.”

“All for ye,” she gasped. “Ye, Drummond.”

Blessed Virgin, only him!

Her legs reached around his thighs, ankles linking behind his arse so he could increase the power behind his thrusts. She pulled her hand from between them so she could reach for his shoulders. One of his hands still cupped and caressed her breast, but his other supported her lower back, holding her against him as his movements became stronger, less controlled.

This is what she loved; when he went all beastly and unrestrained. It made her feel powerful as well, to know she had this effect on him.

Then his hand moved from her breast, lower, between them. His palm was flat

against her pelvis as he thrust, and his thumb ...

This thumb found her clitoris again, and the way he touched it—light brushes alternating with flicks because of his movements—sent her soaring.

“Drum!” she gasped again, tightening her legs around him.

“Come for me, Brigit,” he crooned, rubbing her pearl, his cock filling her. “Come for me, like a good lass.” His teeth nipped at her neck.

That was all the encouragement she needed.

Brigit groaned as her pleasure exploded again, her inner muscles squeezing his cock. Drum’s thrusts slowed, then stilled, allowing her to gyrate beneath him, milking her pleasure for each spasm, each breath-stealing wave of ecstasy.

All for her.

But Brigit didn’t want that. She wanted him to find pleasure as well. So even as her orgasm crashed over her, she reached for him, pulling his lips down to hers again.

He tasted of her , and she’d never considered that to be an erotic flavor, but Blessed Virgin, this was Drummond . Her fingers dug into the back of his neck, pulling him closer, closer, closer, urging him to give himself to her.

It worked.

With a groan, he stiffened in her arms then rocked forward, plunging his cock to its hilt inside her. She felt him spill, felt the flood of warmth, of liquid heat filling her.

And all she felt was satisfaction.

He was a considerate lover, one who kept track of her cycle and knew when to spill outside her body. But today? Today was different. Special .

And the absolute shite of it was...she didn't know why.

Was this a goodbye? Or an acknowledgement of his innocence?

Or an attempt to apologize for all the secrets she'd held from him?

Because she knew what she had to do.

She had to bring him to the Queen, and when she did, he'd realize she'd been lying to him about who she really was.

Slowly, Brigit moved her hands down to his shoulders, then to his upper arms, tightening her fingers, squeezing him with her entire body. When she pressed her palms to the back of his shoulders, hugging him, she was holding his body with all of hers.

All of her heart and soul.

"God's Blood, Brigit," he whispered against her neck, where he had burrowed his face after he'd spilled. "That was..."

Magnificent .

So she sat there, holding him, cherishing him, allowing herself to feel all the joy, the regret, the guilt, the pleasure...as the sun sank in the afternoon sky.

Finally, his entire body shuddered, as if he'd been in a daze and now he was coming out of it, and he slowly straightened. As he pulled away, his softened cock slid from

her, and Brigit couldn't help the way she squeezed just slightly, as if she could keep him—all of him—with her.

The rueful twitch of his lips told her he understood .

But he merely sighed and flipped his kilt back down, then moved toward the wash cabinet where he kept the wash basin and rags, along with his whisky and glasses. He returned to her with a wet rag and cleaned her just as gently, just as reverently as he'd touched her before.

She was used to this treatment, but still, today was...different. She placed her hands on his shoulders in a kind of benediction as he performed the ablutions, and wondered if this was to be their last time together.

He's innocent .

The certainty filled her.

Drummond hadn't tried to kill the King. No one could act as well as he had today, especially not knowing she was a Queen's Angel. He was innocent, but he'd have to convince Their Majesties.

"Dine with me tonight," she blurted.

From the way he twitched a brow as he straightened, he hadn't expected the invitation. She hadn't expected to issue it either. But she had to.

"Alright," he finally said, tossing the rag aside and arranging her skirts over her legs once more. He took hold of her waist and gently tugged her forward, until her arse reached the edge of the desk. "Where?"

With her palms on his chest, she tipped her head back to study him and named a place to meet. She'd take him to see the King and Queen, but he wouldn't suspect, not ahead of time.

But with a quick nod, he dropped a kiss to her forehead.

“Ah, lass, ye do my auld heart good. ”

There was that tone again, a bit of sorrow, a bit of regret. Brigit wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her cheek to his kiss. “Ye dinnae feel so auld to me.”

A little huff of air against her hair, as if he might be laughing, then another kiss. His lips lingered atop her crown, and they stood like that for a long moment, wrapped around one another, reluctant to pull away.

Brigit lost count of how long they stood like that; she'd closed her eyes and could almost imagine herself drifting in and out of sleep, although upright. She could feel his slow and steady breath against her hair, hear his heart beating strongly.

Finally he stirred, but she was unwilling to let him go. “What are ye thinking of?”

He hummed. “Och, all sorts of things.” She thought that was going to be the end of it, but he hesitated, then admitted, “Today was...fun.”

Surprised, Brigit pulled away long enough to glance up at him. “Fun? Even though the stakes are so high?”

“Even so.”

She grinned. “I agree.”

His lips twisted a little wryly, and she pressed her cheek to his chest again. She felt the rumble of his voice deep in his chest as he spoke.

“I...have never had a partner like ye. On an investigation. We work well together.”

They did. “Like me?” she repeated. “A lover?”

He huffed what might’ve been a laugh. “A female . I...had a bad experience, and have no’ allowed myself to work with women. Or for women. ”

Oh, the Queen wasn’t going to like that. But she needed to hear all the information possible, so Brigit pushed. “Tell me about it.” To be honest, she wanted to know for herself , not just for Her Majesty.

He hesitated, then took a deep breath as if preparing himself. “ ‘Twas one of my first assignments as a Hunter, a decade ago. I was young and cocky, and I was sent to escort a lady to a nunnery. Her family disapproved, and I admired her dedication to Christ.”

There was a twist in his tone, as if he were laughing at himself, that made Brigit say, “Was she?”

“Nay. Rebecca was...ambitious. She lied to her family, lied to me. Let me believe we had a chance at a future together.”

Sucking in an angry breath, Brigit straightened to frown up at him. “Ye loved her?”

A pause, then he shrugged, his expression carefully blank. “I thought I did. I thought she loved me too. By then I kenned she didnae really want to become a nun—she wouldnae have used me that way. She wanted power, and was planning on becoming an abbess at the least. She just needed me—and the King’s name—to get her away

from her family.”

Brigit felt her nose curl in disgust. “There are some who will do aught for power. She sounds verra determined.”

He shrugged, but she tightened her hold so as not to lose contact with him. “When I left her at the nunnery, she told me I was a fool to trust her. To trust any woman. She said a strong woman will do what needs to be done to better her life, since nae one else will do it for her. ”

Frowning, Brigit shook her head, but the movement turned into a sigh and a shrug. “I guess...there’s some truth there, honestly. But no’ all women are like that.”

“Clearly.” He squeezed her, then dropped a kiss to her forehead. “Today taught me I’ve been wrong all these years. There are some women who no’ only I can trust, but I can partner with. Have ye ever considered a career in espionage, lass?”

The question was so ludicrous, Brigit felt a hopeless sort of chuckle bubbling up from her chest. “Me?” The word came out too quickly, too squeaky.

He’s going to learn the truth. He’ll ken ye’ve been hiding secrets all these months .

Aye, but...but let her have a few more hours of peace with him. Knowing his innocence, and him not knowing her guilt.

“I dinnae like this Rebecca of yers,” she finally muttered, dropping her forehead to his chest. “She’s ruined ye for the rest of us.”

“No’ the rest of ye, lass,” he whispered, brushing his lips against her hair again. “Just ye. I think...I think I could be happy with ye.”

Squeezing her eyes shut, Brigit whispered the truth into the stillness of her own heart.

I could be happy with ye too, Drummond Kennedy .

‘Twas too bad she was cursed to betray him as badly as this Rebecca had.

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:16 am

Drummond felt as if he were at least three inches taller. He found himself strutting through the palace corridors like a puffed-up cock, a stupid grin barely held in check by his usual glare.

After this afternoon, his signature glare didn't have its usual effect.

Maids didn't scurry out of his way and men-at-arms didn't avoid his eyes. Instead they looked at him strangely, and Drum half-wondered if he had spinach stuck in his beard or something.

When was the last time ye ate spinach ?

Well over a fortnight ago.

Then surely someone would've mentioned yer be-spinaching to ye. Likely they can tell ye're two steps away from whistling and clicking yer heels when ye jump, and bursting into a choreographed melody about the rain and singing in it.

Sometimes, he was better off not knowing what his subconscious was talking about.

All Drum knew was that he was on his way to dinner with Brigit after a full day with her. And this lightness, this contentment ? It had naught to do with the way he'd felt when she'd wrapped him in her arms and accepted him into her body.

Well, mayhap a bit.

Mayhap a lot .

Aye, fine, 'twas one of the more remarkable sexual interludes of his life—happy?

Verra .

So was he. Far happier than a man who'd lost the King's trust, who had a traitor's execution looming over his head. After today, after working with Brigit, he felt as if he could do aught, and that included solving this mystery and removing suspicion from himself.

He nodded to one of the guards he'd interviewed today—the man lifted his crossbow from his shoulder to prove he hadn't lost it—and ducked into one of the doors leading to the niche near the chapel where he said he'd meet Brigit. Interestingly, this part of the palace was near Their Majesties' private quarters, and he wondered what a simple serving lass would be doing here.

Och, but there was little simple about Brigit!

He smiled, remembering the way her quick mind had noticed connections today, and how she'd tricked young Matthias into confessing. But 'twas the way she'd thought like Drum, had understood the way his mind worked during the investigation...that had been what had really warmed his heart.

And the whole licking-her-until-she-squirted thing.

And the fact she'd held him after, and he'd held her, and he'd found himself confessing about Rebecca and the way she'd hurt him. The way he hadn't allowed himself to work with or trust another woman since then.

But this peace he felt inside told Drummond he was ready to do both.

"Hello, love," Brigit said softly, appearing seemingly out of nowhere to twine her

fingers through his. “What has ye smiling tonight? ”

Her expression was different, and it took a moment for Drum to place it; she looked sad , almost. He squeezed her fingers and offered her a lop-sided grin. “Just thinking of ye. I’m dining with the loveliest lass in Scone tonight.”

She scoffed slightly, pink rising on her cheeks. After their interlude in his office, she’d changed gowns into something a bit finer, and he preened to realize she’d wanted to look nice for him. Her red hair was braided neatly about her head, and suddenly he wanted naught more than to pull out the pins and watch those curls cascade around her naked shoulders.

Or better yet, around his naked shoulders.

Despite being so thoroughly satiated earlier today, his cock stirred beneath his kilt and he adjusted his sporran so no one else would know.

What he and Brigit shared should be only between them.

One of the palace guards marched by, hand on his sword hilt, and Drummond adjusted his expression into his more habitual scowl so his reputation wouldn’t be ruined. Any more than it already was.

At his side, however, Brigit sighed. He’d expected her to giggle, to tease him. But instead, when he glanced down at her, she seemed...resigned?

“Are ye ready to eat?” he prompted.

“Aye,” she said in a small voice, and began to move, tugging him along by his hand. “This way.”

Now his frown wasn't forced. Where were they going? "Brigit, this isnae the way to the kitchens. This area is for the King's family. "

She didn't reply, but led him toward a door he recognized. A door he'd only visited a few times when the King needed his input in a personal matter.

The Majesties' private dining room.

"Brigit—"

'Twas all he managed to get out before she dropped his hand then opened the door and stepped through.

Lunging, Drum caught her elbow, thinking to save her from humiliation and possible punishment for interrupting a private meal, but she didn't hesitate. He saw the Queen look up at the pair of them, blink, then smile.

"Ah, Brigit, you have brought your beau, as promised."

Her words didn't make any sense. Drum was too busy glancing around the room, trying to take in everything, assessing possible danger and answers.

There was one of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting, judging by her gown, who turned away from them as she arranged goblets on a tray the seneschal was holding. There was one of the King's personal guards, standing at attention by the window.

And there was the King himself, chin propped in one hand as he studied the intruders in that difficult-to-read way of his Drum used to know so well.

"Yer Majesty," Drum blurted, offering a bow. "Apologies for this intrusion."

“Should I be concerned?” the monarch asked wryly, and the question ripped at Drum’s chest.

“Nay,” he managed hoarsely. “An accident, merely. ”

“No accident.” All eyes swung to the English queen, who sat straight in her chair, examining the silver knife at her setting. “I asked Brigit to bring you here. Lawrence, pour the wine.”

Confused as hell, Drum glanced at Brigit. She was staring straight ahead, face pale except for two small pink spots high on her cheeks, gaze locked over the Queen’s head. Refusing to look at him.

As the elderly seneschal shuffled between the monarchs, placing the goblets and pouring the wine, Drum swung his attention back to the King.

“Yer Majesty—I dinnae understand.”

“Drummond,” the King sighed, reaching for the goblet as the seneschal shuffled toward the door. “I have learned, over the years, no’ to try to second-guess the women in my life. It seems my wife had plans of her own. Darling?” he offered, spinning his wine between his fingers without lifting it.

With a regal nod, the Queen sat forward. “As a favor to you, husband, I tasked my Angels with proving the guilt of the man you have suspected, the leader of your Hunters.”

Angels ? Drum glanced at Brigit again, but received no answer.

The Queen continued. “Luckily, Brigit already had a connection to him, and used that to get close to him. I requested she bring him here to share her findings.”

If he hadn't been looking at her, Drum would've missed the way Brigit shrunk into herself at the Queen's words.

But 'twas only fair; he was doing a fair bit of shrinkage himself. "A connection?" he growled under his breath, knowing he couldn't challenge the Queen directly.

When Brigit flinched, he knew he'd hit his mark.

What in the everloving shite was going on here?

"Drummond." The King's commanding tone yanked Drum's attention away from Brigit. The man lifted his goblet, his voice cold. "Since 'tis clear ye dinnae understand what's going on, allow me to explain. I am no' the only monarch of Scotland to have a group of agents loyal to me, willing to die to protect the interests of our people."

Drummond opened his mouth to reply— Aye, of course, each King had his own version of the Hunters —when he saw His Majesty exchange a sly glance with his wife, and the truth slammed into Drum so hard his chest ached.

Sucking in a breath, he managed, "The...Angels?"

"The Queen's Angels," his monarch corrected, bringing the goblet to his lips. "My wife's secret agents, disguised as her attendees."

Drum couldn't breathe. He couldn't think.

Brigit was...

Brigit was...an agent of the Queen? Using their connection to investigate him?

“Yer Majesty!”

The sharp call came not from Brigit, but rather, the lady-in-waiting dressed in maroon. She was tall and thin, her face scarred beneath an austere wimple. She’d been standing quietly, hands folded, but now stepped forward smartly as both monarchs turned to her .

Instead of saying more, she leaned across the table and pulled the goblet from the King’s hand. The guard moved his hand to his sword, but the King easily relinquished his drink. “Lady Avaline?”

“That smell...” she murmured, peering down into the goblet. “Ye havenae taken a drink yet?”

“Nay,” the Queen answered for both of them, leaning forward, hands clutching the arms of her chair. “What is it?”

“Mayhap naught. But mayhap...” She sniffed the goblet, then glanced about the room. “Nae handy dogs.”

“What?” the King barked.

The lady shrugged. “In the stories, when the hero suspects the wine is poisoned, it is given to one of the dogs, or perhaps a monkey, and then the animal dies, proving the hero’s suspicions correct.”

