



Never Beg a Highlander (Highland Rules #4)

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Category: Historical

Description: "Are ye ready to beg for me, wife?"

Erin knows better than to beg a Highlander. Yet when she's forced to marry the cruelest one, she implores him to let her go...Even if his dark gaze has her craving for more.

Laird Magnus is owed a bride. But the alluring hellion he gets does everything in her power to push him away. So he vows never to touch her...at least not until she's ready to beg for him.

Only, Erin is determined to test his self-control. And now Magnus must keep the monster within at bay...or else he'll consume her.

Total Pages (Source): 29

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"Fire!"

The piercing cry split the predawn silence, startling Magnus Black from the depths of a restless slumber into full wakefulness in a heartbeat. He threw off the plaid that served as his blanket and crossed his room to the thick door, dressed only in his nightshirt. He was the laird of McCormack Castle; the safety of the castle and the people within it rested with him, and he would do all he could to preserve it.

His heart thundered in his chest as he made his way down the long corridor towards the cries of the early servants of the morning. He could see his path well enough as the first ray of the morning sun slipped through the windows. Dawn would bring more men to the castle, including his man-at-arms, but for now, he was the most able-bodied man in the castle.

Magnus strode across the cold stone floor to the kitchen filled with smoke and the smell of burning grain. His servants had enough wits about them to fetch buckets of water. One of the younger stable boys almost ran into the laird, coughing as he retreated with his now-empty bucket.

"Nay." Magnus grabbed the arm of the boy before any harm was done. "Ye daenae want to be running. Form a line and pass the buckets along."

Magnus faced a fire with just stable boys and scullery maids, but it would have to do. He walked the line with broad strides, barking orders to turn a handful of running teens into an organized chain, passing the buckets of water from the well to the grain

store.

"Yer doin' well, lass." Magnus praised his workers as the heavy buckets strained their arms; sweat glistened from his brow as Magnus took his place at the end of the line, placing himself closest to the flames. Ash clung to the sweat, giving an eerie sheen to his body, but they were slowly making headway.

"Me laird." a voice called out to announce the arrival of his man-at-arms. Caelan Ward appeared through the haze, accompanied by burly clansmen wielding buckets of water and sand. The buckets of water came fuller and faster now, allowing Magnus to push the fire back.

Eventually, the fire died out, leaving nothing but ash where it had touched and a thick haze of smoke in the air and in the lungs of all his firefighters.

"Thank ye," Magnus backed, fighting back the cough which irritated his throat. "Caelan, send the young ones home. Let them rest this day."

"Ay, me laird." Caelan turned away to give the orders. Magnus stood alone, as close to the food store as humanly possible without inhaling the foul air.

"What about ye, me laird? Yer needin' to change." Caelan returned before Magnus even realized he was gone, the devastation before him stealing his sense of time.

"Aye," he nodded in agreement but failed to move.

"I'll be gettin' dressed. Ye find out who was here when it started. We will question all, and then assess the damage when we are able." With his order given, Magnus turned to leave.

"Will ye nae rest, me laird? Ye've earned it," Caelan called after him, but Magnus did

not falter in his steps or respond. There was no rest for the Laird of McCormack. Not when danger lurked so close to his heart and home, whether by flame or foe.

The smoldering remains of the storeroom lay before Magnus, tendrils of smoke still clawing at the early morning sky. The chill of dawn could not penetrate the heat that radiated from the blackened walls, a grim reminder of how close they had come to disaster. Magnus stood shoulder to shoulder with Caelan, their breath misting in the cold air as they watched and waited for the stone to cool.

"Fortune favors us this morn," Magnus murmured, his voice barely above a whisper, yet it carried in the quiet. "Hayden and Scarlett are away—less worry for our heads."

"Indeed, me laird," Caelan replied. "'Tis fortunate timing that Hayden took Scarlett to meet her betrothed, lest the fire claimed more than just provisions."

"Provisions can be replaced," Magnus said, the stoicism in his tone belying the tightness in his chest. The thought of his siblings in danger was a weight he was all too glad to be without, even if the absence of their presence within these walls left an unfamiliar hollowness. "It is the cause we need to address."

As the door's charred remains cooled to a less forbidding touch, Magnus motioned to Caelan, signaling it was time to enter. They stepped into the storeroom, their boots crunching on debris, assessing the extent of what was lost. Barrels of salted meat were reduced to ashes, sacks of grain split open and spoiled by water and soot. It was a harsh blow to their supplies, with winter looming on the horizon.

"T'was no malice at work here," Caelan suggested gently, his eyes scanning the destruction with a practiced eye.

"Who would have the carelessness to let such a thing happen?" Magnus's question hung heavy in the air, his gaze sharp as he surveyed the damage.

"I fear 'tis old Moira. Her wits are nae as they once were, and all say she was last to leave this place."

"Perhaps." Magnus's jaw tightened, the muscles working beneath stubbled skin. Morag had served his family loyally for years, her hands contributing to the well-being of the clan. To turn her out now would be a cruel repayment for her service.

Magnus stood before the trembling figure of the elderly kitchen maid, her eyes clouded with confusion and fear..

"Moira," he began, his voice softer than most had ever heard it, "ye daenae remember what happened, do ye?"

The old woman shook her head, her hands clasped tightly together as though seeking warmth or comfort from the chill that had nothing to do with the weather.

"Yer mind may be a wee bit dimmed by the years," Magnus continued, his tone gentle yet firm, "but yer place here at the castle is secure. We'll find ye tasks more suited to yer strengths."

A flicker of relief passed over Moira's wrinkled face, and she nodded, murmuring a grateful, "Thank ye, Laird McCormack."

"See to it that she's well cared for," Magnus instructed Caelan sternly before turning away, leaving the old woman in capable hands.

"Ye show much kindness, me laird," Caelan noted, the underlying note of surprise clear in his voice.

"Kindness has naught to do with it," Magnus bit back, though the truth of his compassion lay unspoken between them. "No one will say Laird McCormack does

nae care for his own."

Caelan nodded, accepting the command, but his eyes lingered on Magnus with newfound calculation. "As ye wish, laird."

A silence settled amongst the ruins of what had been, the only sound the distant call of a raven, its cry a portentous echo in the stillness of the morning. Magnus oversaw the emptying of the storeroom, setting everything that could be salvaged in the main hall, while the kitchen became a graveyard for the spoilt harvest. Magnus was certain some of the wet grain could be sent to the hardy pigs farmed over in the glen, and the meat could be rendered down to fats for candle making. It wouldn't feed the family, but Magnus couldn't abide such waste.

But even as they took stock of the loss, the shrill call of a horn echoed through the courtyard, heralding unexpected visitors.

"Who dares arrive at such an early hour?" Magnus's voice was a low growl, his body tensing for new troubles.

"Shall we find out?" Caelan asked, a sly edge to his words.

"Visitors, me laird," announced the sentry who appeared at the door, breathless from urgency.

"Escort them to the main hall," Magnus commanded, rising with purpose, before remembering the chaotic state of the main hall. "Nay, I will meet them in the courtyard."

"I shall remain by yer side, me laird," Caelan reassured.

Magnus gave a curt nod and strode toward the entrance, his mind already turning to

strategies and defenses. They would soon discover who approached—and whether friend or foe, Magnus Black would be ready to face them.

He strode through the corridors, the echo of his boots on stone a drumbeat to the fire still burning within him. The sight that greeted him stoked his anger anew as he entered the courtyard. His brother was standing before the carriage, his hand outstretched to help Scarlett climb from within.

"Scarlett? Hayden?" His words were clipped, disbelief etched in every syllable. "Why are ye returned so soon? And why is Scarlett nae with the O'Kane clan, preparing for her marriage?"

Scarlett seemed to bristle with indignation, her stance defiant as she met her brother's gaze. "It's nae me fault the man didn't want me," she retorted, chin lifted in challenge.

Magnus stiffened, his hands clenching with a rage now festering within. Scarlett was to marry Laird O'Kane, but he would not cast her aside. He could not believe Flynn Gibson could find any fault in his sister that would cause him to turn her away. The fault had to lie with the Laird himself.

"What did he do to ye?"

"Nothing, brother, I swear it. He was good to me. He just..."

"Tell me what he did."

"He married another."

"He cannae do that. We had an arrangement. He must have given a good reason for this treachery?"

Hayden stepped forward, placing a protective hand on his sister's shoulder. "Nay, brother, 'tis true. Laird O'Kane's heart belongs to another."

Magnus clenched his fists at his sides, the betrayal slicing through him like a dirk. This turn of events would not stand; he would see his family's honor restored, even if he had to move heaven and earth to do it.

"Did ye speak to him on this matter, Hayden. Surely ye could make him see the good sense of this agreement?" Magnus didn't mean to speak so harshly to his brother, none of his anger was towards him, but the bitterness of the betrayal was evident in his actions.

"What could I do, brother?" Hayden protested. "The man has wed another. Nothing can be done."

The words hung heavy in the air, laden with an accusation that made the atmosphere in the great hall of Clan McCormack as volatile as a keg of gunpowder. Scarlett's fierce gaze bore into Magnus, her spirit unbroken even in the face of his mounting fury.

"Please, brother, daenae blame Hayden for this," Scarlett insisted.

"Ye mean to tell me," Magnus started, voice low and dangerous, "that ye return here without a husband because that cur O'Kane had the gall to set his affections on another?"

"Exactly that, brother," Scarlett confirmed with a stubborn tilt of her chin, her fiery hair catching the light of the sun and casting a warm glow about her defiant features.

Caelan Ward, standing a pace behind Magnus, leaned in, his voice dripping with concern. "They would disrespect ye like that, me Laird?" His blue eyes, usually so

charming, now flashed with the thrill of the unfolding scandal.

"Aye," Magnus replied curtly, his brown eyes darkening, a storm gathering within their depths. The betrayal stung, not only the pride of his clan but also the duty he felt towards his sister. "What can be done now?" he asked, though his mind already raced through the possibilities, each more treacherous than the last.

"Nothing, Magnus," Scarlett's voice broke through his thoughts, carrying a note of resignation. "Laird O'Kane's heart was stolen by another, and they are wed."

Magnus's broad shoulders, which had borne the weight of responsibility since boyhood, seemed to tense further, the muscle and sinew beneath his shirt tightening like the strings of a lute. Betrayal was a bitter draught, and it did not sit well in the pit of his stomach.

Could this day get any worse?

"If there was a way around this, I would have pushed for it," Hayden insisted.

Magnus bristled with a rage compounded by his early rise, and now they were to be disgraced like this. To be cast aside as if the McCormack clan was nothing. Magnus could not let that go. He needed to speak to Laird O'Kane himself and seek a resolution. If there was a brother, then Scarlett could wed him. It would not be as secure an alliance, but it would be something, and if there was no brother to be had, then perhaps a sister for Hayden. "Remind me of his siblings?"

"No brothers. Two sisters wed, and one still home." Hayden shrugged, failing to see the purpose of the question.

"There. We can be compensated then."

"Brother, please, ye ken nothing the family' past. He dinnae shun me, but followed his heart on another path," Scarlett protested.

"Scarlett, ye forget that Laird O'Kane has a sister yet unwed." Magnus's words sliced through the silence that had fallen upon the room. With calculated steps, he advanced back toward them, his gaze locking onto Hayden's uneasy expression. "We'll need to consider all our alliances carefully."

"Brother, what are ye suggesting?" Hayden asked, perplexity written across his handsome face.

"Plans," Magnus replied, a shadow of a smile playing upon his lips, a rare glimpse of the calculating mind beneath his stoic exterior. "Strategic plans."

"Ye cannot mean—" Scarlett began, but Magnus cut her off.

"Indeed, I do." His words were clipped, decisive. "The ties of blood and marriage bind us all in this land. And if Laird O'Kane does nae honor his commitment to our family, then we must ensure our position is secured by other means."

"Ye daenae mean that I should marry?" Hayden gasped as realization sunk in.

"I was promised a marriage between us and the O'Kanes, and I shall have it."

"But Erin is..."

"Is she nae attractive?" Magnus cut him off.

"Aye, brother, she is bonnie indeed."

"And she can speak?"

“She can speak, brother, but she daenae fit me needs.”

“So the lass isnae like the harlots ye are used to,” Magnus concluded. “A weddin' is what the clan needs and it is what we get. If ye were unable to give yer sister's hand, then we shall take hers. One of ye will wed the O'Kanes. I will nae be made a fool of again.”

His declaration echoed in the great hall, the import of his words hanging between them like a drawn sword. With a final, meaningful glance at Hayden, Magnus turned on his heel, his long black hair swirling behind him as he strode purposefully toward his chambers to make plans that could alter the fate of their clan forever.

“Yer a bampot, brother.” Hayden yelled after him.

"Prepare yerself, brother," he called over his shoulder, his voice carrying the promise of action. "Find yerself some food, and rest. Be ready to return to O'Kane Castle on the morrow."

And with that, the Laird of Clan McCormack disappeared from sight, leaving his stunned siblings to ponder the implications of his parting words.

“ V isitors,” came the call from the clansman at the main gate.”

“Who calls here unannounced?” Erin cried to anyone who would listen. Her heart pounded with excitement as she hitched the folds of her skirt higher, bolting across the cobblestone courtyard toward the towering gate of her family's castle. They had an unexpected visitor, and Erin was keen to see who would call upon them unannounced. The crisp Highland air bit at her cheeks, but the possibility that one of her sisters had returned sent a warm surge of joy through her veins.

The clang of iron against stone signaled the gate was being drawn open, urging Erin to quicken her pace. That was until her body collided with an immovable force, a solid presence that seemed to rise out of the earth itself. Her breath hitched, expecting the jarring impact with the ground, only to find herself ensnared in a strong embrace that steadied her.

Warmth radiated from the arms that encircled her waist, and for a fleeting moment, Erin's world narrowed to the sensation of being held by this unexpected savior. "Och, lass, ye should watch where yer goin'," a deep, resonant voice rumbled above her.

Flustered, Erin's cheeks burned with a flush that rivalled the crimson of rowan berries. She tilted her chin upward, prepared to offer gratitude mixed with a gentle scolding for his lack of warning. But the words lodged in her throat as her gaze met that of the man who had caught her.

Broad-shouldered and formidable, he towered over her. His eyes held her captive

with an intensity that bordered on wildness. His face may have been handsome once, but now scars decorated his features and she shuddered at the thought of the pain he must have endured.

Erin's heart hammered in her chest as the towering figure steadied her on her feet. The breath she had been about to thank him with hitched in her throat, her words swallowed by shock.

The man before her could have been plucked from the dark tales spun by the fireside—covered in muscles and a map of scars that spoke of countless battles, his presence was both awe-inspiring and terrifying. Long, wild hair framed a face that had surely seen the horrors of war, the untamed look in his eyes fierce enough to freeze the blood of even the bravest warrior. He was a beast of a man, a legend brought to life.

"Thank ye," Erin murmured, her voice betraying her composure as she tried to regain her footing, her hand brushing against the coarse wool of his plaid. She studied the tartan pattern, noting its unfamiliar weave, a reminder that this man was an outsider to her clan.

"Ye've nay need to thank me," he replied, his voice carrying the lilt of the glens, a sound both foreign and strangely comforting.

"Well, I do thank ye, nonetheless."

"Then we're even, lass," he stated, a hint of gruffness creeping into his voice. "Now, if ye'll excuse me, I've business with yer laird."

"Who are ye, then?" Erin called after him, the words escaping her before she could think better of it.

The man just tutted rudely at her. Before Erin could gather her wits, another figure stepped forward, one she recognized: Hayden Black, the roguish charmer who had visited not long ago. His handsome features starkly contrasted with the rugged intensity of the man beside him.

"Hayden, why have ye come back?" Erin asked, attempting to regain some semblance of composure.

Hayden's lips curved into a knowing smile, but the other man commanded the moment. "I demand to see the laird," he growled, impatience threading his tone.

"An apology might be in order first for nearly mowin' me down," Erin retorted, her independent spirit unwilling to let his brusque manner go unchecked.

The man regarded her with cold brown eyes, an unreadable expression settling over his scarred visage. With a dismissive shrug, he brushed past her, his disdain clear in his silence.

Erin's cheeks flushed a deeper shade of red at his audacity. She watched as the two men made their way toward the castle, her gaze lingering on the retreating form of the 'monster' who had so rudely dismissed her. He was a Highlander, and there were rules for men like him, but her curiosity had her following them.

Why are ye returned, Hayden Black? I've nay more brothers for yer sister to marry.

Erin watched as the stranger strode toward the open gate, his gait purposeful and commanding. As the distance grew, an inexplicable pull tugged at her heart, and the brief encounter left her with more questions than answers. She hurried after the men, curious but wary of this man demanding an audience with her brother.

The sudden appearance of the castle steward hastened the moment. With a respectful

bow and a subtle glance at Erin, he gestured for the two imposing figures to follow him. "Laird McCormack, Master Black, if ye'll come with me."

Magnus Black!

Hayden's brother and the laird of McCormack were here to make her brother marry the sister as intended. Erin felt angered by the man's refusal to accept that Flynn married for love. It was what Erin hoped for herself, though she was only nineteen and had no plans to seek out love or marriage for many years to come.

"Why have ye come? Ye'll nae change Flynn's mind. He willnae marry Scarlett." Erin trailed behind, eager to see her brother put this beast of a man in his place. "Ye're better off goin' home now. Tis naught but a waste of time."

The infuriating man still failed to acknowledge her words as he kept walking, causing her hands to ball into fists with frustration.

"Ye'll find no hospitality here with manners such as those, Magnus Black!" Erin called after him, her voice ringing with the fierceness of her Highland blood.

Magnus paused mid-stride, turning slightly to fix her with a piercing gaze that sent an involuntary shiver down her spine. It was a look that promised there was far more to this man than the brute force he wielded—a depth that intrigued and unsettled her in equal measure.

"I've business with yer brother that cannot wait," he stated, his voice low and resonant.

His declaration hung heavy in the air, laden with the weight of unspoken consequences. As Magnus turned away, striding confidently toward the castle, Erin found herself caught between trepidation and a strange sense of anticipation.

What kind of business would bring such a man to their doorstep? And why did the thought of it ignite a fire within her that she could neither understand nor quell?

Erin followed them with a mixture of dread and defiance, her footsteps echoing on the cobblestone path. Each step took her closer to a future bound in mystery and shadowed by Magnus Black's formidable presence.

As the great hall doors swung open to admit them, Erin steeled herself for what was to come, proudly waiting to see her brother send this man running back to his own clan with his tail between his legs.

As they crossed the threshold into the warmth of the great hall, Erin watched her brother extend a hand in greeting, yet it was not lost on her how he kept his other hand close to the hilt of his dirk. Magnus took the handshake, his grip firm, as one would grasp destiny itself.

"Welcome to O'Kane keep," Flynn said, his voice steady despite the unease dancing in his eyes.

"Ye ken why I'm here," Magnus replied, his words clipped like the snap of a flag in the wind.

Aye, thought Erin, everyone in the room could feel the purpose behind those words. But ye'll nay find what yer after.

The crackling hearth and the rich scents of peat and roasting venison did little to soften the edges of this encounter.

"Let us speak plainly then," Flynn proposed, motioning towards the long oak table that had seen generations of kin feast and feud.

Erin's heart raced in her chest. She could sense the gravity of what was unfolding and she yearned to see her brother take command of the situation.

"Will ye sit?" Flynn offered.

"Nay," Magnus replied, his voice a low rumble like distant thunder.

"Very well," Flynn conceded, leaning back against the solid wood of the table, arms folded across his broad chest.

The firelight played across Magnus's scars, casting half his face in shadow, an enigmatic mask that both repelled and fascinated Erin. His brown eyes, dark and intense, caught hers for a moment, sending a shiver through her.

"Speak yer piece, then," Flynn urged, breaking the charged silence.

"Ye broke our agreement. Sent me sister back unmarried. It is an insult to the good name of McCormack and shameful to the name O'Kane. I need to ken why ye dishonor me clan."

"I dinnae intend any disrespect to yer clan. It wasnae me intent."

"O'Kane," Magnus began, his tone brooking no argument, "ye promised unity between our clans. A promise yer marriage to me sister would've sealed." His scars seemed to writhe with each word, a testament to battles fought and won. "And now ye must provide another way to mend the slight."

"I fell in love," Flynn confessed. It was a rare sight indeed to see her brother, usually so fierce and steadfast, put on the backfoot by another.

"There is no place for love in this arrangement," Magnus scoffed.

"Then what would ye have me do, McCormack?" Flynn challenged, his jaw set.

"Ye owe me a weddin', O'Kane."

"Ye've no right to demand such," Flynn's voice rumbled like distant thunder, his stance wide and unyielding as he faced Magnus.

Erin, who stood beside him, watched with an intensity that belied her usual composure. It was a rare sight indeed to see her brother, usually so fierce and steadfast, put on the backfoot by another.

"O'Kane," Magnus began, his tone brooking no argument, "I willnae be denied what I'm owed."

Erin's grip on her skirt tightened, the fabric crumpling beneath her delicate fingers. For a moment, her mind raced with memories of old tales, where pacts and promises were bound by blood and honor, their weight heavier than the mountains themselves. Her eyes turned to Briar, but her mother stood stoic and still, her face unreadable.

"What do ye suggest? Our alliance can remain as negotiated," Flynn challenged, his jaw set, eyes smoldering like peat fires.

"Ye have a sister unwed. She will marry Hayden," Magnus decreed, his gaze shifting to catch Erin's, trapping her in a momentary web of unspoken words and simmering chemistry.

"What? Nay!" Erin's voice cut through the room. "I'll nae be bartered like cattle!"

"Ye think yerself above it?" Magnus retorted, taking a step closer to her, the heat of his presence nearly singeing her skin despite the distance. "This is how alliances are forged, lass."

"An alliance with a man of Hayden's... reputation?" Erin's challenge was met with a low chuckle from somewhere behind Magnus.

"Yer opinion of me is quite clear, Erin," Hayden's voice teased. But Erin's gaze did not waver from Magnus.

"Enough!" Flynn's tone was hard, commanding silence. "There'll be no talk of marriage without consent."

"Consent," Magnus echoed, stepping back, the ghost of a smirk playing upon his lips. "Aye, consent shall be given. Or I'll take what's owed in land and cattle."

A murmur rippled through the hall like a storm-swollen burn tumbling down the highland slopes, each clansman and woman exchanging glances with speculation and concern.

Erin's heart hammered against her ribs; each beat a reminder of the precarious edge upon which her future balanced. As the men continued their verbal sparring, the weight of impending destiny bore down upon her, threatening to crush her spirit.

"Ye knew there would be consequences when ye broke the agreement." Magnus dismissed all Flynn's excuses. He would not be moved on the subject.

As the room descended into murmurs and half-formed plans, the echo of bagpipes from the village below reached her ears—a reminder of the life that pulsed beyond these walls, a life she yearned to claim as her own.

"Ye daenae need to bind our clans by marriage," Flynn's voice cut through the din, his broad shoulders squared as he faced Magnus. "Our allegiance stands firm without such ties."

"Besides," Erin interjected, her gaze steady despite the fluttering in her stomach, "Hayden is well-known for his... diversions with the lasses. I've no desire to be one of many."

Her words coaxed a chuckle from Hayden, whose roguish grin failed to mask the quick flash of admiration in his eyes. "Ye wound me, lass. A man can change, given the right woman."

"A marriage is needed to bind the agreement, O'Kane. Ye ken that." Magnus remained unmoved. "I will keep Hayden in line."

The two men were at an impasse, and neither would back down. Erin still hoped her brother would find a peaceful solution without bartering her away to a man whose reputation repulsed her.

"Perhaps," came the unexpected suggestion from Briar, her voice soft but carrying, drawing the attention of the room. "Erin should marry Laird McCormack himself instead."

"Maither!" Erin gasped. She wanted to marry someone better than Hayden, not some beast of the moors. "I willnae be bartered to such a man!"

The room fell deathly silent, every eye turning to gauge the reaction of the two at the center of this unexpected proposal. Erin's indignation flared hot as burning peat, her cheeks reddening with the heat of it. Magnus stiffened, and Erin found a glimmer of hope that the man would refuse her.

It was odd that he had not requested her hand for himself, indicating the man had no desire to marry. And if he refused her, he could no longer hold her brother to the same claim.

Erin dared to hope that they had called his bluff and the whole thing could be amicably resolved. But Magnus did not immediately refuse, his contemplative pause stirring a strange current between them. Erin's fury ebbed as she regarded him, sensing an odd reluctance in his stance.

"Very well," Magnus said at last, his voice resonating with quiet authority. The simple agreement struck the assembly like a bolt from the blue, leaving a stunned silence in its wake.

Erin's breath hitched, and her momentary calm dashed upon the rocks. That single, heavy breath from Magnus Black had sealed her fate, binding her to the beast when she'd been so certain he would reject the idea outright.

As the reality of her situation descended upon her, Erin felt the weight of centuries of tradition pressing down upon her shoulders—the tales of old, where marriages were forged in the fires of necessity and survival rather than love and choice.

She turned away, the image of Magnus's scarred visage seared into her memory. The beastly warrior might hold her fate in his hands, but she vowed then and there that he would not conquer her will.

"Maither, how could ye?" Erin's knees gave out, and she sank to the cold ground. "Ye ken the rules. I cannae marry a highlander."

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"Nae. I daenae agree to this." Erin's voice rose above the clamor of the great hall, a desperate plea in the midst of unyielding tradition. "Ye cannae do this to me!" she cried, hands balling into fists at her sides. Her words, however, fell on deaf ears, as everyone present had an opinion to discuss with those closest to them. In their minds, her fate was sealed.

"Flynn!" She tore through the crowd, skirts swishing violently as she sought the solace of her brother's understanding. But Flynn stood stoic, an immovable force with resignation etched deep upon his brow. He leaned in, his voice barely carrying over the din. "I've no choice, Erin. 'Tis for the good of our kin. Ye know the strength of the McCormack Clan. Making an enemy of Magnus Black would be devastating; we need this allegiance."

"Nae I. Why should I suffer for yer happiness?"

"Rejecting this man would damage yer chances at a good marriage."

"I daenae wish for a marriage at all."

Fury ignited within her, a fiery blaze threatening to consume her composure. Surely, she was his kin, and he would not abandon her. He knew the rules she was raised by; he had to understand. She would not be thrown to the beast to atone for her brother's mistake. It was his decision to put love before the good of the clan, and she would not stand for this.

Before she could muster another word, Magnus spoke with authority. "Ye shall have the night to gather yer belongings and bid yer farewells."

"Come, McCormack, let us set the arrangements." Flynn directed Magnus towards his office. With a curt nod, Magnus glanced back at her before they strode towards the study, leaving Erin to stew in the juices of her own vexation. Erin's heart thundered, and each beat a war drum, challenging the fate being forced upon her. Livid didn't come close to the tempest swirling inside her

"Erin." Hayden attempted to soothe her, but Erin didn't want to hear it.

"Leave me be," she spat. Without waiting for his response, she hastened away. The door to her chamber loomed ahead. With a forceful push, it swung open, and she slipped inside, slamming it shut behind her. The cold stone pressed against her back as she leaned against the door, breaths coming in ragged gasps. She was cornered, caged by duty and expectation, her spirit rebelling against the very idea of surrender.

Never marry a Highlander.

Never be alone with a Highlander.

Never be captured by a Highlander.

Never beg a Highlander.

For six years of her life, she and her two sisters had been held captive by the cruel Earl of Cramshire, Archibald Hampton. He had kept her away from her parents in his English castle, taught her these four rules. Giving up her Scottish heritage, along with the four rules, had been constant throughout her childhood in captivity. Though she had been rescued and returned home to the family she barely remembered, they had become more important to her in the following years than anything else. Anything but

those rules.

They could force her to marry the Highlander, to send her away to be alone with the Highlander. They would allow her to be the captive of the Highlander, but she would never beg. That was the one rule she had control over. The one rule she could never be forced to break.

"Never beg a Highlander," she whispered to herself. Erin's gaze drifted to the small wooden chest holding her meagre possessions, yet she did not move to pack. If defiance were all she had left, then she would wield it.

A gentle knock at Erin's chamber door signaled an end to her peace. She clenched her fists as she stood, ready to unleash her anger on whichever man had chosen to end her solitude. She could not face her brother now and most certainly would not tolerate the evil laird coming into her private space. "Leave me be."

"Erin, lass, may I come in?" Blair's voice trembled with emotion.

"Enter," Erin replied, her own voice a mere whisper, her anger melting as she longed to be held in her mother's arms.

The door creaked open, and Blair stepped into the dimly lit room, her eyes red-rimmed and sorrowful. She reached for Erin, but her daughter stepped back, arms crossed over her chest.

"Maither, why did ye speak out?" Erin spoke bitterly. "Yer were calling his bluff? Ye ken how these Highlanders are with their pride."

Blair's hand fluttered to her chest, and she let out a sigh. "I thought it would prevent this madness," she admitted, her gaze falling to the floor. "But Magnus is a proud man."

"Ye know the rules," Erin reminded her sharply. "Never marry a Highlander. There are some good highlanders, aye, but nae this one. He is without manners. And now ye want to give me away to him?"

"Erin, me love, sometimes life forces us to forget the rules, especially those ones. Have yer sisters not shown ye that happiness can be found with a highlander? I have tried makin' ye see those rules are naught but the rantings of a madman," Blair said, her voice steady as she reached out again, this time capturing Erin's hands. "Ye must believe me; Magnus is nae like his faither. I've heard naught but good about him."

"Good?" Erin jerked her hands free. "Is it good to storm into our home and demand a bride as if she were no more than beef or bread without a mind of her own? He showed no respect today, Maither! How can ye speak of his virtues when he has shown me none?"

"His faither was a cruel man, 'tis true," Blair conceded, following Erin's restless movements with sad eyes. "But the son is nae the faither. I am sure he will treat ye with kindness."

"Kindness?" Erin's laugh was sharp and humorless. "He may well be kind to those who bow and scrape before him, but what of those who daenae? What of me?"

"Ye are strong, Erin," Blair said softly. "Stronger than ye know. And perhaps that strength will reach the heart of a man who has known little but strife."

Erin turned away, her gaze drawn once more to the wild beauty of the land outside her window. She wanted to believe her mother, to find some sliver of hope in the bleakness that stretched before her. But Magnus Black was a Highlander. "Leave me, Maither," she murmured. "I need to be alone."

Blair hesitated, then pressed a kiss to Erin's forehead before retreating from the room, closing the door with a quiet click.

Alone once more, Erin wrapped her arms around herself, feeling the chill of the stone walls seep into her bones. Maybe she did put too much faith into the four rules, but she didn't remember her life before she and her sisters were taken from their home. Her time spent as the captive of Lord Cramshire was much clearer in her memories than her childhood before her captivity. She only had her sister's stories of her parents and brother to know them by. In the four years since her return, she had fiercely reclaimed her mother's affections and watched her two sisters break the rules to wed and leave her.

If she could swallow her pride enough to beg, she could convince the Highlander to spare her from a loveless marriage.

Will ye beg, Erin Gibson? Will ye? Magnus's voice taunted her, but she was determined.

"Damn ye," she whispered, feeling the heat rise to her cheeks. "I'll show ye that I am no prize to be won."

Regardless of the rules, she was facing an unwanted betrothal to Magnus Black—a man rumored to be as untamed and ferocious as the land he ruled. A man whose presence set her pulse racing with an unsettling awareness she couldn't quite name.

"Curse the lot of them," Erin murmured under her breath. Erin stood abruptly, crossing the room to stand before the mirror. She studied her reflection—blue eyes fierce with determination, wavy brown hair framing her face, the curve of her lips set in a line of stubborn resistance. She was not the frightened girl of her past; she was Erin Gibson, and she would not go quietly into this forced union.

"I'll nae be chattel for anyone, beast or otherwise. Ye willna have me begging, Magnus Black," she vowed into the silent room. "I willna give ye that satisfaction."

The four rules were a part of her, but she had seen her sisters break them without consequence. It was the fourth rule that gnawed at her pride, the one that demanded her submission in the most personal of ways.

"Ye willna have me begging, Magnus Black," she vowed into the silent room, her voice carrying the strength of her ancestors—the warriors and clansmen who had fought for their freedom on these very lands. "I willna give ye that satisfaction."

"Never beg a Highlander," she muttered, the words leaving a bitter taste upon her lips. Yet, as the prospect of breaking the other three rules loomed over her like an ominous cloud, Erin knew what had to be done. She would beg Magnus Black to release her from this unwanted betrothal—if only to save herself from a fate she could not accept.

Erin walked briskly along the corridor towards Magnus's room, drawing deep breaths as she readied herself to beg this beastly man for mercy. Her fingers trembled slightly as she clutched the hem of her shawl.

"Ye can do this, Erin," she whispered to herself, steeling her nerves as she neared the door to the laird's chamber. The heavy oak loomed before her. With each moment that passed, the rules of her captivity echoed louder in her mind, a litany of never-ending commands. But it was the fourth rule that gnawed at her pride, the one that demanded her submission in the most personal of ways.

"Never beg a Highlander," she muttered, Yet, as the prospect of breaking the other three rules loomed over her like an ominous cloud, Erin knew what had to be done. She would beg Magnus Black to release her from this unwanted betrothal—if only to save herself from a fate she could not accept.

Drawing a deep breath Erin raised her hand and knocked softly. There was no response, and for a fleeting second, hope flickered that he might be asleep. With a determined push, she opened the door and stepped inside. The room was dimly lit by the dying embers in the hearth. And there, standing by the window overlooking the moonlit moors, was Magnus Black.

He stood half-clothed, and Erin's hand flew to her mouth at the sight of his bare torso. His broad body was muscular, and dark hair curled across his chest, thinning as it ran down towards the belt of his breeches. Scars crisscrossed his broad torso. Erin's eye followed a thick mark across his stomach until it disappeared below his clothing. Her gaze followed the imagined path of the mark lower, widening at the thought of what could be.

"What are ye doin' here, lass?" Magnus's voice was harsh, pulling Erin from her unintended reverie.

"Ah came to speak with ye," Erin said, finding her voice despite the thunderous beat of her heart. Magnus stepped towards her, and she found herself caught in the intensity of his brown eyes, a challenge lain bare between them. His gaze raked over her, as if searching for deceit or weakness, but Erin stood firm, her own blue eyes unwavering.

"Speak then," he commanded.

Erin swallowed hard, trying to gather the shards of her resolve. "I ask ye... nae, I beg ye to reconsider this union."

The words tasted bitter, but they were out now. Magnus's expression remained unreadable, but the muscle ticking in his jaw betrayed a flicker of emotion that Erin couldn't quite place.

"Ye come into me chamber to beg?" he queried, a trace of mockery lacing his words.

"Nay, this isnae begging. It is..." Erin braced herself against the sting of humiliation, refusing to let it show. "Aye, I beg ye to release me. This marriage... 'Tis nae what either of us wants."

Magnus paced towards her, his presence overwhelming, and Erin fought the urge to step back. He towered over her, a formidable force that both frightened and fascinated her. Their eyes locked in a silent battle of wills, neither willing to relent. The air was thick with tension, crackling like the fire behind them.

"Ye may have begged, lass," Magnus said, his voice low and dangerous, "but whether I grant yer plea is another matter entirely."

"If ye ken what happened... If ye understood... Ye wouldne ask..." Erin fell silent, unable to use her past for pity.

Her words hung heavy in the air as Erin's resolve wavered. She had taken the leap, bared her soul in the hope of freedom, but as the seconds stretched into an eternity, she wondered if her plea had been in vain.

"Will ye nae answer me?" Erin's voice was barely a whisper.

Magnus's eyes bore into hers, and in that heated gaze, Erin felt something shift between them. His presence was not so terrible as she had first thought. She wanted to reach out and touch this bare-chested man, and yet her very presence in his room had broken two rules.

"I have respect for ye daring to come here," he said. "But an arrangement has been made, and unlike yer brother, I cannae break it."

“But ye cannae mean it,” Erin pleaded.

"Nay. I'd have rather yer brother married Scarlett as we had agreed," Magnus scoffed as he casually leaned against the heavy wooden doorframe of his chambers, arms crossed over his broad chest. His dismissive air only fanned the flames of Erin's determination. "So now we have to, daenae we?"

"Aye, we do. This marriage—'tis naught but a farce for both of us." She drew in a deep breath, willing her words to find purchase in his stony heart.

“Ye should be beggin’ yer brother.” Magnus stepped closer to her, pushing Erin back with his mere presence. “Had he married Scarlett, we wouldne be here.”

“True. But do ye nae believe in a marriage built on love?”

“Nay. There is nae such a thing.” Magnus backed her towards the wall. Erin's fingers twitched with the yearning to touch the raised lines marking his skin, but she stepped back to increase the space between them.

"Then why force us through with it?" Erin pressed, her brow furrowed in frustration.

"Because 'tis what must be done," he growled, stepping closer, his presence overwhelming, almost touching her.

"Ye cannae just—" But her protest died on her lips as Magnus moved even nearer, close enough that she could see the flecks of gold in his brown eyes and feel the heat radiating from his scarred skin.

"Ye willnae get yer way with tantrums, lass," he warned. Erin could not help but watch his mouth, the curve of his lips that had softened during their heated exchange.

She held her breath and closed her eyes, half expecting a kiss to seal her fate.

"Ye'll never have me touch ye," Magnus declared with a harsh intensity that made her snap open her eyes in shock, "nae until ye beg me for it."

With a rough hand, he opened the door and thrust her out. Erin stumbled forward, her mind reeling from the encounter.

"Ye cannae do this!" she spat, whirling around to face him.

"Watch me," he replied, his voice devoid of warmth as the door slammed shut, leaving Erin standing alone in the dark corridor.

As she retreated to the sanctuary of her own chamber, Erin knew one thing with certainty: she would move mountains before she'd ever beg Magnus Black for anything.

"A re we to leave before nightfall?" He called to the stubborn lass.

Erin gave him a hard look before turning to her brother.

Magnus Black's patience frayed like a battle-worn flag as he stood by the open carriage, watching Erin Gibson prolong her farewells with a tenacity that could rival the ancient Scottish clans defending their territories.

Yet when Erin embraced her mother, a bond of kinship tugged at the edges of his hardened heart, and a secretive, involuntary smile crept onto his lips. He didn't consider redacting his offer of marriage, but perhaps giving the girl a single night to prepare for her departure had been a little harsh.

His own sister had at least known she was to be wed a few days prior to her trip to meet O'Kane. But it was done, and he would not change his plans when they were so close to getting the girl away from the castle. She had bid her goodbyes to almost all the servants and her mother at least seven times.

"Ye'll be missed, lass," Flynn declared, his voice thick with emotion that Magnus questioned even as it was spoken. Was it genuine, or did guilt lace the Laird O'Kane's words?

Beside Flynn, Elizabeth – the English rose who had caused this entire arrangement – clasped her hands together, her blue eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "I'm so sorry for all this, Erin," she said in a low voice.

"Ye needn't apologize, Elizabeth. 'Tis nae yer doin'," Erin replied, her composure as steady as the standing stones dotting the Highland landscape.

Magnus bristled at the exchange. How could Erin forgive so easily when it was Elizabeth's decision to marry Flynn that now forced Erin into this unwanted union? He clenched his jaw, noting the unusual pallor of Erin's cheeks – a stark contrast to her usually rosy complexion – and his resolve finally wavered. He'd give her the time she needed.

Erin glanced at him as she commenced another round of goodbyes, her aim being to frustrate him, but Magnus wouldn't let the lass get under his skin. He waited beside Hayden, comparing the corbie-stepped gables to that of his own castle to make idle conversation.

"Are ye ready then?" Magnus asked gruffly once Erin approached the carriage after what felt like an eternity.

"Ready as I'll ever be," she answered, her voice steady though her hand trembled slightly as she reached for the carriage door.

He extended a hand to assist her. As their fingers brushed, Magnus recalled the heat that had surged between them the previous night when anger and something far more dangerous had flared during their heated argument. For a man who'd planned to remain unwed and unencumbered, the emotions she stirred within him were as unwelcome as they were undeniable.

"Let us depart," he commanded, his tone leaving no room for further delays. He mounted the chestnut mare that had brought him here, turning her to the castle gate as Hayden and the other clansmen followed suit.

The carriage lurched forward, and they settled into a silence. Magnus rode beside the

window of Erin's carriage, where she sat stiffly inside, heavy tartan draped over her lap. He stole a glance at her, watching how the light danced in her wavy brown hair.