The King’s tone was laced with horror when he said, “Ye expect me to poison one of my dogs?”

“Do ye have a monkey, Yer Majesty?”

“We are not poisoning any animal, Avaline,” the Queen said sternly. “Even if you do suspect the wine is poisoned.”

“Oh, it most certain is,” the scarred lady said, then leaned to tip the goblet into a plate of fruit.

“Excellent,” the King muttered. “Now I cannae have the pear I wanted.”

“Stop complaining, dearest,” his wife commanded, peering intently at the fruit. “You may have an apple.”

“I dinnae like apples,” he complained.

“Ye will like them even less if they continue to smoke like that,” Lady Avaline pointed out .

Both monarchs released breaths and sat back in their seats, as if attempting to get farther away from the smoking, poisoned fruit. Drum’s gaze darted about the room, trying to understand what was happening.

The Queen raised her hand as if bestowing a blessing. “You were correct, Lady Avaline. The wine was poisoned, and you have saved His Majesty’s life again.”

Her husband was staring in horror at the apple. “A true hero,” he muttered.

But the lady-in-waiting merely inclined her head regally, a small smile on her lips. “I was merely doing my duty, Yer Majesty. I am sworn to protect ye both.”

The Queen sent her husband a glance. “And you know what they say; An apple a day keeps the doctor away. ”

He scoffed. “No’ that apple. I’m staying even farther away from them now. And I happen to like the palace doctor.”

“That is because he prescribed you extra ale and beef. The meat is too fatty, dearest, you need more roughage and vegetables in your diet.”

“I’m no ’ eating poisoned apples,” the King muttered, and his wife merely reached over to pat his hand indulgently.

“Respectfully, Yer Majesties,” Drum heard himself growl, and offered a little bow to both of them. “What in the hell is going on?”

The King made a little noise which might’ve been a laugh, but the Queen rolled her eyes .

“It is not obvious, Sir Hunter? Your job is investigation, is it not?”

“Generally I prefer to swing a sword at the bad guy, Yer Majesty,” he growled.

Aye, that was definitely a snort from the King, but his wife huffed.

“Well, my Angels have been trained to use their minds instead. Lady Avaline and Brigit have been partners for years.” She nodded to her lady-in-waiting. “You noticed an issue, correct?”

The slender lady in maroon had taken up position between the monarchs, and now said, too ingratiatingly, “Indeed, Yer Majesty. I recognized a scent out of place as Lawrence poured it, but it took me a few minutes to recognize it as poison.”

“So my seneschal tried to poison me?” the King asked.

His wife shook her head. “It might have been anyone.”

“No’ true,” her lady-in-waiting pointed out. “Only those who kenned ye’d both be dining here tonight, and kens where the wine is stored.”

The King’s gaze swung back to Drum. Startled, he stumbled backward. “ I dinnae ken ye’d be dining here! Why would I want to kill ye, Yer Majesty?”

“Aye,” the man murmured, “something I’ve asked myself many times over the last sennight.”

Despair settled into Drum’s bones.

It hurt even more, coming so quickly on the heels of the elation and peace he’d felt earlier. What could he say to the King of Scotland to convince the man he was still loyal? That he would give his life for his monarch ?

It turned out, he didn’t have to.

Brigit was the one to step forward, to take a deep breath. “Drummond Kennedy is innocent, Yer Majesty. He has been with me since this morning, and has had nae chance to poison anything. Furthermore, I will swear that he had nae idea I’d be bringing him to ye this evening.”

The Queen hummed. “So no opportunity. And we are still without a motive.”

Drum was shaking his head, the despair turned to dread and now to panic. “Yer Majesty, I—”

“He is innocent,” Brigit stated again, chin held high as she met the monarchs’ gazes. “Ye tasked me with investigating him, and I did. Drummond Kennedy did no’ try to

kill ye, Yer Majesty. Neither tonight nor last week.”

She’d been investigating him.

All this time, he was merely a task to her?

Drum’s knees had gone weak, which was a fooking humiliating thing to happen to a warrior. He wished he had his helm so he could close off these thoughts, these feelings, from the outside world.

Dear God in Heaven, he thought he’d trusted Brigit.

But...staring incredulously at her profile, something niggled at the back of his mind.

Ye started fooking her a year ago. Ye had fun with her a year ago .

Aye, a year ago, she’d been just a bit of fun, a bit of skirt. More recently, he’d felt more strongly about her, and what they’d done today...that hadn’t been fooking . It had been special. Meaningful.

Except ye were just a mission to her .

Aye, there went his knees.

Cursing, Drum turned away and stumbled toward a chair, grabbing its wooden back to keep himself upright as his heart fell into his stomach. He couldn’t look at Brigit, couldn’t look at her friend, or at his monarchs.

Vaguely, he heard the Queen speaking. “Brigit, my dear, I can recognize your insistence, but surely you can admit you are too close to be rational? Your feelings...?”

“I believe her,” the King rumbled. “She’s yer Angel, aye? And ye sent her after him.”
A pause, as if the couple were communicating without words. “If she says Drummond is innocent, I’ll take her word.”

Oh Christ.

Oh Christ .

She’d used him. She’d manipulated him and used him, just as Rebecca had.

Holy shite on a stick, she’d been investigating him all this time? When he thought they’d been working together? “My rooms,” he gasped, unable to stop the words from escaping. Someone had rifled through his rooms, and he’d taken that as proof the King had sent someone after him.

But it had been Brigit ?

This was the reason he’d always vowed not to trust women!

And he’d been right!

Bile rising in his throat, Drum turned a livid glare toward the woman he’d only just considered trusting.

Ye did trust her , a tiny voice reminded him. She was doing this for yer own good. Trying to save ye .

Snarling, Drum shook his head, trying to push away the reminder. She’d betrayed him! She’d manipulated him!

And then— and then —Brigit turned to him.

Turned to him, those green eyes tortured, hands turned palms-upward in a signal of helplessness, of offering...and whispered, "I'm sorry."

The words punched him right in the gut, and Drum would've gone down again, had his fingers not curled desperately around the chairback so tightly he could hear the wood creak.

Sorry ? She was sorry for betraying him?

She was trying to help .

He shook his head again, this time more desperately.

In the background, vaguely, he could hear the monarchs discussing him.

"Well if Drummond is not the guilty one, husband, who is it?"

"Ye have yer Angels on the investigation, aye? Then I'll have my Hunter put his mind to it as well. Between them, they'll find the bastard who's trying to kill me."

The Queen sounded almost amused when she said, "It seems as though they work well together."

"Yer Majesty," the scarred lady-in-waiting murmured, "are ye certain ye can trust him?"

Drummond was already forcing himself upright, forcing himself to turn back to his King, when the man said, "Aye."

The King of Scotland pushed himself to his feet, knuckles on the table, and held Drum's gaze. "Aye, Drummond Kennedy was my first Hunter, and the best of them. I

can trust him.”

Focus focus focus .

His name had been cleared and the King trusted him again. Now was not the time to obsess over a woman’s betrayal.

Drum slammed his fist against his chest, the contact extra-hard to remind his heart to start working again, and bowed low at the waist. “I have always been yer loyal man, Yer Majesty.”

When he straightened, the King nodded regally, then smiled almost conspiratorially as he sank back down in front of his mutton. “Then get out there and find the bastard who did this.” He glanced up at Lady Avaline. “And fetch some more wine, will ye?”

As she nodded and stepped back, Drum bowed again, not as low. “’Twill be—” His voice stuck, and he had to swallow and start again. “’Twill be a pleasure, Yer Majesty. If I might be excused to begin?”

The King waved lazily and Drummond found himself exhaling. In relief, in sorrow.

He was innocent. The King believed him innocent and he’d keep his head and his position...and his monarch’s trust, which was equally important.

But why? ‘Twas through no effort of his own that his name had been cleared. Och, nay, ‘twas because the King and Queen trusted the word of someone else!

As he straightened and turned, Drum found Brigit still staring at him, her eyes swimming, her bottom lip disappearing between her teeth. She looked miserable .

Misery at her betrayal?

Good .

Drum forced himself to snarl and hated the burst of satisfaction he felt when she gasped and backed up. “Brigit,” he offered, voice low and menacing. “Dinnae bother to see me out, I ken the way. Goodbye.”

Goodbye.

After what they’d shared—particularly that afternoon—their goodbyes should’ve involved more screaming, more throwing things, more passionate kisses. But not in front of their monarchs.

Goodbye .

He nodded once and stalked for the door, ripped it open and stumbled through.

He had a mission from the King, one he’d take great joy in.

And he bloody well wouldn’t trust a woman in doing so.

Ever again.

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:16 am

“Forty-six!” called the Queen, darting forward to smack the shuttlecock with her wooden paddle.

Brigit followed the path of the cork, which had duck feathers poked into one end to slow its fall, impressed by the altitude the other women managed. As it began to fall back toward the lawn, she judged its trajectory and...

Whack .

“Forty-seven!” she called as the thing soared up again.

“Oh, well done, Brigit, I was not certain we could recover from that!” her partner called, eyeing the fall of the shuttlecock.

The breeze played with the leaves of the trees here in the garden, as well as the veils and gowns of the ladies. There were quite a few of them—all somehow related to the Queen, or owed favors, or hoping for favors—spread through the rows of rose bushes and evenly spaced flower beds.

The garden was protected on three sides by the palace, and on the fourth by a stone wall with a secret exit. Brigit herself had used that door a few times, and she knew Isabel’s son—and the Queen’s daughter—had been kidnapped through it as well.

Aye, this was a familiar location, but the activity...

“Watch it! Brigit, watch it!” the Queen called, and Brigit’s attention snapped back to the feather-covered cork, hurtling back toward her.

She lunged, swinging her paddle. “Fifty-two! ”

But instead of making contact, she swooshed past the target which landed with a disappointing plop on the grass. The Queen wasn’t the only watcher who groaned in disappointment.

“I’m sorry, Yer Majesty,” Brigit offered, scooping up the shuttlecock and hurrying toward her. “I was distracted.”

“Oh, that is fine, my dear,” the Queen replied, taking both the paddle and cork from Brigit. “You are allowed some distraction recently, I imagine. Besides, I would rather you miss the shot in front of everyone than me.”

Her teasing smile told Brigit she meant no harm, although there was a bit of truth in the statement. So, Brigit forced a grin in return.

“’Tis lucky for ye that the game is cooperative instead of competitive; ye already have all the ladies scared of ye. Imagine trying to play against them.”

A small huff of laughter. “They would likely be dropping the cock every which way out of fear of offending me.”

Brigit’s gaze skimmed the courtly ladies and she hummed in agreement. The game of battledore and shuttlecock was a simple one; two or more players rallied the shuttlecock back and forth, trying to keep it aloft and counting the hits. If it ever evolved into a game more similar to tennis where the players attempted to score points on their opponents, the Queen of Scotland would kick everyone’s arse.

“Oh God’s Teeth, Brigit!”

At her monarch’s exasperation, Brigit whirled, already reaching for her dagger to

defend from danger. But the Queen was standing with one hand on her hip, brows cocked.

“What?” Brigit asked, relaxing.

“You! You have been distracted of late, I will agree, but passing up the chance to make a comment about these ladies dropping the cock every which way ?” The Queen stepped forward, reaching for Brigit’s brow. “You must be ill. Are you fevered? Allow me to check.”

Scoffing, Brigit brushed away her hand and side-stepped the English woman. “I am healthy enough. Just...distracted.”

“Very distracted, if you missed dropping the cock —”

“Aye, fine, aright,” Brigit snapped with a roll of her eyes. She made her voice honey-sweet to say, “Heavens, Yer Majesty, if they all dropped the cock, we’d be finding unmanned men throughout the gardens.”

The Queen chuckled. “Sounds messy.”

“I do manage to do other things besides make cock jokes,” Brigit sighed.

“Oh really?” the other woman teased, handing off the equipment to a servant. “Such as embroidery? The purple heather on your neckline is exquisite.”

Unbidden, Brigit’s hand rose to brush the stitching, which were, of course, her secret penises. Judging from the twinkle in the Queen’s eyes, she knew it too.

But Brigit wasn’t in the mood to be teased and looked away.

“Oh, dear, I am sorry,” the other woman finally admitted with a sigh, stepping up to Brigit and sliding her hand through her bent elbow. “You have plenty of other talents. Investigation, strategy....”

“Seduction,” Brigit finished dully.

“Ah.”

The Queen inhaled, as if she was going to say something—mayhap not something Brigit wanted to hear—but was interrupted by a call from the other side of the gardens.

“The chessboard is prepared!”

The announcement was met with a general hue and cry of excitement as the ladies of the court gathered their skirts and moved in various stages of hurry toward the other end of the walled sanctuary.

The Queen sighed and squeezed Brigit’s arm against her ribcage. “Will you partner with me?”

“Of course, Yer Majesty.”

They strolled sedately in the wake of the ladies, and Brigit couldn’t even force herself to find humor in what awaited them. ‘twas the latest rage at court, and one simple enough: life-sized chess.

As they arrived, Avaline was overseeing The Hats. That’s how she called them, and everyone present could hear the capital letters.

“Pawns, yer helms are here—yes, Millicent, feel free to take the mace, ‘tis wood, but

still have a care if ye are called to fight. Milady Keith, will ye play the part of the black queen? Yer daughter should be the bishop. Here is the headdress—nay, just put it atop yer wimple.”

Brigit and the Queen slowed to watch the set-up. Not for the first time, Brigit reflected on how well Avaline took command. ‘Twas as if she’d been born for such a role and only made do as a court attendant and spy.

“She should have been queen,” murmured the monarch at her side.

“I was just thinking something similar. She certainly understands command well, aye?”

“Yes, and she has been quite proud since my husband publicly praised her for saving his life again. I wonder—oh yes, look, Ava has made herself the white queen.”

Brigit watched her partner scurry about the chessboard—merely colored tiles atop the grass—arranging her pieces. “So ye are to play the black side.”

The Queen pulled her arm free to rub her hands together almost gleefully. “Yes, I appreciate advantages of allowing her the first move. Besides, I believe Ava overestimates her skill.”

Eyeing the board, Brigit wasn’t so certain. “It must be difficult to play from the chessboard.”

Avaline was surrounded by the other pieces, unable to see the bigger picture.

“Yes, that is what I mean.” The Queen sounded downright evil. Then she raised her voice. “Are we all ready? Excellent. Lady Avaline, you have the first move.”

“Pawn E2 to E4.” A pause, then, “Mary! That is ye! Move two squares forward! Nay, no’ just the black ones, come back.”

Brigit hid her smirk, but the Queen wasn’t as polite. She immediately called out, “Pawn E7 to E5. Excellent. ”

Avaline frowned as she twisted in place, trying to see the whole board. “Knight G1 to F3. Lady Sybil, pay attention, that is ye— nay , ye’re a knight! Ye remember how knights move?”

The game continued, with Avaline rallying her players and the Queen shooting off commands—and keeping her patience as her players became confused and wandered off. There was a bit of excitement when the first pawn was taken by a knight, and Millicent tried to use her wooden mace to defend herself.

“Oh dear, Sybil, I am certain the bleeding will stop. Millicent—do stop crying, girl—take her to the infirmary. Someone take Sybil’s spot—not you, Brigit.” The Queen took a hold of her elbow. “I need your advice.”

“For certes, Yer Majesty,” Brigit murmured, ducking her head. “Try King to E12.”

The monarch snorted. “That is not a thing. Clearly you do not play this game.”

Thinking of the dangerous games Brigit had played, she sighed. “Nay, no’ this one.”

“Queen D8 to E7,” the Queen called, then lowered her voice to speak only to Brigit. “You have not been yourself this last sennight. I would think you would be pleased, having exonerated your beau.”

Her beau. Is that what Drummond had been to her? Brigit hadn’t seen him—had purposefully avoided him, these last seven days.

But 'twas no use. Even without seeing him, she thought of him.

Thought of his strength and the way he'd held her, protected her .

Thought of his heart and the way he'd always cared so much about her pleasure and comfort.

Thought of his smile, his laughter. The way he looked at her when she tried to comfort him , as if she were a minor miracle.

And, despite everything, Brigit thought of the day they spent working together, trying to solve the mystery of the attempted assassin.

They'd meshed perfectly, each playing off the other's strengths, each complementing the other. It had been nice to have a partner she could trust so easily.

Until she broke that trust.

Mayhap she'd made a sound, because the Queen turned from calling a move to pat Brigit's arm. "You are unhappy with the way things turned out?"

"Nay, Yer Majesty. I just wish..."

The older woman hummed. "You feel conflicted about your role in his exoneration?"

Taking a deep breath, Brigit decided to tell her friend the truth. "Drum is...he doesnae trust easily. He was beginning to trust me, and I can admit that we worked well together. In such a short time, we were able to discover so much, and his mind is as sharp as Ava's. But..."

"But?" the Queen asked, then called, "Knight G8 to F6."

“ But ,” Brigit continued with a sigh, “he only worked with me because...” How to explain? “In the past, a woman he trusted betrayed him. She manipulated him, and because of that, he’s refused to work with women on his missions—I have heard stories from his Hunters about his warnings. ”

“Ah, and because he worked with you, you believe he trusted you?” The Queen raised her voice in exasperation. “Ladies! Chess is a substitute for warfare! Do cease slapping each other with those silly wooden maces—no, only the knights may use the swords, Madeline!”

As the match devolved to a bit of a scuffle, Avaline hoisted up her skirt and waded into the fray. Brigit and the Queen watched—one despaired, one amused.

“I am not certain this game is the best idea for the ladies of the court,” she said.

Brigit huffed . “Where else are they going to get out their petty differences—och, that was a nice shot. Lady MacDonald will be seeing stars for a while.”

The Queen hummed as she watched Avaline trying to pull apart two grandmothers. “So, Drummond is angry at you?”

“He is...” How to explain? “He trusted me, if only for a little while. And I manipulated him and betrayed him.”

“But only because ‘twas your mission,” the Queen pointed out calmly. “Orders from me. And besides that, you had a relationship with him long before I ordered you to get close to him to find out what you could.”

Aye, that was true. But would Drum believe that? “But that day...”

“Ah.” A pause. “You became very close to him, I would imagine.”

Brigit snorted, then nodded. Aye, one might say that.

“What has he said? ”

“Naught, Yer Majesty. He’s avoided me and I’ve avoided him.”

“What?” She rounded on Brigit incredulously. “But you saved him! Does he not realize that? One moment.” She glanced at the board long enough to call, “Rook F8 to F7, please, quickly,” before swinging back to Brigit. “He has been exonerated, thanks to your efforts, and is now on the same assignment you are. You have had no luck in finding the true assailant?”

Stiffly, Brigit shook her head. “Nay, Yer Majesty. My investigations are turning up naught.”

“And he has had no success either, or at least none he’s reported to my husband. Queen G5 to...H4, yes!” She glanced down at Brigit. “Who knows what efforts he is having alone?”

Brigit considered those words as the game continued, then—in a lull while Avaline broke up another fight—ventured, “I dinnae understand what ye mean, Yer Majesty.”

“Just that it is possible he works better with you than he did alone. Bishop G4 to H3! Have you considered that?”

She...hadn’t. “Just as I do?”

“Hmmm. Who knows what he is doing, flopping about on his own, without you. Queen H4 to G3!”

“But, Yer Majesty, he doesnae want to see me.”

The Queen's attention was on the game as the lady playing the white king moved out of the way of the black queen's danger. "Do you know that for certes?"

Squeezing her eyes shut, Brigit remembered the way Drum had glared at her a week ago as the monarchs ate dinner. She remembered the rage in his eyes, the hurt in his tone. "Aye," she whispered, voice ragged. "I do."

"Well, that is too bad." The Queen raised her voice. "Queen G3 to F2. Check!"

"King E2 to D1" said Avaline with a defeated sigh.

"Queen F2 to C2!" the Queen called in excitement. "Checkmate!"

As the ladies—both those in the game and those engaged in bonking one another with their chess hats on the sidelines—cheered, Brigit tried to rally some good spirits.

"Congratulations, Yer Majesty."

"Piffle."

Brigit blinked. "Bless ye? Was that a sneeze?"

"No, it is a dismissive word meaning I am brushing off your praise." The monarch lowered her voice and leaned closer. "Avaline is brilliant at command but lacks something when it comes to chess mastery. Now, what were we talking about before I thoroughly trounced her? Oh yes, your—"

"He's no' mine," Brigit interrupted. "No' anymore."

"Yes, well, you would like him to be."

Since the Queen was looking at her— truly looking at her, not focused on her court, Brigit couldn't brush off the question. She took a deep breath, lifted her chin, and told the truth. "I think I love him."

"Brava!" Her Majesty cried, grabbing Brigit's shoulders and tugging her closer to press a kiss on each cheek. "I am so happy for you, dear. "

"Happy?" Since Brigit was so much shorter than the Queen—shorter than everyone, really—she had to tip her head back to stare incredulously. "I havenae—I cannae..." Her hands flapped about in frustration. "He hates me! He must!"

"Yes, well, that is to be expected." The Queen straightened, her tone no-nonsense as the ladies of the court began to break away in pairs and trios, discussing the game, and Avaline collected The Hats. "He is the sort of man who does not trust easily, and you have merely confirmed that for him."

"Thank ye," Brigit muttered sarcastically.

"But this is a detail." The Queen wrapped her fingers around Brigit's forearm. "You love him. He feels strongly about you—if he did not, then he would not feel betrayed."

The words opened a familiar pit in Brigit's stomach. "I hadnae thought of that," she whispered miserably.

"No, you do not understand!" The other woman shook her slightly. "If he loved you the way you love him, then this current impediment is merely a stone in the path of happiness. You must find a way to step over it! If you can, it will be easy to remind him of his feelings for you."

Brigit refused to see hope, refused to believe it could be as simple as the Queen was

saying. “And how am I supposed to do that?”

The English Queen tsked. “Must I do everything? Fine. I command you to go to him. Work with him. Ask him questions about his investigation and offer to help him—you likely have more contacts than he does. Offer him...offer him the crossbow if he has not seen it. Offer him the truth.”

The truth .

No more lies. No more deceptions. “You mean...I go to him as an Angel? He is a King’s Hunter, and I am a Queen’s Angel... He will be livid.”

“Yes, he will,” the other woman said dismissively. “And then he will get over it because he will realize you were doing everything in his best interest.”

“I dinnae think—”

With a sigh, the Queen released her. “You will have to trust me, dear Brigit; I have been married for some time. Wives need to be cunning to take care of the men we love, and we are . In some cases, that means not revealing we were working behind their backs. In other cases, it means ordering our loyal agent to pick herself up and climb back into the game.”

The last was said with a stern look before the Queen turned about and swept toward her other ladies.

Brigit could only stare after her.

Wives need to be cunning to take care of the men we love .

Aye, she loved Drum, but... wife ?

Nay, 'twas unlikely he'd ever forgive her for what she'd done.

But the Queen was right. She needed to discover the assassin, and experience had taught her she had the best chance if she was working with Drummond instead of against him .

She would tell him the truth of her past and her present. If he'd listen, she would bring him the evidence the Angels had collected and compare it to whatever he had amassed.

Together, they would identify the assassin and bring him down.

God willing .

No matter how angry he might be with her right now, Brigit had to go to him. Had to convince him to work with her.

No manipulations, no lies.

Only the truth.

And pray it would work.

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:16 am

Drummond frowned at the neatly-kept little cottage which sat in the shade of the castle walls. Smoke spiraled lazily from the perfect chimney and flowers bloomed in the front garden.

It didn't look like a sorcerer's cottage.

The King of Scotland had wise men, advisors, and religious counsolders. But the Old Ways were still popular in some places and His Majesty wasn't one to throw away things that still worked, hence the court sorcerer.

Charles the Thirty-Seventh, court sorcerer, to be precise.

Well, if there was any man who could tell Drum about the poison used in the latest assassination attempt, 'twould be Charles.

He rapped smartly on the door, which gave way under his touch, swinging slowly open with an atmospheric squeeeeeek .

Ah . Now this is what Drum imagined a sorcerer's hut would look like.

Dribbly candles lined every surface, some even stuck to the wall with their wax, causing the whole place to flicker with reflected light and also be hot as hell. There was something bubbling and smoking in a pot over the fire, filling the air with white fog and a scent not unlike a diseased goat.

And from somewhere in the mist came the sound of off-key humming.

Drum's fingers wrapped around his sword hilt as he peered about .

Only years of battle-honed instincts warned him of the presence at his back. He whirled, just as an eddy in the smoke blew aside to reveal—

“Christ on the cross!” Drum bellowed, backpedaling.

The creature which emerged from the smoke was hunch-backed, dressed in rags, its face a horrible agglomeration of warts and spikes and two eyes which were just black holes of nothingness. It lifted its arms, fingers curled into claws, reaching for Drum like a demon from hell.

“Whooooo distuuurrrrrbbbs my woooooorrrrrkkkk?” it groaned.

Drum slowly straightened, heart thundering against his ribcage. “Pardon?”

“I said—” The creature bent to one side, hacked loudly, then straightened. “Who disturbs my work? Sorry, this smoke is thick, aye?”

With that, the figure moved to the door through which Drum had entered, and—while Drum watched, not removing his hand from his sword—propped it open.

“There.” The creature flapped its arms, apparently to move the smoke out the door. “Could ye open that window over there?”

Frowning, Drum edged toward the window. “Are ye...are ye the sorcerer?”

The man—for now ‘twas obvious this was a man—was untying something from around his waist. “I prefer the term alchemist , but tradition is a bitch sometimes.”

So saying, he pulled off what looked to be an apron—covered in holes and slashes,

the “rags” Drum had seen earlier—and tossed it over one of the chairs. “Did ye forget how shutters work?” he asked, his tone only mildly curious.

Shaking his head, Drum leaned sideways to open the shutters and allow a cross-breeze in.

“Ah, that’s better,” the man said, reaching for his face. To Drum’s surprise, he pulled the horrific thing off.

Or rather, he took off what turned out to be a mask, covered in splotches and burns, to reveal a surprisingly young man.

Drum squinted. “Ye’re Charles the Thirty-Seventh, the King’s royal sorcerer?”

“Aye.” The man paused halfway through a bow. “Well, actually, as I said, I dinnae do any magic per se, but people expect a bit of a show.” He waved his hands about, encompassing the dribbly candles and eldritch atmosphere. “And of course, my name’s no’ Charles.”

All Drum could think of to say was, “It isnae?”

“Nay, dinnae be daft. ‘Tis Stephanie. But as I said, tradition holds quite a bit of power around here, so the name Charles sort of comes with the job.” He grinned eagerly. “Ye can call me Chuck. Do ye want something to drink?”

Drum glanced around again, fingers slowly loosening from his sword’s hilt. “Absolutely, unequivocally, nay .”

The other man shrugged. “Fair enough, fair enough. Ye ken what they say: Non calor sed umor est qui nobis incommodat. ”

“Uh...” Drum forced his hand to relax as he glanced at the various alchemical accoutrements becoming visible. “I’ll take yer word for that. So...Chuck.”

“Are ye here to see me turn gold into an apple?”

Drum paused. “I thought ye alchemists were trying to turn things into gold?”

“Di! Ecce hora! Uxor mea me necabit! ‘Tis much easier to take some gold down into the marketplace and exchange it for some apples. I can turn the tiniest piece of gold into an entire bushel of barrels, which is a useful skill, I’d warrant. Ha! And my father said I’d amount to naught! Well, In culina, nemo audit te clamare!”

It took a moment of expectant waiting for Drum to realize the sorcerer was done speaking and wasn’t going to make any more sense. He blew out a breath. “Look, I’m here because I want to ask ye about a poison.”

“Oooh, poisons. Aye, I can do poisons, but only on Tuesdays. That’s the day I get my cauldron going and I can make up any brew ye want.”

“Is yer cauldron no’ going now?” Drum asked curiously.

“Och, aye, but that is just my lunch.” Charles the Thirty-Seventh rubbed his hands together, an excited look on his face. “So, what kind of poison do ye want? Nightshade? Hemlock?”

“Nay, I’m seeking information about a poison.” Drum wished he had a bottle or some kind of evidence, but all he had was the story of what had happened last week when the Queen’s lady—Brigit’s partner—had saved the King yet again. “ ‘Twas a sickly-sweet smelling poison, dissolved into wine. And when the wine was poured atop an apple, the apple smoked.”

“Hmmmmmm...” The court sorcerer stroked his beardless chin. “Ye’re certain ‘twas an apple? Was it red or yellow?”

Shite, what color had it been? “Red, I think.”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh, and was it bigger than yer fist? Was it shiny?”

Drum couldn’t recall. “What difference does it make?”

“Och, none at all, I’m just hungry. So...” The man began to pace. “Sickly-sweet-smelling, wine as the delivery method, and made an apple smoke. I’m assuming ye’re speaking of the recent assassination attempt on the King?”

Drum startled. “Ye’ve heard of it?”

“Of course! Everyone in court has! The King was most appreciative to Lady Avaline for saving his life once more. Now there’s a lovely lass—or used to be, at least, afore the burning. That’s why I always wear a mask when I’m working with fire. *Calcei maioris aliorum sunt semper in medio*, and all that.”

“Uh...aye. Aye, that makes sense,” Drum lied. “Has anyone asked ye about it? What kind of poison it might be? Something ye recognize?”

“Something I recognize ? Of course ‘tis! ‘Tis my favorite! Nae one’s come to ask me about it, though, which is a shame.” The other man bustled about, collecting scraps from tables and throwing them in a bowl. “I am the expert after all.”

Drum stepped closer, excitement spiking in his chest. “Ye’re saying ye do ken it? ”

“Ken it? I made it!” Charles thrust the bowl toward Drum. “Snack?”

There was something alive in there. “Um...I’m no’ hungry.” Drum shook his head. “Ye made the poison which was used to kill—to try to kill the King?”

“Oh, it wouldnae have killed him.” The sorcerer was smiling as he popped something from the bowl into his mouth, crunching it. “Just made him smoke a bit.”

Smoke a bit .

Like the apple, when the poisoned wine had been poured atop it?

“So ‘tis...no’ a poison. Just a show?”

Charles waved at the dissipating smoke, grinning proudly. “A simple chemical reaction. Och, it’ll curse yer stomach—and yer arse—if ye accidentally eat it. Ask me how I ken,” he prompted helpfully.

Drum pressed his lips together. No’ for all the golden apples in this place .

The other man shrugged and poked through the things in the bowl. “So ‘tis no’ a poison per se , but no’ pleasant. ‘Twould have made his trips to the garderobe unpleasant, but mainly ‘tis for show.”

So Avaline didnae save the King’s life after all, because the assassin hadnae actually been trying to kill him?