Unbidden memories of how she'd stood up to him the prior evening invaded his thoughts, igniting a spark of admiration alongside his simmering frustration. Hayden rode on the other side of the carriage, but his attempts at conversation were met with complete silence. Even when he tried describing McCormack Castle to its future Lady, she remained uninterested.

"Does yer conscience weigh heavy?" Erin finally broke the silence, her gaze fixed on the passing scenery behind Magnus as if his gaze was more bothersome than Hayden's words.

"Conscience is a luxury I cannae afford," Magnus retorted, his voice devoid of warmth. "But I am nae without honor. Ye will be treated fairly as me wife."

"Fairly," she echoed.

"I willnae touch ye, unless ye beg me to." His promise hung between them, as weighty and complex as the vow they were soon to make. "Ye have me word."

"Yer word," she murmured under her breath, though whether in doubt or defiance, Magnus couldn't tell.

Their journey continued under the cloak of silence, with the only sounds being the rhythmic clatter of hooves and the whispering wind. It was a fitting backdrop for the tumultuous path that lay before them.

As the group rolled onward to their shared future, Magnus knew one thing for certain: Erin Gibson was no meek bride to be bartered and traded.

She was fire and steel, wrapped in beauty. And she was about to become his wife. It gave him confidence that she would find her place in the castle and find company in Scarlett and Hayden. She had an ease about her when bantering with his brother, which reassured him. They would become as close as siblings, and Magnus would, in time, see her as more of a sister, and life would be good.

With a jolt, the carriage hit a rut in the road, throwing Erin against the wooden frame. Magnus reached forward, instinctively acting to tend to her. His hand touched her shoulder, and a charge zipped through the air, a silent acknowledgement of the attraction neither wished to confess.

"Watch yerself, lass," Magnus muttered as he righted himself, pulling his arm back, ignoring the heat that lingered from her touch. He had vowed not to touch her.

"Perhaps if yer driver paid heed to the road..." Erin started, her words trailing off as she dared not meet his gaze.

"Perhaps ye'll have me line the roads with silks for ye," he snapped, his voice carrying an edge as sharp as a dirk blade.

She flinched, and his gut twisted. He'd sworn never to harm her, in word or deed, yet here he was, using his strength against her. He leaned closer, catching her chin, forcing her to look at him. Her eyes, wide and luminous, held a storm of emotions he couldn't fathom.

"Look at me when I speak to ye," he said.

Her cheeks flushed, and something dark and possessive reared within him before he could suppress it. Magnus released her, breaking the contact as if scorched by flame. His vow was once again broken by unfathomable feelings towards this infuriating lass.

"Forgive me," he rasped, pulling the horse from the carriage to join his brother on the grass beside the road. It was a rough patch of road, and it was easier to ride on the verge, but the center of the road was the only option for a carriage.

Erin remained silent, but her eyes stayed on him—a silent challenge, a whispered promise of the battles to come.

And as nothing but open heathland stretched around them, Magnus realized that whatever lay ahead, Erin Gibson was a force to be reckoned with. The path to their marriage of convenience was fraught with temptation, and the true test of their unlikely alliance was only just beginning.

As the carriage jostled over a particularly rough stretch of road, Erin's stomach let out a forlorn growl, loud enough to be heard over the rattle of wheels and clop of hooves. Beside her carriage, Hayden chuckled, seizing yet another opportunity to strike up a conversation.

"Ye sound like ye've got a wee beastie trapped in there, lass," he teased, his voice a warm timbre against the chilly air seeping through the wooden panels.

Erin shot him a withering glance before turning her gaze to the passing scenery—a blur of greens and browns as the Highland landscape rolled by. "If we speak of beasts, perhaps we should consider the company present," she retorted, flicking an intent look at Magnus who sat across from them, his eyes fixed on the horizon.

Magnus suppressed a smile, the corners of his mouth betraying his amusement over the thinly veiled jab. His brother's attempts at chivalry were always swatted away by Erin as effortlessly as one would shoo a bothersome fly.

"Speaking of which, I'm famished," Erin declared suddenly, shifting her attention to Magnus. "We ought to stop. I havenae had a bite since noon yesterday, thanks to yer

abrupt arrival."

"Stoppin' isnae part of the plan," Magnus replied curtly, his focus never wavering from the path ahead. He could sense the challenge brewing between them—a battle of wills that was becoming all too familiar.

"Is it nae customary to provide sustenance to those ye escort?" Erin pressed, her tone laced with sarcasm. "Or does yer reputation as the Beast of the Highlands extend to withholdin' food from a lady?"

"Ye're hardly a lady," Magnus countered gruffly, the insult slipping out before he could rein it in. Yet, even as the words left his lips, he regretted their harshness. She was indeed a lady, whether he wished to admit it or not—a lady soon to be bound to him by necessity.

"Ah, so the laird admits he's a beast, then?" Erin's eyes sparkled with defiance, but beneath the bravado, Magnus noted the pallor of her skin, the subtle tremor in her hands.

"Enough," he said, his voice softening despite himself. "We'll stop at the next tavern."

True to his word, the carriage lurched to a halt outside a modest establishment, its sign swinging gently in the breeze—the Stag and Thistle. Magnus watched her pale complexion as Erin stepped down onto the cobblestone path. She stumbled slightly, her balance off-kilter from the long ride. For a split second, Magnus reached out, steadying her with a firm grip on her arm.

"Thank ye," she murmured, avoiding his gaze, though a faint blush colored her cheeks.

"Let's get ye some food," he said gruffly, releasing her as quickly as decorum would

allow.

Damn this lass, why cannae I keep from touchin' her?

Inside the tavern, they settled at a sturdy oak table while Hayden flagged down the innkeeper to order. The scent of peat smoke hung heavy in the air, mingling with the aromas of roasted meats and fresh-baked bread. Once the meal was set before Erin—broth thick with barley and root vegetables, accompanied by a hunk of black bread—she ate with a subdued eagerness, her hunger evident in every spoonful.

"Are ye satisfied now?" Magnus asked, his voice a low rumble as he watched her.

"Partially," she said, her tone noncommittal. She met his gaze briefly before looking away, her expression unreadable.

"Ye'll need yer strength," Hayden taunted in good humor. "Being the wife of the Laird McCormack is no easy task."

"Nor is being the husband to Erin Gibson," she shot back, her blue eyes flashing with spirit.

"Is that a threat or a promise, lass?" Magnus asked, a challenge underlying his words.

"Perhaps a bit of both," she retorted.

Magnus leaned back in his chair, studying her. Their marriage, born of convenience and necessity, was proving to be anything but simple. And as Erin matched his stare with her own steely resolve, Magnus felt the unmistakable pull of something deeper than mere obligation.

"Ye better finish yer meal," he said finally, his tone carrying an edge hinting at more

than concern for her well-being.

"Or what? Ye'll force-feed me?" Erin quipped, though her smile wavered, betraying a hint of vulnerability.

"Ye might be surprised at what I'm willing to do," Magnus replied, a dark promise hanging between them as the tension in the room thickened like the gathering storm clouds outside.

"Since when does the great Laird McCormack concern himself with the likes of me?" she challenged, her voice stronger now, even as her heart betrayed her with its erratic beating.

"Since ye became mine to protect," he countered, his words a proclamation that sent an unfamiliar thrill coursing through her.

She ate with a quiet determination, leaving Magnus admiring the strength of her pride and determination. Picturing Scarlett in such a situation brought out his protective nature, but he couldn't deny his respect at Erin's resolve.

"Thank ye," she said curtly, and Magnus had to accept that was all the appreciation his gesture would get.

Magnus merely nodded, a silent acknowledgement passing between them. But her eyes, those deep pools of brown, held a storm within them—a tempest of longing and resistance that mirrored his own inner turmoil.

Erin set aside her empty plate. "There, I'm done," she muttered, eyes cast downward, evading the gaze of the man across from her. The tavern's dim light flickered, casting shadows that danced upon the walls, mirroring the silent ballet of avoidance she played.

"I daenae like to repeat myself, lass. Ye will look at me when ye speak," Magnus commanded, his voice low and gruff, betraying his annoyance. His large hand reached across the table, fingers gently but firmly grasping her chin, tilting her face upward to meet his stormy eyes. Erin's breath hitched, heat flooding her cheeks as an involuntary shiver coursed through her.

"Ye are to be me wife," he reminded her, his touch igniting a tumultuous mix of fear and unbidden desire within her. "It is nae fitting for ye to avert yer eyes as though ye were ashamed."

The intensity in his eyes held her captive; there was a ferocity there, a wildness akin to the untamed Scottish moors that both terrified and drew her in. Erin's heart pounded against her ribcage, a trapped bird yearning for escape yet mesmerized by the very thing that ensnared it.

"Ye ken who I am, Erin. And whether ye like it or nae, ye will respect me." Magnus's voice softened, just slightly, but the order remained clear, brooking no argument.

For a moment, something dark flickered behind his eyes, a glimpse of the tormented soul she'd heard whispers about—a beast of a man scarred by battles unseen. Yet she could not look away, caught in the gravity of their shared destiny.

Magnus released her, withdrawing his touch as if scorched by the contact. Erin's skin tingled where his fingers had been, a silent testament to the vow he had broken, to the barrier he had crossed without permission.

"Forgive me," he said, almost inaudibly, the words laced with a strange remorse. But before Erin could decipher the meaning behind them, he stood abruptly, tossing a few coins onto the table for their meal.

"Come, we must continue our journey." His command echoed through the now nearly

empty tavern, leaving no room for debate.

As he escorted Erin back to the waiting carriage, his hand rose to her back. Its aim was to innocently guide her through the crowded place, but he withdrew it, biting into his lip as a harsh reminder of the vow he had made not to touch this lady.

The vow that was becoming increasingly harder to keep.

“A m I lookin’ at ye enough?” Erin kept her eyes fixed on Magnus, but was it really obedience that had her fixed on his features? There had to be more to the man than she had seen. This kindness and attention had to be an act, but when he showed his cruel nature as Lord Cramshire had, she would be ready. She would not be kept captive by such a man again. Erin’s fingers curled into fists at her sides as she sat stiffly in the jolting carriage, the rough wool of her skirt scratching against her skin. The heavy, brooding presence of Magnus Black, the beast of a man to whom she was betrothed, loomed outside, leading their small procession through the rugged Scottish highlands. His very silhouette against the grey sky was like a dark omen, his broad shoulders casting shadows that danced eerily with each flash of lightning on the horizon.

"Ye seem awfully quiet, lass," Hayden's voice cut through her brooding thoughts, a stark contrast to the storm brewing outside.

Erin forced her gaze from the window and turned it upon Magnus’ younger brother. Hayden’s charming smile disarmed her for a moment, and she allowed herself a breath she hadn’t known she’d been holding.

"I'm fine, just weary of travel," she lied smoothly, not wanting to reveal the turmoil within. Her mind, however, was far from idle. In her mind, her memories of Lord Cramshire were replaced with the face of Magnus. But her memories were not true, struggling to give Magnus’ voice to the harsh words she remembered. She was not a child this time, there would be no backing down and cowering with fear. Now she was strong enough to stand up to such a man, and capable of escape.

"Understandable," Hayden nodded, leaning back casually against the leather seat. "But soon ye'll be callin' McCormack Castle yer home. Surely, that's somethin' to look forward to?"

"Indeed," Erin murmured, biting back the bitterness in her tone. She didn't dare glance back at Magnus. She knew he was perceptive—too perceptive. Every time she tried to mask her disdain, she felt his penetrating gaze stripping her defenses bare as if he could see straight through to her rebellious heart.

"Ye daenae fancy me brother much, do ye?" Hayden observed, his voice low enough so only she could hear.

"Yer brother is...complex," she replied diplomatically, though her heart raced at the thought of being so transparent.

"Complex," Hayden chuckled, shaking his head. "That's one way to put it."

The carriage hit a rut in the road, jostling them both. Erin's hands flew to the sides to steady herself.

"Easy there," he said with a wink, his hand meeting hers where it gripped the carriage frame.

"Thank ye," she said curtly, snatching her hand away.

"Ye ken, Magnus isnae all bad," Hayden continued, seemingly unfazed by her coldness. "He might seem like a brute, but he's fiercely loyal to those he cares about. Give him time and he'll care for ye, too. This weddin' is as much a surprise to him as it is to ye."

"Perhaps," Erin conceded, though she couldn't imagine such warmth beneath his icy

exterior. But as they conversed, her strategic mind plotted. She couldn't run from this arrangement without bringing Magnus' wrath down on her family, and she would not wish to cause them any suffering. But if she married Magnus, it would tie her fate to his and free her family from any responsibility should she decide to flee. Then, she could run away, and Magnus would not blame her family. As long as he had the alliance, Erin doubted he would even care to look for her.

"I mean, it's quite a surprise to me, too. I never imagined me brother taking a wife." Hayden's aimless chatter filled her ears as her mind plotted on darker thoughts. The road home was straight enough; if she didn't dally with her plan to leave after the wedding, she was certain she would recall the way home.

As they rode on, the distant thunder rolled closer, mirroring the storm of emotions within Erin. She would need to bide her time and play the obedient bride until she could find her moment to vanish like the mist over the moors.

"Looks like we're in for quite the storm," Hayden noted, glancing out at the increasingly turbulent sky.

"Seems fitting," Erin muttered, her eyes narrowing as she contemplated the gathering clouds. Her resolve hardened like the ancient stones of the highland castles, and she determined she would not let this marriage cage her spirit. But first, she had to survive the journey... and whatever trials lay ahead at Magnus Black's formidable hands.

Erin's fingers danced along the cool wooden edge of the carriage window, tracing the intricate carvings that were supposed to represent luxury but now felt more like the bars of a gilded cage. As the rolling hills of the Scottish highlands unfolded before her, a tumultuous blend of anger and shame churned within her. She needed to be strong and resistant to the Laird's overbearing presence, to his piercing gaze that seemed to unravel her very being. Yet, here she was, her heart betraying her with its

insistent pounding as if echoing the hooves of the horses, drawing them ever closer to a destiny she neither desired nor could escape. But as Magnus filled her thoughts, she was beginning to question what she actually wanted.

"Maybe I shouldnae care," she whispered to herself, the words lost amidst the creaking of the carriage wheels and the distant call of a hawk. The thought of fleeing after the wedding gnawed at her—Magnus would then bear the burden of finding her, and her family would be spared from any further obligations. A plan began to form, delicate and dangerous like thistledown caught in the wind.

"Erin," Hayden said, snapping her attention back inside the carriage. "Ye'll see, life at McCormack isnae so dreich."

"Perhaps for some," she replied tersely, her eyes narrowing slightly.

Then, Magnus's commanding voice cut through the air. "Hayden!"

Erin watched Hayden stiffen, his usual charm momentarily slipping away like mist on the loch. Curiosity pricked at her like briars; what could unsettle such a man? The carriage rolled to an abrupt halt, and Erin seized upon the opportunity to stretch her legs and sate her curiosity.

"Stay put, lass!" Hayden called out, but Erin was already stepping onto the damp earth, her boots sinking into the soft ground. She rounded the carriage to behold the cause of their delay—a once sturdy bridge now lay in ruins, its broken remnants succumbing to the relentless push of the river below.

"Back to the carriage, lassie," Magnus ordered, the deep timbre of his voice sending an involuntary shiver down her spine.

She turned to face him, meeting his troubled gaze with a defiant tilt of her chin. "And

leave ye to deal with this alone? I think nae."

"Ye have no place here," he growled, the muscle in his jaw clenching.

"Yet here I am," she retorted, her own stubbornness flaring as brightly as the violent storm thundering across the distant sky.

"Enough! Get back in the carriage at once," Magnus ordered, and despite her fierce independent streak, Erin found herself obeying. The weight of his stare urged her back toward the safety of the carriage. Yet, as she retreated, she couldn't shake the feeling that there was far more lurking beneath Magnus's stoic facade than she'd first assumed.

"Ye're scared of him, aren't ye?" Hayden observed quietly, holding the carriage door wide for her to climb inside.

"Scared?" Erin scoffed, though the flutter in her chest betrayed her bravado. "I'm only bidin' me time until I can slip away."

"Ye might find yerself surprised by what ye discover if ye stay," Hayden mused, his eyes glinting with something akin to mischief.

"Surprised or nae, it changes nothin'," Erin snapped, her gaze fixed on the landscape whirling past as they detoured the collapsed bridge. The thought of escape never left her mind, but so too did an inkling of curiosity about the enigmatic Laird McCormack. Curiosity was dangerous, especially when it clawed at the edges of a heart determined to remain closed.

"Just give him time. Ye havenae seen him at his best. I can assure ye, that it is a slight improvement on what ye see before ye." Hayden closed the door behind her and promptly strode away.

Erin had to admit his situation was unusual. Flynn was just as grouchy when accompanying her and her sisters across the countryside, but he had good reason to, with their previous capture on his mind. She was certain Magnus had no such concerns.

"We will go around. The next bridge will put no more than an hour or two on our journey." Magnus addressed the whole party with his words, but his eyes fixed on Erin. She felt obliged to nod her understanding, even if her still muscles protested at the idea of spending even one more hour confined within the carriage.

Their journey resumed, now heading towards the distant rain clouds. It was chilling to observe the party of riders travelling closer to the carriage now, and Erin couldn't help the chills that ran up her spine.

She had been taken from her parents at the tender age of nine, and the details of that day were lost, forgotten along with much of her childhood before that day. But she remembered endless days of captivity within the English castle. She had learnt the true meaning of cruelty from Lord Cramshire's harsh hand and bitter mind.

Each story Maeve and Ayda told her of her true home reminded her that she was a stranger in the castle that held her. McCormack Castle was beginning to feel like the same place. She began to wonder if she was truly strong enough.

The carriage bumped along the uneven path, each jolt a reminder of the perilous road ahead. As the skies darkened, Erin felt the simmering tension between her and the laird intensify, crackling in the space between them like the promise of a storm.

"Will we reach McCormack castle by nightfall?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"We shall be home by supper; have no fear." Magnus huffed, turning his horse away

from the window of her carriage. He no longer gazed at her on their journey but kept his eyes cast on the horizon. Erin missed the weight of his stare, even if it was harsh and cold.

The detour led them through a dense thicket, an unfamiliar route fraught with uncertainty. Erin sat rigidly within the confines of the carriage, her mind a tumult of escape plans and the memory of Hayden's taut expression when Magnus had spoken. The air was thick with the scent of moist earth and pine, a stark reminder of the wildness surrounding them. It was unfamiliar and unsettling.

Suddenly, the serenity of their journey shattered like glass upon stone. Masked brigands emerged from the shadows of the trees, their intentions clear as steel glinted in the waning light. Magnus and his clansmen met the bandits head-on. Shouts rang out, and the clash of swords was terrifying. Erin's heart pounded in her chest, a frantic drum against the cage of her ribs. She ducked down, seeking refuge amongst the carriage's plush interior, her mind reeling back to the years of captivity that had once defined her existence.

Erin's breath caught in her throat as the brute of a man wrenched open the door, his leering face a grotesque mask of malice. She recoiled instinctively, her hand scrabbling for a weapon amidst the cushions of the carriage. But before she could react, he was upon her, grasping at her with filthy hands.

"Let go of me!" she cried out, struggling against his grip.

The man only laughed, his fetid breath hot against her face. "Well, well," he sneered, "what do we have here? A wee lassie all alone and ripe for plucking."

Erin's heart pounded in her chest as she frantically tried to break free. But it was no use—she was no match for the man's brute strength.

And as he tightened his hold on her, she knew that this was how it would end—captured and at the mercy of men who sought to use and abuse her. Fears of being dragged off flooded her mind. To live with Magnus was nothing compared to the fear of what fate awaited her in the clutches of these men. At least McCormack Castle was within a day's ride of O'Kane and her mother. But to spend her days lost to her family once again would be unbearable.

But then a fierce roar echoed through the Moore as Magnus Black charged forward like a warrior possessed. Her attacker stumbled backwards in surprise, loosening his grip on Erin just enough for her to wriggle free. She stumbled out of the carriage and into Magnus' arms, grateful for his protection and strength.

"Stay behind me," Magnus commanded his voice a guttural growl, before turning to meet the onslaught.

"Thank ye," she whispered to Magnus as they returned to the carriage. Her heart was full of gratitude and relief.

Erin trembling with fear, but also from the helpless fury that clawed at her insides. Magnus and his clansmen surrounded her, fighting back the strangers around them. She was no wilting flower, yet circumstance forced her into the role time and again. Her gaze followed Magnus as he moved like an avenging specter among the attackers, each swing of his blade an extension of his wrath.

When the ordeal ended, silence fell upon the clearing. Magnus's men attended to the wounded, their curses a low undertone to the pained groans of the injured.

"Are ye hurt?" Magnus questioned her, his hands upon her shoulders, turning her body as he searched for signs of harm.

"Nay." Erin's rejection of his touch didn't reach her lips, her gratitude towards him

kept her quite.

“Are ye sure? Are Ye unharmed? Untouched?” Magnus insisted.

“I am quite well, thank ye.” Erin affirmed. Her glance at her shoulder drew Magnus’ attention to his touch and he instantly released her. “Are ye okay?”

Magnus was covered in the crimson evidence of a battle, he signaled for the party to move on down the river to a spot where the bank widened into a shallow alcove, which would have been a lovely spot for a picnic in very different circumstances.

Erin watched as Magnus stood at the water's edge, washing away the blood from his hands. His presence was as formidable as the mountains that cradled the horizon, and she hesitated only a moment before approaching him.

"Thank ye... for protecting me," she said, her voice betraying none of the chaos that roiled within.

He didn't turn to acknowledge her, his focus solely on the task at hand. "Hmph," was all he offered, a grunt that spoke volumes of his desire to remain detached.

"Great! Me husband-to-be hates talking to me," Erin muttered under her breath, her patience fraying like worn tartan.

The silence stretched between them, taut as a bowstring. She yearned to pierce it with barbed words to provoke some reaction from the stoic laird. Yet she held her tongue, knowing it would bring more frustration.

Magnus stripped his top, stretching out his left shoulder as though it pained him. When he turned, Erin gasped at the sight of blood trickling from a small wound. He had turned his back on the fighting to save her from the man in the carriage, and the

guilt from that fact encouraged her forward.

"Allow me to dress that for ye," she offered,

"Nay, lass. Keep yer distance." Magnus snapped. "Daenae need yer touching me. Hayden can do it."

Erin stepped back with her hands folded tightly across her chest. She was perfectly capable of dressing a man's wound, even if her thoughts urged her to touch more than a simple dressing would require. "And why is it inappropriate for a woman to tend to her would-be-husband? Or are we no longer to be married?"

It may have been inappropriate in the eyes of Lord Cramshire, but Magnus was no Englishman. He surely did not live by such rigid rules?

Perhaps he had decided a wife was more trouble than she was worth. "Send me home, and ye shall still have yer alliance with me brother."

"Hush, lass." Magnus waved her off, flinching as Hayden's unskilled hands dressed the wound to his shoulder. "I will nae be touching ye, so ye cannae be touching me. So I say again, Hayden can do it."

"Why?" she insisted, but Magnus offered her no further explanation, simply allowing Hayden closer.

"Ye think silence makes ye strong, Laird McCormack?" she taunted, standing just out of reach on the water's edge. "Or are ye simply too afraid to speak yer mind?"

His eyes flickered to her, steely and unamused. "I speak when there's something worth saying. Unlike some who prattle on like a brook in spring thaw."

Stung, Erin spun on her heel, her pride smarting more than she cared to admit. A misplaced step sent her stumbling. Without warning, she suddenly plunged into the ice-cold water of the river, screaming as her head submerged beneath the surface.

The cold water swallowed her momentarily before she regained enough awareness to sit up in the shallow water. Further up by the horses, several of the clansmen spluttered to hold their amusement at her plight as if falling was not embarrassing enough.

"Damnation," she muttered, gathering her skirts in an attempt to stand.

"Careful now," Magnus' voice rumbled near her ear as he extended a hand. Reluctantly, she grasped it, feeling the strength in his fingers pulling her effortlessly to her feet. For a moment, they stood close, her blue eyes locked onto his dark ones, a silent acknowledgement passing between them before she quickly averted her gaze.

"Thank ye," she mumbled, cheeks flaming not just from the cold.

"Let's get ye back in the carriage before ye catch yer death," he said gruffly, turning away to hide any concern that might have shown.

"Mind yerself, brother!" Hayden's voice cut through the air as they returned to the waiting men and horses. "Ye took quite the beating back there. Ye should ride in the carriage, rest a bit."

"Rest is for the weak," Magnus scoffed, though the strain of battle had etched lines of fatigue on his face.

"Ye ken as well as I that yer stubbornness serves no one," Hayden persisted, sharing a

knowing glance with Erin.

Erin glared at the back of Magnus' head, silently willing him to capitulate. To her surprise, after a drawn-out pause filled with the tension of unsaid words, Magnus relented with a curt nod.

"Fine," he grunted, grimacing as he climbed into the carriage. The space inside suddenly felt smaller, charged with an unspoken challenge.

As the carriage lurched forward, Erin huddled into her corner, watching Magnus from beneath lowered lashes. Despite his earlier words, his jaw clenched against the pain, betraying the effort it cost him to admit even this tacit vulnerability.

"Stubborn oaf," she whispered under her breath, though a part of her begrudgingly admired his resilience, but she couldn't deny his presence in the carriage did bring her some comfort against the risk of another ambush.

"Ye daenae need to keep such distance, lass," Magnus finally broke the silence, his voice low and strangely gentle against the rattle of the journey. "We're bound by circumstance if nothing else."

"Bound by circumstance," she echoed, her mind racing. But what would happen when those bonds were tested when she made her escape?

Erin caught a glimpse of something in Magnus' eyes—a hint of something deeper, more complex. And in that fleeting moment, she wondered if the beastly laird before her might indeed possess a beauty yet unseen. The thought startled her, leaving her breathless as the carriage trundled on towards McCormack Castle. Erin huddled in the corner, her garments clinging coldly to her skin. She shivered, wrapping her arms about herself in an attempt to retain what little warmth she could muster.

A sudden jolt sent Erin lurching sideways, and for a moment, her eyes met Magnus's. Her breath caught at the intensity of his gaze as it travelled over her, taking in her soaked condition.

"Ye'll catch yer death in these wet clothes," he said gruffly, breaking eye contact as if the sight of her discomfort displeased him.

Erin managed a tight-lipped smile. "I've endured worse than a Scottish chill."

"Stubborn lass," he muttered, almost to himself. But then, as her shivering grew more pronounced, a begrudging concern creased his brow. "Come here."

"Excuse me?" Erin's voice was a mix of defiance and incredulity.

"Ye heard me. Come sit between me legs. We need to share body heat, or ye'll freeze before we reach the castle." His tone was firm, yet it wasn't harsh. If anything, it was tinged with something akin to... consideration?

Erin hesitated, battling the instinct to remain distant and the undeniable logic in his words. Ultimately, the bone-deep cold won, sapping the fight from her. With a reluctant nod, she moved across the carriage, taking the offered spot between his outstretched legs.

The wall of heat emanating from Magnus's body enveloped her immediately. It was disconcerting, this forced intimacy, and she tensed, unsure where to place her hands.

"Relax," he commanded gently, and Erin felt his strong arms encircle her waist, the warmth of his breath on her neck as he pulled her back against his chest. "I willnae touch ye."

"Never thought I'd be thankful for a man's overbearing nature," she murmured,

allowing herself a small, involuntary lean into his solid form.

"Nor I that I'd be warming a willful lass who'd sooner swim in rivers than accept help," Magnus retorted, a hint of amusement in his voice.

As the carriage swayed, the warmth from Magnus's body seeped into her, easing the chills that had racked her frame. For a fleeting moment, Erin allowed herself the dangerous luxury of feeling safe, protected even.

Erin shifted her weight, trying to find a notch of comfort against the hard wooden seat without dislodging the heavy arm encircling her waist. The wool of Magnus's plaid was rough against her cheek, but the heat emanating from his towering frame was a balm to the chill that had taken residence in her bones. She chased the heat, leaning back into the man's thick frame. Her legs braced her body as her hips pushed back against him. Each time she shifted, Magnus released a huff of air. It was not a sound made in pain, but it was a groan none-the-less. Enjoying the warm exhale of breath against her neck, Erin repeated the movement that caused him this reaction.

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"Be still, lass," came the low grumble from above her, vibrating through her skull where it rested just below his collarbone. His tone was softer, more of a plea than to chastise her, a comforting sound that made Erin melt into him more. To her startlement, his hands found purchase on her hips, large fingers curling with an unspoken command for her to cease her fidgeting. Erin momentarily tensed, her breath catching in her throat as she absorbed the unexpected contact. This man, this imposing beast of a Highlander who had sworn he would never lay hands upon her, seemed to be doing a poor job of keeping his promise. And she wanted more of it.

Magnus's grip was firm yet not unkind, and despite the prideful voice in her head scolding her for the weakness, Erin couldn't deny the odd sense of security that his

touch afforded. He wasn't touching her to keep her balance; his touch was too soft for that. His hands remained on her hips now because neither of them wanted him to move them. For one wayward moment, she wondered what it would be like if circumstances were different—if they were bound by desire rather than duty. What if she could love a Highlander?

The carriage jolted over a stone, snapping her out of her musings and pushing her hips back into his pelvis. His moan of protest was certainly warming her inside.

"Good heavens, lass. Can ye nae be still." He spoke through clenched teeth, reminding her that any softness found in Magnus Black's arms was likely more accidental than intentional. Yet she could not shake the thought that, for all his stoicism, there might just be a sliver of warmth hidden beneath the layers of scars and cold authority.

"Ye should ken better than to move about. We're almost home," Magnus murmured, his tone wrapping around the words like a cloak, with a hint of kindness. Erin felt a shiver that had nothing to do with the cold.

"Home," she echoed, the word foreign on her tongue. McCormack castle was not home, not yet, and perhaps never truly would be. But as the formidable stronghold came into view, perched atop a craggy hill with its battlements cutting a stark line against the dusk sky, Erin couldn't help the flutter of something akin to excitement in her chest.

Coming home to O'Kane Castle after six years held in an English fortress, the thrill of exploring a true highland castle had thrilled her. She had spent days upon end exploring every nook and cranny of her home, and for the first time since first running into Magnus, she had the same warm feelings about her new home. It didn't look as dark and terrible as she had expected. Just like O'Kane Castle, it felt warm and happy. Maybe she wouldn't be terribly unhappy exploring McCormack Castle

while she planned her escape.

"Ye'll be safe there," Magnus continued; his voice a low thrum that seemed to resonate with the carriage's walls. Ye have me word."

"Yer word," she said softly, pondering the weight of those three syllables. He gave his word readily enough, but could the word of a man who had been sculpted by betrayal and violence be trusted? A man who held her fate in his scarred hands?

As the carriage rolled under the portcullis, the clatter of hooves echoing off the stone, Erin cast a sidelong glance at the laird beside her. His gaze was fixed ahead, jaw set, a silent sentinel guiding her into the unknown. His profile was all harsh lines and shadows in the deepening gloom—a beauty carved from darkness and necessity.

"Thank ye," she breathed, unsure if the gratitude was for his protection or simply for the ending of their journey.

Magnus's only response was a tightening of his hold, a silent assertion of his presence. And then, just as quickly, he released her, pushing away the thoughts that dared to cloud his focus. Erin watched him, a mix of relief and confusion swirling within her as he retreated behind his impenetrable facade once more.

"Get ready," he said, his voice echoing the steel of his armor. "We've arrived."

The carriage ground to a halt, the door swung open, and Erin peered out into the torchlit courtyard of McCormack castle, heart hammering against her ribs. She was about to step into her future, whatever it may hold, and as she glanced back at Magnus, she knew that no matter how fiercely she might wish to deny it, he was an integral part of that future now. Her hand reached for his, longing to keep the contact with his body that she had enjoyed on their journey. But it wasn't just his warmth that her treacherous mind longed for. His arms had made her feel wanted, and it was a

feeling she wasn't keen to let go of.

"Brother," Scarlett called out, her voice cutting through the distance, laced with a bluntness that often caught courtiers off-guard.

Magnus released a heavy sigh. Arriving home should bring him the usual sense of relief, but this time it felt different. He wasn't ready to release Erin from his lap and face the burden of responsibility that lay ahead of him.

Erin was warm now and sitting peacefully, but he didn't dare loosen his hands from her hips, he wasn't ready to lose the closeness of her presence now he had it.

He was never one for patience. It was a trait honed through years of defending his title and land. But this woman, this fiercely independent lass, tested him beyond measure. She was slowly driving him mad with her sharp tongue and piercing blue eyes that saw too much. To be bound to her in marriage... It was a convenience he required, but intimacy was a vulnerability he could not afford.

"Scarlett," Magnus acknowledged with a curt nod, his tone betraying none of the turmoil that brewed within him. The familiarity of home did little to ease the weight of leadership that rested upon his broad shoulders.

He climbed down from the carriage, landing with the assured grace of a predator. He was skilled when it came to hiding how much his body pained him at times. His gaze lingered on Erin for a moment too long, her own steely gaze challenging him. It was a dance as old as time, the push and pull of two forces destined to collide. Aye, she tested him, but there was no denying the strange pull she had over him—an allure that

was as intoxicating as it was dangerous.

"Welcome to yer new home, Lady Gibson," Scarlett said, extending a hand to help Erin climb out behind Magnus without losing the plaid she held wrapped around her.

"Thank ye, Miss Black," Erin replied, her voice carrying a note of sarcasm that Magnus couldn't miss. "It is as grand as I imagined."

The words hung between them, fraught with an unspoken tension that Magnus knew all too well. It was the sound of a looming storm, the quiet before the thunder. He needed to get away from her, to clear his head of the steamy thoughts that threatened to consume him.

Magnus watched with a guarded expression as Scarlett enveloped Erin in a warm embrace, their reunion a stark contrast to the cold stone walls of the ancient castle. The sound of their laughter danced in the drafty hall, and he found himself begrudgingly pleased that the two women were getting along.

"Ye must be weary from the journey," Scarlett said, her fiery hair catching the flicker of torchlight. "Let me show ye around our home, Erin."

"Home," Erin echoed, a hint of irony in her voice as she glanced Magnus's way. "Aye, a tour would be most... enlightening."

"Scarlett," Magnus interjected, his tone brooking no argument, "I've matters to attend to." He turned slightly toward Erin, catching the glimmer of challenge in her blue eyes. "More important than playing the gracious host. I trust ye will find Scarlett a suitable replacement for me company"

"Of course," Erin retorted with an infuriating and enticing curl of her lip, "ye wouldn't want to neglect yer duties for mere pleasantries."

His resolve wavered under the intensity of her gaze, but it was the sight of her still-dampened clothes clinging to her curves that undid him. With an inward curse at his lack of control, he addressed Scarlett, his voice more gruff than intended. "See to it that she changes into dry garments first. She'll catch her death in this chill."

Erin's cheeks flushed a deep shade of rose, and Magnus felt a peculiar twist in his gut at the sight. Averting his gaze, he wrestled with the unfamiliar sensation clawing at him—concern, perhaps, or something far more dangerous?

"Come, lass," Scarlett urged, oblivious to the silent battle between Erin and her brother. "We'll find ye something fitting for the future lady of this keep."

"Future lady," Erin muttered under her breath as she allowed Scarlett to lead her away, the words hanging in the air like an unspoken vow.

"Scarlett, see to it that the lass is comfortable, yer lady's maid can tend to her needs until we can find someone suitable to tend to Erin," he commanded, turning on his heel without waiting for a response. His boots echoed hollowly against the cobblestones as he strode away, leaving the two women behind.

With every step he took toward the council chamber, he felt the taut string of control fraying. The upcoming council meeting loomed in his mind, but so did the image of Erin, with her defiant spirit and the curve of her lips.

No, he chided himself, shaking off the unwelcome intrusion. There were more important matters at hand. He must focus on the destroyed bridge, the lifeline of their trade, and the implications of his impending nuptials. His future with Erin was a strategic move, nothing more; he would do well to remember that.

But as Magnus approached the council chamber, where decisions of war and peace were made, he knew deep down that his greatest battle wasn't against coups or

dissension within his ranks—it was against the desire for the woman who was now part of his destiny.

And as the heavy doors of the chamber closed behind him with a resounding thud, sealing him in with his fate, he could not shake the feeling that Erin Gibson was a storm he might never weather.

"Me laird, ye have returned with a lady. How was yer travels?" Caelan hurried to his side, an eager look on his face.

"Nae as excitin' as yer imagine." Magnus sighed. "I need to speak with the council."

"Yes, me laird. I'll summon them at once."

When Caelan said he would do something at once, he always delivered. By the time Magnus had freshened himself up and had a proper dressing placed over his shoulder wound, the first councilmen were arriving at his gates. Turning on his heel, he made for the council chamber, each step heavy with the weight of his thoughts. Yet even as he sought to distance himself from her, he could not escape the image of Erin—fierce and independent—nor the feeling that whatever storm she brought with her might just be worth enduring.

Magnus strode through the dimly lit corridor, his boots echoing off the stone walls, a reminder of the fortress that had withstood countless sieges. His mind, however, betrayed him, besieged by thoughts unbecoming of a laird. Images of Erin, her gown clinging to her curves like morning dew on heather, tormented his senses. He could almost feel the warmth of her skin against his roughened hands, the softness of her hair tangled between his fingers.

"Get a hold of yerself, man," he muttered, shaking his head as if to dispel the visions that threatened to undo him. It was not lust that gnawed at him, but something

deeper—a connection he couldn't afford to explore. Not yet.

The council chamber awaited, the air thick with the scent of peat and the mustiness of old parchment. Around the long oak table, his trusted advisers would expect a leader, not a lovestruck fool. The matters at hand were crucial—the safety of his people, the prosperity of his lands. No distractions could be permitted.

"Ye're the Laird of McCormack, Magnus Black," he reminded himself, his voice a low growl lost in the shadows. "Act like it."

His hand reached for the door, the heavy wood carved with the legends of his ancestors, battles fought and alliances forged. With a deep breath, he pushed it open, stepping into the candlelit room where the future of his clan would be decided.

"Let's begin," he announced, his tone leaving no room for argument. But even as he took his seat at the head of the table, ready to command, the image of Erin, fierce and defiant, lingered in his mind, a silent challenge to the walls he had built around his heart.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he greeted, eyes scanning over the faces of his councilmen, all clad in their clan tartan. They nodded and murmured their respects, but there was a tightness in the air, a sense of anticipation that had nothing to do with pleasantries.

"Let us waste no time," Magnus began, clasping his hands behind his back as he paced before the hearth where logs crackled fiercely. "Our bridge to the north has fallen. 'Tis no small matter, for trade routes have been severed, and our coffers will feel its absence."

Murmurs rose around the table, the men exchanging worried glances. It was not only a bridge of stone and wood that had collapsed but also a lifeline that connected them

to the other clans and to prosperity.

"Plans must be laid for reconstruction," he continued, "and swiftly. Winter's breath is upon us, and we cannot afford isolation when the snows come."

"Indeed, Laird McCormack," one elder councilman agreed, his voice grave with the weight of their shared concern.

"However," Magnus added, pausing to let his gaze linger on each man, ensuring he had their full attention, "there is another matter. I am to wed Erin O'Kane."

For a moment, the chamber was still, as if the very stones held their breath. Then, like the warm rush of spring thawing frozen earth, smiles broke across the faces of his councilmen.

"Congratulations, Laird McCormack! That is most welcome news," another exclaimed, and several voices echoed the sentiment. Erin O'Kane, by name alone conjured images of strengthened alliances and tighter ties between clans.

"Thank ye," Magnus replied, inclining his head. He could almost feel Erin's presence beside him, her independence like a beacon that outshone the dim candlelight. The thought of her, stubborn and unwavering, shouldered its way into his mind, stirring a mix of admiration and exasperation within him.

"Her kinship ties are valuable," an astute councilman noted, the corners of his eyes crinkling with approval. "The O'Kanes are well-regarded, and their daughters married to powerful lairds."

"True," Magnus conceded, a flicker of pride swelling in his chest at the strategic match, "but more than that, she is..." Strong. Defiant. More than a mere pawn in a game of alliances. He swallowed down the words, knowing they were thoughts for

him alone.

"Will there be a feast, me laird?" asked a younger member, ever eager for celebration.

"Aye," Magnus answered curtly, his tone brooking no further discussion. "But first, we rebuild. For without strength at home, what good are alliances abroad?"