Drum’s thoughts were whirling, trying to piece everything together. The crossbow had been stolen from the guard on the parapets. The corridor where the ambush was made wasn’t heavily frequented. And now the poison wasn’t actually poison ?

Very carefully, he ventured, “Ye said ye made the no’-a-poison? Did ye sell it to someone?”

“Quantum materiae materietur marmota monax si marmota monax materiam possit materiari?”

‘Twas clearly a question, but Drum didn’t understand it, so he shook his head then reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose. Eyes closed, he asked again, “Charles? I have a verra large sword and a verra short temper. Who did ye sell it to?”

“I didnae,” the other man hurried to assure him. “But I keep close eye on my stock, and a fortnight ago some was missing.”

Drum dropped his hand to glare. “What do ye mean?”

“When I woke up, someone had been in my cottage.” The sorcerer gestured around him. “Nae idea how he got in so quietly, mayhap he’d been here before. But one of my wee bottles was missing.”

He groped sideways, reaching for a shelf, his hand closing around a small vial. Then he held it up in illustration.

Drum took it, turning it over in his hands as he examined the thing, mind skipping ahead. Such a small bottle could be easily hidden on a person, then slipped into the wine at any point during the process. Hell, it could have even been on the goblet itself!

He’d have to interrogate Lawrence again.

“I’m keeping this,” he growled, curling his fingers around the bottle. “I’ll return it when my investigation’s done.”

Charles the Thirty-Seventh shrugged. “Please do. I’m just happy to have visitors. Quidquid Latine dictum sit, altum videtur. ”

What an incredibly strange person.

Still clutching the bottle, and keeping both eyes on the happily humming sorcerer, Drum slowly backed out of the open door.

And right into a wall. A wall he knew well.

“Drum! How in the hell are ye?”

There was only one man in Scotland who had shoulders like that, was strong enough to wrap his arms around Drum and lift him from behind... and who knew him well enough to call him Drum .

“Craig,” wheezed Drum. “What are ye doing here?”

“Looking for ye, of course. Just got lucky to run into ye here. Ha ! I guess ye ran into me .”

Awkwardly, Drum patted the other man’s forearm. “Ha-ha. Now put me down, ye great ox.”

Craig Oliphant had been one of his Hunters before the man had retired to marry a Sinclair lady, the widowed mother of a young earl. Craig’s assignment had been to protect them, but apparently the King had passed on his blessings for the marriage, which meant the huge blacksmith-turned-Hunter-turned-stepfather was settling into his role.

As Drum straightened, he knocked his friend’s shoulder. “Now, what are ye doing in Scone ? Is the family well?”

“Och, aye, but Robbie was invited to a meeting with some other earls, and I’m along

as his guard. He's verra important, ye ken."

Smiling, Drum patted his friend again. "Aye, and ye're a good da, I can tell. I hope ye'll make some time for me? To catch up? "

They fell into step, long used to working together. "Why do ye think I was looking for ye? I ken ye have nae good advice for women, but I wanted to tell ye all about Dungotit and the lassies and—Why are ye looking at me like that?"

Drum wasn't the sort of man who couldn't admit he'd made a mistake.

After a decade of warning his men to take care in their dealings with and missions involving women, he'd gone and made the same stupid mistake. He took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry I ever pretended to be knowledgeable in that area, Craig. Ye shouldnae have taken my advice."

"I didnae," the large man said cheerfully as they entered the courtyard. "I married Elspeth, did I no'? She's far above me, but I love her and the bairns more than life itself, and for some reason they love me."

"Because ye're a good man," Drum said. Dumb as an ox, but good . "And I'm glad ye've all found happiness." He paused, considering his men. "Ye, and Barclay, and Payton. Ye've all found love."

"And ye?"

At Craig's question, Drum stopped and twisted. "What?" he barked. "What do ye mean?"

Craig shrugged, looking like an affable idiot. “Have ye found love? Ye said ye were wrong about working with women. So...?”

Damnation .

“I...wasnae wrong. Women are for falling in love with, making a life together. No’ working with. No’ partnering with. Ye cannae trust them. ”

Except...he’d had plenty of time to think about Brigit’s actions in the last week, and he wasn’t so certain he had a right to be indignant about her actions.

Just as the King had his Hunters, the Queen’s Angels were a shadowy group of women masquerading as her ladies-in-waiting, whom she sent the length and breadth of Scotland on missions rather more discreet than that of the Hunters.

They were unknown, and Drum had only learned what he knew of them because the King was willing to speak to him once more.

Brigit is an agent of the Crown, same as ye. She was only doing what she was ordered...and ye can understand that.

She’d used her relationship with him to learn if he was guilty.

She manipulated ye into revealing yer truth instead of just asking ye !

Would he have done differently? Criminals would claim innocence the same as an innocent man.

She’d used what she could to learn the truth about him.

Just because ‘tis logical doesnae make it hurt less .

“Ye’re scowling,” Craig announced unhelpfully. “Want to talk about it?”

Nay .

Aye.

With a sigh, Drum scrubbed his free hand over his face and admitted that his friend might just have a good idea. “’Tis...complicated. ”

Snorting, Craig turned for the steps. “When are women no’ complicated? Give me the general outline of the story.”

With a deep breath, Drum did. He started with the attempted assassination, the ambush with the crossbow, and was pleased when his friend was suitably irate at the threat to the King’s life and Drum being blamed. He described his investigation and Brigit’s help, and what they’d learned together...only to find out he’d been her mission all along.

“All along?” Craig asked with a frown as they turned down one of the corridors. “I ken the two of ye have been...”

God’s Blood, even Craig had noticed his obsession with the buxom little redheaded maid?

Drum growled, “Nay, just...” Damnation , how to continue that sentence? He took a deep breath. “When I started fooking her, she kenned I was a Hunter, but I didnae ken she was an Angel. And I wasnae a mission to her until I came under suspicion.”

That much he knew was truth, at least.

But Craig hummed thoughtfully. “Did anyone ken she was an Angel?”

“Nay,” Drum snapped. “I told ye! They’re like this super-secret group. The Hunters have helms to announce who we are. No’ them. Ye cannae trust women.”

“But if she couldnae tell anyone who she was, she couldnae tell ye. Unless ye gave her a reason to think ye were worth betraying the Queen’s trust.” Craig looked far too cheerful to be dropping such knowledge. “And ye cannae fault her reasoning. ‘Twas good secret-agenting, ye have to admit. The Queen told her to use what she could to determine yer guilt, and she did. ‘Tisnae to say she liked it, just that she did as commanded.”

Drum’s steps slowed, his attention on the stone floor as they neared his little office.

Brigit... hadn’t looked as if she’d enjoyed betraying his trust, had she? She’d looked tortured and miserable, but Drum had been too angry to notice anything beyond her guilt.

Unless ye gave her a reason to think ye were worth betraying the Queen’s trust.

Drum squeezed his eyes closed. Fook . It wasn’t as if he was her husband. He had no right to be so angry over this...did he?

“Besides.” Craig’s huge hand slammed into his shoulder. “She proved ye innocent, aye? Stood up for ye to Their Majesties?”

“Aye,” Drum croaked.

“So ‘twas for the best?”

Was it?

Drum didn’t know. He still had so much anger sitting in the pit of his stomach, but he

wasn't certain if 'twas directed at Brigit or the Queen or himself or the goddamned universe for keeping such a secret from him.

Craig turned and began to walk backward down the corridor, that stupid grin on his stupid face. "I have to go check on Robbie. Meet me for an ale tonight? After I tuck him in?"

Tucking in an earl. Drum's lips tugged into a reluctant grin. "Aye," he rasped, "I'd like that."

"And ye can tell me more about Brigit," Craig called as he disappeared around the corner .

Could he? Would he? Sighing, Drum reached for the latch of his door.

He'd thought himself falling in love with Brigit...but he couldn't trust. Not anymore.

Three steps into the room he rocked to a halt. There, on the desk, was a scroll he didn't recognize. One he hadn't left there.

Picking it up, he studied it. The seal was simple, no design. Just a dab of yellow wax. He broke it and unrolled the thing.

And couldn't help the way his heart leapt at the words printed there in a simple, unfamiliar hand:

I know who is trying to hurt the King. Meet me in the chapel at midnight.

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:16 am

Brigit watched the warriors practicing archery. She watched the arrows fly, watched the sweat drip, watched them tease and mock one another. But always they ignored the one in the first position, the warrior wearing the heavy helm of a King's Hunter.

She watched as, one by one, they finished their practice and left to address other tasks.

But the Hunter stayed.

Leaning her hip against the stone wall, Brigit's hand dropped to idly finger the bundle hanging from her belt. 'Twas a nasty little weapon, designed to be carried easily, and she'd used it more than once. But it had none of the power and strength of the longbow Drummond pulled.

Aye, the man in the helm was Drummond, there was no doubt of that. Even if another Hunter had returned to Scone, she'd recognize his form, recognize his stance.

Recognize his anger.

'Twas there in his movements, in the way he shook his head sharply when an arrow didn't land as true as it might have.

Finally, with a curse she heard even this far away, the warrior sent the last of his arrows hurtling down the range toward the straw target, then rolled his shoulders.

Brigit's chest ached to see him so coiled up in his emotions. She wanted to help, even though she knew she was the cause of his pain. And the absolute worst part was, even

if she could take back everything that had happened between them, she didn't want to; if she hadn't betrayed him, the Queen would still think him guilty, and thus so would the King.

But she could apologize.

"Drummond," she called softly, but the man was already striding for the target, and didn't hear her. So, she called again. "Drummond!"

Was it her imagination or did his step falter just slightly, his helmeted head tip to one side as if looking for a threat? But he didn't stop, and Brigit found herself hurrying after him, determined to get his attention.

Determined to set this right, somehow.

He'd reached the target and was pulling his arrows from the straw, examining each one before shoving it back into the quiver on his hip.

"Drum!" she yelled, and this time there was no way he didn't hear her.

He froze, his hand wrapped around the shaft of one of the arrows...but he didn't turn.

And Brigit's own anger rose up in her at the knowledge he was ignoring her, ignoring what they'd had and unwilling to even do her the honor of showing his emotions behind that stupid metal helmet.

So, as she strode toward him, she lifted the little crossbow from her belt, slid the bolt into place, then lifted and fired in one smooth motion.

The small bolt made a heavy thwack as it sank into the straw a good foot from his right shoulder, exactly where she'd aimed. Brigit didn't want to hurt him, after all:

just get his attention in an undeniable way .

It worked.

With another curse, Drum yanked his arrow from the target, fitted it against his bowstring, and whirled into a crouch, halting himself from raising the weapon only when he saw her striding toward him.

Well, thank God for small miracles, then .

“What in the absolute shite , Brigit?” he bellowed. “Ye could’ve killed me!”

“Nay, I could no’!” she yelled right back, marching up to him and stopping an arm’s length away. She forced her voice to lower. “I hit what I aimed at. I was tired of ye ignoring me.”

She couldn’t see his expression but had the impression he was gaping at her. Finally, he repeated, “ Ignoring ye ,” in what could only be called an incredulous tone.

Well, too late to back down now. Brigit raised the stakes by stepping forward, tipping her chin up to show she wasn’t afraid. “Aye! I’ve come to apologize to ye, and ye were ignoring me. So, I got yer attention. It worked, did it no’?”

The sound he made was difficult to identify beneath that helm, but she wondered if it might have been a sort of chuckle.

“It worked,” he rumbled, slowly lowering his bow completely and rising from his crouch. “Ye have my attention.”

“Good.” Suddenly, she wasn’t certain how to proceed. She nodded and repeated, “Good. I’m...um...I’m sorry.”

A pause. Then, “Ye’re shite at apologies, Brigit.”

Bah, he was right. “Then I’m sorry for that too!” Deciding ‘twas easier not to look at him, she turned and reached for her bolt which had embedded only partially into the straw. “And I’m sorry for getting yer attention in such a stupid way.”

But as she yanked the small bolt out, Drum’s larger hand closed around her wrist.

“What is this?” he asked, turning her whole hand so he could examine the bolt.

“‘Tis my crossbow bolt,” she said a bit uselessly.

“So small.”

“Aye, well, Angels realized ‘tis easier to be dismissed as a danger if yer opponent cannae see yer weapon.”

Still holding her wrist, Drum turned to her, and she had the impression he was studying her. Finally, he said, “What other weapons do ye carry, then?”

He hadn’t found any on her the times they’d made love, she’d been certain of that.

With her free hand, Brigit lifted the small crossbow and he released her to take the weapon from her. The helm tipped forward as he examined it.

“This is small.”

“Aye, well, I am small.”

Another sound that could be a snort. “Do all Angels use these?”

She realized with a jolt that he was accepting the fact that she was a Queen's Angel, and that there were others. Did this mean he knew she'd only been following orders?

What had he asked? Och aye. "We're all trained with them. Some are better with larger weapons, but my partners and I always relied on these smaller ones. "

He hummed, turning it over a few more times as if analyzing the design, then handed it back to her to hang on her belt. Straightening, he slid the arrow he still held back into his quiver and tucked the bow over his shoulder while he studied her.

Her stomach was in knots. Was he her judge, then? And what would the verdict be?

Finally, he asked, "What else?" as his right hand closed around the hilt of his sword. "Do ye fight with a blade?"

This was a fragile truce, but at least he was speaking to her without anger, so she answered carefully.

"Nay," she admitted, "but I find other uses for them."

As she spoke, she slipped two small knives from her waist, tucked beneath her bodice at the back. Holding her expression steady, she pivoted on one foot, tucked one blade between her fingers, drew back her arm and hurled the other one. As it lodged into the straw of the next target over, she was shifting her fingers, pulling back, then releasing the second to slam into the target right beside the first.

The whole attack took only a moment, and she turned back to Drum to see that helmet cocked to one side, attention on the target. Finally, he sighed.

"Impressive," he murmured.

When he reached up to place his palms on either side of his helm, Brigit realized she was holding her breath.

Drum slowly removed the thing, shaking his hair out of his eyes as he did so, the movement smooth and practiced, something he'd done thousands of times before.

But for Brigit, this time was special.

When his dark eyes met hers, there was sadness there, aye, but perhaps...a grudging sort of respect?

He'd removed his helm, and 'twas as if he was saying he was willing to be Drummond here and now with her...instead of a faceless King's Hunter.

They stood there before the target, staring at one another. Brigit had to tip her head back to meet his gaze, and he tucked the helm under his arm in an easy pose as he studied her.

"Ye are an agent for the Queen," he finally said.

She nodded once. "As ye are for the King."

"The difference being, I am kenned to be one."

Winning slightly at the sudden hardness in his tone, Brigit knew he was referring to her deception. "Yer power comes from the people of Scotland recognizing ye—or at least, that helm. 'Tis yer reputation that works for ye—ye've told me so yerself."

Drummond had made certain that stories of the King's Hunters had been carried far and wide across Scotland; often their enemies were terrified of them before they even arrived, and 'twas why the helms were so similar.

His nod was more of a jerk, his mouth tugged into a fierce scowl. “’Tis the truth.”

“Well...” She offered a small, rueful smile. “’Tis the opposite for us. The Angels’ power comes from people believing us to be naught more than ladies of the court or serving wenches. ‘Tis insulting, aye, but our anonymity allows us to move through Scotland pr actically unseen. I have completed more than one mission because I was underestimated.”

As she spoke, Drum’s expression softened from a frown to a sort of soft consideration .

“I am remembering a story one of my men told me about his life being saved by a maid with a skill for throwing daggers.”

Brigit immediately nodded, pleased she was now able to share everything with him. “Craig Oliphant, aye. The Queen sent me along as his new wife’s maid because I’d been guarding her son—the wee earl—before yer Hunter was assigned.”

Something like realization crossed his face before Drum rolled his eyes a bit and shook his head, looking away. “I should have realized. Leave it to a woman to work in secret.”

Taking a chance, Brigit laid her fingers on his forearm. “’Tis often our only option. The Queen herself, a brilliant leader and bold strategist, hides her skills from her court so she is underestimated.”

“Cannae trust women,” he muttered, still looking away from her.

Brigit squeezed her eyes shut, knowing he was slipping away from her once more.

“Come,” she blurted. “I want to show ye something.”

It wasn't until she'd whirled away that she was able to draw a breath through the crushing weight on her chest. And when Drum fell into step beside her, things felt a little better.

By the time they reached the empty corridor where the attack on the King had taken place weeks ago, his quiver and bow were gone, but the helm was still clamped under his arm, right above the hilt of his sword.

As if he carried both as armor, even if he didn't wear them.

"There," Brigit announced, pointing. "This is where the attack took place."

Without speaking, Drum dropped to a crouch, shifting his blade out of the way as he examined the spot where the assailant had cleverly attached the trip cord. She watched him slowly rise, following the imaginary string up to the niche where the crossbow had been tucked. He sighted along the wall, humming as he visualized how the attack would've taken place.

Then he turned, expression blank. "And ye couldnae show me this place last week?"

Was he thinking—with regret?—of the day they'd spent working together? She raised her hands, palms up, as if to show she had no choice. "Can ye blame me?"

"Ye thought me guilty," he growled. "Ye didnae trust me."

"The King thought ye guilty," she cried, then forced her voice into an even tone. "I was ordered to find proof of yer guilt. If ye had been guilty, then yer reaction to being told the incorrect site of the ambush would've been telling."

"And ye showed me the bolt for the same reason. To watch my reaction."

It wasn't a question, but she nodded. "The way ye believed me, the way ye interviewed the guards and armorer so thoroughly, proved ye were innocent."

Rage flickered in his eyes as he stepped toward her. "Ye could have taken my word!"

Brigit felt him slipping from her grasp. "And ye could try to understand my position a bit better, Drum!" she cried, reaching for him, but halting her hands. "Have ye never had to follow an order ye hated? How do ye think that made me feel? To be ordered to investigate for treason the man I lo—"

She bit down on the word, but Drum reared back as if she'd slapped him, and stared down at her, those dark eyes unreadable.

"The man ye what, Brigit?" he finally asked.

Blessed Virgin . She wasn't going to announce her feelings for him, not now. Not when he was still so hurt by her actions.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, tucking her chin to her chest. "I truly am. I hated—nay, I loved working with ye, but the reasons..."

They stood in silence in the empty corridor for a long moment. Then, releasing his breath on a sigh, Drum stepped toward her.

He was close enough she could press her palm to his chest. She could run her hands along his corded forearms. She could reach for his belt, tugging his pelvis against hers so she could tease him with her own heat.

Just his nearness, his scent , was enough to make her breath quicken, her blood pump.

“Lass,” he murmured, and Brigit closed her eyes, wishing she might hear longing in his tone.

When Drum placed his fingers beneath her chin, she forgot how to breathe. She opened her eyes as he lifted her gaze to meet his and watched as he studied her. Gently .

“Lass, I loved working with ye too. I didnae think I could, and ‘twas what made yer betrayal hurt so much.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered yet again, wondering if he’d ever believe her.

He shifted forward until her hands were trapped between them, his kilt brushing against her skirts. Brigit swallowed, wondering at this rush of desire. Was it because of his nearness after a week apart? Or just because her emotions were roiling in her stomach?

Or was it Drummond ?

“Ye brought me here,” he murmured, gaze dropping to her lips, “to show me the truth. Does that mean ye want to work together again?”

Her tongue darted across her lower lip as she tried to nod. But his hold on her chin halted the movement, so she whispered, “Aye. I can show ye the crossbow as well. I’ve investigated Matthias this past week, but I believe his initial story.”

Drum didn’t seem to care about the cocky guard who’d lost his weapon to the assassin. Instead, he lowered his face toward hers, still holding her steady. “Then, if we are sharing notes, I ought to tell ye I traced the poison the King almost drank that evening.”

Blinking, Brigit stared up at him, trying to force her mind to focus on his words instead of the riot of feelings—desire, worry, desire, hope, desire, desire, desire—churning in her.

“Wha...” She licked her lips. “What did ye find? ”

Her pulse pounded in her core and she wondered what she would discover if she was to press her hips forward against his.

“The poison came from the court sorcerer.”

Focus, idiot ! She forced herself to think about his words. “Charles the Thirty-Seventh? He made poison to kill the King?”

Drum’s thumb was now stroking her jaw, and she doubted he knew what his touch was doing to her. “Nay, lass, he made a potion to create smoke . ‘Twas what was diluted in the King’s wine.”

“No’...No’ poison?” Distracted, Brigit moved her hands to his forearms, the way she’d been yearning, then wrapped her fingers around the corded muscles. Was it her imagination, or did he shudder slightly. “Why would the assassin...”

“Brigit...” Drum murmured, tipping her head back, gaze caressing her features. “Think.”

There was nae assassin?

She gasped in realization just as Drummond’s lips came down to claim hers, and then she wasn’t thinking at all. With a little mewl of need, she rocked her hips forward, pressing her heat against his hardness, and aye Blessed Virgin aye he was hard!

Hard and thick and needing , just as she herself was. His cock jutted against her softness and she couldn't help the way she ground against him as his tongue plundered her mouth, begging him to ease this ache in the way only he knew how.

Her arms rose to hook around his neck, to pull him closer as she leaned upward on her toes. Then he was moving, pressing her backward until her arse hit the stone wall behind her .

“Lass,” he murmured against her jaw, “I want ye.”

“Aye, Drum!” she gasped, wriggling in anticipation. Liquid heat pulsed in her core and he'd done naught but kiss her, for fook's sake. “ Please .”

There was a clang as his helmet hit the floor, then his fingers were in her braid, tugging her head to the side so he could trail hot kisses down her neck. He was forceful and hard, a side of him she hadn't seen before.

And Brigit decided she absolutely needed to see more of him like this.

“I'm angry, Brigit,” he growled, nipping at her skin. “But this? This heat between us?”

One hand closed around her breast, and through the wool of her bodice and linen of her chemise, her nipple pebbled with need.

“Aye,” she gasped, arching into his touch. “This is real. 'Tis always real.”

“Always,” he snarled against her skin. “ Always .”

“Forever,” she promised, knowing despite her haze that 'twas the truth. “Please, Drum,” she begged wriggling against his hardness.

His fingers squeezed, and the rough handling sent a jolt of awareness, of excitement to Brigit's core. She moaned against his chest.

"I want ye."

His simple words made her heart leap in joy. "Aye!"

"But I'm still angry."

She could feel his anger, and in this moment, she wasn't sorry for it, because God's Wounds his touch was making her hot. Still, Brigit forced her hands away from his shoulders to his temples. Forced herself to focus, to say the words that needed to be said.

"Ye have a right to be angry, Drum. But when ye fook me, here and now, 'twill no' be an apology from me. I want ye, I always want ye. I am sorry, but this..." She shook him as much as she could. "This between us is no' going to be sullied by manipulation."

She saw the moment he understood.

Understood their attraction had never been part of the manipulation, part of her investigation.

I love ye, her heart cried, but she pressed her lips together, willing him to understand the simple truth before she tried to convince him of aught else.

"Nae apology," he finally murmured with a little nod.

"Just us," she assured him.

His hand had dropped from her breast and was now fumbling with his kilt. “Turn around, lass,” he growled, and her knees went weak from desire and triumph.

He nudged her toward the deep window ledge and bent her forward, helping her tug up her skirts and press them into place between her waist and the stone wall. She felt him at her back, felt him nudging her legs wider, and she went willingly, gratefully.

When he entered her, they both groaned in satisfaction.

“So wet,” he murmured. “For me.”

“For ye,” she gasped. “Always. ”

This whatever they shared might have been casual, but there’d been no other men but Drummond Kennedy in her life since it had begun.

His hand tightened in her braid, holding her in place as his thrusts increased in speed, each accompanied by a desperate little noise of need. Brigit’s inner muscles were already tightening, the anticipation heightening each movement. She reached forward and wrapped her fingers around the bars of the open shutters, closing her eyes and allowing the afternoon breeze to capture her pants and whimpers.

He began to speak, timing with his plunges, and somehow that only sent her closer to the edge.

“Such a good lass. Taking my cock like ye want it. Ye want this, aye?”

Brigit could barely form a coherent thought, much less words. “Aye,” she thought she might’ve gurgled.

He curled forward, his hand slipping through her skirts and around the front of her

pelvis. “Ye like that? Ye like when I fook ye here in public, where anyone could see ye?”

He was right. Brigit opened her eyes, realizing she could see down into the courtyard. The realization somehow only heightened her pleasure, her excitement.

“Ye’re going to come for me, aye? Like a good lass.”

She didn’t have the chance to respond.

Because at that moment, Drummond’s thumb and forefinger found the nub of her pleasure hidden deep in her curls and rolled it the way he might roll her nipple.

‘Twas enough .

“Drum!” she gasped, inner muscles tightening as she hurtled higher and higher.

“Aye, Brigit,” he growled, his speed increasing. “Come for me.”

She did.

Oh, Good Christ, she did.

“ Drummond !” she screamed out the window as her pleasure burst over her in white-hot sparks. “God’s Wounds, aye !”

And then, with a wordless roar, he locked his hands on her hips, plunged forward once more, and spilled his seed deep inside her.

It should have been degrading, should have felt as if she had been used.

But Brigit blinked up into the bright Scottish afternoon sky, breathing slowing as her core spasmed around him, and realized it had been one of the most exhilarating experiences of her life.

‘Twas a long moment before Drum straightened, pulling his hand from her as his cock slid free with a rush of warmth. She pressed her elbows to the stone and felt him cleaning her with his kilt, his movements slow, gentle.

As he’d always been before.

She smiled, deciding she liked both Drummonds.

His touch was light as he drew her skirts down over her arse again then reached for her arms, lifting her upright.

Then, to her surprise, he nudged her around to face him, closed his hands around her waist and lifted until her arse rested on the window ledge where she’d just leaned. Leaned as he’d taken her hard and fast and deliciously .

“I’m sorry,” he muttered, not meeting her eyes as he reached for her, pulling her against his chest and tucking her head under his chin.

Brigit blinked in confusion. “About what?”

“About...that. I shouldnae have let my anger have such power.”

He sounded positively miffed, and she felt a smile tug at her chest as she inhaled his scent and burrowed into his hold.

“I loved it.”

Drum stiffened. “What?”

She giggled. “Dinnae get me wrong, I love the way ye always... care for me.” Their lovemaking had, up until now, been almost reverent, and he’d made certain she found her pleasure multiple times. “But today...I think we both needed this release.”

His arms tightened briefly before he pressed his cheek into the crown of her head. “I’ll take that into consideration in the future.”

The future.

Her heart leapt at the words.

It meant...

It meant that Drum thought there might be a future, and that was the most wonderful news she could’ve hoped for. Her arms snaked around his middle as her mind jumped from one thought to another.

If they had a future, mayhap ‘twould mean working together again!

Working together...as they’d done in the past. As they’d done today, briefly, when she’d showed him the secrets the Angels had kept and he’d understood what they’d meant. Drum had even told her of his own investigations...

She stiffened.

“What is it?” he murmured against her hair.

“The poison!” she pulled from his hold far enough to look up at him. “Ye said ‘twasnae really poison.”

His lips twitched. “Ye finally remember that?”

“Aye, well, I was distracted.” She poked his side teasingly. “But if ‘twasnae dangerous...”

“Charles said ‘twould no’ be pleasant, but the King wouldnae die from it.”

Nodding, she craned her head to see around him. “And the line of the crossbow bolt...”

He hummed, loosening his hold so he could step back, giving her a better line of sight. “Ye noticed that?” He pointed to a torch holder further down. “Placing it there would’ve given the bolt a better chance at hitting the target.”

She was already shaking her head as she frowned in thought. “The ambush was clumsy from the beginning. The trip wire being too high, the corridor a servant might hurry down. ‘twas as if...”

Trailing off, Brigit met Drum’s eyes, and they spoke together.

“He wasnae trying to kill the King.”

Brigit sucked in a breath, excitement blooming to fill her chest, the coil of energy she always experienced as a mission took a turn. “Is it possible his target was someone else?”

Drum shrugged. “Yer fellow Angel, mayhap, the one who pushed him out of the way?”

A suspicion had her eyes widening. “The ambush, what if it had to have been set off mechanically, as a sort of trigger, because the assassin couldnae be there to pull the

trigger?”

“Aye, that is logical.” He held out his hand to help her from the deep window ledge. “So he could be far away?”

That suspicion, the one she dared not name yet, made Brigit squeeze her eyes shut. “Something like that,” she groaned.

“And the wine that wasnae poisoned, but appeared to be?” He didn’t wait for her to answer, but continued, “Merely for show?”

Oh God .

Suddenly his fingers tightened around hers. “Brigit, did ye send me a note today?”

The question was so unexpected, she blinked up at him. “What? Nay, I came to find ye in person.”

His gaze was serious, thoughtful. “So ye didnae want me to meet ye in the chapel at midnight?”

She reared back. “Nay! Did someone ask ye that?”

He nodded grimly. “And I think I ken who ‘twas.”

Brigit swallowed, holding his gaze. “Someone who wanted the King to think he was the target of an assassin?”

“While no’ actually wanting him dead,” Drum agreed with a nod. “Someone loyal to him, but who wanted to feel more important.”

“Who?” Brigit whispered, knowing the truth.

Suddenly, Drum’s lips twitched. “Well, in murder mysteries, ‘tis always the butler who did it.”

“The...what? What’s a murder mystery?”

“Ye ken, a book about a sleepy little New England town where the resident author works part time as a sleuth—making it completely unbelievable that she could ever produce books at such a prodigious rate, what with all the murders happening. And at the end, someone yells The butler did it !”

Brigit blinked.

She blinked again, wondering if the earlier exercise had rattled her brains lose. “I...have nae idea what ye’re talking about.”

Drum shrugged. “My point is, Lawrence’s role here in the palace is the closest thing we have to a butler, aye? He was the one who delivered the wine. Does he ken aught about crossbows?”

Oh dear.

“Ye think Larry is our suspect?” Brigit shook her head. “Ye’re on the right trail, though. We’re looking for someone who is already close to Their Majesties. Someone who kens weaponry, but isnae as experienced with the larger crossbows the guards use. Someone who was there when the potion was slipped into the King’s wine.”

Drum’s eyes widened. “Ye mean yer partner, the other Queen’s Angel?”

Brigit nodded grimly. “Lady Avaline.”

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:16 am

“Ye’re certain ye understand what ye need to do?”

Drum’s hand gripped Craig’s shoulder and he gave him a little shake in the moonlit corridor. The other man’s grin flashed. “Nay, but when has that ever stopped me?”

Scoffing, Drum shook the larger man again. “I told ye, ye’re no’ stupid. Just...fook, just follow my instructions, eh? If ye can bring him in at the right moment, we might be able to pull this off...”