Nods of agreement rippled around the table, the matter settled for now. Yet, as Magnus watched his councilmen turn their minds to logistics and labor, a sliver of unease lodged in his throat. The bridge would be mended, but the chasm that lay between him and his betrothed—could such a thing ever truly be bridged?

"Meeting adjourned," he declared, his voice echoing off the high stone walls.

"Before we go, we must speak of the coup." Reggie Hogg's voice cut through the silence that had fallen after the other councilmen had expressed their support. His sharp eyes, like flint striking steel, sparked with disapproval.

"There is no coup, Mr. Hogg, I assure ye."

"Ye cannae dismiss the signs, Laird McCormack"

Magnus turned slowly to face him, his expression as stoic as the ancient walls surrounding them, yet a storm was brewing inside. "And what signs would those be, Councilman?" he asked, his voice a low rumble of forced calm.

"First the fire in yer food store, and now the bridge washed away." Reggie leaned forward, his gnarled hands planted firmly on the oak table. "The same ill omens we saw before the coup against yer faither."

A murmur of assent rippled among the remaining council members, the superstitious

undercurrent of their culture as ever-present as the mist upon the moors.

"Times are different," Magnus replied curtly, though his mind raced with the unwanted memories of bloodshed and betrayal that had marked his youth.

"Are they?" Reggie pressed on, emboldened. "Now we hear ye intend to wed the English lass. Erin O'Kane may have Scottish blood, but her ties to England could bring more distress to our people."

Magnus felt the weight of Reggie's words like a gauntlet thrown at his feet. The O'Kane alliance was strategic and necessary, but the councilman's pointed reminder of Erin's English connections was a barb that found its mark.

"Erin Gibson is no English lass," Magnus bit back, the image of her defiant gaze flashing before his eyes. "She is strong, capable?—"

"Capable of stirring unrest," Reggie interrupted, his tone dripping with disdain.

"Erin Gibson will become me wife," Magnus continued, his voice steady and authoritative, "and she will stand by me side as we strengthen these lands and protect our people."

Magnus stood, his broad shoulders casting a long shadow across the stone floor of the council chamber. His jaw clenched as he glowered at Reggie, the fire from the torches flickering in his deep brown eyes. The air was thick with tension, each man's breath held as if bracing for the clash of swords.

"Ye seem to forget," Magnus's voice boomed, cutting through the silence like a blade, "the alliances forged with the O'Kane lass are nae small matter. Her kin are wed to some of the mightiest Lairds across these lands."

The councilmen around the table nodded their agreement, their faces etched with concern but also understanding. They knew the weight of such connections. All save for one.

"Even so," Reggie persisted, his tone dripping with disdain, "bringing an English-tied lass into our midst could stir unrest among the clans. Have ye considered?—"

"Considered?" Magnus interrupted, his laconic reply sharp as a whip. "I've done more than consider, Reggie. I've decided. And me word is law here."

Reggie's mouth snapped shut, his eyes narrowing further, if that were possible. But Magnus was undeterred. The memory of Erin's defiant gaze flashed before him, her spirit as untamed as the windswept moors, and it steeled his resolve. "But—"

"Enough," Magnus commanded, slamming his fist onto the table, making the heavy wood shudder. He would not allow fearmongering to dictate his decisions nor let this cantankerous old man cast doubt upon his judgment.

The room fell silent, all eyes on their laird as the echoes of his declaration faded against the stone. Reggie's mouth twisted into a bitter line, but he held his tongue, knowing he had pushed the boundaries of his station.

The finality in his tone left no room for further argument. With a curt nod, he dismissed the council, leaving no doubt that the matter was closed. As the men filed out, each lost in their own thoughts, Reggie lingered, his eyes narrowed in contemplation—or perhaps calculation.

The room fell silent, the other men sensing the finality in their Laird's words. Reggie looked as though he had swallowed sour ale, his lips pressed into a thin line. But it was clear the argument was over.

"Are we clear on this matter?" Magnus demanded, his presence commanding attention.

One by one, heads bowed, murmurs of assent filled the chamber. All except Reggie, whose pride seemed to grapple with the need to yield. Finally, with a curt nod, even he conceded.

"Good." Magnus's tone left no room for further debate. He turned on his heel, his mind already racing with the preparations needed for the impending nuptials.

As he strode out of the chamber, the echo of his footsteps mingled with whispers of ancient traditions and the upcoming wedding ceremony. Would the Highland spirits bless this union, or would old grudges lead to new battles?

In his private quarters, Magnus poured himself a dram of whisky, the peaty aroma a brief comfort. He thought of Erin again, her hair as fiery as her temperament. Their chemistry was undeniable, even in their banter and bickering, there was a pull he could not ignore.

"Damn it all," he muttered to himself. "How can a woman I barely know consume me thoughts?"

He took a long swig, letting the warmth spread through him, chasing away the chill of the drafty castle. Tomorrow, he would have to face Reggie again, as well as the challenges that come with leading a clan on the brink of change.

But tonight, it was Erin who haunted him—the beauty he was bound to by necessity, yet who felt like both the most considerable risk and the greatest reward of his life.

Magnus set down the empty glass, his thoughts a mix of desire and duty. He had vowed to protect his clan at any cost, but protecting himself from Erin O'Kane might

prove to be the greater battle if he could not keep his promise to remain hands-off. He had vowed not to touch the lass, and that was a promise he was going to keep.

After a restful night in her new room, Erin awoke to a day full of wedding preparations. She watched as Scarlett deftly twisted the wildflowers into a crown, her fiery hair catching the light of the setting sun that filtered through the high windows of the great hall. There was an ease about her, a focus that betrayed none of the reluctance one would expect from a woman who had so vehemently opposed her own match. But Magnus was frustratingly absent.

"Ye've a good hand with those," Erin commented, her voice tinged with genuine admiration and a hint of bemusement.

Scarlett looked up, her lips curling in a subtle smile. "Well, I might not get a husband of me own, but that doesnae mean I cannae appreciate the merriment of preparing for a celebration."

Erin nodded thoughtfully, the warmth growing inside her as she considered the bond they were forming, sisters in all but blood. It was a comfort amid the whirlwind of arrangements and expectations that came with marrying a man like Magnus Black—the Laird McCormack himself.

"Och, but where is yer brother in all this?" Erin couldn't keep the edge out of her voice. "The very man who has demanded this union seems to be the only one absent from the preparations."

"Ah, Magnus has never been one for gatherings unless duty calls him." Scarlett's tone held a hint of regret. "He's got his reasons, though they may not always be clear to

us."

"Reasons or no, he should ken that marrying me for the good of his clan comes with responsibilities beyond the decree itself," Erin muttered, her patience fraying. She plucked a tartan ribbon and began to weave it into her own contribution to the decorations, her fingers moving with less grace as her thoughts tangled like the threads.

"Perhaps he thinks his presence unneeded, given how well ye manage on yer own," Scarlett suggested, watching Erin with observant eyes. "Ye are quite the force, Erin Gibson."

"Flattery will get ye nowhere," Erin quipped, allowing herself a brief smile. But the smile didn't reach her eyes, which remained clouded with frustration. The deep-seated annoyance at Magnus's absence gnawed at her. Here she was, thrust into the heart of his domain, expected to become the lady of a clan whose laird viewed her as nothing more than a chess piece in his game of strategy and survival.

"His absence speaks volumes, Scarlett. It suggests a lack of respect—a presumption that I am naught but a silent participant in this farce of a marriage." Erin's voice was low, laced with defiance.

"Ye are anything but silent." Scarlett chuckled, but the sound lacked its usual cheer.

"Indeed," Erin agreed, the fire in her belly igniting. "And if Magnus believes he can cast me aside until the vows are said, he is sorely mistaken."

The door to the great hall swung open, letting in the cool evening breeze and the distant sound of clinking metal and men's voices raised in training. Erin took a steadying breath, squaring her shoulders as if preparing for battle. Whatever lay ahead, she would face it head-on, with the same fierce independence that had seen her

through darker times.

"Soon we wed," Erin declared, more to herself than to Scarlett. "And Magnus Black will ken that I am his equal, in this and in all things."

Her determination hung in the air, a silent challenge to a man who had built walls around him as formidable as the stone ramparts of his keep. Erin knew that breaking through would require more than sheer will; she would find where this man was hiding, and she would make him endure the wedding preparations with her. Then, when she was ready to flee from his side, he would be glad.

Erin's patience frayed like the hem of her old frock, tugged at by the brambles of neglect. Magnus had become a phantom in his own keep, unseen as a wraith on a summer's eve. The day had trudged on, slow and heavy as a funeral march, each hour stretching longer than the last without so much as a glimpse of the imposing laird.

Dinner arrived, a feast of haggis, neeps, and tatties served amid the boisterous laughter and clinking of tankards that filled the great hall. Yet one seat was glaringly empty, its shadowed vacancy a silent rebuke to Erin's already simmering ire. She turned her gaze from the merry throng to Scarlett, who seemed all too content to discuss bridal wreaths and tartan patterns with Flynn.

"Where is yer brother?" Erin couldn't keep the edge from her voice, the Scottish burr thickening with her growing annoyance. "Does he have no appetite or simply not wish to lay eyes on me?"

"Magnus? Oh, he'll be broodin' in his study, I reckon. Best leave him be; he doesnae take kindly to interruptions." Scarlett cast her fiery locks over her shoulder, a ghost of a smirk playing on her lips. "I assure ye, this is not because of ye."

Scarlett's warning went unheeded stirring Erin's resolve. She pushed back from the

table, her chair scraping against the stone floor with a defiance that echoed in her heart.

"to Well, someone should ensure he eats," she muttered under her breath, feeling the hall's eyes upon her as she made her way to the door with a plate of food gripped in her hand. "Maybe a good meal will improve his manners some."

The corridors were dim, lit only by the flickering flames of wall scones that cast dancing shadows upon the stones. Erin's steps were purposeful, though she knew not where they took her—only that they brought her closer to the source of her vexation.

Erin's determination faltered as the winding passages of the ancient castle seemed to fold in upon themselves, each turn indistinguishable from the last. Her strides slowed, the hem of her dress whispering against the cold stone floor, a soft chorus to her growing frustration. The castle was a labyrinth, and she had no idea where she was.

"Lost, are ye?" The voice cut through her thoughts, as smooth as the whisky that warmed many a night in these Highlands. She turned, finding a man leaning against the wall, a knowing smirk upon his lips.

"Perhaps," Erin conceded, reluctant to admit her predicament to this strange man whose eyes held mischief. "I am searching for the laird's study."

"Ah, then ye have indeed strayed from yer path." He pushed away from the wall, his stride easy as he beckoned her to follow. "Come, I know the way."

She hesitated, following a stranger through the corridors concerned her.

"I am Caelan Ward, me lady, Laird McCormack's man-at-arms, if ye would permit me to guide ye."

"Thank ye." Gratitude mingled with caution as she fell into step beside him. Caelan's charm was effortless, and though he served Magnus, he was respectful and kind towards her.

"Ye seem quite at home in these halls," Erin remarked, watching how the torchlight played across his blond hair.

"Home is where ye make it," he replied, casting her a sidelong glance. "And I've made it me business to know every corner of this place."

She couldn't help but smile. "Then I am in yer debt, Caelan Ward."

"Och, think nothing of it," he said with a dismissive wave. "Though, should ye ever wish to repay me, I wouldnae say no to a dance at the wedding feast."

"Perhaps," Erin teased, feeling an unexpected kinship with this man who navigated the castle with ease.

"If ye would like a tour, I'd be happy to oblige ye. I've picked up a few tricks to help find yer way around."

"Thank ye." The idea appealed to her, for who knew the castle's secrets better than this man.

They arrived at the imposing door of the study, and Caelian bowed slightly, his jesting manner giving way to formality. "Ye'll find the laird within," he said, before turning on his heel and leaving her to face Magnus alone.

With a deep breath, she knocked briskly on the heavy wood, her heart beating a rhythm of war drums in her chest. The door swung open, and there he stood—Magnus Black, the beast of her fate, looking every inch the laird in his

brooding magnificence.

"Erin," he intoned, surprise etching his features for a fleeting moment before his mask of stoicism returned. "What brings ye here?"

"Ye have been avoiding me but ye cannae avoid eating," she groaned inwardly, stepping into the room. "We need to talk about yer skipping meals."

"Talk," he echoed, his tone flat, yet beneath it she sensed a current of something unspoken, an intensity that charged the air between them. She was here to challenge him, and like the rugged Highland terrain, he was wild and untamed.

"Yes, talk," she asserted, her gaze not flinching from his. "It seems the last thing ye want to do, yet here we are."

His expression remained unreadable, but the flicker in his eyes betrayed his curiosity. A storm was indeed brewing, and as the door closed behind her, sealing their fates within the confines of the study, Erin knew that neither would leave unchanged.

Erin squared her shoulders as Magnus leaned back against his desk, a fortress of oak and leather-bound tomes. The lamplight flickered across his face, casting deep shadows that somehow accentuated the rugged lines of his jaw and the untamed mane of dark hair that framed it. His eyes, a stormy grey, held the weight of unspoken thoughts.

"Ye ken, if I am to be the lady of this clan," Erin began, her voice steady despite her heart pounding, "I willnae stand for disrespect."

"Disrespect?" Magnus's brow arched, his question hanging in the air like the strike of a claymore. He crossed his arms, the muscles beneath his shirt tensing. "Who dared to disrespect ye?"

"Yer absence," she said pointedly. "The wedding preparations are underway, yet ye seem to have naught but indifference to show for it. Do ye intend to participate, or must I shoulder the burden alone?"

His lips curled into a humorless smile, though there was no mirth in those turbulent eyes. "Ye think me days should be filled with pickin' tartans and tastin' bannocks? There are more serious issues at hand, lass."

"Serious issues that outweigh yer own marriage?" Erin countered, feeling the heat of challenge rise within her. She took a step closer, refusing to be intimidated by the laird's imposing presence.

"Aye." The word sliced through the tension, his voice a low rumble that seemed to echo off the stone walls. "This clan, its people, our lands—we are constantly under threat. 'Tis me duty to protect them. That is what consumes me, not the color of ribbons or the fluff of a feast."

Erin bit her tongue to keep from snapping back, her mind racing. The intensity in his gaze hinted at the depth of his commitment, the scars of past battles etched not only on his skin but in the furrow of his brow. For a moment, the image of a warrior-poet emerged, one who bore the mantle of leadership with reluctant grace.

"Then let us compromise," she proposed, her voice softer now. "I'll see to the traditions and the ceremony, but ye must be present when it matters. Show yer people—and me—that this union means something to ye."

Magnus's silence was a gauntlet thrown, his internal struggle almost palpable. Erin waited, the air between them charged with a tension that stretched taut as a bowstring. Would he yield or retreat behind the walls he'd built around himself?

"Compromise," he finally echoed, his tone a grudging concession. "Aye, we'll discuss

it further."

"We'll discuss it now," Erin insisted. "I'll not be leaving here until ye agree to do something with me tomorrow."

"Ye ken this is folly," Magnus growled from behind his massive desk, littered with maps and missives that bore the weight of clan matters. His focus remained steadfast on the parchments as if she were no more than another problem to be solved.

"Ye speak of convenience," Erin shot back, the flicker of torchlight casting shadows across the stone walls, mirroring the flicker of defiance in her eyes. "But convenience does not excuse ye from honoring traditions. I willnae stand for a husband who cares so little for what our union represents."

Magnus's hand stilled, his quill hovering above ink as dark as the depths of his eyes. Slowly, he raised his gaze to meet hers, the intensity within them enough to silence the clans' mightiest warriors. "Our union represents an agreement between McCormack clan and that of O'Kane. Daenae expect love or affection. Our marriage is naught but a means to an end, a pact sealed for the protection and prosperity of our people."

"Is that all I am to ye? A means to an end?" Erin's voice trembled with a blend of ire and hurt, though she stood firm, unyielding as the ancient pines outside. "Ye willnae even eat meals in the same room?"

"Ye ken well what I mean," he replied, his deep timbre sending an involuntary shiver down her spine. It was a voice used to command, to lead, and yet here in the quiet confines of his study, it reached inside her, stirring something unexpected.

"Perhaps ye shouldnae marry me then," she retorted with a hint of jest, attempting to shield her hurt with humor. It was better to laugh than let him see the turmoil he

caused within her. "If I disgust ye too much to eat yer dinner-"

"That isnae yer doin'."

"Then I beg of ye to make me undoin'," she insisted. "I mean to say ye should change now. For me. Please."

Magnus rose, the chair scraping against the stone floor. He towered over her, a formidable figure that could strike fear into the stoutest of hearts. "I hate that ye always have an answer," he said, a grudging respect coloring his words.

"Then stop giving me reason to find them," Erin replied, her chin tilting defiantly.

Their gazes locked, a silent battle raging between them, each unwilling to yield. As the tension thickened, neither noticed the wind howling outside, nor the storm clouds gathering overhead, presaging the tempest that was to come.

Magnus' eyes narrowed to slits, the storm within them rivalling the one brewing outside the thick walls of his study. "Maybe I should shut ye up," he growled lowly, the sound rumbling like distant thunder.

"Och, I'd like to see ye try," Erin mocked with a defiant tilt of her head, her heart pounding against her ribs like a drum in the gathering storm.

In an instant, the space between them vanished as Magnus closed the gap, his hands capturing her face with a gentleness that belied the hunger in his eyes. And then, his lips crashed onto hers, igniting a fire that swept through Erin's veins with the ferocity of a Highland gale.

All thoughts of bickering, weddings, and clan duties dissipated like mist over the moors. Erin lost herself in the passion of his kiss, a wild thing unleashed. His taste

was intoxicating, a blend of whisky and resolve, and when his tongue sought hers, it was as if they were dancing a reel, perfectly in sync despite their clashing wills.

Time ceased to exist; there was only the warmth of his mouth on hers and the strength of his arms as they wrapped around her, pulling her closer. She matched his fervor, her fingers threading through the long dark tresses she had often imagined were as soft as they appeared.

But as suddenly as the kiss began, Magnus pulled away, leaving her breathless and startled by the void of his absence. Her eyes flew open to meet his gaze, which held a new storm—one of confusion and desire.

"Ye daenae need to beg for anything," he said, his voice gruff with an emotion he dared not name. "Just ask me to help with yer preparations if that is what yer wish."

Erin, still reeling from the intensity of the moment, could only nod, her lips tingling with the memory of his. The wind howled its approval through the cracks of the stone walls, and as she looked up into the eyes of the man who was to be her husband—her beast—it was clear that the battle lines had shifted.

As Magnus turned back to his desk, his back a rigid line of tension and unspoken words, Erin wondered if perhaps the beast before her was just as afraid of the passion between them as she was eager to explore it. The thought left her with a sense of anticipation that was both exhilarating and terrifying.

As the door closed behind her with a soft click, sealing her alone in the corridor, Erin touched her lips, the heat of Magnus' kiss still lingering there like the afterglow of a sunset. She might not have had to beg, but the price of that kiss—a glimpse into the depths of Magnus Black, Laird McCormack—was one she wasn't sure she was ready to afford.

"N ever wanted marriage," he muttered, his words nearly lost in the crackling of flames. "Never wanted her..."

Magnus stood in the shadowed alcove of his great hall, a silent observer to the flurry of preparations. His gaze followed Erin as she gracefully navigated between the long trestle tables and his staff, her wavy brown hair catching stray shafts of light from the high windows. She moved with an assuredness that belied her youth, her blue eyes flickering with determination, instructing the maids on the placement of thistles and heather in the flower arrangements. A fire crackled defiantly against the chill that sought to invade the room, much like Erin had invaded his carefully guarded existence. He cursed under his breath, the taste of her name bitter as the ale he'd sworn off since she arrived. His tongue licked a strip across his lower lip, her taste still lingered on his skin, heating his cheeks with the memory. "Nay lass, I am stronger than ye."

"Ye look as if yer fightin' ghosts," Scarlett's voice sliced through his brooding thoughts as she appeared in the doorway, a basket of thistle and heather in her arms.

Magnus released a huff so loud he almost announced himself to the whole room. His mind was on Erin, and he did not welcome his sister's distraction. Erin worked tirelessly on the branches in her hand, measuring and comparing them like the very nature on his land was under scrutiny. And yet, she embraced every distraction with the good manners of a lady.

Erin had many of the household staff aiding her preparations, instructing each where

to do and what to do. Never once had he seen her tire of their interruptions or questions. She was polite, firm and yet courteous, and they seemed to respect her for that. Any woman who could have the respect of the staff could manage a household.

"Yer admirin' her work or her form, brother?" Scarlett asked with a chuckle.

"Perhaps a little of both," Magnus replied tersely, pushing away from the wall to tower over her. Erin had skilled fingers and his mind was completely on their deftly tying of bows and ribbons. Not on the way her skirts rustled against the table with each delicate movement of her hips. Nor was it on the way her tongue slipped between her lips when the knots outfoxed her. And his tongue was absolutely not emerging from his own lips in time with hers.

"Perhaps a lot of both, brother."

"Perhaps," he admitted, his cheeks flushing with the confession.

His gaze lingered on the flowers meant for his wedding day—a day he didn't desire but was bound to by duty.

"And why nae? She is to be yer wife."

"Scarlett," he acknowledged her words without shifting his focus from Erin. "She knows how to command a room."

"Ye could learn from her. Join us, Magnus. The bride shouldnae prepare for her wedding alone."

"Marriage is not something I care for, ye ken that well," he grumbled, but his sister's piercing stare compelled him forward.

"Yer nae the only one with demons, Magnus," she said, her tone softening though her eyes remained defiant. "But we've preparations to see to. Ye should be helpin'. She daenae want to do this alone."

"Then let us prepare," he conceded, the corner of his mouth twitching despite his mood.

Approaching the tables, he watched as Erin tied off a bouquet, her fingers nimble.

"Tis a gracious sight to see ye before us," Erin noticed him, a shimmer of a smile crossing her face. He would have thought she was goading him if it wasn't for the blush that colored her cheeks and across her delicate button nose. "Have ye come to prepare for yer special day?"

She spoke, and he had been too busy thinking about her sweet little nose and how he definitely didn't want to plant a kiss on it.

"I have come to help prepare for our special day, aye, lass." His eyes quickly dropped from her nose, falling on her chest where each breath filled her blouse. He coughed and turned to the table, fixing his eyes on the thistles, their thorns as sharp as the woman determined to break him.

"Yer hands seem idle, me Laird," Erin's teasing reached him before he could offer assistance. "I was told ye Highlanders were skilled with more than just the claymore."

His hand quickly reached for sprig of ivy from a nearby basket.

"Ye ken how to arrange flowers, Magnus? I'm surprised," Erin coyly teased, casting him a sidelong glance as she tied a knot.

"Ye'll find there's much ye daenae ken about me, lass," he shot back, his hands deftly

handling the delicate task. "And there's more to being laird than swingin' a sword and scowlin'."

"Scowlin' seems to be a particular talent of yers, though," she quipped, a playful glint in her eye.

"Ye bring it out in me," he retorted, unable to suppress a chuckle. The sound felt foreign on his lips, a remnant of a life he'd long since buried.

Magnus watched as Erin deftly twisted the thistle and heather together, her fingers coaxing beauty from the wildness of the Scottish flora. The hall was a frenzy of activity, with every surface soon to be adorned with arrangements that spoke of the land itself—hardy, enduring, and full of unexpected beauty.

"Ye seem to have a way with these," he remarked, his tone betraying a hint of genuine surprise. "Where did ye learn such craft?"

Erin didn't pause in her work, though a small, proud smile played at the corner of her mouth. "I watched me maither. She had a keen eye for bringing the outside in, making every event feel like a part of the land itself."

"Preparing without her must be hard on ye," Magnus added, softer this time, acutely aware of the void left by absence.

"Indeed," she replied, her hands never stilling. "But life is nae about dwelling in what we lack but making the most of what we have."

Her words struck a chord in him, a reminder of the losses he, too, had learned to bear. To distract himself from such thoughts, he offered, "I could send for yer maither if ye wish. It would free me from this..." He gestured vaguely at the foliage scattered before him.

Erin's laugh, rich and warm, filled the space between them. "Nay, Laird McCormack. Me maither has done enough. 'Tis high time I showed myself capable of such a feat." Her blue eyes twinkled with mischief. "Besides, I'd take much more pride in mastering this... should ye stand beside me."

The challenge in her voice was unmistakable, and Magnus felt something akin to respect stir within him. Aye, Erin Gibson might be forced into this union, but she was not a woman to be cowed.

"Then let us see if ye can indeed teach an old dog new tricks," he said, stepping closer, their bodies touched, and both were slow to recoil. She was so close that the heat of her body mingled with his, and he didn't completely dislike it.

Their eyes locked, and for a moment, the world narrowed to the space between them, to the shared task and unspoken promise of partnership, however reluctant it might prove to be.

Erin paused, her fingers brushing against his as they reached for the same sprig of heather. Their eyes locked, and for a moment, the world fell away. Time slowed, and the air between them charged with an intensity that threatened to ignite.

"Ah, lass, there are many skills required of a laird," Magnus replied, moving closer. Underneath the banter, an unfamiliar warmth curled within him.

"Indeed? And does that include the delicate art of flower arrangin'?" A playful glint danced in her eyes as she handed him a length of ribbon.

"Flowers can be as treacherous as any battlefield," he retorted, taking the ribbon and attempting to secure a stubborn stem. As he fumbled, his hand brushed against hers, the contact a jolt of unexpected electricity. He withdrew slowly, but not before seeing the corners of her mouth lift into a smile that sent another shock through his system,

but from there it seemed they were each thinking the same, as they reached for the same bloom. He withdrew, acting as the fine gentleman Erin seemed to desire.

"Careful, me Laird," Erin chided softly, her tone light but her eyes holding a challenge. "One might think ye afraid of a wee blossom."

"Never," he muttered, his voice low, the moment stretching between them, charged with an intensity that had nothing to do with flora. He targeted the pile Erin was favoring for his next bloom, and their movements became a race. Sometimes he raced for the stem, but more often, he allowed her to reach it first, just so his hand could rest on hers for a few seconds. And each time he touched her warm skin, she giggled with the triumph of winning the flower for her decoration. Magnus didn't mind, as he enjoyed his game with the feisty brunette far more than the flower arranging.

Magnus watched as Erin's fingers deftly entwined stems and blooms, crafting a display that seemed to capture the wild beauty of the moors. A simple task, yet there was an artistry to her movements that he couldn't help but admire. Her independence was a force as formidable as any Highland gale, and it drew him in like a moth to flame.

"Ye handle those flowers as if they were made of the finest glass," he remarked, his deep voice resonating in the space between them. "I cannae say I've seen such care even from the seasoned hands of me own kin."

"Perhaps because yer kin are not preparing to marry off their laird," she retorted, her gaze never leaving the blossoms. "And perhaps because they have not had the weight of expectation pressing down upon them since birth."

Her words carried the sting of truth, and Magnus felt the air thicken with unspoken understanding. He leaned closer, reaching for a sprig of heather, his hand brushing against hers. The contact was fleeting, but it ignited a spark that threatened to

consume his stoic exterior.

"Expectations can be heavy indeed," he conceded, his eyes holding hers. "But ye seem to bear them well."

"Only because I must," she replied softly. The vulnerability in her voice was a siren's call, luring him into waters he knew were dangerous.

"Erin," he began, his voice dropping to a husky whisper, "ye need not face everything alone." He paused, wrestling with the desire to cross the chasm of propriety. "If ye would allow me?—"

"Allow ye?" she interrupted, a playful glint surfacing in her eyes. "To share the burden? Or to distract me from it?"

"Whichever ye prefer," he answered, matching her playful tone, yet the intensity in his gaze betrayed his deeper intent.

They worked side by side, the heat from their bodies mingling as the scent of flowers enveloped them. Each briefest touch, each shared smile wove a thread of connection that neither could deny. In these moments, the world outside this hall, with its threats and responsibilities, faded into insignificance.

"Ye've a gentle touch, for a man of war," she observed, breaking the spell as she stepped back to survey their handiwork. He reached to twist a stray sprig, just as her fingers reached at the same time. His fingers stroked against the smooth skin of her hand as he withdrew, leaving his throat dry.

"Yer hands..." Erin began, her voice barely above a whisper. "They're not just made for war, are they?"

"Warrior or not, it seems I'll never master the complexities of yer craft," Magnus replied, half admiring her skill, half frustrated by this unfamiliar terrain.

"Nor are yers just for weaving flowers," Magnus replied, his voice rough with restrained emotion. "Ye've strength in ye, Erin. More than ye know."

"Strength willnae change our fate," she said, pulling away slightly, her brows knit together in a frown.

"Perhaps nae," he agreed, the mirth fading from his features as the reality of their situation settled upon him once more. "But 'tis the hand we've been dealt."

"Is that what this is, then? A mere hand of cards?" Erin asked, her spirit flaring as she met his gaze head-on.

"Sometimes the game plays us," Magnus admitted, his heart heavy with unspoken truths. "But we play nonetheless."

"Perhaps ye simply need a proper teacher," she suggested, her gaze lingering on his before flitting away, leaving him with the unsettling sense that Erin was far more dangerous to his composure than any enemy he had faced.

"Yer will excuse me, Miss Erin, duty calls me to a meeting." Magnus bid his goodbye with a heavy heart.

"Talkin' of teachers," Erin smiled broadly at him, "I have a meetin' of me own to attend."

Magnus dipped his head, but it lifted his hear to see his fiancé as busy as he was.

Magnus strode through the bailey, his boots sinking into the damp earth that

generations of clan members had trodden. He could scarcely believe the pace at which the castle had transformed in preparation for the wedding. Tapestries adorned the stone walls, and the smell of freshly baked bannocks filled the air. It was a hasty affair, yet everything fell into place thanks to Erin's meticulous efforts. He met with Caelan, walking out to the main gate to give his approval on the stone for the new bridge before leisurely walking back as clan business distracted them from their pace

"Never thought a lassie could manage so well," he mumbled, watching as she directed two kilted men carrying a heavy bench. Her wavy brown hair escaped its binding, framing her face with stubborn locks, and her blue eyes sparkled with an intensity that matched the blade of her resolve. Then Hayden called to her, and the lass curses her tardiness, before clamping a hand to her mouth and checking around her that her word had gone unheard.

"Ye look like ye've seen a ghost, Magnus." Caelan's voice broke through his thoughts, hinting at mischief.

"Hardly," Magnus retorted, turning to face his man-at-arms. "Just admiring the efficiency of the preparations."

"Ah, admiration," Caelan drawled, one corner of his mouth quirking upward. "Is that what they're callin' it these days?"

"Mind yer tongue," Magnus warned, though the banter did little to ease the knot of apprehension tightening in his chest.

"Of course, me Laird," Caelan replied with mock solemnity before they turned their attention to the matter at hand. The work of a laird involved lots of decision-making, but his directions would be carried out by others. Magnus liked being seen by his people outside of his office, where he carried out the really important work with candles and parchment.

As they discussed the logistics of timber and stone, a movement caught Magnus's peripheral vision. He glanced toward the training grounds where Erin stood beside Hayden, curious about their meeting. Magnus's gaze narrowed as he observed them from a distance, noting how Hayden held himself with that easy charm that came so naturally to him, while arming Erin with a longsword.

"Seems the lady is takin' to swordplay," Caelan commented, following Magnus's line of sight.

"Is she now?" Magnus said, his interest piqued despite himself. There was something about Erin—a fierceness that belied her calm exterior—that drew him to her side even when prudence dictated he remain at a distance.

"Would ye not think it more prudent to keep her out of harm's way? She is to be yer wife, after all," Caelan pointed out, his words laced with a subtle challenge.

"Perhaps," Magnus conceded. "But I'd wager she can handle more than ye think." His voice held a touch of pride that surprised even him.

"Shall we see how she fares then?" Caelan suggested a glint of cunning in his eyes.

"Let us," Magnus agreed curtly, his curiosity a live wire within him.

10

Erin stood before Hayden, clutching the sword he offered her.

"Ye came," he exclaimed. "I had thought ye asked in jest."

"Ye daenae think I would?"

"Well, I'll be honest, yer request is an odd one. No lass needs to fight. Yer well protected here."

Erin huffed, walking right up to him. She stared him in his eyes as she raised the sword, albeit with some difficulty. She had been ambushed twice now, and for a woman who was not well travelled, she did not like the frequency at which her life had been threatened. Magnus had saved her before, but he spent so little time in her company, she could hardly rely on him to be her protector.

"Well, lass, let's begin." He raised his sword, demonstrating how to correctly hold the blade. Erin mirrored his actions, but the sword drooped in her grip.

"Ye'll need to work on yer wrist strength. Ye'll nae be getting that from yer needlework." Hayden corrected her grip and her stance, guiding her to bend her legs in a way that drew on her thighs.

Erin's determined figure contrasted starkly against Hayden's relaxed stance. Hayden grinned with more amusement than she deserved. Her safety was no laughing matter, but he instructed her with an air of humor. She moved as he did, but her rhythm

lacked the fluidity of his more practiced ease. Each time she glanced his way, Hayden wiped the smile from his face, but Erin knew it had been there.

"Hit me sword with the flat of yer own. Feel the weight in yer arms."

Hitting his sword was no easy feat when the weight of the blade pulled against her, but she gave it her best swing, finding some satisfaction in the twang that rang out. Hayden found it funny, and to make the moment worse, laughter rang out from behind her. She knew that laugh, turning to face Magnus like a bull in search of a red rag.

The nerve of the man to laugh at her sword fighting burned her after she had accepted and even enjoyed his company during their flower arranging session. After their kiss had broken the ice, their little touches had definitely warmed the air around them, or so she had thought. Now, he was openly mocking her, and his reaction embarrassed her far more than any other. This man was getting under her skin. With the taste of his kiss still on her lips, she had a good mind to stomp over to him and enjoy his proximity, but she would not let him distract her from her training.

"This is none of yer business," she cried out. She needed him to go or she would not be able to focus on the lesson.

"Continue yer work, lass; Caelan and I were just passin' through." Magnus gave a chuckle before he continued his walk around the edge of the green.

"Try again, Erin," Hayden encouraged.

She braced herself once again, both hands gripping the hilt of her weapon. She lifted it with all her strength before driving it around into Hayden's. The sword rebounded, flipping from her grip. It came nowhere near Hayden, but he jumped back all the same.

"Remember, Erin," Hayden jested, "ye need to dance with the sword, not wrestle it."

"Enough of yer teachin', Hayden," Erin snapped back. "I need no dancin' lessons."

"Ye say that now, but wait till the ceilidh at yer weddin'," Hayden teased, earning himself a glare that would have made a lesser man retreat.

"Ceilidh or no, I'll nae be made a fool of," Erin retorted, her gaze blazing with fire that rivalled the hearth back in the great hall.

"Careful, brother," Magnus called out as he approached, a half-smile playing on his lips despite the gravity of his thoughts. "Ye might find yerself bested by a lass."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Hayden quipped with a grin, undeterred by his brother's presence.

"Balance is key, lass," Hayden chided playfully, circling her like a hawk eyeing its prey. "Ye cannae let the sword control ye. Ye must master it."

"Easy for ye to say," Erin grumbled, her voice laced with determination as she hoisted the weapon again, its tip barely clearing the ground.

"This training was yer idea," Hayden reminded her.

"Perhaps if I were trainin' with somethin' less cumbersome," she said through gritted teeth, her suggestion veiled with a hint of defiance.

Hayden laughed, a carefree sound that echoed across the field. "And what would ye prefer? A needle and thread?"

"Enough," Magnus interjected, his deep voice cutting through the banter like the

sharp edge of a dirk. "This is nae the way to teach swordplay."

Erin's attention snapped to him, her blue eyes meeting his with an intensity that belied her struggle. She lowered the sword, her arm muscles quivering from exertion. Damn this man and his presence; even with her back to him, she could feel he was there, watching. If she had a little skill to display, she could perform to her unwanted audience, but she hated being an embarrassment in his eyes. Practicing alone would give her more satisfaction when she finally displayed her learned skills, but in this instance, learning was more important for her safety than the unfathomable urge to impress the man before her.

"Show me then, Laird McCormack," she challenged, extending the hilt towards him, her tone a mix of weariness and provocation.

Magnus's gaze swept over Erin's form, taking note of her stance—feet planted firmly apart, yet her arms trembled under the weight of steel. She was no warrior, but her determination spoke volumes about her spirit. Despite her frustration, a fire in her refused to be quenched—a fire he found both infuriating and enthralling.

"Come now, lass, ye cannae expect to land a blow if ye swing like a wean with a stick," Hayden taunted, his voice carrying on the breeze.

Erin's arm tensed, and with a swift motion, she thrust forward, only to have Hayden sidestep with a laugh. The joy faded from her eyes, replaced by a spark of anger. She shot Hayden a glare so fierce it could curdle milk, and Magnus felt an involuntary chuckle rumble from deep within his chest.

Hayden caught his brother's eye and winked, but Erin, sensing the shared amusement, spun on Magnus, her blue eyes flashing in frustration. The sight tickled something within him—a feeling he couldn't quite name—and amused him with her fiery spirit.

"Enough," Magnus said, stepping forward. His voice, a commanding rumble, instantly silenced the pair. "Caelan, Hayden, leave us."

The two men exchanged glances, Caelan's ever-shrewd eyes flickering with curiosity before he bowed slightly and departed. Hayden followed, though not without shooting Erin a parting grin that promised their little duel was far from over.

Once alone, Magnus stepped closer, his presence like the ancient pines that dominated the landscape—solid, immovable. He watched Erin, whose chest rose and fell with exertion, her wavy brown hair coming loose from its braid.

Their fingers brushed as he took the sword from her, sending an unexpected surge of heat coursing through his veins. He fought to keep his expression impassive, aware of Hayden's watchful gaze.

"Firstly," Magnus began, his voice steady despite the turmoil, "ye need a weapon more suited to yer strength." He set aside the broadsword, retrieved a lighter blade from the nearby rack, and offered it to her. "Try this."

Erin grasped the new sword, testing its balance with a few tentative swings. A small smile tugged at her lips—an acknowledgement of the consideration he'd shown her, however begrudgingly.

"Better," she admitted, squaring her shoulders as she adjusted her grip.

"Watch closely," Magnus instructed, demonstrating a simple parrying technique. "It's nae about brute force. It's about agility... precision."

The air between them crackled as they moved together, the clink of metal punctuating each deliberate step. Erin mirrored his movements, her earlier impatience giving way to focused emulation. Her proximity was an annoying distraction, each brush of her

hand against his sending his pulse racing.

"Ye're quick to learn," he conceded, unable to suppress a grudging note of respect.

"Perhaps there's more to me than ye thought," Erin retorted, her eyes locked on his.

"Perhaps," Magnus replied, the word hanging between them like a promise—or a threat.

Their sparring grew more intense, blades dancing as they tested each other's defenses. The air seemed to grow thicker with every contact, charged with an unspoken desire neither dared to acknowledge.

"Yer not holdin' back," Erin breathed out, a touch of surprise coloring her voice.

"Would ye want me to?" Magnus countered, his gaze never leaving hers.

"Never," she shot back, her blade flashing dangerously close to his.

They stood locked in a stalemate for a moment, their faces mere inches apart, breaths mingling in the cool Highland air. Magnus could feel the wild beat of her heart mirroring his own, and he knew he should step away, put distance between them—but he couldn't.

"Erin," he began, his voice rough with emotion he couldn't name, their lips so close that one false move could be fatal. With the setting sun casting long shadows across the grounds, Magnus began instructing Erin on the finer points of wielding a dirk, each stray touch igniting a charge threatening to consume them both. They were two souls caught in a dance as old as the Highlands, bound by a marriage of convenience yet drawn together by a force that was neither fully understood.

As dusk approached, the air grew charged, and for a fleeting instant, their bodies drew perilously close. A whisper of what might be lingered, palpable as the mist that rolled over the moors.

"Enough for now. We shall continue after the wedding," Magnus instructed.

"Perhaps we should postpone—" Erin's voice broke through the haze of their proximity.

Magnus stiffened, the warmth in his eyes retreating behind a glacier of defense. "The wedding will take place as planned," he stated coldly, distancing himself physically and emotionally with a swiftness that belied his inner turmoil. "Perhaps yer would tell me why ye asked Hayden to train ye."

"Ye always seem so busy."

"Nay, lass. I mean why ye want the training."