Craig twisted to slap his free hand against Drum’s shoulder. “I was teasing, Drum. Aye, I understand, and I’ll do as ye say, nae matter if he willnae listen to me. We’ll be there.”

With a sigh of relief, Drum nodded and stepped back, feeling strangely bereft when his friend’s touch fell away. “I dinnae ken why I’m so antsy about this.”

“I do.” Craig beamed good-naturedly as they fell into step. “’Tis yer neck on the line this time, aye?”

“No’ really. The King and Queen already ken I’m innocent. I— we just need to set the trap to snare the guilty party.”

“Aye, ‘tis that we I’m speaking of.” The other man was smirking. “After all these years, ye’re finally working with a woman. A woman ye care for.”

Care for? Hell, Drum wasn’t certain of his feelings for Brigit, but something had changed today. His anger at not having been told the truth had sort of...drifted away

in her embrace. Not because she'd been manipulative in her attempts to apologize, but because he just didn't care anymore .

And because part of him did understand her reasoning for keeping her secret for so long.

He'd kept secrets as a King's Hunter. Was it any surprise she, as a Queen's Angel, also had secrets? Deep down, he was flattered she'd shared her identity with him at all.

It meant they could work together.

“Ye ken, when we said we'd get together for a drink after Robbie was safe in bed, I didnae expect another Hunter's adventure.”

In the darkness, the two men reached the turn-off for the royal wing and Drum snorted as they halted. “Neither did I, but I appreciate having ye at my side, Craig.”

“I'm guessing ye'd rather I was Barclay or Payton or one of the others.”

The dobber was still learning his worth. Drum slammed his palm into the other man's arm. “Nay, ye arsehole, I'm glad 'tis ye . I ken I can count on ye. Now go.”

“Good luck, Drum,” the other man murmured as he disappeared down the corridor.

Drum listened to him go and then, with a deep breath, turned toward the small chapel the royal family attended as their own.

Ye can do this .

Why was he so nervous about this mission? He'd been in far worse spots in his

career, and he didn't genuinely believe he'd be in danger—if he really was meeting a lady-in-waiting. But he wouldn't be the only one involved, and Drum suspected that was the source of his discomfort .

Brigit. Brigit was involved and he was worried for her. About her.

Remember the way she threw those knives? The way she saved Craig's family ?

Aye, she could handle herself, but that didn't make him less worried. Now his heart was involved.

He'd reached the chapel doors. With a deep breath he placed his palms on the heavy oak and pushed .

The royal chapel of Scone was small and stone and still had the talent of being imposing. In the daylight. At midnight 'twas even worse, his footsteps echoing oddly off the heavy walls, the whole place only lit by a single candle near the altar.

"I'm here!" he called, unnecessarily in his opinion. Anyone with ears and eyes could tell he'd arrived, but he wanted his enemy to underestimate him. "'Tis midnight and I'm here as ye asked."

No response, but he wasn't totally surprised. If he'd been the one to set the trap, he would've allowed his opponent to walk all the way down the aisle before springing.

So, Drum did just that, pretending to stumble a bit on the stones as if he was a bit of a bumbling fool. "Hello? Where are ye?"

When he reached the altar, he frowned momentarily at the single candle. Well, that wasn't going to be useful for much, was it? He scooped it up and stomped toward the pair of candelabra resting atop the altar. They were likely holy something-or-others,

but they'd serve their use well enough .

He lit all six candles, sending more light spilling throughout the chapel, then heard a little huff of disapproval.

Whirling, he wasn't at all surprised to see a woman's figure—tall, slender—wrapped in a dark cloak despite the warm weather.

“Those candles are sacred, and no' for yer touch,” she chastised, and he was surprised to hear genuine disapproval in her tone.

Trying to keep her off-balance, Drum shrugged. “I'm no' particularly devout.”

“Then ye shall rot in hell when ye are hanged as a traitor.”

A traitor ? They were back to this, were they?

“I'm no' a traitor. Who are ye?” As if he didn't know.

With a sigh, the woman stepped forward, allowing the light from the candles to touch her scarred cheek, and Drum pretended surprise.

“Lady...Ava? Avaline, aye? Ye're one of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting! I've seen ye about.”

“Aye, and ignored me as irrelevant,” the woman growled, her chin rising.

Ahh . So that was her irritation; she was dismissed, her abilities ignored, and didn't like it. Was it possible she was tired of being overlooked and had decided to make herself indispensable?

He could use that.

Scoffing, he turned away from her, waving dismissively. “Go away, lass. I’m meeting someone.”

Was it his imagination, or—along with Avaline’s outraged sound—was there a muffled gasp from behind one of the tapestries? Thank fook .

“Ye are meeting someone, Sir Hunter,” Avaline growled—and aye, ‘twas a genuine growl. “Ye are meeting me .”

“Ye?” He pretended surprise as he turned back, eyeing her speculatively. “A woman? What would a woman ken about this business? I received a note telling me to meet a man here tonight who could tell me who was trying to kill the King.”

She stepped forward, the cloak billowing as she moved. “Aye, ye idiot, I was the one who sent the note!”

One of the first rules he’d learned as a Hunter was that people made mistakes when they were angry, so he pushed. “ Ye ? What would ye ken of the man who is trying to kill the King?”

“Everything!” she snapped.

It wasn’t a confession, but when her arm emerged from her cloak, holding a long, thin dagger, Drum’s hand dropped to his sword hilt and he rocked forward on the balls of his feet, prepared for an attack.

But instead of thrusting the blade toward him, Lady Avaline slammed the dagger down atop the altar, where it gleamed in the candlelight. After a terse moment, Drum straightened to examine it.

“What’s that?” he finally asked.

“That is the dagger which will be used in tonight’s attack on the King. The assassin will enter his bedchamber wielding it.”

Despite his certainty he was the one setting the trap for her , Drum’s heartbeat began to speed. “What?” he croaked. “How do ye ken that?” Why would she be so stupid to announce her intentions to him unless she planned to silence him? “Is the assassin here?”

In the candlelight, her scars reflected oddly as she smiled. “Aye, he is.” She stepped forward, her movements graceful, refined. “But dinnae fash, he’ll no’ hurt ye.”

‘Twas the mocking in her voice which raised his hackles, and Drum realized he was squeezing the hilt of his sword. “What are ye talking about lass,” he rasped. “Who is trying to kill the King of Scotland?”

She stopped, a mere arm’s length from him, her smile cruel. “Why, Drummond Kennedy... ye are.”

“Lies!” The growl tore from his throat before he could stop it. The way her grin grew told him that she was playing the same game he was; using his emotions against him, and he tried to force himself to calm. “I am no’ trying to kill the King.”

“Are ye no’?” She turned slightly, giving him her shoulder as she shrugged nonchalantly. One slender finger traced the blade where it lay on the altar. “Ye had access to that corridor where the ambush was set. Ye had access to the crossbow from the guards and the King’s schedule.”

“Aye, so did ye,” he growled. “And ye poisoned the wine.”

“Me?” Her expression of surprise was so convincing that Drum momentarily wondered if their assumption had been wrong. “Why would I want to kill the King?”

“Ye dinnae want to kill him. Ye want to be the hero for once.”

Something like surprise flashed across her face before she turned away, hiding her expression in the shadows of her cloak once more.

And Drummond knew he was right. He and Brigit, working together, had discovered the truth.

“Ye...” Her voice cracked, and she cleared her throat, still staring at the dagger. “Ye are mistaken, Drummond. Ye are the one who wants the King dead. Tonight, he lies sleeping and helpless, no’ caring how he ruined yer life. Dinnae be a coward!” She finally returned her blazing eyes to him. “Scoop up this blade and do what ye must do!”

“The King didnae ruin my life,” he countered calmly, waiting for an opening.

“Aye, he did !” She slapped her hand down beside the handle of the dagger. “He took everything from ye!”

Drum cocked his head, studying her calmly. “He didnae take my honor.”

Another slap. “Aye, he did!”

Interesting. Drum’s mind raced as he tried to piece together her plan. “Ye...want me to kill the King. Or try to kill the King, I’m guessing. Ye were telling the truth that ye dinnae want him dead.”

She drew her hand back, movements jerky. “O-Of course I dinnae want him dead.”

“Then why encourage me— Och , of course,” he murmured. “Ye want me to try to kill His Majesty. Then, at the last moment, ye’ll rush in and save him.” He straightened. “I’m right, am I no’?”

Avaline scoffed, turning away. “Ridiculous.”

“Nay, ‘tisnae. ‘Tis the only explanation.” Her body language told him she wasn’t going to confess, not yet. So, he pushed. “Did ye come up with this plan all by yerself? I’m impressed a lass could be so cunning.”

She snorted. “It willnae work, Drummond.”

“What? I merely complimented ye. I’m surprised—”

“A woman could plan such a thing?” she mimicked with a snarl, whirling back to face him, the shadows of the scars on her ruined cheek making her appear otherworldly. “Yer manipulations willnae work! Ye’re trying to make me monologue!”

Well, that surprised Drum. He reared back. “I’m trying to make ye what now?”

“Monologue,” she repeated with a wave of her hand. “When ye finally have the villain where ye want him and he decides to talk at ye for a while, thinking ye’re safely trapped.” She planted her hands on her hips and straightened her shoulders. “Well, I dinnae have a tank of sharks, this isnae a volcanic lair, and ye arenae strapped into a dentist’s chair!”

Drum blinked. “I...have nae idea what ye’re talking about, lass.”

“Lass ? I am Lady Avaline, one of the Queen’s Angels, and I’m sick and tired of idiots like ye dismissing me! Just because I’m a woman doesnae mean I’m no’ just as

devious, just as cunning , as the next man!”

Ah, they were finally getting somewhere. Drum nodded sympathetically, realizing that he was manipulating her as he’d always accused women of doing. “Ye’re just as smart as a man, if ye planned this. ”

“As smart as?” she screeched, snatching up the dagger and pointing it at him. “I’m smarter, ye buffoon!”

Deciding ignorance was the best path forward—and giving her the chance to monologue —Drum scratched his head, pretending confusion. “But I dinnae understand. If I kill the King, how will he recognize yer brilliance?”

“Ye’re no’ going to kill him, ye idiot! I’m going to save him at the last minute, the way I did from the crossbow ambush and the poisoned wine!”

“Zounds, ‘twas lucky for him ye were there, for certes,” Drum managed with a straight face, hoping he sounded impressed. “Elsewise His Majesty might’ve died.”

“ Luck ?” Her voice had gone all low and hoarse, as she stalked toward him, waving that dagger back and forth, back and forth, as if trying to hypnotize him for a mummer’s show. “ Luck had naught to do with it!”

Playing his part, Drum kept his attention on the tip of the blade as he shuffled backwards, hoping she was speaking loud enough for the words to carry. “Then how do ye explain—”

“ I set it up! ” And huzzah, she was back to screeching again. “I was there to whisk the King from danger, ye complete dobber, because I was the one to arrange the danger in the first place . ”

Excellent .

Drum pretended to gape. “The crossbow ambush?”

“I knew everyone would assume ‘twas a man, since ‘twas set up so high, but I had nae trouble.” Slowly, Lady Avaline straightened, pride tinging her voice. “The trap was clumsy at best, but I didnae need— want it to work.”

“Ye just needed it to look convincing,” Drum finished in what he hoped was an awed tone as his arse hit the altar behind him and he had to stop backing up. “And the poison?”

She scoffed. “ ‘Twas no’ really poison, or have ye no’ figured that out yet? Ye’re a shite investigator, if so. ‘Twas only a concoction to look dangerous, so I could ‘discover’ it and save the King again.”

Drum had to struggle to keep his gaze from darting around the chapel, wondering where Brigit may be hiding. God willing, she heard that confession and understood its meaning. So why hadn’t she shown herself?

Fook .

If she didn’t secret herself ahead of time in the chapel as planned, she might not even be here! She might have missed her cue, or something might have happened to her. Was it possible Lady Avaline had done something? Discovered Brigit?

Drum’s heart began to pound in earnest.

Was it possible this haughty, determined lady-in-waiting actually was capable of true harm?

Dinnae underestimate her. That is the whole bloody point of this, ye arsehole! Ye cannae assume she cannae hurt ye just because she's a woman! She's devious and driven and determined—have ye no' been paying attention?

Aye, Brigit had taught him that women could be powerful allies...or dangerous enemies. He'd be best to keep that in mind .

Good. Otherwise we're going to have to back up a few chapters so ye can understand the moral of the story again .

“Now.” Avaline's voice had turned low and calm again, as she took a deep breath and rolled her shoulders, her gaze steely. “Are ye going to do as I suggest?”

Drum's mind flashed over the previous conversation. “Um...am I going to take that dagger and go into the King's chambers and try to kill him, only so ye can swoop in at the last moment and save him by—by what? Killing me?”

“Aye.”

“Nay,” he said simply. “What's in it for me?”

“Why, revenge!” she cried. “Ye're angry at him, remember?”

Drum shook his head, fighting a smile at the absurdity of it all. “I'm no'. I wasnae even angry at him when he thought I was trying to kill him. He's my sovereign, and I'm loyal.”

“Bah!” Her control was slipping again. “Then I'll kill ye here and now, and then tell him I discovered yer plot to assassinate him in his bed!”

His first instinct was to dismiss her, but the part of Drum which had been paying

attention to the moral of the story grabbed him by the ears and shook him. Aye, Lady Avaline was thinner than he was, but she was tall and she carried that blade as if she knew what to do with it. He remembered the way Brigit had thrown those knives and handled that crossbow, and knew a Queen's Angel would be deadly.

So he swallowed and placed one hand on the hilt of his sword. "A-Aye, ye could do that. But afore we do aught drastic, Lady Avaline, mayhap ye could tell me... Why me?" He tried to keep his voice light and interested, so she would think he admired her scheme. "Why did ye choose me to pin the blame on, when ye needed to point Their Majesties away from ye?"

She paused, considering him. "Ye really dinnae ken, Drummond?"

Shaking his head, he told her the truth, "I dinnae."

Lady Avaline tossed back the hood of her cloak, baring her entire face to the candlelight. She folded her hands before her breast as if she were praying, the dagger pressed obscenely between them, and lowered her chin. Then she peeked up at him through her ruined eyelashes, a touch of smile on her lips, managing to look shy and demure.

Something flashed in Drum's mind, some memory, some hint...and dread settled in the pit of his stomach.

"Why, Sir Hunter, I am devastated ye dinnae remember me," she murmured low and shy and flirtatious.

'Twas the Sir Hunter which did it, which triggered the memory, and Drum stumbled away from her in horror. One hand remained on the altar as if it could hold him upright, while a ghost from his past tormented him.

“ Rebecca? ”

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:16 am

In her years as an Angel, Brigit had been in some uncomfortable spots. Literally.

There was the time she'd infiltrated a castle via the garderobe. The time she'd hidden from pursuit among the offal, and the time—truly horrible—she'd posed as a leper.

Aye, all things considered, hiding behind a tapestry in the palace chapel on a cool evening wasn't the least comfortable spot she'd be in. Wasn't even in the top fifteen.

So why was her stomach in such knots?

She knew: 'twas Drummond. She was worried about him, and that had naught to do with her physical location.

To be fair, things could be worse. Brigit would've been crouched here behind the tapestry—knees locking, thighs aching—had Her Majesty not insisted on a bit of comfort. Queens could insist on that sort of thing, Brigit assumed.