Erin hesitated, her sword lowering as she seemed to gather her thoughts. Her face turned away from his. Magnus watched as Erin's grip tightened around the hilt of her sword, her knuckles turning white with the effort. She stood silent for a moment longer than he liked, and he wondered if she'd dismiss his question with a flippant remark to hide her true feelings. But then, her voice, soft yet laced with an undercurrent of steel, broke the silence.

"Please, lass, I'll nae judge ye, why are ye training?" he asked, his laconic tone stripping the question to its barest form.

"I daenae want to be helpless," she finally said, her tone thick with emotion. "I've been a prisoner before and won't be one again."

“Ye are nae prisoner here. Ours is an arrangement of convenience, but nay lock nor key holds ye here.”

“It was in the carriage, when the brigands attacked and the man came upon me. That is the captivity I fear. If I had protected myself, ye wouldnae have been hurt.”

“Yer need not worry about me, lass.”

“Ye ken...” Erin began, her gaze not leaving the blade she held—a poor substitute for control. “It reminded me of when he took us, I could do naught but watch. It was like being a wee bairn again, helpless in the hands of those who would harm.” Her eyes met his, and he saw the flicker of remembered fear in them. “I was held captive by the Englishman for six years.”

Her words hung between them, a confession that peeled back a layer of her usually calm demeanor. Magnus's gaze softened imperceptibly. He understood the need for control, the desire to fight one's own battles.

“Then train ye shall,” he said, his voice low but firm. “But nae with jests and mockery. I'll show ye how.”

Their eyes met, and Magnus felt a twinge of something—empathy, perhaps—pierce his hardened shell. He had known helplessness, too, when his father's cruelty cast a shadow over their home.

“Thank ye for understanding,” Erin whispered, relief heavy on her flushed lips.

“Aye, I understand that feeling all too well,” he admitted, stepping closer to guide her stance. “It is why I learned to fight, never to find myself at another's mercy. As far back as I can remember, there have been attempts on the laird's life. Me faither was constantly on alert against the threat from others towards himself and his family. I

had hoped for different when I took his place, but I have faced coups and attempts on me life." Magnus dropped his head, then steadied himself, returning his focus to the moment.

"Ye were young when ye became laird," Erin observed, catching her breath as Magnus corrected her grip on the dirk.

"Aye. Fourteen winters," Magnus confirmed, his tone matter-of-fact. "The coups against me faither... they dinnae stop with his death. I had to be cunnin' and resourceful to keep me siblings safe."

"That is why ye keep yerself distanced from yer family?" Erin paused, absorbing his words and the weapon's weight in her hand. "And now ye train me," she mused, a hint of wonder edging into her voice.

"Because I willnae have ye feel that way again," he declared, his gaze locked onto hers. "Not while ye are under me protection."

Their training continued, the clashing of steel punctuating the air, each strike and parry a testament to the intensity growing between them. Erin moved with a determination that impressed him, her earlier hesitation giving way to a fierce resolve. And Magnus, the man who had built walls around his heart, found himself admiring the woman's independent spirit before him.

"Ye're a quick learner," he said, offering rare praise as twilight approached.

"Perhaps there's a warrior in me yet," Erin replied a playful glint in her eye despite the exhaustion that painted her features.

"Perhaps," Magnus echoed, the corner of his mouth twitching into a half-smile, a silent acknowledgement of her potential.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, cloaking them in the cool embrace of dusk, they knew the day's end was near. The wedding loomed over them, a binding contract neither had sought, but both were honor-bound to fulfil.

"Tomorrow, we marry," Erin murmured, the finality of the statement hanging heavy between them.

"Aye, tomorrow," Magnus replied, his voice betraying none of the emotion that churned within him.

They stood there, two warriors caught in the twilight, their future uncertain but their paths irrevocably intertwined. As shadows crept across the training grounds, the promise of what lay ahead hung suspended like the last ray of light before the darkness of night.

Magnus extended the hilt of a minor, intricately carved dirk toward Erin. She reached out, her fingers brushing his as she took hold of the weapon. A jolt shivered up her arm at the contact, but she focused on the tremendous weight of the dirk in her hand.

"Ye need to grip it firmly, like this," Magnus instructed, his fingers wrapping over hers, guiding her into a proper hold. Each touch ignited sparks that danced along Erin's skin, and she swallowed hard, trying to concentrate on his words rather than his proximity. His breath was warm against her cheek, and the scent of pine and leather enveloped her senses.

"Ye see, lass, with a dirk, precision is key," he continued, shifting closer to demonstrate a thrust. "Ye want to be swift and decisive."

Erin nodded, taking in every detail as he moved her hand through the air, mimicking the action of striking an unseen foe. The seriousness in his deep blue eyes held her captive, and she felt a strange mix of safety and exhilaration under his tutelage.

"Good, now try it yerself," Magnus said, stepping back to give her space.

Erin executed the movement, her arm extending with newfound confidence. She turned to him for approval, only to find him closer than expected, their bodies almost touching. His gaze dropped to her lips, lingering there, and Erin's breath hitched.

"Ye're doin' well," he murmured, his voice low and rough.

"Thank ye," she whispered back, her heart pounding so loudly she feared he could hear it. They were lost in a moment outside of time, where the impending wedding and their roles meant nothing.

"Here, let me show ye the sgian dubh now," Magnus said after a charged silence, retrieving the miniature dagger from his boot. He carefully moved it in her palm, closing her slender fingers around the handle. "This one can be concealed easily, used for close combat."

As he spoke, his hand brushed along her forearm and pricked her skin with awareness. Erin looked up at him, meeting his intense gaze, and for an instant, they hovered on the edge of something more profound than their shared lessons in weaponry. They gazed into each other's eyes, both wanting more, both wanting the other to make the move and reunite their lips.

"Ye'll have to be close to yer enemy for this one," he said, his voice barely above a whisper as he leaned in, simulating an attack.

Their faces were mere inches apart, and Erin could count the flecks of green in his stormy eyes. Her lips parted slightly, his gaze flickering down once more. It would be so easy to bridge the distance between them, to taste the promise of what might be...

But the spell was broken as Magnus straightened abruptly, a trace of confusion

marring his features. He cleared his throat, stepping away as if the nearness was a sudden threat. Erin jolted as the moment ended, not just their closeness but their training too. Magnus raised the barriers around himself that she had worked so hard to break through.

"Let's speak of the morrow," he said gruffly, turning to hide whatever emotions battled within. "Are all yer preparations in place?"

Still reeling from the intensity of their encounter, Erin managed a nod. "Aye, everything is ready for the wedding."

"Good," Magnus replied, though his voice lacked the conviction of his earlier teachings.

"E rin, lass, ye look like a vision straight from the Highlands themselves," Flynn's voice broke through the din of conversation and clinking tableware as Erin stepped onto the castle grounds where her wedding was to take place.

"Flynn," she breathed, seeing her brother warmed her heart. She embraced him, the familiar scent of pine and earth clinging to his clothes, bringing memories of home rushing back. Around them, servants scurried about laying out platters upon long tables while the smell of roasted meats filled the crisp air.

"Tell me he's treatin' ye right, Erin. Magnus hasn't been too beastly, has he?" Flynn's brows furrowed with concern, his protective gaze scanning her face for any sign of distress.

"Och, ye know I can handle me own," Erin said, mustering a smile that didn't quite reach her blue eyes. "There's naught to fuss over."

"Yer maither's been worried sick, lass. Ye ken how she is," Flynn continued, his tone softening as he glanced toward Briar, who was approaching with anticipation and anxiety etched on her features.

"Maither," Erin greeted, feeling the knot in her throat tighten at the sight of Briar's fretful expression. "I've missed ye."

"Erin, me sweet girl," Briar said, pulling her into a tight embrace. "Are ye... are ye truly content here?"

"Maither, the castle is grand, and the lands are beautiful," Erin reassured her, swallowing the lump that formed as she spoke. She couldn't voice the truth—her heartfelt trapped within the cold stone walls, yearning for a freedom that seemed just out of reach.

"Ye have changed much, me dear. Still headstrong and feisty," Briar observed, a hint of pride flickering across her face despite her worries. "Just promise me ye'll seek happiness, even amidst this... arrangement."

"I promise," Erin whispered, though her conviction wavered like a candle in the wind. As the moment lingered, her gaze drifted across the grounds, searching for Magnus. She found him overseeing the final preparations, his tall figure casting a long shadow in the fading light.

Their eyes met briefly, and something akin to an electric charge coursed through her. The intensity of his gaze stirred a strange fluttering within her chest—a sensation she was reluctant to admit intrigued her. Yet, as swiftly as it came, he turned away, leaving her with a longing that only deepened the ache within her soul.

"Come now, let's get ye ready. A bride shouldnae be lingerin' where she might catch a chill," Briar said, guiding Erin back toward the keep.

As they walked, Erin's mind raced with thoughts of what lay ahead—the ceremony, the feast, and the dance. But above all, the night that would follow haunted her. She had never imagined her wedding day shrouded in such trepidation, nor had she envisioned a groom whose touch she both dreaded and desired.

"Ye'll be fine, Erin. Just remember who ye are," Flynn called after her, his voice carrying the weight of unspoken promises of protection.

Erin nodded, offering a brave smile over her shoulder. But as the grand hall doors

closed behind her, she couldn't help but wonder if she was stepping into a new life or a gilded cage. And with each step closer to the altar, the question loomed ever larger: Would the man she married tonight be the beast she feared or the protector she secretly longed for?

Erin smoothed the rich fabric of her gown, the tartan of Clan McCormack woven into a pattern that spoke of history and blood. The grand hall swirled with activity as final preparations for the wedding ceremony were made. Heavy tapestries lined the walls, depicting tales of old—a testament to the clan's storied past. Garlands of heather and thistle adorned the room, their purple hues lending a regal air that mingled with the earthy scent of pine boughs and peat fire. Erin hurried to greet her sisters.

"Does Magnus truly have a heart beneath all that armor?" Ayda whispered, her voice tinged with concern. Erin smiled at her sister, but wished she could see the concern replaced by her usual mischievous nature.

"I believe he might, be it tiny or locked away under a wall of ice, I believe I have heard it beating still."

"Or is it as cold and unyielding as the highland stone?" Maeve added, her brow furrowed in sisterly concern. Erin owed so much to her eldest sister while they had been held captive, but this was one situation her sister could not save her from.

Erin offered them a reassuring smile, though her stomach twisted with unease. "He's... complicated," she admitted, her gaze drifting to where the laird stood, tall and imposing by the hearth. "But there's more to him than meets the eye."

"Ye've seen it then? A softer side to yer beast?" Maeve pressed, seeking confirmation.

"Perhaps." Erin nodded, though she could not explain why Magnus's recent distance

gnawed at her fiercely. Was it fear of their union or something else?

The sound of pipes filled the air, signaling the moment had come. Erin's heart hammered against her chest as she took her place at the entrance to the aisle. The flickering candlelight cast dancing shadows upon the stone floor, leading the way to where Magnus awaited.

As she stepped forward, the guests rose from their wooden benches, their eyes fixed upon her. Erin's fingers tightened around the bouquet of wildflowers, each step resonating with the heavy beat of the drums that accompanied the skirl of the pipes.

Magnus met her gaze, his expression unreadable. Yet, she felt the silent current that flowed between them, charged with an intensity that belied the space separating them. As they stood before the priest, Erin was acutely aware of every breath Magnus took, each subtle shift of his broad shoulders beneath the ceremonial plaid draped across them.

"Ye ken, what does this mean?" his deep voice rumbled during a rare quiet moment.

"An alliance," she replied, her voice steadier than she felt.

"More than that," he countered, eyes locking onto hers. "Ye belong to me now, and I vow to do whatever it takes to make ye content."

Content? His pledge to do whatever it takes was heartfelt and sincere, giving her the protective warmth of sanctuary, but did she want him to make her content?

The words hung between them, a promise or a threat; Erin couldn't be sure. She wanted more than a life of contentment. She wanted to be happy.

As they exchanged vows, her world narrowed to the sound of his voice, the warmth

radiating from his body, and the undeniable pull that drew her to him despite her reservations.

With the pronouncement of husband and wife, the hall erupted into cheers. Erin glanced at the faces of her new clan—some warm, others calculating. But the look in Magnus's eyes held her captive, a storm brewing within their depths that both excited and terrified her.

With the final blessing spoken, Erin followed Magnus into the cool air of the Scottish afternoon, her senses immediately assailed by the feast's rich aromas. The castle grounds were transformed; tables groaned under the weight of roasted meats, their surfaces glistening with succulent juices. Freshly baked bread piled high beside bottles of ale and whisky beckoned the guests, promising warmth and merriment.

"Looks as though they've brought the whole larder out," Magnus remarked, his voice low and gruff beside her.

Erin's gaze caught on the sight of a wild boar, its skin crisped to perfection, an apple stuffed in its mouth—a symbol of abundance and hospitality. "Aye, 'tis enough to feed an army," she replied, her voice betraying a hint of admiration.

Magnus's eyes flickered to meet hers, a ghost of a smile touching his lips. "We have enough warriors here that it may well be needed."

His words carried an edge of challenge, inviting her to retort, but Erin held her tongue. She was acutely aware of the space between them—close enough to feel the heat of his body, yet far enough to remind her of the chasm that had formed since their awkward courtship began.

The sudden swell of music broke their silent exchange, drawing Erin's attention to the small ensemble of musicians who had begun to play. Fiddles cried out with lively

notes, pipes trilled like the song of the wind through the heather, and drums beat a rhythm that seemed to pulse with the very heartbeat of the glen. It was the sound of her homeland, celebration and life—a stark contrast to the turmoil twisting within her.

"Ye look like ye could use a dram," Magnus observed, motioning toward the whisky with a barely perceptible head tilt.

"Perhaps later," Erin said, though her throat was parched. Her heart thrummed erratically to the beat of the drums, her thoughts a tangle of anxiety and anticipation. Would he taste of ale and whisky when he kissed her? Or would he be cold and unyielding like the stone of his castle walls?

As the celebration began and Erin watched her siblings join the dance, the reality of her situation settled like a cloak around her shoulders. She was married to a man whose life was a battlefield, whose soul bore scars more profound than the ones marking his skin.

And tonight, she would share his bed. She knew it would happen, and the idea excited her, but fear coiled in her belly at the thought, her mind teetering on the edge of a precipice. Would she find solace in his arms or confirm the beast others whispered he was? The more she thought about sharing his bed, the more her mind sabotaged her thoughts. She didn't want his shifting feelings towards her to ruin her first night as a married woman.

"Ye dance like the others?" he asked, almost too casually, his gaze scanning the revelers as couples began to pair off, joining the dance.

"Only if I must," Erin retorted, her chin lifting defiantly. This was no love match, and she would not pretend it was, even if every note of music called to her feet to join in.

"Then we shall see if ye must," Magnus said, the corner of his mouth twitching ever so slightly. "Will ye dance with me, wife?" Magnus's voice cut through her reverie.

Erin's breath hitched, her decision hanging in the balance as she placed her hand in his.

As they joined the dance, Erin couldn't escape the feeling that no matter how the night ended, nothing would ever be the same again. There was no ease about the way Magnus took hold of her. He was still and awkward, but she didn't feel any resistance. It wasn't reluctance that stiffened him. He knew the dance but was clearly unpracticed in the moves. The whole thing went a lot easier once Erin learnt to go with his movements instead of the ones drummed into her from childhood. After the first dance, he relaxed, and his hand felt ore natural on her waist. They even dared to smile at each other as the joy of the music took over. Eventually, Erin was too breathless to go on, but her cheeks shone, and her smile filled her features. She had enjoyed dancing with Magnus more than she had ever imagined.

As Erin watched the dancers whirl and sway around her own movements, her mind raced. The night ahead loomed large, and with each passing moment, her resolve wavered. She could feel Magnus's presence beside her, solid and undeniable. His nearness sent unfamiliar shivers down her spine, a mix of fear and something else she dared not name.

"Erin," he began, his voice a low rumble that seemed to vibrate through her, "about tonight..."

Her breath caught. Was this it? Would he speak of their duty, of heirs and the continuation of his line? Yet, before he could finish, a raucous laugh from one of the guests sliced through the tension, and Magnus's attention shifted, his jaw setting in a hard line.

"Later," he muttered and strode away toward the disturbance, leaving Erin alone with her whirling thoughts and the haunting melody of the pipes.

As the last note echoed across the glen, Erin's resolve crystallized. Tonight, she would face the beast that was her husband—and she would not go willingly into his bed until she understood the man behind the scars. But how can we unveil Magnus Black's truth without exposing her vulnerable heart?

With the fire of defiance burning in her belly, Erin braced herself for what was to come, unaware that the test of her strength lay just beyond the horizon.

Erin watched as the shadow of a falcon drifted across the sun-dappled grass, its silent flight a stark contrast to the revelry surrounding her. She shifted her gaze back to the multitude of guests, noting how the men clapped each other on the backs, and the women gossiped behind delicate hands. The feast was in full swing, with laughter rising above the skirl of bagpipes and the hearty drums thump.

"Congratulations, me lady," came an oily and unsettling voice like a snake slithering through the heather. Erin turned to find one of Magnus' council members approaching, his smile more a baring of teeth than an expression of joy. "Ye've married well today. Laird McCormack is a man of great... standing."

"Thank ye, Sir Hogg," Erin replied, her words measured. However, her eyes narrowed at the man's fidgeting hands and the way his gaze darted about. It was clear to her that genuine goodwill was absent from his demeanor.

"May yer union be fruitful," he added, though it seemed more a command than a blessing. With a curt nod, he departed just as quickly, leaving Erin to ponder the underlying tensions that ran like unseen currents beneath the surface of festivity.

A lively tune struck up, rousing the guests into motion. Erin's siblings, Ayda and

Maeve, quickly joined the dance, their skirts twirling as they laughed and stepped to the rhythm. Their joy was infectious, yet Erin felt a pang of isolation watching them. She was an outsider at her wedding for a moment, longing for a connection she feared would never come.

"Should ye nae be dancin', sister?" Flynn's voice broke through her reverie. His brow creased with concern as he offered her a half-hearted smile.

"Perhaps more later," Erin murmured, her heart not quite in her words. Her thoughts strayed to Magnus, the enigmatic man now her husband. He was a cypher she yearned to solve, yet every attempt drew her deeper into a maze of unanswered questions and unspoken desires.

Flynn followed her gaze across the hall, understanding dawning in his eyes. "He's not easy to read, that one. But remember, strength lies not just in knowing others but oneself."

"Is that so?" Erin quipped, grateful for the distraction. "I reckon I have much to learn on both accounts then."

"Ye'll do fine, Erin. Yer stronger than ye think," her brother assured her before being whisked away by Maeve, who beckoned him to join the dance.

As Erin watched her family meld into the crowd, the music's tempo increasing, the dancers' steps growing more frenetic, she felt a resolve building within her. Tonight, she would confront her fears, challenge the beast, and perhaps, in doing so, find a path to her liberation.

But as the twilight deepened and shadows stretched long across the castle grounds, Erin couldn't shake the sensation that something pivotal was poised to unfold. And there, amid merriment and tradition, she stood on the cusp of the unknown, her future

with Magnus Black an unwritten saga that could either unite their hearts or rend them asunder.

With the fiddles crying out their spirited songs and the drums echoing like distant thunder, Erin's feet itched to join in the dance. She deserved more than a mere first dance to then be forgotten by her husband. She watched as her siblings spun and laughed, their kilts and dresses blurring into a tapestry of joy that seemed just out of reach for her. The great hall buzzed with celebration, yet beside Scarlett, Erin couldn't help but feel isolated amidst the revelry.

"Scarlett," she murmured, her voice barely rising above the music, "have ye seen Magnus?"

Her fiery-haired companion scanned the crowd of dancers before shaking her head, a frown creasing her fair brow. "Nae since the ceremony."

"Then let's find him," Erin said, determination steeling her voice. "I'll nae be the bride who sits forgotten."

They navigated through the crowd, past tables groaning under the weight of roasted meats and freshly baked bread, their scents mingling with the peaty tang of whisky. Erin found herself drawn to the shadows at the edge of the hall, where torches cast an amber glow over the stones. And there, standing as if carved from the very rock of the Highlands, was Magnus Black.

"Brother," Scarlett called out, her tone uncharacteristically gentle.

Magnus turned, his dark eyes finding Erin's blue ones, cool and mysterious. He dipped his head, silently acknowledging their presence.

"Would ye honor yer wife with a dance, Laird McCormack?" Erin ventured, her heart

thrumming against her ribs.

A muscle worked in his jaw, betraying a hint of reluctance, before he extended a broad hand. "Aye."

The warmth of his touch seeped into her skin, sparking something wild within her as they stepped onto the floor. The musicians took notice, shifting their tune to a slower, lilting melody befitting the couple's station.

"Ye look... bonnie," he said gruffly, his voice a low rumble that vibrated through her.

"Thank ye, me Laird," Erin replied, a blush staining her cheeks at the unexpected compliment.

As they moved together, Erin was entranced by the strength in his arms and the surety of his steps. Magnus led with a quiet confidence that belied the stormy depths she glimpsed in his eyes. She should have been cautious, mindful of their precarious bond, but instead, she allowed herself to lean closer, to breathe in the scent of heather and pine clinging to his clothing.

"Ye daenae make this easy," Erin confessed softly, unsure why she broke the silence between them.

"Nor do ye," Magnus countered, his gaze never leaving hers.

They danced through another measure, the world narrowing until there was naught but the two of them. Erin's pulse raced, and she realized that, for all his brooding detachment, Magnus held her with a gentleness that contradicted the harsh lines of his warrior's physique. It was a paradox that both confounded and intrigued her.

"Perhaps we're both mysteries to one another," she suggested, her voice laden with a

courage she hadn't known she possessed.

"Perhaps," he agreed, a flicker of something unreadable crossing his features.

But the music swelled to a crescendo before Erin could decipher it, pulling them along in its wake. For a fleeting moment, amid the swirl of tartan and the echo of bagpipes, Erin forgot why she had resisted this union. She saw not the beast but the man—wounded, guarded, but holding her as though she were something precious.

And as the last note hung in the air, marking the end of the song, Erin stood breathless, wondering if the touch of Magnus Black's hand might not be a curse but a balm for two souls scarred by the cruelties of fate.

The revelry of the feast around her became a distant hum as Erin's thoughts drifted to the inevitable—the wedding night. A shiver coursed through her despite the warmth from the roaring bonfires that illuminated the castle grounds with an orange glow. Magnus had sworn an oath, his voice gruff yet sincere, that he would not lay hands upon her—yet their duty to produce an heir loomed over them like a shadow at high noon.

Erin twisted the heavy gold band on her finger, a symbol of her new station as Magnus' wife, the weight of its significance pressing into her flesh. She glanced at his broad back where he stood conversing with one of his council members, and she remembered the scars that marred his skin—a reminder of the battles he'd endured, the life he had led.

"Ye look as if ye're about the bolt for the hills, lass," Maeve teased, breaking through Erin's reverie with a nudge.

"Perhaps I am considering it," Erin murmured, only half in jest.

"Ye cannae outrun yer fate, sister," Maeve replied with a knowing smile.

"Nor do I intend to," Erin said, more to herself than to her sister. But the truth was, she wasn't ready for what awaited her within the castle walls. The thought of fleeing crossed her mind; she could disappear into the night and vanish like mist over the moors. Yet, where would she go? Over the past weeks, she had learned to wield a sword and defend herself, but survival required more than skill—it required a destination, a refuge.

Turning her gaze back to Magnus, Erin caught him watching her, his brown eyes locking onto hers with an intensity that halted her breath. It felt as though he could see her fears and hesitations straight through. There was a silent question in his stare, a challenge: Would she flee, or would she fulfil her role?

The clamor of the wedding celebration ebbed away as Erin followed Magnus through the stone corridors of his ancestral keep. Her heart, a frantic deer trapped within the ribcage of her chest, pounded harder with each heavy step she took. The torches that lined the walls flickered their approval, casting long shadows that danced like specters upon the cold floor. Erin was acutely aware of the roughness of Magnus's hand, calloused and firm, as it led her towards an unknown future.

She was surprised to recognize their route led them to her bed chamber, rather than his, but considered the decision was perhaps some kindness on his part. Familiar surroundings were bound to put her at ease on their wedding night.

He opened her door wide, but rather than carry her across the threshold as she expected, he waved her on inside, remaining outside her room.

"Goodnight, wife," Magnus's voice rumbled, deep as the loch yet strangely devoid of emotion. With a curt nod, he released her hand and turned away, leaving her on the threshold of solitude.

"Goodnight?" Erin whispered to the space he had left behind. Confusion furrowed her brow. Was this not their wedding night? Were they not meant to consummate the hastily arranged marriage that bound them, by necessity?

She couldn't allow the night to end with such questions lingering like mist over the moors. Steeling herself, Erin followed the sound of Magnus's retreating footsteps, her gown whispering secrets against the stone as she moved.

Magnus stood before the hearth in his chambers, the flames casting his scarred visage in a dance of light and shadow. He spun around, his surprise evident as Erin appeared in the doorway.

"Erin," he growled, the name sounding like a warning shot across a battlefield. "What are ye doing here?"

"'Tis our wedding night, is it not?" Erin's voice held a defiant edge, even as her insides quivered. She needed to understand this man, who was her husband by name only.

"Did I nae make myself clear, lass?" His frustration was palpable, the lines of his face etched deeper with the weight of unspoken burdens. "I willnae touch ye."

The declaration hung between them, a gauntlet thrown, a challenge issued. Erin felt a spark of anger but also a strange thrill. This was a game of wits and wills, and she was not one to yield.

"Ye willnae touch me," she repeated, allowing the words to linger, a baited hook cast into turbulent waters. This was the way of the world, and she had never thought him capable of rejecting her from consummating their marriage.

Her heart raced, but Erin stood her ground, determined to unravel the enigma of Magnus Black. The Laird McCormack, a man of strength and scars, would not dismiss her so easily. Not tonight.

Erin's fists clenched at her sides as she stood, unwavering, before the formidable figure of Magnus. His broad shoulders cast a looming shadow that seemed to swallow the flickering light from the hearth, yet she refused to be cowed by his darkened gaze.

"Ye have touched me before," she accused, her voice steady despite the maelstrom of

emotions churning within her. "Ye've held me hand, guided me through a crowded inn, even caught me when I stumbled in the courtyard."

His jaw tightened an imperceptible shift that spoke volumes to Erin's observant nature. "Aye, and what of it?"

"This nae about touch, Magnus," she pressed on, her blue eyes blazing with a determination that matched the fiery spirit of her homeland. "We wed this day, and duty bides us to provide an heir for yer clan. We shouldnae dally with such matters."

The room seemed to hold its breath, the tension so thick that even the shadows dared not dance. Magnus' gaze never wavered from hers, though something flickered behind those deep brown eyes—a torment she could not read.

"An heir?" The words left him like the quietest of storms, heavy with portent. "I willnae sire children, Erin. Me brother, Hayden, he is to be me heir."

Erin felt her heart stutter in her chest, the revelation striking her with the force of a highland gale. She searched his face for answers but found none, only the implacable wall he presented.

"But why?" she implored, calm slipping momentarily as confusion laced her words. "Why condemn yerself to solitude? Why deny us both the chance of a family?" She had never considered having a family now, but it wasn't something she had ruled out for the future.

He turned from her then, moving to the window where the night whispered secrets to the stones of the keep. His voice was low when he spoke, a rumble of distant thunder. "Me reasons are me own, lass. I daenae wish to speak of them."

"Ye cannae just?—"

"Enough!" The word cut through the air, silencing her protest. Magnus faced her once more, the lines of his face etched with a pain she yearned to understand.

"Ye asked for answers, and I have given them." His tone brokered no argument, though Erin's mind raced with unanswered questions.

"Perhaps one day, ye will tell me the whole of it," she murmured, her voice softer now though no less insistent.

"Perhaps," he conceded, the single word hanging between them, a promise or a curse—only time would tell.

Erin took a step back, her mind ablaze with thoughts of this man, her husband in name, yet a stranger in truth. The silence stretched on, the space between them filled with the echoes of things unsaid.

"Goodnight, Laird McCormack," she said at last, her Scottish brogue wrapping around his title like a caress.

"Goodnight, Erin," he replied, his voice carrying the weight of their shared uncertainty. Yet something held her feet still, unmoving from his chamber.

"Be gone, lass. Ye're needin' yer rest." Magnus turned away from her.

Erin felt angry that he was rejecting her. He may prefer to distance himself from her company, but now he was forcing her into a marriage he had no intention of honoring. Though she would never say it aloud, she had been wanting his touch all day. Her fears that niggled at her all day were coming true. Erin's fingers trailed the intricate embroidery of her wedding gown, the tartan pattern a testament to the clan she was now bound to. Her heart thrummed in her chest, an erratic dance that matched the flickering light of the candles in her chamber. The celebrations had

ended, the clamor of bagpipes and cheers fading into the night. Now, surrounded by silence, she pondered the enigma of Magnus McCormack.

She wasn't angry with his revelation—no desire for children, no longing for an heir of their flesh and blood. But the simple unity of a man and woman was her right. She had been tingling inside at the thought of giving herself completely to a man, a married woman had needs she would not be forced to live without trying. Yet, as she stood in the doorway of his bed-chamber, she couldn't deny the twinge of disappointment that crept upon her—a yearning for something more than just duty between them. Was she hoping for a love that could never be?

"Ye ken, ye'll never touch me, then?" The words slipped from Erin's lips before she could catch them, carrying across the dimly lit corridor to where Magnus stood like a shadow at his door.

His gaze found hers, piercing through the darkness. "Aye," he replied, voice steady, betraying none of the emotion that surely roiled beneath his stony exterior.

Erin swallowed the lump forming in her throat, her hands moving with a mind of their own as she began loosening the laces of her gown. The fabric fell away inch by tantalizing inch, revealing the fair skin beneath. She felt exposed, her actions driven by an inexplicable need to test the boundaries of his resolve.

"Even now?" she challenged, her voice wavering between daring and vulnerability. The gown pooled at her feet, leaving her in nothing but her chemise, the cold air of the chamber making her shiver.

Magnus's eyes darkened, a storm brewing within them, yet he held fast to his declaration. "Even now," he echoed, his tone ironclad.

Erin could feel the weight of his stare as if he were touching her without laying a

finger on her body. She fought against the flush creeping up her neck, refusing to break beneath the intensity of their unspoken connection.

"Ye must be certain, for I'll nae ask again," she said, her voice barely above a whisper as she reached for the hem of her chemise, uncertainty and determination warring within her.

The room seemed to hold its breath, the only sound of the hearth fire crackling, as though even the flames were captivated by the unfolding drama. Erin's fingertips brushed against her skin, the anticipation tingling her nerves.

At that moment, standing on the precipice of something unfathomable, Erin understood the full measure of the game she played. And with one last glance at the man, her husband by name alone, she prepared to enter the unknown.

Erin's fingers trembled slightly as she slipped the chemise strap off one shoulder, the fabric whispering against her skin. The room was tense; the space between her and Magnus charged like a storm brewed in the highland skies. She dared another step forward, the firelight casting dancing shadows across her form.

"Are ye certain ye willnae touch me, Magnus?" Her voice held a boldness that belied the fluttering in her chest. It was a challenge, a gauntlet thrown at the feet of the brooding laird who watched her with eyes like polished obsidian.

A growl rumbled in his throat, a primal sound that sent an unexpected thrill spiraling through her. "I've told ye, lass," he said, his voice low and dangerous, "I willnae be swayed. I willnae be tempted so cease yer trying and just enjoy all that ye have."

Erin found herself lost for words. His voice held a passion in it, he did want her, yet he still fought what was natural and right.

“Now go, before I do somethin’ we both regret.”

But Erin could see the lie for what it was, written in the barely restrained heat of his gaze. She let the other strap of her chemise fall, exposing her collarbone to the warmth of the hearth. His eyes followed the movement with an intensity that spoke volumes more than his words.

"Then tell me, me husband, what am I to do on this, our wedding night?" she asked, her heart pounding against her ribs.

"Take it off," Magnus commanded, sternly pointing to her chemise. His command was not loud but resonated through the chamber like a decree. Erin hesitated, caught between the modesty of her upbringing and the wild, untamed part of her that wanted to know the touch of the man before her.

"Come here, in front of me." His voice left no room for argument, and Erin found herself complying, drawn by the force of his will as indeed as the tides to the moon.

Standing before him, Erin felt exposed, her chemise falling to the floor with a soft rustle. The chamber's cool air caressed her bare skin, causing gooseflesh to rise. A shiver of excitement ran down her spine as she met his dark gaze, finding a tumult of unspoken desires within it.

"Sit," he ordered, gesturing to the edge of the bed. Erin complied, feeling the weight of his stare upon her like a tangible touch. She perched on the edge of the mattress, her legs hanging awkwardly.

"Open yer legs," Magnus instructed, his voice betraying none of the storm she saw swirling in his depths. Confusion flickered through her, and she hesitated, unsure and innocent of the ways of pleasure.

"Ye daenae ken how?" he surmised, a hint of surprise bleeding through his stoic demeanor. When she shook her head, a flush creeping up her neck, Magnus leaned forward, the predator in him stirred by her vulnerability.

"Place yer hand here," he directed, motioning to the juncture of her thighs. "Explore yerself... there."

Erin's breath caught in her throat as she followed his instruction, her fingers brushing against sensitive skin. A bolt of sensation shot through her, and she gasped, her eyes locked with Magnus's. He nodded, encouraging her to continue, his gaze never leaving her face as she embarked on a journey of self-discovery.

"Good," he murmured, a note of satisfaction in his tone. "Keep going."

Unfamiliar heat pooled within her, and her movements grew bolder under his tutelage. Her world narrowed to the sensation of her touch and the relentless intensity of Magnus's stare, which seemed to draw forth her innermost secrets without a word being spoken.

As she delved deeper into the burgeoning pleasure, the last remnants of her inhibitions melted away. At that moment, Erin realized she was playing with fire, and yet she could not have stopped had the ancient hills themselves commanded it. The chamber spun around her, the walls echoing with the beating of her heart as she stood on the brink of something profound and terrifying—a cliffhanger in her soul that promised either salvation or ruin.

“Reach yer hand inside.”

Erin's cheeks flushed with embarrassment as she followed Magnus's instructions, her hand slowly sliding between her thighs. A tremor of awkwardness coursed through her veins, yet each timid touch began to alight her senses with an unfamiliar warmth.

“Do ye feel it?” Magnus asked, his voice low and husky with desire. “Are ye wet for me?”

Erin bit her lip and nodded, unable to form words as she explored herself under his intense gaze. She could feel the heat and moisture building within her, a foreign sensation that both scared and enticed her.

“Good,” he murmured, leaning closer to her. “Now rub yer fingers, lass. Push in and feel how good it is.”

Her heart raced at his words as she followed his direction, dipping her fingers inside herself. The movement sent a jolt of pleasure through her body, and she couldn't help but moan softly.

The world contracted to the chamber, the rough-hewn bed beneath her, and the man whose dark gaze seared into her very being. In his stare, she found an unexpected adoration, a reverence that painted her not as an unwilling bride but as a woman of enchanting beauty.

“Keep going,” he urged, his voice rough with need. “I want ye to feel every inch of yer body.”

Erin obeyed without hesitation, feeling bolder with each passing moment as she discovered new sensations within herself. With each stroke of her fingers, she could feel the heat building within her until it was almost unbearable.

“Good girl. Obedient wife.” As their eyes locked once again in an intimate dance of desire, Erin realized there was no turning back now. She was his, completely and irrevocably, and she wanted more. “Ye're doin' well, lass,” Magnus's voice rumbled, low and husky, betraying a hint of something more vulnerable than his usual stoicism.

Erin's breath hitched as a wave of pleasure rippled up from her core, setting her nerves ablaze. She felt bare, not just in the flesh but in spirit too, as if Magnus's eyes could pierce through the facade she'd built around herself since those harrowing years of captivity. And yet, amidst her anxiety, there was no place she wished to hide; his look alone cradled her like the gentle caress of a lover.

“That’s it, love, nearly there. Yer doin’ so well.” Magnus moaned. “Touch yer breast with the other hand. Tease yer nipple, tug on it.” His lip slipped between his teeth as she obeyed, squeezing the hardened bud until she cried out.

“Oh Magnus!” She gasped as the world blurred before her.

“Perfect, keep goin’ lass. Squeeze again.”

Her movements grew less hesitant, squeezing the mound of her breasts, urged on by his words and the stirring within her, by the need to reach the precipice that promised a release from the tension that had knotted inside her since their wedding vows were uttered. With every shallow breath and stifled moan, she chased the burgeoning climax, a storm of sensation that threatened to engulf her whole.

And then it struck—a cascading torrent of ecstasy that swept her away like the powerful currents of the lochs she’d heard tales of as a child. Her body arched, a silent plea to the heavens, as she surrendered to the rapture that consumed her.

Magnus, slid his hand within the folds of his thick quilt, tenting the gathering of fabric at the front. His hand moved back and forth in time with Erin’s own passion. Whatever Magnus was doing under there, he was certainly enjoying himself as much as she was. Magnus finally shattered under her passion. A raw and primal growl escaped him as he leaned forward to complete his own pleasure.

As the waves of their pleasure receded, leaving them both adrift in the aftermath,

Magnus's eyes—once filled with the soft glow of untamed fire—hardened like the steel of his blade. He fixed her with a glare that could've frozen the highland moors. Without warning, he leant over her spent body, his lips pressing to hers and he kissed her. It was a gentle brief kiss which she chased as he withdrew, but it was special to Erin. She touched her fingers to her lips, stroking where he had touched her, the taste of her body mixing with his highland scent.

"Never," he said, voice low and almost dangerous, "tempt me again, Erin Gibson."

Yet even his warning couldn't stifle the flicker of triumph in her chest, nor could it silence the whisper of her heart that wondered what it would mean to yield—not out of duty, but out of a blooming, reckless desire.

The room echoed with the unspoken words between them and with tension that hummed like the strings of a fiddle before the dance began, leaving Erin to wonder what tomorrow might bring after a night that had changed everything they thought they knew about themselves.

"Agreed," Erin's voice danced through the thick air, a teasing lilt to her Scottish brogue that belied the rapid tattoo of her heart against her chest. She arched an eyebrow, her blue eyes sparkling with mischief and something more—a daring challenge.

Magnus's breath hitched, his gaze still smoldering from the intensity of their shared transgression. He was a storm contained in the flesh, every line of his body taut with restrained power. The heat from his skin seemed to brand her, even as the space between them crackled with the unspeakable.

"Ye'd best be careful, lass," he growled, "or ye'll find yerself in a storm ye cannae control."

"Perhaps I'm countin' on it," she whispered back, her tone light but her resolve as strong as the ancient stones of their Highland home.

The room around them bore silent witness to their union—candles flickering like distant stars, casting shadows over the simple yet elegant tapestries that adorned the walls. The scent of roasted meats and sweet bannocks from the wedding feast reminded them of the traditions that had brought them here and the vows they now wove together with actions rather than words.

"Ye're playin' a dangerous game, Erin Gibson," Magnus warned, but she could see how his lips twitched, the hint of a smile fighting against the stern set of his jaw.

"Oh, perhaps I am," she conceded, stepping closer, drawn to him as if by the tide's pull. "But isn't life itself a game, Magnus Black? And what is a wife if not yer most formidable opponent?"

"Opponent?" His voice rumbled like distant thunder, and she could tell she'd struck a chord within him. "Nay, lass... partner, perhaps." The admission hung between them, a fragile thing waiting to be shattered or cherished.

"Partner, then," she agreed, allowing herself a small smile. Her previous thoughts of flight, of escape from this man who was both beast and savior, dissipated like morning mist in the warmth of the rising sun.

"Partner," he echoed, and for a heartbeat, she saw the glimmer of the man beneath the scars, the hero hidden behind the torment.

She reached out tentatively, her fingertips brushing against the rough stubble of his cheek. Magnus closed his eyes, a shudder coursing through him at her touch. It was a moment of vulnerability, of connection that transcended their circumstances.

"Erin," he said, his voice a deep thrum that resonated within her, "ye daenae ken what ye're askin' for."

"Maybe I do," she countered, her gaze locked with his. "And maybe ye daenae ken what ye're offerin'."

Their breathing filled the room, a testament to the life they would navigate together, bound by duty and tethered by an emerging bond neither fully understood.

"Get some rest," he finally murmured, a gentle command laced with concern. "Tomorrow comes early."

As Erin slipped under the covers of her bed, her mind raced with possibilities. Each day with Magnus was a step into the unknown, and though fear nipped at her heels, the thrill of the journey—the challenge of taming and being tamed by this Highland beast—held a promise far too enticing to ignore. But as uncertain as the journey was, she would face it within the castle's walls.

"Until the morrow indeed," she murmured to herself, a smile playing on her lips as she drifted towards sleep. The cliff's edge of tomorrow's uncertainties loomed, calling to her adventurous spirit.

Magnus stalked through the stone corridors of his keep, his mind as turbulent as the storm brewing over the Highlands. He had seen the beauty of his wife's body. Her toned thighs opened for him on his command, her silky soft skin glistening under the candlelight. She had followed his instructions with such trust and devotion. She had driven him to completion with the merest touch, and then he had kissed her. The thick and cold walls had witnessed many a McCormack battle, but none so confounding as the one he now faced within his own soul. He would have to double down on his efforts to avoid his wife, to counter his weak will.

"Ye look like ye've been kissin' thistles instead of yer bonnie bride," Scarlett's voice cut through the din of his thoughts, every bit as sharp as her fiery hair suggested.

"Mind yer own affairs, Scarlett," Magnus grumbled, trying to sidestep his sister, but she matched his stride with an ease that irked him.

"Yer bride seems to be doin' just fine makin' herself at home," she observed, a glint of mischief in her eyes. "I saw her helpin' Josie's bairns with their readin'. And they quite fancy her."

"Is that so?" Magnus couldn't care less about Erin's appeal to the children, but the knot in his stomach tightened at the thought of her getting closer to Scarlett. He didn't need two clever lasses conspiring under his roof. Especially with his ability to resist Erin running at an all time low.

"Indeed," Scarlett confirmed with a nod. "But 'tis not the young ones I'd worry about

if I were ye, brother. 'Tis the wife who's got ye dancin' on hot coals."

He stopped abruptly, turning to face his sister with a glare meant to silence her, but she merely raised a brow in defiance. Magnus continued down the hall, knowing he couldn't escape the truth in her words.

In the great hall, Erin awaited him, her presence commanding despite her calm exterior. Her wavy brown locks cascaded over her shoulders, framing blue eyes that sparkled with unspoken challenge.

"Good morn, Laird McCormack," Erin's voice danced across the table, laced with a teasing lilt that made the muscles in Magnus's arm tense as he carved into the venison before him.

"Erin," he grunted, acknowledging her presence with a nod but little more. He flushed at the memory of her naked body before him, the sound of her moans as she neared completion. He had never planned for these shared meals to become an exercise in restraint, nor had he imagined that his bride's company would prove so... disconcerting.

"Ye look as if ye've seen a wraith this fine morn," she observed, her eyes narrowing playfully while she sipped from her watered wine.

"Perhaps I have," Magnus retorted dryly, taking a bite of his food—a traditional bannock, still warm from the hearth. The meal should have been a simple affair, not a verbal joust.

"Oh, and here I thought 'twas only beauty that could tame the beast," Erin quipped, leaning forward just enough to let the light kiss her features, casting shadows that played upon the contours of her curvy form.

Magnus's hand stilled, his fork pausing midway to his mouth. Aye, she knew exactly what she was doing, baiting him with the tale as old as time itself—the beauty and the beast—yet their story was twisted, their roles uncertain.

"Ye ken nothing of beasts, lass," he said, his voice low and steady, meeting her gaze with an intensity that sought to remind her of the vast chasm between them.

"Maybe so, but I am willing to learn," she replied, her voice a whisper of silk against the rough-hewn stone walls.

"I have a way with the sword, me laird," she said, gesturing to the blade at his side. "'Tis a pity ye daenae use it to cut through yer own broodin'."

"Would ye have me turn the blade on myself then?" Magnus retorted, the corner of his mouth twitching involuntarily at her audacity.

"Perhaps 'twould free whatever beast ye keep chained inside," she shot back, stepping closer, her gaze never leaving his.

"Careful, lass," he warned, his voice low, his defenses straining against her proximity. "Ye might not like the beast ye find."

"Or perhaps I'm the only one who can tame it," Erin whispered boldly.

Their eyes locked, and for a moment, the world fell away—the stone walls, the distant clash of swords in training, the whispers of intrigue—all faded before the intensity of her gaze. Magnus felt the beast within stir, eager, hungry for the challenge she presented.

Then, the spell was broken by the hurried footsteps of his councilman, Reggie Hogg, approaching with a furrowed brow. "Laird," he panted, bowing hastily. "I bear ill

news."

Magnus turned sharply, his protective instincts flaring. "Speak."

"Upon the day of yer weddin', a significant amount of crops were destroyed in yer tenant's land. 'Tis a heavy loss."

"Destroyed? By what means?" Magnus demanded, his gut clenching.

"'Tis yet uncertain, me laird," Regie replied, a note of hesitance in his voice, as though he held back a grim 'I told ye so.'

"Then find out," Magnus ordered, his tone brooking no argument. He could feel Erin's eyes on him, but he refused to meet her gaze.

"'Tis it nae the duty of the laird to—"

"Ye seem rather pleased to be the harbinger of doom, Reggie. Does me misfortune warm yer heart?" Magnus's voice was ice, his gaze piercing.

Reggie bristled, affronted by the accusation. "I am naught but loyal to this clan. But I warned ye?—"

"Enough!" Magnus cut him off, his hand clenched at his side. "I'll hear nae more of yer veiled 'I told ye sos'. If yer loyalty is true, work to aid those affected, else hold yer tongue."

"Of course, me laird," Reggie said, bowing again, though the disapproval in his eyes spoke volumes.

As Reggie departed, the silence hung heavy between the wedded couple. Magnus's

jaw tightened, the news of the destroyed crops another blow in a never-ending siege. Yet, amid the turmoil, Erin's image danced mockingly at the edge of his thoughts—a siren among the wreckage, her laughter the only sound in the deafening silence.

“I’ll leave ye to yer work, husband.”

Magnus clenched his jaw as Erin sauntered across the grand hall, her wavy brown hair cascading over her shoulders like the tumbling waters of the River Spey. She was a vision that unsettled him more than any battle ever had. At the lengthy wooden table, she took her seat across from him with the grace of a fawn settling in a meadow, yet the mischief in her blue eyes forewarned of storms on the horizon.

Magnus stormed through the shadowed corridors of the castle, his mind a tempest as fierce as the Highland gales that battered the ancient stones. The scent of peat from the hearth fires did little to soothe the tumult within him; it was as though Erin’s mischievous grin had etched itself into his very soul, igniting a fire he could not quench.

"Brother," Hayden called out, trailing behind Magnus with a lightness in his step that belied the gravity of their situation. "Ye look as if ye've been wrestling with the devil himself."

"Would ye please speak not of things ye do not understand," Magnus growled without breaking stride.

Hayden caught up, matching his brother's pace. "Come now. Ye cannae tell me there's naught but fire and brimstone between ye and yer bonnie wife."

"Yer jests are ill-timed, Hayden." Magnus’ voice was a low rumble, his patience fraying like the hem of an old battle flag.

"Ye ken she is nae enemy, Magnus. 'Tis time ye let go of the shadows of the past," Hayden ventured, his tone earnest, daring to tread where few would.

The words struck a chord deep within Magnus, resonating with a truth he loathed to admit. He halted abruptly, his broad shoulders rigid, eyes blazing with an anger rooted in pain long buried. "Mind yer own affairs, Hayden. Do nae presume to ken what haunts me?"

"So it is not a certain lady who-"

"Nay." Magnus snapped, his hands clenching in to fists. "'Tis the crops destroyed on the tenant's farm that vexes me."

"Crops?" Hayden replied, taken unawares by the news. "Apologies brother. I would nae jest at such a time."

"Ye were nae to ken." Magnus nodded, his frayed temper soothing.

"Ye should speak with her, Magnus," Hayden said softly, breaking the hush. "She might offer comfort."

"Comfort is nae what I seek," Magnus muttered, though in his heart, he knew it was a lie.

But he wouldn't find what he sought. There was nowhere in the castle that seemed to be free of Erin's cheerful laugh. The sound drove a feeling of despair through Magnus, not because he wanted to avoid his wife, but because he knew the feelings her presence would stir in him. She glanced up, her eyes meeting his, and a knowing smile crossed her lips as if she could see the turmoil within him.

"Brother, yer wife is a bonny one and clever too," Hayden remarked, half in jest,

though the observation hung in the air like a challenge.

"Observant, are ye?" Magnus responded briefly, feeling the weight of Hayden's scrutiny. His brother had always been keen at sensing the undercurrents of tension that Magnus strove to keep buried.

"Only when there's a storm brewin'," Hayden replied, his gaze flickering between Magnus and Erin. "And methinks there's more than just the Highlands' weather to worry about."

"Mind yer own affairs, Hayden," Magnus growled, directing his attention back to his plate as if the food held the answers to the riddle that was Erin.

"Ah, but when the laird's heart is caught in a tempest, 'tis the clan's concern as well," Hayden said softly, almost too low for the servants to overhear.

"Enough!" Magnus's voice thundered through the hall, causing even the most seasoned warriors to pause and glance up from their meals.

Erin, however, remained unfazed, her smile never wavering, as though she found delight in the storm they created together. Magnus could feel the beast within clawing at the surface, yearning for release. But he would not grant it the satisfaction—not here, not now.

"Ye have a strange way of showing concern, brother," Magnus muttered, his words clipped as he pushed away from the table, leaving his meal unfinished.

"Perhaps, but sometimes 'tis the strange ways that lead to truth," Hayden replied, his voice barely reaching Magnus as he strode out of the hall. The echo of his boots against the stone floor was a testament to the fury he fought to contain.

With each step, the walls of Dunmore Keep closed around him, a fortress meant to protect, now a prison of his own making. And as he vanished into the dim corridor, his mind reeled not with the matters of crops or coups but with the enigma of a wife who seemed to draw him ever closer to the edge of reason.

The crackling hearth was the only sound filling the great hall, where Erin sat nursing a cup of mead, her eyes following her husband's tall, broad-shouldered figure as he moved with purposeful strides across the room. Magnus, the laird and her unexpected spouse acted as though the wedding bed they had almost shared just nights ago was a distant memory—a fleeting duty rather than a union of passion.

Erin sipped the sweet liquid, feeling its warmth slide down her throat, much like the simmering frustration that heated her blood. She was determined to shatter the facade of indifference he wore like his clan's tartan. The firelight danced in her blue eyes, reflecting a silent challenge as she stood, setting her cup aside.

"Ye seem to have forgotten somethin' important, me lord," she said, her voice carrying the lilt of the Highlands, tinged with an impatience she seldom let show.

Magnus turned, his piercing gaze meeting hers. "And what might that be, me lady?" he asked, his tone guarded.

"Yer wife."

She closed the distance between them, her hips swaying with a grace that belied her inner turmoil. Erin reached for the silver brooch pinned at his shoulder, the intricate thistle emblem catching the light. Her fingers brushed against the wool of his plaid, grazing his chest underneath. The contact was brief, but she saw his jaw tighten, the only sign that he was not made of stone.

"Does it nae warm yer heart to see me wearin' the tartan of yer clan?" she teased, letting her hand linger longer than necessary.

"Aye, 'tis a bonny sight," he conceded, his voice low, a hint of the storm brewing beneath his calm exterior.

"Then why do ye keep yerself at arm's length from me, Magnus? Am I nae yer wife in more than name?"

"Erin, we are bound by duty, naught else." His words were clipped, but his eyes betrayed him, darkening with a need he fought to control.

"Perhaps," she countered, stepping closer, close enough to feel the heat radiating from his body. "But even a marriage of convenience can benefit from... warmer relations."

His breath hitched ever-so-slightly as she rose on her tiptoes, her lips hovering mere inches from his. Erin could feel his resolve wavering, could sense the beast within him stirring. It was dangerous ground she tread upon, tempting the wounded soul behind the hardened facade.

"Ye may act the part of the unmovable mountain, laird, but even the mightiest peaks cannae resist the wind's caress." Her whisper was a feather across his senses, a challenge wrapped in velvet.

"Erin..." His voice was strained, and she thought she had him for a moment.

But then, as though snapping from a trance, Magnus stepped back, putting space between them again. "Duty is all there is," he said, yet his eyes held a stormy sea of conflict.

Erin watched him retreat behind his wall of stoicism, her heart pounding in her chest. Aye, he was every bit the beast, and she the unwilling beauty, trapped in a dance neither knew the steps to. But as Erin stood there, the fire crackling in the hearth, a spark ignited within her—a determination to climb that mountain, to brave the winds, and to awaken the man behind the beast. She had seen the man inside, and instead of wanting to run from this situation, she longed to unearth the man hiding under the cold, gruff exterior.

As Magnus disappeared through the doorway, Erin's resolve hardened. She would not let this be the end of their tale. She would find a way to reach him, to bind their fates with duty and desire.

And with that final, defiant thought, Erin turned away from the empty hall, her skirts whispering secrets of the battle yet to come.

Erin's footsteps were silent as she navigated the cool stone corridors of the keep. The walls, adorned with tapestries that told tales of ancient Scottish valor, seemed to whisper secrets of bygone eras. Her mind was a tumultuous sea, caught between frustration and an unresolved yearning for her husband—Magnus, the stoic Laird McCormack who had become her tormentor and protector.

The crisp scent of heather and earth greeted her as she emerged into the open air. The sprawling grounds of the clan's territory unfolded before her, shrouded in the misty veil of early morning. There, amidst the rugged beauty of the highlands, she noticed two figures locked in heated discourse.

Magnus stood like an immovable force, his broad shoulders squared against the older man before him—Reggie Hogg, councilman and thorn in Magnus's side. Their voices carried on the wind, but the words were indistinct, blurred by the distance and the low rumble of men at work in the nearby fields.

"Something's amiss," Erin murmured to herself, her brow furrowing as she watched her husband's jaw tense with each word Reggie spat out.

"Ye have sharp eyes, me lady," came a voice from behind her, smooth and unsettling. Caelan Ward, the charming yet duplicitous man-at-arms, approached with a wolfish grin that never reached his cold blue eyes.

"What troubles them?" Erin asked, keeping her gaze locked on the distant argument. She could feel Caelan's calculating presence beside her, a reminder that not all dangers were clear as day.

"The crops," Caelan answered, his voice carrying a note of feigned concern. "They've been poor this season. Some think the laird hasn't done enough, that he's too busy with other... distractions." His implication hung heavy between them, and Erin's cheeks flushed with anger and shame.

"Distractions?" she challenged, turning to face him, her pride pricking at his insinuation.

"Aye, lass. Ye ken what folk say. A new wife can turn any man's head from his duties." Caelan's smirk widened, but his eyes remained as calculating as ever.

"Then they know nothing of the man I married," Erin retorted, her voice laced with ice. Magnus was many things—cold, distant, even harsh—but neglectful he was not.

"Perhaps," Caelan conceded, watching her with an unnerving intensity. "But perception is often stronger than truth. And right now, the clansmen are displeased."

Erin's gaze drifted back to Magnus, who now stood with his hands clenched at his sides, the muscles in his jaw working silently. He was indeed a beast, but one whose burdens were many and whose scars ran deeper than the flesh. Yet beneath that

rugged exterior, Erin sensed a flicker of something more—a fire that matched her own.

"Thank ye, Caelan," she said curtly, dismissing him with a nod before setting off towards her husband and the councilman. With every step, her determination grew. She would stand by Magnus and show the clansmen the strength of their laird and his lady united. And perhaps, in doing so, she could chip away at the fortress around his heart.

His glare sharpened as Reggie caught sight of her approach, but Erin met it with the grace and defiance of a true Highland lass. She would not be cowed.

"Is there trouble, me husband?" she called out, letting her concern show as she neared the pair. However, the underlying current of her words spoke of solidarity, of unwavering support in the face of disagreement.

Magnus's gaze met hers, and for a heartbeat, she saw the tempest raging within him. But then, it was gone, shuttered behind the mask of the laird. Reggie turned and stomped away, leaving a palpable tension in his wake.

"Trouble always finds its way, lass," Magnus replied, a low rumble of thunder echoing across the glen. "But we'll weather it together, as we must." Magnus gave a nod to his wife and continued on his way.

Erin watched Magnus, his broad shoulders set against the highland breeze that tossed his long black hair. His presence was a beacon of strength to their people, yet the trouble brewing like a storm on the horizon was plain to see. She felt the weight of expectation upon her as she considered her role in this new life, bound to a man whose heart seemed as untamed as the land he ruled.

"Ye ken, me lady," Caelan's voice cut through her thoughts, smooth as the loch's

surface on a windless day. "Times such as these, the folk need somethin' to unite them. A celebration of sorts."

Erin turned to face him, intrigued. "A celebration?"

"Aye. Tartan Day." His eyes sparkled with cunning. "An opportunity to show the people who their new lady is. Ye could plan a feast, games, perhaps a bonfire. 'Tis an ancient tradition, and it might just bring everyone together."

The idea sparked something within Erin. It was more than just a distraction—it was a chance to weave herself into the fabric of this clan, to earn their respect and affection. An opportunity to stand beside Magnus not just as his wife in name but as a partner in truth.

"Thank ye, Caelan," she said, her voice steady despite the fluttering in her chest. "I believe I shall take yer advice."

Without waiting for a response, Erin strode towards Magnus, her tartan skirts swishing around her ankles. As she reached him, she fought the urge to reach out, to offer comfort through touch. Instead, she stood close enough for him to feel the warmth of her, her gaze locked onto his.

"Ye look troubled, me husband," she said, letting her concern color her words.

Magnus regarded her with those deep brown eyes, the eyes that seemed to hold centuries of sorrow. "Aye, the blight has taken much from us. It's our people I'm thinkin' on."

"Then let us give them something to celebrate," Erin countered, her voice laced with determination. "Let us host a Tartan Day. A day to forget their worries, to come together as one. What say ye?"

She watched his stoic exterior wavered, a muscle twitching in his jaw. Erin held her breath. Here she lay bare her intent to bridge the distance between them, to become more than just another duty for him to manage.

Magnus's following words would either open the gates to a shared future or reinforce the walls that kept them apart—the silent moments stretched between them, taut as a bowstring.

"Perhaps ye are right, Erin. We'll give them a day to remember," he finally said, the corners of his mouth lifting ever so slightly.

Her heart leapt at the victory, small as it might be, and she allowed herself to imagine what it would be like to stand with Magnus truly, united before their people. But even as hope flickered to life, Erin knew the path ahead would be fraught with challenges—challenges they would have to face together.

They stood together, watching out across the moors towards the village. Erin's gaze followed Reggie Hogg's retreating figure as he stalked away, his glare still burning into her like the searing touch of a brand. She could feel the weight of his disapproval, as tangible as the Scottish mist that clung to the highlands. Even the air around them seemed charged with tension, ready to ignite at the smallest spark.

"Reggie does not take kindly to change," Magnus remarked, his voice low and resonant. She knew his statement was an understatement, but it did little to ease the knot of apprehension in her stomach.

"Nor do those who challenge his authority," Erin added, her eyes still tracking the councilman's departure. Turning to face Magnus, she saw something in his expression, a fleeting shadow that spoke of his burdens. She wondered if Reggie's harsh words had struck deeper than Magnus would ever admit.

"Ye have a way of seeing beneath the surface, lass," Magnus said, almost as if he read her thoughts. His gaze on her was intense, stirring a warmth that she found both unsettling and exhilarating.

"Someone has to," she replied with a hint of playfulness, trying to lighten the mood. "The land reflects its laird, Magnus. If the people are discontent, it reflects their leader's spirit."

"Ye think me a poor leader then?" His question was direct, almost challenging, but she heard the undercurrent of vulnerability beneath the gruff exterior.

"No, I think ye're a man who's been dealt a difficult hand and has played it as best he can." Erin stepped closer, her heart pounding in a wild rhythm. This close, she could see the fine lines etched around his eyes, marks of responsibility and strife. "But sometimes, showing strength is not just about wielding power—it's about offering yer hand."

"Is that what ye propose? To offer me hand to the farmers?" Magnus tilted his head, curiosity lighting his dark eyes.

"Exactly." Erin nodded, her resolve strengthening. "We should visit the farms, listen to their concerns, show them that their laird and his lady stand with them. Let them see the man I see—one who cares deeply for his clan."

Magnus considered her words, the setting sun casting a warm glow over his scarred features. For a moment, Erin thought he might refuse, retreating behind the walls he had built around himself. But then, slowly, he nodded.

"Aye, we'll go to them," he agreed, his voice firm. "Together."

Erin's breath caught in her throat at the significance of that word—together. It was

more than a gesture; it was a commitment, a step towards something neither of them fully understood, but both desperately needed.

"Tomorrow, at first light," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Tomorrow," Magnus echoed, sealing their pact.

As they stood there, two souls bound by duty and an emerging, fragile trust, Erin felt the ground shift beneath her feet. Tomorrow's journey would either forge their bond stronger or shatter it completely. And as the shadows lengthened, wrapping the world in twilight's embrace, Erin knew that come sunrise, nothing would be the same.

Magnus led his new bride down the winding path to the village, his long black hair stirring in the brisk Highland breeze. The village itself nestled like a slumbering beast among the rolling moors, its stone cottages bordering narrow streets that wove between them like threads in a tartan. Smoke curled lazily from chimneys, carrying the scent of peat fires and freshly baked bannocks.

Erin walked beside him, her stride confident despite the unfamiliar terrain. Her gaze lingered on the vibrant green hills and the distant purple heather, a stark contrast to her own pale beauty. She looked every bit the outsider in this rugged land, yet she possessed an independence that Magnus begrudgingly admired.

"Ye ken how to walk among sheep without startlin' them?" he quipped, the corners of his mouth twitching with the hint of a smile. It was their first venture out together since the wedding.

"Better than ye ken how to give a compliment, I wager," Erin retorted, her eyes dancing with mirth. There it was again, that spark of banter that ignited something within him he thought long dead.

As they approached, villagers paused in their daily tasks, watching the pair with open curiosity. Children halted their games, and women with aprons dusted with flour smiled warmly at Erin. To Magnus's surprise, his wife returned their greetings with a grace that belied her independent spirit. She chatted with the old weaver about the patterns in her shawl, laughed with the baker as she sampled a scone, and crouched down to whisper tales of mythic beasts to wide-eyed bairns.

"Yer wife has a way about her, Laird," old Angus, the blacksmith, commented gruffly as he clapped Magnus on the back. "A true heart for the people."

Magnus watched, a strange tightness forming in his chest. His father had been feared, not loved, but here was Erin, winning hearts with naught but her charm and a genuine interest in the lives of others. Did she not know how dangerous it was to show such openness? Yet, there was no denying the warmth that spread through the village at her presence.

His stoic facade began to crack, just a fraction, as he observed her. Perhaps she would be good for the clan, for these people who had suffered under the shadow of his father's cruelty. Maybe, just maybe, she could thaw the frost that had settled over his own soul.

"Thank ye, Angus," Magnus replied with a curt nod, unable to express the turmoil of thoughts swirling within him. It was unsettling, this feeling that crept up on him—the pride in his wife.

Magnus watched as Erin stood among his people, her eyes alight with a blend of determination and warmth that he had not anticipated from her. Her voice carried across the cluster of villagers gathered in the square, her Scottish brogue melodic yet commanding attention.

"Ye have welcomed me into yer hearts and homes," she began, her gaze sweeping over the faces before her. "And so, it is only right that I fully embrace the traditions of Clan McCormack."

A murmur of curiosity rippled through the crowd, and Magnus felt himself lean forward ever so slightly, intrigued despite himself.

"Let us celebrate our history, our strength, and the tartan that unites us," Erin

continued, her hands gesturing with a passion that seemed to ignite the air itself. "I propose we hold a Tartan Day celebration, where each of ye will wear the proud colors of our clan!"

The village erupted in cheers and applause. The men slapped each other on the backs, the women's faces brightened with smiles, and children jumped excitedly at the thought of festivities. It was a scene of camaraderie that had long been absent from this place.

"Feasting, games, tales by the fire," Erin listed with enthusiasm growing. "And for those brave enough, a test of skill with the caber toss!"

Magnus could see the way their spirits lifted, how her words painted pictures of a day filled with laughter and unity—a stark contrast to the years of fear his father had instilled. It was as if Erin was weaving a spell, not just over the villagers, but over him as well.

"Will ye stand with us, Laird McCormack?" she called out to him, her blue eyes locking onto his with an intensity that sent a jolt through his core.

He wanted to respond with his usual detachment, to offer a nod and retreat into the shadows of his stoic facade. But the spark of excitement in her eyes and the genuine affection they held for her—it made his chest tighten with an unfamiliar sense of pride.

"Aye," Magnus replied, his voice low yet clear. "I will stand with ye."

Erin's smile, radiant and triumphant, was like a sunburst through the clouds. The villagers cheered once again, some already discussing plans and preparations for the feast. They were united, not just in name, but in spirit, and it was all because of the woman who'd come into their lives like a fresh Highland breeze.

As the initial excitement wore off and his people returned to their mundane tasks, Erin smiled at him, her eyes seeking his approval, which he gave in the form of a nod.

For once, he allowed himself to feel the full weight of his position—not as a laird hardened by battle and betrayal, but as a man, flawed and yearning for connection.

The late afternoon sun dipped lower, casting long shadows over the stone-laden paths as Magnus and Erin made their way back to the keep. The air was crisp, hinting at the chill of evening, yet the warmth from the villagers' reception lingered with them. They walked side by side in comfortable silence, a shared sense of accomplishment bridging the distance that had once yawned wide between them.

"Ye've done well today, lass," Magnus finally broke the silence, his voice deep and resonant in the quiet. His words were few, but they carried the weight of genuine gratitude.

Erin glanced up at him, her cheeks flushed with a rosy hue that rivaled the dying light. "Thank ye, Laird McCormack. 'Twas nothing but what any wife would do for her clan."

Magnus's gaze lingered on the blush that graced Erin's features, something stirring within him—a feeling he had no name for, as it was foreign to the battle-hardened chambers of his heart. Her independence, her fierce spirit that had intrigued him from the start, now seemed to weave itself into the very fabric of his being.

"Ye are unlike any other, Erin," he admitted, his words unintentional, slipping out like renegade soldiers from behind fortress walls. "I... I am beholden to ye."

Her eyes widened, a softness there he had not seen before. Magnus braced himself for a sharp retort, a witty comeback that would put distance between them once more. But instead, she bit her lip, a gesture that bespoke nerves rather than defiance.

"Speaking of which..." Erin began tentatively, her fingers twisting the hem of her plaid. "Would ye...help me with the preparations for the Tartan Day? There's much to be done, and?—"

"Ye wish me help?" Magnus cut in, surprise etching his features. The idea of engaging in festivities was alien to him, a frivolous use of time he would have scoffed at before. But looking at Erin now, her hopeful gaze searching his, he found himself unable to deny her anything.

"Aye, I will help ye," he agreed, the words gruff but underscored by an unspoken promise. He could refuse her nothing, it seemed—a dangerous realization for a man who prided himself on control.

A brilliant smile broke across Erin's face—the kind of smile that spoke of victories won and barriers broken. It was then that Magnus knew, despite the scars that marred his soul, he was perilously close to surrendering to something greater than duty or honor.

"Thank ye, Magnus," she said softly, her voice caressing his name like a balm.

He nodded, the corner of his mouth lifting in the ghost of a smile. And as they reached the heavy oak doors of the keep, Magnus felt the pull of an unseen force, guiding him toward a future he had never dared to imagine—one filled with laughter, warmth, and perhaps, if fate allowed, love.

But as the doors closed behind them, sealing them in the dim corridors of the ancient stronghold, Magnus couldn't shake the foreboding thought that haunted him: In opening his heart, had he also opened the gates to potential ruin? The question lingered, a silent specter in the gathering darkness, as he followed Erin into the depths of his ancestral home.

"Ye put much effort into what will amount to naught but wasted breath," a gruff voice rumbled behind her.

Erin spun around to face Reggie Hogg, the councilman whose disapproval was as familiar as the heather on the hillsides. His brows were knitted in perpetual judgment, his lips downturned in scorn.

"Every endeavor is worthy if it brings peace, Councilman," Erin replied, her voice steady though her insides churned.

Reggie snorted, crossing his arms over his broad chest. "Peace? This is nae more than a festive distraction. Ye think a few colorful ribbons and a belly full of food will soothe the hearts of men who've harbored grievances for generations?"

Erin's jaw clenched at his condescension. She felt the sting of his words, the seeds of doubt threatening to sprout within her. But she would not let him see her falter.

"Perhaps ye underestimate the power of tradition and fellowship," she retorted, meeting his gaze squarely. "Or perhaps ye have forgotten the strength of our people when bound by common cause."

"Or perhaps ye are too naive to understand the depth of our strife." Reggie's voice was cold as a winter's loch, his eyes sharp as flint.

The air between them crackled with tension, the undercurrent of their mutual disdain

palpable. Yet Erin stood her ground, unwilling to cede to his bleak outlook. She turned away, her hands resuming their work with renewed vigor, even as her mind raced with the implications of his challenge.

"Ye'll see," she murmured under her breath, her fingers working deftly. "This day will bring us together. It must."

Unseen by Erin, Reggie's eyes lingered on her form, a begrudging respect flickering in their depths before he turned and strode away. Erin watched him go, her resolve hardening. She would prove him wrong, for the sake of the clan and her place within it.

As the sun dipped lower in the sky, casting long shadows across the stone walls of the keep, Erin's preparations were complete. Yet the weight of Reggie's doubt hung over her like an impending storm, darkening the horizon of her hopes.

Her once happy thoughts of mingling with the villagers turned to an image of hushed whispers behind her back. Erin took a deep breath. The celebration would begin soon, and that night would reveal whether her efforts would forge a path to unity or widen the chasm of discord.

Erin paced the stone-flagged corridor outside the great hall, her mind a tumultuous sea after her encounter with Reggie Hogg. The tartan swatches she'd sewn together for the celebration lay heavy in her hands, now symbols of her waning confidence rather than unity.

"Maybe he's right," she whispered to herself, the flickering torchlight casting her shadow long and distorted against the wall. "What if this does nae bring peace but stirs the blood further?"

She could almost hear Reggie's gruff voice echoing his disapproval, the validity of

his arguments piercing through the veil of her optimism like a dirk. Erin clenched her fists, the fabric crumpling beneath her fingers as doubt gnawed at her resolve. She had poured every ounce of her spirit into these preparations, but now the possibility of failure loomed like a specter in the twilight.

The evening waned, and the castle settled into a restless silence. Sleep eluded Erin, her thoughts ensnared by the fear of what tomorrow might bring. With a sigh that carried the weight of her worries, she made a decision, her feet carrying her towards the one place she had hoped to avoid—Magnus' chambers.

As she approached the heavy oaken door, her heart pounded against her ribcage. She hesitated, her hand hovering over the iron ring that would announce her presence. Erin hesitated at the door to Magnus' chambers, taking a deep breath scented with the peat smoke that permeated the keep, she steeled herself, her hand trembling as she lifted it towards the door and knocked softly. The argument with Reggie had left a bitter taste in her mouth, and the unease that gnawed at her gut had driven her here in search of solace—or perhaps confrontation. With a fortifying breath, she let the knocker fall, the sound echoing through the stone corridors, a harbinger of the tumult in her heart.

"Enter," came the deep, resonant command from within.

Erin pushed open the door, stepping into the laird's private quarters. The door creaked open, revealing Magnus, his imposing frame silhouetted against the flickering candlelight within. His brow furrowed with concern as he took in her disheveled appearance.

"Erin?" he queried, his voice a deep timbre that seemed to vibrate through her. The room was sparsely furnished, a testament to Magnus Black's stoic nature. A large bed dominated the space, its wooden frame carved with ancient Pictish symbols, and furs piled atop to ward off the night's chill. Magnus himself sat by the fire, his broad

shoulders outlined by the flames that danced in the hearth.

"Can ye not sleep either?" she asked, her voice betraying the vulnerability she so often concealed.

Magnus looked up, his keen brown eyes searching hers. There was an intensity in his gaze that spoke of battles fought and scars borne, both visible and hidden.

"Ye shouldnae be here, lass," he said, his tone gruff, yet not unkind. The space between them crackled with an energy that seemed to pull her closer, despite the invisible barriers they had erected around themselves.

"I know," Erin admitted, her own eyes refusing to look away. "But I needed...I needed to talk to someone."

In the flickering light, the lines of Magnus' face softened ever so slightly—a silent invitation that spoke louder than words. Erin moved towards him, drawn by the warmth of the fire and the enigmatic man before her, their mutual stubbornness giving way to the need for connection, however fleeting it might be.

"Reggie thinks this celebration will end in disaster," she confessed, the words tumbling out in a rush. "And I fear he may be right."

"Reggie is a bitter old man," Magnus replied curtly. But there was a question in his eyes, a silent acknowledgment of her concern.

"Perhaps," Erin conceded. "But even bitter men ken the truth sometimes."

A log cracked in the fireplace, punctuating the tension that hung between them. Erin felt the heat of the blaze on her skin, a mirror to the heat rising within her, fueled by proximity and the raw magnetism of the laird.

"Ye should go back to yer room, Erin," Magnus said, but the command lacked conviction, his voice a low rumble that seemed to resonate with something primal inside her.

"Maybe I should," she whispered, yet neither of them moved. The air between them thickened, charged with the unspoken desires and fears that tethered their souls together in this uncertain world. "But Reggie's words have planted seeds of doubt," she admitted, stepping into the warmth of his room, the scent of peat from the hearth mingling with the earthy aroma of his presence. "I fear the celebration could do more harm than good."

Magnus's expression hardened, his eyes reflecting the same stubborn resolve that had seen him through countless battles and clan disputes. "Ye worry too much. The feast will be grand, and it'll remind the clan of their unity."

"Will it?" Erin pressed, feeling the weight of her responsibility as if it were the great tartans woven by the hands of the clan's women—each thread a symbol of their hopes and fears. "Or will it be a reminder of divisions, a feast served upon a table of resentments?"

His gaze locked onto hers, a silent battle of wills beneath which smoldered an intensity that belied their uneasy alliance. Erin felt the pull of it, the inexplicable draw to this man who was both her husband and her adversary.

"Ye speak of disaster as if ye wish it so," he said, his voice betraying a hint of accusation.

"Never," she countered, her own passion flaring. "But I cannot ignore the whispers, nor the looks cast our way. This celebration is a Highland sword that could either defend or cut deeply."

Magnus stepped closer, the heat of his body a contrast to the chill of fear that gripped her. "And what would ye have me do? Cancel the festivities? Admit defeat before we've even begun?"

His stubbornness was maddening, yet it was the very thing that compelled her respect—and ignited the embers of something far more dangerous within her soul.

"Listen to them, Magnus," she urged softly. "Understand their hearts as well as their strength. It may be the only way to prevent further strife."

For a moment, Erin saw the flicker of uncertainty in his eyes, the briefest crack in the armor he wore so well. But then it was gone, replaced by the implacable mask of the laird.

"Ye forget yer place, wife," he said, though the words lacked the bite she expected.

"Perhaps," she allowed, standing her ground despite the tremor in her voice. "But I have not forgotten why we are bound together. Our fates, like our lands, are now one and the same."

Their eyes remained locked, a silent storm raging between them, each lost in the other's depths. And as the evening drew to a close, so too did the distance between them, until all that remained was the space of a heartbeat—a precipice of longing and defiance where the next step could lead to ruin or rapture.

Erin watched as Magnus paced the length of his chamber towards her, his steps as fierce and unyielding as the crags of the Highlands themselves. The torchlight flickered across his broad shoulders, casting shadows that danced upon the stone walls—a silent ballet of light and darkness that echoed the turmoil in her own heart.

"Ye daenae ken what yer talkin' about, woman," Magnus finally spat out, turning to face her with eyes ablaze. "I am nae some weakling laird who bows to the whims of a cantankerous old man. Me standing amongst me people is strong."

His voice was a bellow, resonating through the room like the roar of a winter storm against the castle's sturdy battlements. Yet, Erin stood firm, her hands clenched at her sides, refusing to wilt under the force of his conviction.

"Reggie Hogg may be bitter and harsh," she began, her words deliberate, "but he speaks for more than just himself. If we ignore his counsel, it'll be seen as prideful arrogance. It's nae weakness to listen, 'tis wisdom."

"Is it wisdom, or is it ye trying to please everyone?" he countered. His gaze never wavered, and his question hung heavy in the air, challenging her resolve.

"Even on our wedding day, amidst the skirl of bagpipes and sweet scent of thistles, I knew this union was borne of necessity, not desire." She caught her breath, feeling the sting of truth in her words. "But I accepted it, for the good of our clans."

"Ye did," Magnus acknowledged with a curt nod, his voice softening only a fraction.

"And as me wife?—"

"Yer wife?" Erin cut him off, her patience fraying. "Ach, do not speak to me of titles when there has been naught but duty between us!" Her chest heaved, her eyes blazing with a fire that rivaled his own.

"Ye should stand by me, nae question me every decision," he growled, stepping closer until he loomed over her.

"Stand by ye?" Erin's laugh was sharp and humorless. "I am nae yer true wife, Magnus, nae in any way that matters!" Her voice broke the tense silence that followed, each word laced with an unspoken challenge.

Magnus' jaw tightened, muscles twitching with barely contained emotion. They stood there, a mere whisper apart, their breaths mingling in the charged space between them. The intensity of their closeness sent a shiver down Erin's spine, awakening an awareness she dared not acknowledge.

"Ye are me wife," Magnus said, his voice low and dangerous, "by law and by the bond that ties our lands together."

"By convenience," Erin shot back, her voice equally quiet, yet seething with defiance.

"By necessity," he corrected, his gaze never leaving hers.

"Then let us not pretend it is anything more," she whispered, her heart pounding in her chest as if trying to escape.

As the last word left her lips, the tension snapped, leaving them suspended on the cliff's edge of whatever came next—their fates intertwined in the intricate tapestry of clan alliances, honor, and a reluctant desire that neither could fully deny nor embrace.

The silence that hung between them was thick as the woolen plaids of their clans, charged with a primal energy that seemed to crackle in the cool night air. Erin's heart drummed a wild rhythm against her ribs, matching the intensity of Magnus' stare.

"Ye daenae ken what ye're asking of me," Magnus growled, his voice barely more than a whisper, yet it resonated with a depth that vibrated through Erin's very bones.

"Perhaps I'm asking for too little," Erin retorted, her words bold, but her body betraying her by leaning ever so slightly toward him.

In that fiery instant, all the resentments and frustrations gave way to something more potent—a need as raw and untamed as the highland winds. Magnus bridged the gap between them, his lips crashing against hers with a force that spoke volumes of unspoken yearnings.

Erin's mind screamed at her to push away, to remember the ice that had coursed through her veins when she first heard she was to marry this man, this beast of a Laird who wore scars like badges of honor. Yet, her hands betrayed her thoughts, tangling into his long black hair, pulling him closer. The clash of their lips was less a kiss and more a battle for dominance—and Erin found herself not wanting to win, but to be conquered.

As they fought for breath, their bodies pressed together with a desperation that left no space for doubt or hesitation. Magnus' hands, those same hands that had wielded swords and commanded men, now roamed over Erin's curves with a gentleness that belied his stoic nature. Each touch was a contradiction to the harshness of his life, a softness he seemed to reserve only for her.

"Please," he murmured against her lips, but his fingers traced the laces of her bodice with an intimacy that spoke otherwise.

"Continue," she begged, her own voice surprising her—a mix of vulnerability and command that fueled the fire within them both.

Magnus hesitated, his brow creased with the weight of a decision that could shatter the fragile truce between them. But as Erin looked up at him, her blue eyes alight with a passion that rivaled the legends of old, the stories of fierce warriors and the women who tamed them, he found he could deny her nothing.

The cool night air of the Scottish Highlands whispered through the chamber, but Erin felt nothing but the heat emanating from Magnus's body as he hovered above her. Naked on the bed, the rough linen sheets a stark contrast to her soft skin, she watched him through half-lidded eyes, a tempest of desire swirling within her. The moonlight cast an ethereal glow upon them both, turning his scars into silvered lines of a warrior's life etched upon his flesh.

"Ye ken how to make it a challenge to keep me hands to myself," Magnus murmured, his voice a low rumble that seemed to resonate with the ancient stones of the room. His touch was gentle yet insistent, tracing the curve of her hip, the softness of her belly, before gliding up to cup the weight of her breast. She gasped as his thumb brushed over her sensitive peak, sending a jolt of pleasure through her.