She glanced to her left and her lips twitched at the sight of the Queen of Scotland sitting—back straight, hands folded in her lap, eyes locked on the back side of the tapestry hanging between them and the action—in the chair Brigit had dragged to this alcove. The moonlight coming in from the window behind them allowed her to see the other woman's expressions and gestures, so they could communicate in silence.

When Brigit and Drum had hatched this plan, they'd realized it would be vital to have a reliable witness to whatever would happen. If Avaline really was the culprit, and really was doing it for the reasons they suspected, 'twould be her word against Brigit's. So...Brigit suggested the Queen.

Surprisingly, the Queen was enthusiastic. Brigit didn't tell her their suspicions of the assassin's identity or motives, but the other woman seemed excited to be a part of the trap. She did, however, insist on comfort—the prerogative of royalty, presumably.

So, Brigit had set up this little alcove while the rest of the court dined. She'd dragged a pair of chairs up against the window niche, then pulled the tapestry over it so from the chapel itself it appeared to be an unbroken wall, its secrets hidden. She'd escorted the Queen here before the rendezvous.

Drum had been the one to point out that if he were setting a trap for midnight, he'd arrive an hour before. So, Brigit and the Queen needed to be in place two hours before. Brigit could confess she'd napped for a bit, and hoped her snores were as genteel as the Queen's.

But now they were both wide awake and listening to the drama taking place on the other side of the tapestry.

Oh, how Brigit wished she could see what was happening. Her fingers itched to reach for her daggers, to hold them at the ready.

Could ye really throw them at Avaline? After all the missions ye've completed together?

Brigit swallowed, pressing the heels of her palms against her stomach.

Aye, to save Drummond. She could. She would.

And 'twas sounding as if she might have to.

Avaline had just admitted she was the person who'd not only set the crossbow ambush, but poured the potion into the King's wine. “ ‘Twas perfectly simple,” she

was now saying, “to use my connection with the Queen to suggest ye , as the King’s Hunter, were the only real suspect.”

Brigit’s panicked wide-eyed stare landed on the Queen, but the other woman took her hand and squeezed. Brigit held the Queen’s gaze as they listened, forcing her breathing to slow to match the monarch’s. The Queen was helping her, without words, to calm herself, to focus on what could be done, and Brigit was grateful.

At least Her Majesty heard Avaline’s confession and heard her plans to pin the whole thing on Drummond. At least she knew he was innocent in all things.

Thank the Virgin.

Suddenly the Queen straightened, nostrils flaring and eyes widening, and Brigit heard what her monarch had heard.

Avaline growling, “Then I’ll kill ye here and now, and tell him I discovered yer plot to assassinate him in his bed!”

Brigit was already standing when the Queen’s grip tugged her back down to her chair. She reached for her daggers, but the other woman stood instead, and moved her hands to Brigit’s shoulders, holding her down.

The Queen dropped her lips to Brigit’s ear and breathed, “Trust Drummond. He can handle himself.”

Could he ?

Could he ?

Brigit’s heart beat frantically, and she was desperate to be out there, protecting the

man she loved.

Because there was no use denying it; she loved Drummond Kennedy and she wanted— needed —to protect him. She wanted to fight beside him, to be his equal. And she prayed she'd have the chance to tell him that.

Avaline! All these years, ye kenned she was devious and cunning, but to do something like this?

“Why did ye choose me to pin the blame on,” Drummond was asking the bitch, and Brigit willed her pulse to calm so she could hear the response over the pounding in her ears.

Unfortunately, their voices dropped, and Brigit felt herself leaning forward, straining to hear the answer, despite the Queen's attempt to hold her down.

It wasn't until Drummond blurted, “Rebecca ?” that she understood.

Sucking in a gasp, Brigit bounded to her feet, not even caring if she accidentally gave away their hiding spot. She darted forward, dodging the Queen's grasp, and reached for the tapestry.

Some semblance of control stopped her from revealing herself, thank the Saints. As the Queen's fingers wrapped through the back of her bodice, trying to hold her in place, Brigit settled her cheek against the stone wall and used one eye to peer from their hiding spot at the drama before the altar.

“Rebecca,” Drummond repeated, his tone and his expression showing his shock. “‘Tis really ye? ”

“I am hurt,” Avaline pouted, running her palms down the front of her cloaked gown.

“And a little surprised. All these years together at court, and ye didnae recognize me?”

Why would he ? Drum was a Hunter and Avaline a lady-in-waiting. They had no cause to ever be in the same room.

Drum shook his head then lifted his hand to gesture vaguely at his face.

“Ye’ve...changed.”

Something flashed in Avaline’s eyes, something Brigit only recognized after years of working with her. Knowing her? Nay, tonight’s revelations proved Brigit had never really known this partner of hers.

‘Twas something like rage, and something like hurt , but ‘twas gone quickly. “How like a man,” Avaline sneered, “to notice only a woman’s appearance.”

“Nay, lass, yer burns dinnae matter. ‘Tis...yer eyes? Ye’ve changed.”

“I’m a decade aulder!” she snapped. “The lass ye fell in love with was merely that—a lass.”

Drum had winced at the word love but didn’t deny it. His fingers were still wrapped around his sword’s hilt and he watched her warily.

“Will ye tell me what happened?”

“What is there to tell?” she asked with a breezy shrug. “I needed to get away from my father’s controlling thumb. He was determined to marry me off, and I vowed to never submit to a man’s will.”

“I thought ye holy,” Drum murmured.

“That’s what I wanted ye to think.” Avaline was playing with the dagger now, her attention seemingly on the blade, her tone too nonchalant. “ ‘Twas my only power, my only way to leave my family—what a fight that was! When ye were chosen to escort me, I saw an opportunity to get something else I wanted.”

“What, lass?” he asked hoarsely, stepping nearer. “Pleasure?”

“Nay.” She looked up, eyed him, then flicked her fingers dismissively as she turned away. “Power over a man. I made ye believe I wanted ye, aye? That we had a future together?”

“Ye did.” His tone had gone hollow, and Brigit’s chest squeezed, knowing how much he’d been hurt by her actions. “I wanted to marry ye.”

“Aye, but ye werenae paying attention.” Her lips curled into a cruel grin she sent him over her shoulder. “ I didnae want to marry ye .” A click of her tongue, as if she dismissed him again. “I never forgot yer face as the doors of the nunnery closed after me. Looking so forlorn. I kenned then and there I could have power—no’ just over men, but over anyone if I could find what they wanted and pretend to give it to them.”

Drummond’s expression...

Brigit’s heart ached for him.

His face had gone hard, but his eyes shone with pain. This woman had hurt him for fun .

And even worse...Brigit sucked in a breath as she realized. Avaline’s actions hadn’t

just hurt Drummond, they'd changed the way he thought about women for years. Her deliberate attempts to hurt him meant that Brigit almost lost him!

"I wanted to become the Abbess because I believed that was the only position of power open to a woman like me. I was on my way when I was caught in a fire that started in the library."

Drum's voice turned low and dangerous. "And how did that fire start, Rebecca?"

"Avaline, please," she corrected him. "I was born Rebecca, but I became Sister Avaline, and that is the name the Queen used when she scooped me up. I was recuperating in the infirmary when she found me. She'd heard about the fire, heard about my ambition, and decided she could use me."

"For certes, ye were grateful she didnae ken ye'd been the one to set the fire, aye?" he growled. "Likely part of the scheme to get rid of the Abbess."

Avaline huffed a bit. "I wasnae going to kill her. I just needed her to appear incompetent, so when a series of letters arrived at the palace urging them to appoint a new Abbess, I would be there to step into the role."

"Ye bitch. "

Avaline merely shrugged, her lips curled into a cruel smirk. "Men only say that because they cannae stand to see a powerful woman in control of her own destiny."

"Nay, I say that because ye are a heartless conniver who doesnae seem to care who she hurts in her quest for power. I would call ye a bitch even if ye had a cock."

"Oh, excellent, that is good to ken. Remember, 'tis no' as if I'm a murderer. Nae one has died."

“Ye almost died in the fire that gave ye those scars.”

“And I had more than enough time to lie there and contemplate my errors as I recuperated. I should have been more careful when I laid my trap. Ye’ll see I’ve corrected that in my latest scheme.”

“Ye almost killed me . Or rather, had me executed for attempted regicide!”

“Och nay.” Avaline waggled the dagger mockingly as she spun back toward him. “I will kill ye. And I’ll be the hero who saved the King yet again .”

When she stepped toward Drummond, Brigit pushed aside the tapestry, already reaching for her daggers.

‘Twas the Queen’s grip on her wrist which stopped her, and she twisted to glare at the other woman. “Let me go,” she hissed.

But the Queen merely shook her head, her attention on the pair by the altar. “Drummond can handle her,” she whispered.

“I can handle her.”

The Queen finally glanced at Brigit, eyes hard as she hissed, “Trust him. That is an order.”

And that meant there was naught Brigit could do except trust the man she loved to protect himself. Still, her fingers remained wrapped around her throwing dagger, awaiting the moment the Queen decided Drum needed her help and released her.

But as always, Her Majesty was correct.

Drum had blocked Avaline's blow without even drawing his own sword. The Angel fought fast and dirty, the way Brigit had learned, and Drum wasn't used to the methods. Still, he managed to use his superior size and strength to block her attacks...mostly .

As she spun past him, her cloak billowing in her whirlwind offense, her blade skimmed down the outside of his forearm, causing him to curse and spin away. Brigit jerked forward, and the Queen's hold tightened on her wrist.

"That bitch," Brigit hissed, almost hoping she'd be heard and distract Avaline from her attack.

She needn't have bothered.

Because Drum turned his spin into a crouch, and when Avaline darted forward again, the tip of the dagger poised for blood, he grabbed her wrist, used her momentum to carry her over his shoulder, and tossed her to the ground.

As the knife clattered away, he dropped his knee to her thighs as he grabbed her other wrist, holding her in place. "Stay down," he snapped.

Bucking beneath him, Avaline screeched, "Coward! Fighting like a man—all strength and nae finesse." Her control was deserting her as she kicked. "Let me up and fight me fairly."

"Fairly?" he snorted. "I'm bleeding."

"Aye, and I'll make ye bleed worse, ye whoreson!"

Brigit watched Drum's expression fall into contemplation as he looked at the spitting she-devil beneath him. "I cannae believe I thought myself in love with ye. Was it all

an act, Rebecca?”

“I told ye, I’m Avaline now. And aye, ‘twas all an act. Everything. Ye think I could fall in love? I want naught to do with men!”

“Well, ye need one,” he said finally, rocking back and loosening his hold. “Mayhap a husband and a few bairns would change yer outlook on life. ”

“ How dare ye ,” she screeched...just as the door to the chapel swung open.

“How dare he what ?” boomed a mighty voice, and Brigit’s gaze swung in that direction.

Stepping through the door was the King of Scotland, fully dressed, his crown atop his head, not looking at all like a man caught unawares in bed. As Craig stepped into the chapel at his rear, Brigit smiled in relief, glad that part of the plan had gone off easily.

As the King strode down the length of the chapel, Avaline must’ve been frantically conniving. “Yer Majesty! Oh, thank the Saints! Please, ‘tis yer turn to help me !”

“Drummond?” the King rumbled, halting just inside the circle of light given off by the candelabra on the altar. “Care to explain?”

“Aye, Yer Majesty,” he said immediately, releasing Avaline to rise to his feet. “I’m protecting ye.”

“Me?” The King eyed the slender woman on the floor. “From?”

“Oh, Yer Majesty!” Avaline cried, struggling to her feet, holding her waist as if she’d been hurt, turning tear-filled eyes to the King. “He—the Hunter...” Her voice caught on a sob. “I confronted him about his attempts on yer life and he said he was on his

way to yer chambers now! Thank God ye brought a bodyguard, but dinnae fash...” She struggled to shuffle about to face Drum, as if putting her body between him and the King. “I will protect ye again!”

Oh Lord .

Brigit felt her brows rise. ‘twas...a convincing act. Avaline really did look like a feeble and broken woman. One who was still trying to recover from a brutal attack by a larger man, struggling to maintain her dignity.

“Shite,” Brigit hissed, hoping the King didn’t fall for it.

From behind her, she thought she heard the Queen murmur, “ Indeed .”

Luckily, Drummond didn’t seem worried. Instead, he sighed and met the King’s eyes over Avaline’s shoulder. “I was lured here by a letter, Yer Majesty, and can prove it. ‘Twas from someone saying they kenned the identity of the assassin. When I arrived here, Lady Avaline had an interesting story.”

“Dinnae believe him, Yer Majesty,” Avaline insisted, her earlier quaver gone. She balled her fists and, with a deep breath, lifted them as if to fight Drum hand-to-hand. “Ye can trust me. I’m the hero.”

Drum just shook his head, holding her gaze. “She arranged everything, Yer Majesty. The ambush in the corridor, the potion in the wine. Even this. She arranged it so I would appear guilty, so she could save ye at the last moment and gain power and prestige.”

The King hummed. “A woman being manipulative? What a shock.”

But to Brigit’s surprise, Drum gave the King his full attention and spoke with

passion.

“No’ all women are like that, manipulative and cunning. I thought that way for the longest time, thanks to the actions of this woman. I thought all women were like her, and finding out Brigit was an Angel and had kept it from me...”

Shaking his head, he turned back to Avaline, whose expression clearly showed her rage. “I hate that I gave ye that power over me, Avaline. I judged Brigit based on yer example, jumping to the worst conclusions and thinking her just as manipulative as ye...when really, she was only doing what I would’ve done in her place to protect my monarch.”

“How touching ,” Avaline spat, shaking her fists. “But it just shows she is as weak as ye are.”

“Brigit weak? Nay,” he chuckled, shaking his head as he settled his hands on his hips, ignoring his bloody forearm. “She is strong enough to stand at my side, and I am grateful for it.”

Hearing those words, something deep inside Brigit melted...she suspected ‘twas her fear. She felt the Queen release her wrist, and, in a sort of daze, stepped through the tapestry. She wanted to run to Drum, to nestle in his arms.

The King glanced about. “What exactly is going on here, for the love of shite?”

“I dinnae love shite,” Craig rumbled from behind him. “But I believe ‘tis a case of finding the true villain.”

Brigit was already stepping toward the light when the Queen’s voice rang out clear from behind her. “I can tell you what is going on, husband.”

All eyes in the chapel swung toward the Queen, who held her head high as she stepped to her husband's side.

“Lady Avaline, once known to Drummond Kennedy by the name Rebecca, has manipulated her way through life, intent on gaining power and control. Most recently, she herself set the ambush with the crossbow and poured the poison—which was not really poison—into your wine.”

The King's expression clouded to anger. “She was trying to kill me?”

“No,” his wife's voice rang clear, her face neutral as she examined Avaline. “She wanted it to appear that someone was trying to kill you, so she could ‘save’ you at the last moment and be the hero.”

Brigit wanted to throw herself into Drum's arms, but instead, as Avaline scoffed and straightened, appearing just as regal as the monarchs, she wrapped her hand around her dagger and stepped to his side.

Briefly, he glanced down at her, and she saw his lips tug sideways, as if trying not to smile.

The King considered Avaline. “The plan seems clumsy at best.”

“Clumsy?” she scoffed. “ ‘Twas brilliant. It worked, did it no’? Ye thought me so brave, so smart.”

“Aye, it worked, Lady Avaline,” the King intoned solemnly. “But no’ forever. Thanks to my Hunter—”

“And my Angel,” the Queen interrupted.