"Perhaps I daenae want ye to keep yer hands to yerself," Erin replied, her own voice husky with need. Each caress was a testament to the burgeoning connection between them, a bond forged in the fires of adversity and sealed with the unexpected tenderness she found in his embrace. "Perhaps I might be beggin' ye."

Magnus dipped his head, his lips finding hers once more, kissing her with a fervor that spoke of restrained hunger now set free. She tasted the sweetness of mead from their earlier wedding celebration still lingering on his breath, mingling with the wild, musky scent of his skin.

The stories of old spoke of noble bloodlines, of those whose mere touch could ensnare the mind, and in this moment, Erin felt utterly captive to Magnus's will. His hands touched gently on the fabric of her bodice, fingers deftly undoing the laces that held her restrained. Each tug sent a thrill through her, a mixture of anticipation and vulnerability that made her pulse quicken. As the last lace came undone, her bodice fell open, revealing the swell of her breasts in the moonlight's silver embrace.

Magnus's gaze darkened with a primal hunger, his eyes tracing the curves of her body reverently, as if committing every inch to memory. With a steadiness born of both reverence and desire, he lowered his head, capturing her rosy peak with his warm lips. The sensation was electric, sending waves of pleasure cascading through Erin's body.

A soft moan escaped her lips, mingling with the deep rumble of Magnus's own satisfaction. His touch was both tender and possessive, a paradox that spoke of his conflicted soul laid bare in this intimate moment. As he lavished attention on one breast, his hand sought the other, kneading it, offering a similar caress. The contrast between the firmness of his touch and the tender gentleness of his lips only served to heighten the intensity of Erin's desire.

Their bodies writhed together, a symphony of need and pleasure, as Magnus continued to explore her with his hands and mouth. Each touch, each caress, was a testament to the depth of their connection, a bond that transcended the boundaries of duty and obligation. Erin felt her inhibitions slipping away, melted by the intoxicating mix of passion and tenderness that bound them together in this moment.

As the intensity of their embrace continued to build, Magnus reached down, his hand dipping between Erin's legs. She gasped at the sudden intimacy, the warm heat of his touch sending a shock of desire straight to her core. Her hips arched instinctively, inviting him closer, seeking the connection. His hand moved slowly, fingers deftly coaxing pleasure from her body as only a lover well-versed in the intricate dance of

desire could. Erin arched against him, her breath catching in her throat as he prepared her for the union to come. She was clay beneath his masterful hands, ready to be shaped by his ardor, her own passion stoked to a fervent blaze.

"Please, Magnus..." Her plea was a whisper lost amidst the rustle of the tartan plaid discarded beside them, a symbol of their clans united yet not nearly as binding as the invisible ties that now drew them together.

With a reverence that belied his brute strength, Magnus entered her, joining their bodies in a primal communion as old as the rugged mountains that cradled their home. Erin cried out, but the initial pain of his entry was engulfed in a pleasure she had never before imagined possible. Erin welcomed him fully, her hips rising to meet each deliberate thrust. Together they moved, a rhythm as natural as the ebb and flow of the loch's tide, each push and pull drawing them closer to the precipice of ecstasy.

As the storm of sensation built within her, Erin clung to Magnus, her nails digging into the hard muscle of his back. Their breaths mingled, heavy and ragged, and when she finally crested the wave of climax, it was with his name falling like a benediction from her lips. He pulled out before she was ready to release him, but he clung to her as his body tensed and he cried out with his own release somewhere below her.

They remained locked in their embrace, hearts pounding, the silence around them imbued with the sacred aftermath of their joining. Erin lay beneath him, her body still quivering from the intensity of her release, the knowledge that they had crossed a threshold into something profound glowing within her chest like the embers of a hearth fire.

Yet even as she basked in the afterglow, a shadow of uncertainty crept into her heart. What did this mean for their future? Was this just the warmth of their heated discussion or something deeper? As sleep threatened to claim her, Erin's last coherent thought lingered on the edge of doubt, wondering if the dawn would bring regret or

the promise of a new beginning.

Magnus woke at first light, taking a moment to blink the sleep from his eyes. His memory of the wedding night slipped back through his mind. Erin was in his bed, sleeping beside him. Her head rested on his shoulder, and his arm cradled her. He watched her sleep, her hair splayed down his scarred arm, and the warmth of her body felt good against his. She was his wife, and they had spent the night together.

None of it was as he had planned, and Magnus reflected on how his life had changed since the morning he sent Scarlett off to wed. But his new life brought him a sense of happiness that he hadn't felt before. He felt complete. For the first time, he did not yearn to rise with the dawn. The heat of her body seemed to seep into his very bones and settle itself against his soul.

He held her tight against him for a fleeting moment, caught between the primal urge to protect and the stark reality of their situation. Aye, she was beautiful, as bonny as the blooming heather across the Highland moors, but beauty was a treacherous thing. He could not afford to let down his guard.

"Control yerself, Magnus," he muttered under his breath.

He would not succumb to a weakness such as love. He was a Highlander, as rugged and unyielding as the surrounding mountains. His past was marred by bloodshed and betrayal, and he had learned never to let his guard down. Erin shifted in her sleep, her soft sigh brought a smile to his lips.

"Ye can lie beside her, share her bed, and still resist," he told himself. "It's only

physical. No' something ye haven't conquered before."

He could keep this woman by his side and smile at her beauty. He could lie beside her at night and give her the happiness she desired. But he could keep the walls around his castle and heartstring. She had been satisfied last night without the chance of fathering a child.

"I willnae lose myself to this arrangement," Magnus swore silently, his gaze tracing the contour of Erin's sleeping face. She deserved far better than a beast stained with the violence of his past. Aye, she was strong and determined, a lass who could stand her ground, but she too was trapped in this union neither of them had wanted. She deserved to be happy.

With a resolve as cold as the stone walls of his keep, Magnus slowly began to extricate himself from the bed, careful not to disturb the fragile peace of the moment. They would need to rise soon enough and face the day, the charade they must play as lord and lady of this ancient fortress.

"Control," he whispered to the empty room as he stood tall, his broad frame casting a long shadow. "Aye, I'll control my desires, even if it breaks me."

For a fleeting moment, Magnus allowed himself the luxury of simply watching her sleep, the rise and fall of her chest, the innocence of her face, so at odds with the harshness of his world. But she had known her own harshness, wearing her scars in the inside, without letting them define her. He had underestimated this woman, and here in her sleep, she still challenged him.

As the sun rose past his window, and he had still not risen, the guilt began to sink in. He was the laird, his purpose was to be out there, tending to his castle, his clansmen, his land. Yet, he wanted to be here, next to this woman he was to call wife for the rest of his life. Wife. It sounded alien, yet perfectly natural.

Erin's eyelids fluttered open, and her bright blue eyes looked up at him. Then she raised her arms, stretching out her lithe form.

"Good morn, lass," Magnus greeted with a smile.

"Good morn, husband," Erin replied happily. She pulled the covers up tight as she shifted around, turning so her body rested on his chest as she faced him. "We are married."

"Aye, we are married," Magnus confirmed.

"And last night..." Erin gasped a little, the memory colouring her cheeks.

"Aye lass, last night." Magnus nodded, a smile brightening his face, finding amusement in her shyness.

Her shyness slowly ebbed away as she shifted closer to him, pressing delicate kisses to his jawline, each one a tiny flame igniting along his skin. He stiffened at first, caught off guard by the tenderness of her touch, but as she continued, something within him unwound. Her lips were warm and insistent, and he responded to her touch.

"Erin..." His hand cradled her face, thumb tracing the line of her cheekbone. "What are ye doing, lass?"

"Reminding my husband that he's not as alone as he thinks," she answered firmly. "A wife has duties, ye ken."

She kissed him harder, and he responded in kind; the two of them shared a passionate moment in each other's arms.

The kisses became bolder, her actions weaving a spell that threatened to unravel all the restraints he had placed upon himself. For a heartbeat, Magnus allowed himself to forget the darkness that clung to him, to lose himself in the sensation of her touch.

"Everything is going to be fine after all," Erin whispered against his skin as if she sensed the turmoil within him and sought to soothe it with her presence.

"Is it, lass?" he questioned the words a mere breath as he searched her eyes for answers neither of them genuinely possessed.

"Aye," she murmured with a certainty that seemed to pierce through the shadows, offering a glimmer of hope where none had existed before.

As they lay there, entwined in the early morning light, the outside world faded away, leaving only the two of them bound by a fate neither had chosen but both were beginning to accept. It would not be an easy road ahead

"Let us break our fast then," she suggested, her cheeks blooming with a rosy hue as she rose nervously from the bed, clinging to the linen covers for as long as she were able. Magnus sat back in bed with a grin as she gathered up her clothing from the floor and slipped her things on.

"It would be easier if ye let yer wife share yer room," Erin scolded hopefully.

"Aye, it would. But let's take one step at a time, shall we?" Magnus rolled over, climbing naked from the bed. Erin may have blushed when he watched her, but when he walked around the bed, her jaw all but hit the floor. He smiled at her reaction and she blushed once more.

"I will... be... going... my room," she stumbled over her words before fleeing back to her quarters.

Magnus could not deny the amusement Erin brought to his life.

He lingered in the hall outside his room, playing with the laces on his boots as if he were not actually waiting for Erin's return. When she reappeared, she was fully dressed and every part the lady that McCormack Castle deserved. It had been too long since the estate had a mistress.

They descended the staircase together and entered the dining hall. Hayden and Scarlett sat together, speaking in hushed voices, but they fell silent as Magnus entered. As he approached the table, they both rose to their feet.

"Sit," Magnus ordered. Scarlett grinned at Erin, welcoming her into the seat beside her, and Magnus took his place at the head of the table.

"Morning, brother," Hayden called politely. "Are ye eating with us?"

"Aye, brother, that I am."

Hayden's face explored every expression under the sun, from confusion to fear, finally settling on joy. "Good to have ye join us, brother."

His siblings waited for Magnus to be served his food before they continued eating. Magnus couldn't ignore the fact the meal was resumed in silence.

"I need to find Reggie Hogg," he announced after barely four bites of his food. "If ye will excuse me."

They all rose from the table as he left, but as Magnus paused at the door, he heard the soft sound of voices in his absence. He drew in a deep breath and battled back the feeling of jealousy that bloomed within. This was what he wanted, what had to be to keep them all safe.

The great hall was abuzz with the clan's morning activities as he entered, but Magnus's focus fell on one man—Reggie Hogg. The councilman stood near the hearth talking with another councilman, his expression already one of disapproval, but his face soured when he noticed Magnus enter. The rest of the hall fell silent as Magnus greeted them with a nod before striding towards Reggie, his boots thudding heavily on the stone floor.

"Reggie," Magnus barked, his voice low and menacing. "A word."

The councilman turned, his expression darkening further at the order. Magnus leaned in close enough for his breath to brush against Reggie's ear.

"Disrespect my wife again because she's younger than ye think fitting, and it'll be the last act ye commit on this earth," Magnus seethed.

"It was merely a word of the council, m'laird. If the fair lady took offence to me tone, it was not intended." Reggie huffed. "An event of this size needs more than pretty strings and bows on the wall. Ye should be min mind to put guards around the green. Who knows what coup is being planned against ye."

"Ye would have a greater knowledge of that than I!" Magnus snapped. Reggie seemed so keen on the idea of a coup that Magnus wouldn't put it past him to be behind it himself.

Reggie bristled, his mouth opening to retaliate, but Magnus was already turning on his heel, dismissing the councilman without another glance. He would not tolerate insubordination, especially not against Erin.

He returned to the high table and snatched up a scone from the table, seeking out Caelan Ward, his man-at-arms, who stood guard by the door. Their eyes locked, and an unspoken conversation passed between them.

"Reggie's growing bolder," Magnus muttered once he was within earshot of Caelan, breaking off a piece of the scone with more force than necessary.

"Ye have my sword, Laird McCormack," Caelan replied, his loyalty unfaltering. "Whatever course ye chart, I'm with ye."

"Good," Magnus said, nodding stiffly. He trusted Caelan; though the man was as cunning as they came, it had been an asset to Magnus on many occasions.

"Shall we discuss it later?" Caelan suggested, his voice barely above a whisper, giving a nod to where Erin entered the hall.

"Aye, at sundown." Magnus's reply was terse, and his thoughts were already spiralling toward the potential conflict ahead.

He glanced back at Erin, who watched him with curiosity and concern. A smile tugged at the corner of her lips as she saw him, and her direction was set. Magnus turned to her, his face smiling like he didn't have a care in the world, while in the corner of his vision, Reggie twisted the knife of doubt.

"Erin, ye're sure this is how it's done?" Scarlett's blunt inquiry cut through the bustle, her hands pausing over a particularly stubborn knot.

"Aye, just like so," Erin replied, demonstrating again. She hid a smile; patience wasn't a virtue easily found in either sibling.

"Ye've got an eye for this," Hayden chimed in from the stool he balanced on. Erin tutted at his praise and directed him to move the ribbon along a little more.

Most of the Tartan Day Celebration would be held outside on the green near the keep, but the Scottish weather was a fickle fend, and indoor preparations were essential. The beautiful blue skies could be swept aside as quickly as Magnus changed his mood.

Hayden wobbled on his stool, hastily climbing down as Magnus entered the room. It had not gone unnoticed by Erin that the younger brother wouldn't do anything even slightly risky when Magnus entered the room. Scarlett quietened her usually bubbly character down, keeping her gaze on the ribbons she was tying. Neither would make eye contact with Magnus, but Erin was happy to claim his attention for herself. She walked confidently across to Magnus, greeting him politely, but the siblings remained subdued.

Scarlett was tense, her movements becoming mechanical. Hayden's flirtatious demeanor waned, replaced by a guarded expression. Erin observed the shift; Magnus's presence sapped the merriment from the air. She watched, her heart

thrumming a curious rhythm, as Magnus's gaze swept the room, lingering briefly on his siblings before settling on her with an intensity that stole her breath.

"Everything is in order," she said, mustering her calm. Her voice didn't tremble, but the fluttering in her chest betrayed her composure.

"Good," he replied calmly, but something flickered behind his eyes, a mirror of the tension that gripped Scarlett and Hayden.

Magnus shifted, his broad shoulders rolling back as if preparing for battle rather than celebration. Erin's curiosity piqued; this was a side of him she hadn't witnessed—the laird, always so self-assured, now grappling with an unseen adversary within his own keep.

"Ye seem... on edge, me laird," Erin ventured, her words careful not to wound the pride of a man who bore enough scars.

"Observant," he acknowledged gruffly, his gaze never wavering from hers.

"Is there anything amiss?" she pressed gently, the question hanging between them like a gauntlet thrown.

"These big events have a habit of drawing old enemies from the woodwork. I've been warned against dropping me guard." Magnus's jaw clenched. "Ye just worry about making the hall fancy." He paused and glanced over at Hayden. "Have him straighten that bow, it's crooked."

Erin smiled. She wasn't surprised Hayden had left the ribbon at an angle in his haste to be down on the ground when Magnus entered.

"I'll find me a strong man to help me hang the ribbon."

"No need for that. Hayden is more than capable of hanging things. He'll help ye while I'm planning the..." He didn't finish the sentence, but Erin didn't need him to. He would take care of the security.

As the final preparations were made and the hall stood ready to welcome the dawn of Tartan Day, Erin couldn't shake the feeling that something pivotal was about to unfold. A tale of love and loyalty woven into the very fabric of their lives, waiting to be told. She found Magnus stalking the corridors in search of someone, and his face brightened instantly when he saw her. Magnus beckoned, his gesture as commanding as the mountains that towered over his ancestral lands. "Come with me," he said, an urgency in his words.

Erin's heart quickened as she followed him through the heavy oak door and into the crisp Highland air, where the scent of pine and peat mingled with the promise of spring. They walked in silence until they reached the stables, where the soft sounds of snorting horses and rustling hay filled the space between them. Erin bristled with the excitement of the unknown, and she half hoped to be given a dirk to defend herself against the perceived foe in the days ahead.

"Here," Magnus said, his hand sweeping toward a magnificent bay mare with a coat that shimmered like burnished copper under the fading light. The horse nickered softly, its intelligent eyes settling on Erin with a quiet understanding.

"For me?" Erin whispered, disbelief in her tone as she stepped closer, her hand outstretched to touch the velvety muzzle. This was far better than a piece of sharpened metal.

"Aye, for ye," Magnus confirmed, his eyes never leaving her face, searching for her approval.

"Thank ye, Magnus." Her gratitude was genuine, as she had often found freedom in

riding when the captivity of indoor life had grown too strong for her. After six years of being locked up, she often craved anything that made her feel free. "She's beautiful."

"Ye deserve beauty in yer life," he replied, his voice barely above a murmur. "I'll admit the idea came from yer maither. I asked what she thought was an appropriate weddin' present for ye."

"She was right." Erin stroked the mare's neck, lost for a moment in the simple joy of connection. She was very close to her siblings, especially her two sisters, and she wished Magnus had the same bond with his. A question tugged at her thoughts, urging her to break the comfortable quiet. "Magnus, why do ye keep everyone at arm's length? Yer own kin no less?"

He stiffened, the shadows of the stable playing across his scarred face as he turned away, busying himself with adjusting a saddle strap that did not need adjusting. "I've had to fight for every scrap of respect since I was a lad. Me faither's death left a power void, and there were those who thought a wee lad couldnae fill it."

"Ye were but a child," Erin murmured, realizing that the weight he carried was far heavier than she had known.

"I was fourteen," he corrected, his words clipped. "Old enough to bear arms, too young to inspire loyalty. Those scars ye see?" He gestured absently to the marks that laced his skin like a warrior's tapestry. "Proof of many attempts on me life. I kept Scarlett and Hayden at a distance...to protect them. If I fell, they wouldnae be dragged down with me."

"But Hayden would have become Laird, and he was..."

"Nine. Aye, but young enough then for others to rule in his stead."

"Ye've been alone in this fight for so long," Erin said, her concern laced with a newfound understanding as she stepped closer.

"Alone is how I survive," Magnus replied, his gaze meeting hers, an unspoken challenge flickering in his brown eyes.

"Survival is nae the same as living," Erin countered softly. "How long has it been since the last coup?"

"Some would have me believe the bridge attack was one. There was also the fire in the store and the damaged fields on our weddin' day."

"Then ye are right to be ready, but ye need yer family close now. They are nae children any longer."

Tension hung in the air as she challenged him on his beliefs. He appeared for a moment as if he would turn and charge off back to the castle, but he stayed beside her.

"Perhaps," Magnus conceded. "But it's been so long, maybe it is too late for things to change."

He gave her a pleading glance, as if she held the secrets to changing him from the distant brother into someone else. Someone he didn't know how to be.

Erin felt a shiver run down her spine. There was no doubt this was a big change in all their lives, but she had seen how far he had come in just the short time she had known him.

"Ye have been fighting fer so long," she said softly, moving closer to him, taking his large hands in hers. "Fighting fer yer clan, fer yer siblings... fer yerself."

He turned towards her, eyes searching hers as if they held some secret map to uncharted lands within his soul. "Aye," he admitted, the word rumbling deep from his chest, "But 'tis all I ken."

"Ye've kept them at arm's length because ye love them fiercely," she whispered, her own heart swelling with a realization that had crept up on her. "And that is why I—" She hesitated, her breath hitching. "That is why I am falling in love with ye, Magnus Black."

His eyes, always guarded and shadowed, now sparked with an emotion he seldom allowed to surface. Surprise, and vulnerability. Something she felt herself at this very moment.

"Ye think I can change?" he asked, his voice barely audible over the shifting of the horse in the stall beside them.

"Och, I daenae just think it—I know it," Erin assured him, her resolve as steady as the stones of their fortress home. "And what better way to start than by celebrating Tartan Day with yer brother and sister?"

A small, hesitant smile tugged at the corners of his mouth, transforming his stern visage into something unexpectedly tender. He leaned down, his lips brushing against hers in a kiss that was sweet with promise to try.

"Perhaps ye are right," he murmured against her lips, pulling back just enough to meet her gaze. They both knew it wasn't going to be easy, but together they could weather any storm.

"So are we takin' this beauty out on a ride or did ye just show me to tempt me?" Erin turned back to the horse, swiftly changing the topic to a lighter conversation. "Are we bringin' yer siblings with us?"

"Aye, a ride is just what we're all needin'," Magnus nodded. "I'll have them prepare to leave in twenty minutes."

Twenty minutes was surprisingly little time for Erin to change into her riding clothes, and by the time she had returned to the stables, Hayden and Scarlett were both ready and full of beaming smiles.

Magnus, dressed in his traditional tartan kilt, stood by their horses, looking every bit the stern laird with a hint of warmth that Erin had come to recognize. His gaze lingered on her for a moment too long, a silent acknowledgement passing between them before he turned his attention to Hayden and Scarlett.

"Ready to show yer new sister how beautiful our lands are," Magnus rumbled, his voice carrying the weight of authority mixed with a newfound lightness.

Hayden winked playfully at Erin, his mischievous grin contagious. "Aye, ready as can be, brother," he quipped, mounting his horse with an experienced ease that spoke volumes about his time spent riding the highland trails.

Scarlett's face was filled with joy as she adjusted her saddle, shooting Erin a knowing look. "Ye'll ken yer way around in no time," she said with a confidence that Erin couldn't help but admire.

As they set off towards the rolling hills that surrounded the castle, the air was crisp with the promise of a new relationship between the siblings. Erin rode close to Magnus, feeling the warmth of his presence beside her as they navigated the familiar trails. The beauty of the landscape unfolded around them, a tapestry of green hills and blooming heather that stretched as far as the eye could see.

Magnus cast occasional glances in her direction, his expression unreadable yet laced with a newfound tenderness. Erin couldn't help but steal glances at him as well,

noticing how he was already more at ease with his family, the riding and the views taking the pressure off the need to talk.

"Ye ride well," Magnus commented, his voice breaking through the peaceful silence that enveloped them.

Erin smiled at the unexpected praise, her heart swelling with a mixture of pride. "Thank ye, husband," she replied, her tone light yet tinged with sincerity. "I learned from watching Flynn on our family's lands when we were but bairns. After me sisters and I were taken, I could hardly remember anything about me life before, but when me sister spoke of the boy on the horse, I remembered the image so clearly. Ridin' has been important since me return to me family."

His gaze softened, a rare warmth shining in his eyes. "Family is important," he murmured, the words heavy with unspoken truths.

Erin felt a tug at her heart, a longing for the family she barely remembered. But here, beside Magnus, amidst the rugged beauty of the Scottish landscape, she felt a sense of belonging she hadn't known since before their abduction. "We all have trials sent to test us, but we grow from them, they do nae grow within us."

The sound of bagpipes drifted from the castle in the distance, mingling with the laughter of children and the chatter of guests who had come to join in the festivities. The sun climbed higher in the sky, casting a golden glow over the land and bathing everything in a warm light that felt almost magical.

Magnus guided his horse closer to Erin's, a silent gesture that spoke volumes of unspoken promises and uncharted territories they were beginning to explore together. The subtle brush of his leg against hers sent a shiver down her spine, a sensation both thrilling and terrifying in its intimacy.

As they crested a hill, the vista below unfolded like a painting come to life. The clan's tartan waved proudly in the breeze, banners fluttering with ancient symbols of their heritage. The village looked stunning from afar, nestled amongst the rolling hills, scattered with white dots of sheep grazing in the distance. As they rode on, Hayden and Scarlett relaxed in their brother's presence, and the conversation flowed between them. They were so relaxed, Hayden started showing off how well his horse could jump the fallen trees littering the edge of the trail.

Erin considered the whole ride to be a job well done on her part. There would be more work needed, but the three siblings had now shown one another that they were willing to try, and that was a bigger hurdle than anything Hayden's horse could jump.

The Tartan Day celebration was in full swing as Erin worked her way through the crowd. She was the lady of McCormack, and today, she felt she had earned her place. As she passed, the villagers dipped their heads in respect, and she acknowledged each of them. Her head held high; she felt like she might burst with pride.

She was not proud of herself, although she couldn't help a little reverence for her achievement. She was proud of everyone coming together and helping one another. The celebration was a clan effort, and now the day could be enjoyed by all.

She was very proud of her husband. He stood with several of his councilmen, standing taller than she had seen before, he was happier too, even if he would not admit so. His gaze was on the band playing a merry tune, with the square before them filled with dancers of all ages. The thud of dancing feet drew her attention to the group enjoying the vibrant tune from the fiddles.

She chuckled aloud to see Hayden and Scarlett amongst them, Hayden kicking up his feet in merriment without a care, while Scarlett's more reserved moves were suited to the other ladies she danced with. Hayden noticed her gaze and gave her a wave, his face flushed and happy. She made a mental note for next year not to put the whiskey stall so close to the dancing.

"Try this me lady," Fiona called to her.

Me lady! Erin smiled at the title and moved closer to the baker's wife. They had spoken in the village, and Erin had promised to try some of her bread. She took the

offered oatcake, topping it with a slice of cheese. If she had tasted better, she couldn't recall it. The flatbread was warm but crisp, and the cheese had a tang to it that set everything off beautifully.

"Ye dinnae boast, Fiona. Tis the best bread in the land."

"High praise, me lady from one so travelled as yerself." Fiona's words were kindly meant, but someone had been speaking about Erin's past and for a moment, Erin felt like the world was watching her. She turned, finding only Caelan standing a few paces away, his sword a reassuring comfort as she mingled among friends and strangers alike. "Caelan, ye must come and try this."

"Aye, Fiona's bread is the talk of the village." Caelan gave her a smile and came closer to sample the oatcake for himself.

Erin moved on, keen to see everything on offer. Not long after returning to O'Kane castle, she had attended something similar to this but had spent the day clinging to her mother's side, barely daring to look a single soul in the eye. Now, she stood tall, able to stray away from the company of those she was familiar with. Erin was home; this was her castle, her people, her land, and she felt such a wonderful joy in her heart.

Erin moved onwards, considering Magnus' order for his family to arm themselves with small dirks as nothing more than his lingering possessiveness. Everyone was so happy here. Even so, she didn't stray too far from Magnus and the safety his long sword represented.

A few small children danced away from the main square, and Erin laughed with them as they twirled happily. She would never have children of her own with Magnus, but her hands locked together across her skirts, fingers entwined as she listened to their happy giggles. Then she remembered herself and what would never be, turning sharply.

She nearly walked into a brute of a man standing behind her. He caught her arm as she stumbled.

"Watch yerself, lass," came a teasing voice, his voice rich and familiar.

She glanced up at the face before her, his brow softened by the love she saw so clearly in his eyes. "Tis ye who should watch where yer going. Creeping up on a lady like that."

He frowned, considering the seriousness of her words, but her grin was infectious, and she soon had him laughing with her.

"Will ye dance?" She questioned. "Nay, that is nae becoming of a laird, but ye will try the oatcakes, for they are divine." She slid her arms around his and guided his willing feet back to where Fiona served her delicious offerings, and Caelan lurked hungrily for more.

"Come now; we're nae strangers to merrymaking," he said, his eyes meeting hers before turning to the dancing. Hayden stood to the side, panting, while Scarlett continued to lose herself in the rhythm.

"Perhaps," she conceded, her voice barely above a whisper, "but 'tis a rare sight to see ye so... relaxed."

"Relaxed?" He let out a roar of a laugh. "'Tis a day for celebration. Even beasts such as I ken how to enjoy the festivities."

"Beasts?" Erin chuckled at the memory of a time when she saw him as such "Even a beast can be tamed by the right occasion, can he nae?"

"Or perhaps by the right woman." He turned away, but not before Erin saw the blush

that accompanied his confession. She smiled, keeping her thoughts to herself.

Erin's gaze returned to her new siblings, finding them done with their dancing, walking arm in arm towards the whiskey stall. Scarlett, laughed openly at something her brother said. The charming rogue seemed utterly content under Magnus' watchful eye. It was not just her opinion of Magnus that had improved by knowing him better.

"Look at them together. Ye wouldnae have expected that before." All the pair had ever wanted was a little attention, and now Hayden had found it in his family, there was no more searching for what he sought in the company of women. A little attention from Magnus would certainly continue to go a long way.

"Time is a luxury few can afford," Magnus replied. "But today, for them, I would spare an eternity."

"An eternity?" Erin's heart skipped. "Daenae forget to spare a little time for yer wife."

"Perhaps nae an eternity," he corrected.. "But a moment... aye, a moment can be spared."

"Even for a beast?" Erin teased, unable to resist herself.

"Especially for a beast," he acknowledged, tapping the hand around his arm.

Reggie skulked past the pair, and Magnus stiffened. "I need to speak with him. Could I trouble ye to amuse yerself with Hayden's company for a wee while?"

"Indeed," Erin agreed, releasing her husband from her grip. She waltzed away, knowing his gaze lingered on her, as she made her way to join Scarlett.

"Are ye drinking the distillers dry, brother?" She greeted the pair. "Ye certainly dance

like a man who enjoyed more than a nip or two."

"Aye, sister, I may dance so, but nae a sip has passed these lips." Hayden assured her kindly.

"He is quite boring and will nae allow his sister a nip either," Scarlett complained light-heartedly.

"I agree with him," Erin confessed. "But the oatcakes are something I couldnae deny either of ye."

"Oh! We must have some. Come, Hayden, let's eat."

"Bring me back some. I have told ye that I am too tired to walk."

"Too lazy more like," Scarlett bantered back before walking away.

"Ye are nae lazy, are ye." Erin questioned suspiciously.

"Nay. But if I went with her, so would ye, and it would nae be right for the lady to favor one of our clan over the others."

Erin nodded, realizing that Hayden did, deep down, take his role as the heir seriously. He leant back against the brick wall, surveying the estate like a future laird. Erin found herself lost for words. Her presence changed everything for him. His position as the heir was under question as he and everyone else would expect her to bear children. She longed to offer him assurances that Magnus had not changed his mind on the matter, but she hoped he would one day see the happiness a bairn could bring and anything she said now would be a false promise.

"Ye look as though ye might be enjoying yerself, for once," Hayden teased, pulling

her thoughts back to what was supposed to be a day of celebration. "If it eases ye mind, I daenae want to be laird."

"Perhaps it does," Erin conceded. "I fancy yer sister is eating all the oatcake for herself."

"Let her," Hayden quipped. "She can repay me when next she walks into the village."

Erin searched for Scarlett's form, but the green was quieter now. Clansmen stood strategically around the green, with the women and children retreating to the stalls.

"Somethin's amiss," Hayden murmured, his hand resting instinctively on the hilt of his dirk.

Erin's heart skipped a beat. Her years of captivity pressed down on her shoulders.

"All will be fine, Erin. We should alert Magnus," Hayden comforted her, but before they moved, Caelan headed across towards them.

"Ah, the lovely Erin and the gallant Hayden," Caelan called to the pair. "We should get the lovely lady somewhere safe."

"Somethin' is amiss. What do ye make of it?" Hayden enquired. Caelan's harsh pace didn't ease as he approached them. In the blink of an eye, he drew his sword, slashing the steel towards Erin. Instead of feeling the blade, Erin was pushed aside as Hayden dragged her to safety in the nick of time.

The blade slashed against Hayden's body, cutting through cloth and flesh. The scream that passed through Erin's lips rang out around the grounds. She stumbled back, her heart hammering against her ribs. "Hayden!" she cried out as the man stumbled back, clutching his abdomen.

Caelan's focus turned to her, but Hayden moved between them, armed with nothing but his short blade.

"Get behind me, Erin," he rasped, his eyes never leaving Caelan's as he ushered her behind him,

Blood seeped through Hayden's fingers as he stood guard before her. This was the moment Erin had trained for, yet she felt just as helpless as every other time a sword was pointed her way.

"What madness has possessed ye?" Hayden yelled at Caelan, but the man-at-arms was focused on Erin; Hayden was nothing more than an obstacle in his path.

"Ye ken nothin'!" Caelan snarled in response, his blade lifted to attack. Hayden blocked, absorbing the force of the blow with a backward step.

Erin was frozen on the spot as Hayden and Caelan fought. She had seen Hayden's skill first-hand in training, but he was injured, and his blade was no match against a broad sword. He blocked each thrust, but each one pushed him back, each parry lacked the force of the one before. Erin knew she had to react before the fatal blow was struck, but if she turned and ran, he would chase her down, and if she tried to get to Magnus, she had to pass Caelan to do so. fighting was also an option, but her weapon and skill was no better than Hayden's.

"Erin..." Hayden pleaded. She knew he needed her to react, but she still couldn't think. She couldn't run away and allow him to bleed, or even die for her.

Hayden's foot faltered, his back near the jagged rock of the keep's wall. He had nowhere left to go. As he stumbled, the dirk was knocked from his hand. Erin screamed as she envisioned the fatal blow, but it didn't come. Caelan's blade paused against Hayden's throat. Her eyes met with Hayden's, his look pained and desperate.

Finally her feet were able to move, her direction was decided, and she took a step towards Hayden. If she was Caelan's target, then she would not let him die for her.

"Step away from him, lass," Caelan ordered sharply, the blade pressing a divot into Hayden's skin, threatening to pierce the skin. Erin stepped back a pace.

Erin's mind raced, her instincts screaming at her to do something, anything. She could almost hear the ancient tales whispered by the fireside, stories where brave warriors and cunning maidens outwitted their foes. But this was no myth; it was a ruthless reality where one wrong move could mean death.

"Ye darenae harm him," Erin's words were steel wrapped in velvet, her Scottish lilt betraying none of the fear that clawed at her insides.

"Move back, Erin," Hayden gasped, his eyes imploring her to heed Caelan's demand. She had no option but to shuffle away from the man she had come to love as a brother.

Magnus's jaw clenched as Reggie Hogg offered his opinion on matters that were not his to comment on. But Magnus steeled himself against the words that would come regardless. He had learned that it was often better to let him speak than to attempt to argue with him.

“Ye heeded me warnin' with the arms?” Reggie observed contently.

“Aye, yer warnin' of dangers were taken seriously, but there is nay coup.”

His words could not have come at a more accurate time as a hush fell across the green. Armed clansmen made themselves visible, causing the patrons to withdraw.

“What have ye planned?” Magnus accused, his eyes scouring for his family. Scarlett stood in the bakery stall, but he could not see his brother or wife.

“This is nae me doin', man. Ye need to act.” Reggie scoffed. His scowl was stern, but Magnus heeded his words

“Men, with me,” Magnus called to his clansmen, who had been sanctioned for carrying long swords. His men stepped forward, standing before their own kin, with an air of confusion and hesitation. A woman's scream rang, echoing off the walls of the courtyard. Magnus searched for Erin, his heart quickening by a pace.

“Go to her, man. A laird's priority is an heir and the woman who will bear the bairn,” Reggie urged him. Magnus needed no other encouragement to tend to his wife.

"Erin!" Magnus's voice rang out as he surged forward.

"When last I saw them, they were behind the stalls," Scarlett called, guiding her brother in the right direction.

He rounded the quiet whiskey stand, hunting the scattered groups for his wife.

"Where are ye, lass?" he breathed, scanning the sea of tartan clan bodies. His chest tightened With a fear he hadn't felt since his father's brutal reign. He spied her off to the side near the keep, standing near the motionless figures of Hayden and Caelan. Despite the relief of seeing her with his most trusted men, he continued towards her.

"Erin, is everythin' well?"

She looked at him with fear etched across her face. Magnus slowed his pace, taking in the situation. He had to be missing something.

Caelan turned, revealing the sword he held towards Hayden. The man-at-arms reacted like a foe was approaching and not his trusted laird. He grabbed a fistful of Hayden's clothing, putting himself behind the younger brother.

Magnus's approach halted with the sight of his own brother, bloodied and trembling, held at sword-point by Caelan. Magnus's gut twisted in shock and disbelief.

"Release him!" Magnus bellowed. "Caelan, ye're one of me own! Why do ye turn yer blade against yer kin?"

A misplaced smile crept over Caelan's face as the man tipped his head. "Kin? Nay, Laird McCormack," he sneered. "Ye ken me as Caelan, but I am Archer Gallagher."

Magnus's grip on his sword faltered, the name striking him like a physical blow.

"Gallagher..." he whispered, horror dawning upon him.

"Aye," Archer confirmed, tightening his hold on Hayden as the younger man's eyes pleaded for mercy. "Son to the very councilman who stood against yer faither's tyranny. Remember how the laird slaughtered me kin? Left me for dead beneath the corpses of me own family?"

"I remember," Magnus confessed, though it was something he wished he could forget. Councilman Gallagher had been very much like Reggie; his outspoken ways made him worthy of death in the late laird's eyes. Magnus had been so young at the time, his only memory of the punishment rather than the supposed crime. He was rumored to have staged a coup, and before Magnus's father had him killed, he made the poor man slay his entire family. "I deeply regret the incident, but the past cannae be undone. The whole family died."

"Nay, me laird. One survived." Caelan, , now Archer corrected.

"Archer?" Magnus nodded.

"Aye." Archer confirmed. "It took a long time to earn yer trust. All for this moment."

"Ye did all this to hurt Hayden?"

"Nay. To hurt ye the way yer faither hurt me."

"How?" It hurt enough seeing his brother with a sword against him, with his hands pressing into his abdomen. Magnus had enough scare of his own to know the wound alone was unlikely to kill Hayden, but delaying treatment put him at greater risk. But how would his brother's blood atone for what their father did?

"Yer quarrel is with me, nae them," Magnus growled. "Let me brother go."

Archer's smile twisted into a snarl, and the cold edge of his blade pressed tighter against Hayden's throat. Magnus knew that every second mattered, he had to do something.

"Make yer move, laird," Archer taunted. "Show us if ye're truly different from the tyrant who sired ye."

As desperation clawed at his insides, Magnus knew the next moments would change everything. With a steely gaze fixed upon Archer, he readied himself for what must come next. This was not just a battle for power; it was a fight for redemption—for honor, family, and a love that had taken him by storm, fierce as the highland gales.

And so, with the fate of his clan teetering on the brink of a sword's edge, Magnus Black prepared to make his stand.

"What do ye want?" Magnus demanded. He had given up so much of himself to protect Hayden as they grew; now, he was being asked to give more.

"I want ye to suffer as I have."

"Release him, and we can talk. Ye were wronged by me faither. Let us discuss how to make it right." Magnus's patience was wearing thin, but there was little he could do with his bleeding brother being used as a shield.

Archer's lips curled into a smirk. "Aye, I will let yer precious heir go." However, he made no effort to release Hayden.

"But first, ye must prove where yer loyalties lie." His gaze turned to Erin. "Kill the lass."

The words struck Magnus like a physical blow, sending ripples of shock through his

towering frame. How could he spill the blood of the woman who had unexpectedly become his everything? She was as innocent as Hayden in all of this. As his father's son, Magnus would take some of the blame for the terrible things that happened to Archer, but he could not pick between his wife and his brother.

"Ye cannae ask that of me," Magnus breathed, his voice unsteady. She was more than just his wife, more than a simple convenience. She was his, and he was a better man because of it.

"Make yer choice, Magnus Black," Archer taunted, pressing the blade enough to draw a thin line of blood from Hayden's skin. "What's more important, yer kin or a marriage that shouldnae have been?"

Magnus's mind raced, haunted by memories of his father's cruelty and his promise to shield Hayden from such darkness. But as he glanced at Erin, her blue eyes ablaze with a fire that matched the untamed spirit of the highlands. If he chose neither, he condemned his brother to death.

He could not; no, he would not be the monster Archer wanted to paint him as. Magnus had faced danger before and been in many situations where he had expected death. But he had never been in a situation where he had the responsibility of another's life like this. This was the very reason why he kept his siblings at a distance; it was why he vowed never to marry. He had put his trust in the wrong man.

He could only play for time for so long that Hayden's wound was a ticking clock, pushing him to make a decision that was impossible to make.

"Daenae fool yerself. She's naught but convenience wrapped in a bonny fa?ade," Archer spat venomously. "Yer brother, though—he's yer blood, yer heir. Would ye really cast him aside for her?" Archer pointed at Erin with his sword hand, in doing so, he moved the blade from Hayden's throat.

Magnus' jaw clenched, and his legs moved him forward. But it was Hayden who also reacted in the same heartbeat, turning himself and wrenching free from Archer's grasp with a desperate twist.

"Erin!" Magnus barely had time to shout before she launched into action. Her hand found the dirk concealed in the folds of her skirt and sent it flying with deadly accuracy. It struck Archer's thigh as he reached for Hayden. Magnus ran, feeling the world in slow motion around him. Hayden backing away from Archer as the man-at-arms reached for him, and Magnus feared he would not get to them in time.

His sword pointed ahead of him, grasped in two strong hands, aimed perfectly at Archer. The sword struck the man just as Archer reached Hayden. Magnus's battle cry drowned out any cry from the man, but his hatred for Magnus didn't falter, even as he fell under the force of Magnus's blade.

As Magnus bore down on him, he lashed out in a cruel, final act of defiance, grabbing at Hayden's legs with a snarl. The younger Black's legs were swept from beneath him, the unforeseen force sending him crashing back against the unforgiving brick wall of the keep. Hayden's head struck with a sickening thud, and his body crumpled to the ground, unmoving.

"NO!" Magnus bellowed, his voice echoing off the highland stones, raw with fear. Time itself seemed to slow as he leaned over Archer, his sword raised high. With each strike, memories of a childhood overshadowed by brutality flashed before his eyes—memories he'd sworn would never repeat under his watch.

Magnus brought his blade down with all the might of his ancestors, channeling every ounce of rage and sorrow into the strike. Then finally Archer Gallagher fell still. The threat to Magnus's clan, to his brother, to his reluctant bride, lay vanquished at his feet, but victory tasted like ash in Magnus' mouth.

"Erin," he gasped, turning to her with a mix of desperation and gratitude. She was already approaching Hayden's still form.

"Is... is Hayden..." Magnus couldn't finish, he couldn't bear the weight of another loss, not when his heart was already so torn.

"Alive," she confirmed, pressing her head against Hayden's chest. "But we must tend to him quickly, call for the healer."

Magnus nodded, unable to tear his gaze away from the still form of his brother. He reached for Hayden, cradling him in his arms as he had as a wee bairn, no more than a child himself. Hayden's head lolled back as Magnus rose. For all that had happened to cost him his brother now was unthinkable, but Hayden was unmoving, bleeding from his abdomen and now also his head. Only now did Magnus know true fear.

Magnus walked to the main door of the castle, passing the clansmen fighting one another. "Enough," he bellowed, his voice breaking under the strain. "Yer coup is over. Lay down yer arms and no one else needs to get hurt."

The fighting men looked up, the sight of Hayden gravely wounded in their laird's arms was enough to give pause to the fighting. Scarlett gasped, running across to her brothers.

"Where is the healer?" Magnus called urgently. "Please, someone find the healer."

Erin placed a comforting hand on Magnus's arm, before using the fabric of her skirt to wipe the blood trickling down his arm.

"They'll listen to ye," she encouraged, her words acting as a moment of clarity to Magnus. "They always do."

With a grim nod, Magnus surveyed the battlefield, his gaze commanding the attention of his clansmen. Amongst them, faces turned toward him, etched with confusion and regret. Brothers had fought brothers; kin had drawn blood against kin. But now, they lowered their weapons, the will to fight drained by the true cost of loyalty.

"Seize those who conspired against this clan!" Magnus ordered. His men moved swiftly, rounding up the remnants of the coup with grim faces. They may have been hesitant to fight their own, but they were resolute in their duty.

"Ye think we can trust 'em after this?" Reggie questioned. "What will ye do with them?"

Magnus stiffened at more questioning by the councilman. "Enough blood has been spilled. I'll see nay more of it."

"To the dungeons, then?" Reggie asked. "Ye can leave the rest with me, me laird."

Magnus nodded curtly, before he resumed his route to the healing room. Erin and Scarlett followed behind like lost lambs, and behind them, the healer and her daughters hurried after them.

Magnus would not allow his brother to die today; the Blacks were tougher than that. They were too damn stubborn.

Erin's heart was a leaden weight in her chest, each thud resonating with the guilt that pummeled her insides. Through the partially open door of the healing room, she caught glimpses of Hayden's pale face; the normally roguish smile wiped clean by unconsciousness. The healer was known for her deft hands and gentle spirit, and she worked over him with her daughters, treating and dressing his wounds with hushed voices.

A low fire crackled in the hearth, casting flickering shadows across the walls where herbs hung in bunches, their supposed healing powers now put to the ultimate test. The air carried the scent of blood, antiseptic herbs, and the underlying musk of fear.

"Oh, Hayden..." Erin murmured, her voice catching on a sob. She pressed her forehead against the cool wood of the doorway, feeling utterly useless, a stranger barred from the intimacy of family grief. There was no space inside for her, no place amidst the tight-knit circle of his siblings who clustered around their fallen brother like protective cairn stones.

It was all her fault. Her presence had brought this disaster upon them. The clansmen's distrust of an outsider, the whispered accusations that led to steel being drawn, and now... now Hayden lay wounded, perhaps dying, because of her.

"Curse me," she whispered, her nails biting into her palms, drawing half-moon crescents that mirrored the turmoil slicing through her soul.

Outside, the sky darkened, and the wind howled, carrying with it the lament of the

Highlands. It seemed even the land itself mourned for Hayden Black.

Magnus glanced at her, and she gave him a reassuring smile, which he did not return before dropping his gaze back to his brother.

"Ye shouldnae look at me like that," Erin spoke softly to the door, knowing Magnus would not hear. "I never meant harm to come to yer family."

"This is nay the time, nor place, Erin." Magnus replied coldly. "Wait in yer room."

"But-" she began to protest, but Magnus turned his broad shoulder to face away from her, leaning over Hayden to whisper orders of recovery in his ear.

"Can ye nay forgive me?"

"Later, lass." He shot a brief glance her way, but the damage was done. Her heart reached out to the man she'd been bound to out of necessity, a man as rugged and untamed as the very Highlands that surrounded him. A man whose heart seemed barricaded behind stone and thistle, yet whom she found herself now in love with.

"Forgive me, Magnus," she whispered.

Her gaze lingered on the door, yearning for a sign of forgiveness, a glimmer of understanding from the man she was beginning to realize she needed more than she cared to admit.

The stone corridor was cool against Erin's flushed cheek as she pressed herself to the wall beside the door to the healing room. Her heart thundered in her chest, a wild drumbeat that seemed to echo through the keep. She dared a glance through the narrow opening, seeking the two figures that consumed her thoughts.

A flurry of motion snapped Erin from her reverie as Scarlett burst from the room, nearly colliding with her in her haste. "Out of me way, Erin," the fiery-haired lass said, not unkindly but with an urgency that brooked no delay.

"Scarlett, how are they?" Erin's voice was desperate, her hands reaching for the other woman's arm.

"Cannae talk now," Scarlett replied, brushing past. Her skirts swished as she hurried down the corridor, leaving Erin grappling with the cold absence of connection.

Time and again, Scarlett rushed by, each time more hastily than the last, her footfalls a staccato rhythm against the stone. With every dismissal, Erin felt the divide between her and this family widen. She had not been asked to fetch, and she was more than capable of hunting down what was needed so Scarlett could remain beside her brother. Scarlett emerged with a bowl of bloodied rags, whisking them away without a pause. Erin was utterly invisible to everyone.

In the solitude of the hallway, Erin's resolve began to fray at the edges, the threads of her presence unravelling with each passing moment. She was an outsider, an interloper in a saga whose pages were written in scars and sealed with the blood of kinship. What place could she claim among such fierce loyalty and such storied history? She had been a fool to consider herself anything more than a connection to the O'Kane clan. She would make sure Magnus had the alliance he needed, but she would do so from her mother's arms. Magnus only needed a bride in name, and Erin's heart needed to be protected. She had allowed Magnus to enter her heart, but making him do the same had wounded him.

She had to love this family from afar to keep them safe. Erin took one last look into the room. One last look at Magnus clinging to Hayden's hand, his gaze never wavered from Hayden's pale face. The weight of leadership pressed down upon him, a mantle heavy with expectation and sacrifice. She glanced one last time at Hayden, though his

lifeless form was not how she would like to remember him. She would see his bright eyes and charming smile again, she was sure.

Erin caught Scarlett's arm as she returned with her bowl empty. She had to tell her that she was leaving, or else she would only add to her worry. Leaving here was her only way of lessening their burden.

"Scarlett..."

"Please, Erin, let me be busy." Scarlett pushed past, entering the room to return to her brothers.

Erin nodded and resolved herself to leave a note explaining everything instead.

She packed nothing; her only goal was to unburden Magnus of her presence. Her belongings could be returned later, as she did want to know about Hayden's recovery. It would be good to talk with Magnus about her decision when he didn't have a coup to worry about.

She ran to the stables where her horse waited and grabbed the bridle.

"Can I help ye, me lady?" a young stable boy called to her. "The weather is turning bad, and ye willnae get the weather for a pleasant ride today."

"Please, help me saddle her up."

"Aye, me lady." The lad lifted the saddle and placed it on the horse's back. The lad set about his task with efficiency, securing the saddle and bridle with practiced ease. As he worked, he cast Erin a curious glance. "Where are ye ridin' to?"

"Ye willnae stop me," Erin insisted.

"Forgive me, I willnae stop ye. But I wish to ken."

"Nowhere ye need to ken," Erin replied, her tone sharper than intended. The lad looked up at her, confusion clear in his young eyes, and she softened. "Just ready the horse, lad."

"It's nay safe for a lass alone. Perhaps I can get ye a clansman to escort ye?"

"Nay, I must go alone." No clansman would willingly help her escape from the castle without Magnus' permission.

"Where are ye headin' at this hour? Nae the road to the river? Ye cannae use the bridge path, miss. It's nae safe," he warned, his brow furrowed in concern. "It's nae possible to get across the river yet."

Erin felt the blood drain from her face. The main road—the one she had intended to use—was impassable. Her plan crumbled, and panic flared within her chest. A sharp breath escaped her lips as she searched desperately for an alternative.

"I daenae mean to pry, me lady. Tis only yer safety I think about."

Erin paused, pressing her head into the horse's neck. The stable boy was right; she couldn't ride off into the evening with no plan, and she couldn't get home before nightfall with the bridge being out of use. She needed a plan. She could stop at the inn they had used on their way here, but then she remembered that was the wrong side of the bridge.

"Perhaps ye could just take a ride to the village and return before the rain?" The lad continued with his helpful tone.

The village! That wasn't a bad idea. She needed to leave McCormack castle today,

she didn't need to arrive home today.

"Thank ye. I'll do that." Erin turned to the boy and held out her letter. "Can ye read?"

"Nay, miss. Naught use for it here, feeding the horses. Their needs are simple enough."

"Good." Erin nodded. "Wait for me to leave and then take this to Laird McCormack. Ye'll find him in the healin' room."

"Aye, miss. As soon as yer gone."

She mounted the mare, her hands gripping the reins as if they were her lifeline.

"Be safe, Mistress Erin," the stable boy called out, waving the letter to keep himself visible until she was far enough away to give her the head start she needed.

As she left the castle grounds, she stopped the horse long enough to glance back at the castle she had come to think of as her home. She would miss this place more than she had realized, but she was doing what needed to be done. She spurred the horse forward once more, leaving behind the flickering torchlight of the stable and plunging into the darkness beyond. The wind whispered through the trees, carrying with it the secrets of the night and the silent promise of a destination known only to her.

Magnus stood like a sentry at the foot of Hayden's bed, his brother's breaths shallow but steady, a fragile thread tethering him to this world. The room was dim, the air thick with the scent of herbs and the musty odor of old stone that no amount of scrubbing could erase. A single candle flickered, casting long shadows across the chamber walls that had seen too many vigils, and the fire brought much-needed warmth to the room. The healer had done all she could for Hayden, leaving him to rest until her next check. But Magnus would not allow his brother to sleep alone.

"Brother," Scarlett's urgent voice cut through the muted stillness as she burst into the room, her fiery hair a wild cascade around her shoulders. She moved with a purpose that spoke volumes of the urgency in her heart, her blue eyes wide with alarm. "Erin has left."

Magnus straightened, a taut line of tension coiling down his spine. The very mention of Erin Gibson's name set something primal alight within him, a spark he'd been trying to douse until their wedding night, but now he embraced with a passion. His jaw clenched, his mind already racing with the consequences of her departure.

"Left?" he echoed, his voice betraying none of the devastation crushing inside him. "Why would she?—"

"Read this." Scarlett thrust a folded piece of parchment into his hand, her blunt manner brooking no argument. "I met with the stable boy just outside and he handed with this."

With fingers that shook slightly, Magnus unfolded the letter, his gaze scanning the neat, determined script that he had come to know as Erin's. Each word was a dagger, sharp and precise, revealing the struggle of a lass who wore her heart on her sleeve. She had written that she loved him, which would have made him smile if it wasn't being quoted as the reason why she needed to leave. She blamed herself for everything that happened to Hayden, that it was her act of making him open himself up to his siblings that put Hayden in danger.

"It wasnae that, was it brother. Ye would have protected her if ye had hated me. Ye would have still done so if ye hated her." Magnus would not have his brother's gallant actions blamed on a little tenderness on his part, nor one successful ride in the country. The Hayden he knew before Erin came into his life was still the same as the one who risked his life for her.

"This would break ye to hear, brother." Magnus sighed. "I dinnae show her what she means to us. To me."

"Ye shouldnae blame yerself, brother," Scarlett said. "She's as free-spirited as the Highland wind."

"Free-spirited," he repeated, the word tasting of irony on his tongue. She was spirited, but she didn't yearn to be free. She yearned for respect, purpose, friendship, and family. He even believed now she yearned for his love.

"Go after her," Scarlett urged, handing him his plaid, the colors of their clan woven into the tartan fabric.

Magnus's mind raced, torn between duty and a desire he scarcely understood. To leave Hayden now would be to abandon the brother he had sworn to protect, yet the thought of Erin lost and alone ignited a fierce protectiveness he could not deny. "I cannae leave."

"Ye cannae let her go, Magnus!" she cried, emerging from the shadowed archway, her fiery hair a stark flame against the grey walls. "It's me fault. I should have seen it—the restlessness in her eyes. Go after her, before it's too late!"

"Scarlett," he started, his voice a low growl of confliction, but he faltered, unable to voice the turmoil within.

"Ye ken what ye must do," she insisted. "I am as much to blame as ye. I could have spoken to her, but me mind was on Hayden, I was selfish, brother. The blame lies with me."

"Nay, sister. There is no blame to be had." Magnus drew a deep breath and glanced at his brother's pale face. "We need many eyes searching for her. I need..." he needed his man-at-arms. He needed his brother. He needed someone he could trust to find her for him.

"See to Hayden," he commanded, He turned on his heel, the letter clutched like a talisman as he strode toward the door. "I willnae be long."

He entered the hall, where many of his clansmen worked on removing the Tartan Day decorations.

"Ye are all good men, loyal and true. As yer laird, I respect that in each of ye." Magnus gained their attention. "But I need to call on ye services once more this day. Lady McCormack has fled. I need men to search for her."

Magnus held his breath. Who of his men would choose to ride the moorland while he sat idly by his brother's bed.

"Ays, me laird." Callum stepped forward. "Do we know which direction she took?"

"All we know is that she is on horseback, and I'll wager she is trying to head to O'Kane. The stable boy reminded her that the bridge is out, so I daenae ken which route she would take."

"We'll start there and fan out," Iain assured him.

"Ye'll form a party and search?"

"Aye me laird. Ye stay where yer needed."

He was reaching out and trusting others, and they wanted to help him. His heart swelled as he thought of the pride Erin would feel if she knew.

"Please bring her safely back to me."

Understanding flashed in Callum's eyes. "We'll bring her back, Laird," he assured, but there was an unspoken question hovering in the air—did Magnus truly wish for Erin's return, or was it freedom she sought?

"Go, and daenae spare the whip," Magnus commanded, with the authority of a laird worthy of their respect.

As his men hurried away, Magnus turned back to the chamber where his brother lay. Hayden's breaths were shallow, yet steady—a testament to the resilience of the Black bloodline. A healer had assured Magnus that the charming rogue would wake by dawn's light, his flirtatious grin ready to charm the thistle off a Highland breeze, but first he had to survive the night.

"Ye ken I cannae leave ye, Hayden," Magnus murmured, watching his brother's chest rise and fall. "Nae when death nearly grasped ye. Ye've always been the one to chase after skirts and hearts, while I stood back, bound by honor and land. It's time I find ye

a wife and a purpose beyond me heir."

He brushed a lock of dark hair from Hayden's forehead, the silence of the room punctuated only by the crackling hearth and his brother's breathing. In the quiet, Magnus allowed himself a moment to imagine Erin's fiery spirit challenging his every word, her independence a beacon that both frustrated and enticed him.

"Will ye forgive me, brother?" he whispered, though no answer came. "For placing duty before me own heart?"

The shadows lengthened across the room, and Magnus felt the weight of his decision pressing down upon him. With a final glance at Hayden's peaceful face, he stepped from the room, his resolve hardening.

"Ye must recover, Hayden," he said into the darkness, his voice barely above a growl. "For I have a lass to reclaim, and I'll be needin' ye at me side when I do."

And with those words left hanging in the stale air of the chamber, Magnus strode away, each step carrying him further from his brother's bedside and closer to the precipice of the unknown.

For many hours, Magnus waited for news on his wife, but when it came, the knock had him jumping from his daze.

He turned sharply as the heavy oaken doors creaked open, revealing his clansmen, their expressions grim and foreboding in the firelight.

"Report," Magnus demanded, his voice steady despite the turmoil churning inside him.

"Laird," Callum began, "we've scoured the hills, followed the river to where it forks

at the Devil's Teeth, rode hard along the river and checked all crossin's...but there's nae a sign of Lady Erin."

The words struck Magnus like a physical blow, his knuckles whitening as he gripped the sword hilt tighter. "What do ye mean 'nae sign'? She cannae just vanish into the mist!"

"Ye ken as well as I, the lass is cunnin'," another clansman chimed in, his tone respectful but tinged with unease. "She has the wit to cover her tracks. Even took care nae to be seen by the crofters."

"Erin..." The name left his lips as a whisper, a prayer to the wind that might carry her back to him. His mind raced with images of her - those defiant blue eyes that sparkled even when she was cross, the way her wavy brown hair would escape its braids and frame her face like the wild beauty of the Scottish moorlands.

He could no longer deny the depth of his feelings, the truth that gnawed at his heart like a starved hound. Erin Gibson, his wife in name, had become the very essence of his soul. Her absence tore at him more fiercely than the wounds of any battle.

"Damn it all," Magnus cursed under his breath, his fists clenching so tightly that his nails dug into his palms. He could feel the beastly rage that earned him his fearsome reputation boiling in his veins, but it was the sharp pang of loss that fueled his fury. "Refresh a moment in the hall. I shall join ye momentarily."

"Ye love her." Scarlett muttered. It wasn't a question; it was a realization that dawned on him with the force of a Highland gale. Every argument, every stolen glance, every moment of reluctant admiration - it all led to this undeniable truth.

"More than me own life," he confessed to the empty room, his voice strained with an emotion he'd never allowed himself to show.

“Then find her. I’ll nae leave Hayden until yer return.” Scarlett rested her hand over his.

Magnus nodded and rose up from his stool, leaning over Hayden's bedside, where his brother lay still as death itself, though the rise and fall of his chest whispered the promise of recovery. Magnus leaned down, pressing his lips to Hayden's clammy forehead, a silent prayer escaping into the warmth of his skin.

"Forgive me, wee brother," he murmured, his voice rough with barely contained torment. "I must leave ye now."

"Ye daenae need to ask forgiveness for chasin' after yer heart, Magnus," Scarlett's voice cut through the tension, a touch of her usual bluntness softened by understanding. She stood there, arms crossed over her chest, her fiery hair a vivid contrast to the muted hues of the room. "Go on, before the lass gets too far."

Her words were a lifeline, giving him permission to do what every fiber of his being screamed for. Nodding, he turned on his heel and strode towards the door, determination etched into every line of his powerful frame.

“I expect ye sittin' up waiting to scold me fer leaving ye,” Magnus ordered his brother before leaving the room.

He headed to the hall where over a dozen clansmen waited for orders. "Erin is a smart woman. We know she hasnae taken the road to O'Kane, that has been searched well. So we widen the search, include the village and the farms." His wife was smart, and if she could not reach her destination before night, then she would be lying low somewhere to wait for the morn. He would search with his men, confident she would be found.

The great hall was a blur as he passed through, his mind singularly focused on the

stables that housed the fleetest of horses. Erin would have taken her new mare, a spirited creature that could outrun the wind itself. But no beast, however swift, would keep her from him if he had any say in it.

He burst through the heavy doors leading to the outer bailey, the chill air slapping his face, a stark reminder of the harsh reality he faced. His breath formed clouds of mist as he ran, the night sky an endless tapestry above him, stars twinkling like the flicker of hope within his chest. Just as he neared the stables, a figure stepped out from the shadows, blocking his path. Reggie Hogg, councilman and thorn in Magnus's side, planted himself firmly before the laird, his austere face set in grim lines.

"Where do ye think ye're goin', lad?" Reggie demanded, his tone condescending as ever.

"Out of me way, Reggie," Magnus growled, his fury rising like a storm at sea. The older man had always been critical of him, but now was not the time for their usual power struggles. Erin was out there somewhere, alone and unprotected, and every second wasted was a second too long.

"Ye'll nae stop me," Magnus continued, his voice low and threatening. It was a warning Reggie would do well to heed.

"Ye think I stand here to bar yer way?" Reggie retorted, though the glint in his eye spoke of something more, something unspoken that lurked beneath the surface.

"Move," Magnus insisted, prepared to shove past the older man if necessary. His hands clenched into fists at his sides, ready for action, for anything that would bring Erin back to him.

"Listen to me, boy..." Reggie began, but Magnus was already beyond patience, beyond reason. He couldn't afford to delay, not when every moment meant Erin

slipped further from his grasp.

"I ken where the lassie is hidin'," Reggie called to him.

His heart pounded like a drumbeat of war as he tensed, preparing to unleash the full force of his wrath upon the councilman who dared stand between him and his quest to reclaim the woman he loved.

"Erin?" he breathed, her name a talisman against the despair that threatened to consume him. He would find her, by the sword or by the soul, for she was the light that banished all darkness from his world.

"Aye, tis the reason I am here, me laird. I'll take ye to her."

Magnus paused, frowning at the councilman, but he saw the man in a new light. He needed more men like Reggie around him, those who would tell the truth as it was, rather than say the words Magnus wanted to hear. he had been blinded by Caelan's agreeable nature, and had grown to resent challenge.

"Thank ye, Reggie," Magnus praised, and he couldn't deny the pleasure he felt in seeing Reggie smile.

Erin's breath caught in the back of her throat, a scream stifled by sheer disbelief as Magnus, like an apparition from the misty moors, stepped into the dimly lit chamber. The door groaned on its hinges, a lamenting sound that matched the tightness constricting her heart. Her eyes, wide as full moons over the Highlands, were locked onto his towering form. She had been certain Reggie's scorn for him would have barred any such encounter, yet here stood Magnus—Laird McCormack himself, his presence commanding the very air to still.

Through the thick shadows cast by the flickering candlelight, Erin could discern the hard lines of Magnus's face, the sharp angles softened only slightly by the cascade of long black hair. His broad shoulders, cloaked in a worn plaid that spoke to countless battles endured, seemed to carry the weight of the world. But it was his eyes, those deep pools of brown, that bore into her with an intensity that belied the stoic mask he wore.

"Ye shouldnae be here," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper, betraying her flustered state.

Magnus advanced, each step deliberate and sure, closing the distance between them with a predator's grace. "And yet, here I am," he replied, his laconic tone laced with an undercurrent of urgency she couldn't ignore. "Ye shouldnae be here either. Yer place is with me."

Erin's fingers gripped the edge of the rough-hewn table beside her, seeking stability in a world suddenly tilting. Reggie Hogg, that cantankerous old councilman, had

expressed nothing but disdain toward her and Magnus since the day of her unwanted betrothal to Magnus. She thought his desire to see Magnus suffer would guarantee his silence, but if he had betrayed her, there must be a good reason, and a coil of fear tightened within her chest.

"Has somethin' happened?" The question spilled from her lips before she could stop it, her mind racing with possibilities. Had Hayden, the young brother Magnus so fiercely protected, succumbed to his wounds? Was their precarious hold over the clan slipping through their fingers like sand?

"Nothing ye need concern yerself with," Magnus said, his voice a low rumble that reverberated through the room. He stopped mere inches from her, the heat from his body like a beacon in the cool draftiness of the keep.

"Then why are ye here?" Her tone took on an edge, a reflection of the independent spirit that refused to be cowed even by the beast of a man she was bound to.

"Because despite what ye might think, nae even Reggie can dictate all me actions." His words hung between them, a challenge and a confession wrapped in one.

"Ye ken how he feels about ye," she countered, her gaze not wavering despite the fluttering in her stomach—a maelstrom caused by fear or something far more dangerous, she dared not admit. "So there is somethin' wrong. Are ye well?"

"Aye, I ken well enough," Magnus conceded, his expression unyielding as granite. "But what I feel is nae dictated by the likes of him."

Her breath hitched at the implication, and for a fleeting moment, the walls she had built around her heart seemed to tremble. Erin shook her head, dismissing the thought as quickly as it came.

"Ye have no reason to care what happens to me," she retorted, though the conviction in her voice wavered.

"Have I nae?" Magnus challenged, the corners of his mouth lifting ever so slightly—the barest hint of a smirk that suggested he knew something she did not.

The tension in the room was a living thing, crackling like the fire that roared in the stone hearth. Erin felt herself being drawn into Magnus's orbit, the air between them charged with an energy that defied explanation.

Magnus's eyes never left Erin as he turned around, the heavy fabric of his plaid shifting with the motion. The silence hung between them like the eerie calm before a storm. "I'm as whole as I ever was," he said, his voice a low rumble that reverberated through the room.

Erin's heart thundered against her ribs, her hands trembling as fear knotted in her gut. "Hayden," she gasped, the name falling from her lips like a prayer. Her gaze frantically searched Magnus's stoic face for any sign of tragedy. The color drained from her cheeks as her mind conjured images of blood-soaked tartan and lifeless eyes. With a strangled cry, she clasped a hand over her mouth and collapsed into the nearest chair, her body folding in on itself. "He is passed, and that is why Reggie told ye where I was."

She had been such a fool to leave, and drag Magnus away from his brother in his final hours. She was a fool to think he wouldn't have followed until Hayden's recovery was sealed.

"Erin, lass," Magnus said, urgency threading his tone. He dropped to one knee beside her, his large hand enveloping her smaller one with surprising gentleness. His thumb brushed against her skin in a soothing rhythm, a stark contrast to the usual firmness of his touch. "Hayden lives. He's nae worse than when we parted."

Her sobs were raw, tearing from her throat as if each one clawed its way out. "But the blood—his wounds," she choked out between the violent waves of grief that wracked her frame.

"Look at me." His command brooked no argument, the laird within him rising to the fore despite the tenderness in his eyes. When she finally lifted her head, her gaze met his—brown eyes locked onto blue, a silent exchange more powerful than words.

"Ye ken I wouldnae lie, nae about this." His voice softened, his kind tone wrapping around her like a warm embrace. Magnus McCormack, the man who had survived countless battles and bore the scars of his tumultuous past, now knelt at her feet, offering solace in the midst of her turmoil.

"He lives?" Erin sobbed, she felt stupid and relieved and exhausted all at once.

"Ye mustnae weep so," he murmured, his thumb tracing the line of her jaw. "For yer tears, they cut me deeper than any blade ever could."

As her sobs subsided to tremulous breaths, a new understanding passed between them—an acknowledgment of the bond that had formed, unspoken but undeniable. In the quiet aftermath, as the last of her tears dried upon her lashes, the crackle of the hearth was the only sound—a reminder of life's persistent flame, burning through despair and kindling hope anew. And it was there, in the dimly lit chamber, that the chapter closed, leaving behind a palpable yearning.

Erin turned away, the shame of her selfish actions was too much to bare. She had dragged him from Hayden's bedside, and who knows how many other men were out looking for her. Her back to him, she watched the flames leap in her heath. Those burning the wood stayed strong and bright, while the flames that leapt into the air, flickered out and died. She should have clung to the family who had accepted and loved her.

"Erin," Magnus said, his voice roughened by emotion, "daenae turn away from me."

But she did not heed his plea. Instead, she shook her head, her voice a hoarse whisper, "I'm no good for ye, Magnus. I've brought naught but danger upon yer house. 'Tis me fault Hayden lies wounded."

"Ye are wrong, lass" he declared, rising to his full height and stepping closer until he loomed over her. His shadow melded with hers in the flickering light, an omen that neither of them could escape their intertwined fates. "I refuse to lose Hayden—" here his voice broke, betraying the terror that haunted his dreams, "—and I'll be damned if I lose ye as well."

Her breath hitched, and she turned her head slightly, just enough for him to glimpse the profile of her tear-stained cheek. "Magnus, why do ye care so much? Ye owe me nothin'."

"Erin," he started, the words deep and slow "I love ye."

She stilled, the shock evident even in her rigid posture. Slowly, she turned to face him, her eyes searching his as though delving into the depths of Loch Ness, seeking the fabled monster within its dark waters. But what she found was the raw honesty of a man who had known too much pain and yet dared to embrace the possibility of love.

"Ye love me?" Disbelief laced her tone, even as a glimmer of hope shone through the mist of her tears.

"Aye," he affirmed, stepping forward, closing the distance between duty and desire. "More than I ever thought possible."

His confession hung between them, a fragile bridge over a chasm of uncertainty.

What would she do? Would she cross it to meet him or turn away, leaving him to face the abyss alone?

In the silence that followed, the weight of his revelation pressed down upon them both, a test of wills and hearts, as heavy as the stones of his ancestors' cairns. Would their story, etched in the rugged landscape of their homeland, be one of love's triumph or tragedy? The answer lay in her hands—hands that could either push him away or pull him close, sealing their fate with the simplest of touches.

“Come back to the castle. If ye really want to leave, I’ll have ye taken home in the morrow.”

“I daenae want to...” She didn’t want to go home, but she had to, didn’t she? It was for the good of the clan, wasn’t it? She loved Magnus, and she adored her new siblings. This was her life now. She had been happy until Caelan drew his blade. Could she be happy again.

"Erin," he began, his voice barely above a whisper, "I ken ye fear for me kin, but I need ye to understand—ye are me kin now, too."

She looked up at him, her breath hitching in her throat, the walls she'd built around her heart trembling at his words. The air between them was thick with anticipation, every moment stretching into eternity.

"Ye say ye love me," she murmured, her Scottish brogue wrapping around the words like a caress. "But how can I believe in a love that may cost ye everythin'?"

"Because, mo chridhe," he replied. Erin’s eyes lifted. He had called her his heart. Not the one who warmed it, but the wife who had become his heart.

"Without ye, I have nothing left to lose."

The impassioned declaration hung in the air, a call to the wildness within her. Something primal within Erin stirred, responding to the raw honesty in his voice. She raised her chin defiantly, her inner turmoil giving way to resolve.

"Stop talkin'," she ordered, fighting back the sobs that threatened to spill from within.

"Then know this, Magnus Black," she said, her voice steady, "I love ye too. Nae because I must, but because there's nae part of me that cannae."

"Ye cannae?" Magnus frowned for a moment before his face lit up. "Ye can, ye love me?"

"Aye, husband. I love ye."

With those words, Erin closed the distance between them, her hands finding their way to the breadth of his shoulders. She pulled him down to meet her, and their lips crashed together in a kiss that held the fury of a Highland gale. It was a clashing of spirits, a melding of souls that had been starved of affection for far too long. They kissed with a ferocity born of battles fought and scars shared, their embrace a fortress against the world outside.

As they parted, breathless and hearts racing, Erin could feel the embers of desire still burning, threatening to set their very beings alight. Magnus cupped her face with his rough, scarred hands, and the intensity of his gaze bore into her very soul.

"Promise me, Erin," he pleaded, his voice thick with emotion. "Promise ye willnae keep me away from Hayden. He needs me, and I need ye. I willnae leave without either of ye by me side."

"I will be at yer side, or standing alone in the corridor, or wherever ye need me to be."

"Next to me, me love, always right next to me."

The ancient stones of the castle seemed to echo with urgency as Magnus Black ascended the spiral staircase two steps at a time, his heart hammering against his chest with his haste to return to his siblings. Erin's soft breaths were the only sound in stark contrast to his racing pulse, her presence a constant reminder of her position right behind him.

"Scarlett!" he barked, almost colliding with his fiery-haired sister who appeared suddenly from the shadows of the dimly lit corridor.

"Brother," Scarlett began, her expression grave, eyes wide with unspoken dread. "Thank the lord ye are returned."

Magnus needed no words to sense the dire news she might carry, and a cold shiver of fear ran down his spine. He imagined the worst—that death had claimed his brother while he recovered Erin. The possibility of Hayden's death was a wound too raw, an outcome too bleak to face.

"Outta me way," he growled, brushing past her without waiting for the explanation he feared would steal the last remnants of his resolve.

"Wait, Magnus—" Scarlett's voice trailed off as he thundered up the remaining stairs.

The healing room's door flew open under the force of his entry, the heavy oak nearly splintering against stone walls. Magnus's gaze swept the chamber, frantic until it landed on the disheveled form propped amidst a sea of cushions.

"Hayden," he exhaled the name like a prayer of thanks to the saints.

His younger brother's chest rose and fell with soft breaths, his head swathed in bandages that did little to tame his unruly locks. Those same locks now stuck up in every direction, as if protesting the very idea of being restrained. Hayden's eyes fluttered open, glassy and unfocused, but alive.

"Big brother," Hayden slurred, a ghost of his usual charm curling the edges of his words.

"Save yer strength, lad," Magnus replied, the roughness in his voice betraying his relief.

"Is she well? Tell me, Magnus," Hayden's voice cracked, each word laced with urgency. "Is Erin well?"

"Erin is safe," Magnus intoned once more, his voice a granite promise in the dimly-lit chamber. Yet, it was clear Hayden's restlessness would not subside on words alone.

The door creaked open and Scarlett's fiery hair heralded her entrance like a beacon cutting through the gloom. Close behind her, Erin's silhouette appeared—composure etched into her posture, yet the subtle tremor in her step betrayed her concern.

"He is awake, Erin, come see Hayden is awake," he called joyfully. "See, Hayden. Here she is, quite well."

"I see," Erin smiled as she entered. "It is good to see ye awake, brother."

"I was tryin' to get word to ye," Scarlett muttered. "I would have told ye, had ye given me a breath."

"How are ye feelin'?" Erin questioned.

Magnus stood beside his brother's bed, allowing Erin to sit on the small stool that he didn't really think strong enough for his weight.

"I think..." Hayden began. "I think I am well. Scarlett told me nothin'. She just screamed and ran, but the healer said I would be fine."

"Ye are too stubborn nae to be." Magnus laughed.

"Well, that I learned from ye." Hayden bantered back, a flicker of his former self returning.

"I only left ye because ye wouldnae stop askin' for Erin," Scarlett huffed.

"Aye, and now I see her," Hayden nodded. "Now tell me why me cut belly hurts me head so much?"

"What do ye remember?" Magnus questioned

"I remember..." Hayden's eyes move to Erin. "Erin, do ye swear ye are well? Are ye well?"

"I am fine, I swear." Erin reached forward and took his hand, squeezing tightly.

Magnus watched as Hayden's eyes, clouded with pain and confusion, sought out confirmation of Erin's safety. Despite the reassurance that fell from Magnus's lips, his brother's worry remained untamed, a wild creature pacing within the confines of his fevered mind.

"Ye might need to tell me what I remember, brother; it's all just bits I cannae quite

put together." Hayden admitted.

"The Tartan Day celebrations were going really well, and ye were keeping me from returning to the bakery for fear of favorin' one over all others." Erin pieced together the events leading up to Hayden's capture. "We were taken by surprise. He tried to kill me, nay, he would have, if ye hadn't saved me. Ye took a sword meant for me." Erin placed a hand gently on the bandage wrapped around his bare torso.

Hayden's brow furrowed beneath the stark white of the bandage wrapped around his head, his gaze unfocused as memory beckoned. "Was it... Caelan?" he asked, his words slurred yet insistent. There was a hint of disbelief, a reluctance to reconcile the image of their trusted man-at-arms with that of a traitor. "Does me memory deceive me?"

"I wish it were so," Magnus paced across the small room. "Ye did well, Hayden. All ye need to ken is that ye protected Erin. She's safe because of ye."

"Caelan tried to kill Erin? I hoped I had dreamt it."

"Aye," Magnus confirmed, his jaw setting. "'Twas Caelan, but ken this—Caelan is Archer Gallagher. He sought revenge for the deaths of his kin, cruelly taken from him."

"Should I ken this name?"

"Nay. Ye and Scarlett were so young." Magnus confessed with a heavy heart. "Councilman Gallagher stood against our father. All I remember was the night our father sentenced him to death for his part in a coup. But father always put a cruel twist on everythin'. He ordered the Councilman Gallagher to kill his own family. He refused, and Faither did it himself. I thought all of them had died."

"I daenae remember this, but Caelan... Archer... he wouldnae remember either. He was me age?" Hayden couldn't make any more sense of the matter than Magnus himself.

"Ye were six or seven, it was around two years before Faither was taken from us. I should have done somethin' then to stop it."

"What could ye have done, Magnus, ye were nay more than twelve yerself." Scarlett huffed. "Ye are nae our faither."

Hayden gave a nod of agreement, but his brow was instantly etched with regret at the movement.

"Rest, brother. Ye need to recover yer strength."

"I daenae remember ye bedbound for a mere cut." Hayden protested. His eyes fluttered open and shut, fighting the grip of drowsiness.

"This is no mere cut, Hayden. Yer thick head nearly took down half the wall."

A small smile spread across Hayden's lips. "Aye, got a thick skull for sure."

As sleep claimed Hayden, Magnus allowed his mind to drift to the men who had helped Archer. He couldn't help but wonder what lies Archer had told them to win over their swords. But Hayden was right to question Archer's memories. An experience when he was eight had twisted in Archer's mind, driving him to seek revenge, hoe bitter he must have felt to be unable to have his revenge on the former laird who was the cause of all his pain. If he had known, he could have helped somehow.

Magnus made up his mind to spare the lives of those who helped Archer. Their only

true crime was listening to the rantings of the man they believed to be someone else. There would be punishment, that was certain, but it would be painless. Thinking of his wall comment to Hayden, he decided that they would repair all the damage done, and they would lose their privileges to attend council meetings.

Magnus watched his wife, still gripping Hayden's hand with such compassion and kindness, something he saw rubbing off on himself. He would no longer be ignorant of the needs of others. He would speak personally to each of Archer's followers and discover what they hoped to achieve for themselves in the matter, and he would see that improvements would be made. His clan would be happier because he was happier.

He was happy and complete, and he wanted everyone to feel the way he did.

"Scarlett, would ye call Reggie Hogg to me. It can be his voice that informs the village of their kinsmen's fate. He will make it known to all that nay more blood will be spilled for this."

"And what of the men who stood with Archer? What will become of them?" Her voice held the soft lilt of concern mingled with strength. "Do they nae pay for what happened to our brother?"

"They had nay hand in that. It was Archer alone who hurt Hayden." Magnus felt the weight of leadership upon his broad shoulders, the responsibility to forge a path different from the bloody legacy left by his father. A silent battle raged within him—the instinct to destroy those who betrayed his trust against the yearning to be a laird of justice and mercy.

"Justice will ken their names," he murmured more to himself than to the others. He would not be his father.

"Ye daenae have to decide now, brother," Hayden offered weakly.

"Do ye wish them to die for this?"

"Nay, brother, me head hurts nae more than the morn followin' a night of ale."

Magnus doubted that was true, but he respected his brother's sentiment.

"Killin' those who wrong me... 'twas our faither's way," Magnus finally said, his voice resonant within the stone walls of the healing room. "But I will nae be the tyrant he was."

"Give me a week, and I would gladly stand beside ye brother," Hayden offered.

"We will all stand together, and we shall be stronger for it."

Erin approached him, her blue eyes wide and luminous. "Magnus," she breathed, her voice soft but fervent. With a boldness that defied her past reservations, she reached up and touched his cheek. "I love ye."

In that moment, the world narrowed to the space between them. Magnus looked down at this woman who'd become his unexpected salvation, a fierce flame burning in his chest. As their lips hovered mere breaths apart, a sudden, indignant cough shattered the intimacy.