Her husband nodded. “We now ken the truth. So, the question stands; what to do with ye? As an attempted assassin, I am within my rights to order ye executed now, and I have several loyal Hunters here to perform the task, although neither have their helms.”

Brigit’s chest felt as if an elephant was sitting atop it. Avaline executed? From the way the other woman paled, she was dreading it as well .

But the Queen saved her. “Nay, husband. I have a better idea. More fitting.”

“No’ death, darling?”

As if knowing the King was teasing her, the English Queen sent him a raised brow. “Worse. Marriage.”

Her husband chuckled. “Marriage is worse than death?”

“Nay!” screeched Avaline, slashing her hand through the air. “Execution! I’ll no’ be under some man’s thumb!”

“A good man could—” began the King, but Avaline shook her head violently.

“I’ll no’ be able to gain power!”

The King nodded solemnly. “Aye, that is the idea, lass. Do ye find the thought of a man’s touch abhorrent? Is that the case?”

Avaline hesitated, and Drum spoke up. “She doesnae, Yer Majesty. I can attest to that.”

Brigit wrinkled her nose, deciding she hated Avaline a little more.

The King nodded solemnly. “So be it. I have decided Lawrence is ready to retire. I will provide him with a simple estate and a young wife.”

“Larry the butler?” blurted Brigit at the same time Avaline shrieked, “That auld man?”

“Craig?” The King beckoned the other man forward. “Take Lady Avaline to the dungeons. The wedding will happen soon, and we ought to give her a taste of the alternatives in the meantime.”

As Craig led the other woman away—spitting and cursing—Their Majesties turned to Drum and Brigit, standing before the altar .

“For whatever part I have played in this, I am sorry,” Drum formally offered with a slight bow.

The King chuckled. “It seems as though ye are the one owed an apology. I am sorry I ever doubted yer loyalty, Drummond Kennedy. Ye are a good man and I regret I was manipulated into thinking aught else.”

“We all were,” his wife said, laying her hand on his forearm. “I am sorry as well.”

Drum accepted the apologies with another nod, then glanced down at Brigit. Thinking he was hoping for another apology, she opened her mouth...but was halted when he spoke.

“And I am sorry, Brigit, that I ever doubted yer loyalty.”

Loyalty to the Crown.

Loyalty to him .

She smiled softly. "I love ye, Drummond. I will always be loyal."

Surprise flashed in his eyes, then joy settled into his smile. "Truly, Brigit? Ye love me?" His hand found hers, fingers twining together.

She nodded. "I've cared for ye for a long time, but this adventure has shown me ye are a good man, a brave man, a loyal man. One Scotland is lucky to have. And..." She ducked her head, peeking up at him through her lashes. "One I'd be lucky to have."

"Och, lass, ye'll never have to doubt if ye have me again. I—I love ye so much."

Love ye so much...love ye so much ...

The refrain repeated in her mind until Brigit couldn't hear aught else. She stared breathlessly up at him, unable to speak, unable to breathe .

He tugged her closer until they stood chest-to-chest. She was so much smaller, but still felt his equal.

"I'll stand beside ye, Drum," she whispered, uncertain she was making sense. "I'll guard yer back. Together."

His fingers tightened around hers. "Together. I'll protect ye, Brigit, and ye protect me? Our strength is more powerful together."

"Together," she repeated faintly.

As if from a distance, she heard the tinkle of the Queen's laughter. "Well, darling? It seems we have a new sort of protector."

“An Angel and a Hunter?” the King mused. “As our bodyguards? I think this will work well. I think we ought to make them partners.”

“Make them?” the Queen chuckled. “Darling, they’re already partners!”

Brigit’s gaze hadn’t left Drum’s. “Partners?” she whispered.

He was already leaning closer. “Always.”

Equals .

They were both grinning when their lips met.

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Drummond frowned down at the flimsy cards he clutched in his hands. The numbers and suits ran together and he wasn't certain if 'twas because he still didnae understand this infernal game the Arabs invented...or if he was drunk.

"Do ye..." He squinted across the table at his companions. "Do ye have any threes?"

"Nay!" Barclay declared happily. "Go fish!"

Fook . Scowling, Drum scooped up a card from the pile in the middle of the table. "What does this have to do with fishing?"

"I dinnae ken," Payton rumbled with a shrug. "Do ye have any threes?"

Cursing, Drum tossed his old friend a card. "This game is easier if ye dinnae cheat."

"Cheat? I dinnae cheat!"

Barclay came to Payton's defense, of course. "'Tis no' cheating for him to pay attention. Now it's my turn, and if I ask for three, 'tis because I'm cheating."

Drum squinted. "Are ye cheating?"

"Aye! Do ye have any threes?"

Drum slammed his palms down onto the table, ready to launch himself at his friend, but Craig's rumbling laughter stopped him.

When everyone looked at the giant, he tossed down his cards, showing the numbers, and reached for his flagon. “I dinnae understand why we would care about cups, swords, coins, and clubs when we’re among friends. We have plenty to eat and drink, and this is the only cup that matters.”

As Payton and Barclay slowly relaxed, Drum realized his friend was right. “’Tis a dumb game,” he grumbled, reaching for his cup. “Whose idea was it, anyhow?”

“My wife learned it from a friend of hers at court,” Barclay announced, tipping his mug. “And dinnae insult my wife.”

“Far be it,” Drum muttered. “I could’ve told ye the pair of ye would end up playing card games.”

Barclay pretended to scowl. “As I recall, ye told me to stay away from her, because missions with women always end puirly.”

“Aye, he told me the same thing,” agreed Craig, “and I married her!”

“He never warned me away from Flora,” Payton rumbled, “but only because he didnae have a chance. How about that? The man spends a decade telling us to be wary of working with women...and we all end up married to women we met on our missions.”

Barclay snickered. “No’ only that, but Drum’s found a way to replace us...with a woman!”

“Aye, Drum, how is yer new partner?” taunted Payton. “I mean, yer wife.”

He knew they were teasing him, getting back after years of having to listen to his harping...er...advice. So, Drum just shook his head, wearing a wry smile. “She’s doing well, as ye ken. She’s on guard duty tonight with the Queen.”

Of course, he'd told his oldest friends—his men —about Brigit's role. He didn't spill all the Queen's secrets, but he was proud of the work his wife did for the monarch. The work they both did for Their Majesties.

And now that his friends had brought their wives and families to Scone to celebrate his recent marriage, Drum had to admit, it felt... good to have everyone together. As if...they were his brothers. His family.

"I'm glad ye're here," he announced abruptly, holding up his ale.

Payton clinked his flagon against it. "Here, as in Scone?"

"Or here , as in at this table, attempting a lads' night out after the marriage?" Barclay asked, a sparkle in his eyes, as he tipped his mug up as well.

"Or here ," Craig announced, his ale joining the bunch, "as in alive and well and lucky bastards?"

Drum felt his lips curling as he met the eyes of each of his friends. " Aye ," he drawled.

"Wait, which one—?" Craig began, but the laughter drowned him out.

Chuckling, Drum tipped his head back to swallow his ale.

The men were relaxing once more in their chairs, teasing one another about married life, when a knock at the door heralded Lawrence's entrance. He shuffled in, carrying a tray.

"More ale already?" bellowed Barclay happily, but Payton smacked his shoulder.

"Larry is the butler, no' a servant."

“I thought he wasnae the seneschal any longer,” Craig asked, confused.

But Drum had met the old man’s gaze. “He’s no’. Now he and his wife have their own estate and he occasionally delivers messages for the Queen. Aye, Lawrence?”

“Just so, Sir Hunter,” the old man said with a formal bow and a twinkle in his eyes. “The wife hates it when I’m away.”

“And how is the Lady Avaline settling into married life, Lawrence?”

The old man straightened, cleared his throat and settled his shoulders. “She claims to hate it, Sir Hunter, but I ken that isnae true. I’ve learned the trick is to allow her complete control over the estate. It allows her to feel powerful, which is how she thrives.”

Drum nodded. “Impressive. Ye ken what they say...”

Drummond, Barclay, Payton and Craig all chorused, “Happy wife, happy life.”

Smiling, Lawrence stepped forward with the tray. “And I shall be returning to her in the morning. First though, a message, Sir Hunter.”

Drum’s brows rose as he reached for the scroll. A message from the Queen? Nay...

Barclay read over his shoulder. “ When my garden blooms, the true colors emerge, showcasing love, light, and scent. First plant seeds gently one by one, placing to the right depth. Bed the soil carefully, gets roots to grow. Prize each bloom.”

“Ye’re getting gardening advice now?” rumbled Craig.

Payton’s head was tipped back against his chair, eyes closed. “Must be important gardening advice, considering how late it is. ”

Barclay hummed. “ Bed the soil carefully, gets roots to grow ? That’s no’ good gardening advice. That’s no’ even good grammar.”

But Drum was already counting. He handed his ale to Lawrence. “Take my seat, auld friend, and dinnae let Barclay teach ye to play; he cheats.”

“What?” Craig blurted. “Where are ye going?”

Grinning, Drum waved the scroll. “’Tis an Angel code, every fourth word being important.”

Barclay snatched it from him and began counting. “When...the...showcasing...scent...Gently...placing...depth...carefully—Christ, Drum, this makes nae sense!”

“Nay, that does no’,” Drum agreed with a grin, pushing himself to his feet.

Craig pulled the scroll from Barclay. “Try the next word. My...true...love...first...one...to...bed...gets...prize.”

From where he rested, Payton snorted. “Well, that message is unmistakable.”

Drum was already out the door when the laughter began behind him.

Bridget held her breath, balancing carefully against the wall. Her bare toes were dug into cracks between the stones, and her palms were braced against the tapestries.

Waiting .

She wore only her shift, having stripped out of her favorite purple gown and arranged it on the bed as a distraction. It had worked once, many years ago, when she’d been sent to find evidence against a cardinal. Tonight, it would work again.

Heavy footsteps in the corridor, ones she recognized. Moving quickly. Likely excited.

She gathered herself to spring, heart already pounding in excitement.

The door opened, and from her place behind it, Brigit leaned forward.

When Drum stepped into their chambers, his eyes immediately went to the gown on the bed, and he stepped toward it. “Brigit—”

‘Twas all he had the time to say before she dropped on him.

If she’d yelled, she knew he would’ve had time to turn, but instead she threw herself at his back, arms wrapping around his shoulders to hold her in place. ‘Twas amazing to feel his response in his muscles, to realize the exact moment he recognized she wasn’t a real threat.

Still, his growl sounded realistic as he reached over his shoulder to grab her by the chemise and pull as he twisted. Somewhere along the way he also kicked the door shut, which was remarkably athletic, she thought.

Brigit ended up plastered against his front, legs wrapped around his middle, arms around his neck, as his tongue plundered her mouth.

Right where she wanted to be .

His hardness poked at her, telling her he was as ready for her as she was for him, and the knowledge made her smile against his lips.

He was the one to drop her on the bed, and she propped herself up on her elbows to watch him yank his shirt over his head. When he dropped to one knee, she thought he was untying his boot... So, she let out a squeal of surprise as he grasped her ankles and yanked her toward him.

Then his head was under her chemise, and Brigit let her thighs fall open with a happy sigh.

God in heaven, would she ever get used to the way he licked her?

Each stroke of his tongue, each caress of his fingers, sent her higher and higher, until she was squirming beneath his ministrations.

And when she came, she screamed his name to the canopy.

Drum emerged from her chemise looking quite pleased with himself, and Brigit, breathless, reached for him.

His kiss tasted of her .

And apparently somewhere along the line he had managed to lose his boots.

Together, they squirmed out of the rest of their clothing, their lovemaking unhurried and leisurely now after the frantic beginning. Each touch was a caress, each brush of their lips against skin a tease... Their murmured words were meant to heighten the pleasure.

Soon she was throbbing in need once more.

Drum moved between her legs, then paused, staring down at her .

She knew what he was waiting for, and smiled as she reached up to clasp his shoulders. "Please, husband," she whispered.

He loved her. Even now, months after their marriage, he cared enough to ensure she found her pleasure first. That, more than anything, sent Brigit soaring toward anticipated joy.

When he entered her, they both sighed with pleasure.

His strokes were slow, sensual, each plunge filling her completely and teasing her toward another orgasm. She arched into him, rocking her hips so his cock reached deeper.

Finally, in desperation, Brigit lifted her legs to clasp around his waist, finding the angle that suited them both.

His thrusts increased pace until he plunged into her hard and fast, each stroke releasing a little grunt or mewl from someone's lips. Brigit was panting and Drum held her gaze, his eyes full of intensity.

The sensations grew stronger and stronger, until he reached between them to press his thumb against the small bud of her pleasure hidden among her curls.

She exploded again. "Drum!" she gasped, clutching at him with her arms, her legs, and her inner muscles.

With a low growl, he allowed his own ecstasy to overcome him.

After, he cleaned her carefully before ministering to himself, then gathered her into his arms and tucked them beneath the blankets.

She wouldn't be surprised if he fell asleep. After all, her reports showed he'd been drinking with his friends and apparently playing some sort of card game. But after a few minutes, he pressed a kiss to her temple.

"Ye were lying in wait for me, eh, lass?"

She smiled in the darkness. "I was. Did I surprise ye?"

“Quite a bit. Ye’re lucky I didnae shite my kilt. A lesser man would’ve.”

Snuggling closer, she chuckled. “I wouldnae have married a lesser man. Please note the first time I tried that trick, the cardinal nearly had a heart spasm.”

Drum snorted. “Well, of course he would’ve. A beautiful half-naked woman dropped from the rafters atop him? Could ye blame him?”

‘Twas one of the things she loved about Drummond Kennedy; he never judged her for the things she’d done as a Queen’s Angel.

It had taken him a few weeks to understand that they were equals when it came to past missions and struggles and what they’d done for the good of Scotland. But that night in the royal chapel, it had all become clear to him.

Now that he recognized she did what he would have done, he seemed to admire her for it.

And ‘twas a heady feeling, to be admired by someone she loved.

“All I ask, love,” Drum murmured with another drowsy kiss, “is that ye dinnae employ that technique when we’re on missions together. I’m at risk of becoming...distracted.”

Chuckling again, Brigit allowed her hand to creep along his chest, reveling in the feel of his strong heartbeat. “I promise, husband. When we are on missions together, I cannae afford to be distracted by yer...physique either.”

His hand covered hers and Brigit supposed she was tickling him.

“I kenned ye would find a way to bring up me losing my kilt last month.”

“Well, if ye hadnae, that serving maid likely wouldnae have taken pity on us and allowed us to infiltrate the castle kitchens, and we wouldnae have made the rendezvous in time.”

Partnering with Drum had been the best thing to happen to her. They were mismatched when it came to most things—size, strength, expertise—but perfectly balanced each other. Where he was silent and scowling, she was flirtatious and charming. Where he was skilled with a huge sword, she preferred her small throwing blades. And where he had plenty of experience overseeing larger missions, she was more familiar with the everyday skills to make an infiltration a success.

Aye, they were perfectly matched. Perfect partners.

And here at Scone, in the employ of the King and Queen of Scotland, they’d found their purpose in life. Their mission.

Together.

“I love ye, Brigit,” he rumbled sleepily.

She pressed a kiss to his chest. “And I love ye, husband.”

Partner .

He hummed, then his breathing slowed until it became a snore .

Brigit smiled against the darkness then closed her own eyes.

She was a Queen’s Angel, aye, but also a woman and a wife.

And thanks to Drum, she could be all three, equally.

She fell asleep, secure in the love of a good man and a bright future.

Together.