"Och, spare an injured man the sight," Hayden chided from his propped position, a crooked smile on his lips despite the pallor of his skin. "If ye two keep this up, I'll be needin' to find a wife meself just to have some peace!"

A smirk tugged at the corner of Magnus's mouth, the humor a welcome reprieve from the gravity of his leadership. "Rest easy, brother," he replied with feigned

exasperation. "Yer discomfort is duly noted."

With Erin still in his arms, Magnus was, for the first time in his life, exactly where he wanted to be.

EPILOGUE

The first light of dawn seeped through the heavy drapes, casting a soft glow on the tangled sheets where Erin and Magnus lay wrapped up in each other's arms. Erin woke early as always, enjoying a moment to watch her husband completely at peace. His chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm against her side, his breath warm on her neck. She could scarcely believe that she, a woman who had been taught to guard her heart fiercely, found such serenity in the embrace of a man once thought to be more beast than human.

Erin shifted gently, careful not to rouse him just yet. Today was their day. A rare day out together, free from the weight of clan politics and the haunting shadows of the past. Magnus had been working so hard since the Archer incident. She turned her head slightly, catching sight of the curve of his jaw, the faint scars that hinted at battles fought and won. His features were softened by sleep, and she allowed herself a moment to study him, to trace the lines of his face with her eyes as if committing him to memory.

"Are ye admiring yer handiwork, lass?" Magnus's voice, low and husky with sleep, broke the silence. His eyes remained closed, but a hint of a smile played on his lips.

"Perhaps," Erin replied, her own smile betraying her excitement for the day ahead. "Or maybe I'm wondering how I ended up sharing a bed with the most stubborn man in all of Scotland."

"Ye know well it takes a strong woman to endure such a man," he teased, eyes finally opening to meet hers with an intensity that sent a shiver down her spine.

They rose, the cool air of the room nipping at their skin as they dressed for the day. Erin chose a simple gown, one that wouldn't hinder their explorations, while Magnus donned his plaid, the tartan a stark reminder of his role as Laird McCormack. Yet today, he was simply Magnus, and she was simply his wife.

Together, they descended the stairs, the familiar scent of peat smoke and fresh bread filling the air. The great hall was empty save for Scarlett and one other figure slumped over the table, his copper hair unmistakable even in the dim light.

"Scarlett," Magnus said, addressing his sister with a nod towards the sleeping form of their brother, "why is Hayden taking his rest at the breakfast table?"

"Och, he claims he's 'holdin' the fort' so the two of ye can have yer day out." Scarlett's sharp tongue held a note of affection as she poured ale into a cup. "Ye ken, he still needs rest, though he insists he is quite well."

"Holdin' the fort? Is that so?" Magnus's eyes softened as he looked upon his brother. Despite the years of tension, the bond of family was unbreakable. "He's a good lad, but he still needs to recover."

"Indeed he is, but ye are good to give him responsibilities," Erin agreed, her heart warming at the sight of the brothers—one asleep, the other standing as her protector and partner. They were men shaped by the cruelties of their father, yet each bore the scars differently. Hayden with charm and a roguish smile, Magnus with a stoic resolve that only she seemed able to melt.

Scarlett stood arms akimbo, her fiery hair a stark contrast to the cool stone walls of the keep. Her eyes narrowed playfully at her brother's antics. "Ye always were a tease, brother. Mark me words, Hayden will outshine us all, the best man-at-arms—and brother—a laird could hope for."

Magnus's fingertips brushed the rough surface of the oatcake, a grin playing on his lips as he pocketed the morsel. He glanced at Hayden's slumbering form, his chest rising and falling in the muted light. His brother had taken up residence at the table like a steadfast sentinel, and Magnus would not be the one to rouse him. "Aye. Let him sleep," Magnus decided, his voice carrying the quiet command of a laird. "We'll take our meal on the road."

"Whatever ye say, me lord," Scarlett replied, though the twinkle in her eye betrayed her true feelings. "Just daenae forget yer way home. This castle needs its laird and lady."

"Watch yer tongue, lass, or ye'll find yerself an old maid," Magnus chuckled. Erin loved the carefree way the three siblings teased each other now Magnus had allowed them in.

"Och, enough of yer gloom," Scarlett chided, turning to Erin with a conspiratorial wink. "And ye, lass, ye best be about makin' a wee bairn. It's time someone relieved Hayden of heir duties before he weds himself to that table. I need a nephew to play with."

Heat crept into Erin's cheeks, the blush as crimson as the dawn's early light. She cast a furtive glance at Magnus, whose gaze held hers with an intensity that spoke of unspoken promises and shared secrets. "Aye, the matter is in hand," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper, betraying none of the anticipation that fluttered in her chest like a captured bird.

"Good." Scarlett's smile was knowing, her gaze flickering between the two. "Now off with ye both before I change me mind and send Hayden after ye."

With a final glance at Hayden, Erin followed Magnus outside, where the promise of adventure awaited them. Hayden had taken a slow but steady road to recovery, but he

couldn't use it as an excuse forever to hide the fact he wasn't a morning person.

Erin felt Magnus's hand at the small of her back, guiding her towards the door with a certainty that made her heart beat faster. As they stepped through the threshold, the cool Highland air nipped at her skin, and Erin could only hope that the day ahead would be kinder than the past that haunted them both. Magnus's hand was firm on the reins as he led Erin to the open carriage, the sturdy wheels ready to roll across the rugged terrain. The morning mist clung to the moors like a lover's whisper, but it did little to dampen Erin's spirits. They climbed up front, side by side, their knees brushing in the intimate space.

"Ready?" Magnus asked, his voice low and gruff.

"Always," Erin replied, her heart thrumming with excitement for the day ahead.

As the carriage lurched forward, the keep receded into the background, its stone walls holding centuries of strife and triumph. They headed towards the newly mended bridge, evidence of Magnus's dedication to his lands and people. Erin sat tall beside him, her blue eyes sparkling with apprehension and thrill. She caught the sight of farmer's children chasing alongside the path, their laughter carried on the wind, and she waved, her smile genuine and wide.

"Ye seem at ease," Magnus noted, his eyes on the road but his attention keenly on her.

"Today, I am," Erin conceded, allowing herself this moment of peace.

"Good," he said, smiling at her like she were the center of his world.

The carriage rumbled over the new bridge, the sound of rushing water below filling the silence between them. As they continued, the landscape opened to reveal the little

bay where the shallow water mirrored the sky. It was here that Erin had taken her first unwitting swim in an attempt to capture the Laird's attention.

"Remember yer first dip here?" Magnus's question held a hint of playful challenge.

Erin scoffed, her cheeks warming at the memory. "Aye, as if I could forget. But lest ye think it an accident, know it was deliberate—to make ye jealous."

"Is that so?" He turned to her, his brown eyes alight with mischief. "And would ye do it again?"

"Perhaps," she teased, her gaze holding his, laden with promise. "If the right Laird asked me."

The banter set her heart racing, and she reveled in the tension that always simmered between them, like peat smoke over a fire. Inside, she wondered if Magnus sensed the same wild drumbeat that urged her closer to him. With every passing moment, Erin found herself more entangled in the web of their marriage—a marriage born of necessity but growing into something far more potent.

With a deft hand, Erin unfastened the clasp of her cloak and let it fall to the grass beside the carriage. The morning sun, still gentle in its ascent, cast long shadows over the heath that shrouded their secluded haven. She watched as Magnus, with a grace that belied his size, shrugged off his own heavy plaid. Garments dropped like leaves in autumn, until they both stood as bare as the day they were born, save for modesty's sake.

"Ye sure ye can handle the chill, lass?" Magnus's voice held a low rumble of amusement as he eyed the crystalline waters before them.

"Och, I was forged in the highlands," Erin retorted, her eyes sparkling with mirth. "It

is ye who should be wary of a wee bit cold water."

Without another word, she stepped into the water, gasping as the icy caress enveloped her legs, creeping higher till it kissed her skin with a thousand frigid lips. Magnus followed suit, his body cutting through the water with the assuredness of a man who had conquered much more than mere lakes.

They swam alongside each other, the only sounds being the sloshing of water and their labored breaths. Closing her eyes for a fleeting moment, she allowed herself to feel completely free—untethered from the expectations of her new life as Lady McCormack.

"Erin!" Magnus's voice jolted her back, gruff yet tinged with concern. "Daenae drift away on me now."

"Never," she said, her teeth chattering as she offered him a smile that was as much a challenge as it was an assurance. They continued their aquatic dance until the cold, drove them ashore.

Magnus emerged first, droplets cascading down his scarred torso.. He reached for the large plaid he'd brought and wrapped it around Erin's shoulders, drawing her into the warmth of his chest. Together, they sank onto the soft earth, the highland breeze whispering secrets through the heather around them.

"Ye're shivering," he murmured, his breath hot against her ear.

"Am I?" She leaned into him, seeking his heat, marveling at how natural it felt to seek solace in the arms of the man who was once her rival.

"Ye ken, we could warm up faster..." Magnus's suggestion hung between them, laden with intent.

"Is that so?" Erin turned within his arms, her blue eyes locking onto his. "And what would yer plan be, me laird?"

"Ye'll just have to trust me." His fingers traced the outline of her jaw, sending sparks of desire down her spine.

She nodded, waiting for his next move, her body and heart precariously perched on the precipice of passion.

Magnus's eyes darkened, and he pulled her closer, their lips a breath apart. Magnus's touch ignited a fire within Erin that even the chill of the Scottish waters could not quell. She was a bundle of nerves and need, wrapped tightly in the large plaid that seemed to be the only barrier between her and the raw elements of the Highlands. She dipped down between his legs, planting kisses along the length of his member.

"Does this please ye, me laird?" Erin teased, her blue eyes sparkling with mischief and mirth. It was a rare moment of power, where she held the stoic, guarded Magnus at her mercy.

"More than ye ken," he grunted, the restraint in his voice threadbare as silk worn by time.

She took him into her mouth, making soft moans as she bobbed up and down his length.

Magnus, ever the warrior, was not content to be a passive participant in their dance of desire. His hand slipped between Erin's legs, finding the secret bloom of her womanhood. His fingers delved into her folds, and she gasped, her body arching toward his touch. The sensation was overwhelming, a current that ebbed and flowed, pulling her under into the depths of passion.

"Och, Magnus," she breathed, her independent spirit willingly tethered to the sensations he elicited from her very core. A slow burn began to build within her, threatening to consume her whole.

"Ye are mine, Erin," he declared with a possessive intensity that echoed through the glen, as age-old as the hills surrounding them.

"Yers," she confirmed, her voice a mix of surrender and challenge as she lost herself to the waves of pleasure his fingers conjured.

Their union was elemental, a force as raw and untamed as the land itself. Magnus hovered above her, his brown eyes locking with Erin's as he aligned himself with the heat of her body. The world outside their secluded bay vanished as he pushed inside her, a single fluid motion that drew a gasp from them both. The chill of the water they'd left behind gave way to the fire building between them, each thrust fanning the flames higher.

"Are ye good, lass?" Magnus's voice was rough, the Scottish brogue thickening with his mounting passion.

Erin could only nod, her independent nature melting into the shared rhythm of their bodies. She wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders as he moved within her, feeling every thrust

"Ah, Erin," he groaned, his pace increasing, his control slipping.

"Keep going, Magnus," she urged, her voice a blend of encouragement and desperation. She matched him, move for move, lost in the intensity of their union. They were two souls, once adversaries, now entwined by fate and a marriage of convenience that was starting to feel like something more.

Her thoughts scattered as pleasure coiled tighter within her, the world narrowing to the point of release. "Magnus!" she cried out as her body shuddered, the dam breaking and sending waves of ecstasy crashing over her.

He followed soon after, a primal sound escaping him as he found his own release, his face buried in the crook of her neck. Their climax was a storm, fierce and all-consuming, leaving them clinging to each other as the tempest slowly ebbed away.

Exhausted, they collapsed onto the plaid spread beneath them, their limbs entangled. Magnus pulled her close, wrapping her in his warmth. Above them, the clouds drifted lazily across the sky—a theatre of shapes and stories playing silently for those who cared to watch.

"Look there," Erin whispered, tracing the outline of a cloud that resembled a highland stag. "Do ye see it? It's as if the legends of our land take shape in the very heavens."

"Aye," Magnus replied, his voice softer now, his breath tickling her ear. "And what legend might we be, Erin? What tale will they tell of us?"

Erin nestled closer, her heart pounding at his words. They now had a future together beyond convenience and necessity. Her mind raced with the possibility of children and a time when coups would be a thing of the past.

"They will speak of the peace and prosperity ye brought to these lands." Erin smiled, her hand moving idly across his chest. "But what will they say of me?"

"A wild woman whose sharp tongue and wit bore down their laird's will until he were naught but a compliant husband," Magnus teased.

"Wicked man," she scolded. "Tell me the truth, for I shall nae beg ye, highlander."

"Aye, me lady, ye must never beg a highlander."

The End?

1

“Go to sleep now,” Charlotte whispered, brushing the little girl’s hair from her forehead. She watched the child’s eyes drift slowly closed at the gentle touch.

There. You’re all asleep.

Charlotte breathed a sigh of relief as she cast her eyes around the room. Six beds were lined up along the walls, and six children were drifting soundly to sleep. Two years ago, when she started this journey, she questioned whether her dream of creating an orphanage could ever come true. And here she was with three bedrooms full of children.

Charlotte looked down to see the toddler’s chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm. Little Alice had been the only child still awake when Charlotte did her rounds through the bedrooms, but after a week of difficult nights, Charlotte was finally learning how to calm the girl.

“Who would give you away, little one?” Charlotte whispered to the sleeping girl.

Charlotte knew firsthand that a child could be separated from her parents for many reasons. After all, she had been one of these children. Her chest tightened as she looked around the room, remembering when this place was a monastery, filled with stern and serious nuns. She grew up in these walls under the cruel leadership of a Mother Abbess who thought hitting or insulting children was the only way to manage them.

It was why she was so proud of what she had turned this place into. When the cruel Mother Abbess was brought down, and the monastery abandoned, Charlotte revoked her vows as a nun. She didn't want to be associated with that woman or the church who let her exist. But the large, empty building was crying out to be used, and Charlotte had found the perfect use. She would run an orphanage here and give these children the childhood she never had.

Charlotte headed to the kitchen, rubbing the back of her neck. The quiet respite of her evening tea was all she could think about.

"Charlotte!" Sarah burst around the corner, surprising Charlotte just as she was about to descend the stairs.

"What is it?" Charlotte asked, catching herself to keep from falling. Sarah's eyes were wide, her face pale.

"Come quick."

Sarah turned around, rushing back down the hallways, and Charlotte could do nothing except follow her. She watched Sarah's black skirts swish back and forth with urgency.

"Is it a child?" Charlotte asked, nearly running to keep up with Sarah. Sarah was her most trusted friend and helper here at the orphanage. She was an even-tempered, quiet-spoken woman, who was rarely flustered by the day-to-day surprises and challenges of the orphanage. If Sarah thought something was wrong, Charlotte knew it must be serious.

"Please just come," Sarah said. "You must see for yourself."

Charlotte was following Sarah toward the front entrance where they had found

countless injured or desperate children in the past. She began to think of those children, remembering three huddled under a single threadbare blanket or the baby left naked on the steps in the middle of winter. Charlotte praised God they had gotten to that child in time.

Unfortunately, they were not always so lucky. Some children arrived too sick for doctors to do anything for them. Parents who could not afford doctors or medicine would leave them at the monastery, hoping that the church's charity could save their children. Sadly, most of them wouldn't make it to the end of the week.

"Here," Sarah said. The woman shoved open the front door to reveal the courtyard. Charlotte struggled to see what was beyond the threshold in the fading light of the evening. Once her eyes adjusted, she saw the form of a child lying on the top step.

"Oh my," Charlotte gasped, rushing forward. Sarah helped the boy to his feet, and Charlotte joined in, feeling the thinness of the boy's arm. The child was covered in dirt, and his clothes hung off of his malnourished frame.

"It's all right," Charlotte cooed, speaking quietly. The boy looked at her with terrified eyes, his hair knotted and falling across his face.

"We've got you now," Sarah said. "You're safe."

They led the boy inside, only then noticing that he wore no shoes. His feet were scraped and bloody, making it painful for him to walk across the cold stone of the entryway.

"I've got you," Charlotte said, lifting the boy into her arms. He was so light, she didn't struggle under his weight at all. His skin was far too cold from being outside in the early spring evening. When Charlotte smiled down at him, he only blinked at her.

“He’s in shock,” she told Sarah.

“What age, do you think?” Sarah asked as they walked toward the kitchen. “Five or six?”

“Maybe a bit older,” Charlotte said. “He’s very thin, but his legs are long. Maybe seven.”

Sarah nodded.

“Shall I call for the doctor?”

Charlotte observed the boy again, noting no immediate signs of distress besides the shock she read on his face. She hated to send for the doctor if it wasn’t necessary as she knew the priest was already upset about the large doctor bills the orphanage was accumulating.

“Not yet,” she said, weighing her options. “I believe we start with a warm bath and warm food. We’ll see how he’s faring after a few hours.”

Sarah and Charlotte worked silently, boiling water over the fire to pour into the large bath they kept in the kitchen. They placed the boy on a bench as they did so, and he didn’t move but rather simply sat like a doll, staring at them. Charlotte continued to talk to him, giving gentle assurances every minute or so.

When Charlotte gently removed the boy’s clothes, she noticed the purple and yellow marks on his upper arms and the welts on the back of his legs. Sarah gasped when she saw them, but Charlotte gave her a sharp look, urging her to be quiet.

“Where did you get these marks, child?” Charlotte asked. The boy dropped his head to his bare toes, but he didn’t speak. She saw his shoulders shake as he began to cry.

“It’s all right,” Charlotte cooed, rubbing her hand up and down the boy’s back. “Let’s get you into the bath. It will make you feel better.”

Her heart ached as she helped the weeping child into the steaming water. The sight of a bruised or battered child always brought Charlotte right back to her own childhood. The ghost of the cruel abbess was never far away, always haunting Charlotte’s nightmares. With so many injured children on her doorstep, it was impossible to forget the cruelty an adult could inflict.

“I know what it’s like to have a guardian who treats you cruelly,” Charlotte said quietly as she ran a washcloth up the child’s back. She watched the dirt run in rivulets, turning the water brown. The boy looked at her from the side of his eyes, and Charlotte kept talking.

“The woman who cared for me when I was younger,” she explained, “she liked to hit me when I did something wrong. And sometimes, for no reason at all.”

Behind them, Sarah gathered a plate of food from the evening leftovers. She had made a stew for dinner that the children had gobbled up, some even licking their bowls clean. Charlotte knew it would be the perfect thing to fill the boy up.

“She lived right here,” Charlotte said, disappearing into the memory. She could almost see the woman’s shadow in the doorway as she spoke. “In this monastery.”

Charlotte heard a splash of water as the boy pulled his knees into himself and put his hands on the tub’s edge, ready to jump out.

“It’s all right,” Charlotte said, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. “She’s not here anymore. The woman doesn’t live here.”

She saw him relax, staring back at her to see if he could trust her. Charlotte nodded,

trying to communicate calm and assurance to the boy. She was relieved when she saw his knees drop below the water's surface as he relaxed back into the bath.

The smell of the stew floated through the air as Sarah heated it over the fire. The child looked eagerly at the hearth as Charlotte wiped gently at his feet, cleaning dirt away from the cuts around his feet and ankles. He twisted out of her grip when the cloth tickled the underside of his foot, and Charlotte caught the faintest hint of a smile on his lips.

"Perhaps that's enough for now," she said, noting how desperately the boy wanted to eat. She was rewarded with a nod, the first communication he had given them all evening.

She was disappointed she wouldn't have a chance to work out the knots from the child's shoulder-length hair, but she reasoned they would have plenty of time tomorrow for such an onerous task.

"Sarah, can you bring some clean clothes?"

Sarah placed a bowl of steaming stew on the table before leaving the kitchen for an adjoining room. They kept many of their supplies nearby since this room was frequently the first stop in a child's journey here at the orphanage. Most of them needed food or a bath immediately, if not both.

Charlotte helped the boy step out and wrapped a sheet around him, pleased that she saw a flush of pink in his gaunt cheeks. The chill was gone from his skin and replaced with a warmth that Charlotte was determined to keep. She stood him close to the fire as she dried him off and then helped him into the clothes Sarah brought for him.

"There now," Sarah said, smiling down at him. "Good as new."

Once he was dressed, he walked to the food on his own. He sat down gracefully, surprising Charlotte with his poise before attacking the bowl and eating ravenously.

“I’m going back outside,” Sarah said, gathering up a lantern. “I saw some tracks I want to follow. If I’m not mistaken, they were coming from Scotland.”

The orphanage was only half a day’s ride from Scotland, and it wasn’t unusual for them to receive children from there. Usually, it meant the parents were desperate for the children to disappear, wanting no chance that they could return to their doorsteps. Sarah left with a determination in her step that Charlotte admired.

“Well, now,” Charlotte said, finding herself alone with the boy. “Perhaps now that you’re settled, you could tell me your name.”

She saw him look up at her, but his eyes quickly looked behind her, scanning the room. Charlotte turned around, trying to see what he was looking at.

“Do you need something?” Charlotte asked. And then, with a sudden understanding, she asked, “Can you speak, child?”

The boy stood up abruptly, and Charlotte worried he would try to run. She stood up too, subtly blocking the door with her body, but he only went to the tall counter where Sarah prepared food. He pulled down a piece of paper and began scribbling on the bottom of Sarah’s shopping list.

“Good,” Charlotte said. “You can write. Tell me your name.”

He looked over his shoulder before returning to the paper and finishing his message. With a tentative gait, he approached Charlotte and held the paper out to her. His expression was dangerously serious, and Charlotte felt her heart beat faster even before she read the words:

A monster is coming for me.

“A monster?” Charlotte asked. She bent down, so she was on the same level as the boy. “You’re safe here. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

She saw a tentative trust in the boy’s gaze, and she continued, “Can you tell me your name?”

The boy bent down to scribble again before holding the paper out for Charlotte to see:

Benjamin Fleming,

Son of Laird Alasdair O’Malley.

2

“ A nything from Molly?”

Sarah stood in Charlotte’s office, sorting the mail that had just arrived.

“Nothing,” Sarah said, and Charlotte sank back to her chair, feeling defeated.

“I wrote a week and a half ago,” she sighed. “Surely she’s gotten the message by now?”

“Perhaps she is away,” Sarah suggested. “I know she wouldn’t delay in responding if she got your letter. It must not have reached her yet.”

Charlotte nodded. The same evening she learned Ben’s identity, she wrote to her friend Molly. Molly lived in Scotland, married to a laird herself, so Charlotte hoped Molly could give her more information on this Laird O’Malley. Ben still hadn’t spoken, and Charlotte was desperate to learn anything she could about the place he had come from.

“I don’t know what to do,” Charlotte sighed. “The longer we keep him here, the more likely someone will come looking for him.”

“You mean the boy’s father?” Sarah asked. Sarah and Charlotte had spent many nights speaking about the mysterious child who could not speak. His words haunted Charlotte daily: A monster is coming for me.

“He might have run away,” Charlotte reasoned. “What if his father is the one who hurt him? “

Sarah cleared her throat, and Charlotte looked up. Ben stood in the doorway, leaning against the doorframe and staring at Charlotte.

“Your shadow,” Sarah said gently, and Charlotte stood up, forcing an immediate smile to her face.

“My goodness, is it dinnertime already?” Charlotte asked, moving toward Ben. “Thank you so much for reminding me.”

Charlotte guided Ben to the dining room, letting him sit next to her. Ever since his arrival, the boy hardly left her side, and dinnertime was no exception. She spent each meal coaxing him to eat more while she teased him about the knots in his midnight black hair.

“Perhaps it’s time to cut it,” Charlotte teased, and she watched Ben shake his head aggressively, smiling at the joke they always played.

A slam in the hallway made everyone in the dining hall look up. The children’s chatter died down as they heard men’s voices, loud and aggressive.

“Where is he?” a voice called out.

Charlotte saw Ben cower at the words, and her body turned cold with dread.

“Wait here,” she said, standing up. She rushed forward, wanting to put her body between the children and whatever was in the hallway, but she wasn’t fast enough. Only steps from the door, Charlotte saw a tall, broad-shouldered man with raven-black hair fill the doorway. He stepped forward, and a few other men pushed into the

room. The younger children shrieked of terror, but Charlotte heard the cries as if she were underwater.

She kept her eyes on the biggest man, the one with the dark hair that matched the hair she had been brushing out every evening. She saw his eyes land directly on the table she had come from.

“Ben!” he cried out, his voice filled with unexpected joy. But when Charlotte looked back at the table, she saw Ben hiding, crouched down so only his eyes were peeking out to keep sight of the man.

It was then, as the man began to walk forward, that Charlotte saw the scars that covered his face, long lines in many directions. He wore his sleeves rolled up to the elbow, and Charlotte saw more criss-crossed marks along the skin there.

The monster.

Her body trembled as she took in his strength, his shoulders broad and wide with the muscles of a soldier. He had the same dark hair as Ben with matching black eyes that locked onto Charlotte, making it impossible to look away. She felt her whole body flush at the sight of him, a strange feeling of fear and excitement that made her heart beat faster.

Forcing herself to her full height, Charlotte stepped forward. She swallowed hard as she blocked the man’s path, eliciting a withering glare from the monster before her.

“Excuse me, sir,” she said, unable to remove the shake from her voice. “I need to ask you for some information. Can you please tell me who you are and what you’re doing in my orphanage?”

The man narrowed his eyes at her as he stopped walking. He looked Charlotte up and

down, causing a shiver to run up her spine. She felt exposed, the man's gaze intimate and probing.

"Ye want me name?" he asked with a tone cold as ice. "Very well. I'm Alasdair Fleming, Laird of O'Malley. And who, may I ask, are ye?"

"Me?" she asked, and Alasdair nodded, glaring at the woman who stood between him and his son.

When he walked through the orphanage door, he resolved to remove anyone who kept him from his child, but something about this small woman challenging him made the corner of his mouth turn up in amusement. He took in the small, blonde woman who barely came up to his chest and noted the pretty flush across her cheeks.

"Aye," he said. "I would like to ken who challenges me."

He saw her attempt a scowl of her own, scrunching her eyebrows together as she set her mouth firmly across her face.

"I'm Charlotte Repington, and I run this orphanage."

"Then ye're just the lass I need to speak to," Alasdair said. "I'm here for me son."

"We have rules, sir," she said, forming her words carefully to display her crisp English as she addressed him. "People cannot come in here and simply take children. We will need to verify your background."

"Verify me background?" he asked, a surge of frustration overwhelming him as this woman questioned his credentials. Alasdair saw another woman enter the room, dressed in a simple black dress. A number of the children rushed toward the woman. Alasdair saw the girl in front of him lock eyes with the woman in black.

“Yes, sir,” she said, turning back to him with her head held high. “Perhaps you can come back tomorrow morning...”

“I willnae come back,” he roared. Alasdair saw children cower around him, but he didn’t care. It had been two years since he set eyes on his son. Years of false leads and dead ends as he searched everywhere for the boy who had been taken from him. Now that he had found him, he wouldn’t let some English woman keep him from his child.

“I will thank you not to yell, sir,” she said. “It upsets the children.”

“And what about me bairn?” he asked. “Ye would make him wait another day to be reunited with his faither?”

They both looked toward Ben, who was still peeking out from behind the table. Alasdair’s chest ached as he saw how much older the child looked. He had been barely five when Alasdair lost him.

The woman turned back to him, and he was surprised to see tears suddenly pooling in her eyes.

“I would have him wait a hundred days if it meant he would be saved from violence at the hands of his father!”

“Violence from me?” Alasdair asked, stepping closer, so he could tower over this woman. Their banter had been amusing at first, but he would not stand here and let the woman accuse him of hurting his child.

“Until I can verify that Ben is safe with you, I won’t let you leave with him. I need someone to tell me that you will not hurt the boy.”

“And the word of Laird McEwan is not enough?” Alasdair asked. “Werenae ye the one who wrote to him to tell me me son is here?”

“Laird McEwan?” the girl asked. He could see her thinking about this, trying to place the name. “Is that Ciaran McMahon? Husband to Molly?”

“Aye, lass. Who else?”

“And he wrote to you?”

“Aye. To tell me to come and get me son.”

He thought he had convinced her. A wavering in her eyes told him she was ready to give in. But then she glanced back at Ben, and when she looked back, her jaw was set even firmer.

“No,” she said, matching Alasdair’s volume. “I won’t hand him over to you until I know you aren’t the monster who’s chasing him.”

“Monster?” Alasdair’s fists clenched at his sides, and he was instantly striding forward. He closed the distance between them and towered over her, making the girl’s breath come fast as she stared at him. Alasdair watched the rise and fall of her chest as it strained against the neckline of her dress.

“I’ve been patient,” he said through his teeth. “But it’s time ye hand over me son. I willnae ask ye again.”

Alasdair stepped forward, so his chest was inches from her. Their eyes locked, the space between them crackling with something wild and unnamable. Alasdair had a sudden urge to wrap his arm around her back and pull her body roughly against his own.

“Nay! Daenae hurt her!”

The child’s voice pulled Alasdair from the spell of Charlotte’s gaze. His son emerged from behind the table, and he saw the blonde woman staring at the boy with a sense of shock and pride he couldn’t name. He watched as the boy strode forward, his gaze defiant, before putting himself directly between Charlotte and his father.

The look Alasdair gave his son told Charlotte everything she needed to know. All hints of anger and frustration disappeared as the man gazed at him. He gave Ben a look of affection that Charlotte could only dream of receiving from a parent. In this single look, she saw this was a man who would never hurt his child.

Alasdair knelt to be at eye level with Ben. He was beaming at the boy, taking in every detail of his face, his hands, his shoes. He looked at Ben like he was a precious object he couldn't believe he was looking at. And then, the man opened his arms to his son.

Ben rushed forward without hesitation, and his father lifted him into the air. The little boy was dwarfed by the man's strong arms, but Charlotte saw how gently Alasdair held him. It made her own heart light to watch them.

"I've been looking for ye," Alasdair told him. "For two years, I've been searching. I never gave up on ye."

Two years? If Ben wasn't with his father, where had he been?

Charlotte watched the man stand up and look at her, she had to take a step back. The space between them still felt charged, and his presence was making it hard for Charlotte to breathe. She hadn't had many opportunities to stand so close to a man before, and her body was responding in ways she could never imagine.

"I... I'm sorry for the misunderstanding," she mumbled. "I wanted to be sure he would be safe."

Charlotte remembered Ben hiding behind the table when his father entered the room. Was there a reason the boy had seemed so afraid of the man? She pushed the thought aside. It was likely Ben was simply afraid of the soldiers bursting through so suddenly as all the other children had been.

Even so, she felt an urge to delay Ben's departure as long as possible. She wanted to make sure the child felt comfortable before leaving the orphanage. And then there was his father. Something about this man and those mysterious eyes made Charlotte eager to know him better. She longed to ask him questions and to feel that dark gaze that made her whole body warm with his attention.

"It is late," Charlotte said. "Perhaps you and your men would like to stay here for the night? You can set out first thing in the morning."

"Nay," Alasdair said, putting his son back on the ground. "I've waited long enough to bring me boy home. It's time to leave."

Ben rushed forward at the words, disengaging from Alasdair to grab onto Charlotte's hand. She saw the surprise on Alasdair's face as Ben hid behind her, and they both realized Ben wasn't ready to leave Charlotte's side.

"What is it, Ben?" he asked, his eyebrows dropping in concern. "Ye daenae wish to go home?"

She felt Ben squirm as he hid further behind her skirts.

"What's wrong?" Alasdair asked. "Why does he nay speak?"

Charlotte looked down to Ben's round eyes and saw him pleading with her. She had grown used to his expressions, able to read and understand him with a single glance.

"Sir, there's something you need to know," Charlotte said. "Perhaps we could speak

privately and let Ben finish his dinner?”

“Why didn’t ye tell me me son isnae speaking?”

Alasdair paced the woman’s cramped office. It felt more like servant’s quarters than the office of a woman who ran an orphanage. Alasdair already felt stifled in here, as if the walls were closing in on his tall frame. He was eager to return to his son, whom he had left with Hayden, his man-at-arms and trusted friend.

“You didn’t exactly give me a chance.” He looked up in surprise at her curt words and felt the corner of his mouth twitch in amusement.

“Sorry, sir,” she said, seeming to catch herself.

“Ye ken,” he replied, finally standing still to stare into the woman’s light blue eyes, “no one in Scotland calls me ‘sir’.”

In this small room, with the sun setting outside the narrow window, he noticed how beautiful she was. Her face was round, her cheeks almost perpetually flushed with pink. And those eyes... they seemed to take in every inch of him in a way he found both invasive and exhilarating.

“I apologize,” she said, breaking his gaze. “I am not used to dealing with Lairds, Laird O’Malley.”

She said his name like she was trying out a new language, and it thrilled Alasdair to hear it from her mouth.

“Now, Laird O’Malley, could I ask you... you said you have been looking for Ben for two years?”

“Aye,” Alasdair said, feeling his blood boil as it did anytime he thought of the night

his son was kidnapped.

“What happened, if I might ask?” He sensed the hesitation in her voice. “Why was Ben not with you?”

He kept his face hard as he answered her, his hands held tight in fists.

“He was taken. I dinnae ken by who, but ye can be sure that whoever kidnapped me child will pay for what he did. I willnae let them get away with it!”

Alasdair’s voice rose louder than he intended, and he saw Charlotte stiffen at the outburst. He forced his hands to open, releasing the pent-up energy from his body. When he turned back to Charlotte, he saw compassion in her eyes.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, and then she nodded to the small chair across from her desk. “Would you sit down, please?”

He didn’t like the look on her face, a look that told him she had bad news to deliver to him. He glanced at the delicate chair and grunted.

“Thank ye,” he said. “I’ll stand.”

For a moment he thought she would protest. He saw a flash of frustration in her eyes, but she quickly hid it behind her polite smile. She set her spine in a straight line and began speaking.

“When Ben arrived to us, he was malnourished. We’ve managed to put a bit of weight back on him, but you will see he is still thin. And despite my best efforts, he’s not eating much.”

“Because the boy isnae used to this English food,” Alasdair scoffed.

“I think it might be more than that,” Charlotte said. Alasdair sensed hesitation in her voice, and he narrowed his eyes at her.

“What is it?” he asked, bracing himself on the back of the chair. He saw Charlotte sigh.

“When Ben arrived, he was covered with bruises. And there were welts on the back of his legs. On his first night, he wrote me a message. He said a monster was coming for him. I believe your son was beaten, Laird O’Malley. And he’s afraid of whoever hurt him.”

Alasdair squeezed the back of the chair with such force he thought the wood would splinter beneath his hands.

“Bastard!” he screamed, and he noted the shock that crossed Charlotte’s face as he cursed.

Every muscle in Alasdair’s body tightened as he struggled to keep himself from destroying every chair in the whole damn monastery.

“I know you are upset,” Charlotte tried, but she slammed her lips closed as Alasdair’s dark eyes darted toward her like daggers.

“Ye ken nothin’ about it,” Alasdair said, his tone now icy with disgust. “How could ye?”

“You know nothing about me,” Charlotte challenged, and the force of her words brought Alasdair’s attention to her face. “And I will thank you not to presume any further. We are here to talk about your son, Laird O’Malley. I am only trying to help him through this difficult time.”

Alasdair pressed his lips firmly together, taking in the flash of anger in Charlotte’s

eyes. He watched her fold her hands in front of herself as she watched him, as if waiting to see if he would protest. When he didn't speak, she continued.

"Ben has been through a lot. I believe this is why he isn't speaking."

"He did speak," Alasdair grunted, unable to hold his tongue. Charlotte looked up, and he finally crossed to the chair and sat down. "In the dining room, he told me not to hurt ye."

"Yes," Charlotte said. "So, we know he is capable of speech. But the ability to speak and the willingness to speak are often two different things. Ben's going to need time to recover."

"He will get all the time he needs back at his own castle."

"He's in a frail state," she explained. "He will have a difficult time over the next few months. Perhaps we can help him with this current transition."

Alasdair scoffed at the words. How could this woman think she knew what was best for his son? He was beginning to grow frustrated, and he felt his muscles twitching with impatience.

"Help him how?" he grunted.

"Let him stay here for a bit longer. You could stay as well. We can get him back to his full weight and keep working on his speech. It could do him well to spend time with you here before going to a whole new place."

He barely moved at the words. He simply looked at her with incredulity and let out a derisive snort.

"Nay."

Alasdair turned and began to stride out of the room. No matter how beautiful this woman was, he was done humoring her.

“Wait!” he heard from behind him. “If you won’t stay here, perhaps I can go with you?”

The words were out of her mouth before Charlotte could think them through.

Leave the orphanage? What are you thinking?

But she couldn’t stop thinking about Ben’s eyes as he looked up at her, begging her to speak for him. And then there was Alasdair. She had just met the man, but she couldn’t push down the sense of panic she felt when she thought about him and Ben riding off toward Scotland.

Charlotte rushed forward, blocking the door with her body.

“Please,” she said. “I can accompany you on the journey. I can be a comfort to Ben, so he has someone familiar until you make it back home.”

“Familiar?” Alasdair growled. “And who is more familiar than his faither?”

Charlotte’s back pressed against the solid wood of the door as Alasdair approached her. She struggled to breathe as the man’s solid form stalked closer and closer until he was near enough to touch. She could feel the heat radiating from the man’s body as he brought his hands to either side of her, pressing his palms into the wood beside her head.

“My Laird?” she asked, feeling a flutter deep in her stomach as she stood trapped beneath him. She had never been so close to a man before, and her body was buzzing with new sensations. Her eyes followed the scars that covered his face, speaking of a past Charlotte could only guess at.

“Are ye tryin’ to say I cannae care for me son?” he asked as he leaned closer, bringing his mouth near her ear.

“No,” she whispered. Feeling his breath along her neck made Charlotte weak in the knees. “I want to do what’s best for Ben. I care about him.”

Charlotte heard her heartbeat loud in her ears as Alasdair observed her. She felt a jolt as his eyes dropped down to her lips. The silence extended between them as their chests heaved, something primal and dangerous between them.

“Please?” she begged, her voice nearly breathless. The word surprised her, coming nearly unbidden as she locked her eyes with his own. What was it about this man that made her desperate to stay near him? He looked surprised at her word, and then his face melted into a look of raw hunger.

“A month,” he said, and Charlotte was transfixed by the movement of his lips. “Ye can stay at O’Malley castle until Ben is back on his feet. But it’s only a month. Not a day longer.”

“A month?” Charlotte asked, and Alasdair saw how much he had shocked her.

He pulled his arms away from the wall and went back to pacing, desperate to keep his body moving in the claustrophobic space. The proximity to Charlotte had made him nearly dizzy with desire for the woman. And then there was the way she begged. That simple, breathless question hit him fast and unexpectedly, and suddenly, he agreed, all rational thought abandoned in the face of his longing.

“Ye said ye wanted to help Ben,” he said, clasping his hands behind his back lest he reach out and touch the girl. “What good will a few days do for the boy? Ye will live with us for a month while Ben gets settled.”

The shock of his proposal was so much that Charlotte was still plastered to the door,

unmoving. He glanced back at her and raised his eyebrows, waiting for an answer. The idea of bringing Charlotte home with him was becoming increasingly intriguing. Something about this woman made him desperate to keep her by his side.

“I can’t just leave the orphanage,” Charlotte said. “Who will run it?”

“Don’t ye have people for that?” he asked coolly.

“I have Sarah,” she said, and Alasdair cut her off, sensing a resolution that could seemingly satisfy everyone.

“Perfect,” he said, snapping his fingers to end the conversation. “Ye will leave the orphanage to her when ye are gone. And ye will travel with me and Ben back to Scotland.”

Alasdair moved back to the door, and he heard a slight gasp from Charlotte as he urgently approached her. The heat he had felt so viscerally moments before now radiated between them once again.

“If ye don’t mind?” Alasdair asked. He saw the look of confusion on Charlotte’s face. And was there anticipation there?

Alasdair brushed the thought aside and nodded toward the door, reaching for the handle.

“Sorry,” Charlotte mumbled. She rushed away from the door, hugging the wall to distance herself from Alasdair.

Desperate to leave this stifling room and the tempting woman inside of it, Alasdair opened the door and burst into the hallway.

“Ye have an hour to pack.”